



Ramachandi : The Guardian Deity of Ganjam Port

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At a distance of about 5 kms from Ganjam town, we find the temple of Ramachandi on the summit of a picturesque hillock situated on the right bank of river Rushikulya. As the visitor strives to climb the hillock, the journey appears to be a difficult one but feelings of fatigue abruptly disappear when he finds himself in front of the deity. In the sanctum of the shrine are installed the heads of three Goddesses exquisitely carved out of stone in a unique Orissan style. Here the sculptor had taken utmost care to depict Motherly tenderness and compassion of the deities. Since no inscriptional evidence in regard to the date of the images is available, on style and iconographic features, the image may be assigned to the early mediaeval period. As one comes out of the temple and looks around, he is bewildered in joy by the kaleidoscopic scenes of the hills in three sides and the blue ocean on the other, sandy banks of River Rushikulya, silvery sheets of water in tanks, villages big and small, crop fields, arecanut and coconut plantations, vegetable farms and the colour of the hillock varying from red to saffron. The deities are worshipped under the names of Harachandi, Ramachandi and Jaya Chandi. As regards the installation of three deities, various thoughts come to mind. Probably they represent Mahalakshmi, Mahakali and Maha Saraswati or Durga, Kali and Bhubaneswari of Hindu faith or

the Triratna of Buddhism or the universal mother with two divine attendants. The Mother cult declares that, the mother performs the act of creation, preservation and dissolution. She assumes various forms for the protection of the entire universe, and destruction of the evil. The ruins of the brick structure found in the close vicinity of the temple indicate that the deities were originally worshipped there. The bricks are quite large in size and of light weight. It seems that the old structure had a flat roof. On examination of the ruins it appears that the old structure belongs to the early mediaeval period.

Korraval is the name by which the Mother Goddess was known to the early Tamil writers. As she is associated with war and victory, she can be identified with Durga. The Silappadikaram a Tamil epic of sixth century, describes Her as the "three-eyed Goddess whose crown is adorned with the crescent moon, whose lips red as the coral, are parted in a beatific smile, whose waist is encircled by a serpent, whose arms wield the tridents, and whose feet bedecked with anklets, rest upon the severed head of Mahisasura. She is the embodiment of victory, Dharma and wisdom. Among the numerous sculptures of the Pallava and Pandya rule, from the 7th to the 9th century are the panels, representing Mahisasuramardini.



The members of the famous mediaeval trading corporation were worshippers of Bhagabati Durga. To the Tamil members of this corporation. Durga was Kandall, a Tamil word meaning the divine principle beyond form and name and transcending all manifestations. The common folk install her as the guardian deity of the villages and pray to her for liberation.

"namami bhavabhitoham samsaranavatarini"

Afraid of the pangs of worldly life, I bow unto Thee, who helpeth me to cross the ocean of earthy existence.

The village Karapada and an ancient site situated at the foot of Ramachandi hillock deserve special attention in the context of the Tamil word Korraival. A certain sect of the people of the village differ from other in social custom. Their principal occupation is betel plantation. The ruins of the habitation and burial practice of the ancient site appears to be south Indian in origin. A link between the Oriya word Kandhuni and Tamil word Kandali cannot be also ruled out. Both the words refer to the names of a Goddess. Durga is invoked as Kandall by the members of a trading corporation. The villages like Aliabad, Prayagi and Kantiagoda alias Podumpetta can be associated with the Alvar movement and Alvars of South India under the name of Poygoi and Pudam.

From the great ports of Palur, Ganjam, Kalinganagar and Charitra, the people of Kalinga were carrying on trade and commerce from ancient times with Burma, Malayasia, Siam, Kambodia, Java, Bali, Borneo and Sumatra. Situated near the mouth of river Rushikulya Ganjam flourished as an emporium of overseas trade and boasted of its handsome buildings till recent times. The following observations throw light on its past glory. "As these (Palempores locally known as 'Patta') from Ganjam are much approved you must endeavour to send a large

portion of that sort". This was the note of the Company's Government to the Chief of Ganjam port. Dr. William Hunter, while passing through this deserted town in 1870, saw it as described by him in the following lines: "of its former magnificence scarcely remains, except a few half fallen mansions with hovels swarming around their tower storeys and seeming to grow out of their ruins. Lofty pillared gateways stand about the rice fields leading nowhere, or a more pregnant lesson to human history, are utilized as entrances to the peasant's thatched cottage." It is interesting to note that the temples of Ramachandi, Harachandi and antiquities of Buddhism are found in the ancient port-towns of Orissa. With the network of rivers and sea by the side, the association of people of Orissa with boats was quite intimate, this is even reflected in Mahisasura mardhini (Durga killing the demon Mahisasura) lying near Brahmeswar temple of Bhubaneswar is interesting as having the representation of a boat below the pedestal of the Devi. Tara the primordial deity of Buddhist pantheon is also worshipped to ward off the perils of sea voyage. In those days travel on sea was full of perils. The sailors and sea-faring merchants of Ganjam while setting sails on the ocean worshipped deities like Ramachandi, Durga and Tara for protection and prosperity.

The cultural intercourse that Orissa maintained with other countries helped the spread of Buddhism in the distant lands. The monks and missionaries sailed from different ports on their way to those countries. A number of Buddhist centers were developed in the coastal region for the cause of the spread of religion. Buddhist monuments come to notice in Ganjam port and places around it.

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