

MAHENDRAGIRI AND THE ORIGIN OF SAIVISM IN SOUTH ODISHA

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Abstract

Mount Mahendra, popularly known as Mahendragiri, occupies an important place in the cultural heritage of Odisha. It is the abode of Lord Gokarnesvara. This mountain is one of the seven kulaparvatas of India. After the invasion of Samudragupta, it came into prominence during the reign of the early Gangas and Sailodbhavas who respected it as their tutelary mountain. The importance of Mahendragiri has been reflected in the Puranas, epics and inscriptions. In fact, Mahendragiri played a vital role for the popularization of Saivism during the period of the early Gangas and Sailodbhavas.

Keywords: Mahendragiri, Gokarnesvara, epics and purans, inscriptions, early Gangas and Sailodbhavas.

The origin of Saivism in south Odisha is shrouded in mystery. It is not exactly known when Saivism found its way to south Odisha. Undoubtedly, after the invasion of Samudragupta, the local rulers of south Odisha like the Matharas, Vigrahas, Mudgalas, Sarbhapuriyas, early Gangas or Eastern Gangas and Sailodbhavas followed Brahmnic religion to a great extent. It is really difficult to relate Saivism with a particular dynasty which had first resorted to it and popularized it in south Odisha. One thing emerges very common with the dynasties like the early Gangas and Sailodbhavas that mount Mahendra (popularly known as Mahendragiri) became the centre of Siva worship in south Odisha. Before entering into the discussion on the origin of Saivism in south Odisha, it is necessary to discuss the importance of Mahendragiri which became the abode of Lord Gokarnesvara Siva, who became the tutelary deity of many 'dynasties of south Odisha during ancient and medieval period.

Mahendragiri

Mahendragiri, one of the seven mountains of epic fame, played a vital role in the religious history of Kalinga or south Odisha. It is identified with Mahendra range, as a part of the Eastern Ghats¹ and is located on the Andhra-Odisha border in the Gajapati district of Odisha. Mount Mahendra has been frequently mentioned in literature and inscriptions as one of the seven *Kula Parvatas* or *Kulachalas*² (clan mountains or group mountains) and is said to have been

conquered by the epic hero like Raghu and historical kings like Gautamiputra Satakarni, Samudragupta and Rajendra Chola. The hill is studded with archaeological vestiges, and enriched with minerals, perennial springs, flora, fauna and medicinal plants. The top of Mahendragiri is not only rich with archaeological remains of the ancient palaeolithic age but also of the early medieval period when the Eastern Gangas and Sailodbhavas ruled the land to the south and north of the mountain, respectively.

Emanating from the Eastern Ghat range of mountains, Mahendragiri runs westwards at a distance of twenty-five kilometers from the Bay of Bengal on the east. It is as high as 4923 feet or 1490 meters above the sea level. The river Mahendra Tanaya, originating from it, meets the sea (Bay of Bengal) near Barua in Andhra Pradesh. The other part of the river flows by the side of Paralakhemundi and joins the Vamsadhara river. In due course of time, mount Mahendra became a centre of pilgrimage in south Odisha, mainly for God Gokarnesvara and attracted devotees from all parts of the land. It also served as a pivotal centre of politico-cultural activities under the rule of several dynasties such as the Satavahanas, Guptas, Matharas, early Gangas, Sailodbhavas and imperial Gangas³.

The historical importance of Mahendragiri is highlighted through the statements of both Indian and Greek authors. The famous Greek geographer Pliny states that "Oretes were a people of India in whose country stood mount Maleus" and here, Oretes denotes the people of Odra (Odisha) and mount Malaeus is, no doubt, Mahendragiri.⁴ Many archaeologists and historians have identified mount Mahendra as Mahendragiri. H.C. Raychaudhuri remarks that "Mahendra is the mountain per excellence of the Kalingas".⁵ Mahendragiri and the region around it were originally inhabited by numerous aboriginal tribes like the Pulinds, Sabaras, Gonds, Parajas, Kandhas etc. However, in due course of time, it became a famous centre of religious and cultural life of Kongoda and Kalinga.⁶

The antiquity of Mahendragiri may be traced back to the ages of the epics and puranas. It is known from the *Mahabharata* that Mahendragiri was an important centre of Brahmanical culture where sage Parasurama is not only said to have performed penance but also taught Karna, the art of archery.⁷ The Pandavas, led by Yudhisthira, are said to have taken rest in the skirts of Mahendragiri from where they proceeded to Godavari after visiting some holy places.⁸ The temples of Yudhisthira, Bhima and Kunti on the top of Mahendragiri

bear testimony to the visit of the Pandavas to this place. It was also known to the epic poets that from Mahendragiri, Hanumana had taken a leap to Lanka in search of Sita.⁹

In ancient period, the mountains of India were mainly divided into three groups, viz, *Kula Parvata* (group or clan mountain), *Maryada Parvata* (boundary mountain) and *Kshudra Parvata* (small mountain). The *Vamana Purana* declared Mahendragiri as one of the *Kula Parvatas*, as has also been mentioned by Sarala Dasa, a celebrated poet of Odisha of the fifteenth century CE. Kalidasa, in his *Raghuvamsam*, states that king Raghu, in course of his *digvijaya*, conquered Kalinga and occupied Mahendragiri as the king of Kalinga was the Lord of Mahendra.¹¹ Guhasiva, a ruler is said to have ruled over Kalinga, Mahisya and Mahendra during the age of the Guptas. The Buddhist and Jaina scriptures are silent about mount Mahendra. Most probably, it can be inferred that during the dominance of Buddhism and Jainism in India, Mount Mahendra being a seat of Hindu culture, did not become prominent.¹²

As stated earlier, Pliny is the first foreign geographer who has mentioned about mount Mahendra in his geographical account of India. The next foreign geographer in whose account this mountain finds mention, is Ptolemy¹³, who made his observation in the first half of the second century CE. Ptolemy, while describing the sea trade routes of Eastern India, refers to Mahendra mountain¹⁴. He further indicates that Barova (Barua), where river Mahendratanya meets the sea, was a flourishing trade centre during his time. This conclusively proves that ancient Kalinga had trade relations with Burma and the region surrounding mount Mahendra was an important commercial centre, known to travelers and traders of foreign lands.

It is not known whether, the Mahendra region was included in the empire of Asoka or Kharavela, since there is no reference to it either in Asokan inscriptions or Hatigumpha inscription of Kharavela. For the first time, mount Mahendra finds mention in the Nasik cave inscription where it has been mentioned that Gautamiputra Satakarni, the ruler of Satavahana dynasty had conquered it¹⁵ along with other mountains. Allahabad pillar inscription mentions about Mahendra, the king of Kosala¹⁶, who might have derived his name from mount Mahendra. The kingdom of Svamidatta of Kottura was also located in the neighbourhood of Mahendragiri¹⁷. The Dhavalapetta grant of the Mathara king

Umavarman (*Cir* CE 360-395) mentions about Kottura which was situated in the Mahendrabhoga *Visaya*. This Kottura has been identified by scholars with a village named Kothoor situated around twelve miles to the south west of mount Mahendra.¹⁸ This shows that by the time Umavarman issued Dhavalapetta Grant, he had extended his authority over the territories around mount Mahendra and made it a separate district in his kingdom. It is known that under Umavarman, the kingdom of Kalinga comprised the districts of Ganjam, Gajapati of Odisha and Srikakulam district of Andhra Pradesh. After the death of Umavarman, Kalinga continued to remain under Mathara rule until about 496 CE when the Eastern Gangas or early Gangas came to power.¹⁹ With the advent of the early Gangas in Kalinga, the importance of mount Mahendra as a religious centre was further enhanced and it became a famous centre of Saivism.

On the ruins of the Mathara kingdom, there arose two kingdoms of Kalinga and Kongoda dominated by the early Gangas and the Sailodbhavas, respectively. The early Gangas who came to power in Kalinga in or around 498 CE established their capital city at Dantapura.²⁰ They installed their tutelary deity Lord Gokarnesvara on the top of mount Mahendra. The Odia *Mahabharata* of Sarala Dasa, a poet of 15th century CE describes the origin of Lord Gokarnesvara in this way.²¹

“The five Pandava brothers, while in exile, came to mount Mahendra. To perform the *sraddha* (annual death ritual) of their father Pandu, Arjuna went to hunt a rhinoceros. By mistake, he killed a sacred cow named Kapila which was grazing at the foot hill of Mahendra. When the brothers knew about Arjuna’s mistake they prayed Lord Krishna to help them to come out of this sin. Lord Krishna arranged a *Deva Sabha* (congregation of Gods) on the top of Mahendra mountain. In their presence, several Siva *lingas* sprang up from the places where parts of cow’s corpse fell. The *Sivalinga* which sprang from the ear of the cow was worshipped by the Pandava brothers naming it Gokarnesvara.”

According to tradition, the temples standing on the top of mount Mahendra were built and named after the Pandava brothers and their mother, Kunti. The inscriptions, however, have different stories to tell regarding the installation of Lord Gokarnesvara on the top of mount Mahendra. The copper plate inscription of the imperial Ganga King Chodagangadeva of 11th century CE informs that Kamarnava, the descendant of Kolahalapura and the founder of the early Ganga dynasty in Kalinga, left Kolahalapura with his four brothers – Danarnava, Gunarnava, Narasimha and Vajrahasta to conquer the earth. In due course of time, they came to Mahendragiri. Kamarnava installed and worshipped Lord Gokarnesvara there, got his favour and occupied the mountain. After descending from the summit of Mahendragiri accompanied by his brothers, he defeated the Sabara king Sabaraditya (Baladitya) and took possession of the kingdom of Kalinga.²² Thus, the early Gangas established their family deity Gokarnesvara on the mount of Mahendragiri.

Almost all the inscriptions of the early Gangas sing the glory of Mahendragiri and their family deity Lord Gokarnesvara. Thus, Mahendragiri continued to play an important role in the religious and cultural history of Odisha. The Mahendra *bhogavisaya*, which was an administrative unit under the Matharas, continued to be in existence during the Ganga period. Devendravarman in his Badakhemundi copper plate grant dated 308 Ganga Era, refers to the grant of village called Purujavana on the top of mount Mahendra.²³ On various occasions, the early Ganga kings had donated lands and villages to learned Brahmins before Lord Gokarnesvara.

Mahendra region was also the homeland of the Sailodbhavas who came to power in Kongoda in the 7th century CE. From the preamble of the Sailodbhava records, it is learned that Pulindasena, a leader of the people of Kalinga worshipped Lord Svayambhu who granted his wish and created apparently out of the pieces of Rocks a stalwart youth, named Sailodbhava (emanating out of the rock). He became the founder of the distinguished Sailodbhava line of kings. This Pulindasena, the progenitor of the family, was probably the leader of the aboriginal Pulindas of mount Mahendra region.²⁴ Thus, the Sailodbhava kings of Kongoda associated mount Mahendra in connection with their origin.

A panoramic description of Mahendragiri has been found in the Cuttack Museum charter of Madhavaraja II and Banpur Plate of Madhyamaraja I of the Sailodbhava dynasty. The Sailodbhava kings held the Mahendra mountain in

great veneration and regarded it as their *Kulagiri* (family mountain). For instance, the Banpur plates of Madhyamaraja I (c CE 670- 690) declares Mahendragiri as a *Brihat Kulagiri*²⁵. The Sailodbhavas had their religious centre at the top of the Mahendragiri which formed the southern boundary of their kingdom.

The early Gangas of Kalinganagara (modern Mukhalingam) worshipped Lord Gokarnesvara of Mahendragiri as their tutelary deity from 7th century CE to the 11th century CE. Thus, around four hundred years, Gokarnesvara continued to be their principal deity. Evidently, in all the early Ganga records, not only the glory of Mahendragiri is highlighted but also the omnipotence of Lord Gokarnesvara has been described, thus making the place as the foremost Saiva *pitha*.

The Bhauma-Karas who inherited the Sailodbhava kingdom, seem to have issued grants from villages located around Mahendra mountain. The Svetaka Gangas ruled over the region surrounding mount Mahendra till they were ousted by Anantavarman Chodagangadeva in the 11th century CE who founded the imperial Ganga rule in Odisha.²⁶ Most probably, the Svetaka Gangas accepted the overlordship of Bhauma-Karas. Rajendra Chola (1014-1044 CE) of South India invaded Mahendragiri, conquered it and established a victory tower there as a mark of his victory²⁷. Mount Mahendra was under the Somavamsis who replaced the Bhauma-Karas. Chodagangadeva, the imperial Ganga ruler was instrumental in defeating Karnadeva, the last Somavamsi ruler in 1110 CE and brought Mahendragiri under his control. During the Ganga period, an inscription refers to the donation of perpetual lamp by a native of Arsavilli of the Srikakulam district of Andhra Pradesh where Gokarnesvara has been described as Mahendrasvara.²⁸ During the Gangas, Mahendragiri continued to be in their territory unperturbedly because around four hundred years, the Gangas continued their rule over Odisha. Gajapati Kapilendradeva of *Suryavamsi* (solar) dynasty put an end to the Ganga rule in 1435 CE and mount Mahendra was under the control of this dynasty. The Bhoi dynasty which replaced the solar dynasty also kept Mahendragiri in tact till Mughals occupied Odisha in 1576 CE. There after it passed into the hands of the Marathas. After the British conquest of Odisha in 1803 till Odisha became a separate province in 1936, mount Mahendra was under the control of the zamindars of Mandasa in the Madras Presidency. Now, the mountain is in the Gajapati district of Odisha. A historical survey projects that mount Mahendra had a glorious past which has

enriched the religious and cultural history of Odisha, particularly south Odisha. Mount Mahendra is the abode of Gokarnesvara Siva. The following temples of Mahendragiri are to be discussed here to determine the origin of Saivism in south Odisha.

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