
Single Footed Deities: Glimpses from Art and Literature

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Abstract: Deities of religious pantheon are divine and hence they are attributed divine forms. The divinity of Gods is further glorified by conceiving their appearance as super natural. That is why we find Gods and Goddesses with multiple arms, heads and even limbs. These traits assert the power, superiority and divinity of deities before man. It is therefore very interesting to note that there is one such deity who is defined in literature and sculptural examples as having a single foot. Current paper is an attempt to understand the concept of emergence and development of this very single footed deity in India. In course of aforesaid trail, issues relating to antiquity of such a tradition, nomenclature of such deity, its identification with different Gods, respective iconography are also dealt with.

Keywords: Ekpada, Antiquity, Art, Literature, Identification, Iconography, Chronology

Introduction

Iconography, though meant for art, is actually a science. Every aspect an icon is not only well defined but also well justified according to the iconographic principles laid down in the texts. When it came to sculpture making, artist's freedom of portrayal and experimentation was rather limited. But this did not account for the lack of creativity and imagination in ancient Indian art. We have many examples where unrealistic depictions/forms were included in an icon to highlight the divine, supreme and all powerful aspect of deity and to make it different from ordinary humans. This is aptly demonstrated in the multiplication of organs and limbs the most characteristic ones being multiple eyes, heads and limbs.

Aforesaid multiplicity of names, organs and limbs is one of the most pervasive features in Indian art. Even the casual observer of Indian art becomes aware of the great number of heads and arms with which the deities are glorified. It is to be seen in Hindu, Buddhist and to a lesser degree, in Jain art (Srinivasan 1997: 3). No wonder we have many such iconographically balanced examples in Indian art attesting to its wide and complex usage. This iconographic convention also has an extensive literary usage prior to its plastic appearance (Srinivasan 1978: 194). However there is one distinct class where this multiplicity convention is breached and singularity ushers in form of a deity with only one leg. Such occurrence is unique because it defies the overall concept

of balance and proportion of composition. These one legged images do indeed represent bizarre iconographic type and pose questions like what is the antiquity of this tradition, what literature tells about these images, which deities are supposed to be single footed, and finally why are the images portrayed in this manner? Current study therefore is an investigation of unique single footed images from Indian literary and art tradition.

Nomenclature

It is very interesting to note that the single footed deities are known from folklores of various cultures across the world- Arabian, Japanese, Chinese, South American, Brazilian, German, French and Scotland etc. Despite their different stories of birth, nature, powers and representational details, they all have one trait in common. i.e. all of them have a single leg (Fig. 1). In some countries such deities are supposed to bring good fortune whereas elsewhere they are associated with evil. Travelers and scholars from these countries have addressed them by various names such as Skräeling, Monocoli, Skiapodes, Shadow feet, Monopods etc. In India single footed deities are identified as *Ekpada*, *Aja Ekpada*, *Ekpada Bhairava* and *Ekpada Trimurti*.

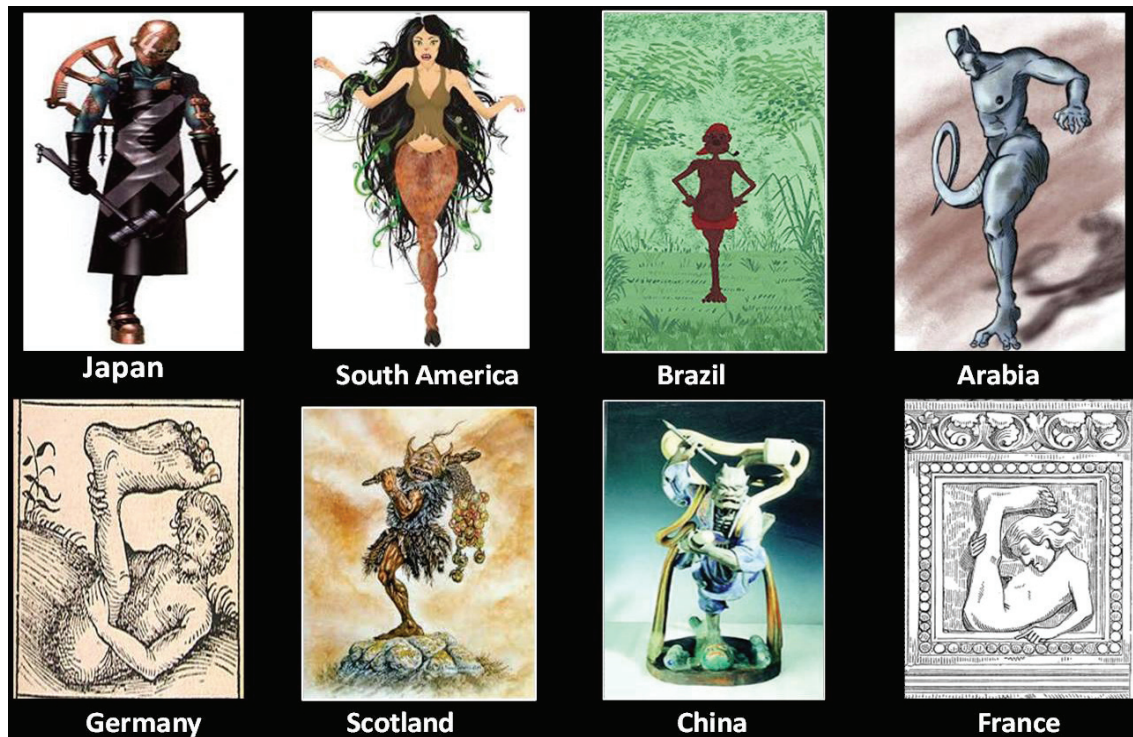


Figure 1: Single footed deities in other world cultures

Antiquity of Tradition

The divinities are attributed multiple body parts and forms right from Rigvedic times. Single footed deities are first mentioned in Rigveda where they are described as *Aja Ekpad*. *Aja Ekpada* is closely associated with *Ahi Budhnya* appearing in juxtaposition with the latter in five Rig Vedic hymns and once without him. *Atharvaveda* XIII.1.6-7

refers to the *Aja Ekpada* in connection with *Rohita*. In Yaska's *Naighantuka Aja Ekapada* is mentioned with the deities of the celestial realms. *Taitariya Brahman*. III. 1.2.8 tells that *Aja Ekpada* rises in the east and delights all beings. *Paraskara-grahya-sutra*.II.15 describes a rite called *Indrayajna* on the full moon day of *Prosthapada* (*Bhadrapada*) where *ajya* oblations are offered to *Indra*, *Indrani*, *Aja Ekapada*, *Ahimbudhanya* and to the *Prosthapadas* (Kane 1974: 874). *Mahabharata* V.114. 1-4 refers to *Aja Ekpada* along with *Ahir budhanya* and *Kubera* as the guardians of buried gold.

It appears that with the passage of time, gradually, *Aja Ekpada* came to be associated with *Shiva*. In the epic *Mahabharata*, both *Aja Ekapada* and *Ahi Budhnya* are described as *Rudras*. It is perhaps why out of numerous *Lilamurtis* of *Shiva*, three forms are known to have a single foot. *Ekpada* is also referred to in the *Shilpashashtra* which says that *Lilamurti* of *Mahesh* is 25 in number and *Ekpada* is one of them (Kane 1974: 370). According to *Vishwakarma shilpa*, *ekapada murti* signifies one of the eleven forms of *Shiva* as a performer of severe penance. *Uttara Karanagama* includes *Ekapada Trimurti* in the list of names of lord *Shiva*. Literary references seem to indicate that both *Aja Ekpada* and *Ekpada* were minor deities often invoked along with other deities as their worship assured all worldly pleasures to the devotees and secures to the votary all material enjoyments.

Some foreign writers too talk about presence of single footed beings in India. For example *Philostratus* mentions *Skiapodes* in his *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* as those who have only one leg & have a habit of lying on their backs. During the time of the extreme heat, they protect themselves from the sun by the shade of their feet. He believed that the *Skiapodes* live in India and Ethiopia. He also asked an Indian sage about their existence but he denied such occurrence. *Eusebius* also cites *Philostratus's* reference to *Skiapodes* in India in his *Treatise against Hierocles*. *Pliny the Elder* tells that *Ctesias* (Greek historian c. 5th B.C.) describes a tribe of men in India and Ethiopia called *Monocoli* who have only one leg, and who move and jump with surprising speed. These references to single footed beings and their activities are peculiar. However it is important to note that these do not talk about divine beings with single foot but instead talk about ordinary humans born with single foot.

Identification

The development and identification of single footed deities can be summarized as shown in Fig. 2. That is to say single footed deities in Indian art are mainly identified with two Gods- *Aja Ekpada* and *Shiva*. *Aja Ekpada* is the earliest form in which a deity with single foot was conceived. Reference to this form can be found in Vedic literature and its offshoots. However, sculptural examples of this form are quite rare- solitary documented example comes from *Rangmahal*. According to V. S. Agrawala, *Aja Ekapada* and *Ahi Budhnya* appear to be twin aspects of the same deity where *Aja Ekapada* represents a form of the fire-god *Agni*. *Durga* on the *Nirukta* interprets him to be the sun. Others associate single foot of *Aja Ekpada* with the single streak of lightning striking earth.

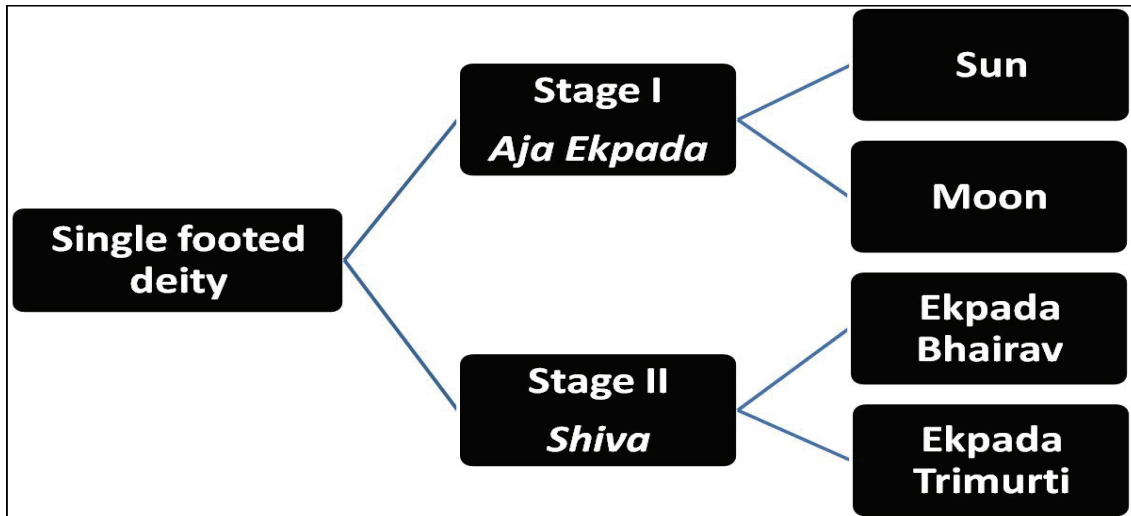


Figure 2: Development of Single footed deities

The evolution of *Ekapada* is unclear; however, most scholars agree that he emerged from the Vedic deity *Aja Ekapada* or *Ajaikapada*. But it is for sure that the process of development of concept of single footed deity further diversified. *Ekapada* came to be worshipped in many forms- *Ekapada Shiva*, *Ekapada Bhairav* and *Ekapada Trimurti*. *Ekapada Shiva* represents the depiction of Shiva with a single leg. In Sangameshwar temple at Sangam Andhra Pradesh, image of *Ekapada murti* is carved in the left niche of the north wall which also adorns image of *Mahishamardini*. He is standing firmly on his only leg. The image is four handed. In the upper right and left hands he carries a trident and battle axe. He wears jatamukta with crescent moon. He is adorned with large earrings and necklaces. Another representation comes from Someshwara temple, Andhra Pradesh where *Ekapada* is depicted with *Chamunda* dancing in a niche above him (Fig. 3). *Ekapada Shiva* is also known from Jambukeshwar temple (Sri Rangan). There have been references to *Ekapada Shiva* found in Mahabalipuram but there is no visible proof to support that yet.

The *Shaiva* model of *Ekapada Bhairava* represents the *Ugra* aspect of *Shiva*. This form was very popular in Orissa especially in upper Mahanadi valley which had a very strong influence of Tantric cult which witnessed a rare churning of the tribal cults of *Ekapada Bhairava*, *Khambeshwari*, *Maheshwari*, *Bhubaneshwari* and above all *Narasimha*, *Purushottama* and *Jagannath* of *Vajrayana*. *Ekapada Bhairav* was identified with many deities- *Narsimha*, *Shiva*, *Balarama* and *Lord Jaggannath*. As a result, many examples of *Ekapada Bhairav* sculptures are known from this region. Sathalpur near Alanahat in present Jagatsinghpur district, Orissa, is noted for its *Saptamatrika* and *Ekapada Bhairava* shrines. From artistic and iconographic point of view the Shakta images of this place can be assigned a date in the Somavamsi period. Another example comes from Hirapur temple, Orissa where there are sixty *yoginis* on the inner wall encircling the *devi mandap* (an elevated platform for the performance of tantric rituals) (Fig. 4). The *mandap* is adorned with the four-armed *Ekapada Bhairava* with *urdhvalinga* facing east towards the narrow entrance. A similar statue faces south. Uniconical figure of *Ekapada Bhairava*

could also be seen as a rock-cut figure on the monolithic rock in hillock called Bhairo Pahad situated about 5 km to the south of Titlagarh town in the upper Mahanadi valley, dated eighth century AD.



Figure 3: Ekapada Shiva, Someshwara temple, A.P. (Courtesy: Gunther 2002)



Figure 4: Ekapada Shiva, Yogini temple, Orissa (Courtesy: Gunther 2002)

Ekpada Trimurti represents the unique form where holy trinity of *Brahma*, *Vishnu* and *Mahesh* are shown together but they stand on Shiva's single leg. For example *Ekapada Trimurti* at the Vadivudai Amman Temple in Tiruvottriyur, North Chennai where above the hip, *Brahma*, *Vishnu* and *Mahesh* share the single leg, with *Brahma* and *Vishnu* emerging from right and left side of *Shiva* respectively. Besides these known forms, *Ekpada murti* of *Vishnu* is also reported. Furthermore, Google search shows one *Ekapada Ganapati* from Kachnar village. But such associations are open for scrutiny.

Iconography

One of the earliest example of *Ekpada* comes from Rang Mahal (Bikaner) Rajasthan in form of a terracotta showing *Aja Ekapad* dated c. 4th cent A.D. (Meister, Michael, W. 1984: plate 260) (Table 1). Here the single footed deity is identified as *Aja Ekpada* of the Vedic literature. Years later when the iconographic principles were codified, specific traits were attributed to the *Ekpada* sculptures. Iconography brings out this *Ekpada* motif even more graphically than literature. The *Ekapada* is primarily represented in two iconographical forms.

Ekpada Murti

The Agama text *Amsumadbhedagama* texts says that *Ekpada* keeps in his left hand the *khatvanga*, *bana*, *chakra*, *damaru*, *mudagara*, *varada*, *akshamala* and *sula* while the right hand

keeps the *dhanush*, *ghanta*, *kapala*, *ardhachandra*, *tarjini*, *ghata*, *parasu* and *chakra* (Rao 1985:388). The *Vishwakarma-shilpa* mentions Ekapada as one of the Rudras and describes his iconography as having 16 arms. However, no representation of a sixteen-armed Ekapada is found.

Table 1: Antiquity of Tradition, Representations in Art

S.N.	Name	Location	Probable Date
1.	Aja Ekpada terracotta	Rangmahal, Rajasthan	4 th cent. AD
2.	Ekpada Bhairav	Talaswara temple, Orissa	7 th cent. AD
3.	Ekpada Bhairav	Bhairo Pahad, Orissa	8 th cent. AD
4.	Ekpada Bhairav	Hirapur temple, Orissa	9 th cent. AD
5.	Ekpada Shiva	Gaya Museum, Bihar	11 th cent. AD
6.	Ekpada Bhairav	Brahmeswar temple, Orissa	11 th cent. AD
7.	Ekpada Bhairav	Panchvarahi temple, Orissa	Somavanshi period. (As per Fleet: between 1000 and 1100 AD)
8.	Ekpada Bhairav	Saptamatrika temple of Santhalpur, Orissa.	Somavanshi period. (As per Fleet: between 1000 and 1100 AD)
9.	Uniconical figure	Konark, Orissa.	12 th cent. AD
10.	Ekpada Trimurti	Pateshwar temple, Maharashtra.	12 th cent. AD
11.	Ekpada Trimurti	Someshwar temple, Andhra Pradesh. (Fig. 3)	Chalukya-Kakitya
12.	Ekpada Shiva	Sangameshwar temple & Mukhlingam temple, Andhra Pradesh	Medieval period
13.	Ekpada Trimurti	Jambukeshwar temple, Tamil Nadu. (Fig. 5)	Early Chola
14.	Ekpada Trimurti	Vadivudai Amman temple, Tamil Nadu	Pallava-Chola

Ekpada Trimurti

Elaborate description regarding *Ekpada trimurti* is found in *Uttar Karanagama*. According to it, Ekpada trimurti should stand erect with only one leg upon a *padamapitha*. It has three eyes and four arms; the front two hands are held in *Varada* and *Abhaya* pose while two back hands are keep the *tanka* and *shula/mriga*. His ears may be adorned with pearls and head with a *jata mukuta*. From the right and left of this erect fig of *Shiva* should be seen emerging those of *Brahma* and *Vishnu*. In the sculpture, they



Figure 5: Ekpada Trimurti, Tiruvanaikkaval Temple, Tamil Nadu
(Courtesy: www.harekrsna.com, 2005)

ought to be shown above waist and must have each a leg kept bent and held up above the ground level. The two front hands should be shown in *anjali* pose and other two as carrying *sruk* and *kamandelu* (Rao 1985:398). Here one distinctly notices that having a single standing leg did not bar the sculpturist from giving *Ekpada* four hands each

carrying a different attribute. Sometimes, besides the central one leg of Shiva, two smaller legs of Vishnu and Brahma emerge from the sides. As opposed to the icon when the legs of Vishnu and Shiva are not shown, it is called *Ekapada-Trimurti*. While some scriptures also call the latter configuration *Ekapada-Trimurti*, some refer it to as *Tripada-Trimurti*.

Regional Traits

Single footed sculptures are generally reported from two main regions in India- Orissa and southern India especially Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. It appears that in these two regions worship of single footed deities was more popular than rest of India as most of the known examples of such form are reported from these regions only. Nevertheless, regional differences in terms of conception of form, iconography and nomenclature are witnessed in these two areas.

In Orissa, the form and iconography of *Ekpada* is quite different from that in South India. This is mainly because in Orissa, *Ekapada-Bhairava* is essentially a Tantric deity. Tantric texts explicitly associate him with the Vedic *Aja Ekpada*, *Yoginis* and *Saptmatrikas*. The earliest *Ekpada* icons in Orissa date back to the 8th century CE and are found at the entrance of a *caitya* or as a guardian-attendant of the *Saptamatrika* goddesses, as an aspect of *Bhairava*. In his *Bhairav* form, *Ekpada* has his characteristic one leg, matted hair and crescent moon headgear, and ascetic attendants. He may be four-armed or two-armed and is considered a form of *Bhairava*, the fearsome aspect of Shiva. He sports a short beard and moustache, an open mouth with fangs, and bulging eyes with a wrathful expression. He is ithyphallic and wears various ornaments and a long *yajnopavita* across his chest and a tiger skin around his waist. Early images depict him with a *varada mudra* gesture and *kamandalu*; however, in later ones these are replaced by a *damaru* and a *kapala*. Also, in later images, *Ekapada* tends to be more terrifying, with a garland of skulls, serpentine ornaments and *yagnopavita*, and a corpse beneath his foot. His other attributes may be an *akshamala*, a *trishula*, a serpent and a deer. His ascetic attendants may hold a *trishula* and sometimes he is accompanied by a female attendant and his *vahana* Nandi. In Orissa, *Ekapada* is never depicted with the torsos of Vishnu and Brahma protruding from left and right as in *Ekpada Trimurti*. As Vaishnavism rose in Orissa, depictions of him became increasingly rare. According to one theory, *Ekpada* may have inspired the popular Vaishnava icon of *Jagannath*, a deity depicted without legs but a single stump below the waist. The *Ekapada-murti* icons found in the Kalinga-era temples of Andhra Pradesh mirror those in neighboring Orissa. They represent simple depiction with Shiva standing erect on one leg and his four arms hold his different *ayuddhs*. But as one goes further south, one notices a change in this form and *Ekapada Trimurti* images become more popular. It is noteworthy that *ekpad murti* of shiva gave rise to a corresponding form of ascetic practice.

Why Single Footed?

Conception of a deity with only leg is uniquely weird both in terms of balance of form and purpose. Being single footed imparts unusual rigidity, stiffness and stillness of

form besides permitting no movement. It is significant to see here that none of the literary sources relate to this single leg as a deformity. Also, deity was given a single leg right from its conception. That is to say that single leg was not the result of some accident or birth deformity. This can be taken to say that the single footed deities were conceived so. Question arises as to why would a deity be given a single leg?

It is wise to infer that probably the purpose or the function attributed to the deity demanded being single footed. Although *Aja Ekpada* is a very minor figure, the function he embodies is vital in the schema of Vedic cosmography. Vedic world is considered hemispherical. A concern that the sky remains arched over the earth is demonstrated from the earliest Rigvedic creation myth onwards. *Aja Ekapada* symbolizes this cosmic support. Atharvaveda.13.1.6 says that *Rohita* stabilized heaven and earth with *Aja Ekpada* who functions as a cosmic pillar holding the worlds apart. P.E. Drumont considers the one foot as a sort of pillar supporting the sun. Whatever may be the case, it is very important to see that the duty ascribed to *Aja Ekpada* was very crucial and it required permanent stillness and zero movement. The feature of being a uniped is the immediate result of the idea that it represents cosmic pillar. Probably this is why the images of *Aja Ekpada* were conceived to have a single leg thus restricting all movement.

In terms of *Ekpada Shiva*, the question of single foot becomes more mysterious as it offers a striking contrast to *Shiva Natraja* which is vibrating and pulsating with energy thus symbolizing motion. The single leg of *Ekpada Bhairava* could be related to the yogic aspect of *Shiva* wherein he performs a tough penance while standing on single leg. This practice of worship can be traced to the tantric form of worship in Orissa. In case of *Ekpada Trimurti*, it appears that such form represents the idea that *Brahma* and *Vishnu*, creating and ongoing aspects, have to be stilled to experience the essence of consciousness that is *Shiva*. This stillness is imparted by giving the form a single leg. These are some of the assumptions put forward by the researcher and are open for further discussions.

Observations

- Antiquity of worship of single footed deities in India goes back to Vedic period.
- Though the worship of *Aja* continued in later times in form of *Naigamesh-Naigameshi* but they are not single footed.
- In course of time, *Aja Ekpada* was identified with *Rudra*.
- Single footed representations of *Bhairava* and *Trimurti Shiva* may relate to this association.
- Worship of this form mainly popular in Orissa and South India

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