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Four Figures of Virabhadra

In the Hindu pantheon the personalities of many gods and goddesses manifest themselves in more than one form. The gods appear before their devotees in both benevolent and malevolent forms. For example, the goddess Śakti manifests herself in her benevolent form as Pārvatī, the daughter of Himālaya Parvata (Parvata=mountain) but in her malevolent form as Caṇḍi, Durgā, Kāli, etc. Similarly the god Śiva, the destroyer, the third god in the Hindu trinity,¹ manifests himself to his worshipers in three different forms, *sāttvika*, *rājasika* and *tāmasika*², performing several *lilās* (sports). His personality is manifold – he is not only destructive but also benign and he bestows wisdom and peace on his devotees. He is, therefore, represented in scriptures as well as in sculptures either as a terrifying destructive deity or as a pacific conferrer of boons.³

Virabhadra, the “Saṁhāramūrti, or destructive form of Śiva,” is a Śaiva demigod (*gaṇa*), created to take revenge on Dakṣa Prajāpati (Lord of Beings),⁴ created by Brahmā. The Museum of Art and Archaeology of the University of Missouri-Columbia has one bronze plaque and three bronze figures of Virabhadra from South India, which we shall discuss later.⁵

Throughout the Vedic period Śiva was called Rudra, the celestial form of Fire, and remained identified with Agni (Fire).⁶ Agni received the epithet “three-mothered,” having his abode in the sky as the sun, in the atmosphere as lightning, and on the earth as fire. Consequently Rudra was believed to be the cause of terrifying and fearful phenomena and considered a malevolent deity.⁷ Owing to his formidable nature, the ancient seers of India looked upon him as a low-class deity and never offered him oblations as they did to the other gods. In the early Puranic period⁸ as well “Rudra retained his attributes as the destroyer and the terrific.”⁹

But in the late Puranic period the auspicious

aspect of Rudra attained prominence and Rudra, who was identified with the Vedic Agni, was named Śiva,¹⁰ the word Śiva meaning in Sanskrit auspicious. During the Epic age of *Mahābhārata*, around the sixth century B.C., Dakṣa denounced the status of Śiva, arguing that he had been teaching *Vedas* to the *śudras*¹¹ (low-caste people) and thus had abolished the caste barriers. Dakṣa decreed that no one should give Śiva any oblations in sacrifices, and so the gods never offered Śiva any portion of a sacrifice. But during the Puranic period this “lowest of the gods” reached the level of the Vedic gods and received oblations for the first time in Dakṣa’s sacrifice.

There are five interesting major versions depicting the different processes through which Śiva first established his right to receive oblations in sacrifices. The *Varāha Purāṇa*,¹² probably one of the earliest sources, does not mention the name of Śiva; instead, it calls him Rudra. Rudra was inactive in the creation of the universe whereas Brahmā was interested in it. So Brahmā created Dakṣa *Prajāpati* (Lord of Beings), the male creative force, and six other *prajāpatīs*. Aditi was the female creative force.¹³ Dakṣa created a great many children and grandchildren who began to perform sacrifices.¹⁴ When Rudra came to know that Dakṣa was performing sacrifices without inviting him to them, he became furious and fire issued from his ears. Many demigods (*gaṇas*)¹⁵ were born of this fire; they destroyed the sacrifice and compelled Dakṣa and others present there to offer a share also to him. Dakṣa apologized and prayed to Rudra to calm down his anger, and gave him his daughter Gauri in marriage.¹⁶

In the *Kūrma Purāṇa* Dakṣa is depicted performing the sacrifice in his subsequent life as a *ksatriya* king,¹⁷ Prāchetas. Similarly Sati, the daughter of Dakṣa, was also reborn as Pārvatī of Himavān (the mountain Himālaya) and was married to Śiva when king Prāchetas performed



1. Bronze plaque of standing Vīrabhadra from the Deccan, South India, seventeenth century. Slightly less than actual size.

the sacrifice. According to this *Purāṇa*, Pārvati on her part created Bhadra Kāli (her malevolent form) to help Vīrabhadra in the fight. Dakṣa prayed to Śiva who was pleased with him and pardoned him.¹⁸

Edward Moor gives a different version of the episode, saying that Dakṣa had only daughters but no son and so decided to make a grand sacrifice to obtain a son. He invited all the gods and men but disregarded his son-in-law, Śiva, who had once quarreled with him. Dakṣa decided not to offer Śiva any share in the sacrifice. Śiva, being indifferent to praise or abuse, did not mind, but his wife Sati could not resist the temptation to attend her father's sacrifice and went to it. Unfortunately she also was neglected by her father, Dakṣa. Feeling insulted, she plunged herself into the sacrificial fire and thereby polluted the religious sacrifice.¹⁹ When Śiva heard about the suicide of his beloved, he became furious. He struck his *jaṭā* (plaited hair) on the ground and created the armed hero Vīrabhadra, his own fierce aspect. He dispersed the whole assembly and suspended the sacrifice, cut off Dakṣa's head²⁰ and threw it into the sacrificial fire. But when Dakṣa surrendered himself to Śiva, his head was replaced by a goat's head.²¹

Vasudeva Agrawala narrates the whole episode differently.²² He says that Vīrabhadra had a lion's face, so all the gods present at Dakṣa's sacrifice became terrified and took shelter under Vishnu. This resulted in a battle between Vishnu and Vīrabhadra, in which the latter made all Vishnu's weapons ineffective. Finally Vishnu used the *cakra* (discus), which Vīrabhadra swallowed. Vishnu challenged him to a hand-to-hand combat and threw him on the ground so violently that the *cakra* came out of his body. Vīrabhadra reported the incident to Śiva, who entered the combat against Vishnu, and ultimately Vishnu disappeared from the scene. Later on, all the other gods came forward to try their strength against Śiva but all were defeated.

According to a Tamil legend, Śiva first sent his eldest son Pulliar (Gaṇeṣa) against Dakṣa but he was bribed by the offering of a cake. Later, Śiva sent his second son Subrāh-

maniar, who was also bribed. Śiva became so furious at his two sons that his whole body was covered with sweat. From one drop of his sweat was born Vīrabhadra, who destroyed Dakṣa's sacrifice.²³

Just as the episode regarding Śiva's victory in attaining the right to receive oblations in the sacrifice is narrated variously by different authorities, so also the creation and relationship of Vīrabhadra to Śiva is interpreted in different ways. Some call Vīrabhadra an *avatāra* (manifestation) of Śiva while others call him a son of Śiva. In the *Śiva Purāṇa*²⁴ it is stated that Vīrabhadra was produced from a drop of Śiva's sweat, while Krishna Sastri states that Vīrabhadra "sprang from a lock of Śiva's hair."²⁵ But *Vāmana Purāṇa* mentions that Śiva "created Vīrabhadra out of his own self."²⁶

Besides the terrifying and destructive form of Vīrabhadra, he is often known as the guardian of Saptā Mātṛkās (Divine Mothers),²⁷ though as far as we know this form of Vīrabhadra is not mentioned in the *Puranas* and other literature.

The images of Vīrabhadra usually have four or eight arms, although it is mentioned in *Silpasangraha* that Vīrabhadra is represented in



2. Back view of the plaque shown in Figure 1.



3. Bronze figurine of standing Vīrabhadra from South India, seventeenth century. Actual size.

three different forms, viz. *sāttvika*, *rājasika* and *tāmasika*, possessing two, four and eight arms respectively.²⁸ His seated figure with two arms is called *yoga vīra* (in meditation), which is *sāttvika* and is worshiped for spiritual realization. He holds a *khadga* (sword) and *khetaka* (shield) in his hands. This figure is rare. The standing figure with four arms represents *bhoga vīra*, i.e. *rājasika* where he holds *dhanuṣa* (bow), *bāna* (arrow), *khadga* (sword) and *khetaka* (shield) in his hands. This category of images is meant to be worshiped for worldly prospects. The third figure, in walking posture with eight arms, is called *vīra vīra*, i.e. *tāmasika*, which is to be worshiped for "military prowess."²⁹ He holds *triśūla* (trident), *khadga*, *bāna* and *mrga* (deer) in his four right hands and the *kapāla* (skull), *khetaka*, *dhanuṣa* and *ankuṣa* (goad) in his four left hands.³⁰

According to the *Srītatvanidhi*, Vīrabhadra has four arms, three eyes and a terrifying face with side tusks. He holds in his left hands a *dhanuṣa* and a *gadā* (club) and in his right hands a *khadga* and a *bāna*. He wears a *muṇḍamālā* (garland of skulls) around his neck and sandals on his feet. On his left is a figure of Bhadra Kālī and on the right a figure of Dakṣa with goat or ram's head, holding his hands in *añjali mudrā* (devotion pose).³¹

But in the *Kāraṇāgama* it is added that his hair is flaming and he wears a snake *yajñopavīta* (sacred thread). Instead of the *gadā* (club) he carries the *khetaka*. His face is red,³² terrifying and expresses great anger.³³ The Tamil legend states that he has heavy mustaches and that formidable fangs protrude from his lips.³⁴

As the guardian of the Divine Mothers his images are carved in relief on rectangular stone slabs. On one side of the Divine Mothers stands four-armed Vīrabhadra and on the other Ganesa as their guardian.³⁵

All the bronze figures of Vīrabhadra in the Museum of Art and Archaeology have four arms. The first of the four bronzes (Fig. 1) is a beautiful cast bronze processional plaque with a handle at the back (Fig. 2). Vīrabhadra is represented in a walking posture. He stands in *tribhaṅga* pose (hips slightly tilted to the right)

on a very low rectangular base. He wears a conical *jaṭāmukūṭa* (crown made of plaited hair) bound by an elaborate diadem in two sections; a short *dhoti* (loin cloth) with incised diaper design edged with double beaded borders; an elaborate girdle, the lower part with a dragon-faced clasp which holds the *adhovastra*, a long garment between the legs which ends in a triangular shape. This appendage is loose at the top but riveted to the plaque at the bottom. A long *muṇḍamālā* (garland of skulls), the lower portion of which is a separate strip, stylized, is riveted to the plaque at both sides of the figure's legs. This is superimposed on the *adhovastra*. Both of these elements seem to be made of metal (reddish copper) different from the rest of the plaque. Vīrabhadra wears *makarakuṇḍalas* (crocodile-shaped earrings) with *dhatūra* flowers, wooden sandals and the customary jewelry. In his two right hands he carries *khadga* and *bāna*, while the left hands hold *dhanuṣa* and *khetaka*. On his left stands the much smaller figure of his consort Bhadra Kālī holding a *śakti* (spear) in her right hand to inspire her husband to victory. On the right is a small figure of Dakṣa with a ram's head and with hands clasped in *añjali mudrā*. They both wear the long *dhoti*, the pleats of which are indicated by curved lines. Two horizontal lines in the center of Vīrabhadra's forehead express his vengeful emotions towards Dakṣa. His face with heavy raised mustaches and side tusks is intended to show a furious expression. On the top of his crown, a ram's head is placed, perhaps a symbol of victory.

At the back (Fig. 2) a handle is fixed at the top with two rivets (visible on the front of the plaque above the ear ornaments) and at bottom with one rivet, which is hidden beneath the lower garments. Besides this, there are two small holes above the shoulders beside the neck, which may have been intended for hanging a seasonal garland of flowers or some other ornament.

In the second figure (Fig. 3) Vīrabhadra stands in the same pose holding the same attributes. A third eye in the center of his forehead and the side tusks coming from his mouth are

4. Bronze figurine of standing Vīrabhadra from South India, eighteenth century. Actual size.



5. Far right: bronze figurine of standing Vīrabhadra from South India, eighteenth century. Actual size.



6. Stone relief of Vīrabhadra from South Arcot, Madras, thirteenth century. Photo courtesy of the Government Museum, Madras.



7. Bronze figure of eight-armed Vīrabhadra from Tiruvālangādu, Madras, seventeenth century. Photo courtesy Government Museum, Madras.

symbols of terror, although his face does not have such a furious expression. He does not wear sandals and only Dakṣa stands at his right, with hands clasped in *añjali mudrā*. At the back of the head is a *Śiraścakra* (a smaller round halo).

The other two figures (Figs. 4, 5) of Virabhadra are somewhat similar to each other. The one shown in Figure 4 holds different attributes: *khadga* and *śakti* (spear) in his right hands and *añkuṣa* in the upper left, while the lower left rests on the *khetaka* (shield). He wears a *muṇḍamālā* around his neck, sandals and a long *dhoti*, the pleats of which are indicated by incised lines. The fourth bronze (Fig. 5) is much smaller and less detailed in some respects than the third, but carries almost the same attributes and wears a short *dhoti*. He does not wear sandals but he is accompanied by Dakṣa standing with hands clasped in *añjali mudrā*.

A representation of his benevolent form as a guardian of Divine Mothers is shown in Figure 6, a relief in the collections of the Government Museum at Madras. Here he is seated in *lalitāsana* pose, with the right leg resting on the seat and the left hanging down. His appearance is not fierce. The upper left hand holds the trident while the upper right carries a club. The lower right hand is in *abhaya mudrā* (protection) and the lower left rests on his left thigh. He wears *jaṭāmukuta* (crown made of plaited hair), *patra kuṇḍala* (plain circular earrings) such as are worn by ascetics in India, double *yajñopavīta* (sacred thread), *udarabandha* (stomach band) and the customary jewelry.

In Figure 7, a bronze also in the Madras Museum, the eight-armed Vīrabhadra stands in *tribhanga* pose on a circular pedestal set on a rectangular base with moldings. The two front lower hands are broken, while other hands carry weapons which are not easily identifiable. His third eye (a symbol of spiritual insight) is

shown vertically in the center of his forehead; his face does not have a terrifying appearance.

Images of Vīrabhadra are usually set up with the belief that he removes all great sins and cures people of their ailments. He is commonly worshiped in South India. Independent temples have been erected for him in the Telugu district (Andhra Pradesh) and the Canarese district (Mysore). He is rarely represented in Tamil land, but there is a Vīrabhadra temple at Madura (Madras).³⁶ He is also represented in the temple of Kailashnath at Kanchipuram, in Madras State. At Elura and Elephanta on the west coast of South India he is represented with eight hands as an independent god as well as the fearsome attendant of Rudra along with other demigods.³⁷ Vīrabhadra is also worshiped by Marathas,³⁸ the people of the Deccan (South India). As the guardian of Saptā Mātrkāḥ he is represented in Puri, Orissa State.

To conclude: In the Hindu pantheon the gods and goddesses manifest themselves in malevolent forms in order to help or to save their devotees from their enemies, and in benevolent forms to bestow boons upon them or to confer *darshana* (vision). The benevolent or malevolent form depends upon the occasion that caused their manifestation. Since Vīrabhadra was created to take revenge on Dakṣa who ill-treated his own daughter and son-in-law, his form is usually terrifying and destructive. People pray to him to protect themselves from diseases, ailments and mishaps. He is worshiped only in South India because Śiva is the favorite deity of South Indians. Since the god, in his destructive aspect, is always in a standing posture and usually possesses four or eight arms, we find almost all the figures of Vīrabhadra depicted in this way.

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- ¹ Brahmā, the creator of the universe, is the first god and Vishnu, the preserver and pervader of knowledge, is the second.
- ² *Sāttvika*: an image of a god sitting in meditation in the yogi posture; *rājasika*: an image of one seated upon a vehicle with various ornaments and holding weapons in his hands as well as granting boons; *tāmasika*: a terrifying, standing armed figure fighting and destroying demons. H. B. Havell, *The Art Heritage of India* (Bombay 1964) 151; Alain Danielou, *Hindu Polytheism* (New York 1964) 24-28.
- ³ T. A. Gopinath Rao, *Elements of Hindu Iconography* 2, pt. 1 (New York 1968) 145.
- ⁴ Dakṣa, Ritual Skill, represents the power of rites that link men with gods. Danielou, *op. cit.* 320.
- ⁵ Acc. no. 65.22, H. 27.5 cm; Acc. no. 65.25, H. 13 cm; Acc. no. 66.240a, H. 7.5 cm; Acc. No. 66.240b, H. 5.3 cm. All four figures were presented by Dr. and Mrs. Samuel Eilenberg.
- ⁶ D. N. Shukla, *Hindu Canons of Iconography and Painting* (Gorakhpur 1958) 173-174, states that the Vedic triad Agni, Sūrya and Vāyu or Rudra, really developed into the Puranic trinity of Brahmā, Vishnu and Śiva. This means that Brahmā represented Agni and Śiva, (Rudra) represented Vāyu. By nature Agni (Fire) is destructive and Vāyu (Air) is life-giving. Hence it would be more appropriate to identify Rudra with Agni and Brahmā with Vāyu.
- ⁷ Gopinath Rao, *op. cit.* 39.
- ⁸ The period from the 5th century B.C. to the 7th century A.D. when the Puranas were written. Puranas are the first among the iconographical literature. They advocate image worship and deal with the lives of gods and goddesses.
- ⁹ Gopinath Rao, *op. cit.* 43.
- ¹⁰ A. A. Macdonell, *Vedic Mythology* (Varanasi 1963) 77.
- ¹¹ There are four castes in India. The first one is *brāhmaṇa* (priest), the second is *kṣatriya* (warrior), the third is *vaiśya* (merchant), and the fourth and the lowest caste is *śūdra* (laborer).
- ¹² *Varāha Purāṇa*, ed. Pandit Hrishikesa Sastri (Calcutta 1893) 137-144.
- ¹³ *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. James Hastings, 7 (New York 1924-26) 156a.
- ¹⁴ According to Edward Moor, *Hindu Pantheon* (London 1810) 107, Dakṣa had one hundred daughters but no son.
- ¹⁵ Virābhadrā's name is also not mentioned in *Varāha Purāṇa*. He seems to be one of the demigods (gaṇas). *Varāha Purāṇa*, *op. cit.* ch. 21, verse 30.
- ¹⁶ According to Tamil legend, Dakṣa's daughter was Pārvatī, who requested her husband to give back life to her father. G. Jouveau-Dubreuil, *Iconography of Southern India* (Paris 1937) 48; but in the opinion of Alain Danielou his daughter "Sati" was married to Siva. *Op. cit.* 122.
- ¹⁷ See note 11.
- ¹⁸ The *Kūrma Purāṇa*; a *System of Hindu Mythology and Tradition*, ed. Nilmani Mukhopadhyaya (Calcutta 1890) 157-170.
- ¹⁹ Moor, *op. cit.* 107-109. According to a Tamil legend, it seems that she did not plunge herself into the fire. Jouveau-Dubreuil, *op. cit.* 48; Vijayananda Tripathi says that Sati destroyed herself through the fire of her anger. "Devata tattva," *Sanmārga* 3 (1942) 682.
- ²⁰ According to *Varāha Purāṇa* and *Kūrma Purāṇa*, Dakṣa's head was not cut off.
- ²¹ Moor, *op. cit.* 107. But according to a Tamil legend, Dakṣa's head was replaced by a ram's head. Jouveau-Dubreuil, *op. cit.* 48.
- ²² Vasudeva Agrawala, *Vāmana Purāṇa, A Study* (Varanasi 1964) 9-10.
- ²³ Jouveau-Dubreuil, *op. cit.* 48.
- ²⁴ Moor, *op. cit.* 177.
- ²⁵ Krishna Sastri, *South Indian Images of Gods and Goddesses* (Madras 1916) 155.
- ²⁶ Agrawala, *op. cit.* 9.
- ²⁷ These seven mothers (goddesses) represent the embodied energy of the seven major gods: Brāhmani for Brahmā, Māheśvari for Maheśa (Śiva), Kaumāri for Kumāra (Kārtikeya), Vaiṣṇavi for Vishnu, Vārāhi for Varāha, Indrāni for Indra and Cāmuṇḍi for Yama. Shukla, *Hindu Canons of Iconography and Painting*, 322-323.
- ²⁸ See note 2.
- ²⁹ Krishna Sastri, *op. cit.* 155-159.
- ³⁰ *Op. cit.* 159.
- ³¹ Gopinath Rao, *Elements of Hindu Iconography*, 2 pt. 1 (New York 1968) 186.
- ³² The *Pāncrātrāgama* mentions that his face is black. Krishna Sastri, *op. cit.* 155.
- ³³ Gopinath Rao, *loc. cit.*
- ³⁴ Jouveau-Dubreuil, *Iconography of Southern India*, 50.
- ³⁵ J. N. Banerjea, *Development of Hindu Iconography* (Calcutta 1956) 482.
- ³⁶ Krishna Sastri, *op. cit.* 159.
- ³⁷ James Burgess, *Report on the Elura Cave Temples and the Brahmanical and Jaina Caves in Western India*. (London 1883) pl. 22, fig. 2. The figure mentions "Bhairava in the Das Avatara" Cave temple. The figure is eight-armed but it is difficult to say whether this is the same Virābhadrā mentioned by Krishna Sastri.
- ³⁸ George C. M. Birdwood, *The Industrial Arts of India* (London 1880) 60.