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Sakti Cult in North Odisha: Tribal, Tantricism and Traditional Deity

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Abstract

North Odisha comprising the present districts of Mayurbhanj, Keonjhar, Balasore, and Bhadrak has for over a millennium sustained one of the densest and most continuous concentrations of Sakta worship in eastern India. This article examines the historical formation and contemporary vitality of the Sakta cult in this region, tracing its roots in aboriginal stone- and grove-worship among the Santal, Bhumij, and Ho communities, its absorption into courtly Hinduism under the Bhanja chiefs of Mayurbhanj and the neighbouring feudatory houses, and its Tantric elaboration through Matrika and Yogini imagery. Drawing on epigraphic, art-historical, and ethnographic evidence, the article argues that the North Odishan Sakti cult is best understood not as a single doctrinal system but as a layered continuum in which tribal Devi worship, Brahmanical Puranic goddess theology, and Tantric ritual practice coexist and interpenetrate a pattern that continues to shape festival calendars, temple priesthoods, and popular devotion in the region today.

Keywords: Shaktism, Odisha, Mayurbhanj, Kichakeswari, tribal religion, Tantra, Sapta Matrika.

Introduction

Odisha occupies a distinctive place in the history of Indian Shaktism. While the Jagannath cult of Puri has drawn the greater share of scholarly attention to the state's religious life, the worship of the goddess as Sakti the active, embodied power of the divine runs at least as deep, and in the northern districts of the state it forms the dominant idiom of popular religion. North Odisha, understood here as the cultural zone comprising Mayurbhanj, Keonjhar, Balasore, and Bhadrak, is distinguished from the temple-centred Shaktism of coastal Puri Cuttack- Bhubaneswar by its closer and more visible relationship to tribal cosmology. This is a landscape where the Santal, Bhumij, Ho, and Kolha communities have long histories of settlement, and where the goddess is as often a rough-hewn stone under a Sal tree as an image consecrated in a *rekha* temple. The purpose of this article is to trace how these two strands an aboriginal substratum of Devi worship and the Brahmanical- Tantric tradition transmitted through royal patronage

combined to produce the particular character of Shaktism found in North Odisha, and to describe the principal centres, deities, and ritual practices through which this tradition remains living rather than antiquarian.

2. Geographical and Cultural Setting

North Odisha is a transitional zone between the Chotanagpur plateau and the coastal alluvial plain. Its interior the forested uplands of Mayurbhanj around the Similipal massif, and the hill tracts of Keonjhar has historically been sparsely Brahmanised, remaining until recent centuries under the political control of tribal and semi-tribal chiefships before their absorption into the *Bhanja* and *Bhanja-deo* ruling houses. The coastal belt around Balasore and Bhadrak, by contrast, was more fully drawn into the Kalinga-Utkal mainstream of temple Hinduism from an early date, lying as it did on the pilgrim and trade routes linking Bengal with Puri. Shaktism in North Odisha therefore developed along two converging tracks: an interior track in which forest and village goddesses retained a dose identity with the land, and a coastal track in which those same impulses were given monumental architectural and Puranic expression. The two tracks were never wholly separate; rather, ruling families based in the repeatedly acted as the passes along interior most importantly the Bhanja rajas of Mayurbhanj through which local Devi worship was elevated into state cult.

3. Tribal Antecedents and Early Historical Layers

The deepest layer of Shakti worship in North Odisha is aniconic and pre-Puranic. Among the Santal, Bhumij, and Ho, the earth, the forest, and unusual natural formations an anthill, a rock outcrop, a grove of Sal trees have long been treated as the seat of a female protective power. This power typically has no fixed iconographic form, where it is represented at all, a naturally occurring stone, sometimes daubed with vermilion or ochre, stands for the goddess. The tribal deity Rankini, worshipped across the Bhumij and related communities of the Chota Nagpur- Odisha- Bengal borderland, exemplifies this pattern: her shrines are typically found in remote or forested sites away from settled habitation, she is represented by a stone rather than a sculpted image, and her worship historically involved blood sacrifice offered by non-Brahmin priests drawn from the local community itself. Comparable goddesses under local names guardian mothers of the village boundary, the field, or the threshing floor recur throughout the Mayurbhanj and Keonjhar uplands. It is this substratum, rather than any imported Puranic model, that supplied the region's earliest and most persistent conception of the goddess as an internal, localized, and frequently untamed power requiring propitiation.

From roughly the post-Gupta and Bhauma-Kara periods (eighth- tenth centuries CE), this tribal substratum began to be drawn into a wider, text-and-temple-based Sakta and Tantric culture that was flourishing across Odisha more broadly, associated with the rise of Kaula and Yogini worship and with royal cults such as that of the goddess Stambhesvari among the Bhanja rulers further south and west. In North Odisha specifically, this process is most visible at Khiching in Mayurbhanj, which served for several centuries as the capital of the Bhanja dynasty of that district.

4. Principal Centres of the Cult

4.1 Kichakeswari at Khiching, Mayurbhanj

The temple of Kichakeswari at Khiching, roughly 150 km from Baripada, is the single most important historical Shakti site of North Odisha. The presiding deity, worshipped as a fierce form of *Chamunda*, was the tutelary and lineage goddess (kula-devi) of the *Bhanja* rulers of Mayurbhanj, and the scale of the surviving black-stone temple

complex-built in a distinctive local idiom rather than the classical Kalinga style used for Vaishnava temples elsewhere in the state testifies to sustained royal investment in the cult across several centuries. Khiching also preserves a rich field of loose Sakta and Tantric sculpture, including Matrika and yogini-type images, which places the site within the broader Tantric efflorescence of eastern India in the early medieval period. The temple's continuing role as a pilgrimage and festival centre, particularly around Durga Puja and Dussehra, shows the persistence of a cult that has never been merely archaeological.

4.2 **Maa Tarini at Ghatagaon, Keonjhar**

Maa Tarini of Ghatagaon in Keonjhar district functions today as something close to a presiding or umbrella deity for Shakti and Tantra worship across Odisha, and her shrine draws one of the largest annual pilgrimages in the state. Her iconography is deliberately minimal a red, stylized face with large eyes and a simple tilak mark rather than a fully modelled anthropomorphic image-a form that self-consciously preserves the aesthetic of tribal stone-and earth-worship even as the cult has been absorbed into mainstream Hindu ritual practice, complete with Brahmin priesthood, an elaborate festival calendar, and pan-Odishan devotional reach. Ghatagaon thus offers the clearest single illustration of the process this article traces: a tribal conception of the goddess, retained almost unaltered in visual form, functioning at the centre of a large-scale, Sanskritized public cult.

4.3 **Bhadrakali at Bhadrak**

The Bhadrakali temple near Bhadrak town from which the town itself is traditionally said to take its name represents the coastal, more fully Brahmanised end of the North Odishan Shakti spectrum. Local tradition traces the deity's history to a cave shrine on the *Meghasana* hill in Mayurbhanj, from where the image is said to have been carried to Bhadrak and later relocated for protection during the Afghan general *Kalapahada*'s iconoclastic raids in the sixteenth century a narrative that, whatever its literal historicity, encodes a memory of the interior-to-coast transmission of Shakti worship characteristic of the region as a whole. Bhadrak's status as 'the seat of goddess Bhadrakali, one of the manifestations of Shakti has made it a major centre for both the spring (Chaitra/Vasanti) and autumn (*Sharadiya)* Durga Puja observances.

4.4 ***Mahishamardini, Varahi,* and the *Matrika* Shrines of Balasore**

The Balasore coastal belt preserves a further set of Shakti sites reflecting the *Sapta-Matrika* tradition that spread across Odisha under *Somavamsi* patronage. The *Mahishamardini* temple complex at Sergarh, near Balasore town, houses images many now fragmentary and under Archaeological Survey protection of the buffalo-demon-slaying form of the goddess, while a Varahi shrine recorded at Narendrapur near Gadi in the same district represents the boar-headed member of the Matrika group, closely comparable to the well-known Varahi shrine at Chaurasi near Puri. The presence of these Matrika images across the district indicates that North Odisha was fully integrated into the Tantric-Puranic goddess theology that produced Odisha's classical Sapta Matrika ensembles at sites such as Parasurameswara and Vaital Deul in Bhubaneswar, even as its interior continued to sustain an independent, less Sanskritized layer of village and tribal Devi worship.

5. **Tantric Dimensions and the Matrika- Yogini Complex**

Odisha as a whole is recognised as one of the principal centres of early medieval Tantric goddess worship in India, home to two of the subcontinent's surviving hypaethral Yogini temples, at Hirapur and Ranipur-Jharial. While these two structures lie outside North Odisha proper, they belong to the same religious world that produced the Matrika sculpture of Khiching and Balasore, and their existence indicates the broader Tantric matrix within which the North Odishan cut must be read.

Tantric Shaktism in this region characteristically combines Sapta Matrika iconography Brahmani, Vaishnavi, Maheshwari, Indrani, Kaumari, Varahi, and Chamunda, typically flanked by Ganesha and Virabhadra with a persistent substratum of aniconic, blood-sacrifice-centred worship inherited from the tribal layer described above. It is this combination, rather than either element alone, that gives North Odishan Shaktism its distinctive ritual texture: elaborate Puranic mythology and Sanskritic liturgy coexisting often within the same temple complex, with animal sacrifice, non-Brahmin ritual specialists, and an insistence on the goddess's fundamentally untamed and protective character.

6. **Assimilation with Shaivism and Vaishnavism**

As elsewhere in Odisha, the Shakti cult of the north did not develop in isolation from the state's dominant Shaiva and, later, Vaishnava traditions. Goddesses are frequently paired with or subordinated to a Shiva form as consort, and several major Shakti sites of the wider region - such as Viraja at Jajpur, regarded in Tantric literature as the navel-seat of Sati- were integrated into pan-Indian Sakta-pitha cosmology alongside their local significance. With the rise of the Jagannath cult and its absorption of large sections of Odishan religious life from roughly the twelfth century onward, many Shakti goddesses were reinterpreted within a Vaishnava idiom: the temple goddess Vimala at Puri, for instance, though a full Tantric Sakta deity in her own right, came to be understood ritually as consort to Jagannath-as-Bhairava. In North Odisha this same absorptive tendency appears more loosely, with goddesses such as Subhadra worshipped at Baripada's Jagannath temple and, notably, pulled in her chariot during Ratha Yatra by women devotees in a practice explicitly understood locally as an expression of Shakti-illustrating how Vaishnava ritual in the region continues to carry an unmistakably Sakta charge.

7. **Ritual Calendar and Popular Practice**

The living intensity of the Shakti cult in North Odisha is most visible in its festival calendar. The Chaitra or Vasanti Durga Puja, observed in the Odia month of Chaitra (March-April), and the autumnal *Sharadiya* Durga Puja in Ashwina (September- October), are both occasions of major public devotion at sites such as Khiching, Ghatagaon, and Bhadrak, while Kali Puja in Kartika (October-November) marks a further point in the annual cycle. These festivals combine Sanskritic elements -recitation of the Devi Mahatmya, formal Brahmanical worship with practices of clearly non-Brahmanical origin, including animal sacrifice and possession-based ritual, particularly at the more interior, tribal-linked shrines. Priesthoods, too, remain mixed: while temples such as Kichakeswari and Bhadrakali are served by Brahmin priests, many smaller Rankini and village-goddess shrines in the Mayurbhanj and Keonjhar interior continue to be served by tribal or non-Brahmin ritual specialists, a pattern that preserves, within an otherwise Hinduized religious landscape, a direct institutional link to the cult's aboriginal origins.

8. **Royal Patronage and the Politics of Sanskritization**

The elevation of local and tribal goddesses into state cults in North Odisha was, in almost every documented case, the work of ruling houses seeking to root their political legitimacy in the sacred geography of the territories they governed. The Bhanja rajas of Mayurbhanj, whose kula-devi was Kichakeswari, are the clearest example: by patronising a temple to a goddess already venerated by the region's tribal population, the dynasty simultaneously secured religious legitimacy among its subject communities and inserted itself into the wider Brahmanical-Puranic order through temple architecture, endowed priesthoods, and Sanskritic liturgy. This pattern a tribal goddess adopted as royal kula-devi and subsequently given monumental, Sanskritized form recurs with local variation at other North Odishan sites and mirrors a process documented across the wider Bhanja-ruled territories of the state, where the Stambhesvari cult served an analogous political function. Understanding North Odishan Shaktism thus requires attention not only to the ology and iconography but to the political history of state formation in a tribal-majority frontier zone.

Conclusion

The Shakti cult of North Odisha is not a single, doctrinally unified tradition but a layered continuum stretching from an iconic tribal stone-worship, through Tantric Matrika and Yogini elaboration, to fully Sanskritized temple Hinduism patronised by royal houses and, in turn, partially absorbed into the region's Vaishnava mainstream. What distinguishes the north of the state from Odisha's better-known coastal Sakta centres is the continued visibility of this layering: at Ghatagaon, a minimally iconic tribal face-image sits at the centre of a mass pilgrimage cult; at Khiching, Tantric Matrika sculpture and aroyalkula-devi temple stand up on a still -active tribal religious landscape ;and across the Mayurbhanj and Keonjhar interior, village and forest goddesses continue to be worshipped by non-Brahmin priests essentially as they have been for centuries. Far from representing a completed process of Sanskritization, the Shakti cult in North Odisha remains a living negotiation between tribal cosmology and Brahmanical-Tantric religion — one that continues to shape the region's ritual calendar, temple institutions, and popular devotional life today.

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