

THE ICONS AND IMAGES IN INDIAN TEMPLES



VIDYALANKARA
Prof. S. K. RAMACHANDRA RAO

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Line drawings by the Author



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THE ICONS AND IMAGES IN INDIAN TEMPLES — The traditional images that the stylized icons are expected to evoke by Prof. S. K. Ramachandra Rao and Published by G. K. Ananthram IBH Prakashana Gandhinagar Bangalore 560 009

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To

Gurusevanirata

Sri S. Y. Krishnaswamy
ICS (Retd.)

with respectful regards

PREFACE

The temple in India is designed to serve many purposes—social, economic, aesthetic and religious. The religious interest of the temple consists in its being a dwelling for an icon and the images that are sought to be evoked by the icon. The icon is to the temple what the spirit is to the body, and images are like the vital currents that relate the body with the spirit.

The icon-makers work in a traditional framework, and their artistic abilities are channelled in well-defined modes of expression which are relevant to the images associated with the icons. The variety of Indian icons acquires meaning only in a polytheistic context. It is a fact, often ignored, that Indian polytheism does not militate against the deeper philosophical conviction of monotheism, even monism. This apparently paradoxical detail has not been widely appreciated because scholars and critics, not rooted in the temple tradition, tend to stop at the icons and do not inquire into the relevant images which are stylized in the Agama texts.

The present book seeks to aid such an inquiry. It highlights the canonical involvement in Indian icons, which apart from their artistic merit have a religious function to fulfil.

S. K. Ramachandra Rao

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CHAPTER I

THE ICON AS A PARADIGM

The expression 'icon' in the word Iconography was evolved in the West mainly in a Christian context. The Greek original of this expression, viz., eikon, means a likeness, an image, a representation of something that is valuable. Greek Christianity encouraged objects of worship, like the crucifix, that could be carried about ceremoniously in cultic festivals. This practice is derived from pre-historic fetishes and totem-objects that we find all over the world. Man not only loves to manufacture icons as representative and symbolic, but has a necessity for them. An icon is what is constructed and also what is utilized. It not only delights, but serves a purpose.

There is a pretty legend concerning Pygmalion, the clever Greek sculptor. He once made an image of a woman in stone, and it was so life-like that he at once madly fell in love with the woman in stone. The love that he bore to this statue was so intense and genuine that Venus took pity on him and infused life

into the statue. The sculptor married her and lived with her happily. The legend has a point. The image that serves as an icon must be artistically perfect and realistic: it must have a profound appeal to the onlooker or the devotee. And it must be meaningful to him.

The portable crucifix as an icon, for instance, has value only when it is meaningful. Its value consists in reminding us of the person of Jesus Christ, representing the event of crucifixion and signifying the idea of redemption. It is only then that it becomes an object of veneration. An icon has a religious significance as well as artistic merit. The pre-historic fetishes, funeral poles, ancestral images, totem-tablets and sacred stones are meaningful to the tribes in which they operate: they direct the magical practices of the tribe, and also delight the folk that surround them.

Their forms may appear crude and frightening to us, but we must remember that these icons were not designed to please us. We should not expect the artistic quality of these objects of worship to conform to our norms of beauty; it is enough if it accords well with the traditional pattern current in the tribe, for that is what matters.

An icon is, therefore, in the nature of a paradigm. The idea of a paradigm, popularized by Thomas S. Kuhn (*The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago

1962), involves an assumption derived from a specific achievement, and the sharing of this assumption in a community, which act of sharing will facilitate coordinated effort. A paradigm is a framework; it has a



The Egyptian deity Isis in
Abidas temple

blinding function, in the sense that it prevents the user of this framework from wasting his time and energy on trivial issues, and helps concentrate on relevant and specific issues. It brings into being a way of looking at things naturally, meaningfully and purposefully; and it develops its own language. "A paradigm", in the words of Margaret Masterman, "is something which

can function when the theory is not there'' (*Criticism and Growth of Knowledge*, Cf. Lian Hudson, *The Cult of the Fact*, London, 1973). It is like a local road-map, which is used when it is needed and which is meaningful when relied upon.

A paradigm works, especially when it is shared in a community. And success of the paradigm provides delight to the users of the paradigm; and ''humans become emotionally attached to what gives them pleasure''. The role of an icon in a tribe is exactly the same. It binds the members of the tribe in a generality of understanding, and helps them communicate with each other as well as function within a framework. Its relevance and value are confined to the community which has generated it and within which it operates.

An icon as an object of reverence satisfies not only the religious impulses of its user, but the artistic expectations also. It thus develops a 'vital quality', and a 'protective role'. No user of the icon can derive any benefit from it unless he regards it as imbued with a living quality, and unless he has trust in its especial, although unseen, powers. An icon is a 'charm': it can work. The earnestness and concentration of the user of the icon determines how the icon is going to benefit him. Was it not the mad love of Pygmalion that prompted Venus to give him the woman that he loved, out of the inert stone that he skillfully carved?

The temple is a structure designed to house an icon, which is both an object of veneration and a work of art. The icon in the temple has a cult, a tradition, a function that is laid down as paramount within the community. The Indian words for icon are 'pratima', 'bimba' and 'bera'. 'Pratima' emphasizes representation of the actual object of veneration (divinity); 'bimba' brings out the character of image; and 'bera', the origin of which word is obscure, means an idol in which certain traits and powers are especially invoked. There is another synonym, 'murti', that is sometimes used; it signifies person-ification, in-carnation, formation. It is making an abstract idea concrete and practical.

The word *pratima* is an ancient one, found even in the Vedic hymns (e. g. *Rig-Veda* 10, 10, 130). It had become popular in the centuries just preceding the Christian era, for we find it used in the sense of icons in several inscriptions belonging to the second and first centuries before Christ. For instance, an inscription of this date on the pedestal of a stone image of Manibhadra (a folk god) has been found in Pol near Gwalior (in Madhya Pradesh); and another in a well in Mora near Mathura (Uttar Pradesh) which mentions the icons of the five heroes of the Vrshni clan (Sankarshana, Vasudeva and others). The *Rig-Veda* (6, 28,6) employs another word 'su-pratika' in the same sense as 'pratima'.

'Bimba' and 'bera', however, are more frequently employed in the Silpa texts. They are specifically sculptures in stone, wood, clay or metal, as distinguished from *lekhyā* (coloured line-drawing) and *chitra* (painting). 'Bera' in particular refers to the variety of icons worshipped in temples in the context of different rituals. We do not know whence this word was derived, for it is clearly not a regular Sanskrit word.

CHAPTER II

THE POLYTHEISTIC FRAMEWORK

The employment of icons in India can be traced in the oldest strata of her recorded history. Besides the cultic images discovered in the remains of the Indus Valley civilization, many of the numerous steatite seals that we find in the same sites are clearly iconic in function. It is unfortunate that the legends upon the seals have not yet been deciphered; for without an understanding of the legends it is impossible to determine the iconic significance of the seals.

One of the seals has become justly famous, although its enigmatic character has not been relieved by a convincing explanation. It is the seal found in Mohenjodaro representing a three-faced (?) male deity with horns, seated on a stool (*asandi*) in a yogic posture, surrounded by four animals (elephant, tiger, rhinoceros and buffalo), and with two antelopes under the stool. The deity has been variously identified as Pasupati-Siva (R. N. Dandekar), an earlier prototype of Siva (Father Heras), the Fire-god or Agni



R

The Indus-seal representing a divinity identified frequently as Siva-pasupati

(B. A. Saletore), an earlier form of Vishnu (T. G. Aravamuthan), the creator - sculptor Tvasht-Visvarupa (S. Srikantha Sastri), the Killer-god Kuejas (Hrozng), and some buffalo-headed composite deity (K. N. Sastri). The supposed nudity of the figure is explained as ithyphallicism and F. O. Schrader is impressed by its similarity with the Celtic god Cernunnos.

The precise identity, however, will not be possible until the six or seven letters that are inscribed above the figure are read. Whatever deity the seal represents, it is clear that it is iconic. It must obviously have had a religious purpose to fulfil ; and its artistic value can readily be seen even today. There are many seals like this. The deities in human and animal representation, divinities as trees and plants, and the ritualistic obser-

vances in connection with them are typical factors involved in icon-making, and we find them in these seals. The seals were also meant to be carried about, either as charms (or talisman) or as possessions on the person of the owner.

The religion reflected in the Vedic literature does not make much of veneration of icons (*iconoduly*), although it is doubtless acquainted with icons (*pratima* or *pratika*). Icons would have been in use by the folk, as they were during the days of the Indus valley civilization. Vedic age was in most respects a continuation of this earlier age. It is becoming increasingly evident that there is no ground for the distinction that used to be made between Dravidian and Aryan races as distinguishing the Indus and Vedic civilizations respectively.

The Vedic hymns refer to charms and talismans, magical powers and cultic images. Their pre-occupation appears to have been with nature and abstract divinities, and not with physical representations of the forces of nature or of divinities derived from nature's nucleus. The Vedic hymns did, however, crystallize the symbols (such as wheel, umbrella, spear, footprint, lotus, noose, goad and vehicles) which helped the iconographic development in a later age.

The idea of the multiplicity of divinities and legendary accounts of aspected deities which are basic to Indian Iconology are also Vedic. The former is eviden-

ced in the remains of the Indus Civilization also, while we have no means of ascertaining the latter in the same context. The gods numbered 3339 (Cf. *Rig-Veda* 3,9,9) but they were all aspects of a much smaller number of deities (only three in *Rig-Veda*, e.g., 10,158, 1, Agni, Indra and Surya). The hymnal outlook is henotheistic (to use the expression coined by F. Max-muller): the god to whom the hymn was addressed was regarded as the highest of gods, even as the only God in reality, all other deities being regarded as aspects thereof.

But the folk religion that continued in the Vedic period and has survived till today, accepted in practice, whatever the theoretical reservations, as many as 330,000, 003 gods ! The staggering figure may indeed be a fanciful extension of the Vedic number 33, which is credited with some validity in the *Satapatha-brahmana* and other early scriptural texts. The thirty-three gods were earth and the heaven, twelve aspected solar energies (*adityas*), eleven frightening forces of the atmosphere (*rudras*) and eight deities of the directions (*vasus*). They were obviously symbolic.

There is another explanation of the number, which accommodates eleven deities in each of the three spheres (the earth, the mid-region or atmosphere, and the heavenly vault). It should be noted that the thirty-three divinities gradually got condensed into three,

each representing a sphere (*tri-dasa*), even in the Vedic literature : as, for instance, the conception of the triad, Agni (Fire on earth), Vayu (Wind in midregion) and Surya (Sun in the heavenly vault). This provided the background for the evolution of the triad of the popular religion in later India, Brahma, Siva and Vishnu.

Polytheism is a fact in Indian religion, and the attempt that is frequently made to show that Indian thought is committed ultimately to monotheism is not only misconceived but irrelevant. Theism is a matter of religious practice, and not a philosophical tenet. Whatever conclusion the Vedanta arrives at is valid, not for the common folk, but for the 'superior' individuals who are able to transcend the confines of theistic involvement. Common people worship a variety of gods, for a variety of purposes, in a variety of ways. The idea of godhead is relevant only in the context of needs and fears, aspirations and aversions, pleasures and pains.

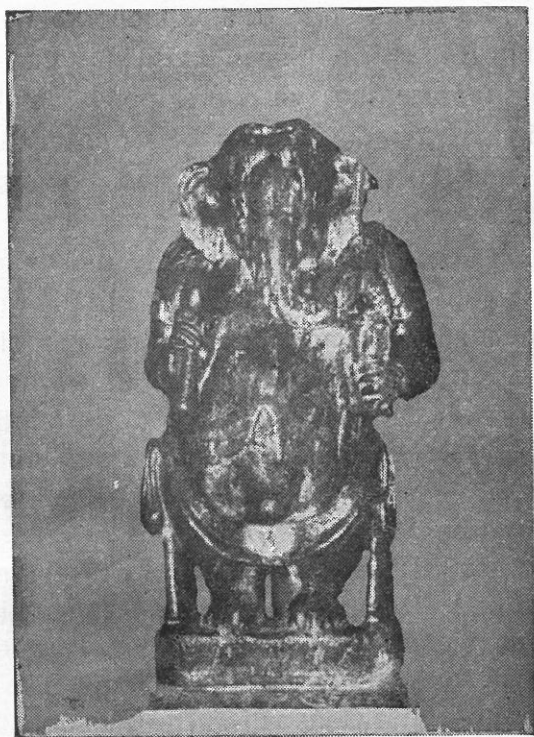
The nature and content of Vedic hymns make this point explicit, and the outlook of these hymns is decidedly polytheistic. The Vedantic wisdom advocated the idea of 'monism' (the ultimate reality of the absolutely one principle), which also has its roots in the Vedic hymns. It is unfortunately not often recognized that in India monism and polytheism have always coexisted, and that they do not contradict each other.

Monism is a matter of conviction of the reality of one principle, while polytheism is concerned with practical approaches to aspected divinities.

And polytheism is fundamental to Indian iconography, or, for that matter, to any iconography in the world. For it is only an aspected divinity that can be concretely represented, or worshipped. Making an icon involves the understanding of Godhead in terms of shapes and traits, personalities and powers. Even in the Vedic hymns, the various gods are endowed with different personalities. Man truly makes gods in his own image. The process of crystallization of traits in gods facilitated the creation of iconic models. The icon is a condensed word-image. That is why an icon in India is always accompanied by a descriptive and mnemonic verse known as *dhyana-sloka* containing the essential features of the icon (traits, weapons, postures and powers).

In course of time, while the folk continued to worship countless deities and spirits, the sophisticated people accepted the group of five deities (the four subordinated to one) for worship: Vishnu, Siva, Sakti, Surya (the Sun) and Ganapati. The five constituted a family (*panchayatana*), free from confrontation. But different groups insisted on different patterns in this family. And depending on which of the five deities was accorded the dominant role, there was a five-fold division of sects.

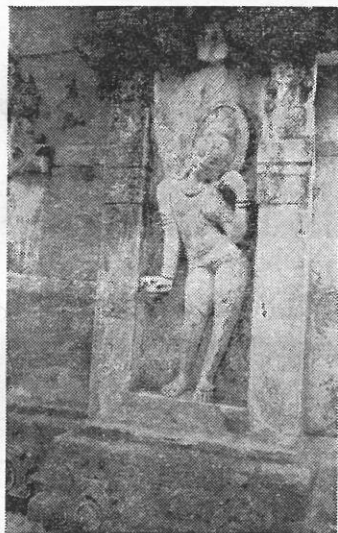
Thus, there were those who worshipped Vishnu as the major deity, the other four being subordinated to him, and they came to be designated as 'Vaishnavas'



Two-armed Ganapati from the South
(with as many as 139 sub-sects, occasioned by historical, geographical and social factors). Likewise, there were 'Saivas' (with 103 sub-sects), accepting the

superior status of Siva ; 'Saktas' (with 17 sub-sects), who worshipped Sakti in the main ; Sauras (with nine sub-sects) given to Sun-worship ; and 'Ganapatyas' (with eleven sub-sects) who worshipped Ganapati in the main. Whatever the affiliation, the ritual invariably involves a degree of syncretism.

There were also composite deities, conceived by the more tolerant and less exclusive. We have images



Ardha-narisvara form of Siva
in a niche in a Chalukyan temple
of Vishnu-Siva (Sankara-narayana, Hari-hara), Vishnu-Surya (Surya - narayana), Vishnu-Sakti (Lakshmi-

narayana, Srinivasa), Siva-Sakti (Hara-Gauri, Uma-Mahesvara, Ardhanarisvara), and Ganapati with emblems of one or all of the other four deities. And each of these five deities came to have in due course numerous presentational forms (*lila-murtis*), designed principally out of legendary material, but not infrequently occasioned only by the artist's fancy.

The icons being concrete, there was a natural tendency for the forms to get crystallized into traditional patterns. The making of icons became a professional detail; there were not only guilds of craftsmen but castes into which craftsmen were born. There was then need for instructional literature concerning the theoretical and practical aspects of iconography (which literally means providing drawings and sketches for the making of icons). And the need was fulfilled in an ample measure. There is now an elaborate literature in Sanskrit which deals with the nature of gods, their images and manifest forms, the craft and technical procedure in the manufacture of icons, the details of rituals associated with the worship, and the legends that provide the background.

CHAPTER III

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The iconographic involvement in India has been continuous at least for about seven thousand years now. The iconic specimens found in the sites of the Indus Valley civilization and the descriptive hymns dealing with iconic conceptions in the Rig-Veda provide the background, however hazy and inadequate, for the nation-wide iconographic tradition that has held the field till this day. But recorded history allows us to have a peep only into the north-western region of India during the sixth century before Christ, when Persian influence was dominant on the region. The next date that raises the curtain from this region is about 320 B.C., when the Macedonian adventurer, Alexander, swooped on the Persian empire and dashed into this corner region of India. Hellenistic impact was in subsequent years felt not only in Egypt, Syria, Mesopotamia and Persia, but also in this region of India as far as Punjab. An aspect of this impact was the art of making images of gods and heroes.

The art-form that developed in the north-western region (including Bactria on the border) during the days when the Indian princes repulsed the invasions of the Greek generals, has been called 'Gandhara', after the name of the region. Although this art-form is heavily Greeco-Roman, it did not materialize here when the Greeks were in the ascendant. It is only when the Indian princes under the leadership of the Mauryan prince Chandragupta of Magadha (around 304 B.C.), assumed control over the area, allowing the Greeks to reside here as citizens, that the Greek sculptors and artisans were encouraged to exhibit their artistic talent and temperament. They found it expedient to integrate the Hellenistic craft with the Indian idiom, and this is how Gandhara art was born.

The Greek sculptor had an eye for the human figure; he had a penchant for anatomical perfection. He treated gods as robust and prepossessing humans, modelling the body as realistically as possible. He introduced the detail of drapery in a conspicuous manner. The Gandhara artist shared this love of the perfect human form, and the tendency towards naturalism. We have a large number of Buddha and Bodhisattva images, both large and small, in relief as well as in the round, answering to the Gandhara type in Taxila, Peshawar, Baniyan (where there is a colossal statue of the Buddha measuring 150 feet in height carved on a

rock face), Hadda, and Jalalabad – all in the Gandhara region of those days. The statues are designed as if they were meant to be accommodated in an architectural pattern, although free-standing statues of those days are not rare.

But Gandhara art is notoriously impersonal. The artists (sculptors, architects and craftsmen) were commissioned to execute works on Buddhist monuments by Indian patrons, especially by the Kushana (Mongoloid) princes. It is unlikely that the artists had much sympathy for the Buddhist themes that they were asked to handle. This becomes evident by the rigidity of most of the statues belonging to this period. The Buddha images of the Gandhara type are more portraits than icons; they scarcely suggest a transcendental feeling or the divine element. That is why the Gandhara art was short-lived; and it disappeared after sixty or seventy years, leaving no lineage and no impact.

The early Buddhist monastic settlements were chiefly cenobiums, and did not accommodate any iconic worship of the Buddha, although the lay folk that supported these settlements were given to the worship of numerous spirits and demi-gods (yakshas). Even when the Buddha images were made, as in the Gandhara period, they were intended more as works of art than as objects of worship. The relic-worship and

the worship of symbolic representations (like foot-print, bodhi-tree, umbrella) were in vogue from early times. When the theme of the Buddha's life and career caught the fancy of sculptors, especially inspired by the Hellenistic models, it was the narrative aspect that was dominant.



Bronze image of Buddha
belonging to early 5th
century now in the
British Museum,
London



An early bronze icon of
Buddha (from Guntur, in
Andhra Pradesh), now
in London Museum ;
dated early 6th century

During the latter part of the second century, Nagarjunakonda in the South, a celebrated Buddhist

center of Mahayana persuasion, witnessed the transformation from the iniconic to the iconic representation of the Buddha. A section of the Buddhist monastic assembly, the Mahasanghikas, favoured iconic worship in the shrines of common devotion (*chaityas*) in opposition to the more conservative Mahisasakas who were against both the shrine idea and iconic representation of the Buddha (although in course of time they conceded the former).

The art-form that emphasized the Indian idiom and tempered the Hellenistic realism with idealistic symbolism that was indigenous to India was the one that developed in the city of Mathura, about fifty miles south-east of Delhi, when the Gandhara-style was half-way through its career. Mathura, under the Kushanas, was an important trade-centre and attracted large concourses of mercantile people owing allegiance to different religious orders. Craftsmen, skilled in the local style of making stylized stone and metallic icons of folk gods, Buddhist and Jain deities, plied a busy trade.

Preparations of icons for money and sale of icons in shops were known even to Patanjali (on Panini, 5, 3, 99). Mathura icons now became popular all over the country and even abroad. The great demand necessitated the mass manufacture of icons! The iconography that originated at Mathura during this

period (first and second centuries after Christ) developed and attained maturity in the golden age of the Guptas (fourth and fifth centuries).

It is interesting that the city of Mathura in those days was frequented by merchants, generals and noblemen from Central Asia, and other parts of northern India (Indus Valley, Taxila, Gujarat gulf etc). And there was for centuries, in the city, generous sprinkling of more or less resident foreigners: Greeks of Bactria, Scythians of Central Asia, Parthians of Iran and Kushanas of Mongolia. The craftsmen of Mathura were thus exposed to numerous extra-Indian influences. Notwithstanding this circumstance, they evolved an iconographic style that was perfectly indigenous, and that was in complete accord with the idiom that is illustrated in the canonical texts. After a phase of initial development, the subsequent period (marked by the patronage of the Gupta kings) saw a large number of canonical works in Sanskrit in the nature of iconographic manuals (*pratima-lakshanas*).

It was about the same time that temples also began to be built in a manner that was different from the *stupa*, *chaitya* or *vihara*. It was about the same time too that the Bhagavata cult was making a headway in the mainland of India. And it was about the same time that the nucleus of the Puranas had been formed and the myths and legends of gods were be-

coming popular. The folk deities as well as the divinities of the sophisticated classes had risen in importance : they needed elaborate shrines and complicated rituals of worship.

Agama as the prescriptive temple-literature took shape in answer to this demand. There was an Agama corpus in Tamil already. It had got formed during the early centuries before and after Christ (from 500 A.D., according to V. R. Ramachandra Dikshitar and M. A. Mehendale). The Agama of all India relevance was naturally influenced by the Tamil Agama.

The Vedic hold had to an extent slackened, and the Tantrik framework gradually assumed considerable importance. Worship in a temple is of course not a Vedic idea. There were no temples even in the earlier Indus Valley phase, although there were household icons. Now the elaborate Vedic rituals and sacrifices as community affairs receded to the background, and the temple as a public place of worship was taking its place.

There is a curious inscription found in Ghosundi (Nagari) near Chittore (Rajasthan), belonging to the second century B.C., which mentions that the King Gajayana, a bhagavata who had also performed an *asvamedha* sacrifice, got a temple (Narayana-vatika) for Vasudeva and Samkarshana. The inscription suggests the co-existence of Vedic rituals of a collective

nature and the temple as a religious institution during the initial phases of this transformation. It was in this context that the Agama developed.

The bhagavata cult, which advocated devotion to the iconic representation of Vishnu, encouraged the building of public shrines. Even in the first century A.D., we have an inscriptional reference to a 'sacred shrine' (*maha-sthana*) at Mathura dedicated to the "worshipful Vasudeva", during the reign of the Saka satrap Shodasha, son of Rajuvala; we have also references to "the icons of the five worshipful heroes of the Vrishni clan" installed in this shrine.

The cult became wide-spread during the rule of the early Gupta Kings. Samudragupta performed an *asvamedha*-sacrifice, but his son Chandragupta II styled himself a "parama-bhagavata". The Varaha-Vishnu temple in Udayagiri near Bhilsa was a bhagavata shrine of 402 A.D. A rock inscription dated 404 A.D. at Mandsor by Nara-Varman, a feudatory of the Gupta King, begins with a verse which transforms the Vedic *purusha* into a personal iconic deity.

सहस्रशिरसे तस्मै परुषायामिततेजसे ।

चतुःसमुद्रपर्यङ्क्तोयनिद्रालवे नमः ॥

The bhagavata-cult began with an adoration of Vishnu, but its basic creed of devotion (*bhakti*) drew within its fold other popular gods also. The later

Guptas were devoted to Siva (*parama-mahesvaras*) almost exclusively. Even Patanjali, the commentator on *Panini* (5, 3, 99), was acquainted with "Siva-bhagavatas", and the early Kushana princes got "Siva-sthalas" (shrines to Siva) built as early as the first century after Christ. There are several inscriptions in Kharoshti which mention this, and there are several early coins (as those of the Indo-Parthian ruler Gondophares and the Kushana prince Wema Kadphises) which unmistakably bear iconic representations of Siva. Besides the later Gupta Kings, Bharasivas and the Vakataka rulers, the Huna generals Maitrikas of Valabhi, and the Maukhari chiefs of Kanoj encouraged the Siva-bhagavata cult.

The innumerable folk divinities were accommodated within the general ideology of Bhagavata, which was the impulse to partake of the grace and glory of godhead (as the etymological meaning of the word *bhakti*, from the root *bhaj*, suggests). The icons of the Buddha and the *bodhisattvas* were already being revered. The icons of *tirthankaras* (perfected saints guiding humanity) were objects of adoration among the adherents of the *Sramana*-tradition (Jains); these iconic saints were accompanied by folk divinities (*yakshas* and *yakshinis*).

With the spread of the cult of devotion to personal gods and goddesses, the Agama manuals attempted a



Tirthankara icon in a basadi in Karnataka

classification of deities and stylization of their iconic forms. By about the fifth century after Christ, Indian iconography was more or less finalized and formalized. Technical development in metal-craft also reached a stage of maturity, so that casting of metallic icons began to be attempted on a mass scale. The class of workers known as *sthapathis*, involved in the preparation of icons, came to be well-established.

CHAPTER IV

ELEMENTS OF ICONOMETRY

As a necessary aspect of standardization, the form of the icons was sought to be clearly defined in terms of anatomical proportions, postures, and the weapons in the hands. The axiomatic assumption that prevailed for all time was that beauty in an icon is derived solely from the measurements prescribed in the canons (Manasara, 51, 70) -

शास्त्रमानेन यो रम्यः स रम्यो नान्य एव हि ।

Thus iconic measures loomed large in the training of the *sthapati*. The iconometry, as standardized, takes into account the most proper height of the icon (*mana*), the breadth (*pra-mana*), the circumference (*pari-mana*), surface of the image (*lamba-mana*), thickness (*un-mana*) and the space between limbs (*upa-mana*). When the icon is to be installed in a temple that is already built, the height and breadth of the temple, and the size of the main door are among the relevant considerations. Some texts insist that the

donor's measurements also become important when he causes the icon to be installed in a temple he himself has built.

An indispensable concept in Indian iconometry is the 'inch-measure' (*manangula*) as the unit, which approximates roughly to three-fourths of the common inch. The iconometric 'inch' increases in degrees, beginning with the atomic size (*paramanu*), which is unseen by the human eye. Eight of these make a 'mobile speck' (*trasa-renu*); eight of these in turn is equal to the 'tip of a thin hair' or the hair on the head, (*valagra*); eight of these make the 'tip of a coarse hair', hair on the body (*romagra*); eight of these make an 'egg of a louse' (*liksha*); eight of these represent the length of the louse itself (*yuka*); eight of these will make the size of a barley grain (*yava*). Eight of the barley grains constitute a 'superior' (*uttama*) 'inch measure'; seven of them is regarded as 'midling' (*madhyama*), and six of them is 'inferior' (*adhama*).

Constituted by the 'inch-measures' we have other measures such as the 'cubit' (*kishku*) which is twenty-four *angulas* (about eighteen of the common inches), the 'bowl-length' (*dhanus*) which is four 'cubits', the 'churning-stick' (*danda*), which is a variant of the above, and so on.

There is also the measure known as 'matrangula', (or 'dehangula'), the inch which corresponds to the



Srinivasa ; a sculptor's sketch according
to the standard *tala-mana*

length of the middle division of the middle fingure of
the sculptor who makes the icon or the patron who

commissions it. By a combination of these two 'inch-measures' (*manangula* and *matrangula*), we have the familiar practical measure in vogue.

The major gods like Vishnu and Siva are prescribed to be made in the 'superior' *dasa-tala* (ten-*tala*-measure), viz. 124 *matrangulas* in height from the top of head to the soles of the feet. Goddesses like Lakshmi, Saraswati and Parvati should measure to the 'midling' *dasa-tala*, viz. 120 *matrangulas*; as they stand they should reach up to the lower tip of the god's ear. The 'inferior' *dasa-tala* is meant for minor deities like Garuda, Sesha, Skanda, and guardians of the eight quarters; the height would be 116 *m*. The nine-*tala* measure (*nava-tala*) equals 108 *m*., and it is the measure for making the icons of the demi-god Indra and demons. There are varieties in this *tala*-measure: *navardha-tala* (114 *m*.) for the planetary divinities; *uttama-nava-tala* (112 *m*.) for sylvan deities (*yaksha*), celestial musicians (*gandharva*), and dragons (*uraga*); and *sattryangula-nava-tala* (111 *m*.) for great human beings.

In Indian iconography, the head of the image merits the most careful attention of the sculptor, for it is the 'major limb'. In all the varieties of *tala*-measure, iconometric details are minutely prescribed in the texts. The face is divided into three equal divisions, the first from the front hair line to the eye-brow-meet, the second

from the eye-brow-meet to the tip of the nose, and the third from the tip of the nose to the bottom of the chin. If we use the nine-*tala* measure (108 *m.*) which is most often used, then height of the face would be 12 *m.*, each division thereof being 4 *m.*, from neck to the middle of the breast-line 12 *m.*, from these till the navel 12 *m.* and so on.

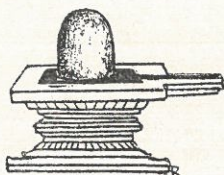
Measurements vary according to the subject matter (gods, spirits, human beings, animals, etc.). And each subject matter has numerous categories. For instance, if the icon is that of a human being, five types are



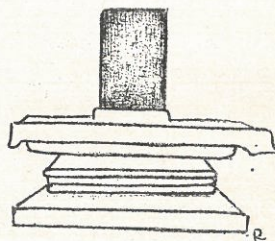
Sankaracharya - sculptor's sketch to define the measurements

recognized : 'hamsa' (superhumans, kings, human incarnations of the divinities), 108 *m.* ; 'bhadra' (sages, royal priests, chief ministers etc.) 106 *m.* ; 'malavya' (wedded wives, heavenly musicians, dragons etc) 104 *m.* ; 'rucaka' (nymphs, dancers, actresses etc) 100 *m.* ; and 'Sasaka' (wel-known mortals), 96 *m.* There are also other characteristic delineations such as webbed hands and feet, a lump on the forehead, forelocks turned rightward and three lines on the palm for celebrated human beings.

Even the aniconic representations of the *linga* are subject to well-defined icono-metric prescriptions. Lingas are of thirty-three kinds, grouped into three main categories according to their iconometric specifications. The 'best' lingas made in stone must measure nine to seven cubits (*hasta*) in height, the 'midling' ones six to four cubits, and the 'inferior' ones three to one. A stone *linga* which is under one foot high does



Natural Linga fixed
on a pedestal



Carved linga fixed
to a pedestal

not merit worship in a public place. If the linga is a crystal one, the 'best' may be 18" to 13" high, the 'midling' 12" to 7", and the 'inferior' 6" to one inch (*Isana-siva-guru-deva-paddhati*, 40).

Naradiya-Samhita (23, 110) recommends that an icon in stone, bronze or wood should be made in the nine-*tala* measure or the ten-*tala*. For the worship rituals (known as *karmarcha*), the icon should be in metal, and should not be taller than twelve *angulas* nor shorter than six.

Iconometry figures prominently with respect to two parts of the shrine, although they are strictly not icons : *kalasa* (finial) and *bali-pitha* (altar). Accounts of these parts have already been given in the first volume. And it has been shown that these two structures are intimately associated with the icon in the sanctum. But the measures here are in terms of 'parts' (*amsas*), and 'levels' (*talas*). For instance, the finial known as *kama-kumbha* is composed of six 'levels' and the total measure is $15\frac{1}{2}$ 'parts'. The 'foot-hold' (*pada-grahi* or base) will be two parts, the 'egg' (*andaka*) five, the 'neck' (*griva*) two, 'lotus motif' (*padma-patrika*) three, the (*karnika*) two and a half, and the top-most unit (*bijapura*) one part.

The altar may be carved out of stone, made in bricks or cast in metal, according to *Padma-Samhita* (30, 140). The height of the altar in front of the sanc-

tum should bear a definite proportion to the height of the sanctum itself. One eighth of the sanctum is considered the best; it may also be one seventh or one-fifth. Breadth of the altar is also determined likewise.

There is another reckoning which suggests that the height of the altar should be equal to the height of the pedestal on which the icon in the sanctum is consecrated. And accordingly, many types of altars are enumerated and named in the manuals like *Silpa-ratna*, *Padma-samhita* and *Vishvak-sena-tantra*. Limbs or levels of the altar are also designated and the measurements given. There are several altars like the Maha-pitha (21 'parts'), Sri-bhadra (32 'parts'), Sarvato-bhadra (35 'parts') and Sri-vijaya (37 'parts'),



The altar belonging to the
Sri-bhadra type



The altar belonging to the
Padma-bandha type

which receive elaborate consideration in the craft-manuals.

It may be noted that the altar usually consists of many mouldings, and texts like *Tantra-samucchaya* divide the total height of the altar into ten parts: 'foundation' (*paduka*) at the bottom, 'platform' (*jagati*) on top of it, and on successive tiers 'flower-pattern' (*kumuda*), 'flower-slab' (*kumuda-pattika*) 'shoulder-blade' (*gala*), 'neck' (*kambu*), 'dove-row' (*kapota*), 'top-slab' (*agra-patti*), and 'lotus' (*padma*), which is the top-most member. The earlier tradition was to have the altar inside the sanctum itself (as, for instance recommended in *Tantra-samucchaya*), and not outside in the open, as the case now is. The altar in this event would be monolithic and not consist of several mouldings.

CHAPTER V

THE CRAFT INVOLVEMENT

Icons in India have been from very ancient times carved in stone, or wood, made in clay, or cast in metal. Sometimes precious stones and crystals are also used for carving small icons out of them. *Ajita-gama* lists gem, stone, metal, wood and clay as materials to be preferred in the order they are mentioned. Little icons are also carved out of conch-shell and elephant's tusk. Icons for permanent use and for installation in temples are usually made of stone, although the old practice was to have wooden icons in the sanctum. Icons for mobile purposes are cast in metal. Household icons are metallic (bronze, copper, silver and gold) or carved out of crystal or gem. Icons for temporary use are made in clay or variant material.

There are manuals (like *Aparajita-priccha*) which provide elaborate instructions for the purpose of carving. Different icons are to be made in different kinds of stone or wood. Stones from the rocky mountains are said to be most preferable, and when they are not

available, stones from ground level may be used. Stones are classified into male (*pum-shila*, bright-coloured; free from spiral grains and knots; which, when struck sounds like a brass-gong; and which during excavation throws out splinters like sparks of fire), female (*stri-sila*, eight coloured, having, streaks of grains, which, when struck, emit a hollow but pleasant sound), and 'neuter' (*napumsaka-sila*, dull-coloured, hard and not producing any musical sound when struck).

'Male' stones are employed for making major icons of gods and goddesses, while the pedestal thereof is carved out of 'female' stones. However, *Purushottama-samhita* (5, 63) suggests that 'female' stones must be used for images of goddesses, while the pedestals must be carved out of 'male' stones. The 'neuter' stones are used for structures hidden under the ground (like *ratna-nyasa*). Among the stones, the black-stone (*krishna-sila*), finely grained granite, is generally recommended. Early Pallavas appear to have preferred sandstone for making *lingas* and icons. But the manuals insist on careful examination of stone before it is selected. Steatite and marble are also employed, especially in the northern regions of the country.

The selection of wood for sculpting icons figures prominently in the early manuals, for wooden images

were frequent in olden days. The most ancient images in the country are known to have been wooden; stone stepped in rather late in the history of Indian iconography. Several trees have been named as fit for icon-carving : khadira, sandal, red sandal, asoka, devadaru, bilva, sala, kadamba, champaka, bakula, udumbara, arjuna and salmali are frequently mentioned.

The location and nature of trees are important considerations. Trees in the burial grounds, on tank-bunds, at road-crosses, and in the close vicinity of huge ant-hills and ponds are to be avoided. Trees that have been worm-eaten, lightning-struck, and damaged by elephants are not regarded as fit. Trees that are barren, very old and worn out, with bark peeling off, are also unfit. Trees on which birds have built nests, and which provide shade for the cattle are to be left alone, and should not be cut down for icon-making. Trees that do not have a pleasant aspect or have fallen by themselves, are likewise unsuitable.

The piece of stone or the log of wood selected is treated in an elaborate manner in order to divest it of its inert nature and to infuse into it the power to contain the divine image.

An interesting procedure is given in *Padma-samhita* (11, 101-104, which also occurs in *Purushottama-tantra*, 6, 22, 27). Before the log of wood is cut off the tree, the priest-sculptor prays thus to the tree :

"You have become inert and immobile owing to your past conduct. But I choose you for a meritorious condition, for carving out of you the image of Vishnu which will confer benefits on humanity. I shall not hurt you, my friend, but I shall release you from your present inert condition! By the grace of God, you shall enjoy all the worship that is done to God!"

Then he ties the consecrated thread round the tree, sets up a small sacrificial fire in front of the tree, and after oblations are offered into the fire, cuts down the tree with an axe that has also been duly worshipped. While cutting, he stands facing East and recites prescribed hymns. The same procedure applied to stone also.

When the piece of stone or log of wood has been cut, it is ceremoniously brought to the sacrificial enclosure (*yaga-sala*) in a procession. A consecrated 'pot' (*purna-kumbha*) is then installed, and the stone or wood is treated to an elaborate ritual before it is given over to the sculptor.

The carving is done, preferably in the apartment of the temple meant to be the sanctum, with doors closed, during three, five, seven or nine days. If the apartment that is designated as sanctum is not available for this work, then a pavilion is specially set apart to the south or north of the temple, covered with a decorated *vitana* from which cocoanuts and fly-whisks

hang. The stone or wood is placed in the center of this pavilion, and is worshipped with flowers, sandal-paste and other offerings. The sculptor commences his work with an initial ritual resembling *ankura-arpana* ('seed-sowing' ceremony).

Different methods for preparing the clay for making the icons are given. The usual method, however, is the following. Soft-clay, red, white, black or yellow in colour, is collected from top of a hillock or from river-beds, and is thoroughly sieved. It is then kneaded well with water, cow's milk, ghee, curds, wheat-flour and *triphala*-powder. Sometimes, gingelly oil is also added. The mass is then kept away for a fortnight or month before it is taken up for icon-making. After the image is made, it is dried in the sun for a month, or baked in low fire. It is suggested that some gold or gems be placed inside the clay image while worship is done. The clay icon may also be painted over.

The clay image is classed among 'temporary' or 'occasional' icons, which are not suitable for installation in temples or for permanent worship. Such icons are installed (*avahana*) just prior to the commencement of a ritual sequence, and is 'discharged' (*visarjana*) in water immediately after worship is over. Besides clay, sand, cow-dung, sandal-paste, rice-flour, jaggory or butter is also used for making such icons that are not supposed to last for more than a day.

While the main icon installed in the *Brahma*-position inside the sanctum is usually carved out of stone, there will be one or more metallic images to serve various ritualistic ends. The former is said to be 'fixed on jewels' (*ratna-nyasa*), and is therefore immo-



Madhukeshvara at
Banavasi-processional image

bile. The latter are not fixtures, and can be taken to the spots of several rituals (*karmarcha*), such as bathing (*snapana*), procession (*utsava*), audience (*koluvu*), and food-distribution (*bali*).

Three major metals are prescribed for the making of such icons: gold (pure, *jatarupa* or alloy, *hataka*), silver (pure, *rupya*, or impure, *rajata*), and copper (pure, *tamra* or mixed, *misrita*). Although the first is

said to be the best, the last is preferred frequently, and for obvious reasons. More usually, however, bronze (*kamsya*) and brass (*arakuta* or *paittala*) are used for portable icons. In the South, icons made of a mixture of five metals (*pancha-loha*) are common : copper, gold, silver, brass and white lead. Iron (*ayasa*), lead (*sisaka*) and tin (*trapu*) are used for making images of wicked and terrific aspects, employed in magical rites.

The casting of bronze icons was perfected in India even during the days of Indus civilisation, as the splendid figure discovered at Harappa illustrates. We have an excellent casket-lid of the Kushana period (second century) found at Shah-ji-Dheri. The Gupta craftsmen appear to have perfected the casting technique, known as 'lost wax' or *cire perdue* (*madhu-cchishta-vidhana*), although Tamil-nadu became the center of this art about the fifth century. A remarkable specimen of the Gupta style is the seven-foot Buddha icon, weighing a ton and cast in two layers in bronze and copper, found at Sultanganj. Nagapattinam icons in the South date almost from the same period.

The original image is made in wax (bees's wax mixed with charcoal powder), and over this model a coat of soft clay is applied leaving an opening, and left to dry. When perfectly dry, the clay coating is heated so that the wax model within melts and comes out through the outlet, leaving the mould of the model.

Into the opening, then, the molten bronze is poured. When, after sometime, the metal cools, the clay coating is broken open, and we have the image cast in solid bronze.

By a variance of the procedure, hollow-casting is also accomplished. This is common in the northern region, especially in Nepal and Tibet. The purpose of making the image hollow is to insert into it a magical formula inscribed on a scroll, a piece of scriptural writing, or a precious relic of the holy teacher so as to infuse into the image an extraordinary power that otherwise it would not contain. The art-work that an icon is, becomes fit for worship only when it accommodates a supernatural energy.

The importance of this casting technique, detailed in texts like *Silpa-ratna*, consists in each classical bronze icon in India being a unique piece. The wax is lost and the clay mould is destroyed. There is thus no way of mechanically duplicating the artist's handiwork. Indian bronze icons have become most valuable on this account. It would be impossible for the same craftsman to produce two identical images in metal; it would necessarily be different each time. But the workmanship is altogether traditional and is so highly standardized that numerous icons fall into definite patterns, and look alike.

Craftsmanship involved in South Indian bronze

icons has become world-renowned. The craft is highly skilled, and the art is superb. While the rules of iconometry are scrupulously followed, each bronze reveals an individual touch that is unmistakable in a master-piece. The craftsman here has freed himself from a natural and compelling impact of stone-sculpture, for it is the stone



Srinivasa in Chera style of the
9th century now in the
Trivandrum Museum

icons that provide models for the metallic ones. The bronze-worker feels freer to incorporate his turns of fancy within the stylized pattern, as he mainly works with wax while modelling. Finishing the bronze icon is essentially a matter of the craftsman's skill and



Srinivasa, an ancient bronze icon

experience ; the wax model, on the other hand, is in every case a work of art.

The icon-maker enjoys a measure of freedom within the framework of canonical prescriptions. It is this utilization of freedom that stamps the icon with an individuality that is unique. The iconometric details have of course the beauty of the figure in view ; but the beauty they envisage is rigid and formal. The texts insist that the image-maker must do the work as it

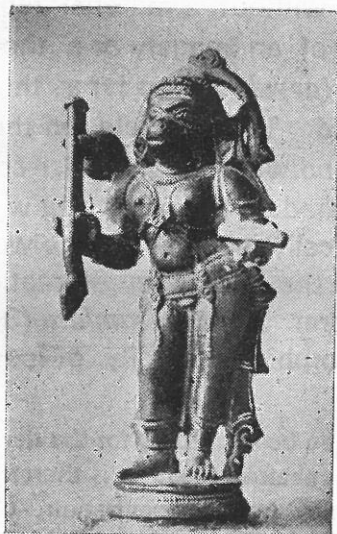


Rama - an old bronze image
found at Nagarjuna-Konda in
Andhra Pradesh ; around
3rd century A. D.

pleases him and as his fancy takes him (*yatha-ruchi*). And the artist has to take into consideration the modes of dress and decoration that are prevalent at the time (*Brihatsamhita*)—

देशानुरूपभूषणवेशालंकारमूर्तिभिः कार्या प्रतिमा ।

This gives the icon a fair degree of plasticity. This also helps to accommodate within stylized iconography numerous divinities that came to be introduced afresh from time to time.



Hanuman as the Exponent of Music ; bronze icon.

There is no canonical background for this image ; it is an improvisation

CHAPTER VI

ICONS FOR RITUALS

The objects of worship are broadly grouped into two sorts : abstract (*nishkala*) and concrete (*sakala*). The abstract is without a material representation : it consists merely of an imagery or a thought-construct. It is unmanifest (*avyakta*), so far as the worship situation is concerned. The concrete, on the other hand, is an icon, the handiwork of an artist-craftsman which represents the traditional idea of a worshipful deity. It can be practically involved in the worship ritual. It is usual to have the iconic representation in imitation of the human form. *Parama-samhita* (3,5,10) explains the anthropomorphic necessity of iconic representations :

"Worship can be done only for the deity with form, and not for an abstract idea. It is therefore that icons are made. They help concentration, contemplation, adoration and worship. The icon is a representation of the deity, and whatever is offered to the icon is really received by the deity. The devotee being human, he can communicate well with an icon with the human

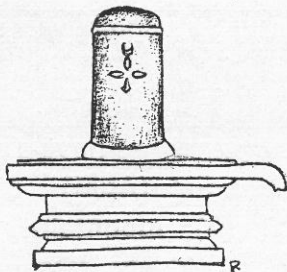
form. The human being therefore will reach the highest goal conceiving the really abstract Godhead in a human form, and worshipping the icon with great devotion''.

It is usual therefore for concrete objects of adoration in India to be human in aspect. Such objects have limbs and meanings (*sa-kala*). Instances are the Vishnu images, images of Rama and Krishna, the sportive forms of Siva, and the icons of goddesses like Lakshmi and Durga, as also several minor divinities. There are also several composite deities included in this group. Animal-human admixtures in the iconic representations are not unusual. Consider, as instances, Ganesha (god with elephant's head) Nara-simha ('man-lion') Haya-griva (human form with the horse's head), Pratyangira (goddess with the lion's head) and Kakamukhi (a *yogini* with the face of a crow).

Several iconic representations involve humanization of animals: animals represented in human forms. We have the icons of Hanuman (monkey), Garuda (kite), Nandi (bull), Subrahmanya (serpent), Daksha (ram), and incarnations of Vishnu such as Matsya (fish), Kurma (tortoise), Varaha (boar), and Kalki (horse). Elemental principles have also been endowed with iconic forms: fire (Agni), air (Vayu), water (Varuna), Sun (Surya), mountains (like the Kailasa, Meru and Vindhya), rivers (Ganga, Yamuna and Kaveri), trees and plants (like Asvattha and Tulasi)

have also their iconic representations with human involvement.

Vishnu in his twenty-four forms according to *Agni-Purana*) is conspicuously and almost invariably represented as pleasantly human, although his worship is also conducted through the aniconic *salagrama* stone. Siva, on the other hand, is usually worshipped in the aniconic *linga* form, although he has about eighteen sportive forms (*lila-murtis*) which are human in delineation. Aniconic representation comprehends both the abstract and concrete sorts ; it is described as 'ubhaya' (both) or 'misrita' (combined). The expression 'linga' strictly means a sign, a symbol. The aniconic linga is the symbol or an index of divine presence and power. It has no readily recognizable human or animal, or composite form. It is not, in this sense, concrete. But it does have a material shape with identifiable parts (like the *pitha*, *Gauri-patta*, *linga* and



vajra). Sometimes a human face is projected on the linga part (*mukha-linga*); or Siva is represented as coming out of the linga (*lingodbhava-murti*). Whatever the details, the linga is a shape that symbolizes the abstract idea of Godhead.

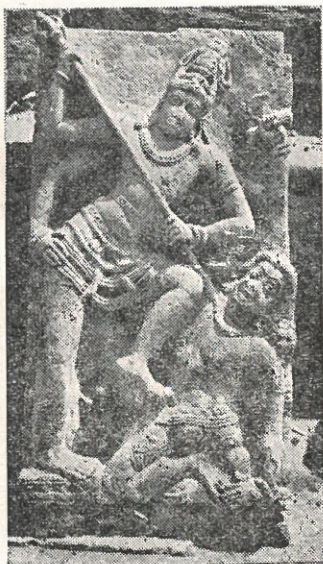
Icons are again divided into 'immobile' (*achala*) and 'mobile' (*chala*). The former are usually carved out of a monolith and fixed to the pedestal in the sanctum. It may be iconic like the representation of Vishnu or Durga; or it may be aniconic like the linga of Siva. Oftentimes, the Devi images are also represented in the form of a linga, especially in the coastal region. It is not unusual to find even Vishnu images so represented; many Ranganatha and Narasimha shrines in the South contain only lingas in the sanctum.

While the stationary icon in the sanctum is doubtless the main object of worship in a temple, it is not suitable for all the rituals enjoined in the texts and stylized in tradition. Portable images made in metal are, therefore, meant to officiate for the main icon in the rituals which are conducted outside the sanctum.

The mobile or portable icons are prescribed to be exact replicas in metal of the stationary stone icon in the sanctum. But when the main object of worship in the sanctum is an aniconic linga, its mobile counterpart will be Siva or Devi in a human iconic representation. It is altogether unusual to find the linga form

among the mobile icons. The sportive forms of Siva were first stylized in metal, and it is only later that the forms were imitated in stone. Divinities belonging to the Siva group, viz. Durga, Ganapati, Kartikeya (known by several names such as Subrahmanya, Kumara and Skanda) and Nandi are, like the Vishnu images, human and iconic in form, both in the stationary and portable versions.

The icons in human form are further classified into three types, depending on their bodily postures : seated (*asina*), standing (*sthita*) and recumbent (*sayana*).

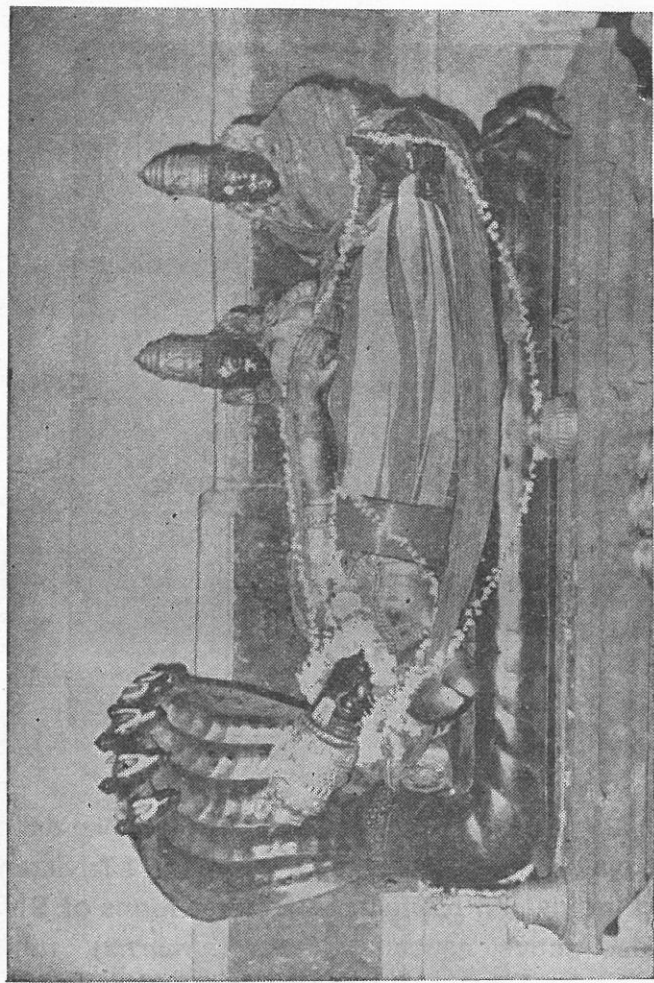


Siva as samhara - murti



Siva as Nataraja in Aralaguppe

There are, however, other postures also, like dancing (Nataraja), measuring the heavens (Trivikrama), killing the demon (Durga and sportive forms of Siva in the destructive aspects, *Samhara-murtis*), running (Hanuman), fighting (Virabhadra, Aghora) and teaching (Dakshina-murti, Vyasa, images of teacher-saints).



Ranganatha, Vishnu in a recumbent posture; stone image from Rangasthala

But these (with the exception of Durga images) are not usually icons meant for main worship; they serve an occasional or accessory function. We do not, therefore, frequently find these postures depicted in the immobile icon in the sanctum or its chief mobile representative. The main icons of worship are chiefly standing, occasionally seated (mostly goddesses and Ganesa) and rarely recumbent (as the Ranganatha or Anantasayana images). The portable icons meant for processional purposes will be as a rule in the standing posture, even when their originals in the sanctum are seated or reclining.

The ritual sequences in the temple necessitate several portable icons. In the Vishnu temples it is a common practice to have four such images in addition to the immobile and main icon in the sanctum (*panca-bera* system). The normal temple-rituals involve bathing the deity (*snapana*); making the first offering of food to it, and then in its presence to the attendant deities (*bali*); processions on the roads round the temple (*utsava*); and an assembly of devotees for several purposes in front of the deity (*koluvu, sabha*). One can see that offering food to the attendant deities, processions and assemblies are ceremonies that have to be gone through only outside the sanctum. Even elaborate bathing is hard to be conducted within the

small enclosure of the sanctum. Portable icons would naturally have to be used for these purposes.

Bathing the deity is an important ritual. In the Siva shrines, ceremonial bath is given to the main linga in the sanctum every day (and several times during the day on occasions), and a mobile icon for this purpose is seldom used. But in many Vishnu temples, the main icon is not given a bath every day; in the great temple at Tirumala-Tirupati, for instance, it is given once a week, on Friday.

Many early icons are not in granite or sandstone which stand frequent washing. When the main image is wooden (as Jagannathapuri in Orissa or the earlier Varadaraja shrine at Kanchipuram, Tamil Nadu), daily bath is ruled out, for the wood would decay. Many of such icons are painted over and are permanently decorated. Or the icon may be a stucco brick and mortar (*sudha*) work, as are the main images in Srirangam (Ranganatha) and Kanchipuram (Ulaganda-Perumal), both in Tamil Nadu. Normal bath in this case would damage the icon; special preparations (like *taila-kappu* in Srirangam) are to be made in order to preserve the icon.

Even images carved out of soft stone would wear out by frequent baths, as can be seen in Palani (the original icon) and Tirucchengode (Ardha-nari) in Tamil Nadu. Marble (which is a kind of chalk, *calcium*

corbonate) would also suffer by continuous exposure to water. It is, therefore, that a metallic image is specially assigned to receive the daily bath that is actually meant for the main icon in the sanctum. This icon is known as *snapana-bera*.

After the daily food is offered to the main deity, the scriptural prescription is that other deities who are attendant (*parivara-devatas*) and resident within the temple enclosure, as well as spirits and goblins that hover round the shrine, must be fed. This is called 'bali-harana', or carrying the sanctified food to the attendant deities, with the permission of the main deity to whom alone all offerings are made. These attendant deities would be symbolized by the *bali*-stones (or altars) that are located in several spots within the premises of the temple, the principal one being right in front of the sanctum. The procession of priests who carry the food-offerings to these altars is led by another small metallic icon who is supposed to deputize for the main and immobile icon in the sanctum. This icon is known as *bali-bera*.

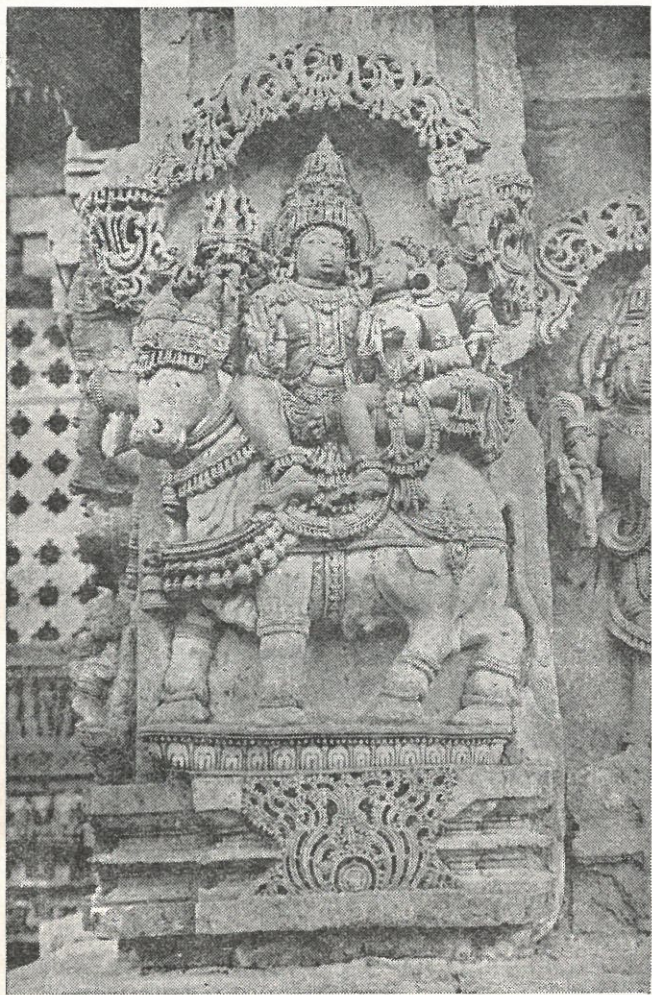
In most of the Siva shrines, the *bali*-icon will be in the form of a trident (*tri-sula*) or a spear (*sula*), as also in many Devi shrines. In the Vishnu shrines, however, it will be a replica of the main icon, or a conventional Vishnu in the standing (*sthanaka*) posture. In any case, the *bali*-icon will be a small one, and is

often carried about by a priest in his arms or on his head. In the more affluent temples, however, a palanquin (*sibika*) is used for the purpose.

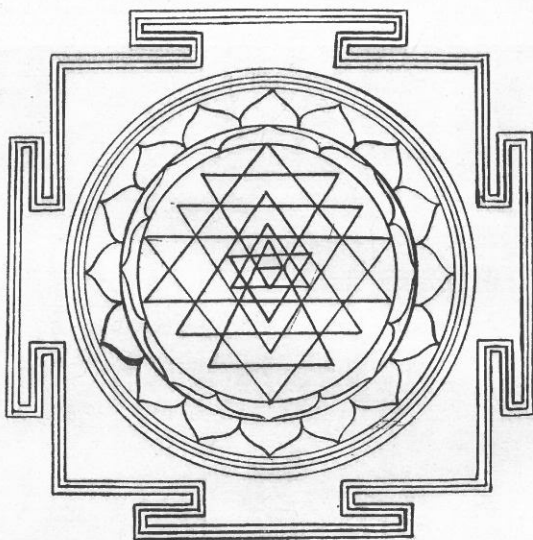
Processions round the town on occasions is a regular feature in all temples. And for this purpose, a specially prepared metallic icon (*utsava-bera*), richly decorated with ornaments and flowers is taken out on several stylized vehicles (*vahanas*) such as chariot (*ratha*), horse (*asva*), elephant (*gaja*), sun and moon, the celestial tree (*kalpa-taru*), the bull (*vrshabha*), the kite (*garuda*), and Hanuman.

Most of the celebrated South Indian bronzes belong to the variety of processional images. They will be of considerable height, although the canonical prescription is that a mobile icon should not exceed sixteen (according to a variant authority, nine) *angulas* in height. If an icon exceeds this limit, it should be regarded as a stationary image although metallic, and should not be carried about.

Besides these iconic and iniconic representations, several *mandalas* or *yantras* (also called *cakras*) are installed in many shrines for ceremonial worship. Such a device is essentially aniconic, but an intricate geometrical pattern predominates here. The basic form is a triangle, representing spiritual energy of the mother-goddess. The *yantra* has been characterized as symbolic of the cosmos in its entirety. The most well-known



Siva and Parvati on bull

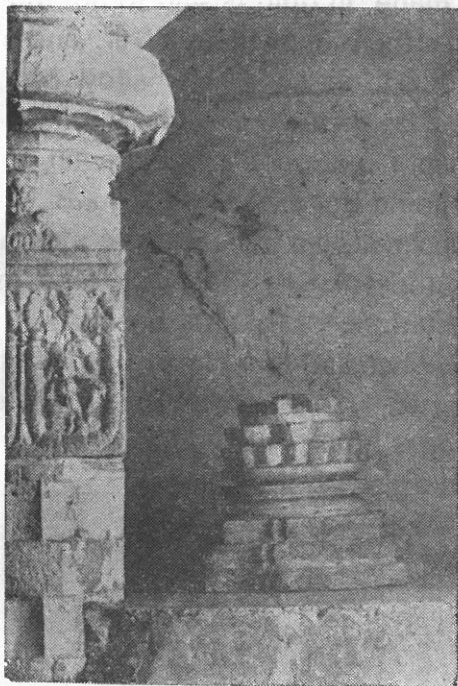


Linear representation of Sri-chakra

of the yantras is the *sri-yantra* (or srichakra), which is composed of 43 triangles (*trikona*), 28 'secret' spots (*marma-sthana*, the meeting place of three lines), 24 'joints' (*sandhi*, where two lines meet). The design is an integration of nine *chakras*, four of Siva (the 'male' principle) and five of 'Sakti' (the 'female' principle), which are superimposed on each other to show the union of the two principles. The whole *yantra* is said to be a representation of the Devi, Raja-rajesvari. There is a corpus of Tantrik commentarial literature explaining the significance of this *yantra* and prescribing the details of ritualistic worship.

There are two types of representation of this yantra, graphic and iconic. The first type is where the

yantra is inscribed (or etched) on a flat copper plate (or a gold or silver sheet). The second type is an aniconic representation like the *linga*, sculpted in quartz, crystal, gem or stone, or cast in metal, usually *panca-*



A sculptural representation of Sri-chakra, called Meru ; from the temple at Sannati

loha. This second representation is styled Meru as it resembles the mythical mountain of that name. There are several temples in South India where the worship of Srichakra figures prominently, like Kanchipuram

(Kamakoti), Chidambaram (Sammelana-chakra), Kurtalam, Avadaiyar-Koyil, Jambukesvara (Lalita), Sringeri (Sarada), Kollur (Mukambika) and Tiruvidaimududur.

Among the aniconic Srichakra, the one carved in crystal or made in gold is said to be the best, after which comes the one made in silver; and next in merit is the one made in copper or alloy of five metals. There is no size restriction when it is carved in stone, crystal or gem; but when cast in metal the weight of the metal should not exceed eight *tolas*.

The specimens are of three types : 'mobile' (*chara*), which are infused with life every time they are worshipped, 'stationary' (*achala* or *sthira*), which are permanently installed at a place, and 'fit to be worn' (*dharanayogya*), viz. which are suitable for being carried on ones body, either as a pendant in a necklace or inscribed on a ring.

CHAPTER VII

THE VALUE OF ICONS

The symbolism of the Indian icon extends to its postural and decorative details. Icons are classified according to the classical *guna* they signify or embody. It is well-known that the theory of three *gunas*, 'sattva' (goodness, brightness, purity, wisdom), 'rajas' (activity, energy, emotion), and 'tamas' (wickedness, dullness, sloth, resistance) is an abiding contribution of the Sankhya school to Indian thought. The entire universe (and every individual) is constituted of different combinations of these three *gunas*, with one of them predominant in an object, or on an occasion.

Images that are seated having an aspect of tranquillity, and showing the *mudras* (hand-gestures) of boon-giving (*varada*) or offering protection (*abhaya*) are said to belong to the *sattvika*-group. Images that stand, or ride on a vehicle (*vahana*), show the *mudras* of valour or challenge, and bear in hands weapons answer to the *rajasa* description. Images that ride on a vehicle, hold in the hands terrible weapons of war-

fare, and have an aspect of cruelty belong to the *tamasa* group. The first group is generally benign and happy (*saumya*), while the last is fierce and destructive (*ugra* or *samhara*).

Images of Vishnu as Para-Vasudeva, Lakshmi-Narayana, Siva as Sadasiva, Somaskanda and Dakshina-murthi, Ganesa, Aiyappa (*sasta*), Lakshmi, Rajarajesvari and Sarasvati are illustrations of the *Sattvika* type. *Maya-sastra*, an iconographic manual, describes this type as characterized by eyes looking



Relief panel of Vaikuntha-Narayana or
Paravasudeva, in the cave-temple at Namakkal
(Salem Dst. Tamil Nada)

straight and serene, and by a peaceful aspect ("sama-dristis tu santa cha"); it brings quiet happiness to the devotee and helps in the dawning of wisdom in him.

Images of Vishnu in the *sthanaka* (standing) posture like Trivikrama, Raja-gopala, Srinivasa, Janardana and Kesava; Siva as Bhikshatana, Nataraja, Umalingana and Vishahara; composite images like Hari-Hara and Ardha-Nari, images of Devi in the *sthanaka* posture; Ganesha in a *dance stance*, Rama with Sita are illustrations of the *rajasa* type.



Vishnu in his incarnation as Trivikrama to subdue the demon Bali. Relief panel in narrative style from the cave-temple at Namakkal



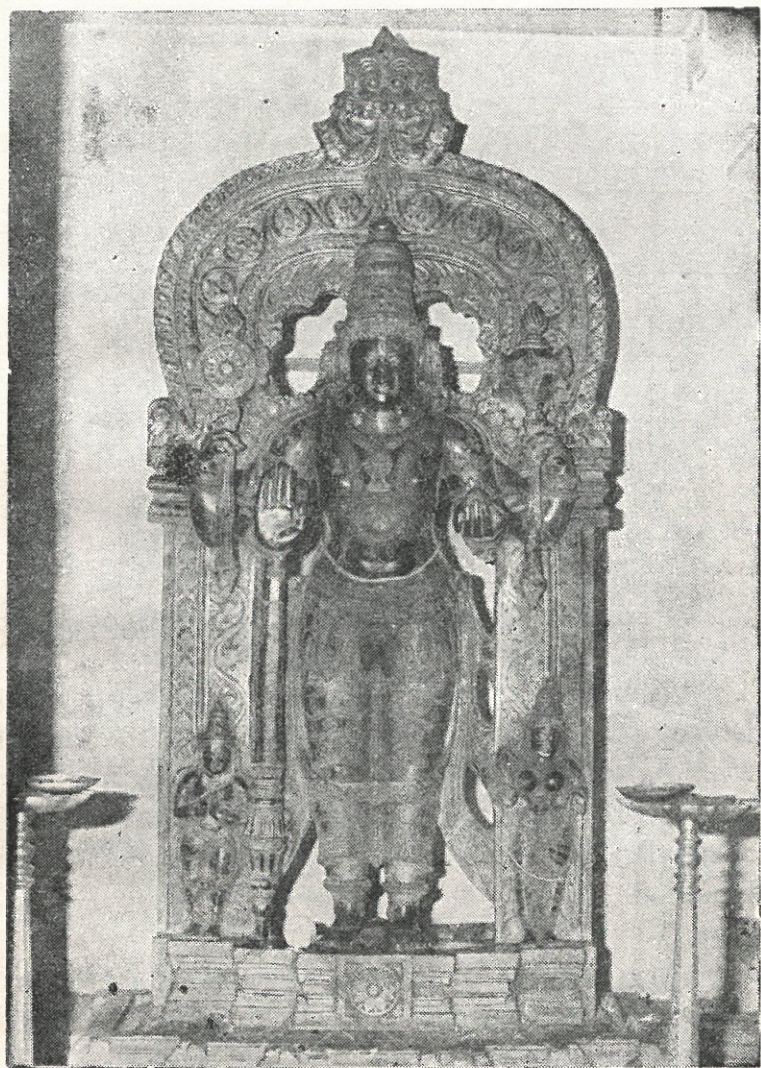
Lakshmi



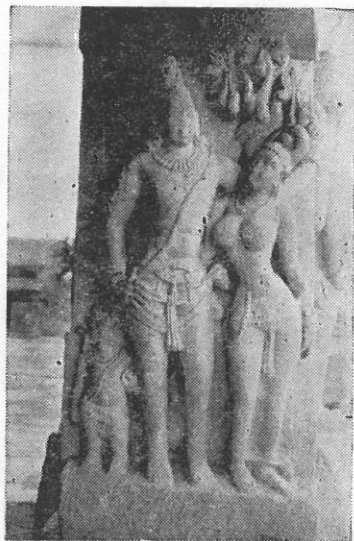
Ganesha in a standing posture ; bronze image



Durga - bronze icon in the worship of the great musician - composer, Muttusvami Dikshitar



Vira - Narayana



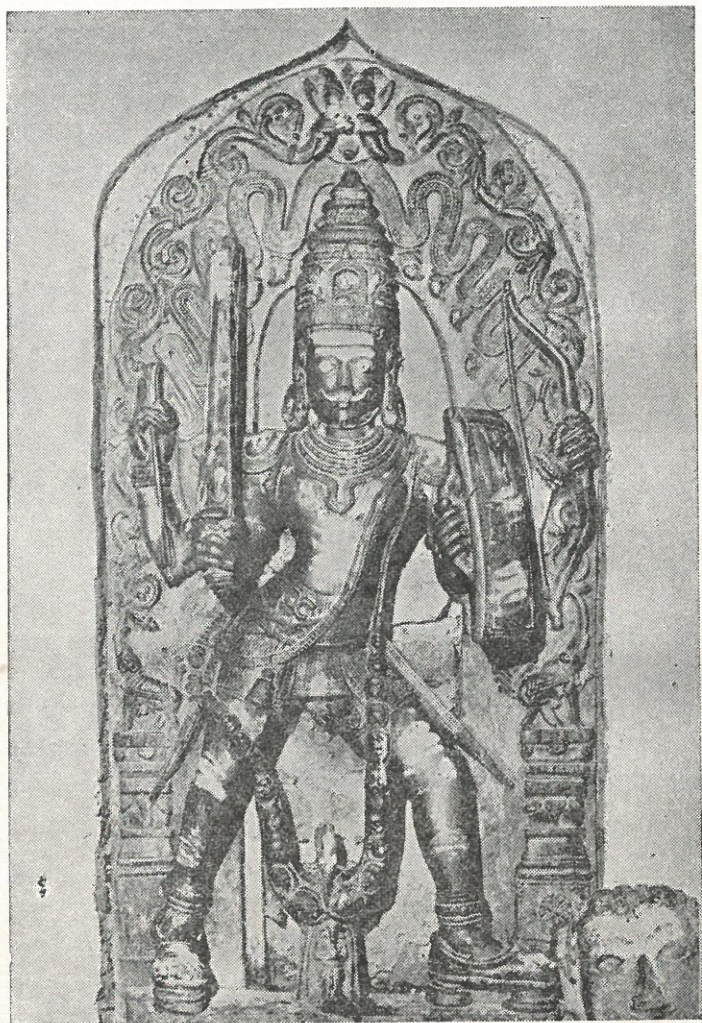
An unusual representation of Virabhadra - Chalukyan sculpture in bold relief on a pillar

Vishnu as Narasimha, Krishna as Kaliya-damana, Durga riding on the lion while killing the demon Mahisha, Skanda riding on the peacock and leading the army of gods against the demons, and Virabhadra destroying Daksha's sacrifice belong to the *tamasa* type.

This typology should not be taken to mean that some gods by themselves are 'good' and others 'bad'. A value-judgment of this sort is not indicated. The *sattvika* icon is worshipped for the final liberation of the devotee from phenomenal involvement. The *rajasa*,



Durga killing Mahishasura



Virabhadra icon



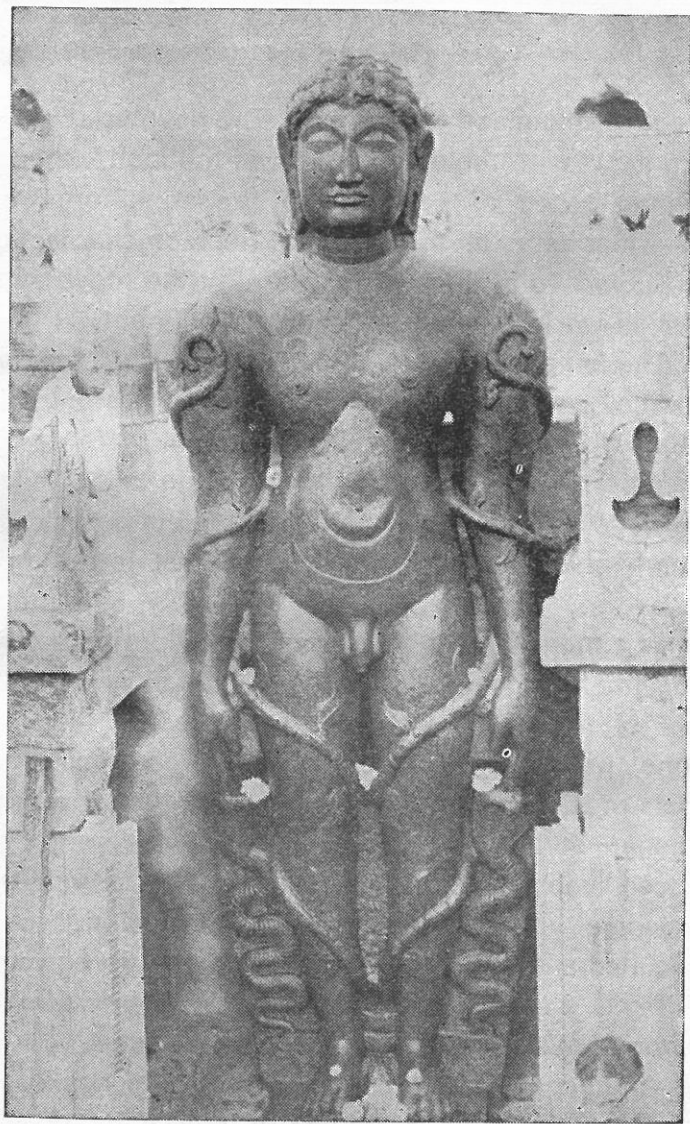
Narasimha in his ferocious aspect, emerging from the pillar and tearing open the bowels of the demon Hiranyakasipu. Relief panel from Namakkal cave-temple however, is worshipped for protection and prosperity, and for the fulfilment of normal desires. The *tamasa* images on the other hand, are invoked in times of stress, danger and challenge.

Any god may assume any of these aspects. Vishnu as Yoga-narasimha is really benign although his countenance is fierce. Siva as Dakshina-murthy is actually destructive (-he stamps on the *apasmara-purusha* with his right foot-), although the general aspect is calm and meditative ; likewise Nataraja. Durga riding on the lion and killing Mahisha has a calm and pleasant

expression on her face. The warrior Rama may stand in a quiet posture, like the warrior Skanda standing as an innocent boy (Kumara or Bala-subrahmanya).

Among the Vishnu images, it is usual to notice four varieties (according to *Marichi-samhita*): *yoga* (meditative), *bhoga* (pleasant), *vira* (valourous) and *abhicharika* (wicked). The bodily posture, and weapons in the hands (Sankha and Chakra) are the same in all varieties; even facial expression may be the same. But the image is *yoga* when it is meant for ascetics seeking final beatitude, *bhoga* when it is meant to be worshipped by common folk for the obtainment of protection and prosperity, *vira* when worshipped by warriors for the conquest of enemies, and *abhicharika* when magicians and sorcerers resort to it in the course of their professional pursuits. However, the manuals suggest that the *yoga* type of Vishnu images is to be installed on banks of rivers and in solitary spots; the *bhoga* type in the midst of human settlement; the *vira* type outside the township; and the *abhicharika* on hill-tops, in forts and in the forest fastness.

According to *Archana-prakasa*, however, *yoga*, *bhoga* and *vira* are three forms of energy (*sakti*) in any icon. The first refers to the pedestal (*pitha* or ritualistic installation of the icon), the second to the peculiar power (*sakti*) that is contained in the image properly consecrated, and the third to the physical or material



Bahubali (Gommata), a monolith on top of hillock near Mysore, Gommata-giri. He represents the ideal ascetic

aspect of the image (*bahyalaya*). The devotee is at first in contact with the exterior form of the icon, then he becomes aware of the import of the iconic form, and finally meditates on the source of the iconic projection. The iconic form thus is a crutch for the devotee to move ahead in the path of spiritual fulfilment.

The images of the Buddha and Jina (a *tirthankara*) are excellent illustrations of icons providing adorable models for man's spiritual aspirations. We should remember that it was the Buddha image that provided enormous encouragement to Indian iconography. In its early phase of development, Buddhist iconography was averse to delineating the supremely enlightened one as a mere human being ; he was represented by a *bodhi*-tree, a royal insignia like the wheel or umbrella, a pair of sacred foot-imprints, or a vacant diamond-throne (*vajrasana*), as illustrated by the early sculptured panels of Sanchi, Amaravati and Nalanda. It was the Gandhara style that broke this resistance, and commenced representing the Buddha like a valorous, handsome young prince or like a miserable ascetic, emaciated and moribund. The Mathura style corrected this trend, and emphasized the spirit of composure and wisdom that the Buddha image symbolized.

An image of great charm and significance is that of Prajnaparamita, the goddess of transcendental wisdom, within the Mahayana framework. The image

stylized with several variants owes its origin to the deification of the *Prajnaparamita* literature around the first century after Christ. The deity became very popular around 300 A. D. and its hold on the Buddhist masses in India continued till about the eleventh century. A manual of rituals (of Tantrik origin), *Sadhana-mala*, provides not only a description of this image but an account of its symbolism. She represents the highest knowledge that enlightens and liberates.

Seated on the adamantine seat (*vajrasana*), she is in a meditative posture, holding the *Prajnaparamita* text



Gandhara Buddha

Buddha in
Gandhara style

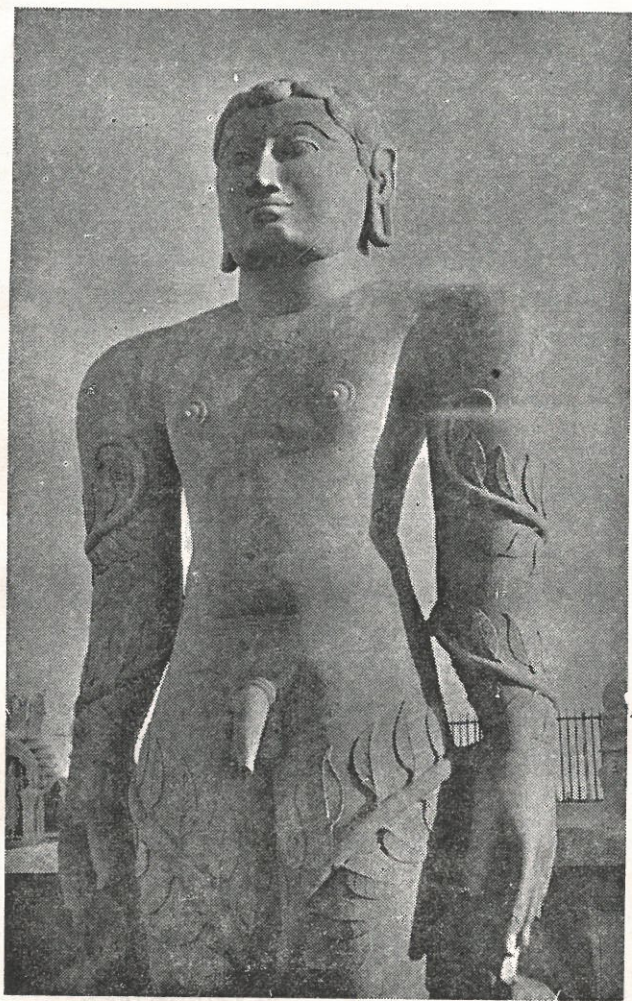


Mathura Buddha

Buddha in
Mathura style

and rosary in her hands, and assuming a teaching (or wheel-turning) gesture. She is the Supreme Female ; and the feminine (or generative) aspect of wisdom is symbolized by the lotus, which motif is prominently involved in her icon. The graphic representation of this deity is more popular (especially in manuscripts and on banners) than the sculptured. But the magnificent stone icon from Java, sculptured about the thirteenth century and now in the Leiden Museum, is well-known.

Perhaps there was an independent trend among the Mathura and Gupta sculptors that crystallized the representation of the twenty-four *tirthankara* icons, with their human individuality lost in the general portrayal of the *kayotsarga* or *pratima-yoga* posture but the uniqueness of a *tirthankara* being symbolized by an emblem. The idea of the Jina, serene and untainted by worldly ills or cares, erect and nude, was also an ideal. The model was followed not only for the *tirthankaras* but also for lesser saints like Bahubali and Bharata. The Sravana-belgola colossus of Bahubali (called here Gommata), measuring 58 feet in height, is a well-known example of the *kevali*-ideal translated into a monolith. The contrasting imagery of the *tirthankara* as an emancipated saint and as a prince steeped in worldly riches (Jivanta-svami) is a favourite theme in Jaina iconography.



Bahubali on the Sravanabelgola hill

The *tirthankaras* are further distinguished by characteristic male and female guardian-angels (*Yakshas* and *Yakshinis*), who also figure prominently in iconography. Many divinities of the folk religion survive in the Jaina framework, like Brahma riding on the horse, Bhairavi the terrible goddess, and Sruta-devata the scripture incarnated. Each of these icons represents an idea relevant to the Jaina discipline ; the icon is more



Siva in a dancing posture

of a symbol than a shape. The Tantrik prescription of *Yantras* is also involved in the Jaina approach to the worship of these divinities.



Siva as Nataraja

Among the Siva images, the most interesting and also the most bristling with symbolism is the dancer Nataraja (Tandavesvara), whose home is Chidambaram in Tamil Nadu. This aspect of Siva is said to have been incarnated among the Dikshitar Brahmins of Tillai 3000, the original capital of which was Tiruvenkada (called *Adi-Tillai*). The Chola monarch Parantaka I (907-955 A.D.) was a great devotee of this aspect of Siva, and he built 'the sky-hall' (*dabhra-*



Siva - Nataraja ; Hoysala panel

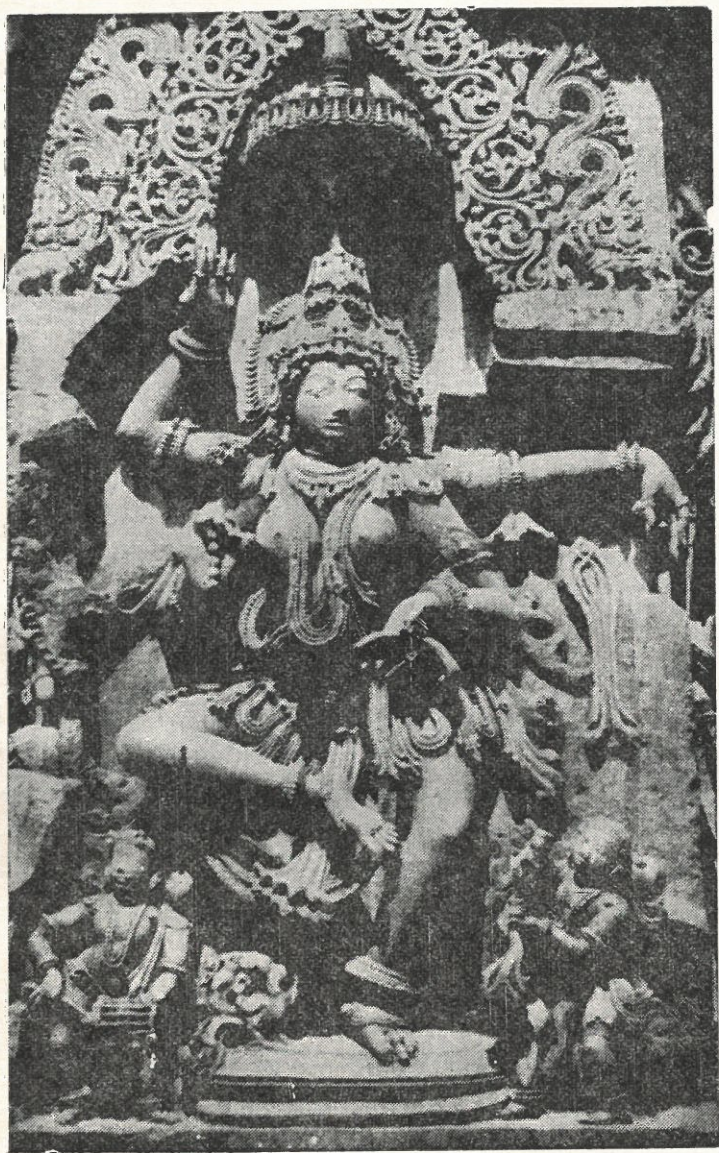
sabha), covered with a roof of gold. It is this hall, in which Siva is supposed to have danced, that came to be called *Pon-ambalam* or Chidambaram. The divine dancer whose Tamil name is Adavallan, became the patron-god of the Chola Kings, and under their patronage numerous metallic icons of Nataraja were made and cast in Tamil Nadu. The most celebrated among such images are the ones of Tiruvalangadu, Kuram and Nallur. All these belong to the latter half of the ninth century.

The significance of the Chidambaram shrine of Nataraja is the representation of the 108 dance-modes (*karanas*) stylized in Bharata's *Natya-sastra* with descriptive labels on two of the inner sides of the gateway of *gopurams* (East and West). We find similar plastic representations on one of the tiers of the sanctum of the Rajaraja Temple at Tanjore and on the eastern *gopuram* of Sarngapani temple at Kumbhakonam. The dance is said to symbolize the five acts of God (*pancha-krtiya*): creation, preservation, destruction, embodiment and release.

Inspired by the Nataraja model, there are images of other gods also in dance postures. There is an unusual sculpture of dancing Narasimha on a pillar in the great temple on the Tirumalai hills. Krishna is often represented as dancing on the hood of the dragon Kaliya or dancing with a ball of butter in hand. There are old sculptures of dancing Ganesa also.



Ganesha in a dance stance ; Hoysala sculpture



Dancing Sarasvati ; stone in Hoysala style



The Boy - Krishna represented in a dancing posture ; bronze icon

Many of the hand and finger gestures (mudras), and bodily postures and bends (bhangis), employed in classical dance modes, are also involved in iconographic delineation, with slight variations. This renders the icons full of grace and charm. And during the ascendancy of the Chola style, the gestures and bends became all too prominent, especially in metallic icons.

The characteristic weapons, like the discus, conch and mace for Vishnu ; trident, kettle-drum, and fire for Siva ; noose and goad for Ganesha ; bow and arrow for Rama ; skull-mace (*khatvanga*) and long spear (*sula*) for Durga ; broad sword and shield of

Virabhadra, and so on together with the manner in which they are held, got stylized during the Chola period of Indian iconography. The weapons have their own specific symbolisms, which contribute to the general symbolism of the entire icon. Some of the symbols have a Vedic background (wheel, fire, lotus, spear, bow etc.) ; and some can be traced back to the Tantric prescriptions : *khatvanga*, skull, bell, *bijapura*, etc.), and some to the Puranic legends (antelope, conch, mace, thunderbolt, broad-sword etc).

Symbols assist in contemplation. An icon is worshipped in order that it can serve as an effective foundation for sustained attention on the divine nature and power—

आलम्बनस्य प्राधान्येन ध्यानं प्रतीकोपास्तेः ।

The devotee seeks to rise from the details that symbolize to the subject that is symbolized. The artistic quality in the icon facilitates the holding of attention there, and the stylized details (like posture, gestures and weapons) quicken the mental processes of ready superimposition and abstraction. The foundation (*adhithana*) viz. the icon, is only initially important ; what is of relevance throughout, however, is the figure that is sought to be abstracted from this foundation (*aropya*), viz. the nature of Godhead. The expression *prati-ma* or *pratika* for the icon signifies

that being different from Godhead (being a materia thing, made by man) it indicates and brings about the experience of Godhead—

तद्विन्नत्वे सति तद्बोधकत्वं प्रतीकत्वम् ।

As a symbol, an icon need not be in human form. By a conventional association, any natural object could function like an aniconic icon : rounded ammonites with spirals cut naturally in the holes (*Salagrama*) stand for Vishnu, white quartz for Siva, metallic stone for Devi, crystal for Sun, and red stone for Ganesa.

CHAPTER VIII

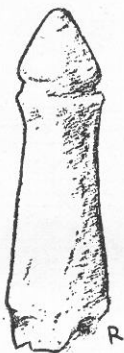
ANTIQUITY OF SIVA - LINGA

Siva is chiefly worshipped in the aniconic *linga*, although his iconic representations (*murti*) are popular, especially in South India. It is not accidental that the form of the *linga* resembles the phallus, and the word itself means 'gender', or more specifically the male generative organ. However, this detail does not dominate over the Indian imagination with regard to *Siva-linga*.

The expression 'linga' also means, and in a more significant manner, "sign", "symbol", index: it is an image of the unmanifest but omnipresent divine principle. It is to be noted that lingas (called *bana-linga*) worshipped in homes usually take the form of unusual pebbles picked up from some sacred river (like Narmada), and they do not in any way remind one of the phallus. Nor do the worship rituals, or the texts recited during them, contain even a remote reference to the cult of the phallus. It is a fact, however, that many *puranic* legends bring in sex to explain the origin

of Siva-linga. The folk fancy that is illustrated here has not survived in the sophisticated take-over.

A suspiciously phallic representation has been recovered from the site of the Indus Valley civilization, and it is identified as a *linga*. We cannot be sure of this identification, but the sculptured lingam found at Gudimallam (Parasu-ramesvara temple) in Andhra Pradesh is unmistakably phallic in delineation. The date of this curious image carved out of a foot-thick



Linga from Indus culture

hard stone and polished, has been given as second or first century before Christ (according to Ananda K. Coomaraswamy). The art involved in it is decidedly prior to the Kushana stylization. On the front part of the shaft has been carved in bold relief a male deity with a battle-axe, a water-vessel and a ram in his two hands, standing on a crouching dwarf. The five-foot

tall icon is indeed remarkably realistic. It may be the earliest iconic representation of Siva within the aniconic framework of a *linga*; there is neither the characteristic pedestal (*pitha*) nor the typical *arghya* of later lingas.

Likewise an early Siva image (now in the Lucknow Museum) found at Bhita is a composite one, aniconic as well as iconic. This image, may be said to belong to the *mukha-linga* variety, containing a human face in the linga framework. Here, not only the head but the deity's bust also is sculpted in relief, one of the hands in the abhaya gesture and the other holding a water-vessel. The image has been inscribed in Brahmi characters which suggest an early date (about the first century before Christ). The art employed in the icon has been described as a specimen of the Sunga style which matured in Magadha around the same period.

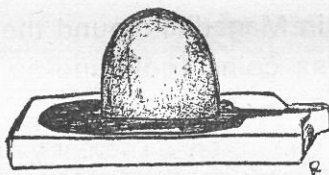
The Kushana coins (gold and copper) of the first and second centuries A.D. portray Siva in a decidedly anthropomorphic manner. The early Ujjain coins have only the two-armed Siva (like the Gudimallam icon), holding a club in one hand and a water-vessel in the other; some coins make him hold a trident or a stick. Siva is found also to be represented in these coins in a theriomorphic manner by a bull.

Patanjali (third century B.C.) is acquainted with Siva icons, and not with the aniconic *linga*. Going back, we do not come across any reference to *linga*-

worship in the Vedic literature, although Siva (Rudra) was a recognized divinity even in *Rigveda*. And we have the well-known and so-called Pasupati-seal in the remains of the Indus Valley Civilization. It may indeed be a representation of Siva.

From the available evidences, the conclusion suggested is that till about the first century A.D., Siva was worshipped only in the anthropomorphic and iconic form. The employment of *linga* as his symbol may have come into vogue in the subsequent period.

Siva is said to have 'manifest' (*vyakta*) or iconic, 'unmanifest' (*avyakta*) or abstract, and 'both manifest and unmanifest' or aniconic (*vyaktavyakta*) forms. The *linga* illustrates the third form : it is manifest and is

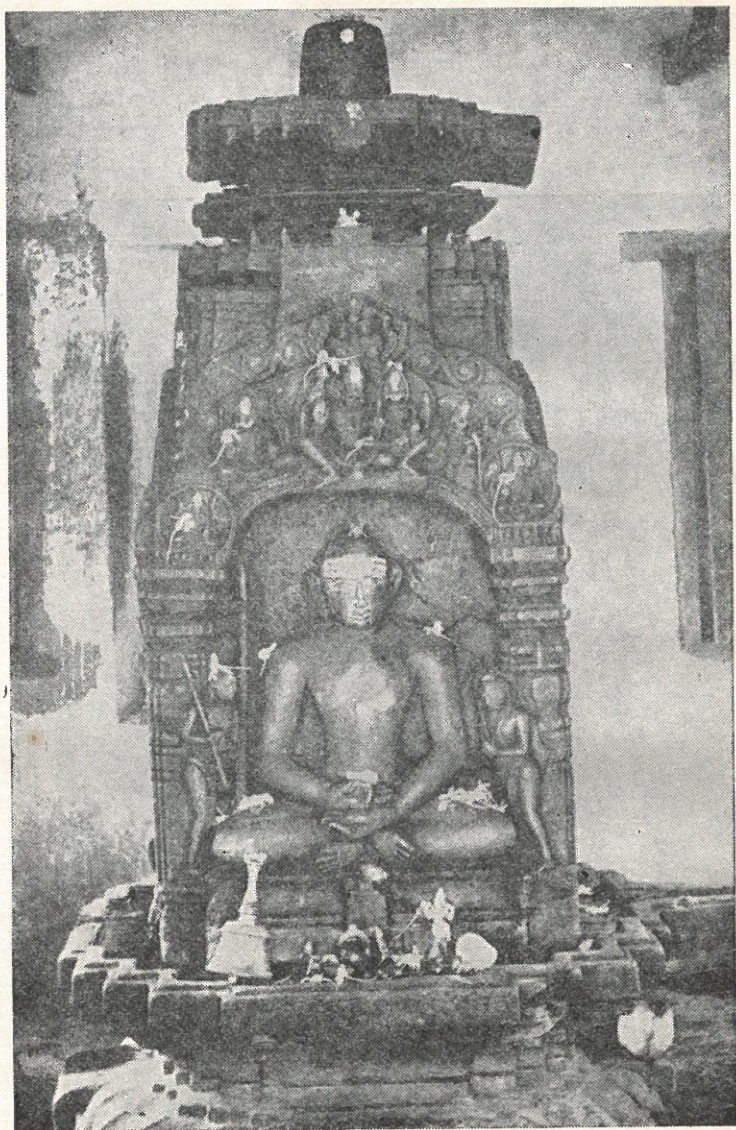


Linga

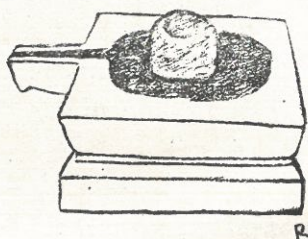
symbolic of divine presence, but devoid of details that could be regarded as human. However, the *linga* is further classified into *nishkala* (having no parts) and *sakala* (having identifiable parts). The former variety of *linga* is a mere monolithic shaft, from one inch to as much as 144 inches in height. The second variety



Relief in stone, often identified as Tri-murti or Mahesa
from the Elephanta caves



Chatur-Vidyasvara murti from a temple in Sringeri ; said to be a representation of the saint Vidya-tirtha. Interesting here is the iconic involvement in the linga



Linga with prominent
yoni - pedestal

consists of parts such as the linga proper (shaft or protuberance), a flat container (*yoni* or *Gauripatta*), a pedestal (*pitha*), and sometimes a round ball on top of the linga (known as *vajra*). The scriptural prescription is that the whole piece should be monolithic, and should have no joints except for the *vajra*.

A reference in the *Mahabharata* (Sauptika-parvan, 17, 13-14) gives a clue to the source of the latter variety. Siva appeared in answer to the prayer of Asvatthama as a golden altar (*vedi*) with fire emanating from it. The *linga*-shaft stands for the fire element, and the altar is the earth element (*mrnmayam sthandilam*, as suggested in the episode of the hunter and Arjuna in the '*Vanaparvan*' section of the epic). An iconographic and Tantrik text, *Ajitagama*, describes *linga* as a "pillar of light" (*jyotih stambha*), and explains it as the fire in which all beings disappear (*li*) and from which all beings burst forth as sparks from fire (*ga*).

The *linga* has three distinct parts. The top one-third of the shaft is visible, and this is the *linga* proper that is worshipped. It is called the Siva-aspect (*Rudra-bhaga* or *Puja-bhaga*). The middle one-third of the shaft is unseen, hidden in the pedestal. While the above is looked upon as 'male', this embedded detail is considered the 'female', although it is called the Vishnu-aspect (*Vishnu-bhaga*). The bottom one-third goes into the structure known as *Nandyavarta*, accommodated inside the earth. This is the Brahma-aspect, regarded as 'neuter'. Iconographical prescription recommends the top portion to be in the round (cylindrical), the middle eight-sided, and the bottom squarish (*Ajitagama*).

There are differential iconometric details which are prescribed for the three parts, thus resulting in several varieties of the *linga*. When the three parts are equal (the proportion being 1-1-1), the *linga* is designated 'sarvato-bhadra'. When the Siva and Vishnu-parts, themselves being equal, exceed the Brahma-part, it is 'Svastika' (4-4-3). Texts like *Aparajitapriccha* mention thirty-three kinds of *lingas*, both 'mobile' (*chala*) and 'immobile' (*achala*), from 24 inches in height to 216 inches.

Making a *linga* under a cubit is not recommended. The lowest kinds of *lingas* are between a cubit and three cubits; the intermediary ones range between

four and six cubits, while the best ones are between seven and nine. Metallic lingas are of eight kinds, and when between three inches and sixteen they are regarded as 'mobile', and when this limit is exceeded, the *linga* must be installed in a place permanently.

Temporary *lingas* may be made out of sand, rice-grains, cooked rice, rice-flour, clay, cow-dung, sandal-paste, jaggory, butter, tender sprouts or flowers. Twelve varieties of such *lingas* are enumerated, and no iconometric regulation is involved in them. They are to be dissolved in water as soon as the worship is over.

Permanent *lingas* made in stone are of four types, according to the variety of stone (coloured white, dark, red or yellow). The minimum height prescribed for a stone *linga* is 24 inches, and the maximum 216 (according to *Aparajita-priccha*).

Wooden *lingas* are likewise distinguished by the type of wood used, and they are of eight kinds. There is a prohibition against making an wooden linga under sixteen inches in height.

While these are man-made *lingas*, the natural *lingas* are said to be obtained in sacred spots like Sri-saila, Amara-kantaka and Narmada river-bed. These are called 'bana-lingas', and the prescriptions of form and size do not apply to them.

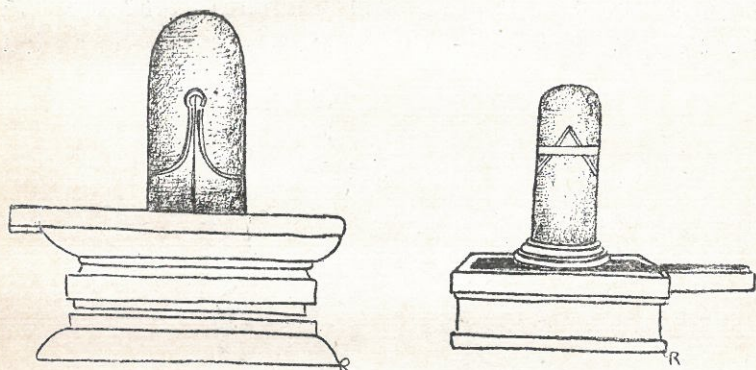
The part of the linga that is worshipped is the visible shaft, which in fact is called the *linga*. The top

of this portion is never flat but rounded off. But there are four main types of rounding off (*sirovartana*) in the manner of an egg of the hen (*kukkutanda*), a gourd (*trapusha*), an umbrella (*chatra*) or half-moon (*ardhachandra*). There is a fifth kind which resembles a water-bubble (*budbuda*). The iconometric proportion of these types in terms of the three parts of the linga (Rudra, Vishnu and Brahma) are: 9-8-7 in the 'egg' type; $8\frac{1}{2}$ -8- $7\frac{3}{4}$ in the 'gourd' type; 8-8-8 in the 'umbrella' type; and $7\frac{1}{2}$ -8- $8\frac{1}{2}$ in the 'half-moon' type.

On the Siva portion of the *linga* (the visible shaft) may be carved flattened vertical strips (*dharas*), usually, five, seven or nine. The strips may be as many as 64. Or there may be the carving in relief of the human face on the linga, in which case the linga is called 'mukha-linga'. This type of linga which is iconic-aniconic is an ancient one. The earlier practice was to have just one face, but later three, four, and even five faces became common. Two faces are never carved, except in the linga meant to be used in blackmagic (*Isana-siva-gurudeva-paddhati*, 2,40). It is a rule that it is only the linga where the Siva's part is in excess of the other two that the faces could be carved. The texts prescribe that the Siva's part of the linga is to be divided in three equal parts, and the face should cover one and a half of these parts.

When the face is not sculpted on the *linga*, there

may be decorative designs such as "the elephant's eyes", "cow's ear", trident, circle, bud, outline of the conch or umbrella, or paddy-grain. This marking is known as 'lakshanoddhara' or 'brahma-sutra'. The rule is that the Siva-part of the linga is divided into



Markings on the linga

three parts, only the lower two parts being used for such marking.

We have mentioned earlier that despite the wide employment of the aniconic linga for worship of Siva, his iconic representations are popular. Texts mention several of these stylized representations : 16 according to *Kasyapa-silpa* and 18 according to *Silpa-ratna*. And these have been grouped into two main divisions : 'benevolent' (*anugraha*) and 'malevolent' (*samhara*). The former is distinguished by the gentle and benign

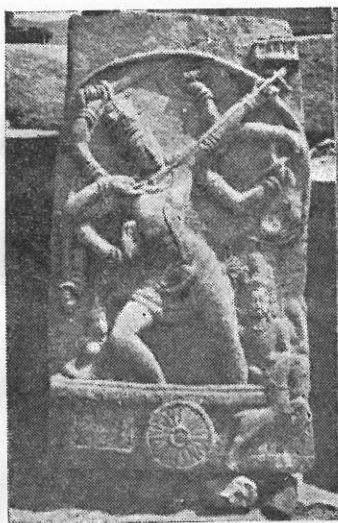
aspect and is represented as conferring boons on devotees, while the latter is fierce and found in the act of killing or subduing the wicked.

Being seated in an easy posture (Sukhasana), donning the moon on his matted locks (Chandra-sekhara), riding his bull (Vrshavahana), accommodating Ganga on his head (Gangadhara), teaching the great sages (Dakshina-murti), bestowing a boon on his



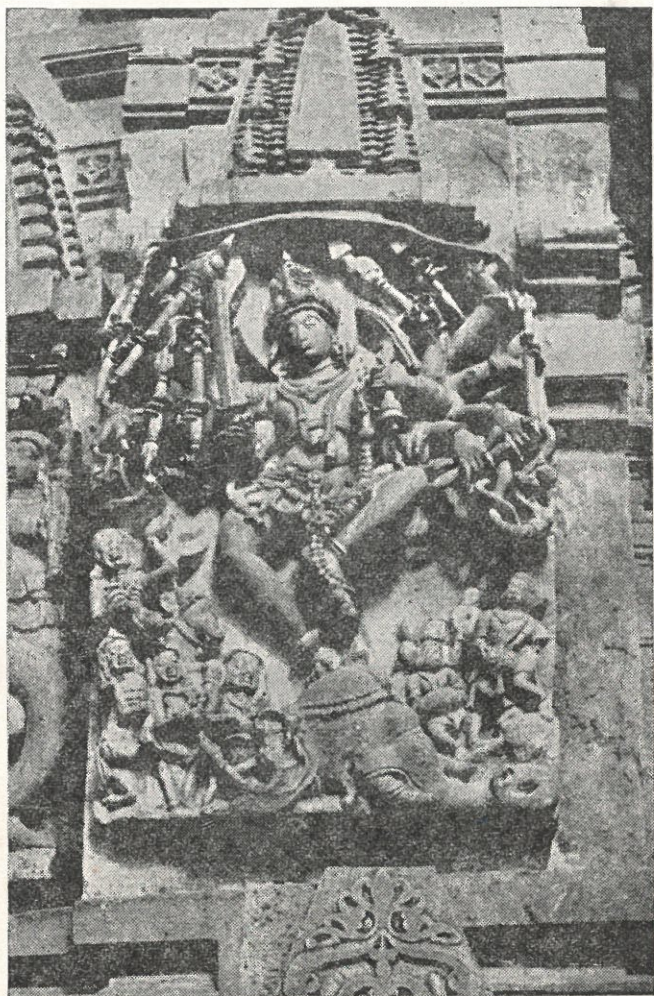
Ardha-narisvara ; Siva as
'man-woman' ; stone image

attendant Chandesa or on Arjuna (Vara-pradana), and emanating with an iconic form from the aniconic linga (Lingodbhava) are among the situations that inspire the 'benevolent' icons. Illustrations of the other division are subduing death (Kalari), tearing down the demon in elephant's form (Gajasurasamhara), and fighting with Tripura (Tripurari).



Siva as Tripurantaka

Interesting among the iconic representations of Siva are Nataraja, Ardha-nari (half male and half female), Hari-Hara (composite Vishnu-Siva), Kalyana-sundara (while wedding parvati) and Bhikshatana (on



Siva as Gajasura - Samhara-murti, killing the Elephant-Demon and dancing on his head ; Hoysala panel

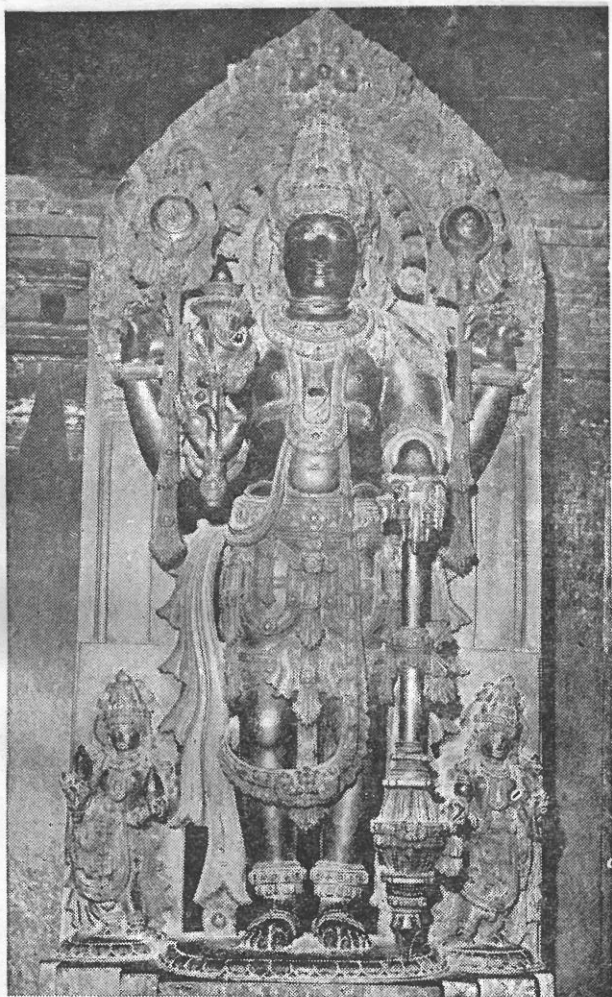
his begging round). Every one of these iconic representations has a Puranic legend in its background. South Indian temples belonging to the Chola period contain numerous metallic icons of excellent workmanship illustrating the above situations in which Siva is glorified.

CHAPTER IX

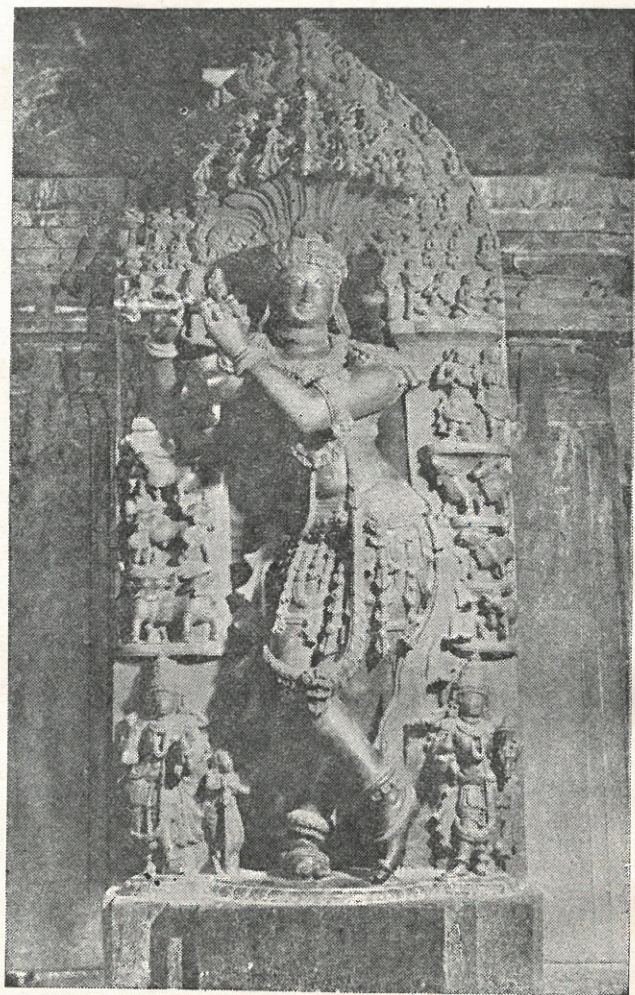
THE VISHNU IMAGES

Vishnu is a divinity of Vedic antiquity. The prevalence of the Bhagavata cult during the centuries prior to the birth of Christ popularized his worship all over the country. We will deal with the five-fold forms of Vishnu that developed incidental to the *Vyuha* theory, in a future volume, when we deal with the Pancha-ratra-Agama. Panini and Patanjali (several centuries before Christ) were acquainted with the iconic worship of Vasudeva and Sankarshana (later Balarama and in a variant form Subrahmanya, the Snake-deity). The heroes of the Vrishni clan were being worshipped in temples (*vatikas*) and in the shape of icons (*pratima*).

The iconic form appears to have been crystallized as early as the first century before Christ, for there is an inscribed sculpture of the "four-armed (*chaturbhuj*) Bhagavan" of that date, found in the Burhikhar village in Bilaspur (Madhya-Pradesh). The image carries discus and mace in its two extra hands. Curiously, however, the normal hands assume the *anjali* (suppli-



Vishnu as Janardana in the Somnathpur temple ;
Hoysala style



Krishna as Venu-gopala ; Hoysala sculpture

cation) posture, suggesting that the icon may be that of an attendant of Vishnu. It is usual for the attendant of a deity to be distinguished by the emblems and weapons of the deity itself. The worship of Vishnu seems to have been popular with the Hellenistic satraps and the early Gupta kings.

The iconography of Krishna as a variant of Vishnu also dates back to a distant past. Krishna's relation with Indra (Vedic hero) has been mentioned even in *Rigveda* (8, 96, 13-5). *Ghata-jataka* knows him as a prince of Mathura. Panini suggests his association



A bronze icon of Krishna in a dance posture with balls of butter in his hands

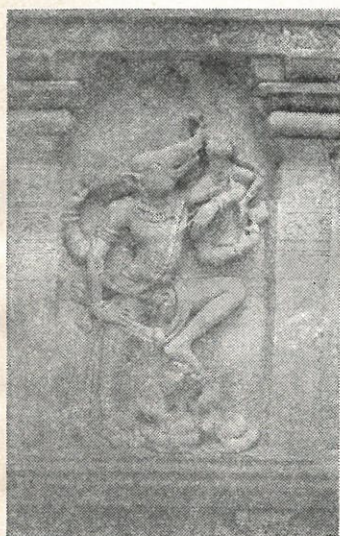
with the Pandava hero Arjuna. Patanjali refers to him as "revered". Kautilya's *Arthashastra* (14,3) recommends the worship of Krishna before collecting medicinal herbs.

Harivamsa makes the tribal goddess Ekanamsa (a prototype of the later Devi image) a sister to Krishna and Balarama. The worship of the three (Ekanamsa as Subhadra) has survived to this day in the famous Jagannatha temple at Puri (Orissa). The belief that all three of these deities, especially Krishna-Vasudeva, are human incarnations of Vishnu had gained ground even in the centuries prior to the Christian era.

Apart from the inscrutable and unmanifest divine presence, there were abstract emanations from that source (*Vyuha*) responsible for the evolution of the entire cosmos, as well as concrete incarnations (*avatara*) in human and animal-human forms. The Vedic literature is acquainted with the animal incarnations of Prajapati, which were now projected on Vishnu.

Rupamanda enumerates as many as 24 images of Vishnu, of which man-boar (*nara-varaha*) is one; all the others are completely human or celestial. *Haya-sirsha-samhita*, however, speaks of the 'man-fish' (*nri-matsya*), 'man-tortoise' (*nri-kurma*) and 'man-lion' (*nri-simha*) forms in addition to the emanations of Vishnu.

The ten popular incarnations (*avataras*) frequently



Vishnu in his incarnation as Boar (Varaha) rescuing Earth from the Evil One ; Chalukyan sculpture, wall panel



Varaha panel from the cave-temple at Namakkal

represented in icons presuppose specific needs of devotees, and among them Rama, Krishna, Parasurama Vamana and Buddha (or Balarama) are entirely human; Matsya (Fish), Kurma (Tortoise), Varaha (Boar) and Simha (lion) are animal forms ; and Kalki is the incarnation in future, appearing either as the hero riding on the horse or as the horse itself.

Besides these ten, Vishnu has other well-known iconic representations, such as Haya-griva (Horse-headed), Dhanvantari (The First Physician), Dattatreya



Haya-griva; Vishnu represented
as horse-headed

(composite sage, incorporating Brahma, Vishnu and Siva) and Vyasa (the sage who compiled the Veda). *Bhagavata-purana* lists twenty-two iconic forms of Vishnu, while *Agni-purana* twenty-four. And some of them have several variations, like Narasimha having as many as seventy-four (according to *Vihagendra-samhita*, 4,7), Varaha five, and Krishna eight.

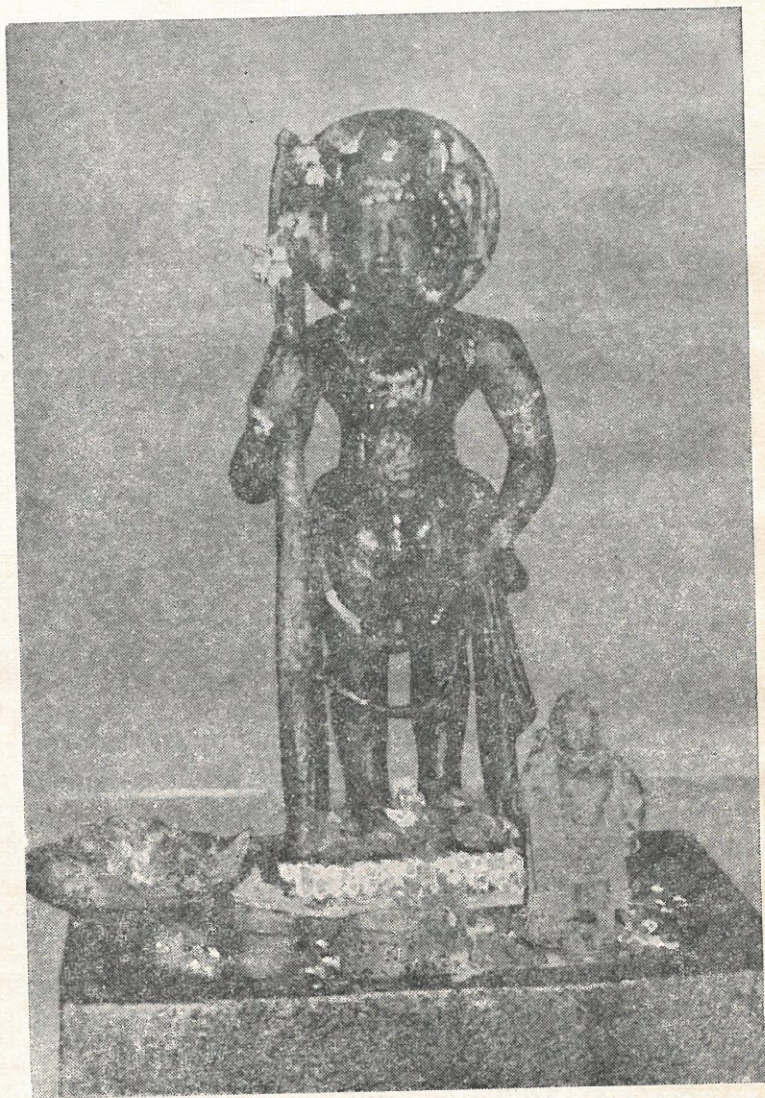
Narasimha is an interesting icon. The occasion for this incarnation was to protect the young devotee Prahlada, and to kill his wicked father Hiranya-kasipu. The main aspect is therefore fierce, but there are relatively milder forms, as when he is with his consort Lakshmi (Bhoga -) or while in the meditative posture



Yoga-narasimha ; Vishnu in his
'man-lion' incarnation, seated in
the yogic posture

(Yoga-). There are fine icons in the South representing him as seated, standing (*sthanaka*), dancing (*nrtiya*), bursting forth from the pillar (*sthanu* -), ferocious and flaming (*jvala*), tearing open the breast of the demon (*ugra*), benign (*varada*), alone (*kevala*); and having two, eight, ten, or sixteen arms. There is a curious image of five-headed Narasimha, described in *Isvara-Samhita* (4, 76), and a composite figure of Varaha-Narasimha (*Parasara-Samhita*, 30, 21).

The iconic *yantra* of Vishnu's discus, Sudarsana, will usually have on its back an image in relief of eight-



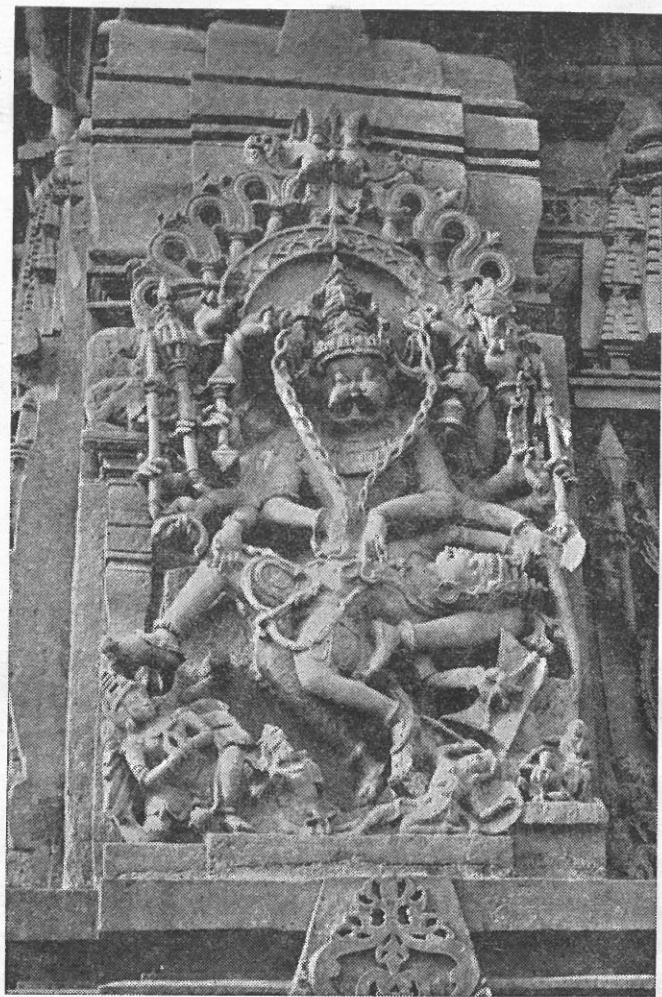
The Krishna image in Udupi



Narasimha, seated alone (Kevala)
in an unusual yogic posture

or sixteen – armed Narasimha ; known as Sudarsana-Narasimha. Narasimha is here regarded as located in the heart of Sudarsana (*Padma-Samhita*, 31, 257).

Narasimha, the incarnation of Vishnu, is said to have continued to be fierce, even after the demon was killed ; and the gods trembled for their safety. Then Siva is supposed to have assumed the form of the mythical animal, more ferocious than the lion, 'Sara-bha' to frighten Narasimha to sanity. We have icons of Sarabhesvara in the South. The story continues that Narasimha, instead of getting pacified, assumed a still more terrible form, a mythical bird-animal, 'Ganda-bherunda'. However, iconic illustrations of



Ugra-Narasimha, relief on a stone pillar in a
Hoysala temple

these two forms are rather rare. Narasimha as Ganda-bherunda is the rarer of the two, but we have a drawing of it from the Mysore Court, done over a hundred years ago.

It is usual for the Vishnu icons to be associated with Lakshmi or her incarnation (as Sita with Rama, and Rukmini with Krishna). Independent representation of Lakshmi (Sri or Sirima-devata) who is a Vedic goddess, can be found in the relief-sculptures of Barhut and Sanchi stupas. Regarded as one of the aspects of Mother-goddess, she is the presiding deity over wealth, agricultural plenty, and prosperity; she is associated with beauty and lotus. There are eight iconic representations of Lakshmi with many arms, familiarly known as *ashta-lakshmi*, which are independent of Vishnu.

'Maha-lakshmi', in particular, has Tantrik Involvements, and is closely related to Durga. As the consort of Vishnu, she is usually represented as a two-armed goddess seated by his side or on his lap (as for instance in the Lakshmi-Narasimha, or Lakshmi-Hayagriva icons). She is also symbolized by a triangular mole-mark (*sri-vatsa*) on the right chest of Vishnu when he is shown alone.

It may be recalled that in the Siva-linga, the middle 'Female' part (called yoni or Gauri-patta, which receives the water poured over the linga in the cere-



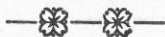
Durga-Mahishamardini - stone ; Pallava style

monial bath given to it) is known in texts as Vishnu's part. We have other references that indicate the feminine role of Vishnu (as in the story of Mohini). Iconographically, the most usual representation of Durga with the discus and conch, which are typical emblems of Vishnu suggests the close association of Durga with Vishnu. Puranic legends make her Vishnu's sister ; Krishna's association with the tribal goddess Ekanamsa (Bhadra or Subhadra) has already been mentioned.



Durga on the lion-

When Devi (Bhagavati) is worshipped, the thought that she is Siva's spouse is vague and irrelevant. She is either a divinity in her own right or is regarded as 'Vaishnavi-sakti', the energetic aspect of Vishnu.



Indian Iconography has suffered by the cavalier manner in which it is often approached. Icons can never be adequately understood without inquiring into the images they are meant to evoke. And this can never be done without attempting to understand the canonical framework.

The present volume seeks to aid the inquiry into the traditional images that the stylized icons are expected to evoke. The Agama texts are relied upon to highlight the value and significance of icons and images.

Iconological and iconometric details are dealt with before the iconographic import is explained. The Linga symbolism, the Yantra, and other major iconic representations are considered in the context of the temple-complex.

The author, Prof. S. K. Ramachandra Rao, who hails from a family which has for generations managed its own temple in his native village (near Mysore), has first-hand knowledge of the art, craft, rituals and modes of worship involved in a temple ; a scholar in Sanskrit, he has also an expert acquaintance with the Agama texts. He was a member of the Agama Board constituted by the Govt. of Karnataka, and is a member of the Karnataka State Lalit Kala Academy.

This is the third book in the Series on Indian Temples. Its companion volume on individual icons and the canonical specifications, also containing a rare collection of iconographical sketches and paintings, will soon be published, as the fourth book in the Series planned by IBH Prakashana.