

2 Decoding Narrative Depictions from Pattadakal: Episodes of Ahalya and Indra's Amour

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At Pattadakal in Karnataka, the Virupaksha and Mallikarjuna (745 CE) temples, sponsored by Lokamahadevi and Trailokyamahadevi, the queens of Chalukya emperor Vikramaditya II (733-744 CE), are huge repositories of narrative sculpture. The pillars in these two temples were embellished with friezes based on mythic episodes of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, various *Puranas* and *Panchatantra*.¹ Included in this rich gamut of narrative panels is an unusual depiction of the romance of Ahalya and Indra, the details of which will be decoded in this paper.

The Story of Ahalya and Indra

The antiquity of the story of Ahalya's adultery with Indra goes back to Brahmanas and Grihyasutras that refer to Indra as 'Ahalya's lover'.² The best exposition of the story, however, is in Balakanda and Uttarakanda of the Ramayana.³ Some Puranas and later vernacular texts also contain versions of the story.

In *Balakanda*, Vishvamitra narrates the story of Ahalya and Indra as a response to Rama's query about the deserted ashrama which they entered en route to the city of Mithila. At one time, the *ashrama* was the hermitage of Sage Gautama and his wife Ahalya. Once, in Gautama's absence, Indra disguised himself as Gautama and sought union with Ahalya. She did not recognize the visitor was Indra yet gratified him. As Indra was about to leave, he was confronted with the Sage who in intense anger cursed him to lose his testicles and Ahalya to stay in that *ashrama* for thousand years, invisible to any being, performing penance, sleeping on a heap of ash. Gautama assured Ahalya would be purified and restored to her pristine form in future when Rama would arrive in the *ashrama*. *Uttarakanda* repeats the story briefly, but adds information about Ahalya's origin, Gautama rearing her up, Brahma offering her to Gautama in marriage, Indra's eye on her even before her marriage, etc.

Venkata Krishnappa Nayaka (16th century), a Chief of Nayakas of Gingee and a Telugu poet, records a version which puts the story differently:⁴

Ahalya used to flirt with Indra even after her marriage with Gautama in the latter's absence. Once Ahalya received Indra's female messenger who mocked husbands avoiding sex by saying that it was not the right day for pleasure. Ahalya retorted that she enjoyed with Gautama imagining Indra in him. That night Ahalya longed for conjugal bliss from Gautama who refused saying it was not her fertile period. Agitated, she wished Indra were there to satisfy her. Perceiving her wish, Indra came in Gautama's guise but revealed himself by his seductive words. Yet, Ahalya made love to him.



Fig.2.1 : Virupaksha Temple, Pattadakal, pillar, east face. Semicircular frame: Gautama's hermitage. Upper panel: 1. Ahalya on a bed of leaves in a grove. 2. Ahalya in the grove. 3. Indra and Vajra watch Ahalya. Lower panel: 1. Tilottama informs Indra about Ahalya's consent. 2. Tilottama returns from Ahalya's place. 3. Indra and Tilottama proceed to Ahalya's place. 4. Ahalya unites with Indra, 740-745 CE, reddish-golden sandstone, horizontal panels: approx. 70x40 cm, semicircular frames: approx. 56x41 cm.



Fig.2.2 : Virupaksha Temple, Pattadakal, pillar, south face. Semicircular frame: Indra and Vajra on the lookout for Ahalya. Upper panel: 1. Indra and Vajra watch Ahalya. 2. Tilottama journeys to meet Ahalya. 3. Tilottama meets Ahalya. Lower panel: 1. Indra and Vajra in the court, attended by Menaka and Urvashi. 2. Indra with Vajra requests Tilottama to be his messenger, 740-745 CE, reddish-golden sandstone, horizontal panels: approx. 70x40 cm, semicircular frames: approx. 56x41 cm.

Visuals of the Story in Reliefs

In Indian art, the deliverance of Ahalya by Rama had been given sole importance, while representation of the antecedent story is hard to find.⁵ However, in Virupaksha and Mallikrjuna temples at Pattadakal, Ahalya and Indra story had been depicted in exceptional detail. These depictions are in the *gudha-mandapa* of both temples, on the second pillar of the nave-side west-east row of pillars in the northern half near the vestibule. All the four faces of the pillars were meant to carry carvings of events from the Ahalya and Indra story as suggested by unfinished ones on the west face of the pillar in Virupaksha temple, though in Mallikarjuna temple it is left plain. In both cases, some panels carry short labels that help identify corresponding characters of the narrative and guess the unlabelled ones.

Pillar in Virupaksha temple

East Face, Fig.2.1

The artist has situated the principal events on the east face of the pillar. In the upper semicircular frame is Sage Gautama teaching two pupils in the hermitage. Trees, birds, rocky outcrops and monkeys, pairs of antelopes and beasts complete the woodland scenario. This relief contextualizes the story in Gautama's hermitage.

The two horizontal panels below contain the key events of the story. The upper panel has, from viewer's left to right, three frames separated by trees: 1. Ahalya reclining on a bed of leaves in a grove; 2. Ahalya in the grove; 3. Indra with Vajra watching Ahalya in the grove.

In the lower panel, the characters are named by labels. With no division in the panel, four events are suggested: 1. Tilottama informs Indra about Ahalya's consent; 2. Tilottama returns from Ahalya's place; 3. Indra and Tilottama go to Ahalya's place; 4. Union of Ahalya and Indra.

The carvings on the south, north and west face of the pillar complement those on the east face hence these are to be read along with them.

South Face, Fig.2.2

In the upper semicircular frame, Indra and Vajra are on the lookout for Ahalya. The upper horizontal panel, without divisions, depicts three events: 1. Indra and Vajra watch Ahalya craving for love; 2. Tilottama journeys to Ahalya; 3. Tilottama meets Ahalya and conveys Indra's desire.

There are two events in the lower panel, the figures being named by labels: 1. Indra and Vajra are in the court, attended by the celestial nymphs, Menaka and Urvashi; 2. Indra with Vajra requests Tilottama to be his messenger of love.

North face, Fig.2.3

In the upper semicircular frame, a couple, probably Indra and Shachi or Indra and Tilottama, is attended by a dwarf lady and dwarf *gana*-like figure.

Three events are depicted in the upper horizontal panel in two segments separated by a tree: 1. Indra flirting with Ahalya; 2. Indra and Vajra are seated on a platform; 3. Indra and Vajra journey towards the centre of the panel.

In the lower panel a royal person, apparently Indra, is watching a dance performance in his court.



Fig.2.3 : Virupaksha Temple, Pattadakal, pillar, north face. Semicircular frame: Indra and Shachi or Indra and Tilottama. Upper panel: 1. Indra flirting with Ahalya. 2. Indra and Vajra on a platform. 3. Indra and Vajra journeying. Lower panel: Indra watches a dance performance, 740-745 CE, reddish-golden sandstone, horizontal panels: approx. 70x40 cm, semicircular frames: approx. 56x41 cm.

West Face, Fig.2.4

There are two horizontal panels with unfinished figures. In the upper panel the central figure is Ahalya on rocks with a trishula set up beside, apparently undertaking penance after Gautama's curse. On the extreme right side of the panel Ahalya and Tilottama are in conversation. On the extreme left are two unfinished human figures, probably Indra sneaking from Ahalya's place. In the lower panel, the figures are too unfinished for correct identification.



Fig.2.4 : Virupaksha Temple, Pattadakal, pillar, west face. Upper panel: 1. Ahalya and Tilottama in conversation. 2. Ahalya on rocks with a trishula beside. 3. Unfinished, Indra sneaking from Ahalya's place, 740-745 CE, reddish-golden sandstone, horizontal panels: approx. 70x40 cm, semicircular frames: approx. 56x41 cm.

Pillar in Mallikarjuna Temple

East face, Fig.2.5

In the upper semicircular frame is Gautama's hermitage. The seated sage is preaching to two pupils while two more are seen in the hut. This depiction situates the story in Gautama's hermitage.

The two horizontal panels below contain figures named by labels. In the upper panel, there are four segments separated by trees: 1. Seated Indra and Vajra watch Ahalya in a grove; 2. Indra with Vajra moving closer to Ahalya; 3. Ahalya watches Indra and Vajra; 4. Ahalya is loitering in a grove. Apparently, the depiction here relates to a lovelorn Indra spotting an agitated Ahalya. In the lower panel are three events with characters named by labels: 1. Lovesick Ahalya reclining on a bed of leaves near a lake; 2. Tilottama conversing with Ahalya; 3. Tilottama arriving to meet Ahalya. The scene apparently relates to Tilottama getting Ahalya's consent to join Indra.

South Face, Fig.2.6

On the south face of the same pillar, the semicircular frame contains a depiction of the worship of Shiva linga. Of the horizontal panels below, the upper one depicts Indra and Shachi watching a dance. In the lower panel, there are four events from viewer's left to right: 1. Tilottama moves away, leaving Indra; 2. Tilottama takes Indra to Ahalya's place; 3. Ahalya and Indra making love; 4. Ahalya waits for the arrival of Indra. Obviously, the panel depicts the consummation of Ahalya and Indra's romance.

North face, Fig.2.7

On the north face of the pillar, the upper semicircular frame contains a couple in embrace who could be Indra and Tilottama.

In the upper horizontal panel are three events: 1. Indra with Vajra presents a flower to Tilottama, requesting her to be a messenger; 2. Indra along with Vajra moving away; 3. Indra, Tilottama and Vajra arrive. The panel apparently depicts the event of Indra insisting on Tilottama to be his messenger of love.

In the lower panel the depictions are: 1. Tilottama, by presenting a flower, conveys to agitated Ahalya Indra's desire for union. The male figure to Ahalya's right is apparently the personification of her dream paramour, Indra. 2. Tilottama arrives to meet Ahalya. The events are to be read from the viewer's right to left.

Restoration of the Story

The following sequence may be conjectured from the depiction of the story on the Virupaksha temple's pillar: 1. North face, lower panel: Indra with a disturbed mind is watching a dance in his court, Fig.2.3. 2. North face, upper panel: Indra and Vajra move to Ahalya's place where Indra flirts with Ahalya, Fig.2.3. 3. East face, upper panel: Indra and Vajra watch lovelorn Ahalya, Fig.2.1. 4. South face, upper panel: Indra and Vajra see an agitated Ahalya and alert Tilottama to go as messenger, and she meets Ahalya, Fig.2.2. 5. West face, upper panel, right hand side figure: Tilottama further able to persuade Ahalya successfully, Fig.2.4. 6. South face, lower panel: Tilottama returns to Indra's court to convey the success of the mission, Fig.2.2. 7. East face, lower panel: Tilottama informs Indra about Ahalya's willingness and takes him to

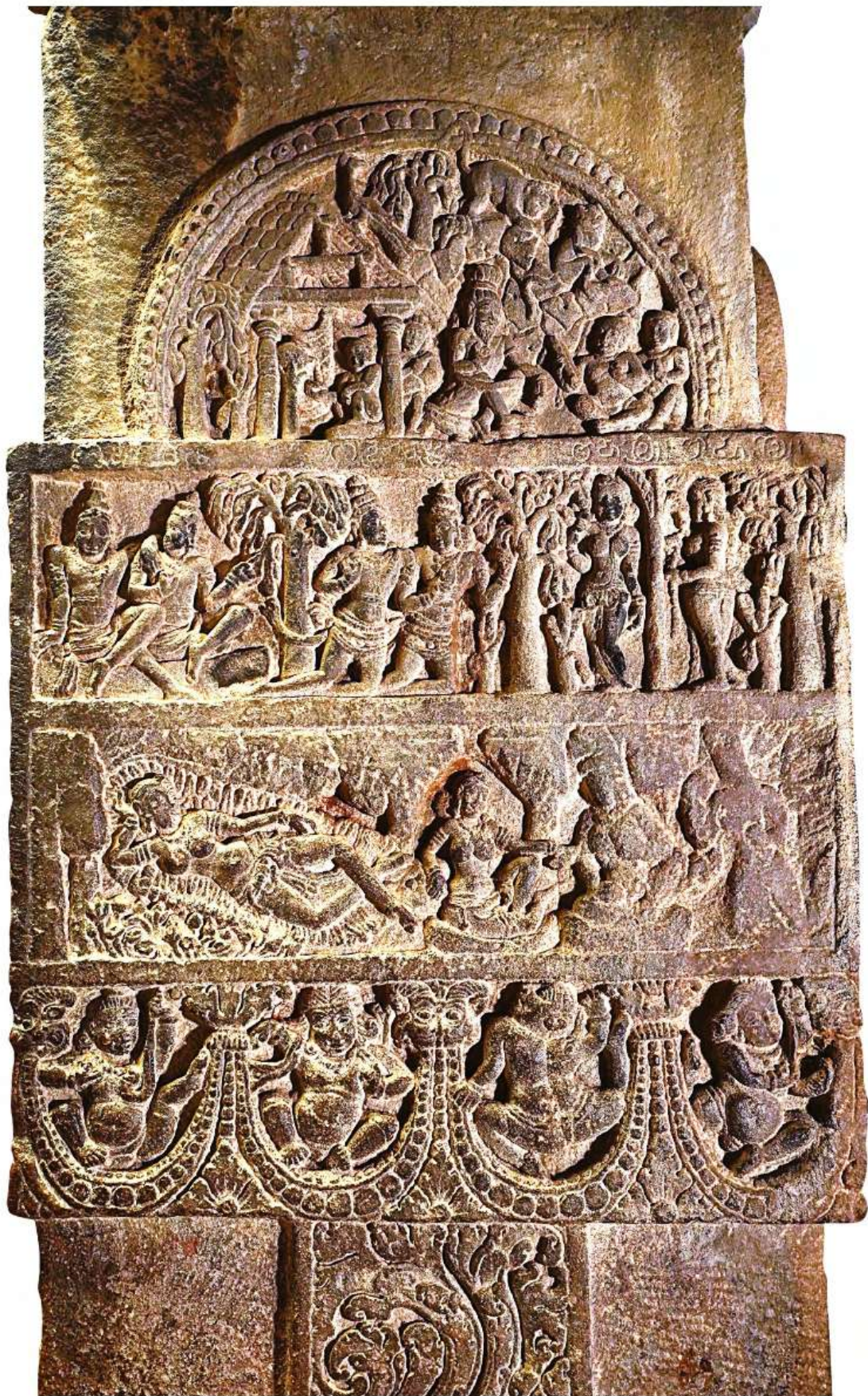


Fig.2.5 : Mallikarjuna Temple, Pattadakal, pillar, east face. Semicircular frame: Gautama's hermitage. Upper panel: 1. Indra and Vajra watch Ahalya. 2. Indra and Vajra move closer to Ahalya. 3. Ahalya watches Indra and Vajra. 4. Ahalya in a grove. Lower panel: 1. Lovesick Ahalya on a bed of leaves. 2. Tilottama converses with Ahalya. 3. Tilottama arrives to meet Ahalya, 740 CE, reddish-golden sandstone, horizontal panels: approx. 70x40 cm, semicircular frames: approx. 56x41 cm.



Fig.2.6 : Mallikarjuna Temple, Pattadakal, pillar, south face. Semicircular frame: adoration of a Shiva linga. Upper panel: Indra and Shachi watching a dance performance. Lower panel: 1. Tilottama moves away, leaving Indra. 2. Tilottama takes Indra to Ahalya's place. 3. Ahalya unites with Indra. 4. Ahalya waits for Indra's arrival, 740 CE, reddish-golden sandstone, horizontal panels: approx. 70x40 cm, semicircular frames: approx. 56x41 cm.

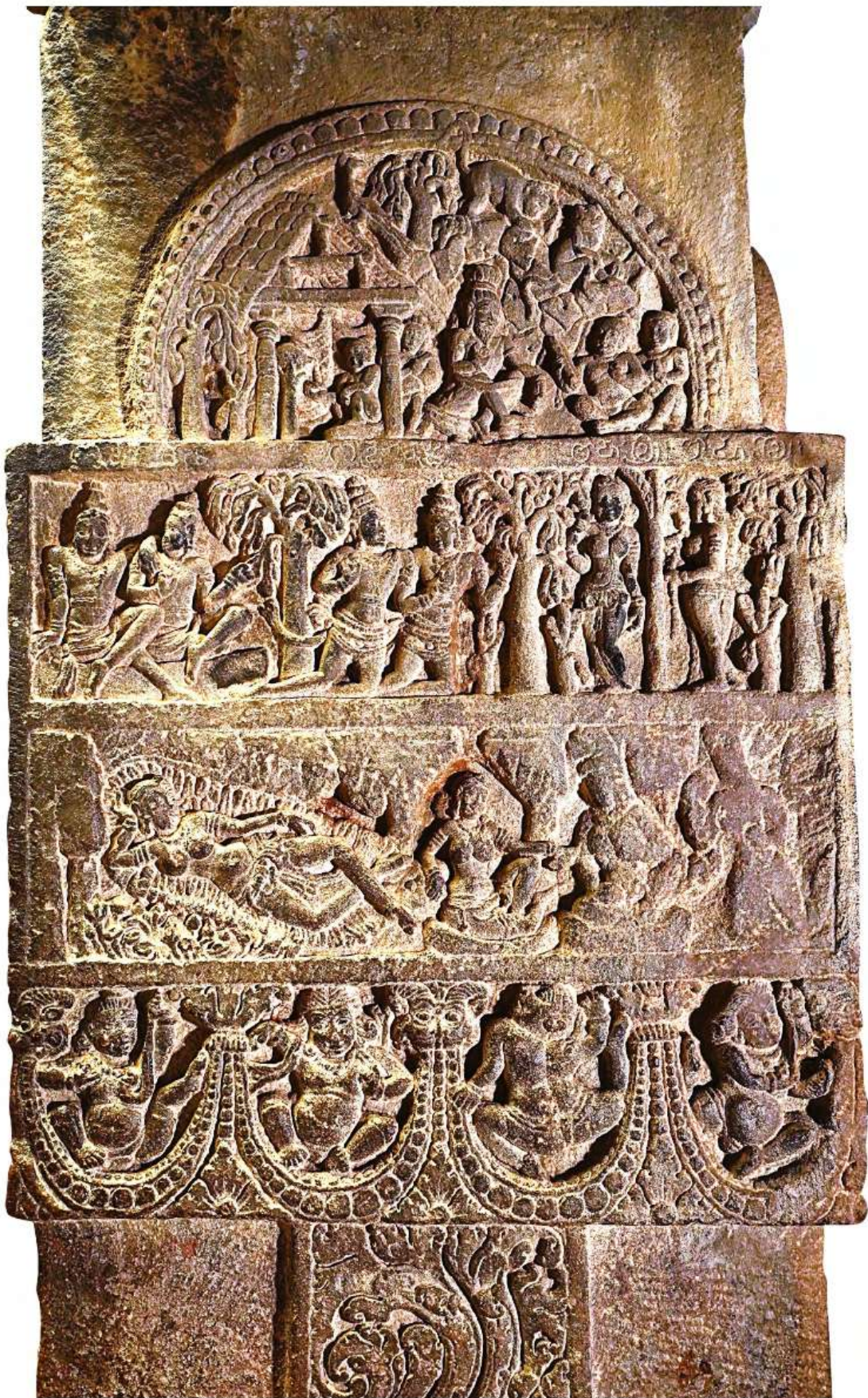


Fig.2.7 : Mallikarjuna Temple, Pattadakal, pillar, north face. Semicircular frame: Indra and Tilottama in embrace. Upper panel: 1. Indra and Vajra request Tilottama to be a messenger. 2. Indra and Vajra move away together. 3. Indra, Tilottama and Vajra on the move. Lower panel: 1. Tilottama conveys Indra's desire, Ahalya rebukes. 2. Tilottama arrives to meet Ahalya, 740 CE, reddish-golden sandstone, horizontal panels: approx. 70x40 cm, semicircular frames: approx. 56x41 cm.

Ahalya's place where their love consummates, Fig.2.1. 8. West face, upper panel, centre: Cursed Ahalya prepares for penance, Fig.2.4.

A similar sequence of the story may be restored from the depictions on Mallikarjuna temple's pillar: 1. South face, upper panel: Indra in his court craves union with Ahalya, Fig.2.6. 2. East face, upper panel: Indra and Vajra go on the lookout for Ahalya; they watch Ahalya loitering in a mango grove, Fig.2.5. 3. North face, upper panel: Indra with Vajra meets Tilottama and requests her to go to Ahalya as messenger, Fig.2.7. 4. North face, lower panel: Tilottama goes to Ahalya as a messenger (and mocks husbands who avoid sex on pretexts), but Ahalya retorts she has been seeing Indra in her husband, Fig.2.7. 5. East face, lower panel: Tilottama makes a further attempt and is successful in persuading Ahalya, Fig.2.5. 6. Tilottama brings Indra to an awaiting Ahalya, and their union consummates, Fig.2.6.

In sum, the Ahalya and Indra story as depicted in these panels were based on a different version, not conforming to the rendition found in the epics and *Puranas*. In this version, Indra repeatedly makes *apsara* Tilottama his messenger to Ahalya and fulfils his desire of union with her. Ahalya on her part rebuked at the outset, but her desire for Indra having been aroused, yields to Tilottama's persuasion, and ultimately unites with Indra. Although figural details of the further elaboration of the story are not presented in the Mallikarjuna temple, a *trishula* planted beside Ahalya in the partially finished depiction on the pillar's west face in the Virupaksha temple suggests that she took to Pashupata penance.

Obviously, the story depicted in the carvings at the Virupaksha and Mallikarjuna temples bears striking resemblance to the version narrated by Venkata Krishnappa Nayaka. It is possible that the Chalukya artists derived the narrative episodes from a contemporary source, now lost, that, centuries later, might have been retold by Venkata Krishnappa Nayaka.

References

1. For some of the narratives depicted in these temples, cf., Sivaramamurti, C., 1957, "The Story of Ganga and Amrita at Pattadakal," *Oriental Art* (New Series), 3, pp.20-24; Annigeri, A.M., 1961, *A Guide to Pattadakal Temples*, Dharwad, Kannada Research Institute; Padigar, Shrinivas V., 1978, "A Sculptural Panel of Yasodhara Story at Pattadakal", *Journal of the Karnatak University: Social Sciences*, 14, pp.30-32; Padigar, S.V., 1978, "Two Narrative Panels from Mallikarjuna Temple, Pattadakal", *Archaeological Studies*, 3, pp.120-123; Padigar, S.V., 2021, "Another Depiction of a *Panchatantra* Story from Pattadakal", *Kala*, 26 (2020-22), pp.37-40; Padigar, S.V., "A Visual Narrative of Ahalya and Indra Story at Pattadakal", *Kala*, 27 (2022-23), pp.153-156; Bolon, Carol R., 1980, *Early Chalukya Sculpture*, Michigan, Ph.D. Thesis, New York University; Sundara, A., 2008, *Pattadakal (World Heritage Series)*, New Delhi, Archaeological Survey of India.
2. For details about Ahalya and Indra's romances in various sources, cf. Wikipedia: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ahalya>, visited on 19 May 2023.
3. *Ramayana, Balakanda, Sargas* 48-49 and *Uttarakanda, Sarga* 30.
4. Wikipedia: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ahalya>, visited on 19 May 2023.
5. For an illustration of the Redemption of Ahalya from Deogarh, c.600 CE, see *ibid.*



Detail Fig. :Fig.2.7

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