

SHAKTA CENTRE IN TRIPURA: A RELOOKING RELIGIOUS HISTORY OF INDIA

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Abstract :

This paper explores the religious history and cultural significance of Shakta worship in Tripura, India, with a focus on the period from the 8th to the 15th centuries CE. Tripura, rich in natural resources and diverse in its tribal population, has been a significant center for the worship of female deities, particularly under the Shakta tradition. The state's association with the goddess Tripurasundari and other female divinities highlights the blend of Aryan and non-Aryan religious practices, which evolved into a unique form of Tantricism. This study delves into the genesis of Shakta worship in India, tracing its roots from Vedic literature to its proliferation in Tripura. The analysis includes detailed examinations of various goddess figures such as Sarvani, Durga, Mahishasuramardini, and Kali, along with their iconographic features and archaeological findings. The evidence from inscriptions, temple architecture, and recovered images underscores the profound impact of Shakta worship on the region's religious landscape. The paper concludes by highlighting the continued relevance and evolution of Shakta practices in Tripura, reflecting the enduring legacy of these ancient traditions.

Key Words : Theravada Buddhism, British period, Hill Tripperah, Political agent

INTRODUCTION:

Tripura is called the land of 'Goddess of Tripurasundari' and the state is belonged to the north-eastern India with its capital at Agartala is located between 20⁰56' and 24⁰32' north latitude and 91⁰10' and 91⁰21' east longitude. Tripura is locked three sides by Bangladesh. It is connected to the main land through the Cachar district of Assam and the State of Mizoram. The districts of Sylhet, Comilla (erstwhile Tippera), Noakhali, Chittagong, and Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh share a common boundary with Tripura on the north, west, south and south-east direction respectively. Tripura is rich in natural resources and ethnologically interesting as a habitat of several tribal communities such as Tripuris, Riangs, Hālāms, Maghs, Jāmātiās, Chākmās, etc.¹ Out of them, Maghs and Chākmās belong to Theravada Buddhism. Tripura which meaning, a land adjoining the waters.² In the British period, the present state of Tripura, was known as "Hill Tripperah." In 1775CE, the British Government gave 'Tripura' the status of "Native State" under the general supervision of a Political agent. Geographically, the pre- Māṇikyā period of Tripura is intertwined with that of ancient Samatata, a region roughly corresponding to the present districts of Sylhet, Noakhāli

and Chittāgong. As a kingdom under the early Māṅikya rulers it also included Tipperā (now Comilla, Bāṅgladesh) and portions of Sylhet and in an extended sense it comprised the districts of Noakhāli and Chittāgong. So, the religious history of Tripura prior to the twelfth century CE is mixed up with the religious history of ancient Sylhet, Samatata, Noakhāli and Chittāgong which are now in Bāṅgladesh.³ Hiuen Tsang, I-tsing and Seng-chi - all Chinese travellers referred to the region in their accounts. The Baghurā inscription of Mahīpāla -1 (988 -1038 CE) and Meherpur copperplate of Dāmudār Deva dated 1234 CE clearly established the connection of the Samatata with the districts of Tipperā , Noakhāli and Chittāgong.

Genesis of Shakta Centre in India

The position of the deities conceived as the female energy was in a negligible state in the period of the Rig Veda but Usha (dawn) was female deity at the time of Rig Veda as the wife of the sun.⁴ But above all, the place of Aditi is unique in the Vedic literature being fancied as the personification of sky or of the universal nature. Sometimes, she is the sister of Vasus and in a later cosmogonic hymn, she plays the role of both the mother and the daughter aspects of Daksha-Prajapati.⁵ In one passage of the Atharva Veda⁶ she is worshipped with her brothers and sons for protection. An interesting point to be noticed in the conception of the supreme function of the Devi is her mother, daughter and sister aspects uniformly present in the mother cult.

Incidental evidences relating to the position of the supreme goddess can be gleaned from the earlier literature where mere appearance of some designations of the mother can hardly be recognized as having the role of Sakti worshipped by the Saktas of the later age. Sri and bhadrakali in the Sankhyayana-grihya-Sutra of the Rig Veda,⁷ Bhavani as the wife of Bhava in the Hiranyakesi Grhya sutra,⁸ Kali and Karali mentioned in the Mundakopanishad, Haimavati and Uma as personified Brahmavidya in Kenopanishad⁹, Ambika the sister of Rudra in the Vajasaneyi-Samhita are all designations of the mother but bearing no concrete evidence of the development of her cult. It is the Taittiriya Aranyaka of the black Yajurveda¹⁰ where Ambika is described not only as the spouse of Pasupati Rudra, but is identified with Devi¹¹. Two more designations viz. Kartyayani and Kanyakumari in the Durga-gayatri of the same text¹² furnish point of significance in the later history of Saktism. The philosophical idea to be noted behind her make Vairochant (Knower of Brahma)¹³ began to exercise its influence over the cult goddess Durga. Fragmentary evidences regarding assimilation of some tribal goddesses showing growth of a accretions in the development of Sakti cult are to be found in two Durga-stavas of the great epic¹⁴ as well as in the Aryastava of the Khila Hari-vamsa.¹⁵ Siddhasenani (general of the Siddhas), the dweller on Mandara, Kaumari, Kali, Bhadrakali, Chandi, Tarini, Vijaya, Jaya, Vasudeva bhagint, Slayer of Mahisasura, Kausiki, Uma, Sakambhari, destroyer of Kaitabha, Saha, Svadha, Saravati, Satitri, Mahadevi, Jambhani, Mohini, Maya, Hri, Sri and Sandhya are names of the goddess found in one of the two staves. In the other the prayer of Yudhishtira incorporated a graphic picture of Devi's iconographic features. She being born in the womb of Yasoda and belonging to the race of Nandagopa was

endowed with four arms with emblems of sword and shield. Her perpetual abode was on the mount Vindhya and her thirst was quenched only with spiritual liquor, flesh and sacrificial victims.

Further source of tribal elements of the Mother in a stanza of the Harivamsa where the supreme goddess is describe as being worshipped by the Sabaras, Barbaras and Pulindas;

“Vasasi Tvam Mahadevi vaneshupavateshu cha/
Sabanraivva rvaraischaiva pulindaischa supujita//¹⁶

Her residence on Himalayas and Vindhya, her love for sacrificial victims, flesh and wine represent her close association with the cult of fertility brought to India by the early invaders like the Mediterranean or the Armenoid race. Scattered evidence in regard to worship of such proto-goddesses in the Indus Valley region come to be known from the archaeological remains of Harappa and Mohenjodaro.¹⁷ Sakambhari and Aparna, two designation of Mother found in the orthodox literature seem to be relies of aboriginal conception of the Earth Mother so vividly represented on the well known seal from Harappa.¹⁸

The Devi-Mahatmya of the Markandeya Purana displays a spirit of eclecticism providing scope of tracing deeper sense of assimilation in the concept of the Mother from both the Aryan and tribal strata. But the trait of the Mother, as universal energy personified, preoccupies an idea of her supreme position as the creator, preserver and the destructor of the universe in the Tantras, which are distinguished from other scriptures by their “immense array of female personality.”¹⁹

During the post Gupta period, Jayadratha Yamala composed perhaps in mid-India issuing conception of Isana Kali, Raksha Kali, Virya-Kali, Prajna-Kali, Ghora-Tara, Yogini-chakra and Chakresvari²⁰ indicates an idea of the practice of Saktism in northern India. The wave of Saktism in Bengal during the 7th-8th centuries CE is derived from the evidence of Devi Purana where practice of Sakti worship in the mode of left-hand-path (Vamamargi) is frequently met with. According to the account of the Purana, Devi was worshipped in different forms after the manners of the Vamacara Saktas in different places in Radha, Varendra, Kamakhya and Bhotadesa,²¹ Apart from the above information, the contents of the Purana ensure apprehension regarding early existence of a Devi Sastra, the materials of which were handled by Puranakara himself, pushing back further the prevalence of Sakti worship in Bengal.²² Literary evidence may be corroborated by archaeological remain in the Paharpur panel depicting a man holding his tuft of hair in the right. Some scholars are of the opinion that the scene is likely to represent a symbol of devotion to the mother goddess by voluntary self sacrifice of a Sakta votary.²³ In the 7th patala of the Kubjika tantra²⁴ we find the reference of Tripura as a great Sakta centre:

Srutatam Savadhanena siddha pitham pativrate,
 Yasmin Sadhanamatrena Sarvasiddisvaro bhavet
 Mayavati Madhupuri Kasi Goraksakarini
 Mayadvan Madhupuri Kasi Goraksakarini
 Hingula ca Mahapitham tatha jalandharampunah
 Jvalamukhi Mahapitham pitham Nagarasambhavam
 Ramagirimahapitham tatha Goddavaripriye
 Nepakam Karna Sturafice Mahakarnam tatha priye
 Ayodhya ca Kuruksetram Simhanadam manoramam
 Manipuram Hrsikesam Prayagafica tapovanam
 Badari ca Mahapitham Ambika ardhandlakam
 Trivent ca mahapitham Gangasagarasangaman
 Narikelanca Viraja Uddiyanam Mahesvari
 Kamala Vinala Caiva tatha Mahismati Puri
 Varahi Tripura caiva Vagmati Nilavahini
 Govardhanam Vidhyagirih Kamarupam kalauyuga
 Ghantakarno hayagrivo madhavasca Suresvari
 Ksiragradmam Vaidyanatham Janiyadyamalocane

Shakta Centre in Tripura

The wide development of Sakti worship in Tripura caused the productions a large variety of such Devi images. The worship of the female deities is even today a common feature in Tripura. Sakti worship prevailed originally among the Indo-Mongoloid²⁵ race of Tripura as matai Katarma Saktism is the blend of Aryan and non-Aryan streams of thought. It is a federation of cults where the main principle is the Tantric way to reach the goal. Tautricism was practiced in Tripura and this tantric worship gradually developed in iconography. Tantricism was the predominant religion of Tripura from the eight to the fifteenth centuries CE The god and goddess of the Saiva form of Hinduism became the deities of the Sakta Tantra, P.C. Bagchi advocates that, "the basis of Saktism was a well established system as philosophy like the Samkhya in which prakriti and purusha play the same role as that of the Sakti and Siva. Once this philosophy was accepted, the affiliation of various local or tribal goddesses to prakritis became a matter of course."²⁶

Irrespective of their creeds almost all the people of the Hindu society pay homage to mother goddesses in spite of their traditional family deities, like Siva, Visnu etc. In Tripura, Saktivada is generally recognized as an integral part of the religion, not so much as a separate cult. Not only among the Saktas, but in almost all other religious sects the Saivas, the Vaisnavas, the Sauras, the Ganapatyas, an important place is occupied by Sakti.²⁷ Epigraphical evidences of the existence of Sakti cult in Tripura, though meager, have also been found. The first that attracts our attention is the Deulbadi²⁸ (about 14 miles south of Comilla, Bangladesh) image inscription, now in the Dacca Museum, of the middle of the seventh century CE It records that

Prabhavati, the queen consort of the king Devakhadga, out of reverence of for Sarvani, covered image of the deity with gold.

The Tripurasundari Temple inscription of Dhanya Manikya bearing the date Saka 1423 (1501 CE) is an important source of information regarding the Sakti religion in Tripura. This inscription is of two parts, first one is engraved on the east side of temple, and second on the south side of the temple. It is recorded that in ancient times there lived an accompanied king named Dhanya Manikya. It is said that his charity was comparable with that of Karna of the Mahabharata. Being pleased by his worship Indra descended to the Earth from the Heaven. In 1423 Saka (1501 CE) he constructed a sky scraper temple in the name of the goddess "Ambika".²⁹ After him Maharaja Kalyanadeva, ruler of Tripura brought the Earth oppressed by enemies under his control. His son Govindadeva, a warrior was prominent among the kings. He endowed gold to Brahmin women. The dedicatory inscription gives the name of the founder of temple, Dhanaya Manikya the foundation year of temple in 1423 Saka or 1501 CE and other two devotee kings Kalyana Manikya (1626 CE to 1656 CE) and his son Govinda Manikya (1656-1660 CE to 1667-1674 CE). Another inscription tells us that the Rama Manikya (1673-1685 CE), son of king Govinda Manikya, renovated and repaired this temple. A devoted worshipper of Ambika, the king Rama Manikya took up this project of beautification of the temple in 1603 Saka era (1681 CE) Tripurasundari is the presiding deity of this revered temple.

The copper-plate inscription, at the throne of the Caturadasa Devata temple of Kalyana Manikya (1626-1656 CE) furnished us with some interesting information for the study of Saktism in Tripura. It is written in Sanskrit language but in Bengali script. It records the successrs of Kalyana Manikya, prince Govinda Manikya's greatness and bravery etc. who gave the throne to Girija Devi for the blessing of her in 1571 Saka (1649 CE)³⁰. But it is true that Girija Devi and Caturadasa Devata is not same deity. However, we do not find any deity name Girija Devi in Rajamala, a chronicle of Manikya dynasty.

Girija Devi is most probably Devi Durga, the daughter of Girira) or Huimalayas. There is a slight hint in the verse of this inscription (Sri Sri Govinda Deva Himgiritanayayai hi Sinhasangryam) to the Devi Durva or Devi Girija tegend. It is clear from the inscription that both the Manikya rulers were devotees or goddess Girija. However a possible misplacing resulted the throne being used for Caturadasa Devata.

Full swing of Sakti worship in Tripura during seventh to sixteenth century CE may be ascertained from a large scale discovery of the images of the Mother Goddess. Two and four handed standing images of the goddess with variant attributes, symbols and attendant figures were generally worshipped in Tripura though six and ten handed varieties were not unknown. According to different iconographic features, the Sakti images recovered from the different parts of Tripura are Sarvani, Durga, Mahishasuramardini, Kali, and others.

Saravani, one of the sixteen aspects of Durga in the Brahmavai vartta Purana, is to be recognized from a specimen from Deulbadi. The figure of the goddess is endowed with eight hands carrying weapons like arrow, sword, discus, conch-shell, trident, bell shield and how. The description of the goddess shows affinity with that of Bhadra Durga, Bhadrakali, Ambika, Kshermankari found in the Saradantilaka Tantra.³¹ Tracing of its identification should not be given much weight as no literary evidence of later date can be admitted for recognition of this present image of so early date. Sarvani is the Sakti of Sarva, one of the eight forms of Rudra in the Atharva Veda. In the Brahmavaivartta-Purana the goddesses are involved for salvation of every living being.³² Another an exceedingly charming bronze image of Sarvani is recovered at Hrishya mukha,³³ near Pilak, south Tripura district. It is now in the government museum of Tripura. The eight handed goddess stands in Sthanaka pose on the central padmapitha. The front surface of the pedestal below the lotus seat is fully covered by flora and vegetal devices and a figure of lion with one of its paws raised in the right corner. On the left, all arms are missing excepting the lower one which holds a Ghanta. On right four hand are partly extant and the first, third and fourth hands hold a conch, a discus and sword respectively, while the rest is missing. This image is assignable to ninth tenth century CE

The important aspect of the mother is Durga, who is widely popular in Tripura. Countless images of this aspects of the Devi come sharp from various parts of this country. It is believed by some scholars that the concept of Durga as a ten armed Goddesses has its sources in the Rig Veda where the wonderous Goddess Usha advances with ten arms.³⁴ Puranakaras ascribe the name Durga to Uma or Parvati because of her exploit of delivery from the confinement of hell, re-birth, fear, disease and punishment of Yama.³⁵ In the Markandeya Chandi, the Mother has been called Durga following her heroic achievement as a subdue of the demon Durga³⁶, In another place, she comes to be known as a vessel for crossing the ocean of the world³⁷, Above all, Durga was originally the presiding deity of fort (Durga) and is repeatedly mentioned in the Puranas like Devi and Devi Bhagavatam³⁸ A fine specimen of two armed Durga³⁹(Saumya) found at Unakoti is shown standing on the back of a lion. She wears a short necklace and a Sari fastened with an ornamental belt at the waist. The image is attributed to eleventh and twelfth centuries CE The figure is standing with slight flexion bedecked with simple jewellery pronged headgear a characteristic feature of Manikya and Ahom sculptures and also common in earlier Bumesse specimen.⁴⁰

Another fourteenth fifteenth century CE female head found at Unakoti, may be identified as Durga and it though very badly defaced, survives. The head of the deity with her spreading matted locks, third eye and soft neck lines is one of the best specimens of Unakoti. Swirling matted hair animates the sculpture. Long ears with Kundalas, carved on the same plane, are not as disproportionate, as noticed in other examples. Soft fleshliness of the ears and the neck attest to a sure hand of chiseling. The figure is bedecked with a pearl necklace, minutely designed earrings and a beaded tears on the forehead used to tuck and swinging hair (equally

an outlandish feature) as it were. On the right side of Devi is another male head, probably of Siva. Locally those are popularly known as Siva Durga.

The most important icon is the Mahishasuramardini type whose independent worship is still popular through out Tripura. Many images of Durga in her Ugra form have been discovered in Tripura.

The Markandeya Chandi introduces the principal career of the mother in the attitude of slaying the demon Mahishasura. The idea of the onslaught of the goddess over the Asuras arose from that the subduing the demon Mahisha. The word 'Mahisha' in the Rig Veda in the sense of beast occurs many times except once, which, according to Sayanta signifies "great"⁴¹. It may be presumed that the episode of Mahishasuramardini indicating slaying of an Asura by the goddess, undergoes changes with the plight of the Devi subduing a buffalo demon. The pre-historic sources of Mahishasuramardini give apprehension in regard to her identity with Virgo of the Mediterranean people because this tribal goddess is very close to Durga the goddess of fort.

Victorious campaigns over the Mon Khmers (who were of mixed origin from the Caspian, Austroloid and Alpine) by the Mediterraneans seem to be in the background of the episode of Mahishasuramardini. Like the cows to the Vedic Aryans, the buffalos to the people of Mon khmer were the most pious animals. The auspicious symbol of the invaded took the form of Mahishasura subdued by the goddess Virgo of the invaders. Archaeological remains of three faced statue with buffalo horned heads from Mohenjodaro and Harappa denoting Mon khmer deity also corroborate the historic information to be true.⁴² This historic evidence of Mahishasuramardini is to be attested by the discovery of image of the goddess belonging to the reign of Chandra Gupta II. A circular clay seal from Nalanda is occupied in the main area by a standing Mahishasuramardini figure with four arms holding sword, trident, shield and bell.

The goddess is almost invariably represented with ten arms but in the early medieval sculptures found in Tripura, she is very often found having only eight arms. A unique image of eight armed Mahishasuramardini⁴³ in stone was found at Pilak and is now housed in the temple of the Rajesvari Asram at Muhuripur. The goddess stands alidha pose. The right leg of the image is firmly placed on the head of the buffalo demon and the left one rests on a plain pedestal. In the four hands on the right, the goddess carries the asi, chakra, sara, and trisula thrust into the body on the buffalo and the four hands on the lefts holds the dhunu, tatika, srpa and tail of the buffalo demon. This image may be dated to the eighth century CE

Similar image of Mahishasuramardini suffered partial damage during the transport to the Asrama at Muhuripur. The damaged face has been crudely re-done and the semi circular top of the back slab restored by the sevits. With one foot on the head of the buffalo demon

(depicted in the animal form), the goddess is in the attitude of piercing the neck of the buffalo with a trisula held in one of her right hand. The three remaining right hands bear an arrow, a wheel and a sword (in the uppermost hand). The lower left hand holds the tail of the buffalo, the next a bow, the third a shield and the fourth (uppermost) a snake (tail alone preserved). Stylistically, the image may be dated to the eighth century CE

Similar image of the deity is also discovered from Thakurani tilla mound, Pilak. The upper part from the chest is missing. The tenon would suggest that the image was enshrined as the principal deity within a shrine. The available height above the tenon is 1m 16cm, the maximum width being 77cm.⁴⁴ The state of the preservation of available part is extremely unsatisfactory. The goddess is standing with her right leg stretched and left leg bent at the knee on a plain pedestal. On the same pedestal are seen two legs of the buffalo, from the truncated neck emerges the demon. The image was at least eight armed. Her lowest left holds the hair of the demon, while another left arm is bent and turned towards her abdomen. The trident which pierces the neck of the buffalo was evidently in the grip of one of her right hands.

And eight-armed image of Mahishasuramardini was found at Devadaru. East Pilak, and now worshipped at the Devadaru Asram. The goddess is in attitude of piercing the neck of the buffalo with a trisula held in one of her right hand. The three remaining right hands are missing. The lowest left hand holds the tail of the buffalo, the next a bow, the third a shield and the fourth a snake. Absence of the lion-mount as well as of sharp cut curves in the atibhanga stance of the deity and also the theriomorphic form of the demon in the relief of the image indicate an early date for it. Though executed in rough stone, the figures are so modeled as to suggest the soft texture of flesh and skin. The heavy form and gigantic size indicates it to be belonging to the eighth century CE

An exceedingly charming image of ten-armed Mahishasur-mardini⁴⁵ of the eleventh and twelfth centuries CE was found at Amarpur, south Tripura. It is now worshipped in the house of Chandramohan Shil, Amarpur. The Devi stands in the pratyalidha pose. The left leg of the goddess is placed on the body of Mahisasura, while the right leg is on the back of the lion. The image is endowed with ten hands carrying, trisula, khetaka, tanka, sara, khadga, dhanu, parasu, ankusa, ngapasa and suchimudra. She has plunged a trident into the body of the Asura.

An interesting sand stone image of Mahisasurmardini of the twelfth century CE is erroneously worshipped as Kali in temple near Kamalagar at Kasha.⁴⁶ The ten armed goddess holds in her hands nakusa, trisula, sakti, chakra and abhaya, but other attributes are not clear. She wears Jatamukuta, and the Jatas are spread over both the sides of the head in an orderly manner. The Vahana, the lion is shown in the middle portion of the stele. The kneeling demon with folded hands rests on a plain pedestal. A Sivalinga is present in front of the demon and this is

rare evidence in the field of Hindu iconography. Two inscriptions are engraved on the northern and the southern side of the temple, both are damaged.

A ten-armed Mahishasuramardini image which is tentatively assignable to eleventh-twelfth century CE was discovered from Hiripura village, Comilla, Bangladesh. Now it is worshipped in the house of Anil Chandra Chakraborty of Nalchhara, Sonamura in Tripura. The height of image is 1.03m, the maximum width being 52cm. The goddess is standing with her right leg stretched on the lion and left leg bent on the buffalo, which are on a plain pedestal. Two front legs of buffalo and front, and a behind legs of lion are seen on the pedestal. Her ten hands hold ankusa, parasu, dhanu, sara, chakra, khetaka, khadga, padma, sankha, and trisula. The central figure is mounted on her lion in pratyaudha attitude seizing the locks of the demon by her left hand and piercing his breast with a sula. Two images stand on two side of the goddess and holds in their hands a khadga and sankha. She wears a short necklace and a Sari fastened with an ornamental belt at the waist.

A fourteenth century CE rock cut image of the Devi is discovered at Devatamuda, South Tripura district. The measurement of image is 12.88m x 7.7m. The goddess of Mahishasuramardini with round face and bulging round eyes, is executed frontly. The heavy torso, broad shoulders and sturdy hands are mechanically joined with each other, as it were, and the total effect, that the image creates, is not of an organic whole. The goddess is standing with her right leg stretched and leg bent at the knee on a plain pedestal. An interesting sand stone image of eight-armed Vaisnavi⁴⁷ of the fifteenth century CE from Amarpur is shown seated in the lalitasana pose with Garuda below her seat. The goddess gracefully holds sankha, chakra, goda, khadga, dhenu, sara.

The famous image of the four armed goddess Kali, locally called Tripurasundari is worshipped in the temple of the Tripurasundari at Udaipur, South Tripura. It is a well known Sakta Pitha in the Tripura state, Daksina pada of Devi Sati fell down here, Tripurayam Duttapado Devi Tripurasundari.⁴⁸

On the composition the goddess under a multifoiled arch stands in the samapadasthanaka, posture on a short figure like south Indian apasmarapurasha, the latter is locally known as Mahadeva, perhaps on the analogy of Kali standing on prostrate Siva. The goddess wears a somewhat elongated pronged head gear and exhibits in her four hands clockwise varamudra, ankusa, pasa and naramunda respectively. It is believed that the image was installed in the temple in the seventeenth century CE after its renovation by Ramadeva Manikya (1681 CE). Stylistic considerations also point to similar dating on the basis of the presence of multifoiled arch on the back slab.

The mother goddess had a great influence in the minds of the people of Tripura from the earliest time till today. The temple of Goddess Tripurasundari not only attracts people of Tripura but also from all over India and abroad.

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