AN IMAGE OF BUDDHĀVATĀRA OF VIṢṆU AT BĀDĀMI

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At Bādāmi, ancient Vātāpi, the capital of the early or western Calukyas (c. mid 6th-mid 8th cent.), is a large lake, locally known as 'Agastya Tirtha'. Under the overhanging cliffs to the southeast of this lake, is a huge collapsed mass of rock leaning against the cliff side. It has so fallen as to form a natural cavern beneath it, the entry to which is obtained by crawling under the rock through a low tunnel-like opening. Inside, upon the cliff-face, is carved a large enthroned image. This image is locally referred to as that of Koṣṭharāya or 'leper king'. A legend about this sculpture is current in two versions1 among the local people:

(i) In olden days, a king of Vārānaśī was suffering from leprosy. He came to know about the miraculous power of the Agastya Tirtha at Bādāmi which cured many diseases. So he travelled to this place to get rid of his ailment. Everyday he bathed in the lake and eventually was cured of that disease. Subsequently, an image of this king was carved and people used to call it the image of "Kuṣṭharāja" which became "Koṣṭharāya" in course of time. (Kuṣṭha in Kannada, as in Sanskrit, means leprosy.)

(ii) One of the relatives of the Calukya royal family, Govinda, was suffering from leprosy. He sought the holy counsel of the sages performing penance at Bādāmi, and on their advice he bathed in the Agastya Tirtha everyday till he was completely cured. The image represents this royal person who is called "Koṣṭharāya" by the people.

On the whole, both the versions are identical except for the royal persons involved and their domicile and period. The first version appears to be fictitious. When the Calukya kings were ruling at Bādāmi, it is unlikely that an image of a royal personage of another kingdom will be carved and be venerated by the local populace. The second version refers to Govinda of the Calukya royal family. Now, Ravikīrti's Aihole inscription (A.D.634) states that Pulakesin II defeated some Govinda (and Appāyika) at the river Bhīmā. However, a sculpture of this defeated Govinda was got carved during the time of Pulakesin II, by his successors, likewise seems an improbable reality.

H. Cousens was the first person to draw attention to this sculpture and illustrate it2. He describes this image as "...seated in Buddha-like attitude, but it is neither a representation of Buddha nor a Jina. It is without doubt, a portrait statue." In recent years, A. Sundara identified this image as the portrait of Kirtivarman I, got carved by his brother Maṅgaleśa, who claimed an unequalled and steadfast devotion for him3.
The image (Plate 1), except for the head, is bejewelled with ear-rings, necklace, armlets, bracelets, rings for the fingers, also chest-band, anklets, etc. It is particularly noteworthy that he wears yajnopavita. The hair is in knobbly curves, but there is no Buddha’s typical usṇīsa-lump on the top of the skull: it rather resembles the Jina head. The figure is sitted in padmāsana. Its right hand is raised in abhayamudrā; and it holds rosary. The left hand rests in the lap, palm upwards (dhyānamudrā). The figure is seated upon a lion-throne (siṁhāsana), the front of which is divided into three compartments, with a lion in each as in many pre-medieval and medieval Jina image-thrones in Karnataka. On either side of him is a male cāmara-bearer, each wearing a kirīta-mukuta and other gem-set ornaments, while behind him is the throne-back with the usual terminal vyāla and makara figures. Delineated as engraved line-drawing are here deer and śaṅkha to the left and cakra to the right. At present the image has been spoiled due to continual application of oil by the worshippers. The halo behind the head is plain and further behind is the depiction of tree.

Beside it, on the rock, a little way to the right of the image, is carved a small bearded sage with a fat body, seated in padmāsana on a bhadrapiṭha. While his right hand is in abhayamudrā, the left hand seems to hold a vessel. On his right side is a long staff. Cousens identifies this image as that of a person who had the big one carved, or perhaps the rāja’s prime minister. To me it appears to be the image of Agastya after whom the lake is named, because of the presence of sage’s beard, fat body, and the water-vessel.

Annigeri, a second scholar who in recent years wrote on this image, feels that Koṣṭharāya must have been a Treasury Officer connected with the Bādami fort who became an ascetic later on. And Carol Radcliffe Bolon remarks: “To me the date and identity of this image remain enigmatic.”

The head of the main image, plain halo, legs in padmāsana, the left hand in dhyānamudrā, the throne-back decorated with makaras, and the two male cāmara-bearers are very similar to the Tīrthaṅkara carved in a tableau in the Jaina cave at Aihole: (late 6th century; Plate 2). This indicates that the sculpture under discussion undoubtedly was carved by a sculptor who was accustomed to carving Jina images. All the same, the posture of legs and hands, the tree (which can be interpreted as the bodhi-tree) at the back, and the representation of deer on the throne-back conclusively prove that this is intended to be an image of Buddha. However, the profusion of ornaments and the engravings of śaṅkha and cakra on the throne-back unambiguously indicate his association with Viśnu. Considering the total evidence, it would be more correct to identify this image as that of “Māyāmohā” of the purāṇas or “Buddhāvatārā Viśṇu”.

On stylistic grounds, the sculpture can be dated to c. late 7th or plausibly the first quarter of the 8th century A.D.
1 Bādāmi. Cave near Bhūtanātha group of temples, image of the so-called Koṣṭharāya ("Māyāmoha" or "Buddhāvatāra Viṣṇu").
2 Aihoľe, Jaina cave, main hall, upavarna-bay, seated Jina in a narrative-tableaux.
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— Editors.

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Plate 2  Aihole, Jaina cave, main hall, *upavarnaka*-bay, seated Jina in a narrative-tableaux.

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