

FEMALE REPRESENTATION AT THE SITE OF NILAKANTHA (ALWAR)

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ABSTRACT

Female representation adds to the aesthetic quality of a structure and provides it curvature and softness. Female sculptures make or mark the quality of temple architecture to a great extent. For many centuries they have been the talk of scholars and are rated by them as the jewels of temple architecture. Here in this paper I will talk about female representation at the site of Neelkanth in the Alwar district of Rajasthan in India. This site boasts of the remains of nearly 18 to 20 temples. The earliest inscription from this place is of VS 979 or 922 AD. Thus the site is a dated 10th century site and it displays Saiva, Jaina Brahmanic and even Buddhist sculptures in the same cultural compound. The place is all the more noteworthy because the antiquity of the surrounding area goes back to stone age and continuous to show activity in pre Harappan Mauryan, Shungan and even Kushana times. At present the temple of Nilkantha Mahadeva at the site is still under worship though the other temples are in a dilapidated condition. Nearby villagers walk up to the site and still go to the temple of Nilkantha Mahadeva to worship the Siva linga. I have attempted a comprehensive study of the site studying the sculptures, architecture, epigraphs and the social economic life of the times. In this paper I aim to bring out the significant position of female sculptures at Nilakantha.

Keywords: Nilakantha Mahadeva Temple, Paranagar, Rajoragarh, Bairat, Bhandarej, Bhurhut, Abaneri.

Introduction

The District of Alwar in Rajasthan is known for the richness of its artistic remains. Here the 10th Century site of Paranagar is the area of our study in this present paper. It is situated 36 kms west of Rajgarh and to the south of the wildlife sanctuary of Sariska. It is also famous by the name of Rajoragarh. We can find the remains of more than a dozen temples here which are mostly in ruins. Only the temple of Nilakantha Mahadeva has its shikhar intact. The temple is under worship till date and the site itself has come to be known as Nilakantha in the popular language. Here we will discuss only female sculptures so as to fully highlight this aspect of the site.

In the sphere of plastic art female deities were started to be carved right from very ancient times, but a marked advance in the field of their iconography is seen in the early Kushana period. At this time Mathura became a chief centre of art. From Mathura we have a number of matrkas, Laksmi, Gaja-Laksmi, Saraswati, Vasudhara, Yamuna and other female deities.¹ Railing pillars too bear female statues.² Yakshi images and ladies on the vedika pillars in various poses were also built during this time. In Rajasthan Kushana art is visible at Sambhar (old Sakambhari, in Jaipur), Bairat (Jaipur district), Rairh (near Newai, Tonk District) and Bhandarej near Dausa.

In the Sunga Age, railing pillars are available from Bharhut and Sanchi. From Rairh we have Sunga remains depicting females. We have a very important image of a Yakshi with a turban on head and two venis behind (the image is presently in the Jaipur Museum) and a number of idols of Mother Goddess.³

During Gupta times in the 5th-6th Century, we have lady figures on the exterior of the temples as well as on the torana pillars. The temple of Deogarh is one such example.⁴ Then Bikaner Museum has a

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rich collection of terracotta and moulded bricks from various places, all belonging to the early Gupta period. 5 Tribal dress and ornaments of these figures is specially noteworthy for their local flavour. In the 6th – 8th Century, we have greenish blue schist (popularly called Pareva) figurines from Dungarpur region. 6 A very important contribution of Gupta art is female figurines on pottery handles which have become available to us from Rajasthan. They have been discovered from Sambhar, Rairh and Nagar and are presently on display in the Jaipur Museum. 7

As we come to the early Medieval times, we the famous 8th Century site of Abaneri in Dausadistrict. It is said that Abaneri is one of the centres of Pratihara art. Here the workmanship is even better than Osian. Unlike Rajoragarh, here we do not find apsaras on pillars. Female representation is seen rather in the form of surasundaris, in niches in matrkareleifs, in mithuna sculptures, or in other scenes where they have been placed besides male figures. Though the female forms have poise and tenseness, they have been built heavily. 8 At Rajoragarh the quality of female statues is certainly superior. Here the limbs are elongated and the body lean.

On reaching Medieval ages, we have the dated temple of Harshantha in Sikar district lying just on the periphery of Alwar. An inscription of V.S.1030 has been found here. In the garbhagrha of this temple there are sixteen female figures studded on the walls with their names inscribed below. This is a great contribution of the artists of those times. We do not have the shastras of that time but we have the names given by the sculptors themselves. These names are their contemporary epithets. 9 An independent surasundari image earlier in the Nilakantha Mahadeva temple compound (now must be stored in an ASI godown) is an apt comparison to these. 10 At Sikar we also have ladies on mandapa pillars and as dancers and musicians with musical instruments striking various poses. 11 At Rajoragarh female figures are most prominent on pillars. These are not inscribed at all. Still some can be identified on the basis of iconographical features like the lady image with mango twigs is clearly Goddess Ambika as a matrka.

The Medieval site of Sainthali is also noteworthy in this regard (Alwar district not far from the town of Alwar). Earlier there was a temple here, now its sculptures have been taken to the Government Museum at Alwar. 12 Here apsaras could be seen on garbhgrha. Ladies as apsaras and as goddesses have been built heavily making them inferior to the figures at Rajoragarh and Sikar. From Chaksu also we have a few Devi and Mother Goddess figures which are now on display at the Amer Museum. 13

Thus for comparing Devis, secular female figures, and apsaras we have 8th century material from Abaneri and 10th Century artefacts from Sikar, Chaksu, Sainthli, Jagat (in Udaipur), Kiradu and Badoli. 14

In the temples at Nilakantha, female figures on the pillars are more artistic than those found elsewhere, they are more prominent than ladies found at other sections of the temple. At Paranagar, we find female representation on mandapa pillars as well as on the mukhachatuski pillars. These pillars are carved in round octagonal in shape. A detailed description of apsaras on these pillars is as follows (See Pl. 1):

On one of the pillars, an apsara holds a chamar with a langoor down below, one has a child in her left hand, another one holds a chamar, one stands in a twisted position with her front and back shown together. There are more of female figures here. On another pillar we have two Alaskanyaa, one lady holds a conch in one hand while drapery with her other hand and other figures. On still another pillar, prominent lady figures are – one gently raising her left leg to wear anklets, one figure holds her open hair in her right hand and drapery in her left hand. On the remaining fourth pillar, a female figure holds a child in her left hand placing him on her waist. With her right hand she holds mango twigs. She can easily be identified as Goddess Ambika placed there perhaps to be worshipped. 15 A figure of Goddess Ambika also used to hang below the dome of the temple of Iswal but is now missing. (Reported in personal discussion with R.C. Agrawala) These figures on the pillars of Nilakantha are in no way inferior to the female sculptures on the torana pillars of Badoli where the shapely limbs are almost in ideal proportion 16 Full figures on full pillars is an important feature. It was not a widely used motif during medieval times. Only some examples at Badoli (late 9th and early 10th Century) and some examples at Rajoragarh (10th Century) are seen. In contemporary times, the examples at Badoli are the best. At Kiradu too we have apsaras displayed on pillars 17 though quality wise they are not comparable to the ones at Badoli or Paranagar.

At Rajoragarh, the surasundaris on jangha are not as rich as those on pillars from the viewpoint of art. As far as apsaras on the jagati are concerned, it has been renovated by the ASI and therefore original form has been lost.

Then we have the very important unusual figure of a lady playing on a flute with one bust and four torso. It was a piece of the ceiling that now lies loose. A dance and music panel is still visible on one of its side. This was earlier stored in the compound of the Nilakantha Mahadeva temple itself but now seems to have been removed to a hutment of the site. (Pl. 2) A similar ceiling piece was found by me lying on ground covered with sand below the ASI Board of Kotan Ki Devri. This is a male figure playing on a flute. A similar kind of a Samatala ceiling fragment has been obtained at the Ambika Temple at Jagat. But in execution the panels at Nilakantha are far better and more refined than that of Jagat, the female flute player being a still better art piece than the male one. Nanawaty and Dhaky write that such bizarre figures are called Kautuki figures. Evoking curiosity rather than appreciation of beauty, these statues are indicative of the direction to which the fancy of the sculptor ran. 18

In the Nilakantha Mahadeva temple there are four female figures of black stone hanging below the dome of the ceiling. Such dome figures were once seen at Nagda and Iswal too but are now missing. (Reported in personal discussion with R.C.Agrawala)

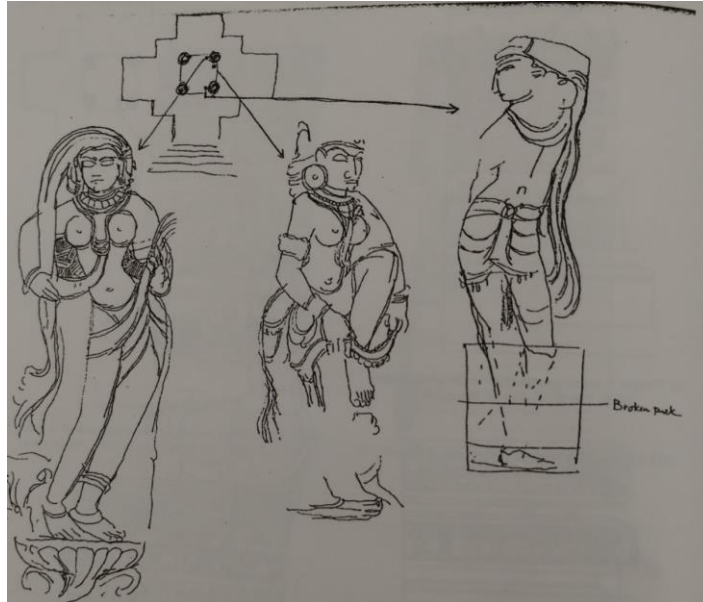
A female head of black stone from Nilakantha is a super specimen of art. (Pl.3) The head throws light on the ornaments and hairstyles of womenfolk in contemporary times. It was sent for an exhibition on Indian Art in London by Pandit Nehru. On return, it was kept back by Nehruji at Delhi itself and it now graces the foyer of the National Museum there.

Thus it can be seen that the site of Paranagar has no dearth of female specimens in art. The temple of Nilakantha Mahadeva holds them at various places and in various poses. Many more such temples must have existed there which have been lost to the ravages of time.

Notes

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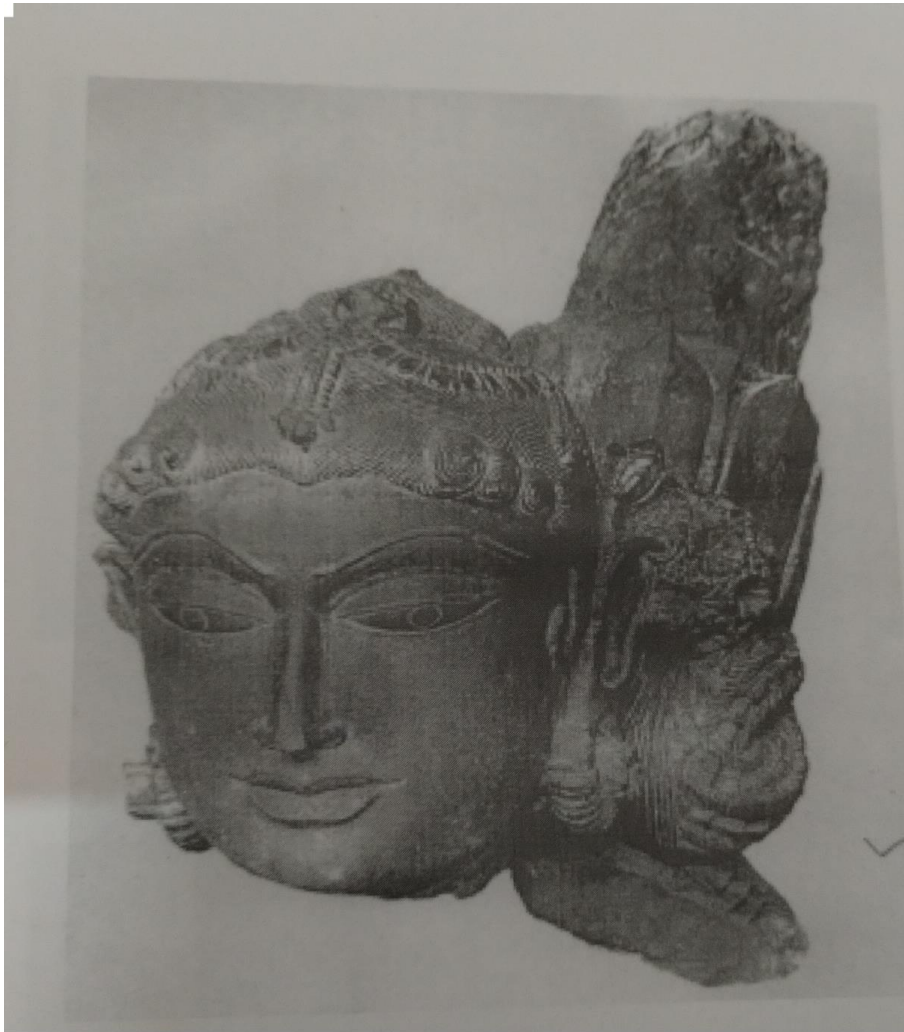
18. Marg XII (2), Marg Publications, Bombay, March 1959, Fig. 6 on pg.46
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Pl. 1, Some noteworthy female figures on the pillars of Nilakantha Mahadeva temple



Pl. 2, Unusual Female Figure, Ceiling fragment, Loose. Photo Courtesy ASI



Pl. 3 ,Female head of Blackstone in the National Museum at New Delhi. Courtesy National Museum.

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