

SHAKTA CULTURE OF BENGAL: A TRADITION BASED ON WORSHIPPING WOMEN

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Abstract: The abstract of this paper is to analyze the Shakta cultural traditions and practices of Bengal that is mainly based on worshipping and respecting women around one's self. The Shaktas don't just worship feminine deities and Goddesses, they actually worship women around them, be it their own mother, sister, wife, daughter or others which lead them towards such a way of life where they have already put women in a throne of respect. This paper explains the Shakta Tradition's relevance in today's world disproving the statement that "Hindus worship feminine deities and disrespects women in real life". Shakta Cult worships Goddesses as well as they respect and preserve feminine forms around it in real life.

Keywords: Shakta, Goddesses, women empowerment.

Introduction: In the land of 'Panchayatani Upasana' i.e. the worship of five deities as the major ones, 'Shaktas' are the ones worshipping the 'Para Shakti' or the feminine form of the Supreme. In 'Sanatan' cultural practice the word 'Shakti' is referred to the female deities and thus the word 'Shakti' automatically became the one engaged with Goddesses. Apart from this general introduction Shakta cult in Bengal is much more than that and the Shakta philosophy ultimately leads towards the oneness of the Supreme as described in the Vedanta scriptures. Shakta traditions are so designed that one who practices it sees and understands the ultimate divine feminine forces working around him and realizes whatever can be seen and heard as a manifestation of that Supreme feminine, mostly known as the 'Para Shakti'. The goal of a Shakta is to serve his Goddess and in order to do that he sees every woman as the manifestation of his worshipped Lady, pays regards and can never think of disrespecting anything female. In this paper we shall discuss about the traditions that make a person so dedicated to his path that he sets the womankind in the throne of respect for all his life as well as performs all his duties as a brother, son and husband with absolute perfection.

Method: In order to reach to the conclusion of this paper I have undergone two methods simultaneously i.e.

1. Studying the original Tantric scriptures for the theories and instructions of the practices
2. Studying different Shakta cults in Bengal by visiting the practicing places and experiencing the traditions personally.

After completing both the steps I have analyzed all my observations and found out that both the steps are in sync. In the next sections the observations are discussed.

Study Of Different Traditions: The Narayani Stuti One of the major Sanskrit scripture available with respect to Shakti worshipping in India is 'Sri Sri Saptasati', a scripture that is based on the legends of

the 'Para Shakti' and describes Her victory over the evil. In the 11th chapter of this book we get a praise named 'Narayani Stuti', where all the Gods praise the Goddess after She conquers the demons. There we get a line which describes "O Devi! Thou art all the wisdom there is and all the women of this world are your manifestations" (Sri Sri Chandi 11:6). For a Shakta 'Sri Sri Chandi' is a major script to follow and thus with an ease a practitioner gets the idea of the piousness of a woman just by this simple line. I have experienced this myself as I saw every Shakta I have ever met avoiding criticizing any woman with that very line chanting. A newly initiated Shakta is first advised to recite or listen to 'Sri Sri Chandi' and when he does this he is taught to scan the complete scripture for duties instructed. While searching for instructions he finds no direct instruction but the encoded ones which he needs to decode in order to follow in his day to day life. This line is one of them, which is praising the Goddess as well as preaching the one chanting to respect women as the manifestation of Goddess Herself. Though decoding the complete scripture is not possible by discussion as it demands regular practice and needs a proper guidance, some basic messages can be retrieved from it just by dedicated study.

Rules for Initiation: When a person is first initiated for Shakti worshipping, the mentor binds him with several rules to follow and the rules are so strict to follow that if even by mistake one of the rules are broken by the practitioner he gets punished by the mentor and sometimes that punishment goes so strict that a practitioner is completely broken mentally and couldn't recover. But that is so ultimate and very rarely seen. Among many rules to follow by a Shakta the first rule taught by the mentor is to respect every woman he sees and on seeing any beauty in a lady, before starting any worldly interaction, pay homage to that beauty as it is sourced by the Goddess he worships. Some of the cults describe disrespecting women as such an offence that the practitioner's all achievements in his

practices are completely destroyed. It is true that respect comes before love and fear before respect, when we deal with something which is beyond our intellectual area of understanding. Primarily for a practitioner the fear of loss makes him respect women and with time the fear disappears and the respects comes spontaneously.

Instructions to deal with Women: A Shakta's life is only worth living when he serves his Goddess. The shloka Shaktas chant every morning before leaving the bed means "Here I wake up today and now I shall do what I need to do to lead my life, for nothing but to please you". In order to complete this vow a Shakta leads his life to please his worshipped Lady. The problems start arising when it comes to deal with women around him. Respecting women for one's own spiritual advancement is one thing but showing it in daily world is really impractical and impossible to maintain. It is not only difficult for the practitioner to maintain but also absurd and abnormal in the views of people. In solution to this problem a beautiful story is described in 'Sri Sri Ramakrishna Kathamrita' where a child gets injured by a mad elephant as he was taught by his guru that God resides in every creature. His fellow friends and the owner of the elephant screamed at him to move aside but he didn't. Finally the elephant takes him in his trunk and throws him away and he goes senseless. When he got his sense back his guru asked for his nonsense behavior. He replied the reason and the guru said, "if the God is within the elephant then God is also within those who asked you to move aside. Why didn't you listen to the forbidding God then". The story teaches us to deal with people as it is demanded. Same goes for dealing with women. In different Tantric scripts that instruct Shaktas we see the instruction to deal with women in daily life as "respect each and every women and pay homage with your mind. Never disrespect or abuse a woman. Avoid touching and talking rubbish to women unnecessarily. Following these rules deal with respective women as demanded." This briefs a proper behavior instructed for the Shaktas to deal with women in daily life.

Tradition of worshipping women and 'Kumari's: Every Shakta undergoes several sacred rituals in his lifetime. All of them are followed by two unavoidable rituals namely "Shakti Pujan" and "Kumari Pujan". Shakti Pujan is a ritual where the practitioner worships a grown up Lady (may or may not be a relative) and Kumari Puja is the one where a girl child (under the age of 10) is worshipped in completion of the main ritual. These two rituals are one of the most misinterpreted rituals I have ever experienced. Most of the people have no idea about the reason behind these two rituals but we hear a lot about them. Here we avoid the misinterpreted theories and present the

real theory according to the scriptures available. Shakti Pujan includes the worship of a grown up lady where the worshipper is supposed to visualize her as one of the 'Ashta-Matrikas'. There are 8 types of women eligible for this ritual representing 8 Matrikas. Through this ritual the worshipper is supposed to get the idea of all the women as the manifestation of Goddess Supreme. It is instructed that in case the worshipped lady feels uneasy on offering food during the ritual, do whatever is needed to make her comfortable, suggested leave that place and leave her alone so that she comfortably accepts the offerings without any hesitations. After the completion of the whole ritual pay mental homage especially to that type of women which is worshipped. On the other hand Kumari Pujan can be performed either in a proper formal way of worship or just by offering to a little girl her desired stuffs. But both of these rituals are restricted. Being a Shakta or a Brahmin does not simply make one eligible for Shakti Pujan or Kumari Pujan. One has to fulfill some criterion and perform much of the rituals (e.g. 'Puraskriya') to achieve the eligibility to perform these two rituals.

Difference with other Cults: In other cults in India, people who worship Shakti are basically either of Vaishnav or Shaiva in origin and initiation. Thus it is difficult for them to worship 'Para Shakti' as their major deity. So the way others perform Shakti worship is clearly incomplete as the basic training of Shakti worship is absent in them. On the other hand a Shakta can perform the worship of any other cult with ease as along with training of Shakti worship a Shakta is also trained as a freethinker which grows his acceptability throughout every possible truth. A Shakta can maintain and handle a 'Shaligram' properly but it is difficult for any other cult to handle a 'Suvarna mukhi Shila'. Moreover no other cult teaches so much about women to its practitioner as much as done in Shakta Cult in Bengal. Where in other sects women are mostly forbidden and restricted in various rituals, Shaktas allows them in almost all rituals; some of the events are even remains incomplete without the active participation of women.

Conclusion & Discussion: The 'Agam Tantra' scriptures, that Shaktas follow, describe and instruct its practitioners to respect women in the first place. It teaches women different ethics as well, but the restrictions are much more for its male practitioners. The complete Shakta cult, which is widely practiced in Bengal is based upon feminine divinity and exploring it through various paths. Being one of the ancient ritualistic cult alive in the world, Shaktas not only worship heavenly feminine figures, but pays homage and respects the whole womankind as well. In spite of all these revered and rich philosophical

thoughts and cultures, it is sad when the worshippers of Shakti are accused as “People in India worship Goddesses but disrespects women in real life.” The answer to such baseless accusations is those who do such things are not Shaktas and probably not even eligible to worship Shakti. People who worship

Goddesses also worship women in real life. A Shakta is trained and educated to emerge within the Universe as he sees it as a manifestation of Goddess Supreme. To a Shakta respecting woman is not a choice.

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