



Sūrya Nārāyana image

A NOTE ON A NEPALESE IMAGE OF
SURYA-NĀRĀYANA

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In a recent monograph, Pratapaditya Pal and Dipak Chandra Bhattacharya have presented an interesting study of astral divinities as they appear in the sculpture of Nepal.¹ The most important of these is Sūrya and the authors distinguish three kinds of images: 1. those which conform to the description in the *Matsyapurāna* and the South Indian tradition; 2. a second variety in which Sūrya is shown dressed in the *udīcyaveśa* (northern costume) riding in a chariot accompanied by members of his *parivāra*; and 3. a pure Nepalese type which has no parallel in India, of more complex composition and iconography.²

These are all what may be called anthropomorphic images of the god: Sūrya is represented in human form with the iconographic items appropriate to each type: lotus, boots, dhoti, etc. The authors also note symbolic representations of the sun (the wheel, the disc) which occur alone and also in conjunction with various anthropomorphic images.³ These symbolic representations are found very early in Indian art and are common representations in Nepal also.⁴ The image which I present here falls wholly into neither of these categories for it is in part anthropomorphic and in part symbolic.⁵

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1. *Pratapaditya Pal and Dipak Chandra Bhattacharya, The Astral Divinities of Nepal (Varanasi: Prithvi Prakashan, 1969).*
 2. *Ibid.* p. 19.
 3. *Ibid.* pp. 8, 14, 27-8, 31. See also note 51.
 4. *The disc as a representation of the sun in India is known from Vedic times. For discussions of the development of Sūrya images in India see Jitendra Nath Banerjea, The Development of Hindu Iconography (Calcutta, University of Calcutta, 1956, pp. 36-107 and pp. 385-444). The disc for the sun and the crescent for the moon are common representations of this in Nepal. They occur, for example, atop the great caitya of Svayambhunath.*
 5. *The image was brought to me in 1968 by a dealer from Patan. I could learn little about its provenance. The dealer claimed that it was privately owned by someone in Patan and used in private religious ceremonies there.*

The image consists of a sphere, almost perfect in form, made of bronze with a heavy copper content, It is six inches in circumference and weighs 1435 grams or about 3.3 pounds. The copper gives it a deep reddish colour, the prescribed colour of the sun. The sphere carries a human face: the eyes, nose, mouth and ears of a man. The eyes, eye-brows and ears are indicated by lines incised in the surface. The nose, mouth and cheeks are modelled on the surface. On the forehead appear three incised lines (concentric, u-shaped) which represent the ūrdhva-pundra or Vaishnava sectarian mark. The entire face is contained within a circle consisting of two incised lines which are about 1/32 of an inch apart. Around this circle and emanating from it are a large number of incised lines varying from one-half to one inch in length set about 1/16 of an inch apart. These represent the rays of the sun. The back of the "head" or sphere is smooth, but not as perfect in conformation as the front. There are no other marks, but it should be mentioned that the combination of metals used in the alloy has produced many marks and lines on the surface, which give the entire image a beautiful texture.

All Nepalese to whom the image was shown, both Buddhist and Hindu, were unanimous in their identification: all spontaneously called it *Sūrya-Nārāyana* and there is little doubt that this is who it represents. *Sūrya-Nārāyana* images of the anthropomorphic type are common in India and though Pal and Bhattacharya list none for Nepal it is probable that such images do exist there. The close connections between Vishnu and *Sūrya* are well-known.⁶ Here, of course, we are dealing with another aspect of *Sūrya* also: a representation of the "man in the sun". Indian belief projects a man or god in the sun rather than in the moon, and it was to this belief that the Nepalese responded when questioned.⁷ It should be remarked also, that in Nepal, as elsewhere, the sun plays an important role in the Buddhist pantheon. The Buddha is sometimes called *Sūrya* in early Buddhist literature and both *Sūrya* and Candra, the moon, are considered Bodhisattvas.



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6. For a discussion of the relationship between *Visnu*, *Nārāyana* and *Sūrya*, see J.N. Banerjea, *op. cit.*, pp. 385-444. Pal and Bhattacharya mention the identification of *Sūrya* and *Visnu* in the *Visnupurāna* (*op. cit.*, p. 14). They mention also the close relationship between *Indra* and *Sūrya*, *Ganeśa* and *Sūrya*, and the god *Śivabhāskara* as these occur in Nepalese inscription (*ibid.* pp. 6-8).
 7. The moon contains a rabbit, not a man. See M. Monier-Williams: *Brahmanism and Hinduism* (London: John Murray, 1891) p. 342 n.
 8. Pal and Bhattacharya, *op.cit.* pp.27 and 53.