
The Image of Vishnu from Chanderi Museum, Madhya Pradesh

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Abstract: The image of Vishnu under study is currently displayed in the Archaeological Museum of Chanderi in the district of Ashoknagar. It is a four-handed sculpture of the deity with the icon identified as a Standing Chaturbhuja image decorated with a Dashavatar Panel, an archetypal form of Vishnu Iconography. The god is generally depicted with his Vahana, Garuda, and on this particular image, Brahma-Saraswati is seen on the upper right side with Shiva-Parvati seen on the upper left side, while all these deities are seen surrounded by attendants as per Hindu iconography. The sculptor or the artist of Chanderi skilfully sculpted this image of Vishnu, and all these artistic activities are considered valuable resources for Chanderi and the entire world.

Keywords: Iconography, Gurjara-Pratihara Art, Dasavatara, Chaturbhuja Vishnu, Sculpture, Chanderi, Madhya Pradesh

Introduction

Presently, Chanderi is a quaint little town in the district of Ashokanagar, Madhya Pradesh. The area is one of the five tehsils which form part of this newly created district. Located between 24°35'N to 24°50'N and 77°55'E to 78°15'E, it is at a distance of 45km from the district headquarters, Ashokanagar (District Hand Book of Ashoknagar 2011). Chanderi, being at a strategic location due to its height, was initially developed by the Gurjara-Pratihāra king Kirti Pal in the 11th Century C.E. It has been invaded and destroyed by Muslim Rulers several times and has been re-constructed each time. The area has now advanced into a historical fort town with many temples, mosques, gardens, and palace structures that can be seen today.

Archaeological Museum, Chanderi

Built-in 1999, the Chanderi Archaeological Museum, under the management of the Archaeological Survey of India, was constructed to preserve the remains of the heritage and history of Chanderi. Many scholars have worked in Chanderi to bring out its cultural heritage.- M. B. Garde, in his report Guide to Chanderi, 1928, gives a general

description of the town and its archaeological sites. Ranbeer Singh Choudhary, 2012, in his work, *Archaeology, Art and Iconography: A Case Study of Early Medieval Chanderi*, describes the history of Chanderi, its art and archaeological evidence while giving brief information about the sculptures in the Chanderi Archaeological Museum. Rakesh Parshvanath Yadav, 2021, in his thesis *A Study of Archaeological Remains of Chanderi Tehsil of District Ashoknagar*, describes the archaeological remains of Chanderi Tehsil.

The beautifully designed museum building is set amidst enchantingly landscaped gardens. The Chanderi Museum consists of 5 galleries: History Gallery, Vaishnava Gallery, Shaiva and Shakta Gallery, Jaina Gallery, and Anandam Gallery. The History Gallery showcases the history and heritage of Chanderi and the surrounding regions right from pre-historic times. The exhibits here include Pre-historic Paintings, Palaeolithic and Neolithic tools, Ornaments, Pottery, and other objects made of Iron and other Metals. The museum has a library that houses around 3000 books that provide more information on the history of this province. This museum also has a collection of ancient sculptures, stone carvings, and remains of the Jain temples found in Chanderi, as well as coins and ornaments. Remains of Jain temples from Thubon and Boodhi Chanderi (Chanderi), dating back to the 10th and 11th century C.E., can be found here, most of which consist of idols of different Tirthankaras.

Most of the sculpture shown in the Chanderi Museum belongs to the Gurjara-Pratihāra period. The sculptures of this era exhibit the 'transitional' stage poignantly placed between the earlier 'classical' and the 'later medieval' styles in the region of Madhyadesa (Mishra 1987). An examination of the Gurjara-Pratihāra sculptures reveals three phases within the art style from a chronological point of view. The sculptures of the first phase, which may broadly be assigned to the eighth century C.E., are closely related to the Gupta tradition and are sophisticated and executed with gliding contours. There is an emphasis on broadness, which is quite pleasant. The sculptures of the second phase, namely those of the ninth century C.E., display a leaning towards medieval traditions. Here, a growing fondness for elaboration and ornamentation may be seen in the sculptures, but the stiffness and harshness of the later work are avoided. These sculptures reached a level of grace which could not be achieved by later examples (Krishna 1989).

The sculptures of the third phase, ascribable to the tenth century C.E., are dull and stale. The richness of ornamentation has become conventionalised, and the images of this phase are devoid of any subtle expression. In general, the sculptures of the Gurjara-Pratihāra period, which are fashioned out of buff sandstone, are characterised by the heaviness of form, elegant postures, Lotus-Petalled Prabhāmandala, expressive facial expressions and less crowding of subordinate figures. The ornamentation of figures is pleasing and light in the early examples, but gradually, it becomes heavy and traditional. These features endow the sculptures with an independent form and style, easily recognisable throughout the kingdom of the Gurjara-Pratihāras. The classical touch in the art of the period is self-evident.

For the present study, the Brahmanical images of gods and goddesses have been broadly divided into two classes- Vaishnava and Saiva deities. In this classification, the images of Devi, Ganesa and other such deities may be included for convenience as some are, according to the *Puranas*, related to either Vishnu or Siva. The earliest references to 'Avataravada' are available in *Satapatha Brahmana* and *Taittiriya Samhita*, wherein Prajapati is referred to have incarnated as Matsya, Kurma and Varaha at different times. The number of incarnations gradually increased and was standardised at ten, though different numbers are indicated in specific texts. *Varaha* and *Agnipurana* contain the stereotyped list of ten incarnations of Vishnu, i.e. (1) Matsya, (2) Kurma, (3) Varaha, (4) Narasimha, (5) Vamana, (6) Parasurama, (7) Rama, (8) Balarama, (9) Buddha and (10) Kalkin (Banerjea 2002).

In the *Brahmanas*, Vishnu is identified with sacrifice, and since sacrifice was the highest form of religious expression, he gained ascendancy and achieved a high status. According to the Mahabharata, Vasudeva is the Supreme Creator and Samkarsana, representing all living beings, is only a form of Vasudeva. From Samkarsana sprang Pradyumna (mind), and from him came forth Aniruddha (self-consciousness). These four forms (*Vyuhas*) are sometimes combined together, and we get *Caturvyuhamurtis* of Vishnu, also called *Vaikuntha Caturmurti*. Later on, the members of *Vyuhas* increased to twenty-four under the Pancaratra impact and the only difference among the twenty-four forms of Vishnu was the order of attributes in their hands (Desai 1973).

It is a notable fact that in the sculptural collection of the Chanderi Museum, other than Jain images, the most significant number of icons are those of Vishnu. Most of them represent the god in a simple manner. In general, where the principal figure of Vishnu is carved in round and the *parivaradevta* are chiselled, the figures of his ten incarnations occupy space on the stele. The personified figures of his emblems, the conch and disc, along with his consort Lakshmi and his mount Garuda and *vidyadharas* hovering in the air, are also shown on either side of the *Prabhamandala*. Sometimes, the Brahmanical triad (Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesa) have been depicted in the portions above. Having mentioned the general appearance of the Vishnu sculptures in the museum, this paper is mainly focused on a single Chaturbhuja Vishnu image (Figure 1a).

This image of Chaturbhuja Vishnu (Measurement -165x90x20cm, Material- Red Sandstone, Provenance - Budhi Chanderi, Time period - Circa 12th Century C.E.) Figure 1a) is in comparatively good condition but shows signs of breakage in a few places. The sculpture depicts Vishnu with four arms standing in a *Sambhanga-pose* on a *Padmasana*. The facial feature consists of an arched eyebrow which connects in the centre, giving it the impression of a bow. It is also noticeable that the right side of the eyebrow is more significant than the left. The *kamalnayana* (eyes) of Vishnu are half opened and half closed, with the nose and upper lip of the image being broken. Vishnu has a broad forehead, long ears and full cheeks. Of the four hands, only one is extant, and the remaining three are broken at the elbow. The extant upper right hand holds the *gada* while the posture of the lower right hand suggests that it probably displayed the

abhaya-mudra. The upper left hand displayed the *chakra*, and the lower one had the lotus, of which only the stalk is extant. The deity is wearing an *Angavastra* and is adorned with *Kirita-mukuta*, *Karna-abushana* which could be *Manikundala* studded with jewels (Sahay 1975), *Hara*, *Vanamala*, *Kankana*, *Keyura*, *Katimekhala*, *Yajnapavita*, *Nupura*, etc. A decorative *Prabhamandala* with a floral design is seen at the back of the head.

On top of the sculpture, there is an *Amalaka*-like *Chhatra*, and at the top of the Vishnu image (*Mulanayaka*) sculpted in the round, there is a panel of figures, with the image in the centre being *Yanaka Vishnu* seated on his *Vahana*, a flying *Garuda* (Figure 1b). *Yanaka Vishnu* holds the *Gada*, *Chakra*, and *Sankha* in his three hands, and the fourth is seen with *Abhayamudra*. *Garuda* has the feet of lord Vishnu in his palms, and he is ornamented with *Mukuta*, *Hara*, *Kankana*, *Vanmala* and *Yajnopavita*.

The ten incarnations (*Dasavatara*) of Visnu are carved on the stele over the head of the *Mulanayaka*. *Matsya*, *Kurma*, *Vamana*, *Varaha*, and *Narasimha* depictions are on the right side, and *Parasurama*, *Rama*, *Balarama*, *Buddha*, and *Kalkin* are on the left. The depiction of *Matsya* and *Kurma* are zoomorphic, and *Narsimha* is theanthropomorphic. A figure of four-armed *Brahma* (Figure 1c) accompanied by his consort *Saraswati* is carved on the stele's right side and shown in the *Alingana* pose. *Brahma* is shown bearded with three faces, holding the *Vedas*, *Gada* and *Akshamala* and the lower left hand is placed on *Saraswati's* left breast. *Brahma* is ornamented with the *Mukuta*, *Keyura* and *Yajnopavita*, while *Saraswati*, seated in *Lalitasana*, is ornamented wearing the *Kundala*, *Hara*, *Valaya*, *Keyura*, *Katimekhla*, and *Saree*. The *Uma-Maheswara* (*Siva-Parvati*) (Figure 1d) depicted on the left are also shown in the *Alingana* pose and seated on the mount *Nandi*. *Siva* is ornamented with the *Jata-mukuta*, *Tatanka-Chaka*, *Keyura* and *Yajnopavita* while holding the *Akshamala*, *Trishula* and *Sarpa* with three of his hands with the lower left hand placed on the left breast of *Uma* who is seated in *Lalitasana* and is ornamented with the *Pushpakundala*, double stringed *Hara*, *Valaya*, *Keyura*, *Katimekhla*, and *Saree*.

This sculpture has the faces of elephants on either side of the stele, and on the top portion of the stele, with the elephant faces, the images of a seated male figure on the left side and a seated female figure on the right are seen. On either side of the *Mulanayaka's* lower half are figures of four attendants highly ornamented with jewellery. The male attendants are decked with *mukuta*, *kundala*, *kankana*, *keyura*, *hara*, *katimekhala*, *vanmala* and *Yajnopavita*. On the other hand, the female attendants are decorated with *kundala*, *kankana*, *keyura*, *hara*, *katimekhala*, and *saree*. The attendant flanking the deity's left leg can be identified as *Cakra-purusa*, who is depicted holding a *Chakra* in his right hand. This *Chakra purusha* standing in *Dvibhanga* pose, is ornamented with a *mukuta*, *kundala*, *kankana*, *keyura*, *hara*, *katimekhala*, *vanmala* and *Yajnopavita*. Five female figures are present below the *Mulanayaka's* feet, with one in the centre and the other two attendants on either side, with the possibility that the seated female figure in the centre could be goddess *Laxmi*. Thus, the entire stele is well executed, exhibiting the calm and quiet nature of the Vaisnavite pantheon. The sculpture may be dated stylistically from the 10th -12th Cent. C.E.



Figure 1(a): Chaturbhuji Vishnu



Figure 1(b): Upper Portion of Image



Figure 1(c): Right Portion of Image



Figure 1(d): Left Portion of Image

Observation

The sculpture is well balanced with Vishnu positioned on the Vertical axis of symmetry. He stands in the centre, and over the head of the deity, there is a *Dashavatara* panel, which is not in chronological order. *Matsya*, *Kurma*, *Vamana*, *Varaha*

and *Narasimha* are found on the right side, but *Vamana* is the fourth avatar in the Dasavatara chronology. On the other hand, *Parasurama*, *Rama*, *Balarama*, *Buddha* and *Kalkin* to the left are in order. The artist changed the position of *Varaha* and *Vamana*. In this sculpture, all the Avatars of Vishnu are adorned with Vanmala, except for *Buddha* and *Kalkin*.

Traditional ornamentation and garments adorn the body of the *Mulanayaka*, and the prominence of the god over his attendants is also stressed by the depth of the carving, as seen in the image. The attendants depicted, as always, in decreasing sizes, are an intrinsic part of the divine personality. The personification of the attributes held by the divine hands symbolises the direct continuation of the god's body as well as the divine power that is exercised through them. The artist shows his innovative skill by resorting to integrating an iconographic model that was out-of-date into the stylistic composition of his time in harmony. He also managed to create an elegant image, carved with attention and elaborated on a very complex and subtle structure that reflects the Indian perception of the creation of the universe and the relationship between the devotee and the deity.

Conclusion

Here, the sculpture, as mentioned, is found from the area of Budhi Chanderi, which is located at a distance of 19km north of the modern Chanderi town on the Chanderi-Pichhor road, along the bank of the river Orr (Urvashi). It can be reached by travelling 12km on State Highway No. 19 and then turning west for another 8 km on an off-road track. At present, the site lies surrounded by the dense jungle of the Budhi Chanderi Reserve Forest. The place offers an incredible natural landscape with the Orr and the Vindhyaachal hill range. Most of the sculptures in this museum were carved initially to be placed on the niches of temples. The museum has many types of Vishnu imagery, with the most important and beautiful sculpture being the Chaturbhuja Vishnu, which is analysed in this paper. This is the only Pratima in the museum with the Dashaavatara patta with Brahma-Saraswati and Uma-Maheswara shown, respectively.

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