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## LEPAKSHI TEMPLE: THE MATRIX OF ANDHRA PRADESH TOURISM

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**Abstract:** This paper describes about the famous tourist place Lepakshi temple which is famous on the name of the village. The temple is dedicated to Virabhadhra swami. This temple is located in a village Lepakshi in Hindupur district. The temple is dated to Vijayanagara dynasty and became famous place for best repository for Paintings and Sculptures. It is one of the Iconic temples in terms of art, archeological and Tourism point of view. Author described restricted to describe the temple from tourism point of View. The important features of this temple are Nagalinga, Ganesha statue, Paintings and Sculptures in Natyamandapa and Mahamandapa, marvelous sculptures in unfinished Natyamandapa, monolithic Nandi and Jatayu park are salient features to drag attention of thousands of visitors. Now the department of tourism, The Govt of Andhra Pradesh taking to develop and creating more facilities for visitors and organizing Lepakshi festival in grand scale.

**Index Terms -** Lepakshi, Vijayanagara, Virupanna, Virabhadhra, Asia, Monolithic Nandi, Jatayu

### **Introduction:**

The Lepakshi is a village situated about 15km East of Hindupur district, Andhra Pradesh. The temple was dedicated to tutelary god Veerabhadra during Vijayanagara dynasty. The temple is constructed over a low rising hill, referred in inscriptions as Kurmasaila. An inscription (Number 572 in South Indian Inscriptions vol. IX, Part 2 refers *Sthalamahatmyam* mentions that sage Agastya stayed here, in a cave on the Kurmasaila hill, during his visit to scared places in the south of Vindhya mountain. He built a small temple dedicated to Papanashesvara.

The Temple has attained the significance in historical, art, archaeological and tourism point of view. The place is well known for the repository of the mural paintings, architecture and sculptures in south India on par with Hampi murals of the Vijayanagara dynasty around 1530- 1542 A.D.(Hanumantha Rao D,2004). The temple complex of Lepakshi consists of three shrines dedicated to Shiva, 'Virabhadra', Vishnu.

During the reign of Vijayanagara kings, pilgrims flooded to this temple to visit Lord Veerabhadra. It was once a great center for trade, flourished as a second capital became insignificant spot after fall of Vijayanagara dynasty.

### **Historical background:**

The Lepakshi temple consists of three shrines dedicated to Papavinaseswara (Shiva), Raghunatha (Vishnu) and 'Virabhadhra'. However the third shrine was dedicated to Raghunatha which was added later. Originally there were two shrines sharing the same mandapa and platform, the main shrine dedicated to God Veerabhadra facing north and a lateral shrine dedicated to Lord Papanashesvara, an aspect of Shiva.

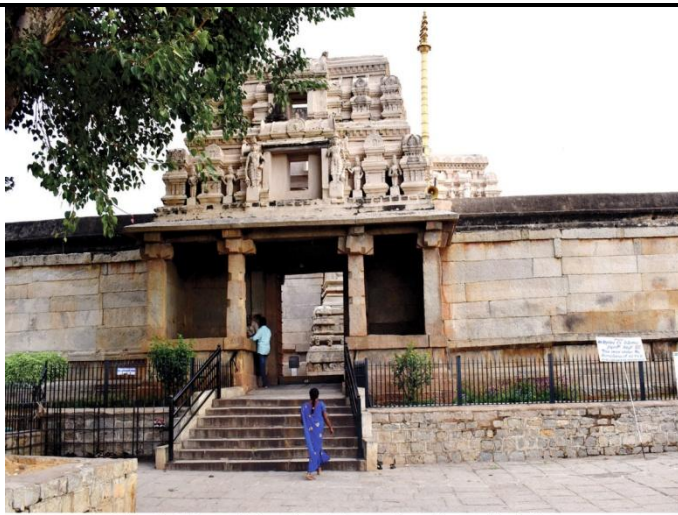


Fig.1 Veerabhadra Temple, Lepakshi

drawing funds without the king's permission from the state treasury to build these shrines. The king ordered, as a punishment to this heinous crime, that he should be blinded as per the existing law of misusing of treasury. The treasurer Virupanna, being a loyal person carried out the punishment himself on the spot. The two reddish spots on the western wall of the inner enclosure are told to be the blood stains from his bleeding eyes when he threw them against the wall after plucking them. Virupanna did not survive for long, and the village is called "Lepa-akshi" or, "Lepakshi" means a village of the blinded eye.

### The Legends and Myths:

The earliest evidence of Lepakshi temple is found in Skandapurana as '*Lepakshya- Papanasanah*' among the 108 Shaiva scared places in south India<sup>1</sup>(Gopala Rao,A,1969) *Sthalamahatmyam* mentioned that sage Agasthya stayed here, in a cave on the Kurmasaila hill. He built a small temple dedicated to Papanashesvara.



Fig.3 Nagalinga, Lepakshi Temple

eye and struck onto the walls" and dried up remains as a strain on the wall of the temple. Even today we may notice wheatish –red colour strains on walls. Due to this place was called "*Lepa Paksh*". According to E. Sivanagi Reddy, art historian say that this place has significance as the Virabhadhra emerged from the wrath of Shiva when Parvathi sacrificed her life by the insult of Daksha" later Virupanna built the temple for his tutelary God Virabhadhra at place where he was created by lord Shiva(Sivanagi

The temple was developed into the present exquisite shrine by 'Virupanna' Naik, the treasurer of the Vijayanagara Kings. He conceived the idea as he found the image of Veerabhadra in the dream. He executed the temple construction in the absence of the king and used the treasure when the king was away at Vijayanagara. When the construction was almost finished, the king returned and found the treasure was empty. Virupanna was accused of



Fig.2 God Veerabhadra swamy

According to the information gathered from the natives of Lepakshi, another mythological story is vogue that Rama saw the wounded *Jatayu* bird by Ravana by cutting of wings, when *Jatayu* which saw and resisted the abduction of Sita. Then Rama called "*LE' PAKSHI*" mean "*Get up Bird*" in Telugu. In support of this, Department of Tourism, Andhra Pradesh has installed a big size sculpture of *Jatayu* bird made of fiber to unfold the greatness of mythological significance of this temple to the pilgrims.

A few local people, scribes tried to assign it with the "dried up liquid of eyes balls of Virupanna who punished himself by plucking



Reddy,E.,2016).Whatever they are associated with *sthalapuranas* and other myths and legends in vogue, we have to rely on the historical facts revealed by the epigraphs.

### Virabhadhra Temple:

For the convenience of the study, the temple complex can be divided as different sections. They are



**Fig.4. View of Natyamandapa**

1. Natya mandapa or Mukhamandapa 2. Ardhamandapa 3. Mahamandapa 4. Kalyana mandapa, an appendix to main temple left mostly unfinished. The ceilings of Natyamandapa was divided into different panels by beams. Altogether there are eleven painted panels. The temple is executed in trikuta fashion, and sandhara style of architecture. The most important and interesting section of the building is natyamandapa which is a pillared hall with dancing figures and drummers. The ceiling of entire natyamandapa was painted in bright colours in strange appearance than the

northern Indian mural tradition of Ajanta. The ceiling of Natyamandapa is divided by the long beams over the pillars into rectangular panels running from North to South in support of beautiful sculptures.

### Paintings and Sculptures

An outstanding huge Ganesha greets us at the entrance. A turn leads to Nagalingeswara a breathtaking master piece. It is a huge sculpture of the holy coiled and hooded Naga featuring a small Lingam is placed opposite to potu rooms or kitchen. The best specimens of the Lepakshi sculptures and mural paintings are found in the Natyamandapa. These paintings are found on the ceilings and outer walls of main shrine also the ceilings of outer corridors. The Natyamandapa has a 60 feet long panel bears paintings on narrative episode of Manunidhicholan along with beautiful sculptures like Shiva as Bikshatanamurti, dancing Apsaras, Bringi, musician like drum beaters and dancers etc. The ceiling of Mahamandapa was decorated by a large painting which is said to be Asia's largest mural. Painting of Veerabhadra measures about 24.55 feet in height by 11.5 feet width (Kameswara Rao, V, 1982). The loose and high relief sculptures on the pillars unfolds us that the kalyana mandapa which was left unfinished. It was situated in the south west of the main temple in complex.



**Fig.5. Painting in Natyamandapa ceiling**

### Theme and subject matter:

The paintings brings reminiscence with the Shiva playing Chess was favorite in Kameswara cave at Ellora. And Vakataka sculpture of Fifth Century A.D as a repetitive theme. The visual language of



sculptures and paintings seems to be intertwined. The sculptural qualities are infused into these murals. The Lepakshi sculptures are infused with the full of life and rhythm attained supremacy in conception and execution. The dancing apsaras, *Kalyana Sundaramurti*, and *dikpalas* were undoubtedly chiseled spilled from the hands of the masters with the influence of Hoyasala sculptures attained charm though they were carved in hard granite.



**Fig.6 Sculptures in Natyamandapa**

### Technique:

Indian *Silpa* texts refers to only two types of mural paintings, they are tempera and Fresco Secco (Jayantha Chakravarthy, 1980) the Lepakshi paintings were executed in Fresco Secco.

### Identification of Murals :

The Lepakshi mural paintings were first noticed by A.H. Longhurst in 1911 (Sivaramamurti, C., 1985) But no serious attention was paid on these murals. Later these paintings were studied by C. Sivaramamurti in 1936 (Gopala Rao, A., 1969) Brought this temple into limelight. But no serious attention was paid on them resulting their deterioration by leakage and damping till 1960s.

### 1. Paintings in Natyamandapa:

The paintings in Natyamandapa one can notice 11 panels each was painted with different themes, mostly belongs to Shiva. Themes like Manunidhicholan story, Arjuna wins Draupadi, worship of Bhairava, Viranna and Virupanna with their retinue, worship of Virabhadhra, Vatapathrasai, Parvati's Toilet, marriage of Shiva and Parvathi, Shiva playing Chess with Parvati Kiratarjuniyam episode depicted in four panels, Nataraja, Rama's coronation, some of the paintings has been identified as follows in each panel.

Panel A1 : Narrative of Manunitikonda Chola

Panel A2: Arjuna shooting moving Pisces and worship of Bhairava

PANEL A3: VIRUPANNA WITH HIS RETINUE, WORSHIP OF BHADRAKALI, VATAPATHRASAI.

PANEL A4: MARRIAGE OF SHIVA AND PARVATI, PARVATI'S TOILET.

PANELS A5-A8: NARRATIVE OF KIRATARJUNIYAM

PANEL A9: SHIVA AND PARVATI PLAYING CHESS, DAKSHINAMURTI, DURA.

Panel A10: Nataraja

Panel A11: Coronation of Rama

### 2. Paintings in Ardhamandapa (B1): Manifestations of Shiva

In Ardhamandapa has single and a lengthy painted panel that measures 73.96 feet in length and 3.95 feet in width. The panel contains ninety three images in total. The panel shall be read from left to right in direction. The panel bears paintings of fourteen manifestations of Shiva such as Lingodhbavamurti, Andhakasurasamharamurti Dakshinamurti, Chandesanugrahamurti, Hariharamurti, Bikshatanamurti, Ardhanariswara, Kalyanasundaramurti, Thripurantakamurti, Nataraja, Gowri were painted. It appears as a narrative in composition but all are loose images but clubbed like a narrative.

### 3. Paintings in Mahamandapa:

Mahamandapa is a common large hall to the shrines of Virabhadhra, Papavinasha, Raghunatha shrines which were highly decorated with paintings all over the ceiling of the Mahamadndapa.

### Panel C1 : Virabhadhra

The largest painting on the ceiling of Mahamandapa is the picture of Virabhadhra of measuring 24.52 feet by 11.50 feet in standing pose. It is categorized as panel C1. According to C.Sivaramamurti it is the largest ever attempted as a mural in Asia<sup>1</sup>.

**Panel C3:** Story of Manunidhicholan, **Panel C4:** Unidentified panel,

**Panel C5:** Bhakta Kannappa Story, **Panel C6:** Cheetah Hunt painting can be seen. The archaeological department has restored them with a chemical was for fresh look.

### Paintings in Raghunadhalaya (Panel D)

The shrine of Raghunadhalaya is a complete temple itself into three separate parts. The main cell is far behind is called as girbhagriha. In the front is an anteroom called as antarala and third part is mandapa. The ceiling of mandapa which is in square of measuring twenty feet by twenty feet divided by cross beams into nine equal square panels. There are seven avatars of ten of Vishnu are painted on these panels. This shrine is opposite to the Papanashesvara shrine, and east faced. The paintings are follows.

**Panel D1:** Kurmavata: This North- East corner panel contains “Kurmavata” incarnation of Vishnu.

**Panel D2:** Damaged: This panel is located in the East direction of the ceiling. No traces of painting are found. It is beyond the recognition.

**Panel D3:** Narasimhavata: This panel is located in the South - East corner direction of the ceiling containing “Narasimhavata” of Vishnu

**Panel D4 :** Matsyavata: This panel is existed in the extreme North of the ceiling contains “Matsyavata” incarnation of Vishnu.

**Panel D5 :** Lakshminarayana: It the Central panel contain “Lakshminarayana” avata of lord Vishnu. Lakshminarayana is painted in the central panel. Even this panel is very much damaged.



**Fig.7. Painting of Veerabhadra on ceiling of Mahamadapa**



**Fig.8 Incompleted Natyamandapa**

**Panel D6 :** Beyond recognition: It is an extreme south pane, hard find an image, and panel is beyond recognition.

**Panel D7:** Empty panel: No image is painted. This panel is left blank completely. The bare surface of the stone of the slab can be seen.

**Panel D8:** Empty panel: No image is painted. This panel is left blank completely. The bare surface of the chiseled stone of the slab is seen that was ready for painting but not. Above two panels 7 and 8 were



left bare, not done any attempt to paint left with barren slab, as well as kalyana-mandapa. Perhaps the temple activity might be interrupted due to the political instability of the Vijayanagara empires, threats from the Islamic troops from Deccan sultans, and the circumstance were might beyond the control of the builder.

Panel D9: Vamana: Extreme South –West corner panel is painted with “Vamanavatara” badly damaged beyond the recognition, told by the priest who is working here for 40 years

Paintings in the passage way of around the Veerabhadra Shrine :

Walls of Virabhadra Shrine also having murals but it's very difficult to identify, they turned up into gloomy and dark. According to the temple priests, the ASI is recently restored to revive them through the chemical cleaning in the month of December 2019.

### The Monolithic Sculptures:

The massive and huge Nandi placed conspicuously a quarter of a mile away from the temple carved out of monolithic red granite stone of 15 feet tall and 27 feet long is reputed in the open area. The image of Nandi is in vogue as icon of Lepakshi which is the largest in India. It is executed with consummate artistry in the proportionate designing of each beautifully finished part.

The Nandi faces the Shiva Linga that is surrounded by the huge Naga (Serpent) within the main temple. The carving is intricate, especially the bells around the neck with gandabherunda image in the pendant will stand as the royal insignia of the Vijayanagara dynasty. Beautiful landscaping enhances the beauty of Nandi yields tranquility to the visitors and the best frame from photographs.



Fig.9 Monolithic Nandi at Lepakshi

One huger monolithic caving is Nagalinga is an attractive master piece. The linga surmounted by the seven hooded serpent carved on high platform. On which the Bhakta Kannappa narrative is carved in low relief was carved. Behind the Nagalinga, to the left side a high relief Ganesha statue of nearly 6 feet high on high platform was carved with details.

### Hanging Pillar in the Lepakshi Temple:

The remarkable feature is what makes us really to think and flashes on the minds of the visitors is hanging pillar in the Natyamandapa in East direction. The entire ceiling of Natyamandapa is supported by sixty nine pillars but one pillar doesn't touch the floor at all, a small gap of one centimeter between its base and plinth of the mandapa, against gravity can be noticed. In this small gap one can pass a newspaper or a tower from one end to another end. The exact technique is used by the architects of Vijayanagara to balance of this unknown till now. The interlocking system between ceiling and pillar is unique. The load of the entire ceiling was evenly distributed to all pillars might be the reason for this. The remaining pillars supported the ceiling by the equal load distribution. It was designed like that to demonstrate the engineering skills our ancestors to the pilgrims and visitors. It is taken into several considerations that all about the weight of the pillars and lintels arranged to support the ceiling must be similar besides the proper interlocking system. Here mathematics played essential role in construction of the temple. It is really an architectural wonder. During the colonial period a British scientist tried to unfold the secret of pillar's interlocking system and tried to dislodge the pillar but this minor shift caused the temple structure and further attempts were stopped. Whatever it may be the uniform weight distribution of ceiling on the pillars and interlocking system between the pillar and lintels of the temple very strong as well the foundation. As per the archaeological report there was an earth quake occurred in the year 1905, temple partially damaged due to the sunken land beneath the foundations. That effect can be seen in the temple pillars of the Ardhamandapa of the right of the temple is slightly shifted in slant. Whatever it may the architecture skills

of Indians executed with much foresight and rises millions of questions about the architectural wonders before centuries when there is no technology as we have today.

### **Jatayu Park:**

Jatayu park is one of the attracting feature soon we enter the village in the surroundings of the Lepakshi temple. Department of Tourism, Government of Andhra Pradesh has arranged an iconic, huge Jatayu bird sculpture was installed on a huge rock boulder which is visible to the tourists. The idea of installing jayatayuvu sculpture was given by the author. The designed Jatayu Park is very interesting place to visit near by the temple located between Nandi and temple.

### **Lepakshi Festival:**

Special rituals will be held on the occasion of Mahashivarathri and Brahmotsavam, the temple will be decorated vibrantly with floral decorations. Lepakshi festival will be celebrated to promote Telugu culture for two days in grand by the Government of Andhra Pradesh under tourism policy, dragging attention from neibogher states as well as from Andhra Pradesh. This festival is enriched by including a grant musical concert and dance programs and art and craft stalls such as Etikoppaka toys, jewellery, wood carvings, and panels in the temples surroundings. One of the major strength of this temple is as famous film actor, Padma Vibhuthi Sri Nandamuri Balaksrihna being the MLA of the Hindupur constituency taking greater care in promoting Lepakshi as tourist place and developing the village more accessible to the tourists.



**Fig.10. Jatayu Park, Lepakshi**

### **How to reach Lepakshi Temple?**

The elegance of Lepakshi is well known to all Rayalaseema people, art lovers, professional photographers and tourists across the globe. The Lepakshi temple is close to the famed spiritual pilgrimage of Puttaparthi where the nearest decent accommodation is available. From Puttaparthi, it takes an hour to reach Lepakshi. There is a Haritha Tourism hotel for accommodation

Hyderabad it is nearly 480 km distance and about 140 kilometers from Bangalore city. For road travel from Tirupati, Vijayawada, visitor should reach Hindupur then 15kms distance to reach village Lepakshi. From Tirupati, there is another route via Madanapalle, Kadiri and Hindupur. From Hindupur there are many share autos, taxis are there to reach Lepakshi temple.

The climatic condition is hot for nine months in a year and morning is the best time to visit. It is suggestive to visit Dharmavaram which is famous for silk weaving craft centres, leather puppetry center. Ten days long festival will be celebrated in February of every year. On this occasion car festival is conducted, a large number of people will attend.

### **Conclusion**

The overall influence of the romantic sensibilities nourished by the power, wealth and splendor of the Vijayanagara Empire hovers over the paintings. Inheriting the concept of beauty as the traditional attributes of God, the monarchs of the great Hindu dynasty are known to have patronized cosmic festivals in the shrines that they got built. The common worship of the images on certain days brought the King and common men together to share the aspirations for bliss. The favored symbol was the powerful Shiva, Lord of Dancers, the essence of the rhythm of the world, who, in accepting the adoration of Parvati, had sanctified the indulgence of the ardent souls in the imaginary consummation of the passion of the female deity for the male lord.



The temple is a famous one, and attracts a large number of Pilgrims during Sivaratri and other Saivite festivals. The temple is a veritable treasure house of Vijayanagara sculpture and paintings and literal museum and art gallery where the entire Puranic legends of Lord Siva are translated into stone and painting. The hanging pillar is the typical example of the architectural refinement of Vijayanagara kings. It is also famous for largest mural painting of Veerabhadra in Asia. The temple is still a very powerful one and



**Fig.11. Performance in Lepakshi Festival**

attracts the pilgrims, the devotees, the archaeologists, the sculptors and the painters in a like measure. The archeological department has taking good care towards the conservation of the temple and its cultural heritage.

According to the opinions expressed by the temple staff and local people, there is an increase in visitors coming to the temple from last six years after the organizing Lepakshi festival. Now the number of pilgrims and visitors

has reached approximately from 4000 to 6000 during Saturdays, Sundays, on other holidays and festivals.

Facilities: Temple guide Virupanna available from 10 am to 5 am. For staying Haritha Hotel by State Tourism and Development corporation nearby the Nandi Statue. For much facilities: Tourists can find lodges in Hindupur.

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Images:1. Author's Filed work( as a researcher on this temple) (image nos. 1-10)

2. <https://lepakshitemple.in/festiv> (image no.11)