

## HISTORICAL INVESTIGATION OF A TRIBAL GODDESS: A SPECIAL REFERENCE TO DANTESHVARI

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### ABSTRACT

*Goddess Dantesvarī is a tribal deity of Bastar and it is a region which has remained a forest dominated land, full of uncertainties and limited economic opportunities, inhabited by various tribal groups. From various textual and geographical descriptions, it is clear that the Bastar region has tribal traits and features of living and due to this a pattern of tribal religion dawn within the pantheon of goddess Dantesvarī had developed and dominated over the region.*

**Keywords:** Tribal goddess, Hinduism, traditions, cultural interaction, religion and society

### INTRODUCTION

The Dantesvarī temple is located in the middle of the town Dantewada, which is around 500 km. from the capital of the Raipur at present day Chhattisgarh. As it is mentioned from earlier literatures, it is surrounded by dense forest and inhabited by various tribal groups. Dantesvarī temple holds a very important place for the various tribal groups in the region. They come here on various occasions like child birth, marriage, etc.

The temple compound is spread over around 0.5sq km. and it is located at the crossing of two small rivers *Śankhini* and *Dankini*. Usually, the local people come here to do Śrāddha, which is a death ritual. Here, it is interesting that one can make a connection between the evolutions of a sacred site from the burial spot at the crossing of rivers. There is a Garud Pillar that was erected by Annamdeo when he came here. The temple existed here from the thirteenth or fourteenth century. Before 1933, the Dantesvarī shrine was made up of a hut over old pillars, but later the queen of Jagadalpur, Prafull Kumari Bhanj reconstructed the temple.

The local people generally used the term *Peddāmā* for Dantesvarī, a Telugu term which means elder mother or aunt. The most interesting fact about the temple is that there are two different shrines for different goddesses. These are *Maṇikēshwari* and Dantesvarī. According to priest Hari Har Nath, *Maṇikēshwari* is the younger sister of Dantesvarī. *Maṇikēshwari* is a local tribal goddess but Dantesvarī came here with the royal patronage of Kākatiya kings of Warangal (Andhra).

Some tribes use the term Maili Mātā or Mauli Mātā instead of *Maṇikēshwari*; here, the terms Maili and Mauli give different meanings. The term Mauli is a Sanskritic term which means a protective thread/ Earth<sup>1</sup>, but Maili suggests on unclean goddess, which again raises the question as to why she is an unclean goddess. And if *Maṇikēshwari* is an unclean goddess, then is Dantesvarī considered a clean goddess? It means that they both have different origins, one from tribal, and other from non tribal but still on the basis of nomenclature, they both are considered two forms of the same goddess.

According to a legend, the king of Bastar owe their position to their possession of the sword of Danteshvarī, which was brought to Bastar by the first of the line, Annam Deo, in the fourteenth century from the kingdom of Warangal. They were accepted by the tribes of Bastar as rulers and the sword gives them the status of sacrificers and priests of Danteshvarī. They established the temple of Danteshvarī at Dantewada and founded their capital at Bastar village, and later at Jagadapur.<sup>2</sup>

Although the ruling family can claim to have introduced the cult of Danteshvarī into Bastar, the legitimacy of their rule depends upon the fact that Danteshvarī has been assimilated to the generic tribal mother goddess, of whom there is a wide variety of local forms. The temple of Danteshvarī is built at the junction of two rivers called *Śankhini* and *Dankini*, and is notorious as a place where human sacrifices were formerly offered. The goddess has eight arms and is reported as in the act of killing the buffalo demon. She is in reality Mahiśasurmardini. There are various other images such as those of Viṣṇu, Kārttikeya, Gaṇeśa etc., some of which are brought away from Barsoor.<sup>3</sup>

## II-INSCRIBING THE GODDESS

The most important inscription regarding the historicity of goddess Danteshvarī and her earlier devotees is the Danteshvarī Gudi inscription of Narsimhadēva. This is a stone inscription written in Telugu characters, situated in the temple of the goddess Danteshvarī. It is dated in the dark fortnight (*Kraśṇapakṣa*) of the month Jyēsthā in the Śaka year 1140, which is 1218 CE. This inscription detailed that at this time Mahārāja Narsimhadēva, who claims himself to be from the lineage of serpents (*Śrī-bhujanga-vara-bhuṣaṇa-Mahārājul=aina Śrī man – Narsimhadēva -Mahārājula-rājyamu*).<sup>4</sup> This inscription is important also because it makes a direct connection between goddess Danteshvarī and the Nagavanshis (serpent lineage).

Another inscription at Danteshvarī temple by Jayasimhadev, of the Naga dynasty which is also called the Bhairamgarh inscription, is dated in Śaka 984, which is 1062 CE. In this inscription, the king proclaims himself as the worshipper of Māṇikyadevī (*Māṇikyadevī Srī- Māṇikyadevi -divya-śrīpāda-padma-ārādhak*). According to the epigraphist Hira Lal, 'Māṇikyadevī which is an older name of Danteshvarī, is so named by the successors of Nāgavanshis, the Kākatiyas, although they later claim that Danteshvarī came with them from Warangal, where she was called 'Maṇikēshwari.

According to Hira Lal, this is the oldest of all inscriptions where there is a mention of goddess Maṇikēshwari. Through this inscription, we can find that actually Maṇikēshwari was the prime deity of Nagvanshi rulers because when we bifurcate the word Maṇikēshwari then it would be Maṇi Iśwari 'Maṇi' is a mythical treasure of serpents, while 'Iśwari' stands for the deity who possesses and protects that mythical treasure. And Nagvanshis were those who belonged to this serpent lineage.

Since there were already some kinds of social changes that were brought about by the Nagavanshis, by the moulding of the nature of the primal tribal deity, it was easy for the later incoming rulers the Kākatiyas to use this transformed identity of the goddess to establish her with a new religious identity, as Danteshvarī. Due to her wider acceptance in the tribal region, she was incorporated into the larger mythological pantheon through the Purāṇic Śiva and Sati episode. Here she is described as personification of Sati's tooth, which had fallen during Śiva's frantic dance in the sky, just after Sati's mortification in the yajña of Dakṣa Prajāpati.

### III- PATTERNS OF PATRONAGE

When we see the historical and mythological background of the Nāgas, we would find that the Nāgas of Bastar called themselves 'Chhindaka Nāga'.<sup>6</sup>

Epigraphic and numismatic evidences prove that Nāga dynasty was ruling for more than five hundred years (eighth century CE to fourteenth century CE). Their capital was at Barsoor and they claim to belong to the *Kāśyapa* gotra and had the snake-banner and 'tiger with cub' crest. One of their significant titles was "the lord of Bhogwati, the best of the cities." Bhogwati was the mythical capital of the snake-demons called Nāgas, who lived in Rasātāl, which is a part of mythical Pātāl.<sup>7</sup>

Scholars like R.B. Hiralal and D.C. Sircar have suggested that the expression 'Chhindaka' is a variant of Sindaka or Sinda; consequently, the Chhindaka Nāgas of Bastar belonged to the stock of the Sindas of Bagalkot of the Bijapur district, Yelburga in the former Nizam's domain, and Hallavur and Belgutti in the Mysore area. According to D.C. Sircar, "the above information about the Chhindaka Nagas of Bastar clearly points to their close relationship with the Sinda of the Kannad country".<sup>8</sup> There is no doubt that the family name Chhindaka, preferred by the Nāgvanshis of Bastar, is the same as Sinda, although Sindas fabricated a mythology to explain their family name from the name of the river Sindhu.<sup>9</sup>

In order to understand the relation between the Nagas and Maṇikéshwari, according to Hiralal Shukla, we need to establish that Maṇikéshwari was the clan deity of the Nāgavamshi kings. "There is inscriptional evidence which also shows the term "Nāgaphanamani" and perhaps in later period it was transformed as Maṇikéshwari."<sup>11</sup>

Since the Nāgas of Bastar claim to belong to the Kāśyapa gotra, with Vāsuki and Takshak as their procreators, it means they are directly seeking legitimacy from the widely accepted mythology, because through this process they can avail the socio-political acceptance among the local tribe. Emergence of Maṇikésvari can be seen as the product of combined ritualistic patterns of local tribes because "religious ritual practices and reciprocal gifts regulates the tribal societies and serve to ensure a fair material distribution to overcome inequalities caused by growing wealth of the chiefs and great joint families."<sup>12</sup>

On the basis of details from the Mahābhārata and the features of Śiva and Viṣṇu we can argue that the presence of Nāgas in ancient India was so strong that they were given a special space in the pan Indian cultural constructions. It also appears that these symbolic and mythological affinities of Nāgas towards the Brahmanical great gods helped in the adoption of tribal goddess Maṇikéshwari in the other form of Dantéśvarī within the larger brāhmanical pantheon.

According to scholar Hiralal Shukla there are many tribal communities who used the Naga surname. He further says that as per the epic and inscriptional evidences, Nagas were residing under-earth which is also called as Pātāl, Rasātāl and Bhogvati. On the basis of mythological references, he argues that the region of Godavari River was actually Pātāl, which is also called as Gondavānā.

S.M. Ali believes that 'the Nāgas or serpent worshippers figure in semi-mythical way in the early epic traditions. In the pre historic times, they are mentioned as people, associated with various mountainous regions of serpent kings like Vāsuki, Karkotaka, Ananta, Shesh, Shankhchud, Poundrik and Takshak. Their daughters were married to epic heroes like Arjuna

and Kusha. Naga colonies and kingdoms therefore extended all over the mountainous belt between Narmada and Godavari along the Vindhya and Satpura up to the Chhota Nagpur.<sup>13</sup>

Edward Washburn Hopkins<sup>14</sup> in his book '*The Religions for India*' has made some fascinating connections between the serpent myths and rain for the fertility. According to him, the hymns of *Rg Veda* called Indra as a god who gives passage to the water bodies, and shows Varuṇa as a general god of the water. He further states that Nāgas have been aided by the serpent worship in the period of northern conquest. The poisonous snake is feared, but his beautiful wave-like motion and water habitat of many of species cause him to be associated as divinity with Varuṇa, the water god.

#### IV- EVOLUTION OF A TRIBAL MOTHER GODDESS

As discussed in our previous part, we have seen how Maṇikéshwari, the goddess who is closely related to Nagas and the local tribes, was patronized for various reasons and aspects, and later she was transformed by the Kakatiyas into the identity of goddess Dantéśvarī. Through this whole process of identity transformation, one thing remains constant and that is the nature of mother goddess worship of local tribes as well as the rulers. They all synthesized a very high degree of respect and belief for the goddess. It has remained some kind of prime nature among the tribes to worship nature in the form of mother, but here the basic question is that how and why this mother goddess worship among the tribes become so prominent, and after a period of time it extended to wide horizontal social and political tracks.

Through this description, a strong argument in support of matrilineal tribal societies has been trying to develop. A similar argument has also been forwarded by Catherine Jantin Vitch.<sup>15</sup> She argues that the matrilineal tribal society was the reason behind the development of mother goddess cult among the tribes. But at the same time, Great Tradition had incorporated elements of fertility and mother goddess worship, and Sanskritized these elements. Tribes had also incorporated Sanskritic names and legends in their worship of mother goddess, and this had them legitimized at the folk level. Actually, there was continuous historical development of the concept of mother goddess in the tribal tradition and as well as in brahmanical tradition.

If we see the development of Maṇikéshwari in terms of tribal production relations and as well with the influence and interactions of brahmanical ideology, then we would find that since the deeply forested region was dominated with various kinds of natural recourses, but at the same time the pattern of settled agriculture was not introduced, that is why there was a competition to claim over the virgin lands among the various tribal community. In this way, we can also say that religion, particularly the goddess which was accepted among all the tribal groups created a socio-religious platform to make a more cohesive society.

According to the Nagapur museum inscription of Somesvara which is dated 1210 CE, and Kuruspal stone inscription of Somesvaradeva, it appears from these Naga inscriptions that Maṇikéshwari is the synonymous of *Vindhyavāsini*. King Somesvaradeva of the state Chakrakota worshiped in his inscription the goddess *Vindhyavāsini* so that he could regain his state from his enemy.

However, in this region instead of Maṇikéshwari, other goddesses were also visible in public worship like Maḥiṣāsūramardīnī and Kankālī Devi. Maḥiṣāsūramardīnī is also

mentioned in Barsoor Nagari inscription, which is dated 1320 CE. And even today there is a Mahiṣāsurmardinī temple, which was made during the reign of Nāgas at Chhindakapal village in Dantewada district. In order to trace the actual theory for the emergence of a tribal goddess Maṇikēshwari, we have looked upon numerous scholarly arguments and analysis, such as the possibility of matrilineal tribal society for the evolution of tribal mother goddess, or the production relations of pre-agricultural Tribal communities and even the tantric practices in relation to the origin of a tribal deity.

### V-DAKṢA MYTH AND DANTEŚVARĪ

According to text *Cūdāmaṇi Tantra*, the place where the tooth of goddess Śati had fallen is said to have been called Dantewada, and the goddess was formulated with a new name as Danteśvarī. Through this, mythological assimilation of a tribal deity within the wider and bigger brahmanical fold occurred, and at the same time she was directly associated with Śiva. Again, here an important question arises that why did the local tribes accepted the direct relationship of their goddess with the great god Śiva?

As we have discussed in our earlier that, among the tribes of central India there was already some kind of consciousness regarding the great god Śiva. According to the mythological stories of Gonds of central India, they have equated their mythological Mahādeo with the brahmanical Śiva, and it might be possible that due to some kind of linkages at mythological level between both the traditions, the great god Śiva was made favourable among the tribes. Thereby, they and accepted Danteśvarī as residing at a Śākta Pīṭha and as a consort of Śiva.

The evolution of the Śākta Pīṭha can be seen from various points of views. No doubt that the above myth of Sati holds a central position in this, but the gradual increasing in the number of Śākta Pīṭha with historical time period is also an interesting fact. Through these discussions, we can get an idea that how the two ways process of “top to bottom as well as bottom to top” acceptance and adaptation was in a continuous process and help in the creation of a ‘Pan Indian’ structure of goddess worship. Through this process, even Danteśvarī might have been recognized and given a place as a Śākta Pīṭha.

If we try to critically interpret the story of Dakṣa’s sacrifice in order to understand the process of cult appropriation then we can get an amalgamation of the philosophy (Śiva, Sati and Sāṃkhya) which has enhanced and smoothly channelized the process of cult appropriation. A critical analysis of the story of Dakṣa’s sacrifice, makes it clear that actually the event of disassociation of Śiva and Sati was the metaphoric expansion of Sāṃkhya, to bring the all feminine power at one place with relation to Śiva. An interesting and important thing about Sāṃkhya philosophy is that they do not to believe in the existence of god, but only in the nature as ultimate creative force.

If we see the whole concept of assimilation of local religious cults through the material point of view, or under the economic relations, then we could find the concept of ‘tīrtha’ as pointed out by R.N. Nandi, the notion of ‘tīrthyātrā’ or the holy visits, that can be traced in *Viṣṇusmṛiti*, which is a third century CE text.

During the tīrthyātrā, gift-rites which are prescribed to the pilgrims include *Śrāddha*, *Piṇḍadāna*, *Vrata*, *Homa* as well as *Japa*. According to R.N. Nandi, the concept of tīrth represents an attempt to revive the prospect of ‘Dāna-Exchange’ in all the

decaying settlements.<sup>18</sup> If we apply this concept of tīrthyātrā on the mythological interconnected Śākta Pīṭha, then logically we can argue that when the widely spread individual seats of goddess get associated with a single myth then probably it has enhanced the process of economic exchange and sometime trade routes are extended even in densely forested tribal tracts such as the regional inhabits Danteśvarī.

If we see the various forces behind the development of goddess Danteśvarī, from its tribal origin to brahmanical accommodation, it has passed through various transformations. But the most important aspect of Danteśvarī cult is its tribal nature which is centred among various tribal communities. As we have discussed in the beginning of this chapter, change in the mode of production in any society leads to some kind of major and essential change in the society. Thus, development of a society around a religious identity provides a notion of personal gain at individual level and mutual gain at the community level.

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