

## Sculptural Representation of Paraśurāma in Kerala

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Paraśurāma is the sixth in the traditional list of ten *avatāras* of Viṣṇu. He is often called Bhārgavarāma as he belonged to the race of Bhṛgu who figure prominently in the Vedic literature. The story of Paraśurāma given in *Mahābhārata* (3.116) says that the purpose of the *avatāra* was to destroy the whole of the Kṣatriya race. When King Kārtavīrārjuna and his sons killed Jamadagni, the father of Paraśurāma, he swore to annihilate the entire Kṣatriya race. He is said to have undertaken the destruction 21 times and destroyed the unrighteous Kṣatriyas accomplishing the mission of his *avatāra*.

Paraśurāma is believed to be an *āveṣa* or a temporary incarnation of Viṣṇu. *Rāmāyaṇa* (1.71) has described how his *tejas* was taken away by Rāma himself. This incident occurred when Rāma Dāśarathī happened to meet Paraśurāma while he was returning to Ayodhyā after his marriage with Sītā. Paraśurāma accosted Rāma with arrogance and challenged him to tie the string on his bow, which he considered to be stronger than the bow of Śiva that Rāma had broken in the contest at Mithilā to win the hands of Sītā in marriage. Rāma succeeded in tying the string of the bow of Paraśurāma with ease and shot an arrow from it. Then Rāma deprived Paraśurāma of his divinity and assimilated his *tejas* into his own divine power.

Paraśurāma temples are not many in India. There are a few temples dedicated to Paraśurāma in Gujarat, Maharashtra, Orissa and Jammu & Kashmir. When compared with other anthropomorphic *avatāras* of Viṣṇu like Rāma and Kṛṣṇa, there are not many images of Paraśurāma in India. This could be because of two reasons: (i) the story of Paraśurāma is not lively and eventful as those of Rāma or Kṛṣṇa with the potentiality for diversified depictions; (ii) worship of Paraśurāma is not popular as he is an *āveṣa avatāra* who possessed divinity for a short duration, though he continued to live long and his name

appears as one of the seven *Cirajivins*, the other six being Aśvatthāmā, Bali, Vyāsa, Hanumān, Bibhiṣaṇa and Kṛpa.

Majority of Paraśurāma sculptures occurring in India belonged to the medieval and the late medieval periods. The sculptures housed in Garhwa fort in Allahabad,<sup>1</sup> Mathura Museum,<sup>2</sup> Amanpur temple in Etah district<sup>3</sup> (Utter Pradesh), temples at Khajuraho and Champa<sup>4</sup> (Madhya Pradesh), Kosli<sup>5</sup> (Haryana), Basohli<sup>6</sup> (Jammu and Kashmir), Barakar<sup>7</sup> (West Bengal), Aihole and Nuggehelli<sup>8</sup> (Karnataka), Thiruppati<sup>9</sup> and Thiruchirapally<sup>10</sup> (Tamilnadu) are good instances. There are very few Paraśurāma sculptures belonging to 5<sup>th</sup>/6<sup>th</sup> century CE found in Gujarat: a mutilated figure discovered from Amreli<sup>11</sup> and another one observed at Musara in Baroda.<sup>12</sup>

### Paraśurāma Images in Kerala

*Keralolpati*, a Malayalam work of anonymous authorship that deals with the origin of the land of Kerala, attributes creation of Kerala to Paraśurāma and identifies Kerala as part of *Bhārgavakṣetram*. Though the legend is very popular, worship of Paraśurāma is not common and strong in the State. There is only a single temple in Kerala belonging to 13<sup>th</sup> century CE located at Thiruvallam in Thiruvananthapuram district dedicated to Paraśurāma.<sup>13</sup> Like other parts of India, sculptures of Paraśurāma are of rare occurrence in Kerala. Those available in the State belong to the late medieval period. He is represented as bracket figures in temples like other *avatāras* of Viṣṇu. He is seen in *sthānaka* and *āsana* forms. Two-armed and four-armed varieties are observed in *sthānaka* form while only two-armed variety occurs in *āsana* form.

### Sthānaka Paraśurāma

The earliest Paraśurāma image in Kerala is of four-armed variety present in Śukapuram Śiva temple in Malappuram district (Fig.1). This wooden sculpture (70 x 29 cm) dated to 13<sup>th</sup> century



Fig.1. Paraśurāma, Wood, 13<sup>th</sup> century CE, 70x29 cm, Śrikovil bracket, Śukapuram Śiva temple, Malappuram district.

CE is seen as a bracket figure of the *Śrīkovil*.<sup>14</sup> The deity stands in *samapāda* and holds *varadamudrā*, *paraśu*, *śaṅkha* and *gadā* as the attributes. He is shown with ornaments like *karaṇḍa mukuṭa*, *kuṇḍala*, *grīvāhāra*, *yajñopavīta*, *udarabandha*, *keyūra*, *kaṅkaṇa* and *pādvālaya* usually worn by Viṣṇu. His lower garment reaches below the knees.

The *Śrīkovil* of Thiruvallam Paraśurāma temple has a stone image (c.104 x 45 cm) of Paraśurāma covered with silver. This four-armed deity holds *śaṅkha*, *cakra*, *gadā* and *paraśu* as attributes.

*Śrīkovil* bracket of Thiruvilwamala Vilwadrinātha temple of 19<sup>th</sup> century in Thrissur district has a two-armed *sthānaka* Paraśurāma sculpture (46 x 22 cm). He is shown standing in *samapāda* with a *paraśu* in the right hand held at shoulder level and *sara* and *dhanuṣa* held together in the left (Fig.2). *Dhanuṣa* is as big as the size of the image. Paraśurāma is depicted with beard, *karaṇḍa mukuṭa*, *vanamālā* and a long lower garment.

The *Kulaśekharamaṇḍapam*<sup>15</sup> ceiling belt of Śrīpadmanābhasvāmī temple in Thiruvananthapuram district has a two-armed Paraśurāma image of 18<sup>th</sup> century CE in stone holding *paraśu* in one of his hands. A similar sculpture in wood of the same period has been observed in the *Vilakkumatam*<sup>16</sup> ceiling belt of Śrīrāmasvāmī temple at Padmanābhapuram in Kanyakumari district (erstwhile Travancore) of Tamil Nadu. Both are parts of the elaborate depiction of *Rāmāyaṇa*.



Fig.2. Paraśurāma, Wood, 19<sup>th</sup> century CE, 46x22 cm, Śrīkovil bracket, Thiruvilwamala Vilwadrinatha temple, Thrissur district.

## Āsana Paraśurāma

A 17<sup>th</sup> century wooden sculpture (45 x 32 cm) present in the Śrīkovil wall of Kaviyur Śiva temple in Alappuzha district shows Paraśurāma seated in *sukhāsana* (Fig.3). He holds *paraśu* with a very long handle in his right hand. His left hand is flexed at elbow and is kept on the left thigh. He is shown with beard and matted long hairs spread behind his shoulder. He wears a three leaved *patrakuṇḍala*.

The *Balikkalmaṇḍapam*<sup>17</sup> bracket of Vettikulaṅgara Bhagavatī temple in Alappuzha district has a 17/18<sup>th</sup> century



Fig.3. Paraśurāma, Wood, 17<sup>th</sup> century CE, 45x32 cm, Śrīkovil wall, Kaviyur Śiva temple, Alappuzha district.



Fig.4. Paraśurāma, Wood, 17<sup>th</sup>/18<sup>th</sup> century CE, 30x17 cm, Balikkalmaṇḍapam bracket, Vettikulangara Bhagavatī temple, Alappuzha district.

Paraśurāma sculpture (30 x 17 cm) in wood

(Fig.4). This image is depicted in *padmāsana* under a *nāgachatra* with both the hands held in *añjalimudrā*. A *paraśu* is shown inserted between the left forearm and the chest. He is shown without beard. He wears ornaments like *kuṇḍala*, *grīvāhāra*, *udarabandha*, *keyūra*, *kaṅkaṇa* and *pādvalaya* normally observed in sculptures of Viṣṇu. Paraśurāma sculptures different from those mentioned above have not been reported from Kerala so far.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Sculptural representations of Paraśurāma are seen in five contexts: (i) as the sixth *avatāra* of Viṣṇu; (ii) in narrative panels depicting *Rāmāyaṇa*; (iii) encounter with Kārtavīrārjuna; (iv) beheading his mother Reṇukā and (v) with his wife Revatī. The first two are seen throughout

India but the third, fourth and fifth are confined to northern parts of India as observed in Basohli and Amedpur (encounter with Kārtavīrārjuna), Barakar (beheading Reṇukā) and in Khajuraho<sup>18</sup> (with his wife Revatī).

According to Purāṇas, Paraśurāma is a great warrior who annihilated the Kṣatriyas and a great *Yogī* who did penance in Mahendragiri mountain. *Rāmāyaṇa* describes him in the context of encounter with Rāma as fair complexioned possessing a strong body and burly physique. He is described as carrying two sets of quivers on his both shoulders and a bow in one hand and an axe in the other. These features bring out the warrior aspect in him. Sculptures of Paraśurāma amply reflect these features. The depiction of *paraśu*, *triśūla*, *śara*, *dhanuṣa*, *khadga*, *gadā* and *sūcimudrā* indicates his warrior aspect. Description of Paraśurāma in *Rāmāyaṇa* indicates that his body is smeared with ashes. He has a Tripuṇḍa mark on his forehead. His matted locks of hairs are tied into a knot resembling a crown. *Jaṭāmukuṭa*, beard, posture of *padmāsana*, *varadamudrā*, ornaments like *rudrākṣa* and *patrakuṇḍala* present in the sculptures of Paraśurāma bring out his yogic aspects.

As for Paraśurāma sculptures found in Kerala, warrior aspects are brought out by the depiction of strong physique and attributes like *paraśu*, *śara*, *dhanuṣa* and *gadā*. There are sculptures in the State, which depict Paraśurāma only with *paraśu* (Kaviyur Śiva and Vettikulaṅgara Bhagavatī temples), *paraśu* and *gadā* (Shukapuram Śiva and Thiruvallam Paraśurāma temples) and *paraśu*, *śara* and *dhanuṣa* (Thiruvilwamala Vilwadrinātha temple). Features like *jaṭā* and ornaments like *patrakuṇḍala* are the main yogic features of Paraśurāma observed on Kerala sculptures. However, there are Paraśurāma sculptures in Kerala depicting him with or without beard (Shukapuram Śiva and Kaviyur Śiva temples respectively). *Śaṅkha*, *cakra* and *gadā* depicted in Paraśurāma sculpture found in Shukapuram and Thiruvallam temples amply indicate the Viṣṇu aspect.

Early sculptures of Paraśurāma were depicted only with two hands having *paraśu* as the sole attribute either in right (Amreli) or in left (Musara) hand. Musara sculpture holds a peculiarly curved *paraśu*. Early medieval period witnessed Paraśurāma sculptures in northern parts of India with four hands having *paraśu* and *śaṅkha* as the main attributes in two hands and *padma*, *kaṭyāvalambita hasta* (Garhwa Fort), *phala* (Khajuraho) or *dhanuṣa* and *gadā* (Champa) as other attributes in rest of the two hands.

Southern parts of India including Kerala did not harbour any sculptures of Paraśurāma before the early medieval period. The sculptures belonging to the early medieval period observed in southern India were depicted with two or four hands. Two-armed images are presented invariably with *paraśu* in one hand and *dhanuṣa* (Aihole) or *phala* (Nuggehalli) in other hand. However, the sculpture located at Saundatti does not have *paraśu* at all in both the hands as they together hold a musical instrument, *caudiki*. Interestingly, a *paraśu* and a *triśūla* are depicted on either side of the deity. Four-armed images of Paraśurāma found in southern parts of India are generally seen with *paraśu* in one hand and attributes like *śaṅkha*, *cakra* and *varadamudrā* in rest of three hands.

*Vaikhānasāgama*, *Agnipurāṇa*, *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa* and *Rūpamaṇḍana* are the main texts that deal with iconographical features of Paraśurāma. An assessment of the features and attributes of Paraśurāma sculptures observed in Kerala show that they do not perfectly conform to the descriptions given in *Vaikhānasāgama* and *Agnipurāṇa*. Both these texts describe two-armed and four-armed forms of Paraśurāma. The two-armed Paraśurāma, according to these texts, should have *paraśu* in the right hand and *sūcīmudrā* in the left. He should wear *jaṭāmukuṭa*, *yajñopavīta* and other ornaments. But the two-armed Paraśurāma sculptures observed in Kerala do not show *sūcīmudrā* and do not always depict *paraśu* in the right hand. The sculpture present in Vettikulangara Bhagavati temple shows *paraśu* inserted between the left forearm and the chest. However, these sculptures show *jaṭāmukuṭa*, *yajñopavīta* and other ornaments as prescribed by these texts. According to these texts, the four-armed images of Paraśurāma should carry *śaṅkha*, *cakra*, *gadā* and *padma*, the usual attributes of Viṣṇu. The lone four-armed sculpture of Paraśurāma noticed in Kerala does not possess all the four usual attributes of Viṣṇu, though it has *śaṅkha* and *gadā* besides *paraśu* and *varadamudrā*. Paraśurāma is not there in the twenty-four forms (*caturviṃśatimūrti*). Moreover, presentation of four-armed Paraśurāma with *śaraṅga*, *śara*, *paraśu* and *khaḍga* as prescribed by *Agnipurāṇa* (49.5) is not met with among sculptures found in Kerala. *Viṣṇudharmottara* (3.85.61, 62) states that the images of Paraśurāma should show him with *jaṭāmukuṭa*, holding *paraśu* and wearing deer skin. Likewise, *Rūpamaṇḍana* (3.26) prescribes *jaṭā*, deer skin and *paraśu* for him. However, Paraśurāma sculptures found in Kerala do not show him with deer skin. As we could see, Paraśurāma sculptures observed

throughout India over different periods of time also do not fully conform to the descriptions provided in ancient iconographic texts.

In short, a general assessment of Paraśurāma sculptures presented here indicates that the forms observed in Kerala are less diverse than those found elsewhere in India, though the legend that Paraśurāma created in Kerala is still vibrant among the people of the State.

## References

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13. P. Nayar, *Vaishnava Iconography of Kerala*, Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, MS University of Baroda, Vadodara, 2000, p.106.
14. **Śrīkovil is the principal shrine, the sanctum sanctorum.**
15. **Kulaśekhramaṇḍapam of Śrīpadmanābhasvāmī temple is located at the right side, outside the Śrīkovil. The maṇḍapam has sculptures on pillars and ceiling belts.**
16. **Vilakkumatam is the structure that surrounds the śrīkovil and inner maṇḍapams with columns in Iron or brass with a galaxy of lamps fixed on them in definite pattern.**
17. **Balikkalmaṇḍapam is the pillared hall raised above the principal balipīṭha in front of the main entrance of the temple.**
18. K.M. Suresh, *Iconography of Vishnu from Khajuraho*, Bharatiya Kala Prakashan, Delhi, 1999, pp.55-56.