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MAA SARALA *Pitha*: AN ANALYSIS ON ITS DYNAMO

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The *Pitha* Culture, since time immemorial, is found to serve the society as a seat of learning, a philanthropic institution, a centre of socialization, a cradle ground to ensure cultural activities, a reflection of patronisation of the royal authorities and the common people, and above all, the economic dynamo.ⁱ *Pitha* is associated with the term temple whose origin might have been traced from the root word 'mad' in Sanskrit which literally means that 'one which gives absolute pleasure. It may also be explained in two other senses, i.e., a place or a home where one could find peaceable and comfortable sleep 'madyate supyate atra'; or a place where one could gayfully offer devotional prayers and offerings.ⁱⁱ In Odisha, the Sanskrit term 'Devalaya' (the abode of divine being) is corruptionised in to the term 'deula'. In this context, it may be told that the present discussed paper on "Maa Sarala *Pitha*: An Analysis on its Dynamo" reflects various welfare achievements in both material and spiritual life of the people.

With an objective to highlight about the significance, importance and its role in social mobility and economic dynamism, the present paper on Sarala Culture is drafted following all heuristical and hermeneutical methodologies with critical analysis and proper evaluation. Sarala culture is a very broad culture like that of the Jagannath culture and is above parochialism, prejudices and biases.

The temple of goddess Maa Sarala which is the blend of mixed cultures of Vaisnavism, Saivism and Tantricism at one go is situated in the Kanakpur village and is also sometimes mentioned as Kutilagrama Dayalpur in the land revenue records of Jagatsinghpur district of Odisha.ⁱⁱⁱ Goddess Sarala is known as *Jhankada Vasini* as it is situated in the *Jhankada Pragana* of *Mughalbandi* settlement in the medieval times. Presently, it is situated in the Jagatsinghpur district. The present temple is not as old as the history of the evolution of Sarala cult that occurred in this region. The original temple of Maa Sarala, is situated in the village Sarola, approximately one kilometer away in the north-west direction of the present temple.^{iv} The temple of Goddess Sarala is situated just 20 kms away from Jagatsinghpur district. The communication is accessible by both trains and buses from Cuttack.

Referring to the *Adi Parva's* of Sarala Das's *Mahabharat*, an eminent historian Manmohan Chakrovarty mentions the geographical location of the origin of Sarala temple in one of his articles published in the *Bengal Magazine of Royal Asiatic Society* (Calcutta, 1898); "To the north of Nilasundaragiri (Puri seat of Lord Jagannath) in the Indian peninsula (North Eastern base), there flows the river Chandrabhaga. She is close to Bridhamatangini river and both of them have a common mouth as they fall in to the *Mahodadhi* (Bay of Bengal). On the bank of the said river there was Kanakabati Patana and close to the village their stands the temple of goddess Sarola Chandi in the village Sarola".^v The geographical account of the temple of goddess Sarola is very nicely described in the *Sarala Mahabharat*; on the north direction of Nilasundaragiri (Puri), there lies an enriched and prosperous land in the north eastern direction of *Bharat Khanda*. A river named as Chandrabhaga while flowing met *Mahodadhi* (Bay of Bengal) near Briddha Matangini river and on the bank of that river, a ferry place named *Parsuram Ghat* and a town called Kanakabati Patana are situated. Next to the north of Kanakabati Patana is situated Sarolagrama where the goddess bearing the name of Maheswari Sarala Chandi is installed.^{vi}

In the *Madhya Parva* of Sarala Das's *Mahabharat*, it is described that *Patana* (a town) named as Jhankerapura is situated at the river bank of Chitrotpala. This temple is believed to be built during the 8th century A.D. by the Bhaumakara rulers who took initiative to popularize Sakti Cult in Odisha and also got the credit of establishing different *Sakti Pithas* out of which Sarala *Pitha* is one.^{vii} The image of goddess Sarala is carved out on basalt stone. Goddess is eight armed, in the right hands She holds sword, book, *Veena* (musical instrument) and Arrow, while in the left arms She holds bow, bell and *dhala* and the head of the giant Mahisasura.^{viii} Maa Sarala represents three energies in a single whole, i.e., *Satwa*, *Raja* and *Tama*. In that way, she is conceived as Maha Saraswati, Maha Lakshmi and Mahakali. But She is popular as *Vak Devi* who is the goddess of knowledge and wisdom that is why She is called Varada. She is conceived as the destroyer of obstacles like *Atma Abhiman* (self-ego), *Asuya* (finding fault of others), *Dambha* (self-pride), *Irsa* (jealousy), *Dwesh* (enmity), *Abhiman* (sulking) and *Ahankar* (arrogance). With the eight-armed deity, two other deities are worshipped, who also represent her and they are made of *Asta Dhatus* (eight metals) and one is two armed whereas the other one is four armed. The goddess Maa Sarala is installed upon a lion seated throne kept upon a wooden pedestal. The temple is five faced. As the deity faces towards the east, so the east gate is considered as *Singhdwara*. Besides, there are four other gates facing different directions and in front of each gate is found two huge structured lion seating on the opposite sides of the *Dwara*. Lord Hanuman, a deity made up of a single piece of stone facing towards Maa Sarala is found to be installed on a small temple on an altar covered by a long wall of height. On the north wall of the temple, an image of Ganesh carved in a single piece of laterite black stone is found to be



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installed. Towards the north gate, a tank is approaching towards the temple which is called *Chandan Pokhari*. In the middle of the tank, a small temple which is erected where a small *Vigraha* (statue) of goddess Sarala is worshipped every day. Towards the extreme south wall of the temple, an image of Maa Kali is also installed which is believed to be carved in a single piece of black granite stone. Below it, a *Paduka Kunda* (container of used waters of the goddess extracted from the *Garbhagriha*) is to be seen which is always full with water. In right side of the temple, the image of Radhakrishna is found to be worshipped. Besides on the west of the temple the subsidiary deities like Siva Linga and Jagannath, Balabhadra, Subhadra are found to be worshipped. Nava Graha and the images of the goddess in eight forms are also found to be installed on the western wall.^{ix}

Sarala Das mentions in the *Adi Parva* of *Mahabharat* about a legendary account of the emergence of Sarala cult describing the appearance of the goddess Maa Sarala and She became a popular deity in this locality. As staunch devotee of goddess Sarala, Siddheswar Parida of the village of Sarola later on known as Sarala Das which means the slave of goddess Sarala, is said to gain knowledge and wisdom with the grace of goddess Sarala. He states that goddess is cursed by Lord Siva to emerge in Sarola bearing the name of Sarola or Sarola Chandi and the place where She was manifested could be known as Singha Sarala.^x Coming down to the iconographic image of Maa Sarala, it is heard from a legendary account that Lord Parsuram, the 6th incarnation of Lord Vishnu and the son of Rishi Jamadagni and Renuka, while roaming around the universe for making expiation of his sins for committing matricide and uprooting the Kshatriyas, sat down under a banyan tree leaving his arrow and bow on the bank of Chandrabhaga river. To his surprise, he found that the land was not compressed down to a little extent and realizing the importance of the place, he dug it down and found a stone on which he carved out the image of the goddess which is now available inside the temple. The goddess was named Sarala as it was engraved by Parsuram from the tip of his arrow. The Sanskrit name of arrow is *Sara*. The banyan tree under which Parasuram met the goddess is still survive and is also called as *Vetabara*.

To support the theory of Maa Sarala as the Goddess of Knowledge and Wisdom, a legend runs through the ages starting that after *Dakshya Jajna*, Lord Siva carrying the charred body of Sati roamed round here and there crying in madness. Lord Vishnu secretly cut down the limbs of Sati through his *Sudarshan Chakra* (disc) which fell down in different parts of India and the tongue of the Sati fell down here for which She is worshipped here as *Vak Devi* or *Sarada*, the Goddess of learning and wisdom.

Besides, there are other mythological legends glorifying the fame of the deity. It is told that She subdued two violent giants, named Kriti and Vasa by pressing them down to underneath who oppressed and tortured the people, in the guise of a cowherd woman. A ditch appeared in the very place and it turned into a beautiful lake which is known as *Devi padahara*.^{xi}

The literary sources of *Sudramuni* Sarala Das highlights about the emergence of goddess Sarala: The story tells that a great sage called Kripajal made a great penance and meditation and ultimately awarded the *Brahmashree* designation by the Gods. To fulfill his desire to get Saraswati as his daughter, the goddess Saraswati appeared in his meditation centre as an eight-year-old girl and spent times with Kripajal playing gayfully with merry making. After the end of *Satya Yuga* when the demon Mahisasura created havoc in the three worlds, the Gods prayed her with deep meditation to save them from the latter's humiliation and oppressions. And the Goddess disappeared from that place to grant the prayers of the Gods. Before She left the place, she had drawn a portrayal of Goddess Mahisamardini on a black granite stone which later on converted to basalt stone and which was undergrounded with the passage of time. On the river bank of Chitrotपाला. In that place a banyan tree was grew up which was later on excavated by Lord Parasuram.

The uniqueness of Sarala *pitha* is that both the leaves of *tulsi* (basil) and *bel* are used in the worship of the goddess. The Goddess is worshipped both in *tantric* and *vaisnavite* rituals. The temple is opened in between 4am to 4.30am in the morning after which the bed-stead are taken away from the *Garbhagriha* which is called *Pahuda Khola* and it happened amidst the beating of drums and musical instruments. It is followed by the removal of the bed-stead and cleaning of the face of the goddess after which the *Mangala Arati* (The first act in the early morning to carry out encircling the lighted lamp with blazed fire) is done. From 5.30 to 7.30am the cleansing of the teeth and the *marjana* (bathing) is observed.

After this performance, oblation to the Sun (*Surjyaghrya*) is made and *balyabhoga* consisting of *Puri**, *Dalimba***, *Ladoo* (sweet meat) and *Amrita kunda**** is offered to the goddess. Around 8.30am, *Panjika* (calendar mentioning the date, year, movement of the planets and stars) are read before the goddess. The *Chandi Patha* is carried out and completed within 10.30 to 11am. So, after *Chandi patha*, around 11 or 11.30am the *Pahadikia Dhupa* (periodical offerings) consisting of *Khichdi* called mixed rice prepared from rice, black gram (mash) scrapped coconut, ginger, cumin seeds, cow ghee and other spices with *Khaja* (sweet meat prepared from rice flour and molasses), mixed curry, *saga* (leafy green vegetables) and sweet-sour curry called *Khata* prepared from either mango/elephant apple (*Ou*)/pineapple/ tamarind paste etc. are offered to the goddess. During this period Goddess is worshipped in *Panchopachara* rituals followed by *arati* where five wicks inserted to a lamp. The *arati* is followed by the *marjana* i.e., the Goddess



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is bathed and the decoration process of the Goddess starts with the application of sandal paste which is called *Chandanlagi* and She is best dressed up with beautiful sarees, ornaments and garlands from toe to the head. And this performance is called *Bada Singhara Vesa*. The principal meal is offered to the deity within 12.30 to 1pm which is known as *Dui Pahadikia Dhupa*. The meals include rice, dal, curry, *chatni*, *khiri*(pius). After this *Dhupa*, *arati* is done. After *arati*, *Palanka lagi* (beadstead is arranged for sleep) is followed and the door is closed which is known as *Pahuda Padiba* or *Abakasha* within 1.30 to 2pm.

Around 3.30 O' Clock in the afternoon, the goddess is made to wake up from the bed through blowing and beating of musical drums, conch shell and opening of the door called '*pahada phitiba*'. This ritual is followed by *marjana*. Then at 4 'O' Clock in the afternoon, she is offered *Puri*, *Marichi Ladoo* and *Magaja Ladoo* (sweet prepared from flour granules, sugar cinamom and cardamom powder). The evening lamp offering called *sandhya arati* is taken place within 6.30 to 7pm. After which *Purana patha* (reciting of Mahabharat, Ramayan, Chandi Puraan and Bhagabat Gita) is done by numbers of persons finishing one after another. And during this period *chamara seva* (fanning)is also performed continuously.

The *Pahadikia Dhupa* (evening breakfast) is offered at 8.30 pm which consist of *Kakara*, *Puri*, *Marichi Ladoo* etc. This is called *balyabhoga*. Then after 8.30pm *Chandan Lagi* and *Bada Singhara Vesa* are once again performed within 9 to 9.30pm in the night. *Anoli Puja* or *Naivedya* consisting of different types of fruits and sweets i.e., *Puri*, *Kakara*, *Ladoo*, *Parijata*, *Biri Pitha* is offered to the deity.

Before taking Her sleep, she is offered *Dahi Pakhala* (watered rice with curd, cumin seeds, black pepper powder) at 10 'O' Clock in the night and then *arati* is done. At 11 'O' Clock in the night, *abakasha* (rest) and *palanka lagi* is observed and the *pahuda* (door closed) is occurred along with the offering of green coconut after which *pahuda* is done till the morning *marjana*. Offering of the *prasads* especially from the temple sides i.e., *Balyaghoga*, *Pahadikia dhupa*, *Dui Pahadikia dhupa*, *Anoli* and *Dahi pakhala* are exclusively performed by the brahmanas or *pandas*. The *Raulas* who are known as *Sudra Sevakas* are entrusted to participate in bathing, dressing and to collect all material for puja offering and to store safely the ornaments and sarees etc. of the goddess. They could not prepare food for the goddess to offer as *Prasad*. Now a days these *Raulas* could offer the *prasads* like *Pheni*, *Jagannath Ballava*, *Ladoos*, *Magaja Ladoos*, fruits and *Ukhudas* brought from outside for *Prasad*. Probably before the independence of India, they could not give such opportunity as it is evident from Chintamani Acharya book "*Shree Sharala Thakuran*". It is mentioned that they were given punishment if they tried to cheat the *Jajamana*.^{xiii}

According to the legend, Parsuram entrusted the Savaras to carry out the worship of the goddess. On the brahmanisation process, these Savaras became Sudras and known as *Raulas* and consequently they help the priest in *puja* activity. Binodini Das, the native of this region is proud enough to said that this temple is people's temple to which all the people of Hindu religion irrespective of their caste distinction are allowed to enter inside the temple and also offer their prayers from a common place.^{xiiii} A numbers of fairs and festivals are observed in this temple, the list of which is mentioned below;

Sunia: Which is celebrated as the New Regnal year of Gajapati King of Puri. The very day falls either in the month of September or October. On this day, the curd is worshipped and it is touched on the head of the Goddess. Then the new *anka* (Regnal Year) written on a palm leaf is offered at the feet of the Goddess.

Nua Chuda: The *Chuda* (flattened rice) prepared from the newly produced rice is offered on an auspicious day to the Goddess falling between September /October.

Dasahara: It starts from the *Mulastami* Day to the day of *Dasahara* in the month of September /October. From the *Mulatami* to *Mahastami* for sixteen days the goddess is decorated in different *vesas* according to the customary rites.

Kumara Purnima: On the day of *Kumar Purnima*, both the *Gajalaxmi Puja* and *Kumar Puja* are observed on the bright full moon night.

Deepavali: It is observed on the dark fortnight of the month of *Kartika* (October-November).

Mahotsava: It is observed on an auspicious day of the month of *Kartika* after *Deepavali*. It is believed that the king of Harichandan dynasty of the village Kantapada started this ceremony as a mark of protest against Kujang Sendha Raja's act of introducing buffalo sacrifice inside the temple on the day of *Mahastami*. On this particular day, the temple is made sacred through cleaning, the vaishnavas are invited and *sankritana* of *Harinama* (uttering the name of Hari amidst the beating of cymbals,bells and gong) is made after which each Vaisnava is offered with a *tulsi mala* (tulsi bead necklace) and then *Mahaprasad sevan* is done in congregation.

Nuakhai: Mahotsava is followed by *Nuakhai* which signifies the rice preparation from the product of *Biali* crops.



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Prathamastami: Which falls on the 8th day of the dark fortnight of the month of *Margasira* (November-December). The goddess is made *Paduhan* (wear new dresses) and *Enduri Pitha* (A rice cake prepared from batter of rice flour, split black gram, scrapped coconut, molasses and turmeric leaf through steaming) is offered to the Goddess as Prasad.

Dhanu Samkranti: On the day of *Dhanu Samkranti* which falls especially in the month of *Pausa*, a *muan* which is named after *Dhanu Samkranti* called *Dhanu Muan* is offered to the goddess.

Bakula Amavasya: It is observed on the dark fort night in the month of *Pausa* (December-January) *Amabasya* for celebrating the occassion of blooming of mango tree with new seeds.

Samba Dasami: It is celebrated on the 10th day of *Sukla Paksha* (bright fort night) of month of *Pausa*(December-January).

Pusya Abhisheka: On the day of *Pausha Purnima* (full moon night of the month of *Pausa*) the goddess is adorned with beautiful dresses and ornaments which is called as *Puashya Abhiseka*.

Makara Samkranti: Usually, it is celebrated in the month of *Magha* (January) especially falls either on the 14th or 15th day of the month of January. Special Prasad called *Makara Chaula* (it is prepared from the mixing of the fine white rice, curd, cheese, banana, camphor and molasses) is offered to the goddess.

Saraswati Puja: The worship of the goddess *Saraswati* is celebrated on the fifth day of the bright fortnight of the month of *Magha* (January-February).

Sapta Bhagabata 'O' Mahabharata Patha: It falls on the 7th day of the bright fortnight of the month of *Magha*. On this day the *Bhagabata* is read out for one week followed by *Mahabharat*.

Agni Utsava: It is observed on the day of *Magha Purnima*.

Jagara Amavasya: It is celebrated in the temple on the dark fortnight of the month of *Phalguna*.

Dola Yatra: It starts from the 10th day of the bright fortnight till the day of *Purnima* of the month of *Phalguna*.

Chaitra Parva: In the month of *Chaitra*, *Chaitra Parva* is observed. In each Tuesday in which *Chaiti ghoda* (representing Goddess *Mangala*) is allowed to dance roaming inside different villages.

Chaitra Purnima: It is observed on the bright fortnight of the month of *Chaitra*.

Chandan Yatra: On the day of *Akshaya Trutiya*, the moving icon of goddess is taken out from the temple for boat-ride called *chapakheala* inside the *Chandan Pokhari*(tank). It is performed twice a day – one in the afternoon and another on the night. It continues for 21 days and ends on the day of *Pana Samkranti*.

Baisakha Pana: On the day of *Pana Samkranti* which categorically falls on the month of *Baishakha* either on 14th/15th April. The Goddess is offered with a *pana* prepared by pulpy juice of the bel, cheese, sugar granules (*Kanda*), scrapped coconut, camphor, black pepper and opium etc. The *Pana Samkranti* is the most important festival of the temple. On which day thousands and thousands of devotees rushed to the place to offer their praying. On this day, *Jhamu Yatra*, is performed and *Chuda Ghasa* with *Kakara Pitha* is offered as *Prasad* by different devotees to the Goddess. These two items are believed to be the most favorite food offering of the Goddess.^{xiv} *Jhamu Jatra* is also performed.

Apart from devotional centre and religious institution, the temple of Maa Sarala creates harmony, amity and a friendly atmosphere in the locality. People from different parts of Odisha visit the temple to take refuge in the goddess's mercy, blessings and magnanimity. The social coherence bond is tightened by the visits of numerous pilgrims who often pay visit to their relatives, friends and acquaintances of the local villagers. An interchange of information relating to socio-economic affairs have been smoothly transmitted through this process. It provides ample scope to solve the unemployment crisis by giving opportunity to open different varieties of stalls or shops to a good number of people. Even a peddler selling groundnut, fried *chana* or *chanachur*, or other varieties of articles gets the chance to earn his livelihood. The temple priests, and other *sevakas* became eligible to manage their household affairs with the donations and *dakshinas* of the pilgrims.

ⁱ Das, Binodini, "Sarala Temple of Jhankada", in Odisha State Museum (ed), *The Odisha Historical Research Journal*, Vol. LIII, No.1, 2 (International Museum Day Special Issue), Bhubaneswar. 2012, p.53

ⁱⁱ Ibid

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid

^{iv} Ibid, p.44

^v Cf. Ibid, p.44

^{vi} Mohanty, Artaballava, (ed), "Sarala Mahabharata", Part-I, Cuttack, p.4

^{vii} Bahalia, Bishnu Prasad, "Jhankada Vasini Sarala", by Brajamohan Mohanty (ed), In 'Orissa Ra Deva Devi', Cuttack, 1980, p.380

^{viii} Das, Binodini, op.cit., p.61

^{ix} Field Study carried out by me on Dt.07.01.2018

^x Cf. Mohanty, Artaballava, (ed), "Sarala Mahabharata", Part-II, Cuttack, p.1050

^{xi} Adhikari, Gouranga, "Shree Sarala", Cuttack, 1985, pp.25-26



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DOI: <http://ijmer.in.doi./2021/10.08.139>

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- xii Acharya, Chintamani, “*Shree Sarala Thakurani*”, Cuttack, Arunodaya Nagar Press, 1947, pp.25-26
- xiii Das, Binodini, op.cit., p.66
- xiv Interview from the Chief priest of Sarala Temple named Sri Ranjan Panda on Dt.07.01.2018.