

NOTE ON STONE CRAFT CLUSTER

Stone Carving is an age old craft practiced by a section of Viiswakarma Community. Most of the works are done for temples in Tamil Nadu and Kerala. Temples are also designed and built by these craftsmen. A few craftsmen have mastered the art from the Stone Carving Training Institute at Mahabalipuram, Tamil Nadu. Most of the craftsmen are simple in living and hardworking. This craft particularly needs exceptional patience. The traditional craftsmen work in patience to carve out a beautiful image of a deity. The sheer talent combined with the good working medium of granite stone transforms into a divine figure with all the "Bhavabhinayas" laid down in the book 'Shilparatna'. During the course of this transformation of granite block, the craftsmen engages his entire attention on the work. He prefers a silent and serene place to work because he should not loose his concentration.

The stone craft is being practiced in Mylaudy, Unnamalaikadai in Kanyakumari District, Pasumalai in Madurai District and Kazhukumalai in Toothukudi District. Mylaudy is a tiny hamlet on the foot hills of Southern most tip of the western ghats. But for its name for stone sculpture it is an obscure village, 9 Kms from Nagercoil, the District Headquarters of Kanyakumari District. In Mylaudy, mainly figures of Gods and Goddesses are carved out. Common figures carved are Ganesh, Subramania, Shiva, Parvathi, Shivalinga, Kali, Maadan etc. The Mylaudy stone carvers Co-operative Society undertakes construction of temples also. Orders on statues of eminent men are also executed. Apart from stone figures, panels in various designs like lathangi, lady with parrot etc., are also made. These panels are mostly copied from the temples. Tomb stone with glossy polish is also done. Semi skilled artisans works on grinding stones used in motorised grinders commonly used in the households.

Regarding the history of stone craft at Mylaudy no recorded evidence is available, but it is believed that the craft came into being at Mylaudy about 600 years ago. Kazhukumalai in Toothukudi District is a place of archaeological importance with the centuries old Jain rock carvings. Here also different types of stone work are undertaken. Sculptured panels and pillars are the speciality of artisans at Kazhugumalai.

The temple with its profusion of sculpture and magnificent proportions, the thousand-pillared mandapas and the pillars of stone, towering gopurams and larger-than-life-sized reliefs speak highly of the architectural skills of the Tamil sculptors. Pasumalai, Villupuram etc, are some places in Madurai District wherein stone craft is being practiced .

The artisans practising stone craft is called sthaphathis. They use traditional methods of stone carving as approved in the Silpa Sasthra. They polish by hand to give the figures a good glaze and glare. Rubbing with wax is also done to give the figures a lustrous appearance. One of the specialities of stone carving at Tamil Nadu is the illustration of animal and bird life. One common animal is Yali, a combination of an elephant and a lion widely found in South Indian cosmology. About 300 artisans are engaged in the craft.

Raw Materials

Granite stone blocks, emery powder, steel powder, gingelli oil and charcoal. The material are locally available.

Tools & Equipments

Common tools are chisels and hammers of various sizes and dimensions. For polishing, the Co-operative society is using a stone polishing machine for polishing the surface of tomb stones, foundation stones and a few architectural parts of temples.

Process

The rough stone is first treated with hammer and chisel by comparatively unskilled workers and then the craftsmen outlines a rough sketch of the image which is to be prepared out of it. For some common figures like Ganesh, the line is not drawn and the craftsman carve out the figure straight away with his imagination and out of experience. The stone is brought out to its form by using different sizes and shapes. If the figure is of a deity pure gingelly oil is applied to blacken the surface of the figure. The figure is prepared according to the set rules on the proportions, ornamentations, weapons, pose etc. that are laid down in the treaties like Shilparatna. While working on an image of a deity the craftsmen strictly adhere to the rules, which he has memorised in verse form.

Annual Production Capacity

Annual Production capacity is estimated at about a crore of rupees. The output of unskilled workers is not taken into account.

Traditional Marketing

The artisans undertake minor work for house like flooring of Pooja hall or carving brackets for stone steps. Construction and repair of smaller temples in and around the place was done.