

Some New Facts About Goddess Samlei

Sasanka S. Panda

It is a popular belief that goddess Samlei is none else than goddess Lankesvari, the titular deity of Ravana, the demon king of Lanka, who was killed in the battle field by Purusottama Rama in the *Tretaya Yuga*. As the demon king Ravana was deeply engrossed in evil deeds, being disgusted the titular goddess of Suvarna Puri Lanka left the fort of Lanka and vanished. As about Samlei it is said that then Lankesvari reappeared in the kingdom of Sambala and was worshipped as Samlei by the local populace in her place of open-air worship on a rock bed inside the river Mahanadi in a place called *Gumodarha* (Gumo Gorge). When the Chauhan kingdom of Sambalpur was established by king Balaram Dev some time in the 16th century, she was brought from her original seat of worship and installed in a temple, constructed by the king. However, as the when this temple became dilapidated the seventh Chauhan king of Sambalpur, Shri Chhatra Sai (1689-1725 A.D.) rebuilt the present temple form of the goddess is uniconic and does not confirm to any Hindu iconography, it seems probable that she

was originally a deity of the tribal populace of Sambalpur region and to appease them king Balaram Dev elevated her to the status of the Rastra Devi of Sambalpur kingdom.



Goddess Samalei

Goddess Lankesvari is worshipped at Sonapur now also on a rock bed in the river Mahanadi, at a distance of around one furlong from the right bank. It is said that the monolithic rock is surrounded by a deep gorge having unfathomable water. The impression we get from the Lankesvari *pitha* at Sonapur that of open-air worship. There is no shrine or temple for this goddess, but various religious symbols like the *gada*, *sankha*, *padma*, *chakra*, a pair of foot-prints, a pair of sacrificial pillars or posts called *Merukhunti*, two lions and three *yonipithas* are carved on the monolithic rock. In the south-west side of this monolithic rock, there is a two-lined long inscription in the *Nagari* character of the 10th-11th century A.D. This monolithic rock is quite interesting as we find the rock-cut carving of a temple diagram also amidst the above mentioned

symbols. Each line of the inscription has twelve characters. In the starting of this inscription there is the rock-cut carved figure of a running horse with a *chhatra* fixed on its back. The entrance portion of this rock-cut diagram is in the southern direction, where in both sides there are two figures of lions with their raised forepaws as if depicting the *simhadvara* or the lion's

gate of a temple. After these carvings, to the proper left there are two rock-cut pillar figures on the floor, symbolizing the pair of sacrificial posts, called the *Merukhunti* or the *Merukham* (Meru pillars). A figure of Hanuman is carved near these pillars in the north-east corner. It is quite interesting to be noted that in the Samlei temple at Sambalpur, a huge image of Hanuman is enshrined in a subsidiary shrine, situated in the north-east corner of the *pradaksina patha*, the path of circumambulation). An old priest of the Samlei temple of Sambalpur once told this

scholar that Hanuman is also worshipped there because he was instrumental in bringing Lankesvari (Samlei) to Sambala from Lanka in the *Tretaya Yuga*. This theory is very interesting as we find a pair of foot-prints, Vaisnavite images like Kacchapa, Varaha, Matsya and Narasimha etc. in the big *Mukhasala* hall of the Samlei temple at Sambalpur. It is quite possible that these symbolism is associated with the cult of Lankesvari. As three *yonipithas* are carved on the monolithic rock, Lankesvari *Pitha* at Sonepur, it is possible that some sort of esoteric cult related

to *yonis* worship might be prevailing there also in the remote past. As this Lankesvari *pitha* at Sonepur is situated deep inside the river Mahanadi, it seems that in the ancient days *sadhakas* were engaged in austerity in complete seclusion.

Identifying Samlei of Sambalpur with

Lankesvari by the priests and taking into account the original place of worship of goddess Samlei, which was in the Gumo *Darha* (Gumo Gorge) of the river Mahanadi, it can be surmised that like the Lankesvari *pitha* of Sonepur, the Samlei *pitha* of Sambalpur was also on a rock bed inside the river, being surrounded by deep water.

Is Samlei the same goddess Lankesvari who has been mentioned in the Tantric Buddhist text *Sadhanamala* as a deity of Vajrayana? If so, was she

popular atleast from the time of Indrabhuti, the king of Sambala, who was a great devotee of Lord Jagannath in the 8th century A.D. ? Is she having any connection with Vaisnavism? In this connection it can be mentioned that for the first time Jagannath has been mentioned in a religious text titled *Gyanasiddhi*, authored by king Indrabhuti of Sambala. Now the question arises, whether there is any connection between Jagannath and goddess Samlei or Lankesvari?

It is also said that goddess Samlei was worshipped as the protectress goddess by the



Twenty Armed Durga
Sambaleswari Temple

boatmen who were navigating the long and vast water course of the mighty river Mahanadi in the ancient days. Therefore, goddess Samlei is called *Chaurasi* Samlei also who protects each and every boat journey through Mahanadi. The *Chaurasi* or Eighty-four is vaguely related to the 84 *Siddhas* (*Chaurasi Siddhas*) who were experts in Tantric Buddhism or the Vajrayana Sahajayana.

Goddess Samlei of Sambalpur and goddess Subhadra of Sri Jagannath temple at Puri are worshipped in the same Bhuvaneshvari *mantra* by the priests. There might be some similarities between both the goddesses.

Lankesvari is called VindhyaVASINI Durga also. In the *K a u m u d i Mahotsava*, we find the mention of Ekanga (Ekanamsa) as the tribal goddess of the Yadavas. Here the goddess is depicted in her dual capacity as VindhyaVASINI Durga and the tribal deity of the Yadavas.

Although it is quite interesting to be noted that Samlei or Lankesvari worship is associated with open-air worship in the rock bed on huge monolithic rocks, at Junagad in the present Kalahandi district, Lankesvari is worshipped inside a temple of the *pidha* order, built some time in the 17th century A.D. It is a four-handed deity, seated in *vajraparyankasana* on a *visvapadma* pedestal. She is holding *sankha* and *chakra* in her upper left and right hands respectively, while the lower left and right hands

are in the *abhaya* and *varada mudras*. She has a protruding tongue like that of goddess Kali.

Lankesvari as a goddess of tantric Buddhism was already popular in the 8th century A.D. By the late Somavamsi period, around the closing years of the 11th century A.D. the Sonepur region was known as *Paschima* Lanka, as recorded in the Sonepur Copper Plate grant of the Somavamsi prince, *Kumaradhiraja* Somesvara Deva, who was the governor of the Sonepur region of the mighty Somavamsi empire.

This Charter was declared from Suvarnapura, his administrative headquarter, in which, he has been mentioned as *Paschimalankadhipati* or the Lord of Western Lanka. The present seat of worship of goddess Lankesvari on the rock-bed of river Mahanadi at Sonepur was so much popular

as a place of religious sanctity that in the first decade of the 12th century A.D. the Telugu Choda king Somesvara Deva II registered the land grant of his Mahada Copper Plate Charter near the *Lankavarttaka* (Lanka Whirlpool) on the bank of river Chitrotpala (Mahanadi).

It is possible that Kot Samlei Cave on the Trikuta Parvat (mountain), situated one km away from the left bank of river Mahanadi, just opposite Sonepur town, was the original place of worship of goddess Samlei and Samlei has some connection with Lord Jagannath, as the idol of Lord Jagannath was kept hidden in this cave



Hati Gate, Sambaleswari Temple Complex

during the invasion of the Yavana invader Raktavahu some time in the 7th century A.D. It seems more probable that Samlei and Subhadra are the one and the same goddess, as both are worshipped in the same Bhuvaneshvari *mantra* even now. Therefore Lankesvari alias Samlei alias Subhadra is the same deity in the uniconic form, who was worshipped by Indrabhuti, the king of Sambala in the 8th century along with Lord Jagannath in the Kot Samlei Cave of Trikuta Parvat. Most probably the same goddess was called Panchambari Bhadrabika by the Somavamsi king Mahasivagupta Yajati II (circa 1025-1040 A.D.), who installed her as his titular deity at *Pattana* Suvarnapura, the capital city of the Somavamsi empire. As she was in the uniconic form, she was having the *Panchamahabhuta* or nature as her dress. (*Panchambari*). It connotes a sort of open-air worship. Further researches can prove this contention.

In the Samlei temples at Sambalpur and Sonepur, in both the places, Hanuman, the monkey-god and the supreme devotee of Purusottama Rama is enshrined inside the temple as a Parsvadevata of goddess Samlei. At Sambalpur, the priests of Samlei temple told this scholar that as goddess Samlei was brought from Lanka by Hanuman, he is also installed there as a devotee of the goddess. Goddess Samlei and goddess Lankesvari seems to be the great Goddess Durga herself, whom Purusottama Ram worshipped and satisfied (propitiated) to build the bridge over the sea (*Setubandha*) to enter Lanka and kill Ravana. Therefore Samlei and Lankesvari might be the same goddess and both are associated with the Vaisnava cult. Panchambari Bhadrabika might be the same goddess Lankesvari of Sonepur, who was Bhadrabika having the nature as her garment (*Pancha ambara*) and at the same time she has been

described as *Bhagavaty* Panchambari Bhadrabika or a goddess related to the *Bhagavata* cult of Vaisnavism. The uniconic form of goddess Samlei at Sambalpur, Barpali and Patnagarh denote her tribal origin, but the icon of Samlei at Sonepur relates her to the Supreme Goddess Durga, and that of Bolangir also to the great goddess (Mahadevi). Therefore Maa Durga is the same deity who is worshipped as Lankesvari and also as Samlei and has been manifested in the form of goddess Subhadra, the sister of Lord Jagannath in the Supreme Jagannath Cult.

In the Tebetan text *Bstan - hgyur* Laksmikara has been mentioned as *Bhagavati* Laksmi and the successor of king Indrabhuti in the succession list of the *Siddhacharyas*. (158, K. Sahu).

The all-pervading Universal manifestation of Sakti, the great goddess Mahadevi was worshipped by Rama and therefore she is called Ramachandi. An image of goddess Ramachandi is fitted to a Parsvadevata niche of the Samlei temple at Sambalpur in the western side of the *Pradaksina Patha* which proves her connection with goddess Samlei. She is the same goddess who was called Lanka Devi or Lankesvari in the *Ramayana*. Her magic force was pervading over Lanka and it was protected by her. But ultimately, being satisfied by the prayer of Rama she left Lanka and Ravana was defeated. Then she was taken to Kosala, the kingdom of Rama to be worshipped there. As Sambala was also a part of South Kosala, which was the maternal place of Rama (His mother Kausalya was the daughter of the king of South Kosala and as she was having no brother, ultimately it merged with Kosala of King Dasaratha. After Rama it was ruled by Kusa), the Great Goddess preferred to be

installed and worshipped in the kingdom of South Kosala.

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The writer lives at VR-23, Unit-6, Bhubaneswar



Temple Sambaleswari