

Viṣṇu in the Art of Kāśī

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Kāśī as we all know was divided mainly as Śiva Kāśī and Viṣṇu Kāśī.¹ We propose to discuss in the present paper the *ekala* images of Viṣṇu found from different places in Kāśī. These images belong mainly to a period from about c. 7th century to 13th century A.D. and even beyond that. The paper aims at discussing mainly those images (about 10 in number) which are scattered over or are preserved in the temples, sometimes even in worship. The stylistic and iconographic features of *ekala* images of Viṣṇu will be discussed here which are found in continuity from about seventh century A.D. and which represent different stylistic features of pre-Pratihāra, Pāla, Pratihāra, Candella, Kalacuri and Gahaḍavāla periods.

The images of different styles, though meagre in number, suggest that Kāśī was almost equally important for the Vaiṣṇavas who took pilgrimage to this place and paid their homage to Lord Viṣṇu through the carving and installation of images. These images, besides revealing the political sway of different dynasties, also present Kāśī as a great center of pilgrimage and cultural confluence. Kāśī atleast by the time of the Gupta rulers was having some Vaiṣṇava temple as suggested by the finding of huge Govardhanadhārī Kṛṣṇa image from Bakariā Kuṇḍa near Alaipura-Varanasi City station on G.T. Road which belonged possibly to 5th century A.D.²

One of the earliest known Viṣṇu figures 5 from Kāśī is carved on a Caumukhī of about 7th century A.D. found at Lolārka Kuṇḍa near Assi. It shows the figures of Viṣṇu, Umā-Maheśvara, Durgā and Gaṇeśa on four sides. The figure of four-armed Viṣṇu standing in *samabhaṅga* with placid and pleasing face shows the continuation of the later Gupta style (fig.1). The long *vanamālā* (a typical feature of Viṣṇu image) and small decorated *kirīta-mukuta* and also the small face are all in Pre-Gurjara Pratihāra style, hence the image could well be dated to Harṣa's time. The rounded plasticity and grace are all superb. Viṣṇu holds mace, *mātuliṅga* (fruit), conch and disc in the style of the Gupta images. Instead of holding the attributes in hands Viṣṇu places his hands on mace and disc, which again was an early feature.

Another image of four-armed Viṣṇu in typical Gahaḍavāla style of 12th century A.D. is now preserved in the premises of Śuśkeśvara temple of Sukulpura near Khojwan (Durgākuṇḍa)(fig:2). The image though badly mutilated with head being completely lost is important from the view point of the iconography. Viṣṇu with *Kaustubhamāṇi* symbol on chest and long *Vanamālā* stands in *samabhaṅga* on *triratha* pedestal. The composition of the *parikara* and the modelling of the figure are graceful and animated. The moderate body though not much slim has the grace and dignity of Viṣṇu who is the cause of preservation of the entire world.

The image also exhibits two such features which are commonly found in north Indian Viṣṇu images. These features pertain respectively to the renderings of incarnatory forms of Viṣṇu in the *parikara* and also to the rendering of the figures of four armed Brahmā and Viṣṇu in diminutive forms at the two top ends of the image. The presence of Brahmā and Śiva with

Viṣṇu (being the principal deity) is suggestive of the entire process of Creation, Preservation and Dissolution (*sr̥ṣṭi*, *sthiti* and *vilaya*) controlled by the trinity. It is quite interesting that the figures are in order, first comes Brahmā, the Creator, then Viṣṇu in the centre as the principal deity and at last Śiva, the cause of dissolution. Of the ten incarnatory forms only nine could be identified, these are Matsya, Kūrma, Nṛvarāha, Vāmana, Rāma (with bow and arrow), Balarāma (with snake canopy), Nṛsimha, Kalki (riding on horse) and Buddha.

However, Viṣṇu holds in his surviving lower left hand the principal *āyudha cakra*. The presence of *garuḍa* in human form on left flank is also worth noting. *Garuḍa* with garland of snake as usual shows snakes in his hands.

The iconographic features of *ekala* Viṣṇu images under the name Viṣṇu, Vāsudeva or even Para-Vāsudeva are enunciated in several texts and the Purāṇas, according to which the four-armed Viṣṇu with Śrīvatsa mark on chest and decked with *kaustubhamāṇi*, *kirīṭa-mukuta* and *vanamāla* is accompanied by *garuḍa vāhana*. The **Br̥hatsamhitā** of Varāhamihira (c. 6th century A.D.) conceives Viṣṇu as two, four and eight armed which testifies that by the 6th century A.D. Viṣṇu was visualized in variety of forms. It may be noted that in Kāśī and even at other prolific centres like Osiāñ and Khajurāho Viṣṇu in *ekala* form is usually shown mainly with four hands and as standing in *samabhaṅga* with *garuḍa vāhana*, shown in a human form with snakes around his head, neck and even in hands. The **Br̥hatsamhitā** envisages *abhaya-mudrā* and mace for right hands while the corresponding left ones show conch and disc.³ Another text of the same period the **Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa** describes Viṣṇu in the name of Vāsudeva who is adorned with usual ornaments and is *sudarsana* (good looking) in appearance. It makes detailed description of the *ekala* Viṣṇu image and prescribes lotus and conch in upper right and left hands while the lower hands of Viṣṇu are placed on the heads of *gadādevī* (on right) and *cakra puruṣa* (on left).⁴ The rendering of *āyudhapuruṣas*, so popular during the Gupta period, was subsequently carried on during the Pratihāra, Candella and even Pāla period, a few example of which are found from Kāśī also.

The description of the four-armed image of Viṣṇu found in the **Agnipurāṇa**⁵ (8th-9th century A.D.) also gives the name Para-Vāsudeva for such images. Viṣṇu, according to the text holds disc and lotus in right hands while the left hands carry conch and mace. Interestingly, the figures of *Śrī* and *Puṣṭi* bearing respectively lotus and *viṅṇā* are also to be shown on two flanks of Vāsudeva. It may be remembered that figures of Viṣṇu with *Śrī* and *Puṣṭi* are mainly found from Eastern India, a few example of which are also known from Kāśī.

Two important observations may be made here on the basis of the texts. First, the four-armed independent images of Viṣṇu may also be identified as Vāsudeva. Second, the texts perhaps do not prescribe the rendering of the incarnatory forms of Viṣṇu in the *parikara* which are found invariably in the images of Viṣṇu atleast from about c. 8th-9th century A.D.⁶

The Kardameśvara temple near Kandawa village is perhaps the only ancient surviving temple of Kāśī which belongs to the Gahaḍavāla period and is datable approximately to 12th century A.D. The temple is dedicated to Śiva but in keeping with the non-sectarian character of the Indian temples, this temple also contains in its facade niches the figures not only of four-armed Vāsudeva but also of Vāmana, Varāha, Nṛsimha and Balarāma (along with Śakti). The *samabhaṅga* Vāsudeva image shown with *garuḍa vāhana* and *kirīṭa-mukuta* reveals stiffness in body (fig.3). The four-armed Vāsudeva bears



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig.3

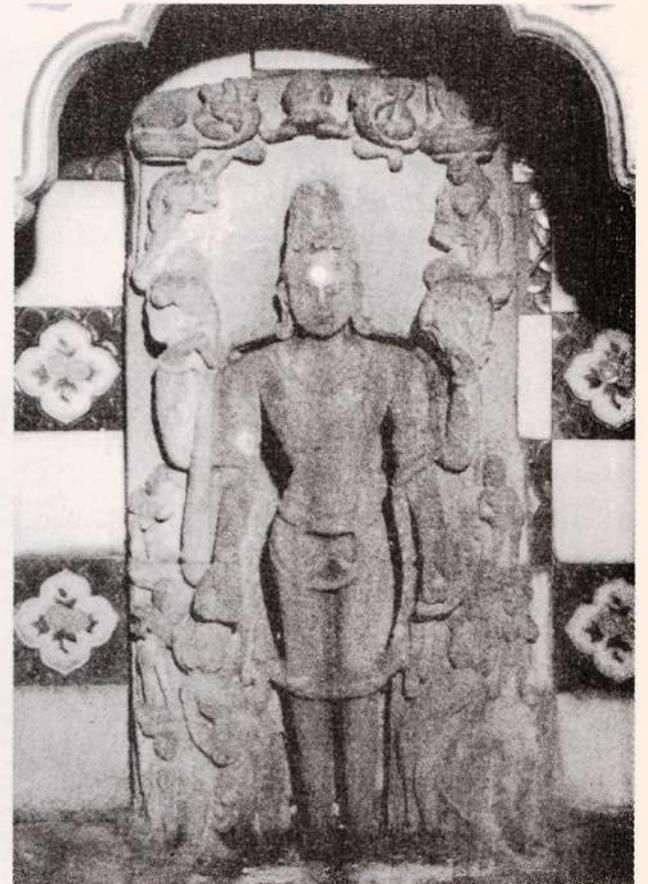


Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7

varadākṣa, mace, disc and conch. It appears that although the **Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa** and **Agnipurāṇa** prescribe lotus in one of the four hands of Vāsudeva yet in sculptural examples from Kāśī and elsewhere one hand is usually known in *varada* or *abhaya-mudrā* (sometimes with *Varadākṣa*) to suggest the unceasing compassionate grace of God for the devotees. This also suggests the bearing of the **Bṛhatsamhitā** conceiving four-armed Viṣṇu as showing *abhaya-mudrā* with one of his hands.

A magnificent ninth or early 10th century image of four-armed *samabhaṅga* Viṣṇu can be seen in the Trilocana Mahādeva temple at Matsyodarī (now Machodarī fig.4). The figure distinctly reveals the matured Pratihāra features in terms of slim and graceful body, plasticity and beautiful and light ornaments. The image may well be compared with Pratihāra figures from Kanauj. Here also Vāsudeva carries mace, disc and conch in three hands while the remaining one hand is in *varada-mudrā*. The rendering of the incarnatory forms of Viṣṇu in the *parikara* reveals compositional elegance which includes figures of Matsya, Kūrma, Varāha, Vāmana, Rāma, Balarāma and Nṛsimha.

Typical Pāla examples of Vāsudeva images are found from Gabhastīśvara temple (Viśvanātha Galī) and Bharata Kāla Bhavan. The Gabhastīśvara temple represents four-armed Vāsudeva as standing in *samabhaṅga* and bearing conch, disc and mace. The representation of disc and conch as *āyudhapuruṣas* along with the figures of flywhisk bearing Śrī and *Viṇā-dhāriṇī* Puṣṭi are the features which were shown in the Pāla sculptures. The stone also is a black basalt one. The slim body, decoration of ornaments and *parikara* and stele are all typical Pāla. These images reveal that in Kāśī the Vāsudeva Viṣṇu images are carved mainly on the basis of the tradition of the early texts like **Bṛhatsamhitā** and **Viṣṇudharmottara** and **Agni Purāṇas**.

Another interesting image of four-armed Vāsudeva is preserved in the Kāśī Maṭha Saṁsthān at Brahmā Ghāt (fig.5). The delineation of foliages, stele, *parikara* composition, stone and the presence of the figure of Śrī and Puṣṭi are all in Pāla style but the modelling of the *Śrī-mūrti* (main figure) of Vāsudeva with volume and without Pāla delicacy reminds of Pratihāra-Candella style. Thus the present image is an outcome of the fusion of different styles. Vāsudeva standing in *samabhaṅga* shows as usual clockwise *varada-mudrā*, mace, disc and conch.

Two other examples of Vāsudeva images are worth mentioning which belong to the Candella and Kalacuri styles. The image with rounded plasticity, volume and ornaments typical of Candella images is being worshipped in the 20th century Rāma temple situated in Mānsarovara Muhallah (locality, fig.6). The *kirīṭa-mukūṭa* and other ornaments are all in Candella style of 10th century A.D. The transparent *dhoṭī* with design, small face and comparatively bigger eyes and attributes are all pleasing and in Candella style. The image is completely preserved. Vāsudeva standing in *samabhaṅga* shows (clock-wise) conch, lotus, disc and mace. The figure of *garuḍa* is carved in human form. As usual the top ends of *parikara* exhibit the seated figures of Brahmā (with *sruk* and manuscript) and Śiva (with trident and snake) which were shown mostly in Candella and Gahaḍavāla images.

The 11th century beautiful image of Vāsudeva with all the four hands being broken is lying unshaded in the courtyard of Dvārakādhīśa temple at Śaṅkudhārā (fig.7). Vāsudeva is adorned with number of necklaces and tall *kirīṭa-mukūṭa* carved profusely with dexterity.

The benign and oval face has a divine look. The exquisitely carved image is hewn out of blackstone and is undoubtedly the masterpiece of Kalacuri art. Some portion of mace of Viṣṇu is also visible. The figures of worshippers and attendants along with Bhūdevī with snake canopy are vibrant and profusely bejewelled.

Thus the Vāsudeva-Viṣṇu images from Kāśī show different art styles which developed in succession with overlappings in Kāśī which was equally an important place of pilgrimage for the Vaiṣṇavas. The images bear testimony to this. The images also suggest that they were carved on the basis of the texts and they do reveal some distinct regional iconographic features.

Foot Notes

1. **Nārada** and **Vāmana Purāṇa**, **Tristhalī-setu**, p. 216; Kāśī khaṇḍa of **Skanda Purāṇa**, 61, 207-9.
2. Anand Krishna, 'The Gupta Style of Sculpture from the City of Banaras', *Rūpa-Pratirūpa* (Alice Boner Commemoration Volume), New Delhi, pp. 87-95.
3. **Bṛhatsamhita**, 57.31-35.
4. **Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa**, 85.1-18.
5. **AgniPurāṇa** 44.47-49.
6. Kamal Giri, Maruti Nandan Tiwari, and Vijay Prakash Singh, *Kāśī ke Mandir aur Mūrtiyāñ*, Varanasi, 1997, pp. 48-64.

(Photo courtesy *Jñāna Pravāha*, Varanasi)

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