

ARCHITECTURAL ACHIEVEMENT OF CHAUHANS OF SAMBALPUR- A STUDY INTO ASHTASAMBHU TEMPLES

Raghumani Naik, Ph. D.

Assistant Professor, Dept. of History, NSCB College under Sambalpur University,
Sambalpur, Odisha, Email.ID: raghumaninaik@gmail.com

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Abstract

Shaivism, since its inception, has remained not only as a set of code for religious practice but also as a philosophy of life for the people. It is a pre- Aryan conception as revealed by the archaeologists and Historians remnants of Indus valley civilization. Shaivism has evolved as a popular cult since then and it is still a prominent religious faith among the people. Shiva's Panchakshari mantra and Mrutunjay mantra is the life line for Rishi, Tapaswi Deva, Danav, Manav and Asuras . God Shiva, popularly known as Bholababa, easily gets pleased and offers boon or benediction to his devotees irrespective of any category who invokes Him. This cult is so popular that today in every village there is at least one Shiva temple one can find. The construction of Ashtasambhu temples at different places in Sambalpur district during Chauhan dynasty (1670-1848) is attributed to the popularity of Shaivism. They are Kedarnath Temple at Ambabhona, Baidyanath Temple at Deogaon, Balunkeswar Temple at Gaisama, Swapneswar Temple at Sorna, Vishweswar Temple at Soranda, Nilakantheswar Temple at Niljee, Bimaleswar Shiva temple at Huma and Mandhata Baba Temple at Maneswar. Ajit Singh introduced "Sitalsasthi Yatra" a unique form of Divine Wedding in humanistic form to live popularity of Shaivism.

Keywords: Chauhans, Sambalpur, Shaivism, Ashtasambhu, Sitalsasthi



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Introduction -

Sambalpur district is the hub of western Odisha. It lies between 20° 40' N and 22° 11' N latitude, 82° 39' E and 85° 15' E longitude with a total area of 6,702 Sq. kms. Sambalpur district forms a part of North-West upland of Odisha, which is rolling and multiplying the ground slopes from a height of 776 ft. to a height of 460 ft. Sambalpur district is surrounded by Bargarh in the west, Sonapur in the South, Boud in the South-east and Jharsuduga in the north. These districts were elsewhere under Sambalpur district. Present Bargarh is a well-
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known district in the state of Odisha bounded by the state Chhattisgarh on the north, Sambalpur on the east, Balangir district to its south and Sonepur is to its west. On April 1st 1993, present Bargarh was separated from Sambalpur and came into existence as one of the developed districts of Odisha. This article is categorically based on the Shaivism of both districts.

1. Traces of Shaivism in India

Shaivism is one of the most ancient cults and it has permeated entire India. Archaeological and Historical remnants of the Indus Valley Civilization attest the fact that Shaivism is a pre- Aryan conception. The availability of a large number of ancient relics i.e. stone pieces resembling phallus had led the indologists as well as historians to conclude that Pasupati (Shiva) was worshipped in the form of Linga (phallic) shaped by the non-Aryans of Indus Valley Civilization. This practice of Shiva worship seems to have spread over different parts of India from 3000 B.C1. Sambalpur is not an exception to it.

The history of Shaivism can be traced back to the first century A.D. Worship of Shiva in the form of Bhairava was had been in vogue in the Upper Mahanadi valley of Odisha at least from the first century A.D., even though some other scholars are of the opinion that, the Bhairava cult became rose into popularity from the eighth century A.D. onwards.² All the same, people of Sambalpur area adore Shiva both in iconic and aniconic form. The phallic worship is the most accepted and symbolical compromise of the worship of Shiva in his iconic and aniconic forms.

2. Shaivism in elsewhere Sambalpur district

Shaivism had already been a popular cult of this area before the coming of Chauhans to Patnagarh. Ramai Deva(1360-1380), the first ruler of Patnagarh , showed great honour to Kosaleswara Shiva who was enshrined in a temple adjacent to Patneswari temple. The subsequent rulers built Shiva temples in different parts of Sambalpur kingdom. They donated revenue villages and provided grants for regular and elaborate performance of Seva-Puja. The great example of popularizing Shaivism in this district can be found in the pomp and grandeur the Chauhan rulers showed while observing the unique, annual and divine festival known as “Sitalsasthi” at Sambalpur. It is great a festive occasion of Divine Wedding between Divine Spirits organized by the human beings. This festival is celebrated every year in the bright fortnight of the month of Jyestha (June) mainly in two places – Sambalpur and Barpali.³

3. Role of Chauhan rulers in the spread of Shaivism

Virtually, the Chauhans ruled over Sambalpur from 1570 to 1848. They were not only an empire builders, administrators but also great patrons of religion which was in accordance with the religious faith of the subjects. Apart from Vaishnavism, they showed keen interest in Shaivism and built many Shiva temples all over the district. Among the Chauhan rulers, three names are associated with the spread of Shaivism. The first one was Raja Ajit Singh (1725-1766) who understood that Sambalpur was famous for Shakti pith from ancient times and the union of Shiva and Shakti were of great religious significance in his kingdom. Dewan Dakshina Ray also suggested the king to establish and contribute generously to the Shiva temples of west Odisha. Therefore, The Chauhan rulers began to build Shiva temple in the whole district. King Baliar Singh (1650-1688), the fifth Chauhan ruler in Chauhan genealogy of Sambalpur had already built the Bimaleswar Shiva temple at Huma, on the bank of Mahanadi, Sambalpur. It was the most prominent among the Ashtasambhu Shiva Temples. The rest of Seven Sambhus was built by Ajit Singh (1725-1766) and his son king Abhaya Singh (1766-1778), the 8th and 9th rulers of Chauhan dynasty respectively.4 (Present the historical data chronologically).

The Seven Sambhus Temples that have been nourishing the religious faith of the people are Kedarnath Temple at Ambabhona (Bargarh), Baidyanath Temple at Deogaon (Bargarh), Balunkeswar Temple at Gaisama (Bargarh), Swapneswar Temple at Sorna (Bargarh), Vishweswar Temple at Soranda (Bargarh) and Nilakantheswar Temple at Niljee (Bhatli.), all now at Bargarh district.

Only two of eight Ashtasambhus are in Sambalpur district. They are Bimaleswar Shiva temple at Huma and Mandhata Baba Temple at Maneswar. These temple, though small in height, carry immense artistic value.

It is pertinent to discuss briefly Ashtasambhu temples so as to update the readers of present time with the unbound glory achieved by the Chauhan kings.

i. Mandhata Baba Temple, Maneswar

The Mandhata Baba temple was built at Maneswar in the middle of the 16th century by the first Chauhan king of Sambalpur Balaram Dev. It is on the bank of the river Maltijor. It is the first Shiva temple in Sambalpur district. This temple is situated 8 kms away from Sambalpur town and on the Highway side of Cuttack road. The exquisite Chauhan architecture can be well marked on the body of the temple. This temple, though small in

height, is designed on a grand picturesque background and is of great artistic beauty. A tank spreading over an area of one and half acres of land and in the close vicinity of the temple abounds with plenty of turtles who as per the folk Lore have abiding mythological grandeur. The devotees, who come to the temple, never go back without paying a visit to the turtles.

ii. Huma - The only Leaning Shiva Temple in Odisha

Lord Bimaleswara at Huma is considered as the Adya-Sambhu, i.e. the earliest among the Astadambhus. This Shaiva Peeth (Seat) is located on the left bank of the river Mahanadi 14 miles (24 kms.) downstream and to the south of Sambalpur. This historical temple is situated at the confluence point of river Mahanadi and Dhulijhor.

Many legends corroborate the construction of this temple. One says that a milkman used to go across river Mahanadi every day to worship Lord Shiva – Bimaleswar, then unshrined and offer milk to the deity. Surprisingly, one day, the stone idol consumed the milk offered by the milkman. This miraculous incident drew the attention of the people who later on constructed a temple and enshrined the idol. Having heard of such a mysterious phenomenon of the deity at Huma Raja Balaram Dev visited this Peeth.

It is believed that its construction was started by King Balaram Dev (1575-1595) but Baliar Singh (1617-1657), the 5th King of the Chauhan dynasty of Sambalpur completed this work in 1670 A.D. Impressed by the religious sanctity and popularity of this Peeth, he allocated revenues of some villages namely Huma, Bulpunga, Dhatukpali, Gangadharpali and Mahle for the maintenance, regular worship and religious ceremonies of Lord Bimaleswara.

Thus, the temple had an endowment consisting of Huma and six other villages, which were exempted from assessment so long as the temple stands and the religious ceremonies are maintained.

The most mysterious thing about the place which still awaits unfolding is that the main temple looks tilting in one direction whereas other small ones, in some other directions. Besides, whatever structures are there inside the temple complex including the boundary walls always present tilting look. Therefore, this temple is well known as leaning temple. The main temple is adorned with other temples like Bhairav temple, Jagannath temple, Arun stambha and Kapileswar temple.

According to the popular source given out by the people in the village Huma and its surrounding areas the Ganga Emperor Anangabhimadeva-III (1211-1239 A.D.), had constructed this temple and in course of time it was either demolished or left in a dilapidated condition. So Chauhan rulers might have renovated or rebuilt it. Investigation is yet to get at any substantial reason as to the leaning nature of this temple. Whatever legends or myth may be behind this unusual structure, it can be said with precision that Huma bears the testimony of a significant place of pilgrimage and a glorious place of Shiva worship since at least the eleventh century A.D., if the historical relics existing at Huma are reckoned to be the earliest of all.

It is assumed that there was no sculpture of significance excepting the Parsva Devas. Obviously, sculptural consideration is of less importance here than the technique of construction which deserves special consideration and attention. In all probability, the architects avoided any type of sculptural representations on the body of the temple in order to keep it light so that the centre of gravity was free from heavy pressure. Though we are not in possession of any documentary support to explain the plan of the Bimaleswara temple as a leaning temple, no clarification or findings properly convinces us to acknowledge the theory that the present shape of the temple is the effect of some natural happenings or calamities. In view of this, the Bimaleswara temple unquestionably bears testimony to the advanced technical know-how of the Chauhan builders of Sambalpur area. (Make this paragraph more clear)

a) Huma – An-all-time destination of pilgrimage

Huma is a place of pilgrimage drawing streams of devotees throughout the year. It is also famous for the fishes that abound in the river floating close to the temple. A great fair takes place at the foothill in the month of March every year on the occasion of Shivaratri. There is enough shelter among these rocks to harbour a variety of fish locally identified as Kudo fish. That is why, the river Ghat is known as Machhindra Ghat. Some rituals in connection with the reverence of Lord Bimaleswara are performed at this river Ghat. Twenty-two steps starting from the temple precinct lead one to this Ghat which remind one of Baisi Pabachha i.e. twenty-two steps of Shri Jagannath Temple at Puri. The water of Machhindra Ghat is considered to be sacred. Devotees take holy dips here prior to offering Puja to the divinity.

Devotees and tourists present the Kudo fish with balls of food grains, exclusively prepared for them. This reminds us of the Maneswara Shaiva Peeth where tortoises in the

adjoining pool accept food from tourists without fear. Entertainingly, the Kudo fishes respond to the call of the priests and approach even to the top step of the bathing Ghat to be fed by the pilgrims. No one is permitted to catch them.⁵

Leaning temple at Huma is one of the wonders of medieval period. The temple is positioned on the rocky cradle just on the bank of the river Mahanadi. The basis of leaning cannot be assumed to be the technical flaws at the time of construction. It is also not easily acceptable that weak foundation might have caused leaning posture of the temple. Actually skill of construction is one of many achievements the Chauhan Rajas had earned. This is well known to us from innumerable temples built during their reigns. They had established themselves as good builders.

The temple along with other temple-like structures stands tilted in spite of the fact that none of them are of colossal nature. Researchers often surmise that one side of the rocky bed on which it stands might have given way resulting in such look of the temple. And this might have been caused either due to flood current in the river Mahanadi. The angle of inclination has not changed since last 40/50 years as said by the villagers and priests. The tilting structure has also heightened the curiosity of geologists according to whom the earth crust underground is un-even which makes the temple look tilting. About the inclination, it's not possible to judge whether the angle is in an increasing trend or not. However, people visiting this temple can't but watch at this phenomenon in bewilderment. Be that as it may, there is no denying the fact that this has fascinated the attention of historians, sculptures and other researchers.

During Mahashivaratri, a grand fair takes place at Huma temple. Devotees visiting this temple cannot spare visiting a place named "Machindra Ghat. " In this place a lot of "Jude" fishes eat food from the hands of devotees. Apart from that, this is a suitable place for swimming and boating. Devotees cross this deep brackish stream to see some legendary things between Machindra Ghat and river Mahanadi. (Why not bring the reference of the stone image of an old woman) For the scenic beauty it attracts more photographers, devotees and scientists. This place is worthy to visit.

iii. Balunkeswara Temple of Gaisima

The Balunkeswara temple is situated at Gaisima, a village which is 13 kms to south - east of Bargarh town, on the bank of Jira River. This temple was built during the Chauhan period in between 1766 to 1778. It was supposed to have been constructed by Abhaya Singh,

the son of Ajit Singh of Sambalpur. It was an ancient shrine and one of the Ashtasambhu in Bargarh and Sambalpur district. Balunkeswar Shiva is worshipped in this temple. Devotees visit this temple to seek the fulfillment of deliverance of soul, prosperity, relief from diseases and several other earthly wishes.

iv. Swapneswar Temple of Sorna

Sorna is a village in the block of Attabira. It is 30 kms far from the Bargarh town. There are 2 routes to go to the village. One is through Rengali Camp and another is through Remunda. Swapneswar temple was built during the Kingship of Ajit Singh in Sambalpur under the supervision of Dewan Dakshinray. There is a big pond in front of the temple covering an area of 6 acres. The temple itself spreads over 4 acres of land. The place bears immense religious significance in the district.

v. Baidyanath Temple of Deogaon

Baidyanath Temple is situated at Deogaon, a village 7 kms far from Bargarh in Odisha. It is situated on the western side of the District Headquarters and beside the road that leads to Bhatli. It is one of the eight Astasambhus (Shiva temples) in Baragarh. Deogaon is about 19 km from Chiplima. The presiding deity here is Lord Shiva. The temple, built during the Chauhan period, is an outstanding example of exquisite Chauhan architecture. This temple, though of small height, is of great artistic beauty and with picturesque background. Baidyanath Temple can be approached from Chiplima, around 36 km from Sambalpur. As per the version of Historian Shiba Prasad Dash, this temple of Lord Baidyanath was also built by King Ajit Singh of Sambalpur under the supervision of his Dewan Dakshinray.

vi. Mahakaleswar Temple of Niljee

The village Niljee is situated to the South of Bargarh and comes under Bhatli Police station. According to a popular legend, Lord Shiva had taken incarnation here as Mahakaleswar during the reign of Chauhan King Balaram Dev. Subsequently, the temple was built to worship him.

vii. Visweshwar Temple of Saronda

Vishweshwar Temple is situated at Soranda in Baragarh District, Odisha. Village Saronda is situated beside the National Highway joining Bargarh and Sambalpur. It is an ancient temple that dates back to the period of Chauhan rule. It is also a fine paragon of Chauhan architecture. The presiding deity of the temple is Lord Shiva. The significance of this famous shrine is that it is one of the Ashta Shambhu (eight Shiva) temples in the Baragarh

and Sambalpur districts. This temple too was built under the supervision of Dewan Dakshinray of Sambalpur. The spot glorifies the charisma of Lord Shiva

viii. Kedarnath of Ambabhona

Ambabhona is situated at the foot of Barapahar Mountain. It is on the northern side of and 40 kms far from the Bargarh town. Etymologically, Ambabhona means (Amba means mango and Bhona means grove of this tree) mango groves. The name of the place is attributed to the availability of mango trees in profusion over large areas. In contrast to this pragmatic interpolation of the place name, there gains ground a conventional one which holds that Amba means Parvati and bana, forest. Thus, Ambabhona is the forested abode of goddess Parvati, wife of lord Shiva (Baba Kedarnath). It was once a fortified place during the reign of the Chauhan Rajas of Sambalpur. Major points of attraction here include the remains of an old fort.

Historical records state that the construction of the temple was started by Baliarsingh, the king of Sambalpur with the help of his Dewan Dakshinray but completed during Ajit Singh, the successive king of Sambalpur between 1695 to 1765.

4. Temple architecture of Ashtasambhus

All the Ashtasambhu temples have the similar type of architectural structure. The temple has a square vimana (shrine) measuring 2.45 metres with a frontal porch of 0.53 metres. Its pancharatha (five chariots) as distinguished by a central raha and a pair of anuratha and kanika pagas are on either sides of the raha. On elevation, the vimana is of rekha order that measures 5.72 metres in height from pabhaga to kalasa. From bottom to the top the temple has a bada, gandi (body) and mastaka (head). With three fold divisions of the bada the temple has a trianga bada measuring 1.72 metres. At the bottom the pabhaga has four base mouldings of khura, kumha, pata, basanta that measures 0.47 metres. Jangha measures 0.90 metres and baranda measuring 0.35 metres thick has three mouldings. The gandi measuring 3.00 metres in height is devoid of any decoration and mastaka measures 1.00 metres with components like beki, amlaka, khapuri and kalasa.

The Parsvadevata niches are located on the raha paga of the jangha on the three sides of north, west and south measuring 0.50 metres x 0.32 metres and with a depth of 0.20 metres. Except the southern niche the rest two are empty. The niches are decorated with talagarbhika and urdhagarbhika of khakhara order. The southern niche houses a four armed Ganesha holding a parasu in his lower left, a rosary with varadamudra pose in lower right hand. His

upper hands are broken. The deity is flanked on the top by two flying vidyadharas holding garlands in their hands. This temple is made up of coarse grey sandstone, construction technique is dry masonry type and construction type is Kalingan6.

5. Decorating Features of Ashtasambhu

The Doorjamb is decorated with three vertical bands and measures 1.20 metres in height x 0.84 metres in width. At the base of the door jamb there are dwarapala niches on either side measuring 0.28 metres in height x 0.12 metres in width and houses the Shaivite dwarapala's holding trident. At the lalatabimba there is a Gajalakshmi holding a lotus in her left and right hands in Varada mudra. The architects above the door jamb are carved with the traditional Navagrahas flanked by two Atlántida ganas on either side.

6. Conclusion

Among the Trideva or Trimurty, God Shiva is known as Bholababa. He is the most lenient of gods to listen to the prayers of the devotees and offer blessings. Every village of Western Odisha or all over Odisha there is at least one Shiva temple where every dawn and dusk is echoed with Shiva's Panchakhyarimantra. In the minds of the people mrutunjay mantra recited on regular basis in these temples fills the minds of the people with courage to get victory over death. Shivaratri, so common to the Hindus all over India, is celebrated at the temple yard with remarkable devotion. Sambalpur district is always one foot ahead in this regard as apart from Shivaratri Sitalsasthi is a prominent festival here where the people observe and celebrate the holy wedding of Lord Shiva and goddess Parbati. So, as per 33 crores of Gods and Goddesses in Hindu mythology, God Shiva is the most popular among the people. Shiva is the favourite God of Tantricians, Asuras, Devas and Danavas. Therefore, Shaivism is the most popular cult not only elsewhere in Sambalpur district, Odisha but also all over India. Construction of Ashtasambhu temples in this context is the bright example of the popular of Shaivism in Sambalpur district.

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