

A Chalukyan Legacy (Art and Culture ,GS paper 1,UPSC IAS Mains)

The western Chalukya dynasty, established by Pulakeshin I, has given us some of the most spectacular architectural treasures. Among them is a small site, Aihole, built between 450 and 650 C.E. Situated in Karnataka on the banks of the river Malaprabha with the Meguti hill overlooking it, Aihole was known in ancient India as Aryapur or Ayyavole and was probably the earliest capital of the Chalukyas. It is believed that Parashurama came to the river Malaprabha to wash his bloodied axe after avenging the death of his father Jamadagni and killing the entire Kshatriya clan. At the sight of blood in the river, he apparently cried, "Ai, ai holey! (Ah, the river!)".

I travelled to Badami, Aihole, and Pattadakal with a friend and we walked just like that into a glorious past. It is in these places that you see the earliest development of structural temple architecture. First we went to Badami, which has rock-cut temples and exquisite sculptures, and then to Aihole, one of the earliest places where structural temple architecture was developed, if not actually born. This form of building robust structures was further developed in Pattadakal.

Centre of temple building

For two centuries Aihole was at the centre of temple building. There are over a hundred temples in Aihole, all marking the shift from rock-cut temple architecture to a form where stone blocks are placed on top of one another. While the earlier cave temples had a simple cella in a verandah-like construction, these temples were constructed with a garbhagriha (sanctum sanctorum), a mandapa (sanctum), an enclosed sabha mandapa (assembly hall), an antechamber, and a

pradakshina pratha (circumambulation path). Temples in Aihole have flat or sloping roofs and resemble thatched cottages. Some of them have a small upper storey (shikhara) on these sloping roofs, but these were probably later additions.

The oldest temple in Aihole is the Lad Khan temple named after a Lad Khan who lived on its premises for some time. A large Nandi dominates the inside and faces the shiva-ling in the garbha griha. The masonry here is basic – huge dressed stone blocks placed one on top of the other without any binding material. The stones are fixed in place with grooves and offsets and the ceiling is supported by load-bearing walls and pillars.

The Durga temple

While the Nandi with its placid face is impressive, it's the apsidal-shaped Durga temple which is the centre of attention in Aihole. Like Lad Khan, the naming is interesting in the Durga temple too. Though there is a magnificent statue of goddess Durga in her Mahishasura Mardini form, this was probably a Shiva or Vishnu temple and got its name from the word 'Durg' (fortress). At some later point, this temple was used as part of the region's fortifications.

Apart from its apsidal shape, what is striking about the Durga temple is that it is built to resemble a Buddhist chaitya hall in imitation of Buddhist rock-cut architecture. It's built on a high and heavily moulded plinth. Here, too, the shikhara is a subsequent addition.

Here we find the mukha mandapa, sabha mandapa, pradakshina pratha, and garbha griha. The apsidal shape is known as Gajaprishta, which means the back of an elephant. Four squat stone pillars decorated with beautifully carved mithuna medallions, and friezes inside bands and beads hanging from makara mouths, support the mukha mandapa.

The ceiling of the mukha mandapa has two circles – inner and

outer – carved on a huge stone slab. The inner circle features fishes which form the spokes of a central wheel with a floral design in the outer ring. Near it is a ceiling frieze of a seven-headed naga holding a beautiful garland in his right hand and a bouquet in his left, with two beautiful nagins on his right. You have a small price to pay in order to admire this intricate work, though: a sprain in your neck from staring at the ceiling. A glorious Garuda, with his wings spread out on either side of the door, welcomes you in. Ramayana scenes are exquisitely carved in the porch. A colonnaded verandah runs around the inner structure and has magnificent carvings in the inside niches. The Varaha and Narasimha avatar of Vishnu, and Durga, Surya and Shiva with Nandi, especially stand out.

As we came out, we saw a group of young students sitting on the two stone benches carved at the entrance of the temple, exclaiming at what could have been board games cut in stone. We walked away, turning every now and then to see the remnants of that wonderful past.

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