

REPRESENTATION OF PARASOL IN THE ART OF COASTAL ANDHRA IN PRE AND EARLY CHRISTIAN ERA

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Abstract

Parasols symbolize spiritual and temporal sovereignty. Umbrellas were always held over deities and respectful persons. Parasols over deities suggest spiritual sovereignty over temporal world. As in other religious doctrines, the parasols occupy a significant position in the Buddhist art tradition of India. The Buddhist art of lower Krishna valley exhibit beautiful varieties of parasols which may be studied on the basis of symbolism and iconography.

Keywords: Parasols, Coastal, Andhra, Christian Era

Introduction

Umbrellas stand for sovereignty, both spiritual and temporal. The custom of carrying umbrella possibly owes its origin to the ancient custom of a ruler sitting under the shade of a tree to administer justice. The shade giving tree, thus, signified the royal insignia of sovereignty. When the king moved about the shade of the tree was replaced by the shade giving parasol (Harvey Peter, 1991: p 87). Thus the emblem of sovereignty, that is, the parasol stood for the tree. Umbrellas have always been held over deities. This act suggested spiritual sovereignty over the temporal world. Similarly *chhatras* were placed on top of the *Bodhi* tree or *stupas* to honour the Master like the deity in the temple. On top of the *stupa* the *chhatra* can be seen as a *yasti* with three discs on it. These discs represent the ceremonial parasol. Thus the parasol occupies a significant position in Buddhist tradition and was amply depicted in Buddhist art centres. The present work is an attempt to explore the sculptural and architectural remains of parasols in the art of coastal Andhra (lower Krishna valley) and interpret them on the basis of symbolism, iconography, varieties and socio-cultural aspect.

Before delving into the representations of parasols in the art of coastal Andhra in pre-Christian and early Christian era, a few words may be said about the architectural development of parasols in Buddhist establishments over the centuries and available textual references relating to parasols.

Evolution

Architecturally the parasol on *stupa* underwent evolution. While in the early stages three parasol discs were usually constructed but later the number increased possibly to increase the honour of the Master. Sometimes the discs were fused together to form a spire. This is usually seen in *stupa* of Anuradhapura in Srilanka (*Ibid* : pp 86-87). In the 14th-16th century CE the dome became bell shaped and merged with the spire. In this phase a separate large metal parasol came to be placed at the summit. Such a parasol is found in the Dragon *stupa* in Rangoon (*Ibid*: p 87).

Literary evidence

Several literary texts bear reference of *chhatra*. The Sona Nanda *Jataka* mentions that the parasol

was carried in such a way that the ribs of the parasol were clearly marked to ward off sun's rays (Cowell E.B, 2014: Vol V-VI, No 532, p 17). From Banabhatta's *Kadambari* it is learnt that the parasol was slender and elegant in shape and the handle was adorned with gold work. (*Chhatresu Kanakadanda*) (Basu Prasun, 1980: p 4). In *Cullavagga* it is stated that once Buddha forbade his follower to use sunshades (Davids T.W Rhys and Oldenberg Hermann, 1975: p 133). But in the later portion of the text it is stated that Buddha allowed his followers to use sun shades in the *arama* or in the precincts of *arama*. From the commentary on the rules for nuns it is known that Bhikkuni Vibhanga Pakittiya mentioned about parasol which were either white or made of humbler material like talipot palm leaves and matting. Two methods for joining the handle of the parasol is also mentioned. These two methods were *Mandalabaddham* and *Salakabaddham* (*Ibid*, p 134). The *Cullavagga* further refers to the etiquette of putting down a sun-shade before entering the *arama* (*Ibid*, pp 273-274). In *Mahaviracharitam* it is stated that the king presented umbrellas to the *Brahmanas* during the *Vajapeya* (Mahakavishree Bhavabhuti, 1955: Act IV p 161) ceremony. The *Kusa jataka* while mentioning about the Madda king described that when the king mounted on the elephant the white umbrella was carried over him (Cowell E.B, *op.cit* : vol V-VI, No. 531, pp 162-163) . Several references of umbrella is found in many *candas* of *Ramayana*. The custom of carrying parasol over the head of Rama even while riding on the elephant is mentioned in the *Ayodhya Kanda* (Mukhopadhyaya Upendranath, 1997: *Ayodhya Kanda*, Canto 2, p 100). Again in the same section it is mentioned that in the *avishekha* ceremony of *yuvaraja* Rama, *rishi* Vasistha asked for the white

umbrella among several ceremonial things (*Ibid*, *Ayodhya Kanda*, Canto 3, p 101). It was believed that *ekacchatradhipatya* or the dominance over a single umbrella over the universe was the ambition of powerful monarchs (Sivaramamurti C, 1956; p 58). Usually *svetachhatra*, that is, the white umbrella was held over the king. However, in canto 97 of the *Ayodhya Kanda* the yellow *chhatra* was held over *Raja Dasaratha* (Mukhopadhyaya Upendranath, *op.cit*, *Ayodhya Kanda*, canto 97, p 266). The 5th canto of *Aranya Kanda* mentions about the spotless *chhatra* that was decorated with garlands. (*Malyasushobhita*) (*Ibid*, *Aranya Kanda*, Canto 5, p 310) . In the 51st canto of the same *kanda* it is stated that the *chhatra* was circular like the full moon (*Ibid*, *Aranya Kanda*, Canto 51, p 378). In *Kautilya's Arthasastra* it is mentioned that in the age of the Mauryas the fiery spies were employed to carry the royal parasol (Dr. Shamasastri R, 1961: p 245 20). In addition to it *Arthasastra* also refers to the prostitutes of higher rank who were allowed to hold the royal umbrella and attend on the king (*Ibid*, p 136). Therefore it can be undoubtedly stated that parasol have deep socio-religious significance and was widely depicted in various forms of art.

Geographical and Historical Location of the site

It may be stated that our study area, that is, coastal Andhra (lower Krishna valley) in the centuries preceding and following the Christian era was dominated by the Buddhist monastic culture. The Krishna riverine zone was studded with Buddhist monuments which bear evidences of creative activity. The region became the hub of art and culture in early Andhradesa.

Interestingly majority of art centres of the valley were located along the banks of Krishna and her tributaries. Some of the rivers are Bhima, Tungabhadra, Gundlakamma, Musi, Dindi, Chandravanka, Naguleru, Muniyeru, Tamirileru, Buddhameru etc. The important Buddhist centres like Bhattiprolu, Amaravati, Nagarjunakonda, Jaggayyapeta, Goli, Ghantasala, Gudivada, Gummadidurru, Alluru, Bezwada, Peddaganjam, Peddamadur, Chinnaganjam, Kanuparti etc are all approachable through the lower reaches of the Krishna river. It may be surmised that the Buddhists were conscious of the water transport system of coastal Andhra which facilitated trade. Moreover the region was extremely fertile. These factors probably encouraged the Buddhists to undertake constructive activities in the region which in turn led to the cultural and intellectual growth of the region.

Depictions

Several beautiful iconoplastic depictions of parasol in the reliefs of the coastal Andhra in centuries preceding and following the Christian era is discovered. In addition to it some parasols which are architecture in the true sense of term are also found from the region. These are also our concern.

Sculptural Antiquities

In the outset the sculptural specimens which bear the representations of parasol is taken account of. These representations are visible in the scenes illustrating various episodes of the life of Buddha and the *Jataka* stories.

Among the various sites of coastal Andhra, Amaravati (lat 16° 34' North, long 80° 24' East, Sattanpalli Taluk, Guntur District, Andhra

Pradesh) was the most prolific site. A plethora of Buddhist antiquities excavated from Amaravati reveal beautiful depictions of parasol. In a relief on a crossbar from Amaravati depicting Suddhodana's visit to Mayadevi (Sivaramamurti C, *Op.cit*, pp 176-177, plXXVII), a parasol can be seen. The narrative shows Suddhodana's arrival on the horse. Mayadevi is in the courtyard of the building within the Ashoka grove. Mayadevi is attended by a number of women. The king is also accompanied by attendants. Among the attendants, one person carries a parasol above the head of the king. The umbrella is of superior type which suggests that it is of royal variety. This sculpture is preserved in the Madras Government Museum.

Another beautiful depiction of the parasol can be seen in a scene illustrating the birth of Buddha (Knox Robert, 1992: p 119, pl 61). It is chiseled on a drumslab from Amaravati preserved in the British Museum. The theme is illustrated in four registers. The last panel shows queen Maya taking baby Siddhartha to *yaksa* Sakyavardhana, the Sakya clan *rishi*. In this scene the royal parasol is visible. It is carried by a royal attendant over the head of queen Maya. (Pl 1)

Nagarjunakonda (lat 16°31' N, lon 79°14' E, Palnad Taluk, Guntur District, Andhra Pradesh) was an important archaeological site of coastal Andhra. The site bequeathed to us beautiful narratives of Buddhist affiliation. A dome slab from site 3 of Nagarjunakonda, now in the National Museum, New Delhi is mention worthy (Stone Elizabeth Rosen, 1994: Fig 188). It is divided into three register. The middle panel illustrate the scene of nativity and

seven steps of Buddha. In this scene the royal parasol is chiseled on the *Bodhi* tree flanked by two *chowries*. The tree may be taken as the symbolic representation of the Master as enlightenment of Buddha took place under the tree. Thus the parasol over the tree exhibit respect to the spiritual sovereign. The female figure in *anjali* posture also shows her adoration for the new born Master. Mayadevi is also visible in the scene in the form of *Salabhanjika* holding the branch of the *sala* tree signifying the birth of Buddha.

In another depiction from Nagarjunakonda illustrating Buddha's nativity and seven steps the parasol is viewed just behind Mayadevi (*Ibid*, fig 210). The umbrella is visible above the first figure holding the cloth. The cloth represent Buddha's seven steps this relief is preserved in the Archaeological Museum, Nagarjunakona (Pl 2).

In a broken slab preserved in the Madras Government Museum a parasol is visible. The scene illustrates *Mahaviniskramana* scene (Sivaramamurti C, *op.cit*, p 166, pl XIX, Fig 1). The bottom above a railing pattern depicts a horse coming out of the gateway preceded by a couple of *devas*. Two figures almost broken are sculpted soaring in the sky. The horse Kanthaka is riderless but it can be surmised that the royal parasol carried by the bearer above the horse indicates the presence of the Master. It can be understood that in the absence of the figure of Siddhartha the parasol acted as a visual marker for the anthropomorphic presence of Buddha.

Another stele from Amaravati preserved in the Madras Government Museum is mentionworthy

(*Ibid*, pl LXIII, Fig 1). In this relief the lowest panel illustrates Siddhartha's flight from Kapilavastu. In this scene dwarf *yaksas* hold the hoofs of the horse and the *deva* attend on the prince holding umbrellas on their head.

A dome slab from Amaravati preserved in the British Museum again illustrates the *Mahabhiniskramana* scene (Knox Robert, *Op.cit*, p 185, fig 103). In this scene the parasol is visible. The relief like the previous mentioned specimen shows the rider less horse. Behind the horse Kanthaka is a turbaned man holding an umbrella above the horse's head. Here too the umbrella stands for the symbolic representation of the Master.

The middle register of a frieze panel from Amaravati preserved in the British Museum deserves special mentions. This panel illustrates *Mahabhiniskramana* where prince. Siddhartha is visible riding on Kanthaka (*Ibid*, pp 116-117, fig 57). This feature is different from the previous examples. The parasol is chiseled diagonally over the head of the prince. It is carried by an attendant of the prince.

A relief from the site 6 of Nagarjunakonda contained the depiction of a parasol. This relief illustrated the scene of Great Departure (Stone Elizabeth Rosen, *op.cit*, fig 114). In this relief the attendant behind the prince carries a parasol. The parasol is held over the head of the Master. The parasol exhibit striated design and it definitely belongs to the royal category. This specimen is preserved in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

An interesting depiction of the parasol is seen in an illustration of Naga on a fragmentary drum slab from Amaravati (Archaeological Museum,

Amaravati, ASI, Acc No. 7 , Measurement 73 x 86 x 18cm). In this slab a miniature *stupa* is chiseled where the worship of Naga is visible in the centre. A partially visible *chhatra* is sculpted above the Naga's hood. This possibly indicates the royal lineage of Naga and can be identified as Naga Muchalinda. This specimen is preserved in the Archaeological Museum, Amaravati.(Pl 3)

In the illustration of the enlightenment episode of the life of Buddha in the art of lower Krishna valley the parasol is chiseled with utmost care. In a frieze on the lower panel from Amaravati two men flanking the *bodhi* tree is visible. Among them one noble man carries a banner and the other a double umbrella. Beside them stands a woman showing the *anjali mudra* (Sivaramamurti C, *Op.cit*, p 167, pl XXI, fig 1). This specimen is preserved in the Madras Government Museum.

The *chhatra* is also visible in the scene illustrating the subjugation of Nalagiri from Amaravati preserved in the Madras Government Museum (*Ibid*, pp 188-189, pl XXV, fig 1). This scene is sculpted in a circular medallion on the cross bar. The sculpture shows the elephant rushing towards the Master in the street. The street is definitely the street of Rajgriha as the incident of Nalagiri occurred in that location. Synoptic method is followed in the relief and the same elephant is again chiseled to suggest another sequence of the Nalagiri episode. The backdrop of the scene showcases the panic stricken crowd. Among this group one person is depicted with a humbler type of parasol.

In several reliefs illustrating the *Mahaparinirvana* episode in coastal Andhra, the parasol is visible. In one such example from Amaravati preserved in the British Museum a *stupa* mounted on a

double lotus base is visible (Knox Robert, *Op.cit*, p 168, fig 92). In this regard it may be suggested that the *stupa* symbolically represent Buddha's *Mahaparinirvana*. It is surrounded by a high railing. Out of the *harmika* arise five umbrellas signifying spiritual sovereignty of the Master.

Another dome slab preserved in the British Museum again shows the *stupa* mounted on a lotus base. This dome is decorated with garland with central fringed lotus roundel. Out of the *harmika* emanate seven umbrellas on curving stems (*Ibid*, p 172, fig 95) (Pl 4)

The depiction of a cluster of umbrella is seen on a drum slab from Amaravati preserved in the British Museum (*Ibid*, p 126, fig 64). This slab illustrates a plain *stupa* on a lotus base signifying *Mahaparinirvana*. It is interesting to note that the relief displays a profusion of umbrellas projecting out of the stepped *harmika*.

Representation of parasols in the *jataka* stories is also found in the art of lower Krishna valley. In this respect a depiction of Mandhata *Jataka* from Amaravati preserved in the British Museum is worth mentioning (*Ibid*, p 122, fig 62). To the left of this relief is visible a male figure, that is, king Mandhata with left hand on the hip and a lotus in his right hand. Behind him is a female holding a shaft of a large umbrella.

In several reliefs of the Vessantara *jataka* the depiction of parasol is found. In this regard mention may be made of a scene from the Vessantara *Jataka* from Amaravati kept in the British Museum. In this relief three episodes of the Vessantara *jataka* is delineated. In the second episode a Brahmin is visible with an umbrella probably asking for the beast (*Ibid*, pp 101-103, fig 42). The umbrella has a short handle.

Another relief on the same *jataka* from Goli (lat 16°35' North, long 79°3' East, Palnad Taluk, Guntur District, Andhra Pradesh) deserves special mention. In the second scene prince Vessantara is visible making the gift of the elephant. In this scene a *chhatradhari* is sculpted providing shade to king Sanjaya, the father of Vessantara (Ramachandran T.N, 1963; pp 8-9, pl V frieze No 2B). Again in the sixth sequence of the narrative the prince is visible presenting his two children to the Brahmin. The Brahmin carries a parasol in his left hand (Subrahmanyam B, 2005: p 189, pl 70c).

Further a panel from Nagarjunakonda illustrating the Vessantara *Jataka* is worth mentioning. This scene narrates the sequence of gifting of children by Vessantara. In this relief a *chhatra* is carved over the head of a Brahmin intended to mark his superior social status (Archaeological Museum, Nagarjunakonda, ASI, Acc No 31, Measurement 56 x 91 x 10 cm). This iconoplastic representation is housed in the Archaeological Museum, Nagarjunakonda. (pl 5)

Flying figures are often seen in the art antiquities of the Lower Krishna valley and they are usually in the worshipful attitude. Sometimes the figures carry parasols. In one such drum frieze from site 3 of Nagarjunakonda two parasols are visible in the hand of flying figures worshipping the *stupa* (Archaeological Museum, Nagarjunakonda, ASI, Acc No. 4, Measurement 144 x 91 x 13 cm).

The ritual of *Buddhapada* worship is a sacred custom to the Buddhists. Several depictions of *Buddhapada* is found in the Buddhist sites of coastal Andhra. In a richly decorated drum slab from Amaravati housed in the British Museum the motif of *Buddhapadas* are found. On either

side of the *ayaka* pillar the design of *Buddhapadas* are placed under the parasol. *Buddhapadas* symbolize the physical presence of the Master's and the parasol above it signifies respect to the spiritual sovereignty (Knox Robert, *op.cit*, pp 141- 142, fig 73).

Architectural Specimens

Architectural specimen of parasol is also discovered from some centres of the lower Krishna valley. A circular umbrella was usually intended to be placed over the *stupa*. In one such specimen from Amaravati the ribs of the circular umbrella radiate from a central lotus design with a square hole for fixing the shaft to it. The inscription on it reads "Meritorious gift of umbrella for the *chaitya*. This donation was made by the female lay worshipper Chada, the mother of Budhi with her sons and daughters. This piece is preserved in the Madras Government Museum Collection (Dr. Kannan R, 2014: p 184, fig 168).

Another *Chhatra* over *Buddhapada* is discovered from Ghantasala. It is preserved in the Archaeological Museum, Ghantasala. The umbrella is of circular type and has a square hole to fix the shaft to it (Pl 6).

A circular parasol is also discovered from Nagarjunakonda. However only the disc is found and the shaft was later constructed to hold the parasol. Its ribs also radiate from a central lotus design. It is now preserved in the Archaeological Museum, Nagarjunakonda (Archaeological Museum, Nagarjunakonda, ASI, Acc No. 38).

Taking into consideration the various representations of parasol in the art of Coastal Andhra we encounter a remarkable variety. Such a wide variety of parasols in our study

area is not only an interesting facet but raises a question regarding the justification for such a variety. In order to investigate the above dimension it is required to address the issue in the light of the nature of art activity prevalent in the region and the motivation of the artists for their production. In this regard it may be stated that the art of coastal Andhra unfold before the onlooker a comprehensive lithographic canvas of the society where different social groups are delineated with utmost care. Hence *chatradharis* and *chhatradharinis* in different postures with different types parasols often found their representation in various narrative scenes of the lower Krishna valley. They usually hold the parasols over the head of their Master, both spiritual and temporal. In addition to this some parasols in the scenes simply serve its utilitarian purpose, that is, providing sun shades. However from the various antiquities at our disposal it may be suggested that the artists were possibly inspired by the intellectual development of the age and did not restrict their creation only to the mundane world. They also made a conscious effort to explore their creativity to justify spiritual and intellectual dimension of Buddhism, the dominant doctrine of the region. Consequently the artists used several indexical signs including the parasol, that is, the symbol of sovereignty to indicate the anthropomorphic presence of Buddha. Thus parasols were depicted over the *Buddhapada*, the throne the *Bodhi* tree, the cloth of nativity, the *stupa* etc. Parasols also found its appropriate place in various episodes of the life of Buddha and *jataka* stories. In such depictions the symbolic significance of umbrellas were always intended to be conveyed to the spectators. This definitely indicates that the artists were aware of the textual tradition and its interpretation

associated with parasols.

The reason for using visual marker for Buddha's presence is a complicated problem. In this regard it may be stated that the early followers of Buddhism believed that in the quest for truth and perfection Buddha took several births and ultimately in his final birth as prince Siddhartha he attained enlightenment. In this birth he attained the state of *nirvana* by which he freed himself from the bonds of the body and the chain of rebirth forever. It may be surmised that possibly the early Buddhists refrained from depicting Buddha in his anthropomorphic form that the Master himself finally succeeded in giving up. Another explanation can be given to this complicated issue. It can be suggested that portrayal of Buddha as indexical sign and symbol was probably due to the feeling of profound nature of Buddha which could not be portrayed by his mere human form. Thus in the act of exalting the Master to the rank of god, the immediate followers of Buddhism depicted Buddha symbolically like Brahmanical deities. However with the growth and flourish of *Mahayanism* image worship was introduced.

The architectural remnant and the icono-plastic representations of parasols from coastal Andhra showcase both the humbler and superior variety. The circular royal umbrella usually visible in the narrative reliefs of coastal Andhra falls in the superior variety. Some *chattras* were also semi-circular and oval in shape. In keeping with the ornate quality of art of coastal Andhra some *chattras* exhibit decorative richness. The parasols in both architectural and sculptural specimens display intricate details and decorative patterns. Some of the patterns chiseled on parasols are striated designs, double line border design and

garlanded parasols. However, some parasols are unadorned. The shapes, designs and varieties of parasols visible in the artefact suggests that such types possibly existed in the contemporary society and the artists took firsthand knowledge from existing social scenario while chiseling parasols in the art of coastal Andhra.

In addition to the above characteristics, variety is also noticed in the number of umbrellas represented in the art of lower Krishna valley. Besides single umbrella, the reliefs exhibit two, five, seven and a cluster of umbrellas emanating from the *harmika*. A question can be raised regarding the reason for the increased number of parasols. In this regard it may be stated that there was no textual tradition available to the artist regarding the number of parasols. It may be conjectured that the number of parasols were possibly increased to suggest the increased spiritual significance of the Master and bestow more honour and glory to lord Buddha.

Conclusion

From the above analysis it may be surmised that the artists of Coastal Andhra (lower Krishna valley) were aware of the double layer of meaning associated with parasol and always kept it in mind while conceptualizing their architectural and sculptural creation. This speaks a lot of the knowledge and expertise of the artists of our concerned area. Thus the parasols not only served an utilitarian purpose of the narratives but were demonstrative of its deep spiritual and intellectual significance. In fact it may be stated that if art became a vehicle of intellectual and spiritual conception of the people of a region, then the fascination for making parasols in the art of coastal Andhra definitely justified its need.

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PI 1 : Birth of Buddha, Drum slab, Amaravati , British Museum , London (Source : R. Knox , 1992)



PI 2 - Buddha's Nativity, Nagarjunakonda, Archaeological Museum, Nagarjunakonda. 3rd-4th Century CE
(Photographed by the author)



PI 3• Parasol over Naga, Amaravati. Archaeological Museum.Amaravati. 2nd Century CE
(Photographed by the author]



PI 4 - Mahaparinirvana of Buddha, Amaravati, British Museum, London. 2nd Century CE
(Photo Courtesy - Robert Knox. 1992)



Pl 5 - Vessantara Jataka.Nagarjunakonda. Archaeological Museum. Nagarjunakonda.
3rd-11th Century CE (Photographed by the author)



Pl 6 - Parasol over Buddhapada, Ghantasala. Alchaeological
Museum. Ghantasala. 2nd - 3rd Century CE
(photographed by the author)

