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# Iconographic Notes on a Viṣṇu Image from Chandpur District, Bangladesh

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**Abstract:** This paper introduces and analyzes a newly accessioned Viṣṇu sculpture in the Bangladesh National Museum, discovered in Chandpur District and dated stylistically to the late 11th–early 12th century CE. Carved in dark stone, the image preserves its *prabhāvalī*, pedestal, and iconographic detailing with remarkable clarity. On the basis of hand-order arrangement (Chakra, Śaṅkha, Gadā, Padma) and supporting programmatic cues, the sculpture is identified as Trivikrama Viṣṇu, one of the twenty-four canonical forms (caturviṃśati-mūrti). Distinctive features include a haṁsa frieze on the pedestal and, uniquely, the addition of a miniature Viṣṇu figure within the Daśāvatāra frieze of the *prabhāvalī* an element not paralleled in other museum holdings. This article situates the piece within the wider corpus of Viṣṇu images in Bengal, highlighting both continuities and local innovations in style and symbolism, and underscores its significance for the study of regional Vaiṣṇava iconography.

**Keywords:** Viṣṇu, Iconography, Bangladesh National Museum, Daśāvatāra.

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## Introduction

Among the sculptural repertoire of Bangladesh, images of Viṣṇu are especially numerous when compared with other deities. Within this broad corpus there are both similarities and differences in structure and style. On close inspection, the newly recorded image discussed here shows that, although the Bangladesh National Museum holds other Viṣṇu sculptures with comparable iconographic features, there is no other piece in the Museum that is exactly identical to it in terms of decorative program. From a purely sculptural standpoint there are several parallels; but from an archaeological and iconographic perspective this image can be identified as Trivikrama Viṣṇu, one of the twenty-four canonical forms (caturviṃśati-mūrti). In popular eyes, however, it might easily be taken simply as a generic Viṣṇu. A distinctive feature of the present piece is the addition within the miniature Daśāvatāra frieze on the *prabhāvalī* of a separate, small Viṣṇu image alongside the ten incarnations. This supplemental figure lends a unique character to the Trivikrama Viṣṇu

under study. Historically, wherever the cult of Viṣṇu flourished in Bengal, images of the deity were fashioned in different manners. Literary evidence suggests that this tradition has deep roots. According to Bhattasāli, the earliest specimens were fairly rudimentary; later examples reveal advances in iconography and execution, with the same deity represented in different styles and with local variations (Bhattasali 1929, 77–78).



**Map 1: Map of Chattogram Division showing the location of Kachua in Chandpur District, Bangladesh (Courtesy: modified after Wikipedia 2025)**

### Discovery and Documentation

The image was found in the jurisdiction of Chandpur District (exact locality recorded in the Museum register) and was brought to the Bangladesh National Museum through official channels. It was formally accessioned on 23 September 2019, under Accession No. 01.01.033.2019.00285. Since entry, the image has been documented and studied through standard museum procedures.

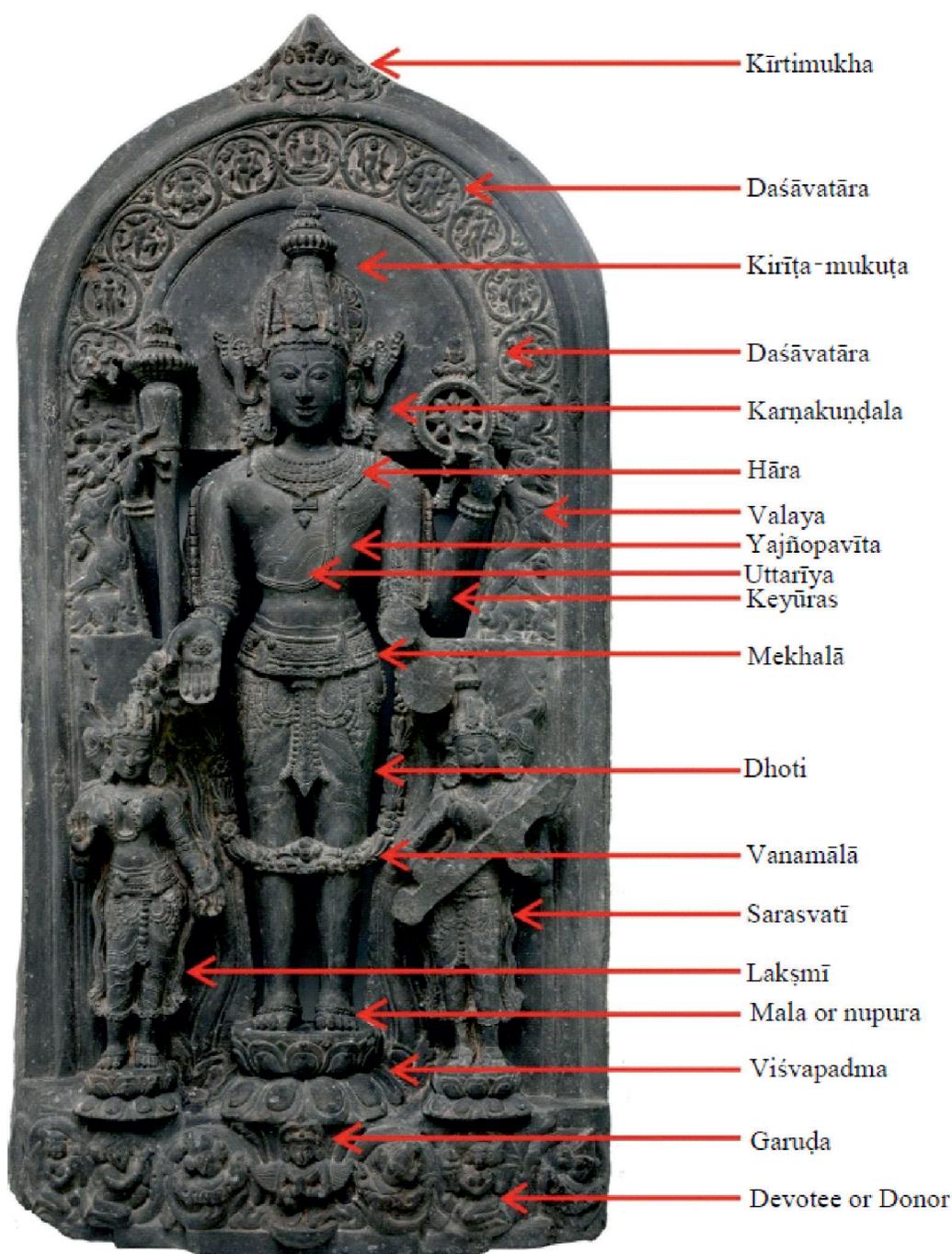


Fig. 1: Vishnu-Trivikrama Image, Black Stone, 95 cm × 43 cm, Kachua, Chandpur District, Bangladesh, Bangladesh National Museum (Acc. No. 01.01.033.2019.00285)  
(Photo courtesy: Bangladesh National Museum)



Fig. 2.1: Gadā on the upper right hand



Fig. 2.2: Chakra on the upper left hand



Fig. 2.3: Padma on the lower right hand



Fig. 2.4: Śaṅkha on the lower left hand  
(now broken)

## Measurements and Condition

Overall height: 95 cm; width: 43 cm; thickness: 43 cm. Weight: approximately 210 kg. The sculpture is carved from a dark, fine-grained stone. The *prabhāvalī* with its flame-tips is preserved; the back-slab is complete, and the pedestal is intact. The upper register of the back-slab shows three compartments (**Fig. 1**): A tri-foil arch at the top; a scene in the upper right field; a scene in the upper left field. The lower register on the pedestal is decorated with a procession of *hamsas*. The lotus-petal mouldings are crisp, though some edges show minor wear.

**Formal Description** The image is carved in high relief upon a rectangular back-slab. Viṣṇu stands erect upon a full-blown lotus; his body is well-proportioned and the torso slightly sways. The face is oval with full lips and slightly elongated eyes; the gaze is serene. The hair mass is neatly arranged and secured by a *kirīṭa-mukuta* (tall crown). The ears are elongated with heavy circular ear-ornaments. Across the chest appears the śrīvatsa mark; necklaces, the *yajñopavīta* (sacred cord), and waist-bands are all carefully indicated. The lower garment is tied with an elaborate sash whose fluttering ends fall over the thighs. Anklets, armllets, and bracelets are present. The *prabhāvalī* surrounds the head and upper body; the outer rim is composed of stylized flame-tongues. The back-slab is articulated with registers; miniature figures occupy the lateral niches. The pedestal shows a row of *hamsas* in relief.

**The Attributes (Āyudhas)** In the four hands, the attributes appear in the following order: the upper right hand hold a *gadā* (**Fig. 2.1**), the lower right hand hold a *padma* (**Fig. 2.3**); the upper left hand hold a Chakra (**Fig. 2.2**) and the lower left hand hold a *Śaṅkha* which is now broken (**Fig. 2.4**). The lower register on the pedestal is decorated with a procession of *hamsas*. The lotus-petal mouldings are crisp, though some edges show minor wear. The grips of the weapons and the modeling of palms and fingers are executed with care. The *gadā* shaft is slender and fluted; the chakra is shown as a solid disk with a narrow rim; the *śaṅkha* is of the typical right-winding type; the *padma* has a clearly delineated seed-pod.

## Ornament and Dress

The deity wears multiple necklaces; a *vaijayantī* mala reaches to the navel. The waist-cloth is pleated and tucked, with the central *mekhalā* (girdle) supporting pendant striated bands. The anklets are broad. The sacred thread runs in the *upavīta* fashion across the chest. The crown is embellished with leaf-like elements; the hair appears as fine beading below the rim of the crown. The ear-ornaments are large circular *kuṇḍalas*. Overall, the detailing is consistent with late Pāla-Sena idioms seen in western and northern Bengal.

**Miniature Figures and Side Panels** Within the lateral panels appear standard attendants and devotees. The right panel shows a standing male with hands in *añjali*, and above him a small hovering figure. The left panel holds a counterpart figure. On the pedestal, the *hamsa* frieze continues in a rhythmic march. On the *prabhāvalī*, a small frieze presents the Daśāvatāra sequence; remarkably, alongside these ten incarnations a miniature Viṣṇu has been added, a feature the author emphasizes as unique for the Trivikrama identification. This additional Viṣṇu is aligned compositionally with the *avatāra* procession and is slightly smaller in scale than the principal deity.

## Iconographic Discussion

The Twenty-Four Forms of Viṣṇu (Caturviṁśati-Mūrti) Classical texts and later iconographic manuals enumerate twenty-four forms of Viṣṇu distinguished by the order of the four attributes in his hands. The ancient literatures provide a tabulation of these orders (see **Table 1**). Because the original file is partially garbled in the names column, only the attribute orders are reproduced here, with the conventional equivalences noted above. The table follows the observation order noted by the author (rear right, front right, front left, rear left). The form relevant to the present image places the Chakra in the upper right and the Padma in the upper left, with Śaṅkha and Gadā occupying the lower hands—an order that aligns with Trivikrama as attested in iconographic literature. The original manuscript cites Bhattasali (1929: 78) for discussions of local styles and Haque (1988) and others for the twenty-four forms and their hand-orders. Given the encoding loss in the provided digital text, the personal names of the forms are not repeated here; the identification is instead argued from the hand-order and the presence of Trivikrama-specific program on the aureole.

**Table 1: Chaurviṁśatimūrtayaḥ (twenty-four Forms of Viṣṇu) according to the texts such as the *Aparājītaprṇchha*, *Rūpamaṇḍana* and *Devatāmūrtiprakaraṇa***

SN	Name of Image	Front		Back	
		Right Hand	Left Hand	Right Hand	Left Hand
1	Keśava	Padma	Gadā	Śaṅkha	Chakra
2	Nārāyaṇa	Śaṅkha	Chakra	Padma	Gadā
3	Mādhava	Gadā	Padma	Chakra	Śaṅkha
4	Govinda	Chakra	Śaṅkha	Gadā	Padma
5	Viṣṇu	Gadā	Chakra	Padma	Śaṅkha
6	Madhusūdana	Chakra	Gadā	Śaṅkha	Padma
7	Trivikrama	Padma	Śaṅkha	Gadā	Chakra
8	Vāmana	Śaṅkha	Padma	Chakra	Gadā
9	Śrīdhara	Padma	Śaṅkha	Chakra	Gadā
10	Hṛṣikeśa	Gadā	Śaṅkha	Chakra	Padma
11	Padmanābha	Śaṅkha	Gadā	Padma	Chakra
12	Dāmodara	Padma	Chakra	Śaṅkha	Gadā
13	Samkarṣaṇa	Gadā	Chakra	Śaṅkha	Padma
14	Vāsudeva	Gadā	Padma	Śaṅkha	Chakra
15	Pradyumna	Chakra	Padma	Śaṅkha	Gadā
16	Aniruddha	Chakra	Padma	Gadā	Śaṅkha
17	Puruṣottama	Chakra	Gadā	Padma	Śaṅkha
18	Adhokṣaja	Padma	Chakra	Gadā	Śaṅkha
19	Narasimha	Chakra	Śaṅkha	Padma	Gadā
20	Achyuta	Gadā	Śaṅkha	Padma	Chakra
21	Janārdana	Padma	Gadā	Chakra	Śaṅkha
22	Upendra	Śaṅkha	Padma	Gadā	Chakra
23	Hari	Śaṅkha	Gadā	Chakra	Padma
24	Śrī-Kṛṣṇa	Śaṅkha	Chakra	Gadā	Padma

## Literary and Comparative Evidence

In the epigraphic and literary record of Bengal, references to Viṣṇu worship are frequent, and sculptural representations are correspondingly abundant. The manuals (śilpaśāstras) and purāṇic

passages record the permutations of attributes that define each form, and museums in Bangladesh preserve multiple examples demonstrating these systems (Haque 1992: 66–67). While a “generic” Viṣṇu may present the same bodily canon, a Trivikrama should additionally be legible through programmatic cues—e.g., related *avatāra* imagery and, in some cases, narrative vignettes linked to the three strides myth. In the current piece, the hand-order and the aureole program together justify the Trivikrama identification.



Fig. 3: Viṣṇu, Mainamati Museum, Cumilla, Bangladesh (Photo courtesy: Mainamati Museum)

### Stylistic Placement and Date

The treatment of ornaments, the crisp lotus on the pedestal, the haṃsa frieze, the flame-edged prabhāvalī, and the proportions correspond to a mature Pāla-Sena idiom. On stylistic grounds, the piece may be dated to around the late 11th to early 12th century CE (Museum Catalogue Register no. 972; cf. Haque 1992; Bhattasali 1929). The author notes that within the Bangladesh National Museum this configuration of attributes combined with the specific aureole program is unusual if not unique, strengthening the case for the identification and the interest of the piece. An image from the collection of the Mainamati Museum shows almost same iconographic features (see **Fig. 3**).

The hand-order observed on this sculpture corresponds to the Trivikrama configuration in the standard lists, and the aureole’s miniature program (Daśāvatāra plus a separate Viṣṇu) is congruent with that reading.

## Conclusion

The number of Viṣṇu images documented in Bangladesh surpasses that of many other deities, and this piece adds another notable specimen to that count. Structurally, it both resembles and differs from previously known examples. Within the Bangladesh National Museum there is no other image exactly identical in decorative scheme, although sculpturally there are many that are related. On iconographic grounds the present piece is best understood as Trivikrama Viṣṇu, one of the twenty-four canonical forms, rather than a merely generic Viṣṇu. Its most striking peculiarity lies in the *prabhāvalī*: the miniature Daśāvātāra band is augmented by a small Viṣṇu image, a feature that lends special distinction to this sculpture.

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