

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Iconographic Study of the Vamana Avatara Sculptures as Socio-Cultural Heritage: Collection of Rani Mahal Museum, Jhansi

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ABSTRACT

This research paper focuses on the Iconographic Study of the Sculptures of Vishnu's Vamana Avatar stored in Rani Mahal Museum, Jhansi, located in Uttar Pradesh. This Study explores the Vamana Avatar Sculptures as a significant artifact of socio-cultural heritage. A comprehensive analysis of them has been presented through the research paper, which is famous for its rich cultural heritage and artistic traditions. Rani Mahal Museum has an important collection of Sculptures of Vamana Avatar, which displays the rich cultural heritage and artistic traditions of this region. The aim of this research paper is to study the mentioned Sculptures in detail from the iconography point of view and discuss their spiritual and worldly nature and the purpose of their construction. Ancient man has first tried to bring his feelings and thoughts into the open through art. Studying these Sculptures gives us a deep understanding of Vishnu worship in the referenced region, as well as highlights the importance of this region in the development of Vaishnav art and iconography. Valuable information about the religious, social and cultural practices of any region can be obtained from the Sculptures found in that region. The research paper also underlines the urgent need to preserve these cultural treasures for future generations. An attempt has also been made to relate these Sculptures to the stories of Vaishnava religion described in ancient Indian texts. This research provides insights into the socio-cultural heritage of the region, shedding light on the historical and cultural narratives that continue to influence contemporary society. This research paper is based on the historical research methodology of social sciences.

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KEYWORDS

• Indian Art • Iconography • Avatars of Vishnu • Mythology • Ancient Indian Literature • Museum • Archaeology

INTRODUCTION

The Rani Mahal Museum is situated in the middle of Jhansi district of Uttar Pradesh and near the Jhansi Fort. This museum is about 3.5 km from Jhansi Railway Station and about 4 km from Jhansi Bus Stand, which makes it easily accessible. The palace of Maharani Lakshmi Bai, one of the greatest warrior women of India, has been converted into a museum over time. This museum comes under the Archaeological Survey of India and at present the office of the Jhansi Division of the department is located in this museum palace. Many Sculptures related to Hindu, Buddhist, Jain religions and folk art are stored in this museum palace. The author's research paper is focused on the Sculptures of Vishnu's Vamana Avatar (Figure 1-4) in the said museum. The aim of the research paper is to relate the mentioned Sculptures to the mythological and cultural significance of Krishna's Avatars and also to examine the story, symbolism and cultural expressions related to this incident. The literal meaning of Pratima is replica. Reply means similar figure. The word Pratima has been used in ancient India since the Vedic era. In the Rigveda, the word Pratima has been used in relation to the form of Yagya.¹ The word Archaa is also used for Pratima in the Rigveda.

Patanjali has also used the word Archaa for Pratima.² Sculpture is a form of art which is three dimensional. The roots of Indian sculpture and crafts are very deep, which have contained the true form of Indian civilization and culture since the beginning. The subject matter of Indian sculpture has always been the immaterial human form, which has been used in almost all religions to explore the truth. The history of Indian sculpture is very ancient. There is clear evidence of sculpture worship in the epic and Brahmanical literature.³ After the Mauryan period, the tradition of sculpture creation continued uninterrupted during the reign of Shunga and Kushan rulers. This tradition of sculpture creation reached its pinnacle during the Gupta period. It is noteworthy that during the Gupta period, regional characteristics also start getting reflected in sculpture and architecture and

the uniformity prevalent in the classical art system also starts disappearing and various provincial styles gradually get incorporated in different forms. After the fall of the Gupta rulers, sculpture was again encouraged under the patronage of the Chandela rulers ruling this region and art got incorporated with the values of public welfare, appreciation of values and religion.

Vamana Avatar

The antiquity of Vamana, the fifth Avatar of Vishnu, goes back to the Vedic period. Because the entire story of this Avatar is based on the title of Aditya, Vishnu's Trivikram.⁴ In the Rigveda, there is a description of three pada vichramana of Vishnu. According to Shatapath Brahman, once the demons conquered the earth and started dividing it. With Vishnu as their leader, the gods also started demanding a part of the earth. But the demons agreed to give them only that much land on which Vishnu could sleep. Then the gods, along with Vishnu, performed a yagya and took over the entire earth.⁵ This entire story has been elaborated in the Puranas and other scriptures. And to make it impressive, it includes the grandson of Prahlad and son of Virochana, Bali Vaman Brahmachari, the Guru of Vamana demons, Shukra and others. The story of this Avatar has been told in the Puranas in such a way that King Bali dethroned Indra with his might. Indra's mother Aditi prayed to Vishnu, as a result Vishnu reached Bali's yagna in the form of a Vaman and asked for alms of three steps of land. When Bali gave the alms, Vaman took the form of a giant and with the first step he covered the earth, with the second step he covered the space and with the third step he placed it on Bali's head, with which he went to the netherworld and Indra was re-established. It is worth mentioning here that the Vedic three steps make an important contribution in this developed story, because Vaman had asked for only that much land from Bali which he could measure in three steps.

Making of Vamana Avatar Sculpture

There are two types of Sculptures of Vamana Avatar:

1. Vamana Sculpture
2. The giant form Trivikram Sculpture measuring three steps

Vamana Sculpture

According to Vishnudharmottarapurana,⁶ Lord Vamana should be made with small limbs and a fat body, i.e. Vamana like. His body should be dark like Durva grass and he should be wearing black Ajinopavit. He should be holding a stick and ready to study. In Agnipuran⁷, Vaman's Sculpture is described as holding an umbrella and a stick. In contrast to this North Indian description, the South Indian Vaikhanas Agama⁸ mentions that Vaman should be made in the form of a celibate boy, with a crest on his head and wearing a loincloth, girdle, black Ajinopavit and holding a book. He should have two arms holding an umbrella and a stick. Shilparatna⁹ mentions that these hands have an umbrella and a water pot.

Trivikrama Sculpture

According to Vishnudharmottar¹⁰ Puran, the complexion of Trivikrama should be like that of a water-filled cloud. He should have a staff, noose, conch, chakra, mace and lotus in his hands, which should not be depicted as Ayudha-purushas but in natural form. He should have (only) one upward face with dilated eyes. According to 'Shilpa Ratna', the left foot of the Trivikrama Sculpture should be placed on the earth and the right foot should be spread upwards to measure the entire sky. A detailed description of the Trivikrama Sculpture is found in Vaikhanas Agama¹¹. According to this Agama, the Sculpture should be made with four arms or eight arms. If it is four arms, then it should have a conch and a chakra in two hands and one right hand should be in Abhaya or Varada Mudra and one left hand should be spread upwards. If the Sculpture is octagonal, then it should have chakra, conch, mace, sharanga and plough in five hands and the remaining three hands should be as before.

Examples of Vamana Avatar Sculptures

The making of Sculptures of Vamana Avatar started from the Gupta period. A Vamana Sculpture of the Gupta period is preserved in the Prayag Museum, in which the deity is wearing Yagyopaveet and deerskin. A Sculpture of Vamana Avatar It has been found from the Dash Avatara temple of Devgarh, in

which Vishnu is situated in the middle of a snake coil. A similar Sculpture has been found from the Udayagiri cave of Bhubaneswar. A Sculpture of Vaman is preserved in the Calcutta Museum¹², in which Vaman is holding an umbrella, a rod and a water pot. His form is like that of a brahmachari. He is shown asking for the earth from Bali. There are two Gupta period Trivikrama Sculptures¹³ in the Mathura Art Museum, in which the right foot of the deity is on the ground and the left is raised upto the shoulder. A Trivikrama Sculpture of the 7th century Pallava period has been made in Mahabalipuram. An eight-armed Sculpture of Trivikrama has been found in Badami. Many Sculptures of Vamana Avatar have been found from Khajuraho. There is a temple of Vamana Avatar (Vaman temple) in Khajuraho, in which a huge Vamana Sculpture is installed. In this, the deity is shown standing in the form of Vamana with small limbs and fat body. He has curly hair on his head and he is wearing necklace, graveyak, earrings, Kaustubhmani, cashew, Yajnopaveet, girdle, anklets and forest garland. Unfortunately, all his four arms are broken. In another Sculpture of Khajuraho, the depiction of Vamana is as before, but his head-turning is especially worth seeing. In this Sculpture All the four hands of Trivikram are also broken. An independent Sculpture of Trivikram has also been found from Khajuraho which is in a broken state. In this, the right foot of Trivikram is shown resting on the earth and the left foot spread upwards is broken. He is decorated with ornaments like necklace, graveyak, cashew, girdle, anklets, garland etc. Unfortunately, all his four hands are broken. Below the spread foot upwards, there is a Vamana figure holding an umbrella, whose head and one hand are broken. In front of this Vamana, there is a depiction of Bali with his wife and followers, on one side of Trivikram, Chakra Purush and on the other, Shankh-Purush is standing. Trivikram's head is broken but the beautiful Shishrachakra is safe behind. A Sculpture of Trivikram has been found from a place called Rajim in Raipur district of Madhya Pradesh.¹⁴

Vamana Sculptures preserved in Rani Mahal Museum of Jhansi district of Uttar Pradesh

This museum has many Sculptures of Krishna in his Vamana Avatar out of which only 4 Sculptures have been included in this research paper which are in the best condition among

all the Sculptures. All these Sculptures have come from a village named Chandpur in Lalitpur district of Uttar Pradesh. All these Sculptures have been accepted by the museum as belonging to the Chandela period. In the article these Sculptures have been named as Sculpture No. 1 to 4 respectively.

Sculpture No. 1

The Reference Number of this Sculpture is GM-RMM-UP-765004. This Sculpture of Vamana Avatar of Vishnu is one of the best Sculptures. This is a four-armed Sculpture of Vamana in Standing Posture (Sthanaka Mudra) which is made of grey sandstone, its size is 98x56x22 (length x width x thickness) cm. This sculpture was found from a village named Chandpur in Lalitpur district of Uttar Pradesh. Vamana has a bunch of curly hair on his head like Buddha. The Sculpture is adorned with Ajinopavit and various types of ornaments. Three hands of this Four-armed Vamana Sculpture have been destroyed, only the upper left hand is safe. Some part of the upper right hand is safe, in which there is a decorated mace (Gada) on the top, which shows that Vamana must have been holding a mace in one hand. He is holding a chakra in his left upper hand. Vidyadhara's and Malayadhara's have been depicted showering flowers on Vamana on the top, which has further increased the beauty of the Sculpture. Many male and Female attendants have also been depicted on the bottom. Figures of Shardul, Gaj etc. have also been depicted on both sides. This Sculptures have been accepted by the museum as belonging to the Chandela period.

Sculpture No. 2

The Reference Number of this Sculpture is GM-RMM-UP-765031. This is the best Sculpture of Vamana Avatar of Vishnu which has been made between two decorated pillars. This is a four-armed Sculpture of Vamana in Standing Posture (Sthanaka Mudra) which is made of grey sandstone, its size is 58x53x20 (length x width x thickness) cm. This sculpture was found from a village named Chandpur in Lalitpur district of Uttar Pradesh. Vamana has a bunch of curly hair on his head like Buddha. Vamana is adorned with Ajinopavit and various types of ornaments. All the four hands of this Sculpture of four-armed Vamana are in a safe state. The upper right hand is holding a decorated mace (Gada) and the lower right

hand is unclear, possibly he was holding a lotus. The upper left hand is holding a chakra and the lower left hand is holding a conch. Figures of attendants are also inscribed on both sides of the pillars. The Sculptures have been accepted by the museum as belonging to the Chandela period.

Sculpture No. 3

The Reference Number of this Sculpture is GM-RMM-UP-765021. This is the Sculpture of Vishnu's Vamana Avatar, which has been made between two decorated pillars. This is a four-armed Sculpture of Vamana in Standing Posture (Sthanaka Mudra) which is made of grey sandstone, its size is 65x68x20 (length x width x thickness) cm. This sculpture was found from a village named Chandpur in Lalitpur district of Uttar Pradesh. Vamana's head has been destroyed. He is wearing Ajinopavit. Two hands of this Sculpture of four-armed Vamana have been destroyed, only the right hand is safe. The upper right hand is holding a conch and the lower right hand is unclear. Many attendants and attendants have also been depicted on the lower side. An elephant has also been depicted on the outer right side of the pillar and the figure on the outer left side of the pillar is unclear. This Sculptures have been accepted by the museum as belonging to the Chandela period.

Sculpture No. 4

The Reference Number of this Sculpture is GM-RMM-UP-764975. This Sculpture of Vamana Avatar has been made between two decorated pillars. This is a two-armed Sculpture of Vamana sitting in Lalitasana posture (Lalitasana Mudra) which is made of grey sandstone, and its size is 51x57x20 (length x width x thickness) cm. This sculpture was found from a village named Chandpur in Lalitpur district of Uttar Pradesh. Vamana's hair is curly like Buddha's. Vamana is adorned with various types of ornaments. Both the hands of this two-armed Vamana Sculpture are safe. The right hand is in Abhaya Mudra and the left hand is holding an umbrella. The Sculptures have been accepted by the museum as belonging to the Chandela period.

CONCLUSION

This iconographic study of the Vamana sculpture has provided valuable insights into

its significance as a socio-cultural heritage artifact. Through a detailed analysis of its iconographic, artistic and cultural context, this research has demonstrated the intricate connections between mythology, art, and society. The above Sculpture has been studied on the basis of iconographic features described in ancient Indian literature. On the basis of the above details, it can be said that the Sculptures of Krishna's Avatars were in vogue in the entire Bundelkhand including the nearby areas of Jhansi, whose manufacture continued from the beginning to the Middle Ages. Among the Krishna Avatars, Sculptures of Vamana Avatar has been found in large numbers, on the basis of which it can be easily said that the Sculptures of Vamana Avatar had special importance. The manufacture of such Sculptures started from the first century CE itself. By the time of the Gupta period, the importance of the Sculptures of Vamana Avatar had increased a lot. In the early medieval period, Central India can also be called the main center of Vaishnavism. As a result, the Sculptures of Krishna Avatar was made the most during this period. The Sculptures of Vamana Avatar in the museum are stored in both seated and stationary postures. These Sculptures have been made according to the iconographic texts. The expression of love is visible on the face of Vamana. These Sculptures through their expressions, face, hand and foot postures and postures of various parts of the body structure reveal meaningful expressions of spirituality

as well as worldliness. An attempt has been made to show the vastness and grandeur of divinity in the Sculptures, which are capable of presenting a unique aspect of Indian culture. Vamana is depicted wearing Ajinopavit and at some places holding an umbrella and a stick. All these Vamana Sculptures belong to the Chandela period. Thus, it can be said that these Sculptures displayed in Rani Mahal Museum, Jhansi are made in full compliance with the characteristics described in the Shilpa texts. Incorporation of stylistic features is also visible in these Sculptures. In fact, in these Vamana Sculptures, along with religion, art, philosophy and spirituality, one also experiences the sense of worldly beauty. The Vamana sculpture emerges as a powerful symbol of cultural identity, reflecting and shaping the values and beliefs of the society it originated from. This study underscores the importance of preserving and promoting our cultural heritage, as it continues to influence contemporary society. By examining the iconography of the Vamana sculpture, we gain a deeper understanding of the historical and cultural narratives that shape our collective identity. Vaishnavite Sculptures in Uttar Pradesh are characterised by intricate carvings, dynamic postures and emotional expressions, which also provide valuable information about the religious, social and cultural practices of the region. It is imperative to conserve these Sculptures so that we can preserve our cultural heritage for future generations. The



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3:



Figure 4:

study reveals a distinctive Uttar Pradesh style, characterised by intricate carvings, dynamic postures and emotional expressions.

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