
Sun-worship, Religion and Mythology in Premodern Odisha (A Case Study of Pataleswar Siva Temple at Paikapada, Rayagada)

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Abstract: Representations of Surya as a deity are found in many texts and products of art and architecture of premodern South Asia. This deity has also found mention in Brahmanical, Buddhist and Jain traditions. In some Vedic texts, the word Surya simply means Sun as an inert object, a stone, or a gem in the sky, while other Vedic texts refer to it as a personified deity. The Rigveda mentions Surya with particular veneration for the "rising sun" and its symbolism as the emitter of darkness and the one who empowers knowledge, the good, and all life. The study of Surya is one of the essential aspects of understanding Hinduism, and it has remained unnoticed in the socio-religious studies of premodern Odisha. Thus, the present paper makes a case study on the depiction of Surya in the Pataleswar Siva temple at Paikapada of Rayagada district of Odisha state.

Keywords: Sun, Worship, Hinduism, Iconography, Pataleswar Siva Temple, Rayagada, Odisha

Introduction

Surya is the term used to denote the personification of the Sun as a deity in Hinduism. A prevalent tradition of worshipping the solar deity is found all over the states of India, such as Rajasthan, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand and Odisha, along with southern Indian states. The solar deity in his iconography is often depicted riding a chariot harnessed by seven horses. These seven horses represent the seven rays of the rainbow. In medieval Hinduism, the term 'Surya' is also an epithet of the major Hindu gods like Shiva and Vishnu (Dalal 2010:399-400, Mishra 2016:1-6). Surya as an independent deity is also found in some ancient texts and art traditions of the Brahmanical, Buddhist, and Jain faiths. In some Vedic texts, the word Surya simply means Sun as an inert object, a stone, or a gem in the sky, while other Vedic texts refer to it as a personified deity. The Rigveda mentions Surya with a particular veneration for the "rising sun" and its symbolism as the emitter of darkness and the one who

empowers knowledge, the good, and all life. The Vedas also assert the Sun (Surya) as the creator of the material universe '*Prakriti*' (Atkins 1938:419-436, Macdonell 1897: 31-38).

Surya is one of the several trinities, along with Agni and Vayu or Indra, who are presented as correspondent icons and as an aspect of the Hindu metaphysical concept called the Brahman. According to *Kapila Batsayana*, Surya is the first principal seed of the universe, and the *Upanishads* refer to Surya as the power of sight, to visual acuity and knowledge (Macdonell 1897; 31-38, Dalal 2010:399-400). Thus, owing to the importance of Surya in various religions of the subcontinent, the present paper makes a case study on the depiction of Surya in the Pataleswar Siva temple at Paikapada of Rayagada district of Odisha state.

Sun Worship in Indian Literature

In epic sources like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, we find references to practices giving importance to Surya or the Sun. The Ramayana describes Surya as the father of King Sugriva, who helped Rama and Lakshmana in defeating Ravana and trained Hanuman as well (Dalal 2010:399-400). Ramachandra, the protagonist in the Ramayana, is also said to belong to the solar dynasty "*Suryavamsi*". The Mahabharata opens its chapter on Surya, which humbly calls him the "eye of the universe, soul of all existence, origin of all life, the goal of the *Samkhyas* and *Yogis*, and symbolism for freedom and spiritual emancipation." In Mahabharata, Karna is the son of Surya and the unmarried princess Kunti (Dalal 2010:399-400). Apart from the above sources, Surya is also celebrated as a deity in Buddhist artwork. For example, the images of Surya appear in the Mahabodhi temple in Bodhgaya. Here, Surya or the Sun God is seen riding on a chariot pulled by four horses (Kumar & Kumar 2010: 87-89). Therefore, the concept of Surya as a symbol of the victory of good over evil has developed independently in the ancient Indian subcontinent and continues to this day.

Surya in Indian literature is referred to in various aspects matching the phenomenological characteristics of the Sun. These are *Savitr*, *Aditya*, *Mitra*, *Pushan*, *Arka*, etc. *Savitr* refers to one that rises and sets, *Aditya* means one with splendour, *Mitra* refers to the Sun as "the great luminous friend of all mankind", while *Pushan* refers to the Sun as an illuminator that helped the *Devas* win over *Asuras* who use darkness (Donaldson 2005:35-45, Dalal 2010:399-400). *Arka*, *Mitra*, and Surya have different characteristics in early mythologies, but they become synonymous by the time of the epics. The term "*Arka*" is commonly found in temple names of northern and eastern parts of India. The 13th century Konark Temple in Odisha is named after a composite word "*Kona* and *Arka*", or "*Arka* in the corner"; thus, the Konark Sun temple is often called the "*Arkakshetra*" meaning the board of Sun (Donaldson 2005:35-45). Other Surya temples named after *Arka* include Uttararka and Lolarka in Uttar Pradesh and Balarka in Rajasthan. A 10th-century sun temple destroyed in the 14th century during the Turkish invasions in Bahraich, Uttar Pradesh, is named Balarka Surya Mandir.

Sun Worship in Indian Temples

Surya temples are found in many parts of India, and artworks related to Surya are found in all types of temples following various traditions within Hinduism, such as in the temples associated with Shiva, Vishnu, Ganesha, and Shakti (Mishra 2016: 1-6, Sahu 2011:27-33). Reliefs on temple walls and forts, as well as artwork above doorways of many Hindu monasteries, also feature Surya. Many temples containing Surya icons and artwork are dated to the second half of the 1st millennium and the early centuries of the 2nd millennium C.E. The sixth-century Shiva temple at Gangadhar in Rajasthan includes Surya and the 8th and 9th-century goddess (Shaktism) temples of central India, similarly have engraved depictions of Surya along with other Hindu gods within the temple. The 11th-century Vaishnava temple at Kdwaha in Madhya Pradesh, also features an artwork of Surya along with many other gods and goddesses in its doorway. Cave temples of India are similarly dedicated to different gods and goddesses, which feature Surya. For example, the 6th-century carvings in the Ellora Caves in Maharashtra, the 8th and 9th-century carvings in Cave 25, and the Kailasha Temple (Cave 16) all depict Surya in their iconographies. The famous sun temple of Modhera (Gujarat) was sponsored by King Bhimdev of the Solanki dynasty. Other famous examples of sun temples are Arasavalli (Andhra Pradesh), Kanakaditya Temple at Kasheli (Maharashtra), Galtaji's temple in Jaipur (Rajasthan), and Navagraha temple (Tamilnadu) (Sahu 2020:857-869). There were also sun temples outside India, such as the dilapidated sun temple identified in Multan (the temple was destroyed by the Islamic army).

There are some temples dedicated to Surya that are still in worship today; these are the Kattarmal Surya mandir in Almora (Uttarakhand) created by King Kattarmal in the 12th century C.E. The sun temple known as *Jayaditya* was constructed by the Gurjar king of Nandipuri named Jayabhatta II. This temple is situated in Bharukachha (Gujarat). The Jagaswami Surya temple of Bhinmal Rajasthan and all the temples mentioned above were created during the 12th -13th century C.E. These shrines primarily have their main entrances facing east, and their architecture also lines up with the direction of the rising Sun. This alignment towards sunrise is also found in most Buddhist and Jain temples in India and outside. The iconography of Surya in Hinduism varies with texts. In the Brihatsamhita, he is typically shown as a resplendent person standing upright, holding a lotus flower in both hands and riding a chariot pulled by one or more horses (typically seven). Here, the seven horses are named after the seven meters of Sanskrit verses: *Gayatri*, *Brihati*, *Ushnih*, *Jagati*, *Trishtubha*, *Anushtubha*, and *Pankti*. Surya can also be shown with two hands and wearing a crown.

In contrast, the Vishnudharmottara, a Brahminical text on architecture, states that Surya's iconography should show four hands, with flowers in two hands, a staff in the third, and in the fourth, he should be shown to be holding writing equipment (Kundi, palm leaf and pen symbolising knowledge). His charioteer in both these texts is stated to be Aruna, who is seated. Two females typically flank him, who represent the

goddesses of dawn, named Usha and Pratyusha. The goddesses are shown to be shooting arrows, symbolising their initiative to challenge the darkness.

Matsya Purana also describes the iconography of Surya and represents him in two forms. As per the text, the image of the Sun should be seated on a lotus; there should be seven horses and one chakra (wheel in the chariot of the Sun), and the deity should be decorated well with ornaments. His body should sometimes be covered with a bodice, and two other figures, named Dandi and Pingala, should be placed as guards with swords in their hands. Near the image of the Sun should be an image of Brahma holding a pen, and several devas should surround the image. Aruna, the charioteer of Surya, should be resplendent like the lotus leaves, and on both his sides are highly spirited horses with long necks and well-bedecked bodies. These horses should be tied together with the string of the serpent. The image of the Sun should be thus made either seated in the chariot or on the lotus and holding two lotuses.

Regarding the context of the Surya worship and depictions in Odisha, the most famous Sun temple of Konark, constructed in the 13th century by the Eastern Ganga dynasty, represents a significant example (Sahu 2020:857-869, Sahu 2011: 27-33). It is considered that the temple was built on a pre-existing pilgrimage site for Surya, with the temple architecture imitating a grand chariot with twelve wheels pulled by seven horses. The temple features Surya in three representations, with the principal and largest depiction of Surya having been destroyed along with the temple by repeated Muslim invasions (Sahu 2011:27-33). Besides Konark, there is another sun temple in Orissa called Biranchi Narayan Temple. However, the earliest depiction of Surya or the Sun God in Odisha has been carved in the Anantagumpha cave of Khandagiri. This place is situated at the hillocks of Khandagiri and Udayagiri hills on the western outskirts of Bhubaneswar, and the image of the Sun dates back to the 1st century BCE. Here, Surya is depicted as a turbaned royal personage wearing heavy *kundalas* (earrings), necklaces, and bangles. He is seated under the umbrella with two female figures holding a flywhisk in their hands and driving a chariot drawn by spirited horses. Another sun image can be found in the Tattvagumpha cave situated downward on Khandagiri hill. Although, the image is not visible today.

Most of the Surya icons found in various temple complexes of Odisha date back to the 9th century C.E. to the 12th /13th century C.E. and stand out as great masterpieces of Indian art in general and Odishan art in particular. Iconographically, the images found in Odisha can be divided into three broad types. These are Surya images without a chariot, the second, Surya riding in a chariot with Aruna placed at his feet in *padmasana* and the third, characterised by the depiction of the Sun God in full length standing in his chariot driven by horses.

The first category is the earliest surviving images of Surya that generally represented him in a simple standing or seated pose without any depictions of a chariot or an attendant. Surya holds the stalk of a full-blown lotus in each hand and assumes a right

frontal pose either in *samabhanga* or *padmasana*. He is usually dressed in a heavy garment and wears a truncated crown. A scarf frequently hangs from his shoulders, and his feet are covered with boots. Such figurines can be seen in the temples such as Laxmaneswara and Parasurameswara in Bhubaneswar, Paschimesvara (Khanderpur), Madhukesvara, and Chhatrapada (Sahu 2020:857-869, Sahu 2011:27-33). At the Madhukeswar temple, the figurine has four arms. A simple seated image of Surya can be seen at Satrughaneswara, Svarnajaleswara, Parsurameswara, and the Siva temple complex of Banka. Surya is depicted in the seated posture (*padmasana*), and there is a carving on the *navagraha* slabs over the door that shows the chariot added to the pedestal of God.

In Surya images from Konark, many warrior figurines representing time are added on either side. These warrior images, in some cases, replace other figures. A trefoil *torana* frames the head of Surya in this temple. Attendant female figures are added above the *mundis* on either side of the base with the *Parsvadevatas* (subsidiary deities) of the Surya idol. Sometimes, as the *parsvadevata*, the trinity Brahma, Vishnu, and Siva are also depicted on the *Torana*. In some cases, the depictions of King Narasimha and his guru are added by the feet of Surya, surrounded by dancers and musicians above the chariot horses, and a pedestal on the border of the *toranas* can be seen. Such images appeared in the Lingaraj temple complex, the Valukeswara temple complex of Khiching, Shergar, Champeswara, and the Konark Sun temple. Such a category of iconography became popular during 10th/11th century Odisha (Sahu 2020:857-869, Sahu 2011: 27-33).

Sun Worship at Paikapada Shiva Temple of Rayagada District

Paikapada is located near Therubali in the Rayagada district in the Indian state of Odisha (Figure 3). The Pataleswar Siva temple in this area, dated back to the 9th century, is dedicated to Shaivism. However, images of other deities such as Ganesha, Kartikeya, Surya, Durga, Saptamatrika, Bhairava, Buddha, Kali, and Vishnu are also depicted on the walls as well as in the entire temple complex.

Regarding the historicity of the region, in the 3rd Century BCE, during the reign of Ashoka, it was ruled under the Kalinga Empire. The hilly tract between the river Languli and Prachi, spoken as Bansadhara and Nagabali, was famous for spices. The Bhojpur inscription in Brahmi of Rastrika king Manadhata contributes more information about the region. Later, the Rastrikas were defeated by Kharavela, the then emperor of Kalinga. The region was also invaded during Samudragupta's rule. This area then came to be known as Champagada. A fort built in the subsequent period is now in ruins, and the historical idol of Mahakal Bhairab has been found in Champikota near the Rayagada district. During Gangavansi and Suryavansi's rule, the area came under Dadarnabdev of Gudari Kataka. A rock inscription identified at the Pataleswar temple in Paikapada provides evidence to support this (Tripathy 2010:437-446). The same inscriptions also provide information about the river Languidi or Nagabali. Consequently, in the medieval and modern periods, the region came under the reign of the Bahamani of Deccan and the Jayapur Zamindari of Odisha.



Figure 1: First Surya image

The art and architecture of the Pataleswar temple can only be grasped on-site or with the aid of dozens of photographs due to the importance and magnanimity of sculptures. Many local scholars have mentioned accounts of the temple's architecture but have given little attention to the artistic styles of the sculptures or icons present on the site. In this paper, we only discuss the significance of the features of the Sun God in particular. Two Surya images were found varying in size. One image is found at a small shrine behind the main shrine, and the other image can be seen on the wall of the main shrine. The image at the small shrine is placed separately, having a size of 4.5 feet in height and 3 feet in length (Figure 1). The second image is 2×1 feet in height and length, respectively (Figure 2). The first image has two portions, upper and lower. The upper portion of the back contains a full-bloomed lotus on both sides, and there is a wheel 'chakra' behind the head of the figure. The lower portion depicts the chariot,

which a charioteer rides in a seating position over seven horses. Other deities are also represented on the lower portion. The chariot is below the pedestal of the Sun god. The central figure Surya, is in a standing posture. In both his hands, there are fully bloomed lotus flowers. The image also has a decorative crown and jewellery such as a necklace, waist ring, earring or 'kundala'. A robe can be seen from his left shoulder to his right knee. From the length of the knee portion, we can see other figurines on both sides of Surya. Two females flank him, representing the goddesses of dawn named Usha and Pratyusha. They are shown to be shooting arrows, symbolising their initiative to challenge the darkness, as mentioned in the Brihatsamhita and the Vishnudharmottarasutra.



Figure 2: Second Surya image (Source: Authors)

The second image also represents some decoration on the background, like the previous one, but with some differences. This image does not have the chariot associated with the first image. Above the main deity, in the background, there are fully bloomed lotus flowers on both sides, along with a wheel 'chakra' behind the head of Surya. He holds the fully bloomed lotus flowers in both hands, and his body is decorated with ornaments like a necklace, waist ring, 'kundala', etc. There is also a robe from his left soulder to the waist. Regarding the *Parsvadevatas*, this sculpture is slightly different from the previous one. Here, we can see Dandi and Pingala, along with Usha and Pratyusha. According to the Matsyapurana, Dandi and Pingala are the two bodyguards with a sword in their hands. The role of Usha and Pratyusha is almost the same in the second image as in the first one.



Figure 3: Pataleswar Siva Temple at Paikapada Rayagada, Odisha
(Source: www.newindianexpress.com)

Conclusion

From the above passages, it is understood that the deity, Surya in Hinduism, has been symbolised as clarity, knowledge, and power, which dispels darkness and brings illumination to one's life. Regarding the Surya images of the Pataleswar temple of Paikapada, only two images have been identified from the site. More research on the social history of the temple is expected to begin in the future.

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