Niali Sobhanesvara Temple: Studies in 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 Amareesvara temple located in the Srikakulam district of Andhra Pradesh. This is one of the important Saitite shrines of not only in coastal Odisha but also in India.

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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 branchning 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 garbha griha measures 3.40 square mtrs situated 1mtr below the chandrasila.

Rituals like Sivaratri, Sankranti, Jalabhiseka, Rudrabhisheka, Dola Purnima, Kartika Purnima, Gomha Purnima, Magha Saptami, Bada Osa, Jannastami, Chandanayatra, Sitalasasti, 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 and the architectural features like baranda consisting of ten mouldings and the navaratha plan of the temple. Again, the female counterpart of the Dikpalas has been carved on the upper jagha 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 rituals. 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 barren - 1.40mtrs). The gandi having is curvilinear spire measures 6.82 mtrs in height and mastaka measures 3.80 mtrs in height in having bekhi, amalaka, khapari 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 masonry 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, dvarpapala niches enshrined four armed Nandi and Bhrungi with the river goddesses like Ganga and Yamuna. The dvarpapala niches surmounted with the Bho motifs. At the latabimbha there is a Gajalaxmi seated in latitasana 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 Gajavala on either side. Flying
Vidyadharas and Sivaganasare found at the top of the image. The deity is crowned with jatamukuta.

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 angusikharas 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 ganthihala 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 kirti mukuta. There is a jagrata motif in the talaj angha of the ganthihala 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 latitasana.

**Right side of raha**

The conjunction between raha and anuraha 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 is 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 rajahlisana (Fig.4), narayayala, female figurines decorating their hair and squeezing her hair, teaching scene, a chamari, Siva in dhyamamudra, 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, Vyau in latitasana, pot - bellied male figure standing over a padmapitha, gajayyala, 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, Vyau, 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 kalanca flanked by two lion facing towards opposite direction.

**Natamandapa and Bhogamandapa**

These two structures are found in front of the jagamohanaas usual to Kalinga 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 area. 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 kirti 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 Vidyadhārās 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 kirtimukha. At the top, the deity is flanked by two flying Vidyadhārās 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
Figure 3: Parsvadevata Kartikeya

Figure 4: Rajalilasana scene

Figure 5: Amorous couple