

SOMLAI : A UNIQUE IMAGE IN INDIA

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A massive triangular rock with something like a penis protruding at the bottom. This is Somlai aryanised into Somaeswari. A unique image in the whole country. A rare relic of the *Linga-Yoni* worship of yore.

This deity of the diamond valley, Goddess Somlai, is the presiding deity of Sambalpur ('Samvalaka' of Ptolemy's times), premier district of West Orissa. Enshrined in a tall temple on the bank of the Mahanadi, she was once the tutelary deity of the Sambalpur Chauhans whose progenitor was Balaram Dev (AD 1540–57) of the lineage of the illustrious Prithviraj Chauhan of Delhi.

There is an interesting story about the exploration and enshrinement of Goddess Somlai, which was synchronous with the establishment of the Chauhan dynasty of Sambalpur about 450 years ago. Balaram Dev got Humadesa (Bargarh-Sambalpur area) as an award from his elder brother, Narasingh Dev (AD 1540–47), the 12th Raja of Patna, the original seat of the Orissan Chauhans. For, he had carried a nurse on horse back across the river Mayabati in full flood in the month of *Sravana*, and had saved the life of the Rani. Balaram Dev got Humadesa, but the queen-mother did not rest content. Apprehensive of her younger son's vaulting ambition and valour, she made him swear on the bank of river Ang that he won't covet his brother's territory.

Balaram Dev set up his capital at a place which he called Balaramgarh (modern Bargarh) on the left bank of the river Jira.

One day, during a hunting expedition, Balaram Dev was surprised to see his hound chased by a hare. "Extraordinary", exclaimed the Raja, "hare chasing a hound!". The Raja returned to his camp at Chaunrpur, searching in his mind for the key to this unusual, unnatural phenomenon. When night came, the Raja, in his dream, heard a voice saying, "I am Goddess of Gumdarh ! The hunting hare ! Look at the *Simili* tree whereunder the hare had vanished on the left bank. Take me there, O' Raja, from the island in the middle of the Mahanadi, and build your fort !".

Next morning, the Raja's men went round, located the deity and carried her ceremonially to the other side, to the *Simili* tree where Goddess Somlai was installed in a temple in whose foundation an old brahmin couple—one Krupasindhu Panigrahi and his wife—willingly buried themselves. The foundation of the Somlai temple was, thus, laid on their bodies, on their bones, and a tunnel was dug, leading to the spot where the royal

fort was constructed. Since then the goddess was worshipped as Simlai or Somlai, the presiding deity of the royal cantonment.

The temple was rebuilt by Chhatra Sai (AD 1657–65), 7th in the line from Balaram Dev. Chhatra Sai installed in the niches of the outer wall of the temple some tantric images of *Dasa Mahavidya* : Goddess Durga, Mangala, Jwalamukhi, Vanadurga, Varahi, Chhinnamasta, Matangi, Ramachandi, Kali and Ugratara. The Raja made arrangement for land and *Sebayats* called 'Rai' for the daily worship of the deity.

The initial human sacrifice was subsequently supplanted by buffaloes, and then by goats and sheep. There is a story about how this human sacrifice was stopped. Once one Bihari Das from U.P. was caught and brought for sacrifice. Confronted with death, the intelligent Bihari devised an escape route. He appealed to the Raja to leave him to his fate. If the goddess was so inclined, she could kill him on her own. Bihari Das was confined to the Somlai temple for the night. In the morning, however, he was found quite hale and hearty. The Goddess chose to spare Bihari.

Bihari Das ended up as the *Mahanta* of *Ramji Math*, Puri.

This incident, sometimes associated with the Durga Devi Temple of Sonapur, presumably took place during the regime of Raja Baliara Dev, brother of Bansigopal, founder of the *Ramji Math*.

There lies in the *Mukhasala* of the Somlai temple a huge drum said to be the war-drum of the legendary Kalapahar whose tomb can be traced in a mango-grove near Durgapali on the Mahanadi. When Dussera comes, Goddess Somlai, amid thunderous drum-beats, assumes the form of Rajarajeswari in the full moon night of *Aswin* which inspires in the devotee a deep sense of awe and wonder.

Thus the deity worshipped by the aboriginals has become an idol of the Hindus with the passage of time. Pt. Gopinath Panigrahi goes so far as to identify her with Goddess Ashapuri of the Garhsambhari Chauhans. He goes to prove the lunar origin of the Chauhans through the etimological significance of the word 'Somlai' (*Soma*—crescent moon, *La*—to wear, 'i' feminine gender). The word implies the consort of Lord Siva, wearer of the crescent moon. A close look, however reveals that Somlai is no Hindu icon, no armed Durga. On the other hand, she has the form of a vast vagina interpenetrated with a penis, which leads us to conclude that the name is, perhaps, derived from the word *Sambhalai* suggestive of the ability to bear. This conjoint *Linga-Yoni* image sends us several centuries back to the Greco-Roman days of Phallic worship. This phallic image of Somlai is hardly concealed by our efforts to aryanise and modernise and Hinduise this very primitive deity through improvisation and visualization of an oval face with a protruding tongue. With all her superimposed ornaments and garlands Goddess Somlai stands a huge block of stone in the unmistakable shape of a vagina penetrated by a penis.

Like Goddess Charchikai of Banki, Birajai of Jajpur, Sarala of Jhankad, Chandi of Cuttack, Somlai of Sambalpur has made this important district headquarters a famous *Sakta Pitha* of Orissa.

Sambalpur town, the seat of Goddess Somlai, is centrally located amid spots of tourist attraction, while the Hirakud dam, the temples of Ranipur-Jhari, Harisankar and Nrusimhanath, Baidyanath and Charada and Charisambhu, the hills of Kotsamalai, the waterfalls of Khandadhar and Pradhanpat, the rock-paintings of Gudahandi etc. open up a colourful world of virgin beauty and hoary antiquity, the image of Goddess Somlai carries the tourist into the mysterious depths of the immemorial past.

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