

The land of forgotten temples

 www.deccanherald.com/content/545421/land-forgotten-temples.html



Srikumar M Menon visits Sirival, the place that has the largest cluster of Rashtrakuta monuments in the State, and observes that there are many aspects to be explored in this little-known centre of architectural excellence

At first glance, there seems to be nothing special about the land. As one leaves the dusty town of Shahapur in Yadgir district, with its fort perched on the low hills that serve as a backdrop to the town, fields of cotton and sugarcane stretch seemingly all the way to the horizon, interspersed with the odd clutch of boulders and stretches of active and disused limestone quarries. One is headed towards a place where River Bhima, flowing southwards, suddenly makes a pronounced C-shaped detour before hurrying off eastwards to its distant confluence with River Krishna. But if the layers of history of this innocuous-looking landscape could be peeled back layer by layer, one could see just how important this place must have been a couple of millennia ago.

A place of antiquity

The Chandralamba Temple, situated at Sannati village, on the left bank of the Bhima, is a popular pilgrimage destination. Though the present structure of the temple is relatively recent, archaeologists suspect that its origin may date back to the Rashtrakuta or even Chalukyan period, over a thousand years ago. However, the fortuitous discovery of Ashokan edicts and unearthing of several stupas in the vicinity, including the remains of the magnificent stupa called Adholoka Mahachaitya at nearby Kanaganahalli, firmly pushes back the antiquity of the place by at least another millennium. This land was a major pilgrimage destination in Buddhist India, probably right from Mauryan and Satavahana times till nearly 6th century, when it is suspected that a massive earthquake destroyed the big stupa. The importance of this region, though, did not diminish immediately, as the innumerable monuments belonging to later periods testify. This region seemed to have blossomed under the Rashtrakuta rule, and boasts of the largest cluster of Rashtrakuta monuments known in the State. A large majority of the monuments are located in Sirival, on either banks of the Sirival Halla that joins the right bank of the Bhima close to where it turns northwards in its loop, though there are noteworthy monuments at nearby villages like Anabi and Kollur upriver.

Sirival alone has nearly 50 monuments within and around the village. Most of these are temples, but there are also stepped wells, mathas etc. Many of the temples are not in use, and dilapidated. The most dramatic group, perhaps, is the group around the Nannayya-Nadayya temples, outside the village and across the Sirival Halla that skirts the northern and eastern sides of the village. This cluster of 5 temples, in various states of repair, and one stepped well embellished with beautiful carvings is situated in a landscape that is littered with scores of memorials from later periods, many of them sporting just a linga and a Nandi on stone platforms. The Nannayya and Nadayya temples are excellent examples of Rashtrakuta architecture. Both are west-facing with a garbha-griha connected to a mantapa by a small antarala, with entrances from north and south, in addition to the one from the west. The pierced windows of both these temples are interesting, with carvings of deities, human figures and geometrical patterns incorporated in the window openings. The nearby Sugnaneshwara Temple has been incorporated into the memorial of a local saint and the structure is heavily encroached and modified to be almost unrecognisable.

It is distressing to note conservation efforts of dubious nature being initiated in the Nannayya and Nadayya temples

too, recently. There is a stepped well with magnificent carvings to the north of this temple group. Another major temple is the Siddheshwara Temple, on the western outskirts of the village. This large temple complex is still under worship, and is an assemblage of a main temple having 5 garbha-grihas, several sub-shrines and a couple of smaller temples all within one compound. There is a magnificent stepped well adjoining the temple compound. The Mallikarjuna Temple within the village is another large temple where worship still continues.

Treasure trove

Most of the temples in the village are Hindu temples, but there is a Jain temple to the south of the settlement, of which only the basement and a broken column base with the carving of a tirthankara survive. But a magnificent idol of a Jain tirthankara inside one of the sub-shrines of the Siddheshwara Temple complex strongly indicates the presence of a Jain community in the past. A large majority of the temples are encroached, vandalised or in extreme disrepair.

We were shocked to see a magnificent temple with its entrances blocked up and being used as the neighbourhood garbage dump. Another temple is being used as a toilet by the local residents. Near this unfortunate building, we found a broken eave with the carving of a lion, which is so evocative of the style of carving encountered in the Kanaganahalli stupa. Did some of the artisans who worked on the stupa stay on in the vicinity, with their descendants serving the Rashtrakuta overlords centuries later? Such questions are of enormous importance in understanding the flowering of early architecture in the subcontinent, especially when one considers that the artisans who worked on the Kanaganahalli stupa are believed to belong to the same school that executed the exquisite Amaravati stupa.

There are plenty of unresolved questions about this showpiece site of Rashtrakuta architecture. North of the village, across the stream and east of the Nannayya-Nadayya group of temples are several wells in various stages of disrepair. Beside one of these wells is a small shrine consisting of a garbha-griha, a porch with two pillars and a ruined mantapa.

It is intriguing to note that the seated lions which form the pillar-bases are of Pallava style. We know that the Badami Chalukyas who ruled the region before being overthrown by the Rashtrakutas, were perpetually at war with the Pallavas of Kanchi. After one of the skirmishes, the Pallavas defeated Pulikeshi II and occupied Badami, the Chalukyan capital, for nearly 13 years between 642 and 655 CE. Was this temple built during this brief period of Pallava rule? Of what importance was Sirival during the rule of the Chalukyas?

These and many other questions await study in this little-known centre of architectural excellence from our past. There has been only one comprehensive survey of Sirival, by C S Patil and his team, in 1987, which resulted in the publication of the only available book on Sirival. The nearby sites of Anabi and Kollur remain undocumented. My own guess is that if all the monuments of this region are rescued and restored to even a fraction of their former glory, we will have a site to rival the famous temple complexes of the Malaprabha Valley.

As the Sun went down after yet another day among the forgotten temples of Sirival, we found ourselves on the bridge at the barrage on the Bhima. The waters of the Bhima lapped lazily against the pylons of the barrage, telling tales of the days when the waters of the river flowed free and unfettered, of times even before the temple of the great goddess, when this land throbbed to the chisel blows of those artisans, who authored some of the glorious architectural masterpieces of our nation.