

Iconic *Gaṇapati* to aniconic *Pillaiyār*: An archaeological and ethnographical study on iconographic variations of *Gaṇēsha* figures in Sri Lanka

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A sculpture of a two-armed Gaṇapati has been found on the frontispiece of Mihintale Kaṇṭaka Cētiya shows the concept of Gaṇapati has been known to Sri Lankan Buddhist society since 2nd century CE. During Polonnaruwa era (11th-12th Century CE) many four-armed stone images and bronzes of Gaṇapati is appeared due to the cultural interaction between Sri Lanka and south India. It is clear that four-armed Gaṇapati became popular among Sinhalese Buddhists since Polonnaruwa era, and he was intruded into Buddhist pantheon. Worshipping Gaṇēsha by the name of Pillaiyār or Pullaiyār in North-Central and Northern Provinces by Sinhalese Buddhists should be paid a special attention owing to the simple aniconic figure of which the deity is represented. Thus, three major forms of representing Gaṇēsha among Buddhists in the area covering North-Central and Northern Provinces from historic period can be identified. It is questionable that 'why the aniconic figure is restricted to a specific area while the four-armed Gaṇēsha figure is still being the common representation among the Buddhists in other parts of the country?'. Therefore, the paper seeks to examine the socio-cultural factors which would have influence the evolution of the Gaṇēsha sculpture of that area. It is revealed that the beliefs of Gaṇapati in the Buddhist socio-cultural context of the area were influenced in forming the iconography of the deity.

Keywords: *Gaṇapati, Pillaiyār, iconic, aniconic, socio-cultural influences*

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