



OSun-Worship In South Kosala: A Study Of Art And Iconography

Dr. Rusav Kumar Sahu

Abstract:

South Kosala region comprising the southern part of Chhatisgarh and undivided Sambalpur, Balangir Kalahandi, Koraput and Phulbani district of Odisha played a significant role for the revival of many cults like Buddhism, Jainism and Brahmanical Hinduism right from the beginning under the patronage of various dynasties like Guptas, Sarabhapuriyas, Somavamsis and Kalachuris. Apart from the Saivism, Vaisnavism and Saktism many minor religions like Saura, Ganapatya, Brahma cult, flourished throughout the region and immensely contributed for the development of the same in coastal Odisha after the conquest of Utkala by the Somavamsis in 9th century A.D. In the present article an attempt has been made to show the art and iconography of Surya images found in this region.

Key Words: South Kosala, Somavamsis, Kalachuris, Saivism, Vaisnavism, Saktism, Odisha, Somavamsis, avarana devata, Visnu.

History of Sun-worship in South Kosala:

The earliest evidence of Sun worship in India comes from this region in the prehistoric rock art panel of Singhanpur¹ in Raigad district of Chhatisgarh followed by the depiction of Sun motif in the chalcolithic potteries of Nuagada and Manamunda of Sonepur and Baud district of Odisha². However in the early historic period scores of punch-marked coins discovered from Asurgarh in Kalahandi district displays the symbolic representation of the Sun-god i.e. a circle with radiant rays from all sides³. But the inscriptional evidence of Sun worship in this region comes from Sonepur dating back to 9th century A.D. where it is mentioned that during the seventeenth regnal year of Mahabhavagupta Janmejaya-I, donated Gettaikela to a merchant association of Kamalavana for the maintenance of Lord Kesava (Visnu) and Lord Aditya (Surya) temple located in the same village⁴. The Somavamsis early capital Sirpur and a large number of Surya images discovered from Western Odisha revealed the patronage of the deity besides the above mentioned epigraphs. The transitional and mature phase temples of Bhubaneswar constructed by the

Somavamsis also carved with the images of Surya as an avarana devata besides his presence in the navagraha architrave. According to Madala Panji (temple chronicle of Lord Jagannatha) it was Purandara Keshari, who is identified as Mahabhavagupta Puranjaya, elder brother of Karnadeva, last ruler Somavamsis dynasty constructed the first Sun temple at Konarak which still survives in the precinct under the protection of ASI.

So far as South Kosala region is concerned, the sculptural remains of the deity have been found from places like Saintala, Salebhata in Balangir district, Manamunda and Gandharadi in Baud district, Nrusimhanath in Bargarh district. Apart from this, one Revanta image that is considered as the son of Surya was also discovered from Balangir town now preserved in the N.K. Sahu Museum of Sambalpur University⁵. Very recently the scholar discovered a Revanta image from Podagarh in Umerkote of Nabarangpur district. It was the capital of the Nala dynasty. Another Navagraha slab having the images of Ravi (Surya) is still worshipped in the Ramesvara temple precinct of Baud town which is unique in terms of art and iconography. Some tribes and the followers of Mahima Dharma still conceive Surya as their principal deity for which they prayed Surya at every sunrise and sunset.

Description of Saura images:

Apart from the abstract and figurative form of Surya, there are composite forms of Sun-god and one image of Revanta has been found from this region.

Surya-Narasimha:

There is a Surya-Narasimha image in a modern shrine near Narasimhanath temple of Bargarh district⁶. The god is depicted as wearing high boots up to the knee-level like the Iranian gods. The deity stands in a samabhanga posture is seen wearing high boots like the Surya images of northern India. Surya's connection with Visnu is well-known but this might be the only Narasimha image in entire India wearing the high boots. An exquisitely carved Viranchi- Narayana image has been collected from the village Salebhata in Balangir district by the Sambalpur University Museum authority⁷.

Surya image from Manamunda:

The image of Surya enshrined in the Durga temple at Manamunda is worshipped as goddess Durga by the local villagers⁸. It is a standing image of Surya that measures 3ft in height and 1.5 ft in width. In both his raised hands he is holding stalks of lotus and crowned with kirita mukuta. In both sides above his head are flying Vidyadhara couple with garland in hands. At the base, in the left and right sides there are two standing female figures representing his wives, Rajni and Nikshubha. The seven front-faced horses in the galloping position are depicted on the pedestal. His charioteer Aruna with a whip in his right hand and the reins of the horses in his left hand is seen in between both legs of Surya, on the pedestal. Manamunda being a village just across the river Tel and situated on the opposite bank of Sonepur, it is presumed that

this unique image of Surya might have been taken away by the villagers of Manamunda from Sonepur in the remote past (Fig-1).

From the Sonepur copper-plate charter of the mighty Somavamsi king Mahabhavagupta Janmejaya, which was issued from Arama in his seventeenth regnal year, the king donated Gettaikela village to the illustrious Kamalavana Vanika Sangha, who in turn bestowed the same village on the temples of Lord Kesava (Visnu) and Lord Aditya (Surya) for charity, oblation and offerings as well as for repairing the temples.

We have enough evidence regarding the existence of an early temple of Visnu at Sonepur from the loose sculptures of the Narasimha and Trivikrama incarnations of Visnu, at present kept in the Jagamohana of the Suvarnameru temple. The Surya image of the early temple is not found anywhere at Sonepur. Therefore, the Surya image of Manamunda might be the Surya image which was worshipped as the central deity in the temple of Aditya, of the Sonepur plates of Mahabhavagupta Janmejaya⁹.

Other images of Surya:

The independent standing Surya images are found in the Durga temple at Manamunda in Baud district, in the Siva temple at Panchgaon in Jharsuguda district, amidst temple ruins at Bhuliasikuan in Nuapada district and carved in one side of a square-shaped temple pillar, presently kept inside the Jagamohana of the Svapnesvara temple at Kamsara-Majhipali in Sonepur district. Another standing Surya image was found during excavation amidst temple ruins at Sauntpur in Balangir district in 1946, which has been shifted to the Sambalpur University Museum subsequently. The pedestal portion of the broken Surya image is found at Narasimhnath in Bargarh district, Gandharadi in Baud district (Fig. 2) and Lalei in Sundargarh district. The only Surya image, seated in Padmasana is found as a loose sculpture, and at presently kept inside the Jagamohana of the Siva temple at Kapilapur in Jharsuguda district. The pedestal portion of the standing Surya images of Manamunda, Kamsara-Majhipali, Sauntpur and Panchgaon, as well as in the broken pedestals carved with seven galloping horses pulling the chariot with Aruna as the charioteer are depicted, whereas the Surya images at Bhulia Sikuan and Kapilapur, there are three and four horses depicted on the pedestal respectively.

Inside the Jagamohana of the Siva temple at Kamsara-Majhipali, the broken pedestal of one square-sized pillar is kept to the proper left of the sanctum doorway. Four figures, namely those of a standing Nayika, Surya, dancing Ganesa and Uma-Mahesvara in sukhasana are carved in all four sides of this pillar. The Nayika is standing in tribhanga with her right hand raised up and the left hand hanging in the katyavalambita posture. A Ratikera scroll-work is carved as borders of this figure in all four sides. Surya is seen to be standing in samabhanga, holding the stems of two full-blown lotuses in both his raised hands. He is wearing a kiritamukuta on his head and makarakundalas in his ears. In both sides are two profiled female figures seen to be standing near his legs. They can be taken as his wives Rajni and Niskhubha. In the pedestal portion are carved seven horses with the diminutive figure of Aruna, the legless charioteer.

Bhulia Sikuan Surya:

Another Surya image of utmost importance is kept near the Jagannatha temple of the village Bhulia Sikuan, who is standing in samabhanga holding two round lotus flowers in both of his hands. He has a smiling countenance. A beautiful mukuta is adorning his head. He is wearing long boots up to his knee-level. Two female figures are standing in both sides of his legs. Four horses instead of seven horses are depicted on the pedestal, which might be denoting four directions; east, west, north and south. In the central portion of the pedestal is carved with his charioteer, Aruna, who is depicted as front-faced, with both of his hands folded in obeisance. This sculpture measures 30" in height and 18" in width.

The Surya image is of the height of 18" and breadth of 15" approximately and depicts the two-handed Sun god standing in samabhanga posture holding two full-bloomed lotus flowers in both hands. Dandi (Yama) and Pingala (Agni), who are the door-keepers of Surya are sitting in both sides of the pedestal, while his charioteer Aruna is sitting in the centre and seven caparisoned horses are carved on the pedestal. Another important sculpture found here is the fourhanded Surya, sitting in padmasana and holding two full-bloomed lotus flowers in both of his lower hands while in the upper left and right hands are cakra and kaumodaki gada (a kind of mace) respectively. Iconographically, it is the image of Aryaman, who is taken as one of the twelve forms of Surya (Adityas).

Similarly in the copper-plate charters of the Bhanjas of Khinjali Mandala and Somavamsis of Suvarnapura- Yayatinagara fame, belonging to the 8th-9th and 9th-11th centuries A.D. respectively, gods like Aditya (Surya), Varuna, Visnu, Brahma, Soma (Moon), Hutasana (Agni or fire) and Sulapani (Siva) have been prayed in the Dharma Section. - Adityo Varuno Visnu Brahma Soma Hutasanah / Sulapanisca Bhagavan Abhinandati Bhumidam //

It is proved from the mention of names of minor gods like Surya, Brahma, Candra, Varuna and Agni in the copper-plate charters belonging to the period from 8th to 11th centuries A.D. that their worship was extremely popular among the common populace in that locality. Even from the 5th-6th centuries A.D. the worship of Aditya (Sun) and Agni (Fire) gods was prevailing in the upper Mahanadi valley from the ruling period of the Parvatadvaraka dynasty. Solar eclipse was so auspicious that many land grants were given to the Brahmins to earn religious merits of king's parents as well as for himself and his family members by the kings of the Somavamsis who were ruling over western part of Odisha in the 9th -10th centuries A.D. The above epigraphical records and sculptural remains testified that Sun-worship was extremely popular roughly the area corresponding the region of South Kosala in the upper Mahanadi valley.

Conclusion

Thus it is concluded that in South Kosala region there is a continuity of Sun-worship right from the prehistoric period to the present day under the patronage of Panduvamsis and Kalachuris as evident from the epigraphic and sculptural remains. Though the Somavamsis were ardent followers of Saivism still then they paid their homage towards the other religions like Buddhism, Jainism and many more minor religions of Hinduism. The concept of Panchayatana puja (Siva, Visnu, Devi, Surya and Ganesa) and panchayatana temples were introduced by them in coastal Odisha. The earlier Bhaumakara tradition for depicting the images of Surya in temples as an avarana devata (Fig.3) was still continued by them though few Sun temples were constructed by the Somavamsis as evident from the Chhayadevi temple of Kumuda (Fig. 4) near Titlagarh. Finally the later Somavamsis ruler Purandara Kesari realized the significance of Arkakshetra (Konarak) and constructed a Sun temple there in his honour. The association of wheel with the images of Surya and the concept of Navagrahas was also popularized by the Somavamsis in Odisha. In all pre-Somavamsis temples we are getting eight planets in the architrave of Odishan temples. Ketu was introduced during this period. The position of Sun-god facing towards the east has been standardized. In the Bhaumakara temples Surya has been carved in the eastern, western, northern and southern wall of the temple as evident from the Parasuramesvara temple in Bhubaneswar. From the Muktesvara temple onwards most of the images were carved in the eastern wall. The beki part of Odishan temple is also carved with the image of Surya from the Somavamsis period onwards. Before that the god has been carved in the bada and gandi of the temple. So the above points clearly suggest that the Panduvamsis of South Kosala contributed a lot for the development of Saura cult in their homeland as well as the coastal part of Odisha.

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Illustrations



Fig. 1. Surya image, Manamunda, Baud



Fig.2. Broken pedestal of Surya with charioteer and seven horses, Gandharadi



Fig. 3. Surya as an avarana devata, Parasuramesvara temple.



Fig.4. Chhayadevi temple, Kumuda.