

Mural Paintings of Virupaksha Temple: A Rich Resource to Studying the Textiles and Clothing

Anamika Pathak

Abstract

Elegantly dressed, heavily jewelled God-Goddesses and Divinities are painted on the *gopurams* and *mandapas* in the temples of South India. These mural paintings belong to the period of Vakataka (4th-6th century CE) to Nayaka period (17th-18th century CE). There are several temples in South India, which are decorated with beautiful mural paintings. These 'mural paintings' has a special place in the study of art history. As these mural paintings portray the prevailing fashion trend, influences of different cultures, communities and the material culture of that time and region. Among all the temples, seventh century Virupkasha temple is significant from the study of art history. Situated on the banks of Tungabhadra river in Hampi, Karnataka this temple has mural paintings of Vijayanagar period. Here, these mural paintings have been examined in the light of fashion trend of textiles and clothing of that period.

Introduction

Elegantly dressed, heavily jewelled God-Goddesses and Divinities are painted on the *gopurams* and *mandapasin* the temples of South India. These mural paintings belong to the period of Vakataka (4th-6th century CE) to Nayaka period (17th-18th century CE).¹ The continuity of mural painting tradition is also recorded with the long list of *chitrakarars* in literature.² The long narrative paintings have been done in horizontal or square panel on the backdrop of architecture setting. These paintings portray the stories of God-Goddesses from Epic, and Puranic literature. These paintings also depict the prevailing fashion trend, influences of different cultures, communities and the material culture of that time and region. There are several temples in South India, which are decorated with beautiful mural paintings. Although the list is quite long, where the Shiva, Vishnu, Krishna or Jain God-Goddesses have been beautifully painted. The few noteworthy temples and rock-cut cave are; Kailashnath Temple, at Kanchipuram (Pallava period, 7th century CE); Sittannavasal cave paintings, in Pudukottai (Pandya period, 7-9th centuries); Virupkasha temple, Hampi (7th century); Tirunandikkarai cave painting (Chera period, 8-9th centuries); Brihadishvara temple, Tanjore, (Chola Period, 9-13th centuries); Hampi, Kanchipuram, Kalahasti, (Vijayanagar, 14-17th centuries); Madurai, Tiruvalanjuli (Nayaka period 17th-18th centuries). Here only the mural paintings of Virupkasha temple, which is the world heritage site declared by UNESCO, have been discussed in detail with special focus to textiles and clothing.

Virupaksha temple

The Virupaksha temple, dedicated to Lord Siva is situated on the banks of Tungabhadra river in Hampi, Karnataka dates back to the seventh century. (Fig-1) Started with a little shrine, slowly and gradually this become one of the largest temple complexes with several shrines and it is under worship even today. The most famous king of Vijayanagara King Krishnadevaraya (r.1509-1529) was also the contributor of the temple as mentioned in a stone slab inscription in the hall. The rich tradition of mural paintings is evident from the few remains available on the central portion of the pillared hall.



Fig. 1 Virupaksha Temple, Hampi, Ballari district, Karantaka, photographed by Pigour William
Photo Courtesy: Author

The Male Costumes

The ceiling of Virupaksha temple has several registers illustrating marriage scene, Arjuna's archery aiming fish, Tripurantka Siva on the chariot is targeting arrow on three *puras*, Vidyaranya's procession, divinities on a chariot, etc. (Fig-2) Here the Gods and Divinities are shown as warrior and their interesting garments are explained by the famous Art Historian Prof, Dr. Choodamani Nandagopal. While explaining the attire of Tripurantka Siva she mentions, "His garments include for the top it is like armour known as *kavacha* to protect. Lower one *kachche*, *challana* in stitched form and the flowing wrappers are *kase*. There are four pieces attire, *kavacha*, *kachche dhoti*, *challana* and *kase*."³ The *dhoti* is either plain or striped, having narrow borders, remain little longer from the knee. Above the *dhotikachche* and *challana* is wrapped. Long *kase* or sash with broad border's having angular pointed corner and wore either around the shoulder and hang in front or around the arms like emperors use to wore. Jewellery pieces from head to toe glorify the images of Gods. The most impressive accessory among all is the elongated crown having multiple tiers, which reduce in size and ends with a conical knob on the top. Such crowns are evident in Tanjore-Mysore paintings, sculptures made of stone, wood or bronze of Tamil Nadu, *yakshgayana*⁴ dancers of Karnataka and so on. Such elaborate crown symbolizes the Hindu philosophy also, where the human body is considered as a temple, the human head as *shikhara* of the temple and the soul as God. Such tiered *shikhara* crown seems to be the popular style as evident in the sculptures made of stone or wood,⁵ even reminds the Virupaksha or Brihadeshwara temple (dates back to thousand CE) of Thanjavur (Fig-3) and the most fascinating aspect is that these tiered crowns are used by all the divinities; male-female or main-minor ones. In addition to the crown, several necklaces, armlets, and anklets give the grand look to the divinities.

The scene of Vidyaranya's procession, in the lower register of painting on the ceiling, is an important example of three styles of male attire prevalent in that period. (Fig-4) Vidyaranya the saint wore simple plain *dhoti*, which is warped around the body and even covers the head. This style of garment is still being worn by the Vidyaranya saints. His palanquin bearers are shown in white *dhoti*, up to the knee length and full-sleeves

printed short jacket or short *kurta*. Such depiction is sometimes used for the depiction of warriors.⁶ The attires of two flag bearers, walking in front, are different from palanquin bearers. They are dressed in full-length *jama/kurta*, which has full selves. Similar style of garment is worn by the flag bearer, canopy and banner holders in a miniature painting of Sultan Husain Nizam Shah I of Ahmadnagar.⁷ They are not wearing the lower garment, while in the case of Vidyaranya's procession they are in *dhoti*, the traditional attire. They also wore striped turban-short *dhoti* and *patka* is across the shoulder and the waistband is around the waist.



Fig. 2 Paintings on the Ceiling of Virupaksha temple painted in several registers
Source: South Indian Painting by C.Sivaramamurti, National Museum, New Delhi, 1968, Photo Courtesy: Author



Fig. 3 Brihadishvara temple, around 1000 years, Tanjavur, Tamil Nadu. Photo Courtesy: Author



Fig. 4 Detail of Fig. 2 depicting Vidyranyan procession.
Photo Courtesy: Author

The Female Costume

Parvati, Sita and Draupadi and other goddess were elegantly dressed in *sari-choli* and lots of jewellery.⁸ The *sari* worn by these Goddesses is draped in traditional way. (Fig-5) It shows the covering of leg portion similar to God's *dhoti* style, however, the depiction of angular projection around the foot is done very cleverly to give the feel of pleats and flare of a *sari*. Such style is the reflection of the Jain style of miniature paintings of the western region.⁹ The *anchalon* the left shoulder comes across the right shoulder and falls in the front. Half sleeve *choli*, short in length, up to the waist, show the fashion trend of 14th-15th centuries. The tiered crown, necklaces, bangles, anklets, and the ornamental waistband enhance the charm of Goddesses.

Such composition and illustrations were also used in the traditional *patta* painting, long embroidered temple hanging and, in the *kalamkari* hangings, wall hangings or tent panels¹⁰ or the canopy.¹¹ The earliest epigraphy reference to a painter in India is in Ashokan Brahmi dates back to 3rd-2nd century BCE in the Ramgarh (Jogimara) cave, district Sarguja, Chattisgarh.¹² The earliest *patta* painting example is evident from the Buddhist cave complex at Kyzil, Xinjiang Autonomous Region of China, which dates back to the 1st half of the 7th century.¹³ The cave painting shows the monk holding a painted banner, which illustrates the Buddha's story.



Fig. 5 detail of Fig. 2 depicting Goddess in marriage scene Photo Courtesy: Author

Almost same period (Post Gupta; 5th-6th centuries CE) text written by Banbatta mention about the Yampatika tradition.¹⁴ However, the known *patta* painting is from the 14th-15th century in the Jain tradition, popularly known as 'Jain Patta'. In a nice *patta* painting of Ganesh (from Andhra Pradesh) the painters had used the arched frame for illustrating the Ganesh, in Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and around Him, the number of male-female figures, saints, devotees. These male and female costume i.e., *saris*, *dhoti*, crown, etc., had been painted in a similar style as the mural paintings are.¹⁵ A similar depiction of costumes and jewellery of Gods-Goddesses is evident in the embroidered temple hanging (Tamil Nadu/Karnataka) illustrating the Ramayana scenes in the National Museum collection.¹⁶ Kalamkari, the painted wall hangings and canopy (from Andhra Pradesh) preserved in National Museum, New Delhi and Museum der Kulturen, Basel respectively) convey the story from Mahabharata and Krishna-Lila or incarnation of Vishnu in similar fashion of composition and style.¹⁷

In addition to the study of textiles and clothing, their colour, pattern and wearing styles, these mural paintings also illustrate many other things. These are like temple architecture, lobbed arched frame with pillar, composition, and division of scenes, birds, animals, chariots, weaponry, floral borders, flora-fauna of the region, etc. Each of these can be studied in great detail while studying the literature, miniature paintings and compare with mural paintings of the region.

Glossary

- **Anchal:** (in Hindi) Term used for the end panel of *sari*.
- **Chitrakaras:** (in Hindi) Refers to Painter.
- **Choli:** (in Hindi; in South India its known as *ravike*) Is the stitched upper garment of female.
- **Dhoti:** (in Hindi) is a traditional men's garment worn in the Indian subcontinent. Dhoti, around 4.5 metres, is a rectangular piece of unstitched cloth. It is wrapped around the waist, and the legs, and knotted at the waist.
- **Gopuram:** (in Sanskrit) A monumental tower, usually ornate, at the entrance of a temple, especially in Southern India.
- **Jama:** (in Persian) Refers to a stitched garment, gown or vest, an upper garment.
- **Kurta:** (in Urdu) Refers to a long, typically knee or calf length loose collarless upper garment for both male and female.
- **Kalamkari:** (in Persian) Is the combination of two words, '*qalam*' which refers to pen and '*kari*' means craftsmanship.
- **Mandapas:** (in Sanskrit) In Indian architecture it's a pillared outdoor hall or pavilion for the public rituals.
- **Patka:** (in Hindi) rectangular cloth used as waist band by man.
- **Sari:** (in Hindi, 'Saatti' in Sanskrit) Is female drape garment, which wrapped around waist with one end draped over the shoulder.
- **Shikhara:** (in Sanskrit) refers to 'mountain peak', usually it refers to the rising tower in the Hindu temple architecture

References

1. Sivaramamurti. C., *South Indian Paintings*, New Delhi, 1968.
2. Sivaramamurti, *ibid*, pp:19-22.
3. In the personnel discussion Dr. Choodamani Nandgopal, the National Tagore Fellow at the National Museum had explained the attire of God.
4. The word Yakshgana refers the songs of the Demi-Gods (yaksh 'meaning Demi-God, and 'gana' meaning song). The performers wear interesting and colourful costumes, and elaborate headgears. The stage design and unique rendering is similar to that of the Western Opera.

5. Pathak, A; *Ramayana Poetic expression on Temple Hanging*, National Museum, New Delhi, 2017, p-79.
6. Sivaramamurti, *ibid*, p: 88; Fig: 43.
7. Elgood.R., swords in the Deccan in the 16th-17th centuries, their manufacture and the influences of European Imports, in *Sultans of the South* (ed) N. Haidar, M. Sardar, USA, 2008, p-220, Fig: 2.
8. Sivaramamurti, *ibid*, Fig: 10, p-157.
9. Jain. R., *Rapture: The Art of Indian Textiles*, New Delhi, 2011, p: 16.
10. Jain. R., *ibid*, pp: 22-72.
11. Jain, *ibid*, pl-76; p-188.
12. <https://www.wondermondo.com/jogimara-cave/>
13. Guy, J. and Britschgi J., in "Wonder of the Age: Master Painters of India", USA, 2011, p-20.
14. Agrawal., V., *Harshchrita: Eka Sanskritka Adyana*, (in Hindi) Bihar, 1963 p-91.
15. Jain. R., *ibid*, pl-66, p-186
16. Pathak, A., *ibid*, pp-30-31.
17. Dwivedi V.P., The *Chitrakatha* Tradition of India, in *Kalakshetra* magazine, Oct-Dec-1978, pp-21-22.

About the Author

Anamika Pathak, Former Curator, National Museum, had curated several permanent & temporary exhibitions. Extensively travelled to several countries, closely associated with many academic and cultural institutes to deliver lectures on various aspects of Indian Traditional Textiles, Decorative Arts, Museology and Preventive Conservation, presented research papers in seminars, published fivebooks, booklets, exhibition catalogue, portfolio & children'sbook, more than fifty published articles on art, textiles & decorative arts in journals like *Marg*, *Arts of Asia*, *National Museum bulletin*.