

## Śaiva Cult Images in Stone and Stucco in the Gor Khatri Temple (Peshawar)

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### Abstract

*The work in hand discusses Śaiva cult representations executed in stone and stucco at the famous Gor Khatri temple located within the Sarāi Jahānābād (built 1641CE) inside the walled city of Peshawar. The cult object executed in stone is characterized by the now missing Śivaliṅga once supposedly fixed in yonipīṭha as speculated by the surviving socket in association with channels going northwards out of the western shrine. This group is complemented by divine imagery done in stucco on the outer walls of the western shrine in addition to those of the eastern shrine in its niches as is evident from the traces left behind. Attempt has also been made here to assess iconographic value of these godly figures, some of which are conjecturally restored to complement decorative scheme of the temple built during 1823 to 1830.*

**Key words:** Gor Khatri, shrine, Śaiva, cult, liṅga, pīṭha, devakoṣṭha, niche, yogī, Bhairava.

### The Temple

The famous Hindu temple at Gor Khatri (Figs. 1, 2) has been referred to variously in the context of building heritage of the Sikh period in Peshawar (Lal 1846: 44, 51, 74; Raverty 1852: 22ff; Das 1874: 153; *Gazetteer of the Peshawar District 1897-98*: 363; Jaffar 1946: 76ff, 103ff; Shah 2008). The spot where it stands today is significant from historical point of view as it had been visited by Bābar (Beveridge 2002: 230,394; *Waqāi'* 2007: 204), Akbar (Abul Fazl 1973 I: 528), Jahāngīr (1968 I: 201; Rogers 1968 I: 102; Elliot and Dowson 1976 VI: 314), and others (Elphinstone 1992; Lal 1846; Raverty 1852; Das 1874) at different times; all endorsing its association with ritualistic activities of the Hindu yogīs. The temple remained abandoned for some period of time and has recently been restored to the local Hindu community to use it for their worship and rituals.

It formed part of our previous work that focussed on the architectural heritage of the Hindus in Peshawar (Shah 2008). This temple was formerly believed to be built during the tenure of Avitabile, the Sikh governor of Peshawar, who held his office from 1838 to 1842 (Das 1874: 153; Jaffar 1946: 82ff, 103ff). An analysis of the contemporary and near contemporary literary sources led to push the date of its construction back for about a decade; thus placing it between 1823 and 1830 (Shah 2013a). The present paper aims to highlight iconographic features of Hindu cult images executed in stone and stucco that survive in whatsoever state of preservation on the wall surfaces of this religious establishment.

The temple complex consists of two shrines, lying in east-west orientation, connected by means of an arcaded *antarāla* (Fig. 3). Square

on plan, the western shrine is provided with a *śikhara* superstructure; while that on the east, being smaller and octagonal, is surmounted by a ribbed dome (Fig. 4) in line with the architectural fashion of 19th and early 20th century buildings in the Vale of Peshawar.

### Cult Representations

For the purpose of convenience in the study and to locate these iconic and aniconic cult representations properly on the inner and outer surfaces of both western and eastern shrines, we have divided them, in relation to the scope of the present work, into two different types.

#### Type 1: Stone

##### *Śivaliṅga*

This type is characterized by the only cult object in the form of the now missing *Śivaliṅga* (cf. Shah 2013b, 2009, 2006) once consecrated in the *garbhagriha* of the western shrine occupying central place on the floor. It was provided with channels to drain off liquids used at the time of *abhiṣeka* ritual. This important cult object had been plucked off from its original context about half a century ago, whose present location is not known for certain. We, therefore, base our enquiries on the literary evidences and personal information of those who happened to visit the temple in the past and found this *liṅga* fixed in its original place.

As to its material, SM Jaffar (1946: 82) records that it was made of red stone. On an enquiry into the matter, Professor Abdur Rahman (University of Peshawar) informed the author that this *Śivaliṅga*, carved out of brownish stone, survived until 1963-64, when he visited the temple, as an MA student under the supervision of Professor AH Dani, and noticed it *in situ* (Pers. comm. dated 14

October 2012). It appears to have been dislocated or lost only after that date at the latest. Was it destroyed or found its way into some private collection in or abroad may be any body's guess. Archaeological evidence, eye-witness record and literary references would affirm the presence of a *Śivaliṅga* in the western shrine of this temple complex, which leaves us in no doubt that it served as the Śaiva shrine as suggested earlier (Shah 2008). This is also corroborated by the statement of Jaffar (1946: 82) as opposed to the late Professor Dani (1969: 173), who believed it to be the shrine of Gurū Gorakhnāth, which is actually not. The existence of the latter's image in the eastern shrine and the 'absence of the *lingam*' (Jaffar 1946: 82) therein further affirm it.

The local Hindu community has recently filled the socket, lay empty in the form of a hole since plucking off from the original stone *liṅga* together with its *pīṭha* (Figs. 5, 6), with a huge one made of cement and painted in black to complement ritualistic paraphernalia of *abhiṣeka* for the visiting devotees (Fig. 7). In the absence of the cult object once installed here, we are left with the only alternative of filling in the socket to restore it conjecturally. Possibility of the shape of the now missing *liṅga*, therefore, lies between two choices: it was carved rising out of the *yonipīṭha* both done in a single block of stone with roughly carved base placed directly on the earth like a near contemporary example (no.1872,0701.119) in stone now in the British Museum (Fig. 8) (Blurton 1992: 79, fig. 40; see also Mitterwallner 1984: pl.13; Taddei 1962: 288); or the *yonipīṭha* was set on a tiered pedestal containing a socket above in the centre of its cistern to receive a detachable *liṅga* like another example in black stone (no.

1805,0703.481) in the same collection (Fig. 9) (cf. Shah 2008: fig.17).

Generally speaking, *liṅgas* used to be fashioned, in accordance with the Purāṇic injunctions, of various types of rocks, a practice continued down to recent past (cf. Shah 2009). Thus the *Liṅga Purāṇa* (Shastri 1973: 366-68) praises *liṅgas* made of stone, which material excels others in order of merit. The sponsors and artisans of the Gor Khatri temple were seemingly well aware of the choice of material for the *liṅga* to be consecrated here and the degree of merit associated with it.

Therefore, we feel justified in adhering to the existence of the now missing stone *liṅga* and its *pīṭha* in the western shrine that enjoyed its life here at least until early 1960s.

### Type 2: Stucco

Images of different forms of Śaiva cult divinities wrought in stucco mostly stamped on the inner and outer mural surfaces decorated the western shrine, and restricted to the interior of the eastern one. In the former case, stucco images are confined to three *devakoṣṭha* panels on the west, north and east sides except for the south where the same place is occupied by a ventilator protected with iron grill allowing fresh air and light into the *garbhagriha* interior.

These arched panels are made in such a way that each is supported on a floriated base and semi-dome ribbed in shape with acanthus leaves at the springing point; marked on the right and left by pilasters with multi-foiled shaft, all being decorative in nature. Similar treatment for such decorative niches can be found on the central niche inside the eastern shrine of Gor Khatri, on the northern face of

the larger temple at Pañch Tīrtha, and other contemporary religious and secular buildings of the Muslims in Peshawar.

### Western Shrine

#### a. Gaṇeśa

*Devakoṣṭha* on the western side shows the figure of Gaṇeśa seated in *utkuṭikāsana* on a floral throne placed on the back of rat (or *muṣika*), running to left (Figs. 10, 11). He wears *keyūras* decorating his arms and a heavy *hāra* round his neck. His proboscis is outstretched to the extent that it touches the head of a parrot perched on the left side of the throne in front of the god. Apparently, his two hands hold no attributes whatsoever, but in the case of his left hand, tip of an unrecognizable attribute is visible lying almost in close proximity to the *hāra*. He was previously wrongly identified as boar (or *Varāha*), and the trunk mistaken for his hands (Sher 1995: 69f). Two birds, seemingly parrot, are shown one each on the right and left ends of the throne.

Closely comparable examples of Gaṇeśa seated on his mount and created in Murshidabad (West Bengal) are illustrated by Pratapaditya Pal in his recently published article (Pal 2013: figs. 1, 8). His figure 1 shows the subject deity as part of a tableau worked in ivory showing Durgā Mahiṣāsuramārdinī (dated to 1836); while figure 8 is a miniature painting (c.1775) that depicts Gaṇeśa on the back of his mount as an integral part of the same composition in the Durgā shrine. Although differing in many ways, a contemporary (c.1830) image of Gaṇeśa done in miniature painting and created at Kolkata is now preserved in the Victoria and Albert Museum (no. IS.208-1950) (Fig. 12). Here the god, holding *gadā*, *cakra*,

*śaṅkha* and *padma* clockwise in his four hands, is shown seated on a low throne with his mount below. Curiously, all the four attributes are of Vaiṣṇava and not Śaiva. The Los Angeles County Museum of Art (hereafter LACMA) preserves a beautiful miniature painting created in Chamba (c. AD 1800), which shows Gaṇeśa riding on bull with rat going along in front (see Pal 2010: xv, fig.5) as part of the composition of Śiva and his family descending down the Kailāśa in the Himalayas. Another contemporary mural painting is coming from Qila Mubarak (Patiala) where the figure of enthroned Gaṇeśa is accompanied by his mount, rat (or *muṣika*) (Srivastava 1983: pl.1).

#### **b. Umā-Maheśvara**

The arched panel on the north is decorated with the divine couple of Śiva and Pārvatī both seated astride on the back of *vṛṣa*, charging to left (Fig. 13). The two-armed figure of Śiva holds *akṣamālā* in his right hand and an indistinguishable attribute in the left. Scratches on the upper parts of the divine figures have made it difficult to ascertain details of their facial features, drapery and proper identification of attributes they hold or the gesture they display except for *akṣamālā* in Śiva's left hand as noted above. This type of the union of Śiva and Pārvatī is called *Umā-Maheśvara* as seen in sculptures and (miniature and mural) paintings executed at different art centres through the ages.

Figural composition of our panel can be compared with a miniature painting (no. 1880,0.2161) now in the British Museum characterizing the Rajasthan school and dated to early 19th century. It depicts the godly couple on the back of *vṛṣa*, Śiva's mount, similarly charging to left (Fig. 14). Mural paintings inside the western shrine of the Gor

Khatri complex also contains an almost similar composition where the god is shown in his *Gaṅgādhara* form (Fig. 15).

Later whitewash, as part of conservation of the inner and outer surfaces of both shrines, has further marred figural beauty of the building under consideration. Obviously, photographs taken before whitewash give us more details than those of the later days. We were lucky enough to document this religious complex in 1993, and subsequently in 2005 and 2008 until which time the mural decoration remained almost not too badly disfigured as seen in the following years.

#### **c. Bhairava or Gorakhnāth (?)**

The eastern *devakoṣṭha* of the western shrine shows the central male figure with matted hair flanked on his left by an extended human figure (or corpse?) and a standing figure on his right in addition to an animal, which looks more like a dog than *Varāha* (see Sher 1995: 71). The central standing figure in the composition seems to hold a severed human head from which blood drops down on the earth. The contextual evidence related with this shrine of the temple complex would lead us to identify this figure as Bhairava (Sastri 1916: 151) (Fig. 16), a form of Śiva, who is generally represented with dog, which, although being inauspicious, is accompanied by mendicants (for details on dog, see Crooke 1896 II: 218ff).

The British Museum preserves a good number of almost contemporary paintings depicting Bhairava from various art centres of north and south India. We may support the identification of our image as Bhairava in the light of his *vāhana* and iconographic attributes with a painted example (no. 1925,1016,0.18) done in the Punjab hills and dated to c.1820 (Fig. 17),

and another contemporary painting (no. 1925,1016.016) illustrated in Blurton (1992: fig. 49). Yet another painting (no. 1993,1023,0.1) from Rajasthan (19th century) shows Bhairava, accompanied by a dog as his *vāhana*, holding a bleeding human head in his left hand (Fig. 18). The same iconographic setting might also indicate Guru Gorakhnāth, the religious leader of the *kānpḥaṭa yogīs*, who use to pierce ears to wear earrings (cf. Srivastava 1983: fig. 108).

The central figure in this composition also appears to wear earrings in both ears (cf. Sher 1995: 71), hence his identification with Gorakhnāth cannot be ruled out in view of the fact that Gor Khatri also known as Gorakhsetra, in addition to Ṭīlā Jogiyān near Jhelum, once served as hub of religious activities of this sect in the northwest (Shah 2008; Briggs 1973: 101, 229). A contemporary miniature painting (no. M85.283.10) from Mandi (Himachal Pradesh) now in the collection of the LACMA shows a Nāth *yogī* wearing earrings in addition to his other Śaivite features (Fig. 19).

This particular class of the Hindu *yogīs* had secured firm position at various places in the vales of Peshawar, Uḍiyāna and Kabul as we find a number of place names associated with them, for instance the localities of Jogīwārā, Jogan Shāh, and the Dargāh of Pīr Ratannāth (in Peshawar); the shrine of Jogiyāno Sar ‘on the summit of the Tortaba spur of the Īlam mountain’ in Buner (*Gazetteer of the Peshawar District 1897-98*: 113), Jogiyāno Dheri (Ali 1994: 36, site no. 137), Mīr Ziyārat in Charsadda (Marshall and Vogel 1904: 154; *N-W.F. Province Gazetteers 1931*: 320; Shah 2008) and the Dargāh of Pīr Ratannāth in Kabul (Verardi 1977: 278; Shah 2008).

### Eastern Shrine

In addition to those mentioned above, traces of some divine images in stucco installed in arched niches inside the eastern shrine can also be ascertained (cf. Shah 2008: 123, fig. 9). The central niche, looking the main entrance, is more prominent in execution and relief decoration than the flanking ones, which indicates that the presiding deity of the eastern shrine was consecrated here (Fig. 20). But the question still remains unanswered as to the image of this specific deity; which, in the words of Jaffar (1946: 82), was Bhairava; and Nandi, according to Professor Dani (1969: 173). In the absence of archaeological evidence, convincing textual record, or personal observation, we are on a slippery ground as to commenting on the cult images once placed in these niches. We presume that all niches in this shrine were decorated with likenesses of gods and goddesses wrought in stucco as the signs left behind plucking off from their original context would suggest (Shah 2008).

### Conclusion

An analysis of historical and architectural data together with artistic and iconographic features of the sacred imagery (iconic or aniconic) at the temple under review places it in the first half of the 19th century. The style and technique of stamped decoration in the form of stucco tracery and figural representations at Gor Khatri find parallel in the other contemporary buildings of Peshawar irrespective of their religious or sectarian affiliation. In certain instances, iconographic attributes of gods and goddesses overlap each other and the artist does not seem to abide by the diagnostic indicator of attributes among the three major sets of divinely figures, i.e. Śaiva, Vaiṣṇava and Śākta.

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Fig. 1. Gor Khatri temple: Western view of the western shrine (author)



Fig. 2. Northern view of the above (author)



Fig. 3. Gor Khatri temple: View of the eastern shrine (author)



Fig. 4. Gor Khatri temple: Arcaded *antarāla* connecting eastern and western shrines (author)



Fig. 5. Western shrine: Socket lay empty after removal of *Śivaliṅga* and the associated *yonipīṭha* (author)



Fig. 6. Close up of the above (author)



Fig. 7. *Śivaliṅga* made of cement and installed recently in the socket in figure 5 (Photo courtesy: Directorate of Archaeology and Museums, Peshawar)



Fig. 8. *Śivaliṅga* in the British Museum: no. 1872,0701.119; stone, 18th/19th century (Photo courtesy: Trustees of the British Museum)



Fig. 9. Another *Śivaliṅga* in the British Museum: no. 1805,0703.481; black stone, 18th century (Photo courtesy: Trustees of the British Museum)



Fig. 10. Western shrine: Gaṇeśa seated on rat in the western arched panel (or *devakoṣṭha*) of *śikhara* (author)

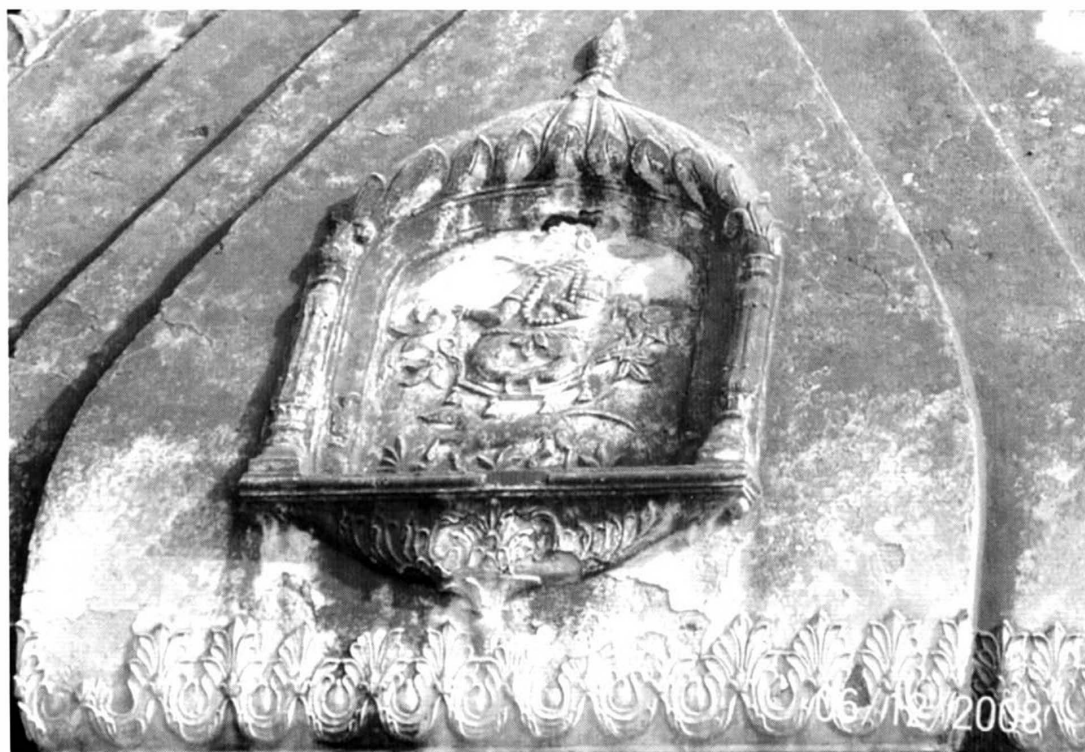


Fig. 11. Close up of the above (author)

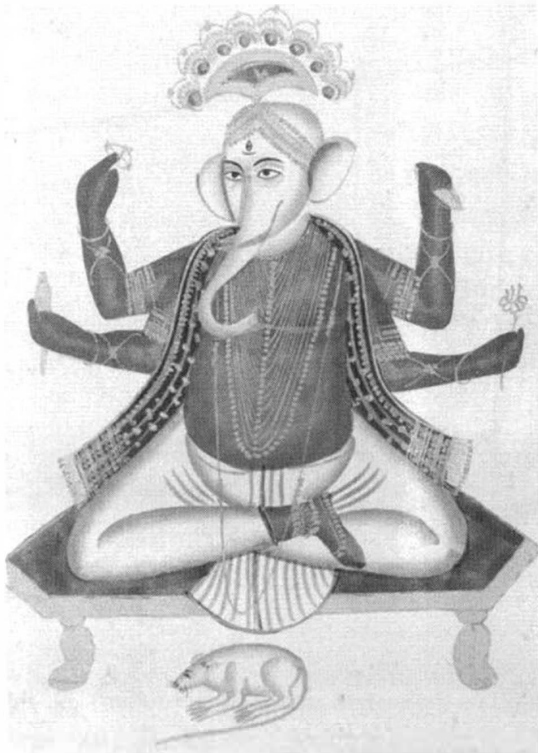


Fig. 12. Miniature painting (no.IS.208.1950) in the Victoria & Albert Museum showing seated Gaṇeśa (Photo courtesy: Trustees of the Victoria & Albert Museum)



Fig. 13. Western shrine: Umā-Maheśvara seated on bull in the arched panel (or *devakoṣṭha*) on the north (author)



Fig. 14. Miniature painting (no.1880,0.2161) in the British Museum depicting Śiva and Pārvatī on bull (Photo courtesy: Trustees of the British Museum)



Fig. 15. Western shrine: Mural painting showing Umā-Maheśvara seated on bull (author)



Fig. 16. Western shrine: Bhairava or Gurū Gorakhnāth (?) on the eastern arched panel (author)

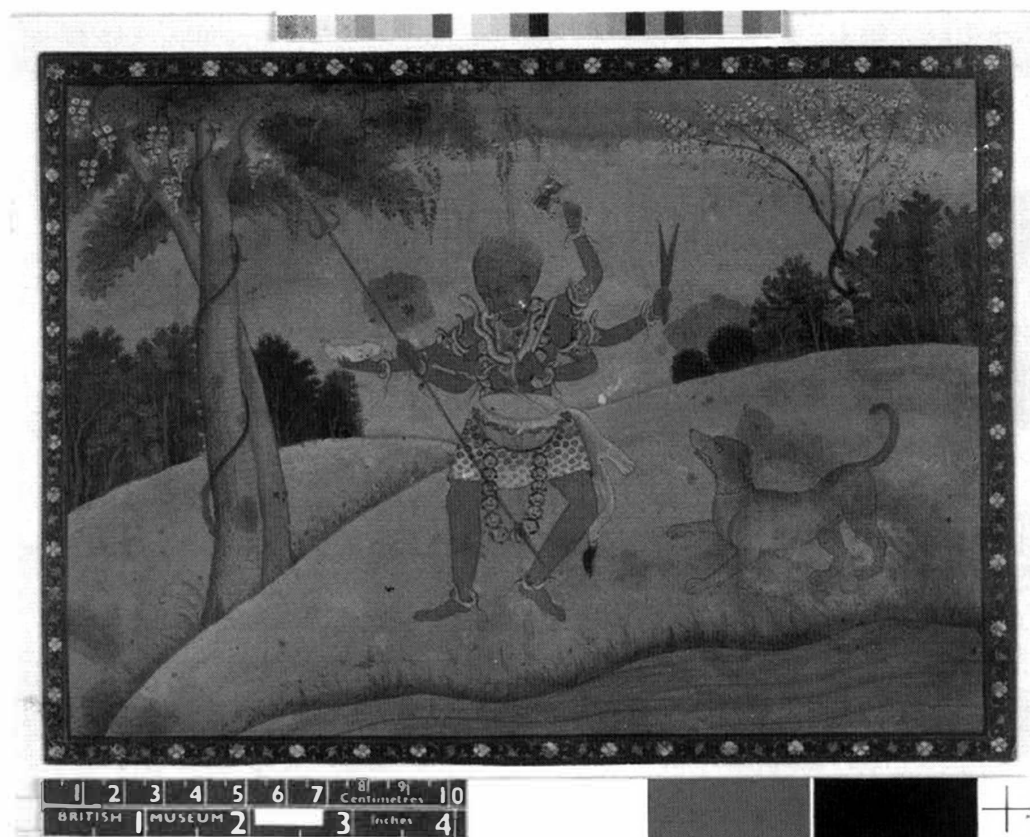


Fig. 17. Miniature painting (no.1925,1016,0.18) in the British Museum showing Bhairava (Photo courtesy: Trustees of the British Museum)



Fig. 18. Another example (no.1993,1023,0.1) in the same collection depicting Bhairava holding bleeding human head in association with dog (Photo courtesy: Trustees of the British Museum)



Fig. 19. A Nāth yogī represented in a miniature painting (no.M85.283.10) now in the LACMA (Photo courtesy: Trustees of the LACMA)



Fig. 20. Eastern Shrine: Signs of the now removed stucco images from arched panels and niches (author)