

Godness Samaleswari: A Timeless Emblem of Faith and Culture of Western Odisha

Dr. Laxman Kishan

Post Graduate Teacher in History, Salandi HSS, Po- Garadapur, Uttarahahini, Bhadrak, Odisha, India

Abstract

Godness Samaleswari occupies a unique and revered position in the religious, cultural and social life of Western Odisha. Worshipped as the presiding deity of the region, Godness Samaleswari symbolized faith, devotion, unity, and cultural identity. This article explores the historical origin, spiritual significance, and socio-cultural influence of Maa Samaleswari in shaping the traditions and collective consciousness of Western Odisha. It highlights how the worship of the goddess transcends religious boundaries and strengthens communal harmony, local customs, festivals, folk traditions, and religious heritage. The study also examines the role of the Samaleswari Temple as a center of spiritual inspiration and cultural continuity. By analysing the enduring relevance of Maa Samaleswari in contemporary society, the article presents the goddess as a timeless emblem of faith, culture and identity in Western Odisha.

Keywords- Samaleswari, Western Odisha, Mahanadi, Semel, Pitha, Tantrik, Sakti, Nabanna.

1. Introduction

Mother goddess Samaleswari, the Istta Devi of Sambalpur region occupies a unique position in the socio-religious life of the people of Western part of Odisha and Chhattisgarh state of India. On the bank of the river Mahanadi the mother goddess Samaleswari is worshipped below a semel (Bombax malabaricum) silk cotton tree from ancient times as Jagatjanani, Adishakti, Mahalaxmi and Mahasaraswati. The regular puja is performed there with Bhuvaneshwari mantra by non-Brahmin priest, called jhankar.¹ The region in which the temple is situated has a rich cultural heritage, besides being the seat of Buddhism and Hinduism, is also home to other religions and communities such as Muslims, Christians and innumerable indigenous tribal communities. With this multi-racial, multi-religious, multi-cultural and multi-lingual composition, Sambalpur has always chosen the path of social accommodation and social integration. Thus, people of diverse religious faiths have been residing together in harmony in Sambalpur. Therefore, it may be rightly called the most pluralistic society. Sambalpur is headquarters town of modern Sambalpur districts. It is situated on the left bank of the river Mahanadi. From ancient times, Sambalpur has been popularly known as Hirakhand as the land of Tantrik Buddhism. It is an ancient town, which has the reputation of Tantra Pitha. Significantly, when Buddhism as a religio-cultural force began to decline in many parts of India, Sambalpur played the most important role for the continuation of Buddhism in its new form i.e. Tantrik Buddhism. The existence of Sambalpur may be dated back at least to the early Christian era.²

The Greek geographer Ptolemy (middle of the second century A.D.) in his book *Geographike Hyphegesis* refers to a town named Sambalaka situated on the bank of the river Manada.³ Ancient Sambalaka and Manada are identified with modern Sambalpur and the river Mahanadi respectively. The suffix 'pur' has been later added by Sanskritising the original name Sambal when territory has come under the Chauhan rule. Similarly, the Samalai Pitha may be said to be much older and the deity may have been worshipped by the aborigines since time immemorial. Goddess Samalai came into significance as the presiding Goddess of Sambalpur after the establishment of the kingdom of Sambalpur by Balaramdev, younger brother of Narasinghadev of Patnagarh kingdom. Balaramdev got his share from his elder brother Narasinghdev and came to Bargarh in seeking for a place to establish fort. He established his camp at Chaurpur located on the bank of the river Mahanadi where his dogs came after rabbit, but the rabbit ran after the dogs. The king was very much astonished on seeing this incident. In that particular night Balaramdev saw a dream. Goddess Samalai stood before him and said, "My son, I am Samalai, is now at Gumdarha. Take me and construct a temple under the Semel tree on the other side of the river." Balaramdev accepted the goddess Samalai of that area as his tutelary deity and establish his fort and kingdom. The legend mentioned in *Jayachandrika* is supported by Siba Prasad Das mentioned that the tribal people like Savara (Sahara) Oram, Munda, Gond, Kondh, Binjhal, were living in Sambal region when Ramaidev established Chauhan kingdom at Patnagarh.⁴ These tribal people established and worshipped the goddess Samalai on the bank of the river to get blessing for safe landing before starting their journey. They were offering fish to the deity which is till now continuing in the Samalai temple of Barpali, S. P. Das mentioned Samalai as the deity of aboriginals.⁵

The contribution of tribal people to the cultural history of Odisha is not unknown as we know from *Skanda Puran* that the Savaras are associated with Lord Jagannath Cult. Goddess "Stambesvari" which is the earliest form of the Sakti worship in Odisha is found in the tribal dominated areas like balangir, Baud, Kondmal, Sambalpur, Sonapur and Kalahandi region. The concept of Sakti worship is the outcome of the worship of plants, trees by the remote tribal race which in later time crept into Hindu Pantheon and names were given according to the name of the place, nature or any other such as Sekharabasini, Stambeswari, Pataneswari in Balangir- Patnagarh, Sureswari in Subarnapur, Manikeswari in Kalahandi, and Samaleswari in Sambalpur. Goddess Samaleswari which is made of stone reveals the aboriginal character. She is also worshipped along with "Banjara-Devi", the goddess of tribal people. During the composition of *Odia Mahabharata* by Siddheswar Parida/ Sarala Das, who flourished during the time of Bhanudeva IV and Kapilendra Deva i.e. early 15th C. A.D. She was popular as he referred to Samalai of Sambalpur in the "Mangalastuti", the opening canto of *Madhya parva* of his *Mahabharata*. If this stuti is not interpolated and from an integral part of original *Sarala Mahabharata* then it may be regarded as a glowing testimony of their existence much before the coming of Balaramdev to Sambalpur. The poet mentioned Samaleswari along with twelve names such as Sarala, Mangala, Ramachandi, Bimala, Charchika, Biraja, Hingulai, Gauri, Bhagabati, Chandi, Bhattarika etc. According to historical evidences the existence of goddess Samaleswari is very ancient.⁶ The manifestation myth of the goddess i.e. here repulsing the dog, Balaramdev's selection of the place as capital and establishment of Samalai devi have been created later on. Much before the king, the goddess was in existence. The king elevated the status of the deity to the goddess and propagated found till the present day about the manifestation of the goddess. The goddess stepped out of the tribal barricade and became famous goddess of great tradition and created a cult of her later on. The Chauhan king Balaramdev made her the state deity. Now she is conceived as

the embodiment of the Sakta trinity Mahakali, Mahalaxmi and Mahasaraswati the universal cosmic goddess. So Samalai originally was being worshipped by the local tribe. With the rise of importance of the deity, people of other tribe's locally worshipped her. She became the protectress of not only the tribes but also other people. She earned the position of a Nagaradevata /gramadevi and became the presiding deity of Sambalpur. She was propitiated by the ruling class. The Chauhan king recognized as their tutelary goddess. With the growth of the power of the Chauhan, the glory and the strength of the Goddess increased and she obtained the status of the state deity of Chauhan kingdom. She became popular and command respect and reverence from people of all parts of Chauhan kingdom. Her tribal nature gradually was observed with the great cult of Sakti.⁷

The Mother Goddess Samaleswari Temple is constructing in Sandhara baroque (these types of the temples have a square sanctum encircled by a gallery of pillars meant for Pradakshina). Thus, the Sandhara temples have a Pradakshinapatha is constructing by stone cemented with lime mortar, the whole building is plastered, but in the course of time the surface has become mouldy. The temple recognizes two separate structures. The square sanctum sanctorum enshrining the deity is four steep below the ten-foot-wide covered circumambulation, which is supported by twelve stone pillars. Eleven parswa devis (side Goddess), are embedded on the outer wall of the sanctum, so that the devotees can worship those deities during parikrama through the vaulted circumambulation. The main Idol of Shree Shree Maa Samalai Devi consists of a large block of Granite rock with an inverted, trunk like projection at the bottom. A shallow cut on her "Baraha" like face symbolizes her mouth. Classical Sambalpuri nose ornaments of pure gold hangs down from her imaginary nose Beaten gold leave fixed on two disproportionate golden eye like depression on the face acts as substitute for her eyes in an attempt to define the face of the mother deity on a mass of self-shaped rock, the devi's idol inspires sublime sentiments of awe, fear, reverence, devotion, love and affection towards all-pervading motherhood. Samaleswari is worshiped with a great care and devotion by the natives in her temples. Some important ritualistic ceremonies are still observed before the goddess throughout the year. There are three major festivals are observed prominently.

1. Chaitra Nabaratra – observed in the months of March- April.
2. Sharadiya Navaratra – observed in the months of September-October.
3. Nuakhai (Harvest festival)- observed in the month of August-September.

Among the important religious observance associated with Maa Samaleswari, the first two major Nabaratra pujas- Chaitra Navaratra during March-April and Sharadiya Navaratra during September-October-hold special significance of Maa Samaleswari are celebrated with great devotion and religious fervor. This two interesting occasion nabaratra pujas (nine days continuous worship of the goddess) is observed with pomp and ceremony.⁸ The third festival which is said to be the chief festival of the whole part of the Western Odisha (Sambalpur) region is Nuakhai. According to the calendar it is celebrated on panchami tithi (the fifth day) of the lunar fortnight of the months of Bhadrapada or Bhadraba (August-September), the day after the Ganesh Chaturthi festival.⁹ This is the most interesting social festival of Western Odisha and adjoining areas of Simdega in Jharkhand, where Odia culture is much predominated. Its coastal counterpart is Nabanna, observed in Coastal Odisha and West Bengal. In this festival the farmers offer the first crop from their lands to the goddess before using it for his personal use. It has a big significance for farmers and the agricultural community. It is a festival for the worship of food grain. Which is celebrated in a particular tithi (day) and samaya (time), known as Lagan (auspicious moment).

When the Lagan comes, the people offers Arsaa pithaa (rice cake) made in new rice to their beloved goddess and have their nua (new). The head priest of the temple offers the nua-anna or nabanna to the goddess Samaleswari, the presiding deity of Sambalpur.¹⁰ This event is proceeding through nine steps such as:-

1. Beheren (announcement of a meeting to set the date).
2. Lagan dekha (setting the exact date for partaking of new rice).
3. Daka haka (invitation).
4. Sapha sutura and lipa puchha (cleanliness).
5. Ghina bika (purchasing).
6. Nua dhan khuja (looking for the new crop).
7. Bali paka (final resolve for Nuakhai by taking the Prasad) (the offering to the deity).
8. Nuakhai (eating the new crop as Prasad after offering it to the deity, followed by the dancing and singing).
9. Juhar bheth / nuakhai bheth hghat (respect to elders & gift transfers).

These processes of diffusion, acculturation and assimilation were not one-way flow from Hindu Great tradition to local little tradition alone. In Sambalpur area, it was the simultaneous process of acculturation and deculturation. It proceeded through complex processes of interaction which are conformed by myths, legends and historical evidences. Thus she created a cult in her name and the cult of Samalai began to spread.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Goddess Samaleswari is not merely a regional deity but a living symbol of the spiritual consciousness, cultural heritage, and collective identity of Western Odisha. For centuries, the Goddess has occupied a central place in the hearts and lives of the people of Western Odisha, guiding them through faith, devotion, and moral values. Her temple traditions, rituals, festivals, folk practices, and oral narratives have significantly contributed to the preservation and enrichment of the cultural ethos of the region. Goddess Samaleswari embodies the ideals of compassion, protection, strength, and motherly benevolence, which continue to inspire millions of devotees across social and cultural boundaries. The celebration of various religious festivals associated with the Goddess fosters communal harmony, social solidarity, and a shared sense of belonging among the people of Western Odisha. Her influence is visible not only in religious life but also in the literature, music, art, folklore, and everyday traditions of the region. In the modern age, despite rapid social and cultural transformations, the relevance for Goddess Samaleswari remains unwavering. She continues to serve as a spiritual anchor and a unifying cultural force, connecting the past with the present and preserving the sacred traditions of Western Odisha for

future generations. Thus, Goddess Samaleswari truly stands as a timeless emblem of faith, devotion, resilience, and cultural continuity, reflecting the enduring spiritual legacy of Western Odisha.

References:

1. Das, S.P. *Sambalpur Itihas* (Oriya), Bhubaneswar, 2002, p.169.
2. Das, Sarala, *Mahabharata, Madhya Parva, (Oriya) 1st canto, Mangala Stuti*.
3. Ptolemy, *Geographike Hyphegesis*, Edited by Karl Muller, Paris, 1883, pp-68-74.
4. Mallick, R.C., *Samkhipta Kosala Itihas*, (Oriya), Patna.
5. Pradhan, B.C., “*Samaleswari, the Presiding Goddess of Sambalpur, Origin*”, in ed. H.C. Panda and S.K. Acharya, O.P.H.C., Bhubaneswar, 1994, pp-41-43.
6. http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=samaleswari_Temple&oldid=912688121 20/9/2019 7:03 AM.
7. <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Nuakhai&oldid=915970227> 14/10/2019 8:05 AM.
8. Panda, S.S., “*Some new facts about goddess Samalai*” in ed S.S. Panda and B. Biswal, Orissa Riview, Vol. LXII No, 2, 3, 2005, p.87.
9. Pradhan, P. *Samalai Ba Samaleswari in Panchajanya* (Oriya), 1980, p.3.
10. Sahu, N.K., and others (ed) *History of Orissa*, Cuttack, 1985, p.250.