

Iconography of Surya in the Temple Art of Odisha

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Surya, the visible celestial luminary was being worshipped in two important forms i.e. abstract and figurative since time immemorial. The abstract form of Sun is evident from the prehistoric rock art, Harappan and Chalcolithic pottery paintings, Punch-marked and Cast coins in the early historic period of India followed by the Hero stones and royal charters of medieval period of South India. The earliest figurative representation of the Sun-god is gradually influenced by the Iranian-Mithra particularly in northern and eastern India.

The description of *Matsya Purana* regarding the iconography of Surya is very noteworthy which throw light on the iconographic features of the Sun-god. It states that the image of the Sun-god (who causes the lotus to bud) should be made as seated on a lotus with two hands holding two lotus flowers¹. "The image of the Sun should be made with beautiful eyes, seated in a chariot and holding a lotus. There should be seven horses and one Chakra (wheel) in the chariot of the Sun and decorated well with ornaments. His body should sometimes be shown covered with a bodice and two pieces of cloth. The feet should be made brilliant and two other figures, named Dandi and Pingala, should be placed as guards with a sword in their hands.

Near the image of the Sun, should be an image of Brahma holding a pen and the image should be surrounded by a number of *Devas*.

Aruna, the charioteer of the Surya, is resplendent like the lotus leaves and on both his sides are high spirited horses with long necks and well-bedecked. They should be shown as properly held by reins of snakes. The seven horses yoked to the chariot of the Sun should be tied together with the string of the serpent. The images of the Sun should be thus made either seated in the chariot or on the lotus and holding a lotus.²"

The artistic expression of Sun motif in Odisha is found in the prehistoric period as evident from the rock art panel of Gostimoda-I in Sundergarh district. The Chalcolithic pottery of Nuagada in the upper Mahanadi valley and Manamunda in Western Odisha also yielded the Sun motifs i.e. a circle with radiant rays from all sides³. We find solar symbols like the rays and the lotus, etc. in the silver and copper punch-marked coins discovered from Sonepur, Khandagiri, Jharpada, Baripada, Chatrapur, Asurgarh, Salipur, Dhauli, Sisupalgarh etc⁴. After that the rock-cut monuments and a series of Hindu temples of Odisha depicts the figure of Surya throughout the length and breadth of the State.

One of the earliest figurative representations of Surya in Odisha has been carved in Anantagumpha⁵ (Cave No-3, Khandagiri, A.S.I) in the Khandagiri Udayagiri hillock located in the western outskirts of Bhubaneswar, dating back to 1st Century B.C



Surya in Ananta Gumpha and Parasuramesvara Temple

Here Surya is depicted as a turbaned royal personage wearing heavy *kundalas*, a necklace and bangles. He is seated under an umbrella, with a female figure holding a flywhisk on either side and driving a chariot drawn by four spirited horses. Above them are representation of moon surrounded by stars and the Sun which symbolize the stellar world. The left hand of the figure is placed on the waist and the right hand on the chest. A demonic pot-bellied dwarf holding a spouted water pot in his left hand and a banner in his right hand stand at the right end of the relief near the right wheel of the chariot. Another Sun-image is carved in the middle of the back wall of Tattvagumpha cave, lower down the Khandagiri hill which is not clearly visible. The twin hill is a holy place of Jainism right from the 1st Century B.C. to the present day. So the Saura cult was popular here along with this faith in this early age.

In general the Surya images of Odisha can be divided into three broad categories⁶ i.e. (i) standing or seated images without a chariot, (ii) riding in a chariot, (iii) riding on his horse. In the first category the earliest surviving images of Surya generally represented him in a simple standing or seated pose without any suggestion

of a chariot or attendant figures. He holds the stalk of full blown lotus in each hand and assume a right frontal pose, either *samabhanga* or *padmasana*. He is usually dressed in a heavy, northern type garment and wears a truncated crown. A scarf frequently hangs from his shoulders and his feet are covered with boots. Standing images of this simple form exists at Chhatrapada, on the Lakshmanesvara, Parasuramesvara, Paschimesvara (Khanderpur) and Madhukesvara temple, with four

such images appearing on the latter. Except for one example on the Madhukesvara, which has four arms they are all two-armed. In this lone exception the lower hands hold the loose ends of the waist cloth⁷. Similar standing images of Surya are also included in the frieze motifs of the marriage of Siva on the Svarnajalesvara and Parasuramesvara and on the later detached panel at Visnupur. A rare later example of this simple form of standing Surya appears on the south *raha* niche of the Mahagayatri temple at Konark. In this example he is flanked by a warrior on either side standing in front of a *khakharamundi*. All three figures stand on a *Visvapadma* cushion.

Simple seated images of Surya appear on the small niches on the *gandi* of the Satrugnesvara, Svarnajalesvara, Parasuramesvara and in the compound of the Siva temple at Bankada. A late example, the *beki-bhairava* images inserted into the *beki* of late temples are sometimes of Hara-Surya. On the Surya *deul* at Konark a seated Surya was inserted into the *beki* above each *raha*. Surya (Ravi) is also depicted seated in *padmasana* when carved on *navagraha* slabs over the door lintel. In a few cases a chariot is added on the pedestal of Ravi.

In the second category the more complex images of Surya riding in a chariot can be divided into several modes depending on his pose. Surya is depicted from the hips up with his legs disappearing into the chariot. He holds a full blown lotus in each hand and charioteer Aruna seated on the front edge of the chariot. Except for a lone example at Shergarh where he is seated in *bhadrasana*, or a few examples where he is seated on the centre horse, Aruna is always seated in *padmasana*.

He usually holds the reins in his left hand while his uplifted right hand holds a lash. The front edge of the chariot is generally straight and the seven horses are carved in a continuous row with the centre one facing forward and those on the sides facing away from the centre. They stand on their hind legs with their front paws uplifted and curled in towards the chest. In several examples, the centre horse is awkwardly rendered and appears to be squatting. In the two late examples at Kaupur the chariot has a *triratha* plan with the horses being divided into three groups. In an example inserted into a niche of the Kapilesvara compound the chariot has a *saptaratha* plan. In the earliest images of this mode, Surya is generally flanked by small images of Usa and Pratyusa dispensing arrows from a stringed-bow. On later images he is usually flanked by the standing figures of Dandi (Skanda) and Pingala (Agni), the upholder of justice and recorder of merits and sins, though their attributes are not standardized. In a few examples all four figures are present. Images in this mode appear on the Vaital Deul, Madhukesvara and Simhanatha temple as well as at Suklesvara, Paikpada, Shergarh, Kaupur, Gandharadi, Lataharana, Mukhalingam



Surya in Parasuramesvara and Vaital Temple

(Somesvara temple), Ghoradia, Kundesvara, Tirthamatha and in the Kapilesvara compound.

In the less popular second mode, of which a few 10th century examples exist, Surya is seated in *padmasana* on the chariot. In examples at Khiching⁸ and Chaurasi, Surya is seated in *Viswapadma* cushion with Aruna carved on its face. The seven horses are depicted standing on their hind legs beneath the cushion. At Chaurasi, the charioteer is represented down to his waist only while at Khiching and on a small image on the compound wall of the Muktesvara he is seated in *padmasana*. On the more elaborate sculpture at Chaurasi Surya is flanked on the right and left by Dandi and Pingala respectively. If the palm-leaf drawing produced by Boner is correct, then the *puja* image from the Sun temple of Konark was seated in *padmasana* on a chariot⁹.

In the third mode of this class, particularly popular from the 11th century through the 13th centuries, Surya is depicted in full length standing in his chariot. He is in the *samabhanga* pose and holds a full blown lotus in each hand as in the other modes. The northern dress is abandoned except for the boots and in some examples even

these are discarded. Aruna is placed at his feet, seated in *padmasana* on early images while depicted down to the waist on later works, with the seven horses carved on the face of the pedestal. Surya is flanked at the base by Dandi and Pingala with Usa and Pratyusa also included in some of the works. In many images from Konark, a warrior representing time, is added on either side and in some cases replaces other figures. The black-slab becomes increasingly elaborate, as on other cult images, with a trefoil *torana* framing the head of Surya. Attendant female figures are added above the *mundis* on either side of the base and, on the *parsvadevatas* of the Surya *deul*, a small image of Brahma is added at the base of the *torana* on the right and one of Siva or Vishnu, are added on the left to form a trinity with Surya. King Narasimha and his Guru are added by the feet of Surya while dancing musicians are inserted above the horses and pedestal and around the *torana* borders. Images in this mode appear in the Lingaraja temple compound, on the Valukesvara and at Khiching, Paikapada, Shergarh, Champesvara and Konark.

In another variation, in the Konark museum, Surya is combined with Siva to form a composite form of Hara-Surya. At Champesvara, housed in a small pavilion next to Surya, is a standing female who possibly represents Chaya, one of the consorts of Surya. She stands in a *tribhanga* pose holding a dart in her right hand and a mirror in the left hand.

In the third group of images, Surya riding on his horse, only two examples are now available. They are both at Konark and serve as *parsvadevatas* in the north *raha* niches of the Mahagayatri and Surya temple. They are two-armed and most likely hold a full blown lotus in each hand though the hands are now broken off. Surya is flanked by a warrior on either side while in the more elaborate image from the Surya *deul*

the image of Dandi, Pingala, king Narasimha and his guru, four consorts are added.

In addition to these conventional images of Surya, there is *Caturmukha* image of Surya in the sanctum of the Biranchi Narayana temple at Palia, a reconstructed temple with its *deul* pierced by four doors. The image is crudely carved, however, in much later in date than the other sculptures at the site. There are also two bronze *Utsava murtis* of Surya preserved in the Jagannatha temple at Puri. They are standing images with Surya holding a lotus in each hand¹⁰.

Composite forms of Surya:

The worship of divinities in individual or composite forms had been prevalent in India, from the early times in various forms and shapes side by side. The earliest archaeological evidence of the cult objects comes from Harappan culture. The genesis of the syncretistic divinities could be traced back to these sites, which produced numerous examples of composite *Linga-yoni* motifs. These objects are believed to be the combined form of Siva and Shakti. The availability of the female figurines representing the mother-Goddess and the Harappan seal in which Siva is shown seated in the form of Pasupati, leads one to believe that both were under worship individually as well as in composite form of *linga* and *yoni*. The syncretism became popular after Gupta period due to the Tantric influence in which the multiplication of deities both in Buddhism and Hinduism started. Within the Hinduism multiplication among the various Gods and Goddesses were also started¹¹. In Odisha the following composite figures of Surya are displayed in various museums.

Hara-Surya:

A chlorite image of Hara-Surya displayed in the Konark museum is notable for its

iconography¹². Another beautiful sculpture having the images of Jagannatha, goddess Durga and Sivalinga are on one platform to which the King who is the builder of the Sun temple paying homage to the deities shows the religious assimilation of Odisha in 13th Century A.D. This image is also displayed in the same museum.

The image of Hara-Surya stands in *samapada* position on a *triratha* chariot drawn by seven horses. Aruna, the charioteer sits in front of the feet of the deity and drives the chariot. The God has four hands, the upper two hands are missing but they evidently carried two lotus flowers which can be seen above his shoulders. He holds a trident in his lower right hand while the lower left hand is in the *varada* pose. The god wears boots, girdle, high crown necklace and other ornaments. He is flanked on either side by an attendant holding sword and shield. At his back there is an elaborate trefoil arch, on the sides of which are four female figures holding garlands and *chamaras*. At the top of the arch, there is a *kirtimukha* flanked by two *gandharvas* bearing conch shells. At the top corner of the slab are two *vidyadharas* flying with garlands.

The image in question definitely syncretistic image of Siva-Surya as Surya is often identified with Siva. The Ekamra-Purana identifies Siva with Surya while prescribing prayer to Bhaskaresvara Siva of Bhubaneswar. The Adityahridaya declares that there is no difference between Aditya and Siva. From the passage of

Ekamra-Purana, the identification of Siva with Surya is evident and the same notion may have been at work in carving this sculpture of Konark.

The Gayatri Mantra itself is conceived as Brahma, Vishnu and Siva in the morning, midday and evening respectively each of the deity shines resplendent within the solar orb. The clear connection of Surya with Vishnu as Narayana hailing from different parts of India is well known but the composite figure of Surya and Shiva are very few. One such figure noticed by Hiralal, which



Hara-Surya, Konark Museum

is a six armed composite image found at Madhia in Bundelkhand region. The figure holds in two of his left hand a trident and a lotus, the third in *varada* pose and other one holding a lotus. Its legs are clad with shoes; the boot and lotus is solar feature while the trident indicates the Saivite feature¹³.

Another very interesting composite sculpture from Bihar now on exhibit in Gupta gallery of archaeological section of Indian museum Kolkata shows the four armed Harihara in the centre, the back hands carrying a trident and a conch shell and front hand skull cap and discus. But what is unique in this sculpture is the presence of standing Buddha and image of Surya in the right and left side of Harihara. The halos round the head of Buddha and Surya, the former stands on a double – petalled lotus and the latter on his seven horsed chariot driven by Aruna. The separate sections of pedestal allotted to them prove that they are no more attendants here but are cult objects of worship¹⁴.

Surya-Narayana:

Surya has been variously described in the *Rig Vedic* hymns. Sometimes he was called as the beautiful celestial bird “Garutman” or a “white brilliant steed brought by “Ushas”. From these descriptions of the concepts of Garuda – the vehicle of Vishnu and Tarakshya - the horse mount of the Sun-god originated. This further led to the development of the idea of the Sun-god moving on a chariot driven by seven horses so frequently found in the post *Vedic* texts and projected in the early reliefs and described in the *Rig Vedic* hymns¹⁵.

Vishnu on the other hand enjoyed a prominent position in the *Vedic* literature. There is a school of thought which believed that Vishnu who became popular in the Brahmanical cults in vogue during the period contemporary to the beginning of Christian era was different from *Vedic* Vishnu¹⁶. The feet associated with him in *Vedic* literature relates to his having traversed the whole universe in three strides. These three steps in course of time developed in to myths on the dwarf incarnation of *Puranic* Vishnu. Sakapuni, one of the *Vedic* commentators, interpreted these three steps as a course of solar deity, through the three divisions of the universe, the god being manifest in three fold forms, as Agni on earth, Indra or Vayu in atmosphere and Surya in the sky. Both the deities namely, Surya and Vishnu are very much inter-connected and there should be no surprise if both of them are projected in composite form of iconoplastic art.

According to Arunabha another commentator of *Vedic* literature the three steps of Vishnu indicate the different positions of the Sun at its rising, culminating and setting. The idea underlying this solar explanation is evidently incorporated in a *dhyana* wherein Vishnu as Narayana is described residing in the orb of the Sun. Thus the idea that Vishnu in the Sun appears to have been maintained in the worship of Surya-Narayana.

Gopinath Rao, speaks of a bronze of S u r y a - Narayana from Belur, which is preserved in M a d r a s museum. The image belongs to Hoysala period and has four hands, two of which carry a conch and a chakra. The Hoysalesvara temple at Halebidu and



Surya-Narasimha

Chanakesava temple at Belur carved with this composite figure. Similar types of images are carved on the exterior wall on the later temples of Odisha. Besides there is a bronze image of Surya-Narayana seated over a horse displayed in the Orissa State Museum located in Bhubaneswar and in the Nrusimhanatha temple on the foot of Gandhamardana hills at Paikmal and at Kotakolla in Ganjam district. In the Viranchi-Narayana temple of Buguda of Ganjam district Surya and Narayana are worshipped together.

Surya-Narasimha:

To the north of Nrusimhanath temple, on the foot of Gandhamardan hills at Paikmal in the undivided district of Sambalpur, there is a modern structure which enshrines the figure of Surya-Narasimha¹⁷, one of the unique of its kind Carved in high relief in grey sandstone, it depicts Narasimha as standing on a *triratha* (three projections) pedestal in *samapadaasthanaka* (erect) posture, flanked by two female attendants, one to the right holding a lotus and the other to

the left a flywhisk. The four armed lion- faced god exhibits in his upper right and left hands a lotus and a conch and in the lower right and left hands a *gada* and the *varada* pose. He is sparsely ornamented in addition to his usual *vanamala* (prominent garland), wears armlets, bangles and necklaces of simple designs and a short dhoti (cloth) reaching up to the knee. But what is most striking is the pair of gumboots the ends of which reach up to the knee and their ends are conical at the centre. This particular feature makes this image unique, because among the Brahmanical deities, it is only the Sun-god who wears boots and that too only in the north Indian art¹⁸.

The other image, also of Narasimha, can be seen on the lintel of the entrance doorway of the Gangadharesvara at Kotakola near the Buguda town in the district of Ganjam¹⁹. And like the previous one this is also unique. This is high relief, made of stone, the god is seen engaged in killing Hiranyakasipu by his normal pair of hands standing on a platform of a *ratha* drawn by seven horses, by his left leg, which is slightly bent, trampling another demon, apparently the demon of darkness, the emblems in the upper hands are not clear, but the one in the left may be a lotus. Here again the solar element is articulated in the seven horsed chariot, a never failing feature of the iconography of Surya in north- Indian art.

Both the images represent a blending of two divinities Vishnu and Surya and thus belong to the class of syncretistic image like Harihara, Ardhanarisvara and Martanda Bhairava. These two images of Surya-Narasimha have made significant contribution to our knowledge of Brahmanical iconography. Aesthetically both the examples are of different workmanship. The pillar like legs, stylized manes and moustaches and the rigid stance of the god in the first instance and almost similar features together with his lifeless, almost petrified, posture of killing the demon in the second tend to assign them to the folk-tribal

tradition which was, and still is, relatively predominant in the area they belong to on the basis of associated temples.

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