



Kanakeshwar Temple Historical Overview

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ABSTRACT:

The Kanakeshwar Devasthan Temple is 13 km from Alibag. This is a very famous Shiva temple. The temple is on a 384.35 m. high hill. Kanakeshwar close to the sea in the extreme north-west of the district, is a long even-topped hill, stretching nearly north and south, with bare sides and a wooded top. Its nearness to the sea makes the hill top pleasantly cool, and its buildings and holy places, its waving beautifully-wooded top and its wide views of hill and sea always repay a visit.

The hill is most easily climbed from the south-west, where, from the foot to the top and far along its waving upper slope, the ascent is made easy in steep places by a broad flight of steps and by a paved way where the surface is level. The pavement begins at the foot of the southwest spur, near a shrine of the Dattatraya, about a hundred yards to the north of the large village of Mapganv. The first 183 or 275 meter have patches of smooth and rough paving, and stretches of bare rock. Beyond this a well finished pavement climbs the south face of the hill in a zigzag flight of steps, and stretches over mounds and hollows, about half a mile to the great temple of Kanakesvar. and beyond the temple, about 275 meter to the Visnu pool or cow's mouth cistern, a total distance of about 1737 meter (1,900 yards). Two masonry ponds on the hill top, the chief Siv pool and Brahma's pool about 137 meter to the south, formed part of this great work.



Please cite this Article as : Jadhav Baban Bhivsen ,Kanakeshwar Temple Historical Overview : Golden Research Thoughts (Sept ; 2012)



A few paces to the east of Dattatraya's temple, the spot from which the paved way begins is marked by four stone pillars about two feet high which were set up by the masons. On one of them a ling case or salunkha is carved. After about 183 meter of an irregular pathway is another small pillar with a hammer and three chisels carved on it. A hundred yards more of the same unfinished pavement, lead to the foot of the steep ascent, the beginning of a zigzag light of steps. At the beginning of the steps, on the right, are two square whitewashed tombs about three feet high known as Mohangiri and Balgiri. On the south tomb are carved a ling-case, a pair of feet, and a conch shell. On the north tomb are a ling-case, a pair of feet, a conch shell, and a bull and between the two tombs is a smaller tomb also with ling-case, bull, conch shell, and feet. Along the sides of the steps are rows of nandruk trees, with many gaps, and the trees that remain are little more than stunted bushes. This avenue of trees, which improves in the less exposed upper slopes, was a separate work from the steps, and was carried out by the headman of Mapgaon village, who was rewarded by freedom from forced labour and from other exactions. In a square paved resting-place, at the top of the first hundred steps, on the right, is a cleft rock called the Cobra's Seat, Nagobaca Tappa, because a cobra lived in it and came out to be worshipped on Nagpancami day. Close by is a broken land-grant stone with the ass-curse.

From the Cobra's Seat, the steps wind up the steep south face for about 270 paces, to a platform known as the Gayamandi or Cow's Scat. On this platform, which measures about thirteen feet by eleven, is the figure of a cow (1' 7" x 1' 7") and a small natural hole full of crystals in the shape of a cow's foot.

Beyond the Cow's Seat the paved way winds north-east up a gentle slope, and between less stunted and broken rows of trees, about 348 meter to a small domed shrine the Palesvar (13' x 10' x 10'), with a ling inside and a curious pointed cement-covered roof. Beyond the Palesvar shrine the pavement turns to the north, and, with rising ground on the right passes along waving hill-top, whose hollows are beautifully wooded with mango and ashok trees. About 400 paces beyond the Palesvar temple, on the right, a two-arched doorway leads through a seven feet high wall of laterite masonry into Ram's pool or Ram Tirth, a stone-lined pond about forty-three feet by fifty-four. In the centre of the other three sides are doors with single arches, and, inside of each of the four doorways, flights of steps lead to the water. This is the first of the four pools in which pilgrims to Kankesvar should bathe before they enter the chief temple. The water is drunk but it is not good. At the foot of a tree about ten yards west of Ram's pool, on a stone about eighteen inches high, is the rudely carved figure of a horseman with a spear in his hand. Under it, in Gujarati letters, are the words, Kumbhar Ramji Pasa, Samvat 1929 no Vaisakh sud II ne var Gareu, that is Thursday the 11th of the bright half of Vaisakh (April-May) A. D. 1872. This stone was set up by a potter of Cheul to a dead member of his family whose spirit haunted his house. A little beyond the north wall of Ram's pool are three red white-spotted stones, the centre stone roughly shaped like a human figure. These are vetal, the prince of the spirits and two of his soldiers. Steps to the right lead to an old temple with an image of Rakhmabai. The feet on her right are all that remains of an image of Vithoba, which some years ago was smashed by a madman. Vithoba's temple is completely ruined.

TEMPLE:

About 150 paces further north, along the well-wooded hill top, in the slight hollow, the chief buildings on the hill cluster round a large stone-lined pond, with a stone parapet wall with eight sides, and small flights of steps leading to the water.

The pond (Pokhran) is surrounded by a parapet wall about four feet high, around which is a pavement about thirty feet broad. In the parapet wall are eight doors, three of them large and five of small size. The pond is eight-sided, with, inside of each door, a terrace or platform with a plain front and flights of steps at each side. The temple of Kankesvar, the chief building on the hill, stands in the middle of the west bank of the pond. Its dark shrine and white-washed spire are built in the richly carved many-cornered Calukyan or Hemadpanti style. This temple is contemporary of Ambernath's Shiva temple. There are three main faces, to the east, north and south, each face enriched with image niches. The lines of the corners, between the faces, are carried up beyond the heavy eaves into pointed panels, which, in sets-of three, each ending in a round avla berry and a stoppered water-pot, stand out round the central spire. The central spire, like its side panels, ends in an avla and a water-pot, which at certain seasons is crowned by a large brass oil jar. The height of the walls, to the heavy stone eaves is about sixteen feet, and to the top of the spire fifty-one and a half feet. In the centre of the north, east and south faces, a belt about three feet broad, is occupied with

image niches, and a third image niche occupies the face of the spire above. Between each of the three main faces the wall is built in five corners, the two corners nearest the image niches being shallow and the three others deep. At the top of each of the corners is the figure of a monkey and under the eaves are small seated Yogi figures. According to the local people the images in the three niches on the south face are, in the spire niche Brahma with Savitri on his knee, in the upper shrine niche Bhairav, and in the lower niche Gayatri. Below Gayatri are a pair of elephants. On the east face, in the spire niche is Siv, in the upper shrine niche Bhairav, and in the lower shrine niche Savitri and elephants below. On the north face, in the spire niche is Visnu, in the upper shrine niche Bhairav, and in the lower shrine niche Sarasvati and elephants below. To the north the water passes from the shrine through a stone lion-mouth or sink mukh into a masonry cistern, and from the cistern through a covered masonry drain. A few yards to the west, at the corner of the shrine, are some old carved stones, one of which, said to be an inscribed land-grant stone, has lately been carried by the bava inside the temple. The hall or mandap to the west of the old shrine is modern. It is a low tile-roofed building like a dwelling house. Above the hall roof, in the west face of the spire, is a square block of old masonry surmounted by a standing figure of a tiger, and with an upper and a lower row of image-niches with figures said to be of Bhairav. There is also another niche to the west of the main niche in the north face with a figure said to be of Bhairav. The outer wall of the shrine has been lately repaired and many of the crevices have been pointed with mortar. But the building is in the star or many-pointed Calukyan style, and, though much less ornamented, seems to belong to about the same time (11th century) as the Ambarnath temple near Kalyan. Though the spire is white-washed, some of the figures in the image-niches have been left black and the stoppers in the water pot ornaments are red. In the inside, through the east wall of the modern hall or mandap, a door leads to a lobby or passage about ten feet long by five broad. In the back or east wall of this passage is a central door eight feet high by three feet eight broad with richly carved pilasters, and, on each side, a row of five door-keepers each about eighteen inches high. To the right are two female and three male figures, and to the left two female and two male figures, the fifth in the centre of the left row having disappeared. Through the doorway six steps lead down into a dark shrine about ten feet square with plain walls, and, about fifteen feet from the floor, a domed ceiling in the Calukyan or cross-corner style. The floor is paved with stones. In the middle is a salunkha or ling case about three feet long, hid by a brass cobra that raises a five-hooded head facing the north. In the centre of the ling case is a round hole about six inches across and a foot deep.



Outside of the old shrine, on the western side and overlooking the sea, a big hall has been built in 1960 largely with the help of the donations received from the public. The hall presents a contrasting foreground to the background provided by the old shrine in regard to the nature of construction, architecture, etc. It is built on a solid stone foundation which from the ground measures about six feet. The

whole structure is squarish in dimensions. A flight of about 8 stone steps leads to the main entrance of the hall. On both sides to the entrance doors, on platforms built above the steps are the sitting figures of lions ordinary and not too aweinspiring in their format. The hall measures about 50' x 50' and has a flooring of polished tiles of diagonal shape. The height of the Sabhamandap is about 3 meter. The Sabhamandap is support-ed by eight concrete pillars of a majestic rounded shape. Of those, two pillars are embedded in the wall adjacent to the main shrine. The roof of the Sabhamandap is a concrete slab very plain in appearance and with no pretence to any architectural beauty. The Sabhamandap is built in close proximity to the main shrine and to an observer therefore there is feeling of continuity if not in respect of structure, at least in respect of length. The Sabhamandap has a door each to the north and south sides and the one to the east leads to the gabhara of the main shrine. The excellent feature of the construction is the pleasant atmosphere in the main hall where the air is cleaned by ample ventilation let in by the artistic grill work in the side walls. The figure of the sitting bull which was formerly outside of the old mandap has been stuck in-side of the hall and is the only rustic feature of the otherwise modern construction.

To the south-west of the temple, about a 92 meter down the hill, is Bhim's pond or Bhim Kund where the pilgrim should bathe immediately before entering the temple. But this pool dries soon after the close of the rains and is seldom visited. West of the main temple, under an open tiled canopy, is a bull and at the side two lamp-pillars about twenty-five feet high. Monday is sacred to the god, and, once a year, comes his great fair, at the November full-moon. The November fair is attended by a large number, mostly belonging to the villages round, being the most numerous and most devout worshippers. A pilgrim should bathe in the Ram pool about 137 meter south of the temple, then in the Visnu pool about 275 meter to the north, then in the main pond or siv pool, and perhaps in the Bhim pool to the south-west. He should then make his offering to the god. It is a pretty fair with crowds of gaily clad visitors. In the afternoon three gods come in palanquins to pay their respect to Kankesvar; Ganapati from Avas about four miles to the north-west; Bhairav from Siroli about two miles to the north; Devi from Jhirad about two miles to the west. There is also the long pole of Phupadevi from Revas about four miles to the north. Each of these are escorted by about live and twenty villagers. When the gods have paid their respects to Kankesvar, Kankesvar's crown is brought out and placed in a palanquin. Then a procession is formed and the palanquins are carried round the outside of the pond, with crowds of: men bare to the waist and their hair streaming down their backs, dancing and shouting in front of the palanquins, each with a cane in his hand which they clash together as an accompaniment to their singing. On the day of the great fair a large brass oil jar is pulled up by the Guravs and set on the top pinnacle of the spire and a light burnt in it. It remains on the top of the spire till the Mahasivratra day when it is taken down. On that day a largely attended fair is held.

To the north-west of the main temple is the shrine of Ramesvar. It is a building of plain dressed masonry about twelve feet square repaired with mortar, but apparently as old as the temple. To the east is a porch about six feet six inches square supported on two pillars with deep eaves. On each side of the shrine door are carved pilasters and in the centre of the lintel is a small Ganapati. The walls of the shrine are plain both outside and inside. The porch ceiling is flat, hut the shrine ceiling rises in a cross-cornered dome to a central stone. In the centre of the paved floor of the shrine is a ling in a ling-case. The outer roofs of the porch and of the shrine are of large blocks of dressed stone. They rise in three tiers of steps with stone horns or knobs in the corners and in the centre of each tier. The ornament in the centre of the dome roof is an dvald berry, or round flattened crab-apple, with a water pot on the top and a stopper in its mouth, probably representing a coconut.

To the east of Ramesvar's shrine, from the north bank of the pond, rises a flight of ten steps. The small tiled building on the left is a rest-house. Behind it, the modern square building with a domed roof, entered by five steps, and with a standing image of the deity inside, is the temple of Laksmi-Narayan. Behind are some thatched huts. The larger tiled building on the right (about 36' x 33' and 12' high) in the modern dwelling-house style, is Ganapati's temple. The three figures in the east wall, facing the door, are. Ganapati in the centre, Siddhi on Ganapati's right, and Rddhi on his left. Opposite the temple door is a small shrine with an alabaster image of Ganapati's carrier rat. North of Ganapati's temple is a domed shrine of Bhairav.

The small domed shrine at the north-east of the lake is dedicated to Kankesvar. It is on a plinth about twelve feet square and is entered by three steps. The walls are plain and the dome eight-sided, with a round pot-like top, and pillars at the corners of the roof. In front is a small old bull and a female figure. Inside is a ling and a Ganapati in a niche opposite the door. At the south-east corner of the pond, closely like the

Ramesvar shrine in the north-west corner, is a little old shrine with plain walls measuring 7' 9" x 6' 10". It is dedicated to Kundesvar or Brahmesvar. and has a porch five feet square. In front of the porch are a pair of old carved pillars. There are old stones in the roof both of the porch and of the shrine which rise in tiers with knobs or points in the centre and at the corners of each tier. On the top of the dome is a rounded apple-like avala on which stands a water-pot with coconut stopper. An inscription states that the shrine was re-paired in Sak 1773, that is in A. D. 1851. The large two-storied building on the south bank of the pond is a rest-house.

From the north bank of the pond, the paved way leads between Ganapati's and Laksmi-Narayan's temple, and the trees, across a bush-covered hill top, with beautiful views of the sea and of the harbour and island of Bombay. The pavement leads about three hundred yards down a gentle slope to a small stone-lined cistern filled from a spring whose water passed through a stone cow's mouth. In the front of the cistern is an open pavement with broad stone benches at the sides. This is Visnu's pool or Visnu Tirth, the second of the four pools in which the pilgrim should bathe before he presents himself to the god.

From the high ground above the pool is a fine sea view, west over Underi and Khanderi, and north, beyond the beacon-tower of Mandva across the broad Bombay harbour with its fleets of white-sailed fishing and coasting craft and passenger and cargo steamships passing all over the world. To the right rises a forest of masts and the many-storied houses of eastern Bombay. To the west stretches the long claw-like line of the Colaba rocks, and behind the Back Bay, the green of Malabar Hill, and the encircling sea.

NOTES AND FOOTNOTES

¹The pavement was the gift of a Gujarat Vani of Alibag, named Govind Revadas, the minister of Raghoji Angre (1759-1793), who died in 1774 (Shak 1696), before the pavement at the foot of the hill was completed.

²The details are: From Dattatraya's temple to the hill foot about 300 yards from the beginning of the steps to the Cobra's Seat about 100 yards; from the Cobra's seat to the Gayamandi or Cow's Altar about 270 yards; from the Cow's Altar to Paleshvar shrine about 380 yards; from Paleshvar to Brahma's Pool about 400 yards; from Brahma's Pool to the temple about 150 yards; and north to Vishnu's Poo about 300 yards, that is a total of about 1,900 yards.

³The cow used to come from Valukeshvar temple in Bombay (in Kolaba) and sprinkle milk on the God Kankesvar. Once the cowherd followed the cow and tried to catch her. When she found that she is being chased she leapt from the top of the hill to this spot, and the cowherd was killed, and his image is engraved on the Stone at the Cobra's Seat.

⁴Dr. K. K. Choudhary (Ed.), Maharashtra Rajaya Gazetteer - Raigad Jilha (In Marathi), Maharashtra Govt. Mumbai, 1993, p. 685.

⁵Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency, Kolaba District, Vol. XI, 1883, Government Of Maharashtra, Bombay, Reprint 1989, p. 320.

⁶Ibid, P. 322.

⁷Dr. K. K. Choudhary (Ed.), Maharashtra Rajaya Gazetteer - Raigad Jilha (In Marathi), Maharashtra Govt. Mumbai, 1993, p. 687.