

'Footnotes' at Ambarnath Śivālaya

Kumud Kanitkar

The *karotaka* ceiling of the Ambarnath Śivālaya *maṇḍapa* is supported on four beams. Both sides of west, north and south beams have friezes with images. There are seven images on each side/face (inner and outer) of these beams. Each image is but ten inches tall, placed in a pillared niche and flanked by a pair of attendants. These images are remarkable both for their beauty and their significant placement. The focus here is on two sets of images. First, the *dvādaśa-mūrtis* of Viṣṇu, on the north beam (seven images on inner face and five on part of outer face); and second, the seven images on the outer face of west beam.

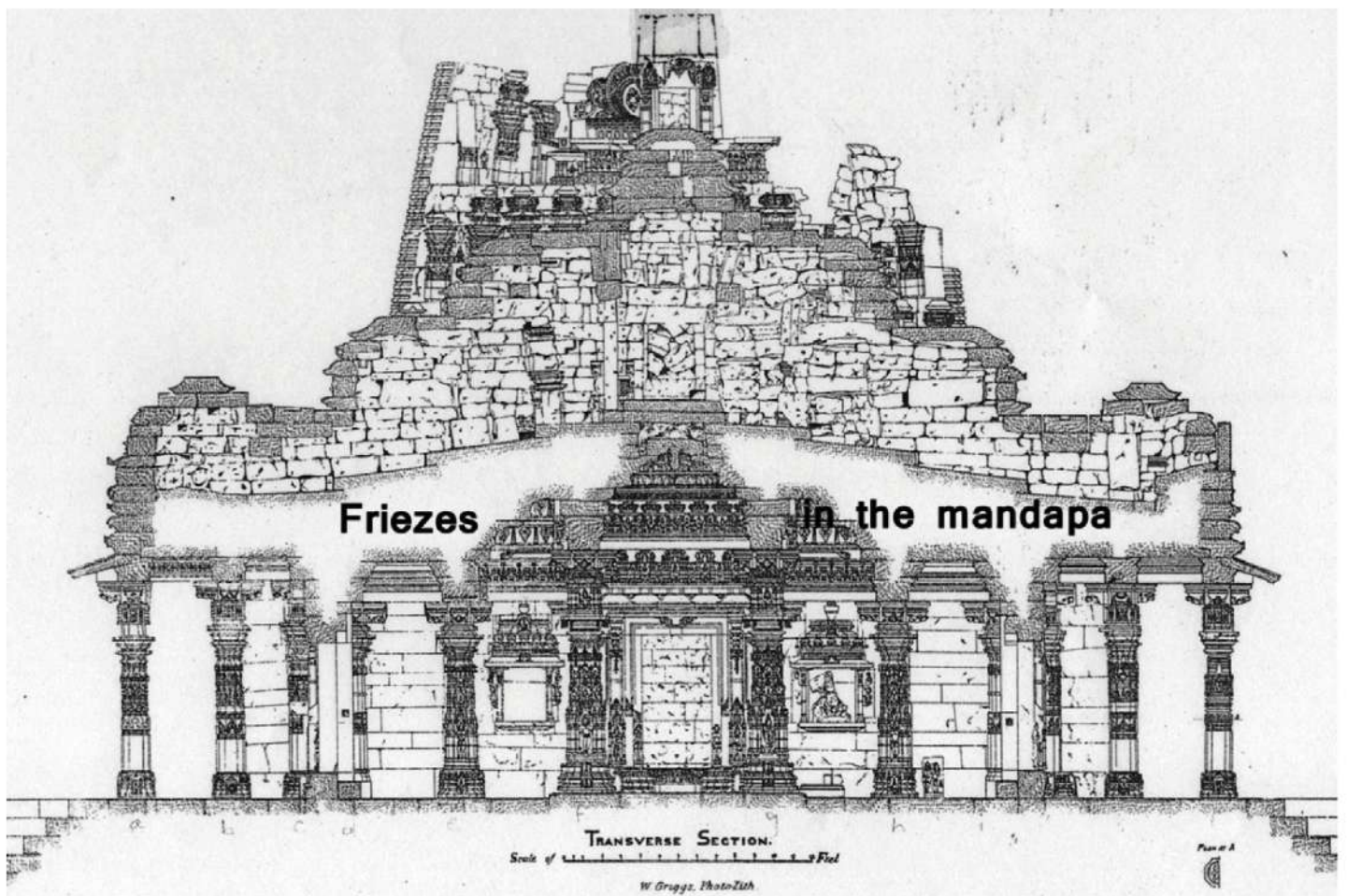
A point worth noting: Ambarnath Śivālaya was constructed between 1035 and 1060 CE. The images described here remain exactly as they were carved in eleventh century. The first set of images could thus be considered a 'dated visual text' about *dvādaśa-mūrtis* of Viṣṇu.

A brief introduction to the Ambarnath temple iconography is required to understand the title of this essay. This artistic monument functioned in its own right as text; images were not just art – they conveyed many concepts. The *Ācārya* (preceptor priest) of the Ambarnath Śivālaya endeavored to convey concepts of *Śaiva Siddhānta* theology through sculptures.¹ One of the concepts illustrated was the transformation of the 'Śiva' principle (formless/निर्गुण), through Sadāśiva (निर्गुण/सगुण - formless/with form) to manifestations (with form/सगुण). The formless was in the sanctum as a mere symbol (*liṅga*). The choicest locations on the temple's outer wall (*bhadra* and *maṇḍapa karṇa*), were cleverly used to convey the concept of Sadāśiva through directional aspects of Sadāśiva. The remaining locations were used for lesser manifestations, *dīkṣālas* and *āvaraṇadevatās*.

The four directional aspects of Sadāśiva are Tatpuruṣa on the east, Aghora on the south, Sadyojāta on the west and Vāmadeva on the north.² The east-west

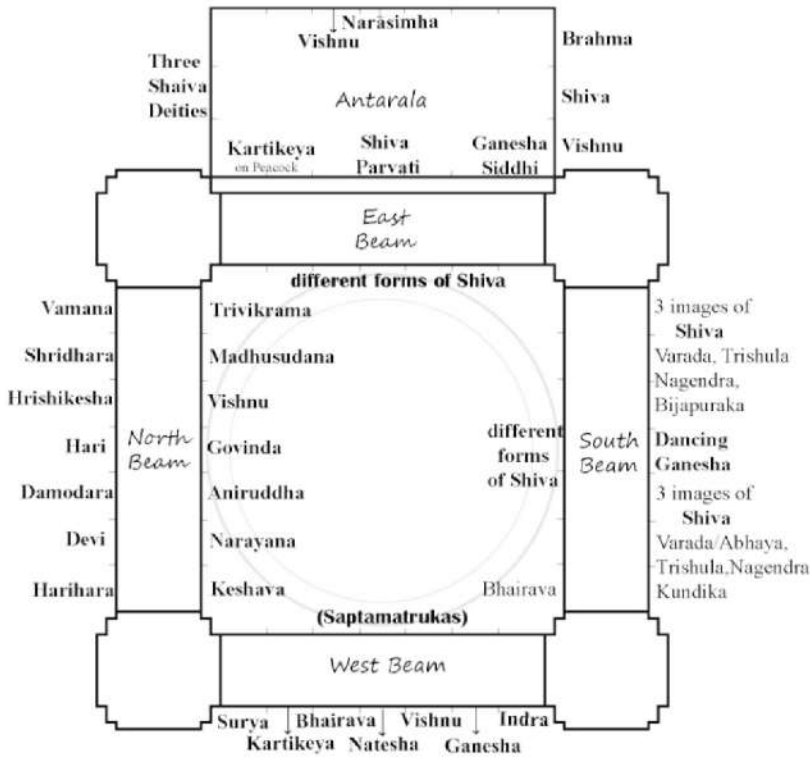
central axis of the structure and strict adherence to mirror symmetry about this central axis permitted portrayal of only the complementary aspects of Sadāśiva, Vāmadeva on the north and Aghora on the south, on the *janṅhā*. The *Ācārya* stressed hierarchy amongst other divinities as perceived in a *Śaiva* thought-world. In addition to location, he also used 'tāla' (relative size), highest for Śiva, lower for others, to convey lower status of other divinities. This meticulously planned imagery makes Ambarnath Śivālaya (in a limited sense), an 'illustrated book on *Śaiva Siddhānta* in stone'.

Present essay takes the understanding of the imagery further to focus on a set of friezes inside the temple. At a height more than twelve feet (Drawing 1), these friezes remain ever shrouded in darkness. As a result, these are not noticed by a casual viewer. The question often asked is 'why are they there at all?' The answer is they serve the same function as 'footnotes' in a book. The book in question here is in stone, the Ambarnath Śivālaya itself. A casual reader of a printed book may not read footnotes but a serious researcher will definitely read them and gain valuable



Drawing 1 : Transverse section illustrating position of friezes

extra insight. Extending the analogy to the 'Lithic' book (Ambarnath Śivālaya), a devotee visiting the temple would look at the sculptures on the outer wall in the course of *pradakṣiṇā*. A *Śaiva sādḥaka*, on the other hand, would spend many hours during the day, performing rituals inside the temple. He would naturally spend more time meditating on the Sadāśiva aspect in order to try and reach the formless. The images on the friezes were for his benefit (Drawing 2).



(error in labelling: W outer frz :Brahma, not Bhairava)

Drawing 2 : Labeled drawing, images on friezes

Four beams support the central *karotaka* dome of the Ambarnath temple *mandapa* (Fig.1). Both sides of west, north and south beams have friezes with images. There are seven images on each side/face (inner and outer) of these beams. Each image is but ten inches tall, placed in a pillared niche, and flanked by a pair of attendants.



Fig.1 : Central Karotaka Ceiling of the *mandapa*; north inner frieze in full at bottom



Fig.2 : All seven images on north inner frieze

First discussion is on *dvādaśa-mūrtis* of Viṣṇu on the inner and part of outer face of the north beam (Viṣṇu Vāmadeva on the north).

The friezes on north beam (inner and part of outer faces combined) are very interesting. Seven Viṣṇu images (Fig.2) on the inner face of the north beam continue on the outer side of the north beam with remaining five Viṣṇu images. This completes *dvādaśa-mūrtis* of Viṣṇu. It is accepted that out of 24 *vyūhānatara* forms of Viṣṇu, twelve are more important, as they represent three emanations each from four *vyūhas*, Vāsudeva, Saṁkarṣaṇa, Pradyumna and Aniruddha.³

from *vyūha* Vāsudeva emanated : Keśava, Nārāyaṇa & Mādhava

from *vyūha* Saṁkarṣaṇa emanated : Govinda, Viṣṇu & Madhusūdana

from *vyūha* Pradyumna emanated : Trivikrama, Vāmana & Śrīdhara

from *vyūha* Aniruddha emanated : Hṛṣikeṣa, Padmanābha & Dāmodara

Thus, the order of images should be – 1. Keśava, 2. Nārāyaṇa, 3. Mādhava, 4. Govinda 5. Viṣṇu, 6. Madhusūdana, 7. Trivikrama, 8. Vāmana, 9. Śrīdhara, 10. Hṛṣikeṣa, 11. Padmanābha and 12. Dāmodara.

There are small discrepancies. The images identified on the basis of *āyudhas* (on the inner frieze, going from west to east) are Keśava, Nārāyaṇa, Aniruddha, Govinda, Viṣṇu, Madhusūdana, Trivikrama; then (on the outer frieze, east to west), Vāmana, Śrīdhara, Hṛṣikeṣa, Hari and Dāmodara.

Location	Vyūha according to Text	Text attributes	Actual Attributes	Actual Vyūha on frieze	
N 1	Keśava	p-s-c-g	- -c-g	Keśava	or Padmanābha
N 2	Nārāyaṇa	s-p-g-c	s-p-g-c	Nārāyaṇa	
N 3	Mādhava	g-c-s-p	c-g-s-p	Aniruddha	
N 4	Govinda	c-g-p-s	c-g-p-s	Govinda	
N 5	Viṣṇu	g-p-s-c	g-p-s-c	Viṣṇu	
N 6	Madhusūdana	s-c-p-g	c-s-g-p	Pradyumna	
N 7	Trivikrama	p-g-c-s	p- - -	? six possibilities	
N 8	Vāmana	s-c-g-p	s-c-g-p	Vāmana	
N 9	Śrīdhara,	p-c-g-s	p-c-g-s	Śrīdhara	
N 10	Hṛṣikeṣa	g-c-p-s	g-c-p-s	Hṛṣikeṣa	
N 11	Padmanābha	s-p-c-g	s-c-p-g	Hari	
N 12	Dāmodara	p-s-g-c	p-s-g-c	Dāmodara	



Fig.3 : (- - c-g)

Figures below show that the *vyūhānatara* Viṣṇu images, identified on the basis of the order of *āyudhas* in their hands (order: lower right, upper right, upper left, lower left) are N1 - - c-g (Padmanābha s-p-c-g ? or Keśava p-s-c-g ?); N2 s-p-g-c Nārāyaṇa, N3 c-g-s-p Aniruddha, N4 c-g-p-s Govinda, N5 g-p-s-c Viṣṇu, N6 c-s-p-g Madhusūdana, N7 p - - - (with just one *āyudha* visible, could be Dāmodara, Trivikrama, Keśava, Śrīdhara, Janārdana, Adhokṣaja ? identification not possible).

The first image in the series, (north inner) is partly eclipsed by the last image, Cāmuṇḍā on the west frieze, clearly seen in Fig.3, so could represent Padmanābha s-p-c-g or Keśava p-s-c-g.

Figs.5,6,7 show individual

images of N3 Aniruddha, N4 Govinda and N5 Viṣṇu. These are not only exquisite, they show symmetry in their postures too! Central image N4, both legs are folded. Image to true right has right leg folded, and *vice versa*.

The very first image (north inner frieze, west end) is pressed into the corner and only two *āyudhas* in the left upper and lower hands can be seen (Fig.3). These are *cakra* (discus, UL) and *gadā* (mace, LL). The image could be either Padmanābha (*śaṅkha-padma-cakra-gadā*) or Keśava (*padma-śaṅkha-cakra-gadā*). It is likely to have been Keśava since it is the first *vyūha* in all texts,⁴ so it is assumed to be Keśava. The second image is Nārāyaṇa. The third image should be of Mādhava (*gadā-cakra-śaṅkha-padma*). The attributes appear in the order *cakra-gadā-śaṅkha-padma* which would identify it as Aniruddha. One is tempted to attribute this to an error on the part of the sculptor, interchanging the position of two attributes held in the right hand (Fig.4). Subsequent images are Govinda, Viṣṇu, Madhusūdana. The seventh

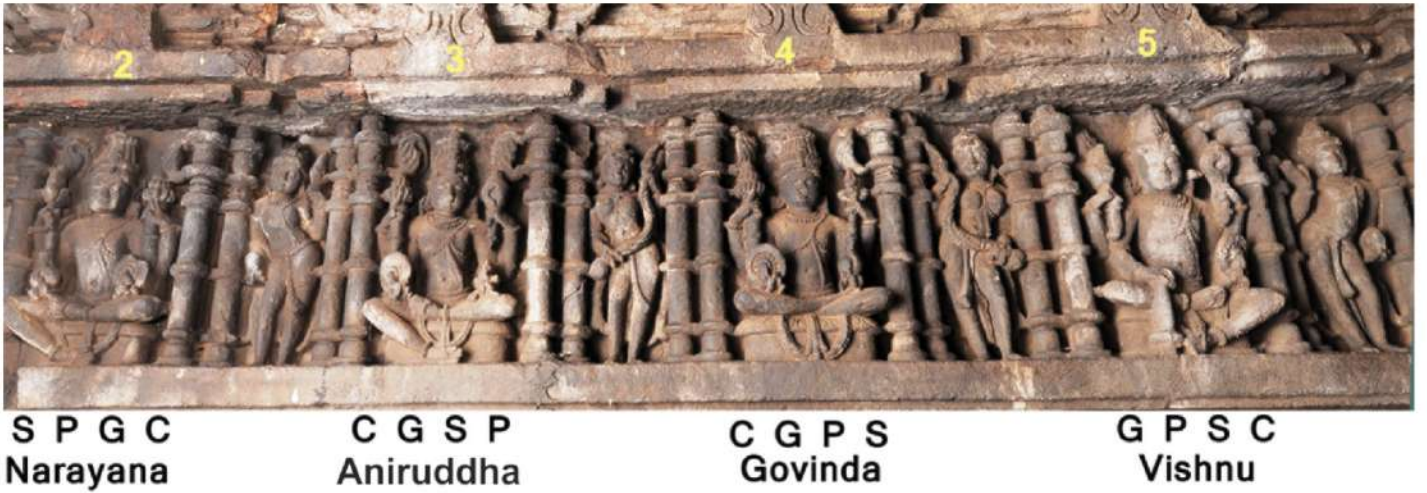


Fig.4 : Shows images 2,3,4, and 5 in the frieze



Fig.5 : N3 c-g-s-p Aniruddha

Fig.6 : N4 c-g-p-s Govinda



Fig.7 : N5 g-p-s-c Vishnu



image is again in a corner and only *Padma* can be seen in the lower right hand. It is assumed to be Trivikrama (*padma-gadā-cakra-śaṅkha*). Individual figures of 6th and 7th are not included here.

Outer face of north beam has images of Vāmana, Śrīdhara, Hṛṣikeṣa (Fig.8), Hari (*śaṅkha-cakra-padma-gadā*, Fig.9) and Dāmodara (*padma-śaṅkha-gadā-cakra*, Fig.10). Hari is again assumed to be an error, a result of interchanging the position of two attributes in the upper hands. It should have been Padmanābha (*śaṅkha-padma-cakra-gadā*). Thus, twelve *vyūhāntara* Viṣṇus would seem to have been intended for north beam frieze. Dāmodara is followed by images of Harihara and Devī. Harihara image could be to emphasize that the twelve Viṣṇu images are to be understood only as an aspect of Sadāśiva. Devī image could be acknowledgement of *Umā-vaktra* as an alternate directional aspect (north) of Sadāśiva. It is noteworthy that a Śivālaya has these twelve beautiful sculptures of Viṣṇu.



N8 s-c-g-p Vāmana

N9 p-c-g-s Śrīdhara

N10 g-c-p-s Hṛṣikeṣa

Fig.8 : Frieze on North outer face East to West



Fig.9 : N11 s-c-p-g Hari



Fig.10 : N12 p-s-g-c Dāmodara

The second frieze in focus is on the outer face of west beam (on entering the *maṇḍapa* from the main west entrance and looking up). It has seven images: 1. Sūrya, 2. Kārttikeya, 3. Brahmā, 4. Naṭeśa, 5. Viṣṇu, 6. Gaṇeśa and 7. Indra (Figs.11-15).



Fig.11 : Sūrya



Fig.12 : Kārttikeya on peacock, Brahmā on goose



Fig.13 : Naṭeśa



Fig.14 : Viṣṇu (*aṅjalihasta*) on Garuḍa and Dancing Gaṇeśa



Fig.15 : Indra on Airāvata

It is natural that Naṭeśa has the pride of place in the centre of the frieze with Brahmā to his right (*dakṣiṇa*) and Viṣṇu on his left *Vāmadeva* (Viṣṇu appears here as himself, not as an aspect of Sadāśiva so is pointedly in *aṅjalihastamudrā*). Kārttikeya and Gaṇeśa claim their place as Śiva's sons, on the north and south

flank of Śiva, just as they do on the *antarāla* outside. Sūrya probably represents the *nava-grahas* and Indra, the *aṣṭadikpālas*.

The corresponding frieze on the inside of west face (Fig.16) of the dome is partly damaged but five of the seven *saptamātṛkās* can be seen, ending in Cāmuṇḍā.



Fig.16 : Bhairava and Brahmārī, first of *saptamātṛkās* on west frieze

The south frieze (inner face) has images of seven forms of Śiva. Directional aspect of Sadāśiva (south) would require images to be of Aghora/Bhairava. Specific identification of images is difficult. Only one image, the 7th, with the distinctive *jaṭā-bhāra*, normally associated with Bhairava, is in the west corner of the south frieze holding a *kapāla*, *khaḍga* and *naramuṇḍa*.

Viṣṇu in a Śiva Shrine

The main entrance of Ambarnath Śivālaya is on the west. Images on the outside, on the *bhadras* are - Mahākālī (*Ūmāvakra*, north) a syncretic Hari-Hara-Brahmā-Sūrya (*Tatpuruṣa*, east) and *Gajāsursamhāramūrti* (Aghora, south).

Maṇḍapa karṇas (on north and south) depict directional aspects of Śiva as Sadāśiva, on the north are Viṣṇu as Vāmadeva (Varāha and Narasimha) and Devī (Caṇḍikā, Mahiṣāsoramardinī Durgā).⁵ The *Ācārya* has emphasized that 'Viṣṇu' is a 'mere aspect' of Sadāśiva by showing images only on the *Maṇḍapa karṇas* alongside of Devī (not so on *bhadras*) that too, only as Narasimha and Varāha, not *vyūhāntara* Viṣṇu!

Yet it is noteworthy that a Śivālaya has twelve beautiful sculptures of *vyūhāntara* Viṣṇu on the north frieze when these represent Vāmadeva aspects of Śiva as Sadāśiva.

The *Ācārya* has re-emphasized 'lesser status' of Viṣṇu as himself in the west outer frieze by showing only Viṣṇu with folded hands; not Brahmā, not Kārttikeya, not Gaṇeśa, not Sūrya nor Indra!

References & Notes

1. Kumud Kanitkar, *Ambarnath Śivālaya*, Dileep Kanitkar, Mumbai, 2013 (English); डॉ. सौ. कुमुद कानिटकर, अंबरनाथ शिवालय, दिलीप कानिटकर, मुंबई, 2014 (Marathi).
2. सद्योजातम् तु वारुण्याम् वामदेवम् तथोत्तरे
अघोरम् दक्षिणमुखं प्राचि तत्पुरुषाढ्यम्
Īśāna Śiva Gurudeva Paddhati of Īśāna Śiva Gurudeva, Ed. Ganapati Sastri, Bharatiya Vidya Prakashan, Delhi, 1988, Vol.I, *kriyāpāda*, p.62.
3. G.B. Deglurkar, विष्णुमूर्ते नमस्तुभ्यम्, Shri Dvarakadhisha Charities, Karnala (Dist. Raigad), 2007, p.39
“from *vyūha* Vāsudeva emanated: Keśava, Nārāyaṇa and Mādhava
from *vyūha* Saṅkarṣaṇa emanated: Govinda, Viṣṇu and Madhusūdana
from *vyūha* Pradyumna emanated: Trivikrama, Vāmana and Śrīdhara
from *vyūha* Aniruddha emanated: Hṛṣīkeṣa, Padmanābha and Dāmodara”
4. *Ibid.*, example page 10: “केशवः प्रथमा मूर्तिस्ततो नारायणाढ्यः ...”
5. Ref.1, pages 98-102; also डॉ. सौ. कुमुद कानिटकर, अंबरनाथ शिवालय, दिलीप कानिटकर, 2014, पान 108-110.

Acknowledgements

Author thanks the ASI Mumbai circle for permission to photograph inside sculptures at Ambarnath Temple.

Thanks to Mr. Arun Maid for permission to use photo of the northern inner frieze at Ambarnath.

The author is grateful to Amar Reddy, Anil Daware and Prashant More for photographing the friezes, 13 feet above floor level, in total darkness and in suffocating heat at Ambarnath.

Photo Courtesy :

Figs.1,2 - Kevin Standage 0686,0257; Figs.3-10,16 - Amar Reddy; Figs.11-15 - Anil Daware