

## From Unimpressive to Impressive: Understanding the Alagum Temple Complex, District Puri, Orissa

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“There is a small temple in the village, in which the god Śiva in the form of a *liṅga*, styled Garteśvara is worshipped. The temple itself is rather unimpressive like so many of its class in the villages in different parts of Orissa.”

D.C. Sircar (*Epigraphia Indica*, Vol. XXIX)

Alagum, a small village in the Satyabadi Tehsil of Orissa has a single temple and allied institutions located centrally in the village. The principal deity worshipped as Garteśvara Śiva and also locally known as Gupteshwar seems to be central to the cultural landscape of this village. As the above quote

reveals this temple was considered to be an unimpressive one by D.C. Sircar.

When one visits the site it seems to be the most impressive structure in the vicinity. The temple and its complex at Alagum will be discussed in this paper to unravel the different structural phases in the making of this



Fig.1: The Garteśvara Temple at Alagum, Puri district, Orissa

temple and the religious life of the people of Alagum. From the antiquarian remains in the village we may trace the history of the village, specifically the

temple from the early medieval times, if not earlier. There are two very interesting and important inscriptions in the temple. These two help us to unfold the history of the village in an altogether different dimensions and also provides vital insights to the cultural landscape of the area. They not only inform us about the activities centering the temple complex but also the associated political, social, economic and the religious lives of the people.

The architectural style of the temple reveals that it was built in the medieval period sometime during the 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> century CE. It is represented both by *rekhā* and *pidhā* types with an east-west axis of worship

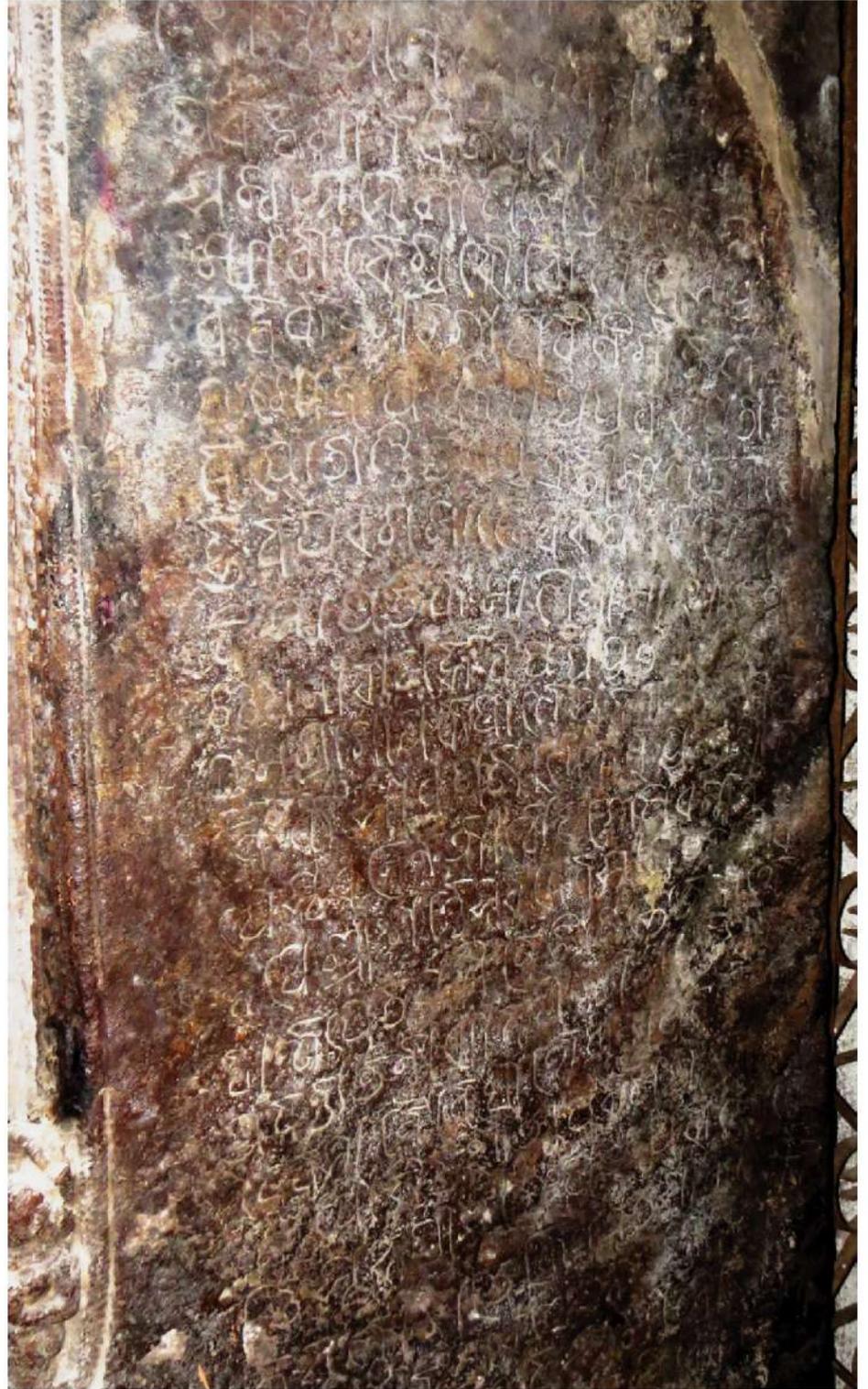


Fig.2: The Sanskrit Inscription (left entrance wall of the temple)

(Fig.1). But the information about the temple and its existence comes from two stone inscriptions presently located on either sides of the entrance of the temple (Figs.2 and 3). Both the inscriptions were composed during the reign of the Gaṅga ruler Anantavarman Coḍagaṅga. It is interesting to note that one of the inscriptions is in Sanskrit and the other is in Telugu language. The Sanskrit inscription consists of 26 lines in cursive Gauḍī script and the language is



Fig.3: The Telugu Inscription (right entrance wall of the temple)

Sanskrit influenced by local dialect (Sircar 1951-52). In a recent study it has been shown that the Telugu record is earlier than the Sanskrit one (Basu Majudmar 2014).<sup>1</sup> The Sanskrit inscription is dated in the 62<sup>nd</sup> regnal year of the Eastern Gaṅga ruler Anantavarman which provides us a date c. 1140-41 CE (as the coronation date of Anantavarman was c. 1078 CE). While, on the other hand, the Telugu inscription speaks of the 23<sup>rd</sup> regnal year of the king Anantavarman. So there is a gap of about 39 years between the inscriptions. However, it is interesting to note that both these epigraphic records speak of the same king and about the same Gartteśvara temple complex at Alagum. Gartteśvara was evidently the prime deity of the temple complex and is mentioned in the Sanskrit record as *palli-devatā*, i.e. the community deity.

The Telugu inscription opens with the name of Śrīmadananttavarmadeva. This has a remarkable affinity with an inscription from Visakhapattanam, Andhra Pradesh, dated 1090 CE,<sup>2</sup> this record clearly shows Anantavarman's

control over Visakhapattanam in 1090, while this area had certainly been previously under the Eastern Cālukyas of Veṅgī. From 1070 onwards the area merged with the Coḷa realm with the accession of Kulottuṅga (1070-1120), a contemporary of Anantavarman. The Coḷa-Eastern Gaṅga rivalry over the possession of northern Andhra coastal area is also evident from *Kaliṅgattupparani* of Jayangondar.<sup>3</sup> This provides the clue why the fragmentary Telugu record at Alagum begins with the mention of the reigning king Anantavarman Coḷagaṅga. His political control over northern Andhra explains why an inscription of an Odisha ruler would be composed in Telugu. It is also important to state here that the Gaṅga ruler Anantavarman Coḷagaṅga also had a Coḷa connection. Coḷagaṅga's mother Rājasundarī was a Coḷa princess. His links with the southern part of the subcontinent is well attested through these records.

It is known from the Sanskrit inscription too that from the Coḷa country, hailed a person well known as Kāmāṅḍī who was born in the village of Kadamvura, belonging to the Kāśyapa *gotra pa cārṣeya pravara* whose grandfather was Potaṅḍī whose father's name was Bhimāṅḍī. It was probably Kāmāṅḍī who established this temple, though we have no conclusive evidence in favour. Kāmāṅḍī is designated both as a devout worshipper of Śiva (*parama māheśvara*) and a devout

worshipper of Viṣṇu (*parama vaiṣṇava*). Apart from this in the epigraph the epithet *diśāpati*, i.e. 'lord of directions' has been used for Kāmāṅḍī. This vital piece of information here is also very much significant and will be discussed later. It is worthy of mention that within the present temple complex, both the images of Śiva and Viṣṇu are currently being



Fig.4: Idols in the *Garbhagṛha* of the temple

worshipped (Fig.4). Both the records attest the continuation of the practice of worshipping both the deities simultaneously in the temple and Kāmāṅḍī's faith

in both the deities might have played an active role in the emergence of this dual worship as the principal deity was Śiva in his Gartteśvara form.

The name of the village as mentioned in the Tamil inscription is Aruguma which is the same as Alagumma. Apart from Anantavarman Coḍagaṅga the Telugu record also mentions another figure of political prominence Viṣṇuvarddhana Vijayāditya. The portion containing the name of the queen of Viṣṇuvarddhana Vijayāditya is unfortunately broken; it only allows us to read *loka* (which in all probabilities was a part of the name). Viṣṇuvarddhana Vijayāditya may be identified with the Cālukyan king Satyāśraya's son, one of the seven sons. Viṣṇuvarddhana Vijayāditya's son from his queen --loka has been mentioned in our inscription as Rājarāja. He was in all probability subservient to Anantavarman Coḍagaṅga as the title used in the inscription is *rāhuta*.

The above epigraphic documents lend us a vision regarding the nature of the donations which have been made to this *palli-devatā* or the village deity of Gartteśvara. The Telugu inscription records that Viṣṇuvarddhana [Vi]jayāditya-Chakravartti and --loka devī's son Rājarāja *rāhuta* made some gift in favour of god Gartta mentioned with a honorific suffix 'pu'.<sup>4</sup> To Gartteśvara, the deity at the village of Aruguma is given this perpetual endowment to last till the sun and the moon. On the other hand the Sanskrit inscription mentions that Kāmāṇḍī, hailing from the land of the Coḷas, purchased a '*hala*' of land named Kapāleśvara and gave it in favour of the '*maṭha*' of God Gartteśvara. It is specifically mentioned here that the donor purchased this land and made the donation with his own money (*sva-dhanena krītvā*). It was for attaining endless merit for the donor and also for feeding ascetic named Bhija or for feeding ascetics (if we consider Bhija as a mistake for *dvija*). It has been shown by Basu Majumdar that this was a *bhojana akṣaya-nīvī* created by Kāmāṇḍī. In addition to the grants made to the monastery, Kāmāṇḍī also made gifts to the principal deity. He gave three *pravarttas* of paddy for providing *naivedya* to the deity and for pleasing the deity Gartteśvara. The inscription mentions that he provided an amount of five *purāṇas* added to hundred *curṇis*. This is the principal investment that he made and from this money the arrangements were to be made for three *pravarttas* of paddy and a perpetual lamp (*akhaṇḍa pradīpa*) to please the deity. The donated amount is repeated in the epigraph in numerals to clarify that the total amount was equivalent to 105 *purāṇas*.<sup>5</sup> Then follows the

words 'etsya (i.e. of this) *kāparyaka*' (in lines 20-21). Basu Majudmar has shown that *kāparyaka* here should be taken as *cowrie* shells and thus the payment equivalent to 100 *purāṇas* was made in *kaparyakas* or *cowrie* shells and rest five *purāṇas* in coins. This investment or the total sum of money was deposited with the local *adhikārins* (probably of the temple) who maintained the *palli-devatā* or the village deity. The donation was expected to bring about the *kula tārana*, i.e. the thing that ensures the easy crossing of the sea of *samsāra*. Thus, this inscription informs us that there was a temple committee too in the village of Alagum which was responsible for the management of the affairs and transactions on behalf of the temple. Apart from this, it is one of the earliest inscriptions mentioning the ritual of *kula tārana*. Till date for the ritual of *kula tārana*, *cowrie* shells are used as payment for the smooth journey across the *vaitaraṇī* or the final departure from this world and a secure journey to the other world.

The Telugu inscription written in the 23<sup>rd</sup> regnal year of Anantavarman shows that, the temple of this deity already existed in the 12<sup>th</sup> century CE. On the basis of architecture of the present temple of Gartteśvara, one would assign a date as late as 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> century for this temple. The inscriptions thus bear clear indication that there existed a temple in the same place in the 12<sup>th</sup> century CE and later either it was demolished and again another temple was constructed there or the old temple underwent a process of renovation.

It is interesting to note that within the temple premise, there are two Śiva *liṅgas* and three *nandīs*. One in the *garbhagrha* worshipped at present and the other is kept outside and is still worshipped. All this denotes that the temple was renovated at least twice and the principal deity, Gartteśvara (in the form of *liṅga*) was replaced by new ones. The old Śiva *liṅgas* were not discarded and continued to remain in the same temple premise. It is also interesting to note that a small stone bears the engraving of a temple and is kept

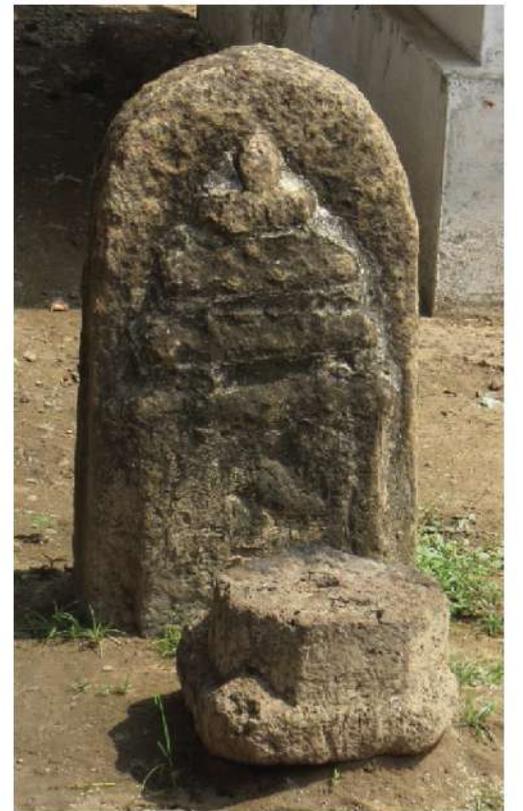


Fig.5: The carved stone piece depicting a temple



Fig.6: Image of Varāha within the temple complex

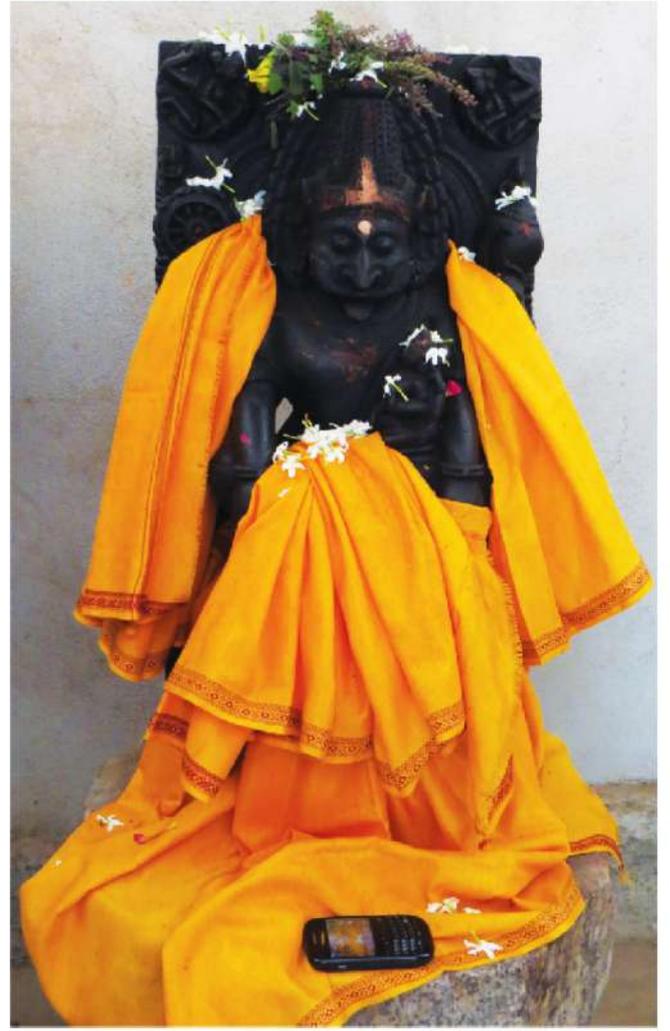


Fig.7: Image of Viṣṇu within the temple complex

inside the premise (Fig.5). This was probably the figure of the old temple and was created to serve the purpose of a memorial of the old temple when a new one was created at its place. It is worth mentioning here that the loose sculptures (9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> centuries CE, Figs.6 & 7) found from the temple complex are now housed within a modern establishment and have been reported from the same area of the temple complex. So based on all these evidences, it might be surmised that the antiquity of the village might go back at least to the early medieval times.

Coming to the most important piece of information provided by the Sanskrit inscription while mentioning the grants of Kāmāṇḍī and the amount donated by him, it mentions that five *purāṇas* added to hundred *curṇis* were given. As already mentioned, that the donated amount is repeated in numerals to clarify that the total amount was equivalent to 105 *purāṇas*.<sup>6</sup> Here is a direct reference to giving away of five *purāṇas* (coins) and the rest in *curṇi*, i.e. change

here in *cowrie shells* (*kaparya*, i.e. *kaparda*). Basu Majumdar has proposed that the terms *cūrṇi*, *cūrṇṇa* or *cūrikā* mean 'broken' and all indicate submultiples of a principal money of account and finally paid or by the person as per his/her convenience (Basu Majumdar 2014a).<sup>7</sup>

The *cowrie shells* were thus regular medium of exchange in this region as is well known. But the records give us very interesting information and a link of a navigator from Coḷa country, who might have an association with *cowrie* trade. *Cowries* were brought from Maldives to the Bay of Bengal coast and in this context it is interesting to note that the Egra copper plate of Śaśāṅka in early 7<sup>th</sup> century CE, discovered from Egra in Medinipur district, which is very close to the coast, records the name of a village, in the context of the boundary demarcations of the donated Ekagraharam as *Kaparddipadrika*.<sup>8</sup> The name ending *padrika/padraka* is quite common in inscription of Bengal of this time in the sense of a settlement. The first portion of the name *Kaparddi* cannot but be related to *kapardda/kaparddaka*, denoting *cowrie shells*.<sup>9</sup> The village was so named probably because of the regular availability and circulation of *cowrie shells* there. Probably *cowrie shells* imported from Maldives were stored here as the place was very close to the coast. Similarly at Alagum, the deity is called Garteśvara, which denotes the deity of the *gartta* or hole. It is worth mentioning that *cowries* were stored in large pits or holes and the deity associated with *cowrie shells* is Śiva. In Coḷa records Śiva is called Kaparddīśvara (Basu Majumdar 2014b).

The Alagum inscriptions are worthy of re-reading and consideration in association with the architectural and archeological features of the entire temple complex. The enormous amount of data coming from the temples is very much significant to understand the overall role of the temple complex and the religious ideologies attached to it. The picture emerging from the present study gives an impression that the concerned landscape never lost its importance, as a result of which, it was in constant use for the *palli-devatā* or Garteśvara and eventually turned out to be the main focus of religious activities in this domain of Anantavarman. The temple complex might have been the sole centre of worship from the early medieval times and was eventually taken up for granting of lands during the 23<sup>rd</sup> regnal year and the 62<sup>nd</sup> regnal year

consecutively during the rule of the same king. A person hailing from a distant land was also enthusiastic in providing patronage to the local temple or the village deity. The associated information of the temple committee adds to our knowledge regarding the involvement of the people of this village in the temple activities. The relation of the ruler Anantavarman with his neighboring allies is also well attested through the inscriptions. The study of the architectural features of the temple testifies to the point that the temple had gone through successive phases of construction and renovations; however what is of concern here is that the place was never abandoned. The temple is presently the centre of all religious activities in the area of study. Now in the light of all the evidences the temple of Gartteśvara at Alagum seems to be one of the most impressive structures. Sircar's statement is not completely out of proportions as his was a general statement and he had, at the back of his mind, the impressive architectural wonders of Odisha and in comparison to them this temple seemed quite unimpressive to him. The two epigraphic records in the village have turned this temple into an impressive one and with all humility and regards we beg to differ from Sircar.

## References

1. A small note on the inscription was published in the *Archaeological Review* 1950-51 but the text of the record remained unpublished till recently and has been published with a summary followed by a detailed discussion by Basu Majumdar (*The Alagum (Odisha) Gartteśvara Śiva Temple and the Two Temple Inscriptions* by Susmita Basu Majumdar and Sharmistha Chatterjee, *Prtanasamiksha*, New Series: Vol 5, 2014).
2. South Indian Inscriptions X, p.651 also N. Karashima ed., *Ancient and Medieval Commerce in the Indian Ocean: Testimonies of Inscriptions and Ceramic Sherds*, Tokyo: Taisho University, 2002: 236. It reads: *Svasti srimad Anantavarmmadevara pravarddhamāna vijayarājye samvatsarambulu [17] nemti śakavarushambu 1012... etc.*
3. This point has been elaborated in Ranabir Chakravarti, *The Pull towards the Coast: Politics and Polity in India 600-1300 CE*, Presidential Address, Section I, Indian History Congress, 72<sup>nd</sup> Session, Patiala, 2011.
4. Probably the Telugu equivalent of *īśvara* = *Gartteśvara*.
5. The inscription clearly mentions that again or also mentioned in numerals *pu* (abbreviated form of *purāṇa*) 105.

6. The inscription clearly mentions that again or also mentioned in numerals *pu* (abbreviated form of *purāṇa*) 105. Then follows the words '*etsya* (i.e. of this) *kāparyaka*' (in lines 20-21). Sircar takes the term *kāparyaka* as a mistake for *kāpyaka* and takes it as a penitent and mentions that the donor is mentioned as a penitent but here we would like to differ and further state that the term *kāparyaka* originates from the Sanskrit term *Kāpardaka* meaning *cowries* or *cowrie* shell dealer.
7. For detailed study on the cowries and the monetary history of early Medieval India see Bin Yang 2004, 2011, Heimann 1980, John S. Deyell 1999.
8. Sircar, *Select Inscriptions Bearing on Indian History and Civilization*, II, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1983.
9. Rajat Sanyal briefly refers to the village in p.213, note 42 'The Pala-Sena and Others' in Dilip K. Chakrabarti and Makkhan Lal (eds.), *A History of Ancient India*, vol. V, New Delhi: Aryan, 2014: 165-213.