

Sculptures of Kamakhya Temple: An Aesthetic View

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Abstract- The Kamakhya temple is one of the world known religious centre. Though, the temple is regarded as the great religious *Tantric* centre but, it lays great emphasis on the sculptural art. The temple exists at the Nilachal hill of Assam. The myth, religion and art are amalgamated in the Kamakhya temple. The reconstructed temple shows the sculptural art of different times. Numerous sculptural images are very similar to the Gupta art style. The study focuses upon the characteristics of the stone images and traces the myth behind the temple. The stone images are analyzed according to the subject matter.

Index Terms- *Aesthetic, Kamakhya temple, Myth, Sculptures*

I. Section I

The Kamakhya temple is one of the main *pithas* (sacred place) among fifty one *Saktipithas* and the temple is dedicated to Mother Goddess Kamakhya. Kamakhya is another form of Goddess Parvati. The Kamakhya temple is located on the Nilachal hill in western part of Guwahati city in Assam. There is an incomplete stone staircase known as the *Mekhalaujua* path along with the Kamakhya temple. Mother Goddess Kamakhya is worshiped here in the 'Yoni' (genitalia) form. The most celebrated festival is the Ambubachi festival. It is widely believed that during the period of festival of each summer, Devi Kamakhya goes through her menstrual cycle. The history was silent that when the temple was originally built. But, it was estimated that the temple was built around the 4th -5th century A D. There was a traditional belief that Kalapahar, a Muslim iconoclast from Bengal destroyed the original form of the Kamakhya temple. But, there is not found any authentic evidence regarding this matter. Though, the temple is well known as a great sacred centre, but, the temple also plays an important role in the sculptural art of Assam and now the temple is in ruin. According to the inscription of the Kamakhya temple, Koch king Naranarayana reconstructed the temple over the ruins of the old structure in 1565 A D. The nature of the temple indicates that the original structure of the stone built temple is reconstructed many times; hence, the sculptural compositions of this temple reflect their characteristic style of different periods. Some of the stone carvings display the characteristic styles of the Gupta art as well as art of Orissa. Sculptures of Assam closely associated with the style of Bengal and Orissa. In addition, Rao mentions that the sculptures of Assam are included under the fourth school of Indian art representing the Bengal, Orissa and Assam due to the stylistic similarities [1]. The Kamakhya temple essentially follows the *Nagara* style of architecture of the North India. The sculptures are apparent mostly on the exterior walls as well as on the interior walls of the Kamakhya temple. A good number of sculptures are also fixed on the temple gates. Besides, some of the sculptures are lying scattered within the temple campus. But due to the religious prohibition, the sculptures of interior walls are not given permission to study.

II. Section II

Numbers of legends as well as myths are associated with the Kamakhya temple. Among them, a well known mythological story is found in the *Kalika Purana*. According to myth, once Daksha, father of Sati or Parvati organized a sacrificial program where all Gods and Goddesses were invited, but, Siva and Sati were not invited for the reason that Daksha disliked Siva for his appearance. But, without invitation, Sati came to the program. Daksha immediately became angry and scandalized to her husband Siva. This incident was unbearable for her and at last Sati gave up her body. Hearing the news, Siva became furious and went to his father-in-law's house where Siva destroyed the sacrificial alter. Siva carried the dead body of Sati on his shoulder roaming around the whole universe or *tribhuvana*. All the Gods and Goddesses became fearful and finally then Lord Vishnu started secretly to detach the whole body of Sati into fifty one pieces with his *Chakra* (wheel). On where every piece had fallen down, every place turned into important *pithasthana*. It was believed that the 'Yoni' part of Sati had fallen down on the top of the Nilachala hill which was known as *Kamakhya pitha*. *Kalika Purana* mentioned that the 'Yoni' part of Sati existed in the form of a stone in the *Kamakhya pitha* [2]. The *Kalika Purana* also mentioned that the mountain Nilachala represented the body of Siva himself and when 'Yoni' of Sati had fallen on the mountain, it turned blue. There was also a mythological concept that Goddess Kamakhya came to this place secretly to fulfill the sexual enjoyment (*kama*) with Her husband Siva. It is noteworthy that the sanctum of the temple looks like a natural cave which is a dark and mysterious chamber. In the sanctum, there is no any image, but exists a sculptured image of stone which is like a form of 'Yoni' and interestingly, a natural spring keeps the image moist in all times.

The walls of Kamakhya temple are richly embellished with the numerous relief sculptures where varieties of subject matters are depicted such as religious, secular, flora and fauna and geometrical design. The divine images of the temple are included under the

religious subject matter and found abundantly. A great number of exquisite figures of the divine images which follow the iconographic rules are inscribed on the outer walls of the sanctum and they serve to evoke the religious feeling of the devotees. To carve the divine images, artists had to follow the rules and principles of the canonical texts, but, added their own creativities also. Mostly, the life size male divine figures are installed on the outer temple walls of this *Sakti* temple. An important aspect is that the images are depicted with emotionally expressive pose as well as gesture. It is noteworthy that the depictions of Siva in his various forms are found. Most of the figures of Siva show the terrific aspect which is called Bhairava. Due to the influence of *Tantricism*, the images of Gods and Goddesses show a tendency of characterize of the terrific and the destructive forms. According to *Agamas*, twenty five sporting forms (*lila-murtis*) of Siva are found in the sculptural representations and most of them are usually illustrated in the South Indian temples [3]. According to *Vishnudharmottara Purana*, Bhairava appears with flabby belly, round yellow eyes, side-tusks and wide nostrils, and adorns a garland of skulls. He adorns snakes as ornaments with other some ornaments. The complexion of Bhairava is dark as the rain-cloud and his garment is the elephant's skin. The image carries several weapons [4].

In the Kamakhya temple, an image of Siva which performs a terrific aspect is inscribed on the outer wall of the sanctum (Figure 1). The image is given four handed where the emblems are the *trisula* (trident), *khatvanga* (club of bone with skulls), *kati-hastamudra* (one hand is half-raised at ease and kept on the hip), *jnana-mudra* (knowledge comes from within). For beautification, the God is fully ornamented with different ornaments. A particularly interesting sculpture is found on the same wall of same attitude which is known as Bhairava (Figure 2). Here, the image's look is horrible, since, God has a terrible face with protruding teeth. His emblems are the sword, skull, *kati-hastamudra* and an indistinct object. Mythology informed that the skull which God holds was of the gate-keeper of Vishnu. A good number of Bhairava images are observed on the wall of the temple, but every figure's attributes are different from each other. Interestingly, another image of Siva expresses his terrific aspect through his dancing posture (Figure 3). Considering as a great master of dance and music, the image of Siva is carved in the form of Vinadhara Dakshinamurti where Siva holds a *vin* in his hands. The head of the dancing Vinadhara Dakshinamurti is unfortunately mutilated but, a superior craftsmanship is given in the physical form. The lower both hands hold the *vin* while upper right hand holds the *sruga* (sacrificial spoon). The back left hand carries an indistinct object. Interestingly, the God adorns a *mundamala* (garland of skull) and is standing on a dead man. These images are carved in realistic manner with the accuracy of physical details. These images can be regarded to be the best products of sculptural art of Assam. The figures are amalgamated with different characteristic features like full of charm, elegant posture, spiritual expression, simplicity etc. Besides the Bhairava figures, there are also enshrined some others divine images like Surya, Ganesa, Daksha etc.

Along with these great numbers of the male divine figures, two females Goddesses are associated on the exterior wall of the sanctum. The females are identified as the form of *Sakti* namely Gauri and Uma. Woman is regarded as the form of Mother Goddess. Nature is the symbolic representation of woman who has creative power. According to India mythology, Gauri is the wife of Siva where Uma is another form of Gauri. Here, in the sculptural representation, Gauri is standing in graceful posture and holding a half bloomed lotus in the right hand while the other performs the *kati-hastamudra* (Figure 4). The figure reflects the characteristic feature of the Gupta art in the carving style. According to the treatise, the image of Gauri has to depict like an unmarried girl. Like Gauri, Uma is also almost similar but the figure is holding a mirror which is special emblem of Uma. Since, Uma is holding a mirror; therefore, the figure produces the *Shringar rasa* (erotic sentiment). The sculptors illustrated the images in the temple architecture not only for divinities, but also add some human characters like subtle human moods as well as some sentiments. Artists gave more concentration to show adequate sensitivity and charming qualities in carving of the female sculptures. Therefore, the images become more lifelike on the stone surfaces. Some others mutilated stone blocks display the representations of female divine beauty (Figure 5). These sculptural pieces are also reflection of the Gupta style. The females are very sensuously carved. "*The sensuous figures that sculptors made not only commanded the admiration from the beholders but also excited their senses finally leaving an experience of ecstasy. Thus a piece of beauty turns as a source of delight and pleasure*" [5]. Proportionately the figures are well carved out where the physical beauty of the females is transferred into the spiritual beauty. A unique representation of female is shown in meditation posture (Figure 6). The treatment of the carving of the figure is like Indian terracotta style. Another image of woman is exposing openly her genital organ. This type of figure is carved on the temple wall due to the influence of *Tantricism*.

The secular themes which are the everyday life of the human societies are depicted in the temple art. In the secular theme, numbers of scenes are carved out. A recognizable sculptural composition is found on the gate of the temple where the composition is of mother and child (Figure 7). The woman is engaged in suckling her child in seated posture. Through the sculpture, a mother aspect is focused. Some other important scenes display where a female is engaged in supplying water to a male who is in thirsty. Another scene represents a robust male who is eating something. A scene which is very uncommon representation is inscribed on the temple wall. According to scene, a man is carrying a heavy load over his head. Some stone blocks are illustrated with the representations of dance posture and erotic posture which are found within the temple campus.

The flora and fauna are the important parts for the decoration of the temple architecture. The depictions of the flora and fauna have been always connecting to the nature with its blessings as well as rhythms. These are used in the temple building for auspiciousness as well as for the beautification of the temple. The depictions of the floral motif in the Kamakhya temple can be considered as important part for the ornamentation. Mostly, the floriated motifs are carved on the outer walls of the sanctum of the temple where the lotus is

the major flower motif. Lotus is considered as most sacred flower for all religions and signified the emblem of beauty. It is regarded as one of the auspicious motifs among the eight sacred motifs. Besides, lotus is given as pedestal to the most of the Gods and Goddesses of this temple. Different kinds of floral motifs are amalgamated with the geometrical design (Figure 8). A carved stone block which is found within the temple campus shows the unique representation of creeper motif in interlacing pattern. Interestingly, a man is holding the two branches in his hands of this creeper motif which are carved in realistic manner. “.....animals and floral patterns have throughout the history of Indian sculpture been treated with far more realism than the figures of men and Gods” [6]. The carved creeper motif shows the characteristic style of Gupta art.

The Kamakhya temple contains the fauna motif in limited numbers where the lion is given more prominent place. For example, a broken door sill depicts a *mangalakalasa* (auspicious jar) which is flanked by two running lions in opposite direction with raised tails and their heads bent towards the *mangalakalasa* are commonly met in the sculptural art of Assam (Figure 9). *MangalaKalasa* is also one of the members among the eight auspicious symbols. Besides, a very common motif which is *gaja-simha* found on the temple wall. In this motif, a huge lion is seated vertically by his back legs on an elephant which is small in size. This type of sculptural representation is also displayed as an architectural device in the Orissa temples. Another stone block shows two lions are joined by one lion head which are fixed on the upper part of the temple. Possibly, this sculptural part is used as architectural device in the original Kamakhya temple. Some Gods are composited by the human and animal figure together such as Ganesha of elephant headed, Daksha of goat headed etc which are found on the temple walls.

III. Section III

Thus, it can be concluded that the temple art is the reflection of broad aspects such as myth, beliefs, mythology, customs and cults which are clearly as well as aesthetically reflected through the sculptural motifs found in the symbolic representations. Amalgamations of different myths as well as the sculptural parts enhanced the grandeur of the whole architectural part of the Kamakhya temple. Though, the Kamakhya temple is influenced by other parts of India but the regional variation is properly represented in some of the elements. The sculptural compositions are nicely arranged in the Kamakhya temple to create the most sophisticated ideals of aesthetic effect. Each sculptured figure is able to provide different aesthetic sentiments called *Navarasa* to the viewers.

References

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Figures



Figure 1 (Bhairava) Figure 2 (Bhairava)

Figure 3 (Vinadhara)

Figure 4 (Gauri)



Figure 5 (female divinity)

Figure 6 (Meditative woman)

Figure 7 (Mother & Child)



Figure 8 (Floral design) Figure 9 (Lions with mangalakalasa)

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