Mahabalipuram's Famed School of Architecture & Art
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Mahabalipuram's Famed School of Architecture & Art

Reported by Gowri Shankar, Madras

In the eggshell-white beachsand and weathered granite ruins were found corroded Chinese, Roman and Persian coins from 20 centuries past-testimony that tiny Mahabalipuram, South India, was once a vital crossroads seaport. No doubt some deistic sculpture created from Mahabalipuram's tight-grained granite sailed its way to dynastic China. Traders once called the town `Seven Pagodas,' after seven lilliputian temples hewn from solid rock. Today, specialty buyers and tourists from everyland cruise the beaches and flint-smelling shops stuffed with common sculpture and curios. Street urchins try to hustle soapstone knockoffs. Long-dead urchins probably sold cheapies to Roman sailors. But somewhere in back of shops or inside a home's courtyard teenage tyros of sculpture are chinking away at stone, perfecting the art they are studying at college, and earning a few hundred rupees during their weekend or vacation time. They are students at the Government College of Architecture and Sculpture, a wild warren of buildings and shops that look like they were designed by a post-modernist Tagore. The college facade doesn't reflect the ancient architecture taught within. But, this is where the good stuff-the rare, big, skill-kissed sculpture-comes from. And where 220 boys from ages 13 and up polish their minds and hands with iconometry, granite engineering, chisel wielding, figure painting and a hundred other facets of the art, along with academics. And its free for those who make it in, mostly sons of artisan families. The government provides the whole deal, "from pencils and erasers on up," says K.S. Shanmugam, the college principal. He tells us the school offers degrees in temple architecture, temple painting and sculpture-stone, wood, stucco and metal. The 3-year degree course includes music and dance, philosophy, Sanskrit literature, art aesthetics, history of Hindu architecture and arts and temple conservation. Fifteen graduate each year with a B.Sc. degree. They usually join the studio/shops of established stapathis, master architect /sculptors, turning out high quality work on a pricey commission basis.

In 1957 the school began simply as a roughshod workyard that lathed out marvelous pieces while trying to purify and propagate the old technology to a new

generation. Vaidyanatha Stapathi, father of V. Ganapathy Stapathi, the internationally acclaimed Hindu temple architect sculpture, was the first head of this school. The elder architect held the post for three years-till 1961-when he was succeeded by his famous son Ganapathy who navigated the institution into its present eminence and size. He remained its head for close to three decades till his retirement in 1988. Ganapathy says, "There is a bright future for this institution. The alumni are doing well with regular jobs, with occasional opportunities for independent designing and executing."

C. Harikrishnan, 25, a graduate says that "Even as students in the diploma classes, boys acquire enough proficiency to design and carve busts. Depending on their ability, these novices earn some Rs.200 for what they can produce in a holiday of 2-3 days."

When asked about the demands for seats in the institution, the school principal K.S. Shanmugam says, "There is tremendous competition for the pre-diploma-the first two-year program." So far the school has not admitted any student from outside India. Tamil is compulsory. There is no bar against foreign students. "But no one has approached us yet," says Shanmugam. Though the majority of apprentices are Hindus, there are several Christians studying. A hostel is under construction and is expected to be ready in two years.

Boopathy Stapathy, 52, is in charge of the Metal Section concerning metal sculpture, which was begun in 1978. He recalls, "They scouted me out and brought me over here. I felt flattered when they told me `If you aren't joining, we are closing the section.'" He had undergone intense training in Swamimalai, a famous center for bronze icon production.

S.K. Sivakumar, 28, a diploma holder from the school, is the son of a diamond cutter. He works in the thriving workshop of Nagaraja Stapathy in Madras. In a fascinating process he is molding a meru (mountain-like structure) made of a blend of five metals into shape. Sivakumar says he averages about US$100 a month. When a good project rolls in, he can bring home US$300 for one month. But other months can be lean.When asked if a student from an artisan family is likely to out perform one from a family with no architectural or sculpting background, he quickly noted his colleague, 35-year-old Krishnan Palani, who is a son of a farmer. "He is a crack embosser and engraver of metals," says Boopathy. Palani says, "I haven't had any formal qualification. Began at 13 as a hack helping a stone mason engaged in

building the temple tower at Tiruvanmiyur."

Are girls frowned upon with hammer and chisel in their hands? Sivakumar observes, "It isn't so. Only they happen to prefer painting. They fancy it as a hobby. They take to Tanjore gold leaf painting with studding of the flashy gems thrown in and also modern glass painting. Even many society girls evince interest in this and practice it as a hobby."

School principal Shanmugam proudly relates one of the current projects the college is engaged in: "We are creating a horse pillar hall consisting of forty equestrian warriors to be erected in Kotiswaram, Jaffna, in Sri Lanka. When it is ready, it will be taken to Sri Lanka and assembled there."

V. Ganapathy Stapathi says that traditional housing architecture has not been adopted into the college's curriculum. He says, "The Western mode of building architecture made great strides in India on account of institutional training. But to lead a simple, happy, contented life for the poor and middle class-those house patterns are yet to develop. Only Indian tradition can offer solutions. But the passage is blocked. This school can play a role only if the public is taught to be disenamored of the flashy West and reorient themselves to the simple but beautiful life pattern of their forebearers."

Tradition vs. Technology

The Japanese have flicked out their trading tentacles to the granite bedrock of Mahabalipuram, offering big yen for granite that will be carved into Shinto and Buddhist tombstones or veneered onto skyscrapers back in Japan. While most of the carving is hand-executed, the Japanese employ sophisticated cutting and polishing machines and computer-aided-design to get an edge on competitors. Hindu stapathis in India are also dabbling in techno-sculpting, but most are shy of letting hand work go entirely in favor of machine work. Woodworking in Mahabalipuram was given a technological boost a hundred years ago by the British who wanted more and better export objects d'art. World class temple architect V. Ganapathy Stapathi observes on stone, "Machines can't give the finish human hands do. We don't turn our back on modern equipment. It'd be myopic and retrogressive. But

there are areas in the Hindu art of making images which demand the feel of God-given hands. The proboscis of Ganapati and the serrated jaws of Vishnu as the Lion/man avatar defy polishing machines." But one alumnus of the Government College of Architecture and Sculpture uses technology extensively. Rangaswami Stapathy has developed a thriving studio that specializes in computer design and machine-polished statues and granite blocks. In particular demand are his interior decor items: domes, flower pots and pillars. If pure granite temple building becomes popular in the global Hindu community, the protean power and visual accuracy of computer depiction of design would enable clients to custom select features of their future edifice while watching a three-dimensional image on screen.