

Hayagrīva Sculptures in Kerala

Dr. Preeta Nayar

Hayagrīva, one of the minor *avatāras* of Viṣṇu, is associated with knowledge and wisdom. He is thus, looked upon as a God of learning. He is referred to as the *avatāra* of Viṣṇu in *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and *Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇa*.¹ Viṣṇu was believed to have assumed the horse-headed human form to kill a horse-headed demon named Hayagrīva² or Madhu and Kaiṭabha (*Śāntiparva* of *Mahābhārata*). Another interpretation is that Viṣṇu took this form to recover the *Vedas*, which were stolen and hidden beneath the sea by the demon Hiraṇyakaśipu or Jvarāsura.³

The *Kālikā Purāṇa* says that Viṣṇu took the form of Hayagrīva to kill Jvarāsura.⁴ *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* describes that Viṣṇu manifested himself in Bhadrāśva and Hayaśira (horse-headed).⁵ The *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa* repeats the same story and adds that in horse-headed form Janārdana possessed forearms resembling a horse's forelegs and three eyes.⁶

The *Sātvata Tantra* mentions that a late *avatāra* of Hari restored the *Vedas* from Madhu and Kaiṭabha at the beginning of times.⁷ The *Skanda Purāṇa*, a later work, explains that Kṛṣṇa's head was severed from his body by the cord of his own bow and Viśvakarmā replaced it with head of one of the chariot horses of the Sun.⁸ As mentioned, there are many conflicting legends about the origin of Hayagrīva.

Images of Hayagrīva

Hayagrīva images are not found in abundance in India. The earliest sculptural representation of Hayagrīva is found from a small architectural fragment belonging to 3rd century CE., now preserved at Bharat Kala Bhavan, Varanasi.⁹ Some Hayagrīva images have been procured at Kanauj (U.P.).¹⁰ Chandpur (Jhansi)¹¹, Kotah Museum (Rajasthan)¹² and Vāmana and Lakṣmaṇa temples at Khajuraho.¹³ There is an image of Hayagrīva belonging to 12th-13th century CE. at Vaikunthaperumal temple at Kanchipuram.¹⁴ Eight-handed image of Hayagrīva¹⁵, though not common, is reported from Nuggehalli in Karnataka.¹⁵ Where in the deity holds in his uppermost right and left hands - *cakra* and *śaṅkha*; in the second

pair - *khadga and khetaka*; in the third - *śara and śāraṅga* and in the lower most - *gadā and padma*. Sculptures of Lakṣmī-Hayagrīva are found from Tiruvendiouram and Pāpanāśam¹⁶ and Tirupati Govindarājasvāmī¹⁷ temples in Tamilnadu.

Hayagrīva Images in Kerala

Hayagrīva images found in Kerala, are datable from 16th century CE. only.¹⁸ These images are presented always in hybrid form, showing with a horse head and a human body. These are both in standing and sitting postures and in stone and wood. Based on the postures and attributes, two varieties of *Sthānaka* Hayagrīva and three varieties of *Āsana* Hayagrīva images from Kerala could be discerned.

Sthānaka Hayagrīva

In standing form, Hayagrīva is generally depicted in *abhaṅga* posture. There are four-armed and eight-armed images. A four-armed Hayagrīva belonging to 17th century is found at Tiruppatisaram temple in Kanyakumari district of Tamilnadu (earlier in erstwhile Travancore belonging to Kerala). The upper right and left hands in this image carry *cakra* and *śaṅkha* while the lower two are held in *varada* and *abhaya mudrās*. He wears a conical *kirītamukuṭa* and ornaments like *grīvāhāra, bhujāvalī, keyūra, kaṅkaṇa, udarabandha, yajñopavīta, kaṭisūtra* and *pādavalaya*.

Kidangur Subrahmaṇya temple in Kottayam district has a wooden image of eight-armed Hayagrīva (fig. 1). This is the only eight-armed image of Hayagrīva located in the state. The upper most right hand and left hands of the deity carry *cakra* and *śaṅkha* along with *padma*, the second pair *khadga and khetaka* and the third *śara and śāraṅga*. The lower most hands are held in *varada* and *abhaya mudrās*. Below the feet of Hayagrīva, waves and lotus flowers are shown. He wears a short *karaṇḍamukuṭa* and heavily decorated ornaments like *grīvāhāra, bhujāvalī, keyūra, kaṅkaṇa, udarabandha, yajñopavīta, kaṭisūtra* and *pādavalaya*.

Āsana Hayagrīva

In *āsana* form, only four-armed Hayagrīva images are noticed in Kerala. A 16th century stone sculpture present in the Sucheendrum Sthānunāthasvāmī temple in Kanyakumari district of Tamilnadu (earlier in erstwhile Travancore) shows the image seated in *savyalalitāsana*. He is represented with *varada, cakra, śaṅkha* and

19.1: Hayagrīva, Wood, 17th century CE,
Kuttambalam pillar, Subrahmanya
Temple, Kottayam



19.2: Hayagrīva, Wood, 16th century CE,
Shrikovil wall, Ettumanur Śiva
Temple, Kottayam



19.3: Hayagrīva, Wood, 17th century CE,
Shrikovil wall, Kaviyur Śiva
Temple, Alappuzha

abhaya mudrās as attributes in lower right, upper right, upper left and lower left hands, respectively.

A wooden sculpture of the same period seen on the *shrikovil* wall of Ettumanur Śiva temple in Kottayam district depicts Hayagrīva seated with one leg crossed over the other (fig. 2). He shows *abhaya mudrā* with the lower right hand. *Cakra* and *śaṅkha* are held in the upper right and the upper left hands, respectively. Lower left hand is held in *jñāna-mudrā*. A broken *yogapaṭṭa* is seen around his folded legs and belly. His snout is ornamented with a ring. He wears a beautiful *karaṇḍamukuṭa* and ornaments as in the previous sculptures.

The fifth image of Hayagrīva in the State is found at Kaviyur Śiva temple in Alappuzha district (fig. 3). This 17th century image is a four-armed one. He is seated on a decorated *pīḍhā* with one leg crossed over the other. A broken *yogapaṭṭa* runs over the left folded leg and the waist. *Jñāna-mudrā*, *cakra*, *śaṅkha* and *kamaṇḍalu* are shown in his lower right, upper right, upper left and lower left hands, respectively. A long *daṇḍa* is kept across his chest. A male figure, possibly a devotee, is depicted on the upper left side of the sculpture. All these *Āsana* Hayagrīva images are sculptured with body in 3/4 and face in 1/2 profile.

Discussion

Though Hayagrīva is considered as one of the minor *avatāras* of Viṣṇu, he was not very popular in worship and probably, this was the reason why Hayagrīva sculptures are meager in number in Kerala as well as other parts of India. Some ancient texts have provided details about how icons of Hayagrīva should be sculptured. According to *Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa*, Hayagrīva could be eight-handed. His feet should be stretched on the palms of the Earth Goddess. He should be depicted in white complexion and in blue clothes. His face is that of a horse and body that of a human. Of the eight hands, four should carry *śaṅkha*, *cakra*, *gadā* and *Vedas* in four hands. All images observed in Kerala, except one, are with four hands. In all these cases, the upper two hands carry *śaṅkha* and *cakra*. However, the lower two are shown with *abhaya*, *varada* or *jñāna-mudrās* or carrying a *kamaṇḍalu*. In these images, no *gadā* or *Vedas* are depicted as attributes as mentioned in *Agni Purāṇa*. Interestingly, the Hayagrīva images kept in Kotah Museum and those observed at Vāmana and Lakṣmaṇa temples at Khajuraho have *grantha* or *Vedas* in their hands.¹⁹

The *Śāradātilaka Tantra* mentions that the images of Hayagrīva should have their lower two hands kept on his knees and the upper should carry *cakra* and *śaṅkha*.²⁰ The *Pāñcarātrāgama* prescribes four hands to Hayagrīva and says that the God should be depicted with *śaṅkha*, *akṣamālā*, *pustaka* and *jñānamudrā* as attributes in his hands. Such combinations of attributes are not observed in any of the images reported from Kerala. In other words, these ancient texts have not influenced the 16th/17th century sculptors of Kerala at least in sculpturing Hayagrīva images. They appear to be influenced by the attributes of Viṣṇu.

In the eight-armed image reported from the State, besides the typical *śaṅkha*, *cakra*, *abhaya* and *varada*, war weapons like *khadga*, *khetaka*, *śara* and *śāraṅga* are observed. The presence of long *daṇḍa* in the four-armed image of Hayagrīva observed at Kaviyur Śiva temple appears as a unique feature emphasizing the yogic aspect of the God. Though in general Hayagrīva is considered as a God of knowledge. Kerala images are never shown with *grantha* or *Vedas* in any of his hands. However, the presence of war weapons (*khadga*, *khetaka*, *śara* and *śāraṅga*) provides sufficient indication of his character as the destroyer of evils and the rescuer of knowledge. Again, this appears to be a strange deviation from the prescribed attributes mentioned in ancient texts. His might to kill the demon for recovering the *Vedas* is reflected also in the attributes of war in these Hayagrīva figures. The sculpture, perhaps, depicted the God getting ready for a fight before he rescued the *Vedas*. The eight-armed Hayagrīva image located at Nugehalli has also war weapons (*khadga*, *khetaka*, *śara* and *śāraṅga*) in his hands though *gadā* and *padma* in the lower most hands are replaced by *varada* and *abhaya-mudrās* in Kerala image. The waves and lotus flowers depicted below the feet symbolize water and give strong indication of the mission (to rescue *Vedas* from ocean) attributed to him.

Sculptures of Hayagrīva found in Kerala belong to 16th-17th century CE. It was the period during which splendid wooden sculptures were carved in many temples of the state. This could be one of the reasons why wooden Hayagrīva sculptures excelled those in stone in beauty. Sculptors have taken care to bring out the salient features of Hayagrīva by depicting the horse faces of Hayagrīva in profile because the exact frontal image would not provide the beauty and strength of the animal face. We can also see adoption of such technique in

depicting the Hayagrīva sculptures in temples like Lakṣmī-Narasimha at Nuggehalli in Karnataka.

Some sculptures of Kalki, another incarnation of Viṣṇu, found in Kerala closely resemble the Hayagrīva images. Both have horse faces and attributes like *khadga* and *khetaka*. But Kerala does not have eight-armed horse-faced Kalki images and Kalki images also do not show *abhaya* and *varada mudrās*. These are also not depicted with *kamaṇḍalu*. Moreover, in total assessment of attributes, Hayagrīva images impart strongly a *yogic* aspect of Kalki that of annihilator. In this context, the presence of *yogapaṭṭa* in seated wooden sculptures of Hayagrīva is very relevant. It runs around the waist and over the crossed leg of these images. Besides Hayagrīva, *yogapaṭṭa* is observed in Kerala, only in seated images of Dakṣiṇāmurti, Yoga Narasimha and Ayyappā. All these icons undoubtedly show *yogic* characters.

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