



# SAKTI CULT IN WESTERN ODISHA: A STUDY OF SAMALESWARI OF SAMBALPUR

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## Abstract:

In Indian context it is not certain, whether the origin of Mother Goddess and Vedic Aryan or non-Vedic or pre-Aryan has been a hotly debated question. The Indus civilization provide earliest positive and somewhat details evidence for the worship of mother goddess in the forms of numerous terracotta female figuring and representation on of seals and ring stones. After the *Harapan* culture, the mother Goddess is traced continuously to till date. One headless image of mother Goddess was found from *Inamgoan* near *Pune* which has been assigned to 12<sup>th</sup> century B.C.

*Sakti* cult particularly in the form of *Mahisamardini* made its appearance in Odisha since very early times. In the beginning of the Christian era, a large number of tribal deities were incorporated in Buddhism, Jainism and Hinduism. The origin of Sakti Cult in Western Odisha may be traced to the called of fertility has been discussed. The earliest sakta pitha of this origin is Terasinga of Kalahandi District and second to the Viraja Pitha of Jajpur in Odisha.

*Samalai* or *Samaleswari*, the presiding Goddess of Sambalpur Kingdom occupies a unique position in the religious life of the people of Western part of Odisha. *Samalai* or *Samaleswari* is worshipped beneath a 'Semul' Silk cotton tree. *Samaleswari* temple is the most important one among all Sakta temple Sambalpur. The *Samaleswari* temple who build by Balaram Dev, the first Chauhan Raja of Sambalpur. It was later on renovated by Chhatra Sai. The temple is dated to the part of 16<sup>th</sup> Century to be constructed that in 1575 A.D. In this region there are many *Saktas* centres which have acclaimed eminence due to patronisation of kings, Zamidars, landlords and common people.

## Keywords:

Dakshak, Phillic, Tara, Samalai, Gramadevatas, Metakani, Mahantas, Iconography, Nuakhai, Gogadarshan

## 1.Introduction

The term *sakti* represent female divinity in general and energining power of some . divinity in particular literary meaning of *sakti* is power or energy. *Sakti* as we understand power which is expressed through different phenomena . In the material manifestation, it is the physical ultimates of all forms of matter. But in highest metaphysical form *sakti* is the cosmetic mother, god in famine form as supreme which create,sustains and destroys the universe.

*Saktism* which represents the worship of an active female principle as divine mother or supreme brahman is worshipped in various forms and names in different parts of the country. The worship is one of the ancient most and primitive religions in mystry. It cannot however be definitely stated when the *sakti* called came into existence.

The Indus civilization provides the earliest positive and some what detail evidence for the worship of mother goddess in the forms of numerous terracotta, female figurine and representation on seals and ring stones. After the age of Harappan culture, the mother Goddess are traced continuously to till date. One headless image of mother Goddess was found from Inamgaon near Pune. Which has been as signed to 12<sup>th</sup> century B.C.<sup>1</sup> The earliest representation of *Mahisamardini* form of the Goddess found so far belonging to 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C. form Nagar in Tope district of Rajasthan.<sup>2</sup> So *Sakti* cult is the ancient most and popular, which influenced all system of religion like Vaishnavism, Saivism, Buddhism. In every system we find the important of the female deities.

The epic like Ramayana and Mahabharata mentioned the name of *Uma, Girija, Rudrani*. In Ramayana is not an independent cult through she holds a very high position. She is known as Devi revered by all.<sup>3</sup> There is the reference of Goddess *Durga* in the Mahabharata which throws light on the position of *Sakti* cult.

The puranic story of *Daksha* sacrifice proves the intimate relation between Siva and Parvati. *Vayu Purana* described that *Daksha* performed sacrifice and invited all gods except Lord Siva. *Sati* daughter of *Daksha* and consort of Lord Siva came to that place and was shocked at the cool reception of her father as a result she destroyed her body in the sacrificial fire. The death body of *Sati* moved about the country aimlessly which was a danger to the universe. During that time it is described that Lord *Vishnu* cut the body of *Sati* in to pieces. The place where the parts of the body fell was sanctified as a *Sakta pitha*.

## 2. Sakti Cult in Odisha Context

*Saktism* is an important and ancient cult of Odisha. It has been discussed by a number of scholars who focused their study on icons, monuments, sub-cults like *Sapta Matrika* and *Yogini* etc. On the basis of available archeological data we can presume that the powerful religion made its appearance in Odisha two or three century B.C.<sup>4</sup>

In the beginning of the Christian era, a large number of tribal deities were incorporated in Buddhism, Jainism and Hinduism. *Stambeswari* or *Khambeswari* a tribal deity represented in the form of a pillar was worshipped in certain parts of Odisha. *Stambeswari* is a Sanskritised name of an antechthonous and anionic. Goddess *Satmbeswari* or *Khambeswari*, the lady of the posts, who was being and is now also worshipped in the form of a wooden posts. The Sulkis of Kodalaka Mandala and the Bhanjas of Dhirtipura were the ardent devotees of this deity.<sup>5</sup> D.C Sircar opines that the Goddess was of phallic types but later on took the shape of Siva and *Sakti*.<sup>6</sup>

*Sakti* cult particularly in the form of *Mahisamardini* made its appearance in Odisha since very early times. The earliest representation of the deity is offer by the two armed Viraja at Jajpur on the river *Baitarani* has been a place of pilgrimage since the time of Mahabharata and Puranas. The image of Viraja represents the earliest phase of the cult of Odisha.

The Bhaumakara ruler patronised, Tantric *Saktism*. They constructed many *Saiva* and *Sakta* Temple in places like Ranipur-Jharial, Hirapur etc. Both the places has *Yogini* temples. During this period Tantrism came in to the fold of *Saivism*. During this period *Saktism* made its first appearance in Bhubaneswar. The Vaital Temple is the first *Sakta* shrine of this period. The presiding deity of the temple is *Chhamunda*. In this temple we find the image of *HaraParvati, Arthanariswara, Lokulisa, Vhairava* etc.

During this period the concept of female principle dominated the Mahayana Buddhism. Tara the primordial deity of Buddhist pantheon absorbed, with in herself a number of divinities representing different aspect of female principle. From 7th century onwards the influence of Tara in her various manifestations began to felt in the religions system of Odisha.

*Sapta Matrika* representing the *Saktis* of important deities are found in different parts of Odisha. They are *Brahmani, Maheswari, Kumari, Vaishnavi, Varahi* and *Chamundi*. A group of eight *Matrikas* has been mentioned in *Devi-Bhagabat* and *Linga Purana, Markandeya Purana* indicates that the *Matrikas* helped *Ambika* to kill the powerful demons *Raktavija*, who was endowed with the quality of multiplying in to demons of his stature and strength from the drops of his blood oozing from the wounds. It was with the assistance of this *Matrikas* that Devi could cause death to demon. The *Agni Purana* and *Matsya Purana* deal in detail the iconographic of these Mothers.

## 3. Sakti Cult in Western Odisha

Western Odisha comprises the districts of Bargarh, Kalahandi, Nuapada, Boudh, Kandhamal, Balangir, Sonepur, Deogarh, Sambalpur, Jharsugura, Sundargarhand Athamallik sub division of Anugul district. This tract of land has experienced the rule of various dynasties in different span of time i.e. Nalas, Sarabhapuriyas, Bhanjas, Somavanshis, Chindakanagas, Kalachuris, Gangas, Nagas and Chauhanas.<sup>7</sup> They had ruled successfully from their different head quarters at Subarnnapura, Patna and Sambalpur leaving behind rich legacies of culture,

South Kosala seems to have occurred in ancient literature the Ramayana, Mahabharata and Puranas like *Bramanda, Matsya, Vamana* and *Vayu* repeatedly mentioned South Kosala. The Allahabad Pillar inscription is the earliest known epigraphic reference to South Kosala.<sup>8</sup> In the land of South Kosala of which Western Odisha many religious cults flourished under the patronage of different rulers. Among those *Sakti* cult is most popular.

The origin of *Sakti* cult in Western Odisha may be traced to the cult of fertility has been discussed . The *Debhogaka khetra* in the Tel Velly near the village Terasingha in the Madanpur-Rampur of Kalahandi district, may be taken as the earliest *Sakta Pitha* of this region and second to the *Viraja pitha* of Jajpur in Odisha.

The Teluguchoda king SomeswarDeva-ii declared the grant starting on the bank of *Chitrotpala* (Mahanadi) looking straight to the *Lankavarttika* is *Lankeswari* . Probably the kind issued the grant before the Goddess *Lankeswari* . So here also *Lankeswari* may be taken as the protectress deity of *Pashima Lanaka* i.e. Sonpur. This Goddess is still worshipped by the people and boatman in the form as a low rock very close to the *Lankavarttika* in the bed of Mahanadi. A short inscription which may be placed 9<sup>th</sup> /10<sup>th</sup> century A.D. On the ground of Palaeography is found in an eroded condition adjacent to the deity .<sup>9</sup> However, there is no image of the Goddess .

In Junagarh , the old capital of Kalahandi state there is a temple of *Lankeswari*. *Lankeswari* was the family deity of early Naga Kings of Junagarh. After the transfer of the capital from Junagarh to Bhabanipatna, the Nag rulers accepted *Manikeswari* as their presiding deity. <sup>10</sup> However, it is learn from the epigraphs of Chindaka Naga rulers of Chakrakot. It is not known whether the deity had an iconic or uniconic form. The Chindaka Nagas belonged to Naga dynasty. They were worshipping *Manikyadevi* and using snake banners. <sup>11</sup> The rulers of Kalahandi are also descendent of Naga family. They also used snake banner. So it appears that the deity *Manikyadevi* inside have been brought by Nagas and established their family deity as *Manikeswari* in Kalahandi state.

Ranipadra identify with modern Ranipur -Jharial in Balangir districts is an important *Sakta Pitha* in this region. J.D. Beglar who first reported the site assigns the construction of the temple to a date of 9<sup>th</sup> century A.D. But T.E Donaldson assigns the construction in the early part of 10<sup>th</sup> century A.D. i.e. posterior of Hirapur temple.<sup>12</sup>

There are also different Goddess worshipped in Western Odisha like *Patneswari*, *Ghateswari*, *Limsarian* and so on with the advent of the Chauhan dynasty a number of *Sakta shrines* were build under their Patronage. The Chauhans were noted for the worship of *Sakti*. The family Goddess of Chauhans of Patna was *Patneswari* while that of Sambalpur was *Samalai*. The temple of *Samalai* are found in large number in Western Odisha.

In this region there are many *Sakta* center which have acclaimed eminence due to Patronisation of kings , Zamindars and Landlords . There are also some lesser-known centers, which have no less contribution to the development of *Saktism* such as *Gramadevatas*, *Ghanteswari*, *Metakani*, *Limsarian*, *Saptamatrikas*, *Dwarsenni*, *Dasamata*, *Bhagabati*, *Maheswari*, *Vindhyavasini* and *Ramachandi* and so on.

#### 4. *Samalai* or *Samaleswari* of Sambalpur

*Samalai*, the presiding Goddess of Sambalpur kingdom occupies a unique position in the religion life of the people of Western part of Odisha . In the ancient times Sambalpur was a part of South Kosala, comprising roughly the modern districts of Raipur and Raigarh in Chhatisgarh and the undivided districts of Sambalpur, Bolangir and Sundargarh of Odisha. <sup>13</sup> South Kosala has been one of the most ancient places of human civilization. That a developed civilization existed in Sambalpur region is clearly evident from rock engraving and painting. The Vikram Khol pictograph scripts clearly indicate that a cultured and developed people lived in this region about five thousand years ago. <sup>14</sup>

*Samalai* is worshipped beneath a semel ( Bombay Malavarium) silk cotton tree. Later on the deity was enshrined in the house called temple and regular puja is performed there with *Bhubaneswarimantra* by non-Brahmin priest, called in some places is Jhankar. The Kshatriyas in Sambalpur, Barpali, Patnagarh, Bhikhampur, Paramanpur, Saharas in Bargarh, Arjunda, Podhmunda, Gonds in Ambapali, Paharsirgida, Keut in Kuchinda, Pandara in Balangir, Kondh in Themra, Binjhalas in Kangaon. Bhaina in Nuagarh became the priest/ Jhankar of the *Samalai* temple in the particular places which in some places became hereditary and continue the worship. The Jhankar or the principal watchman of the temple became the village priest. Which duties was to propitiate the deity and the aboriginal tribes latter on got an honourable position in the village and enjoy rent free land.

Goddess *Samalai* came in to prominence as the presiding Goddess of Sambalpur after the establishment of the kingdom of Sambalpur by Balaramdev, Younger brother of Narasinghadev of Patnagarh kingdom. The *Kosalananda mahakavya* written by Gangadhar Mishra in 1664 A.D, *Chikitsamanjari* of Gopinath Sarangi written during Chhatrasinghdev (1657-1695), *Jayachandrika* by Prahallad Dubey (1781), the copper plate grant of Jayanta Singh dated 28<sup>th</sup> April 1790 A.D maintain the name *Sameleswari*. Among the *Koshalananda kavya* , the pride and pleasure of Kosala is a historical pride written under the Patronage of Chauhanraja of Sambalpur Baliardev, In Sanskrit language. It is the earliest *kavya* to deal with the history of the Chauhan rule in Odisha and is the earliest sources to recode the genealogy of Chauhan rulers of Patnagarh and Sambalpur. It mentioned the name *Samaleswari*.<sup>15</sup> Goddess *Samalai* as *Samaleswari*, who was the presiding deity of Sambalpur in the then time. <sup>16</sup>

In A.D 1781 about 120 years after Kosalanand was written, Prahallad Dubey of Sarangarh, located in Chhatisgarh state wrote a Hindi kavya, *Jayachandrika*. Where he describe the establishment of Sambalpur kingdom based on legends.

Balaramdev got his share from his elder brother Narasinghdev and came to Bargarh in seeking for a place to establish fort. He establish his camp at Chaurpur located on the right bank of river *Mahanadi*. Where is dogs came after rabbit, but the rabbit ran after the dogs. The king was very much astonished on seeing this incident. In that particular night Balaramdev saw a dream. Goddess *Samalai* stood before him and said, "My son, I am *Samalai*, is now at Gumdarha, Take me and construct a temple under the simuli tree on the other side of the river. "Balaram Dev accepted the Goddess *Samalai* of that area as his tutelary deity and established his fort and kingdom. The legend mentioned in *Jayachandrika* is supported by Siba Prasad Das mentioned that the tribal people like Savara(Sahara), Oram, Mundas, Kondh, Binjhal were living in Sambalpur region when Ramaidev established Chauhan kingdom at Patnagarh.<sup>17</sup> It cannot be denied the existence to the tribal people at the Gonds, Saharas, Binjhals, In some *Samalai* temple are presently in-charge of worship of the Goddess *Samalai*. They were also engaged in collecting diamond and fishing in river *Mahanadi*. These people established the Goddess on the bank of the river to get blessing for safe landing before starting their journey. They were offering fish to the deity which is till now continuing in the *Samalai* temple of Barpali as well as other part of Western Odisha, S.P. Das mentioned *Samalai* as the deity of aboriginals.<sup>18</sup> A popular legend says that during the demolition of Hindu Gods and Goddesses by *Kalapahad*, the pandit of Puri fled with the image of Lord Jagannath and buried it in Sonepur on the bank of *Mahanadi*, to the south of Sambalpur. *Kalapahad* followed them to Sambalpur. Goddess *Samalai* is said to have assume the form of a milkmaid and sold milk and curd to the soldiers. Which is turn spread desolation among his army. In panic *Kalapahad* fled away. Learning his war drum, bells etc. Which is now preserved in the temple.<sup>19</sup>

It is heard that in ancient times human sacrifice was offered once in a year, human sacrifice was stopped following miracle of *Maa Samaleswari* with a saint from Amritsar, who became the mahanta of *Gopaljee Math* later on Bihari Das, the first mahanta of *Gopaljee Math* of Sambalpur.<sup>20</sup>

Dr J.K. Sahu is of opinion that the Chauhans( successor of Ramaidev) in Patna, Sambalpur, Sonepur and Khariar made tremendous development in social, political, economic and cultural aspects. They made Aryanisation by accepting the dogmas of the aboriginals of the areas.

S.S. Panda said that the un-iconic form of Goddess *Samalai* at Sambalpur, Barpali and Patnagarh denotes her tribal origin, but the icon of *Samalai* at Sonepur relates her to the supreme Goddess Durga and that of Balangir also to the great Goddess Mahadevi. Therefore *Maa Durga* is the same deity, which worshipped as *Lankeswari* and also as *Samalai* and has been manifested in the form of Goddess *Subhadra*, the sister of Lord Jagannath in the supreme Jagannath cult.

Dr C. Pasayat mention that Balaramdev has established Sambalpur Rajya. He has exalted the local deity *Samalai* as *Samaleswari* meaning 'Isvari' or Sambal/Sambalpur and the king has accepted her as his own tutelary Goddess. This way the local name of the deity i.e. *Samalai* has been hinduised to *Samaleswari*.<sup>21</sup>

From the writing of Ptolemy it has been proved that Sambalpur was existed much before the establishment of Balaramdev, where the then people were engaged in collecting diamonds, available in a small island, presently called *Hirakud*. Barahamihira in his "*Brahatsamhita*" writes in praise of diamond available in Kosala.<sup>22</sup>

The kingdom of Balaramdev originally extended from the river *Mahanadi* in the North to the river *Ang* and in the South and from the river *Surangi* in Phuljhar in the West to the village Huma on the *Mahanadi* in the East. He extended his kingdom on all sides by war and conquests.

## 5. *Sambaleswari* temple of Sambalpur

*Sambaleswari* temple is the most important one among all *Sakta* temples of Sambalpur. The presiding deity of the temple is Goddess *Samaleswari* which very popular not only in Sambalpur but in the whole Western Odisha. The *Samaleswari* temple was build by Balaramdev, the First Chauhan Raja of Sambalpur. It was later on renovated by Chhatra Sai. The temple is dated to the last part of 16<sup>th</sup> Century to be constructed that in 1575.<sup>23</sup>

## 6. Architecture

The temple is constructed North-South and facing the North. It is constructed on a raised platform, the lower portion of which contain numerous niches all round occupied by various *Sakta* Goddess. The temple is made of stone and covered with thick lime plaster. The temple is having the architectural features like : high platform, *Jangha*, *high Shikhara* and *Mastaka*. It again has a circumambulatory path around the sanctum which is covered. In addition to the inner sanctum of the temple, there is a pillared hall in front. A flight of steps is provided to lead to the upper platform and the temple. The vimana represent the *triratha* style of temple architecture having a prominent shikhara raising straight from the plinth in a tapering manner upwards. The vimana has thirteen horizontal mouldings and the pagas on the other hand are carved beautifully. They are characterised by a succession of ascending lotus petals terminating grading *angasikharas*. The *beki* write upon the *gandi*, is surmounted by a big *amalaka*, then the *khapuri*, the gold *kalasa*, a trident as *ayudha* and finally a *dhvaja* or flag. The vertical

segments adorned by the *sikhara* with miniature temple motifs and ascending successive lotus petal designs presents and architectural grandeur. Some art historians regards this as the style of khajuraha group or the central Indian temple architecture but some other suggest that it is a logical out come of a regional development in the architectural style. These type of temple is also termed by some scholar at the Chauhan style of temple architecture.<sup>25</sup>

## 7. Parsvadevatas

The *garbhagriha* or the *Samaleswari* is a dark square chamber enshrining Goddess *Samaleswari*, iconography of which dose notMatch to any of the iconographical form of Hindu *Sakta* deities. It is a huge block of stone having the middle a projected shape with depressions on both sides which are provided with beaten gold leaves Representing eyes. Again under it is a narrow groove which represents as mouth. When properly clothed and bedecked with ornaments, it gives the look of a face of a female deity. It was very likely a tribal deity of the locality and was transformed in to a BrahmanicalGoddess through the process of accumulation. The roof of the arched pillared circumambulatory path is made of four domes in the four corners supported by pillars. On the outer wall of the *garbhagriha Sakta* divinities are enshrined. Among those, four handed *Narasimhi*, *Mahisamardini Durga*, ten armed *Mangala*, four armed *Jwalamukhi*, ten armed *Vana Durga*, four handed *Varahi*, four handed *Chhinnamasta*, four handed *Matangi* and four handed *Ramachandi* are enshrined in the niches, three is in the eastern, southern and northern sides respectively. The south -western corner is occupied by *Hanuman*, while the south-eastern corner is enshrined a four handed Goddess called *Ghantasuni*. On the two sides of entrance of the sanctum Goddess *Kali* and four handed *Ugratara* are found.<sup>26</sup> In the pillared hall, there are images of *Vishnu*, *Varaha*, *Mahisamardini Durga*, *Bhairava* and *Kachchhapa Vishnu*, all four handed and *Narasimha*. Some other sculptures of this temple are an eight handed dancing Goddess, ten handed *Ganesa*, four handed *Ganesa*, six armed *Mahisamardini Durga* etc. Three temples of *Vajrangbali*, *Pitabali* and of *Bhairavi* are found inside the campus.

## 8. Fair and Festivals

The celebration of various religious festivals reflect the culture of the people of a particular community or area, *Varta*(vow) *Puja*(worship of sacred places) *Utsava*(celebration) entertainment, marry making, group feast with music and dance bind the community in a socio-cultural tie. <sup>27</sup> The celebration of different festivals is the parameter of the society. Member of such celebration are held through out the year in *Samaleswari* temple of Sambalpur which are different from other *Sakta* temple of Odisha.

Many festivals are observed in the temple through out the years with much pomp and ceremony. <sup>28</sup>

- 1-*Jyestha Purnima-Jalasayee of Bhairava Baba*
- 2-*Shravana Purnima- Shraavanabhishak*
- 3- *Bhadra Sukla Panchami- Nuakhai*
- 4-*Bhadra Krushna Astami- Ambikapuja*
- 5- *Aswani Amabasya- Mahalaya, Dhabalamukha and Gangadarshana*
- 6- *Aswini Sukla Partipata- Navaratra pujarambha and Dasahara*
- 7-*Aswini Purnima- Dhwarohana and Raja-Rajeswaribesh*
- 8- *Kartike Amabasya- Shyamapuja*
- 9-*Pousha Purnima- Poushyabhishek*
- 10- *Magha Sukla Panchmi- Saraswati Puja*
- 11- *Magha purnami- Purnahuti of 24 Prahari Mahamantra Namagagya.*
- 12- *Makar Sankranti- Purnahuti of 3days Deepa Mahayagya*
- 13- *Falgun Purnima- Gundikha and Dolapurnima*
- 14- *Chaitrasukla Pratipata- Basantika Navaratri Pujarambha*
- 15-*Bishuba Sankranti- Sitala Thakurani Puja*
- 16- *Akhyatrutiya- Samaleswari Bhajan Samaroha*

On *nuakhai annabhoga*, rice from new peddy is offered to *Maa Samaleswari*. It is the most important mass festival in the western part of the state which is also a government holiday in the state.<sup>29</sup>

On *mahalaya* about two lac divotes have a holydevi darshan of *Dhabalamukhibesha*. It believes that *darshan* of *Dhabalamukhi Samaleswari* gives the blessing of *Ganga Darshan*. So it is known as *Gangadarshan besha*.

*Devi Samaleswari* is worshipped in *Bhubaneswari mantara* by *kshyatriya sevayats*. They belong to 12 families and uses the surhamee "Rai". On days of festival like *Nuakhai puja* is offred in total 115 places in the temple premises.No one including *pujaka*s demand money or any thing from the devotees which creates an atoshphere for comfortable darshan. On the other hand the *pujaka*s, members of *Samaleswari yubak Sangha* and others organisation as well as the local people co-operate in solving problem of the devotees.<sup>30</sup>

During this festival the *akhada ustad* and *akhada* master display martial art along with their follwers with sticks, words and fire which attracts the people very much Sambalpur is named after Goddess *Samaleswari*. Devotees pilgrims and tourists from all parts of the country come to this place in large number to have a holy *darshan* of *Maa Samaleswari*, the presiding deity.

## 9. Conclusion

In this region there are many *Saktas* centers which have accelaimed eminence due to patronization of kings, Zamindars and Landlords. There are also some lesson known centres, which have no less contribution to the development of *Saktism*, *Saktism* had been a widely prevalent and acceptable cult among the common men and rural folk of retained its popularity and preponderanch. Originally *Samalai* or *Samaleswari* was the Goddess of a family or tribe, and then became the deity of the clan and other tribes. Gradually her states elevated from *Gramadevatas* to *Nagaradevatas* and subsequently to state deity of Sambalpur Kingdom.

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