

A Rare Image of Ardhanari-Narayana

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Images of Ardhanarishvara which evolved in the Kushan period in Indian art and were skillfully handled by the Gupta artists have been quite popular even in the medieval period. The composite form of Shiva and Parvati seems to have inspired the Himalayan artists to blending of Vishnu and Lakshmi similarly the first examples of which in the form of a bronze and a painted *pata* belonging to 13th century were brought to light by Dr. Pratapaditya Pal from Nepal (Fig.1).¹ The *pata* is now preserved in the collection of the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Kolkata and the bronze figure in the Museum für Volkerkunde at Basel in Switzerland. In the sculpture the eight-handed composite deity with its right half represented as male and left half as female exactly as in the Ardhanarishvara form of Shiva and Parvati is shown in the *samapada-sthanaka-mudra* on a double-petalled lotus pedestal. The necklace, waist-band and anklets are common to both halves of the body but the right ear is adorned with an earring and the four right arms bear armlets; the left ear bears a large ring and the four arms have ornaments of a different type than those on the right arm. The plain diaphanous nether garment clings to the right leg but the left leg is draped in



Fig.1 Bronze image of Vasudeva-Lakshmi
Nepal (after P. Pal)

cloth with a floral design. The right half belonging to Vishnu is holding the disc, the mace, the conch and the lotus in the four hands while in the left hands of his female counterpart are shown the book, mirror and the vase (fourth hand broken). In the *pata*, the right hand side male is painted white, the breast of the left female half is marked by a circle; right leg is covered to the knee only while the left leg is covered down to the ankle. Garuda and a *kurma* (tortoise) are shown near the right and left feet respectively and the attributes in the four hands respectively are *chakra* (discus), *shankha* (conch-shell), *gada* (mace) and *padma* (lotus) for Vishnu and *pustaka* (manuscript), *utpala* (lily), *darpana* (mirror) and *kalasha* (water pot) for Lakshmi. The *pata* bears the date in Nepalese "varsha 383, Karttika sudi 11" (4th November, 1261 CE) and the *dhyana-mantra* put below it names the figure as Kamalanvita-Purushottama. Pal observed that the weapons of the deity have been carved in strict accordance with the literary texts of *Brihat Tantrasara* and *Sharada Tilaka Tantra*.²

Kalpana Desai³ has also alluded to Dr. Pal's articles and refers to the description of eight-handed Lakshmi-Narayana in the 16th century text *Shilparatna* of Shrikumara:

हस्ते बिभ्रत् सरसिजगदाशङ्खचक्राणि विद्याँ पद्मादर्शौ कनककलशं मेघविद्युद्विलासम् ।
वामोत्तुङ्गस्तनमविरलकल्पमाश्लेषलोभादेकीभूतं वपुरवतु वः पुण्डरीकाक्षलक्ष्म्योः ॥ (XXIII.23)

Haste bibhrat sarasija-gada-shankha-chakrani vidyam

Padm-adarshau kanaka-kalasham megha-vidyud-vilasam /

Vam-ottunga-stanam-aviral-akalpam-ashlesha-lobhad-

ekibhutam vapur-avatu vah pundarikaksha-lakshmyoh / /⁴

Kalpana Desai has rightly observed that "The use of the expression *ekibhutam vapuh* would suggest that the author of the *Shilparatna* has conceived of a half Lakshmi and half Narayana image after Shiva Ardhanarishvara. The same text uses the term Ardhanarishvara while describing the Ardhanarishvara form. Since the author has not specified that the first four symbols are of Narayana and the next four of Lakshmi, it is likely that the author here has in mind an Ardha Lakshmi-Narayana form".⁵

D.C. Sircar drew our attention to a late 11th century inscription in the Shitala Temple at Gaya belonging to the local ruler Yakshapala who built a shrine of Kamalardhangina-Narayana along with many other deities mentioned in the epigraph. Kamalardhangina-Narayana means 'Narayana, one half of whose body is Kamala (Lakshmi)'. So he postulated that "The image referred to in our inscription, which is earlier than the specimen alluded to by Pal, was under worship at Gaya in Bihar, so that the conception does not appear to have originated in Nepal, but was imported from East India to that land."⁶ Sircar has

referred to the image as Ardhanari-Narayana.

R.C. Agrawala published the first Indian specimen of this form from Kashmir datable to circa 9th-10th century CE now preserved in the Indian Art Museum, Berlin (Fig.2). This stone image shows the composite Vishnu-Lakshmi form lifted by four-armed hybrid Garuda who holds a water pot in its upper left hand and a rattle-type parasol in the upper right with normal pair of hands folded in salutation. The attributes on the right side belonging to Vishnu are a lotus flower, a wheel, a conch and a typical mace



resembling a sword while those on the left are a manuscript, long-handled mirror, water pot and a lotus with long stalk. This medieval image of typical Kashmir art style furnishes evidence of the evolution of this syncretistic form in Kashmir hills in the 9th-10th century CE.⁷

A bronze image of Vasudeva-Kamalaja riding on a winged Garuda standing on a lotus pedestal assignable to circa 8th-9th century CE in Pahari style preserved in

the National Museum collection (Acc.No.72.249/A), 21 cm in height, was brought to light by B.N. Sharma.⁸ The deity wears a bejeweled crown wearing a *ratnakundala* in his right ear and a *patrakundala* in the left. The coiffure shows the interesting feature of curly locks flowing on the right side while the left part carries half halo shaped decoration. The right half of the chest is that of the male figure while the left part has the (single) breast of a female. The four right hands of the octomanous deity



Fig.3 Location of Baijnath, Himachal Pradesh

hold a lotus, lower end of the mace, a conch and a disc while the left hands carry a mirror, an indistinct object (perhaps a manuscript), the long stalk of a lotus and probably a vase. The uppermost pair of the six-armed Garuda supports the deity while the middle ones are hanging along the sides and the front hands are carrying a jar as shown in the New York image published by Pal.⁹ Sharma has expressed the possibility of Pal's New York image as belonging to Himachal Pradesh rather than to Kashmir on the basis of style and the back-frame.¹⁰

No other image of this syncretistic deity popularly known as Vasudeva-Kamalaja is known yet. Such paucity lends great importance to this composite form and published here is an example from Baijnath in Himachal Pradesh. Baijnath (32°05 N, 76°65 E) is located at a height of 1,314 m (4,311 ft) on the left bank of the rivulet Binwa (ancient Binduka), a tributary of river Beas on the Pathankot-Mandi highway (NH 154) almost midway between Kangra and Mandi, at a distance of about 50 km southeast of Dharmashala, the summer capital of Himachal Pradesh (Fig.3). The name of Baijnath is derived from Vaidyanatha ('Lord of the physicians', Shiva) and as an old temple dedicated to Vaidyanatha existed in this town the place itself came to be called Baijnath since the period of British occupation. Earlier it was called Kiragrama as known from the local

epigraphs. The temple was constructed in CE 1204 according to the two *Prashastis* in the temple but has undergone renovations from time to time.¹¹ The image of Ardha Lakshmi-Narayana lies fixed in the main sunken southwestern niche of the *mandapa* of this temple facing west (Fig.4). As in the Kashmir image it shows the syncretistic deity seated astride on the anthropomorphic Garuda having wings at the back (Fig.5). The proper right side shows Vishnu wearing cylindrical crown and holding a lotus by its long stalk in its normal right hand while the three additional hands support the mace, the conch and the wheel in the *pradakshina* order. The left

side shows Lakshmi bearing a *dhammilla* coiffure with distinctive ear ornament and one breast. She holds a manuscript in her natural left hand and a lotus by its long stalk, a vase with lid and a mirror in the back hands. Two unrecognizable diminutive acolyte figures are depicted standing on the two sides. What is of unusual interest is that the winged Garuda too has been shown as having eight hands, the proper pair is not very clear and seems to be holding a vase of nectar and of the three others stretched on either side the middle ones supporting the feet of the deity.

Since the known Ardhanari-Narayana images in the Kashmir-Himachal region are earlier than those referred to in the Gaya inscription and the Nepal specimens it is more probable that the innovation and evolution of this form took place in this region and the idea flowed from Kashmir and Himachal to Nepal.

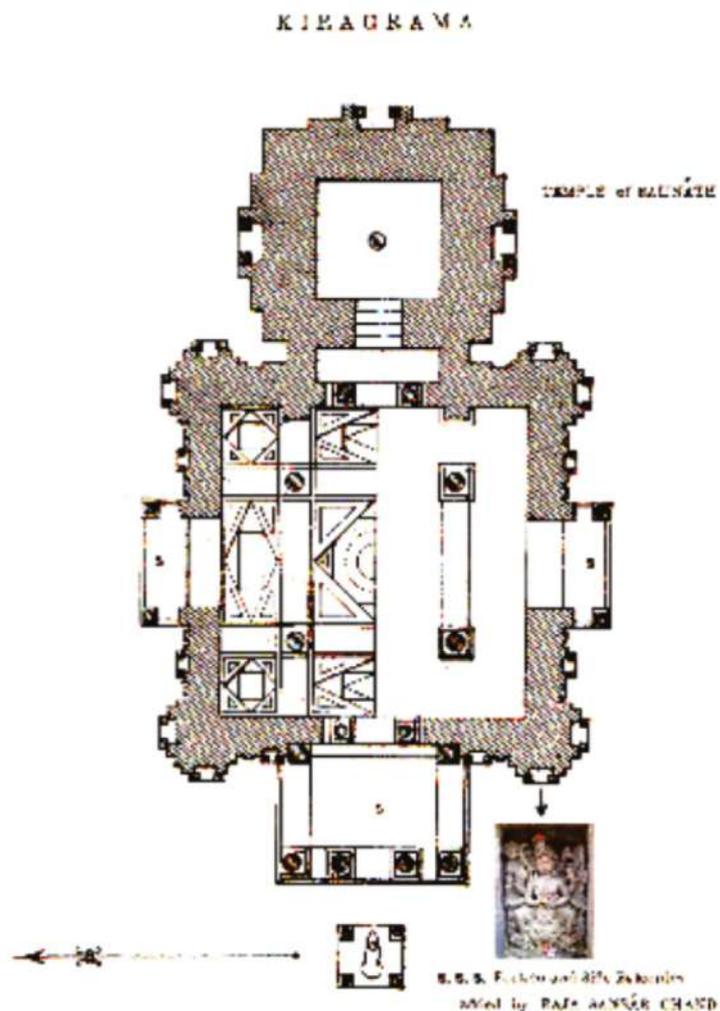


Fig.4 Place of the image of Ardha-Nari-Narayana Vaidyanatha Temple, Baijnath (H.P.)



Fig.5 Ardha-Nari-Narayana, Baijnath (H.P.)

References and Notes

1. P. Pal, "Composite Form of Vasudeva and Lakshmi", *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, Vol.V (1963), pp.73-79; "Notes on Five Sculptures from Nepal", *British Museum Quarterly*, Vol.XXIX (1964-65), pp.29-34 and plates. Later Pal also brought to light a composite image of the deity from Kashmir. See for details 'Bronzes of Kashmir: Their Source and Influences', *Journal of the Royal Society*, London, CXXI, No.5207, fig.2.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Kalpana Desai, *Iconography of Vishnu*, New Delhi, 1973, p.35.
4. *Shilparatna* (Trivandrum Sanskrit Series) Trivandrum, 1929, 23.23 and 23.75.
5. Kalpana Desai, *loc.cit.*
6. D.C. Sircar, *Studies in the Religious Life of Ancient and Medieval India*, Delhi-Varanasi-Patna: MLBD, pp.221-28. See also *Epigraphia Indica*, Vol.XXXVI, pp.92ff.
7. R.C. Agrawala, "Unpublished Sculptures and Terracottas in the National Museum, New Delhi, and Some Allied Problems", *East and West (New Series)*, Vol.17 (3-4), Sept.-Dec. 1967, pp.278-79, fig.10.
8. B.N. Sharma, "Pahari Bronzes", in Vishwa Chander Ohri (Ed.), *Arts of Himachal*, Shimla: State Museum, 1975, p.21, fig.7 on page 17.
9. P. Pal, 'Bronzes of Kashmir', fig.2.
10. B.N. Sharma, *loc.cit.*
Alexander Cunningham, *Archaeological Survey of India: Report for the Year 1872-73*, Vol.V, Calcutta, 1875, pp.178ff.