

Tutelary Goddess of Chauhan Dynasty

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Chauhan dynasty ruled over erstwhile Sambalpur kingdom from 14th century A.D. Tradition says that one Hammira Deo was ruling over Mainpuri in North India. He was killed by the Sultan of Delhi. His widow Asavati who was pregnant at that time fled to Bolangir-Patna and took shelter in the house of one Chakradhar Panigrahi of Patna. She gave birth to a son named Ramai Deo. At that juncture Patna was ruled by an oligarchy of *Astamalik*-eight headmen. Ramai Deo killed them and succeeded to the throne of Patna. In course of time Chauhans extended their sway over Sambalpur and other adjoining areas. The Mainpuri branch of the Chauhans were connected to Gar-Sambhar of Rajasthan which was related to Prithviraj Chauhan-III. Thus the Chauhans had a hoary antiquity of glorious legacy.

In the middle of 16th century A.D. Narasingh Dev of Patna gave over the territory of Sambalpur to his brother Balaram Dev in recognition to his meritorious service. The Ang

river was the dividing line of Patna and Sambalpur kingdoms. According to Jayachandrika of Prahlad Dubey Balaram Dev's territory was initially known as Huma kingdom with capital at Bargarh on the bank of Jira river. He subsequently shifted his capital



Sambaleswari Temple, Sambalpur

to Sambalpur on the left bank of Mahanadi and fortified the capital. The Hathigate near Samlai temple still stands in grandeur reminding one of the heydays of Chauhan ascendancy. He installed Samalai the popular deity of aboriginal local inhabitants and made her the tutelary deity of his family.

Sambalpur has a hoary past of Shakti worship. Great luminaries like Laxmikara and Luipa etc. flourished in 8th/9th century A.D. in this part. Several tantrik deities of Vajrajana and Saivism were popular here. Interestingly the Chauhans leaving aside their traditional tutelary deity Asapuri Devi, worshipped the local Sakta deities.

Ramai Deo established the temple of Pataneswari at Patna fort and worshipped the

deity as his family deity. She was in fact an emanation of Durga. Five villages namely Deulgaon, Kalangapali, Diadumber, Uchvali and Ghunghutipali were assigned for the worship of the deity. These villages are still enjoyed by the priest families.

As hinted earlier Balaram Deva accepted Samalai as his family deity and made a temple for her worship inside his fort. It is thus evident that the early Chauhans greatly esteemed and extolled the deities of the local people wherever they expanded their kingdom. This religious strategy helped them a lot for an enduring and farflung empire.

Patneswari temples are found at Patnagarh, Bolangir and Sambalpur. The temple of Patna was built by Ramai Deo in the middle of 14th century A.D.. The Patneswari temple of Sambalpur was built by Balaram Dev in the 16th century A.D.. The Patneswari temple of Bolangir was built in the 19th century.

The worship of Samalai however became more popular later on in whole of Sambalpur region and at present we find a seat or temple of the deity in almost each and every village. The most important ones are found at Sambalpur, Sonepur and Barpali. The deity occupies a pivotal position in the religious life of the people. She is generally worshipped in the form of a piece of stone under a tree in the vicinity of every village. Interestingly, She was made a witness in the Copper plate grant of Jayant Singh (1790). Gangadhar Misra has

made graphic reference about the deity and her *mahima*. Legend says that when the priests of Puri fled with the image of Jagannath to Sonepur, Kalapahad the turbulent Muslim invader followed them. At this juncture deity Samalai appeared in the guise of a milkmaid and offered milk and curd to his soldiers who in turn ran in disarray. Taking advantage of this king Balabhadra Dev drove away Kalapahad.

The origin of Samalai deity is surrounded in mystery. Because of phonetic semblance, the word Samalai has been derived from *Simul* a silk cotton tree as is believed by a group of scholars. Sambalpur District Gazetteer edited by King accept this theory. Gangadhar Mishra also supports this in his *Kosalananda Mahakavya*. Balaram Dev established the

deity after seeing an unusual incidence of a hare repulsing his hound at the present site of Samaleswari temple at Sambalpur

Samalai of Sonepur is represented in a very fierce form in sharp contrast to Samalai of Sambalpur and Barapali . The image of Samalai of Sambalpur presents a serene conception. In fact, the deity is a unique sculpture and it does not conform to any known iconic form of Hindu iconography. It is a big block of stone in the middle of which we find a projection with depressions on both sides and a narrow groove looks like her mouth. When dressed with ornaments its countenance looks like a Sakta deity. Beglar who visited Sambalpur in 19th Century describes that “it



Twenty Armed Durga,
Sambaleswari Temple

is a large block of stone in the middle of which is a projection resembling the mouth of a cow. The extremity of this projection has a groove of thread breadth which is called the mouth. At both sides of the projection there are depressions over which beaten gold leaf is placed as a substitute for eyes.” This image does not resemble any known Sakta deity found in Orissa. It is believed that she is a non Aryan-deity worshipped by the local aboriginals. Balaram Dev accepted this local deity as his royal deity. Siva Prasad Das says that Pitabali is a Parsva Devata of Samalai. Pitabali is the goddess of Khonds. Sahara caste people worship Samalai in Sambalpur district. Buffalo sacrifice is recommended during religious rituals. All these factors indicate that the deity has a primitive origin. In Sambalpur it seems that Balaram Dev established this deity in the middle of 14th Century. However, the present temple was built by Chhatra Sai about the year 1691 A.D. For the maintenance of the deity he was known to have granted 40 villages.

“The temple is of the Gothic order. The plinth is about 16 feet high. Above the plinth the building is square, 21 feet 7 inches x 21 feet 7 inches. The arched roof commences at a height of 18 feet, and then tapers to the height of 35 feet, where the gradual diminution of the bulk has been abruptly interrupted by a hip-knob, over which a gold pot and spire are

placed. The arch is supported by abutments, each of which is gradually diminished, one inch in size, by each successive layer. The arch is an oblong vault, or half of an ellipse, with regular longitudinal furrows and elevations throughout the whole surface. Commencing from each corner at the base project four subordinate buildings eleven feet square, they are so situated that if the sides of the square base of the temple be produced, they will only touch two extremities of each of the buildings.



Hati Gate, Sambaleswari Temple Complex

Each of them has a domed roof, supported by six pillars. A hip-knob, pierced by an iron spike, adorns the top. Between these domes there are flat roofs supported by pillars, thus forming a square *veranda* on each side of the temple, with four domes at the corner, in the

midst of which the steeple rises above all with a gilt pot and spire glittering in the sun-shine.”

“The temple is built of a kind of stone as durable as granite, cemented with lime mortar. The whole building is plastered, but in the course of time the surface has become mouldy.”

As a rule the Samalai temple generally faces to the north while Patneswari to the south. The latter has a sanctum with a circular court which acts as circumambulation path. The Samalai temple is more elaborate and spacious. It consists of two structures, the sanctum and a pillared hall. It has a covered path of circumambulation round the sanctum. In

between the sanctum and the outer hall there is an open yard which serves as the link between the two structures. The Samalai temples of Sonepur and Barapali have similarity with the Khajuraho group of temples adorned with miniature temple motifs. The image of Patneswari of Patnagarh is a representation of ten-armed Mahisamardini Durga. The deity holds the war weapons like sword and shields, bow and arrow, thunderbolt and a snake as well as a long trident. These types of images are common in Orissa. The sculpture is beautifully carved on the eastern *Torana* of Samalai temple of Sonepur. In Gopalji temple it is an isolated figure. In sharp contrast Patneswari of Sambalpur has an image of goddess Kali. Such a figure is also found in Barapali.

Samalai of Sambalpur is a shapeless rock-made deity. Siva Prasad Das opines that Samalai is a deity of the Sabara community who is worshipped almost in every village. She is worshipped alongwith Kandha deity and other deities named after nature. All these deities are simple pieces of stone. What they represent is a subject matter of further research. The institution of Jhankar, the hereditary village priests are given free land holdings for the ritualistic service of the deity. Thus the tutelary deity of the Chauhans of Sambalpur, Samalai is a popular deity of the masses as well.

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A girl NCC cadet pinning the flag on the dress of Hon'ble Chief Minister Shri Naveen Patnaik on the occasion of Armed Forces Flag Day at Naveen Nivas on 7.12.2004.