

Abstract

This paper focuses on the identification, analysis, documentation and interpretation of various myths, legends, oral traditions, folklores, cultural practices as well as scientific data that indicate the existence of river(s) around Konark, which lies on the east coast by the Bay of Bengal. While tradition talks of a holy river known as Chandrabhaga near Konark, currently there is no river. Did a river exist? Where was it located? What role did it play in community life? How did it possibly disappear? The paper attempts a comprehensive review of ancient and contemporary texts, oral traditions and folklores, epigraphic documentations, old illustrations and photographs and interviews with the elderly people of local communities to arrive at the conclusion that there is a very high probability that a river existed near Konark. This is supported by the existing scientific data. The challenge is to go through conflicting indicators, identify consistent components and to come up with a working hypothesis with the support of scientific evidences. This would both contribute to history and myth and to further some location-specific scientific explorations.

Keywords: *Myths, oral tradition, folklore, socio-cultural practices, cultural heritage, coastal heritage belt*

Exploring the Lost River(s) at Konark : A Multi-Disciplinary Approach

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Introduction

Konark is a small town in Puri district in the state of Odisha and lies on the east coast touching the Bay of Bengal. It is well known for the 13th Century CE Sun Temple which is one of the most important structures epitomizing the vast cultural heritage and glory of the land. Many legends, myths and folklores indicate that the Konark Sun Temple was originally built on the mouth of a river named Chandrabhaga but in the course of time the river has dried up and been reduced to a small pond and the present shoreline is nearly about 3 km from the temple. In this study,

history, mythology as well as science play a vital role in attempting to decipher the past. The main objective of the study is to identify, analyze, document and integrate various myths, legends, oral traditions, folklores, and cultural practices associated with the Chandrabhaga River and the Konark temple and also to identify the palaeochannels around Konark through satellite images and remote sensing to emphasize the existence of the mythological river Chandrabhaga near Konark temple. In the future, further exploration along these lines may even throw light on the possible reason for the collapse of the temple.

Methodology

The methodology proposed for the work is (a) identification and reviews of ancient and contemporary texts; (b) analysis and reviews of folk tradition and Hindu beliefs; (c) identification and analysis of socio-cultural practices; (d) identification and documentation of archaeological evidences, paintings and photographs; (e) and correlation of the findings that emerge with scientific evidences.

The textual exploration primarily focuses on identification, classification and analysis of myths and legends from various texts. Folk tradition plays an important role in reconstructing the past. It includes review of literature on myths and legends and field work. The socio-cultural practices comprise many religious practices, festivals, rituals and sacred ceremonies of a community. The visual references comprise archaeological evidences and carvings which have been excavated from the site. Some archeological sites having ruined temples and monuments along the channel can be helpful in finding the lost river. There are some old paintings and photographs which might be helpful for our study. Also, scientific evidences consisting of analysis and interpretation of satellite imagery and snapshot taken from Google Earth as well as data integration in the GIS platform are inter-related to trace the palaeo-channel of river(s) around the Konark region.

Review of Literature

The Chandrabhaga River is considered to be the one of the holiest rivers of Odisha. Its name is mentioned in *Puranas* and many sacred scripts. We also find the name of the river associated with many rituals and festivals of Odisha. There are also many myths and stories

related to the river. River Chandrabhaga has been described as a sacred river in many myths and it is believed that whoever takes a bath in the Chandrabhaga will be cured of leprosy and barrenness.

The *Samba Purana* (500-800 CE) narrates the story of Samba who was cursed with leprosy by his father, Krishna and was advised by Sage Narada to worship the Sun God at *Maitreyavana* on the bank of Chandrabhaga River to cure his ailments. He meditated with devotion, after taking bath in the Chandrabhaga River for twelve long years and was finally cured. As a sign of obligation and reverence he constructed a temple dedicated to the Sun God in *Maitreyavana*, on the bank of the Chandrabhaga River and also brought eighteen *Magha* Brahmins from *Sakadwipa* to perform the daily rituals of the temple. This is a very important myth as it appears many times during different ages. The *Bhavisya Purana* (500-800 CE), *Madala Panji* (1078-1150 CE) and The *Kapila Samhita* (14th century CE) also narrate the same story of Samba and the holy river. Historians like R. L. Mitra (1880), Pandit K. S. Mishra (1919) and many others had also mentioned the same story of Samba in their works. The *Baya Chakada* (12th Century CE), the temple manual which constituted all the records of the Konark temple on palm leaves during its construction mentions that King Langula Narasimha Deva appointed Sivai Santara as the minister, for temple construction and ordered to construct a sun temple on the mouth of the Chandrabhaga River. The *Sarala Mahabharat* (15th Century CE) is a work by Odia poet Sarala Das and it states that a large number of people used to visit the *tirtha* of the Chandrabhaga in the Odia month of Magha on the Sukla Saptami day.

However, with the help of the above mentioned texts, it is quite possible to imagine that a Sun temple was built in the mouth of the *Chandrabhaga* River but the waterline receded with the course of time.

Myths Associated with Oral Tradition

Traditional material on this exists in the form of oral literature which is communicated from one generation to another through stories, songs, compositions and verses. One such tale is that of Dharmapada, the twelve years old son of Chief architect, Bisu Maharana, who sacrificed his life by jumping from the top of the temple to the river Chandrabhaga to save his father and twelve hundred craftsmen. After thousand years, the Sun Temple is in a state of ruins but Dharmapada still lives in the folklore and in the aspiration for every young craftsman of the region.

One of the most notable folklore is of the story of Sivai Santara and the goddess in disguise of an old lady. As the temple was supposed to be built on the river mouth, many problems occurred and everyone was in distress. So, one day an old lady came and offered Sivai Santara some hot *Prasad* (rice pudding) of the village deity, but while eating he put his hand into the middle and burnt his fingers due to severe heat. The lady then suggested how to eat the pudding and from her words he realized his mistake and ordered his workers to close the side of the shoreline and then laid the foundation of the temple and started the construction of the great temple of Konark.

These folk stories are very popular among the local people. Even today, these stories are narrated by grandparents to children. On an initial inspection, they suggest at least the following few things: (a) existence of water body near the temple, and (b) difficulty related to the water body in building the temple.

Rituals and Festivals Associated with the River

Magha Saptami and *Samba Dashami* are the most important festivals of Konark Sun temple. *Magha Saptami* falls on the 7th day of the bright half of the Hindu month of *Magha*. Every year on this day many pilgrims gather to take holy dip in the Chandrabhaga River that is reduced to a shallow pond and welcome the rising Sun with prayers. A fair also takes place on this occasion known as the *Chandrabhaga Mela*. The particular day is also known as *Ratha Saptami* and is marked as the birthday of Lord Surya. *Samba Dashami*, celebrated on the 10th day of the waxing phase of moon in *Pausha* month, as per traditional Odia calendar is also very significant. This day is dedicated to the worship of the Sun God and the legend of '*Samba Dashami Brata Katha*' is recited and prayers are made for the well-being of all family members. Another unique festival is the *Ratha Yatra/ Chaitra Yatra*. As per *Kapila Samhita* and *Brahma Purana*, it was a famous festival carried out in ancient times when the temple was in a functional state and was performed on *Chaitra Sukla Sasthi* day. Again, without going into the details, the presence of these cultural practices point to both the existence and purported holiness of the river.

Pictorial Evidence

Visual evidence, especially from earlier times, can be historically very relevant. Some pictorial evidences were discovered which suggest the existence of water bodies near the Konark temple. The figure below show a painting by James Fergusson (1837 CE) in which a water body is clearly visible in the background and a part of the main sanctum is still standing; also some rare photographs by William Henry Cornish (1890

CE) are recovered from the British Gallery, where water body is visible in the background. A very relevant illustration of the Konark temple drawn in nine pieces of palm leaves is also retrieved which is currently preserved in Banaras Hindu University's Bharat Kala Bhawan. The masterpiece is a complete sketch of the temple and can be seen in the Alice Boner Gallery.



Fig 1: Painting by James Fergusson

Study Area

During the initial exploration from a scientific perspective, based on the various cultural and historical evidences, the broad study area chosen was the Konark-Puri region from latitude 19°30'N to 20°30'N and longitude 85°30'E to 86°30'E.

Exploration by the Research Team

Another less known temple has been identified by historians, testifies the existence of water way system in and around Konark. The archaeological heritage which provides sufficient evidences to corroborate the existence of Chandrabhaga river system is the *Gangeswari* temple situated in a small village named *Gop*, better known as 'Mini Konark' among the local people, strengthen our assumptions and hypothesis about the river system. The village is

20 km from Konark, and villagers have a saying that this was the campsite of the 1200 artisans who constructed the Konark Sun Temple. The temple is dedicated to the village deity *Gangeswari Thakurani* and has striking resemblance with the Konark temple in certain ways. The area where the temple stands is known as *Bayalisbatti*. Some patches of water bodies near the temple were also identified, which according to the villagers, are the remains of an ancient river (tributary) called *Patharabhasa Nai* which joined Chandrabhaga River somewhere near the main construction site of Konark temple and was a medium of transporting stones and sculptures to the construction site of the temple.

Even now there are huge blocks of stones beneath the water of the village pond, revealed in the dry months. While the rivers flow only during floods, palaeo-channels can be traced up to 2 km from Konark temple.

The most important geographical evidence is a pool named after the Chandrabhaga River; very close to the seashore, where people take holy bath/dip on the occasion of *Magha Saptami*. The pool is an enclosed portion of a larger water body where the *Chandrabhaga Mela* is held every year even today. Local people believe it to be the last remains of the glorious river Chandrabhaga and adore the purity and sacredness of the holy place.

Hence, an attempt has been made to corroborate the findings from myths, legends, folklores and other historical references with scientific evidences. This will give more confidence on the existence of past river system and heritage sites.

Scientific Study

The study includes observation of the work area with the help of Google earth, and

satellite images; analysis and interpretation of satellite images and the processing of those images help to identify synoptic view of the lost river that cannot be easily identified through the field survey. An initial assessment by looking at the geology, vegetation, moisture content as well as relevant snapshots of the study area are taken from the Google earth suggest that traces of palaeo-channel or previously existing river systems, can be identified in and around Konark region.

Conclusion

The exploration through various approaches, all point in one direction – the existence of water bodies near the temple and the possibility that the river Chandrabhaga and other smaller channels, very active at that point of time in history, were used to carry building material for the construction of the temple. While for the people of Odisha and for the pilgrims of the *Chandrabhaga Mela* that the existence of the river is a certainty, for both historians and scientists, it is important to procure evidence for such a claim and to map the path that the river(s) followed. Based on this first step, one will be able to retrace the history of the river, its decay and also explore why all this happened. It is also expected that this first step will help us answer the next set of questions that are all the more pertinent for us: Why did the river system dry up? Why did the temple collapse? Was the sea always this far away from the temple or have geological processes led to this state of affairs?

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