

THE SUBRAHMAṆYA IN THE ALLENTOWN MUSEUM OF ART

Henri Schildt

I. INTRODUCTION

Image

The gray stone image of a young Brāhmaṇa warrior in the Allentown Museum of Art (Allentown, Pennsylvania, USA) presents Subrahmaṇya, god of eternal youth (Plate 1). This deity is High God Śiva's younger son, also known as Skanda, Kumāra or Kārttikeya. According to the donors, this piece of sculpture was called "Candrama the Moon God" which is an error. However, the assumption that it was once placed in a niche of an outer wall of a medieval Drāviḍa-style temple is probably correct.¹

The purpose of this article is to analyse the age, style, meaning and origin of the sculpture. As to the dating and geographic origin of the image, the bodily shape and attire of the sculpture may indicate particular stages of evolution in dynastic and geographic styles helping to find the approximate *terminus post quem* and *terminus ante quem*. As to meaning, a deity itself is generally known by the attributes, involving the 'weapons' (*āyudha*) in his two, four, six or more hands, or by the attire, bodily shape and facial features typical of the individual deity. Ultimately, all these factors together may reveal the role of the image as a part of a larger iconographic whole, or part of a cult.

¹ The original information provided by the Allentown Museum Of Art: "Candrama (Moon god), about AD 900, Granite, 43 x 11.5 x 9 inches; India, Kerala; Gift of the Jaipaul Family, 2001. (2001.001.001); This sculpture was originally part of the architectural setting in a stone temple. Indian temples have a very carefully prescribed hierarchy for the placement of deities. Since Candrama is a minor god, he was most likely placed on an exterior wall together with other planetary deities. He functioned as a guardian figure and his gesture is one of warning."

On the dynastic styles of mediaeval Dravidian sculpture

Since the style of the sculpture is clearly a product of the Dravidian school of sculpture and because the overall appearance matches with the Cōḷa style, I have selected C. Sivaramamurti's (1963) work *The South Indian Bronzes* as the key work when it comes to the evolution of style. Sivaramamurti (1963: 24–38) provides his work with an outline of stylistic evolution illustrated by line drawings showing the Pallava, Early Cōḷa, Late Cōḷa and Vijayanagara styles. He has selected the elements of the outfit in images of deities, heroes and nobility, like the crown (*kirīṭamukuṭa*, *jaṭāmukuṭa*, *kaṇḍamukuṭa* and a variety of different hair styles), necklaces, armlets, sacred thread (*yajñopavīta*), warrior's double-shoulder belt (*channavīra*), waist belt (*udarabandha*) and the loin cloth (*kaṭisūtra*) provided with a belt and lion-shaped buckle. Sivaramamurti's line drawings also include the devolution of the "weapons" (*āyudha*) of the gods (ibid. 38–39).²

A crucial issue is also the definition of the dynastic Cōḷa style and its early, middle and late stage. Due to the close ties and local hegemonies of both Toṇḍaināḍu and Pāṇḍi-Nāḍu, and because the Cōḷa-Nāḍu falls in the middle of them, one could speak of a general Dravidian sculptural style which radiates all over present-day Tamil Nadu and Kerala in the early Middle Ages, from the 7th century on. The evolution of the Pallava style at its latest stage fits almost seamlessly with the earliest stage of the Cōḷa sculpture. Later on, as the Cōḷas achieve hegemony, their craftsmanship and sculptural idioms prevail in the whole southern part of the peninsula from northern Sri Lanka and Kanyakumari to the southern parts of present-day Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. The differences in the Cōḷa sculptural style are only subtle and local while the style itself is later like a kind of accepted general format, forming the basis of the hybrid Vijayanagara imperial style of the early Late Middle Ages with a considerably strong impact from both the Late Cālukya and Hoysala dynastic styles.

Different scholars define the Cōḷa sculptural style in a slightly different manner. C. Sivaramamurti (1963: 12–13), considers the "Early" Cōḷa sculptural style to date to the foundation of the Cōḷa dynasty by King Vijayālaya (AD 866), the "Middle" style at the time of the ascension to throne by Rājārāja I (AD 985) and the "Late" style by the reign of Kulōttuṅga II (AD 1135) while he does not allude to any precise end point for the "Late" Cōḷa style. Douglas Barrett (1974: 17), like Sivaramamurti, regards the "Early" style beginning with King Vijayālaya's ascension to throne (AD 866), but ends the "Early" stage with the death of Rājārāja

2 G. Jouveau-Dubreuil (1978 [1926]: 61 & Fig. 19 & c) also provides line drawings illustrating the evolution of the divine *āyudhas*.



Plate 1



Plate 2



Plate 3

I (AD 1014).³ Finally, S.R. Balasubrahmanyam (1979: ix–x) dates the “Early” stage to AD 850–985, following the frame given above by Sivaramamurti, but admitting that the so-called “Sembiyan Mahādevī” phase survived to some extent up to c. AD 1000 but that the “Early” stage, in his opinion, ends in AD 985. He (ibid. xi) adds that the “Middle” phase, on the other hand, lasted to the ascension of Kulōttuṅga I to the throne (AD 1070), and, significantly, he is willing to provide a closure for the “Late” phase after which would start the transitional phase leading to the strongly Cōḷa-inspired but hybrid revival style of the Vijayanagara Empire in the latter half of the 14th century. Balasubrahmanyam states, reasonably, that the Late Cōḷa style ends in AD 1280 at the end of the existence of the Cōḷa dynasty while obviously a continuity of craftsmanship survives.⁴

As already stated, the Allentown image presents Subrahmanya. Françoise L’Hernault’s (1978) exhaustive work *L’Iconographie de Subrahmanya au Tamilnad* is the second key work for understanding this particular image and its underlying meanings in detail. The aspects of this deity vary between a sage (/teacher/ascetic) and a hero (/warrior/warlord/king). In all cases, however, this deity is a manifestation of youth. L’Hernault provides the reader with a comprehensive Pan-Indian description including the Vedic religion and the origin of Subrahmanya (/Kumāra/Skanda/Kārttikēya) in the sacrificial fire, Agni, and the genealogy associated with Śiva but not his spouse Pārvatī. The work also analyses Pallava, Pāṇḍya and Cōḷa temples in order to define the place of the deity in a greater iconographic whole.

II. APPEARANCE AND STYLE OF THE IMAGE

General appearance of Subrahmanya

The Allentown figure of Subrahmanya is standing with his face straight ahead (Plate 1), and the body has a fixed stance. This type of overall shape, called *samaṇāda* in iconographic texts (see Nardi 2006: 98–100) is extremely common in lithic sculpture but is not uncommon in bronze sculpture either. The hand gesture (*mudrā*), the soothing *abhaya* gesture (i.e. ‘no fear’) of the right hand while

3 Barrett (1974: 17) divides the first phase further into three phases of which the first and third are clearly different in character and the second period transitional: (1) the “Aditya I phase” from AD 866 to c. AD 940, (2) the “Sembiyan Mahādevī phase” from AD 940 to c. AD 970, (3) the transitional phase from the “Early” to the “Middle” phase AD 970 to c. AD 1014.

4 S.R. Balasubrahmanyam (1975 and 1979) begins the “Late” phase of the Cōḷa dynastic art and architecture from King Kulottuṅga I Cōḷa’s ascension to throne, in AD 1070.

the left hand is placed on the hip (*katyavalambana*) is also very common and can be found in all prominent deities throughout the Middle Ages in Dravidian sculpture.⁵

When one observes the Allentown image of Subrahmaṇya, it is immediately clear that it is not complete but cut out from a larger whole which consisted of the sculpture itself and a larger lithic background (Plates 2 & 3). On the sides and the back of the Allentown image, the chisel marks indicate that the image was once, and even recently, surrounded by a larger entity of a stone slab. This can be deduced from the chisel marks at its sides reaching from the round base up to the top of the crown. It is also noteworthy that the sculpture itself is lacking plasticity, in other words, is a flat relief. The sculptural entity which consists of the image and a slab background is typical of images placed in niches (*devakoṣṭha*) in the iconography of Drāviḍa-style temples which often provide a narrative (/didactic/ contemplative) set of idols for the ambulation (*pradakṣiṇāpatha*) on the outer wall of the temple.

Subrahmaṇya as a subordinate deity in Drāviḍa-style temples

As a subordinate deity in the iconographic programs of the *pradakṣiṇāpatha*, Subrahmaṇya shares the attributes of Brahmā in Pallava-dynasty temples from the 7th to the 9th century while in the Pāṇḍya temples contemporary with the Late Pallava style, Subrahmaṇya is paired with Gaṇapati. In the Śiva temples of the Cōḷa Period, Subrahmaṇya occupies the central eastern niche (*devakoṣṭha*) when the temple is oriented towards the west, but if it is oriented towards the east, the image of Subrahmaṇya is in the central niche (*devakoṣṭha*) of the high temple (*vimāna*). After the late 10th or early 11th century, Subrahmaṇya is also found on the west, north and northwestern façades. In courtyards of Śiva temples, the location of Subrahmaṇya's attendant shrine is in the west between the southwestern and northwestern shrines of Gaṇapati and Jyeṣṭhā, and later, at the northwestern corner (L'Hernault 1978: 196–203 & 271–272).

5 Isabella Nardi (2006), in her work *The Theory of Citrasūtras in Indian Painting* points out that certain texts, e.g. the *Viṣṇudharmottara* and *Śilparatna* discuss the technique of sculpture and painting while the iconography is generally dealt with in different texts, e.g. in the *Bṛhat-Saṃhitā* and such comprehensive Āgama texts as *Karaṇāgama* and the architectural treatise *Mayamata* which is of Āgamic background, or in special sections of the *Citrasūtra* texts, such as the *pratimālakṣaṇa* in the *Viṣṇudharmottara-Purāṇa* (Nardi 2008: 108). The postures (*āsana*) and hand gestures (*mudrā*) are found, along with the *Citrasūtras*, in the *Natyasāstra* of Bharata. Nardi points out that the *mudrās* are difficult to verify as to how they look in reality, always requiring a context and consequently, different interpretations (ibid. 87–88).

Evolution of the devakoṣṭha figures

In the early sculptural styles of the Pallava and Early Cōla style, *devakoṣṭha* figures are reliefs, carved on slabs which form the background of the image. Good examples of such sculptures are particularly the Śiva in the Agastyeśvara temple at Kīlayūr, District Tiruccirāppalli, from AD 892 (Barrett 1974: 50 & Pl. 2) and the Sūrya in the Nāgeśvara temple, Kumbakōṇam District, from AD 947 (ibid. 69 & Pl. 13), both from the Early Cōla period like the Subrahmanyas from the Śiva temple at Kōvintapuṭṭūr, District Tiruccirāppalli, from c. AD 900 (L'Hernault 1978: 149 & Ph. 147, and from the above-mentioned Agastyeśvara temple at Kīlayūr (ibid. 153 & Ph. 156). The outlines of the volume tend to follow more the outline of the figure, a mode which already existed very early alongside the sculptural entity with a slab. The whole becomes more and more sculptural and elaborate towards the inception of the Middle Cōla style. The slab or background may already vanish altogether before AD 1000, like the figure of Viṣṇu in the Bilvanātheśvara temple of Tiruvallam (District North Arcot) from the latter half of the 10th century AD (Barrett 1974: 106 & 72), while the slab may also occur as it did earlier. Even though the use of the slab appears not to altogether vanish in the Middle and Late Cōla styles, the virtually free-standing image without a background seems to become more and more popular (L'Hernault 1978: 157 & Ph. 168; Balasubrahmayam 1979: Pls. 214–218).

III. EVOLUTION OF THE DETAILS OF THE IMAGE

Hands of the image

The right hand forms an *abhaya-mūdrā* and the left a *kaṭyavalambana-mudrā*. As pointed out above, the chisel marks on the sides of the sculpture, from the base on which the figure is standing to the top of the crown probably indicate that the sculpture originally had a stone slab as its background like sculptures usually had in Drāviḍa-style temples when placed in *deva-koṣṭha* niches. Hence, it is more than probable that the image had two pairs of hands with the tell-tale “weapons” (*āyudha*) for recognising this image of Subrahmanya and emphasising his special character.

Françoise L'Hernault notes (1978: 141–142) that Subrahmanya has a single pair of hands only in two particular cases: either when the deity is depicted as a child in a *somaskanda* group, placed between Śiva and Pārvatī, or when he is a warrior deity holding a spear (*vēl*) and riding an elephant in certain temples of the Cōla dynasty. In all other cases, Subrahmanya would have two pairs of arms (and in the Late Middle Ages, even more). Thus, the standing Subrahmanya, from the

early Pallava, Pāṇḍya and Cōḷa dynasties on, had two or more pairs of hands, and more than two pairs in the Late Middle Ages. We can thus assume quite safely that the figure originally had two pairs of arms – the anterior or primary which display the *mudrās* and the posterior or secondary which held the attributes or “weapons” of the deity.

The attributes held by the missing posterior pair of hands reflected the special aspect of the deity agreeing with the evolution of the dynastic style which is, in this case, clearly the mature Cōḷa style from 12th century (cf. the details of the attire, particularly the form of the *kaṭisūtra*, below). Since the Subrahmaṇya of this type in the Middle and Late Cōḷa styles was often an ascetic scholar and a warrior, the attributes in the posterior hands may be reconstructed, the first option with a special type of thunderbolt (*śakti*), inherited from Indra, and the second with a rosary, inherited from Brahmā, coming from the earlier Pallava style. This form of weaponry occurs in the Early and Middle Cōḷa styles, but is virtually non-existent in the Late Cōḷa style. In this case, the *śakti*-type or “faceted” thunderbolt, formed of two or more lozenges, is usually in the posterior right hand while the rosary is in the posterior left hand. The second choice for the weaponry consists of the two different thunderbolts (*śakti* and *vajra*) and is popular from the Early Cōḷa to the Late Cōḷa styles. The posterior right hand holds the *śakti*, as above, and the *vajra*-type “pronged” thunderbolt, in the posterior left hand, is formed of three prongs and is thus shaped like a trident (L’Hernault 1978: 269).

We may assume, however, since the Allentown Subrahmaṇya is clearly a Late Cōḷa product (see below), the most probable attributes are the latter, i.e. the “faceted” thunderbolt (*śakti*) in the posterior right hand and the “pronged” thunderbolt (*vajra*) in the posterior left hand (Plate 4). Some individual sculptures of Subrahmaṇya give clues as to how the Allentown image might have looked. The middle Cōḷa style Subrahmaṇyas of Gaṅgaikoṇḍācōḷapuram and Cōḷapuram (L’Hernault 1978: 155 & Ph. 163, 164) are similar, albeit slightly earlier in style, presenting the secondary arms with the *vajra* and *śakti* as a part of a background consisting of a stone slab. While it is likely that the Allentown image was a part of a slab, the overall expression is closer to certain Late Cōḷa-style Subrahmaṇyas, like the Late Cōḷa Subrahmaṇyas from Nellikkuppam (District South Arcot, Taluk Kūṭalūr, L’Hernault 1978: 156 & Ph. 167) and from Dārācuram (District Tañcāvūr, Taluk Kumbakōṇam, L’Hernault 1978: 157 & Ph. 168). In these images, the lozenges of the *śakti* are prism-like, unlike the flat lozenges of the earlier images. The *vajra*, on the other hand, seems to have two sets of prongs forming a peculiar trident pointing both upwards and downwards, the form which will be in vogue after the Cōḷas as well.

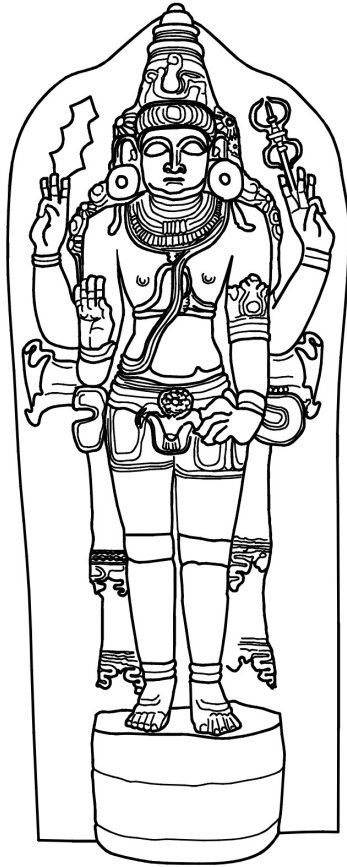


Plate 4

Face and crown

The face of Subrahmanya is typical of the Drāviḍa school of sculpture. It is symmetric, with large eyes and strong features. His hair is falling abundantly on the shoulders and his ears are provided with large symmetric earrings. The crown is, typically, of the so-called *karaṇḍamukuṭa* type. Subrahmanya generally wears this kind of crown from the Late Pallava school throughout the Middle Ages even though the *kirīṭamukuṭa* or the tiara-like crown, usually worn by Viṣṇu, may sometimes occur even in 11th-century Middle Cōla bronzes, but more typically later, in Late and post Cōla styles in the 13th and 14th centuries, Vijayanagara and later (cf. L'Hernault 1978: 98–99 & Figs 15c, 16a–d; *ibid.* Ph. 183, 184, 191 & 206). The normal *karaṇḍamukuṭa* crown is often worn in sculpture by epic heroes, a characteristic which does not necessarily associate him with the Goddess even

though she wears a similar crown. Since Pārvatī is not originally Subrahmaṇya's mother, the reason for sharing the similar *karaṇḍamukuṭa* type of crown probably lies in their martial background, Subrahmaṇya the archetypical young warrior, comparable to the epic heroes in military prowess, and Pārvatī the royal daughter of the Himalayas and wife to Śiva, with her warlike aspect Durgā, the defender of cities and citadels.⁶

Sacred thread and the warrior's cross-shoulder belt

The Allentown Subrahmaṇya wears simultaneously, on his left shoulder and upper body, a sacred thread (*yajñopavīta*) which is the sign of a "twice-born" male, particularly a Brahmin, who has been initiated into the sacred learning by the investiture of the sacred thread (*upanayana*), and a particular double belt (*channavīra* or *suvarṇavaikakṣa*) is running from the shoulder to the waist, an ancient attribute of a warrior or a hunter. The term *channavīra* which signifies "the protection of a warrior" does not occur in Classical Sanskrit literature but only in the South Indian Āgamic literature, and its Tamil counterpart *caṇṇavīra* means a kind of garland of triumph. It is also noteworthy that the *channavīra*, the *yajñopavīta* and the *karaṇḍamukuṭa*-type crown are associated with both Subrahmaṇya and the epic heroes such as Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa in Tamil imagery. Finally, we observe that Kṛṣṇa's aspect as a child is also provided with a *channavīra* which here is a sign of childhood, preceding the *upanayana* rite, but does not apply to the aspects of Kṛṣṇa in his more mature stages of life (L'Hernault 1978: 92–98 & Figs 11a–f, 12a–d, 13, 14a–b & notes 84–87).

It is not reasonable to assume that Subrahmaṇya would have inherited the cross-shoulder belt from Pārvatī because the Goddess herself is not, as pointed out above, the mother of the deity. The reason that Pārvatī wears a similar cross-shoulder belt (*suvarṇavaikakṣaka*) is her similar, warlike background, not her direct relationship to Śiva's younger "eternally young" son (note this paradox discussed in the context of the similar crown-type above). The *suvarṇavaikakṣaka* worn by Pārvatī is a type of *channavīra* worn by women and used in the decoration of goddesses, particularly in the early Cōḷa period (Sivaramamurti 1963: 33 & Fig. 21).

The cross-shoulder double belt (*channavīra*) of Subrahmaṇya occurs in the earliest examples of Subrahmaṇya as an exemplar of a warrior. This applies to the

6 The Early Cōḷa bronze statue of Rāma, Government Museum, Chennai, from Vaṭakkuppaṇayūr, District Tañjāvūr, c. AD 1000, wears a *kirīṭamukuṭa* crown (see: Sivaramamurti 1963: Pl. 40a).

Pāṇḍya and Early Cōla dynastic styles of sculpture. Even though Subrahmaṇya is associated with Brahmā in the Pallava style, he does not wear the sacred thread but the cross-shoulder belt, as in the Pāṇḍya and Early Cōla styles. Only in the Late Cōla style, in the 13th century and later, can one find images of Subrahmaṇya wearing both the sacred thread and the cross-shoulder belt, as in the Allentown image. The bronze image of Subrahmaṇya of the Cempiyaṅ Mādēvi is from the 13th century (District Tañjāvūr, Taluk Nāgapaṭṭiṇam) (L'Hernault 1978: 161 & Ph. 193). The attire is stylistically close to the Allentown image, particularly the *kaṭisūtra* (see below). A thin stomach band (*udarabandha*) is immediately below the double crosswise belt (*channavīra*).

Necklace and the shoulder epaulettes

The necklace of the figure consists of a series of five or six concentric necklaces, of which the inner two or three are flat and solid whereas the lower and outer ones are more three-dimensional with the beads of the one or two outermost ones in the shape of tiny mangoes strung together. This kind of necklace is typical of the mature or Late Cōla sculpture, differing clearly from the Early Cōla examples.

The two 12th-century bronze images, one of Viṣṇu, originating from District Tañjāvūr, and the other an image of Veṅugopāla from Nāgapaṭṭiṇam, District Tañjāvūr, are close matches in overall style, and components (Sivaramamurti 1963: 71a and 73a). In both cases, the concentric set of necklaces is similar to that of the Allentown image, where the outermost necklace consists of small mango-shaped beads and the next necklace inwards bears only an odd number (3, 5, 7, etc.) of mango-shaped beads in the centre, while the innermost necklaces are flat and simple bands (cf. also Sivaramamurti 1963: 30–31 & Fig. 17c).

The shoulder epaulettes which are single tassels on both shoulders, match those of the above mentioned bronze of Viṣṇu and thereby, the 12th-century Late Cōla style. Similar epaulettes also occur on the shoulders of a bronze presenting Śiva Vṛṣabhavāhanamūrti with Devī, dating to the 12th or 13th century and originating in Vedāraṇyam, District Tañjāvūr, also representing the Late Cōla style (Sivaramamurti 1963: 30–31 & Fig. 17c & Pl. 51).

The waist band (*kaṭisūtra*) bears a buckle which is here lotiform, but, in fact, is usually shaped like the face of a lion which is the normative solution with images of male deities from the Early Cōla to the Vijayanagara period. Typical of the Late Cōla style is the loop below the buckle which, compared to those of the Late Pallava and Early Cōla styles, is considerably reduced in size. Other characteristic features are the semi-circular tassels hanging from the waist belt (*kaṭisūtra*) on the loincloth which covers the hips, as well as the manner in which the cloth, supposedly behind the legs and reaching the ankles, is folded. A Late Cōla bronze statue of Śiva Candraśekhara from the 12th century (Haridas Swali Collection,

Bombay) is almost an exact match as regards style. Particularly the *kaṭisūtra*, its semi-circular tassels and the loop in the middle are virtually identical, as are the covering loincloth and the cloth doubly folded on the sides as well (Sivaramamūrti 1963: Fig. 24c & Pl. 61b).

IV. CONCLUSION

Style and age of the image

The Subrahmaṇya of the Allentown Museum of Art represents the Late Cōla style and was probably made in the 13th century. Its original form may have consisted of a stone slab or stele, due to the rather two-dimensional appearance of the image, but, due to the relatively late date, it could also have had a sculptural outline.

The secondary or “posterior” pair of hands probably bore the attributes of a warrior or warrior king: the faceted “thunderbolt” (*śakti*) in his posterior right hand and the pronged thunderbolt (*vajra*) in his posterior left hand, both attributes inherited from Indra (see reconstruction in Plate 4).

The relatively late date of the sculpture can be recognised from its several stylistic traits which allude to the Late Cōla style. A particularly late characteristic is the simultaneous occurrence of the cross-shoulder belt (*channavīra*) and the sacred thread (*yajñopavīta*) and thus does not allow a date earlier than the 13th century but this artwork is clearly anterior to the Vijayanagara style of the late 14th century. The other traits of the outfit are in accordance with this assumption, particularly the Late Cōla-style *kaṭisūtra* ornamented with the loops of tassels hanging from its belt on the loin cloth and its doubly folded back part reaching the ankles, reflecting 12th- or 13th-century Cōla sculpture.

The place of this sculpture was probably on the outer wall of a Cōla-style temple, reflecting the principles of Śaiva iconography, in the central eastern niche (*devakoṣṭha*) when the temple is oriented towards the west, but in the central niche of the high temple (*vimāna*) if it is oriented towards the east. After the early 11th century, Subrahmaṇya is also found in the west, north and northwestern façades.

The style of this Subrahmaṇya seems slightly provincial, so it is possible that it is from Kerala, even though there is no reason to assume that this would be a more probable origin than some other locality in the Dravidian South. The origin of this sculpture, given its widely spread idioms, can be anywhere between the Kanyakumari, southern Andhra Pradesh and southern Karnataka.

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