CHAPTER - IV

THE CULT OF EARTH

The Cult of Earth is yet another aspect of the Minor Religious Cults, which may appear minor at the outset but a thorough study may reveal its conspicuous role, played in the course of evolution of religion. In Hinduism, specially, it enjoys a position of utmost veneration. It will be a layman's view, if one says that the veneration of earth was a feature of the religion of the simple people of the pre-historic age and that to-day it survives only in the religion of the tribals. So, in this work, an attempt has been made to reveal the actual status of the Cult of Earth in the modern religion of India, in the light of its prevalence in the classical, popular and tribal levels of Indian religion.

ORIGIN

The Cult of Earth lies at the root of worship of Mother Goddesses. As such its origin can be traced back to the Palaeolithic times. For the food gatherer nomad of the Palaeolithic times, a mother was the only individual whose identity was recognised by all. Because, the services rendered by her extracted the love and affection, respect and gratitude from others. Her main function was to give birth to the young ones, to rear them up and to teach them their habits, norms of behaviour etc. So, she was regarded as the symbol of generation, the producer of life. "In the earliest phase of social evolution, it was this maternity which held the field, the life-producing mother being the central figure of religion. This has been proved by the plentiful discovery of Palaeolithic female figurines in bone, ivory, stone with material organs grossly exaggerated" (Bhattacharya, 1974:2). Preston (1980) also mentions that figurines of female deities have been unearthed all over Europe, on which the maternal organs are emphasised. This implies an association of women with fertility rites. So, the reverence, showed to human mother may have introduced female element into religion.
Bhattachrya (1974) mentions that the father element crept into religion during the subsequent period. But even after the introduction of the father element, the mother element predominated, specially among the agriculturist people. Because, agriculture was regarded as the invention and business of women. Thus, the agricultural activities of women became an additional factor to support their revered status in the society.

Stenkonow (1925) refers to the worship of mother Earth during the period when Indian and European tribes were one people, with a common language and common religious conceptions. Dhal (1978) refers to the worship of Mother Earth in Greece, in early ages as 'Demeter', when people were nomads 'Demeter' was the mother of the wild things. But when agriculture started, she was converted to the corn mother and the bearer of fruits.

People of the early times had a tendency to project their own experiences into the objects around them. So, they made an analogy between the human mother and the Earth Mother, on the basis of their common character, concerning birth, generation and agriculture. An intimate relation was established between the process of birth and generation and that of fertility. The status of human mother became gradually extended to the Earth Mother. As a result, Mother Earth was contemplated as the womb, in which crops were sown. Thus, started the process of worshipping Earth as Mother Goddess. "She continued her glorious career among the agricultural peoples, till the rise of the essentially male oriented religions". (Bhattacharya, 1974:2).

In the Neolithic Society, attempts were made to influence the Earth Goddess and to regulate her moods. "The earth from whose bosom, the grains sprout, was imagined as a goddess, who might be influenced like a woman, by entreaties and gifts as well as controlled by imitative rites and incantations. Female figurines were moulded in clay or carved in stone or bone by Neolithic Societies in Egypt, Syria, Iran, all round the Mediterranean and in South-eastern Europe". (Bhattacharya, 1974 : 10).
In the Palaeolithic and Neolithic days, India was not an exception to this world order, which regarded Earth as a life-producing mother, the mother of vegetable kingdom. "Nothing Specific can be said about the Palaeolithic and Neolithic Mother Goddess of India, simply because, the data are much too meagre. So, the picture has to be restored from conjecture and reasoning based upon reports of observations all over the world". (Bhattacharya, 1974: 0).

In the days of Harappan civilization, the matriarchal ideas of the agricultural communities, who came from adjacent villages, formed the basis of religion. Some of the cults and rituals of the simple agricultural communities were adopted by the higher urban society of Mohenjodaro and Harappa. A seal unearthed at Harappa, shows on the obverse, a nude female figure, head downwards and legs stretched out upwards, with a plant issuing out of her womb. "Marshall as quoted by Bhattacharya, 1974). This seal is interpreted as Earth Mother Sakambhari of the Puranas, from whose body the life-sustaining vegetables grow. On the reverse side, there is a female figure with dishevelled hair and arms raised in alarm. In front of her, there is a male figure, holding a shield-like object in one hand and a sickle-like object on the other. The male figure appears to bear a threatening attitude. Bhattacharya (1974) mentions that Marshall interprets this seal to be a scene of human sacrifice, connected with the Earth Goddess. He further mentions that, besides the Sakambhari seal, there are many other seals, which depict the association of trees and plants.

The status of motherhood, which was thus attributed to Earth, did not remain confined to the vegetable kingdom. Rather, it was extended over the universe as a whole. As a result, she came to be regarded as the creator of the universe. Bhattacharya (1974) mentions that in the Sakta scheme of cosmogenical process, the Prakriti (Earth) alone existed before creation. It was she who created Brahma, Vishnu and Maheswara, the prominent male deities of later times. The Sankhya Philosophy, in which, the Prakriti is all in all and the Purusha or male element is subversive, must have derived its roots from the pre-vedic matriarchal tradition, in which the conception of a material Prakriti evolved from that of a material Earth Mother. "Magical fertility rites, originally performed by women, to ensure the process of nature, were invariably associated with such a conception of a material Earth Mother. These rites, surviving through the ages in popular beliefs and customs were conserved and
crystallised in the later Tantras, while the more rational speculations centering round the conception of a material Earth Mother (*Prakriti*) developed into a distinct metaphysical form, the Sankhya system. (Bhattacharya, 1974: 17).

**EARTH CULT IN THE CLASSICAL LEVEL**

By the beginning of the Vedic period in India, the male element in religion must have overshadowed the female element. Because, the Vedic literature, attributes dominating status to the male deities and a secondary one to the female deities. Moreover, Mother Earth was no longer the only female deity, worshipped. The Vedas mention many other female deities like Aditi, Usha, Saraswati etc. But the Earth Goddess seems to be the most important of all. She has been invoked in the Vedas as the Great Mother. But an important element assumed by the Earth Goddess by the Rig-Vedic period is that she came to be regarded as the consort of Heaven (Dyaus). Heaven (Dyaus) and Earth (Prithvi) are regarded as the father and mother of the entire universe. "So interdependent are these two deities in the Rig-Veda that, Prithvi is rarely addressed alone but almost always as part of the dual compound *dyava Prithvi*, sky-earth". (Kinsley, 1986: 8). By now, Earth, was no longer a goddess of the agricultural community only. As the Vedas depict her she was a goddess of many sided virtues, who is the source of life, and prosperity in the world. This may be justified by a brief reference to the Vedic hymns.

In Rig Veda (1.5.12) the earth is prayed to be extensive free from thorns and to give mankind profuse happiness. Rig Veda (1.3.159) prays Heaven and Earth to bestow blessing upon the worshipping who are, but his children. Through invocations the mind of the benevolent father and affectionate mother is propitiated. it is through their kindness that they have secured the immortality of their progeny. The benignant Heaven and Earth are prayed to bestow upon the worshipping, the riches consisting of habitations, hundred of cattle and the like.

Rig Veda (1.4.160) describes Heaven and Earth as the diffusers of happiness on all, encouragers of truth, sustainers of water. In the interval between them proceeds the divine Sun. They are widespread and vast. They are the father and mother of all beings and they preserve the world. The god who gave birth to the all delighting Heaven and Earth is the most divine. Heaven and Earth are glorified by worship and are prayed to give abundant food, great strength, commendable vigour by which mankind can be multiplied.
Rig Ved (1.6. 185) mentions that it is not certain as to who is prior, whether Earth or Heaven. But it is true that they uphold the universe and cause the Day and Night to occur. They are footless and motionless, but they sustain numerous moving and footed races. They are prayed to defend mankind from great dangers. Man should always be devoted to them. Because, they are not subject to annoyance, they satisfy all beings with food and they have both gods and men for their children. They are invoked for the preservation of both gods and men. Their adorers propitiate them with sacrificial food, and desire for ample wealth for the sake of making ample donations. Thus, Heaven and Earth, as father and mother are repeatedly praised and are prayed to provide food, shelter, strength, long life and protection from all sorts of dangers.

The same holy book in 6.9.70, describes Heaven and Earth as asylum of created beings, and as spacious, manifold, water-yielding and lovely. The mortal who offers them oblations, accomplishes his objects and prospers with progeny. They are propitiated in sacrifice. The pious pray them for happiness and success in the sacrifice. Rig Veda - 7.20.53 mentions that the adorer, attended by a concourse of priests worship the Heaven and Earth with sacrifices. They are invoked to come along with celestial beings. They are prayed to give unlimited wealth and blessings. The Atharva Veda (12.1) contains special hymn on Earth (Bhumi Sukta) which heightens her many sided virtues and enriches her status as the source of life and happiness in the universe. The Atharva Veda does not restrict its reference to Earth as the consort of Heaven. Rather, it associates her with many male deities. The hymn 12.1.10 associates her with lords *Indra* and *Vishnu*. "Earth, in which the Asvins measured out and Vishnu strode which Indra, Lord of might made free from foes for himself may she pour out milk for me, a mother to her son" (Bose, 1966:365). Hymns 12.1.12 and 42 associate her with Paranjaya. "Set me, O Earth amidst what is thy centre and thy navel and vitalising forces that emanated from the body. Purify us from all sides, Earth is my mother, her son am I, and Paranjaya my father, may he fill us with plenty" (Bose, 1966:365).
As per hymn 12.1.7, the Earth has been protected by unsleeping Devas. "Earth, whom unsleeping Devas protect for ever without erring" (Bose, 1966:365). Hymn-12.1.61 associates her with Prajapati - "Thou art the vessel, the Mother of the people, the fullfiller of wishes, far, extending whatever is wanting in thee, is filled by Prajapati, first-born of Eternal order." (Bose, 1966:379). Inspite of such associations with male deities, she has been described in the Atharva Veda as a great deity in her own right.

The hymns of Atharva Veda (12.1), elevate the status of Mother Earth as the bearer of plants of various healing powers (12.1.2) of sea, river and other waters (12.1.3), of corn fields (12.1.4), as the home of all moving life and bearer of universal fire (12.1.6), as the bearer of hills, mountains, woods (12.1.11) and in fact the bearer of all things in her womb (12.1.43). She is sacred because of the consecration austerity, prayer and ritual (12.1.1) performed upon her, because she witnessed the overwhelming of Asuras (demons) by Devas (lords) (12.1.5) because altars are built upon her for the performance of Yajna (sacrifice) (12.1.13) because, on her are built sacred seat and shed and pole is raised on which Brahmanas versed hymns from Rig, Sam and Yajur Veda (12.1.38); because, upon her the seven sages prayed in session with sacrifice and austerity (12.1.39). She is prayed to make a wide world (12.1.1) to give cattle and crops (12.1.4) to give wealth (12.1.6), to give lustre and strength (12.1.8), to endow with honeyed speech (12.1.16), to provide longevity (12.1.22) to take away deadly weapons (12.1.32), to make free from foes (12.1.41), to protect from the wild beasts of the woods (12.1.49), to drive away the Gandharvas (semi divine beings), Apsaras (angels), Pisachas (witches) and Rakshasas (demons) (12.1.50).

The above mentioned features of the Hymn to the Earth, from Atharva Veda (12.1), tempt to presume that, the veneration of Earth Goddess had culminated by the time of the Atharva Veda. By this time she was the bestower of agricultural prosperity and at the same time, the bestower of everything, that could confer happiness and prosperity in general. Another remarkable feature of this hymn, is the association of Earth Goddess with a number of male deities. This may be regarded as a novel conception, which in subsequent years, resulted in the emergence of new forms and names of Mother Goddesses in India. To-day, Mother Goddesses occupy a conspicuous position both in the Little and Great Traditions. The
reverence shown by early people to human mother, which in turn, assumed the form of Goddess Earth, may be presumed to have resulted in the subsequent years, in the emergence of numerous mother goddesses. In the Great Tradition, there are Mother Goddesses, who are worshipped and are regarded as the consort of Sun God and some other great male deities such as Vishnu, the creator. They can also be viewed as the aryenised form of Mother Earth. Dasgupta (1977) mentions in this regard that in the 'Aitenya Brahmana' (8.5) and in some other later Upanishads, the Earth is identified with Shree. Shree is the other name of Laskhmi who is the consort of Lord Vishnu, the Creator and who is worshipped as the goddess of harvest and fortune. "......................in the sculptural representation of Lord Vishnu of the Gupta period and a few centuries following it, the goddesses who are found associated with Lord Vishnu on His either side are Shree and Bhu or sometimes Shree, Bhu and Nila. In these representation of later times, Vishnu seems to retain something of the old Vedic Sun-god and Shree and Bhu may stand for two aspects of the Earth Goddess, the aspect's of prosperity and productivity". (Dasgupta, 1977 : 50).

Durga is another prominent mother Goddess. Kinsely (1986) refers to her identification with Prakrili and Earth. Earlier, in this chapter, it has been mentioned that Prakriti is none other than the material Earth. Durga is the Prakriti, because, she is inextricably associated with the physical world, of which, she is the creator and protector. With a reference to 'Devi Mahatmya', Kinsely (1986) mentions that Durga is described as the Earth itself, who conveys cosmic stability. As the embodiment of Earth, she supports, protects and nourishes all beings. As Sakambhari she provides food from her own body. "As immanent in the world, Durga is equated with the mother Earth. As transcendent, she is the heavenly queen, who descends from time to time to maintain harmony on Earth". (Kinsely, 1986 : 105). Dasgupta (1977) too mentions in this regard that, in India, the annual worship of Goddess Durga takes place in the autumn, which marks the beginning of harvest season. In this worship, she is first represented in a branch of Vilva tree (aegle marmelos) and next in Navaptrika i.e., a female figure made with a plantain tree and eight other plants and herbs. She is also identified with rice. Thus, in her autumnal worship, Durga emerges as the goddess of harvest and fortune. "All these will go to prove how the Mother, in later times was identified with the harvest goddess and the goddess of fertility, who again is nothing but a particular aspect of Mother Earth". (Dasgupta, 1977 : 50). Dasgupta (1977) further mentions that,
Durga or Candi (read it as Chandi) of the Puranic age is named as Bhramari or female bee, and through it, he traces an identification of Durga with Mother Earth. Because, in the Vedas, the Earth is described to yield honey, to discharge honey, as the depository of honey and thus is conceived as bee.

Sita is another female deity in India, who, though not worshipped separately, holds her status of veneration as the consort of Lord Rama. In Hindu mythology Lord Rama and Sita are regarded as the manifestation of Lord Vishnu and Lakshmi. Kinsley (1986), mentions that Sita, the consort of Rama, was originally a goddess of agricultural fertility. The dictionary meaning of the word Sita is 'furrow', the furrow made by the plough. In the Vedic literature, Sita is referred to as a goddess associated with ploughed field. Kinsley (1986) mentions that in the Kausika Sutra, Sita is depicted as the wife of Paranjaya, and the mother of gods, mortals and creatures. In the Paraskara Sutra, Sita is the wife of Indra. But it has already been mentioned that Paranjaya and Indra are the male deities with whom Mother Earth is associated in Atharva Veda (12.1). So, it can be presumed that, Sita is another manifestation of Earth.

Moreover, Kinsley tries to ascertain a link between kings and the fertility of the Earth. As, the mythological king Prithu had converted Earth from her barren and inhospitable condition to fertile and the most tender hearted one, all kings try during their reign to enhance the fertility of the Earth. With this view, king Janaka was performing some ritual upon earth, when he obtained Sita and so Sita is described in the epic Ramayana as the daughter of Earth. As such, she can also be regarded as the symbol of the fecund forces of the earth. Kinsley (1986) interprets Rama's marriage to Sita as an activity of a king to enhance the fertility of the earth. Because, he feels that, out of this union, emerged the Ramarajya or the kingdom of Rama, which is unparalleled in its social, economic, political and religious prosperity. In the Ramayana, Rama's wife is associated with the powers of the earth, or the earth itself, through her name, through her unusual birth. Underlying Sita's epic character and personality, is the ancient fertility goddess, associated with the ploughed field who was worshipped for abundant crops and who was ritually activated by rulers in certain contexts. Sita, the epic heroine has ancient roots, and one important dimension of her character, associates her with the primordial powers of the earth". (Kinsley, 1986 : 70).
From the above account of the female deities of the post Vedic period, who can be regarded as the manifestations of Goddess Earth, it should not be concluded that, during this period, Earth Goddess completely lost her former identity and that she was no longer worshipped by her original name. "The idea of the earth as a personified goddess and the idea that the cosmos as a whole is a living being persist and are central in later Hindu mythology". (Kinsley, 1986 : 178). Medieval mythological texts mention about Prithvi. In the Vaishnavite mythology and iconography she is revered as Bhudevi. Whenever Bhudevi was oppressed by any demon, it was Lord Vishnu, who took incarnation to rescue her. But the Bhudevi of medieval mythology did not retain her former virtues. She was no longer stable, fertile, or inexhaustible. These virtues passed over to other deities of later period like Sakambhari, Lakshmi, Mahadevi, Bhudevi became an injured supplicant, being oppressed by wicked rulers (Kinsley, 1986).

Moreover, the tradition of worshipping Mother Earth (Bhoomi puja) before laying the foundation of any construction is still in vogue throughout the country. On this occasion, elaborate rituals are performed by Brahmin priests to satisfy the goddess Earth, as if to obtain her permission to start the construction. Because she is the bearer of each and everything in the Universe.

POPULAR ASPECT OF EARTH CULT

In the popular level, the Earth cult is prevalent with slight variations, in all the regions of India. In Orissa, this cult has assumed some specific colours. Every village in Orissa has its local deity known as the Grama Devati. The Grama Devatis or village deities are viewed by scholars as an evolutionary form of the Earth Goddess. "It has been suggested that probably many of these represent some form of Mother Earth originally worshipped by the non-Aryan aborigines" (Dasgupta, 1977 :53). This suggestion can be justified on the ground that agriculture is an activity which enabled man to give up nomadic life and to start a permanent and settled life. First, agricultural communities were set up which developed into villages. It has already been mentioned in this chapter that the main deity of the agricultural villages was Mother Earth, who was their guardian and protector. Since the conception of village deities has been continuing from such an early period, it will not be wrong to presume that it is Mother Earth, who has been worshipped all through as village deity.
Another aspect of the Cult of Earth is reflected in Orissa in the performance of agricultural festivals. Agriculture, being one of the major occupations of the people of Orissa, the farmers as well as the government are ever vigilant to implement modern equipments and scientific inventions to enhance the yielding of farm products. Still the traditional festivals, connected with seasonal agricultural activities are performed with a view to obtain the blessings of Mother Earth for better crops. The prominent among such festivals is the "Akshaya Trutiya" which is celebrated on the third day of the bright half of the month of Baisakha (April-May). On this day, paddy seeds are sown in the field. So the blessings of Mother Earth is sought for obtaining abundant (Akshaya) crops. So this festival is known as Akshaya Trutiya. In the villages of Orissa, on this day, farmers go to their fields to worship Goddess Earth. They carry paddy seeds in a new basket (gauni) decorated with turmeric, vermillion, sandal paste etc. and sweet cake in another basket when they start from the house, the women folk make "hulahuli" or ululation sound. They worship the Earth by offering the cakes and then bury the cakes underground on the eastern side of the field. Thereafter, they start sowing the seeds. Since paddy is the principal crop of Orissa, the blessings of Goddess Earth, thus sought, is traditionally believed to be essential for a good harvest.

'Chitalagi Amavasya' is another festival, celebrated by the farmers of Orissa, in order to seek the blessings of Goddess Earth for abundant crops. It falls on the new moon day of the month of Sravana (August-September). On this day a special type of cake, known as Chitaupitha is prepared out of rice powder, gur (molasses), coconut etc. Farmers take the cakes to the paddy fields, offer to Goddess Earth and then bury these underground.

Garbhana Sankranti, first day of the month of Aswina (September-October) is another such festival. On this day, farmers take their bath, early in the morning, take branches of Garbhana tree (cordia myxa) and plant them on the paddy field, on account of a belief to have healthy growth of crops.

'Raja' is a popular festival in Orissa, which is celebrated in the honour of Mother Earth. Earlier, in this chapter, it has been mentioned how Earth has been identified with woman. Fertility is the basis of such identification. "The same preconditions which
fertilise women are also thought to fertilise Mother Earth. This explains why in different parts of the world Mother Earth is believed to menstruate and why there are so many rites and customs in which all fluxes of blood are treated alike as manifestation of life-giving power inherent in the female sex". (Bhattacharya, 1974 :5). Dasgupta (1977) mentions about a vow which is related to the menstruation of the Earth. This religious vow known as Ambuvaci is observed specially by Hindu widows at the end of Summer and beginning of rain. On this occasion, cooked food is strictly prohibited so as not to disturb Mother Earth, who happens to be in her menstruation. After the end of summer and with the advent of first showers, Mother Earth should be prepared to conceive the next crop. So on the eve of it she is presumed to pass through a period of menstruation. The Raja festival of Orissa is also associated with this conception. It is celebrated for four days, in the month of Jyestha (June-July). During this period all the agricultural activities and other activities, associated with the Earth are suspended, so as to enable the Earth to take rest. This is a period of rejoicing, specially for young virgins. They put on new clothes and do not touch the Earth bare foot. They avoid work as far as possible and take their food before sunset. Sweet meats are prepared in every house and are sent to the houses on neighbourhood. Gifts, consisting of sweet cakes, new clothes etc. are also sent to the married daughters. The fourth day is known as the day of Basumati snana, because it is believed that, on this day Goddess Earth takes her sacred bath to mark the end of the period of menstruation. The Earth gets purified after a period of segregation, so she is worshipped and is prayed for abundant crops.

The Cult of Earth has assumed another feature in Orissa in the form of the worship of Gadi Brahmas, which implies the worship of heap of earth (soil). Gadi Brahma denotes a gada or heap of earth in which the existence of Brahma is presumed. In Orissa, three types of Gadi Brahmas are worshipped. One of the types consists of the grave of great saints, another involves Balmikas or termite hills and the third category is just a heap of earth being set up by great sages for the sake of worship.

The origin of the tradition of the worship of graves of great sages can’t accurately be ascertained. But, it is definitely an ancient custom. In Orissa, the earliest such graves being worshipped are those of the Natha yogis, which belong to the 7th century A.D. In village Chhapada of Tirtol, there is the Gadi of Gorakha Natha. The Gadi of Matsyendra
Natha is there in Pundala, a village in Patakura. Another set of the graves of sages, worshipped as Gadis in Orissa, are those of the Panchasakha. Out of these, the Gadis of Achyuta and Jashobanta at Nemala and Adhanga respectively are quite popular in Orissa. These two saints are said to have passed away while on meditation. So the places, where they passed away, became converted into their Gadis. It is believed that, the earth of such Gadis has divine power. Mostly, such earth is used in curing snake bite and many chronic diseases. There are also Gadis of sages belonging to Mahima Dharma. Jogeswara Mahima Prabhu, famous as Dhulia Baba, wandered from place to place in Orissa, preaching his religious discourses. Finally, he arrived at Joranda in Dhenkanal District, where, on the fourteenth day of the bright half of the month of Phalguna (February-March), he passed away while meditating on Padmasana (sitting cross legged). His body was engraved there, which is famous as Mahima Gadi. In course of time the popularity of this Gadi spread far and wide. To-day, it attracts devotees even from outside Orissa. The greatest gathering of devotees takes place in its annual celebration of Mahima Mela on the fourteenth day of the bright half of the month of Magha (January-February).

The Santara Gadi offers an instance of the worship of termite hills (Balmikas) as Gadi. It is situated at about 60 Kms. from Cuttack. The Gadi constitutes some termite hills in the midst of Sahada trees. It is believed that a sage, named Parasurama came and settled there in a monastery. Thereafter, people began to worship the Gadi. The people of the village believe that, people used to cut wood in the forest, once a man was about to cut a tree in front of the Gadi, he felt as if somebody struck a blow on his back. Thereafter, the people realised the existence of the Gadi and began to worship it. People lay there prostrate without taking any food for seeking divine blessing, which is known as adhia and thereby get cured of many chronic diseases.

There is a big termite hill at 'Kaipadar' in Khurda District which is divine equally for both Hindus and Muslims. This is the grave of a Muslim sage named Sayyad Abdulla Shah Bokhari Jalal Uddin. He is believe to have been born in Bulagh Bokar near Tashkent. He had come to Kaipadar for meditation. About the year 1735 A.D. King Ramachandra Deva-II, chanced to meet him, while he was on meditation. He had donated the sage some land and entrusted eight Muslim families to look after him. This sage had
passed away while on meditation. In course of time, his grave was turned into a termite hill. At present the termite hill is about 6' high and 2' wide. In the opinion of the attendants of the Gadi (the termite hill), it was the size of the hill even at the beginning and that there is no change in it. A mosque has been constructed around the hill. Sandal paste is applied on the hill. "Chaddar" a special piece of cloth available there, is wrapped on the hill. At present, there are about thirty-two Muslim families, who perform the worship. There are also some Hindu families of Mali (florist) and Gudia (confectioner) caste, whose ancestors are believed to have been entrusted by King Ramachandra Deva-II to supply flower, sandal paste and special kind of sweet made of gur (molasses) and known as gudasirini. Koran is recited every day and dry food is offered to the Gadi. Every Thursday, a special offering of Khiri (porridge) is made. Once a year on the 24th day of Ramjan, the day on which the Baba had passed away, dressed food called Khechidi (mixed rice preparation) is offered. Thus, it is a dargha (shrine) for the Muslims and gadi (sacred seat) for the Hindus. Hindus keep their vows and on fulfilment offer worship through the qazi. The bibhuti (ash) distributed there is very famous as it cures many chronic diseases. The bibhuti (ash) is a type of red coloured earth, obtained from a well in a nearby village, named "Bengitangi".

The monastery at Benupada in Delanga in Puri district, offers an instance of the worship of the Gadi of third type. This monastery was founded by a man called Baidhara Das of Village Ankula, west of Benupada, in the 17th Cent. A.D. He was a labourer. One day, while carrying water, he felt the shadow of an umbrella over his head. Thereafter, he was ordered in a dream to proceed to Benupada, which was, at that time, almost a jungle. There, he first set up an umbrella and after some days, made a tungi (a small hut, meant for religious gathering). Gradually, people became his followers. His first disciple was Dinakrushna Das of village Humara near Benupada. But the second disciple, named Arta Das was the most famous of all, who belonged to Bamadebpur village in Puri district. He was a farmer and the son of a widow. He had such a divine inclination that, even while working, his mind was set on the thought of the Almighty. He became inspired by the ideas of Baidhara Das, renounced worldly life and preferred the life of a monk in the monastery. He not only believed in the teachings of Baidhara Das, but added his own discourses to it. This group of sages believed in atheism and worshipped heaps of earth or Gadis (religious seat) which were neither graves nor termite hills. These were simply heaps of earth, set up with a purpose to worship earth. They placed
earth over and above other things of the world and justified the need to worship it. In his prayer (Bhajans) Arta Das sings the glories of earth:

"Mati gadiku mane hetu kara,
Mati rahichhi Parama Sarira.
Matiru janma Suna debata,
Aau keun gyana jaanichhu bata.
Mati sarira matire misiba,
Bhane Arata kathamatra thiba".

It can be translated as follows:

"You think about the heap of earth (Gadi) because earth is divine, it gives birth to everything divine, living and non-living, there is no other knowledge besides this. The body is made up of earth and will mingle in it. So says Arta Das, whose words will remain eternal".

In the above mentioned prayer, these saints appear to be atheists, but in some other prayers they appear to be Vaishnavites. For example:

Arta Das sings:

" Basudha bikala dekhi
Baidhara martye abatara hele,
Mayare Sri Vaishnava rupa dhari
Mahima prakasha kale".

Its translation goes as follows:

"Seeing the plight of the Earth, Baidhara was born in the world as the devotee of Lord Vishnu and gave vent to his divine discourses".

The presumption that Baidhara's idea of worship of heaps of earth had Vaishnavite element in it, can be justified on the basis of certain factors. The decorative hats, in the shape of isosceles triangle, with a peacock's feather at the top and the stick which are
preserved in the monastery implies an association with Vaishnavism. Another feature is the umbrella under whose shadow Bai Dasa first realised the divinity in him. Because these were used by Lord Krishna when he presented himself as a cowherd boy. Moreover, a flute, which Lord Krishna was fond of playing and a ghagudi, a type of rope tied around the neck of cows, are also preserved in the monastery.

Besides Baidhara Das, Dinakrushna Das and Arta Das, there were two other sages, whose contribution is this regard is note worthy. They were Madhaba Das and Niladri Das. All these five sages spread the tradition of the worship of heaps of earth (Gadis), by setting up a number of Gadis mainly in coastal areas. The Mahanta and other officials of the monastery believe that Arta Das, alone set up hundreds of such Gadis. The following are a few of the places, where the five sages had set up Gadis, which are worshipped even to-day. In Puri, the one at Ghantigopalapur (near Nimapara) was set up by Baidhar Das. Around this Gadi a temple has been built up. The Gadi at Andhara (near Gop) was set up by Arta Das. The Gadi at Humara was set up by Dinakrushna Das. The one at Badagan was set up by Madhaba Das and the one at Balapur was set up by Niladri Das. The above mentioned Gadis are there in the Puri district. In the Cuttack district, the Gadis at Podana, Sagadaila, Kalaka were set up by Madhab Das, Niladri Das, Arta Das respectively and are worshipped till date.

In the Benupada monastery there are five Gadis each set up after the five sages mentioned above. These Gadis are not the graves of the sages. Their graves are preserved along with those of the Mahantas at a separate place inside the courtyard of the monastery. The five sages were famous as Mahapurusha (greatmen) for their divine knowledge. As, during their life time, they professed for the worship of earthen heaps, after their death, these Gadis were set up in their name. In the first decade of the 20th Century, during the period of Mahanta Bharata Das the present temple was built. Gradually, the popularity of the monastery spread far and wide, as a result, many people donated land for the monastery and financed the construction of the temple. After the temple was constructed, the images of Madana Mohana, Lakshmi and Saraswati were set up. The Arunastambha in front of the main gate and the garudastambha (Pillar- that symbolizes Vaishnavism) in front of the images were erected. With these features the monastery seems to have obtained the status of a Vasishnavite temple. In course of time, the Gadis also underwent a change in their form and mode of worship. The heaps of earth are now covered by cement plaster and are decorated by a wrapping of clothes. Ropes are tied round the body of the Gadis and at the top, the triangular hat with peacock's
feather is placed. To-day, the rituals performed before these Gadis are quite similar to that of a Vaishnavite temple. The daily rituals like alati (offering of light), abakasha (light refreshment) snana (ritual bath), bhoga (offering of food) etc. and the performance of seasonal festivals bear similarity to that of the Jagannath temple, Puri.

THE EARTH CULT AT THE TRIBAL LEVEL

The philosophy of the Vedas regarding the all pervasive and almighty Earth has been reflected in the tribal idea of Earth worship. To them, she not only ensures good crops and beholds all the objects, but she is supposed to bestow all sorts of happiness on mankind. Any sort of suffering is believed to be caused due to the wrath of Mother Earth. So, she should be propitiated at any cost. Even though, there are variations in the names attributed to the goddess, and also in the occasions and modes of worship, still the motive behind it remains the same for all tribes.

The tribal aspect of the 'Earth Cult' has been discussed here, with a reference to its prevalence among two tribes - the 'Bhuinyas' and the 'Kandhas'. The Bhuinyas, who are also known as Bhumia, Bhuihar etc. have derived their name from the word Bhumi, which means 'land'. "One or the other of the variants of the name appears to have been applied, in different parts of India, to widely separated communities, either in the sense of autochthones or children of the soil, or in the sense of reclaimers or owners of the land (Bhumihar) was implying some connection with land (Roy, 1935 ).

In the Vedas Mother Earth has been treated as the consort of Heaven, but the Bhuinyas, like other tribes, regard Her as the consort of the Sun god. Roy (1935) mentions that the Sun-God or Dharam Deota is the supreme deity of the Bhuinyas. Among the deities of the Pauri Bhuinyas, the status of Mother Earth comes next to the Sun-god. Perhaps, they started worshipping Earth, only after they took up cultivation. They have attributed various names to this goddess, like 'Dharti Mata', 'Basuki - Mata', 'Basri Thakurani', 'Basu-Mata' etc. They believe that 'Dharam Deota' and 'Dharti Mata' are not represented by any specific symbol nor do they possess any specific seat. But they are omnipresent. So, at the beginning of every festival, they are invoked as "

"Tare Basumata and Upare Dharam Deota".

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(The Earth at the bottom and the Sun at the top). They believe that, these two deities regulate the entire universe. Dharam Deota and Basukimata are supposed never to cause any harm, because they are always beneficent. In the villages of Pauri Bhuinyas, Mother Earth is also known as "Gai Sri' or 'Gram-Sri'. 'In the villages of the Pauri areas in the Bonai, Pallahara, Keonjhar, states, where the village site is changed from time to time, the Basuri or Gaisri is represented by a wooden post on one side of the darbar, whereas in the villages of Kuria Pargana and the villages where the villagers are all settled agriculturists, the Gai-Sri is represented by a stone, placed along with other stones in a permanent sacred grove called Jahira". (Roy, 1935).

Roy (1935) mentions the various seasonal occasions when Bhuinyas worship Gaisri. In the month of Ashar (June-July), Gai-Sri is offered either a black fowl or a black goat, so that seasonal rain and good crops can be obtained. In the month of Chaitra (March-April), on the Akahni-Pardhi day, the dehuri (village priest) offers a few drops of blood of the games brought by the hunting party, to Boram and Gai-Sri jointly. In the month of Magha and Phalguna (January-February and February-March), when mango blossoms come out, the dehuri makes offering to Gai-Sri and Boram to obtain good fruits and to avert all evil. In the month of Baisakha (April-May), an offering of rice is made to them to safe-guard the sowing operations against all dangers. In Bhadraba or Asvina (August-September or September-October) offerings are made by the cultivator on the field, on the occasion of the cutting of the first sheaves of paddy. Two or three days later, on the occasion of the eating of the new rice, the dehuri, on behalf of the whole village, sacrifices a fowl to Boram and offers to Gai-Sri Jau, prepared out of the new rice in a new earthen pot.

Roy (1935) further mentions that, while selecting a site for a new settlement, the Pauri Bhuinyas seek the blessings of Mother Earth through the performance of a form of divination. For this purpose, the dehuri after taking bath, goes to the intended site and places there, a handful of rice, covers it with a new earthen vessel and plasters the rim of the vessel with clay. Next morning, after taking bath, the dehuri goes to the same place to observe the condition of the rice. If the rice is found intact, without being touched by ants or insects, then the site is considered auspicious and thus selected for settlement. The dehuri places a log of
wood at the centre of the site, which is regarded as the Subha Khunta or the auspicious post. Then the dehuri faces towards east and offers rice and molasses in the names of Gai-Sri, Basukimata, Boram and Dharam Deota and seeks blessings for a successful clearing of the forest and for a peaceful and healthy living. The site for a village settlement depends on the condition of the Gai-Sri post. If the post is blown away by wind or is uprooted otherwise, except through natural process of decay, the village site is immediately changed.

The Kandha way of worshipping Goddess Earth has drawn the attention of many scholars, because of its association with the system of Meriah Sacrifice. The Kandhas, originally a hill tribe, belonging to the Dravidian language family, mostly live in the districts of Ganjam, Koraput, Kalahandi, Boudh and Phulbani of Orissa. Agriculture, being their main occupation, worship of Mother Earth is quite natural for them. But the Meriah sacrifice is performed by them, not only to ensure the fertility of the soil, but also to obtain overall prosperity, health and peace. Like the Bhuinya, the Kandhas regard Goddess Earth as the consort of the Sun God and that these two are superior to all other gods and goddesses. They believe in a myth which supports this conception. Boal (1982) mentions about it as follows:

The Shiva-god, known as the Bura-god is the Supreme Being, who has created the universe, its creatures and even the inferior gods. Earth Goddess, Tari Penu, has been created by Bura god to become his consort. But Tari Penu did not render wifely attention to him. So Bura god created human beings to live on Earth, which made Tari-Penu jealous. When Bura-god created the animals and the vegetables, Tari became still more jealous. The conflict between Bura god and Tari goddess led to he division of Kandhas into two group i.e. Bura's followers and Tari's followers. Each group believed in the supremacy of its god. Bura created a number of inferior gods also. But they were to be worshipped only by the sanction of Bura and Tari, because it was their exclusive right to enjoy priority in worship. Tari's followers acknowledged Bura and his creation, but they regarded him as second to Tari. They believed that Tari taught man the art of agriculture, hunting, war etc. In return of these benefits conferred upon man, Tari needed human blood. So it was offered to satisfy her, through the performance of the Meriah sacrifice.
The Meriah sacrifice involved the murder of human beings in the presence of the entire community. The Kandhas looked upon it, not as a crime but as a ritual, required to satisfy Mother Earth. But to a sensible man, not belonging to the tribe, it appeared quite brutal. So the British authorities, took a lot of hardship to reform the custom by introducing animals as substitute of human beings as Meriah.

Boal (1982) mentions about the Meriah sacrifice that it was performed both in the interest of the community at large and also in the interest of a single family. Every household, in a village community, offered human blood for prosperity in agricultural activities i.e. (i) when the principal crop was sown or planted (ii) at the harvest period and (iii) throughout the growing season. Besides, in the interest of the health of the community, its flocks and herds, human blood was sacrificed. Even, when the head of the clan suffered from any serious disease, it was regarded as the wrath of the goddess, and to satisfy her, human blood was sacrificed. Private performance of Meriah sacrifice took place whenever any unusual calamity befalling on a family was declared by the priest as a consequence of the wrath of the goddess.

Mahapatra (1983) refers Frazer to mention in this regard that, Meriah was a voluntary victim brought by the community, which performed the sacrifice. Even, after being purchased, the victim could live for years and could marry and have children. It was only a few days before the performance of the sacrifice that, he was ceremonially consecrated and worshipped. On the occasion of the sacrifice, the priests, on behalf of the people, pray to the Earth Goddess that they offered her the sacrifice, so as to obtain good harvest, good seasons and good health. On the eve of the sacrifice they inform the victim that they had purchased him but did not have seized him by force. So, no sin may be incurred by the sacrifice.

The British administration in India, took nearly two decades, i.e. from 1836 to 1854 to suppress this system. The British officers tried to reform this systems, without infringing the basic religious conception of the Kandhas. Their faith in their supreme deity, Mother Earth was not challenged. What was challenged, was their belief that to ensure prosperity in agriculture or to cure any chronic disease or to avert any serious danger, offering of human blood to Mother Earth, was the only solution. Boal (1982) mentions from Macpherson's letter dt. January, 1843, that the Kandhas realised that human blood was not really demanded by the goddess nor could it make their fields richer or their axes sharper than
the non-sacrificing Kandhas. Moreover, they were assured by the government that, that they could be protected against diseases or any other danger, even if they would give up the practice of human sacrifice. Inspite of such realisation, they could not be completely retrained from the system of offering blood to the goddess. The fear of the wrath of the goddess, still hunted their mind. So, after much bewilderment and confusion by the year 1845, they accepted buffaloes as a substitute for human beings as Meriah.

Boal (1982) mentions about the change, which was caused in the beliefs of the Goomsur Kandhas. By 1846, they declared that Bura God was their supreme god but not the Tari goddess, whom they previously worshipped. But, in areas, where this sort of change had not taken place, and the Earth goddess was still believed to be the supreme deity, there was much reluctance to believe that, she could be satisfied with the blood of buffaloes. So, they tried to satisfy the frustration of the Earth goddess, which they feared to incur thereby, in two ways, one was the addition to the Meriah ritual of a new song which laid the blame for lack of human flesh on the Europeans, the other was the introduction of an axe-cut to cause a little human blood to flow from the priest or a worshipper, just before the buffalo breathed its last.

Elwin (1964) mentions that, in the villages of Kutia Kandhas the relics of Meriah sacrifice are still dealt with honour. His description of the Kutia villages runs as follows : " The villages were very picturesque. They were usually laid out in two long rows of houses, each joined to its neighbours. In the middle, standing up impressively against the sky, was a forked pillar of sacrifice with buffaloes horns, placed on its points. The stone of Mother Earth stood in front of three other stones, which served it as a protecting wall. Often, there was an elaborately carved pillar of sacrifice, decorated with such relics as a buffalo's skull the tail of barking deer, Sambhaar bone, or a buffalo's hood. Even in 1944, the desire for human sacrifice was fundamental to Kond psychology ....... In almost every village, hidden away in a priest's house were the old implements of sacrifice. The knife, the chains, the bowls to catch the blood, and the priests told me, how at certain seasons, when the moon was full they could hear these hard tools, weeping for the human blood, which was not denied them. There were still, carefully treasured, a few human skulls, perhaps a hundred years old or bits of human bone, which were brought out at special ceremonies or used as amulets. A great hunter, who had a bit of finger bone, told me that he attributed all his luck in the chase to his possession of it". (Elwin, 1964). He further mentions that when the Kuttia Kandhs began to sacrifice buffaloes in place of human beings, an old human skull or mask was brought out and laid before the symbol of goddess Earth.
Boal (1982), mentions about the state of the Kondh ritual by the year 1979 that the Kedu-buffalo ritual continued to be celebrated by that time, though there were some variations in its practical implementation. At one place the reason behind the celebration of the sacrifice was the diagnosis of the priest of one member's sickness as the touch of Earth Goddess, which indicated the need for blood. Boal's (1982) description of the Kedu-ritual in a village about 15 Kms. from G.Udaigiri reveals the value attached to the sanctity of the Meriah sacrifice performed in the 20th century.

"The climatic slaying of the buffalo and burial of the flesh was due there in 1975. All was going according to custom, when some rising flesh-takers who had come over from the Tikkabali area, suddenly challenged the Kond priest in charge. He had not, they suggested, found the right place for burying the flesh. (This is necessarily where the Meriah human sacrifice had previously been performed). The priest, accordingly searched very carefully over the heat cracked earth in the ban (Meriah grove) for the particular tell-tale crack, which he believed would indicate the place of Earth Goddesses's need. They dug at the place he chose and found proof-positive in the form of a human skull that must have lain there since before 1840s, when human victims were replaced by buffalo" (Boal, 1982).

Boal (1982) also mentions that, the village - darni shrines are still kept in regular use for rituals mainly connected with agricultural activities. But the number of participants in the rituals has declined in course of time. The following invocation to the Darni - God bears evidence to the continued faith in the Earth Goddess -

"Darni stones ! Gumi stones ! Stones at the bottom ! Stones at the top !
Take a handful ! Take a fistful Take blood ! Take rice-water. Let nothing happen to the children ! Let there be no fever! Let there be no disaster!
O Earth deity, Land deity ! Bura God, God of Increase !
(Boal, 1982).

Earth is thus, deified by man all through the ages. The veneration showed to earth is so deep rooted that it appears to be quite justified even in the present age of science and technology. In this regard Maxmuller (1964 : 177) mentions that - "Nothing again may seem to us more real than the Earth, on which we stand. But when we speak of the earth as something complete in itself, like a stone or an apple, our senses fail us, or at least the senses of the early framers of language failed them".