



“Malabar Hill is not a new name. What is now Kambala Hill, in the last century was included in the name, and is merely an upheaval of the same chain. It early attracted the attention of geographers and in a map representing the knowledge of these coasts in 1583, we find it named Cape Bombaim. Its oldest name, however, is Walukeshwar, which means Lord of Sand” (Douglas 1893, 231).

The Walkeshwar temple situated at the tip of the present-day Malabar Hill, holds a fascinating legend dating back to the times of the epic Ramayana written by Valmiki. In the epic, the demon Ravana, lured by Sita’s beauty, abducts her from the forest where she resides with her husband, Lord Rama, and his loyal brother Lakshmana. When Rama and Lakshmana return to find an empty hermitage, they begin an arduous journey to Lanka to search for Sita. Their journey takes them through dense forests and treacherous terrains, and according to a local legend, they arrive at the sacred shores of Bombay.





A group of Brahmins engaged in deep tapascharya on the seashore, learned of Rama's presence and sought his darshan. Upon witnessing Rama's distress over the abduction of his wife Sita, a wise sage named Gautam advised him to set up a Shivalingam to succeed in his mission. There are two classes of Shiv temple, Stapith and Swayambhoo. A Stapith Shivlingam is supposed to essentially be a boulder from the river Ganga in the north (Gilder 1855, 16). Gautam Rishi instructed him to procure the finest Shiva Lingam from Benares to perform its panchamrit pooja. Acting upon his counsel, Rama entrusted his devoted brother Lakshmana with the task of acquiring a Shiva lingam from the sacred city of Benaras, where the River Ganga flows.



However, Lakshmana's journey took longer than anticipated. Faced with the urgency of the situation and the impending battle with Ravana, Rama takes the matter into his own hands. Displaying his profound connection with the elements, Rama fashioned a Shivalingam from the sand that lined the shores of Walkeshwar. Rama decided to make a Shivalingam using the sand from the nearby shore. He performed the pranpratista, the life-creating ceremony, over the sand-made Lingam. Miraculously, Lord Shiva appeared before Rama, imparting his divine blessings and assuring Rama of the success of his quest. Even though it was not the original plan, this impromptu creation got Walkeshwar its name. 'Valuka' means sand and 'Ishwar' refers to God. The sand-made lingam came to be known as 'ValukeIshwar', meaning 'Lord made of sand' (Vijaylakshmi 2023). This name evolved into its present version, Walkeshwar.

When Lakshmana arrived with the Shiva lingam from Benares, the sacred lingam was placed ceremoniously beside the sand-made lingam. The lingam brought by Lakshmana is the one venerated within the temple premises today. Walkeshwar is also known as 'Lakshmaneshwar'. The sand-made Lingam, however, showcased its mystical character by submerging into the sea upon the arrival of the Portuguese in Bombay, a gesture believed to safeguard its sanctity from potential pollution. The exact location of its departure, near the Government House at Malabar Point, is known to some fishermen. They uphold the tradition of annually performing worship on Mahashivaratri, paying homage to the location of departure (Raghunathji 1895, 3-4).

In the tenth century A.D., the temple was erected by the Shilahara kings. In 1127 AD, Lakshman Prabhu, a Gowd Saraswat Brahman who worked within the court of the Shilahara Kings in Thane, undertook the construction of the first Walkeshwar Temple (Gowd Saraswat Brahmins Konkani). Unfortunately, the passage of time brought about its destruction, attributed to either Muslim or Portuguese invasions. The Walkeshwar Temple is considered one of the oldest on the island. A Sanskrit legend called 'Walkeshwar Mahatmya' in Mr B. X. Murphy's possession talks about the temples on Malabar Point and the old Mumbadevi temple. It describes how Hindu residents of Bombay faced challenges in practising their religion during the rule of Emperor Mombarik I during the Delhi Sultanate era. This legend hints at the existence of a higher class of Hindu society on the island before the construction of the temple around the 14th century (Maclean 1889, 302).

In 1715, the temple experienced a renaissance under a respected leader within the Shenvi community, Rama Kamath. The Shenvis claim the entirety of the Walkeshwar village as their property (David 1995, 176). Rama Kamath is said to be the only Indian present while laying the cornerstone of St. Thomas's Cathedral (Douglas 1893, 240). In 1728, Rama Kamath passed away. The Shenvis were among the earliest migrants from Goa who travelled to Bombay, Bassein, and Salsette. They were recognised as merchants and an influential community engaged in government service. The Shenvis constructed the temples, including those at Walkeshwar, Bhuleshwar, Thakurdwar in Mahim, and the temple of Shri Vyankatesh in the Fort (Maclean 1889, 802).

The temple architecture is relatively modest and constructed using cut stone masonry. It features a tall dome with a flag at the top. It is divided into a sanctuary and a Sabhamandap. The sanctuary is square-shaped with a marble slab-paved floor. The Sabhamandap is adorned with silver plates on the entrance door, a gift from VasANJI Devji Bhatya. The surrounding walking space has a circumference of about seventy-five feet. A stone Nandi in the sabhamandap faces the sanctuary door, and around twenty-seven bells hang in the temple (Raghunathji 1895, 3).

The Pindi, the symbol of Mahadev, is said to have been brought by Lakshman from Banaras. The Pindi's height is approximately three-fourths of a foot. It is adorned with a brass kavach and placed on the coiling of a stone serpent, surrounded by a brass serpent. The deity is placed on a silver mandap or pavilion. The devotees worship the lingam as well as the serpent. A constantly burning nandadip or lamp is kept near the Pindi. Suspended over the Pindi is a brass Abhishekpatri, found in every Shiva temple. Abhishek refers to pouring liquids, such as water, milk, ghee, honey, or other sacred fluids, over the deity or holy object. The Abhishekpatri is the vessel or container used to perform this pouring ceremony. This ritual not only symbolises a gesture of devotion but also appeases the powerful energy within the Shivlingam, creating an intense warmth. Even with constant Abhishek, unlike other Shivlingam, the one at Walkeshwar remains as it is. A side of the Shivlingam is blocked, as one does not offer Shiva a full Pradakshina or



circle. The devotees believe that none should cross the tapering side of the Shivlingam, which stems from the belief that this particular side channels the divine energy inherent in the lingam. It is considered an attempt to surpass the spiritual journey or bypass the sacred energy presented by the Shivlingam. According to this understanding, crossing this area might inadvertently absorb and disturb the sacred energy, potentially affecting the well-being of the lower part of the body of the person who crossed it.

Adjacent to the Pindi is a marble image of the Lord Ganesha, and before it, a square-shaped marble makhar houses an image of Parvati. Lord Ganesha holds a battle-axe, trident, rosary mala, and a cup containing modaks. Behind the Shivlingam, there is an idol of Maa Adishakti. Maa Adishakti is the force from which the Trimurtis (Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva) derive their power. During the genesis of the world, when Brahma Dev required the energy to form the universe, Shiva separated Devi Shakti from himself to aid Brahma in accomplishing the act of creation (Maitri 2022). The temple also houses the deities of Vishnu and Lakshmi. Worship is conducted thrice a day by a Gujarati Brahman and a Shenvi Brahman. The temple also employs a Gurav or Bhopi responsible for overseeing the Pindi, maintaining temple cleanliness, managing furniture, and lighting lamps when needed.

The entire month of Shraavan is celebrated as an utsav or festive month in the temple when the Laghu Rudra Abhishek is performed daily on the Pindi. A jatra or a fair occurs at Walkeshwar on the full moon of Kartik (October-November) and Mahashivratri day. The Palkhi procession, accompanied by native music, takes place with the Pindi adorned in ornaments. The origin of these fairs is unknown, with a longstanding tradition that predates memory. On regular weekdays, the number of visitors is relatively modest. There is a noticeable increase on Mondays or Somvaar, the day of the moon. A crescent moon adorns Shiva's head. The alignment of this celestial symbol is linked with the day dedicated to the worship of the divine deity. For similar reasons, Shiva is also known as 'Somnath' i.e. 'Lord of the Moon'. During significant occasions like Shivratri, Vaikunth Chaturdashi, and Kartiki Purnima, the temple observes a substantial surge of visitors (Raghunathji 1895, 3-4). A timeless source of spirituality that transcends generations, the temple of Walkeshwar reminds us of the sanctity and significance of the shores of Mumbai.

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