The Diversity of the Divine

Posted on
The bronze Avalokitesvara
Bodhisattva

The extraordinary spiritual diversity of Sri Lanka created by the Island being home to all four major religions leads to the worship of some colourful and unique depictions. These are mostly Hindu, because the pantheon of gods is so large, and are often represented in enigmatic images with an aura of their own.

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From the time of the early travellers, from the dawn of international commerce, Sri Lanka has been exposed to the sacred beliefs of those from near and far. Thus the Island has become a microcosm of the spiritual Earth. When travelling in Sri Lanka, statues of the Buddha and the deity encrusted exterior of Hindu *kovils* (temples) are apparent and information of certain depictions are quite interesting.

Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva

“Bodhisattva” is a Buddhist term for one who aspires to enlightenment: a Buddha-to-be. A prominent form is Avalokitesvara – referred to as Natha, ‘he who looks down on the world with compassion’. A magnificent bronze statue of Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva (8^{th}-9^{th} century AD) was found in 1968 near Anuradhapura. Just 48.8cm high, it can be viewed at the National Museum of Colombo, seated ‘at ease’ in a combination of *lalitasana* and *rajalisana* poses, and displaying the *kataka mudra* (‘link in the chain’), a symbolic gesture with the right hand.

Maithri Bodhisattva

Maithri, or Maitreya Bodhisattva, is due to appear on Earth in a spiritually-eroded future, to achieve enlightenment and succeed the present Buddha. Maithri, or ‘loving-kindness’, is portrayed either seated on a throne, awaiting his time, or in the typical Bodhisattva standing position, like the image at the Kelaniya Raja Maha Viharaya, in the Gampaha District. Royal attire is worn and each hand displays a *mudra*: the right hand of energy, the left of knowledge.

Murugan

Murugan is revered by Hindus but has devotees among Buddhists and is called Skanda or Kataragama *deviyo* (‘god’) – Kataragama being a pilgrimage site where he is worshipped. He is a war god, sometimes depicted with several weapons – sword, mace, discus, bow – but usually holds a *vel* or ‘divine spear’, as does the 9.7 metre high image at the Madampe Murugan Kovil in Chilaw. The *vel* symbolises Murugan’s cleansing of human ills, for he is said to assist his devotees whenever needed.

Saraswathi

Saraswathi, meaning ‘one who leads to essence of self-knowledge’, is the Hindu goddess of knowledge, music, arts, wisdom and learning. Described as ‘the celestial creative symphony who appeared when Brahma created the universe’, she is generally shown with four arms, holding items with symbolic meaning. The hands of the image of Saraswathi at Mayurapathy Sri Bathrakali Amman Kovil in Colombo hold a book representing true knowledge, a water-pot – the purifying power to separate right from wrong – and playing a *veena* (a stringed instrument), signifying creativity.

Vishnu

As Lord of the Universe, Vishnu is one of the most significant deities in Hinduism. The image of Vishnu at the Meditation Hall Mayurapathy Sri Bathrakali Amman Kovil is in the form of *dasavatharam*, incorporating the god's 10 avatars (manifestations in bodily form). Vishnu, who is traditionally represented as being pale blue, stands with one of his several right hands raised in the *mudra* of knowledge. The heads of the 10 avatars, on either side of Vishnu, recede into the background.

Maithri Bodhisattva in
the standing position

Bhagavathi

Bhagavathi, a Hindu mother goddess, is an incarnation of some of the religion's other goddesses such as Durga, Parvati, Lakshmi, Kali, and the already encountered Saraswathi. Normally Bhagavathi is depicted as possessing eight arms, one holding the head of an *asura* (a powerful demigod with good or bad qualities), and the others a sword, an anklet and bell. The image at Mayurapathy Sri Bathrakali Amman Kovil, elegantly attired and garlanded, has 16 arms with various objects of significance.

Nadaraja Peruman

Nadaraja Peruman, or Nataraj, 'The King of Dance', is a portrayal of the Hindu deity Shiva as the cosmic dancer who performs 'The Dance of Bliss' to destroy the old universe and prepare for its renewal. This image is usually of bronze, but the one at the Mayurapathy Sri Bathrakali Amman Kovil is not and is finely coloured.

The four-armed Shiva dances within an arch of flames, balancing on the conquered demon of ignorance. A cobra uncoils from his lower right forearm, while the upper right holds a small drum: the symbolism is endless.

Varaki

Varaki, or Varahi, is one of eight Hindu mother goddesses. She is a Shakti – the female principle of divine energy – and the consort of Varaha the boar, one of the 10 avatars of Vishnu. Varaki is suitably depicted with a sow's face, but the body is in human form in a seated pose with one leg resting on the other. Normally Varaki has eight or 10 arms, but the image at the Pillayar Kovil in Colombo has four, withone palm downward, meaning the worshipper can take refuge, and another upward,

indicating protection.

Shaniswarar and his consort Chaya

Shaniswarar, or more commonly Shani, is one of the nine primary celestial beings in Hindu astrology, and is associated with Saturn. In Sanskrit *“shani”* means ‘the one who moves slowly’, as Saturn takes 30 years to orbit the sun. Shani is depicted dark in colour, clothed in black, holding a sword, arrows and two daggers and variously mounted on a black crow. His consort Chaya, or ‘shadow’, is seldom incorporated in the image as it is at Sri Anjaneyar Kovil in Dehiwela.

Pancha Mugam Anjaneyar

Pancha Mugam Anjaneyar, or ‘five-faced Hanuman’, is a rare image of the Hindu god, a great yogi and one of the central figures of the epic poem *The Ramayana*, in which he managed to extinguish five lamps in different directions at the same time. The portly black image topped by five faces encircling a large disk-shaped platform, found at the Sri Anjaneyar Kovil, is an imposing one.

Dhanvanthri

Dhanvanthri, or Dhanvantari, is another avatar of Vishnu. He materialises as the physician of the *devas*, or ‘gods’, and is relevant today for health-seekers, being the god of ayurveda. Thus Hindus pray to Dhanvanthri to seek good health for themselves and others. He is usually depicted with four hands, as at the Sri Anjaneyar Kovil, one carrying *amrita*, the nectar that confers immortality on the gods.

Shirdi Baba

Shirdi Baba, or Sai Baba of Shirdi (1835-1918), differs from the deities not only due to his mortal existence, but also because Muslims regard him as a saint although he has Hindu devotees too. Shirdi was the town where he settled; ‘Baba’ denotes a saintly person. Iconic photographs of the saint have led to a good likeness in statues. The richly-costumed example at the Old Kathiresan Kovil in Colombo is in the usual seated position, with one leg balanced on the other, and the right hand palm raised, ensuring protection.

This has been an account of a mere handful of unfamiliar holy images to be experienced in Sri Lanka. You don’t need a master’s degree in iconography and

comparative religion to appreciate them and to wonder at the diversity of the divine.