

AMBUBACHI: CELEBRATING WOMANHOOD

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(English Version)

As the world's oldest living religion, Hinduism has some ancient features that have not been modified or edited to suit more refined modern tastes, that generally avoid raising many stark issues of life. In fact, until some young ladies began discussing their biological cycles before males in colleges, universities and in public for a very recently, much to the horror of their mothers and grandmothers, the subject of monthly cycles had deliberately been kept out of any conversation, except in whispers. India could thus be commended observing for several centuries, certain festivals that other religions ignored and one of them symbolises the menstruation of mother goddess: *Ambubachi*. This worship of the earth, of course, was to ensure bountiful crops and vegetation and the concepts of Shri Devi, Maha Lakshmi, and Durga as *Shakambhari* are all very old and just a few among the countless forms of such worship. Ancient Hinduism was clear that it was inevitable to go through this dynamic cycle of barrenness and fecundity, and that it calls for public celebration not condemnation.

All historic civilisations had believed that the cycle of procreativity among human females and nature are linked in some strange way and men have admired or envied the regenerative powers of both. In Mesopotamia, the great goddess *Ninhursag* was believed to have infused the 'clay of humans' with her 'blood of life'. In fact, the name of Adam is from the feminine 'adamah', meaning 'bloody clay' though scholars translate it more delicately 'red earth'. The Bible's story of Adam was obviously lifted from older female-oriented creation myths. Ancient

Greece substituted procreative blood as the supernatural red wine that was given to the gods by Mother Hera. Even the Norse God, Thor, was reborn after bathing in a river filled with this blood. Egyptian religion also believed that the period-blood of Isis was the real strength behind the Pharaohs, that made them immortal. In the Roman empire, Plutarch declared that man was made of earth and that the moon provided the menstrual blood that was required for life. In many ancient societies, both in the east and west, this blood carried the spirit of sovereign authority, because it was the medium of transmission of the life of clan or tribe. Chinese sages called this red the essence of Mother Earth and said that this was the *yin* principle that gave life to all things. It is amazing that even a few thousand miles away, the native Indians of South America clearly declared that all mankind originated from ‘moon blood’.

With the arrival of organised Semitic religions like Judaism, Christianity and Islam, new patriarchies reversed this abiding regard for the female, though some of them did make provisions for a space for women. Most Orthodox Churches advised women not to receive ‘communion’ during this period though some Churches were a bit more liberal. The Holiness Code section of Leviticus was somewhat similar to the Jewish ritual of *Niddah* that declared women to be impure for sacred devotions and public events. Muslims advised them not to enter the mosque without any important purpose in this period, in the same way that they insist on couples purifying themselves with a bath after their act. Far away in Japan, another structured religion, Shintoism, believed that their worshipped spirits did not grant wishes if one had traces of blood, dirt, or death. The Hindu tradition of venerating the mother and her periods, however, ended with similar restrictions on the female, which are now rightly being challenged so vociferously.

Let us return to eastern India, specifically to the originally-Tantric Kamakhya temple near Guwahati, where the menstruation of the earth in late June becomes an open national celebration, with fairs and festivities. It marks the entry of the Sun into the first *Padma* or *Adra* constellation that invariably takes place on the 6th-7th day of *Ashara* month of the Indian Calendar. It is at one of the major *Shakti Peethas* where the female genitalia of Sati is said to have fallen and is represented as a natural cave with a spring. In very early times, a great civilisation and a powerful kingdom arose from nearby Pragjyotishpura, which was later famous, between the fourth to ninth centuries AD, as Kamrupa: named after the god of love and desire. Its very old association with mother worship and the Siva legend was not ignored by Vaishnavism, which developed its own stories of Narakasura, Bhumi Devi and the rather-late Narayana Upanishad. So powerful and matriarchal is this cult that even small bits of red cloth symbolising the Devi's cycle of regeneration are prized by millions of devotees. Let us not forget, however, that the word for the plough, the *langula* or *langol*, arose from the term *lingam* or the phallus, that entered the earth to procreate. There is no reason to be shy about life, felt our sages and the *langol* is not used at all during this period.

It is not only in Assam but even in Odisha that these celebrations still take place. In Odisha, the *Rajo* or *Mithuna Sankranti* is a four-day festival held in mid-June, that also observes the periods of the earth-mother and welcomes the rains that herald the agricultural year. Women get a break from household work and have time to play and sing *Rajo* songs, as they do not have to cook. They are actually served food by their menfolk complete with a pan. *Pitha* sweets and the *pona* drinks are also the flavours of the season.

Bengal has strong matri-centric and Tantric tradition that venerates this state of preparation of the earth to bear more bounty. *Ambubachi* is celebrated in many

villages of the State but on a lower scale. At the sites of worship of the mother goddess, from the important *Shakta Peethas* to the tiny shrine or grove, fairs are often held, but in this respect, this State falls behind its two ancient neighbours. It moved its focus away from women who were married and fecund to only widows who were to observe the ritual of having uncooked food. It is strange, therefore, that this land of Durga and Kali had sanitized itself from the reality of menstruation, that Assam and Odisha actually celebrate on such a grand scale.

Many feel that the tragedy of Hinduism arose from the later dominance of the overarching patriarchy of the north over the strong matri-centric beliefs and worships that ruled the east, many parts of the south and the Himalayan region. This upset the previous delicate balance and may have been necessitated as a medieval response to Islam, or as a pure defence mechanism. By and large, it has now resulted in daily internal contradictions like worshipping images of goddesses in homes and temples, but misbehaving with live women elsewhere. While blind veneration of whatever is old is certainly not logical, let us acknowledge that in some respects our ancients were far more modern in accepting and publically acknowledging painful realities of life, that other religions have usually considered taboo.