

## Caturvīṁśatimūrtis of Viṣṇu and their Śaktis

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As the preserver of the universe Viṣṇu has emerged as the most influential member of the Brahmanical triad. Even when only six hymns have been allotted to him in the *R̥gveda*, he has emerged as the central figure of the powerful Brahmanical cult of the *Vaiṣṇavas*.

The iconography of Viṣṇu has been dealt with meticulous abundance by pioneer scholars such as T.A. Gopinath Rao (1968) and J.N. Banerjea (1974). Recent works relating to either North Indian or South Indian Vaiṣṇava iconography have further enriched our knowledge of ancient literature centred on Viṣṇu and of ancient monuments devoted to him. The present article intends to focus on a detailed treatment of the *caturvīṁśatimūrtis* of Viṣṇu along with their respective *śaktis*. Ancient Sanskrit works have provided us with a list of *śaktis* related to each of the twenty-four forms of Viṣṇu. However, in the absence of iconographic depictions of these forms, they seem to have been somewhat ignored by scholars, even while dealing with the *caturvīṁśatimūrtis* of Viṣṇu. Inability to clearly distinguish between a consort and a *śakti* figure may also have caused some confusion.

The *caturvīṁśatimūrtis* (twenty-four forms) of Viṣṇu, like Keśava, Nārāyaṇa, Mādhava, etc. are enlisted in various texts such as *Agni*, *Padma* and *Skanda Purāṇas*, *Isānaśivagurudevapaddhati*, *Vṛddhaharitasmyti*, etc. The respective *śaktis* of these forms of Viṣṇu though referred to in some of the available texts have not been given their due so far while writing on the iconography of Viṣṇu.

The present article, therefore aims at bringing to light one of the unnoticed dimensions of Viṣṇu's iconography, that is the *śaktis* (and not consorts) of Viṣṇu. It will not be out of place here to discuss the difference between a consort and a *śakti* to avoid any confusion. Consort can be regarded as *śakti* but not *vice-versa*. It can be presumed that, exceptions apart, no god has more than one spouse, the other female figure if shown along with the deity is his *śakti*. For instance, when Brahmā is depicted flanked by two female deities, one of these is his spouse Sāvitrī and the other one is Gāyatrī, his *śakti*. Since he has propounded the Gāyatrī hymn wherein lies his strength, thus Gāyatrī became his *śakti*. Similarly, Viṣṇu has Lakṣmī as his wife and Bhūdevī as his *śakti* or strength. Kārttikeya is shown some times in the

company of two female deities Mahāvallī and Devasenā. In this case, the earlier one is his spouse while the latter one his *śakti*, for he is the chief of divine army. If the presence of two female figures with a male deity is not to be understood as a consort-*śakti* pair, then it can lead to a lot of confusion for how would we account for the association of same female deity when shown in the company of more than one god? For example, Sarasvatī - the goddess of learning - is very often seen along with Brahmadeva, Gaṇeśa and Viṣṇu as Saṅkarṣaṇa<sup>1</sup>, all three gods being related to learning. In such a situation one has to understand Sarasvatī as a *śakti* and not as a spouse. To support this presumption another example can be cited. The names of *saptamātṛkās* such as Brāhmī, Māheśvarī, Kaumārī and Vaiṣṇavī are given separately from the names of spouses like Sāvitrī, Pārvatī, Lakṣmī, etc. Moreover, we know from the *Purāṇic* story that the *mātṛkās* as *śaktis* were presented to Lord Śiva by the respective gods to serve in the fight against the elephant demon Gajāsura. Once it is clear that the *śaktis* are different than the consorts, our thesis discussed in the following pages would become acceptable.

The texts such as the *Isānaśivagurudevapaddhati*<sup>2</sup> and the *Vṛddhaharitasmṛti* (*śloka* 172)<sup>3</sup> provide lists of *caturvīṃśatimūrtis* of Viṣṇu along with the names of their *śaktis*. The *Nāradapañcarātrāgama* gives names of fourteen *śaktis* only.<sup>4</sup> However, it should be noted that the names in these lists do not tally with each other. The list provided by Pratapaditya Pal (*Vaiṣṇava Iconography in Nepal Appendix*, 1985, p.iv) is as below:

Keśava	Kīrti	Nārāyaṇa	Kānti
Mādhava	Tuṣṭi	Govinda	Puṣṭi
Viṣṇu	Dhṛti	Madhusūdana	Śānti
Trivikrama	Kriyā	Vāmana	Dayā
Śrīdhara	Medhā	Hṛṣikeśa	Harṣā
Padmanābha	Śraddhā	Dāmodara	Lajjā
Vāsudeva	Lakṣmī	Saṅkarṣaṇa	Sarasvatī
Pradyumna	Prīti	Aniruddha	Rati
Puruṣottama	Vasudhā	Adhokṣaja	Trayī
Narasimha	Vidyut	Acyuta	Sugandhā
Janārdana	Umā	Upendra	Vidyā
Hari	Śuddhi	Śrīkrṣṇa	Buddhi

While surveying the temples in the Marathwada region of Maharashtra, the author came across a temple of Lakṣmī at Anwa in Aurangabad district. This was described as a temple of Śiva by Furgusson (1910, 56, 57)<sup>5</sup>, who calls it a gem in temple architecture and he was followed by many other scholars as usual. Prima facie, they

were not totally wrong as it has a *śivaliṅga* in its *garbhagrha*. In earlier days and even now scholars very rarely give importance to the images carved on various parts of temple while studying its architecture and nature. It is observed that the *mandovara* of this temple is studded with sculptures, mostly of female deities,<sup>6</sup> who are shown holding emblems like lotus, conch, disc and mace in different order differentiating one deity from the other. The disposition of the emblems suggests similarity with those held by Keśava, Nārāyaṇa, Mādhava, etc. They are therefore obviously related to these forms of Viṣṇu. The difference between any two of these has to be made out by the way in which the emblems are found distributed among their four hands.<sup>7</sup> The *Agnipurāṇa* states "*etas tumurttayo jñeya dakṣiṇādhaḥ kramāt.....*".<sup>8</sup> It further states (48.1), "*oṃ rupaḥ keśavaḥ padmaśaṅkhacakraḥ gadādharaḥ/ nārāyaṇaḥ śaṅkha padmagadācakri pradakṣiṇam*". The emblems are thus to be placed clockwise, starting from the lower right hand and ending with the lower left hand. In the temple referred to above a female deity who holds the attributes *padma*, *śaṅkha*, *cakra* and *gadā* in this fashion has to be taken as the *śakti* of Keśava. On the other hand, one who holds *śaṅkha*, *padma*, *gadā* and *cakra* clockwise is to be presumed as Nārāyaṇa's *śakti*. As per the above list, the earlier one is then Kīrti and the latter one Kānti. Here comes the difficult and hard task of justifying the match of these two respectively, to be followed by other pairs given in the above list. And for this we have to seek either significance or implied meaning of these names. Here are some examples<sup>9</sup>.



Keśava and Kīrti

### 1. Keśava and Kīrti

Viṣṇu is named as Keśava when he killed the dreadful demon Keśin. Keśava also means 'the one whose rays of fame spread all over'. Kīrti means to spread or to expand, thus the one who helps in spreading Keśava's fame is Kīrti, his śakti.

### 2. Nārāyaṇa and Kānti

Nārāyaṇa means the one who lives in the waters and also the one whose intimate union is longed for by all creatures. Kānti means (along with other meanings) 'desire or wish'. All creatures desire to become one with Him as Nārāyaṇa.



Nārāyaṇa and Kānti

### 3. Mādhava and Tuṣṭi

Viṣṇu as Mādhava kills the demon Madhu, Ma i.e. Tuṣṭi means 'satisfaction, contentment, happiness'. By killing the demon and by giving affluence, Mādhava brings happiness and makes creatures contented.

### 4. Govinda and Puṣṭi

Govinda means 'master or regulator of organs' and also 'master of speech'. Puṣṭi means 'plenty, enrichment and growth'. Govinda controls the body-organs, enriches speech and helps growth of cattle. Puṣṭi manifests these qualities of Govinda.



Mādhava and Tuṣṭi



Govinda and Puṣṭi



Vamana and Daya

### 5. Viṣṇu and Dhṛti

Viṣṇu is omnipresent, omniscient, all pervading, and ever growing while Dhṛti means 'to patronize, to support and to sustain'. Obviously, Dhṛti is that *śakti* of Viṣṇu which upholds his omniscience and omnipresence.

### 6. Madhusūdana and Śānti

By killing the demon Madhu, Madhusūdana establishes quietitude and hence the quality of Madhusūdana of creating quietitude is his *śakti* named Śānti.

### 7. Trivikrama and Kriyā

Trivikrama covers the entire universe in three strides suggesting his unique action. In his powerful deed lies his *śakti*. Kriyā denotes this.

### 8. Vāmana and Dayā

Vāmana is seemingly a dwarf. As per the Purāṇic description<sup>6</sup> he assumes smallness for himself to ward off the calamity faced by gods because of compassion for them. This compassion (*dayā*) is his *śakti* (*yatnād api parikleśam hartum ya hr̥di jayate/ icchā bhūmi suraśreṣṭha sa dayā parikirtitā*).

### 9. Śrīdhara and Medhā

Śrīdhara means the one who upholds Lakṣmī and who is splendid and Medhā means intelligence. This power helps him to support Lakṣmī and to become glorious.

### 10. Hṛṣikeśa and Harṣā

Hṛṣikeśa is supposed to be the master of *hr̥ṣikas* (organs). He makes universe blossom with his bright rays. Harṣā is his *śakti* which satisfies them and brings happiness to them.

### 11. Padmanābha and Śraddhā

Padmanābha is one who possesses the navel like lotus. Viṣṇu as Padmanābha created lord Brhamā from his own navel, so the origin of the world is accepted from the navel



Śrīdhara and Medhā

of lord Viṣṇu. In the *śruti*, '*ekoham bahusyām*', wish of the lord to create universe is reflected. This wish is indicated through Śraddhā - śakti of Padmanābha. Śrad+dhā is the division of the word Śraddhā. Śrat means desire and root dhā denotes to hold, to create. So Śraddhā in the form of śakti of Padmanābha helps to create the world.

## 12. Dāmodara and Lajjā

Dāmodara has two meanings: (1) he bears entire universe within himself and (2) he is the one whose stomach is encircled with a rope. The *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* tells as to how Lord Kṛṣṇa, as a punishment for stealing butter, was tied with a rope. This brought shame on the part of Kṛṣṇa. Hence Lajjā, who makes the guilty ashamed, is a śakti. The root *lasj* means to envelop. Lajjā enables Dāmodara to envelop entire universe in his stomach. Hence efficacy of Dāmodara of enveloping is his śakti.

## 13. Saṅkarṣaṇa and Sarasvatī

Being himself one of the *caturvyūha*, Saṅkarṣaṇa is regarded as the embodiment of *jñāna* and *bala*. Sarasvatī is the goddess of learning and thus she is śakti of Saṅkarṣaṇa. Moreover, Saṅkarṣaṇa attracts *jñāna*, *vāṇī* and *pratibhā*; and Sarasvatī is the goddess of all these, thus she is his śakti.

## 14. Vāsudeva and Lakṣmī

Vasu means *devatā*, waters and grain. Vāsudeva is the resort of all creatures and he resides in all creatures. Lakṣmī means effulgence, wealth, etc. She can rightly be taken as śakti of Vāsudeva for Vasu indicates all the above meanings.

## 15. Pradyumna and Prīti

Pradyumna means one who possesses beautiful form like gold or one who possesses the highest prosperity. Prīti denotes to be satisfied or to feel affection. Because of his qualities like exquisiteness, splendour, prosperity, he causes the world to feel affection for himself with the help of his śakti - Prīti.

## 16. Aniruddha and Rati

Aniruddha is one of the four forms of Hari. Śaṅkarācārya explains the word Aniruddha as '*na kenapi prādurbhāveṣu niruddha iti aniruddhaḥ*' - Aniruddha is one who cannot be stopped from any new creation. Aniruddha possesses enormous power of creation. Rati being śakti of Aniruddha helps him to his work of creation.

## 17. Puruṣottama and Vasudhā

Puruṣottama is the greatest among all the *puruṣas*. He is superior to any *kṣara* or *akṣara*. Vasudhā denotes the meaning of holding *vasu* (wealth, prosperity), so Vasudhā means earth. The one who dwells in the house of body, that soul is this Puruṣottama. Just as soul upholds the world which includes beings and non-



beings, similarly, earth upholds all the beings and non-beings. Therefore Vasudhā is described as the *śakti* of Puruṣottama.

### 18. Adhokṣaja and Trayī

*adhobhūte hyakṣagaṇe pratyagrūpapravāhite/  
jāyate tasya vai dhyānam tenādhokṣaja ucyate//*

He looked down and knowledge gets flowed, therefore he is Adhokṣaja. Again Adhokṣaja state is the highest physical state in the *samādhī*. This physical state is seen while Viṣṇu enjoys *yoganidrā*. Trayī means *vedatrayī*, so ultimately knowledge. This Trayī is the *śakti* of Adhokṣaja in his work of flowing the knowledge in the world.

### 19. Narasimha and Vidyutā

Narasimha means the man having the head of *simha*. He is greatest human being. Vidyutā is his *śakti*. *Viśeṣeṇa dyotate iti ...* meaning is that which illuminates distinctly. By darkening the lustre of others, Vidyutā helps Narasimha to establish his lustre in the world.

### 20. Acyuta and Sugandhā

Acyuta means steady. One can connect the steadiness with the earth as she provides the steadiness to living-nonliving beings. *Gandha* is a basic characteristic of the earth and so Sugandhā is the *śakti* of Acyuta. Or as according to the *Vaikhānasāgama*, Viṣṇu's five-fold manifestation is equated with another philosophic presentation - Viṣṇu is *anna*, *puruṣa* is *prāṇa*, *satya* is *manas* (mind), *acyuta* is *vijñāna* (wisdom) and *aniruddha* is *ānanda*. So if Acyuta is wisdom, its fragrance, i.e. *sugandha* is bound to spread in ambience. Thus, Sugandhā is to be taken as *śakti* of Acyuta (*Vaikhānasāgama*, 3.179-181a).

### 21. Janārdana and Umā

Janārdana is one who destroys sorrows of people. Umā means who can measure *paramātmā*, the ultimate authority who makes well of all. Hence, Umā is *śakti* of Janārdana helping to destroy the sorrows of people.

### 22. Upendra and Vidyā

Viṣṇu in the form of Upendra works as the creator of the universe. So Vidyā (knowledge) is *śakti* in his work of creation.

### 23. Hari and Śuddhi

Hari destroys the worldly ocean. Word Śuddhi is derived from the root *śuddh* which means to purify. Without purifying one's mind one cannot go at par of worldly ocean; so Śuddhi is *śakti* of Hari.



Janārdana and Umā

#### 24. Śrīkr̥ṣṇa and Buddhi/Bhakti

Viṣṇu as being Kṛṣṇa attracts all the individuals towards him. There is a difference in the name of *śakti* of Kṛṣṇa amongst scholars. According to some, Buddhi is *śakti* of Kṛṣṇa and according to some Bhakti. If Buddhi is considered as *śakti* of Kṛṣṇa, it is *niścayātmika* Buddhi who helps Kṛṣṇa for one pointed attraction of individuals towards Kṛṣṇa. Bhakti is derived from word *bhaj*. It means to resort, to engage in. If Bhakti is considered as *śakti* of Kṛṣṇa, she helps Kṛṣṇa to provide resort to the devotees.

The purpose of this article is to highlight another dimension of the iconography of Viṣṇu.

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## Endnotes

1. He is held as the manifestation of *jñāna* and according to the *Mahābhārata* (IV.66.40) he was the expounder of the doctrine of *Satvata* (*satvata-vidhi*).
2. Ganapati T. Sastri, (Ed.) Trivendrum Sanskrit Series, *Śloka* 172, 1920-25, Trivendrum.
3. V.G. Apte, (Ed.) *Vṛddhāharitasmṛti in Smṛtinām Samuccayaḥ*, Anandashram Sanskrit Series, 48, pp.236-356, 1905, Pune.
4. K.M. Banerjea, (Ed.) *Pancharata, Narada, Bibliotheca Indica*, 865, Calcutta (Cf. TAG Rao, 1968, Pt.I, p.233).
5. *History of Indian and Eastern Architecture*.
6. G.B. Deglurkar, *Temple Architecture and Sculpture of Maharashtra*, p.34, 1974, Nagpur.
7. TAG Rao, *Elements of Hindu Iconography*, Vol.I, Part I, pp.227-230, 1968.
8. J.N. Banerjea, *Development of Hindu Iconography*, p.410, 1974.
9. Variant meanings given by Apte (1968) in *Sanskrit-English Dictionary* are followed here, for most of the names of Viṣṇu and his twenty four *śaktis*.