

## Prevalence Of Shaktism In Hindu Bengali Community

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### Abstract:

*In Hinduism, Shaktism is one of the major and vital sects, which represent Motherhood. Women provides humanity in earthly form, nourish and endow it with character, charm and dignity, all the tremendous personal sacrifices that divinity assumes when it accepts role of motherhood. Motherhood is an assertion of women's creative power as pinnacle of her glory; it is epitome of service and sacrifice, love and virtue, devotion and dedication and self-restraint and self-reliance. In Hindu iconography cosmic dynamic of male-female or masculine-feminine interdependence and equivalence is expressed in half Shakti, half Shiva deity known as Ardhanariswar. Hinduism does not harp on equality of sexes on idealistic plane but adduces argument of perfect balance and harmony in nature. They consider soul as sexless and women representing energy aspect of lord can't be viewed in physical dimension. In Shaktism, it is believed that goddess as Shakti or energy of Vishnu and Shiva and revered in numerous Hindu temples and festivals. The way in which Shaktas perform their acts of adoration or worship is mysterious, full of rites and rituals which is filthy and obnoxious.*

### Introduction:

Hinduism considers women not as mere flesh and bone but as the embodiment of Sakti, the primordial energy at root of existence. Hindu sacred scriptures and Ayurveda contains hymns and formulae suggesting about how one may have male progeny. Newly married women are ritualistically blessed so that she can have a spate of sons. Vedic rites performed during the third month of pregnancy aim at ensuring birth of baby-boy. The Mahabharata regards daughter as an embodiment of Lakshmi, goddess of prosperity. She is the pride of family and brings fortune by virtue of mere presence. The tradition of worshipping girl child during nine sacred nights when Shakti is invoked continues among Hindus. The Smriti expects father to take care of his daughter even when elemental forces protect her. The tantric texts related to cult of Shakti states that daughter deserves same treatment at home unlike son and should be given equal educational opportunities for growth and development. The Manu convinces that daughter must be protected by her father till she gets married. Failure of father deserves condemnation. Manu permits girls to select groom worthy of her from her own caste three years after attaining puberty. According to Manu, if a girl decides to remain spinster she is entitled to be in her father's house till death.

### Theology and Origin:

Shakti theology grew in ancient India, climaxing as important texts of Shaktism called Devi Mahatmya. Shakta conceives goddess as supreme, ultimate, eternal reality of all existence as same as the Brahman of Hinduism. She is considered as simultaneously source of all creation, its embodiment and energy that animates and governs it and into which everything will ultimately dissolve. Shaktism pervades Devi as source, essence and substance of everything in creation. Shaktism focuses on divine female but does not reject male presence. It rejects masculine-feminine, male-female, soul-body, transcendent-immanent dualism considering nature as divine. Devi is cosmos itself, she being the embodiment of energy, matter and soul motivating force behind all action and existence in material universe.

Shakti worship has been traced back to Indus Valley Civilization. Earliest evidence of reverence for female aspect of Goddess in Hinduism is passages of Rig Veda called Devi Shuktam hymn. Goddess Uma appeared in Upanishads as aspect of divine and knower of ultimate knowledge of ancient Kena Upanishad. Hymns of goddess in ancient Hindu epic Mahabharata in Harivamsa section that was late addition in work. Important texts of Shaktism include Shakta Upanishads and Shakta oriented Upa Puranic literature as Devi Purana and Kalika Purana, Lalita Sahasranama. The Tripura Upanishad is historically a complete introduction to Shakta Tantrism distilling into 16 verses into important Shakti Tantra tradition. The 18<sup>th</sup> century Shakti Bhakti poems and songs were composed by Bengal court poets, Bharatchandra Ray and Ramprasad Sen and Tamil collection Abhirami Anthadi. Sri Ramakrishna, Shakti universalist is most influential figures of Hindu reform movements believed that all Hindu goddesses are manifestations of same mother goddess.

### **Various Deities of Shaktism in Bengal:**

The Hindu philosophy based on the Vedanta and group of works based on Vedanta postulating Tantras. The source and sustenance of all creation at the level of matter or life or mind. It is the Sakti or the energy, Brahman of the Vedanta and Sakti or Devi of the Tantras are identical. If Brahman is fire, Sakti is its burning power; the two are inseparable. In Hindu mythological literature, Tantras are picturized as a female deity, the Devi as the consort of male counterpart. Mother worship or mother cult has evolved over the last centuries centred around Parvati, the consort of Lord Siva.

**Sarasvati-** Sarasvati is one of the Sakti the consort of Brahma, the creator. Sarasvati means 'flowing one' She is connected with fertility and purification. She is considered as personification of all knowledge- arts, sciences, crafts and skills. Knowledge is the antithesis of the darkness of ignorance. She is clad in a white apparel and seated on a lotus seat holds Vina, Aksamala and Pustaka. She uses Hansa or swan as her vehicle of Brahma, her spouse is also associated with her. Mythologically, peacock also acts as a carrier.

**Lakshmi-** Lakshmi is the goddess of fortune. Being the power and consort of Vishnu, she is represented as the power of multiplicity and goddesses of fortune which are equally important in the process of preservation. Lakshmi is depicted in the Vedas, the goddess of wealth, fortune, power and beauty. Her four hands signify the power to grant Purusarthas, Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksha. In the scriptural depictions of Lakshmi, the owl as her carrier vehicle.

**Durga-** Durga is the one who is difficult to approach or difficult to know. She being the personification of totality of powers of the gods. She being the 'Mother of the Universe', is the personification of love. Durga is the power of sleep, taking resources to which Lord Vishnu rests between two cycles of creation. She is a mysterious power, personification of knowledge, wisdom, memory, pleasant and beautiful. She poses ten hands, three eyes. Hair is crowned; gorgeously dressed with red cloth and several ornaments. Lion, the royal creature is her carrier representing the greed of food.

**Kali-** Goddess Kali is personified as dark nude woman decked up in human hands and garland of human heads. Kali derives from the word Kala meaning time. Time is all-destroying and all-devouring. In the Gita's, it is explained as a power that destroys in terms of awe-inspiring terror. As the embodiment of Tamas, aspect of energy responsible for dispersion an infinite creating limitless empty, an emptiness which swallows up everything. She represents a state where time, space and causation have disappeared. Goddess Kali depicts the destructive aspect of power, eternal night, limitless peace and joy. She is the power of God in all His (Siva) aspects.

**Parvati-** Parvati is power and consort of lord Shiva, the god of disintegration and destruction. She is worshipped with many names like Parvati, Haimavati, Girija and Daksayani indicating her origin from the Himalayas or Daksa. The deity was found in Kenopanishad where she is referred as Uma Haimavati enlightening Indra, the king of gods about Brahma, the Absolute or God. According to Pauranic accounts, her first incarnation was Daksayani, the daughter of Daksa and Prasuti and married to lord Shiva. Due to various circumstances, she was reborn as Parvati, daughter of Haimavati and Mena. After performing intense austerities she succeeded in pleasing Shiva and accept her again as his consort. Unlike Shiva, she also has two aspects; mild and terrible. As Parvati or Uma she represents mild aspect. In this character, she has two hands, one holding a blue lotus and left hanging loosely by side. She is richly decorated and when independently represented with four hands, two hands holding red and blue lotuses and other two exhibiting the Varada and Abhaya Mudras. Considering lord Shiva as Mahadev, the Supreme God, Parvati represents his power by which universe is created, sustained and destroyed. She often holds Sankha and Chakra as Vaishnava symbols; though the Puranas describe as active power of Shiva and symbols are in hands of Devi. This fact is strengthened that in Haryardha-murti of Siva, the left half is Vishnu and in Ardhanarisvara form, Devi forms the left half. <sup>1</sup>

### **Shrines and Pilgrims of Shaktism (Shakti Peeths):**

Many towns, villages and geographic landmarks are named for various forms of the Devi. Major pilgrim sites are known as Shakti Peeths or Seats of the Devi. Shakti peeths are significant shrines and pilgrimage destinations in Shaktas. These are goddesses of power is incarnation of Adi Shakti and is known by her three chief manifestations: Durga, goddesses of strength and valour; Mahakali, goddesses of destruction of evil and as Gouri, goddesses of benevolence. Most of shrines are in India but few are in countries of Nepal, Bangladesh, Tibet, Sri Lanka and Pakistan.

This incident infuriated Daksha, and he organised massive yajna in his kingdom and invited all important celestial dignitaries barring Shiva. Sati felt insulted as his husband was not invited and committed self-immolation. After news of Sati's death, shiva reached there furious. He took Sati's corpses on his shoulder and go for tandava as destroyer of universe. Lord Vishnu, came to salvage the situation and cut Sati's corpse into 51 parts with his Sudarshan Chakra which fell in different locales. These places are regarded as holy pilgrimages especially Shakti peeths.

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<sup>1</sup>Harshananda; 2021; Pp: 77-86  
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Out of these 51 holy pieces, almost 13 fell in our states and out of 13, majority of goddess body parts fell in district of Birbhum. In small village in Dakshindihi, Labhpur temple of Attahash is situated; Sati's lips fell here. She is worshipped as Phullara and her consort is Vishvesh. In Birbhum, at Nalhati, Nalateshwari temple is situated. Devi Kalika and Yogesh is presiding here. Sati's throat has fallen here. On banks on Kopai river, temple of Kankalitala where skeleton of Sati has fallen. On north-east of Bolpur station, her deity is not an idol but portrait of Kankaleshwari or Devgarbha and her bhairav is Ruru. Sati's eyebrows fell at Bakreshwar on banks of Paaphara river, Sati is worshipped as Mahishasurmardini and her divine consort is Bakranath. Huge banyan tree provides shade to Nandikeshwari temple at Sainthia in Birbhum district that domains Devi's necklace.

In temple of Bahula on banks of Ajoy river in Ketugram near to Katowa in Burdwan district she is worshipped as goddess Bahula and her Bhairav is Bhiruk. Sati's left arm has fallen here. At Gushkara station in Burdwan district lies Ujaani where Maa Mangalchandi is worshipped along with Kapilambar; it is believed that her right wrist has fallen here. Jogadaya in Khirgram under Burdwan district houses for temple of devi Jugaadya and Ksheer Khandak; it is believed here Sati's severed great toe fell. On banks of Teesta in Boda, at Trisrota, small village in Jalpaiguri, Devi's left leg fall and she is worshipped as Bhraamari Devi and Ambar. At Vibhash in Tamluk, East Midnapore is temple of Kapalini Bhimarupa Sarvanand. The Devis' left ankle has fallen here.

At temple of Kirreteshwar at Kireetkong village situated 3kms away from Laalbagh Court Road station in Murshidabad, Sati's crown fell and worshipped as goddess Vimala. She is accompanied with Bhairav Sanwart. On banks of river Khanakul, Krishnanagar in Hoogly district, here, Sati's right shoulder fell at Ratnavali; Kumari and Shiva are presiding deities of shrine and is locally known as Anandamoyee temple. Sati's right toe at Kalighat in Kolkata is worshipped as Devi Kali.

#### **Significance of Durga worship:**

**Mythological roots-** According to Hindu mythology, devi Durga arose as combination of energy of all gods as embodiment of Shakti or divine feminine power. She evolved to destroy the demon Mahishasura, who was blessed not to be defeated by any man or God. In Sanskrit, Durga means 'the impenetrable'; exists in state of self-sufficiency and in ultimate power. In Kolkata, the powerful form of mother goddess is respected which is why her return is celebrated with great pomp and ceremony every year. In Hindu month of Ashwin, Durga puja is celebrated to commemorate invocation of goddess by lord Rama before going to war with demon king Ravan. The Autumnal ritual is distinct from original Durga puja generally celebrated in Spring. Thus, it is known as Akal Bodhon or out of season worship. The story of lord Rama worshipped as Mahishasurmardini or buffalo-slayer demon by offering 108 blue lotuses and lighting 108 lamps.

**Historical roots-** Durga in her Mahishasurmardini form became popular throughout India from Gupta period onwards. Extensive geographical spread of Mahishasurmardini sculptures in ancient and medieval Indian temples indicates that she had been established in religious and artistic vocabulary of Indian sub-continent from 5<sup>th</sup> century C.E. Widespread distribution of Mahishasurmardini sculptures, popularity of concept of goddess slaying demons have social significance. The fight between devi and demon symbolises the triumph of good over evil, must provide with toiling masses with illusion of cherished reality when existing reality goes against their hopes and aspirations. Durga Mahishasurmardini form is depicted on gold coins of Gupta king where royal couple Chandragupta- Kumaradevi is found on the obverse on the contrary, goddess is seated on the lion holding lotus in her hand. <sup>2</sup>

**Evolution of Iconography of Mahishasurmardini-** The iconography of Mahishasurmardini evolved and changed with time and geography. With passage of time, orientation and movement of images changed and asura attained human form. Earlier, asura was represented in form of buffalo but such images are found in temples of Pratiharas, Pallavas and Chalukyas. Temples of Bhubaneswar, the Baital Deul is an example. Half-human mahishasurmardini seems to kneel in front of Durga as she pushes him down and slays with her trisula. Her outstretched arms hold snakes, and shield, all in swirl of motion but her face is compassionate.

Evolution found in Chalukya and Hoysala temples, the compositions focus on human Mahisasmardini slayed by Durga. Eight armed Durga, is thrusting her trisula into miniature Mahisasmardini as emerges from the buffalo. The lifeless buffalo collapses as Mahisasmardini emerges ready to strike. Durga gently holds asura's head as she kills him while her other hands brandish weapons, a sword drawn, an arrow being taken out of quiver, bell being rung.<sup>3</sup> Terracotta temples in Bengal, those in Hugli and Howrah region. The standardized Bengali group of deities has been portrayed. Durga slaying Mahisasmardini in centre and her children surrounding her. In temples, triple arched entrances, images are positioned on heavy octagonal columns in porch. Similar temples are found in Medinipur as well. <sup>4</sup>

#### **Significance of Kali Worship:**

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<sup>2</sup>Guha Majumder; 2021; Pp:145

<sup>3</sup>Guha Majumder; 2021; Pp:146

<sup>4</sup>Ibid; 2021; Pp: 146

Shaktism encompasses endless variety of beliefs and practices from animism to philosophical speculation of highest order that seek to access Shakti that is believed to be Devi's nature and form. Its largest and visible schools are Srikula, family of Tripura Sundari, strongest in South India and Kalikula, family of Kali prevailing in northern and eastern India.

**Kalikula: family of Kali-** The Kalikula form of Shaktism is dominant in north-eastern India, and prevalent in WB, Assam, Bihar, Odisha and Kerala and Nepal. The goddesses Kubjika, Kulesvari, Chamunda, Chandi, Shamsan Kali, Dakshina Kali and Siddheshwari are worshipped in region of Bengal to protect against disease and smallpox and ill omens. Kalikula lineage focuses upon devi as source of wisdom and liberation or moksha. Tantric stand in oppose to Brahmanic tradition which they view as overly conservative and denying experiential part of religion.

The main deities of Kalikula tradition are Kali, Chandi, Bheema and Durga. Goddess enjoying veneration are Tara and other Mahavidyas, Kaumari and regional goddess as Manasa, the snake goddess; Sasti, the protector of children; Sitala, the smallpox goddess and Uma, Bengali name of Parvati considered aspects of Divine Mother. The major centres of Shaktism in West Bengal are Kalighat where skull of Maa Kali is believed to be worshipped along with her 25 forms. The Kali ghat is located in Kolkata, Tarapith in Birbhum district.

In Kolkata emphasis is on devotion to goddess as Kali, where maa is seen as the destroyer of evil. At Tarapith, devi's manifestations as Tara or Ugratara is ascendent as goddess who gives liberation. The forms of sadhana performed are more yogic and tantric than devotional and often involve sitting alone at the cremation ground surrounded by ash and bone. There are shamanic elements associated with Tarapith tradition including conquest of goddess, exorcism, trance and control of spirits. The philosophical and devotional underpinning of such ritual remains pervasive vision of Devi as supreme, absolute divinity.

#### **Shaktism in Bengal:**

Bengalis practiced Yoga that allowed them to limit and control experiences and gave something to teach disciples; it also gave them descriptive language and cosmology on which they could point ecstatic events. In Shaktism, yoga confirms religious identity by defining status of guru. The guru controlled trances and ecstatic states, rather occurred spontaneously and skill was accomplished through yogic practice. It makes devotee into guru in this sect, allowing memory and understanding of goddess presence and words. In Shaktism, possession of both the goddess and conscious awareness of union with goddess. The state of possession was called *bhar*; while conscious communication merges with deity was called *bhava*<sup>5</sup>.

*Bhar* is state of gendered-women possessed by goddesses and men with gods. It is frequent among women when goddess Kali call women to serve her and she obeys. Kali comes erratically in dreams and visions but adapts to ritual practice and arrives during weekly sessions of prayer and chanting in temples, houses, clearings in jungle. Kali arrives according to her wish but yoga creates an agreement and Kali comes when she is invoked. Male possession is rare and occurs during rituals of endurance or tapsayya when Shiva's presence allows male practitioner to stand out hunger and pain. The state of bhava is less gendered and male devotees have described relationships in which Kali shared awareness and love.

*Bhar* is considered to be inferior form of religious experience as someone's mind is too weak and immature to maintain awareness in deity's presence. The state of bhava is superior state as person retains both consciousness and memory. This ability is gained through yogic practice. Yogic meditation combined with devotion channels and controls entrance and exit of deity. It results in reorganization of personality in which deity becomes true or deeper self and devotee becomes surface self. The person in whom the transformation occurs are called siddha or perfected as deity is constantly present and accessible, eternally living heart. They have a permanent and extended merger of identity with deity and can identify with deity and speak from divine perspective without necessity of ritual. Siddhas are put on title of avatar. Avatar refers to powerful siddha.<sup>6</sup>

Yoga in folk tantra emphasizes siddhis or supernatural abilities; many folk tantrikas in WB focus on rituals tends to be on dealing with ill health and misfortune and come practitioners seek to overcome death. Spirits and ancestors are invoked, might be some exchange of mantras for sakti in which Tantrika take power of dead souls to fuel meditation and in exchange gives mantras which allows soul to be liberated. It is an economic exchange benefitted for both. In folk tantrik practice, ritual practices come from dreams. It is believed that God or Goddess comes down in dreams to teach widespread and folk practitioners spoke of learning yogic skills from visionary experience. Yogis in Shakta folk tradition described having dream commands or svapnadesa from goddess to found temple and offer in certain way. Shakta classical tradition focuses on mantras and disciplines and past revelations; Shakta yogis must have Diksa guru but not a Shiksha guru, learning by dream and vision is only way to have extended instruction in meditation techniques.

Yoga and tantra are claims of truth or power but may be one's job. They are means of salvation from power of death and path towards immortality. Yoga and tantra bring us towards divine or away from it and ritual practice may be an ideal lifestyle or set of cautionary tales. They are idealized and forbidden, paths to insight or power<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup>McDaniel;2016; Pp:3

<sup>6</sup>McDaniel; 2016; Pp:5

<sup>7</sup>Ibid;2016; Pp: 5-9

**Festivals related to Shaktism:** Shaktas celebrate major Hindu festivals, huge variety of local, temple or deity specific observances.

**I.Navratri-** Most celebrated Shakta festival is Navaratri, festival of nine nights also known as Sharad Navaratri as it falls during Hindu month of Sharad. In this festival, people worship Navadurgas, forms of devi. The festival is taken together with following tenth day known as Dussehra or Vijaydashami celebrates goddess Durga's victory over series of powerful demons described in devi Mahatma. In Bengal, the last four days of Navratri are called Durga puja and mark an episode in particular: Durga's iconic slaying of Mahishasura, the buffalo demon. Durga puja is main religio-cultural celebration within Bengal diaspora in West. Shaktas celebrate two additional Navratris one in Spring and one in the summer. The spring festival known as Vasant Navratri or Chaitra Navratri and celebrated in Hindu month of Chaitra. Srividya lineage dedicate festival to devi's form as goddess Tripura Sundari. The summer festival is called Ashada Navaratri as it's held during Hindu month of Ashadha.

**II.Lakshmi Puja-** Lakshmi puja is a part of Durga puja celebrations by Shaktas where Lakshmi symbolizes goddess of abundance and autumn harvest.

**III.Diwali-** Shaktas celebrate as another Lakshmi puja placing small oil lamps outside homes and praying for goddess blessings. Diwali coincides with Kali puja popular in Bengal, and some Shakta traditions focus their worship on devi as Parvati rather than Lakshmi.

**IV.Jagaddhatri puja-** Jagaddhatri puja is celebrated on last four days of Navaratri following Kali puja. It is similar to Durga puja in details and observance and is popular in Bengal and other parts of Eastern India.

**V.Gauri puja-** It is performed on fifth day after Ganesh Chaturthi during Ganesh puja in Western India to celebrate arrival of Gauri, mother of Ganesha where she brings her son back home.

**VI.Ambubachi Mela-** Ameti or Ambubachi Mela is celebration of menstruation of goddess by hundreds of devotees in festival held in June/ July at Kamakhya temple, Guwahati, Assam. Devi is worshipped in form of yoni like stone and site is one of Shakta pitha or pilgrimage sites in Shaktism.

### Conclusion:

Hinduism with its systems of beliefs and rituals is sustained by women as their unshakeable faith in quintessential of dharma. They go for vows for spiritual upliftment and for welfare of their kith and kins. Hindu women in temples or religious congregations exceeds that of men, which reveals their religious freedom and their keen desire to imbibe holy traits. Hinduism allows women to play meaningful role at home as mother, wife, sister and daughter. In tantric disciplines women are given liberty in religious practices but not allowed to chant 'OM' or Gayatri Mantra or touch the Salagrama stones, sacred emblem of Vishnu. Women are regarded as Shakti of devotee without whom no spiritual practice can lead to perfection. Female foeticide was not in vogue in ancient India. Killing of an embryo was considered sin. The girl was invested with sacred thread and initiated into Vedic studies, the sacraments which were abandoned in post Vedic period. Till then, girl can choose to be life-long student of sacred texts to pursue education till marriage. Education of girls suffered around beginning of 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE when marriageable girls were lowered by Smritikaras and pre-puberty marriages gained popularity.

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