

Unakoti Carvings : Problems of a Perspective

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It may be recalled that on an earlier occasion we had discussed the early medieval sculptures of Tripura¹ in very general terms, Unakoti Carvings did figure into that discussion, but treatment was far from detailed or comprehensive. In this note, an attempt is being made to understand some of the basic problems connected with the sculptures of Unakoti.

Unlike most of the Tripura monuments, Unakoti is much better known among the archaeologists and art-historians. As early as 1919 (B. S. 1326), Padmanath Bhattacharya² alluded to the carved images of this site. Bhattacharya contended that the Unakoti remains are very old and they were in existence during the time of Hiuen-Tsang's visit to South-Eastern Bengal and Assam. In support of his contention Bhattacharya quoted from a handwritten Sanskrit manuscript referring to Unakoti and its association with sage Kapila. Admittedly, this is an attempt to accommodate a popular myth and push back the antiquity of the site. By 1921-22, Annual Report of the Archaeological Survey of India³ gave a fairly lengthy account of Unakoti remains and made a note of its unusual features. R. D. Banerji's pioneering study of Eastern Indian Sculptures⁴ made room for one of the sculptures of Unakoti. Subsequently, Nihar Ranjan Ray's *Bangalir Itihas*⁵ (History of Bengalee Speaking People) commented upon the Saivite affiliation of the site. Beside the works cited above, Unakoti remains had been discussed by a number of authors, mostly from Tripura state⁶. What, however, appears to be most surprising is almost complete absence of meaningful discussion on the problematic nature of the chronological, stylistic and iconographic features of the sculptures.

II

Unakoti is located close to Kailasahar, the district headquarters of Northern Tripura. The remains, scattered over an extensive area, are carved on the rocky surface of the hillock, about 159 feet high, and lying on either side of the hill tract and the streamlet. The carvings conform to two basic types, viz (i) stelai and (ii) rock-cut figures. And all the carvings relate, in a broader use of the term, to the Hindu pantheon. But there is no denying the fact that each group is very much different from the other in spite of a common religious affiliation.

The relative chronological positions of two groups remain an

unresolved issue. Images carved against stela background adhere to the Eastern Indian idiom prevalent between the 9th and the 12th centuries. A.D. The dominant theme of the stela figures is Saivaite, but images pertaining to Vaisnava and other sects are also known. Mukhalinga forms of Siva seems to have enjoyed a special position at this site. But one must not, however, lose sight of the fact that this site has evolved certain distinctiveness in the realm of iconography. R. D Banerji rightly pointed out that depiction of human figure instead of head in a Mukhalinga is rather unusual⁷. The other feature which calls for attention is the presence of a conch in the left hand of the central figure. The distinctiveness is further reflected in a Trimukhalinga. (Plate 1). One of the faces of the linga is bearded and in all likelihood represents Aghora aspect. Even in the rendering of Vaisnavite images, one comes across some unusual forms like Visnu with five heads and ten hands or the alignment of Garuda on a subsidiary stela at the foot of Visnu. Images of Uma-Mahesvara or Ganesa, on the other hand, strictly follow the more well-known methods of depiction. As suggested earlier, these figures are datable between c. 9th-12th centuries A.D., and one can work out the sequences of growth of the standard Eastern Indian idiom in these figures. The heavy-set Visnu figures carved against a stela background with a rounded top is probably datable to c. 9th cent. A. D. the sturdy figure of the five-headed Visnu and Ganesa (Plates 2 & 3) should come next and may be assigned to the late 9th-early 10th century, Uma-Mahesvara figure with slender and attenuated limbs as well as the Trimukhalinga can roughly be placed between the 11th-12th century A. D. Incidentally, a Chaturmukhalinga with a short inscription in the 11th-12th century East Indian alphabets mentioning one Sri Jayadeva⁸ indicates that the stela carving technique continued to be in use till the 12th century A. D. Going by the extant remains, the site came into existence as a religious centre as early as the 8th-9th centuries A. D. with a decidedly Saivite bias.

When compared to the stelai, rock-cut figures provide very different approach-both in the method of rendering forms as well as in the choice of iconographic elements. It appears that stela carving technique went out of use, instead rock-surfaces were chosen and carved. In this phase, dominant theme is colossal head; tentatively identified as Siva. One of the heads-about 30 feet high is symptomatic of this phase. (Plate 4). It is almost rectangular, the huge third eye carved in the middle of the head, the other two eyes are indicated by incised double lines without any representa-

tion of pupil ; the nose comes down in an almost straight line ; the mouth is shown by a long narrow slit with vertical strokes indicating the teeth. The incised moustache takes an upward turn and ends in a loop. The ears are indicated by carved double lines ; the lower extremes of ear lobes are decorated with circular floral motifs. This huge carving, popularly known as Unakotisvara Kala Bhairava, is the presiding deity of the site. Three displaced figures of huge bulls are found lying below. Another head visualised in the same manner is found at some distance of the head discussed earlier (Plate 5). In addition, there are many more heads carved on the rock surface in different states of preservation. Some of the heads were never finished. Another figure, popularly known as the goddess Ganga, is also referable to this group. Of extreme significance is the representation of a group of colossal Ganesa. (Plate 6). They are shown standing erect and have attenuated waists. Each has three or four tusks and six and eight hands respectively ; the objects held as emblems are conch, discus, rosary and damaru, they have conch on their ears. A figure of four-armed Visnu with standard attributes is recognised at the right end of the group. The other important carvings depicts two female figures on either side of the central Siva head.

One important visual element that all the carvings have in common is the absence of sculptural or three-dimensional quality. In spite of their imposing height, the carvings are essentially conceived in flat and two-dimensional terms. There seems to be hardly any concern with modelling. In the Central Siva head, for example, nose is the only part of head that shows some amount of modelling. The pictographic effect conveyed by the figures becomes all the more apparent when one turns to Ganesa group. The skeleton-like figures hardly comes out of the depth of the rock. When artists chose to depict full-length human figures, they gradually came in turn with modelling. Two standing female figures are definitely less attached to the surface. And a sense of modelling is discernible in the rendering of breast, waist and some other parts of the body. But a sense of overall flatness remained even with these carvings.

The iconographic elements are also worth notice. There is a marked preference for the depiction of heads. The third eye and the presence of bulls lead us to identify the heads as representing Siva. But the stark, toothless, moustachaeoid faces are reminiscent of the malevolent aspect of the god. It is not without significance that a terrific, not the usual placid, form of Siva was preferred. The female figures, despite their close proximity to the Siva head,

cannot be definitely identified. The statement holds good for the figure known as Ganga. Ganesa group appears to be most curious. Many of the iconographic features, like three and four tasks instead of one or six and eight hands instead of usual two or four, are difficult to explain. And the presence of Visnu's emblems in the hands of Ganesa is probably without any parallel.

III

There can hardly be any doubt that we are dealing with two distinct groups. And it is not much of a problem to explain the origin, nature and religious-artistic affiliation of the figures securely datable between the 9th-12th centuries A.D. Elsewhere⁹ we have discussed how as a part of the greater geo-political formation of Harikela, substantial portion of present-day Tripura had shared the socio-cultural ethos of South-Eastern Bengal. Iconographic innovations characterise a number of images known from sites of South-Eastern Bengal, and many of the peculiarities of Unakoti stelai have to be viewed in this context.

Rock-cut sculptures, however, raise a number of problems. When did they originate? What kind of cultural milieu did they represent? Why are the carvings so much different from the stelai both visually and conceptually? Most of the questions can hardly be satisfactorily answered. One must begin by recognising that rock-cut figures are not contemporaneous with the stelai. This becomes apparent when one compares contemporaneous stelai and rock-cut statuary known from different sites of North Eastern India. Surya-Pahar examples¹⁰ are sufficiently illustrative. In spite of being curved on the rock-surfaces, they belong to the main stream of Assam sculptures of the Post-Gupta period. Eastern Bihar rock-cut sculptures¹¹ of the 5th-6th centuries A.D. are indistinguishable from either the free-standing or high-relief figures of that period. But the position is totally different at Unakoti. Its flat and enigmatic figure seems to be an outright negation of the earlier tradition. In the context of stylistic development of Eastern Indian sculptures it had been the endeavour of the sculptors to gradually separate the figure from its background and achieve an effect of a free-standing form.¹² Here at Unakoti, the carvings stick, as it were, to their backgrounds. This would not have been possible without a fresh start and a new approach to the form.

Admittedly, the artists had made use of the iconic types available at the site, but in so doing they have transformed the characters of the earlier gods. Of the three available forms of Siva, viz;

aniconic Linga, composite Mukhalinga and mythological Uma-Mahesvara, they chose only one but disassociated it from the phallic content. Similarly, the female form was not based on the model of any of the celebrated goddesses. They evolved a curious synthesis of Visnu and Ganesa. Evidently, they were in the process of being absorbed into Hindu pantheon ; but the process had just been initiated. The mythology associated with the images and canons governing the representation of icons had not yet spread their roots. Survivals from the earlier cultural system did not completely lose their meanings. Probably, this kind of a set-up made these carvings possible. Its precise chronology is difficult to work out, but historical conditions of the post 12th century A.D. provide some understanding about the process.

IV

The Tripuri or Tipperah tribe reached the Cachar valley around the 13th century A.D., where from they entered into Northern part of Tripura before finally arriving at Agartala area.¹³ At this stage they must have come under the influence of Brahmanical system. Till the 13th century, Harikela, in sharp contrast to other regions, had witnessed a kind of political stability, reinforced by trade, currency and elaborate Brahmanical and Buddhist rituals and mythology.¹⁴ Migrant tribes, with their earlier myths and symbols, started interacting with the dominant Hindu population, sharing in the process their myths and symbols. In so doing, they did not, however, cut themselves off totally from their earlier pantheon. In fact, it was a period of transition, when new gods were incorporated and new myths were created to accommodate old and new gods side by side. Rajamala, the official chronicle of Tripura rulers, obliquely hints at this direction. Although, much of Rajamala's testimony belongs to the realm of fanciful speculations, yet its cultural implication can hardly be overlooked. It refers to King Kumara who worshipped Siva Linga installed at Shyambalanagara, on the bank of the river Manu. Significantly the place is described as being inhabited by the Kiratas in the by gone days. It further states how Siva got enamoured by a Kiratini (a female member of the Kirata Community) and on being chastised by Parvati assumed the Linga form at that particular place.¹⁵ The myth might be a creation of the priestly community to attract the tribal population towards Hindu pantheon, but it explains to a great extent how the interaction between the two communities was taking place. It is no wonder that Siva would be chosen as catalytic agent. Saiva mythology is best suited for this purpose. In this context, the evidence

of the sculptural remains from Bhuvan Pahar ¹⁶ in South-eastern border of Cachar district assumes importance. Here, one comes across the co-existence of standard Brahmanical images carved in eastern Indian idiom and images rendered in a different style. And significantly, Bhuvan Pahar is also a Saivite centre.

But, of greater significance is the manner in which the Hindu gods were transformed. The choice of head as the dominant theme of Unakoti is also indicative of assertion of tribal myths and symbol. The fourteen deities (Chaturdasa Devata) of the Tipperah tribe are all represented through heads. These tribal deities were subsequently given Hindu epithet, but their original tribal identities were never lost. The associated ritual, are dominantly non-Brahmanical. The principal deity is Mataikatar or the Great God. Can it be so that Mahadev worshipped in Mukhalinga form came close to the concept of the great god of the tribal pantheon? Any answer will be at best tentative, but as early as 1950, Suniti Kumar Chatterji¹⁷ had observed that the use of heads only in lieu of full images, is something unique in Hindu ritual and this thing is found not only in the representation of Chaturdasa Devata but on the rocks at Unakoti. This is a highly suggestive hypothesis and worth enquiring in greater details for a more meaningful understanding of the historical processes which were at work in the region.

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PLATE 1:

MUKHALINGA

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PLATE II : VISNU



PLATE III ; GANESA



PLATE IV : SIVA HEAD

PLATE III : GYMNASTY



PLATE V : SIVA HEAD

PLATE VI : GANESA



PLATE VI : **GANESA**