

RESEARCH PAPER

Iconography of Sage Narada in Indian Sculptural Art: Regional Variations

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Narada is one of the most admired characters in ancient Indian literature and mythology. He has been associated with numerous aspects of Indian life like music, architecture, art, law, justice, storytelling, agriculture and devotion. This versatile and adroit nature of Narada made him very popular among different ethnic, linguistic, religious groups and geographical regions of India. This paper is an attempt to document the sculptural depictions of Narada across the country and to identify and designate its iconographical features. The authors have tried to understand the regional varieties among the sculptural illustrations of Narada. This paper also looks into the symbolism behind the attributes and icons of Narada in view of the regional variations in legends and mythologies.

Introduction

“Narayana ... Narayana”, a chanting commonly heard in many Indian mythological soap-operas and Amar Chitrakatha reminds us of one of the admired personalities of Indian mythology, ‘Narada’. He is a recurring character in the Indian epics and early Hindu texts who often appears from time to time. His role is usually acquainted with shrewdness, clever, witty and mischievous cunningness. He is also known for his ardent devotion of Lord Vishnu. Vishnu Purana describes Narada as “*Naramnarsamuham Kalahenadyathi Khandayatiti*”, the one who is an instigator of disputes among people. Yet in the stories, he is never malicious or rancorous; rather his meddling is portrayed as for the greater cause. These attractive natures of Narada made him as one of the popular characters in early literature. There are innumerable references to Narada in the early literature, medieval murals, manuscript paintings and temple sculptures. This paper aims at studying the iconography of sage Narada in Indian sculptural art.

Narada in Early Indian Literature

In both the epics, Narada has repeated appearances and multiple references to his interventions. Particularly his counsel on ethics and polity to Yudhisthira is well known. Mahabharata also compliments his knowledge on *Angas* (pronunciation, grammar, prosody, terms, religious rites along with astronomy), *Nyaya* (logic), *Neeti* (moral science), and further refers to him as the master of the *Sankhya* and *Yoga* systems of philosophy, sciences of war and treaty. Two major early Indian texts named after Narada are Naradiya Purana and the Naradasmriti. Naradasmriti is treated as pre-Gupta Dharmashastra (Lariviere

1989: xix–xxiii) and also called as Naradiya-samhita. The Puranas consist of material which has grown by numerous accretions in successive courses of time (Dimmitt and van Buitenen 1978: 5). The Narada Purana also doesn't have a single date of composition. Rajendra Hazra (1940: 130) dates it to 9th to 10th century CE. Another eminent later Hindu religious text named after Narada is Narada Bhakti-Sutra containing eighty-four verses (Prabhavananda 1986) which deals with the practice of devotion (*bhakti*), or *bhakti yoga*. Narada symbolises the *bhakti* or devotion towards Vishnu. Puranas give us ample stories on Narada, even about his previous births. Matsya Purana lists him among eighteen masters of architecture or *Vastu-acharyas* (Bhrgu, Atri, Vasistha, Visvakarma, Maya, Narada, Nagnajita, Visalaksha, Purandara, Brahma, Kumara, Nandisha, Saunaka, Garga, Vasudeva, Aniruddha, Sukra and Brahaspati). Evidently Narada-samhita gives a detailed description about architecture in its 31st chapter with the title *vastu-laksanadhyaya*.

The name Narada appears in several mythical legends, referring to different persons. Bhagavata Purana lists avatars of Vishnu thrice; the first list has 22 numbers, the second has 23 and the third has 16. The first list contains the name of Narada as one of Lord Vishnu's avatars. The Satvata-samhita mentions 39 incarnations of Vishnu and one among them is Santatman. F.O. Schrader (1916) in his ‘*Introduction to Pancharatra and Ahirbudhnya Samhita*’ identifies Sanatman with Narada. At a few instances, Jain and Buddhist texts also refer to Narada. In the Jataka tales, Sariputta's previous birth is named as Narada. According to Jainism, nine Naradas (Bhima, Mahabhima, Rudra, Maharudra, Kala, Mahakala, Durmukha, Narakamukha and Adhomukha) are the parts of Jaina heroes (Doniger 1999: 550). Goswami (2018) states that “Narada was in reality an appellative name or epithet which was conferred upon certain distinguished persons who were endowed with some requisite qualities which are implied

in the Sanskrit root from which the word Narada is commonly derived”.

Iconography of Narada

Narada is regarded as one of the most important masters of music and is usually portrayed carrying a *kartal* (also pronounced as *khartal*) and *tambura* (lute) or *veena* (also known as *vina*). *Kartal* (Figure 1A) is an indigenous musical instrument made of two metal plated wooden clappers that make a clinking sound while clapping together. The name *kartal* is derived from two Sanskrit words namely *kara* meaning hand and *tala* clapping. Even today this instrument is found everywhere in the country with wandering singing artists, *harikatha* artists (who tell the story of Vishnu in song and tale predominantly in South India), devotional congregations, dancers and beggars (Deva 1977: 31).

Narada is shown carrying either *tambura* (Figure 1B) or *veena*. The name of the *tambura* or *veena* carried by Narada is Mahathi. *Veena* (Figure 1C) is a stringed musical instrument, having seven wires or strings upon nineteen frets or supports fixed on a large, rounded board, towards the ends of which are two large gourds (Monier-Williams 1960: 1005). *Veena* is considered to have been invented by sage Narada himself. It is supposed to be an ancient musical instrument which appeared in Indian art from a very early date (Tarlekar 1965). There is a difference in the form of *veena* in North and South Indian context (Wrazen 1986).

Tambura is also a stringed instrument of about a meter in length. The wooden spherical resonance box has an upper cover of a plain flat plank. The hollow body has a small neck continuing as a short *danda* which terminates in a scroll with the motif of a snake-hood. Four strings of metal are passed from the lower end of the resonator vessel to the pegs near the scroll over a bridge on it. These

strings are constantly strummed to accompany the singer (Deva 1977). The word *tambura* is derived from *tumbi* or *tumbiphala* referring to pumpkin. In the north Indian variety of *tambura* pumpkin is used for the bowl part of the instrument whereas in south India, the whole instrument is made of wood (Deva 1977: 103–105). Along with Narada, *tambura* is also invariably connected with another mythological musician sage Tumburu. Much evolved poly-chords form of *tambura* is *veena*.

Narada is depicted as a travelling musician and a story teller. In the scriptures, he is named as *trilokasanchari* (traveller of three worlds). *Shabda Kalpadrum*, the Sanskrit dictionary compiled by Raja Radhakanta Deb (1967) mentions Narada as “*Naram paramatma vishyakam gyanam dadati iti nardah*” (one who gives knowledge of God to humans). Typically Narada is depicted as Brahmanical ascetic, *jata* with long beard sometimes *kiritamukuta*. As per the popular belief, the sage can travel by will (*man-ovega*, i.e. as fast as the mind) but in eastern part of India mainly in Bengal and Assam he is shown travelling on *dheki*. *Dheki* is an agricultural object used for de-husking of rice in rural areas of Eastern India. *Shunya Purana* written by Ramai Pandit, a Bengali poet of 11th century provides a vivid description of *dheki* as Narada's vehicle. It is observed that from then onwards *dheki* and *veena* became typical iconographic attributes of Narada in sculptural art in Bengal and Assam.

Narada in Sculptural Art

Sage Narada is depicted in different sculptural contexts of India as a part of temple art. Most of the times we find Narada as a subsidiary figure along with images of Vishnu, Brahma and *Kalyanasundara Murti* of Shiva. However, in rare occasions, we do find individual images of the sage. He is a part of extensive narrative scenes depicted on temple walls and rock-cut caves. In Brahmanical temples,

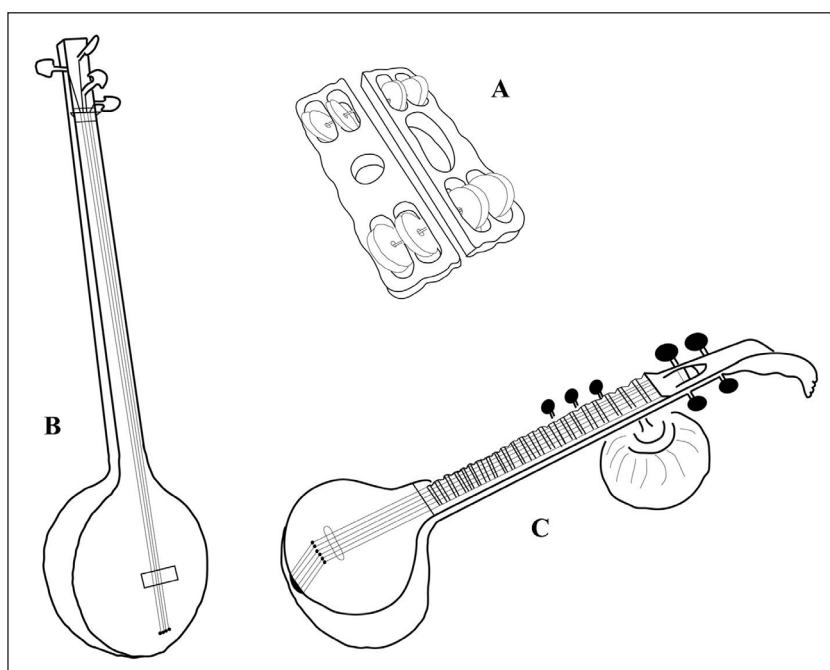


Figure 1: Line drawings of – (A) Kartal, (B) Tambura and (C) Veena.

Epics and the Puranas are the subject matter for narrative illustration in which Narada plays a key role; hence, his appearance is obvious. A few individual Narada images are reported from different parts of the country.

One of the beautiful images of Narada is reported from the famous Chola temple dedicated to Ranganathaswamy of Srirangam at Tamil Nadu. This temple is considered as one of the largest functioning Hindu temples in the world. This temple is also known as Thiruvaranga Tirupati. Srirangam is located about 12 km north of the city of Tiruchirappalli and about 325 km southwest of Chennai. This Narada sculpture is located on the temple wall near the eastern gate next to the *Madappalli* (the temple's kitchen). Along with the image of Narada (**Figure 2**), there are many sculptures depicting dancers and musicians in this temple. This temple was once a centre for learning of music and dance; and Narada is considered to be the first teacher of music. This particular image is sculpted inside a Dravidian shrine like structure. Narada is shown standing on a circular pedestal. The face is indicating *prasannavadanabhava* (state of peaceful happiness) and he is shown with *jatamukuta* and beard, elongated earlobes are indicating a *Mahapurushalakshana*. He is wearing an *upavita* (sacred thread) and *udharabhanda* (an ornamental band just above the stomach). Clear depiction of *katibhanda* (waistband or girdle around the waist), *antaravasa* and *urudama* on his lower drapery can be observed. He is holding a *veena* in his right hand but the lower part (resonator) of the *veena* is broken. Left hand is shown in *vitarka mudra*. This is important because *vitarka* means argumentation. Here in this *mudra*, thumb and the index finger join to form a ring while rest of the fingers are slightly twisted and face upwards (Gupta and Asthana 2002: 130). This *mudra* is very apt for Narada as he holds the reputation as instigator of disputes among people.

A similar sculpture of Narada is also reported from Nataraja temple of Chidambaram. Chidambaram is located 220 km south of Chennai. Chidambaram was the capital of the Chola dynasty and the present temple was built in the 10th century CE. This temple is renowned for

its display of all the 108 *karanas* from the *Natya Shastra* and which are the foundation of *Bharatanatyam*, depicted on the temple wall. This Narada depiction can be found at *Nrithya Sabhai* (also spelled as *Nritta Sabha*) which is a 56-pillared hall of dance. It is in the south section of the second courtyard that circumambulates the Nataraja sanctum of the complex. There are many similarities between this sculpture and that of Srirangam. The major difference is that the Narada image of Chidambaram is shown with *tambura*, however without the *vitarka mudra* as both the hands of the sage are placed on the lute.

Another Narada sculpture is reported from a temple in Marudur near Lalgudi, a town in Tiruchirappalli district of Tamil Nadu. This temple is called as Marudur Shivan Koil (Shiva temple of Marudur). The sculpture is kept inside a shrine. The feet of the sculpture is buried under the ground and not visible due to renovation works. The image appears to be standing in *tribhanga* posture. The hairstyle on this image is distinctive.

Two rock-cut images of Narada can be seen in Undavalli cave (**Figure 3**) in Guntur district of Andhra Pradesh. Undavalli is located 6 km southwest from Vijayawada and 22 km northeast of Guntur city. This rock-cut cave temple complex is said to have been created during the Vishnukundi dynasty (CE 420–620). This cave temple complex is centrally protected by Archaeological Survey of India. The Narada sculptures are found in the façade of the east facing four storied monolithic rock-cut cave. Both the images can be observed on the third floor of the temple. A life sized Narada (**Figure 4**) in seated posture can be seen on the façade of the third floor. Here Narada is sculpted with other *alvars*. The *alvars*, also spelt as *alvars* means 'those immersed in god' were Tamil poet-saints of South India and devotees of Lord Vishnu. There may be differences of chronology of these images with the rock-cut temple structure. Sage Narada is sculpted on the left most corner of the façade. Here Narada is shown sitting in *padmasana*, *veena* is placed on his left thigh and it is supported by his left hand. In his right hand he is holding the *kartal. Jata* (dreadlocks), moustache and beard are beautifully depicted. Armlets and



Figure 2: Depiction of Narada on the temple wall at Srirangam, Tamil Nadu.



Figure 3: Rock-cut caves of Undavalli, Guntur district of Andhra Pradesh.



Figure 4: Narada in seated posture, depicted in Undavalli Cave of Andhra Pradesh.



Figure 5: Sculpture of Narada from Undavalli Cave of Andhra Pradesh.

bracelets can be seen on both the arms. Lower and upper draperies are without any decorations. The second image (**Figure 5**) is found inside the same floor and it is in standing posture. Here Narada is facing north, holding *tambura* in his right hand and *kartal* in the left. Flattish kind of headgear can be observed and lower and upper drapery covers the whole body of the image.

Two Narada sculptures (**Figures 6 and 7**) along with an image of Tumburu (**Figure 8**) are sculpted on the pillars of *Kalyana mandapa* at Veerabhadra temple of Lepakshi. This Vijayanagara temple is known as one of the architectural marvels of medieval India as it contains the largest monolithic Nandi image in the country and a few unique features such as hanging pillar. The village Lepakshi is



Figure 6: Sculpture of Narada, Lepakshi of Andhra Pradesh.



Figure 7: Narada in dancing posture, Lepakshi of Andhra Pradesh.

located in the Anantapur district of Andhra Pradesh. A life sized Narada (**Figure 6**) in upright posture can be observed on one of the pillars of *Kalyana mandapa*. In the



Figure 8: Depictions of Tumburu on the pillars of Veerabhadra temple of Lepakshi at Andhra Pradesh.

right hand the sage is holding *tambura* and left hand is in *abhaya mudra* (gesture of fearlessness or reassurance or safety). Here Narada is well decorated with conical crown and different kinds of jewellery. In the same *mandapa* another relatively smaller, yet distinct image of dancing Narada (**Figure 7**) is present. Narada's left leg is lifted and right leg is bent indicating a dancing movement. He is shown with *jatamukuta* covered by cloth bands. Elongated earlobes are present indicating a *Mahapurushalakshana*. Elements of *katibhanda*, *antaravasa* and *urudama* can be observed on his lower drapery. He is holding a *veena* in his right hand. Left hand is shown with *vitarka mudra* similar to the Srirangam image. Another celestial musician who is associated with sage Narada is Tumburu. Many a times he is sculpted along with Narada on the temple walls. As per the Puranas, Tumburu is a son of sage Kashyapa and his wife Pradha and he is described as the best among Gandharvas or celestial musicians. Although Tumburu and Narada have identical attire, yet Tumburu is recognised with his horse head. Iconographically accurate image of Tumburu is depicted in Virupaksha temple (Lokesvara temple) constructed in 740 CE at Pattadakal, Karnataka. This Tumburu image is part of a Nataraja sculpture on the third pillar of the southern half of the *mandapa*. Two sculptures of Tumburu can be observed on the pillars of Lepakshi temple (**Figure 8**).

A Nayaka period Narada image (**Figure 9**) can be seen on a pillar of *Mukha mandapa* at Parthasarathy temple at Tiruvallikkeni or Triplicane as the British called it in Chennai city. The evidence of the Tiruvallikkeni village is mentioned in literature as dating back to the Pallava period. This image is in upright posture on a flat pedestal holding a *veena* using both the hands. Narada is shown in *prasannavadanabhava* (state of peaceful happiness). Artistically this image is comparable to other Nayaka period sculptures of Tamil Nadu. It must have been added during the restoration of the temple during 1564 CE.

Another Narada sculpture (**Figure 10**) can be seen on the temple wall of Arulmigu Dandayudhapani Swami temple at Palani of Dindigul district in Tamil Nadu dedicated to lord Murugan (Kartikeya). Even the local legends relate the creation of this shrine to Narada. It is said that Narada



Figure 9: Sculpture of Narada, Parthasarathy Temple, Triplicane, Chennai, Tamil Nadu.



Figure 10: Sculpture of Narada, Arulmigu Dandayudhapani Swami Temple, Palani, Dindigul district, Tamil Nadu.

presented the *gnana-palam*, the fruit of knowledge to Shiva and Parvati and Shiva decided to award the fruit among his sons who encircle the world thrice. Ganesha wittily won the fruit by circumnating his parents. Kartikeya (Murugan) was furious and settled in Palani as a hermit. As per the legend, saint Boghar was responsible for the establishment of a shrine dedicated to Murugan at this place. In the present temple architecture, influence of both Chera and Pandya dynasties can be observed. The Narada image is placed on the southern wall of the temple. He is shown in *samapada* (upright) posture playing *veena* with his right hand. The left hand of the sculpture is damaged, however, based on other instances, we can assume the damaged hand to be shown in *vitarka mudra*.

A unique individual sculpture of Narada (**Figure 12**) can be seen in a Jaina temple at Moodbidre (**Figure 11**). Moodabidre or Moodbidre is a town in Dakshina Kannada (South Canara) district of Karnataka and it lies 34 km northeast of the Mangalore city. Moodabidre is popular as Jaina Kashi, Jainism was and still is strongly practiced here. There are a total of 18 Jaina Basadis or temples in Moodabidre. Narada depiction can be seen on one of the pillars of Tribhuvana Tilaka Cudamani (**Figure 11**) or famously known as thousand pillars temple. This Jaina shrine dedicated to *tirthankara* Chandraprabha was built in 1430 CE by a local chieftain known as Devaraya Wodeyar. Narada is sculpted here on a pillar base (**Figure 12**). In this image, the side hair bun is tied with cloth bands suggesting local influence. This image is shown in standing posture on a flat pedestal. The direction of feet indicates his movement. Here, Narada is holding *tambura* using both the hands. He is shown without beard and moustache. His upper body is shown without any cloth and is ornamented using jewellerys like *hara* (garland), *bahuvalyas* (armlet) and *kankana* (anklet). The elongated earlobes indicate a *Mahapurusha* or divine figure. Decorated lower drapery also can be observed in this sculpture. Along with this, many images of dancers and musicians are also sculpted on the pillars of this Jaina Basadi.

Couples of individual Narada images are reported from Nepal. One of such sculpture can be seen on the temple premises of the Gokarneshwar Mahadev temple of Gokarna in Kathmandu. This sculpture is placed between Surya and Agni images. This sculpture is in upright posture standing on an inverted lotus motif. Here Narada is holding a rosary in the right hand and *tambura* in the left. The image is completely clothed and details of both lower and upper drapery are clearly seen. Another sculpture is kept at the Patan Museum in Lalitpur in Nepal and it falls under the UNESCO's World Heritage Site. Here Narada is shown sitting in an *ardhapadmasana* on an animal skin with the help of *padapatta* or *yogapatta* (belt around the legs). Emaciated or starved body of Narada can be seen here. Prabhavali or a hollow is shown behind the head. He is having a *jatamukuta* banded with Rudrakshis. Even a *hara* of Rudrakshi can also be seen around the neck of the sage.

Another Sculpture of Narada is reported from Deo Bagh in Gwalior in Madhya Pradesh. Here the standing image



Figure 11: Tribhuvana Tilaka Cudamani (Thousand Pillars Temple), Moodabidre, Karnataka.

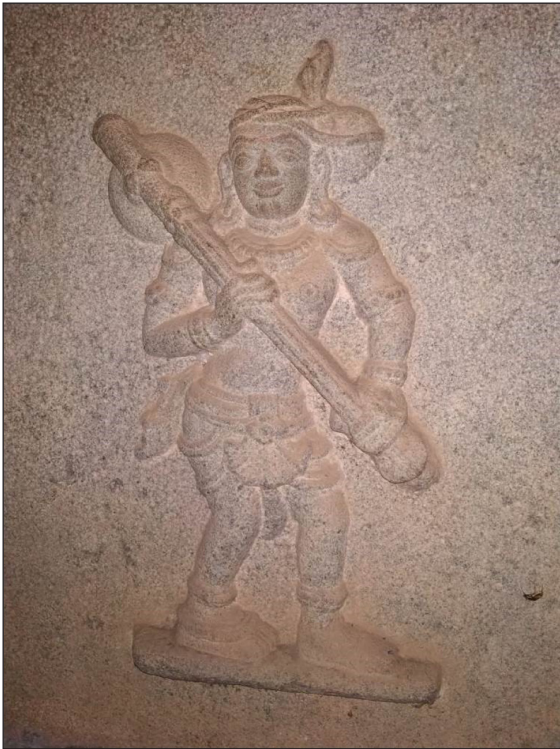


Figure 12: Sculpture of Narada, Moodabidre, Karnataka.

of Narada with moustache is depicted on the cenotaph of Sardar Deorao Jadhav. A deer and peacock can be seen sculpted beside the Narada image.

Depiction of Narada in Narrative Panels of Indian Temples

The earliest sculptural representation of Narada can be seen in 5th century CE Gupta caves at Udayagiri near Vidisha in Madhya Pradesh. The famous colossal rock-cut depiction of Varaha incarnation (**Figure 13**) of Vishnu depicted in Cave No. 5 of Udayagiri contains distinctive images of Narada and Tumburu along with many other divine beings. The musical skill of Tumburu and Narada is



Figure 13: Narada and Tumburu in the famous Varaha sculpture in the Udaygiri Cave no. 5 in Madhya Pradesh.

well recognised in the Gupta period, and Samudragupta in the Allahabad pillar inscription is said to have excelled these two by his musical accomplishments (Dass 2001: 166). Narada is shown with *veena* to the south of the Varaha, Tumburu stands next to him playing a guitar. Both the figures are devoid of ornaments and wearing a short *dhoti*, broad band like *upavita* (Mitra 1963). This Varaha panel can be considered as the “iconographic center-piece of Udayagiri” (Willis 2009). Dass (2001: 166) has recorded two celestial musicians in a lintel of a cave in Udaygiri. On one side a man is shown playing *veena* and on the other side a guitar.

Images of sage Narada can also be seen on the narrative art panels on temple walls and Hindu rock-cut temples all around the country. Narada is associated with the major stories related to the trinity of Hinduism, i.e. Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. As a result, we find his depiction along with them. At Olipathivishnu Vishnugraham cave complex of Malayadippatti (Tiruchirappalli district, Tamil Nadu), Narada is depicted along with Brahma. The village of Malayadippatti at the foothills of the mountain contains two rock-cut cave complexes, i.e. Alathurthali

and Olipathivishnu Vishnugraham cave temples, centrally protected by the Archaeological Survey of India.

The Olipathivishnu Vishnugraham is a rock-cut temple complex with several painted stucco images and sculptures. There is a large bas-relief panel depicting a reclining Vishnu, with Brahma in attendance above, sitting on a lotus on the southern wall of the main sanctum. To his right, Narada is depicted with *jatamukuta*, moustache and beard. He holds his *veena* with one hand, while the other is in *vitarka mudra*. These images were painted many times as part of the renovation process and have unfortunately lost their natural beauty and needs a keen observation to identify these sculptures.

Sage Narada is closely connected with Lord Vishnu, hence, we find him as a subsidiary image in most of the Vaishnavite narrative sculptures like *Narasimha* avatar, *Bhogasana Murti* of Vishnu, *Varahavatar* of Vishnu, *Anantashahi* Vishnu (reclining Vishnu) and so on. At Malaiyadippatti, we can also observe Narada above the reclining Vishnu image. Narada is also related to many stories of Shiva Purana. Evidently he is a part of many Shaivite narrative scenes. The usual image which contains Narada in connection with Shiva is *Kalyanasundara Murti*. *Kalyanasundara Murti* is also called as *Panigrahana Murti*, which is the iconographical depiction of the wedding between Shiva and Parvati where Shiva is shown holding Parvati's right hand. In this sculpture, Brahma, Vishnu, Lakshmi and other celestial divinities including Narada are elaborately depicted. *Kalyanasundara* sculptures are found across India. This icon is a popular feature on Dravidian temple *gopurams* (temple gate). Its depiction at Ellora cave is a popular one and it has a depiction of Narada.

A *Kalyanasundara* image having Narada depiction is observed from Brihadeshwara temple (**Figure 14**) at Tanjavoor in Tamil Nadu. The complete *Panigrahana* is depicted on the outer wall of the *gopura*. We can witness Shiva holding Parvati's hand surrounded by different deities around him. On the left most part of the wall we can see depiction of Narada. Amusingly here Narada is depicted with just a *kaupina* (loin cloth). He is shown with elongated ears, beard and moustache. The *veena* Mathali is resting on his right arm and his hands are in *anjali mudra* or *namaskara mudra*. This particular *mudra* is a hand postures where two palms are facing and joining each other and raising to the level of the chest indicating reverence or devotion or salute. One more *Kalyanasundara* sculptural



Figure 14: Images of *Kalyanasundara* and Narada, Brihadishwara temple, Tanjavoor, Tamil Nadu.

panel has been reported from Omkareshwar temple of Khandwa district of Madhya Pradesh. It is situated in Mandhata Island on the banks of Narmada. A comprehensive description of Shiva and Parvati's wedding ritual is portrayed on the temple wall. On the left most part of the wall we can see the life size depiction of Narada. Here Narada is shown in standing posture, well decorated with different jewellerys and draperies. He is holding a *tambura* in both the hands.

A Shaivite narrative scene containing Narada can be seen in Satruganeswar temple at Bhubaneswar in Odisha (**Figure 15**). This temple is dedicated to Shiva and was built during Sailodbhava rule in later half of 6th century CE and is considered to be one of the oldest structural temples of Bhubaneswar. On the temple wall, a scene from Shiva Purana is depicted consisting of various divine figures like Brahma, Vishnu, Kubera, Agni, Yama, Narada and so on. This panel has ten images and Narada is the central image. Here he is shown with *jatamukuta* holding a *tambura*. This can be considered as one of the earliest sculptural representations of Narada.

Narada can be seen on Chola bronze sculptures as well. A bronze sculpture from a personal collection illustrates Lord Shiva with his consort Parvati and sons Ganesha and Kartikeya. Shiva is the prominent figure of this sculpture and is shown with four hands. Sage Narada is seen in the backdrop. Here Narada is shown holding a *kartal* in his right hand and left hand is playing the *veena*. Iconographically and artistically he has been depicted similarly to the sculptures of Srirangam and Chidambaram.

Another panel with Narada depiction can be seen on wall of Veerabhadra temple of Lepakshi (**Figure 16**) in Andhra Pradesh. This seems to be a depiction from Parasurama's story. There are four figures in this panel. A female, a sage with *kamandala* (sacred oblong water pot) and *danda* (armrest used by sages), Narada and an ascetic figure holding a *parasu* (axe) are shown here. Here Narada is shown holding a *tambura* in his left hand. The right hand movement indicates that he is in conversation.



Figure 15: Narrative panel, Satruganeswar temple, Bhubaneswar.



Figure 16: Narrative panel, Lepakshi temple, Andhra Pradesh.

Narada in the Terracotta Plaques of Bengal and Assam

Bengal is well known for terracotta sculptural art (Datta 1959; Mccutchion 1972; Ghosh 2006). The terracotta art in the temple walls depict individual sculptures as well as narrative scenes. Here, there are several panels with images of Narada. An interesting point to be noted is that the *Naradiya-samhita* itself talks about preparation of terracotta. The *Samhita* suggests that the clay used for preparing the figurines should be collected from river banks and it should then be kept in a dry place and sieved with a cloth, further it should be mixed with metal powder, sand, sugar and adequate quantity of water. Then the clay can be used for making the images (Dhavalikar 1977; Joshi 1937).

There is characteristic difference in the iconography of Narada between other parts of India and in Bengal and Assam. In these parts of the country, a vehicle is additionally seen in the iconography of Narada. On the terracotta plaques found in Bengal and Assam, Narada is shown travelling on a *dheki*. The *dheki* is also known as *dhenki*, *dhinki* or *dekhi*. The *dheki* (Figure 17) is a multipurpose long wooden device for de-husking various types of grain, mainly paddy. It is also capable of performing 'grinding' functions. This particular wooden long device is also called a foot beater. *Dheki* is primarily seen in the states of Assam, West Bengal and Odisha.

Ramai Pandit's *Shunya Purana* gives a vivid description of *dheki* as Narada's vehicle. Even today, a sacrificial ritual in Bengal is connected to the harvesting of paddy. It is a ceremony to mark Narada's advent on a *dheki* to the *Ghambira mandapa* (festivity hall) to grace the rituals. This is regionally called the *Dheki Chumana* ritual. In this ritual the *dheki* is worshipped and women give out their musical symbolic shout and there is symbolic rhythm of the *dheki* thumping. It is apparent that *Shunya Purana* popularised *dheki* as a vehicle of Narada in Bengal and Assam.

Depiction of Narada in the Terracotta Art of West Bengal

The Dutta Para Temple in Joypur of Bankura in West Bengal is a forty feet tall temple standing on a square base plan. On the eastern wall of this temple we see two narrative plaques depicting Narada. From the left, first shows the depiction of *Kamale Kamini*, a scene from medieval Bengali literature *Chandi Mangal*. Here depiction of the Bhagavata story where sick Krishna is asking his wives for dust of their feet as medicine. The wives were scared as it would be a sinful act and thus did not oblige. In this



Figure 17: *Dheki* used in rural Assam.

plaque can be seen Narada with the *veena* conveying the request of Krishna to Radha for the dust of her feet (Gupta 2019). Very next to this image, Shiva and Parvati on Nandi and Narada riding on his *dheki* are shown. Story of this narrative scene is not clear but it has a clear depiction of Narada riding on a husking pedal (Figure 18). He is completely clothed and depicted with a *veena* in his left hand and a *kartal* in his right. As he is facing towards Shiva and Parvati, it seems like he is visiting Kailash, the abode of lord Shiva. A *Shivagana* is also depicted in this panel.

Another temple complex at Uchkaran in West Bengal has a cluster of four Char Chala Shiva temples standing on a single platform adorned with intricate terracotta art on their walls. The temples were founded by Harendra Nath Sarkhel in 1768 (Gupta 2019). These temples are protected by the State Department of Archaeology, Govt. of West Bengal. One of the façades has a depiction of sage Narada with *veena* in hand sitting on a *dheki*. In the same plaque, a dwarf *Gandharva* (nymph) is also shown playing a flute (Figure 19).



Figure 18: Narada reaching Kailash on his vehicle *dheki*, depicted at Dutta Para temple, Joypur, in Bankura, West Bengal.



Figure 19: Narada on *dheki*, represented at Uchkaran in West Bengal.

Narada in Terracotta Art of Assam

Ghanashyam's House (Figure 20) at Joysagar is located at a distance of six km from the district headquarter of Shivsagar in Assam. This monument is centrally protected by Archaeological Survey of India. This building was built under the patronage of Ahom king Rudra Singha (CE 1696-1714). This brick built monument is dedicated to the architect 'Ghanashyam' who was responsible for the masonry works, temples and other secular structures during the Ahom reign (CE 1228–1826) in the Brahmaputra valley in Assam. External walls are decorated with terracotta plaques. This monument has three large terracotta panels in the façade and almost 50 individual plaques all around.

The plaque containing image of Narada at Ghanashyam's House is 22 cm in height and 15 cm in width (Figure 21). This terracotta plaque is placed on the entrance wall (southern wall) of the house. The Narada depiction here



Figure 20: Ghanashyam's House at Joysagar, Assam.



Figure 21: Narada on terracotta plaque at Ghanashyam's House, Joysagar, Assam.

is comparatively similar to that of Uchkaran. Here Narada is shown with untied long hair and is flying on his vehicle *dheki*. He is holding *veena* in his left hand and *kartal* in his right. This image has gone through severe weathering.

Conclusion

Although Narada occupies a popular and important role all across the country, there are some iconographical variations. The universal similarities are the *veena* and *kartal*. The typical difference in the depiction between south Indian and other region is in terms of clothing. The upper part of the body in south Indian context is always shown without clothing. Symbolically it might be due to the tropical weather since we see this feature in south Indian Surya images as well without the shoes and *kavacha*.

An additional iconographical variation is the presence of *dheki* in Bengal and Assam as Narada's vehicle whereas it is missing in other parts of the country. In rest of India, travelling ability of Narada is connected as *manovegam* which means he can travel with the speed of thought. The credit for cultural adoption of *dheki* into mythology should be given to Ramai Pandit's Shunya Purana.

Olivier Messiaen (1908–1992), a French musician and composer who worked on Hindu and Greek sources of music and studied the 120 rhythmic units mentioned in 'Sangita Ratnakara', an ancient Indian text on music (Simundza 1988). Messiaen called these units as non-retrograde rhythms. The sound of *dheki* is one of them, so, Messiaen called it as 120 *deci-talas* (*dheki-tala*: rhythm of *dheki*). So *dheki* creating a musical note actually makes sense as Narada's vehicle as he is considered as the first master of music as per the tradition of Hinduism. Husking also metaphorically symbolises the husking away of the ego. Showing Narada in *vitarka mudra* in Shrirangam and Malaiyadippatti reiterates the importance of symbolism in Indian sculptural art. Sculptural representation in a Jaina temple establishes the popularity of the character Narada across different Indian religions.

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Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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