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THE VISNU IDOLS OF VALMIKI NAGAR, BIHAR

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Abstract: The state of Bihar is rich in artistic remains that indicate the prevalence of religions harmony. West Champaran District situated between 26°81*N and 84°51*E was a religious centre for Vaishnava, Shaiva, Shakta, Buddhist and Saura communities. The present paper seeks to examine the Visnu sculptures of Valmiki Nagar area of West Champaran District which were found amidst other remains and are presently preserved at the site.

Keywords: Visnu, avatara, Valmiki Nagar, Vaishnava.

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Among the five sects of the Brahmanical religion, the worshippers of Visnu belonging to the Vaishnava sect have a special significance. Among the different divinities of the Brahmanical pantheon, Visnu holds an important place as he has been worshipped with reverence and devotion since the Vedic age till the present times. Visnu is one of the major deities among the Vedic gods and goddesses. Within the Puranic concept of *tridevas*, Visnu is the preserver of the world but the Bhagavata and the Vaishnava sect has identified

Visnu as the supreme deity. In fact, the imagery of Visnu has been the culmination of the combined worship of Vasudeva-Krishna, the Vedic solar deity Visnu and the Narayana of the Brahmanical scriptures. The composition and preservation of the Puranas by the Gupta rulers, who were followers of the Bhagavata cult, resulted in an increase in Visnu's reputation along with his various forms that developed simultaneously. This is evident from the narrative of Brahma being born from the lotus emerging from the naval of Visnu who is

sleeping on Sheshanaga. In the Puranas, Visnu is said to be the cause of the creation, preservation and destruction of the world.

In the *Bhagavad Gita*, the importance of Visnu is revealed through the concept of the great forms of Visnu. The concept of *Avatara* and the Pancharatra cult is an important contribution of the Bhagavata or the Vaishnava sect. The roots of Avatarism of the Bhagavata sect can be traced to the later Vedic literature. The earliest mention of *Avatara* is found in the *Satapatha Brahmana* and the *Taittiriya Samhita* where it is said that *Prajapati* incarnated as *Matsya*, *Kurma* and *Varaha* on various occasions for the benefit of the world (Banerjee: 1956:389). Indian expression related to *Avatara* is found in the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Matsya Purana*.

Yada-Yadahi Dharmasya Glanirbhavati
Bharata

***Abhyutthanam Adharmasya Tadatmanam
Srijamayaham***

***Paritranaaya Sadhunamuinnasaya Cha
Duskritam***

***Dharam- Samsthapanarthaya Sambhamvami
Yuge- Yuge.***

(Sri Madbhagwat Gita 4 -7,8)

***Matsyankurmavarahashchanarasimhotwaman
Shamo Ramashcha, Krishnaschabuddha
Kalischalhedesah.***

(Matsya Purana 2-16)

Three lists of incarnations of Visnu are found in the *Bhagavata Purana*. Their number is 22 in the first list, 23 in the second and 14 in the third. At the same time, in the *Varaha Purana*, a common list of ten *avatars* or incarnations is found (Srivastava 2010: 23-24). The ten incarnations of Visnu can be divided into three classes based on form, namely - Animal Incarnations like *Matsya*, *Kurma*, *Varaha*; Human Incarnations, i.e. *Vamana*, Rama, Krishna, Balarama, Buddha, Kalki and the Composite or Mixed Incarnation of *Narasimha*.

Pusalkar has divided these *avatars* into three parts according to their social

importance chronologically (Pusalkar 1963: 12). The five incarnations of *Matsya*, *Kurma*, *Varaha*, *Narasimha* and *Vamana* fall under religious incarnations. The four incarnations of Parashurama, Rama, Krishna and Buddha are included under historical incarnations. The future *avatara* of Kalki is included in the category of Future Incarnation.

Vaishnavism has a very important place in Brahmanical religion and the different images of Visnu are revered throughout India as well as in the other parts of the world. West Champaran district has been a religious centre for the Vaishnava, Shaiva, Shakta, and Buddhist along with other sects. The present paper is based on the study of Vaishnava idols obtained from the Valmiki Nagar area of West Champaran district.

In the Vaishnava *Dasavatara*, the incarnations of Visnu can be divided into three classes -*Purna Avatara*, *Avesh Avatara* and *Ansh Avatara*

There appears to be a scientific meaning behind this ordered division of the *avatars*. It is acceptable in the religious world that there is no specific expression of God. They are born in all kinds of species, from small to high. The second poignant fact is that in this sequence, the principle of scientific development theory is clearly demonstrated. The sequence of evolution of the universe begins unicellular organisms and life first develops in the waters. Similarly, the God of Avatarism descended on earth- *Matsya avatara* as the first developmental life in the form of aquatic fish, *Kurma avatara* as a living creature (amphibian) on both water and land, *Varaha avatara* as a living creature (terrestrial) after renunciation of water, *Narasimha Avatara* as an animal trying to walk on two legs, *Vamana avatara* as an underdeveloped human being, physical and intellectual development as the embodiment of Parashurama, Rama *avatara* with intellectual and human qualities (having tolerance, religion, kindness etc.), very high development of intellectual qualities and having knowledge of politics, philosophy, art, logic, etc. in the form of Krishna *avatara*, the only rationalist who

instead of using his force was full of compassion, friendship and grace was the Buddha *avatara* and lastly a fully developed man that will incarnate in future as Kalki *avatara* can be understood in a scientific manner. From the scientific point of view, the concept of *avatara* can thus be considered as a symbol of the development of the universe.

Along with India, the roots of God or the Supreme deity assuming different *avatars* or incarnations are found among different peoples of the ancient world like Egypt, Babylonia, Assyria, Hebrew, Greece, China, Africa, America, and Australia (Srivastav 2010: 24). In fact, the secret of the world appears hidden in these incarnations. The first four incarnations contain information about the creation of the world. On the basis of *Vayu Purana* (Vayupurana 1950 : 98/71,117), *Roopmandanam* (Roopmandanam 1996: 3/24-28) and other literary texts, it can be said that there are ten major incarnations of Visnu - *Matsya*, *Kurma*, *Varaha*, *Narasimha*, *Vamana* (*Trivikrama*), *Parasurama*, *Rama*, *Krishna*, *Buddha* and *Kalki*. Collective and independent statues of all incarnations of Visnu are not found prior to the Kushana period. In the Kushana period, sculptures of *Varaha*, *Krishna* and *Balarama* began to be made (Tiwari and Giri 1997:80). Under the patronage of the rulers of the Gupta period, the notion of *Avatara* became more powerful. In the Gupta period, the *Dashavatara* idols of Visnu were built in the form of *Varaha*, *Narasimha*, *Vamana*, *Rama*, *Balarama* and *Krishna* on a large scale (Srivastav 2010:26). Even after the Gupta period, between the seventh and thirteenth centuries CE, the images of different *avatars* were made that also formed a part of the *Dasavatara* panels.

Among the Puranic *Tridevas* (Brahma, Visnu, Mahesh), Visnu is called the preserver of the world. In the perception of the idol of *Trimurti*, Visnu's form is important. Visnu is the *sattvic* element of the cosmopolitan form of the universe, whose main duties are amalgamation, retention, centralization and protection. Visnu has been given an important place in the Brahmanical

pantheon. Among the Vedic deities, Visnu is considered as the solar deity (Upadhyay 1982: 61).

It would have taken many centuries for Visnu to be revered as the supreme deity in the Bhagavata or Vaishnava sect. The merger of three independently recognized figures led to the creation of the god Visnu, the head of the Bhagavata sect. Among these three independent figures, the first is the solar deity Visnu as found in the Vedas, the second is Narayana of the *Brahmanas* and the *Aranyakas* and the third is Vasudeva-Krishna of the *Vrisnis*. Five forms of Visnu are considered in the evolved form of Bhagavata sect (Srivastav 2010: 12).

First – Para form, it signifies the highest form of Visnu.

Second- Vyuha form, this is the emanatory form of Visnu.

Third- Vibhava form, it is related to the incarnation of Visnu.

Fourth- Antaryami form, this form is invisible and remains in the heart of devotees.

Fifth- Archa form, it is related to deity form (idolatry).

Based on their postures, the statues of Visnu are divided into three sub-classes, namely –

Sthanaka or standing idols, *Aasana* or seated idols and *Sayana* or supine/reclining or sleeping idols.

As a part of survey conducted in West Champaran district, many statues of Visnu were found. The first *Sthanaka* statue of Visnu is marked on the coin of Panchala ruler Visnumitra (first century CE) (Joshi: 1977: 73). The single idol of Visnu is represented in *Brihatsamhita*, *Visnudharmottara Purana* and various Puranas and *Shilpashastras*. In these texts, Visnu is generally described as having four hands and is adorned with *Shrivatsa* or *Kaustubhamani* and *Kiritamukuta* and rides on his eagle mount *Garuda*. He carries Conch, Discus, Mace and a lotus in his hands. According to the *Visnudharmottara Purana*, the lower right and left hands of Visnu will be located on the foreheads of *Gada Devi*

and *Chakra Purush* respectively. In the *Agni Purana*, there is a law for the representation of *Padmadharini* Sri and *Veenadharini* Saraswati on the sides of Visnu (Tiwari and Giri: 1997: 80). In the city of Valmiki Nagar, the statues of Visnu are mostly *Dashavatara* and *Sthanaka*.

The site of Valmiki Nagar is situated on the international border of India-Nepal which lies in the dense forest of Valmiki Nagar Tiger Project. It is four kilometre north-east of Bhaisalotan situated on Bagaha-Bhaisalotan route. Sonaha River which is a tributary of river Narayani flows through this site. The local residents sieve gold from this river. In a survey conducted, ruins of temples dating back to the period fifth to twelfth centuries CE were found that also included idols of *Mahishasurmardini*, the ten incarnations of *Visnu*, *Navagrahas* and the *sthanaka* Visnu images made from black basalt stone. The description of the *sthanaka Visnu* and the *ten incarnations of Visnu* that have been found are given below:

Site : Valmiki Nagar
 Medium : Black Basalt Stone
 Idol : Standing Visnu (Fig.4.1)
 Period : 10th – 12th century CE

This four-armed idol of Visnu is sculpted upon a stone slab made of black basalt stone. Only one arm of this four-armed Visnu is in proper condition (left) and the rest three are not found. The god in standing posture is shown wearing *kiritamukuta*, *kundala*, necklace, sacred thread, garlands made from forest flowers, dhoti, divine jewel or mani, belt and conch in the left hand. The size of the *Prabhamandala* is equal to the *Chakra*. The garland is shown squirming through both the shoulders extending below the knees. On the lateral side of the idol Saraswati in bending position is shown and on the southern lateral the figure of Lakshmi is seen. The accompanying figures are inscribed in greeting posture alongside the foot of these two goddesses. A *vidyadhara* is shown above the idol.

Site : Valmiki Nagar
 Medium : Black Basalt Stone

Idol : Standing Visnu (demolished)
 (Fig. 4.2)

Period : 7th – 9th century CE.

Shells and *Chakra* is inscribed on the base of the *sthanaka* Visnu. The other right hand of Visnu is graced in *Varadamudra*. Devi Lakshmi and Sarswati are seen standing having the posture of worshipping on both left and right side of Visnu. Visnu is wearing crown on the head, *kundala* in the ears, garland in the neck and dhoti on the lower body.

This four-armed idol of Visnu is carved upon a pedestal made of black basalt stone. This idol is completely intact and bears holds the usual *ayudhas*. The deity is portrayed wearing crown, necklace, Capricorn/fish motif earrings, sacred thread (*Janeu*), garlands, lower body cloth (Dhoti), armllet, divine jewel (*Kaustubhmani*) and waistband along with conch shell and *Chakra* in two left hands and mace in one of the two right hands while the other right hand is in *Abhaya Mudra* (meditating gesture). On the upper portion of the idol, *vidyadharas* are positioned on both sides with Saraswati in *Tribhanga* position on its lateral side, and Lakshmi on its southern lateral side. Anklets are portrayed in the legs. Accompanying figures are portrayed greeting near both these goddesses. The slab of the idol is fully covered in ornamentation.

Site : Valmiki Nagar
 Medium : Black Basalt Stone
 Idol : Standing Visnu (Fig.4.3)
 Period : 10th – 12th century CE

It is a standing idol of four-armed Visnu built on a black basalt stone slab. This idol shows Visnu in the standing position on a Lotus wearing crown on his head. The deity is seen wearing Capricorn/fish like earrings, necklace, the sacred thread (*Janeu*), garlands, and a *Dhoti*, armllet, divine jewel (*Kaustubhmani*) and waistband. Lord Visnu is seen holding Lotus and Conch in the right hand and Mace and *Chakra* in the left. The garland is shown squirming through both the shoulders below the knees. On the lateral side or the left

side of the idol, goddess Saraswati is presented on the Lotus in a worshipping position and goddess Lakshmi in a standing position on a Lotus along with several other worshippers.

Site : Valmiki Nagar
 Medium : Black Basalt Stone
 Idol : Standing Visnu (Fig.4.4)
 Period : 10th – 12th century CE

In the present idol, Visnu is portrayed in the standing posture wearing a crown, earrings, necklace, the sacred thread (Janeu), garlands, lower body cloth (Dhoti), armlet, divine jewel (*Kaustubhmani*) and waistband. The god is shown holding Mace and Garland of Rudraksh (*Aksh mala*) in the right hands whereas Conch and Chakra are seen in the left hands. Goddess Lakshmi is portrayed worshipping on the right side in the lower part of the idol and Goddess Saraswati is seen on the left side. Along with the goddesses, accompanying figures are also portrayed below the idol. They are seen playing an instrument similar to drum.

Site : Valmiki Nagar
 Medium : Black Basalt Stone
 Idol : Standing Visnu (Fig. 4.5)
 Period : 10th – 12th century CE

The idol is engraved on a slab of black basalt stone. The deity is portrayed in a divisional standing position (Fig.4.6) wearing a crown, a leaf like earrings, necklace, the sacred thread (*Janeu*), garlands, *Dhoti*, armlet and waistband. In the two right hands, Visnu is seen holding Mace and Conch, and in the two left hands he has Lotus and Chakra. In this idol Visnu is portrayed sitting on the eagle in stationed position. Anklets are portrayed in the legs of Visnu. On the lateral or the left side of God Visnu, Saraswati is portrayed in the *tribhanga* position and Goddess Lakshmi is portrayed on the right side in worshipping position. On the southern lateral side of the God, his animal incarnations are portrayed (from bottom to top) *Matsya avatara*, *Kurma avatara*, *Varaha avatara*, *Narsimha avatara*. In a similar

manner, his man incarnations are portrayed from above to below on his lateral side, Parashurama, Rama, Balarama, Krishna, Buddha and Kalki. Every human incarnation is portrayed in stationed position other than Buddha and Kalki. Buddha is portrayed in meditating position (*Asana Mudra*) whereas Kalki is portrayed ascending the horse. On both the lateral sides of the deity a garland is seen. Both the *vidyadharas* are shown holding the garland on the lateral side of the idol flying. A Lion is also engraved on the right side bottom of the idol.

Site : Valmiki Nagar
 Medium : Black Basalt Stone
 Idol : Standing Visnu (Fig. 4.6)
 Period : 11th – 12th century CE

The deity is engraved on a slab of black basalt. The god is portrayed in *Samabhanga* stationed position (Fig.4.7). He has a halo that looks like a Chakra and the deity is wearing crown, earrings, necklace, divine jewel (*Kaustubhmani*), sacred thread (*Upavitamala*), garland, armlet, *Dhoti* and waistband. One right arm of this four-armed idol is fragmented while the other right arm carries Mace and the left arms carry Chakra and *Sankha*. Anklets are portrayed in the legs of Visnu. Goddess Saraswati is on the left side of the god while the right side is not clear. Probably goddess Lakshmi is depicted here. Accompanying figures are portrayed in greeting position near both the goddesses. On the southern lateral part of the God (right part) the animal incarnations of god is portrayed from below to above, *Matsya avatara*, *Kurma avatara*, *Varaha avatara* and *Narasimha avatara*. Like this the human incarnations of the god is portrayed from above to below namely Parashurama, Rama, Balarama, Krishna, Buddha and Kalki. The *vidyadharas* present on both the lateral sides of the God are portrayed carrying garland while flying.

In the course of a survey conducted in Valmiki Nagar, an independent idol depicting the Incarnations of Visnu is discovered. In the independent idol found, the idol of *Varaha avatara* described below is of much importance.

Varaha avatara

Varaha avatara is the third out of the ten incarnations of God Visnu. The *Varaha* form finds mention in the *Rigveda*. A tale from *Taittiriya Aranyaka* describes that a hundred-armed male boar lifted up the drowning earth from water.

In the *Ramayana*, the boar who lifted up the earth is considered a form of Brahma. In the *Mahabharata*, it is said that Visnu took the form of a boar and killed the demon Hiranakashyapa in the interest of the world and the people. (Pandey 2010:50) –



Fig. 4.1

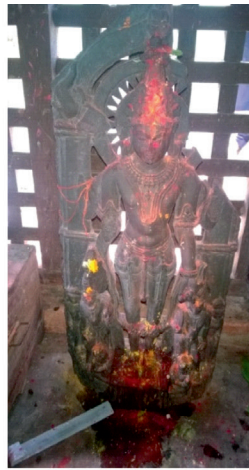


Fig. 4.2



Fig. 4.3

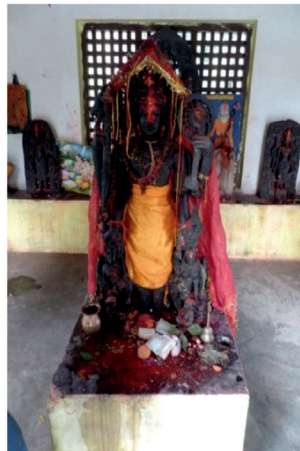


Fig. 4.4



Fig. 4.5



Fig. 4.6



Fig. 4.7

Varaharupamasthaya Hiranyakshonipatita

Site : Valmiki Nagar

Medium : Sandy stone

Idol : *Varaha Avatara* (Fig. 4.7)Period : 10th century CE

The idol of the male-boar found has two arms. The left hand is bent with conch shell in it and Bhudevi (Goddess of Earth) in sitting position is portrayed on it. The right hand is placed on the right thigh. The idol is wearing necklace, the sacred thread (Janeva), garland, lower body cloth (*Dhoti*) and waistband. His right leg is placed on the ground level and the left leg is placed high on a slab. Mace is portrayed attached to the right side of the idol.

On the basis of the idols found of Visnu and the independent incarnations of Visnu from the region of Valmiki Nagar it can be said that this provides evidence of patronage of Vaisnavism by the contemporary rulers of Valmiki Nagar area of West Champaran district in Bihar. The development of sculptures in this area is an indication of the popularity of the worship of the deity. The idols of standing Visnu and independent incarnations of Visnu belong to the

later Gupta period. From the above discussion one can conclude that the local rulers patronized the popular religion of their subjects.

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