

# Saivaite Traditions of South Odisha; With Special Reference to Mahendragiri

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## Abstract

There are thousands of monuments belonging to various religions spread over in Odisha in all its modern thirty districts. In the Brahmanical and puranic system Vaishnavism, Saivism and Shaktism constituted the great trio that contributed richly to the growth of art, architecture and literature, tradition, legends, myths, etc. With her magnificent Saivite monuments of nook and corners of Odisha glimmers with enduring glory as an enormous centre of Saivism in the records and heritage of India. There are numerous literature puranic traditions, legends and folktales never leave any reason in narrating the origin and importance of supreme God Siva. The earliest Saiva temples of South Odisha is regarded as *Gokarnesvara Siva* on the peak of Mahendragiri hill and the *Madhukesvara Siva linga* of Kalinganagar at Mukhalingam on the banks of the *Vamsadharariver* are noteworthy. The objective of this paper is to highlight the religious importance of South Odisha in general and the sacred *Mahendragiri* hill in particular.

**Keywords:** Saivite Traditions of South Odisha.

## Introduction

The Eastern Gangas who ruled over Kalinga in 498 CE is recorded in their inscriptions as the patrons of Saivism. These inscriptions not only reveal the prevalence of Saivism in Kalinga but also fact that great Saivite teachers like, *PatangaSambhu*<sup>1</sup> initiated the Ganga monarchs in the doctrine of the *Matamayura* branch of the Saiva Siddhanta system. One of the inscriptions of Indravarmana-I records his homage to *paramesvara* who is creator, sustainer, and destroyer of all the worlds.<sup>2</sup> *Gokarnesvar Siva* in the top of the Mahendra hill was the state God of Eastern Gangas. A large number of Saiva temples were constructed all over the country under the patronage of Ganga kings. The Saiva temples like; *Gokarneswara, Madhukesvar, jogesvara Bhattaraka, Ramesvara Bhattaraka, Mukhalingesvar, Somesvara*, etc. were constructed over the extensive Ganga territory. It is interesting to note that although Siva is the presiding deity in all these temples, we also find a good number of Vaisnavite sculptures like those of *Vishnu, Varaha, Nrusimha, Trivikrams*, etc. Besides a large number of *Hari-Hara* images have also been found in these Saiva temples. The peaceful co-existence of Saivism and Vaishnavism in the territory of Kalinga under the Early Gangas led to the synthesis of the two creeds and ultimately a new cult known as *Hari- Hara* cult emerged out of this synthesis. This event is considered a great landmark in the religious history of Orissa<sup>3</sup>. The Ganga king *Indravarman* like his predecessor *Hastivarman*, was a devout worshipper of Siva. According to his *Santabommali* plates, he donated the village called *HaribhattaKshetra* for the maintenance of the deity *Bhagavat RamesvaraBhataraka* installed in some local temples. The name of *Ramesvaraitself* is a significant and symbolical representation of the synthesis of Vaishnavism and Saivism. In this, the deity was possibly worshipped partly as *Hari(Rama)* and partly as *Isvara(Hara)*<sup>4</sup>

*Pulindasena*<sup>5</sup> the illustrious tribal chief of Kalinga is known to have worshipped *Svayambhu Siva* on the top of Mahendragiri which is reputed in the Puranas as one of the seven *kulagiris* of *Bharatvarsha*. It seems by this time in the middle of the sixth century CE the teachers of the *mattamayura* sect of Saivism had reached as far as Mahendragiri and preached their new ideology in Kalinga. At the expense of the *Lakulisa-Pasupata* cult, the *Mattamayuracult* appears to have gained a stronghold over Kalinga from now onwards. In the Saiddhaba inscription<sup>6</sup> it is recorded that on the summit of Mahendragiri, *Pulindasena* worshipped the lord Siva with his matted hair besmeared with ashes and associated with

Ganga and the crescent moon on his head, embracing Parvati in *alingana* pose. This is the earliest reference in the worship of Siva in form of *Uma-Maheshwar* in Odisha<sup>7</sup>.

From the invocatory verse of the *Buguda* copper plate grant of *Madhavaraja-II* of Sailodhbhava family, we understand that *Pulindasena*, the progenitor of the family, worshipped Siva with all his personal attributes. The Saiva Acarya of *Mattamayura* clan of Saiva Siddhanta school who had migrated from *Daitabana* near Kuruksetra<sup>8</sup>. Overwhelming influence over the Sailodbhavas of Kangoda and played a significant role in popularizing the concept of Siva Siddhanta school of Saivism in *Kangoda Mandal*. *Madhavaraja-II* of this family was a feudatory of Sasanka, the lord of eastern India. Ganjam Copper plate grant clearly indicates that the southern limit of *Kangodaas* the southern limit of Sasanka's empire in eastern India. It is further recorded that Sasanka constructed a massive and beautiful temple at Bhubaneswar for lord Siva<sup>9</sup> Sasanka being a devotee of Siva might have erected a temple for *SwayambhuTribhubaneswar*. K. C. Panigrahi opines that the temple built by Sasanka was replaced by the present great temple of *Lingaraja*<sup>10</sup> was built later on by ChandiharaYayati.

#### Objective of the Study

The objective of this paper is to highlight the religious importance of South Odisha in general and the sacred *Mahendragiri* hill in particular.

#### Sacred Saivite Centre Mahendragiri

Mahendragiri is situated in the middle of the Eastern Ghat. It is one of the first *Kulagiri* of India. In the ancient period, this mountain is described in Puranas. The top of the Mahendra Mountain has been a sacred place from the *Puranic* Period. In *Ramayana* age, *Sri Ramachandra* climbed to the top of the Mahendra hill. It is known from the following Slokas; *Tang Sahyang Samitikramya Malayancha Mahagirim Mahendranath Samprapya Ramo Rajibalochanah. Aruruhya Mahabahu Sikharnng Drumabhusitam Tat Sikhara Maruhya Ramo Dasarathmajah. Kurma-Minasamakeerna Apasyat Salillasram Asedurana Purbena Samudrang Bhima Nihswadam. (Lanka Kanda,4, 92-94)*

In *Balmiki Ramayana* of *Kiskindakanda*, states that *Mahaveer Hanuman* jumped to Srilanka from the summit of Mahendragiri hill. (Balmiki Ramayana, Kiskinda Kanda- 67 Swarga 39-49 Slokas). So it is clear that during the writing of *Ramayana* Mahendragiri hill was a sacred and famous *Risi Ashram*. By the instruction of *Lomasarisi*, the Pandavas took a deep bath in the sea and took shelter in the foothill of Mahendragiri mentioned in *Mahabharat*. (*Mahabharat, Banaparva,114* Chapter). So for that reason, they developed themselves as powerful as before. It also mentioned in *Bhagabat Purana* that, *Parsurambuilt* an Ashram at *Mahendranchal* and did twelve years *Tapasya* and became very powerful (Bhagavata Purana, 10th Skanda, 9th chapter, 12th Sloka, 9th Skanda 16-26).

It is also known from the Puranas that the *AswmedhaYajna* (Sacrifice) performed on the summit of Mahendragiri. (*Brahmanda Purana 3rd-47th*

Chapter 39,45th Sloka; 56th Chapter, 23rd Slokas). It also said that to perform *Sradha* for the ancestors is a great Dharma-. *Baibhabaswat Manu* performed his *Tapasya* there.

In the extension of the hill of MahendraGiri, the *Sabaras* named '*Guha*' lived there. One king from '*Guha*' Sampradaya ruled Kalinga mentions in Puranas. (*Brahmanda Purana*, 3rd-74 Chapter, 198 Sloka, *Bayu Purana*,99, 368, *Vishnu Purana* 4th *Khanda* 24th Chapter, 65 Slokas). The Copper Plate grants of Sailodbhava states that in the past one ruler named Pulindasena from Kalinga during his old age prayed to God for getting an heir and in his dream, God Said one person would be ousted from the rock of the top of the Mahendragiri and that person would be able to rule your Kalinga. So according to the sacred statement, the person generated from that rock and his name was Sailodbhava. After his name, the dynasty became famous as the Sailodbhava dynasty. The 7th and 8th century CE Copper Plate grant Said about legend *Pulindasena* or *Saber* tribe of Kalinga indicates very remote past activities of Mahendragiri hill. Presently *Sabar* tribe lived in and around Mahendragiri hill. They claimed themselves the next generation from *BiswabasuSabar*, the priest or worshipper of lord Nilamadhava and the leader of the *Sabar* tribe. Now they famous as the '*Baragharia*' tribe.

Now on the top of the Mahendragiri hill near *Bhima Deula* (temple), one big piece of rock became two-part. From there if one can enter in this pass and reach the other side of the rock will be punyaban.

During the 7th-8th century CE, the *Pulinda* or *Sabar* tribe has great regards for *Kitung* or *Swambhu* shifted from tribal deity to Brahmini kings and became famous as *Swambhu*<sup>11</sup>. The Hindu Mathara dynasty ruled Kalinga during the 3rd or 4th century CE. The foot region of Mahendra hill was named '*MahendraBhoga Bisaya*' by Matharas. According to their Copper Plate grant, the ruler of this dynasty declared themselves as '*ParamaBhagabat*'. The ruler of the Gupta dynasty of India also received this title. Therefore, the *Bhagabat* religion or Vishnu worship was first started by the ruler of the Mathara dynasty. So, there were two *Vishnu Chaturbhuj* installed on the summit of the MahendraGiri hill. Probably in place of tribal wooden gods the two stone Vishnu images replaced by Matharas<sup>12</sup>.

Samudragupta's southern Indian campaign was held during Mathara rule in Kalinga, who were staunch worshippers of Vishnu. He defeated the small feudatory ruler and subsequently returned their territory<sup>13</sup>. Allahabad Pillar inscription gives us details about that. Samudragupta was himself a *Param Bhagabat* so he might have visited the *VaishnaviteKshetra* of Mathara on the top of Mahendragiri. *Kalidasa* in his "*Raghubamsa*" describes that a lion-like *Maharaja Raghu* defeated the tusk-like powerful *Mahendranath*. Similarly in *Ramayana Hanumana* hugged *Mahendra*, described by Maharishi Balmiki.

So, in the age of Gupta MahendraGiri became reached its Excellency or prosperity. But in 5th or 6th century CE the early Gangas of Kalinga

constructed some temple on Mahendragiri and completely it converted into the Saivite center. It is known from their Copper plate grants *Gokarnesvara Siva* as their tutelary deity. So, they installed a *Siva linga* there and founded *BrahmanaSasan*. *Gokarneswara Siva* was installed inside a temple on the top of the Mahendragiri. That temple is known as Bhima temple now. If we analyze the style of architecture of this temple it must be built during the Gupta age. That means by the time of the Samudraguptas campaign Kalinga was ruled by Matharas and that temple must be a Vishnu temple because the ruler of the Matharas were the *ParamaBhagabat* or Parama Vaishnavas. But in the later period, it was converted into a Saivite temple by Early Gangas. Probably at that time they installed Sivalinga by replacing Vishnu images. So in India, the impact of Saivism started during the pre-Christian age, but in Kalinga the age of the end of Matharas and the beginning of Ganga rule<sup>14</sup>. Just the lower level of the top of the hill from *Bhima Deula*, there are two Saiva temples named *Judhistir* and *Kunti Deula*. If we analyze the architecture these temples made after *Bhima Deula*. That means these belong to 9th or 10th century CE. Therefore it is reliable to say that, Mahendragiri is the Saivite center.

According to the Copper Plate charter of Anantavermana Chodagangadeva that, there were five brothers of the Ganga dynasty named, *Kamarnava*, *Danarnava*, *Gunanava*, *Marasingh*, and *Bajrahasta*. They left their ancestral states named *Kolahalapura* and reached the Summit of Mahendragiri. They fought a war against *Sabaraditya*, the ruler of Kalinga and defeated him, and occupied Kalinga. After that, the Kalinga was ruled by the Ganga rulers for some years.

So from the above discussion, one thing is clear that, before it became a Saivite center, Mahendragiri was the center of separate administrative capital and religious center of tribals. Gradually it snatched away from the tribal kings to the hands of Brahmana Kings and become the Brahmanical center and constructed Vishnu and Siva temples there. In the post-Mathar period, the early Gangas and the Sailodbhavas equally champion the cause of Saivism in Odisha. Therefore both the Sailodbhavas and the Gangas hailed from Mahendragiri and paid obeisance to Lord Siva on the summit of this *Kulagiri*<sup>15</sup>.

The Suryavamsi Gajapatis who succeeded the Gangas did not introduce any new feature in the realm of Saivism but followed the age-old tradition in some manner showing their esotericism to all existing religious faiths. Kapilendradeva, the founder of this dynasty is said to have constructed the temple of *Kapileswara Siva* temple at *Kapilaprasad* in Bhubaneswar. According to tradition, Purusottam built the temple of *Sundara Madhava* at Purusattampur in the Ganjam district and Prataprudradeva built the temple of *Dhavaleswara* near Cuttack on Mahanadi

bed<sup>16</sup>. The temple of *Gokarneswara Siva* in Medinapore district of West Bengal contains mutilated inscriptions which refers to Kapilendradeva.<sup>17</sup> Chaitanya worshipped that deity during his first journey to Odisha.

In South Odisha, the temples were patronized by Gajapati kings. An undated inscription in the *Draksharama* temple records the gifts of Purusottam Gajapati. A damaged inscription in the Mukhalingam temple belongs to the reign of Prataprudradeva. The *Papavinasana* temple at Vijayawada was patronized by Kapilendra and his son *Hamiradeva*. Kapilendra provided separate feeding houses for Saivite priests. *Jangamas*, who did not interdone with Brahmanas who were also provided with feeding houses.<sup>18</sup>

The temple of *Malikarjuna Siva*, one of the Jyotirlinga at Srisailam in the Kurnool district contains an inscription of Kapilendra. Purusottamdeva granted the village of *Potavaram* in the Guntur district to *Lingodbhava Siva*.

### Conclusion

Therefore the South Odisha is the seat of Saiva from the eastern Gangas to Gajapatis. The above fact highlights the sacred nature of the Saivite monuments of South Odisha in general and sacred Mahendragiri hill in particular in the name of Hindu belief systems. The relevance of the traditions and legends is of great importance as far as religious history is concerned.

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