

Abstract

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Sacred Symbols, Enlightened Beings and Temple Guardians: The Display of Holy Elements on Pillars in Jaina Temple Complexes in Karnataka

Jaina temple complexes in Karnataka usually contain a large central temple building surrounded by further shrines and a variety of associated buildings. In addition, many include other accessories and more sculptural elements, which so far have widely been neglected in the analysis and discussion of the art and architecture of the region. The emphasis in this paper will be on a variety of pillars or votive columns (*skambhas*, *stambhas*, *dhvajas*), which are regularly positioned in front of temple structures throughout the region. The pillars fulfil a series of functions and are associated with a variety of sacred and symbolic sculpted elements.

Some pillars fulfil largely practical functions, such as raising lights (*dīpa-stambhas*) or flags (*dhvaja-stambhas*). Most wide-spread and best known are *māna-stambhas* (*mānavaka-stambhas*). These are closely, but not exclusively, associated with the Digambara form of Jainism. *Māna-stambhas* are part of the complex set up of the *samavasaraṇa*, the teaching auditorium of the Jinas. As every temple is considered a symbolic representation of the *samavasaraṇa*, also temple structures have often been associated with such pillars. Early carved representations indicate that at the beginning of the iconographical development of Jaina imagery, the pillars were surmounted by the symbol of the sacred wheel, the *dharmacakra*. This is related to the Jinas' identification as cakravartins. Today, however, most *stambhas* have a quadruple sculpted representation of a Tīrthaṅkara (*caturmukha*) positioned at the summit of the tall slender shafts. These can also be seated in a small pavilion.

Closely related in style, but independent in nature, are so called *brahma-stambhas*. These raise a statue of the Jaina god and *kṣetra-pāla* Brahmadeva, above the ground of the sacred temple complex. Part of the developed iconography of *brahmadeva-stambhas* is also the representation of the guardian's associated *vāhana*, the horse. As has been described in association with *māna-stambhas*, also those associated with representations of Brahma often

are topped by small pavilions or shrines. In Karnataka, a noteworthy development can be noticed in connection with the pavilions of *brahma-stambhas*. Over time, the size of the shrines associated with guardian pillars at prominent pilgrimage sites, got larger and larger. In order to support the substantial structures above, additional supporting columns had to be constructed around the central pillar. At many sites, only the head priests have access to these exalted statues. The placing of additional images, such as *nāga-kals* or *nāga-śilas*, usually at the bottom of such pillars, allows parallels to be drawn with venerated Jaina trees (e.g. *caitya-vṛkṣa*, *kalpa-vṛkṣa*) as well as with multi-storeyed temple constructions, common throughout the region.

Due to the inaccessibility of the sculptures of Brahmadeva in pillar-shrines of this kind, and also due to a lack of funds at more local places of Jaina worship, not all *brahma-stambhas* are as tall as those described here. Especially temples in smaller localities often have versions of *kṣetra-pāla-stambhas* with much lower pillars. These express a tendency to move away from tall pillar-like constructions, in which the image is far removed from the gaze and access of the people. The development is towards the creation of a shrine at eye-level, in which worshippers can more actively participate in the veneration of the figural images. It is a movement away from an abstract concept raised on a high pedestal, to a more approachable image integrated into everyday temple rituals.