



LEGEND AND TRADITION OF NARSINGHANATH

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Narsinghanath is an exceptional historical site in Odisha that witnessed cultural development in the state over a long time. Even today uncountable number of picnickers, tourists, pilgrims, and scholars gather at the site around the year. It is a sacred place for many faiths and beliefs. The place is located (between 82° 49' 44 '' east longitudes, 20° 53' 41" north latitude, and 342 meters at mean sea level) in the southwest of district the headquarters town of Bargarh in the west of Odisha at a distance of 115 kms (32 kms from Padampur, the Sub-divisional headquarter and 03 kms from Paikmal) near Durgapali. The place is named after lord Nrusimha the fourth incarnation of Vishnu, the presiding deity of the temple.

The temple is situated in the foothill of the Gandhamardan. This hill is located south-east of Bargarh and north-west of Balangir. In the Ramayana, the Gandhamardan is described as a storehouse of rare medicinal herbs. *Vishalyakarani* was available only in the Gandhamardan of the Himalayan Mountains. It is described that when Laxmana was severely wounded in the battle against Ravana of Lanka, the medicinal herb *Vishalyakarani* was used to cure him. Based on the epic, the local tradition of western Odisha expresses that, when Lord Hanuman failed to identify the herbs in the Himalayas, he carried this hill on his shoulder from the Himalayas to save the life of Laxmana. Further, it is said that a portion of the hill dropped here when he was taking it back to the Himalayas. Further, the place is known in different records as a famous *tirtha* with the name of Narsinghanath or Nrusimhanäth or Narasimhanatha. This reputed place of pilgrimage is also known as *Haranpäp* (waiver of sin). Because it is believed that, the water of *Papahärininälä* (stream) flowing near the temple is considered very effective to wash away sin.

The study of legend and local tradition associated with a site is an integral part of reading concerning its heritage and culture. It is not only important for a holistic approach but also to understand the cultural continuity of the site. Accordingly, this article is intended to focus on the myth and tradition of Narsinghanath in general and to appreciate the cultural continuity of the region in particular.

The Site

The main attraction of the site is a 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. However, it is found due to the tribal influence which constitutes the prominent populace of the locality. The temple has all the features of earlier and later constructions with renovation works as exemplified by the presence of stone pillars along with the tradition of an earlier period inside the *Jagamohana* and the inscription of proto-Odia script found in the outer southern wall of the *Jagamohana*¹. But, the inscription records that Vaijala Deva, the Chauhan king of Patnagarh built the temple in 1413 CE.

Odisha is famous as a land of temples. The temples were built based on *silpa sāstras* for housing the deities of the Hindu faith. *The Silpa* texts are guiding principles for the art of construction of the temples. It is generally found that most of the ancient temples were constructed and patronised by the ruling class. Interestingly, legendary accounts on almost all the temples are known from various sources concerning the origin of the deities and stories relating to the construction of the same. Myth is also a main basis in this regard.

The Legend

The origin of the presiding deity of *Mārjāra Kesari* and the story relating to the construction of the Narsinghanath temple is known from *Nrusimha charita* of Yuga Das². The work presents a descriptive account of the genesis of the deity. It is found that the author of *Nrusingha Charita*, Baba Yuga Das was a poet who belonged to the Kandh tribe and was described as the scion of *Yamuna* and *Hari*, who had discovered the image of *Marjarakeshari*, the presiding deity of Narsinghanath Temple³. According to the legend narrated in the work, a *Kandha* couple *Yumana* and *Hari* had located the deity in *Gandhagiri* and informed it to the king of Patnā. It is narrated that, *Yamunā* and *Rodana*, (wife of *Sahadeva*, who is brother of *Hari*) were digging soil near a Bel tree (wood apple) in search of *pithākandā* (sweet yam, *Dioscorea bulbifera*)⁴. It was largely available in *Gandhagiri* (Gandhamardan) being a source of food for them. Incidentally, the *khanāti* (axe meant for digging) of *Yamunā* touched

with a big piece of *pithäkandä*. Then, she found bleeding and heard mewing reverberating from that particular root. Yamunä rushed home and intimated the same to her husband *Hari*. Afterward, both of them ran to that place to examine the truth, but the reverse situation was marked. Milk in place blood was found. The *Kandha* couple was frightened by the weird situation but surprisingly they could hear a message from Heaven. Being pleased with *Yamunä* and *Hari*, God introduced himself as *Nrusimha* who is no other than Lord *Näräyana*, the creator of the universe. He is waiting in the form of *Märjära Kesari* to kill *Musikadaitya*⁵. God wanted to be worshiped by them in that form and told them to construct a shrine for him. Unexpectedly an image of black chlorite came out from the earth in the shape of the head of a lion and the body of a cat⁶. Again, it is narrated that, the lord *Näräyana*, creator of the universe accepted *Hari* and *Yamunä* as father-mother and sought to receive *pithä kandä* as *bhoga* from their hands⁷.

They took the image of *Märjära Kesari* to their home and worshiped the deity by offering *pithä kandä*, orange, jack fruit, etc. available to them in *Gandhagiri*⁸. Finally, the *Kandha* couple approached the *Rajā* of *Patnä Harinatha Deva*, who constructed a magnificent temple for the deity⁹. It is also narrated in the *Nrusimha Charita* that *Hari* had selected the site for the temple.

Nrusimha Chartia has also described the episode relating to *Musikadaitya* (a demon Mouse). *Musika* was the son of *Mäläti* the beautiful daughter of *Udunga Rishi*. He was the offspring of two fathers viz. *Ravana* and a mouse (*Indura*), accordingly named as *Musikadaitya*. Soon after his birth, he killed his mother *Mäläti*, and became a terror for the whole universe. Subsequently, he pleased Lord *Shiva* and got the blessing of immortality. After that, he proceeded to occupy *Swarga* (heaven). Finally, all Gods and Goddesses prayed to Lord *Vishnu* to save them from the attack of *Musikadaitya*. In the meantime, *Brahma* visualized that, only *Sri Rama Chandra* (*Nrusimha avatar*) has to take the responsibility of killing the demon. When the lord accepted the proposal, the demon was terrified by *Nrusimha's avatar* of lord¹⁰. He requested the *Gandhagiri* for shelter and then he kept himself hidden in the *Gandhagiri* as a mouse. It is described that the lord *Nrusimha* as *Märjära kesari* (cat-lion) has been watching the passageway in *Gandhagiri* to kill the mouse (*Musikadaitya*)¹¹. In that context, *Yuga Das* wrote,

“*tumbara bachane ambhe ehi thare thibu*

belakala jani ambhe asura maribu

Märjära rupa dhari gupate rahile

nija dehe beni bhai ayodhyaku gale”

(We will be here to keep your words to kill the demon on time. In disguise Cat, the God remains secretly; the two brothers go to Ayodhya physically).

Analysis

The analytical study of the legend reveals that mythological characters and episodes are deliberately adjusted in the narration to highlight the fame and glory of the place, the deity, and the cultural understanding. It seems to be a transitional phase of a cultural pattern i.e. from the end of tribal pattern of way of life to the beginning of Aryanisation in the area under study.

It is observed that the image of *Märjara Kesari* is of a unique origin in Odisha. It is not supported by standard architectural text or any Hindu iconographic parameter. It is clear from the mythological context that, whenever the earth is in danger, the creator and preserver of the universe appears to save it. In that consideration, *Märjara Kesari* is no other than a local form of *Nrusimha* incarnation. However, a non-Hindu deity became accepted as a Hindu deity. *Märjara Kesari* has been worshipping in the temple of the Hindu pantheon. Thus, the situation expressed the idea rightly regarding the influence of greater tradition over little tradition in the locality.

Besides, the origin of *Märjara Kesari*, the presiding deity and building of the temple by Rajä of Patnä, almost all places, shrines, and waterfalls of the site are narrated in *Nrusimha Charita*. It seems that the objective of the narration is to popularise the name and fame or the glory of the sacred place, deity, and cult itself. Further, the utmost care has been taken to highlight the place as a scary one with the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, and Puranic episodes. This made it a *tirtha* a sacred religious center or pilgrimage. Everyone who visits this holy place takes a bath in the water of the stream. Thus, it is observed that the process of cultural change and influence of greater tradition in local tradition is distinct¹².

The influence of legend and myth is also reflected in the rituals, mode of worship, religious beliefs, festivals, and ceremonies of the site. Although these are not historical a reference to those aspects may not be out of context to understand the socio-cultural activities of the area under study.

Tradition

The image of *Märjara Kesari* was initially worshipped by the *Kandhas* in the temple built by the king of Patnä. They were offering forest products of *Gandhagiri* like mango, orange, jack fruit along with *pithäkandä* to *Märjara Kesari* as *bhoga*. Later on, the mode of worship became ritualistic when the

king handed over the responsibility of worship to a *sanyasi* named Gopal Dash¹³. The change was most probably introduced due to the predominance of *Vaisnavism* in the area.

In the present situation, only the unmarried teenage Brahmin boys are worshipping the deity conventionally. The deity is believed as the Lord Vishnu in the form of *Nrusimha* accordingly the deity is being worshipped in *Vaisnavite* rituals. It is to be mentioned here that, all ritual ceremonies and festivals of Hindu temples are adopted here including local festivals connected to religion like *nuakhai* (*Navarra*), *Dasahara* (*devi puja*), and others¹⁵.

Several ritualistic ceremonies are conducted in various sacred places and *kundas* (pools) of the stream of *papahärini nälä*. The water of the *päpahärini nälä* is believed to wash away all sins. The tribal of the locality along with many people of this region including the people of neighboring Chhattisgarh assembled here to immerse funeral ashes of their departed soul in the water of the stream with a belief to attain heaven for them. They considered this place as sacred as *the Triveni ghat* of Prayag (Allahabad). It is to be mentioned here that, such a local tradition is created by traditional literatures connecting the place with mythological situation. Anyway, faith plays a dominant role here.

The most remarkable ritual of Narsinghanath temple is *Hari-Hara pangat*. Every day a large amount of *anna bhoga* (cooked food containing rice and other items) is prepared as an offering to God. After offering the *bhoga* to lord *Marjari Kesari* by the priest with all ritualistic practices, the same is generally distributed among all the people present there as *prasad*. Then, the priest recites a hymn dedicating the same to the deity and converting it to *Hari - Hara prasad*.

“Rama kahe sukha puchhe

Krishna kahe dukkhkha Jae

mahima mahaprasad pao

chitta lagao

premse bolo

Hari -Hara Hari –Hara”

The *Hari Hara prasad* is distributed among the people assembled there irrespective of their caste and creed. They share sacred *anna-bhoga* with great pleasure. Thus, the practice of community dining of *prasad* is called *Hari Hara pangat*. Though community dining of cooked food is prohibited in

Brahminic customs, *Hari Hara pangat* is Narsinghanath accepted by all with the same belief as *Mahaprasad* of Jagannath temple of Puri.

The most remarkable festival of Narsinghanath is the celebration of *NrusimhaChaturdashi* on the 14th day of the bright- fortnight in the month of *Vaisakha*. It is believed that the deity *Märjara Kesari* was discovered by *Yamunä and Hari* on that day. Accordingly, *Nrusimaha janma tithi* (birthday of *Nrusimha*) has been celebrated every year with great attachment. On that occasion, the successors of *Yamunä and HariKandha*, the traditional priest of the temple are invited to perform special worship of the Lord¹⁶. They usually offered *pithäkandä* to the deity and were honoured by putting a new *dvaja* (Flag) in the temple on that day.

The festival is celebrated for a long week. A large number of devotees and visitors from all over western Odisha and neighboring Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand are congregated in the sacred place. Apart from that the auspicious celebration of the lord is marked as a good opportunity for marketing medicinal herbs and other forest products including necessities of regular life. The celebration of *Nrusimha Chaturdashi* known as *Vaishakhamela* (festival) of Narsinghanath is also popular as *Vaisakha Bazar*.

It is known that the responsibility of worship and other activities of the temple were managed by disciples of Gopal Dash for three generations. But after that, the Zamindar of Bodäsambar (Padampur) took responsibility for the temple management. He appointed a Brahmin named Basu Panda for the same. Subsequently, the Panda family served the temple and enjoyed the property. Later on, negligence in worship and ill management of the temple marked from the year 1934 to 1952. Finally, the people of the locality demanded intervention from the government for better management of the temple. As a consequence, the Narsinghanath temple management trust was established in the year 1952 under the direct supervision of the Endowment Commission of Odisha. At present Block Development Officer, Paikmal is officiating as President of the Trust and the temple is being managed by an executive officer assisted by other staff of the temple under the control of the Trust.

REFERENCES

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2. Yuga Das, *Nrusimha charita (Odia)* ed, N, Pruseth, Padampur 1982, P. 110.

3. T.Pradhan," A Study on Historicity of Nrusingha Charita of Baba Yuga Das", in S Pani(ed.) *Journal of Odishan History*, Vol. XXVII,2014,pp.159-162.
4. Yuga Das, *op. cit*, P.116.
5. *Pithä kandä* (Sweet Yam), this particular root is still available in the *Gandhamardan* mountains and is being used by the locals as food.
6. Yuga Das, *op. cit*, P.119.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Harinathdeva of *Nrusimha Charita* may be identified with Vaijaladeva of the stone- inscription of Nâusimhanäth temple.
11. On the western side of the temple, facing to western *pärçva/devata* niche housing *Narasimha avatara*, a hole on the hill is marked by locals as the tunnel where *musika daitya* is supposed to be hidden.
12. Yuga Das, *op. cit*, P. 72.
13. T. Pradhan, *Nrusimhanath: A Study on Art and Archaeology, unpublished Ph.D. Thesis*, Sambalpur University, 2014, pp.70-72.
14. N. Mahalik, *Shri Nâusimhanätha, Tatwa, Mandira O Ksetra Parichaya, (Odia)*, Padampur, 1984, P.4.
15. The senior priest of the temple Sri Narasingha Hota narrates about the fairs and festivals of the temple. He says that all rituals of the Hindu temple along with other local festivals and customs are performed in the temple of Narsinghanath.
16. The successors of *Yamunä* and *Hari* are known to be living in the nearby villages of the hill such as Manbhang, Magurmäl, Khandi Jharan, and Cherenga Jhanj etc.
17. It is reported by Sri Mahadeva Debata, an official of the temple that the members of the Panda family are still rendering services to the temple in turn of land granted in their favour earlier.