

## Śiva and Pārvatī's Game of Dice at Aihole

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*nīcā vartanta upari sphuranti  
ahastāso hastavantaṁ sahante/  
divyā aṅgārā iriṇe nuptāḥ  
śītāḥ santo hr̥dayaṁ nirdahanti//*

*The dice roll down, then spring upwards; without hands, they overcome him that has hands: divine coals thrown down upon the gaming board, though cold, they burn the heart.*

*- Ṛgveda, "The Gambler's Hymn",*

A.A. Macdonell's translation, slightly retouched

**T**he gambler's predicament is well expressed in *Ṛgveda* (X.34), the lament of the game's addict, scorned by mother-in-law and wife, hounded out by relatives and hunted by creditors - yet powerless to keep away from the gaming hall once the dice begin to roll.

For a wanderer god, favourite of ascetics and renouncers, one having few worldly possessions, the repertory of Śiva's episodes and exploits in sculpture, painting and verses is rich indeed. Śiva bestows blessings on his devotees, slays the demons who torment his devotees. He tames the pride of the lord of Laṅkā steadying the shaking of the Kailāsa peak with one toe; burns Kāma the god of love to ashes; seduces the wives of the sages; supports the heavenly Gaṅgā on his head. He is the ultimate teacher of Music, Yoga and the Dance. At the end of an aeon, Śiva presides over the dissolution of Time and the Universe. Emerging from the fiery Liṅga, he stamps his supremacy over the Brahmanical triad - and a hundred other exploits.

About a dozen sculptures from the fifth to the tenth century from north India and the Deccan portray Śiva and Pārvatī playing the game of dice (*akṣakrīḍā*) - and the supreme god being beaten every time by his wife. To these sculptures, whose number is by no means large, we can now add a hitherto unpublished representation from the Early Western Cālukya site of Aihole in the Deccan, the southern-most occurrence of the motif known so far.

According to the narrative, Śiva and his wife play the game of dice on Mount Kailāsa in the Himālaya. As the match progresses, Śiva pledges his possessions one after another, the crescent of the moon, the cobra, the skull cup, the stream of the heavenly river Gaṅgā - and loses everything. He then wagers his most precious possession, the Nandi bull, to lose him as well; but his *gaṇas* would not allow their favourite animal to be led away by Pārvatī's maids.

Such is the simple story, one that the *Purāṇas* convert into a theological dispute.

Krishna Deva has published these sculptures, which show varying degrees of success of the sculptors, from lively and playful young divine couple in the early period to a rather set and lifeless iconography later on.<sup>1</sup> He cited the narrative in the *Skanda-*, *Brahma-*, *Padma-*, *Vāyu-* and *Vāmana-Purāṇas*. The composers of the *Purāṇas* unfortunately miss the light-hearted and amorous banter that must have passed between the couple - and the fact that the dice game between lovers is not really a duel but a duet the divine lovers, so to say. They could not come to terms with the lord of the three worlds, the vanquisher of Rāvaṇa, could lose out to a woman.

But if the *Purāṇa* writers missed the whole point, the poets understood. An anonymous verse can be quoted:

*Smitenopāyanam dūrād āgatasya kṛtam mama/  
stanopapīḍamāśleṣaḥ kṛto dyūte paṇastayā//*

*“As I came, she presented me from afar with a smile. In the gambling match we then played, the stake was a close embrace.”<sup>2</sup>*

The carvings published by Krishna Deva are summarized below, with references to his illustrations. References are also given to the photographic

archives of the American Institute of Indian Studies (AIIS) [dsal.uchicago.edu](http://dsal.uchicago.edu) accessible on the internet.

The panel from the fifth century brick temple at Bhitargaon (district Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh) is much damaged. Only the divine couple, seated in the pose that later became well known for the game of dice scene, the bull that Śiva wagered and lost, and a couple of the god's *gaṇa* followers, are preserved. A rectangular chess board (?) is on the god's lap: Krishna Deva, Pl.XIV, Fig.1/ AIIS 48200.

The panel high on the wall in the rock-cut shrine at Jogeshwari, second quarter of the sixth century, is better preserved, more animated, Śiva throwing the bits, betting his bull by touching his horn. The rectangular gaming board lies between the pair<sup>3</sup>: Krishna Deva, Pl.XIV, Fig.3; this is not on AIIS.

At Mandasor/Sondani (Krishna Deva, Pl.XIV, Fig.2/ AIIS 19859), the Aulikara period panel of the same date as Jogeshwari, equally charming, is split vertically, Śiva, his bull and the *gaṇas* alone surviving. We can only guess the glee of the goddess at winning. In a stanza of the poet Tuṅga anthologized in Vidyākara's *Subhāṣitaratnakoṣa*, Skanda reports the result of the duel to Bhṛṅgin:

*“Kasmāttvaṃ?” “Tātagehāt/” “Aparamabhinavā brūhi kā tatra vārtā/”*  
*“Devyā devo jitaḥ/” “Kiṃ?” “Vṛṣaḍamarucitābhasmabhogīndracandrān/”*  
*Ityevaṃ barhināthe kathayati sahasā bhartṛbhikṣāvibhūṣā-*  
*vaiguṇyodvegajanmā jagadavatū ciram hā-ravo bhṛṅgarīṭeḥ //<sup>4</sup>*

*“Whence come you?” “I come from Father’s house.” “And what’s the latest news from there?” “The god has lost to the goddess.” “What?” “His bull, his drum, his funeral ash, his moon and snakes.” May the cry of Bhṛṅgarīṭi as Skanda tells him this, born of the sorrow at his master’s heavy loss of means to beg and ornaments, long aid the world (Ingalls' translation).*

At Tala, a seventh century temple known as the Deorani temple, Bilaspur district, Chhattisgarh State, the goddess is trying to persuade her incredulous consort, as the dice board lies between them, that it is indeed 'she' who has won. Krishna Deva Pl.XV, Fig.4/ AIIS 42051 for the game, 42052 and 42050 for details of the other participants.

Elsewhere, the composition is less lively.

Ellora Cave 21 (Rāmeśvara Cave, sixth century) accommodates the scene in two registers, the actual game above, and then the bull being led away in the compartment below: Krishna Deva, Pl.XV, Figs.5-6/ AIIS 44198 full; other views are in AIIS 44109, 44199, 44200, 44202 and 47393).

In Ellora Cave 14 (Rāvaṇa-kī-Khāī) also the scene is in two registers, the actual game above and the bull struggling to be free below: Krishna Deva, Pl.XVI, Fig.7/ AIIS 43360 full, 43396.

Ellora Caves 15 (Daśāvatara) and 16 (Kailāsa) are similar, but images are not published by Krishna Deva. On *dsal* only small index images are uploaded, 56079 for Cave 15 and 97459 for Cave 16.

Mukhalingam, Srikakulam district of Andhra Pradesh, seventh century, is once again lively, with the gaming board with its squares marked; the story occupies the entire lintel on a doorway: Krishna Deva, Pl.XVII, Fig.9/ AIIS 64213.

Jabalpur Museum, Cedi-Ḍāhala country, tenth century (Krishna Deva, Pl.XVII, Fig.8/ AIIS 36057). Nandīśvara-Mahākāla and devotees on either side, Bhṛṅgin between the over-sized couple, Śiva's bull tamely waiting to get on with the game: with all this formal symmetry, the *līlā* has lost the life it had at Sondani and Jogeshwari, it has become an icon. The rough-and-tumble, the horseplay of Abhinanda's following verse is all but missing:

*Śṛṅgaṃ bhṛṅgin vimuñca tyaja gajavadana tvaṃ ca lāṅgūlamūlam  
Mandānando'si nandinnaṃ abala mahākāla kaṅṭhagraheṇa /  
Ityuktvā nīyamānaḥ sukhayatu vṛṣabhaḥ pārvatīpādamūle  
Paśyannaḥ śairvilakṣaṃ valita galacalatkaṃbalaṃ tryambakaṃ vaḥ//*

*Subhāṣitaratnaśoṣa*, verse 77 of Abhinanda

*“Let go his horn, Bhṛṅgin, and Gaṇeśa, drop his tail. Ah, but you are sad, Nandin! Poor Mahākāla! Clasp not his neck.” With such words being led to the feet of Pārvatī may the bull with turning neck and dewlap swaying, still looking at his three-eyed master who has lost at dice, bring you to happiness (Ingalls' translation).*

To these episodes of the god's domestic life, one more hitherto unknown carving can now be added, which is on a lintel on the back or west wall of a small



Fig.1 : Small shrine in the *Jyotirlinga* group, Aihole



Fig.2 : Śiva and Pārvatī playing the game of dice, lintel, west wall of a small temple in the *Jyotirlinga* group, Aihole

shrine in the *Jyotirlinga* group at Aihole (Figs.1-2). The lintels on the north and south walls have garland-bearing *bhūtas*, but the back or west wall has a panel of Śiva and Pārvatī playing at the game of dice. The panel occupies the entire six foot length of the wall.

At the centre, Śiva has thrown the dice on the long rectangular gaming slab with the squares etched placed between himself and his consort. His devout follower Bhṛṅgin is seated at ease, a yogī's sash around his knees, by the god's side, amused at the good-natured quarrel just erupting. Gaṇeśa and a Śiva *gaṇa*, and Pārvatī's companions watch from the sides. At the right, a minor riot has broken out: the god having lost their favourite bull, the *gaṇas* are blocking the goddess' maids from claiming their booty. An easy familiarity, a relaxed air pervades the happening, and Bhṛṅgin is not perturbed.

Later *Purāṇas*, cited by Krishna Deva (pp.44-45), labour the point, missing the spirit of the light-hearted play of the divine couple; they add jealousy, ill temper of the god's followers and the other gods, Bhṛṅgin contesting the result and then even being cursed by the goddess to become a skeleton, etc.

The builder of the small shrine in the *Jyotirlinga* group (earlier than the other structures in this group) inserted the panel so unobtrusively that no one seems to have given this (perhaps also somewhat unfinished) panel a second look. The north and south sides with thick garlands borne by running *gaṇas* also are somewhat coarsely carved.

Standing right on the road leading to such prominent monuments as the Durgā and Lad Khan temples, and hardly a hundred metres from them, this small plain shrine has escaped attention. K. V. Soundarajan did insert a few lines in his chapter in the *Encyclopaedia of Indian Temple Architecture*, but his eye did not spot this temple's only sculpture of interest: "A small, square, *muṇḍamālā* temple of *maṇḍapikā*-type in the *Jyotirlinga* group is notable for a few points. Over a simple *kapotabandha adhiṣṭhāna* are four corner pillars filled between by masonry; these support a carved lintel showing garland-bearing *bhūtas* on the south (Plate 281) and Śiva and Pārvatī with Gaṇeśa, Bhṛṅgi, etc. on the west (Plate 282). The temple

falls in this phase [= Phase 2 of the Cālukyas of Bādāmī, circa 700-750 AD]”, this all he has to say.<sup>5</sup>

Surely, artistic centres in the Deccan (and centres further to the north) were in contact with each-other; sculptors must have drawn inspiration from one another. They preferred themes with more narrative than iconic interest from tradition. The descent of Gaṅgā was represented at both Aihole (Rāvalphāḍi) and Elephanta in the sixth century (and at about the same time also in Daśapura-Mandasor). Śiva as *Dakṣiṇāmūrti* or exponent of Science and Art was at both Elephanta and Ellora. Now we have found one more example, with the sculpture of the gods playing the game of dice at Jogeshwari and Aihole, besides Ellora.

The story of the dice game remained just that, a delightful anecdote, an innocent sport (*līlā*) in divine domestic life. Unlike some other myths of Śiva, this motif did not rise from being a specific anecdote to something greater than it is.

For example, down the centuries, countless Hindus have seen their departed ancestors in terms of the myth of the descent to earth from heaven of Gaṅgā to liberate the sons of the King Sagara who had been reduced to ashes, and Śiva's act of supporting her on his head.

Similarly, the blended figure of Śiva and Pārvatī as *Ardhanārī* came to express the ultimate Unity - and Divinity - of Man and Woman:

*“Yadambā tāto vā dvayamidamagādekatanutām,  
tadardham cārdham ca kva nu gatamathāryaḥ kathayatu;  
jagattattajjātaṁ sakalanaranārīmayam...”*

*“When Mother and Father attained to the state of being one in body [Pārvatī and Śiva as Ardhanārī], what happened to the half of the body of each that remained, please explain, Master!” “Śiva was born in this world as every man, Pārvatī as every woman.”* (Free translation of a verse attributed to poet Maṇḍana: *Subhāṣitaratnaḥ*, verse 85).

The theme of Śiva's dance expanded to take on a 'cosmic' import, the performance of Śiva Naṭarāja's *tāṇḍava* “dancing the world out of existence, in the burning ground”, at the end of an eon, as Stella Kramrisch said.

Śiva and Pārvatī's duel with the dice did not attain to a lofty height in

India's iconography it is true, yet it does furnish a delightful detail in Hindu marriage ceremony. In some parts of the country (Krishna Deva, p.44), the bride and groom at their nuptials play the same game that Śiva and Pārvatī play on Kailāsa. The young couple's enactment of this myth on the threshold of conjugal life it is believed will ensure them marital bliss, just as the outcome will also predict whether her writ will run in her family. And as the new bride and her circle of friends pray that the dice should always roll in her favour in life, as they do for the goddess in myth, the good-natured groom will not grudge her that - as Śiva does not grudge the goddess' good luck at gambling, all said and done.

If we may give a little spin to the verse quoted above: in the gambling match the newly married couple plays, the stake is a close embrace.

This paper is offered to the memory of Dr. N. P. Joshi.

Courtesy : Fig.1 is from the author's photograph. Fig.2 is by Ritu Joshi.

## References & Notes

- 1.. Krishna Deva, "Śiva and Pārvatī Playing at the Dice (*Akṣakrīḍā*)", *Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art*, New Series, Volumes XVI and XVII, 1987-89, pp.44-49.
2. This is Daniel H.H. Ingalls' perceptive translation of an anonymous verse from the *Sāhityadarpaṇa*: Daniel H.H. Ingalls, tr., *An Anthology of Sanskrit Court Poetry: Vidyākara's Subhāṣitaratnakoṣa*, Harvard Oriental Series 44, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1965, p.8.
3. Thanks are due to Dr. A.P. Jamkhedkar for pointing out this older shape of the gaming board.
4. Vidyākara's *Subhāṣitaratnakoṣa*, ed. by D.D. Kosambi and V.V. Gokhale, Harvard Oriental Series 42, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1957, verse 98.
5. K.V. Soundarajan, 'South India, Upper Draviḍadeśa, Early Phase', *Encyclopaedia of Indian Temple Architecture*, ed. by Michael W. Meister and M.A. Dhaky, New Delhi, 1986, p.90.