

Anwa: A Unique Vaishnavi

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The Siva temple at Anwa is an extremely interesting temple site from 12th century CE in proximity to Ajanta and Ellora Cave structures, which puts it on the Dakshinapatha revived in the medieval period. The temple shows very interesting architecture style that seems to be in the transition period from Nagara to the more elaborate Bhumija. Although much small in scale, it has the outer mandapa that reminds of lineage to Gujarat Modhera Sun temple of Solankis and even closer to the Kopeswar Siva Temple at Khidrapur near Kolhapur. The focus in this article though is more towards the unique Vaishnavis, or the prakritis of Vishnu. The depiction of Saptamatrikas or seven mother goddesses is quite common the western and southern part of India seen abundantly from 9th century CE onwards, although a number of saptamatrka images of pre-Gupta and Gupta period, from 4th-6th century CE have also been found in Western India. Women depictions of Durga as Mahisasuramardini, Mahalakshami, Gajalakshami, river goddesses, Gayatri, Parvati and Lakshami (wives of Brahma, Siva and Visnu) has been seen on many temples. Very creative depiction of Kali, Shalabhanjika (fertility goddess) and yakshis and surasundaris have been seen on temples too. But a temple dedicated to depiction of only Vaishnavis is quite unique! In this preliminary observational article, attempt is to analyse the inspiration of this unique iconography and appreciate the exquisite quality of sculpture achieved by the artists.

Keywords: Anwa, Siva Temple, Vaishnavi, Astamatrika, Matrika, Bhumija, Yogini

There stands a small not much known Siva temple in a small town of Anwa in Sillod Taluka of Aurangabad district in Maharashtra, just 30 km from the famous Ajanta Group of caves. It is locally called 'madh', slang for Siva temples.



Fig. 1: Siva temple at Anwa, view from right of entrance (Courtesy: Snehal Joshi, Nashik)

Surprisingly elaborate and intricately carved, there seems to be no logical reason for it not being a popular tourist destination, it is ignored by popular as has been by art historical studies for quite a long time now. It has no inscription but stylistically can be dated to medieval centuries between 12th to 13th centuries. Stylistically it can be seen in proximity to the late 12th century temples built by Yadavas of Devgiri in southern and western Maharashtra, like Sinnar, Ambejogai, Devlane, Mankeshwar, Khidrapur (although built by Chalukyans and rebuilt or mended by The Yadavas) (Deglurkar 1980) and can be attributed to the same dynasty. Anwa has architectural and decorative characteristics also seen at Ambarnath (Mumbai District, Maharashtra) and Khidrapur (Kolhapur District, Maharashtra) Siva Temples.

In the post 11th century temples built by Kalyani Chalukyans and Devgiri Yadavas, we see a number of decorative characteristics of Solankis of Gujarat and Parmars of Malavya since they are contemporary to these dynasties (Deglurkar 1980). A quick glance at Anwa Siva temple reminds of the majestic *ranga mandapa* at Modhera, with the elaborate decorative pillars widening the *mukhya mandapa* of the temple into a beautiful diamond shape.

The temple has a dwarfed wall, no *pravasha mandapa* or *gudha mandapa*. The outer wall has beautiful *thara* or layers of sculptures of *Padma*, *Kani*, *Kirtimukha*, *hamsa* and *Simhayugula*. The temple stands on 50 pillars, a domical ceiling with eight concentric circles with a pendant (Deglurkar 1973). Although the superstructure or *Shikhara* of the temple does not exist anymore, the temple is in quite a good condition, with elaborate and well-crafted sculptures on all the sides. The ceiling of the temple is cited as *karotaka style* as it is held by the intricate pillars of the *mandapa* (Deglurkar 1980). The temple is called as a Siva temple and is believed to be a Siva temple, although Deglurkar finds it to be unlikely. He suggests that in middle centuries many temples in this region were converted from Vishnu to Siva and this would be the same (Deglurkar 1973). Another



Fig. 2: Siva temple at Anwa, view from left of entrance (Courtesy: Snehal Joshi, Nashik)

mentioned that the *mandapa* has almost 25-30 Vaishnava deities, especially images of Vaishnavi (Deglurkar 1973). Here we would like to propose that the female deities sculpted on the walls seem to be close to Shakti or eight *matrikas* further converging in the *yogini* sect which was associated with both Vaishnavas and Saivas. We shall discuss this later in the paper.

This temple is unique on two fronts; firstly, it seems to be an experiment towards an architectural style *Bhumija* which was seen executed at Ambarnath temple in Mumbai some few years back. Either it is an experiment extending this style to the south and western Maharashtra or a later phase of *bhumija*. Secondly, it could be one of the only temples having female Vaishnavite deities all around, unique to any temple be *Saivite* or *Vaishnavite*.



Fig. 3: Siva temple at Anwa, the front view (Courtesy: Snehal Joshi, Nashik)

aspect to support this argument could be the *garbhagriha* or the sancta sanctum does not have a sunken shrine to place the below the ground level, as seen in the contemporary temples like Ambarnath and Galtessvara. The doorway of the *gabbara* has Visnu, Lakshmi, Garuda and a Vaishnava *dwarapala*. He has

Bhumija style in architecture could be said as a further development from *Nagara* and literally means one born from the *bhumi* (earth) (Patel 2004). This style was used to build Siva temples as the whole temple seems one with the superstructure and resembles a mountain emerging from the ground.

Although Anwa is not *Bhumija*, it seems

to be in transition from late *Nagara*, which has led to it having a circular *mandapa* and sculptures that begin from the *bhitti* towards the end of the *shikhara*.

My focus in this paper though is not the architecture, although the study of the same would have its own merits in understanding transitions in architecture styles. I would rather be proposing my theories on the female deity sculptures on the temple which have been cited as *vaishnavis*.



Fig. 4: The intricate columns in the Mandapa (Courtesy: Snehal Joshi, Nashik)

Vaishnavi is recognised as the female energy of Vishnu from the *Saptamatrika*. The depiction of these began sometime around the 9th century CE. She is also one of the 64 *yoginis*, a *Shakta* cult that emerged around 9th century to 13th century CE. These 64 *yoginis* are often confused with *saptamatrikas*, the *yoginis* however evolve from nine mothers or the *Asta Matrikas* (eight

divine mothers). *Vaishnavi* though has been described much before these, in as one of the 64 *matrs* to be worshipped during *Āvaranapūjā* (circuit of Durgā).

Bhavopanishad has mentioned *Vaishnavi* as one of the eight *Matrikas* of unfavourable dispositions such as desire, anger, greed, delusion, pride,



Fig. 5: Ceiling held by columns, circular Mandapa (Courtesy: Snehal Joshi, Nashik)



Fig. 6: Close view of the *bhitti-shikhara*, transition towards *Bhumija*
 (Courtesy: Snehal Joshi, Nashik)

jealousy, demerit and merit; *Vaishnavi* is identified with power to fascinate and delude (*moha*). *Varahapurana* mentions *Vaishnavi* as the form of *Trikala* having a red body representing energy of Vishnu; she is said to be born from combined looks of *Brahma*, *Vishnu* and *Maheswara*. *Matsya Purana* mentions *Vaishnavi* as a mind born 'divine' mother created for the purpose of drinking

blood of the Andhaka demons borne from *Andhakasura*; she is mentioned as most terrible they all (*Vaishnavis*) drank the blood of those *Andhakas* and became exceedingly satiated. With the various *Vaishnavis* holding the attributes of *Chakra*, *Gada* and *Padma* in different hands in each image, Deglurkar associates these with the Vaishnavite images with *Chaturvimshatimurti*-s of Vishnu. This can be re-thought as the *Vaishnavis* here do not have all the four attributes of *shankha*, *chakra*, *gada* and *padma* on each of the sculpture

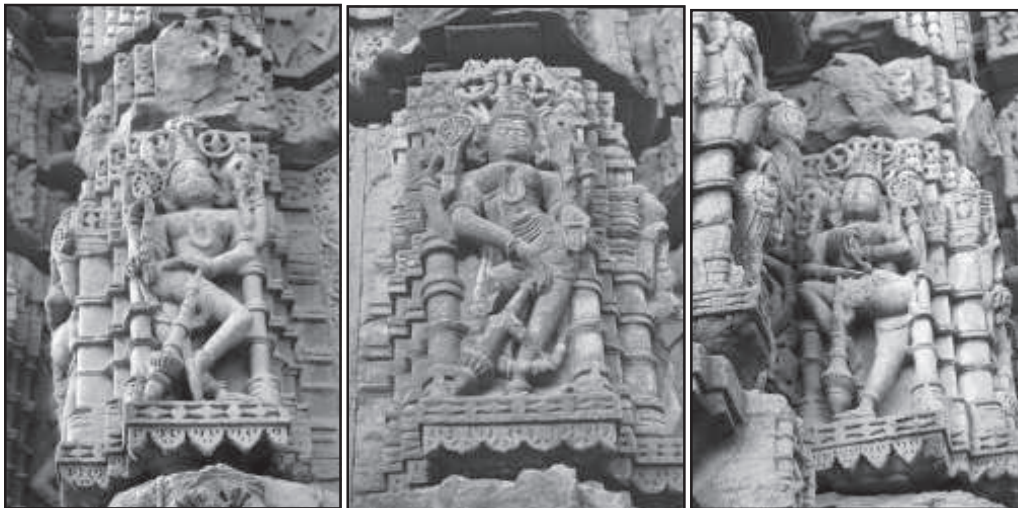


Fig. 7, 8 and 9: Vaishnavis with four hands and attributes stand like warrior-guardians (Courtesy: Snehal Joshi, Nashik)



Fig. 10: The unique Vaishnavi, dancing like Nataraja (Courtesy: Snehal Joshi, Nashik)

(*shankha* absent in most sculptures), one of the lower arms in the giving position with open palm facing front pointing to the ground. Also the postures of the *Vaishnavis* do not associate with the *Chaturvimshatimurti* forms, while some combinations like the *padma* on upper left, *gada* on upper right and *chakra* on lower right arm are not found in the mentioned *Chaturvimshatimurti*-s. Although this association cannot be completely denied till further detailed studies, they don't seem likely currently to my understanding.

The reason behind citing the above references is our further proposal that these *Vaishnavis* as not just *Vaishnavis* but the *Asta Matrikas* which further developed into the *yogini* cult through the *Natha pantha* or *Navnatha* cult in western and central Maharashtra.

The temple has exquisite medieval sculpture almost all the *Vaishnavis* in *tribhanga* conforming to the iconography from *Shilpashatra*; she stands under the *Raja*



Fig. 11, 12 & 13: Vaishnavis with four hands and attributes, in peaceful, meditative and splendour offering forms (Courtesy: Snehal Joshi, Nashik)

Vriksha, head adorned with *kirita mukuta*, richly adorned with all the ornaments as worn by Vishnu as also his characteristic *Vanamala*. Her *vahana* is *Garuda* and when shown with four arms she adorns *Chakra, Shankha, Gada* (seem explicitly at Anwa) and one arm in *Varada Mudra*. *Vishnudharmottara Purana* mentions *Vishnavi* with six arms but we do not see these at Anwa, there seems to have been transformation in the 6th centuries between. The sculptures are intricately carved and stand in all majesty as can be seen in the Surya sculptures at Modhera and Ambarnath temples. It is interesting to observe that the sculptors here have not tried to depict the *Vaishnavis* as mother goddesses or amorous figures but they resemble their male counterparts in power and wrath.

These are images of Shakti, the superpower and thus seem to be more inclined towards Durgâ, adhering to the previous cited references of having power to delude, more like *yoginis* who are attendants or various manifestations of Durgâ engaged in fighting demons. According to Khadgamala tradition of Shri Vidya, the *Matrikas* are located along the wall guarding the city Tripura on all eight directions. Though this text mentions that *Vaishnavi* is on the south, at this site we find her depicted as a warrior guardian on all the sides.

One of the most alluring of the depictions is this dynamic dancer on the back wall of the temple. She is considered *Vaishnavi* owing to all the other depictions though she looks more like the female counterpart of *Nataraja*. Unfortunately only two of her arms remain which holds cymbals. She has proximity to *Chamunda* owing to the garland resembling skulls or also could be *Mohini* the one having power of delusion. This figure has immense rhythm and force; it is the dance of power, no ordinary form of bodily movements. Her posture exudes her capacity to kill and destroy, like the above mentioned *Vaishnavi* satiated having drunk the blood of *Andhakas*. This sculpture is a unique *Vaishnavi* and further studies need to be pursued to understand its dynamism.

Two other sculptures in *dwibhanga* are *Vaishnavis* in more peaceful mood, one seated on object resembling lotus and other in her composure with all the attributes. It is interesting to observe how a single *Matrika* has been explored in various moods here. Whether this temple was a Vishnu temple converted to Siva or not, there is a certain transition in ritual practices and a rise of Shakta cult in this region that must have initiated the depictions of *Vaishnavis*. There is no specific text dedicated to *Vaishnavi*, and there seems to be a strong influence of *Asta Matrika* cult on the depictions here. The presence of a single large *mukhya mandapa* circular in shape (does not seem unusual because it resembles the contemporary temples in many aspects) could be associated with the *yoginis*.

The above views are to be looked into detail but there is no doubt that the *Vaishnavis* here allure you and are unique in their imposition. These also reflect the changing gender roles and textual references of the creators and patrons. These are powerful women who are aware of their feminine and are beyond mothers and grace, they are *tamasa, rajasa* and *sattvika*- the wrath, eros and peace at the same time.

The above mentioned views are initial observations in documenting and studying the temple site at Anwa, the observations shall be further scrutinised to detail in upcoming papers.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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