VARUNA: A CULTURAL STUDY WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE INSCRIPTIONS AND SCULPTURES

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Abstract

Varuna is a small village in Mysore district and it is a historically and culturally important place from the period of early Western Gangas of Talakad to that of Wodeyars of Mysore. For the study of any culture or history inscriptions and temple art and architecture are the best original source materials. Here also for the study of socio-cultural and socio-religious history of Karnataka history in general and Varuna history in particular these original sources became very important. The inscriptions found at Varuna gives us an interesting account on the socio-cultural and socio-religious and architectural history of the place. The inscription of Ganga King Shripurusha of 8th Century A.D. is the earliest and speaks about Bhuteshwara temple. The temple, sculpture and hero stones of Varuna village of the 9th and 10th century A.D. and the inscriptions are very important original source for knowing the Shaivism and Jainism and its socio-cultural contribution to Karnataka history from this small hamlet.

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Any attempt to study the cultural history of the Mysore region is quite fascinating, informative and educative. The epigraphically based sources for such a study are undoubtedly the copper plate charters issued by the respective kings and the inscriptions found on the temples built from the period of the Early Western Gangas of Talkad to that of the Mysore Wodeyars. They collectively represent the strong socio-cultural and socio-religious growth and development during that span of time. The temples played a pivotal role. They were not only the centers of the religious and devotional activities in ancient period but also the hub for education and learning. They largely catered to the need of the learning process through their sculptural carvings consisting of the puranic subjects.

The present paper aims to make a serious study and a lime-squeezing analysis of the inscriptions, the art and architecture of the place, called Varuna. The inscriptions found at Varuna offer us an interesting account on the socio-cultural and Architectural history of the place. The inscriptions speak abundantly of the grants to the temple and to the heroes who laid their lives by the rulers of the respective period. The earliest inscription of this place has been issued during the time of Ganga king Shripurusha. This inscription may be dated to 8th Century A.D. It records the grant made over to a chief of Edattore nadu (referring to Krishnaraja Nagar in Mysore District) to feed probably the army. However, the contents of the inscription have no direct bearing on Varuna. It only records the grant to his chief. But again as the inscription is partly worn out, the other details are missing. The other important inscriptions which shed some light on the socio-political and religious life of Varuna belong to the 9th and 10th Century A.D. The inscriptions issued by the mahasamantas of the Chalukyas have no direct mention of any of the kings belonging to the period between 9th and 10th Century A.D. But they seem to have a direct bearing on the God Bhuteshwara. On the basis of the inscriptions we may say that the Bhuteshwara Temple at Varuna appears to have been built circa 950 A.D. Bhuteshwara temple belongs to the religious denomination of the Shaivites. The interesting fact is that Bhuteshwara temple has simple architectural features of the Dravidian mode and style. The sculptural narratives of the temple speak of the Shaivite affiliation of the people in Varuna, in addition to the other existing Jaina establishments which can be proved by the sculptural images of Parshwanatha, Mahavira and Kushmandini yakshi found in Varuna.
As mentioned above Bhuteshwara temple at Varuna was built circa 10th century A.D. From the inscription it becomes very clear that Goggi was the Chalukya chief, and he is referred to as the *mahasamanta*, meaning the chief. Therefore, on the basis of the inscription, it is clear that Goggi held some administrative powers in this region. The inscription also mentions the God Bhuteshwara and a village given as the grant to one Nannikartara Balara. Another inscription from Varuna also associates the Chalukya family to Narasinga a *mahasamanta*. Interestingly, his wife by name Gavilabbarasi is also mentioned in the inscription. The inscriptions are datable to circa, 10th Century A.D. on paleographical grounds. Again another inscription found at Varuna refers also to one Dugga, another *mahasamanta* of the Chalukya. The inscription makes mention of the God Bhuteshwara. These inscriptions conspicuously have the references to the God Bhuteshwara, and grants made over to the Nannikartara Balara, who was possibly the priest of the temple. The reference to Bhuteshwara in these inscriptions clearly attests to the existence of the temple there. It appears that the temple was already constructed much before the issue of these inscriptions. There is no direct reference to either the construction of the temple or the consecration to the God Bhuteshwara in these inscriptions except the mere mention of the God.

There are also some hero-stone inscriptions found in Varuna village. Interestingly, the hero-stones shed light on the Shri Goggi family. An inscription mentions the death of one Ere Birayya a house servant (*manevagati*) who fought against one Edavari. It appears that he lost his life in that battle. Therefore, the king granted two *khandugas* of land to his family. In another hero-stone inscription the Goggi family and another servant by name Bochiga- Dharmashetti are mentioned. It appears that he was also killed in the same battle. *Mahasamanta* Dugga made some grants to his family also. There are around nine hero-stone inscriptions at Varuna. These are mostly connected with the Goggi family. It further attests to the intense socio-political activities of the Goggi *mahasamanta* family at Varuna.

The issue pertaining to the *mahasamantas* of the Chalukyas at Varuna provides a new insight on the existence of the Chalukya power here. During that particular period, the Kalyana Chalukyas were in power. Since Varuna is within the heartland of the Gangas power, it leads to several doubts and queries whether the Ganga rulers were gradually losing the control over the region. From the *mahasamanta* inscriptions referring to the grants and the mention of the God Bhuteshwara, besides the hero-stone inscriptions at Varuna, it is inferred that Varuna
should have been a small administrative centre of the Kalyana Chalukyas mahasamantas under the mighty power of the Gangas as supreme lords. It is more reasonable to believe that the mahasamantas appear to have ruled this particular area under the umbrella of the great Ganga rule. As mentioned above, the chief of Shripurusha administering at Edattore nadu is an attesting example for the subordinates ruling the different parts of the dynasty. However, we may surmise by saying that the mahasamantas who hailed originally from the Chalukya territory had made Varuna as an administrative centre under the Gangas.

The wealth of the inscriptions at Varuna village is clearly attests to the fact that it was an important centre of the mahasamantas of the Chalukyas. In the absence of concrete evidences, hypothetically the date and affiliation of the temple may be considered as to that of the Ganga period under the mahasamantas.

Architecturally, the temple is a rather small structure with single sanctum sanctorum, a hall and closed frontal hall. The original tower of the temple is replaced by brick and lime mortar structure. The outer walls of the temple are not very decorative. They are quite simple and have the pilasters at regular intervals. The temple roof has a canopy; it juts out from the roof. The canopy consists of rotund arches at every interval. These arched blind windows known as the gavakshas are decorated with projected thin laces and festoons. The space beneath the canopy known as valabhi, has some rare and beautiful narrative panels. The story of Ramayana has been narrated over the valabhi. The space over the valabhi is not very large or spacious to accommodate the sculptures. The artist at Bhuteshwara temple has made it possible by carving the Ramayana story in a more interesting manner. It should be noted that the Bhuteshwara temple has no wall sculptures. The walls are plain and consist only of a few pilasters. Hence, the interior of the temple is also simple with a sculpture depicting seated figures of Uma Maheshwara and Nandi. The door frames have regular simple features with minimum decorations. The Shiva Linga has been installed in the garbhagriha. The pillars are of very simple type with square base and shaft as well as round capitals. The ceiling has regular flower design. The most interesting sculptures of this temple are the Ramayana narratives carved on the valabhi. The narrative sculptures depict a fine variety of the mode of the representation.

The Ramayana narratives decorate the valabhi portion of the temple. Interestingly, the early examples of the narrative stories are found at Badami cave
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temples datable to 6th Century A.D. However, the earliest Ramayana narratives are found on the adhishthana of the Upper Shivalaya at Badami, also datable to late 6th Century A.D. The narratives at Varuna village have only selected episodes from ‘Ramayana’. The themes are related to Rama and Lakshmana’s meeting with Sugriva, Hanuman and other latter episodes of ‘Ramayana’. The episodes depict the battle of Rama and Hanuman’s exploits of Shrilanka. The relief sculptures are very large in size. They are about eight to nine inches in height and carved as relief figures. The episodes depict: a) Sugriva and Hanuman meeting Rama and Lakshmana, b) Hanuman going in search of Sita, c) the Burning of Lanka city, e) the Battle between Rama and Ravana, and f) the Defeat of Ravana. The episodes have very interesting mode of narrations. Among the episodes, the burning of Lanka city is depicted symbolically. Lanka city is shown here as if it is burning. The flames are shown semi-circularly in an aspote angle. Ravana is shown with his ten heads and multiple arms. The battle scene is depicted with great sense of reality. Rama and Ravana are in battle field. The figures of Rama and Ravana are shown in full force as in fighting. In another episode, Ravana is depicted as defeated by Rama. The body of Ravana is flying in the air because of the force of the arrows of Rama. The narrative panels present the fine forms of composition. The figures are very bold and direct in the narration. The characters in the narration have direct bearing on the story. Though the images look very simple, they have a solid and impressive role in the story. Over all, the narrative sculptures at the simple structure of Bhuteshwara temple are excellent examples of the ancient art at Varuna. It is interesting to note that the narrative sculptures stand as precursors to the succeeding sculptures of the later periods.

Varuna was also an important center of Jaina faith and art activities. The inscriptions found at Varuna refer to Jaina establishments at Varuna. An inscription carved on the pedestal of Shantinatha Tirthankara refers to the gift of the image by Achan Chamundara with the mention of the sculptors as Vijayan and Bamana. Another inscription records the death by sanyasana of Dharmasena, a Jaina ascetic and disciple of Padmaprabha, who belonged to Nandi Sangha of Dravila-Sangha. The record is datable to 13th Century A.D. The images are presently kept next to the compound wall of Mahalingeshwara temple close to Bhuteshwara Temple. The images of Shantinatha Tirthankara, Mahavira, Dharanendra Yaksha, Padmavathi Yakshi and Ambika(Kushman) Yakshi sculptures are found. The images are carved in chloritic- schist stone. The sculptures are very realistically carved. They
have sophisticated style. All the sculptures strongly exhibit the Hoysala style. It becomes clear that the Hoysala artists, who were from the same region, appear to have executed these beautiful sculptural works. From the above discussion, the temple, narrative sculptures and Jaina sculptures clearly attest to the importance of Varuna as an active center of cultural activities.

Though, the Varuna village in Mysore District is so small, but culturally it speaks more with the continuous existence of inscriptive as well as architectural evidence from Gangas, Kalyana Chalukya and Hoysalas. The existence of temple in this village is so important that it gives continuity of cultural existence with evidence Shaivism and the Jaina religion.

References


