

Savannah College of Art and Design

Shree Kopeswar Temple:
The Abode of the Vexed Shiva

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When the Shilahara King Gandaraditya envisioned building a temple for Shiva, he aspired for it to be a masterpiece of architectural and sculptural beauty. Unlike his predecessors who built relatively plain yet enormous shrines along the Western Ghats of Maharashtra, Gandaraditya chose to carve a complete story in stone. After all, what else would appease his favorite deity than the reenactment of a tale that depicted Shiva's divine form? Among the many Hindu temples in India, Kopeshwar temple finds a special place solely due to its strongly narrative-driven architecture. In spite of the temple being incomplete and attacked several times, the structure stands tall and fervently exhibits the newly-emerging Bhumija style of temple architecture. Therefore, the Kopeshwar temple exemplifies the depiction of puranic legends in its architecture while encouraging creative expression that defies traditional norms.

Built by the Shilahara King Gandaraditya in the latter part of the 11th century CE¹ at Koppam (present day Khidrapur), Kopeshwar temple is dedicated to the furious form of Shiva (wherein "Kop" = anger and "Eshwar/Ishwar" = god). Located on the banks of the river Krishna, the structure commemorates a sacred site as the river flows up north instead of its usual southerly path². The very feature that makes the temple exceptional is the *Swargamandapa*, an open ceiling mandapa with elaborate sculptures of deities (fig. 1). Looking at the temple itself as a whole, one notices a few irregularities in the structure that are attributed to the abandonment in construction due to various reasons. The most conspicuous of these irregularities is the oddly shaped shikhara and main mandapa (fig. 2). Records indicate that the tall shikhara and mandapa

¹ International Journal of Advanced and Applied research. *KHIDRAPUR – A NEGLECTED, HERITAGE TOURIST CENTER: A CRITICAL STUDY*. Kolhapur: International Journal of Advanced and Applied research, 2014. <http://ijaar.yra.in/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/020201.pdf?fc0e1>. Page 2.

² Denglurkar, G.B. "ऐतिहासिक पार्श्वभूमी." In *Kopeshwar: Mandir aani Murti, कोपेश्वर: मंदिर आणि मूर्ती*, 1st ed., page 12. Kolhapur: Snehal Prakashan, 2016.

collapsed soon after completion due to an earthquake³. Nonetheless, the current shikhara was restored by the Yadavas of Devgiri after defeating the native Shilahara kings in 12th century CE⁴ (fig. 3). Subsequently, the temple suffered great damage when the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb ordered to destroy the temple sculptures during his Deccan campaign in the 17th century CE.

It is paramount to know and understand the myth from the Shiva Purana⁵ which shapes the architecture. It is summed up in the following events. Once Daksha Prajapati resolves to perform a sacrifice (*yajna*) to all the gods and goddesses. He sends invitations to everyone to participate except Shiva as Daksha considers him to be a lowly deity in contrast to his father Brahma or his beloved god Vishnu. To add fuel to the fire, Daksha's daughter Sati had married Shiva without fatherly consent. Hence, with an intent to insult Shiva, Daksha commences the *yajna*. Sati, on the other hand, is puzzled with her father's actions. She finds herself in a difficult situation as a sacrifice cannot be completed without hosting the divine trinity (*trimurti*) or their representatives. She contemplates whether to go or not. The messenger of gods, *Narada* convinces her to leave for the sacrifice as he cites that a father's house is always open to his progeny. Much to Shiva's protest, Sati departs to attend the sacrifice. Out of concern, Shiva sends the Nandi bull to accompany Sati for the sacrifice.

On reaching the venue, Daksha is enraged to see his disowned daughter Sati at his doorstep. He accuses her of desecrating the *yajna* and for having no shame to arrive as an uninvited guest. He demeans her and Shiva in front of all the deities. Overcome with extreme

³ Chothe, Shashank R. "The Kopeshwar Temple." Lecture, Kopeshwar temple, Khidrapur, December 2, 2018.

⁴ Denglurkar, G.B. "ऐतिहासिक पार्श्वभूमी." In *Kopeshwar: Mandir aani Murti, कोपेश्वर: मंदिर आणि मूर्ती*, 1st ed., page 11. Kolhapur: Snehal Prakashan, 2016.

⁵ Shastri, J. L. "The Inauguration of Daksa's sacrifice." In *Siva Purana*, page 400. Ancient Indian Tradition and Mythology, 1999.

humiliation, Sati curses Daksha and burns herself in the sacrificial fire. When Shiva hears the news, he is infuriated at Daksha for being the cause of his wife's death. In vengeance he performs the *tandava* dance and incarnates as the destructive deity of Veerbhadra who in turn beheads Daksha. Veerbhadra desecrates the sacrifice, disrespects the guest gods and sets out to destroy all creation. To prevent the apocalypse, Vishnu pacifies Shiva and asks him to forgive Daksha. Having calmed yet upset, Shiva resurrects Daksha but with a goat's head as a symbol of foolishness. A grieving Shiva then retires to the mountains to meditate while withdrawing himself from his divine duties.

The Swargamandapa at Kopeswar temple is the very recreation of this myth. The structure replaces a *mukhmandapa* that serves as an entryway to the temple. The floor plan (fig. 4 and 5) shows the circular Swargamandapa that connects to the main mandapa. On either side of the main mandapa are foundations of what could have been minor shrines or even auxiliary entrances (fig. 5). However, they were left incomplete due to the aforementioned reasons (earthquake and change of rulers). 46 columns of two different orders (fig. 6 and 7) support the Swargamandapa⁶. Raised on a platform, it has entrances from 3 ways that lead to the perfectly circular *rangshila* (fig. 1) which is proportionate to the circumference of the open ceiling. The unusual open ceiling was a topic of debate for scholars to the point where the Archaeological Survey of India had the ceiling sealed with concrete. The concrete ceiling was eventually taken down as historians found the much-ignored drainage spouts hidden away in the architecture.

⁶ Prabhudesai, Yogesh. "Kopeswar Mandir, Khidrapur." In *Kolhapuratil Mandirsampada*, कोल्हापुरातील मंदिर संपदा, 2nd ed., page 138. Kolhapur: Akshar, n.d.

Moreover, the sloping mandapa floor that allowed rainwater to drain strengthened the claim of an open ceiling⁷.

On the other hand, the puranic myth was always compatible with the Swargamandapa architecture. There are not many conspicuous sculptures in the Swargamandapa in comparison to the rest of the temple. In contrast, whatever smaller sculptures one finds here are of a great symbolic value. The inner circle of 12 pillars, each holds a sculpture of a deity. In addition, the lintels in between the pillars are carved with minor deities. The sculptures on the 12 pillars however, represent the *asthadikpalas* (guardian gods of the eight directions) paired with gods of zenith and nadir and 2 additional deities⁸ (fig. 8). The idea reinforces the importance of orienting architecture to the cardinal as well as intercardinal points as per *Vaastu shastra*. It is important to note that the Kopeshwar temple faces east like the majority of Hindu temples. Besides, the main entryway opens to the waters of the Krishna river which is of ritual importance.

As one considers the mythical aspects that tie in to the architecture, one notices Gandaratiya's clever architectural planning in conjunction to the thoughtful symbolism. From a symbolic standpoint, the *asthadikpalas* and the minor deities are shown to be gathering in a sanctified sacrificial space in a similar fashion to the puranic myth. As Shiva is not a part of the *asthadikpalas* and definitely not a minor deity, he 'watches' the event from a distance in the *garbhagriha*. Whenever sacrifices were conducted at the temple, the architecture and decoration assisted in the reenactment of the story. Such reenactments helped devotees to relate to the gods

⁷ Chothe, Shashank R. "The Kopeshwar Temple." Lecture, Kopeshwar temple, Khidrapur, December 2, 2018.

⁸ Denglurkar, G.B. "Columns in the Swargamandapa: स्वर्ग मंडपातील स्तंभ." In *Kopeshwar: mandir aani murti, कोपेश्वर: मंदिर आणि मूर्ती*, 1st ed., page 16. Kolhapur: Snehal Prakashan, 2016.

on a human as well as on a personal level. From a functional lens, the open ceiling also allowed the sacrificial smoke to rise up to the heavens and to the gods. Apart from the ritual purpose of the Swargamandapa, it was also used to entertain the masses and the deity through dances and reenactment of puranic myths. Hence, the circular stone derives its name as *rangshila* (the performance stone)⁹ (fig.1).

Popularly referred to as the Khajuraho of Maharashtra, the temple is an architectural and sculptural marvel. As stated earlier, the newly emerging Bhumija style of temple architecture is commendably depicted. The Bhumija style emerged in the 11th century CE and traces its roots to the earlier Nagara style. The word 'Bhumija' is described as 'country born' wherein it can also describe a storey (*Bhumi* = storey, ground)¹⁰. The most distinctive features of Bhumija temples are the cascading chains made up of *kuta-stambhas* (smaller shikharas) that are arranged in horizontal bands and are separated by *bhadras* (vertical ribs)(fig. 9). If the Kopeshwar temple shikhara and mandapa ceiling were intact, they might have greatly resembled the ones at Udayesvara Temple at Udaipur, Rajasthan(fig. 10)¹¹, but on a much larger and meticulous scale. Likewise, the shikhara would have had an *amalaka* and a *kalasha* at the peak.

The builder's obsession with recreating a heavenly form is reflected in the floor plan of the temple. Like all temples, the mandala plan is evident. However, the mandala now takes the form of a star with seven projections between the diagonals. This is achieved by rotating a square from a center point which in turn creates a 32 point star with 3 points hidden in each cardinal

⁹ Denglurkar, G.B. "Swargamandap: स्वर्गमंडप." In *Kopeshwar: mandir aani murti, कोपेश्वर: मंदिर आणि मूर्ती*, 1st ed., page 15. Kolhapur: Snehal Prakashan, 2016.

¹⁰ Hardy, Adam. "Nagara shrines." In *The temple architecture of India*, page 118. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2007.

¹¹ Bharne, Vinayak, and Krupali Krusche. "The Hindu Temple as language and Style." In *Rediscovering the Hindu Temple: The Sacred Architecture and Urbanism of India*, page 71. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014.

directions (fig. 11)¹². The principal deity of Shiva resides in the garbhagriha while multitudes of lesser gods and mortals are carved on the exterior walls.

There are 3 tiers of sculptures (fig. 11a) that add on the representation of the Hindu cosmos. The first and the lowest tier is called the *gajapitha* and depicts the Hindu trinity, gods, goddesses, yakshas and mortals. All the deities on the *gajapitha* ride elephants which possibly relates to the myth (as the guest gods travel to the sacrifice on an elephant) (fig. 12). Additionally, elephants are a symbol of strength and are thought to bear the load of the temple (and hence the cosmos) on their back while being memorialized (as elephants were used during construction). Similar *gajapithas* can be seen in the Kailasa temple at Ellora among many others. It is interesting to note that this tier includes sculptures of a Persian and an African man as an indication of the extensive trade links of the Shilahara kingdom from the time of the settlement of Brahmapuri in 1st century CE (fig. 13)¹³.

The second tier has the bigger sculptures that again depict deities but in accompaniment with *apsaras* and mortal women who engage in various activities. Archery, writing and dancing are among such activities (fig. 14). This tier also contains sculptures of major deities like Ganesh, Vishnu, various forms of Shiva and Parvati as an indication of their superior status. The smaller sculptures in the third and the uppermost tier correspond or contrast to the ones in the second tier, for instance the second-tier sculpture of *Bhairava* (a form of Shiva) is contrasted by a third-tier sculpture of Vishnu (fig. 15) (Vaishnava and Shaiva sects consider themselves to be

¹² Hardy, Adam. "Nagara shrines." In *The temple architecture of India*, page 120. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2007.

¹³ Barrett, Douglas. "An Early Indian Bronze Figure." In *Studies in Indian Sculpture and Painting*, page 138. Pindar Pr, 1990.

opposites, hence the pairing). Such pairing can be seen throughout the two tiers which complements the harmony and balance of the architecture from a mythological standpoint.

The mandala plan successively progresses into the main mandapa which has ornately carved pillars with bas reliefs depicting puranic myths like the Ramayana and Panchatantra. These reliefs are primarily associated with themes of goodwill, peace and rationality. The most fascinating of these include the Buddha and the bodhisattva of *Avlokiteshvara* carved onto two separate pillars¹⁴(fig. 16). Among the many figures of peace, these are the most significant as they starkly differ from the angry deity of Shiva in the garbhagriha. It seems as if all the mandapa bas reliefs attempt to mollify Shiva while preventing him from acting out of impulse. Going back to the myth, Shiva Purana states that Shiva sends the Nandi bull to accompany Sati for the yajna. This feasibly explains the absence of a Nandi sculpture that usually sits either outside the temple or in the main mandapa. There are no signs of any Nandi statues used for worship except for the decorative ones on the exterior walls. There is however a separate Nandi and Veerbhadra shrine in the neighboring village as a physical representation of the events in the myth.

Subsequently one enters the *antarala* after passing the guardian figures or *dwarpalas*. The entrance to the garbhagriha from the antarala is carved with an intricate *torana* that illustrates the Hindu creation myth. The unusual feature about the garbhagriha is the presence of not one but two deities. There is the main deity of Kopeswar (Shiva) while the other is *Dhopeswar* (Vishnu who attempts to pacify Shiva, *dhop* = to pacify)¹⁵. The more atypical

¹⁴ Denglurkar, G.B. " Buddha: बुद्ध." In *Kopeswar: mandir aani murti, कोप्पेश्वर: मंदिर आणि मूर्ती*, 1st ed., page 40. Kolhapur: Snehal Prakashan, 2016.

¹⁵ Chothe, Shashank R. "The Kopeswar Temple." Lecture, Kopeswar temple, Khidrapur, December 2, 2018.

element is that Vishnu is worshiped in a lingam form rather than an ornate sculpture (fig.17). This is probably because the detailed myth mentions Vishnu who renounces all his worldly pleasures and embraces an ascetic life to appease Shiva (hence no ornamentation or even corporal form).

Kopeshwar temple today lies neglected in the small village of Khidrapur. In spite of being so breathtakingly beautiful, it is ignored by chaotic tourists and even pilgrims. Perhaps, this adds to the ambience of peace which the temple painstakingly attempts to represent. It is a place where Shiva recovers from the loss of his wife. Thus, the devotee witnesses a thoughtfully carved story in stone that reminds oneself of the temporary nature of the universe and urges them to rise above the cycle of reincarnation to attain *moksha*. The temple with its unusual architecture is undeniably special as it boldly breaks the basic norms of temple construction to allow creative expression. The Swargamandapa, absence of the Nandi bull, presence of two opposing deities in the garbhagriha are among the many remarkable features of Kopeshwar temple. In conclusion, Kopeshwar temple meritoriously embodies the depiction of events from the Shiva Purana while paving the way for new forms of temple architecture to emerge.



(author photograph)

Figure 1. The Swargamandapa is a pillared hall with an open ceiling. Directly below the opening is the monolithic *rangshila* where the yajna sacrifices were conducted as well as dance performances.



Figure 1a. Entrance to the Swargamandapa and the temple.



(author photograph)

Figure 2. The rear side of the temple with its stout and lanky shikhara above the garbhagriha and an incomplete mandapa.



(author photographs)

Figure 3. The inscription of the Yadavas of Devgiri at the south entrance to the mandapa stating the year and the restoration work carried out in the Hindu year of 1135 (वर्षे ११३५) or 1213 CE.

(author photographs)

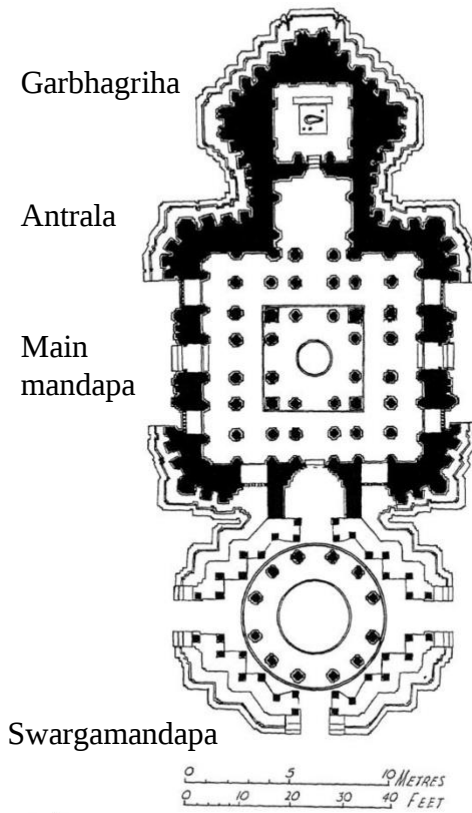
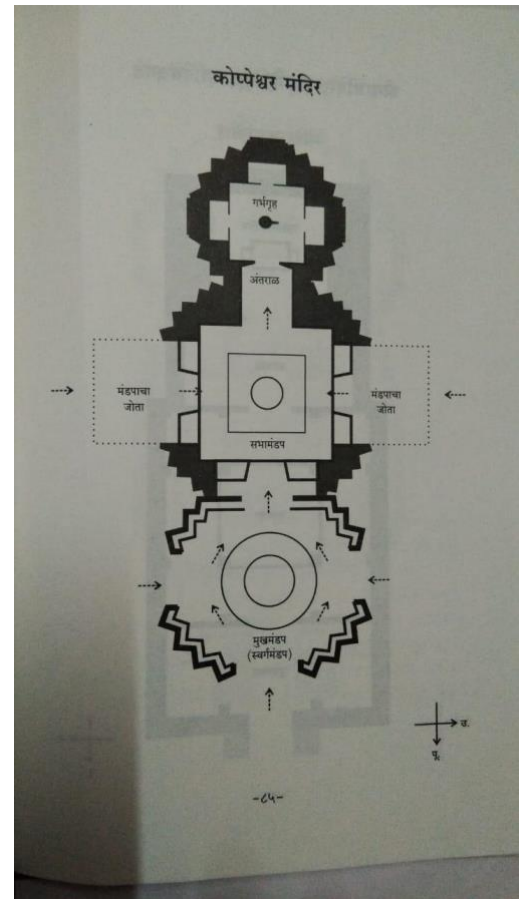
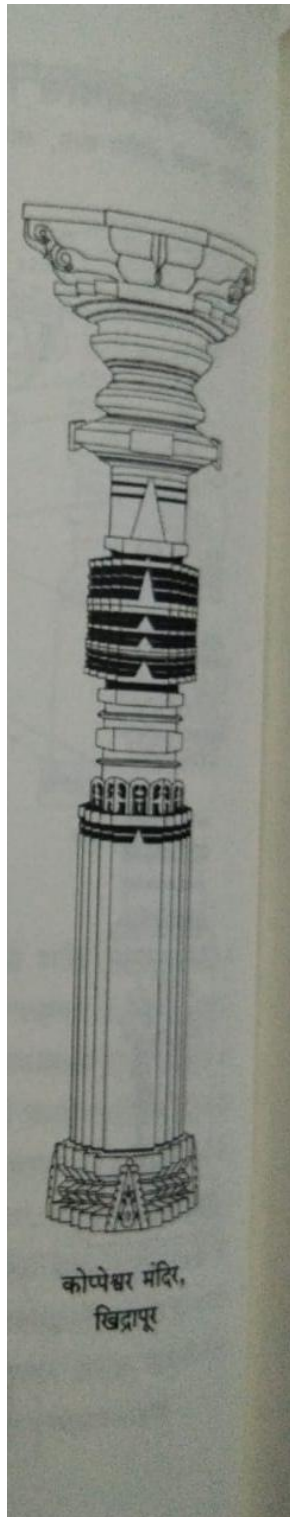


Fig 30—Ground-plan of Kōppēśvara Temple at Khidrāpur



Figures 4 and 5. The floor plan of the temple showing the placement of pillars in the (figure 4) circular Swargamandapa, the main mandapa, antarala and the garbhagriha. Figure 5 floor plan shows the foundations of the incomplete entryways in dotted lines. Arrows indicate openings and transitional spaces.

(Image Source: <https://thecustodiansin.wordpress.com/2017/03/30/kopeshwar-temple-khidrapur/corpusinscriptio014678mbp-1/>)



Figures 6, 7 . The distinct pillars of Kopeshwar temple with latticework



mid portions.

(Image from book, *Khidrapurchi mandire*)

Figure 7a. Notice the different types of Nagara architecture shikharas at the base of the columns. (*author photographs*)



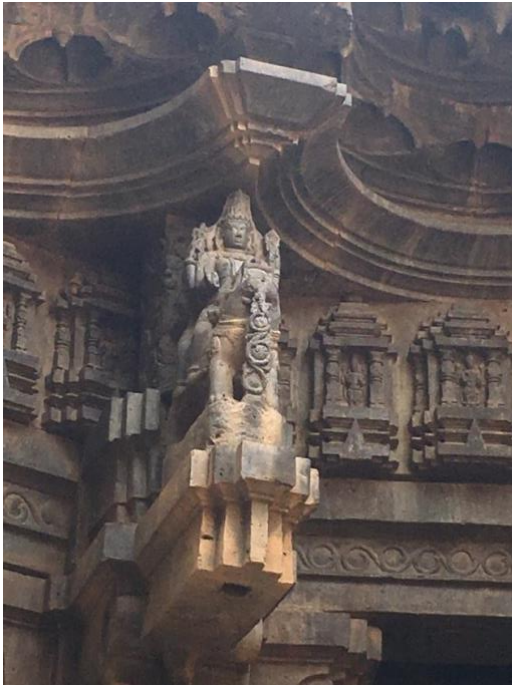


Figure 8. 2 of the surviving 9 sculptures of deities Varuna (left) and Agni (right) on their mounts with their consorts behind. Varuna guards the west while Agni guards the southeast. Another view with the positioning of the asthadikpalas with a missing sculpture (below). (*author photographs*)



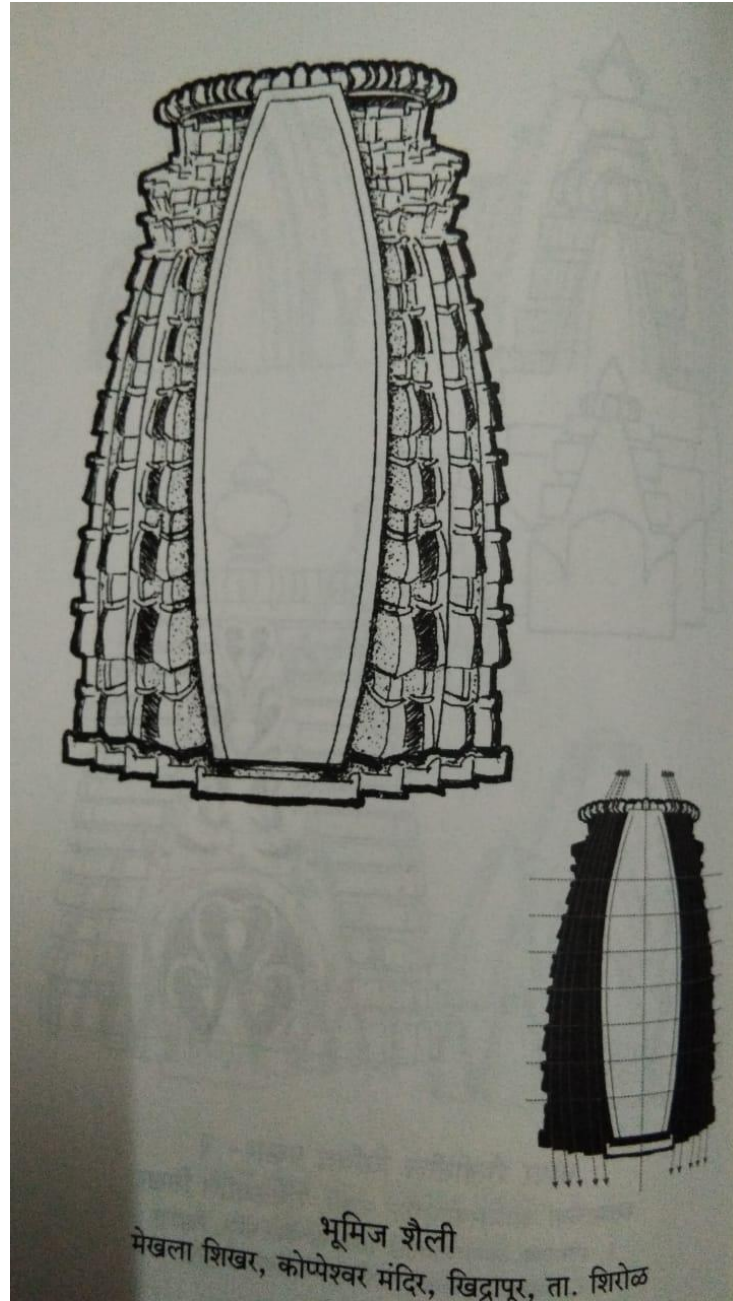


Figure 9. The Bhumija shikhara with a string of smaller shikharas that cascades down.

(Image from book, *Khidrapurchi mandire*)

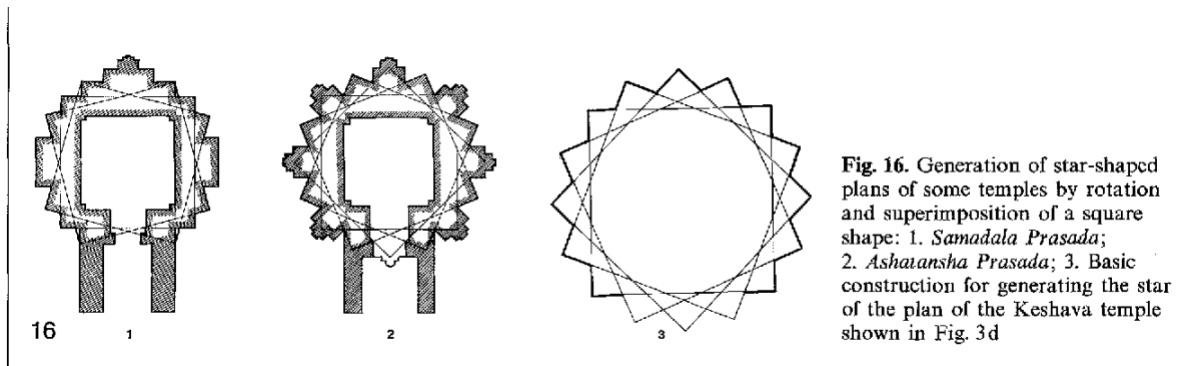


Figure 10. The Udayesvara temple at Udaipur is built in the Bhumija style.

(author photograph)

Figure 11. Star plan used in the construction of the Kopeswar temple while following the Bhumija style.

(Image source: <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Hindu-temples%3A-Models-of-a-fractal-universe-Trivedi/0cb86a580012affed7738e3b1554a6c5627b2966/figure/7>)



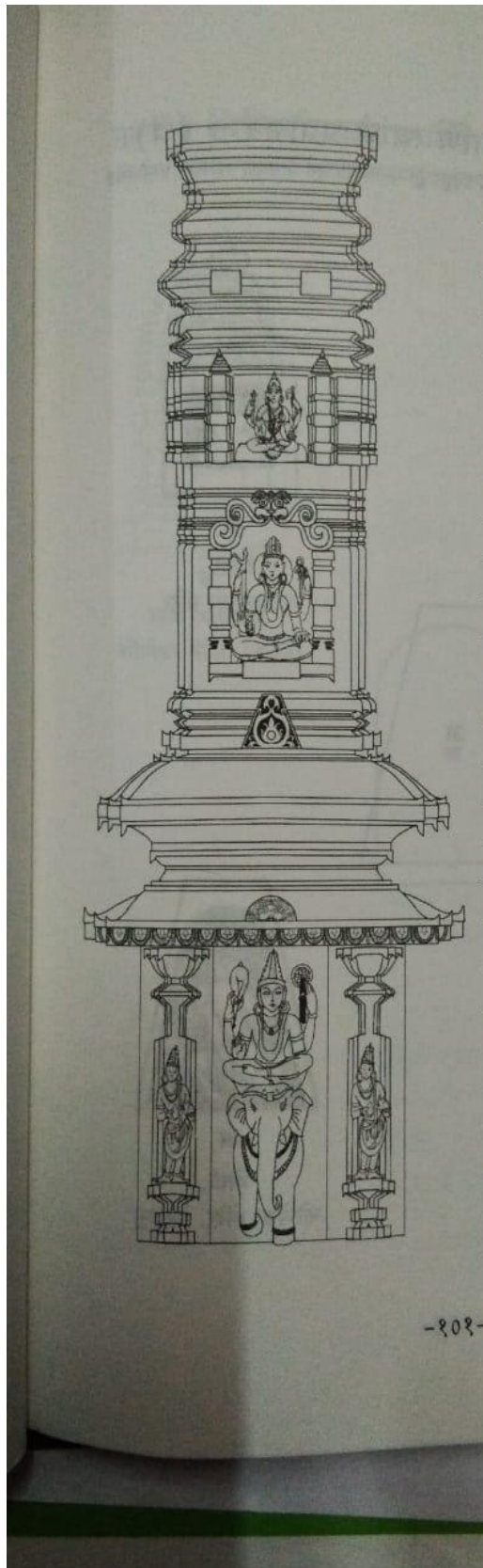


Figure 11a. An illustration showing 3 tiers of sculptures at Kopeshwar temple. Notice the gajapitha at the bottom.

(Image from book, *Khidrapurchi mandire*)

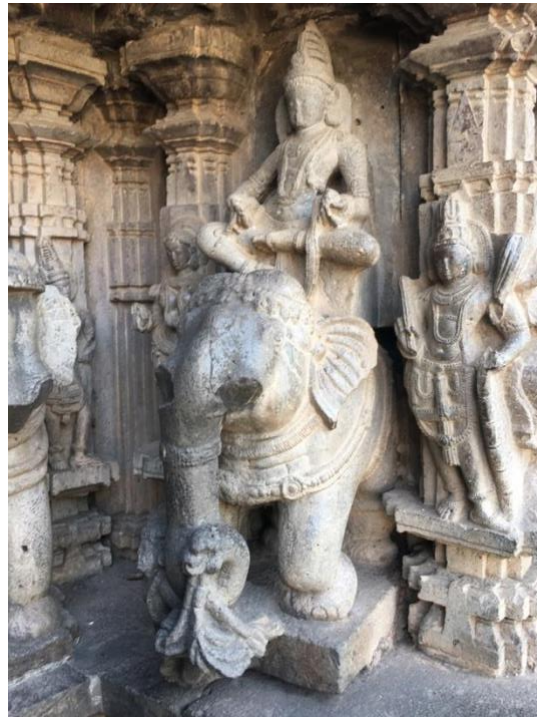


Figure 12. Deity riding an elephant of the gajapitha.

(author photograph)



Figure 13. The sculptures of an African and a Persian man. There is a difference in clothing and facial features.



(author photographs)

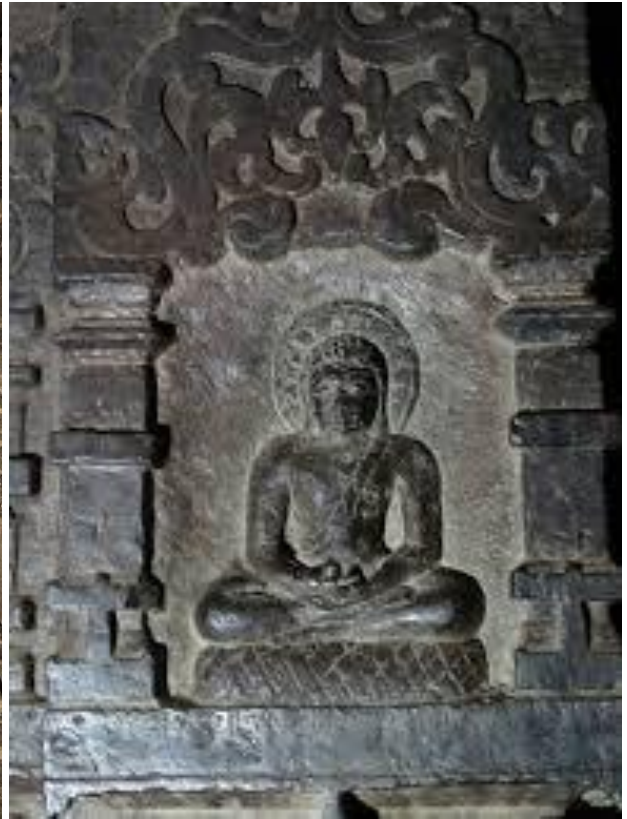
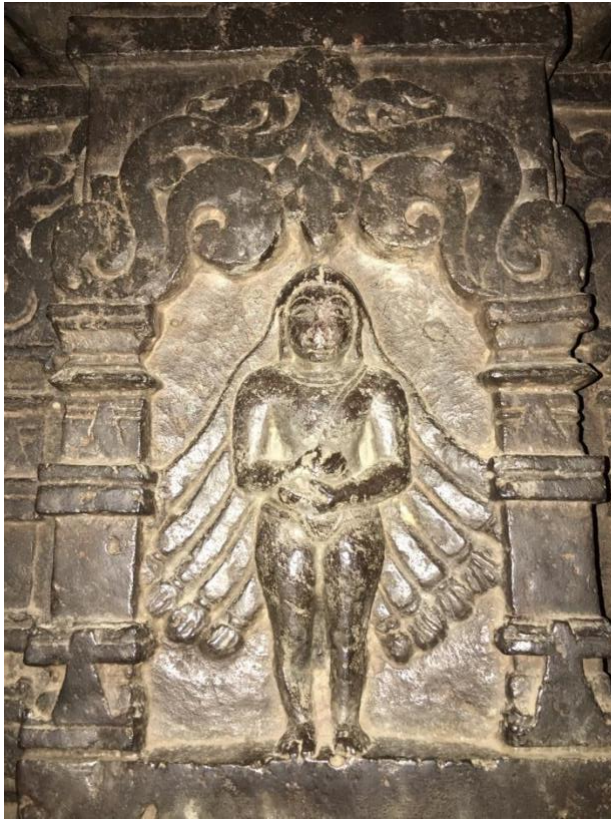
Figure 14. A *sarpkanya* plays with snakes in the second tier of sculptures.

(author photograph)



Figure 15. Bhairava with Vishnu sculpture above on the third tier.

(author photograph)



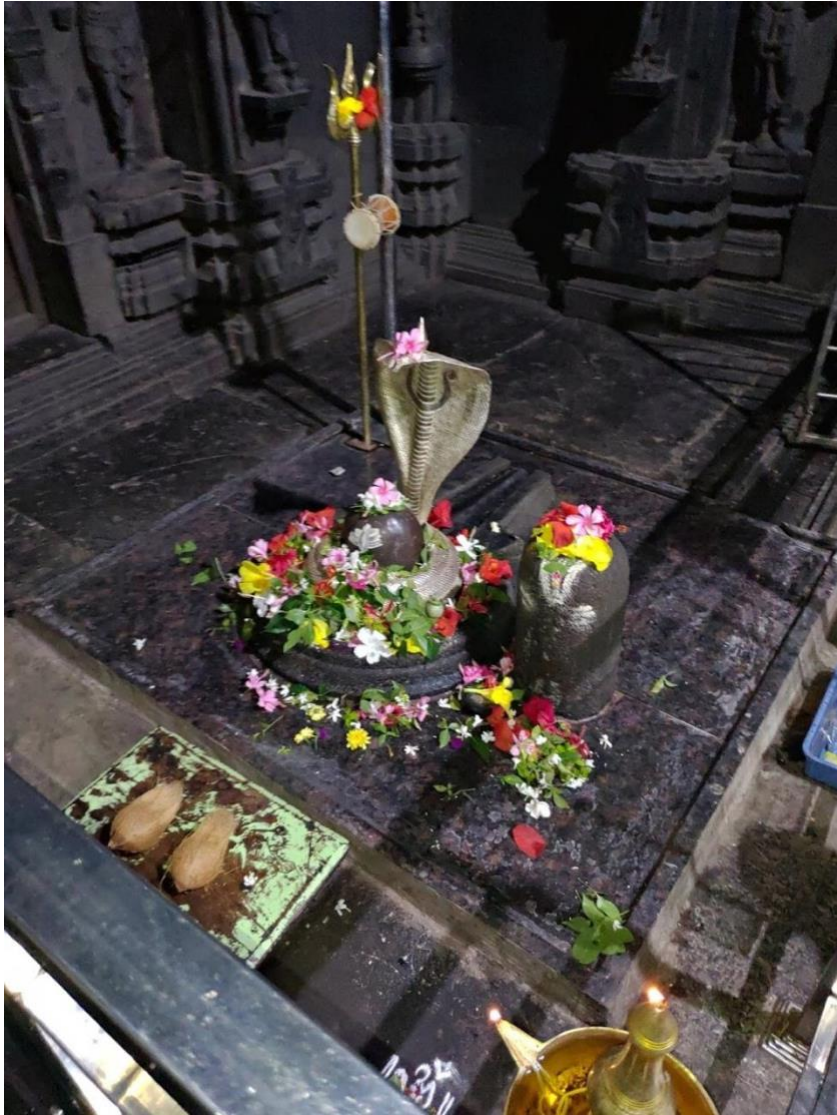


Figure 16. The many armed Avlokiteshvara (left) is a bodhisattva embodying the compassionate form of Buddha. The Buddha in a meditative pose (right) which reinforces the notion of peace.

(author photographs)

Figure 17. The lingams of Kopeshwar (Shiva) on the right and Dhopeswar (Vishnu) on the left. Note the Trident and the hooded cobra over the Kopeshwar lingam.

(author photograph)

Glossary:

1. Amalaka: a notched stone disk on top of a shikhara.
2. Antarala: transitional space between the mandapa and the garbhagriha.
3. Apsaras: celestial singers and dancers who entertain the gods.
4. Asthadikpalas: guardian gods of the 8 directions as well as zenith and nadir.
5. Avlokiteshvara: the many armed bodhisattva who embodies Buddha's compassion.
6. Bhadra: vertical ribs in a Bhumija shikhara.
7. Bhumi: a storey or ground.
8. Daksha Prajapati: one of Brahma's sons who is a divine king. Father to Sati.
9. Dwarpalas: guardian figures on either sides of the garbhagriha in the antarala.
10. Gajapitha: a tier of elephant sculptures.
11. Garbhagriha: sanctum sanctorum of the temple where the image of the deity resides.
12. Kalasha: a metal or stone spire on top of the amalaka.
13. Kuta-stambha: a smaller shikhara.
14. Mandapa/Sabhamandapa: a pillared gathering hall used for worship and other events.
15. Mukhmandapa: entryway to the main mandapa, also known as *ardhamandapa*.
16. Nandi Bull: Shiva's mount.
17. Narada: sage messenger of gods.
18. Rangshila: a flat circular (monolithic) stone on which dance-dramas are performed.
Serves as a stage to performances.
19. Sarpkanya: a sculpture of a woman playing with snakes.
20. Sati: One of the daughters of Daksha, wife of Shiva and a form of the mother goddess Shakti. Parvati is a later reincarnation of Sati.
21. Shikhara: a rising tower in Hindu temple architecture
22. Swargamandapa: translates to 'the mandapa of the heavens' (Swarga = heaven). The pillared hall at Kopeswar temple with a circular open ceiling.
23. Tandava: Shiva's dance of destruction and creation.
24. Torana: decorative frieze usually carved over gates or doorways.
25. Trimurti: the 3 gods, Brahma (Creator), Vishnu (Preserver) and Shiva (Destroyer).
26. Vaastu shastra: traditional Indian system of architecture.
27. Veerbhadra: A ferocious form of Shiva.

- 28. Yajna: a ritual sacrifice done in front of a sacred fire.
- 29. Yakshas: demigods in Hindu myths.

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