



## The Mythology and Background of Samaleswari Devi

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### Abstract

This paper explores the rich mythology and cultural significance of Devi Samaleswari, the revered goddess of Sambalpur in Odisha. It delves into the historical context of her worship, tracing the origins of her temple and the intertwining narratives of local rulers and tribal traditions. The paper highlights the legendary tales surrounding Devi Samaleswari, particularly her divine intervention in the life of Kalapahad, a warrior whose quest for power became a symbol of courage and controversy. Additionally, it examines the vibrant festivals dedicated to her, such as Nuakhai, which showcase the deep-rooted devotion and cultural heritage of the region. Through the annual celebrations and the enduring legacy of Devi Samaleswari, this study underscores her role as a powerful protector and nurturing force, embodying the spirit of the community and uniting people across diverse beliefs in a shared reverence.

Keywords: Devi Samaleswari, Sambalpur, Odisha, Mythology, Cultural significance, Kalapahad, Nuakhai Festivals, Divine intervention, Historical context, Tribal traditions, Religious devotion, Spiritual heritage.

### Introduction

The term "myth" is often employed to characterize narratives or beliefs that are deemed incorrect or fantastical. However, the stories that constitute national or ethnic mythology usually encapsulate profound truths and values, reflecting the collective identity and cultural heritage of people. These narratives, featuring larger-than-life characters and extraordinary events, challenge the boundaries of common sense and conventional practices,

inviting us to explore deeper meanings and insights. Myths are not confined to ancient or "dead" religions; they continue to resonate in contemporary society, shaping our understanding of the world and influencing modern beliefs and practices. They serve as a bridge between the past and present, illustrating the enduring power of storytelling in human experience. Among the many myths in our world, the story of Devi Samaleswari is a particularly interesting one.

Sambalpur, situated in Odisha, has long celebrated social harmony and integration, allowing individuals of diverse beliefs to coexist peacefully. Known as "Hirakhanda" since ancient times, this vibrant region was referred to as Sambalak by the Greek explorer Ptolemy. Renowned travelers like Jean-Baptiste Tavernier and historian Edward Gibbon noted that diamonds were once traded from Sambalpur to Rome, underscoring its historical significance as a centre of commerce and culture. This rich tapestry of heritage rightfully earns Sambalpur the title of one of the most diverse societies. The region is also celebrated for its enchanting Sambalpuri songs and dances, lush forests, and the exquisite Sambalpuri handloom textiles that are recognized worldwide. The rhythmic beats of Sambalpuri drums resonate with energy, igniting immense joy and a sense of celebration throughout the community.

The revered mother goddess Samaleswari is worshipped on the serene banks of the Mahanadi River in Odisha, embodying the essence of Jagat Janani, Adi Shakti, Mahalaxmi, and Mahasaraswati. As the mother of the cosmos, she represents the nurturing and protective forces that sustain all life. Her divine presence extends throughout Western Odisha, where devotees celebrate her myriad forms and attributes, honoring her as a symbol of power, abundance, and wisdom. Samaleswari's influence is deeply woven into the cultural and spiritual fabric of the region, making her a cherished figure in the hearts of many.

### "The Divine Legacy of Devi Samaleswari: The Guardian Goddess of Sambalpur and the Eternal Flame of Devotion"

The history of Sambalpur and the Samaleswari Temple is deeply intertwined with regional legends, traditions, and the rise of local rulers, during the mid-16th century. However, it gained historical and religious significance with the establishment of the Samaleswari Temple, which became a focal point for spiritual and cultural life. The temple, dedicated to Goddess

Samaleswari, the presiding deity of the region, is believed to have been founded during the reign of Raja Balaram Dev, the first ruler of the Sambalpur region and a prominent figure in the local history.

According to some historical records and oral traditions, the idol of Goddess Samaleswari was worshipped by indigenous tribes under the **Semel** tree, known botanically as *Bombax malabaricum* (Silk Cotton Tree), as early as the third century A.D. This suggests that the goddess was a revered figure long before the construction of a formal temple. Some researchers speculate that the name "Samalei" may have originated from the worship of the goddess under the Semel tree, and over time, the goddess came to be known as **Samalei** or **Samaleswari**, a deity deeply embedded in the local tribal beliefs.

The present-day temple was rebuilt by Chhatra Sai Deo, the 7th independent ruler of Sambalpur, who ruled from 1657 to 1665 AD. His contribution was significant as he not only renovated the temple but also provided vast tracts of land to the **sevayats** (temple priests and caretakers) to ensure the uninterrupted worship and daily rituals (seva) of the deity. His act of gifting these lands illustrates his devotion to the goddess and his commitment to the cultural and spiritual preservation of his kingdom.

In terms of the political history, Sambalpur's early rulers were connected to the **Patnagarh kingdom**, which was ruled by **Raja Narasingha Dev**, the elder brother of **Raja Balaram Dev**. Oral legend suggests that Balaram Dev was granted the Sambalpur region by his elder brother, marking the beginning of Sambalpur's independent rule. Balaram Dev is credited with founding the **Chauhan dynasty** in Sambalpur, which played a key role in shaping the history and identity of the region.

The political narrative also notes that the Patnagarh kingdom, which originally governed Sambalpur, experienced internal and external turmoil. **Prataprudra Dev**, a previous ruler of

the region, was defeated in battle, which led to the transfer of control over the kingdom to the **monarch of Vizianagaram**. However, when the Vizianagaram kingdom faced economic challenges and was on the brink of collapse, Narasingha Dev seized the opportunity to declare Patnagarh an independent kingdom in 1540 AD, with the support of his younger brother, the valiant **Balaram Dev**. This event marked the emergence of Sambalpur as an independent kingdom under the Chauhan dynasty, laying the foundation for the region's future development and the establishment of the Samaleswari Temple as a central symbol of religious worship.

Thus, Sambalpur's history is not just the story of a small village growing into a significant region, but also one of strategic political maneuvers, the rise of local rulers, and the blending of tribal and mainstream religious traditions surrounding the revered Goddess Samaleswari. The temple, rebuilt and revitalized by Chhatra Sai Deo, continues to be a symbol of cultural identity and religious devotion in the region.

The kingdom's capital was located near what is now present-day **Patnagarh**, on the banks of the **Mayabati River**. During the dark fortnight of **Sravana**, in the midst of the rainy season, the queen of **King Narasingha Dev** went into intense labor, and her life, along with that of her unborn child, was in grave danger. Despite the royal physicians' best efforts, the situation worsened, and the queen's survival hinged on the expertise of a traditional midwife known for her skill in childbirth. Unfortunately, the midwife lived in a community across the **Mayabati River**, which, due to the torrential rains, had swelled into a raging torrent with a powerful current.

In this moment of desperation, **Balaram Dev**, the king's younger brother, took it upon himself to save the queen and her child. Without hesitation, Balaram Dev braved the ferocious river, swimming through the floodwaters and

battling the rapid currents. Against all odds, he successfully reached the village, found the midwife, and carried her back across the river on his back, risking his life to ensure her arrival at the palace.

Thanks to the midwife's timely care and treatment, the queen safely gave birth to a healthy son, who was named **Hamir Dev**. In recognition of his brother's unparalleled bravery and selflessness, King Narasingha Dev was deeply moved. As a reward for his courage and dedication, the king granted Balaram Dev a vast expanse of territory. This land would later become known as the kingdom of **Huma Desh**, which, under Balaram Dev's rule, grew into the independent and well-recognized **kingdom of Sambalpur**. This heroic act not only saved the queen and secured the royal lineage but also laid the foundation for the future of Sambalpur, marking Balaram Dev's rise as a key figure in the region's history.

Years later, the queen-mother summoned her sons, Narasingha Dev and Balaram Dev, to Kalapathar on the banks of the Anga River. From a vantage point, she gestured toward the kingdom of Patna and proclaimed that Narasingha Dev would one day be its independent ruler. Turning to face Huma Desh, she then foretold that her younger son, Balaram Dev, would establish dominion over that vast region. This prophecy led to the founding of the Sambalpur kingdom, which later came to be known as Huma Desh.

Between 1540 and 1557 A.D., Balaram Dev established control over Sambalpur and founded the Chowhan Dynasty. His initial capital was at Bargarh, located near the modern town of Bargarh on the left bank of the Jira River. For reasons likely tied to military or administrative concerns, Balaram Dev later relocated the capital to Nuagarh, situated near the Barapahar mountain range. Seeking a more strategic location, he eventually moved to Chaunrpur on the right bank of the Mahanadi River (near present-day Chaunrpur village) to

select a new site for his capital. Thus, the Chowhan Dynasty's legacy took root, with Sambalpur emerging as a powerful kingdom under Balaram Dev's leadership.

Balaram Dev, renowned not only for his prowess as a warrior but also for his skills as a hunter, had an extraordinary experience one day while hunting. With his hounds by his side, he crossed the Mahanadi River to the right bank in pursuit of game. During the hunt, something miraculous occurred. Instead of his hounds chasing a small rabbit, the roles were reversed – the rabbit was fearlessly chasing the terrified dogs. Astounded by this bizarre spectacle, Balaram Dev watched as the rabbit retreated to the foot of a massive simili tree on the left bank of the Mahanadi and mysteriously vanished.

That night, as he returned to his camp, the king had a strange and vivid dream. Goddess Samaleswari appeared to him, revealing that she resided in Gumadarha, within the depths of the Mahanadi River. She instructed Balaram Dev to enshrine her at the base of the simili tree where the rabbit had disappeared and to construct a temple in her honor. Before departing, the goddess blessed the king.

The next morning, inspired by the divine vision, Balaram Dev resolved to act. Recognizing the spiritual and administrative significance of the left bank of the Mahanadi, he chose that location as the site of his new fort and capital. There, he built the temple of Goddess Samaleswari, who would become the revered deity of the region, forever linking his dynasty to the sacred land.

### **The Legend of Devi Samaleswari and the Warrior Kalapahad: A Tale of Divine Power and Valor**

Kalapahad, originally known as Rajiv Lochan Ray, was a prominent idealist warrior serving under Sultan Sulaiman Karrani, the Mughal ruler of Bengal. A pivotal figure in the Afghan conquest of Odisha, Rajiv Lochan Ray initially fought against Karrani but after the defeat at the Battle of Tribeni, he made peace

with the Sultan. During this time, he fell in love with Karrani's daughter and, in defiance of the prevailing norms, converted to Islam to marry her, adopting the name Kalapahad (meaning "Black Mountain").

King Gajapati Mukunda Deva, the ruler of Odisha, vehemently opposed this union and declared that any attempt to return to Hinduism after conversion would be forbidden. Despite the opposition, Kalapahad sought to return to his Hindu roots and traveled to Puri to reconvert. However, the orthodox Hindu priests rejected his plea, leading him to fully embrace his new faith.

Fueled by resentment, Kalapahad became a key figure in Karrani's campaign of retribution against King Mukunda Deva. In 1568, he led the attack on Odisha, laying waste to major towns and destroying numerous sacred temples and religious sites. His actions left a lasting mark on the region, intertwining his name with both conquest and controversy in Odisha's history.

The Kalapahad is the most common story for the cause of the Konark Sun Temple's destruction. Kalapahad invaded Odisha in 1508, according to Odisha history. He ruined the Konark Sun Temple as well as other Hindu temples in Odisha. The Puri Jagannath temple's Madala Panji relates how Kalapahad stormed Odisha in 1568. He shattered most of the images in Odisha's Hindu temples, including the Konark temple. Despite the fact that the stone walls are 20 feet (6.1 m) to 25 feet (7.6 m) thick, he was able to move the Dadhinauti (Arch stone), causing the tower to fall. He also destroyed the majority of Konark's images and side temples.

It is believed that, according to mythology, Kalapahad, military commander of the nawab of Bengal, camped with a large army near Durgapali on the bank of the Mahanadi beyond the temple Samaleswari during one of his journeys to Sambalpur. He has a large cowhide drum with gigantic bells (Hulgulas).

According to legend, as the drum beats and the bells (Hulgulas) sound, the limbs of the temple's deity's dissolve. Kalapahad's objective was to destroy the temple of Samaleswari as well as other temples and goddesses in Sambalpur's old town. Before Kalapahad could begin his depredation, a charming milkmaid clothed in gold jewellery and carrying a basket of milk, curd, and cheese arrived to Kalapahad's camp on a lovely evening. She gave the things to Kalapahad and his soldiers. The next morning, the whole army, including Kalapahad, is claimed to have suffered from cholera and other allied illnesses, producing full chaos. Kalapahad abandoned the temple attack and departed the land with survivors of his army, leaving most of his armoury, the massive drum, and the brass bells behind (Hulgulas).

It is said that the Goddess Samaleswari showed herself as a milkmaid and destroyed the army of Kalapahad to keep her people safe from Kalapahad. She disguised herself as an attractive lady to protect her children from the army of Kalapahad, and she saved her people.

#### **Celebrations Honoring Samaleswari Devi: Festivals and Traditions of Devotion**

Festivals are events that celebrate the presence of gods and goddesses in the lives of people and communities. Those are also times for the people to enjoy and be a part of old, yet alive and live traditions. Festivals are especially enjoyable when they coincide with agricultural events such as harvest festival "Nuakhai", which is held in West Odisha every year during Bhadraba Sukla Paksha.

Nuakhai is such a prominent event in western Odisha that on this occasion, people express their thanks and thankfulness to the creator and Mother Goddess Earth. This event is traditionally held on the fifth day of Bhadraba Sukla Paksha, when newly harvested rice is first presented to the presiding goddess Samaleswari. Though it is a harvest festival, the people of Sambalpur worship that devi, and they offer so many things to Samlei devi.

Gundikhai is another important festival associated with Goddess Samaleswari. On the day of the full moon of Phalguna, the first crop of mangoes with char (a type of miniature sweet blackberry) and new Mahul flower are first offered to Goddess Samaleswari, and then members of the community take those offerings.

Jalasya Utsav of Bhairava Baba, Sravanabhiseka of Goddess Samaleswari, Beginning of Sohala Puja, Mahalaya, Dhavalamukhi Vesa or Ganga Darshana Vesa, Beginning of Triratri Manasika Jagara Dip, Vijaya Dasami, Ranajita Sobhayatra, Special Puja of Sitala Thakuran. These are some festivals related to Samaleswari Devi.

#### **The Dhavalamukhi Besha of Devi Samaleswari: A Spectacular Celebration of Divine Grace and Beauty:**

Throughout the year, Goddess Samaleswari is adorned in a vibrant red outfit, symbolizing strength and vitality. However, during the auspicious occasion of Mahalaya, this attire transforms into a serene white garment, signifying purity and peace. Following the enchanting "Dhavalamukhi Besha," also referred to as "Ganga Darshan," the festivities continue with nine days of Navaratri. During this sacred period, Goddess Samaleswari manifests in various forms of Goddess Durga, each incarnation embodying unique aspects of divinity and power. This vibrant celebration showcases the rich tapestry of devotion and reverence that surrounds the goddess, drawing countless devotees to honor her in all her magnificent forms.

Up to Monday afternoon, the Goddess will stay in the "Dhavalamukhi Besha." The preparation for this "Besha" began at midnight and went till 4 am. At 5 am, the doors of the temple were opened for "darshan" by the faithful.

The Goddess wears the "Shailaputri Besha" on the first day of Navaratri and the "Brahmacharini" on the second.

Following that, the goddess takes on the guises of 'Chandraghanta,' 'Kusumanda,' 'Skandhamata,' 'Katyayani,' 'Kalaratri,' 'Mahagouri,' and lastly, 'Raja Rajeswari Besha.' During the occasion, elaborate arrangements have been prepared for pilgrims visiting the temple from around western Odisha.

Similarly, suitable security procedures have been put in place to ensure that the deity's 'darshan' is as seamless as possible. Hundreds of people, on the other hand, presented 'Tila Tarpan' on the banks of the Mahanadi River as the day marked the conclusion of 'Pitru Pakhya' and tribute was paid to forebears.

### Conclusion

The devotees of Devi Samaleswari offer their prayers and worship at her shrine, the revered Samaleswari Temple, with profound care and unwavering devotion. Among the numerous festivals celebrated in her honor throughout the year, three stand out for their grandeur and significance. These celebrations attract large crowds of devotees who come to seek her blessings and express their gratitude.

Devi Samaleswari is revered as a powerful goddess, often referred to as the "Mother of the Universe." Her divine presence is believed to encompass all creation, embodying nurturing qualities and offering protection to her followers. As the embodiment of strength and compassion, she inspires deep reverence among her devotees, who view her as a guiding force in their lives.

The festivals dedicated to her are characterized by vibrant processions, elaborate rituals, and devotional music that fill the air with a sense of sacredness. During these auspicious occasions, the temple becomes a hub of spiritual activity, with devotees engaged in prayers, offerings, and communal gatherings. The atmosphere is alive with devotion, as people from all walks of life come together to celebrate the divine feminine energy that Devi Samaleswari represents, strengthening their

bonds with one another and with the goddess herself.

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