

A Re-Reading on Cult of Lord Vishnu in Reclining form; Its Evolution and Iconography

Mr. S. Kannadasan

PhD., Research Scholar, Part Time (External), Dept. of History, Annamalai University, Annamalai Nagar.

Dr. S. Sridhar

Assistant Professor, Arignar Anna Government Arts College, PG & Research Department of History, Arignar Anna Govt. Arts College, Villuppuram.

Dr. K. Govindaraj

Assistant Professor, Department of History, Thiru A. Krishnaswamy, Govt. Arts College, Tindivanam.

Dr. G. Indirajith

Assistant Professor, Department of History, Govt, Arts & Science College, Kovilpatti.

Corresponding Author - Dr. G. Indirajith

Abstract

Among the trinity of Hindu Gods, Brahma, Vishnu and Siva, Vishnu is considered to be sustainer and protector of universe. Lord Vishnu, the supreme God of protection, is worshipped with great faith and fervour by people not only in India but also in many countries of the world. The early iconographic representations of Vishnu are from the Pallava period (6st to 7rd century A.D.) and majority of them are found in the area of Mahabalipuram, which is even now a strong and living Pallava Monuments. This paper portrays the most important reclining form of Lord Vishnu, its iconographic details, evolutions and Significant Temples in this regard in detailed manner.

Key Words: Dvaita, Trivikrama, Yagyapurusha, Bujanga Sayanam, Ananda Sayanam and Prarthana Sayanam.

Among the trinity of Hindu Gods, Brahma, Vishnu and Siva, Vishnu is considered to be sustainer and protector of universe. Vaishnavism or Dvaita philosophy states that, Vishnu is the supreme soul, the genesis, the end, and the in-between. Vishnu hasn't been mentioned often in the Vedas. In the Rig-Veda, he is mainly the Sun God, taking three steps across the world (*Trivikrama*), during the rise, mid-day and setting of the Sun¹.

He is also associated with Indra and with Agni. In the Brahmana texts and the Upanishads one can easily observe the importance given to Vishnu since he is described as the sacrificial entity or *Yagyapurusha*. In the Vedic literature we see two phases of Vishnu; earlier as Aditya or Sun God and later as the sacrificial entity possessing the forms of Agni and Aditya altogether.

In the Vaishnava Puranas, the etymology of the word Vishnu has been derived from the prefix Vishnu which means, to enter. The most important of the *Puranas*, particularly the *Bhagavata Purana*, focus on the God Vishnu and his various avatars, or incarnations². This suggests Vishnu as the entering or pervading entity into the universe which has its roots in the Vedic texts. Lord Vishnu is also referred to in many of the well-known ancient Tamil literary works namely Paripadal, Aganaanooru, Padhitruppatru, Madurai Kanchi and Silappadhikaram. Lord Vishnu in reclining form is also known as *Bujanga Sayanam*, *Ananda Sayanam* and *Prarthana Sayanam*. During the Puranic period; possibly somewhere around 5th - 6th CE, we see the foundation of the well-defined Vishnu cult in India. Vishnu gained importance during this period; he was promoted as the Protector and Sustainer of the universe. The Puranas – Vishnu, Narada, Bhagavata, Garuda, Padma and Varaha – are the Vaishnava Puranas where we can find many stories associated with Vishnu and his various forms.

The rise of Puranic literature helped in forming the strong and well defined Vaishnav cult where Vishnu gained so much importance that he was identified as the all-pervading Brahma or Parabrahma. Although the *Puranas* provide differing descriptions of creation, they generally focus on two main themes, both of which feature Vishnu reclining on the many-headed serpent Shesa (also called *Ananta*). In the version depicted here, Vishnu, resting under the protection of the serpent's hood and accompanied by his consort Lakshmi, Goddess of wealth and prosperity, floats on the cosmic waters.

Lord Vishnu, the supreme God of protection, is worshipped with great faith and fervor by people not only in India but also in many countries of the world. There are innumerable temples for Vishnu, of which 108 are held as particularly sacred, as the deities enshrined here have been sung about the Alvars, the great Vaishnavites Saints, are known as Divyadesams. In these, Divyadesams the deities can be worshipped in different postures, that is, as sitting, standing and reclining. Of them, there are 24 Divyadesams, in which the Lord can be worshipped as lying down or reclining form. This paper portrays the most important reclining form of Lord Vishnu and Significant Temples in this regard in detailed manner³.

The most important forms of Vishnu is His reclining form, known by Anantasa- ine names Anantasayin (or Seshasayin), Padmanabha and Padmanabha Ranganatha. The temples at Srirangam and Trivandrum or Ranga may be specially mentioned as the places where this form of! Vishnu is worshipped. In Tamil He is known as *Palligondan*.

A good illustration comes from the old sculptures at Mahabalipuram. In the so-called Mahishasuramardhini Mandapa, on the proper right wall of the front verandah is depicted the scene under reference. Here on the coils of the serpent *Ananta* sleeps on His back a gigantic figure of Vishnu with two arms. The right hand is carelessly thrown on the body of the serpent while the left hand is raised up at the elbow.

The early iconographic representations of Vishnu are from the Pallava period (6st to 7rd century A.D.) and majority of them are found in the area of Mahabalipuram, which is even now a strong and living Pallava Monuments. After the Pallavas, the Cholas, the Pandyas and the Vijayanagar rulers promoted Vaishnavism and thus helped to build many Vishnu temples in Tamil country. The basics of the Vishnu iconography for the later centuries were established in the Pallava period (6rd to 7th century CE).

In the early phases of depiction, we see an evolution from the Pallava Vishnu to the Chola, the Pandya and Vijayanagar Vishnu. The Pallava Vishnu iconography featured the reclining form of Vishnu. This iconography underwent some modifications during the Subsequent period. After the Pallava period we see a more artistic and composite image of Vishnu is seen. In early iconography, Vishnu was most probably shown as a reclining form. Thus, the definitive Vishnu iconography came into existence incorporating various elements attested in Vaishnavism since many centuries.

In Southern India, during the Chalukya and Pallava periods (6th-7th century CE) some beautiful Vaishnava panels were carved at the site of Badami, Mamallapuram and Kanchipuram. Bhu-Varaha and Ananta Sayanam panels at Mamallapuram caves are some of the praiseworthy bas-reliefs carved during that period. Among them the *Ananta Sayanam* Vishnu is where the relaxed pose of Vishnu is depicted, with his right hand stretched out of the snake bed. The varied iconography of Vishnu from an early period illustrates the development and spread of Vaishnava cult *Sampradaya*, its many branches and its influence all over the Indian subcontinent. It reflects religious texts as well as regional beliefs.

Here it is worthwhile to understand the iconography of reclining form of Vishnu in details. The God wears a cloth round the waist, which reaches down to the feet. The usual *Xidarabandhana*⁴ is also tied round the lower part of the stomach in the form of a girdle, its ends gracefully hanging down and touching the right side of the serpent couch. The garland round the neck (i.e., the *vanamala*) has slipped down the right arm of the God, thus emphasizing His sleeping posture. By the side, of the serpent couch⁵, near the feet of Vishnu, is the figure of Lakshmi kneeling down and worshipping him with folded hands. In front of her are two other figures also seated by the side of the serpent couch? These may be the two colleagues of Vishnu, viz., Brahma and Siva, or the attendants Jaya and Vijaya- Above the sleeping God in the air are two flying figures, one a female and the other a fat figure, probably a goblin⁶. Beyond His feet and looking him straight in the face are two stalwart figures standing one in a defiant attitude with a club in His hand and the other dissuading him from, what looks apparently like a murderous attack on the God. The Padma-

Purdna gives a description of Vishnu, which comes very near to, what has been depicted above. It says: "That God of Gods sleeps on the serpent⁷. One of His legs lies on the thigh of Lakshmi, while the other is placed on the body of the serpent- He has two hands, one of which is stretched along the right thigh and the other is placed over His head- Brahma is comfortably seated on the lotus which springs from the navel of Vishnu.

Entangled in the stem of the lotus, stand the demons Madhu and Kaitabha. The symbols of the God, viz., the conch, discus, club and lotus are all represented about him, each assuming a body-⁸" A similar description is given by Hemadri under the Jalasayana. Term Jalasayana- God Vishnu seated comfortably on the serpent couch is named Vaikuntha Narayana.

The left leg is stretched down and the right is bent at the *knee*; the left hand rests on the knee-joint, while the right hand rests carelessly thrown back on the head of the serpent; the two back hands hold the weapons Sankha and Chakra. The image is decorated with jewels and by its side are His consorts Lakshmi and Prithvi Lakshmi Narayana is another of Vishnu's seated forms where, to the left of the God⁹, by His side or sometimes on His thigh, is found seated the image of Lakshmi throwing her right hand round the neck of the God while she holds in her left a lotus- The left hand of Vishnu similarly passes round the waist of Lakshmi. A female deity called Siddhi stands near, with a fly *whisk* in her hand.

The vehicle Garuda is on the right side at the foot of the God- The Sankha and Chakra not being held by the God are carried by two dwarf male figures standing in front of him; Brahma and Siva also stand by, worshipping Vishnu with folded hands¹⁰.

A unique feature of Vaishnavism is the *Avataravada* or the incarnation theory. It probably began early and kept on developing until the 16th century or so. The famously known Vishnu *Avatars* are: Matsya, Kurma, Varaha, Narasimha, Vamana, Parashurama, Rama, Krishna, Buddha and Kalki¹¹. In some regions such as Kalinga¹² and Balarama¹³ were names among the avatars. Apart from these incarnations, we also see Hari-Hara, Vishnu-Surya¹⁴, Dhanvantari¹⁵, Yoga-Narayana¹⁶, Hayagriva¹⁷, twenty-four forms such as Keshava¹⁸, Madhava, Narayana, Govinda, etc. which are also considered as incarnations¹⁹. Interestingly almost all these incarnations are represented in sculpture and paintings and well documented in ancient to medieval period texts on iconography and architecture²⁰.

In the concluding part the study reveals that the evolution and local variations in the artistic representations of Vishnu will contribute significantly to our understanding of the evolution and dissemination of Hindu scriptures. The diversity of India in terms of art, culture, and regional beliefs is interestingly reflected in the Vaishnava iconography which is an important part of Indian art history. After the Pallavas, the Cholas, the Pandyas and the Vijayanagar rulers promoted Vaishnavism and thus helped to build many Vishnu temples in Tamil country.

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