CULTURE OF ODISHA

Architecture of Parsurameswara Temple

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The **Parasurameswara** temple of **Bhubaneswar** is one of the oldest and most important temples of Odisha. Built in the **7th century CE**, it is the best-preserved temple of the early (formative) phase of the **Kalinga** style of temple architecture. Small in size but rich in sculpture, it shows us how the Odishan temple looked at the very beginning of its long journey, which ended six centuries later at Konark. For students of art history, it is a key monument: many features that later became standard in Odishan temples — the jagamohana, the division of the walls into pagas, the arrangement of side deities — appear here for the first time or in an early form.

The temple is dedicated to **Shiva**. Its name means “the Lord (Ishwara) of **Parashurama**“, and local tradition says that the sage Parashurama worshipped Shiva at this spot. It stands in the old temple area of Bhubaneswar, close to the **Mukteswara** and **Siddheswara** temples, and faces **west**.

*Note: the earlier version spelled the name as “Parsuramesvara” and “Parsurameswar”, and the city as “Bubaneswar”. The doc now uses **Parasurameswara** and **Bhubaneswar** throughout. The two photographs in the earlier version (credited to Balaji and Bernard Gagnon) are not reproduced in this text version.*

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Key Points at a Glance

Topic	Key facts
Location	Old Town, Bhubaneswar, near the Mukteswara temple
Date	about **650 CE** (7th century)
Period / dynasty	**Sailodbhava** period
Deity	**Shiva** (linga)
Facing	West
Style	Early **Kalinga** style; **rekha deula** with a rectangular **jagamohana**
Plan of the deula	**Triratha** on the bada, with **pancharatha** features in the gandi
Height of the deula	about **40 ft 3 in (12.3 m)**
Special importance	Earliest surviving temple in Bhubaneswar with a **jagamohana**; earliest **Saptamatrika** panel in Bhubaneswar; fine **six-armed Mahishamardini**
Protected by	Archaeological Survey of India (monument of national importance)

Date and Historical Background

The Parasurameswara temple dates to the **7th century CE**, usually placed around **650 CE**. At that time the coastal part of Odisha was ruled by the **Sailodbhava** dynasty, whose kings were followers of Shiva. The temple belongs to the same early group as the **Lakshmaneswara, Bharateswara and Satrughneswara** temples (late 6th–early 7th century), but it is much better preserved and more developed.

The sculpture of the temple shows the influence of the **Pashupata** sect of Shaivism: images of **Lakulisa**, the founder of the sect, are carved on the temple. This suggests that Pashupata ascetics were active in Bhubaneswar at this time and played a part in building

and maintaining the early temples.

> *Read more: History of the Evolution of Temple Architecture in Odisha*

The Deula (Sanctum and Tower)

Although the plan of the deula is **triratha** (three projections on each side), the **gandi** (tower) shows features of the **pancharatha** style. The **pagas** (vertical projections, sometimes called pilasters), which became a distinctive feature of Odishan temple architecture, were not yet fully developed in this temple. Each of the three pagas on a side carries **niches**. The central paga (the **raha**) has the most important niche, while the two side pagas have an equal number. Altogether the temple has **eleven niches**.

Instead of an **ayudha** (the emblem or weapon of the deity, such as a trident) at the very top, the **mastaka** (crown) of the tower carries an **amalaka**, a **kalasa** (pot) and a **linga**. This is an unusual feature of the Parasurameswara temple.

How the deula is built

Odishan temples are made up of two main parts: the sanctum, called the **vimana** or **deula**, and a hall in front of it, called the **jagamohana**, from which devotees view the deity (the hall of worshippers). The **Parasurameswara** is the earliest surviving temple in Bhubaneswar to have this addition. The very early temples of Bhubaneswar, such as the **Lakshmaneswara** group, had no jagamohana, while later temples added two more structures: the **natamandira** (dance or festival hall) and the **bhogamandapa** (hall of offerings).

The plan of the vimana is **square**, and its walls are divided into vertical sections called **rathas** or **pagas**. The vimana is crowned by a **curvilinear tower**, called the **gandi**, which rises with a gentle curve. Above it, the **amalaka**, a large stone disc with ribbed edges, is placed on the **beki** (neck) at the top of the gandi.

*Note: the earlier version said the tower is “called bada” and resembles “a pyramid made of horizontal planes”, and that the amalaka is placed “over the temple’s bada”. In Odishan terms the **bada** is the wall; the curved tower is the **gandi**; and a pyramid of horizontal tiers describes a **pidha** roof, not a rekha tower. The amalaka sits at the top of the gandi.*

The main dimensions of the sanctum are:

Measurement	Feet	Metres
Inside	9.88 × 9.75 ft	3.0 × 3.0 m
Outside	19.75 × 21 ft	6.0 × 6.4 m
Height	40.25 ft	12.3 m

The **bada** of the vimana begins directly from the **talapattana** (the pavement or ground course). Its base mouldings (**pabhaga**) have only **three** elements rather than the five found in later temples, and the bada encloses a **rectangular** (parallelepiped) sanctum rather than a cubic one. The vimana is **triratha**, with a faint resemblance to a **pancharatha**, as shown by the projecting niches on either side of the central projection.

Note: the earlier version gave the measurements without the multiplication signs (for example “9.88 9.75 ft”); they now read 9.88 × 9.75 ft, and so on.

The Jagamohana (Mukhasala)

The **jagamohana**, also called the **mukhasala**, first appears in the **Parasurameswara** temple among the surviving temples of Bhubaneswar. It is **rectangular** in shape and has a **clerestory** (a raised band of openings for light and air) between the two tiers of its sloping terraced roof. The roof is supported by **two rows of three pillars** each, as well as by the two side walls. The addition of this porch-hall to the main shrine marks the **second stage** in the evolution of Odishan temple architecture.

The Parasurameswara temple shows some other peculiar features too. The mukhasala has **two doors** and **four irregularly placed windows**. One door is on the **south** side, while the other is in the **western** wall, directly opposite the sanctum (the temple faces west). The windows on the north and south help ventilation. The windows on either side of the west door contain figures of **musicians and dancers**.

The main dimensions of the jagamohana are:

Measurement	Feet	Metres
Inside	24.94 × 18.33 ft	7.6 × 5.6 m
Outside	29.33 × 28.58 ft	8.9 × 8.7 m

The windows are of the **pata jali** type: latticed windows with square or rectangular openings. There are also trellised windows decorated with stone slabs carved with dancers and musicians. The interior is lit only by the doors and the latticed windows.

The joint between the vimana and the jagamohana is not perfectly built, which has led some scholars to suggest that the hall was **added later**. Others explain the rough joint by the **building technique** of the time. The temple was built by raising finished sections and burying them in sloping layers of earth, up which the heavy stones were dragged to the next level; joining two separately built structures in this way was difficult.

*Note: the earlier version wrote “Muklasala”, “terrace roof tyres” and “architechiral”; these are corrected to **mukhasala**, roof **tiers** and **architectural**. It also said the jagamohana was “long” when giving both length and breadth; the figures are now given as size (length × breadth).*

Sculpture

The walls of the porch and the shrine are carved with many kinds of sculpture. The decorative motifs include **scrolling creepers**, human and animal figures, and scenes from **mythology**. Although some of the carving is rough and simple, it has great **vitality and**

naturalness. These sculptures combine simplicity with elegance, and they hold a special place in the history of Odishan art.

*Note: the earlier version said the carvings are “crude and coarse” and yet “unmatched” in the history of Odishan temple architecture. The text now says more carefully that they are simple but full of life and hold a special place in Odishan art; later temples such as the Mukteswara and Rajarani show far more refined carving. “Scros creepers” has been corrected to **scrolling creepers**.*

The Mahishamardini Durga

The temple contains one of the earliest images in Odisha of a **six-armed Mahishamardini** (Durga killing the buffalo demon). She wears a headdress, **karna kundalas** (ear ornaments), a **mala** (garland) and **kankanas** (bracelets). Durga holds a **sword** in her upper left hand and presses the face of the buffalo demon with her upper right hand. With her middle left hand she pierces the demon’s neck with a **trishula** (trident), while her lower left hand holds a pointed weapon. Her middle right hand holds a **khetaka** (shield), and her lower right hand holds a **bow**. A similar image of Durga is found in the **Vaital** temple, a well-known **Shakta** centre.

*Note: the earlier version translated **kankana** as “anklet”; it means a **bracelet** (an anklet is a nupura). It also described the image as “the earliest depiction” of a six-armed Mahishamardini; since the dating of early images is uncertain, “one of the earliest in Odisha” is safer.*

Shaiva and Shakta Images

Though the temple is a **Shaiva** shrine, its walls carry images of many **Shakta** deities as **parsvadevatas** (side deities). The temple is the first in Bhubaneswar to show the **Saptamatrikas**, a group of **seven** mother goddesses. They are placed between images of **Virabhadra** and **Ganesha**. Except for Ganesha, all the figures are shown with their **vahanas** (vehicles).

The walls also show an **eight-armed dancing Ardhanarishvara** (Shiva and Parvati in one body), an image of **Shiva and Parvati**, and the river goddesses **Ganga and Yamuna** at the doorway. In the rectangular niches around the base of the porch are images of **Vishnu**, **Indra**, **Surya** and **Yama**. On the southern wall is a figure of **Kartikeya** riding his **peacock**. Other notable carvings show **Shiva subduing Ravana**, the demon-king, who is trying to uproot Mount **Kailasa**, Shiva's abode. Shiva also appears as **Nataraja** in different **tandava** (dance) poses, and **Lakulisa** with his disciples appears on the temple.

As in other Odishan temples, the **interior** is plain. Other carvings show designs of fruits, flowers, birds and animals. The Parasurameswara shares a **floral motif trailing from the tail of a bird** with the **Vaital Deula**, and a **vase-and-flower motif** with the **Mukteswara** temple.

*Note: the earlier version described the Saptamatrikas as "a sextet of seven goddesses"; a sextet means six, so this is corrected to a group of **seven**. It also wrote that "the ones in Vaital Deula share a floral motif" and "the ones in Mukteshvara Temple share a vase and flower motif"; the sentence has been rewritten to make clear that the Parasurameswara shares one motif with each temple.*

Other Figures and Scenes

On the pilasters of the jagamohana and on the faces of the vimana are **grotesque figures** of **vetalas** (ghosts or goblins). **Nagas** (snake-men) and their female counterparts, the **naginis**, and other female figures are shown in many graceful but modest poses. Several scenes on the vimana show **processions**. Another notable scene on the vimana is the **hunting scene** above the central niche on the south side, in which stags flee from a hunter. On the outer frame of the jagamohana's latticed window are delightful scenes of **monkeys** at play in all kinds of mischief.

*Note: the earlier version said numerous scenes on the vimana are devoted to "pilgrimage"; the scenes are usually described as **processions**. It also wrote "jaganamohana"; this is corrected to **jagamohana**.*

Significance of the Parasurameswara Temple

The Parasurameswara temple is important for several reasons:

- **Best-preserved early temple.** It is the most complete surviving example of the formative phase of the Kalinga style, and so the starting point for any study of Odishan temple architecture.
- **Earliest jagamohana in Bhubaneswar.** It is the earliest surviving temple in Bhubaneswar with a hall in front of the shrine, which later grew into the pyramidal **pidha** jagamohana.
- **Early experiments in the plan.** The triratha bada with pancharatha features in the gandi shows the builders moving towards the pancharatha plan that became standard later.
- **Rich iconography.** Its Saptamatrikas, Mahishamardini, Ardhanarishvara, Lakulisa and Ravananugraha panels are among the earliest of their kind in Odisha and show the growth of Shaiva and Shakta worship.
- **Link with later temples.** Motifs such as the bird-tail floral design and the vase-and-flower design connect it with the **Vaital** and **Mukteswara** temples, showing the continuity of the tradition.

Parasurameswara Compared with Later Temples

Feature	Parasurameswara (c. 650)	Mukteswara (c. 950–975)	Lingaraja (11th c.)
Plan of bada	Triratha (pancharatha features in gandi)	Pancharatha	Pancharatha
Bada	Three parts (trianga)	Five parts (panchanga)	Five parts (panchanga)
Base mouldings	Three	Five	Five

Jagamohana	Rectangular, sloping two-tier roof with clerestory	Pidha (pyramidal), two tiers	Pidha, fully developed
Pillars in hall	Yes (two rows of three)	No	No
Other halls	None	None (separate torana)	Natamandira and bhogamandapa (added later)
Height of deula	about 12.3 m	about 10.5 m	about 55 m

Timeline

Period / year	Event
late 6th–early 7th c.	Lakshmaneswara, Bharateswara and Satrughneswara temples built at Bhubaneswar
c. 650	**Parasurameswara** temple built, in the Sailodbhava period
8th c.	Vaital Deula and Sisireswara temple
c. 950–975	Mukteswara temple, close to the Parasurameswara
19th–20th c.	Temple studied by British and Indian scholars (R. L. Mitra, M. M. Ganguly, R. D. Banerji)
20th c. onward	Protected and conserved by the Archaeological Survey of India

Evidence: How Do We Know?

Source	What it tells us
The temple itself	Plan, measurements, building technique and sculpture
Comparison with other temples	Its place in the sequence of Odishan temples, and so its date
Style of script and sculpture	Dating to the 7th century

Silpa texts (*Silpa Prakasa*, *Bhuvana Pradipa*)	Names of parts and types of temple
Studies of scholars (Panigrahi, Dehejia, Donaldson)	Detailed descriptions and interpretation

Points of Debate

Question	Main views
Exact date	about 650 CE (most scholars) / slightly earlier, close to the Lakshmaneswara group / slightly later, early 8th century
Was the jagamohana added later?	Yes, because of the poor joint with the vimana / No, the rough joint is due to the building technique
Who built it?	Sailodbhava rulers or officials / Pashupata ascetics with local patronage
Earliest Saptamatrika panel?	Earliest in Bhubaneswar / similar panels at other early sites in Odisha

Recent Developments

- The temple is a **protected monument** of the **Archaeological Survey of India** and is part of the old temple area of Bhubaneswar, which has been developed under the **Ekamra Kshetra** heritage project of the Government of Odisha.
- The nearby **Mukteswara** temple hosts the annual **Mukteswar Dance Festival** of Odissi, which brings many visitors to this group of temples, including the Parasurameswara.
- Bhubaneswar’s group of early temples, including the Parasurameswara, has been proposed for recognition as part of a wider **World Heritage** nomination for the city’s temples.

> *Read more: Bhubaneswar, the Temple City*

Conclusion

The Parasurameswara temple, built around 650 CE, is a small building of very great importance. In its triratha deula with pancharatha features in the tower, its rectangular pillared jagamohana with a clerestory roof, and its lively sculpture of Shaiva and Shakta deities, we can see the Kalinga style of temple architecture in its youth. Many ideas that were tried here — the hall in front of the shrine, the division of the walls into pagas, the placing of parsvadevatas in niches — were developed and perfected in later temples such as the Mukteswara, the Lingaraja and the Sun Temple at Konark. For this reason, the Parasurameswara remains the natural starting point for anyone who wants to understand the history of temple architecture in Odisha.

Quick Revision for OPSC and University Exams

- **Location:** Bhubaneswar, near the Mukteswara temple; faces **west**.
- **Date:** about **650 CE** (7th century), **Sailodbhava** period.
- **Deity:** Shiva; named after **Parashurama**.
- **Plan: triratha** bada with **pancharatha** features in the gandi; **trianga** bada; **three** base mouldings.
- **Mastaka:** amalaka, kalasa and **linga** instead of an ayudha.
- **Height:** about **12.3 m (40 ft 3 in)**.
- **Jagamohana:** earliest surviving in Bhubaneswar; rectangular; two-tier sloping roof with **clerestory**; **two rows of three pillars**; two doors; **pata jali** windows.
- **Sculpture:** six-armed **Mahishamardini**; earliest **Saptamatrika** panel in Bhubaneswar (between Virabhadra and Ganesha); eight-armed dancing **Ardhanarishvara**; **Ravananugraha**; **Nataraja**; **Lakulisa**; hunting scene; monkeys.
- **Shared motifs:** bird-tail floral design with **Vaital**; vase-and-flower with **Mukteswara**.

Practice Questions

Short answer (about 50–75 words)

1. Why is the Parasurameswara temple important in the history of Odishan temple architecture?
2. Describe the jagamohana of the Parasurameswara temple.
3. Write a note on the Mahishamardini image of the Parasurameswara temple.
4. What are the Saptamatrikas? Where are they shown in the Parasurameswara temple?
5. What unusual feature is found in the mastaka of the Parasurameswara temple?

Long answer (about 250–400 words)

1. Describe the architecture of the Parasurameswara temple at Bhubaneswar.
2. Discuss the sculptural art of the Parasurameswara temple.
3. “The Parasurameswara temple represents the formative phase of the Kalinga style.” Explain.
4. Compare the Parasurameswara temple with the Mukteswara temple.

Multiple choice questions

1. The Parasurameswara temple was built in about: (a) 450 CE (b) **650 CE** (c) 950 CE (d) 1150 CE
2. The plan of the bada of the Parasurameswara deula is: (a) **Triratha** (b) Pancharatha (c) Saptaratha (d) Navaratha
3. The roof of its jagamohana is: (a) Pyramidal pidha (b) Barrel-vaulted (c) **Two-tier sloping roof with a clerestory** (d) Flat
4. The Saptamatrikas in the temple are placed between: (a) Vishnu and Surya (b) **Virabhadra and Ganesha** (c) Ganga and Yamuna (d) Indra and Yama

5. The Mahishamardini of the Parasurameswara has: (a) four arms (b) **six arms** (c) eight arms (d) ten arms
6. The temple was built during the rule of the: (a) Somavamsis (b) Gangas (c) **Sailodbhavas** (d) Bhaumakaras

Frequently Asked Questions

Is the Parasurameswara the oldest temple in Bhubaneswar? Not quite. The Lakshmaneswara, Bharateswara and Satrughneswara temples are slightly older, but they are in ruins. The Parasurameswara is the oldest **well-preserved** temple of the city.

Is worship still performed in the temple? Yes, the temple houses a Shiva linga, and worship continues, although the temple is also a protected monument.

Why is the inside of the temple plain? In Odishan temples, decoration is concentrated on the outer walls. The inside of the sanctum is kept plain and dark, so that the attention of the worshipper is fixed on the deity.

How was such a heavy temple built without modern machines? The builders used earthen ramps: as each course of stone was laid, earth was heaped up in sloping layers, and the next stones were dragged up to the required height.

Further Reading on This Site

- History of the Evolution of Temple Architecture in Odisha
- Origin and Development of the Cult of Jagannath
- Panchatirtha of Puri
- Daily Rituals of Lord Jagannatha
- Impact of the Jagannath Cult on Odishan Society

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