

Khajureswar Temple Of Shergarh: An Archaeological And Religious Inquiry Into Tantric Practices

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Abstract

Archaeological evidence from the Balasore district, such as hilltop Shaiva shrines, Shakta Iconography, early mediaeval temple complexes, and protective goddess cults, indicates the presence of Tantric religious traditions Integrated into the natural sacred landscapes of the Nilagiri region, At Ajodhya, the Tantric goddess Maa Marichi, Varahi, and Jaina sculptures are found. These sculptures date back to the 11th century. The temple contains Tantric, Buddhist and Jaina images suggesting a multi religious ritual centre during the somavanshi period. This indicates that the region was a part of the Tantric Buddhist Shakta cultural zone. The current study revealed that the elements of Tantricism and the socialization of Tantric culture still exist in North Odisha particularly in Balasore and Mayurbhanj district, reflecting the long continuing traditions.

Keywords: Archaeological, Iconography, Protective, Tantricism, Traditions

INTRODUCTION:

Tantricism is one of the oldest and most complex spiritual traditions in India, although it remains the most misunderstood topic, it has been a long challenge for both the Indian and Western scholars to understand Tantricism. *Tantra* is a systematic and scientific experimental method that helps in expanding human consciousness and potentially. It is the process of realizing the intrinsic spiritual power of an individual which resides within himself. Recent archeological exploration has revealed more than 130 *Buddhist* sites in Odisha, most flourishing between the 7th and 12th centuries AD, for which Odisha served as an important source of inspiration for Tantric Buddhist arts, architecture, and religion in Japan and Tibet. Odisha is a land of temples, exhibiting a wide variation in temple architecture across India, which is known by different names in different regions—*Nagara* in the North, *Dravida* in the South, and *Vesara* in Central India. In Odisha, it is known as the Kalingan style of temple architecture. Although Odishan architecture is broadly recognized as the Kalingan school of architecture, it displays several categories and regional

variations. Generally, North Odisha, with examples from Balasore and *Mayurbhanj*, features *Gaudiya* temples, probably influenced by the *Vishnupur* style of Bengal, hence known as *Gaudiya*. However, the temples under discussion in the region of *Shergarh* exhibit the chief characteristics of Kalingan temple architecture. Both *Rekha* and *Khakhara* orders are found here. The *Khakhara* temples are usually dedicated to female deities. Images of the *Saptamatrikas* are also found in the early temples of Bhubaneswar, such as the *Parshurameswar* and *Vaital* temples. In the *Parshurameswar* temple, they are depicted on the outer wall of the *Jagamohana*, while in the *Vaital* Deula, they appear on the inner wall of the *Jagamohana*, where *Chamunda* is the presiding deity. In both cases—*Parshurameswar* and *Vaital*—*Virabhadra* and *Ganesha* are found along with the *Saptamatrikas*.^[1] In the case of the Durga temple at *Shergarh*, the *Saptamatrikas* are carved on the lintel, flanked by *Virabhadra* on one side and *Ganesha* on the other. Many other interesting features have been reconstructed and interpreted on the basis of fragmented sculptures and images found within the compound of the *Durga* temple at *Shergarh*.

SCULPTURES OF THE KHAJURESWAR TEMPLE:

Khajureswar Temple complex is a group of deula-complex in Odisha, India. This ShaivaShakta temple complex is located at *Khajurisahi, Shergarh* in the Balasore district of Odisha^[2]. This is a small temple consisting of two components: the *Deula* and the *Jagamohana*. The present structure is a new construction with cement walls, probably built near or on an older temple.



Plate 1: Image of Khajureswar Temple

The Deula complex was built during 9-10th CE.^[3] There are several stone idols found to be placed in each deula. The *deulas* were built based on Kalinga architecture. The *deulas* that are intact were built in the “*khakara*” style except one where the latter was built in *rekha* style. The newly built temple was built in *Pidha* style. There are a few idols that are found in this temple which date back to the *Somavamshi* period and the idols are mainly carved in laterite (locally known as “*mankada pathara*”).^[4] Based on the images found in the niches of the temple and the stray and fragmented sculptures lying in the compound of the nearby Durga temple, it appears that the earlier temple belonged to the 9-10th CE. The temple faces west. Another temple, known as the *Mahishamardini Durga Temple*, is situated approximately fifty meters to the left or south of the *Khajureswar*

Temple. This temple is also very small in size and is surrounded by a low compound wall. Within the compound of the Durga temple, five structures can be found, including the Durga temple itself. The Durga temple is approximately 15 feet high from the ground. It is a single temple constructed of laterite stone. Like the Khajureswar Temple, the Durga temple also faces west. It rises abruptly from the ground without any platform. The lower part of the temple has a small plinth and displays the three components of a *Rekha Deula*—*Khura*, *Kumbha*, and *Patta*—in the *Pabhaga*. There is no *jangha* division; instead, it has a single

jangha. The temple has a single *bada* without any division. The *baranda* consists of three mouldings, followed by the *gandi*, which is curved toward the *beki*; the *beki* is followed by the *khapuri*, *kalasha*, and *ayudha*. The temple is *tri-ratha* and is devoid of any sculpture. The gateway contains beautiful carvings. The gateway, made of chlorite stone, has two *sakhas*. It has a *pista* and *pabhaga* in the lower part on each side, and two *dvarapalas* contained within niches. Their headdresses are unique and interesting, showing elements on the upper part of the head that indicate tribal affinities. Above each *dvarapala* is a *makara*, from whose mouth springs a series of vegetation motifs arranged within beaded boxes—vertically on the sides and horizontally on the upper part. At the centre above the doorway, on the lintel, is a sculpture of Gajalakshmi seated on a lotus pedestal. Another *sakha* of the doorway, in contrast to the vegetation design, contains floral motifs arranged in square boxes. These do not have beaded borders. They are arranged vertically and horizontally according to the available space on the doorway. All three walls, except the one with the doorway, contain small niches for *parsvadevata* images. These *parsvadevatas* belong to the Shaivite pantheon: Kartikeya in the east, Ganesha in the south, and Shiva in the north, in place of Parvati. Typically, the northern *parsvadevata* niche of a Shiva temple contains an image of Parvati as the pantheon deity.

ICONOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF IMAGERY IN SERGARH:

In Sergarh, the Khajuresvara temple complex is a group of deula complexes in Odisha India. These Buddhist and Shaiva-Shakta temple complexes are located at *Khajurasahi*, *Sergarh*, and Balasore. The *deula* complex was built during the 9th-10th CE. There are several stone idols found to be placed in each of the *deula*. The idols worshiped in the different *deulas* are Shiva, *Durga*, *Ganesha*, *Vaishnavi* and *Purushottama*. The *deulas* were built based on Kalinga architecture. The *deulas* that are intact were built in the “*khakara*” style, except one, which was built in “*rekha*” style. The newly built temple was built in “*pidha*” style. There are a few idols that are found in this temple, which date back to the *Somavamshi* period and were carved during 10-11th CE. The idols are mainly carved in laterite (locally known as “*mankada pathara*”).

The sculptures of *Dasa Bhuj Mahisha Mardini* and *Ekapada Bhairava* are found through the application of lime; the sculptures are not properly recognised.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS:

The architrave which was originally fixed over the door-frame of Khajureswar temple contains the image of four-armed Siva with Parvati and a panel of saptamatrikas with Ganesh and Virabhadra at the centre. A large number of sculptures like Surya, Kartikeya, Ganesh, Ajekapada Bhairav, Ganga, Vishnu, Yamuna, Varah, Astamahabhaya Tara,^[5] Avalokiteswar and Jaina tirthankara with their usual attributes and respective Vahanas suggest that the environ was a flourishing centre of Buddhism, Jainism and Brahmanical traditions.

KARTIKEYA:

The *parsvadevata* Kartikeya in the Durga temple—an old image carved out of chlorite stone—is seated on his mount, the peacock. The head of the peacock is broken, and Kartikeya’s right hand is also broken. The face of Kartikeya^[6] is mutilated. He has an early-style hairstyle and wears a tiger claw, which is a tribal feature. The Durga temple was reconstructed and conserved in a later period, probably after the collapse of the original temple. This is evident from the *grahaslab* and other fragmented images such as

Gajalaxmi and the gateway carvings, made possible due to the easy availability of chlorite stone in the nearby Nilagiri region. The gateway, lintel, and *grahaslab* are beautifully designed and follow the typical features of a Rekha Deula.



Plate 2: Image of Kartikeya

HAR-PARVATI:

The Har–Parvati image found on the *navagraha* slab is beautifully designed and shown seated on a bed-like asana. Har–Parvati is flanked by small pillars. The pillars are four-sided in their shafts, and their capitals are modelled with step-like elements: the lower one is slightly uplifted, the middle one is proportionately raised, and the abacus forms a square shape. On both sides of the pillars, there is a round element decorated with a beaded border on each side, along with a lotus flower design. Above the heads of Har–Parvati, there is a half-moon-shaped banner, arranged with a larger one in the middle and smaller ones on either side. This banner is beautifully and proportionately hung and hovers above Har–Parvati. Below the seat of Har– Parvati, a lion and a bull are depicted, the respective mounts of Shiva and Parvati. There are also nine niches. Interestingly, these nine niches contain female images instead of the *Navagrahas*. These images are identified as Saptamatrikas^[7]—*Brahmani*, *Vaishnavi*, *Maheshwari*, *Indrani*, *Kaumari*, *Varahi*, and *Chamunda*. The Saptamatrikas are flanked by Virabhadra and Ganesha. Although this temple is known as the Durga Temple, the enshrining deity is wrongly worshipped by the local people, who have installed a Shiva *linga*. However, the presence of small *Khakara* temples in the compound of the Durga temple suggests otherwise. According to the tradition of Odishan temple architecture, *Khakara* temples are mainly dedicated to female deities. For example, the Durga Temple at Baideswar near Banki is a *Khakara* temple. Whatever the case may be, the *Saptamatrika* panel on the lintel is a unique feature. Besides the Saptamatrika panel, many other fragmented images are found in the compound.



Plate 3: Image of Har-Parvati and Saptamatrikas

SURYA:

The image of Surya, though preserved only from the waist upward, shows him holding two lotuses in his hands. Two female figures—identified as Usha and Pratyusha—flank him on either side. The chariot is drawn by seven horses. The charioteer, Aruna, reins the horses in his hands. The central horse is large, three horses on the right side are present, while the three horses on the left side are missing. Interestingly, an image of Surya serves as a *parsvadevata* in the



Plate 4: Image of Surya

Varahi Temple at Chaurasi. From this, it can be inferred that Surya^[8] appears as a *parsvadevata* in *Khakara*-order temples. Here in the compound of the Durga temple at Shergarh, three small *Khakara* temples are also found. This connection—*Khakara* temples and an image of Surya as *parsvadevata*—indicates that the broader features of *Khakara* Deula are also present in the Durga temple at Shergarh^[9].

GANESH:

Two fragmented images of Ganesha are also found in the compound of the group of laterite temples in the village of Shergarh. As mentioned earlier, in the Durga temple, one Ganesha^[10] is seated in *ardha-paryanka asana*, while the other is a standing image. Both images differ in sculptural style: they wear different types of beaded necklaces—the seated one has round beads, while the standing one has square beads. The fan-shaped ears are also depicted differently. The seated image wears *kundalas* hanging down on either side of the face, and its hairstyle resembles a bun. The standing one has a *jattamukuta*. Both images probably belong to an early temple.



Plate 5: Image of Ganesh

Another image, that of a *Kshetrapala* riding an animal and holding a sword, is also found in the compound. Three Shiva lingas, one with an *Arghapitha*, are present there. Another fragmented *Arghapitha* is also found, suggesting that many small temples once existed at the site. An unidentified fragmented image is also found in the same compound. On this basis, one can say that many small temples existed there earlier, just as the five temples currently standing in the compound. Probably all these fragmented images and sculptures belonged to these temples and were removed during conservation and repair works, and now lie scattered in the compound. *Gadchandi* Temple in the village of Shergarh in Balasore district is situated approximately half a kilometre away from the Khajureswar Temple. A microscopic, villageto-village survey has brought many hidden aspects to light, helping both the general public and researchers understand the importance of micro-studies in rural areas. Such studies can support the reconstruction and interpretation of regional and national history, and also help ascertain the processes of evolution, amalgamation, and diffusion of culture.

MAHISHAMARDHINI DURGA:

Interestingly a ten-armed image of Mahishamardhini Durga fixed in the northern wall of the adjacent khajureswar temple clearly fits into the pedestal of the Durga temple.^[11] Durga places her right leg on the buffalo, and one of her upper left hands presses the body of the demon Mahishasur. One of her upper right arms thrusts the spear into the demon's body. The raised upper right hand holds a sword, while the raised left hand holds a *gada*. Her earrings hang on both sides of her face. The demon Mahishasura is shown seated below, holding a sword in his right hand. On stylistic ground these images are assignable to 9-10th century A.D. The *Gadchandi* Temple at Shergarh is a small circular cement structure. It enshrines the presiding deity worshipped as *Gadchandi*, who originally belonged to the Jaina pantheon.



Plate 6: Image of Mahishamardhini

VISHNU:

Next to the presiding deity, another image is also found there. This is a four-handed Vishnu^[12] in a standing position. The upper left hand holds a conch, the upper right hand holds a chakra, and the lower left hand holds a gada, with the hand resting on an attendant. In the lower right hand, he holds a lotus and touches the attendant with the same hand. A garland (generally a varna mala) covers his entire body, hanging from both shoulders down to the knees. He is bejewelled with a necklace, earrings, and a head crown. The back of the image has a hollow.

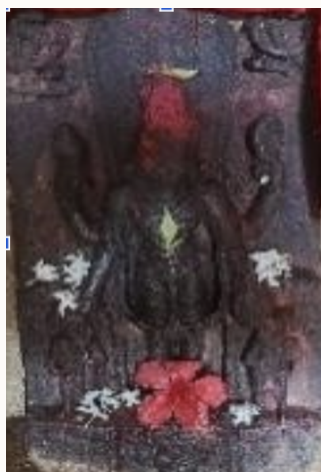


Plate 7: Image of Vishnu

Though the enshrined Jaina pantheon image and the image of Vishnu belong to two different religions, the people of the village keep both of them in the same place and worship them according to their own beliefs. The Jaina image also has a similar kind of background, like the *prabha mandala* seen behind the Vishnu image. The Jaina pantheon image is seated. On the back slab up to the shoulder, the body of a snake is visible, and from the shoulders to the head the figure is covered with a seven-hooded snake. The *prabha mandala* that covers the entire body of Vishnu also shows a similar design. This is why the snake over the head is found in depictions of *Anantaśāyī* Vishnu and *Muchalinda* Buddha. The snake, as a representative of nature, is not the monopoly of any single religion; it is found in Buddhism, Jainism, and Vaishnavism in the same fashion, over the head in the form of an upraised hood.

Although the Khajureswar Temple is a renovated one, its niches contain some ancient images. The image of Ek-pada Bhairava is also found in one of the niches of the Khajureswar temple as a pantheon deity. He stands on a single leg and is two-armed. Behind his head there appears to be a design resembling a serpent hood, though the serpent head is missing. He is flanked by two attendants in the lower part of the image, and two flying Vidyadharas holding garlands are shown on either side in the upper part. This niche has a well-designed frame. The lower part contains Naga images holding pots at their chest level, and above them are several small figures holding garland-like objects. Interestingly, a Proto-Odia inscription is also found on the temple wall.



Plate 8: Image of Ajekapada Bhairav

CONCLUSIONS:

Monuments are the products of the human way of life, their faith, beliefs, practices, and rituals. In every part of the world, one can find monuments created by our forefathers across different periods, forming layers in the stratigraphy of time and space. All these monuments speak the story of human past—how different stages of life passed through various beliefs and practices. Their monuments and sculptures are reflections of these human experiences of the past. Thus, in conclusion, the micro-study of this local region of Balasore, particularly the village of Shergarh, reveals the development of religious aspects belonging to different periods, similar to the cultural evolution seen in Odisha and other parts of India. The Khajureswar Temple of Shergarh stands as an important testimony to the religious, artistic, and cultural development of coastal Odisha. Though modest in scale, the temple reflects a rich blend of Shaiva and Shakta traditions, indicating the strong presence of Tantric practices in the region during the early medieval period. The sculptural fragments, architectural features, and associated deities highlight the continuity of local worship patterns and the deep-rooted belief systems of the community. Overall, the Khajureswar Temple is not only an archaeological landmark but also a cultural symbol that preserves the historical identity of Shergarh. Its study helps us understand the evolution of temple architecture, regional religious practices, and the enduring spiritual heritage of Odisha.

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