CHAPTER II

CULT OF THE MOTHER GODDESS AND CANDI

2.1 GENESIS AND CONCEPT OF THE MOTHER GODDESS:

The Mother Goddess is highly characterized by long and continuous history of origin and development of her own. It is effectively evident by the material and non-material facts belonging to the diverse nature and extent. The large mass of archaeological data and objects, found at the different parts of the world, support the idea that all through the Palaeolithic cultural stages people usually lived in small groups leading a life very close to that of wild beasts in an atmosphere pregnant with terror. That particular terror-oriented situation had its effect on the formation of the spiritual ideas and thinking of the primitive human beings (Mehta: 1956: 17; Jaggi: 1973: 27; Moore: 1923: 9; Zambotti: 1962: 58).

In the Upper Palaeolithic period men usually lived on hunting, so the herdsman had to choose nomadic life, and naturally in the long stage the people had to face the scorching heat of the sun, the devastating storm and wind, the awe-inspiring thunders and rain. The vastness of the emerald sky might have absolutely impressed the minds of the primitive man, which, in turn, gave birth to the idea of Gods of the same type, that is, the vast Sky, the Rain, the Lightnings,
the Sun, the awful activities of the Nature have been accepted in the form of Supreme Being. The different aspects of Nature especially those, who have been transformed into different gods, are heroic in form, power and manners. Before the sudden invention and regular adoption of agriculture, a precarious existence was eked out mainly on the chase and hunting, plus the search of edible fruits, roots and berries, etc., which formed the staple food of the people at that period. But the staple food and animals were not always abundantly available. So, to secure the chase, to acquire edible fruits, roots and berries, etc., the primitive people had to face 'hard days' off and on. In this precarious state of living, the primitive people had to believe in some kind of process which we may call 'Magic' or more precisely 'Sympathetic Magic'\(^\text{10}\) . Hence, there was an atmosphere of forming a favourable condition, in the minds of the primitive people, to acquire a sacred character and meaningful significance about the animal and vegetation species, which became the main source of staple diet at that time.

Grain-gathering and cultivation of grain, as it is suggested by the modern scholars, was usually done by the women in the Neolithic period, and till the implementation of the ox-drawn hoe or plough, agriculture was mainly, if not solely, the woman's business. Naturally, the status of women in the primitive society was raised considerably high over the hunting and chase, and lastly, it assisted the tendency to change reckoning or settling of descent through the
Mother (Matrilineal pattern) to that through the Father (Patrilineal) which hunting had first induced (Bernal : 1969 : 93). The sexual division of labour, characteristic of a hunting economy is such as to impart to that economy an inherent tendency to paternal descent (Thompson : 1949 : 43). Further, it has also been observed by some scholars that the system of mother-right was neither prevalent amongst those people whose livelihood depends mostly on hunting, nor the element was found amongst the people who usually lived by herding the large animals. On the other hand, this system was much popular amongst the primitive agrarian society and remained unchanged till the invention of cattle-drawn plough. Thus, it may be derived that the people who discovered agriculture, supremacy of females was prevalent amongst them, at the initial stage of agricultural economy (Bhattacharya : 1971 : 71). In the country like India, it was observed and found that mother-right elements were stronger in the remotest days, both in extent and in degree than the other parts of the globe, but it was probably violently suppressed in the subsequent days by the protectors of Aryan and Brahminical traditions, respectively. Perseverance for Sanskritization of every act related with worship, dogmas, etc., in a concealed embraced way by the learned specialists and priestly class people - the Brahmins, who have had almost a monopoly as officials, teachers and scholars of Hindu religion or Hinduism. As a result, the tradition and culture, the dogmas, the social function of religion, the nature and form of the deity of the "little community" have been overshadowed by the constant
communication of the Brahminic or the priestly class people.

With the introduction of agriculture, man had achieved a new state of equilibrium through the soil and climate, corn and crop, rather than as before with the animals, edible roots and plants. The main function of the Neolithic community was closely related to crops. Accordingly, the women's side of the totemic rituals for increase and reproduction of plants and crops was emphasized and further developed. The most noticeable factors in this stage were, adoption of 'fertility' rites in which human matings were used to encourage the crops on the one hand, and "imitative magic" to produce rain became another main object of ritual. Many scholars observed that the belief in act of coitus assists to produce an abundant harvest in the earlier phases of cultural development. Ultimately, these factors tended to make fertility rites and magical control of weather more orderly and transformation into the governing power and religion (Bernal : 1969 : 98). It was also noticed further that with the transition from hunting and food-gathering stage to the cultivation of crops and cereals, the ritual control of fertility and food-production was concentrated to the crops, meadows and fields including breeding and rearing of domestic animals. Nevertheless, under the influence of these new ceremonies, social structures and religious organizations began to emerge which adopted to the requirements of an agricultural or pastoral mode of life (James : 1957 : 181). In fact, in every corner of the world, in every ancient society of the globe, the Cult
of Mother Goddess is mainly concerned with the vegetation and fertility, and India is not an exception to this perspective.

As human civilization developed around the shores of Mediterranean Sea, in and around the Fertile Crescent, as well as in the Indus Valley, and also in some other parts of Western-Europe, viz. : Greece, Rome, Crete, etc., a paramount female goddess, the Great Mother, took a prominent shape and position in almost every pantheon. She became gradually familiar in different names, as for example, Ishtar in Babylon, Isis in Egypt, Cybele in Phrygia, in the Semetic conception, Aphrodite in Babylon of Syria, Paphos in Cyprus and so on. The Mesopotamian Mother Goddess was known to the Sumerians as Inanna, and in later Babylonian religion, Inanna was simply transformed into the Great Goddess Ishtar. Among the Great-Mother-worshiping people it was believed that agricultural civilization had a female origin. In the ancient seats of human civilization like Egypt, Babylon, there was a trend of belief that life in the universe had a female origin. The worship of Mother Earth which later developed into that of an all-pervading Mother Goddess was thus a notable and significant feature of the civilization of the agrarian people. Though at different times the pastoral patriarchal invaders brought with them their own religious beliefs and conquered the dominions of the Mother-worshipping people, yet they could not altogether eliminate the Cult of the Mother Goddess.

The Aryans of the Vedic period were the worshippers of the male gods but they could not annihilate the Earth Goddess of the
Pre-Vedic period, and as a result the Earth Goddess, that is, Prithivi was conceived in the Vedic pantheon, though her previous glorious position was lost to her male counter-part Dyaus, the Sky-Father. In Egypt, though the Cult of Isis was superseded by the glorious male-god Osiris, yet Isis could not be wiped out. The matriarchal system is also found among the people of Indonesia and Micronesia and also among many other African tribes who have remained chiefly agricultural. Figurines from Knossos include all principal types of the Mother Goddess found in South East Europe and Aegean basin. In the Tigro-Euphrates Valley of the earliest settlers were the worshippers of the Earth Mother and their livelihood rests on agriculture. In Asia Minor the Hittites brought with them a social system based on the Father-right but their patriarchal pantheon could not be able to suppress or eradicate the Mother-right system prevalent in the society of former settlers. Similarly in Assyria and Babylonia, the Cult of Ishtar could not be fully absorbed by the male-god Cult (Bhattacharya : 1971 : 12-14).

In the Indian sub-continent before the advent and final settlement of the Aryans, the worship of the Mother Goddess was prevalent among the earliest settlers and aboriginals, viz: Sabaras, Barbaras, Pulindas, Mishadas, Chandalas, etc. In recent period the Mother Goddesses in various forms are worshipped regularly at the different parts of the country. She has been identified with the Supreme Being conceived as the vital source as well as
the controller of all forces and potentialities of nature.

In the society of first farmers, women became the fecund procreator and her mysterious prerogatives favoured her endowment with magical powers which presided over the fertility of the earth. Matrilineal stage seems to have occurred in all primitive human societies and in turn, in most of the ancient civilizations women have been treated as the 'Ancestor Mothers' of the mankind. Woman as the mother of the children, woman as the cultivator, woman as the guardians of the primitive community, woman as the fecund and generative force, became the head of the matriarchal clan and in course of time primitive people began to treat women as the symbols of fertility and generation. After realising the importance of maternity, primitive people honoured women in every respect, and lastly, accepted her as the 'Ancestral Mother'. Thus in the eyes of the primitive society, women were the main sources, the inspirers, the fullfillers of all the productive and reproductive acts and functions. Such steatopygous figurines spread over a vast area including Spain, North Africa, Syria, Anatolia, etc., and in later times they were found also in Crete and in India (Dikshit : AIA : 116).

In spite of his 'control over Nature' in the field of agriculture, man was mystified at the whole process of the growth and decay of corns. The Cult of the Mother Goddess, that is, Mother Earth, originated and slowly but gradually became predominant at the primary level just on the basis of the knowledge of agriculture.
The same sacred magic, which enabled the paleolithic men to 'obtain' or 'secure' his food or at least provided him with an incentive to do so, was also responsible here for the introduction of a vast number of rituals, fasts, feasts, festivals, etc., which were intensively connected with the agriculture as well as the Cult of the Mother Goddess (Dikshit : AIA : 162-4). Moreover, all the traits of habits and norms of human behaviour were mainly formed by the females and also transmitted through them from age to age. The woman was treated as not only the symbol of generative power but the actual producer of life. Her sexual organs, breasts and buttocks, and other attributes were thought to be endowed with procreative force and hence she had been treated as the life-giving symbol. In the earliest evolution of society, it was this maternity that held the agricultural field and the life-producing power of the mother became the central theme of the different ritualistic procedures as well as custom and belief traditions. This may be referred to the plentiful discovery of palaeolithic female figurines in bone, mammoth ivory, stone with representative organs prominently shown.

Archaeologists and art-critics stated that these earliest fruits of aesthetic sense were solely and essentially connected with his intricate problem of securing chase and obtaining staple food as well as the prosperity of the society. Almost same type of archaeological evidences found at the different ancient sites
situated within the area of the Indian sub-continent.

It is interesting to note that most of the human figurines made by Gravettians of central and Western Europe were female and were highly symbolic. The emphasis was solely sexual. The female figurines were shown undressed, though occasionally with a suggestion of an ornamental border of girdle; pregnancy was often indicated; emphasis was laid on breasts, buttocks and thighs; the arms were relatively unimportant; the legs were tapered and feet were barely suggested, if shown at all. These figurines, as suggested by the experts, were used in the various types of rituals and magic for securing food by way of hunting in the Palaeolithic period.

Farming economics appeared in the vast area stretching from Turkestan to the Valley of Indus in the 4th millennium B.C. from which the urban economy formed though with some limitation. The emergence of comparatively highly civilized societies in the Near East was by no means a matter of inevitable sociological development, and that in certain region the simpler forms of peasant and limited urban economy persisted for centuries close by those areas where exceptional and unpredictable combinations of circumstances and persons brought about one of the manifestations of human achievement which we may call a "Civilization". A beginning may be made in Mesopotamia turning their direction eastwards to Iran and Turkmenia, and thence to India. Asia Minor was closely connected
with the same region; Egypt with its highly individual and localized traditions, can then be considered as an outpost of the African continent (Clark and Piggot: 1976:174-5).

The following elements of the material culture became prominent throughout the peasant communities of Western Asia:

Firstly, the pottery with dark brown, buff or reddish black coloured background and painted designs on its surface;

Secondly, the use of instrument for throwing stones (sling) in hunting and warfare in lieu of bow and arrow became prominent in Asiatic and Aegean regions; and,

Thirdly, the figurines of human females in large number and wild animals to a lesser extent, found or used.

The female figures were normally modelled in clay and also in stone, have an almost universal distribution in the different centres of Western Asiatic peasant society or culture. It is assumed that these female figurines were generally used or placed in the household shrines than in any formal temple, and erudite scholars guess that these figurines were perhaps associated with fertility or the Cult of the Mother Earth. The Cult figurines occur in profusion in a large number of agricultural communities
in Europe and Asia (Clark and Piggot: 1976: 177-78).

The earliest people, as it is presumed on the basis of the knowledge of archaeological findings and ancient texts, that were the worshippers of Nature and Mother Goddess. The fact lies behind the worship of the Mother Goddess, a prominent feature of the religion of the agricultural people is the predominant influence of the Mother-right which seems to have developed particularly among the agricultural tribes, who were mainly dependent on the economic role of women as the first agriculturists (Childe: 1954: 84 ff; Ehrenfels: 1941: 7-8).

Some other scholars opined that the agricultural pattern of life without any intervening pastoral phase enhanced the position of women not only as the owners and heiresses of the arable land but also through their traditional association with agricultural magic and religion, which assumed in archaic societies a momentous development in correlation with that of agricultural pursuits, the women retaining for a long period the character of priestness (Briffault: 1952: Vol.II: 251).

Thus it is seen from the above discussions that the total perspective of the origin and development of the Mother Goddess is highly influenced by the very nature and extent of the changing social system through the ages. The dominant position of the women in the society in consequence of their direct influence on the
economic spheres during the transitional phase from hunting-gathering to horticulture-agriculture based economy did a great deal in the establishment of the Mother Goddess and ultimately gave her a supreme position.

2.2 **EARTH AS THE REPLICA OF THE MOTHER GODDESS:**

The Mother Goddess has been taken as the replica of the earth on which the human beings have taken their birth and have been continuing their life-activities. Let us try to understand the trend of this particular belief style by analysing the various spheres of human activities.

(a) **In the Concept of the Primitive Human Mind:**

The religious history of the primitive man can broadly be divided into two categories, namely, -

(i) The Worship of the Nature, and
(ii) The Worship of the Ancestors.

The former category includes the propitiation of the Sun, the Rain, the Wind and the Earth. The worship of the trees also comes under this perview. To the primitives the world in general was treated as an animated being. Hence, the primitive man could equate the Earth easily with the women. Though the time cannot be precised, but it
may be assumed that the conception of Earth as the Mother or the Great Mother came into being when the primitive people began to settle down as agricultural communities and their subsistence economy began to develop on the solid ground of the agricultural activities conducted by the women. The very idea of identification of the earth with the women influenced the line of thinking of human being in all stages of cultural development. This particular tendency of equalization between the earth and the women implies that the functions of earth with those of women are alike. From 'Her' all things are born out, "for all of earth and all turn to earth again". The early and basic conception about the Earth as well as women has occupied the most vital and remarkable position in the theology of many ancient people, both on account of her benevolent and malevolent characteristics. In this way, the Earth has been treated as the Mother of all things and all living creatures from the very earliest part of human civilization all over the world.

(b) The Worship of Earth around the Globe:

(i) India — The belief in the Earth Goddess was all along very much prevalent in the ancient Indian culture. The Aryans used to nourish the idea of the Earth-Goddess, though the Earth-Goddess played very small role in the Vedic religion. In the Indian Mythology the Earth has been regarded as the wife or the counter-
part of Sky-Father named as Dyaus. The Mother-Earth, that is, Prithivi and the Father-Sky are treated as the divine pair – the mother and father of all the living creatures.

There are a few short hymns in the Rig Veda in which She is hardly regarded as an Earth-Goddess in pure and simple form. Indeed, the Father-Sky or Father-Heaven and Mother-Earth are associated so clearly in the minds of the worshippers that the impact of both of them, linked together in the dual compound 'Dya-Prathivi'. But in the Atharva Veda, which was composed after a considerable period than Rig Veda, we find a long and beautiful hymn addressed to the Earth-Goddess:

"The Earth is the Mother and I am the son of the Earth:
Parjanya is the Father, may He nourish us!"

Further, in the same hymn we find:

"O Mother Earth kindly set me down
upon a well-founded place!
With (Father) Heaven co-operating
O thou wise one do thou place me into happiness and prosperity".

We read further in the same hymn that –

"May this Earth give us breath and life
May She cause me to reach old age" (A.V., XII/1.63-Tr.Muir).
It is stated that "the Sky-Father in India came to be identified with the male-god Rudra himself as the composition of Rig Vedic hymns (VI.49.10); the composition expresses as follows:

"I am Dyaus, thou art Prithivi:
Come, therefore, let us marry".

In the religious conception of the Indian folk, Rudra-Dyaus was represented as 'Lingam' and Earth (Prithivi) as 'Yoni', and both of them unitedly formed a divine pair to whom all the world owes to its origin.

The worship of the Mother Goddess, especially the Earth-Goddess was prevalent in the pre-Vedic period of India, and the reference can be cited from a seal unearthed at the proto-historic site of 'Harappa'. On the observe side of the seal referred above, portrayed a figure of a nude female, head downwards and legs stretched out upwards, with a plant issuing out of her womb. This may be regarded as the proto-type of the Puranic deity Earth Mother 'Sakambhari', which means "the herb-nourishing goddess", from whose body grows the life-sustaining vegetables. On the reverse side of the said seal, we find a female figure with dishevelled hair and arms raised in alarm and a male figure standing in front of her in a threatening attitude with a shield-like object in one hand and a sickle on the other hand. Marshall indicates that this seal is intended to portray a human sacrifice connected with the Earth-Goddess with the vegetative forces of Nature is not confined only
to the afore-mentioned seal (Marshall : 1931 : Pl.XII,12).

In the great epics of India, namely, the Mahabharata, the Ramayana, the Earth Goddess has been identified with the wife of Lord Vishnu and She has been depicted as Bhū Devī. In the stone-sculptures of the Gupta period the Bhū Devī was placed by the side of Lord Vishnu along with other deities.

The Markandeya Purana, which has been considered as one of the oldest among the Puranas, was compiled and edited in the present form in the Gupta era or sometimes later. In the Markandeya Purana, the reference of the deity named Šākambhari can be found out.

The worship of the deity, 'Šākambhari' is performed during the autumn season (i.e. Asvin-Kartick according to Bengali Calendar, i.e., September-October), simultaneously with the worship of Devī Durga in deltaic Bengal and also in some other parts of India. The deity Šākambhari has now been identified as Durga alias Caṇḍi the great Mother Goddess.

Belief in the sanctity of Earth is universal throughout the Indian sub-continent. The Earth is believed to possess mystic powers and it has been treated as the remedy from some sorts of disease. There is also popular belief that man derives strength and vitality from the touch of the Mother-Earth. Here, the interested persons can find out the connection of 'lie down before the image of a deity' (that is, Dharna or Hatya deoa in Bengali term),
generally done before the village gods or folk deities, praying recovery from illness, or such other case. The Cult of the Earth has been associated with agriculture and worship of Earth is being held during the agricultural seasons and it bears some kind of intimate connection with the harvest festivals usually held at the different parts of India. In the Eastern Punjab, the Earth-Mother is called Shaod Mata whom the farmers invoke to increase their agricultural production and to make their bankers and rulers connected. In Rajasthan "Gaurî" is being worshipped as the Earth-Goddess and at Udaipur a festival is held annually in honour of "Gaurî". In some parts of Maharastra, the earth is being used from time immemorial to make altars for the rite known as "Grahasanti" and in some other places, seven kinds of "Lucky Earth" are collected and kept in a holy place - offerings are made to Mother-Earth, which is being called as Mahamai, that is, Great Mother, whose shrine is nothing but an earthen platform with seven knobs of coloured clay at the topmost part of the clay heaps (Bhattacharya: 1971: 26-28).

The Earth-worship is connected with the Rain-magic. There are various 'Vrata' rituals, namely, 'Kshetra Vrata', Basudhara Vrata, etc., performed by the women-folk of Bengal for invoking rain. It is a very interesting ceremony, prevalent among the Rajbanshi community of Cooch Behar in West Bengal, connected with the invoking of rain and the other performance is popularly known
as "Hudma". During the time of severe drought a few women go to an agricultural field in the darkness of night, preferably on the New-Moon day. They became naked, perform obscene nude dance and sing in chorus. The main theme of the songs is that they are inviting Varuna - the Lord of rain to copulate with the Earth, alias the Prakriti and the result of copulation will give birth to children in the shape of heavy rain.

In the world of tribal divinity in India, the Mother-Earth has been associated with the fertility and agricultural rituals. Among the different tribes of Central India the worship of Earth-Mother prevails widely. Among the Oraons, the worship of Earth is a customary matter. When an Oraon cultivator wishes to begin transplanting his rice-seedlings to the field, he must employ a village priest to make an offering to the 'Dharti Mai', that is, Earth-Goddess. Every year the Oraons celebrate the marriage ceremony of the Earth-Goddess with the Sun-God in order to ensure the fertility of the soil. The rite is known as 'Sarhul' celebrated in the month of May every year (Cf.Hahn : JASB, 1903 : Vol.LXXII).

The Oraon girls, during the time of sowing the plants, pat the Earth to render Her fertile. The Earth-Goddess, alias, Basuki-Mata and the Jungle spirit, alias, Boram together constitute the main village deities or the Gram-Deoti of the Hill Kharias of Orissa. The Hill Kharias of Mayurbhanj offer sacrifices to the Mother-Earth
under the name of Basuki or Basuki-Mata. But the Hill Kharias of Dhalbhum and Manbhum do not apply the name Basuki. The name Basuki or Basuki-Mata has been evidently borrowed from the neighbouring tribes and Hindu castes in Mayurbhanj and Keonjhar (Ray : 1937 : 310-13). The Hill Bhuinyas of Orissa apply the term 'Thakurani' to denote the Earth-Goddess (Ibid).

Human sacrifices were systematically offered by Khands, alias, Khonds, a tribal group in Bihar in the pre-independent era, to satisfy the Earth-Goddess and to ensure good crops. The human sacrifices were made before the Earth-Goddess, Tari Pennu or Bera Pennu, and were believed to ensure good crops and immunity from all diseases and accidents.

Frazer opined that the Meriah, that is, the victimized person (the person may be of either sex - male or female) seemed to have been regarded as Divine. As such he or she may originally have represented the Earth-Goddess, which, in course of time, changed into a victim offered to a deity, rather than, as himself or herself an incarnate God (Frazer : 1960 : 571-75). The slaying of a person in honour of the Earth-Mother or the Mother-Goddess was also important in the Ancient India. Mention has been made of 'Purusha Medha' or human sacrifice in the White Yajur Veda, Kalika Purana and in some other texts of the Tantric Cult. The human sacrifices or the Mother-Goddess to procure blood for the fertilization of the fields and for the attainment of Her gratification, was a prevalent custom.
in the tribal world of the North-Eastern India (Gohain: 1977: 9-24 + 93).

(ii) Greece and Rome:

As in ancient India, also in Greece and Rome in good old days, the worship of Earth as a goddess was prevalent, but various Cults and forms have absorbed the real nature of the Earth-Goddess. In the Greek pantheon she was a goddess of corn rather than the Earth, though we regard Demeter, as an Earth-Goddess. In Rome Her proper name was Tellus, which is also a common Latin name signifying "Earth"; but in later period She was more usually invoked under the name Terra or Terra Mater, that is "Mother-Earth", Terra being practically synonymous with Tellus in the sense of Earth (Frazer: 1926: 327). The two are neatly composed and distinguished by Ovid, who says that the corn-goddess makes the seeds to grow, while the Earth-Goddess gives them a place in which the corn will germinate and grow.

(iii) Other Parts of the Globe:

The earliest inhabitants of the Tigro-Euphrates Valley were the worshippers of the Mother-Earth. Goddess Nerthus represented as the Mother-Earth among the Teutons and the Earth-Goddess named as Danu was the member of the earliest Gaelic pantheon. In the pantheon of Mexicons goddess "Centeolte" absorbed many other goddesses and
She was taken into consideration as the Earth-Mother. Another Earth-Goddess of Mexico, named Contalicue was the presiding deity of death and war.

The goddess 'Mamma Pacha' has been treated as the Earth-Goddess by the Peruvian people. In the mythology of Finland the Mother-Earth, named as 'Akka' was a popular deity. In Crete, the original form of the Mother-Goddess was the Earth-Mother.

The worship of Earth-Mother was also very much popular among the various African tribes and in different parts of Africa. She became an object of extensive Cult.

In the Asian countries, namely China and Japan the Cult and worship of the Mother-Earth was also popular. In the Japanese Pantheon 'Kojiki' and 'Nihongi' have been described as the Sky-Father and 'Earth-Mother', respectively.

2.3 CONCEPTUALIZATION OF THE MOTHER GODDESSES THROUGH TREES AND PLANTS:

(a) Tree Consciousness of Mankind

From long time past man could establish an intimate, manifold, deep correlation and reverential relationship with the trees and plants grown wildly in his surroundings. The history of mankind is highly conspicuous by this attitude-system centering round trees. Tree worship became an indispensable part in the life and
living of man through the ages. Various ancient civilizations that flourished in the different corners of the world were highly influenced by the existence of tree-worship. The trees were considered by the ancient people highly pulsed with life-force and they had dedicated themselves to the cause of the human beings and other animals.

Frazer made a fascinating study on the attitude of the primitive men towards the trees and plants around them. According to him, the primitive people were in the habit of regarding the trees and plants as animated with life-force. They thought that the trees had souls like their own and usually they treated them accordingly. An ancient vegetarian Porphyry stated that primitive men led an unhappy life, for their superstition did not stop at animals but extended even to plants (1960 : 148-49).

There was a wide range of animistic conception connected with tree and forest worship during the early period of human history. The tree may be the spirit of perch, or shelter or favourite haunt; or may serve as a scaffold or altar, where offerings could be set out for some spiritual being; or its shelter may be a place of worship set apart by nature, of some tribes the only temple, of many tribes, perhaps the earliest; or lastly, it may be merely a sacred object patronised by, or associated with, or symbolising some divinity (Tylor : 1913 : ).
Tree consciousness in India is as old as his first imprint of civilization impressed the mind of the people in the remotest antiquity and certainly there can be no doubt that the alliance between the plant-world and the divine essence is extremely intimate. The tree-Cult in India, like many other ancient civilized countries, has duly been accepted by the masses; and it is still a part of the living-culture. The tree-worship has been able to hold a grandiose position both in the lives of the caste Hindus and aborigines, Shastras, that is, sacred books and the popular folk religion, lores and legends, mythologies and tales, rites and cults, literary texts and oral traditions prevalent in the hamlets and towns of this age-old country from the hoary past.

The concept of tree-cult can broadly be placed into three or four classes, - firstly, the Tree-God, whose worship gave birth to a new cult; secondly, the Tree has been accepted as an incarnate of God; thirdly, the Tree as the abode of demons and evil spirits; and lastly, the Tree as the beneficient and indispensable part of the life of the Nation, or kinsmen.

The worship of Tree is one of the earliest form of divine ritual and it existed long long before the erection of shrines and temples, status and images of gods and goddesses. Sometimes it is observed that guardian deity of a hamlet is represented by a tree, for example, the 'Porama' of Nabadwip in West Bengal. Further, it is stated that in the 17th Century there existed near Surat, a
sacred Banyan tree, supposed to be 3000 years old, which the Hindus would never cut or touch with steel for fear of offending the God concealed in its foliage. They made pilgrimages to it and honoured it with religious ceremonies (Philpot : 1897 : 35.6).

The worship of trees and plants, as the abodes of gods or goddesses, or the demons and evil spirits, or the incarnates of Supreme Being or village deity, is one of the stages through which the mankind passed. It is identified as one of the first imprints of religion and the object of worship by the man. One of the greatest monks of modern India, Swami Vivekananda, stated that: Tree-worship and Serpent-worship always go together. There is the tree of knowledge. There must always be the tree, and the tree is somehow connected with the serpent. These are the oldest forms of worship. Even there you find that some particular tree or some particular stone is worshipped, not all the (trees or ) stones of the world.... These are all low states of worship and yet worship. We all have to pass through them.... In our hearts we cannot get rid of them (1963 : 61-3).

Indian folk honour and worship not the physical substances of the trees and plants, but the symbolic representations of the Supreme Being or the Deity. By the immense influence of Brahminical rites and rituals, the animistic and tribal nature of this lowest form of worship has greatly been changed.
(b) Trees and Plants as the Presiding Deities or their Abodes -

The trees in Indian philosophy are ever divine perhaps since the forgotten epochs of the Bronze Age and their cults are often symbolic and super-eminent. In some of the steatite seals unearthed at the proto-historic sites of Indus Valley, viz., Mohenjodaro and Harappa, tree-gods and tree-spirits either in the context of a forest or ritual, are depicted elaborately. In explaining the scene on Mohenjodaro Seal No.430, Marshall opined that the nude deity appearing between the two branches is very small and roughly portrayed, but the absence of any evidence of male sex coupled with the fact that the tree deities in India are usually females, and that ministerant figures on this also appear to be women, all point to its being a goddess rather than a god. In explaining the other remarkable features of the said Seal No.430, Marshall further stated that the seven figures in a line at the bottom I take to be female officiants or the ministerants of the goddess. The plumes on their heads might be feathers, but it is more probable that they are small branches (1931 : 63). Apart from the steatite seals, the painted pottery of chalcolithic India often visualise apparently sacred trees, plants creepers, leaves, especially those of the holy Asvattha - the "Ficus religiosa" (Dasgupta : 1965 : 81), and Acacia more frequently than some other trees of doubtful identity. They were regarded as celestial plants and supposed to be inhabited by divine spirits (Sastri : 1957 : 25).
The Asvattha tree (Ficus religiosa) is made the basis of a profound metaphysical doctrine in Vedic period. Asvattha tree is said to be abode of all gods. (Cf. Atharva Veda, XIX, 39.6). There is so much meaning in the conception of Supreme Being (Brahman) as the Tree and Brahman as the Forest - "Brahma tad vanam, Brahma sa vriksha āsa" (Taittiriya Brahmana, II, 8,9,6). We have already referred in the foregoing part about the sealing found at Harappa which bears a representation of a female from whose womb a plant issues and suggests the idea of a female deity concerned with vegetation (Marshall : 1931 : Pl.XII/12).

Many of the hymns of the Rig Veda were simple and naive; and many of these hymns were composed in the praise of nature-gods and goddesses, as because it is believed that the culture of the Rig Vedic period flourished in the midst of the penance-grove (i.e. Tapovan) and on the banks of the river. In Vedic India, the 'Soma' plant (Sarcostemma acidum) was very much familiar to its milky, acidulous, narcotic juice. The plant and its juice were considered to be the seat of the divine power and were worshipped as the incarnation of 'Soma' - the presiding deity of Moon and also the Lord of Vegetation. Some of the hymns of Rig Veda (e.g. X.97 and IV.57.3) is devoted to singing of the praises of the creative properties of plants (medicinal - Oushadhi); and thus, in the Atharva Veda, we find "As many in number and in kind the plants here are upon the earth, may they, furnished with a thousand leaves, release me from death and misery" (A.V., VIII.7.13./Tr.Bloomfield).
Kalpataru - the tree of eternity was a mythological tree, which grew in the garden of Lord Indra. It was treated as the symbol of plenty, prosperity, health, wealth, joy and happiness.

In the most revered religious texts, namely, the Bhagawad Gita, the Markandeya Purana, along with the other sacred texts like Brahma Vaivarta Purana, Brihad-Dharma Purana, Kulacudamani, Jatakas, Ramayana, Mahabharata, Divyavadana and Jaina Sutras etc. the traces of tree-worship could be found, and certainly these texts have influenced the contemporary and other scripture-writers as well as the composers of the Bengali Mangal Kavyas of mediaeval period.

There are many sacred trees and plants, some of whose names and characters are described below. The sacred trees and plants are usually treated either as the above of the gods and goddesses, or the incarnation of gods and goddesses, or the Tree-spirit, throughout the Indian sub-continent by the caste Hindus as well as aborigines.

Lord Krishna has identified himself as the Bo-tree, that is, Pipal (Ficus religiosa) in the Bhagawad Gita(12) as "Ashwattha Sarbavrikshanam" - "Know Ye that of all the Trees I am the Ashwattha Tree". Bo-tree is also treated as the above of the Hindu Trinity - Brahma, Vishnu, Mahesha. It is believed that Lakshmi, the Hindu goddess of wealth and prosperity takes her shelter on it on a particular day, which is Sunday. In rural Bengal it is believed that the
Gram-Devata takes abode beneath this tree. In Bihar and Uttar Pradesh this tree is being annually worshipped by the women-folk on the 15th day of the month of Jaistha (May-June) in memory of Sati Savitri.

Neem (Azadirachta indica) tree is designated as the dwelling place of Śiṭṭalā, the goddess of small-pox. In the Nav-Ratra (bright half of the month of Chaitra i.e. March-April, the women folk offer flowers, vermillion and objects of worship.

The Tulsī (Ocimum sanctum) is being regarded as the Mother of the Indian folk. It is a common custom for every household to plant a Tulsī sapling on a special raised altar which is regularly propitiated with deep devotion. Tulsī is regarded as the consort of Lord Vishnu hence the sapling is also called as "Hariptiya". According to 'Brahmavaivarta Purana', Tulsī was a Gopika, that is, one of the beloved consorts of Lord Sri Krishna.

The Bilva (Bel-Aegle marmalos) is identified with fortune-goddess Lakṣmī. Hence, it is also known as Śrībrikṣa and the fruit is called Śrīphala. According to Purana, Lakṣmī came to the world as the sacred cow and from the cow-dung the bilva-tree had taken its origin.

Snuhi, alias Siṣa Manasā (Euphoria lingularea) is identified with the snake-goddess Manasā. In the mediaeval Bengal, many eminent and popular poets and composers composed the sacred verses
generally known as "Manasā-mangala Kavya" in honour of the deity depicting the worship and her positive potentiality.

It was a prevalent folk-belief, that Vata (Ficus indica) is the symbol of Goddess Laksṁī, the presiding deity of plenty of wealth and prosperity. Vata or Banyan tree (Ficus bengalensis - Ficus indica) has been referred to by Kavikankan Mukundaram, the famous Bengali poet of the 16th Century A.D., as the abode of the goddess 'Sasthī', the presiding deity of children. Mukundaram wrote "Vata Taru Kahila Sasthīra Dham". Further, Govardhana Acharya, the famous poet of the 12th Century, A.D., composed a poem describing the 'Vata Taru' (Ficus bengalensis - Ficus indica) as the abode of Goddess Lakshmi, the presiding deity of wealth and prosperity, which is as follows:

"Tvayyi Kugrama Vatadruma Vaisravano Vasatu Ba Lakshmi,
Pamara Kuthrapatat Kasarairasaiva te raksha".

It is said that the Amlaki tree (Emblica officinalis) and its fruits are worshipped in the month of Kartick (Agarwal : 1970 : 120). Here it may be mentioned that the worship of Naba-patrika (i.e. Nine plants) is an essential part of the Saradiyā Durgā Puja, that is, at the time of worship of the Goddess Durgā held in Asvin (September-October). The custom of the worship of Naba-patrika has been explained in a variety of ways by the distinguished scholars. The Naba-patrika consists of nine plants are creepers, namely,
(i) Rambha (Plantain - *Musa sapientum*), (ii) Kaccvi (Kachu-Arum), (iii) Haridra (Halud - Turmeric), (iv) Jayanti, (v) Bilva (Bel - *Aegle marmelos*), (vi) Dadima (Pomegranate), (vii) Asoka (Saroca indica), (viii) Manaka (Arum indicum) or Barley (Hordeum hexastichon) and (ix) Dhanya (Paddy - *Oryza sativa*).

It is described in the sacred scriptures that -

"Rambhā Kaccvī ca Jayantī Bilvadarimaiv/
Asoko Mānakascaiva Dhānyanca Nabapatrikā".

These nine plants are tied up with an Aparajita creeper (*Clitoria ternatea*), bathed in a tank or river, and then worshipped individually. This is one of the most popular expression of Mother worship of the present day, which has its root in the sacred books and folk belief. It is believed that the nine plants of Nabapatrikā represent different parts of the body, like head, hair, breast, ear, nose, female organ and so on.

The worshippers, at first, cut a life-size plantain plant and they dress it with white coloured with red bordered Sari as a newly-wedded bashful woman. The leaves of the plant are twisted like a bow (as if the newly wedded bashful woman bow down her head) with the help of the fibre of the same plant. They represent the head and hair of the plantain plant lady. The pair of Bel fruit represent the breast of the said lady, and so also the other plants indicate some other parts of the body of the lady.
It is mentioned in the scriptures that the Goddess Durga established 'Peace in the world in the shape of Rambhā (Kadali - Musa sapientum). The presiding deity of the plant is 'Brahmani'.

The Mother-Goddess Durgā took the image of Kaccvi (Kachu - Arum) at the time of fighting against the demon Mahisasura. The presiding goddess of the plant is 'Kālikā'.

The third plant is Haridra (Halud - Turmeric). Durgā took the shape of Haridra when She was 'Umā'.

The presiding deity of the third plant is 'Durgā'.

The fourth plant 'Jayanti' was worshipped at the time of fighting against Sumbha and Nisumbha. The goddess of this plant is 'Kārttikī'. The Bilva (Aegle marmalos) represents the goddess 'Śibani' - the tree is loved very much by Lord Shiva, - fifth in the chronological order.

The sixth plant is 'Dādimba' (Pomegranate). Dādimba helped Durgā at the time of fighting against the demon Raktabija; the presiding deity of the tree is 'Raktadantika', - that is, She with blood-red teeth.

The Asoka tree (Saroca indica) is considered as 'Sokarahita' or 'Sokanasaka', that is, She is without sorrow caused by bereavement.

It is the plant, seventh in numerical order. Durgā is residing in the leaves of Mānaka. Mānaka is considered as the deity Gāmundā. Māna is the eighth plant. Lord Brahma created the paddy plant for supplying the staple food for the folk. The paddy has been identified with Goddess Lakshmī. The paddy plant is ninth in number. Hence, these nine plants are closely associated with Durgā, which is usually known as Naba Durgā or Nabapatrikā-bāsinī Durgā.

Further, the Durgā, a form of Cāndī, the fierceful goddess, is
believed to be the mother of the world with the life sustaining vegetables grown on the earth. After praying severally to the presiding deities of the nine plants, the votary concludes - "Om, O pātrikā (leaves), O nine forms of Durgā, You are the Darling of Mahādeva; Please accept all these offerings and protect me, O queen of heaven. Om, adoration to Durgā dwelling in the nine plants". The worship of Nabapātrikā, according to the opinion of some scholars, is nothing but a reminiscence of the agrarian phase of the worship of Mother Goddess, under the name of Durgā, who ultimately protects the folk from all sorts of sufferings, in the earthly world (Chanda : 1916 : 131-2).

Further, it may be mentioned that the Sāktas of Bengal believe that the Mother Goddess dwells in some kind of sacred trees and they treat these trees as the 'Kula trees', that is, the following trees are incorporated with the followers of Sākta religion as their tutelary deity. The 'Kula' trees are -

(i) Asoka (Saroca Indica),
(ii) Bilva (Bel - Aegle marmalos),
(iii) Cuta (Am - Mangifera indica),
(iv) Asvatha (Ficus religiosa),
(v) Champaka (Champa - Michelia champaka),
(vi) Kadamba (Kadam - Anthocephalus cadamba),
(vii) Nimba (Nim - Azadirachta indica - Melia azdirachta),
(viii) Vata (Bat - Ficus indica - Ficus bengalesia),
(ix) Dhatri (Amlaki - Phyllanthus emblica - Emblica Officinalis),
(x) Udumbara (Dumer - Ficus glomerata - Ficus racemosa),
(xi) Kesara (Bakul - Mimusops elengi),
(xii) Nameru (Rudraksha - Elaeocarpus ganitrus),
(xiii) Piyala (Buchania latifolia),
(xiv) Karnikara (Premna spinosa),
(xv) Sindhuvara (Misindha - Vitex negundo),
(xvi) Maruvaka (Jhintika),
(xvii) Karanja (Pongamia glabra),
(xviii) Slesmataka (Vaheda - Nauclea sp ),
(xix) Cinca (Tetul - Tamarindus indica), etc.

It may be mentioned here that in the famous Śākta scripture, namely, 'Śāktanandatataranjini' stated two separate lists of Kula trees, which include -

Asoka, Kesara, Bel, Karnikara, Cuta, Nameru, Piyala, Sindhuvara, Kadamba, Marukava and Champaka are being placed in the first list.

The second list consists of the 'Kula trees', namely,

Slesmataka, Karanja, Neem, Asvattha, Dhatri, Cinca, etc.

The Kula Yoganis, who were probably minor vegetation spirits, dwell in all these Kula trees; hence, no follower of Śākta religion and
scripture falls asleep under these trees, nor injures them, whatever the case may arise (Chanda: 1916: 135-6).

In the tribal world the parallel beliefs regarding the trees and their veneration are met with. The tribal people of India possess some conspicuous concepts as regards the existence and functions of the trees with which they are all along tied together economically, psychologically and emotionally.

The Chhotanagpur tribes like the Ho, the Birhor, the Kharia, the Munda, the Oraon, and the Santals maintain a sacred grove, usually beneath the Sal trees (Shorea robusta), generally situated at the outskirts of the villages or at one corner of these.

The most popular and highly honoured deity of the Oraons is the 'Chala Pachho', alias, the 'Lady of the Grove'. The sacred grove of the Oraons is generally known as the 'Sarna' or the 'Jaher Than'. (Ray: 1915: 108). Near the entrance to the most of the Oraon villages there is a 'Devi-asthan' or the 'Devi-manda'. The altar of this deity is placed usually by the side of a Palash tree (Butea frondosa), offering of goat's milk and sweets are being offered to Devi-mai in the month of Sravana (July-August) (Ray: 1928: 52-3).

The Birhors worship female deities. A small rounded piece of wood, whose length is not more than twelve inches, painted with red ochre at the topmost part is called as 'Banhi' - the goddess of jungles (Dalton: 1960: 218).
The Mundas also maintain a 'Sarna' grove in the vicinity of the village. These are the remnants of the primeval forest life left as it is or uninjured for the local gods. The 'Sarna' grove is supposed to be the above of the tutelary deity of the village, named Desauli; every village has his own Desauli, who rules over only on a village and never extends his authority outside the particular village. The deity is held responsible for the good harvest, hence, especially honoured at all the agricultural festivals (Dalton : 1872 : 188). Roy refers to some other deities of the Mundas, amongst whom, the Jaher Buri and Chandi Bonga are mentionable. These gods usually helped the Mundas at the time of agriculture and hunting excursions, and these deities are worshipped by the Pahan (i.e. village priest) at stated or prefixed time and date, in the sacred groves (Ray : 1968 : 266-7). The Mundaris in Assam generally believed that if a tree in the sacred grove is felled, the sylvan deities evince their displeasure by withholding rain, which ultimately may be harmful to the harvest and agricultural fields (Frazer : 1960 : 155).

The Kharias also worship the tutelary deity of the village and maintain the sacred grove 'Sarna'. The Kharia tribes of Chhotanagpur Plateau are divided into three distinct sections, namely, the Hill Kharia, the Dudh Kharia and the Dhelki Kharia. The Hill Kharias of Dhalbhum and Manbhum usually believe that their main deity Baram resides in the sacred grove, known as 'Thakurani-Sal or Baram-Sal'. The deity Baram is considered to be the spirit of their
native forest. Before the hunting expedition they must worship and bow down before this deity and then enter into the jungle to hunt.

The Dudh and Dhelki Kharias also maintain sacred groves in their places of habitation, and these are known to them as Jankor, Jhankar or Sarna. The Sarna is believed to be the settlement of the different deities; the Sarna consists of Sal (Shorea robusta) or Mahua (Murum - Bassia latifolia), alias, Madhua indica trees (Roy : 1937 : 310-58).

The Santals and Hos of Singhbhum generally use the words Jaher and Jahira, respectively, to mention their sacred grove which is the abode of their tutelary deities.

One of the most popular festivals of the tribal people of Chhotanagpur Plateau and Central India is the 'Karam' festival, and in fact, this festival is named after the Karam tree (Nauclea parvifolia). It is stated in the Visnu Purana that Lord Krishna has got some close association with the Karam tree (Sahay : 1965:70).

Among some tribal communities there is a custom that on the eve of transplanting the paddy seedlings, a part of young men and women go to the nearby forest and collect a young Karam tree or a branch of it. Then the said party returns to the village dancing and singing collectively associated with the beating of Dhamsa (i.e. a kind of very large-sized drum). The Karam branch is then planted
in the dancing ground, generally situated in the centre of the village. In the next morning the youths linked arm-in-arm, dance in a great circle keeping the Karam tree in the centre, the triumph and joyous mood. The Karam tree is bedecked with the strips of coloured cloth and plaited straw. As a penetration for the festival the daughters of the headman of the village cultivate blades of barley in a peculiar way. The seed is sown in moist, sandy soil, mixed with turmeric and the blades sprout and unfold a pale-yellow or primrose colour. On the day of the festival the girls take up these blades and carry them in baskets to the dancing ground, where prostrating themselves reverentially they place some of the plants before the Karam tree. Finally, the Karam tree is taken away and immersed into a stream or tank. The explanation lies behind the ritual is that the trees are supposed to exercise a quickening influence upon the growth of the crops. The act of immersion of Karam tree is to be interpreted as a rain-charm. This festival bears some resemblance with the Greek rites of Adonis. The main striking fact is that in the Karam festival the tree-spirit appears in his original form as a tree; whereas in the Adonis worship he appears in human form - his vegetable nature is indicated by the gardens of Adonis, which are secondary manifestations of his original power as a tree-spirit (Frazer : 1960 : 145).

The pattern of close association between the trees and men is not only restricted to the Indian social scene, but also it is extended to a considerable extent to the other parts of the world.
The tree worship was prevalent in Egypt - the first cradle land of human civilization, and as well as in all the great European families of Aryan stock.

Thus it is seen that the people of India, ancient or modern, advanced or backward, have been in intimate relation with the vegetative world. This intimation is not only governed by the economic standpoint but also it is extended to the other spheres like religious and psychological. The latter aspect very naturally gave rise to a concept of Mother Goddess in relation to some species of trees and plants. In this way there develops a well-knit pattern of tree adoration conditioned by the integrated belief-system in the Mother Goddess.

(c) The Corn-Mother and the Deity of Vegetation -

The corn and vegetation in many parts of the globe especially in the ancient countries of the world have been treated as the gods or goddesses. Almost all the deities of vegetations were usually believed to have died a violent death but to have been brought to life again - and their sufferings, death, resurrection were enacted in the sacred rites.

The deep-rooted influence of the female deity as the 'Corn-Mother' can be traced back in the history of the conception of Aphrodite (alias, Ashtarte) in Syria, Cybele in the conception of
Phrygia, Diana in the conception of Romans, Demeter and Persephone in the conception of Greeks, Isis in the conception of Egyptians, Śakambhari, Lakshmi, Annapurnā in the conception of the Indians as well as the Bengalees and so on. It may also be noticed in this connection that in the times of yore the agricultural magic was the monopoly of women. We find that in ancient Greece men were excluded from the agricultural rites. So also, the Attic festivals of agriculture and fertility were celebrated only by the females. The rites of Dionysus were confined exclusively among the females. In Greece, the priestess of Demeter occupied a special throne of honour at the Olympic games. In Egypt the queen was the high priestess of Ra - the tutelary deity of the Egyptians and there was scarcely a female from the lowest to the highest who was not connected with the service of temples during the period of New Empire.

Aphrodite - whose cult and rites flourished in Syria and Greece, was originally a goddess of corn and vegetation. Likewise, Artemis in her original form and character was probably worshipped as 'Corn-Mother' in Western Iran and its adjoining territories, where she was popularly known as Anakitis. Perhaps, Isis was originally the Mother-Earth and Corn-Mother of Egypt and whose cult in the later period spread over a considerable parts of Europe. The cult of Cybele mainly flourished in the city of Pessinus on the river Sangarius in the State of Phrygia. Further, we find, Demeter and Persephone are alike picturised as the goddesses of the corn and
vegetation in the ancient monuments of art in Greece and Rome. They were dressed up by the crowns of the corn on their heads and by the stalks of corn which they hold in their hands (Cf. Frazer: 1960: 521-22).

The word 'Demeter' probably originated from the Cretan word 'Deai', which means barley and that accordingly Demeter means neither more or less than 'Barley-Mother', alias, the Corn-Mother. But in Greek religion, we find that two species of corn are associated with Demeter, namely, Barley and Wheat.

The Corn-Mother of European peasants has her match in the Rice-Mother of the East Indies, namely, Java, Malay, Sumatra, Indonesia and Borneo, etc. The peasants of Borneo, like the Javanese, think that the rice is under the special guardianship of a female spirit known as Saning Sari, who is conceived as so closely knit up with the plant that the rice often goes by her name.

Turning towards the wider perspective of India we naturally find different types of names of vegetation deities and corn-goddesses, some of whom are of Vedic and Puranic origin and the rest have originated in the minds of the common folk. The Puranic corn-goddess like Śākambhārī, Lakshmi, Annapurnā are certainly the off-shoots of the Great Mother, Durga, - a form of Gaṇḍī. The worship of Nabapatrikā or the Nine-plants and leaves at the time of the annual worship of Durga during the month of Asvin (September-October) has already been described elsewhere in details, and it
has been pointed out previously that the Nabapatrikā, alias, Naba-Durga is nothing but the vegetation deities or the Corn-Mother.

The most common and popular deity of wealth and prosperity, agriculture, vegetation and corn is the 'Lakshmi'. The rituals connected with the Lakshmi, the goddess of fortune and vegetation, observed by the common people and peasant folk of Bengal in Eastern India is most remarkable, and simultaneously, it bears some special features which vary from region to region, and caste to caste.

Lakshmi is believed to be the tutelary deity of agriculture and vegetation, crop and corn. Her worship is performed in general almost in all the hamlets of Bengal delta, in the following manner:

Small quantity of paddy collected from the well-matured plants during the month of Poush (November-December) and is kept in a sacred basket with reverence and special care. Within the said basket, over the heap of the newly-collected paddy, a wooden pot generally known as 'Gacha-Kauta' or tree-case is placed. The said tree-case (Gacha-Kauta) is usually bedecked with 'cowrie-shell' and sindur (vermillion). The shape of the 'Gacha-Kauta' bears some resemblance with that of an womb. The womb-shaped gacha-kauta, and the cowrie-shell indicate the fertility cult and the reproductive power. The paddy within the sacred tree-case or gacha-kauta ornamented with the cowrie-shells and vermillion represent the deity 'Lakshmi'. This goddess is being worshipped by each and every
family belonging to the different caste-groups of the Hindus as their household deity. Special offerings and pujas are performed normally four times in a year, that is, in the month of Bhadra (August-September), Asvin (September-October), Poush (December-January), and in the month of Chaitra (March-April) being the last month of Bengali Calendar year. The first period of performing these worships started from the month of Poush (December-January) and it is held usually on the day of Poush-Sankranti, that is, the last day of the month of Poush. Apart from the special pujas held four times in a year, the weekly worship is also performed on every Thursday. It is interesting to note that the special pujas are performed in most of the cases either on the eve of the reaping of the harvest or at the time when the crops become fully matured, ripen and collected from the field for storing in the granaries. In this connection, we have also observed that in the month of Bhadra (August-September) the worship is being performed on the eve of the Aush or Asu brand rice and ritual commonly known as 'Bhadra-Lakshmi'; secondly, in the month of Asvin (October-November) - the ritual takes place on the eve of ripening of the Aman paddy plants in the fields; thirdly, in the month of Poush (December-January) when the Aman paddy plants become matured, ripen and collected from the fields but before keeping the paddy in the store-houses or the granaries; and lastly, in the month of Chaitra (March-April), when the winter crops are ripen and collected from the fields. The special pujas held in the month of Bhadra, is usually known as
'Bhadra-Lakshmi', and likewise, the pujas held in the months of Poush and Chaitra are generally known as 'Poush-Lakshmi' and 'Chaitra-Lakshmi', respectively. The ceremony of Nabanna or the New Rice is performed on the last day of Poush, wherefrom the cycle of the special pujas starts. In Asvin, the Lakshmi puja is held on the full-moon day just after the annual worship of Durga, that is, Saradiya Durga Puja is popularly known as 'Kojagari' Lakshmi, and the worship of 'Kojagari Lakshmi' is held gorgeously in the eastern part of Bengal, now known as Bangladesh. The word 'Kojagari' is derived from the term 'Ko Jargati', that is, 'who is waking at mid-night without sleep for my arrival?' It is generally believed that the goddess of fortune, vegetation, crop and corn comes to everybody's home at mid-night and She would naturally testify the eagerness of the worshippers to earn the blessings from Her end. So, the worshipper should keep herself alert for the grand ovation of the deity.

The worship of Kojagari Lakshmi is most popular amongst the people of eastern part of Bengal, now in Bangladesh, and the inhabitants of West Bengal, specially those who have come from East Bengal. But on the other hand, the Poush-Lakshmi is one of the most common and popular deity in West Bengal, and almost all the agriculturists, as well as the common folk, arrange to perform the ritual of 'Poush-Lakshmi' on the last day of the month of Poush, that is, 'Poush-Sankranti'. It is a remarkable feature that the altar of the deity of Poush-Lakshmi is decorated with the ritual drawings, and these
drawings are made with the rice-paste, locally known as Pituli. The motifs usually used in the drawings are mainly the implements used in the agricultural fields, namely, the plough, the cow, the ladder, the granary, the winnowing fan (Kula) including the ornaments used by the Bengali women folk, like comb, necklace, ear-ring, bangles, etc. Objects like mirror, cowrie-shell, lotus (Padma), trees, birds are also drawn on the altar.

It is noticed further that the worship of Lakshmi, specially the Poush-Lakshmi is not only prevalent among the caste-Hindus but it is also very common amongst the backward rural communities in the region of study. The Bagdis, a dominant caste-group having aboriginal stock worship Lakshmi in a regular manner. However, the particular deity is propitiated according to their own particular indigenous way. It is extensively seen amongst the Bagdis residing throughout the districts in the region of study. A picture of the deity 'Lakshmī' is hung on the outside of the wall of the granary, known as 'Gola' in which the paddy is preserved. She is worshipped by the women-folk of the family on every morning and evening. The wife places an ablazed earthen lamp in front of the goddess and pays tribute and obeisance by blowing a conch-shell. Puja are also offered in an elaborate way once in a week. Special pujas are also held twice in a year, - once in the month of Vaishakh (April-May) and another in the month of Asvin (October-November).

In this connection, it may be noticed that the Puranic deity, Shākambharī, a form of Cāndī, was also known to the common folk of
the Indian sub-continent.

The deity Sākambhārī, whose identity has been cited in the sacred scripture "Sri Sri Caṇḍī" -

"Tatahahamkhitam Lokamātamedaḥa Samudbhābāi/
Bharishyami Sura Shākairābriste Prandharakai.

(Canto 11, Verse 48)

Shākambhāriti Bhikhyatim Tadā Yasyamhami Bhubī/
Tatraiba Ca Bhadhishyami Durgāmākham Mahāsuraṇaṁ".

(Canto 11, Verse 49).

- Next 0 Ye Gods,
I shall support the whole world
with the life sustaining Vegetables
Which shall grow out of my own body
during a period of heavy rain.
I shall gain fame on the Earth
then as Sākambhārī.

It indicates that Sākambhārī is the deity of vegetation and crop. The traces of this kind of deity may easily be found throughout the world. And in India the traces of the deity like Sākambhārī could be found in the Pre-Aryan settlements. It is interesting to note that there is a deity known as Sākambhārī Devī in the village Majigram (District-Burdwan,P.S.Mangalkote, J.L.No.91) whose annual worship is held in Sravana(July-August) in the same manner of Durgā, a form of the deity Caṇḍī.