

Locating the Importance of Yogini Temples of Odisha

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In Odisha, we see two temples belonging to 9th century CE which are unique in their construction. These temples are circular structures, open to sky with the images placed in a row on the inside of the wall. The iconography of the images and their placement in the temple suggests to the tantric nature of the shrines. The first temple is in Hirapur village which is 16 km from the city of Bhubaneswar. The second temple is located around 200 km away at Ranipur-Jhariā, in Bolangir district, the temple is 35 km from Titilagarh which is the closest village. The temples are less than 10 feet in height enclosing a circular area inside. The 64 images of Yoginīs are placed in a row on the inside of this enclosing wall. There is a mandapa present in the centre of both these shrines which house images of aspects of Siva.

Several other tantric temples and images seen, and several accounts of Kaula practices seen in this region suggests that it was an important centre with established Sakta practices. Since it was an important centre for tantric practices and these two hypaethral temples located in Hirapur and Ranipur-Jhariā, are one of the earliest surviving examples of such constructions, it is important to study and document these temples in an attempt to understand the Kaula cults.

Apart from being in a reasonably fair state of preservation, the temples also have a large number of sculptures still on site. The shrine at Hirapur is the smallest of such open shrines and also it has all sculptures with exception of one in their original locations. It is said to have been re-discovered by Kodarnath Mohapatra in 1953 as recorded in the slim volume titled "Puranic Representations in Temple Art of Odisha". Though it is suggested that some amount of reconstruction has been done to the site one finds very little reports of the temple in any early religious documentation of the area. The presence of true arches suggests that the British might have possibly visited the Hirapur shrine, but we do not find mention of it in any of their accounts.

The Ranipur-Jhariā shrine is allocated to the Somavamsi rule while the construction of the temple is said to have been patronized by Hira Mahadevi, the queen of the 9th ruler of the Bhauma-Kara dynasty. The Yogini images of the Ranipur-Jhariā site are seen in stiff dance poses while those in Hirapur are noted to be in more graceful and natural postures. The Hirapur Shrine is also the only hypaethral Yoginī shrine to have images placed in niches on the outside elevation. The quality of carving seen in the images of Hirapur is quite proficient and stylistically more advanced. The Yoginī iconography pertaining to this region and detailed description of the iconography of each goddess is said to be given in *Canāḍāṭ Purāṇā* authored by Sarala Das in 15th century CE. Since the text is yet to be translated and no inscriptions are seen on either site, it is difficult to determine the names of the Yoginīs. In my study I shall attempt to identify the importance of the temples in the cultural context of the region. To achieve this goal, I will be tracing the political and religious history of Odisha. I will also study the temple architecture and sculptural programme.

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