

# History through a different lens



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## Studying material culture could help piece together history, says archaeo-metallurgy expert Sharada Srinivasan

“It is harder to study Hindu artefacts as compared to Buddhist and Jain artefacts because the former are not inscribed,” says Sharada Srinivasan, professor at the National Institute of Advanced Studies. She holds a Ph.D from the Institute of Archaeology, University College London (1996) on Archaeo-metallurgy of South Indian bronzes.

She recently gave a talk on 'Ramayana Bronzes and Sculpture from the Chola to Vijayanagara Times' at the DSA Memorial International Conference on 'Connecting Cultures: Ramayana Retellings in South India and Southeast Asia' held at REVA University in honour of noted historian Prof D S Achuta Rao's centenary celebration.

"Archaeo-metallurgy is the study of the metallurgical profile of artefacts which could contribute to the stylistic analysis of the subject," Srinivasan said. "Here scientific analysis is used to clarify the dating of bronzes through certain criteria."

It is this technique that Sharada used to study the Chola and the Vijayanagara bronzes pertaining to the Ramayana.

"This paper talks about the earlier depictions of the Ramayana through the cultural narratives of that period. In the Chola period, for instance, we find the first appearances of Rama as a princely icon, linked to the notion of god kings."

Sharada observes that there are fairly few bronzes linked to the Ramayana before the Chola period. "The idea of a god king appears in the context of Pallava epigraphs. These influences have also spread to South-East Asia. And we also have Ramayana narratives that come in under the context of Shiva, quite similar to the depiction in the Nageshwara temple in Kumbakonam. But there was no full-fledged temple to Rama until the Vijayanagara period."

What is interesting about this from the bronzes' point of view is that if you look at the iconometry in the Chola times, Rama is still closer to the idealized prince. It is not until the Vijayanagara period that he begins to be depicted as a deity (apparent in the elongation of the body in that period).

Hanuman's iconography too seems to have had variations. While his form is still more human in the Chola period, by the late Pandyan period, he is depicted with open mouth and fangs, a depiction which is also found in Thailand.

"It is interesting to see how some of these ideas travelled through South-East Asia, perhaps they moved along with the performing arts traditions. There are so many different ways in which the epic is visualized in art."

Such studies, believes Sharada, are important from the scientific point of view as well because they involve looking at material culture to piece together narratives of trade and exchange.

"We don't get all the answers through inscriptions and literature and some of the evidence may even be lost. Looking at the history of technology and material culture throws up answers."

And the subject of the Ramayana in this context remains relevant because of the many ways in which the epic has been internalised and portrayed across South India and South-East Asia.

“It is great to see that the Ramayana generated so much artistic and literary interest across centuries. Such conferences are a way to energize and give life to it as art historians, archeologists and anthropologists,” explains Sharada.

“It is also great in the broader sense of how great literature has inspired great artistic output.” In case of the Cholas, for instance, what really sets them apart is their clear inspiration from the Bhakti tradition. The inspiration from the Alwar and the Nayanmar poet saints and their devotional poetry infused a certain life in the bronzes.

“They were steeped not only in literature, but also in the performance art traditions. A lot of the performance art tradition also moved to South-East Asia. The nuances of the episode involving Soorpanakha, which is critical to the narrative, in many ways, is found in the shadow puppetry traditions of Hampi. It was a feature in the Chalukya depictions and also find itself in the narratives of Khmer.”

In terms of the nature of the bronzes, especially the Chola ones, their craftsmanship and skill remains unparalleled.

“But this skill didn’t emerge from a vacuum, the megalithic bronzes are highly skilled and finely wrought and the tradition seems to have continued. What is significant about the South Indian bronzes is that the craftsmen were clearly cognizant of what type of alloy would give the best output. And the moulding technology was far superior. That skill is lost now.”

Sharada is now working on documenting her research on the subject, working with master craftsmen, while writing a book.