
A Unique Composition of *Samudra-manthan* Panel from Kiradu, District Barmer, Rajasthan

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Received: 23 July 2019; Revised: 16 September 2019; Accepted: 19 October 2019
Heritage: Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in Archaeology 7 (2019): 679-690

Abstract: Kiradu is a legendary village with the episode of curse by a sage' which holds fear even today in the minds of locals, that their stay after dark will transform them into stone. However, the site is famous for temple complex with mysterious and complex iconographic particularities. The present case study is one of such panels with unique composition of *Samudra-manthan*. This theme arises twice in the temple complex of Kiradu and distinctly represents Gaṇeśa in the composition. The paper attempts to identify and rationalize this composition of *Samudra-manthan* by surveying contemporary literary tradition of the period and comparing the theme with other similar manifestations.

Keywords: *Samudra-manthan*, Kūrma, Purāṇa, Gaṇeśa, Cult, Kiradu, Barmer

Introduction

Samudra-manthan or *Amṛita Manthan* (churning of Ocean) is an important episode in Hindu mythology related to the idea of re-creation of lost divinity, light and universe (Dange 1984: 48). On the other hand, Joanna Williams (1992) put a practical sense to the episode by relating the event with utilisation of natural resources and irrigation or complex water management system of indigenous origin in south East Asia.

Interestingly, the episode of churning is said to be first play composed by Brahmā, according to *Nāṭyaśāstra* of Bharat Muni (Desai 2013: 185). According to the mythology, the event of churning was initiated with serpent Vāsuki wrapped around the mount Mandara and Kūrma (a tortoise incarnation of Viṣṇu) supporting the base of the mount. The importance of this event is depicted in various temples of the subcontinent with minor variations.

Iconographic Manifestation of Churning Episode

Kūrma or tortoise incarnation plays an important role in the churning episode, which holds mountain on his back and prevents it from sinking. Hence in the iconic depiction of this event, Kūrma is very much a central focus. Eminent scholar Devangana Desai

(2013: 192-93) attaches the symbology of Kūrma with “self controlled man” in religious texts and suggests that it was the “emblem of stability” in myth and *vāstu* ritual. On the second century BC Sanchi stupa no. 2, Kūrma is depicted supporting life which is in the form of creepers (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Tortoise supporting creepers

Some of the earliest representations of churning event can be traced at Pawaya, Udaigiri cave no. 19, Badami, etc. At Pawaya, the churning episode is depicted on the *torāṇa* lintel at the back side of Bali episode (Patil, 1947: 138); it is now housed in Guhel Palace, Gwarlior. The episode is depicted in two panels which are partly broken and eroded. The lower panel represents Kūrma as supporter of Mandara Mountain while four figures, either gods or demons, churn the ocean with serpent Vāsuki being used as a churning rope. In addition, Surabhī (a divine cow) and goddess Lakṣmī with a jar is shown emerging from the centre. To the right, possibly figures of Vāruṇa and Yama, holding noose and a stick respectively are depicted. At Udaigiri cave no. 19 (Figure 2), on the top of the lintel is another depiction of churning with the addition of Rāhu in the scene. Joanna Williams (1982: 55) on the basis of varied position of gods and demons suggests that the panel of Pawaya precedes Udaigiri panel.

In Rajasthan, the depiction of churning panel starts from early medieval period and more particularly from the frieze from Kalika temple of Chittor fort of eighth-ninth century AD (Agrawal 1965: 2). This panel depicts tortoise holding pot on back and

single god and demon churning with serpent wrapped to the octagonal *Mathani* (churning stick) which is placed into the pot. Some other panels depicting this *Puranic* episode comes from Sās temple (Nagda, 23 kms from Udaipur), Ambikā Mātā temple (Jagat, 58 kms from Udaipur) and Jageshwar Temple, Sadaddi of tenth century AD. The panel from Jagat reveals four-handed Viṣṇu heading 11 gods out of which six are in sitting posture (Agrawal 1965: 2).



Figure 2: Samudra-manthan panel from Udaigiri

The churning panels are generally depicted on the pillars, *torāṇa* lintel, ceilings, and exterior side walls or on the walls of *mukhamanḍapa* and *narathara* row of the plinth. The variations in the churning panel can be seen which may be due to regional polity and religious affinity. Though the centre composition (Mandara mountain being staff, twirled serpent Vāsuki and God-Demon figures) remains constant, however, artists usually play with supportive characters discussed by various *Puranas* that result in abstract symbology. The panel of Kiradu is distinct for its composition of Gaṇeśa figure in the churning episode. Here, is a brief attempt to understand the composition and its literary association.

Kiradu

Kiradu (25.752987, 71.096291) ancient Kirātakūpa is located 41 kms west of Barmer in the Barmer District of Rajasthan. Archaeological antiquity of the site goes back to the Paramāra period. The site preserves dispersed archaeological remains with temples

and other buildings giving impression of a flourishing town and a centre of art (Jain 1972: 434). The site is known for temple complex rich in intricate iconography.

The group of five temples namely Someśvara, Viṣṇu temple, Śiva temple no. 3, Śiva temple no. 4 and Śiva temple no. 5 dated to eleventh-twelfth century AD are lying in isolation and dismantled position. The affiliation of the temples suggests the site to be a Shaivite centre and prominence of shaivism in the region (Jain 1972: 436). However, scenes from *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata* (Agrawal 1957: 45; Agrawal 1985: 157-58) and other iconic panels associated with *puranic* mythology along with mainstream icons and miscellaneous themes like music, dance, profession, wrestling and daily life scenes of the contemporary society (Choudhary 2012) are well presented in these temples.



Figure 3: Samudra-manthan panel from Kiradu Someśvara Temple (Courtesy Ganvir)

The Churning Panel

Amṛita Manthan episode is depicted in the Someśvara Temple (Figure 3) and Śiva temple no. 5 (Figure 4). The panels depict Mount Mandara as churning staff with serpent Vāsuki as churning rope. The mouth portion of the serpent is held by single figure that represents *asura* and the tail portion is occupied by five gods under the leadership of Lord Gaṇeśa. Here the association of Lord Gaṇeśa with churning episode is significant.

Secondly, churning staff in the Someśvara temple is depicted with possible flames on top possessing a look like an altar. At bottom of the staff is another twirled serpent. The Mandara in the Śiva temple no. 5 is manifested as staff in the pot, giving an impression

of churning of curd. All these features in a single panel make the episode challenging to be interpreted. The association of Gaṇeśa cult with churning, relevance of flames and second serpent figure in the episode make it important to understand the symbology in ancient literature.



Figure 4: Samudra-manthan panel from Kiradu Shiva Temple no. 5 (Courtesy: Ganvir)



Figure 5: Samudra-manthan panel from Gondesvara Temple, Sinnar



Figure 6: Ganapati from Samudra-manthan panel from Gondesvara Temple, Sinnar



Figure 7: Samudra-manthan panel from Sachiya Mata Temple, Osian

Other Similar Depictions

The *Samudra-manthan* panel is depicted in the right side *ardhamandapa* of Gondeshwar temple in Sinnar (Nashik District) in Maharashtra (Figure 5). In this depiction, mount Mandara is shown in personified way holding attributes in his two hands. Vasuki is also prominently shown, while single demon is holding its mouth portion. The tail portion is held by nine gods. In this frieze, fifth figure is represented as Gaṇeśa (Figure 6) in the line of gods pulling the tail of Vāsuki. All the gods are two-handed pulling the snake rope. Only the fourth figure is shown supporting roof with one hand.

In the temple of Sachiya Mata at Osian, on the back of small Kūrma a big churning vessel (similar to the depiction of Kiradu Śiva temple no. 5 though the former is more intricately decorated) is placed with churning stick inside it. Wrapped to it is snake-rope held by *devas* and *asuras* at either side (Figure 7). The hood side is held by single demon, while the tail portion is held by seven gods, who are identified as Śiva, Viṣṇu, Brahmā, Sūrya, Indra, Gaṇeśa and Kārttikeya (Kalia 1982: 73; Handa 1984: 85). With the exception of Gaṇeśa and Kārttikeya, all other gods are shown with four hands holding snake-rope with their front hands and attributes in their rear hands. Śiva is depicted with *triśūla* and *sarpa*, Viṣṇu with *gadā* and *chakra*, Brahmā with *sruva* and *padma*, Sūrya with *padma* in both hands, Indra with *aṅkuśa* and *vajra*. Gaṇeśa and Kārttikeya are holding Vasuki with both their hands. This panel is depicted on *narapīṭha* at eastern side.

Cult of Lord Gaṇeśa

Lord Gaṇeśa is amongst the late deities admitted to the Brahminical pantheon (Getty 2006: 1). His rise is connected to *Puranas* though the earliest uncontroversial reference comes from *Maitrāyaṇīya Saṃhitā* and *Taittirīya Āraṇyaka* (Rocher 1992). No mention of this deity is found in Gupta inscriptions (Bhandarkar 1995: 212). The earliest epigraphical evidence of his name comes from Velupuru inscription of Mahadevavarman I (Sankaranarayanan 1967: 128), where his individual status is revealed (Nagar 1992: 67). The sixth century AD text *Bṛhatsaṃhitā* of Varāhamihira notes details regarding fashioning of Gaṇeśa images which suggest the images of this deity existed at least in the fifth century AD (Dhavalikar 1990: 3).

Its manifestation in Indian plastic art appears in early Gupta period (Nagar 1992: 100), where he emerges as two-armed deity with elephant head, sitting and holding bowl of sweets. However, M.K. Dhavalikar (1992: 59), on the basis of sculptural evidence from Mathura, states that the worship of the deity was in vogue during Kushana period and even to the period of Indo-Greek ruler Hermaeus on the basis of numismatic evidence (Dhavalikar 1990: 15; Narain 1992: 26; Bopearachchi 1993: 426).

According to Alice Getty (2006: 10), because of his popularity as obstacle remover, Gaṇeśa was associated with groups of deities like Saptamātrikā and Navagraha. Saptamātrikā are accompanied by male deities on both sides which are Śiva, Kārttikeya, Gaṇeśa, Kālabhairava etc, which shows their shaivite association. From mid-sixth century AD, image of Gaṇeśa replaces Kārttikeya and established iconography of Saptamātrikā with Gaṇeśa as accompanying deity comes in picture, which according to Shivaji Panikkar (1997: 94, 126) suggest "shift in ritualistic import".

The ancient imagery of planets appears on the lintel of Nachna-Kuthara dating around 500 AD and represents six Grahas. Representation from Rajasthan belonging to eleventh century AD, and Pala-Sena period (AD 1106-1225) depicts Gaṇeśa at the head position of Navagrahas instead of Surya (Martin-Dubost, 1997: 291). Some examples are from Kankandigi (West Bengal), Harshagiri (Rajasthan) from tenth century AD,

Nacholi (Bangladesh) from eleventh century AD (Joshi & Srivastava 2012: 60). Similarly, the image of bull-headed yogini named Vṛṣabhā from Satna, Madhya Pradesh dated to tenth century AD hold tiny Gaṇeśa on lower left-hand palm and the representation of Vaināyikī in sukhāsana below the seat of the deity (Joshi & Srivastava 2012: 59).

By eighth century AD, Jains and Buddhists borrowed Gaṇeśa from Brahmanical pantheon and the cult travelled beyond Indian frontiers (Nagar 1992). The Ganapati cult achieved unique position due to the influence of Shaktism (Michael 1983: 112) and finally in tenth century AD independent sect of Ganapatya came into existence. The two Puranas, i.e. *Mudgalapurāṇa* and *Gaṇeśapurāṇa* associated with the sect regard the deity as supreme to Brahmanical triad and cause of universe (Krishan 1991: 9).

This development made prominent changes in the iconic depiction of the deity in various religious monuments of Indian Subcontinent. The imagery of Gaṇeśa attained tantric affiliation and is reflected in the form of multiple hands and eyes distinct from common iconography. With the Ganapatya sect coming into existence, cult of five śakti-Ganapati called Uchchista-Ganapati (four-armed), Mahā-Ganapati (ten-armed), Urddhava-Ganapati (six-armed), Pingala Ganapati (six-armed), Laxmi-Ganapati (four or eight-armed) came into existence (Getty 2006: 20). Some forms influenced by text and tantric ritualism like Pancha Gaṇeśa, Dvimukh Gaṇeśa, Trimukh Gaṇeśa, five faced Gaṇapati with complex iconographic features appear to become common from ninth century AD (Agrawala 1977; Krishnan 1992; Nagar 1992).

Vināyikā (also referred as Gaṇeśanī), the elephant-headed goddess and believed to be śakti of Gaṇeśa trace its antiquity from Mathura belonging to Gupta period (Nagar 1992). However, elephant-headed terracotta figurine excavated from Riarh in Rajasthan (Puri 1962: 29, Pl. XIV (f)) dates the presence of cult from the first century BC. The deity was worshipped with Chaunsattha-Yoginīs and also as independent goddess. Being the shakti of Ganapati, with the rise of Ganapatya cult the goddess attained important place in Hindu mythology (Sharma 1979: 44) and also Jaina and Buddhist world. From ninth century AD, the images of the deity are seen in India and also in Nepal, Indonesia, Japan and China.

Thus, the prominence of elephant-headed deity increased by tenth century AD and many independent temples dedicated to him were built from fourteenth to eighteenth century AD in the region of Maharashtra (Phadke 1974; Krishan 1991:24), where the fame of deity conceptualised into āstavināyaka.

Lord Gaṇeśa and His Association with Churning Episode

Many variations in the churning legend are found in the *Mahābhārata*, *Rāmāyaṇa*, *Matsya Purāṇa*, *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*, *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, *Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇa*, *Padma Purāṇa*, *Śrīmad Bhāgavatam*, *Āgneya purāṇa* and *Skanda purāṇa* (Bedekar 1967: 8). *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (Shastri 1976: 1030) mentions "set-back caused by the Lord of Obstacles", i.e.

Lord Gaṇeśa and as a result of which Mandara mountain began to sink. Finally, Lord Viṣṇu took the form of gigantic tortoise and sustained the mountain on his back. *Skanda Purāṇa* (Bhatt 1992: 74) refers to the obstacles created by Heramba (Gaṇeśa) in the process of churning as people did not worship him or Śiva. Śiva, in the subsequent chapter describing swallowing *Kalakuta* (poison), directs the worship of Gaṇeśa as well as Durgā before the beginning of any holy rites. Then the Gods worshipped Gaṇeśa according to the procedures prescribed by Maheśvara, while the *Asuras* ignored. Lord Gaṇeśa finally was pleased with their veneration.

Flames in the Churning Event

When the churning was initiated, the flames started emitting from the mouth of Vāsuki which started burning the living creatures. The *Mahābhārata* says that vigorous pulling of Vāsuki issued gases mixed with smoke and flame (Bedekar 1967: 27). *Skanda Purāṇa* (Bhatt 1992: 71), on the other hand, gives an account of submarine fire generated by the friction of tortoise' back and the mountain.

Discussion

The macrocosmic event, also looked upon as the event of microcosm (Williams 1992), is an important episode in the *Puranic* mythology. The variations in the episode can be observed from epic to the *Puranas* (Bedekar 1967). The increasing prominence of *puranic* deity Gaṇeśa in the *Skanda Purāṇa*, where the malevolent side of the deity is represented, and the proper procedure to get rid of his malevolent nature can be observed. The Ganapatya sect used the "fear and hopes in the mind of public" and provided Gaṇeśa with "orthodox scriptural authority" to popularise their cult (Krishan 1991: 9). In *Mudgalapurāṇa* and *Gaṇeśapurāṇa*, the deity is regarded supreme even to the Brahmanical triad. This rise in the status of the deity is also reflected in iconic depiction as discussed above. His presence with the group of deities like Saptamātṛikā and Navagrahas shows the important place achieved in the Śakta and planetary world. Similarly, in the narration of *Samudra-manthan*, the presence of Gaṇeśa is indicative of the position attained by Ganapatya cult in the socio-religious and cultural life of the region.

Mythologically, Indra is heading the side of gods in the episode. But over the years with the Vaiṣṇavite and Śaivite pantheon gaining in prominence in the society, the importance of Indra was diminished. This is reflected in some of the *Samudra-manthan* panels in Rajasthan. As mentioned above, the churning episode in Jagat represents Viṣṇu heading the gods instead of Indra. This iconic representation is supported by literary reference from *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (Shastri 1976: 1030), where it is said that Lord Hari took hold of Vāsuki tail along with gods. In the temple of Osian, lord Śiva is shown heading all gods which includes Gaṇeśa at sixth position. The Ganapati on the frieze of Sinnar is at the fifth position. But the succeeding four deities and preceding four deities are difficult to identify in the absence of attributes. The panels from Kiradu represents Gaṇeśa heading the divine side. This representation of Gaṇeśa as the leader of gods reflects the prominence achieved by this deity in the region in the twelfth

century AD. This is also reflected in the other forms of iconic depiction of the deity in the Kiradu (Choudhary 2012: 90-91) and Osian Temples (Handa 1984: 114).

As the story from *Skanda Purāṇa* reveal Gaṇeśa was pleased by the worship of gods and chose to be by the side of *devas* while the *asuras* were left in isolation without his blessings. The Kiradu panels possibly represent the support of Gaṇeśa to the gods in the iconic form.

The possible flames in the Someśvara panel can also be traced to the accounts in the *Mahābhārata* and *Skanda Purāṇa*, where it is said that the flames were burning the living creatures and even flora on the Mandar Mountain.

The second serpent below the Mandara is similar to the *nāga-yajñopavīta* in the iconography of Gaṇeśa. The textual evidence of the *nāga-yajñopavīta* is seen in the *Padma Purāṇa*, *Śilparatna* and *Viṣṇudharmottara Purana* (Nagar 1992: 92). This element is absent in the iconography of the Gaṇeśa figure from Someśvara temple. However, it is manifested on the mount Mandara.

To sum up, the depiction of *Samudra-manthan* usually highlights the Kūrma *avatār* of Viṣṇu (Desai 2013) or Viṣṇu in multiple roles (Kalidos 1986; Rangarajan 1990: 127). Though other prominent deities are depicted, they are presented as audience. Thus, the episode purely signifies Vaiṣṇavite affiliation. The participation of Śiva, Brahmā and other deities in the frieze of Osian along with Viṣṇu but under the leadership of Śiva suggests Śaivite association to the episode. The Kiradu panels, however, depict Gaṇeśa at the prime position and no Vaiṣṇavite features are evident not even the depiction of turtle. This marks iconographic changes in the episode in the region and indicates the popularity of Gaṇeśa cult in twelfth century AD.

Acknowledgment

I am grateful to Gopal Joge, Amiteshwar Jha, Dr Shrikant Ganvir, Suken Shah, Vineet Gaware and Dr Riza Abbas for their valuable inputs on the manuscript. My thanks are due to library staff of Deccan College, Pune and INHCRF library, Nashik to carry out the reference work of this paper.

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