



## THE TRIPURA SAMHARA NARRATIVE IN VIJAYANAGARA PAINTINGS AT HAMPI

**R. H. KULKARNI**

Professor & Head, Department of Art History, College of Fine Arts, Karnataka Chitrakala Parishath. E-mail: [rhkulkarniarthistory@gmail.com](mailto:rhkulkarniarthistory@gmail.com)

**Abstract:** *Tripura Samhara or Tripurarantaka Siva is very interesting image of the deity in Indian lore. Siva killing the sons of Tarakasura was an event which has been celebrated by the divinities. The Sons of Tarakasura, namely Tarakyaksha, Vidyunmali and Vindhyaaksha (Viravana) were troubling the divinities. The gods met the lord Siva and request him to save them from the demon brothers. Siva's son Skandha had already eliminated the demon Tarakasura. Siva agrees to eliminate the demon brothers, and all gods in turn agreed to give away their weapons and energy to Siva who finally kills the demon brothers. This paper is primarily based on a detailed study of the primary source materials, i.e. the paintings.*

**Keywords:** *Tripurasura, Tripurantaka, Tripura Samhara, Tarakasura, Tarakyaksha, Vidyunmali and Vindhyaaksha (Viravana)*

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The Tripura Samhara, Tripurantaka or Tripurari episode represent destroying of the Tripurasura brothers inside Tripura (Tri= three and pura= city) by Siva. The theme has been one of the popular subjects employed by the ancient Indian artists. Siva killing the three sons of Tarakasura viz., Tarakyaksha, Vidyunmali and Vindhyaaksha (Viravana) has been the core theme of depiction in sculpture and paintings as well. The *Puranas* and the *Mahabharata* have a detailed version of

the story connected to Tripurantaka Siva. The *Matsya Purana*, *Siva Purana*, and the *Drona, Karna and Shalya Parvas* of the *Mahabharata* elaborately narrate the story of Tripurari Siva and the defeat of the Tripurasura brothers<sup>1</sup>. The story is connected with the three cities constructed by Mayasura, who was the architect of the demons. The cities were made of Iron, Gold and Silver and located in the Earth, Sky and Heavens. The brothers also had a boon to travel anywhere they

want along with their respective cities. They could be destroyed only by a single arrow, when the *Pushya Nakshatra* would be conjunction with the Moon. As they believed that it would not be possible to destroy their three cities with a single arrow the brothers felt virtually invincible. However, the literary details furnish that Siva destroyed them with a single arrow thus fulfilling the conditions of their destruction.

In visual art, the *Tripurantaka* episode has been found delineated as early as the fifth/sixth century CE. Sculptural examples have been found in the temples of Badami, built during the Chalukya, Rashtrakuta, Later Chalukya, Hoysala and also Vijayanagara periods. The mode of depiction of the cities varies from place to place. The Chalukya images represent three shrines which are symbolically depicting the three cities of the demon brothers<sup>2</sup>. At the Kailashnatha Temple at Ellora we find identical depictions<sup>3</sup>. Circular shaped cities have been depicted in the Hoysala narrative sculptures (Fig.6.2). The shapes of the cities have interesting features quite imaginatively delineated by the artists. In the sculptural depictions, Siva is found to be standing in *alidha* posture, having a large bow *pinaki* in his hand and in a ready position to release the arrow towards the three brothers. The mode of narration depends upon the available space for the sculpture. In the Chalukya image, the Tripurasura in the form three cities are depicted in the upper left corner, where Siva's arrow is shown as touching them (Fig.6.1). Similar features are followed by the artists of the Later Chalukyan period. It only in the Hoysala period that the narratives which appear on the *adhithana- katha pattika* (Fig.6.2) have horizontally composed narration<sup>4</sup>.

Tripura Samhara was equally a favourite subject for the painters of the ancient period. In entire southern India the earliest known examples of Tripura Samhara has been recorded on the outer walls of the Brihadeshwara Temple, at Tanjore. The paintings belong to King Raja Raja Chola's period (1000 CE) (Fig.6.3).

Hampi in Karnataka has ceiling paintings datable to Vijayanagara period (Fig.6.4). The *maharangamantapa* of the Virupaksha temple at Hampi has ceiling paintings datable to 1510-1525 CE<sup>5</sup>. The paintings consists of varied thematic depictions such as Trinity figures with their consorts, *Girija Kalyana*, *Dasavatara*, *Manmatha Vijaya*, *Tripura Samhara*, wedding of Rama-Sita and Arjuna's Wedding with Draupati and also a procession of pontiffs. The paintings as mentioned above are found on the ceiling of the *maharangamantapa*. The themes are composed in a rectangular framed space which has shrines and retinue figures all around the main narrative, forming a frame for them. The main figures are thus framed within the arched decorative elements which culminate in a *kirttimukha* at the centre.

Among the themes depicted here, the Tripura Samhara painting is quite interesting from the point of its narration and composition of the figure of Siva and the Tripurasuras. In the painting, Siva is standing upon a chariot or *ratha*, while Brahma is his charioteer. Siva holds a heavy bow, with his arrow comprised of three divinities. The *ratha* has wheels formed by the deities Surya (Sun) and Chandra (Moon). The serpent Vasuki has become the yoke of the *ratha* which is driven by horses in a galloping posture. Siva holds his mighty bow *Pinaki* and a single arrow in shooting gesture. The arrow comprises of the energies of the divine ones personified as the figures of Kartikeya, Visnu and Agni who are all depicted in the arrow of Siva<sup>6</sup>. They symbolically represent the transformation of their mighty energy as a single arrow to destroy the demon brothers. Thus the gods collectively aid Siva – the sun and moon transforming themselves into the wheels of the chariot of which Brahma has become charioteer. In the upper right corner three circle rings are depicted with demons standing in two of them while the third one has a Devi like figure. The three rings represent the individual cities of the three brothers. As their wish was that they would meet only on the day of *pushya nakshatra*, here symbolically the connected rings represent the meeting of three brothers on that

day. The artist has beautifully conceived the idea of the rings as cities and connected them by thin tube like bangle. The cities are so designed that they are exactly at the eye level of Siva, and he can easily shoot the arrow.

The figures of Siva and Brahma are painted in great detail. Siva is standing in *alidha* posture. His person is depicted with sharp rhythmic outline and his body covered with white colour with some details. He has four arms, holds a small *trisula* and fire while the other two hands are busy in shooting the arrow. He is clad in a *dhoti* and his arms and legs are adorned with jewellery like necklaces, shoulder ornaments, armlets, designated *kati bandha*. He also wears a long garland with heads appearing like *munda mala*, which further attests to his malevolent form. Siva's face is depicted in profile. He has sharp wide opened eyes, sharp beard and artistically done moustache. Siva's third eye is depicted on his forehead. The *kirita* of the Siva is a noteworthy feature as it follows the contemporary features as seen in the sculptures. The *kirita* is like a cylindrical form with a pointed finial. The artist has done a very neat drawing of the image as all details are very clearly visible. The garment of the deity, as mentioned earlier is a *dhoti* and he is further covered with another *ardhodaka*, in the centre of his widened legs, the piece of *ardhodaka* is shown as extended down with a widened end<sup>7</sup>.

The figure of Brahma as charioteer is depicted sitting in the front controlling the galloping horses. His persona has a reddish colour and the deity has four faces crowned with *kiritas*. As mentioned in textual sources the horses were also tied by the serpent which acts as rope. Brahma thus holds the rope-like serpent body tethered to the horses to control them. His seated posture and hand gestures are nicely coordinated by his act here.

The horses that lead the chariot have also been given equal attention in their delineation. The speedy movement of the horses is demarcated by the roaring and galloping bodily postures. The movement of the horses is further enhanced by

their necklaces and decorative motifs on heads. An interesting feature is that wings have been added to the flanks of the horses as they need to fly in the air. It is a highly imaginative and also faithful depiction of the texts, enabling the horses to fly along with the *ratha*. In the narration of Tripuarari, Gauri (Parvati) is also required to be depicted. Early sculptural examples have the depiction of Gauri seated on the rear edge of the *rathas*. Whereas here, there is no depiction of the image of Gauri, instead, a *Naga Kannika* in her rhythmic posture holds the *chatra* on Siva.

Siva's *vahana* (mount) Nandi is depicted in the lower left corner of the composition looking upwards towards the deity. Possibly, Nandi is also witnessing Siva's great act of destruction of the three cities with a single arrow as prophesied.

The artist has depicted the entire canvas as crowded and active with various figures. The artist has employed uniform colours for the backgrounds in all compositions in the ceiling paintings. The background colour is red and it is flat, upon which all the figures are depicted. The figures appear to be overlapping and super-imposed on the canvas. The whole narration displays sophisticated images and also stylistic maturity. To break the monotony of the background, the artist has inserted a few flying birds, which also create the feel of the sky by their flying movements.

The *Maharangamantapa* ceiling paintings were done when the mural tradition in India was mostly replaced by the miniature paintings. In North and Western India, the Rajput paintings inherited the miniature style and narrative contents from the manuscript paintings<sup>8</sup>. The Islamic rulers of Delhi also began to patronise the miniature paintings. The Vijayanagara period witnessed a revival of the mural tradition in the post-Chola Era in Peninsular India. The *Maharangamantapa* paintings become the precursors to the later paintings traditions of Mysore, Tanjore and Surpur. The *Tripurasamhara* Siva theme also becomes a regular feature in the later paintings, including the Mysore traditional school.

**Illustrations**

Figure 6.1: Tripurasamhara, Pattadakal, Badami Museum Early 8<sup>th</sup> Century CE



Figure 6.2: Tripurasamhara, Lakshmi Narayana Temple, Hosaholalu. Ca, 1240 CE



Figure 6.3: Tripuranataka Siva, Brihadishwara temple, Tanjavuru. 10<sup>th</sup> Century, CE



Figure 6.4: Tripuraantaka Siva, Hampi Virupaksha Temple, 1520/25 CE

## Notes and References

1. Mahabharata's *Drona*, *Karna* and *Shalya Parva* have elaborate description of the image of Tripurari. Especially *Shalya Parva* records the theme as a

comparison of Brahma to that of Shalya, whom Duryodhana requests to become Charioteer to Karna. The episode is also depicted in a contemporary Kannada work "*Karnataka Bharata Kathamanjari*" based on the *Vyasa Bharata* written by Kumara Vyasa, a noted writer of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century,.

2. Early Chalukya images of Tripurari appear for the first time in Pattadakal sculptures. An image is now preserved in Badami ASI museum; another image of Tripurari is found on a pillar of the Papanatha Temple at Pattadakal.
3. Ellora has fine examples of Tripurari Siva. The Lanka Cave has sculptural depictions of the theme.
4. Hoysala temples have narratives on *Katha Pattika* of the *adhithana*. The Tripurasuras are represented in circular form like entwined bangles. Siva is shown upon a *ratha* shooting arrow towards the Tripurasura brothers. Since the Vijayanagara kingdom was established immediately after the fall of the Hoysalas, there are many such art motifs and elements that were inherited by the Vijayanagara artists. The present circular shapes of the cities were definitely inspired by their Hoysala predecessors.
5. The dating of Hampi Ceiling paintings are varied. C. Sivaramamurthy dated them to 14<sup>th</sup> Centuries CE (South Indian Paintings). Same views were followed by Stella Kramrisch (Paintings of Deccan). Some later scholars even dated them to 18-19<sup>th</sup> Century CE. However in the last two decades, I have studied the paintings in great detail and concluded that they belong to early 16<sup>th</sup> Century CE. The *Maharangamantapa* was built in 1509, CE by Krishnadeva Raya to commemorate his coronation. Therefore the 14th Century date is explicitly ruled out. Paintings were possibly painted by 1510-25 CE. For further discussion see Kulkarni, R H. 'Hampi Virupaksha Devalayada Maharangamantapada Olamaligeya bhitiyallina Yatigala Chitra Vyasrayarade athava Vidyaranyarade?' in *Itihasa Darshana*, Karnataka Itihasa Akademi Annual Journal. Bangalore, 2001. Also see my recent You Tube Lecture in Kulkarni Chalukya You Tube Channel.
6. *Shalya Parva* of Mahabharata has these details.
7. The figures in painting and stuccos at Vijayanagara, Hampi are almost identical in their shape and forms. The drawings for such sculptures also follow similar typologies as seen in paintings.
8. *Rajput Paintings* by Ananda K Coomaraswamy for the first time identifies the stylistic developments of the paintings. Also See: Krishna Chaitanya: *Traditions of Indian Paintings*. Rajasthani Traditions. Abhinav Publications, Delhi, 1976.