



## VISHNU SCULPTURES IN GOA: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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### ABSTRACT

Vaishnavism is a popular cult in Goa. Vishnu is considered as a householder, hence no elaborate rituals or harsh penance is needed for his worship. It has evolved as a major cult as a result of its easy nature and the idea of *bhakti*, the love of the worshipper for god and the love of god for his worshipper. This paper aims at studying Vishnu sculptures in the larger context of Vaishnavism in Goa. Vishnu was a major Puranic deity for the Hindus of different castes and classes. The manifold ways in which Vishnu is worshipped are seen in the scriptures, the sculptures and in the names assigned to the god. As Vishnu was worshipped differently by different groups most of the sculptures that are analysed have the unique features of Vishnu in specific association to the devotees make them feel closer to god in turn making lord Vishnu truly the loved one.

**Keywords:** Vaishnavism, Iconography, Vishnu, Epigraphy, Sculptures.

### INTRODUCTION

The present paper aims at analysing the presence of Vaishnavism in Goa and its manifestations in the iconography of Goa. Though several scholars have written on Vaishnavism, due to the nature of problem that they had investigated they wrote on one or other aspects of the faith and not substantially iconography. This is an attempt to study Vishnu as a householder who does not need any harsh penance or elaborate rituals to appease him. The sculptures of Vishnu are collected from field work by visiting some major Vaishnava shrines or temples in Goa and also from the collections of Goa State Museum.<sup>1</sup>

Hinduism is a religion which is closely associated with the forces of nature. The universe is perceived as a living entity which will eventually perish one day hence there exist the trinities; creator (*Brahma*), preserver (*Vishnu*) and destroyer (*Shiva*). Vishnavism is an important cult in Hinduism which focuses on the monotheistic path in adoration of Vishnu, the preserver of universe. It focuses on the *karma* (work), *jnana* (knowledge) and *bhakti* (love or adoration) *marg* to reach the path of salvation.<sup>2</sup> The concept of god taking many forms to help his followers, all the other beings are a manifestation of one god is the main ideology of Vishnavism.<sup>3</sup> The main focus lays on love for god, self-surrender, pure and selfless devotion making it one of the most popular cults of Hinduism.<sup>4</sup> It is an easier path to follow as Vishnu - the chief god is perceived as a householder who does not need any elaborate rituals or severe penance but emphasises on love for god. It is also a two-way relationship, the followers love towards his personal god as well as the love of god towards his follower.<sup>5</sup>

The earliest references to Vishnu are found in the Rig Veda where he is a solar deity. He is considered one of the twelve Adityas in the Vedas. The primary task bestowed in the Rig Veda is *urukrama*, *vikrama* and *urugaya*, that is, wide going and wide traversing.<sup>6</sup> Vishnu gains a little more importance during the age of Brahmanas. A special reference is made to him in the *Satapatha Brahmana* where he is associated with sacrifice.

He was later identified with *Vasudeva* in the *Mahabharata* but he evolved in a major way only in the *Itihasa-Purana* tradition as preserver of the universe. The concept of avatars is derived from the *Taittiriya Samhita* where there is a mention of *Prajapati* taking the form of fish, tortoise and boar.<sup>7</sup> Puranas played a major role in bringing the worship of Vishnu to the forefront. The ones worth the mention are *Vayupurana*, *Bhagvatapurana*, *Varaha Purana*, *Agni Purana*, *Matsya Purana*; besides these *Pancharatra Samhita*, *Satvata Samhita*, *Abhirbudhnya Samhita* are also some of the important sources for the development of Vaishnavism as a major cult.

## EVOLUTION OF VISHNU

D. D. Kosambi in his work, *Myth and Reality: Studies in Formation of the Indian Culture* observes that the socio-economic imbalance led the people to turn towards the philosophies of Shankara and Ramanuja was caused by the regression of Buddhism due to the extravagant spending on building huge monasteries. He further states that the philosophy of Ramanuja's Vishishtadvaita was more appealing to the people as opposed to the philosophy of Shankara's Advaita. Kosambi is of the opinion that the syncretic nature of Narayana resulted in the popularity of the cult. He believes that the cult of Krishna was "synthetic"<sup>8</sup> in nature. It is the fusion of many sages which led to founding of modern Krishna. The use of wheel as a principal weapon, which is not found in the Vedas, is also highlighted of being Pre-Aryan origin as references are found in the cave paintings of Mirzapur dating to 800 B.C. He points out that faith, rather than ritualistic beliefs, played a more important role for making this cult popular among the masses.<sup>9</sup>

Jitendra Nath Banarjea, in his work, *The Development of Hindu Iconography*, points out that the evolution of the cult revolves around three main theories i.e. the cult of Panchaviras incorporated in the *Sankhya system*, the *Vibhava* theory and the *Vyuha* theory. The *Samkhya* system is tremendously influenced by the cult of the *Ekantis* or the *Pancharattras*. The core of the *Vibhava* concept is the theory of incarnation. The six *Gunas* that combine to form the *vira* to create the *Chaturvyuha* or *Chaturmurti* leads to the *Vyuha* theory. The permutations of *Gunas* and the *Ayudhas* led to the formation of the *Chaturvimsatimurtis* during the Gupta period or by the *Pancharattras*.<sup>10</sup>

J. N. Banerjea's observed that Vishnu is perceived in his five principal features- "Para the highest, Vyuha the emanatory, Vibhava the incarnatory, Antaryamun the inner controller of all beings, and Arcca, the images of the god".<sup>11</sup>

T. A. Gopinath Rao, in his magnum opus work, *The Elements of Hindu Iconography*, observes that the images of Vishnu are generally represented as standing (*Sthanaka Murti*), sitting (*Asana Murti*) and reclining (*Shayana Murti*) which are further classified into *Yoga*, *Bhoga*, *Vira* and *Abhicharaka*. These characteristics are categorised on the end result desired by the worshipper.<sup>12</sup> However, J. N. Banarjea clarifies that the most revered images are the *bhoga* for obvious reasons and *yoga* being the second. He points out to the complete absence of the other two in his findings. The last being considered inauspicious in nature might have been immersed in water after due worship.<sup>13</sup>

## VISHNU SCULPTURES

The art of making Vishnu sculptures is described in great detail in various texts such as *Puranas* especially the *Padma Purana*, *Agni Purana*, *Rupamandana*, *Shilparatna*, *Agamas*, *Tantras*, *Brihat Samhita*, and the *Shilpashastras*. In the Puranic period, a lot of *ayudhas* came to be associated with Vishnu. The most important ones being the *shankha* or

the conch, the *chakra* or the discus, the *gada* or the mace and the *padma* or the lotus. Besides these the *varada mudra* and the *abhaya mudra* are also frequently seen in the Vishnu sculptures. Each of the *ayudhas* has a deeper meaning in terms of Vishnu holding the status as the preserver of universe. They also are known by different names signifying the importance of their existence in the hands of their bearer. The *shankha* known by the name of *Panchajanya* is the symbol of prosperity. It is also considered to be *nidhi* or treasure. It is revered as a precious object. The *chakra* is named *Sudarshana* and is a symbol of universality and power and ceaseless time. The *Kaumodaki gada* is a metaphor for strength and the *Padma* or the lotus is known as *Padma* itself. It is a symbol of purity just as the actual lotus is pristine in spite of its muddy surroundings. The lotus is also a metaphor for goddess *Lakshmi*.<sup>14</sup> Sometimes Vishnu is also shown with *Sharanga* the bow and *Nandaka* the sword. The *Abhaya mudra* means gesture of protection whereas *Varada mudra* means granting of boons.

The entourage of Vishnu also contains his vehicle *Garuda* and *Sesha* his eternal couch. *Garuda*, his *vahana* is in the form of an eagle, the king of birds, the bird of prey, signifying strength over the others. He is also known as *Suparna* or the one with golden feathers. In iconography *Garuda* is shown with the human body having wings, beak and legs of the birds of prey.

## VAISHNAVISM IN GOA

Vaishnavism is a very important cult in Goa. In fact there is a legend associated with the creation of Goa related to Vaishnavism. The *Sahayadri Khand* of *Skanda Purana* gives a divine origin to the creation of Goa ascribing it to the sixth incarnation of Lord Vishnu namely Lord Parashuram. The legend goes that Lord Parashuram fired an arrow in the sea which receded to give a new piece of land known as the *Parashurama Kshetra* which was in-turn given by the creator to the Brahmins whom he had brought from Tirhut.<sup>15</sup> We cannot ascertain how far the legend is true but geological evidences suggest that Goa is in fact formed due to the receding sea.<sup>16</sup> Reference is also found to a mountain called *Gomant* in the *Harivamsha Purana*. Lord Krishna in order to hide away from Jarasandha had to take shelter here.<sup>17</sup>

There are various epigraphic evidences to suggest the popularity of Vishnu. The inscriptions of the Satavahanas point to the existence of Vaishnavism in Goa from the first century B.C. The earliest reference is found in Vadgaon - Madhavapur in Belgaum district. There are also references to various names of lord Krishna in the Satavahana inscriptions over the years.<sup>18</sup> In fact the Naneghat cave inscription of Naganika mentions the worship of *Samkarshana- Vasudeva* prevalent in the region during the second century B.C.<sup>19</sup> The Shiroda Copper-Plate inscription of Devaraj Bhoja dating to 4<sup>th</sup> Century A.D. mentions about grants given to two Brahmins, one of them is Govind Swami.<sup>20</sup> Vrishibhumikheta inscription of Prithvimallavarman Bhoja dating to 6<sup>th</sup> -7<sup>th</sup> Century A.D. refers to a grant given to Madhvarya.<sup>21</sup> Arge Copper Plate grant of Kapalivarma dating to 6<sup>th</sup> Century A.D. refers to Krishna Bhoyaka as the writer of the Charter and Nandaka Talavara as the executor of the Charter.<sup>22</sup> These examples prove that the epithets of Krishna were popularly used as names by the common people. Direct mentions of the worship of Vishnu are found during the Chalukyan period. Mangalesha of the Chalukyas of Badami preferred to be referred to as *Parama Bhagvata*.<sup>23</sup> A. K. Priolkar provided a list of temples in the Old Conquests which were destroyed by the Portuguese. Thirty-five of them are that of Narayana<sup>24</sup>. However,

Gopal Rao has pointed out that Twenty-two *Narayana* temples were found in the old conquest and were later destroyed by the Portuguese during the 16<sup>th</sup> Century<sup>25</sup>, speak for the fact that Mangalesha was a staunch follower of Vishnu. A Vaishnavi sculpture found at Chandor and now located at the Heras Institute Museum, Mumbai convey the penchant of the Shilaharas towards Vaishnavism.<sup>26</sup>

A lot of Kadamba inscriptions present their inclination towards Vaishnavism. Though their family deity was *Saptakoteshwara*, a form of Shiva, they were not averse to Vishnu worship. The Kundur inscription describes Jayakeshi II as an incarnation of *Narayana*. The *Bhuvaraha Narasimha* temple of Vishnuchitta Vijayaditya II is a classic example of his devotion to lord Vishnu. Goa Copper Plate grant dated 1246-47 mentions the temple of *Murtinarayana* situated to the north of the city of *Gopakapuri*, modern day Goa Velha.<sup>27</sup>

The sculpture of Padmanabha was found in Cuncollem village of Ponda taluka, which was well-known for its potters. It is currently in the possession Goa State Museum. It was locally known as Narayandeva and is the *Parivar devata* of Shantadurga. But the textual references identify him as Padmanabha.<sup>28</sup> This image of Vishnu in his Padmanabha form is holding a *Padma* in his right upper hand, *Chakra* in his left upper hand, *Gada* in his left lower hand and *Shankha* in his right lower hand. A striking feature of this image is that though fully ornamented the lord is wearing a short *dhoti*. "Padmanabha is particularly the god of the potters, the petty merchants, the harlots, the oil-monger, the vendor of liquor and such others."<sup>29</sup> It may be seen that the attire of the lord represents the dress of his devotees. The image also depicts the *Dashavtars* of lord Vishnu in miniatures. The attendants at his feet are - Garuda, Shankhapurush and Shridevi - all located on his right. The left portion is mutilated but it might have had Bhudevi and Chakrapurusha, as seen in many sculptures of Goan households.

The sculpture of Gopinath from Netravali, Sanguem is also housed in the Goa State Museum. The tale goes that a Kadamba king who was a devout Vishnu follower built a temple dedicated to *Gopinath*. We cannot totally neglect this tale as the Kadamba king Vijayaditya was the follower of Vishnu and had assumed the title of *Vishnuchitta* upon taking up the throne. This sculpture is of lord Krishna in his Gopinath form playing the flute. The lord is standing in his typical style of *Dehudacharan Gopal*.<sup>30</sup> These types of sculptures are popularly known in South India as *Venugopala*. The sculpture of *Venugopala* is always in presence of the cowherds, the cowherdresses, and the cows who are mesmerized by his music.<sup>31</sup> The posture of *Venugopala* is always unique to Krishna where he stands with his one leg crossing the other erect one, so that only the toes of the foot touch the ground and the flute held at his lips.<sup>32</sup> The noticeable difference in this sculpture is that the lord is dressed as a cowherd. The cows, cowherds and the *Gopis* (Milkmaids) accompany the lord. He is shown as one of them and is known as *Gopinath*, lord of the cowherds.

The temple of *Bindhu Madhav*<sup>33</sup> is situated in the Dutale Wada of Madkai village in Ponda taluka. The idol of *Bindhu Madhav* was shifted from Neura in Tiswadi taluka to Madkai somewhere during 1540-1570 to save it from Portuguese oppression. The belief is that the idol of *Bindu Madhav* was brought from Kashi by the ancestors of the Nevrekars. These ancestors are worshipped in the temple as the *Kulpurush* of the families affiliated to the temple, that is, one *Kulpurush* is of the Nevrekars, another one of the Kulkarni, Gajendragadkar, Deshpande, Saraf and Bhats. The third family got converted and was known by the name of Noronha, but the ancestor is still worshipped in the *Bindhu Madhav*

temple at Madkai, and some of the family members still pay obeisance to the deity and the ancestor.<sup>34</sup> The sculpture housed in the sanctum- sanctorum was bronze so the proper dating is not possible. In this form, lord Vishnu holds a *chakra* in his upper right hand, *Shankha* in his upper left hand, *Padma* in his lower left hand and *Gada* in his lower right hand. He is standing in *Samabhanga* posture on a *Kurmasana* which is placed on a *Padmapitha*. The idol is recently replaced by the temple committee.

The southernmost village of Goa has a temple dedicated to *Keshav*. *Keshav* is another form of lord Vishnu.<sup>35</sup> This sculpture has prominent features of Hoysala iconography. The belief goes that an elderly man from the village dreamt that lord *Vishnu* calling him to the river and when he went to see he found the idol there. It was installed in the temple after performing the various rituals.<sup>36</sup> Lord Vishnu in his *Keshav* form holds *Shankha* in his upper right hand, *Chakra* in his upper left hand, *Gada* in his lower left hand and *Padma* in his lower right hand. *Rupamandana* states that the Brahmins who desire pleasure should worship the *Keshava*, *Narayana*, *Madhava* and *Madhusudhana* forms of lord *Vishnu*.<sup>37</sup> Interestingly *Loliem* has had a high number of Brahmin populations. The other forms of lord *Vishnu* found in *Loliem* village are the *Vishnu* temple at Pedem, the *Nirakar* temple at Maxem and the *Venkatesh* temple at Panchakhanem.

The sculpture of *Ananta* is located in the temple at Savoi Verem in Ponda taluka. It is in the form of *Bhoga-shayana-murti* in *uttama* class. It is a panel of sculpture showing Vishnu in *shayana* or sleeping posture with fourth of his body raised with the remaining laying on the *Shesha*. The image has four arms of which the upper right arm touches the *kirita* and the lower right is in the *kataka* pose. The upper left hand holds the *shankha* and the lower left hand holding a lotus is resting on the thigh. The right leg is stretched whereas the left leg is bent. The *gada* is laying besides him on the right side. Seated near the head of lord Vishnu is goddess Lakshmi on a high seat with her right hand in her hair with *kataka* pose and her left hand holding *darpana*. Seated near the feet of lord Vishnu is goddess Bhudevi with the lord's legs in her hands. Brahma is shown seated on the lotus coming out of the naval of Vishnu and Shiva is shown on the right side near the head. On the upper sides are shown *Saptarishis* and on the lower are shown *Dashaavatars*. Beneath the reclining images are shown Garuda, on the right side, and Hanuman, on the left, in *anjali mudra*. Hanuman is also shown as kneeling on one knee. The coils of the serpent can be seen prominently beneath the body of Vishnu.

The sculpture of Vishnu was found in Khandepar in Ponda taluka and currently is in Goa State Museum. This is a unique sculpture shown in *asana* posture seated on a throne, hence he is identified as *Narsimha*. His upper right hand holds *padma*, left hand holds *chakra*, lower left hand holds a fruit and the right is mutilated. He is adorned with *kirita* and *vaijayantimala*.

## CONCLUSION:

The above analysis shows that Vaishnavism had a major influence in Goa and a large number of Vishnu sculptures existed in Goa. Vishnu was a major Puranic deity for the Hindus of different castes and classes. There were many families and social groups following Vaishnavism in Goa over the centuries. This study shows that various forms of Lord Vishnu were worshipped in Goa according to the occupation of the believers. The manifold ways in which Vishnu is worshipped are seen in the scriptures, the sculptures and in the names assigned to the god. The various beliefs though, cannot be taken for granted,

lend a great sanctity to the faith of the followers in their much revered god. As Vishnu was worshipped differently by different groups most of the sculptures that are analysed have the unique features of Vishnu such as the *ayudhas*, *mudras* giving us an idea as to who was the worshipper like, for Brahmins he was Keshava, for artisans he was Padmanabha, for cowherds he was Gopinath. Sculptures like Ananta and Narsimha indicate the importance of the devotees for the god. The sculpture of Ananta is said to be in *bhoga-shayana-murti* in *uttama* class because of the devotees in his company. The story of Narsimha assures the devotees that the god comes to his help when he is in extreme need. The sculptures in Goa were made according to the caste, occupation and belief of the devotees. Their description in the scriptures and in explicit conformity with and relevance to the devotees made the latter feel closer to god and inturn making lord Vishnu truly the loved one.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES:

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- <sup>1</sup> The original Vishnu sculptures have been taken as the primary sources for study. The author is thankful to the Authorities of Goa University, Goa; Goa State Museum, Panaji, Goa; and a few temple Authorities and Priests, for their support in undertaking this research. The author acknowledges the academic guidance received from the research supervisor, Prof. N. Shyam Bhat, Department of History, Goa University, while writing this paper.
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  - <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* 389.
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- <sup>24</sup> Priolkar, A. K. *The Goa Inquisition*. Panaji: Rajahamsa Prakashan, 2008. 67-82.
- <sup>25</sup> Rao, Gopala V. "Temples of Goa- An Architectural Study". Unpublished Thesis. Goa: Goa University, 2003. 34. This needs to be studied further to arrive at a conclusion.
- <sup>26</sup> Rao, Gopala V. *op. cit.* 35.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* 42-45.
- <sup>28</sup> Mitragotri, V. R. *op. cit.* 102.
- <sup>29</sup> Rao, T. A. Gopinath. *op. cit.* 238.
- <sup>30</sup> Joshi, Mahadev Shastri. *Bharatachi Murtikala*. Pune: Anmol Prakashan, .1980 99.
- <sup>31</sup> Rao, T. A. Gopinath. *op. cit.* 207.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* 208.
- <sup>33</sup> The original sculpture is replaced and currently is in the possession of the temple itself.
- <sup>34</sup> As informed by Shashikant Nevrekar on 18<sup>th</sup> April 2017 during the field visit.
- <sup>35</sup> The idol can be seen in the sanctum- sanctorum of the temple. One can see the original idol for iconographic details before the morning *puja* after which it is decorated by *alankar*.
- <sup>36</sup> As informed by the temple priest Jayaram Upadhe on 20<sup>th</sup> May 2016.
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