

E-ISSN: 2709-9369
P-ISSN: 2709-9350
www.multisubjectjournal.com
IJMT 2019; 1(1): 51-54
Received: 25-06-2019
Accepted: 30-07-2019

Bineeta Dash
Ph.D Scholar, Department of
Sociology, Pondicherry
University, Pondicherry, India

Repreentation of goddess in Shakta tradition: theory and practice

Bineeta Dash

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22271/multi.2019.v1.i1a.129>

Abstract

Contemporary intellectual debates in religious studies especially revolve around the issues of relationship between religion and politics along with religion and gender, which is the direct result of development of postmodern ideology. On the eve of postmodern discourse, intellectuals are questioning and challenging the traditional and rationalists view of religion and its increasing importance to male centric ideology. So the recent scholarship has begun to uncover and explore the marginalised tradions in which special attention is given to studies on Shakta Shrines or the Goddesses. Focusing upon literature, it is found that there are a growing number of studies pertaining to temples and male goddesses where as the number of studies conducted for female goddess are only a few in number and those few studies has viewed the goddess from a feminist and gender perspective by contrasting female category with their male counterpart. Again, these literatures have only focused upon the issues like theological, cultural-anthropological and historical aspects of the goddess. Meanwhile, issues like the relationship between language and reality, the status of the goddess in social context and the negotiating gulf between precept and practice is rarely examined, which are essential aspects for sociology of religion. Against this background, the present paper intends to analyse the representation of the goddess in Shakta tradition on the basis of some important and noteworthy review of literatures.

Keywords: Goddess, Shakta tradition, theory

Introduction

India, where amalgams of different religions and sects with diverse worshippers are found, Shakta Tradition occupies an important place along with Vaishnava and Shaiva within Hinduism. Hindu religious tradition is unique in the sense of providing an ancient, continuous and diverse history of Goddess worship and it is also the richest source of mythology, theology and worship available for the Goddess (Kinsley 2005) ^[6]. Although the importance and popularity of Vaishnava and Shaiva traditions are found throughout India in contemporary Hindu society, still the practices and popularity of goddess are continuing and increasing day by day. As far as extant scholarship is concerned there are a growing number of studies available for male gods, where as a limited number of studies available for female goddesses which are largely by eminent western scholars along with quite a few Indian scholars. But as the contemporary discourse of religious studies is going through a paradigmatic shift due to the appearance of post modernity, feminist ideology and gender issues, intellectuals are questioning and challenging the traditional and rationalist view of religion and its increasing importance to male centric ideology. So the recent scholarship has begun to uncover and explore the marginalised tradions in which special attention is given to studies on Shakta Shrines or the Goddesses.

History of goddess worship can be traced back to the ancient period where female figurines have been found in the form of baked clay in Mohenjo-Daro, the major city of Indus valley civilisations (Flood 2004) ^[4]. By that time it was clear that religion was projected both through masculine and feminine terms. Though in early Vedic periods Goddesses like Ushas, Prithvi, Aditi and Nirti are appeared but they have only subordinated positions, whereas male deities dominate Vedic vision of the divine. However the most developed Shakta theology and mythology along with the idea of a single all embracing Great Goddess was found in Pauranic tradition and simultaneously a different picture emerge due to the gradual incorporation of goddess into Brahminical sphere. This process of assimilation has brought the upward movement and transformation of local Goddess to the Brahminical pantheon as the wives of gods. The earliest work glorifying the Goddess is the Devi Mahatmya, a part of

Corresponding Author:
Bineeta Dash
Ph.D Scholar, Department of
Sociology, Pondicherry
University, Pondicherry, India

Markandeya Purana dated to 5th and 7th century (Hawley & Wulff, 1998) ^[4] which represents the Goddess as the ultimate reality and also the Mahamaya, the great illusion. During medieval period the Pauranic Smarta ideology dominated throughout India and through the Purana the Goddess was assimilated to Brahminical religion and thereby a theology of goddess was articulated throughout the sub continent. The myth which is central to the cult of Devi is her manifestation as Durga, the warrior goddess which portrays her as Mahisa Mardini, the slayer of buffalo demon. So it is often argued that the cult of mother Goddess was Dravidian and non-sanskritic in origin and it was the religious custom of the tribals and low caste groups which were later incorporated into the Brahminical religion (Ray 2009) ^[11]. Though it is true that the Aryan civilisation was increasingly dominant in north India at the level of high culture which allotted only minor roles for goddesses, but material evidences shows that indigenous culture never dies for which Mackenzie Brown viewed that, “The history of Hindu tradition can be seen as a Re-emergence of the Feminine” (Hawley & Wulff 1998) ^[4].

Focusing upon literature, it is found that, there are mainly two major groups of scholars, one group focusing upon the religious text and the other focusing upon the techniques of participant observation through ethnographic approach (Theology & Anthropology). Meanwhile, issues like the relationship between language and reality, the status of the goddess in social context and the negotiating gulf between precept and practice is rarely examined, which are essential aspects for sociology of religion. Against this background, the present paper intends to analyse the representation of the goddess in Shakta tradition on the basis of some important and noteworthy reviews.

Theories and practices in Shakta tradition

As theoretical aspect is concerned, representation of Goddess in text occurred through Devi-Mahatmya, a part of Markandeya Purana, which mentioned Goddess as the ultimate reality of universe and most often maintained that there is one supreme Goddess who has many forms or who is the unity underlying many discrete Goddesses. But when scholars started interpreting the text, the richness of its vision along with some of its problematic aspects came to appear. Based on textual analyses, Kinsey, (1978) tries to analyse the portrait of goddesses in Devi-Mahatmya and then classify the goddess as Ambika and Chandika which is related to their character and personality. While the former is associated with motherly qualities, expresses the warm, nurturing nature of existence, the latter emphasizes fierce qualities and expresses the limited painful aspects of phenomenal world. Hence goddesses tend to be strongly associated with the forces of nature and the earth in its nurturing maternal aspects, sometimes in its natural periodicity and sometimes in its uncontrollable destructive power. In addition to the categories of Indian goddess O'Flaherty has referred two distinct forms, one the goddess of tooth (Erotic, Ferocious and Dangerous) who are independent, low ranking and dominating. Second the goddess of breasts (Auspicious, Bountiful and Fertile) who are role model for Hindu women through embodiment of maternal quality of generosity, graciousness and subservient to their divine husbands (Flood, 2004) ^[4]. In a study by Coburn made a detailed study of Devi-Mahatmya and explored both the richness of its vision of Devi along with

some of the larger interpretative issues. He mentioned that, although the vision of Devi in Devimahatmya is understood to bear a special relation to each particular deity but this is never a mere consort relation rather beyond being a consort to anyone, not externally but internally, not as consort but as Shakti. Then he addressed that while the text understand the conception of Shakti as a singular and universal phenomena that Devi simply is, but in addition, the text understand shakti as something plural and particular phenomena that each individual deity has (Hawley & Wulff 1998) ^[4]. In a way the textual interpretation of goddess represent her as the creator, protector, destructor and regenerator of this universe through the narratives and creation of myths which is mainly theological in character. The next part will deal with the practical aspects of Goddess worship.

Though goddess worship is found everywhere in India, but it is mostly and highly concentrated in the eastern states of Odisha, Bengal and Assam. Coming to practical aspects, there found a number of studies based on anthropological, sociological and historical aspects which will delineate the practical aspect of goddess worship in present society. Based upon anthropological aspects through the use of ethnography Marglin, (2008) ^[11], tried to address the issue that how a regular and repeated set of events (*Rejuvenation Ceremony, Rath Yatra & Raja Parba*) related to life occurring in Odisha especially its relation with goddesses. She has specifically focused upon the nature of modern understanding of the world through how human being experience, what they know about their world. So here the reality is not the product of scientific revolution and renaissance rather it is abstract, purely based upon individual understanding, their own act of doing and practicing which simultaneously became a part in their everyday life. For her the human perception of time and social organisation of time in Odishan rituals shows a strong, regular and repeated movement (Rhythm) in the manner of their repetition and alteration. So the rhythm in the rituals are motivated by the actions of the deities, their abstention from sexual activity or engagement in it, their health or illness, their death or rebirth and their capacity of menstruation and non-menstruation, which are the outcome of the right actions on the parts of humans, deities and the earth among others. Finally she mentioned that these alterations marked a continuity of life or regeneration. In another study, with regard to contemporary relevance of Shakta tradition, Preston, (1980) ^[10], based on anthropological field work conducted in Cuttack city of Odisha, focuses exclusively on the *Chandi temple* in a large urban centre to observe religious change in India due to the appearance of modernisation. For him though the *Chandi temple* exists in the urban centre but the number of devotees coming for worship started increasing day by day since its establishment which shows the popularity of shakta tradition among urban dwellers. In-depth interviews with the devotees of goddess in Cuttack city revealed that religious experience of individual in his day to day life is a valid reason for following or practicing religion. With regard to changing attitude towards religion in the wake of modernisation and urbanisation the response of the devotees shows that religion is not threatened by change because spiritual truth exists internally inside each person. Finally he has tried to show the changes that have occurred in *Chandi temple* as part of a change in bureaucratic structure in regulating temples along with how religious institutions are

surviving as they become less dependent on economic support from the landed properties.

Concerning Shakta cult and its relation to other cults this section will focus upon goddess Sarala of Odisha. Religion & culture cannot be separated in a land like Odisha where thirteen festivals are celebrated in twelve month. Jagatsinghpur, a newly formed district of Odisha in 1993 with small size and large population is a heavenly abode of sacredness due to the presence of goddess Sarala. This shrine of Goddess *Sarala of Jhankada* is one of the most spiritually elevated expressions of Shaktism from time immemorial. Maa Sarala, a Hindu goddess patronizes the cultures of Vaishnav, Saiva and Shakta and rarely one finds the use of *Bella Patra, Tulasi patra, and hibiscus* in any temple, as they are symbols of three distinct Hindu cultures. The Devi is eight armed and placed within a circular medallion decorated with lotus petals. She is the incarnation of *Mahakali, Mahalaxmi* and *Mahasaraswati* (Tri Shakti). Goddess Sarala is known as *Vak Devi*, goddess of Knowledge and Wisdom. It is well documented that [Sarala Das] - a small time farmer and part-time Oriya *Paika*, was an ardent follower of the goddess and it was after her blessings that Sidheshwar Parida became Sarala Das, the author of Oriya Mahabharata. Folklore goes back to thousands of years, to the age of *Parshurama*. It is said that it was God *Parashurama* who had carved the goddess with the tip of his arrow. The present shrine of goddess Sarala has also undergone historical transformation throughout the ages. Under the royal patronage of *King of Kujanga* (Sendha Raja) she was worshipped for getting victory in war. Earlier she was worshipped by the tribal's, but in course of transformation *raula*, an OBC caste member took the charge of her and today in her temple one can find *raula* as the main worshipper along with Puja Pandas with subsidiary status (District Gazetter). Regarding the birth of the goddess, puranas portrays that *Devi Sarada* was born from *Burning Fire* so she is called *Agni Sambhuta*. When the demon Mahisasura became mysterious by defeating the Devatas, Parambrahma Vishnu prayed the Devi for killing Mahisasura. So the Devi Sarala is called *Ajoni Sambhuta* (one who born through unusual process of birth), so she has an extraordinary Shakti and in this form she can be kept above the male god Vishnu because of her power in saving the earth. Therefore the shrine has a direct link to lord *Vishnu* and lord *jagannath*. On every Ekadasi Devi Sarada is dressed and made up as the figure of *Lord Jagannath (jagannatha besa)* ultimately signify the association of vaishnava cult in a shakta temple and the relation between a male and female are nothing but to complete the structure. In the present temple of Maa Sarala one can find the place of *Lord Jagannath* and *Subhadra as the side deities*. The unique feature in Jagannath temple is that the Bhoga prepared in temple is first offered to goddess Bimala (one form of Sarala) and then offered to Jagannath and there after it became *Prasada*. So the divine quality of motherhood or female Shakti is in itself a symbolic representation of rhythms of life which are negotiated through the process of creation, recreation, destruction and rebirth for a sustainable life (Marglin 2008)^[1].

Understanding the representation of goddess

In relation to the representation of goddess in Shakta tradition, two forms are there, first the representation of goddess as an *independent deity*; second the representation

of goddess as *being a consort of male gods in temple iconography*. Focusing upon the Sanskrit tradition, Babb, (2008) argued that even though in Sanskrit tradition the goddesses is spoken of as being married to god, in the lived experience of temple ritual and iconography the goddess is often regarded as having no consort. For him these two forms of representation reflect two types of opposition, benign and malevolent nature of goddesses. According to him wherever the goddess portrait are without their male consort she is not conceived of as an exemplar of social values but as the personification of a dangerous force that threatens even the gods. His understanding and interpretation is that malevolence of Hindu goddesses who are represented without their male consort results from danger reside in the female sexuality which is not under the control of a male consort but in other part female goddesses who are represented with a male consort have benevolent natures because of the direct result of male control. Challenging Lawrence Babb's gender biased understanding, Citing epic stories about Draupadi from Mahabharat and goddess Laxmi from Jagannath culture, Marglin 2008^[1], has described that, it is not the inherently dangerous and malevolent nature of female sexuality that needs to be controlled by a male in order to transform them into benevolent wifely submission because such a character doesn't exists. The character of single goddesses is ambivalent because their Shakti, their potency can go in two directions in a conjugal or any sexual relationship. Female Shakti is always stabilized and auspicious. Against Babb's interpretation she has showed that goddesses are the power of generation and regeneration, destruction and protection and even necessitate life and death. For her there is symmetry between the dangers emanating from both male and female celibacy because it is a danger to renewal and regeneration where as sexual union signifies renewal and prosperity. It can be well said that goddess imagery does not mean the loss of the image of the male god but rather it is a completion of anthropomorphic imagery (Gross 1978)^[3]. As the origin of goddess is concerned Scholars agree in the opinion that the basic impulse behind the worship of the goddesses in India is of non-aryan and non-sanskritic. Similarly the name of Devi as Chandika (means violent & impetus) in Devi-Mahatmya also supports to this view of origin of Devi (Hawley & Wulef 1998)^[4]. Through the use of Sanskritisation approach, Mahalaxmi, (2011)^[8], focuses upon the historical aspects and transformation of the early tradition of the worship of goddesses *Koravai* during the Sangam period, a local presiding deity of war and victory in Tamil region along with its transformation over the next millennium through the interaction, assimilations and appropriations of myths, symbols and motifs particularly through the agency of Sanskritic and Pauranic religion. It is basically dealt with the historical background drawing upon literary sources comprised of sacred and secular through inscriptional reference to goddesses. A study by Katyal, (2001)^[5] shows that how *Sitala*, a pre Aryan goddess, worshipped by tribal's of Bengal, Bihar, Orissa and Assam who demands animal sacrifice became sanskritised. The incorporation of *Sitala* into the Hindu pantheon and through the process of her brahminisation and gentrification animal sacrifices became less important and she became sanskritised.

Celebration of motherhood is rejoiced with great respect in India and there always exists a close connection between the

role of women and the special position of female deity in Hindu pantheon (Tanaka 1997) ^[12]. In a way the recognition of feminine divine reflects the social perception of gender in wider society (Mahalaxmi 2008). In case of representation of goddess in textual tradition, though her divinity is considered as supreme, but it is always in connection with the consort relationship, as being a spouse of gods. Though Devi-Mahatmya has been highly influential in shaping text based portrayals of Goddess, but when it comes to practice, Coburn mentioned that Devi's identity is always shaped by local custom. The qualities of the goddess that are emphasised, the name and nature of the goddess identified as Devi and other such factors are all subject to local interpretation (Pintchman 2001) ^[9]. So it can be concluded that the textual tradition has been interrogated because scholars are questioning the ways in which a religious text pervades religious action and examining the importance of text for liturgical action (Ray 2009) ^[11].

Conclusion

On the question of association of history with the transformation of goddess, Mahalaxmi, 2008 shows that through the process of historical analysis of different important literature in Tamilnadu along with the methodological issues concerning the concept of appropriation, assimilation and integration how the goddess Koravai, a martial deity transferred into independent Durga and finally to the demure Parvati in the present context. Though history bears an important imprint in studying the particular deity but imaging of the goddess should allow scope for multiple representation and meanings.

It can be well said that goddess imagery does not mean the loss of the image of the male god but rather it is a completion of anthropomorphic imagery (Gross 1978) ^[3]. Goddess by means of symbolism of the co-existence of opposites valorises the round of birth and death which is the ultimate and fundamental truth of the mundane world of human beings (Kinsley, 1978). Thus there should not be any misrepresentation of potentiality or Shakti and importance should be attached to the feminine character in its own unique spirit of embodying ultimate truth consisting of Maya, prakriti and Shakti without putting her in the categories like Vishnu, Purusa and Shiva.

It is evident that, Shakta tradition in India is significantly influenced by the regional, local and tribal practices. Whereas at pan India level it is somehow dominated by the male God identity. However, there is a need for further research in various state of India to create better understating of practices in Shakta tradition and its implications for new theoretical interpretations.

References

1. Apffel-Marglin, Frederique. "Rhythms of Life: Enacting the World with the Goddesses of Orissa", Oxford University Press, India. 2008.
2. Flood G. "An Introduction to Hinduism", Cambridge University Press India Pvt Limited, New Delhi. 2009.
3. Gross RM. Hindu female deities as a resource for the contemporary rediscovery of the Goddess. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 1978, 269-291.
4. Hawley SJ, Wulef MD. "Devi: goddesses of India", Motilal Banarasidass Publishers Private Limited, New Delhi. 1998.
5. Katyal A. Performing the Goddess, Sacred Ritual into Professional Performance. *TDR/the Drama Review*. 2001;45(1):96-117.
6. Kinsley D. "Hindu Goddesses: Vision of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition", Motilal Banarasidass Publishers Private Limited, Delhi. 2005.
7. Kinsley D. The Portrait of the Goddess in the Devi-māhātmya. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*. 1978;46(4):489-506.
8. Mahalaxmi R. "The Making of the Goddess", Penguin Publications, New Delhi. 2011.
9. Pintchman T. "Seeking Mahadevi: Constructing the Identities of Hindu Great Goddess", State University of New York Press, Albany, 2001.
10. Preston J, James. "Cult of the Goddesses: Social and Religious Change in a Hindu Temple", Vikas Publishing House Private Limited, New Delhi. 1980.
11. Ray HP. The Shrine in Early Hinduism: The Changing Sacred Landscape. *The Journal of Hindu Studies*. 2009;2(1):76-96.
12. Tanaka Masakazu. "Patrons, Devotees and Goddess", Manohar Publications, New Delhi. 1997.