

## A Brahmā Image from the Śakti Devī Temple, Chamba

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Brahmā, the Hindu god of creation of the universe, according to the Hindu mythology, occupies a prominent place in the Hindu triad. The first canto of the *Manusmṛiti* mentions him as the progenitor of the entire world (*tasmin jajñe svayam Brahmā sarvaloka pitāmahaḥ*). One of the earliest allusions to him is found in the first verse of the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*, that describes him as the Creator of the universe and the Preserver of the world (*Brahmā devānām prathamahaḥ sambabhūva viśvasya kartā bhuvanasya goptā*).

Generally, it is said that the god has only one temple consecrated to Him at Pushkar in Rajasthan. But in the Himachal state, there are as many as three wooden temples dedicated to him, all located in the hamlets of the Kulu valley – one at Khokhan, not very far from Bhuntar, the other two at Dhiri and Tihri, off Kulu-Mandi highway from Kataula. These shrines indicate that the god had his own cult since hoary antiquity, but do not shelter very ancient images installed in their *garbhagrhas* (sanctum sanctorum).

Brahmā has endeared Himself to the artists of Himachal state to such an extent that from the earliest times, his images have been shaped in a superb manner by the local artists. They are not cult images, but figure on the door frame panels or niches, or in the *bhadra* (cardinal) niches, carved in relief. The earliest sculpture of Brahmā (Fig.1) dates from a fairly late period, i.e. the seventh century CE,\* and stands chiselled in the topmost niche of the right *dvārasākhā* (Fig.2) of the



Fig.1. Detail of the Brahmā image  
Śakti Devī temple, Chhatrarhi  
Chamba, 7th cent. CE



Fig.2. *Garbhagrha dvārasākhā*, Śakti Devī temple, Chhatrarhi

*garbhagrha* doorway to the Śakti Devī temple at Chhatrarhi village in Chamba district. This wooden temple (Fig.3) had been ordered to be built by Rājā Meruvarman of Bharmaur, who had prayed to the Great Goddess at this temple site for victory over his enemies. This temple was erected by way of thanks giving to Her by this ruler, according to the long inscription engraved on the pedestal of the icon of Śakti Devī enshrined within the inner sanctum.



Fig.3. Śakti Devī temple, Chhatrarhi

Four-armed Brahmā standing in *samapāda sthānaka* posture occupies the topmost niche on the third *rūpa śākhā* on the right side. His figure carved in high relief appears to be completely in the round, although it is not detached from its background. He is tricephalic – his central head flanked by side faces are chiselled in three-quarter view; probably he had a fourth head at the back, that is implied. His central face is somewhat plump and roundish, relieved with delicate, sharp, and shapely features, and framed by the *jaṭāmukuṭa*, culminating in what is called the widow's peak that covers also the side heads.

Masses of curly hair ringlets are neatly arranged over both his shoulders. The sensitive modelling of his massive physique, well articulated pectoral and abdominal muscles, and heavy legs fully draped in a diaphanous *saṅghāṭī*-like garment that covers his left shoulder, leaving the right one bare, are impressive. The *jaṭābhāra* coiffure, his ascetic garb, the *mṛgājina* (black antelope's skin) thrown over his left shoulder, and lack of ornaments of any kind serve to emphasise the ascetic qualities of Brahmā, an impression further reinforced by the *kamaṇḍalu* (ritual water vessel) held in one of his four hands. The cognizances wielded by the god in his other three hands are conventional : the *sruk*, the *sruvā* (implements for performing ritual sacrifices), and his main right hand is disposed in *abhayākṣa mudrā*. Flanking him is a pair of exquisitely chiselled *hamsas* holding pearl strands in their beaks. This is in complete conformity with the iconographic precepts of the *Viṣṇudharmottara-purāṇa*.<sup>1</sup> Identical iconographic features are not peculiar to our Western Himalayan region alone; they inform numerous sculptures from the Dudahi temple in Madhya Pradesh, Vasantgaḍha temple in Rajasthan dated to the seventh century CE.<sup>2</sup> Some of these images might have been inspired by the *dhyāna ślokas* in Varāhamihara's *Bṛhatsamhitā* that mentions the staff as one of Brahmā's attributes (*Brahmā caturmukho daṇḍī kṛṣṇājīnakamaṇḍalī*).<sup>3</sup>

Numerous parallel examples to our present image can be cited from Kashmir, both in iconographic and stylistic terms. The earliest one is the bronze icon of unicephalic Brahmā from Berlin Museum, datable contemporaneously, i.e. the seventh century CE.<sup>4</sup> This icon has striking similarities with our present image. Amongst other parallels can be cited the following : a stone relief image of the Hindu triad, that is, Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Maheśa, from Avantipur, presently in the Brooklyn Museum, USA<sup>5</sup>; an identical sculpture is preserved in the collection of the Śrī Pratāp Museum, Srinagar (Kashmir)<sup>6</sup>; an image exists also in the collection of Ashmolean Museum at Oxford, UK.<sup>7</sup> They are all datable to between the seventh and ninth centuries CE. The Brooklyn Brahmā holds the same cognizances in the same order, although the god is portrayed as having only one head. Stylistically, our image shares numerous features with Kashmiri sculptures such as : full, plump face, sharp and delicately carved physiognomical features, firm, smooth and round chin, the *jaṭābhāra* coiffure, heavy massive physique, powerful shoulders, articulated chest and abdominal muscles, accentuated knees, etc. There are, however, minor differences. With

the exception of the Brooklyn Brahmā, all the sculptures show the god draped in a *dhotī* in the style that had become a standard feature of Kashmiri sculptures till then, that is, the left leg fully covered up to the ankles, whereas the right one is bare knee downwards.

Brahmā's monastic garb covers his entire body up to his ankles, forming vertical pleats. A series of meandering folds along the hemline have been carved with extreme precision and minuteness. Identical treatment of the neckline and hemline of the god's robe is seen in a few Kashmiri sculptures from Pandrethan. The absence of folds on the shawl worn diagonally and covering the god's chest and left shoulder, and the large *vanamālā* encircling his entire body that characterise almost all Kashmiri style sculptures distinguish our example from the latter. The sculptor of the present image of Brahmā was most certainly a Kashmiri artist, a close associate of the master sculptor Gugga in the royal court of Rājā Meruvarman, and no less accomplished and consummate. It goes without saying that he was free to follow his own predilections, even while working within the traditional framework of iconographic tenets stipulated in the local *śilpa* texts as well as following the stylistic components of his own region.

A comparison with the image of Brahmā chiselled by Gugga on the main entrance of the Lakṣaṇā Devī temple at Bharmaur is iconographically related, but is far slimmer and elongated. It presents a striking contrast to our image of Brahmā from the Śakti Devī temple, having been executed in the post-Gupta style.

In subsequent centuries, Brahmā images continued to be created by the local sculptors, but none is as impressive as our present example. This sculpture serves as a useful point of cross-reference, as the general stylistic features accord with contemporary sculptures from Kashmir.

\* The image of four-headed, two-armed standing Brahmā from Brahmanabad in Sindh, now preserved in the Karachi Museum, Pakistan attributed to the Gupta period is the earliest known till now.

- Editors

## References

1. Stella Kramrisch, *The Vishnudharmottara Purana*, Part 3, (Eng.tr.), Calcutta

University, Calcutta, 1924 ; ch. 63, verses 1-3; pp.85-86.

2. See J.N. Banerji, *The Development of Hindu Iconography*, New Delhi, 1956 (rep.); p.514.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Pratapaditya Pal, *Bronzes of Kashmir*, Graz, 1975; p.3.

5. See Subhasini Aryan, The Brahma Image from Shakti Devi temple in Chamba district : A Reappraisal, *Bulletin of Himalayan Research and Cultural Research*, New Delhi, 1998; pp.32-33.

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*