

# Jakanachari: An artisan or a collective genius?

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Myths about legendary artisans who built spectacular temples abound in many parts of India. Those mysterious, faceless personalities who built the considerable architectural wealth of the Indian subcontinent have always fascinated us lucky inheritors of this treasure. In Kerala, we have the legendary Peruntacchan, to whom many a temple has been attributed, and everyone in Odisha is familiar with Dharmapada, the young son of the chief architect of the Sun Temple at Konark, who solved the puzzle of the crowning stone of the temple shikhara. And in Karnataka, we have the legendary Jakanachari, whose chisel is said to have given form to innumerable temples of this land.

Most of these artisan-myths appear to have the same plot, with more than a whiff of tragedy. Peruntacchan, supposedly jealous of the rising talents of his own son, accidentally drops a chisel while the duo was working on the timber roof of a temple, killing the son. Dharmapada, who solves the riddle which allowed the completion of the tower of the Konark Temple, which had vexed twelve thousand artisans, sacrifices himself so that their honour is not diminished in the eyes of the King. There are other myths in other lands which echo this tragic course of events. In Tamil country, the unfinished state of the rock-cut temple called Vettuvan Kovil is believed to be the consequence of the architect of this structure striking his son dead, because the son had boasted upon finishing his own temple project ahead of the father. And the artisan of the Simhachalam Temple in Andhra had, in a similar fit of rage, cut down his son when the latter tried to magically transport the temple to their hometown so that his mother could see the magnificent structure.

In the legend of Jakanachari, it is the father who suffers. The son chances upon his father working on an idol in chloritic schist, or potstone, the popular medium of the Hoysala artisans. The father and son do not recognize each other, because Jakanachari had left home on his peregrinations for work before the son was born. The boy claims that the stone selected by Jakanachari was flawed, at which the veteran artisan takes umbrage and vows to cut off his hand if that was proved to be the case. The young upstart covers the idol in sandalwood paste, and points out a persistent wet patch near the navel. A blow with a chisel reveals a cavity with a resident frog to boot. The peeved father is said to have cut off his hand in disgust. Thus the legend follows the plotline of the standard artisan-myth of a talented artisan, rising friction when the son's talent threatens to overshadow the father's, and a subsequent tragic resolution.

The legend of Jakanachari is larger than life, and the number of temples which are attributed to his authorship are numerous. However, a close examination of the temples said to be built by him shows that it is almost exclusively temples built in the Vesara idiom, during the periods of Kalyani Chalukya and Hoysala rule, which are pointed out as Jakanachari gudis. If we look at the time period over which Jakanachari gudis were built, we can easily see that it spans over three centuries! What is even more interesting is that though most of these temples fairly bristle with inscriptions naming several artisans who worked on them, the name Jakanachari is not mentioned in any of these inscriptions.

The tradition of inscribing names of the principal artisans involved in constructing temples dates back to the earliest examples of stone temples in Karnataka, the temples of the Early Chalukyas in the well-known sites at Badami, Pattadakallu, Aihole and other sites in the Malaprabha Valley. Inscriptions naming artisans of various temples, their professional lineage and extolling their superior skills are common in these temples built during the 6th – 8th centuries CE. For instance, an inscription introduces us to one Narasobban, who built the Huchappayya Gudi at Aihole, an architect par excellence, and, we are led to believe, there never was nor would there ever be anyone more skilled than him at temple-building in all of Jambudvipa. We encounter Narasobban again, at a quarry near the rock-cut Jaina Temple at Meguti Hill, Aihole, where an inscription claims the quarry as belonging to him; while another, beside what appears to be an unfinished rock-cut temple project nearby, in addition to stating his prowess as an architect, also mentions his mentor Binjadi.

Signatures on monuments of the Vesara type associated with Jakanachari are also numerous and common. Thus, we learn about the prolific Hoysala artisan Mallitamma, who enters history by sculpting the ornate ceilings of the Amritheshwara Temple at Tarikere, near Shivamogga and goes on to have a long and splendid career culminating at the Keshava Temple at Somanathapura. In the span of this illustrious career, he left his signature on no less than seven Hoysala temples.

Fictional construct?



So how is it that the legendary Jakanachari never left his signature on any of the monuments he is credited with? Could it be that he is a fictional construct, arising in folklore and getting inextricably entwined with the Vesara monuments? R.

Narasimhachar, in his book on the Keshava Temple at Somanathapura, avers that the name Jakanachari is a corruption of dakshinachari, which simply means a sculptor of the southern school, or style of architecture.

The Vesara idiom of temple form was initially considered a mixture of the northern Nagara and the southern Dravida idioms. However, recent scholarship leans towards the idea that the Vesara evolved entirely from the Dravida, and does not contain any Nagara elements. Ajay Sinha, in his well-researched book, *Imagining Architects*, charts out how classical Dravida elements in temples transformed into equivalents which looked entirely different in the Vesara monuments. These transformations were the result of experimentation in temple-form in Aihole and nearby regions like Ron, by certain guilds of artisans during the 10th – 11th centuries.

### Southern style

The earliest proper Vesara monuments were built during the rule of the Kalyani Chalukyas. However, this was not the only style of building in that period. In the regions north of the Krishna River, another style called Hemadpanti, was in vogue. So, could it be that the architectural idiom prevalent in the southern part of the kingdom was called the “southern style” which ultimately ended up as “Jakanachari” style?

Lending credence to this line of reasoning are a couple of inscriptions from Pattadakallu. In the Virupaksha Temple at Pattadakallu, there is an inscription which describes an artisan called Sarvasiddhi Achari as “tenkana diseya sutradhari”. While this inscription has been interpreted variously, it seems reasonable to accept the early interpretation by epigraphist John Faithfull Fleet as “architect of the southern country” or architect of the Dravida idiom. Another inscription, at the Papanatha Temple at Pattadakallu, attributes an artisan Revadi-Ovajja, a disciple of Sarvasiddhi Achari, with constructing the southern part of the temple. Interestingly, the Papanatha Temple is an attempted fusion of the Nagara and the Dravida styles. Could then, the import of this inscription be that the disciple of the tenkana diseya sutradhari was responsible for the southern style elements in this hybrid building?

If this is true, then, in the light of Sinha’s conclusion that Vesara evolved entirely from the Dravida idiom of building, it is quite probable that these monuments were seen to be the southern or Dakshinachari style during the period of Kalyani Chalukyan rule, when two dominant styles of temple-building prevailed to the north and south of the Krishna.

Thus, it appears quite likely that Jakanachari was not a historical artisan but rather, a corruption of the term for a style of temple architecture developed by a guild, or a set of guilds, of artisans over a couple of centuries. Over time, this seems to have somehow got

entwined with the generic artisan-myth encountered across the subcontinent, to give us one of the endearing stories in Kannada folklore.

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