A Study of Virabhadra As Depicted In Ancient Indian Texts

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Abstract: Virabhadra the auspicious hero raging like flaming fire is Shiva’s ferocious instrument for destruction of ignorance, ritualism and dogma. Virabhadra, the Great Warrior, is the sublimation of Shiva’s impatience and anger; the embodiment of his resolute might; and is therefore regarded an aspect of Shiva in blazing mood burning down delusion and falsehood (samhara –murti). It is said; Shiva represents pure-consciousness (jnana shakthi); Devi is the creative energy, the thought within his consciousness, the will to intend an act (itccha shakthi); and Virabhadra is the power of action (kriya-shakthi) the determined might to transform that will into an act. Virabhadra, the action-hero, personifies implicit faith, absolute devotion and reverence as also the ruthless efficiency in carrying out the command of his creator. Virabhadra also symbolizes the sharp incisive power of discrimination, potent in each of us, to sever attachments to concealed values, misplaced faith and the routines that we all run through thoughtlessly. He points out to our adulation of that which should not be esteemed; and to our neglect of that which ought to be valued. Virabhadra’s message is to open our heart; to embrace everything that life has given us, without fear or prejudice. Virabhadra destroys in order to save.

1. INTRODUCTION

The origin and the relevance of Virabhadra have to be appreciated in the context of the running quarrel between Daksha and Shiva spread over many eons, manvantara (astronomical time). The two mighty personages represent two different realities, two divergent faiths, two separate streams of understanding and two opposed world orders.

2. HISTORY AND ORIGIN OF VIRABHADRA

Daksha meaning ‘able, competent, skilled ‘in performing rituals, is rooted in the propriety and the relevance of elaborate rituals; and in their techniques as prescribed in the scriptures. He is also a great believer in the organized hierarchy of gods and the proper order of apportioning the oblation among various levels of gods. He is one of the Prajapatis and is sometimes regarded as their chief. He is charged with the responsibility of ensuring perpetuation of life on earth, as also the richness and dignity in life. He is a very prominent person of the established order; and, in fact, is at its very core. Daksha holding the office of Prajapathi was a lawgiver who formulated rules for conduct of behaviour in the society and norms for the orderly working of the society along the well respected traditional lines. The world order as envisaged by Daksha defined the precise role and conduct not merely of humans but of gods as well. He expected from all, reverence to his self and obedience to his law. He would not tolerate subversive bunch of renegades who had scant regard for the social dignity and decorum. Daksha therefore represents the matter-of-fact logical mode of thinking, the way in which most of us would like to lead our lives.

Shiva, in contrast, was beyond the pale of normal society; and stood for everything that Daksha dreaded. Shiva was a Vratya, and the most distinguished among them, Ekavratya, an unorthodox hermit, who lived by his own rules, not always acceptable to traditional society. He refused to conform to the ways of the world.

Vrathyas were a community of dissenters, social rebels and ascetics living under a set of strange religious vows (Vrata). They totally rejected the Vedic rites and rituals. Vratyas followed their own cult-rules and practices; and did not care either for the rituals or for initiations (adhikshitah); and not at all for celibacy (Na hi brahmacharyam charanthi). They did not engage themselves in agriculture (Na krshim) or in trade (Na vanijyam). They behaved as if they were possessed (gandharva grithaha) or drunk or just mad. They roamed about the countryside and lived among the warriors, herdsmen and farmers. They were worshippers of Rudra, Isana or Mahadeva; and yet were regarded irreligious. In the words of Shri DSamapth, they were the ‘freethinkers who gave a very time and space based approach to the issues; and, were the initial social scientists with rationality as the anchor’.

Shiva, Rudra the wild one, like a true Vratya, wandered among cremation grounds with a rowdy bunch of renegades consuming intoxicants
experience; and between the man of the world and the one who has cast off all concerns and obligations.

The Indian traditions, for some reason, have always regarded content-less intuitive understanding and recognition of ‘what Is’ as being far superior to belief systems or a schools of thought. Our ancients always asserted that the immediate experience (saksat aparoksha) which liberates is truly superior to the intellectual knowledge of scriptures, rites and rituals. They explained it as the sort of experience that leads to the true understanding of the problems of being and becoming; that which aids to cross over all sorrows (shokasya param trayathī); and to realize one’s true identity. It is beyond the understanding of the intellect; it is experience (we shall return to this theme a little later).

The Daksha–Shiva conflict enacts the theme of limited formal learning giving place to expansive intuitive understanding. This theme manifests in life, in all ages, in various forms. The ego fears for its death, so it refuses to surrender to the heart. But, it eventually does give in. The old sage Parashara wryly remarks “in every age Daksha and the rest are born and are again destroyed.”

The emergence of Virabhadra as Shiva’s instrument for destruction of Daksha’s small ‘ego’ and for awakening of true understanding in him occurs when Daksha was born as the son of Prachetas and Marisha; and was designated as Prajapathi in age of Vaivasvata Manu.

4. DAKSHA YAJNA–AS DEPECTED IN PURANAS,SMRITHIS AND EPICS

The performance of the magnificent and most elaborate Brahaspathi – savana - yajna by Daksha Prajapathi must have been a highly significant event in the very ancient past. The Daksha story became a ground for fertile epic imagination. Countless versions of the event were described elaborately in various Puranas, epics and folk legends; each version, of course, bending the event to champion its own pet theme.

By all accounts, ‘Daksha’s sacrifice’ shook the old world and brought in a new world order. Shorn of prejudices and rhetoric, the legend indicates that Rudra-Shiva an unorthodox god stormed his way into the world of established order, secured there a prominent undisputed status among all gods and claimed a fair share of esteem and oblations that were due to him. It also amply demonstrates the futility and irrelevance of mere scriptural learning, rituals and sacrifices; and upholds the way of right-understanding as the means to liberation from all sorrows.

But the core of the story seems to be in the Taittiriya Samhita(2.6.8)', where the gods,
excluded Rudra from a sacrifice; and he pierced the sacrifice with an arrow; thereafter a ‘well offered yajna(svista)’ was submitted to Rudra. Gopatha Brahmanatoo carries a similar story where Prajapathi deprived Rudra of his share in the Yajna; then Rudra pierced the Yajna (prasitra) and gained his share. In these brief references, there is no mention of Daksha by name; and Rudra gains his share of the Yajna by force. There, of course, is no Virabhadr.

There is another reference to Shiva and Daksha in Ramayana. The King Janaka describes the great bow Shiva Dhanus as the one wielded by Shiva when he threatened to destroy Daksha’s Yajna because Devas had not offered Shiva a portion of the oblations. In this version of the legend also there is no mention of Rudra commissioning Virabhadr, or anyone else, to destroy the sacrifice or put the gods to flight. He is simply said to wound the gods with his bow.

All these references indicate that Shiva (it is not clear if he was the same as the Rudra of the Rig Veda) who perhaps was at the periphery was determined to break into the world of Vedic rituals, to be recognized as one of the major gods and to secure a fair portion of the Yajna because of the esteem associated with it.

The later epic poets strung together these references; and spun amazingly elaborate and divergent tales around Shiva - Daksha Prajapathi conflict. The various Puranas were structured, basically, in two levels. One, Daksha and Shiva were projected as two opposite poles in the society; Daksha representing the establishment and Shiva the anti-establishment and everything that Daksha hated. Uma the Devi was the gracious link of love that connected the two opposing worlds.

The other was the determination of the Devas to continue to keep Shiva out of the Vedic fold and to refuse him recognition within its orthodox framework by denying him a share of the Yajna; and Shiva’s repeated, determined and forceful efforts to secure the esteem which he thought was due to him. He does eventually succeed not merely in gaining acceptance but also in becoming the premier god in the Vedic pantheon revered with the esteem associated with it.

5. SHIVA’S DICHOTOMY IN ANCIENT TEXTS

In addition, two other minor themes run through the narrations: One is the element of Shiva –Vishnu rivalry; and the other is the efforts of the Shaktha cult to use the events at Daksha-yajna in order to relate the origins of its Shakti peethas and to base its legends.

There is however a dichotomy in these narrations; and it is not adequately explained. The followers of Shiva, mainly the Pashpathas, did not seem to have faith or respect for the Vedic rituals and their efficacy. Yet, they fight very hard, even by violence, to secure their leader a fair share in the Yajna and to see him established in the hierarchy of the Devas. And, eventually they agreed to become a part of the very Yajna which they set out to destroy.

In any case, several Puranas together have woven a very complicated (at times confusing) maze of stories involving assumed traditional proprieties, their alleged breach, disputed claims, divided loyalties and prejudices for and against Shiva or Vishnu; and, an undecided stand on the efficacy of Vedic rituals.

6. NARRATIONS IN VAYU PURANA

Of the several versions of the Daksha Yajna, the narrations in Vayu Purana, perhaps the oldest of the extant puranas and in Mahabharata are restrained and comparatively brief. They describe, in substance, the waste of food and drinks stored for the Yajna and the burning of the Yajna. Here, Devi is presented, without a preamble, as Parvathi or Uma daughter of Himavat (Uma Haimavathi) by Menaka or Mena. In this version she is not related to Daksha; she does not also visit the Yajna; and she does not die (out of grief at the insult directed at her husband). There are no references in these versions to the previous conflicts or the enmity that existed between Daksha and Shiva. Here, Shiva’s anger is directed not so much against Daksha as against the unfair arrangement devised by the Devas to deprive him of a share of the Yajna. He wills Yajna to be disrupted; but he does not command Virabhadr to kill Daksha. Shiva left to himself; perhaps, would have accepted the position as it were but for Devi who felt slighted and did not want to see her husband belittled by other gods.

Here, Uma is terribly unhappy that her husband is not invited to a great Yajna where all other gods participate joyously. And she anxiously enquires why he does not proceed to the Yajna; what holds him back? Mahadeva replied ‘This is the contrivance that in all sacrifices no portion should be assigned to me’. Devi is filled with ‘deep sorrow and trembling’ and is hardly able to restrain as her husband ‘of unsurpassable splendor, glory and power’ is excluded from share of oblations. Then, after prodding from Parvathi, Shiva says ‘O queen of the gods, behold whom I shall create for the purpose of claiming my share of the oblation in the yajna’.

He then creates Virabhadr from his mouth. In these versions; there is no beheading of either the
Yajna who assumed the form of a deer or of Daksha. There is also no mention of beating up and mutilating various gods and sages assembled at the Yajna. Daksha at the end realizes his folly and submits to Shiva who pardons and grants him salvation. Yajna is concluded successfully. All ends well.

7. DEPICTION OF VIRABHADRA IN MAHA BHARATA AND VAYU PURANA

Lets us briefly go over the narrations as provided in vayupurana\(^{iii}\), and Mahabharatha-Book:Shanthi Parva:Mokshadharma Parva.\(^{iv}\)

“Having spoken thus to his beloved the mighty Mahadeva created out of his mouth a most magnificent and frightening being glowing like the fire of fate (kaala-agni); a divine being with thousand heads, thousand eyes, thousand feet, thousand arms, wielding a thousand clubs, thousand shafts; holding the shankha, chakra, mace, bearing a blazing bow and battle axe; fierce and terrible shining with dreadful splendour; decorated with crescent moon; clothed in tiger skin; dripping with blood; having a capacious stomach and a vast mouth armed with sharp protruding formidable tusks; his tongue was lightening; his hands brandished thunderbolt; flames streamed from his hair; a necklace of pearls wound around his neck; a garland of flames descended from his breast; radiant with luster he glowed brilliantly like the final-fire of destruction that consumes all existence.

Four tremendous tusks projected from his wide mouth extending from ear to ear; he was of vast bulk, vast strength a mighty war god and destroyer of universe and like a vast fig-tree in spread, like a thousand undimmed moons; in bulk like Himadri, Kailasa and Meru or Mandara with all its gleaming herbs; like the sun at the end of ages; of irresistible power; beautiful aspects; irascible with lowered eyes and a countenance of burning sun; clothed in the hide of elephant and lion and girdle of snakes; wearing a turban on the head, moon in his brows.

Sometimes savage; sometimes benign; having a chaplet of flowers on his head; anointed with various fragrant perfumes adorned with variety of ornaments and many designs of jewels; wearing a heavy garland of karnikara flowers and rolling his eyes in rage. Sometimes he danced wildly, sometimes he sang out aloud, sometimes he wept out uncontrollably; sometimes he spoke gently sweetly, meditated intensely; he was endowed with faculties of wisdom, dispassion, power, penance, truth, endurance, fortitude and self-knowledge.

8. FORMS OF VIRABHADRA

Virabhadra of Rudra-manohara –rupa, of terrifying and the same time heart warming form, born of Shiva’s potent mouth was thus like Purusha of Rig Veda of immense strength and splendor, a great being with a huge body the size of any mountain, ablaze and adorned with crescent moon. His monstrous exterior disguised his true nature of vibrancy – full of wisdom, detachment, sovereignty, asceticism, truth, patience, fortitude, lordship and self knowledge. He greatly resembled Shiva whose emanation he was.

The mighty Virabhadra knelt down upon the ground in respect and raising his hands on to his head in reverence addressed Mahadeva “Sovereign of gods, Command me! What is it you desire me to do?” Mahadeva charged Virabhadra to “destroy the yajna of Daksha”.

Then the powerful Virabhadra having heard of the pleasure of his Lord bowed down his head to the feet of his Master and jumping out like a lion loosed from shackles he rushed to despoil the Yajna of Daksha. The wrath of Devi took the form of the fearful Rudrakali. She accompanied Virabhadra with all her train to witness the destruction.

Virabhadra then created from the pores of his skin powerful demigods the Ganas the attenders on Rudra, of equal valor and strength, who poured out in hundreds and thousands. Then, a loud and confused clamor filled the air and heavens with dread. The mountains tottered, the earth shook, the winds roared wildly, the depths of the oceans were disturbed; the fires lost their radiance and the sun grew pale; the panels of the firmaments shone not; neither did the stars give light; Rishis ceased their hymns; and gods and demons alike were muted; thick darkness enveloped the sky like blankets.

Virabhadra and his Ganas set out in chariots drawn by ten thousand lions. Among his bodyguards were Sixty-four groups of Yoginis, Shakhini, Dakhini, along with Bhutas, Pramathas (churn spirits) guhyaka (guardian of hidden treasures), Bhiravas, kshetrapalas and other types of spirits and fiends.

In the meantime, Dadhichi, one of the sages assembled at the Yajna is distressed when he learns that Rudra had not been invited. He queries Daksha, “Why do you not offer homage to the god who is the lord of life?” and remarks “The man who worships what ought not to be worshipped or pays not reverence where reverence is due, is guilty, most assuredly, of heinous sin”.

Imperial Journal of Interdisciplinary Research (IJIR) Page 661
To which, Daksha laughs and replies “I have already many Rudras present, armed with tridents, wearing braided hair, and existing in eleven forms. I recognize no other Mahadeva”. Dadhichi offended by Daksha’s reply walks out of the Yajna warning it would not be completed.

Then the gloom emerged fearful and numerous hideous forms, shouting aloud frightening battle cries instantly broke and overturned the sacrificial altar and danced amidst the oblations. Running wildly hither and thither like hurricanes they tossed about the implements and vessels of the yajna. The piles of the wood and the beverages stocked for the Devas like little mountains; the rivers of milk; the banks of curds and butter; the sands of honey, buttermilk and sugar; the mounds of condiments and spices of every flavor; the undulating knolls of flesh and other vandals; the mounds of celestial liquor, pastes and confections which had been prepared; these the spirits of wrath devoured with glee.

Then falling upon the assembled Devas the vast and furious Rudras mocked and insulted the nymphs and quickly put an end to the Yajna. His sacrifice being destroyed, Daksha overcome with terror and utterly broken in spirit fell upon the ground. The multitude of the assembled Devas in disarray cried out helplessly “O Rudras have pity on us thy servants; o lord dismiss thy anger”. They all pleaded “Declare who you are. Which Deva are you”. Virabhadra shouted back “I am not a Deva or an Aditya; nor I come here for enjoyment; nor am I curious to see the various Devas. Know you all that I am here to destroy the despicable Yajna of Daksha; I am Virabhadra springing forth from the wrath of Rudra; Bhadra kali who sprang from the anger of Devi is sent here with her multitudes of spirits to destroy the yajna. Take refuge you all Devas and Rishis at the feet of Rudra the lord of Uma; f or better is the anger of Rudra than the blessing of the Devas (ymram Icrodho ‘pi devasya vara-danam na chanyatah)”. 

Suppressing his vital airs – prana and apana-and taking a position of meditation, Daksha tried fixing his thoughts. Then god of gods, Mahadeva appeared out of the sacrificial altar resplendent as thousand suns, smiled upon him and said “Daksha your Yajna has been destroyed through the sacred knowledge. I am well pleased with you. What shall I do for you?”

Then Daksha frightened, distressed and alarmed fell on his four, his eyes suffused with tears and hands raised over his brows in reverence and submission pleaded with the mighty Lord” If you are pleased with me, have mercy on me, confer me this boon, this is the blessing I beseech of you, all these provisions that have been prepared with much effort and time, which now have been eaten, drunken and destroyed by hosts may not have been prepared in vain”. “So be it” said the merciful lord. Whereupon the relieved Daksha fell upon the feet of Mahadeva and burst into hymns, celebrating one thousand and eight names of the lord.”

The story, though it highlights vandalism and destruction, it is, in essence, the glorification of Shiva as the Supreme Lord. He destroyed the sacrifice from which the Devas had excluded him; and having destroyed it he made it the whole again and won his share. After the destruction of the Yajna the Devas lost their creative power. It is said; the Devas did not fully understand Mahadeva the great god, ferocious and kind at the same time; ruthless at one time, kind and benevolent at another; a demon and an ascetic. That is the pristine nature of Shiva.

As the Devas praised Shiva they all Pashus were relieved of their bonds and Shiva became their Lord Pashupath. He gave back to each god his of creative power and understanding .The gods recognized Shiva as the lord of the knowledge that liberates - Pashupathi.In substance, the event was primarily a solemn Vedic event to which all important persons of that age were invited. Daksha who performed the yajna appeared a follower of Vishnu; and obviously there were many others who were not. A participant, perhaps a follower of the Pashpatha School which dominated the mountain areas, points out the lapse in not inviting Shiva and suggests that could be rectified by more equitable representation. Daksha annoyed at that, spurns the suggestion. But eventually Daksha learns his lesson the hard way; and submits to the strength of the Pahupathas. It was the triumph of Pashpatha; but then thereafter they seemed to soften their stern stand.

In one of the Versions of the event, Nandisvara, an ardent follower of Mahadeva very strongly condemns Vedic rituals as also those who believe in it : " let him, from a desire of vulgar pleasures, practice the round of ceremonies, with an understanding degraded by Vedic prescriptions. Forgetting the nature of soul, with a mind which contemplates other things, let Daksha continue to exist in this world of ceremonial ignorance. Let the enemies of Rudra whose minds are disturbed by the flowery words of the Veda, become deluded! Let those Brahmans, eating all sorts of food, professing knowledge and practicing austerities and ceremonies merely for subsistence, delighting in riches and in corporeal and sensual enjoyments, wander about as beggars! ".

The sage Bhrigu spokesperson of the orthodox who were present at the sacrifice launched a counter attack and cursed the Pashupathas: 'Let those who practice the rites of Bhava (Mahadeva) having lost their purity, deluded in understanding, wearing matted hair, and ashes and bones, let them undergo the initiation of Shiva, in which spirituous liquor is the deity'. The Pashupathas that Bhrigu described might be the forerunner of the Naga Sadhus of all weird appearances who throng the Kumbha Mela. As mentioned earlier, the legend as narrated in Vayu Purana is simpler and more restrained. The story however gets complicated and more violent in other Puranas. For instance, in Kurma Purana, Sati is described as the daughter of Daksha prajapathi who is unhappy with Shiva his son-in-law because Daksha thought Shiva did not offer him the respect he deserved. And when Sati his daughter visits him next, Daksha abusing Shiva and turns Sati out of his house. Sati in deep sorrow and anguish gives up her life. Shiva on hearing the horrible news curses Daksha. Shiva then did penance and obtained Sati again reborn as Parvathi daughter of Parvatha-raja. She also undertook penance to obtain Shiva as her husband. It is in her next birth that the much talked about Yajna takes place. The Linga, Matsya, Skanda, Padma and Bhagavatha puranas mention of disputes between the daughter and her father in greater detail and say that Sati put an end to herself out of devotion and love to her husband.

It is only in Kasi kanda, a long poem, forming a part of the Skanda Purana that Sati throws herself into fire. This could be an improvement over Vayu purana and other versions.

The exploits of Virabhadra and his Ganas are more particularly described in the Linga, Skanda and Bhagavata puranas. Here, on hearing of the death of Sati, Shiva enraged produced out his wrath a terrible form of Virabhadra and asked him to destroy Daksha’s Yajna. Bhagavata Purana adds a more picturesque creation of Virabhadra. Shiva pulls out locks of matted hair and strikes against the mountain rocks. However, In Kurma purana it is the Devi who requests Shiva to create Virabhadra. According to Mahabharata, Virabhadra was born out of Shiva’s brow. The destruction and violence are particularly described in these texts. Indra is knocked down and trampled upon; Yama has his shaft broken; Saraswathi and Maitra have their noses cutoff; Mitra or Bhaga has his eyes pulled out; Pusan has his teeth thrust down his throat; Chandra is pummeled; Agni’s hands are cut off; Bhrigu loses his beard; the Brahmanas are pelted with stone; Prajapathi is beaten up; and all Devas and semi Devas run through the swords, struck with trident or pierced with arrows.

This explains the destruction caused by Virabhadra to satisfy his master-Shiva

**FOOTNOTES**


1 Taîtirîyâ Samhitâ(2.6.8) Albrecht Weber, Die Taîtirîyâ-Sahitât, Leipzig, Indische Studien 11-12, Brockhaus (1871, 1872) 1 Wilson’s translation of Vayu- Purana.

**REFERENCES**


