



THE CHANDANOTSAVAM FESTIVAL AT SIMHACHALAM TEMPLE: MYTHOLOGY, HISTORY, AND SOCIO-CULTURAL IMPACT

D.Sahadevudu

Lecturer in History

Government Degree College

Uravakonda, Ananthapuramu District, A P

Abstract:

The Simhachalam Temple, located in the Visakhapatnam district of Andhra Pradesh, is a renowned shrine in Eastern India, dedicated to Lord Narasimha, the fourth incarnation of Lord Vishnu. The temple's most significant annual event is the "Chandanotsavam" festival, celebrated every year on Vaisakha Suddha Tadiya. This festival attracts lakhs of devotees from across India, particularly from the states of Andhra Pradesh, Odisha, and Chhattisgarh. Known for the "Nija-Rupa-Darshana" of the deity, where the lord's true form is revealed only once a year, Chandanotsavam marks the beginning of various other major and minor festivals at the temple throughout the year.

Keywords: Temple, Chandanotsavam, Evolution, Vaisakha Suddha Tadiya, Akshaya Tritiya

1. Introduction:

The name "Simhachalam" is derived from two Sanskrit words: "simha," meaning lion, and "anchala," meaning hill or mountain. The temple, an important shrine dedicated to Lord Vishnu, is situated 16 km away from Visakhapatnam city, on a hill 800 feet above sea level in the Eastern Ghats range. The area, known as Kailasa, is noted for its perennial springs, which are believed to possess valuable medicinal properties. The mythology surrounding the Simhachalam Temple centers on the divine incarnations of Lord Vishnu, specifically his Varaha (Boar) and Narasimha (Man-Lion) avatars. This narrative



underscores the protective role of Vishnu and his commitment to restoring cosmic order.

2. Methodology:

This study on the Chandanotsavam festival at Simhachalam Temple adopts a qualitative approach, integrating historical, textual, and ethnographic methods. It draws upon over 500 inscriptions, mythological narratives, and *Puranic* accounts to trace the temple's evolution and ritual practices, supported by archival records, archaeological reports, and scholarly literature on South Indian temples and Vaishnavite traditions. Additionally, observations of the festival, particularly the *Nija-Rupa-Darshana* and sandalwood rituals, alongside participation in cultural performances and informal interviews with priests, devotees, and local historians, provided valuable insights into its lived experience and meanings. By combining these diverse sources, the research offers a holistic perspective that bridges mythology, history, ritual practice, and contemporary socio-cultural dynamics.

3. Historical Background:

The Simhachalam Temple's rich history is documented in over 500 inscriptions found within its complex. The earliest inscriptions highlight significant contributions from Kulottunga Chola. Subsequent major contributions came from Narasimha Deva I of the Ganga dynasty, who was known for his generous donations and efforts to develop the temple. The region later came under the influence of the Vijayanagara Empire, with Emperor Sree Krishnadevaraya's royal visits and donations in 1516 and 1519 enhancing the temple's grandeur. For the past three centuries, the temple has been under the trusteeship of the Pasupathi Gajapathi royal family.

Simhachalam, one of the prominent shrines dedicated to Lord Vishnu, is renowned for its grandeur and historical significance. The temple's evolution can be understood through an exploration of both its legendary narratives and historical developments.



4. Iconography:

The central icon of Simhachalam is dedicated to the fourth avatar of Lord Vishnu, known as Narasimha or Nrusingha. What sets this temple apart is the unique tradition of covering the deity's idol with sandalwood paste, which is only removed once a year during the Chandanotsavam festival. This practice may symbolize the philosophical synthesis of Adi Shankaracharya's Hari-Hara worship or could be rooted in a historical sectarian conflict. The latter suggests a transition under the guidance of Ramanujacharya, converting the temple from a Shiva center to a Vaishnavite one.

The principal deity, Sri Varaha Lakshmi Narasimha Swamy, is depicted in a unique form with a boar's head and a lion's tail, symbolizing the combination of the Varaha and Narasimha avatars. The idol is enshrined in a Tribhanga posture, with only two hands, flanked by metal images of Sridevi and Bhudevi, who are shown holding lotuses.

The Simhachalam Temple's architectural evolution reached its zenith under the patronage of Narasimha Deva, whose renovation efforts left a lasting impact. His contributions, rooted in the Kalinga architectural style, are evident in the temple's intricate carvings and structural design. This style, characterized by its distinctive features such as the use of elaborately carved stone, graceful figurines, and a pyramidal superstructure, established the temple's architectural prominence across the region.

The temple's legend is deeply intertwined with the story of the demon king Hiranya Kashyap and his son Prahalad. According to the mythology, Hiranya Kashyap, along with his brother Hiranyaksha, disturbed the cosmic balance. Hiranyaksha dragged the Earth to the subterranean realms of the universe, known as Rasatala. In response to these disturbances, Lord Vishnu incarnated as Varaha to rescue the Earth and later as Narasimha to protect Prahalad and restore dharma.



5. The Mythological Account of Varaha and Narasimha Avatars

Lord Vishnu incarnated as Varaha to rescue the Earth, which had been submerged in the cosmic ocean by the demon Hiranyaksha. In this form, Vishnu defeated Hiranyaksha and restored the Earth to its rightful place. This act symbolizes the triumph of good over evil and the restoration of cosmic balance.

Hiranyaksha's brother, Hiranyakashipu, sought revenge for his brother's death. Through intense penance, he secured a boon from Brahma, ensuring that he could not be killed by any creature, whether man or beast, neither during the day nor night, neither on the ground nor in the sky, nor by any weapon. Empowered by this boon, Hiranyakashipu unleashed a reign of terror, persecuting sages and gods, especially targeting devotees of Vishnu.

Despite his father's tyranny, Prahlada, Hiranyakashipu's son, remained a devout follower of Vishnu. His unwavering devotion infuriated Hiranyakashipu, who subjected him to severe punishments. In a final attempt to kill his son, Hiranyakashipu ordered his soldiers to drown Prahlada in the sea and crush him under a mountain. However, Vishnu intervened, rescuing Prahlada at Mount Simhadri. Manifesting as Narasimha—a being neither man nor beast, appearing at twilight (neither day nor night), and emerging from a pillar (neither on the ground nor in the sky)—Vishnu killed Hiranyakashipu with his claws, bypassing the boon's protections.

After these events, Prahlada established a temple at the site where Vishnu had appeared, dedicating it to the combined form of Varaha and Narasimha, known as Varaha Narasimha. The temple's central shrine, Prahlada Mandapa, commemorates Prahlada's devotion. The temple later fell into decay until it was rediscovered by Emperor Pururava of the lunar dynasty, who, guided by divine instructions, covered the idol with sandalwood paste and reconstructed the temple.



6. Chandanotsavam

Chandanotsavam, also known as *Chandana Yatra*, stands as the most important annual festival of the Simhachalam Temple, dedicated to Lord Sri Varaha Lakshmi Narasimha Swamy. Celebrated on *Vaisakha Suddha Tadiya*—the third day of the bright fortnight in the month of Vaisakha (March–April)—the festival coincides with the sacred occasion of *Akshaya Tritiya*. On this auspicious day, thousands of devotees, particularly from Andhra Pradesh, Odisha, and Chhattisgarh, as well as from other parts of India, congregate at the hill shrine to participate in rituals that symbolize both spiritual renewal and cultural continuity.

The central highlight of Chandanotsavam is the rare and highly anticipated ritual of *Nija-Rupa-Darshana*, or the revelation of the deity's true form (*nijasvarupa*). Throughout the year, the idol of Lord Varaha Lakshmi Narasimha remains completely covered in layers of sandalwood paste, believed to preserve the sanctity of the idol while also symbolizing divine coolness and purity. On the day of Chandanotsavam, in the early hours of the morning, these layers of sandalwood are carefully removed, granting devotees a glimpse of the uncovered form of the deity. This moment, experienced only once a year, is considered profoundly sacred and is believed to bestow divine blessings and spiritual merit upon those who witness it. By dusk, the idol is once again anointed with fresh sandalwood paste, and the deity's *nija-rupa* remains visible to devotees for approximately twelve hours alone.

The elaborate ritual of sandalwood anointing follows a strict schedule. The deity is traditionally covered with twelve full mounds of sandalwood paste over the course of the year. Of these, four are applied specifically on the day of Chandanotsavam, while the remaining mounds are applied in three separate installments: on the fourteenth day of the bright fortnight of Vaisakha, on the full moon day of Jyestha, and on the full moon day of Asadha. The sandalwood paste is first spread upon a layer of silk cloth, which, upon removal, is torn into strips, signifying ritual renewal. Interestingly, during the hours of *Nija-Rupa-Darshana*, no ritual offerings are made to the deity, and regular temple services are suspended. Only after



nightfall, once the idol has been re-covered with sandalwood paste, are the customary offerings and daily rituals resumed, underscoring the unique sanctity of this occasion.

Chandanotsavam is deeply interwoven with the theological traditions of Vaishnavism. Falling on *Akshaya Tritiya*, a day considered eternally auspicious, it is believed that even the smallest offering of sandalwood paste to Lord Vishnu on this day brings salvation and eternal bliss. The ritual thus becomes more than a festival; it is a sacred covenant between deity and devotee, emphasizing themes of purity, renewal, and divine grace. The annual unveiling of the deity's true form not only provides spiritual solace but also strengthens the cultural identity of the community, as generations of devotees continue to participate in this centuries-old tradition. In its ritual symbolism, collective participation, and profound spiritual resonance, Chandanotsavam embodies the enduring socio-cultural significance of the Simhachalam Temple, reinforcing its role as a major pilgrimage and cultural center of Eastern India.

7. Socio-Cultural Impact of Chandanotsavam

The Chandanotsavam festival at Simhachalam Temple holds immense socio-cultural significance, particularly for the people of Andhra Pradesh and Odisha. As the most prominent event in the temple's annual calendar, it serves not only as a religious occasion but also as a unifying cultural force that brings together devotees from diverse social, economic, and regional backgrounds. The central ritual—anointing the presiding deity with layers of sandalwood paste and its removal during the “Nija-Rupa-Darshana”—symbolizes purification, renewal, and spiritual awakening. For devotees, the rare sight of the deity's true form is believed to confer divine blessings and spiritual merit, making the festival a once-in-a-year culmination of faith, devotion, and community participation.

Chandanotsavam reinforces cultural continuity by integrating music, dance, and ritual performance into the broader framework of worship. These traditional artistic expressions not only enliven the festival atmosphere but also act as mediums for transmitting cultural memory across generations. The festival fosters a sense of shared



identity among the people, while also serving as a platform for the exchange of cultural practices between regions, particularly Andhra Pradesh and Odisha. Furthermore, the influx of thousands of pilgrims during the festival significantly stimulates the local economy, providing seasonal employment and boosting activities in the transport, hospitality, and retail sectors, thereby underscoring the close relationship between religious festivals and regional socio-economic dynamics.

The religious impact of Chandanotsavam lies primarily in the *Nija-Rupa-Darshana*, which occurs only once a year. This ritual moment holds unparalleled spiritual significance for devotees, who believe that beholding the deity's original form ensures divine grace, prosperity, and the removal of obstacles. The festival also marks the beginning of a series of major celebrations at the temple, such as Narasimha Jayanthi, Krishna Ashtami, Navaratrotsavas, Sami Puja, Kartika Deepam, Dhanurmasotsava, Adhyanyanotsava, Makara Sankranti, Teppotsavam, Dolotsavam, and Kamadhanotsavam. In addition to these annual events, the temple observes weekly (*Varotsavas*), fortnightly (*Pakshotsavas*), and monthly (*Masotsavas*) rituals, reflecting the depth of ritual continuity within the Vaishnavite tradition.

The socio-cultural impact of Chandanotsavam cannot be understood without reference to the historical and political developments that shaped Simhachalam's evolution as a cultural center. Located strategically in Madhyama Kalinga, the temple was not only a religious landmark but also a significant politico-military outpost in the region. Its prominence was nurtured and sustained through the patronage of various dynasties, including the Cholas under Kulottunga I, the Eastern Ganga rulers such as Narasimha Deva, the Matsyasyas of Odisha, the Chalukyas of Ellamanch, the Gajapatis of Odisha, and the Pasupathi family. Most notably, the Vijayanagara emperor Krishnadevaraya made generous contributions to the temple, enhancing its cultural, religious, and political stature. This patronage ensured that Simhachalam became both a center of worship and a hub of regional cultural identity.



Beyond its immediate religious context, Chandanotsavam embodies the living cultural heritage of Eastern India. The festival serves as a cultural confluence where traditions, rituals, and artistic practices converge, reinforcing the collective memory and identity of the community. For devotees, participation in Chandanotsavam transcends ritual obligation, becoming an affirmation of cultural belonging and spiritual continuity. Thus, the festival not only sustains devotional fervor but also plays a crucial role in preserving and transmitting the socio-cultural values of the region across generations.

8. Cultural Significance:

The observance of Chandanotsavam and other festivals at the temple has a profound socio-cultural impact. The ritualistic and spiritual practices associated with these events provide a sense of cultural continuity and identity. On Akshaya Tritiya, for instance, the tradition of purchasing gold, silver, and other semi-precious artifacts is widespread. However, for many devotees, the act of visiting the temple and paying homage to their family deity holds greater significance, believed to purify their sins and ensure divine blessings.

The temple is deeply embedded in the cultural fabric of the region, particularly for the people of Visakhapatnam and southern Odisha. Lord Sri Varaha Lakshmi Narasimha Swamy is revered as the family deity, often referred to by various names such as Nilachala-Sinhala, Niladri-Simadari, Appana, and Simadari. The temple's premises feature tri-lingual signposts in Telugu, Oriya, and English, reflecting its wide appeal and cultural inclusivity. The annual pilgrimage to the temple and the substantial donations it receives underscore its continued relevance and the deep-seated devotion of its followers, even in the 21st century.

9. Discussion:

The Chandanotsavam festival at Simhachalam Temple emerges as a multi-dimensional phenomenon, embodying religious devotion, cultural continuity, social cohesion, and historical legacy. At its core, the annual *Nija-Rupa-Darshana* ritual reflects Vaishnavite theology,



symbolizing purity, renewal, and divine grace, while the festival's integration of music, dance, and ritual performances ensures the transmission of cultural memory across generations. The influx of pilgrims transforms the temple into an economic hub, stimulating local trade, hospitality, and seasonal employment, thereby linking religion with regional livelihoods. Historically, royal patronage from the Cholas, Gangas, Vijayanagara rulers, and the Pasupathi Gajapathis reinforced the temple's grandeur and political relevance, situating it within the broader cultural narratives of Eastern India. Beyond ritual worship, the festival strengthens social bonds by uniting devotees from diverse backgrounds, reaffirming the temple's role as both a family deity and a symbol of regional identity. In essence, Chandanotsavam is not merely a religious event but a socio-cultural institution that sustains spiritual faith, fosters community solidarity, and preserves the cultural heritage of Andhra Pradesh and Odisha.

10. Conclusion

The Chandanotsavam festival at the Simhachalam Temple is not merely a ritualistic observance but a profound socio-cultural phenomenon that embodies the spiritual ethos, cultural continuity, and communal solidarity of the region. Rooted in a unique blend of mythology, history, and ritual practice, the festival highlights the temple's pivotal role as both a sacred space and a cultural landmark. The "Nija-Rupa-Darshana" during Chandanotsavam symbolizes the deep devotion of countless devotees, while the temple's annual cycle of festivals—from Chandanotsavam in April to Giri-Pradakshina, Dhanurmasotsava, Makara Sankranti, and Ugadi—reflects an ongoing spiritual journey that binds generations together.

The socio-cultural significance of Chandanotsavam extends beyond religious worship; it strengthens regional identity, fosters inter-community harmony, and preserves traditional forms of artistic, ritualistic, and devotional expression. For the people of Andhra Pradesh and Odisha, the festival is a living bridge between the past and the present, affirming the temple's enduring role as a center of devotion, cultural heritage, and spiritual resilience. Thus, the Simhachalam Temple, through its rituals and festivals, continues to



influence not only the religious life of its devotees but also the cultural fabric of Eastern India, standing as a testament to the timeless power of faith, tradition, and collective identity.

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