

## MEDIEVAL ODISHA

# The Suryavamsi Gajapatis

By **Brajabandhu Mahanta** • August 25, 2022 • Updated June 6, 2024 • 17 min read



The Ganga dynasty was succeeded by another glorious dynasty known as the Suryavamsi Gajapatis. Political anarchy reigned in Odisha from the middle of the fourteenth century A.D. due to the later Gangas' weakness and ineffectiveness was brought to an end by the emergence of a powerful military leader named Kapilendradeva, who overthrew the Gangas and established the Suryavamsi dynasty (solar dynasty). The rulers of this dynasty claimed descent from the mythical solar dynasty to which Lord Ramachandra belonged for personal glorification. Due to the fact that they possessed a sizable elephantry in their army, they were popularly referred to as Gajapatis, or lords of the elephants.

The Suryavamsi rulers traced their ancestry all the way back to the Sun God. The title 'Gajapati' or 'Lord of elephants' was invariably bestowed upon the dynasty's rulers. Previously, some Eastern Ganga rulers bore the title 'Gajapati,' but they were not well-known as Gajapati rulers. Perhaps the rulers of this dynasty owed a great deal of their royalty to their possession of a large number of elephants. Odisha reached its zenith of glory during the 15th and 16th centuries under the Suryavamsi kings. Not only were the Suryavamsi Gajapati kings noted for their aggressive imperialism, but also for their century-long rule and the renaissance of Odia literature.

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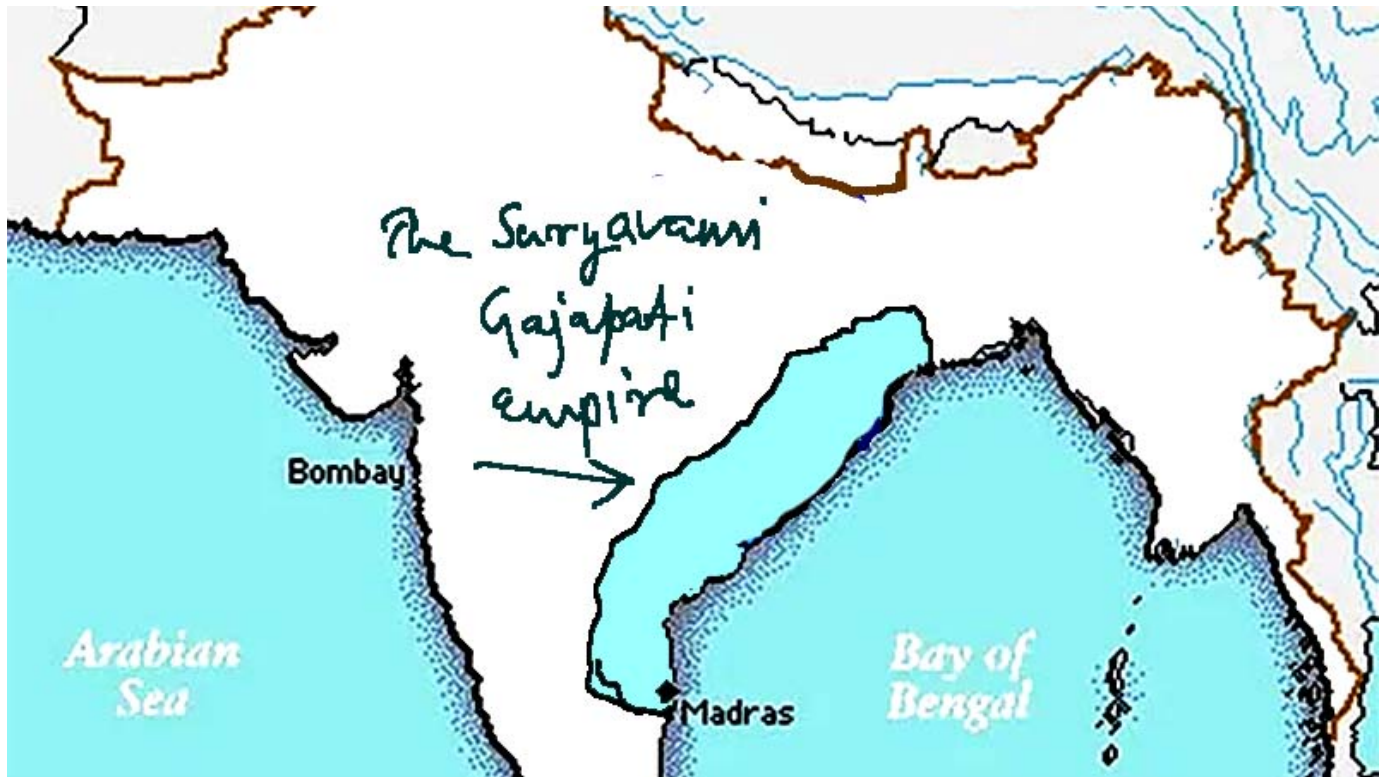
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## Sources

The history of Odisha's Suryavamsi Gajapatis is based on a variety of available sources. The sources are classified into two categories: literary sources and inscriptions.

Sanskrit literary works such as the Parasurama Vijaya, Abhinava Venisamharam, Sarasvati vilasam, Jagannatha vallabha, and Prabodha Chandrodaya are all examples of literary sources. The Madala Panji, Sarala Mahabharata, Chaitanya Bhagavata, and Jagannatha Cheritemrite are all Odia works. Bengali literary works such as the Chaitanya Charitamrita and Chaitanya Mangala are examples of this. Telugu works such as Manucharitam and

Krishnarasa Vijayamu, as well as Persian works such as the Tarikh-i-Ferishta, Tabaqat-i-Akbari, Akbarnamah, and Burhan-i-Ma'asir, constitute the Suryavamsi Gajapatis' literary sources.



Similarly, inscriptions such as the Velagalani copper plate inscription, the Lingaraj temple inscription, the Puri Jagannath temple inscription, inscriptions discovered in Simhachalam, Sri Sailam, and Srikurmam, as well as the Velicherla copper plates and the Kondavidu inscription, among others, serve as inscriptional sources for the Suryavamsi rule in Odisha.

## Kapilendradeva (1435-1467 CE)

*Kapilendradeva (1435-1467 CE)*

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Kapilendra Deva was the founder of the Suryavamsa Gajapati Empire that ruled parts of eastern and southern India, including present-day Odisha as the center of his empire. He had staged a military coup against the preceding and the last Eastern Ganga dynasty ruler Bhanu Deva IV and overtook the throne as the king was weak and had lost territories to the south. His name is also written as Kapilendra Routray or Sri Sri Kapilendra Deva. In claiming descent from the Surya Vamsha (Sun dynasty) of the Mahabharata, he also took the title shri shri ...(108 times) Gajapati Gaudeshwara NabaKoti Karnata Kalabargeswara. This title literally meant the lord of Bengal (Gauda), of Karnataka region or Vijayanagara, the lord of Gulbarga and of nine crore subjects.

## Purusottamadeva (1467 - 1497 CE)

*Purusottamadeva (1467 - 1497 CE)*

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Vira Pratapa Purushottama Deva was the second Gajapati emperor of Odisha who ruled from 1467 to 1497 C.E. He was the second ruler from the Suryavamsa Gajapati Empire. His father Gajapati Kapilendra Deva Routaraya chose him as his heir to rule Odishan Empire at the banks of river Krishna where he breathed his last. This decision infuriated the elder brother Hamvira Deva who was a battle hardened and successful warrior fulfilling the task of conquering the southern territories and expeditions against the kingdom of Vijayanagara as wished by his father.

There is a legend that when, under divine guidance, Kapilendra Deva announced that he was naming Purushottama as heir apparent, the eighteen older sons in anger threw spears at Purushottama, all of which missed. Purushottama Deva is also the lead character of the legend of Kanchi Kaveri Upakhyaana (poem) written by the poet Purushottam Das in sixteenth century and later translated to Bengali by the Bengali poet Rangalal

Bandyopadhyay. This legend is also popular among the Hindu devotees of the Jagannath worship tradition of Odisha.

## Prataprudradeva (1497 -1540 CE)

*Prataprudradeva (1497 -1540 CE)*

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Prataparudra Deva was the third Gajapati emperor of Odisha from the Suryavamsa Gajapati Empire started by his grandfather Kapilendra Deva Routaraya. He ruled from the year 1497 to 1540 CE. Besides being a ruler, he was a devout Vaishnava and adherent of the famous saint, Sri Chaitanaya who arrived in Odisha during his rule. His life was extremely occupied with overwhelming military campaigns in defense of his inherited territory from three frontal invasions by the enemy states Vijayanagar, Hussain Shahi dynasty of Bengal and Qutb Shahi dynasty of Golconda. He lost large portions of his territory to the neighboring enemy states initiating the dissolution of Odisha's military hegemony and imperial status that continued for nearly a period of 600 years before him.

## Suryavamsi Administration of Medieval Odisha

The Suryavamsi Gajapatis' vast empire stretched from the Ganges to the Godavari. The capital of this vast empire was Kataka-Pattana (Cuttack), which was known as Abhinava Varanasi Kataka during the glorious days of the Gangas. Kruttivasa Kataka (Bhubaneswar) was the second citadel of the Gajapati power, and it was here that Kapilendradeva was coronated. To ensure the stability of their vast empire, the Gajapati rulers established an efficient administration. The Suryavamsi Gajapatis exercised benevolent administration over their subjects, as follows.

## **The Kingship Theory**

The Suravamsi Gajapatis had governed their subjects with beneficence. When his feudatories rebelled against him, Kapilendra went to the temple of Lord Jagannatha and engraved an order on the Jagamohana invoking the name of Jagannatha and declaring that the chiefs revolting against him would actually rebel against this great deity.

Since Kapilendra's reign, the Suryavamsi kings have been known by lofty titles such as Maharajadhiraja, Paramesvara, Gajapati, Gaudesvara, and Navakoti Karnataka Kalavargesvara. Kapilendra assumed these titles following his conquests of Bengal, the Bahamani kingdom, and the Vijayanagara empire, and they were all continued by his son and grandson, as well as by the Bhoi rulers.

## **Ministerial Council**

The king was assisted in carrying out his duties by a large number of ministers and officers. Among them were the amatyas (ministers), Mantri sreni siromani (Ministers' Head), Sandhivigrahi (Minister of War and Peace), Sena-narendra (Army Chief), Vahinipati (Army Leader), Rautaraya (Army Captain), Kathaghara, and Samantaraya. Pariksha (Treasury Secretary), Mudra Hasta (Seal bearer). Lenka Budha (Chief priest of the temple of God Jagannath). Srikarana (accounts writer), and so forth.

## **Revenue from land**

The Gajapati period's land revenue system was highly developed. The land was measured and a tax assessment was made in accordance with the measurements. Guntha (20 Cubits square). Mana (25 Gunthas) and Bati (20 Manas) were used to denote distinct land units. The crown lands were divided into Khanda and Bisi and were administered by two hereditary officers known as Khandadhipati and Bisayee. To facilitate revenue collection from villages, the king appointed a headman known as a pradhan or Bhai. In the south, revenue officers were referred to as Nayaka and Naidu. During natural disasters, the state provided seeds to assist peasants in continuing their cultivation.

## **The Gajapati rulers' military organisation**

A strong military organisation was a necessary adjunct to a strong state, which was required for both protection and expansion. Gajapati kings, like their Gangas counterparts, were renowned for their military organisation. However, the Suryavamsi records provide us with a detailed picture of their military organisations. The Suryavamsis inherited a well-organized military system from the Gangas, which they enhanced and developed into a very strong force, which accounted for their success in establishing an empire. Odisha was virtually transformed into a military state during the reign of Kapilendradeva, with all castes and communities called upon to render military service in times of emergency. Although the Brahmins appear to have been exempt from mandatory military service, some Brahmins joined the army as big and small officers. According to the Madalapanji, the traitor Vasudeva Ratha was the commander-in-chief of the last Somavamsi king, and it was through his treachery that Chodaganga conquered Odisha. Vishnu, the Brahmin minister of Anangabhimadeva HI (A.D. 1211-1238), is depicted in the Chatesvara Inscription as leading an army against the Kalachuris of Ratnapura and successfully wresting the Sonepur tract from them. Gopinatha Mahapatra is depicted in the Gopinathapura Stone's Inscription as a Brahmin minister and general of Kapilendradeva. These evidences demonstrate that Brahmins also held high positions in the army, despite the fact that they were generally exempt from compulsory military service. The other castes were compelled to serve as officers and soldiers in the military organisation. As evidenced by Sarala Dasa's Mahabharata, which was composed during the reign of Kapilendra, an Oriya belief was fostered that dying in battle was the surest way to reach heaven. To die on the battlefield with weapons in hand, according to the poet, is a supremely religious and meritorious act that assures the person dying a secure place in heaven and absolves him of serious sins committed in this world. In the Sabha Parva, Narada explains to Sri Krishna how a man who murders a Brahmin can absolve himself of this heinous crime, and prescribes, among other things, death on the battle field while fighting with weapons in hand. The poet places a premium on the necessity of fathering male children and makes no mention of the necessity of female children. The birth of a son was a joyous occasion that he occasionally detailed, but he ignored the births of daughters. According to him, a wife without male children is

unlucky and inauspicious, and he prescribes eight ways for her to conceive sons in the Adi Parva of his Mahabharata. Given the high demand for young men in the army and the fact that many of them died on the battlefield, we can easily understand the poet's preference for male children and his desire to increase the male population. The protection and expansion of the state were shared responsibilities of the entire populace, not just the king. Militarism permeated all strata of society, and all physically capable individuals were compelled to serve in the military. The king maintained a standing army, but the local militia far outnumbered the standing army's soldiers. Additionally, feudal lords supplied the king with a specified number of soldiers during times of war and were required to fight for him on the battlefield.

Numerous Odias, as well as Adivasis and Harijans, retain military titles that their forefathers must have received from the Gajapatis. Even though some individuals did not serve in the army, they appear to have received honorary military titles from the monarch for assisting him in some way in perfecting his military organisation. The vast majority of the local militia were cultivators who took up cultivation during times of peace and converted to soldiers during times of war. According to a rough estimate, approximately half of the people in Odisha still bear military titles, including the following: Senapati, Chamupati (Champati), Routaraya (the cavalry commander), Sahani (the elephant force commander), Dandapata, Dandasena, Paschime Kava te, Uttara Kavata, and others (the marches guardians), Samantaraya, Vidyadhara, Bhramaravara, and Har Sarala Dasa's Mahabharata also provides insight into the various divisions of the Gajapati army while on the march. The first division was known as the Hantakaru Da/a Le., the pioneer force responsible for clearing jungles and constructing roads; the second division was known as the Aguani Thata, or advance units; the third division was known as the Pradhana Vala, or main army; and the fourth division was known as the Pachhiani Thata, or rear guards. The king and senior military officers were provided with bodyguards known as Angavalas, while the detachments in charge of captured forts and conquered territories were dubbed Paridandas.

Sarala Dasa also depicts an army in motion, complete with flags and other decorative devices, as well as musical instruments such as Damalu and Dadama. Tamaka, Bijighosa, Daundi, Ghumura, Bheri, Turi, and Ranasinga were sounded, among other things. Weapons such as Dhanu, Trona, Sara, Asi Parigha, Patiisa, Kunta, Jathi, Guruja, and Saveli have been mentioned. The preceding few facts are taken from Sarala Dasa's Mahabharata, which is not a historical work. However, because these facts occur in connection with the fights between various characters in his Mahabharata, we can be certain that he was drawing on his own knowledge and experience gained in actual wars when he made such references. According to the poet's description, the forts' gateways and walls were previously breached using horses, elephants, crow-bars, and shovels.

### **The Gajapati army's size**

Concerning the size of the Gajapati army, various sources provide conflicting accounts that may not accurately reflect the actual number of men and animals employed in it. Muslim sources have occasionally exaggerated or minimised its size. According to the Burhan-i-Ma'rtasir, Kapilendra possessed two hundred thousand elephants, which is obviously an exaggeration. Purushottamadeva had encamped on the banks of the Godavari with 7,00,000 foot soldiers, according to Nizam-ud-din. According to Azizullah, Kapilendra attacked Bidar with only ten thousand foot soldiers, an absurdly small number. The figures provided by Nuniz, a Portuguese author, appear to be more reliable. According to him, Odisha's king opposed Krishnadeva Raya with a force of thirteen hundred elephants and twenty thousand horses. "The people of Otisa are excellent fighters," Nuniz writes. "The king of Otisa commands a mighty army of foot soldiers." In one section of the Rayavachakam, an account is given of the feats of strength displayed in the Gymnasia at the Gajapati Capital. This account was presented to Vijayanagara Emperor Krishnadeva Raya by his spies, who had been hired to ascertain the Gajapati Prataparudradeva's military strength. According to some southern scholars, the account is exaggerated. Even if it is an exaggeration, we must respect the fundamental truth that the Oriyas of the time possessed considerable physical strength and were capable of performing amazing physical feats. We reproduce a summary of this account from Additional Sources of Vijayanagara below. "We entered the city and saw

the Gajapati's palace, the sixteen Patras' mansions, the Gymnasia, and the people who exercise there. Even gods and demons are incapable of demonstrating such proficiency in physical exercises as they do. Your Majesty may have observed the ability of great wrestlers from other countries to perform physical exercises, but the way of life in the capital of the Gajapati is quite different. They are the only ones capable of lifting such large dumbbells. They raise them, and they raise them crosswise. They raise a sack weighing ten paddes to the height of a standing man's raised arm and toss it onto their own bodies. Additionally, they trap the sack between their thighs and suspend themselves in mid-air by grasping the cross-beam (or the gymnasium). The reason for this exercise is that troopers are accustomed to carrying away their opponents bodily by imprisoning them between one of their arms and their body; however, if the opponents fight without losing their hold on their steeds, the troopers abandon their attempt, deeming the opponent unmanageable. The riders on the armoured horses are unafraid of receiving a wound. They attempt to smuggle such riders away under their arm. The soldiers practise this exercise to ensure that they remain steadfast and courageous (in their seats) during such times. They completely destroy hundred-foot-tall walls with a rummi mattakhandam that is heavy enough to be carried on the head of a man. They also cut strong tamarind pillars with that sword as easily as they cut the pitch of plantain trees. They planted two crowbars on the ground and cut them in half with their sword.

## **System of justice**

When it came to the judicial system of the time, it was quite effective in carrying out its duties. Criminal justice was severe. Gopinatha Badajena, a revenue officer, was prosecuted and imprisoned (an instrument to give torturing death by putting a man under two swords). Similarly, Rama Patra received a death sentence. As a result, criminals faced severe penalties for their crimes.

## **Provincial government**

Provincial administration was quite efficient under the Gajapati kings. The empire was divided into Dandapata or Rajya provinces. Governors of these provinces were referred to as Parikhas or Rajas. Provinces were subdivided into simas, which were further subdivided into sthalas or muthas, each of which contained a few villages, and the lowest administrative unit was the village (grama).

## **The Samanta Rajas**

Additionally, the Gajapati empire was divided into fragments, each under the control of a Samanta or feudal lord. It is obvious that feudalism flourished under Gajapati rule. Among the feudal lords, the Matsyas of Oddadi, the Suryavamsis of Nandapur, and the chiefs of Panchadharala, Palkonda, and Narasapur should be mentioned. This feudalism, a heinous feature of the mediaeval period, played a significant role in the demise of the Suryavamsi Gajapati rule in Odisha.

## **Fortifications**

Forts were critical components of the Gajapatis' military system. The Odishan kings occupied existing forts or built new ones throughout their empire. In the north, they occupied the great forts of Mandaran, which is now known as Bhitargarh, in the Arambagh subdivision of West Bengal's Hooghly district; Kotisamigarh, variously described as Kotasin, Katasin, etc., which is now known as Kotsimul, on the west bank of the river Damodara; and Raivania and Deulgoan in the Balasore district. Several forts that existed in the Cuttack and Puri districts were also used during this period. Jajpur Kataka, Amaravati Kataka (near Chhatia), Chaudwar Kataka, Varanasi Kataka (modern Cuttack), and Chudanga Kataka or Sarangagarh near Barang are some of them. Kasiagarh, located on the road from Chandaka to Khurda near the village Dalua, was also a large fort, most likely used to conceal troops during times of war. Apart from these large forts, there were also smaller ones, which Abul Fazl mentioned in his Ain-i-Akbari. At Humma, Khimidi, Chikiti, Palur, Khallikot, and Athagarh in southern Odisha, ancient forts of considerable importance existed. Great forts existed in the conquered territories of the south at Rajahmundry, Undrakonda in the Krishna

district, Kondapalli near Bezwada in the Krishna district, Adanki in the Ongole Taluk, Vinukonda in the Vinukonda Taluk, Vellamkonda in the Sattenapalle Taluk, Nagarjunakonda on the bank of the river Krishna, Tangeda in the Paln Telingana's feudatories occupied the great fort of Devarakonda in the Nalgonda district, as well as the famous fort of Warangal. However, the forts of Udayagiri in the Nellore district and Kondavidu near Guntur were the most formidable of all the forts occupied by Odishan kings. Krishnadeva Raya's occupation of these two great forts determined the fate of the Gajapati empire in the south.

To ensure the stability of their vast empire, the Gajapati rulers established an efficient administration. The Suravamsi Gajapatis had governed their subjects with beneficence. Suryavamsi's administration was largely modelled after that of the Gangas, with a few innovations. Kapilendra Deva was incapable of administering effectively during his reign due to his involvement in wars and conquests. The people enjoyed peace and tranquillity during Purusottama Deva's reign. However, during Prataprudra Deva's reign, there was instability as a result of external attack. As a result, effective administration was impossible during his reign.

The Suryavamsi Gajapatis' rule began with Kapilendradeva's. He was a brilliant military mind. After centuries of military inactivity, he reintroduced Odisha to the Indian political chessboard. He was given the opulent title of 'Gajapati Gaudesvara Navakoti Karnata Kalavargesvara'. Apart from that, he was a man of letters and a great patron of poets. Purusottamadeva, on the other hand, was an exceptional diplomat. Odisha's boundary did not expand during his reign. Purusottama was a liberal administrator. His reign was tranquil, which fostered the growth of Odia literature. However, under Prataprudradeva's rule, Odisha's imperial greatness, which had been built by Kapilendradeva and sustained by Purusottamadeva, was lost. Due to the appearance of Sri Chaitanya and the Panchasakhas, the Odisha people lost their military tactics, paving the way for the Gajapati dynasty's demise.

## To Conclude

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