Lithic melodies

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The sun has slipped behind Hemakuta, painting the sky in vivid orange and pink hues, as I make my way to the Vitthala Temple at Hampi. All visitors have left the premises and it feels strange to have the entire monument to myself. The mahamantapa of the temple is a hulking silhouette against the dramatic sunset sky, while the familiar chariot-shaped Garuda shrine is lost in the shadows.

K Mohammed Ali, of the Archaeological Survey of India, is waiting to show me around. I am here with special permission to study the musical pillars of the mahamantapa. Ali takes me to a pillar in the southeasternmost corner of the mantapa. This is the famous sa-re-ga-ma pillar. Ali knocks against the colonettes of the pillar with his thumb, producing a slightly off-key rendition of the saptaswaras. Is this merely an accident, or did the sculptor intend the colonnettes to emit these notes?

As twilight fades into night, we go over the pillars one by one, Ali patiently demonstrating the musical merits of each pillar. Apart from the saptaswara pillar, there are several other pillars which have been likened to various musical instruments like the mridangam, veena etc. There is even one pillar, two of whose colonnettes, when struck in quick succession, emit the familiar notes commonly employed by doorbells!

Stories abound

The musical pillars of the Vitthala Temple have long been an enigma. Local guides would routinely entertain visitors by knocking on the pillars to produce musical notes, regaling them with stories of how one of the wives of Krishnadevaraya, Chinnammadevi, a former courtesan, danced in this mantapa to music from the pillars. A sculpture of a dancer on one of the pillars near the eastern entry is pointed out as a likeness of the queen.

This appears unlikely, given that the mahamantapa was built in 1554, by one Udagiri Timmaraja, well after the reign of Krishnadevaraya. An inscription calls it “dolotsava mantapa”, for conducting the swing-festival of the deity. Neither this inscription nor any of the several visitors’ accounts of Vijayanagara mention anything about the musicality of the pillars. Is this because the mantapa was too short-lived to make an impression? It was extensively damaged following the defeat of the Vijayanagara army at Rakkasagi-Tangadagi in 1565, less than 12 years after it was built.

Modern literature about the pillars is confusing. While most art historians dismiss any claims of the pillars’ musicality as purely accidental, renowned musicologist Pichu Sambamoorthy vouches that these musical pillars were deliberately fashioned.

The mahamantapa of the Vitthala temple has 56 columns arranged to create one large rectangular space along the axis of the temple, flanked by three squarish open spaces to its north, east and south. Each of the columns has a load-bearing portion that is roughly 50cm square and 3.2m tall, with slender colonnettes, rearing yalis, deities and musicians carved as projections. The entire column, including the colonnettes and sculptures, was carved from a single piece of granite.

Curious details

During my documentation of the pillars, several curious details emerged. The colonnettes were of widely varying heights — with a difference of nearly half a metre between the shortest and the longest ones. Sometimes the variation in heights appeared among colonnettes in the same row, creating jarring visual compositions. Each colonnette has a base, a slender shaft, a bulbous cushion and a lotus-shaped capital. This lotus-shaped capital was quite clumsily carved in most instances — in some cases, they were just conical lumps of rock, while in others they were shaved almost flat.

Several of the colonnettes look inelegant, even clumsy, in their finish. The Vitthala Temple is regarded as the “climax of architectural development at Vijayanagara” by the architectural historian George Michell, for its evolved aesthetic of planning, and the whittling down of the considerable mass of the pillars by using detached pillars and images.

For such a masterpiece, the poor finish of the colonnettes seems quite odd. In contrast, the colonnettes of the columns of the mahamantapa of the Virupaksha Temple, constructed in 1509-10 by Krishnadevaraya, and the earliest structure in which such composite pillars were introduced, are most elegantly carved.

With visual elegance obviously not the priority of the sculptors of the mantapa at the Vitthala Temple, could it be that they experimented with the dimensions and shapes of the colonnettes and the mass of the capital to create different notes, when struck? Sambamoorthy seems to concur, stating that they “went on chiselling off fragment after fragment until the correct note was reached.”

Stones which emit musical sounds are encountered early on in the material culture of our ancestors. Lithophones or ringing rocks are known from as early as the Neolithic, presumably appurtenances to ritual. There is one such prehistoric lithophone near the Vanibhadreshwara Temple, belonging to the Vijayanagara period, 13 km to the north of Hampi. Referred to as Manibhadreshwara in *Pampamahatmyam*, the sthalapurana of Hampi, it is one of the eight “gateways” to the holy Pampakshetra – situated in the cardinal and sub-cardinal directions.

Visitors to the temple marvel at the metallic, bell-like chimes which ring out when this rock is struck. It is unlikely that the Vijayanagara artisans who worked on the Manibhadreshwara Temple were unaware of this musical rock in the vicinity.

From such awareness and their own experience born of repeatedly striking metal against rock, those ingenious artisans must have pioneered a technique to produce resonant musical notes from certain forms of rock — an architectural curiosity which continues to intrigue visitors and scholars alike.

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