



The Shakta Temples of Sonepur

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From the very ancient times, Sonepur is considered as a holy city. The *Kosalananda Kavya* of poet Gangadhara Mishra, written in 1664 A.D., describes the temple city of Sonepur as the second Varanasi of India. Sonepur came under the Chauhans during the days of Ramaideva, the founder of the Chauhan rule in western Orissa in the middle of 14th century A.D. But Sonepur got the status of a separate state in the first half of 17th century, with Madana Gopala Deva as its king. The work of the court poet, Kavi Gangadhara Mishra shows that there were many temples at Sonepur prior to the Chauhan rule.¹ The Somavamsi charter also corroborates this fact.

The copper plate inscription issued in the 17th regnal year of the Somavamsi king Janmejaya (850 A.D.-885 A.D.) states that the temples of 'Sri Kesava' and 'Adidtya Deva' were very famous.² This inscription has been unearthed near the Stambesvari or Khambhesvari, situated in the heart at the present Sonepur town. The Maranjamura Copper Plate of Yayati II, the Somavamsi ruler, issued in his 3rd regnal year from his capital Suvarnapura, also makes a reference to the temples. The description of Suvarnapura, identified with modern Sonepur, in this inscription is simply wonderful. According to the inscription, there were several temples and gardens, which enhance the beauty of the town.

After that there are no references about the temples of Sonepur till the coming in of the Chauhans in mid-14th Century A.D. The temple building tradition might have continued in Sonepur, but no inscripational or architectural evidences are available with us. Further research may throw more light on this.

Almost all of the temples now standing at Sonepur were built during the Chauhan rule. On the basis of their cult images, the temples of Sonepur can be divided into three thematic divisions i.e., the *Saiva*, *Vaisnava* and *Sakta* temples.

Ancient Sonepur was a famous seat of tantricism. Even now Sakti worship is more prominent at Sonepur than any other cult. Some of the most important Sakta temples are Sureswari, Stambhesvari or Khambhesvari, Bhagavati, Samelesvari, Budhi Samalei, Manikesvari, Narayani, Sitalei and Landesvari.

The temple of Sureswari is situated on the left bank of the river Tel towards the north of Suvarnameru temple and south-east of Ramesvara temple. It is difficult to determine the time of the installation of the deity. However it seems that, Sureswari was the presiding deity of the Suvarnapur fort during the Somavamsis in about 9th century A.D. The present Satabandha,



Gudialibandha and Jilabandha or tanks and the adjacent mud ridges were probably the water moats and walls of the fort. According to the *Bratacharita*, Suresvari Devi was being worshipped as the guardian deity of the fort at the entrance gate of the Satabandha.

According to legends the legendary hero Parasuram built the temple on the request his mother to make him free from the sin of killing the *Kshyatriyas* of the world, after performing a *Yagnya*. A noteworthy fact about this is the presence of an ancient and big altar, which is believed as the altar of Parasuram by the local people. Some people believe that, this is the seat of Renuka, mother of Parasuram herself.

The present temple of Suresvari devi was constructed by the Chauhan king Achal Singh Deo, with an eight armed Chamunda image as its presiding deity. Goddess Suresvari is offered fish everyday. It is a must for her. The same practice is prevalent in the Varahi temple at Chaurasi. The main festival of the temple is the *Bali Parva* which covers fifteen days starting from *Asvina Amavasya* to *Purnima*.

The temple of Stambhesvari or Khambesvari is situated in the centre of the town. When this temple was built is not known. It is said that wife of Raj Singh Deo, mother of Achal Singh Deo brought her deity Khambesvari from the house of her father, the Raja of Kimidi. Later King Raj Singh built a temple for the deity to honour the goddess of his wife's forebears.³

According to Dr. N.K.Sahu, Stambesvari is the oldest *Sakta* deity of Orissa. Monarchs belonging to different dynasties like Sulki, Bhanja, Tunga had described themselves as the *Padabhakta* or devotee of the deity, in their charters from 8th to 11th century A.D."⁴

From the above fact it can be said that Stambesvari worship was prevalent in this region

much before the coming of the Chauhans. Generally Stambesvari is taken as the tutelary goddess of the Dumals and Kandhs.⁵ The word Stambha or Khamba means pillar. A black wooden post symbolizing the deity was initially being worshipped⁶ and later on an image was installed. According to the court poet Gopinath Panigrahi, the image of Stambesvari is built after the Vanadurga icon. He again opines that, there is the tradition of keeping two *Nisana*, that is a type of musical instrument made of iron, hidden. So, there must be two *Nisanas* kept hidden here also.⁷

The Bhagavati temple is situated on the eastern part of the town. Nothing definite is known about the date and builder of the temple. But it is regarded as an ancient monument by the local people. The presiding deity of the temple is called Bhagavati, a form of Durga. The icon, though blurred, exhibits an antiquarian look. Some scholars identify the deity with Panchambari-Bhadrambika, as mentioned in the Maranjamura plate of Mahasivagupta Yayati II.

The temple of Samalesvari is standing on the right bank of river Mahanadi towards the south-east of the royal palace. Goddess Samalesvari was the tutelary deity of the Chauhan dynasty of both Sambalpur and Sonapur. Maharaja Sobha Singh (1771-1786 A.D.) constructed the present edifice.

The Bruddha Samalei or Budhi Samalei is situated towards the north of the Dadhivamana temple facing north. As the Goddess is installed here from an ancient time, she is given the name of Bruddha Samalei. Initially she was worshipped in a thatched house. The present structure is the creation of Maharaja Prataparudra Deva (1891-1902 A.D.).

The Manikesvari temple stands on the right side of the Sonapur-Manamunda road.



Manikesvari was the tutelary deity of the fisherman community. The present temple was built by the headman of the said community named Chamar Mahalik during the reign of Maharaja Prataprudra Singh Deo.⁸

The Narayani temple is built towards the north of the Gopinath temple. It was built by Maharaja Prithvi Singh Deo. But it is not known, when and by whom the Sitalei temple was built. Its *Mukhasala* was however, constructed by Maharaja Vira Mitrodaya Singh in 1935 A.D.

In the bed of the Mahanadi, there is a small rock called Lankesvari and the deity installed there is also known by the same name. Lankesvari is the presiding goddess of Lanka, the old Sonepur and is worshipped daily even at present by the boat-men. The deep gorge in the Mahanadi near the Lenkesvari hillock is called Lankesvari Darha⁹ and it is referred to as *Lankavarttaka* in old inscriptions. The deity was being worshipped on the rock, in a small niche like structure but recently, it has been shifted to a highrise structure on the same place apparently to protect it from flood waters during rains. The new structure rests on a pillared platform negotiable by a flight of steps.

Sakta Images

Being a stronghold of Sakti worship, a large number of Sakta images are found in the temples of Sonepur. Some of them appear as the presiding deities and the others are found in niches as the Parsvadevi. Some images are also carved on both exterior and interior walls of the temples. But due to the thick coating of vermilion and sandal paste, some of them are not in a condition to be identified. Fortunately enough, still there are a few images, which have distinct features at present.

The image of Mahisamardini is found in all the temples dedicated to Sakti worship in

Sonepur. Mahisamardini is the main incarnation of Durga. Generally she appears in standing pose with ten arms and scattered hair. She usually holds sword, arrow, knife and kharpara in her right hands and shield, bow, disc and mace in her left hands. The Mahisasura or the buffalo-demon is seen lying at her feet. The Goddess is depicted killing the demon by a long trident, by holding it with two hands. Such images are found in the Samalesvari, Suvarnameru and Ramesvara temples. In the Bhagavati temple, the presiding icon is Mahisamardini. The attributes are indistinct but her third eye is visible on her forehead. The presiding deity of the Suresvari temple also corresponds to the above description. Devi Mahisamardini also appears as the Parsvadevi in the northern niche of the Vimana of the Ramasvara temple. This six-armed image is depicted in her conventional archer's pose. She assumes alidha position. The Goddess is shown killing the demon Mahisa by piercing the trident by holding it in her lower left hand. The demon is absent in the sculpture. Her right leg is on the back of her mount lion. She holds a mace in her uplifted right hand whereas the upper left and middle right arms are broken. The Goddess is wearing a karanda mukuta.¹ She is also found in the niche of the Jagamohana of the Samalesvari temple. The four-armed Devi holds conch and disc in her upper back arms and a trident in front arms.

A unique image of goddess Durga is found in the western side niche of the Khambesvari temple. The uniqueness of this icon is the number of arms i.e., fourteen, which is yet to be found anywhere else. It is a standing image holding battle-axe, bow, disc, pasa, kharpara, shield in her left arms and mace, arrow, ankusa, sword etc. in her right arms. She is embellished with ornaments like kirita mukuta, kundala in ears, bangles in hands, anklets in feet etc. The deity



stands on a pedestal and below it stands her mount lion, in a marching position. Two female attendants are standing on her both sides. In the northern niche of the same temple, another eight-armed standing Durga is enshrined as the Parsvadevi. Her weapons are disc, knife, bow and battle-axe in left hands and sword, arrow, trident and dagger in right hands. She is flanked by two attendants while her mount lion is found below her.

An icon of Durga is also found in the lintel of Budhi Samalei temple of Sonapur. Here she is sitting on a tiger, endowed with her usual ornaments. This eight-armed deity is holding disc, trident, sword in her right three hands and the fourth one is in varada mudra while her left hands hold conch, mace, bow with arrow and a lotus. Her very countenance is quite graceful.

The most interesting images found at Sonapur are a group of Matrikas installed in niches around the inner wall of the Jagamohana the Samalesvari temple. The Matrika images are usually found in a set generally of seven (Saptamatrika) and occasionally eight (Astamatrika), though individual images of some Matrikas such as Chamunda and Varahi are frequently found as presiding deities in Sakta temples. The set usually consists of Brahmi, Sivani, Kaumari, Vaisnavi, Varahi, Indrani and Chamunda and when the eighth one is added it is either Nrisimhi or an aspect of Chamunda. But in Sonapur only one set of eight Matrikas is found in the niches of the interior walls of the Samalesvari temple where Nrisimhi replaces the image of Brahmi and the eighth one is of Daksina Kalika. The Matrikas here are not depicted in their conventional passive mode i.e. with a child on their lap but as warrior goddesses who include a garland of skulls in their body ornamentation. Narasimhi, riding on a lion holds a vajra and a

sword in her right hands and blows a conch held in one of her left hands. Varahi assumes an alidha pose and stuffs a demon into her gaping mouth with her uplifted back hand. The eight-armed Chamunda stands on a prostrate corpse while the other matrikas are riding on their respective mounts. Sivani holds a vajra, rosary, trident and a parasu while the two-armed Indrani carries an ankusa and either a bell or a vajra. Vaisnavi is riding the Garuda and Kaumari is shown with her mount Peacock. The eighth image of Daksina Kalika is found seated in intercourse on the corpse of Siva. The matrikas are accompanied by Mahisamardini and Hanuman. The images are partially covered with whitewash and paste. So their features are indistinct.³

Another image of Kali is also found as the Parsvadevi in the eastern niche of the Bhagavati temple. Standing on a corpse, the four-armed deity carries a spear and a sword in her uplifted hands and a kharpara in her lower left hand. Exhibiting a fierce look, she wears a garland of human skulls. The presiding deity of the Suresvari temple is also Chamunda. This six-armed image is standing on a corpse. She is holding a sword, rosary and a small trident in her right hands respectively where as in her left hands, she is holding a *skull-cup* and a shield while biting the finger of her remaining left hand.² A garland of *Skull* is hanging from her neck. A second image of the ferocious Chamunda is found towards the north of Suresvari temple. The four-armed standing icon is depicted with hanging breasts, shunken belly and skeletal body. She carries a spear and a sword in her uplifted hands and a human skull in her lower left hand. She wears a garland of human skulls. A jackle under her feet is dragging the corpse upon which the image stands. Another icon of Varahi is also found in the western niche of the Suresvari temple. In the Suvarnameru temple compound, some loose



sculptures are kept. One among those is that of a six-armed Chamunda. In her up-raised upper right hand she holds a sword whereas she is seen biting the finger of her upper left hand. In her middle left hand she is holding a long khatvanga while her middle right hand is on her right breast. She is seen wearing a jatamukuta. Her left leg is raised up to the knee level.

The present Sonepur town may not be in focus in modern context but it bears testimony of a long and glorious past, literary accounts speak volumes of her rich cultural and sculptural antiquities. Being a seat of Tantric Saktism, it was once upon a time at the peak of esoteric practices, the impact of which can be felt even today during Duga puja.

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