Varuna as Marine God: Iconography and Symbolism

Y.S. Sanathana & Manjil Hazarika

***

Varuna is one among the earliest deities to be worshipped in Hinduism. His mention can be traced to the Rig Veda, the oldest known Vedic Sanskrit text. Interestingly, over the ages the duties and roles of the deity Varuna have been evolved and changed. Initially he was the God of Sky and Water, however later on, he was associated with Justice and Truth. He is also considered to be the guardian (dikpalaka) deity of the western direction. From the early Christian Era, Varuna has been worshiped predominantly as a Deity of Ocean and Maritime trade mainly in Peninsular India. His role as a Deity of Oceans has been reflected in the early Indian literatures like Upanishads, Brahmanas, the Epics (Ramayana and Mahabharata) and in numerous Puranic (mythological) stories where he is described as the Lord of the Subterranean and Casual Waters, giver of the rain and the owner of Soma (wine).

In Indian sculptures Varuna is shown riding on a mythical sea animal called Makara. Usually he is depicted handsomely and well dressed. His attributes are naga pasha (noose made of serpent) and a pot of wine. Usually he is accompanied by his two wives Varuni (Goddess of Liquor), Riddi (Goddess of Prosperity). Sometimes his first three sons Pushkara (Nourisher), Bala (Strength), Sura (Liquor) are also depicted alongside. Contradictingly he has another son named as Adharma (Wrong Deed) and grandsons Nairrta (Ill omen), Rakshasa (Demon), Bhaya (Fear), Maha Bhaya (Terror) and Mrithyu (Death). In this paper, the authors have tried to interpret these iconographic and mythological descriptions of Varuna which carry a lot of symbolism related with sea voyage.

Regional variation is the hallmark of Indian art. Hence it is important to note that Varuna has been worshiped in different forms in different parts of India and Southeast Asia. For example, he is portrayed as the God of Sea Voyage in Hoysala temple art and architecture. Evidently the capital city of Hoyasalas was Dwara-Samudra (Gateway of Ocean) which is the modern town of Halebidu located in the western coast of India. Similarly in ancient Assam, which was well known as the center of Astrolatry, Varuna was worshipped as one among the twelve Adityas (Suns). This multifacetedness and complex description makes Varuna as one of the most interesting Vedic Gods.

This paper is an attempt to document the sculptural depictions of Varuna across India and to identify and designate its iconographical features. The authors have tried to understand the regional varieties among the sculptural illustrations of the deity. This paper also looks into the symbolism behind the attributes and icons of Varuna in view of the regional variations in legends and mythologies.