

Beyond the tourist's Badami

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The narrow track leads off from near the Bhutanatha group of temples on the eastern edge of the lake called Agastya Tirtha in Badami. Heading eastwards, seemingly towards a pass in the distance, one soon leaves the tourist's Badami behind, walking in the lee of a sandstone cliff.

Roughly 500 metres from the lake, one has to leave the path and scramble into the cliffs. It is a short but intense scramble, over blocks that are like large steps and braving the thorny embrace of plants. A tiny pool under a rock overhang hints at the presence of unseen aquifers in the bowels of the sandstone.

Suddenly, two cubical forms made of sandstone blocks pop up ahead, their regularity contrasting with the organic shapes of the surrounding terrain. One crests the ridge just west of the westernmost of these shrines. The terrain is fantastic — over centuries, wind and water have sculpted the sandstone into fantastic shapes and jutting outcrops.

Hidden pool

Nearing the western shrine, one sees beyond it a large fissure in the sandstone, and through it a large rock pool below, with an array of sculptures surrounding it. The eastern shrine is built against the rock with sandstone blocks. It is empty now, but the lintel block has an image of Gajalakshmi sculpted on it, indicating that this was indeed a shrine once.

Moving towards the western shrine along a narrow band of rock with little round pools carved for collecting abhisheka water, the sculpture-filled niche suddenly swims into view to one's left. A serene, natural pool lies nestled in a hollow, ringed on one side by a large rock overhang. On the walls of this overhang are carved a variety of figures — deities, their vahanas and attendants, and what must be figures representing the patrons who commissioned these.

The pool and the overhang at this place called Arali Tirtha seem to be of natural origin. The overhang looks like a large, cavernous example of weathering features called tafoni — commonly encountered in places like Badami, where sandstone weathers in an arid environment. The rock pool is a perennial water source, and appears to be spring-fed. It is quite likely that the spot must have been regarded as a Tirtha or holy spot from early times, though the sculptures probably were carved only less than six centuries ago. Several holy places in the Malaprabha Valley came up around spring-fed tanks such as Mahakuta, Siddhana Kolla etc. There is an 'endless knot' design incised on a boulder adjacent to the eastern shrine which might have greater antiquity than the shrines or the sculptures.

An examination of the sculptures reveal several Hindu divinities represented — with Surya, the Sun-god, represented four times. There are also sculptures of Bhairava, Saraswati, Ganesha, Mahalakshmi, the Trimurtis, Mahishamardini, Anantashayana Vishnu and Narasimha. There are also carvings of people in worshipful attitudes, thought to be the donors who sponsored some of the sculptures.

Professor Shrivas Padigar, a renowned historian who has published a scholarly article on this site, concludes that the sculptures seem to have been executed in two phases. The sculptures of the first phase, which he assigns to the 14th – 15th centuries CE, are the first four panels from the left. The remaining sculptures belong to the second

phase, which he dates to the 16th century.

Why were these sculptures carved over three centuries, at such a secluded and relatively inaccessible place? Author Jurgen Neuss suggests a dramatic situation as an answer to this question, in an article in the journal Berliner Indologische Studien.

There is a Sanskrit inscription in Nagari characters adjacent to the Mahalakshmi icon, above the images of Saraswati and Ganesha, which states that, pleased with the devotion of a tridandin called Ravideva, Mahalakshmi of Kollapura came to reside at this spot. Indeed, the depiction of Mahalakshmi is identical to the idol at the famous temple at Kolhapur. It is known from some accounts that the idol of Mahalakshmi was removed from Kolhapur following the invasions by Malik Kafur in the early 14th century and returned to the temple only by the 18th century.

Jurgen Neuss argues that Arali Tirtha was where the image was kept hidden during this period, or at least one of the places, in case there was more than one hideout over the four centuries of exile. There is a small rocky projection near the centre of the cave, the top of which has been fashioned into a pitha to hold an image. There is a depression in this platform which must have held the tenon of an idol, now missing. A nearby image of an ascetic, with a triple-fluted staff next to him, is believed to be that of Ravideva.

Professor Padigar attributes a date earlier than the sculptures to the two shrines, which are now empty. The western shrine is built on higher ground and faces east, while its eastern counterpart faces north. It is exhilarating to be at this dramatic location — the rock pool, the ring of deities and attendants and the silent shrines, cleverly located near the edge of a cliff.

Leaving Arali Tirtha and exploring the numerous outcrops at the top of the cliff, some more surprises lie in store. A rock shelter with a pair of feet carved on the floor and the likeness of a Jaina saint on the wall has an inscription that informs us that Vardhanaanadeva, a holy man, attained liberation at that spot.

Mysteries galore

A ruined shrine lies near another rock pool, its fallen slabs lying broken around an idol niche carved on the rock surface. Another empty rock-cut pitha under a rock overhang distinctly gives a feeling that there are secrets yet in and around Badami that are not yet deciphered. This clifftop is also one of the best places to get a bird's eye view of Badami. Gazing out at the jade-green waters of the Agastya Tirtha, on either side of which are scattered the famous monuments of Badami, one realises that this ancient capital of the Chalukyas continued to play important roles in history long after the sun had set on their empire. And as the contours of the sandstone and the vegetation swallow up Arali Tirtha during the descent, it is easy to imagine this hidden pool in the cliffs hosting a goddess in exile, all those centuries ago.