



NRUSIMHANATH TEMPLE: A STUDY ON ARCHITECTURE

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Nrusimhanāth is a rare historical site in Odisha that witnessed cultural development in the state over a long period. Even today an uncountable number of Picnickers, Tourists, Pilgrims, and Scholars are bristled in the site around the year. It is a sacred place for many faiths and beliefs. The place is named after lord Nrusimhanāth, the fourth incarnation of *Vishnu*, the presiding deity of the temple under study. Further, the place is known in different records as a famous *tirtha* with the name of Nrusimhanāth or Narasimhanatha, or Narsinghnath. This reputed place of pilgrimage is also known as *haranpāp*(waiver of sin). Because it is believed that, the water of *Papahārini nālā* (stream) flowing near the temple is considered very effective to wash away sin. It is situated in between 82° 49' 44'' East latitudes and 20° 53' 41'' North longitudes at 342 meters mean sea level on the foothill of the Gandhamardan near Durgapali at a distance of 04 kms in the southeast of Paikmal and 115 kms towards the southwest of the district headquarter town Bargarh in the state of Odisha. The Gandhamardan hill of western Odisha under study is not only full of natural resources and scenic beauty but also important from both historical and cultural perspectives. The main attraction of the site is a medieval stone temple of typical Kalingan order which enshrines Lord Vishnu as Marjara Kesari with the head of a Cat and body of a lion. Such a deity is unusual in the typical Odisha context. But, it is found due to the tribal influence which constitutes the prominent populace of the locality. The study reveals that the temple has all the features of earlier and later constructions with renovation work.¹

The temple stands on the left bank of *pāpahārini nālā* on the northern slope of the Gandhamardan hill. It is found built on a raised platform. Just after entering the main gate, one can find several modern structures in the outer compound of the temple complex. These are generally used by the Trust for regular activities of the temple and its offices such as *Bhogamandapa*, Book Stall, *Mandapas* for socio-religious purposes, etc. In

front of the temple, on the other side of the *nälä*, a circular Pillar (called *Garuda stambha*) is constructed with a prominent niche at the top. It is said that a lamp glowed in that niche on the occasion of the *Deepavali* festival. D R Bhandarkar² has mentioned the same *Garuda stambha* or Pillar in his account on Nrusimhanäth that, it was constructed seven years before his visit. He had visited the site in or around 1902-03 CE. So, the year of construction of the earlier *Garuda stambha* may be calculated as 1895-96 CE. It is essential to be mentioned here that, the old Pillar as narrated by Bhandarkar was partly damaged due to the tremor of blasting meant for the mining work of BALCO in August 1984. However, the existing pillar is a concrete structure built in the year 1985-86. In addition to that, an arch bridge made of burnt brick is found on the *papahärini nälä* between the temple and *Garuda stambha*. But it is now in severely damaged condition. Some modern structures are also found constructed on the other side of the stream for various ritualistic purposes. Besides that, near the *Jagamohana* many small chambers are found. These are of also later construction. There is a small cooking room attached to the *Jagamohana*, where the *Bhoga* or offering is prepared exclusively for the deity. However, all early structures are found in the inner compound of the temple on a raised platform.

Temple

The temple is facing east. It is associated with the Chauhan King, Vaijal Deva of Patnāgarh Kingdom as attested by an inscription found on a slab of Black stone attached to the southern wall of the *Jagamohana*. The inscription consists of four lines and is assigned to a date of 1413 CE, the time of the 4th Chauhan ruler of Patnā, the so-called builder of the temple. It is written in proto-Odia script and Odia language with much Sanskrit influence³. The Temple is the earliest surviving Vaisnava monument of the Chauhans and has been dedicated to the Lord Nrusimha in his Catlike incarnation i.e. *Mārjāra Keshari*. The image is of black chlorite having the head of a Cat and body of a Lion and is the presiding deity of the sanctum⁴. The temple consists of a *Rekhā Vimāna* of Kalingan order with a flat roof *Jagamohana* may be a later addition.

Indian temples are categorized into three types; *Nāgara*, *Dravida*, and *Vesara* as identified by the *Silpasāstras*. But, the temples of Odisha have been recognized as of distinct character. An inscription of 1235 CE found in the *Mukhamandapa* of the Amriteswara temple of Holal in the Bellary district of Karnātake speaks about the Kalingan style of the temples as a fourth type. A Silpa text named *Pratistha Lakhsyanasara Samuchaya* of 11th/12th century CE mentions the Kalingan temple as of *Rekhā* order with distinct architectural features.

Features

The *Silpasāstras* like *Bhubanā Pradipa*, *Silpa Prakāsha*, and *Silpa Ratnakara* have described various features of Kaligan temples. Further, these *Silpa* texts divide Kalingan temples into three types. These are *Rekhā deula* (curvilinear *shikhara*), *Pidhā* or *Bhadra* (having pyramidal *shikhara*), and *Khakhra Deula* (a vaulted roof). Sometimes, the *Rekhā* and *Pidhā* consist of two components of one architectural plan. The *Rekhā* type of temple is represented by a sanctum with its curvilinear tower while the *Pidhā* formed the

frontal porch with a flat roof. Moreover, the Kalingan temple has represented both Indian tradition and local influence in its architectural plan and sculptural design. Thus, the temples of Odisha have so many special features with distinct characteristics from Indian temple architecture. Hence, it forms a class of its own and is treated as a unique style called the Kalinga style of temple architecture. The temple of Nrusimhanāth has the *Rekhā Vimāna* (curvilinear tower) and *Jagamohana* (frontal porch with flat roof) as features of the Kalinga style of architecture.

Vimāna

The Vimāna of Nrusimhanāth temple is *Pancha Ratha* on plan and *panchangabāda* on elevation. It measures 6.20 meters in length and 5.75 meters in width. On elevation, the temple represents the three usual sections such as *bāda*, *gandī*, and *mastaka*. The *bāda* measuring 6.20 meters has five divisions of *pabhāga*, *talajangha*, *bandhana*, *uparajāngha* and *baranda*. While *pabhāga* measuring 1.00 meters consist of five moldings: *khura*, *kumbha*, *patta*, *kani*, and *basanta*. The *talajangha* measuring 0.78 meters in height and *uparajāngha* measuring 0.78 meters is decorated with architectural motifs like *khakarāmundis* and *pidhāmundis* in *talajangha* and *uparajāngha* respectively. Both the *khakarāmundis* and *pidhāmundis* are *triratha* on plan.

The *bandhana* dividing the *jangha* into *tala* and *upara* segments consists of three moldings of *khura*, *moti*, and *pata* measuring 0.30 meters and the *baranda* consists of seven moldings measuring 0.80 meters. From bottom to upward these moldings are *khura*, *pheni*, *patā*, *noli*, *patā*, *kāni* and *patā*.

The *gandī* above the *baranda* is an imposing curvilinear structure in profile measuring 6.90 meters. It is divided into seven *pabhāga amālās* each having five *pabhāga barandis* in the *kanikapagas*. A series of four miniature *rekhāmundis* in succession on *anurahapagas*, *talagarvika* in *rekhāmundi* design, a large *angashikhara* surmounted by a *gajakranta* motif on the frontal *rahā* and the rest of the *rahā* have *bho* motifs are crowned by *gajakranta*. The frontal *rahā* has a *vajramastaka* design with a Ganesha in the center. The *rahās* and the *anurahas* are like *kanikas*, serrated without the *Pabhāga* division. The horizontal movement of the serrated lines on the *pagas* compensates mildly through the vertical sweep of the *gandī*. At the summit of the *gandī*, a *pancharatha bisama* is found. It supports a *mastaka* measuring 3.92 meters with all the elements of a fully evolved type. The usual elements like a *beki*, a huge *amalaka*, a *khapuri*, and a *kalasa* are placed one above the other. The crowning members are consisting of Pitcher, *dhvaja*, and *chakra* (wheel). The *chakra* was added to the temple in 1957 CE⁵. At the top of the temple, there is a flag known as *patitapābana bānā*⁶.

The *trisakha* door jamb of the *Vimāna* measuring 1.88 meters x 0.30 meters in height and width respectively is plain. The lintel and *graha* architrave measuring 1.45 meters x 0.23 meters and 1.45 meters x 0.35 meters are also devoid of any sculptural ornamentation. The doorway of the shrine is known as *the jayavijayā*

doorway because it contains images of *Jaya* and *Vijayä* in the bottom niches, which are elegantly carved. There is also an image of *Gajalaxmi* seated in a cross-legged found on the shrine lintel.

The *Vimāna* has been joined with *Jagamohana* by a tunnel-like passage i.e. *antarāla*. It measures 1.98 meters in length. The sanctum sanctorum of the *Vimāna*, where the presiding deity is placed measures 2.35 meters in length and 2.30 meters in width. It is provided with an intermediary ceiling, which creates a non-functional upper storey⁷. The floor of the sanctum is around 0.70 meters down from the floor of *Jagamohana*. A flight of steps is there in descending order to reach the sanctum for worship. The upper end of the staircase negotiates with *antarāla* which connects the sanctum with *Jagamohana*.

Jagamohana

The *Jagamohana* measures 5.90 meters in length and 8.50 meters in width consisting of four pillars in the center and twelve pillars attached to the walls. The pillars are set in the *Jagamohana* to support the superstructure through brackets and lintels. These four monolithic pillars are reddish and richly carved with decorative motifs. These pillars are square in cross-section and identical in design. Among the four pillars in the center, the erotic figure of a man and a woman has been carved on two pillars that are facing the side of the deity. The decorative design of the other two pillars consists of an upwardly moving creeper with a semi-lotus medallion on the top. Charles Fabri⁸ suggested that the architecture of these pillars is similar to that of the cave of Kailash and Rangamahäl with cave No.16 of Ellora.

The pillars inside the *Jagamohana* are four in number, square in shape, and decorated with scrollwork, floral motifs, and lotus medallions. The pillars are square at the bottom raising a height of 1.18 meters. From the base, it has a pedestal of 0.27 meters high. The pillars are decorated on four sides. At the base and the top is a half-lotus medallion and the space in between is covered with a scroll. The capital is of the vase and foliage type. They may be called *purnaghata* pillars.

These pillars supporting the roof of the *Jagamohana* are square in section and identical in design. The decorative design of the shaft reveals an upward meandering creeper with semi-lotus medallion at the top and the crowning element is a vase surmounted by foliage. It is observed that, in Odisha, a similar type of pillar is set up in the temples of *Triratha* order⁹. However, the use of such pillars in the *Jagamohana* or *Mukhasälä* of the *pancharatha* temple of *Nrusimhanäth* is a rare expectation¹⁰.

It is suggested that these pillars were queried from the ruins of an earlier temple¹¹. D R Das¹² also believed that these pillars are reused to serve the present function of renovation work. Thus, it seems to have been objects of an earlier ruined temple utilized here during the time of restoration probably under the Chauhans.

Analytical Study

The *Jagamohana* had originally four doorways facing all directions. But now only two, the east and the north are in use. The third one i.e. the south doorway is being blocked up and replaced with masonry work,

thus giving a rude and irregular shape to the side wall. The block up of this doorway has been pointed out by D R Bhandarkar¹³. At present the images of Jagannath, Balabhadra, and Subhadra have been installed in that place by the Gauntia of Mandiadhupa by the order of Borasambar Zamindar since 1912 CE¹⁴. It is to be believed that, this doorway was closed because it was damaged. The fourth one of the west is of the shrine doorway. The door frames incorporated into the *Jagamohana* are made of black chlorite and are deeply and beautifully carved. According to Beglar¹⁴, these door frames were built in the Khajuraho style, whereas stylistically some scholars related it with the Khiching temple, which is datable to the 10th or 11th century CE¹⁵. The use of pillars in the *Jagamohana* of the temples of upper Mahanadi valley is believed as an influence of the Chhattisgarh region and is dateable to the 9th century CE¹⁶. It is marked that, in the *Jagamohana* or *Mukhasälä* additions and alternations have been made from time to time. But, the plan seems to have remained unchanged as some degree of originality has been found¹⁷.

Observation

It is observed that the *Vimāna* along with its architectural programs, flat-roofed *Jagamohana*, and interior pillars does not seem to build at once. The architectural embellishment of the *Vimāna*, decorated pillars inside the *Jagamohana* along with decorated doorjambs are quite older than that of the architecture of *Jagamohana*. Like other medieval Odishan temples sandstone is used for the construction of the temple and black chlorite is used for the doorjambs. So, the architectural scheme and decorative motifs date the temple to the 13th/14th century CE. Vaijaladeva of the stone inscription might have done renovation work on the temple and would have rebuilt the *Jagamohana* in 1413 CE.

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