



The Unique Festival of Lanka Podi at Subarnapur

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According to the historians the Subarnapur region was known as Paschima Lanka or western Lanka around the 10th/ 11th centuries. The evidence comes from a copper plate charter issued in the late 10th centuries by Somavamsi prince named Kumar Someswaradeva of Subarnapur. The Prince had identified himself with the king of Paschima Lanka. It was further found that the Mahada copper plate grant of Kumar Someswaradeva registered on the Bank of the river Chitrotpala (Mahanadi) and near the province of Lanka. The presiding deity of Paschim Lanka was Goddess Lankeswari.

The district earned the name of “Subarnapur” during the time of Somavamsi rule. The district was established on 1st April of 1993.

Lanka Podi or Lanka Pudi (the burning of Lanka is a festival celebrated in Sonapur region of western Odisha). Many say this festival is a further evidence that Sonapur was known as Paschima Lanka.

Sonapur lies roughly 125 miles from the sea at a place where a major tributary, the river Tel, flows into the Mahanadi; river junctions are auspicious as well as strategic in India. Sonapur is a city of temples of the 18th and 19th century except for one very ancient shrine dedicated to

the Goddess Lankeswari, which is located on an island in the middle of the river Mahanadi. The name of Lankeswari means Goddess of Lanka, the capital of demons in the epic Ramayana. “Sonapur” itself (Subarnapur in Sanskrit) means city of gold, an epithet of Lanka is identified with the island to the south known today as Srilanka. For inhabitants of Sonapur the epic has vivid local reality every year in the festival of Lanka Podi, which commemorates the burning of Lanka.

The basic plot here begins with the incarnation of god Vishnu as a heroic prince. Rama, in order to save the earth of the demon king Ravana, who lived in Lanka, while Rama was dwelling in exile in the forest. His devoted wife Sita was kidnapped by Ravana. Rama and his brother Laxmana were assisted by the forest dwelling monkeys in winning her back. The monkey general Hanuman used his super natural powers to leap to the island of Lanka, circumventing the guardian Lankeswari and made contact with Sita. Hanuman was then captured and brought before Ravana who ordered his tail bound with oily rags and set on fire. The mighty monkey escaped magically becoming small and then bounded over the roofs of the golden fortress of Lanka, reducing to ashes with the torch of his tail before he returned safely to Rama. Eventually



Rama and his brother led an army of monkeys in a war killed Ravana and won back Sita. It is Hanuman's initial raid that is annually celebrated in Sonepur.

Lanka Podi falls on the new moon of the lunar month of 'Bhadra' to mark the epic event of Lord Hanuman's raid on the kingdom of Ravana. The town twinkles with the countless flames that indeed create the illusion of Lanka burning. As the night wears on, acrobats and gymnasts perform in the streets. The sense of adventure and festivity is contagious. Sonepur is a town rich in craft of many kinds including energetically patterned ikat textiles, locally known as *bandha* or "bound" because the thread is tie-dyed before weaving. Women wear their best sarees made of this material. Old men may pass the time with a game of tiny round cards or *Ganjapas*, organized in twelve suits that correspond to the major actors in the Ramanaya, a version of the game peculiar to Sonepur where it played year-round. But the day of Lanka Podi essentially belongs to the town's children.

From early morning, boys up to the age of eight or so pull wheeled wooden toys throughout the streets. While such toys are used for play at other time in the year, they are repainted or replaced and paraded en masse with particular pride on Lanka Podi. Many of the carving represent travellers riding on horses or elephants.

While little boys pull their wheeled toys, the girls of Sonepur are busy assembling sets of miniature clay cooking pots and utensils, toy replicas of the object in their mothers' kitchen. Towards the middle of the day the pubescent teenage girls take over in arranging these utensils in front of the household after decorating with

flowers and with *chitta* or patterns of rice flour on the ground beneath. The entire rituals is said to prepare the girls for their household duties.

But all day long Sonepur has been preoccupied with clay images of Hanuman himself, which must be purchased either in the bazar or from the house of the potter. To make the image of Hanuman, the potters collect clay from the river bank, formed deftly on a manually operated wheel and the products are later on dried in large piles in open. The monkey images of the most traditional type join units from the potters ordinarily repertoire. Thus the head is a money bank, its mouth where a slit for coins could be eaten. And the legs and bodies are cylindrical tubes that could be sliced with a wire while still wet to form a pair of roof tiles. Twisted "wicks" of clay form teeth and other features, a spiky crown, and the all important tail (which the potter constantly warns the buyer is not a handle for carrying). Some are dusted with powdered mica after firing, which gives them a sparkling, slightly gilded skin. Not all images are of this imposing "standard" type, twenty inches high. Some are smaller with legs of solid clay rather than hollow roof-tile tubes. These are cheaper and traditionally thought of as appropriate for small children. Virtually every family in Sonepur buys a Hanuman, sometimes one for each child. At home they are assembled with bamboo axles to attach the clay wheels. Decorations continue daubs of white paint, stalks of leaves and yellow flowers are added. Some are transformed by coloured paint like folklore images, each different are the product of the community at large, beginning with the professional potter but radically varied by other people. At nightfall the tail is wrapped in old cloth. Then a dish or container is attached at the very tip and filled with oil or kerosene, which is set on fire.



Children from the age of three grasp a rope attached to the front and roll their creations over the streets with pride. Among groups of teenagers there is often lively competition. Very young children are usually accompanied by an adult. The monkeys regularly used to be taken to the courtyard of the temple of the Goddess Samalei and broken early in the morning following Lanka Podi. This follows a pan-Indian pattern invoking supernatural presence to inhabit a clay image and then after a dramatic ritual, destroying the inert body. Even in the past, however, Hanuman might occasionally be placed on a roof top, an apotropaic guardian of the town.

At present various competitions are being organized by the Lankapodi Mahotsav Committee under the chairmanship of Mr. Shyama Om Prasad Mishra, Advocate and social activist for the years together. The best well decorated terracotta Hanuman as well as various competitions i.e. essay and debate are held among the students and awarded by the committee too. Veteran potters are also felicitated by the committee. It would create a social attraction for

outsiders, if a huge Hanuman Statue (like terracotta Hanuman of Lankapodi) will be installed in any Chowk of main road of Sonepur Town, they might be aware about this unique tradition and culture of Sonepur.

Let us upkeep this unique tradition in tact, otherwise it may disappear in this digital world.

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