

Situating Viraja Kshetra and Its Environs in the Odishan Historiography

Dr. Atul Chandra Pradhan

This paper aims to situate the cultural heritage of Viraja Kshetra (Jajpur) and its environs in the historiography of ancient and medieval Odisha. Situated on the bank of the Vaitarani river, it was an important urban centre of ancient and medieval Odisha. It had three important ingredients of urbanisation - religious - cultural, Buddhist, Tantrik (Shaktism), Jain and Brahmanical (Shaivism and Vaishnavism), political - administrative (Guhadevapataka, the capital of the Buddhist king Guhashiva, and Bhauma and Somavamshi kings, which is identified with modern Gohirkira is five miles away from Virajakshetra and military (Jajpur was one of the five Katakas or forts of Odishan kingdom in ancient and medieval periods; at Gohirkira Mukundadeva, the last independent ruler of Odishan kingdom died while fighting with his rebellious feudatory Ramachandra Bhanja, the commandant of Sarangagada). For certain historical reasons such as the emergence of an

efflorescent Brahmanism which suppressed and absorbed Mahayan and Tantrik (Vajrayan) Buddhism and another heterodox non-Vedic religion called Jainism, which were predominant in the earlier phase of the history of Virajakshetra, the shifting of centre of gravity of Cuttack which was considered to be secure because of its location between the river Mahanadi and its distributary Kathjodi and Muslim invasion and occupation which resulted in the destruction of temples (The temples such as Laliteshwar, Kusumeshwar, Dandishwar and Rajarajeshwar which are mentioned in Viraja Kshetra Mahatmya, a part of Brhmanda Purana do not exist now; according to K.C. Panigrahi, the main mosque of

Jajpur was built with the materials of a Hindu temple during Aurangzeb's reign¹), the heritage of Viraja Kshetra and its environs remained in relative obscurity. Although Viraja Kshetra and its environs are rich in archaeological remains, the epigraphic sources which can be used for



constructing its history are few. Viraja Kshetra Mahatmya is an important literary source of its history, but it is a much later work (it is assigned by scholars to fourteenth - fifteenth centuries A.D.) and based on legends.

Most of the earliest temples of Viraja Kshetra do not exist now. The present Viraja temple where Goddess Viraja has been enshrined was built in the eighteenth century by a local zamindar. The deity was earlier worshipped at a place, called Kalaspur, one mile away from the present temple, in a small temple of Gupta Age.² The ancient name of present Jajpur is Viraja Kshetra. Viraja Kshetra is found mentioned in the Sanskrit Mahabharat, which is a work of third century B.C. This has led some scholars to hold that worship of Shakti (deified female energy) in the form of Viraja was prevalent in Jajpur as early as or even earlier than third century B.C. According to R.P. Chanda, stylistically the image of Viraja, the two-armed Mahishamardini was a work of 4th-5th century A.D.³ (Hence the mention of Viraja Kshetra in Mahabharat might be an interpolation.)

If Goddess Viraja was installed in 4th-5th century A.D., whether the deity had her origin in Brahmanical religion or in Mahayan-Vajrayan Buddhism which was pre-dominant in Viraja Kshetra in that period ? According to Viraja Kshetra Mahatmya goddess Viraja was born out of a sacrifice, performed by the Creator Brahma. Shakti worship which did not remain confined to the worship of Viraja and led to the worship of Sapta Matruka, seven mother goddesses became a popular cult in Viraja Kshetra during Bhauma rule (8th-9th centuries A.D.) and afterwards. It cannot be connected with Vedic religion; it is generally associated with Tantrik cult. According to Pag-Sam-Jon-Zang, the Tibetan text Tantrik Buddhism originated in a place, called Uddiyana.

Some scholars identify Uddiyana with Odisha. According to Mahamahopadhyay Haraprasad Shastri who identifies Uddiyana with Odisha, Indrabhuti, the king of Uddiyana organised Mahayana Buddhism into Vajrayan (Tantrik) Buddhism.⁴ According to Kubjika Tantra, an early Tantrik text Viraja is the goddess of Uddiyana.⁵ According to some scholars and Nepalese Tantrik traditions Indrabhuti's son Padma Sambhava was also associated with Viraja Kshetra.⁶ We may therefore identify Uddiyana with Viraja Kshetra and consider Viraja to be originally a Tantrik (Mahayan-Vajrayan) deity who was subsequently absorbed into the fold of Brahmanical and religion by the performance of sacrifice. There are many instances of deities originally belonging to the non-Brahmanical cults being absorbed into Brahmanical religion. At Lalitagiri, the early Buddhist site stone plaques of Mahisamardini have been unearthed.⁷ The protagonists of Brahmanical religion adopted a clever stratagem to assimilate Buddhist sites and deities and Buddha himself into their fold as is very well illustrated in the legend of Gayasur, embodied in Viraja Kshetra Mahatmya - Gayasur was a benevolent demon (probably a Buddhist king); god Vishnu took his permission to cut his body into three pieces - head, trunk and legs; he threw his head to Gaya which was originally a Buddhist site, his navel (nabhi) to Viraja Kshetra which was therefore called Nabhi Gaya, and his legs to Mahendra mountain.⁸

The spread of Buddhism in Odisha is generally traced back to Ashoka's Kalinga war i.e. from 3rd Century B.C. onwards. In the post-Mauryan period important Buddhist monasteries representing Hinayan, Mahayan and Vajrayan or Tantrik phases of Buddhism emerged in the Assia mountain range, situated to the south of Viraja Kshetra (Jajpur town).

Probably the earliest Buddhist establishment in the Assia mountain range was Lalitagiri whose cultural sequence extends from 3rd century B.C. to 1200 A.D.⁹ It is situated in the Virupa - Chitrotala valley of Kendrapada district (on the Landa hillock near Olasuni hill beside the Express Highway) at a distance of forty kilometers from the Jajpur town (Viraja Kshetra). A terracotta seal found after excavation, which is palaeographically datable to 9th - 10th centuries A.D. shows that this monastery was known as "Sri Chandraditya Vihar Samagra Arya Vikshu Sangha." Excavation at Lalitagiri revealed a massive stupa on hill top, an apsidal Chaityagruha, four monasteries (out of which two are double-storied), numerous sculptures of Buddha and Bodhisattvas of Mahayan and Vajrayan pantheon, Kushana Brahmi inscriptions, a gold ring, silver ingots, stone plaques of Ganesha and Mahishasurmardini, a tiny figure of Avalokitesvara terracotta seals and a number of votive and structural stupas. The excavation at the massive stupa revealed a relic casket. It is a four-layer casket. The outer casket is made of Khandalite stone in the shape of a votive stupa, within its central part a groove is cut to accommodate the second casket which is made of steatite, inside the steatite the third casket is made of silver, inside the silver one gold casket is placed and within the gold casket the sacred Dhatu or relic has been preserved; the relic may be of any of the three Buddhist sages - Buddha himself and his two foremost disciples, Sariputta and Mohamoggallana. Similar casket has been earlier found at Sanchi.¹⁰

Another important Buddhist establishment called "Sri Ratnagiri Mahavihariya Arya Bhikshu Sangha" flourished from 5th century A.D. to 13th century A.D. on the Ratnagiri hillock (Latitude 20°38' N, Longitude 86°20'E), situated in the Assia range in the district of Jajpur between

the Brahmani and Virupa rivers at a distance of twenty five kilometers in south-western direction from the Jajpur town. It was a magnificent monastery, patronised by the rulers of the Bhauma dynasty. This monastery has a Mahastupa (massive stupa) built over the plinth of an earlier edifice, three monasteries and a number of votive stupas. A terracotta sealing found in the excavated site reveals the name of the monastery - Sri Ratnagiri Mahavihariya Arya Bhikshu Sangha. The monasteries have spacious court yards. The monastery one has an elaborately carved chlorite door frame with Gajalaxmi on the lintel and vertical bands of floral creepers and Gelabai motifs. The sanctum in the monastery one enshrines a massive seated Buddha in Bhumisparsha *Mudra*, flanked by the standing figures of Padmapani and Vajrapani holding *Chamaras* on each side. The sanctum in the monastery two contains a Khandalite image of Buddha in standing position, flanked by small figures of Indra and Brahma indicating the miracle of Sankisa. Excavations have revealed a hoard of antiques such as stone and bronze images of Buddha and such deities of Buddhist pantheon as Tara, Lokesvara, Vajrapani, Padmapani, Aparajita, Heruka, Sambara, Hariti and Manjushri.¹¹

Twenty five kilometres away from the jajpur town, in the district of Jajpur on a low hill, called Udayagiri, latitude 20°39' N; longitude 80°16' E, on the right bank of the river Virupa two monasteries, called Madhavpur Mahavihar and Simhaprastha Mahavihar flourished from the early centuries of Christian era to 13th century A.D. The excavations of Madhavpur Mahavihar have yielded a huge monastic complex, comprising a massive stupa, made of bricks and a huge square size monastery. The niches in the stupa contain images of Dhyani Buddhas. The monastery court yard has a shrine chamber with an ornate gateway which houses a colossal image

of Buddha in Bhumisparsha Mudra. The excavations of Simhaprastha Mahavihar have exposed a double - storied monastic complex and a massive shrine complex with an inscribed image of Avalokitesvara as the presiding deity and Buddhist divinities in the niches of the wall. Excavations at Udaygiri sites have yielded sculptures of Buddha and Buddhist divinities like Tara, Manjushri, Bhrikuti, Hariti, Chunda, Avalokiswara, Maitreya, Aparajita, Virochana, Vasudhara etc.¹²

In the Langudi hillock, Latitude 20°43' N; Longitude 86°11'E in the Assia hill range, situated in the Dharmasala Tehsil of the Jajpur district a centre of Buddhist activities emerged in the pre-Christian era (According to some scholars as early as 3rd century B.C.). Exploration of the site has revealed rock-cut stupas, ruins of a monastery, sculptures, terracotta figurines, votive stupas, inscriptions, seals and sealings. The base of a structural stupa, built with dressed laterite blocks and burnt bricks has been unearthed. Out of the 50 rock-cut stupas, one has a figure of Buddha in relief. Two inscribed images of King Ashoka have been unearthed out of a stupa.¹³ As many as twelve inscriptions, mentioning "Pushpagiri", "Pushpasabharagiraya", "Pushpagiri Vihariya" etc. have been found. On examining these inscriptions Professor B.N. Mukherji, an eminent epigraphist has observed that the famous Pushpagiri Vihar mentioned by the Chinese traveller Hiuen-Tsang who visited India in seventh century A.D. was located in the Langudi hill. Mukherji holds that as per the topographical map of the area, the Langudi hill has locational similarities with Hiuen-Tsang's "Pushpagiri".¹⁴

Besides the above four Buddhist establishments a number of Buddhist caves, dating back to pre-Christian era have been discovered at Brajagiri, Kayama, Deuli, Tarapur, Neulpur and

Paikarapur in the Assia hill range. On the Kayama hill a rock-cut elephant has been found with an inscription, mentioning "Sri Sri Buddha".¹⁵

The Bhaumas who established their rule in Odisha in the first half of eighth century A.D. had their capital near Viraja Kshetra i.e. modern Gohiritikira. From the mound at Gohiritikira five huge Buddhist images have been collected and preserved in the Odisha State Museum. The early Bhauma Rulers-Kshemankerdeva, Shivakaradeva I, Shubhakaradeva I and Shivakaradev II were Buddhists and respectively assumed Buddhist epithets like Paramopasaka, Parama Tathagata, Parama Saugata and Saugatashraya. One of these early Bhauma rulers – Shivakaradeva I or his son Shubhakaradeva I sent the Buddhist manuscript Gandavyuha to the Chinese emperor T-Tsong.¹⁶ The Bhauma rule saw the growth of Tantrik Buddhism and carving of Sapta Matruka images. The mother goddesses, actually eight in number are Chamunda, Varahi, Mahesvari, Dantura or Sivaduti, Kaumari, Vaishnavi, Indrani and Narasimhi. (The Sapta matruka shrine is situated beside the river Vaitarani. In the site museum at Jajpur, constructed and maintained by the Archaeological Survey of India, there are three gigantic images of Chamunda, Indrani and Varani.)¹⁷

According to N.K. Sahu, Odisha is the birth place of Mahayan and Vajrayan (Tantrik) Buddhism.¹⁸ It is held by the scholars that Padma Sambhava, a Tantrik Buddhist of Uddiyana Pitha which was most probably a Buddhist establishment in Assia range went to Tibet and preached Buddhism there.¹⁹

The Bhauma Kings accepted the prevalent Varnashram system of Brahmanical society and followed a liberal religious policy. They extended patronage to Buddhism as well as Shaivism. Madhavadevi, the wife of king

Shubhakara Deva I built the Hamseswar Shiva temple at Jajpur. Some Bhauma kings gave land grants to Brahmins and Shiva temples. According to K.C. Panigrahi, the Shiva temples such as Laliteshwar, Kusumeshwar and Dandishwar were built by the Bhauma kings.²⁰

During the Somavamshi rule (ninth to eleventh century A.D) the Tantric practices of the earlier period were replaced by the Vedic sacrifices. Tradition has it that a Somavamshi king (Yayati I or Yayati II) brought ten thousand Brahmins from Kanyakubja (Kanauj) to perform sacrifice at Viraja Kshetra on the bank of the Vaitarani. Thereafter the nomenclature of the place changed to Yayatinagar or Jajnapur or Jajpur. The Somavamshi rulers raised Shiva temples at Bhubaneswar as well as Viraja Kshetra which, according to K.C. Panigrahi, were built by the artisans of the same school.²¹ Viraja Kshetra Mahatmya gives a list of Shiva temples constructed at Viraja Kshetra during Bhauma, Somavamshi and Ganga periods.

By the beginning of twelfth Century A.D. Chodaganga deva, the Ganga ruler of Kalinga conquered the Somavamshi kingdom of Utkal and shifted his capital from Kalinganagar (Mukhalingam) to Katak which had already grown up into an important urban centre during Bhauma and Somavamshi periods. Although Jajpur ceased to be the capital of Utkal during Ganga and Suryavamshi reigns, yet it remained an important place from religious and military points of view. The Shiva temples like Trilochaneshwar, Siddheshwar and Rajarajeshwar were built during the Ganga period.²² In the sixteenth century A.D the Suryavamshi Gajapati Prataparudra Deva built the temple of Varahanath at Jajpur.

In the early phase of its history Jajpur appears to have been dominated by the non-

Vedic or heterodox religions like Buddhism and Jainism. Jain images have been found in Jajpur and its (near by) places. Two Tirthankaras (Parsvanath and Chandranath) images have been found at a place called Narasinghapur near Jajpur. When Buddhism, Jainism and Brahmanical religion existed in the same milieu, they interacted and got amalgamated. Hindu or Brahmanical Tantricism and Sahajiya Vaishnavism are said to have been derived from Vajrayana Buddhism.²³ Influence of Buddhism is traceable on the cult of Shakti and Shiva. The Shaivite sculpture got influenced by the Buddhist sculpture. The image of goddess Kali has been found to be a Buddhist one.²⁴ There was an amalgamation of the cults of Shiva and Shakti. Outside the Viraja temple at Jajpur there exists seventy three Shiva Lingas. At one time Tantricism became powerful enough to influence the cults of Jagannath and Shiva. Viraja, a Tantrik deity was treated in Tantrik texts as Bhairavi (consort) to Lord Jagannath, Lord Shiva and Varaha (who appears to be originally a Tantrik deity). Kalika Purana mentions Jagannath and goddess Katyayani as the presiding deities of Odra Pitha which is regarded as one of the four Pithas, the other three being Kamarupa, Purnagiri and Jalandhara.²⁵

In Uddiyana Tantra Viraja is regarded as the Bhairavi of Varaha.²⁶ The Brahmins performed several sacrifices to absorb Tantrik deities into their fold. That is how emerged the myth of originating or sanctifying the deities like Viraja, Varaha and Ishaneswar (Shiva) through Yajnas or sacrifices and Virajakshetra got its name changed to Jajnapur or Jajpur.

References :

1. Krushna Chandra Panigrahi, *Itihas O Kimbadanti* (Odia), Utkal University, 1962, p.11.
2. Ibid, pp 4 and 5.

3. Quoted in R.C. Mishra, "Jajpur, a centre of religious Activities", Cultural Heritage of Orissa, volume II, (B.C. Ray ed.) Bhubaneswar, 2000, P.75.
4. N.K. Sahu, Buddhism in Orissa, Utkal University, 1958, p. 142.
5. I bid, p.146.
6. Ibid, 146.
7. Buddhist Heritage of Orissa, a Bulletin of the Archaeological Survey of India, Bhubaneswar Circle.
8. Quoted in Panigrahi, op.cit., pp.3 and 4.
9. G.C Chauley.
10. As reported by Chauley in The Telegraph, 17 October 1997 The archaeological site of Lalitagiri was brought to public notice by Chandrasekhar Bannerji in 1869, The site was documented by the archaeologist R P Chanda in 1927-28. It was declared a centrally protected monument in 1937. In 1977 Professor K.S. Behera undertook excavation at Lalitgiri. During 1985-1992 G.C. Chauley the Superintending Archaeologist, Bhubaneswar Circle of the Archaeological Survey of India unearthed the Buddhist establishment at Lalitagiri.
11. M M Chakravarty brought to public notice the archaeological treasure of Ratnagiri in 1905. During 1958-61 on behalf of the Archaeological Survey of India Debala Mitra conducted extensive excavation in Ratnagiri site. She published her book Buddhist Monuments at Calcutta in 1969.
12. Chandrasekhar Bannerji drew public attention to the huge Buddhist monastic complexes on the Udaygiri hill spread over an area of 325. 49 acres in 1870. It was declared a centrally protected monument in 1937. Excavations were undertaken by the Archaeological Survey of India in two phases, in the first phase at Udaygiri from 1985 to 1997 and in the second phase at Udaygiri II from 1997 to 2003.
13. Ekadashi Padhi, Jajpur, the land of Viraja at a glance, Jajpur, 2004, p.25.
14. The Utkal Pradeepa, Vol.I, No1, January 1997, B.N. Mukherji, "Two Early Brahmi Inscriptions from the Langudi Hill Area (Orissa)"The Buddhist remains of Langudi hills were first explored by Dr. H.C. Prusty during his field work in 1991. Prof. K.S. Behera and Devaraj Pradhan, respectively the Director and Secretary of Odishan Institute of Maritime and South East Asian Studies started excavations in Langudi hills in 1996. The excavation continues for five successive seasons from 1996 to 2001. In 2004 the Archaeological Survey of India declared the Buddhist vestiges of the area as centrally protected.
15. Report on excavation of Buddhist sites submitted by Devaraj Pradhan on 28 may 2005.
16. See foreword to Sahu, op.cit IX by Professor Nalinaksha Dutt, the Pali scholar. Prof. Dutt holds that the Gandavyuha text, sent to the Chinese emperor T-Tsong was copied by the Bhauma King with his own hand. Close to the Dubri hill, in an old village called Gandivedha, probably named after Gandavyuha, There are the remains of a large Buddhist Stupa, (Sahu, op.cit.,p.86).
17. Padhi, op.cit, pp.12 and 15
18. Sahu op.cit., pp79-94. 122-140
19. Ibid, p.146
20. Panigrahi, p.9
21. Ibid, pp 1-2
22. Padhi, op.cit, pp 9-11
23. Sarala Smaranika, Prajatantra Prachara Samiti, Cuttack, 1954. P 13, Pandit Nilakantha Das, "Sarala Dasanka Dharma".
24. Ibid, p.5, Artaballabha Mahanty, "Sarala Das"
25. Sahu, op.cit, p.145.
26. Quoted in Ekadasi Padhi (ed.) Shivaraha, Jajpur, 1995, p35.