
Image of Dakshinamurthy in the Mural Art of Kerala

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Abstract: *Dakshinamurthy is one of the well admired iconographic incarnations of lord Shiva in the sculptural as well as in the temple murals of Kerala. Lord Shiva is often considered as a great master of music, dance, yoga and other natural sciences. He is shown in a seated position, facing south, imparting the eternal knowledge to the rishis, hence he came to be known as Dakshinamurthy. The Dakshinamurthy form is usually enshrined in the niche of the southern wall of Hindu temple. This form of Shiva is not worshipped as an independent deity, but it is a popular theme in sculptures and paintings. The earliest sculptural representation of Dakshinamurthy is noticed on various rock-cut temples of Kerala, afterwards it is frequently observed in the structural temples from the 15th century CE. Dakshinamurthy is one of the most respected and prominent themes in Kerala paintings. It is always depicted on the southern wall of the srikovill and it symbolizes the aspects of knowledge. This form of lord Śiva appears in Kerala paintings only after 16th century CE onwards. Today there are more than ten temples in Kerala having Dakshinamurthy panel. This paper deals with the iconographic study of Dakshinamurthy in the temple murals of Kerala.*

Keywords: Murals, Kerala, Shiva, Dakshinamurthy, Iconography, Colour, Temples

Introduction

Dakshinamurthy, is one of the well venerated pacific incarnations of lord Shiva, reflecting the aspects of a universal teacher or *guru*. Literally, the word Dakshinamurthy consists of the combination of Dakshina means south and *murthy* means lord, it implies that the deity is facing south. He is the only Hindu deity sitting facing south. However, in Hinduism the god Dakshinamurthy represents the god and bestower of all knowledge conveyed through as facing south. In this form the god is depicted as seated under a banyan tree and amazingly imparting the knowledge to the aged pupils or sages, it obviously generates the distinctive appealing effect of the god. In this form he is always exemplified in an appearance of a youthful *kevalamurti* or single (without accompanying deity or consort). The sculptures as well as the paintings were promoted for the adoration of Dakshinamurthy form of Shiva. Here the god is represented as a heavenly intellectual in appearance and a meditative figure with different iconographic nature.

The iconographic descriptions of Dakshinamurthy aspect of Shiva has been discussed in ancient literature such as *Agamas*, *Silparatna*, *Sutasamhita* and *Dakshinamurthy Upanishad* (Rao 1914 277). Depending on this iconographic nature the sculptures of Dakshinamurthy demonstrate four different forms like, *Yogadakhinamurthy*, *Jnanadakhinamurthy*, *Vyakhyanadakhinamurthy* and *Veenadharadakhinamurthy* (Sastry 2003 26).

Dakshinamurthy in Kerala

At the initial stage, the description of Dakshinamurthy in Kerala is in the form of stone sculptures, which can be noticed from various rock-cut temples in Kerala, like Vizhinjam rock-cut Temple in Thiruvananthapuram district (Figure 1a) and Irunilamkodu rock-cut Temple in Thrissur district, belonging to 8th-9th centuries CE. From 15th century CE onwards, it is frequently observed in the structural temples of Kerala.

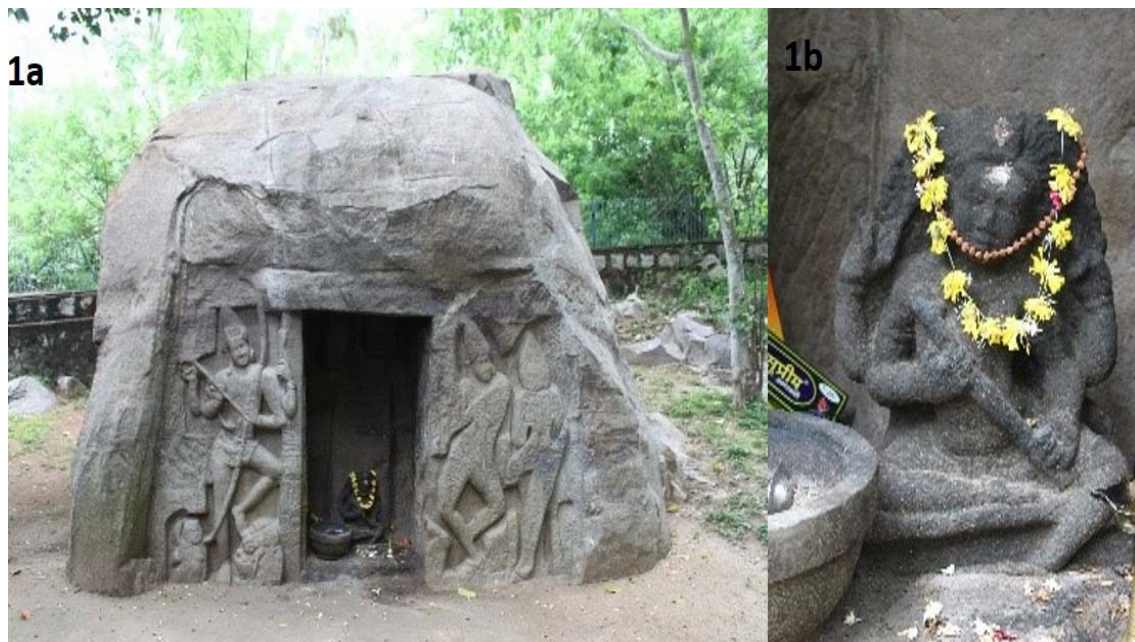


Figure 1: a - Vizhinjam Rock-cut Temple, b – Dakshinamurthy (Courtesy: Abhayan)

In Kerala, the idol of the Dakshinamurthy is either carved as a principal deity or as a relief. Only a few temples in Kerala have adopted Dakshinamurthy as the principal deity, like Vizhinjan rock-cut Temple in Trivandrum district, Vellave near Thaliparambu in Kannur district, and Panaickal Sree Dakshinamurthy Temple at Kadakkarappally, Cherthala Taluk in Alappuzha District.

Among these, the Dakshinamurthy from Vizhinjam is considered as one of the earliest Dakshinamurthy sculptures in Kerala (Kramarisch 1999 60) (Figure 1b). Here the image of Dakshinamurthy is placed inside the sanctum sanctorum. The image is shown as seated with four hands. The upper right hand holding *mriga* and left-hand holding *tanka* and the two lower hands carries a veena like instrument. So, this image is called as *veenadharadakhinamurthy*.

The relief sculpture is usually observed on the southern side of the circumambulatory passage around the Sanctum Sanctorum of every Shiva Temple of Kerala (Ettumanoor Mahadeva Temple and Vaikom Mahadeva Temple in Kottayam district, Kazhakootom Mahadeva Temple in Trivandrum district). Apart from these, one Dakshinamurthy image is also noticed on the southern side of the *sopana* of Avanavancherry Indalayyappan Temple in Thiruvananthapuram district, this image looks like a saint, and it is called *Lakuti Dakshinamurthy* (Figure 2), but this type of image is very rarely and occasionally found in the temples of Kerala (Sanitha 2018: 53).



Figure 2: Lakuti Dakshinamurthy (Sanitha 2018)

Dakshinamurthy in Kerala Murals

The mural artists of Kerala give a supreme prominence to the depiction of Dakshinamurthy figure. Usually this theme is depicted on the southern walls of the *srikovil*. The Dakshinamurthy form of Shiva appears in Kerala paintings only after 16th CE onwards. After surveying the thirty seven temples in Kerala, which were embellished with murals, about fifteen temples have the paintings of Dakshinamurthy; they are Thodeekalam Shiva Temple in Kannur district, Irringannur Shiva Temple, Chendamangalam Shiva Temple, Lokanar *kāvu* Bhagavathy Temple, Kizhur Shiva Temple and Thali Mahadeva Temple in Kozhikodu district, Kottakkal Venkittathevar Temple in Malappuram district, Peruvanam Mahadeva Temple, Pallimamana Shiva Temple, Chemmanthatta Mahadeva Temple and Vadakkumnathan Temple in Thrissur

district, Pandavom Sastha Temple, Thali Mahadeva Temple and Thrikodithanam Mahavishnu Temple in Kottayam district and Panayannar kavu Devi Temple in Pathanamthitta district.

In Kerala murals, the image of Dakshinamurthy is depicted as seated on a pedestal or raised platform placed under a *peepal* tree (*Ficus religiosa*). His right leg is folded while the left leg is kept bent in *utkutasana*, resembles *sukasana* posture. Left leg and the body are bound together by a snake which looks like a *yogapatta* (Figure 3) (Chemmenthitta Mahadeva Temple). But in some murals, he is shown with his left leg folded while the right leg is hanging down, resembling a *lalithasana* posture (Figure 4) (Lokanarkavu Bhagavathy Temple).



**Figure 3: Dakshinamurthy,
Chemmenthitta Mahadeva Temple**



**Figure 4: Dakshinamurthy,
Lokanarkavu Bhagavathy Temple**

He wears *jata-mkauta* that is adorned with flowers, wild plants, crescent and Ganga (Figure 5) (Thrikkodithanam Mahavishnu Temple). But in some paintings the *jata* is tied up as a knot on the crown of his head decorated with crescent, Ganga and serpent (Figure 6) (Lokanarkavu Bhagavathy Temple).

He has four hands, holding *tanka* in the upper right hand and *mriga* in the left hand, the lower right hand is in *Jnana mudra* and left-hand rest on the left knee. The *jnana mudra* represents God, denoted by the thumb, and man, denoted by the index finger. The other three fingers stand for the three congenital impurities of man like arrogance, illusion and bad deeds of the past births. Which symbolically represents the man detaches himself from these impurities, he reaches God. If the hand is placed inwards, it represents that knowledge comes from within (Figure 3). When the hand facing the viewer, it means imparting knowledge (Figure 4).



**Figure 5: Dakshinamurthy Wearing
*Jata-makuta***



**Figure 6: Dakshinamurthy, *Jaṭa* Tied up
as Knot on the Crown**

The complexion of Dakshinamurthy in mural paintings are white like bright as the jasmine flower or the moon, clear crystal or white as a milk. It shows his *sattva* character along with pure, blissful and bright nature (Figure 7) (Pallimamana Shiva Temple). Along with this white complexion in some cases the upper arm and below the knee to foot of the god is demarcated by using red colour. This red colour in mural paintings convey the character of *rajo guna*. Though these images show Dakshinamurthy with predominant *sattvic* character and minimal *rajasik* character (Figure 8) (Thrikkodithanam Mahavishnu Temple) (Sheena 2016 106).



**Figure 7: *Sattva* Character of
Dakshinamurthy**



**Figure 8: *Rajasik* Character of
Dakshinamurthy**

The body is adorned with ornaments, *kundalas* (large circular earrings), *haran* (necklace), *keyura* (armlet), *bhujavalaya* (an ornament worn on shoulders), *bahuvalaya* (armlets worn on upper arms), *kankaṇa* (wrist band), *udarabanda* (belly band), *padasara* (ornaments loosely covering the top of the foot), and *padavalaya* (tight fitting anklets). Along with these ornaments the body is also adorned with *rudraksha*, garlands of wild flowers, flowers above his forehead, the *yajnopavita* (sacred cord), *naga-bandha* armlets and anklets with little bells. The ornaments symbolize his spiritual power, moral virtue and wisdom.

The god is depicted as surrounded by birds, animals or rishis or celestials. The birds are mainly peacock (Figure 8). The *rishis* are depicted as eagerly absorbing the teaching of their *guru*. Their number and names are mentioned in various texts like *Karanagama* mentions four *rishis* (Agasthya, Pulasthya, Viswamitra, and Angora) and *Kamikagama* mentions seven *rishis* (Kaushika, Kashyapa, Bharadwaja, Atri, Gautama and two others). Usually he is shown with a smiling face, slightly opened eye and steady gaze as facing the viewer and imparting the knowledge. The sages are shown with matted hair coiled up (*jata bhara*) wearing *rudraksha mala* with different hand gestures (Figure 7). He wears either both lower and upper garments or lower garment only. The upper garment reaches up to the chest. The lower garment reaches up to the below the knee (Figure 7), sometimes it reaches up to the thigh (Figure 8). The garments on the body are demarcated by using yellow or red colour.



Figure 9: Dakshinamurthy,
Peruvanam Mahadeva Temple



Figure 10: Dakshinamurthy,
Kottakkal Venkittathevar Temple

Discussion and Conclusion

The Dakshinamurthy image in Kerala murals appear only after 16th century CE onwards. Various iconographic forms of deities appear in Kerala mural only after 15th century CE,

due to the second *bhakti* movement of Kerala. After 15th century CE the mural paintings of Kerala were purely iconographic in nature, the artist gives importance to depicting the iconographic theme rather than the natural theme. This reflection is noticed behind the appearance of Dakshinamurthy in Kerala murals. About fifteen Dakshinamurthy themes are noticed on various temples of Kerala, among these, twelve of them are observed on the walls of the Shiva temple. It shows the relationship of the mural theme and the principal deity kept on the sanctum sanctorum. In Shiva Temple the mural artist gives importance to depicting various iconographic themes of Shiva. This notion is purely conveyed here.

One of the most distinctive natures of Dakshinamurthy themes in Kerala mural is the absence of *apasmrapurusha*, the symbolic representation of arrogance or ignorance. Here the god is purely depicted in the form of teacher or a *guru* seated under a tree surrounded by animals or sages or celestials. The mural artist of Kerala gives the reputation as well as a supreme position for the depiction of Dakshinamurthy theme. They purely retain its location (south) and iconographic details within the temple parameters. Subsequent to this the present study shows some indigenous nature of Dakshinamurthy in Kerala paintings.

The biggest advantage of paintings is the precise conveyance of the character of the deity by the application of the colour. The complexion of the Dakshinamurthy in Kerala mural is purely white, it shows the character of *sattva guna*, but in some images depicted with minimal of red or yellow colour, it denotes the character of maximal *sattva guna* and minor *rajo guna*, this distinguishable nature can be recognizable from the paintings. The colour, decorative elements, and the stylistic features are also helpful for identifying the chronological variation of theme. Here the fifteen themes broadly represent three periodical influences.

The first category is noticed on the walls of Peruvanam Mahadeva Temple in Thrissur (Figure 9) and Lokanarkavu Bhagavathy temple in Kozhikode district. Here the god is depicted with minimum jewels and wears only lower garment, the colour of the lower garment is yellow. But about eleven temple murals are belonging to the second category, in this period the body of the god is fully adorned with ornaments wears both lower garment and upper garment and the colour is darker, which shows a shift from yellow to red (Figure 8) (Thrikkodithanam Mahavishnu Temple). Ensuing to this period another variety is noticed on the paintings of Kottakkal Venkittathevar Temple in Malappuram district. Here the body of the god is adorned with usual ornaments and *rudrakshas* (Figure 10). It may indicate the influences of later periodical evidences.

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