Asta Tirtha: Hidden Gem of Ekamra Kshetra

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ABSTRACT

Ekamra Kshetra or Bhubaneswar popularly known as temple city of Odisha has a unique position among the sacred sites of India because of having a series of ancient sandstone temples with Kalingan temple architecture, heritage ponds, tanks, monasteries or mathas, stupa, rock cut caves etc. Its wealth of monuments shows its cultural, historical and architectural weightage ranging from 3rd C.B.C to 15th C.A.D covering more than a period of 2000 years. We all are very much well known about the importance of water and its sacredness. It is always interconnected with religion which grown up its sacredness. As a part of religion, every Hindu temple has one or two water storage in the form of tank, pond or well. This heritage pond, well or water tank is built to meet the daily necessities of the temple such as conduction of ritual bath, preparation of daily meal for the deity etc. as well as for the domestic use of the local people during water scarcity. This paper is a small effort by the present scholar to throw light on the heritage tanks of Ekamra Kshetra; special focus has given to the well famous Asta Tirtha of the place.

Keywords: Asta Tirtha, Ekamra Kshetra, Bhubaneswar, Temple, Heritage Pond or well, Temple tank,

INTRODUCTION

Ekamra Kshetra popularly known as Bhubaneswar lies on the south-west of the Mahanadi River and the river forms its northern boundary while the Daya River bounds the city to the south and the Kuakhai River to the east. It is one of the sacred cities of India which famous for the presence of a number of monuments related to different religion and sect. one of the peculiar element is that the city is the only place where the Kalingan temple architecture evolved throughout the ruling period of different dynasties.

Ekamra Kshetra is also associated with Asta ayatanas; each of the ayatanas is associated with temple, water body and small shrines. In the narration of Asta ayatanas, Ekamra Chandrika and Swarnadri Mahodaya have been described as follows.

- The first ayatana includes Bindusagar, Ananta Vasudeva temple, Devi padahara tank, Tirtheswara tank
- The second ayatana includes Maitreswara temple, Baruneswar temple, Isaneswar temple, Yameswara temple and Papanasini Kunda
- The third ayatana includes Ganga Yamuna tirtha, Gangeswar linga
- The fourth ayatana includes several lingas namely Kotisvara, Svarnajaleswara, Subarnajaleswara, Mukteswara, Kedareswar, Indreswara and Sidheswara
- The fifth ayatana includes shrines of Brahmeswar, Gokarneswar, Brahma Kunda
- The sixth ayatana includes Megheswara temple, Megheswara Kunda, Bhaskareswar temple and its Kunda
- The seventh ayatana includes Alabukeswar with Alabu tirtha, Uttareshwar and Bhimeswar temple
- The eighth ayatana includes Rameswara temple and Rama Kunda, Gosagareswar temple and Parasurameswar temple, Bharateswar temple, Satrughaneswar temple, Laksmaneswar.[1]

ASTA TIRTHA: In around the temple city Bhubaneswar, a number of temple tanks are found and the Ashta Tirthas are prominent landmarks in this context Literatures such as Swarnadri Mahodaya, Kapila Samhita, Ekamra Purana, Skanda Purana have been described about the Asta tirtha of Ekamra Kshetra. The Asta Tirtha includes Bindu Tirtha, Papanasini Tirtha, Ganga Yamuna Tirtha, Koti Tirtha, Brahma Kunda, Megheswar Kunda, Alabu Tirtha & Ram Hradha or Asoka Kunda. These temple tanks are referred as Tirthas for their spiritual qualities and curative power.

BINDUSAGAR: In around the temple city Bhubaneswar, a number of temple tanks are found and the Ashta Tirthas are prominent landmarks in this context. Among all the tirthas of Bhubaneswar, the puranic and historic famous Bindu Sarovar or Bindu Sagar is the prominent one located in the middle of Ekamra Kshetra or popularly known as temple city Bhubaneswar. Ekamra Purana, Ekamra Chandrika, Kapila Samhita, Swarnadri Mahodaya not only describe about Ekamra Kshetra but also gives information regarding the origin, situation, historic and socio-religious importance of holy Bindu Sarovar through the ages. Legends are variously described in different Puranas and Upapuranas.

Bindu Sarovar or Bindusagar in Bhubaneswar is the prominent one. All the religious activities of Lord Tribhubhaneswar or Lingaraj are related to this sacred tank. Explaining the significance and sanctity of Bindusagar, it is said that all over the three worlds there is no sarovar like Bindu Sarovar. You will get crores of blessings after taking a bath in the sarovar because every drop of water is sacred as it is collected from all the tirthas of India for its formation. It is considered as a source of reverence and respect in the term of pilgrimage and cultural centre. People from all regions come here to take a dip in order to get moksha. Through this paper it is discussed on the legends, mythologies related to the origin of the tank and also its socio-religious, historic importance.

According to Ekamra Purana, Lord Shiva had built the sacred tank Bindu Sarovar through his trident for which it's other name is Sankara Bamphi. It also mention that drops from all the sacred pools on earth, in heaven, in the lower region as also of nectar, wine, holy butter and all that is most delectable constantly fall into it. Bindu Tirtha is a holy one because water from all rivers, seas, ponds, spring has been collected by Rudra to form this tirtha as mentioned in Ekamra Chandrika. In Swarnadri Mahodaya the origin of Bindusagar has been narrated that for quenching the thirst of goddess Gopaluni after dismissing Kriti and Vasa, Lord Shiva struck his trident. As a result this holy Tirtha is formed. Shiva Purana mentions that Lord Shiva struck his trident on the earth to prevent the thirst of goddess Parvati who was in the form of Gopaluni to kill the demons Kriti and Vasa. With his struck, a tank was formed. That was known as Bindu Sarovar. Linga Purana also describes the creation and inauguration of Sankara Bapi. It mentions that the holy rivers like Brahmani, Chandrabhaga, Baitarani, Daya, Goutami, Kusha Bhadra, Krishna, Tapti, Reba, Suvarna Rekha etc. are assimilated with this Bamphi which makes the Bapi sacred. The responsibility of this Bamphi has been given to Lord Vasudeva or Vishnu. Brahma Purana narrates its virtues by mentioning that Bindusagar is formed with the collection of each drop of water from every Tirtha of India. In Kapila Samhita, Bindusagar is named as Bindu Sarovar, Bindu Hradha, Bindu Tirtha, Binddbhava etc. All over the three worlds there is no tirtha like Bindu Tirtha. A verse regarding Bindusagar is as follows.

"न च स्वर्गे न च पाताले लोकालोक परयाने

बिन्दु सागर समोतीर्थ नास्ति ब्रह्माण्ड मण्डले"[2]

From above literary evidence, it is clear that Lord Shiva is responsible for the creation of Bindusagar. After getting married to goddess Parvati, Lord Shiva left his in-laws house at the request of his wife and settled at Varanasi. As Varanasi got more populated, goddess Parvati requested for a secluded location where they could spend their time peacefully. At Least goddess Parvati chose the Ekamra Kshetra which was the home of the demons Kriti and Vasa. Taking the form of Gopaluni, goddess Parvati killed both of them by pressing down on her foot in the battle. As she was suffering from thirst, Umaballava Shiva quenched her thirst by forming a pool through his trident. For its establishment, all the river deities were invited. All tirthas poured a drop of their holy water in order to make the pool sacred. After the assimilation of every drop of water from all tirthas, the pool is known as Bindu Hradha or Bindu Sagar. It is also regarded as Tirtharaja.

It is also believed that Asoka, the great Mauryan emperor, carved Bindu Sarovar according to his father's name Bindusara. After Kalinga War, he initiated into Buddhism and transformed from Chandashoka to Dharmasoka. Then he made efforts to propound Buddhism. He engraved his inscriptions at Dhauli and Jaugada. He also established Pillars, Viharas, Chaitya and Stupa to popularise Buddhism. Among his religious achievements, the engraving of Prapa or Pool was important one. For which he carved Kaushalya Sarovar in the name of his mother Kaushalya Devi, Bindusarasar or Bindusagar Sarovar in the name of his father Bindusar and also carved another pool as per his name Ashoka Sarovar at Bhadrak.

There is also another saying that queen Kolavati had a daughter namely Bindumati. After her death, Somavamsi ruler Udyota Kesari established Bindumati Sarovar in honour of her memory. With the passage of time Bindumati Sarovar came to be known as Bindu Sagar. Another popular legend is that Somakula king Yajati excavated Bindu Sarovar before constructing the huge temple for Lord Tribhubhaneswar. He felt the need to dig such a huge pool because of the movement of large numbers of workers and sculptors. After him Udyota Kesari established the temple along with the Pool. The water of all Tirthas was brought for the establishment of the temple and the same was poured with drop to the pool for which this is named as Bindu Sarovar.

The earliest documentary evidence regarding Bindu Sarovar comes from the Angul Copper Plate of Santi Karadeva -II and it mentions Santi Karadeva had donated a village Bhatta Vamana Swami at Bindu Sagar on the 5th day of Shukla Paksha of Odia month Pausa. It proves that Bindu Sagar had already got the popularity as a holy place before his rule. Again Queen Chandrika Devi, Daughter of Anangabhimadeva-III mentioned in her Ananta Vasudeva temple inscription a Sanskrit verse as follow.

"यस्मिन् बिन्दुसरः सरस्वद सद्दग् दृक् पेयपाथः पतत्

पान्थः शन्तिहरं सुधाजनिथनिःस्यन्दब्दपुः शम्भाबिम्

जद्युन्दोरपि नानूयन्ति पदवीं तीर्थानि तानि स्पुटम

भूतानु ग्रह निर्मितं पुरजिता लोकौकसोकापहम्".[3]

Through this inscription it is proved that the unique pool Bindusagar was built by Lord Shiva for the benefit of all creatures. It is the only mourner of three worlds. Its water is delightful to look at and mesmerizing to drink. Its arched ground is graced with the sight of the banari playing on the surface of the elderly workers swimming in the pool. So it is proved that the Bindu Tirtha was also popular during the Ganga rule.

The tank Bindusagar measures approximately 1300 feet in length and 700 feet in width with 16 feet depth. It is fed by natural spring from the underground. The water is of dull green colour. The excess and waste water is discharged through an outlet channel. The four sides of the holy tank are covered with laterite stones forming flights of steps. On the southern side, the steps are still in a good state of preservation. But on the northern side, the stone embankment has fallen down, except about 20 ft. in the middle which forms a Ghat on that side leading from a group of small temples there to the water.

The sacred sarovar has also cultural significant which known from the observation of different festivals and occasions. All the festivals and occasions related to lord Lingaraj such as Chandan yatra, Maghasivaratri, Kartika purnima, Rukuna ratha jatra etc. have been observed at the tank. In the centre of the tank, there is an island where a white Pidha shrine is found and it is locally known as Jagati (Brahma temple). Inside the temple there are three small shrines. Among the three shrines, the biggest shrine contains a big Chandan Kunda while the other two have small Chandan Kunda. During Chandan Yatra, the idol of Lord Tribhubhaneswar or Lingaraj and his wife goddess Parvati are taken out of the temple for the ritual bath in the scented water mixed with Karpur and Chandan of the Chandan Kunda of the biggest shrine while Lord Vasudeva and Sri Kapileswara take their bath with the water of the Chandan Kunda of the two small shrines. After that, preparing food such as Laddu, Kakara has been offered to all the deities. This bath festival starts in the Odia month of Vaisakha (Akshya Trutiya) and continues for 21 days. This annual ceremony of Lord Lingaraj shows his connection with Bindusagar. Not only the Chandan Yatra but also the annual floating

festival is observed and a number of devotees are floating the boats made of paper and banana leaf. Water from the sacred tank is also used for the holy or ritual bath (Abhishek) of the deity.

The Padma Purana mentions that the person who bathes in the sacred pool of the Bindusagar and then beholds the lord of the three regions or Tribhubaneswar cleanses himself of all sins and finally retires to the region of light or jyotirloka. The Brahmanda Purana, Ekamra Purana, Kapila Samhita and Shiva Purana repeats the same praises about Bindu Sagar.

Besides these religious and cultural activities of the deity, the holy tank also plays an important role for the devotees. The earlier work Ekamra Purana describes that a pilgrim after having a dip in the Bindu Sarovar must first see Ananta Vasudeva and then goes to the temple of Lingaraj. This act gives religious merit to the devotees. They clean their feet and hands before entering into the temple as they believe that water is the symbol of purity and by cleaning or taking bath in it, they clean their bodies, soul and mind. In other words it can wash away all their bad or evil thoughts, deeds and sins. The Brahma Purana describes that he who undertakes his pilgrimage to this tirtha and performs due ceremonies should go to heaven. So all the Hindu devotees must start their journey from Bhubaneswar by taking a bath in the sacred tank Bindu Sagar that will give them salvation or moksha. It is the foremost sacred tank not only for the people of Odisha but also for the people of India. Lastly it is said that Bindu Sagar is the symbol of Utkalian Culture throughout ages.

KOTITEERTHESWAR TANK: Kotiteertheswar tank is one of the important tirtha among the Asta tirtha of Bhubaneswar. It is located behind the temple of Kotiteertheswar. It is believed that the tank is belonged to 11th century as the temple near to the tank was built by the Somavamsi rulers. In Odia pronunciation, the name 'Kotiteertheswar' refers to the repository of the water of the crores of tank.

The tank is in rectangular shape with flight of steps made of laterite blocks. The tank measures approximately 19.75 mts. in length, 9.75 mts. in breadth with 1.56 mts. in depth.[4] It is fed by a natural spring and the tank is favourable place for aquatic life like fishes and turtles. The fresh and clean water of the tank is used for ritual bathing. It is mentioned on the wall boundary of the temple that the name Kotiteertheswar deciphers that a dip in Kotiteertha tank followed by worship of the linga in the sanctum of Kotiteertheswar temple is equal to one crore pilgrimages. Local people are using the water of the temple tank for ritual bath as they have a belief that the water of the sacred Kotiteertheswar tank will wash away their accumulated sins over years. They usually take a holy dip in it and then worshipped the linga found inside the Kortiteertheswar temple.

As per the view of Sadasiva Mohapatra, one of the priests of Kotiteertheswar temple, the tank is very ancient one and the name Kotiteertheswar signifies the sacredness of the Kunda as it assembles water from crores of tirtha (Tirtha is another term used for temple tank). Local people believe that the Kotiteertheswar tank remain pure and sacred throughout the year. They observe festivals like Sivaratri, Sankrati, Karikapurnima here. To maintain the water level throughout the year, there is a pipe through which supply water enters into the tank which clearly states that the tank is not in a good condition although there is outlet channel and it is not properly cleaned. So it should be cleaned properly and also should be protected.

GANGA YAMUNA KUNDA OR TIRTHA: Another popular Ganga Yamuna tank is located in the temple precinct of Gangeswara Siva temple. According to local belief, goddess Parvati was residing in Ekamra Kshetra disguised as a cowherd when the demons Kriti and Basa confronted her. She killed them by crushing them underground. After killing Kriti and Basa, Goddess Parvati felt thirsty. In order to quench her thirst, lord Siva stuck his trident into the earth. A spring came out and to consecrate the spring, river goddesses Ganga and Yamuna were invited. To commemorate this incident, twin temples of Gangeswara and Yamuneswara were constructed during the Ganga rule. Inside the temple premises the sacred pool has been found known as Ganga Yamuna pool or tank.

The tank has embankments on all the four sides made of laterite blocks. The tank is rectangular in plan measuring 12.25 mts in length, 11.40 mts in width and 3.20 mts in depth.[5] On the northern embankment, there is a channel for outlet of the excess water of the spring that discharges into the Lingaraj west canal. On the northern canal of the tank, a wall is erected making a small tank for bathing. This is probably uses by the

women. A club house is also encroached the tank in the north western corner. Bathing ghat is also provided with steps in the southern embankment. Local peoples use the tank for bathing purposes as well as for religious activity. It is filled with clean and clear water. It is the best place for aquatic animals (fish). A large number of fishes have been found in the tank. The tank is maintained by Ganga Yamuna Sangathana.

Chandan yatra, Sitalasasthi, Makara sankrati and many other festivals are observed. Taru Badu, a local people has stated that the tank is very much pious and it is related with lord Shiva and goddess Parvati. The name Ganga and Yamuna shows it's pure and sacredness significance. He also states that people from far and near come to the tank with the belief of getting blessing after taking bath in the Ganga Yamuna tank.

RAMA TIRTHA: The Rameswar tank is another important ancient tank of Bhubaneswar which is situated behind the Rameswara temple or Mausi Maa temple. According to local legend, when lord Rama, son of Dasaratha was returning from Lanka after defeating Ravana, goddess Sita asked to worship lord Siva during passing over Ekamra Kshetra. To fulfil her wish, lord Rama built a Shivalinga. A popular is prevalent till now that one day before Ramanavami (Asokastami which falls in the month of Chaitra), the idol of lord Lingaraj (in the form of Chandrasekhara) has been taken to the Rameswara temple in a large chariot namely Rukuna Ratha and stays for four days. Then he returns on the fifth day. This is a popular festival which celebrated as Analeutta Ratha Jatra.

The Rameswar tank is one of the large size tanks in the temple city with raised embankments on all four sides. The tank measures approximately 130 meter length and 45 meter breadth with 3-6 meter depth.[6] Laterite stone stepped Ghats are found on all four sides of the sacred tank.

Asokajhara or Asokabamphi is the ancient well which situated on the northern side of the Rameswar temple. The well has approximately 4-5 meter of depth. To enter into the well, there are steps on one side while wall made of laterite stones are surround the well from other three sides.

Surya Panda, the main temple priest of the Rameswar temple has stated that there are more 500 temple tanks in Bhubaneswar and the Asokajhara is one of them. It is the sacred one which water is used for the daily rituals of the lord Rameswar. The water is used for preparing the meal (Niti Bhoga), ritual bathing and other religious activities. Another tank Rameswar tank which situated behind the temple is the creation of king for the pilgrims. The pilgrims who come to the temple will need water to cleanse them before entering into the temple. For this purpose the tank is created. As a hub centre of festivals, the Rameswar tank gathers a large number of pilgrims at its bank. The tank had a natural aquifer which was fed by the underground spring from very earlier days but now the perennial source has dried off which makes the heritage tank a poor one. Therefore the tank is not in a good condition and due to lack of proper maintenance, the quality of water is also degraded. It has now been become a poor pool with garbage. So it should be cleaned and maintained as it is one of the valuable heritage and sacred tirtha of Ekamra Kshetra.

PAPANASINI TANK: The Papanasini tank is another significant tank of temple town situated within the temple complex of Papanasini. According to local legend, sage Sajoti performed severe penance without food and water for a long time. He meditated and worshipped lord Shiva. Pleased with his devotion and after getting satisfaction with his penance, lord Shiva appeared before the sage and asked for the boon. Sajoti requested his lord to build a tank which would be filled with sacred water that will cleanse the sins of human beings. Then lord Shiva built the Papanasini tank where sage Sajoti performed penance.

The Papanasini tank is rectangular in shape measuring 45.30 meters in length, 40 meters in width and 13 meters in depth.[7] The tank is surrounded by many ancient temples and is enclosed by large dressed laterite masonry embankment. The name Papanasini literally signifies the clean of sins and from the time immemorial the water of the sacred tank has been used by the people for this purpose. Festivals like Pathamastami, Sankrati, Kartika purnima are observed at the bank of the tank. But now the tank is not in a good condition. Water of the tank is degraded due to the growth of algae, herbs, crippers etc. The Archaeological Survey of India has now restored the temple complex of Papanasini but still no progressive work has been planned for the restoration of the tank as it is one of the heritages of the temple city Bhubaneswar.

MEGHA TIRTHA: Inside the 13th century Megheswar temple premises, a popular tank is found namely Megheswar Kunda. The rectangular shaped Megheswar Kunda measure about 37.50 meters in length, 30.50 meters and 3 meters depth.[8] It is built of dressed laterite blocks. Although a natural spring has fed the holy tank throughout the year but now the water level of the tank has not remain constant due to the building of sewage. There is an outlet channel in the southern direction of the pond. Steps are provided from three sides to enter into the sacred pond.

The tank gathers devotees at its bank during the observation of festivals and cultural activities. They make offerings and prayers at the tank of the bank to get moksha or salvation. Festivals like Sravanapurnima, Kartikapurnima, Sivaratri and Sankrati are observed with a great joy. Since ancient days, the water of the tank was used for the preparation of daily food (Niti Bhoga) for the deity, ritual bath of the deity and also for the conduction of other religious activities related to the temple.

Khirod kumar Kar, one of the priests of the temple has blamed ASI for the present condition of the temple and the temple tank. He said that the roof of the Garbha griha has been damaged since many days for which water is fallen on the deity (Sivalingam) of the temple during rainy season and the sacred water of the Megha Kunda which was used for religious and domestic purposes from ancient days now is not useful for any purposes. According to him, for all these issues ASI is responsible as he along with some other priests have already made efforts to attract attention of ASI on the current problems of the heritage. Still now any developmental strategy for the protection of the heritage has not been taken by it.

BRAHMA KUNDA: Brahma Kunda is another important sacred tank of Ekamra Kshetra. It is situated to the west of the Brahmeswar temple complex. It is believed to hold waters of many rivers and used for sin cleansing baths b the devotees who come to the tank from far and near. Near to the large Brahma Kunda, there is also sacred well. The tank is built of laterite blocks and from all sides, the tank is well protected. A natural sprig has fed the tank throughout the year.

According to mythological narration, once lord Brahma asked supreme deity Shiva about his most favourite place where Brahma will worship him. Shiva answered that there is no necessity to worship him because the Trinity i.e lord Brahma, lord Shiva and lord Vishnu all are equal. He also praised Lord Brahma as the creator of the Universe. Without getting any answer from him, Brahma went to Ekamra Kshetra and meditated under the mango tree. After 16 days, lord Shiva appeared before him and said that the land shaded by the single mango tree of this Kshetra is considered as a divine abode and he is present in every part of this Kshetra. So he will satisfy wherever of this Kshetra lord Brahma will choose to worship him. Thereafter lord Brahma decided a beautiful place on the bank of river Gandhavati, 2miles away from the east of Lingaraj temple. There a temple namely Brahmeswar along with a Brahma Kunda was built which remain famous for all the time in the field of religion.[9] Mahasivaratri, Chandan yatra, Sankrati etc. festivals are observed by using the sacred water of the Tirtha. Local people believe that it is one of the purest and auspicious Kunda of Utkala desha as it contains the name of Brahma, the creator of Universe.

ALABU TIRTHA: Alabu tirtha is a sacred water body of Ekamra Kshetra and one of the eight tirthas of the place. It is well mentioned in Swarnadri Mahodaya. There is a well mentioned popular story regarding the Tirtha. In Satya Yuga, there a famous sage named Pulaha among the saptarishi was a Brahmin and had created many illustrious sons by the power of his penance. Among his sons, two famous sons were Vishnusakha and Indrasakha. Both of his sons went on pilgrimages to perform penance. Visnhusakha travelled towards south while Indrasakha towards north. Indrasakha circumnutated the whole universe and observed penance for 2000 years which pleased lord Shiva. Lord Shiva appeared before him and suggested to visit sacred land Ekamravana and perform penance to see his eternal form of Brahman. Hearing these words, Indrasakha reached at the holy land of Ekamrakanan. Taking his bath in Bindusagar, he worshipped Krutivasa and sat in austerity to see the supreme Brahman. During his long penance, his only companion was his water pot which he liked a lot. So his aim was that the pot which benefitted hi could benefit the living beings of the world. The water pot was made of Alabu (Lau/Lav/ bottle guard). Lord Shambhu appeared before him after getting satisfaction of the log years of his penance. Then Indrasakha requested to lord to transform his alms pot into a Kunda. A holy Kunda was formed which is named as Alabu tirtha. It is named after the water pot which made of Alabu. With the blessing of lord Shambhu, the Kunda will remain

always pure. Special rituals are performed here on every 8th day of the month. It is believed that if anyone chants the Aghora mantra for 500 times in everyday then he will be freed from all sins and achieves liberation.[10.] Local people worship Alabukeswar in the name of Nageswar.

CONCLUSION

The temple city has a number of sacred water tanks. Asta tirtha of Ekamra Kshetra are important among them. They hold not only immense spiritual and cultural significance but also represent the city's history, art and architecture, community spirit. Each tank has its own special feature which raises its significance in the field of religion. They show their rich cultural heritage which attracts pilgrims throughout the year. Special rituals are observed at the bank of the sacred tank on specific auspicious day. People from far and near comes to it in the belief of getting moksha or salvation, getting motherhood, curing skin diseases etc. Thus Asta Tirtha related to the emotion of people from bygone days.

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