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Varaha

Varaha (Sanskrit: वराह, “boar”) is the avatar of the Hindu god Vishnu in the form of a boar. Varaha is listed as third in the *Dashavatara*, the ten principal avatars of Vishnu. When the demon *Hiranyaksha* stole the earth (personified as the goddess *Bhudevi*) and hid her in the primordial waters, Vishnu appeared as Varaha to rescue her. Varaha slew the demon and retrieved the Earth from the ocean, lifting it on his tusks, and restored *Bhudevi* to her place in the universe.

Varaha may be depicted completely as a boar or in an anthropomorphic form, with a boar’s head and human body. His consort, *Bhudevi*, the earth, is often depicted as a young woman, lifted by Varaha. The earth may be depicted as a mass of land too.

1 Iconography

Like Vishnu’s first two avatars - *Matsya* (fish) and *Kurma* (turtle), the third avatar Varaha is depicted either in zoomorphic form as an animal (a wild boar), or anthropomorphically. The main difference in the anthropomorphic form portrayal is that the first two avatars are depicted with a torso of a man and the bottom half as animal, while Varaha has an animal (boar) head and a human body.^{[1][2]} The portrayal of the anthropomorphic Varaha is similar to the fourth avatar *Narasimha* (portrayed as a lion-headed man), who is the first avatar of Vishnu that is not completely animal.

In the zoomorphic form, Varaha is often depicted as a free-standing boar colossus, for example, the monolithic sculpture of Varaha in *Khajuraho* (c. 900-925) made in sandstone, is 2.6 metres (8 ft 6 in) long and 1.7 metres (5 ft 7 in) high.^[3] The sculpture may not resemble a boar realistically, and may have his features altered for stylistic purposes. The earth, personified as the goddess *Bhudevi*, clings to one of Varaha’s tusks. Often the colossus is decorated by miniature figurines of gods and goddesses and other world creatures appearing all over his body, which signify the whole of creation. Such sculptures are found in *Eran*,^[3] *Muradpur*, *Badoh*, *Gwalior*, *Jhansi* and *Apasadh*.^{[4][5]}

In the anthropomorphic form, Varaha often has a stylized boar face, like the zoomorphic models. The snout may be shorter. The position and size of the tusks may also be altered. The ears, cheeks and eyes are generally based on human ones. Early sculptors in *Udayagiri* and *Eran* faced the issue of how to attach the boar head to the



Zoomorphic Varaha, Khajuraho.

human body and did not show a human neck. However, in *Badami*, the problem was resolved by including a human neck. While some sculptures show a mane, it is dropped and replaced by a high conical crown - typical of Vishnu iconography - in others. Varaha sculptures generally look up to the right; there are very rare instances of left-facing Varaha depictions.^[4]

Varaha has four arms, two of which hold the *Sudarshana chakra* (discus) and *shankha* (conch), while the other two hold a *gada* (mace), a sword, or a lotus or one of them makes the *varadamudra* (gesture of blessing). Varaha may be depicted with all of Vishnu's attributes in his four hands: the *Sudarshana chakra*, the *shankha*, the *gada* and the lotus. Sometimes, Varaha may carry only two of Vishnu's attributes: a *shankha* and the *gada* personified as a female called *Gadadevi*. Varaha is often shown with a muscular physique and in a heroic pose. He is often depicted triumphantly emerging from the ocean as he rescues the earth.^{[1][4][6][7][8]}

The earth may be personified as the goddess *Bhudevi* in Indian sculpture. *Bhudevi* is often shown as a small figure in the icon. She may be seated on or dangling from



A rare left-facing Varaha holding Bhudevi, 7th century CE, Mahabalipuram.

one of Varaha's tusks, or is seated on the corner of his folded elbow or his shoulder and supports herself against the tusk or the snout, as being lifted from the waters. In later Indian paintings, the whole earth or a part of it is depicted lifted up by Varaha's tusks. In Mahabalipuram, a rare portrayal shows an affectionate Varaha looking down to Bhudevi, who he carries in his arms. The earth may be portrayed as a globe, a flat stretch of mountainous land or an elaborate forest landscape with buildings, temples, humans, birds and animals. The defeated demon may be depicted trampled under Varaha's feet or being killed in combat by Varaha's gada. Nagas (snake gods) and their consorts Naginis (snake goddesses), residents of the underworld, may be depicted as swimming in the ocean with hands folded as a mark of devotion. Varaha may be also depicted standing on a snake or other minor creatures, denoting the cosmic waters.^{[1][4][6][7][8]}

Two iconographical forms of Varaha are popular. Yajna Varaha - denoting Yajna (sacrifice) - is seated on a lion-throne and flanked by his consorts Bhudevi and Lakshmi. As Pralaya Varaha - indicative of lifting the earth from the stage of the pralaya (the dissolution of the universe), he is dedicated only with Bhudevi.^[1] Varaha may be depicted with Lakshmi alone too. In such sculptures, he may be depicted identical to Vishnu in terms of iconography with Vishnu's attributes; the boar head identifying the icon as Varaha. Lakshmi may be seated on his thigh in such portrayals.^[9]

Varaha often features in the Dashavatara stele - where the ten major avatars of Vishnu are portrayed - sometimes surrounding Vishnu. In the Vaikuntha Vishnu (four headed Vishnu) images, the boar is shown as the left head. Varaha's shakti (energy or consort) is the Matrika (mother goddess) Varahi, who is depicted with a boar head like the god.^[4]

2 Legends



Varaha stands on Nagas, rises from the waters with the earth (Bhudevi) on his elbow, National Museum, New Delhi.

The earliest versions of the Varaha legend are found in the *Taittiriya Aranyaka* and the *Shatapatha Brahmana*. They narrate that the universe was filled with the primordial waters. The earth was the size of a hand and was trapped in it. The god Prajapati (the creator-god Brahma) in the form of a boar (*varaha*) plunges into the waters and brings the earth out. He also marries the earth thereafter. The *Shatapatha Brahmana* calls the boar as Emusha. The epic *Ramayana* and the *Vishnu Purana* - considered sometimes as the oldest of the Puranic scriptures - are the first to associate Varaha with Vishnu.^{[1][10]} Various Puranic scriptures including the *Agni Purana*, the *Bhagavata Purana*, the *Devi Bhagavata Purana*, the *Padma Purana*, the *Varaha Purana*, the *Vayu Purana* and the *Vishnu Purana* narrate the legend of Varaha with some variations.^{[1][11][12]}

The gate-keepers of Vishnu's abode Vaikuntha, Jaya and Vijaya are cursed by the four Kumaras, sages who roam the world in the form of children, to be born as asuras (demons). They are born on earth as Hiranyaksha and

Hiranyakashipu to the sage Kashyapa and his wife Diti and were one of the Daityas, a race of demons originating from Diti. The demon brothers are manifestations of pure evil and create havoc in the universe. The elder brother Hiranyaksha practises *tapas* (austerities) and is blessed by Brahma with a boon that makes him indestructible by any animal or human. He and his brother torment the inhabitants of earth as well as the gods and engage in war with the latter. Hiranyaksha takes the earth (personified as the goddess Bhudevi) and hides her in the primordial waters. In some versions of the tale, the earth gives a loud cry of distress as she is kidnapped by the demon; in others, she assumes the form of a cow and appeals to Vishnu to rescue her from the clutches of the demon. In some variants, the distressed gods led by Brahma along with the sages go to Vishnu for help.^{[1][11][12]} In some versions, the kidnap of the earth by Hiranyaksha is dropped. Instead, the earth sinks on her own to *Rasatala* (underworld) due to the weight of the mountains or due to the torture of the demons.^[1]

Since Hiranyaksha had not included the boar in the list of animals that would not be able to kill him, Vishnu assumes this form with huge tusks and goes down to the primordial ocean. In the *Bhagavata Purana*, Varaha emerges as a tiny beast (a size of a thumb) from the nostrils of Brahma, but soon starts to grow. Varaha's size increases to that of an elephant and then to that of an enormous mountain. The scriptures emphasize his gigantic size. The *Vayu Purana* describes Varaha as 10 *yojanas* (The range of a *yojana* is disputed and ranges between 6–15 kilometres (3.7–9.3 mi)) in width and a 1000 *yojanas* in height. He is large as a mountain and blazing like the sun. Dark like a rain cloud in complexion, his tusks are white, sharp and fearsome. His body is the size of the space between the earth and the sky. His thunderous roar is frightening. In one instance, his mane is so fiery and fearsome that Varuna, the god of the waters, requests Varaha to save him from it. Varaha complies and folds his mane.^{[1][11][12]}



Rock-cut sculpture of Varaha at the Udayagiri Caves, near Vidisha, carved when the city was a provincial capital of the Gupta Empire. One of the earliest anthropomorphic sculptures shows Bhudevi clinging to Varaha's tusk as Varaha emerges from the ocean.

In the ocean, Varaha encounters Hiranyaksha, who obstructs his path and challenges him for a duel. In some versions, the demon also mocks Varaha as the beast and warns him not to touch earth. Ignoring the demon's threats, Varaha lifts the earth on his tusks. Hiranyaksha charges towards the boar in rage with a mace. The two fiercely fight with maces. Finally, Varaha slays the demon after a thousand-year duel. Varaha rises from the ocean with the earth in his tusks and places her gently above it in her original position, as the gods and the sages sing Varaha's praises.^{[1][11][12][13]}

Further, the earth goddess Bhudevi falls in love with her rescuer Varaha. Vishnu - in his Varaha form - marries Bhudevi, making her one of the consorts of Vishnu. In one narrative, Vishnu and Bhudevi indulge in vigorous embraces and as a result, Bhudevi becomes fatigued and faints, sinking a little in the primordial ocean. Vishnu again acquires the form of Varaha and rescues her, reinstating her in her original position above the waters.^[1] Some scriptures state that Bhudevi gives birth to Varaha's son, an asura called *Narakasura*.^[14]

The scripture *Varaha Purana* is believed to be narrated by Vishnu to Bhudevi, as Varaha. The Purana is devoted more to the "myths and genealogies" connected to the worship of Vishnu.^[1]

Some *Shaiva Puranas* narrate a tale in which the god Shiva defeats Varaha, a clear indication of the conflict between *Vaishnavism* (who consider Vishnu as the Supreme Being) and *Shaivism* (who venerate Shiva as the Supreme One),; both of which are sects of Hindu religion. In the *Kalika Purana*, Varaha had amorous dalliance with Bhudevi. He and his three boar sons then create mayhem in the world, which necessitates Shiva to take the form of *Sharabha*, to kill Varaha.^[1]

3 Evolution

Varaha was originally described as a form of Brahma, but later on was crystallized as the avatar of Vishnu.^[1] The earliest Varaha images are found in Mathura, dating to the 1st and 2nd century CE.^[1] The cult of Varaha seems to have been popular in the Gupta era (4th-6th century) in Central India, considering the large number of Varaha sculptures and inscriptions found.^{[8][15]} A red sandstone sculpture of Varaha in boar form with an inscription is traced to the reign of Toramana (late 5th to early 6th century). Early sculptures of Varaha generally depict him in his boar form. Anthropomorphic depictions of Varaha with human body and boar's head became popular in the later period.^[1] Other early sculptures exist in the cave temples in Badami in Karnataka (6th century) and Varaha Cave Temple in Mahabalipuram (7th century); both in South India and Ellora Caves (7th century) in Western India.^{[1][4]} In the Udayagiri Caves (Cave 5) in Madhya Pradesh, an image of Varaha rescuing the earth



Coin with Varaha (Vishnu Avatar) on a Gurjara-Pratihara coin 850-900 CE, British Museum.

sculpted in sandstone (dated to 401-450 AD) is seen; and a zoomorphic image from 8th century from Bago-Pathari is now with the Archeological Museum at Gwalior.^[4] By 7th century, images of Varaha were found in all regions of India.^{[1][8]} By the tenth century, temples dedicated to Varaha were established in Khajuraho (existent, but worship has ceased), Udaipur, Jhansi (now in ruins) etc.^{[1][15]}

In the first millennium, the boar was worshipped as a symbol of virility.^[8] The Chalukya dynasty (543-753) was the first dynasty to adopt Varaha in their crest and minted coins with Varaha on it.^[16] The Gurjara-Pratihara king Mihira Bhoja I (836-885 CE) assumed the title of *Adi-varaha* and also minted coins depicting the Varaha image.^[1] Varaha was also adopted as a part of royal insignia by the Chola (300s BCE-1279) and Vijayanagara Empires (1336-1646) of South India.^[8] In Karnataka, a zoomorphic image of Varaha is found in a carving on a pillar in Aihole, which is interpreted as the Vijayanagara emblem, as it is seen along with signs of a cross marked Sun, a disc and a conch.^[4]

However, the boar and its relative the pig started being seen as polluting since the 12th century, due to Muslim influence on India. Muslims consider the pig and its meat unclean. This led to a decline in Varaha worship to a certain extent.^[8]

4 Symbolism

In the *Vishnu Purana*, Varaha represents yajna (sacrifice), as the eternal upholder of the earth. His feet represent the Vedas (scriptures). His tusks represent sacrificial stakes. His teeth are offerings. His mouth is the altar with tongue of sacrificial fire. The hair on his head



Varaha tramples the fallen demon with Bhudevi on his shoulder, Hoysaleswara Temple.

denotes the sacrificial grass. The eyes represent the day and the night. His coarse hair represents sexual prowess. The head represents the seat of the Brahmin (priest). The mane represents the hymns of the Vedas. His nostrils are for oblation. His joints represent the various ceremonies. The ears are said to indicate rites (voluntary and obligatory). Thus, Varaha is the embodiment of the Supreme Being who brings order amidst chaos in the world by his sacrifice.^[1]

Varaha symbolizes the resurrection of the earth from a pralaya (dissolution of the universe) and the establishment of a new kalpa (aeon).^[1] Symbolism also attributes that evolution from water could relate to the geological phenomenon of the tectonic age. It could also represent the rescue of earth from "false cults".^[1]

5 Temples

The most prominent temples of Varaha is the Sri Varahaswami Temple in Tirumala, Andhra Pradesh. It is located on the shores of a temple pond, called the Swami Pushkarini, in Tirumala, near Tirupati; to the north of the Tirumala Venkateswara Temple (another temple of Vishnu in the form of Venkateswara). The region is called *Adi-Varaha Kshetra*, the abode of Varaha. The legend of

the place is as follows: at the end of **Satya Yuga** (the first in the cycle of four aeons; the present one is the fourth aeon), devotees of Varaha requested him to stay on earth, so Varaha ordered his mount **Garuda** to bring his divine garden Kridachala from his abode Vaikuntha to Venkata hills, Tirumala. Venkateswara is described as having taken the permission of Varaha to reside in these hills, where his chief temple, Tirumala Venkateswara Temple, stands. Hence, pilgrims are prescribed to worship Varaha first and then Venkateswara. In the *Atri Samhita* (*Samurtarchanadhikara*), Varaha is described to be worshipped in three forms here: Adi Varaha, Pralaya Varaha and Yajna Varaha. The image in the sanctum is of Adi Varaha.^{[17][18]}

Another important temple is the Bhuvarahaswami Temple in Srimushnam town, to the northeast of Chidambaram, Tamil Nadu. It was built in the late 16th century by Krishnappa II, a Thanjavur Nayak ruler.^[19] The image of Varaha is considered a swayambhu (self manifested) image, one of the eight self-manifested Swayamvyakta Vaishnava kshetras. An inscription in the prakaram (circumambulating passage around the main shrine) quoting from the legend of the *Srimushna Mahatmaya* (a local legend) mentions the piety one derives in observing festivals during the 12 months of the year when the sun enters a particular zodiacal sign.^[20] This temple is venerated by Hindus and Muslims alike. Both communities take the utsava murti (festival image) in procession in the annual temple festival in the Tamil month of Masi (February–March). The deity is credited with many miracles and called *Varaha saheb* by Muslims.^[2]

Varaha shrines are also included in Divya Desams (a list of 108 abodes of Vishnu). They include Adi Varaha Perumal shrine Tirukkalvanoor, located in the Kamakshi Amman Temple complex, Kanchipuram and Thiruvidadai, 15 km from Mahabalipuram.^{[21][22]}

In Muradpur in West Bengal, worship is offered to an in-situ 2.5 metres (8 ft 2 in) zoomorphic image of Varaha (8th century), one of the earliest known images of Varaha.^[4] A 7th century anthropomorphic Varaha image of Apasadh is still worshipped in a relatively modern temple.^[1] Other temples dedicated to Varaha are located across India in the states of Andhra Pradesh, Haryana Pradesh at Baraha Kalan,^[23] Karnataka at Maravanthe and Kallahalli, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha at Yajna Varaha Temple,^[23] and Lakhmi Varaha Temple, Rajasthan at Pushkar, Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh.

6 See also

- Narasimha
- Varahi

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