

THE CONCEPT OF SHAKTI: A STUDY

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ABSTRACT: *Worship of the female principle (Shakti) and of Surya did not achieve equal importance as the other major Brahminical cults. The female aspect of the divinity might have been venerated in the pre-Vedic times. In the Vedic age respect was shown also to the female principle as the Divine Mother, the Goddess of abundance and personified energy (Shakti). However, clear reference to the exclusive worshippers of the Devi is not to be found until a comparatively late period. Surya has been venerated in India from the earliest times. In Vedic and epic mythology, Sun and his various aspects played a very important part. The East Iranian (Shakadvipi) form of the solar cult was introduced in parts of northern India in the early centuries of the Christian era. But it was only at a comparatively late period that god figured as the central object in religious movements.*

KEYWORDS: *Shakti, Cult, Durgā, Sakambari*

INTRODUCTION

In this eternal world, either man or woman either rich or poor, either young or old everybody desires to lead a life with peace, joy and happy. For this one has to perform his physical function which known as work or 'karma' but depends on an unseen power. This unseen power believed as god or goddess and people worship them. The female counterpart of God is known Shakti. People adore mother Goddess in a female energy as creator, preserver and destroyer of the universe which is considered to be the power of the universe. Indian iconography has chiefly been catalogued by historians; it has not been extensively subjected to the analytical scrutiny that is essential to its use as a source of knowledge about our historical past. The present writing is therefore a briefly discussing about iconography at Shakti cult. As an Index of socio religious change at the micro and macro levels. Shakti cult was most dominant and popular among the people of Medieval Bengal. It plays an important role from that time till today. It plays an important place in the literatures also. There are various forms of the cult worshipped by the people in the ancient period is evidenced by the inscriptions also.

1.1. CONCEPT OF SHAKTI

The word Shakti is derived from the root 'sak' meaning the capacity to have power and to 'perform'. It indicates both capacity and activity. It may also be applied to. These are all powers of activity which are ultimately reducible to the primordial energy (*adya Shakti*) from where every other form of power proceeds. Further, Shakti may be conceived to be the any form of action like seeing, hearing, smelling etc. Shakti cult is a deep-rooted religious and historical phenomenon which evolved throughout the ages in the whole world. The Shakti cult had been worshipped as the mother Goddess, conceived as power both creative and destructive has been an object of worship in India from early times.¹ Personification of universal energy in abstract, She resides in the macrocosm and microcosm. While all the forms of activity in the perceptible world are the manifestation of the macrocosmic forms of Shakti, in the microcosmic form she resides doormat in the human body at the bottom of the spinal column (*muladhara chakra*). The ultimate aim delineated in the scriptures that the association of Shakti and Siva is at the root of material and spiritual progress of mankind. Men in all ages have realized the manifestation of Siva through her in contemplation, and this has been possible only through worship.

1.2. GENESIS OF SHAKTI CULT

The various views regarding the genesis of the concept of Shakti and her cult are as follows:

- i.. According to some the fertility theory in the Hindu conception of the earth as Mother and its intimate association with agriculture may be the origin of the Shakti cult.
- ii. Friedrich Heiler has opined that the conception of God as mother is as natural and ultimate as the concept of Him as father? And it is just possible that the Indian concept of the Shakti cult is nothing but a part of the widespread worship of Mother Goddess, in his work 'The Shaktas' speaks of the possibility of certain contacts between Knossos and Egypt on the one hand and Per-Aryan Indian on the other as early as the 3 millennium B.C. leading to the worship of Mother goddess. In this regard the history of India, Baluchistan, Iran, Mesopotamia, Asia minor, Egypt etc. bear testimony to the worship of Mother goddess in pre-historic.
- iii. Mackenzie advocates an Asiatic origin. He says that during the Brahmanic age, the Bharatas, the inhabitants of "Middle Kingdom" started worshipping Bhārati, goddess not unlike the mother goddesses of Egypt and early Europe. This goddess became associated with 'Sarasvati' and was ultimately recognized as the wife of Brahma, the Supreme God. When Buddhism declined and Siva became the most popular deity, this goddess worship was transformed to his consort and was organized into a separate sect".
- iv. Starbruck in his book Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics has mentioned that when he Aryan invaders settled in India and led a peaceful agricultural life, the worship of female deities rose to a position of supreme importance and among these were *Durgā*, the eternity, *Sarasvati*, supreme wisdom and Shakti, mother of all phenomena. either side of the head". Large numbers of terracotta figures, very probably representing this goddess have been found in course of excavations from various sites of the Indus Valley, The early settlers of this valley appear also to have worshipped the goddess in her an iconic form. Many ringstones, discovered at the sites can justifiably be described as cult objects symbolising the mother aspect of the goddess. These must 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, Košam, Rajghat and Patna, but also phallic objects symbolising the father god of the Indus Valley people, conveniently described by Marshall as Proto shrines. The ornamented ringstones of the historic period no doubt represent some variety, but their general character shows that they were cult objects comparable with the ring stones of the Indus Valley on the one hand and the *cakras* and the *yantras* of the later Śaktas on the other A seal unearthed at Harappa 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-Siva on the Mohenjodaro seal amulet are depicted. Marshall has rightly compared this striking representation of the nude female figure with plant issuing from her womb, with the almost similar example of early Gupta terracotta sealing showing a female figure with her legs in much the same position but with a lotus emerging from her neck instead of from her womb'. This idea of vegetation emerging from some part of the body of a female form can at once remind us of the *Devi-Mahatmya* concept of the *Sakambari* aspect of the goddess. Thus,

in the opinion of John Marshall, Shakti worship originated in India out of the cult of the mother goddess, and it was closely connected with the cult of Siva. Shakti and Siva are integrally linked in Indian imagination, as the creative principle (power) and the creator, with colourful family representing the collective organism of life.

The pre-Vedic archaeological data discussed above throws much light on the early stages of the cult long before it was fully developed into the Shakti worship of the Epic and the Puranic age. The Epics and the *Puranas* are mainly responsible for the consecration of this female entity in Hindu pantheon and unfolding her diverse aspects supported by various myths and legends.² Historical evidence suggests that Mother Goddess worship was prevalent in different forms in the Indian Peninsula. It seems that ancient people living in the primitive matriarchal society had a veneration and love for the mother, which culminated in mother worship. It is no surprise that literary evidence corroborated by archaeological findings suggests that Shakti Cult was widely worshipped in the eastern part of the country especially in Assam and Bengal in the early period of history.³

1.3.i. Concept of Śhakti in the Vedas

The concept of Shakti was there in the minds of Vedic seers (though the term Shakti is not found in Vedic texts), is proved by the fact that a number of goddesses are mentioned in different capacities. Early vedic ritualism presents to us a different picture and the Goddess occupy comparatively subordinate position⁴. The ancient R̥ṣis assigned importance to such goddesses as Aditi, the Divine Mother, Uṣās, the goddess of dawn; Prithivi, the mother of Earth; and lastly, the goddess of speech. These three distinguishable types of Mother Goddesses in the R̥gveda viz.

- i. The type of mother goddess for giving kindness and gentleness is represented by Aditi.
- ii. The type of virgin mother goddess for martial spirit and beauty is represented by Uṣās.
- iii. The type of mother goddess who is regarded as a tutelary or special guardian deity of people is represented by Sarasvati.

It has been described in the post Vedic texts as the Devi-Sukta, and great importance was assigned to it in the ritualism as the puranic Śhakti worship⁵.

1.3.ii. Concept of Shakti in the Epics and Purānas

Śhakti is depicted in a very high position in the age of Epics. She is called Devi and is respected by all. In the Rāmāyaṇa she is always considered the wife of Siva. Her name Umā and Girija were very popular. Even she was regarded as Rudrāni and Pārvati". There are other references in the Rāmāyaṇa which indicate that the worship of mother goddess was quite well known to the tradition though not mentioned in clear terms. In the fifth book there is a mention of a goddess named Surasa who is told to be the mother of Nāgas. There is another goddess in the Rāmāyaṇa named Simhikā seen by Hanuman. We find a mention that Lankā, the capital city of Ravana's kingdom was protected by a demon goddess named Lankini. Sita, the wife of Rāma is described as Kala Ratri, the terrible aspect of Shakti". Even Sita took the form of Kālī for the destruction of Rāvana is found in the two later Rāmāyaṇas viz. Adhyatma Rāmāyaṇa. In ancient India Devi Durga or Shakti designated as six arms, eight arms, ten arms and also hundred arms who is identified as Mother Earth.⁶ It was mentioned by R.D Banerjee.

1.3.iii. Concept of Śhakti in the Mahābhārata and Harivamsa Purana

During the period of Mahabharata many new names and aspects of the goddess were introduced. In the *Bhisma Parvam* there is a prayer by Arjuna to *Durgā* in which he invokes and pays reverence to *Siddhasenāni* (leader of Siddhas), the noble, the dweller on Mandara, the Kumari, Kali, Kapali, Krsna-Pṅgalā, Bhadrakali, Mahākālī, Candī, Chanda, Tārini, Varavarnini, Kātyāyāni, Karālī, Vijaya, Jayā etc. In the *Virata Parvam* of the Mahabharata, Yudhisthira, one of the five Pandavas invoked the goddess of power who would remove dangers which would occur to his devotees. She is represented in this chapter as the sister of Hari, born of Yaśodā and Nanda Gopa. She is praised as the feminine side of Krsna and Kumārī or the maiden. The two Durgāstotras in the Mahabharata and the Aryastava in its supplement outline the various constituent elements underlying the principal cult picture of the developed Shakti cult. The concept of the composite goddess contained in its various elements such as her 'mother daughter' and 'sister' aspects, her Vedic Āryan element and last but not the least, the various non-Āryan strands in her character. The Aryastava says that she was well worshipped by the Savaras, the Barbaras, and the Pulindas, and she is often described in other contexts as from the higher class including the nobles and kings (as she is worshipped by Aparna, Nagna śavari and Parna Savari. She is also commanded respect and adoration there is mention of various Devi tirthas. In the Vanaparva of the Mahābhārata Parvata", Gauri śikhara, Sri tirtha, Devi tirtha and Matr tirtha" etc. "Shaktism", says Eliot, "in the sense of a definite sect with scriptures of its own, if not confined to the north-east corner, at least has its head-quarters there".⁷

1.3.iv. Concept of Śhakti in the Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa

The scholar identified one of the oldest Purana, the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purana* its appears as the centre of the great Shakti cult, was compiled and edited in its present form in the Gupta period. There comes a complete book under the Markandeya Purana consisting of 13 chapters named as *Durga Saptasati* or *DeviMahatmya*. The *DeviMahatmya* is an elaboration of the concept of Devi of the Vedic doctrine, of an all powerful Goddess of supreme transcendence as propounded in the *Ambhri Sukta* and *Daksayani Sukta*. The Saptasati speaks of the goddess *Candī*, who represents a consolidated idea of different aspects of the divine truth as divine power. Here the mother goddess identified as Umā or Pārvati is associated with the Himalayas. In *Markandeya Purana* the goddess *Durgā* is pure consciousness, (*Chīti*) power of Siva and the Maya of Visnu (*visnu māyeti Savdīta*). She is Prakṛti, the primal root-evolvement. She is also represented as hunger, thirst, sleep, memory etc. She exists in them as her reflections (*Chaya rūpena samahsthita*) She is also regarded as Mahavidya, Mahāmāyā, Mahāsuri and Mahamoha. In her Mahakali-Mahālakṣmī Mahasarsvati aspects, she is depicted in killing the demons like Madhukaitava, Mahiṣāsura and Sumbha -Niśumbha as delineated in the Prathama, Madhyama and Uttama Charita of the *DeviMahatmya*. In *DeviBhagavat Purana* Shakti is addressed as Brahmavidya and Sarvachaitanyarūpas. Another passage describes Devi as *Vaiṣṇavi Purana*, *Agni Purana*, *Matsya Purana*, *Brahma Vaivarta Purana*, *Vamana Purāna* and Sankarī. She is also Bhuvaneśvari, the great lady of the world. Besides, *VāyuBhavisya Purana* also contain the descriptions about Shakti-worship.

Conclusion

From the critical survey of research data ,it is concluded that the worship of Shakti is prevalent from the very beginning of human civilization, as the source of energy dispel bee of enemy. Shakti cult is one of those rare of India which has its beginning in the earliest stages of human beings' Thus, it can be very well observed that North Indian sculptures of Mahisasuramardini would easily depict the various types which were followed in presenting the Shakti cult. Earlier figures have provided the goddess with two, four, and six arms only slaying the asura, represented as buffalo by piercing the trident into back, pressing asuras head with her right leg and lifting its hind part by catching its tail. The mount lion of the deity is generally not known. Some scholars like D.C.Bhattachary feels that the earlier artists seem to have taken the inscription from sources rather than the Markandeya Purana because the mount of the goddess is absent from some of the earliest images.

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