



THE FORM OF VIŚĀPAHARAṆA SCULPTURES IN INDIAN ART

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ABSTRACT

This form of Śiva in Indian art is associated with the act of drinking poison that emerged after the churning of the ocean. For this reason, T. A. Gopinatha Rao was the first to use the term 'Viśāpaharaṇa' for this image. This form of Śiva is also known by names such as Nīlakaṇṭha, Śrīkaṇṭha, and Viśakaṇṭha. Evidence of this image in Indian art begins to appear around the 9th century CE, although the number of discovered sculptures is very limited. However, these images have been found in different parts of the country. References to this legend are found in Sanskrit literature from early times, yet North Indian iconographic texts do not provide descriptions related to this image. The South Indian iconographic texts, on the other hand, contain detailed accounts of the method of creating the Viśāpaharaṇa image. Based on these texts, it is observed that there is no uniformity in the early sculptural methods of Viśāpaharaṇa depictions. This research paper presents a new dimension to the understanding of the form of Viśāpaharaṇa images in Indian art, drawing upon iconographic texts as its foundation.

KEY WORDS: Nīlakaṇṭha, Viśāpaharaṇa mūrti, Śiva, Śrīkaṇṭha, Viśakaṇṭha, Nīlagrīva, Śītikaṇṭha, Viṣapāna.

VIŚĀPAHARAṆA FORM IN SANSKRIT LITERATURE

The earliest mention of this form of Śiva is found in Vedic literature. In the tenth maṇḍala of the *R̥gveda* (Pillai, 1958: 37), there is a reference to Rudra drinking poison along with Keśī. According to Sivaramamurti (1976: 8-9), in the *Śatarudriya Sūkta* of the *Vājasaneyī Samhitā*, Rudra is described with the epithets Śitikaṇṭha (white-throated) and Nīlagrīva (blue-necked). Over time, these terms became the basis for the development of this mythological narrative. According to the *Rāmāyaṇa* (2007: 1/45/15-26), during the first age (Krita Yuga), the Daityas, sons of Diti, and the Devas, sons of Aditi, were powerful beings. Desiring to obtain amrita (nectar of immortality) to become immortal and free from disease, they decided to churn the ocean. For this purpose, they used Mount Mandarācala as the churning rod and Vāsuki, the serpent, as the churning rope. As the churning began, the first thing to emerge was a deadly poison named Halāhala, blazing like fire. The poison began to burn gods, demons, and all beings of the world. Terrified, the gods prayed to Lord Śiva for protection. Hearing their prayers, Śiva appeared and, at the request of the gods and Viṣṇu, drank the poison, treating it as nectar, and held it in his throat.

The *Mahābhārata* (1987: 1/18/13-43) also contains an extensive description of this legend. It narrates that in ancient times; the gods and demons churned the ocean using Mount Mandarācala as the rod and Vāsuki as the rope. The demons held Vāsuki's head while the gods held his tail. As the churning continued, various precious objects emerged one by one. Among them appeared the terrible poison Kālakūṭa, blazing with fumes like fire and threatening to destroy the whole world. The beings of the three worlds fainted from its fumes. At the prayer of Brahmā, Śiva took the poison into his throat to save the universe, which turned his neck blue, earning him the name Nīlakaṇṭha.

After Śiva consumed the poison, the churning resumed. Then appeared the divine cow Kāmadhenu, taken by the sages; the horse Uchhaiśravā, taken by the demon king Bali; the elephant Airāvata, taken by Indra; the jewel Kaustubha, taken by Viṣṇu; followed by the Kalpavṛkṣa tree and the celestial nymph Rambhā, both retained in heaven. Then emerged Mahālakṣmī, who chose Viṣṇu as her consort, and later Vāruṇī, who was taken by the demons. Subsequently, the moon, the Pārijāta tree, the conch shell, and finally Dhanvantari, the divine physician, emerged carrying the pot of nectar. The demons snatched the pot and began to fight among themselves. The gods, weakened by a curse from the sage Durvāsā, could not fight

them. Then Viṣṇu assumed the enchanting form of Mohinī, approached the demons, and with her charm, persuaded them to let her distribute the nectar. Enchanted, they agreed. While distributing, Mohinī gave nectar only to the gods. One demon named Svarbhānu, disguised as a god, sat among them and drank some nectar. The sun and the moon pointed him out, and Viṣṇu immediately cut off his head with the Sudarśanacakra. Due to the nectar's power, his head and body became the celestial beings Rāhu and Ketu, who cause eclipses. After giving nectar to the gods, Viṣṇu disappeared, and when the demons realised the deception, a fierce battle between the gods and the demons ensued, in which Indra defeated Bali and regained his realm. Thus, in this context, it is notable that while the *Rāmāyaṇa* refers to the poison as Halāhala, the *Mahābhārata* calls it Kālakūṭa.

According to the *Vāyu Purāṇa* (2013: 1/54/46-95) and the *Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇa* (2016: 1/2/25/45-88), when the gods and demons churned the ocean, the first thing to emerge was a blazing poison like Kālāgni (the fire of destruction). Terrified, the gods and demons went to Brahmā, saying, 'A dreadful poison, shining like dark clouds and blazing like the fire of dissolution, has appeared. From its heat, Viṣṇu's fair complexion has turned dark.' Brahmā, unable to bear its power, advised them to seek Śiva's help, for only he could neutralise it. The gods, led by Brahmā, prayed to Śiva, who, pleased with their devotion, asked the cause of their distress. Brahmā explained that the poison from the ocean threatened to burn the three worlds like the sun at the end of time. Hearing this, and with Pārvatī's consent, Śiva drank the poison for the welfare of all beings, and his throat turned blue, giving rise to the name Nīlakaṇṭha.

The *Śrīmadbhāgavata Purāṇa* (2017: 8/7/8-43) also recounts this story. When the gods and demons churned the ocean using Mount Mandarācala as the rod and Vāsuki as the rope, the first thing to emerge was the Halāhala poison. Seeing its terrible power, all the gods and demons were terrified and prayed to Śiva. Pleased by their prayers, Śiva, with Pārvatī's consent, held the poison in his palm and drank it. His throat turned blue, and he became known as Nīlakaṇṭha.

According to the *Matsya Purāṇa* (2017: 250), when the gods and demons churned the ocean, first the moon emerged, followed by Lakṣmī, Surā Devi, the divine horse, Kaustubha gem, and Pārijāta tree. Then appeared a dense blue smoke, spreading in all directions, unbearable to all beings, followed by a blazing fire with fierce flames. Its heat burned both gods and demons. Soon after, from this fire emerged serpents of various types, insects, bees, flies, and

other poisonous creatures. Terrified, the gods and demons again sought refuge in Śiva, explaining that during the churning, a dreadful poison had appeared that was destroying all beings. To save the world, Śiva drank the poison, which made his throat radiant and blue.

Thus, across Vedic, epic, and Purāṇica literature, Śiva's Viśāpaharaṇa (Poison-Drinking) form is celebrated as an act of supreme compassion and cosmic preservation, earning him eternal reverence as Nīlakaṇṭha (the blue-throated lord).

VIŚĀPAHARAṆA FORM IN ICONOGRAPHIC TEXTS

According to the *Karaṇāgama*, in this form, Śiva should be depicted as four-armed, adorned with a matted crown and having three eyes. In two of his hands, he should hold a battle-axe and a deer; of the remaining two, one should hold a vessel containing poison while the other should display the gesture of granting boons (*varada mudrā*). Śiva's gaze should be directed toward the vessel of poison, and his expression should suggest that he is about to drink it. In this form, the deity should be adorned with the matted crown and all usual ornaments. To his left, Pārvatī should be depicted standing in a tribhaṅga posture, appearing distressed. Her right foot should rest on the ground, and her left leg should be slightly bent. The two-armed Pārvatī should be shown embracing Śiva with her right arm and pressing his neck gently, expressing anxiety and sorrow. The deeper meaning behind this depiction is that when Śiva consumed the poison for the welfare of the world, Pārvatī, fearing its disastrous effect, stopped it in his throat, which caused his neck to turn blue, giving him the name Nīlakaṇṭha. Another description suggests that in this form, Śiva should appear fierce, with slightly protruding teeth, and his face should shine like the full moon. He should be adorned with a tiger skin, a garland of bells, and all usual ornaments. The four-armed Śiva should hold a trident in one of his right hands and a vessel of poison in the other, while in one of his left hands, he should hold a skull. However, the text does not specify what is held in the other left hand. Śiva should be depicted seated on the bull along with Pārvatī. (Rao: 1916: 356-58)

According to the *Śrītattvanidhi* (2004: 3/276-79), the three-eyed Śiva should be shown adorned with a matted crown. In this image, the four-armed deity should hold a deer and an axe in his upper hands. In his lower hands, the right hand should hold the vessel of poison in such a way that he appears ready to drink it, while the left hand should be in the gesture of blessing (*varada mudrā*), reassuring the gods that there is no reason to fear and that he is drinking the poison for the welfare of all beings. Śiva should be shown adorned with all

ornaments. To his left, Pārvaṭī should be depicted standing in tribhaṅga posture, with her right leg straight on the ground and her left leg slightly bent. She, appearing anxious due to the poison, should be shown pressing Śiva's neck with one hand.

According to the *Śāradātilaka* (2016: 19/48), in this form, Śiva should be depicted shining with the radiance of a thousand suns, adorned with a crescent moon on his matted hair, having five faces and three eyes, decorated with serpent ornaments, wearing a tiger skin, and seated in a lalitāsana posture. The four-armed Śiva should hold a rosary, trident, skull, and khaṭvāṅga in his hands.

THE FORM OF VIŚĀPAHARAṆA SCULPTURES IN INDIAN ART

An inscription found at the Nārāyaṇapuram temple, one of the main art centers of the Eastern Gaṅga kings, refers to this deity as Nīleśvara and the temple itself as Nīlakaṅṭheśvara. A temple bearing the same name, Nīlakaṅṭheśvara, also exists in Gallavalli. Similarly, there was once a temple named Nīlakaṅṭheśvara located on Tarī Hill in Visakhapatnam. Another temple by the same name is found in Rishikesh, in the Garhwal region of Uttarakhand. Unfortunately, not a single image of Śiva in this particular form has been discovered from any of these locations.

A beautiful bronze image of this form, dated to the ninth century CE (Fig. 1), was discovered at a place called Kilāppudnur in the Nannīlam taluk of Tirūvarūr District, Tamil Nadu. This sculpture is currently preserved in the Government Museum, Chennai (Acc. No. 226). In this image, the deity is shown seated in lalitāsana on a bhadrapīṭha. The four-armed deity holds a paraśu in the upper right hand and a black deer in the upper left hand. Of the front two hands, the left hand holds a snake with its hood raised, while the right hand holds a vessel containing poison. The three-eyed deity is adorned with a matted crown decorated with a crescent moon and a serpent, a forehead band, serpent-shaped earrings in both ears, necklaces, a serpent sacred thread, waist belt, armlets, bracelets, girdle, waist cloth, and anklets. The expression on the deity's face reflects profound serenity, symbolizing his willingness to drink the poison for the welfare of the entire world. However, it is noteworthy that, unlike the description given in the Āgama texts, this sculpture does not depict Pārvaṭī alongside Śiva.

Stella Kramrisch (1981: 110) has mentioned a bronze image from the tenth century CE, created during the reign of the Eastern Cālukya kings (Fig. 2), which is presently preserved in the Nelson-Atkins Museum, Kansas City, Missouri. In this sculpture, the four-armed deity stands

in samabhaṅga mudrā upon a viśvapadma pedestal. The upper two hands, similar to the previously mentioned image, hold a paraśu in the right and a deer in the left. Among the two principal hands, the right hand holds a vessel containing poison along with a rosary, while the left hand, in katyāvalambita mudrā, grasps a serpent, which alludes to the deadly poison in his right hand. Thus, both sculptures conform to the description given in the *Karaṅgama*, according to which the deity should hold an axe and a deer in two hands and a vessel filled with poison in another. However, it is notable that this sculpture represents the deity standing, as described in the *Karaṅgama*. The three-eyed god is adorned with a matted crown decorated with serpents, makara-kunḍalas, a garland, necklace, sacred thread, waist belt, serpent armlets, bangles, girdle, mekhalā, anklets, and lower garments. The standing posture and the slightly downcast eyes of the deity clearly indicate his readiness to consume poison. In this image, the deity is also portrayed as a youthful figure.



Fig. 1. Government Museum, Chennai
(Tamilnadu)

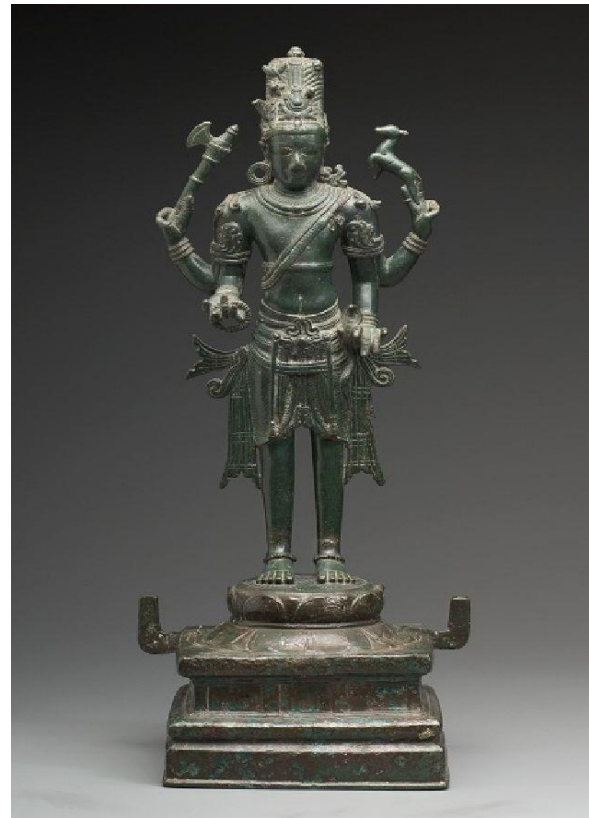


Fig. 2. The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art,
Kansas City (Missouri)

N. K. Bhattasali (1929: 116-17, pl. 46) has mentioned another image of this form discovered at Kashipur, located a few miles west of Barisal, which is currently worshipped. Based on the description in the *Śāradātilaka*, he identified it as the image of Śiva in his Nilakantha form. Although the image does not possess five faces, the weapons held by the deity correspond to those described in the *Śāradātilaka*. The four-armed god holds a trident and a khaṭvāṅga in the upper hands, while the lower hands hold a vessel of poison and a rosary. The image is exceptionally beautiful, and the deity's face bears a gentle smile. The deity is depicted with a parasol above his head. Below, Gaṇeśa and Kārttikeya are shown, while on either side of the deity, Gaṅga riding a makara is depicted on the right and Gaurī riding a lion on the left. Both two-armed goddesses display the right hand in abhaya mudrā and hold a lotus in the left. On the pedestal below, Śiva's mount Nāndī is depicted gazing upward at his master's divine act. As in other sculptures from Bengal, Śiva is represented here in the ūrdhvaliṅga (erect phallus) form.

A beautiful image of this form (Fig. 3) is preserved in the Archaeological Museum at Jageshwar in the Kumaon region of Uttarakhand. In this sculpture, the deity is seated in lalitāsana on a lotus pedestal. The left leg rests upon the base, while the right leg hangs downward, touching the lotus below. The four-armed deity holds a lotus in the upper right hand, shown attracting a serpent emerging from Śiva's matted locks with its fragrance, while the upper left hand holds a trident. Among the lower hands, the right is in varada mudrā, and the left holds a vessel of poison. It appears that this image too was created according to the description in the *Karaṇāgama*, which prescribes that one of the deity's hands should be in varada mudrā and another should hold a vessel of poison. The deity is adorned with a matted crown, forehead band, jewelled and leaf-shaped earrings, necklaces, pearl-sacred thread, armlets, bangles, waist band, garland, and anklets. Below the pedestal, on either side, two doorkeepers and two other standing figures are shown, though their identities are uncertain due to damage. To the right of the deity, a male serpent figure is depicted, while in the centre, beside Śiva's mount Nāndī, another serpent figure is shown seated with folded hands, indicating Śiva's act of drinking poison. On the left, besides Gaṇeśa, another male figure is depicted sitting on the pedestal, but due to damage to the face, his identity is uncertain. In the centre of the prabhāvalī, Brahmā with three faces is shown seated in lalitāsana on a lotus pedestal to the right, while to the left, Viṣṇu with four arms is seated on his vehicle, Garuda.

At the top of the prabhāvalī, celestial beings adorned with garlands are shown among clouds, welcoming the deity.



Fig. 3. Archaeological Museum, Jageshvar
(Almora)



Fig. 4. Śrīkaṅṭheśvara Temple, Nanjangud
(Mysore)

An image of this form (Fig. 4) was found in the Śrīkaṅṭheśvara Temple at Nanjangud in Mysore. In this sculpture, the deity is shown standing on a high pedestal in sambhaṅga-sampāda posture. The four-armed deity holds an axe in the upper right hand and a deer in the upper left, while among the lower hands, the right holds a vessel of poison and the left is in varada mudrā. The deity is adorned with a matted crown, earrings, necklace, garland, waist belt, bangles, armllets, girdle, garland, anklets, and a dhoti. Additionally, a small bell is tied below the right knee. To the left of Śiva, the two-armed Pārvatī is shown standing and facing him. Her right hand is indistinct, while her left hand is depicted pressing Śiva's neck. This scene corresponds to the description in the *Karaṇāgama* and *Śrītattvanidhi*, according to which one of Pārvatī's hands should be shown pressing Śiva's neck. Like Śiva, Pārvatī too is

adorned with a conical crown, conch-shaped earrings, a shoulder garland, bangles, armlets, a girdle, a waist ornament, a necklace, anklets, and a sārī. Behind Śiva and Pārvatī, an ornamented archway is also depicted.

EVALUATION OF VIŚĀPAHARAṆA IMAGES

The first bronze image belongs to the Cola period. The distinguishing feature of this image is the vessel of poison in the right hand and the serpent in the left. In this sculpture, Śiva is seated on a pedestal, while the iconographic texts prescribe a standing posture. The second image represents Eastern Cālukyan art. It too depicts a solitary image of Śiva holding a vessel of poison in his right hand. In both these sculptures, the absence of Pārvatī is notable, which is inconsistent with the iconographic texts. Due to the presence of the poison vessel, both images are categorised as Viśāpaharaṇa forms. The next image, found in Bengal, probably belongs to the Sena period. N. K. Bhattasali used the term 'Nīlakaṇṭha' for this sculpture and stated that it was influenced by the *Śāradātilaka*. The description of the weapons in this image aligns with that text. The presence of the poison vessel is again the reason for its identification as Nīlakaṇṭha.

The fourth image belongs to the Pratīhāra period and was found in the Kumaon Himalayas. Several sculptures related to Pratīhāra art from the 9th-10th century CE have been discovered in this region. In this image, the vessel of poison is held in the left hand, unlike all the other images, where it is held in the right. This sculpture possibly depicts the serpent king Vāsuki standing before Śiva in a gesture of reverence (añjalibaddha mudrā). The depiction of Vāsuki in a human form is a significant feature of this sculpture.

The final image belongs to the 17th-18th century CE. It is kept inside the Naṅjuṇdeśvara Temple (Śrīkaṇṭheśvara Temple). The term Naṅjuṇdeśvara means 'the poison-drinking Śiva,' and Nanjangud in Kannada signifies 'the place where Naṅja (Naṅjuṇdeśvara) resides.' This site is closely associated with Śiva, and several forms of the deity are found in the temple. Among them, the Viśāpaharaṇa image is one of the most attractive and rare. It is the only image that has been created completely in accordance with the iconographic texts. The entire description of this sculpture corresponds to that in the *Karaṇāgama* and *Śrītattvanidhi*. This sculpture, a remarkable example of Indian art, also expresses the emotion of love between Śiva and Pārvatī. The depiction of Pārvatī pressing Śiva's neck after his act of poison consumption is



unique and unprecedented. In none of the other images is Pārvaṭī present; this sculpture, therefore, symbolises harmony and unity.

The term 'Viśāpaharaṇa mūrti' was first coined by T. A. Gopinatha Rao. Later, N. K. Bhattasali used the term 'Nīlakaṇṭha' for this form. Subsequently, C. Sivaramamurti and Stella Kramrisch also referred to this form as Viśāpaharaṇa. The story of the churning of the ocean (Sagara Manthana, Kshirasagara Manthana, or Amrita Manthana) is well known in epics and Purāṇica literature, but its description is found less frequently in iconographic texts.

In Indian art, Viśāpaharaṇa images have been found in both seated and standing postures. Almost all the sculptures display a sense of gravity and calmness on Śiva's face. Each image reflects the distinctive traits of its regional art while being based on iconographic texts. However, it is surprising that despite the immense popularity of this form of Śiva among the people, it did not gain much prominence in Indian art. This may be because the Viśāpaharaṇa form is absent in the early phases of Indian sculpture. The earliest known image dates to the 8th-9th century CE, indicating that, unlike other forms of Śiva, it was rarely represented. Another reason might be the lack of detailed descriptions of its construction in many iconographic texts, which led to its limited representation in Indian art.



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