

THE ALAMPUR TEMPLE - COMPLEX

(A tale of Vandalism)

Ishwar Allah tere naam
Sabko sanmati de Bhagwan !

—*Mahatma Gandhi*

By

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Gahna Ek Kanak se gahna
In mahan bhav na duja
Kahana Sunana ko dui kari thapini
Ik Nimaj ik Pooja

(Ornaments differ in shape - But all are made of the same gold. So also names differ - the same worship is called Namaz by some and Pooja by others)

—*Saint Kabir Das*

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THE ALAMPUR TEMPLE-COMPLEX*

CATHOLICITY OF SANATANA DHARMA

India had been, for scores of centuries in the past, a cradle of several religions and faiths, which constitute the eternal culture, Dharma i.e. Sanatana Arya Dharma. It is erroneous to use the word 'religion' for Dharma. Strictly speaking, the former forms part of the latter or to further clarify the issue, several religions are an integral part of the expansive orbit of Dharma. Religions like Saivism, Vaishnavism, Sankhya, Yoga, Saura, Kaumara, Ganapatya, Shakta, Bouddha Jaina etc are accorded equal place in the Dharma. These variety of faiths cater to the diverse tastes, prevailing in the human society and they are all assured equal and respectable position. The catholicity of the Arya or the Sanatana Dharma, abhors the idea of forcing religion or faith on any body. This generous catholicity explains the survival of the Indian culture, absorbing and assimilating a number of strands of culture and thought currents that lashed against its shores, still retaining its distinctive character of universality. The searching question posed by the national poet Sir Mohammad Iqbal in his popular poem, (Saare jahan se Acha Hindustan Hamara) in the lines—"Kuch baat hai ki hasti mit thi nahin hamari-Sadiyon Rahahai Dushman Daure Zaman Hamara," finds a convincing answer in this phenomenon. Today, we only hear of cultures like the Greek, Hebrew, Roman, Egyptian, Assyrian, Hittite, Chinese, Mangolian etc., which had co-existed with the Indian culture several thousands of years ago. Thus, the diversity of faiths making a mosaic of Indian Culture, visualised by the Sanatana Dharma accounts for its vitality.

SAIVISM-THE OLDEST AMONG FAITHS :

Among the various faiths or religions enshrined in the Sanatana Dharma, perhaps Saivism is considered as the earliest, as evidenced by the excavations, conducted at Mohenjodaro and Harappa. The terracota seals unearthed there with the bull, linga, reveal the existance of Saivism as early as B. C. 2500 years, as a popular faith. This fact was upheld by the existence of

* Alampur is a small town, 125 miles away from Hyderabad in Mahabubnagar district of Andhra Pradesh. It is accessible both by road and rail.

several saivite shrines in the various parts of the country, whose antiquity was accepted by historians and research scholars. The cluster of nine temples which stood for centuries on the banks of the river Tungabhadra at Alampur in Andhra Pradesh, breathes history.

ANTIQUITY OF THE PLACE, ACCORDING TO LEGEND :

Vedic scholars and saints, with deep spiritual insight believe that this holy spot existed several billions of years ago. Interpreting some hymns from the Atharva Veda, His Holiness late Shri Ramananda Saraswati alias Bellamkonda Swamiji, maintained that the Jyotirlinga at Srisailam in Andhra Pradesh, manifested itself one hundred crores of years ago and that the four gateways of the kshetra with an area of 300 sq. miles - Tripurantaka in the east, Siddheswara in the South, Brahmeswara (Alampur) in the West and Maheswara in the North, came into existence one crore years later! Sri Swamiji was a great yogi with supernatural powers and was believed to have lived for more than a hundred years, even though he appeared as a middle aged person! He had a thorough knowledge of several rare herbs and roots with miraculous powers which grow at Srisailam and had combed the entire area. This legend puts - whether we believe it or not-the antiquity of Alampur kshetra at 99 crores of years,

The great Sanskrit work Skanda purana, portrays a very vivid and colourful picture of Alampur, the Western gateway of the famous Srisaila kshetra. Later, in his treatise on alchemy 'Rasa Ratnakara', the author, one Nityanatha Siddha made a special mention of Alampur as a unique place for conducting experiments in Rasa Vada (Alchemy), with sure and successful results. The time of Skanda Purana, dates back to the first Century A. D., according to some western scholars. The great Sankaracharya (1st Cent. A. D.), visited Alampur and installed a 'yantra' in the temple of Jogulamba (Yogeswari), who at that time was a fearful deity and made her a compassionate and benevolent Goddess.

Even though many western scholars brush aside the legend as sheer myth, a few among them with an unbiased approach, like the French Scholar Jaccoliot in his 'Bible-le-Indi' and Mr. F.E. Pargiter in his 'The dynasties of Kali age', openly admit that the Bhavishya Purana offers more authentic and convincing material while deciding the chronology of Indian rulers. Ironically, the other western scholars, who base their conclusions merely on inscriptions, seals, coins etc., which alone can not

obviously supply full details and which theories, consequently, always stand to be corrected, do not delve into Puranas for possible and reliable clues. On the other hand, they reject them as incredible. But, these scholars without sufficient knowledge of Sanskrit chronicles fail to note the caution given by our sages that all apparent discrepancies should be comprehended and understood in the light of the different Kalpas :

क्वचित्क्वचि त्पुराणेषु विरोधो यदि दृश्यते
कल्पभेदादिभिस्तत्र व्यवस्था सद्भिरिष्यते ।

The knowledge of these scholars regarding our Kalpas is meagre. And, our Indian scholars who generally lack the knowledge of our scriptures blindly follow the half-baked theories of westerners.

HISTORICAL ANTIQUITY :

Leaving the legend and scriptures aside, if we look to the historical antiquity of the place, we come to know from an Asokan stone inscription found at a place called Maski that this 'kshetra' was known in the 3rd Century B.C. Another Satavahana stone inscription in the Nasik cave (1st Cent. A.D.), mentions

Srisailam as ,Sirithan' सिरिथान-श्रीस्थान

Subsequent dynasties who ruled over the Srisaila region, - the Ikshwakus, Pallavas, Vishnukund ins, Kadambas, Telugu cholas, Rashtrakutas, Chalukyas, Kakatiyas, Reddis, Vijayanagara Kings and Marathas - all had visited Srisailam and its gateways, and made liberal grants to the temples.

The construction of the temple - complex, in its present pattern at Alampur, dates back to 7th Century A.D., when the Badami Chalukyas held complete sway over the region. The famous king Satyasraya Pulakesin II, who defeated Emperor Harsha on the banks of the river Narmada, and his successors, Vikramadaditya, Vinayaditya and Vijayaditya were responsible for the construction of these carved structures. A local hearsy ascribes the construction of the nine temples to the efforts of an ascetic, 'Rasasiddha' an alchemist who, with the help of some powerful herbs and the 'Rasa' given to him by Lord Brahmeswara, prepared gold. The main Linga of Bala Brahmeswara and the idol of his consort Mother Jogulamba were believed to have blessed the efforts of the sage-alchemist. The names of the nine Brahmeswaras, Bala, Veera Arka, Padma etc., indicate some rare

herbs which were used in the preparation of the yellow metal. Thus, the place was reputed for its laboratory of alchemy during the middle ages. Later, the Kalyani Chalukyas constructed the bathing ghats on the banks of the river Tungabhadra, and the temples of Yoga Narasimha and Suryanarayana.

GREATNESS OF THE KSHETRA :

The 'Srisaila Khanda' of the 'Skandapurana' gives a detailed record of Alampur, the western gateway for the Srisaila kshetra. It was named as Brahmeswaram as the four-faced Brahma installed the Linga there, after performing severe penance. The main Linga is known as Bala Brahmeswara. The main shrine is surrounded on eight quarters by eight Lingas, installed in separate temples, known as Kumara Brahmeswara, Arka Brahmeswara, Veera, Viswa, Padma, Garuda Swarga and Taraka Brahmeswaras. This place was mentioned in olden times as Hemalapur, Halampur and finally Alampur. The Rasa Ratnakara names it as Alampuri and says that the presiding female deity is Yogeswari.

योगीश्वरीतिविख्याता देवतायात्यलंपुरे ।

It also maintains that both the Brahmeswara Linga and the idol of the Devi were shaped from 'Paras' the touch-stone.

श्रीशैले पश्चिमे द्वारे नाम्ना ब्रह्मेश्वरेश्वरः ।

तल्लिंगं स्पर्शमित्याहुः दुर्गा तत्रैव तादृशी ॥

Besides, these gods, other deities, found at Alampur are Ganeswar, Parvati, Bhairav, Kamakshi, Bhudevi, Surya, Venkateswara, Kartikeya, Narasimha and Dattatreya. The place was known as Parasuramakshetra and Bhaskara kshetra as well. Renuka Devi, wife of sage Jamadagni was said to have been beheaded here by her son Parasurama at the command of his father. The body is now worshipped as 'Bhudevi', whereas the head which fell at a distance in a Harijan hamlet is adored as Yellamma. Some opine that the word Alampur may be the corrupt form of Yellammapur. The word Alampur can even be derived from the word Hemalapur found in old inscriptions, which by the interchange of syllables becomes Helamapur, then Yellamapur, and finally Alampur.

THE SOUTHERN KASHI :

The spiritual significance and sanctity of Alampur are said to be beyond expression in words. In several aspects, it resembles

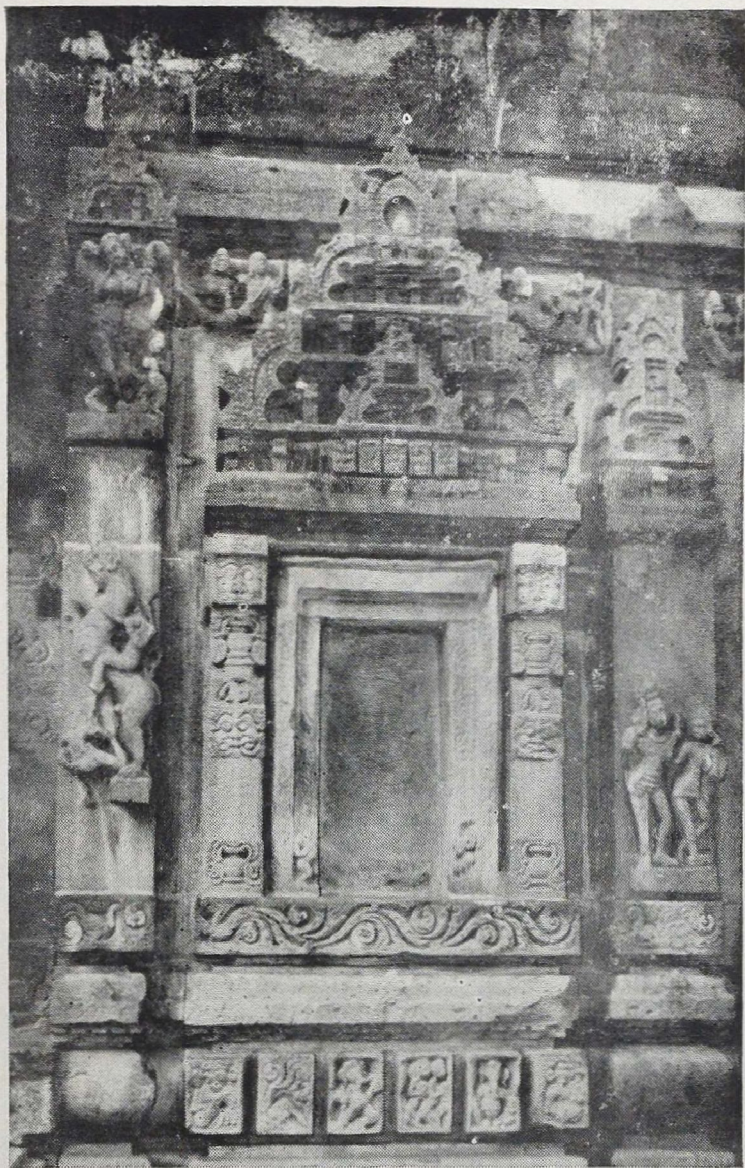


Fig. No. 3

A beautifully carved sculpture on the southern wall of Viswa Brahmeswaralaya which luckily escaped the attention of the vandal.

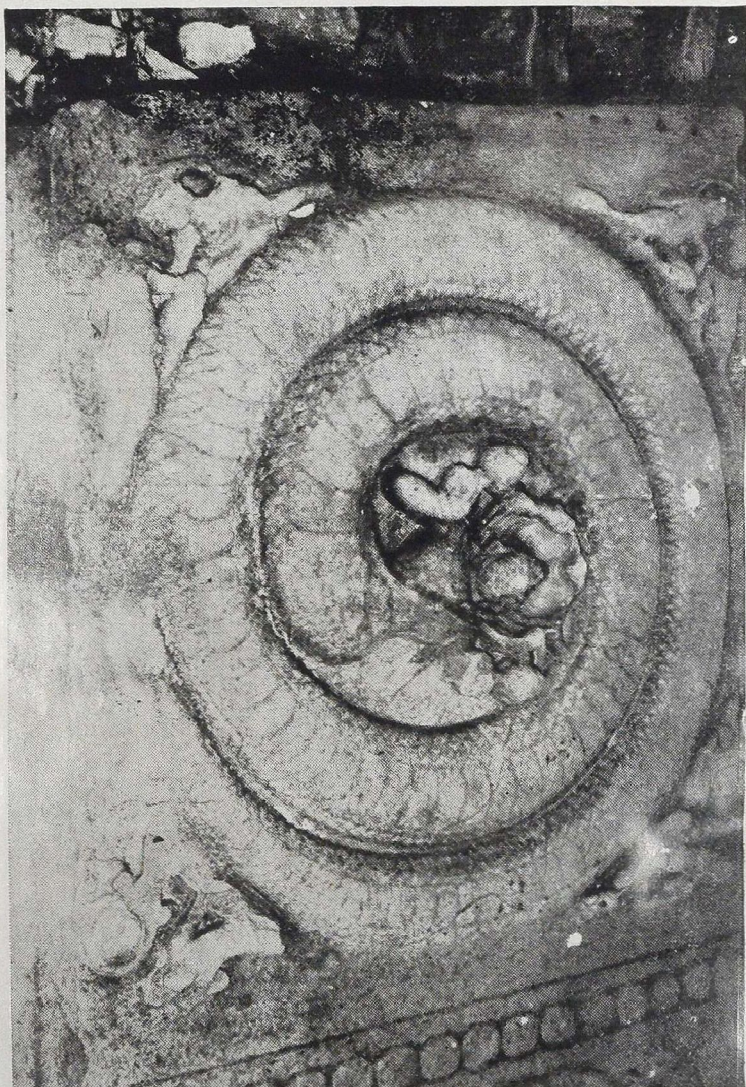


Fig. No. 4

A beautiful piece of art depicting the mysterious kundalini (serpent-coil) with minute details. This was removed from the inner ceiling of the Arka Brahmeswaralaya, which was converted into a mosque for some time during the reign of the Nizam. Now it is kept before the museum. This too escaped the eye of the vandal.

Varanasi the famous Shiva kshetra in the North. Like the Ganga at Kashi, river Tungabhadra takes a northward course (उत्तरवाहिनी) at this place which is considered very holy.

There are sixty four bathing ghats as in Varanasi. Lord Visweswara and Mother Visalakshi find their counterparts in Brahmeswara and Jogulamba. Papanasana kshetra and the confluence of the rivers Tungabhadra and Krishna Veni are likened to Gaya and Triveni Sangam in the north. Thus, it combines in it all the three prominent holy places - Kashi, Gaya and Prayag.

GREAT SEAT OF LEARNING :

Several Copper plate inscriptions and idols of teachers found at Alampur reveal that there flourished a full-fledged 'Vidyapith' at this place several centuries back. Beautiful idols of the preceptors, Trilochana Muninatha, Vyalasinha, Ekanta Desika. Sadyorashi, and Eeshanarashi are still preserved in the temple with their names inscribed. Inscriptions mention some more names - Acharya Bhuvana Shakti, Kukkuteswara, Dharanindrarashi, and Brahmarasi. Bhattaraka, to whom munificent grants were made by kings and patrons. Besides, instruction in spiritual lore, education of high standard was imparted in the fields of alchemy, temple-architecture, medicine and allied subjects. The building of the Vidyapith today houses a museum in its premises.

TEMPLE ARCHITECTURE :

The architectural splendour of Alampur temples is varied and bewitching. The main shrine which somehow escaped the fury of the vandals, presents a very fine model of Badami Chalukyan architecture and reminds one of the massive temples of Bhuvaneshwar with the Amalaka Vimana pattern. Thus, one can notice the features of the Kalinga temple-architecture. The beautiful temple at Sangam about 12 miles north of Alampur, which at present, is dismantled to be re-erected at Alampur, as a matchless piece of Chalukyan art. To save this temple from submersion in the reservoir to be formed by the Srisailem project, every stone of the structure was carefully removed and brought to Alampur. The pillars and walls are profusely carved with beautiful figures of Gods, fairies, couples, and serpent-coils in medallia (Fig. Nos. 3,4). Red sand stone easily available in the vicinity was mostly used in these structures. Besides Kalinga and Chalukyan styles, one can see here the Pallava and Chola architectures also. The main

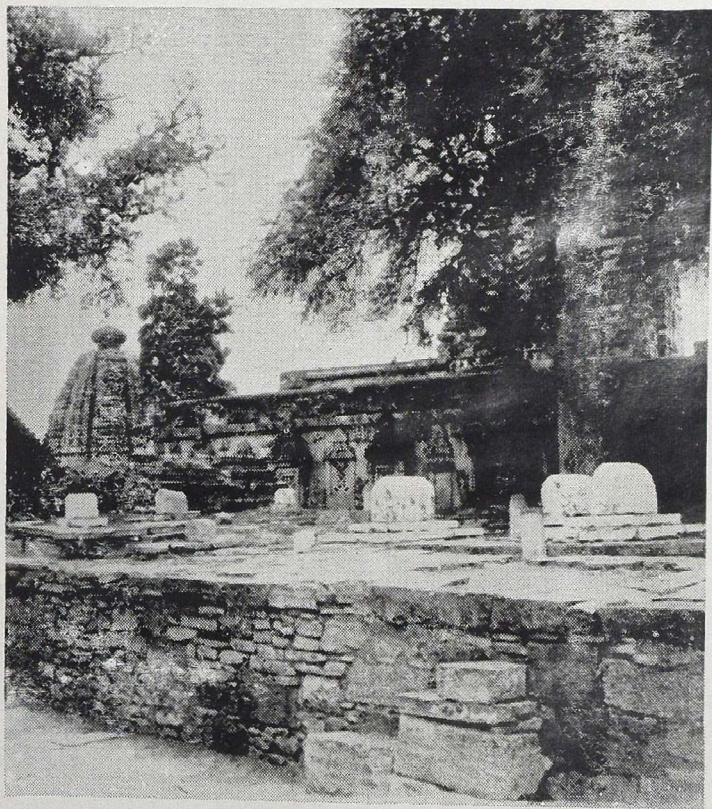


Fig. No. 1

Grave Yard of Moslems inside the temple complex, to the north of Swarga Brahmeswaralaya. These tombs blocked the entrance to Padma Brahmeswaralaya, which was consequently abandoned.

entrance of Bala Brahmeswara temple was decorated with the figures of Kamakshi Devi, Ekamranatha, and Trimurthis. Inside the shrine, besides the presiding deities, the images of Veera-bhadra, Navagrahas, the seven Matrikas, Trimurthis, Narasimha, Kanyakumari and a number of others, present a varied gamut of the Hindu pantheon. The walls, pillars and ceilings of other eight temples also arrest the attention of the visitor with their spectacular carvings. Temples dedicated to Sun-God are very few in India. Of these, two are found in Andhra Pradesh, one in the fort area at Alampur and the other at Arasavalli in Srikakulam district. This Sun Temple and another temple of Yoga Narasimha date back to the 10th Century A.D. Sculptures depicting, besides gods, the varied aspects of human life, and the rich flora and fauna, render these monuments, objects of wonder and admiration of the foreign tourists and archaeologists. Thus, the temple-complex at Alampur, with its remarkable blending and synthesis of various sculptural systems, offers a rich treasure of information to the student of the Indian Temple-architecture.

THE TRAGIC DECLINE :

The power of religious fanaticism, both in the creation and destruction of beauty, during the mediæval times, has been blind and irresistible. To substantiate this statement, one cannot, perhaps, find a better example than the desecrated and ruined cluster of the historic monuments which stand today, isolated on the banks of the Tungabhadra, recollecting sadly the glory of its hoary past, which was sullied by the savage religious intolerance of the vandal. The black and bleak age started with the decline of the Kakatiya kingdom (13 cent. A.D) which gave rise to the Bahamani rule in the Deccan Plateau. They believed that desecrating and destroying the sacred places, was a noble and pious deed, even though, it had no sanction anywhere in any of their religious works.* The Sultans of Golconda, Bijapur and later, the Confederation of the five Deccan Sultans attacked these precious temples of art, which were reduced to shambles, as a result of their brutal attacks. Even though the kings of Vijayanagar forestalled and pushed them back, intermittently for some

* An inscription in the Fatehpur Sikri Agra, Sulah-Kul' reveals that perfect religious tolerance was observed during the rule of the Great Moghul Emperor, Akbar who accorded equal status and importance to all the religions throughout his kingdom.

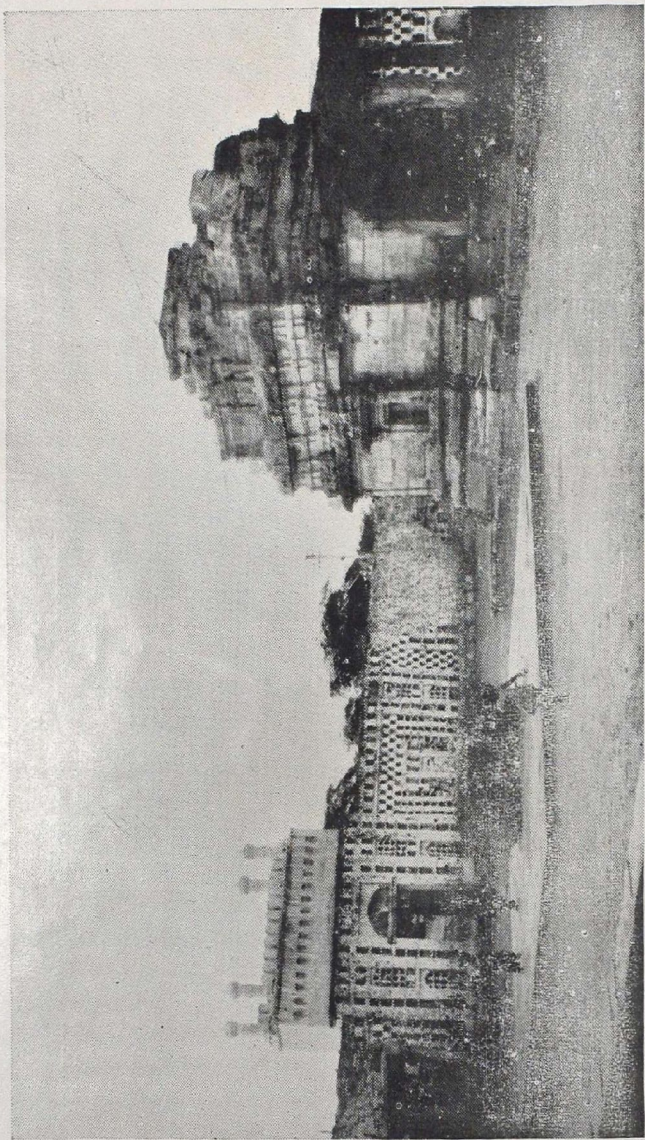


Fig. No. 2

The stone boat before the tomb of Shali Pahalwan. On the extreme right stands a desecrated temple depicting the Pallava architecture. (See foot note on page No. 7)



Fig. No. 5

The Tandava (dance) posture of Shiva with 16 hands in the North wall of the temple of Swarga Brahmeswara mutilated beyond recognition. A typical specimen depicting the wrath of the vandal.



Fig No. 6

The figure of Lord Vishnu with eight hands mounted on Garuda, carved to the south-east of the gateway to Viswa Brahmeswara temple. An elephant - tortoise fight can be seen below this disfigured sculpture.



Fig. No. 7

A mutilated sculpture of River Yamuna Devi on the southern portion of the entrance to the Viswa Brahmeswaralaya. The Goddess stands on a tortoise, mount, flanked by lady attendants on both sides.



Fig. No. 8

The broken Gangadhara image of Lord Shiva on the western wall of Viswa Brahmeswaralaya with king Bhagiratha to the left performing penance standing on one leg. Shiva is releasing the flow of Ganga, loosening a lock of his head with a finger. Below seated is the sage Jahnu receiving the flow, which he lets out ultimately through his ear.

time, the ever growing power of the later Moghuls and their representatives in Deccan, had, ultimately, brought about the sad end of a glorious cultural chapter in the history of the country. Rare specimens of art were pulverised, beautifully carved faces, pointed noses, tender and delicate fingers, smiling looks and lips, elegant and agile dance poses (Fig. Nos. 5,6,7,8) were mercilessly mutilated and heartlessly destroyed. The sanctified sites of worship were desecrated with little regard for divinity and aesthetics. It was a blood-curdling and gruesome tale of terror unleashed, which was unparalleled. And the worst part of the nightmare was the account of Shali Pahalwan, an Arab pirate.

As the name clearly denotes, Shali was a vagrant wrestler, who with a band of fanatics, went on desecrating and looting temples that came his way. During his marches, he attacked Alampur. He was beheaded in a clash with local people. His head was carried away by his men and the body was left in the temple premises. After some time, the Moslem forces from Raichur raided Alampur and avenged the death of the pirate by once again attacking the temples and desecrating the premises by erecting a tomb at the place where Shali fell. And they called it 'Dhar-mubarak'. They built another tomb over the severed head of the vandal, a few miles away and named it 'Sir Mubarak'. The desecration of the premises was continued by transforming the holy spot into a cemetery, where today a number of tombs stand flanked by temples. (Fig. 1). Can there be a more painful thing for a citizen of India than to find the sacred temple premises turned into a grave yard? The terror-stricken sons of the soil could not even heave a sigh of anguish or displeasure. And what was more, the tomb of the pahalvan in the temple yard stands today with a 'Shivalinga' on it! And every year, a 'Urs' * (mela) is conducted at the tomb, as if it was

* During the 'Urs, a strange rite 'kisti-loot' i.e. 'looting the boat' was observed with great pomp. Possibly an abandoned structure was converted in to a boat (Fig. No. 2) which stands before the tomb in memory of the profession of the pirate. Every year during Urs, it is filled with boiled coloured rice - pulav - and then sturdy wrestlers jump into the boat and 'loot' the boat, scattering the pulav all around! Thus they celebrate the memory of the vandal much to the sentimental torture of the local majority community reminding them of the havoc committed generations back!

a Durgah of a pious saint. Pir or Fakir, like Hazrat Nizamuddin at Delhi, Salim Chisti at Sikri, Agra, or the Ajmer Sherif ! During the 'Urs', the premises of the abandoned temples are used for answering calls of nature ! - a sad commentary on the state of affairs. Naturally, during the rule of the Nizam, things could not improve and status quo continued. In the recent past, during the black days of the Razakars, one of the temples, Arka Brahmeswaralaya, was converted into a mosque for a few months, with the ulterior motive of establishing claim over it. But, thanks to the timely action of the local people, soon after the Police Action, their evil designs were foiled and today the temple is taken over by the Department of Archaeology, as a protected monument. But still, the pollution of the premises during the 'Urs' days and other occasions, continues without proper check. This state of affairs only adds insult to the injury, perpetrated over generations. And, the insult becomes more humiliating and painful, when foreign tourists, who frequently visit and admire the sculptural splendour even in its most decadent state, pass sarcastic remarks on the total absence of decency, aesthetic sense, national pride and regard among the Indians towards their holy, historical and national monuments !

CONCLUSION :

Let the past lie buried. Let us not brood over it. Then all were right and all were wrong. Today, we are a secular nation wedded to co-existence of different faiths and religions, with mutual goodwill, understanding, tolerance and respect. There may be many an Alampur today in India, which breathe national disgrace. They may belong to any faith or religion. Insult done to any faith in India is a blot to the dignity and threat to the integrity of the nation. Should we not start a nation-wide campaign to erase such shameful blots in this sovereign, secular and independent India? Is it not high time, that every national-minded Indian-to whatsoever religion or faith he may belong, as a member of a secular state, ponders over this vital issue, and volunteers to undo the damage perpetrated by his misguided ancestors in the past on a section of his own countrymen and thus set a noble example of religious tolerance and national solidarity? Will not our Moslem brethern, who are equally citizens of this country under the constitution, agree with this?

Kanaga Sommulenno Kanakambadokkate !
Pasula Vanne Veru Palokatiye
Pushpajatulenno Pooja Okkate sumee
Viswadabhirama, Vinura Vema !

(O Vemana listen ! Ornaments are many, while the gold used in them is one. Milch cattle vary in colour while milk is the same. Flowers are of many types, but pooja - worship, is one !)

—*Telugu Saint Poet Vemana*

Kaari Peeri dooho gayee-Takar doodh dehu alagayee !

(Milk both the black cow and the yellow cow.
Can you discriminate their milk which is of the same white colour ? Religions may look different, but their purport is the same)

—*Saint Kabir Das*

Shiv Chuy thali thali Rozaan
Mo zaan Hyond ta Musalman,
Thrukh Aya chukh ta pan parz naav
swaya chai saahibas sooti zaanizaan.

Shiv is present at every place (in every being).
Do not discriminate between a Hindu and a Musalman.
If you are clever and shrewed, know thy own self.
That is your real acquaintance with the Lord (Shiv) !

Kashmiri Poetess Lal - Ded
(Lal - Vakh No. 105)