

Listen to the idols

The sculptures in Egmore Museum date back to several dynasties who ruled the state. A recent walk by Sahapedia and Prastara decoded the symbolism in them.



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Thirty five history enthusiasts assembled at the Egmore museum, recently, for a guided heritage walk

By Aarthi Murali

Express News Service

CHENNAI: Lining the walls of high rise buildings at Government Museum, Egmore, were sculptures that looked faintly familiar to some of us. We had visited the museum during a college trip or family tour; and soon realised we barely knew the history behind the icons and inscriptions. We were 35 history enthusiasts, young and old, who had assembled at the entrance of the museum, recently, for a guided heritage walk. It was curated by organisations Sahapedia and Prastara. Jayakumar S, founder, managing trustee, Prastara, was our guide.

At 10 am, we headed to the stone museum, to delve into histories of the earliest granite structures from Pallava and Chola periods. Shiva's form was that of a dwarapalaka (gate-keeper), and Vishnu sat majestically in sukasana position. Placing this in the context of early Pallava era, Jayakumar explained, "There was a



divinity to the security that Shiva represented. And this era's iconography was characterised by a certain realness, as structures look almost like human forms.”

And this was starkly different from the next set of granite structures from the early Chola period (850-1100 AD).

Shiva, similar to certain depictions of Rama, had a bow and arrow, and highly stylised ornaments. “Our earliest

temple structures are from this period. And it only transitions to more stylisations and intricate carvings in the following eras,” said Jayakumar.

He walked us through later Chola period, Vijayanagara period, and modern era — from 1600 AD to present day. The relevance of every intricacy in the structures was symbolically explained. And certain unusual depictions, like Muruga and Shiva sitting on an elephant, was even traced back to famous Thiruppugazh songs.

One of the most striking sections was that of Naga structures, which Jayakumar said, was closely associated with South Indian gods and worship. “The intertwined snakes, commonly found under arasa maram (Peepal tree) in towns and villages, were made by extremely skilled craftsmen. It's very hard to tell where the snakes begin and end,” he explained, referring to one of the icons.

Of sculptors and patronage

The walk was not structured chronologically. Amaravati art and sculptures, influenced by Buddhism in the region, was traced to over 600 years before Chola period. And striking mandalas or medallions were characteristic of art in these times.

Jayakumar insisted that art practices must be traced to a sculptor's craftsmanship, and not to a period's 'style'. “The sculpture is offered to a king as patronage, but the style is influenced by a period's landscape and political reality,” shared Jayakumar, adding that not all architecture schools teach this right, and a Pallava or Chola period is simply a classification of time.

Jayakumar's work is also driven by the need to clarify and unlearn a European understanding of architecture. Referring to it as limiting, he said, “Only certain aspects of Indian symbolism gets covered in their interpretations. But unfortunately, it's what is taught in most schools and history classes.”

He believes that only a comprehensive understanding, that lets us connect

literature, art, music, and social landscapes of a period, is meaningful. “I come from Thiruvengadu, and neither me, nor my parents knew of the richness of its heritage until my recent interest in researching heritage. This is why such walks need to be taken to children, to make history both fun and relevant,” he shared.

Prastara’s heritage walks

April: Egmore

Museum — overview

May: Egmore Museum— Amaravati art

June: Mamallapuram walk

July: Kanchipuram walk

To know more about Prastara’s work or heritage walks in the city, visit: www.prastara.in, or write to: jayakumar@prastara.in

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