

RIVALRY AND RAPPROCHEMENT OF VAISHNAVISM AND ŚAIVISM FROM NORTH INDIA WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO SIGILLOGRAPHIC EVIDENCE (CIRCA THIRD CENTURY B. C. TO MID-SEVENTH CENTURY A.D.)

Mohd Javed

*Research Scholar, Department of Ancient Indian History, Culture and Archaeology, Panjab University,
Chandigarh, India*

ABSTRACT

Religion has created much that is beautiful and sublime, and it is religion again that has often been responsible for its destruction. It has created feelings of love and oneness, but has also been responsible for factionalism, brutality, oppression and hatred. Some seals and sealings do throw light, in howsoever a scanty fashion, on these two aspects- sectarian rivalries and attempts at rapprochement. To specify the rivalry and rapprochement of Vaishnavism and Śaivism with sigillographic evidences is the purpose of this research paper.

KEYWORDS: *Vaishnavism, Śaivism, Seals and Sealings, Rivalry, Rapprochement*

Article History

Received: 18 Jan 2021 | Revised: 20 Jan 2021 | Accepted: 04 Feb 2021

INTRODUCTION

VISHNU

In the *Rigveda*, Vishnu held a comparatively subordinate position. His significance, however, increased in the literature of *Brāhmaṇa* and he came to attain the position of the supreme deity and the most important figure of the Brahmanical triad by the age of the epics and the *Purāṇas*. In the historical period, the deity around which different Vaisṇava cults evolved was the result of the syncretism of three god-concepts, the Vedic sun-god Vishnu, the cosmic god Nārāyaṇa of the *Brāhmaṇas* and the man-god Vāsudeva-Kṛishṇa, whose worship is attested also by Pāṇini.¹ Epigraphic evidence, begun in the second and first centuries B. C., shows that Vāsudeva worship alone,² or in combination with his close relatives,³ has been gradually rising in popularity. Later on, the number of forms of Vishnu increased to twenty-four. A significant aspect of Vaishnavism is the principle of incarnation, the origins of which are traced back to the Vedic period.

ŚAIVA

In the entire Hindu pantheon, no other god is worshiped as extensively as Śaiva and with such singular devotion, too. In aniconic, theriomorphic, as well as anthropomorphic form, he is venerated. The antiquity, in its different ways, of the

¹ Banerjea, J. N. *The Development of Hindu Iconography*, 2nd Edition, p. 386.

² Sircar, D. C., *Select. Inscription*, p. 88-89.

³ *Epigraphia Indica*(EI), XXII, pp. 203, *Ibid*, p. 193, *EI*, XXIV, p. 194.

worship of Śiva goes back to a hoary past.⁴ From the pre-Harappan period onward, archaeological evidence exists for this impact and the literary references from the time of the *Rigveda* itself refer to Śaiva by one name or the other, the earliest being Rudra-Śiva. While his image as Paśupati on the Harappan seals and in the phallic form is known independently from a very early date, his anthropomorphic form first appeared in the third-second century BCE during the historical period and the sculptures still later. The literary references to the image of Śiva, however, are found in the *Grhasūtras*, the *Aṣṭādhyāyī* of Pāṇini and the *Arthaśāstra* of Kauṭilya, suggesting at least from the sixth century BCE the prevalence of image worship of Śiva. At the same time, depictions of other Śaiva deities such as Pārvatī, Kārttikeya and Gaṇeśa also came into existence simultaneously.

RIVALRY AND RAPPROCHEMENT

A Vaishṇava seals from Basarh representing the Narasimha incarnation.⁵ Vishṇu punishing Hiranyakaśipu, a devotee of Śiva, and protecting Prahlāda, his own devotee, is the central idea of the story connected with the image. It seems the motive behind this creation was sectarian rivalry and envy. There are many seals and sealings that together represent more than one religious pantheon's symbols and devices and are symbolic of religious rapprochement. A seal unearthed at Pāṭaliputra has a *triśūla* with sub-script *chakra* flanked on the left by a *śaṅkha* and, on right, by a *svastika*.⁶ The legend is *Chatrasya*. Another from the same site⁷ has a *śaṅkha* in the centre, a *triśūla* and a *chakra* in the upper right corner and a *svastika* in the lower right corner.⁸ It bears the legend *Gopalasa* in *circa* first century B. C., characters.

The religious catholicity of certain rulers. Harsha called himself a *parama-māheśvara* and used the bull device for his seal, while Hiuen-tsang described him as a great Buddhist;⁹ Vainyagupta is referred to as a *parama-bhāgavata* in a Nalanda sealing and *Bhagavān-Mahādeva-pādānudhyāta* in the Gunaighar inscription, the copper-plate seal of which shows the bull device.¹⁰

The Bhita sealing of *Daṇḍanāyaka Śaṅkaradatta* shows a bull with a round object between the horns and flanked by a *chakra* on one side and *śrivatsa* on the other.¹¹ A humped bull and a *śaṅkha* are shown in No. 84 of Spooner's list of Basarh seals.¹² A clay sealing in Indian Museum from Sunet shows, on one side, a *triśūla* and the legend *Māṭriśarma* in Gupta characters.¹³ The other side has a *chakra*. Thus, we come across a combination of Śaiva and Vaishṇava symbols and a Śākta name. A Sankisa sealing has a *triśūla*, a *śaṅkha* and the legend *Indramitra*.¹⁴ Śaiva and Vaishṇava symbols, thus, occur along with the legend after the god Indra.

Some clay lumps showing the combination of (i) the figure of Mahishamardinī, (ii) Brahmā, (iii) horse (denoting *aśvamedha* ritual) and (iv) the legend *Chhandoga* suggest rapprochement.¹⁵ Similarly, several other *Chhandoga charaṇa* sealing portray legends and devices pertaining to various divinities.¹⁶

⁴ For the antiquity of the worship of Śaiva see R. G. Bhandarkar (1928); J. Gonda (1970); Stella Kramrisch (1984); C. Sivarammurti (1975); Mahadev Chakravarti (1986); etc.

⁵ Thaplyal. K. K. *Studies in Ancient Indian Seals*, pp. 169-70.

⁶ *Archaeological Survey of India, Annual Reports (ASIAR)*, 1912-13, p. 82. No. 1.

⁷ *Ibid.*, No. 2.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

⁹ Thaplyal. K. K. *Studies in Ancient Indian Seals*, pp. 94-95.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 69-70

¹¹ Banerjea, J. N. *The Development of Hindu Iconography*, 2nd Edition, p. 185.

¹² *ASIAR*. 1913-14, p. 129, no. 84, pl. XLVI, 84.

¹³ Handa, Devendra. *Studies in Indian Coins and Seals*, p. 124.

¹⁴ Thaplyal. K. K. 'Three Terracotta Seal-impressions from Sankisa', *JUPHS (NS)*, IX, pp. 91-95.

¹⁵ Thaplyal. K. K. *Studies in Ancient Indian Seals*, pp. 250-53.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*,

A Rājjan Abhaya sealing from Rajghat show the figure of a standing bull with the three-arched 'hill symbol' in front, a *chakra*, a *śaṅkha* and a spear. Another Rajghat sealing shows on the obverse a conventionalised *śrīvatsa* and the legend *Bhadrasena* in Gupta characters.¹⁷ The reverse shows three impressions (i) a bull, (ii) the legend *Droṇasya* and (iii) a *chakra*. Several Rajghat sealings show the figure of Garuḍa in the centre, *anyūpa* on the left and a *gadā* on the right.¹⁸ There is nothing strange about the Vedic and the Vaishṇava symbols being shown together; even some of the *paramabhāgavata* kings of the Gupta dynasty were performers of the horse-sacrifices.

The two Taleshwar copper-plate seals¹⁹ show a bull, a *chakra*, a Garuḍa and a *śaṅkha*. All are surmounted by a hooded cobra. The seals appear to represent both Śaiva (bull and snake) and Vaishṇava (*śaṅkha* and *chakra*) motifs.

Spooner's list of seal no. 764,²⁰ is interesting from the religion and iconographic point of view. Spooner described the device on this seal but leaves the figure (described by him as a female figure) unidentified. According to Banerjea, this is the representation of *Ardhanārīśvara* form of Śaiva.²¹ His contention is based on the following observations; (i) the left breast of the figure is large and looks like that of a female in proportion to the right (which is male); (ii) the curious head-dress 'like a single high horn' of Spooner's description²² is in reality the longish coil of *jaṭā*, a characteristic of Śaiva images, and is placed on the right (male) part only, (iii) there seems to be an *ūrdhvaliṅga* feature on the front part of the waist. (iv) the figure has a staff in the right hand which again is a feature of some Śaiva images.

The Kushāṇa period onward sculpture representation of the *ardhanārīśvara* form is known. The union of the great god and goddess was considered necessary not only for creation, but also for the destruction of the Asuras as is clear from the story of *Kumārasambhava* relating to the birth of Kārttikeya. The idea of the complete union of Śaiva and Śakti is often beautifully reflected in literature.²³

The Basarh sealing and a Rajghat sealing representing a *liṅga* in a *yonipūṭha* symbolising male and female energies which permeate and sustain the life of the Universe. "*Liṅgam* and *yonī*, Śaiva and his goddess symbolise the antagonistic yet co-operative forces of the sexes. They are the archetypal parent's father and mother of the world".²⁴

A nicolo seal shows a chief standing in respectful pose before a four-armed god.²⁵ According to Ghirshman, the inscription gives the name of Mihira, Vishṇu and Śaiva in Tocharian script.²⁶ The deity holds a *chakra*, an object identified by Banerjea as club, which is sometimes shown in one of the hands of śaiva figure, and a ring and globular object. The first attribute is Vaishṇava, the second may be connected with Śaiva and the last two with Mihira, the Iranian counterpart of the Indian Sun-god.²⁷ In passing, reference may be made to a coin of Huvishka showing ithyphallic Śaiva with a *chakra* in one of his hands suggesting that Śaiva-Vaishṇava syncretism had begun in the Kushāṇa period.²⁸

The best glyptic examples of religious harmony between the śaivites and Vaishṇavites are the various seal impressions from Sunet bearing the legend *Śaṅkara-Nārāyaṇābhyām* on one side and the name of an individual coupled

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 203.

¹⁸*Ibid.*,

¹⁹*EI*, XIII, pp. 109 ff.

²⁰*ASIAR*. 1913-14, p. 152, pl. L.

²¹Banerjea, J. N. *The Development of Hindu Iconography*, 2nd Edition, p. 181.

²²*ASIAR*. 1913-14, p. 152.

²³ Rao, T. A. G. *Elements of Hindu Iconography*, pp. 322-23.

²⁴ Zimmer, H. *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization*, p. 127.

²⁵Banerjea, J. N. *The Development of Hindu Iconography*, 2nd Edition, pp. 123-25, pl. XI, 2.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 124.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 125.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 123.

with a symbol or two on the other side.²⁹ In one case the reverse does not bear any device. These sealing were perhaps votive offering to a temple dedicated to both śaṅkara and Nārāyaṇa. The icon enshrined in this temple may have been Hari-Hara type.

A clay sealing from the same site in the Indian Museum shows the device of a *triśūla* and a *chakra* in the upper field and the legend *Śri-dvipārshadasya* in Gupta character.³⁰ The term *Dvipārshada* here stands for the *triśūla* and *chakra*, the weapons of the divinities Śaiva and Vishṇu respectively. The sealing perhaps belonged to a combined Śaiva and Vishṇu temple at Sunet, the existence of which is borne out by tokens bearing the legend *Śaṅkara-Nārāyaṇābhyām* referred to above.

Before we close the present discussion, it is pertinent to briefly refer to another interesting seal³¹ with four faces showing variously (i) standing nude Śaiva holding a trisula and a club, (ii) a male and a female figure probably 'paired divinities', (iii) an Indo-Scythian chief sacrificing over an altar and (iv) Herakles standing, holding a club and the pelt of Nemean lion in right and left hands respectively. Ascribable to the fifth century A. D., on stylistic grounds, the seal is remarkable evidence of cult syncretism.

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²⁹Handa, Devendra. *Studies in Indian Coins and Seals*, p. 124-125.

³⁰Handa, Devendra. *Studies in Indian Coins and Seals*, p.125.

³¹ Rosenfield, J. M. *Dynastic Arts of the Kushāṇas*, p. 103, no. 6.