



ICONOGRAPHIC DESCRIPTION OF A SCULPTURE RELATED WITH KRISHNA'S BIRTH

SATYAM DUBEY

Research Scholar, Department of Ancient Indian History, Culture and Archaeology, Indira Gandhi National Tribal University, Amarkantak, Madhya Pradesh.

E-mail: satyamdubey171995@gmail.com

Abstract: The research paper describes the iconographic form and characteristics of a sculpture displayed in the Rani Mahal Museum located in Jhansi district of Uttar Pradesh. This rare sculpture is related to the story of the birth of Shri Krishna, one of the most important deities in Hinduism. This sculpture is unique in itself because such a sculpture has probably not been found from any other place. On the basis of iconographic characteristics, the museum has dated the sculpture as belonging to the Chandela period. According to ancient Indian literary texts such as the Bhagavata Purana and other ancient texts, Krishna was born in the ancient city of Mathura and his parents' names were Devaki and Vasudeva, but he was brought up by Yashoda and Nanda, residents of Gokul. Krishna's birth is celebrated as a symbol of divine love and wisdom and the victory of good over evil. This story highlights the cosmic struggle between divine forces and demonic forces embodied by King Kansa. King Kansa was the brother of Devaki and maternal uncle of Krishna. This paper explores the mythological and symbolic significance of Krishna's birth, and its relevance to Hindu theology, philosophy and culture. It also analyses the cultural and artistic expressions of Krishna's birth. This research paper is based on the historical research methodology of social sciences.

Keywords: Indian Art, Iconography, iconography of Krishna Birth, Hindu Mythology, Ancient literature.

Received : 17 June 2025

Revised : 19 July 2025

Accepted : 26 September 2025

Published : 31 December 2025

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Dubey, S. (2025). Iconographic Description of a Sculpture Related with Krishna's Birth. *Journal of History, Art and Archaeology*, 5: 2, pp. 111-117. <https://doi.org/10.47509/JHAA.2025.v05i02.01>

Introduction

The Rani Mahal Museum is situated in the middle of Jhansi district of Uttar Pradesh and near the Jhansi Fort. This museum is about 3.5 km from Jhansi Railway Station and about 4 km

from Jhansi Bus Stand, which makes it easily accessible. The palace of Maharani Lakshmi Bai, one of the greatest women warriors of India her palace has been converted into a museum over time. This museum comes under the Archaeological Survey of India and at present the office of the Jhansi Division of the department is located in this museum palace. This museum has many sculptures related to Hindu, Buddhist, Jain religions and folk art. The present research paper is focused on a rare sculpture (Fig.2.1) displayed in the said museum. In this article, an attempt has been made to link the sculpture to the event of Krishna's birth and the objective of this research paper is to link the mentioned sculpture to the mythological and cultural significance of Krishna's birth and also to examine the story, symbolism and cultural expressions associated with this event.

The word sculpture (*pratima*) has been in use in ancient India since the Vedic era. In the *Rigveda*, the word *pratima* has been used in relation to the form of *yajna* (*Rigveda*:1933: 10: 130: 3.).The word *arccha* is also used for *pratima* in the *Rigveda*.

Nu Manvanah Esha Devan Archa (*Rigveda*: 1933:7:9: 19)

Patanjali has also used the word *arccha* for the sculpture (*Mahabhashya*:1987:45) Sculpture is that form of art which is three dimensional. The roots of Indian sculpture and crafts are very deep, which have contained the true form of Indian civilization and culture from the very beginning. The subject matter of Indian sculpture has always been the inanimate human form, which has been used in almost all religions for the exploration of truth. The history of Indian sculpture is very ancient.

Clear evidence of sculpture worship is found in the Epics and Brahmanical literature (Gond: 2018:117). After the Maurya period, the tradition of making sculpture continued continuously during the reign of the Sunga and Kushana rulers.

This tradition of sculptural art reached its peak in the Gupta period when regional characteristics also start getting reflected in sculpture and architecture and the uniformity prevailing in the classical art system also starts disappearing and various provincial styles were gradually included in different forms. After the fall of the Gupta rulers, sculpture was again encouraged under the patronage of the Chandela rulers who ruled over the region and the art got accrued with the welfare of the people and the religious tendencies.

Iconographic Details

The Reference Number of this Sculpture is GM-RMM-UP-762799. This sculpture was found from a village named Chandpur in Lalitpur district of Uttar Pradesh. The making of sculptures related with the stories of Krishna's incarnation had started since the Kushana period. This sandstone sculpture is in the form of a panel. The length of this panel is approximately 100 cm, height is approximately 50 cm and width is approximately 20 cm. In the sculpture, a woman is shown lying on the coils of a snake. She has been identified as Krishna's mother Devaki and above the woman's head is a five-hooded serpent's head. It appears that the snake is holding a hood-like umbrella over the woman. The woman is wearing many types of ornaments on her entire body, which indicates that this woman is a queen or belongs to a royal family. The woman is wearing many necklaces around her neck, bracelets and armlets in her hands, a waistband around her waist and anklets on her feet. Since this sculpture is being considered to be related to Krishna's birth, on this basis of that this snake is none other than Sheshnaga, also known as Nagraj and Adishesh. A child is shown lying down beside the woman, which can be understood as Vishnu taking birth in the form of Krishna. The number and list of Vishnu's incarnations is not found in the ancient part of *Mahabharata*, but in his Narayaniya part, at one place only four incarnations have been

counted, namely Varaha, Vaman, Narasimha and Vasudev Krishna (*Mahabharata*: 2021: 12/349/37) In another place, the above number has been added to say six by adding Rama, Bhargava and Ramadasarathi (*Mahabharata*: 2021: 12/389/77-90) and at the third place the number has been increased to ten by adding Hans, Kurma, Matsya and Kalki (*Mahabharata*: 2021: 12/369/104)

The right hand of the child in the sculpture is partially damaged. The woman is nursing the child, in the same way as a newborn is breastfed immediately after birth. Looking at this scene also it appears that Krishna's earthly mother Devaki is breastfeeding Krishna immediately after his birth. The upper left side of the woman is damaged due to which it is difficult to identify the scene but these can possibly be the figures of the Navagraha panel. The practice of worshipping the Navagraha's has been prevalent in India since ancient times. In almost every Hindu ritual, there is a tradition of worshipping them, performing *yagya* etc. Sun (Surya) is the main deity among the Navagrahas. In ancient Indian sculpture, only eight planets were recognised earlier. Later, the last *Graha* (planet) Ketu also started being depicted in sculpture along with them. As in *Garuda Purana* (*Garun Puran* : 2021: 1,110, 2-12) Surya (Sun), Soma (Moon), Mangal (Mars), Budh (Mercury), Vrahaspati (Jupiter), Shukra (Venus), Shani (Saturn), Rahu and Ketu are called *Grahas* (planets), which are worshipped for wealth and peace. They have a prominent place in astrology and human life has been continuously influenced by them. Kubera is depicted sitting in *lalitasana* posture in front of the woman's feet. He is holding a purse in his left hand and a cup in his right hand. To the right of Kubera, a woman is standing with a *chauri* in her right hand. Towards the head of the reclining woman, i.e. Mother Devaki, and just below the hood of the *panchmukhi sarpa* (Five headed Snake), Ganesha is depicted sitting in *tribhanga* posture on the extreme left. Just below

Devaki and the child Krishna, there is a depiction of a sword and a shield and just below Kubera's image, to the extreme right, there is a depiction of a seated man. The man is holding some weapon which is not clear. The man is shown sleeping and the sword and shield are shown without any human being. Based on these two points it seems that as described in the Puranas, at the time of Krishna's birth, Lord Vishnu performed a *leela* in which all the guards and soldiers present in the prison left their weapons and went into deep sleep. The artist has depicted the sleeping man and the weapons lying on the ground to depict the same scene. This sculptures have been accepted by the museum as belonging to the Chandela period or Early Medieval period.

Another 9th century C.E. similar sculpture (Fig.2.2) is displayed in the Archaeological Museum Gwalior. It was recovered from Bateshwar village of Morena district of Madhya Pradesh. Another Gupta Period sculpture that is slightly similar to the above sculpture (Fig.2.3) has been found from the Dashavatar temple situated in Devgarh of Lalitpur district. But here Lord Vishnu is lying on the Sheshnaga and in the above sculpture Devaki in the form of a woman is lying. The Sheshashayi Vishnu sculpture of the Dashavatar temple is a beautiful work of art of the Gupta period. In this sculpture, four-armed Vishnu is lying on the serpent bed. Lakshmi is sitting in front of Vishnu and she is pressing his feet. Brahma is seated on a lotus flower above Vishnu, but the lotus is not connected to Vishnu's navel. Brahma has a deerskin on his shoulder. On one side of him Kartikeya is seated on his vehicle peacock and Indra on Airavat and on the other side Shiva-Parvati are seated on Nandi. The *vahanas* of all the gods are depicted flying. Veerbhadra is also present behind the Shiva-Parvati.

On the pedestal of Sheshashayi Vishnu, there are depictions of five men and one woman. Rao has described the female figure as Lakshmi (Rao: 1971: 112), but his identification is not correct

because Lakshmi is pressing the feet of Vishnu. Hence, again, depicting Lakshmi on the pedestal is not appropriate. In fact, this figure is of Gada Devi, the weapon of Vishnu (Srivastava:2018-19: 131). On the sides of Gada Devi, from right to left, there are figures of Chakra Purush, Shankh Purush and Khadga Purush respectively. The statues after Ayudha Purush have been called Madhu-Kaitabh by Rao (1971:112) and Joshi (1977:106). In this context, it is worth considering that these two statues are not in the form of demons. Ram and Lakshman are wearing similar clothes and ornaments in the sculpture depicting Surpanakha, found from Deogarh (Trivedi: 1984:37).

Therefore, apart from the Ayudha Purushas, these two statues seem to be of Vishnu's gatekeepers Jai and Vijay, who have been depicted as vigilant guards (Srivastava:2018-19:131). In the Dashavatara temple, many events of Krishna's are also depicted- such as Krishna's birth, Shakat Leela, etc.(Vats:1952: xviii, b).

There is disagreement among scholars regarding the construction period of the Dashavatara temple of Deogarh. Mr. A. Cunningham accepted the construction period of this temple to be around 600 CE (1880:110). R.D. Banerjee has considered its date to be 575 CE. (1933:147). Madhoswarup Vats (1952: 6) has given its time as the beginning of the sixth century. According to Coomaraswamy (1927: 08) the construction of this temple is accepted to be in the last years of the Gupta period. Vasudeva S Agarwala (1965: 224-25) and Prithvi Kumar Agarwala (1968:11) have determined the construction period of this temple to be the middle of the fifth century.

The oldest depiction of the story of Krishna Janmashtami is from the second-third century, which is preserved in the Mathura Museum. In the Mathura Museum, one plaque shows Vasudeva crossing the Yamuna River with Krishna on his head, while another shows Krishna kicking the demon Keshi in the form of a horse (Sahni: 1925-

26: 148). This tradition continued in the Gupta period as well. Two sculptures of this period, *Makhanchor* Krishna and *Govardhandhari* Krishna are displayed in Bharat Kala Bhavan, Kashi. One sculpture of Krishna performing *Kaliyamardana* is on display in the Mathura Museum and another sculpture is on display in the State Museum, Lucknow (Deva:1960: 86). Two door pillars from Mandore in Rajasthan have engraved depictions of Krishna's *Leela*, which have been described as follows - (1) Govardhandhari Krishna, (2) Makhanchor Krishna, (3) Bal Krishna overturning a cart with his small feet, (4) Krishna taming a snake, etc.

The Mythology of Krishna's birth

The holy event of Krishna's birth, as described in the *Bhagavata Purana* and many other ancient texts, has been celebrated throughout India as Janmashtami for centuries. According to the *Bhagavata Purana* (2021: 10.1-10.3) Krishna was born in Mathura to Devaki and Vasudeva, but was raised in Gokul by Yashoda and Nanda. The story begins with the prophecy of the birth of Krishna, who is destined to end the sins of his uncle, King Kansa, by killing him and restoring happiness, peace and justice to the entire kingdom. Devaki, the sister of King Kansa, becomes pregnant and conceives a divine child. As Devaki's pregnancy progresses, Kansa becomes more and more tyrannical and insane and imprisons Devaki. Krishna is born as the son of Vasudeva and Devaki, who is considered the eighth incarnation of Vishnu. Vasudeva, determined to save his child, takes the newborn Krishna across the Yamuna River to Gokul, where he is raised by Yashoda and Nanda. The *Matsyapurana* states that Krishna is the full incarnation of Vishnu –

"Krishnavataretu gada vamahastaprashasyate."

Conclusion

The concerned sculpture has been studied on the basis of iconographic characteristics described in

ancient Indian literature, due to which the author has accepted the scene depicted in this sculpture as related to Krishna's birth. But scholars are not unanimous about this sculpture, some scholars accept it as *Sadyojat* form of Lord Shiva due to the presence of Ganesha in the sculpture, and some scholars consider it to be related to Krishna's birth. *Sadyojata Avatara* is considered to be the first *Avatara* (incarnation) of Lord Shiva. The period of this sculpture has been accepted as Chandela period by the museum, since the author of the research paper has done an in-depth study of the sculpture from the iconography, therefore he considers this sculpture to be a little before the Chandela period or early Chandela period. By looking at the sculpture, it can be easily said that the sculptor has tried to depict the incident of Krishna's birth. It also shows the skill of the sculptor towards his work. This is a very unique and rare sculpture as the author has not seen such a sculpture anywhere else yet, which is extremely beautiful and captivating. The birth of Krishna is a sacred event that has been celebrated and revered for centuries. It can be said without doubt that

the worship of Krishna and his popularity have continued from ancient times to the present. The birth of Krishna is full of symbolism and cultural significance. The birth of Krishna represents the victory of good over evil, as embodied in the struggle between Kansa and Krishna Vasudeva. The narrative highlights the cosmic struggle between divine and demonic forces, with Krishna representing the divine principle.

The mythology, symbolism and cultural expressions associated with this event provide a rich and complex understanding of the significance of Krishna's birth. This paper has explored the archaeological, mythological and cultural significance of Krishna's birth, highlighting its relevance to Hindu philosophy and culture. The cultural expressions associated with the birth of Krishna are numerous and varied. In India, Krishna's birth is celebrated as Janmashtami, a major festival that involves music, dance, and drama. The festival is marked by the singing of devotional songs and hymns and the enactment of the Krishna legend through folk theatre and dance.



Fig. 2.1: Birth of Krishna, Rani Mahal Museum, Jhansi



Fig. 2.2: Birth of Krishna, Archaeological Museum Gwalior



Fig. 2.3: Sheshashayi Vishnu depicted in the Southern Wall's Rathika, Dashavatara Temple, Lalitpur

Notes and References

Primary Texts

Bhagavata Purana, (2021). Geeta Press, Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh

Garun Puran (2021). Geeta Press, Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh.

Mahabharata, (2021). Geeta Press, Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh.

Mahabhashya, (1987). Chaukhamba Sanskrit Pratishthan, Delhi.

Rigveda, (1933). Vedic Sanshodhan Mandal, Poona.

Secondary Texts

Agarwal, Vasudevas S (1965), Studies in Indian Art, Archaeological Survey of India, Varanasi.

Agarwala, Prithvi Kumar (1968) Gupta Temple Architecture Prithvi Prakashan, Varanasi.

Banerjee, R.D.(1933) The Age of Imperial Guptas.

Coomaraswamy, Dr. A.K. (1927). The Art of India and Indonesia.

Cunningham, Alexander(1880), Occultation Survey Report, Part 10.

Deva, Krishna (1960). "Krisna Lila Scenes in the Lakshmana Temple, Khajuraho", Lalit Kala, No. 7.

Gond, Dr. Hira Singh, (2018). A Study of Archaeological Remains of Anuppur District. Madhya Pradesh.

Joshi, Neelkanth Purushottam, (1977). Ancient Indian Sculpture, Bihar Rashtra Bhasha Parishad, Patna.

Rao, Gopinath, T.A., (1971). Elements of Hindu Iconography, Volume 1, Part 1.

Sahni, Dayaram, (1925-26). "A Stone Sculpture Representing an Incident from the Life of Krishna", A.S.I. Annual Report

Srivastava, Dr. O.P.L. (2018-2019). "Sheshashayi Vishnu Sculpture of Deogarh – New Interpretation New Context", Vetravati Shodh Pratika, Issue 1-2

Trivedi, S.D. (1984). Archaeology of Bundelkhand, Government Museum Jhansi.

Vats, M. S., (1952) "The Gupta Temple at Deogarh." Memoir of Archaeological Survey of India, No. 70.