

Sobhanesvara Temple, Niali: A Study of Art, Architecture and Iconography

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Abstract: *Sobhanesvara temple at Niali is located on the eastern bank of the river Prachi which was constructed towards latter half of the 12th century CE as per the inscription carved on the eastern wall of jagamohana. Accordingly, the temple was constructed by the Nagavamsi king Vaidyanatha probably a vassal king of the Ganga monarch. The writer of the inscription was a poet namely Udayana known from the inscriptions discovered from the Amaresvara temple located in the Srikakulam district of Andhra Pradesh. This is one of the important Saivite shrines of not only in coastal Odisha but also in India.*

Keywords: Sobhanesvara, Siva, garbhagriha, vimana, jagamohana, natamandapa, bhogamandapa, iconography, Visnu, Dikpalas, pidhamundi, khakhara mundi, bho motif, kirtimukha

1. Introduction

The Sobhanesvara temple (Lat: 20° 14' 15", Long: 86° 05' 91") is located in Bangali Sahi of Niali in the Cuttack district of Odisha. It is on the right side of the road leading from Phulnakhara to Niali branching from Bangali Sahi Chowk. The temple is also located on the left bank of the sacred river Prachi at a distance of 100 mtrs. This is a living temple facing towards the east. The enshrined deity is a circular *yonipitha* without a *Sivalingam* facing towards the north. The *cella* or *garbhagriha* measures 3.40 square mtrs situated 1mtr below the *chandrasila*.

Rituals like *Sivaratri*, *Sankranti*, *Jalabhiseka*, *Rudrabhiseka*, *Dola Purnima*, *Kartika Purnima*, *Gamha Purnima*, *Magha Saptami*, *Bada Osa*, *Janmastami*, *Chandanayatra*, *Sitalasasthi*, *Snana Purnima*, etc. are observed. Besides the above cultural programme marriage, engagement, thread ceremony, *mundane Kriya* and public meetings are also held here.

Date of the Temple

The temple is ascribed to the 12th century CE as per the inscription carved on the eastern wall of the *jagamohana*¹ and the architectural features like *baranda* consisting of ten mouldings² and the *navaratha* plan of the temple. Again, the female counterpart of the *Dikpalas* has been carved on the upper *jangha* of *bada*. The *Nisha* shrines (additional shrines for the *Parsvadevatas*) are also found in the temple like the *Lingaraja* and *Jagannath* temple of *Bhubaneswar* and *Puri* respectively. Most of the architectural and sculptural details of the temple are ascribed to the *Ganga* period.

Plan and Elevation of the Temple:

On plan the temple has a *vimana*, *jagamohana*, *natamandapa* and *bhogamandapa* (Fig - 1&2). However, the superstructure of the latter two structures has been collapsed since long. Whatever survives are the pillars of the *natamandapa* and *bhogamandapa*. These latter two structures were added in course of time to meet the growing need of the rituals³. Both *vimana* and *jagamohana* are *navaratha* on plan having a central *raha* with a pairs of

anuratha, *anuraha*, *pratiratha* and *kanikapagas* on either side of the central *raha*.

On elevation the *vimana* is *rekha* and *jagamohana* is in *pidha* order, as usual to the *Kalingan* style of temple architecture. The *vimana* measures 16.12 mtrs in height from *pabhaga* to *kalasa*. With five fold divisions of *bada* the temple has a *panchangabada* that measures 5.50 mtrs in height (*pabhaga* - 1.40 mtrs, *tala jangha* - 1.10 mtrs, *bandhana* - 0.50 mtrs, *upara jangha* - 1.10 mtrs, and *baranda* - 1.40mtrs). The *gandi* having is curvilinear spire measures 6.82 mtrs in height and *mastaka* measures 3.80 mtrs in height having *beki*, *amalaka*, *khapuri* and *kalasa*. The *jagamohana* is 12.30 mtrs in height from bottom to top.

The *vimana* is made of ochre colored sandstone whereas the *jagamohana* is in grey sandstone with the technique of dry masonry⁴ as usual to *Kalingan* style. The temple is repaired by Odisha State Department of Archaeology, Govt. of Odisha under 10th and 11th financial plan.

Doorjamb

The doorjamb of the *vimana* is decorated with three vertical bands of scroll works like *Puspasakha*, *narasakha* and *latasakha* from exterior to interior. At the base of the doorjamb, *dwarapala* niches enshrined four armed *Nandi* and *Bhrungi* with the river goddesses like *Ganga* and *Yamuna*. The *dvarapala* niches surmounted with the *Bho* motifs. At the *lalatabimba* there is a *Gajalaxmi* seated in *lalitasana* over a lotus pedestal. The deity holds lotus in left hand and her right hand is in *varada mudra*. At the architrave there is a *navagraha* panel and each Planet seated in *padmasana* posture with their usual attributes.

Decoration (Western wall)

The western *raha* niche enshrined a four armed *Kartikeya* (Fig.3) standing over a lotus pedestal. He is holding a cock in his upper left hand and the leg of the cock resting over the right hand of a female attendant. The upper right hand of the deity is broken and lower right hand is in *varadamudra*. The mount Peacock is found at the base. The deity is flanked by two *Sivaganas* and two *Gajavyala* on either side. Flying

Vidyadharas and Sivaganas are found at the top of the image. The deity is crowned with *jatamukuta*⁵.

The *raha* niche is flanked by two pilasters which are decorated with floral designs, animal motifs and *Kirtimukha*. At the base of the *gandi*, three miniature *rekha angasikharas* are found in which the central one is larger than the rest two. Another *Kirtimukha* is found at the centre of the *gandi*. The *tala jangha* and *upara jangha* are decorated with *khakhara mundi* and *pidha mundi* respectively. At the top of the *khakhara mundi chaitya* motifs are found depicted. The *bandhana* has three mouldings decorated with scroll works or floral designs. The *baranda* has ten horizontal mouldings devoid of any decoration.

Human figurines have been carved at the centre of the *khakhara mundi* niches whereas *bho* motifs are at the top. In the *pratiratha paga* so far in the *tala jangha* niche there is Aja Ekapada Bhairava and in the *pidha mundi* niche there is a female figurine of *tribhanga* pose. The female attendant is pushing an unidentified object into her genital organ in her left hand and the right hand is touching to the chin.

Right side of raha

At the centre of the *khakhara mundi* of *anuratha paga*, there is an Aja Ekapada Bhairava and in the *pidha mundi* niche, there are two male figures standing close to each other. The *tala jangha* niche of *anuratha paga* is depicted with a seated bull over a lotus pedestal. In front of the bull there are two bearded male figurines. There is a *Darpana* figurine in *tribhanga* pose in the *pidha mundi* niche of *pratiratha paga*. She is holding a mirror in her right hand and pushing her fingers into her genital organ in her left hand. In the *pidha mundi* niche of *kanika paga* *Visnu ganas* with *aradhana* pose are also found along with two attendants at the base. Nine *bhumi amalas* are found in *kanika paga*.

Northern wall

There is a teaching scene in the *khakhara mundi* niche of *anuratha paga* in which a male is teaching whereas two are listening. In the eastern wall of *vimana*, behind the *ganthiala* there is an image of Surya in the *pidha mundi* niche. The Sun - god is holding two lotuses on his either hands with a chariot drawn by seven horses flanked by two female attendants. The deity is crowned with *kirita mukuta*. There is a *jagrata* motif in the *talaj angha* of the *ganthiala* portion and in the *pidha mundi* niche a female figure in *tribhanga* pose.

Southern wall of vimana

The central *raha* niche enshrined with a four armed Ganesa standing over a lotus pedestal. The deity holds a *parasa* in lower left hand and upper left hand holding *modakapatra* while his lower right hand holding rosary and upper right hand holding a tusk. The image is crowned with *jata mukuta* and standing in front of a decorated *torana* flanked by female worshippers and *Vidyadharas*.

Left side of raha niche

The *anuratha paga* is partially renovated. The *tala jangha* decorated with *khakhara mundi* pilaster and the *mastaka* of the *khakhara mundi* pilaster is further decorated with stylized *chaitya* motif. At the centre of the *chaitya* there is a

pidhamundi pilaster having scroll works. At the centre of *pidha mundi* pilaster there is a *nayika* standing in *tribhanga* pose over a decorated pedestal. Her left hands resting over her left thigh while her right hand holding a *chamara*. In the *tala jangha* portion, there is a male figure sitting in cross legs and his hand resting over two female attendants. The *mastaka* of *khakhara mundi* pilaster is decorated with *Bho* motif. The *kanika paga* decorated with Dikpala figurines like Kubera which is partially broken and seated in *lalitasana*.

Right side of raha

The conjunction between *raha* and *anuratha paga* has *vyala* figurines in *tala jangha* and *upara jangha* is plain due to the renovation work. The *anuratha paga* is decorated with *nayika* figure (*Darpana*) at *upara jangha* portion standing in *tribhanga* pose. The *anuratha paga* decorated with two male figures seated over a pedestal at *tala jangha* portion. The *pabhaga* portion is plain but one vertical band has decorated with *kanakalata* motif that joined the five segments of *pabhaga*. The *bandhana* is decorated with floral designs.

Decoration of jagamohana

The doorjamb of the *jagamohana* is decorated with single vertical band of scroll work. At the base of the doorjamb, there are two small niches enshrined with two female figurines. At the centre of the lintel there is a *kirtimukha*.

The *pabhaga* is partially buried and what survives are a series of *khakhara mundi* flanked by vertical pilasters surmounted by the *naga* and *nagi* figures. The *Naganagi* holds garland in their hands. A royal person in *rajalilasana* (**Fig.4**), *naravyala*, female figurines decorating their hair and squeezing her hair, teaching scene, a *chamari*, *Siva* in *dhyanamudra*⁶, *nayika* cleaning her tooth, erotic couple standing over a tree pedestal, a male holding a *kamandalu*, a *salabhanjika*, *alasakanya*, a female fondling with her child, amorous couple (**Fig.5**), bearded male etc depicted in the western wall of the *jagamohana*.

The northern wall of *jagamohana* enshrined the following figures from exterior to interior in the left side of the balustrated window i. e. male figure in standing pose, *Vayu* in *lalitasana*, pot - bellied male figure standing over a *padmapitha*, *gajavyala*, a *chamari*, a potbellied a tantric deity capturing two female figurines, a bearded male figurine and a six armed *Siva* seated over a lotus pedestal. The *pidha mundi* niches houses the figurines like *chamari*, *Vayu*, female warrior holding a sword in her right hand, a teaching scene, amorous couple and a female carrying to his child.

The south wall of *jagamohana* decorated with a balustrated window measuring 1.58 mtrs in height and 1.78 mtrs in width having six vertical pilasters. The *pabhaga* portion of the *bada* decorated with a *khakhara mundi* pilaster surmounted by pair of *Naganagi* image with serpent hood. The *khakhara mundi* pilaster crowned with a *kalasa* flanked by two lion facing towards opposite direction.

Natamandapa and Bhogamandapa

These two structures are found in front of the *jagamohana* as usual to Kalingan style of temple architecture. There are

altogether ten pillars in *natamandapa* and sixteen in *bhoga mandapa* respectively. The sixteen pillared *mandapas* are also found in the Gosagresvara temple precinct, Kalarahanga temple, Kapilesvara temple precinct in Bhubaneswar and in the Muktimandapa of the Jagannatha temple of Puri.

Detached sculptures

There is a modern building located on the northern part of the temple premise constructed by the Odisha State Dept. of Archaeology to display the detached sculptures found in the adjacent area⁷. The building houses 10 images of which eight are Visnu or locally known as Madhava, one Varaha and one Yama. For the convenience, from the extreme right, the Scholar documented the sculptures irrespective of their iconography and measurement.

Visnu image - 1

The four armed Visnu made of chlorite standing over a lotus pedestal is holding wheel in his lower right hand, upper right hand in *varada mudra*, conch in his lower left hand and mace in his upper left hand. The image wearing sacred thread, bangles, armlets, necklaces, beaded garlands, *padma kundala* and crowned with *kirita mukuta*. At the base there are two female attendants found on either side. The right side female attendant holding lotus in her left hand and right hand is in *varada mudra*. The left side female attendant resting her left hand over her left thigh and her right hand is in *varada mudra*. At the top of the sculpture there are two flying *Vidyadharas* holding garlands in their hands. The image measures 1.48 mtrs in height and 0.70 mtrs in width.

Visnu image - 2

The four armed Visnu image standing over a lotus pedestal. Except the lower right hand the rest hands are broken. The image wearing armlets, bangles, wrist ornaments, sacred thread and crowned with *kiritamukuta*. At the top, the deity is flanked by two flying *Vidyadharas* with their female counterparts and at the centre there is a *Kirtimukha*. The figure measures 0.73 mtrs in height, 0.38 mtrs in width and with a thickness of 0.16. All the Visnu images are similar iconography.

Other Sculptures

Yama, the *dikpalas* of southern direction is seated over a lotus pedestal with *lalitasana* pose. At the base of the pedestal there is a buffalo flanked by two male attendants. The image is partially broken and measures 0.85 mtrs in height and 0.45 mtrs in width. The deity is made of sandstone.

The four armed Trivikrama made of chlorite measures 0.48 mtrs height and 0.28 in width. The deity is holding wheel in his lower right hand and the upper right hand is broken. Bhudevi seated over his lower left arm and conch in his upper right hand.

Compound wall

There is a compound wall made of dressed laterite blocks with an entrance in the eastern side and there are eight flights of steps leading to the temple precinct. One flight of step measure 0.36 mtrs in length and 1.50 mtrs in breadth with a height of 0.23 mtrs. The compound wall measures

55.50 mtrs in length and 32.50 mtrs in width, 2.30 mtrs in height with a thickness of 1.20 mtrs.

This is one of the important Saivite centre not only in Prachi valley but also in Odisha that needs conservation and chemical preservation for posterity. The detached sculptures housed in the sculptured shed either is shifted to a new building or to the Odisha state museum for documentation and research.

References

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Figure 1: General View of Sobhaneswara temple



Figure 2: Natamandapa and Bhogamandapa



Figure 3: Parsvadevata Kartikeya



Figure 5: Amorous couple



Figure 4: *Rajalilasana* scene