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Investigating Iconographic Genius in Namakkal Hillock Caves – A Historic Study

Dr. V. Prabhakaran

Assistant Professor of History
Thiruvalluvar Government Arts College
Rasipuram – 637401
Namakkal District, Tamil Nadu

Abstract

India witnessed the rock-cut architecture in third century B.C but Tamil Nadu had to wait up to seventh century A.D during the pallava period. The two hillocks caves at Namakkal which as structural rock-cut, were excavated by the ruler Gunaseela of Adhyaman dynasty, a descendent sub-group of ancient Chera dynasty of ancient Tamil region. The two caves temples are dedicated to Lord Vishnu in the form of Narashimasamy and Ananthasayi. It is fascinated that the inscriptions tell about the architect of these caves. The Narashimasamy temple which is on the western side of hillock has remarkable sculptures of Narashimasamy and Ulaganantha Perumal. The Ananthasayi temple which is on the eastern side of hillock has notable sculpture of Yogasayana Vishnu and Sankara Narayana. Sculpture evidence indicates an undoubted influence from pallava carvings particularly in the depiction of tall and slender figures in the southern style. Although there is sculptural influence in pallava style, the Adiyaman architecture in kongu region has a unique style that it's need to be given prominence in Tamil Nadu history.

Keywords

Namakkal, Adhyaman, Narashimasamy, Ananthasayi, Ulaganantha Perumal, Sankara Narayana,

Introduction

The two hillock caves, primarily rock cut and structural temples excavated by Adiyaman rulers of seventh and eighth centuries stands as historic monument at Namakkal, the headquarter city of Namakkal District of Tamil Nadu. Rock cut cave art was one of the oldest arts forms which have almost seven thousand years old in the world. There were rock cut cave in China and Egypt which were identified to five years old. But in India, it is witnessed that the great King Ashoka excavated the caves during his period in third century B.C. In Tamil Nadu, the earliest rock-cut caves were excavated very late during the period of pallavas and pandyas in seventh century A.D only. The caves in Namakkal hillock are in the form of structural rock-cut were excavated by Gunaseela Adiyaman in seventh-eighth centuries A.D. It stands as an important historic monument in the state of Tamil Nadu which needs special attention to study as it was not given due importance. There are two cave-temples viz., Narashimaswamy temple and Ananthasayi temple found at the east and west side of the hillock respectively. As a tutor in history, the researcher wanted to investigate the local history of his region and trace its historical importance, this research paper is a modest attempt to bring out select sculptures and its excellence in Namakkal hillock cave temples.

Namakkal

Namakkal is one of the 38 districts of Tamil Nadu. It was one of the seventeen divisions of the Baramahal region of Madras Presidency in 1760 and one of the twenty seven taluks ceded by Tipu Sultan to the

British in 1792. The name Namakkal derives as "Namam Rock" is one of the renowned historic hillock fort towns in the state of Tamil Nadu. In the olden days, the town was known by names like Araikal (Rock hill) and Thiru Araikal (Holy Rock hill). Owing to the representation of the Hindu mythological stories depicted in the rocks of Vishnu temples, the town was also represented as Thirumurthi Sthalam (Holy place of Trinity). In the local legends, it is referred as Srisailam. The hillock made up of single rock situated on the mid-point of Namakkal town is a natural one. As in the center of the town it separates the town into two areas. Kottai area is on the west and Pettai (business) area on the east. The hillock has two cave temples carved by Adiyaman rulers.

Adhiyaman Rulers

Among the ancient ruling dynasties of Cheras, Cholas and Pandyas, the Adiyaman ruling families also had special place in the history of Tamil Nadu. They have a long line of ancient rulers ranging from Third century B.C to Thirteenth century A.D. The region included the east and north of Kongu Nadu i.e., Baramahal region, the present Salem, Dharmapuri, Krishnagiri and Namakkal districts of Tamil Nadu. The Adhiyamans may have descended from Kosars, the early tribes of this region. The word Adhiyaman probably means Adhiyar Magan (son of Adhiyar). Therefore some authorities consider that they were the descendants of Adhiyar, a sub-group of Cheras. The town of Thagadur, present Dharmapuri of Tamil Nadu was their capital. Athiyendhra Gunaseelan Adhiyaman was ruled from Kurumporai halli as his Capital which is in present Erode district. There was a belief that Gunaseela was related through his mother to pallava king Narasima varma II (700-728) and remained a staunch ally against Pandyas. In a battle for the territories, Gunaseela allied with Pallavas and Cheras against Pandyas in 784 A.D. The combined armies lost to Pandyan Paranthaka Nedunsadayian and lost his country to pandyas.

Gunaseela's Cave Temples

This Athiyendra Gunaseelan excavated two cave temples on the bottom of Namakkal hillock and dedicated them to two forms of Vishnu namely Narashimasamy and Ananthasayi. There are four main inscriptions found in the corbels of the pillars of Ananthasayi temple. The script is in Grantha and the language is Sanskrit. It tells that the cave is carved for the *Atiyanantha Vishnu Grihan* by the Atiya King Gunaseela. This Inscription also tells the many titles of Gunaseela as *Kamavilasa*, *Manasara Manomaya*, *Naradheva*, *Naravahana*, *Prakrithi Priya*, *Sribasha*, *Silibritham*, *Udhara-*

chittha, *Uthpala Karnika* and *Vimalacharitha*. K.V. Soundarajan reveals that the early Pandya rock-cut styles have an influence of Chalukyan Rock cut caves of Badami. So rock-cut caves in seventh century Tamil Nadu had convergence character of Pallava-Pandya- Chalukya art. It is noted in the Namakkal cave-temple also. The sculptures at Narashimasamh, Ananthasayi temples have a influence of Chalukayan art and architecture at Badami. in He had also excavated another cave temple for Thaanthonri Isvarar near Karur and built a Vishnu temple in Gunaseelam near Musiri, both in Karur and Tiruchirappalli district respectively.

Sculptures in Sri Narasimha Swamy Temple

Sri Narashimar Swamy cave temple has been situated on the western side of Namakkal hillock. The temple is dedicated to Lord Narasimha (Man-Lion) who stood as main deity in the carved cave-vi. Here Lord Narashimar faced the west side and sitting in the ardha padmasana with the right leg down and left leg in the sitting position. Sun and moon accompanied by Lord Shiva on his right side to bring down the anger of Lord Narashimar. On his Right side stands Lord Brahma and Sanka and Sanatar can be seen near Lord Narashima. Blood clotting and sharp nails were well illustrated in the right hand of Narashima which was made during the *samhara* of the demon *Iraniyan*. It was learnt that santum sanitorium including *mandapam* in cave temple was constructed by the architect Devathachan. Later it was renovated by Pallavas which was evidently seen in the inscription.vii

Beside Lord Narashima, carved statues of *Sri Vaikuntanathar*, *Iraniya samaraNarashimmar* can be seen on one side and *Vamnamoorthi*, *Ulagantha perumal*, and *Varahamoorthi* on the other.

On the right side wall of Lord Narashimar, Sri Vaikuntanathar facing southern can be seen. As the sayings of Alvars, Sri Narayanan was in Sri Vaikuntam on Tiru Anandalvar seated on Athise-shan and acting as an umbrella for Sri Narayan. The Sun and Moon fans Lord Sri Narayanan. Lord Shiva, Lord Brahma, and Markendeaya Maharishi were praying to Sri Narayana to save them from the demon *Iraniyan*. Sri Narayana shows his Narashima Avatar to Lord Shiva intending to kill the demon by not violating the boon he got from Lord Shiva to save all. This can be seen down as a statue in the corner. Usually, Lord Shiva is represented as Linga in most places, But here, we can see Lord Shiva personified as a human figure keeping a crescent moon in his head and a snake in his hand. Lord Brahma is seen with four hands.

In the cave, on the right side of Lord Narashimar, there lies the statue of Narashima Moothy who came out of the pillar with anger and put Iraniyan in his thighs and used his sharp nailed two hands to kill Iraniyan by opening his heart and other four hands hold weapons which show the angry of Sri Narashimar. Prahaladan prayed to Lord NarashimarDevathas and Sri Mahalakshmi was in fear of seeing Sri Narashimar. But Prahalada who got the blessings of Sri Narayana while he was in her mother's womb was praying without any fear. His only intention was bhakti towards Sri Narashima. This statue reveals the bhakti of prahalada towards Sri Narashima.

Ulagantha Perumal

In the cave, there is an *Ulagantha Perumal* statue near the left leg of the *Perumal* (Lord Vishnu). It is well known and referred to as Vamana Avathar, one of the nine avatars of Lord Vishnu. The Statue is holding an umbrella in one hand and getting *thanam* (Gift) in the guise of Brahmin Vamanan. Opposite to *vamanan* statue, there stands the statue of King Mavali holding a kettle in his and giving *thanam* (gift) to Vamanamoorthy. Near him, there is Vindhyaalli's statue, the wife of King Mavali. At the top, there is the face of a horse near a pillar. Perumal's right leg in the sky and left leg in the land can be seen on top of perumal an umbrella can be seen. On the top of the right leg, a face can be seen with a knife and shield upside down. Under the right leg of statue, there is statue of Sukirachariyar where karuda Alwar is sitting on Sukirachariyar to punish him. Jambavan is in the sky. It is a fine example of architecture.

Namagiri Amman

The Narashima Swamy temple complex is where *Namagiri Amman* is located. Following legends, the letter "Na" destroys sins, "MA" letter blesses glory, "GI" letter gives success "RI" letters gives unborn stage to reach Moksha. So the place Namagiri in the name of the Namakkal is a holy and sacred place. Namagiri Amman shows her kindness by showers of her blessings to all her devotees. There is Narashimar pool in this temple where devotees bathe morning and evening and worship Sri Namagiri and go around temple 12 times will not be affected by any evil or devil and can cure all diseases and get heir for their families with the blessings of Namagiri.

Sculptures in Sri Ananthasayi Temple

As mentioned earlier, the Ananthasayi temple is located on the eastern side of the hillock. It is committed to Lord Vishnu in the name of Ananthasayi "one who lies on nantha" (joy). It is also

popularly called as Ranganathan temple. Another small shrine Ranganayakiamman, the consort of Ranganathar was also present in the temple complex. The massive rock-cut figure of Lord Vishnu lounging on the five-hooded snake is housed in the main temple. The attended figures like Brahma, Bhrgu, Chandra, Garuda, Dhaksha, Guru, Kaitaba, Naradha, Thumburu, Markendeya, Sani, Srimadhu, Samga, Surya, and Varuna are present. On the wall in front of the central shrine are panels showing Vishnu's manifestations of Thirivikrama, Sankaranaryana, and Balanarashima. The Vamana panel of the other rock-cut temple, which is found in Narashima temple, is comparable to and just as magnificent as the Thirivikrama panel. Sankaranarayana's figure is depicted as standing rigidly. Siva is on the right half, and Vishnu is on the left. Compare this symmetrically posture with that of Arthanari temple of Tiruchengode. This rendering of Siva-Vishnu represents a contemporary attempt made to establish the unitary nature of the divided sects of Saivism and Vaishnavism. With two pillars as well as two pilasters at the front, the temple features two elevated rectangular shrines. The adhishtana molding, which resembles that in the Narashima cave, was interfered with by two steps that ran between the center pillars. The *ardhamandapa* in front is a tiny hall with two pillars and an open facade that is marginally longer than the shrine but no broader. The cave, which has three entrances, is enclosed by a wall that has been constructed here as well. The cave's pillars are of the typical type found in early Pallava and Pandya caves, and they are made up of an octagonal kattu between two square *sadurams* embellished with lotus medallions.

The striking image of a yogasayana Vishnu resting atop the serpent known as Karkotaka dominates the Anantasayi cave at Namakkal. Because it is believed to be the most vicious of all the serpents, this five-hooded creature is depicted with a lion's face inside each hood. One of Lord Vishnu's arms is extended, while the other is bowed and kept in the kataka hasta mudra. The demons Madhu and Kaitabha are shown at the shrine as powerfully designed figures that form the end wall and are located close to Vishnu's feet. They appear as though they are ready to charge at Vishnu. This end features Chandra, whereas the statue of Surya is located on the opposite end wall. The images of Brahma sitting on a lotus rising from the naval of Vishnu, Narada, Tumbura, and other sages are depicted on the back wall of the shrine, above the reclining Vishnu. The Ayudha gods are shown on the base of the snake couch. *Markandeya*, *Bhrgu*, *Parna* (*garuda*), *Maharishi*, *Brahma*, *Daksha*,

Sasi, Surya, Tumbura, Narada, Guru, Varuna, Sarnga, Kaupotaka, Isa, Sri Madhu, Chakra NantakaPanchanjanya and Kaitabha are the attendant figures listed in the inscription in that sequence. It appears that the representation falls under the *uttama* categorization.

A representation of the *Vamana avatar* that is comparable to the relief in the Narashima Cave in treatment can be found on the left wall of the Ardha Mandapa and extends onto the back wall. It's fascinating to note how the Vamana is shown differently in the Narasimha cave. Here, the form is shown less as a fat boy and more as a young Brahmacharin. Mahabali is delivering a gift, with one hand holding an umbrella and the other outstretched to accept it. Trivikrama's figure is shown in a similar position to that of the Narasimha cave, with his right arm extended nearly touching his leg and his right leg lifted to shoulder level. The figure appears to be enduring this relief despite being strikingly similar to the one in the Narashima cave, down to the outward swinging makara kundalas. In contrast to the more realistic treatment in the Narasimha cave, the lower garment's draping is also slightly fanciful. It is amazing that the Vamana avatar should have been included twice in the Namakkal sculptures and that each panel, despite its minor changes, was so popular.

Sankara Narayana

On the opposite wall of the ardha mandapa is a sculpture of Sankara Narayana, with his right half representing Siva and his left half representing Vishnu. According to the Vamana purana, Vishnu clarified that he and Siva were actually one to a Rishi, who then explained that the form was a manifestation. One of Vishnu's hands is in the *Katyavalambita hasta*, while the other is uplifted with the *sankha*, and above the hand are tongues of flame. Siva is depicted with a snake in one hand and a deer in the other hand, just above it. The *makuda* depicts a division, with Siva's side displaying a crescent moon and Vishnu's side being *Kirita*. Siva seems to have a *sarpa kundala* in his ear, but Vishnu has a *makara kundala*.

According to the *samabhanga* established in the *Vishnudharmotara*, Sankara-Narayana is depicted standing on a little elevated platform with an upright and straight posture.

Conclusion

Architectural and sculptural evidence indicates an admixture of Pallava and chaluksya traditions which the genius of the Adiyaman craftsmen transformed into a single entity. A complete

mastery of the art of stone relief sculpture is displayed at Namakkal. The somewhat stylistic treatment of the figurines of Anantasayi cave as compared with those in the Narasimha cave together with the uniformity of style within each cave, lead us to suggest that the two sects of carvings came from the hands of two different sculptors trained however in the same school. The paleographic evidences give very meager information on fixing the date for the Namakkal Inscription. The records display features that appear to be earlier than those of Anaimalai and Tirupparankunram inscriptions of Pandya Parantaka Nedunjadaiyan inscriptions dated to A.D 770 and A.D 773. They could however belong even to the period of Pallava Rajasimha a time at which a variety of scripts were in use. Historic evidences from various sources have come to a suggestion to fix the date of excavation of caves could be at 784 A.D. Sculpture evidence indicates an undoubted influence from pallava carvings particularly in the depiction of tall and slender figures in the southern style. The Adiyaman architecture in kongu region has a unique style that it's need to be given prominence in Tamil Nadu history.

Foot Note

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