



The Bracket Figures of Maha Vishnugriha at Badami

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Abstract :

Maha Vishnugriha of Badami is a cave temple excavated and consecrated by Mangalesa in the year 578 A.D., the twelfth regnal year of his elder brother Kirtivarma I of the Early Chalukya dynasty. The bracket figures of this cave temple are the earliest in the south and deserve special attention. Here is a brief survey of the same.

It is a known fact that brackets in wooden architecture existed from the very beginning of historic time and played an important role in strengthening the structure. The function of brackets is to support the beam and pillars. Gradually, a sense of beauty made the artists ornate them with various sculptures. Subsequently, by the virtue of this deep rooted practice, the tradition of bracket figures persisted in excavated caves and structural temples as well. Then apparently bracket figures are vestiges of the wooden architecture. The rock cut caves are monolithic and therefore these brackets being the part of the same rock remain almost non functional.

As pointed out earlier the main purpose of carving the bracket figures is it adds beauty to pillars and pilasters. Thus the bracket figures of Maha Vishnugriha are things of beauty. These being the earliest bracket figures in Karnataka, paved a new avenue to the subsequent sculptors. The tradition continued and reached its excellence during the Hoysala period.

Confining our study to the bracket figures of Maha Vishnugriha the following classification may be made for sake of convenience.

1. Amorous couples.
2. Individuals.
3. Mythological animals.

Let us explore these categories and view each of them from close quarters.

1. Amorous couples

The bracket figures under study are both secular and religious. However, both of them aim at an expression of amorous feeling. The word 'amorous' is used as an expression of sexual love ranging from mild gestures to sexual act. That there was a trend of depicting erotic figures in temples is noticed throughout the length and breadth of our country since 2nd century A.D. The Early Chalukya art was not an exception to this.

In Indian thought mithuna figures represent the union of prakriti and purusha. Hence the tradition of depicting figures of couple came into being. As such the figures of mithuna or maithuna need not be considered as obscene. Lord Krishna in his divine song assures that he is the very embodiment of righteous kama. So kama (eroticism) approved by dharma (religion) is treated as holy, as it is the very act of creation leading to the continuity of human race.

It is known to every Indian that kama is one of the four purusharthas. The amorous figures carved as a part of brackets in Maha Vishnugriha are representations of mithuna. Here one can notice tender amorous feelings expressed by dignified couples.

Agni Purana and Brihat Samhita prescribe mithuna sculpture for door decoration. Kamasutra, the first systematic work on erotics, is authored by Vatsayana who deals with various kinds of love making and other related aspects of sex. The bracket figures of Badami appear to be influenced by this text. It is also true that the sculptors were very much inspired by the literary works of the period which glorified bhoga or sexual enjoyment and shringara or erotic sentiment. Kalidasa the most revered Sanskrit poet in his epic poems like Raghuvamsha and Kumara Sambhava, has given adequate emphasis on the art of sex. Offering of wine has been a popular theme in Sanskrit literature. Kalidasa describes at length such scenes in his Meghadoota and Raghuvamsha. A kiss (chumbana) is found to be a well liked matter for Sanskrit writers. In Abhijnana Shakuntala, the king Dushyanta compares himself with a bee and expresses his desire of sucking nectar from the lower lip of his beloved. The same kind of feeling is poetically expressed in stone by Chalukyan sculptors.

While shaping an image of Parsvanatha or Ardhanarisvara an artist is confined to iconographical constraints but in carving bracket figures, especially that of human couple, he is free from traditional confinement. The Chalukyan sculptors had enough liberty to exhibit artistic excellence in these bracket figures.

The eaves of this cave provided a lot of room for paintings. As a matter of fact the entire verandah was painted. Traces of paintings are noticed even today. The scanty traces suggest that the painters used heavy and thick colours. Naturally the bracket figures must have been more enchanting when they were made colourful.

Now let us take a look around these figures of amorous couples carved on the brackets of Maha Vishnugriha. For the sake of our study we may categorize these as secular amorous couples and religious amorous couples.

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1.1 Secular Amorous Couples:

The sculptures showing human couples constitute this group. There are nine figures of this kind. Let us have a close look at these one by one.

1.1.1 Find spot: east pilaster, west side.

A man and a lady are standing under a tree full of flowers. Both of them wear rich ornaments including crowns. Having put their hands around each others neck they are enjoying closeness. The smiles and flowers suggest fragrance of life.

1.1.2 Find spot: pillar 2 from east, west side.

An aristocratic couple is standing under a mango tree which is suggestive of autumn of their life. The man, being skilled in love making is wooing the lady by caressing her breast. Her unbuckled cincture is indicative of her arousal. She in turn is reciprocating by loosening his lower garment.

1.1.3 Find spot: pillar 3, east side.

A tree full of flowers catches our attention. A lovely couple of royal stature is deep in conversation. The lady is shown as if posing a problem by putting her finger at her chin, which is a typical Indian style. The man in turn is waving his hand as if giving her a solace. It is a beautiful work of a master artist. The lady in the bracket is tall and thin with elegant feminine stance. A female attendant at her left has an expression of wonder. It perhaps indicates that his view point was wonderful. 1.1.4. Find spot: pillar 3, west side.

Under a tree a man is seen holding a flower in his right hand obviously to offer it to his beloved. He has placed his left arm over her shoulder and she has held his hand with her left hand. The lady is positively responding to his proposal. She is keeping her right hand on his lower garment. She is gazing at him in an attempt to read his mind. Amorous feeling of the lady is delicately expressed.

1.1.5. Find spot: pillar 5, east side.

In this bracket figure we find a man hugging a lady and touching her left breast with his left hand stealthily from behind. She, out of shame, has placed her right hand on his chest as if pretending to push him away. They do not look at each other. Instead the man is looking at somewhere as if he has not done anything to her. They seem to be the beginners in love making. The idea, that secret love is at stake, is allegorically expressed by a big sword held by a dwarf below. Interestingly the sword is bigger than the dwarf holding it!

1.1.6. Find spot: pillar 5, west side.

This bracket figure is interesting from the point of view of execution. As usual it represents a couple standing under a tree. The upper half of the figure appears to be a

work of a master sculptor while the rest is a product of a poor artist. The fact that proportion of the two human figures is lost is felt at first sight. At the same time a beholder cannot miss the excellent work of chiseling in composing the beautiful faces of lovers. Accuracy in linear expression is of high order. It is rather difficult to carve precise eye brows, lips and nose in sedimentary rock which may be easily achieved when worked on soft stone. The theme of the figure is that of madhupana or enjoying a drink of wine. A lady with a cup of wine is standing by the side of her lover. Delicacy of workmanship in shaping the faces is highly remarkable but as noticed above the lower portion of the bracket figure is poorly chiselled.

1.1.7. Find spot: pillar 6, east side.

This bracket figure is an accurate portrayal of a wedding scene (panigrahana). The newly married couple is richly dressed. The lady is fully clad with an embroidered sari and is suitably decked for royal wedding. Her right hand is held by her husband with his right. His left hand is placed over her left shoulder. The bride carries a vase, full of flowers. Allegorically it suggests that his home will blossom into love.

1.1.8. Find spot: west pilaster, east side.

The fact that the text of Vatsayana on Kamasutra (erotic science) was widely known by the sixth century is evident from this bracket figure. Vatsayana makes a mention of an erotic posture called lataveshtitaka. The bracket under discussion is an excellent example of the same. A kiss is aggressively attempted by an excited lady who is pulling man's face down to her own. Her intense arousal is explicitly revealed in the physical posture she has assumed. Being unable to control herself she has upraised her left leg to his waist inviting him for

sport. Loosened hair dangling at the back speaks of her intense readiness for the same. Sculptural composition of the bracket is perfectly executed.

1.1.9. Find spot: pilaster to the proper left of Varaha sculpture

It is a royal couple standing under a tree. Their facial expressions suggest that they are displeased or dissatisfied about something. The lady seems to be rather unhappy. She has brought the palm near to her mouth as if revealing some unpleasant thought. A feeling of wonder can be noticed in the wide opened eyes of the dwarf standing by her side.

1.2 Religious Amorous couples:

In Indian thought gods are also conceived to be in couples. They are depicted with their consorts both in painting and sculpture. Their life style as a couple stands as a model for devotees. Through such figures perfect wedded life is presented with sanctity. In religious amorous couples human sensual pleasure is exhibited in a dignified way as if suggesting that it should be the way of leading the wedded life. There is nothing like obscene or abnormal in depiction. Socially speaking, these bracket figures are real eye openers for the innocents and adolescents.

In Maha Vishnugriha the brackets are those of Shiva and Parvati or Kama and Rati. Quite interestingly the god to whom the cave temple is dedicated is Vishnu who is not found in any of these brackets with his consort Lakshmi.

Here super human beings are shown enjoying human life there by ascribing sanctity to lawful sexual life. Now let us cast a quick glance on these brackets that consist of five divine couples and a solitary semi divine pair.

1.2.1 Find spot: pillar 1, west side.

The bracket is chiselled with figures of divine couple - Shiva and Parvati. Attributes like crescent on Shiva's matted hairdo help onlookers to identify the deity. Parvati is represented in an unusual stance. The way she is stepping suggests that she has lost balance and she is about to fall down. Perhaps the sculptor aims to convey his message that man should assist his spouse at times of difficulty. An artist is a social teacher too.

1.2.2 Find spot: pillar 4, west side.

Here is another composition of Shiva and Parvati in a different mood. They are gracefully smiling. Shiva is supporting Parvati who is leaning on his left hand with her legs crossed. Bends of feminine body are artistically represented. Indians generally believe that man is to a lady as tree is to a creeper. This idea is metaphorically delineated in this bracket

figure. Kartikeya, one of the sons of this divine couple, is seen on his vehicle peacock by the side of his mother. A dwarf is serving lord Shiva by holding a long umbrella over his head.

1.2.3 Find spot: pillar 2, east side.

This bracket bears a composite figure of Shiva and Parvati. Absolute oneness is generally described in folk conversation as two bodies with one spirit (atman). The same thought is solidified in the figure of Ardhanarisvara where one can notice that Shiva and Parvati are exactly half each forming one single being. The figure of Ardhanarisvara is shown with matted hair with crescent on Shiva's side while Parvati is decked with a jewelled crown. Blending feminine and masculine anatomy is a challenge to an artist which he has successfully executed in this figure.

1.2.4. Find spot: pillar 4, east side.

One can easily identify the bracket as of Kama and Rati, the divine couple of love. A sugar cane bow, an attribute of Kama, is seen in his left hand. A horse faced dwarf carrying a quiver full of arrows also comes to our help in identifying the sculpture.

As far as composition is concerned Rati is depicted in a vigorous erotic posture. Taking a lead in the sport she has entwined her leg with Kama's. It is a beautiful piece of art in which the sculptor has exhibited his skill especially in maintaining physical balance and force of emotion.

1.2.5 Find spot: pillar 6, west face.

This bracket is another remarkable work of chiseling. Beyond doubt sculpturing is an art of organizing space. The present bracket is an example for the same. Shiva is wielding a battle axe and a cup in two of his four hands. He is shown standing under a tree with his leg upraised on the head of a dwarf and his upper left hand raised up. The space between Shiva and Parvati is fully organized. This has made Parvati assume a rare stylistic posture. A sublime feeling of love is expressed in their smiles. The entire composition has gained an artistic credit.

1.2.6. Find spot: pillar 1, east face.

The antiquity of Naga (serpent) worship goes back to the very beginning of civilization. One of the remains of Sindhu culture evidences Naga mithuna. It is believed even today that Naga worship brings both prosperity and progeny.

The present bracket displays Naga and Nagini. They are depicted in human forms with their hoods as crowns. They are standing face to face in such a way that on lookers can see the back of Nagini. She is seen wearing a vaikakshaka which is a unique ornament used by

Chalukyan ladies in the 6th and 7th centuries. The lady figures in the Chalukya caves are invariably decorated with this ornament. Interestingly it is only in this sculpture we can see the back side look of the ornament when worn.

2. Individuals :

A few bracket figures in the Maha Vishnugriha exhibit individuals. Out of nine such brackets eight belong to a group called Salabhanjikas while the other one shows a solitary depiction of Kama, the god of love.

The Salabhanjika is a Sanskrit word composed of one - sala meaning a tree and two - bhanjika which means breaker or destroyer. By plucking a flower or breaking a twig as a part of her game, a lady is likely to 'annoy' a tree. The sculpture depicting a lady in close proximity of a tree is referred to as Salabhanjika.

On a gateway of a stupa (2nd cent. A.D) at Sanchi one can find such sculptures of ladies playing with creepers. These may be regarded as the earliest examples of Salabhanjika. The same kind of sculptural representation can be found at Ajanta and Badami. Let us have a look at each of these Salabhanjikas.

2.1. Find spot: east pilaster, south side, close to Maha Vishnu image.

It is near the hood of Adishesha. The bracket shows a lady standing under a tree which is not well finished. There is a graceful look on her face. The stance reveals beauty of feminine anatomy. She is attended by a female attendant.

2.2. Find spot: pillar 1, from eastern end, south side.

A lady holding a mirror in her hand has been a popular theme in the depiction of a Salabhanjika. This is an example for the same. This may be regarded as the earliest darpana sundari image in the south. The lady holds a round mirror in her left hand while she is dressing her hair with the right. She is shown as if she is kicking the stem of the tree under which she is standing.

It is supposed that there is a kind of bio- influence between trees and ladies. The trees are also believed to have a kind of desire for something as ladies experience during pregnancy. It is referred to as dohad. It is the longing of a pregnant woman or the desire of plants at the budding time. Fertility being a common feature between them it is said that they have a tendency of influencing each other.

In his epic poem Raghuvamsha, Kalidas describes that at the time of flowering Ashok tree desires the tender kicks of young ladies. The sculptor of the bracket in discussion might be aware of this.

The lady appears to be in melancholy perhaps disappointed by her lover who made her wait. A mirror in her hand may perhaps symbolically reflect an idea that her pleasure is like treasure in a mirror.

2.3. Find spot: pillar 2, south side.

Here is a large breasted young lady decked with rich ornaments including a crown. She is standing under a fruit bearing mango tree. She, in an impressive stance holds a long palm leaf in her hand. It appears to be a letter carrying unpleasant news from her lover. Her facial expressions clearly suggest that she is in a plaintive mood. 2.4. Find spot: pillar 3, south side.

The bracket exhibits a lady in pensive or thoughtful mood. She has placed her right hand on the dwarf below and looking at something on the other side. With the other hand she is holding the strip of a garment she wears. By her side is a dwarf not proportionately presented. He attends the nayika with a fly whisk and a pot. Interestingly the tree under which she is standing is that of jack fruit. It is a tree not generally seen in this part of Belavalanadu.

2.5. Find spot; pillar 4, south side.

A damsel is seen holding a branch of a tree but is in a sad mood. Loneliness is deeply felt. She is attended by dwarfs who are gazing at her and expressing a sense of wonder. A pair of peacocks attracts our attention. Perhaps the reason for her anguish is that she is not as lucky as these peacocks are.

2.6. Find spot: pillar 5, south side.

A graceful lady is seen standing under a tree. There is a feeling of shyness in her smile. She holds a flower which perhaps is offered by her lover. She is attended by a sakhi on either side. A monkey in a tree may suggest her fickle mind.

2.7. Find spot: pillar 6, south side.

The bracket comprises a jack fruit tree under which a youthful lady is seen holding a flower in her left hand and placing the right on the head of a dwarf. Her facial expression reveals that she is in a state of distress. Her womanly bend of body is eye-catching.

2.8. Find spot: west pilaster, south side, close to Narasimha sculpture.

The lady in the bracket is standing as usual under the shade of a tree. She seems to be in a happy mood. A graceful smile radiates from her face. She is decked with ornaments and clad in a sari full of designs. To her left is a dwarf huddling a pot but the figure is poorly executed.

Thus there are eight salabhanjika sculptures in Maha Vishnugriha, and all of them invariably occupy the southerly sides of pilasters or pillars. As pointed out earlier these are the earliest examples of a salabhanjika in the south.

2.9. Find spot: west end pilaster to the proper right of Harihara sculpture.

Of the nine brackets with individual figures eight are salabhanjikas whereas this bracket bears the sculpture of Kama a divine being. The god of love is attended by his horse faced dwarf holding a quiver full of arrows. Traces of colours may be noticed. Kama is shown with an umbrella. He is standing under a mango tree.

3. Mythological figures :

The bracket figures on north sides of all the front pillars and pilasters consist of 'yalis'. They are ornamental in nature and are highly stylized. It is a known fact that lion appears as a prominent feature in the pillars of Pallava temples, where it forms the lower part of the pillar. Long before these Pallava temples, lion found a place in Chalukya architecture. Here in Maha Vishnugriha, the brackets are elaborately carved with motifs of lion in stylized forms. It may be noted that the lion is a symbol of power and prowess. Its ferocious look symbolizes dignity and royalty.

All the brackets bearing mythological figures are on the north-sides of pillars or pilasters. Unfortunately three of them are badly destroyed. That which remains may be jotted as below.

3.1. The bracket on the east pillar, near Virat Vishnu sculpture displays a deer with a dwarf close to its feet.

3.2. The one on the pillar, from east end, reveals a figure of lion with a dwarf squatting in front.

3.3. The bracket on the third pillar is a composition of a huge, ferociously looking lion with horns.

3.4. Perhaps the same kind of yali was there on the next pillar but now broken badly.

3.5. The bracket on the west pilaster reveals a composition of a springing lion. Below its belly is a dwarf holding its tail in his right hand. Expression of wonder and fear is evidently seen on his face.

The study may be summarized in the tabular form as under:

Amorous couples	a) Secular : 9
	b) Religions : 6
Individuals	a) Human : 8

	b) Divine	: 1
Mythological animals	-	: 5
Existing brackets	-	: 29
Brackets badly destroyed	-	: 3

Total number of bracket figures carved originally : 32

To put in a nutshell the bracket figures in Maha Vishnugriha are decorative architectural members. They reflect the social life of the period in terms of dress and ornaments they wore, fashions they were interested in, and so on. As many as fifteen bracket figures express amorous moods of couples in different degrees. A couple of pairs are extremely erotic. However, it is interesting to note that no where do we find perverted sex displayed in the cave temple under discussion. As a matter of fact this is true with other Chalukya temples. Sex in these sculptures is a process of sublimation of animal instinct latent in human beings. It is also note worthy here that though animal copulation or beastliness is a favorite theme in Indian art, no where it is represented in this cave temple or in any other Early Chalukya temples.

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