



Fig.3.2 : Nara-Narayana, Ahichatra, 5th century, Terracotta, Los Angeles County Museum of Art

A Nara-Narayana Image From Osian

Devendra Handa

The *Mahabharata* describes Narayana as the soul of the world, the eternal one born in quadruple form as twin sons of Dharma, the mind-born son of Brahma, as Nara-Narayana and Hari-Krishna in the Svayambhuva Manvantara 'aeon'. The details of Nara-Narayana performing penance in the Badarikashrama 'hermitage of Badarinatha' from the epic is as follows:

*Narayano hi vishvatma caturmurtih sanatanah /
Dharmatmajah sambabhuva pitavvam me'bhyaabhashat //
Krite yuge maharaja pura svayambhuve'ntare /
Naro-narayanashchaiva harih-krishnah svayambhuvah //
Tesham narayanarau tapastepuravyayau /
Badaryashramamasadya shakate kanakamaye //
Ashtachakram hi tadyanam bhutayuktam manoramam /,*

O king, my sire told me thus that the eternal four-fold Narayana is one and the soul of the world, he was born as the mind-born son of Brahma in the twin form of Nara-Narayana in the Krita era and as Hari-Krishna in the *Svayambhu manvantara* 'aeon'. Of them Nara-Narayana performed immutable austerity having reached the hermitage of Badari on a beautiful golden chariot having eight wheels constituting the eight *bhutas*.¹

The *Mahabharata* glorifies Narayana as the soul of the universe, older than the oldest and the one who existed before creation, having his abode in the primeval waters, the concept which evolved in Vishnu's *sheshashayi* form.² Narada who visited the Badarikashrama also stated that the Supreme Being has appeared in quadruple form here as Nara, Narayana, Krishna and Hari :

*Ekamurtiriyam purovam jata bhuyashchaturvidhah //
Naranarayanabhyam cha krishna-harina tatha //,*

He was born formerly as of single form and four-fold subsequently as Nara-Narayana and Hari-Krishna.³

Narada further states that Hari and Krishna are engaged elsewhere but Nara and Narayana are engaged in penance in the hermitage of Badarinatha. He then praises them and narrates their

importance. In the *Kiratarjuniya* episode, Shiva tells Arjuna that he is the Nara of earlier birth, a helper of Narayana, who had undergone severe austerities in the hermitage of Badari for many years :

*Narastvam purvadehe vai narayanasahayavan /
Badaryam taptavanugram tapo varshayutan bahun //*,

In the former birth you were Nara who was a helper of Narayana and had performed severe penance for many years in the hermitage of Badari.⁴

The *Bhagavata Purana* takes Nara-Narayana as the fourth *avatara* in its list of twenty-two incarnations. The only iconographic text which describes Nara-Narayana image is the *Vishnudharmottara Purana* which also identifies the duo with Hari-Krishna and prescribes four hands for Narayana and two for Nara, colour of blue lotus petals for the former and green like the *durva*-grass for the latter. Between them should be depicted a jujube or *badari* tree laden with fruits; both should hold rosary string, wear black antelope-skin and bear matted hair; self-controlled both should be seated on a beautiful eight-wheeled chariot constituting the *bhutas*, Hari like a king and Krishna as the image of Narayana, placing one foot on the chariot and the other on the knee :

*Durvashyamo narah karyo dvibhujashcha mahabhuj /
Narayanashchaturbahu nilotpaladalacchavih //
Tayormadhye cha badari karya phalavibhushana /
Badryamanu tau karyavakshamaladharavubhau //
Krishnajinadharau dantau jatamandaladharinau /
Ashtachakre sthitau yane bhutayukte manohare //
Padena chaikena rathasthitena padena chaikena cha janugena /
Karyo harishchatra narendratulyah krishno'pi narayanatulyamurtih //*,

O king, Nara should be represented as green like the *durva*-grass, and as two-armed; Narayana should be four-armed and should have the complexion of the blue lotus. Between them should be shown a *badari* tree rich with fruits; below the *badari* tree should be shown both of them as holding the rosary string. These two self-controlled ones wear black antelope-skin and bear matted locks. The two, Hari like a king and Krishna as an image of Narayana, should be represented as seated on a beautiful chariot with eight wheels consisting of the *bhutas*, in the pose of placing one foot on the chariot and the other on the knee.⁶

In the earliest and most elaborate example of Nara-Narayana image from Dashavatara Temple at Deogarh, Madhya Pradesh, Fig.3.1, Nara and Narayana have been depicted as two ascetics sitting majestically in *maharajalilasana*, royal posture of ease, with one leg folded and the other hanging down and placed on the ground.⁷ Both wear deer-skins and bear *jata-mukuta*, crown of matted locks. The venue of a hermitage is indicated by a lion and deer under their seats and another deer in the centre of

the pedestal. Narayana is four-armed and Nara has two hands, both hold *akshamala*, rosary of beads. In one of their right hands, Narayana carries a *kamandalu*, vessel for the sacred water, in the lower left with natural right in *vyakhyana-mudra*, gesture of explaining. Bearded hermits flank these figures while branches of the *badari* tree form ornamental arches over Nara-Narayana. At the corners of the uppermost frieze, were depicted Brahma and garland-bearing *vidyadhara* couples hovering in the sky. An upward flying female figure fills the gap between their heads amidst the *badari* tree. Adalbert J. Gail has recently observed that the "purpose of the myth is to demonstrate the victory over the attack of seductive heavenly *apsaras* by the stratagem of the creation of the most fabulous *apasara*, Urvashi, from the thighs of Narayana."⁸

The other important example is a terracotta plaque with Nara-Narayana figures from Ahicchatra, Fig.3.2.⁹ Datable to the latter half of the 5th century CE, Nara-Narayana were depicted here as two ascetics, both bi-handed and bearing *jata-bhara*, pod of matted locks, falling on the shoulders. Both wear antelope-skin, scarves and short *dhotis*. Narayana, on the left, has his right hand in *vyakhyana-mudra* and the left resting on the thigh. Nara, with his face turned slightly towards Narayana, seems to be holding manuscript in both hands. Both are seated cross-legged on rocky structure with a stool placed between carrying a manuscript. The locale is indicated by a jujube tree with long stem and thick growth of leaves atop simulating a parasol.

Gail¹⁰ has referred to a badly damaged terracotta panel from Bhitargaon of almost the same period depicting two human figures identified by Vogel¹¹ as Krishna and Balarama which may have actually been Nara-Narayana, Fig.3.3. Both the figures are very badly mutilated. Krishna is seated in *maharajalilasana* with left leg folded and the right one suspended obliquely with foot placed on a foot-rest. All the four hands of the deity are damaged. The natural right forearm is lost and the additional right is raised above the head. The normal left hand seems to be placed on the respective knee and the back left looks like supporting a book. The heads of the deities are completely lost. Balarama on his left can be recognized by a multi-hooded snake-canopy. Seated in *sukhasana*, posture of ease, he has placed his left hand on the left thigh and the right hand on the right knee. The figure of Balarama is shorter in size to represent the lower stature of Nara that he represents.

No post-Gupta image of Nara-Narayana is known so far. This utter paucity is enigmatic. In this context, an 8th century image which occupies the *bhadra-rathika* or the central niche of the back wall of west-facing northeastern corner shrine of the *panchayatana* Hari-Hara Temple No.1 of Osian, Fig.3.4, is a rare example. Osian is a famous Hindu and Jaina pilgrimage and archeological site, 65 km north of Jodhpur in Rajasthan.¹² In this panel in high-relief Nara-Narayana have been represented as twins, both bi-handed, wearing *jata-mukutas* adorned with pearl strings and *chudamanis* or crest jewels, circular earrings, armlets and wristlets, scarves and *kaya-bandhas* in addition to tight-fitting ankle-length trousers. They stand cross-legged, slightly turned towards each other, under a jujube tree that indicates the locale of Badarikashrama, Fig.3.5. Narayana has his left hand held near his chest in *vyakhyana-mudra* while Nara is holding *akshamala* in his right hand. Bereft of elaborative paraphernalia, this simple depiction of Nara-Narayana as twins in the hermitage of Badari is a solitary post-Gupta example now known to us so far. The rendition of the jujube tree is unique in terms of a specific iconographic detailing.

It seems that the Nara-Narayana incarnation lost its popularity after the Gupta period though a cogent under-current of the worship of Krishna representing Hari-Krishna continued to exist which is amply corroborated by *Krishna-lila* scenes at Osian and other places in Rajasthan.¹³ It is also notable that Narayana was depicted in the Gupta and later period both as four as well as two-handed and that the canonical prescription of showing the twin gods seated on *ashta-chakra bhutamaya* chariot has not been followed in any of these images of Nara-Narayana.

References

1. *Mahabharata, Shanti Parva*, 334, verse 8-11A; Bhattacharyya, D.C., 1991, *Pratimalakshana of the Vishnudharmottara*, New Delhi: Harman, p.185, fn.4 has referred to the commentary of Nilakantha which explains *ashtachakra bhutayukta shakata* as a chariot of eight wheels made up of *avyakta, mahad, ahamkara*, and the five *mahabhutas*.
2. Desai, Kalpana, 1972, *Iconography of Vishnu*, New Delhi: Abhinav, 1972, pp.2-3.
3. *Mahabharata, Shanti-parva*, 334, verses 16B and 18A.
4. *Mahabharata, Vana-parva*, 40.1.
5. *Bhagavata Purana*, I.3, 9.
6. *Vishnudharmottara Purana*, III.76, 2-5; Bhattacharyya, *op.cit.*, pp.182-83.
7. Desai, *op.cit.*, pp.145-46, Fig.104.
8. Gail, Adalbert J., 2018-2019, "The Vishnu Temple of Deogarh Revisited on the Concept of its Three Images", *Jñāna-Pravāha Research Journal*, XXII, p.13. Gail has referred to the story of the creation of Urvashi from his thighs by Vishnu to counter his seduction by Rambha and other celestial nymphs sent by Indra to deviate the Lord from his austerities as stated in the *Vamana Purana*, VII.5-13, and compares it with the version of the *Vishnudharmottara*, III.129.
9. Pal, P., 1970-71, "Notes on Two Sculptures of the Gupta Period", *Archives of Asian Art*, XXIV, pp.78-79, fig.3; (1986), *Indian Sculpture*, Vol.2, Los Angeles: County Museum of Art, S122, Fig.6.
10. Gail, *op.cit.*, p.16, fn.7.
11. Vogel, J. Ph., 1908-09, "The Temple of Bhitargaon", *Annual Report of the Archaeological Survey of India*, pp.5-21. I could not find any reference to this identification in Vogel's article, a digital copy of which was kindly made available to me by Suken Shah of Deccan College, Pune. While examining the scans of images of Bhitargaon temple put on the net by Sabya Sachi Ghosh, however, I found the image which could have possibly been referred to by Gail and is published in this article.
12. Kalia, Asha, 1982, *Art of Osian Temples*, New Delhi, p.3, Plate 1; Handa, Devendra, 1984, *Osian History, Archaeology, Art & Architecture*, Delhi, Pls.XI-XV.
13. Meister, Michael W., 1972-73, "*Krishnalila* from Wadhwan and Osian", *Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art*, Vol.V(2), pp.28-36.



Fig.3.1 : Nara-Narayana, Dashavatara Temple, Deogarh, 5th century, Sandstone, *Photo-courtesy*: Sabya Sachi Ghosh



Fig.3.3 : Nara-Narayana, Bhitargaon,
5th-6th century, Terracotta,
Photo-courtesy: Sabya Sachi Ghosh

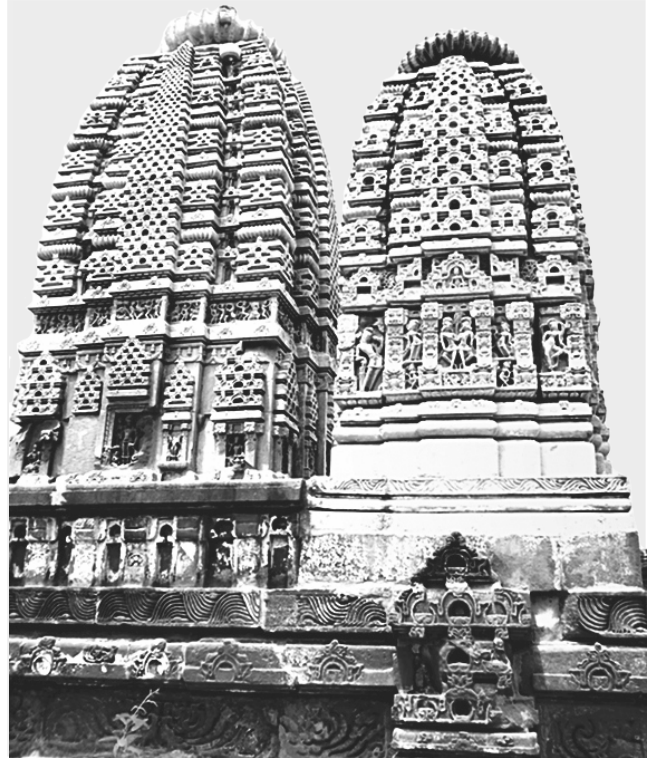


Fig.3.4 : Back view of Hari-Hara Temple-1,
southwestern corner shrine, Osian, 8th century, Sandstone



Fig.3.5 : Nara-Narayana, southwestern corner shrine of Hari-Hara Temple-1, Osian, 8th century, Sandstone