

The Tradition of Sun worship and Arka Kshetra Konark in the Sarala Mahabharata

Dr. Biraj Mohan Das



The Hindus have been worshippers of the Sun God from time immemorial. They perform their morning ritual after praying to the Sun God. It is their belief that the well being and strength that they get from worshipping Him contribute to their prosperity. Every created form on this earth owes its origin to the Sun God. Therefore, it has been justly said, *Surya Atma Jagatascha*, which means Sun is the soul of the entire world. No wonder, the Sun

is worshipped as the creator of the entire universe, the overseer of all their activities.¹ It is believed that one can overcome all obstacles and problems by worshipping the Sun. One can even hope to be cured of incurable diseases of the eye, heart and nerves, leprosy and asthma by worshipping the Sun God. This is what is stated in the scriptures and is commonly believed.² Hence the saying, *Arogyam Bhaskarat Ichhet*, which means

that man's recovery from illness is entirely the will of the Sun God. It is stated in the *Mahabharata* that Samba, the son of Krishna, got cured of leprosy by worshipping the Sun God.

Of the three principal Gods of the *Vedas*, the Sun God is one.³ In the *Rg Veda* there is mention of the seven horses who pull the chariot of the Sun God.⁴ The *Chhandogya Upanisad* mentions the fearsome cry that followed the advent of Sun at the primal phase of the Universe. That cry is the root of all life and all pleasure.⁵ In the *Ramayana* it has been stated that Rama was able to defeat Ravana by learning the hymn *Aditya Hrudayam* from Rishi Agastya, which pleased the Sun God.⁶

The Sun God happens to be the son of Rishi Kashyap and his wife Aditi. The name Aditya by which he is known, derives from the name of his mother. He is also known as Rabi, the name of the first day of the Hindu week and his rotation period around the orbit is one year. According to the Hindu astrology, of the nine planets the Sun is the most significant. The day of *Makar Sankranti* is observed as a special day to worship the Sun God because from this day the Sun begins its journey from the tropic of Capricorn to the tropic of Cancer, otherwise known as *Uttarayan*. The Sun God has various names such as *Bhaskar*, *Bhanu*, *Sabitru* etc. The Sun temple at Konark in Odisha, the Dakshinark temple of Gaya in Bihar, the Suryanar Kovil in Tamilnadu, the Suryanarayan temple at Asavalli in Andhra Pradesh are a few ancient monuments in India dedicated to the Sun God.

Some research scholars opine that the ritual of worshipping the Sun in Odisha was prevalent in the pre-historic period.⁷ This view is established by the symbolic representation of Sun in the rock art panel of Gostimada-I in Sundergarh district, the chalcolithic pottery of Nuagada and Manamunda in Suvarnpur and Boudh districts respectively and early-historic pottery of Manikpatana and Narisho in coastal Odisha. Rishi Dirghatama, the first ancestor of prince Kalinga is known to have composed the hymn of the Sun in the *Rg Veda*. This leads some scholars to argue that the Sun worship was prevalent in Odisha from the Vedic age.⁸ Besides, the narration *Jatam Arka Kalingesu* in the *Jaimini Gruhya Sutra* indicates the relation between the Sun and Kalinga. Thus significant evidence exists to show that Sun worship was widespread in Odisha from fifth century to thirteenth century A.D.

The Sumandala plate of Prithivi Vighraha (Gupta year 250-569 A.D.) records that King Dharmaraj who ruled from his capital Padmakholi was a devotee of *Sahasrarasmi*, the Sun God. The relationship between *Padma* (Lotus) and the Sun (God) strengthens this assumption. The oval seal of the plate contains an emblem, which has the shape of the solar disk. It is recorded that King Dharmaraj was from the Sailodbhava dynasty and the first king of Kalinga to promote Saura cult. Later the Sun God was worshipped as Rabi, the first among the *navagrahs* (nine planets), and as the covering god who was placed in the outer walls of the temples. Some images of the Sun God, erected in the seventh century A.D., prove the immense popularity of the tradition of Sun worship, both in literature

and architecture, during the rule of the Somavansa dynasty in Odisha.

According to *Madalapanji*, a king by the name Purandar Kesari had established a Sun-temple at Konark. One of the fragmentary inscriptions engraved on the back of an image of Surya from the village Gandibeda near Soro in Bhadrak district mentions the name *Somakulatilaka Sri Karnarajadeva* which has been identified as that of the Somavansi King Karnadeva. Someswara Dev Burman III ruled from Subarnapur (Sonepur) on South Kosala. In the Mahada plates (1155 – 1180 A.D.) the king is named as *Satyamarttandadeva Sri Baidyanatha Padapankaja bhramara* (The black-bee at the lotus feet of the sun of truth, Sri Baidyanatha). This denotes his alligiance and devotion to Surya and Siva (the Sun-God and Lord Siva). During the reign of the Ganga dynasty this form of worshipping the Sun God became more popular. In the Nagari plates of Anangabhima-III (1211-38 A.D.) we find the mention of *Aditya Purana* (Scripture of the Sun). During the rule of Narasimha-I this concept of Sun worship had further spread. The grand Sun-temple at Konark (thirteenth century A.D.) was the outcome of this devotion. Even the king had named his son as Bhanu Deva after the Sun God.⁹

The temple of Biranchi Narayan of Palia of Bhadrak district in Odisha is one of the eminent temples dedicated to the Sun God. It is said that this was built by Keshari dynasty in the thirteenth century A.D. During the invasion of Kalapahar, the temple and its presiding deity, the Sun God, were destroyed. According to archeologists, Marahatta rulers

in the eighteenth century A.D. has reconstructed the present temple.¹⁰ Another temple of Biranchi Narayan Swamy, dedicated to the same Sun God and known for its finery in wood work of Odisha, was built by Srikar Bhanja, a king of Bhanja dynasty. This temple is situated in Buguda of Ganjam district. Some scholars opine that the image of the Sun God was retrieved from the dilapidated Malatigarh not far from the village of Kelupadar associated with the Keshari dynasty and was installed in a newly built temple at a Buddhist-pitha.¹¹

In later years the worship of the Sun God ceased to exist as an independent stream and assimilated into Vaishnavism. But it continues to play a significant role in the people's daily conduct of religious rites. Offering of ablution in form of water to the Sun is also a form of *Namaskar – Surya Namaskar*. The daily ritual of worship of the Sun God practiced in the temple of Siva (*God Lingaraj*), is an evidence of this. 'The worship of Vishnu is considered to be incomplete without the worship of the Sun God.' This is stated in the *Niladri Mahodaya* which stipulates how and when the rites of Lord Jagannath are to be performed.^{12,13} The rituals of *Rabi Narayan Brata, Pausa Rabibara Brata, Dwitiya Osha, Samba Dashami* and the rituals offered at the pedestal of tulasi, which are prevalent in Odisha, suggest the significance of Sun worship.¹⁴

It has been established since long that Kona Ark or Konark is the most significant spot of worship of the Sun God.¹⁵ In ancient India, of the three places famous for worshipping the Sun, one is Mundira or Mundira Swamin. Mundira has been subsequently named as Kona Ark or Konark.¹⁶ The importance of taking a holy dip in the Chandrabhaga, a

river near the Konark seashore, on the seventh day of *Shukla Paksha of Magha* has long been recognized. It may be mentioned here that after the Konark temple was demolished the river Chandrabhaga was buried under salt and sand. However, the practice of dipping continues unabated. *Brahma Purana* mentions the rites and rituals to be performed after taking the holy dip on *Magha Saptami*.¹⁷ Bruhaspati Mishra (1350 A.D.) in the *Kruta Kaumudi* has elaborately dwelt upon these rites which are based on quotations from *Smritisukhaya*, *Matsya Purana* and *Brahma Purana*.¹⁸ Sarala Das in his *Mahabharata*, written approximately in the fifteenth century A.D. has included this Konark or Kona Ark and Chandrabhaga among the rivers and rivulets, hills and mountains of Odisha he has glorified. The significance and importance of Konark and Chandrabhaga, have been described in the several parbas of Sarala's *Mahabharata*.

Writers of scriptures in the regional languages have modified certain episodes on the basis of local legends and folk tales while keeping the main stories of the Sanskrit scriptures intact. They have done this in order to heighten the significance of the streams, rivers and the places of pilgrimage of their region. So did Sarala Das. It has been advised to take bath in the rivers like Chandrabhaga in the month of *Kartik* to free oneself from various sins.¹⁹ In order to save the country from famine caused by drought King of Kanaya worshipped the Biranchi or Sun for fifteen years at the Arka Kshetra.²⁰ Pleased with the devotion of the King Kanaya Bindu, the Sun God wanted to give him a boon. At that time the Demon Arka who also lived there could foresee the danger he was about to face. He thought that

the king would pray to the Sun God for more power than he had and attacked the king with an intention to kill him. The king tried to defend himself. As the Demon Arka tried to disturb the meditation of rishis and oppressed them in many ways, the Sun God reprimanded him and thrust him on the ground with his bare hands. To kill the demon he invoked *Suryabrata Chakra*, but it went in vain. Meanwhile, all the Gods in the Heaven prayed to Surya Deva to kill the demon and he killed Arka at one corner of the sea. The blessings of the Sun God poured forth from heaven in the Kingdom of Kanaya in form of rain and the people were saved from famine and disease.²¹ From that day onward the land to the west of Chandrabhaga has been known as Kona Ark and its derivative Konark. According to Sarala *Mahabharata*, when the *Pandavas* were wandering in the forests they visited different places of pilgrimage, took bath in different sacred ponds, rivers and seas of Odisha. These include river Chandrabhaga and the temple at Konark. When Judhisthir wanted to know the significance of this place, the story of King Kanaya Bindu and Demon Arka was narrated to him.²²

According to *Mahabharata* composed in Sanskrit by Vyasa, when Draupadi was on the verge of being denuded in the presence of all of *Kauravas* and *Pandavas* including their guru, kith and kin, ministers and attendants, she prayed to Narayana and accordingly the God of Dharma by the direction gave her millions of sarees to protect her from shame. But Sarala Das made some changes in this story where Surya Deva has taken the place of Dharma Deva. Draupadi prayed to Narayana to save her from disgrace. Narayana advised her to

pray to Surya Deva and asked Surya Deva to give her sarees and save her from disgrace. Draupadi in her prayers and invocations has sung the praise of the Surya Deva as ‘the one without beginning’ (*Anadi Purusa*), ‘the one who can see the past and future’ (*Bhuta Bhabisyatara drsta*) ‘the master of earth, water, heat and wind’ (*jala, sthala, patala, prithvi, ap, tej, bayu o marut ra karta*), ‘the God of meditation’ (*Jogeswar*), ‘one without any form and shape’ (*anakar*), ‘one who cannot be destroyed’ (*abyay*), ‘one who knows the inner self’ (*antaryami*) and ‘one beyond death’ (*akshaya purusha*). Here the poet has used words like *Aditya, Gagana bihari, Dibakar and Bhaskar* etc. to represent Surya or the Sun. In this context she had sung in praise of Surya Deva, ‘who killed the demon in the land of sun on the bank of Chandrabhaga for the well-being of the world’. Thus the importance of the temple and the river has been enhanced.^{23,24}

When Draupadi, disguised as Sairindhri, lived in the kingdom of Birata, she sought the help of Krisna and Surya Deva to evade the imminent danger of Birata’s brother-in-law Kichaka to whose palace she had to go with a letter from the queen of Birata. While praying to the Sun God she uses terms such as ‘one who wears garland of rays’ (*Ansumali*), ‘born of Aditi’ (*Aditya*), ‘God of destroyer of darkness’ (*Timira bidarana Natha*), and ‘the glowing Sun’ (*Martanda*). In course of the prayer she also recounts the greatness of Chandrabhaga and Konark. She prays to the Sun God to save her as he had saved her from utter shame and disgrace of being nude in the *Kurusabha*. This time Surya Deva sends his two wives, Chhaya and Maya, to

stand on either side of her and save her from Kichaka’s carnal desire.^{25,26}

Once Krisna, the king of Dwaraka, was in the house of his queen Jambabati. His son Samba Kumar acted as the sentry. Narada arrived and wanted to meet Krisna immediately. Samba was not in a position to yield to Narada’s demand. Narada became angry and threatened to destroy the entire Dwaraka. Samba was helpless and had no alternative but to go into the zenana. Krisna and Jambabati were in an intimate embrace. Out of shame Jambabati left the room and Krisna was infuriated and cursed him with leprosy. The curse took effect immediately. When he heard the news that Narada had come to visit him, he came out followed by his son. Narada heard everything and saw the disfigurement of Samba with his own eyes. He felt regretful about Samba’s distress. He advised Samba to go to Konark and worship Surya Deva in order to get cured of this incurable disease. Rishi Markanda told this to Judhithir when he was wandering in the forest and advised him to worship the Sun God. The five Pandava brothers accordingly bathed in the river Chandrabhaga and worshipped Biranchi Narayan at Konark.²⁷

In some other episodes of Sarala *Mahabharata* the greatness of these two places, Konark and Chandrabhaga, have also been graphically delineated. In the *Sabha Parba*, Sahadev, advised by Markanda Rishi, visited all the kingdoms to invite the kings and in the course of the travel he visited Chandrabhaga and Konark.²⁸ Arjun’s son Nagarjun learnt about the benefit of the dip in the water of Chandrabhaga on his way to meditate in some far off land.²⁹ Chitrarath,

the son of Indra, also visited Chandrabhaga.³⁰ Chandrabhaga has also been mentioned in the context of the birth of Abhimanyu and the destiny of king Nahusha.³¹ Water from various holy rivers including Chandrabhaga was fetched during enthroning ceremony of Yudhisthir.³² How the scripts of *Vedas* were stolen from the banks Chandrabhaga near the Arka Kshetra (Konark) by the demon Sankhasura when Brahma, the grand father of the universe, was performing the daily chores and how these (the *Vedas*) were retrieved, have been described in the *Udyoga Parba*. Other episodes such as of 'The death of king Drupada during the clash at night' (*Ratri Gola Judha Drupada Rajara Mrutyu*), 'The birth of Hanuman' (*Hanumant Janma Bibarana*) and 'The anger aroused in Arjun at the death of Drona and Angad's recompense for his father's death' (*Drona Nidhane Arjunankara Kopa O Angadra Pitururuna Parisodh*) in the *Drona Parba*, 'The Killing of Karna' (*Karna badha*) in the *Karna Parba*, 'The story of Markanda Brahma before his coronation, the legend that made Hari look bovine' (*Markanda Brahmanka Purba Janma Brutanta O Gomukhi Harinka Katha*) in the *Musali Parba*, 'The test of piety of Yudhisthir and his visit to heaven with his body intact' (*Yudhisthiranka dharma pariksha O swasarire swarga gamana*) in the *Swargarohan Parba*, the glory of Chandrabhaga and Konark has also been narrated.

Thus in different episodes Sarala Das has described the significance of Konark, Chandrabhaga and Biranchi Narayan, while in the introductory and concluding lines he has sung the praise of the Sun. Lines such as 'Bowling at the feet of rising glowing Sun / Sudramuni Sarala Das humbly seeks salvation'

(*Udaya Martanda charane sarana nitye / Sudramuni Sarala Das Binaya Anubrate*) are testimony to this.³³ Again he has written, 'I bow at the feet of Sri Biranchi Narayan / Sudramuni Sarala Das eternally asks for your kindness'. (*Sree Biranchi Narayan charane Namaste / Sudramuni Sarala Das anugraha magai nitye*).³⁴ It can be asserted on the basis of the Sarala Das' *Mahabharata* that the then society of Odisha worshipped the Sun God as one of the principal deities and that Sun-worship had gained considerable prominence and popularity in that society.

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Dr. Biraj Mohan Das, Plot No.K9B-398, Kalinga Nagar, Bhagabanpur, Patrapada, Bhubaneswar- 751019, E-mail: das.birajmohan@gmail.com.