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History

NEW LIGHT ON THE PALLAVA ROCK-CUTS OF TAMIL NADU

KEY WORDS:

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ABSTRACT

The Pallavas were the pioneers in the rock-cut architecture of Tamil Nadu. Mahendravarman I initiated the new style of temple architecture in Tamil Nadu. Mahendravarman's declaration in his own inscription at Mandagappattu, obviously the first of his cave-temples, is significant. He created a temple, an object of wonder, for the Trinity (trimurti) without the use of brick, timber, metal or mortar. The cave temples of Mahendra style continued to be excavated between 630 to 700 by Mahendra's son and successors, whose products, marking the second phase, are the cave temples at Thirukalukunram, the Kotikal mandapam and the Dharmaraja mandapam. Mahendra and Narasimha contributed for the emergence of new trend in temple architecture. Even though rock cuts were found in northern and western India, Pallavas were the pioneers in Tamil Nadu

The latter half of the 6th century A.D. forms an important landmark in the political and cultural history of South India. It marks the rise to power of three great dynasties, viz. the Chalukyas with their capital at Badami, the Pallavas at Kanchi and the Pandyas at Madurai. This period of five centuries is a story of conflicts among the three powers for the extension of their influences and empires. Such conflicts, however, were no obstacle to the growth of art, religion and culture in these areas. The many sided religious revival checked the growth of Jainism and Buddhism and resulted in a volume of soul stirring devotional literature and advanced philosophical speculation. In fact, the contending parties seem to have vied with one another in their architectural and artistic creations and definite and crystallized styles of architecture and sculpture in their respective areas. The Pallavas emerged as a new political force unknown to Sangam politics and played a very important role in the history of South India for more than five centuries. They were not dislodged from nearly Imperial position till the emergent Imperial power of the Cholas who destroyed their power politically.

The tradition of rock-cut architecture and excavation into living rock of chaityas and viharas of the Buddhists initiated by Ashoka near Gaya was soon taken up in the trap rock regions of the Deccan and Western India, reproducing aspects of contemporary brick and timber originals which, because of the perishable nature of the fabric of the construction, did not survive the march of time. This expression of forms of architecture and sculpture through the permanent medium of stone, adopted earlier by the Buddhists, then by the Hindus and the Jains, has enabled the monuments to last for centuries and give us a fairly good idea of what the contemporary religious architecture and sculpture in general was. These stupas and Chaityas show their own distinct regional characters as against their compeers in North and North-Western India.

From the sixth and seventh centuries A.D., the Hindus and Jains of the South too adopted the stone medium, and started excavating rock-cut cave temples, or carving out rock-cut monolithic temple forms, and ultimately building them of stone. We have a long series of such stone temples created in close succession and extending uninterruptedly through the past thirteen centuries. The early Hindu and Jain temples came in to being under the royal patronage of the rulers of the three great empires of the south, the Chalukyas, the Pallavas and the Pandyas along with the lesser kingdoms wedged in between.¹

The early temples

The cult of worship of objects or phenomena considered super human in a specified manner and in specified places has been one of the traits of mankind from very remote times. The early form such practices can only be deduced from literary evidences, traditions and material relics that have come down to us in the course of centuries. The material evidence would be the numerous megalithic monuments of diverse variety and shape that have survived.

The megalithic cult was popular and worship and veneration of funerary monuments are frequently described, particularly the nadukal or stone erection (menheir or megalith) with offerings including toddy and animal sacrifice, keeping lamps lighted and oblations of large quantities of boiled rice in heaps (perumchoru or pavadai). The dead, according to the literary evidence, were believed to have become stone itself which had acquired divine properties. A stone could be a hero, warrior, a king or even an ordinary person.

Women who immolated themselves on the death of their husbands, at a time when the cult of chastity and faithfulness was spreading fast, were given memorials in the nature of sati stones, later called in inscriptions toru or masatikkal (maha-sati-kal). Such memorial or sati stones, belonging to the second-third centuries A.D., are found with inscriptions and sculptural reliefs in the Andhra sites. The early Tamil works speak of such a stone erection or nadukal in many contexts on which were written, evidently with ochre paint and brush, the name and exploits of the dead person is represented.

Where roofed structures were built enshrining such platforms, cult objects, symbols or iconic representations, they imitated secular buildings in the plan and style of construction. The only difference was that the temples were made of more permanent material. Like brick and wrought timber, more lavishly decorated with plaster, stucco, carving and painting, and often larger in dimensions in contrast to the humbler mud-and wattle-walled thatch-roofed houses of the common folk. Such temples or shrines, mostly of brick and timber, are variously designated in the sangam works as Kottam, Nagaram, Koyil and Palli. Side by side with the predominantly brick and timber architecture of early times, these arose a movement at the time of Asoka which resulted in a series of temples and other religious resorts being excavated into living rock. Being made of more permanent material, these have survived to the present day.

Cave Temples in Tamil Nadu

The earliest caves excavated by Asoka and his grandson Dasaratha into the very hard local rock are in the Barabar and Nagarjuni hills near Gaya. They were dedicated to the Ajivikas. Of the numerous temples of South India, the earliest extant group belongs to the Pallavas and the Chalukyas, while the subsequent groups fall into more or less unbroken lines, with Pallava or Chalukyan characteristics as their basis. The Gangas, the Muttaraiyars, the earlier Cholas, the later Cholas and the Pandyas, the Vijayanagara rulers and the provincial Nayakas continued the Pallava tradition in their respective zones. Each of them would thus form a separate group with individual characters.

The Pallavas were pioneers in the translation of the contemporary brick and timber architecture of the south in to the more permanent stone and in the tackling of harder and less tractable rocks such as granite, charnockite and gneiss in the excavation of their cave temples and the carving of their monoliths (rathas), as

opposed to their contemporaries, the Chalukyas, who chose the much softer and more tractable sand stone in the excavation of their cave-temples and in the construction of their structural temples. The choice of softer rocks by the Chalukyas was intentional and was made in view of the facility not only of quarrying but also of carving fine reliefs and designs.⁴

It was the Pallavas alone who chose the hardest of the rocks, viz. granite, gneiss and charnockite, primarily because of the absence of softer rock cliffs in their area and also perhaps, because they thought the local hard rocks were more durable and an altogether new material not tackled by their compeers and rivals, the Chalukyas or even their predecessors. Mahendra Pallava, who initiated such work in the south, was really a Vichitra- chitta (inventive or curious-minded), as he styled himself, in this respect also. In the whole range of 'rock-architecture' in India, the only other achievements of this kind are the seven Ajivika caves in the Barabar and Nagarjuni hills near Gaya, and one more at Sitamarhi near Rajagriha, both in Bihar, making eight in all and dating between the time of asoka and his grandson Dasaratha. Here, for the first time in India, one sees the large boulder like masses of quartzose gneiss forming this range quarried with infinite labour and finished with an enamel like polish. This technique of quarrying, carving and polishing started and ended here within the same century, and it was not till after about a thousand years that the Pallavas started excavating into hard stone again in south India.

The Pallavas, as well as the other contemporary south Indian dynasties, who excavated in to hard rock, did not do any polishing but continued the tradition of plastering the interiors often with paintings, or covering the carvings and reliefs with painted stucco, e.g. at Mamandur, Tiruchirappalli, Sittannavasal, Tirumayam and Tirunandikkara.⁵

Mahendravarman's declaration in his own inscription at Mandagappattu, obviously the first of his cave-temples, is significant. He says that as a Vichitra-chitta, he was the first to make a habitation in stone for the three gods (Brahma, siva and Vishnu) without the use of the brick, timber, metal or mortar, the conventional ingredients of contemporary and earlier structures in the south; this would, therefore, refer more to the fact of his having chosen the hardest of the rocks and his natural exultation in his successful achievement of scooping out the first temple named after him than to the mere introduction of rock cut cave temples in the south. The cave-temples of the Pallavas, as also of the contemporary dynasties, are mostly models of the type called mandapas with shrines in their hind portions or in their midst, sometimes lateral.

The similar excavations are merely small cells cut in to the rock without a verandah or porch in front reproducing in a very simple manner the internal aspects of structural shrines. Among the whole series of Pallava cave temples in Tondai-mandalam there are only two such examples, but there are many more examples excavated by the Pandyas in their region, by the Muttaraiyars in th Chola country and other dynasties in the southern districts of coastal Andhra. But the mandapa- type cave temples are the most common to all these dynasties, particularly those with lateral or hind shrines, while some have the shrines designed right in their midst with the mandapa extending over all the sides. Such mandapas are common in the south and were built mainly of timber and brick before the sixth-seventh centuries A.D.

Mahendravarman I style

After the wars with the Cholas and other southern princes were ended, the son of Simhavisnu, the great Mahendravarman I, was to turn towards Mahabalipuram and lay the foundation stone of its grandeur and reputation, as the birth place of South Indian architecture and Sculpture.⁶

Mahendravarman was the initiator of the stone and cave architecture in Tamilnadu. Many of his cave shrines have survived with his foundation inscriptions. During the study of his shrines, we see a repetitive and definitive style employed. This style has been names as Mahendra Style by many eminent scholars. As per a

theory, proposed by G Jouveau-Dubreuil, Mahendra got the inspiration of the cave architecture from Undavalli and Bhairavakonda caves at Krishna river basin as his childhood was spent in there. Mahendra got a vast empire in heredity from his father, in which part of Andhra country was also included. We have an inscription of him in Chezrala, which suggests that he was active in that part however whether his childhood was spent there is not very clear. But to get such an inspiration he needed not to spend his childhood there, spending some time or just a cursory look over those monuments would have been enough.⁷

Among the Mahendravarman's cave temples , Mandagappattu was the earliest attempted and first finished excavation, for it is here that Mahendra says that he created a temple, an object of wonder, for the Trinity(trimurti) without the use of brick, timber, metal or mortar. He perhaps chose this spot in an area surrounded by numerous scattered rocks or boulders in a hilly district, far from his capital, since it was the traditional chola country, this was the farthest of his excavations away from his capital in his own home country of Thondai mandalam. The rest were nearer home, the nearest ones being at Mamandur and Kuranganilmuttam within eight miles of Kanchi, while Pallavaram and Vallam lay on the road from Kanchi to the ports of Mahabalipuram and Mylapore; Siyamangalam and Mahendravadi were on the western roads leading to the Chalukyan and Ganga territories.

Mamalla's Style

The cave temples of Mahendra style continued to be excavated between 630 to 700 by Mahendra's son and successors, whose products, marking the second phase, are the cave temples at Thirukalukunram, the Kotikal mandapam and the Dharmaraja mandapam, both at Mahabalipuram, the Narasimha cave temple at Singaperumal kovil(Chingleput District), the Ranganatha cave temple at Singavaram(South arcot district) and two unfinished cave temples at Mamandur (caves 3 and 4) Athiranachanda's cave temple at Saluvankuppam near Mahabalipuram, of the time Rajasimha (700-30) would mark the end of second phase.⁹

The style of cave temples initiated by Narasimhavarman I (Mamalla) was independent of the Mahendra type, and , though it persisted only for two generations after him, marks some great advances with new features in cave architecture. The most outstanding advance noted is a fuller representation of the mandapa in its frontal and interior aspects, making the stone copies more true to their contemporary structural originals. In place of the simple, essentially four sided and often unornamented pillars of the mandapa type without the differentiation of the members of the capital (the capita being represented by the top saduram occasionally with a phalaka or abacus and rudimentary padma below it), Mamalla introduced pillars with taller and quite slender shafts with capitals. They conformed perhaps to the same proportions as contemporary carved wooden pillars with all the members of the "order" reproduced, viz. the kalasa, tadi, kantha, kumbha, padma or pali, and phalaka.¹⁰

CONCLUSION

The Lakshita's Mandagappattu rock cut was followed by many rock cuts which were better in their design. Mahendra and Narasimha contributed for the emergence of new trend in temple architecture. Even though rock cuts were found in northern and western India, Pallavas were the pioneers in Tamil Nadu. They formed rock cuts in Mamandur, Kuranganilmuttam, Vallam, Mahendravadi, Mamandur, Dalavanur, Siyamangalam, Tiruchirappalli, Vilakkam, Tirukalukunram, Mahabalipuram and singaperumal koil.

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