

Spiritual Magnificence of Bhagawan Gommateshwara and Foreign Writers

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Ancient Indian Art has been religious in Character. The temples were built with sculptural decorations and paintings to serve the aesthetic and spiritual needs of the devotees visiting them. Jain temples are sermons in stones speaking the doctrines of renunciation, peace and meditation. The images themselves are simple, either sitting or standing in deep meditation, often amidst the serenity of a hill or a lonely forest quite away from the turmoil of worldly life. They are beautiful in their simplicity; the grandeur is only to be discerned from the serenity of their facial expressions, of sound and quite proportionate parts of their bodies. They are almost uniform without any variety unless it be the idol of a *yaksha* or *yakshini*.

The images of *Yakshas* and *Yakshinis* are carved at some distance from the main image; they appear as if they have flown down to earth from their heavenly abode with all their crowns and ornaments, eager to render service to the Tirthankara seated or standing on the central platform or other ornamental seat. They are indisputably handsome. The well-built bodies of the Tirthankaras are mistaken by European art critics as well-fed, according little credit for their yogic poses and deep continuous meditation. The simplicity of the images normally stands in contrast with decorative pillars, attractive designs on the ceiling and the outer walls of beautiful temples to satisfy the tastes of the dignitaries who undertake to construct them.

The statue of Gommateshwara at Sravanabelgola was sculptured at the behest of Chamundaraya, the Minister and Military General of Rachamalla, the Ganga king. Gommata means 'beautiful' and that was the nickname of Chamundaraya; so Gommateshwara means "Lord, the beautiful", though the statue represents Bhagavān Bāhubali, who attained salvation even before his father, Adināth or Vṛashabhadev, the first Tirthankara, to whom references are found in the R̥gveda, Yajurveda, Śrīmad Bhāgavat and Dhammapada.

Every image which is worshipped by followers of different faiths has its own religious history and background; or else, it might represent some principles which form the very core of a religion. Gommateshwara or Bāhubali is son of the first Tirthankara. When R̥shabhadeva decided to renounce his kingdom prior to his acceptance of asceticism, he divided his territory between all his sons including Bharat and Bāhubali. After his father had become a Tirthankara, Bharat desired that he should become an Emperor by gaining suzerainty over the entire kingdom of his father. So he first sent his royal messengers to all his younger brothers to inform them of his intentions and call upon them to surrender their territories to him. The brothers were all surprised at his greed but they did not want war. So they surrendered their respective portions of the empire of their father, accepted asceticism from their father who was by then a Tirthankara and wended their way to solitary places for meditation on the Self. Bharat was quite happy over the success of his mission and was thus encouraged to send the same messengers to Bāhubali.

On hearing that his elder brother had entertained the ambition of becoming an emperor like his father, he told the messengers to inform his brother that it was the duty of a son to obey his father and be satisfied with the portion of the kingdom allotted to his share. Bharat was not happy with Bāhubali's answer and invited him for a war. Bāhubali told him that he was prepared for it, that the fight should be between them-

selves only and that no innocent soldier should be involved in their fight consistently with the principle of Ahimsā practised by Rshabhadev. It was agreed that they should fight among themselves by *dr̥ṣhti-yuddha* (looking at each other without winking the eye-lids as long as possible), *Malla-yuddha* (fight to test their mutual physical strength) and *jala-yuddha* (splashing of water at each other with force from a well or tank) and that whoever won in all, should be declared the victor. Bāhubali was superior to Bharat in physique, height and strength. He won the battle in all the three events and became victorious. Bharat had no alternative but to surrender to his younger brother all his kingdom and accept his sovereignty. So, out of sheer desperation, he wielded his *Chakra* (wheel) which would cut the head or any other part of the body of Bāhubali; to his great disillusionment, the wheel flashed towards Bāhubali flew towards him but stood by his side without harming him in any manner. Thus, truth and justice triumphed; Bharat stood crest-fallen.

Bāhubali was a hero not only on the battle-field but also in the conquest of his soul. He felt grieved for making his elder brother bend down his head in shame for the sake of perishable and impermanent glory or kingship so, he told his brother that he had surrendered all his kingdom to him and would accept asceticism. He was thus a unique hero who found satisfaction in renunciation even in his victory. He became a *muni*, became deeply engrossed in meditating over the infinite qualities of the soul and attained liberation. Though kukkuta-serpents built their ant-hills around the lower portion of his body and the mādhami creepers encircled his thighs and arms, he remained undisturbed, calm and engrossed in meditation. Bharat was astonished at the spiritual achievements of Bāhubali and fell at his feet. After Bāhubali attained liberation, he erected a colossus in gold measuring 525 arrows in height at Paudanapur where Bāhubali ruled. It became a great spiritual centre for worship and meditation.

This is the back-ground history of erection of the colossus of Bāhubali of Gommateshwara. Madhura was the capital of Ganga kings; Chamundaraya was an eminent Prime Minister, a brave General of the army, learned in religious lore, a literateur in Kannada and a devoted pious house-holder. Āchārya Nemichandra and Ajitajinasenāchārya were his preceptors; in fact the former wrote two renowned works in Jaina philosophy; *Dravyasangraha* and *Gommatasāra* which have immortalized the Āchārya in the history of Jaina philosophy. During the course of their talk, Kālālādevī, the mother of Chamundarāya, came to know of the colossus at Paudanāpurā and vowed not to take milk until she had a visit to that holy place and offered her prayers. When Chamundaraya came to know of his mother's vow, he started with his family and the two *gurus* to go to Paudanāpur. During the course of their journey, they halted at Śravanabelgola which had already become famous as a holy place, hallowed by the visit and death by *Sallekhana* of Śrutakevalin Bhadrabāhu in 272 B.C. and of his disciple Chandragupta Maurya who had accompanied him with 12000 other monks as the Śrutakevalin had predicted of a severe famine for 12 years in the north. The details of this event are to be found in an inscription (No. 1, 600 A.D. E.C. Vol. II). Though the historicity of this event was first doubted by some scholars, Vincent Smith who has written on Ancient Indian History, has supported the event to be true. Prof. S.R. Sharma, the author of "*Karnataka and Jain Culture*" and Dr. Saletore, the author of "*Medieval Jainism*" are in agreement with Smith. These events find support from "*Bṛhat-kathakośa*" by Harishena written in 981 and by *Bāhubalicharitre* in Sanskrit written by Ratnanandi.

Chamundaraya and his party paid their homage to the foot-prints of Bhadrabāhu and to the idol of Bhagavan Pārśvanāth in the temple built in the name of Chandragupta by his grandson on the small-hill (vindhya-giri), and rested for the night. It is believed that both Chamundaraya and his mother dreamt identical dreams in which Padmāvatī and Kūshmāndinī, both *yakṣinis* told them that Paudanāpurā was far distant, that the colossus of Bāhubali had become wholly covered with the ant-hills built by the kukkuta serpents which surrounded it and that he would see the image of Bāhubali on the summit of the opposite hill (indragiri), if he were to aim his golden arrow at the top. The next morning, Chamundaraya took his bath, paid his homage to the foot-prints of Bhadrabāhu and to Bhagavan Pārśvanāth. Then he shot his arrow at the top of summit on the hill opposite. There, to the joy of all, appeared the head of Bāhubali, Chamundarāya secured the services

of eminent sculptors and had the colossus measuring 57½ ft. in height made after considerable labour. Lewis Rice who first prepared the volume of “*Mysore Gazetteer*” stated that the magnificent image of unequalled beauty with a serene and contemplative face with a mild smile was prepared by Ariṭṭonemi, which is a prākṛit form of Arishṭanemi. History makes no reference to such sculptor, though there was one Acharya Arishtanemi who lived in about 650 A.D. as testified to by inscription No. 11 (E.C. Vol. II). Mention is made in inscription No. 458 of one Arittanemi-panditara, the destroyer of other philosophies. There is no other Arishtanemi mentioned in any of the inscriptions. It appears to me that as was usual with the ancient artists, they preferred to remain anonymous rather than carve their names somewhere. Chamundarāya must have employed a large number of workmen, though some Jaina Ācharya might have supervised the work, since the image is identical in description with that given by Jinasena Acharya in his *Mahapurāna*.

This colossus of incomparable beauty, serenity and engrossed in contemplation of the self, has received encomiums from numerous foreign artists and historians who visited India. None can dispute that the colossal image of Gommateshwara is an immemorable contribution of Chāmundarāya to Indian art and a tribute to the workmanship of the sculptors of the time, who have chosen to remain anonymous. It may be of interest to students of history to know that a similar small bronze image is to be found in the Prince of Wales Museum in Bombay.

The image is standing erect facing the North. It is, as already stated, serene in facial expression and the head is attractive “with curled hair in short spiral ringlets” as described in the *Mahāpurāna*. Upto the thighs, the figure is supported by ant-hills upto the thighs. Thereafter, the upper portion of the image stands erect without any support standing on an open lotus whose petals are proportionately carved to spread out accommodating the big feet. A plant of *Mādhavi* creeper has been carved to show as if it has grown encircling the thighs and the arms. It has been cut out of a solid granite rock standing on the top of the hill Indragiri. Even though it has been standing in the open overlooking the whole world, it has braved the vagaries of the sunshine, cold and rains.

Gommateshwara has watched over India for 1000 years preaching his message of Ahimsa and peace, of the perishable nature of worldly wealth and glory, of the need for renunciation of worldly pleasures, and meditation with concentration on the infinite qualities of the soul to attain imperishable bliss in heaven, never to return to the worries and anguishes of worldly life.

Behind the statue is a closed corridor with small uniform cells containing small images of the Twenty-four Tīrthankaras and of some *Yakshas* and *yakshinis*.

“The statues of this Jain Saint (Gommata)” says Fergusson in his book : *History of Indian and Eastern Architecture, Vol. II* “are among the most remarkable works of native art in the south of India. Three of them are wellknown and have long been known to Europeans. That at Sravanabelgola attracted the attention of the Duke of Wellington, when as Sir Wellesley, he commanded a division at the siege of Seringapatam. He, like all those who followed him, was astonished at the amount of labour such a work must have entailed, and puzzled to know whether it was a part of the hill or had been moved to the spot where it now stands. The former is the more probable theory. The hill is one mass of granite about 400 feet in height, and probably had a mass or Tor standing on the summit, either as a part of the subadjacent mass or lying on it. This, the Jains undertook to fashion into a statue 58 feet in height, and have achieved marvellous successWhether, however, the rock was found in situ, or was moved, nothing grander and more imposing exists anywhere out of Egypt, and even there no known statue surpasses in height, though it must be confessed that, they do excel it in perfection of art they exhibit”. (Page 72). But it is certain, that the Rameses in Egypt do not exhibit the same saintly expression on the face which is artistically most perfect and absorbing as in the case of Gomateshwara.

Mrs. N.R. Gusheva, who is a Russian author has written a book on “Jainism.” She merely refers to Sravanabelgola being the centre of Jainism in the South and to the image of Gomateshwara as of “tremendous size” carved from a rock in 980-999 A.D.

Workman in his “*Town and Jungles*” has been more realistic and impartial. He has stated that “the image is majestic and has impressive grandeur”. “The monolithic Indian saint is thousands of years younger than the prostrate Rameses or the guardians of Abu Simbal ; but he is more impressive, both on account of his commanding position on the brow of the hill overlooking the wide stretch of plain and his size.” He has also appreciated “the wondrous contemplative expression touched with a faint smile” (Pages 82-4).

The main purpose of art is to assist human beings in mastering their environment with a view to liberate themselves. Zimmer has referred to the characteristics of Jain sculpture in “*The Art of Indian Asia, Vol. I*” and has stated : “The Jain sculpture is the only art in India in which absolutely unclothed figures are foundthe nakedness of statues, like that of the monks of the archaic period, represents a condition of absolute detachment from the world, from the social order, and the common values of earthly life. For, the Jaina gospel of release from the bondage of life and rebirth was unremitting in its disciplines of renunciation.” (Page 15). He has also referred to the absolute perfection of Jain saints, purging themselves “of all the idiosyncrasies ... that make for the movement and variety of life.” He speaks of “rigid symmetry and utter immobility of their stance and of their spiritual aloofness.” Referring the Jain images, he observes that they are generally “rigid, erect, immobile, with arms held stiffly down, knees straight and the toes directly forward. The ideal physique of the Tirthankara is compared to the body of a lion, powerful chest and shoulders...” He further refers to the supreme triumph achieved by them by yoga and meditation (Page – 133). These are the observations of the author with reference to all Jain images in general. I have no doubt that they do apply with equal force to the statue of Gommateshwar which speaks of the “spiritual aloofness” of Jain saints.

This description applies to all Jain images whether sitting in *padmasana* or standing in *kayotsaraga*. Sound health and well-built body are the result of numerous restrictions in food, high ethical thoughts and meditation. A Tirthankara stands far supreme above all the run of common ascetics : there is therefore no surprise in his well-built body.

Dr. Anand K. Coomaraswamy is an eminent writer from Ceylon whose book on *Indian and Indonesian Art* expresses his views on Gommateshwar. He speaks of “the most remarkable ... great image of Gommateshwar” as being “one of the largest free standing images in the world” representing the “serenity of one practising *Kayotsarga* austerity, undisturbed by the serpents about his feet, the ant-hill rising to the thighs or the growing creeper that has already reached his shoulders.” This is indeed a graphic description of one who is fully immersed in deep in meditation, being oblivious to all things worldly and his liberated soul enjoying the heavenly bliss of an abode from which there is no return. Even when his victory over Bharat had placed emperorship at his feet, he spurned the glories and pleasures of the throne as his father had earlier and followed the path of renunciation to become the first *Siddha* in the Jain tradition. The facial expression impresses the onlooker with detachment, austerity and harmony of one who has attained bliss in heaven.

It would not be out of place to refer to an experience which I had with some two American academics who had come to visit Gommateshwar. They were sitting gazing at the monolith for a couple of hours; I gave them the religious background of the image. Words like “oh marvellous, magnificent, unimaginable” came from their mouths. They told me that they were feeling elated at the sight of Bhagavan, never experienced before.

Havell studied the entire field of Indian art of different religions. His critical impressions are contained in his book: “*The Art Heritage of India*.” He was attracted by the Hindu art where there are “divine incarnations of heroes, like Krishna who laboured for the material prosperity of humanity.” He therefore feels that the Jaina artists were limited “to a very small range of ideas” without the help of a mythology which allows free scope both for imagination and variety of picturesque colours. According to him, the Jain art suffers from “poverty of intellect.” It must be remembered that life undoubtedly offers a

variety of colours, scenes which are either glamorous or austere according as people seek for what is beautiful to the eyes or satisfying to them in their search for the real. Divine philosophy comes from within and whatever helps to realise it, is spiritual. Real beauty is ennobling and is the outcome of careful, intelligent and victorious struggle against the innumerable obstacles that beset the path of harmonious living. Even Krishna whose external appearance has provided material for painting of numerous pictures of excellent art pleasing to the eyes, yet the philosophy which he has preached in the Bhagwadgæta is one of inner satisfaction, being "divine philosophy." It is undoubtedly true that even among the art-lovers there are those who seek what is satisfying to the eye and others who seek for what is elevating to the soul. Since Jainism has not valued material prosperity, their art and architecture have an inner appeal. For one who finds satisfaction from external appearance, Jain art has little to offer except by their temples; it ministers to the inner grace, holiness, goodness and purity that help for liberation of the soul from the shackles of worldly life.

Prof. A.L. Basham, who is a learned and widely read scholar, has written a fine book: *The Wonder that was India*. It deals with almost all aspects of life, history, philosophy, literature and art. He admits that "nearly all the artistic remains of ancient India are of a religious nature or were at least made for religious purposes". According to him, "the artistic remains are expressions of deep religious experiences" and "sermons in stone". Writing about Gomateshwara, he says: "Asceticism and self-denial in various forms are praised in much Indian religious literatures, but the ascetics who appear in sculpture are usually well-fed and cheerful. As an example, we may cite the colossal rock-cut medieval image of Jain saint Gommateshwara at Sravana Belgola in Mysore. He stands bolt-upright in the posture of meditation known as *Kayotsarga*, with feet firm on the earth, and arms held downwards but not touching the body, and he smiles faintly. The artist must have tried to express the soul almost set free from the trammels of matter, and about to leave for its final resting place of ever-lasting bliss at the top of the universe. Whatever the intentions of the artist, however, Gommateshwara is still an ordinary young man of his time, full of vitality. The saint is said to have stood so long in meditation that creepers twined around his motionless legs, and they are shown in the sculpture; but though intended to portray his sanctity, they do but emphasise that he is a creature of the earth whom the earth pulls back".

I am unable to understand the last part of the remarks quoted above. It must be remembered that interpretation of work of art depends upon the knowledge of the religious, ethical or material background which a work of art is prepared to represent; absence of such knowledge will make us miss the spirit and know only what appeals to the eye. "Beauty is the virtue of the body, as virtue is beauty of the soul," said Emerson. While the former is visible to the naked eyes, the latter is not; the depth of understanding of the virtue of a soul necessarily depends upon the extent of knowledge of the principles which a work of art represents. Reading a work of art is itself an art depending upon depth of knowledge of the subject which it represents. As they say rightly, "heard melodies are sweet but those unheard are sweeter still". We have already seen that one of the critics has rightly said that Gommateshwara was quite unmindful of the anthills and creepers that had grown round his feet as he was deeply engrossed in meditation; the reading of Prof. Basham that the creepers which had entwined around his legs appeared to pull him back as he is a creature of the earth, appears to be superficial and contrary to the religious conception. If the creepers showed that he was a man of the earth, then Bāhubali would have removed them. The author has said, "Gommateshwara is still an ordinary young man of his time"; but this cannot be accepted by those who have read the life-story of Bāhubali, whether real or mythological. This observation of the author is inconsistent with his earlier observation that the artist must have tried to express that the soul was almost set free from the trammels of matter and about to leave for the final resting place of ever-lasting bliss. To my mind, there is a certain amount of self-contradiction.

Another foreign writer who has referred to Gommateshwara is Jack Finegan, the author of *"Archeology of World Religions"*. He has studied all the religions mentioned in his book including Jainism and its principles. He refers to the image as "a colossal statue of a great man of the Jaina faith". Then he

goes on to describe the image : “A remarkable example of the latter type of sanctuary may be seen on the summit of Vindhyagiri Hill at Sravana Belgola. In the centre of the open court surrounded by corridors adorned with Jinas and other figures, stands the enormous statue pictured in Fig. 75. The huge image measuring fifty-seven feet in height and standing erect and unclothed facing north, represents Gommata (Gommateshwara). Although the figure is treated in conventional form, there is a calm and serene expression upon the face. The anthills rise on either side and, as in the relief in the Indra Sabha, creeping plants spring from the ground and twine around the thighs and arms of the saint. Thus is symbolized the profound abstraction of the great ascetic who stands in his place of seclusion, neither moving nor noticing while ants build and plants climb around him. Inscriptions (No. 175, 176, 179) at the side of the statue, “Chamunda Raja caused (this image) to be made” and thus we learn that it was none other than the famous minister of Rajamalla who was responsible for the making of this monument. The date must have been about 983.” The author then quotes the prose translation of Boppana’s poem fully (as reproduced in Ephigraphia Carnatica Vol. II at pages 97-101).

This year, the Mahamastakabhisheka of Bhagavan Bāhubali is being celebrated by the Jainas with the active co-operation of the Government of Karnataka to mark the thousandth year of installation of the statue. There is however a difference of opinion amongst scholars as to the date of installation.

The celebration should not end merely like a mass congregation gathering to perform certain ritualistic ceremonies. Every one who participates in the celebration and even those who do not attend, must imbibe something of the renunciation of Bāhubali. What is most needed today in the world is his stoppage of bloodshed by not involving the armies of both sides in his war with his brother. The principles of Ahimsa, love, austerity, aparigraha and meditation which form the core doctrines of Jainism should be understood and practised in daily life by every one according to his capacity. The Jain concept of Puja or anointment is that it should not end with rituals. But those who are engaged in the acts and who observe the ceremonies, must meditate upon the infinite qualities of religion which Bahubali symbolises. The end of a Puja is self-purification and sincere effort towards perfection of ethical conduct a spiritual qualities of the soul. All expenditure would be waste of money if the devotees fail to aim at perfection.

अरे, ये खड़े हैं गोमटेश्वर ! दसों दिशाएँ मानो विनत हो कर उस विशाल चरण-युगल तले नील कमल बन कर बिछ गई हैं । अनन्तों की गहन, अशेष नीलिमा के भातर से यह कौन उतुंगकाय व्यक्तिमत्ता अनायास रूप ले कर प्रकट हो गई हैं ? आकाश ने इसके बाहु-मूलों में मुँह दुबका लिया है । ससागरा पृथ्वी इसके चरणों में लिपटी पड़ी है । कोमल और कराल ने समान रूप से इसका प्यार पाया है । यदि इसकी बाहुओं और जंघाओं ने कोमल लताओं के परिंरम्भण स्वीकार किये हैं, तो इसकी रानों पर भुजंगम विषधरों ने अपने चुम्बन भी अंकित किये हैं । प्रकृति की परम वत्सला गोद में शिशु की तरह अभय आत्मार्पण करके, यहाँ पुरुष ने उसके हृदय पर प्रभुता प्राप्त की है । निरंजन, निराकार असीमता ने यहाँ सीमा का वरण किया है । क्या मानवीय कल्पना ने कभी इससे अधिक भव्य-दिव्य सपना देखा है ? मुक्त अलकावलि से शोभित उस कोटि सूर्यो-से प्रचण्ड प्रतापी मुख-मण्डल पर जगत् के सारे दुःख-द्वन्द्व, क्लेश-विषाद की सारभूत छाया पड़ रही है । पर नासाय पर स्थिर वह दृष्टि, एक निर्बाध विजेता की समता और वीतरागता लिए एकदम निर्विकार और भावशून्य है, और उन सुदृढ़ फिर भी कमनीय ओठों के बीच जो अस्फुट मुस्कान दीपित है, उसमें सर्वजन-वल्लभ का सम्पूर्ण प्रार लहरा रहा है । मानो निरंजन, निराकार सच्चिदानन्द ने निर्वन्धन होते हुए भी, ईषत् मुस्कुरा कर काया-मया के बन्धन को स्वीकार कर लिया है ।

श्री वीरेन्द्र कुमार जैन की एक स्वप्न फन्तासी कथा ‘जब गोमटेश्वर ने डग भरा’ से सादर उद्धृत