Chapter - 3

NARRATIVE SCULPTURAL TRADITION IN EARLY KARNATAKA

The Earliest evidence of narrative art in Karnataka sculpture comes from the Buddhist site of Kanaganahalli near Sannati. Sannati has yielded major edicts of Asoka thus proving its importance during the Mauryan period. The Satavahana inscriptions refer to the Kanaganahalli stupa as Sakya Mahachaiya and Adholoka-mahachaitya. This indicates that the stupa there contained the relics of Sakyamuni Buddha himself. An inscribed portrait of Asoka and his queens (Fig. 3.1) at this site suggests the association of Asoka with the stupa there. Apparently the Kanaganahalli stupa was one of those numerous Mahastupas erected by Asoka in various parts of his empire after opening up the original eight stupas of Buddha. The form and the decorative aspects the original stupa of Asoka’s time cannot be visualized at present because it has undergone modifications and additions during the Satavahana period.

The Satavahanas had great attachment to the site of Kanaganahalli stupa, which they enlarged and beautified by providing gates, railings, veneerings etc. all decorated with relief sculpture. The Ayaga platforms were provided with four Ayaga thabas in each cardinal direction. The veneer stones, called patas in inscriptions, carried beautiful sculptured reliefs.

It is these veneer slabs that carry significant narratives pertaining to Dure-nidanas (previous births of Buddha or Jataka stories) and Avidure-nidanas (pertaining to Buddha’s life time). This apart there are several
sculptures of historical nature like prince Sata riding the chariot drawn by lions and Pulumavi crowning the king of Ujjaini.⁴

The Jataka stories include the *Suka-jataka, Hamsa jataka, Vidura Pandita Jataka, Sutasoma Jataka* etc. Similarly the episodes of the life of the Buddha include descent of the celestial white elephant from heavens, visit to *vriksha-chaitya, Maravijaya, Abhinishkramana, Mahaparinirvana*, the division of Buddha’s relics into eight parts, the descent of Buddha from *trayatrimsa* heaven and so on. Most often the presentation is symbolic, synoptic and rarely conforms to the techniques of continuous narration. There are clear evidences that the Sannati artist preferred monoscenic or sequential compartmented narrative technique. For instance the scenes like the ‘First Seremon’ (Fig. 3.4) are presented by showing a seven ringed pillar crowned by *Dharmachakra* with four deers seated below. A decorative panel (Fig. 3.2) contains three scenes each separated by the previous one by a pillar. In this a narration commences from the right where gods are shown holding a spread out cloth for receiving the babe Siddhartha, while Mayadevi stands under the tree. Apparently this scene represents the nativity of Buddha. The second panel represents a lady with followers holding a spread out piece of cloth showing it to the *Yaksa* of Kapilavastu. The latter is represented with folded hands under a tree on platform. The third panel represents the horse *Kanthaka* being led by Channa. The hoofs of the horse are supported by *Devas* in order to contain the sound of the horse’s steps. In each of these cases the presentation is direct without representation of the same character more than once. This may well be described as compartmented sequential narration.⁵

The post-Satavahana period saw a desertion of most of the urban sites that had flourished under the Satavanahas. Sannati’s case was no better. For reasons unknown, activities seem to have ceased at the site. Apparently the kind of archaeological evidence obtaining from 3rd century A.D. suggests preference to perishable material like wood and clay for architecture. Sculptural art in stone did continue, but sparingly. Vaisnava, Saiva and Jaina activities
were in the forefront, while Buddhism seems to have lagged behind. Numerous stone images of Narasimha⁶ (Fig. 3.7) Durgabhagavati etc., indicate the continuity of stone sculptural tradition. Each of was meant for enshrining in the sanctum and as such the narrative import in them is meagre. Stone sculptural tradition during Chalukyas of Badami, right from its inception, leads to the inference that sculptural narrative tradition in Karnataka had not died out with the Satavahanas. One is led to believe that such a tradition was strongly current in perishable medium, particularly wood.
Notes and References


4. Sannati has yielded very significant sculptures of historical and religious significance. But a detailed report is still awaited from the Archaeological Survey of India.


6. Kulkarni R.H., 2008, *Karnatakada Arambhika Shilpakale*, Karnataka Shilpakala Academy, Bangalore, Fig. 31-33.
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