

Reflections of some minor Deities in the Sculpture of Pallavas

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Introductory: Apart from the main forms of Siva and Vishnu, people also worshipped various goddesses like Durga, Sridevi or Lakshmi, Jyesthadevi and Sarasvati. Of all the goddesses, the worship of Durga in Pallava period seems to be of utmost importance as an embodiment of victory and warfare. The earliest temple dedicated to Durga can be seen in the Pallava period from Mamallapuram in Kotikal mandapam and in the so called Draupadiratha, both of the time of Narasimhavarman I. For the first time iconographical representation of Durga in Pallava period can be seen in the Draupadiratha at Mamallapuram, where she is portrayed not only in the sanctum, but also on the three niches on its outer wall, facing north, south and west. Perhaps, such an arrangement was intended to give the look of a sarvatobhadra shrine. Here and also in the Varaha cave temple, Durga was portrayed as a four handed goddess carrying sankha and chakra in the upper right and left hands and placing the lower right and left hands in abhaya and katiposture. She is seen standing in samabhanga pose over the severed head of Mahisha. Kneeling on either side of her feet are shown two devotees, with the one on her proper right in the act of either offering his head or shedding blood by means of his sword and the other one is seen with hands kept in anjali pose. This particular representation was identified first by Dubreuil as the navakandam sacrifice. Additionally in the Varaha cave temple She is flanked on either side by a bust of a lion and stag, along with a pair of ganas.

Main Theme: The idea here is to show both the ugra and saumya aspects of Durga and as a universal mother, She is also provided with a chattri over her head. The association of the lion symbolizing victory and valour with Durga is also interestingly portrayed by carving a more than life size figure of lion in front of the so called Draupadiratha and also in the two monolithic lions with niches enshrining Durga at Mamallapuram. In the latter, the figure of Durga is seen carved in a niche set into the chest of the lion. Whereas, in Adivaraha cave temple at Mamallapuram of slightly later date, she is shown standing in beautiful tribhanga pose, having eight arms accompanied by a pair of dvarapalikas; in the Trimurti cave temple She is standing in samabhanga pose on a severed head of a Mahisha. Perhaps, the pose of samabhanga was choosento hint that slaying of Mahisha was accomplished just at that moment and Durga is standing over his head with undiminished furiousness and tribhanga may indicate Her relaxed stance.

Another variant in the portrayal of Durga in the sculptural art of Pallava period is the narrative depiction of the story of Durga in the act of fighting with Mahishasura seen in the Mahishasuramardini cave temple at Mamallapura and on a stone panel opposite the

Atiranachandesvara cave temple at Saluvankuppam. The juxtaposition of the panel of Mahishasuramardini opposite the Seshasayi-Vishnu in the Mahishasuramardini cave temple is interesting as it matches very well with the sequence of description given in the Devimahatmyam and this shows the popularity of this text, which was taken as a source of inspiration.

Vaikhanasagama suggests that in a Siva temple, the image of Durga should be placed in the niche on the outerwall of the ardhmandapa facing north¹. That this rule was followed in the allocation of Durga images in the Saivite temples of Pallava period is attested in many structural temples from the time of Rajasimha (close of 8th century A.D.). In the niches adorning the structural temples, a simpler version of eight-armed Durga standing in a beautiful tribhanga pose, along with her mount lion is normally depicted. All these various aspects of Durga seen either in situ adorning the temples or as loose finds belonging to the Pallava period, attests to the devotion shown to this goddess of victory by the Pallava monarchs, who were facing frequent political incursions and warfare from their neighboring kingdoms, especially the Chalukyas of Badami. Alongside Durga, the worship of Sridevi or Lakshmi, as a goddess of prosperity seems to be very popular. Most often she was depicted in two forms viz., Srivatsa and Gajalakshmi. Srivatsa is portrayed as an amalgamation of aniconic or abstract and anthropomorphic form having a human head and torso, but with the hands and legs curled up at the sides. The earliest image of this kind in the period under study is found adored in the middle of the makara torana adorning the facade in Avanibhajanapallavesvara-griham at Siyamangalambelonging to the reign of Mahendravarman I. She is seated on a lotus, wearing the suvarnavaikakshaka, a more delicate variety of chennavira of military origin worn usually by warriors. This ornament thus associates her with victory and power and can be called as Rajyalakshmi or Jayalakshmi in this depiction. The context matches very well with the warrior figures flanking the facade.

Sculptural depiction of Srivatsa as a separate panel is found from places such as Kanchipuram (Durga temple) and Kaverippakkam (now in Government Museum, Chennai). The sculpture from Kaverippakkam is carved on a slab flanked by the elephants in the act of bathing her and also by a pair of lamps, Sankha and Padma-nidhis in the form of lotus and conch with coins rolling from them. Here, the presence of elephants, lamp, coins and the suvarnavaikakshaka ornament adorning Her projects the idea that She is an embodiment of wealth, prosperity, victory and fame. Thus, this sculpture dated to 9th century A.D., is one of the earliest representation of Srivatsa conveying all the attributes in a symbolic manner. Of almost the same period, C. Sivaramamurti² describes a unique miniature image modeled out of copper found from Enadi in Thanjavur district (now preserved in the Government Museum, Chennai). Image of Srivatsa as symbolising prosperity and good luck can also be seen depicted on the sati panels found from places like Munnur (Adavallesvara temple), Manimangalam (Dharmesvara temple), Tenneri, Madhurantakam (Chandesvara shrine in the Siva temple), Uttaramerur (one from Merkatti Amman temple and another from Madari temple)³ Ukkal and Brahmadesam (Ganesa temple). The other variety which is commonly seen is the Gajalakshmi type, where she is depicted with human limbs in its entirety. She was portrayed as a norm, with only two arms holding the lotus

buds and is found seated on a full-blown lotus in pralambapada posture, attended by four celestial women and bathed by a pair of elephants. The earliest such depiction of this period is from the Varaha and the Adivaraha cave temples at Mamallapuram. It will be of interest to note here that the description given in the Kasakkudi plates of Nandivarman II Pallavamalla⁴ in respect of Gajalakshmi matches very well with the sculptural representation. The Vishnudharmottara– Purana⁵ describes the elephants as symbols of royalty and identifies these four celestial women as representing four goddesses viz ., Rajya-sri, Svarga-lakshmi, Brahmi-lakshmi and Jayalakshmi. It has to be noted that in the creation of Varaha-mandapa, the patron king Narasimhavarman I, had grouped the sculptures with a view to convey not only the religious message but also its underlying political aspect. Thus, here the juxtaposition of Varaha with Gajalakshmi conveys that he like Varaha rescued the earth, which in this case is to be understood as his territory, from the flood of difficulties caused by the enemies i.e. primarily the Chalukyas of Badami and thereby attained prosperity and victory, which is conveyed through the adjacent portrayal of Lakshmi, who indeed symbolized Rajyasri.

The portrayal of Gajalakshmi in the niches and as a part of ornamental torana and door-ways continued well into the structural temples of this age. For example, in the niche on the southern wall of the mandapa in the Kailasanatha temple at Kanchipuram, She is portrayed along with Jyestha-devi and in the Piravatanesvara temples from the same place She is seen occupying the southern niche of the vimana . Whereas in the Kailasanatha temple at Tirupattur She is seen gracing the lintel in the form of lalatabimba, in the Chandramoulisvara temple at Brahmadesam, she adorns the makaratorana embellishing over the western niche of the vimana . Thus, from these different spatial contexts in which Gajalakshmi or Srivatsa was portrayed, it can be concluded that She was depicted not only as an object of worship, but also to convey the meaning of auspiciousness, good luck, victory and prosperity. Along with Lakshmi, Jyestha was also worshipped in this period. Bodhayana Grhyasutra⁶ describes her in glorious terms and devotes an entire chapter. Jyestha is considered as the elder sister of Lakshmi and was depicted as a stout goddess having saggy breasts, flabby belly, drooping lower lips with her hair braided with a single-knot, carrying a broomstick in one of her hands and the crow as the insignia on her banner. She is accompanied by her bovine-headed son and contrastingly beautiful daughter⁷. However unusually she is also portrayed solitarily as can be seen in the sculpture found from the erstwhile Chengalpattu district (now deposited in Government Museum, Chennai). The figure of Jyestha is not found in any of the cave temples of this period under study and was found in situ for the first time adorning the north facing devakostha niche in the Kailasanatha temple at Kanchipuram, built under the aegis of Narasimhavarman II, and as a later addition, probably at the end of Pallava period outside the Vasantesvara cave temple at Vallam.

The very fact that most of the sculptures of Jyestha are found in loose and neglected condition hint at the subsequent development of sacrilegistic feelings towards her worship. Thus, loose sculptures of Jyestha are found from several places like Mylapore (now deposited in Government Museum, Chennai), Kumbhakonam, Tiruvellavayil temple, Pallikonda,

Uttaramerur, Tiruvellarai etc. A fragmentary sculptural panel from Merkatti Amman temple at Uttaramerur, show Her seated along with three devotees⁸. Perhaps, this panel if complete could be a sati panel and might have comprised of other deities such as Brahma, Siva, Parvati, Skanda, Narasimha and Srivatsa. Thus, it seems that the worship of Jyesthadevi in the Pallava period could only be seen from the beginning of 8th century A.D. Eventhough, the contemporary literature like Nandikkalambakkam⁹ (9th century A.D.) refers to Her as an elder sister of Lakshmi, it also regards Her as a goddess of evil and further states that She is mainly propitiated for warding off evil. Similarly, the alvar saint Tondaradippodi (circa 850 A.D.) in his hymns known as Tirumalai¹⁰ condemns Her worship and little later Sendan Divakaram, one of the earliest lexicons of Tamil dated to 10th century A.D., calls Her as Kedalanangu or goddess of evil¹¹. It is interesting to note here that the image of Jyestha, which is kept outside the temple of Naganathesvara, datable to late Pallava period, is now under worship by the local people by the application of vermilion and offering of flowers.

Along with Lakshmi, Bhudevi was also depicted in this period. But She was always shown as part of the panel illustrating either, Varaha-avatar or Seshasayi-vishnu as can be seen in the Varaha and Mahishasuramardhini cave temples at Mamallapuram. Later in the Kailasanatha temple at Kanchipuram, She is shown seated along with Vishnu and Sridevi in one of the angalaya niches. However, unlike Sridevi, Bhudevi has no cultic following and She is shown always in association with Vishnu as part of an image or panel. The contemporary alvars like Periyalvar¹² and Tirumangai¹³ also mention Nappinnai as a consort of Vishnu. The only sculptural representation of Nappinnai in this period is from the Govardhanadhari panel at Mamallapuram, in which She is bejeweled like a princess looking in awe at the marvelous feat of Krishna lifting the mount Govardhana. Interestingly she wears a breast-band, thus, justifying the belief of the later day alvar saint i.e. Andal¹⁴ that she was none other than Lakshmi, because in the Vaishnavite iconography, of the two consorts of Vishnu, only Sridevi wears a breastband.

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