Art History 771

Fall 2000

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The Orissan Gaṇeśa Database: Project Summary

Introduction

This project began as an effort to use a computer database to find connections between the iconography of figures of Gaṇeśa on Orissan temples and the cardinal orientation and direction of circumambulation of those temples. As the project developed a significant relationship between these two features did not emerge. This may be due to the fragmentary nature of the records available, or there may simply be no relationship. I was however able to dismiss a few initial assumptions, to discover a great deal about the evolution of Gaṇeśa's iconography, and to critique the usefulness of the program "FileMaker Pro" in managing and analyzing this type of data.

Methodology

Virtually all the data for this project came from Thomas Donaldson's monumental three volume book, Hindu Temple Art of Orissa.[1] Donaldson's text contains an enormous amount of detailed information about Orissan temples and temple sculpture. From this work I scanned a set of over 100 Gaṇeśa photographs and 60 temple ground plans. Working with these images, and with Donaldson's accompanying descriptions, I built 126 records detailing temple size, type and orientation, the location and size of the Gaṇeśa figures, and the iconographic attributes of the figures.

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[1] Donaldson, Thomas E, *Hindu Temple Art in Orissa, Vol. I, II, & III*, New York: E.J. Brill Leiden, 1985-1987

Orientation and Figure Location

The basic iconographic program of the Orissan temple was well-established by the seventh century. Most temples face east (65 in this survey) but a significant number (15) were oriented to the west. In addition there were two found to face the south and one described as facing north. These temples, typically dedicated to Śiva, display on three sides of the exterior of the sanctuary (the *deul*) the figures of three other deities referred to as *pārśva-devatās*. On temples facing east and west where the *pārśva-devatās* were intact, Gaṇeśa was found in the major *rāhā* niche on the south side, some form of the goddess (Parvati or Durga) was found on the northern *rāhā* niche and Karttikeya was found in either the east or west *rāhā* niche, whichever was opposite the entrance. (Frequently Donaldson failed to mention the location of the entrance but the location of the *pārśva-devatās*, when known, could be used to locate the entrance by a process of elimination.) On the two south-facing temples Gaṇeśa was located in the west *rāhā* niches, and on the one north-facing temple Gaṇeśa was located in a south *anartha* niche (a smaller niche between the *rāhā* niche and the corner of the temple).

Because, when present, Gaṇeśa is always the first deity to be worshiped when circumambulating the temple prior to entering the sanctuary, it may be hypothesized that the direction of circumambulation can be determined by the relationship of Gaṇeśa to the temple entrance. Hence, as the orientation of temples varies from east to west, it may be suggested that the direction of circumambulation is also changed. Unfortunately, only four of the west-facing temples and only 36 of the east-facing temples possess an intact image of Gaṇeśa in the south *rāhā* niche. The vast majority of Gaṇeśa images in Donaldson's survey were found detached from their original context and set up in compounds, *jagomohanas* (attached halls in front of the *deul*), or in museums. Therefore, this study was unable to provide more conclusive evidence.

Comparing the four Gaṇeśa images from west-facing temples to the images on east-facing temples, or those detached from their original context, one can find no distinctive unifying trait. One is from the seventh century, one from the late eighth or early ninth, one is from the tenth and the fourth is from the twelfth. The three earlier ones are sitting while the one

from the twelfth century is standing. They all have trunks reaching to the left (at first suggesting they may be pointing out a counter clockwise circumambulatory direction) but then so do 25 of the figures on east-facing temples and 67 of the total collection of figures surveyed. One figure does wear an anklet formed of small skulls suggesting a Tantric connection but that feature is unique among all surveyed. In all other respects these four figures have no features that would distinguish them from those in clockwise positions. They are simply four figures whose iconographic features make them natural, normal representatives of their positions in the evolution of Gaṇeśan iconography.

Iconographic Evolution

Donaldson's approach was to organize the Gaṇeśa images into three groups – sitting, standing, and dancing. This division also roughly corresponds to a chronological organization of the images. From the seventh century through the tenth century most of the images are sitting in a posture known as *ardhaparyaṅka*. After this time a few images can be found sitting in a posture known as *lalitāsana* or *sukhāsana* but most are either standing or dancing. While a few standing images can be found as early as the seventh century it is not until after the tenth that they occur with any frequency. The earliest ones stand either very slightly flexed or in a pose identified as *dvibhaṅga*, while in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries figures in a *tribhaṅga* pose predominate. There is one example of a dancing figure as early as the eighth century but after the ninth century these too become fairly common. Most of the dancing figures are in a posture identified as *lalita* but there are two in the tenth century in a *catura* pose. The seated and standing figures, with few exceptions, all have four arms while dancing figures typically have eight, although a few examples can found with six arms. Invariably the dancing figures with eight arms hold a snake over the head with the upper two arms. The two most notable exceptions to the general iconographic pattern are both from the thirteenth century and show Gaṇeśa with five heads and 10 arms with a goddess (or *śakti*) sitting on his knee.

The early seated figures typically hold a bowl of *modaka* sweets in the dominant left hand with the rear or minor left hand raised and holding a *kuṭhāra* (axe). The right hands typically hold a radish and a *mālā* but as to which holds which, there is considerable flexibility. In the eighth and ninth centuries it is a little more common to see the *mālā* in the top right hand, but after the tenth century both seated and standing figures will typically hold the *mālā* in the lower right hand while simultaneously making the *varada* or boon granting *mudrā*. The trunk of these early seated figures is most commonly curled to the mouth or taking a *modaka* from the bowl held in the left hand. After the ninth century the form taking a *modaka* from the bowl in the left hand dominates to the near exclusion of all other forms. Many of the early seated figures wear a *yoga-paṭṭa* (a strap that makes sitting for long periods easier) and many of those are formed by a snake. This feature disappears entirely after the late ninth or early tenth century. A related detail is the *yajñopavīta* (sacred thread), which is almost always formed by a snake and can be found on almost every figure regardless of posture or date.

Two early seated figures from the seventh century are on a seat whose legs are formed by lions. Other early seats have legs formed by jars. Below these early seats one often finds an offering bowl and several jack-fruit. There may also be attendants or ganas holding the offering bowl or jack-fruit. Gaṇeśa's vehicle, or rat, is very rarely seen in the early centuries. When he does appear he is either under Gaṇeśa's seat or, more commonly, sitting by Gaṇeśa's right side. The rat on his left side is rare but five examples do exist. There are also a few examples of humanoid attendants with the facial features of rats. Curiously, on five examples in the tenth century, and just a few afterwards, the rats are unusually large. In one example Gaṇeśa sits on the back of an enormous rat as if he were a child riding on the back of a dog.

From the ninth century onward figures commonly sit or stand on a lotus seat (*viśvapada*). The later standing figures commonly hold the *kuṭhāra* with the head down. These often have a triple lotus seat with Gaṇeśa standing on one, a rat standing on a small lotus to his right, and the head of the kuthara resting on a small lotus to his left.

A marked shift that takes place regarding one of Gaṇeśa's major attributes around the late ninth or early tenth century. The earlier images show him holding a radish in one of his right hands but with rare exception all the later figures show him holding a broken tusk. There is also a shift in the style of his hair at the same time. Nearly all of the early images show his hair in a style known as *karaṇḍa-mukuṭa*. This form disappears after the late ninth or early tenth century to be replaced by a form known as *jaṭā-mukuṭa*. In the tenth and eleventh centuries it is also common to see a *kīrtimukha* and his hair. However, with the appearance of trefoil *toraṇas* in the eleventh century the *kīrtimukha* motif largely disappears from his hair and appears instead at the apex of the *toraṇa*, or occasionally on both the *toraṇa* and in his hair. One can also find halos on figures up until the late tenth or early eleventh century at which time they may be replaced either by the trefoil toranas, plain backgrounds, or a complex arrangement of smaller figures. Some of these later compositions become extremely complex with *makaras* on the *toraṇas*, assorted attendants bearing offerings, *vidyādharas*, musicians, dancers, *gaṇas* blowing conchs, and on two examples a pair of figures, one of which is fat and the other emaciated.

Concluding remarks

Much of what was revealed by this database could have been discovered using more traditional research methods. Indeed, many of my observations on the evolution of Gaṇeśa's iconography are clearly stated in the text of Donaldson's book. What has been personally invaluable is the act of creating the database which focused the way I looked at the images. It also permitted me to keep track of much more information than a simple stack of 3 x 5 cards. After its creation, the database aided in constructing charts that could graphically represent the evolution of various iconographic features over time. Finally the database now exists as a useful tool for quickly re-accessing the images and data, and remains an open receptacle easily adaptable to other studies such as the larger iconographic program of Orissan temples or Gaṇeśan imagery throughout South Asia.

As for the program "FileMaker Pro" used in constructing this database, I was not thoroughly satisfied. More useful would be a program that combined the features of a

graphic viewer such as "ACDSee" with database capabilities. "FileMaker Pro" is limited in the image file types it will display (it would not import TIFF files) and does not allow for conveniently zooming in or out on details of an image. There is also one rather disturbing bug that cropped up in the program: about halfway through building the database I added an extra field to distinguish between a plain *yoga-paṭṭa* and one formed by a serpent. Now when performing a search which should return just the five plain *yoga-paṭṭa* it also returns records for 10 serpent *yoga-paṭṭa* despite the fact that their boxes are not checked. A similar anomaly occurs in searching for the serpent *yajñopavīta* where at least one extra record (that of a plain *yajñopavīta*) is also returned. I can only hope that there are no additional anomalies that I have failed to observe and which would call into question much of my data.

	6-7th	7th	7-8th	8th	8-9th	9th	9-10th	10th	10-11th	11th	11-12th	12th	12-13th	13th	13th-14th	14th	14-15th	15th
Radishes																		
broken tusk		3	1	7		3	2	7	4	6	2	4		8	1			
ardhaparyanka	1	3	1	8	6	6	3	2	1									
lalitasana								4			1	1		3		1		
standing stiff												1		1		1		
standing slightly flexed								2	1	3	1	1						
standing dvibhanga				1		1		1										
standing tribhanga				1		1			1	1	1	5		8				
dancing lalita				1		3	1		2	1	2	2		3				
dancing catura								2										1
karanda-mukuta			1	6	3	5	2	10	3	6	3	2		5				
jata-mukuta						1	1	4		4	1	2		3				1
kirtimukha in hair					2		1		1	4		1		3		1		
kirtimukha torana						3			1	6	2	6		7		1		
trifoil torana						1			1	6	1	6		11		1		
extra large rat								6		1	1			2				
visvapada					1	1	1	6	5	7	3	11		11		1		
halo	3			4	1	3	2	2	2	4	2	2		5				
kuthara head down		2		7	3	1	3	2	3	4	2	8		9		1		
kuthara head up	1	2	1	7		7	3	3	2	1	1	2		1				
plain yoga-patta				3		1	1											
serpent yoga-patta		1	1	4	2	1	1											
plain yajnopavita			1	2		2			1			1						
serpent yajnopavita		3		3	1	6	4	10	4	7	4	7		13	1			
jack-fruit		1		5	1	5	3		2	2	1	5		5				
varada mudra w/mala in LR	1	2		2		4		8	4	5	3	7		13		1		
mala w/o varada in LR		2		2		2		1		1				1				
mala in TR		1		6		5	3	1	3	1		1		1				
trunk curled to mouth		1				3	2							1		1		
trunk turned to left	1	1		7	3	3		2	1					1				
trunk turned to right	1	3		2	2	8	4	9	5	11	3	9		12		1		

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