

Khambesvari Yatra: A Symbol of Shakti Worship in Boudh District of Odisha

Dr. AmareshSahoo¹, Dibya Ranjan Tripathy²

¹Lecturer, Deptt.of History, Boudh Panchayat College

²Research Scholar, Gangadhar Meher University, Sambalpur, Odisha

Abstract

The cult of the mother Goddess is associated with the most ancient faith of human beings all over the world from time immemorial. The divine mother is considered to be a source of energy or the Shakti itself. In the ancient world from the dawn of civilization mother Goddess was worshipped in different names. Every nook and corner of Odisha is associated with the mother Goddess which is popularly known as *Gramadevati*. The mother Goddess enshrined almost in every village in Odisha either of a pillar or a post or an anthropomorphic representation was popularly famous as the Stambhesvari or Khambesvari. The cult of Stambhesvari alias Khambesvari is widespread and popular particularly in western Odisha and Ghumusar region of south Odisha. She is still the presiding deity in most of the villages of Ghumusar, Boudh, Sonapur, Angul, Talcher, and Dhenkanal regions which consist mostly of hill and forest tracts. Khambesvari Yatra is one of the most popular folk traditional festival of this locality.

Keywords: Stambhesvari, Khambesvari, Gramadevati, Shakti, mother Goddess, Yatra,folk .

Introduction

The Shakti worship in the form of a post or pillar seems to have emanated from the primitive tree worship which like the serpent worship was an ancient religious cult of India.¹ The primitive people like the Savaras and the Pulindas appear to have worshipped the mother goddess in the form of a tree or the trunk of a tree at the part of nature. In some early inscriptions¹ of Odisha Siva is referred to Sthanu i.e. a branchless trunk.² Stambhesvari was originally an aboriginal Goddess worshipped by the non Aryan tribes of hinterland Odisha. In course of time she was like many other tribal deities given a place in Hindu pantheon. She was adopted and worshipped by the Aryan invaders who had settled amidst the non Aryans Tribes.³ Subsequently She was transformed from a nomadic cult to Shakti cult. Gradually when the Aryan chiefs established small kingdoms of their own, they had to depend upon the sturdy tribals for the consolidation and defence of their newly established kingdoms. The Aryan kings who also needed the lands of different tribes and their services for the promotion and extension of peasant agriculture which would yield enough surplus crops to meet the requirements of the increased civil and military personnel. Thus the kings were dependent upon the support and loyalty of the tribes. Therefore, they kept them in good humour through the gradual process of inclusion of the tribal groups into the Hindu caste system and the absorption and adoption of some aspects of the tribal religion and culture into the Aryan fold. Pargiter has observed that the Aryans met with the religious practices and beliefs among whom (the tribes) they ruled over and came into lasting contact with and had assimilated some of them gradually

thus modifying their own religion to a certain extent. In this process the dominant tribal deities like Stambhesvari or Khambesvari were Aryanised and patronized by the kings as tutelary deities.⁴

By this process of Aryanisation the Brahmanas who were granted rent free lands in the tribal area played an important role. They settled in the forest tracts through land grants and came into contact with the forest tribes which resided in the dominion of the Aryan kings. The co-existence of Brahmanical and tribal culture led to the inter-action between these two.⁵ So much so the deities like Stambhesvari worshipped by the non-Aryan tribes entered into the Brahmanical pantheon.⁶ It may be mentioned that the hill tribes who believed in matriarchy were worshippers of Shakti.⁷ Stambhesvari is also worshipped as a manifestation of Shakti in the hill tracts of Odisha or at least in tribal surroundings. The first epigraphical record referring to the worship of mother Goddess Stambhesvari is found in the Terasinga copper plate of Maharaja Trustikara. He ruled over the Kalahandi, Sonapur, Boudh, and Ghumusar region in the 5th century A.D. In this inscription the king has styled himself as 'Stambhesvari Padabhakta'. This inscription reveals that Maharaja Trustikara in order to cure his ailing mother Sri Sobhini worshipped at the feet of Goddess Stambhesvari, the Istadevi of his family.⁸ He was the 1st known ruler to give royal patronage to the cult of Stambhesvari.

Stambhesvari Cult in Boudh District-

The Bhanjas of Khinjali mandala who issued charters from Dhritipura ruled over Boudh-Sonapur region from the 9th century A.D. as the subordinate chiefs (Ranaka) of the Bhaumakaras were the worshippers of Stambhesvari although they accepted Saivism and Vaishnavism in different periods. Ranabhanja was the first monarch who is known to have received the cult of Stambhesvari. It seems that among the innumerable aboriginal tribes of Sonapur, Boudh, Phulbani, Athmallik and Ghumusar region the cult was very popular. When Ranabhanja, the son of Satrubhanja occupied the Athmallik region he was obviously influenced by the cult of Stambhesvari which was popular among the natives of that locality.⁹ In the Orissa Museum plates¹¹ of the 9th regnal year, Ranabhanja calls himself "Stambhesvari Labdha Vara Prasad." Ranabhanja continued to be a devout worshipper of Stambhesvari and extended benevolent patronage for the growth and development of the cult in Boudh-Sonapur region. The successors of Ranabhanja were deeply influenced by Vaishnavism. Yet they continued to remain devoted to Goddess Stambhesvari. When Janmejaya occupied Khinjali mandala the Bhanjas continued to be the Mahasamantas of the Somavamsis. In the Sambalpur University Museum plates of Mahabhabagupta Janmejaya one Bhanja chief Mahasamantadhipati Ranaka Sri Devapya, son of Ranaka Sri Sa-killi describes himself as paramavaishnava as well as a devotee of Goddess Khambesvari (Khambesvari Labdha Prasadah).¹⁰

Khambesvari Yatra in Boudh District:

In Boudh district inhabited by the tribal people the mother Goddess is worshipped in the form of a log of wood or a pillar made of stone and she is popularly designated as Khambesvari. The primitive tribe like Khonds were original inhabitants of the Boudh district. These tribal people maintained their religious system basing upon the elements of hills and forests. They worshipped different types of gods and goddesses from very ancient time in order to fulfill their desires. In the process of religious evolution they considered to worship trees, mountains, animals, snakes and different elements of nature. Being tribals by origin and cultivators by profession, they worshipped the trunk of trees and pillars. Their worshipping

of trunk of trees and pillars gave birth the evolution of the worship of Khambesvari.¹¹ Although the people worship Khambesvari in every day but they give importance to it in the month of Aswina (September-October). It is famous in the name of Khambesvari Yatra. They observe it from the 11th day of bright fortnight to 14th day of bright fortnight of the month of Aswina (September-October). The priest of this Yatra belong to Kondh tribe. The chief *Jhankar* (priest) invites to the other Dehuris (priests) of nearby villages before seven days of this Yatra. On the 1st day of this Yatra the Gauntia or the chief of the village give the bhog or offerings to the Goddess Khambesvari. The villagers give offerings on the second and third day of the Yatra. On the last day of the Yatra the other people of nearby village give offerings to the deity. During this Yatra Goddess Khambesvari moves in the village. Every house of the village worship the Goddess.¹³ On the last day of this Yatra Maa Khambesvari come into the body of the Dehuris or priests. The people pray to the Khambesvari regarding their problem and desire. On the last day they give sacrifices to the Goddess in the form of animals and birds. The villagers believe that by this rituals and traditions they live in the society with happy and prosperous life. This Yatra is being observed in the different places of Boudh district like Barpadar, Lukapada, Kudiabahali etc. of Boudh district.¹² Animal sacrifices are offered to Khambesvari on festive occasions like the Dasahara and the non-vegetarian Bhoga cooked by the Sudra priests is taken by all the devotees irrespective of caste. Wooden posts representing Khambesvari are also found at many places among which the one at Gandharadi near Boudh is famous.¹⁴ The wooden posts are renewed every ten years and the ceremony of the renewal is known as Dasandhi which is like the Navakalevara of the Jagannath trinity images. In the Jagannathshrines making of images out of wood has continued to be a practice. Stambhesvari also continues to be carved in wood at some places of western Odisha since time immemorial. Some scholars have linked Khambesvari with Subhadra on account of the similarity in their iconography and iconology to a certain extent and stated that the Hinduised iconography of Khambesvari might be taken as the proto-type for the development which led to the figure of Subhadra which is worshipped with the Bhubaneswari Mantra (Sakta Mantra) in spite of her appearance as a Goddess of the Vaisnava Pantheon.¹⁵

Conclusion-

Moreover at present almost all the Gramadevatis of this area are Stambhesvari or Khambesvari in iconography. The Gramadevati like Pitavali, Mauli, Bauti etc. are nothing but pillars of wood or stone. Even the most famous deity of this area, the Vairabi of Purunakatak is a block of stone. Saktism is very popular in this area and Stambhesvari or Khambesvari being identified with Durga is being worshipped now in this area. All rites and rituals of the goddess Durga are also observed in these shrines of Stambhesvari or Khambesvari.

References-

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