

Gajendramokṣa Sculptures From Hampi

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Hampi, is now a small village, situated (Lat. 15⁰-20' N and Long.70⁰-30' E) on the southern bank of the river Tuṅgabhadrā, in Hospet taluk, Bellary district of Karnataka.¹ The word Hampe or Hampi is generally held to be a later Kannada form of the ancient term Pampā. During the medieval period, Hampi was also known as *Pampākṣetra*,² *Bhāskarakṣetra*,³ *Pampā Tīrtha* (of the *Rāmāyaṇa* fame),⁴ *Pampā*,⁵ and so on. References to the site in inscriptions, copper plate grants and literary works are numerous. A poetical account describes that "its rampart was Hetnakūṭa, its moat the auspicious Tuṅgabhadrā, its guardian the world protector Virūpākṣa, its ruler the great king of kings, Hariharah".⁶

Even before founding of Vijayanagara, this place was a centre of human activities right from the Pre-Historic times and was a part of kingdoms of the Kadambas, the Chalukyas of Badami, the Rashtrakutas, the Chalukyas of Kalyanī, the Hoysalas, the Kalachuris and the Yadavas, untill it became the capital city of the mighty Vijayanagara empire. With the establishment of the Vijayanagara kingdom Hampi acquired greater political importance and emerged as one of the leading cities of the medieval period. In the later inscriptions, Hampi is referred to by various names as Virūpākṣapura, Hampe, Hosapattana, Vidyāraṇya and Vijayanagara, The Portuguese travellers who visited this place called Beejnuggar.

There are various legends in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* from which interesting concepts or motifs have been taken up for representations in sculptures. The story of Gajendramokṣa⁷ is one such narrative. According to *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, one Gajendra went to sport with his wives in a beautiful lake in the Trikūṭa mountain, when his leg was caught by a fierce crocodile 'grāha' and started dragging into the deep waters of the lake. In spite of his efforts, he could not free himself from the terrific animal, so he intensively prayed to Lord Viṣṇu to free him from the clutches of the monster. Viṣṇu in answer to his prayers, hurried on his *vāhana* Garuḍa and killed the *grāha* with his *cakra*. The later was none other than the Gandharva king Huhū, who was curshed by the sage Devala to be born as a crocodile.

Huhū was also freed from the curse and regained his previous form after the destruction of the crocodile form. The Purāṇa says that Gajendra was the old Pandya king Indradyumna in one of his previous births. He was cursed by the sage Agastya to be born as an elephant. The king was also released from his elephantine state of existence through the touch of Viṣṇu and was received by him as one of his bodyguards.

Gajendramokṣa is one of the most important exploits of Viṣṇu, for which a prominent crown as a symbol of laurels is held up over his head. He is also known as Varadarāja, which means 'king among boon bestowers' and is so called because he saved and bestowed boons upon Gajendra, the elephant king. As a deliverer of Gajendra, Viṣṇu is praised in several places in the *Divyaprabhanda* of Vaiṣṇava saints of South India and the temple of Varadarāja Swāmy at Kanchi in Tamil Nadu is one of the famous temples dedicated to Viṣṇu. The earliest shrines of the temple, containing the Gajendravarada form of Viṣṇu, has been praised in songs by the great Vaiṣṇava Alvars. The whole episode frame expression in elaborate verses specially in one of Tirumangai Alvar's hymns in which the details of the incident such as the elephant collecting flowers from a tank for *pūjā*, being caught by a crocodile, his fervent appeal to Nārāyana-Viṣṇu and the god hurrying to his succour and killing the crocodile with his *cakra* are narrated.⁸ The *Tāmraparṇī Māhātmya*, a late *Sthala Purāṇa*, also gives the story.⁹

Gopinatha Rao has cited two medieval sculptures of Varadarāja, one from Karnataka and other from Tamil Nadu.¹⁰ He describes "Here, Viṣṇu is seen riding on the shoulders of Garuḍa, with *cakra* in his back right hand which is lifted up, the *saṅkha* in the back left hand and the *gadā* in the front right hand. The uplifted hand is supposed to be in the act of hurling the *cakra* against the crocodile which had caught hold of the leg of the elephant Gajendra. The feet of Viṣṇu rest upon the hands of Garuḍa. Below Garuḍa is to be found the affected Gajendra praying to Viṣṇu with its uplifted trunk carrying a lotus. The crocodile is apprehending with its powerful teeth the legs of Gajendra, on its back is seen sculptured the *cakra* of Viṣṇu and a human figure seated with crossed legs and with hands held in *añjali mudrā*. The *cakra* is sculptured on the back of the crocodile to convey the idea that it had killed the crocodile and that the human figure represented the Gandharva who was relieved from his existence as a crocodile. The water of the tank is shown in the conventional way by means of wavy lines".

This beautiful story has given rise to the concept of Viṣṇu as Karivarada or Gajendravarada and it forms the theme of one of the most remarkable sculptural

representations in the 6th century Gupta temple at Deogarh.¹¹ Here, the *grāha* is not the crocodile or *makara*, as mentioned in the *Bhāgavata Purāna*, but a huge Nāga or Nāgarāja in the human form upto the waist and that of serpent coil below. The Nāga or snake could also be the divine personality.

The story of Gajendramokṣa is narrated more interestingly in sculptures at Paṭṭadakal¹² in Bagalkot District. Here, the monster is transformed into a great tortoise, instead of crocodile or snake according to mythology. The *Kūrma* or tortoise also has enormous strength and this episode is of an elephant and a tortoise engaged in a mortal fight in the waters of a huge lake. The legend of fight between elephant and tortoise is narrated in *Rāmāyaṇa*, where one is trying to pull the other into the water and the other on to the land respectively.

The earliest reference of the elephant caught by an aquatic monster is found in the *Kakkata Jātaka* of the Pālī literature, which is however styled in the label for sculpture from Bharahut, in Madhya Pradesh, as *Nāga Jātaka*. The story of *Kakkata Jātaka* is of 2nd century B.C.E. and Mr. Rhys David has pointed out that the text of the *Jātaka* could be very much earlier and certainly had variations by the time the Bharahut sculptures were carved,

Few sculptures of Gajendramokṣa from Hampi are described below :

The story of Gajendramokṣa is depicted in three sequences on a pillar in the *mukhamaṇḍapa* of Amman shrine within the Achyutarāya temple complex of Achyutapur at Hampi.

In the first scene an elephant standing on a pedestal, holds a lotus flower in its trunk. At the back of the elephant a crocodile, emerging out of lake's water, is holding the rear leg of elephant.

The second example shows four-armed Viṣṇu as Varadarāja riding on Garuḍa with *abhaya*, *varada*, *cakra* and *śaṅkha*. Garuḍa is flying in the air in kneeling posture.

In the third example (Fig. 13.1), Viṣṇu is represented as Varadarāja, standing in *dvibhaṅga* pose on an oblong pedestal. Out of his four hands, lower right and left are placed on the head of the elephant standing in front of him. The upper ones hold a stylised *cakra* and *śaṅkha* in between the middle fingers. He wears a *kirīṭamukūṭa*, *kuṇḍalas* and other usual ornaments on the body.

Gajendra, the elephant, is shown standing on the same oblong pedestal bowing his



Fig.13.1: Gajendramoksha, Ammana shrine, Achyuta Temple



Fig.13.2: Gajendramoksha, mukhamandapa, Vitthala Temple



Fig.13.3: Gajendramoksha, Brahmā Temple



Fig.13.4: Gajendramoksha, outer wall, Hazara Rama Temple

head for the blessings of Viṣṇu. The story of Gajendrarnokṣa is beautifully depicted on three phases of the pillar although the details are not clear.

Varadarāja story or Gajendramokṣa is also depicted on a musical pillar capital of the *mahāmaṇḍapa* of Viṭṭhalaswāmī temple at Hampi. The sculpture shows an elephant standing with its front left leg raised and its back right leg is caught by crocodile in the water. The elephant is praying Viṣṇu for getting free from the clutches of crocodile. The elephant is decorated with bell ornaments on its body.

The same story is depicted on another two musical pillar capitals of the *mahāmaṇḍapa*. Here first scene shows Viṣṇu as Kārivarada, with Garuḍa *vāhana*. His four arms show *abhaya* and *varada-murdrā* in lower hands and *cakra* and *śaṅkha* in upper ones. He wears *kirītamukūṭa* and other usual ornaments. His feet are placed on the open palms of Garuḍa who is seated in *vīrāsana* on a pedestal. This scene shows Viṣṇu charging crocodile with his *cakra*, for releasing the elephant from its clutches. In the second scene Viṣṇu as Varadarāja with *kirītamukūṭa* and other usual ornaments, is standing in *dvibhaṅga* on a pedestal. His lower hands are placed on the head of elephant for blessing while upper hands show *cakra* and *śaṅkha*. On the top of the elephant, Gajendra appears in human form with lower hands held in *añjali-mudrā* and upper ones with *cakra* and *śaṅkha*.

The Gajendramokṣa (Fig. 13.2,3) episode is also depicted on the pillars of *mukhamaṇḍapa* of Brahmā temple. The first example shows elephant having a *padma* in the raised trunk requesting Viṣṇu to free him from the clutches of crocodile.

In the second example Viṣṇu as Varadarāja, with his *vāhana* shows four arms with *abhaya*, *varada*, *śaṅkha* and *cakra*. Garuḍa in *vīrāsana* wears *kirītamukūṭa*, other ornaments and *vanamālā*. The third scene (Fig.13.3) almost is same. Here two arms of Viṣṇu are placed on the head of an elephant while upper ones hold *cakra* and *śaṅkha*.

The scene depicted on the other wall of *sbhāmaṇḍapa* of Hazara Ramachandraswamy temple, Hampi shows Viṣṇu as Varadarāja in *sukhāsana*. His lower right hand shows *abhaya-mudrā* while the left one is placed on the head of elephant, Upper hands have *cakra* and *śaṅkha*.

In Gajendramokṣa scene of Viṭṭhalaswāmī temple, Hampi (Fig13.4), Viṣṇu stands in *dvibhaṅga* with four arms. His lower right hand is blessing the elephant and left hand is in *lola* pose. The upper hands hold *cakra* and *śaṅkha*. The elephant is standing in a submissive manner after being relieved from the clutches of crocodile.

References and Notes

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