Matśya Avatāra, Terraacotta, 44 cm x 29 cm. National Museum, Chhauni, Kathmandu
Terracotta Sculptures: as Found in Toraṇas

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Abstract

This brief piece attempts to describe and identify the terracotta sculptures of three toraṇas at the Śiva temple in Hanuman Dhoka Durbar, which were damaged by the earthquake of 2015. The UNESCO earthquake experts and the JICA archaeological team headed by Moshimichi Okumura recreated the Toranas out of the retrieved artifacts from the debris like a jigsaw puzzle. The significant rubbles were selected and labelled with tags for identification for recreation of the damaged Toranas. In fact, this piece is about the by-product of describing and identifying broken pieces of the terracotta sculptures of Toranas, which the earthquake of 2015 ruined to rubbles.

Keywords: Śiva temple, terracotta, toraṇa

Toraṇa

Toraṇa – tympanum – is the semi-circular or triangular decoration over a doorway of temple, which is bounded by a lintel and an arch. It often contains pediment sculpture or other imagery deities of Hindu and Buddhist and their ornaments. Conventional wisdom has it that it is an integral part of entrance to a sacred temple and an important monument. It is decorated with Garuḍa, Makara, Apsarā and nympha including floral motifs and clouds. Thus, it is believed to be a gate-way to heaven.

Three sets of terracotta toraṇa

I attempt to describe the terracotta sculptures of the Śiva temple, which were damaged by the earthquake of 2015. It was a kind of jigsaw puzzle. My description is entirely based on the retrieved artifacts from the rubbles and debris that are labelled with tags by the earthquake team of experts from UNESCO. The three sets of toraṇas were expertly put together for identification. For this article, I label them as Toraṇa A, Toraṇa B and Toraṇa C for description and easy comprehension.

Toraṇa A: Direction – East

On the basis of eight pieces of sculptures out of nine belonging to Toraṇa A faces east. The middle of the Toraṇa T43 (Sucha 5) has Garuḍa, the vehicle of
Vişňu, holding two serpent heads, seen on T42 (Sucha 4) and T14 (Sucha 6). The other two pieces on either side are T23 (Sucha 3) and T73 and T52 (Sucha 7) – broken slabs. The T40 (Sucha 2) has a human riding on a deer. It could be a depiction of Vāyu – one of the guardian deities residing in ten cardinal directions. A deer is the vehicle of Vāyu. The counter-piece on the other side is missing. The T38 (Sucha 1) and T13 (Sucha 9), on the both sides there are the lions, the vehicle of Indra.

**Toraṇa B: Direction – South**

On the basis of ten sculpture pieces belonging to Toraṇa B and one piece is missing though. It has same physical dimension as of that of Toraṇa A. However, the sculpture pieces of Toraṇa B, have some challenges in identifying the divine images. This is primarily because the divine images do not tally with the Śiva temple including the other attendant deities on either side.

Image II shows nine sculpture pieces out of ten, and one piece is missing. The topmost on either side has four figures in a perfect symmetric composition. The top centre figure T31 (devi 6), is a male deity. He holds two emblems in his both hands, they are difficult in identifying them as they are also worn out. However, the documents reportedly describe it (T31) as Devi that is a goddess. Its physical features betray. This figure T31 has an unmistakable
religious mark on his forehead. The mudra is described as urdha-pundra: and is essentially associated with Viṣṇu, not with Śiva. Therefore, it can be concluded that it is a male god – most likely the sun god – Surya. Furthermore, it should be intriguing that in the later phase of Hinduism, all the attributes or the solar energy are believed to be the manifestation of Viṣṇu. In other words, Surya – the sun god – is being practically identified with the Viṣṇu thereafter. The flaming aureole round the figure T31 also supports that this sculpture indeed represents Viṣṇu – manifested as Surya – the sun god.

There are the intriguing four female deities – two on the either side flanking the central figure T3. Assuming the central deity is Surya according to the iconographical details, he is said to be attended by his two wives – Rajani and Niksubha: likely T22 (devi 4) and T26 (devi 8). In some cases, he is also said to be attended by two other female companions – Danda and Pingala: T32 (devi 2) and T27 (devi 10) respectively. As the mudras of the figures are mostly broken and worn out, it’s very difficult to ascertain their identities. The rest of the three pieces – T30, T33 and T34 – have the familiar motifs of mythical lions – supposedly guarding the divinities.

**Torana C: Direction – North**

Out of eleven pieces, there are only six pieces intact to make a complete torana. Ascribed to the direction of north, the
composite shape confirms it has an exact dimension as of the earlier two toraṇas. It is apparent that all the auspicious symbols meant for good luck and prosperity. There are four forms of pūrṇa kalaśa (T3, T2, T44, T20), an auspicious jar with plenty of grains. It could be assumed that the rest of missing parts would certainly contain the same relief motifs. Only two pieces – T39 and T37 – on the bottom are makaras.

In Hinduism and Buddhism pūrṇa kalaśa symbolizes Lakṣmī and Annapūrṇa Azimā respectively. Lakṣmī – the consort of Viṣṇu – regarded as the goddess of good luck prosperity. And Annapūrṇa Azimā is considered the mother goddess of all forms of grains and prosperity.

It gives a clear and innate relationship of Viṣṇu with Lakṣmī and Annapūrṇa Azimā. IV

This Torana C with stone sculptures is associated with Viṣṇu like Torana A and Torana B. It has no relationship with Śiva although the temple is known as Śiva temple.

Conclusion

The terracotta sculptures of three toraṇas at the Śiva temple are described on the basis on the recreated toraṇas out the debris. The presence of all these forms and motifs on toraṇas at temples is an established tradition. This traditional practice of decorating temples, vihāras and religious shrines with toraṇas

Image III: Torana C: Direction – North, Shiva Temple, Hanuman Dhoka
continues even today. The central image on a torana is usually flanked by attendants. Images of mythical creatures are associated with the main deity of temples and vihāras. For example, if a temple of Durā is built its torana has the goddess Durgā in the center with mythical lions on her either side including animals, celestial nymphs, flowers and clouds. Each motif has its significance. In other words, like a signboard of store, the torana gives some information about an identity of the main deity that resides in a temple or vihāra.

As I already said this brief piece is the by-product of the terracotta sculptures of toranas, which the earthquake of 2015 damaged. Thanks to the restoration of the broken toranas by the UNESCO experts and the JICA archaeological team, the task of systematically describing the terracotta sculptures of toranas and their significance became much easier.

It seems terracotta sculpture was introduced to the Taleju Bhawani temple at the Hanuman Dhoka Durbar built by King Mahindra Malla in 1549. The medium of terracotta construction was very fascinating. This is testified by its outer entrances with terracotta arches with toranas. Moreover, the torana of main entrance from inside is also embellished with terracotta works. And coincidently, the terracotta sculpture at the Śiva temple is very similar and consistent with terracotta sculptures at the entrance of the Taleju Bhawani temple. The terracotta arches both at the Śiva temple and the Taleju Bhawani temple are similar and consistent. Therefore, I will not be far wrong in concluding that both these temples were built by King Mahindra Malla.

Notes


II. ibid. 88

