

Images of Brahmā from Nagarā, Khambhāt

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Of the Brahmanical trinity, Brahmā, unlike Śiva and Viṣṇu, seldom had been worshipped in an independent temple. In the triple shrine (*tripuruṣa-prāsāda*, *trikuṭācala*) for the *tripuruṣa-deva-s*¹, in one of the three sancta and as one of those three highest deities, of course, he is offered worship. But otherwise, in other contexts, he is relegated to a position subsidiary to Śiva and Viṣṇu². The *Purāṇas* were not always kind to him³. It is also said that his *viśeṣa-pūjā* is forbidden. His independent shrines, therefore, are somewhat infrequently met, as are his cult images.

However, for some reason, in Western India, a few independent shrines were devoted to Brahmā's worship, Kheḍabrahmā in north Gujarat (c. late 11th cent. C.E.) and that famous shrine of medieval founding in Puṣkara near Ajmer in Rajasthan still survive. And apparently, there were one or two shrines dedicated to him at the ancient and now neglected site of Nagarā--ancient 'Nagarā-mahāsthān'-- near Khambhāt or Cambay situated close to the gulf between Central Gujarat and Saurashtra. In fact, the existence of a temple of Brahmā at Nagarā-mahāsthāna is



1.1: Brahmā from Nagarā, now in Anand, c. 1030 CE



1.2: Ṛṣi and Sāvitrī image beside the central Brahmā image, Nagarā

noticed in the well-known Jaina chronicle, the *Prabandhacintāmaṇi* of Merutuṅga (1305 C.E.). This was in the context which mentions Solaṅki (Caulukya) emperor Siddharāja (1095-1144 C.E.) camping there.⁴

At Nagarā, while the temples dedicated to Brahmā, alongwith the shrines for other deities there, have completely disappeared together with the old township, a couple of cult images of Brahmā hailing from that site still remain. The present article wishes to discuss these rare sculptures, with illustrations.

In about 1947-48, Bhaikākā, the founder of the Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel University in Vallabh Vidyanagar near Anand, brought an image of Brahmā (illustrated here as fig. 1) from Nagarā. It has been stationed in the compound (set as it is within a protective frame-like structure) that lie within the precincts, and in front, of the office of the Charuttara Vidyamandala, Anand. It is a six foot tall sculpture in marble, its nose mutilated. Two *ṛṣis* stand as attendants (the left one has only his head remaining) near the feet and the *hamsa*-the mount of the god is shown on the floor and near the right foot. All the four arms of Brahmā, together with the attributes they carried, are broken.⁵ His head shows three very serene faces. To the right and left of the triple head are shown flying godlings. Though partly damaged, it is a very dignified and impressive image of the god.⁶

The placidity and calm reflected on Brahmā's three faces, the ornaments as well as the *jaṭā*, the physiognomic features and the style of carving of the image comes very close to those larger sculptures in Maru-Gurjara style, particularly the Dikpālas such as Indra and Agni, on the famous Sun temple, Moḍherā (north Gujarat) (1027 CE). Hence this image from Nagarā must have been fashioned around 1030 CE, in the time of the Solaṅkī (Caulukya) monarch Bhīmadeva I. In view of this qualitatively high level of art, the Nagarā image is among the finest divinity sculptures produced in the 'High Medieval' times in northern India and is a significant addition to the iconographical wealth of that age.

In the Nagarā township, in a very late shrine, are enshrined five sculptures in marble, the central one possibly was of Brahmā, flanked by one goddess image each, in turn flanked by an image of a *ṛṣi* on each side. All of them, in pairs, are shown in *dvibhaṅga* and the pairs are conceived as standing in *savya-apsavya* postures (figs. 2 & 3).⁷ The central image could not be discussed here for want of the photographic illustration. Apparently the paired images have suffered retooling



1.3: Ṛṣi and Gāyatrī image beside the central Brahmā image, Nagarā



1.4: Fragment of *parikara*-frame surrounding the image of Brahmā, Nagarā

at some point in time after mutilation. All of the four figures possess *padma-prabhā* (lotus-petal aureole) and wear bejewelled *jaṭā-mukūṭa*. The two goddesses' right palms had been reworked and hence in both the cases it is shortened, looking strange, and misshaped; also, their rotund visages have turned squarish due to reworking. In the left hand both carry *kuṇḍikā*, the example in fig. 2 is cylindrical (an unusual occurrence), the one in fig. 3, an elongated round. The long garlands, the *keyūras*, the *hāras*, and the *dhotī* tied with *kaṭisūtra* are all in the period style. These two goddesses tentatively may be identified with the two consorts of Brahmā, namely Sāvitrī and Gāyatrī.⁸

The two *ṛṣi* figures (figs. 2 and 3), bearded, are shorter by a few inches than the goddess figures, yet sufficiently large to take notice. Except that they possess one head and two arms (and correspondingly two attributes), in form they follow the iconogram of Brahmadeva. They carry *akṣamālā* and *kuṇḍikā*. To my knowledge, nowhere such separate images of *ṛṣiṣ* as members of the pantheonic assembly occur. (This is also true of the two images of the consorts.)

It seems that the central image of Brahmā was surrounded by a *parikara* frame, its surviving fragment is shown in fig. 4. Its two extant panels show each a figure of *ṛṣi*. Altogether, it is an impressive and unique group of images.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

1. In the assembly of the significant deities figuring as *alamkāra-devatās*, Brahmā is associated with the northern wall in the *bhadra*-niche in the temples of Śiva when at the three *bhadras* the figures of the trinity are shown. In early Chola Śivaite temples, too, a standing sculpture of Brahmā is stationed at the northern wall's *bhadra-devakoṣṭha*.

As for the *tripuruṣa-prāsāda*, this type is known and encountered in Gujarat and in Karnataka in south India. Solankī king Mūlarāja I (946-1000 CE) had built a *tripuruṣa-prāsāda* in the capital Aṇahillapattana. And so did Bhimadeva I (1022-1066 CE). While these have disappeared, that at Limkhedā, central Gujarat (late 11th cent. CE) and at Kasārā, north Gujarat (c. 3rd quarter of the 12th cent. CE) still stand though the original cult images have for the most part disappeared. Outside India, the type is met at Prambanan in Jāvā (c. late

9th - early 10th cent. CE) as a majestic trio in a vast complex. And several brick temples of the ninth and the 10th century of this class, all of which are now partly ruined, are met in sites like My'son in Campā (Vietnām).

2. In the Tamilian Chola temples, in the depiction of the Liṅgodbhava Śiva, Brahmā is shown flying in the form of *haṁsa* upwards making an effort to reach the upper end of the endless column. Skanda appears as 'Brahma-śāstā' in southern Śivaite legends. Originally he had five heads, the fifth one was chopped off by Śiva. At the door of Viṣṇu's later sanctuaries, sometimes Brahmā (alongwith Śiva) appears as an adorer, *et cetera*.
3. I forego noting these here. They are relatively well-known.
4. Jinavijaya Muni Ed., *Śāntiniketan*, V.S. 1989 (1932 CE), p. 62. It is said there that, when the flag was hoisted at the Brahmā temple at Nagarā-mahāsthāna, the flags of all the Jaina temples in Gurjaradeśa were lowered as per the king's decree.
5. An outline of the libation spoon which the figure carried can be discerned in the upper right hand.
6. Hemant Dave informed me about an anecdote which reports that, Svāmī Sahajānanda, the founder of the Svāminārāyaṇa sect, had visited this image in Nagarā, was very impressed and, had got emotional by its sight.
7. Their presence proves that the central image was of Brahmā.
8. In regions like Mālavā, Sarasvatī was believed to be the consort of Brahmā, In western India, Sarasvatī has been regarded as the daughter of Brahmā. The Jaina mendicant Surācārya (2nd quarter of 11th cent. CE) has severely criticized Mālavā convention which renders Sarasvatī as Brahmā's consort. If I have recalled correctly, in Karnataka medieval tradition, too, Sarasvatī is known as Brahmā's consort.

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Fig. 1 Shri Chudasma of Anand

Figs. 2-4 American Institute of Indian Studies, Gurgaon/New Delhi