

# *Sun and Moon as Subordinate Figures*

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Being eternal source of life, light and energy the sun has always enjoyed a superior position in the Brahmanical pantheon. At least ten hymns in the *R̥gveda* speak about Sūrya. In the epics and Purāṇas too the god has often been described as one manifesting himself in the form of Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva<sup>1</sup>. In the medieval sculptures we have syncretistic images of Sūrya - Nārāyaṇa<sup>2</sup>, Sūrya-Śiva<sup>3</sup> and Sūrya-Brahma<sup>4</sup>. Closely associated with the sun is the moon. Actually as we know the moon receives light from the sun. Movement of the sun (as is popularly believed) and the moon serves as unit of measuring 'time' or *Kāla*. Kālidāsa calls them as two forms creating time (*ye dve kālam vidhattaḥ*)<sup>5</sup>. Not only in the group of planets, but elsewhere too the sun and moon find a close mention. The *Brahma*<sup>6</sup> and the *Matsya*<sup>7</sup> Purāṇas call the two as the eyes of the day and night (*ahorātrekṣaṇa*). Presence of the two has been well conceived in the human body as well. The breath (*śvāsa, svāra*) from the right nostril is called *Sūrya-svāra* and that from the left is *Candra-svāra*. These two, according to the experts in the *Svāra-śāstra* (*Śiva-svārodaya*) play significant role in determining failure or success of actions performed in their respective durations.

In sculptures the sun and moon appear either in human forms with their distinct iconographic features or in symbolic forms namely a disc with or without rays and crescent (rarely a disc). Independent images of Sūrya have been found in plenty; those of Candra, on the other hand are not so common, rather these can be termed as 'rare'. In the present paper we do not intend to discuss the independent figures, but shall be confining ourselves to their joint symbolic depictions only. Such depictions seem to be serving four different purposes namely (i) appearing as attributes, which thereby suggest superiority or control of the concerned deity over 'time' (*kāla*) - the ever present and most dominating factor; (ii) indicating high heavens in the composition; (iii) marking extreme ends of a door lintel and (iv) appearing as independent units in the group compositions such as *Sūrya-pañcāyatana*.

- (i) Let us start our discussions with the sun and moon as attributes held by the deities in their hands. But before passing on to the sculptures it would be interesting to take notice of a related reference appearing in the Vālmīkīya *Rāmāyaṇa*<sup>8</sup>. Trijaṭā, the demonic guard, describing her dream to her fellow attendants observes that she in her dream had seen Sītā reaching the heavens and cleaning or wiping off

(*parimārjati*) the sun and moon with her hands. Explaining this further in the footnote it has been said that one, who in dreams touches either of the two, rules over a large kingdom in reality. In the field of plastic art depiction of the solar disc and lunar crescent (or even disc) in hands, generally right and left respectively, starts from c. 1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D., or little prior to that. A few such figures are mentioned below.

*Mahiṣamardīnī Durgā* -

- (1) Six armed Durgā<sup>9</sup> in the Los-Angeles county Museum of Art (Fig. 1) overpowering the assailant buffalo with normal hands and carrying a sword and shield (?) and planetic symbols in the extra pair of hands.
- (2) Eight armed Durgā<sup>10</sup> in the Museum für Indische Kunst, Berlin, similar to above in all respects except that she is tying a garland on her head with additional pair of hands.

*Goddess on lion* in neighbouring land -

- (1) A silver bowl from ancient Sogdiana (part of Afganistan) with Pahlavi inscription shows at the bottom a four armed female deity seated on some animal (lion?)<sup>11</sup>. In her normal hands she holds a *patera* and sceptre and a disc and crescent in extra hands (Fig. 2).
- (2) Four armed goddess on lion carrying the sun and moon from Syr Darya and Hisar ridge<sup>12</sup>.
- (3) A bronze figure of eight armed goddess on lion holds the sun and moon in two of her upper hands<sup>13</sup>.

- Himachal Pradesh, c. 10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> century.

*Śiva* -

- (1) *Caturvyūha Śiva*<sup>14</sup> seated on a throne with three male figures seen jutting out from his body. Amongst them the central one holds the disc and crescent in his upraised right and left-hand.

- Kuṣāṇa, Musanagar, Kanpur, U.P.

- (2) Terracotta panel in the Bikaner Museum, Rajasthan depicts seated Śiva and Pārvatī<sup>15</sup>. Over the head of the three headed Śiva rises the bust of a male figure carrying the disc and crescent (slightly damaged) in his extended hands.

- c. 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D.; Rang Mahal, Rajasthan

- (3) Three headed and six armed Śiva<sup>16</sup> from the N.W. Provinces is seen with planetic symbols in two of his hands.

- Shāhi period (c. 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> century A.D.)

- (4) R.C. Agrawala refers to some figures from Champa and paintings from Chinese Turkistan showing Śiva with the sun and moon in hands<sup>17</sup>.

*Boar Incarnation of Viṣṇu -*

A figure of Nṛ-varāha<sup>18</sup> in the Govt. Museum, Mathura (G.M.M. 65.15) has his normal hands resting on hips, while in the upraised extra hands one can notice the sun and moon in the form of miniature figures, each seated in his chariot drawn by horses.

*Gaṇapatī -*

A painted panel from Khotan in Central Asia shows Gaṇeśa<sup>19</sup> holding the sun and moon.

(ii) *Indicating high heavens*

- (1) Fragmentary panel from Padam-pavāyā in the Gwalior Museum, showing eight armed Trivikrama<sup>20</sup> has on its top right corner crescent with moon-god in horse drawn chariot. In its complete form the corresponding side must be having similar figure of Sūrya.

- c. 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D.

- (2) Trivikrama from Sikha-nārāyaṇa (South-West of Kthamandu)<sup>21</sup> also depicts rayed discs symbolising the sun and moon on the top portion of its back-slab.

- Nepal, c. 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D.

- (3) Śeṣaśāyī Viṣṇu<sup>22</sup>, a bronze figure from Keral in the National Museum, New Delhi (Acc. No. 71.66) shows solar disc and lunar crescent flanking Brahmā seated on lotus which emits from Viṣṇu's navel.

- Kerala, c. 17<sup>th</sup> century A.D.

- (4) Satī - memorial stones, in some cases, have top panels depicting Śiva-liṅga flanked by the sun and moon. Lower part in the accompanying illustration<sup>23</sup> shows *Satī* with her departed husband. A large arm issued from the memorial pillar further repeats the gesture (Fig. 3)

(iii) *Marking ends of the door lintel*

- (1) This motif seems to have remained in use right from the Kuṣāṇa period. We know of a fragmentary door lintel from Mathura<sup>24</sup> (Lucknow Museum, B. 208) showing six bands from top to bottom. The third band from our right to left depicts scenes from Buddha's life namely *māra-vijaya*, *dharma-cakra-pravartana* and Buddha in Indraśilā cave. This band opens with Sūrya seated

in double horsed chariot. The remaining part, which is now lost, might be having other scenes and the figure of the moon as the closing mark.

- Kuṣāṇa, Mathura

- (2) The motif continued in the Gupta period also. We know of a door lintel from Allahabad<sup>25</sup>, now in the Lucknow Museum (SML. B.223 a,b,c) showing worship of *Viśvarūpa* Viṣṇu and other scenes. The lintel has solar disc with figure of Sūrya in chariot on one end and that of Candra with his spouse Rohiṇī ūsing the crescent as their seat on the other.

- Gaḍhavā, Allahabad, c. 6<sup>th</sup> century A.D.

(iv) *Appearing as independent units in composition*

The sun and moon in the form of full and half circle are sometimes to be seen in miniature brass figures called *pañcāyatanas*, specially the *Sūrya-pañcāyatana*. Herein figures of Annapūrṇā, Gaṇapatī, Nāga, bull Nandī, bust of the goddess Reṇukā and *pañca-piṇḍas* (five small ball-like *liṅgas* placed together) appear on three sides of a rectangular platform. The middle portion bears symbols of the sun and moon. The fourth side has outlet water channel (Fig. 4).

Besides the sculptural depiction the sun and moon often appear in folk paintings and line drawing compositions on walls or papers used for domestic rituals.

### **References**

1. Comp. the famous verse -  
नमः सवित्रे जगदैक चक्षुषे, जगत्प्रसूतिस्थितिनाश हेतवे।  
त्रयीमयाय त्रिगुणात्मधारिणे, विरञ्चि-नारायण-शङ्करात्मने॥
2. e.g. R.C. Sharma, *The Splendour of Mathura Art and Museum*, 1993, Fig. 69, p. 166; R.C. Agrawala, Some interesting Sculptures and Bronzes in the Udaipur Musuem, *Journal of Indian Museums*, XII,1955, Fig. 2, p.21.
3. L. Davidson, *Art of Indian Subcontinent from Los Angeles Collections*, Los Angeles, 1961, Fig. 48
4. Devangana Desai, *The Religious Imagery of Khajuraho*, Mumbai, 1996, p. 69.
5. *Abhijñāna Śākuntala*, opening verse.
6. *Brahma-purāṇa* Mor Edition, Calcutta, 213.34, p. 218
7. *Matsya*; Mor. Ed., 247.68, p. 692.
8. *Vālmikīya Rāmāyaṇa*, Gita Press, Gorakhpur., Sundara., 27.15-16, p. 933, fn. p. 34.
9. R.C. Agrawala, Rajasthan's Contribution to Early Brahmanic Iconography, *Investigating Indian Art*, Berlin, 1967, Fig. 14, p. 18.
10. *Ibid.*, Fig. 13, p. 18.

11. B.N. Mukherjee, *Nanā on Lion*, Calcutta, 1969, Fig. 47, p. 89.
12. R.C. Agrawala, Sun and Moon in Early Śaiva Icons, *Bhāratī*, Bulletin of the College of Indology, Banaras Hindu University, No. 16, 1985-87, p. 315.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 316.
14. N.P. Joshi, A Unique Figure of Śiva from Musanagar, *Bulletin of Museums and Archaeology in U.P.*, no. 3, June 1969, pp. 25-29.
15. J.C. Harle, *Gupta Sculptures*, Oxford, 1974, Fig. 128, p. 53ff.
16. R.C. Agrawala (1985-87), No. 12 above, p. 314.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 315.
18. N.P. Joshi, Four Armed Nṛ-Varāha, *Arts Asiatiques*, Paris, Tome XII, 1965, pp. 113.
19. R.C. Agrawala (1985-87), No. 12 above, p. 317.
20. P.K. Agrawala, *Guptakāliṅga Kalā evam Vāstu* (Hindi), Varanasi, 1994, Cavicitra 45.
21. B.N. Sharma, Iconographic Parellels, *H.R. Shervani Felicitation Volume*, Pl. 1, p. 553.
22. B.N. Sharma, Further unpublished Bronzes in the National Museum, *East and West* (N.S) nos. 1-2, p. 175, Fig. 11.
23. Stella Kramrisch, *Unknown India, Ritual Art in Tribe and Village*, Philadelphia, 1968, Fig. 35, p. 86.
24. *Ancient Sculptures from India : A Catalogue of the Exhibition*, The Cleveland Museum of Art, 1964-65, Pl. 57.
25. N.P. Joshi, *Catalogue of the Brahmanical sculptures in the State Museum, Lucknow*, Vol. 1, 1972, Pl. 3.

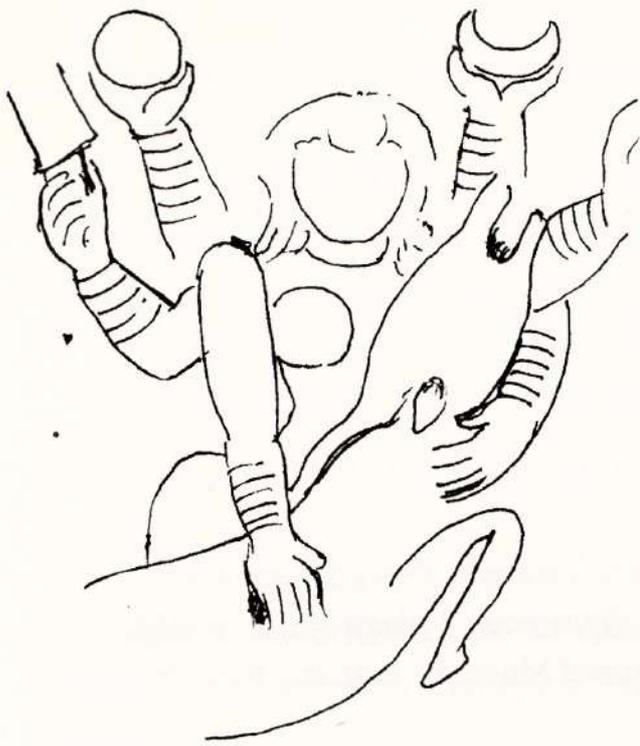


Fig. 1



Fig. 2

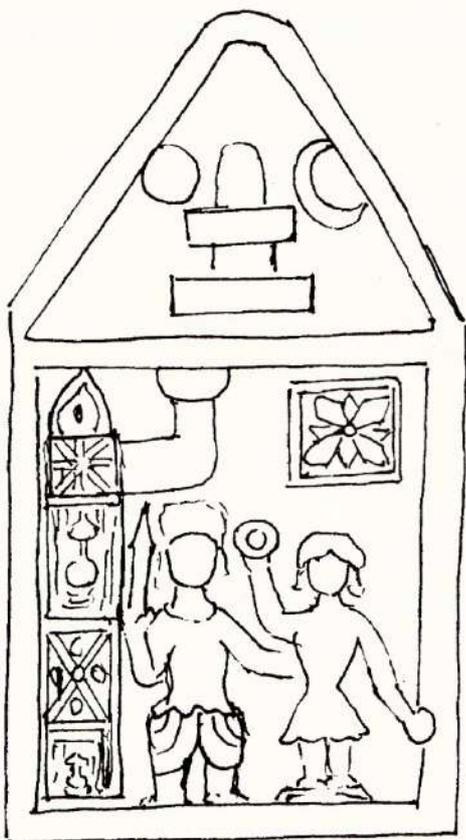


Fig. 3

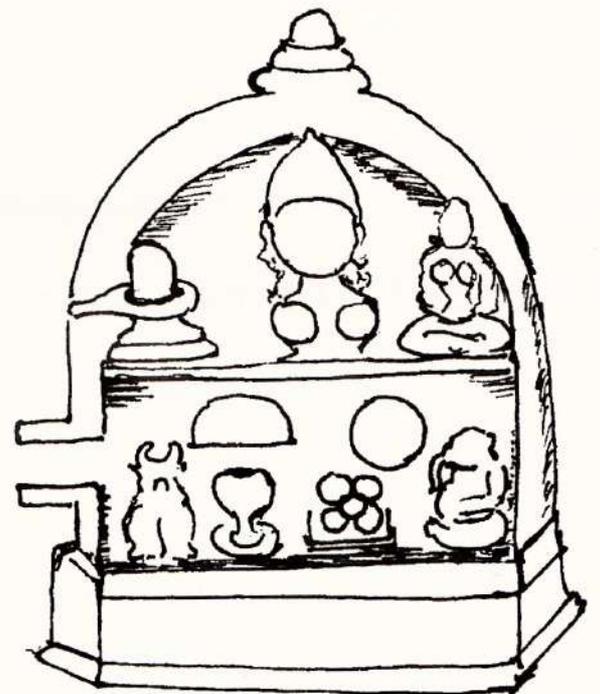


Fig. 4