

TARA TARINI IN THE LEGENDS AND LITERATURE OF SOUTH ODISHA

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Abstract

Tara Tarini temple is near Purushottampur in the Ganjam district of South Odisha. It is famous for its rich historical tradition and Puranic antiquity. The temple's presiding deity, Tara Tarini, represents the female goddess of Shakti and has been regarded as the presiding deity of almost all the people of South Odisha. This shrine has also acquired fame as one of the important Shakti Pithas of India since ancient times. This paper attempts to trace the literature related to the temple of Tara Tarini and the legends associated with the temple.

INTRODUCTION

The temple is about 32 Km. from Berhampur, the Silk City popularly known as the nerve centre of Odia culture, particularly the folk culture. This temple is situated in the Kumari hills on the bank of the river Rushikulya. As mentioned, it is one of the oldest Shakti Pithas in India. Thousands of people from all parts of India visit this temple yearly. Tuesdays in the month of Chitra are considered the most auspicious days for visiting this temple. Thus, people from nearby areas usually visit the temple in the month of Chaitra to get the deity's blessings. There is a tradition to offer the hairs of the firstborn (child) of the family at this place during the month of Chaitra, seeking the blessing of the deity for the healthy, blissful and long life of the child. The temple can be reached by climbing 999 steps. Recently, a ropeway was also arranged to reach the temple. Devotees can also get to the mountaintop by taking a motorable road to offer prayers. The view of the Rushikulya River and the green pastures surrounding the area are a feast for visitors who travel by road. Two stone structures resembling human faces are the main shrines of this temple. Gold and silver ornaments adorn the deities, and two other idols are present in the main shrine for special *puja* celebrations.

LITERATURE SURVEY

Some literature has been written on the Shakti Pithas and the development of the Shakti cult in India as an essential branch of Hinduism. The cult of Shakti in India embodies a female deity's power. A book written by Suresh Kumar Singh discusses 51 Shakti Pithas. These Pithas were selected from all over Asia, mainly in India. Among them are Maa Hingulaja Devi, Maa Sunanda, Maa Mahamaya, Maa Tripuramalini, etc. Another book by Francesco Brighenti brings the ethnohistorical study that explores the evolution of worship of Sakti in Odisha from prehistorical times to the modern period. Another critical article published in the edited volume of the book *Exploring Orissan History* is written by Manmath Padhy. This article

concerns the Sakti Worship in Rushikulya Valley, the Tara Tarini Temple. However, there is a lack of literature regarding legends associated with the Shakti Pithas in the Ganjam district, particularly the Tara Tarini temple, though it has been treated as one of the important Sakti Pithas of India since the ancient period. Hence, an attempt has been made here to find out the mention of Tara-Tarini in ancient literature and the cult's origin based on the legends associated with the temple.

Literature associated with Tara-Tarini:

The Tantrika cult mentions the deity Tara in one of the eighteen principal *Puranas*. The *Brahmanda-Purana* in the *Lalitopakhyayana* gives credit to Tara as a distinct deity. “*Tara Naam Maha Shakti*” (ch.31, st.12, *Brahmanda Purana*) means a divinity named Tara. She is called “Amba” or “Tara”, the mother in this description. She is praised as the one who controls the flooded water. She represented the *sakis or navikis (boat women) who navigated in the “lake of nectar”* (amritavapi)

There is a sloka in the same Purana about the power of Tara in controlling the waters, which says:

“*Taasan Naukavahikanam Shattonam syamalatvisham, pradhanamuta tarava jamouhashamanachama.....*”(Ibid. st.17)

Another sloka from the exact text gives us the information on the duties of Tara and Tarini in the Lake of Nectar as follows:

“There is a great hall called ‘*manas*’ whose middle enclosure comprises the nectar lake. There is no way to go into it save the conveyance of a boat. There is the great *sakti* – Tara by name, who controls the gate. Many attendants of Tara are dark like the blue lotus and are sporting in the waters of the lake with thousands of boats and jewels. They come to this shore and go back to the other shore. Millions of boat women under Tara are in the prime of youth.

.....of these *saktis* who guide the boats and have dark colours, the chief one is Tara, the mother, who can calm the floods. Without the permission of *Mantriniand Dandanatha*, Tara does not allow even Siva to come into the waters of the Vapika or lake. The union of Tara and the ‘Powers controlling the boats (Tarani-sakti) is indeed very charming. Thus Tara, the mother, surrounded by various boats and herself occupying a large boat, shines exceedingly.” (Shastri, p.16)

However, the Tara of the *tantras* is unknown in Brahmanical literature, evidenced by Tara's mention in *Agni-Purana*, where Tara was mentioned as a *Yogini* and not as a goddess. It is to be noted here that the Yoginis are of a far lower rank than a devata, though they are worshipped on every auspicious occasion.

Another mention of Tara is found in a Tantrika work, *Laghustuti* (the little or short eulogy probably written by Laghubhattaraka. There is no proper evidence of whether it was his name or the reference to the smallness (laghutvam) of the poem.

Thus, the Brahmanical *tantra* works refer to Tara as an essential deity, if not the principal deity. She was also praised as granting quick boons or success (*nou Tarasama kaachidevata sidhidayino*).

As the antiquity of tantra books could not be dated too old (not later than the 6th century A.D.), Tara, as represented in these books, could not be found in the earlier literature.

The Buddhist inscriptions refer to Tara as a deity, and the earliest evidence of the mention was found in the inscription in Java in the Nagari inscription dated Saka year 700(778 A.D.) Another mention of Tara is found in the Chalukya inscription of Tribhuvanamalla Vikramaditya VI dated Saka year 1017(1095A.D.) (Roy, p.164)

We also find Tara mentioned in the Jain literature. However, the position assigned to her in the Jain literature is not as high as that of the Buddhist literature. The Svetambara sect *Sutara* is identified with Tara in Buddhist literature. Some aboriginal people, such as Kondhs, also mention the name Tari. According to the Kondh legend, Tari lives in heaven with her husband, Bara Pennu. She is a bloodthirsty deity and has nothing in common with the Tara of the previous description.

The above shows various mentions of the Tara and Tarini in numerous pieces of literature from the ancient period. While Tara is mentioned in the Brahmanical literature as a Yogini, Tara Tarini is a maritime deity in the Tantra puranic literature. Even Buddhist and Jaina literature mentions Tara. Tara holds the same place in Buddhism as the Goddess Durga in Brahmanism. She is treated as Sakti's counterpart. Durga is the Sakti of Siva. Durga is also depicted as the mother of gods in the Brahmanical mythology. Even in Mahayana Buddhism, Tara is the mother of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. However, Tara is chiefly known as mentioned in *Laghusthuti*, the deity who “safely carries the travellers across the waters”. Thus, the description of Tara in the *Lalitopakhyana* or the *Brhamanda-Puran* proves that she is the goddess of navigation. She is the *Naukesvari*, “the mistress of boats, has oars of jewels and occupies the boat of jewels”.

Countless boatwomen move with her in hundreds of boats and save distressed people. Thus, we find that Tara came out of an extensive lake and controls flooded water, enabling her votaries to cross them safely. At the same time, Tarini takes the people across waters on whose mercy success in sailing will depend. Due to the belief in this legend, many sea-bound travellers worship Tara-Tarini before embarking on a mission into the sea. They believe the deity/deities guard them throughout their journey and safely reach the other shore. Since ancient times, navigators have used River Rushikulya for overseas maritime trade activities. Since the mouth of Rushikulya on the Bay of Bengal is a little distance from the temple site, merchants were believed to be performing pooja and offerings before and after embarking on boats for maritime trade.

The legend associated with this tradition says that Berhampur traders embarked on a sail from the port of Gopalpur to Rangoon. At the same time, she was returning from his sail when he was just 10 Km. Away from the shore, he was attacked by a vast sea creature. Awestruck by the incident, he started praying Maa Taratarini would pull him out of trouble, and by the grace of

the Devi, he reached the shore safely. After returning home, he donated all the money he had earned from the trade to the goddess Taratarini. Other legends also associate maritime traders and the worship of Taratarini as a maritime god. (Padhy p.63)

Legends Associated with Tara Tarini:

Puranic literature is the earliest literature that could find mention of the deity. As written in the Puranas, Maa Tara Tarini belongs to the Satya Yuga. Puranic texts where the mention was made were the Shiva Purana, Kalika Purana, Devi Bhagavat, etc. These sources shed light on this deity's origin and the legends associated with the construction of temples.

The widely believed legend associated with the Tara Tarini temple comes from the legend of Devi Sati. Devi Sati, who was the daughter of Daksha Prajapati, married Shiva and lived in the abode of Kailasha mountain against the wishes of her father, and this was the cause of the ill will of Daksha towards his son-in-law, i.e., Shiva. This ill-will finally leads to the destruction of Sati's life. The anger of Shiva and the interference of Vishnu with his *Sudrasana* finally led to the establishment of the Pithas. The detailed legend is as follows:

Even from a very young age, Sati was attracted to Shiva and desired to marry Shiva. King Daksha was against Sati's decision to marry Shiva, as Shiva does not lead a life of luxury as a king. Despite her father's opposition, Sati married Shiva and decided to live a life of ascetics with her husband, leaving the pleasures of palaces.

Then Daksha decided to perform a Yagna to insult Siva. He did not invite his daughter and son-in-law intentionally. On knowing about the Yagna to be performed by her father, Sati wanted to attend it and requested Shiva to attend it. But Shiva politely refused to participate in it, and he also advised Sati not to visit her father then. But Sati was furious about her father's indifference towards her and her husband and decided to attend the Yagna performed by her father. She was insulted by her father, and unable to bear the insult, she sacrificed herself in the fire of the Yagna.

When Shiva learned about it, he became furious and destroyed Daksha completely. He cut off his head and replaced it with that of a goat. He started dancing in a fury, carrying the remains of the sati's body. This was a dance of destruction performed by Shiva in rage due to the grief of losing his beloved. As the dance of destruction was unstoppable, Vishnu used his *Sudarshana* (circular disc) to cut through Sati's corpse. When Sati's corpse was cut into pieces, they were dropped in various parts of the earth. Wherever the body parts of Sati fell, there arose a Sakti Pitha. According to the legend, the breast pieces of Sati fell on the Kumari Hills on the north bank of Rushikulya river. They thus formed the Sakti Pitha of Tara Tarini, giving it the name *Sthanapitha*.

This episode is described differently in Devi Bhagawat (Saptasati Matraka), written by Vyasa Dev. On the request of the Brahma and especially Shri Hari Vishnu, Shani (symbolized by the Saturn Graha) entered the corpse of Sati and disposed of it in 108 parts. Sakti Pithas sprang up in the places where these pieces of Sati fell.

Four important Sakti Pitas, which sprang up from four body parts of the Devi, are as follows.

1. In Calcutta, *Dakshin Kali*, where the Head portion of *Devi* dropped.
2. In Puri, *Bimala(Bhairavi)*, where the feet portion of *the Devi* dropped
3. *Kaunri Kamakhya* in Assam, where the waist portion was dropped, became famous as *Kamakhya Devi*.
4. Kumari Hill is near Purushottampur, where the breast portion of the Goddess was dropped.

Another legend associated with the origin of Tara Tarini Shrine is found in the mythological story of the Ramayana or specifically in the “Raghunatha Kirtana”. According to this legend, Maharshi Vasistha invoked Goddesses Tara Tarini to fulfil his desires. To get the desired result, he spent several years deep meditation at the foothill of the Shrine. But he displeased Goddess Tara Tarini even after an extended meditation. And having failed to please the Goddess, he cursed that the Goddess would remain un-worshipped. When Goddesses Tara Tarini knew about it, they requested Maharshi Vasistha to free them from the curse. After seeing the Goddesses, Maharshi cooled down and repented for his grave mistake. He said that Goddesses Tara Tarini would again resurface on the earth in the Tretaya Yuga, from the eyes of Goddess Laxmi. Until then, they should remain in the eyes of Goddess Laxmi. Maharshi’s words proved true. With the dawn of Tretaya, Lord Vishnu was incarnated as Lord Ram, and his spouse, Goddess Laxmi, was conceived as Devi Sita. When Tears came down from the eyes of Goddess Sita in Ashoka Vatika, two magnificent Devis Tara and Tarini resurfaced. After helping Sri Ram against Mahiravan and with the permission of Goddess Sita, they returned to their eternal abode, Tarini Parvat, for the wellbeing of the universe. Another legend is the Puspaka Vimana of Ravana taking Devi Sita to Srilanka over the Kumari hills. At the same time, two drops of tears of Devi Sita fell on the top of the Kumari Hills, out of which two stone images emerged and worshipped as Tara and Tarini.

Kalika *Purana* and Tara Mahatma are other mythological books that provide legends about the Tara Tarini deities.

According to the legend, Vishnu Das, an educated, handsome, wealthy person, stayed at Srikhetra. He worshipped Goddess Bimala. He was childless even after ten years of his marriage. The couple started worshipping lord Somanath. Vishnudas’s wife Sukeshi dreamt that lord Somnath gave a banana to her. The following day, she told this story to her husband. With the blessings of Somanath, she became pregnant soon after giving birth to a son. The couple were thrilled. They called him Somanath.

Unfortunately, Sukeshi died early. Vishnu Das, on the advice of his family members, married a pretty lady named Kutilakhi. This lady was evil, sexy and greedy. Vishnudas could not forget his first wife, Sukeshi, and died soon after. Kutilakhi spent her remaining life as a prostitute. Once, Somanath was hungry and wanted some food. Instead of giving food, Kutilakhi had beaten him so harshly that he fainted. The neighbours forced her to leave the house.

Somanath roamed many places as a monk, leaving his house and village. But he could not forget his native place and started a return journey to reach home. On the way, he reached the town where Kutilakhi stayed and took shelter in Kutilakhi's house. Both of them started to live together. One day, Kutilakhi saw the spot on Somanath's head and asked him about it. Then, Somanath narrated the entire story of the past to Kutilakhi. Then, she recognised Somanath and disclosed that she was his stepmother. When Somanath learned the truth from Kutilakhi, he was filled with guilt. So, he left that city and roamed here and there as a mad person. At last, he reached Kasi and started worshipping Lord Shiva.

After worshipping Lord Siva for five years, Lord Shiva asked him to worship Lord Mahakalanath, who was situated in Ujjain. Mahakalanath again advised him to worship Devi Ratna. Pleased in his worship, *Devi* Ratna appeared before him. She was so stunning that Somnath could not open his eyes. That day was Tuesday of Chaitra month, and the *tithi* was *amabasya*. From her glazing eyes, two pretty young girls appeared. *Devi* Ratna disappeared after giving birth to those girls. The first girl smashed Somanath with the power of her eyes. But the second one gave life to Somanath. Then he opened his eyes and told them his past story. Then the elder sister told him they were twin sisters; her name was Tara, and her younger sister was Tarini. Goddess Ratna was their mother, and she gave birth to them for the welfare of the universe, and Purna Ratnagiri was their living place. She also said that when Somnath was smashed, he was relieved of his sins, and the twin sister gave him a second life.

The twin girls wanted to go home. When Somanath enquired about the place, they said that Purna Ratnagiri was created by the breast pieces of Parvati's dead body, which was their home. In the past, Maharshi Viswamitra, Vashistha, Hanuman and Parsuram stayed at Purna Ratnagiri and prayed to the *Devi* for her blessing. Tarini asked him to start the journey. She also told him not to look back while walking but to follow the sound of their anklets.

They also told him that after reaching the south of Rushikulya, Somnath would become the Siva Linga and be worshipped by the people. On hearing this, Somanath gladly and respectably touched the feet of both sisters and started his journey. After reaching river Rushikulya's bank, he was changed to Somanath Siva Linga.

Then, the two sisters met Kulapati, a childless man in Golakpur. The two *Devis* reached his house. Gouri was the wife of Kulapati. When she asked where the pretty young girls were from, they said they belonged to the royal family but were interested in staying in their house as their daughters and called them Bapa and Maa. Kulapati and his wife were childless, so they felt pleased and agreed.

Kulapati called them Hira and Nila, and from that day, they stayed in his house. Villagers did not like Kulapati giving shelter to the unknown girls. But he did not care. Soon, with the blessing of the twin *Devis*, Kulapati became wealthy, and Gouri gave birth to a son named Gourachandra. On seeing the couple's fortune, many people came to their house to take the blessings of the twins. The two *Devis* advised them to observe Tarini brata to worship the Goddess Taratarini on a particular day of the Odiya calendar.

The popularity of the sisters reached the king. He was a wicked person. Encouraged by the minister, he decided to marry them. Kulapati was called to the court. The minister informed them that the king wanted to marry them as they belonged to a royal family. Kulapati said that his daughter's opinion is essential, and he cannot promise the king without their wish.

After reaching home, he told his wife what had happened in the court. After learning of what happened in the court, the girls asked him to inform the king that they were ready to marry him, but the marriage would be performed at the bride's residence per the day's custom. The king agreed to this and reached Kulapati's house by horse. On reaching there, he saw the two girls adorned with rich jewellery and pretty dresses. They told the king that they stayed in Kulapati's house as they promised it to their forefathers, and as they fulfilled the promise, they decided to leave the house. Saying this, they started towards the Rushikulya River and walked to the middle of the river. The king, madly attracted by their beauty, followed them and died. Tara and Tarini were not seen by the villagers afterwards.

Kulapati, Gouri and Gourachandra lived very sadly after the disappearance of the two Devis and always remembered Tara Tarini. One night, Gourachandra dreamt that both the Goddesses appeared in his dream and asked him not to worry about them. They asked him to go to the Ratnagiri Mountain and the Mulur Jungle. There, he will find a big tree; on the stem of this tree, he will find a *Bila*. There, he will find them sitting on the diamond throne. Kulapati's family followed the Goddesses' advice the next morning and reached Mulur Jungle. There, they found the Goddesses and started worshipping the *Devis*.

Once, Gourachandra went to the town to purchase an animal for the *Devi*. The minister's wife, Gunabati, saw him there and recognised him. She told Gourachandra of their problems. Gourachandra asked her to build a temple for the *Devi* so they would be blessed and their problems would be solved. The minister and his wife followed his advice. Soon, her husband was cured.

Another legend of Taratarini states that in the past, a king named Manikeswara ruled Purbakhanda. In this palace, there was a *Mali* (gardener). Every day, *Mali* went to the river Rushikulya to take a bath. One day, Taratarini came from the river and appeared before *Mali*. *Mali* was childless; he took both the sisters to his house and treated them as his daughters. Once, both the sisters made a beautiful garland for the king. The king was pleased to see the garland and wanted to see the sisters. Hearing this news, both the sisters left *Mali*'s house. King's soldiers followed them, and the sisters went to the Purna Ratnagiri and changed their bodies into stones. Since then, these two sisters have been famous as Taratarini, and people worshipped them every day.

There was also a legend associated with the temple building. Two adjacent mountains were worshipped for centuries as the breasts of the Goddess because of their natural shape and the ancient association of the Mother as the pervasive energy of the land. Over time, a temple was built upon this land, solidifying the traditions of the tribal people. According to the widely known legend, the mountain of *Dahihandi* (Odia), which is another name for the Kumari hills, the construction of the temple took place in 1799 A.D. by a Brahmin devotee named Basu

Praharaja constructed the temple. The legend associated with the construction and renovation of the temple is as follows. Maa Taratarini was seen in the house of the childless Brahmin devotee Basu Praharaja, a learned Brahmin belonging to the Jagannadhpur area near Purshottampur, in the form of two sisters. Basu Praharaja had the opportunity to become the foster father of the two sisters. These sisters stayed in the house of the Brahmin devotee for a few years, and they were adopted as the daughters of the Brahmin. But all of a sudden, one day, these two sisters disappeared on Taratarini Hill. The Brahmin, unaware of the divine nature of Taratarini, grieved on their disappearance. Then, one night, Taratarini appeared in his dream, made him aware of their divine existence and asked him to build/ renovate a temple for them. With utmost dedication, the Brahmin started to build a temple so that the devotees worship the deities. The stone form of the deity is decorated with ornaments, and then eventually, two movable forms of the deity were also placed for different ceremonies.

There are other devotees also who made their contributions towards the development of the shrine. A famous businessman from Berhampur named Kalapili Chitibabu donated a large amount of money for the renovation of the temple, and it is believed that the stone steps were laid for the devotees to reach the temple. During the post-independence period, a famous social reformer named Sashibhushan Rath tried to stop animal sacrifice on the shrine abode. Due to his efforts, the custom of sacrificing the animals (*Bali tradition*) was stopped. Afterwards, a trust was made to take care of the activities of the Tara Tarini Temple, and from then onwards till date, a lot of developmental works have taken place; the temple is now a place of visit not only for pilgrims but also for tourists who visit the south Odisha.

CONCLUSION

The twin Goddesses of Tara Tarini are worshipped as the Ista Devati (presiding deity) of South Odisha. All the fairs and festivals associated with the deities are performed with utmost devotion. Thousands of people gather here to worship the gods at all important festivals. Mass Hair Cutting (Mundan) is performed in the auspicious month of Chaitra. Recently, the temple has been renovated and made vast and beautiful. This also boosted temple tourism. It has become famous as one of the important pilgrim places of India due to its legendary association as one of the Sakti Pithas of India.

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