

## The Viṣṇu Images from Bengal : Problem with Nomenclature

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Generally the art-historians dealing with the sculptures (mostly stone, but also bronze) of Bengal (both West Bengal and Bangladesh) described Viṣṇu images of the Pāla-Sena period (8<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> centuries CE) according to the twenty-four (*caturvīṃśati*) forms of Viṣṇu given in the lists of various *Purāṇas* and several other Sanskrit texts,<sup>1</sup> the dates of which are generally controversial and later than some of the sculptures.<sup>2</sup> By an objective study of the sculptures concerned however, this *purāṇic* description of the twenty-four forms of Viṣṇu does not agree in general. But still the scholars follow these nomenclatures according to the arrangements of the four attributes of the deity, viz., *padma* (lotus), *śaṅkha* (conch), *cakra* (disc) and *gadā* (mace). A good example of this statement is the monumental and pioneer work of Enamul Haque (1992) *Bengal Sculptures : Hindu Iconography upto c.1250 A.D.* Haque, following the description of the *Purāṇas* accepts *padma* (lotus) as an invariable attribute of Viṣṇu.<sup>3</sup> This is quite unfortunate.

In his short article, *Varieties of the Viṣṇu Images*, Bidyabinod discussed the twenty-four (*caturvīṃśati*) forms of Viṣṇu based on the different order of four attributes, *padma*, *śaṅkha*, *cakra* and *gadā*, according to the description of the various *Purāṇas*, but *padma* (lotus) is not present in any of his illustrations.<sup>4</sup>

However, the early and important Sanskrit text, *Bṛhat-saṁhitā* (c.6th century CE) describes Viṣṇu either eight-, four- or two-armed (Ch.57, VV 31-35).<sup>5</sup> It should be remembered that the text does not mention lotus as an attribute of the deity. The unique but fragmentary two-armed Viṣṇu image from the Tangail district, now in the Bangladesh National Museum holds *cakra* in the right hand and perhaps *śaṅkha* in the left hand (damaged) (fig.1). In this connection, read my article 'Vāsudeva-Viṣṇu Images from Bengal : Development and Innovation : Is lotus an Essential Attribute?'.<sup>6</sup>

It is indeed known to the readers that the earlier images of the deity is called Vāsudeva in the inscriptions and most probably it is called Viṣṇu from the Gupta period onwards. Returning again to the presence of lotus in the front or lower right



**2.1:** Viṣṇu, Tangail, Bangladesh National Museum, c.11<sup>th</sup> century CE, after Haque 1992, pl. 66



**2.2:** Vāsudeva, Narhatta (Bogra district, Bangladesh), pre-Gupta, now Varendra Research Museum, Rajshahi, after Haque & Gail 2008, pl.6

hand of Viṣṇu during the Pāla-Sena period of Bengal, we may refer in this connection to the short but scholarly written article of Claudine Bautze-Picron (figs. 1-4) where she has illustrated four stone images of Viṣṇu, three seated on Garuḍa and the fourth standing on a lotus, belonging to the 11th - 12th centuries CE, all having a small lotus flower on the palm of the front or lower right hand.<sup>7</sup> Bautze-Picron describes the seated figures (p.3), "Viṣṇu is sitting in the position named *lalitāsana*, in which his left leg is folded on Garuḍa's back, while the right one is supported by the royal eagle. He is four-armed, and is presenting his traditional weapons, i.e. the club (*gadā*) and the disc (*cakra*) in his upper hands and the conch (*śaṅkha*) in the lower left hand, his lower right hand opening in the gesture of generosity (*varada-mudrā*) and offering a tiny lotus flower." (diacritical marks only on long vowels have been used in the article).

This is no doubt an interesting observation of the scholar and may hint to the lotus attribute of the deity, but does not explain the tiny circular floral design engraved on the palm of lower right hand in *vara* or *varada-mudrā* of the deity in the majority of cases. This type of floral design occurs on the palm of Buddha in *varada-mudrā* and other Buddhist, Jaina and Brahmanical deities.

In his volume Haque illustrates earlier than the Pāla period images of the deity carrying a fruit (*mātuluṅga* or *bījapūraka*) but not a lotus (*padma*). It is quite surprising that the *Purāṇas* do not refer to Viṣṇu holding a fruit in the front right hand, although the early forms of the four-armed deity (Vāsudeva, generally wrongly called Viṣṇu) are shown with this attribute. Compare for example, the well-known Narhatta, Bogra district (now in the VRM, Rajshahi) pre-Gupta image of the deity holding clock-wise (*pradakṣiṇam*) a fruit (perhaps pomegranate, Haque ingeniously calls it *bījapūraka* or lotus bud)<sup>8</sup>, *gadā*, *cakra* and *śaṅkha* - (fig.2). Actually this is the later common form of Viṣṇu, the so-called Trivikrama, with a lotus instead of a fruit according to the *Purāṇas* and this form is mostly illustrated in the later sculptures of Bengal. This fruit attribute occurs as late as 11th century CE as is to be seen in the Kalandarpur (Bogra district, Bangladesh) stone image of Viṣṇu (now in the VRM, Rajshahi) (fig.3) Haque (p.79, Type 25) ignores the fruit and describes it as "PCGS order of attributes." PCGS stands for *padma*, *cakra*, *gadā* and *śaṅkha*.

In another interesting example, the Garuḍa *vāhana* stone image from Agradigun (Naogaon district, Bangladesh), now in the Asutosh Museum, Kolkata



**2.3:** Viṣṇu, Kalandarpur (Bogra district, Bangladesh), now Varendra Research Museum, Rajshahi, c. 11<sup>th</sup> century CE, after Haque & Gail 2008, pl.2



**2.4:** Garuḍavāhana Viṣṇu, Agradigun (Naogaon district, Bangladesh), now Asutosh Museum, Kolkata, c.9<sup>th</sup> century CE, after Haque 1992, pl. 56



ॐ नमो भगवते वासुदेवाय ॥ श्रीमन्नारायणसुवर्णसूक्तं ॥  
 कोटिरियं नारायणसुवर्णसूक्तं नारायणसुवर्णसूक्तं ॥  
 कीययामते सुवर्णसूक्तं नारायणसुवर्णसूक्तं ॥  
 श्रीमन्नारायणसुवर्णसूक्तं नारायणसुवर्णसूक्तं ॥

**2.5:** Nārāyaṇa, Baghaura (Comilla district, Bangladesh), Mahīpāla (I) period, now Bangladesh National Museum, c. 11th century CE, after Bhattasali 1929, pl. XXX.1



**2.6:** Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa (inscribed), Raiganj (Uttar Dinajpur district, West Bengal), now Raiganj Museum, c.12th century CE, photograph by Gudrun Melzer, courtesy Raiganj Museum

belonging to c.9<sup>th</sup> century C.E. Viṣṇu holds a fruit (damaged) in the lower right hand. Haque (p.87, Type 1, pl.56) ignores the fruit and describes the image of the PGCS ( *padma, gadā, cakra* and *śaṅkha*) order of attributes (fig.4).

The other problem, which we face with the images of Viṣṇu of Bengal, is when they are inscribed and in the inscription the name of the deity is given. It appears clearly from this fact that the sculptors of Bengal were not familiar with the names of the twenty-four forms of Viṣṇu given in the *Purāṇas* . The common form of Viṣṇu made by the sculptors of Bengal is the so-called Trivikrama form in which the deity holds clock-wise (*Pradakṣiṇam*) *varada-mudrā* (or *Padmā*), *gadā, cakra* and *śaṅkha*. But in the pedestal inscription the deity is named otherwise.

We may refer to the case here with the well known Baghaura ( Comilla district, Bangladesh) stone image belonging to the reign of the Pāla ruler, Mahīpāla (I) where the Viṣṇu image has been called *Nārāyaṇa*. But according to the order of attributes (clockwise) viz. *padma, gadā, cakra* and *śaṅkha* the deity is the Trivikrama form of Viṣṇu (fig. 5).

The Raiganj (district-Uttar Dinajpur, West Bengal) Museum has several inscribed stone images of Viṣṇu ( including a Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa image), which are called *Mādhava* in the pedestal inscriptions below. All of them have the attributes of Trivikrama following the *Purāṇas* clock-wise, viz. *varada-mudrā* (with a small floral design), *gadā, cakra* and *śaṅkha*, excepting the Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa image, which has clock-wise *śaṅkha, padma, gadā* and *kuca* of the goddess (fig. 7). Now according to the *Purāṇas*, the Mādhava form of Viṣṇu should hold clock-wise (*Pradakṣiṇam*) the following attributes, viz. *gadā, cakra, śaṅkha* and *padma* (see Haque 1992, p. 51, Table-B).

From this short article it will be clear to the serious readers how complex is the situation with the Viṣṇu images of Bengal and how textual description fall short of the actual representation of the deity.

## **REFERENCES AND NOTES**

1. For detailed references see, Enamul Haque - *Bengal Sculptures : Hindu Iconography upto c. 1250 CE*, Dhaka, 1992, pp.48-54; N.K. Bhattasali, *Iconography of Buddhist and Brahmanical Sculptures in the Dacca Museum*, Dacca, 1979.

2. It may be quite interesting to the readers to consult the article by Claudine Picron-Bautze where she refers to the various names of Viṣṇu mentioned in inscriptions of the so-called "Pala-Sena period", i.e. from the 9th to 13th century CE, See Claudine Bautze-Picron - "Names of Viṣṇu in the inscriptions from Bihar and Bengal : 9th to 13th centuries", *Deyadharmā - Studies in memory of Dr. D.C. Sircar* (ed. Gouriswar Bhattacharya), Delhi, 1986, pp.65-81.
3. See Enamul Haque *op.cit.*, pp.48-54, tables A-E.; p.60, table E; and p.69.
4. B.B. Bidyavinod, 'Varieties of the Viṣṇu Image', *Memoirs of Archaeological Survey of India*, 1920, pp.23-33, Calcutta, Rep. 1977, New Delhi.
5. *Bṛhat-Samhita*, edited by M.R. Bhatt, Delhi, 1982;
6. Gouriswar Bhattacharya, " Vāsudeva Viṣṇu Images from Bengal: Development and Innovation : Is Lotus an Essential Attribute ?", *Kalhār (White Water Lily), Studies in Art, Iconography, Architecture and Archaeology of India and Bangladesh (Prof. Enamul Haque Felicitation Volume)*, (eds. Gouriswar Bhattacharya, Gerd J.R. Mevissen, Mallar Mitra and Sutapa Sinha), New Delhi, 2007, pp.99-108.
7. Claudin Bautze-Picron, 'Flying from Heaven to Earth : Viṣṇu on Garuḍa', *Asiatische Kunst*, vol.32, no. 2, 2002, pp. 2-12; 'The Viṣṇu Image from Sarisadah in the Indian Museum, Kolkata; *Prajñādhara: Essays on Asian Art History, Epigraphy and Culture in Honour of Gouriswar Bhattacharya* (eds. Gerd J.R. Mevissen and Arundhati Banerji), Delhi, 2009, pt.II, pp.273-280.
8. Enamul Haque, *op.cit.*, pp-58, type-I, plates 1-5.