

**How to Cite:**

Rate, R. K. (2024). Sati Stones in Podagad, Nabarangpur District of Odisha. *International Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 18(12), 2525–2537. Retrieved from <https://ijeponline.org/index.php/journal/article/view/790>

# Sati Stones in Podagad, Nabarangpur District of Odisha

**Raj Kumar Rate**

P.hd Research Scholar, Nirwan University, Jaipur, Rajasthan, India

**Abstract**--Podagad *alias* Puskari was the ancient capital Nala dynasty who ruled over the present Bastar- undivided Koraput-Kalahandi region during 3<sup>rd</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> century CE. The literary meaning Podagad is burnt fort. The explorations of G. Ram Das (1948) and Dr. C.B. Patel (1985) provide us the preliminary information and its archaeological importance. The vicinity of Podagad is full of scattered ruins, sculptural remains, giving the impression of one time busy and prosperous city life in this past. The Podagad inscription of Saknadavarman mentioned about the frequent struggle between the Nala and Vakataka for territorial dominance and the findings of Memorial stones further clarified these struggle. As we know that Memorial stones also represents the military art tradition. Sati Stones is an integral part of Memorial Stones tradition. As many as 34 memorial stones founded in Podagad region and it represents a glorious military as well as socio-cultural tradition of this region. The present paper attempts to study the nature and form of the Sati stones, sculptural art traditions and their evolution. The present paper contains both primary and the secondary sources to reveal the political and socio-religious significance of the Sati stones tradition of Podagad.

**Keywords**--Podagad, Sati stones, Memorial stones, Culture, Self-immolation, Commemorate.

**Introduction**

To commemorate the dead was an ancient tradition found in all over the world. From southern India we witnessed the earliest sculptural evidence of erection of memorial stones for dead and the Sangam literature like- *Tolkapiyyam*<sup>1</sup> and others gives us a detail information regarding the erection of memorial stones (*Menhir or Nadukals*) during megalithic culture for the person who died in cattle raids. Even the Vedic literature *Sthapatha Brahmana* also briefly mentioned about the erection of monument for the dead during Vedic age<sup>2</sup>. Around 4<sup>th</sup> century C.E.

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**Corresponding author:** Rate, R. K., Email: [rajrate84@gmail.com](mailto:rajrate84@gmail.com)

Submitted: 27 September 2024, Revised: 18 Nov 2024, Accepted: 11 Dec 2024

these megalithic cult (*Menhir*) took the shape of *Veericals*/Hero stones tradition<sup>3</sup>. From this period Hero stones were erected even for the dead soldiers and the custom of Sati stones also emerged side by side. The present paper deals with the Sati stones of Podagad of Nabarangpur district of south Odisha. The Sati stones of this region datable to 3<sup>rd</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> Century CE and most of them non-inscribed in nature and we notice simple carving on it.

### **Sati Stones Culture and its Origin:**

Memorial stones erected in the memory of a woman who invited the death by self-immolation after the death of her husband called as Sati stones<sup>4</sup>. Generally the women who committed Sati are fully shown accompanied by her husband, whose hand was raised in *Anjalimudra*. In few Sati stones only right ornamented arm of the Sati is carved in *Abhayamudra*, rising towards heaven which symbolizes blessings to all human beings. The Sati stones are classified based on, whether the woman scarified her life along with the dead body of her husband or without. They are *Sahagamana* and *Anugamana*<sup>5</sup>. Practice of Sati system was a part of Hindu religious belief. We found the first known literary evidence of Sati system from Vedic age (Rigveda and Atharvaveda).<sup>6</sup> In Mahabharata, the self-immolation of Madri after the death of Pandu, that of Vasudeva's four wives and the self-immolation of Rukmani, Satyabhama, Jambavati etc. after death of Lord Krishna highlighted the practice of Sati system in Epic periods. This episode of Mahabharata reveals that the system of Sati prevailed among the Yadava community who settled in the Western India. *Vishnusmirti* (Dharmasastra literature) of 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE clearly mentioned about the practice of Sati<sup>7</sup>. The first sculptural and epigraphical evidence of Sati was found from the Eran memorial pillar inscription of 510 CE and this Sati pillar was erected for the memory of Goparaja (feudatory chief of Gupta king Bhanugupta) whose wife performed Sati on his death<sup>8</sup>. The memorial inscription of Sangsi, Kolhapur district of Maharashtra also regarded as the earliest evidence of Sati system<sup>9</sup>.

### **Study area:**

Podagad or *Burnt Fort* lies at 19° 34' 38.3"N and 82° 08'34.9"E in the Umarkote Tehsil of Nabarangpur district, Odisha. The site is hardly six - km distance from Taragaon, the origin of the Tel River, celebrated in classical literatures as '*Telavaha*'<sup>10</sup>. Podagad alias *Puskari* is identified as the ancient capital of the Nala dynasty during 3<sup>rd</sup>- 6<sup>th</sup> century CE. Archaeology of Podagad seems to corroborate this identification. The urban settlement at Podagad is observed in a picturesque landscape, full of hills and valley, pierced by hilly streams *Singasari* and *Nangi*. It is a part of the revenue village Bhandariguda. The Fort locates on a granite hill peak, measuring 3043feet in height from the Sea level<sup>11</sup>. Whereas, the settlement of people was positioned on the plain beginning from the piedmont zone of the hill that houses the citadel and expanses towards all directions. The site exhibits a different profile of ancient urban contour<sup>12</sup>. From the epigraphical evidences like-Podagad stone inscription of Skandavarman, Rajim stone inscription of Vilasatunga, we get an insight into the political, socio-cultural and religious condition of Podagad<sup>13</sup>. The findings of Memorial stones also furnished us a great military tradition of this region.

As many as 32 Memorial stones located at Podagad. Out of these 32 Memorial stones, 24 were Sati stones and all are non-inscribed in nature. Most of them preserved in Podagad museum, which is a great initiative taken by the Bhandariguda Panchayat to save these cultural heritage.

### **Sati Stones of Podagad:**

The Sati stones of Podagad can be divided into three basic groups. The first group (A) lies in the Podagad museum, here generally the Sati memorial stones were kept in a disorganized manner with little maintenance. The Second group (B) lies outside the Shiv temple nearby the museum.

And The Third group (C) lies under the foot hill of Podagad hill.

### **Group A: Podagad Museum (Bhandariguda):**

In the Podagad museum premises we found 25 Memorial stones (23 Sati stones and 2 Hero stones). Most of these sculptures collected from the nearby Shiv temple and also from the foot hill of Podagad fort.

### **Iconography:**

Generally the Sati stones are either cylindrical, square or rectangular upright standing stone slab. The majority of them installed near a temple probably a Shiv temple adjacent to a pond. Many differences have been noticed in the iconographic details in Memorial stones of Podagad region as discussed below. The Sati stones of Podagad museum may be grouped into three categories. The dimensions mostly range from 3ft to 5ft and smaller version measures between 2 feet to half feet.

In the first category of Sati stones (Fig.1, 2) we noticed unique Sati stones having a rare features found in the Sati iconography of Odisha, probably an imitation of *Umamahesvara* image.

In these sculptures a male and a female sitting in *Lalitaasana*<sup>14</sup> is carved similar to the *Umamahesvara* image. The hand of the male figure is depicted in *Anjalimudra*. The female figures raised their one hand in *Abhayamudra* and rest the other hand on the shoulder of the male figure. Even she placed her right thigh on the lap of the male figure. Symbol of sun, crescent moon, shiva linga and female palm with bangles is also erected. Podagad is the only site in Odisha till date, where we found such Sati stones in *Lalitaasan* posture. Even also in Badedongar<sup>15</sup> of Bastar region in Chattisgarh we find this type of Sati stones and as we discussed earlier Bastar region was part Nala dynasty. In India, Podagad (Odisha), Bastar (Chattisgarh), and some parts of Madhya Pradesh are probably the primary centers of the *Lalitasana* position depiction of Sati stones<sup>16</sup>.

**Figure 1:** We found the carving of two female palms with bangles on the top portion, symbol of sun is there on the left hand side of the palms. Below there is image of a front faced king with hands in *Anjalimudra*, along with his two queens in sitting on either side. Here we noticed a unique thing that both the queens rest their thigh on the lap of the king and raised their hands in *Abhayamudra*. Generally this type of iconographical feature we noticed in *Umamahesvara* sculpture, where goddess Parvati, rest her thigh on the leg of Shiva, which is

called *Lalitasana*. The height of this sculpture is 3ft and width is 1.4ft. This sati stone is the only sculpture of Podagad which point out the interesting point of polygamy as two wives are represented with raised hands indicating that both of them performed Sati<sup>17</sup>.

**Figure 2:** A rare votive temple style Sati stone is also placed in the museum. The female palm with bangles is carved on the right hand side corner of the upper portion, symbol of Sun and crescent moon is erected on the left hand side of the palm. On the lower portion we noticed royal couple seated in a pose similar to that of *Umamahesvara*. The female figure, raise her left hand in *Abhayamudra* and rest her right hand on the shoulder of the male figure. Even she placed her right leg on her husband thigh.



Fig. 1 & 2: Sati Stones (in imitation of Umamahesvara)

In the second category of Sati stones (fig.3, 4, 5) the iconographic features are similar to Sati stones generally found in pan-Indian tradition and also non-inscribed in nature without any panels. Here we saw the symbol sun, crescent moon and female palm with bangles in *Abhayamudra* is carved on the upper portion. In the middle portion we saw the depiction of male and female figures in sitting profile worshipping a Shiva linga and their hands always in *Anjalimudra*.

This type of Sati sculpture is locally called as *Dhangra-Dhangri Patthar* (MaleFemale stone).

**Figure 3:** Here we find the image of a bearded king worshipping a Shivalinga along with his queen. The symbol of Sun, crescent moon and a female palm with bangles is carved on the upper portion.

**Figure 4:** Probably the largest memorial stone preserved inside the Podagad museum. The lower part is already broken still its height is 3.9ft and width is 1.2ft. The middle portion of the slab contains the carving of a female in *Anjalimudra* worshipping the symbol of a sun, which is a rare iconography in Sati sculpture. On the top portion the carving of an upright female palm with bangles in *Abhayamudra* is there. This one also a rare iconography so far as Odishan Sati sculpture is concerned. Because generally we noticed the upright female palm but here saw the carving a female palm from its elbow and this type of iconography we noticed in North and South Indian Sati sculpture<sup>18</sup>.

**Figure 5:** The upper portion of the slab is semi-circular in shape. The lower portion contains the carving of two human figures worshipping a Shivalinga within a semi-circular profile. On the upper part the symbol of Sun and Moon is carved on both side of a Female palm, which is in *Abhayamudra*.



Fig. 3, 4, 5: Sati stones inside the Podagad Museum

Even the simplest version of Sati stones (Fig.6) also found in Podagad. In these sculptures we noticed the simple carvings of an upright female palm with bangles,

symbol of sun and crescent moon, locally called as *Hatho-Pokhono*<sup>19</sup>. Here one could easily observe the lack of sculptural work visible on the stone slab.

**Figure 6:** This Sati stone is collected from the Shiv temple of Bhandariguda, it is in conical shape, on the right hand corner of the top portion symbol of female palm with bangles is carved. Symbol of Sun is carved on the left hand side of the palm and above the Sun we saw the symbol of crescent Moon. The middle portion had an engraving of a circular hole on it. Its height is approximately 4.6 foot and width is 1.3 foot.

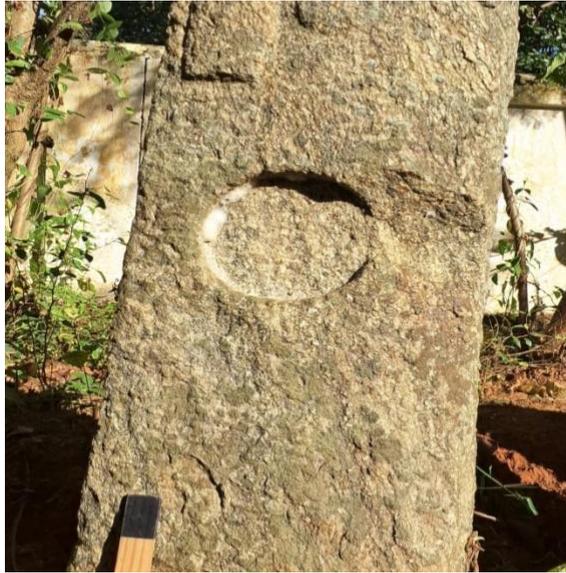


Fig.6: Sati stones outside the Podagad Museum

In the third category we noticed two hero stones (Fig. 7, 8). The iconography of figure no. 7 is found in the all the Hero stones of Odisha. In *Dvibhanga* (hipshot) position, the hero figure is portrayed in fighting posture, with a lower garment knotted around his waist and a portion of it falling between his two thighs. The hero figure holding a dagger in his raised right hand and an unknown object in his left hand. The sculpture is also embellished with a distinctive headdress or *Mukuta*. The symbol of sun and moon is missing on the upper part. It measures 1.7 foot in height and 1 foot in width. The second hero stone (fig. 8) is a horse rider hero stone, measuring 2.4 foot in height and 1 foot in width. In this sculpture we noticed the depiction of a hero riding a horse with raised hand holding a sword. Some portion of the upper part is broken.



Fig. 7 & 8 Hero Stones of Podagad Museum

**Group B: Memorial Stones near the Bhandariguda Shiv Temple:**

In the Shiv temple premises of Bhandariguda village more than 10 Sati stones are found. Behind the temple there is an open field, where all the Sati stones were installed, most of them carried away to the Podagad museum. According to myth, these Sati stones are raised for the eight Nala princesses, who performed Sati by self-immolation for their fallen heroes<sup>20</sup>. At present two sati pillars are lying near the Shiv temple and the other Sati stone (Fig.9) is installed just near to the above pillars. The top portion is in conical shape. Here we saw the depiction of two female palms with bangles. The symbol of Sun is carved on the right side of the palms and crescent moon is on the left hand side. On the middle portion we noticed the erection of a king and his two queens worshipping a Shivalinga. The lower portion is unadorned and devoid of carvings.



Fig. 9: Sati Stone near Bhandariguda Shiv Temple

### **Group C: Memorial Stones under the foot hill of Podagad Hill:**

Under the foot hill of Podagad hill seven Memorial stones along with a Ganesh sculptures is installed in a *Mandapa* under the Mango tree. In front of the *Mandapa* two wooden memorial posts are there, which is worshipped by the local tribal people as *Bhima Khamba*<sup>21</sup>.

A Hero cum Sati stone<sup>22</sup> (Fig.10) is installed in the *Mandapa*. In this sculpture we noticed that the Hero is in fighting position, holds a sword in his raised right hand, a dagger in his left hand and carry a shield on his back. The female figure is also beautifully carved, we clearly saw the *Mukuta* on his head, ear rings, bangles etc. and even we noticed that in her left hand she hold an object, may be fruit. Generally in south Indian Sati stone iconography we observed that the female figure holds a lemon in between the thumb and forefinger<sup>23</sup>. This tradition is a symbolic expression of offering themselves to their husband.

The most unique Sati stone (Fig.11) of Podagad is also found in this place. Its height is about 9 inch and width is 7/8 inch. On the right hand side of the upper part we saw the carving of Sun, crescent Moon on the left side and in the center Shivalinga is carved. On the lower portion we noticed royal couple seated in a pose similar to that of *Umamahesvara*. The female figure raised her left hand in *Abhayamudra* and rested her right hand on the shoulder of the male figure. Even she placed her right thigh on the lap of male figure. The hand of the male figure is in *Anjalimudra*. Both the figure crowned by *Jatabhara*.



Fig. 10 & 11 Sati cum Hero Stones under the foot hill of Podagad Hill

### Observations and Conclusions:

The Sati system was a social tradition emerged from Vedic period and continued till medieval period. In our Hindu culture women is always display as symbol of purity and honour. And the life of women is evolved around her husband, women worshiped their husband as God and they could not thing about their life after the death of their male counter-part. The relationship between a man and woman is just like soul and body. And it is an eternal relationship that continued after death. The devotion towards their husband signifies through this Sati stone sculpture. The basic element in all Indian iconography of Sati Stone is upright open right arm showing bangles intact. The bangles symbolizes the married status<sup>24</sup> and the ritual movement when a wife breaks her bangles signals her entry in to widowhood that these bangles remain on the wrist bear witness to the continuation of her wifely status demonstrating denial that she has been detached from her husband. The raised arm of the Sati facing forward in *Abhayamudra*<sup>25</sup> and with the bangles adoring the wrist is the essential features in all Sati stones which symbolizes blessings to all human beings and also represents protection, fearlessness, benevolence and peace. Other elements are generally present on Sati stone are the symbol of Sun and Moon, signifies that as long as the sun and moon is exist the name and fame of the Sati is exist<sup>26</sup>. It also indicates the immortal feature of this tradition. The carving of a male figure along with two female figures worshiping the Sivalinga in sitting profile with their hands in *Anjalimudra* is another important feature of Sati stones. The *Anjalimudra*<sup>27</sup> symbolizes the devotion, respect and obeisance of the women towards their

husband and also towards the worshipping deity and also towards the Sati tradition. Worshipping Shivlinga and its installation near the Shiv temple became one of the socio-cultural indicators of the growth of Saivism in this region. Even it also represents the religious connection of Sati system with goddess Sati<sup>28</sup>, the first wife of lord Shiva, who sacrificed herself in the honour of her husband. In Podagad (Fig.1, 2, 9) we noticed that the women figures raised their left hand in *Abhayamudra*, whereas the usual iconographical feature represented on Sati stone generally all over India, the woman raised their right hand towards heaven. It is noteworthy that the aforementioned Sati stones are portrayed in the *Lalitasana* pose, which is also generally found in the *Umamaheswara* iconography, and this iconographical representation of Podagad Sati stones is another strong piece of evidence for the spread of Saivism in this region. The discovery of *Umamaheswara* imitation Sati stones in the nearby Bastar region reveals the possibility of cultural connection between the two regions and suggests that a common iconographical tradition prevailed in both of these places' Sati traditions. In the Sati stones of Podagad, one can easily notice the splendidly carved slender bodies, enchanting faces, and lovely knotted hairdos. Even the bodies of the female figures have been elegantly proportioned with grace and attractive feminine devotion and exquisiteness. All these sculptures constitute an interesting category of regional forms of Sati stone tradition. They are generally simple and prominently to locate within the topography and their iconographical features are easily identifiable. These stones exhibit the simplification of the much grandeur iconographical tradition. The present paper is a preliminary study on the Sati stones culture of Podagad and its try to reveal the historicity of this tradition along with its regional, political, socio-religious and cultural connection.

### **Acknowledgement**

I am extremely thankful to Dr. Baba Mishra, Dr. Ranvir Singh and Mr. Ujjwal Kumar Mohanandia, for their prompt guidance regarding the fieldwork. I also like to express my heartfelt gratitude to Mr. Sasanka Sekhar Panda and Mr. Kornel Das.

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