

STATE-OF-THE-ART OF MONUMENTS AT BUDDHIST SITE OF GUNTUPALLI CAVES, WEST GODAVARI DISTRICT, A.P

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Abstract - India is known for its rich, diversified and cultural properties. The country is having a history of thousands of years, which is evident from the existing historical building, monuments, temples, etc. of the past. There were different types of historical building, monuments, temples, etc. in different times of the history based on the construction material used, construction process, designs of buildings and plans. Also it is clear from the existing heritage monuments and buildings that there is a lot of advancement and improvement in the construction technology right from the early ages of 2nd – 3rd centuries A.D itself. During those days, the advancement has been reported from the existing monuments at Guntupalli caves, located near Kamavarapukota, West Godavari district, A.P. from rock-cut monuments to brick monuments and then to stone monuments. In this paper, a study on different types of monuments of the Guntupalli caves is presented.

Key Words: Monuments, Rock-cut caves, Brick monuments, Stone monuments, Guntupalli caves

1. INTRODUCTION

Earlier as it is well known the most natural instinct of man for many centuries during the pre-historic period was to find shelter in caves and rock cut shelters. There were no monumental buildings consciously built by man, but naturally available in nature. As the dawn of the history emerged in early India, natural cave and caverns began to be selected for the dwelling of the monks during the rainy season known as Vassavasa when peregrination was not possible. Monks always practices some religious prayers by living spiritual life alone or with a group of monks. They live a very simple life and spend all their time in religious activities. That is the reason why they always choose such type of places where the common habitation is thin for being away from the posh activities of society.

In developing such kind of peaceful environment most of them settled at the hill slopes, in forests and at the banks of rivers. At the initial stage to safeguard them self during the different seasons of rainy, winter and summer they starts dwelling into the open ground called pits and they used to take shelter in them by covering them with leaves.

In Guntupalli, during the 2nd – 3rd century A.D., the monks started excavating into the hill just like some concave sections later on with the improvement of the architecture and sculptures they started excavating deep into the hill by forming some group of chambers which are interconnected to each other. They have provided some basic requirements like drainage to drain out the water coming into the rooms from leakages from the hill, some bed like structure, niches, openings for doors and windows. These group houses are archaeologically called as monastery. Later with improvement in the construction materials the monks started using the clay bricks for the construction of brick chaitya, apsidal stupa, and votive tombs by making the bricks at the foot of the hill with available clay. They found that the bricks are weak when compared to stones and then for the permanency reason they started using the stones of the available rock near the construction site.

2. Different monuments at Guntupalli

Guntupalli is dotted with some of the finest specimens of monolithic and structural Buddhist remains datable to the 3rd-2nd century BC to 5th-6th century AD. The important monuments located are: rock cut temple or *vritta chaitya*, large monastery, small monastery, brick chaitya, ruined mandapa, stone stupa and cluster of votive stupas.

2.1. Rock cut Temple (*Vritta Chaitya*)

Datable to the 3rd-2nd century BC, the *vritta chaitya* is circular on plan and enshrines a rock cut votive stupa provided with a small circumambulatory path around it. Locally known as 'Dharmalingeswara', it has vaulted domical ceiling marked by carved ribs while its exterior shows an arched facade, with ornamental rafts resembling famous Sudama and Lamasrishi caves of Bihar.



2.2. Large Monastery

Excavated into the sandstone cliff, the monastery contains a series of cells of varying dimensions meant for the monks to live in. It has a main entrance with the windows on sides, a narrow terrace and varandha. Both the entrances as well as the windows invariably bear arched facades akin to that of vritta chaitya. Marked by its simplicity the entire monastery is devoid of any ornamentation or decoration and thus attributed to the earliest Buddhist monastic architecture. Some of the cells were provided with deep cut channels to facilitate the rainwater drain in to a natural fissure located on the backside of the monastery.



2.3. Small Monastery

This rock cut vihara, located at a higher elevation of the hill is relatively smaller in dimension. In all there are five cells in it, which are crudely excavated and some remained unfinished. Due to the ravages of nature its façade was badly affected leaving behind traces of gables on it.



2.4. Group of Stupas

Located on one of the terraces of hilltop and numbering more than sixty, these votive stupas erected on different occasions and time frames vary in their shape, size and mode of construction. Fashioned out of stone and also in brick, these votive stupas were set up on stone or brick basements. Amongst them are also seen small apsidal and circular votive chaityas.



2.5. Stone stupa

Datable to the 2nd century BC, this stupa with block stone veneering was subjected to partial excavations in the last quarter of 19th century. Considerable damage was done to its dome by the treasure hunters even before the excavations. The dome measures 2.62m height and 4.88m diameter was erected over a circular basement. The excavations have yielded a stone relic casket containing gold and rock crystal.



2.6. Ruined Mandapa

The monument, presently represented by four standing broken stumps of the pillars was once supposed to be part of a large pillared assembly hall meant for the monks. An inscribed stone pillar retrieved during the clearance work speaks of the existence of a pillared mandapa, which received donations from the 1st to 5th century AD. The dimension of the original assembly hall was estimated as 56ft.x34ft and was provided with entrance porches on eastern and western sides respectively.



2.7. Circular Brick Chaitya Griha

Datable to C. 3rd-2nd century BC, it is at the eastern extreme of the hill over an elevated terrace, approached by a long flight of stone steps. A record of an *upasika* datable to 2nd-1st century BC refers to the setting up of these stone steps at the entrance platform. Its external diameter is 11 m and has an imposing adhistana. The wall of *chaityagriha* rises to 80 cm height and measure 2.14 m wide. It houses a stupa at the center. The circumambulatory path around the stupa is 1.38 m wide.



2.8. Caves

There are caves of about different shapes and are also of different type of rocks. On the south cave a cave with some bed like structure which was cut into the rock was observed. All the caves appear to be like hanging cliffs and some carving like plan of the vihara are present on the caves. Some caves were very deep and while some of them are shaped like some rectangular boxes very near to the surface.



3. CONCLUSIONS

In this paper different structural monuments of Guntupalli are presented. It clearly indicates the evolution of structures during those early periods of 2nd – 3rd century A.D. The art and architecture in the Guntupalli caves is the indication of well expertise and artistic talent of monks. The perfectness in the erection of the structures and the façade carving on the doors and windows resembles their immense knowledge in construction technology. So these types of heritage structures are to be safeguarded and preserved for the future generations to know the well expertise technology and advancement in the art and culture of the past periods.

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