

# A slice of Gandhara in Kanaganahalli

The camel sculptures at Kanaganahalli shed light on the integration of artisanal traditions, writes Srikumar M Menon



(Clockwise from left) A panel on an upper drum slab showing a camel-drawn chariot, at the Buddhist stupa in Kanaganahalli, Kalaburagi district; a coping stone of the railing of the stupa, with a camel image; part of the eastern torana of the Sanchi stupa, showing depiction of Bactrian camels. PHOTOS BY AUTHOR

**A**s dawn breaks on the banks of River Bhima, a devotee hurries along a pathway, clutching an armful of lily stalks. She passes a tall pillar crowned by an image of a seated lion and pauses before the hulking mass of a stupa looming in silhouette against the lightening horizon. A tall railing of limestone uprights and crossbars surrounds the stupa, images of real and mythical animals carved on the heavy coping which runs around its top. The animals are shown moving from right to left, indicating how the devotee must circumambulate the stupa within.

Stepping through an entryway in the railing, she bows before an image of Muchilinda—the king of serpents who once shielded the Buddha from a storm. Proceeding along the circumambulatory pathway, she gazes, in the soft light of dawn, on stories from the life of the Buddha and depictions of rulers who upheld the *Dhamma* over the centuries after his passing. Some of these are at her eye level, carved on the creamy white limestone slabs cladding the lower drum of the stupa.

To see the others on the tall upper cylinder of the stepped stupa, she has to move to the periphery of the pathway, craning her neck. She moves on, murmuring prayers, occasionally laying a lily on the flower receptacle—a sculptured ledge which runs all along above the lower drum, recognising among the images stories and scenes which the *bhikkus* at the monastery had narrated to the villagers.

Almost done with the *pradakshina*, she pauses in the south-west, intrigued by one of the images on the upper drum showing a chariot drawn by two animals, the likes of which she has never seen before. She knew many creatures of fantasy were carved on the stupa, such as winged cats and fish-tailed elephants, but what were these humped beasts of burden,

neither horse nor elephant?

This hypothetical scene could easily have played out at the Adhalaka Mahachaitya—a Buddhist stupa at Kanaganahalli, in Kalaburagi district of Karnataka, nearly two millennia ago. The stupa started out as a small mound of earth and rubble in the 2nd century BCE, during the period of Mauryan rule. Subsequently, under the patronage of Satavahana rulers, it was considerably enlarged, and embellished with beautiful carvings in shallow relief on the limestone slabs cladding the structure.

## Early artisans

The identities and migrations of early artisans who contributed to Indian monumental architecture have fascinated and puzzled scholars. Often, artisans have left signatures on their creations, and sometimes even the region they hailed from. At Kanaganahalli too, names of a few sculptors—Bodhiguta, Nagila, Kanhila, Nagabudhi etc., adorn the images of their creation.

Were these, and other artisans at Kanaganahalli, local residents or migrants from other lands? It is difficult to guess the identities and origins of the artisans based on available evidence, but some clues offer tantalising glimpses into possibilities. The strange-looking animals pulling the chariot which fascinated our hypothetical devotee from the second century are camels, animals unknown

in the region the stupa is situated.

A closer look reveals that the animals are two-humped Bactrian camels, whose historical range covers the cold deserts of China, Mongolia, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Kazakhstan. There are other depictions of camels at Kanaganahalli, on the coping stone of the railing, on a lower drum slab and another frieze above the upper drum slabs. It is incredible that all of these feature only the Bactrian camel.

Does this hint at the involvement of artisans from the land of the Bactrian camel in the construction of the stupa? After all, there is incontrovertible evidence for the presence of at least one scribe named Chapada, from the Gandharan region (now in Afghanistan) who carved the Ashokan edicts at Brahmagiri, in Chitradurga district. Chapada, who carved the characters of the edict in Brahmi *lipi*, preferred to inscribe his own identity in his native Kharosthi script.

Many of the images at Kanaganahalli are carved by gifted artisans, evidently familiar with the subject of their creations. For instance, the elephant sculptures at the stupa are some of the most beautiful, and anatomically accurate ones encountered in Indian art. In comparison, most of the camel depictions come across as mere caricatures. Even the relatively better-carved images on the upper drum slab seem inadequate compared to the depictions of Bactrian camels

on the eastern *torana* of the Sanchi stupa, which were obviously executed by artisans familiar with the animal.

## Imagery

Stupas in Gandhara, too, frequently featured camels. Camels are often the mounts on which the relics of the Buddha are transported, in imagery at Gandharan stupas, while the elephant is the mount of choice in most Indian stupas. Given the intimate familiarity with which the artisans of Kanaganahalli carved locally common animals like elephants, it appears likely that they were local sculptors, instructed or supervised by Buddhist monks from the Gandharan region.

Prof S Settar, in his book, *Early Buddhist Artisans and Their Architectural Vocabulary*, discusses the various categories of craftspeople involved in building monuments. He mentions a category of *bhikkus* called *navakamis*, some of who were responsible for designing religious monuments, without actually participating in their construction. Could it be that there were *navakamis* from far-off Gandhara at Kanaganahalli, planning the religious architecture of the stupa, and instructing local sculptors on the images to be carved?

The camels of Kanaganahalli might hold the answers.

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# Shantakavi: The architect of modern Kannada theatre

PRAKASH GARUD

**P**oet and playwright Sakkari Balacharya, popularly known as Shantakavi, lit the light of Kannada identity through theatre, and other literary and cultural experiments.

He is known as Adya Natakakara or the architect of modern Kannada theatre. He authored 75 literary works which include 20 plays, with an aim to rebuild *Kannadattva* or Kannada identity.

Shantakavi was born in 1856. He grew up in Dharwad.

During his childhood, he was attracted towards folk forms like *doddatta*, *Radhanata*, shadow puppetry etc. During the time, Marathi was the dominant language in the region. Even though Marathi was the medium of education, he grew up in a family of *pandits* who were well-versed in Kannada and Sanskrit. He learnt the nuances of Kannada dialects through folk art.

It is said that he drew inspiration from his family deity Satenahalli Shantesh, which is reflected in his pen name—Shantakavi.

After education, Shantakavi became a primary school teacher and soon he put in efforts to bring modern theatre to Kannada-speaking people. He is said to be the first playwright to write original Kannada plays. He wrote his first play *Ushaharana* in the 1870s.

Before him, there were only translations and adaptations from Sanskrit dramas or Shakespeare's plays.

He promoted one of the first professional theatre companies of Karnataka, formed by theatre enthusiasts of the time, *Veeranarayana Prasadita Kritapur Nataka Mandali* (1877).

He was a *keertanaka* (one who sings devotional songs). He sung *keertanas* and raised funds for the fourth Kannada Sahitya Sammelana held in Dharwad in 1918, which was about to be called off due to the shortage of funds.

He considered himself as a servant of Kannada language (*Kannadada dasayya*).

When he was working in Gadag town, higher officials didn't approve of his involvement in the theatre. They alleged that Shantakavi was spreading hatred among people of different languages. But he firmly believed that one need not hate other languages to strengthen a language.

Shantakavi was transferred from Gadag to Hombal, a village 10 km away. He would come



Shantakavi. PHOTO COURTESY: AUTHOR

to Gadag after duty hours for rehearsals.

His 10-year stint in Agadi village of Haveri district in the early years of the 20th century is considered a golden period of his work.

He chose themes from mythology and used the local dialect of North Karnataka for dialogues. *Shrungara* (romance), *veera* (valour) and *hasya* (comedy) *rasa* are the key elements of his plays. The dialogues are marked by elaborate rhetoric. His books have interesting titles: *Vasappa Nayakana Farce* (Vasappa Nayaka's Farce), *Adda Kathagala Booku* (A book of anecdotes) are just two examples.

He translated a few literary works from Sanskrit including Kalidasa's *Meghadoota*, *Ritusamhara* and *Raghuva sha*.

His literary and theatre experiments were ahead of his time and modern in approach.

He took to farming after retirement and formed a co-operative society of farmers in 1917 at Varanagalavi village near Dharwad.

He wrote *Vidyaranya Vijaya*, the first *keertana* in Kannada with a historical theme, in 1918.

It is said that Sufi saint Shishunala Sharif appreciated his *keertanas* with these words: *Sakkariyappa, ninna Kannada vani andara nijavagi sakkari id-dhanga*. (Sakkari ji, your Kannada recitation and speech is as sweet as sugar)

Celebrated poet Da Ra Bendre wrote an elegy, *Shantakavigala Vishranti*, when Shantakavi passed away in 1920.

Most of his works are not available in the public domain now. The need of the hour is to collect his works and publish them before they are completely lost. The government should work towards this and also honour his work by instituting an award in his memory.

(The author is a theatre practitioner based in Dharwad)



A scene from Shantakavi's Ushaharana, directed by Shripad Bhat and enacted by Natana Mysuru. PHOTO COURTESY: NATANA MYSURU



The remains of the Buddhist stupa at Kanaganahalli.

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# This 'symbol of love' reflects the water wisdom of Keladi rulers

SATHYAPRAKASH M R

**F**olk tales abound about Champaka Sarasu, a historical lake in Anandapura, Shivamogga district, which stands testimony to the water conservation efforts during the 16th century.

Sagara-based writer and researcher Na D'Souza says that the lake was built during the Keladi regime for the purpose of providing drinking water.

Popular belief is that this is a monument of love built by Keladi King Raja Hiriy Venkatappa Nayaka in memory of his wife Champaka.

According to a folklore, Venkatappa Nayaka falls in love with Champaka, a woman from the fishing community and eventually, she reciprocates. Locals believe their love transcended the barriers of caste and class but their marriage saw a tragic end due to societal norms and pressure, with Champaka ending her life by suicide.

## Historical accounts

Italian traveller Pietro Della Valle, who visited Keladi in 1623 during the rule of Venkatappa Nayaka (1586-1629), has eloquently written about the architecture of Keladi

Nayakas. In his book, *The Travels of Pietro Della Valle in India*, he makes a passing remark about "twice married Venkatappa Nayaka's affair with another woman from a meat-eating community." However, not much information is available about the identity of the woman.

Historically, there is no evidence about the existence of Queen Champaka.

However, there is evidence to establish that this lake was built by Venkatappa Nayaka for the purpose of providing drinking water to the people of Anandapura and that it was donated to a *math*.

An inscription found in Yedehalli, near Sagara town, mentions the details of handing over of Champaka Sarasu lake to Mahathina Math in Anandapura.

According to *Imperial Gazetteer of India Mysore and Coorg 1908*, Keladi king Venkatappa Nayaka established Sivachara Math, and called it Champaka-Sarasu.

Na D'Souza says Champaka Sarasu, situated in Anandapura, finds a mention in *Shivatava Ratnakara* written by Keladi Basappa Nayaka.

As this place was surrounded by Champaka trees, the lake was named as Champaka Sarasu.



Views of Champaka Sarasu in Anandapura, Shivamogga district. PHOTOS BY S DORESWAMY



## Water sources

English traveller Alexander Hamilton, who visited the Keladi kingdom in the 17th century, famously wrote, "Keladi Nayakas have built public infrastructure such as water reservoirs, parks, stepped wells, tanks

and roads, apart from palaces and temples." Champaka Sarasu does seem like one such stepped lake.

Hamilton cites the example of Keladi Hirekere reservoir built in those days. The reservoir is the primary source of water for the surrounding regions even to this day.

Champaka Sarasu is spread across five acres, with two elephant sculptures placed at the front. Steps are arranged on the four sides of the

lake much like the *pushkaranis* of the Vijayanagara empire.

A small Shiva temple is built in the middle of the lake. The entire lake is covered with a laterite stone compound and a small window-like opening is kept on the rear side to let the water out.

Champaka Sarasu is a living example of water conservation and management initiatives by Keladi Nayakas. Many water tanks,

ponds and lakes built during their rule are perennial even to this day. Devagange, a lake built in Nagara, is another such example.

## Conservation efforts

Today, this beautiful lake remains obscure. Lack of public attention and administrative care has not dampened the spirit of Anandapura's residents. They have formed a group called Save History and Heritage Committee for the conservation of this lake.

The group has been conducting various activities in this premises. From poetry sessions to workshops and government-supported programmes, Champaka Sarasu has been used as the venue for many events.

Swimming classes are conducted here for the past three years. Recently, YashoMarga foundation, an NGO, has taken up the preservation work of the lake under the guidance of water conservation expert Shivananda Kalave.

The committee is optimistic of getting government help for preservation and beautification of this cherished structure.

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