



Sakta Pithas of Purusottama Kshetra

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Saktism played a very prominent role in the development of Indian religions. The all pervasive *sakti* became so powerful a cultural force that all the religious thoughts in the mainstream and folk religious faiths had to acknowledge its profound influence. With the widespread efflorescence of *sakti* cult, there emerged numerous manifestations, *sakta pithas* and vast masses of literature in support of the *sakta* principle. The sacred centres of India were spotted with *sakta* centres (*sakta pithas*). The royal houses in acknowledging the significance of the emerging religion patronized it and people accepted it with heart and soul, as there was no caste or sex restriction in this faith. As a result of emergence of numerous manifestations of *sakti*, the sacred places in India were associated with them and these places came to be known as *sakta tirthas* or *pithas*. The literal meaning of *pitha* is the seat (*asana*). The sacred places which contain the seat of the *devi* are *sakta pithas*. The *sakta pithas*, the favourite abodes of *devi* are virtually the places of pilgrimages. According to noted scholar J.N. Banerjea and others, a *pitha* sprang of wherever a limb or severed part of Sati's body fell as per the *Daksha Yajna* story. Of course there are certain *sakta* centres, which though not linked with the limbs of Sati are also called *sakta pithas*.

The ancient sacred texts enumerate Uddiyana, Jalandhara, Purnagiri and Kamakshya as the earliest *sakta pithas* of India. Scholars like Sylven Levi, P.C. Bagchi, D.C. Sircar and few others have identified Uddiyana of the *Hevaraja Tantra* and Odra of *Kalika Purana* with Swat Valley of northwestern India where Katyayani is the presiding goddess and Jagannath is the tutelary god. But in fact there is no archaeological evidence in the Swat valley to justify the view points of scholars. Jagannath is the original god of Orissa and Vimala, Viraja and Katyayani are his consorts. Vimala is the *pitha devi* of Puri, Viraja, the *pitha devi* of Jajpur and Katyayani of Chausasthi Yogini temple of Hirapur (Near Bhubaneswar). The Sanskrit *Mahabharata* refers to Odra, Utkala and Kalinga in several contexts. The *sakta* importance of Odra or Uddiyana is substantiated by the *Kubjika*, *Pranatoshini* and *Yajnarnava tantras* with the illustration of Jagannatha as Bhairava and Viraja as Bhairavi. The *Yajnarnava tantra* relates Uddiyana and Ekamra as a *Sakta kshetra*. Uddiyana can be identified with Purushottama Kshetra (Puri) and Ekamra with Bhubaneswar.

Puri is a holy city in the whole world and referred with many synonyms in *Puranas* and old Sanskrit texts as *Srikshetra*, *Samkha*



Kshetra, Purusottama Kshetra, Nilachala, Niladri, Jagannatha Kshetra etc. Out of these Puri is more popularly known as *Purusottama* (best synonym of Lord Jagannath). Although *Purusottama kshetra* has been recognized as a great centre of Vaisnavism, it is also recognized as a *sakti pitha (pada pitha)* where the foot of sati fell down according to *Daksha Yajna* story. It was also a centre of Saktism of India as attested by literature, tradition and archaeological remains. *Matsya Purana* refers to *Purushottama Kshetra* as a *sakta pitha* with its presiding goddess Vimala. In tantric lore, lord Jagannath is considered to be a Bhairava and Vimala is worshipped as Mahadevi. In the *Devi Bhagavata*, Vimala is considered to be a *kshetra sakti*. *Vamana Puarana* refers to *Purusottama* along with Viraja as a sacred centre. According to *Tantra Chudamani*, the naval portion of Bhagavati fell in Utkal and therefore this kshetra came to be known as Viraja or Navikshetra where the name of Devi is Vimala and Jagannath is Bhairava. Tantric literature *Rudra Yamala* glorifies Jagannath as adorning the Mahapitha. Another tantric literature *Kalika Purana* refers to *Odra pitha* as a famous *sakti pitha* which was the celebrated centre of goddess Katyayani and god Jagannath. Vimala has been mentioned as presiding goddess of *Purusottama kshetra* in the list of 108 pithas found in the *Pranatoshini Tantra*. In the Puranic list of 108 names of the mother goddess in Namastotra Sata, we come across the expression *Vimala Purusottama*. In the list of *Mahapithas* and *Upapithas* given by the author of *Sivacharita* also we come across *Nilaparvata* or *Nilachala* where Vimala is the presiding *devi* and Jagannath is Bhairava. The *saktas* consider Vimala the real presiding deity of *Srikshetra* and that Lord Jagannath is merely her Bhairava (the terrific manifestation

of Siva traditionally associated with each goddess presiding over a *sakta pitha* of her own. The *yantra* of *Purusottama* consists of an eight-pettalled lotus with the *Vija Mantra* "Klim" in the centre. The priest first worships Purusottama with Lakshmi and proceeds thereafter to worship the *eight saktis* of Vishnu (Vimala, Utkarshini, Yajna, Kriya, Yoga, Prahvi, Satya and Eshana). Vimala is regarded as one of the *Asta Chandis* of *Purusottama Kshetra*. The other seven are Ramachandi, Harachandi, Vaseli, Varahi, Alamchandi, Dakshina Chandi, Jhadeswari.

In *Purusottama Kshetra* Jagannath and Vimala are regarded as Madhava and Durga respectively. During Dusshera festival the images of Durga and Madhava are brought to Vimala temple for propitiation. A sculptural panel of Sun temple at Konark depicting Jagannath, Siva Lingam and Durga altogether symbolizes syncreticism of Vaisnavism, Saivism and Saktism. The worshop of Madhava and Durga in the Madhavananda temple in the Prachi valley further substantiates the prevalence of Durgamadhava worship tradition in Orissa.

The origin of Vimala at *Purusottama Kshetra* is shrouded in obscurity. She has been the *pitha devi* much before the emergence of Lord Jagannath. It is pertinent to mention here that the *Bhogas* of Lord Jagannath become *Mahaprasad* after those are offered to Vimala. The present temple of Vimala, a four-chambered structured shrine dating back to the imperial Gangas, like most of the edifices lying within the Jagannath temple compound, was most probably built on the foundation of an earlier *sakta* shrine dedicated to the same goddess. According to noted scholar H.C. Das, the iconographic features and artistic imagery



of the goddess bear the art tradition of Bhaumakara period when most of the *sakta* tantric *pithas* emerged in Orissa. The literary traditions assign her origin to the Puranic Period. However, Vimala is the earliest *sakta* deity of *Purusottama kshetra*.

There are other *sakta* temples inside the Jagannath temple complex. Those are dedicated to goddess Bhubaneswari and Lakshmi. The fore-armed Bhubaneswari is seated in *vajraparyanka* on a lotus cushion. Her front right hand shows *varada* while the left hand displays *abhaya*. The uplifted back hands hold *ankusha* (goad) and *nagapasa*. She has three eyes and has a crescent moon in her crown. The four-armed Lakshmi assumes a similar *vajraparyanka* pose and likewise displays *varada* and *abhaya* with her front set of hands. Both uplifted back hands hold a lotus. Within the *bhogamandapa* of Jagannath temple itself is an image of Mahisamardini. Mahisamardini or Kanaka Durga is also the palace deity, the personal deity of the king of Puri and her image plays a major role in the Durga Puja festival.

The *sakta* environment of *Purusottama kshetra* is also apparent in the believe that the shrine is protected by *asta saktis* namely, Sarva Mangala, Bhubaneswari, Indrani, Patta Mangala, Chamunda, Durga, Vimala and Lakshmi. *Sakta* influence is also visible in the mode of worship of Lord Jagannath that is partly Vedic and partly *Sakta/Tantra* with the incorporation of various *Nyasas* like *sristi*, *sthiti*, *samhara nyasa*, *matrika nyasa*, *kesa vinyasa*, etc. and *yantras* such as *Sri* and *Bhubaneswari*, *kriyas (mudras)* and *vijamantras*. Equally interesting is the yogic tantric system of impelling the *satkaras (satcakrabheda)* of the body which is also

given an important part in the mode of worship. The tantric *panchamakaras* are identified in a manner that divests the individual items of their gross sensuality. *Matsya* is replaced by green vegetables mixed with *hingu*, *mansa* is replaced by *adapacedi* (ginger), green coconut water served in bell metal pots substitute for *madya*, *Mudra* is replaced by *kanti*, a podding prepared with sugar and water and *maithuna* is replaced by dancing performed by *devadasis* and the offering of *aparajita* flower (conceived as the *yoni*).

The image of Subhadra with the Jagannath trinity probably has *sakta* origin. She is no other than Ekanamsa, often considered to be the personification of Durga as well as the sister of Krishna and Baladeva. Once absorbed into this predominantly Vaisnavite trinity her association with Durga is still apparent in the Car Festival, however her chariot is decorated with nine representatives of goddesses who are either aspects of Durga or her incarnation *Navadurgas*. In *Brahma Purana*, Ekanamsa is identified with Katyayani. Subhadra has been regarded as *Parasakti*, *Yogamaya*, *Kampilya Vasini*, Ekanamsa, Bhubaneswari, Mahalaxmi and also in many other forms of supreme power of the world. She is worshipped in *Bhubaneswari Mantra (hrim)*, which implies that she is the *lipta (gnana) sakti* of Lord Jagannath. Learned scholar Sasanka Sekhar Panda has opined that Goddess Samalei of Sambalpur is worshipped in the same *Bhubaneswari mantra* as in the case of Subhadra. The uniconic form of goddess Samalei like the present anthropoid form of Subhadra seems to be identical. Samalei initially worshipped and later absorbed into Hindu fold by the Somavamsis who were ruling over Orissa from the upper Mahanadi valley from their capital city Suvarnapura in



the 9th/10th centuries A.D. Noted scholar B.C. Pradhan and Herman Kulke hold the view that the iconography of Subhadra resembles that of the iconography of goddess Khambeswari. So Subhadra existed in the Jagannath triad at least during the Somavamsi period. She was a *sakta* deity and was adorned as Katyayani, Durga and Bhadra Kali. Thus, it seems that the central placement of Subhadra in the Jagannath triad is an indication of the pivotal position of the *sakti* in the great *sakta pitha* Purusottama.

In course of the growth of Saktism in *Purusottama kshetra* a number of *sakta* shrines were constructed, highlighting the *sakta* character of the Jagannath *kshetra*. Among the *sakta* shrines mention may be made of Ramachandi, Baliharchandi, Vaseli, Varahi, Alamchandi, Dakshina Kali, Syama Kali, Jhadeswari, Saptamatrikas, Bata Mangala, etc. some of which deserve a little discussion to justify Puri as a *sakta pitha*.

Ramchandi

The shrine of Ramchandi is located on the mouth of the dead river Banki Muhana in Puri town. She is traditionally associated with the legend of the *daru* of Jagannath. It is believed that she protected the sacred *daru* when floating in the mouth of Banki Muhana through the sea. She is further believed to be the protector goddess of the fishermen and the naval crews. It is a six-handed Mahisamardini image of chlorite stone. She holds sword, arrow and trident in her right hands, shield, bow, in her two left hands while the third one twisting the head of the demon. This goddess can be compared to the images of Dakshina Chandi at Bhubaneswar and Sikhara Chandi of Patia near Bhubaneswar which is assignable to Bhaumakara period.

Bali Harchandi

Bali Harchandi has been depicted in *Tantra sashtra* as one of the protector *Chandis* of Shrikshetra and one of the powerful *sakta* tantric goddess of Chilika (along with Kalijai, Bhagavati, Tara, Durga, Narayani, Kalika, Hingula and Charchika) is enshrined in the west of *Srikshetra* near the mouth of the lake. She is mentioned frequently in the invocatory verses composed by poets in Oriya literature. She is also very prominent in legend and tradition. During the regime of Bhoi dynasty, a *tantrika* named Pratak Kapalika attained enlightenment (*siddhi*) in this *pitha*. Sri Ramachandra Deva, the founder of the Bhoi dynasty was attracted to this *tantrika* for his miraculous power. He constructed the present temple in honour of the deity and granted land for her daily rituals. This goddess is also regarded as goddess of water and navigation, who protects the boatsman and fisherman, when confronted with danger in the sea. The goddess is eight-armed Mahisamardini on the demon in therimorphic form which is assigned to the illustrious Bhaumakara period.

Varahi

A beautiful image of Varahi at Bali Sahi, Puri town is four-handed holding a fish and a skull cup in the upper two arms, while the lower right one is in *abhaya* and the lower left holds a child on her lap. She is worshipped by the Brahmin priest with non-vegetarian food, particularly fish. The image with bold workmanship emitting celestial smile and grace looks elegant. It is dated to the Bhaumakara period.

Saptamatrikas

A set of Saptamatrika images near the Markandeswara tank are assigned to the epoch



of Somavamsis. The *Madala Panji* relates the construction of the Saptamatrika temple by one Bhimakasari of Kesari dynasty. This is the definite evidence to indicate that Puri was well-known as a *sakta pitha* by the 9th and 10th centuries A.D.

Syama Kali

Syama Kali was the presiding deity of the old palace of Puri. She was probably established at Bali Sahi, Puri town by the Bhoi dynasty after it shifted its headquarters from Khurdha to Puri. The deity is four-handed, holding *khadga* and severed human head in upper right and lower left hand respectively. The upper right and left are in *varada* and *varada* mounting on a dead body respectively. She is worshipped in *Dakshina Kali mantra* and confirms to the *dhyana* of first *mahavidya* Kali.

Bata Mangala

The goddess Mangala is so popular in Orissa that she is worshipped both in folk and anthropomorphic forms. Bata Mangala of Puri is enshrined on the gateway to Srikshetra on Jagannath road. She is believed to guide the pilgrims to Sri Kshetra. She is worshipped in the *mantra* of Durga and is the same as Mahamangala, Sarva Mangala and Mangala. She is beautiful, two-handed and three-eyed goddess seated in *padmasana* with smiling face holding consciously *pasa* and *ankusa*.

Thus *Purusottama kshetra* was earliest *sakta pitha* of India. Taking into account the numerous legendary accounts of different times, the antiquity of this *kshetra* can be traced from the time of *Mahabharata*. This was a great centre of pilgrimage from the ancient

times. The successive royal dynasties have left behind their cultural and religious influence on this sacred centre.

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