

A Tantalizing Image from Gās (Sopārā)

Kumud Kanitkar

A first look at the image of a deity, recovered from a pond in Gās, near Nālāsopārā (Fig.1), carrying a child on her hip and her elephant mount standing by her right side brings to mind Indrāṇī, one of the saptamātrīkās. However a closer look shows that in her right hand she is holding a *ghaṇṭā* (bell) with a *vajra-top* (Fig.2-3). Indrāṇī as a part of Hindu pantheon would hold a *vajra*, not a bell. A female attendant holding *aṅkuśa* (elephant goad) stands on her left.

Some corroborating facts presented below, suggest that the image could have been a part of the Buddhist Vajrayāna pantheon in a structural temple. Such a hypothesis would indicate that Vajrayāna Buddhism existed in this region up to late medieval times.¹

First fact is an image of Avalokiteśvara Padmapāṇi (Fig.4), found at Anushakti Nagar building complex at Deonar in the greater Bombay area on April 6, 1976.²

The above fragmentary sculpture, in grayish basalt, was unearthed during work in Anushakti Nagar building complex (BARC, Mumbai) on April 6, 1976. Identification was based on a lotus stalk held in lower left hand combined with Dhyānī Buddha Amitābha in *jaṭāmukuṭa*. Jamkhedkar dated it stylistically to 10th century, supporting the probability that Buddhism was still extant in this region in 10th century.

Following observations noted by Henry Cousens in his “Progress Report of Archaeological Survey of Western India, for the period ending June 30th, 1898” provide evidence that a Buddhist structure existed at Borivali.³ Part of the report which covered work at Sopārā and Borivali is quoted here.

Cousens remarks “My visit to the place (Sopārā) was with the object of ascertaining what ‘Hindu remains’ were to be found there. That ancient Hindu temples did exist in this part of the country is without doubt. The many fragments found in the villages around testify to this. But so complete has been their destruction at the hands of the Muhammadans and Portuguese that their very sites have become obliterated. It was then with a great deal of satisfaction that I discovered and unearthed the foundations of a large Hindu temple at Sopārā itself. The moulded walls of the basement had



Fig.1 : Child held by left hand, bell in right hand; vāhana elephant, female attendant with aṅkuśa



Fig.2 : Close up of bell



Fig.3 : Contemporary brass bell from Nepal

been built most of the way round the *maṇḍapa* or hall. We excavated and opened out the walls as far as the funds at our disposal would permit. The temple building had commenced but had been abandoned for some reason, at least this is what the general appearance leads me to think.... The length of the main building, judging from the extent of the plan disclosed, would have been about 120 feet exclusive of the platform on which it stood.... From the sculptures lying about, and a fragment of a huge *liṅga*, I believe the temple to have been intended for a Śaiva shrine. But more interesting still was the discovery of another Buddhist *stūpa* and relic box, the latter, alas, empty. In building the foundations of the temple just mentioned, the medieval workmen had probably dug into a brick mound which was the remnant of a *stūpa*, and it was through this mound that the foundation walls of the shrine were to have passed..." Cousens speculates that this was perhaps the reason why construction of the large Hindu temple was abandoned.



Fig.4 : Padmapāṇi Avalokiteśvara

The report continues.... "Our next camp was at Borivli, about ten miles south of Bassein Road Station. " ..about a quarter of a mile further is a small temple connected with the hamlet of Devī-kā-Pārā. Beside it was noticed the site of some Buddhist building or stūpa. In the centre was a well-laid brick platform, while around it on all four sides ran one or more walls with traces of the foundations and some of the masonry remaining. There was not sufficient evidence left from which to form any opinion as to what the building was. A few carved stones lay about, with Buddhist symbols upon them, showing that a substantial structure of some sort existed here..."

Observations made by Cousens more than hundred years ago are relevant on many counts. One is the observation that ancient temples had existed in this area but their very sites have become obliterated at the hands of the invaders. Second point is the observation that construction of a large Hindu temple at Sopārā was abandoned most likely because while digging the foundation for that temple, a more ancient Buddhist stūpa was encountered. Third point is the observation that a substantial Buddhist structure existed near Borivali. All these observations support the conjecture that structural Buddhist temples existed in this area (Sopārā, Gās) in medieval times. Judging from the changes observed in nearby Kanheri, Mahāyāna-Tantrayāna must have been the dominant sect in the region, at that time.⁴



Fig.5 : The child's posture viewed from left

Third supporting fact to be noted is that Indrāṇī is mentioned in the Dharmadhātu-Vāgīśvara Maṇḍalam in the book *Niṣpannayogāvalī*⁵ by Mahāpaṇḍita Abhayakaragupta (fourth quarter of 11th and first quarter of 12th century).

The author of *Niṣpannayogāvalī*, Mahāpaṇḍita Abhayakaragupta was a greatly respected scholar and a Tāntric author affiliated to the Vikramaśilā Monastery. His other book, *Munimatalaṅkāra* was written in the 30th year of Pāla King Rāmapāla, thus placing Mahāpaṇḍita Abhayakaragupta in the fourth quarter of 11th and first quarter of 12th century. The *Niṣpannayogāvalī*, edited by Benoytosh Bhattacharya, has listed Indrāṇī amongst the deities in the Dharmadhātu-Vāgīśvara Maṇḍalam. It is an elaborate *maṇḍala* with a large number of deities. It has

Mañjuḥoṣa as the central deity. The fourth circle comprises of the eight Dikpālas, including Indra on Airāvata. Beyond the fourth circle, are a large number of deities from the Hindu Pantheon including Brahmā, Viṣṇu, Maheśa, Kārttikeya and mātṛkās (from Brahmānī to Cāmuṇḍā, including Indrāṇī). Thus it is seen that Indrāṇī does appear as a minor Vajrayāna deity in a *maṇḍala*.

An incidental observation relates to the sculpting style, namely, a very realistic ever-so-natural, restless posture of the child carried by Indrāṇī on her hip (Figs.5-6).

This natural style of portrayal of a young-one brings to mind the Mārkaṇḍeya-*anugraha* panel at the 11th century Ambarnath Śiva temple (Figs.7-8), which is a few kilometres from Sopārā. According to the story, Yama appeared at the appointed hour to claim Mārkaṇḍeya's life, the terrified Mārkaṇḍeya clung to the *Śivaliṅga* and fervently prayed to lord Śiva for succour. Śiva rose in anger from the *Śivaliṅga* to vanquish Yama. The panel shows Mārkaṇḍeya peeping at Yama in a very natural posture, with obvious curiosity!

If these sculptures were from the same period then the similarity can be construed as a distinctive, 'realistic style' of the master-artist at work, both at Ambarnath and nearby Sopārā. The date for Ambarnath is definitely 11th century.

In summary, based on some corroborating facts, the image recovered from the lake near Durgādevī temple at Gās, Sopārā, can be taken as proof that a structural temple of Vajrayāna Buddhist sect existed at Sopārā in the medieval times.

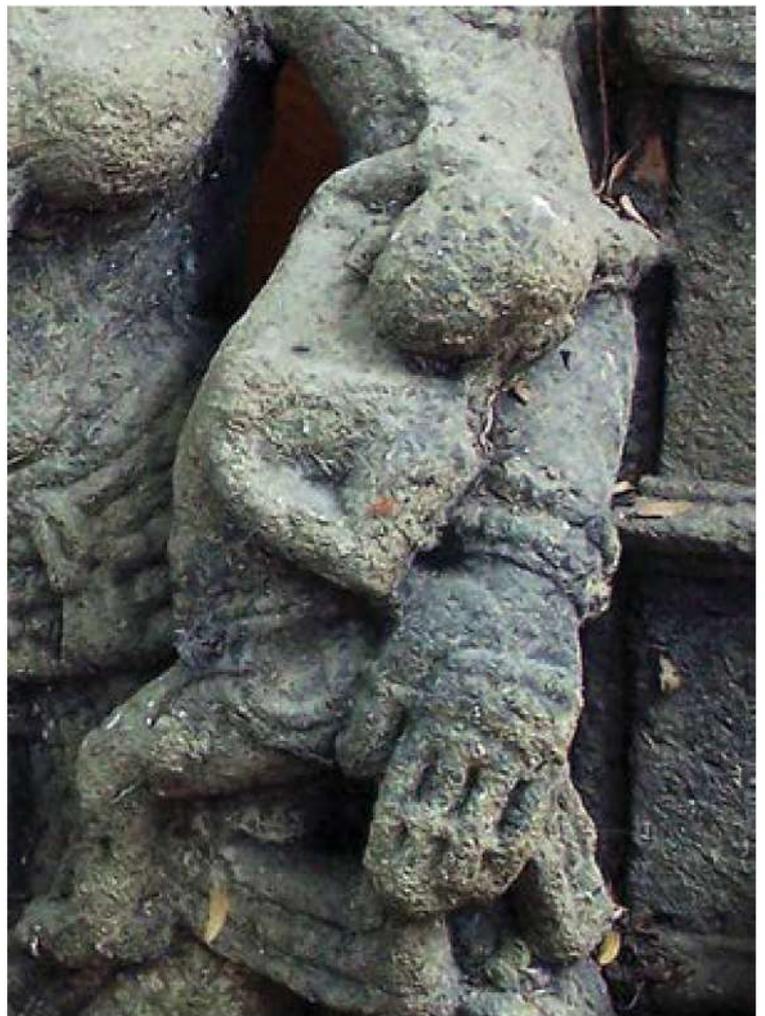


Fig.6 : The child's posture viewed from right

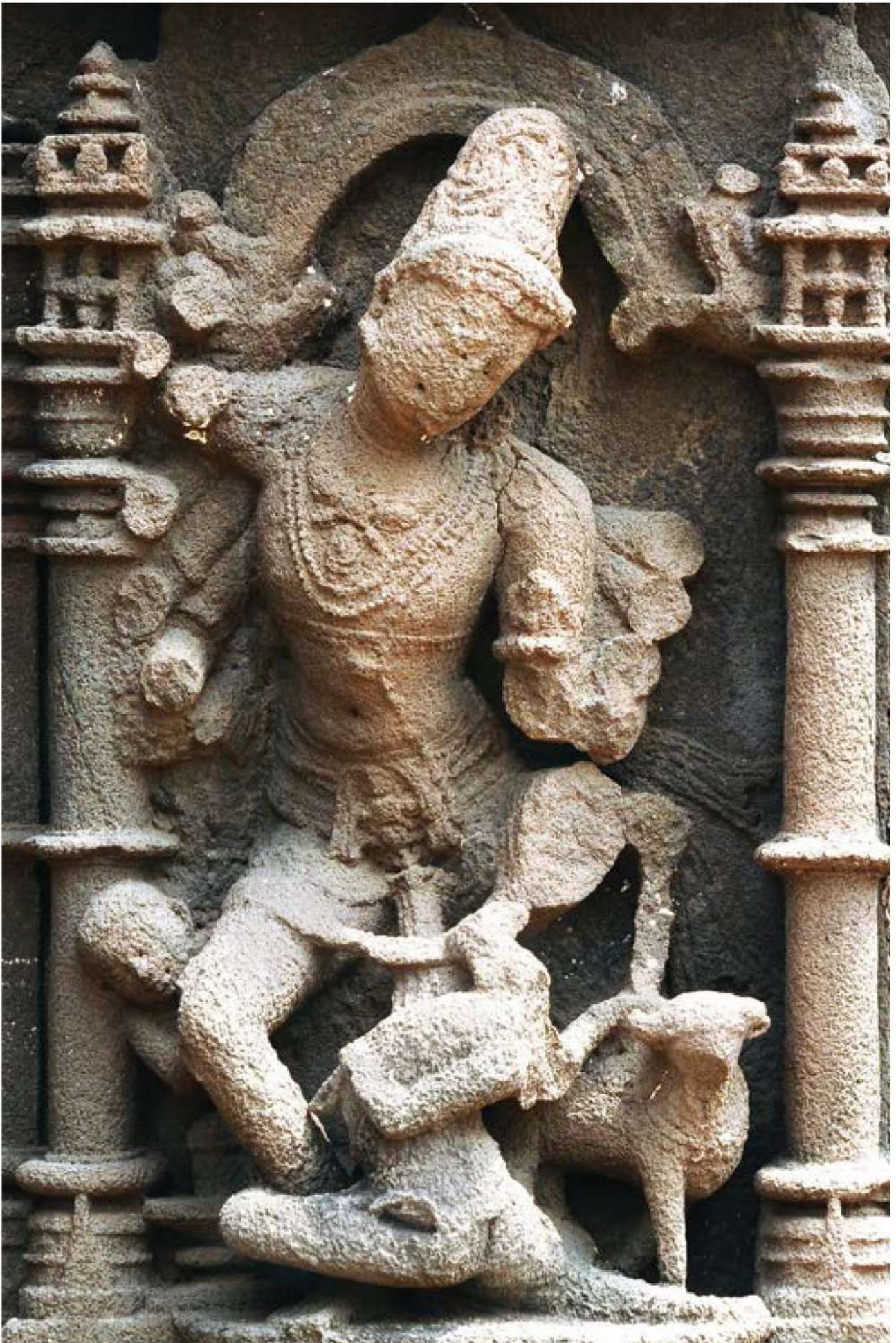


Fig.7 : Ambarnath - Mārkaṇḍeya's posture viewed from right

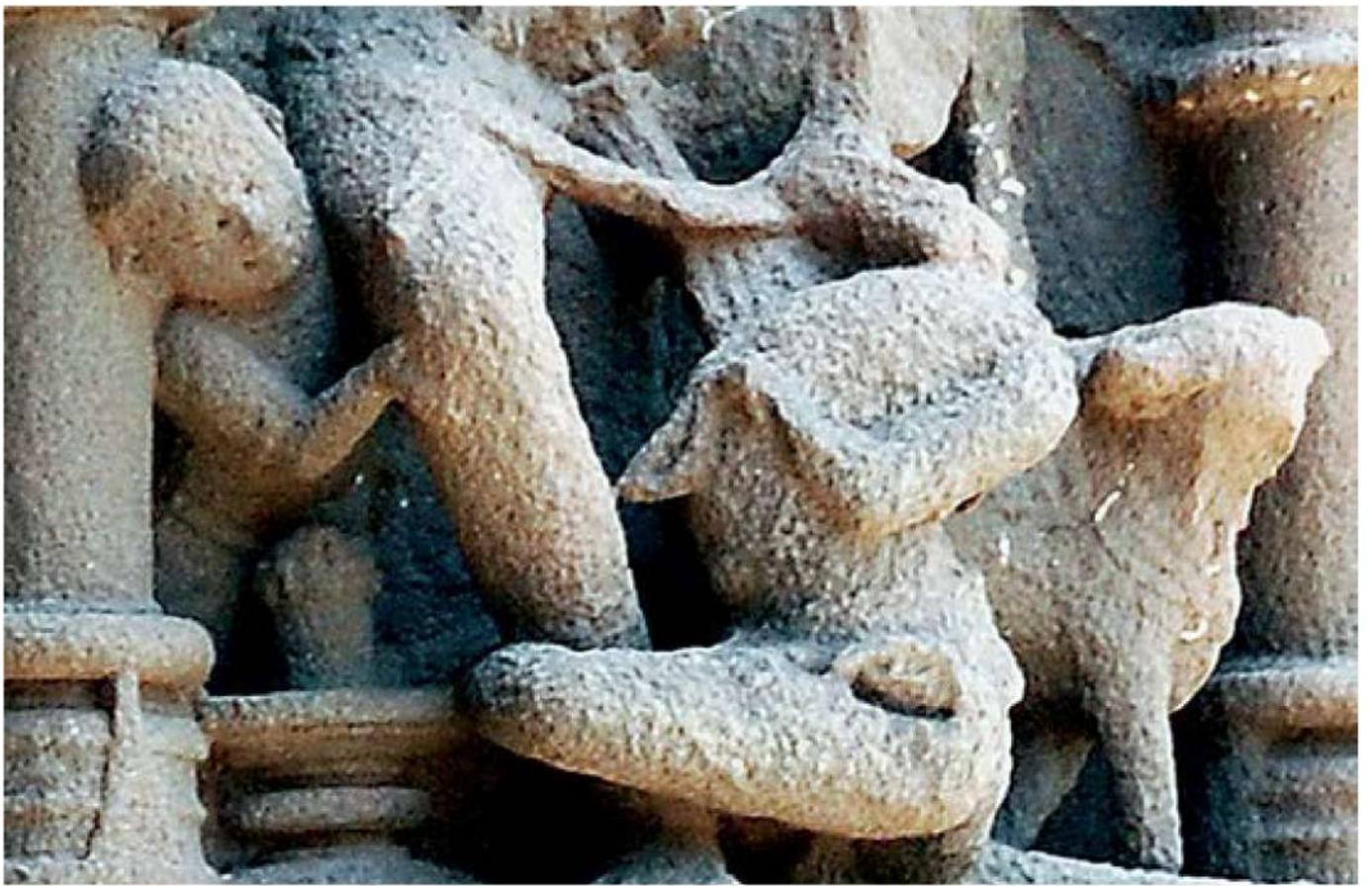


Fig.8 : Ambarnath - Mārkaṇḍeya's posture viewed from left

Endnotes

1. B.G. Gokhale, *Buddhism in Maharashtra: A History*, Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 1976, p.111. 'It was already at Ellora by seventh century'.
2. A.P. Jamkhedkar, "A New Image of Avalokiteshvara from Bombay" p.99, *Marg*, Vol.34, No.34, June 1981, Size : 26 cms x32 cms.
3. Henry Cousens, *Progress Report of the Archaeological Survey of Western India for the year ending June 30, 1898*; The report is available at <http://dsal.uchicago.edu/books/DS416.A3>. Also reproduced in *Medieval Temples of the Dakhan*, p.19, Sopara, p.20, Borivali.
4. Shobhana Gokhale, "Kanheri Inscriptions", *Deccan College Post Graduate and Research Institution*, Pune, 1991, p.30. 'The Shilahara inscriptions at Kanheri offer an authentic evidence of Vajrayana Buddhism (late ninth century)'.
5. *Niṣpannayogāvalī* of Mahapandita Abhayakaragupta, edited by Benoytosh Bhattacharyya; Gaekwad's Oriental Series No.109, Oriental Institute Baroda, 1949, reprint 1972, pp.10-11.