

Nilakanthesvara Temple at Matiapara : A Study on Art and Architecture

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Introduction

The temple of Nilakanthesvara is one of the important Pancha Mahadeva shrines of Purusottama Kshetra in Odisha. It is situated on the bank of Indradyumna tank, which is about 400 meters to the north east of the Gundicha temple of Puri. Skanda Purana writes that at the top portion of Shankha Kshetra, Nilakantha Mahadeva shrine is situated.¹ On the basis of tradition, a few scholar has referred that once Lord Shiva took poison to protect the world which came out from the Churning of the Ocean by both Devata and Asura. From that day, his name became famous as Nilakantha.² This Nilakantha Shiva is one of the eight guardian Sambhus of the kshetra of Purusottama.³ It is a very small temple, which consists of three structures such as Vimana, Jagamohana and Natamandapa. All the structures of the temple are built in sandstones. They are also thickly plastered with lime mortar. The temple faces to east. Here a modest attempt has been made to



highlight the detailed art and architecture of the temple of Nilakanthesvara of Matiapara.

Art and Architecture of Nilakanthesvara temple

Vimana

The Vimana of the Nilakanthesvara temple is a *pidha deula* and its height is about 17 feet from the ground of the temple.⁴ Now it is 12

feet high from the surface of the temple complex. The structure of the Vimana has three parts viz *bada*, *gandi* and *mastaka*. The base of the *bada* is square of 12 feet. The *bada* has four component parts, which are plain and simple.

Parsvadevatas:

The central niches of the three sides of the *bada* are housed with *parsvadevata* images of Ganesa, Karttikeya and Shiva-Parvati. The image of Ganesa is the *parsvadevata* of the southern side. The four handed small image of Ganesa has been installed on the plain pedestal. His four hands hold broken tusk, rosary, parasu

(hatchet) and a pot of Ladus. The image is about 1 foot in height. Mouse, the mount of the deity is installed on the right side of the deity. The image of Karttikeya is the *parsvadevata* of the western side. His three hands exhibit trident, rooster cock, *dambaru* and another hand is engaged in feeding the peacock, which is carved on the right of the pedestal. A standing figure of Devasena is lifting the legs of the cock and it is carved on the left side of the Karttikeya image. Shiva-Parvati is the *parsvadevata* of the northern side of the bada. There is a shrine of *pidha* order built in front of the Shiva-Parvati images. The image of Shiva is in seated posture installed on the plain pedestal. Devi Parvati is carved seated on the left lap of Lord Siva. They display usual attributes in their hands with respective gestures. Lion, the conventional mount of Devi Parvati has been installed on the square sized pedestal of one foot high.

The *bada* of the Vimana is surmounted by the pyramidal superstructure and it consists of five *pidhas*. Tankus are designed in the sides of each *pidha*. *Dopichha* lions and Deula Charini figures are completely absent in their respective places.

The *mastaka* of the Vimana consists of *beki*, *amalaka sila*, *khapuri*, *kalasa*, *ayudha* (trident) and *dhvaja*.

Shivalinga within Shaktipitha is worshipped in the sanctum as the presiding deity of the temple. Here Shivalinga is not visible to outwards and it is installed about one foot below the Shaktipitha of the sanctum. There is an image of Narayana kept on the back wall of the sanctum. The four handed Narayana image is carved on a single slab. He holds Chakra in upper right hand, *varada mudra* in lower right hand, conch in upper left hand and *gada* in left lower hand. Two

female attendant figures are flanked on either side of the deity. Two flying apsara figures are carved on the both side top corners of the slab. The backside of the head of Narayana image is finely decorated with the trefoil makara-headed arch crowned by the kirtimukha motif. Garuda, the mount of the deity is installed on the pedestal. The inner walls of the sanctum are completely undecorated. The floor of the sanctum is about five feet below from the surface of the temple complex.

Jagamohana or Mukhasala

The Jagamohana of the Nilakanthesvara temple is a *pidha deula* and its height is about 15 feet from the surface of the temple complex.⁵ It is erected on the platform of one foot high. The *bada* is *panchanga* type i.e. having fivefold divisions viz. *pabhaga*, *talajangha*, *bandhana*, *upper jangha* and *baranda*. All the component parts of the *bada* are bereft of decorative elements. The *bada* of the Jagamohana is surmounted by the pyramidal superstructure. It consists of four *pidhas*. Tankus are fixed in all side *pidhas* of the *gandi*.

The *mastaka* of the Jagamohana consists of *kalasa*, *ayudha* (trident) and *dhvaja* only, so all the elements of *mastaka* are not found.

The inner walls of the Jagamohana are completely undecorated. There is a Sivalinga within Shaktipitha kept on the north-west corner of the inner *mukhasala*.

The Jagamohana has one doorway towards the Natamandapa. The figures of Nandi and Bhrunji carved on either side doorframe of the *mukhasala*. They are acting as the traditional *dvarapalas* of the temple. Rahu-head is carved on the middle portion of the doorway lintel. The Navagrahas are carved on the architrave above

the doorway lintel. They are all in seated postures with respective attributes in hands.

Natamandapa

The Natamandapa of the Nilakanthesvara temple is a *pidha deula* and its height is about 20 feet from the surface of the temple complex.⁶ The plan of the structure is rectangular and it measures approximately 30 feet in length and 20 feet in width respectively. The *bada* is *panchanga* type and all the component parts of it are devoid of decorative ornamentation. The *bada* of the Natamandapa is surmounted by the pyramidal superstructure and it consists of three *pidhas*. The upper *pidha* of the *gandi* contains a *kalasa* in which a trident is inserted. Two lions have been projected on the northern and southern sides of the *kalasa* respectively.

The inner walls of the Natamandapa are finely depicted with paintings of Dasamahavidya figures such as Shyamakali, Ugratara, Sodasi, Bhubanesvari, Mahavidya, Chinnamasta, Dhumavati, Matangi, Kamala and Bagala. Besides these (Dasamahavidya figures), there is a painting of ten armed Banambara Shiva found from the southern side inner wall of the Natamandapa. These paintings are excellently executed by the local artists of Puri. All the above figures are depicted in the traditional Patta Style paintings of Odisha.

The western inner wall of the Natamandapa contains an image of Ganesa in its niche. He holds broken tusk, rosary, *parasu* (hatchet) and a pot of *ladus* in his four hands. There is a bull pillar noticed in the floor of the Natamandapa. The recumbent bull has been kept on the circular pillar of 4 feet high.

There are other two small sculptures of Sarasvati and Lakshmi-Narayana found from the close of the inner western wall of the

Natamandapa. Image of Jagannatha is installed on the south-west corner of the Natamandapa. In the Natamandapa an image of Kali (3 feet high) is installed in front of Siva.⁷

The Natamandapa has three doorways on the eastern side and one doorway on the north. The doorframes of the eastern side main doorway are devoid of any ornate device. The Navagraha figures are only carved on the architrave above the doorway lintel of the main doorway. They are all in seated postures with usual attributes in hands.

There is only a boundary wall on the eastern (front) side of the temple complex. Other three sides are not enclosed by walls. The height of the eastern side boundary wall is about 8 feet from the surface of the temple complex. This wall is built in both sandstones and bricks.

Two huge *jhapa simhas* are projected on both sides ground of the main gate (eastern side). They are acting as the gate keepers of the temple complex.

Date of the Temple

There is no authentic historical record with regard to the exact date of the construction period of the Nilakanthesvara temple of Matiapara. The architectural features of the temple indicate that it was built after the construction of the present Jagannatha temple of Puri. According to Jagabandhu Padhi, Nilakanthesvara and Kapala Mocana temples must have belonged to the same period though the respective temples do not bear the characteristics of Somavamsi architecture.⁸ H.S. Pattanaik opines that the temple of Nilakantha is a later structure and contains, in its present form, very little signs of great antiquity.⁹ B.K.Ratha has said that the temple of Nilakanthesvara was constructed in the 15th century A.D.¹⁰ On the basis of the architectural

features, the construction period of the present Nilakanthesvara temple can be tentatively assigned to the 2nd half of the 15th century A.D. Most probably, the temple was built by the Suryavamsi ruler of Odisha.

The temple of Nilakanthesvara is being managed by a local committee of Puri town.

Conclusion

Thus it is known from the above discussion that all the structures of the Nilakanthesvara temple are completely plastered with modern mortar. The *parsvadevata* images of Ganesa, Karttikeya and Siva-Parvati may be assignable to the medieval period by considering their iconographic features. The four-handed Narayana image noticed in the sanctum of the temple suggests that the image might have been brought from adjacent Vaishnavite shrine of Puri town. Although the architectural features of the Nilakanthesvara temple is not so important but from the religious point of view, this temple has same sanctity like other Saiva temples such as Lokanatha, Yamesvara, Markandesvara, Kapala-Mochana of Puri town. Those devotees who visit Lord Jagannath temple and Gundicha temple of Puri, they also do visit Nilakanthesvara temple site. So, considering the religious aspect,

Nilakanthesvara temple is regarded as one of the Pancha Mahadeva shrines of Puri town in Odisha.

References :

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6. Ibid.
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