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Myths And Realities Of Simhachalam Shrine

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to highlight the myths associated with the very famous shrine of Northern Andhra and to rediscover the truths regarding the Simhachalam shrine both mythologically and historically. In society, to date, many believe that Simhachalam was built by Vijayanagaras or Gajapatis. Also, mythologically though this shrine is accorded much significance, many own percepts which are far away from the historical truth are associated with this shrine. Percepts for research are collected from groups of devotees both from northern Andhra and other states. Many historical books and authentic sources were gone through to put forward the realities. Finally, this article tries to untangle the myths and disclose the realities regarding the Simhachalam temple both mythologically and historically.

KEYWORDS:

Simhachalam, shrine, Northern Andhra, Visakhapatnam, Varaha Lakshmi Nrusimhaswamy, Vijayanagaras, Gajapatis, Eastern Gangas, Chalukya Cholas, Kulottunga I, Narasimhadeva I.

I. INTRODUCTION:

The holy shrine of Simhachalam is located in the Visakhapatnam district of Andhra Pradesh. Simhachalam is the abode of the Hindu God, Sri Varaha Lakshmi Narasimha Swamy. Simhachalam shrine is dedicated to Lord Vishnu and situated on the Simhachalam hill (simha=lion + achalam=hill) which is 800 meters above sea level. Simhachalam hills are spanned across 32 km and form part of the Eastern Ghats. These hills apart from housing the holy shrine of Sri Varaha Lakshmi Narasimha Swamy also bear ecological significance. These hills contain many medicinal herbs and also have abundant flora. Andhra University has found 74 varieties of flora and discovered 200 species on this hill range. Simhachalam bears the label of the

second largest temple in Andhra Pradesh in terms of income earned and the first one being Lord Sri Venkateswara temple in Tirumala.

II. HISTORICAL MENTIONINGS ABOUT THE TEMPLE:

Though the exact age of the temple is unknown, from an 11th century inscription, it can be known that the temple has a history of nearly a thousand years. The earliest mention of the temple to date can be found in an inscription dated back to 1087¹ A.D during the reign of Chola king Kulottunga-I. The temple was patronized in the Chalukya Chola period. Later after the decline of Chalukya Cholas, Eastern Gangas paid attention to the temple. During the reign of Eastern Ganga king Narasimhadeva I (1238 – 1264 AD) i.e in the latter half of the 13th century many constructions were undertaken in the temple. Narasimhadeva I built the central shrine, Mukha mandapa, Natyamandapam, and Verandah in black stone around 1247 A.D. Approximately 252 texts in Oriya and Telugu describe the predecessors of the temple of Simhachalam, therefore, the construction of this powerful facade cannot be attributed to a single entity. Some of the prominent kings who visited and made land donations to the Simhachalam shrine were Kulottunga I (1076-1118), Gonka II (in 1137 AD), Bhanudeva II (in 1307 AD), and Sri Krishna Deva Raya (in 1516 and 1519AD).

Apart from royal patronage temple also received patronage from officers, merchants, citizens, etc. Many Danasasanas (donative records) were inscribed in the temple complex and on temple walls. The government epigraphists listed not less than 524 such inscriptions². Eastern Ganga kings also added sub-shrines such as Vaikuntanatha, Yagnavarala, and Madhavadarala to the temple complex. Narahari Tirtha, a Dvaita philosopher and disciple of Sri Madhavacharya and once a minister under Eastern Gangas, converted Simhachalam temple into a Vaishnavite religious centre and educational centre as per information derived from a hagiography called 'Narahariyato Sthothra' and Narayana Pandita's Madhava Vijaya and from an inscription from Srikurmam and Simhachalam temples. Reddy dynasty also donated land and villages to the temple. After the fall of Eastern Gangas, Gajapatis came into power and they also supported the temple which can be evident from inscriptions of Gajapati kings Kapilendradeva, Purushottamadeva, Prataparudradeva Gajapati.

Tuluva dynasty rulers of Vijayanagara also offered patronage to temples until the 16th century. Krishnadevaraya as part of his Kalinga campaign erected Jayastamba i.e pillar of victory in Simhachalam. Sri Krishnadeva Raya is believed to have visited the temple twice around 1516 AD and 1519 AD after defeating the Gajapati ruler of Orissa Gajapati Prataparudra Deva. The temple of Simhachalam still contains inscriptions left here by Sri Krishna Devaraya of the Vijayanagara Empire. Krishnadeva Raya and his queens presented a necklace of 991 pearls³ along with costly gifts to lord Varaha Lakshmi Narasimha Swamy. After the decline of the Vijayanagara dynasty the region went into Muslim rule and faced forty years of religious inactivity from 1565 to 1604 as informed by a donative inscription of Sarvappa Asraya. In the 18th century, a band of Muslims invaded the temple but fled away due to the efforts of two devotees named Gogulapati Kurmanathakavi and Adurthi Hariharadasu⁴. In 1949 temple came under the purview of endowments of the Andhra Pradesh government. It was handed over to the endowments department and through them to the Pusapati Gajapatis family of Vizianagaram who for the last three decades to date are serving as the trustees of the temple.

III. ARCHITECTURE:

The architecture is a blend of Chalukya and Ganga architectural styles. Unlike all temples, Simhachalam faces the West direction signifying victory. The temple has five gateways. The western gateway has a five-tier Raja Gopuram with sculptures of Vishnu, Lakshmi, Alvars, etc. The 3-tier Vimana is in a similar style to the Konark temple. Simhachalam shrine is an admixture of Odisha and Dravidian styles of temple architecture. The main temple is built in Dravidian style whereas the Mukhamadapa is of Odisha style. A famous sculpture of Narasimha killing Hiranyakasyapa is on the southern wall. 96 pillared Kalyanamandapa has 96 different Narasimha sculptures no one being the same as the others viz., Asana Narasimha on the first pillar, Sthouna Narasimha on 37th pillar, Yoga Narasimha, Khadga Narasimha, Sankha Narasimha, etc. To the right of the shrine, *Kappa Stambam* installed in the 13th century with Santana Gopala Yantra is believed to bestow children to couples who hug this pillar⁵. At the entrance of the main shrine which houses the lord, Eastern Ganga king, Narasimhadeva's mother Ganga Mahadevi's statue is installed with a diya in her hand.

Dr. K. Sundaram of Andhra university briefly studied the architecture of the temple and presented a thesis titled 'The study of Simhachalam temple.'

IV. MYTHS AND REALITIES REGARDING SIMHACHALAM SHRINE:

People widely believe that on these very hills of Simchalam, Lord Vishnu incarnated in his fourth avatar as Narasimha i.e half lion and half human, and killed the demon king Hiranyakasyapa and saved his devout disciple Prahlada. But as per the Puranas, the story is different. In Simhachalam Lord Vishnu hadn't killed Hiranyakasyapa. According to the Sthala Purana of the temple, Simhachalam is the place where Prahlada was thrown into the sea and a mountain was placed upon his head. Then Prahlada prayed to lord Vishnu who moved the mountain aside and lifted the drowning Prahlada from the sea. The mountain moved aside while saving Prahlada was the Simhachalam hill. It was Prahlada who first constructed the Simhachalam temple for lord Vishnu. It is believed that after Krutha Yuga the temple fell into ruins and the lord was piled up with mud crests. Later king Pururava of the Aila dynasty happened to see the lord, cleared up the mud crests and consecrated the idol, and rebuilt the temple.⁶

Lord Vishnu has ten incarnations viz., Matsya(fish), Kurma(tortoise), Varaha(boar), Narasimha(half-lion, half-human), Vamana(dwarf), Parashurama, Rama, Krishna/Balarama, Buddha/Krishna, Kalki. Only in the Simhachalam shrine, the lord appears in *Dwayavathara* i.e in a combination of two incarnations of Varaha(boar) and Narasimha (half lion-half human) which is a special feature of only the Simhachalam temple exclusively. According to the local legend, it is said that Prahlada requested the lord to stay up on the Simhachalam hill in dual form i.e with the Varaha (boar) incarnation which killed Hiranyaksha and the Narasimha incarnation (half lion-half man) which killed Hiranyakasyapa. The deity in Simhachalam appears with a Varaha(boar) face and Narasimha (half lion-half man) i.e with the face of a boar, the body of a human, and a lion tail. Thus, only in Simhachalam lord is in a combination of two incarnations. Hence lord here is called *Dwayavathara Varaha Lakshmi Narasimha* and also *Dwayavathara Sri Simhadri Appana Swamy*. Though Narasimha temples are spread across the length and breadth of the country only in Simhachalam the deity can be seen with a lion's tail⁷ towards his left shoulder and his right hand serving ambrosia to Garuthmantha and left hand holding the cloth over his body. Here in Simhachalam the idol of the lord doesn't have feet. It is said that when the lord jumped over the hill to save drowning Prahlada his feet remained in the earth and later when king Pururava discovered the lord's idol, he was instructed to not unearth the lord's feet and since then lord's feet remained inside the earth.

In addition to these, another notable feature exclusive to the Simhachalam temple is the linga form of the lord. All over India lord Vishnu and his incarnations can be seen in idol/statue form. But only in Simhachalam lord appears in linga form year-long covered by a huge amount of sandal paste over the original idol. Nijaroopa darshan (original idol) can be seen only on a specific day in the whole year. M.Satyanarayana Sastry and M.Sarabeswarara Sarma in their book 'Alayalu-Devalayalu' have mentioned that Simhachalam is a Shaiva temple as the deity here is in linga form but later it was transformed into a Vaishnavite temple by Ramanuja, a 12th-century dvaitha philosopher. To date, in a corner of the shrine a space called 'Hamsamoola' is allocated in remembrance of Ramanuja. It is said that Ramanuja visited the Simhachalam temple and sat in this corner known as Hamsamoola and recited hymns. The pleased lord visited Hamsamoola personally to listen to the Ramanuja's hymns.

It is also mistakenly believed by many that the lord is covered with sandal paste all long year to calm his ferocious nature. But according to Simhachala Kshetra Mahatyam lord is in a peaceful form in Simhachalam and the original idol of the lord is white⁸. According to the local legend of Simhachalam, it is believed that when king Pururava of the Aila dynasty discovered the lord, piled up in mud crests, he was instructed to not expose the lord's original form and to re-cover the idol with the same amount of sandal paste equivalent to the piled-up mud crests. Hence even to this day, the lord is covered with sandal paste all throughout the year. Annually only on Vaisakha Suddha Thadiya day of the Hindu calendar, the sandal paste over the lord's idol is removed and *Nijaroopa darshan* i.e original idol can be seen only for 12 hours on that day. 500 kg of fresh sandal paste is reapplied to the idol as 125kg each in four phases in four consecutive months. This process is famously celebrated as the *Chandanotsavam* festival in Simhachalam.

V. CONCLUSION:

Though Simhachalam is a very famous shrine in Northern Andhra and attracts devotees from all over India and the very fact that Simhachalam shrine stands as the second largest temple in terms of its income, the realities regarding Simhachalam temple both mythological and historical are unclear despite its popularity. From the above inferences, it can be clearly understood that the lord here is in Dwayavathara (dual incarnation) form upon the wish of Prahlada but not to kill Hiranyakasyapa. The lord here is covered with 'Chandana' i.e sandal paste not to calm his ferocious nature but as a custom followed for ages since its inception by king Pururava. Mythologically though the shrine was first built by Prahlada and then rebuilt by Pururava, historically the central shrine was built by Narasimha Deva I. Along with Narasimhadeva I, many other kings and emperors made their contributions to the upkeep of the temple.

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