

# A blend of art & adventure

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Srikumar M Menon, August 23, 2016

Cliffhanger creations

**Be careful of those rib-like projections,” cautions Nagaraj. “They tend to come off when you put your weight on them.”**

We are trying to scale a sandstone cliff near Badami, and Nagaraj – a 20-year-old resident of this historic town — is playing the role of my instructor. I had run into him while exploring near Ranganatha Gudi, on the outskirts of Badami, on the way to Banashankari. The temple, recently renovated and painted in garish colours, and believed to date back to the Vijayanagar period, is cleverly located in a narrow gorge created by crumbling cliffs of sandstone some 60 feet high. Nagaraj had seen me look appreciatively at the soaring cliffs of the gorge and offered to help me climb them. “You get better photographs of the temple from up there,” he had told me with a wide grin.



I avoid the ribs, which are features produced by weathering of the rock and manage to climb the cliff without incident. Nagaraj is right. The view from atop the cliff is magnificent and I can appreciate better the aptness of the placement of the shrine by its builders. My worry about the descent evaporates as Nagaraj points out an alternate, easier, way down, though it involves leaping across a chasm some five feet wide and 60 feet deep. Once we are down, Nagaraj points out several spectacular rock climbing routes in the vicinity of Ranganatha Gudi, some of them fiercely overhanging and secured with bolts and other climbing aids.

Nagaraj, and his older friend Ganesh Waddar, are just two of the several local lads who have taken to rock climbing, inspired by climbers from India and abroad, who have been attracted to the challenging sandstone cliffs of this spectacular location. One such world-class climber is Gerhard Schaar from Germany, who has even written a small booklet on the various climbing routes around Badami, freely downloadable from his website.

## Head for heights

However, the likes of Gerhard Schaar, Ganesh and Nagaraj and the rest of their ilk are not the first people to scale the sides of the tall narrow gorges and the fractured cliff faces of Badami. The earliest climbers who left their traces on the pinkish brown sandstone did so centuries before the first settlement arose at Badami, when roving bands of our hunter-gatherer ancestors roamed the landscape hunting game and found refuge in the several natural rock-shelters that dot the region.

Less than a hundred metres away from the gorge that leads to Ranganatha Gudi is a rock overhang which shelters a painting in red ochre drawn high up on the cliff. Experts estimate that this rock art panel was painted in the Mesolithic, or Middle Stone Age, perhaps 10,000 years ago. Two large human figures — a man and a woman, tower above the rest of the figures in a dancing pose. What was the significance of this work of art for our Mesolithic ancestors? Was this spot a gathering place for the hunters before they set out on a hunt, with the painting meant to be seen and venerated for good luck in order to obtain sufficient prey? We will never know why exactly the paintings were made, but we can safely conclude that whoever executed these had a great head for heights, for they would have either had to dangle on ropes from the overhang or stood on some kind of scaffolding to do so.

There are many other sites with prehistoric rock art located in and near Badami. In the vicinity of the nearby town of Kutukanakeri, is an extensive rock art site, with several panels painted on high cliff faces protected by overhangs. In

fact, this region prompted some of the researchers who studied rock art around Badami to term it a 'mini Bhimbetka' for the sheer profusion of rock art in numerous rock shelters! The landscape around is also nothing short of spectacular, with wind and water shaping the sandstone into bizarre shapes like impossibly balanced boulders and turret-like towers, the latter being a neat little problem for budding climbers to tackle.

### **Awe-inspiring**

This propensity to leave a mark on sheer cliff faces did not end with our prehistoric forebears. In the sixth century AD, when the young warlord Pulikeshi I established Badami, then known as Vatapi, as the capital of the Early Chalukyan kingdom, one of the first things he did was to carve out what is today called the 'cliff inscription' of Pulikeshi I on a high cliff face near where the modern museum is located. The inscription describes how Vatapi was established as the fortified capital of the Chalukyas by Pulikeshi I.

A taste of the difficulty that the scribe might have had while carving this inscription was brought sharply into focus when an estampage was made in modern times. The person making the estampage was lowered on ropes from above but he hung out of reach of the inscription due to the overhang. He then had to be pushed close to the cliff face with a pole so that he could reach the inscription! There is a name — Shri Tatvartthan — inscribed some distance below the main inscription and the renowned scholar Shrinivas Padigar surmises that it is the epithet of Shri Kolimanchi, an artisan whose name figures at several other places too in Badami, and that he must have been the brave soul who etched those characters high on the sandstone.

The obsession to locate their creations on seemingly impossible perches seem to have pervaded the imagination of the Early Chalukyan architects, too. Many of the notable monuments at Badami — such as the Malegitti Sivalaya, the Lower Sivalaya and the Upper Sivalaya — are cheekily sited on large boulders or on the edges of tremendous drops. This tendency applied in later times too, with two shrines erected centuries after the end of Early Chalukyan rule also occupying the top of a boulder near the Agastya Tirtha Lake.

Even for a modern visitor to Badami, the best views are to be had by wandering on the cliffs that hem in the Agastya Tirtha on three sides. As one stands on the edge of the cliffs to the east of the town, there is a breath-taking view of the emerald waters of the lake spread out below, with the Early Chalukyan monuments on either side of it. And as one experiences that heady high obtained when clinging on to a high rock face and drinking in this ruggedly beautiful country from the perspective of a bird nesting among the cliffs, realisation dawns that it is this same high that one shares with those faceless ancestors of ours from yore.