

REFERENCE OF PRABHAVALI (STELE) IN PURANAS AND SHILPA TEXTS

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ABSTRACT

The Stele is the backdrop of icons of Ganesha, Surya, Vishnu, Shiva and Devi called Prabhavali in the puranas, Shilpa Shastras, Agamas and Pooja Padhhatti whereas it is known as Mandala in Budhhist Vajrayan Sadhna texts. In Bengali folk term it is called Chala. Prabhavali is actually ornamental decoration, usually having elliptical super structure, found behind the whole personality of the central image of the composition; it is sometimes embellished with number of flames/jwalas and subsidiary/ retinue figures of the central deity. This is really the backdrop or the original slab on which the icon is carved in a very high relief. Actually, Prabhavali along with central deity represents the whole universe. The Prabhavali sometimes bears the emblems special to the God whose image it serves as the background; while in the case of Devi images the Sapta Matrikas or Dasha Mahavidyas are carved out. In Post Gupta and High Medieval Hindu, Budhhist and Jain images of Northern and Eastern India, it commonly represents a layout of decorative carving on it; thus, in a fully complete stele, the order of placement of the motifs from pedestal upwards is the first the leogryph (gaja-shardula sometime the animals bear sword- bearers on their back), then the Makara motif above it the Gandharvas playing on musical instruments and dancing, a little higher up mala dhari, vidyadharas against clouds. The age of an icon can be satisfactorily determined with the help of its Prabhavalis.

KEY WORDS

Prishtthapatta, Shirashchakra, Macrocosm, Nether World, Parikara, Parshada, Pooja Paddhatti, Vishwa Padma, Yogini, Mandala

INTRODUCTION

icons are not only housed inside the sanctums of Hindu temples but also given place in the exteriors i.e. on the Bhadrarathikas, Anurathikas and Karnarathikas of shikhar. These above-mentioned Punch Devtas are either housed in niches or directly against the walls of different architectural members. These divine figures are invariably found attended by different retinue figures i.e. the celestials- parivara devtas mounts and semi divines viz flying attendants. As per the nature and entity the subsidiary divines are given place on the original slab of the icons with the deity i.e. on Prabhavali, and this group of parivara devtas are the Parikaras.

Prabhavali

Prabhavali is the iconographic terminology used in North Indian and South Indian Shilpa manuals for the backdrop of a relief icon the original slab from which the mula vigraha or the central divine figure is carved out, whereas the 'Parikara Devta' is comprised of Parivar Devata, Aayuddha Purushas, Vahanas, emanations, incarnations and Gandharvas and Vidyadharas. The Prabhavali is the place where these above-mentioned figures are given place, as any devta is worshipped and evoked with his entire family. Puranas and Shilpa texts refer to many synonyms for Prabhavali i.e. Mandal and Prishth Patta and in English it is called Stele.

Actually, Stele or the Prabhavali has a great importance in the field of Iconography and Hindu religious sculptures. In the absence of the central figure or the Mula Nayaka of the icon is recognized through the remaining Parikara Devtas- the broken state of any icon. For as example, if a broken stele shows the absence of central figure and displays the Trishula Purush, Khatwanga Purush, Karttikeya, Ganesha and Devi, definitely it is an icon of Shiva as all these above mentioned Parikara Devatas are Parivara Devtas of Shiva.

Idioms of Prabhavali

Besides the Parivara Devta, through the depiction of other subsidiary figures the basic nature of a deity is also recognized, for an example Paravati is always found with Ganesha and Kartikeya which denotes her motherly aspect i.e. the Parmaprakriti, whereas in her Chamunda form She is invariably found with Yoginis, Saptmatrikas, jackals and vultures, which denotes her samhara aspect.

Not only the puranas and Shilp texts, the Pooja Paddhaties strictly prescribes to officiating priest to worship any presiding deity along with their Parivar Devtas. For an example Vishnu is always worshipped along with Lakshmi, Dahavataras and Garuda. During the autumn Navaratri it is referred to in Devi Purana that Lord Rama evoked Durga along with Shiva and her family. Hence, whenever any temple of any of the Panchdevta is erected, many subsidiary shrines are also planned to house corresponding Parivar Devtas.

Textual Reference of Prabhavali and Parikara Devata

If we scrutinize Indian ancient religious depiction, the concept of backrest of icon or the representation Prabhavali with figurative detail are found from Indus valley. The Rudra Pashupati and the Matrika seals of Mohenjo-Daro, bear many apparent subsidiary figures which are directly related to the central figures of Rudra and Devi. These are the apparent earliest examples of stele formation. The practice of locating subsidiary figures was continued and gradually developed. The Puranas like Markandeya, Agni, Skandha, Matsya and Varaha, and Shilp Manual the Vishnudharmottara during Gupta period, without using the words like Prabhavali or Prishthpatta these firmly insist to painters and sculptors to locate Parivara Devtas and Parshadas along with the Mula Nayaka. In this reference we can quote the iconography of Surya in Vishnudharmottara, which refers to the various Parivar Devtas of Surya to be housed in Surya Stele viz Usha, Pratyusha, Dandi and Pingala along with the Saptashva and Arun.

The contemporary of Vishnudharmottara, the Vrihatsamhita also refers to the similar iconography of Surya and its Parivar Devtas which should be incorporated in Surya Mandala. The concept of making Prabhavali along with subsidiary figures was not confined in Hindu art but also practiced in in the Mahayana/ Vajrayana and Jain iconic art. Like Puranas and Shilpa texts the Buddhist Sadhana texts and Jain Pratishtha texts also clearly refer to create stele to depict the subsidiary figures. The Tara Mandala of early and medieval period show the deified forms of syllables of the mula mantra of Tara, whereas the Jain Arihantas of the same period are found in stele with shasan devtas like flying semi divines.

Gradually new Shilpa texts came in existence after Gupta period- in the early and high medieval period. The Manasara, Samrangana Sutradhara, Aprajitprichcha, Jayaprichcha, Rupamandana and Devtamurtiprakarana provide many new forms of Ganesha, Surya, Vishnu, Shiva and Devi, consequently their multiple benign and aggressive multiple forms. As per their nature and appearance, the nature and number of their subsidiary forms also came in conception. Artists were bound to depict each and every subordinate on the stele as it was strictly instructed.

Not only about the subsidiary figures but also some decorative devices are prescribed by Puranas and Shilp Texts to incorporate in stele. The Matsya Purana and Mansara refer to superimposed toranas all around the central figure of the composition and these toranas should accommodate the Parivar Devtas of the central figure. Actually, these architectural members are derived from Nagara Temple orders.

The South Indian Agama texts like Vaikhanasagama, Kamikagama and Suprabhedagama also refer to the term Prabhavali for the black slab of relief icon. These Shilpa texts refers to various segments of Prabhavali i.e. the components- the base or the plinth of the composition called Pithika and it should be having facets in odd numbers, similar to the rathikas of Nagar Temple order like Bhadrathika, Anurathika and the Karnathika. The nimbus behind the head of the central figure is called Prabhamandala , Abhamandala and Shiraschakra.

Actually a Prabhavali denotes the three different zones of the Macrocosm i.e. the highest zone of the stele with flying celestials is the Sky- the cosmic zone where gods and goddesses reside while the middle zone represents the Earth, whereas the Pithika represents the Nether world, supporting the Vishwa Padma on which the deity stands or sits.

The Matsya Purana states that behind the entire personality of the mula vigraha in a mandala should be enveloped with an arched torana and jambs and nishes, and the jambs are termed as rathika- very similar to the facets of Nagara Temple Shikhara. The apex of the torana should have simhavyala motif and the vyalas should be issuing garlands. The Mansara states that this arch should have decoration of floral devices, hence it will be called Pushpa torana. The High Medieval texts the Jayaprichcha also referes to that these torana should be carved with central deity in Prabhavali and this text also refers to housing effigies of different emanations and incarnations of the deity who is carved as the central figure. Various types of toranas are referred to in the Aparajitapichcha and it also states the central zone of the curvilinear of the toranas should have alcoves to house Parikar Devtas. The above stated symptoms of Prabhavali with toranas is referred to in Roopmandana also.

The vahikas are the prime components of Prabhavali- the flying semi divine beings. According to Matsya Purana, Jayaprichcha, Aparajitapichcha and Roopmandana these are essential to represent at the top of the Prabhavali and these flying celestials represent the heavenly abode and these flying beings are called vidyadhara, gandharva and kinnaras and they should be utmost handsome in appearance endowed with different ornaments. In the Jain Pratishtha text, they are estimated as the most compulsory idiom of a Jina Parikara and this group of celestials a are called Pratiharyas. The Matsyapurana uses the term vahika for the flying celestials i.e. gandharvas and kinneras and they are the integral part of the apex of stele. They should be youthful in appearance.

In the context of depiction of vahana or mount in stele, it is noteworthy to mention the Mansara-Vahanas should be very lively in appearance and they should be placed next to the central deity. The Nandi of Shiva should be placed near the feet of the Shiva, gazing to him whereas the Garuda of Vishnu should be holding amrit kalasaha in posture of adoration. The Bhavishya Purana states that the seven horses or the saptashva of Surya should be found in galloping mode on the face of the pedestal occupying the different ratha projections.

The South Indian text Mansara deals with the implementation of vahanas into Prabhavali in great detail- all the images of vahanas should be made in their natural stance and action e. g. bird should be looking like bird and animal should be found in movement and action. The Tarakshya Garuda should be very energetic in appearance with palms joined together and adorned with snakes.

CONCLUSION

All the above-mentioned figurative details are apparently found in the Prabhavalis of Northern India during early and high medieval period. If we go through the Prabhavalies of Gurjar Pratihara, Chandela, Kalachuri, Parmara and Solanki school from Eta and Kannuj, Khajuraho and Mahoba respectively we see the images of central figure is dominated by the retenue figures and different architectural members in Prabhavali. Since the sculptors were strictly guided by the complicated canonical details laid in the post Gupta and medieval Shilpa

manuals. Therefore, we can say the medieval Prabhavalis are quite dense and complicated than of contemporary South Indian sculpture schools of Ellora, Badami and Mahabalipuram.

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