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Dear Sai Brothers and Sisters

This month our sojourn is to the sacred Lingaraja Temple in Odisha.

Lingaraja Temple



Lingaraja Temple is a Hindu temple dedicated to Harihara, a form of Shiva and is one of the oldest temples of Bhubaneswar, the capital of the East Indian state of Odisha. The Lingaraja temple is the largest temple in Bhubaneswar. The central tower of the temple is 180 ft (55 m) tall. The temple represents the quintessence of the Kalinga Architecture and culminating the medieval stages of the architectural tradition at Bhubaneswar. The temple is believed to be built by the kings from the Somavamsi dynasty, with later additions from the Ganga rulers. The temple is built in the Deula style that has four components namely, vimana (structure containing the sanctum), jagamohana (assembly hall), natamandira (festival hall) and bhoga-mandapa (hall of offerings), each increasing in the height to its predecessor. The temple complex has 50 other shrines and is enclosed by a large compound wall.

Bhubaneswar is called the Ekamra Kshetra as the deity of Lingaraj was originally under a mango tree (Ekamra) as noted in Ekamra Purana, a 13th-century Sanskrit treatise. The temple is active in worship practises, unlike most other temples in Bhubaneswar and Shiva is worshipped as Harihara, a combined form of Vishnu and Shiva. The temple has images of Vishnu, possibly because of the rising prominence of Jagannath cult emanating from the Ganga rulers who built the Jagannath Temple in Puri in the 12th century.

History



Lingaraja means "The king of Lingam", the symbol of Saivism. Shiva was worshipped as Kirtivasa and later as Harihara and is commonly referred as Tribhuvaneshwara (also called Bhubaneswar), the master of three worlds, namely, heaven, earth and netherworld). His consort is called Bhuvaneshvari.

The temple is more than 1100 years old, dating back in its present form to the last decade of the eleventh century, though there is evidence that part of the temple was built during the sixth century CE as the temple has been emphasized in some of the seventh century Sanskrit texts. The Assembly hall (jagamohana), sanctum and temple tower were built during the eleventh century, while the Hall of offering (bhoga-mandapa) was built during the twelfth century. By the time the Lingaraj temple was completely constructed, the Jagannath (form of Vishnu) cult had been growing in the region, which historians believe is evidenced by the co-existence of Vishnu and Shiva worship at the temple. The Ganga dynasty kings were ardent followers of Vaishnavism and built the Jagannath Temple at Puri in the 12th century.

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The temple is believed to be built by the Somavanshi king Jajati Keshari, in 11th century CE. Jajati Keshari had shifted his capital from Jajpur to Bhubaneswar which was referred to as Ekamra Kshetra in the Brahma Purana, an ancient scripture. One of the Somavamsi queens donated a village to the temple and the Brahmins attached to the temple received generous grants. An inscription from the Saka year 1094 (1172 CE) indicates gifts of gold coins to the temple by Rajaraja II. Another inscription of Narasimha I from the 11th century indicates offer of beetel leaves as tambula to the presiding deity. Other stone inscriptions in the temple indicate royal grants from Chodaganga to village people.

Religious significance

Bhubaneswar is called the Ekamra Kshetra as the deity of Lingaraj was originally under a mango tree (Ekamra). Ekamra Purana, a Sanskrit treatise of the 13th century mentions that the presiding deity was not seen as lingam (an aniconic form of Shiva) during the Satya and Treta yugas and only during the Dwapara and Kali yugas, it emerged as a lingam. The lingam in the temple is a natural unshaped stone that rests on a Sakti. Such a lingam is called Krutibasa or Swayambhu and is found in 64 places in different parts of India. With the advent of the Ganga dynasty in the early 12th century, who had Vaishnavite orientation, a new movement started resulting in the synthesis of Saivism and Vaishnavism. The Ekamra was associated with Vaishnavite gods Krishna and Balaram during the period. It is attributed the raising prominence of Jagannath cult that became predominant during the construction of the temple.

The Ganges remodelled the temple and introduced certain Vaishnavite elements like images of Vaishnava Dwarapalas namely Jaya and Prachanda, Jagannatha, Lakshmi Narayan and Garuda were installed. Tulsi leaves, which are favoured by Vishnu, were used along with Bela leaves for the worship of Lingaraj. Lingaraja came to be known as Harihara, a combination of Shiva and Vishnu. The flag of the temple was fixed to a Pinaka bow instead of trident usually found in Shiva temples. The temple priests also changed the mark in their forehead from horizontal to a "U" sign with a dotted middle line. The Ganges also introduced certain fairs like Swing festival, Sun worship and mock quarrel between priests after chariot festival, similar to the practises in Jagannath Temple in Puri. The influence of the Ganges dynasty has led to a cosmopolitan culture, that has reduced the status of Lingaraja temple as a distinct Saivite shrine.

Festival and worship practises

As per Hindu legend, an underground river originating from the Lingaraj temple fills the Bindusagar Tank (meaning ocean drop) and the water is believed to heal physical and spiritual illness. The water from the tank is thus treated sacred and pilgrims take a holy dip during festive occasions. Shivaratri is the main festival celebrated annually in Phalgun month when thousands of devotees visit the temple. Apart from a full day of fasting, bel leaves are offered to Lingaraj on this auspicious day. The main celebrations take place at night when devotees pray all night long. The devout usually break their fast after the Mahadipa (a huge lamp) is lit on the spire of the temple. Every year the chariot festival (Ratha-Yatra) of Lingaraja is celebrated on Ashokashtami. The deity is taken in a chariot to Rameshwar Deula temple. Thousands of devotees follow and pull brightly decorated chariots containing the idols of Lingaraj and his sister Rukmani. This chariot procession stays for five days at the Rameshwar Temple and then will be brought back. This festival commemorates Lord Lingaraj having slayed a demon. Thousands of bol bom pilgrims carry water from river Mahanadi and walk all the way to the temple during the month of Shravana every year.

Sunian day is observed from royal times in the month of Bhandra, a day when temple servants, peasants and other holders of temple lands offer loyalty and tribute to Lingaraja. Chandan Yatra (Sandalwood ceremony) is a 22-day festival celebrated in the temple when servants of the temple disport themselves in a specially made barge in Bindusagar tank. The deities and servants of the temples are anointed with sandalwood paste to protect from heat. Dances, communal feasts and merrymaking are arranged by the people associated with the temple.

Our sojourn continues next month...Till then Sai Ram

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