

# Early Kalinga Style Architecture of Temples of Mahendragiri of South Odisha in Eastern India

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## Abstract

Mount Mahendra, popularly known as Mahendragiri, occupies an important place in the cultural heritage of Odisha in eastern India. It is one of the seven clan mountains (Kula Parvata) of India. The Eastern Gangas and the Sailodbhavas in their charters, recognize Gokarnesvara on the summit of mount Mahendra as their tutelary God. There is a controversy regarding Gokarnesvara temple and this paper attempts at a close study on that.

**Keywords:** Kalinga, style, architecture, Mahendragiri, Kunti temple, Yudhistira temple, Bhima temple, Odisha, India.

## I. Introduction

The state of Odisha is famous in India and in the world for its rich cultural heritage. A large number of temples are found in the nook and corner of Odisha. As per the enumeration of Silpasastras, Indian temples have been classified into three categories, viz the Nagara, Dravida and Vesara (Ganapati Sastri, ed. 1921). The temple architecture in Odisha is famous as Kalinga style (Behera, 1993, p.1). Some eminent scholars form opinion that the Kalinga style follows the Nagara style which is very popular in the North and Central India (Banerjee, 1931, p.335; Panigrahi, 1961, p.52 and Das, 1995, pp.30-46). However, the Kalinga style of architecture was undoubtedly a class of its own and distinct in its own way (Behera, 1993, p.2). In case of the above mentioned temples of Mahendragiri, it can be stated that, these temple bear the testimony of the early temple architecture of Odisha.

The origin of the Sailodbhavas and description on Gokarnesvara are found in the Ganjam grant, Khurda grant, Buguda grant, Purusottampur grant, Puri grant and Orissa Museum grant (Rajguru 1958, pp.157-167). All these inscriptions singularly

point out that the Sailodbhavas traced their origin from Mahendragiri due to the grace of Gokarnesvara Siva who created out of rock, a man named Sailodbhava after whom the dynasty assumed its name. The rulers of the dynasty accepted Gokarnesvara as their tutelary deity. In a similar manner, the Eastern Ganga rulers also accepted Gokarnesvara as their tutelary deity as is evident from the Ponnature copper plate grant and Sanatabommali plate (Ibid, pp.69-70). Now, the problem arises that out of the three temples on the top of Mahendragiri, which one was the Gokarnesvara temple? H.C.Das (G.Mohan, et al, ed. 2004, p.3) opines that the present Bhima temple is Gokarnesvara temple whereas R.C.Misro and B.Subudhi do not accept this view. A deep analysis is required to detect Gokarnesvara temple.

## II. Methodology

Both primary and secondary sources have been consulted for the preparation of this research article. By consulting the District Gazetteer, texts and inscriptions; by field survey and interviewing the priests of the temple, the primary

data has been collected. The secondary data for the present work has been collected from different books, articles, periodicals etc. The description of different parts of the temples, as others view them, has been critically analyzed. After analyzing the view of the learned scholars, critical and comparative study of these temples have been made. That study has enabled to arrive at a conclusion. The importance of these temples at the beginning of the Kalinga style of architecture has been duly analyzed. At last the conclusion has been derived.

### III. DISCUSSION AND RESULT ANALYSIS

3. The three temples on the summit of Mahendragiri known as Yudhisthira, Bhima and Kunti temples (assignable to the Gupta and post-Gupta age) can be regarded as the earliest Saiva temples of Odisha. Although these temples are named after the two Pandava brothers and their mother Kunti, in fact, these temples are Saiva temples. Lord Gokarnesvara who became the tutelary deity of the early Gangas and Sailodbhavas of Kalinga and Kongoda, respectively is regarded as the presiding deity of one of the three temples.

#### 3.1. Yudhistira Temple



Mahendragiri is a place of scenic beauty with unrivalled glory (Behuria, 1995, p.936). The Yudhisthira temple is situated on the top of mount Mahendra in its central part. It is constructed on the other end of the flat ground. It is made of local granite blocks. It stands on the landscape on the height about 14 metres having an Amalaka and finial. The temple is fairly wide and resembles to that of Parsuramesvara temple of Bhubaneswar built during the Sailodbhava period. The superstructure of the temple is made with fourteen pidha like bands in diminishing shape. The temple is a pyramidal structure. It falls under the category of Nagara temple with pidha like outer

decoration. Although raha (central projection) is quite distinct in this temple, the anuraha and kanika pagas are conspicuously absent in this temple. Only at the varanda level, a huge chaitya motif is carved in bold relief on raha projection only, which was a part of the early Odishan temple architecture. The artists of ancient period had put their skill by using huge blocks of granite stones in building this temple. The front portion of the temple is enclosed by hexagonal wall.

The Yudhisthira temple follows a tri-ratha plan (Bose, 1932, pp.92-93). It abruptly rises from the ground and follows a taperint projection. The top of the temple is adorned with an amalaka (fluted finial) and an ayudha (weapon). Probably, the artists had thought to have sculptural designs on the wall, but it was left unfinished. A notable thing in connection with this temple is marked that it has no parsva devatas (Rath, 2010, p.88). Four chaity arches are conspicuously present on four sides of the sikhara (tower). No sculptural progress or decorative motifs are noticed in this temple.

The Yudhisthira temple faces the west. With no super- structure but only a front platform having traces of walls made out huge blocks of granite. From the front elevated platform, six steps have been added leading to Grabhagriha (inner sanctum). It is further noticed that the original Saktipitha (Yonipitha) exists but no lingam is found. One oblong stone resembling with lingam is hafted on the existing saktipitha by the devotees. On the occasion of Savitri Amavasya, thousands of pilgrims visit this temple to worship the God although they assemble in the Kunti or Gokarnesvara temple complex (Chauley, 2010, p.115).

A close look on the temple will reveal that originally it was dedicated to Lord Siva. It consisted of a bada deula of rekha order and on oblong mukhasala. Apart from some portions of the walls, nothing of the mukhasala has been found preserved. As stated earlier, the bada of this temple followed a tri-ratha plan, the rathas found on straight lines. It has a plinth, a wall relieved by pilasters at regular intervals and a gabled roof (Das, 1984, p.96). The

gabel is shaped like a round arch with a shovel head. At the top of the gandi, bisama is placed which is square on plan which is a straight departure from tri-ratha plan (ibid). The door of the garbhagriha of the temple is enclosed by an undecorated frame. As the floor of the garbhagriha is below the ground level, a stepped passage running through the door comes down to reach it. The door lintel of the temple contains an inscription of the Chola King, Rajendrachola (Orissa State Museum, Vol.XXII, p.96). The inscription states that after defeating his brother-in-law Vimaladitya, he set up a pillar of victory (vijayastambha) on mount Mahendra. Tiger and two fishes, the emblems of Chola and Pandyan feudatories, respectively are engraved below the inscription (Donaldson, 1986, pp.727-728).

If one looks from inside garbhagriha to upwards, one will find the corbel off sets minimizing the central point to house the top covering slab to make space for beki and amala. The architectural features of this temple reveal that it can be assigned to the later part of the 6th century CE which resembles to the Satrugnesvara temple at Bhubaneswar (Panigrahi, 1981, p.371). The boundary wall of the temple is of nine huge rectangular pieces of stone which is not in a very good state and needs preservation. Broken idols of so many deities lie scattered inside the courtyard of the temple which give an impression about the existence of many ancient temples there.

### 3.2. Bhima Temple

On Kubjagiri, the highest peak of Mahendragiri, stands the Bhima temple. It appears to be the earliest structure, which is situated towards further south-west of the Yudhisthira temple. The temple is made out of huge sized stone blocks kept one over another in a simple way. It is a pile of huge granite stones balanced on each other. Neither there is carving nor decoration in this temple. The panoramic view constitutes the majesty of this temple. It is a very small sized temple of 7 metres height. Needless to say that it is unique of its kind so far as its massiveness is concerned (4m × 4m). The

temple is constructed with the help of 17 pieces of stone blocks only. It is made out the 16 pieces of huge dressed stones placed one above the other.



The last stone (17th stone) forms the topmost part serving as the last course of the rekha deula having a huge size (3m×3m×1.4m). One circular beki is added followed by usual amalakas again dressed out of the single stone. It is difficult to comprehend that how such a huge stone block was lifted to such a height and placed there. The temple contains one small door which is 1.2m height and 31cm wide. The inner garbhagriha is 1.5m×1.5m. Although, the temple stands bare footed but it is indeed, an architectural splendour. The basement of the temple is out of plumb and big gaps are formed. It might be due to the dislocation of plinth because of tectonic movement and lighening. A big portion of architectural fragmen

t of the temple has fallen on the ground creating big crevices. No saktipitha or lingam is found inside the temple. However, one block of stone has been kept as lingam for worship. It is also found that due to dislodgement and out of plumbness of top courses, joints between the stone slabs are widened and water leads inside (Chauley, op.cit., p.116).

Built in clumsy manner, the Bhima temple defies any recognized temple style (Das, op.cit., p.84). Huge blocks of stone, used in its construction, gives it a cyclopean character not allowing it to fall under any temple category. There is no deity in the garbhagriha. The temple is eka-ratha in plan (ibid). Among the vertical axis, the temple is divided into bada, gandi and mastaka. The deul has two openings, one of the west and the other, on the east. Entry to the deul is made through the western opening. On the

east, the aperture is a little more than a slit in the wall. Obviously, it was made for anything other than a passage for entering into the deula. The garbhagriha of the temple is a squared chamber and its width has not been made in consonance with its height. That is why, the bisama of the temple is unduly massive. As a result, the deula became unusually heavy and squat or more precisely, dwarfish (ibid).

As per local tradition, originally, the temple was constructed by using five huge stone slabs – one as roof and the other four as walls with a small opening. It appears that the fact contains grains of truth. The temple has been reconstructed adding some more pieces of stones along with amalaka sila which looks very much misfit to be the original structure. Further, the local tradition states that the temple was constructed by the Bhima Sabaras, who are still existing in Mahendra region as a branch of the Savara community (Mallick, 2004, p.246). This local tradition cannot be ignored because, the temple is devoid of any artistic skill, rather is built in a crude form which might have been the work of the unskilled Sabara tribes of the region.

Thus conceived, the Bhima temple on the summit of the hill is not constructed after the traditional Odishan temple architectural style. It can be stated without doubt that this temple was constructed much earlier than that of the period of construction of Yudhisthira or Kunti temples. Of course, generally scholars form opinion that the temple was constructed just after the invasion of Samudragupta. It is only because this temple has a square sanctum, squat sikhara and flat roof which are characteristics of the Gupta temples. Any way, this was the earliest stone temple in Odisha.

### **3.3. Kunti Temple or Gokarnesvara Temple**



The Gokarnesvara temple is also known as Kunti temple as is popularly accepted by the people. Existing on the eastern slope about half a kilometer further east of Yudhistira temple, it belongs to the rekha order. The temple houses a linga named Gokarnesvara and faces to the east. Although it is Pancha-ratha in plan, but it is built without any plinth. It consists of a tri-anga bada, a gandi without bhumi divisions and a mastaka with the finial which is not found now. The three niches of the three sides of the temple are occupied by three deities. On the southern nich is placed Ganesh, east niche houses Kartikeya and northern niche houses Vishnu. However, D.R.Das opines that earlier, the northern niche housed Parvati which in due course of time, has been replaced by Vishnu (Das, op.cit., p.85). This is a very important deviation of the temple which needs elaboration. This replacement seems deliberate. It is only because, the Matharas, early Gangas, Sailodbhavas, Bhauma-Karas (Buddhist Kings but later on followed Saivism) and Somavamsis were the devotees of Siva. During the period of Chodagangadeva, the temple of Jagannath at Puri was built and Vaishnavism became very popular in Odisha. With utmost probability, with a tolerable degree of certainty, the present scholar thinks that replacement of Parvati image by Vishnu must have taken place during the Ganga period.

In the jangha segment of the temple, the raha is fashioned like a shrine with a sunken niche. The base of the raha on each of its three sides has a rectangular niche. The purpose of each niche was most probably to house a deity but no image is found in these niches. However, the design of these niches are beautiful and have been carved nicely. The beauty of the temple is, infact, enhanced by the presence of



these niches. There is no more design or sculptural plan on the base. It is very simple, yet artistic.

In the front of the temple, the sukanasa is crowded with six chamu-sikharas arranged in two rows of three sikharas each. The central sikhara in the first row and the two sikharas at the two ends of the second row follow the khakhara type. The other remaining three sikharas belong to the rekha order. This design is quite peculiar. The bisama, placed on the gandi, is pancharatha in conformity with the plan of the temple. On the bisama, rest the mastaka which at present has a beki, amalaka and khapuri. However, the members above the khapuri are missing.

The Gokarnesvara temple opens with a door on the west. The door is enclosed by a case with inner and outer frame. A Navagraha slab is placed on the lintel of the outer frame containing nine planets. All the grahas are seated except Rahu, who is found standing. Among all other eight grahas, Ketu is found sitting in prajambapadasana on a padmasana. This is an artistic peculiarity of this temple which is not found in other temples of Odisha. It is difficult to discuss the reason for the same. Except the two grahas, viz, Rahu and Ketu, all other grahas are found sitting in padmasana, a sculptural design which reveals the fact that the seven grahas have been attached godly characteristic (sitting on padmasana) were as the other two (Rahu and Ketu) have been attached with somehow demonic characteristics. Here, Ketu is found in anthropomorphic form and sits on a stool, as stated above.

It is pertinent to discuss the probable date of construction of the Gokarnesvara temple. It should be dated after the Yudhistira temple on account of some of its characteristics. To cite a few examples, indented garbhagriha, kumbha in the pabhaga, navagraha panel on the door lintel, khapuri and mastaka appear in Odishan temple towards the close of 9th or the beginning of the 10th century CE. After a century or more, the chamu-sikharas appeared to cover the sukanasa. A systematic stylization of the rectangular panels and leafy foliage into a single vertical band to connect all the members of the pabhaga took place still later. Taking all these aspects into consideration,

D.R.Das opines that the Gokarnesvara temple should be dated not earlier than the 13th century (Ibid,p.88). However, this statement should be taken with a pinch of salt. It is only because, the earlier Ganga rulers were devout worshippers of Gokarnesvara Siva on the summit of mount Mahendra. The earliest reference to the Gokarnesvara temple is found in the Ponnuturu plates of the Ganga ruler Maharaja Samantavarma. This presupposes the existence of Gokarnesvara prior to the date of the issue of the Ponnuturu plates, i.e. A.D. 560.

Today part of the temple is seen buried due to flow of murrum and soil deposits. The present Kunti or Gokarnesvara temple measures 3.7m × 3.7m. The measurement of the temple is 2.25m × 1.25m and the measurement of newly built compound wall is 174m × 12m only. Two wells exist, one of the northern side and the other to the west, to supply water to the pilgrims.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The controversy prevails among the scholars regarding the identification of Gokarnesvara temple. As stated earlier, H.C.Das considers the Bhima temple as Gokarnesvara Siva temple. On the other hand R.C.Misro and R.K.Bisoyi consider Kunti temple as Gokarnesvara temple. An analysis will reveal that no doubt, the Bhima temple is the earliest Siva temple on the top of mount Mahendra. The early Gangas and Sailodbhavas must have referred to this temple as Gokarnesvara. In due course of time, the temple architecture developed in Odisha and the other two temples were built on the top of this mountain. In 11th century CE the inscription of Rajendra Chola is found on the Kunti temple. Later on the Imperial Gangas attached importance to Mahendragiri. If it will be analyzed, a fact will be clear that Chodagangadeva promoted Vaishnavism and during his period, the construction work of Puri Jagannath temple was completed. Since, he was the follower of Vaishnavism, it will not be out of place to suggest that the three Saiva temples on the top of mount Mahendra might have been named as Bhima temple, Yudhistira temple and Kunti temple coming under the influence

of Vaishnavism. Perhaps, from this period onwards, the importance of Kunti temple increased and people started worshipping Gokarnesvara there and the practice is being followed even today.

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