

# A STUDY OF INDIAN ICONOGRAPHY

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## I. Introduction :

The explanation of a number of technical terms which are usually employed in the description of images may well precede their systematic description. These terms relate first to the objects which images of Hindu Gods are shown to bear in their hands, such as weapons, musical instruments, animals, birds, etc. secondly, to the various attitudes in which the hands of images are shown, thirdly, to the postures which the bodies of the images are made to assume; and lastly, to the costume, ornaments and head gear in which they are represented. The most important among the weapons are: Sankha, Khatvanga, Ankusa, Chakra, Dhanus, Tanka, Gada, Bana, Khadga, Parasu, Musala

The sculpturing of the several objects shown in the hands of Hindu images differs from place to place; sometime they are not alike even in the same place. The simple, yet striking, representations of these in the early Chalukya, Pallava and other styles of sculpture are no less artistic than the minute and elaborate carvings of the later Chalukya-Hoysala School. Ghanta, Darpana, Akshamal and Pustaka etc. In the detailed description of these objects given below, only their important variations are noticed.

## II. Study of Important Indian Iconography :

**A) Weapons :** of these weapons Sankham Chakra and Gada are peculiar to Vishnu. In rare instances, the images of that deity are found carrying other weapons also, and this feature is noticeable in the representations of several of Vishnu's avatars; for instance, in images representing the Trivikramavataram the image is shown to carry, in addition to the three weapons mentioned above, the Dhanus, the Bana, the Khadga and the Khetaka. But Parasu, Khatvangam Sula and agni are generally associated with Siva, while Ankusa and Pasa are held by Ganesh, Sarasvati and other deities. Sakti, Vajra and Tanka are Subhramanya's characteristic weapons. Musala and Hala are found in association with Balarama, Varahi and a few other deities. These are all briefly described in the order in which they have been mentioned above.

**1) Sankha** is the ordinary conch shell which is almost always found in one of the hands of the images of Vishnu. The Sankha of Vishnu is known by the name of Panchajanya, being supposed to have been derived from the body of the asura named Panchajanya. It is declared to have been employed by Vishnu in war; by the blowing of this powerful conch-shell, he often struck terror into the hearts of his enemies. The conch represented in sculptures is either a plain conch, held in the hand with all the five fingers by its open end (Pl. I, Fig.-1) or an ornamented one, having its head or spiral-top covered with decorative metal cap, surmounted by the head of a mythical lion, and having a cloth tied round it so that portions of it may hang on either side (Pl. I, fig.-2). Curiously enough a Sankha of this description is shown so as to be held between the first two fingers, which is indeed a difficult task to perform.

**2) Chakra** is also a characteristically Vishnava weapon. It is also carried by Durga, who is said to be the sister and as such the female form of Vishnu. It is shown in sculptures in two different forms. In the first variety, it is shaped like the wheel of a cart, with spokes, nave and all, and is meant to be grasped by the rim. But in the other form, it is highly ornamented; the spokes are made to resemble the petals of a lotus so that the internal parts appear like a full blown lotus in the total ensemble ((Pl. I, fig.-4). As in the case of the Sankha, the Chakra also has ornamentations on the top and sides and jeweled running around it (Pl. I, fig.-5).

**3) Gada** is the ordinary Indian club. It is held in the hand by the images with all the five fingers. In some cases, however, one of the hands of the image is placed upon the top of the Gada which rests on the floor. In the earlier sculptures, its representation is always plain; it has a tapering top and a stout bottom (Pl. I, fig.-6). In comparatively later instances, it is more or less elaborately ornamented (Pl. I, fig.-7 and 8). It is a weapon meant to strike the enemy at close quarters and does not therefore leave the hand of its owner.

**4) Khadga** is a sword, long or short, and is used along with a Khetaka or shield made of wood or hide. The Khadga is either single-edged or double-edged and has a handle which is not different from the handle of swords seen in the pictures of the Crusaders and the early kings of Europe (Pl. I, fig.-9 and 10).

**5) Dhanus** is the bow. It has three different shapes. The first is like an arc of a circle, with the ends joined by a string or thong taking the place of the chord (Pl. II, fig.-2). In the second variety it has three bends, the top and bottom bends being smaller and turned in a direction opposite to that of the middle bend which is the larger one (Pl. II, fig.-3). The third variety has five bends and belongs to a much later period in the evolution of this weapon (Pl. II, fig.-4).

**6) Bana** or the arrow is so represented as to appear to be made of wood, and is tipped with a metallic point, its tail-end having a few feathers stuck in it (Pl. II, fig.-5). The arrow is extracted from it for use with the aid of the fore-finger and the middle-finger.

**7) Parasu** is a battle axe. The earlier specimens of this are light and graceful. The parasu of the archaic type consists of a steel blade which is fitted on a turned, light, wooden handle. The handle is sometimes fixed in a ring which is attached to the blade of the axe. Sometimes, however, the blade is fixed in a hole bored in the handle (Pl. II, fig.-6). The later forms consist of a heavy club, closely resembling the Gada, into which the head of the Parasu is fitted. The blade is disproportionately small in these later forms (Pl. II, fig.-7). But is of proper proportion in the earlier types.

8) **Khatvanga** is a curious sort of club, made up of the bone of the forearm or the leg, to the end of which a human skull is attached through its foramen. (Pl. II, fig.-9). From this description it must be clear that this peculiar weapon comes from very remote antiquity. In the ornate style of the later Chalukya-Hoysalas, the osseous shaft of this old weapon is dispensed with and a well turned wooden handle is substituted in its place (see Pl. II, fig.-10)

9) **Tanka and Agni** the small chisel used by the stone-mason is called the Tanka. Its shape, as found in sculptures, is given in (Pl. II, fig.-11). The Agni is represented in two varieties according as it is used as a weapon of war or employed for the purpose of making offerings. In the first case Agni is represented as in Pl. II, fig.-12 and 13; and this form of Agni is commonly met with in the hands of Siva. Agni used for the purpose of religious offerings is sculptured as in (Pl. II, fig.-14).

10) **Vajra** is the thunder-bolt. This has a long history beginning from the Buddhist period. In later Hindu mythology, it is shown in almost the same form which it had in earlier times. It is made up of two similar limbs, each having three claws resembling the claws of birds; and both its parts are connected together by the handle in the middle (see Pl. III, fig.-7).

**Musical Instruments** : The second classes of objects which are met with in the hands of the images of gods consist of certain musical instruments.

Some images, as, for instance, those of Dark-shinamurti and Sarasvati, are shown with a Vina held in the left hand the right hand being made to play upon it. The Damaru is another instrument generally found in the hands of the images of Siva and of his manifestations such as Bhairava. Murali, also called Venu is the flute peculiar to Krishna. Sankha is more properly a natural bugle than a weapon of war, and is treated as such in the representations of Vishnu. Ghanta or the bell is another musical instrument, which is generally found in the hands of Virabhadra and Kali.

1) **Vina**: It consists of a long hollow semi cylindrical body with a number of keys on its sides. From each of these keys precedes a string or wire which is stretched over the long body of the instrument and tied at the lower end. At this lower end is a square sounding box, and to the upper end a hollow gourd is attached to serve as a resonator. It is played with the left hand by passing the fingers lightly over the strings and pressing them down a little in required positions. The right hand plucks the various strings periodically to suit the requirements of the musician (see Pl. III, fig.-1 and 11).

2) **Damaru** is a small drum with a hollow body open at both ends. Over each of the open ends of this hollow body is stretched a membrane which is held in position firmly by means of a string passing to and fro over the length of the body of the drum. By pressing these strings, the tension of the membranes may be altered at will so as to produce different notes by striking thereon, or by rubbing one of the membranes with a rescinded stick. Sometimes there is a string attached to the middle of the body of the drum; and to the end of this string is attached a bead. By holding the drum in the middle and shaking it suitably, this string with the bead may be made to strike against the membranes alternately and produce the required sound (see Pl. III, fig.-12 and 13).

3) **Murali or Venu** is a flute made, as its name indicates, from a thin and hollow bamboo. In a piece of bamboo, suitably chosen holes are bored in proper places. By blowing in the hole which is near to the closed end and stopping one or more of the other holes with the fingers as required music of a very high standard of perfection is often elicited from this simple instrument (see Pl. III, fig.-14).

4) **Ghanta** is the common bell (see Pl. IV, figs.-1 and 2)

There are certain other objects shown as held in the hands of the images of Hindu gods. Among these are to be found the representations of certain animals and birds? Siva is almost

**B) Other Objects held in the hands of images** : Among these are to be found the representations of certain animals and birds? Siva is almost always shown as carrying a mriga or deer, and his son shubramanya is made to hold a Kukkuta or cock in his hand. Parrots and beetles are represented as being carried in the hands of Durga and other goddesses. The earliest known image of Siva that on the Linga at Gudimallam, carries a ram. Later sculptures show a buck. In the case of the ram, it is held by the hind legs, with the head hanging downwards, whereas in the case of the buck though held by the hind legs, it is represented in the actual pose of "Bucking" up (see Pl. III, figs.-15 and 16). We see, moreover certain utensils in the hands of the images. The chief ones among them are the Kamandalu, the Sruk, the Sruva, the Darpana and the Kapala. The Ajya-Patra, or the Vessel to contain Ghee is sometime found in association with the figure of Brahma, who is, however, more generally seen to carry a Pustaka or book in one of his hands. The book is also held as an emblem by his consort Sarasvati.

1) **Kamandalu** : This is an ordinary vessel to hold water and is of different shapes. It has some cases a spout. The earlier specimens are simple in design, though not very handsome in appearance. The later forms are more symmetrical and beautiful in design and workmanship (see Pl. IV, figs.-3,4,5 and 6).

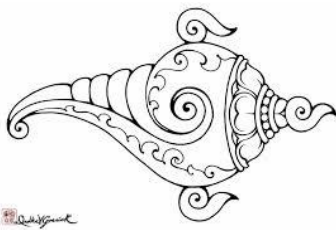
2) **Darpana** means a mirror. In ancient times, when glass either unknown or was not employed for making mirrors, highly polished metal plates of various designs were utilized to serve as mirrors. It may be remarked by the way that this old speculum industry has not yet died out in India. In a place called Aramula in Travancore, such mirrors are still manufactured; and the mirrors made by the workmen of this place are so true that they do not show distortion in reflection. Glass mirrors are not allowed to be used in temple service in Malabar, and it is not rare to find in wealthy temples in this part of the country speculum mirror even as large as three feet by two feet. In sculptures the Darpana is either circular or oval in form, and is mounted on a well-wrought handle (see Pl. IV, fig.-7)

3) **Pustaka** means a book. It is made up either of palm leaves or of paper, the latter variety being, however, comparatively modern. In older sculptures it is always a palm leaf book that is represented as being held in the hand by Brahma and other deities (see Pl. IV, fig.-9)

4) **Akshamala** is the rosary of beads. The beads are either Rudraksha or Kamalaksha in variety, and the rosary is found in the hands of Brahma, Sarasvati and Siva, though rarely in association with other deities (see Pl. IV, fig.-10)

Flowers, such as the Padma, (lotus), and the Nitotpala, (the blue Lily) are to be seen in the hands of the images of goddesses in general, though more especially in the hands of the goddesses Lakshmi and Bhumi.

**A. Weapons**



Pl.- I, Fig. 1



Pl.-I, Fig. 4



Pl.-I, Fig. 6



Pl.-I, Fig. 9



Pl.-II, Fig. 12



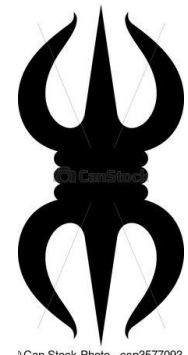
Pl.-II, Fig. 2



Pl.-II, Fig. 5



Pl.-II, Fig. 6



Pl.-II, Fig. 11

**B. Musical Instruments**



Pl.-III, Fig. 12



Pl.-III, Fig. 14



Pl.-IV, Fig. 1

**C. Other Objects**



Pl.-IV, Fig. 7



Pl.-IV, Fig. 9



Pl.-IV, Fig. 10



Padma

**III. Conclusion :**

The Hindu God and Goddesses are Shown to bear in hand such as weapons, Musical Instruments, Attitude and Postures of which the bodies of image. Weapons likes Chakra, Gadha are Peculiar to Vishnu. Khatvanga, Sula and Agni are associated with Siva. Parasu and Pasha are holding by Ganesh secondly some images certain Musical Instruments like Saraswati shown with a Veena, held in the left hand. The Damaru is Musical Instruments which is generally found in the hands of Veerabhadra.

Thirdly other god and goddesses held some animals and birds. For example: God Shiva is always shown as carrying Mriga(Deer). Parrots and Beetles are represented as being carried in the hands of Durga. So this study stated that these weapons, Musical Instruments, animals postures objects, birds are significations of Indian Iconography.

**IV. Reference Books:**

Sl.No.	Name of Author	Title of Book	Year	Publishers
1	-	Indian Iconography	-	-
2	S.K. Ramachandra Rao	Moorthi Shilp Nele-Hinnele	1988	Joint Director, Published Division Bangalore University Bangalore-560056
3	Dr. Sindagi Rajasekhar,	Karnataka Vastushilpa Mattu Chitra Kale	1998	Sujata Publications, Halabhavi Compound, U.B. Hill, Dharwad-580007
4	Ashok T. Akki	Kala Charitre	1998	S.M. Shabadimath Book Depot. Box No.-65 Gadag-582101

**Abstract (Summary) :**

The terms relate first to the objects which images of Hindu Gods are shown to bear in their hands such as weapons musical instruments, animals, birds etc. secondly to the various attitudes thirdly to the postures which the bodies of the images. And lastly to the custom, ornaments and head gear in which they are represented the important among the weapons like Shanka, Chakra, Tanka, Gadha, Parasu etc. some of Sculptures are more elaborate carvings of the later Chalukya and Hoysala School. Akshamala, Darpana, Pustaka etc.

Weapons like Chakra, Gada and Shanka are Peculiar to Vishnu. Khatvanga, Sula and Agni are General associated with Siva. While Ankusha and Pashu are held by Ganesh. Vajra and Tanka are Subhramanyas weapons. Musala and Hala are found in association with Balarama. Varabi and a few other deities.

The second classes of objects which are net with in the hands of the image of Gods consist of certain musical instruments. Some images as for instance those of Dakshinamurty, Saraswati are shown with a Veena held in the left hand and the right hand being made to play upon it. The Damaru is another instruments generally found in the hands of the images of Shiva and Bhairava. Murali also called Veenu is the Flute peculiar to Krishna. Similarly Ghanta (Bell) is another Musical Instruments which is generally found in the hands of Veerabhadra and Kali.

Thirdly other objects held in the hands of images. Shiva is always shown as carrying Mirga (Deer). Parrot and Beetles are represented as being carried in the hands of Durga and other Goddesses. The book is also hold to Saraswati. Similarly flowers such as the Padma (Lotus) in the hands of the Goddesses Laxmi.