

The Mountain Mahendragiri - An Eco-Heritage Tourist Destination

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There are several mountains associated with history, culture and civilization of any country or region. In India number of such mountain peaks starting from the Himalyan Badrinath, Kedarnath to the Vindhya, Sahyadri and Satpura hills ranges which have some element of historical footprints which are all depicted in the Epics, Puranas, and other literatures together with visible archaeological remains. Among the mountains of Odisha, the most important is the Mahendra mentioned in the great Epics and Puranas as *kulaparvatas* of India. The mountain Mahendragiri is located in the Gajapati district of Odisha in the middle of Eastern Ghats which is part of almost an unbroken chain of hills between the Mahanadi and the Godavari rivers, but in their southern parts they occur as detached hills. The structural trends and litho-stratigraphy of the Archean-Early Proterozoic rocks arech-carnokite-khondalite which is one province out of six such provinces of India. In general the Eastern Ghats extends from the Mahanadi in Odisha to the Vaigai in Tamilnadu, roughly paralleling the eastern flank of Peninsula behind the coastal tract on the Bay of Bengal.



Bhima Temple

The Eastern Ghats is divided into a northern and a southern portion, the dividing boundary is lying somewhere south of the Godavari Valley. True mountain character is exhibited only in the northern portion i.e. up to the Godavari Valley. The Eastern Ghats (North) is comprised of Maliya and Madgula Konda Ranges. The Kondhmal Hills are from their northern tip and the Rampa Hills in the south. The Kondhmal Hills have lent their name to the Khondalite rocks which make up the peaks and ridges of the Maliyas, whose general elevations are 900 to 1,200 meter though some of their summits soar higher and the tallest is Mahendragiri which is 1501 meter high. It may be mentioned that the name Mahendragiri once extended to the whole of Eastern Ghats. Archean gneisses have developed in the lower elevations of these hills.

It is situated amongst the Eastern Ghats at an elevation of 1,501 metres (4,925 ft) and is one of the highest peaks in eastern India, only next to Deomali (1762 mts) of Koraput district. It is the second highest peak measuring 4923 feet and the highest peak Singharaj (4976 ft) and the third

Devagiri (4534 ft). The Eastern Ghats run as detached hills, more or less parallel to the eastern coast of India with an average elevation of about 200ft. Mahendragiri is a natural wonderland and is surrounded by hills and thick forest growth. The hill is situated amongst the Eastern Ghats at an elevation of 1,501 mt. above mean sea level with geo-coordinates $18^{\circ} 58^{\prime}$ N and $84^{\circ} 22^{\prime} 05^{\prime\prime}$ E. As per the Odisha Space Application Centre the core area could be spread over an area of 42.54 Sq. Km. while the buffer zone has an area of 1577.02 sq. km.

The major river in the area is the Mahendra Tanaya, originated from the hill top of Mahendra Mountain and is also characterized by the presence of numerous rivers and rivulets which empty into the Mahendra Tanaya which ultimately falls into the Vamsadhara in Andhra Pradesh. The vegetation

of the region is marked with the presence of tropical dry and wet deciduous forest range which is a home to several plants and wild animals and avian fauna. The principal rock types of the hill range are granite, charnokite, khondalite with intrusive veins of chert, chalcedony, quartz of both crystalline and opac forms. Mahendragiri hill and its surrounding areas are recognized as a biodiversity hot spot due to numerous medicinal plants and other species that are found here. A heaven for medicinal plants, Mahendragiri Hill is home to over 600 flowering plants. The faunal diversity of the region is huge and particularly known for being a herpetic-faunal hot spot. The



Yudhisthira Temple

fauna of the region includes peacocks, flying squirrels, deer, elephants, various avian species (leopards). From the hill-top trekkers are rewarded with a mesmerizing view of the surrounding. The Eco system of the hill and the undulating landscape with serpentine roads are just heaven for any visitors. It has something to be relaxed and rejuvenate to all kind of tourists be young or old.

The Mountain

The magnificent mountain Mahendragiri stands as the dosimali stone of the provinces of Odisha and Andhra boarder in Ganjam and Gajapati districts of Odisha and Srikakulam district of Andhra Pradesh. Mahendragiri is 51 kms to the south-west of Brahmapur, 26 kms from the sea. It is approachable at Tumba from Brahmapur side, at Kainpur from Parlakhemundi side and at Jangalpadu from

Srikakulam side. More easiest way to ride Mahendragiri mountain is from Paralakhemundi Dist. Headquarter which is about 50 kms enroute Narayanpur, Jiranga, Kanipur and then about 20 kms on the undulating hill terrain to reach at the flat land on the peak where temples of ancient past with archaeological remains available. Mahendragiri mountain is also very close to Ramagiri and Gudguda waterfall. The mountain is important from mythological, religious, historical, archaeological, ethnical, ecological and tourism points of view. It is a famous centre of pilgrimage since time immemorial. Every-year during Sivaratri (Feb-March) thousands of

pilgrims from neighboring Ganjam and Srikakulam districts usually visit and gather on the peak for celebration. The local *Adivasis* or ethnic people also gather here on that day in large number. In our recent visit in March 2020 to the site, we witnessed that many people from around Andhra Pradesh and Odisha throng the place, particularly for ritualistic purpose in the age-old traditional Parasurama *kshetra*. But historical evidences are there which reveals the cultural depth of the place when nowhere temples constructed in entire Odishan region, there constructed the earliest temple in about 6th-7th century CE which again proves the historicity of the place.

Let us have a glimpse of the traditions and history associated as known from the archaeological sources. Due to the strategic location of the Mahendra mountain, many early kingdoms were established around it for which the mountain has rich tradition, referred to in copperplate grants (charters) and inscriptions as well as reflected in visible archaeological remains that all speak a loud about the rich cultural legacy. Almost all erudite scholars, starting from Pragiter, Pliny, H.C. Ray Choudhury, B.C. Law and historians and archaeologists of Odisha like D.K. Ganguly, R.P. Mohaptara, B.K. Ratha and some others have focused some aspects of Mahendra Mountain. The mountain is so important in the cultural history of Odisha which served as an important benchmark for the study of history and culture of Odisha and even for South-East Asia. An account of the Mahendragiri

is discussed here, taking together the reference in Copper Plate Charters and all the material remains available in the site in recent perspective.

Associated Traditions

The Mahendra mountain has been eulogized by several hymns and religious texts as a sacred place and is the abode of Lord Shiva. The cultural assemblage of the region is also quite rich with strong traditional values reflected in the rituals, traditions, customs, practices and ethno-historical parallels. Mahendragiri is associated with

mythological stories from the Ramayana as Mahendra *Parvata* (mountain). It is a *Kula Parvata* along with Maninagesvara, Malaya, Sahayadri, Parijata, Shuktiman, Vindhya and *Malyavanta*. The *Mahabharata* mentions Mahendra mountain while describing Parasurama's penance. The story goes

that Parasurama, the youngest son of Jamadagni, exterminated the *kshatriyas* from the earth twenty-one times. Then he performed a sacrifice at Ramatirtha with Kasyapa the *Upadhyaya* (preceptor). After completion of the sacrifice, he offered the earth as his fees to Kasyapa but Kasyapa became angry and banished him to the southern seas. As a result Parasurama went to Mahendragiri and practiced penance and lived for a long time here. It is also said that Parashurama was meditating on Mahendragiri when Lord Rama broke the sacred bow of Shiva. Ramayana and Mahabharata also refer this mountain in various contexts. The Vamana, the Vishnu, the Markandeya, the Agni and the



Kunti Temple

Skanda Puranas also refer Mahendra Parvata. It is in fact that no Purana is complete without mention of the Mahendra Hill.

The *Viraja Kshetra Mahatmya*, presents a traditional account of Odisha in connection with the killing of Gayasura by Vishnu. The legs of Gayasura fell at Mahendragiri. Even Kalidasa in his *Raghuvamsa* mentions that king Raghu in course of his *digvijaya* conquered Kalinga and occupied the Mahendra as king of Kalinga was the lord of this mountainous region. It is mentioned that Raghuvamsa of Kalidasa contains an interesting episode of Sunanda and princess Indumati.... “Would you marry this prince – he is Hemangada, the king of Kalinga, said Sunanda, the companion of princess Indumati. Sunanda elaborated further “He is the king of Mahendra Mountain and Mahodadhi (lord of Sea). If you marry him you will get the fragrance of cloves from his body that is because cloves are imported to his kingdom from far off islands. Guhasiva of the Puranic fame was ruling over Kalinga-Visaya and Mahendra during the age of Gupta.

One more important tradition is associated with the Southeast Asian Country of Funan or Cambodia with mount Mahendra. It is referred to in a number of Copper Plate Charters of various dynastic rulers of this area that land donations were given to Kaundinya Brahmans who were living around Mahendragiri region in 7th-8th centuries CE. It is very interesting that Kaundinya Brahmans still continue to live near Mahendra Mountain range of Odisha. Even a peculiar custom still exists in the Bahuda-Vamsadhara basin around Mahendragiri where a peculiar sect of Brahmans set out once a year to sell silk cloths. Even the rich Brahmans of this sect had to sell one piece of Silk cloth every year.

This is the reminiscent of the trade of Kalinga with South East Asian countries.

There is a tradition still believed in Funan or Cambodia that a Naga Princess got married to Kaundinya Brahmin and the country of Cambodia came into existence. It is also known from inscriptional sources that Huen-tien (Kaundinya) introduced the Indian culture in Funan. It is a fact that the Odia seafarers at some point of time began to trade with South East Asian island countries around post Common Era as known from archaeological sources, particularly from the pottery remains. Initially, they hugged the coast till the Isthmus of Kra. This is the thin strip of land, now part of Thailand, from which the Malaya peninsula hangs. Goods were taken overland to the Gulf of Thailand from where they were loaded again on ships for ports of Cambodia and southern Vietnam. This explains why India's eastern coast established links with faraway Vietnam before the Indonesian islands of Java and Bali that may appear closer on a map. OcEo, in Vietnam's Mekong delta, seems to have become a major hub. From there, merchandise would be traded up the coast to China.

It is in the Mekong delta that we witness the establishment of the first Indianized kingdom of South East Asia around first century BCE/CE. The Chinese called it the kingdom of Funan. There is an interesting legend about how this kingdom was founded. It is said that an Indian merchant ship was sailing through the region when it was attacked by pirates led by Soma, daughter of the local Naga chieftain. The Indian fought back and fended off the attackers led by a handsome young Brahmin called Kaundinya. It appears that Princess Soma had been impressed by Kaundinya's bravery and had fallen in love and got married. The union is said to have founded a

lineage that ruled Funan for many generations. Whether this legend has some historical base or not is difficult to answer, but slightly different versions of the story have been repeated in inscriptions by both the Chams of Vietnam and the Khmers of Cambodia. It is also repeated in contemporary Chinese records. Further, we see matrilineal genealogies would be given a great deal of importance over 1500 years that these Indianized kingdoms flourished in this part of the World.

This myth may be the reason, why the serpent (*naga*) became such an important royal symbol in Khmer iconography. More than thousand years later, the mystical union between the king and a 'serpent' princess remained an important part of the court ceremonials at Angkor. So now who was Kaundinya? It is certain that he was a Brahmin from India. While Kaundinya is not a common first name, it is the name of a *gotra* (i.e., male lineage) of Brahmin who still live along the Tamil-Andhra-Odisha coastline.

According to the Chinese sources, the kingdom of Funan was established by Brahmana Kaundinya-I, at the close of 1st century CE and the capital was at Vyadhapura and the process of Indianisation began. It was further accelerated with the arrival of another Brahmana Kaundinya-II in later part of 4th century CE. One of the greatest Kings of Funan was Jayavarman II (790 CE) who conquered, first Vyadhapura (south-east of Cambodia) and then Sambhapura (present day Sambor) and finally Aninditapura and established his power. On the basis of these evidences, one can infer that the Kaundinya Brahmanas might have migrated through the Port of Palur which was referred to by Ptolemy (2nd century CE). Palur, Baruva and Kalingapattanam were three ports in between the River Rusikulya and Vamsadhara

and Mount Mahendra were the ideal place to undertake sea voyage which the people of Kalinga adopted. The firm foundation of Kalinga or Ancient Odishan maritime trade could be glimpsed even now from the archaeological remains available at Palur around Chilika, Baruva around Nagavali river, Salihundam-Kalingapattanam-Mukhalingam area on the river Vamsadhara on either side of the mount Mahendra in Odisha –Andhra border.

The name of the Mahendra mountain appears in the history of Funan in two occasions. The history of southern Ch'I states that during the reign of Jayavarmana (5th century CE.), the custom of this country was to worship the God Mahesvara (Shiva) who continually descends on mount Mo-tan. The mountain Mo-tan could be another name of Mahendra mountain of Odisha which was also considered as the abode of Shiva since the Eastern Gangas of Kalinga were worshipping Shiva Gokarnasvami as their tutelary deity on Mahendra mountain. According to a Chinese tradition, there were more than 1,000 Brahmanas in Tuan Suan, a principality under Funan. The Kambuja records mention a number of Brahmanas who came from India. The establishment of tutelary god Gokarnasvamin on Mahendraparvata in Kalinga and Mahesvara in Funan belonged to same time.

This led to an important assumption that as Funan was Indianised by the traders and merchants from the eastern coast of India, the migrants, with the passage of time named a local mountain of Funan as Mahendraparvata after the Mahendraparvata of Odisha which had God Mahesvara (Gokarnesvara) on it. The imitation and adoption was obvious on the part of migrant Indians in the process of spread and introduction of Indian culture there as elsewhere.

This is further corroborated by Jayavarman II (9th century CE) of Funan or Cambodia who went to reign at ‘Mahendraparvata’ and installed a miraculous Siva lingam there as *devaraja* or king of gods (which is god Siva or Mahesvara himself in c. 802 CE) with the help of a Brahman named Hiranyadama whom he invited from Janapada (probably in India). Jayavarman II is most often cited in the inscription as “the king who established his residence on the summit of Mount Mahendra”. This Mahendraparvata (i.e. Mount Mahendra) has been identified with Phnom Kulen, the sandstone plateau that dominates the northern part of the Angkor plain. As Jayavarman II went to Mahendra Parvata to reign and established his residence there, it appears that mount Mahendra which was considered as *Kula Parvata* (PhnomKulen) and used as the abode of *devaraja* was already there in Funan (Cambodia) before the reign of Jayavarman II. So, this could have been the mount Mo-tan of the Chinese record of the fifth century CE. This indicates that the Kaundinyas of Funan were not only ardent Saivites but also had intimate association with the Mahendraparvata of Kalinga and there was close contact between Kalinga on the eastern sea coast of India and Funan.

On the basis of the above discussion, it is presumed that the Kaundinya Brahmanas might have migrated from Mahendra mountain region of Kalinga. The main reason for the belief that the homeland of Kaundinya Brahmins of Funan could be Mahendraparvata of Kalinga arises from the fact that the name of Mahendra Mountain appears in the history of Funan on two important occasions as discussed. It is an accepted fact that Kalinga played an important role in the Indianization of Southeast Asia during the early centuries CE.

Long back, scholars opined that the Andhra-Kalinga country on the east coast of the Deccan was the home land of many, if not all of the migrations which resulted in the establishment of Hindu-Buddhist kingdoms in the Archipelago.

The question comes why they named a mountain of Funan as Mahendraparvata and not after any other Indian mountain names which logically implies that Kaundinya and early emigrants most probably went from Kalinga region, especially from the Mahendraparvata region. The Ragolu Copper Plate Charter issued from the victorious Singupura, one of the chief cities of the kingdom of Matharas (350 to 500 CE), identified with modern Singapuram situated between Srikakulam and Narasnapeta towns not far from Mahendragiri. The Copper Plate was issued by Nandaprabhanjanavarman, the lord of the whole of Kalinga or Pitrbhakta king record the grant of a piece of homestead land in favor of the *Brahmacharin* Nandisarman of Kaundinya *gotra*. Another grant Pedda-Dugam Copper Plate Charter issued from Simhapura of Maharaja Satrudamana deva records the grant of villages namely Duha-grama, Vasu-vatak and Go-vataka situated within the *agrahara* called Vardhamana in Giri-Kalinga in favour of two Brahmanas belonging to the Kaundinya gotra and Taittiriya (sakha of Yajurveda) who were residents of Pattuvagrama. Here, both Giri-Kalinga and Kaundinya denote again the area around Mahendragiri.

Historical Context

Epigraphic records are replete with references to Mahendra mountain from 2nd century CE to 13th century CE as how the mountain Mahendragiri held high esteem by different dynastic rulers of Kalinga or ancient Odisha. The importance lies that great conquerors

like Gautamaputra Satkarni, Yosdharman and Rajendra Chola claimed supremacy over this mountain. To begin with Nasik cave inscription of 2nd century CE which describes the conquests and achievements of Gautama putra-Satakarni who was the Lord of Mahendra region along with other areas. This is also known from Satavahana antiquities recovered from nearby Salihundam, Buddhist site on Vamsadhara. It is already established that Andhra Satavahana influence was there in Odisha as known from recent excavations at Langudi, Lalitgiri, Radhanagar and Sisupalgarh in the last two decades. K.C. Panigrahi observes long-back that Andhra Satavahana coins have been discovered at Sisupalgarh, Salihundam, Ramatirtham, Sangharama. The Yaksha images of Sanchi type has already been found on the sculptures of Udayagiri. Since Sanchi was under the Andhra Satavahana rule during the rule of Satakarni II, it may be adhered that there was a period of Andhra Satavahana contact with Odisha. Since the mount Mahendra situated in Kalinga has found place in the list of the mountains of which Gautamaputra Satakarni is stated to have been Lord, the importance of the mountain has to be accepted significantly for the cultural history of Odisha and from 2nd century onwards, the mountain stands to be important from several points of view such as Kalingan identity, a milestone for trade route as well as cultural linkage to south etc.

The Allahabad Pillar inscription (*Prasasti*) records that during southern campaigns, Samudragupta conquered some principalities of Odisha and defeated principalities, located mostly in the Kosala and Kalinga region. In this campaign Samudragupta defeated Vyaghraraja of Mahakantara, and Mantaraja of Korala (principalities in modern Koraput district) and further south Kottura a village in

Mahendrabhoga-visaya and further Mahendragiri of Pistapura, Damana of Erandapalli, and Kuvera of Devarashtra. All these principalities of Kalinga are now identified in Srikakulam and Vishakhapatnam District of Andhra Pradesh. The political condition of this part of Odisha (then known south Kalinga) was divided into certain pretty principalities such as Mahendra, Kottura, Erandapalli all were in the region around Vamsadhara river. Since Mahendragiri is a important geographical landmark all the *prasasti* writers might have referred the hill as a region.

Next, following 4th-5th centuries, the region was a great importance during the rule of Matharas (350-500 CE) whose territory extended all around the mountain as known from Devalpetagrants. Under Umavarmana of Mathara dynasty the newly acquired area was formed a *visaya*. Simhapura was their capital identified with the modern Singhapuram near Narasannapeta of Srikakulam district. However, it is known from their records the name of five such capitals situated at Siripura, Sunagara, Vardhamanapura, Singhapura and Pisthapura (Panigrahi, 1981) all are in Ganjam, Gajpati (Odisha), Srikakulam and Vaizagpatnam (Andhra) districts. As known from copper plate grants these were cities or *nagaras* and Mahendra *bhoga* - at the foot hill of Mahendra mountain constitute important principalities under Matharas. At least five copper plate charters are known to have issued from these places by Mathara kings. In fact, the kingdom was extended from Mahendra mountain to Godavari. (The dynasty appears to have put to an end by the Vishnukundins of the south and Gangas of Svetaka in about 6th century, perhaps due to the invasion of Harisena of Vakataka dynasty –one of the builder of Ajanta. (Ajanta Inscriptions Hyderabad Series). For some time

Svetaka Gangas were ruling over the principalities around Chikiti region adjoining to Mahendragiri mountain in Ganjam district. However, the history of Matharas are not yet explored and recorded systematically. In the mean while, a Vighraha General named Prithvivighraha had established a kingdom consisting of northern Kalinga and a portion of south Kosala. This kingdom is described as *Kalinga-rastra* in the Sumandala plate of Dharmaraja (570 CE) who was a feudatory chief of Prthvivighraha and was ruling over Khalikote region of Ganjam district. (E.I.XXVIII.)

Hastivarmana (577 CE), the third known Ganga ruler of Trikinga, wrested away north Kalinga from Vighrahas and conquered south Kalinga from Prithivi-maharaja of Pistapura and thus founded the Ganga kingdom of Kalinga. He built the new capital of Kalinganagara on the bank of the Vamsadhara and assumed the title of *Sakala-Kalingadhipati*. Hastivarmana, in fact was considered to be the real founder of Ganga-kingdom of Kalinga. The Early Gangas or Eastern Gangas established their capital at Kalinganagara identified with modern Mukhalingam in Srikakulam district only 30 Kms from Paralakhemundi and around 60 kms from Mahendragiri. Scholars also opine that the Gangas had a secondary capital at Dantapura identified with Dantapurakota near Kotavalsa (The same site of ancient capital of Kalinga), again on the bank of Vamsadhara. The region of Gangas was around the present Srikakulam-Gajpati district, otherwise known as the Eastern Gangas or Early Gangas and ruled from 496 CE to the middle of 11th century CE. The Chicacole plates of Indravarmana (Ganga Era 146), states that “hail from the victorious city of Kalinganagara which is the ornament of all the land of Kalinga that is

embraced by the fingers of the waves of the water of the ocean, the Maharaj Sri Indravarmana, who has had the stains of the kali age removed by unceasing obeisance to Gokarnasvami, the sole architect for the formation of the universe, who has full-moon for (his) crest-jewel, (and) who is clothed with the coils of great serpents, (and) who dwells on the summit of the mountain Mahendra” and goes on narrating kings personal eulogy. It seems that Mahendragiri had already got its due importance in the cultural life of Kalinga people from the days of Eastern Gangas. As known from the archaeological and epigraphical sources, Mahendragiri is adorned with the Gokarnesvara (Kunti Temple), Yudhistira, and Bhima temple built by these early Gangas around 7th century CE. The most famous of these temples is Kunti or Gokarnesvara temple. It is one of the earliest temples of Odisha which is assigned to 7th century CE. However, there are divergent views on the date of these temples since the original form is altered now.

After the accession of Anantavarmana Vajrahastadeva in 1038 CE, the Gangas of Kalinga rose up to follow a policy of aggressive imperialism followed by Chodagangadeva (1077 to 1147 CE), the grandson of Vajrahastadeva V, the Ganga empire extended from the mouth of the Godavari to the Ganges. They also shifted their capital from Kalinganagara (Mukhalingam) to Avinava Varanasi Cuttack or Choudwar Cuttack.

Almost contemporary to the Eastern Gangas, the Sailodbhavas of Kangoda were ruling from middle of 6th century up to 736 CE and their area is around Chilika in between Mahendragiri and Bhubaneswar. Their capital was at Bankadagada and Niladriprasad which are traced with palace ruins and temples in the modern

Banapur area of Khurda district. The art and architecture with full form is known from a number of sculptural and architectural remains found at Bankada, 30 kms from modern Banapur. The cradle land of Sailodbhavas of Kangoda was mount Mahendra. As known from epigraphic records Kangoda was bounded by Chilika lake and the Bay of Bengal on the east, Mahendra mountain in south which was included in Kalinga territory in larger extent. Hiuen Tsang refers Kong-u-t'o or Kongoda as a hilly country, bordering on a bay of sea. It is accepted that Pulindasena, the progenitor of the Sailodbhava family, was the leader of the aboriginal Pulindas of mountain Mahendra. Pulindas were the powerful tribal people residing in the Mahendra region of Kalinga which was the gate way to south India. The two expressions in Sailodbhava records "*Kulagiri Ksto Mahendrah Ksitu*" and "*Kshata Kalinga jantasu Pulindasena*", undoubtedly indicate that the original home of the Sailodbhava family was 'Mahendragiri'.

The Buguda plates of Madhavavarman records that Pulindasena, a leader of the Kalinga-Janata, worshipped the god Swayambhu on top of this mountain where he received a boon from Brahma that a stalwart youth would come out of a rock after it had been split. He was called Sailodbhava after whom the family was named. Further, it is known from the preamble of Sailodbhava records that Pulindasena worshipped Lord Swayambhu who granted his wish and created apparently out of pieces of rock the prince Sailodbhava, who thus became the famous as the founder of the Sailodbhava line of Kings. However, there are number of stories and legends associated with Pulindasena and origin of Sailodbhava from the rocky region of Mahendragiri. Both Early Gangas of Kalinga and Sailodbhavas of Kangoda were devout Saivas

and both point out Mahendragiri as their seat of adoration. When the Bhaumkara king Subhakar I after occupying Kangoda marched towards Kalinga, the Gangas, the friend of Sailodbhavas, made a strong defense by resisting Bhuamas and mount Mahendra remained as the border of Kalinga. Here, again it is postulated by scholars like S.C.Chadra that the Sailodbhavas being hard pressed between Bhuamas of Utkala and Gangas of Kalinga migrated to Malaya Archipelago. (OHRJ, Vol.III, No.2). It may have some historical truth as the Sailendras of Java and Sailodbhavas have many similarities and the name mount Mahendra also occurred in the countries of Malaya Archipelago.

The explicit weakness of the Somavamsi king Karnadeva and his kingdom encouraged the neighboring kings to capture it. Kalinga was then under a very powerful ruler named Chodagangadeva invaded Utkala in 1110 CE, but the Mukhalingam inscription refers that Chodaganga succeeded in occupying Utkala by defeating the Somavamsi king before 1108 CE. Chodagangadeva annexed Utkala permanently to the Ganga kingdom and transferred his capital from Kalinganagara (Mukhalingam) to the Somavamsi capital Varanasi Cuttack around 1114 CE.

Thus, the Gangas of Kalinga, a branch of the Ganga dynasty, had ruled Odisha continuously for a long period of nine and half centuries from 498 to 1435CE. They are designated as Eastern Gangas to distinguish themselves from the Western Gangas of Mysore. The whole period of their reign as discussed can be divided into two historical phases. The first phase i.e, from CE 498 to 1038 CE ruled from Kalinganagar of Kalinga principality as early Gangas and the second phase which extends from CE 1038 to

1434 CE ruled from Varanasi Cuttack uniting whole of Kalinga, Utkala, Odra, i.e., Odisha and known under the name of imperial Gangas. During the imperial Gangas, Vajrahasta-V, the first imperial ruler was a *paramamahesvara* and a great devotee of Lord Gokarnesvara.

The Ganga dynasty of Kalinga and the Sailodbhava kings of Kangoda had regarded great respect to the mountain as *Kulagiri*. Even the imperial Gangas shifted their capital from Kalinganagara on the bank of the river Vamsadhara to the central Odishan capital Varanasi Kataka (modern Choudwar-Kataka) but still they offer their devotion and regarded Gokarnesvara as their family deity at least at the beginning. The Gangas, on the other hand, most likely followed the earlier revered and established tradition of Gokarnesvara on the mountain as their family deity. Two inscriptions of 12th century CE are found engraved in Kunti temple referring God Gokarnesvara. The first one is engraved on a slab lying to the right of the entrance to the Kunti shrine on the Mahendra mountain having sixteen lines of writing in Sanskrit and Telugu in prose of about 12th century CE (Saka year 1045). It records the gift of a perpetual lamp in favour of the god Mahendrasvara (i.e. Siva Gokarnesvara) by Laksmidharaya, son of Devasramana and grandson of Narayana.

The second inscription is engraved on a slab found on the left of the entrance to the Gokarnesvara (Kunti) temple having altogether nineteen lines in Telugu of 12th century CE. (Saka year 1055). The inscription records the gift of a perpetual lamp in favour of the god Gokarnesvara (Siva), on Mahendragiri on the occasion of Vyatipata-yoga by Srikarana Bhimanatha, for the increase of religious merit of Medapotu Sdyya of Arsavelli, during the victorious sixtieth *srahi* of

Anantavarmana Chodagangadeva (of the Ganga dynasty). For the burning of the gift lamp, he deposited 5 *madas* under the custody of the *kampus* (mercantile community) for regular supply of clarified butter to the temple.

The Yudhisthira temple inscription on the Mahendra Mountain having six lines in Telugu of about 12th century CE, but not in a good state of preservation. Below the inscription, there is the emblem of Chola dynasty, representing the figure of two fishes with a seated tiger in front of them. The inscription records the eulogy of Rajendra Chola of the Chola dynasty and apparently states the installation of a victory pillar (*vijayastambha*) on the top of the Mahendra mountain. It seems Mahendra region was remained for some time under the Cholas but the Ganga King Anantavarman Chodagangadeva recovered the lost territories around 1090 CE. Mahendraparvata is still played an important in the Odishan Culture even under Suryavamsis and further under Moughals after 1576 CE.

Archaeological Remains:

The area on an undulating flat land and hilltops ups and down was chosen a place for temple construction on the middle peak of the mountain. As of now, we see three standing temples at distance from each other forming a triangle. But there are other ruins and remains as huge stone blocks are seen gathered perhaps belong to some more temple edifices of the past. A number of scholars in recent times tried to put all the archaeological remains of the hill mostly the temples around 6th-7th century. The scholars discussed on this issue were K.C. Panigrahi, K.S. Behera and B.K. Ratha and others were given a passing reference. Even, a popular ancient architectural text *Silpapraksha* having three copies of the manuscript in Sanskrit script are

reported from Puri but was transcribed in the village Sobanpura on the banks of the river Rusikulya. The second copy was (Manuscript-2) traced from the town Manjusa in Andhra and was written in the same village, described as “surrounded by the Mahendra mountains”. Manuscript 3 was found from in Srikakulam in Andhra and was written on the banks of the river Musali in the Mahendra mountain area.

As discussed, in many of the Eastern Ganga plates begin with invoking ‘Mahendra *pratisthita* Gokarnaswami’, or the deity at the summit of Mahendra mountain, but not a single record refers a temple is constructed for him or donation made to him. However, temples were constructed being earliest one dated to 7th century CE may be assigned to Eastern Gangas or Sailodbhavas. However, none of the scholars dated the temples but arrived at the conclusion by taking together the architectural styles. In our recent study of the standing temples and other ruins, we accept the dates of the previous scholars earliest being assigned to Sailodbhava period as that of Satruganesvara group of temple of Bhubaneswar. As has been discussed Mahendragiri was the Kulagiri of Sailodbhavas and Lord Gokarneswara was the *Istadevata* of the Eastern Gangas of Kalinganagar. They must have built *devayatana* for the God. Although we are getting inscriptions from the temples but all are dated to late period of 12th and 13th century of the imperial Gangas. In Odishan context, we get reference of *devayatana* from 1st century CE and standing temples from 6th century CE.

Now, there are three temples standing on the top of Mahendragiri mountain although ruins of some other edifices are still scattered around. Saraladasa, in his *Odia Mahabharata* mentions that the temples were built by Pandava brothers

and their mother Kunti who visited the mountain during the exile. These temples named after Bhima, Yudhisthira and Kunti.

Bhima Temple

Let us start with the smallest and oldest one at the highest peak locally known as Kubjagiri at Mahendragiri. This temple is located about a km away further highest peak from Yudhisthira temple located on flat on the lower peak. One has to climb the narrow serpentine pathway to reach at the temple; of course, the temple is visible from Yudhisthira temple area. The Bhima temple as named itself, there is no historical record to support it, but well-known to all by this name, is with a height of 7 mtrs. approximate and with 4 x 4 mtrs. square on plan. The whole temple was constructed with a good number of huge stone blocks. All together there are about 26 stone blocks used for the temple. The stone blocks, as seen around 3 x 3 mtrs and 1.40 mtrs. in length, width and height. The stones are placed one on another forming a *Rekha* temple of one chamber or only *deula* and placed in proper plumb. The circular *beki* is marked followed by usual *amalaka* dressed in single stone. An opening of 1.2 mtrs in height is seen facing south. The inner *garbhagriha* is around 1.5 x 1.5 mtrs. The present temple seems to be reconstructed on the older one with some alteration and addition of *amalaka sila* placed on its flat roof. Some scholars have studied closely and opined that originally it was a flat-roofed structure walled by eight big pieces of stones. K.C. Panigrahi who was a pioneer in drawing the chronology of Odishan temples states that the Bhima temple found on the top of Mahendra mountain is devoid of sculptures, but is not a *sikhara* temple. It is a flat roofed stone structure, but with no circumambulatory covered path to be generally seen in the early Gupta

temples. Some scholars assigned its construction to the Mathara King Uma Varmana (360-395 CE) with generally comes under Gupta period. as the form of temple evolved at Sanchi and Tigwa.

The whole temple is just a replica of Kalinga School of Architecture at its beginning. R.D. Banerjee referred to Kalinga style. S.N. Rajguru and other scholars accepted it as the earliest specimen of temple architecture, generally dated to 5th-6th century (Gupta period) but in Odishan context either Eastern Gangas or Sailodbhavas. It is more akin to Sailodbhava period.

There some similar temples exist at different regions of India as is found at Kud in Jabalpur district and another at Bilaspur. Some more in Bijapur district. Here, Bhima temple as tradition goes was constructed by Bhimasura, the demon Bhima and his demonic race Bhima Savaras, who are all still existing in Mahendra region as a branch of Savara community.

Yudhistira Temple

Next down on the flat land of the peak of Mahendra mountain stands a temple called Yudhistira as known widely and dedicated to Siva. The temple is one single *deula* of *tri-ratha* type rises abruptly from the ground and has a tapering projection. The *bada* portion is straight and is adorned with an *amalaka* with an *ayudha*. The temple has no deities and a frontal opening is there. The opening faces to south and approximately six feet in height. Four *chaitya* arches adorn from four sides of the *sikhara*. There is a boundary wall made of huge rectangular pieces of stone. The temple is fully restored and conserved. The temple may be compared with Satruganesvara group of temples of

Bhubaneswar dated to last part of 6th century or early part of 7th century CE. This temple is also a proto type of Somesvara and Madhukesvara temples of Kalinganagar or Mukhalingam but without artistic representation. A number of architectural pieces and stone blocks are found scattered around the temple. This temple perhaps was re-built from the original shattered one. The front door lintel contains an inscription of the Chola king Rajendra Chola.

Gokarnesvara Temple

This temple is situated at one end of the flat ground further towards east down after Yudhistira temple. This temple is popularly known as Kunti and dedicated to Gokarnesvara Siva as has been referred to in numerous copper plate charters. The temple is a single chambered shrine having characteristics of a *sikhara* temple or *Rekha Deul* (curvilinear tower) built in Kalingan style. The approximate height of the temple is 30 feet and does not have a plinth. The temple is facing west and the side niches contain figures of *Parsva-devatas* (side deities). It has a square sanctum enshrining a *linga* devoid of porch, narrow doorway, walls without niches, incipient mouldings, squat *sikhara* formed by one small flat roof over a big flat roof with an asymmetrical fluted *amalaka* are its characteristic placing it in period of transition from Gupta to Post-Gupta period. The Ganesha and Karttikeya figures are well preserved, but the Parvati figure in north façade is badly mutilated. Navagraha figures are seen in the lintel over the front door. The temple is classified under *Pancha-ratha* type of Kalingan architecture. However, the temple has been repaired thoroughly with lime and mortar. A small niche flat roofed chamber (temple) in front of temple is seen which housed some images and the door jamb contain inscriptions. Nandi and

Garuda images are seen in front of the temple. Scholars dated this temple to 9th-10th century CE on the basis of the architectural and sculptural features and further two inscriptions of 12th century are found one on a slab to the right of the entrance and the other on the left of the temple. Even some scholars consider this temple as the oldest standing temple in Odisha. K.C. Panigrahi remarks that the shrine of Gokarnesvara is very ancient and is frequently mentioned in the copper plate records of the Ganga kings of Svetaka dating back to 5th century CE.

Conclusion

No temple can stand alone. The rituals or temple complex, all part of a socio-religious matrix, connecting people in different geographical region in a series of complex symbolic networks. The temple is a monument of manifestation, node between the flux of man's world and eternity, his doorway to divine realization as well as window through which the formless eternal divine force of Hinduism is made visible and approachable as images in this world. This is the symbolic representation of the divine cosmos, recreating in three dimensional form the supernatural worlds inhabited by the gods and spirits. Here mention may be made that why these temples were built in such a remote and hilly terrain, the answer may be as H. Kulke remarks that the Hindu *raja* (Eastern Gangas) appropriated the local cults by donating the deities like Stambheswari, Maninageswari, Gokarnesvara, etc. and adopted these tutelary deities. This integration was completed by the Gangas who unified whole Odisha through Jagannath cult. Perhaps this integration was started from very beginning of their rule from 6th-7th century itself and that of Gokarnesvara of Mahendragiri. From 2nd century to 5th century CE, the region was well known

among the great emperors which must have more evidences in Odisha too but not yet recovered which need a through exploration and documentation.

Mahendragiri stands in a strategic location, very close to Sea and the ancient ports such as Palur, Baruva and Kalingapatnam. This is why it is on a trade route and connecting to all regions of north, south and hinterland which was very well known from Samudragupta's march to South India and building of a strong capital city Kalinganagar near Mukhalingam by the Early Gangas. This is also reflected from the Chola inscription where Rajendra Chola fixed an inscription as well as a *vijayastamba* at Mahendragiri.

The South East Asian connection and the tradition associated with Kaundinya Brahmana could also be seen as K.A. Nilakantha Sastri remarks the Andhra- Kalinga country on the east coast of the Deccan was the home land of many, if not all of the migrations which resulted in the establishment of Hindu-Buddhist kingdoms in the Archipelago. The story of this mountain narrates the history of Kalinga which we all should need to know and let the state should come forward to preserve both the tangible and intangible heritage of the mountain -what we have tried little bit to record for our research purpose. The site is best to use history as economic activity or what we may call applied history by way of promoting heritage tourism. In fact, Mahendragiri is a heaven for the trekkers, youths, art lovers, naturalists, historians and others who have some inclination for nature. Let us preserve, promote and publicize the strength of the site through tourism which may help the local to regenerate their economic activity by establishing an eco-heritage destination.

Applied history could be the best means to grow livelihood in the region.

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