



## The Arrival of Vaishnavism and Vaishnava Art & Architecture in Early Medieval Chamba

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**ABSTRACT-** The paper is an attempt to bring out the *Vaishnava* landscape of the area under study as it developed over the period of early medieval. Included in this is also the analysis of how the *Vaishnava* landscape start getting manifested through institution and structure over space through time. One would also try to see the art and architecture through the forms and pattern of patronage extended to them.

**KEY WORDS:** Vaishnavism, Patronization, State authority, Structural manifestation, Art & Architecture.

### I. INTRODUCTION

*Vaishnavism*, was introduced in Chamba in 10<sup>th</sup> century A.D. on a spacious level during the reign of Sahila-Varman (A.D 920) but the existence of the *Vaisnava* cult in Chamba region can be traced from the eighth century A.D. as evident from a Vaikuntha murti of Vishnu from the village of Svaim (Chamba).<sup>1</sup> *Vaishnavism* established its strong roots during the reign of Sahila-Varman (A.D.920<sup>2</sup>)

The journey of *Vaishnavism* started in Chamba region by the construction of the temple of Laxmi-Narayan in the newly established capital at Chamba.<sup>3</sup> Sahila-Varman's efforts to patronize *Vaishnavism* seems to have started from the fact of sending his nine sons to bring the stone from Vindhya for the consecration of the idol of Laxmi-Narayan.<sup>4</sup> The king used the increased economic resources at their disposal and patronized the sect. Actually *Vaisnavism* with its royal patriarchal tradition was more suited to the task of royalty.<sup>5</sup> However, the rising cult of *Vaishnavism* did come into conflict with the established cult of *Saiva* but this soon gave way to syncretic tendencies, demonstrated in the temple complexes<sup>6</sup> and land charters that involve not only the trinity but also the pentad of Shiva, Vishnu, Ganesha, Devi and Brahma.<sup>7</sup> The epigraphic records and archeological evidences clearly tell us the flourishing conditions of *Vaishnavism* in the subsequent centuries under the benefaction by the successors of Sahila-Varman. Though they remained persistent followers of *Saiva* cult yet they patronized the *Vaishnava* cult. The Brahmour land charter<sup>8</sup> was the first grand act of patronizing and spreading the *Vaisnava* cult through the grant of land by the king Yugakara-Varman (A.D 940).<sup>9</sup> Under the charter, an image and shrine of lord Narsimha was founded by queen Tribhunarekha and land was granted for the temple.

After Yugakara-Varman, during the reign of Vidagdha-Varman (c.A.D.960<sup>10</sup>) a Vishnu image of *Thakkikasvamin* was established by his feudatory chief Thakkika.<sup>11</sup> *Vaishnavism* flourished in its splendid form during the reign of Soma-Varman (c.A.D. 1060),<sup>12</sup> who was called *Parammahesvar Pramvaishnav*<sup>13</sup> means great devotee of Siva and Vishnu. He donated lands to the two temples of god Hari which were previously built by Laksamana-Varman<sup>14</sup> and the *maharaja-putra* Asata i.e.Asata-Varman.<sup>15</sup> Though the rulers continued to project themselves as supreme worshippers of both Vishnu and Shiva, there is clear shift towards *Vaishnavism*, particularly of the *Pancaratra* or *Vaikhanasa* school, which was popular in Kashmir.<sup>16</sup>

*Vaishnavism* continued to exist in the 12<sup>th</sup> century during the reign of king Lalita-Varman A.D.1143,<sup>17</sup> in the 17<sup>th</sup> year of whose reign, an image/statue of Narayana was placed by his feudatory Nagapala.<sup>18</sup> Another image inscription at Saho, gives the reference to the installation of the statue/image of Vishnu by the chief of the area, Ukukana.<sup>19</sup> The image itself is donated as *Ukukana-svamin*. The image bears three faces, the side faces are those of a lion and a boar, apparently an illusion of the Narasimha and Varaha with four arms and their figurines also. These were seated on equal sides of the head of Vishnu seems to be Brahma and Siva, thus demonstrating his being of principal god of the Hindu triad. The figure represented to be a symbol of the ten incarnations of *Vishnu*.<sup>20</sup> This would indicate also that from 10<sup>th</sup> century A.D & onwards Vishnu was worshipped in the form of his incarnation in Chamba.

The wide popularity of the Vishnu cult during the 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries in Chamba is also evidenced by a large no. of fountain slabs with a large number of spatial distribution in Chamba, contains the

figurines of Vishnu & its incarnations and other deities.<sup>21</sup> *Vaishnavism* in Chamba was a regionalized version, borrowing ideas from Kashmir and the plains but retaining its own distinguished features such as Vaikuntha-Vishnu, Vishnu Chaturanana representations and *Vaishnavism* within the pentad in the tenth through the thirteenth century A.D.<sup>22</sup> which shows the localization of the cults.

As far as the art & architecture is concerned, Chamba region witnessed significant influence from both Kashmir and the plains. Kullu being situated at an old trade route passing inside the hills from Uttar Pradesh to Kashmir, Ladakh and Central Asia, was prosperous. So, its contacts with the Uttar Pradesh were accountable for extension of the style of sculpture of the Gangetic plains to Kullu and the tradition travelled to the other adjoining areas also.<sup>23</sup> As the empire of the great Harshavardana of Thanesar (A.D. 606-647/8), extended upto Ravi, thereby the territories of Jalandhara (Trigarta-Kangra in the Beas Valley), Brahm-pura and Satadru acknowledged his suzerainty<sup>24</sup> which also resulted in the flow of the Gupta art in these regions.<sup>25</sup> After the death of Harsha and the disintegration of the empire, Kullu resulted in deteriorating its defence. Meanwhile, Meru-Varman (ruler of Brahmour, A.D. 680<sup>26</sup> onwards) conquered Kullu,<sup>27</sup> resulted in the close contacts with the plains.

The introduction of *Nagara* stone temple formula in the hill states early in the eighth century may be because of political measures prepared by Lalitaditya (king of Kashmir, A.D.699-736) Lalitaditya is attributed with extensive conquests not only in the Himalayan regions adjoining to the valley of Kashmir but also in the distant plains of India. He is said to have overpowered Yashovarman (king of Kannauj during A.D. 723-753),<sup>28</sup> who was ruling middle India where *Nagara* architecture was first developed.<sup>29</sup> After the defeat of Yashovarman, the upper Gangetic mainland had a dependency of Kashmir empire, which facilitate passable two-way religion-cultural art and architectural flow. The artisans could move liberally to the approaching centres for better opportunities. Under the patronage of Lalitaditya Muktapida, Kashmir had become a centre of art and architecture which attracted the artisans from all directions, which augured in a process of metamorphism in the Gangetic-Kashmir and the later Gupta i.e. Kannauj-Pratihara art tradition in the Gangetic plains.<sup>30</sup>

The image of Narasimha at Brahmour<sup>31</sup> shows the combination of Gupta and Kashmiri features. Narasimha was the favourite *avatars* of Vishnu during the later Gupta period.<sup>32</sup> Image of *Vishnu-chaturanana* (not later than second half of the eighth century A.D.) belonged to the Kashmiri style, presenting a preference for naturalistic treatment and round and somewhat heavy modeling had developed in the later part of the reign of Lalitaditya (king of Kashmir, A.D. 724-760).<sup>33</sup>

The movement of the *Nagara* style further, have been observed in the Chamba region during the tenth century A.D. in the temples of Laxmi-Narayan, Hari- Rai and Laxmi-Damodar. These temples are remarkably in the overall uniformity of structure. The *Nagara* style became fairly a norm in temple architecture, which can be placed within the larger classical idiom of brahmanical architecture.<sup>34</sup> The marble image of Lakshmi-Narayan in Laxmi-Narayan temple at Chamba is bigger than life size in dimension, shows a stage in transition from Kashmiri style to the north Indian Style. The torso of the figure of Vishnu is shaped in the Kashmir idiom and so is the stance of the standing figure. The face is round as commonly seen in Kashmir images. Lotus petals offer a halo for the head which innovation was not adopted from Kashmir or some other nearby centre. This motif of Lotus was generally used to serve the purpose of Halo (*prabhachakra*) behind the head of deity in sculptures of the Pratihara period in north India. The act of using the motif in this image was in its own way by a local artist working in the Kashmir style. The crown of this image is also in a different form from those seen in the sculpture of the earlier period. Its use in sculpture in north India is seen from the tenth century A.D. onwards. This image remains garmented and abundantly ornamented and only some parts of the halo and the crown can be seen apart from the face. Herman Goetz had roundabout that the image was in the style of Rajasthan. These facts indicate that at the point of time when the image of Laxmi-Narayan was fashioned, some other sculpturers were working in Chamba in the style of north India, coupled with the Pratiharas and thus the work of the local artisans exhibits mixed traits.<sup>35</sup>

The iconography of the sculptures also reflect the influence of North Indian style as well as Kashmiri style. Chamba and its adjoining areas e.g.Kullu, Kangra are the areas from where the Kashmir style bronzes have come to light. This reflects that these areas were unquestionably under the orbit of Kashmir's cultural influence.<sup>36</sup>

*Vishnu-chaturanana* and *Vaikuntha*<sup>37</sup> Vishnu in Hari-Rai temple at Chamba (eleventh century A.D.), shows a strong influence of Kashmir metal images.<sup>38</sup> A *Vaikuntha* image containing an inscription have been

found at Devi-ri-kothi.<sup>39</sup> The Saho image inscription<sup>40</sup> and a relief of the deity on a Salhi fountain inscription (A.D.1170)<sup>41</sup> also depict *Vaikuntha* Vishnu.

## II. CONCLUSION:

The ruling dynasty i.e the Varman dynasty patronized *Vaishnavism* on a large scale, which brought many changes in the religious landscape of Chamba. It also brought changes in the religious configuration of the state from tenth century A.D. onwards. The state authority was trying to establish the brahmanical order in the state by patronizing *Vishnavism*. *Vaishnavism* penetrated in the state with Gupta and post-Gupta influence in the form of art and architecture also. Apart from this, the neighbouring areas had also a great influence in terms of art and architecture in Chamba.

## REFERENCES

- 1 A three-faced vaikuntha form of Vishnu seated on the garuda. Vishnu wears crescent-shaped crown of Kashmiri type. Garuda wears judge's wig which was fashionable in the Gupta period. A catalogue of stone sculpture in the museums of H.P, Dept. of Language & Culture, Shimla, Himachal Govt. Press, 2002, p.98.
- 2 Hutchinson, J. and Vogel. J.Ph. (2000). *The History of Punjab Hill States*. vol.II, rpt., Govt. Printing Lahore, Dept. of Language & Culture, Himachal Pradesh.p.283.
- 3 Vogel, J.Ph. (1994). *Antiquities of Chamba*, part I. Archeological Survey of India, Govt of India, New Delhi.p.100.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p.93.
- 5 Bawa, Seema, (1998). *Religion & Art of the Chamba Valley*. Delhi: Agam Kala Prakashan.p.159.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 In the opening stanzas of the inscription, the mention of these five gods were made by the ruler of Chamba. See. Vogel, J.Ph. *op.cit.*, plate xxv, no.25, p.194.
- 8 Vogel, J.Ph. *op.cit.*, plate xvi, fig.15, p.159.
- 9 Hutchinson, J. and J.Ph. Vogel.(1993). *The History of Punjab Hill States* .vol.II, rpt., Govt. Printing Lahore, Dept. of Language & Culture, Himachal Pradesh, p.278
- 10 Hutchison & Vogel, *op.cit.*, p.290.
- 11 Vogel, J.Ph. *op.cit.*, plate xix a, p.172.
- 12 Hutchinson, J. and J.Ph. Vogel. *op.cit.*, p.291.
- 13 Vogel, J.Ph. *op.cit.*, plate xxiv, p.185.
- 14 About Laxmanavarman nothing is known, but we may assume that he was a member of the ruling house of Chamba. Vogel, J.Ph. *op.cit.*, p.191.
- 15 Vogel, J.Ph. *op.cit.*, plate xxiv, p.194.
- 16 This involved the worship of *bhuyisthamukha-Vishnu*, particularly *Varaha* and *Narsimha*, along with *Vaikuntha-Narayana*. *Hari-Rai* temple at Chamba belongs to this genre. The image of four headed, or Caturmuka-Vaikuntha (consisting of Varaha, Nrisimha, Saumya or Vasudeva and Kapila), contained in the Hari-Rai temple, is one such example of Kashmiri cultural import. See. Sharma, Mahesh (2009). *Western Himalayan Temple Records: State, Pilgrimage, Ritual and Legality in Chamba*, Laiden: Brill, p.36.
- 17 Hutchison & Vogel, *op.cit.*, p.294.
- 18 Vogel, J.Ph. *op.cit.*, p.208.
- 19 *Ibid.*, plates xxxix & xl, p.249.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p.248.
- 21 *Ibid.*, pp.180-246; The fountain-slabs of the Ravi valley are usually carved with numerous rows of figures. Among these we find Vishnu sleeping on the serpent Sesha, Laxmi holding his feet and the four-faced Brahma seated on a lotus rising from Vishnu's navel. Other common subjects are the nine *Grahas* and the ten *avatars* or incarnations of Vishnu. *Ibid.*, p.31.
- 22 Bawa, Seema, (1998). *Religion & Art of the Chamba Valley*. Delhi: Agam Kala Prakashan, p.58.
- 23 Ohri, V.C. (1991). *Sculptures of the Western Himalayas*. Delhi: Agam Kala Prakashan, p.165.
- 24 Goetz, Herman. (1955). *The Early Wooden Temples of Chamba*. Leiden: E.J. Brill, p.11.; Samudrasena, who was a *mahasamnta* of the great power issued copper-plate at Nirmand (Kullu) shows his presence in

- Kullu. Fleet, J.F.(ed.)(1888).*Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, vol.III. Calcutta: Printed by the Superintendent of Government Printing India,p.287.
- 25 Goetz, Herman. *op.cit.*, p.104.
- 26 Hutchinson, J. and Vogel, J.Ph. *op.cit.*, p.279.
- 27 J. Hutchison & Vogel, *op.cit.*,p. 281; Ohri, V.C.(1991). *Sculptures of the Western Himalayas*. Delhi: Agam Kala Prakashan, p.164.
- 28 Lalitaditya, is said to have defeated Yashovarman, overrun Kalinga, brought under his sway the Karnata princes Ratta and marched through the kingdoms of Konkan, Dvaraka and Avanti. See. Stein, M.A (tr.) (2017), *Rajtarangini* by Kalhana, vol.I , 5TH rpt., New Delhi: Moti Lal Banarasidas Publishers, pp.130-131. The account of Lalitaditya's achievements is no doubt exaggerated, but not baseless. His Triumph over Yashovarman (the king of Kannauj) is also mentioned in the Prakrit Epic *Gaudavaho*. Lalitaditya's victory over the Kannauj region and regions further to its east is corroborated by finds of Kashmirian coins containing the legend Sri-Pratapa, a title that the king adopted, according to Kalhana, on the completion of his successful campaign. *Ibid.*, p.133, fn134; Before the victory over Yashovarman, Lalitaditya considered him as ally when they were sending emissaries with messages to China Ray, S.C. *op.cit.*, p.46.
- 29 Meister, Michael W (2006). Mountain Temples and Temple –Mountains: Masrur in *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*. vol.65, No.I, pp.26-49.
- 30 Handa, O.C. (2005). *Gaddi Land in Chamba: Its History, Art & Culture*. New Delhi: Indus Publishing, p.72. So, the architectural remains of Nagara style have been found at Jageshvar and Narayan koti (small stone temples) with barrel-vaulted and simply layered superstructures associated with the Nagara style were first built in the hills at the end of the seventh and beginning of the eighth century A.D. At Masrur (Kangra) and Bajaura (Kullu), two mature and developed Nagara stone temples (Pratihara genre) had been constructed by the end of the eighth century A.D. Most extraordinary is the rock cut temple of Shiva at Masrur. Mishra, R.N. The Vaikuntha Images from Chamba and North India in Ohri, V.C. (1983). *A Western Himalayan Kingdom: History and Culture of the Chamba state*. New Delhi: Books & Books Publishers., p.142; The temples of Chamba are related to the Nagara of Bajaura (Kullu). Vatsyayan, Kapila (2006). *The Cultural Heritage of India*, Vol.VII, part-1. The Ramkrishan Mission, Institute of Culture, Kolkatta, p.124; Meister, Michael W. *op.cit.*, pp.26-49.
- 31 J.Ph. Vogel, *op.cit.*, plate xvi, fig.15 no.14, p.162; Exact date is not given, rough date is estimated on the basis of the date of accession of Yugakara-Varman in A.D.940+issuance of the land charter in the 10th year of Yugakara-Varman's reign=A.D.950.
- 32 Goetz, Herman. *op.cit.*, p.85.
- 33 Ohri, V.C. *op.cit.*, p.165.
- 34 Bawa, Seema, (1998). *Religion & Art of the Chamba Valley*. Delhi: Agam Kala Prakashan, pp.130-31.
- 35 Ohri, V.C. *op.cit.*, p.166.
- 36 Pal, Pratapaditya (1975). *Bronzes in Kashmir*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manohar Lal Publishers Pvt. Ltd, p.39; Ohri, V.C. *op.cit.*, p.165; For instance, the bronzes of Brahmour and Chatrarhi produced during the reign of Meru-Varman (c.A.D.680) are in the style and spirit quite similar to the north Indian sculptures. These bronzes are however, touched by certain motifs e.g. the crescents, the necklaces using disc type component and the peculiar design of the crowns, which are seen only in the north-west India. Ohri, V.C. *op.cit.*, p.165.
- 37 In the religious scheme of Vaisnavas, Vaikuntha is supposed to be the central deity of the Kashmiragrama school or the Tantrantara sect. Tantrantara or Kashmiragrama sect is especially related to the worship of Vaikuntha or the other forms of bhuiisthamukha-Vishnu specially Narasimha and Varaha besides his sumya form. The Tantrantara sect had a wide appeal and exercised its sway throughout the northern India, especially in Kashmir and Himachal Pradesh. Mishra, R.N. *op.cit.* p.112.
- 38 Bawa, Seema. *op.cit.*, p.143; Ohri, V.C. *op.cit.*, p.165.
- 39 Vogel, J.Ph. *op.cit.*, plate xxix, no.30, p.207; Mishra, R.N. *op.cit.*, p.114.
- 40 *Ibid.*, plate xxxix and xl, no.47, p.248; Mishra, R.N. *op.cit.*, p.114.
- 41 *Ibid.*, plate xxxi and xxxii, no.33, p.216.; Mishra, R.N. *op.cit.*, p.114.