

Sun-Worship in Odisha

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The present paper throws immense light on Sun-worship in Odisha right from the pre-historic period to the present day with a background for Sun-worship in Indian context. In early-medieval period along with Buddhism, Jainism, Saivism, Vaisnavism and Saktism, Saura cult flourished throughout the length and breadth of the state of Odisha under the patronage of various dynasties. Here, an attempt has been made to study the history of Sun-worship based on archaeological sources and attention is being paid for the present practice among the primitive tribes as well as rituals practised in various temples.

The Saura cult practised before the above religions are evident from the symbolic representation of Sun in the rock art panel of Gostimoda-I of Sundergarh district¹, Chalcolithic pottery of Nuagada and Manamunda in Suvarnapur and Boudh districts

respectively, early-historic pottery of Manikpatna and Narisho in coastal Odisha and a scores of silver punch-marked coins discovered from

Jharpara, Dhauli, Sisupalgarh and Khandagiri in Bhubaneswar, Sonapur, Baripada, Salipur, Asurgarh and Chatrapur etc. These coins display the abstract form of Sun-god i.e. a circle with radiant rays from all sides. However the earliest figurative representation of Surya in Odisha is carved on the tympanum of Anantagumpha in Khandagiri hill, Bhubaneswar. Thereafter, the temples of Odisha displayed the Sun-god as an *avarana devata* on the exterior wall of the temple in different segments besides his presence in the *navagraha* slab.



In India, Sun-worship was originated as early as the Neolithic period unlike the rest of the world². In Vedic India, the Sun-god of the primitive age was

transformed and sublimated. The depiction of an encircled Sun on a Neolithic pottery from Piklihal³ in Karnataka is no doubt significant. On the paintings in the rock shelters of Singhanpur (Raigar area, Chhatisgarh), the Sun-god has been represented with seven rays⁴. The two stone slabs retrieved from the Neolithic site of Burzahom (Period-II) in Kashmir depicted the abstract form of Sun. The excavator as well as the other scholars define one to rising and other to setting Sun of which the hunting is being performed in the day time⁵.

However the earliest anthropomorphic representations of Surya has come from Patna in Bihar on a terracotta circular disc in which the Sun-god is shown mounted on a chariot drawn by four horses.⁶ The figure is ascribed to the Mauryan period. The terracotta image of Sun-god from Chandraketurgarh,⁷ Surya from a medallion of Bharhut⁸ and a railing of Bodhgaya⁹ Stupa and the Sun image of the Bhaja¹⁰ cave in Maharashtra are the finest workmanship of the Sunga and Satavahana artists dating back to 2nd century B.C. But after the Gupta period, a large number of Sun images have been sculpted throughout the country although very less in South India.

The antiquity of Sun- worship in Odisha can be traced back to the Prehistoric period. Traces of Sun-worship in Odisha are also found in the early Vedic period. According to the mythical accounts of the Puranas, a *rishi* named Dirghatamas was the first ancestor of prince Kalinga from whom the territory derived its name¹¹. Though there is no direct reference to Kalinga in the Vedas, mention is made of seer Dirghatamas Aucathya, who was the author of Rigvedic hymns which refer to the glory of the Sun¹². It is probable that Dirghatamas of the Vedas and of the Puranas was one and the same *rishi*.

Thus Sun-worship in Kalinga in all probability existed from the remote days. The connection of the Sun-god with Kalinga is known from the *Jaiminiya Grhyasutra* (2.9) which mentions, *Jatam Arka Kalingesu*, indicating as god.

Like other parts of India, we do not find the human representation of the Sun- God either on the coins or on the potteries. Epigraphy plays an important role in the study of the antiquity of Sun worship supported by various copper plate grant and inscriptions found in various parts of the state ranging from 5th century A.D. to 13th century A.D. During the time of Harshavardhana in northern India in Kalinga also we find references to Sun-worship. A new dynasty called Mathara, appeared in Kalinga in the 5th century A.D. But those Matharas began to worship Narayana.¹³ It may be pointed out here that Visnu and Surya belonged to one group namely celestial- according to Rgveda.¹⁴ Apart from the revival of Vedic ritualism and the growth of Vaisnavism and Saivism, Sun-worship found a definite place during the time of Sailodbhavas.

Sun-worship in Sailodbhava period

After the Matharas, the next reference to Sun worship is found in the Sumandala plate of the time of Prithivi Vighraha (Gupta year 250-569 A.D.). This inscription reveals that Maharaja Dharmaraja who was ruling from his capital at Padmakhali, was devoted to the god Sahasrasmi or the Sun-god. The name of the capital appears to be significant in view of lotus with the Sun-god. The oval seal of the plate contains an emblem, which looks like a solar disk. Probably he belonged to Sailodbhava dynasty. This reveals that Sun worship had already become the religion of the royal house in 569 A.D. He is the first person who patronized Sun-cult in Kalinga.

The cult seems to have been popular in Odisha in 6th-7th century A.D. that a set of Brahmins known as “*Maitrayeniya Brahmanas*” appeared in coastal Odisha during this period. The Olsing copper plate of Bhanuwardhana¹⁵ and Kanasa plate of Lokavigraha (600 A.D.),¹⁶ it is mentioned that these Maitreyaniya Brahmanas, who were worshippers of Mitra (Sun), were accorded royal patronage with the issue of land grant. Varahamihira, who was in all probability a Maga Brahmana devoted to the Sun-god, mentions in his Brihat Samhita, that of the countries of Odra, Kalinga and their people are under the direct influence of the Sun (Bhaskara Svami).

In this connection, it is to be noted that according to Agni Purana,¹⁷ the Brahmanas who were deputed to Sun-worship and who migrated from the Saka dvipa, were named as Magas. N.N. Vasu,¹⁸ after discussing at length about Sun worship in Odisha, has come to the conclusion that the Magas introduced Sun worship in Odisha from an early time. According to Puranic sources only the Angirasa Bharadvaja Brahmanas preserved their ancient cult. From the Ganjam grant of Madhavaraja-II, we know that he granted the village Chhavalakhya to Chharampadeva of Bharadvaja *gotra* and Angirasa Pravara on the occasion of a Solar eclipse,¹⁹ a day of significance for the Sun worshippers. According to the Banapur²⁰ and Parikuda²¹ copper plate grant of the Sailodbhava ruler Madhyamaraja -I (665-695 A.D.), certain solar saints of Kangoda mediated in front of the mid-day Sun to get merits from the Sun-god. Thus it is obvious that Madhavaraja-II was a patron of Sun worship in Kangoda. It was not only the personal religion of Dharmaraja-I in 569 A.D., but it was also widely accepted by a set of

Brahmins of the Puri and Ganjam districts of Odisha by the years 600 A.D. and 695 A.D.

The Bhanjas of Khijinga *mandala* were the ardent follower of Sun-worship. They donated landgrants to the Angirasa Brahmins of Bharadvaja *gotra* which is known from the Baud copper grant of Ranabhanja²² and copper plate grant of Odisha State museum of Tribhuvana-Bhanja.²³ In medieval Odisha, Sonepur, Baud, Phulbani and Ghumsur area of Ganjam district were the stronghold of Sun-worship according to the copper grants of the Bhanja rulers. The sculptural representations of Surya found in the Khiching museum also testified the fact.

Somavamsis Period

The popularity of the Sun-cult in Odisha during the Somavamsi period can be inferred from both literary and archaeological evidence. According to the traditions of the Madala Panji, one Purandara Kesari constructed a Sun temple at Konarak. A fragmentary inscription engraved on the back of an image of Surya from the village of Gandibedha, near Soro in Bhadrak district, mentions *Somakulatilaka Sri Karnarajadeva* who may be identified with the Somavamsi king Karnadeva. The locality from which this inscribed Sun image was discovered continued to be a centre of Sun-worship until a very period. N.N. Vasu, who noticed the ruins of a Sun temple at Soro, remarks that the village was formerly known as Saurapura or Suryapura.

The prevalence of Sun-worship in western Odisha is evident from the surviving images of Surya. There was a Sun temple at Salebhata in Balangir district which has been converted into a Candi temple. The Mahada plates of Somesvaradevavarman-III (c. 1155-1180 A.D.), who was ruling in south Kosala with headquarters

at Suvarnapura (Sonepur), described the king as Satyamarttandadeva-Sri Vaidyanatha-Padapanka-jabhramara, which indicates his devotion for the Sun god and the god Vaidyanatha (Siva), whose temple exists in the same locality. The grant was issued on the 7th day of the bright fortnight of Magha, which fell on a Sunday (*Maghamasi sukla-paksa tithau*). The Magha Saptami, considered as the sacred to the Sun-god, when it falls on a Sunday, as in the case of the grant, it is known as Vijaya Saptami.

During the Somavamsis period (695 A.D - 1118 A.D.), Sun worship was popular in Kosala and Utkal region. The Aranga copper plate grant of Bhimasena-II of Kosala king (Gupta era 282 or 601-602 A.D.),²⁴ Rajim copper plate grant of Somavamsis king Tibaradeva (A.D. 690-725),²⁵ Patna copper plate of Mahabhavagupta Janmejaya-I (A.D. 850-885),²⁶ Chaudar copper plate of Mahasivagupta Yajati (A.D. 885-920)²⁷ and Nibina copper plate²⁸ suggest the popularity of Sun-worship during the Somavamsis period. They donated land grants to the Angirasa Brahmanas of Bharadvaja *gotra* in Kosala region. The Sonepur charter of Somavamsi king Janmejaya²⁹ records that a merchant association of Kamalavana transferred the gift of a village named Gataikela included in the “Luputtara Khanda” in Kosala to two temples, one of which was dedicated to Sri Adityabhattacharakadevakula means the Sun-god Aditya. This proves the existence of a Sun temple and the popularity of Sun-worship of Kosala in general and Sonepur in particular.

The Cuttack copper plate grant of Mahasivagupta Yajati-I mentions the name of Divakara.³⁰ The Sirpur inscription³¹ of Balarjuna (A.D. 790-850) mentions the name of the inscriber as Prabhakara. The uncle name of

Balarjuna was Bhaskara Verma (Solar name) according to this inscription.³² The Baud inscription of Bhandaka ascribed the name of an officer as Bhaskarabhatta. The above solar epithets of the royal house indicate the popularity of Sun-cult in western, southern as well as coastal Odisha.

Ganga and later Ganga Period

The inscriptions of the early Ganga rulers throw light on the progress of Sun-worship. The Sun temple at Arasavalli in Srikakulam district of Andhra Pradesh was a centre of Sun-worship, at the time of Devendra Varman of the early Ganga family. The inscriptions of the early period of the Gangas contain many proper names referring to the Sun-god like Bhanuchandra, Prabhakara, Adityadeva, Udayaditya, Divakarasarma, Ravisarma, Bhanusarma etc.

Sun –worship made further progress during the rule of the imperial Gangas. The connection of the Sun-worshipping Maga-Brahmanas of Bihar with Odisha may be inferred from the Govindpur stone inscription of the Maga poet Gangadhara (1137-38 A.D.), which records that Manoratha went to “the sacred Purusottama”. The stone inscriptions of the Nilesvara temple³³ (modern Nilakanthesvara in the village Narayanapur, Visakhapatnam district) shows that an image of Aditya or Sun was enshrined there in the reign of Ganga king Rajaraja-I (1070 A.D.-1078 A.D.). This is most probably the earliest instance to show that Sun worship was practised by the Gangas. The Nagari plates of Anangabhima-III (1211-38 A.D.), contain interesting information regarding the Aditya Purana or the text of Sun-worship. Anangabhima-III is said to have granted five *Vatis* of land in accordance with the recommendation of the Aditya Purana (*Adityapuranaotam*).

In a copper plate inscription found from Kapalesvara³⁴ on the north bank of the Mahanadi (opposite to Cuttack), Aditya the Sun God is invoked along with other Gods like Brahma, Varuna, Soma, Agni and Siva who bring happiness to the giver of a gift of land. During the eastern Ganga rule the second Chicacole grant was issued by Indravarman III in the year 1138 (Circa A.D. 636) on the occasion of Rathasaptami in the month of Magha³⁵ (auspicious for the Sun god) records the donation that reveals the wide popularity of Sun worship in the kingdom of the Gangas. The Alagum inscription of Chodagangadeva records that the grant was made on the 7th *tithi* of the bright fortnight of Magha. The fact is further corroborated when Narasimha –I constructed the grand Sun temple at Konarak in 13th century A.D. and the devotion to Sun-god amply testified when he given the name of his son as Bhanudeva. However, the fact remains that it was during the Ganga period, Sun-worship was merged into Vaisnavism.

Other Royal dynasties of Odisha

The famous Nalavamsi king Arthapati (465-475 A.D.) ruled over modern Bastar and Koraput region whose Kesaribeda copper plate grant³⁶ mentions the name of Ravi Raya and Ravidatta Raya. Saravapuriya dynasty's king Sudeva Raj-I's (630-655 A.D.), Sarangagada copper plate³⁷ also mentions the name of two epithets like Bhaskarasvami and Prabhakarasvami. The above facts indicate that, the Nalas and Saravapuriya kings were also the patron of the Sun-cult in *Dakshina Kosala*.

The Pherova grant of Samantavarman of Svetaka *Mandala* was made to Brahmanas bearing names such as Ravi Sarma, Divakara Sarma etc. The Masunika grant also records the donees having solar names like Bhanu Sarma and

Ravi Sarma. These donees belonged to Bharadvaja *gotra* and the connection of Bharadvaja *gotra* with Sun worship is very ancient. This suggests that the above mentioned two families were Sun-worshippers. We find such references to kings, officers and donees having solar names in a number of inscriptions of Odisha-of the Matharas, Nalas, the Vighras, the Dattas, the Sailodbhavas, the Early Gangas and Imperial Gangas.

Present form of Sun-worship

Sun worship is a part of everyday ritual is till practised in Odisha. In central Odisha (Dhenkanal and Angul) the followers of Mahima Dharma, everyday pray to the rising and setting Sun. At the Lingaraja temple, *Surya puja* is a part of the daily routine. On Magha Saptami the representative of Lord Lingaraja is taken out in a procession to the Bhaskaresvara Siva temple located in Brahmesvara Patna of Bhubaneswar. Bhaskaresvara, the Sivalinga, is named after Bhaskara, the Sun-god. After joint worship of Siva and Surya, the deity returns to the Lingaraja temple. Magha Saptami is also known as Ratha Saptami, as on this day the Sun-god got his chariot. The chariot of Lord Lingaraja is constructed as per the specification of the Bhaskaresvara temple. The *Niladri Mohodaya*, which lays down the rules regarding the worship of Lord Jagannatha also mentions the ritual of Sun-worship with appropriate *Dhyanas*, *Nyاسas* and *Mudras*. It even proclaims that without the worship of Sun, the worship of Visnu is fruitless. The worship of the Lord Jagannatha at Puri is also supposed by some Scholars to be connected with solar worship and the image itself is supposed to be a primitive representation of the orb of the Sun. It is noteworthy that the Car festival of Jagannatha at Puri is a feature which was also observed in the worship of the Sun-god at

Mathura, Konarak and Sambapura, and the Varaha- Purana also extols the merit accruing to the pilgrims who, having the Car festival of the Sun-god at Mathura, also attend the same festival held in honour of the Sun at Sambapura which is identified as Multan in Pakistan located on the bank of the river Chandrabhaga, a tributary of the river Indus. The festival was held in the month of Magha Saptami.

Sun-worship survives in the society in the form of popular *vratas* such as *Ravi Narayana vrata*, *Pusa Ravivara vrata* and *Dutiya Osa*. The *Samba Dasami* which falls on the 10th day of the bright half of the *Pausa* is a popular festival connected with Sun-worship. The 7th day of the bright fortnight of the month of *Magha* is considered as an auspicious day for Sun-worship. On the *Magha Saptami* a ceremonial bath in the sea or in the river Chandrabhaga near Konark, is considered highly meritorious. The Brahma Purana mentions the Magha Saptami at Konark and prescribes the rites to be performed after the ceremonial bath in the sea. The *Krtya Kaumudi* of Brhaspati Misra (c. 1350 A.D.) also lays down the procedure, quoting passages from the *Smṛti Samuccaya*, *Matsya Purana* and *Brahma Purana*. Sarala Das (15th century A.D.) in his *Mahabharata* mentions that a large number of people used to visit the *tirtha* of the Chandrabhaga in the month of Makara on the Sukla Saptami day. The festival continued even after the ruin of the temple and gradual silting up of the river Chandrabhaga.

In Kumara Purnima (which fall in the full-moon day of the month of *Asvina*), especially the unmarried girls of Odisha prayed the rising Sun and Moon in the early morning and evening respectively for getting a life-partner who should be dazzling personality like Surya and beautiful like Chandra. Moreover, Sun is also considered as a god of fertility throughout the world.

Sun in tribal belief system

Located in the eastern coast of Bay of Bengal Odisha is fabulously rich in material culture of the tribals. There are three major patterns of worship centre round on Sun. The changes of weather, day break and night fall and the germination, growth and decay of plants and their effects on the human beings necessitated the concentration of tribal worship on Sun. The tribals like Kondhas, Orans, Bhuiyans, Gonds, Kharias and Bhunjias of western Odisha worshipping in their own ways either the Supreme Being or as a powerful god regulating their agriculture. Moreover, they invoke him to protect their fields, to help them in hunting and to relieve them of the debts and other unpleasant aspects of life³⁸.

The Saoras and Juangs, two important primitive tribes of Odisha worship Sun as their supreme god in which they paid their homage on all festive occasions particularly before any agricultural operations, construction of houses and marriage ceremonies. When any fruits like mango and jackfruits ripen and when any crops are harvested, the concerned deities, ancestral spirits and mother goddesses are worshipped by offering such fruits to them. Unless that is done no one can eat them. Any violation of such tradition and customs brings misfortune and mishap to them.

The Khaira tribe of Mayurbhanja district also worships the Sun-god under the name of Dharani Devata.³⁹ The Bondo tribe of Malkangiri district worshipped their supreme deity as Patkhanda Mahaprabhu who stands for the Sun and Moon.⁴⁰ He is considered as benevolent. The Santalas inhabiting in the hilly region of Mayurbhanj, Keonjhar and Balasore districts had a strong belief in various deities, ghosts, spirits

residing on hills, forests and streams and the ancestral spirits guiding their every walk of life. “Thakur” or “Sing Bonga” or “Dharam” is their supreme deity, who is identified as Sun-god. Similarly the Kondh tribes of Southern Odisha worship the Sun-god under the name of Bona Pennu for good crops and in the past human sacrifices were also offered to this God. So the tribal’s had a strong belief for the eternity of Surya like the other parts of the country.

In conclusion it can be said that, because of its popularity in belief, ritual and religious practices a chequered history is quite natural in the realm of art, architecture and iconography of Surya, the Indian Sun-god. Right from the prehistoric times to the construction of the grand Sun temple at Konark one encounters an interesting account of the origin, growth and development of the Sun worship which is still practised in some form or the other in the state among the tribes as well as the people of Odisha. The vast span of time from the 1st century B. C. to the middle of the 14th century A. D. has yielded numerous images of the god which provide a material support to the information gathered from various literary sources. Odisha, being an important strong hold of Sun worship, has also supplied a number of Sun images of different types having conformity with the prescriptions laid down by the many sacred texts, some of the images which are intact highlight clear iconographic features, while others are damaged either by the cruelty of man or nature. Some of them even throw new light on the iconic features of the deity. In spite of some conceptual deviations, his basic iconographic features were maintained throughout. Further work on this subject will certainly highlight many new theories on Saura cult in Odisha.

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