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Tracing Nātha Siddhas: Authors of the Lost Tradition of Tantric Alchemy at Srisailam

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Abstract: *The Nātha Siddhas are an order of renunciate ascetics renowned for the historical practice of haṭha yoga and tantra. The sect is encountered from Kashmir to Tamil Nadu, however, it has historically evolved into diverse regional forms, encompassing varied hagiographies, practices, beliefs, etc. The Nātha Siddhas aimed to attain siddhis (perfections) through various yogic and tantric practices, including rasāyana (alchemy). Srisailam is a prominent Śaivite pilgrimage site in Āndhradeśa and an enigmatic center of Siddhas. The prākāra wall of Mallikārjuna temple at Srisailam features an array of ascetic and Siddha figures, depicted in acts such as haṭha yoga, alchemy, etc. This paper in the aforesaid context attempts to situate alchemy in the regional nature of the Nātha Siddha sect in Āndhradeśa. It presents the textual and archaeological evidence of Srisailam as a center of rasāyana, alongside an iconographic analysis of sculptural panels depicting Siddha alchemy. Further, it highlights the role of alchemical practices in the historical prominence of Nātha Siddhas in medieval Āndhradeśa.*

Keywords: Nātha, Siddha, Alchemy, Tantra, Śaivism, Srisailam, Vijayanagara

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This paper investigates into the alchemical tradition of the Nātha Siddhas in Āndhradeśa with special reference to Srisailam. Siddhas are medieval yogis common to Śaivite and Buddhist tantra, while Nāthas are followers of the yogic path founded by Gorakṣanātha. The Nātha Siddhas aimed to attain *siddhis* (perfections) through various yogic and tantric practices, including alchemy (*rasāyana*). Tantric alchemy focuses upon the application of various alchemical formulations in religio-spiritual pursuits,

such as bodily immortality, invincibility and attaining *siddhis*. Srisailam is a historically renowned Śaivite site in Āndhradeśa and a lesser-known centre of Siddhas. In addition, the Mallikārjuna temple complex here features an array of Siddha figures, depicted in their characteristic practices such as *haṭha yoga*, alchemy, display of *siddhis*, etc.

Previous studies on the Nātha Siddha sect primarily focussed upon the key doctrines and practices derived from authoritative texts and the development and spread of the sect (Briggs 1938; Dvivedi 1950; White 1996; Dhere 2010; Mallinson 2011). However, there have been limited studies focussed on understanding the archaeological and iconographic signatures of the tradition (Linrothe 2006; Shaw 2011; Sarde 2019). Further, the regional nature of the sect in Āndhradeśa is seldom investigated. The Nātha sectarian presence is encountered from Kashmir to Tamil Nadu, however, the sect historically evolved into diverse regional forms, encompassing varied hagiographies, practices, beliefs, etc (Lorenzen and Muñoz 2011: xi). This paper on the aforesaid lines presents the textual and archaeological evidence of Srisailam as a center of *rasāyana*, alongside an iconographic analysis of sculptural panels depicting Siddha alchemy. It further attempts to situate alchemy in the regional character of the Nātha Siddha sect in Andhra region. Additionally, it highlights the role of alchemical tantric practices in the historical prominence of Nātha Siddhas in medieval Āndhradeśa.

Nātha Siddhas: Historical Background

The 6th to 12th centuries CE marked the rise of tantric traditions, with the emergence of Siddhas in Śaiva, Śākta and Buddhist Tantra. A Siddha is a practitioner who has attained various spiritual perfections (*siddhis*), with the eight great *siddhis* (*aṣṭa-mahā-siddhi*) being the most prominent, through rigorous yogic practices (Lorenzen and Muñoz 2011: ix). Emphasizing the body and mind as central to achieving *siddhakāya* (perfected body) and *jīvanmukti* (liberation while living), Siddhas supplemented yogic discipline with alchemical techniques (*rasayāna*). Known for their mastery of yoga, alchemy and mystical arts; the popularity of Siddhas transcended sectarian boundaries, often being portrayed in texts as semi-divine figures with extraordinary abilities or *siddhis*. With these traits, along with their distinct attributes, Siddhas were likely, at least in part, the forerunners of the Nātha yogīs.

Siddhas are broadly categorized into three groups: the Indo-Tibetan *Siddhācāryas* (typically numbering 84), the Indian *Mahāsiddhas* and the *Rasa Siddhas*. Figures such as Matsyendra, Gorakṣa, Nāgārjuna, Caurāṅgi, Carpaṭi, Taṇṭi, Karṇarī and Kanthaḍī; appear in all three types of Siddha lists (White 1996: 92). Many of these names also feature in the later lists of the nine Nāthas, reflecting the shared heritage of Siddhas and Nāthas. Some scholars have proposed Buddhist origins for the Nātha sect, citing the appearance of Nātha names-including the founding figures Matsyendra and Gorakṣa-in Buddhist Siddha lists. However, Mallinson (2011: 3) refutes this view, asserting that the Nātha teachings and doctrines do not substantiate this theory with evidence.

The Nātha tradition likely emerged between the 10th and 11th centuries CE, resulting from the amalgamation of pre-existing sectarian traditions such as Kāpālīka, Kālamukha, Kaula, etc. In the process of refining practices inherited from the precursor tantric sects, Gorakṣanātha is said to have founded the Nātha path and systematized the *haṭha yoga* discipline (Mallinson 2011: 05). The origin of the sect is traced to the Deccan region, where most of the early literary and epigraphic references of Matsyendranātha and Gorakṣanātha have been found (Mallinson 2011: 17). The Nāthas held a popular presence in Southern India during the Vijayanagara period, notably in the Karnataka and Andhra regions (Powell 2018: 85).

Srisailam: Seat of Nātha Siddhas

Srisailam (Fig. 1), situated in the Kurnool district (latitude 16° 05' N, longitude 78° 55' E) of Andhra Pradesh, is nestled in the Nallamalla Hill ranges of Eastern ghats, surrounded by thick forests through which the river Krishna flows in deep gorge. Śiva is venerated here as 'Mallikāṛjuna' (the Jasmine Lord) in the form of a *svayambhu liṅga*, listed among the 12 *jyotirliṅgas* (*Śiva purāṇa* list). Due to its natural landscape of dense forests and mountains, Srisailam provided a secluded and serene setting, making it an ideal and preferred site for occult tantric practitioners who usually evade public gaze and attention. From the 11th century CE onwards, the site developed into an urban town (*Śrīśailapaṭṭana*), due to several contributing factors: its status as a sacred Śaiva pilgrimage site, consistent royal patronage and the establishment of temple institutions. Contemporary inscriptions equate Srisailam's sanctity with the five *puṇyakṣetras* of Āryāvarta: Prayāga, Vārāṇasī, Kurukṣetra, Puṣkara and Arghyatīrtha (Sastri 1927: 217). Grants from kings, local chieftains and devotees funded temple construction, renovations, daily rituals and the maintenance.

Several literary records note the economic and political activities in Srisailam, for instance, a 15th century inscription mentions reduced toll rates on animals transporting goods into Srisailam and voluntary donations from merchant guilds to support the Śivarātri festival at the Mallikāṛjuna temple (Anuradha 1988: 69). During 12th to 15th centuries CE, Srisailam emerged as a center of prestige, with several influential Vīraśaiva *maṭhas* (monastic institutions), whose heads often served as royal preceptors to the major dynasties in the Andhra-Karnataka region. The site is renowned in the religious history of Āndhradeśa for the historical presence of Śaiva sects such as Kāpālīka, Kālamukha, Vīraśaiva and Nātha Siddha.

Various textual records attest to the prominence of the Nātha Siddha sect in Āndhradeśa with its seat at Srisailam. The *Agni Purāṇa* refers to Srisailam as *Siddhakṣetra* (Shaw 1997: 161). *Haṭhapradīpikā* of Svātmārāma (15th century CE), a classical Sanskrit treatise on *haṭha yoga*, was composed in Andhra Pradesh, likely around the Srisailam temple (Powell 2018: 56). The influence of the Nātha sect in the Andhra region was immense, with numerous Telugu literary compositions referring to the Nātha Siddhas. Nannecōḍadeva's *Kumārasambhavam* (12th century CE) honours the nine Nāthas as 'Ādisiddhas'. The *Śivayogasāramu* text (14th century CE) of Kolani Gaṇapatideva regards Matsyendra as a prominent figure teaching *Śivayoga*. The Telugu work *Navanāthacaritramu* by Gauraṇa (15th century CE) narrates the localized recension of the nine Nātha yogis revolving in the sacred geography of Srisailam. The legends of celebrated Nāthas and Siddhas were narrated in community gatherings, akin to the reading of *Purāṇas* and *Itihāsas* (Sarma 1948: 310). Today, the Nātha Siddha tradition is largely absent in the Andhra region, with few, if any, surviving practitioners, in contrast to its continued prevalence in Northern and Western India. Their sectarian presence in Andhra is majorly historical, traceable to the Vijayanagara period through several literary records and archaeological evidences.

Tantric and Siddha Alchemy

Rasāyana, or alchemy in Indian traditions refers to the discipline of longevity and rejuvenation constituting various therapeutic methods, lifestyle practices and the applications of mineral and herbal preparations. It is divided into several branches based on its objectives, such as transmutational alchemy (*dhatuvāda*), therapeutic alchemy (*rogavāda*) and elixir-based alchemy (*dehavāda*), among others. In Tantric alchemy, the above-mentioned techniques are utilized for religio-spiritual pursuits, such as attaining longevity, invincibility, *siddhis* and even divine embodiment. Tantric alchemy encompasses both physical and spiritual processes i.e. yoga, rituals and the usage of mineral formulations, including mercury, which is regarded as the 'seed of Śiva' in tantras (White 1996: 14).

The medieval alchemists extracted mercury from cinnabar, the naturally occurring mercuric sulphide (*darada/hingula* in Sanskrit), a vivid red mineral in which mercury is commonly found. The purification process was carried out using a sublimation apparatus known as the *pātana yantra*. Three main types of apparatus were majorly used: *ūrdhvhvāpātana* (for upward sublimation), *adhōpātana* (for downward sublimation) and *tiryakpātana* (for horizontal sublimation). In all the cases, mercury was vaporized, leaving behind residual impurities in the ores (or with which it was amalgamated) and then recondensed by passing through cold water. The *Rasaratnasamucchaya* text describes several mercury extraction and purification techniques, including the upward sublimation through amalgamation with copper, in combination with various herbal substances. Similar procedures are detailed in other key alchemical texts such as the *Ānandakanda*, *Rasārṇava*, *Rasahr̥daya Tantra*, etc (White 1996: 247). Many significant alchemical texts of the era were labelled as Tantras and presented as divine revelations of Śiva, often in his Bhairava form. The alchemical tantras are rich in references to tantric formulae (*mantras*), diagrams (*maṇḍalas*), descriptions of divine hierarchies, yogic practices and the Śākta-Śaiva devotion, being the hallmark of the tantric religious system.

Siddha alchemy is a branch of tantric alchemy, distinguished by its unique combination of mercury-based preparations along with *haṭha yoga* techniques, to ultimately transform the yogi into a perfect immortal, a Siddha or a ‘second Śiva’. Mādhavācārya in his philosophical treatise *Sarvadarśanasangraha* (14th Century CE) devoted a chapter ‘Raseśvara Darśana’ (‘Doctrine of the Lord of Mercury’), where he explains the Siddha alchemist’s dual aim of body stabilization and immortality. A codified list of 27 Rasa Siddhas finds place in three alchemical texts (dating to the 13th-14th centuries CE): *Rasendra Maṅgala* of Śrīmana Nāgārjuna, *Rasaratnasamuccaya* of Vāgabhaṭṭa II and *Rasaratnākara* of Nityanātha Siddha (White 1996: 81).

Several Siddhas who were master alchemists were later coopted into the Nātha sampradāya, such as Nāgārjuna, Nityanātha, Carpati and Gorakṣa himself (Mallinson 2011:14). *Bhūtiprakaraṇa*, a Nātha text on alchemy, is attributed to Gorakṣanātha. In medieval India, numerous monastic orders and yogis were active, but only one group i.e. the Nātha Siddhas were widely recognized as alchemists. Known for their mobility, Nātha yogis spread the practice of Siddha alchemy across India. This phenomenon was also noted by travellers such as Marco Polo and Francois Bernier, who recounted ‘Yogis’ as long-lived and healthy due to mercury and sulphur consumption (White 1996: 50).

Srisailam: Centre of Siddha Alchemy

White (1996:77) describes the Andhra region (Śrīparvata-Srisailam) as the cradle of alchemical art in India. Akka Mahādevi, a Vīraśaiva poet in the 12th century, praises Srisailam in one of her *vacanas* as:

“Every tree in the forest was the All-Giving Tree, every bush the life-reviving herb,
every stone the Philosopher's Stone, all the land a pilgrim's holy place, all the
water nectar against age, every beast the golden deer, every pebble I stumble
on the Wishing Crystal: walking round the Jasmine Lord's favourite hill
I happened on the Plantain Grove” (Trans. Ramanujan 1973:133).

This *vacana* expresses Akka's awe upon arriving at the sacred Srisailam hill. The idioms such as ‘All-Giving Tree’, ‘life-reviving herb’, ‘wishing crystal’ and ‘nectar against age’ symbolises an alchemist's paradise that is Srisailam, an ideal realm sought by various occultists. Srisailam is noted to be a mountain of special herbs. In Vīraśaiva poetry, Prabhudeva describes *Kaḍali vana* (Plantain Grove) of Srisailam as a source of healing herbs and rejuvenating waters.

The Sanskrit novel *Vāsavadatta* (sixth century CE) describes Srisailam as an alchemical wonderland where liberation can be realized. Harṣavardhana's *Ratnāvali* (seventh century CE) mentions 'Dhārmika-puruṣa' of Śrīparvata, who could make flowers bloom in all seasons. The Sanskrit writer Bāṇabhaṭṭa in his work *Kādambari* (seventh century CE) gives an account of a South Indian Śaiva priest travelling to Ujjain, who in a hysterical state induced by mercury, recounted thousands of enigmatic stories about Śrīparvata (White 1996: 49).

Dowman (1985: 72) decisively identifies Śrīparvata with Srisailam. He emphasizes its prominence, stating, "Śrīparvata, perhaps the most important tantric center on the subcontinent to both Buddhists and Śaiva-Śāktas". Śrīparvata also finds mention in Tibetan legends. Mārpa, a 11th century Vajrayāna teacher, on his journey to Tibet, dreamed of being taken by *ḍākinīs* to Śrīparvata to meet the great Siddha Saraha (Trungpa 1980: 134).

Srisailam has a long-standing association with several celebrated Siddhas. Nāgārjuna, a disciple of Saraha, is regarded as the greatest Siddha alchemist of India. Nityanātha's *Rasaratnākara* gives an account of Nāgārjunanātha setting up an alchemical laboratory in Srisailam. The Telugu text *Navanāthacaritam* (15th century CE) narrates the pursuits of Gorakṣanātha, Allama Prabhu and Nāgārjuna at Srisailam. This source also notes that Nāgārjuna imparted the 'gold-making' *siddhi* to his son i.e. Siddha Nāgārjuna, who thereby attempted to transmute the entire Srisailam hill into gold, only to be interrupted by Lord Viṣṇu (Roṣu 1992: 154).

According to the 16th century Telugu writer Pigapaṭṭi Somanātha Kavi, both Gorakṣanātha and Nāgārjuna received initiation in *rasāyana* tantra from the Vīraśaiva teacher Allama Prabhu at Srisailam. This narrative is also mirrored in the Tamil Sittar tradition, which recounts that Nāgārjuna established a *sparśavedhī* (transmuting) *līṅga* in Srisailam. The *Vīramaheśāgama* states that Gorakṣanātha learned alchemy from a Maheśvara Siddha and subsequently transmitted his knowledge to Raseśvara Siddhas in the 'Antarvedi' region i.e. Present-day Alampur, where Tungabhadra meets Krishna (White 1996: 111).

Mallikārjuna Temple Complex, Srisailam

The earliest shrine in the Mallikārjuna temple complex was likely constructed in the seventh or eighth century CE. The Kākatiyas (955-1323 CE) extended patronage to Srisailam, during which the *mukhamaṇḍapa* and several subsidiary shrines were built. Significant architectural expansion of the complex occurred during the Vijayanagara period (1336-1678 CE), including the addition of *maṇḍapas*, *prākāra* walls, *gopuras*, etc (Fig. 2). Around 1510-11CE, Sānta Līṅgayya hired Koṇḍoru, a skilled mason, to work on the *prākāra* wall (Sastri 1990:114). The *prākāra* wall resembles a massive defence battlement (Fig. 3), with an average height of seven meters. Each wall is built of 10 horizontal courses of stone blocks, except for the south wall, which has only nine. The stone blocks have been intricately fitted together without the use of mortar. Nearly 4000 finely cut stone blocks make up the *prākāra*, among which almost 3000 blocks are carved.

The *prākāra* portrays the medieval Southern India, with most carvings found in the lower four rows (Fig. 4): an elephant frieze at the bottom; followed by horses and warriors; and above these are various forms of deities, purāṇic stories, local legends and scenes from contemporary social life such as hunting, processions, wrestling, etc. Further, the *prākāra* presents a diverse range of ascetic figures, including Siddhas, Nāthas, Vīraśaivas, Ṛṣis and other yogi figures. Some of the relief panels illustrate narrative scenes of legends surrounding Matsyendranātha, Gorakṣanātha and Caurāṅgīnātha. The upper rows of the *prākāra* feature an array of Siddha figures, depicted in practices such as *haṭha yoga* (*āsanas* and *mudrās*), meditation, deity worship, alchemy and demonstration of *siddhis* such as

Vajradeha. The following section describes select images of Siddha alchemy depicted on the *prākāra* wall of Mallikārjuna temple, Srisailam.

Depictions of Siddha Alchemy

Fig. 5, a sculpted panel on the third row of the western half of the north *prākāra* wall, portrays a Siddha alchemist seated in *padmāsana* atop a pedestal. He is shown preparing an alchemical formulation by operating a narrow-mouthed cauldron set on a stand with twisted legs. His hair is styled as a *jaṭāmaṇḍala*, with locks radiating outward like flames. Nearly nude, he wears only a *kaupīna* (loincloth) and is adorned with large round earrings (*kuṇḍalas*), necklaces (*hāras*), armlets (*bājubhuṣaṇa*) and bracelets (*kaṅkaṇa*). To the left of the panel, a standing figure is depicted pouring a solution into the cauldron. With a bun-like hairdo, he is clad in a *mekhala* (lower garment) and bears minimal ornamentation, wearing only earrings and armlets. The vivid contrast in their postures suggests that the seated figure is likely an alchemy Guru, while the standing figure appears to be a disciple or attendant, assisting in the alchemical ritual.

Fig. 6, located on the third row of the eastern half of the north *prākāra* wall, depicts an alchemist seated in *padmāsana*, pouring a solution into a cauldron resting on a flat base. Nearly nude, he is dressed in a *kaupīna* and adorned with *kuṇḍalas*, *hāra*, *keyūra* and *kaṅkaṇa*. At the centre of the panel, a woman is shown assisting him in the alchemical ritual, while another woman on the far left is engaged in work near a pile of pots. Both women have bun-like hairdos and are adorned with *kuṇḍalas*. Due to the surface deterioration of the stone panel, some details, such as their attire and ornaments, are unclear. The spatial setting of the scene, with the stack of pots in the background, points to an alchemical work site.

Fig. 7, located on the third row of the southern half of the east *prākāra* wall, depicts a Siddha alchemist seated in *padmāsana*, diligently pouring a solution into a cauldron. The ascetic, nearly nude, is dressed in a *kaupīna* and adorned with *kuṇḍalas*, *hāra* and *keyūra*. At the center of the panel, two women stand before him: one assisting him in the ritual, while the other stands with hands folded in *añjalī mudrā* gesture. On the far left of the panel, a woman is shown washing the feet of a nearly nude figure, likely a revered Siddha. This ascetic, also dressed in a *kaupīna*, is adorned with a long-matted hairdo, *kuṇḍalas*, *keyūra* and *kaṅkaṇa*.

Fig. 8 is located on the third row of the eastern half of the north *prākāra* wall. The relief depicts a Siddha alchemist seated in *padmāsana* before a dome-like legless cauldron. He is clad in a *kaupīna* and adorned with large round *kuṇḍalas*, *hāras*, *bājubhuṣaṇa* and *kaṅkaṇa*. To the right end of the panel, two women stand before him, assisting with the ritual: one is seen pouring the ingredients into the cauldron, while the other hands over the pots. The latter, draped in a sari, is flanked by a child standing in front of a pile of pots. On the left side of the panel, three nearly nude figures—likely a guru and his two disciples—are portrayed as seated in *padmāsana* and dressed in *kaupīna*. The disciple's hands are folded in *añjalī mudrā*, a gesture of reverence, as they receive teaching or blessing from the guru figure.

Fig. 9, located on the third row of the central segment of the east *prākāra* wall, depicts an ascetic in long, matted hair *jaṭā* seated in *padmāsana*. He appears to be either pouring a solution into a cauldron or performing a fire ritual. He is nearly nude, dressed in a *kaupīna* and adorned with *kuṇḍala*, *hāras*, *bājubhuṣaṇa* and *kaṅkaṇa*. A woman stands before him, holding a long staff/stick, while behind her, a child-like figure is depicted with hands folded in *añjalī mudrā* gesture. The stack of pots in the background points to an alchemical hermitage or work site.

Fig. 10, located on the third row of the southern half of the east *prākāra* wall, likely depicts a symbolic initiation scene of Siddha alchemists. On the far left of the panel, a guru figure is portrayed

performing a mystical act of levitating various objects-coat, cauldron and *yogadaṇḍa*-into the air. He is dressed in a *mekhala*, with long, knotted hair (*jaṭābandha*) and adorned with *kuṇḍalas* and *bājubhuṣaṇa*. On the far right of the panel, three nearly nude standing figures-likely to be disciples-are shown witnessing the act and plausibly getting initiated into alchemical tantra. Notably, the coat in levitation, identified as *kantha* or *gudarī*, is traditionally associated with Nātha yogis, as evidenced in the Nātha depictions of Mughal-era paintings (Powell 2018: 86). Such a distinctive coat is also worn by a Siddha figure in fig. 11.

Analysis and Discussion

The 15th and early 16th centuries CE witnessed a profusion of ascetic imagery, particularly in the Vijayanagara temple constructions. The most impressive record among them is exhibited at the Mallikārjuna Temple of Srisailam, which holds the richest assemblage of ascetic images in Southern India. A comparative study of ascetic iconography at various Vijayanagara temples reveals a dominance of Śaivite ascetic imagery, even in Vaiṣṇava temples, with the Siddha tradition being particularly prominent (Shaw 2011: 237). The widespread presence of Nātha Siddha imagery in the Vijayanagara temples points to the strong presence of the sect in Southern India. This is a complex and enigmatic subject about which little is known and understood.

The Siddha imagery at Srisailam remains largely unexplored and presents interpretative challenges. Notably, there is no standard scheme for Siddha iconography, although certain elements in their attire and ornamentation along with attributes such as *yogadaṇḍa* and *yogapaṭṭa* frequently recur. Most of the Siddha alchemist figures in the panels are depicted nearly nude and adorned with limited ornamentation. Some Siddha figures are presented with *jaṭāmaṇḍala* hairstyle, resembling Śiva's characteristic hairdo. While the Vijayanagara sculptors conventionally followed prescriptive texts such as *śilpaśāstras* for carving deities, they relied more on observation for carving human figures and secular themes (Dallapiccola and Verghese 1998: 10). The depiction of attire and ornamentation along with the postures of the sculpted yogis indicates that the sculptors were acquainted with various of Siddhas, who likely appeared in the public spaces of Vijayanagara empire.

In the Siddha alchemy panels, the guru figure can be distinguished clearly due to the nude-like ascetic appearance, vivid seated posture and dominant projection of leading the alchemical ritual, while the disciples are shown to stand, assisting in the ritual. A common theme in the panels is the reverence of disciples towards the guru, expressed through acts such as standing before him or with *añjalī mudrā* gesture. The recurring feature of disciples assisting the central guru figure in the alchemical rituals reflects a prevalent *guru-śiṣya* tradition through which the esoteric knowledge of *rasāyana* tantra was transmitted, alongside the proliferation of Siddha monastic lineages during this period. While Fig. 7 shows a woman washing a Siddha's feet, numerous other panels on the *prākāra* depict similar scenes of commoner's reverence towards Siddhas, indicating the high social regard Nāthas Siddhas enjoyed in medieval Andhra.

Fig. 11 depicts a Siddha seated on a row of pointed swords, symbolizing his attained state of an indestructible diamond-like body (*vajradeha siddhi*) while disciples stand before him in reverence. Such visual imagery represent the mystical feats Siddhas were widely known for. The folklore and regional literature surrounding the Nāthas Siddhas often highlight their miraculous abilities or life-saving deeds. Central to the Nātha belief is the notion that the body, when fortified through yogic and alchemical practice (*siddhakāya*), becomes a vehicle for liberation in this life itself (*jīvanmukti*).

An interesting panel (Fig. 12), located on the fourth row of the central portion of the north *prākāra* wall, depicts two Siddhas seated in *padmāsana*, alongside Nandi and Bhriṅgī standing in veneration

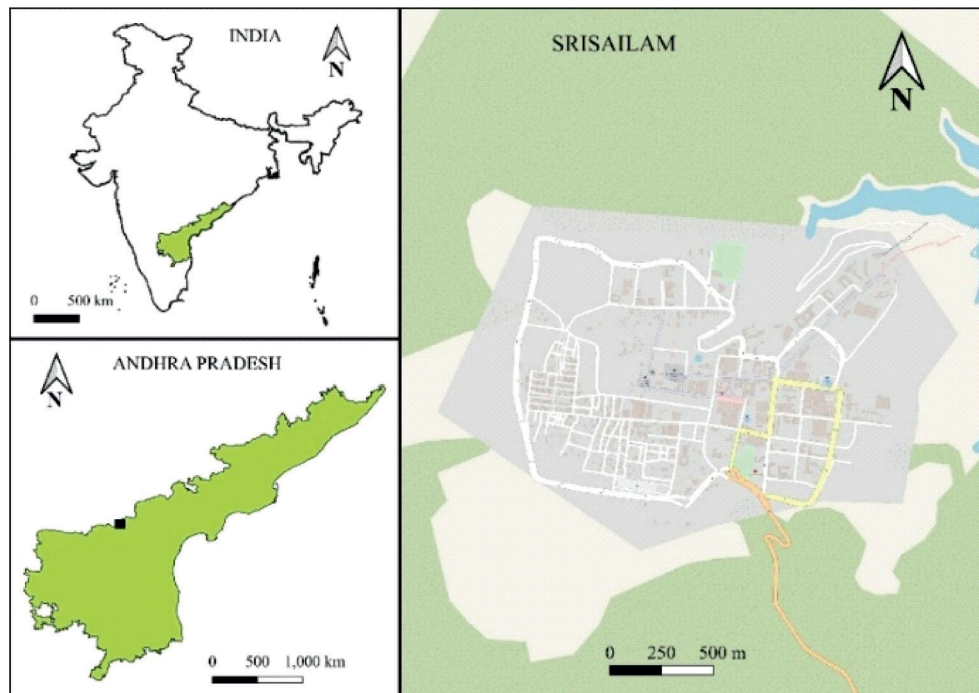


Fig. 1: Srisailam town



Fig. 2: Mallikārjuna temple complex, Srisailam

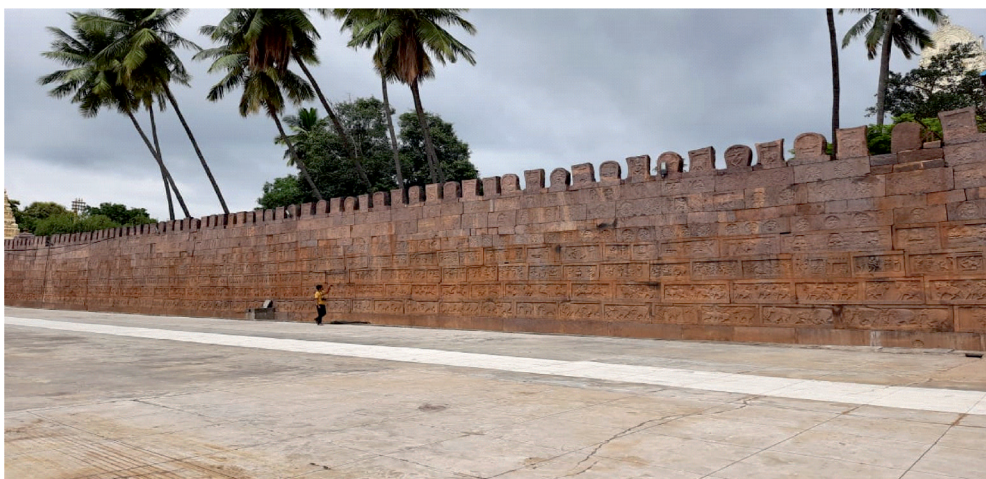


Fig 3: The *prākāra* wall (East) of Mallikārjuna temple, Srisailam



Fig 4: The *prākāra* wall (South) of Mallikārjuna temple, Srisailam



Fig. 5: *Siddha alchemy* panel, third row, west half of north *prākāra* wall, Mallikārjuna temple, Srisailam



Fig. 6: *Siddha alchemy* panel, third row, east half of north *prākāra* wall, Mallikārjuna temple, Srisailam



Fig. 7: *Siddha alchemy panel*, third row, south half of east *prākāra* wall, Mallikārjuna temple, Srisailam



Fig. 8: *Siddha alchemy panel*, third row, east half of north *prākāra* wall, Mallikārjuna temple, Srisailam



Fig. 9: *Siddha alchemy panel*, third row, central portion of east *prākāra* wall, Mallikārjuna temple, Srisailam



Fig. 10: *Siddha initiation scene*, third row, south half of east *prākāra* wall, Mallikārjuna temple, Srisailam



Fig. 11: *Siddha seated on row of pointed swords*, third row, north half of east *prākāra* wall, Mallikārjuna temple, Srisailam



Fig. 12: *Siddhas venerated by Nandi and Bhṛīṅgī*, fourth row, central portion of north *prākāra* wall, Mallikārjuna temple, Srisailam

towards them. The distinctive portrayal of Nandi in *añjalī mudrā* and dancing Bhṛīṅgī is otherwise seen alongside Śiva and Pārvatī in the panels of the temple *prākāra*. Such an artistic representation is significant as it symbolically presents the Siddhas as divine beings, equating them with Śiva himself. As noted earlier, the Siddha alchemist aspires to become a perfected immortal or a ‘Second Śiva.’ A Siddha is a yogi who has attained various supernatural powers, one who has realized Śiva in himself and one who has transformed himself into Śiva (Ganapathy 1993: 9).

The iconographic analysis of the sculptural panels suggests that Siddha alchemy played a crucial role in shaping the regional character of the Nātha Siddha tradition in Āndhradeśa. In addition to their yogic and tantric pursuits, Siddhas likely offered medicinal remedies, helping the public at large by curing ailments (*doṣas* or *rogas*). Despite their nonconformist practices, the Siddhas were socially valued, for working towards human upliftment.

Conclusion

Between the 10th to 12th centuries CE, a momentous ascetic movement arose with the integration of diverse religious, mystical and alchemical traditions. It was initiated by the great Siddhas, later divinified and idolized under names such as Gorakṣanātha and Matsyendranātha, representing a fertile ground conducive for the percolation of deep spirituality towards the marginal strata of India. The folk legends and local literature surrounding the Nāthas and Siddhas capture the spiritual yearnings of peripheral masses.

The sheer number of Siddha carvings on the *prakāra* wall of Mallikārjuna temple should be seen in light of the popularity of the Nātha Siddha movement during the Vijayanagara period. The Vijayanagara Artisans could create generic and non-individual visual portrayals of Siddhas due to their familiarity with wandering Siddha ascetics in the towns of the Vijayanagara empire. The iconographic analysis of these sculptural panels suggests that tantric alchemical practices were instrumental in shaping the distinctive regional character and historical prominence of the Nātha Siddha sect in medieval Āndhradeśa. Fig. 12 further portrays Siddhas as semi-divine beings, reflecting the divinified status held by Nātha Siddhas in popular belief. The temple sculptures from the Vijayanagara era, when analysed alongside textual sources, offer deep insights into tantric traditions of medieval Southern India. These sculptures, therefore, serve as mediums of embedded history. Further investigation into the ascetic imagery at other Vijayanagara sites would enhance our understanding of the Siddha iconographic scheme and its links with the regional Nātha Siddha order.

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Competing interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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