

Aspects of Saiva Cult in Burma

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Though a Buddhist country, Burma could not escape the influence of Brahmanical religion. The records and finds of several images in different parts of the country clearly shows that there was a considerable number of followers of this religion. This influence is also reflected in some of the place-names of both upper and lower Burma¹ such as Bissunomyo or Vishnupura, the city of Visnu- a name given to old Prome or Hmawza which was in those days a center of Visnuite influence. It is interesting to note that the foundation of the ancient city of Prome as described in the Mahayazawin, a late Burmese chronicle, is associated with Visnu and his Vahana (mount) Garuda, as also with Candi and Paramesvara equivalent to Durga and Siva respectively.²

While the two of the three stone-slab belonging stylistically to about the latter half of the 9th century. A.D., brought in recent years from Thaton to the Rangoon Museum, depict in bold relief the Anantasayanam episode of Visnu, the third represents Siva with Parvati seated by his side.³ Of the slabs that still remain at Thaton, two certainly represent Siva with his trident. Coins and terracotta tablets bearing the Saivite symbol of the trident and representation of the bull (Nandim) have been found in large numbers at Mrohaungs and other localities in Arakan as well as other places both in Upper and Lower Burma.

It is true, Siva, though a prominent god of trinity, has been denied an important position by the members of the Brahmanical fold in Burma. Though he has hardly any place in legends and traditions as well as in the epigraphic records of Burma, the numismatic evidence nevertheless shows the Arakan had once been a stronghold of Saivite cult and was under the domination of a dynasty of Saivite kings. It is here that coins bearing Saivite symbols (trident of Siva on the reverse and a recumbent humped bull on the obverse) have been discovered and are being discovered even now. Though discovered at different localities and at different times these coins bear a family likeness having common symbols, and over the recumbent bull a legend or names of the king, ending invariably with the surname Candra bull a legend or names of the king, ending invariably with the surname Candra indicating the rule of the Candra dynasty⁴ (c.400 A.D. C. 1000 A.D), whose scions were evidently the followers of the Saiva cult.

From stylistic point of view the earliest Siva image in Burma is the one discovered at Thaton along with two Visnuite stone-sculptures, referred to above. It depicts Siva seated with his consort Parvati and constitutes one of the best examples of medieval relief sculptures in India and Burma. The whole stele is occupied by the god alone, Uma or Parvati playing a minor part throwing herself in the background. It represents the god seated in Lilasana on a lotus pedestal with the goddess seated between two arms to his left. Though her face is roughly weathered, her richly embroidered cloth as well as her heavy ornaments in her ears and round her neck, and hands are clear. The god wears a crown from which emerges out the jata-mukuta, a headdress belonging to Saivite deities: a halo adds dignity to the divine crown. He is holding in his two upraised hands the trident and the vajra, and in the two lower hands, resting on his respective thigh, the rosary (aksamala or rudraksa) and the matu-langu fruit. The snake hangs downwards from the shoulder of the god, and Nandin under the right foot of the god with the Mahisasura on the left corner of the slab under the seat of Parvati or Durga who is supposed to have killed it. It is interesting to note that "the position and attitude of the two figures have a suggestive similarity with those of the famous Siva-Parvati relief at Ellora."⁵ The most remarkable is the complex linear composition effected mainly by the portion of the four hands and the two legs, "The two upper hands raised upwards and in angular curves, we find their happy response in the two hands lowered down in delightful lines and soft curves ending in the supple movement of their figures." The surface comprising the head with its halo and mukuta comes down to rest on the body up to the waist zone and then dividing itself into two, takes a linear movement in two directions, the right one is a sympathetic response with the raised right hand and the left one with the raised lower hand and the pedestal below. "Thus in the soft but bold and masculine modeling of the body, in the distribution of the mass, in the very difficult surface-treatment in difficult complex planes resulting in a rich display of light and shade, and finally in the complex linear composition of the whole relief, this sculpture shows the artistic efficiency of the colonial artists at their very best."⁶

These three reliefs are remarkably similar to those, found from different sites of Orissa, now deposited in India Museum, Calcutta.⁷ If one is not told of the find-spot of the Siva-Parvati stele from Thaton, one would aptly style it as Orissan of the 9th-10th cent. A.D.⁸ Moreover, this particular relief has great iconographic similarity with a Siva-Parvati relief⁹ found along with the images and reliefs noted above. The Siva-Parvati relief of Thaton has such a striking affinity with the Orissan sculptures in respect of form and appearance, modeling and

composition and their general treatment and execution that one is compelled to believe that these are the works of the same artists who had migrated from Orissa, possessing rich art-tradition to Burma.

We come across another important Siva image in Burma, installed at the entrance of the Ananda Museum, Pagan where it was taken from Nat-hlaung Kyaung. About four feet high, the image is carved out of grey soft sandstone in bold and round relief in South Indian style and may be dated not earlier than 12th century A.D. It stands on lotus pedestal.¹⁰ in erect pose with four hands, the two upper raised carrying the trident and the vajra, while the two lower hands having the sword and the gadda (mace). Iconographically speaking, it is quite novel because the khetaka (sword) and the gada (mace) are rarely associated with Siva, Moreover, the shape of the gada, so unlike its familiar form, is also remarkable. The head of the statue is crowned with a jata-mukuta and its body is profusely decorated with carved ornaments. Though it is undoubtedly a representation of Lord Siva, its presence in a Visnuite temple is interesting. "Its presence in a Vaisnave temple," according to Mon-Duroiselle, "wherein no other Saivite images have been found, would seem to point out to the existence at Pagan of a Saivite temple from which it was removed after its destruction or its crumbling to ruin."¹¹

In recent discoveries another Saivite icon, now in the Ananda Museum, was found at Pagan on the river-side near Shwe-onhmin monastery at Myinpagan. It is a large, heavy piece of stone sculpture representing the god in rajalila attitude on a double- petalled lotus pedestal, on which the right foot of the god is placed. He has four hands, all badly broken, and only the aksamala can be seen in the lower left, apparently holding the trident in the upper right hand. "The sculpture is worked out in bold and round relief and the general treatment, though not very refined, shows yet a sure hand in schiselling and a keen sense of the Indian form. It seems to belong to period not later than the 11th century A.D..... The iconography of the sculpture is South Indian but the art-inspiration, like that of the Nat-hlaung images, seems to have come from the North."¹²

We have the fragment of a stone sculpture distinctly Saivite in cult and iconography which is regarded as one of the earliest in Burma, and even earlier than the earliest of all Brahmanical images found there. Found from vesali in Arakan, a locality which has yielded numerous Gupta finds, it forms the lower part of a sculpture and is much damaged. It probably represents Durga slaying Mahisasura and belongs to the Gupta period.¹³ Besides this, there are also few other finds of Saivite images discovered in Burma which are much removed in date

from on another, ranging from the 6th or 7th century A.D. to the 14th century A.D.¹⁴ All this shows no doubt the popularity of Saiva cult in Burma, though confined to a few areas only.

References :

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2. An. Rep. Arch. Surv. of Burma, 1910, p. 18
3. An Rep. Arch. Surv. Burma, 1910, 8/6, 16/6; 1908, 9.6
4. Phyre, Coins of Arakan, Pegu and Burma, p. 40 (figs. 9-17) & p. 42 (figs. 1-9); An. Rep. A.S. Burma, 1926, pp. 28 & 30
5. A coomaraswamy, Indian and Indonesian Art, pl. LV, fig. 198
6. Dawee Daweewarn, Brahmanism in S.E.A. p. 135
7. Ibid., p. 134
8. N.R. Ray, Brahmanical Gods in Burma, pp. 78-79
9. Indian Museum Exh. No. 33/N.S. 2222
10. Yule, Mission to the Court of Ays, pp. 53-54; An. Rep. A.S. Burma, 1918, p. 19
11. An. rep. Arch. Surv. Burma, p. 19
12. Dawee Daweewarn, op. cit. p. 78. For other Saivite icons see An. Rep. Arch. Surv. Burma, 1917, p. 17
13. An. Rep. Arch. Sur. Burma, 1916, p. 35
14. For details see Dawee Daweewarn, op. cit., p. 79