

ORAL TRADITION OF HUMA AND LEGITIMISATION OF CHAUHAN RULE

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Saiva cult is a primitive cult and it has pervaded all over India. Archaeological and historical remains of the Indus Valley Civilization attests the fact that Saivism is a pre-Aryan concept. The availability of a large number of ancient relics, i.e. stone pieces resembling phallus had led the indologists as well as historians to believe that Pasupati (Siva) was worshipped in the phallic form by the non-Aryans of Indus Valley Civilization. Thus, practice of Siva worship seems to have been spread to different parts of India from 3000 B. C. Sambalpur is not an exception to it. The history of Saivism can be traced back to the first century A. D. According to the learned scholar Sashanka Sekhar Panda (2004 : 39), Siva worship in the form of Bhairava worship was prevalent in the upper Mahanadi valley of Orissa at least from the first century A. D., although some other scholars are of the opinion that the Bhairava cult became popular from the eighth century A. D. onwards. All the same, people of Sambalpur area worship Siva both in iconic and aniconic forms. The phallic worship is the most popular and symbolical compromise of the worship of Siva in his iconic and aniconic forms. The Somavamsis, who began their rule in modern Binka-Suvarnapur area in the eighth century A. D. were great patrons of this stream of Hinduism. Subsequently, the Chauhan rulers who reigned Sambalpur area from about 14th century A. D. to middle of the 19th century A. D. had also extended royal patronage to Saivism. They built Siva temples in different parts of Sambalpur Rajya and made extensive village and land grants for regular and elaborate performance of puja in these religious pithas.

In the erstwhile Sambalpur Rajya one finds a large number of Siva temples built under the royal patronage during the Chauhan reigns. The most famous among them are those of the Asta-Sambhus, literary meaning eight Sambhus or Sivas. They are namely, Bimaleswara at Huma, Kedarnath at Ambabhona, Biswanath at Deogaon, Barada Balunkeswara at Gaisama, Maneswar at Maneswar, Swapneswara at Sorna, Bisweswara at Soranda and Nilakantheswara at Niljee. Lord Bimaleswara at Huma is believed to be the *adya-Sambhu*, i.e. the earliest among the Asta-Sambhus who appear to have become very popular during the reigns of Chauhan Rajas in Sambalpur. This Saiva pitha is situated on the left bank of the river Mahanadi 14 miles (24 Kms.) down stream and south of Sambalpur. Lord Bimaleswara is worshipped in the garbhagriha (sanctum

sanctorium) of the temple. Goddess Bhairavi is worshipped to his left and lord Bhairo to his right. The temple is believed to be rebuilt or renovated by Maharaja Baliar Singh (1660-1690 A. D.), the fifth Chauhan ruler of Sambalpur Rajya. The rest of the temples are constructed during the rule of Raja Ajit Singh (1766-1788 A. D.) of Sambalpur (Panda, 1996 : 34-35; Senapati and Mahanti, 1971 : 51, 526). All these unfold the truth that the Chauhan rulers of Sambalpur Rajya were also great champions of Saivism.

It is really amusing and wonderful to see the Bimaleswara temple in leaning form. Everybody looks at the temple in silent wonder. As walking on the moon is one of the wonders of our time, leaning temple at Huma is one of the wonders of medieval period. It reminds us the famous leaning tower of Pisa. The temple is situated on the rocky bed just on the bank of the river Mahanadi. The cause of leaning cannot be believed to be the technical defects at the time of construction. It is also not easily acceptable to believe that weak foundation might have caused leaning posture of the temple. Because as a matter of fact construction of temple is quite favourite of Chauhan rulers as known to us from innumerable temples built during their reigns. They have already proved themselves as good builders. Again the temple is not a massive one. There might have been internal displacement of the rocky bed on which it stands, either due to flood current in the river Mahanadi or earthquake, thus affecting the straight posture of the original temple. In other words, the plinth of the temple has been deviated slightly from its original position and as a result, the body of the temple has become tilted. Nevertheless, people visiting this temple look at it in open-mouthed bewilderment. Be that as it may, there is no denying the fact that this has attracted the attention of historians, sculptures and other researchers.

Nonetheless, there is sufficient shelter among these rocks to harbour a variety of fish locally known as *kudo* fish. This is why, the river ghat is known as *machhindra ghat*. Some rituals in connection with the worship of Lord Bimaleswara are performed in this river ghat. Twenty two steps leading to this ghat reminds us twenty two steps of Shri Jagannath Temple at Puri. The water of machhindra ghat is considered to be sacred. Devotees take their bath here before offering puja to the deity. Sometimes, people offer food to kudo fishes. It is quite fascinating to see these fishes accepting food from the human beings without any fear. This reminds us the Maneswara Saiva pitha where tortoises in the adjacent pond also accept food from human beings without fear. Interestingly, the kudo fishes respond to the call of the priests and come to the steps of the bathing ghat to be fed by the pilgrims. Nobody is allowed to catch them (Senapati and Mahanti, 1971 : 11). Local people consider them as divine creatures and *matchha avatar* (incarnation) of Lord Vishnu at Huma and Katchhapa avatar at Maneswara. It is believed that there is a secret path from the seat of Lord Bimaleswara to the river Mahanadi and the kudo fishes take shelter at the feet of the deity during the rainy season. Similarly, it is also believed that there is a secret path from the seat of Lord

Maneswara to the adjacent pond. Several myths are associated with kudo fishes. As per the oral tradition, once a woman did not pay any heed to the local people and caught a kudo fish and decided to cut it into pieces. While attempting to cut the fish with her pankhi (locally made knife) she was immediately transformed into a stone. The stone image of the woman was found on the river bed for many years. Later on, it has been swept away by the flood water.

According to the oral tradition, the temple was leaning from the very beginning of its construction. Because, Lord Bimaleswara himself desired such a temple. In order to fulfil his desire Maharaja Baliar Singh built a leaning temple for the deity. In course of time, the shape of the temple and associated myth itself popularised this pitha far and wide. For some, from the very beginning of the construction of the temple, the temple architect might have deliberately made the temple inclined towards the river keeping in mind that the centre of gravity of the body would remain outside the temple so that the strong flood water cannot destabilise the temple. Be that as it may, such an unusual feature of the temple was not easily acceptable to the people for which there was a need of a myth to justify its leaning position that Lord Bimaleswara desired to have such a temple for Himself. On the other hand, the myth has glorified Lord Bimaleswara and on the other hand the myth has helped in the popularisation of this pitha.

It may be mentioned here that apart from the main temple, there are two small temples of Lord Siva and one Vaisnava temple constructed later on inside the temple complex. The temple complex is surrounded by high boundary walls. The temples are made up of 'siuly' cut stones. In Jagamohana, burnt bricks are also found. These miniatures are also said to have been in leaning position. But they are so small in size that they cannot lean unless they are treated to do so. In all probability, in conformity with the existing tradition and design of the main temple these small temples are also built accordingly. These temples cannot stand so had there been any displacement of foundation area or technical defects.

As it is mentioned earlier, sculptures quite pet of Chauhan rulers are not found in dominating in Bimaleswara temple like that of the Narasinghnath particularly in Vimana portion. Even though, it is presumed that there was no sculpture of significance excepting the *parsva devatas*, it is quite possible that some sculptures are hidden under the thick plaster. Of course, sculptural consideration is of less significance here than the technique of construction which deserves special consideration and attention. In all likelihood, the architects avoided any type of sculptural representations on the body of the temple in order to keep it light so that the centre of gravity was free from heavy pressure. Though we are not in possession of any documentary evidence to show the plan of the Bimaleswara temple as a leaning temple no explanation or findings properly convinces us to accept the theory that the present shape of the temple is the effect of some natural happenings or calamities. In view of this, the Bimaleswara temple certainly bears testimony to the advanced technical know-how of the Chauhan builders of Sambalpur area.

The village Chaunrpur on the right bank of the river Mahanadi is said to be the seat of Raja Balaram Dev, before his coming to Sambalpur. According to the local tradition, the worship of Lord Bimaleswara is said to have been initiated by a cow-herd boy residing in a nearby village of Chaunrpur. He used to take the cows to the interior jungles on the river bank. To his surprise, once he found that a black cow was remaining absent for a particular time on every day. So, he started watching the movement of the cow. It was a rainy day and the river was furious. To his amusement, he saw the cow crossing the high current of the river Mahanadi. One fine morning, the cow-herd boy followed the cow and swam across the river and came to the left bank of the Mahanadi. He observed the cow going up to a stone and spraying her milk over it. The cow-herd boy realised that there was a superior power which directed the activities of the black cow. Thence he observed devotion, submission and reverence to the supernatural power residing in that rock. Subsequently, people residing nearby came to know about this fact and visited the spot. Seeing the spot, they at once believed it to be Saiva pitha and since then started worshipping it. It would not be out of context to mention here that the abovementioned religious myth is associated with a large number of religious pithas all over Orissa which include not only Saiva pithas but also Vaisnava and Sakti pithas (Pasayat, 2003 : 16-18).

Oral tradition relates that Raja Balaram Dev was given a grant of this area by his elder brother Raja Narasimha Dev of Patnagarh. Balaram Dev established himself first at Bargarh on the bank of the river Jira. Therefrom, he is said to have shifted his capital to Chaunrpur, on the right bank of the river Mahanadi and finally to Sambalpur on the left bank of the river Mahanadi. Balaram Dev heard the miraculous incident of deity at Huma narrated above and visited this pitha. Realising the religious sanctity and popularity of this pitha he assigned some villages namely, Huma, Bulpunga, Dhatukpali, Gangadhar-pali and Mahle for the maintenance, regular worship and religious ceremonies of Lord Bimaleswara. The temple has an endowment consisting of Huma and six other villages, which have been exempted from assessment so long as the temple stands and the religious ceremonies are maintained. The grant is an old one, said to date back to the time of Balaram Dev, the first Chauhan Raja of Sambalpur (Senapati and Mahanti, 1971 : 526). In other words, state funding of the puja-services has been introduced since then. Most probably, when Balaram Dev carved out a new Rajya out of the territory of his elder brother he named it *Huma desh*. Thereafter, as the learned scholar Dr. N. K. Sahu has a scribed the period of foundation of the Sambalpur Rajya was about the year 1570 A. D. (Panda, 1996 : 35).

The village Huma and its Saiva pitha may be said to be much older than the time of Raja Balaram Dev whose Rajya was once called Huma desha. The following analysis uncovers that the existence of this pitha can at least be dated back to the eleventh century A. D. Learned scholar S. S. Panda (1996 : 34-35) identifies some significant

points that the gateway/doorjamb to the garbhagriha of this temple is of late Somavamsi period and it is similar to that of the Jagamohana of the Narasimhanath temple of Gandhagiri near Paikmal of Bargarh district. Another significant stone-panel fitted to the wall of the Jagamohana on the proper right of the doorjamb is a broken one, depicting three *grahas* of the Navagrahas panel which can also be dated to the late Somavamsi period and in all probability was fitted above the doorjamb of the garbhagriha in its original state. Thus, the doorjamb as well as the broken Navagraha panel can be iconographically dated to the eleventh century A. D. Furthermore, according to the oral tradition prevalent in the village Huma and its surrounding area, the Ganga king Anangabhimadeva III (1211-1239 A. D.) has constructed this temple. In view of this, it can be said with precision that Huma bears the testimony of an important place of pilgrimage and a glorious place of Siva worship since at least the eleventh century A. D. if take these historical relics to be the earliest of all antiquities available at Huma.

In the 15th and 16th century A. D. after the disintegration of Ganga empire of Orissa, a strong pull towards political fragmentation as well as decentralisation of power hastened place partly due to the partition of ruling families and partly due to land grants of villages by the ruler to indigenous tribal chiefs who ended up as independent potentates. In the frontier zone of uncertain control like Daksina Kosala (roughly modern West Orissa) the indigenous tribal chiefs and chiefs of obscure origins took advantage of weak central authority, assumed power and formed several Rajyas (Deo 2003 : 196). Formation of a separate Rajya by Balaram Dev in the 16th century A. D. was the result of the partition of ruling family of Patnagarh. In all probability, Huma as well as its surrounding area was a thick forested area and inhabited by aboriginal people when Balaram Dev first arrived here. He was a reputed warrior. Owing to military necessity, the administration of this tribal dominated, hilly and forested part was entrusted to him by his elder brother Narasimha Dev, the tenth Chauhan Raja of Patna Rajya. Balaram Dev was successfully consolidated the Chauhan rule in this part of the Rajya and carved out a new Rajya out of the territory of his elder brother and named it Humadesha.

In order to sustain his separate and independent Rajya, most probably Balaram Dev had to depend upon the *bhogas* and *bhagas*. He had to persuade the local tribal people to become settled agriculturists so that production would increase, because a tribal economy based on shifting cultivation cannot sustain an emerging Rajya as analysed elsewhere by the learned scholar Dr. F. Deo (2003 : 96). To legitimise his status as Raja and to his share of the produce (*bhaga*), Balaram Dev granted lands to Brahmins and temples which contributed to changing the agrarian situation, formation of a hierarchical social order and Brahmanisation / Hinduisation of the Society. Thus, it may be suggested here that Huma pitha was already existing when Balaram Dev arrived here. Perhaps, the temple was in a dilapidated condition. Balaram Dev extended royal patronage and rebuilt or renovated the temple. Subsequently, Maharaja Baliar Singh, the fifth Raja of

Sambalpur had also most probably rebuilt or renovated it. Be that as it may, there is no denying the fact that Balaram Dev adopted this pitha and extended royal patronage.

Huma was located strategically in a jungle area during those days between Sambala (Sambalpur) and Suvarnapur on the banks of the river Mahanadi. District Gazetteer of Sambalpur discloses the fact that the chief areas of cultivation lay along the banks of the river Mahanadi. The cultivated plains of this area yielded numerous varieties of paddy, some of which were the finest in the Country. The river Mahanadi was also the main out-let for the trade and produce of this area. The produce was carried in boats from Sambalpur to Binka (Binitapur), Suvarnapur, Boudh and even to Cuttack. Commodities were also brought back through this river route. Notably, boat transport was carried on as far as Suvarnapur in the flood season till very recently. Furthermore, Sambalpur had the tradition of producing diamonds extracted from the sands of the river Mahanadi at Hirakud, literary meaning "Diamond Island". Hirakud to Suvarnapur was that part of the river Mahanadi where the diamonds and golds were procurable down the river Mahanadi to as far as Suvarnapur (Senapati and Mahanti, 1971 : 86, 273-74). Even today, valuable stones are reportedly recovered from the river bed of the Mahanadi.

In all probability, Huma region was quite important from commercial, political and social points of view besides its religious significance. Balaram Dev was not unconcerned in the fact that there were antagonism between people of different races, religions and communities. He was well aware of the problem of communalism that would weaken the State formation, cause disharmony in social life and divert the attention of people from formation of a separate Rajya in this area, which was his desired goal. So, he had made attempts to integrate the indigenous communities into one fold under the umbrella of the Hinduism. Understandably, in the process of the building of an unified and separate Rajya, indigenous communities with their religious traditions were also successfully absorbed in the mainstream of the Hindu great tradition through its branches like Saivism, Saktism and Vaisnavism and various Hindu epics. In the context, it may be mentioned here that temple is an important agent of Hinduisation (Eschmann, 1978 :80). Construction of a Siva temple led to the upward mobility of the local priests of this shrine, who were non-Brahmins. The royal patronage drew the attention of the people in large number from far and wide. It led to the regular flow of devotees, both tribals and non-tribals to this pitha. The coming of non-tribal devotees might have led to social interaction between the caste-hindus and the local tribal people. The fame and popularity of this deity had come to be known as Bimaleswara. By the time of renovation of this temple in 1670 by Raja Baliar Singh, this was very popular as Huma Kshetra not only due to its religious importance but also due to its socio-economic and political significance. Businessmen as far as from Kantilo, Bolangir, Barpali, Bargarh, Suvarnapur and Maniabandha were attending the fairs and festivals at this pitha to sale their goods (Senapati and Mahanti, 1971 : 526).

Royal patronage to this religious pitha was a firm and uncompromising measure to appease the local people and to legitimise his authority over them, which also facilitated the process of Hinduisation to build up a larger Hindu/Chauhan Rajya in this area. Understandably, Balaram Dev was successful in bringing people closer to the temple and by means of the temple he was able to consolidate his authority over the forest region of Huma. In a similar fashion, he adopted the deity Samlei and constructed a temple at Sambalpur and extended royal patronage (Pasayat, 2003 : 67-84). The successors of Balaram Dev had also systematically followed this principle of patronising the Saiva pithas in different parts of erstwhile Sambalpur Rajya. The most famous among them were those of Asta-Sambhus as mentioned earlier. Thus, the Chauhan Rajas consolidated their power and position and established a larger Chauhan kingdom in Sambalpur.

It is important to note here that the religious importance of Huma Kshetra is equated with other kshetras of Orissa namely, Shri Kshetra (Shri Jagannath Temple) at Puri, Arka Kshetra (Sun temple) at Konark. It may be suggested here that the purpose of such royal patronage is to give a boost to the local cults and at the same time to capitalise the religious sentiments of the local people to such an extent / degree that it can be used as a means for political ends. In any case, the rise of Huma Kshetra in Sambalpur particularly during the sixteenth century has to be attributed to the patronage of the Chauhan rulers which has helped in consolidation of Chauhan rule and state formation in Sambalpur area and also facilitated the process of Hinduisation in this region.

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