

JAIN SCULPTURE OF MAHABALIPURAM

This paper is intended to recapitulate the findings of the research scholar Late Mylai Seeni. Venkatasamy in his paper in Tamil, presented in the conference conducted on the 21st January 1949, by the South Indian Archaeological Society presided by the renowned scholar Late. Prof. A. Chakravarti Nainar.

A brief introduction about the scholar:

Mylai Seeni. Venkatasamy was born in 1900 at Mylapore in Chennai. He was a Tamil scholar, who was initially employed in the editorial board of ‘திராவிடம்’ (Dravidam), a magazine of the Justice party. He studied fine arts for some time in the College of Fine Arts, Egmore, Chennai. Later he got trained as a teacher and was working in the corporation school at Santhome. He spent his vacations in researches about various historical and religious centres. He took up field works in the areas of archaeology, epigraphy and numismatics. He was adept in deciphering the inscriptions in Brahmi, Grantham and Tamil. He focused his researches more on the Jain and Buddhist sites and temples. He was elected twice (1963-64), as the President of Chennai Tamil Writers’ Forum.

The great Tamil poet Bhārathidasan adored his service to the Tamil language and composed a poem in praise of his scholarship as under,

“தமிழையே வணிகமாக்கித் தன்வீடும் மக்கள் சுற்றம்
தமிழிலே பிழைப்பதற்கும் தலைமுறை தலைமுறைக்குத்
தமிழ் முதலாக்கிக் கொண்ட பல்கலைத் தலைவன் எல்லாம்
தமிழ்ச் சீனி வேங்கடத்தின் கால்தாசும் பெறாதார் என்பேன்”

meaning that those Tamil scholars who commercialised and capitalised their scholarship in Tamil language were no comparison to Mylai Seeni. Venkatasamy. The Tamilnadu government has nationalised all his books in the year 2000.

History of the sculptural site:

Mahābalipuram is a coastal village situated about 60kms to the south of Chennai city. This name is the colloquial version of ‘Māmallapuram’ named after the title ‘Māmallan’ conferred on the Pallava king Narasimha Varman, son of the Pallava Emperor Mahendra Varman and is no way connected with ‘Mahābali’ referred in Vaishnavaitic context.

It is not surprising to note that this panel was sculpted during the period of Mahendra Varman in which Jainism was in its peak. This is about 96 feet long and 43 feet high. It belongs to 7th century C.E. It is commonly referred to as ‘Arjunan’s Tapas’ meaning ‘Arjunan’s penance’.

Literary reference:

This paper is designed to bring out the forgotten features of the bas relief sculptural panel on a megalithic rock boulder, the sculpting of which was started during the period of Mahendra Varman (580 AD – 630 AD) and was completed during the period of Narasimha Varman (630 AD – 668 AD). Mahendra Varman was following Jainism and later got converted to Saivism, under the influence of ‘Appar’ (Tirunāvukkarasar), one of the Saiva Quartet, who was a Jain monk, by name “Dharma Senar” in the early part of his life. In one of his hymns in praise of Lord Shivan, Appar refers to the story of Sāgara Kumārars, later explained in this paper.

Meaning:

Lord Shivan blessed the Sāgara Kumārars by relieving them off the curse.

-10, Thiruvārūr Thiruthāndakam

Common notions about the sculpture:

A few consider that the sculpture referred to the episode of Arjunan being granted by Shivan with ‘Pāsupathāstram’ as a reward for his penance as per the ‘Vana Parvam’ of Mahābhāratham. It is also to be noted that on seeing this sculpture, French scholar M. Victor Goloubeaw opined that it depicted the penance of Bhageerathan as referred to in the Bāla Kādam of Rāmāyanam and not ‘Arjunan’s penance’. It was felt that his opinion was correct. On further scrutinising, it is clearly evident that it depicted the penance of neither Arjunan nor Bhageerathan.

On observing the sculpture keenly, it is evident that it depicted neither the episode of Arjunan receiving ‘Pāsupathāstram’ nor the episode of Bhageerathan’s penance for the descent of Gangā as there is no connectivity between those episodes and the other figures in the sculpture. Some say that the figure engrossed in penance, standing on his single foot with both his arms raised is Arjunan and the figure with four hands before him is Lord Shivan. If it were to be construed as depicting Arjunan’s penance, there are several questions arising regarding the various figures present in the panel, such as Nāga Kumārars, Deva Ganas, elephants, river Gangā, a temple, 3 headless figures and other human figures. Moreover, according to Hindu Purānams, it is said that Lord Shivan along with Parvati appeared before Arjunan in penance in the disguise of a hunter couple. Since such figures are missing and the other figures not related to

this story are present, it is to be considered that the sculpture did not depict Arjunan's penance, for the grant of 'Pāsupathāstram' but indicated some other different story other than that.

On the other hand, if it had to depict the penance of Bhageerathan, then the role of the other figures poses a doubt. The flow of Gangā is depicted but with the figures of Nagarajan and his wife. If the figure in penance is to be understood as Bhageerathan, then the figure before him with four hands cannot be taken as Lord Shivan, as the figure is seen with a crown, and a mace like weapon but without 'Jatā makutam', Shūlam and 'Mazhu'. Therefore the figure does not indicate Lord Shivan. It is to be noted that in the episode of 'Bhageerathan's Tapas', it is observed that Lord Shivan holds the speedy Gangā in his 'Jatā'. The absence of 'Gangādharamurthy' depicting Lord Shivan holding river Gangā on his head, adds to this doubt. There are many sculptures of 'Gangādharamurthy' of the Pallava period are still available at various places. There is a figure of 'Gangādharamurthy' sculpted on one of the walls of the 'Dharmaraja Ratham' at Mahabalipuram itself. Further the figure bears a crown and has a mace like weapon. Thus it is to be concluded that it implied a story other than the above said.

On reading the Jain texts, it struck to the scholar, that it had depicted actually the story of Sagara Chakravarti as narrated in Ajita Nātha Tirthankara Purānam. This is also referred to in 'Sripurānam' and 'Jeeva Sambōdhanai' in Tamil Jain texts.

Story of Sagara Chakravarti and Saagara kumaras:

Jitachatru was the king who ruled over the Bharatha Kandam. He had two sons namely, 'Ajitan' and 'Sagaran'. The first son later became the second Tirthankara Ajita Nāthar. The second son took up the throne after his father. On his penance, he was granted a boon by the

demi god 'Nāṭyamālakan' also known as 'Sowdharmendran'. On further penance, he was bestowed upon with 'Nava Nidhi'.

Navanidhi:

1. Naisarppam - Villages and cities with houses, palaces and barracks
2. Pāndukam - Food grains, cereals and pulses
3. Pingalam - Ornaments and jewellery
4. Mahā Padmam - Silk and cotton clothing
5. Kālam - Tools and instruments for six professions
6. Maha Kālam - Gems and metals
7. Mānavam - Army and weapons
8. Sangam - Music instruments and fine arts
9. Sarva Ratnam - 7 'Jeeva Ratnams' and 7 'Ajeeva Ratnams'

7 Jeevaratnams:

1. Women
2. Purohit
3. Senapati
4. Grihapati
5. Sthapati
6. Elephant
7. Horse

7 Ajeevaratnams:

1. Chakram
2. Dhandam
3. Chatram
4. Choodāmani
5. Kākini
6. Khadgam
7. Carmam

Thus Sagarar was enjoying the 'Nava Nidhi'. He had 60000 sons. They were referred to as 'Sāgarars' meaning sons of Sagarar. Jānu was the eldest among them.

All of them wanted to go on a tour around the entire empire. Sagara Chakravarti gave them all the Jeeva Ratnams and Ajeeva Ratnams except women. They finally reached Kailāsh. They paid their obeisance to Rishabha Tirthankarar image in the temple built by his son Bharatha Chakravarti. They also wanted to safeguard the temple against burglary. Using the Dhanda Ratnam, they started digging a moat around the temple which ran deep by 1000 yochanas. It had almost reached the Nāgalokam. On this the Nāgars became fearful and Jwalana Prabhan, the Nāgarājan was furious, but was calmed down by Jānu's comforting words explaining him about their intention.

Then Sāgara Kumarars, with the help of Dhanda Ratnam, diverted the waters of the river Gangā to fill the moat. On this, the Nāgalōkam was flooded. Jwalana Prabhan, the Nāgarājan was so outraged that all the Sāgara Kumārars were burnt to ashes by his poisonous sight.

On knowing this, Sagara Chakravarti, though sad, ordered his grandson Bhageerathan to drain all the waters of the river Gangā into the sea with the help of Dhanda Ratnam. Bhageerathan duly accomplished the task and brought control over the situation.

Explanatory notes to the sculptural panel:

The part on the upper half of the panel on the left side of the onlooker is explained as follows. On its right side, there is a human figure with a long beard and an indrawn belly, holding his both hands up above his head, engrossed in penance by standing on a single foot with the other leg bent towards his knee. He is Sagara Chakravarti doing penance in Kanda Prabhātha Mountain.

There is a figure of a god just opposite to him. He is 'Nātyamālakan' or the 'Sowdharmendran' with four hands. In Saivaite and Vaishnavaite traditions, Indra is portrayed

to have been with only two hands, but as per Jaina shilpa shāstram, in many Jain temple sculptures, Sowdharmendran is portrayed to have been with four hands* or even more*. So there is no doubt about the identity of the figure as ‘Indra’.

(*Essay on Saiva Vainava Bouddha Jaina Sirppakkalai, page 101 – 105. Saiva Siddhanta Noorpathippuk Kazhagam, 1008th publication of journal 1961 & *Paintings in Thiruparutthikkundram temple at Kanchipuram)

Next to these figures, 6 dwarf figures are seen. Two more of such dwarfs are seen in the left corner also. So there are 8 such dwarf figures which are the ‘Bhoothams’, along with 8 pairs of male and female celestial gods and goddesses, (deva-devi), adorned with crown, in flying mode are also seen.

Each of the 8 Nidhi out of the Nava Nidhi is headed by a pair of the above mentioned celestial couples who are served by a host of 1000 ‘Bhoothams’ for security. The celestials are named after their respective Nidhi.

8 of the Navanidhi: Deity in charge:

- | | |
|----------------|---------------|
| 1. Naisarppam | - Naisarppan |
| 2. Pāndukam | - Pāndukan |
| 3. Pingalam | - Pingalan |
| 4. Mahā Padmam | - Mahā Padman |
| 5. Kālam | - Kālan |
| 6. Mahā Kālam | - Mahā Kālan |
| 7. Mānavam | - Mānavan |
| 8. Sangam | - Sangan |

Thus the sculptors have depicted 8 pairs of celestial couples with 8 ‘Bhoothams’ in place of 8000 ‘Bhoothams’ in order to symbolically represent the 8 Nidhi of the ‘Nava Nidhi’ as it is not possible to depict 8000 ‘Bhoothams’ in the panel. Such representation would not have been possible otherwise. The heads of the ‘Nava Nidhi’ are depicted to be flying in order to imply that they are divine, super human beings.

There are four other figures, some seen to be standing on the ground and some seen with weapons. They denote the ministers who accompanied Sagara Chakravarti to Kanda Prabhātha Mountain for penance. Animals like lion, tiger and deer seen here remind us of the forests on that mountain.

This part is on the upper half of the panel on the right side of the onlooker. This denotes the 9th Nidhi of the ‘Nava Nidhi’ i.e., ‘Sarva Ratnam’. This contains 7 ‘Jeeva Ratnams’ and 7 ‘Ajeeva Ratnams’ amounting to 14 in total. This part explains all the 14 Ratnams in different figures. Music is represented by the figures of ‘Kinnarars’, having the upper portion of their bodies as those of celestials and the lower portion of their bodies as those of birds.

There are sculptures depicting a temple and to its front, an ascetic in a leaned position lending his ears to someone. This refers to the temple of Rishabha Nathār at Kailāsh and the ascetic actually refers to none other than his son Bharata Chakravarti, listening to his sermons. The emperors and kings of the early ages used to grow beards and moustaches. There are evidences to this in Jain and Buddhist sculptures and texts.

Adjacent to this temple, a river is seen with the figures of ‘Nāgars’ often misunderstood to be river Gangā. Actually it refers to the moat around the temple. The ‘Nāgars’ seen in this moat

are Jwalana Prabhan, the Nāgarājan and his wife. This depicts their furious warning to Sagara Chakravarti with regard to the depth of the moat jetting into their land.

Next to the temple, there are headless human figures and to their opposite side elephants are seen. The headless figures denote the 60000 ‘Sāgara Kumārars’. The sculptors made them headless to imply that they are dead. Moreover, there should have been a reason for their numbers too. In Sanskrit grammar, numbers are represented in three different ways as against the usual two ways i.e., singular and plural in all other languages.

Singular – Eka Vacanam

Dual – Dwi Vacanam

Plural – Bahu Vacanam

Following this grammar rule, 3 figures, the least of the number representing the ‘Bahu Vacanam’, were supposed to have been sculpted to denote 60000 ‘Sāgara Kumārars’.

The elephants in this panel denote Jwalana Prabhan and his family. The biggest of the elephants is seen with a furious look. There may be a doubt as to why Nāgarājan Jwalana Prabhan was not shown as a snake but as an elephant. The author of the kāvīyam compared him with an elephant hurt by a goad. The sculptors tried to bring out the same comparison in their sculpture too. Moreover the word ‘Nāgam’* in Sanskrit, means both snake and elephant. The sculptors thoughtfully made use of this pun and the simile.

Some human figures are also seen. One of them is seen with a pot over his left shoulder and his right hand throwing something in to the water. Most of the people opined that water for ‘abhishekam’ is carried in the pot. Actually, it indicates the custom of carrying the bones of the

dead in a pot and throwing them in to the river. The custom of throwing the bones of the dead into the river was depicted here. In Ajita Nātha Purānam, it is said that when Bhageerathan diverted the river Gangā to the sea, the bones of the dead Sāgara Kumārars were drawn into the flood and that from that time onwards the custom of throwing the bones of the dead into a river came into practice.

Next to this figure, a person is seen to be carrying something heavy with both his hands. Some have opined that this was the ‘Cornucopia’ a symbol of excessive yield of food grains as depicted by the sculptors and artists in Greek and Roman empires. This is symbolised by a horn filled with fruits and flowers in Greek and Roman mythology, but is not the case in this panel. It is the ‘Dhanda Ratnam’ with which the Sāgara Kumārars were able to dig the moat.

Finally, the temple refers to that of Rishabha Nāthar in Kailāsh. The figure in the temple should have been Rishabha Nāthar, but instead, Lord Vishnu was depicted in this. This is because Rishabha Tirthankarar is considered to be one of the ‘avatārams’ of Lord Vishnu according to Bhāgavatha Purānam.

Apart from these, there are minor figures seen in this panel. A cat is seen engaged in penance with rats playing around it. Monkeys and tigers are also seen. These are meant to beautify the panel.

Thus there are a lot of evidences to prove the connectivity between the story depicted in this panel and story of Sagara Chakravarti as per Ajita Nātha Purānam. This story should have been very much prevalent in Tamilnadu around the 7th century C.E., the period during which Jainism was at its peak.

There is a moral behind narrating this story. However great (like the emperor Sagara Chakravarti) a person is, whatever wealth (like 'Nava Nidhi') he could accumulate, one can be never be an exception to the order of Karma.

Though having been born as sons of the great emperor Sagara Chakravarti, all the 60000 Sāgara Kumārars could not enjoy the pleasures of wealth and power nor could they live through the full span of their lives.

The purpose of this sculpture panel should have been to instill in the minds of the people, the hard reality of Karma in every one's life. This panel is no doubt a visual treat to the connoisseurs of fine arts, but it is a pity that the original story background of the sculpture has been totally forgotten with the passing of time.

Conclusion:

Author S. Swaminathan in his book 'Māmallapuram' mentioned the varying opinions of the researchers about the theme of the sculpture. He expressed his confusion by saying that the ascetic figure and the three headless figures near the temple in the panel posed a puzzle. He considered those headless figures to have been broken. From his account, it is clear that he could not decipher the scene portrayed in the sculpture clearly, as he simply listed the characters like the celestials, Naga couple, the elephant clan and the other animals he had observed in it without actually narrating their possible roles of play in the sketch of the theme in discussion as against that given by Mylai Seeni. Venkatasamy.

The figure of the deity before the figure in penance cannot be construed to be Lord Shivan, as reasoned out by the Mylai scholar and the sculptures of Gangādharamurthy, and the paintings of Natyamalakan are quoted to support his views. Finally the theme of the sculpture goes well

with the scene depicted in Ajita Nātha purānam. Hence it is felt that the findings of Mylai Seeni. Venkatasamy had a scheme of logical flow of events in complete agreement with that story narrated in the said purānam, without any religious bias whatsoever, also without meaning any offence to the other researchers. Mylai Seeni. Venkatasamy was a non – Jain. His research books were held in high esteem as he was found upright and impartial in delivering his conclusions.

Notes:

*The word ‘Nagam’ is used to connote a snake, a mountain, and also an elephant in the following verses of Tamil Jain texts, Seevaka Chinthaamani and Meru Mandara puranam.

நாகாந்தத் தென்னைக் காணா
மதத்தி னாலந்த நாகம்
வேகாந்தத் தாலென் மேலே
வெகுளியா லோடி வந்தது
ஆகாசத் தியானெ முந்தேன்
அங்குவந் தென்னைக் காணா
ஏகாந்த நெறிபுக் கின்மை
கண்டவ னொருவ னொத்தே

-465, மேரு மந்தர புராணம்

நாகத்தைப் போலும் நாகம்
நாகத்தால் நாக மெய்த
நாகத்தை நாகந் துய்த்து
நாகந்தான் நாக மெய்த
மேகத்தி னொடும் திங்கள்
வீழ்ந்துடன் கிடந்த தென்னை
நாகத்தின் கொம்பும் முத்தும்
நரியெனும் குறவன் கொண்டான்

-523, மேரு மந்தர புராணம்

சாகரம் சலசரங்கட்கு ஆகாரங்கள் அல்லவாம்
நாகமாதி பாதகால் போக பூமி தீவெலாம்

-1251, மேரு மந்தர புராணம்

நாகம் நெற்றி நல் மணி சிந்தும் அருவி போல்
நாகம் நெற்றி நல் மணி ஓடை நற விம்மும்
நாகம் நெற்றி நல் மலர் சிந்தி நளிர் செம்பொன்
நாகம் நெற்றி மங்கையர் ஒத்தார் மடநல்லார்

-2330, பூமகள் இலம்பகம், சீவகசிந்தாமணி

நாகம் மருப்பின் இயன்ற தோடும்
நலங்கொள் கறவுக்குழையும்
போக நீக்கிப் பொருவில் திருவில்
உமிழ்ந்து மின்னுப் பொழியும்
ஏகமாகி எரியும் மணியின்
இயன்ற கடிப்பு வாங்கி
மெகா விசும்பில் தேவர் விழைய
விளங்கச் சேர்த்தினாளே

- 2440, இலக்கணையார் இலம்பகம், சீவக சிந்தாமணி

பகர்தற்கரி தானசெந்தமி ழிசையிற்சில பாடலன்பொரு
பயிலப்பல காவியங்களை யுணராதே
பவளத்தினை வீழியின்கனி யதனைப்பொரு வாய்மடந்தையர்
பசலைத்தன மேபெறும்படி விரகாலே
சுகரக்கடல் சூழமம்புவி மிசையிப்படி யேதிரிந்துழல்
சருகொத்துள மேயயர்ந்துடல் மெலியாமுன்
தகதித்திமி தாகிணங்கின எனவுற்றெழுந்தோகையம்பரி
தனிலற்புத மாகவந்தருள் புரிவாயே
நுகர்வித்த கமாகுமென்றுமை மொழியிற்பொழி பாலையுண்டிடு
நுவல் மெய்ப்புள பாலனென்றிடு மிளையோனே
நுதிவைத்தக ராமலைந்திடு களிறுக்கரு ளேபுரிந்திட
நொடியிற்பரி வாகவந்தவன் மருகோனே
அகரப் பொரு ளாதியொன்றிடு முதலக்கர மானதின் பொருள்
அரனுக்கினி தாமொழிந்திடு குருநாதா
அமராக்கிறை யேவணங்கிய பழறித்திரு வாவினன்குடி
அதனிற்குடி யாயிருந்தருள் பெருமாளே

-11, திருப்புகழ், (பழநி - திருவாவினன்குடி)

“சுகரர்களை மறித்திட்டு ஆட்கொண்ட நாளோ”
ஈசனாய், உலகு ஏழும் மலையும் ஆகி,
இராவணனை ஈடு அழித்திட்டு, இருந்த நாளோ?
வாசமலர் மகிழ் தென்றல் ஆன நாளோ?
மதயானை உரி போர்த்து மகிழ்ந்த நாளோ?
தாது மலர் சண்டிக்குக் கொடுத்த நாளோ?
சுகரர்களை மறித்திட்டு ஆட்கொண்ட நாளோ?
தேசம் உமை அறிவதற்கு முன்னோ? பின்னோ?
திரு ஆரூர் கோயிலாக் கொண்ட நாளே

-10, திருவாரூர் திருத்தாண்டகம், 349, தேவாரம் (அப்பர்)

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