

## **GRAMSIRI - THE PRESIDING VILLAGE DEITY OF ODISHA**

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### **Abstract**

*There is no religion in India which does not have folk gods and goddesses with vital influences on regulating the socio- cultural life of the people. All kinds of fame and achievements gained by men go to the credit of God. He is considered the creator and destroyer of the universe. In Hindu mythology people worship thirty three crores gods and goddesses to get their blessings. Besides that many gods and goddesses are of local origins. Ancestors and nature are worshipped especially by the people inhabiting rural and hilly areas. These gods and goddesses are everything to them. They evoke them to steer clear of evil days which they feel befall due to foul play by evil spirits or provocation of their presiding deities. They promise to offer birds, animals or men as sacrifice if they are made to get rid of these occult influences. Among them the most important village deities are Gramsiri, Sthambeswari, Tara Tarini, Mauli, Goddess Laxmi, Pitabali etc. People perform many rites and rituals and celebrate many festivals like Nuakhai, Rakhi puni, Chait puja, Bihida puja etc to propitiate their deities at different times and on different occasions all the year.*

**Keywords:** *Hinduism, Tribals, Gramsiri, Rites and Rituals, Festivals*



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### **1. Introduction:**

Hinduism was full of mysteries. Old traditional values were adhered to with austerity. Religious dogma was the cardinal principle of religion. Our ancient religious literature which contains a large numbers of hymns and verses in praise of the higher religious system seldom refers to the cult worship of the masses. Nothing or very little is said on the beliefs, rites, amusements and other aspects of common people. This is because (at the food producing stage of culture) during harvesting season various aspects of the universe such as Sun and Earth were the main objects of ceremonial worship without any philosophical and ethical reason attached to them. Because of primitive faith and ignorance of elevated aspects of life, emphasis was laid by them on the petty aspect of the life. It was during the time of Vedic age  
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that the Aryans tried to understand the inner meaning of various objects and phenomena of nature and became conscious of spiritual, metaphysical, philosophical and ethical aspects of things. This consciousness became so dominating that the primitive cult seemed almost extinct<sup>1</sup>.

The people of Odisha especially the tribal worship many gods and goddesses of local origin which run counter to the sanction of Brahmanism. These deities do not possess any specific iconographic features nor do they appear in Brahminical theology. In this connection Charls Louis Fabri, a Hungarian Archaeologist and art Historian in India says “The simple folk were reduced to slavery and misery by the Brahminical revival for which they even feared to worship openly their beloved little fairies, spirits, nymphs, the Yakshas and Yaksis, Naga and Nagis.”<sup>2</sup>

Even R.N.Nandi, former Professor of History of Patna University has observed that “they were acknowledged as the members of the documented theology of the society in whose contact the tribals lived.”<sup>3</sup> It may be mentioned that the hill tribes who believed in matriarchy were the worshippers of Sakti. The practice of human sacrifice which was prevalent among the hill tribes was adopted in earlier times by the Aryans who assimilated this system into their religion in the form of Narmedha. In this process of assimilation and acculturation several heterogeneous cults blended together and several new aspects sprang up.

## **2. Anecdotes about the origin of village Deities –**

The priests of the different villages admit that the cult of Gramsiri has been prevailing since the creation of the earth. Wherever the tribal people like Gond, Kondh and Kisan go, they take Gramsiri along with them and establish it in their new habitation. Foundation of god at a new habitation is the most common religious function for these people. On the other hand, contrary opinion has its say that the god Gramsiri originated in the form of a linga in many villages. After his revelation he appears before village head man in a dream and instructs the headman to worship him in the place of origination<sup>4</sup>.

One such anecdote has remained alive in the memory of the villagers of Bundelkani in Fashimal Gram Panchayat in Jamankira Block. It goes that –

“A big rat was moving about in a corn field of the village. A group of tribal people named Kola had its inhabitation adjacent to the field. Once a member of the community had run after the rat to kill it. After a long chase the Kola man was able to kill the rat with a stone. The Kola man who killed the rat died at the spot after vomiting blood. The following night,

the village headman had a dream that the god Gramsiri had already his incarnation who instructed him to worship the god at the place where the Kola had killed the rat. The next day when the villagers reached the spot, they found the dead body of the Kola man and a Siva linga which was broken at the top. Since, the linga has been worshipped as Gramsiri of the village<sup>5</sup>.

There is yet another folk tale of the village Deherunimal in the Kuchinda Tahsil. Three little boys about fifteen years old thought to play a game while moving in the forest. Out Two of them were tribal and the third one was a Brahmin. The two tribal boys tied the neck of the Brahmin boy with a rope made of grass and a blade of thick and hard grass was used as a sword to kill the boy. When the boy held the grass tightly, it turned into an iron sword and the head of the Brahmin boy was cut off. The villagers came to the spot, kept the sword in between the two branches of a tree and worshipped that place as the abode of lord Gramsiri. Till today a small piece of iron is found on a dried tree<sup>6</sup>.

Still another tradition of a place named Deogaon in Kuchinda Tahsil area states that from the time immemorial god Gramsiri has been worshipped at that place. The people of that locality worship the god with great veneration on different occasions. It is known as one of the reputed Pithas of Gramsiri in that locality. It is a fact that in 1966-67, the then Sub-Divisional Magistrate of Kuchinda named Basant Mohanty excavated that place after inducing the people by saying that the God Gramsiri has instructed him to do so, in his dream. In that excavation, the plinth of a temple, a Siva linga, an image of Shiva and Parvati and three separate images of Ganesha, Kartikeya and Bhairavi made of black granite stone were found. From that time the place has been recognized as a Saiva Pitha and recently a small temple has been built to enshrine the linga. As part of tradition of the bhoga of that Siva temple is distributed to all the villages after being offered to God Gramsiri. This distribution of bhoga is made once a year, i.e. prior to Navarna Bhakshana.

Some of the villages like Damgaon and Patbandha in Deogarh Tahsil area claimed that the god Gramsiri originated in their village in the form of a linga and the village headman was instructed to worship Him. It is also stated that the tribal of those villages were sacrificing man before the god to please Him.

The origin of the cult of Gramsiri and adoption of this cult by the people is shrouded in mystery. No information regarding this is available till today. Therefore we should peep

into the local traditions, customs and folklore relating to the Gramsiri cult to have a better understanding of it.

### **3. Areas where people widely worship Gramsiri-**

The people of ex-state of Bamanda, Jaipur and Gangpur of present Deogarh district, parts of Jharsuguda, Sundargarh, Kuchinda sub-division of Sambalpur, Bolangir and Kalahandi district are worshipped Gramsiri. He is the presiding deity of each village of these areas in different names. Leter, Turechhada, Chapria and Mahaling of Kalahandi district worship many gods and goddesses in the name of Jananbudha, Raja Khunal, Gangadibudhi, Mauli and Dukribudhi. People offer goats, hens, cocks and pigeons to gods and goddesses during rites and rituals.

Buffalo is sacrificed every twenty years to god Jananbudha with much pomp and elaborates rituals at dharnikutha (under the tree or wood pillar) at the yard of the Jani, the head male priest of the village.

### **4. Priests:**

Both the male and the female priests of these gods and goddesses are non- Brahmins.

The male priests are called as Sudra, Muni, Jani, Mali, Dehuri, Jhankar, Kalo, Raula, Devata where as the female priests are known as Janiani and Malini. The Puja is performed every day in some places, once a week in some places, or according to tithis (Memorial Day – a lunar day of the Month) throughout the year.

### **5. Basic objective of worship-**

The tribals worship these gods and goddesses in the belief that they will protect the human being, cure diseases, save the people from epidemics and increase fertility. The tribal deem that their goddesses cause famine as a punishment for their sin. Hence, they fear to commit a sinful act. They also think that the Goddesses they worship are all powerful and can bless men with wealth and prosperity. Apart from that, they think the goddesses have appeared on the earth to restore peace and to induce the art of agriculture as well as other blessings into the world.

### **5. Places and Form of Worship-**

The gods and goddesses in the form of stone, tree or any other symbol of a particular locality are kept in open space under the bushy groves or under a tree on the road sides or in the caves. They are worshipped both in their aniconic and iconic forms by representing stones, are planted under a big tree at the outskirts of the village. That stones

which measure about one and half feet in length and 6 to 9 inches in diameter represent Gramsiri. Another stone planted on the right hand side of Gramsiri named Bhairavi, is considered Gramsiri's counterpart. However this stone representing Bhairavi is slightly smaller than the male counterpart Gramsiri. Previously, people used to offer them both animal and human sacrifices. Now a days, human sacrifice (Meriah) is stopped though the practice of offering animals and birds is still in vogue.

### **7. Importance of Village Deity -**

The Sakti (power) as a form of nature occupies a significant place in the tribal community. Apart from regular worship she is invoked with special rites mainly at the time of natural calamity, draught, famine or any other panic. The essence of Sakti worship in tribal community is mental satisfaction.

The village deity in the region of Deogarh district, Kuchinda sub-division of Sambalpur district and some portions of Jharsuguda and Sundargarh district, is considered the Savite Sakti cult and named as Gramsiri (village head). He is given the highest status in all kinds of social functions performed by the villagers.

God Gramsiri and goddess Bhairavi are combined treated as the gods of fertility of the soil. If they are pleased with the people, then they bless them with plenty of crop. It is interesting to note that the tantric cult associates Sakti with yoni and Siva with linga.<sup>7</sup> Primarily, the linga (procreative genital organ of male) is the symbol of act of cultivation while yoni (genital organ of woman) represents mother earth. This fact finds support in a statement of Manu "iyam bhumirihi bhutanam sasvati, yoniruchyate".<sup>9</sup>

The god Gramsiri is worshipped to avert the diseases like small pox, cholera and some incurable diseases. He is also believed as the disease curer of domestic animals. The people further believe that he punishes those people who commit evil deeds. If a person is found to have committed any theft in the village and he is not prepared to admit it then the god punishes him after receiving a general obligation from the village people. For all these reasons God Gramsiri, with his counterpart goddess Bhairavi and their associates viz. Laxmi, Pitabali, Mauli and Bhima are considered the supreme deity of the village.

### **8. Other Deities worshipped along with Gramasiri -**

The presiding deity of the village is worshipped with the association of Bhairavi (Ma-Bhairo), Pitabali (the great father god) and goddess Laxmi. At the same time, the people of different villages worship Bhima, Mauli and Barabhai Mallar who have been very much

there in the villages since past. However, these gods and goddesses are enshrined at a little distance from the Gramsiri Pitha, locally known as Deul ( Gudi or temple).

Goddess Laxmi who is one of the indispensable parts of Gramsiri cult is represented with a small elephant made of brass, which is placed by the side of the God Gramsiri. This small brass elephant is associated with Bhat Parshi/ Salegrama, a white transparent metal. It is very small in size and a good number of Bhat Parshi/ Salegrama are buried at the side of the brass elephant. It is stated by the priest and the villagers that the number may grow or reduce depending upon the mood of the God Gramsiri. They also say that at night Bhat Parshis come out of their places and move on the ground with their own light.

The god Pitabli, the great father god, which is one of the branches of Gramsiri, is worshipped at a small distance, amidst the groves of bushes. A stone is placed as the symbol of god. God Bhima, who is identified with Bhima of Mahabharata, is worshipped at some distance from the place of Gramsiri. A stone beneath a tree is usually worshipped as the god Bhima.

The people of this region associate the worship of Bhima with Gramsiri, probably due to the legend which associates Bhima with Siva. The legend mentions that when Siva became the lord of the cultivator and cultivated the land with a pair of bullock, he was helped by Bhima, the hero of Mahabharata. This legend is clearly reflected at the Siva temple of Jalesvara in the district of Balasore. In that temple Siva is worshipped as Langalesvara. Stone statue of two oxen named Basua and Pabana with a stone plough (langala) are kept outside the temple. The local people believe that, Langalesvara Mahadeva was once engaged in ploughing the land on the bank of the river Suvarnarekha with his two oxen. Bhima appeared there and helped Siva in ploughing the land. Since then people have been believing that Bhima will help god Gramsiri, the other form of Siva in ploughing the land which yields plenty of crops.

Mauli is another aspect of Gramsiri cult. They are worshipped by the villagers as the offshoot of Siva and Parvati. A tree is worshipped in the vicinity of the village as Mauli.

The tantric text Pitha Nirnaya gives a different opinion. Here Jagannath is described as Bhairava and Vimala as Bhairavi. Vimala is the other name of laxmi. Probably for this reason the people of this locality associate Laxmi with Gramsiri cult.

But it is a fact that the God Gramsiri with Bhairavi who is the presiding deity of the village is considered to be the gods of the tribal people like Gond, Kandh, Kisan and Bhuyan inhabiting the hinterland Odisha. Keeping this idea in their minds the non-tribal Gountia and

the people accepted the gods and goddess of wealth, laxmi with the Gramsiri cult. Rites and rituals The worship of Sakti is three folded such as Satvika, Rajasika and Tamasika as per the desire of the Sadhakas.<sup>4</sup> Offerings of vegetarian materials to the goddess, meditation, chanting of mantras and sacrificial fire (Yajna) are practised in Satvika upasana.<sup>10</sup> Except wine, non-vegetarian food and sacrifice of animals are permissible in Rajasika upasana. In the Tamasika Upasana offerings of non-vegetarian food, wine and sacrifice of animals are prevalent.

The tribal people who are the followers of Gramsiri faith follow both Rajasika and Tamasika types of propitiation. The most common elements of offerings of these people to their god Gramsiri are goats, sheep, cocks, wine, coconut, gandha (sandal paste) , puspa (flower), dhupa(incense), dipa (lamps), naividya (other eatable materials) like milk, molasses, perched corn etc. In the remote past human sacrifices were offered as a material of oblation before the god. It is evident from the accounts of the British that the tribes like Kondh were sacrificing human beings before their village deity.

In some areas like Jeypore( undivided Koraput district), Kandhmaal, the Kondhs were offering human sacrifices to their goddess 'Jenkery' or 'Sankari' with a view to securing good crops.<sup>9</sup> These facts signify that the Kondh people of Odisha were offering human beings before their goddess to win over the earth goddess. But nowadays the human sacrifices are out of practice and the animal sacrifices have taken its place.

The use of wine, one of the Tamasika oblation materials in Sakti worship was also in vogue from early times. In the later tantric tradition the use of the wine is well known. Wine (madya) is considered one of the five Panchamakara of the tantric cults.<sup>10</sup> Other four are mamsa (meat) Matsya (fish) mudra (consisting of hand gestures and finger-postures) and maithuna(copulation).

William Crooke has revealed from his observation that liquor as the vehicle of magical power plays at the root of all tribal rituals all over India.<sup>11</sup> The people who have faith on Gramsiri also sacrifice animal and offer wine which is the common ritual of Sakti worship. All these sacrifices i.e. human and animal were offered to the god Gramsiri who is known to be the Bhairava form of Siva in the region of western Odisha. They believed that Siva and Parvati have created the earth and if they are pleased the earth yields good crops. This statement is evident from an account made in the manuscript kept with Tankadhar Jhankar of the village Bundelkani, which runs like this.<sup>12</sup>

During one of blissful sojourns of Lord Siva and Parvati in the heaven with Brahma and Vishnu, Goddess Parvati gave birth to one lakh children in the heaven. They lived in the heaven for twelve years when they felt hungry due to shortage of food, they asked for it. At the endearment of Parvati Lord Siva created the earth and sent all the children to the earth. They were blessed by Parvati to receive worship from the men on the earth and to live on their obligations. Those creations of Siva and Parvati were known as 'Bara Bhai Mallar' and 'Mauli'. The names of the Bara Bhai Mallar (12 brothers) are found from a palm leaves manuscript 'Matitola' written by Fagu Gand.<sup>13</sup> Those names are (1) Banka Mallar (2) Jayema Mallar (3) Kama Mallar (4) Andha Mallar (5) Siba Mallar (6) Tamacha Mallar (7) Pan Mallar (8) Bara Mallar (9) Khedu Mallar (10) Khaja Mallar (11) Basu Mallar (12) Jayeta Mallar.

These traditions signify that the people thought Shiva and Parvati to be the creator of the earth. This fact is further corroborated by the descriptions in the Siva Upanishad which consider Sakti to be the creative power of Siva, without her the later cannot create the universe. She creates the Prakriti (nature), Purusha (man) and the world.<sup>14</sup>

To pacify lord Siva and Parvati, the creator of the earth, the tribal people of ex-state of Bamanda, Jaipur and Gangpur have been worshipping different forms of Siva Parvati and their mythological children ; viz. Bhairava, Bhairavi Bara Bhai Mallar and Mauli, in the form of Gramsiri.

The tribal people observe a strict principle of rites and rituals. They have a fear that if the priest commits any kind of blunder in performing the rites then the gods become furious and may cause harm to the people. For this reason, they perform the rituals very meticulously and with purity of mind. The followers of Gramsiri faith believe that their god warns the village headman and priest to be alert and not to commit the same type of mistake once again. The ritual system is so strict that the oblation to God Gramsiri is to be offered on Khajuri Patra (date leaves), Maa Bhairavi on Bela Patra and Bhima on Bhuja Patra. There are also special Kosthis for each god associated with Gramsiri cult, 17 on which the oblation materials on specified leaves are offered before the Gods.

### **9. Ceremonies related to Village Deities -**

Though the cult of Gramsiri is popular among all sections of people yet the Gond, Kondh, Kola, Oran and Kisan claim the God as their own. The priests are also nominated from these castes only. If the people of these castes are not available in that village then a man from the



general caste can act as a priest. In most of the villages Kondhs and Gonds are appointed as priest. They serve post hereditarily and were granted free land from their Zamindars and kings till 1947 when all their properties were nationalized. The priest is commonly known as Jhankar or Kalo who acts as the mediator between the villagers and the Gods and Goddesses. He performs all rites and rituals in the pattern of tribal worship at different tithis and occasions. Some of the festivals observed in the connection of Gramsiri are briefly mentioned below:

**a) Chait puja:**

The most important ritual of lord Gramsiri takes place on the first Wednesday in the bright fortnight of Chaitra (March-April). On this day Gramsiri, Bhairavi and laxmi are worshiped together where as Bhima is worshipped separately. Barabhai Mallar and Mauli are also offered with oblations on the same day. The Jhankar/Kalo offers the oblations that are fetched by the villagers for the same. He draws a Mukha (face) out of vermilion on each of stones as done in symbolic Sakti worship to start the ritual.<sup>15</sup>

The goat and the cock that are offered by the villagers are worshipped and their heads are chopped off to make prasada (sacrament) of the gods. The blood, head, liver of each sacrificed animals and wine are offered before the god. Laxmi, who is considered to be the goddess of wealth, is never offered blood and wine, rather she is offered coconut and other sital samagree(angelic oblations ) like dhoop (incense) deep(lamps),ghee, gur (molasses),gandha (sandal paste), puspa (flower), lia (perched peddy) etc. The Chait puja is also known as Katha puja (wood oblation) because the villagers collect firewood from the forest only after they accomplish this puja.

**b) Bihida puja:**

When the crops are in the growing stage on the growing stage in the month of Sravana (July-August) a day except Tuesday and Saturday in the bright fortnight is selected to perform the Bhida puja. On that day lord Gramsiri, goddess Bhairavi and laxmi are worshipped. On the same day Pitabali (the great father god) described as the god of Kondhs by S.P. Das is also worshipped.<sup>16</sup> The same method of worship as followed in Chait puja is carried out on this occasion. But god Pitabali, Barabhai Mallar and Mauli are also offered with blood, liver and head of the sacrificed goat and cock. Wine, a special material of oblation is also offered to these gods and goddesses. Another difference observed on this day is that Pitabali (the great father god) is given much importance by the people.

1. After performing the ritual the people of the village take plough and start re-planting or Bihida of their corn fields. It is believed that, if someone in the village starts replanting of his corn field prior to the commencement of the Bihida puja then the god Gramsiri becomes furious and warns the village headman and the priest to save the village from destruction. In this case he is pacified by offering a special oblation by the person who has violated His rule.

**c) Nuakhai puja (Navarna Vakshyana) -**

Nuakhai or Navarna vakshyana (eating of new rice) is a popular festival observed in the region of western Odisha. The people offer new corn to their village god Gramsiri and others at Nuakhai. A day in the bright fortnight of Bhadraba (August-September) is selected by the village people to observe the Nuakhai puja.

A day before the commencement of puja the Kalo/Jhankar (priest) collects oblations from each and every house of the village. Out of the collected paddy and oblation materials the priest prepares the bhoga which is to be offered to the god.

**d) Rakhi puni (rites on the day of Raksha- bandhan).**

The full moon day of Sravana (July-August) is considered one of the auspicious days for the Hindus. On that day the Hindu ladies tie 'rakhi' (an ornamental cotton wristband or thread) on the wrist of their bothers with the hope that the brothers will stand by their sisters at the hours of crisis. On that day, god Gramsiri is worshipped in the early morning by the Jhankar/Kalo. On the Seetal Samagree (vage oblation) coconut, dhoop (incense), deep (lamps), ghee, milk, gur(molasses), gandha(sandal paste), puspa (flower), lia (perched peddy) are offered to him. No animal is to be sacrificed on that day nor is wine needed for offering. The priests on behalf of the villagers tie the Rakhi on god Gramsiri. After this ceremony, the village girls put Rakhi on the wrists of their bothers and the family head man, on the horn of the domestic animals.

**10. Conclusion:**

God Gramsiri is the titular God of the villagers. Apart from Gramsiri, his counterparts are also worshipped on different occasions. The villagers have unflinching faith on them and they invoke them at the beginning of any auspicious work like marriage, festivals, rites and rituals etc. In the time of difficulties and danger, sorrows or sufferings these gods are their main hope and savior. They invoke these gods for better health, wealth and to free them from diseases and enemies. To fulfill their wish, they promise to god to offer goat, hens, cocks,

pigeons, buffaloes, etc and offer them in the time of Chaita puja or tithis related to god's rituals. In this context, village deities play a prominent role for the fulfillment of the desire of the people.

We too just can't leave out the contribution the village deities have towards the flourish of our folklore and culture. Gramsiri is manifested to us only through variety of folklore which the village forefathers handover to their successors in the hope that it remain alive from generation to generation. The bequeathed folklore, in turn, enriches the culture by which it is fostered. So there is no gain saying that Gramsiri as adored in the state of Odisha has immensely contributed to the rich heritage of Odisha.

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