

## **Decoding the cultural landscape of Badami - Towards sustainability**

Pragya Shankar

Assistant Professor

School of Environment and Design

Navrachana University, Vadodara

[pragyas@nuv.ac.in](mailto:pragyas@nuv.ac.in)

There exist a great variety of Landscapes that are representative of the different regions of the world. Combined works of nature and humankind, they express a long and intimate relationship between peoples and their natural environment. Cultural landscapes testify to the creative genius, social development and the imaginative and spiritual vitality of humanity. They are part of our collective identity. (UNESCO)

Culture is the agent, the natural area is the medium, the cultural landscape the result (Sauer, 1925). Cultural landscapes are as much the expression of culture as the disciplines of arts and architecture. These are reflection of the common existential ideas and represent the relationship of people with the environment. This world view is a people's more or less systematic attempt to make sense of environment. To be livable, nature and society must show order and display a harmonious relationship (Tuan, 1977).

The environment has been considered detrimental in shaping of cultures by environmental determinists, whereas according to the ideas of cultural determinism, it is culture which influences the relationship of man with environment. None the less, it is an accepted premise that both, the environment and culture are very closely inter-related and have multifaceted relationship with each other, the original landscape forms the part of transcendental idea and the world view and there are landscapes removed from the original place, but represent elements in similar relationships.

### **Cultural landscape of India**

Landscape in India offer the possibility of transcendental experiences, their cultural meaning going beyond views or the visual composition of forms. (Sinha, 2006)

The existential ideas of the Hinduism that have manifested in form of Arts, literature and architecture, the same have influenced the imagination of landscape in Indian subcontinent. The Hindu mythology is nurtured in landscapes that are woven in the religious texts and folklore to form a powerful source of religious imagery. The

landscapes of sacred sites in India are not designed but imbued with archetypal symbols referring to existential meanings.

Author Amita Sinha, in her book *Landscapes in India: forms and meanings*, categorizes these archetypes into two categories, natural and spatial. The natural archetypes refer to the natural elements, mountains, rivers, caves, water and vegetation, their character, experiential qualities and associated meanings. These are icons that are part of cultural narratives of mythology and literature. Their sheer presence creates a sense of sacredness in landscape.

The spatial archetype primarily consists of the *mandala*, the cosmic diagram encompassing the idea of *bindu* or centre, the axis mundi, movement around the centre and orientation to cardinal directions.

### **Methodology**

The idea of the natural and spatial archetypes has been used in the paper to comprehend the key elements of the landscape and their relationship with the larger cultural ideas.

Badami is selected as the study area for two reasons. One, the landscape of Badami has experiential quality that has a sense of sacredness and two, it has a history of habitation of over two millenniums. The place has yet not been disturbed to a great extent by urban development or tourism; hence it has a sense of continuity of age old relationships between inhabitants and their environs.

Secondary sources have been used to comprehend the natural elements and their interrelationships, the key mythological underpinnings, the places of cultural importance, rituals and practices. Drawings have been used to analyze the relationship between natural setting and cultural ideas.

### **Badami**

Badami is located in state of Karnataka, India. The region has been inhabited since prehistoric time and it is most renowned for the ancient temples and caves, which are the earliest examples of Hindu temple architecture. Along with these temples, the region has many other sites of cultural importance still in use by the inhabitants. The natural

landscape of the region is stunning with the fissured red sandstone rocky outcrops and narrow floodplains created by holy Malaprabha river. The entire region is dotted with perennial springs, seasonal water bodies and artificial lakes. Agriculture is the primary mode of occupation in the region.

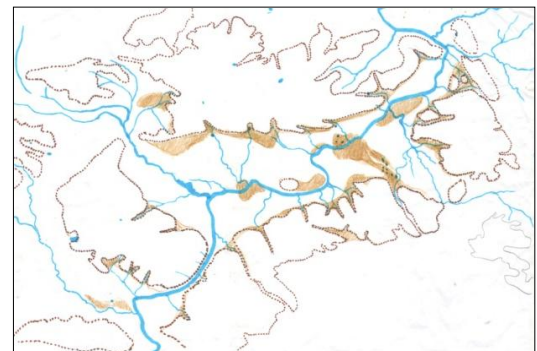


Figure 1: Badami and its environ (Google earth)

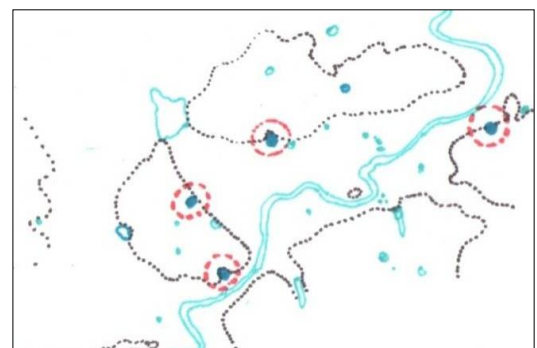
During early Chalukyan period, the region witnessed the development of many settlements, the primary being Aihole, Pattadaka and Badami. This was the time when the part of forests was cleared to allow for agriculture, the trade flourished and this became the seat of ruling power. This was the time when different religions, Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism co-existed in harmony with each other in the region. The most important monuments of the region belong to the same time period. Many rules changed with time, and the region came under Islamic rule at much late date.

### **The Natural Setting**

The key elements of the natural landscape of Badami are the hills, river and its flood plains, natural springs, lakes and forest. The elements are in unique relationship with each within the larger landscape of Deccan Plateau.



**Landform:** Badami falls in the geological formation categorized as Kaladgi Super group, which consists of Badami group and Bagalkot group. The region with sandstone, limestone & shale lies within the larger geological region predominantly formed by volcanic rocks- gneiss, granite and basalt. The landform of the region



consists of the rocky sandstone outcrops, which rise over 160 meters above the river Malaprabha. Some of these are bare and highly fissured where others are covered by

Figure 3: The seasonal ponds and perinneal springs (red) dotted around the landscape (Author)

scrubs. The rain water has been the key factor in shaping of the landform, creating several ravines in the sandstone outcrops.

**Hydrology:** Malaprabha is a non-perennial river that originates in the Sahyadri Mountains and flows through the semi-arid landscape of Deccan plateau. It flows east to west with the sandstone outcrops in north and the rolling landscape in south. At the mouth of the Badami region it enters the valley created by the sandstone outcrops and flows further east to finally meet river Krishna. Within this valley it creates narrow fertile flood plains, where the historic settlements of Pattadakal and Aihole are situated. Due to the sandstone outcrops, the river takes many bends and turns passing through this region.

The region is arid, with the rains in Monsoons as the primary source of water. The rain water gets collected in form of numerous natural seasonal ponds scattered around the landscape and several manmade lakes. Agastya Lake is one such manmade lake. The sandstone acts as an aquifer that contains ground water in the pore space along with the subterranean pockets created by fractures in the rock. This ground water emerges on the surface at various places in the region in form of perennial natural springs.

**Vegetation:** The majority of the land in the valleys is under cultivation with degraded scrubs on the outcrops. Though most of the forest cover is degraded through thousands of years of occupation, some small pockets of the natural vegetation are still intact in form of sacred forests.

### **Cultural Landscape of Badami**

The engagement of man with this landscape began during Stone Age, which is evident in form of rock shelters, cave paintings and burial sites. The Hindu and Jain temple caves in the Badami were carved out in the Early Chalukyan era from 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> centuries, when the most important engagement of man with landscape began in the region. These were followed by some of the earliest Hindu temples in Aihole and Pattadakal, which played important role in creating the Hindu temple typology.

**The sandstone outcrops:** The outcrops act as fortification, create an enclosed area that can be entered through narrow passes, resulting in ease of defence. The outcrops create a setting which allows for multiple narratives to be created in reference with the holy landscape of Himalayas.

Its ravines create hidden, mystical spaces, which have been overlaid with many meanings and associations. The natural caves along with ravines create a sense of being in womb, invoking the idea of Mother Goddess.

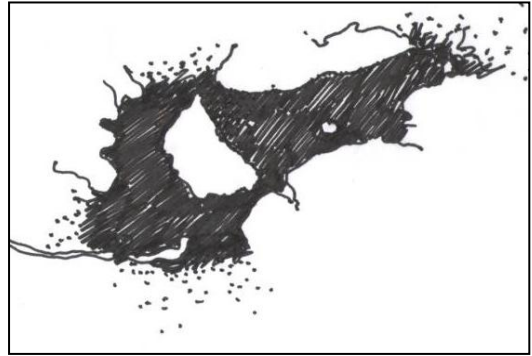


Figure 4: The idea of defence and circumambulation  
(Author)

The rocks are eroded, hence seem aged, symbolic of time these connect to the time long ago, to the time of the Gods and *asuras*. They

seem to have seen the time, witnessed many ages, they were there when the Sage *Agatsya* killed *Vatapi* and when Lord Rama wandered in the forests. Its decay is the proof of its wisdom and spirituality. The founding ancestors and heroes of the mythic world largely transcended these normal cycles of human time experience; they lived in a timeless past. (Tuan, 1977)

The rocky outcrop of Badami appears like an island surrounded by green scrubs and farms. Mighty, raw, aged and pure; the setting resonates between two mythical realms. On one side it evokes the idea of mythical abode of Gods, Mount Meru and, on the other, Lord Vishnu floating in the celestial ocean.

It allows for circumambulation around it, thereby reinforcing the idea of the mythical mound and the spatial archetype of *mandala*. The understanding of landscape as *bhu-mandalas* is reinforced through ritual circumambulations by pilgrims around natural features. (Sinha, 2006)

**River Malaprabha:** River Malaprabha has a mythical origin, marked by temple of Mauli Devi.

The divine river Ganga, believed to have descended from the heavens, is a natural archetype for other rivers named after her and with similar myths of descent. Such is her power that all rivers are contained in her and she in them, an example of spatial transposition in Hindu Sacred geography (Sinha, 2006). With the vertically rising Rocky outcrops, River Malaprabha resonates with the cultural narrative of Himalayas and Ganga.

The river also becomes a threshold to be crossed while approaching the religious centre of Badami from the rolling plains of South. Each of its bend becomes the site for an event.

### **The cultivated plains and settlements:**

River Malaprabha creates fertile flood plains feasible to cultivate, which became the primary basis for the settlements. The region has been under cultivation for more than 1500 years and the rich agriculture and trade led to the prosperity during Early Chalukyan period. Agriculture is setting for these heritage monuments and one of the key characters in the narrative of the region.

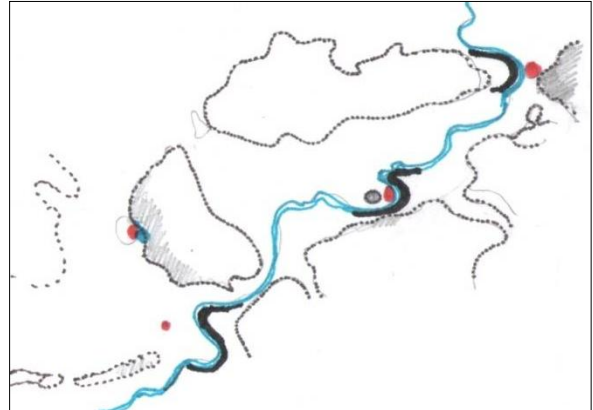


Figure 5: The bends of the river and location of important places (Author)

The settlements are located on the low rocky outcrops, leaving the fertile land for agriculture. The locations also seem to have connection with the bends of the river, similar to the holy cities of Varanasi & Ayodhya. All the three important sites on the bank of River, Banashankari, Pattadakal and Aihole, are located at the places where river takes a sharp turn.

### **Agastya Lake and the spiritual centre:**



Figure 6: Agastya lake (Wiki Commons)

The spiritual centre is approached through number of thresholds; the river, the pass between hills the wooded in-between land and mouth of the ravine. The idea multiple thresholds create the sense of multiple boundaries building up the idea of sacred centre.

The lake is nestled within the sandstone outcrop, having rocks on three sides. It is fed by rainwater falling down in form of multiple waterfalls into the lake. It is still and green with a sense of depth. Being deep and placid it resonates with the spiritual mood of the place. The lake is almost still and reflects the rocks around, enhancing their monumentality. With the reflection of rocks and sky, along with the sense of mysterious depth, it evokes a sense of connection with the akash (sky/ heaven), prithvi and patala (underworld).

There is also the transformation of the natural form into spatial forms, such as with built temples tanks and wells, believed to be linked directly to through underground streams with Ganga (Sinha, 2006). The peaceful lake, stone outcrop and blue sky evoke the sense of the holy landscape of *Kailas Mansarovar*.

For the Hindu worshippers, the lake also embodies ritualistic values. The ritual of purification through water makes it important for the worshippers to access the water, which resulted in location of temples at the water edge and creation of Ghats, the distinct sacred water edge.

### ***Banashankari & Lajja Gauri:***

At the place where River Malprabha enters the outcrops and bends to east to enter the fertile plains, there is a temple dedicated to *Banashankari*, the goddess of forest. The word *Bana* (forest) suggests that it perhaps marked the end of the settlements and beginning of the Forest.

The Goddess *Banashankari* embodies many meanings. As *shakti* she is a symbol of the primordial feminine creative, preservative & destructive energy relating to the idea of sacred forest and establishing the agrarian basis of the regional economy. As *Durga*, she is the fierce protector of people, guarding the region from all evils. The idea of Mother Goddess also reinforces the relationship of the region with the cultural narratives related to *Shiva-Parvati*, establishing self-similarity with their holy abode of Himalayas.

Going up a river to its source is to return, symbolically, to the beginning of one's own life (Tuan, 1977). The other form of Mother Goddess present in the region is *Lajja Guari* who is the primordial form of mother goddess related to the fertile power of the element 'water'. These are the sites where there is presence of perennial natural springs, locally known as *Kullas*, that drain into River Malprabha. *Lajja Guari* is still worshipped by



local women who are childless. The sites of Lajja gauri are surrounded by sacred forests, where the locals do not venture unless for the need of performing rituals. In Hindu mythology, the natural springs are also

associated with the emergence of River Ganga from the nether ground.

### Architecture

There are four distinct landscape settings for the temples in the region. The first being in the plains, at the bank of the river, the temple complexes of Pattadakal and Aihole are located.

The second setting is the banks of Lake Agatsya, with varying degree of relationship with the lake. The lake acts as a centre around which the temples are located in a reference to the cardinal directions, few are located on the lake edge and others carved in the surrounding cliffs.

The third site is the top of the outcrops, from where there are distant views towards all sides that evoke two binary opposite responses as such sites do. The first experience is of being on the top of everything, having the sense of command over others, manifested in form of the fort. On the other side, it also humbles one down in comparison to the vastness of landscape, where the self is lost in unity with the larger cosmos. It invokes a spiritual



Figure 7: Temple at Pattadakal (Wiki Commons)

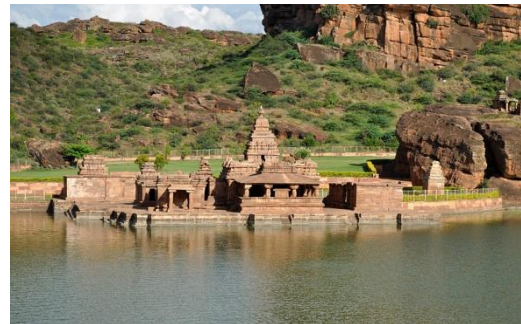


Figure 8: Temple on the edge of Lake Agastya (Wiki Commons)

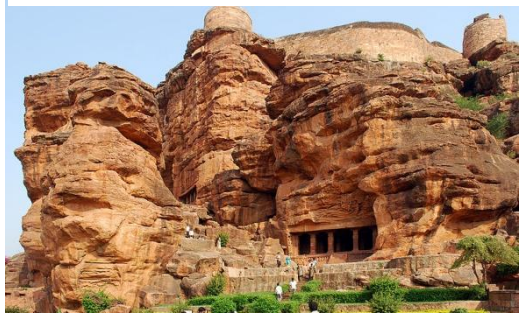


Figure 9: Temple carved in the cliff face (Wiki Commons)

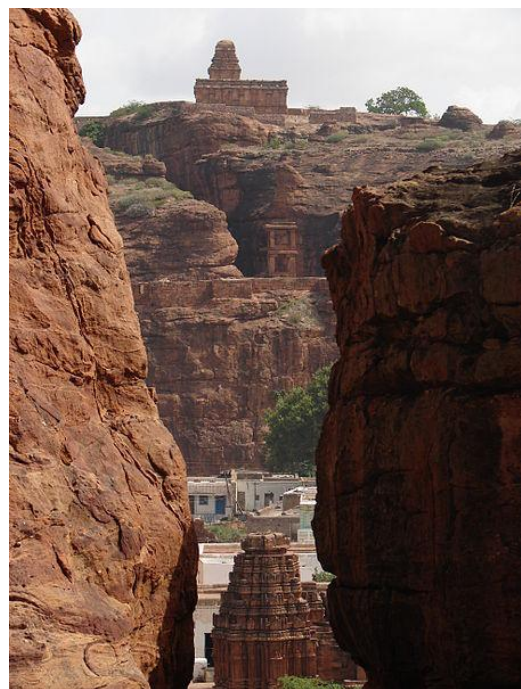


Figure 10: Temple on the top of rocky outcrop (Wiki Commons)



experience where one is able see within and able to detach oneself from the distant world. This manifests in form of temples and also a Dargah. As it is primarily a Hindu site, the presence of Dargah justifies the universality of the spiritual experience of the site, which is beyond religion and cultures.

The fourth site is the natural springs, *kullas*, where the temples are surrounded by sacred forests.

### **Conclusion**

Badami's natural landscape has a very unique character within the larger region. It has distinct natural elements; the rock type, landform and perennial springs, all of which are very specific to the Badami region. Also, the relationships between the elements are such that they result in a distinct spatial and experiential character. These unique physical qualities make the region an identifiable "place" within the larger "space".

The act of occupying this "place" is first act of man in the region. Appropriating the landscape and endowing it with the cultural ideas of imagined archetypical landscape creates narration of the "place" in which each natural element has a certain role. This narration may amalgamate with the existing mythologies of might create a new myth. This is a very important act through which the ideas of the tangible "place" transform into intangible collective ideas.

The architecture steps in now. The architectural intervention responds to the established ideas of "place" through the archetypical codes. This intervention further reinforces the cultural ideas and enhances the experience of "place" and its elements.

The beliefs, practices, rituals and festivals have been the means through which the cultural ideas have lasted over more than a millennium. It is not a cultural landscape of "then and there" but still continues to be "now and here". People have played the most important role in sustaining this landscape, though not consciously. The sacred forests, the last remaining patches of the native forests, are the proof that the community could be the best protector of such places. Once the community is removed from it, the landscape would lose most of its meanings and only the historic buildings and artifacts of "then and there" would remain. After all, what is the value of the Char Dhams, if the pilgrims are not allowed to worship there?

## **Bibliography**

Michell, G. (2011). *Badami.Aihole.Pattadakal* . Pictor Publishing Pvt Ltd,Mumbai.India.

Sauer, C. O. (1925). *The Morphology of Landscape*. University of California Publications in Geography 2.

Sinha, A. (2006). *Landscapes in India- Forms and Meanings*. Boulder, Colorado 80303: The University Press of Colorado.

Tuan, Y.-F. (1977). *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press.

UNESCO. (n.d.). Retrieved October 04, 2015, from UNESCO/WHC:

<http://whc.unesco.org/en/culturallandscape/>