

THE WORSHIP OF SAPTAMATRIKASIN THE SCULPTURE OF PALLAVAS

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Introductory:

Brahmi, Vaishnava, Mahesvari, Kaumari, Indrani, Varahi and Chamundias a group seems to be not much popular in Pallava period until the mid-8th century A.D., as known from the sculptural remains. The image of Chamundi at Mamallapuram, placed alongside other Saptamatrikas of later Pallava period, on the basis of its gigantic size, simple dress and ornamentation, can be regarded as one of the earliest sculptural creations of this period. As no other sculpture in this group matches with Chamundi in its proportion and style, it can also be interpreted as a goddess of local importance, worshiped in solitary without any affiliation with the Saptamatrika cult. Except this image of Chamundi, there is no further evidence of this cult in any rock-cut cave temples and monolithic rathas till the time, when Narasimhavarman II Rajasimha, incorporated the Saptamatrika group as a whole in one of the angalaya in the Kailasanatha temple at Kanchipuram. Separate temples dedicated to Saptamatrikas can be seen in the time of Dantivarman, as gleaned through an inscription of his reign in the Selliyamman temple at Alambakkam¹ (Tiruchchirappalli district).

Main Theme: Sculptural panel of Saptamatrikas can also be seen fixed on the inner wall of the Svastika tank at Tiruvellari, belonging to the same period. The Virattanesvara temple at Tiruttani (Tiruvallur district) of the reign of Aparajitavarman preserves a unique Saptamatrika group, which for the first time displays the mount for respective matrikas on the pedestal. Normally this feature seems to be the usual practice in the area ruled by the Chalukyas². Representation of Sarasvati in the art of this period is seen only twice. For the first time She is depicted in the southern niche of the mandapa wall in the Kailasanatha temple at Kanchipuram and for the second time on the southern parapet wall of the steps leading into the adjunct sanctum, on the ground floor of the Sundaravaradaperumal temple at Uttiramerur. In the latter, She is depicted in a rare form resembling Gajalakshmi, with two elephants one on either side bathing Her with water. Two ascetics are also seen offering their salutations on either side. However, from the attributes in Her hand like kalasa , pustaka and aks h amala ,She can be identified as Sarasvati.

Among the gods, the worship of Ganesa also seems to be popular. Scholars like T. P. Minakshisundaram views that, the worship of Ganapati became popular in Tamilnadu only in the time of Narasimhavarman I, when his commander-in-chief Paranjoti, after successfully conquering Vatapi brought back an image of Ganapati and installed it in the temple at

Tiruchengattankudi (Tiruvarur district). This story is narrated often in support of the significance behind the name Vatapi Ganapati. But this view has been refuted by scholars like Arunachalam³, who traced the reference to Ganapati worship in the Sangam literature. The Nayanmar trio Appar, Sambandar and Sundarar refers to Gan/pati in their hymns and Sambandar in his Tevaram⁴ refers to the customary practice of installing an image of Ganesa in the niche on the southern wall of the ardhmandapa in a temple⁵. Even the Tiruchengattankudi temple, which was supposed to have been built by Paranjoti, was mentioned in the hymns of Appar⁶ known as Ganapatisvaram, i.e. the place where Ganapati worshipped Siva. The relationship of Ganesa with Siva also seems to have been well established by this time as known from the Tevaram⁷ hymn of Appar, wherein Siva was called as the father of Arumugan and Anaimugan. The popular belief of Ganesa as the removal of obstacles is also well known in the Tevaram hymns. It is interesting to note in this connection that Sankaracharya, a late contemporary of this period in his commentary to Bhagavadgita⁸ interprets the sect Bhu tavratas i.e. those who worship the spirits, as comprising three schools i.e. those who worship Vinayaka, the Matrugana (Saptamatrikas) and Chaturbhaginis (the four sisters). Thus, Sankaracharya groups Vinayaka as one of the bhutas. These bhutas are regarded as bhutaganas or attendants of Siva and Ganapati was the leader among them⁹. The earliest iconographical representation of Ganesa in the temples of Pallava period can be found from the the Ramanuja cave temple at Mamallapuram of the time of Paramesvaravarman I. He was portrayed along with other ganas as a freeze on the vallabhi portion of the facade. It is interesting that, Ganesa was again portrayed in a similar fashion in the adhithana portion of the Kailasanatha temple at Kanchipuram and also in the crest of the torana arch over the devakosthas, in spite of the fact He is represented as a deity in one of the niches of the temple. In both the cases, He was depicted as a two-armed pot-bellied gan a with the head of an elephant. He was also portrayed as a decorative element in the kudu arches over the kapota of Kshatriyasimhesvara shrine and on the miniature shrine in the tank adjacent to the Shore temple at Mamallapuram.

For the first time Ganapati is shown occupying the devakostha niches as a regular deity in the Piravatanesvara, Iravatanesvara and Kailasanatha temples of Kanchipuram of the time of Rajasimha. The same is followed in the subsequent creations, in the Muktesvara, Matangesvara, Tripurantakesvara temples at Kanchipuram of the time of Nandivarman II, Chandramoulisvara temple at Brahmadesam of the time of Kampavarman and Virattanesvara temple at Tiruttani of the time of Aparajitavarman, to name a few. He is also included as one of the devakostha deities in the purely Vaishnava temples like Adikesavaperumal temple at Kuram of the time of Dantivarman. As a later addition of the time of Nandivarman II, He is seen flanking the Vasantesvara cave temple at Vallam. In most of the early specimens, He is shown along with the Saptamatrika group as can be seen from the Kailasanatha temple at Kanchipuram. An interesting sculptural panel from Madari temple at Uttaramerur includes a four-handed image of Ganesa seated on a lotus pedestal along with the other deities like Brahma, Siva-linga, Parvati, Skanda, Vishnu and Srivatsa¹⁰. The images of Ganesa in this period are invariably of the valampuri type

i.e., with the trunk turned to the right and occupies the southern niche of the ardhmandapa. He may be sitting, standing or dancing. His weapons are the pasa, ankusa, danda, etc., and He often holds in His right hand a modaka.

Inscriptional evidence to the construction of a shrine dedicated to Ganesa in this period is found only in one case i.e. from Paramesvaramangalam, of the reign of Nrupatungavarman (circa 884 A.D.)¹¹. It mentions about the construction of a shrine and consecration of an image of Ganapati-bhatarar in the temple of Sailesvaram at Paramesvaramangalam, by a brahman a lady, who also provided 40 kadi of paddy as archanabhogam for providing food-offerings, maintenance of the lamps and to conduct worship in the temple. Thus, it is seen that the worship of Ganapati has not attained cultic status in the time of the Pallavas and initially He was regarded as one among the ganas of Siva and portrayed as such in the decorative friezes and only later on, probably due to the influence from the Chalukyan territory, where He became popular, Ganapati seems to have attained an identity as a separate deity and therefore came to be enshrined in the niches of the ardhmandapa of the main temple and in the sub-shrines.

Murugan or Seyon 'the red-hued one' of the Sangam fame has been and still continues to be one of the favorite gods of the people of this region. The nayanmars referred to Muruga by various names such as Sendan, Kumaran, Kadamban, Vel, Kandan, Murugavel, Saravanattan, Velan, Arumugan, etc.¹². From the extant archaeological evidences, it can be said that the earliest temple dedicated to this god was built at Saluvankuppam as far back as circa 6th century A.D.¹³ and it continued to receive the patronage of the Pallava kings up to the 9th century A.D. as known through the inscriptions of Nandivarman II, Nrupatungavarman and Kampavarman¹⁴. The earliest sculptural representation of Muruga in Pallava period is ambiguous. The deity on the back of an elephant adoring the eastern wall of the Arjuna-ratha at Mamallapuram has been variously identified as Skanda or Indra, as both have elephant as their mount. The neighboring apsidal Sahadeva-ratha based on its shape and the presence of a monolithic elephant nearby may be regarded as a Murugan shrine, but with an iota of doubt. Similarly, the deity seated in a howda on the back of two large elephants in the Yali mandapam at Saluvankuppam and also in a smaller Yali mandapam at Mamallapuram has been variously identified as either Skanda or Sakra. He is more popularly depicted in the cave temples of this period in the form of Brahmasata. The eastern wall of the first storey in Dharmaraja-ratha and the Trimurti cave temple at Mamallapuram portray Muruga in the form of Brahmasata. From the time of Paramesvaravarman I Muruga as a child can be seen in seated or standing posture in the Somaskanda panel which started adorning the rear walls of the cave temples and rathas and subsequently followed by Rajasimha in his structural creations. From an inscription¹⁵ of the time of Narasimharvarman II it is known that the Kandasvami temple at Tirupporur was already in existence by his time. Few loose sculptures dated to about 9th century A.D., depicting Him in seated posture was found from Kaverippakkam (now in Government museum, Chennai), Kilperumpakkam, Tiruvamattur and Tiruvorriyur also hints at the existence of sub-shrine dedicated to him¹⁶. Of these, the sculpture from Kilperumpakkam is of interest and can be

identified as of Subrahmanya. It is shown seated on a padmasana, holding in the upper hands the vajrayudha and akshamala thus, incorporating within the concept of Brahmasasta as well. Similarly, a standing image of Subrahmanya sharing the same attributes of weapon is found recently from the village Poondi (Tiruvannamalai district)¹⁷. Both these sculptures can be fairly regarded as of 9th century A.D. and can be identified as Subrahmanya. The discovery of Tiruttani copper plate grant of Aparajitavarman, (circa 904 A.D.)¹⁸ which describes the king as a devotee of Shangmuga facilitated to take back the antiquity of the Subrahmanya shrine at Tiruttani to the Pallava period. He is called perhaps for the first time as Subrahmanya in the Mallam inscription of Nandivarman II Pallavamalla (circa 746 A.D.)¹⁹. It is seen from the sculptural art of this period that mostly Muruga is portrayed as Brahmasasta or Somaskanda and later on as Subrahmanya only. Perhaps, the reason could be attributed to the fact that Muruga is more popular as a god of the common people and not of the royal elite, who got more attracted towards Durga as a war goddess rather than Muruga. As a result, it is possible that Muruga continued to be worshipped through the images carved out of perishable materials like wood and stucco. Brahma in early stages of Pallava art is never represented individually and was normally shown associated with either Siva or Vishnu, as a subordinate deity or represented as part of the concept of Trimurti. Even Brahma was superimposed by Skanda in His form as Brahmasasta. Separate angalaya for Brahma and His consorts is seen in the Kailasanatha temple at Kanchipuram. He is also seen represented on the sculptural panels found from places such as Mangadu, Uttaramerur, etc. Later on He is included in one of the devakostha niches as subsidiary deity in the structural temples of the period.

Minor deities, celestials, sages and asuras: In the sculptural representation of this period minor deities like Surya, Chandra, Dikpalaka, Chandesa, Ayudha-purusha, Garuda, Adisesha and Nandi; celestials like Kinnaras, Gandharva and Vidyadharas either in single or with consorts; several

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