

The Ambarnātha Temple

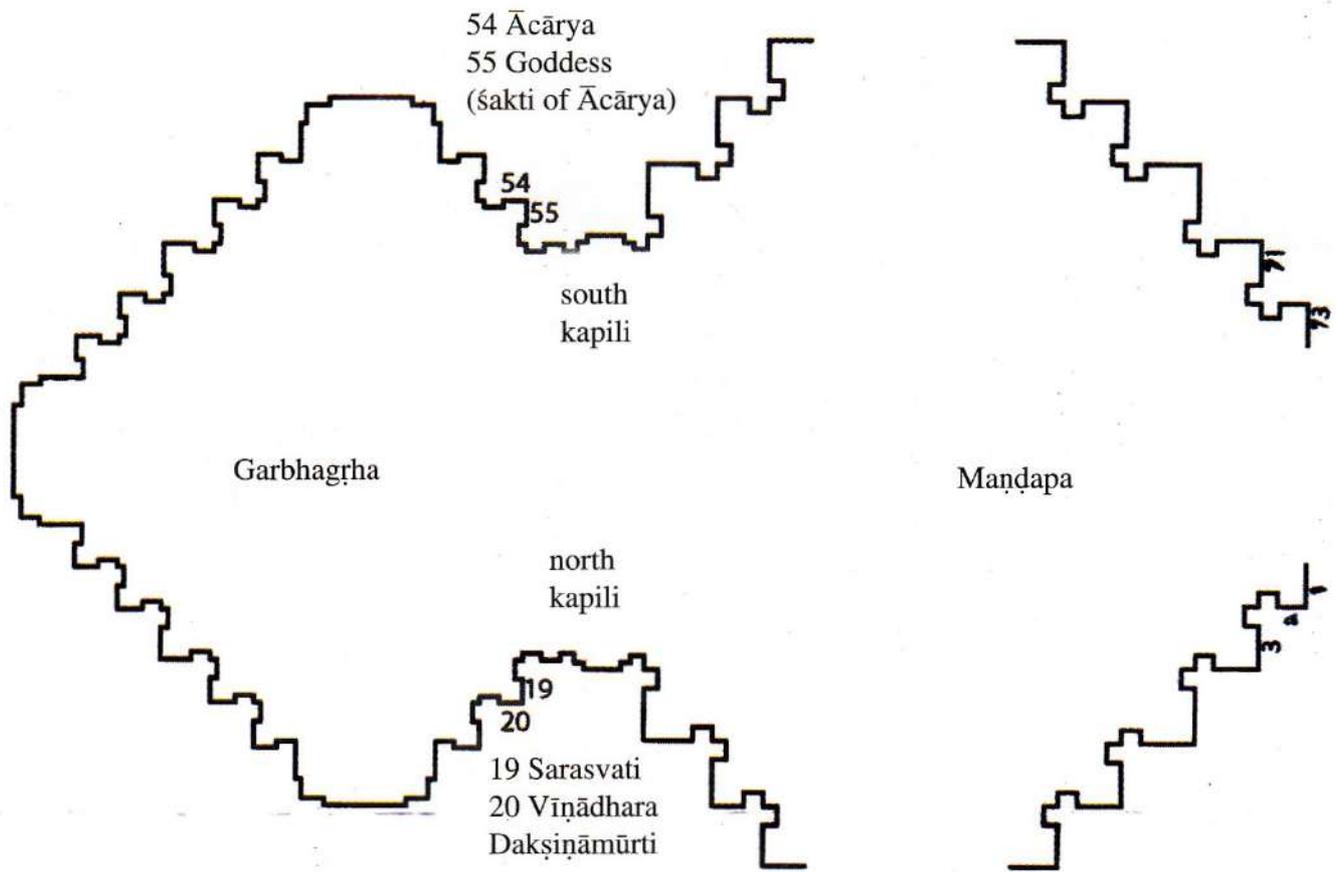
Dr. (Mrs.) Kumud Kanitkar

There are many temples in Maharashtra but amongst them, the Ambarnātha Śiva temple is the oldest dated structural temple with a *Bhūmija śikhara* (Line drawing 1,2). The west facing temple, consecrated in 1060 CE, is decorated with sculptures that are dynamic and beautiful. There was an inscription on a north stone girder inside the temple that mentioned Śilāhāra kings Chittarāja and Mummuṇi.¹ Their reigns spanned roughly the period from 1024 CE to 1060 CE during which the temple must have been conceived and built. The present article discusses the monastic establishment at Ambarnātha and the influence of different sects as seen from epigraphic records, iconography and sculptures. The Ambarnātha temple was surveyed in 1868-69 by the British Government in India (fig. 1) shows a cropped section of the detailed map of the environs of Ambarnātha and (fig. 2), further enlargement, shows details of the remnants of the temple complex in existence in 1868. The first figure gives an idea of the environs of the temple such as the stream flowing south-east to north-west, an 'artificial cut quarry' to the south of the temple and smaller quarries to the north, a stepped tank to the north-east (probably built in 18th century CE or later), a smaller tank/ *Puṣkariṇī* opposite the southern porch of the temple (accessible from the temple compound) and some ruins of a small temple adjacent to the south-west wall. It also shows that the village of Ambarnātha was located away from the temple to the south-west.

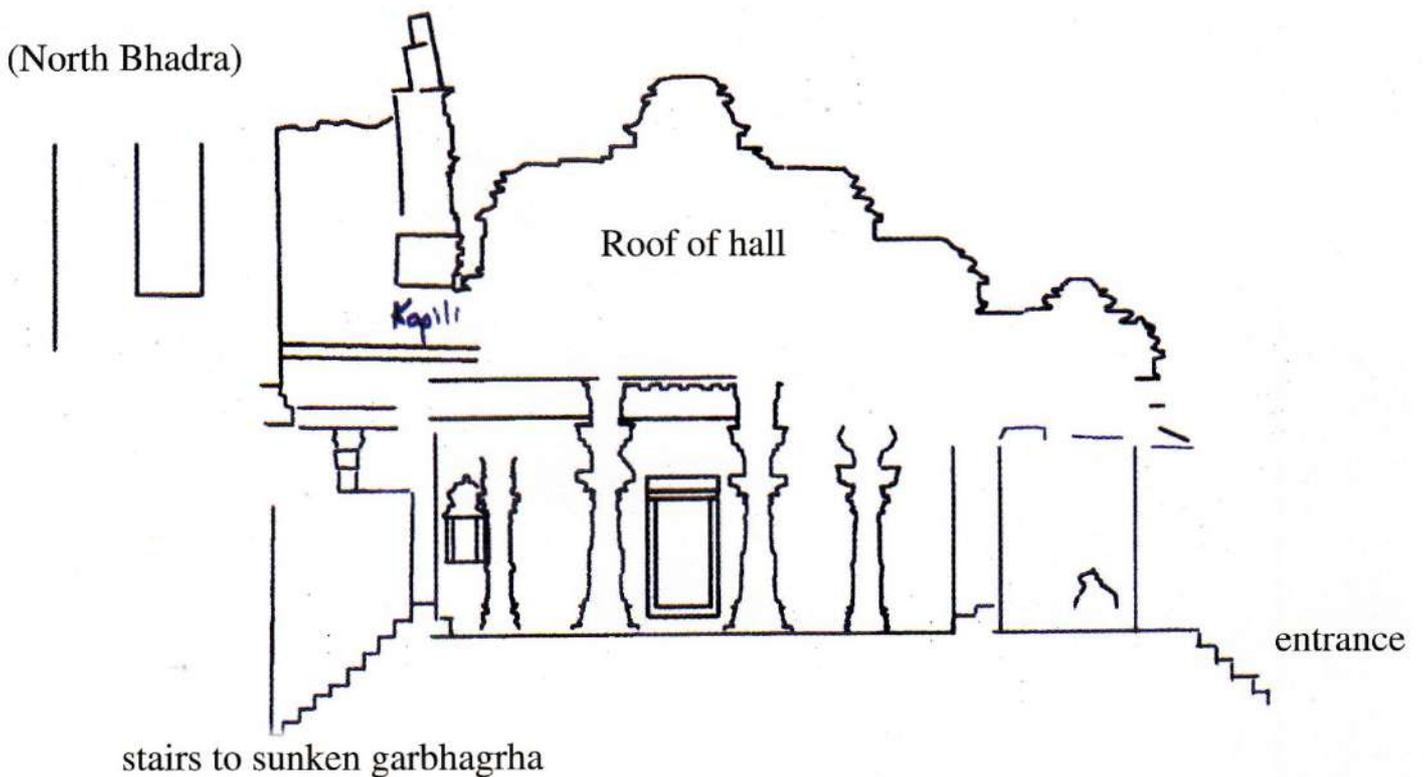
The above features are important for the study of Ambarnātha temple. The presence of the quarries tallies with the local stone used for the temple. The *Puṣkariṇī* tallies with the features common to the temples of that era. The presence of a smaller temple indicates the possibility that other similar structures dedicated to other deities may have existed in the complex at one time.² Incorporation of some decorated pieces of the Ambarnātha temple embedded in the walls of the stepped 18th century tank show that the temple was already damaged by then.

The enlarged photograph shows an area, larger than the temple, which leads to the main entrance of the temple, labelled as 'palace yard'. The probable reason

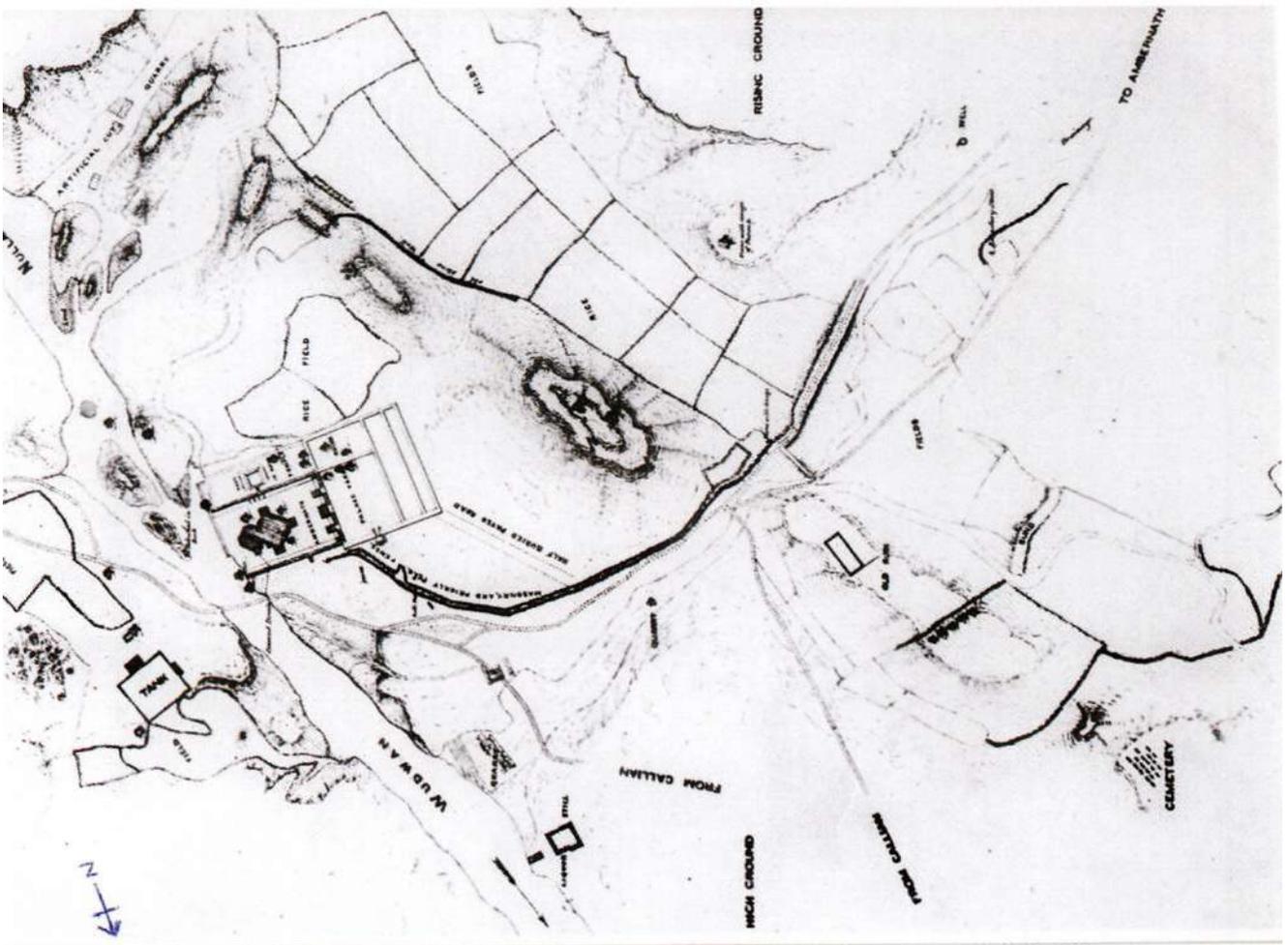
Ambarnāth, Temple floor plan and Numbering System



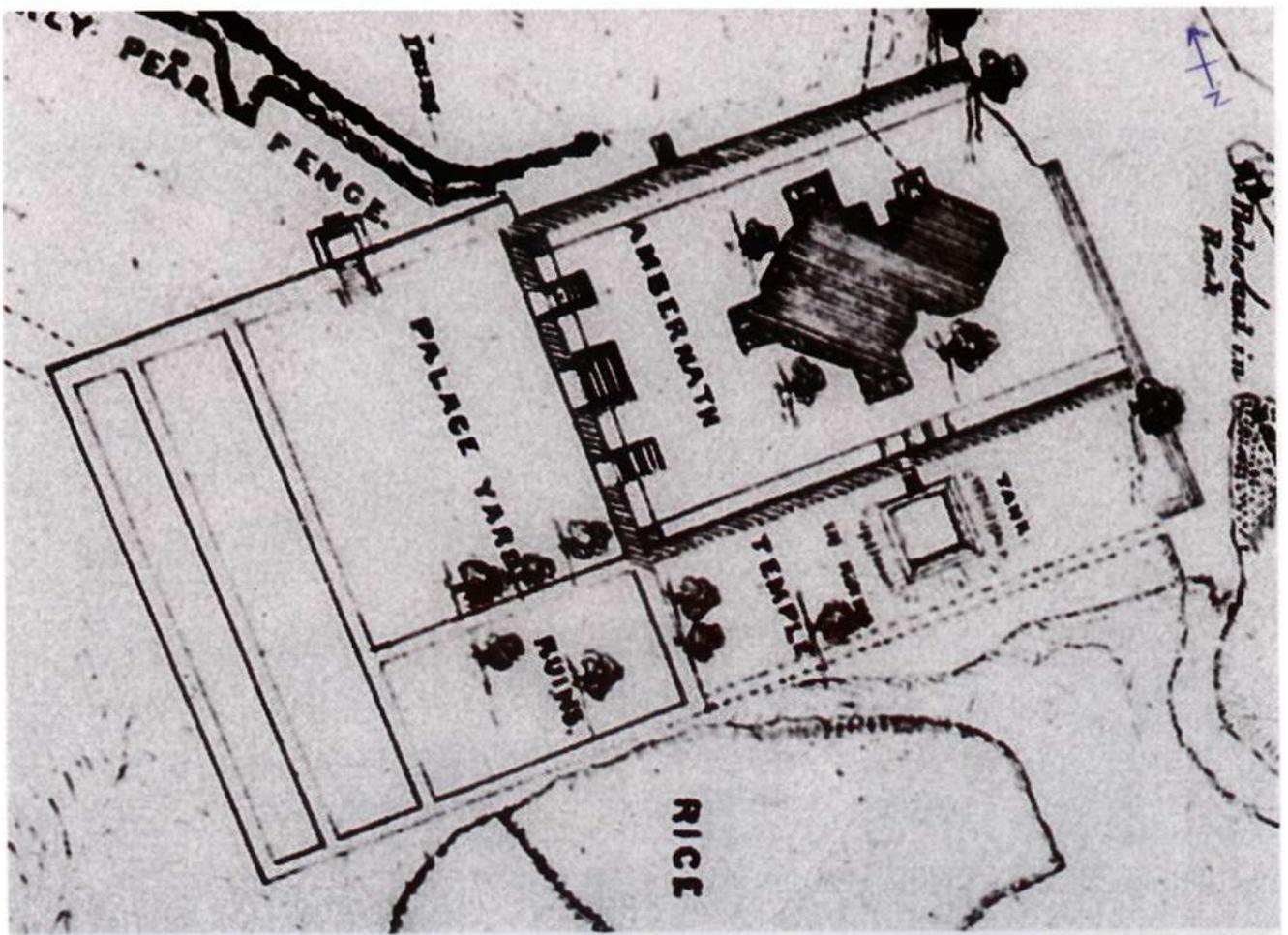
Line Drawing 11.1: Ambarnātha Temple, Floor Plan



Line Drawing 11.2: Ambarnātha Temple, Longitudinal Section



11.1: Cropped Section, 1868 map, Environs of Ambarnātha Temple



11.2: Detail of Ambarnātha Temple Complex

why the part was labelled 'palace yard' is as follows. The 1868 expedition by G.W. Terry noted an inscription high up on the north stone girder in the temple, took a cast of it and provided it to the scholars for study. The inscription ends with words, '*Cittarājadevasya bhavanam sampāditaṃ*' which was interpreted then as the 'palace of Cittarājadeva'. Later scholars concluded that it was referring to the temple itself and not to the dwelling palace of *Mahāmaṇḍaleśvara Cittarājadeva*. But the plans had long been prepared and submitted so the label 'Palace yard' remained on the plan.

It is likely that the 'Palace yard' was actually a complex that may have consisted of a *maṭha* /*pāṭhaśālā* and a *sattra* and subsidiary temples as was common then. Temples of that era served many functions. Ascetics could live there, travellers could stay there, ideas were exchanged, pupils were taught not only the scriptures but the arts such as of sculpting and carving of temples constructed by the *ācāryas* and so on. Recent excavations at Ambarnātha show cell like structures as possible dwellings. Probably served as a centre for education in religion and art. Inscriptions of *Śilāhāras* refer to such structures attached to various temples in their territory.³

The influence of different sects can be seen at Ambarnātha. In this connection, the observations made by the erudite scholar G.V. Tagare in his book *Glimpses of Śaivism* are very apt and are quoted below.⁴

'Śaivism is not a dry philosophy. Its cultural contribution is a superb fusion of art and philosophy that includes knowledge, belief, morals, laws, customs and other capabilities. Śaiva art is not flippant. It is pregnant with *vedānta* and *bhakti* with its intensely appealing lyricism and such other serious concepts. But they are presented in such an attractive form which conveys its message to the common man without being aware of it.'

Ambarnātha temple is an example of how seamlessly concepts are woven together. A case in point is the image of an *ācārya* on the *garbhagrha jaṅghā*, the only mortal to occupy such a prominent position amongst the 73 images carved on the *jaṅghā*.⁵ He is shown with the *yajñopavīta* and a *tilaka* (on forehead), long pierced earlobes, a beard and a moustache and is wearing a *kaupīna* but totally bereft of any ornaments.

Guru is essential for the final and real understanding (by any name, *mokṣa*, *dukhānta*, *anugraha*). Although the greatest teacher, the ultimate *guru*, is Śiva as

Dakṣiṇāmūrti, yet *ācārya* can conceptually be equal to Śiva. The significance of the placement of the image can be understood better with the help of the floor-plan and the numbering system and a drawing of the longitudinal section of the temple. Both *Vīṇādhara* Dakṣiṇāmūrti and the *ācārya* are placed where the *garbhagrha* begins. If entrance into the *garbhagrha* can be symbolically equivalent to the realization of Śiva, then the devotee's mundane life, *saṃsāra*, can be represented by the *maṇḍapa*. Realisation is possible only through the *anugraha* of the *guru*; their images are placed as though waiting to bless the *sādhaka* (*anugraha*). This may be why Dakṣiṇāmūrti is placed on the north side. In the *pradakṣiṇā-krama*, he should be encountered first before the mortal *guru*.

Using mirror symmetry on either side of the central east-west axis, *Vīṇādhara* Dakṣiṇāmūrti is placed on the north side while the *ācārya* is on the south side; the two are portrayed in the same position but on opposite sides. This symmetrical placement is put in proper perspective by the correct use of *tālamāna*. The image of the *ācārya* is in *aṣṭatāla* only (fig. 3).

Both Dakṣiṇāmūrti and *ācārya* are flanked by females in lower *tālamāna*. Sarasvatī is adjacent to Dakṣiṇāmūrti whereas a four-armed goddess is next to the *ācārya*. Sarasvatī as goddess of learning would be the *śakti* of Śiva, the great teacher.⁶ The four-armed goddess wearing snake ornaments, placed next to the *ācārya* could represent this spiritual *śakti*. Her ascetic nature is emphasized by her *rudrākṣa hāra*, *keyūra* and snake ornaments. The arms of the goddess are broken but the small figure in a panel above her seems to imitate the goddess's posture and clearly has hands in the *añjali-mudrā* shown above her head. Further confirmation is seen in the *tāla* used. The goddess, though four-armed, is portrayed in a lower *tāla* than the *ācārya*. In fact she is portrayed in the lowest *tāla* of 72 images on the *janḡhā*; (73rd being Gaṇeśa, is in *ṣaṭtāla*). This lends further credence to the suggestion that she represents the spiritual *śakti* of the *ācārya*.

The *kapilī*, the juncture between the *garbhagrha* and the *maṇḍapa*, a bridge linking the two, has also been used to depict *sādhanā*.⁷ However, the *sādhanā* depicted seems to tally with 'Pathways to liberation' for *Pāśupatas*. This brings us to the observation that religious environment of the region was tolerant during this era.

It is possible that different *Śaiva* sects accepted each other without rancour and with respect. The Śilāhāra inscriptions indicate *Śaiva Siddhāntins* as their



11.3: *Ācārya*, Ambarnātha Temple



11.4: Lakulīśa (?), inside *Maṇḍapa*, atop the north-east pillar

*Rājagurus*⁸ yet inside the *maṇḍapa* at Ambarnātha, there is an image that seems to be of Lakulīśa (fig. 4), albeit at a height where it would not be easily noticeable. Some images on the *kapilī* also seem to portray *pāśupata vidhīs*. 'Pathways to liberation' for *Pāśupatas* include five stages in *sādhanā* (*pancārtha*). One of the means is walking like a disabled person (fig. 5), another, showing oneself as if in love and making amorous gestures on seeing a beautiful woman. The *kapilī* at Ambarnātha shows high up on the north side, a man exhibiting his exaggerated private parts, while the matching position on the south side shows an emaciated lame person walking with the help of a stick. There is a *skhalitavastrā surasundarī* in a *salilāntara* on the north *kapilī* whereas on the south side there is a man in a *yogic* posture who wears a snake *yajñopavīta*. In the *salilāntara* on the south side of *kapilī*, a bearded man is shown totally absorbed in playing a small drum. Amongst the vows as part of *Pāśupata vidhi*, singing and dancing are listed. One can argue that musicians are very commonly portrayed on temple walls but the image of the male musician is distinctly different and is very similar to the image of 'a young saint' that appears in 'The art of India' written by Stella Kramrisch.⁹

Another instance of religious tolerance is seen in the importance given to Brahmā in this Śiva temple¹⁰. Brahmā appears on the *jaṅghā*, in the *adhiṣṭhāna* in a *devakulikā* with Sāvitrī, on the *kapilī*, on the *śurasenaka* above the east *bhadra*.¹¹ Brahmā appears on the three of the central pillars in the *maṇḍapa* as well. Brahmā was important and was still worshipped in this region is amply proved by life size statues of Brahmā found in Sopara as well as the one recovered from a lake at Thana ('Śrīsthānaka' of old, the capital city of the later Śilāhāras of the north Konkan) in 1996 (fig. 6). Nilakantha Sastri's observation is relevant here¹²- "Fortunes of Gods have varied in time no less than those of their worshippers". A sect worshipping Brahmā must have been still in existence in this region and the portrayal of Brahmā in the Ambarnātha temple reflects awareness of regional sensitivities.

Viṣṇu also appears as Śrīdhara, Varāha and Nṛsimha on the *jaṅghā*. He is portrayed on the *śurasenaka*, and at the top of the central pillars of the *maṇḍapa*.

It is to be noted that although Brahmā and Viṣṇu are given due veneration by placing their images at important positions, display of episodic sculptures on the *jaṅghā* proving greatness of Śiva over Brahmā or Viṣṇu (*Liṅgodbhava*,



11.5: Pāśupata vidhi, imitating a lame person



11.6: Brahmā recovered from a lake in Thana in 1996

Sarabheṣa) and the choice of lower *tāla* for these gods makes it clear that builders of this temple considered Śiva as the supreme god.

Religious tolerance is also evident from syncretic images such as Ardha-nārīśvara and Hari-Hara on the temple. But above all. It is noteworthy that the main *bhadra* on the east has the syncretic image of Hari-Hara-Pitāmaha-Sūrya rather than Śiva alone.

One can thus conclude that a detailed study of the Ambarnātha temple provides an insight into the religious practices, teachings and tolerance prevalent during the era when this temple was built.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

1. Pandit Bhagavanlal Indrajī, *Journal of the Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, vol. XII, p.329.
2. There is enough evidence in the form of ruins but that must form a part of a separate article.
3. V.V. Mirashi, *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, vol. VI,
grants no.11, Berlin Museum plates of Chittarāja, 5.4.1034 CE, of a grant for providing food and clothing to the ascetics dwelling in the temple of the holy Bhaiyapeśvara, constructed by Bhaiyapa;
grant no.29, Mallikārjuna, 17.1.1162 CE refers to the 'Gurukul' attached to a temple.
grant no.42, Raṭṭarāja 24.12.1010 CE refers to *pañcamahāmaṭhasthāna*.
4. G.V. Tagare, *Śaivism: Some Glimpses*, New Delhi - 5.
5. Ranjusri Ghosh, *Journal of the Asiatic Society, Kolkata*, vol. XLVIII, pp.44-61 'Śaiva Cult and some images at Bangad : Dakṣiṇ Dinajpur; "ācārya Rūpaśiva, the disciple of Mūrtiśiva caused the *praśasti* to be engraved and an image of his *ācārya* Mūrtiśiva (of Golaki mahāmaṭha of the Durvāsa sect) to be sculpted". That image must have been installed in the temple built by him'.
G. Bhattacharya, 'Inscribed image of a *Śaivācharya* from Bengal' *Essay on Buddhist, Hindu, Jain Iconography, Studies in Bengal art Series* : no.1 (The International Centre for study of Bengal art, Dhaka 2000, pp.393-413; Mūrtiśiva in the Asutosh Museum, Calcutta, Vidyāśiva in the Pritzker collection of Chicago. Inscribed pedestals bear the names of these *ācāryas*. Vidyāśiva, depicted like a *yogī* in meditative posture, is sitting cross-legged on a full blown lotus. He has matted hair, is devoid of ornaments and wears a *kaupīna* and *uttarīya* through which the *upavīta* (sacred thread) is visible.
6. T.A. Gopinath Rao, *Elements of Hindu Iconography*, vol. 1, part II, p.378; He says with reference

to Hoyasala sculpture of Sarasvatī at Halebidu, 'It is obviously intended here that Sarasvatī is to be looked upon as a śakti of Śiva. In Pāla sculptures, she is seen as the śakti of Viṣṇu'.

7. Devangana Desai, *Religious Imagery of Khajuraho*, Mumbai; Dr. Desai has explained the depiction of erotica at Khajuraho on the basis of a pun on this '*Sandhikṣetra*'.
8. V.V. Mirashi, *ibid*, grant 41, Rattaraja, 22.5.1008 CE, refers to 'my preceptor Atreya, a disciple of Ambhojaśambhu who has obtained knowledge from a series of preceptors of the Karkaroṇi branch of the famous Mattamayūra clan.'
9. Stella Kramrisch, *The Art of India*. The figure at Ambarnātha bears close resemblance to a plate in the book, identified as 'a young saint(?)' on the wall of the Nāgeśvarasvāmī temple in Kumbhakoṇam, South India.
10. A.P. Jamkhedkar, *Maharashtra State Gazettier; Itihas : Pracīna Klā, " Sāhitya ani Kalā*, p.160.
11. The Brahmā image is reproduced from an early photograph. At present, the only part seen is the right face of Brahmā.
12. Nilakanta Sastri, *An Art Historical Sketch of Śaivism*, p.65.