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Maa Tarini Peetha of Kendujhar

**Sacred Confluence of Tribal and Mainstream
Religious Traditions of Odisha.**

Deeti Ranjita Ray





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Executive Summary

This paper explores the evolution of Sakti worship in Odisha, focusing on Maa Tarini of Ghatagaon, Kendujhar, one of the most revered aniconic mother goddesses in the eastern Indian religious landscape. Sakti, the divine feminine energy, is conceived as the supreme mother goddess and embodies the forces of creation, preservation, and destruction. Her veneration, rooted in prehistoric cultic traditions, finds early expression in the iconography of the Indus Valley Civilisation and evolves through complex interplays with Vedic, Jain, Buddhist, and Puranic thought systems.

In Odisha, Sakti worship developed as a dynamic religious phenomenon, sustained across centuries by the syncretic integration of tribal animism, folk beliefs, tantric rituals, and Brahmanical orthodoxy. The paper traces this transformation from rudimentary stone and tree worship in tribal villages to institutionalised goddess cults within temple complexes patronised by regional dynasties. Central to this trajectory is the role of royal patronage, particularly by the Bhanja dynasty, whose political power in the hilly forested terrains of Kendujhar and Mayurbhanj was legitimised through their devotion to tutelary deities like Kichakesvari and later, Maa Tarini.

The Ghatagaon temple of Maa Tarini is presented not only as a religious site and node where indigenous traditions converge with pan-Hindu practices. Worshipped in her aniconic form, a head-shaped stone smeared with vermilion, Maa Tarini exemplifies the benevolent aspect of the Sakti principle, revered as a protector deity who relieves her devotees of misfortune and crisis (hence the title Sankata Harini). The temple's origin legends, including the Kanchi Abhiyan folklore involving King Purushottam Deva and Govinda Bhanja, are critically reviewed with both historical and mythological narratives.

The study highlights how Sakti Peethas, such as Ghatagaon, have evolved into supra-regional pilgrimage centres, driven by oral traditions, ritual performances, poetic hagiographies, and the continued custodianship of tribal priestly families. Maa Tarini today occupies multiple identities, Rastradevi, Gramadevi, Istadevi, and Gruhadevi, thus reflecting her expansive spiritual and cultural resonance across Odisha and beyond.

This paper concludes by advocating for greater archival and archaeological investigation into the origins and development of the Tarini cult, which remains under-documented despite its widespread prominence. It contributes to the broader understanding of how feminine divine traditions rooted in forested tribal geographies have become enduring pillars of regional religious identity and sacred legitimacy.

Maa Tarini

Peetha of Kendujhar

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1. Introduction: The Feminine Divine in India

Sakti originates from the root word ‘*Sak*,’ which means to have energy to do or act. Thus, Sakti worship is the worship of energy personified as a female and is generally conceived as the all-pervading mother goddess. She is regarded as the Supreme Creator, Sustainer, and Destroyer of the universe, and those who worship her are known as *Sakta*.^[1]

Archaeological evidence suggests that the concept of Sakti can be traced to the Indus Valley civilisation through terracotta female figurines and ring stones, indicating the presence of worship of the female principle in both aniconic and iconic forms. With the advent of Buddhism and Jainism, the worship of the female principle did not decline; instead, the principal goddesses Ambika, Durga, Kali, and Bhadrakali were integrated into Buddhist and Jain practices in various forms.

In the earliest period of the Vedas, the Gods were conceived, along with their respective consorts, without assigning any divine work to their consorts that corresponded to that of their lords, thus emphasising the worship of male deities. Usha, Bharati, Sarasvati, Prthvi, Ratri, and others only find a mention in the Rigvedic hymns and nothing more than that. *Agnayi*, *Varunani*, *Asvini*, *Rodasi*, the wives of Agni, Varuna, Asvins and Rudra, respectively, are only alluded to in a few passages. The insignificance of these goddesses

forms a striking contrast to the prominent place assumed by the spouses of Shiva and Vishnu.^[2] The *Upa-Puranas*, including the *Devi Purana*, *Kalika Purana*, *Mahabhadgavata Purana*, and *Devi Bhagavata Purana*, refer to the Sakti as the supreme divinity. Kalidasa's *Raghuvamsha* begins with a salutation to Parvati. Devi Durga was perceived in the *Devi Mahatmya* section of the *Markandeya Purana* as all-powerful and capable of overpowering the dangerous demons. To assist Devi Durga in her efforts to defeat the enemies and uphold the



Image 1: God Shiva Seated with the Seven Mother Goddesses (Saptamatrika), 10th Century, Madhya Pradesh, India (Wikimedia)

dharma, numerous female manifestations of Sakta goddesses emerged, further increasing with the addition of tribal and folk goddesses of remote origin. Feminine powers such as *Brahmani*, *Mahesvari*, *Kaumari*, *Vaishnavi*, *Aindri*, *Varahi*, *Narasimbi*, and *Chamunda* were known as *Matri* and collectively referred to as *Matragana*,

meaning "mothers." They are the Sakti personification of respective gods as described in Brahmanical literature.

In Odisha, the first reference to the *Saptamatrikas* (seven mothers) is found in the Parsuramesvara temple in Bhubaneswar, dated to the 7th century CE. The availability of Matrika figures, either individually or in groups, across the state reveals different phases of iconographic development, indicating their widespread distribution and prevalence throughout the centuries.^[3] Odisha has the distinction of having two *Chausathi Yogini* (Sixty-four Yogini) temples, one at Hirapur near Bhubaneswar and the other at Ranipur Jharial in Bolangir. Yoginis are various manifestations of Durga during her fight with the demon Sambhu and Nisambhu. From *Saptamatrikas*, they rose to sixty-four by the time of the destruction of Raktabija.

2. Sakti Worship in Odisha: Historical Roots and Political Patronage

According to historical records, Jainism is the first religion patronised in Odisha during the rule of the Mahameghavahana dynasty. In the earlier period, Jainism was prevalent in Odisha from the decline of the Nandas till the invasion of Ashoka, reaching a glorious period under the reign of Kharavela. The Hatigumpha inscriptions open with a salutation to *arhats/ tirthankaras* and *siddhas* (liberated souls). In the 12th regnal year, Kharavela led an expedition against Magadha and reclaimed the seat of *Jina* from Magadha.^[8] In one of the sculptural panels in the Mancapuri cave on Udayagiri Hill, it is identified as a

depiction of the possible celebration and reinstallation of the image of Kalinga Jina by Kharavela, who recovered it from Magadha and returned it to his people.^[9] With Ashoka, Buddhism began to gain ground after the 1st century CE. Buddhism in its Vajrayana form reached its height of prosperity under the Bhaumakaras in the 8th and 9th centuries.

Saivism in Odisha can be traced back to the 4th to 6th century CE, with the discovery of a Shiva image in the Nataraja posture, featuring eight hands, at Asanapat in Kendujhar, regarded as the earliest evidence (Image 2). The inscription below the image records that Maharaja Satrubhanja Deva of the Naga dynasty, the son of Mahabhanja and Damayanti, built a temple dedicated to Lord Shiva. The image is currently displayed at the State Museum of Odisha.

The popularity of Saivism is evident in the sculptural panels at the Vaital temple, as well as in the images of *Ardhanarisvara*, *Umamahesvara*, and *Bhairava*, which serve as the presiding deities or side deities in temples around the Prachi Valley. Saivism reached its peak under the Somavamshis and subsequently faced the influence of Vaishnavism, likely after the construction of the Lingaraj temple. Lingaraj, regarded as Hari (Vishnu) and Hara (Shiva), includes the *Vahanastambha* in front of the temple with a Nandi and a Garuda.

The Bhanjas were one of the oldest royal dynasties of Odisha. The Bhanja rulers governed from two territories, Khinjali Mandala and

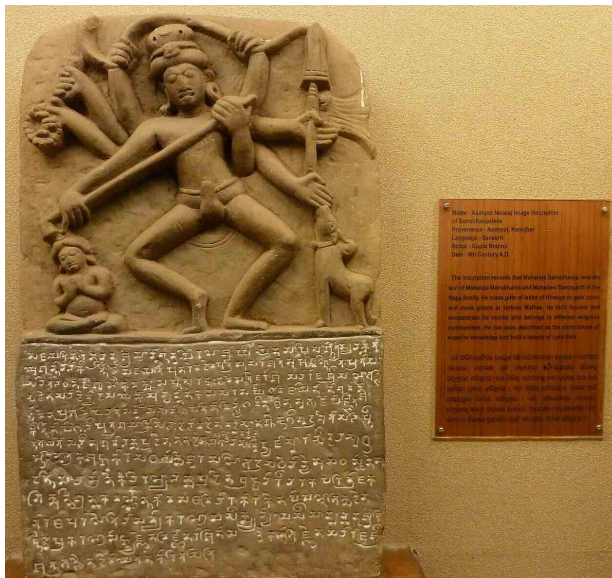


Image 2: Asanpat (Kendujhar) Nataraj Inscription of Satrubhanjadewa (Wikimedia)

Khijjinga Kotta (modern Khiching). Khinjali Mandala was further subdivided into two parts, with a combined capital at Dhritipura, and continued to rule until the 12th century CE, as evident from the Baud Charter.^[4] They had goddess Kichakesvari- a form of Chamunda, as their tutelary deity. The original shrine of the goddess, whose ancient cult image is presently placed within the sanctum of the reconstructed Kichakesvari temple at Khiching, has been restored. The foundation of the original temple was discovered during an excavation in 1922-24. Construction on the new temple began in 1934 and was completed in 1942.^[5] The Bhanja territories were attacked by Delhi Sultan Firoz Shah Tughlaq in 1361 CE,

resulting in the transfer of the capital from Khiching to Hariharpur, as evident from the record that mentions King Harihara Bhanja establishing a new town in 1400.^[6] They installed their family deity Kichakesvari at Hariharpur. When they established their last capital in Baripada, the image of Kichakesvari was transferred from Hariharpur to Baripada, where the goddess is still worshipped as the tutelary deity by the descendants of the dethroned Bhanja dynasty. ^[7] Thus, Kichakesvari has acted as the *Ista devata* (family deity) of the Bhanjas for at least 1000 years, suggesting the deep-rootedness of the Sakti cult in that mountainous region of Odisha.

The Bhanjas of Khijjinga gradually divided into two branches: one continued to rule over the current Mayurbhanj district, while the other settled in the present Kendujhar district. The Bhanjas of Kendujhar and Mayurbhanj consistently posed a significant threat to the Mughal domination of the coastal provinces of Odisha, particularly in the second half of the 17th century. The *Ista devata* of the Bhanja royal family of Kendujhar was the goddess Tarini of Ghatagaon.

The worship of lesser-known deities has a long-standing tradition in the rural and tribal regions of Odisha. The sight of stone pieces smeared with vermilion, surrounded by terracotta horses sheltered beneath a tree, suggests the veneration of aniconic forms even today. One of the oldest and most popular aniconic modes of representing the goddess is the sacred stone or wooden block, installed within a

temple, under a tree, or simply in an open courtyard. The stone or wood, often acting as the presiding deity of a sakta sanctuary, is generally regarded as the goddess's *Syambhu murti* (self-generated image). Most villages in Odisha have their tutelary goddesses, known as *thakuranis*, worshipped under various local names and decorated with facial elements to represent a female head. These goddesses, closely associated with the village or territory, assist villagers in times of crisis—whether personal, communal, natural, or manmade—and are thus regarded as their protectors and saviour. The significant proliferation of such tutelary goddesses compellingly demonstrates the popularity of the Sakti cult in Odisha from early times to the present. Some local deities have been assimilated into Hinduism as appendices of Sakti while retaining their local names, such as Mangala, Hingula, or Sthambesvari.

It is challenging to pinpoint the exact date of the Sakti cult's inception in Odisha. *Yakshini* and *Nagini* images are depicted in sculptural representations dating back to the 2nd century BCE. In a tank near Bhadrakali in Bhadrak, a stone inscription of Maharaja Gana was discovered, featuring an engraving of Parnadevi, a female deity with leaves, ascribed to the 3rd century CE. The two-armed *Mahisamardini*, representing the goddess Viraja at Jaipur, and the flat-roofed brick temple (the remains of which are visible in Kalaspur, the original shrine of Viraja), assigned to the early Gupta period, depict the evolution of the Sakti cult. [\[10\]](#) The period of Odisha's history, spanning from the 7th to the 13th century, was a flourishing

era for Sakti and Saivism, during which most of the *Sakta Peethas* presently located in the state emerged.

The *Astabhujā Mahisamardini* became popular during the Bhaumakaras. At that time, Tantrism also became a dominant religious trend in Odisha and continued to influence other existing religions until the later medieval period, even though the Ganga and Suryavamsi rulers did not favour Sakta Tantric practices in their dominions. During the Somavamshi rule, the profusion of *Mahisamardini*, *Saptamatrakas*, *Parvati* and the images of *Nayikas* in the temples reflected the spread of Saktism. During the Somavamsi rule, the compassionate aspect of *matrikas* was emphasised by associating each of these deities with a child in their lap.

Some of the well-known aniconic goddesses of Odisha include Bhagavati at Banapur, Kalijai in Chilika, Bhairavai in Purunakatak in Phulbani, and Bhattarika at Badamba. The Bhattarika temple, situated in the middle of the Mahanadi, is represented by an old image of the Buddhist goddess Tara, who is said to have been worshipped initially in the form of a rock protruding from a hillock, where the temple was built at a later date. Lankesvari of Sonepur is represented by a small flat rock cropping up from the bed of the Mahanadi. Vermillion paste is usually applied to the rock's external side in a pattern to symbolise the face of the god or goddess. A holy rock rising from the top of a hillock at Charchika in Banki is said to be the birthplace of the goddess, who is currently worshipped in the

temple's *garbha griha* (sanctum sanctorum) in an iconic form as Chamunda. Tara Tarnini in Ganjam, Tarini in Ghatagaon, and Budhi Thakurani at Berhampur are all represented by head-shaped stones placed on the floor of the sanctum. The shrine of Samlei at Sambalpur, that once stood on an island on the bed of the Mahanadi, now part of the riverbank, is worshipped in the form of a large block of stone, on whose surface a narrow groove is regarded as the mouth and protuberance below it as the tongue of the goddess. Goddess Stambhesvari/Khambesvari, represented with a stone or wooden pillar, is a tribal deity still worshipped in various parts of Odisha. The earliest epigraphical evidence of Stambhesvari is recorded in the Tersinga Copper Plate grants of King Tushtikara, who ruled over Kalahandi in the 5th-6th centuries CE. [\[11\]](#) Between the 6th and 8th centuries, Stambhesvari was the tutelary deity of the Sulki dynasty, which ruled the riverine territory of the Dhenkanal-Talcher area. In the 9th century, the Bhanjas of Khinjilli Mandala in Baudh Sonepur region worshipped Stambheswari. [\[12\]](#)

Thus, most of the above goddesses have acted as the tutelary deities of some royal families in Odisha in the past, indicating their aniconic manifestation. According to the legends, the goddess herself ordered the people to worship her in an aniconic form.

The rites performed in eminent Sakta shrines of Odisha do not differ to a great extent from those performed in a shrine where the goddess is represented through iconographic canons. The presence of the

deity is ritually established through the performance of sixteen services (*upacharas*).^[13] Calling the deity (*avahana*), offering a seat (*asana*), providing purified water (*arghya*), washing the feet of the deity (*padya*), watering to cleanse mouth (*acamana*), providing light refreshment (*madhu paraka*), bathing (*snana*), clothing (*vastra*), investing with a sacred thread (*upavita*), offering sandal paste (*gandha*), decorating flower (*pushpa*), burning incense (*dhupa*), lighting lamp (*dipa*), offering food (*naivedya*), lighting lamp for devotees (*aarati*).

Saktism has been popular in Odisha for centuries and has spread widely throughout the state. At many places in Odisha, the trunks of banyan trees are surrounded by red flags or threads, besmeared with vermilion paste, and adorned with silver eyes, reflecting the presence of a mother goddess, which is a common sight. Votive offerings of clay figures of mostly horses (*mataghoras*) and, in some cases, elephants often surround the sacred trees. There are instances where female tree deities are regarded as the manifestation of the folk goddess Mangala, venerated throughout Odisha. Red is synonymous with the worship of the mother goddess. Red hibiscus, a preparation of mercury with Sulphur, termed as Hingula in ancient Sanskrit texts and also referred to as Sindura, is employed in the propitiation of all Sakta worship in Odisha.

3. Maa Tarini Peetha of Ghatagaon, Kendujhar



Image 3: Maa Tarini (Author's Collection)

In Saktism, pilgrimage to holy places gave rise to the tradition of *Sakta peetha*, indicating the seats of goddesses who have been locally revered since time immemorial. The sacred *Peethas* are guarded by *Bhairavas* (terrific forms of Shiva). The number of *Sakti peethas* varies from 8 to 108. Kendujhar, home to more than 150 Shiva temples and more than 50 Sakti temples, is a significant Shaiva-Sakta centre. Among the Sakti temples, the Tarini temple at Ghatagaon is the most

popular. The temple's presiding deity is the goddess Tarini, worshipped in an aniconic form, represented by a head-shaped stone placed on the floor of the temple sanctum. The native tribal worship seven mother goddesses along with Tarini: Kichakeswari, Dhanuguriani, Chanchakhai, Bararasiani, Tarini, and Charchika.

Goddess Tarini in Ghatagaon, as the presiding deity of Kendujhar and one of the well-known goddesses throughout Odisha and beyond, is visited by hundreds of devotees daily. It is believed that since the shape of her image resembles a *ghata* (pot), the place came to be known as Ghatagaon. Anyone passing by the temple stops their vehicle as a courtesy to pay respect to the goddess. She serves as their protector and saviour against all odds (*Tarini*) and, like a mother, helps her devotees navigate troubled times.

Jaya Maa Tarini Ghatagaon Basini

Sankata Harini Jaya

Tora nama dhari pangu Langhe giri

Na kari kahaku bhaya'

A poet's salutation to the glory of the goddess:[\[14\]](#)

[Let victory prevail over Maa Tarini, resident deity of Ghatagaon, may victory prevail over the reliever of distress, as with the glory of her name, a lame person can jump over a mountain, fearing none:
Author's Translation]

Offering coconuts to the deity is a tradition, as she is fond of coconuts (also called *Nadia Rani*/Queen of Coconuts). Even devotees from distant places, who cannot visit in person, send coconuts to the goddess, which are invariably delivered at the temple, even though the sender and the transport carrying the coconuts are unknown to each other. Each delivery tells a tale of devotion and gratitude. Initially, goddess Tarini was honoured under a Sala tree in an inaccessible terrain in the middle of a jungle, infested with wild animals. This belief was negated entirely by Bipin Bihari Das, who concludes after much discussion with the Dehuri communities (Kond tribe) that the present temple is the oldest and only temple dedicated to the goddess Tarini.^[15] With the formation of the Tarini Temple Committee in 1936, the *Tarini Jatra* was initiated, engaging Pala singers to propagate the magnificence of the goddess among people throughout the state. This effort successfully raised awareness among the public and significantly increased the footfall of devotees at the temple. The increase in visitors reflected in good revenue and also necessitated better public facilities. The first temple enlargement project was initiated in 1970.^[16]

In a picture taken by German Indologist Herman Kulke in 1971, Goddess Tarini is seen as a small stone with two prominent silver eyes, the lower part of the stone covered by a cloth. She wore a silver crown. Before the first renovation, she was surrounded by numerous clay horses and elephants. The popularity of the goddess has grown fast and is presently visited by thousands daily. In the newly

constructed temple in 1995, goddess Tarini continued to be worshipped at the feet of a tree under the open sky. As a goddess of the jungle, she demands to be worshipped in the jungle and formerly received only uncooked food. Besides Tarini, the goddess Dvarasuni, her watchman, has a shrine nearby. The Ghatesvara Shiva temple was added to the temple complex in 1990, and subsequently, a guest house and a wedding hall were constructed to accommodate visitors.

Tarini is among the many goddesses who have gained supra-regional significance in recent decades. Like many other goddesses, Tarini has her origin deep in the forest with hidden power, discovered by a king. Over time, the goddess gains greater significance for the local ruler, who adopts her as their *istadevi* and thus promotes her cult.

4. Divine Origin of Goddess Tarini: Competing Narratives and Legends

The name of the goddess, Tarini, is justified in the Bruhat Tarini Purana.^[17]

*Kamana purana pai devi ra ashraya
Neithanti sarbajana ekatha nischaya
Pahanchi pakhare bhakta dukhaku tarana
Kariba uttaru taku niye sirsasthana
Tenu sankata tarini namaku tabara
Karina sampurna eha kala satyagira'*

[It is well established that everyone takes refuge with the goddess to fulfil their wishes, and she reaches out to each of them and helps them sail through the challenges. Hence devotees revere her to the meridian. This justifies the meaning of her name – one who drives away all crises: *Author's Translation*]

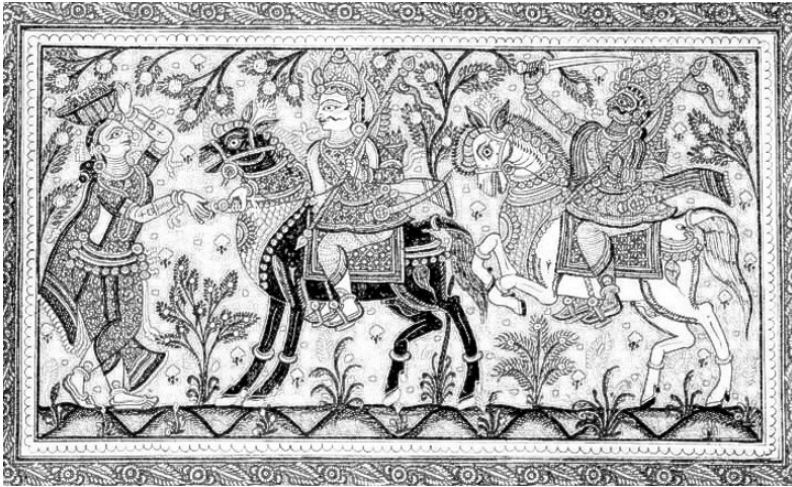


Image-4: Kanchi Vijaya depiction in Pattachitra (Wikimedia)

Among many legends, the most popular regional tradition associated with the divine presence of goddess Tarini at Ghatagaon is the *Kanchi Vijaya* or *Kanchi Abbijan* (Victory over Kanchi/Expedition to Kanchi-Image-3). It relates to the victory of the Suryavamshi king Purushottam Deva (1467-97) over the king of Kanchipuram in the Vijayanagar Empire.

The story goes that Purushottam Deva wanted to marry the daughter of the King of Kanchi, who refused the proposal, citing that the Odisha king acts as a sweeper during the annual Rath Yatra. Purushottam Deva took this as an insult to himself and his Lord, Jagannath, and to take revenge, he led an expedition against Kanchi, but failed. Purushottam Deva sought help from Lord Jagannath, who assured him of assistance in his next expedition, which was successful. The King finally married the Kanchi princess on the day of Rath Yatra. The Kanchi expedition is depicted in the *Natamandira* of the Jagannath Temple.^[18]

The aspect of Maa Tarini gets interweaved in the legend with Govinda Bhanja (1480-1534) of Kendujhar, the commander in Chief of Odishan army during the Kanchi expedition, realised that the presiding goddess of the city, Tarini, should be propitiated to secure Purushottam's victory and asked for permission from the King to accompany the goddess to his ancestral kingdom as the goddess had directed the same in his dream. The goddess agreed to follow Govinda Bhanja with one condition: if the king turns back, she will not move further. On their way back, the king suddenly could not hear the sound of her footsteps and looked back out of anxiety to see if she was coming. According to the pre-condition, the goddess immediately transformed herself into a stone. She told him to worship her at that very spot as the goddess of the forest (*Vana Durga*) and to worship another representative image of hers at the royal palace as the tutelary deity of his family. Kanchi, as we have

seen, has been a stronghold of Sakti worship, with the Kamakshi temple being the most popular *Sakti Peetha*.

Satrughna Mohanty has assigned a specific date to the event, specifying that it occurred towards the end of 1480.^[19] He has referred to Govinda Bhanja as an ardent devotee of Lord Jagannath, who was sent by his father, Trilochan Bhanja, to Puri in 1478. The rest of the events he described remain more or less the same as described above. It also notes that, as the new abode of the goddess was far from the palace, Govinda Bhanja obtained permission to install a replica of the goddess at his palace and worship her regularly. It is believed the goddess is still worshipped there.

However, the theory that the goddess was brought to Kendujhar is not accepted by all scholars. The reference to Tarini already existing and getting worshipped around the 11th century is reflected in the work of Damodar Dwija's *Banei Madala*, when Kendujhar was a part of Khinjjili Mandala. In that case the narrative in *Kanchi Abhiyan* of the goddess being brought to Kendujhar from outside seems erroneous.^[20] It is further corroborated that Ghatagaon is the *adya peetha* of Tarini and has been the resident goddess of Kendujhar.

The authenticity of the Kanchi expedition is subjected to controversy. There are historical references to the wars between Purushottam Deva and Saluva Narasimha. Accepting the historicity of the tradition it is agreed that Purushottam Deva married the daughter of Saluva Narasimha under peculiar and pressing

circumstances and the Kanchi Kaveri tradition is based on this historical fact.^[21] Folklore suggests that around the 16th century, Govinda Bhanja, following instructions received in a dream, built an image of the four-armed Tarini and installed it in an exclusive temple at his palace, known as Gada Tarini. Before that, he worshipped the victory stone he got from the main temple at Ghatagaon, where the goddess originally resided. The earlier victory stone was immersed in the nearby waterfall once the image worship started.^[22] The Dehuris play a significant part in performing the temple rituals. Dehuris have to maintain strict discipline in their lifestyle and perform the temple rituals regularly. It is mentioned that at the time of war, the king and his soldiers would offer prayers at Gada Tarini before leaving for the battlefield. The Dehuri would perform the prescribed rituals at the goddess before the king's arrival. Holding the sacred umbrella of the goddess, the Dehuri would start the procession surrounded by the soldiers towards the battlefield.^[23]

There are other narratives about the origin of the goddess, including Buddhist and Jain theories. Dhaleipata, Asanapata, Sitabinjhi, Nandapur, Biragobindapur, Charatirtha, Kusalaeswara, Deogaon Vishnupata, Mahaghata, Laxmipada, and many other sites have traces of Buddhist and Jain sites. Numerous sculptural fragments indicating Buddhist and Jain relics have been discovered, and further research and archaeological excavations would be beneficial. It is observed that the region was once a renowned Buddhist site, and the practice

of tantra worship in this area declined over time. It is assumed that Govinda Bhanja revived the tradition as a Sakti Peetha.^[24]

It is also argued that Tarini is named after the Buddhist goddess Tara. The presence of the village named Tara near the Tarini temple corroborates this claim.^[25]

The Bruhat Maa Tarini Purana suggests that Govinda Bhanja came with three idols, which include Tarini, Madanmohan, and Raghunath. ^[26]Madanmohan probably refers to Sakshigopal near Puri, and Raghunath is a prominent temple in Kendujhar.

*‘Utkala ku Puri dhame Madan mohan
Tarini, Raghunath adi devagana
Sarabe sthapana hele boile ananda
Dhanya dhanya gajapati boile govinda.’*

[People hailed the efforts of King Govinda Deva in bringing the deities from Kanchi to Utkal and installing Madanmohan in Puri, Tarini and Raghunath at their respective places: *Author’s transation*]

5. Rituals, Festivals, and Living Traditions

In Odisha, most festivals in Chaitra culminate on *Mababisuba Sankranti*, reckoning on a conjunction falling on a different date yearly but roughly coinciding with the sun’s equinoctial passage in spring.^[27] At some Sakti temples, *Patua Jatra* is also organised. *Patuas*

are devotees who perform heroic acts and bold performances in large congregations during the festival. They are characterised by putting a band of cloth, usually black, called a *pata*. While performing heroic acts, they continuously praise the goodness and draw cheer from the crowd. In the Tarini temple, contemporary rituals include celebrating *Mahabisuba Sankranti*, *Raja Sankranti*, *Pana Sankranti*, *Chaitra Parba*, and *Makar Sankranti*. *Mahabisuba Sankranti* is a week-long festival with sastric discourses, traditional music and dance performances, theatre and Yagna. Musical instruments at the temple include *ghanta*, *ghanti* and *shankh*.

Animal sacrifices, perhaps inspired by the ancestral religious tradition of the hill Bhuniya tribe, were once practised at the goddess Tarini, but they are no longer performed. They used to occur during the *Asadhi puja* (*Asadhi Parva*).^[28] The annual *Asadhi Parva* festival attracts a large gathering as devotees gather to witness the *Sunabesha* (golden adornment) of the goddess. Observed as the day when Maa Tarini fasts for the welfare of her followers, the temple remains closed until the evening, when rituals and puja are conducted. Traditionally marking the commencement of agricultural activities (Monsoon season), the temple administration invited chiefs from over 20 nearby villages to participate in the festivals. While the villagers offered goats (usually bucks) in line with past customs, the animals were only allowed to roam freely within the temple grounds, as animal sacrifices have been officially discontinued.^[29]



Image 5: An Arch adorning the Temple entrance and a ritual offering.

In her paper, German scholar Cornelia Mallebrein provides a detailed account of the changing practices surrounding animal sacrifice at the temple, reflecting both historical traditions and modern reforms. In earlier times, rituals involved the sacrifice of buffaloes, later followed by goats, which were conducted near the goddess's murti (idol). This practice reflected the deep tribal and tantric connections, where blood offerings were considered a potent way to appease and invoke the goddess's power. Such rites were common in Odisha's tribal regions, where deities like Tarini were perceived as fierce and powerful protectors demanding tangible sacrifices. However, the practice evolved into a symbolic ritual over time. Instead of killing the animal, a drop of blood was extracted from the ear of a goat, and

then the animal was returned to the devotee who offered it for sacrifice. ^[30] This compromise retained the ritualistic essence for devotees while aligning the practice with broader Hindu sensibilities that increasingly viewed animal sacrifice as incompatible with temple worship. The temple explicitly prohibits animal sacrifices, and offerings are limited to coconuts, fruits, and cooked food (*anna bhoga*), which was introduced in the late 1970s (Image 4). This evolution reflects a theological shift and the growing influence of modern values, animal rights sentiments, and the desire of temple administrators to position Tarini's worship within a more universally acceptable framework of devotion.^[31]

6. Maa Tarini as Rastradevi: Supra-Regional Relevance

The rulers of small principalities, who were feudatories of the king of Orissa, played an important role in the growth and development of goddess worship. The assignment of military duties to tribal or semi-tribal groups usually resulted in the royal patronage of the dominant Indigenous deities of the respective area. Royal patronage of indigenous deities was an essential supposition for consolidating political power and legitimising the local ruler.^[32]

To proclaim and strengthen their power as local rulers, they depended on the validation and protection of the prominent local goddesses. They were generally the primary donors for the rituals in the temple and played a crucial role in conducting them. In due

course, the deity gained the status of a tutelary deity for the royal family and was regarded as the protector of the locality. With the patronage of the local rulers, her prominence grew amongst the larger community, and with time, her glory acquired supra-regional recognition. The prominent tutelary deities of the former royal families in Orissa include Kichekesvari of Bhanjas from Mayurbhanj, Tarini of Bhanjas from Kendujhar, Hingula at Gopalprasad, Maninaga Devi or Maninagesvari of the royal family of Ranpur, Vyagrha Devi of Kulhada of the Bhanja dynasty of Ghumsar, Bhairavi at Baudh, Patnesvari at Patnagarh, Samlei of Chauhan family at Sambalpur, Manikesvari, family goddess of the royal family of Kalahandi, Kanakadurga at Jaipur and Barunei and Arunei at Khordha, Stambhesvari of Raja Tustikara of Sonepur.

The elevation of local deities to the rank of royal *istadevas* started quite early and was closely connected with the state formation. Along with the expansion of territories, the local goddess and her cult gained prominence. During festivals, the female principle represented by the goddess and the male, represented by the king, revitalised the community and confirmed the socio-political order dominated by royalty. The period of early sub-regional state formation in Odisha declined after the 11th century, with the emergence of the Somavamshis. After independence, when the royal families lost their privileges and compensation, local rulers could no longer provide financial support for festivals to the same extent as they had in the past, and there was a shift in focus from the royal family to

privatising temple-related expenses. The royalty maintained the tradition of starting every correspondence with the customary salutation “*Sri Sri Tarini Devi Charane Sharanam.*” [\[33\]](#)

7. Conclusion

Odisha has more than sixty tribal communities, each with its indigenous belief system that contributes to shaping its religious landscape. More often than not, it is observed that legends describing the divine manifestation of a goddess are revealed to a tribal chief or King personally or in his dreams, where the goddess expresses her desire to be worshipped. With the installation of the goddess, devotees are blessed with miracles, and her glory spreads far and wide. In return, she is pleased with the faith and devotion of her devotees and accepts a standard offering from them, such as a coconut for Tarini, flags for Vanadurga, and so on. Among the many such revered mother goddesses, Tarini is the most popular and occupies the coveted position. She is revered as *Rastradevi*, *Istadevi*, *Gramadevi*, and *Gruhadevi*. The ever-increasing inflow of devotees to the temple has been recorded as one of the highest among the state's major pilgrimages. Kendujhar has come to be identified with the goddess Tarini.

Centuries have passed, and the goddess Tarini's power, glory, and influence over her faithful devotees have increased manifold. What remains uniquely original is that descendants of the Dehuri community continue to be the chief custodians of the temple and its

ritual activities. The goddess continues to receive coconuts and sindur as offerings from devotees. Devotees with true faith and devotion are getting blessed as they were in the past. People generally start their day in praise of the mother goddess and regard her as their guardian deity. Every resident takes a moment to reflect on her blessings before initiating any new work. Over the years, she has epitomised motherly love and care, bringing every needy person into her refuge. It is interesting to note the transformation from the fierce images of Sakti described in earlier stages to the Matrika images, which hold babies in Odisha.

Unfortunately, little research has been conducted to reveal the historicity of Maa Tarini's legacy. Between 1974 and 1980, numerous scripts were written and plays enacted in Kendujhar, describing the glory of the goddess. Many books are readily available in the market describing the goddess's legacy. They are all written in poetic form to facilitate recitation during festivals.

It is observed that there are several views regarding the origin of Maa Tarini. Interestingly, there is a difference of 500 years between the two theories. One group of scholars ascribes the existence of the goddess to the 10th century, and the other group traces it back to the 15th century. The Buddhist theory takes it back to at least the 5th-6th centuries, as Buddhist Bhikshu Nagarjuna is said to be worshipping goddess Tara, and Tarini is believed to be a later derivation from Tara. The village of Tara, located near the Tarini temple, is a

testament to that theory. Except for the Kanchi Kaveri legend, every other argument suggests that Tarini is an indigenous deity of Kendujhar. Further research is necessary before drawing any conclusions. In the absence of any historical record, such as inscriptions or land grants, the divine origin of the goddess would remain a legend and a subject of research.

NOTES

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