

The Bhāgavata Sculptures in Amṛteśvara Temple at Amritāpura, Karnataka

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Amritāpura is a small village located in Tarikere Taluq of Chikkamagalur District in Karnataka. The Amṛteśvara Temple, situated in the village, can be dated to the fourth quarter of 12th Century CE. The temple built of schist stone is facing east. It is an *ekakūṭa vimāna* and the inscription found within the temple complex is dated to CE 1196. The inscription refers to the construction of the temple by Amṛteśvara Daṇḍanāyaka during the reign of Ballala II of Hoysala dynasty. The inscription is composed by Janna, the famous Kannada poet of this period.¹

On plan, the temple consists of a sanctum sanctorum, an *antarāla*, *navaraṅga* and *mahāmaṇḍapa*. This *mahāmaṇḍapa* was added perhaps in CE 1206.² The temple was built by a group of sculptors, some were from later Chālukya area, while the rest were local artists. For example, Mallitamma, the famous sculptor worked on the inner ceiling at the north doorway and the central and southern ceilings of the *maṇḍapa*.³

The *garbhagrha* is square and is enshrined by a *Śivaliṅga* on a *pīṭha*. The temple is adorned by a well preserved *dvitala vesara vimāna* and also has a *sukanāsa* projection where one can see Sala fighting with tiger on its front face. In the centre of the shrine it has a huge *kīrtimukha* depicting Śiva as *Gajāsurasamhāra-mūrti* in the centre. The *mahāmaṇḍapa* is also square and has lathe turned pillars and an elevated floor in the centre. The railing of this *maṇḍapa* is noteworthy because it consists of narrative sculptures of *Rāmāyaṇa*, *Mahābhārata* and the *Bhāgavata*. This paper concentrates only on the *Bhāgavata* stories as seen in this temple. They are quite extensive, well told and relatively intact.

Altogether there are 24 panels of *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*. They are mainly highlighting the childhood stories of Lord Kṛṣṇa. They are seen on the north

and west faces of the *mukhamaṇḍapa*. In depicting the stories from Kṛṣṇa's life the sculptor has followed the descriptions given in *Harivaṁśa* and the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* (c. 10th century). The stories in the temple begin with Kaṁsa's court and ends with Akrūra accompanying Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma across the Yamunā on route to Mathura. Thus the series of panels of *Bhāgavata* story ends with Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma entering Mathura, the seat of Kaṁsa. The confrontation between Kṛṣṇa and Kaṁsa is not depicted further. The artists have left some empty space ahead of the last panel. It is interesting to note as to why the *Bhāgavata* story is not completed in the panel?

The Narrative Sculptures

The *Darabāra* of Kaṁsa (Fig.1)

The panel depicts Kaṁsa seated in his court receiving a group of subjects. The panel has altogether five persons including Kaṁsa, who is seated on a lotus-shaped throne. The other standing figures hold sword and elongated shield.



Fig.1



Fig.2

Devakī's labour (Fig.2)

The second panel depicts Devakī lying in the chamber accompanied by females and guards. This is the scene which highlights the birth of Kṛṣṇa. Like earlier panel once again the two guards are seen holding sword and shield in their hands. Their presence indicates prison wherein Kṛṣṇa was born.

Vasudeva bows to a Donkey (Fig.3)

The third panel is quite an interesting one. Because Vasudeva is shown begging a donkey not to bray so that Kamsa would not learn of the birth of Kṛṣṇa. This is apparently a local version that does not appear in *Bhāgavata* or any other standard works of Kṛṣṇa Carita. So the sculptor must have taken it either



Fig.3

from the village story teller or learnt if from the elderly folk of the village.⁴

The scene depicts Devakī with baby Kṛṣṇa, seated on a couch and surrounded by attendants. The guards are shown with shield and sword looking at each-other. To the left is seen the donkey. In front of him, Vasudeva⁵ prostrates himself as if praying.

Durgā (Baby) escapes Kamsa's slaughter (Fig.4)

The next panel shows Devakī on the couch and a flying figure on the upper left corner, probably Durgā Vindhyaśinī. A water-pot and a box are visible under the couch. The scene is mutilated and hence difficult to identify the other figures.



Fig.4

Baby Kṛṣṇa taken across Yamunā (Fig.5)

In this panel Vasudeva, followed by two figures bearing sword and shield, is carrying newly born baby Kṛṣṇa to Gokula. River Yamunā is shown in a form of strip of water filled with fishes and tortoise. The artist has tried to give a bird-eye view of the swollen river Yamunā. But what is interesting here that Vasudeva is accompanied by two attendants holding sword and shield. This is surprising because according to *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* Kṛṣṇa was secretly carried to Gokula.



Fig.5

The *gopas* and *gopīs* receiving Kṛṣṇa (Fig.6)

Vasudeva* is shown in the lower right corner of the panel holding baby



Fig.6

Kṛṣṇa. To make the viewer know that it is Gokula the artist has tried to depict row of cows in three tiers. In the middle part a flutist, with two *gopas*, a *tambūrā* player and a drummer are present from left to right. The artist has tried to show a jovial movement of arrival of baby Kṛṣṇa to Gokula.

* This figure should be identified as Nanda, not Vasudeva, because Vasudeva had already left Gokula with the

newly born daughter of Yaśodā. (Editors)

Yaśodā receives Kṛṣṇa (Fig.7)

The Immediate next panel depicts Vasudeva (should be Nanda, not Vasudeva) handing over baby Kṛṣṇa to Yaśodā who is seated on a couch. The artists again tried to depict cows in the panel so that one can realize that the scene is taking place in Gokula.

Kṛṣṇa is placed in a cradle (Fig.8)

A beautiful cradle is suspended from the ceiling with the help of ropes steady by a

gopī.

The scene

is witnessed by three *gopīs* on left and a row of cows. On the right hand side one can see how Yaśodā is trying to place baby Kṛṣṇa inside the cradle. Behind her stands another *gopī*. All the *gopīs* are wearing *sārīs* and their ears are adorned with *vṛtta kuṇḍala*. The cows, two with calves again indicate Gokula.



Fig.7



Fig.8

From here onwards the artist has tried to depict how baby Kṛṣṇa slaughtered some of the demons. At the same time the artists also tried to highlight the childhood naughtiness of baby Kṛṣṇa.

The Śakaṭāsura-samhāra (Fig.9)

The scene depicts Śakaṭāsura in the form of a cart (*śakaṭa*). Baby Kṛṣṇa is kicking the cart, which toppled because of the divine strength of Lord Kṛṣṇa. On



Fig.9

the right side the demon appears in human form. The whole scene is witnessed by cows and bulls of Gokula.

Kṛṣṇa slays Pūtanā (Fig.10)

According to *Bhāgavata* story, Kāṁsa sends demoness Pūtanā to kill baby Kṛṣṇa. The demoness comes in the form of a beautiful woman and tries to feed baby Kṛṣṇa with her poisonous milk. But instead, baby Kṛṣṇa suckles poisonous milk and kills Pūtanā. Finally, Pūtanā comes to her real form and dies.

Here the panel shows a few details. Pūtanā is seated on a couch and baby Kṛṣṇa is seen sitting on her lap suckling her breast. On the other side corner Pūtanā is present with a shield and sword wearing a decorated *vr̥tta kuṇḍala*.



Fig.10

Kṛṣṇa slays the Stork (Bakāsura-vadha) (Fig.11)

From this panel onwards the artists tried to depict some of the demons



Fig.11

killed by Kṛṣṇa. Since as a young boy Kṛṣṇa kills all these demons, in the panels he is shown as toddler wearing typical toddler's cloth that is still prevalent in South India. He is presented with *kaṭisūtra*, small jingling bells and few other ornaments.

The panel depicts Kṛṣṇa grasping Bakā's beak. The figure to the right could be the demon original. The artist also carved three trees on the background at

the upper level, suggesting *vana* (forest) as the place of action.

Kṛṣṇa slays the Calf throwing it at a tree (*Vatsāsura-vadha*) (Fig.12)

Kṛṣṇa is shown holding a calf by its hind legs and throwing it up to a tree. At the bottom of the panel is seen the demon Vatsāsura in his real form with a shield and sword in hand.

Kṛṣṇa fights the Cocks (Fig.13)

In *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* there is no reference of Kṛṣṇa fighting with cock.



Fig.12

Though in this panel Kṛṣṇa is holding two birds in his two hands (identified as cocks).⁶ It is quite confusing. The scholars are of the opinion that it may be one such series which shows Kṛṣṇa's miraculous defeat of demons in his early childhood. The defeated demon with a sword and shield lies prostrate in the lower left corner and two subsidiary figures bearing sword



Fig.13

and shield witness the scene. The artist has tried to depict the suspended tree branches above.

Kṛṣṇa uproots the twin Arjuna trees (Fig.14)

In this panel baby Kṛṣṇa with his foot, tied to a mortar (*ulūkhala*) is crawling through the trees. It actually refers to two imprisoned Guhyakas who got released from their curse from



Fig.14

Nārada with breaking of the trees. A lady is shown watching the same behind the Arjuna tree.

Yaśodā scolding Kṛṣṇa for eating dirt (Fig.15)

Kṛṣṇa is seated with his hand in the mouth while Yaśodā is standing in front of him with a stick and raised forefinger. Another *gopī* is witnessing the event. The artist has tried to carve river Yamunā to make it clear that the incident is taking place in Gokula.



Fig.15



Fig.16

Kṛṣṇa stealing butter (Fig.16)

Here Yaśodā is churning curd for butter and baby Kṛṣṇa hiding himself behind the upright is trying to steal the butter from the churning pot.

Kṛṣṇa plunders vessels suspended from the ceiling (Fig.17)

Kṛṣṇa is stealing butter from the pots suspended from the ceiling. Being the main figure Kṛṣṇa is in a bold form standing on a mortar. The *gopīs* are watching the event and Yaśodā is scolding Kṛṣṇa for his act.



Fig.17

Kṛṣṇa subdues Kāliya (Fig.18)

In this panel the famous Kāliya-*mardana* story is depicted. Kṛṣṇa in the centre is dancing on Kāliya's head holding his tail with his left hand. The Nāginīs are present in *añjali-mudrā*. The scene is also witnessed by other *gopas* in *añjali-mudrā* shown behind the tree and aquatic animals in the water. Kṛṣṇa's right hand is in *abhaya-mudrā*. He is wearing *kaṭisūtra*, anklets, *hāras* and a *kirīṭa*.



Fig.18

Kṛṣṇa as Veṅugopāla (Fig.19)



Fig.19

Kṛṣṇa is standing in *svastika-mudrā* playing *veṅu* (flute) along with his adorers cows and *gopas*. In three registers on each side of Kṛṣṇa, one can see the cows listening to the flute of Kṛṣṇa and *gopas* and *gopīs* are mesmerized by the divine sound of the flute. Kṛṣṇa is adorned with many conventional ornaments like jewelled crown. Interestingly, on the left hand upper tier there are two human figures – one holding an offering

bowl and another standing behind him.

Govardhanadhārī Kṛṣṇa (Fig.20)

Lord Kṛṣṇa is lifting Govardhana with his left hand. On the top of the mountain beautiful flora and fauna is seen. Below, the cows are present with their calves and other *gopas* and *gopīs* in two tiers. Lord Kṛṣṇa is depicted with all traditional ornaments.



Fig.20

Kṛṣṇa slays the Bull
(Ariṣṭāsura-vadha) (Fig.21)

This is a beautiful panel arranged in the tier. In the centre Kṛṣṇa is fighting a humped Bull. The whole scene is being witnessed by *gopas* and *gopīs* standing on the right and the herd of cows on the left. The cows are beautifully carved superimposing one another.



Fig.21



Fig.22

**Kṛṣṇa slays the Horse (Keśī-
vadha) (Fig.22)**

This panel shows Kṛṣṇa encountering with the horse demon (Keśī). Unfortunately, due to weathering action the scene is damaged very badly. Kṛṣṇa is kicking the horse with his right foot and people are watching him. Some of them are holding clubs in their hands and some are in *añjalī-mudrā*.

Akrūra takes Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma across the Yamunā (Fig.23)

The scene reveals a procession of two horse-drawn carts traversing across the panel from right to left. The first cart shows a seated figure identified as Akṛūra followed by the second cart wherein Kṛṣṇa and Balarāma are standing in *samabhaṅga*. Beautiful decorated royal umbrella is held above the figures. Kṛṣṇa is *caturbhuja* having *padma* in the lower right hand and *gadā* in the lower left hand. Unfortunately, both the upper hands are effaced badly; hence it

is difficult to identify the attributes in them. The figure of Balarāma is also damaged beyond recognition but one can see a bow hanging behind his shoulder.

This is the last panel in the series of *Bhāgavata*, though there were few more panels but they are left un-carved.



Fig.23

Discussion

Now coming to the cultural aspects of these narratives, the artist has made use of local culture. This can be seen in a typical *sāri* worn by the female figures, however, they are adorned with various ornaments, especially the *vr̥ttakunḍalas*. They are also adorned with bangles, shoulder ornaments (*bhujakīrtis*) and *hāras*, etc., whereas the men show waist-cloth up to the knees and decorated with ornaments like *kunḍalas* and *hāras* and many have elongated headgear which looks like a *kirīṭa*.

The most important musical instruments depicted in these narrative sculptures are flute, *vīṇā*, drum, *bugal*, *mṛdaṅga*, etc.

In the whole series of the narratives, the artist has emphasized only the use of elongated shields and swords and occasionally we come across the use of clubs. The shields are beautifully decorated with different designs.

Conclusion

The narrative scenes are more static, though efforts have been made to show the movement but it is not emphasized properly. There are more of symbolic gestures. The intention of the artists seems to highlight the Kṛṣṇa's divine power. The artists have tried to utilize the available space in a clever way and wherever necessary they have solved the problem by carving the figures in two or three tiers. Thus, the way the episodes are depicted, it speaks of the liberty of the artists in selecting and narrating the scenes.

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