



## INTRODUCTION TO THEATRICALITY

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Each cave from Ellora has been brought onto the anvil of dispute time and again but the real conundrum from this cave complex is the Daśāvatāra Cave, not only due to its Buddhist origin but for many other reasons as well. This is the only cave in this complex that is studded with 'evidence' of different kinds viz. iconographical, stylistic and architectural, as also the only inscription mentioning the name of a dynasty and also a particular emperor which could be a decisive evidence for dating<sup>1</sup>. The kinship between this cave and the other multi-storied Buddhist caves like Cave 11 and Cave 12 spares no doubt about its Buddhist origin and the Buddha images on the pillar capitals from the facade provide a verdictive evidence in support of it. The obvious similarity between some of the sculptures from this cave - like the pratihāras (Fig. 60) on the outer walls or the Vaiṣṇavite panels on the southern wall- and the sculpture from Pattadakal clearly indicates the Chālukyan interaction with this monument. All these facts together should project a coherent picture of the developments in this cave, leaving no place for controversy. Still, the controversies do exist, for all these issues appear simple in isolation, but all of them taken together plead for something

contrary to the obvious implications of each issue taken independently.

Since the incomplete inscription from the *nandi-maṇḍapa* (Fig. 61) of this cave does not clearly mention the authorship of this cave, it refuses to furnish anything more substantial than the genealogy of the Rāṣṭrakūṭas and the latest possible date of the *maṇḍapa*. The evidence about the annexation of this cave is glaring but whether it was done during the reign of Dantidurga or earlier is difficult to say. Deshpande prefers to believe that the *maṇḍapa* did exist in the courtyard before the arrival of Dantidurga at this site<sup>2</sup>, but the Chālukyan character of this architecture does not indicate a period that is prior to the mid-eighth century. Moreover, to whom are we to attribute its authorship if not to the Rāṣṭrakūṭas ?

It cannot be attributed to the Kalachuris on stylistic grounds, which implies that it was an addition to the existing excavation by the Chālukyans when the cave was abandoned. Krishnakumar's article gives the impression that R.S.Gupte feels that this *maṇḍapa* is not of Brahmanical origin<sup>3</sup>, but in his discussion Gupte clearly mentions that it cannot be of Buddhist origin<sup>4</sup>. As it is, nowhere in any Buddhist monument do we come across a structure similar to this. It is not possible to explain its purpose and logic in front of a Buddhist *vihāra*. An intense Buddhist activity at Ellora is also questionable during the period that is ascribed to it<sup>5</sup>.

In the light of the flight of steps leading to this cave, one immediately infers that the intention was to carve out a three-storied cave like Cave 11 and Cave 12. From among the two existing stories the lower one is not fully carved which indicates that it was taken over either by force - which I don't find likely - or as an abandoned site, as already discussed in the previous chapter. I presume that the cessation of work at the cave occurred due to lack of funds and patronage somewhere around A.D. 600. It ceased abruptly leaving the existing ground floor incomplete. Since it clearly indicates the proposal to carve one more storey, it is not at all likely that the existing courtyard was cleared off at that juncture. Except for two narrow lanes excavated to dispose off the debris, a huge solitary lump of rock must have been standing right in front of the incomplete cave. That free-standing living rock, separated from all sides must have inspired the later Brahmanical architects to create this unique structure. Save the Mahabalipuram Rathas - which are not monoliths carved out of living rock<sup>6</sup> - this monolith can be treated as the successful commencement of a new tradition in cave architecture. In that sense, I feel that this *mandapa* inaugurates the 'Age of the Exotic' at Ellora. It initiates a new experiment which gets fulfilled a few yards away from here a few years later.

The spirit of the exotic is discernible in the sculptural panels of this cave too. They do not necessarily follow any programme but like in Cave 14 a broad distribution of Śaivite and Vaiṣṇavite sculpture

is seen in this cave also, although the placement has now changed; whereas in Cave 14, the Śaivite sculpture is on the south wall, here it is on the north. Each of these sculptures is deeply carved in the large niches between the pilasters. The niches are so deep that Krishnakumar suggests that the previously existing Buddhist sculpture was carefully chiselled out and then the Brahmanical panels were carved at a deeper level<sup>7</sup>. The suggestion merits some thought but

as some of the images physically protrude out of the niche provided to them, it appears that the depth has been provided for the characters to act freely and dynamically, and it adds an immense theatricality to these sculptural compositions. This theatricality is a common element in all these panels, otherwise the total corpus of sculpture in this cave betrays stylistic and qualitative inconsistency that clearly indicates the presence of not less than three guilds working in this cave, two of them of an extremely high calibre and the third of a lesser one.

Carmel Berkson rightly complained that the sculpture from this cave is never granted the attention it deserves<sup>8</sup>. The inconsistency might be the reason, but it is true that even the most overwhelming panels from this vast cave are not regarded as rivals to the sculpture from Rāmeśvara or Kailāsa, though they are not in any way lesser than any masterpiece of Indian sculpture. Carmel Berkson has done an interesting formal analysis of some of these panels, and she rates them as some of the greatest sculptural manifestations in the history

of world art<sup>9</sup>. Her analysis seems to have been inspired by the unique work by Alice Boner who has tried to crystallize the principles of composition in Indian art and has analysed two of the sculptural panels from this cave<sup>10</sup>. She feels that these sculptures reflect the state of bliss reached by the *ṛṣi* ; she finds them infused with the pacific nature of the realized *yogi*.

Is that indeed the impact of these sculptural panels ? The experience of 'bliss' is perhaps the result of the architecture. In Cave 12, the onlooker enters a similar mental state. The vastness of the cave, the pillars placed at calculated intervals, the diffused sunlight trying to reach the deep corners and the dark niches create a serene atmosphere. The Buddha images within the cave also contribute to this serenity. Can the same be said about the sculpture from the Daśāvatāra which is quite flamboyant when compared to the architecture?

The agility enhanced through the body flexions in the Andhakāsuravadha (Fig. 63) or Natarāja Śiva (Fig. 62) from the north wall, the dynamism of the Mṛtyunjaya (Fig. 64) or the self-conscious elegance of the Trivikrama (Fig. 65) or Narasimha (Fig. 66) are far from being pacific. On the contrary, all these reliefs betraying different legacies share only one common element - that is, theatricality - which is not seen before in any of the art traditions of the Deccan barring Pattadakal.

The association between the sculpture from the Virūpākṣa temple at Pattadakal and at least the *pratihāras* from Cave 15 is already established in a meticulous study by Doris Chatham<sup>11</sup>. She has also extended it to the *pratihāra* images from Kailāsa and Cave 22. Two more sculptural reliefs can be deciphered as a further development of the Pattadakal idiom. The Trivikrama and Narasimha panel from this cave reveal the characteristics of this Chālukyan subschool - the arrested movement, the contrived elegance, the supple motions and rhetoric lyricism are essential derivations from Pattadakal. But these sculptures are in deeper niches and are carved in higher relief almost like round sculpture. This change might be due to the different technicalities, as the sculpture is carved in living rock, the sculptor is not obliged to retain uniform depth of carving, unlike the sculptors working on a structural temple. The Narasimha panel from the Daśāvātāra promptly recalls a tiny bas-relief from the Virūpākṣa temple where two warriors in combat are depicted in the same posture (Fig. 67) - the hands raised, the palm spread out and the legs interlocked. These gestures like the *karaṇas* in Indian dance are very common at Pattadakal in which the characters almost 'perform' for the onlooker. Even the *pratihāras*, which are so different from the Vākāṭaka-Kalachuri *dvārapālas* or the Avalokiteśvaras from the Buddhist caves, pose dramatically. This rhetoric - theatrical parole was never an accent of the earlier Chālukyan expression. Badami and Aihole sculpture, in comparison with Pattadakal is extremely self-absorbed and introvert and hence this

particular element appears outlandish. It is not at all indigenous to the Chālukyan idiom.

While tracing the evolution of Pratihāra images Doris Chatham picks up the thread from Pattadakal<sup>12</sup>. With due awareness of the radical change in the Chālukyan idiom it becomes imperative to search for its origin, which can be traced to a site in south-eastern India. The Brahmanical caves at Vijaywada, Undavalli and Mogalarajapuram have much to tell us about the evolution of post-Gupta sculpture in the Deccan. Here, in these Eastern Chālukyan (or Vishṇukundin ?)<sup>13</sup> cave temples the formative phase of late Chālukyan and Pallava sculpture is discernible. The *pratihāra* images from Mogalarajapuram (Fig. 68) immediately point towards the source of Pattadakal sculpture. They share not only the same stance but even the physiognomy and iconography is borrowed from Mogalarajapuram. Along with the *pratihāra*

images the other sculpture from Pattadakal (Fig. ) also displays kinship with the *pratihāra* image with horns (Fig. 69) and the Natarāja from Cave 2 (Fig. 70) at Mogalarajapuram. The Pattadakal sculpture owes its slender grace and theatricality to this little-known idiom. The subtle stylization, compromising somewhat on naturalism, and the simplified modelling is evident in Pallava sculpture too and in the light of the architectural details, Mogalarajapuram may well be perceived as a source of this stylization. This slender simplified physiognomy seems to have been prevalent in Eastern Indian schools right from the Khandagiri-Udaigiri sculpture. Amaravati, Nagarjunakonda, Sannati, the caves in the vicinity of Vijayawada,



Mahabalipuram and Pattadakal perhaps derive from the same physiognomy and body language.

These Eastern Chālukyan / Vishnukundin caves are seldom mentioned in the history of Indian sculpture. They are apparently very insignificant. The sculptures from these caves are cursorily carved. Except for a few good but mutilated sculptures, the rest of them are tentative, but the sculptures as also the architecture evinces the spirit of innovation. The multistoried cave with terraces is a glaring example but the other one, I believe, is more significant in the present context. A little distance away from this cave, the Akkanna-Madanna cave is an attempt to carve a monolith (Fig.71) from a living rock which is a much earlier attempt in this direction than the Mahabalipuram Rathas. It is at a rudimentary stage but the intention to carve out a *Drāviḍa vimāna* is vividly disclosed. The only reason that can prevent us from assuming this incomplete excavation as the inspiration for the Kailāsa temple is the physical distance between these two sites. But Soundara Rajan furnishes very significant information to negate this doubt<sup>14</sup>. On architectural and epigraphical grounds he has convincingly shows that the artisans from Vijayawada region reached and worked at Bhokardan probably for the Raṣṭrakūṭas in the late 7th or early 8th century. The solitary cave at Bhokardan conspicuously stands out from the other caves of the upper Deccan. The architecture, with a narrow rectangular hall and six garbhagṛhas, is very unusual in the architectural scene of the 7th-8th century

Eastern Deccan but such features are observed often in the Vijaywada region. The sculpture from Bhokardan, stylistically and iconographically is foreign to this region. Its Andhra origin does not remain at a conjectural level since this cave bears an interesting inscription which is found in a number of caves in the Eastern Andhra region. It is a small inscription reading "*utpatipidugu*" the meaning of which is not quite clear. But it certainly proves a nexus between all these sites. The one found at Bhokardan on epigraphical grounds seems a little later to the others found in the Andhra region, clearly indicating the mobility of a group of artisans from that region towards Maharashtra.

But Bhokardan was too modest a project to attract artisans from such distant lands. They must have arrived anticipating a better incentive - and - presumably at Ellora.

The new-born superpower in the Deccan seemed to have something unbelievably grand on their mind, and to make it manifest, master artisans were invited from several places known for their artistic splendour, and the artists from Mogalarajapuram, Undavalli and Vijayawada also must have staked their aesthetic inventions and artistic skills at this site.

In the previous chapter a possibility of 'common resource',<sup>15</sup> for both Chālukyan and Vākāṭaka sculpture was suggested. Something similar to that can be perceived at this juncture also. Rhetoric, which was

never a *genre* in Western Karnataka, is grafted onto the existing Chālukyan style, at Pattadakal in early 8th century. The cultivated style of the Chālukyas absorbs this new element and hops into an unanticipated sophisticated stylization<sup>16</sup>. It does not evolve from the amorphous but intense expression of the Vijayawada caves but adopts the latter's nascent theatricality, unfortunately only on a superficial level.

Coming back to Cave 15, the first two Vaiṣṇavite relief sculptures - the Narasimha and the Trivikrama bear all the characteristic features of this appropriated stylization. They are highly cultivated and sophisticated.

The reliefs on the opposite wall, the Andhakāsuravadhamūrti and Śiva Naṭarāja, though share the same theatricality, do not sacrifice their sentience. Despite the high degree of deliberation on their execution they do not appear designed or contrived. These two sculptures do not belong to any 'school' from Ellora. It is not possible to trace their lineage to any of the well-known idioms of Indian sculpture. They stand out distinctly in this complex. The legacy of this *genre* too is not traceable. These two masterpieces stand apart, in seclusion. They are different in every respect from the rest of Ellora sculpture. Unlike the other protagonists from the Daśāvatāra reliefs, they almost pounce out from the dark deep niches. The body flexions are complex and the sculptures display a thorough understanding of human anatomy and a tremendous ability to delineate it in stone.

The sinews of the shoulder and torso are no less tough and tensile than those of a lion. The body tension radiates to every corner of the relief and the agility of the protagonist churns the atmosphere in the niche. The restlessness and turmoil that prevails in these two panels is never again experienced elsewhere in Ellora barring the Rāvaṇānugrahamūrti opposite the Paralāṅkā in Kailāsa. No other sculpture including the Narasiṁha panel in this cave is as sentient as these two and that is why it would not be appropriate to relate it to Pattadakal sculpture where the expressions on the faces of the character are put on like a mask. The rawness of these Daśāvatāra sculptures speaks of its healthy evolution and is a legitimate resultant of the evolutionary process of a living style, the rawness of which is not sacrificed for elegance. There is no evidence to trace the roots of this particular idiom to the Eastern Andhra caves but they certainly owe much to the latter - the spirit and the gusto in particular.

These two reliefs must have been the contribution of a master who had thoroughly internalized the element of theatricality to the point where it does not remain on the surface but becomes an essential, intrinsic quality of the expression, and is attainable only by those who have invented and explored it and not merely borrowed it from some other art tradition. Therefore it is quite likely that the master of these two reliefs hailed from the Vijayawada school, the progression of which can be traced through Bhokardan, though at

Vijayawada itself the style appears quite rudimentary and tentative. There is no decisive evidence to substantiate this speculation but in the absence of any other possibility to explain the stylistic distinctness of these two reliefs and in the light of some essential qualities that can be observed at both these places, this speculation calls for serious investigation.

Ellora sculpture readily adopts this theatricality which gets manifest in almost every relief from this cave and numerous sculptural panels from the Kailāsanātha temple, especially from the rear corridor and Lankeśwara cave. The instant appeal in this expressionistic and extroverted idiom seems to have tempted the different dialects of Indian sculpture to adopt it, which becomes an integral feature of the artistic expression of medieval India. From here onwards the Indian expression opts for *gauḍi rīti* in place of the *vaidarbhi* which was more in vogue during the Gupta era. The *gauḍi rīti* is flamboyant, ornate and intricate compared to the restrained lyrical splendours of *vaidarbhi*. When an intense emotional content is to be expressed, flamboyance becomes a pre-requisite of expression. It enhances the intensity of the tangible manifestation. The theatricality born out of such a compulsion flows along with the life-sap of an art object and cannot be rated lesser to the classical manifestations of *vaidarbhi*. The Indian aesthetic tradition too repeatedly warns us not to attempt a qualitative comparison between the two. These two styles-though style is not an appropriate synonym for *rīti*, it is

the usage in vogue - they can be broadly compared with classicism and romanticism<sup>17</sup>, where not only the manner of expression but the ways of experiencing the world around are different. Though it is illogical to pronounce one of them as superior to the other, classicism is unknowing treated so. Similarly in India, *vaidarbhi* has won the favour of the elite, probably because of its inherent subjectivity that can lead to a precarious state of excellence. The expressionistic attitude may tend to lose this precarious balance, get loud and may go off at a tangent 'to play for the galleries' due to which the intrinsic tension of emotions, the essential pre-requisite of both romanticism and the *gaudī rīti* is loosened. A chauvinistic expression that is not empowered or reinforced with intense emotions would appear not only hollow but also idiotic at times. The theatricality in the neo-classical painting or in the Hoysala sculpture would substantiate this.

Michael Fried in his 'Absorption and Theatricality' alarms us of another risk that is of the cleavage between the temporality of the viewer and the spectacle<sup>18</sup>. The figures of the spectacle exist in the incremental moment whereas the viewer exists in a time which is prolonged, extended sans the excitement of the former. This disparity builds a proscenic barrier between the active figures of the stage and the passive spectator, who is not ushered through the dissolution of the proscenic barrier and hence deprived of the congruence that is desirable between his vision and that of the characters on the proscenium.

The two masterpieces from Daśāvatāra succeed in evading both these pitfalls. They retain the tenacity of emotions and their parity with the degree of dynamics in their manifest form. They not only usher the viewer into the arena of activity but the viewer is absorbed in the activity. The 'aesthetic attitude' obtained through an intense aesthetic experience of this expression in *gaudī rīti* is in no way lesser to the tranquility reached to, with the help of any serene manifestation in Vaidarbhi.

But the question raised in the beginning still remains unanswered. This master, who introduced this exotic element to Indian sculptural tradition, where did he come from and at this juncture, one more question to supplement the former - where did he disappear ? No trace of his chisel is discerned in Ellora after this creation.

## REFERENCES

1. V.V.Mirashi, 'Dantidurga, the founder of the Rāshtrakūṭa Imperial Power', Journal of the Oriental Institute of Baroda, Vol.I No.1 Sept. 1951. The incomplete inscription from the nandimaṇḍapa of the Daśāvatāra Cave is issued by the Raṣṭrakūṭa sovereign Dantidurga and is very significant in the present context. This long inscription mentions the geneology of this royal family, tracing it back to five generations before Dantidurga himself. With the help of other Raṣṭrakūṭa inscriptions, Mirashi proves the indigenous origin of this dynasty which implies that the Raṣṭrakūṭa, probably in the capacity of the feudatories of the Chālukyans, governed this region at least for one hundred and fifty years before Dantidurga. It is surprising, that while giving a thought to the authorship of the early Śaivite caves of Ellora, this dynasty does not merit any consideration. Alongwith this inscription, Mirashi has discussed two dated copper plates issued by this ruler. One of them found at Samangad near Kolhapur, mentioning a date corresponding to 753 A.D., seems to be a spurious document. Sukhtankar, Bhandarkar and Mirashi himself consider it to be counterfeit. The other issued at Elapura, is also a dated grant corresponding to 751 A.D., issued immediately after Dantidurga obtained the panchamahāśabda. On the basis of this plate Mirashi places his reign from 715 - 850 A.D. Some other scholars like Bhagwanlal Indraji consider this reign to have



been between 725 - 755 A.D. Considering the elevated status of this ruler as mentioned in the Daśāvatāra inscription, it could be placed towards the end of his reign, i.e. around 750 A.D., and the sculptural activity before that.

2. M.N.Deshpande, 'Verulchi Leṇi', Marathwada, Diwali issue 1958.
3. Krishna Kumar, 'The Buddhist Origin of Some Brahmanical Cave Temples of Ellora', East and West, Vol.26, 1976, p.360.
4. R.S.Gupte and B.D.Mahajan, 'Ajanta, Ellora and Aurangabad Caves' Aurangabad, 1962.
5. As stated in the previous chapter, I feel that the Buddhist activity at Ellora ceased with the advent of the seventh century.. There is no evidence to believe that it continued in the eighth century.
6. The perfect alignment of the four Mahabalipuram Rathas, viz. the Draupadi, Arjun, Bhīma and Dharmarājarathas suggests that they were carved from one extended mass of rock. It should have been a long whale-shaped boulder which was separated into four; perhaps therefore the height of the Rathas increases uniformly.
7. Krishna Kumar op.cit.
8. Carmel Berkson, 'Daśāvatāra Cave - Its, importance in the history of world Art' Ellora Caves : Sculpture and Architecture, Delhi pp. 207-229.

9. Ibid
10. Alice Boner, 'Principles of Composition in Hindu Sculpture' Cave Temple Period, Leiden, 1962.
11. Doris Chatham, 'Pratihāras from Pattadakal to Ellora - The Early Western Chālukyan Basis for the Sculptural Style of the Kailāsa Temple', Chhavi II, Banares, 1981.
12. Ibid.
13. K.V.Soundara Rajan, 'Cave Temples of the Deccan' A.S.I., Delhi, 1981. pp.248-251 attributes these caves to the Eastern Chālukyas but it seems that these caves existed even before the Chālukyan empire was extended to this region. Arya Mahadevi, the queen of the Eastern Chālukyan king Vishnuvardhana I (624-642) in her grant to a Jain temple mentions the boundaries of the village that is to be donated. The layout is demarcated with other landmarks, including these caves, which means that these caves did exist and were known even before the foundation of the Eastern Chālukyan empire. The dynasty that preceded the Eastern Chālukyas in this region is Vishnukundin. M.Rama Rao, New Light on Vishnukundin, Journal of Indian History, Vol.XLIII Part III, Dec.65, pp.733-746 and Somashankar Sharma have traced the history of the Vishnukundins and K.Ramachandra Rao (Perspectives of Archaeology of Art and Culture in Early Andhradeśa, New Delhi, 1992, pp.36-50) discusses this issue in detail. N.L.Nigam

'Ellora's affiliation with the sculptural art of Andhra', Ellora Caves.... pp. 406-415, also attributes most of the antiquities from Eastern Āndhra to this dynasty. Also refer to V.V.Krishna Shastri (Architectural Affiliation of Andhra with the Rock Cut Caves of Ellora, Ellora Caves...pp. 379-388) in this context.

The iconographic features of the sculpture of this cave also correspond with the Daśāvatāra Cave. The Andhra caves reveal an assorted iconographic programme where the śaivite sculpture is accompanied by Vaiṣṇavite panels including the Kṛṣṇaīla which can be observed in the Daśāvatāra Cave and the rear corridor of the Kailāsa as well. K.R.Srinivasan points out that the eight-armed Naṭarāja found at Mogalarajapuram is not seen elsewhere in this period. Even at Ellora we come across a Govardhan image with four arms (Cave 15) and Trivikrama with six arms (Cave 16) which are not often seen elsewhere.

14. K.V.Soundara Rajan : 'Cave Temples of the Deccan,' Delhi 1981, p. 248.
15. While tracing the development of Indian sculpture, some of the formal similarities between lineages are seen as mutual influence. I think that some of the art centres apparently very insignificant, evince an element of innovation. These centres acted like fountain heads to the consecutive developments in the neighbouring regions. Hence, the similarities should be interpreted as parallelism caused by the centripetal diffusion initiated at these centres.

16. In this case, the sudden change is not due to the cumulative effect. As discussed before it is a result of an unanticipated interaction and hence should be treated as foreign.
17. Gaudi and Vaidarbhi are two of the manners of expression - the *ritis* mentioned in Indian aesthetics. They are not regional variations as they sound from their nomenclature. They are two different tendencies or attitudes, where not only the expression, but the way of experiencing is also different. Considering the characteristic features which can be interpreted as subjective and objective respectively, I have attempted to compare them with romantic and classical attitude and expression.
18. Norman Bryson, 'David and the Problem of Inheritance' in 'Tradition and Desire', Cambridge, 1984. In this essay Bryson refers to an article by M.Fried (Absorption and Theatricality : Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot Berkeley 1980) in which Fried discusses this problem citing some of the paintings by the neo-classical French master David. David alongwith the other neo-classical painters, is criticized for chauvinism, which I feel is relevant to this discussion.

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