

Representation of Elephants in Vijayanagara Art – Relevance, Symbolism and Interpretations

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Introduction

The monuments that are popularly known as ‘Hampi ruins’ are mainly situated between the modern villages of Kamalapura in the south to Hampi village on right bank of river Tungabhadra in the north (Rao, 1983: 2). M.S. Nagaraja Rao termed Hampi as the ‘Pompei’ of India (Rao: 1981: 61). A large number of monuments - religious as well as civil in nature are scattered all over the ruined city in different states of dilapidation. The enchanting grandeur of this region is such that the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has declared it a World Heritage Centre. It was in this period of socio-cultural changes that we understand how the changes taking place in the realms of political, socio-religious and economy matured to give a new dimension to the sculptural and iconographical developments which were deep rooted in the changed material life of the people.

Art Perspective

The sculptural art as a visual medium invariably yields a complex notion of art associated with historiography. The Vijayanagara artist succeeded in describing the process of change and evolution in society, economics, and philosophy and through his artistic expression as it weaves in and around human life. A state of tranquility and relative liberty appears at all times to have been favorable to the cultivation and perfection of arts as seen during Vijayanagara times also. Granite is the material commonly used by the artists, and most of the reliefs at the site are carved on the granite blocks. Its particular texture, however, makes it prone to flaking and surface alterations, resulting in the comparative rarity of well-finished sculptures and intricate details (Filliozat, 1985: 296).

But one has to keep it in mind that just like other strains of the visual arts, sculptural art mature outside the broad discursive domain of medieval ethos, though they may have evolved within its contextual ambit, a controlled zone of the beholder of the art. The high relief scenes carved on nearly all prominent edifices bring out a sense of equilibrium in which the human – animal relation as part of space as well as time as they are constitutive of signification processes that are intrinsically multi-layered, dynamic, and complex (Thakur, 2013:10). These wall panels carved on granite reflect both certain changes characteristic of the whole of Southern India and, as a specimen of Vijayanagara sculptural art, the possibilities inherent in locally available materials and the popular social and cultural traditions of the Vijayanagara period.

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Depiction of Elephants

Sagoff (1974) discusses that animals serve as a generally recognizable cultural emblem of some idea or concept and believes that this cultural function provides a reason for valuing and preserving wild animals. This account is widely applicable to animals, since their forms can be said to have functions in the sense that those forms have been naturally selected in virtue of performing certain tasks. The representation of pachyderms in art – mural or rock art, has been as old as prehistoric times as evident from various rock art sites across India and other parts of the world. The presence of elephant, rhinoceros and hippopotamus can be also observed on the seals of Indus sites. Somehow, out of the three pachyderms – elephant continued to sustain the interest of artists since ancient times in India. It emerged as an dominant motif in sculptural art transcending across all the religions as well as royal and common traditions as early as early millennia BC. The similar traditions continued to trend even in the early medieval i.e. 12th-13th century in south India.

The Hoysala rulers, political and cultural predecessors of Vijayanagara empire in Karnataka region, made tremendous contribution in art and architecture in form of magnificent temples across their territories. These temples also represent friezes with elephant, generally as marching in one direction and interspersed occasionally with the soldiers or their riders, as one of the main motifs in the wall carvings as the load carrying motifs – in the lowest panels of the wall and as projections from the platform of the temples. This similar motif continued to be depicted by the sculptors in Vijayanagara also – a major development occurred at this phase – now the representation of elephants was not limited only on the temple walls but they were incorporated in the structural as well as the ornamental plan of the palaces and other royal paraphernalia, as evident from the existing examples.

The depiction of elephants during Vijayanagara cultural period changed to perceptible extent due to the transition in the nature of the new states. The state of Vijayanagara was evidently military in nature. Also, the landscape and the difficult terrain of the capital of this new empire made the availability of the elephants easy for catching and war training purposes. the elephants were also considered important in ceremonial activities and increasing became the object of increase rites and probably this development was parallel to the disengagement of the man-animal relation in the realm of reality of war. The presence of numerous elephants and horses in the royal establishment is mentioned in the foreign chronicles as well as by the sculptural depictions on the monuments. In any situation, artists have the potential to choose which motifs to select from the repertoire or vocabulary of their artistic system. The appropriate choice will be dictated by the context, in this case, the location of the site within the culturally mediated geography of the region. Painters and engravers are motivated by considerations of appropriate subject and context. If these motivations remain constant for long enough, a visible, archaeologically-measurable pattern will be generated. (Sauvet *et. al.*,2009: 321)

With the rule of Dēvarāya-II, elephant die was introduced in the Vijayanagara mints. This is explained by his being adept in elephant hunting and his assuming title of ‘*gajabēntekāra*. (ARASM, 1932)’ Across the river, in the hilly crop, there is a rectangular structure that has been termed as ‘*āneśāle*’ or elephant stable by the archaeologists. There is a dated epigraph on a slab near Zenānā enclosure, which record donation to god Narasimha located near elephant stables by Konamarsayya.

This record says that, “. . . *śrīmatu āneyasāle baliyana Narasimhyadēvarige Konamarsayyanavaru kotta . . .*” (Rao, 1985: 39). Elsewhere also we find mention of the sheds made of graphite, which accommodated 400 elephants, and the royal stables had 40,000 horses in them. (Sastri and Venkataramanayya, 1946: 87) Razzak also mentions a large number of elephants in the city of Vijayanagara and mentions that “*one sees there more than a thousand elephants, in their size resembling mountains and in their form resembling devils.*”(Sewell, 2000: 65)

Discussion

The iconography of the elephant in the Vijayanagara art can be understood in three types of representation: dynamism, plasticity and symbolism. In the reliefs found on the diverse monuments at Vijayanagara, man’s ascendancy over the animals like elephants has been well depicted and captured vivaciously. Although a mighty beast, an elephant meekly submitting to a man is realistically, and sometimes, tragically portrayed. Human figures and the animals are presented in almost same scale in most of the friezes within rectangular frames. The elephants are nearly always depicted only in profile while the human figure are seen in profile, full frontal or three-quarter view. The human figures themselves have a lot of movement keeping up with the animal through different motions of activities – hunting, load carrying, military parade or sometimes just standing aloof from surroundings. The pace and bearing of the elephants in their forward march while in a procession – military or ceremonial, is seen in the movement of their legs and the swing of their tail where one foreleg and one back leg are bent. Their heads held high, looking majestic and dignified elephants go forward in a single file. Some sculptures depict ropes running across their legs thus suggesting their tameness along with ornamental trappings including head bands, chains, jingled necklaces, bells and anklets.

The majority of the portrayal shows the grand beast in military procession in company of soldiers and alongside other animals like horses and camels. These pachyderms were also treated as baggage animals and facilitated movements for military and sometimes traders across difficult terrain. Elephant calves are also depicted beside their mothers in some rare friezes. Some of the animals are shown within pillars probably indicting some sort of enclosure and captivity with a cyclical flow of existence and survival. Most of the friezes represent the animal richly bridled with ornamental decoration in the forehead and the neck and rarely the pachyderm is represented in bare natural form, thus highlighting the ceremonial importance attached to these illustrations. some panels portray the animal uprooting trees and carrying off branches. In some panels, the elephant is shown engaged in a fight with lion or a pair of tigers in a ferocious portrayal of struggle of existence and survival. The rider and the caretaker of the beast is shown in close proximity with long goads in their hands.

The most prominent representations of this animal can be seen at the Mahanavami Platform. The structure appears to have been built during the period of early rulers of Vijayanagara and it appears that it went through a number of reconstruction and renovations during the reign of subsequent rulers. There are four distinct phases of its construction or refurbishment and was built in granite and subsequently encased in sculptured schist stone.. The earliest dates back to the period close to the founding of the capital city. The last phase of the sculptures belonging to the 16th century is carved on schist slabs on the west facade of the platform. The southern flight of steps has sculptured balustrades representing

elephant and *yāli* (mythical leogryph) that opens on the west. The lower tier has low relief sculptural friezes depicting the socio-cultural activities as well as the court-related festivities of that time. The extant pillar bases in the centre of this platform indicate the presence of a pavilion. The vertical walls of the lower platforms were converted into picture galleries by means of bands of figures and animals carved in bas-relief and of a most entertaining description. In one interesting frieze, a excited elephant is portrayed brutally killing a fallen enemy while four armed men are goading the beast from behind – this scene depicts the brutal carnage possible by this animal as a weapon of war.

Elephants as part of platform friezes can be seen in many other palace basements at the Vijayanagara capital along with other motifs such as foliage patterns, horses and mythical creatures. the animal is represented as almost three dimensional sculpture in free standing forms when portrayed in balustrades flanking flight of steps leading to the platform – both in religious as well as civil structures. At the Vithala temple, the elephants are portrayed as dragging the famous monolithic stone ratha (chariot) within the temple complex. But at the same time the significance inception of the *gandabherunda* motif in Vijayanagara sculptural art could have been no other than a symbol of supreme strength and supremacy over other states does indicate the decline in the previously assigned prominence to this animal. The elephants are depicted in a state of helplessness with utter dismay and anguish once *gandabherunda* motif gains popularity among the royal symbolism. In Hazara Rama temple enclosure wall – the lowest panels represent the marching elephants with one or two riders, in some instances, three also. But such representation gives a monotonous flow of movement in a stifled manner.

Conclusion

The presence of elephants in the Vijayanagara art provides us with an interesting opportunity to understand how the artists could draw inspiration from non- anthropocentric sources and depict the same in such living forms. Fibicher (2008: 8) states that the animal presence in visual art through different historical periods would be proportional to our need of animal contacts, whereas it would be inversely proportional to our real closeness to the natural realm, indicating the complexity of the cultural interactions between human and elephants in Vijayanagara art where the animal shared its own existence with the human population.

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