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## “SALABHANJIK A DECORATIVE MOTIF DEPICTED IN THE TEMPLE ART OF ANDHRA DESA”- A SCULPTURAL STUDY

**Dr. Govindu Surendra**, Assist. Prof of History,  
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Nature is represented in its various aspects and moods in ancient India. Perhaps there was no actual intention of artists of showing landscape, but we do get in early sculptural reliefs scenes of trees, flowers, foliage, *udyanas* (gardens), birds, animals, rocks, water, rivers and oceans. In the 2 -1 century BC art of Bharhut and Sanchi, a rich variety of trees and creepers have been depicted *Salabhanjika* images have been continuously depicted in the sculptures of India since ancient times. The *shalabhanjika* is *ayakshi*, a minor female deity or spirit of nature who resided in the tree. The fertility so gained by the tree became, in time, an attribute and ability of itself. The worship of trees is of great antiquity in the Indian subcontinent, and each tree has its own auspicious associations. The motif of the tree goddess descends from the *yakshinis* of earlier Indic cults and extends the associations of fertility and the power of nature (*prakruti*). *Shcdabanjika* a Sanskrit word meaning literally ‘breaking the branch of a *shala* tree’. Unlike the *Natyasastra* and the Jaina canonical (literature, the *Silpasastras* rarely mention *shalabhanjika*. among the few texts, which prescribe this motif, is the *Samarangancpsutradhara* by Bhojadeva of Malava. It mentions auspicious motifs, including *shalabhanji*, on *dharagrihas* or chambers with an arrangement for water (Chapter XXXI, verse 126- 134) under *mandapalakshana* (Chapter LXVI, 30-31), it prescribes *shalabhanji* on stambhas. The Orissan *Silpa Prakasha*, first *Prakasha*, stanzas 418-422, describes *Dalamalika*, holding a branch like a garland, however, the western Indian *vaastu silpa* text *Kshirarnava* in its 120th chapter gives details of *Dikpalas*, *devakanyas*, and celestial damsels, but does not mention *shalabhanjika*.

Early Buddhist literature describes the *salabhanjika* festival as celebrated on a big scale in Shravasti. J. Ph. Vogel, one of the pioneers to have studied the *salabhanjika* motif in art, pointed out in 1929 that it originated in a flower festival customary in ancient India, and that the motif “is a truly indigenous element of decorative art”<sup>1</sup>. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy states<sup>2</sup> “There is no motif more fundamentally characteristic of Indian art from first to last than is that of the Woman and Tree”. Sometimes these dryads stand on a vehicle (*yahana*) such as a *Yaksa* (*Guhya*), elephant, or crocodile (*makard*). Sometimes they are adorning themselves with jewels, or using a mirror. Very often they hold weight one hand a branch of the tree under which they stand, sometimes one leg is twined round the stem of the tree, sometimes one foot is raised and rests against the trunk of the tree. Sometimes there are children, either standing beside the dryad mother, or carried astraddle on her hip. Of the trees represented the Ashoka and Mango are most usual. The *shalabhanjika* a decorative art motif created and followed by Andhra artist could be seen in the Ancient and Medieval temples in Andhra desa.

The early Buddhist literature narrates the story of the *Shalavana-krida* of Maya Devi, and the miraculous birth of Bodhisattva. The *Nidanakatha*<sup>3</sup> describes a grove of *shala* trees called *Lumbini-vana*, situated between the two towns of Kapilavastu and Devadaha. Beholding the blossoming *Shala* trees, Queen Maya was filled with a desire of sporting herself in the grove. She entered the wood with attendants. She came near the root of the *Shala* tree and wanted to take hold of its branch, when the branch itself bent down and approached within the reach of her hand. She took hold of the branch and the pains of delivery

began. While holding the branch of the tree, Maya delivered the Bodhisattva in a standing position. It has been suggested that Maya must have held the branch so tightly because of the labour pain that it broke down. Therefore she became “*shalabhankika*”, the breaker of the branch of the *Shala* tree. In due course of time, the celebration of the birth anniversary of the Buddha in the *Shalavana*, turned into *shalabhanjika-parva* or festival, as described in the *Avadanashataka*.

Vogel has researched on the occurrence of the word ‘*shalabhanjika*’ in literature. He points out that it is the court poet Asvaghosha, contemporary of the Kushana ruler Kanishka in the 1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D., who first time uses the word “*torana-shalabhajika*”, as an architectural his ‘*Buddhacharita*’. Unlike the *Natyashastra* and the Jain canonical literature, the *Shilpasastras* rarely mention *shalabhanjika*. Among the few texts, which prescribe this motif, is the *Samarangana-sutradharaby* Bhojadeva of Malava. It mentions auspicious motifs, including *shalabhanji*, on *dharagrihas* or chambers with an arrangement for water, under *Mandapa-lakshna*, it prescribes *shalabhanji* on *stambhas*.

In the south India, the 11th-12th century temples under the Chalukyas of Kalyani such as Kikkeri, and 12th-13th century Hoyasala temples present female figures under trees, in various activities of *nayikas*. Those at Belur and Halebidu, called *madanikas*, are well known. In the art of Vijayanagara in 14th century to 15th century a motif called *Lata-sundari*, akin to *shalabhanjika*, is represented on the *gopura* passageway, on either side of inner jambs. The figure is often shown standing on a *makara*. We are reminded of the river goddess and *shalabhanjika* connection in the early 5th century A.D. But in the medieval period, the association of river goddesses with trees is not noticed, however, in the Vijayanagara and post-Vijayanagara art of south India from 15th century A.D., Ganga (not Yamuna) is shown as “*lata-sundari*” amidst creepers, and standing on a *makara*. The figure holds a branch of a stylized creeper or tree and strikes it with her foot, this motif is seen at Tadipatri, Lepakshi, Srikalahasthi, Tirumala, Tirupati, Nagalapuram, Ontimitta, Pushpagiri and other temples of Andhra *desa*. A typical *Shalabhanjika* sculpture depicts a woman standing in a *tribhanga* pose (the body is broken or bent at two points to give three bends in the body, one at the neck and the other at the hip) holding a branch of a tree. More often than not, the sculpture is adorned with heavy jewellery and complex hairstyles. In later sculptures, other trees found their way as a part of this motif, the Ashok tree, the Mango tree also feature in some *shalabhanjika* sculptures.

From Coomaraswamy’s interpretation of the symbolism of *vriksha* (tree) and *vrksadevatas* (tree goddesses), we learn that *shalabhanjika* is connected with human life and productivity. Apart from dancing figures, some temples in Andhra *desa* commonly contain images of *shalabhanjikas*. In this paper explore *shalabhanjika* motifs and description how to depicted temple art of Andhra *desa*. In the History of sculpture in Andhra *desa* there are four periods - the Buddhist, the Chalukyan, the Kakatiya and the Vijayanagara. In the sculptural art, trees and plants play a significant role either as a part of iconography or a part of decoration. The early Buddhist centres in Andhra *desa* viz., Dhanyakataka (Amaravathi), Bhattiprolu, Jaggayyapeta, Nagarjunakonda, Goli and Gummadiidurru are found clustered around the Krishna delta. As in Buddhist literature, in sculptural art also we find representations of Queen Maya in the Lumbini grove in “*shalavahanakrida* “. In the Art of Amaravathi and Nagarjunakonda the Four *Lokapalas* hold a cloth indicating the presence of the infant. There are some examples of *chaitya-shalabhanjika* embellishing a *chaitya*, in the art of Andhra *desa*.<sup>5</sup> The plants were named according to their special association and other peculiarities. Certain plants are associated with certain historical events. The *bodhidruma* (tree of enlightenment) received its name on account of its being a tree under which Gautama got enlightenment. Buddha and Mahavira, the protagonists of the two religions Buddhism and Jainism got enlightenment under the sacred *Bodhi* tree (pipal) and the *keval* tree respectively. When the images of Buddha and

Mahavira were conceived and carved out, the respective tree was also associated. The *stupas* and the monolithic pillars with Ashokan inscriptions, the earliest stone structures of the historic period, are the earliest archaeological evidence depicting the figures of trees, plants and animals.<sup>6</sup> The Rudresvara temple, popularly known as Ramappa temple was built by Recharla Rudra, a general in the service of Kakatiya king Ganapati Deva<sup>7</sup> according to an inscription of the temple dated 1213 A.D. The ceiling, pillars and the exterior walls of the temple are richly carved and adorned with the iconography of dancing girls, musicians, *naginis* and bracket figures. On the lower part of the door-jambs of the *antarala* and *garbhagriha* are carved the erotic motif of *Salabhanjika* or “woman and tree”. This motif has its roots in a flower festival ceremony in ancient India. It is found from the Mahabharata that is the general belief that the trees would bestow children.<sup>8</sup> It is also believed that a young woman can revitalize a tree and make it blossom by her touch. Thus the relationship between the woman and the tree was believed to be reciprocal. Just as the woman could ‘fertilise’ the tree, could also impart ‘fertility to her’. One female figure i.e. *shalabhanjika* on the facing side of the eastern portico entrance main temple of Palampet and also seen some *shalabhanjika* sculptures on the exterior walls of the main temple at Nagulapadu temple.

This design became a common feature of temple gateways in the Vijayanagara period. Probably saw *salabhanjika* motif there on the inner and outer parts of the door-jambs of the gateways of the Vijayanagara temples in Andhra *desa*. In the sculptural art of Tirumala and Tirupati temples, the depiction of trees and plants are met with in connection with the *purana* stories. Trees are also found associated with the door-jambs, *Alasakanyas*, *Gandharvas*, *Kinnaras* and as a part of decoration of the recesses of the temples. In the case of *gopuras* found at Tirumala, Tirupati and Tiruchanur, the creeper, originating again from the mouth of a *makara* serves as a support for the elegantly standing *Shalabhanjika* or *Latasundaris*<sup>9</sup> Sc\Ap\UKS of female dancers are depicted as *Shalabhanjika*, *Darpanasundari* and *Sukasundaris* are seen in the *Kalyanamandapa* of Lepakshi temple.

The Chintala Venkataraman temple is located at the north eastern end of Tadipatri, in the *rangamantapa* there are various figures of royal ladies sculpted as *Sukasundaris* in *samapadasthanaka* ^ose, “*darpanasundarissukhasana* pose (seated with one leg freely hanging down and the other folded) *madhupatradharinis*, *veenadharis* in *samapadasthanka*. Sculptures of other ladies carrying flower baskets, *pooja* articles, and few celestial figures with *abhaya* and *varadamudras* can also be seen. These might be the representations of the *devadasis* as *shalabhanjika* poses attached to the temple as the activity they carry on are more connected to the rituals of the temple and it was only the dancers who conducted these services.

### Conclusion :

We find a variety of such motifs used for decorating the various components of the temple art of Andhra *desa*. Indian sculptor of yore fully identified woman with nature and represented her as such in his art in anthropomorphic form. The *vrikshadevata* (tree goddess) motif emerged early in Indian art, with particular focus on images of the woman and tree i.e. *shalabhanjika*. Synonymous with fertility, prosperity and auspiciousness, *shalabhanjika* sculptures are found on Buddhist monuments like the Amaravati, Nagarjunakonda etc. and on Hindu temples all over Andhra *desa*. Widely understood and interpreted by architects, sculptors, monks, nuns and lay worshippers, the *shalabhanjika* is motif which speaks a universal language of desire, passion, fecundity and sexuality. It celebrates the passionate force of nature to procreate. The Andhra *desa* temples are beautiful examples of detailed *Salabhanjika* motif pertaining to the Sathavahana, Chalukya, Kakatiya and Vijayanagara period.

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