

Experiencing the Goddess Annapoorneshwari sculpture in Lepakshi temple

- Deepthi Hathwar P V, Bengaluru.

In Sanathana Dharma, it is thought to carry oneself with a mindset that every activity is approached with reverence and gratitude. For example, it is a tradition in most Indian homes to pray and convey gratitude and seek blessings of Goddess Annapoorneshwari before the consumption of food. Annapoorneshwari is the Goddess of Food/Nourishment. As the name suggests, ‘Anna’ means ‘food’ and Poorna means ‘complete’.

Since childhood it has always been exciting for me to know the stories/reasons behind these simple actions. I remember asking my grandmother, who is Goddess Annapoorneshwari and why do we pray to her? She had said, Goddess Parvati took the form of Annapoorneshwari as children were starving at Varanasi. As a child it was quite challenging to understand the hidden and deep meaning of the story which symbolizes materialism, anti-materialism, spirituality, and purpose of life. Hence, I had bombarded her with follow up questions like, why were people starving!? Why did Parvati take this form!? and so on. She continued saying Goddess Parvati took Annapoorneshwari form for two reasons, one to teach how important food is for living beings and the other was that she was angry at her husband Lord Shiva. The answer got me even more curious. I pestered her to explain the story in detail. She went on and said, once Goddess Parvathi and Lord Shiva were happily playing the game of dice, eventually they started to gamble by giving away small things they owned. Later it turned into a big competition between them, where Lord Shiva had to stake his trident. He eventually loses the game by staking everything he had. To get his things back, Lord Shiva seeks the help of Lord Vishnu to win another game. Shiva then calls Goddess Parvathi to play again, and this time with assistance from Lord Vishnu wins and retrieves everything he had lost in the first game. Parvathi eventually gets to know about Lord Vishnu’s trick. She gets furious about the act and confronts them both, then Lord Vishnu replies all these materialisms(games) is all an illusion (Maya). The situation gets worse when Lord Shiva being an ascetic that he is adding on to Lord Vishnu comment says everything including food is Maya. This comment on food makes Parvati furious and she disagrees. To make Shiva understand the importance of Food, she disappears from the world. This creates an imbalance and Earth completely becomes arid, people die in hoards because of starvation. Looking at the grave situation, Devas and Asuras pray and pleaded with Goddess Parvati to return. Parvati, being a mother to the world is unable to hold herself back anymore and takes the form of Goddess Annapoorneshwari at Varanasi and starts to shower food to the masses. This makes Lord Shiva realize his mistake, surrenders, and takes Bikṣāṭana form to seek food from her. I couldn’t understand it then, but this story showcases the importance of both materialistic and non-materialistic aspects and how they’re needed to survive in this world.

I recently saw a perfectly sculpted sculpture, (while NrityaShilpa Yatra); depicting one of the parts of this story. I had never imagined an aesthetically stunning sculpture could be created with a grandeur much better than my imagination for this story, OH! yes, I am talking about Goddess Annapoorneshwari sculpture in one of the pillars of Nātya Maṇṭapa found in Lepakshi Temple which is located near Hindupur almost 120km from Bangalore. This temple is famous for Hanging pillars, Nātya Maṇṭapa, Nāga liṅga, giant bull, mural paintings and so on. This was built by brothers Viranna and Virupanna who were at service of Vijayanagar empire.

On one of the pillars of Nātya Maṇṭapa, the sculpture that caught my attention is the one depicting Goddess Annapoorneshwari, Lord Shiva and his attendant. The detailing and the artistic mastery that would've gone into sculpting it mesmerized me and I got lost in thoughts for quite some time. Anyone with a flair for appreciating art would easily experience what I experienced. The depth of thought and attention to detail the artist has put into this work is Extraordinary and Inspiring!!



In this Image, Sculptor has given a clear indication for a Rasika to understand that Lord Shiva himself took Bṛksaṭana form and taking his attendant Gana along with him to seek food from Goddess Annapoorneshwari. Isn't it thoughtful of a sculptor to create these vibrant sculptures?! I got immersed and was perplexed to figure out where to start, whether to observe from top to bottom or sideways. I know by seeing this even you readers would have gotten confused and lost

in admiration of it. Beginning from the top we can clearly see beautifully etched Goddess Ganga's face on the head, if we move down one can notice his third eye on his forehead. His crescent smiling face indicates he is examining Goddess Annapoorneshwari's dedication and love towards her Bhaktas. Whoever came to her, she would offer food, shower blessings, and give unconditional love. Coming to Shiva's grandeur Āhārya, we can see him wearing long Rudrākṣa mala, garland of skulls, intrinsic designs of jewels such as necklace, tolu bandi, decorative waist belt, and snake design ornament worn on right wrist. Kapāla (skull bowl) is extremely realistic, the trident is held on the left hand and in one of the right hands he is holding a Damaru and in the other right hand he is feeding a dog which is indicated by the dog standing on two legs, depicting his Kālabhairava rūpa. The long fingers and sharp nails depict the minute detailing work which showcases the workmanship and talent of the sculptor. We can observe the intricate work on knees and imagine the elaborate thought process gone into portraying perfectly postured knees. The design of his Pādarakṣe (slipper) can also be seen in today's world. Isn't it surprising to know the styles seen today may have roots to these temple sculptures!? The lifted right toes and bent knees suggesting he is in movement or turning aside, such detailing is magnificent!



The main character and the primary subject of the story I've narrated till now is Goddess Annapoorneshwari! Look at this astonishing and magnificent Devi sculpture, isn't this little unique from the idols we have seen in other temples!!? Isn't she looking stunning!? We can observe she is adorned with beautiful ornaments. It is surprising to see that the saree is dropping off and has gone almost near the knee level. In this, the sculptor has shown another story line which goes like this, In-order to test the devotion of Goddess towards serving the masses, Lord Shiva pulls the saree of devi. Devi being so involved in her duty of serving food to Lord Shiva doesn't even act to stop the saree from dropping off. Lord Shiva finally concedes and accepts defeat. We could again say, it is a brilliant work done by a great artist. This story line is unique and not a common one as this is unheard of in scriptures and Puranas, but this story line was explained by our guide at Lepakshi Mr. Virupanna and the temple priest

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Mr. Surayarprakasha Sharma. But the story on Bikṣatana form of Lord Shiva can be found in Kurma Purana, Matsya Purana, Skanda Purana, Shiva Purana and Linga Purana with slight changes. Still, Isn't it fascinating and exciting to know how an artist would have imagined and thought of a story line which adds beauty to the main story? This work brilliantly brings out the creative and thought-provoking work by an artist. One could get true inspiration as he sets an example of what a true artist is!

The thought of explaining the whole story in one frame and executing it with exquisite detailing is unbelievable and inspiring. There are many works like these by master sculptors across south Indian Dravidian temples which are still unheard and un-identified. It is impossible to understand and research all these exquisite works in one's lifetime, hence it is imperative to visit temples not just to study sculptures but also to relish these marvelous works.



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