Tracing the Śaivite Legacy of the Monolithic Temples at Palsambe

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Abstract: Palsambe is a small town located in Gaganbāvḍā tehsil (16° N, 73° E) at about 49 km westward of Kolhāpur; southern end of Maharashtra. The town of Palsambe is famous for Śaivite monolithic temples all carved in laterite stones. The number of main temples is four and that of carved miniature temples is nine. The intriguing fact about these monolithic temples and miniature temples is that all of them reflect early architectural styles. The temples are located in a valley, in the middle of a stream that flows through a carpet of laterite as well as basalt stones. The entire area falls within an evergreen forested area and is remote from human settlements. The plausible reason behind the very existence of these monolithic temples could be the unique location of Gaganbāvḍā. This essay focuses on finding possible reasons behind the Śaiva settlement in the area remote from human settlement, on the existence of the monolithic temples there and on the geo-political importance of Gaganbāvḍā area.

Keywords: *temples, monolyths*

Introduction

Palsambe is a small town located in Gaganbāvḍā tehsil (16° N, 73° E) at about 49 km westward of Kolhāpur; southern end of Maharashtra. Kolhapur is adjacent to the Western Ghats and hence is connected to the south Konkan region that comprises of Ratnagiri, Sidhudurg and Goa. The town of Palsambe is famous for the Śaivite monolithic temples all carved in laterite stones. The number of main temples is four and of miniature temples carved is nine. The temples are located in a valley, in the middle of a stream that flows through a carpet of laterite as well as basalt stones. The entire area falls within an evergreen forested area and is remote from human settlement. Of the four
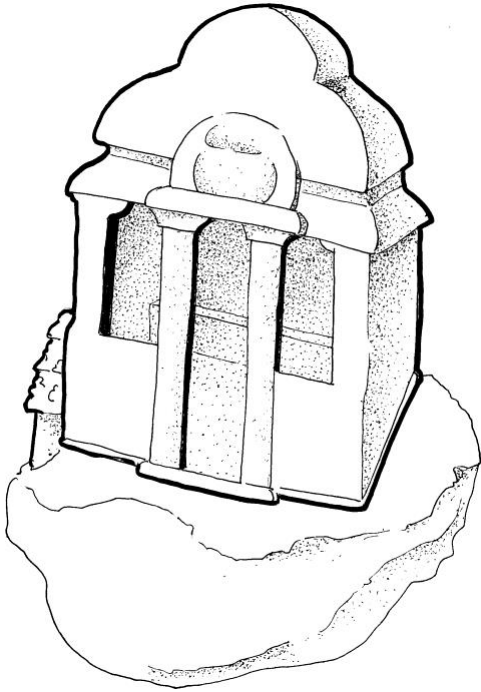
temples, two are located on the lower level of the river bed while the rest of the two are on the upper level and one needs to climb up huge stones to reach the upper temples; however, there is another way to reach them but it is inaccessible most of the year. Dr. A.P. Jamkhedkar opines from an architectural perspective that these temples are pre-Cālukyan i.e. they were carved probably in the Vākāṭaka times[1]. Dr. M.K. Dhavalikar postulates that the Vākāṭakas had expanded their empire up to Kolhāpur[2]. But we do not have any evidence of architectural activities by the Vākāṭakas remaining in Kolhāpur now. So, we need to take a good span of time from 400 CE to 600 CE as the period when these monoliths were carved.

Dr. A.P. Jamkhedkar has recorded a small-scale image of Lakuliśa on one of the temples few years back (however the exact location is not mentioned) and hence he inferred that these monoliths were dedicated to the Pāśupata Śaivas[3]. However, during my frequent field-visits I could not find that Lakuliśa image anywhere in or around the temples, bigger as well as smaller ones. Perhaps it must have been worn off by the weather and its continuous contact with water. If it ever existed and that it eroded eventually then we must think of it as a great loss for future researchers for it could have been a unique feature of the monolithic group there, as there is no sculpture carved on the temples except the Śivaliṅgas. The aim of this essay is to trace and discuss the Śaivite legacy of the Palsambe monoliths. Let us first begin with the architectural features of the monoliths.

Architecture

For the sake of understanding we shall label the temples as follows: Temple I and Temple II (temples on the lower level of the river bed), Temple III and Temple IV (temples on the upper level of the river bed). The monoliths of Palsambe are particularly carved in laterite stones and according to my observations none of them were carved in a single span of time. However, it is not possible to state firmly which one was hewn first and which one was built later. But it can be logically stated that the small-scale temples were carved first, and the bigger ones were carved later, when the Śaivas must have stayed there for a longer time and thus donations were made in their service. Temple II is the best example of that. There are two small scale temples that seem to be carved; but in reality, Temple II is carved in the stone where these two temples were already carved. It can be inferred from their unusual, and apparently inexplicable, positions on the temple.

It is significant to note that all of the temples are carved in the Draviḍa and/or pre-Draviḍa style. I use the term 'pre-Draviḍa' to denote that all the *śikhara*s are not carved in the typical Draviḍa style of the later period that comprise of the composition of *śālās*, *kuṭa*s, *pañjara*s, *chatra*s, *alpa-vimāna*s, etc.[4]. Most of the *śikhara*s, especially on the small-scale temples reflect what we may call secular or urban architecture from which the Draviḍa style evolved[5]. From the variety of *śikhara*s on the small-scale temples we can easily understand the well-developed architecture by then. Two storied *śikhara*s are especially unique.

It is interesting to note that we get to study a great deal of varied *śikhara*s at the site. Another important point here to be noted is that from Temple I to Temple IV, we see the utilization of various parts of *śikhara*s; from simple to composite.

After having introduced the temples briefly, it is necessary to study them one by one. For the sake of better understanding I have provided their sketches instead of photographs. Apart from the sketches of the main temples, I have provided sketches of the *śikhara*s of the small-scale temples too.
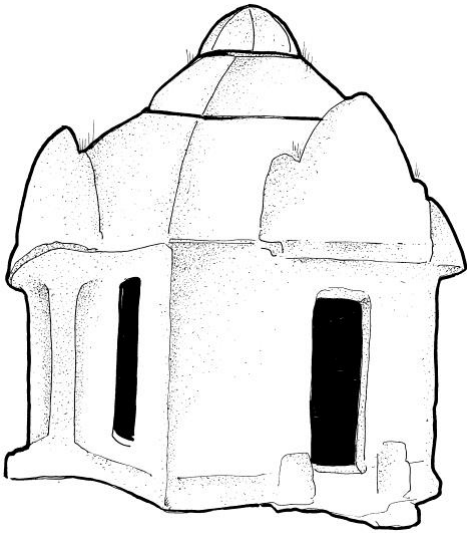
Temple I

We come across this temple as we go down the stream. It is carved in a huge laterite boulder. The temple was once erect but now owing to continuous contact with water the base has become pointed and hence the temple leans to one side. The parts of the temple are as follows: (elevation) i. A *kuṭa śikhara* with three steps, ii. A *śuknāsi* or *caitya-gavāksha*, iii. A pair of pillars supporting the *gavāksha*, iv. One miniature aedicule cum temple strangely attached at the base and, v. Another miniature aedicule cum temple attached to the rear of the *chādya*; (plan) i. A rectangular veranda, ii. A raised platform at the end of the sanctum.

The temple is of half-open type and there is no sign of any deity inside the sanctum. The raised platform gives a hint of a bed rather than of the *pāda-pīṭha* of the seat for a deity. There are

differences in the crafting of the *śikhara*s of the miniature temples attached to Temple I and its own *kuṭa śikhara*.

Temple II

Opposite to Temple I is Temple II which is nothing but a miniature *śālā* building. The temple does not contain any proper sanctum but a small niche within which a liṅga is carved in the same stone. The parts of the temple are as follows: (elevation) i. A two storied *śālā śikhara* with *stupis* on it, ii. A *caitya-gavāksha*, iii. A *chādya*(coping/entablature), iv. Two pillars supporting the *gavāksha*, v. A miniature aedicule cum temple attached to the end of one side; (plan) i. a small-scale platform from the pillars to the sanctum niche, ii. The sanctum niche.


Though of a small scale, Temple II is gracefully carved. Its pillars are not plain but cut inside and visually divided into two distinct parts. They have square bases and brackets at the top. From observation it comes to surface that the *gavāksha* was once beautifully carved. Unfortunately, no sign of any deity or design pattern is found in the niche of the *gavāksha*.While we have seen the major temples on the lower level of the stream, now let us get introduced to the temples on the upper level. These temples are architecturally and/or artistically, proportion wise much advanced than the temples on the lower level.
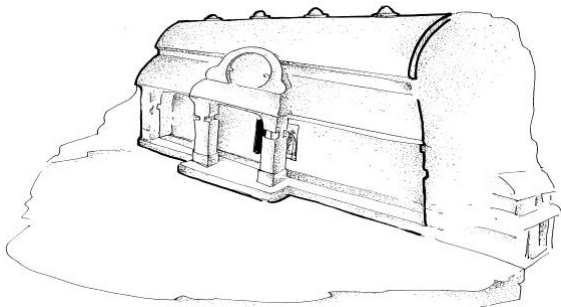
Temple III

Temple III is of the type known as the *Sarvatobhadra*. It has entrances on all the four sides and hence is like a hall with openings on all sides. It is bigger than the rest of the temples on the lower level. There is no sign of a bench or a pedestal inside. The parts of the temple are as follows: (elevation) i. An octagonal *chatra*, ii. A two storeyed *kuṭa śikhara*, iii. *Gavākshas*
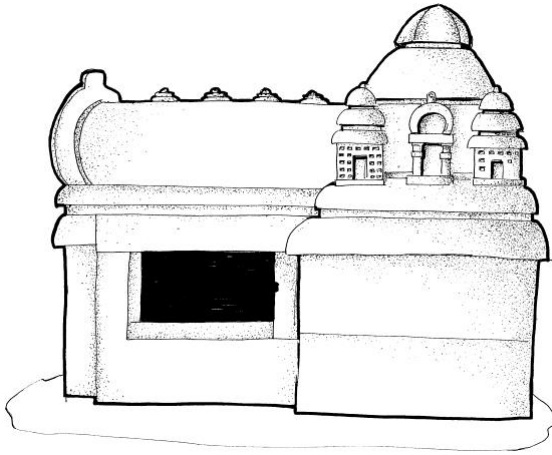
at all the entrances, iv. Two pillars supporting each *gavāksha*; (plan) i. The temple consists of a square sanctum.

The pillars of Temple III are worn out hence their actual design is incomprehensible. Same is the case with the *gavāksha*s on all sides. Of all the temples, this could actually be called a temple, as I believe it had a deity installed at the centre and one could reach or have vision of the deity from any side. At present it is locally known as the Yajna-Śālā or the house for fire rituals. For the sake of comparison, we can find two such Sarvatobhadra temples belonging to Pāśupata Śaivism in Gharapuri (Elephanta) caves and Jainism within the Kailasnātha temple complex. Inside the Jain Sarvatobhadra temple, a sculpture-slab is kept with the Tīrthaṅkaras carved on all the four sides so that anyone can take vision of the Jinas from any of the four doors.

Temple IV

Next to Temple III is Temple IV, a *full-form* temple. One can easily guess that it had some special importance and special attention was given to it, for it would not have been carved as '*complete*' otherwise. The parts of the temple are as follows: (elevation) i. An octagonal *chatra*, ii. A *vimāna* or *śikhara*, iii. A *harāntara* containing *karṇa-kuṭa* in the corners and a *goṣṭha-pañjara* in between them, iv. A *chādya*, v. a *jagatī* or *pīṭha* type part bifurcated by little dado-like protrusion from the same wall, vi. A *śālā*, vii. A *caitya-gavāksha* supported by pillars in the facade; (plan) i. A veranda or here, what we may call an *aṅtarāḷa*, ii. Sanctum, iii. Raised platform at the end of the sanctum. There is a niche carved in the wall behind the raised platform which could have served as a pāda-pīṭha for some object of worship; most probably an image of Śiva if not a *liṅga*.

Here the temple under discussion has been given full form of an ideal complete temple for it has an ante-chamber with four pillars as support(virtual) which is absent in rest of the temples. The vestibule or ante-chamber is covered by a *śālā śikhara* which leads to a *kuṭa śikhara* with a complex touch. Here the *hārāntara* of the later period seems to have been utilized. The only difference is that the miniature *śālā* in the *hārāntara* of the later period is replaced by a *goṣṭha-*

pañjara which is nothing but the gable-arch(es) at the ends of the *śālā*. Here we can observe the pre-cursor of Draviḍa *vimāna* on the sanctum. The *talas* of the later period are replaced by multi-storeyed *kuṭa* structure. The ceiling of the vestibule is decorated with shafts that run parallel to the vestibule. This is purely the reflection of wooden structure into stone-carving.

So much for the architecture of the temple. A study of the Śaiva legacy of the temple complex however is the objective of this research. It is important to try and find the logic behind the existence of the monoliths.

The Śaiva Legacy

It is quite obvious that the Palsambe monoliths are centres of Śaivism and it is obvious from the variety of the *liṅga*–s carved on the rock surfaces of the temples and rock boulders. The *liṅga*-s carved are peculiar in design and they are carved on the *pāda-pīṭha* instead of the *vāri-mārga* or the *yoni-pīṭha* which is most frequently found among the Śiva-liṅgas of later centuries. The *liṅgas* have *meḍha-sutra* or *brahma-sutra* carved on them[6]. Dr. Jamkhedkar had once documented a small-scale miniature of Lakuliśa image on one of the temples; hence we may presume that the temples belong to the Pāśupata sect of Śaivism. Assuming this, we might consider some practices/rules for the Pāśupatas prescribed in the Pāśupata sutras and we might compare them with the Palsambe monoliths in order to trace their legacy to the Pāśupata sect.

First of all; we must find a reason behind the carving of *liṅga*-s all around the site. The most plausible reason could be that these *liṅga*-s must have been carved in the memories of the Śaiva ascetics who must have lived there for a while; if not life-long. We see many inscriptional evidences regarding installing/carving *liṅga*-s in the memory of persons of spiritual or social higher status. The earliest example comes from the Mathura pillar inscription of 380 CE wherein two *liṅga*-s were installed by one Uditācārya to consecrate the memory of two departed Ācāryas, Kapila and Upamita[7]. This tradition continued until the decline of the Pāśupatas and their scions such as the Kālāmukhas and the Lākuliśas. Next, we see many examples in the early medieval period where a great number of temples were built for the *liṅga*-s installed in the name of some person. One Kālāmukha example from Karnataka can be given here. The Kedāreshwara temple at Baḷḷigāvi was named after Kedārśakti Munīpatī, the Kālāmukha Ācārya of Muvara-koṇeya-santati of Śakti Parṣe, somewhere between 1060 CE and 1070 CE[8]. The liṅga as the emblem of Śiva

became gradually important. Until the Kuṣāṇa times Śiva was worshipped in his anthropomorphic form, for it can be well seen on the coin of Wema-Kadphises where Śiva is shown holding trident and an animal[9].

But it is significant to ask why these Palsambe monoliths were hewn in the remote area, near the ghat area of Gaganbavda? For that we need to consider some of the Pāśupata *sutra*-s. According to the Pāśupata *sutra*-s – 'A Pāśupata adept should go out of the reach of the Ācārya, enter a village or a town and should stay neither very far from nor very close to a group of people'[10]. Further it is said that an adept should be *āyatana-vāsī* i.e. he should stay next to a Śivaliṅga, wear garlands offered to Siva, sing and dance before him[11]. As the practice of the Pāśupata vows advances and as the adept becomes more eligible, he should then switch to *śūnyāgāra-guhā-vāsī* from being *āyatana-vāsī*[12]. That is to say, he must dwell in a vacant building or in a remote cave away from society.

Discussion

If we take into consideration the sutras and try and apply them to the location of the Palsambe monoliths then we can see the connection between the Pāśupata practices and the very existence of the temples in the middle of the jungles of Gaganbavda. Since the Pāśupata adept should dwell in a secluded area, in a Śiva temple; the monolithic temples must have been carved for such adepts. It was a tradition among the Pāśupatas to install a *liṅga* in the memory of their great precepts and this can be well inferred by the existence of multiple *liṅga*-s carved on the rocks at the site. The monolithic temples play the role of caves as well that of temples. Hence the site must have been important for the fresh and advanced Pāśupata practitioners as well. However, this site was not developed into a monastery and an educational centre like the rest of the Pāśupata and Kālāmukha centres from eight to thirteenth century CE for the geographical location is not favourable for the establishment of monasteries.

The plausible reason behind the very existence of these monolithic temples could be the unique location of
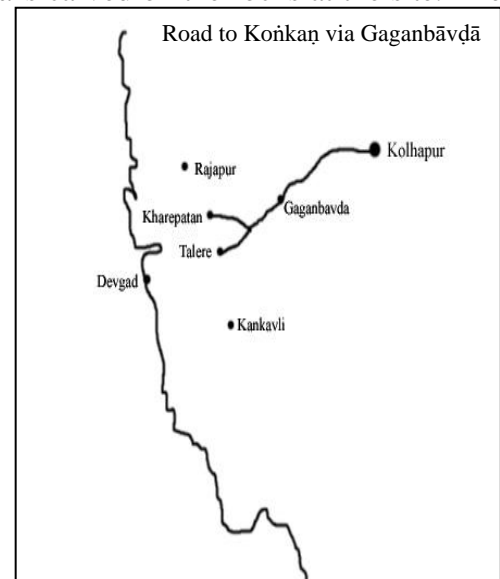
Gaganbavda. Kolhapur is dotted with hill ranges. The ranges are important for the passes, through which the inlands are connected to the sea, hence majority of the passes are trade-routes. Apart from providing versatile forest products, they are also suitable for rock-cut cave activities. It seems that due to the importance of Kolhapur, throughout history, the hill-ranges have been utilized by various cultures[13]. Gaganbavda is on the threshold of the famous Karul pass and Bhuibavda pass. Gaganbavda is possibly the only place having two passes originating at a single place but going towards different directions, one towards Talere-Kankavali, Sindhudurg district via Karul pass and another towards Kharepatan-Rajapur, Ratnagiri district via Bhuibavda pass. Of these two, the Kharepatan was the capital of the Śilāhāras of South Konkan, before them the area was under the control of the Cāḷukyas of Badāmī and then the Rāṣṭrakuṭas[14]. So, it can be inferred that the Gaganbavda area must have been used by the traders to travel from Konkan to Kolhapur and vice-versa. Since the majority of the Śilāhāras, from south as well as north Konkan were ardent Śaivas it is quite natural that they settled down the Śaiva community in their territory[15]. The area of Gaganbavda must have been under trading activities even before the Cāḷukyas of Badami conquered south Konkan, for there is one fifth century Brāhmī inscription found in the village of Sangshi, not very far from Palsambe, which talks about a king erecting a memorial in the name of his late queen Hālidevī[16]. The existence of some king as early as sixth century CE in the area of Gaganbavda points towards the trade carried out through the pass. There is a possibility that this unknown king must have contributed to the carving of these Śaivite monoliths. Besides, from the inscriptions of the Badami Cāḷukyas also we come to understand that the kings had contributed to a good extent to the settling of Pāśupata Śaivism in their territory, especially on the banks of Malprabha river, in the areas of Siddankolla, Badami and Mahakuta[17]. As the sovereigns were helping the Pāśupatas to settle down in their territory, their subordinates naturally had to follow the same strategy. Hence the subordinates of the Badami Cāḷukyas, who were ruling South Konkan and Gaganbavda region must have taken initiative in settling down the Pāśupata Śaivas on the trade route.

Considering all this, we can easily understand why the monoliths of Palsambe exist. The Śaivas must have travelled along with the traders down the Koṅkaṇ and hence the Śaivite cave-temples exist before the pass begins. The site of Palsambe must have served as a resting place for the Śaivas and Pāśupatas in particular, who travelled from South Konkan to Kolhapur and vice-versa to visit the Buddhist caves located near the trading routes, near Karad-Kolhapur in particular.

Also, there is one Buddhist and one secular cave near the Palsambe town which again shows activities related to the trade-route. The location of the Śaiva cave-temples is not far, not too close to the human settlement which is quite appropriate for the Pāśupata adepts. Hence the monoliths of Palsambe leave us least scope not to ascribe them to the Pāśupata sect of Śaivas and that they represent, by the number of liṅgas carved, a great Śaiva legacy that once existed over time.

Śikharas of the miniature temples carved at Palsambe
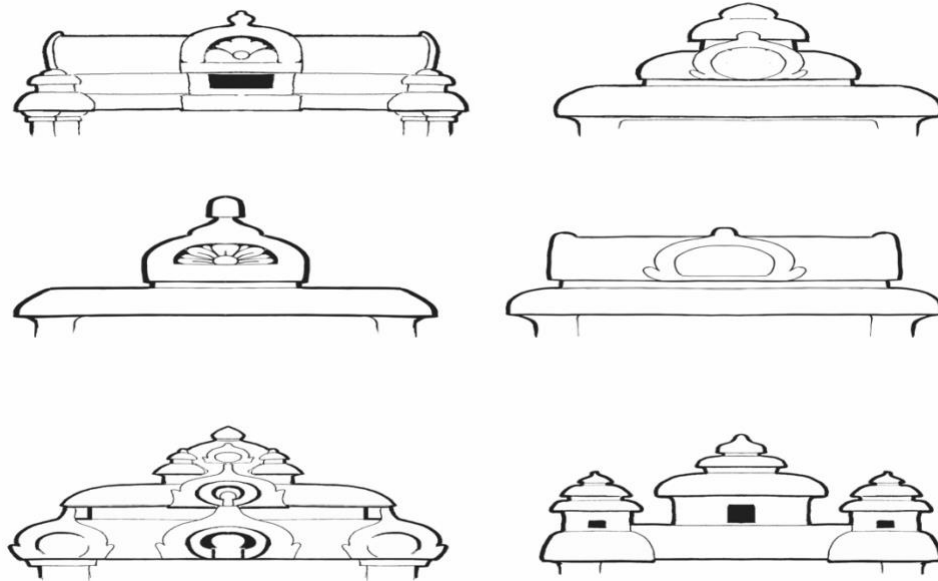
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[12]Ibid., 160.

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