



Stambheswari/Khambheswari In The Folk Religion And Regional Cultural Tradition Of Odisha

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Abstract:

Humanity, regardless of geographical boundaries, shares a common belief in a supreme power that guides human actions. This belief is manifested in various religious practices that form an integral part of our daily and weekly routines. All religions, in their unique ways, seek to praise the deeds of this supreme power, which is believed to be the orchestrator of all events, both good and bad, in the world. Hinduism, one of the oldest religions in the world, is widely followed in India and to a lesser extent in other parts of the world. Like the ancient religions of Greece and Athens, Hinduism is characterized by its multitude of deities, each responsible for different aspects of nature and guiding humanity towards salvation through various paths. In this paper an attempt has made to explain folk tradition of South Odisha connected to Stambheswari/Khambheswari.

Keywords: Stambheswari, Khambheswari, Folk religion, Cultural tradition, Odisha

Introduction: The worship of Mother Goddess is as old as the religion of Hinduism itself. Mother Goddess is an embodiment of all power. Hymns like the 'Devi Suktam' and 'Durga Chalisa' are written in praise of this feminine deity and are abundant in Hindu mythology. The divine feminine is also worshipped in the name of 'Devi' or 'Shakti' in different parts of India and other places. In India, several 'Shakti peethas' are famous for worshipping this feminine form in different names. These 'Shakti peethas' are believed to be the spots where the body parts of the Goddess Sati fell when Lord Shiva was carrying her burnt body. The

Puranas consider the Shakti peethas as powerful places of worship. These peethas are specially sanctified by the Divine Mother through Her symbolic presence.

The legend of Daksha Yajna offers a mythological explanation of the origin of Shakti peethas. According to the Puranic legend, the places where parts of sati's body fell are said to have become Shakti peethas, or holy seats of the Mother Goddess, which are scattered in all parts of India. There are several Shakti peethas in our country [Pande:2020:07]. It is interesting to note that in due course of time, almost all the Shakti peethas which came up in different regions of India apart from the traditional peethas also associated their origin with the puranic legend and claimed to be the critical Shakti peethas.

Folk religion is a form of Hinduism modified according to the traditions of the local people, mainly residing in tribal areas. Most tribal areas follow the tradition of believing in one deity of their local area by worshipping it as the 'Ista Devi' (Presiding deity) for the feminine form. Several communities worship one "Ista Devi" – the Goddess Kalijai is worshipped as "Ista Devi" by the fishermen community. The people of the Berhampur area worship Maa Budhi Thakthe urani as "Ista Devi", and The Twin Goddesses of Tara-Tarini are worshipped as the "Ista Devis" by the people of the whole of Ganjam in particular and South Odisha in general.

Ganjam is one of the important regions of Odisha, situated in the southern part of Odisha. This region is famous for its scenic beauty and religious importance. The word "Ganj-i-am" which means the Granary of the world. The district is named after the old township and European fort of Ganjam situated on the northern bank of river Rushikulya [Nayak:2013:63]. There are several hills and hillocks, most of which are adorned by small and big temples. Many of these are the temples of 'Devi' belonging to 'Shakti' tradition [Choudhury:2017:50-53]. Hence, it can be said that tourists get double the benefit of pilgrimage and enjoy the beautiful scenery around. For example, the Tara Tarini Temple is one such place with scenic beauty around the hillock, and the temple itself is a majestic structure that covers a large part of the hill. Other such temples include Moharikalua, Maa Bhairabi, Baghdevi/Byaghradevi, Ramachandi, Sinhasini, Maa Khambheswari etc [Satapathy:2017:56-60].

Tribal Deities: The tribes thickly populated some parts of the Ganjam District. The tribal pantheon mainly consists of deities like Sun God, Dharma Devata, Mother Earth and other Gods and Goddesses of lower hierarchy in Hindu mythology. Apart from these are spirits of nature, presiding deities, village tutelary and ancestor spirits. Tribal deities can be put into two major divisions, first the Native and the other the Borrowed. On the Native side, all those deities originated from tribal beliefs. In contrast, the borrowed site is devoted to the worship of the gods, which are influenced by the faiths of religious sects of Saivism, Vaishnavism and Shaktism in Odisha. In short, the tribals believe in the world of Gods and spirits and the world of ancestors [Elwin: 1954: XXII].

The religious performances also differ significantly from the regular Hindu rites. They observe various types of occult practices. They believe in supernatural forces, ghosts, witchcraft and many such practices which are not seen in modern Hinduism [Nayak: 2022:265]. Tribals believe that the priest can communicate with the Gods and spirits and rely much faith on their words. The offering of food, drink,

blood of animals, birds and even human sacrifice were parts of tribal religious practices. Animal sacrifice was in vogue in many temples until recently and still could be seen in minimal volume.

In the twenty-first century, they should be engaged in significant economic growth, enacting the law and developing tribal legal institutions, protecting their cultural heritage, and increasingly engaging them in legal encounters with the states and federal government [Nayak & Naik:2023:104]. The tribal people have their cultural traditions. They follow their local customs and traditions in which music, dance festivals and myths play a prominent role. Some age-old traditions, customs, and animistic beliefs in supernatural powers led to debatable subjects. Over time, a change and assimilation of Hindu and tribal religious practices took place [Mohapatra: 1993:90-111].

Village Deities and Ista Devi tradition in Odisha: Village deities occupy special space in the daily worship of the residents of a village. Most of the village deities are the idols of different incarnations of Shakti. The idol is usually a block of rock decorated with vermilion and turmeric and adorned with a sari. Apart from rocks also these deities are worshipped in the form of wooden pole/ metal pole popularly known as Khambheswari/ Stambheswari.

The tradition of worshipping a village deity is in vogue from time immemorial in Odisha. The traces of this kind of worship are found in other parts of India also and are traced back to the Harappan civilization. Outside India the references of such worship are found in Baluchistan, Iran, Mesopotamia and Egypt.

The village deity is specially worshipped on all important occasions of a village family like marriage, thread ceremony, birth of children etc. If the village is in the grip of an epidemic the villagers try to please the Goddess by various offerings and seek blessings of the village deity to save them from the vagaries of the epidemic. They conduct special puja in groups or the members of the village as a whole to seek blessings from the deity. In olden days sacrifices of animals were made to please the deity. In modern days this practice is replaced by different kind of offerings which include cooked and raw food.

The procedure of worship is simple in the village deity temples. There are usually no elaborate rituals or Sanskrit Hymns to please the deity. The priest in responsibility of the temple offers the daily puja, bhoga (offering of food to the deity) as per the stipulated procedure. Most of the puja procedure is conducted in the local language. Yearly festival is the day of celebration for all the villagers. They offer prayers to the deity with total devotion. Most of these festivals are observed with pomp and devotees from nearby villages gather there on the day of yearly festival to offer prayers and to be a part of the celebrations.

Khambeswari/Sthambeswari- Meaning: The literary meaning of the term 'Stambheswari' can be loosely translated in to a 'pole' or 'pillar' deity. This deity does not have any form but look like just a pillar. In colloquial language it is also known as Khambeswari. Kambeswari is originally a tribal deity but in course of time She occupied a place in the Hindu pantheon. This formless autochthonous deity is widely worshipped in the hilly areas of Bargarh, Sambalpur, Angul, Talcher, Dhenkanal, Bolangir, Subarnapur, Boudh, Kalahandi and in Aska in the Ganjam districts of Odisha. She is worshipped as a manifestation of Shakti in the form of wooden posts or pillars.

Indigenous origin of Stambesvari: The indigenous origin of the goddess can be traced to ancient times when some of the tribes in Western and Southern Odisha started Worshipping Shakti in the form of wooden posts or pillars. The fact remains that priests like Sudramuni, Muni, Jani, Mali, Rauta and Dehuri were engaged in worshipping the deity belonging to the so-called lower castes according to the caste division of Hindu Dharma or tribal origin. The local legends (discussed elsewhere in the article) also evidence that the deity had a tribal origin [Rath: 2009:85-90].

Origin of Khambheswari/Stambheswari tradition and its worship in Odisha: In the ancient period, the aboriginal goddess was worshipped by the non-Aryan tribes of Odisha. Though in the beginning She was a tribal deity, in the course of time, She was adopted as a Hindu deity. Gradually, worship of the goddess transformed and assimilated into a Shakti cult.

The Aryan tribes, which had settled in different areas of Odisha, established smaller kingdoms and tried to establish friendly relations with the ethnic tribes for mutual benefit. This eventually led to the inclusion of tribal gods and goddesses into the fold of Hinduism. According to Pargiter, “the Aryans met with the religious practices and beliefs among whom (the tribes) they ruled over or came into lasting contact with, and have assimilated some of them gradually, thus modifying their religion to a certain extent”[Pargiter:1922:03]. However, as sighted in an article by Panda, the German scholars A. Antemen and A.H. Kulke opine that the goddess Stambesvaree was established during the period of 5th Century A.D. Anterman also identified Stabesvaree of Aska as the same with Subhadra, the goddess of Puri[Panda:2017:45-46].

During the 1st century A.D., Jainism, Buddhism, and Hinduism absorbed several aboriginal deities into their fold. The tradition of Stambheswari entered the fold of the Hindu religion at the same time. The Bhanja Dynasty of the Khinjili Mandala region, which was predominantly tribal in nature, patronized the Goddess Sthambhewari, which was evidenced in the Singhara copper plate of Ranaka Ranabhanja. The Kalahandi copper plate grant of the Sulki king Tushtikar is a testimony to the fact that King Tustikar worshipped Stambeswari as the tutelary deity of the dynasty. The Kamalpur cooper plate grant issued around A.D 1100 was the first one where the Odia word Khambesvari is used for the Sanskrit word Stambheswari[Rath:2009:85-89].

There is also evidence that some of Odisha's dynasties worshipped the deity from 8 to 11 Century A.D. They attached the word ‘Stambha’ in their names (Kanchana Stambha, Kula Stambha, Jayastambha etc.) to show their devotion to the deity. Starting from the conquest of territory to any event that brings prosperity to the kingdom was credited to the deity's blessings. Rana Stambha, in his Puri Copper Plate Grant, mentioned the word “Khambeswari”, while Raja Kula Stambha mentioned it in the Dhenkanal Copper Plate[Patnaik:2004:276-301].

In the ninth century, the areas of Baud, Kandhamal and Ghumsur also evidenced the worship of the Devi in the form of Khambheswari. Ranakarana Bhaja's copper plate grants mentioned Sthabheswari Baralabdha meaning roughly ‘gaining boons from Stambheshwari’.

The Bhanja Kings worshipped the Khambeswari of Aska, built a temple for the deity, and granted lands and other grants for the daily worship of the god in the 13th century. The temple of Khambeswari of Aska also received liberal patronage from these kings. During the 15th century, Raja Pratap Dhananjaya Bhanja (1637-1701 A.D.) took up the renovation of the Temple of Khambeswari of Aska.

Stambheswari temple in Aska: Aska is a town in the district of Ganjam, Odisha. It is around 40 km from Berhampur, another central city of the Ganjam district, with more comprehensive railroad connectivity. Though Aska houses numerous temples, a devotee would not miss to visit the Devi temple of Maa Khambeswari thakurani of Aska. This temple is famous as one of the Devi temples of the Shakti cult. The renowned and well-known legend of Sati (when she visited her father's Yagna without intimation, she was insulted and unable to bear the insult; she sacrificed herself in the fire. Siva became angry and started dancing to destroy the world (Rudratandava), carrying Sati's body in his hands. Lord Vishnu used the circular disc (Sudrashna) to cut Sati's body and control Siva's anger. The parts of her body fell in different parts of India and are worshipped as Shakti peethas) she was also associated with the temple in the same way as it was related to the Tara Tarini temple of Ganjam District. It is believed that the local devotees of Khambeswari have appropriated the traditional legend to justify the importance of their Shakti peetha at Aska.

In the olden days, the temple was small, and the deity was a pole or pillar. But later a temple was built and became famous as an essential worship site in Odisha. The simple pole structure has been transformed into an anthropomorphized deity. The deity's appearance changed. A round-shaped metal head adorned the top of the pole, giving it a feminine form. The body is covered with a Sari and then it is ornamented. The face is a sight with a protruding tongue, three eyes and an opened mouth, all carved out of gold. After all these changes, the deity became a regular Hindu deity and resembled the idol of Maa Subhadra of Puri.

Legends associated with the Worship of Khambeswari: The most widely known legend states that a hermit named Khambamuni lived in the forest near the present temple. One day, Khambamuni dreamt that the deity appeared before him and showed her desire to be worshipped by him. Khambamuni then asked the deity to stay with him as his daughter; the deity agreed and stayed with him.

But the legend says the deity was mischievous and angered the sage often with her childish acts. She took the mudi mua (puffed and sweetened rice) from village traders and asked them to collect the money from Khambamuni. Fed up with the girl's acts, the villagers asked the sage about the girl's relationship with him. Compelled by the circumstances the sage had to reveal the truth and said that she was not an ordinary girl but an incarnation of Shakti. Devi was unhappy about it, demanding costly ornaments and saris from the Khambamuni. When the mischiefs angered him a lot, he lost control of his mind and slapped the deity in the form of a little girl. Maa Khambeswari then told Khambamuni that her childhood acts were over, and She disappeared immediately. Soon, the sage also died. Seeing one stone appearing in the same place where the sage built his ashram, people started worshipping it as 'Khambeswari' – the daughter of Khambamuni.

According to another legend, there was a tribal chief on the hill of Rushimal who worshipped eight 'daredevils' (the wooden pole deities). Out of these eight deities, the important one was Khambheswari.

According to this legend, once the Rushikulya River was flooded and with this flood water came a piece of log floating. A washerman collected this piece and kept it in his house for some time. After a few days, he wanted to use it for firewood and axed it to collect it. The moment the axe touched the wood, he saw that the wooden log started bleeding human blood. Frightened by this sight, the washerman called the nearby people and showed them the bleeding log. Everybody was afraid, and no one touched the wood. Meanwhile, the washerman died, and then, one night, Khambamuni dreamt that the deity complained to him that she was lying on the ground with no care. Khambamuni brought the wood log to his home in the forest, placed it under a tree, and started worshipping it. Based on the sage's name and the wood's shape, the deity has become famous as Khambheswari.

Whatever the legend associated with the deity, the truth lies in the fact that the people believed that the deity took the form of a pole (Khambha) and came to the village to bless and guard the people of the town. From that day to this day, the same belief is seen among the people of Aska's near and far areas. The firm belief in the karuna (compassion) of the deity made the Khambeshwari temple famous for long and every year; people from all over Odisha visit this temple, particularly on the day of yearly festivals.

Different castes worship Khambhesvari. The priests of the Khambhesvari shrines, both male and female, are not Brahmins. They are affiliated with other tribal groups. The male priests called themselves Sudra Muni, Muni Jani, Dehuri, Devata, Raula, etc. The female priests are generally called Janiani, Maliari'. The puja is performed in some shrines daily and in others only once weekly or monthly.

Fairs and Festivals of Maa Khambheswari: Fairs and festivals are an essential part of Hindu worship. Mainly, tribal and village life is bound around the fairs and festivals. The folklore is a mirror of these fairs and festivals. Maa Khambheswari of Aska, like any other village deity, has some general and special fairs to celebrate apart from the daily worship by the devotees.

Khambheswari deity has a famous festival named Maa Khambheswari Baisakhi Jatra, celebrated annually. 'Thakurani' – Devi in different forms in nearby regions is considered a powerful deity. Hence, Khambheswari Thakurani Jatra is an essential festival in this region. The fair is held in April – Baisakha according to the Hindu calendar. Tuesdays in this month are considered auspicious [Tripathy: 2024:49-53]. As a part of the fair, the deity is taken for a tour of the town, sitting on a throne made of alloys of metal. Then, there is a brief halt at the western part of the town, where the deity receives puja and offerings from the devotees. After a short rest, the deity returns to the temple. The deity is specially worshipped by those who are childless to bless them with children and those who are suffering from diseases to get relief from diseases. After fulfilling their wish, those who wished for children revisit the temple on the Tuesdays of Chaitra. They offer the hairs of the children (mundana) to the goddess. Those who visited the deity for health also visited the deity with their families and offer Bhoga (offering of food). People strongly believe that the goddess is benevolent, understands the difficulties of her children, and stands by them when they need her.

Conclusion: The yearly fairs include various events, processions and other rituals. These fairs and other Hindu festivals, such as Navaratri, celebrated in the temple, attract thousands of devotees from all over the state. The different events arranged during the processions and celebrations as a part of the fair symbolise folk culture and carry forward the folk heritage. Fairs like Khambheswari Jatra blend Hindu and tribal traditions and represent both cultures. These kinds of fairs represent the rural culture, take it to the towns and cities, and blend rural-urban cultures as they attract many people from far-off places from Odisha and nearby states.

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