

Shakti Icons of Ambari : An Analysis of their Style and Religious Significance

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In tracing the early history of Assam, archaeological sources are of great significance. While references to the ancient city of Pragjyotishpura are found in literary records like the Ramayana, Mahabharata, it is primarily the copper plate grants that throw light on the different historical phases. The rule of different dynasties like the Varmans, the Salastambhas and the Palas not only witnessed changes in the domain of polity, society and economy but also the patronage to religious establishments. In this context, the material culture found in the form of temple ruins, sculptures, pottery demonstrate attempts on the part of the ruling class to patronise the Brahmanas. Moreover, the rich evidence of archaeological remains reflects the existence of artisans as a distinct social group and also the prevalent religious beliefs. The Ambari archaeological site, located in the heart of the Guwahati city in the course of the excavations has yielded a great number of sculptures, among which those of Vishnu, Surya and Mahishamardini Durga predominate. An attempt has been made in this paper to discuss the Sakti icons from the Ambari archaeological site, analysing their style that correspond to two different periods and the religious significance.

Keywords: Ambari, Pragjyotishpura, Sculpture, Sakti, Vishnu

Introduction

The modern city of Guwahati which stands on the banks of the river Brahmaputra is historically significant owing to the existence of rich material culture in the form of archaeological remains such as temples, sculptures, pottery, and coins. Their discovery implies not only the essence of patronage but also the importance of trade links and the influence of different art forms. The nature of religious beliefs which were prevalent along with an analysis of the social, political and economic dimensions is closely linked with the material culture. While literary references to the ancient city of Pragjyotishpur lack historical authenticity, the importance of material remains towards reconstructing the history prior to the 13th century CE needs to be emphasised. While the nature of archaeological remains recovered in the context of early Assam has always been marked by accidental discoveries, the Ambari archaeological site assumed historical significance as soon as it came to light. In the year 1969, during digging trenches for the construction of the building of Reserve Bank of India, a significant number of objects primarily pottery and sculptures were unearthed. These finds established the antiquity of the area. In the subsequent excavations conducted in the site, the discovery of a huge number of stone sculptures reflects the existence of a distinctive art style. The time framework of the sculptures belongs to the 10th-12th and 13th-14th centuries respectively. The evolution of this new art style characteristic of the sculptures from Ambari coincides with the rule of the Pala dynasty in Assam which demonstrates the role of patronage in facilitating the production of these sculptures. The intrinsic association of religion and the depiction of varied religious themes in the domain of art and architecture highlight the importance of attempts in attaining union with the divine. The Ambari sculptures primarily belong to the deities of the Brahmanical pantheon such as Visnu, Surya and Mahishamardini Durga. A great number of *Siva lingas* and *yoni pithas* have also been found. The introduction of Brahmanical rites and rituals as well as the patronage extended by the ruling class gave a major boost to religious as well as artistic activities. The phenomena of extending patronage also highlight the importance of supporting a class of specialists who by making these objects catered to the prevalent demands of the time. The site of Ambari located in close proximity with the ancient Dighalipukhuri channel demonstrates the existence of trade links and also establishes the status of Ambari as an atelier. The Sakti icons found from the site constitute both smaller and bigger images. In the former, the icons of Mahishamardini Durga predominate while in the latter the images of Chandanayika as well as those of Ganga, Yamuna are significant. Differences in terms of carving techniques and raw materials are visible. It is thus significant to analyse the stylistic features of these images to interpret the artistic trend and also understand their religious importance. Assam which has since time immemorial been identified as a centre of Sakti worship, the Sakti icons recovered from the Ambari archaeological site need to be placed in this context.

Material and Methods

The material for the present paper constitutes the sculptures found at the Ambari archaeological site owing to the different phases of excavations (Dutta 2006). A total of 234 sculptures (stone and terracotta) were recovered in the course of the excavations. Both bigger and smaller Sakti icons have been found that can be placed respectively in two time frameworks from the 10th-12th century and 13th-14th century respectively. The time framework of the sculptures reveals differences in carving techniques and the influence of art forms essentially of the Pala-Sena period. However, it is also important to trace the regional variations evident in the sculptures that place Ambari as a centre of the local school of art. A careful examination of its sculptures display variations. This is not only visible in terms of the raw materials used for carving the images but also the technique. The sculptures from Ambari demonstrate the use of local raw materials such as gneiss, granite, amphibolite unlike the black basalt stone that was used while making the images of the Pala-Sena period. Moreover, retention of the features like the stele, *kirtimukha*, *vidyadharas*, stiff posture noticeable in the sculptures from Ambari bring them in close proximity with the Pala-Sena school. However, the images from Ambari (bigger images) in contrast to the sculptures of the Pala-Sena school does not show too much overcrowding of the stele. The facial expressions of the images also do not display sharp features. The miniature icons from the site are nevertheless crude in character due to the quality of stone used and are not polished. The methodology involves field visit to study the sculptures unearthed from the site that has now been kept in the Ambari Site Museum and the Assam State Museum.

Findings and Results

The great variety of sculptures recovered from the Ambari site exhibit a distinctive style not only in terms of the physiognomic features but also in the use of decorative motifs. The physiognomic features of the Ambari sculptures lack the angular or sharp features that characterise the sculptures of the traditional Pala- Sena School. The use of decorative motifs like flying *vidyadharas*, projections and *kirtimukha* is also visible in the Ambari sculptures like the Pala- Sena School. However, the sculptures of Ambari do not display the polished character like the images of the Pala-Sena School which involved the use of black basalt as a raw material. The sculptures from Ambari include both small and big images, the majority of the sculptures being of Visnu, Surya and Mahishamardini Durga. The figures display differences in terms of their carving technique and polish. The crude aspect of the smaller icons is in sharp contrast to the polished features of the bigger images. Compared to the smaller images which display a crude character because of the raw material used like granite, gneiss, etc. the bigger icons involve the use of sandstone as a raw material along with amphibolites. The stylistic dimension of the sculptures found from Ambari can be attributed to the influence of the art of the Pala-Senas of Bengal who established their rule in Bengal and Bihar from the middle of the 8th century CE and

continued till the end of the 11th century CE. Their rule brought about the development of the East Indian School of Medieval Art (EISMA). One of the salient features of this school is the evolution of the stele on which the images were carved. This feature is noticeable in the sculptures from Ambari also. The sculptures are stylistically datable to two phases from 10th-12th centuries and 13th-14th centuries CE respectively. They represent a transition from the mature phase of Gupta art in the form of the use of motifs as well as the technique of carving of the images. Development in the field of art in the context of ancient Assam can largely be traced to the spread of Gupta influence and it is from the Gupta period (c. 319-467 CE) onwards that the region of Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa entered into a phase of vigorous sculptural and architectural development. The spread of Gupta influence in the Brahmaputra valley can be traced at least as far back as the period of the Allahabad Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta, i.e. fourth century CE. This inscription is the first epigraph to refer to Assam or a part thereof as Kamarupa. It clearly states that the *pratyantira nripatih* (kings of frontier states) of Kamarupa, Samatata, Devaka, Nepala and Kartripura acknowledged the suzerainty of Samudragupta (Sircar 1985: 265-266). In terms of the sculptural remains of the period extending from the 5th-8th century CE, mention may be made of the Da-Parvatiya door frame located near Tezpur on the north bank of the Brahmaputra river. The door frame shows the images of Ganga and Yamuna along with their attendants. The tender modelling of the figures, the transparent drapery and the subtle movement in the treatment of the body very vividly depict the influence of classical traits characteristic of the Gupta school of art (Dutta 1990: 45). Gupta art form gave importance to the vegetal motif and this naturalistic approach characteristic of the motifs was transcended to the human figure. Moreover, vegetation and abstract motifs recede to the panels or borders of the sculptured figures during this period (Majumdar 1989: 521-522). The characteristic features of the flora and fauna are transferred to the human figures that now occupy centre stage in the art form of the Guptas. Being highly expressive, the Gupta art style bears evidence of an inner spiritual meaning as well as dynamism.

In the post-Gupta period with the break-up of the Gupta Empire, regional kingdoms emerged and one notices the development of regional art forms in the states that had hitherto been under Gupta suzerainty. This is true of the kingdom of Kamarupa as well. During the 7th century CE in the art of the kingdom of Kamarupa, a break in the Gupta classical phase is evident with a lingering of the classical style being noticed in terms of the modelling of the images as well as the representation of transparent drapery in the art form.

The regional tendencies in art forms demonstrated certain significant traits in the sculptures too. The figures tend to lose the spiritual element and were more slender and sensuous. Though there is retention of classical traits in the form of transparent drapery, less ornamentation is visible, nevertheless the assertion of regional idioms in art forms facilitated the trend of sculptures being frontally carved in the stele (backward stone slab attached to an image) along with stylisation and the emphasis on canonical norms. The sculptures moreover depict a central figure being accompanied by attendants or consorts

and the use of decorative motifs like *kirrtimukha* (the grinning lion face usually shown on the top centre of the stele) and *vidyadharas* (a class of demi-gods).

The miniature Sakti icons from Ambari of the 10th-12th century needs to be analysed in the context of the political developments and the assertion of these regional tendencies. While the Palas and later the Senas succeeded in establishing their rule over regions of Bengal and Bihar, in ancient Assam, the Varman dynasty was replaced by the Salastambhas and in the second half of the 10th century CE, the Palas of Assam under Brahmapala succeeded. The coming into power of the Palas of Bengal and Bihar provided a great impetus to the art of Eastern India as well. This new school of art with a lingering of Gupta traits in the form of slender body and emotional sensuousness lasted upto the end of the 12th century CE till the Muhammedan invasions penetrated Bengal, Bihar and Assam (Banerji 1981: 18-20).

The rule of the Palas of Bengal and their influence on the art forms are visible in the evolutionary growth of the stele. The stele was at the beginning rounded at the top which gradually assumes the shape of being slightly pointed on the top (Banerji 1981: 4). The stele moreover is supported by a pedestal which as a rule had several *rathas* or projections. The carving of the images on the stele confirming to the East Indian Art style are characterised by the stele being richly decorated and the decoration extending all over its surface. Attention is paid towards carving the minute details of the images in terms of their ornaments, the facial features such as crossed eyebrows, ridged lips, etc. During



Fig. 1: *Mahishamardini Durga*, Ambari, 10th - 12th Century CE, Ambari Gallery (Courtesy: Directorate of Archaeology, Assam)



Fig. 2: *Mahishamardini Durga*, Ambari, 10th - 12th Century CE, Ambari Gallery (Courtesy: Directorate of Archaeology, Assam)

the first half of the 9th century CE, the stele moreover is devoid of decoration while from the 10th century onwards, jewellery and background decoration over the surface increases. The top of the stele is occupied by the *kirrtimukha* and flanked by *vidyadharas* on either side. Changes in the style of the stele from the 11th century CE assumes the form of stiffness and rigidity in the postures of the figures along with increasing ornamentation, use of stylised motifs and the existence of *rathas* (projections). The stylistic analysis of the Sakti icons from Ambari belonging to the 10th-12th century CE reveals retention of the features of the East Indian school in terms of the stele and the rigidity of postures characteristic of the images of Visnu and Surya. The miniature Sakti icons, however, are crude in character and the stele assumes a pointed shape at the top. The stiffness in the posture of the goddess that represents her Mahishamardini form is however lacking. The *ayudhas* that the goddess is holding is moreover not distinct and is probably due to the crude nature of the stone used, possibly granite and gneiss (Fig. 1-3). The miniature Mahishamardini icons from Ambari exhibit similar features in terms of their style.



Fig. 3: *Mahishamardini Durga*, Ambari, 10th - 12th Century CE, Ambari Gallery (Courtesy: Directorate of Archaeology, Assam)



Fig. 4: *Chandanayika*, Ambari, 13th - 14th Century CE (Courtesy: Assam State Museum)

In contrast to the miniature icons, the bigger images belonging to the period from the 13th -14th century CE demonstrate polished features and close resemblance with the Pala-Sena school, i.e. the existence of *rathas* or projections and the use of *kirrtimukha*



Fig. 5: *Ganga*, Ambari- 13th – 14th Century CE (Courtesy: Assam State Museum)



Fig. 6: *Yamuna*, Ambari, 13th – 14th Century CE (Courtesy: Assam State Museum)

as well as *vidyadhara*s as decorative motifs. The *kirrtimukha* in the image of Chandanayika assumes a grotesque shape and *vidyadhara*s are seen on both the ends of the stele (Sonowal 2006a). The stele, however, does not have projections (Fig. 4). In this regard, it can be mentioned that Durga is worshipped in nine forms collectively called Nava-Durga, with one of them being at the centre and the eight others in eight directions. The eight figures surrounding the central figure is sixteen-handed while the central one is eighteen-handed. The names of these nine goddesses are *Rudra-Chanda*, *Pra-Chanda*, *Chandogra*, *Chandanayika*, *Chanda*, *Chandavati*, *Chandarupa*, *Atichandika* and *Ugra-Chandika*. According to the *Agni Purana*, *Chandanayika* and the other Durga forms constitute the sixty-four Yoginis (Barpujari 1990: 370). The Sakti sculptures from Ambari also include one image each of Ganga and Yamuna. This indicates the importance of the river goddesses in art forms. From the Gupta period onwards, the iconographic representation of the deities began to take shape. This is evident in the Da-Parvatiya door jamb that depicts the figures of Ganga and Yamuna. As per iconographic representation, Ganga has *Makara* as her *vahana* while the Yamuna has *Kurma* as her *vahana*. The image of Ganga from Ambari depicts the goddess in *tribhanga* posture with the deity standing on the *Makara* which is her *vahana*. The deity holds a water pot in her right hand and lotus stalk in her left hand. Ornaments like *Jatamukuta*, *Puspakundalas*,

Stanahara is worn by the deity while her hair is bound in a single knot which is seen projecting towards the left of the deity's head. A three-hooded snake canopy surrounds the head of the goddess (Sonowal 2006b) (Fig. 5). The other figure is of the Yamuna which is again in *tribhanga* (the body bent at three parts - neck, waist and knees) posture. She has *Kurma* or tortoise as her *vahana* and is adorned with *hara*, *kundala*, and girdle, etc. The goddess has a single snake canopy over her head and carries a water pot in her right hand. The left hand of the figure is in *abhaya mudra* (gesture of protection) (Fig. 6). The stele of both the images reflects a plain character, devoid of any elaborate decoration. The *kirrtimukha* of both the figures is however not distinct.

Interpretation and Discussion

The Sakti icons, both smaller and bigger images from the Ambari archaeological site demonstrate significant stylistic variations. The miniature Mahishamardini figures show similar features and the lack of polished characteristics. The likeness in style and their profuse quantities indicate that there was a huge demand for these sculptures and may have adorned the private shrines of the people. These figures could also have served the purpose of a decorative motif on the outer surface of a temple though evidence of such a structure is lacking from Ambari. On the other hand, the polished aspect of the bigger icons must have catered to the needs of a rich clientele. However, the plain nature of the stele characteristic of these images indicates degradation in the art form. The onset of the Turko-Afghan invasions must have given a setback to the required patronage in facilitating the production of these sculptures. The region witnessed the coming of the Turkish Muhammedans as recorded in the *Kanai Barasi Bowa Inscription* (Sarma 1981: 226). According to this inscription located at North Gauhati, the Turks coming into Kamarupa were annihilated on the 13th day of Chaitra, of the Saka year 1127 (1206 CE). Starting with the invasion of Muhammad-bin-Bakhtiyar Khalji in the year 1202 CE, repeated invasions continued till 1257 CE. The invasions from the west naturally created a situation of political turmoil that probably gave a setback to art activities. For instance, the Ganga, Yamuna and the *Chandanayika* images reflect a disproportionate character and unfinished look. The Ganga image from Ambari exhibits an unfinished surface, as there is an etching of geese or *hamsa*, unlike the properly sculpted *hamsa* in the Da Parbatiya. The Ganga and Yamuna icons from Ambari can stylistically be assigned to the 13th - 14th century CE because of the plain or sparse decoration of the stele denoting the changing political context following the Turko-Afghan invasions. This in the long run must have given a setback to art and patronage. The Ganga image is in no way comparable to the art traditions of the Gupta period. The significance of the snake canopy on top of the images of Ganga and Yamuna from Ambari is unique. The use of the snake canopy is a rather unusual feature in the representation of the river goddess. The association of the serpent is nevertheless well known by having close association with that of *nagas* and *nagis*. This aspect is noticeable in the images from Bangladesh. The depiction of *nagas*

and *nagis* are also found on the door jambs of the Da-Parbatiya gateway that also depicts Ganga and Yamuna. Snakes moreover symbolise rivers in art and mythology.

Conclusion

The diverse manifestations of the goddess in her different forms that have been recovered from the Ambari archaeological site throw valuable light on the predominant religious beliefs apart from the stylistic variations. The discovery of a large number of Sakti icons highlights the importance of early Assam as an important centre of Sakti worship. Not only the Ambari sculptures depict the popularity of the goddess in her anthropomorphic form but also manifest the existence of her worship in an iconic form as well. This can be corroborated by the evidence of a great number of *yonipithas* that has been found from Ambari. The status of Ambari as an important centre of production cannot be denied. Being in close proximity with the Dighaliphukhuri that served as a channel of the Brahmaputra river, these images most likely were brought to Ambari and was probably meant to be transported to different places. It is also quite likely that these sculptures may have been made to adorn a temple, but such a temple did not come in its final form since Ambari lacks evidence of such a structure. The importance of Ambari as an atelier thus indicates the artistic excellence of the sculptors who received the patronage of the ruling authority.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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