

Some Aspects of Shakti Worship in Ancient India

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The beginnings of the worship of the female principle go back in India, as in many other countries of the ancient world, to a very remote past. Remains of the cult of the Mother Goddess have been recognized by many scholars among the various interesting objects unearthed in the pre-Vedic sites of the Indus Valley. One of the commonest of such objects is a pottery figurine of a female, practically nude, with a very short skirt held round the loins by a girdle. It has been said that 'these pottery images of the goddess whose name is unknown were kept almost in every house in the ancient Indus cities, probably in a recess or on a bracket on the wall.'¹

The early Indus Valley settlers seem also to have worshipped her in her aniconic form; many ring stones, some of a very suggestive nature, discovered at Mohenjodaro and Harappa can be described with a great deal of justification as cult objects symbolizing the Mother aspect of the goddess. An earlier suggestion of some scholars that these objects were of an architectural character; being no other than mere components or sections of a peculiar type of a column, cannot be seriously considered. They should be studied along with not only the much decorated types of ring stones of the Maurya period found in many north Indian sites like Taxila, Kosam, Rajghat, and Patna, but also the phallic objects symbolizing the Father God of the Indus Valley people conveniently described

by Marshall as Proto-Shiva. The ornamental ring stones of the historic period no doubt represent some variety, but their general character shows that 'they were cult objects comparable with the prehistoric ring stones of the Indus Valley on the one hand and the *cakras* and the *yantras* of the later Shāktas on the other.'²

One such, of a representative nature, unearthed by Marshall at Hathial near Taxila, has been described by him in this manner: 'It is of polished sandstone, 3¼" in diameter, adorned on the upper surface with concentric bands of cross and cable patterns and with four nude female figures alternating with honeysuckle designs engraved in relief round the central hole.'³ These female figures either represent different aspects of the goddess, or are mere repetitions of the same theme. The Lady of the ring stone exactly resembles the gold leaf female figure dug out of the *stupa* at Lauriya Nandangarh by Block and correctly identified by Coomaraswamy and others as the Mother Goddess.

Seal amulets

The juxtaposition of the much earlier undecorated ring stones with the phallic objects of the Indus region leaves little doubt about their original character. With the aforesaid iconic and aniconic objects associated with the cult of the female principle may be considered a few devices on some seal amulets of the early Indus sites.

One such device only, on the right side of the obverse face of an oblong terracotta seal, unearthed at Harappa, may be noticed here. It shows a nude female figure upside-down with legs wide apart, and 'with a plant issuing from her womb'; her arms are shown in the same position in which those of the Proto-Shiva on the Mohenjodaro seal amulet are depicted. Marshall rightly compared this striking representation of the goddess, with a plant issuing from the womb, with the device on an early Gupta terracotta sealing showing a goddess with her legs in much the same position, but with a lotus emerging from her neck instead of from her womb.

The idea of vegetation emerging from some part of the body of the goddess reminds us of the *Devi-māhātmya* concept of the Shākambhari aspect, in which she is said to have nourished her drought-afflicted people with vegetation produced from her body (*Yato 'hamakhilam lokam ātmadehasamudbhavaih; bharishyāmi surāh shākairāvrishteh prānadhārakaih. Shākambhariti vikhyātim tadā yāsyāmyaham bhuvi*).⁴ The pre-Vedic archaeological data discussed above throw much light on the early stages of the cult long before it was fully developed in the Shakti worship of the epic and the Purānic age.

It has been usually accepted by scholars that Vedic ritualism was characterized by the prominence given to male deities, and goddesses, comparatively few in number, play very little part in it. Macdonell says that 'Goddesses occupy a very subordinate position in Vedic belief and worship, and play hardly any part as rulers of the world.'⁵ But the female deities, though few, are of a very interesting character. Some of them bring out in a striking manner the inner workings of the Vedic seers' minds.

If an analysis is made of the nature of such goddesses as Aditi, Ushas, Sarasvati, Prithivi, Rātri, Purandhi, Ilā, Dhishanā, Vāc,

one cannot fail to recognize the importance ascribed to them by the ancient *rishis* of India. Aditi, the Divine Mother, Ushas, the great Goddess of Dawn, on whose description and characterization the Vedic seers employed their highest poetic fervour and genius, Sarasvati, primarily deifying a river, on the banks of which distinctive traits of Vedic culture were formulated. Prithivi, the great mother earth, Rātri, the goddess personifying a starlit night, Purandhi, Ilā, and Dhishanā, etc.—personifications of such abstract attributes as abundance and nourishment—all these were the different manifestations of the great divine principle conceived by the old sages in its female aspect.

Divine energy

But it is in the sublime conception of Vāc, the great goddess of speech, that is to be found one of the greatest and, at the same time, simplest expositions of the idea of the divine Energy or *Shakti* inherent in everything—animals, men, and gods and in the universe. The *Devi-sukta*,⁶ in the eight verses of which occurs this sublime characterization, came to occupy a very prominent position in the Shākta ritual of subsequent times. A place of honour was also given in it to the *Rātri-sukta*.⁷ All these facts show that the developed Shakti worship of later days was not a little indebted to the goddess concepts of the early Vedic age, the very idea underlying the word *Shakti* being based on the central theme of the *Devi-sukta*.

It is, however, a well-known fact that there is no mention in the *Rig-Veda* of such names of Ambikā, Umā, Durgā, and Kālī, which became singly or collectively the name of the central figure of the Shākta cult. Such names begin to appear in the later Vedic texts. Thus, Ambikā appears as Rudra's sister in the *Vājasaneyi Samhitā*

(III. 57) and in the *Taittiriya Brāhmana* (I. 6. 10. 4-5), and as Rudra's consort in the *Taittiriya Āraṇyaka* (X. 18). There is an invocation to the goddess styled Durgā Vairocāni in the tenth book of the same *Āraṇyaka*; she is described here also as Kātyāyani and Kanyākumārī in the *Durgā-gāyatri* (X. 1. 7). The *Kena Upanishad* refers to Umā Haimavati as the personified Brahmaidya (III. 25). The *Mundaka Upanishad* mentions Kālī and Karālī, but they are described here as two of the seven tongues of Agni; the names are Kālī, Karālī, Manojavā, Sulohitā, Sudhumravarnā, Sphulingini, and Vishvaruci (I. 2. 4). Their number is to be noted, for it corresponds to the number of the Divine Mothers—the Sapta Mātrikā.

Greek parallel

The name of *Shri* as a concrete goddess concept occurs for the first time in the *Shatapatha Brāhmana*, such words as *siri* and *rayi*, indicating wealth, prosperity, and fortune, occurring in earlier literature. The *Shatapatha Brāhmana* account of the origin of this goddess reminds us of the story current in Greek mythology about the birth of Pallas Athene. Such names of the Devi as Bhadrakālī, Bhavāni, and Durgi are found in late Vedic work like *Sāṅkhyāyana* and *Hiranyakesh* in *Grihya-Sutras*, and in the *Taittiriya Āraṇyaka*. The aforesaid data clearly prove that some features of the cult, which were in a nascent stage in earlier times, were gradually taking the shape and form of a type well familiar in the epic and Purānic age.

The two famous *Durgā-stotras* in the *Mahābhārata* (IV. 6 and VI. 23) and the *Āryāstava* in its supplement (*khila*) *Harivamsha* (III. 3) illustrate in a characteristic manner the various constituent elements underlying the principal cult picture of the developed Shākta cult. The

composite goddess was no doubt made up of such various elements as her Mother, Daughter, and Sister aspects, her Vedic Aryan element, inasmuch as she or her particular forms were the objects of worship of the members of such Aryan sage clans as the Kushikas and the Kātyas (compare her appellations Āryā, Kaushiki, and Kātyāyani), and the various non-Aryan strands in her character. It is specially mentioned in the *Āryāstava* that she was well worshipped by the Shavaras, the Barbaras, and the Pulindas (*Shavarairbarbaraishcaiva pulindaishca supujitā*), and she is often described in other contexts as Aparnā (not even covered with a leaf garment, that is, nude), Nagna-Shavari (the nude Shavara woman), and Parna-Shavari (the leaf-clad Shavara woman).

It is true that the *Durgā-stotra* in the *Virātaparvan* is not found in all the recensions of the *Mahābhārata* and thus is regarded as an interpolation, but this fact does not minimize the importance and authenticity of its contents. The original *Rāmāyana*, on the other hand, is less indicative of the prevalence of Shakti worship in India. The incident of the worship of the Devi by Rāma, when he was in some difficulty about Rāvana's destruction, is to be found in the Bengali *Rāmāyana* by Krittivāsa. In its Sanskrit original (*Yuddhakānda*, 106), it is the wise counsel of the sage Agastya to propitiate the Sun-god by ceremonial recitation of the *Ādityahridayastava*, that helps Rāma to put the demon king of Lankā to death. But the absence of any clear mention of the worship of the Devi does not in the least suggest that the Shakti cult was not well in vogue during the time when the lesser epic was composed.

Puranic characterizations

Some of the early authoritative Purānas, however, fully compensate for the dearth of reference to the Shākta cult in the

Rāmāyana. The most representative and important of the Purānic characterization of the cult picture is to be found in the *Devīmāhātmya* section of the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāna*. The various *Devi-stutis* (*Brahmā-stuti*, *Shakrādi-stuti*, and *Nārāyani-stuti*) in it reveal in a striking manner some of the multifarious strands that contributed to the building of the concept of the composite cult goddess. The last few verses in the *Nārāyani-stuti* chapter, which are put into the mouth of the goddess herself, refer to several of her incarnate forms, assumed for the welfare of the three worlds (*trailokyasya hitārthāya*) and for the destruction of the wicked (the *dānavas* in this context). The last couplet ‘*Ittham yadā yadā bādhā dānavotthā bhavishyati, tadā tadāvatiryāham karishyāmyarisamkshayam*’ incidentally reminds us of the famous exposition of the theory of divine incarnation (*Avatāravāda*) in the fourth canto of the *Gītā*. The sublime ideas about the divine power and energy, again, that are so beautifully expressed in the two great hymns of the *Rig-Veda*, the *Devi-sukta* and the *Rātri-sukta*, are fully expounded in the elocutory verses of the Purāna. A careful comparison of them with the epic *Durgā-stotras* alluded to above brings to light also one important and interesting fact. The Purānakāra seems to have almost completely eschewed any explicit reference to the non-Aryan elements in the composite goddess so frequently and unblushingly mentioned in the *stotras*.

Mother aspects

It will now be necessary to expound with the help of literary and archaeological data some of the different aspects of the cult goddess alluded to above. The Mother Goddess of the pre-Vedic times and Aditi the Mother Divine in the *Rig-Veda* have already been mentioned. The epic *Durgā-*

stotras also harp on her Mother aspect, and she is described as Skandamātā, Vedamātā, Mother of Siddhasena, and Mother of the *mantra*-collections, though her Daughter and Sister aspects are more prominently emphasized there. Her *Jaganmātā* or *Jagadambā* aspect is more outstanding in the *Durgā-stutis* of the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāna*. The Mātrikā concept, specially canalized into that of the Seven Divine Mothers, namely, Brahmāni, Māheshvari, Kaumāri, Vaishnavi, Vārāhi, Indrāni, and Cāmundā (who are also conceived as the individual Shaktis of the gods after whom they are named, the last one being the Shakti of Bhairava, an aspect of Shiva), is also fairly old, being met with in texts and inscriptions of the Gupta period.

There is a reference in the *Brihat Samhitā* to the images of the Mātriganas, who are to be made with the features and cognizances of the gods after whom they are named (LVII. 56:—*Mātriganah kartavyah svanāmadevānurupakritacihnah*), and in the chapter after the next of the same text, *Pratimāpratishthāpana*, we are told that it is only those well-versed in the Tāntric *pujā* rites who are fit for the ceremonial installation of these images (*Mātrināmapi mandalakramavido*); *mandalakrama* has been simply explained by the commentator Utpala as *pujākrama*, but the very word *mandala* seems to suggest its association with the Tāntric *cakra*.

This raises an interesting point about the antiquity of Tāntricism, most, if not all, of the extant texts which expound it being adjudged as late compositions. The *Brihat Samhitā*, which is usually dated in the sixth century A.D., thus appears to associate the worship of the Mother aspect of the goddess with Tāntric rituals. We find a still earlier reference to this association in a stone inscription of the first quarter of the fifth century A.D. found in the village of

Gangdhar (Jhalwar, Madhya Bharat). In lines 22-23 of the inscription, mention is made of the erection of 'the very terrible abode of the (Divine) Mothers, filled full of Dākinis, who utter loud and tremendous shouts in joy, and who stir up the very oceans with the mighty wind rising from the Tāntric rites of their religion' (*Mātrināncā pramudita-ghanātyartha-nirhrādininām tantrobhutaprabala-pavanodvartitāmbhoni-dhinām . . . gatamidam dākinisamprakīrnām veshmatyugram nripatisacivokārayatpunyahetoh*). The royal minister, who caused this shrine to be made for merit or piety, was well aware of the nature of the rites connected with the creed centring on the Divine Mothers, as the mention of the Dākinis and the terrific Tāntric rites prove.

Daughter aspect

The Daughter aspect of the goddess is also hinted at in some of the hymns of the *Rig-Veda*. Aditi is sometimes described as the daughter of the Vasus, and in a later cosmogonic hymn (X. 72. 4-5) she is said to be the daughter as well as the mother of Daksha. Mention has already been made of her description as Kanyākumāri in the *Durgā-gāyatri* of the *Taittiriya Āranyaka* (X. 1. 7). But this is very frequently alluded to in the epic *Durgā-stotras*. Durgā is born to Yashodā, the wife of the cowherd Nanda, and is a virgin goddess practising *brahmacarya* and thus sustaining the three worlds (*Kumāri brahmacārini, kaumāram vratamāsthāya tridivam pālitam tvayā*), and she is the *brahmacarya* of the virgins.

This trait of the Devi finds a curious echo in one of the passages of the *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea*, a work composed by an unknown Greek in the first century A.D. There is a reference here to the southernmost point of India, named as Comara, which was traditionally associated, according to the author, with a virgin

goddess who bathed in the seas lapping its coast. This is an undoubted allusion to the sacred Kumārikā-tirtha, where the Devi is still worshipped in her virgin aspect. Such was the importance attached to this form of the cult picture that in some medieval texts (compare Rājashekhara's *Kāvya-mimāmsā*, XVII) the sub-continent of India is given the name of Kumāri-dvipa. It is true there is no mention of this important *tirtha* in the *Si-yu-ki* of Hiuen Tsang, but it should be noted that the Chinese pilgrim did not visit this southernmost part of India.

Sister aspect

The Sister aspect of the goddess is to be found as early as in the *Rig-Veda*. She is once, strangely enough, described as the sister of the Ādityas,⁸ and a passage in the *Atharva-Veda* (VI. 4. 1) refers to her brothers as well as sons. Mention has already been made about the description of the goddess Ambikā as the sister of Rudra in the *Vājasaneyi Samhitā* and the *Taittiriya Brāhmana*. But this trait of the Devi again finds prominent place in the *Durgā-stotras*. She is frequently described there as the sister, not of Rudra, but of Vāsudeva Krishna and Baladeva (*Vāsudevasya bhagini, Gopendrasyanujā, bhagini Baladevasya*, etc). Some of her names in this aspect are Ekānamshā, Bhadrā, and Subhadrā. One of the earliest references to the first of these names is to be found in the *Brihat Samhitā*, where two-, four-, and eight-armed images of the goddess are described, and it is specially enjoined that such images of Ekānamshā should be placed between those of Krishna and Baladeva (*Ekānamshā kāryā devi Baladeva-Krishnayormadhye*, LVII. 37).

That the worship of this aspect of the goddess was very prevalent in eastern India is proved by some extant images of the early and late medieval period. An inscribed

bronze composition of *c.* tenth century A.D. found at Imadpur (Bihar) and now in the collection of the British Museum, London, shows the goddess Ekānamshā between the figures of Baladeva and Krishna. There is no doubt that this was a cult object held in veneration by her devotees in Bihar. That she was also worshipped in some parts of Orissa in medieval times is proved by the discovery of such sculpture compositions. Many people may not know that the central object of worship in the temple of Ananta Vāsudeva, on the bank of the holy tank Bindusarovara at Bhubaneswar, is none other than this composite sculpture group in which the principal or the central figure is that of Ekānamshā. A careful scrutiny of the images collected in the subsidiary shrines inside the temple enclosure of Lingarāja at Bhubaneswar will also reveal the existence of such relief compositions of medieval times. The symbolic icons of Jagannātha, Balarāma, and Subhadrā in the main sanctum, again, of the Puri temple is clearly reminiscent of the Ekānamshā worship; the two main subsidiary shrines of Vimalā and Annapurnā, occupying important positions in the Jagannātha temple enclosure at Puri, also emphasize in a way this association of Shakti worship with Vishnu worship. Subhadrā, in the image group of Balarāma, Subhadrā, and Jagannātha, obviously stands for the sister aspect of the goddess.

Consort of Shiva

One, if not the most important, aspect of the Devi is that of the concept about her as the great consort of Shiva. Ambikā is conceived in some later Vedic texts, as we have shown, as the spouse of Rudra, the Vedic counterpart of Shiva. This mythology is further reoriented in the well-known story of Daksha's sacrifice in the epic literature. I shall lay stress here only on the '*pitha*' idea

which grew out of it. The dismembered limbs of Sati, Daksha's daughter and beloved consort of Shiva, fell according to epic and Purānic tradition, in different parts of India, and different Bhairavas—really Shiva in his many terrific forms—kept guard over them. The cult adaptation of this story was the transformation of these places into Shākta *pithas*, variously enumerated in different texts. They usually consisted of shrines containing aniconic—sometimes iconic—emblems of the goddess supposed to be associated with one or other of her different limbs, with the temples of her consort close by. Bhairava or Shiva thus kept a watchful eye, as it were, over his beloved spouse.

The idea underlying this mythology no doubt goes back to a remote period, but it is fully worked out in detail in comparatively later texts. The *Tirthayātrā* section of the *Mahābhārata* (*Vanuparvan*) refers to three Shākta *pithas* associated with the *yoni* and *stana* of the goddess. *Kundas* or sacred tanks are also their inevitable adjuncts, and mention is made there of two *yonikundas*—one situated at Bhimāsthāna beyond Pancanada (Punjab), and the other on a hill called Udyatparvata probably in the Gaya region, and one *stanakunda*, on a peak known as Gaurishikhara, possibly in the Gauhati region.⁹

The evidence of the epic passages is partially corroborated by the statement of the keenly observant Chinese pilgrim, Hiuen Tsang. He records that there was a great mountain peak in the heart of ancient Gandhāra (modern Peshawar district), which possessed 'a likeness (or image) of Maheshvara's spouse Bhimādevi of dark blue stone. According to local accounts, this was a natural image of the goddess; it was a great resort of devotees from all parts of India. At the foot of the mountain was a

temple of Maheshvaravada in which the ash-smearing Tirthikas performed much worship'.¹⁰ Bhimādeviparvata and the site of Maheshvaradeva's temple below have been identified by Foucher with the hill known as Mt. Karamar and the modern village of Shewa at its foot, in the Peshwar district. The existence of a very sacred shrine of all-India fame with 'the natural image' of the goddess (probably an aniconic stone emblem) and the temple of Shiva near by distinctly alludes to the developed concept of the Shākta *pithas*.

The *Mahāmāyuri*, a Sanskrit Buddhist text composed in the early centuries of the Christian era, also seems to refer to the shrine of Bhimā when it lays down that 'Shivabhadra was the titular deity of Bhishana'.¹¹ Bhishanā (the feminine form of Bhishana) is a synonym of Bhimā, and we have copious instances in Sanskrit literature of designating one and the same locality by its various synonyms (compare the various names of Hastināpura, Nāgasāhvaya, Gajasāhvaya). The cumulative evidence of the aforesaid data proves the early prevalence of Shiva-Shakti worship in this

peculiar form in various parts of India, specially in the extreme north and north-west. The early association of Tāntricism with the Mother aspect of the Devi has already been commented upon. Certain observations of the Chinese pilgrim also show how it became the special trait of this form of worship of the goddess in that remote part of India. Hiuen Tsang says, 'The people of Uddiyāna (Swat valley, north of Gandhāra) were fond of learning but not as a study, and they made the acquisition of magical formulae (really Tāntric ritualism) their occupation'.¹² The *Hevajra Tantra* (c. eighth century A.D.) enumerates the following four holy regions as *pithas*:— (1) Jālandhara, (2) Odiyāna (Uddiyāna—Udyāna), (3) Purnagiri, and (4) Kāmarupa.¹³

It is not the intention of the present speaker to give a complete picture of Shakti worship, including its fully developed phases of later times. Some of its early aspects, specially from the historical and evolutionary point of view, have only been touched upon here. The topic is a vast one, and it cannot be satisfactorily dealt with in such a short speech. ■

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 Mackay, *Early Indus Civilization*, 2nd Edition, p. 54.
- 2 Banerjea, *Development of Hindu Iconography*, p. 188.
- 3 *A.S.I.A.R.*, 1927-28, p. 66.
- 4 *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāna, Devi-māhātmya*, XCI, pp. 48-49.
- 5 *Vedic Mythology*, p. 124.
- 6 *Rig-Veda*, Vol. X, p. 125.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 127.
- 8 *Rig-Veda*, Vol. VII, pp. 10-15.
- 9 D. C. Sircar, *Shākta-pithas*, *JRASB*, Letters, Vol. XIV, pp. 8-9.
- 10 Watters, *On Yuan Chwang*, Vol. I, pp. 221-22.
- 11 For detailed discussion about Bhimā-Bhishanā, compare the present writer's article in *Indian Historical Quarterly*, Vol. XIV (1938), pp. 751-53.
- 12 Watters, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 225.
- 13 Sircar, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

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