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## Mural Paintings of South India– A Study of Visual Narration of Kiratarjuniya

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### Abstract

*Saivism is one of the religious sects of Hinduism and concept of Shiva has been developed at length in the epics and the puranas. The puranas wove legends to explain all the characteristics of Shiva and his many aspects as narratives. The early iconographic manuals like Tantrasara describes several aspects and forms of Shiva. The iconographic representations of Shiva in twenty-five forms are categorized into four groups: Shristi, samhara, anugraha and nritya. These forms appear in the visual narratives like sculptures and murals on the sacred walls of the temples in south India. Shiva as Anugrahamurti in Kiratarjuniya legend describes the combat between Arjuna and Shiva, who disguised as Kirata, a hunter. Quoted in thirty-ninth chapter in Shivapurana and also in Vanaparva episode in Mahabharata epic, illustrates the fight between the two for a hunted boar. The legend of Kiratarjuniya has been illustrated in the visual form in many temples dedicated to Shiva in south India in different timeline and shows that the popularity among the artists. The present paper chooses some of the temples in south India, like Veerabhadraswami in Lepakshi, Andhra Pradesh, Terumalleswaraswami in Hiriyur, Karnataka, Mahadeva temples in Chemmanatitta and Pallimana, in Thrissur, Kerala. where this episode has been narrated in murals, and attempts to discuss the visual aspects in the narratives exhibited.*

**Keywords:** Shiva, Visual Narratives, Mural, Painting, Mythology, legend



## Introduction

Religion, myths, legends, mural, sculpture, tradition and rituals are all unified with each other in an intricate form which defines many aspects Indian culture. Religion has its influence on the art and visual tradition, can be witnessed in the murals and sculptures and temple architecture, which are emerged out of beliefs attached to the legend, text and myths. Saivism is one of the religious sects of Hinduism and concept of Shiva has been developed in multi dimension in the epics and the mythology. The legends were constructed to explain characteristics of Shiva. The early iconographic manuals like Tantrasara describe several aspects and forms of Siva all of which are anthropomorphic in character. Ananda Coomaraswamy describes the Indian or Far Eastern icon, carved or painted, is neither a memory image nor an idealization, but a visual symbolism, ideal in the mathematical sense. The “anthropomorphic” icon is of the same kind as a *yantra*, that is, a geometrical representation of a deity, or a *mantra*, that is, an auditory representation of a deity.<sup>i</sup> The iconographic representations of Siva in twenty-five forms are categorized into four groups: shruti, samhara, anugraha and nritya. The lilamurtis of Siva are known for their narrative and visual qualities, which are executed on the ceilings and sacred walls of the Saiva temples in South India. The anthropomorphic images introduce themselves to the devotee by their shape, stance, and attributes. Although the image is anthropomorphic, it is a symbol of deity and its more - than human relevance indicated by multiplying the number of its heads and, particularly its arms.<sup>ii</sup> The image of Shiva is distinguished, in many of his different manifestations by an antelope leaping from the fingers of one of his hands.<sup>iii</sup> The anugrahamūrti aspects of Shiva as explained by Gopinath describes the various boon-bestowing aspects of Shiva as *anugrahamūrtis*: for example, Shiva is called *Chañḍēśānugrahamūrti*, because he conferred on *Chañḍēśvara* the boon of being the steward of the household of Śiva; *Vishṇvanugrahamūrti*, because he restored an eye to Vishṇu, who had plucked the same for offering it to Śiva, and for which act Shiva also presented Vishṇu with the chakra or the discus; and so forth.<sup>iv</sup>

## Visual Narratives

Wall paintings played significant role in the development of Indian painting tradition. These paintings can be seen mainly in temples, palaces, schools, i.e. (chitrashalas or painted rooms, galleries) and homes. The word ‘narrative’ is used to highlight the narrative quality of the visual much like an adjective. Narrative is used as qualifier and is added as a prefix to refer to any visual that has a narrative aspect.<sup>v</sup> It is traditionally accepted that a narrative has two aspects - a story or content that generally consists of a sequence of events, and the form or expression which is the means by which the story is communicated and its actions presented.<sup>vi</sup> Dehejia describes about the monoscenic mode of narratives which centers around a single event in a story, one that is generally

neither the first nor the last and which introduces us to a theme of action, such a scene is usually an easily identifiable event from a story and it serves as a reference to the narrative. This system of representation functioned well in India, where legends were generally familiar to the viewer.<sup>vii</sup> The word ‘painting’ informs about the visual i.e., it could be a painting, illustration and a scroll.<sup>viii</sup> Hence the narrative paintings generate extensive scope for understanding of narrative tradition through expressive characteristics of visuals. The stylistic evolution of the South Indian mural paintings emerged from the 2<sup>nd</sup> B.C. through the Ajanta, followed by Badami and Ellora, the Pallava-Pandya and Chola to the Vijayanagara paintings in Hampi and Dravidian style of Kerala murals. The present research paper incorporates study about the narrative and visual aspects in Kiratarjuniya mural paintings of South India.

### **The narration of Kiratarjuniya in Puranas and Itihasas**

The puranas and Itihasas are the most dominant narrative modes in the Indian narrative tradition. Puranas, as a rule, deal with legendary matter presented as history, while Itihasas are concerned with historical matter presented as legend; in puranas the glorification of divinity is the central concern and in Itihasas, the human element is dominant.<sup>ix</sup> The oral narrative form is common to both in earlier period and later both were written with local versions were added with contemporary episodes. The narration of Kiratarjuniya is found in Puranas like Shivapurana and also in Itihasas like Mahabharata, which narrates about the divine and human elements along with demons as central characters. The kiratarjuniya episode is wide spread narrative in different periods from vanaparva episode in Mahabharata to mahakavya of Bharavi, and also in later stages of Vikramarjunavijaya of Pampa, The Shiva is depicted as central character in Shivapurana with his divinity, the Arjuna is portrayed as human hero in the Mahabharata, who gained victory over Shiva in the narration of pampa’s Pampa Bharatha, later realized about the divine power of Shiva and bowed to him to get the divine weapon called Pasupatastra. We find both characteristic elements of purana and Itihasas within the narration of Kiratarjuniya.

Maharshi Vyasa advised to Arjuna should do penance Shiva to grant the great weapon Pashupatastra to achieve victory over Kuaravas in battle. Arjuna went to Indrakiladri Mountain, where he began severe austerities for gratifying Shiva. The Parvathi and rishies were anxious about the penance of Arjuna and reported to Shiva, being already aware of the reason behind the Arjuna’s penance and wishes to make sure about the Arjuna’s potential. The Shiva and Parvati assuming the form of Kirata and Kirati as hunters move towards Indrakiladri Mountain. At the same moment an asura named Mukasura in the form of a wild boar approached Arjuna to attack, disturbed by the roaring sound of boar, aimed his arrow against it, in the mean while the Shiva who is a hunter killed boar by his arrow. The Shiva and Arjuna claimed about the killing of boar and both are not satisfied by

the dispute. While claiming the fight was ensued between the Kirata and Arjuna with all types of arms, later hand to hand combat. Both are uniformly unsuccessful while advancement of fighting Arjuna felt exhausted and unconscious for a moment. After he regained his senses, Arjuna recognized the Shiva in the form of Kirata, bowed to his feet and praised him. Siva in his turn admired the strength and courage of Arjuna and granted the Pashupatastra.<sup>x</sup>

### **The visual narration of Kiratarjuniya in mural paintings of South India**

The illustrations of Kiratarjuniya episode in mural paintings are found in many temples of south India. Some of them referred here are Virabhadraswamy temple in Lepakshi, Andhra Pradesh, Terumalleswamy temple in Hiriyuru, Karnataka, Mahadeva temples in Chemmanattitta and Pallimanna in Trissur, Kerala, Vishnu temple in Kadavallur and Mahadeva temple in Chengannur in Kerala. The visual narration of Kiratarjuniya episode is in sequential mode which depicted in the order of action, time and space, from the beginning to end of story as narrated in the Shivapurana and Mahabharata. The adoption of narration from oral to visual is significant characteristics of the mural paintings where the whole episode came into life in front of the viewer with life size characters. The viewer has to walk around the available space to witness legend to unfold with previous knowledge of the saga, where he can connect with the visual narration.

Virabhadraswamy temple in Lepakshi, Andhra Pradesh, Terumalleswamy temple in Hiriyuru, Karnataka, Mahadeva temples in Chemmanattitta and Pallimanna in Thrissur, Kerala, are chosen for the study in present paper; in the following part the mural paintings are analyzed for their visual and narrative aspects.

### **The visual narrative aspects in the Kiratarjuniya mural paintings**

The visual aspects of Kiratarjuniya mural paintings are period of execution, composition and its elements like line, space, form and colours and narrative aspects of Kiratarjuniya mural paintings is composition in narration. The visual narration contains a story with sequential events, a visual and the medium of narration; these key points are discussed in the following part of the present paper.

### **Virabhadraswamy temple, Lepakshi, Andhra Pradesh**

Lepakshi is situated at a distance of 15 Km and 125 Km from Hindupur and Bengaluru respectively. The temple built during the period of Achyutaraya (A.D.1529 – 1542) by Viranna and Virupanna Nayaka, the local rulers of the region with their headquarters at Penukonda.<sup>xi</sup> The mural paintings were discovered by A.H.Longhurst in 1912-13.<sup>xii</sup> The Kiratarjuniya episode is depicted in four panels on the ceilings of the Natyamantapa which is built with granite stone blocks.

#### **Visual Narration:**

The narration is divided into four panels on the center point of ceiling in Rangamantapa, the available space between horizontal granite beams and cross bars are utilized to illustrate number of episodes from the Kiratarjuniya legend. The long rectangular space is decorated with several design elements like flowers, creepers, circular, square shapes and horizontal lines filled with colours are separating from the central focus area and outline. In between the frame, the space is filled with figures and the chief characters according to the narration. All characters are in standing positions with their faces turned to one side while their body faces to the front towards the viewer and whole composition of the space is packed with figures. The composition of forest landscape is painted with various animals like deer's, dogs, parrots, wild animals are shown in action like running, jumping in the woods as background scene, the hunters and their associates are shown in their natural surroundings. The many events were shown in a sequential mode without dividing space in between the narration of Kiratarjuniya.

The importance of line and its representation in the paintings are explained in detail in the text like Manasollasa and Vishnudharmotharapurana, where the line drawing itself is a complete form of expression without application of colours. In the beginning of mural painting artist starts with composing the figures in available space using light colored outline of the forms were made and after filling desired colours within the lines with flat hues, completes the picture with dark black colour outline, which gives the distinct characteristics of linear quality. The textile designs, the action of various characters, trees, animals and design elements also show linear qualities, which creates movement in the paintings.

The forms are in standing positions, adorned with different styles of robes and armaments according to their social status and importance in the narration. Ladies and gentlemen are composed in a packed manner within the available space and placed left and right side of the central character. The forest scene is depicted in their natural surroundings like wild animals, birds and other animals in action, trees and other vegetation are shown in the background. The red, black, white, blue, green, yellow, light red, brown and grey colours are used to depict the characters and background of panels are painted in red and other colours are used to differentiate the various characters in the narration; the Shiva is shown in white to highlight his divinity. The Shiva, Parvati, Arjuna, demon, Shiva ganas, animals, trees and other figures depicted in various colours with contrast to each other.

### **Terumalleshwaraswamy temple in Hiriyuru, Karnataka**

The temple is situated near the historically well-known district Chitradurga, and constructed in the 17<sup>th</sup> century during the period of Kenchappa Nayaka.<sup>xiii</sup> The mural paintings are executed on the ceiling Infront of the main sanctum of Treumalleshwaraswami in the period of 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>xiv</sup> Along with Kiratarjuniya narratives, Dashavatara, Ashtadikpalakas, Ishana, Vayu, Agni, Kubera, Varuna, Yama, Sitakalyana and sporting scenes of Shiva are depicted in mural paintings.

## Visual Narration

The three horizontal panels are depicted with narration of Kiratarjuniya on the ceiling of rangamantapa in front of the Terumalleshwaraswami sanctum; which starts from Arjuna's worship of Shiva and later his penance standing on a single leg in the dense forest along with wolf, deer and boar, in the top most panel of the narration; Apsara is dancing in front of Arjuna in the next scene, wild animals, deer, boar, rabbits, wolfs, elephants, cattle's are roaming freely and are shown in action in the middle panel, which creates movement to the painting, which is also set in the forest background. Second horizontal strip shows the forest background and in one corner Arjuna doing yajna with rishi; end part of the panel is heavily damaged so that part can't be recognized. The third horizontal band shows Shiva as a Kirata and Parvati as Kirati assumed as hunters along with their attendants in the form of hunters shown in their action. In the right corner of the panel the Shiva and Parvati are seated on platform and Arjuna is standing in front of them with folding hands to receive Pashupatastra. The narration of Kiratarjuniya ends here and in the center of the panel the snake carved in stone is hanging from the stone hook. The linear quality of the forms depicted in the mural paintings is known for their distinguished characteristics, finished with minimum colour hues like grey, red, light blue, black and brown.

## Mahadeva temples in Chemmanatitta and Pallimanna in Thrissur, Kerala

The circular temple complex of Mahadeva in Chemmanatitta is situated in Pannitadam, Talapilli taluk of in the district of Thrissur. The temple was constructed in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, and mural paintings are executed in between 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>xv</sup> The outer surface of the main sanctum is covered with mural paintings like, coronation of SriRama, Mohini, Vishnu, Indra with thousand eyes, Markandeya, Nataraja, Dakshinamurti, Kalasamharamurti, Kiratarjuniya, Umamaheshwara, Kiratasunu, Shastra, Krishnalila, Venugopala and Durga.

The Mahadeva temple complex in Pallimanna was constructed in between 12<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> century, which is in square shape and outer wall of the main sanctum is decorated with Mural paintings, which are executed in between 17<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>xvi</sup> The mural paintings in the Chemmanatitta and Pallimanna temple complexes are executed in Dravidian style; which is unique in its stylistic depiction, visual narration, decorative elements and technical aspects; developed from the influence of Pandya, Chola and Vijayanagara style of paintings.

## Visual Narration

The Kiratarjuniya narration is divided by pillars and doors; gives architectural beauty along with splitting up different visual illustrations and narratives. Kiratarjuniya episode is depicted in four and five panels in the Chemmanatitta and Pallimanna temples respectively; starts from Arjuna took consent from his guru and brothers; combat between Kirata and Arjuna, Arjuna worshipping Shiva



in the form of Linga under the tree and forest in the background; ends with receiving the pasupatastra weapon from Shiva. The selected episodes from the legend depicted on the outer wall of main sanctum. Each panel is divided in to two sections and composed in a sequential order. The thick outline, five different colour tones, decorative elements like dresses and adornment of exquisite jewelry, action packed characters in the front and also in the background of the panel, depicting different aesthetic emotions are significant characteristics of the mural paintings.

## Conclusion

The visual narration of Kiratarjuniya in all the four temples of Shiva illustrates stylistic, decorative, aesthetic, iconographical elements. The essentials of visual narration are mode of narration, the medium and the story; all these aspects act as a distinguished character in the south Indian mural paintings; which were traced in visual narration of legend Kiratarjuniya. The design of narration is in continuous visual narrative in Lepakshi and sequential in Hiriyur, Chemmanatitta and Pallimanna temples. The mural paintings act as a medium for the visual narration and the Kiratarjuniya episode from Mythology and Mahabharata presents as a story, which is an important communicator between art, artist and the viewers. The stylistic development of these mural paintings can be traced between 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> century; shows distinct characteristics, which are originated from the Ajanta, Badami, Pandya, Pallavas, Cholas, Vijayangara, Nayaka and the Cheras of south Indian region. The techniques of execution may vary by different schools of the regions, artists were adapted various mode of visual narration, compositional, aesthetic and iconographical elements to depict the same story. The viewer should have previous knowledge of the story to understand the different episodes depicted in the mural paintings and to follow the order of narration; has to move around the available space to witness the story to unfold in front of him as characters in action, narration of story, the time and space of action; all are important elements to study the Mural paintings.

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**Annexure – photographs – Shiva as Kiratarjunyamurti,**

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**Panel – 01 – size – H 4’2” × W 31’4”**



**Panel – 02 – size – H 3’6” × W 24’1”**



**Panel – 03 – size – H 4’6” × W 31’5”**



**Panel – 04 – size – H 5’2” × W 22’3”**

**Images courtesy.** Panel. 1, 2, 3, 4 – Kiratarjunyamurti, Virabhadraswami Temple, Lepakshi, Andhra Pradesh. <http://iiacd.org/lepakshi-interactive-ceiling-murals-plan/fourb.html>, 21/02/2017







Panel – 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 – Kiratarjuniyamurti, Terumalleshwara temple, Hiriyuru, Karnataka.



Panel – 1, 2, 3, 4- Kiratarjuniyamurti, Mahadeva Temple, Chemmnatitta, Thrissur, Kerala

Image Courtesy: 1, 2, 3, 4. Nambirajan, M and Suresh, S. 2015. Kerala Murals. New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India.





Panel 1, 2, 3, 4 – Kiratarjunyamurti, Mahadeva Temple, Palliamanna, Thrissur, Kerala

<sup>i</sup> Coomaraswamy, Ananda K, (2010) *The Transformation of Nature into Art*. New Delhi:Motilal Banarasidas. P – 28

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iv</sup> Rao, Gopinatha T A, (1916) *Elements of Hindu Iconography*. Vol. II - Part 1, Madras:The Law Printing House. P - 145 -146

<sup>v</sup> Pimenta, Sherlin and Poovaiah, Ravi, (2010) *On Defining Visual Narratives*. Design Thoughts, p - 27

<sup>vi</sup> Dehejia, Vidya. (1997) *Discourse in Early Buddhist Art*. New Delhi:Munshiram Manoharlal. P - 5.

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid, P - 10

<sup>viii</sup> Ibid, P - 27

<sup>ix</sup> Paniker, K.Ayyappa. 2003. *Indian Narratology*. New Delhi:IGNCA. (page -41-42)

<sup>x</sup> (Ed), Shastri, J L, *The Shiva– Purāna*. vol – 2. Motilal Banarasidas. Delhi. 2010

<sup>xi</sup> Kumari, Krishna. M. *Mural Paintings of Andhra*. Delhi:BR Publishing. Page- 23

<sup>xii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xiii</sup> Shastri, BVK. *Mural Paintings of Karnataka*. Bangalore:Lalit Kala Akademy.1983. page -12

<sup>xiv</sup> Michel, Georje. 1995 page -229

<sup>xv</sup> Nambirajan, M and Suresh, S. *Kerala Murals*. Delhi:Archiological Survey of India. 2015 page -76

<sup>xvi</sup> Ibid. page -105