

The Galaganatha temple in Pattadakal with exquisite carvings and a *shikhara*, which became a feature of North Indian temples later



AIHOLE

KARNATAKA



GETTING THERE

Aihole is in the Bagalkot district and is 132 km from Hubli, one of the two nearest railheads, the other being Bagalkot. It is 500 km from Bangalore. There are State buses as well as private ones plying from Bijapur (128 km away) and Bagalkot. You can even take a conducted tour of the Karnataka State Tourism Development Corporation (KSTDC).

The forerunners of form

In the cradle of temple architecture, they created a legacy we can be proud of



AIHOLE, KARNATAKA

KALPANA SUNDER

Imagine a laboratory where experiments on architectural styles were conducted by anonymous architects, sculptors, masons and artists — different influences were absorbed and creative structures emerged. This is exactly what happened in Aihole and Pattadakal in northern Karnataka, both UNESCO World Heritage sites now. The canvas for these experiments was the soft sandstone found in these parts.

Aihole today, is a small hamlet where local houses and small ancient shrines co-exist as if to say—“I have history in my backyard!”

It happens only in India

Legend has it that after wiping out the entire Kshatriya race, Parasurama went in search of a river to wash his bloodstained axe. On seeing the river Malaprabha, he exclaimed, “Ai hole” meaning “Ah! the river”. Aihole was the first capi-

tal of the Chalukyas and has more than hundred temples from the sixth, seventh and 12th and 13th centuries. Our guide calls this the cradle of temple architecture, where early Indian carvers and architects with no precedents to learn from came up with stunning works of art. Our guide shows us live board games carved on to the floors of the temples and marks of fire. He tells us that the temples were named ad hoc, as many of them did not have deities inside. The names of many of the temples are derived from the names of the families who lived there or their professions! The famous Durga temple is misleading — it refers to the *durg* or fortress-like edifice and is actually dedicated to the Surya.

An inside view

Our guide uses the term ‘apsidal’ to describe it — a rectangular structure with a semi-circular rear. Vaguely reminiscent of our Parliament building, we learn that there may have been some Buddhist influence in its architecture. There are intricate latticed windows and a riot of carvings on the walls and ceilings — Narasimha,

Mahishasuramardhini (Durga slaying the buffalo demon) and Ardhanadhishvra (half-man, half-woman). There is a small squat tower on top, a foretaste of the *shikaras* which became a spectacular feature of North Indian temples later. In the next temple we see the shrine with a proper *shikhara* with nine layers.

The cave-like Lad Khan temple (probably named after a Muslim who lived here) has two *mantapas* in front of a shrine, latticed windows and carved pillars. We see images of Ganga and Yamuna on the pillars and our guide explains that as feet had to be washed before entering a temple, this detail was incorporated to substitute real water. Amorous couples too are carved on some pillars — was this the forerunner for Khajuraho? It is the oldest temple here and has a second sanctum directly above the one on the ground floor. A stone ladder leads you to it. The temple has a sloping two-tier roof and seems to have been a meeting place since it has stone seats.

We wander around seeing a relief here or a latticed window there, marvelling at the evolution of the temple form over the passage of

time. There are excavated friezes and statues lying around carelessly, some pieces unfinished. School children play cricket and goats wander nonchalantly among the ancient structures.

We leave Aihole wishing that contemporary life wouldn’t cause further damage to these wonderful temples.

The other temple town

It’s a short drive to Pattadakal along a dusty road. Outside the complex is a bevy of fruit sellers, small boys peddling guide books, shouting, “Madam, history book please!” and legions of curious school children. At first glance, one cannot help but be wowed by Pattadakal.

Immaculately-kept, sprawling lawns, well-laid pathways and a group of ochre-coloured ornate temples (which look much more sophisticated than the ones in Aihole) are bunched together. All Chalukyan kings were crowned here — the name of this town when translated, means ‘place of coronation’. This place has the unique distinction of being a melting-pot of South Indian (Dravidian) and North Indian (Aryan) styles of architecture. The



Mahishasura-mardhini (Durga) slaying the buffalo demon on a temple wall

temples proceed in succession, from simple to architecturally complex.

Although, the temples here too, were experimental in style, they set the standards for future temple building. Of the nine we see, each is more exquisite than the other. The entire front of the Galagnatha Temple has collapsed, giving us a glimpse of the stones, which are normally hidden from sight. Its conical tower resembles the Nagara (North Indian) style.

There are two temples built by the queens of Vikramaditya in honour of his victory over the Pallavas. The Virupaksha temple built by Lokeshwari has sculptures from the epics in its *mukha mandapam*. People pray here even today. All along the temple are carvings of Shiva, Harihara, Vishnu, Ganesha and Rama like ancient comic books where people could read the stories of the Gods. Soft afternoon light filters in through gaps in the ceiling, lending a mysterious aura to the interiors.

Much happened in India after these temples — Khajuraho, Bhubaneswar, Sringeri and countless other masterpieces — but all had their origins here. The unique charm of Aihole and Pattadakal is that it gives us a glimpse of the beginnings of temple architecture in India.

Kalpana is a Japanese language specialist based in Chennai.



The Virupaksha temple was built to celebrate Vikramaditya’s victory over the Pallavas. It is part of the Pattadakal complex (right), which is surrounded by well-kept lawns