

## Mattavāraṇa : A Key Word for Understanding the Significance of the Torāṇa in South Asian Art

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The story of torāṇa, the Sanskrit word for a type of entrance, is as old as the history of architecture and sculpture in India. The torāṇa's earliest appearance is found at the facade of the Lomash Rishi cave (Fig.1), which is indeed a sculptural representation of a free-standing superstructure prevalent during the Maurya emperor Aśoka's time (272-231 BCE) and perhaps even earlier. Because the architrave of the torāṇa is flanked by two makaras from the very beginning of its appearance, such an entrance is also known as a makara-torāṇa. Representation of the makara-torāṇa in architecture, sculptures and paintings remained popular throughout the history of South Asian art beyond religious boundary. Artists from many different countries in Asia found the torāṇa and its representation in artistic works fascinating and aesthetically pleasing.

Recently, I came across a sumptuously illustrated new work, *The Torāṇa in Indian and Southeast Asian Architecture* by Parul Pandya Dhar.<sup>1</sup> As soon as I saw the book at the university library here in Madison, Wisconsin, I grabbed it and began to read with the expectation that the author must have expressed his views regarding some of the questions I raised in my works directly or indirectly related to the torāṇa.<sup>2</sup> Unexpectedly, however, the author of the new book does not seem to be familiar with my works. His study is actually a survey of the vast subject, covering the entire range of the torāṇa's history. Such an endeavor is indeed appreciable, and I do realize that despite great scholarly efforts, often it becomes impossible to include all details in a monograph.

What I have explained in my earlier works can be summarized in following words : the mythical creatures and foliage motifs, frequently seen around the torāṇa, also appear at the Ajanta ceiling paintings because the torāṇa actually signifies the gateway to the atmospheric heaven; whereas the ceiling painting symbolically represents the auspicious appearance of various creatures and plants in the formation of cloud, known to the astrologers of ancient India as garbhakṣaṇa, 'the symptom of atmospheric gestation.' The present article is a

continuation of my earlier study regarding the concept of the atmospheric gate. Our investigation is based on the artistic representation of toraṇa as well as the proper understanding of the significance of the Sanskrit word mattavāraṇa, a technical term for the architrave of makara-toraṇa, and its association with mattavāraṇi, a pillared edifice endowed with such an architrave.

### The makara-toraṇa at the entrance of the Lomash Rishi Cave

The facade of the Lomash Rishi cave is adorned with four pairs of large elephants moving freely (Fig.1). They appear as emerging from the widely open mouths of the mythical creatures depicted at the squeezed ends of the panel, shaped like a rainbow. Three pilasters-like objects are shown interspersing the procession of the

elephants. This work may be the actual prototype of the makara-toraṇa, but not necessarily. It is a well-known fact that the entire structure of the Lomash Rishi cave is the sculptural representation of the pre-existing wooden superstructure standing on pillars, slightly battered inward to stabilize the structure.

Unquestionably, however, this is the earliest available example of the

makara-toraṇa, which is represented in later periods with multiple variations, most of the time replacing the moving elephants with lotus vine or foliage. Such foliage motif is known to the authors of the *Aparājita-prcchā* and *Nāṭyaśāstra* as *meghapatra* and *abhrapatra*, respectively.<sup>3</sup> Both of these Sanskrit words literally mean 'cloud foliage'.



Fig. 1 : Entrance to Lomash Rishi Cave  
Barabar Hills, India, c. mid-3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE

The water pot, called a *pūrṇa-kalāśa*, placed on the rooftop of the gateway of Lomash Rishi cave and the scene depicting makaras and moving elephants are also associated with the relevance of atmospheric water. This view is supported through various sources, such as Vedic and Buddhist literature and Indian theatrical tradition, including the architectural elements of the theater hall and works of art.

The twenty-fourth chapter of the Yajurveda Saṁhitā provides us with a long list of Vedic divinities and a large variety of sacrificial creatures. These creatures are considered to be appropriate for being sacrificed to various divinities, depending on the characteristics and responsibilities of the deity and the natural features of the creature. For example, frogs, the symbols of monsoon rain, are the sacrificial creatures for the cloud god Parjanya (parjanyaḥ maṇḍūkam). Likewise, mice are suitable for the earth deity Bhūmi (bhūmyai ākhūn), elephants for the Himalaya (himavate hasti) and śiśumāra (a variety of makara) for the sea god, Samudra. Nākra, another Sanskrit word for makara, is also prescribed for Varuṇa. In Vedic literature, Varuṇa is mentioned as a great god who is capable of controlling the seasons, including the monsoon cloud.<sup>4</sup>

According to the Ṛgveda (10.98.5-6), there are two oceans in the universe : uttara samudra and adhara samudra. Uttara samudra literally means 'the upper ocean', a Vedic expression for the monsoon cloud which is considered to be the counterpart of the terrestrial ocean called adhara samudra. The shower of rain, particularly torrential monsoon rain, connects these two oceans.

Although in the classical period, the concept of the cloud ocean seems to be mostly, but not entirely, forgotten, there is the story of Jalaśayana Viṣṇu who slumbers annually for the four months of the rainy season in the middle of ocean, called ekārṇava 'the single ocean'. Undoubtedly, this story is based on the hidden concept of two oceans and the phenomena of monsoon rain. More importantly, in classical period Indian art, Varuṇa is shown standing or seated on makara; hence, we do see a direct relation between the Vedic statements and the iconography of Indian art.

Despite such reasoning, due to the time difference between the Vedic period and Classical period, the Vedic statements still would not have been of much significance for our investigation of the makara-toraṇa if we did not have the following solid evidence regarding the symbolism of makara, which is found in the following stanza from the Nāṭyaśāstra :

śikhipiṇḍī kumārasya ūlupiṇḍī bhavecchriyaḥ /  
dhārāpiṇḍī ca jāhnavyāḥ pāśapiṇḍī yamasya tu //

(A peacock is the piṇḍī of Kumāra; a turtle(?) is the piṇḍī of Śrī; a dhārā is the piṇḍī of Gaṅgā, and a noose is the piṇḍī of Yama).

As I have explained in my earlier work, dhārā actually means rain water; hence, in classical Sanskrit, rain-cloud is known as dhārādhara and a raindrop dhārāṅkura, whereas in Vedic Sanskrit, the storm cloud Maruts are described as

dhārāvāra. But, in the Nāṭyaśāstra, the word dhārā is used for the animal vehicle of the river goddess Gaṅgā. This animal vehicle cannot be anything other than makara, not only because the creature is the undisputed animal vehicle of the goddess, but also because the story of the Gaṅgā's descent is based on the annual phenomenon of summer drought, which comes to an end with a dramatic downpour of monsoonal rain. Traditional pañcāṅga of India tells us that the Gaṅgā descends on the tenth day of the bright half of the Jyeṣṭha month. This is the time when pre-monsoonal rain is desperately expected for planting garbha-dhānya, 'rice seed'. Such annual phenomenon briefly mentioned in Kauṭilya's Arthaśāstra (9.1.12) as a dangerous situation.

Piṇḍī, on the other hand, is a technical term associated with a theatrical performance in which the actors representing the animal vehicles and attributes dance with the main gods or goddesses. For example, when Viṣṇu appears at the theater, he is accompanied by the five actors representing his animal vehicle, Garuḍa, and his four attributes, conch, wheel, club, and lotus. Such dance was known in ancient India as rāsa. Later, rāsa lost this original significance and became associated with Kṛṣṇa's dance with the milkmaids. The actors, who performed the dance along with the main deity as his or her attributes or animal vehicles, were designated as piṇḍī. One can visualize a glimpse of this type of theatrical performance with an observation of the āyudha-puruṣas depicted at the well-known sculptural representation of Anantaśayana Viṣṇu at Deogarh. In fact, such theatrical performance is the origin of the personified representations of divine attributes in Indic art. Thus, the Nāṭyaśāstra statement 'dhārāpiṇḍī ca jāhnavyāḥ' helps us to understand that the makara actually symbolizes the rainwater. It became the animal vehicle of the heavenly Gaṅgā because from the practical point of view related to agriculture, the celestial river is the seasonal rain.

The word dhārā, used as a synonym for makara, also explains a peculiar iconographic feature of the river goddess. In at least three examples of three-dimensional ivory sculptures from Begram, the river goddess, is shown with the water falling on her back (Fig.2). One of these sculptures, shown in



Fig. 2 : Three ivory sculptures representing the river goddess Gaṅgā Begram, Afghanistan, c. 1<sup>st</sup> century CE

Figure 3, shows the water descending from an inverted water pot, which can only be the rain pot known to Sanskrit literature as varṣasthāli.<sup>5</sup> But in all examples, the waterfall is connected to the body of makara, on which she is standing. The water fountains cascading from the makara sprout are still known to the Newars of the Kathmandu as dhārā, and we know for sure that these fountains symbolically represent the story of Bhagīratha and the descent of the celestial Gaṅgā, because it is customary to place an image of Bhagīratha immediately below the makara sprout (Fig.4).

Thus, it is not surprising that Bharata Muni chose to call the animal vehicle of the Gaṅgā a dhārā, rather than a makara. Very likely, in ancient Indian theater, the garment of the actor playing the mythical animal was decorated with a representation of a waterfall turning into the



Fig. 4 : Golden Makara fountain with the stone image of Bhagīratha below, Kathmandu, Nepal, dated

foliate tail of the makara. Thus, we can safely conclude that the depiction of two makaras on the facade of the Lomash Rishi cave and the architrave of so many Indian toraṇas of later periods originated from the concept of the celestial and terrestrial water.<sup>6</sup>



Fig. 3 : Ivory sculpture representing the river Goddess Gaṅgā, Begram, Afghanistan, c. 1<sup>st</sup> century CE

## Mattavāraṇa and Mattavāraṇī

The symbolic relationship of the makara with two oceans is also associated with our investigation into the toraṇa architrave known in Sanskrit literature as mattavāraṇa, 'the untamed wild elephant' that is undoubtedly named after the running elephants that appear not only in the Lomash Rishi cave (Fig.1) but also in the second century CE ivory carvings found in Begram, Afghanistan (Fig.5). The nomenclature remained intact for many centuries even after the wild

elephants were no longer depicted in the arch or architrave. Puṇḍarīka, the author of *Vimalaprabhā*, a commentary on *Kālacakra*, prescribes *mattavāraṇa* architraves to be delineated at the *torāṇas* of *maṇḍala* painting, which is indeed a painterly representation of a palace compound with *kūṭāgāra*, a principal superstructure in the centre of the compound, surrounded by walls and *torāṇa*. The relevant passage gives us a closer examination of the word *mattavāraṇa*<sup>7</sup> :

... aṣṭādaśabhāgaistriparaṃ torāṇamiti / tatra prathamapure ... stambhopari paṭṭikā dīrghatvena caturviṃśatyāṅgalā / tadupari ... mattavāraṇaṃ dīrghatvena ṣoḍaśārdhāṅgulam / ... savyāsavyaṃ torāṇastambhoparyākṛāntagaḥajasiṃhayugalaṃ mūrdhni śirasā darśayet / ... tadupari mūlamattavāraṇavad mattavāraṇaṃ dīrghatvena dvādaśārdhāṅgulam / ... bāhyastambhayoḥ savyāsavyaṃ śālabhañjikāṃ kuryāt / ... tadupari mattavāraṇaṃ pūrvavat ...

“(the artist should render) a three stories high *torāṇa* consisting of eighteen units. Above the pillars of the first story, the *torāṇa* should have a twenty-four *āṅgula* long *paṭṭikā* (a panel decorated with *ratnas* 'jewels' and *hāra* 'pearl garlands'). Immediately above the *paṭṭikā*, (the artist should depict) sixteen and a half *āṅgula* long *mattavāraṇa*. ... Either side of the *torāṇa*, lions surmounting the heads of the elephants should be depicted above the pillars. ... On top of (second *paṭṭikā*), twelve *āṅgula* long *mattavāraṇa* should be rendered in the imitation of (above mentioned) principal *mattavāraṇa*. ... Either side of the outer pillar of the *torāṇa*, *śālabhañjikās* should be represented. ... On top (of third *paṭṭikā*), just like before, (the painter) should delineate (one more) *mattavāraṇa*.”

Although the commentator apparently belongs to the 11th century, the various elements of *torāṇa*, such as *śālabhañjikās* and three layers of architraves, described in the text remind us of the 1st century BCE Sanchi *torāṇas* and the representations of similar *torāṇas* in the 2nd century CE Begram ivory carvings and the Kushan period Mathura stone sculptures. Neither *śālabhañjikā* nor multiple layers of *torāṇa* architraves are typically seen in the 11th or 12th century *maṇḍala* painting. Around this time, temple-like superstructures are seen at the four directional entrances of the Tibetan *thankā* or Newari *pauvā* paintings. Thus, we



Fig. 5 : Ivory carving showing an entrance, Begram, Afghanistan, c. 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE

can surmise that the technical terms, including *mattavāraṇa*, found in the commentary are not the author's invention but inherited from much earlier sources.

Our argument becomes more significant if we pay attention to the fact that the architectural unit endowed with such *mattavāraṇa* architrave was known to the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (2.63-64, 98; 3.69) as *mattavāraṇī*, '(an edifice) with *mattavāraṇa*.' This text on theatrical tradition of India is believed to be written around 2nd century CE or earlier. Although references to *mattavāraṇī* are found in several places in the treatise, the following is the most important passage directly related to our study :

raṅgapīṭhasya pārśve tu kartavyā *mattavāraṇī* /  
catustambhasamāyuktā raṅgapīṭhapramāṇataḥ // 2.63-64

(The theater hall should be flanked by a *mattavāraṇī*, erected on four pillars and well proportioned in accordance with the size of the theater).

Almost certainly, this edifice, like so many religious and secular buildings depicted in the 2nd or 1st century BCE stone carving, originated from the freestanding wooden architecture of the Maurya period, with the Lomash Rishi cave being a representation of such architecture.<sup>8</sup> Note the fact that *mattavāraṇī* is described here as a superstructure standing on four pillars. This reminds us of the facade of the Lomash Rishi cave showing the solid pillars slightly battered inward, which is practical for wooden structure, not for monolithic representation of the structure seen at the facade of the cave.

According to Abhinavagupta, two of such *mattavāraṇī* edifices flanked the main theater hall (*nāṭyamaṇḍapa*). Bharata Muni, the author of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, does not clearly refer to the number of the edifices, but prescribes to build the main theater hall in two stories (*dvibhūmi*) and suggests designing the upper story after *śailaguhā*, 'the cave of the rocky hill' (*Nāṭyaśāstra*, 2.80). Undoubtedly, this architectural unit designed after the cave was identical to so-called *caitya* windows or *candraśālā*, which are frequently seen in Indian art, particularly in the stone carving of Karle and Ajanta cave.

According to the *Amarakośa*, the well-known text on Sanskrit synonym and gender, *candraśālā* is built on the upper story of a building. Further, if we compare the windows with the 1st century BCE representation of Indra's *śailaguhā* (Fig.6), it becomes easier to



Fig. 6 :Indra-*śailaguhā*, Bodh Gaya India, c. 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE

understand how candraśālā is related to 'the cave of the rocky hill.' Although candraśālā is a window, its shape and form actually derives from the Lomash Rishi cave type of entrance. In ancient Indian architecture, the design and shape of windows and gates bore many more similarities than differences.

Thus, it is possible to have some idea regarding the appearance of the ancient theater hall of India. In multiple examples, we do find a main building flanked by two edifices whose entrances bear similarity with the arched doorway of the Lomash Rishi and gateways depicted in the Begram ivory carving. Very likely the prekṣāgrha, the entire theater described in the Nāṭyaśāstra, was not much different from the representation of the freestanding architectural unit shown in a stone sculpture from Sanchi that we have illustrated here (Fig.7).



Fig. 7 : Stone sculpture showing a superstructure with a candraśālā flanked by two mattavāraṇīs Sanchi, India, c. 1<sup>st</sup> century

## Unrestrained Elephants

At the Lomash Rishi and Begram ivory carving, the representations of moving elephants are interspersed by three pillar-like objects with ropes encircled around them. In Indian art history, the objects are often interpreted as Buddhist, Jaina or Ājīvaka stūpas with medhis.<sup>9</sup> I have difficulty in accepting this view, because the elongated shapes of the stūpa and medhi are representative of the later development that began to appear only after the 1st century CE. Both these

elements, the medhi and elongated shape, are completely missing from the 2nd century BCE Sanchi stūpa (Fig.8). These pillar-like objects are actually the wooden posts to which the



Fig. 8 : Stūpa II, Sanchi, India, c. 2<sup>nd</sup> century



tamed elephants are tied. Such posts are described in Sanskrit and Vedic Sanskrit as ālāna and aulāna, respectively. It is also known in Pali literature as ālāna or alāhana. The posts and rope, not connected with moving elephants, indicate that the animals are not tamed elephants but the uddāma diggaja, or 'unrestrained elephants of the atmospheric directions.' Although such statement is also found in Kālidāsa's Raghuvamśa (1.78), originally it is a Pali expression.<sup>10</sup> The word uddāma literally means 'beyond ropes', which is sculpturally translated in the architrove, juxtaposing the posts bound with ropes and elephants detached from the ropes. Evidently therefore, the Pali expression is synonymous with the mattavāraṇa, which literally means 'the untamed wild elephant', but became a technical term for the toraṇa architrove because such elephants are shown there.

Ancient India believed that in the atmosphere and ground there is an object called dakārgala, or 'a bolt (or a post) that controls both celestial and terrestrial water', which is also a title of a chapter in the Bṛhatsamhitā of Varāhamihira, the renowned astronomer of the 6th century. Such water posts are also associated with the story of the atmospheric elephants, responsible for making rain. According to the legend of the elephant found in the first chapter of the Hastyāyurveda, a treatise on the health of the elephant, these large animals manifest as the cloudscapes in the sky. As soon as they descend to the earth, they turn into elephants, but their bodies still remain soaking wet and puffy like rain clouds. The people of India, including the king, had difficulty identifying the cloud elephants either as creatures or rain-clouds when these animals descended to earth for the first time. These elephants occasionally created problems by making too much rain. In these cases, they needed to be restrained. Therefore, the Ṛgvedic hymn (10.30), although composed for making rain, ask the rain gods not only for rain but also erecting an elephant post, or aulāna, in the heavens.<sup>11</sup> Thus, we have good reason to believe that the elephants depicted on makara-toraṇas are the atmospheric elephants, wild and unrestrained, but responsible for making seasonal rain; hence, they are auspicious. As a matter of fact, Varāhamihira in his work Bṛhatsamhitā (79.7) suggests that an artist should start his work only after having a darśana of a mattavāraṇa. Undoubtedly, he means the toraṇa architrove, rather than the dangerous wild elephants in a deep forest.

## Conclusion

With these observations we can safely deduce following points :

1. Symbolically, the makaras depicted on the facade of the Lomash Rishi cave are associated with the concept of the celestial and terrestrial water. The makara was also known as dhārā because this mythical creature signifies the rainwater.

2. The toraṇa architraves were called mattavāraṇa, the 'intoxicated elephants', undoubtedly because in Ancient India it was customary to decorate the toraṇa with the images of such freely moving elephants.
3. These 'intoxicated elephants' of the atmosphere are described in both Pali and Sanskrit literature as uddāma 'beyond rope'. This expression was artistically rendered in the toraṇas by juxtaposing the elephants and the post with ropes.
4. Due to their association with rainwater, the representation of the elephants at the architraves was considered auspicious.
5. The edifices that have the mattavāraṇa architraves were known as mattavāraṇī. Such edifices are repeatedly depicted in ancient Indian art. The theater hall of ancient India was also flanked by one or two the mattavāraṇī superstructures.
6. Almost certainly, the Lomash Rishi cave is designed after the wooden structure of a mattavāraṇī.

## References

1. Parul Pandya Dhar, *The Toraṇa in Indian and Southeast Asian architecture*, New Delhi, D.K. Printworld (P) Ltd, 2010.
2. Gautama V. Vajracharya, 'Painted History : The Tulādāna Ceremony in a Medieval Nepalese Palace,' *Orientalia* 34, no.10 (December 2003), pp.47-51; 'Atmospheric Gestation : Deciphering Ajanta Ceiling Paintings and Other Related Works,' pt.1, *Marg* 55, no.2 (December 2003), pp.41-57; pt.2, *Marg* 55, no.3 (March 2004), pp.40-51; 'Meet the Genies from Kathmandu,' in Pratapaditya Pal (ed.), *Nepal : Old Images, New Insights*, Mumbai, Marg Publications, 2004, pp.106-115.
3. Reference to meghapatra is found in the *Aparājitaṭṭhā*, see Vajracharya, 'Atmospheric Gestation...', pt.I, *Marg* 55, no.2 (December 2003), p.45. Recently, I found more evidence on this subject. The author of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (23.212-213) prescribes to decorate the crown of the divinities with abhrapatra 'cloud foliage', which can be no other than the familiar foliage motif repeatedly used for decorating the crown including the cloud god Indra's miter like royal crown.
4. Gautama V. Vajracharya, 'Symbolism of Ashokan Pillars : A Reappraisal in the Light of Textual and Visual Evidence,' *Marg* 51, no.2 (December 1999), p.56.
5. *Ibid.*, 59-64.
6. It is important to note that very likely the rainbow like panel between two makaras of the toraṇas actually represents the phenomena of rainbow. According to the Newars of the Kathmandu valley the rainbow is the link between the earth and atmosphere. It appears in the sky when the invisible deities draw the water from the earth to the sky (dyayā lah sāgu). This story does not seem to be local interpretation of the Newars because astrologers of ancient India (*Bṛhatsamhitā*, 30.8, 47.23, 54.94) inform us that the appearance of the rainbow forecasts the shower of rain in near future. They also tell that ground water will be found in the earthly region touched by the rainbow.

7. Samdhong Rinpoche (ed.), *Vimalaprabhā*, part 2, Varanasi, Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies, 1994, pp.46-48.
8. For many decades, *mattavāraṇī* has been the subject of debate among the Sanskrit scholars specialized in the Indian theatrical tradition. To my knowledge, however, no Sanskrit scholar made any attempt to solve the problem comparing the textual information with the contemporaneous examples of Indian architecture depicted in stone sculptures.
9. P.K. Agrawala, 'On the Identity of Architectural Form Depicted in the Lomas Rishi Facade,' in Devangana Desai and Arundhati Banerji (ed.), *Kalādarpaṇa*, The Mirror of Indian Art, Essays in Memory of Shri Krishna Deva, New Delhi, Aryan Books International, 2009, pp.3-7.
10. Pali Canon Online Database, Pali Canon : History1 , Mhv, book 1, record 17875 <http://www.bodhgayanews.net/pitakareults.php>.
11. During the Vedic period, when early Brāhmaṇa literature such as the Jaiminiya Brāhmaṇa, was composed, elephants were indeed domesticated. The Brāhmaṇa text clearly mentions that when an elephant gets up from the ground it rises together with the howdāh (*hastyāsanam*). Because there is no reason to doubt that etymologically *aulāna* is Ṛgvedic version of classical Sanskrit *ālāna*, Pali *ālāna* or *ālāhana*, I am of the opinion that elephants were tamed even when the tenth maṇḍala of the Ṛgveda was composed. Note also the fact that *ula* or *ulū* literally means wood, stump or trunk as in *ulūkhala* 'a wooden mortar' or *ulūka* 'one which has a nest in the trunk, an owl.'

### Photo Courtesy

- Fig.1 : Huntington Archive.
- Fig.2 : Jean-Francois Jarrige, et. al., *Afghanistan les trésors retrouvés Collections du musée national de Kaboul*, Paris : Musée national des Arts asiatiques-Guimet, 2007, p.284.
- Fig.3 : Huntington Archive.
- Fig.4 : Gudrun Buhnemann.
- Fig.5 : Huntington Archive.
- Fig.6 : Huntington Archive.
- Fig.7 : ACSAA, Michigan.
- Fig.8 : Author.