

Iconography of the Cosmic God and the Three Worlds-Gleanings through the Paintings of Tamil Nadu

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Abstract: *The Hindu perceptions of the Universe as reflected in the sacred texts never remain to be static but keep on changing. The imaginary and speculative ideas of the Hindu myth-makers had given rise to symmetric Cosmos consisting of the three realms-the earth in the middle separating the Heavens and the Nether World with each realm consisting of seven Lōkas. Most of the major Purāṇas provide the mythical geography of the Universe with some variations and refer to the Saptadvīpas in the form of lotus petals, seven Oceans, Mount Mēru (the Axis Mundi), mountains, divine beings, and people of all classes, animals and birds. However, it was not until the Nāyaka period of 17th Century CE that the artists of South India attempted to create the allegorical portrayal of the Cosmos in the image of a man with different components of the Universe, assigned to the corresponding body parts. This article attempts to analyse the iconography of the very few surviving unique mural paintings noticed in the two Vaishnavite temples located at Srirangam and Adiyamankottai (Tamil Nadu state) that relates to the creation of the Universe and its compositional structure, respectively with the help of the images and texts written in Telugu. The study reveals the continuation of the Hindu cosmological views, religious and devotional faith in Lord Viṣṇu as the Supreme and Omnipotent deity whose body is regarded as the Cosmos in the iconic form of ViśvarūpaViṣṇu that balances both Saiva and Vaishnava elements in the subsequent periods.*

Keywords: Adiyamankottai, Saptadvīpa, Srirangam, Trilōkas, Viśvarūpa-Viṣṇu

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Introduction

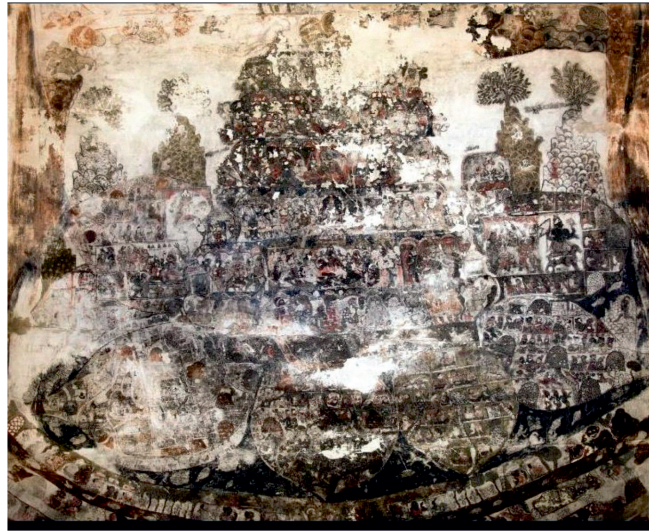
Different theories on the origin, development and structure of the Universe which form the essence of cosmogony can be gathered from the study of the mythology contained in the texts including the *Vēdas*, epics and *Purāṇas* as well as the visual arts such as the sculptures, mural paintings on the ceilings and walls of the temples and the paper paintings. Attempts to deal with the creation of the Universe

and the cosmogonies of the past have been a part of religion or mythology. As a cosmogenic myth constitutes a sacred history that describes the origin of the Universe, close attention has been paid by the people of different religions to describe the primordial creative events which had an impact on life (F.B.J.Kuiper, 1970:91-138). The cosmological speculations of the Hindus in India can be traced back to the Vedic period which attained its pinnacle in the *Purāṇas* in the form of the myths. As a result, with slight variations, the mythical geography of the Universe is narrated in the *Bhuvanakośa* section of the *Purāṇas*. The compilers of the *Purāṇas* describe in them not only the continents, their names, number and structure; Oceans, people, flora and fauna but also the names of the *Lōkas* both above and below the earth. Further, they mention the names of the gods responsible for the creation and maintenance of the Cosmos at different stages of its development. The present paper attempts to analyse the Hindu perception of the Universe consisting of three *Lōkas* and the Cosmic Man or Universal Man who encompasses within Himself, the whole of the Universe based on the mural paintings on the ceiling of the *maṇḍapa* hall of *ChennarāyaPerumāḷ* temple at Adiyamankottai near Dharmapuri (Tamil Nadu State) dedicated to Lord *Vishnu*, paintings on the ceiling of Ranganathasvami temple, Srirangam and the Tanjore paintings of Nineteenth-Century in the collections of Kuldip Singh. Since the Thanjavur paintings have closely followed the themes of the murals of the South Indian temples which are evident from the collections, these paintings are taken into consideration to make analogies and to draw inferences.

The mural paintings of *Viśvarūpa* form in the temple at Adiyamankottai were noticed, illustrated and discussed earlier by Neena Ranjan in her work along with the *Viśvarūpa* paintings of Krishna-Vasudeva from different parts of India (Neena Ranjan, 2008). She has briefly discussed the paintings and all the iconographical details are not fully covered owing to the difficulties in reading the text and the damaged condition of the paintings. Anna Lise Seastrand in her doctoral dissertation has successfully dealt with the text and images of the paintings of *ViśvarūpaVishṇu* of Adiyamankottai (Anna Lise Seastrand, 2013:224-246). However, there is no mention of the mural paintings of *Ranganāthasvāmi* temple at Srirangam of Seventeenth-century that has a painting of *Brahma* as the creator of the Cosmos with label inscriptions in Telugu. The paintings of Srirangam based on the narrative of *VishṇuPurāṇa* present the details of the *Lōkas* and the earthly world filled with men, women, sages, the fourfold divisions of the society, animals, plants and nether world etc., Therefore, it would be worthwhile to relook into the iconographies of cosmology and Cosmic Man as depicted in the mural paintings of South India. It is generally observed that the mural paintings portrayed on the temple ceilings and walls after the sixteenth century are marked by the accompaniment of inscriptions written either strictly on the frames of the paintings in white on black colour background or close to the main characters or the major content of the painting, very briefly referring to the names or the nature of the activity or the theme of the murals. These inscriptions are written in Tamil or Telugu or sometimes in bi-lingual form for the benefit of the large number of devotees visiting the temples from different parts of South India. Due to the patronage extended by the *Nāyaka* rulers Telugu was then treated as the courtly language and therefore the mural paintings in the temples of Srirangam and Adiyamankottai demonstrate the narratives of *Vishṇu Purāṇa* and the epics *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata* with Telugu labels. The mural paintings that are going to be discussed here are not primarily astronomical in content but it is only in the context of conveying the idea of the Omnipotence and all-pervasiveness of the God that the anthropomorphic form of the God has shown the entire Universe on his body, generally called as the *Viśvarūpa* of the god.

The earlier studies have shown that the surviving examples of the cosmographic paintings of South India are considerably few in number and belong to a much later period when compared to the Jain cosmographies of North India which are large in number (Joseph Schwartzberg, 1992:343).

The *Purāṇas* and other texts describe the mythical space of the Cosmos for religious purposes as it has a symbolic ordering of its sub-divisions and places. The worldview of the Hindus given in the texts suggests the circular design modelled on the Cosmic wheel (*Chakra*) but there is no unanimity or agreement among the *Purāṇas* on the internal structure and composition of the Universe. Most of the major *Purāṇas* provide the schemata of the mythical geography of the Universe consisting of Continents, Oceans, mountains, rivers and forests with slight variations in their number and names (Jaipal Singh and Mumtaz Khan, 1999:269-278). For example, *VāyuPurāṇa* mentions the petals of the lotus as the large islands (*mahā dvīpa*) and refers to the earth as being endowed with four large islands (*Chatur mahādvīpāvatī*) (D.C.Sircar, 1967:fig.1). In the four *dvīpa* concept, the four continents are arranged in four lotus petals in the four cardinal directions and mount *Mēru* formed the pericarp of the lotus (D.C.sircar, 1967:40; B.H.Kapadia, 1961:215-221; 1962:146-153; R.KrishnaDass, 1959: 202-205). The World lotus mentioned variously as *PrithvīKamalā*, *Lōka Padmā* or *bhū Padmā* is identical to *Jambū dvīpa* and the four world regions (*varshas*) *Bharata*, *Kētumāla*, *Uttarakuru* and *Bhadrāśva* coincide with the four petals of the lotus and are situated in the South, West, North and East of *Mēru* respectively (Thomas Kintaert, 2011-12: 85-120). The four *dvīpa* concept has been transformed to give rise to a new concept of seven *dvīpas* (*Saptadvīpā Vasumatī*) in the *Purāṇas* (V.V.Iyer, 1924:62). In this scheme of *Saptadvīpa* of our Universe the *Jambūdvīpa* is encircled by six annular island continents, surrounded each by six Oceans of different nature each double the size of the preceding one (*Matsya Purāṇa*, 121-122; *Agni Purāṇa*, 108, 1-2). The seven intermediate Oceans consist of saltwater, sugar cane juice, ghee, curd, milk and pure water (*VishṇuPurāṇa*, Ch.II). The innermost island is *Jambū dvīpa* which is subdivided into a series of regions or *varshas*, by ranges of mountains. *Bharata* or *BharataVarsha* is the southernmost portion of *Jambū dvīpa* and it is defined by the *Varsha* Mountain called *Himavān* (W.Randolf Kloetzli, 1985:116-147). The seven islands or *dvīpas* derive their names from the trees and plants that grow there and they are *Jambū dvīpa*, *Plaksha dvīpa*, *Sālmali dvīpa*, *Kuśa dvīpa*, *Krauñcha dvīpa*, *Śāka dvīpa* and *Pushkaradvīpa*. *BhāgavataPurāṇa* states that *Jambūdvīpa* is as round as a lotus leaf (*samavartulo yathā pushkara pattram*) (*BhāgavataPurāṇa*, 5.11.5). *Bhāgavata* and *VāyuPurāṇas* mention the existence of eight mountains. According to the *BhāgavataPurāṇa*, the eight mountains encircle *Mēru* as exterior barriers separating it from *Ilāvṛitta* for 18000 *yōjanas* in each direction (Richard Thompson, 2007). The peak of Mount *Mēru* is the highest point of the earth and it is the navel of the earth, at which the creation began (M.Eliade, 1974: 16). It is observed that by pointing upwards *Meru* points to the inner space, which becomes *Purusha* as well as the shaft by which one rises to salvation (I.W.Mabbett, 1983:64-83). Further, the ideas of the separation of the earth from Heaven and the expansion of the world by divine winds are closely associated with the symbolism of Mount *Mēru* in Puranic cosmography (C.Chakravarty, 1969-1970:123-129). *Vishṇu*, *Bhāgavata*, *Padma* and *Vāyu Purāṇas* describe the seven regions of *Pātāla* and their names below the earth beside the seven divisions of the hells (*Narakas*). According to the *Bhāgavata* and *Padma Purāṇas* the seven *Lōkas* of *Pātāla* are *Atala*, *Vitala*, *Sutala*, *Talātala*, *Mahātala*, *Rasātala* and *Pātāla*. Although the *Purāṇas* give the elaborate description of the imaginary ideas of the Creation of the Cosmos, its composition and symbolism, it is only in the Eleventh Chapter of *Bhagavadgīta* that the Cosmic being of *Krishṇa* is described as *Viśvarūpa* or *Virāṭrūpa* of the God who ensembles all the *Lōkas* of the Gods, earthly world and the nether world within his physical form. By having a clear understanding of the puranic cosmography the artists of Tamil Nadu have tried to illustrate the portrayal of the Cosmos as a giant anthropomorphic body with the different components of the Universe assigned to corresponding body parts by setting aside the iconographic convention of showing the multiplicity of the heads, eyes and arms in the *Viśvarūpa* form.



Pl. 1: Cosmic Deity, Mural painting on the ceiling of the *maṇḍapa*, Chennaraya Perumal temple, Adiyamankottai



Pl. 2: Mural painting showing *PātālaLōka*, Adiyamankottai

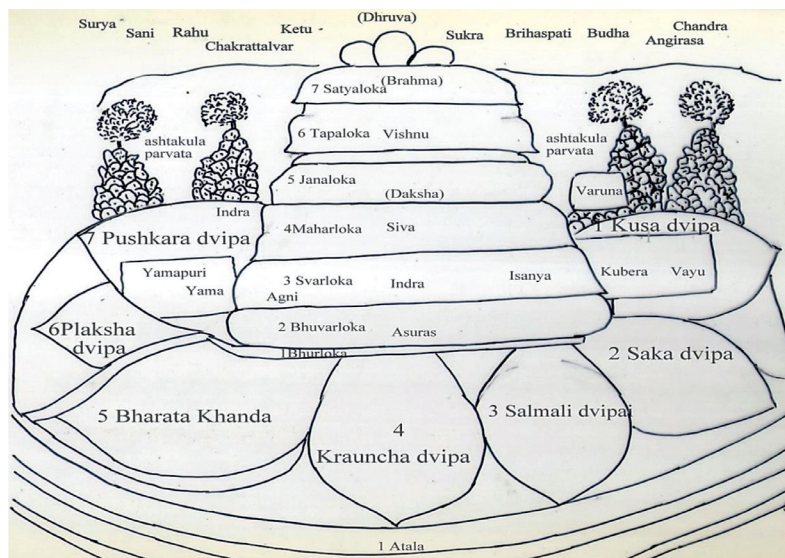


Fig. 1: Schematic drawing of *Viśvarūpa* –lotus petals as *dvīpas* (continents), seven *Lōkas*, *Mēru*, the celestial world above and the *Lōkas* of *Pātala* below.

In the *ChennarāyaPerumāḷ* temple at Adiyamankottai, the figure of Cosmic Man is painted on the low ceiling of the pillared *maṇḍapa* hall in front of the *garbhagriha* of the temple. While the different episodes of *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata* are portrayed on the two bays of the northern and two bays on the southern side of the *maṇḍapa*, respectively, the Central bay is mostly covered with the painting of the Cosmic being of *Vishṇu* that displays the mortal, immortal beings and the physical environment of the Cosmos including the Oceans, rivers, mountains, trees, birds and animals of different kinds (Pls. 1&2). Since the painting is partly damaged, we cannot see the head portion of God. The entire body of the Cosmic deity is filled with the paintings of several images except on the arms below the elbows and below the knees. Two lotus flowers are depicted on the laterally spread feet and below this is the narrative painting of the coronation of *Rama*, close to the entrance of the *garbhagriha*. The standing figure of *Viśvarūpa* is thus portrayed starting from the entrance of the *maṇḍapa* on the East and extends to the West close to the entrance of the sanctum. In an attempt to describe the cosmographic scenes of the painting a schematic drawing based on the several photographs from the Collections of the British Museum is given above. (Fig. 1).

The iconographies of the stone sculptures of *Viśvarūpa* form of *Vishṇu* reported from North, West and Eastern India are characterized with multiple heads, eyes and arms holding different weapons and attributes by about 7th to 9th Century CE as detailed in the Sanskrit texts (T.S.Maxell, 1983:213-234; Adalbert Gail, 1983: 297-307; Doris Meth Srinivasan, 1997: 140). In South India, during the late medieval period, the *Viśvarūpa* forms of the Hindu Gods, *Vishṇu* or *Śiva* have been evolved iconographically to display the colossal size and sometimes with many arms, multiple heads or with a single head and two arms. The artists have shown them with complex iconography by depicting the cosmology of the Universe in a structured manner that envelope the god. The Vedic concept of the three *Lōkas* (*trailōkya*) or the triple world consisting of the earth, atmosphere or sky and the Heaven was never forgotten and generally accepted. But at a later stage, the *Purāṇas* describe seven levels in the three-fold division of the Universe, thus making it to a total of twenty-one *Lōkas*. In the painting under study, the names of the *Lōkas* are mentioned as the labels for the better understanding of the viewers in the Telugu script. Each of these *Lōkas* displays a wide variety of the physical environment associated with people of all classes. In the painting of Adiyamankottai can be seen the faint traces of the celestial space (*svarga*) whose head fills the space. The head of the god is oriented at the Eastern end of the *maṇḍapa* and it is filled with the figures of goddesses, planetary deities, and zodiacal signs (*rāsis*) in circular and oval frames within the semi-circular frames arranged horizontally. Based on the names given in the labels the symbols can be identified as the twelve *rāsis* starting with *Tula* (scale), *Kanyā* (Virgo), *Simha* (Leo), *Kaṭaka* (crab, Cancer), *Mithuna* (Gemini), bull (*Rishabha*, Taurus), *Mēsha* (ram, Aries) *Mīna* (fish, Pisces), *Kumbha* (pot, Aquarius), *Makara* (Capricorn), *Dhanus* (Sagittarius) and *Vṛiśchika* (tree symbol, Scorpio) (Fig.2). Seven horsed chariot below the Sun disc is depicted on the extreme left of the painting indicating the presence of the Sun god, *Sūrya*. On the other end of the horizontal frame is the figure of the seven horsed Chariot and above it is the anthropomorphic figure of *Chandra* on the crescent moon suggesting their movement in a circular manner above the earth. *Dhruva* is shown seated within a rectangular frame in the row in the centre surrounded by the planetary figures on either sides between *Kētu* and *Sukra*. The divine status of these planets is indicated by the circular halos around their heads. The figure of *Dhruva* is partly damaged and we can find the traces of the seated figure with five heads and ten arms attended by some other semi-divine beings. In view of the positioning of the image in the centre above the peak of Mount *Mēru*, the deity can be identified as the representation of the Pole star *Dhruva* who is none other than a personification of *Vishṇu* in the name of *DhruvaNārāyaṇa* (Margaret Stutley, 1985: 39-40). According to *VishṇuPurāṇa* (Chapter XII:

96) *Vishṇu* was pleased by the penances of *Dhruva* and granted him the boon of being placed “in the sphere above the three worlds and that he shall sustain the stars and planets; the sphere above the Sun, Moon, Mars, Mercury, Venus, Saturn and all the other constellations above the region of the seven rishis and the divinities who traverse the atmosphere.”

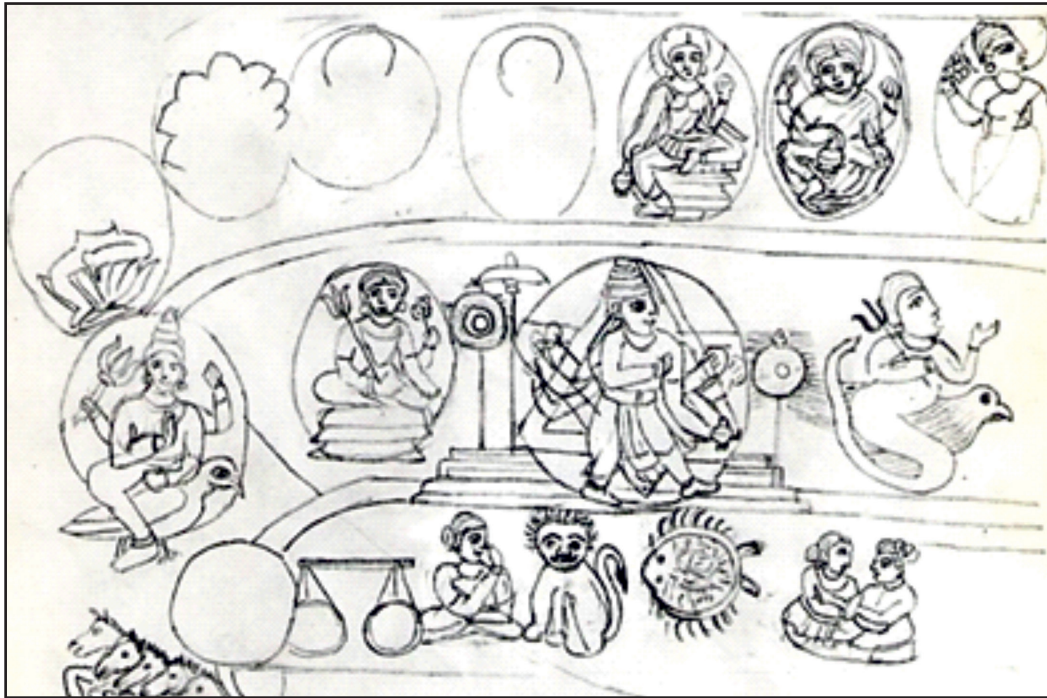
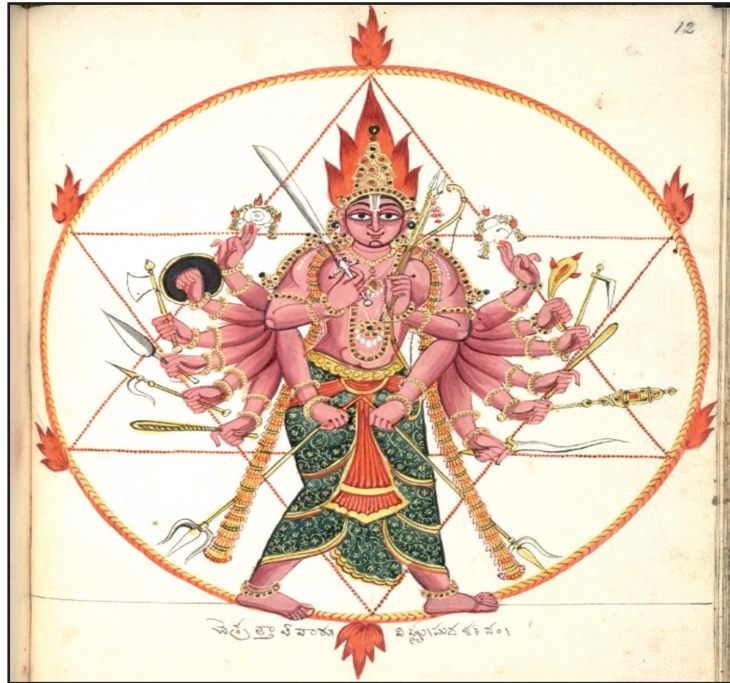


Fig. 2: Layout of the Celestial World – Goddesses, *Navagrahas*, *Chakratālvār* and *Rāsis*

Amidst the planetary images is the figure of *Chakratālvār* distinguished by an umbrella (*Chattra*) with a long staff and two parasols which needs some elaboration. His image is shown on a long *pīṭha* and the deity is portrayed as moving to his left in a circular frame interlinked with two triangles forming *ṣaṭkōna* in the background. Earlier studies have revealed the emergence of the cult of worshipping the deity by installing his icons in independent shrines within the major temple complexes dedicated to Lord *Vishṇu* in South India from the 11th Century onwards (R.Champakalakshmi, 1981: 251; P.N.Naidu, 2011: 67). On the beginnings of this iconic form as well as on the construction of small and separate shrines dedicated to this cultic god as an object of worship in the temples of *Vishṇu* scholars differ in their opinions. W.E. Begley has mentioned that “the multi-armed cult images of the deified *Sudarśanachakra* appear from 13th century and the personified *chakra* came to be considered as an independent agent of *Vishṇu*’s creative and destructive power, a separate deity in his own right.” (W.E.Begley, 1973: 2 & 65). V.R.Mani has followed same the date of the worship of the deity carved on *Sudarśanachakra* as 13th century CE (V.R.Mani, 1985:19) and the same has been accepted by Anila Verghese in her study on an image of *SudarśanaChakra* at Hampi (Anila Verghese, 1995: 407-414). In South India particularly in the regions ruled over by the Rayas of Vijayanagar, the cult became very popular and its iconography has been well evolved without altering the basic elements of the iconographical features. The number of arms shown for this God varies and the images with four, eight, ten, fourteen and sixteen are reported so far. The deity is shown sometimes on a wheel with flames rising all around or with flames in only four directions, with or without the spokes of the wheel in the background. Sometimes the image of *Narasimha* is depicted on the central rim on the other

side of the wheel in stone sculptures. Mostly the images of *Sudarśana* are portrayed as striding in *pratyālīdha* pose and the arms arrayed vertically similar to the spokes of a wheel. The iconographical forms of *Sudarśana* are found in the temple sculptures of Vijayanagara and post-Vijayanagara periods in South India. A sixteen armed image of *Chakrattālvār*, a painting on paper illustrated here from the British Museum collections shows the wide variety of weapons in his hands including the characteristic weapons of *Vishṇu* and *Śiva* (Pl.3). Two tridents with long handles, *śankha*, *chakra*, sword, shield, *aṅkuśa*, *pāśa*, bow, arrow, *paraśu*, staff, *abhaya* and *varadahastas* can be seen in this painting.



Pl. 3: *Chakrattālvār*, Painting on paper, early 19th Century (British Museum Collections)

The *Chakra* is shown in the painting with flames and a *ṣaṭkoṇa* within it as the background and the Telugu text below the figure reads as ‘*Chakrattālvār Vishṇu Sudarśanam*’. Similar to this iconic form of the deity, *Chakrattālvār* is depicted in the mural painting of Adiyamankottai along with the planetary figures. But in this mural painting, the deity is shown only with eight arms. Eight handed image of *Chakrattālvār* is noticed in the temple namely the *Chakrapāṇi* temple (Kumbhakonam) dedicated to the god. Being the personification of one of the weapons of Lord *Vishṇu*, he is worshipped as the god of protection by his quick movement. In the mural painting of the deity at Adiyamankottai, the feet are shown little beyond the rim of the wheel and the flames are omitted on the rim of the wheel and also on his hair. On the horizontal tier above *Rāsis* can be identified the figures of planets as *Sūrya* on Chariot, *Śani* seated on his mount crow and *Rāhu* seated with a trident in one of his four hands, *Kētu* seated on vulture and a trident in one hand, *Śukra*, *Bṛihaspati*, *Budha* seated on lion mount and *Angāraka* seated on ram within a rectangular frame.

The images of female deities seated on *padmapīṭha* or riding on their mounts are displayed horizontally in circular or oval frames. Altogether there are thirteen images of the goddesses and they are arranged nine on the left and four on the right side of the central axis. Mostly they are with four arms and their front two hands are in *abhaya* and *varadahastas* and the remaining are shown with a trident, water pot, *akshamāla* etc. The goddess on the horse mount may be identified as goddess *Kaubērī*, the consort of *Kubēra* (Pl.4) and likewise, the figure of the female deity seated on the swan or *hamsa* can

Pl. 4 *Kaubēri*, AdiyamankottaiPl. 5 *Brahmāṇi*, Adiyamankotta

be identified as that of *Brahmāṇi* since the swan is also the mount of Lord *Brahma* (Pl.5). Because of the damaged condition of the painting, it is difficult to identify the other images. It appears that the consorts of the *dikpālas* and some of the *saptamātrika* figures are included in this row. *Prithvī* or the terrestrial space occupies the chest and abdomen of the Cosmic deity and it is systematically portrayed with seven lotus petals encircling Mount *Mēru* consisting of seven horizontal rows that rose from the pericarp of the lotus flower. Four mountains are depicted with men and animals on either side of Mount *Mēru*, the Cosmic Mountain with large trees on top of them. The inscription in Telugu that reads as ‘*Aṣṭakulaparvatam*’ (eight mountains) is suggestive of the presence of the eight mountains in the four cardinal and intermediate directions of the Universe. The images of the *dikpālas* are painted quite close to *Svarlōka* and *Mahālōka*, the third and fourth Lokas of the seven-fold divisions of *Prithvī*. Of the eight guardian deities (*aṣṭadikpālas*) the figure of *Niṣṛiti*, the lord of the South West quarter of the Universe is not shown in the painting. The remaining *dikpāla* images are portrayed with their characteristic iconographical features and the names of the deities are also written in Telugu characters. *Indra* is depicted as riding on his mount *Airāvata* and the two headed *Agni* riding on his mount ram, *Īśānya* with his mount bull, *Kubēra* riding on a horse, *Vāyu* on his deer mount and *Varuṇa* on *Makara*. *Dikpālas* are not isolated and independent figures but they are associated with male and female figures (Figs 3 & 4).

Mēru is painted with seven horizontal tiers indicating the seven *Lōkas* of *Prithvī*. The space allocated in the painting for *Bhū lōka* is small in comparison with the other *Lōkas* of *Prithvī* that are shown one above another with the principal deities seated in the centre surmounted by arched architraves in the accompaniment of the other divine figures and devotees. The horizontal bands consist of the seven *Lōkas* recede as they progress upwards and they are topped by a trefoil design filled with indistinct figures. The peak of Mount *Mēru* is shown at the top and it resembles the tower of a South Indian temple. The figures of *Asuras* and mankind dominate *Bhuvarlōka* and *Svarlōka* and they show the figures of *Indra* as the principal deity seated in the centre, while the figures of *Agni* and *Īsana* are depicted on either side of him in individual frames. Parallel to these figures *Kubēra* and *Vāyu* images are shown beyond the horizontal frame and in the lotus petal labelled as ‘*Kuśadvīpa*’. Above this lotus



Fig. 3: *Kubēra* and *Vāyu* Adiyamankottai

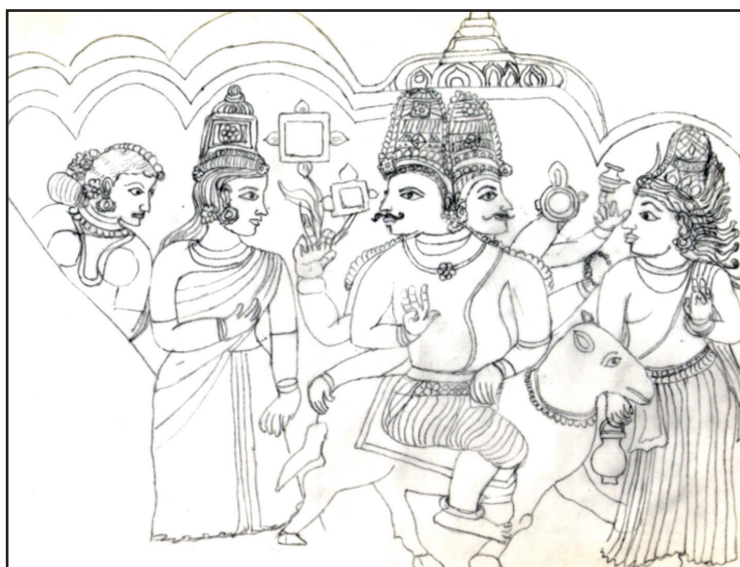


Fig. 4: *Agni* riding on his mount, Adiyamankottai



Fig. 5: *Yama* and his retinue, Adiyamankottai



Fig. 6: Nandi, Bhrīngi and sages attending Śiva, Mahā lōka, Adiyamankottai

petal is the image of *Varuṇa* seated on his mount *Makara* (crocodile) on the left of the Cosmic Man. Just below the two tall mountains and at the fringes of the lotus petal named *Pushkaradvīpa* is the figure of *Yama* seated along with his attendants (Fig. 5). The text mention *yamapuri* (the town of *Yama*) and on one side is portrayed the sinners subjected to different kinds of punishments while *Yama* observes it. *Yama* carries in his four hands *pāśa* (noose) and mace in his upper right and left hands; the natural right-hand rests on his folded right knee. Below the elevated *āsana* of *Yama* is depicted a buffalo seated close to the feet of the deity. *Mahālōka* has the figure of Śiva as the main God in the centre attended by his consort, *Nandi*, *Bhrīngi*, sages and other deities (Fig.6). A bull is shown seated below his feet. The three-legged *Bhrīngi* is shown in a dancing posture along with deities and sages. On the other side of Śiva the figures of Brahmin priests and devotees are painted below the architectural structures similar to the temple towers (Fig. 7). *Janalōka* has the figure of the God *Daksha* or *DakshaPrajāpati* seated on an elevated *pīṭhain* the centre and surrounded by several other semi-divine figures and people. *Vishṇu* is the central figure of *Tapa lōka* and he sits with his two consorts on an elevated *āsana*. The four hands of the god are adorned with the vaishnavite attributes. *Satyalōka* is the last and seventh *Lōka* and *Brahma* is the principal deity. The details of the images on this horizontal band are not very clear. The names of each *Lōka* are inscribed in Telugu using white colour.



Fig. 7: Details of Mahā lōka, Adiyamankottai

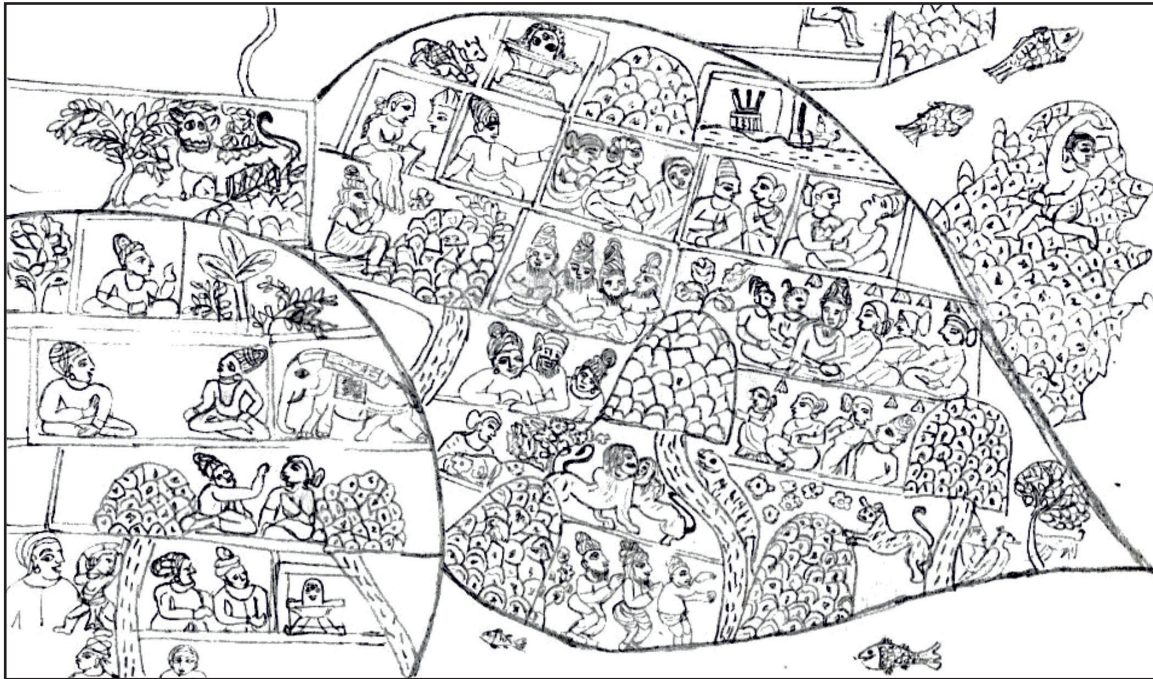


Fig. 8: *Sālmali* and *Śākadvīpas* (from left to right), Adiyamankottai

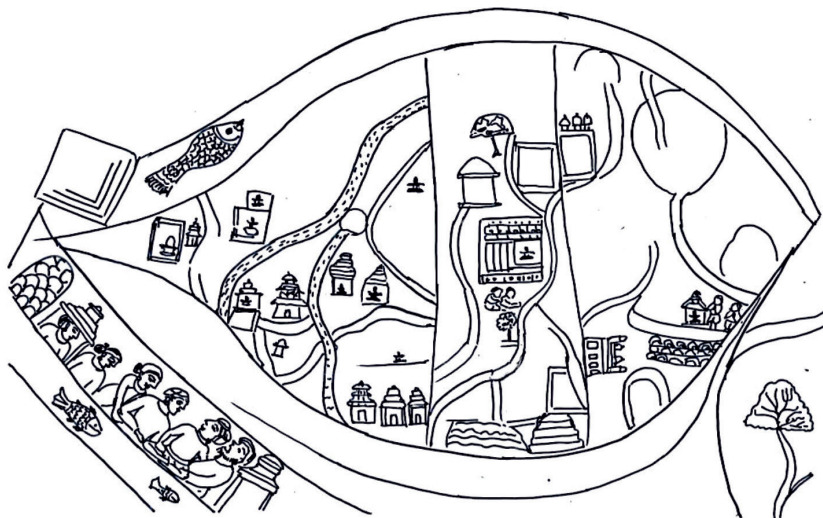


Fig. 9: Fifth petal of lotus named as *Bharata Khanda*

In the cosmographic accounts of the epics and *Purāṇas*, we find two different versions as discussed earlier. According to the earlier version, the four petals of the world lotus coincide with four *varshas* i.e. *Bharata*, *Ketumala*, *Uttarakuru* and *Bhadrāśva* are situated in the South, West, North and East, respectively. The second version is the *Saptadvīpa* concept and by this Hindu speculation of the mythical geography of the Universe, the seven lotus petals are portrayed on the body of the Cosmic man of Adiyamankottai.

Each of the *dvīpa* consists of several images painted in many frames of various shapes and sizes. The paintings include men and women, royal people, Brahmin priests, sages, *asuras*, forest dwellers, pilgrims, devotees, temples, rivers, architectural structures etc.



Fig. 10a & b: *Sālmali* and *Śākadvīpas* (from left to right), Adiyamankottai



Fig. 11: *Vishṇu* as *Śeṣhaśayana* in Milk Ocean



Fig. 12: *Asuras* in *Pātālalōka*, Adiyamankottai



Fig. 13: *ŚivaGaṇas* and elephants

Asuras seated and engaged in conversation. The seven island continents of the earthly world are surrounded by the Oceans and each of them are differentiated by the labels as *Kuśa dvīpa*,

Śāka dvīpa, *Sālmali dvīpa* (Figs. 8,10 a & b) *Krauncha dvīpa*, *Bharata khanda*, *Plaksha dvīpa* and *Pushkaradvīpa*. *Purāṇas* mention *Jambūdvīpa* comprising in its Southernmost portion *Bharatavarsha* and in the painting under study, the fifth petal is named as *BharataKhanda* and not as *Jambūdvīpa* (Fig.9). *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* describes the shape of *Jambūdvīpa* as round as a lotus leaf (*Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, 5.16.5). Of all the continents shown in the painting, *BharataKhanda* is portrayed with great detail as the artist has taken care to show the rivers and streams passing through it dotted with temples and sacred tanks. The different sections of the people including men and women are shown within the frames as engaged in various kinds of activities. The architectural structures of the temples are shown with the *Śiva liṅga* being worshipped by the devotees (Fig.9). Besides the several temples dedicated to *Śiva* in *liṅga* form, few temples of *Vishṇu* are shown and the names of the sacred centres are indicated by the label inscriptions. Chidambaram, Srirangam, Tirupati, Arunachalam, Jambukesvaram are some of the places that can be deciphered from the Telugu texts. Besides these some fortified structures and mosques are also depicted. The names of the seven Oceans are mentioned in the paintings and presently one can read only the names of the Oceans as *ŚuddhōdakaSamudra*, (same as *Svādūdaka* or pure water) *Kshīra* (milk Ocean) and *Dadhyōda* (curd Ocean). In the painting, seven concentric circles are shown below the lotus petals interspersed by the landmass filled with people, *asuras*, divine beings, snakes and animals.

Vishṇu is depicted as lying in the milk Ocean on the coiled serpent that raises its hood over the god and his feet are being pressed by his two consorts (Fig.11). Below the seven layers of rings that demonstrate the *Pātāla* and its divisions, eight elephants are shown on either side of the relief sculpture of the lotus medallion (Fig.14) Eight *ŚivaGaṇas* and eight serpents are also portrayed on either side balancing the symmetry of the painting (Fig.13 & 14). The figures of the *Śiva Gaṇas* display stout bodies, round faces, prominent eyebrows, long and curled moustaches. Teeth and fangs are clearly shown and they wear only *dhōti* up to their knees and their hands and legs are displayed as they are actively engaged in dance. Three horizontal *nāmas* with a *bindu* in the centre is shown on the foreheads of all the *Śiva Gaṇas*. The elephants stand for majesty and strength and they are like the guardians of the Universe.

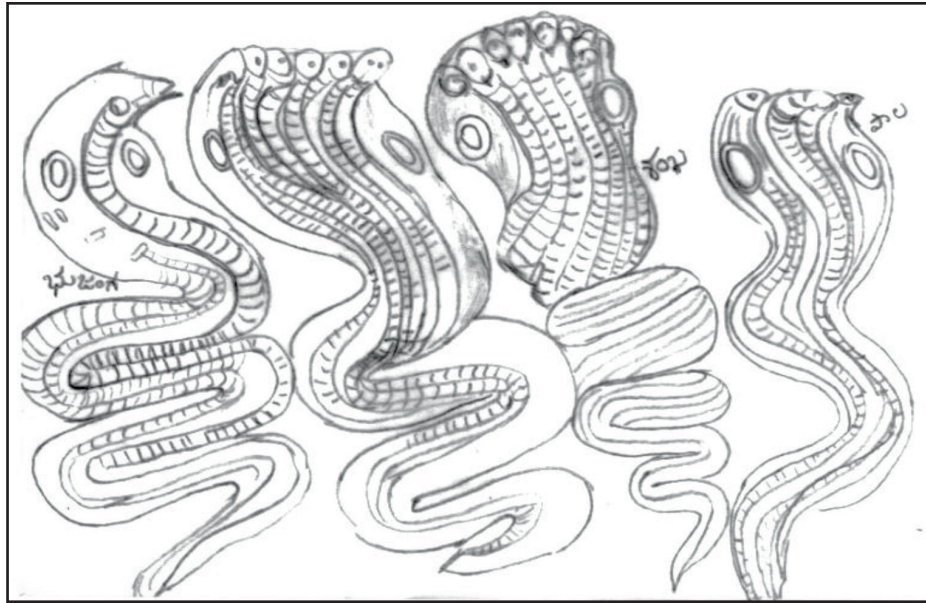


Fig. 14: Snakes in the *Pātāla* with names, Adiyamankottai

Their names are given in the Telugu labels and they can be identified as *Vāmana*, *Puṇḍarīka*, *Airāvata*, *Kumudōśana*, *Sārvabhauma*, *Supratīka*, *Pushpadanta* and *Sushkaprāsu* (?). The names of the elephants mentioned here tally with the list of the names of eight male elephants given in *Amarakōśa* except for one name. *Añjana* is referred to in *Amarakōśa* but it is not included in the painting.

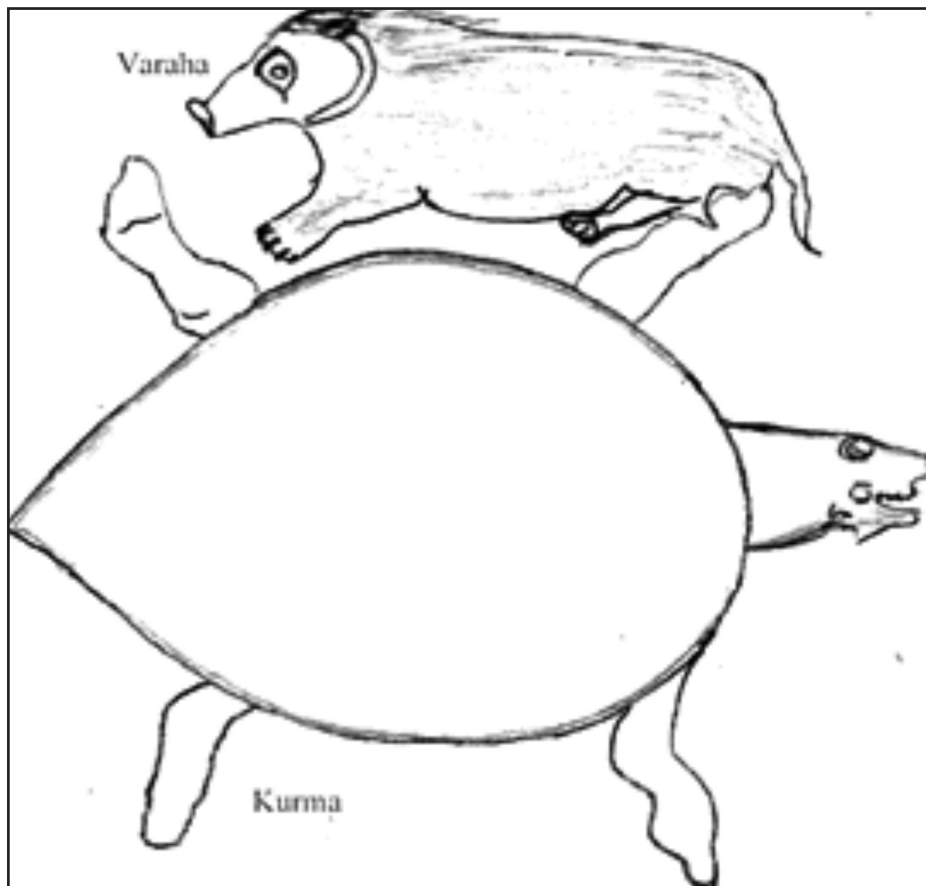


Fig. 15: *Varāha* and *Kūrma*, Adiyamankottai

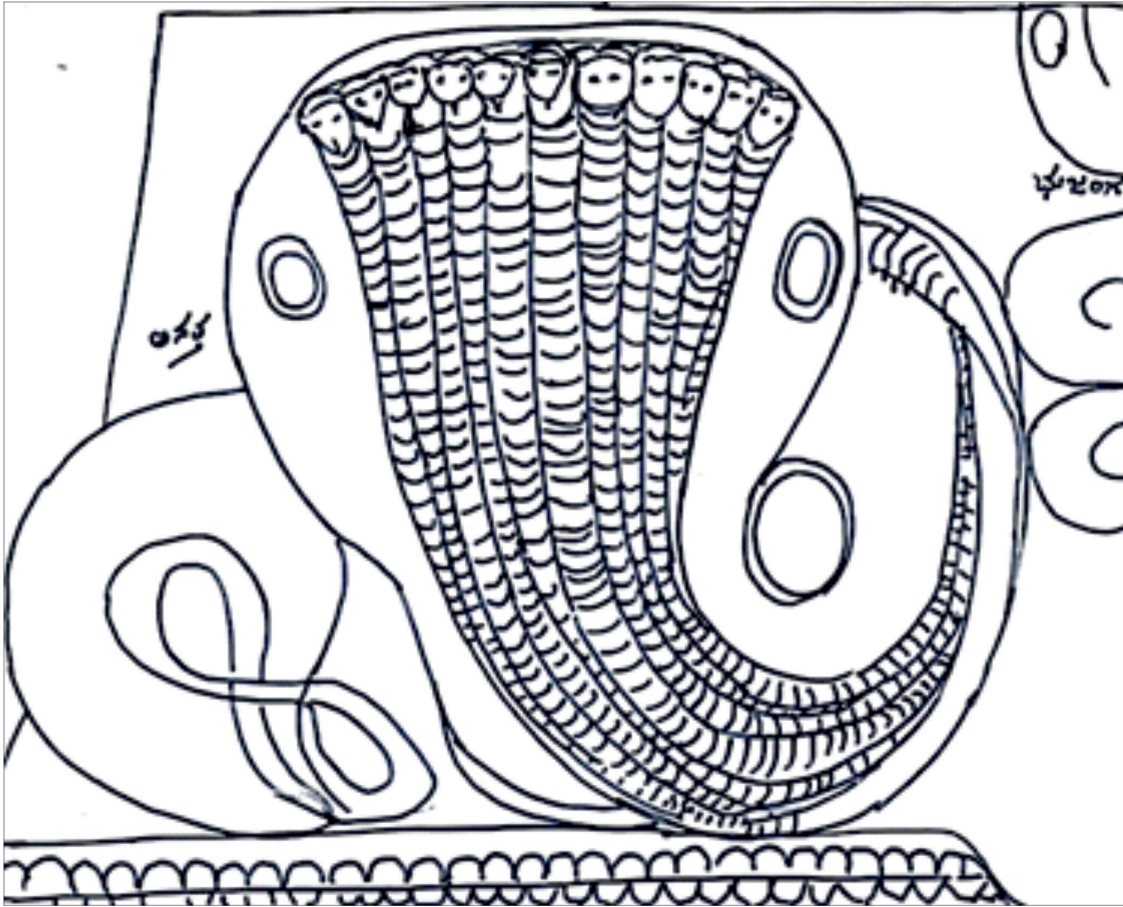


Fig. 16: *Ananta*, the Great serpent, Adiyamankottai

The names of the serpents mentioned in the mural painting are *Sarusōdasa*, *Padma*, *Danasa*, *Vāsuki*, *Bhujanga*, *Sāndva*, *Śaṅkha* and *Padma*. *Vishṇu Purāṇa* states that *Ananta*, the thousand headed snake bears the entire Universe on just one of his heads (*Vishṇu Purāṇa*, Ch.V) Between the two legs of the God is painted the figure of the serpent called *Ananta* in large size (**Fig. 16**). The figures of *Varāha* and *Kūrma* (**Fig. 15**) are painted completely in zoomorphic forms which are the two important *vi bhava* forms of *Vishṇu* closely connected to the myths of *Ēmūsha*, the Great Boar uplifting the earth from the great deluge and the *Kūrma*, bearing the burden of the *Mandarāchala* at the time of the ‘churning of milk Ocean’ by the *dēvas* and *asuras*.

A painting on a paper from Rajasthan (probably from Jaipur), now preserved in Victoria & Albert Museum, London has a figure of *Viśvarūpa Vishṇu* that belongs to early 19th century CE (John Guy, 2007: 70. Pl.71; Diamond D Yoga, 2013: 160,163). In this painting the god is shown as standing in *samabhaṅga* with four arms and the hands carry the usual vaishnavite attributes; and the three *lōkas* are demarcated as *Svar Lōka*, *Bhuva Lōka* and *BhūLōka*. Below his navel the seven *Lōkas* of *Pātāla* are mentioned as *Atala*, *Vitala*, *Sutala*, *Tālātala*, *Mahātala*, *Rasātala* and *Pātāla*. The figures of the eight *dikpālas* are depicted on his arms below the elbows. The body complexion of the god is blue and the small figures painted on his body with the text written in *Devanagari* script convey that the God is omnipotent and pervades the whole Universe. The celestial space is shown on his face with the images of divine beings. *Brahma* sits on his forehead, the Sun and the Moon are his Right and left eyeballs, respectively; an architectural structure occupies the space between his two eyebrows and two demons emerge out of his nostrils. They can be identified as *Madhu* and *Kaiṭabha* who are associated



Pl. 6: *Viśvarūpa Viṣṇu*, Victoria & Albert Museum (Acc. No.15.33-2006)

with Hindu religious cosmology. On the neck and chest of the God are painted small figures of Gods in seated position engaged in the act of the creation of the Universe. The creation of the Universe several times by *Indra*, *Śiva*, *Viṣṇu*, *Dakṣa* and *Brahma* is indicated by the portrayal of the tiny figures of Gods with four arms. The images of the group of planetary bodies starting from the Sun God riding on his chariot drawn by seven horses are painted just below his chest constituting *BhūvarLōka*. Mountains, trees, birds, animals, men and women form the *BhūLōka* followed by the seven divisions of *Pātāla*. Architectural structures, royal persons, men and women are shown on his thighs and legs. Figures of snakes rise high on his legs below the knees and the ankles. Further, a group of several serpents are portrayed as lying below the feet of God. The bodies of the figures of the human and divine beings and also that of the snakes are painted in white colour.

Creation of the snakes by *Brahma*, Srirangam mural painting details. In the mural paintings of Srirangam *Brahma* is depicted as the creator of the entire Universe demonstrating the three realms subdivided into several *lōkas* depicting the creation of the divine, human, animal and plants of different kinds from his body parts in one large panel (Fig. 17, Pl. 7). This mural painting is unique as *Brahma* is depicted here in the act of the Creation of the Cosmos. Even though *Brahma* is considered as the god of Creation based on the Hindu myths and texts, nowhere in the visual arts he alone is represented as creating the cosmos from his body parts. In the background of the seated figure of *Brahma* is the Telugu label inscriptions that mentions the creation of *Suvalōka*, *Mahalōka*, *Brahmalōka* and *Bhūlōka* (M. Krishnakumari, 2017: 125-139; R.Chitra Viji, 1978: 53-58). The Telugu labels provide sufficient information on the different body parts of the God that gave rise to the creation of different classes of the people such as kings (*Rājulu*). Brahmins, *Vaiśyas* (*Kōmaṭlu*) and *Śudras* and also the time of

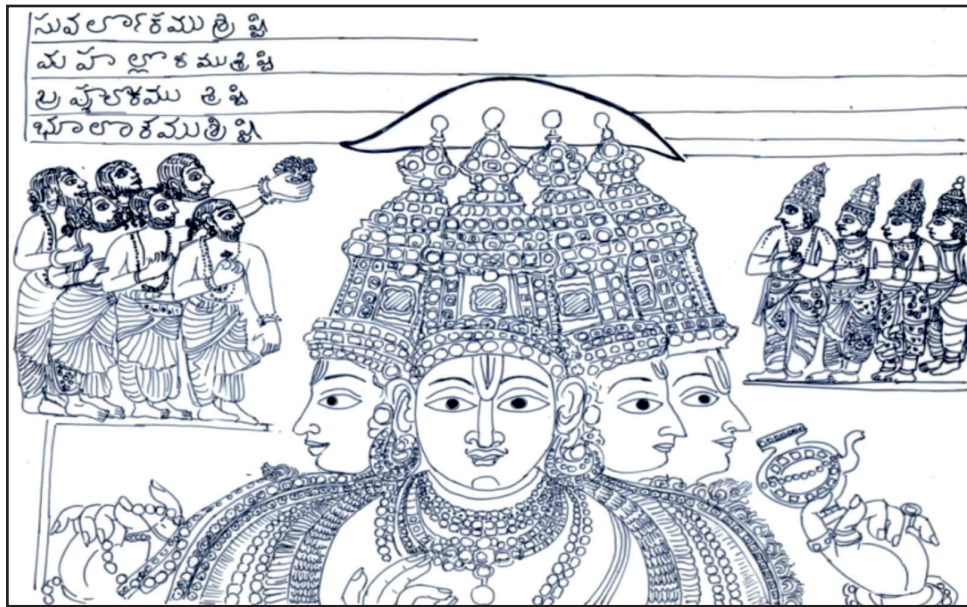


Fig. 17: Brahma as the Creator god, Ranganathasvami temple, Srirangam



Fig. 18: Creation of *Vaiśyas* from the thighs; creation of the *yakshas* from the *pārśva* (side part)

creation (Fig. 18). They also mention the names of the plants, flowers, animals, *Yakshas*, *Gandharvas* etc., The nature of the three *guṇas* (*rajas*, *tamas* and *sattva*) and the six enemies of the mind such *askāma*, *krōdha*, *mōha*, *lōbha*, *mada* and *mātsarya* the negative characteristics of mankind created by the God are mentioned in the associated inscriptions. The human habitat and the environment in the earth and the nature of the *asuras*, serpents and other creatures are portrayed in detail in this painting. Although there is no reference to the *sapta dvīpas* and the creation of the Universe by the other Hindu gods, the mural painting of *Brahma* shown in the act of creation is highly useful to understand the Hindu perception on the iconography of the Cosmic deity.



Pl. 7: *Brahma* in the act of the creation of the Universe, Srirangam

Another painting of *Viśvarūpa Viṣṇu* from Tamil Nadu (Pl. 8) comparable to the mural painting of Adiyamankottai temple in certain respects is included in the collections of Thanjavur paintings of Kuldip Singh and it belongs to the early 19th century (Anna Dalla Piccola and Kuldip Singh, 2018). It shows Lord *Viṣṇu* within an oval frame marked by a thick black border as standing in *sambhaṅga* with four hands. *Padma*, *chakra*, *śaṅkha* and *kaumōdaka* are the attributes shown in the four uplifted hands (R.K.K.Rajarajan, 2020, Fig. 2). The three *Lōkas* are distinguished by using different colours in the background within the oval frame. The sky of the heavenly world is in wavy lines in light and dark blue colours behind the head of the deity. *Sūrya* is depicted in human form in a circular frame with rays rising from it and riding in a chariot of seven horses to the right of *Viṣṇu*. Similarly, on the other side, the anthropomorphic form of *Chandra* is portrayed as seated within a crescent and riding on a chariot of seven horses. The inner circular halo around the head of the Cosmic god is filled with the figures of the signs of the zodiac in independent circles and the outer circles show the semi-divine beings. The figures of *Kāmadhēnu*, *Purushāmṛiga* and the seven sages (*saptarshis*) are on either side of the head of the God. The red colour is used as the background to depict the mortal world that encompasses the images of the guardian deities, *Nārada*, *Tumburu*, *Gandharvas* (winged gods), *Daśāvataras* of *Viṣṇu*, men and women of all classes on either side of the body of the deity. Except for the figure of *Nirṛiti* the rest of the guardian deities are shown as riding on their respective mounts. The mortal world is surrounded by the great Ocean. The Oceans are displayed in white colour with waves by drawing the wavy lines in grey colour. *Pātāla* or the Netherworld is represented in light yellow colour, comparatively in small space with the figures of hybrid forms of serpents whose hands are in the gesture of *añjali mudra*. Two devotees stand on either side of the God. Below the feet of the God is the great serpent Ananta in coiled form raising its hood between the two feet of the God. The figures of *Kūrma* and *Varāha* are depicted below the feet of the deity. Behind the figures of *Vāyu* and *Varuṇa* and at the knee level of the god are shown the figures of an ascetic seated with his knees tied in *paṭṭabandha* gesture and engaged in deep meditation in a cave-like setting. The two ascetics are attended by two women standing with their hands in *añjali hasta* followed by male devotees. Outside this cave-like setting with the sage is the standing figure of the ten-headed *asura* king, *Rāvaṇa*. *Rāvaṇa* is a great devotee of Lord *Śiva* and the narrative scene on the left of the god can be explained as that of the two queens of *Rāvaṇa* namely *Maṇḍōdarī* and *Dhānyamālinī* offering their prayers to the ascetic

while *Vindhyāvalī*, the queen of the *Asura* king *Bali* (the grandson of *Prahlāda*) meets *Sukrāchārya* and offers her prayers along with the other devotees. Above them are shown the groups of royal men, and the people of all classes of the society.



Pl. 8: *Virāt rūpa* of *Vishṇu*, Tahanjavur painting (Kuldip Singh's Collection)

Below the oval frame of the image are the figures of *Kūrma* and *Varāha* in the centre and the figures of eight elephants as the signifiers as the protectors of the eight regions. On the torso of the God, the figures of small images of the four-armed deities involved in the creation of the cosmic world are depicted seated on lotus medallions of different shapes and sizes that decorate the god as the ornaments. Sages are shown as offering their prayers to the divine beings. People, hills, mountains, trees and some architectural structures are painted on the legs of the god. In the Tanjore painting, the religious harmony is balanced as the figures representing both the Saiva and Vaishnava religious traditions are painted on the Right and Left sides of the standing deity in equal proportions. This can be viewed in the inclusion of the figures of *Kāmadhēnu* and the scenes of sage *Sukrāchārya* attended by King *Bali* with his wife *Vindhyāvalī* on the Right emphasizing the Vaishnava leanings and *Purushamriga* a great devotee of *Śiva* and the scene of the ascetic venerated by *Rāvaṇa*, another devotee of *Śiva* on the Left demonstrating the Saiva affinities. The Axis Mundi is shown in the torso of the God with the circulating celestial bodies shown in the halo around the head. In several respects, the *Viśvarūpa* paintings of Adiyamankottai and Tanjore are more or less similar in showcasing the Cosmos and its composition but with few differences. The major difference between the two is that the physical structure and space of the seven *dvīpas* with their flora, fauna, hills, rivers, temples sacred tanks and people are vividly portrayed in the mural painting of Adiyamankottai which is lacking in the Tanjore painting. On the other hand, while the Tanjore painting emphasizes the devotion and worship of the God by the inclusion of the figures of both Saiva and Vaishnava devotees of great name and fame, the same idea is demonstrated differently in the mural painting by displaying the temples dedicated to *Śiva* and *Vishṇu* both in images and texts in the mural painting.

Based on the iconography of the Cosmic Man of Adiyamankottai discussed above it is difficult to identify it as the *Viśvarūpa* of *VāsudēvaKṛishṇa*. *Bhagavadgīta* mentions that the world is regarded

as the body of the *Bhagavān* and *Arjuna* visualizes in the *Virātrūpa* of *Krishṇa*, that the entire world is assembled and divided variously in the body of the god of the gods (*Bhagavadgīta*, XI.13). Unlike the vision of the *Viśvarūpa* of *VasudevaKrishna* by *Arjuna* with multiple heads and arms and the entire Universe, the mural painting of Adiyamankottai represents the god with only two hands, a single head (?) and the compositional structure of the Cosmos. Further, the absence of the figures of *Arjuna*, *gōkula* and *gōpis* which are usually portrayed in the *Viśvarūpa* forms of *Krishṇa* known from the other parts of India analysed by Neena Ranjan in her study prompts us to consider the mural painting of Adiyamankottai as the iconic form of *Viśvarūpa Vishṇu* rather than that of the *Viśvarūpa* of *Krishṇa*. Although the Hindu cosmological ideas are known from the *Vēdas*, the epics and the *Purānas*, the development of the iconic form of the god representing them seems to be very late in the South Indian context. The images showing the geography, topography and religious traditions are very meagre in the different media of visual arts. The study shows that there is no specific or standard type of iconography that was uniformly followed by the artists of South India even though they observe the descriptions given in the Sanskrit texts in the layout and structural composition of the Universe on the body of the god. It can be observed that the artists of Adiyamankottai have not followed the cosmological speculations of any one particular text like *Vishṇu Purāṇa* or *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* or *Padma Purāṇa* but have taken into consideration the essence of several texts together in the portrayal of the Cosmos within the body of the god as *Viśvarūpa Vishṇu* reflecting the contemporary religious and cosmological perceptions of the people of South India. Like the other works on the *Viśvarūpa* form or the symbolic form of the Cosmic Being in the visual arts of South India, the purposes of the mural painting of *Vishṇu* of Adiyamankottai are both didactic and eschatological. The iconic form of the god conceived by the painters of Adiyamankottai is unique since so far no such image of the god that ensembles within him the divine and mortal world composed in *Lōkas* and *dvīpas* with labels in local language is known from South India to the scholarly world. Although it is a single example it throws a welcome light on the cosmogenic views of the Hindus on the creation and dissolution of the Cosmos several times, the *Saptadvīpas*, *Mahāpadmā*, Mount *Mēru*, celestial bodies, the relationships and the interdependence among the three *lōkas* which were all pervaded by the god *Vishṇu*.

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