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THE ICONOGRAPHY OF KĀLA-BHAIRAVA

One of the temples of Begur, near Bangalore, is dedicated to the *Jyotirlinga*, known in the popular tradition as the temple of Nāgेशwara, the "Lord of snakes", namely, Siva. *Jyotirlinga* is one of the creative symbols of Siva meaning "fiery energy". Siva is the Lord of the fundamental elements (*bhūta*) such as earth (*prthvi*), water (*apas*), fire (*tejas*), air (*vāyu*) and ether (*ākās*). Consequently, this ancient Dravidian style temple has five independent sanctuaries (*garbhagrahas*) dedicated to each of the five elements in their "*linga* form". This temple was built during the early Chola period when the strategic road linking Tamilnadu to its Karnataka Province passed through Begur. The most interesting images of this temple were later removed to the Bangalore Museum. One of them, very striking in its iconographic details of the Dravidian style of sculpture, carries the caption, "Kāla-Bhairava-Dravidian style, 10th century A.D." This icon is believed to be the original one, its replica being placed in the main sanctuary (*antarāla*) of the temple. There is something mysterious about the Kāla-Bhairava icon which seems to be unique in many ways. The following provides some information, interpreted from the artistic point of view.

General Principles of Temple iconography:

According to the Hindu tradition an image worthy of worship made either in colour or in stone, is a form (*rupa*) manifesting the "Formless Divine" (*a-rupa nirākāra*). The icon for temple worship is to be made according to the canons of the *sāstras* especially *śilpasāstra* (the science of sculpture). This is essential in order to infuse the "spirit of cult" (*tātvās*) and other divine aspects into the image. The result is that the image reflects and radiates primarily the specific divine characters which are intended in its

making rather than mere aesthetic elements judged from the purely secular point of appreciation. Consequently, an icon in a temple is rightly considered as a living replica of a divine quality which is true to its model.¹ Although the image worthy of worship (*archāvatāra*) belongs to the lowest form a man is capable of conceiving, the Supreme is understood in the form of an image which incarnates the "descent" (*avatāra*) of some power of the Divine manifestation.² The value of an image as an object of worship does not depend upon its beauty or harmony, but upon its conformity to the descriptions in mythology (*purānas*) and the canons of the *sāstras*. Hence "only an image made in accordance with the canon (*sāstra*) can be called beautiful",³ because there is not "much difference between the idol (*archa*) and the original."⁴

Even today the *sāstric* traditions, at least in South India, are to a great extent followed and controlled by a few brahmin priests called "*āchāryas*" (teachers). These specialists are said to be the official custodians of the religious knowledge and art intimately connected with temple worship. They pass on their authority traditionally to their sons in the order of seniority; thus the patriarchal tradition of priesthood is being perpetuated in the lineage of the ancient brahmin priestly families.

The *sāstric* injunctions have two main functions: First to preserve the icons from unworthy misinterpretations. Second to preserve the mystery behind the idol free from sacrilegious ignorance: "An established symbology was necessary to guard against the danger of inferior craftsmen perverting the book of sacred objects

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1. The Egyptians too had a similar concept when they made images of the dead person as his replica or "duplicate". When the dead body is placed in the grave these duplicates could be used by the bereaved in place of the dead person for keeping his memory alive. In India, the deity's image is charged with power and vitalized so that it enjoys the life of the deity in having the same spiritual forces and qualities.
 2. "The *archāvatāra* consists of the images of Bhagavan which accommodate themselves to the various tastes of creatures, having no fixed form but that which the worshipper may himself choose and desire to call him by; all knowing, but seeming as needy, seeming to exchange to be ocularly manifest to him in temples and homes, in short at all places and at all times desired" Sri Lokacharya Pillai, "*Arthapanchaugē*", quoted by R.K. Das in *Temples of Tamilnad*, p. xiv
 3. Cf. *Silpaśāstra Sakranita*
 4. Cf. *Sivapurāna Kailāsa Samhita*, 14. 22.

by giving shape to unholy eccentricities and idiosyncrasies".⁵ The knowledge of these basic rules is also necessary if we want to understand and enjoy the treasures of Indian Art and the significance of its esoteric symbolism, all hidden in a multiplicity of forms and attributes.

The image-maker (*silpin/ropakāra*) was considered as "a servant of the temple"⁶ and had the right to wear the sacred thread.⁷ The Vedic *mantras*, rituals and also the instructions of the *sāstras* had to be memorized. These canons, in the form of Sanskrit *slokas* (stanzas), were taught to the apprentice by degrees according to his ability and aptitude. There were various grades among the *silpins*: those who were recognized for their great knowledge and skill were called to work for the famous temples and allowed to make precious worthy of worship images. Others could only fashion decorative carvings or produce for village shrines.

The Begur Kāla-Bhairava is not the work of a great artist but of a local well-trained *silpin*. The crudeness of the image is made worse by the blackened state of the stone. Repeated oil baths have affected the stone and added heaviness to the artistic details and this also proves that the image was worshipped devotedly.

According to the *sāradātilakatantra*⁸ there are three kinds of worthy of worshipable Batuka-Bhairava. 1) The *sātvika* (having the quality of stability and preservation). Images of this kind protect the devotee from malignant death. 2) The *rājasika* (having the quality of creativity and continued action). The worshippers are sure to obtain the desires granted by God as represented in the image. 3) The *tāmasika* (endowed with the quality of destruction or re-absorption). The icon has a fearful appearance. It is worshipped for protection against one's foes and the evil spirits. The specifications for this image require that *bhairava* (awe-inspiring) must be represented holding a snake (cobra) as one of his decorative symbols. The image of Begur Kāla-Bhairava belongs to the *tāmasika* kind.

5. Mulk Raj Anand, *The Hindu View of Art*, p. 188.

6. *Ibid*, p. 171.

7. Cf. "A Tamil Silpa Sāstra", translated by Keams in *Indian Antiquary*, Vol. V, 1876

8. Cf. R.M. Chaterji (Ed). *Sāradātilakatantra*, p. 59.

Kāla-Bhairava and its Scriptural Foundations:

Etymologically, *kāla* has two series of meanings: The first series implies "black", "dark", "opaque", all of which symbolize night, gloom and destruction. The second series denotes the duration of a certain movement, often related to the worldly realities. The movement of things for a definite period is known as time, and hence called *kāla*. It also implies the idea of destruction as time destroys everything at a particular moment. It means, therefore destiny or preordained fate (*vidhi*), and death (*mṛthyu*).

In the Ṛgveda *kāla* is understood as the regulations of the cosmic movement whose spokes are days and nights⁹. The *Satapatha* brāhmana speaks incidentally of "time", but with specific reference to the time which is appropriate for the worship or of performing sacrifices as indicated by the divisions of *kāla* of the moon. The *Atharvaveda*¹⁰ dedicates two of its hymns to *kāla* personified as "primordial power"; however, there is no anthropomorphic description. *Kāla* is only considered as the "First God" who begot heaven and earth, as the Lord of everything who carries away all these beings. The Upanishads throw some light when they find to equate *Kāla Deva* (time-god) with Brahman:

All being *Kāla* digest
 In the great self
 In whom or what is *kāla* digested?
 Who knows this, knows the Veda.¹¹

It is also postulated that *Kāla* belongs to the highest sphere of heavens (*ākāśa*).¹² It partakes of its very nature and is eternal as far as the cosmic whole is concerned. The *Mahābhārata* seems to identify *kāla* with dharma (understood as the eternal law or order); it goes so far as to say "*Kāla* is not artificial (unreal), *kāla* is the supreme God"¹³. The *Sivapurāna* speaks of *kāla* as that which follows the track of all creatures¹⁴ *kāla* is also compared

9. *Ṛgveda*, I. 155, 6; I, 164. 48

10. *Antharva Veda*, XIX. 53-54

11. *Maitri Upanishad*, V. 1.2

12. *Svetāśvatara Upanishad*, V. 1.2.

13. *Mahābhārata*, V. iii.20.

14. *Sivapurana, Umāsamhita*, 26.2.

to a "wheel of dissolution, wonderful and divine"¹⁵. Finally, *kāla* is one of the four constituents of the personal forms of Brahmā the creator¹⁶. This may be the reason why a "day and a night" of Brahmā is taken as a division of the cosmic time called *kalpa* (aeon) whose duration is 8.640.000.000 mortal years.

Bhairava, according to the root *bhiru*, means "fearful" and "terrifying". It makes people timid and cowardly, as in the presence of *bhairava* the most courageous assume the "lustre of the flickering glow-worm beneath the sun"¹⁷. The *bhairava* is the aspect of the energy of Siva let loose through an excess of anger; he assumes in its fullness the *tāmasic* quality of Brahmā as the destroyer of the creation. It is not a human *avatāra* (incarnation), but the projection of Siva's fiery temper taking a certain form (*rūpa*). All the time Siva alone manifests himself the various forms. Siva appears in different forms due to our illusion (*māya*)¹⁸. He is the great soul behind the *māya*,¹⁹ and deludes man, sages, and even gods. Even Vishnu, deluded by the *māya* (Siva appearing in the form of bull), was exhausted and utterly shattered²⁰. Siva in himself is a "static" energy endowed with eternal bliss *ānanda*. He is the god who is embodied in the centre, the base of the whole world.²¹ So the *bhairava* is the majestic aspect of his destructive anger. There are sixty four *Bhairavas* and each one has a name and function, form, colour and attributes. Siva calls them his "sons". They are said to constitute the full form (*pūrṇa rūpa*) of Siva, and so after having accomplished their tasks they are integrated into the primary cause, Siva.

Siva is not just the god of fearful aspect; he is endowed with a number of auspicious qualities. Hence Siva, traditionally known as Kāla-Bhairava, is worshipped in both manifestative motifs: On the one hand, he is represented as the lord of destruction (*sambhāra*) and hence has a fearful look (*ghora*), terrifying (*ugra*) and formidable (*bhishapa*). Through his power of destruction he annihilates sins and evils and even absorbs the cosmic existence into

15. *Ibid*, *Kailāśasamhita*, 25.13.

16. *Ibid*, *loc. cit.*, 25, 32.

17. *Sivapurāna Satarudra Samhita*, 12.12

18. *Ibid*, *Kotirudra Samhita*, 42.15

19. *Ibid*, 41. 15.

20. *Ibid*, 23.12.

21. *Īṣvara pūrvadeśaca tejavata* (Hymn to the fiery energy 360.5.6) Cf. *Stuti and Stava* by T. Gouddian and C. Hooykaas.

himself putting an end to all. So he is known as the lord of the cosmic illusion and death. On the other hand, Siva is alone the protector (*bharana*). He is non-terrifying (*aghora*) and a benevolent distributor of his grace (*anugraha*). He also protects and purifies the worlds from sins and evils, dispels the darkness of illusion thus liberating his devotees from the cosmic snares of body-spirit conjunction. In this sense his destroying power is but a blessing in disguise.

The iconography of Kāla-Bhairava:

The iconography of Kāla-Bhairava presents Siva as the Lord of the five cosmic elements (Bhuteśa) as well as the ruler of the five cosmic directions. So his figure has five faces (*pañcāṇana*), each of them facing one of the four cosmic directions and the fifth one is fixed on the top of the four indicating the zenith of all perceptions, and centre of all attention. The *Viṣṇudharmottara Purana* describes the southern face of Siva as *aghorabhairava* although the face is of dark complexion. It radiates immense gracefulness and liveliness.

The symbols associated with the Kāla-Bhairava are so varied that most of the *sāstras*, like the *Puranas*, give different descriptions. But most of them agree that he is accompanied by a dog. This dog may jump up to the severed head or skull, which Bhairava holds in his left hand, and lick the dripping blood. The description given in the *Silpasāra* is as follows: "Kāla-Bhairava wears a girdle of tiny bells on his waist and holds a sword, a trident, a drum and a drinking cup in his hands. He has a fearsome face with protruding teeth; he wears a garland of skulls and dishevelled hair".²² This description, however, does not perfectly coincide with all that details in the "Begur Kāla-Bhairava".

The Kāla-Bhairava of Begur, an icon barely a yard in height, is carved in a granite stone. Its rectangular stature has been shaped as a "halo of glory" with the upper portion semi-circular in form. The whole background is plain, devoid of all decoration, even the pedestal (*piṭha*) is bare. Although it appears heavy, like a strong man, Kāla-Bhairava of Begur is not "pot-bellied", nor does it really have a fearful appearance. The image bears an imposing expression of self-centred, calm and profound arrogance. The

22. Cf. H. Krishna Sāstri, *South Indian Images of Gods and Goddesses*, p. 151.

“easiness” of the image is accentuated by the posture, which is not exactly “heroic”, but impressive like of the voluptuous self-assurance of a victorious man who has displayed his power. The body is slightly bent, adopting almost the elegant triple bent posture (*tribhanga*). The legs and feet separated, give the impression of a man who called upon to control a situation fully exhibits himself as its master.

The head is the most attractive and interesting piece; perhaps the artist wanted to concentrate his attention on this part of the body which is the centre of intellect and consciousness. This attractiveness may be due to a certain “*beauté du diable*” along with the subtle dress of allured erotism. Though the massive face lacks in elegance, the eyes under the curved arches of the eyebrows are the wide doors opened to the world. In the middle of the forehead is the “third eye”, the destructive eye of fire, characteristic of Siva.²³ The common *purānic* interpretation is that when the third eye of Siva opens, the fiery energy (*tejas*) is discharged and it consumes the universe. In the statue of Begur-Kāla-Bhairava, though the third eye is open, it is, apparently, inactive in its expression.

The nose is short and flat; the lips are thick with a suggestion of a faint smile expressing a tranquil satisfaction, yet no teeth can be seen. There is a double chin, hiding partially a short neck. The ear lobes extend down to the powerful shoulders because of the weight of the heavy *patrakundala* (lobes of the ear). Such lofty ears are a symbol of greatness, wisdom and beauty.

The hair is neatly arranged in four rows of curled locks forming a hair-wreath (*jatamandala*). The uncombed and loose hair show a state of anger as well as give an impression of renunciation (*sanyāsin*). The circular appearance and arrangement of the locks of hair accentuates the stillness of the calm face. The head being the centre of consciousness, the locks are symbolic of the active prolongation or material manifestation of the accumulated spiritual energies. The hair is considered to be an extension of the person. So “anger” (*bhairavam*) is exteriorized and materialized by the rays of the discharged hair. The locks are bound by

23. In Buddhism this third eye is the realm of those who have attained the Buddhahood symbol of wisdom and consciousness associated with the cosmic lights (sun-moon-fire).

two knotted snakes in order to symbolize the deadly state of mind of Kāla-Bhairava. These hair and snakes are common features of the icons of Siva and Devi (the *Sakti* of Siva) expressive of the state of horror and awe.

According to the iconographic tradition, both Kāla (Siva) and Kāli (Sakti of Siva) exhibit their supremacy over time and death by carrying on their head a skull. This is noticeable even in some *Natarāja* icons. But in the icon of Kāla-Bhairava the motif is not of a skull but of a jewel which adds to the lustre of the Bhairava statue. This jewel seems to be related to the "fire-jewel" (*arka-ratna*) or "fire-lotus" (*arka-padma*). Arka means, sun, light, fire etc. The *Satapatha Brāhmana* says: "Arka is the man and *agni* is the sacrificial fire. They are all a "fourth entity" (Prajāpati) the Lord of creatures. The *arka* plant (*calotropis gigantea*) symbolizes the same. Hence "arka is the firs, and these worlds are his bodies".²⁴ Arka flowers are used in offerings to Siva.²⁵ As the incarnation of Siva's fiery anger, Kāla Bhairava is the annihilating power of the sacrificial fire; this is symbolized by the *arka-padma* jewel.

The body of Kāla-Bhairava is stark naked, except for a few ornaments: a heavy necklace and bangles, a girdle of dancing bells around his hips hanging down so that his penis, realistically worked out, appears a decorative pendulum. This is not shocking, as nakedness is a obligatory for realized sanyasins; but it can give rise to erotic attraction like any other aspect of Bhairava, say the *kankāla*.²⁶ Down his left shoulder runs a girdle made of beads. It is the Brahmanical sacred thread (*yajñōpavita*). There are various interpretations about these beads. According to older traditions these beads were human skulls. Other traditions interpret the chain as made up of 52 or 53 letters of the Sanskrit language.²⁷

24. *Satapatha Brāhmana*, X.6.5.8.

25. Cf. B. Bhattacharya, *Saivism and the Phallic world*, p. 1020.

26. *Kankāla* according to the *Lingapurana* is the following anecdote: Siva Bhairava having killed the door-keeper of Vishnu was punished to expiate the *brāhmanahatya*. He was condemned to carry the bones (*kankāla*). He then wandered in the pine-forest where he seduced the wife of a *rshi*. He was disguised as a naked beggar or ascetic but was a hideous person. The *silpīratna* and other *sāstras* say that the "*kankālamurti*" should be beautifully attractive so that the *rshi's* wife may appear completely out of her mind in front of the God.

27. Cf. Sir John Woodruffe. *The Garland of letter*, ch. XXI.

Some of the *Puranas* say that the leading bead is the head of Brahmā or Vishnu. In their terrific aspects, Siva or Devi have their *yajnōpavitas* made of skulls, showing their cosmic powers over life and death, matter and spirit.

The arms and their accessories:

The upper arms of Kāla-Bhairava are decorated with a "snake coiled bangle", while the wristlets have rings. The bells which are tied round the feet are the typical accessories of a professional dancer; even the prescribed wooden sandals of the ascetic are missing so as to emphasize his function of the "cosmic dancer". The bare feet are firmly planted on the ground. They are not parallel, but pointing in different directions, known as the *swastika* posture (*svastikapaspita*). It symbolizes the hooked cosmic cross, controlling the cosmic directions and movements, and it also signifies the partial knowledge entangled with the cosmic bonds. The four arms are symbolic of the absolute and unlimited power he wields over the four cosmic directions. One of the hands is broken, but the modern replica placed in the Begur Temple has in the right hand a cup looking like a skull (*kapāla*).

a) *The front right hand* has the *triśula* or Vama. This terrific weapon made by Viśvakarma from the rays of the sun was given to Siva. The tripple-headed spear is identified as the thunderbolt (*vajra*); it enjoys the same adamantine quality and power. Sharp and acute like a diamond, the *vajra* or *triśula* pierces any element (spiritual or material, divine or demoniac). In the *tāntric* tradition it symbolizes the virile male power. Other traditions identify the *triśula* with the three cosmic qualities (*gunas*). The control and harmony of all the three makes one a *tridandin*, a perfect man. The *triśula* is also *akāla* (indivisible), hence perfect and sharp beyond time. This weapon is fashioned out of iron, the head and rod of "one" piece. It symbolizes like the iron which melts only in fire, the striking power of destructive fire. Kāla Bhairava holds the *triśula* as a sceptre showing that the time of destruction is over.

b) *The back right hand* is holding a *damarau* or *dhakka* (a small drum). This drum is beaten in connection with exorcism or rituals of divination. The *āgamas* hold that the peculiar shape (two conical triangles united by their apexes) is understood as the union of the opposites. The triangle pointing upward is *purusha-Siva* (the male) and the other pointing downward is Prakṛti Sakti (the

female). When united, creation takes place through the vibration of their passionate desires and the sound (*śabda*) is born transmitting in all directions the message of the event of creation. This *ādisabda* is the creative *pranava* or *AUM*, the "indestructible syllable". The rhythm of the *damaru* is identified with this creative power; it is produced by two small bones or iron balls tied to the strings which when banged against the flat side of the *damaru* produce a peculiar sound which is excitingly musical. According to the creation myth the cosmic developments originated at the moment of the first vibration *damaru* of Siva; and this first wave also cut the chords of the music of creation composed of seven primary sounds (*saptasaras*). Kāla-Bhairava holds the *damaru* symbolizing the still or soundless period that follows the cosmic annihilation.

c) *The back left hand* supports a cobra which stands up as whispering into Kāla-Bhairava's ear.²⁸ The *sāstras* generally describe the noose (*pāsa*) and the snake (*sarpa*), both having the same significance. They represent "time" as the cosmic bond that rules over the cosmic cycles. The dissolution occurs when the bond is loosened: That by which the world is bound, by the same bonds are the worlds released. The snake is represented in the loosened form hence conveying that the universe is no more in chains.

d) *The front left hand*, according to the modern replica, holds an empty cup or skull (*kapāla*). The head is regarded as the seat of the intellect, spirit and mind. The skull, a hard bony case, encloses and protects the brain which they called *sahasrāra* (the lotus seat of thousand petals). This shield guards the mind which is the essence of manifestation, desire and activity. Thus it is compared to the "shell" of the mundane egg or the golden embryo. When it is empty, the shield or skull is lifeless and deprived of cosmic forms. When the illusion (*māya*) disappears nothing is left except the void; this brings an end to all discriminating thought which would regard existence and non-existence as essentially different. Skull is the symbol of renunciation of the world as well as realization of the cosmic unreality. It is also the symbol of knowledge and wisdom. Kāla Bhairava deliberately

28. A bronze image from the Bhairava temple of Sitibetta (near Kolar, Karnataka) represents the same rare fashion of holding a cobra loosely. This image dates from the reign of Rajendra I (1012-14 A.D.), a Chola king, whose empire extended as far as the goldfield (Kolar).

holds down the empty skull (of Brahmā), while the huge cobra rises up to lick it.

The symbol of the cobra:

The giant cobra appears as the second biggest among the details of the whole composition on account of its huge size. Although it is undecorated, this snake could be the *śesha* or *vasuki*. *Siva purāna* describes the snake as follows: "He (*śesha*) is Rudra in the form of *Sankarshana* (the preserver). At the end of the kalpa, flames of fire come out of his mouths (he is described as having a thousand heads and mouths). After consuming the three worlds they subside".²⁹ The worlds subside as they are re-absorbed into their supreme cause (*kāraṇa param*). The *Vishnu purāna* says: "The destroyer of all things, Hari (Vishnu) in the form of Rudra, who is the flame of time, becomes the scorching breath of the serpent *śesha* and it consumes the whole world. Then Rudra breathes out clouds which shower torrents of water inundating the three worlds. The universe is now enveloped in darkness the Lord Vishnu sleeps upon *śesha* in the midst of the deep seas".³⁰ He is also called *ananta* (endless) and it is a form of Vishnu who is also eternal and undistinguishable; so *śesha* is endowed with the quality of darkness. From his mouth at the end of the *kalpa*, proceeds the venomous fire that is personified as Rudra, who is one with Balarama and devours the three worlds".³¹ The same *purāna* gives us these two versions, which though they appear to be different, have the same meaning.

In the Kāla Bhairava tradition *śesha* is not superior Kāla Bhairava, not even equal to him. In Saivism, Siva prevails above all; so *śesha* remains only an instrument or the minor form of destructive anger. The followers of Siva, who are also known as *Mahā-yogis*, have the same aptitude. "Those embodied beings, who are yogins, engrossed in meditation can easily kill kāla (time) Those who are sinless (free from the cosmic illusion), the

29. Cf. *Sivapurana*, *Uma Samhita*, 15. 7. The Vishnu Purana also describes the same scene of the destruction of the worlds with more details, but comes to the same conclusion: after the annihilation of the world *śesha* remains floating on the primeval ocean where the cosmic ashes had been engulfed.

30. *Vishnu Purāna*, 4. 1.

31. *Ibid.* 2.5.

yogins, hurl the *serpent kāla* entirely".³² These yogins are absolutely "empty" of desire, hence free from the cosmic cycles of death and rebirth; for them even time does not exist.

Conclusion:

In Hindu iconography and art the injunctions of the *śāstras* are not a dead weight shifting the spontaneity of the artistic mind. Though the canons, of temple art are rather demanding still a variety of details which should evoke devotion and a high sense of religiosity are included so that the people may live their religion of the *Puranas*. Temple images are the expression of a living faith. When, for example, a *purana* says that Vāsuki (śesha) indicates divine anger which destroys the three worlds, the artist who fashioned Kāla Bhairava's icon followed this traditional concept but avoided the "terrifying" aspect of the fiery anger. The worlds are annihilated, and Kāla Bhairava is satisfied and the snake *śesha* recoils upon himself after having emptied the mundane egg. After that the cosmic illusion of time, form and matter are no more. Since the "dog attribute" could not convey the same, the huge "cobra-attribute" is placed as a substitute very rightly at the left foot of Kāla-Bhairava.

•2. *Sivapurāna*. 26. 12. 13.