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**REVIEW ARTICLE**

**SHAKTISM**

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# Shaktism

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Shaktism in which the highest place was accorded to the female principle was the faith of a large number of people all over the continent. The goddess of Shakti was worshipped with different names: most popular was the mother goddess. The origin of Shaktism evolved out of the pre-historic mother goddess cult symbolizing the facts of primitive life. The primitive society was a food gathering one and the clan centered on the women who was conceived as not only the symbol of generation, but also the actual producer of life. Her organs and attributes were thought to be endowed with generative power, and so they have been the life giving symbols. In the earliest phases of social evolution, it was this maternity that held the field, the life-producing mother being the central figure of the religion. The transition of the society from the food gathering to food production mode of life naturally brought changes in its religious beliefs and practices. With the passage of time, when people began to settle down in agriculture communities, it accordingly raised the status of women, there was a revival of ancient mother-right. The mother goddess of the primitive food gathering society was envisaged as mother earth who was mainly conceived with vegetation and fertility.<sup>1</sup> The Goddess was, thus, seen in terms of fertility and as a multiplier.<sup>2</sup> Several types of rituals and ceremonies became prevalent in the agriculture societies of India for propitiating the mother earth.

Several fertility rituals of mother earth became popular in the agriculture societies of Bengal, Punjab and Deccan. The worship of mother earth assumed varied forms. The mother goddess same to be identified with the mother earth that became the womb in which the crops were sown. In the eastern Punjab, mother earth was called Shaod Mata whom the farmers invoked to increase their agricultural production and to make their bankers and rulers contented.<sup>3</sup> In the Punjab, 'when a cow or buffalo was first brought, or when she first gave

milk after calving, the first five streams of milk drawn from her were allowed to fall on the earth in honor of Goddess, and every time of milking the first stream, it was so treated.<sup>4</sup> In Kerala, also such practices have been popular in relation to agricultural community till recent times. The ritual called 'Uccaral', which takes place at the end of the second harvest, represents the menstruation and seclusion of the goddess.<sup>5</sup> There is still a belief in Assam, that goddess Kamakha has monthly menstrual rites, and on such occasions, the temple is closed to the public so that the deity may take rest.<sup>6</sup>

The root of the Goddess worship in India is doubtless ancient.<sup>7</sup> Various phallic symbols representing the goddess and her consort have been found in archaeological remains. Terracotta and clay objects like the 'nude idol' and other female deities have been found at Taxila.<sup>8</sup> In the Indus Valley Civilization, there is enough evidence to prove that female deities were worshipped.<sup>9</sup>

At Mohenjodaro, we come across the models of *linga* and *yoni* (male and female generative organs) which were probably used as life-bestowing amulets, while in Harappa a number of conical *lingas*, representing the male organ, and large undulating ring stones, thought to be symbolizing the female principle, have

<sup>4</sup>William Crooke, *The Popular Religion and Folk Lore of Northern India*, Vol. 1, Munshiram Manoharlal Publications Pvt. Ltd., reprint, 1978, p. 26.

<sup>5</sup>E. Jenett Dianne, *Menstruating women/ Menstruating Goddess: Sites of Sacred Power in Kerala*, South India, Journal of Menstruation and Culture, [www.metaformia.org](http://www.metaformia.org).

<sup>6</sup>James J. Preston, *Cult of The Goddess, Social and Religious change in a Hindu Temple*, p. 11

<sup>7</sup>Lynn Foulston, *At the Feet of the Goddess, The divine Feminine in Local Hindu Religion*, Sussex Academic Press, Brighton Portland, 2002, p. 4

<sup>8</sup>J.S. Grewal, *Social and Cultural History of the Punjab*, p.76

<sup>9</sup>James J. Preston, *Cult of the Goddess, Social and Religious Change in a Hindu Temple*, Vikas Publishing House, New Delhi, 1980, p. 10

<sup>1</sup>Narendra Nath Bhattacharyya, *The Indian Mother Goddess*, pp. 2-3

<sup>2</sup>Mahesh Sharma, *The Realm of Faith, Subversion, Appropriation and Dominance in the Western Himalaya*, IAS, Shimla, 2001, p. 38

<sup>3</sup>*North Indian Notes and Queries*, I. 173, Narendra Nath Bhattacharyya, *The Indian Mother Goddess*, p. 39

been found.<sup>10</sup> This has been proved with the plentiful discovery of Paleolithic female figurines in bone, ivory, and stone with the maternal organs grossly exaggerated.

A considerable number of goddesses were known in the earliest Hindu scriptures and the Vedic hymns. The Vedic tribes of India were worshippers of father gods, but they could not annihilate the pre-Vedic mother earth, and so the goddess Prthivi was allowed to remain in the Vedic pantheon, but in a less glorious position in contrast to her male consort Dyasus, the sky father.<sup>11</sup> In the Vedic literature of India, Shakti was worshipped as the Devi of dawn, as Usha, Prthivi, Aditi and Sarasvati. All segments of Hindu society, especially the women, propitiated her. The Vedic ideas of the spiritual life as a sacrifice, a battle and a chant, were mostly found in goddess worship. The Goddess as Durga was the main demon slayer in the war between the Devas and Asuras. Hindu goddess, in fact, arose out of Vedic symbolism. The great goddess Kali first arose in the Upanishadas as the name of the first tongue or flame of the sacred fire, Agni. While these tongues were mentioned in the *Rig Veda*, and had a feminine nature, their names were not given. She was clearly a personification of the feminine aspect of the fire sacrifice. Her sacrificial nature was evident by the garland she wore and the cut-off head she held. The worship of Kali, therefore, was essentially the worship of the sacrifice, emphasizing its feminine side.<sup>12</sup>

Shakti became more intimate and powerful in the Gupta age, as is suggested by the evidence of *Puranas* and the story of Daksa's sacrifice.<sup>13</sup> There is a legend of Daksa's sacrifice and origin of the *pithas*, the goddess of fifty-one *pithas* or places.<sup>14</sup> However, some texts often consider that there are 108 of these *pithas*, extending all over India, commemorated by a network of temples.<sup>15</sup> There are a number of legends behind the establishment of *pithas*.

The sculptures of the Gupta and later period depict the form of Goddess Mahisamardini, which was most popular. An image in a relief carved on the façade of a cave at Udayagiri near Bhilsa, Madhya Pradesh, shows the goddess killing Mahisasura, the buffalo-

demon. A Terracotta plaque of Mahisamardini from Bhadrakali in the Gunanagar District of Rajasthan, shows the Devi killing the buffalo-demon with a *trisula*, which she holds in her right hand. The goddess Durga temple at Aihole was erected by the Chalukya kings in 642 A.D. The famous Chalukya monuments are the cave temples of Badami, which, have some of the finest figures of the Goddess in her different forms.<sup>16</sup>

The position of the goddess as the supreme deity has been described in the *Devimahatmaya* chapters of the *Markandeya-Purana* in which the goddess destroyed Mahishasura, Raktabija, Shumbha, Nishumbha, Chunda and Munda. She sucked the blood of Raktabija, literally the demon who could multiply blood that was life.<sup>17</sup> She lived in crematoriums. She was the protest. As Shivaduti, she inverted patriarchal dominance by reducing Shiva to the position of her messenger to the demons she slayed.<sup>18</sup> The importance attached to these exploits was reflected in the images of the goddess, especially as *Mahishasuramardini* with eight or ten arms. The easy association of 'the mother' Amba and the subordination of the 'seven mothers' or 'eight mothers' to her, combined her benign aspect with the fierce and ferocious, assimilating Devi or Durga with Shiva.<sup>19</sup> Mythologically, she was a heroic personality and ruled over the evil things. Chandika was the slayer of Chunda and Munda. Chandi literally was 'fierce and passionate'.<sup>20</sup> But in all popular narration, the god of destruction subjugated the goddess, set to destroy the world, by matrimony. In other words, patriarchy asserts to order the conception of the social. She, however, was the dominant partner. She was the one who danced over the body of Shiva.<sup>21</sup> The Shakti Devi in her developed form absorbed within herself innumerable goddesses representing different streams. The old conception of Shakti acquired side by side a new significance amongst the toiling masses. The cult of Shakti came to denote the cult of that power which led to the victory of the oppressed classes, and ensured the Devi's final triumph over the demons.<sup>22</sup>

Devi's victory has been memorialized in a series of sculptures that began to appear in the Gupta and Pallava periods from fourth to eight centuries, contemporary with the *Devi Mahatmaya*.<sup>23</sup> Among those whose names frequently occur are Kali, Durga, Chandi, the fierce ones; Parvati, the mountain goddess, daughter of Himalaya; Kumari the maiden;

<sup>10</sup> Narendra Nath Bhattacharyya, *The Indian Mother Goddess*, Manohar, 1977, pp. 2-3

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 28

<sup>12</sup> David Frawley, *Gods, Sages and Kings, Vedic Secrets of Ancient Civilization*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1993, p. 225

<sup>13</sup> Narendra Nath Bhattacharyya, *History of Sakta Religion*, Munshiram Manoharal Publishers, New Delhi, 1974, P. 72

<sup>14</sup> D.C. Sircar, *The Sakta Pithas*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1973, p. 3. See also David Kinsley, *Hindu Goddess, Vision of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition*, Archives Publishers, New Delhi, 1987, p. 37

<sup>15</sup> Jacob E. Safra, *Britannica: Encyclopedia of World Religions*, p. 448

<sup>16</sup> Narendra Nath Bhattacharyya, *History of Sakta Religion*, p. 82

<sup>17</sup> Jacob E. Safra, *Britannica: Encyclopedia of World Religions*, p. 448

<sup>18</sup> T.B. Coburn, *Devi Mahatmaya: The Crystallization of the Goddess Tradition*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1984, p. 137

<sup>19</sup> J.S. Grewal, *Social and Cultural History of the Punjab, Prehistoric, Ancient and Early Medieval*, Manohar, Delhi, 2004, pp. 156-157

<sup>20</sup> T.B. Coburn, *Devi Mahatmaya*, pp. 94-95

<sup>21</sup> David Kinsley, *Hindu Goddess*, p. 120

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 120

<sup>23</sup> *Britannica: Encyclopedia of World Religions*, p. 449

Uma, whose characteristic was gracious, and who originally had been a mountain goddess.<sup>24</sup>

Kamakhya Devi temple is one of the most vibrant centers of the Goddess worship in India with a history that can be traced back to at least 1200 years. The worship and symbolism of the Kamakhya is closely tied to the forces of sexuality, passion and creative energy. One of contemporary priests put it; she is simply 'the Goddess of sex'.<sup>25</sup> Sacrifice has been a central part of her worship, and so are the regular offerings of goats. Research shows that human sacrifice at Kamakhya was revived in the last century, but later discontinued. A 1933 *Journal of the Assam Research Society* says that living people were sacrificed until the reign of King Gaurinath Singha who ruled between 1780 and 1796.<sup>26</sup>

In the medieval period, there are a number of examples of association of the goddess with a range of aspiring and successful Rajas and landed magnates of Bengal. Mukunnda Chakrabarty, composer of Bengali *Chandimangalkavya* composed his landmark eulogy to the goddess Chandi under the patronage of Raja Bankura Roy who ruled over the Brahmanbhum area of Midnapur and was a devotee of the goddess known locally as Joychandi Thakurani.

During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the goddesses enjoyed great importance. In Bengal, Raja Ganesh (1400-1421), who usurped effective power from the Sultan of Bengal, as well as his son, said to have converted to Islam and ruled as Sultan Jalaudhin Mahumud (1415-1432), proclaimed association with the goddess by performing ritual worship and issuing coins bearing symbols associated with the Goddess.<sup>27</sup> In 1757, Nabakrishna Deb of Bengal, who had attached his fortunes to the rising star of the English Company, hosted a Durga *puja* for the first time to celebrate the victory of the English against Nawab Sirajuddaula of Bengal. Lord Robert Clive participated in this thanksgiving ceremony to the goddess by personally sending over a number of goats to be sacrificed to the Devi.<sup>28</sup>

The Shakta ideas could be traced not only in Hinduism but also in Jainism and Buddhism. As an organized

sect, however, Shaktism was linked closely with Shaivism and the goddess was regarded as one of the many forms of the consort of Shiva. The goddess used to take many forms, both benign and malevolent. As Durga, she was capable of great vengeance against those who would cross her. Kali demanded blood sacrifice to symbolize her strength as the archenemy of the demons. She was associated with crematoriums, funeral pyres, death and darkness. If not propitiated, she could destroy humanity; bring disaster, illness, or death.<sup>29</sup> As Lakshmi, she represented good fortune and wealth. As Saraswati she was the symbol of learning and culture. In her manifestation as Sitala Devi, she was able to either cause or cure disease, particularly smallpox and cholera.<sup>30</sup>

Though Shaktism was known in ancient India, it emerged as a distinct religion in the early medieval period. The transformation period from ancient to early medieval period was about the new social and economic set up but it changed radically the complete religious outlook of India. In the age of Guptas, the Shaivites did try to supersede the Shaktas by making the Shakta goddess the wife of their own lord Shiva. The Vaisnavites also attempted, but could not succeed as Shaivites did, because Shiva absorbed more popular elements than Vishnu. Thus, Devi naturally came to be associated with Shiva.<sup>31</sup> In the seventh and eighth centuries, the religious phenomenon became very popular about both gods and goddesses. This intermixing of the god and goddess produced a new religious trend that was marked by the association of Shakti not only with Shiva but also with Vishnu and Buddha. This type of worship found a place in the Shakta *tantras*, which became very popular in Punjab during the ninth and the tenth centuries.<sup>32</sup> In the course of amalgamation, the ancient female fertility spirits were elevated to the status of wives of the *brahmanical* gods. Many gods and goddesses not even represented in ancient literature now appeared as 'orthodox'. This process appeared throughout India and the *puranas* are its literary expression.

The worship of Vishnu and Shiva along with their consorts, installed in numerous temples became a very important feature of religious life, the installation of these temples happened due to the social surplus introduced by the new economic conditions. Vaisnavism and Shaivism came in closer connection and were added to Brahma of the older pantheons, they formed the trinity. Same prestigious change took

<sup>24</sup> Ernest A. Payne, *The Skatas: An introductory and comparative study*, p.6

<sup>25</sup> Ganga Sarma, *Kamrum Kamakhya*, Bishnu Prakashan, Guwahati, 2002, p. 6

<sup>26</sup> Rahul Karmarkar, *Indian Temple Revives 'Humansacrifice'* 3 April 2002, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/1908706.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/1908706.stm)

<sup>27</sup> M. Eaton Richard, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1994, pp. 58-59

<sup>28</sup> Sudeshna Bannerjee, *Durga Puja: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow*, Rupa and Company, New Delhi, 2004, pp. 35-41

<sup>29</sup> J.J. Preston, *Cult of the Goddess*, p. 63

<sup>30</sup> Jolly J., *Indian Medicine*, N.P. Poona, 1951, p. 139; Narendra Nath Bhattacharyya, *The Indian Mother Goddess*, p. 53

<sup>31</sup> Sudhakar Chattopadhyaya, *Evolution of Hindu Sects in Ancient India*, p. 162

<sup>32</sup> Sukhinder Kaur Dhillon, *Religious History of Early Medieval Punjab*, National Book Organisation, Delhi, 1991, p. 74

place in the cult of the female principle. Nevertheless, in all religions, female deity was placed by the side of the god, but by doing so the entire emotion centering around the female principle could not be channelized. So need was felt for a new religion, entirely female dominated, and a religion in which even the great gods like Vishnu or Shiva would remain subordinate to the goddess. The belief in and worship of the supreme principle as a female force or Shakti, thus became popular. This new religion came to be known as Shaktism.<sup>33</sup> Shakti became synonym with power, the power or active aspect of immanent god called Shakti. Shakti represented female divinity in general and stood for the energizing power of divinity in particular. However, in Shaktism, the Devi or Shakti was assigned an active part and attained the status of an independent religious tradition.<sup>34</sup> The emergence of Shaktism as a distinct and specialized religion in the medieval period, receiving nourishment from many other kindred systems, makes an interesting study. With the development of the idea of an all-pervading female power, a need was felt to equate this local goddess with the supreme being of the Shaktas. The female principle had to be given a very prominent position. Even the atheistic religions like Buddhism and Jainism could not avoid this popular influence.<sup>35</sup> The goddess Shakti (or Devi) started representing divine power, being present in sacred places, within the hearts of her devotees and in her heavenly world.

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<sup>33</sup> N.N. Bhattacharyya, *History of the Sakta Religion*, pp. 64-65

<sup>34</sup> R.G. Bhandarkar, *Vaisnavism, Saivism and Minor Religious systems*, p.144. See also Padma Upadhyaya, *Female Images in the Museums of U.P. and their Social Background*, Chaukhambha Varanasi, 1978, p. 43

<sup>35</sup> Narendra Nath Bhattacharya, *History of the Sakta Religion*, p.