

## 'A CRITICAL REVIEW'

### WHAT THE SCHOLARS SAY

The focal point in South Indian Medieval art has been the Early Chōḷa period. Undettered, scholars have tried to unravel some of the hidden nuances that shroud the origin and emergence of style. A rare phenomenon; the foremost uniqueness is its apparent ambivalence and ambiguity of meaning; that at once startles and surprises. The level of its style and presentation is higher and more ennobling than any other preceeding or contemporary period. An intense spiritualisation occurs and the tangible forms of divinities, amra, rsi and lesser beings show levels of articulation hither to unknown. They are at once 'out of this world' and at once very physical and tangible, nevertheless.

There is gaping lacunae in the area of Early Chōḷa Art. Readings in the history and archaeology of the Chōḷa are prolific, but pointed. Topics relevant to these branches of humanities have been uniformly and systematically documented and speculated on. The understanding and study of temple architecture and sculpture from an art historical view point has been minimal or ignored. We are left with a plethora of reports, illustrating these temples epigraphic records, and inscriptional evidence that are carefully gathered inventories. The very fact that they are listed by year

and number reduces them to auditing. They are needless to say a lot of information, but to the art historians they apply with great limitation. Information minus any aid to perception is like searching for a needle in the haystack. To the art historical approach they stand independent of each other with defined function. The 'humanities' approach which is interdisciplinary must work towards composite integral or interrelated structural patterns or parallel development in art styles. This is very essential in trying to see the emergence of style.

Questions pertaining to origin, evolving forms and emergence have rarely been asked. The art historical methodology due to reasons best not known have so far adhered to iconographic and documentary patterns. Explorations in formal and stylistic modes have been relatively ignored. Very little is known and whatever is new and neat even till today is M.A. Dhaky's 'Chōla sculptures' which explores stylistic possibilities and affiliations. Apart from time capsulation, chronological bracketing and rigid nomenclature scream danger. Apparent water tight compartment and isolated studies have been made. Such isolation is against the law of nature; it can never show total understanding. We are only exposed to that particular facet. This breach can only be closed by a merging and interlinking - where both art and art style are understood in their formal aspects as well as an ethos of cultural 'weltanschauung'. The present study is an attempt

based on the art historical and art critical coalescence, tracing the hows and whys of emergence of style in Early Chōla art.

Essentially analytical - descriptive, similar - dissimilar traits and continuing - vanishing features in sculpture and architecture are after careful survey highlighted and brought forth. The major problems we are faced with are either chronological incompatibility, continuity of traditions, unexpected changes and discrete influence, transplantation and sibling attitudes. The temptation to do away with chronology is overwhelming; however, it is used with discretion.

The study departs from the usual norm and lays greater emphasis on the formal approach to Chōla art than its 'cultural weltanschauung'. There is furthermore a departure from iconography, iconometry and excessive inscriptional documentation, the efforts are concerted towards visual data of architecture, and sculpture in stone and metal. The resurgent religious philosophy is seen simultaneously as affecting the emergence and synchronisations in art and society as a back drop. The study gradually picks its way through extant examples till certain areas are marked and spotlighted. They are either the ultimate in impenetrable style or in the throes of being reborn, carrying genetic traits and passing them over to the following phase. The temper, milieu, religious sentiment and the form as it stands independent and

on its own merit all come forth from their embryonic sleep into an awakening emergent state.

Review of literature points to relevant conclusions justified within their defined contexts. With every new discovery the emphasis shifts. The major preoccupation has been thus far with chronology and historical development, or studies in iconography. Due to breaking down in parts and narrowed down methodology many streams of thoughts have emerged. The major break up is in the most popular (1) Pallava Chōḷa transition (2) the Pāṇḍyan and Muttaraiyar influence, the intermediary view, positing an indigenous origin and a healthy share in the common legacy of the Tamil country. (3) Each of these links is seen in the light of political effects annexations, sovereign and vassal relationship, marriage liaison, the friend and foe relation and last of all (4) The Chōḷa itself created its style with just an open door policy. The lacuna in the period just before the rise of Vijayalaya and their status just prior to his ascent have caused much of these speculations.

The Pallava-Chōḷa transition is posited by the maximum number of scholars. Within their context they are more than justified. It cannot however be denied that the two are quite different. Erroneous or partly prejudiced views or as general views they are respected for what they stand at that moment of time. Decades

later such views naturally are treated slightly and with diffidence.

Dubreuil, Fergusson and Burgess were the pioneers of Dravidian Archaeology. Methodical and systematic in their approach they were right as far as the extant sources of material were available to them.

Dubreuil divided the Dravidian style into five periods. The most damning statement was that, "Images from one period do not differ much from those of the epochs which immediately proceeds and succeed that period" (1) He further spreads out his period chronologically by an archaeological method alone. He naturally takes one period into another. Balasubramanyam tactfully points out the futility of building any hypothesis or theory without the available resources.

O.C. Gangoli in his South Indian Bronzes remarks that the panels at Kailāsanātha, Kāñcī representing the pinnacle of Pallava perfection 'furnished types' for the later school of sculpture under the Chōḷa. (2) Rea Alexander observed that the Pallava art merged with the Chōḷa style in 8th and 9th centuries A.D. Adding to this with great ease and certainty is Vincent Smith, "beauty and dignity and restraint approaches in its spirit and treatment very nearly, the splendid figures of Śiva which we find amongst Chōḷa sculptures executed between the ninth and thirteenth centu-

ries. The Śiva four armed at Dharmarāja ratha..... is a conception of a type that are forerunners of many of the images of the Chōḷa school"(3).

Percy Brown in his Indian Architecture, Chapter XVII, quotes the views of Dubreuil "..... Pallava features are observable while their relation to the monolithic rathas at Māmallapuram may be noted"(4). He further uses words like 'connecting link'. Nilakanta Sastri(5) and S.K. Saraswati(6) also echo Dubreuil's views.

Sivaramamurti in his South Indian Bronzes throughout makes references to the Pallava features. He uses words like transitional lingering effects and a full phase called the 'Pallava-Chōḷa transition'. Gravely and T.N. Ramachandran who had declared the absence of Pallava metals revised their views. In his review of South Indian Bronzes by Sivaramamurti, he writes "..... what Sivaramamurti calls Pallava were characterised by the earlier writers as those stylistically falling in the transition period when the Pallavas were receding and the Early Chōḷa was appearing"(8). Karl Khandalavala states that it was easier to believe a sculptor copied truly in bronze what he saw in the stone with its clichés in Pallava..... He also refers to a Pallava-Chōḷa transition approximately from 900 to 950 A.D.(9). Harle and S.R. Balasubramaniam also posit this Pallava-Chōḷa transition. The latest renowned authority on bronzes is Nagaswamy, he states that, "the

art of the Chōḷa, though soon to show an individuality and vitality of its own, was essentially an extension of the art of the Pallavas, the transition taking place around A.D. 900"(10).

Douglas Barret while stating to stress the originality of style says that all architecture and sculpture in Tonḍaimaṇḍalam and Chōḷamaṇḍalam upto the end of ninth century A.D. are clubbed under the rubric Pallava style. "If a source for the Early Chōḷa style must be looked for outside that particular genius of the Early Chōḷa craftsman it would perhaps be more rewarding to continue the search farther South in the Pāṇḍyan country." Some scholars who extended the Pallava style in Chōḷamaṇḍalam upto 900 A.D. postulate also a Pallava-Chōḷa transition between 900 A.D. In other words where Barret's first phase ends(11) The Pallava-Chōḷa transition between 900 A.D. and 950 A.D. specifically refers to Karl Khandalawala's chronology.

Barret in his work on both art and architecture and the bronzes does not attempt to relate it and its many manifestations to the Pallava style. He only shows that within the history of Chōḷa art an Early Chōḷa period has point and meaning. Barret was also very suspicious of this Pallava-Chōḷa transition and dispenses with it. This he called the Aditya I phase.

Khandalawala(12) upon viewing the figures of Sapta Mātṛs of the

Vijayālaya Chōḷīśvaram at at Nārttāmalai he rejects the Pāṇḍyan influence of Barret and adheres to the Pallava influence as dominant (figs. 113, 114) despite recognising that the Pāṇḍya and Chōḷa were just evolving a style of their own. Infact Khandalawala contradicts Barret's non-transition and claims that Early Chōḷa sculpture owes much to the Late Pallava sculptures. He finds it difficult though, to fix the limits of this transition, or even show its progression. He takes the example of Kilaiyūr Agastīśvaram (figs 124, 125, 131) to show the Pallava as well as the 'tightly modelled manner' which Early Chōḷa was developing as one of its own characteristics. The Viṇādhara, Kartikēya and Brahma show this combined Chōḷa, Pallava features. Khandalawala is fair in making this observation and therefore posits the 'transition' phase. It is clear that vestiges or remnants of the Pallava show up off and on, but it seems more probable that they do not have that vital influencing factor. They don't determine nor deter the emergence of a style.

Taking the trio - Barret, Balasubramanyam and Khandalawala and their argument about the Takkōlam sculptures, it is clear that Karl is closer in calling them Late Pallava. The transition effect is confirmed by Nagaswamy's discovery of the Aparājita Inscription; which indisputably proves that the Jalaṇātheśvara at Takkōlam is a later Pallava temple(13). If the transition is to be believed, here is a case of a Pallava temple that shows a mixed identity and undoubtedly influenced by the Chōḷa hauteur.



K.V. Soundara Rajan takes a much broader stand and says that the Early Chōḷa temples are obliged to Pallavas, Pāṇḍyas or Muttaraiya. . He writes that there are prominent protagonists fathering an original trend of the Chōḷa of Vijayalaya line very soon after the seizure of power; on the other are those inclined towards a Pallava 'immersion workshop' stage almost upto the end of ninth century A.D., followed by a transition stage in the next half century - temporarily blighted by the Takkōlam reverse. The mature and truly Chōḷa design was ultimately born from the seventies of the tenth century A.D.(14) He adds of the existence of quite a small but obscure Chōḷa kingdom prior to Vijayālaya which must have had some art and architecture. A facile familiarity with the brick and stucco tradition must have been known. Metamorphosis was never an overnight phenomenon. Looking at the Chōḷa love for detailing the pillars, draws attention to a predecessor art either of the Māmalla times or the metropolitan sandstone style from Kāñcī. It is not out of place to quote "that art being primarily a regional motivation cannot live down easily the idioms already created in the zone. The period between 800-71 A.D. in the Chōḷamaṇḍalam was fraught with political ferment and cultural activation. Pallava, Muttaraiyar, Paluvēṭṭaraiyar Pāṇḍyan and Irrukuvēḷ craft guilds were freely displaying their skills and political masters were busy expanding their patronage in the buffer zones for furthering their own ambition. It was by and large a congeries of parts, the assemblage of variety of

skills, and its own special contribution was the aesthetics of the blend and certainly the sublimity of the icon that lend lustre to the niches on these temple walls(15). Soundara Rajan has employed a balanced view. He does not altogether deny the Pallava influence, and he is right. Pallava is a starting point of South Indian architecture and sculpture, specially in the Tamil areas. When the whole of lower Drāviḍa dēśa was infused by 'Saṅgam ethos' it was so categorised due to its 'individual cultural ethos' which makes it a period style. The Saṅgam itself pointed to a unity beneath all that is diverse. Centuries of culture and ethos don't turn to ashes. The amber leaves its glow. And so to say in Soundara Rajan's own words, that, "the argument that Pallava architecture and other peripheral art movements have not bequeathed anything to the Chōḷa art metier, has therefore no legs to stand upon"(16). Again and again he refers to the seemingly 'imitations' of the later Pallavas. "The 'riparian' setting and close geographic politic proximity raised artistic temples, sculptures and bronzes albeit under the cultural transfusion of the Pallavas, Pāṇḍya and Cēra art pools"(17). The use of terms like pioneers transition, transfusion, seeming imitations have been 'over-read' by every researcher. They are all time bound factors. It was probably only meant to show the chain of evolutionary links which are universally applicable in all fields. A ferment, admixture are only in parts. The very nomenclature and status given to 'Chōḷa' calls forth a separate identity.

How this identity emerged may have a lot of unsequential, unconnected features which we try to organise and project into a 'coherent conclusion'. Needless to say a coherent conclusion solves all further problems, but the human limitation is quelled by a deep underlying cultural psyche that never leaves open or lays bare all.

The use of broad terms and theories brings forth fresh questions like "Is Early Chōḷa Art an extension of the rubric Pallava style, or have its sources to be searched outside of the Chōḷa and Pallava? Is this a parent child relationship? Could it be an outcome of a political allegiance?" M.A. Dhaky summoned up enough courage and stamina to answer some of these questions(18). He is close to Barret, but mostly very close to Soundara Rajan in agreeing upon giving a status to the Muttaraiyar. Their structural temples, although the output is less calls forth by its 'small is beautiful' and compactness an independent identity. Soundara Rajan took up the cause for the Muttaraiyars. These feudatories of Nēmam and Sēndalai to a large extent in the Vijayālaya period had much to do towards the sharing and contributing in the visible formation of Early 'Chōḷa temples; after a quarter of a century or more when the Chōḷa and Muttaraiyar had totally merged as one political and cultural community with the former in dominance. Dhaky calls the Early Chōḷa art as the post-Muttaraiyar Chōḷanāḍu style which rests perilously on..... one example.

By simultaneously making studies of contemporary temples around and necklacing the Chōla tracts he questions "Whether three separate idioms - Chōla, Irrukuvēl, Paḷuvēṭṭaraiyar - could simultaneously exist within the ambit of Chōlanāḍu, narrow as it indeed was at that period"(19) . He suggests they be regarded all as products of the Chōla school, based on certain conception of style reckoning. The way the three belong to the major 'stylistic framework; Chōlanāḍu' following sub-cultural patterns set by history. In his essay on the 'Early Chōlanāḍu Style' on summing up he says very succinctly Chōla art belongs first and foremost to the Chōla. This is a very subtle compliment giving identity and credit to a unique art form and style.

Gary Schwindler in his 'Ideas and Some New Directions' says that "Medieval South Indian Sculpture in metal and stone developed in a non-linear dynamic manner; that localised inflections of style seem to have considerable effect upon the evolution of sculpture forms....."(20) He recommends an 'interdisciplinary' approach. In a nutshell he propounds an intermediary view that shows an indigenous origin and a sharing in the common legacy of the Tamil country(21). He also takes a socio-cultural view point from Glen Yocum, who takes an interdisciplinary approach and points to the Saiva religion and literature as 'leading to a more 'inclusive' view of the Hindu tradition'.

Having contemplated on the ideas and theories generated thus it is only fair that 'style' is briefly introduced and opens a less trodden vista for discovery.

## REFERENCES

1. J. Dubreuil, *Iconography of South India*, Varanasi 1978, p.7.

The pioneering efforts concern the documentation and classification of a broad Dravidian style. It is commendable because it was the earliest attempts, however, the uniformity of iconography and architecture are established by archaeological method alone to a large extent.

2. O.C. Gangoly, *South Indian Bronzes*, London 1915.

Similar observations are made by the author; he is more specific in saying that regional style was a continuous trend following a natural chronological progression. However, what causes a vague uneasiness is the placement of some of these sculptures side by side and yet proclaiming certain similarities of iconography. The overly fleshy and baroque quality of the sculptural forms at Kāñci, which according to the author represents the 'Pinnacle', but in no way evoke the same feelings or empathy one feels when compared to the Early Chōla. A glaring fact is the stylistic visual and formal approach which is altogether different.

3. V. Smith, *History of Fine Art in India and Ceylon*, Oxford 1930, p.22.

Belonging to Dubreuil's school of thought, Vincent Smith could still pay cursory homage to the spiritual evocation and

treatment of form.

4. P. Brown, Indian Architecture (Buddhist and Hindu), Bombay 1959, pp.107-108.

A survey of architectural and structural components as they developed from the wooden counterparts, and uniform progression are retraced. Dubreuil's view still sustained and was popular; nevertheless, the aspect of design and decoration had not come within his purview.

5. K.N. Sastri, The Cōlas, Madras 1955, p.176.
6. S.K. Saraswati, The History and Culture of the Indian People, Vol V, Bombay 1955-63, p.622.

7. C. Sivaramamurti, South Indian Bronzes, New Delhi 1963.

The bulk of this work emphasises on the external features - specially ornaments, dress, attributes and iconography. The arrangements and placements are minutely observed and traced from as early as the Satvāhanas. The cultural intercourse between the South Indian, Rastrakūta and Cālukya as the outcome of a political interaction are often remarked upon. The suggestion specially that the Chōla bronzes are larger than the Pallava bronzes; to an extent even the scale of temples seems unimportant, because what has come to light in recent years shows otherwise.

8. F.H. Gravely and T.N. Ramachandran, Marg Vol XVII, no.1, Bombay 1964.

9. K. Khandalawala, The Chronology of South Indian Bronzes, Lalit Kala 14, 1969.

The validity of the author's statement is fair in only as much as the Pallava is concerned. The early Pallava bronzes do simulate the stone sculptures (fig 258 ). It appears more feasible to attribute a Chōḷa style that is absorbed by the later Pallava bronzes (figs.259,260). This is also true of the stone sculptures. The simultaneous stone sculpting and bronze casting are better confined within their own Pallava norms and guilds. The number of Chōḷa bronzes that have come to light suggest a strong organising logic of their own irrespective of stone. Instead, the Sembian phase, shows the bronze influence on the metallic finish of the stone sculptures (fig- 204 )

10. R. Nagaswamy, Masterpieces of South Indian Bronzes (Catalogue), New Delhi 1983, p.6.

The use of the term 'transition' has to be seen in a larger context because the author acknowledges the Pallava dominance and as representatives of the Dravidian traits. These are extended thus as naturally and in consequence. It is clear from the dated examples that the formation of a style was



in the making, while slowly freeing itself from the Pallava.

11. D. Barret, Early Cōla Architecture and Sculpture, London 1974, pp.17-18.

It is at this juncture that a distinct line between transition and transformation must be drawn. The former is a smooth movement, while the latter a subtle variation of form. Nuances of the old and creation of the new affect the latter. Barret dispenses with transition altogether. The aspect of transformation is clearly seen (figs 126, 128 ) and guided by the form itself. The 'Vestiges' of the Pallava style remain as mere habitual convention and were being unlearned or detached from the new spirit coming to life.

12. K. Khandalawala, Early Chōla Sculpture (considering Barret's Early Cōla Architecture and Sculpture), Lalit Kala, 1979, New Delhi .
13. R. Nagaswamy, The Tiruppālanam Temple - A Study in Pallava-Chōla. Transition Phase, Damilica Vol III, Part 3, p.93.
14. K.V. Soundara Rajan, The Art of South India : Tamil Nadu and Kerala, New Delhi 1978.
15. Ibid, p.107.

16. Ibid, p.109.

17. Ibid, p.136.

There is a marked emphasis on the Chōḷa love for decor (figs. 250,251 ). A combination of regional guilds in the throes of creating from their adverseries, was doing something better than them. It is not thus mere 'imitation' but the 'challenge' of manipulating a long fixed form. The power wielded by the metropolitan styles are at once acknowledged and overcome by the successful attempts of the Chōḷa artists. And so is born their unique identity.

18. M.A. Dhaky, Cōḷa Sculpture, Chavvi, Golden Jubilee Volume, Varanasi 1971, pp.270-271.

In his outstanding perception and analysis of Chōḷa sculpture he comes up with the origin and emergence, closely linked with the visual approach. He categorically rejects the classification of all that is not Pallava is Chōḷa and vice versa. Recent studies ought not use misleading terms like intermediate style of Dubreuil or fail to research into other schools besides the Pallava and Chōḷa. Despite Barrets and Soundara Rajan's pointers to the Pandyan Muttaraiyar tracts, the majority of scholars have chosen to follow the Dubreuil school. The major failing that, is obvious is the lack of 'visual discrimination' which has deterred and 'hin-

dered in the grasping of distinctions of style'. Aschwin Lippe in his 'Bibliographia' in *Artibus Asiae*, vol XXX 2/3 p 269 concluded that there was no transition. Dhaky too agrees that this term fits in with the political aspect alone.

19. Ibid, p.280.

The acknowledgement of the three separate idioms of Chola, Irrukuvel and *Paḷuvēṭṭaraiyar* as falling within the ambit of *Chōḷanāḍu*, and falling under the same major stylistic framework are morphological derivations. They also follow the 'sub-cultural patterns set by history and the ruling power'. It is here that a regional and familial style can be perceived. Under a ruling 'psyche', they struggle towards a transubstantiation. the torment is one of over-reaching - going beyond their heritage and emerging with their own distinct identity. These are highlighted in the later chapters.

20. G. Schwindler, *Study of the Sculptures in Medieval South India - Some Old Ideas and Some New Directions*, 'Kaladarsana' (ed. J. Williams), Varanasi 1981, p.94. (N. Delhi)

The non linear dynamism and localised inflections of style have been freely used to show the extension or inclusion within the *Chōḷa* style in the *Irrukuvēḷ* and *Paḷuvēṭṭaraiyar* temples.

21. Ibid, p.95.

The author too recognised the challenge first thrown by Barret in his 'Early Chōla Bronzes' seeking other traditions as 'instrumental' in the formation of the Chōla style. He also saw much hope in Dhaky's comprehensive treatment of Chōla sculpture and pinning down the regional artistic forces at work. However, his recommending the 'Zeit-geist' and interdisciplinary approach are more 'ideal' than practical.