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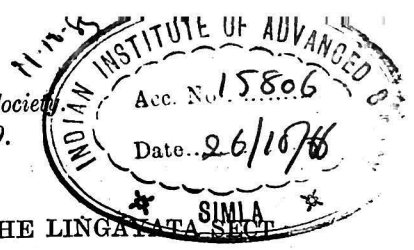
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FOUR VIRABHADRA ICONS AND THE LINGAMATA

By AMITA RAY

In course of my studies in archaeology and museology at the Rijksmuseum Voor Volkenkunde at Leiden I came across, in 1959 last, four metal plaques, three in bronze and one in brass, representing a Brahmanical divinity showing more or less the same iconographic characteristics and attributes and standing in slightly differing poses and attitudes. In the records of the museum the images are entered as having been acquired in and brought over from South India. Two of these figures (Figs. 1 and 2), each of which is executed more or less in bold relief against a flat background, are endowed with four hands, the right hands showing respectively the arrow and the sword, and the left, the bow and shield. The third figure (Fig. 3) has only two hands, the right holding vertically a sword, and the left resting on the shield. The fourth one (Fig. 4) has again four hands, but the upper right hand, instead of showing the *vāṇa* or arrow, holds an attribute which can be described as a club with three round knobs; the left hands show the arrow and the bow, the arrow obviously being misplaced since it is shown in the left instead of in the right hand. All the figures, especially Figs. 1, 2 and 3, are richly ornamented with all kinds of traditional ornaments. At least two of the figures are provided with *jaṭā mukuṭa*, of which one at least (Fig. 1) is shielded over by the five hoods of a snake. The fourth figure (Fig. 4) also has on its top a five-hooded snake. All the figures have a long and heavy garland of skulls hanging down from their neck. All the main figures except one (Fig. 3) are shown in a striding attitude as if walking forward on wooden sandals and are flanked by two figures, one on each side, though the main figure (Fig. 3) shows only one figure standing on the right. The figure on the right (Figs. 1, 2 and 3) is a human figure with a goat's head, which is everywhere shown in a worshipful attitude with folded hands. In Fig. 4, however, this goat-headed figure is placed on the left, but here, too, it is represented in an *añjali* pose. The figure to the left of the main divinity (Figs. 1 and 2) is evidently that of a female divinity. But in Fig. 1, this female divinity holds in her right hand the sword in a vertical position while the left hand is shown hanging along. In Fig. 2, however, both the female figures seem to be standing in *añjali* pose. In Fig. 4 the figure to the right, which seems to be a male figure, is also shown in the same pose. On either side of the top of all the main figures there are representations of the Sun and the Moon, the Sun in two cases being on the right and the Moon on the left; in two other cases the position is, however, reversed. In the fourth figure (Fig. 4), there is in addition the representation of what seems to be the bull, Nandi, on the right and that of the Śiva-*lingam* on the left. On the pedestal of the figure, represented in Fig. 1, there is also the representation of what seems to be a crouching bull, evidently the Nandi.

There cannot be any doubt that here are representations of a divinity that must belong to the Śivaite pantheon. From *pratimā-lakṣhaṇa* texts the divinity can easily be identified as the Virabhadra form of Śiva assumed by the god at the time of the destruction of the *yajña* of Dakṣha. Legends say that Virabhadra was created from the wrath of Śiva, that Dakṣha,

the father of Satī or Umā, terrified by the wrath of the god, stood in awe and reverence in *añjali* pose before Śiva-Virabhadra, also that Daksha had the head of a goat with two horns. In the present examples the face of the main figure does not have a very fierce expression; it is rather pacific in all these cases, but the goat-headed Daksha in *añjali* pose discloses the real nature of the composition. The female figure to the left can be identified, on the basis of mythology, with Bhadrakālī, the counterpart of Pārvatī, who is supposed to have been present helping Virabhadra destroy Daksha's sacrifice. But in at least one instance (Fig. 4) the other figure is definitely that of a male. It has been suggested by some that this attendant is Brahmā, for which, however, we have no textual support. It has also been suggested that instead of Brahmā this figure may represent Garuḍa, which, too, has no textual basis. Virabhadra, according to the texts, is one of the *gaṇas* or attendants of Śiva, who seems to have been derived from non-Aryan demonolatry.¹ He is described in the texts to have a thousand heads, a thousand eyes, a thousand arms, powerful shoulders and side tusks. He is further described as having *saṅkha*, *chakra*, *dhanu* and *vāṇa* as his attributes.² The *Śilpa-saṅgraha* mentions the three varieties of Virabhadra, namely the *sāttvik*, the *tāmasik* and the *rājasik*. The figures reproduced here may easily be taken to represent the *sāttvik* variety.

Images of Virabhadra and shrines dedicated to him are very common in the Telugu and the Canarese districts of the South. There is also evidence to suggest that Virabhadra as a form of Śiva was very popular among the powerful Liṅgāyatas of the South.³ Long ago Thurston suggested that at least a certain section of the Jaṅgamas or priests of the Liṅgāyata sect used to hold Virabhadra in great veneration. He had noticed that some of these priests used to hold in their left hand or wear huge metal plaques with representations on them of the image of Virabhadra in a more or less clear relief. According to his interpretation these plaques were used by them as shields or amulets to protect them against evil eyes and acts.⁴ He also provided a photographic representation in support of his suggestion and interpretation (Fig. 5).

The metal plaques from the Volkenkunde Museum at Leiden seem to lend strong support to Thurston's hypothesis that the plaques were presumably hung from the neck or held by the hand with the aid of a fastener. This is proved by the fact that one plaque is provided with a handle at the back for gripping, two plaques with two fasteners presumably for fixing the chain, and another with four holes in four corners.

The hypothetical association of the Virabhadra form of Śiva, with the Jaṅgamas of the Liṅgāyata sect of the South, raises certain interesting questions in respect of the religion and religious ideology of the Liṅgāyatas, who also describe themselves as 'Vira-Śaivas' and 'Śiva-bhaktas'. According to texts and traditions, the Liṅgāyatas are not supposed to worship any image. In fact, their religious texts and their myths are altogether silent about the gods, and hence also about any of the anthropomorphic forms of Śiva. By the very derivation of the term, a Liṅgāyata is one who bears the *liṅga* or the phallic symbol, or one who belongs to the arena of *liṅga*, that is one who is a worshipper of the *liṅga*. *Liṅga* or the phallic

¹ *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. V, p. 22.

² Rao, Gopinath: *Elements of Hindu Iconography*, Vol. II, Part I, p. 183.

³ *Channa Basava Purāna*, translated by Rev. G. Würth in the *Jour. B.B.R. As. Soc.*, Vol. VIII, p. 101.

⁴ Thurston, E.: *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, p. 257.

symbol is, therefore, evidently the object of worship and veneration of the Lingāyatas.⁵ Indeed, the worship of this symbol is the chief feature of the members of the Lingāyata sect; next in importance of veneration is the guru and finally the *saṅgha* or the sect itself. 'The guru is the preceptor, who imparts to the aspirants spiritual knowledge, the Jaṅgama is the realized soul and the *liṅga* is the deity Śiva.'⁶

Knowing that the Lingāyatas do not worship any form of Śiva other than that of the abstract *liṅga*, how is it that the Jaṅgama priests wear a plaque representing Śiva's Virabhadra form? Is there really anything that can connect the Jaṅgamas with Virabhadra?

In the *Basava Purāna* of the Lingāyatas we are told that the god (Śiva), in order to prevent evil, injury, falsehood and faithlessness, should take the form of the Jaṅgama to go to the world of the mortals with a view to refuting and wiping out all false religion and making men adore Śiva in order to protect them.⁷ From this point of view the Jaṅgamas are not merely the priests, but they are themselves incarnations of Śiva, brought into being to fight the enemies of Śiva and Śivaism.

According to the *Kūrma* and *Bhāgavata Purānas*, as recorded by T. A. Gopinath Rao, it is well known that Virabhadra was created from the locks of Śiva with the sole objective of killing Daksha who, for all that we know, was a believer in Vishṇu and upholder of Vaiṣṇavism.⁸ The *Basava Purāna*, referred to above and datable perhaps in the twelfth century, tells us further the story of how the eyes of the two of Basava's disciples were put out by Vijjala and of how Vijjala in his turn was killed by Basava's followers.⁹ The *Siddhāntaśikhāmaṇi* of the Śaivas also states that if anybody shows disrespect to Śiva, he should be killed at once.¹⁰ This would show that amongst a certain sect of the Śaivas of South India there was a definite tendency towards thinking and acting in terms of aggressive violence in respect of those whom they considered as their contenders or enemies.

It is not unlikely that the Lingāyatas, otherwise known as Viraśaivas, were one such militant sect. We have been told that the Viraśaivas were called as such because of their heroic attitude in an aggressive and defensive manner in support of their faith.¹¹ We are also told that in order to save the religion (Śaivism) from disgrace, a true Lingāyata should risk his life, even if it means taking recourse to violent means.¹²

This militant attitude of the Viraśaivas or Lingāyatas seems to distinguish them sharply from other sects of the Śaivas. It is not, therefore, perhaps difficult to understand why Virabhadra should occupy a special place of honour and veneration with the Lingāyatas, because Virabhadra himself is supposed to represent a terrifically militant and aggressive form of Śiva. According to Purāṇic legend, Daksha, a devotee of Vishṇu,

⁵ Channa *Basava Purāna*, Jour. B.B.R. As. Soc., Vol. VIII, pp. 125-127; Rao, Gopinath: *Elements of Hindu Iconography*, Vol. II, Part I, p. 33.

⁶ Mazumdar, R. C. (ed.): *History and Culture of the Indian People*, Vol. V, p. 449.

⁷ *Basava Purāna*, translated by G. Würth in the Jour. B.B.R. As. Soc., Vol. VIII, pp. 66-67.

⁸ Rao, Gopinath: *Elements of Hindu Iconography*, Vol. II, Part I, pp. 182-183, 185-186.

⁹ *Basava Purāna*, Jour. B.B.R. As. Soc., Vol. VIII, p. 96.

¹⁰ *Siddhāntaśikhāmaṇi*, Chapter IX.

¹¹ Das Gupta, S. N.: *A History of Indian Philosophy*, Vol. V, p. 42.

¹² *Siddhāntaśikhāmaṇi*, Chapter IX.

refused to make offerings to Śiva. Virabhadra, therefore, put out the eyes and plucked the teeth of Sūrya, cut off the hands and tongue of Agni, cursed Indra's arm to stiffness, crushed Chandra or the Moon by his toe and obliged Garuḍa to flee for his life.¹³ Such was the powerful, aggressive and militant Virabhadra who caused havoc to the non-believers of Śiva's power and made all the Śaiva sects, including the Viraśaivas or the Liṅgāyatas, accept his supremacy. This would perhaps explain why Virabhadra occupies such an important position with the Liṅgāyatas.

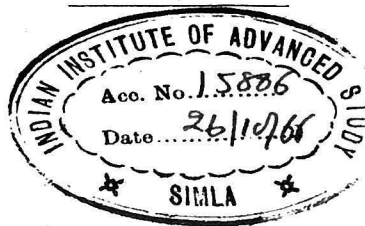
The use of the Virabhadra plaques as protective shields or amulets can also be satisfactorily explained. It is very well known that copper and *ashṭa dhātu* (alloy of eight metals) are considered sacred by the Liṅgāyatas. Over dead bodies of members of their sect, they are known to place 21 small pieces of copper or *ashṭa dhātu* on which is engraved the sacred formula of the sect in order to protect the corpse from evil spirits.¹⁴ It is not unlikely, therefore, that the members of the sect, especially their priests, even when alive, should wear copper or *ashṭa dhātu* metal plaques engraved with the image of a divinity that was supposed to reflect their character and religious ideology.

Of the four figures, that of Fig. 1 is certainly plastically the best and the earliest from the point of view of artistic form. Its decorative and iconographic embellishments, its quality of linear movement and plastic treatment affiliate the image to the classical Chola stylistic tradition, though a slight stiffening of the plasticity of movement seems to suggest that it belongs to a slightly later date, probably to the thirteenth century. Figs. 2 and 3 are definitely much later and, though they still indicate the classical tradition, they cannot belong to earlier than the fifteenth or the sixteenth century; Fig. 3 may even be later. Fig. 4 belongs clearly to the folk tradition and is typical of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century metal images of the *bazaar* tradition of image-making for the ordinary folk.

The image on the relief of the shield, held by the Jaṅgama priest (Fig. 3), seems to belong to the same tradition as that of Figs. 2 and 3, which seem to prove that already by about the fifteenth century the association of Virabhadra-Śiva had become established. But this association can be pushed further back, even to as early as the twelfth or thirteenth century, to which period, roughly speaking, Fig. 1 seems to belong, since the stele of the figure is also provided with a handle for its use as a shield. Therefore there can be no doubt that this stele was also meant for being held as a shield by the Jaṅgama priest.

¹³ Rao, Gopinath: *Elements of Hindu Iconography*, Vol. II, Part I, p. 184.

¹⁴ *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. III, p. 443.



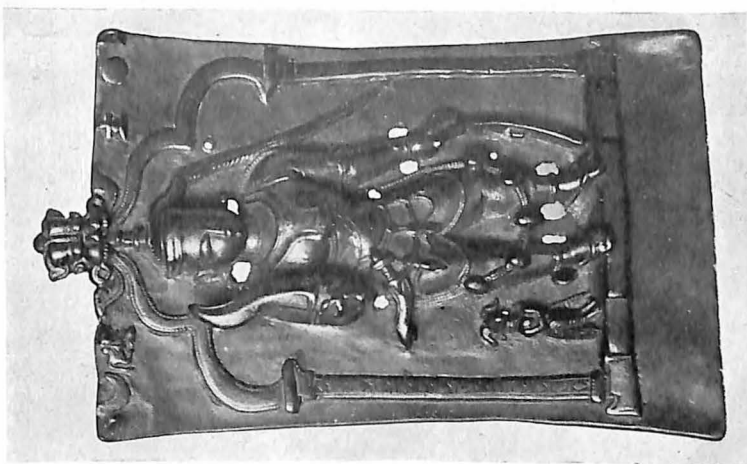


FIG. 3.



FIG. 2.



FIG. 1.

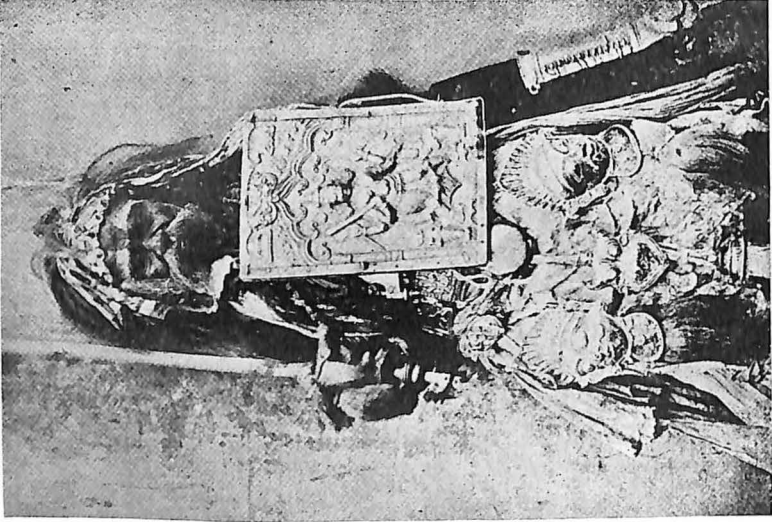


FIG. 5.

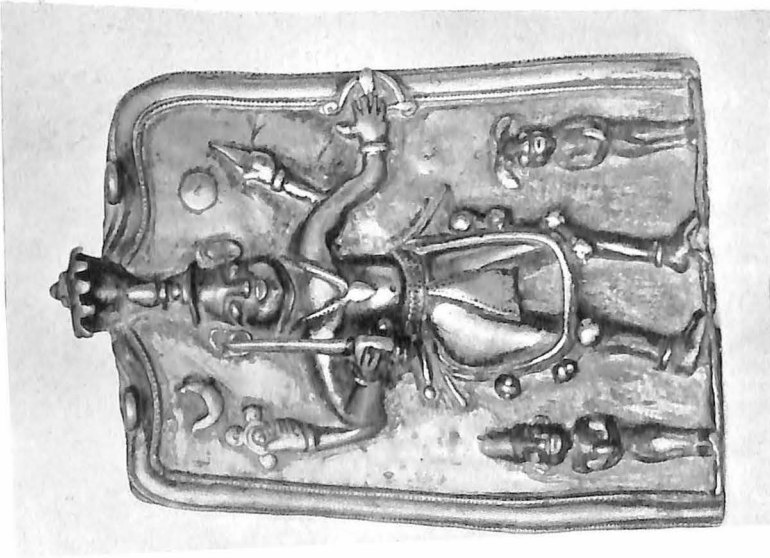


FIG. 4.

