

Narrative theme of Sarabeshwaramurthi in Hoysala Art—A Canonical Study

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Abstract

Shiva the god of destruction is one among the Hindu trinity and more widely worshipped in India. Siva is represented in sculpture either as a terrific destructive deity or as a pacific boon conferrer and is regarded as destroyer of evils and Siva is worshipped in two forms.

- *Phallic form or Linga*
- *Anthropomorphic Form*

The chief image in the central shrine of a Siva temple is in phallic or linga form, very rarely do we meet with human images of Siva in the central shrines. In south India the human images of Siva had occupied the subordinate position to Linga. As the destroyer of the evil he is called samhara purusha and is usually attributed with certain terrific features and destructive attributes in different forms such as, he killed Gajasura (the elephant demon), Kala (god of death), Kama (god of lust of love) Tripurantakamurti, (destroyed three cities and three demons) Bramasiraschedakamurti (axing the head of Brahma). Bhairava, Veerabadhra and Andhakasuravadamurti. Present study focuses on the Samhara aspect of lord Siva i.e. monoscenic narrative theme of Sarabeshwaramurthi in Hoysala art, Sarabeshwara themes are chiselled on the walls of Hoysala temples at Koravangala and Belur, details of

Sarabeshwara, are found in the canonical texts i.e. Vamanapurana, Kamikagama, Srittvaniidhi Uttarakaranagama, Uttra-Kamika and Sarabhopenishad and we learn here that lord Vishnu assumed avatar or incarnation of Narashima to slay demon Hiranyakasipu. As this avatar or incarnation become so omnipotent that the benevolent gods began to fear of total destruction. Hence the gods approached lord Siva and prayed him. Siva then assumed the form of Sarabha a mythical animal and tamed Narashima. Vishnu then transformed himself in to Gandabherunda (two headed eagle) and faced Sarabha. Gandabherunda (two headed eagle) thus came to be known as a symbol of immense power. Later this mighty mythical bird was adopted as an emblem by several rulers.

Keyword: Gandabherunda, Hoysalas, Narashima, Siva, Sarabeshwara, Vamanapurana,

Introduction

¹Siva did manifest as Sarabeshwaramurti to do away with the ugra aspect of Narashima and bring out the original Vishnu from the leonine mask, Sarabha was a fabulous mythical eight legged beast known since the Vedic period. In the iconographical illustrations he is expected to have a leonine head, the claws of the lion, wings, eight legs and a human body. The earliest images of Sarabeshwaramurti have been reported from the later Chola temples at Tribhuvanam, and has separate temple for the lord. Hoysalas who ruled the Karnataka from 1000 AD to 1300, were lover of art tolerant rulers, they built temples dedicating to both Shiva and Vaishnava sect. Sculptures of Sarabeshwaramurti are found on the southern wall of the Hoysala Buceshwara temple and at Chennakeshava temple Belur. We do not find Sarabeshwaramurti in the sanctum of the Hoysala temple, but as stone wall sculptures. Hoysalas, who ruled southern Karnataka between 1000 AD to 1345 AD, were great temple builders with their own style of architecture called Hoysala style. The Hoysala achievements in the cultural field were excellent, they flooded their land with innumerable temples of various sects which are known for their style and decoration.

1. ¹ Jeya Priya Rangarajan Terrific Manifestations of Siva Virabhadra Sharada publishing House Delhi 2009

Narrative Art

Indian temples are like veritable open books of mythology, sculptures are frozen dialogues and action of drama.” A visual narrative is defined as a story which is accessible in a series of fixed images; the visual expressions in sculpture are pertinently called “the medium of stone writing.” The Indian artist has used a variety of narrative modes in visual narratives; these visual narratives served the purpose not only of decorating the temples, but were intended also to convey existing myths, morals and ideals. Story telling must have been an art of great the distant past, it has pre-historic antiquity. In the context of India the antiquity of narrative stories can be traced to her earliest literature, namely the *Vedic* literature .Narrative themes are of monoscenic and continuous.

Data and Methodology

The collection of necessary data is obtained from both primary and secondary sources. The primary data are obtained from visiting the sites, of Koravangala and Belur, also by referring Archaeological reports, canonical texts etc, secondary data are sources based upon the reviews and references, books, journals, periodicals and website.

Antiquity

The images of Sarabeshwaramurthi are extremely rare, however a lovely sculpture of Sarabeshwara is found in the central niche on the south wall of the Mukhamandapa of the temple of Airateshwara at Darasuram. The Sarabeshwaramurthi image in bronze is found in Siva temple at Tribhuvanam. The god stands on his back legs firmly planted on the Padmapita, while the front leg tears the body of Vishnu. In the Hoysala period they are found in the Buceshwara temple and at Belur. The sculpture of Sarabeshwaramurthi is found in the north wall of the garbhagriha of the Sangameshwara temple at Animela. In this example Sarabeshwara is represented with two bodies without heads having four legs each and the body of a human being above the lions having two heads with the faces of a lion. God has eight hands and holds *khadga* ²*trisula*, *parasu*, *damaru* etc. He is adorned with

³*Kiritamakuta, Kundalas, Kankanas* etc.,. This sculpture totally deviates from the iconographical descriptions given in the texts, the Sarabeshwara images are rarely found in North India.

Iconography

Sharaba is a mythical animal of great ferocity; his wings, body and beak are all golden in hue; there is also crescent moon on his head. His roar is deep. Sharp and loud. He is endowed with multiple arms. Sharaba is attributed with *vajra, musthi* (clenched fist), and gesture of protection, *sakti, goad, sword, khatvanga*,

Sources

Kamikagama

The Sarabeshwaramurthi is described in the Kamikagama as follows. The body of Sarabeshwara is that of the bird of golden hue, it should have two wings which should be uplifted. Sharaba has two red eyes four legs resembling those of the lion resting upon the ground and four others with sharp claws kept lifted upwards and an animal tail, the body above the loins should be that of a human being but having the face of the lion which should be wearing upon its head a *kiritamakuta*. There should be also side tusks and on the whole a terrific appearance. Sarabeshwara is to be shown as carrying Narashima with two of his legs. The figure of Narashima should be in ordinary form of a human being with the hands held in the *anjali* pose.

The Sritvanidhi

²Trisula also called tri sikha (triple flame) and tri-sir-Saka (three pronged) it is the trident held in the hand of Siva and some forms of Devi. Vishwakarma the celestial artisan is said to have fashioned it for Siva out of effulgence known as Vaisnava Tejas got from churning of the solar disc,

³ Kiritamakuta is the crown ornamental crest or diadems worn on the head signifying power and glory. Kiritamakuta is bedecked with many jewels and has distinct parts like band (patta) central motif of a large gem (mukhamani) body with varied designs and crest jewel,

This work gives a somewhat different description, it tells that the figure of Sharabesha should have thirty two arms in the right one should have *Vajra, musthi, abahaya chakra, sakti, danda ankusha, khadga, ⁴khatvanga, parasu, akshamala, a bone, dhanus, musale, and agni*. Whereas the left hands ought to keep the *pasa, varada, gads, bana, ahvaja*, another kind of sword a snake, a lotus flowers, *kapala, pustaka, hala* and *mudgara* and one hand should be embracing Durga

Uttarakaranagama

States that by consecrating this image all enemies will be destroyed battles won, all ailments cured and very good will be achieved and that the three eyes of the this aspect of Siva are the sun, the moon and the fire, That his tongue is the subterranean fire known as *badavanda* that his two wings are Kali and Durga his nails, Indra the belly, kala agni is the thigh, Kala and mrityu and his gigantic strength is Maha vayu.

Sarabhopenishad

It is stated that Sara means the jiva or soul. Hari is shivering in the limbs of Sharaba and that Hari himself is Sharaba who is capable of granting moksha

Vamanapurana

Vamanapurana contains a brief allusion to the story in two verses in the chapter 15 of the Saromahatmya. Saromahatmya the glorification of lake, having taken the form of man-lion Vishnu killed the mighty demon. But then being an animal, he began to enjoy himself among the lions. Gods along with the Gandhrava propitiated Siva, who grants boons. They prostrated

⁴Khatvanga an unusual weapon held in the hand of some forms of Siva, of variant and violent form of Siva like Bhairava. It is described as osseous shaft of the human forearm, surmounted by a skull. It is prescribed that the murderer of a learned and pious person must wander about without rest and naked holding this weapon in his hand and beg food in a human skull everyday for twelve years. Siva had to carry this weapon in order to expiate the sin for having cut-off one of the heads of Brahma. Carrying this weapon announces a law that never be transgressed anywhere or any time and the weapon itself is of invincible power for it can help remove the gravest of sins. It is also used in magic and sorcery

themselves and asked that Vishnu be made to take on his own body. In an answer to their plea Siva takes the form of a Sarabha and the two gods fight. They fall into the middle of the lake and Vishnu takes on his divine form while Siva becomes linga. Sage Narada first happens to be practicing austerities on the bank of that lake and praises both gods.

Uttra-Kamika

⁵According to Uttra-Kamika, the worship of this form of Siva is resorted to by those who intend destroying their enemies, by those who seek to win battles, or by those who want to get their ailments cured. The form of Sarabha, as given in this text is more symbolic than iconographic: the two wings represent Kali and Durga; the three eyes are Sun, Moon and Fire; the tongue is the oceanic fire; the nails represent Indra, the belly the fire of destruction, the thighs Kala and Mrtyu and energy Vayu. Its two eyes are round and red, but it has eight legs, four of which are those of lion touching the ground, and other four are those of a bird with sharp claws, lifted up, and it has a fine tail.

Story

⁶Vishnu in his Nrashimavathara destroyed the asura Hiranyakasipu who was causing great annoyance to the gods. Even after the destruction of the asura, Vishnu did not abate his terrific attitude which was causing the great problem to the people. They approached Siva for help and Siva promised them his favour, Siva at once assumed a form of a Sharaba, an animal with two heads, two wings of resplendent beauty, eight legs of the lion with sharp claws and a long tail, making dreadful noise. Sharaba approached Narashima, caught hold of him and tore him up, the skin of the Narashima he wore as his garment and the head was worn on his chest or as some accounts have it, on his *makuta* as an ornament, Vishnu came to his proper senses and retired after praising sura to his own abode the Vaikunta. Siva came thenceforth to be known as Sarabeshwaramurthi or Simhaghnamurthi.

⁵ SK Ramachandra Rao, Shiva Kosha pg 330

⁶ Elements of Hindu Iconography vol TA Gopinath Rao vol I



Figure 1 Sarabeshwaramurthi at Iravateshwara temple Darasuram

However this above lovely sculpture of Sarabeshwara is found in the central niche on the south wall of the Mukhamandapa of the temple of Airateshwara at Darasuram. In this sculpture the god is shown dancing by placing his two back legs on the prostrate body of Vishnu, while the remaining two are lifted up in front and the other four are shown upwards. Thus there are eight legs the face of the body of the god are those of a lion is in a stylised manner. He wears *kirita*.



Figure 2 Gandabherunda in Balligavee

In Karnataka at the Balligavee image of Gandabherunda is the oldest, chiselled in about 1047 C E. found on a tall stone pillar, this image has human form and two heads of a large mythical bird with sharp beak. This bird appears in many temples built in middle ages. When Shiva in the form Sharaba attacks Narashima, Narashima turns into Gandabherunda and counter attacks Sharaba

Hoysala style of Art

The most important contributions of Hoysalas is in the field of art and architecture. In the entire history of South India no dynasty built so many temples as the Hoysalas did, they are known to have built more than 300 temples. Temples for Jaina, Saiva and Vaishnava faith were attested by great rulers and nobles. Their minute carvings have become proverbially famous in the field of Indian Art. Hoysala art sculpture is like a pictorial script which expresses the subtle thought of its mythology and philosophy. Hoysala sculptures evoke visions movement of gods and human beings.



Figure 3 chain of destruction (Sarabeshwara) in Hoysala temple Buceshwara Koravangala

This monoscenic narrative art sculpture is found on the south wall of Buceshwara temple at Koravangala, we have narrative panel depicted vertically. A double headed eagle or Gandabherunda is attacking a Sharaba at the top, Sharaba in turn attacks a lion, lion which attacks an elephant, the latter seizing with its trunk a huge serpent, and serpent is in the act of swallowing an antelope. This chain hangs in air, with a figure of a sage wondering at the sight.



Figure 4 chain of destruction (Sarabeshwara) in Chennakeshava temple Belur

An eagle or Gandabherunda is carved in the scene of chain of destruction in the Chennakeshava temple of Belur. Here a deer becomes prey to a big python, which in turn is lifted by an elephant. A lion attacks the elephant and the lion itself is devoured by Sharaba. And Gandabherunda or eagle attacks Sarabeshwara in the form of lion.

Sarabeshwara and Gandabherunda in emblem of Government of Karnataka



The above mystical bird of Gandabherunda is featured in the emblem of the state of Karnataka. The shield with the image of double headed bird is Gandabherunda, flanked on either side by red-maned yellow lion-elephant known as Sarabeshwara standing on a green, leafy compartment. The compound name is made of Ganda, the mighty, and Bherunda meaning two headed. One of the most well-known images of Gandabherunda is found in the Mysore court, where it is royal logo of the Wodeyars, former rulers of Mysore incorporates the form. After the Vijayanagar rule Nayakas of Madura and Keladi continued the usage. Mysore Wodeyars also followed by introducing slight change of lion and vyali in the paws of the bird.

Observations

Sarabeshwaramurthi are found both in Shaiva and Vaishnava temples of Hoysala at Buceshwara temple in Koravangala and at Chennakeshava temple in Belur. In both the temple chain of destruction or combat of Sharaba and Gandabherunda is depicted very marvellously. To claim the superiority of one sect over the other many biased mythological stories were created. The mythological accounts are the basis for the creation of Sarabeshwaramurthi. It may be suggested that the sculptors took liberty to create Sarabeshwaramurthi according to their whims and fancies. Further they might have rightly found it difficult to adhere to the agamic prescriptions.

Conclusion

The rich material culture portrayed in the Hoysala sculptures picturises vividly the panoramic cultural pattern of sculptures that throbbed during the Hoysala period in the 10th and 13th centuries. Sarabeshwara sculptures appeared to be popular in Chola art in Airavateshwara temple, Balligavee and in Hoysala temples at Koravangala and Belur. Buceshwara temple is a Shaiva and Belur temple a Vaishnava with Sarabeshwara narrative theme. Here the religious tolerance is exhibited among the rulers of Hoysalas. Hoysala temples are a veritable museum of sculpture containing thousands of carved figures. Nictely, refinement and minuteness of details are the special merits in which Hoysala artists universally excelled.

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