

# SANSKRITIZATION OF TRIBAL DEITIES DURING THE CHAUHAN RULE IN WESTERN ODISHA : AN OVERVIEW

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## Introduction

Brahminization is a fascinating subject of investigation in Odisha history and culture. M.N Srinivas<sup>1</sup> used the term *Sanskritization*. H.Kulke,<sup>2</sup> later on found it a suitable to explain the genesis of Lord Jagannatha Triad and he called it *Hinduization*. B. Mishra<sup>3</sup> applied the term *Sanskritization* lest in the early historic Tel river valley of southwest Odisha. Land donation to Brahmana, temple construction, adoption of Sanskrit as court language, and assimilation of autochthonous Deity , Symbol of belief and worship with the Orthodox religious tradition, were some of the cardinal characteristic features of Sanskritization<sup>4</sup> .

In Odishan historiography , Sanskritization is first glimpsed during 5<sup>th</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> century CE, just after the Deccan campaign of Samudragupta, when he defeated king Mahendra of Kosala, Vyagraraja of Mahakantara and Mantaraja of Kurala.<sup>5</sup> Last two kingdoms and kings very well belonged to modern Western Odisha . King Vyagraraja and Mantaraja seems to have recognized the cultural supremacy of the Gupatas. Thus , we see the earliest evidence of Sanskritization such as the rise of Stambeswari worship<sup>6</sup> during the reign of king Tustikara of Mahakantara kingdom, who probably belonged to the line of descend of Vyagraraja of 4<sup>th</sup> century CE. His land donation to Brahmana Dronaswamin<sup>7</sup> and construction of the early brick temple for Stambeswari worship at Asurgarh ( Narla)<sup>8</sup> speaks about deliberate attempt of Sanskritization in the tribal pocket during the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE.

Kulke, while evaluating *Hinduization* or *Sanskritization* process in the sub-regional kingdoms of early medieval Odisha, (from 6<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> century CE) adopted three models or typology of Hinduization like, Sakta ( Stambeswari worship) , Saiva ( Bhairava creed) and Vaisnava ( Narasimha creed). The model can be applied in case of the later Medieval age (14<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> Century CE ) when the Chauhans exercised sovereignty on greater part of western Odisha. Nevertheless, in the present study the term *Sanskritization* is adopted instead of *Hinduization* in view of the present politicalization of the latter.

## The Chauhans and their dominion in Western Odisha

Literary Sources make us to believe that Ramaideva or Ramadeva, the founder of the Chauhana rule in Patna region of western Odisha belongs to the Chauhana lineage of Garh Sambar near Mynpooree of North

India<sup>9</sup>. R.D Banerjee<sup>10</sup> is the first historian to doubt the ksatriya lineage of Ramaideva having affinity with the famous Chauhan dynasty of northern India. S.K Panda<sup>11</sup> too subscribes to the view of Banerjee and boldly asserts indigenous origin of Ramaidev. Nevertheless, it can be said at the present state of our knowledge that Ramaideva brought the end of the Oligarchy controlled by *Eight Mahaliks* in Patna. In the beginning, Ramaideva ruled over *eight Garhs* like, Patna, Salebhata, Kangaon, Jhorasingha, Sindekela, Kholagarh, Gooragarh, Komnagarh<sup>12</sup>. It later on expanded into eighteen *garhs* locating on either bank of the river Mahanadi, Ong and Tel. *Kosalananda Kavya* provides a vague description of Chauhan sovereignty over a wild tract of land during its glorious epoch. On the other, the description of *Jayachandrika* of Prahlada Dubey<sup>13</sup> during 1782 appears more rational in this context. Thus, eighteen localities or *garh* which were added with the Chauhan dominion were Patna, Sambalpur, Sonepur, Khariar, Athmallik, Bamanda, Bonai, Baud, Rairhkhola, Gangpur, Raigarh, Sarangarh, Surguja, Bindra- Nuagarh, Phuljhar, Sakti, Bargarh and Borasambar.<sup>14</sup>

The regions mentioned above were purely tribal pocket, inhabited by primitive tribes like the Kondhs, Gonds, Brinjal, and Sauras etc. It was full of forest and hills. Its mountain system shares partly the same of Gondwana and Deccan peninsula.

### **Evolution of Primitive belief ( Fertility creeds and mother goddess worship)**

At least from Neolithic period, fertility belief persisted in western part of Odisha. Prehistoric headless painting of a female figurine, triangles designs and vulva carving etc, betray fertility belief among the primitive peoples of the concerned landmass<sup>15</sup>. In Chalcolithic and Iron Age perspectives, the findings of terracotta nude female figurines from the archaeological sites like Budhigarh and Jamgudapadar of Kalahandi district further highlight the continuity of this prehistoric tradition. Early historical urban centre like Asurgarh – Narla has also yielded one nude terracotta figurines from layer IV, period – III ( 500 CE ) in 1973 excavation.<sup>16</sup>

Moreover, field study shows that mother goddess has been worshipped by the tribals in the shape of log, uniconic stone and heap of earth at different places of western Odisha. As stated already, Stambheswari is the best example of early process of Sanskritization in western Odisha during the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE. Thereafter, in between Christian era to 10<sup>th</sup> century CE, large numbers of local goddesses were assimilated with Orthodox creeds across India<sup>17</sup>. They were all identified with the Sakti or mother goddess. The process of peaceful assimilation stirred up the tantric tradition. Ranipur - Jharia and its sixty – four Yoginis and Sonepur were hub of mother goddess worship through tantric formula during 10<sup>th</sup> to 12 the century CE. Fertility Symbols and diagrams were often found access into iconography. Thus from Khariar

– Komna zones, another Chauhana realm, we come across Sakambari alias Lajja Gauri worship. The Lajja Gauri image combines fertility and fecundity aspects.<sup>18</sup>

### Pre existing Brahmanical culture and kingship

Evidence of Orthodox belief in western Odisha goes back to Early History. During early medieval period, temple construction activities geared up by the Somavamsis and the Gangas. A good deal of Copper plate grants of these dynasties reveals Sanskrit as court language and the brahmanas were its custodians. Saiva, Sakta and Vaisnava creeds prevailed and Sanskritization of tribal deity and usages was ongoing. It resulted in the rise of Jagannatha cult in Odisha.

At Patnagarh, primitive practice and belief persisted on the eve of the foundation of Chauhan rule. Oligarchy system of government was an ancient Indian polity, very popular in the tribal zones of India. As the tradition says, Ramaideva, the founder of the Chauhan dynasty of Patna brought an end to this kind of polity<sup>19</sup>. Probably, he organized a *coup d'état* and brought the fall of the Oligarchy and its *Eight Mahalikas*. Consequently, Legitimization of kingship was essential for him and his descendants. So, the Chauhan kings deliberately adopted Sanskritization method by recognizing tribal deity and its culture. In this sphere, the brahmanas played a significant role by inventing anecdotes and stories for identifying the same with any one of the god or goddess of Orthodox practice and belief.

It is on this background, Sanskritization in western Odisha during the Chauhan rule can be discussed.

### Sanskritization of tribal Deity and symbols

As stated already, Kulke;s, three types of Hinduization can be applied in case of the later medieval Odisha, when the Chauhans exercised sovereignty in Kosala land of the former Somavamsis.

Already, Sakta type of Sanskritization was noticed in Western part of Odisha since the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE, when the tribal revered log or wooden post/ pillar was Sanskritised into Sthambhesvari. Having identified with goddess Durga, the brahmanas and non – brahmanas worshipped her and in subsequent period Stambhesvari creed engulfed the middle Mahanadi valley. She has been worshipped at Sonepur. Chauhan king later on build temple for her worship.

When Ramaideva started Chauhan rule with Patna as its headquarter, he recognized the local goddess and designated her as Pataneswari. Probably she was the popular tribal goddess of Patna. At least from the

Kalachuri rule ( 12<sup>th</sup> century CE), Patna was celebrated as a Tantric centre. Thus, it was known as *Kumari Patana*. Ramaideva not only accepted the local deity by assigning the Sanskritise nomenclature Patanesvari but also establish brahmana settlement called *Brahmapura* near the fort or *garh*. J. Mohapatra<sup>20</sup> writes thus

*“These Brahmanas were instrumental in Sanskritising the local culture, although they could not totally do away with the animistic form of worship of the tribes and their culture”.*

*Samalai* or its Sanskritise name *Sambalesvari* ( lady of wealth) or *Samalesvari* is another example of Sanskritization of the uniconic symbol of the Tribals by the Chauhanas. Myth and anecdote is recorded in *Kosalananda Kavya* and *Jayachandrika* regarding the adoption to Samalai as tutelary deity by the first Chauhana king of Sambalpur Balaram Dev.<sup>21</sup> Later on, O Molley<sup>22</sup> ( 1901) repeated the version of Jayachandrika. This often tends as *prima - facie* evidence of Sanskritization.

Goddess Samalai is mentioned in the copper plate grant of Chauhana king Jayanta Singh , dated 28<sup>th</sup> April 1790 CE.<sup>23</sup> She has been worshipped under a tree ( Simuli or Silk – Cotton tree) in the form of a stone in every tribal villages of Sambalpur. It is also hailed that Samalai was the deity of the Savaras of Sambalpur.<sup>24</sup>

The ‘triangular design rock’ designated as Sambaleswari is a unique symbology of fertility worship in India. In another sense, it is a combination of Linga and Yoni on stone. A close scrutiny shows that it is in the shape of a huge *Vagina* ‘interpenetrated with a penis’.<sup>25</sup> We have in historical period such type of *Votive lingam*, a conjoint form of Linga and Yoni, chiseled on two separate stone blocks. They are recovered from Veerapuram excavation. Archaeological survey of the Tel Valley of western Odisha too has yielded such type of composite Linga – Yoni stone or Votive Lingam . Both Veerapuram Votive Lingam and the same recovered from the archaeological sites of the Tel valley have been ascribed to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE.<sup>26</sup>

After recognition of Samalai as tutelary deity by Balaram Dev, the founder of Sambalpur kingdom, as junior Chauhan branch of Patna, the fertility symbol of aborigine worship became an Idol of Orthodox creed after its identification with goddess Durga. Her worship usages was Sanskritised, yet, its basic form of worship was retained. King Chhatar Sai ,(1657 – 65 CE) the seventh descendant of Balaram Dev, build the present Sambaleswari temple.<sup>27</sup> The king provided land and engaged priests from brahmana *varna* as well as from tribal community for her daily worship as per brahmanical ritual form. Nonetheless, the archaic practice of *human sacrifice* before the goddess was retained and the practice continued. It was substituted by

buffaloes sacrifice probably during the British rule. In course of time, Samalai worship spread into other regions ruled by the Chauhans. The Chauhan rulers constructed temples for her worship at Sonepur, Patna and Khariar etc.

By patronizing the most popular deity of the tribals, the Chauhans easily succeeded in consolidating the sovereignty.

Moreover, under the direct patronage of kings, Saiva model of Sanskritization operated at various places. It is Bhairava, a tribal god, who was incorporated with the orthodox Saiva creed. He was identified with Lord Siva especially by his *ugra* aspect. Ethno - religious survey of Kalahandi district by B. Mishra<sup>28</sup> shows that the tribal militia ( Paiks) and Sauras or Savaras were the early worshipper of Bhairava. Often Gonds also worship Bhairava by the name Budharaja. Generally, the Bhairava centre of worship is found within a thatched hut, where in the middle is found an unhewn stone one, two or three as God Bhairava. On either side of stone trident or sword or both are kept. Outside the shrine, just in front of it, wooden pillars or posts are inserted into the ground. This is known as Bhairava post. The post is believed to be the replica of the main deity. Tribal belief vouchsafes twelve kinds of Bhairava. Jhamuyatra is the most enticing festival of the tribals at the Bhairava centre of worship. On the occasion, the priests walk to and fro on hot carbon in the long trench dug for the purpose.

It seems that Sakta – Saiva typology of Sanskritization operated simultaneously during medieval Odisha. Shrines dedicated to Bhairava, however, are few in early medieval period. Bhairava is projected as *Parswadevata* on the temple niche of Saiva shrine. Budharaja, another evolutionary aspect of Bhairava creed was patronized by the Chauhans. Thus, at Sambalpur, a shrine dedicated to Budharaja was constructed by king Chatrasai (1690 – 1725 CE). The deity is also called Somnath by the people.<sup>29</sup>

Early evidence of Vaisnava creed goes back to the 4<sup>th</sup> – 5<sup>th</sup> century CE. Apparently, after Samudragupta's meteoric campaign in Deccan, Gupta Vaisnavism spread into it. In Western Odisha, early form of Visnu has been documented in the Nala realm ( Podagad) of Nawarangpur district and Asurgarh (Narla) of Kalahandi district dated 5<sup>th</sup> century CE.<sup>30</sup> Growth of Visnuism continued during Post – Gupta period in Odisha. Among various forms of lord Visnu, his Narasimha *avatar* was hailed as furious one. The uncanny and weird form of the supreme god of Hinduism was due to the absorption of god Narasimha into the Vaisnava creed. Primarily, Narasimha was a tribal deity. It has its affinity with the wooden post of the tribals of western Odisha. Both Stambeswari and Narasimha have thus common source of origin from log or wooden post. According to Purana, Narasimha derived his strength to tore up Hiranyakasipu from the

wooden pillar in the palace of the demon king, where was presided goddess Durga. A good deal of Narasimha images are documented in recent time in the Tel valley of western Odisha.

Chauhan kings were votaries of post worship, which was already Sanskritised as Sthmbeswari. So, Stambeswari temple at Sonepur was build by King Rahsingh Deo during the later part of the sixteen century CE. In addition, in front of the Palace of Sonepur, wooden post be are the carving of Narasimhi.<sup>31</sup> She is the consort of god Narasimha and a goddess of *Dasamahavidya*.

Moreover, in dealing with the Narasimha worship, the Chauhana king Vaijjala Deva went a step ahead. He flourished in the early part of the 15<sup>th</sup> century CE. He was the third Chauhan ruler of Patna. He constructed the temple of Narasimha on the Gandhamardana hill in 1413 CE.<sup>32</sup> The king granted the revenue village Luhasingha for the worship of god and maintenance of temple. The site is a heritage sight of the State. It seems that the composition of *Nrusimha Mahatya* made the site famous for Narasimha worship. An original uniconical stone of the Kondh tribe was Sanskritised as *Marjara Kesari Visnu* Or Cat - Lion incarnation of Visnu, who killed *Musika Daity* at the site, so the story developed in literature and thereby ensued peaceful assimilation of two culture viz, Sanskrit and non -Sanskrit. .

## Evaluation

Sanskritization was a continuous process from 4<sup>th</sup> - 5<sup>th</sup> century CE up to late medieval period in Odisha. In this process, deity and the symbol was elevated from Village level to temple level. Temples were constructed and land donation was made for worship and maintenance. Both tribal and brahmana priests served in the shrine. Tribal practices were ensured in the temple. At the same time brahmanical usages of worship was adopted as in the case of Sambaleswari of Sambalpur. As Gandhamardana mountainous zone was a tribal belt, in order to, legitimize expansion into it, a peaceful and gradual policy of Sanskritization by revamping Narasimha belief of the tribals was desideratum for the early Chauhans of Patna. Our literary source is vociferous about it. Therefore, Vaijalla Deva patronized it.

The Chauhans also championed Stambeswari creed. Probably the concept of Stambheswari and Narasimhi as one was current in the country. Therefore, one may see the carving of Narasimhi portrait on the wooden post standing in front of the Sthambeswari temple of Sonepur.

However, as outlined previously, the question of legitimization of power and upsurge of an integrated homogeneous culture, were two major political and cultural thinking of the then polity of India.

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### Abbreviations

OJMS – The Quarterly Journal of the Mythic Society of India.

CII - Corpus Inscription Indicarom

EI, - Epigrphia Indica.

S.U – Sambalpur University

OHRJ – Orissa Historical Research Journal.

NAHO – New Aspects of the History of Orissa.

JOH – Journal of Orissan History

ICSBA – International Cent re for Study of the Bengal Art.

P.O.H.C – Proceedings of Orissa History Congress.

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