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GRT DASAVATARA IMAGES IN ANCIENT INDIAN ART

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Abstract:-Incarnations (avatars) are manifested forms of god assumed for some specific purposes. After the completion of the mission of his life He returns to his original self.

The oldest reference of avataravad is found in Satapatha Brahman. The names of incarnations vary with descriptions of different texts and their number. Later on this list became stereotyped to ten. The avatara images started being made in Kushana period and reached to its climax in pre medieval period. The depiction of several dasavatara images by the artisans, on the lintels, doorways of various temples establishes the popularity of the concept of incarnations in ancient Indian art.

Keywords:Dasavatara, iconography, patta, incarnation.

INTRODUCTION

Visnu is regarded as one of the most influential god in Puranic age. Visnu was really a result of the syncretism of the three god concepts, the Vedic Visnu, the Narayana and the Vasudeva.

The doctrine of avatars was no less a component part of the Pancharatra or the Bhagavata creed that then of the Vyuhās. The term avatara is applied to the act of the god coming down in the form of man or an animal to the earth and living there in that form till the purpose for which He has descended in the universe was fulfilled.

DISCUSSION:

One of the earliest reference to the assumption of some forms by the divinity for the attainment of the particular ends is to be found in the Satpatha Brahmāna and the Taittiriya Samhita where Prajapati is said to have assumed Fish(Matsya), Tortoise(Kurma) and Boar(Varaha) forms on different occasions for the furtherance of the creation and the well being of the created.¹ When the doctrine of the incarnations in its association with Vasudeva-Visnu-Narayana was well established, all these three were boldly transferred to that composite god, and regarded as some of his divya incarnation. The ideology about the avatars is clearly expounded in Bhagavadgita.

Yada yada hi dharmasya glanirbhavati Bharat /
Abhyutthanam dharmasya tadatmanam srijamyaham //
Paritrānaya sadhunam vinasaya cha duskritam /
Dharmasamsthapanarthaya sambhavami yuge yuge //²

Despite a number of important variations, sanskrit texts normally list ten standard avatars

in the following order: Matsya, Kurma, Varaha, Narsimha, Vamana, Parsurama, Rama, Balarama, Buddha and Kalki.

It is an established fact that avatara images started being made in the Kushana period. Images of Varaha, Narsimha and Vamana have been found to this effect.³ The theory of incarnation had been vigorously evolved in the Gupta period. Fine images of dasavatara have been depicted in dasavatara temple at Deogarh. In the Gupta age it is unlikely that complete depiction of the ten avatars were planned, although separately conceived avatars such as the great Varaha at Udayagiri (Dist. Vidisha, M.P.) were not uncommon. Loose images of Varaha and Narsimha occur at Eran (Dist. Sagar, M.P.), but it is not clear if they were originally linked together or with other avatars. A fragmentary fifth century Gupta period column from the Allahabad area, however, associates two of the avatars, on opposite sides of this square pillar are Harihara and Visnu, while the other two sides bear images of Varaha and Vamana.⁴ A four sided pillar from Rajghat Varanasi (476 A. D.) has two avatars Vamana and Narsimha.⁵ The formulation of the doctrine of ten avatars must have emerged shortly after the late Gupta period in north India. By the eight and nine-centuries the concept of the dasavatas had largely achieved the form that prevailed throughout subsequent centuries. In medieval period the incarnations are shown in two ways- firstly, independent images and secondly avatara depicted in series. In the early medieval period it was almost a tradition that the dasavatas images are carved. Various dasavatas pattas are also found in this period.

A fine stone lintel containing depiction of dasavatas preserved in archaeological museum of Khajuraho. It is a part of temple doorway⁶. The lower lintel would likely feature a prominent image of Visnu in its centre, and other major deities, at horizontal bands of decorative motives that would have continued on the jambs (Fig. 1). This lintel was normally designed with three or five principal niches, the niches; themselves were crowned by triangular shaped projections that often resembled shrine super structures that were frequently embellished with small circular motives. The figural style of the lintel belongs to the tenth century. The imagery of the lintel represents dasavatas described in Puranic sources. The avatars are usually placed in a descending order at the top of the image frame, beginning with the first and second avatars of the standard list, Matsya and Kurma. The last two avatars Buddha and Kalki are frequently represented on the base of the image on the far left and right hand sides respectively in the same spirit, the remaining avatars are distributed on either side of the image frame.



Fig.1 Lintel, Archaeological Museum, Khajuraho

Another fine lintel from an eight century temple at Batesvara (Dist. Morena, M.P.), illustrates the standard sequence of dasavatas. On this lintel the fish and tortoise are far left, the former placed directly upon the later (Fig.2).

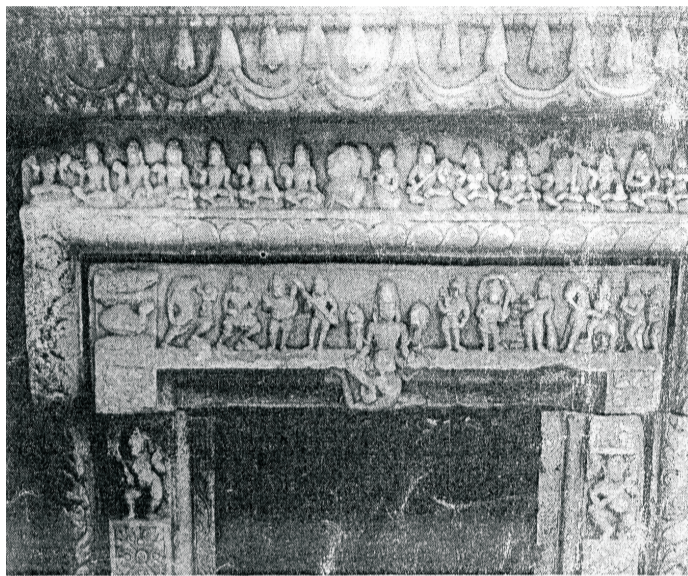


Fig.2 Temple Doorway, Batesvara, Dist. Morena, M.P.

In the prabhavali of a standing Visnu from Mehrauli dated 12th century, in the national museum, a horizontal grouping of dasavataras occurs within a narrow band above the central image.⁷ The ten small avatars are disposed in their correct order, from right to left. This piece from Mehrauli indicates that by the 12th century the number and the ordering of the avatars were well fixed in north India, at least in stone depictions. The unique feature of this lintel indicate the degree to which traditionally accepted forms, the ordering of the avatars, and their individual depiction were, moulded to suit religious and aesthetic aims.

One of the dasavataras impressive image is found at Garhwa(Dist. Allahabad, U.P.). Here dasavataras carved in a row on stone slabs were usually placed in different parts of the Vaisnava shrines as decorative reliefs edifying the pious. Dasavataras were also represented on one side of the small stone or metal plaques known as Visnupattas found in Bengal. In one of the Pala sculpture of Lucknow museum representing Visnu dasavataras have been carved out in which Krishna is included after Rama deleting Balarama.⁸

The dasavataras along with innumerable gods and goddesses have been shown on the back of Pasuvaraha image from Jhansi which is preserved in the state museum Lucknow.⁹

In south India dasavtara reliefs are very popular at Badami and Mahabalipuram. We have evidence of dasavatarapatta from Somnathpur(Kesava temple, Karnatka,) Hoyasala temple of Halevid where dasavatara are carved on the doorways of the temples.¹⁰

CONCLUSION:

From the above evidences it can be concluded that dasavatarapatta was very popular during pre medieval period and the artisans depicted several dasavatarapatta on the doorways and lintels of various temples, which establishes the concept of incarnations.

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