

Historical Evaluation of the Rock-Cut Sculptures of Unakoti

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Of the existing archaeological sites in the state of Tripura, the most striking one is Unakoti which is situated to the eastern side of Kailashahar at a distance of 9 K.M. and, 180 K.M. from Agartala. To the north-west corner of Unakoti-chhara, there is a hill top where the ruins are scattered over the surface. Besides ruins strewn over the region, Unakoti yields many important sculptural finds proving the antiquity of the place. Among numerous rock carving figures, the head-images of Siva and Sakti, Virabhadra, Ganga, Gauri, Parvati, Tapasya, Bhairava, Bhairavi, Ganesa and Vishnu are shown standing erect signifying mental, physical and spiritual equilibrium. A good number of stone images lie scattered over the hill tops, on both the banks of the Unakoti chhara and the elevations of the hillock. These include the images of Visnu, Narsingha, Uma-Maheswara, Ganesa, Hanumana, Panchanana and Mukhalingas. The sculptural finds differ considerably from the above one which consist of the Siva-lingas excluding Brahmabhaga, boulder like lingas with several balls depicted on the top surface and colossal linga with inter-locked serpent and garland of lotuses around it.

Although the previous notices have dealt with rock-cuts of Unakoti, no faithful and systematic study of the rock-cut sculptures of Unakoti has yet been brought to light on the socio-religious point of view. In this paper we propose to evaluate the rock cut sculptures of Unakoti.

The beginnings of the rock-cut sculptures in Unakoti go back not to a very remote age like the rock-cuts of the Southern and Western India. N. R. Roy in his monograph entitled *Idea and Image in Indian art* has observed that "the rock cut sculptures doubtless share the common denominator of language and idiom of contemporary sculptures worked out of isolated pieces or boulders of stone, but formally they afford a different kind of perception. Issuing out of the rock and yet tied to it the life of the rock itself seems to cling to the bodies of form, the rock seems to lend to these bodies its latent energy of weight, its texture and proportions." :

Sculptures wrought out of isolated pieces or boulders do not seem to produce this kind of aesthetic response. The rock-cut sculptures

of Unakoti that we like to re-evaluate are all related to the Brahmanical religion or Hinduism.

The fact is that the rock-cut panels of Unakoti were made in about the 14th-15th century A.D. for Brahmanism to establish its high position over the tribals of Tripura when the Buddhism had lost its hold by the strong influence of the followers of Brahmanical religion. It is significant that the Buddhism never attained the supreme position in Tripura because this religion had not been patronized by the Royal house. The Bengali speaking Hindus of Noakhali-Tipperah-Sylhet region came to the hill Tripura due to the emergence of the Muslims and they came across the Kiratas of the Epico-Puranic fame.² By the 13th century A.D. after the death of Dasharatha Deva, the Brahmanical way of life and thought flourished in Tripura under the earlier generations of the Manikya dynasty. They were driven to the sub-mountain area who became autonomous when the Turkish deluge swept over North Bengal after 1200 A.D.³ They made cultural contact with neighbouring Assamese Princely families⁴ and the culture of South East Asia had ample scope for extensive intercourses with the indigenous culture of tribal Tripura.⁵ It is evident that the earlier members of the Manikyas who were able to establish its supremacy over the district of Tipperah⁶ had been drawn into the main cultural heritage of Hinduism along with its marginal subjects. In the rock-cut sculptures of Unakoti appear, however, not one but various styles mixed up from two sources. The amalgamation of Indian main cultural stream and the alien cultural influence might have immigrated to Unakoti in which indigenous styles of the tribals of Tripura have been emerged. As a result of it, in Unakoti, the rock-cut sculptures have created a complex style from the 14th century A.D. onwards. The kings of Manikya dynasty were not obliged to succumb to the pressure of Buddhism owing to their religious beliefs in Hinduism.

In the remote hill of Tripura we find the rock-cut sculptures in Unakoti which bear the evidence of the art and iconography of Brahmanical Gods and Goddesses. What were the causes that led to the utilisation of these Brahmanical rock-cut sculptures in Unakoti ?

It appears that Brahmanism wanted to seek quantitative acceptance and expansion in the fairest field of Indo-Mongoloid tribals of Tripura when Manikya dynasty had come to patronise and to act as the spearhead of Brahmanical religion and society. It was, no doubt, a hard task because the Tibeto-Burman families

had all their own indigenous religion and the Gods and Goddesses of both benevolent and malevolent nature, but they are "always awesome and fearful, strong and powerful."

To win the tribal people over is to overpower their deities first; therefore, the kings of Tripura seem to have helped the process. The series of rock-cut sculptures of Unakoti have their own language. The Brahmanical rock-cut sculpture is generally "dynamic and outward looking, vibrant and strident, the emphasis is on strength, vigour and vitality, on action and movement." It is evident that in Unakoti, the various rock-cut sculptures are presenting the tremendous power and energy, of dynamic action and movement and colossal growth of Hinduism.

The most significant fact is that the Brahmanical deities of the rock-cut sculpture of Unakoti absorbed all the characteristic features of the tribal deities along with Brahmanical ones. On the religious point of view, it may be indicated that preference of height, volume and boldness of Unakoti was applied to rock-cut sculpture to show the superiority of the Brahmanical Gods and Goddesses which was the main theme and underlying idea during the early period of Manikya dynasty. Further, it can be said that the sand stone rock of Unakoti was to be the best material through which the sculpture could articulate the vigour, power and strength of Brahmanism.

The bold reliefs of Unakoti rock-cut sculptures seem to bear the epic-opouranic myths which are representing the nature and character of contemporary Brahmanism which flourished in Tripura. Here in Unakoti the central Siva head is flanked on either side of his crown by Ganga and Gouri which represent the well known characters of the Puranas. The central Siva head ⁸ measuring 13 m 43 cm x 9 m 33 cm vertically carved on the soft rocky wall of Unakoti, is locally recognised as Unakotisvara who has been identified by the scholars as Ardhanarisvara ⁹, Aghora Rudra ¹⁰, Trilochana ¹¹ etc, but these identifications requires further research., The gigantic face of Siva ¹² having a third eye of unique variety is carved out of a flat square block of stone with elaborate head-dress, the upper lip and the lower lip are indicated by the two horizontal lines only, while the face bears the double contour lines on the upper part of the eyes and the brows are absent which make the figure loughin horribly with his bulging eyes. In the same rock the figures of Ganga and Gouri are carved on either side of the headgear who are standing on their vehicles in a stylise manner with simple ornaments and indigenous garments. ¹³

According to Dr. Ratna Das the central bust of Siva "is strongly reminiscent of the Devaraja cult" and it had penetrated into north Tripura through the land route ¹⁴ of upper Burma, Manipur, the Ahom state and Cachar. In her article she has sought to suggest that the mythical king Trilochana having a third eye and trishula emblem became a part of Siva and his portrait was carved on the rock which made him a defied king. But most unfortunately, the exact identification of the central Siva head has been found wrong at the present stage of our knowledge because the images of Gouri and Ganga over the head of the head-image, on the iconographic point of view, remind us that the central head should be identified as Gouri -Ganga-Shirodhra-Siva, although this type of image is rare in the Brahmanical iconography. It appears that the sculptors of Unakoti did not follow the Hindu iconography accurately and they prefer to give importance to their own imagination along with the Brahmanical iconography. The famous remark of Suniti Kumar Chatterjee suggests that the head image of Unakoti is something unusual in the Hindu iconographic system. ¹⁵

The statement of S. K. Chatterjee is justified in a certain sense because a considerable indo-mongaloid characteristic feature is strongly emphasised in this bust. The report presented by Jayanta Nath Choudhuri makes an intricate problem on the question of identification about the central head of Siva. The reason is that Mr. Choudhuri has tried to prove it as an image of Ardhanarisvara Siva. ¹⁶ But what is more significant from the point of view of iconography is that the left half of the moustache has been flaked off, but the trace of which is visible as yet. Therefore, on the basis of the extant features of the figure, Mr. Choudhuri's identification bears no certainty. On the other hand, we would like to say that the cult of the fourteen deities (Chaturdasha-devata) may be associated with the head image in which the characteristic feature of the fourteen deities is traceable.

Left side of this head image is another similar panel which presents us the same type of head image of Siva measuring 9 mtr x 8 mtr 30 cm with a crown consisting of beaded decoration, a third eye and kundalas. The awe inspiring expression on the face, the open teeth and the terrible laughter appear to have close similarity with Ugra Siva as indicated by the Dhyana described in the *Prapanchasara Tantra*.

Another head image of Sakti takes her place to the left side of this Siva-head measuring 9 mtr. 90 cm x 10 mtr. 25 cm. The colossal Sakti head bears matted locks which are spread over both

the sides of this head consisting of five tufts in each side and a resplendent crescent in the middle of the head over the crown which seems to be a "Jata Kuntal" according to "*Bharatiya Shilpasanghita*"¹⁷

An unique rock at Unakoti in the stream-bed disgorges the remarkable carvings of the gigantic figures of three Ganeshas along with an Achuyata variety of Vishnu image at the right end.

The four-armed seated Ganesha measures 17 mtr. 40 cm x 9 mtr. 40 cm and to his right two standing Ganeshas with attenuated waists may be identified as Sarabhuja and Ashthabhuja Ganesha who have possessed three and four tusks respectively. According to Mr. K. N. Dikshit¹⁸ these two figures are elephant-headed and the emblems of their hand are not noticed elsewhere. Alice Getty observed that these are two standing elephant-headed attendants of the seated four-armed Ganesha.¹⁹ In spite of such opinions Mrs. Ratna Das identifies them as the images of Ganesha with a comment that "of the two, the left one appears to be a female figure."²⁰ From the intensives study of the sculptures carved on the rocky wall, the identifications presented by Mr. Dikshit, Alice Getty and Mrs. Das appear to be found wrong at the present stage of our knowledge. It is clear that the trident and Asksamala are the emblems of Ganesha in our country. An image of Ganesha has been found at rajbaridanga²¹ who holds a trident and Asksamala in his hand. Therefore, the remark of Alice Getty that "they carry none of the attributes of Ganesha"²² is not true. Besides, there are Ganeshas in Tibet, Mongolia, Burma and Nepal having trident in their hands.²³ In Nepal and Burma the six-armed and eight-armed Ganeshas were worshipped.²⁴ Mr. Dahavalikar rightly observes that "Ganesha is very often shown carrying the symbols of Siva."²⁵ On the anatomical ground no Ganesha of Unakoti may be identified as female figure. Therefore, the opinion of Mrs. Das requires further research.

Among the rock cut sculptures, not included in the Archaeological report and in the writings of Mrs. Das or any other authorities, mention may be made of an interesting panel in which the images of Bhairava²⁶ and Bhairavi are shown carved in heigh relief facing the stream Unakoti Chhara. The panel measures 12 mtr. 70 cm x 10 mtr. 95 cm in which the three-eyed Bhairava is sitting in padmasana posture with the legs locked and the soles of the feet are not visible²⁷. The God presses the kettle-drum against his breast with his left hand, while the right hand is missing. He wears a pactoral round the neck, a garland of skulls of which five are visible and a elaborately decorated dhoti with awe - inspiring expression on

a complex style of indigenous art was created in which the elements of Adivasi art and culture appeared to be prominent one which leads some scholar to think that the sculptures of Unakoti bears exotic character, ³⁴ but the head-images carved on rock are the notable specimens of the art of Tripura representing its indigenous character. Therefore, we are not ready to accept the opinion that the sculptures of Unakoti are exotic in character. However, the examination of the Ganga and Pārvati-Tapasya and Gouri and Bhairavi images show that clothings represent the costumes of the women in Tripura.

The clothings required to be given to Ganga, Gouri, Parvati and Bhairavi point out that female used to have pāchra with floral designs of tribal art of Tripura. The Dheri type of ear-rings of the Riangs, Tipras and others are utilised for ornamentation of the images along with Taiya. ³⁵ The string of beads, the designs of head-dress, beaded decoration, Kharus of the images are analogous to the designs of the tribal Tripura.

The patrons of the sculptures of Unakoti are not known definitely, but we are sure about the fact that the early kings of the Manikya dynasty owing to their Brahmanical faith have patronised the sculptors to spread Brahmanical Hindusim in Tripura for the welfare of the Indo-Mongoloid peoples during the 14th-15th century A. D. The early Indo-Mongoloid Brahmanical dynasty of Tripura was related with the rock-cut sculptures of Unakoti, authenticity of which may be proved by two figures of lion which have been neglected by the scholars of India. On both the side of Unakoti chhara, just above the rock-cut panel of Ganesha, there are two carved images of typical lion of Tripura which are similar to the figures of the coins of Ratna Manikya, the first king of Manikya dynasty according to Archaeological evidence so far as discovered. The coins of Ratna Manikya are attributed to the 15th century A. D. On the basis of the coin of Ratna Manikya, the rock cut sculptures of Unakoti seem to be brought to light with regional flavour and characteristics of the remarkable patronage of the Tripura dynasty as soon as it established itself some time in the last part of 14th century and the first half of 15th century A. D. Unakoti fell into a decline perhaps during the second half of the 15th century A. D. for want of active patronage from the Royal house of Tripura or any institution, the cause of which is that the rock cut sculptures of Unakoti have not been carved according to the instructions given by Hindu Iconography only ; as a result of it, the Brahmin priests of the Royal court disallowed the images

of Unakoti as the ritual objects and the kings of Tripura separated themselves from the cultural complex of Unakoti, but the subjects including tribal and non-tribal accepted it as a centre of pilgrimage.

Unakoti rock-cut sculptures thus are the logical outcome of the mediaval sculpture of Tripura and its plasticity is derived from that of Bengal, its elegance, if any, from that of Tripura. The rock-cut art of Unakoti more or less influenced the contemporary sculptures of Tripura. The undulating matted tufts, absence of eyebrows, indication of mouth by two simple lines, beaded decoration and anatomical features have without doubt influenced the image of Tripurasundari, the Mahishasuramardhini of Kasba and Devatamuda, and Vaishnavi of Amarpur which are attributed to the 15th-16th century A.D.

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