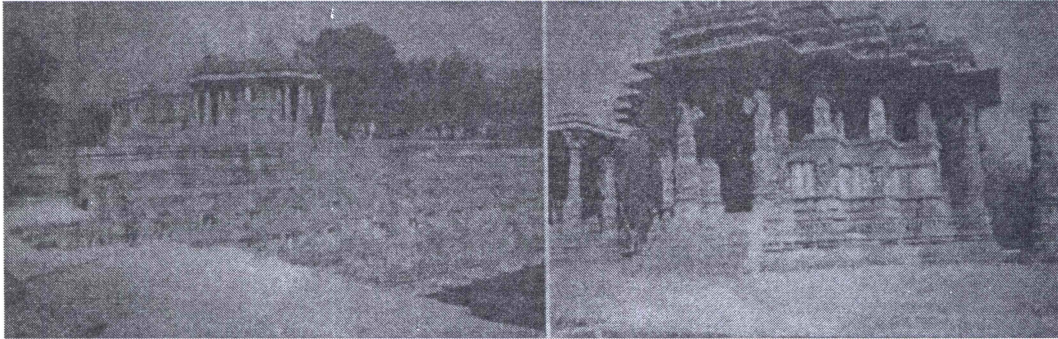


The Sun Temple at Modhera, Gujarat

Mandira Bhattacharya

The temples of the sun are quite a number in India. The Buddhists started building activities quite early. The Brahmanical architecture had a slow start. Temple activity of the latter creed did not start before the Guptas appeared in the scene. However the Sun was represented symbolically in the earliest coins for example the Punch-marked coins. Image making and temple building activities almost simultaneously started during the time of the Imperial Guptas. This was also the time of the Puranas. The early Puranas were compiled during this period. This was the epoch of re-assertion of the Brahmanical religion. The Puranas eulogized various gods and goddesses. Many of the indigenous deities were merged within and formed the core of the stories of the many Puranas.



Slowly five important gods and goddesses along with several off shots occupied the central stage. The Vedic god Rudra was transformed into Siva. The Vedic Visnu absorbed the Adityas and the hero gods of the Satvatas. Surya or the Vedic Visnu combined within and created a separate entity. The early symbols had a part to play. The other deity that originally was a follower of Siva, the leader of the Ganas, curiously stepped into prominence, the followers were called Ganapatas. The last group of deities were called by a generic name-Sakti. Within it were included goddesses like Lakshmi, Sarasvati, Mahisasuramardini and many more.

The image of the Sun took two separate course in the north and in the south. The north Indian image developed after the Iranian type. His dress is called a udichya Vesa. He wears high boots, his body is covered like that of a Kushana king, the Aviyangna or the sacred thread goes criss-cross over, a dagger is fitted to his waist. He rides on a chariot driven by 7 horses. The divine charioteer is Arun. In course of time all the foreign elements were subdued. The icons of the Sun from the south did not have any foreign influence.

The temple of the Sun is reported by Huien Tsang in the seventh century at Mulastanapurah or the present day Multan. One Gupta period inscription from Bengal (Jagadishpur inscription from Dinajpur) speaks of a temple of Sahasraramshi.

From the 7th century onward India witnessed the rise of regional powers. Several small, large, powerful, some feudatories continuously fought with each other. The family of Vardhanas were Aditya Bhaktas, so also Sashanka, the first independent king of Bengal.

These kings adopted high sounding epithets and went into a spree of temple building. This was an attempt to show off and legitimize their position. In the 9th and 10th centuries innumerable temple were built in western India, Central India, eastern India and in the South.

At present eight temples are visible –

Modhera in Gujarat, Konarak in Odhisa, Martand in Uttarakhand, Dakshinarka in Gaya, Punark and Deobarak in Bihar, Surya Pahar in Assam, Suyanaar temple in Tamilnadu and Surya Narayana temple in Andhra Pradesh.

The Solankis of Gujarat were a petty dynasty who ruled over a region but they mobilized a good number of resources and constructed an extra ordinary piece of temple architecture. The sun temple at Modhera was built near their capital Anahilavada Patan. It is 102 km. to the north from Ahmedabad. There is an inscription that say it was built by Rushabh Bhimdeva in 1026 A.D. It was raided, according to the legends, by Mammud of Gazni and again by Allauddin Khilji.

There are three axially connected structures, Surya Kund, also called Rama Kund, Sabha Mandapa and the Guda Mandapa or the Garbhagriha.

The Duda Mandapa and the Sabha Mandapa do not have the Shikhara. The conservation work has given a crude top over the structures. It was a typical Nagara type of temple with tapering shikharas.

The most interesting to the present writer was the structure of the rectangular Surya Kund. It is a large rectangular water tank measuring 53'6x36'6 m. It is a terraced reservoir. All over the terraces, there are big and small dedicatory shrines of various gods and goddesses. There are small triangular niches all over the steps.

The Sabha griha – The roof originally stood on 52 intricately designed pillars. A little trace of the concentric circular roof may be imagined above. The sabha could be approached from all sides. The number of the pillars might mean 52 weeks of the year. The pillars were richly decorated with scenes from the epics and the Puranas. On one of the pillars a scene from Krishna's child hood is depicted.

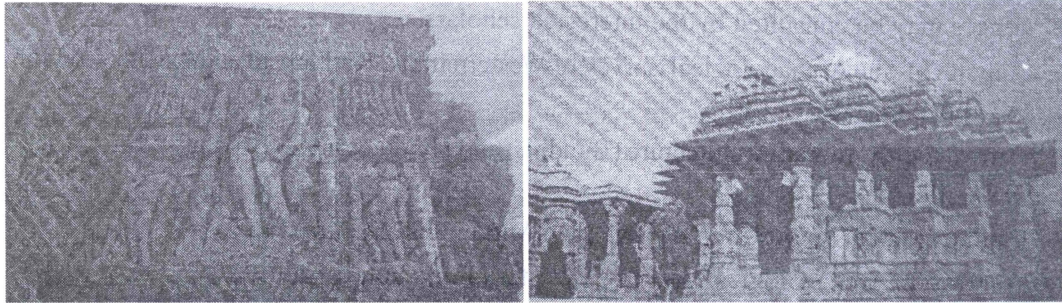
Guda mandapa or Mula mandapa is deep bellow the surface which is about 15 feet. According to tradition the image was made of gold. The pit, from the same source, was filled with gold coins. This myth of wealth no doubt brought about the looters.

Exterior of the temple – The outside walls contain 12 figures of the Sun along with many other detities of the Brahmanical order — the eight dikpalas, Siva, Sarasvati, Visvakarma, Varuna and many such.

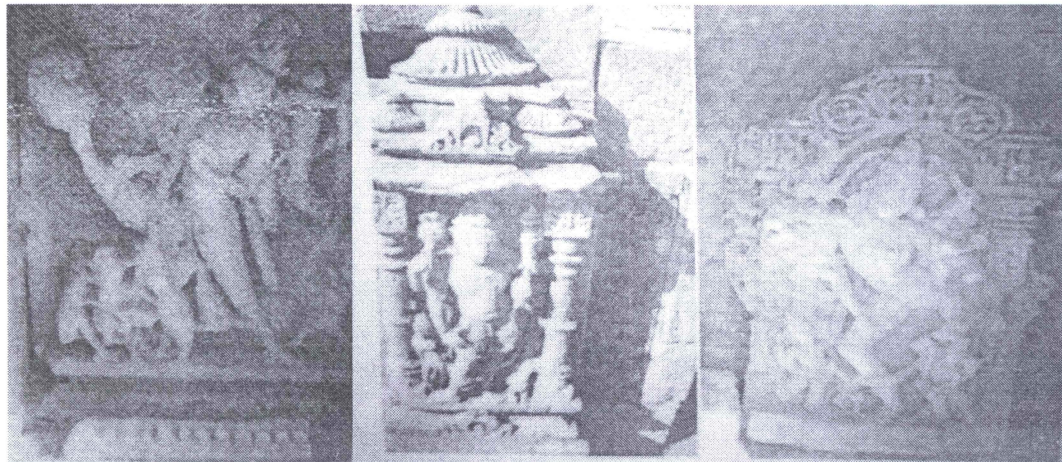
The dedicatory smaller temples of the Kund:

On the south there are two small Shikhara type of temples on the two side of the staircase. A bigger temple was constructed right at the centre of the pathway. The present

writer is of the opinion that it was a later construction as it looks odd and does not go with the plan.



These 3 temples had three separate idols in them (1) a Visnu is anantasayana, (2) a Ganesha (3) a Devi on a quadraped. She is identified by the people as Sitala. But she is actually sitting on an elephant and holding a boat like object with her two hands. Probably she was Indrani but the boat like object cannot be identified. The image of Visnu lying on Shesa naga is not very common to find. His head rests on a seven headed snake. The emblems, Sankha, Chakra, Gada and Padma are clearly depicted. The stela over the deity is semi circular in shape. People in various poses are shown in between two compartments where two seated figures are sculpted sitting in an enclosure. Below the entire design there is depicted a scene whose closest resemblance is that a scene of the Samudra manthana. The third figure is that of a seated Ganesha on Alidha pose.



The figure is tension free and is sitting on a relaxed mood. In his four hands he holds the Ankisha, Modaka, Mulaka and the Akshamala. The trunk comes down gracefully and turns to the right. — All the figures were eroded because of the quality of the stone, a type of sand stone, was used. The other pyramid like it shrines have a variety of deities like a Trivikrama Visnu, a dancing figure whose identification is impossible to get.

Like many other temples this temple also has quite a number of erotic sculptures as in Khajuraho or in Puri and Konarak. This master piece of a temple was unfortunately constructed with a type of sand stone and the air and rain are causing enough damage to it. The Archaeological Survey of India should remember it.

References:

The paper was composed on direct survey of the temple by the writer. However the followed references may be consulted by the interested scholars.

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An apology: All the photographs were taken by the writer while she was on a tour of Gujrat.