

Contribution of the Somavamsis to the Odishan Culture: A Critical Analysis

Dr. ABHIJIT SAHOO

Lecturer in History
KIIT School of Social Sciences (KISS)
India

Introduction:

The two hundred years rule of the Somavamsis form a magnificent era, in the cultural heritage of Odisha. For the first time *Kalinga*, *Utkala*, *Kongoda* and *Kosala* were unified and brought under one political authority. The uniform pattern of administration, removed disorder and confusion throughout the state and paved the way for a cultural synthesis leading to the emergence of a unique *Odia* culture. The Odishan temple architecture took a concrete form during the Somavamsis and the kingdom basked in the golden glow of peace and prosperity. Their multiple activities in various fields ushered in a new epoch in the political and cultural history of Odisha and for that they have remained immortal in the minds of the Odishan people.¹

The Somavamsis are also known as the *Panduvamsis* in the archives of history. They belonged to the family of Moon (*Chandra*) and were Kshatriya by race. In ancient times, the Kshatriya traced their origin either from the Sun or Moon. Similarly, the Somavamsis took credit of belonging to the lunar family. The Somavamsis were, perhaps, the direct descendants of the *Pandava* dynasty and so, they are also known as the Panduvamsis. They ruled over *Mekala*, identified with the modern *Maikal* range in Madhya Pradesh. The history of the Panduvamsis before fifth century A.D. is full with obscurity. However, in the fifth century A.D. there ruled rulers like Jayabala, Vatsaraja, Nagabala and Bharatabala in succession. Kosala was the base of the activity of the early Somavamsi kings. They ruled over a wide area comprising Modern Bilaspur, Raipur and Chattisgarh, Sambalpur and Sonapur, the capital being *Sripur*. The rulers like Janmejaya Mahabhavagupta(C-882-922A.D.), Chandhira Yayati II (C-1023-1040 A.D.), Udyotakesari(C-1040-1065A.D.) established their sway over Utkal and ushered a new era of military expansion which resulted in the growth of a mighty kingdom.²

Political unification of Odisha was an important achievement of the Somavamsi kings. They ascended to the throne of Utkal at that time, when there was disorder and misrule prevailing throughout the country, threatened by external forces and disturbed by internal feuds. There was no progress of art, architecture, any unity and peace among the people. So, the credit goes to the Somavamsi kings who brought to an end years of misrule, disorder and saved Odisha from internal decay and external dangers, set up an efficient administration and well organised government for the welfare of the people. The king occupied the highest position in the realm of administrative structure. No doubt, kingship was hereditary but sometimes the ministers had a voice in the selection of a king as happened in the case of Yayati II, When a king was minor, someone from the royal family acted as his regent. The king exercised unrestricted royal power. For promoting trade and commerce inside the country the king generously gave grants to the merchant community. For the promotion of learning, they granted lands to the Brahmins. To spread Brahmanism inside the land, they patronised the Brahmin, performed several Vedic sacrifices including *Asvamedha* sacrifice, they also built a good number of Saiva temples to meet the same end. All these activities show that though the Somavamsi kings were powerful, they were not despots rather on the other hand; they were liberals and looked after the welfare of the people. Thus, the political unification was very much essential factor for the growth and development of the culture, religion, art, architecture and sculpture of one country.

Objectives

Following are the objectives addressing the present study

1. *To make an analysis and highlight their religion.*
2. *To make a critical analysis on the development of art, architecture and sculpture during the Somavamsi period.*
3. *To focus on the development of literature during that period.*

Religion during Somavamsi Period:

The Somavamsis were great patrons of religion and in sense they championed the cause of *Brahmanism* in Odisha. The recovery of the glory of the *Vedic* religion was a great achievement of the Somavamsi, who sought to give it impetus by performing orthodox *Vedic* rites and *Asvamedha* and other sacrifices. Such recovery was perhaps a reaction to Buddhism, which had received patronage under the Bhaumakara kings. The Somavamsis, when in Kosala were ardent Vaishnavas, but they became Saivites when they came to rule over Utkala and assumed titles like *Parama-Mahesvara*. Particularly they were

influenced by the *Mattamayura School of Saivism*, which was then prevalent in central India. During their reign, this school of Saivism had made a considerable advance in Western Odisha. Acharya Gaganasiva, the famous ascetic of this sect, who is known from his inscription in the old Somesvara temple at Ranipur-Jharial, had an establishment here. He received the patronage of the Somavamsi king, Mahabhavagupta Janmejaya I. possibly king Janmejaya built the Siva temple at Ranipadraka (Ranipur) and named it as the temple of Somasvara. So, *Acharya Gaganasiva* played an important role in the development of Saivism in Odisha. After the Somavamsis occupied the Coastal regions of Odisha (Cir. A.D.1000), they constructed a number of Siva temples (Muktesvara, Rajarani, Brahmesvara and Lingaraj temple) in Bhubaneswar. The kings out of their religious faith showed great zeal in temple building. They bestowed special attention on the Siva temples, but for that other deities were not neglected. They liberally made gifts and grants to Saivite and Vaishnavite temples and persons associated with the performance of rites and rituals in the temples. The Somavamsi kings also patronised Vaishnavism. The *Madalapanji* gives credit to Yayati I of building the Vimala and Mahalaxmi temples inside the premises of God Jagannath temple. The images of *Ganesha, Kartikeya, Surya, Indra, Agni, Yama*, and the *Navagraha* etc. were largely carved out in the temple walls during the glorious rule of the Somavamsis. Saktism also prevailed in Odisha during the Somavamsi rule. The *Saptamatrika* temples at Puri (near *Markandesvara tank*), Jajpur, Ranipur-Jharial etc. show that the Somavamsis also patronised Saktism. The family deities of the Somavamsis were known as *Bhagavati, Panchambari, Bhadrabika* etc. in the *Maranjamura* charter of Yayati II.³

The Somavamsis also showed patience to other faiths like Buddhism and Jainism. Both the religions prospered under their tolerant rule. Though Saivasim made headway under their royal patronage side by side, Jainism also continued to flourish. This is proved by epigraphic and sculptural evidence. There are three inscriptions, belonging to the reign of Udyotkesari, found engraved in the caves of khandagiri. One of two inscriptions at Navamuni cave records the work of Subhachandra, a disciple of Kulachandra, who was the Acharya of the Desigana, belonging to the Grahakula of the Arya Samgha, in the eighth year of Udyotakesaris reign. The second inscription also refers to Subhachandra, a disciple of Sri Acharya Kulachandra. The inscription in Lalatendu Kesari Gumpha, dated 1045A.D, of the same king records the restoration of a decayed vapi (well) and temples of the kumara hill (khandagiri) and also installation of the images of twenty four Trithankaras there. Besides epigraphic evidences, a large number of sculptural representations of Jaina images assigned to the period 10th-11th century A.D. have been discovered at Charampa near Bhadrak town, Ayodha in Balasore, Khiching in Mayurbhanja in

the districts of Keonjhar, Koraput, Cuttack and Puri. It seems that Jainism flourished in this period since the Saivas were not antagonistic to Jainism. A number of Jaina images were allowed to be carved in the Siva temples and the example of Muktesvara temple at Bhubaneswar testify, to this fact. Buddhism never failed to receive the royal patronage of the Somavamsi kings. In Banapur, a number of Buddhist bronze images belonging to that period have been found. *Indraratha's* copper plate belonging to that place shows that he made a land grant to Khandiravati Bhattaraka, a female Buddhist deity. Many Buddhist monasteries located at Sirpur also belonged to this period.⁴

The Somavamsi kings also worshipped Chandi, Krishna, Yasoda, Karttikeya, Ganesh, and other deities, which could emphasise their religious liberality. They also performed several Brahmanical sacrifices. Janmejaya is said to have performed a sacrifice at Kataka and Jajati Kesari also performed one *Aswamedha yagna* on the bank of the river *Vaitarani*, for which he is said to have invited ten thousand Brahmins from Kanyakubja. He had also built the famous *Dasamedha Ghata* on the bank of river *Vaitarani*, which became a sacred place of the Hindus for ancestral worship.⁵

Art, Architecture during Somavamsi period:

The greatest and the most lasting contributions of the Somavamsi kings to the Odishan life and cultures were made in the realm of art, architecture and sculpture. This period is a great landmark in the history of Odishan as well as of Indian art. A large number of monuments were constructed in the Somavamsi period, which represents the finest specimens of Odishan art and architecture. The typical *Kalinga style* reached its peak under their patronage, assumed its final shape and became distinct in form and style. The *Jagmohana* became an inseparable element in the temple architecture and emerged as a *Pidha Deul*. The *deul* came to possess a soaring height and majestic look in this period. The study of these monuments gives definite idea about the extent and nature of medieval Odishan art. This period also witnessed an unprecedented artistic activity all over Odisha. Tradition attributes most of the temples of Bhubaneswar to the agency of the Somavamsi kings. In fact the creative activity of the latter was not only continued but also perfected by the Somavamsi kings.⁶

The Muktesvara Temple:

The Muktesvara temple is a novelty in the field of Odishan temple architecture. It was so stylishly designed that it became one of the most beautiful temples of India.⁷ The gate of the temple was well designed and its balance and design give it a grandiose look. Muktesvara means "*Lord of Freedom*". The temple is

dedicated to Hindu god Shiva, located in Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India. The temple dates back to 970 CE and is a monument of importance in the study of the development of Hindu temples in Odisha. The stylistic development the Muktesvara marks the culmination of all earlier developments, and initiates a period of experiment which continues for an entire century, as seen in such temples as the Rajarani Temple and Lingaraj temple, both located in Bhubaneswar. The Muktesvara Temple is found to be the earliest work from the Somvamsi period. Most scholars believe the temple is the successor to Parsurameswar Temple and built earlier to the Brahmesvara Temple (1060 CE). *Percy Brown* puts the date of construction of the temple to 950 CE. The presence of *torana* (gateway), which is not part of any other temple in the region, makes this temple unique and some of the representations indicate the builders were starters of a new culture. The Somavamsi king Yayati I contributed to the building of the temple. This temple is also regarded as a grand ancestor of the Brahmesvara. Fergusson calls it “a gem of odishan architecture”. And to Rajendra Lal Mitra “it is the handsomest-a charming epitome of the perfection of the Odishan architecture”.⁸

The most essential feature of the *torana*, or the arched gateway, dating back to about 900 CE and showing the influence of Buddhist architecture. The arched gateway has thick pillars that have strings of beads and other ornaments carved on statues of smiling women in languorous repose. The porch is a walled chamber with a low, massive roof and internal pillars. The combination of vertical

Muktesvara temple is the



Figure-1 (Mukteswar Temple)

and horizontal lines is skillfully arranged so as to give dignity of buildings of moderate height. This early astylar form of the temple is best illustrated in this temple. The gateway has sculptures that range from elaborate scrolls to pleasant female forms and figures of monkeys and peacocks. The front and back of the arch are similar in design. There are a number of sculptures of *skeletal ascetics* in teaching or meditation poses. Some scholars correlate the role of the temple as a center for *Tantric initiation* with the name Muktesvara as a possible thesis. The outer face of the compound wall has niches of Hindu deities like *Saraswathi*, *Ganesha* and *Lakulisha* (the fifth century founder of the *Pashupata* sect of *tantric Saivism*).

The Brahmesvara Temple:

The Brahmesvara temple is a Hindu temple dedicated to Lord Siva located in Bhubaneswar, Odisha, erected at the end of the 9th century CE, and is richly

carved inside and out. This Hindu temple can be dated with fair accuracy by the use of inscriptions that were originally on the temple. They are now unfortunately lost, but records of them preserve the information of around 1058 CE.⁹ The temple is built in the 18th regnal year of the Somavamsi king Udyotakesari by his mother Kolavati Devi, which corresponds to 1058 CE. The temple is built with traditional architectural methods of wood carving, but applied on stone building. The buildings were built in a shape of full volume *pyramid*, and then the wood would be carved inside and outside. The basic structure of the Odishan temple has two connecting buildings. The smaller is the *Jagmohana*, or assembly hall. Behind it is the *Sikhara*, the towering sanctuary. Later temples have two additional halls in front—one for dancing, and the other for banquets. The Brahmesvara shows quite a bit of affinity with the much earlier Muktesvara Temple, including the carved interior of the *Jagmohana*, and in the sculptural iconography such as the lion head motif, which appeared for the first time in the *Muktesvara*, and is here evident in profusion. There are quite a number of innovations, however, including the introduction of a great number of musicians and dancers, some holding lutes, on the exterior walls. For the first time in temple architectural history iron beams find their first use. On sandstone walls there are symbolic decorations and the notion of godlike figures that helps the believer in his meditation. The carvings over the door frame contain beautiful flower designs as well as flying figures. Like the Rajarani, there are images of the eight directional Guardian Deities. There are also quite a number of tantric-related images, and even *Chamunda* appears on the western facade, holding a trident and a human head, standing on a corpse. Shiva and other deities are also depicted in their horrific aspects. One of the lost inscriptions stated that a Queen Kolavati presented 'many beautiful women' to the temple, and it has been suggested that this is an evidence of the '*Devadasi*' tradition, which assumed such importance in later Odishan temple architecture and temple life.

Figure-2 (Brahmeswar Temple)



The Rajarani Temple:

The Rajarani temple (A.D.1000-1022) in Bhubaneswar is a splendour in Odishan art. The name *Rajarani* owed its origin to the particularly variety of sandstone, locally known as *rajarani* of which the temple is constructed.¹⁰ The temple is now without a deity but the saivite doorkeepers, the image of *lakulisa* over the lintel and the



Figure-3 (Rajarani Temple)

scene of linga worship indicates its *Saiva* associations. The temple is originally believed to be known as *Indreswara* (as per the name of its builder *Indraratha*, an illustrious Somavamsi ruler) and locally known as "love temple" on account of the erotic carvings of women and couples in the temple. Rajarani temple is built on *pancha ratha* style on a raised platform with two structures; a central shrine namely the *vimana* (sanctum) with the *bada* (the curvilinear spire) over its roof raising up to a height of 18 m (59 ft) and a viewing hall called *jagamohana* with a pyramidal roof. The temple consists of a *deul and jagamohana*. The most interesting aspects of the temple are a cluster of *angasikharas* (miniature of rekha deuls) around the spire. They are similar to the temples of *khajuraho* in central India. Standing on a platform with three elegant mouldings, its *prabhaga* is made of five mouldings. The *vimana* is square in plan and the walls are variegated by resaults (called *rathas* or *pagas*). *Amalaka* (also called *mastaka*) a stone disk with ridges on the rim is placed over the *bada* (tower) of the temple. Now, Rajarani temple is maintained by the Archeological Survey of India (ASI) as a ticketed monument.

The Lingaraj Temple:

Among all the temples built during the Somavamsi period, the *Lingaraj* temple of Bhubaneswar deserves exceptional attention. It bears architectural splendour and is regarded as one of the best archeological monument of the East reflecting *Kalinga type* of architecture with all its perfection. It was constructed between 1025 and 1065 A.D.¹¹ The temple is the most prominent landmark of the Bhubaneswar city and one of the major tourist attractions of the



Figure-4 (Lingaraj Temple)

state. The central tower of the temple is 180 ft (55 m) tall. The presiding deity of this temple is known as *tribhubanesvar* (Bhubaneswar) from which the city has derived its name. The temple is built in the *deul* (main sanctum) style that has four components namely, *vimana* (structure containing the sanctum), *jagamohana* (assembly hall), *natamandira* (festival hall) and *bhoga-mandapa* (hall of offerings), each increasing in the height to its predecessor. The jagamohana of the lingaraj temple is decorated with various sculptures. It had also balustrade windows in the north and south, which of course, are closed now.¹² The *Natamandira* and the *Bhogamandapa* are open halls. The images of *Parvati*, *Ganesh*, *Kartikeya* appear in the northern, southern and western niches of the sanctuary respectively. The beauty of the *deula* and *mukhasala* is very much artistic in nature. The temple complex has 50 other shrines and is enclosed

by a large compound wall. The temple is active in worship practices, unlike most other temples in Bhubaneswar and Shiva is worshipped as *Harihara*, a combined form of Vishnu and Shiva. James Ferugsson (1808–86), a noted critic and historian rated the temple as "one of the finest examples of purely Hindu temple in India".¹³

Some more temples of the Somavamsis rulers, such as the Kosalesvara temple at Baidyanath (Sonepur), Siva temple at Charda (Sonepur), Siva temples at Boudh, are architecturally magnificent and it represents the full-grown kalinga-style of artistic excellence in Odisha.

Sculpture:

The Sculpture during the Somavamsi period reveals exquisite beauty of implementation and a high degree of skill possessed by its workmen. The artists of this period have shown their zeal and genius in the sculptures of *Lingaraja*, *Mukteswara*, and some other temples. Some images of this time are regarded to be the best specimens of sculpture. Fine scroll works are to be noticed in some images of which *prasava devatas* provide the best example. In the *Lingaraj* temple, the windows, the sun god, marriage scenes etc., the style and poses of the female figures, decorations, etc., are the greatest contribution of the artists of this period, to Odishan Sculpture.

A substantial progress was made in the development of temple architecture in Odisha during this period. Most probably the first stage of the development of temple architecture took place during the time of the *Bhaumas*, and the second stage of development of Odishan temple styles began during the *Somavamsi* period. The earlier temples were of three *rath* type. But gradually this becomes *pancha ratha*, then *sapta ratha*, which is to be noticed in the styles of the temples of *Mukteswara*, *Brahmeswara* and *Lingaraj* of this period. The *mukhasalas* of the early temples are rectangle in design with a thatched type of roof and from this the point of departure is to be noticed in the *mukhasalas* of the *Mukteswar* and *Rajarani* temple, being built with *pidha* type of roof. The knowledge of the architects of temple regarding temple architecture achieved much progress with the construction of the great *Lingaraj* temple, which dominated the all other temples with its much bigger size in proportion and height. In this, Dr. Krushna Chandra Panigrahi observed "the Odishan temple type reached its complete form towards the close of the Somavamsi period. The architectural activities in the later period though by no means scarce, were more concerned with elaboration than with any introduction of new features or forms indicating new directions of development".¹⁴

Literature:

In the field of literature, the rulers were great patrons of Sanskrit literature. In their copper plates and inscriptions they used Sanskrit language, which undoubtedly suggests its popularity in those days in Odisha. Some of the texts are composed partly in prose and partly in verse. So, Sanskrit language and literature seems to have made considerable development in Odisha during this period. Among all the Somavamsi rulers' Mahabhavagupta Janmejaya I and Udyotkesari gave patronage to learning and literature. Sadharana, the chief minister of Mahabhavagupta was a sound scholar having a good knowledge of the Arthasastra, Veda, Vedangas and Sastras. Purusottama bhatta was another great scholar, who edited the eulogy of the Somavamsi king Udyotkesari and also scholarly in grammar, poetry, logic, political science and Veda.

Thus, the Somavamsi period forms an important landmark in both political and cultural history of Odisha. The rulers of this dynasty were great conquerors who, by their extensive conquests, gave a geographical unity to this land. Their rule witnessed the growth of culture and civilizations of Odisha. Of course, their political achievements became shadowy in the foot prints of time but their cultural activities remained ineradicable for all times to come.

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