



Vamana-Trivikrama In Badami Chalukya Sculpture

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Introduction

Until the time of Vikramaditya I the rulers of the Chalukya dynasty of Badami (543-757 CE) were the inclined towards Vaishnavism. The records of Mangalesa (Padigar:2010:9-11,12-15) and Polekesi II (Padigar:2010:42-45) are vocal in describing them as *parama-bhagavatas*, 'great devotees of Vishnu'. The fact that two of the four caves excavated by them at their capital Badami, all of them dating from pre-620 CE period, are dedicated to god Vishnu is further evidence of the situation. In 659 CE Virkamaditya I was initiated into *Mahesvara* brand of Saivism through a ritual called *Sivamandala-diksha*. (Padigar:2010:67-70) Henceforth he came to be called a *parama-Mahesvara*, 'a great devotee of Mahesvara or Siva'. (Padigar:2010:83-85) From that point of time under the Chalukya patronage Saiva temples with distinct characteristics multiplied. If we therefore divide the span of Chalukya rule into two phases, the first from 543 to 660 CE and the second from 660 to 757 CE, it will be of interest to compare and contrast the iconographic forms of Vishnu in the two phases. The present paper proposes to study the depictions of Vishnu's Vamana *avatara* in order to highlight the iconographic variation discernible in the two phases and reflects on the possible reasons for the variation. At the outset it may be mentioned here that there are several sculptural depictions of Vamana-Trivikrama theme in Chalukya context, particularly so in Badami, Pattadakal, Aihole and Alampur.

In Vaishnava perceptions, Vamana figures normally in the list of ten avatars of Vishnu as the fifth avatara. But Vaishnu avatars also enlist Vamana and Trivikrama separately among the *chaturvimsati-murtis* (twenty-four images, Kesava, Narayana, Janardana etc.) as the eighth and seventh *vyuhantaras* respectively. (Padigar 1996:102) However, during the time of Chalukyas of Badami, the concept of *chaturvimsati-murtis* does not seem to have crystallized yet. Hence what one comes across is the depiction of Vamana *avatara* myth.

Vishnu-Trivikrama Episode in Literature

The myth of Trivikrama is usually traced by scholars to the Vedic literature. However in a crystallized form the myth is mentioned in the *Ramayana* and the *Harivamsa* part of *Mahabharata*. In the *Puranas* the myth is narrated quite extensively particularly in the *Bhagavata Purana*. Here we focus briefly on the myth as narrated in some *Puranas*, in order to identify the possible impact on iconography of the Vamana-Trivikrama episode depictions in Badami Chalukya context.

Kurma Purana

Virocana, the demon king, abdicated the throne in favour of his son Bali. Bali was well disposed towards *Brahmanas*. He conquered Puranadara, i.e., Indra. The defeated Indra sought refuge in Lord Vishnu. Bali wanted to perform a *yajna*. When Vishnu came to know of this, he came to the place of *yajna* assuming the form of Vamana. Then he begged him to grant three steps of land. Bali washed the feet of Vishnu and drank that water. Bali then gave pouring water the three steps. Now Vamana transformed into a gigantic form of Trivikrama and sent Bali to nether world. (Shastri:1981:165-172).

Matsya Purana

Bali, the king of demons organized a sacrifice. Knowing this Vishnu came as Vamana to attend the sacrifice. Sukracharya the demon's *guru* came to know that the dwarf was none other than Vishnu. He advised Bali not to commit himself to Vamana. But Bali did not listen to *guru's* advice. He welcomed Vamana with offerings and asked him what he wanted. Vamana replied that he be granted three steps of land measured by him. As soon as Bali made the grant Vamana assumed the gigantic form and covered the whole universe and sent Bali to *patala*. (Jamna Das Akhtar:1972:268-278)

Padma Purana

Vishnu was born as a son of Aditi. Knowing about sacrifice being performed by Bali, Vishnu went to the place of sacrifice along with eight sages. Vamana told the reason for his arrival and asked for a piece of land measured by his three steps. Sukracharya advised Bali not to grant Vamana's request. But Bali would not listen to his *guru*. He washed the feet of Lord and granted Vamana's wish. After that Lord abandoned his dwarfish form, took the body of Vishnu, covered the whole universe and sent Bali to netherworld. (Bhatt:1991:3211-3215)

Narada Purana

Vishnu was born as a son of Aditi, known as Vamana to destroy asura king Bali. Bali had begun a great sacrifice of a long duration with a help of his *guru* Sukracharya and other prominent sages. Vamana went over to the place of sacrifice. The preceptor of daityas came to know that Vamana was none other than Vishnu. He advised Bali not to grant him boon. But Bali did not listen to and asked Vamana how he could serve him. Vamana asked him the space as can be measured by three steps. As soon as the boon was granted to him, Vamana increase his size. He covered the heaven and the earth in two steps. When he placed the second step on Brahmaloka, water emerged from the centre of the universe. This water washed Vishnu's feet and poured down on the mount Sumeru and formed the holy river Ganga. Due to Bali's inability to grant place of one more step, Vishnu imprisoned Bali. But knowing that Bali was dedicated to him Vishnu gave Bali the dominion in the nether world called *rasatala* to live. (Ganesh Vasudeo Tagare:1980:188-205)

Bhagavata Purana

Of all the *Puranas*, it is the *Bhagavata Purana* which gives the Vamana-Trivikrama episode in great detail. Asura king Bali was performing an *asvamedha* sacrifice. Vamana entered the *pendal* of *asvamedha* sacrifice carrying with him his umbrella, sacred staff and water bowl full of water. Bali washed the feet of Lord and sprinkled on his head asked Vamana what he should do for him. Vamana told him to grant three steps of land measured with his feet. When Bali granted the gift Vamana transformed into gigantic form of Trivikrama. He covered earth in one foot, and the heaven with his second foot. There was no space left for the third foot. Garuda bound Bali with the noose cords of Varuna. Then Vishnu asked Bali to provide the place for the third step. Bali then submitted his head for the third step to the Lord. After that Bali freed from the bonds and entered *sutala*. (Shastri:1987:1083-1115)

The Earliest Sculpture of Vamana-Trivikrama Episode

The earliest sculptural depiction of Vamana-Trivikrama *avatara* is from Mathura (Fig. 1) and it dates from late Kushana or early Gupta period (c. 3rd-4th Cent CE). This sculpture is reported from Katra mound in Mathura and is now preserved in the Mathura Museum (No. 2664). (Desai 1973). In this a rather small but considerably weathered sculpture. The principal figure is that of Vishnu as Trivikrama, standing on his right foot and with his left leg raised to the level of waist. He has four hands, of which the proper right hand is placed on hip and the proper left hand is held parallel to the raised leg. Of the remaining two hands, the right one is damaged but there are indications that it either carried a *chakra* or held a fluttering piece of cloth as a mark of victory. The remaining left hand holds a *sankha* (conch). A halo is shown behind Trivikrama's head. There is a significant aspect of this depiction: Trivikrama's raised leg is thrust into the mouth of a demonic face, usually identified as the face of Rahu. As will be noticed below, in later depictions, the raised leg and the raised hand point towards a laughing face. The backdrop of Trivikrama comprises of what looks like a wall of stones, a feature never to be noticed in later sculpture. There are a few human figures around. One of them is in the upper region to the left of Trivikrama. He has his hands in *anjali-mudra* and most likely represents Garuda. In the lower region to the left of Trivikrama, there seems to be a group of

three human figures, but they are so small and weathered that it is impossible to perceive their identity. It may be speculated that the event of Vamana receiving gift from Bali is intended by this group. However, there is a damaged human figure nearer to the right foot of Trivikrama. This is likely to be Namuchi, the son of Bali, probably firmly holding Trivikrama's leg. As will be seen later, the last mentioned feature is present also in the first-phase Badami Chalukya depictions of the story of Vamana-Trivikrama. Thus this image provides an example of early iconography of Vamana-Trivikrama.

Vamana-Trivikrama in Badami Chalukya sculpture

The sculptural depictions of Vamana-Trivikrama episode are found throughout the Chalukya period on both Vaishnava and Saiva monuments. They are basically narrative in import. They decorate walls or pillars of temples. Usually the depictions view two events in the episode, one showing Vamana receiving the *dana* (grant) from *daitya*-king Bali and the second, Vishnu as Trivikrama in *Virat* form measuring the strides. Some of the best examples may be noticed in Cave II and Cave III at Badami, Chikkigudi at Aihole, Visvabrahma and Svargabrahma temples at Alampur and Virupaksha temple, Papanatha temple and Kasi visvesvara temples at Pattadakal. Smaller depictions are also noticed such as in the *gala* (neck) part of *adhishtana* (basement) of Mudi-Mallikarjuna temple at Mahakuta, on a beam of Huchchappayyagudi at Aihole, etc. Among these monuments, Cave III at Badami is dated by inscription to 578 CE (Padigar:2010:9-11). Cave II at Badami has foundation inscription and hence its date is debated. Some scholars assign it before Cave III (Padigar 2008: 27) while others prefer a date early in the reign of Polekesi II. (Dhaky 1988: 443) Thus these two monuments, together with the sculptures therein, are assigned conveniently in the first phase of Badami Chalukya rule, viz. 543-650 CE. However, the present author prefers to date it before Cave III. The Mudi-Mallikarjuna temple at Mahakuta shares common features with the Mahakutesvara temple, referred to in Mangalesa's pillar inscriptions dated 597 CE. Chikkigudi at Aihole does not have a foundation inscription but stylistically it is assigned to a defendable 620-642 CE period. (Radcliffe 1981: 152). The two temples at Alampur referred to here, viz. Svargabrahma and Visvabrahma are dated to Vinayaditya's reign (681-696 CE) (Radcliffe :1981) and hence fall in the second phase of Chalukya rule, i.e., 650-757 AD. Huchchappayyagudi at Aihole is dated to early part of 8th Century. The temples of Virupaksha (Vikramaditya II' reign, 733-44 CE) and Papanatha (c. 750 CE) can also be dated on epigraphic and circumstantial evidence to the second phase i.e., 733-757 CE span.

In Cave II the Vamana-Trivikrama sculpture is carved on the western wall of the *mukhamandapa*. The lower left part of this panel depicts dwarf Vamana holding an umbrella as a *vatu* in front of Sukracharya, the *asura* *purohita* to receive gift of three paces from the *asura*-king Bali. Sukracharya is shown with curled hair and an antelope-skin *uttariya* on left shoulder. Bali stands behind Sukracharya, touching latter's hand while his queen Vindhyavali and other members are depicted behind. In the central region of the panel is Vishnu as Trivikrama. Eight-armed, he has placed right leg firmly on the ground, while his left leg is raised up to the level of chest. Of the eight hands seven hold the attributes of *khadga*, *banu*, *gada*, *chakra*, *sankha*, *khetaka* and *chapa*. The remaining left hand is stretched out parallel to the raised leg pointing towards the huge laughing face, probably Rahu, in the sky. At the top right Jambavan and Garuda are shown with *pataka-hasta* suggesting the victory of the god. A soldier is shown falling upside down from the sky near the raised leg apparently suggesting the force with which Trivikrama raised his leg to measure the sky. In the lower right part a soldier with a sword is attempting to attack the God. A dwarfish person is portrayed in royal outfit holds the right leg of Trivikrama firmly, to obstruct his measuring the paces; he is identified as Namuchi, the son of Bali. (Ashwin Lippe:1972: 181, Annigeri :1978:18, Banerji:1928:16, Soundara Rajan:1981: 50-51, Radcliffe :1981: 76, Padigar :1996 :201). A point to be noted in this representation is the fact that Sukracharya is actually pouring water into the hand of Vamana while Bali stands behind him touching his hand. This is the traditional procedure of ritually conferring a gift (*dana*). It may be pointed out here that Soundara Rajana and Ashwin Lippe have mistaken the figure of Sukracharya to that of Bali.

In Cave III, the depiction of Vamana-Trivikrama Vishnu is similar in detail to that of Cave II. (Lippe:1972:182, Annigeri:1978:28, Banerji :1928: 18, Soundara Rajan:1981: 67-68, Radcliffe :981: 92.) The difference is in the number of associated figures which is considerably reduced here. A figure depicting upper part of a god holding a *pasa* (noose), probably

of Varuna, is also present here.

The *gala* part of the *adhishtana* of Mudi-Mallikarjuna temple at Mahakuta has a narrative depiction of this theme. Here again one notices the presence of Namuchi holding Trivikrama's leg. The twin temples of Mudi-Mallikarjuna and Mahakutesvara at Mahakuta are dated by certain scholars to post 650 CE though the temples betray pre-650 characteristics and the latter temple is referred to in the pillar inscription issued by Mangalesa in 597 CE. The iconography of Trivikrama here is an additional evidence of its pre-650 date.

The example from the ceiling of Chikkigudi, which is damaged on its left part, also answers to a similar description. Its details resemble the Cave III specimen to some extent. But here Sukracharya seems to be wearing a crown unbefitting a *purohita*.

Visvabrahma temple at Alampur depicts Vamana-Trivikrama twice, once in a *koshtha* and second time in sequence in five separate blocks of the *tulapitha*: Vamana with *chhatra*; Bali with Vindhyavali, ready to confirm gift on Vamana; Trivikrama lifting up left leg; Bali and Vindhyavali in astonishment; and, lastly Bali being bound by *varunapasa* by Garuda.

The exterior *koshtha* of the Vishvabrahma temple depicts the same theme. It is badly damaged but interesting from the point of view of composition. The artist has chosen to depict the moments in the episode in an anti-clock succession. To the left of Trivikrama there are two moments depicted one above the other: First Vamana approaches *asura* king Bali who is seated on a low stool. Above this scene Bali and his wife Vindhyavali are performing the ritual of *dana* to Vamana. The next moment is that of Vamana assuming gigantic form, which is given prominence in the central region of the panel. The last moment is shown in the lower region to the right of Trivikrama. In this scene Bali is bound by Garuda.

The southern *ghanadvaya* of the Svargabrahma temple at Alampur contains another representation of Vamana as *Virata-rupa*. This sculpture is badly damaged. His six hands carry *khadga*, *chakra*, *gada*, picking a *banan* from the quire, *khetaka* and *sarnga* bow and *katyavalambita*. His left leg is placed on the ground while the right is raised up (damaged). In this arrangement Vamana, Bali and his wife Vindhyavali appear twice, first Vamana requesting for the gift and second receiving the gift. Thereafter, Vamana has assumed Trivikrama form to measure the sky, while Garuda binds Bali with *varunapasa*.

The panel in Virupaksha temple represents Trivikrama form of Vishnu. (Annigeri: 1961:36, Radcliffe:1981:346, Padigar :1996:201, Tabo-jji:2011:127-136). The composition is same as mentioned before.

The ceiling slab of the Chikkigudi at Aihole depicts the Vamana-Trivikrama form of Vishnu. The theme of this form is as same as in cave II and cave III at Badami. But here Trivikrama is six armed.

Mallikarjuna temple at Mahakuta depicts the same story. But the placement of leg is different. He placed his right leg on the head of asura king Bali.

Papanatha temple and Kasivisvesvara temple at Pattadakal depict the same theme as in other structural of post-650 CE temples.

Observations

The Vamana incarnation theme was popular in the Badami Chalukya. But the way of depicting the theme has variations in caves at Badami and structural temples. The Cave II and III at Badami and Chikkigudi at Aihole represent almost similar: 1. Vamana receiving gift from Bali 2. Assuming Trivikrama form 3. Namuchi holding god's leg. The customary method of *dana* i.e., Vamana receiving gift from Bali through Sukracharya are depicted in all these examples. This type of representation of the theme has been assumed to be conforming to *Vaikhasagama* (Padigar :1996:199). The two Vaishnava cave temples at Badami follow this tradition. The Chikkigudi at Aihole is the only structural temple to follow this tradition. On this ground, the Chikkigudi may be assigned to the pre 650 CE.

In the temples of Pattadakal the representation of Vamana-Trivikrama theme is slightly changed. Here beside the foot of Trivikrama there is

depiction of Garuda belabouring Bali (*balibandha*) and binding with *Varunapasa*. This is a different tradition and obviously it is inspired from advent of a new version of the Vamana-Trivikrama storey. This tradition is reflected in the *Bhagavata Purana*. (*Bhagavata Purana*, of Skandha 8, Chapter 21). Thus it may be deduced that the storey of Vamana-Trivikrama as conceived in the *Bhagavata Purana* assyned its form some time in 7th Century CE.



Fig1



fig2



fig3



fig4



Fig5



fig6

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