

# Temple of Sri Mahalsa in Verna-Part 2

KONKANAPURANA



Tensing Rodrigues is engaged in research on Konkani language and people

TENSING RODRIGUES

Last week we discussed the destruction of Sri Mahalsa Temple in Verna, Salcete in the year 1567. We continue with the note on that temple, based on two more historical sources- Mitragotri [Mitragotri, 1992: 'A Socio-Cultural History Of Goa From The Bhojas To The Vijayanagara'] and the letter of Fr. Gomes Vaz in 'Documenta Indica' [Wicki (ed), 1962: Documenta Indica VII, (1566-1569), Fr. Gomes Vaz S. I., Goa 12 Decembris 1567].

Mahalsa is known by different names in the various regions of the country but the prefix Ma is common in all regions. She became Malti in Maharashtra; in Goa she became Mahalsa; and in Karnataka she is Malachi or Malavva. The root 'mal' is derived from Malai which means a hill or a mountain. Therefore, Mahalsa is the goddess of mountains, that is Parvati. [Mitragotri, 1992: 'A Socio-Cultural History Of Goa From The Bhojas To The Vijayanagara', 187]

The word Mahalasa is not found in Sanskrit religious literature, and might have come into usage as a result of borrowing from Kannada, after the arrival of Brahmins in the Deccan. A goddess called Hyalasa was popular in this region and she is referred to as Mahalai in Jnaneshwari. The references from Kannada literature clearly reveal that Mahalasa was a local folk deity in the beginning and associated with cemetery.

It is evident from the above discussion that from 900 to 1200 CE, Shakti-cult spread throughout the country. There were four Shakti-pithas at the beginning and gradually they became numerous.

In the temple at Mardol, one of the parivar devata (subsidiary deity) is Chousasta-yogini. Though this shrine was transferred from Verna to the new

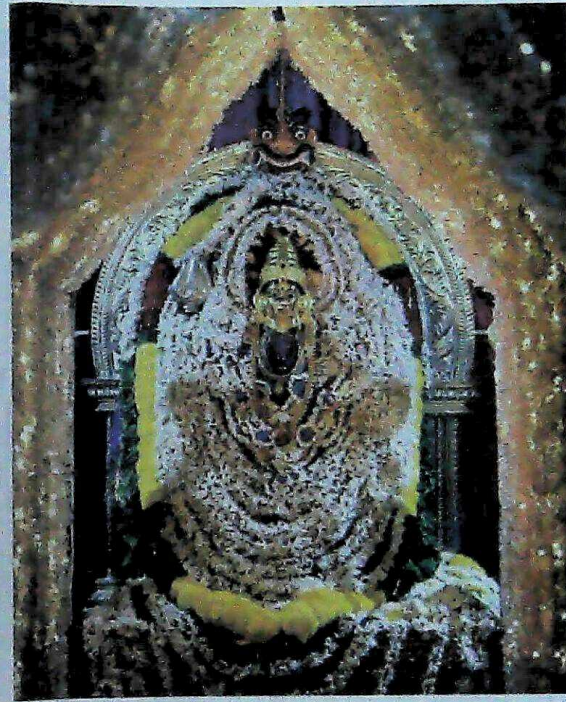
site after the destruction of the temple by the Portuguese, the Chousasta-Yogini might not have been added during this period. The devotees who had full knowledge of parivar devata may have installed later all the shrines of parivar devatas which existed in ancient Mahalsa temple of Verna. [Mitragotri, 1992, 189]

From the architectural pieces of the ancient temple lying at Verna it is evident that the worship of the goddess Mahalsa goes back to Kadamba period, that is circa 1100 A.D. But strangely, in no Kadamba inscriptions discovered in Goa references to Mahalsa have been found.

That leaves us with 'Sahyadrikhand' as a good source for a thorough study of Mahalsa in Goa. Varunapur Mahatmya in SKH deals with Mahalsa. The first 17 verses mention about the construction of the abode of Parshuramin Varunapur. In the 18th verse there is a reference to a powerful demon who disturbed the peace in Varunapur and caused hardships to the residents. The people of Varunapur surrendered to Parshuram and he informed them that Mahalsa shall annihilate the demon. This is one of the many common stories of Parshuram as a protector.

As regards Narayani suffixed to Mahalsa it may be stated that it is one of the epithet of devi mentioned in Devibhagvat which forms a section of Markandeya Purana of circa 1,000 A.D. Though in 'shakticult' Siva enjoys the position next to Shakti, this goddess is referred to as Mahalsa-Narayani.

There has mentioned a legend from Nevasa about Mahalsa; she was a daughter of a lingayat merchant and was annoyed with Khandoba as he married the daughter of a dhargar by name Banai. When the worship of Mahalsa began during the Kadamba period she was worshipped as plainly



as Mahalsa. The concept of Mahalsa Narayani probably came from Maharashtra during 1,300-1,400 CE.

Let us now move to the letter of Fr. Gomes Vaz in 'Documenta Indica' [Wicki (ed), 1962: 'Documenta Indica VII', (1566-1569), Fr. Gomes Vaz S. I., Goa 12 Decembris 1567]. Like the book 'Oriente Conquistado A Jesu Christopelos Padres da Companhia de Jesu Da Provincia De Goa' (East Conquered for Jesus Christ by the Priests of the Society of Jesus of the Province of Goa) by Fr. Francisco de Sousa, this is a 'from-the-horse's-

mouth-account' by those who were responsible for the destruction of the Mahalsa Temple in Mardol Ward of Verna; moreover, having been written in the same year, it can be expected to be fairly authentic.

Describing the temple, Fr. Vaz writes "It was located in the middle of a courtyard with a floor made of flat cobblestones to make a paved yard; which was bigger than the whole of our vegetable garden. From that emerged a paved road leading to a below ground tank, the biggest that I have ever seen. Along the road there are high stools

with seats and steps; behind these there are many trees arranged in a line which form a bridge with those on the other side of the road. At the end there are some big trees for shade whose tops almost touch the ground. At the entrance to the temple there is a water tank with a vaulted ceiling over it; similar to the one in the church of Our Lady of Divar, with a portal of black stone."

This reference to 'the church of Our Lady of Divar with a portal of black stone,' is interesting. This church somehow managed to retain some of the sculptural elements from the Sri Ganesh Temple at Navelim, Divar, including the 'portal of black stone'. The historians are unanimous in accepting that Albuquerque did not demolish a single temple in Goa in the wake of his conquest of Goa. But, according to Gomes Pereira there was just one exception: the Sri Ganesh Temple at Navelim, Divar. Gaspar Correia narrates the last moments of the great Albuquerque: 'Always praying very hard Albuquerque reached the shores of Goa on that day. On entering Aguada and on being told that the Church of Our Lady of Divar was visible, he got up from his bed and was carried up to the door of his cabin on which he leaned with his shoulder. As soon as he held sight of the Church he bent himself, raised his hands and prayed. After doing this, he returned to bed, held the crucifix close and asked for a candle and prayed 'God have mercy on me'. With that his voice quietened, and reciting Credo he gave up his life on 27th of December of 1515.' [Correia, 1860: 'Lendas da India', Livro 2, Tomo 2, p. 459]

Albuquerque perhaps had tried to overcome his enchantment for the Divar Temple with its demolition; but such was the beauty of that temple that till his death he could not resist it.