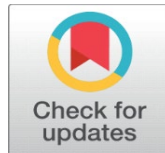


THE BHIKSANATA ŚIVA SCULPTURE OF THE DOIYANG–DHANSIRI VALLEY, ASSAM

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ABSTRACT

This research article examines the Bhikshatana Śiva sculpture of the Doiyang–Dhansiri Valley as a fundamental element for comprehending regional creative innovation, religious practices, and trans-regional exchanges in early mediaeval Assam. The study contextualises the four-armed lotus-borne figure, found at the Deopani Śiva Temple in 2003, within the wider Śaiva traditions and local silpasāstra lineages through meticulous field documentation, stylistic analysis, and comparative iconography. The literary analysis of the Kurma purana, Vāmana purana, and Śiva Purāṇas elucidates the interpretation of the Bhikshatana form as Śiva's Brahmahatti-atoning mendicant, while epigraphic and archaeological evidence from the 7th to 12th century CE contexts demonstrates enduring royal sponsorship and devotional networks. Essential discoveries underscore the sculpture's amalgamation of Gupta-influenced physiognomy with Eastern Indian early mediaeval themes and its distinctive compositional arrangement of attendant deities. A comparative analysis of South Indian Bhikshatanamūrti highlights regional differences in posture and decoration associated with Assam's trading connections to Southeast Asia and North India. The research article indicates that the Doiyang–Dhansiri Bhikshatana Śiva sculpture exemplifies localised artistic activity and signifies cultural connection, providing fresh insights into the interplay of art, commerce, and religious identity in the Brahmaputra valley periphery.

1. INTRODUCTION

The development and prosperity of civilizations are closely intertwined with their deliberate positioning in proximity to riverbanks. The ancient civilization that inhabited the Brahmaputra valley had significant growth and prosperity, with the prominent river Brahmaputra playing a vital role in its development. In addition to the river Brahmaputra valley, substantial historical evidence has been discovered that indicates the presence of two separate civilizations that flourished in the sub-river valleys of Doiyang Dhansiri and Kapili Jamuna Valley. Based on the available archaeological and historical evidence, it may be inferred that the Doiyang Dhansiri valleys possess a comparable significance to that of the Brahmaputra valley. Specifically, it is situated between the coordinates 25-26.8° E and 93-94.5° N, within the south-central zone of the state of Assam. The geographical region under consideration is characterized by alluvial soil, which is highly conducive to agricultural activities. There appear to be geomorphological variables that have significantly influenced the transformation of human settlements throughout the Pre-Ahom period (Dutta, 2011, p.5). The well-preserved archaeological remains suggest that this valley played a crucial role as a vibrant cultural hub from the 5th to the 12th century CE during the pre-Ahom period. The extant historical texts pertaining to the Doiyang Dhansiri Valley indicate that this civilization flourished under the sway of formidable political organizations. The designation of "Maharaja Dhiraja" was bestowed upon the ruler, indicating that the prevailing culture of the region was influenced and governed by a prominent ruling dynasty (Baruah, 2001, p.178). One notable contribution made by this culture was its significant sculptural legacy, which was distinguished by a unique form of sculpture that set it apart from the artistic

traditions observed in other regions of India. Founded on the discernible characteristics, it can be deduced that the art iconography discovered in the Doiyang Dhansiri valley is suggestive of the early medieval era. The sculptures discovered in the Doiyang Dhansiri valley exhibit a discernible influence from Gupta art, as they embody a regional artistic tradition that has preserved certain characteristics of Gupta art (Dutta, 2011, pp. 54-57). The evolution of sculpture in the Doiyang Dhansiri valley can be delineated into two discrete periods: the 7th to 8th century CE and the subsequent era following the 8th century CE. Between the 7th and 8th centuries CE, there was a prevailing association of iconography with the Vishnu worship. However, as the 8th century CE progressed and extended into subsequent periods, the sculptures generally depicted content that was closely aligned with the Saivite faith (Baruah, 2018, p.74). These sculptures exhibit noteworthy geographical peculiarities. These Sculpture are commonly adorned with engraved inscriptions and display a variety of distinctive characteristics. The visages of these sculptures have a round semblance, with the lips and eyebrows prominently characterized by their substantial thickness, contributing to their discernible artistic qualities. In addition, the arms are frequently portrayed with increased size, enhancing the overall toughness of the represented characters. An additional salient feature pertains to the fact that these sculptures are commonly hewn from a solitary stone, exemplifying the dexterity and artistry of the craftsmen responsible for their creation. The cultural significance and aesthetic intrigue of these sculptures are derived from their regional features, which provide valuable insights into the artistic traditions of the Doiyang Dhansiri Valley during their different periods. Numerous sculptures associated with the Shaivite faith have been excavated in this region, encompassing depictions of Hari-Hara, Bhairava, Bhikshanta Śiva, and Umma Maheshwara. However, the most remarkable discovery among them is the Bhikshanta sculpture of Śiva, which stands out as a unique and unparalleled find. This sculpture is notable for its association with the Deopani Śiva temple, a feature not encountered elsewhere in the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam. The significance of this exceptional sculpture extends beyond its rarity; it also offers valuable insights into the distinctive religious practices and iconography that prevailed in the region during its historical era.

2. BHIKSHATANA ŚIVA IN LITERATURE

Bhikshatana Śiva, a prominent manifestation of Lord Śiva, is frequently represented in Hindu iconography as the Kankala Murti form. The portrayal of Lord Śiva in this particular artwork is characterized by its distinctiveness and visual impact. It encompasses a profound narrative derived from the Kurma Purana, which serves as a means to convey a timeless moral lesson regarding the importance of humility and the consequences of arrogance. Within the narrative, Lord Śiva assumes the persona of Bhikshatana, an itinerant monk who embarks on a quest for alms. The portrayal of the character as a beggar serves as a representation of the profound act of renunciation and detachment from material possessions. The narrative of Lingodbhava offers an additional noteworthy manifestation of Lord Śiva, recognized as Bhikshatana murti, which is frequently portrayed in temples located in South India. As per the Kurma Purana, the manifestation of Śiva described herein transpired after the severance of one of Lord Brahma's heads, resulting in the unintended transgression of slaying a Brahmin and the subsequent acquisition of sin. In an unexpected turn of events, the cranium of Lord Brahma became firmly attached to the palm of the deity Śiva, rendering it immovable. In order to absolve himself of the transgression and the weight of the skull, it was mandated that Lord Śiva undertake a pilgrimage as a destitute mendicant, referred to as Bhikshatana, until he arrived at the revered urban center of Varanasi, alternatively recognized as Kasi. After arriving in Kasi, the sin was separated from Lord Śiva and went into the netherworld. The cranial structure of Lord Brahma and the corporeal form of Visvakesana, the guardian of Lord Vishnu, were likewise disentangled from Śiva, therefore liberating him from his encumbrance. Upon the successful completion of the purifying process, Śiva was restored to his original state as the immaculate and highly esteemed Mahadeva. The narrative presented here in serves as a poignant and compelling testament to the enduring themes of penance, purification, and the final victory of divinity over sin within the realm of Hindu mythology (Patra, 2007, pp.142-143).

The Vamana Purana, Kurma Purana, and Śiva Purana offer comprehensive accounts of the mythical occurrences that culminated in Lord Śiva's manifestation as Bhikshatana. Within the Varaha Purana, Lord Śiva is portrayed as experiencing intense anger towards Lord Brahma, denoting him as "Kapali." The narrative is intricately linked to the notion of "Brahmahanti," which refers to the grievous transgression of causing injury to Lord Brahma, and underscores the significance of the revered city of Kasi. In order to safeguard himself from the potential repercussions associated with the imagined transgression of causing injury to Brahma, Lord Śiva undertakes a profound and metamorphic expedition, assuming three separate manifestations: Brahmasiraschedakamurti, Kapali, and Bhikshatana. The aforementioned shapes are intricately connected and symbolize distinct facets of Śiva's celestial persona. The narrative

highlights the profound principles embedded in Hindu mythology, placing particular emphasis on the themes of humility, atonement, and the ultimate purifying of the soul. The aforementioned statement serves as a poignant reminder of the profound moral and spiritual teachings that are intricately woven within the vast and complicated fabric of Hindu mythology (Srivastava, 2021, pp. 210).

The portrayal of Bhikshatanamurti adheres to a discernible array of attributes and embellishments. The typical depiction of him features basic embellishments, with him donning his customary hairdo and footwear. The individual's posture is characterized by the strong grounding of his left leg, while his right leg exhibits a small bend, indicative of a stance associated with walking. The Bhikshatanamurti is shown as a deity with four limbs, each holding a specific object: a kapala (skull), damaru (drum), Krishna mriga (black antelope), and trisula (trident). Regarding his physical appearance, his hair can be characterized as either untidy or styled in a circular jatamandala adorned with a crescent shape. The individual's forehead is embellished with a patta, which is a decorative band. Additional adornments are observable on his physique, and conventionally, he is portrayed in a state of nudity, with a serpent securely fastened around his midsection, accompanied by supplementary serpentine embellishments adorning his person. The individual's chest is adorned with a white Yajnopavita, which is a sacred thread, while their neck exhibits a blue colour. The individual's forehead exhibits an aesthetically pleasing tripurendra mark, while their feet are adorned with a set of wooden sandals. The hand that grasps the kapala is elevated to a position parallel to the navel, whilst the hand that holds the damaru is elevated to a position adjacent to the ear, maintaining a distance of sixteen angulas from the ear. The dentition of Śiva, partially exposed, may be embellished with either conventional Kundala (earrings) or makarakundala in the right ear, and Sankhapatra in the left ear. Moreover, it is worth noting that the presence of Lord Śiva's pet deer is a recurring feature in numerous sculptural depictions of Bhikshatana murti (Ramachandra Rao, 1998, pp. 283-286). As per the Vamana Purana, subsequent to the demise of Sati, Lord Śiva assumed a concealed identity and retreated to the woodland with the objective of impeding Daksha's Yajna, a ceremonial act of sacrifice. While situated within the jungle, the protagonist encountered the divine projectiles of Kama, the deity associated with desire, who relentlessly pursued him. Upon recognizing the profound importance of Śiva's existence and the imperative to pacify him, the deities endeavored to venerate his fallen linga, a symbolic manifestation. Nevertheless, the individuals were unable to attain either the base or the summit of the boundless pillar, which served as a representation of the holy manifestation of Śiva. Subsequently, Śiva successfully recovered the linga and proceeded to create four ashramas, which served as spiritual communities dedicated to the veneration and adoration of the aforementioned deity. The ashramas were designated as Saiva, Pasupata, Kalavadana (Kalamukha, Karukasiddhantin, or Karunikasiddhantin), and Kapalika, signifying distinct traditions and rituals associated with the veneration of the deity Lord Śiva (Donaldson, 1987, pp. 51-56).

The Hindu scriptures have two divergent narratives that provide varying viewpoints of the acts of Lord Śiva throughout the forest. As per the Vamana Purana, subsequent to the demise of his cherished consort Sati, the deity Śiva embarked upon a sojourn into the wilderness with the purpose of impeding the Yajna ceremony conducted by Daksha. During this temporal period, the individual in question became ensnared by the projectiles of Kama, the deity associated with longing, resulting in the veneration of his celestial manifestation by the deities who were unable to attain the apex or foundation of his emblematic linga. The aforementioned event ultimately resulted in the formation of four separate ashramas that were specifically devoted to the veneration of Lord Śiva (Patra, 2007, p. 144).

In contrast, the Linga Purana depicts a scenario wherein Lord Śiva ventures into the forest with the intention of bestowing blessings upon and safeguarding women and children who have willingly forsaken worldly existence in favour of a path characterized by asceticism and unwavering devotion. In contrast, the Śiva Purana presents a narrative wherein Śiva has unsatisfied desires, leading him to venture into the forest with a sense of longing and thereafter establish amorous connections with the spouses of the sages. The aforementioned narratives serve as illustrations of the intricate and diverse characteristics attributed to Lord Śiva, depicting him as a supernatural entity possessing the ability to embody both transcendent asceticism and relatable human wants. These texts offer valuable perspectives on the multiple dimensions of Śiva's persona and his profound importance within Hindu mythology and spirituality. The Bhikshatana murtis, which portray Lord Śiva assuming the guise of a nomadic ascetic, hold considerable importance as motifs within Hindu temple architecture. Frequently, these entities assume the role acting as guardian deities occupying positions on the periphery of the temple. The Bhikshatana Śiva sculptures serve as significant depictions that signify diverse facets of his divine identity, encompassing his portrayal as a nomadic ascetic, an instructor, and the personification of both renunciation and longing. It is noteworthy that certain subordinate themes of Bhikshatana murtis are also present in temple friezes, in conjunction with depictions of indulgence in drinking, sensual rituals, the deity of

desire (Kama), and Kapalika ascetics. The intricate and various portrayals presented in these images serve to underscore the close connection between Lord Śiva's sensual conduct and the Kapalika sect. The use of these themes in temple design not only enhances the visual aesthetics but also acts as a monument to the intricate relationship between spirituality, sensuality, and asceticism in the context of Hinduism. The aforementioned portrayals offer a vivid account of the multidimensional nature of Lord Śiva and his importance throughout different sects and traditions. They provide insight into the complex fabric of Hindu mythology and spirituality.

3. BHIKSHATANA ŚIVA SCULPTURAL REPRESENTATION IN DOIYANG DHANSIRI VALLEY

The Bhikshatana Śiva icon is presently housed within the Deopani Śiva Temple, which is located in close proximity to the Deopani Durga Mandir. The aforementioned religious location holds great significance and is situated in the Karbi Anglong district within the state of Assam. The Deopani Śiva Temple functions as a sacred place of worship, safeguarding the esteemed artifact of Bhikshatana Śiva and extending an invitation to individuals who come from nearby and far locations to express and fulfil their spiritual pursuits. The sacred and culturally significant nature of this place is enhanced by its positioning within the tranquil surroundings of Karbi Anglong.

The icon of Bhikshatana Śiva, a significant religious sculpture, was discovered by the local people of Deopani in the year 2003. It is a four-handed Śiva icon, standing on a lotus pedestal and having a tall stella that exhibits a distinctive representation (Figure 1) (6.23X3.27 ft.). The iconography of this figure is characterized by its considerable elongation, giving it a unique and visually striking appearance. The artist has meticulously crafted the figure, imbuing it with a deep sense of spiritual disposition through its facial expression and posture. In the hands of this deity, we observe significant symbolism. The right hand of the figure cradles a japamala, a prayer bead rosary, shaped in the form of a serpent, underscoring its connection to spiritual devotion and the subjugation of inner obstacles. Meanwhile, the left upper hand of the deity clutches a trisula, a trident emblematic of divine power, and the left lower hand embraces a padma, representing purity and transcendence. Notably, the right lower hand is depicted in a varadamudra, symbolizing the gesture of divine blessing. This intricate portrayal combines artistry with spirituality, offering a profound glimpse into the religious and cultural significance of the deity it represents.

The sculpture prominently focusing on the deity Śiva, accompanied by four associated consorts, positioned on either side. Ganesha is in sitting posture on a mouse, while Kartikeya is positioned on his right and left flanks, each astride a peacock. All the icons are on a pedestal resembling a lotus flower, with the stems of the lotus sprouting organically from the base. There are two female representations located towards the lower half of the central deity, which are hypothesized by certain researchers as Umma and Parvati (Dutta, 2011, p.108), occupying the right and left flanks correspondingly. A square shaped prabhavali has been illustrated, encompassing all the figures in such a way as to produce a composition that is balanced and symmetrical. The upper half of this resembles to a bow. Overall, the Śiva sculpture as a whole exhibit a narrative derived from Hindu mythology, skillfully presenting the central as well as the accompanying figures in a visually captivating and aesthetically beautiful manner.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The Bhikshatana sculpture of Lord Śiva of the Doiyang-Dhansiri valley is renowned for its exceptional aesthetic allure. The available historical evidence presents overwhelming evidence that the Saiva tradition, which revolved around the veneration of Lord Śiva, exerted a significant and enduring effect during the Early Mediaeval period. The sculptures and other archaeological discoveries of the Doiyang-Dhansiri Valley exhibit unique artistic characteristics, that may indicate the emergence of regional silpasastras. It was a period of emerging prosperity when these sculptures were crafted and epigraphs were engraved correspondingly. The Dubarani Stone Slab Inscription of Sri Vasundharavarmana prominently features the depiction of a trisula, a revered symbol. This representation serves as evidence of the widespread influence of Saivism, which was not just a religion associated with royalty but also a widely adopted faith throughout many segments of society. The cult's popularity might gain its peak with the support of the monarchy. The epigraphs on Saivite and Vishnu icons shows the extensive impact of these religious beliefs. Even in instances where the portrayal represented Vishnu, the inscriptions were employed to glorify Saivism. The art, sculpture, iconography, and epigraphy found in the valley provide clear evidence of a significant presence of Saivism. Likewise, the Bhikshatana sculpture was created inside this region under significant influence (Dutta, 2011, p.47).

The sculptural element has clear indications of being influenced by the artistic traditions of East Indian mediaeval art of Bengal and Bangladesh. This influence is well shown by the rounded stela and vidyadhara decoration that adorns the primary figure. The sculpture emanates a remarkable level of polish and sophistication. There exists considerable empirical data that substantiates the utilization of round-top stelae in diverse geographical sites throughout Assam. In addition, this sculpture vividly exhibits the slim body and elegant facial expressions which are the distinctive features of 12th century CE sculptures of Brahmaputra Valley. Bhikshatana Śiva, a prominent sculpture in South India, occupies a distinctive role within the creative legacy of the region. It is noteworthy that the depiction of Lord Śiva, as represented iconically, is comparatively less prevalent in North India, hence underscoring a notable regional discrepancy. The primary differentiating characteristic between the Bhikshatana Śiva sculptures discovered in the Doiyang Dhansiri Valley of Assam and those discovered in South India pertains to their physical stance, with the latter typically showcasing the tribhanga position (Figure 2). The historical evidence reveals the deep commercial connections between the Doiyang Dhansiri Valley and various regions across Southeast Asia and North India, as well as their influence on the art and cultural exchanges of the time (Dutta, 2007.p.150). One prominent artifact that illustrates this cultural exchange is the Bhikshatana Śiva sculpture. This sculpture, which emerged as a significant object within this historical and cultural framework, is a reflection of the intricate web of commerce and cultural interaction that unfolded between different regions. As these commercial routes connected distant places, they also facilitated the exchange of ideas, materials, and artistic styles. The Bhikshatana Śiva sculpture, evolving through these exchanges, began to assimilate diverse influences from both Southeast Asia and North India. Over time, the sculpture took on a distinct regional aesthetic that reflected the artistic sensibilities of the areas with which the Doiyang Dhansiri Valley had commercial ties. This process highlights how the movement of goods and ideas across regions influenced the development of art, as cultural and economic interactions merged and blended. The Bhikshatana Śiva sculpture thus serves as a remarkable example of how art, commerce, and regional identity are intertwined. It is not only a physical manifestation of cultural synthesis but also a testament to the enduring impact of trade and exchange on the formation of regional and cultural identities. The sculpture can be seen as a cultural artifact that bridges the gap between artistic traditions from different parts of the Indian subcontinent and beyond, providing a visual representation of the connections between them. Moreover, the route from the Doiyang Dhansiri Valley to South India played a crucial role in shaping the evolution of the sculpture. It highlights the significance of this particular route, which facilitated not only the movement of material goods but also the cross-pollination of ideas and artistic expressions. As such, the Bhikshatana Śiva sculpture is a reflection of the dynamic cultural landscapes that emerged in response to these interregional interactions. The sculpture's evolution exemplifies the fluidity and adaptability of artistic traditions as they respond to external influences, and it stands as a symbolic representation of the broader historical forces at play in the Indian subcontinent during this period.

In essence, the Bhikshatana Śiva sculpture encapsulates the rich cultural and historical heritage that defines the Indian subcontinent. Through its development, it reflects the complex relationships between art, commerce, and regional identity, offering insights into the cultural exchanges that have shaped the artistic and historical trajectory of the region.

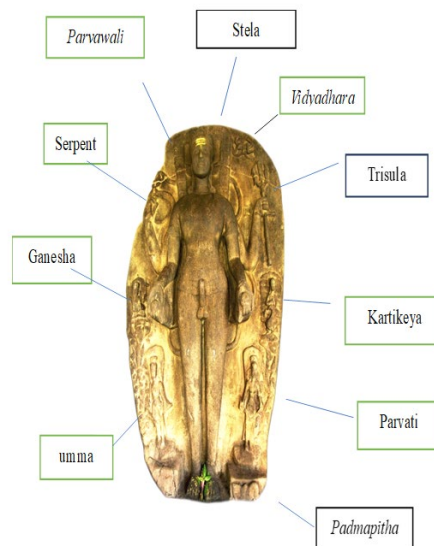




Figure 2 Bhikshatana Śiva of South India

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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