

An Ancient Artist's Lineage Spanning through a Millenium

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This account constructs the lineage of an ancient Indian artist named Kokāsa who figures first in an inscription of a.d. 1159 and then continues being mentioned in other epigraphs till the end of the fifteenth century. If we bring textual sources too in the reckoning, his first ever mention would go back to the fifth century, adding to the lineage more than one thousand years backwards in antiquity from the fifteenth century. As we go back and forth in time to reconstruct his lineage, Kokāsa turns out to be a historical figure recast into a legendary personage. Also remarkable is the fact that the scions and the descendants of the Kokāsa lineage continued to make their mark through centuries, practising the same profession and accomplishing varied works in different parts of India and beyond, where monuments edifying different religious persuasions were continually commissioned. Recurrent references to this lineage indicate hereditary character of artists' vocation where skill seems to have been perfected within the exclusive domain of the family, which must have been a crucible to create artistic modes and style and to train its members in their pursuits.

Going backwards in history from the fifteenth century, we propose to describe the works accomplished by Kokāsa and his descendants in regions wide apart. We may begin with a fifteenth century inscription from Ratanpur (Dist. Bilaspur,

Chhattisgarh). This inscription dated in Vikram Samvat 1552/ a.d. 1495-96 is engraved on a wall of the sanctum of the local Mahamaya temple of the same date. Composed in an indifferently constructed Sanskrit, the inscription begins with a salutation to Viśvakarmā, the patron deity of artisans and reads like a eulogy of the descendants of Kokāsa in eight verses. The verses read as follows:

Among *sūtradhāras*, Chītaku, the light of Kokāsa family [*vamśadipaka*], is well-known for his proficiency in *Śilpaśāstra*-s and has the virtue of compassion in his heart [*br̥dayam dayādbarmah*].

By the favour of gods and preceptors, he is the ocean of five sciences [*pancavidyā mahodadhibh*], a veritable Nārāyaṇa in respect of draftsmanship [*rekha Nārāyanovā'pi*], meritorious and truthful.

The *sūtradhāra* Chītaku can work on wood and stone and also on gold, with ease. [*kāṣṭha pāṣāṇake caiva kanake 'pi ca tilayā*.] He possesses knowledge of the great science, the science of machinery [*yantravidyā mahavidyā*].

The *sūtradhāra* Chītaku knows how to play on *vanča* and *trivānča* [*vančatrivanča vādanam*] and to carve (?) creepers and leaves [*vallipatrādikaih*]. He knows also the *tritāla* and *saptatala* [*tritāla saptatalam ca*].

The *sūtradhāra* Chītaku, the able son of Manmatha, is a perfect master

of sciences [*vidyāpatiśca gambhīraḥ*] and has fixed his heart on Keśava.

His younger brother is Mandana, devoted to three deities (?) and a reader of scriptures. . . [*upāṅga rūpavādi ca kāmasāra grahe sadā, sāstrajapī tribhaktaśca Mandanam laghubāndhavaḥ*].

He is devoted to Brahmanas [*brahmabbaktah*]. All merits [*sarvagunah*] together with the knowledge of astronomy [*jyotiḥ śātra*] will be found in Mandana by the favour of Viśvakarmā.

The writer is Dityana, the sculptor [*rūpakāmaśca*], (who is) well conducted [*vidyā sarvaguṇeśu ca*] and devoted to his brother, and is praised for his knowledge of sciences and all merits.

"May there be always bliss!" (V.V. Mirashi 1955: 556-557).

One can here see a reference to four artists of the Kokāsa lineage (*vamśa*) namely, Manmatha and his three sons Chītaku, Mandana and Dityana who are all represented as well-accomplished artists. Chītaku, a 'master architect' as his title *sūtradhāra* implies, was eldest among the brothers and evidently, most eminent in his profession by virtue of his expertise in draftsmanship, his knowledge of the standard measurements in carving sculptures and in architecture besides his skill in carving creepers and floral designs. He was equally proficient in playing on musical instruments,

which combined well with his knowledge of the canons of *śilpa*, 'arts'. The record claims his complete mastery over art-related *vidyā-s*, 'streams of knowledge', e.g., sculpture, architecture, music, measurement and proportions and draftsmanship. He was also blessed with a brother who was proficient in *sastra*, 'canons of art', which he expertly recited or chanted. In addition, he knew the science of astronomy, knowledge essential for architectural lay out, measurements and proportions, which were extremely important to artists in their work. The youngest brother Dityan is mentioned in the inscription as a sculptor (*rūpakāra*) and he is said to have been also a 'writer' who engraved the inscriptions in question.

If the claims made in the inscription are taken as literally true—and there is no reason to doubt them—it can safely be claimed that these artists together made a complete team fully and excellently endowed with capacity to undertake the different art-related tasks. In fact, the inscription reads like a manifesto advertising their skills. The claims of expertise are made in it with sufficient humility unlike those of certain master-artists of the Karnata region who are known to have been abrasive and brazen about proclamation of their merit.

Going back in time we find a reference to two other artists of Kokāsa lineage in a copper plate grant of a.d 1167 from central India (Mirashi 1955: pp. 330-31). This copper plate inscription from Jabalpur mentions two artists namely, Talhaṇa, a sculptor (*rūpakāra*) and his father, Palhaṇa. Both these artists are stated to have descended from *śrī* Kokāsa. The honorific '*śrī*' prefixed to the name of Kokāsa indicates that by the time this inscription was engraved, the

lineage had already achieved eminence and Kokāsa had come to be respected as progenitor of the lineage. The inference about the lineage is categorical in the term '*vamsa*', used in the inscription while mentioning Palhaṇa and his son Talhaṇa. Palhaṇa is mentioned in many other inscriptions also, which we intend to quote below. But in the record under review, these two artists are specifically mentioned as descendants of the lineage (*vamsa*) of Kokāsa. Talhaṇa figures here as a 'sculptor' who 'engraved' the copper plate after the letters of the document were 'written' by Vatsarāja, an officer of the state. The fact that Vatsarāja, a state functionary collaborated in the job with Talhaṇa may indicate that like Vatsarāja, Talhaṇa too was employed by the state and two together performed their respective roles before the land grant was finally proclaimed by the ruler. The authenticity of the record is not in doubt. Nor in doubt would be the historicity of the Kokāsa lineage along with Palhaṇa and Talhaṇa who find a mention in it. This record is essentially an official document. It records a royal endowment to a donee involving the latter's rights to property and this kind of dispensation would not permit any inaccuracy to creep into the text.

We hear about Palhaṇa again, first along with his teammates working near Satna (Madhya Pradesh) and then independently, as he figures in certain other records from Bundelkhand region. His father Rājapāla also finds a mention in some of these records which shows a growing Diaspora of the Kokāsa lineage.

For these details we may go back in time to a.d 1159 when we find a Kokāsa as member of a confederation of artists who possibly constructed a temple of goddess Ambikā and an

embankment nearby which is designated in the inscription as *Sataśadikā ghāṭ*. The Ambikā temple was constructed near the road leading to that *ghāṭ*. The inscription itself was found near a cave of Alhaghat (District Satna, Madhya Pradesh), which serves as "one of the natural passes of the Vindhya hills by which the Tons River finds its way from the table-land of Rewa to the plain of the Ganges" (Mirashi 1955). The Alhaghat inscription is the first ever of the records to mention Kokāsa. But this Kokāsa has none of the aura of a legendary figure, the originator of a line of distinguished artists. He just happens to be a member of a confederation of five artisans including four others beside him, e.g., Some, Palhaṇa, Dalhana and Kamalasimha; the last being the foreman. All these artists may have belonged to the Kokāsa lineage in the Kalachuri-held region because that name designates at least one member of that confederation of artists. The inscription is significant for mentioning Palhaṇa whose accomplishments are reported later from Jejākabhukti territory of the Chandella rulers in central India. This would indicate that after completing the work at Alhaghat in the Kalacuri domain Palhaṇa had moved over to the Candellas' territory, bereft of constraints and full of promises and possibilities.

Rājapāla's son Palhaṇa, a scion of Kokāsa lineage, had a reasonably hectic career under the Candellas. He figures in their records in different capacities for fourteen years from a.d. 1165 to a.d. 1178. After his mention in Alhaghat inscription in a.d 1159, Palhaṇa figures in a Candella record of a.d. 1165 as a brazier (*pītalakāra*) who 'engraved' an inscription. Five years later, in a.d. 1170, he came to be designated as a *śilpīn* and two

years hence, he came to receive the title *vijnānika*, 'knower of the science (of architecture and allied work)'. These designations seem to indicate his gradual rise in the professional set up of the *śilpi*-s. The upward mobility of Palhaṇa in artists' hierarchical ranks from *pitalakara* to *śilpi* and then on to *vijnānika* continued further and, in two inscriptions respectively of a.d. 1175 and a.d. 1178, he is mentioned as an 'expert in the discipline of Viśvakarmā' (*vaidagdbī Viśvakarmā*). These different designations applied to Palhaṇa indicate his active career of two decades in the employment of the Kalacuri-s and the Candella-s with ever rising professional status, which is indicated by his designations that represented hierarchical positions in an ascending order. Applied to Palhaṇa these designations and titles help in linking up the different hierarchical ranks and in concluding that professionally artists rose up in status with accretion of experience and expertise (Misra 1984: p. 68). Above all, the references to Palhaṇa indicate Diaspora of the Kokāsa lineage between a.d. 1159 and a.d. 1178 in neighbouring territories regardless of the Kalacuri-Candella antecedents of war and peace.

II

There is more about Kokāsa lineage in literary texts. Kokāsa story is told in the *Vāsudevabindī*, a text of the fifth century and it is further developed in the commentary to *Āvaśyaka* of Haribhadra and *Brhatkathā* of Hariṣeṇa. According to the *Āvaśyaka Cūrṇi* (Misra 1987: pp. 137-8) there was a carpenter named Kokāsa who lived in Śūrparaka (Sopara, Maharashtra). Using his knowledge of crafts (*śilpavidyā*), he made mechanical

pigeons that would fly into the royal palace and collect the royal crop of rice in their beaks. Later, the ruler commissioned him to devise a mechanical Garuda (a large bird), which could fly in the sky. Kokāsa is said to have successfully crafted such a mechanical bird and the prince is said to have used it, moving around on it in the company of his queen. Still later, on being commissioned by the ruler of Kalinga, he built a seven-storied palace for him. In the *Brhatkathā śloka samgraha* of Buddhasvāmin, Kokāsa seems to be mentioned as Pukvasa, an artisan in the service of king Mahasena of Ujjain. The variants of Kokāsa as found in the Jainā texts include Kokkasa, Kukkasa, Kukkāsa, Kokāsa, Kakkosa, Kokkāsa and Pukvasa. The *Āvaśyaka Niruykti* and the *Viśeśāvaśyaka Bhāṣya* also refer to him (Misra 1987: pp. 137-8). In all these texts, he figures prominently as a master craftsman. In the *Vāsudevabindī*, the earliest of these texts, he is said to have belonged to Tamralipti and went to Yavanadeśa (Greece or Bactria?) with a traders' caravan. Once there, he learnt woodcraft from a carpenter of that land. Coming back to Tāmralipti, he established himself as an artist of repute and made a mechanical horse that could fly! The *Brhakathakośa*, a text of the tenth century, refers to Kokāsa as a carpenter who was expert in crafting elegant female figures in wood. We are told that these female figures were unrivalled in beauty and grace and they put to shame the work of best of the sculptors in comparison.

Kokāsa thus turns out to be a sculptor of great merit, associated with several places like Ujjain, Alhaghat, Jabalpur, and Jejākabhukti in central India, Ratanpur in Chhattisgarh, Tāmralipti in Bengal and Yavanadeśa beyond the frontiers of India. But the saga of the Kokāsa

lineage seems to have picked up further in the Marathi literature from the thirteenth century. The *Lilācaritra*, a Mahānubhāva text of that date refers to Cakradharaswamy who went to Elapura (Ellora, in Maharashtra) and stayed there for ten months. According to a *tilā* of the text, when Baisa asked of Śrī Cakradhara about the authorship of Ellora caves she was told that Kokāsa, a carpenter, excavated them (Parimoo, Ed. 1988: p.109).

The *Kathākalpataru* of Kṛṣṇa Yājñavalkī (c.1470-1535 a.d.) associates Kokāsa with Paithan and regards him as a master craftsman who excavated the Manakeśvara cave (Cave X) of Ellora to alleviate the misery of Yelurai and his wife Manikāvati. The text describes the event in some detail and we are told that Kokāsa *vadbai* (*vardhakin*, 'carpenter') of Paithan lived a pious life. He would not take his food without taking a dip in the Godavari river everyday. He was like a veritable Viśvakarmā and was destined to build Śiva's shrine at Ellora. He worked with a contingent of seven thousand artisans and the king's minister was commissioned to bring Kokāsa from Paithan. On being commissioned by the king to excavate a temple, ". . . Kokāsa proceeded to carve the mountain and before the sun rose on the morning of the seventh day (he) showed the rock cut tower of the shrine to the queen Manikāvati. (When she) saw the tower (she) . . . took her food. Kokāsa thus carved out in a topsy-turvy style, the shrine which was named Manakesvara. He carved many other caves. Thus, Yelurai raised a beautiful settlement. It came to be named Yelura" (Parimoo, Ed. 1988: pp. 116-17).

Kokāsa surfaces again in the *Śrīkṛṣṇa Caritra*, a Mahānubhāva text from Maharashtra. But in it his

character is largely mythical. He is identified in the text with the demon Margajasura who is killed by Krṣṇa. But he is said to have had a friend named Drumil who is “credited to have excavated an underground settlement in Ellora caves” (Parimoo, Ed. 1988: p.118).

The foregoing account presents Kokāsa both as a skilled master-craftsman and a mythical figure. He is associated with many a place within the Indian subcontinent, the places like, Sopara, Paithan and Ellora in western India, Ujjain, Alhaghat, Jabalpur and Jejākabhukti in central India, Orissa on the eastern coast, Tāmralipti in Bengal and Yavanadesa beyond the frontiers of India. Kokāsa legends may be traced back to the fifth century in the Jain texts. But his accounts are not limited to the texts

alone. References to him in the copper plate land grants are authentic and their historicity is not in doubt. Inscriptions thus are significant in historicizing Kokāsa lineage firmly. It remains to trace out styles that could be identified with signature of the Kokāsa lineage. The repertory of such heritage could be vast and fairly expansive for the Kokāsa lineage is credited with having built temples, *ghāṭs* and rockcut caves and crafted sculptures at many sites between the fifth and the fifteenth century. The ultimate tribute to the artists who carved the Ellora works is paid in a Marathi ditty. And, the ditty, in complete empathy with work and its mode of construction, marvels at the reversed order of excavating the rock cut monuments of Ellora where, ‘on a mere tamarind leaf, the summit was

built before the foundations could be laid’: *cincicya panavari deul bāndhile: ādhi kalasa magapayare!* This marks a popular and perceptive but the ultimate tribute to Kokāsa whose identity, almost epical, survives in the *loka*.

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STUDIES IN HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

Vol. X, No. 2, Winter 2003

Editor: R.N. Misra

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