



A Study of Medieval Sculptures of the Sayāli Mahādeva Temple Complex in Manali and Kullu, Himachal Pradesh

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Abstract: *The present paper deals with the sculptural remains found in the complex of the Sayāli Mahādeva temple at Manali in the Kullu valley of Himachal Pradesh. The study highlights the early medieval transitional development in temple architecture and the sculptural art. During this period different Brahmanical faiths such as Śaivism, Vaiṣṇavism and Śāktism, were dominant in the society. The diversity of religious practices can be evident and seen in the scattered images in the Sayāli Mahādeva complex. At present most of these relics are in a state of neglect and ruin. The study tries to explore the extent of influence from the Kuṣāṇa-art, Gupta-art, and post-Gupta-art registered on the regional style. Further, it probes the extent that sculptors' technique on the images of liṅga, Umā-Maheśvara, Mahīśāsūramardīnī, Viṣṇu and Brahmā datable to c. eighth century CE onwards and the transitional period {8th century CE to 11th century CE}.*

Key words: *Archeology, Āsana, Brahmā, Brahmanical, Gupta-art, Kuṣāṇa-art, liṅga, Mahīśāsūramardīnī, Pīṭha, Prabhāmaṇḍala, Sculptural art, Śilpa-Śāstra, Umā-Maheśvara, Viṣṇu*

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Introduction

Manali is situated on the right bank of the river Beas in the Kullu district of Himachal Pradesh. It is nearly 45 km to the north of Kullu town and about 280 km from Shimla, the capital of Himachal Pradesh. It is situated at an altitude of 1926 AMSL. and spread in an area of about 12.5 square km. According to the popular local legends, the name Manali is known to have originated from the Hindu legendary 'Manu'. According to the oral traditions, during the time of the great flood (*pralaya*), the boat of Manu reached this place and he made it his home. Hence, this place was previously known as *Manu-Ālaya*, the home of Manu. However gradually it came to be known as Manali. According to the folklores and folktales, the universe was rejuvenated by Manu after the great deluge (*Mahāpralaya*).

In ancient times, this region was a part of the Kulūta kingdom, known for its rich history. The antiquity of this kingdom has been recorded in the *Rājatarāṅgiṇi* of Kalhana, the *Kādambari* of Bana Bhatta. The Chinese monk Hiuen Tsang has visited and left a note about this kingdom in his travelogue. Presently Manali region of the old Kulūta kingdom has become a world-famous tourist destination. The region of Manali houses many temples belonging to diverse sects as *Śaivite*, *Vaiṣṇavite*, *Śākta*, *ṛiṣis*. Among which the temples of Hidimba Devi, Manu ṛiṣi, Gautam ṛiṣi, and Sayāli Mahādeva are the popular locations. The Sayāli Mahādeva temple is situated to the west of the Manali town.

In this paper sculptures of various sects that flourished in this region in ancient times, especially of the Sayāli Mahādeva, have been studied. Several sculptures are scattered on the premises of the temple complex. Almost all of the sculptures are in a dilapidated state and are datable to c. eighth to eleventh century CE based on their sculptural style. The following sculptures are important and worthy of description.

Śiva-liṅga

Śaivism is the oldest cult of the Kulūta region. The earliest archaeological evidence of the Śaiva cult can be traced on the coins of Virayaśa, the ruler of Kulūta kingdom (Allan. 1936. 158). The other references are found in the Nirmand Copperplate inscription (Handa. 2015. 213), copperplate inscription of Bahadur Singh, the ruler of the Kulūta State (Shastri. 2005. 129-31), *Kulāntapīṭha Mahātmaya* (n.d. 213). However the development of Śaivism in the Kulūta region in the post-Gupta period is evident in form of the architectural and sculptural remains. The evidence of such development can also be seen in the complex of the Sayāli Mahādeva temple. Here, we find the sculptures of Śiva in both of the forms i.e. *avyakta* (symbolic) and *vyakta* (anthropomorphic) forms. First, I will study Śiva in the *avyakta* form. There are some stone *Śiva-liṅgas* in the premises of the complex of the temple. These *liṅgas* as well as other sculptures seem that they all are brought from some other places and kept here. The *Śiva-liṅga* studied by the author is set in around *pīṭha* (pedestal). The *liṅga* is made up of black stone while the *pīṭha* is made up of grey stone. The diameter of the *liṅga* is approximately 32cms and the visible part of it is approximately 26 cm high. The diameter of the *pīṭha* is approximately 96 cms. The *Śiva-liṅga* is in three parts- the *pūjābhāga* or *rudrabhāga* (the round and visible part of the *liṅga*), the *piṇḍikā* (the octagonal part) and the *Brahmabhāga* or *Brahmapīṭha* (the lowest part) (pl. 1). According to the *Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa*, the upper round portion of the *liṅga* should be visible, below it the octagonal part should be inserted in the *pīṭha* and further below is the square portion which is also known *Brahmapīṭha* (Bhattacharya. 1991. 174-77). The *śirōvarttana*, top of the *liṅga* is *ardha-chandrākāra* in shape (Rao. 1968. 93-94). Thus, the above-mentioned sculpture follows the iconographic instructions mentioned in *Śilpa-śāstra*. This type of *Śiva-liṅgas* are widely noticed in the entire Kulūta region.

Umā-Maheśvara

There is a life-size stone sculpture of Umā-Maheśvara under a pine tree in the temple complex (pl.2). It is a black sandstone image. The physical appearance has folk influence as well as the influence of Kuṣāṇa art. Maheśvara is depicted seated on the back of Nandi, the mount, in *lalitāsana*. The *lalitāsana* images of Umā-Maheśvara can be seen at Jageshwar with slight variations (Singh. 1977. 31). Umā is shown seated in the lap of Maheśvara on his left thigh. Drapery is depicted as transparent. Maheśvara is shown in two-armed format wearing a loin cloth and with *yajñopavīta*, *hāra*, ear-rings, and a big headgear. In his right hand, he is shown holding fruit and the left arm is behind Umā and in this hand, he carries a *triśūla* which is at the head level of Umā on the left side. Umā is depicting as

wearing a petticoat and *choli*. The clothes of Umā-Maheśvara give a local look. She has heavy breasts. This feature of Pārvatī is indicative of Gupta affinity (Agrawala. 1995. 218). She is depicted wearing *kaṅṅanas*, two *hāras*, in which one is with a pendant which is shown hanging between her breast. This type of pendant is the characteristic of Gupta-art. She wears round ear-rings and a headgear that is bigger than that of Maheśvara's headgear. Their faces are rectangular. Umā's lower lip is thick and eyes are like lotus petals. Behind the heads of both Maheśvara and Umā is a big round *prabhāmaṇḍala*. Umā has two arms. In her right hand, she is shown holding a flower. While the attribute on the left is not visible as the vision is barred by the stem of the tree. The background is simple without any detailed elaboration. The other details of Maheśvara and Umā can not be given as these are slightly rubbed-off however the cool and serene expression on the face of Umā can still be noticed clearly. The image is carved in proportion.

Viṣṇu

The stone sculpture of Vaiṣṇavite cult, found in the complex of the temple, is of *sthānaka* Viṣṇu (i.e., standing Viṣṇu) (pl.3). The grey sandstone image of Viṣṇu is approximately 47 cms in height and 35 cms wide. Viṣṇu is shown standing on the wings of Garuḍa. He has four arms. The four-armed Viṣṇu images were common in the Kuṣāṇa period (Singh. 1977. 52). In his lower right hand he holds a *cakra* and in the upper hand may be a lotus while in the lower left hand he holds a *gadā* and in the upper hand a fruit. The *cakra*, *gadā* and *Garuḍa* are depicted in their natural form as in the art of Kuṣāṇa (Singh. 1977. 113). His body is depicted in cylindrical shape like Gupta-art. He wears *ekāvalī*, a loincloth, which is above his knees, *hāra*, *kaṅṅanas*, *karnaphulas* and a small headgear, flat on the top. This feature, Viṣṇu with the crown with a flat top is seen in the Kushana period however more commonly seen in the Gupta period. He is also shown with long stem *vanamālā* which is indicative of the post-Gupta affinity. A scarf is depicted on his left shoulder. His face is a little bit square in shape. His facial details are slightly rubbed-off however his chubby cheeks and thin lips can still be noticed. Behind his head, the big *prabhāmaṇḍala* can be noticed, however it has broken near about half. It seems that the sculpture has been carved during the transitional period {8th century CE to 11th century CE} and partly follows the *Śilpa-śāstras*.

Mahīśāsūramardīnī

The sculpture of *Śākta* cult is in the form of Mahīśāsūramardīnī (pl. 4). The grey sandstone sculpture of Mahīśāsūramardīnī in the complex is the work of great merit and skill (approximately h. 86 cms, w. 60cms). She has a cylindrical and elongate body as seen in the sculptures of the post-Gupta period. She is shown standing on a seated buffalo. Her right foot is planted on the back of the buffalo while the left is stretched and planted on its head. In the sculpture, the demon Mahīśāsūra has been shown disguised as a child on a sitting buffalo. He has a bulged belly and two arms. The right hand is shown as holding the hand of the goddess while in his left hand a shield is seen. He wears *karnaphulas*, *dhoti*, girdle – the festoon of which can be seen as hanging downwards. The goddess wears lower garment resembling a short skirt, *choli*, anklets, *kaṅṅanas*, armlets, scarf – the corners of which are blowing outwards in left and right sides and partly folded, a necklace with a pendant hanging between the breast, a big *hāra*, a *mālā*, big *karnaphulas* and headgear or *jaṭābhāra* on the head. A bun is shown on her left side. The big and round hair-buns are typical of Pratihara art of the post-Gupta period, seen in female deities of northern India. Behind her head, a plain halo with a scalloped margin like the halo of Kuṣāṇa period is carved. Her face and eyes are round as we see in the Kuṣāṇa-art. More details of the face can not be given as it has rubbed-off however a serene and cool expression can still be noticed

clearly on her face. The four-armed goddess is shown carrying in her back right hand a *khadaga* and in the front right hand a *triśūla*. The *triśūla* is shown as piercing the belly and right thigh of the demon. While the left upper hand is shown carrying a *ghaṇṭī* (bell) and with the lower left hand, she is depicted as holding the hair of the demon. Behind the goddess, a lion is depicted. The hind left leg of a lion is shown behind the head of the buffalo demon while the lion's face is on the right-hand side of the goddess. The depiction of the lion and the anthropomorphic form of the demon indicates that the sculpture is carved in the later period, and possibly during the 10th or 11th century CE. Because these are the characteristics of post-Gupta art. The image is carved in good proportion.

Brahmā

Brahmā comes first as the creator of the universe in the Brāhmanical triad. He is generally shown in the sculpted medium as the deity with four faces. However, the images of this deity in the Kulūta region are very few. Among them, one can be noticed in the complex of the Sayāli Mahādeva temple at Manali (pl. 5). In this grey sandstone image of Brahmā, the deity is shown seated in *padamāsana* on a coarse stone pedestal and has four arms. He is shown wearing a loincloth. In his right lower hand he holds a rosary and in the upper hand a small *gadā* at the head level while in the left lower hand he holds a *kamaṇḍalu* and in the upper hand the four *Vedas*. He has four faces however the fourth one is not depicted as it is in the back. The other details of the whole sculpture are rubbed-off, therefore, the complete details are not available. His feet and arms are not carved in proportion. This sculpture seems a work of a folk artist. Most of the details of this sculpture correspond to the description given in the *Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa* (Bhattacharya. 1991. 15-20).



Plate 1: Sculpture of Śiva-līṅga in the complex of the Sayāli Mahādeva temple, Manali



Plate 2: Sculpture of Umā-Maheśvara in the complex of Sayāli Mahādeva temple



Plate 3: Sculpture of Viṣṇu in the complex of Sayāli Mahādeva temple



Plate 4: Sculpture of Mahiṣāsuramardini in the complex of Sayāli Mahādeva temple



Plate 5: Sculpture of Brahmā in the complex of Sayāli Mahādeva temple

Conclusion

The sculptures in the complex of the Sayāli Mahādeva temple at Manali in the Kulūta region illustrate artistic development datable between the 8th to 11th century CE. This period was a transitional and transformational period of art in the entire hilly region of Himachal Pradesh. It was marked with progressive development in the religious emotions with sense and grace. The above-mentioned sculptures are shown the influences of local art-forms and institutional art-schools like Kushana, Gupta and Post-Gupta. It indicates that the patron of such art could be local hilly chiefs. They were also influenced by the art of the mainland of India because at this time some parts of the Himachal were under direct contact with the plains. As Rājaśekhara (Cappeller. 1885. 2) and the Gwalior inscription of Bhoja dated 876 CE (Majumdar. 1983. 99 ff) state that the parts of Himalayas like Kulūta and Kirāta were in contact with the Pratihāras. All this evidence indicates that the art of Kashmir and the mainland was responsible to encourage the folk art of this region.

During the period under review, it is significant that several ideas were coming to this hilly region through contacts with the people in the mainland as well as with Kashmir. During this period Kulūta was not only under the Pratihāra rulers however through this region, traders were also visited, Central Asia. Thus, it was a meeting place of different artistic traditions and currents. The Kushana art influenced the art of this region earlier and later the Pratihāra art left its impact on the local art. Thus, the period under review is called the transitional period. And this transformation in the sculptural art can be seen in the sculptures of Śiva-Pārvatī, Viṣṇu, Mahīśāsuramardinī, and Brahmā.

It is unfortunate to find sculptures in bad conditions which bear a great archaeological interest for the Kulūta region. The sites are so far not protected. Sculptures lying scattered in the complex of the Sayāli Mahādeva temple and surrounding region should be brought to the State Museum, Shimla. However, a new museum can be opened in the district where these sculptures should be relocated and find a safe place. Conservation of these archaeological remains is necessary to safeguard the rich cultural heritage of the Kulūta region.

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