

UMĀ - MAHEŚVARA _ A Unique Sculpture

Prof. (Mrs.) M. Rao

The form of Umā-Maheśvara sculpture was very popular throughout the country and even in some parts beyond its northern and eastern boundaries. The sculpture of Umā-Maheśvara has been found from Assam, Bihar, Bengal, Orissa, Uttaranchal, Uttar Pradesh, Harayana, Punjab, Madhya Pradesh, Chattisgarh, Rajasthan, Gujrat, Maharastra, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Tamilnadu etc.

Umā-Maheśvara is one of the most fascinating and popular forms of Śiva's couple figures in *ālīngana* posture, beautifully carved by Indian artists and codified in different Śilpa text for making such images.

In Umā-Maheśvara form, the God is ordinarily represented sitting on a lotus with the pendent right leg resting on a lotus or on the back of the Bull placed below. His wife Umā sits on his left thigh. Her left leg hangs out and is placed similarly on a lotus or on the back of the vehicle lion. The god and goddess are represented as embracing each other.

The *Matsya Purāṇa* gives the best and most detailed directions as to how these images should be made. From this it appears that the god may have either two or four hands. He should have the lotus and trident in his right hands, and one of his left hands should hold the breasts of the goddess. The goddess embraced should be gazing on his face. She may be depicted as sportively touching with her right hand the left shoulder of the God, or his right shoulder on his right side. The left should hold a lotus or a mirror. The two maids Jayā and Vijayā, the two sons of the couple, Kārttikeya and Gaṇeśa, and various other ghosts and supernatural beings should be depicted at suitable places¹.

B.C. Kavyratna has written in an article² that god may be depicted in the following manner.

“The upper left hand of the God, should hold the trident, the lower one should be placed on the bosom of the goddess. The upper right hand should hold the *nāgapāśa* or the *khaṭvāṅga* and the other right hand should sportively touch the chin of the goddess”.

In the above description Śiva has been shown in chin touching attitude.

In the Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa³ figures of both Umā and Śiva are prescribed to be carved as two armed and as a divine *mithuna* or couple. It is ordained that the left arm of Śiva whose *jaṭājūta* or hair locks is adorned with crescent, should be kept over the left shoulder of Umā and the right should hold an *uptala* flower (lotus).

Similarly, the right arm of Umā is to be carved over the shoulder of Śiva and her left hand should hold a mirror.

In the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*⁴ Śiva and Umā are described as roaming about in close embrace on Kailāsa mount full of ṛṣis and *munīs* and the semi divine beings like *siddhas* and *cāraṇas*.

The *Aparājītapṛcchā*⁵ describes the Umā-Maheśvara sculpture in the following manner.

Śiva may be represented as four armed deity. Out of the four hands of Śiva, *mātuliṅga*, a fruit and *trīsūla* or trident are held in his right hands whereas one of the left hand embraces Umā and the next one hold the snake. Out of the two hands of Umā one kept on the shoulders of Śiva and the other holds a mirror. Beneath the couple are shown *vṛṣabha* (bull), Kumāra or Kārttikeya and Gaṇeśa together with the attendant Bhṛṅgī.

In *Rūpamaṇḍana*⁶ the description of Umā-Maheśvara is given as follows.

The image of Umā with that of Śaṅkara should be called Umā-Maheśvara. Śiva should be four handed and Umā should be shown with two hands. The placement of all the hands of Śiva and Umā are same as given in the *Aparājītapṛcchā*. The description of the carving of other sub-ordinate figure is also similar.

Dr. N.P. Joshi⁷ and Dr. A.L. Srivastava⁸ have classified in many ways, the sculpture of Umā-Maheśvara.

However, we limit ourselves with the favourite love sports of Umā-Maheśvara, which has been alluded in text as follows :

1. *Āliṅgana* (embracing)
2. *Aṅkārohaṇa* (holding spouse in one's lap)
3. *Kuca-sparśa* (gently touching the nipple of the breast)
4. *Mukha-darśana* (looking face to face) and
5. *Cibukotthāpanam* (uplifting the face by chin)⁹

A small image of Umā-Maheśvara (Pl. 1) carved in grey sandstone bearing accession number 99.237 of 10th century A.D. has been displayed in Kalā Maṇḍapam (Art Pavilion) Exhibition of Jñāna-Pravāha Museum.

In the present sculpture Śiva sits in *lalitāsana* on a high pedestal on a lotus *pīṭha*. He holds a *trīsūla* in upper right hand while the one natural hand is placed between the breasts of Umā, the fingers of which are raised to touch the chin of Umā. The left upper hand is raised above the head of Umā with an indistinct object. The fourth hand is not clearly shown but it may be presumed that it must have come round the shoulder of Umā to touch her breasts.

The right leg of Śiva rests on his mount. The face of Nandī is shown towards right. The sitting posture of Nandī shows a sense of relaxation.

The God is bedecked with nicely carved high *jaṭāmakuṭa*, round prominent ear-rings, necklace, *keyūra*, *kañkaṇa*, waist girdle, *vanamālā* and anklets.

Two armed Umā sits in *lalitāsana* on the left of her beloved. Her folded right leg is placed on the left thigh of Śiva. She embraces him by throwing her right hand around his neck. The fingers of Umā are visible on the right shoulder of Śiva. She holds a special mirror in her left hand. Her suspended foot which is raised a little rests on her *vāhana* lion whose face is shown in frontal position. The delineation of Umā's hair is beautiful. She is embellished with ear-rings, necklace, waist girdle, *valaya*, and anklets. She wears a fashionable upper garment and an ornate *sārī* shown with wavy lines.

There is an oval *prabhāmaṇḍala* with a beaded design in between the two lines covering the whole figure at the back.

The head of Śiva in the present sculpture is straight while the head of Umā is tilted. They are not looking each other as we find in other sculptures.

The hands of Śiva seems to be a little-bit elongated as compared to the proportion of the body.

However, the round face, the modelling, the expression of the faces beautified by a faint smile bespeak of artistic skill of Pāla sculptors.

If we compare this sculpture with the prescription as given in texts we will find that the number of hands in-case of Śiva are made as per the canons of *Matsya Purāṇa*, *Aparajitapṛccha*, *Rūpanaṇḍana* and *Viṣṇudharmottra Purāṇa*.

In the *Viṣṇudharmottra Purāṇa* it has been mentioned that out of four hands of Śiva *mātuliṅga*, a fruit and *triśūla* or trident are held in his right hands where as one of the left hands embraces Umā and the next one holds the snake. The *āyudha* of right hand i.e. *triśūla* is as per the canon but in the left hand he does not hold a snake as prescribed in the text. An indistinct object is being held by him. As regards Umā's hands and the *āyudhas*, they have been perfectly carved as per the injunction given the *Viṣṇudharmottra Purāṇa*.

द्विपाणिं द्विभुजां देवीं सुमध्यां सुपयोधराम्।
वामपाणिं तु देवस्य देव्यास्कन्धे नियोजयेत्॥८॥
दक्षिणं तु करं शम्भोरुत्पलेन विभूषितम्।
देवास्तु दक्षिणं पाणिं स्कन्धे देवस्य कल्पयेत्॥९॥
वामपाणिं तथा देव्या दर्पणं दापयेच्छुभम्॥१०॥

The image is devoid of all accessory figures even the sons of Umā-Maheśvara have not been depicted which goes against the injunctions given in *Matsya Purāṇa*, *Aparājitapṛcchā*, *Viṣṇudharmottra*, *Rūpamaṇḍana*.

We can place this image in the *cibukotthāpanam* (uplifting the face by chin) variety of love sports of Umā-Maheśvara.

Placing the full right palm firmly by Śiva between the breasts of Umā is a unique feature in this sculpture.

After having surveyed many Umā-Maheśvara images in various museums and observed many illustrations in the books (as far as I have seen), I can affirm that I have not seen any image of Umā-Maheśvara where Maheśvara's palm is shown so firmly between the breasts of Umā and this gives uniqueness to the sculpture. There is no reference of this hand posture in text also.

Of-course there are many sculptures showing Śiva's right hand uplifting the chin of Umā but in such cases the hand is shown on the right side of Umā's breast¹⁰. (Pls 2 and 3)

The enchanting carving of the *chibukotthāpaman* theme appears to be quite popular among the artists of Bihar, Bengal and they may have put in it a flight of imagination too.

References

1. *Matsya Purāṇa*, *Sri Venkaṭeśvara Chāpakhāna*, Mumbai, 1895, 260, p. 11-21.
2. Journal of the Rangpur Sahitya Pariṣad, 1316 R.5, p. 178.
3. *Viṣṇudharmottra Purāṇa*, vide TAG, Rao, *Elements of Hindu Iconography*, Vol. 2, pl. II, App B.
4. *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, Anand Ashram, Poona (Pune) 1895, 6.17.8.
5. उमामहेश्वरं वक्ष्ये उमया सह शङ्करम्।
मातुलिङ्गं त्रिशूलञ्च धृतं दक्षिणतः करे॥
आलिङ्गन् वामहस्तेन नागेन्द्रं च द्वितीयके।
हरस्कन्धे उमाहस्तं दर्पणं द्वितीये करे॥
अधस्तात् वृषभं कुर्यात् कुमारञ्च गणेश्वरम्।
भृङ्गिरीटं तथा कुर्यात् निर्मासं नृत्यसंस्थितम्॥ अपराजितपृच्छा 213. 25-27
6. Srivastava, B. (ed.) *Rūpamaṇḍana*, IV, 27-29.
7. Joshi, N.P., *Brahmanical Sculptures in the State Museum*, Lucknow, Pt. 2, Vol. 1, p. 49-54.
8. Srivastava, A.L., *Umā Maheśvara*, Delhi, 2004, p. 15-16.
9. *Ibid*, p. 16-22
10. *Ibid*, figs. 8.10.25.



P1. Umā-Maheśvara, J.P.Museum, 10th Century CE.



P2. Umā-Maheśvara, Unchgaon (Sitapur), U.P., 9th Century CE.



P3. Umā-Maheśvara, Candela Art, 11th Century CE.