

NOTES ON HINDU IMAGES



Published by
Director of Museums
Government of Tamil Nadu

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**Published by
The Director of Museums,
Government Museum, Chennai – 600 008**

First Edition : 1977
Second Edition : 1996
Third Edition : 2006

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Director

Government Museums

Price : Rs.15/-

Printed at Government Central Press, Chennai

NOTES ON HINDU ICONOGRAPHY

Of the Trimurthi or three principal Hindu Gods, Brahma, the Creator, has no separate temples, his function being in abeyance till cycle of time brings in a new age requiring a new creation. Vishnu, the preserver, and Siva, the destroyer, on the other hand, are each regarded as supreme by their special followers and have numerous different images associated with them, including images of their attendants and saints. It will therefore be convenient to arrange the following list of principal forms of Hindu images in three sections: Vaishnavite images, Saivite images and images (including that of Brahma) that are not specially associated with either Vishnu or Siva.

VAISHNAVITE IMAGES

Vishnu has a royal headdress and usually four hands, of which the upper right holds a discus and the upper left a conch shell. His consorts Sri Devi the goddess of prosperity and Bhru Devi the earth goddess, should be on his right and left respectively. The former is identical with Lakshmi, who may be worshipped independently holding a lotus in her right hand and a bael fruit in her left, or as Mahalakshmi or Gajalakshmi, with two pairs of arms and in the case of Gajalakshmi an attendant pair of elephants. Garuda, half-man, half-kite, is Vishnu's vahana or "vehicle".

Certain places have particular forms of Vishnu associated with them, the chief among such forms being:-

- *Varadaraja of Kanchipuram* in which the lower right hand is lowered with palm forwards in bestowal of boons. The lower left may rest either on a mace or on the thigh.
- *Srinivasa of Tirupathi*, in which the lower right hand is raised with palm forwards of protection, the lower left being placed against the thigh.
- *Ranganatha of Srirangam*, reclining on a serpent bed.

- *Panduranga of Pandharpur*, with only one pair of hands which rest on or hand beside his hips, the left one in the latter case holding a conch.

Other noteworthy special forms are –

- *Vaikunthanatha* seated on a serpent throne.
- *Lakshminarayana* with Lakshmi on his left knee.

When virtue wanes and vice predominates, Vishnu is believed to become incarnate to punish the wicked and support the weak and helpless. The following are his ten principal avatars or incarnations.

- i) *Matsya*, the fish that recovered the Vedas from the ocean where they had been hidden by a demon.
- ii) *Kurma*, the tortoise that supported the mountain used for churning the ocean of milk.
- iii) *Varaha*, the boar that rescued the earth from the ocean in which it had been submerged by a demon.
- iv) *Narasimha*, the man-lion that killed a demon king who had condemned his own son to death for his devotion to religion.
- v) *Vamana*, the dwarf who appeared before the Demon Bali and conquered him by crossing the whole universe in three strides as the giant Trivikrama. As a dwarf he is almost always represented with an umbrella and should carry the Vedas in his right hand, often with spouted vessel in his left.
- vi) *Parasurama*, who destroyed the Kshatriya or warrior caste by means of his axe, with which he is always represented.

vii) **Rama**, who killed Ravana, the demon king of Ceylon. He is represented in the posture of a man holding an arrow in his right hand and a bow (the bottom of which rests on the ground) in his left, but the weapons are usually missing. He is generally accompanied by his brother Lakshmana in the same posture and by his consort Sita, an incarnation of Lakshmi.

viii) **Krishna**, who destroyed a number of demons. He is worshipped in a number of forms, the chief of which are

- Santanagopala, a baby putting his toe in his mouth.
- Yasodakrishna, carried by his mother Yasoda.
- Balakrishna, and Navanitakrishna, crawling or dancing, the latter with a ball of butter, the former without it.
- Kaliyakrishna, subduing the serpent king Kaliya at the age of five.
- Venugopala, a youth playing the flute.
- Krishna, a man with the left elbow projecting to rest on his consort Rukmini's shoulder. She is an incarnation of Lakshmi. He may also be accompanied by a second consort Satyabhama, an incarnation of Bhudevi.
- Parthasarathi, as the teacher of Arjuna, the great archer among the five Pandava kings of Mahabharata.

ix) **Buddha**, (Sometimes replaced by Jagannatha, Vishnu as Lord of the world)

- x) *Kalki*, who is to overcome evil at the close of the present age and ushers in an age of virtue and prosperity. Usually with horse's head.

Balarama, the elder brother of Krishna is sometimes inserted between Rama and Krishna, Buddha (or Jagannatha) then being omitted.

Vishnu also assumed forms known as minor avatars including –

- *Dattatreya*, with three heads and attended by four dogs.
- *Hayagriva*, with a horse's head and Vishnu's discus and conch.

Vishnu's attendants are—

- *Ananta*, a serpent with one or five hoods, serving as his couch.
- *Garuda*, half-kite, half-man serving as his Vahana or "vehicle"
- *Vishwakshena*, his chamberlain, seated with discus and conch in upper hands, lower right in warning position or holding a cane, lower left resting on knee holding a mace.
- *Jaya* and *Vijaya*, the door-keepers of his heaven.
- *Hanuman*, the monkey devotee and helper of Rama.

There are twelve deified Vaishnavite saints or Alvars and a long line of Acharyas, or Vaishnavite teachers. Most of them are as a rule, shown seated with their hands in the attitude of prayer, sometimes but by no means always with individually distinctive emblems. Such figures carrying a cloth for straining water, borne like a flag on a triple staff usually represent Ramanuja, the Vaishnavite revivalist of the eleventh century A.D. Nammalvar and Vedanta Desika each hold a palm-leaf manuscript.

Vishnu's discus may be personified a Sudarsana, bearing on one side a fierce eight-armed or many-armed figure carrying Vishnu's emblems and often a figure of Narasimha on the other side.

SAIVITE IMAGES

Siva is generally worshipped in the form of a phallus or linga. Images of his are, however, also worshipped. His matted hair is usually tied on the top of his head and ornamented with a jewel, skull, snake, crescent moon and thorn-apple flower, but it sometimes encircles the head like flames, especially in terrible forms. He should have a third eye between and a little above the other two. In South India, his most usual emblems are an axe and an antelope, but in the north the trident is more common. Other emblems are the drum, skull-cup and various weapons. Parvathi is his only consort though she has other names such as Kamakshi of Kanchipuram and Minakshi of Madura. She should be on his left.

His Vahana or "vehicle" is Nandi, the bull.

He has two aspects, the benign and the fearsome. Both aspects have a number of forms, some of which were taken for particular purposes.

Benign forms were assumed for blessing devotees. Chief among them are—

- i) *Sukhasana*, sitting at ease.
- ii) *Chadrusekhara*, standing erect and holding axe and antelope. The crescent moon should be conspicuous in his hair.
- iii) *Pradoshamurti*, Chandrasekhara with Parvati, leaning towards her, with his lower left arm round her.
- iv) *Umamahesvara*, seated with Parvati (Uma) on his left knee.

- v) *Umasahita*, standing or seated with Parvati (Uma) beside him.
- vi) *Somakanda*, seated with Parvati and their son Subrahmanya (Skanda) in between.
- vii) *Kalyanasundara*, the form in which he married Minakshi (Parvati), whose hand he holds. Vishnu, who gave her in marriage, is usually included in the group.
- viii) *Gangadhara*, standing, holding a trident obliquely across his back. This is the form in which to prevent flooding, he entangled the Ganges in his hair at the time of its descent to earth. The goddess Ganga should be visible in his hair.
- ix) *Vishapaharana*, holding in his lower right hand a vessel containing the poison produced by churning the ocean of milk.
- x) *Dakshinamurti*, the form in which he taught certain rishis philosophy. Upper right hand with snake, left with flame; lower right hand in upadesa or teaching pose, left holding Vedas.
- xi) *Vinadhara Dakshinamurthi*, with lower hands in position to hold the vina on which he taught music to certain rishis; upper hands with axe and antelope.
- xii) *Natesa*, dancing to quell the pride of Kali. In his upper left hand he holds a flame, there is drum in his upper right hand, his lower right is in the abhaya pose, and with his lower left he points to his upraised foot.

Fearsome forms of Siva are always represented standing and usually have a pair of protruding tusks. Chief among them are:-

- i) *Bhikshana*, as a naked beggar to expiate the sin of cutting off Brahma's head.

- ii) *Kankalamurthi*, using the backbone of Vishvaksena, and others whom he had killed, as a staff and carrying drum and drum stick. He should be accompanied by an antelope.
- iii) *Bhairava*, as protector of the universe, naked. Represented in sixty-four different forms, of which the commonest is accompanied by a dog and has at least two pairs of hands, the upper-most holding a drum and a noose.
- iv) *Virabhadra*, with a linga in his hair and carrying sword and shield, usually with other weapons in additional pairs of hands. He wears sandals and either carries the head of a goat or is accompanied by his father-in-law Daksha shown as a human figure with a goat's head.
- v) *Kalarimurti*, protecting his devotee Markandeya by piercing Yama, the god of death, with his trident.

Siva sometimes combines with Vishnu as Hari-Hara or Sankara-Narayana in both of which images, Siva forms the right side and Vishnu the left.

Siva may also combine with his consort, Sakthi or Parvati, for there is a belief that Siva can only function when he combines with Sakthi, the female principle. Ardhanarisvara is the name given to the resulting figure - the right half being male and the left half being female.

Parvati or *Ambika*, when represented merely as Siva's consort has one pair of hands and is apt to be indistinguishable from the consorts of Vishnu and others. When represented alone, she is always seated and has two pairs of hands, the upper two holding an axe and a noose and the lower two in the poses of blessing and bestowing respectively, except in her special forms, *Rajarajeswari* and *Maheswari*, which bear different emblems. Parvati's vahana or 'vehicle' is a lion.

The Sakti sect regard the female principle, whom they call Devi, as the supreme deity; and as they are Saivites, they commonly regard her as the consort of Siva. Devi has three main forms: Durga, the fighter, the angry Kali and Mahalakshmi of Kolhapur.

As *Durga*, she should always hold in her upper hands Vishnu's emblems, the conch and discus. Her chief manifestations are Durga with two pairs of arms and Chamunda and Mahishasuramardani with more than two.

As *Kali* she may carry any of Siva's emblems except the antelope. She has many manifestations, but all belong to two generalized types, Kali with two pairs of arms and Bhadrakali with more than two.

As *Mahalakshmi* of Kolhapur she should be seated, with a linga on her head.

Ganesa, Ganapati or *Vinayaka* is Siva's eldest son. He has the head of an elephant and ordinarily two pairs of hands holding a goad, a noose, his broken tusk and a cake. His vahana is the musk rat (shrew).

Subrahmanya, Siva's second son, is represented with one pair of arms as a child or when seated without his vahana, the peacock; with two pairs when standing; and with three, four or six pairs when seated on his peacock. He has two consorts, Valli and Devasena. He usually carries weapons, sakti (sometimes represented by a spear) and thunderbolt. He is known as Balasubrahmanya in his child form (usually distinguishable from Balakrishna only by his Saivite instead of Vaishnavite associations) and as Shanmukha when represented with six faces. At Palani, he is worshipped as Palani-Andi, wearing only a loin-cloth and with a staff in his hand.

*Aiyana*r is the son of Siva and Mohini, a female form assumed by Vishnu after the churning of the ocean of milk. He is often

represented as riding on an elephant or a horse, and should hold a goad, a whip or a crook.

There are over sixty deified Saivite saints, each represented with a single pair of arms and usually standing. Most images are however, one of the following:-

- *Chandikesvara*, the custodian of Saivite temple property. He usually carries an axe and is in an attitude of prayer.
- *Kannappa Nayanar*, the outcast hunter who gave his eyes to Siva. He stands in an attitude of prayer, wearing sandals and carrying a bow and arrow.
- *Manikkavachakar*, author of the Tiruvachagam hymns. His right hand is in the teaching pose and in his left he holds a palm leaf manuscript.
- *Appar*, author of the Tevaram hymns. He carries a spud for weeding temple premises and stands in an attitude of prayer.
- *Sundaramurti*, who added to the Tevaram hymns. He is represented as singing in ecstasy.

IMAGES NOT SPECIALLY ASSOCIATED WITH VISHNU OR SIVA

Brahma, the creator and the first member of the Trimurti, has four faces and two pairs of arms, the upper pair bearing a rosary and a spouted vessel. The Hamsa or sacred goose is the Vahana or vehicle both of himself and of his consort Saraswati, the goddess of learning. Saraswati, has two pairs of arms and bears a rosary, a book and a Vina.

Dvarapalaka and *Dvarapalika* are male and female doorkeepers for gods and goddesses respectively. Each has two pairs of arms (except in very early examples which have only one

pair) bearing either the emblems of their respective deities or weapons of war.

The *Dikpalas* are the guardian deities of the eight directions or divisions of the universe. They are:-

- Indra, on elephant, with thunderbolt. God of rain. East
- Agni, on ram, with two heads. God of fire. South-East
- Yama, on buffalo, God of death. South.
- Nirriti, on man. South-west.
- Varuna, on makara or crocodile. God of the sea. West.
- Vayu, on deer, with fan. God of wind. North-west.
- Kubera, on horse. god of riches. North,
- Isana, on bull, one of the many forms of Siva, whose usual emblems he bears. North-east.

The *Navagrahas* or Nine Planets are –

- Surya, the Sun, with a lotus flower one in each hand of one usually his only pair. Often with a halo behind his head. His one wheeled chariot is drawn by seven horses.
- Chandra, the Moon, with a water-lily in each hand of one, usually his only pair. Often with halo behind his head. His two wheeled chariot is drawn by ten horses.
- Angaraka, Mars with a club and a three-pronged mace.
- Budha, Mercury on a lion.
- Brihaspathi, Jupiter, with book and rosary.

- Sukra, Venus, with treasure chest.
- Sani, Saturn, with trident, bow and spear.
- Rahu, one of the two eclipse-demons, with sword and shield.
- Manmatha, is the Hindu god of love. He scents the fragrance of a five-flowered arrow held in his right hand, his left holding a sugarcane bow. His consort Rati holds either a mirror or a lotus.

Seers or Rishis are represented as old men with hair tied above the head like Siva's and long pointed beards.

Worshippers are represented in an attitude of prayer, usually standing or half-kneeling.

Village deities or grama devatas, though not worshipped by orthodox Hindus, are extensively worshipped by others. Those most commonly met with are Mariamman, Munisvara and the deities of a cult centering round Aiyanar.

Mariamman, the smallpox goddess, is a form of Durga. She should be clad only in margosa leaves but is usually represented by her head alone.

Muniswara, is represented by a stone or a tree.

Aiyanar, has been described among the orthodox Hindu deities.

Madurai Viran, Aiyanar's general stands bearing a sword and shield.

Karuppannaswamy, Aiyanar's attendant, always stands and is worshipped under four principal forms:-

- Karuppannaswamy, with a bill-hook

- Kulla karuppan, also with bill-hook, but of small stature
- Chappani-Karuppan, lame and leaning on a staff.
- Sangili-Karuppan, with a chain in one hand and a vessel in the other.

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