

## **An Investigation into the Visual Manifestation of Nara-Narayana Panel from the Dashavatara Temple at Deogarh**

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Reference to this paper should be made as follows:

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Artistic Narration 2023,  
Vol. XIV, No. 2,  
Article No. 12 pp. 88-93

**Online available at:**  
<https://anubooks.com/journal/artistic-narration>

### **Abstract**

*The purpose of human life is nothing but to get God-realization or Moksha as per the concept of Sanathana Dharma. It can be achieved through taming the mind and getting released from the clutches of 'Maya'. To attain that state, an ascetic life with utmost contemplation is believed to be a prerequisite as per Indian epics. The epics also cite examples of the reincarnation of Gods on earth to uphold 'Dharma' and maintain a balance. One of the most beautiful sculptures of the post-Gupta period is nothing other than the sculptures available on the walls of the Dashavatara temple at Deogarh. The 'Nara Narayana' image is one of the marvelously carved relief sculptures on the exterior wall of the temple. This sculpture would provide a marvelous picture of what an ascetic is constituted of. The state of deep meditation of the images probably, indicating to the union with the 'Paramatma'. The present paper is an attempt to analyze the content and form of the relief sculpture Nara-Narayana's image as given on the exterior of the Dashavatara temple at Deogarh.*

## **Introduction**

India possesses an incredibly rich and diverse cultural heritage that spans thousands of years. India indeed holds a significant place among the world's ancient civilizations. India's artistic and cultural legacy is a result of centuries of continuous experimentation and innovations. Indian art forms including paintings, sculptures, and architecture, reflect a synthesis of various regional, religious, and cultural influences. The experimentation and evolution across different periods have contributed to the richness and uniqueness of these art forms. India is often referred to as the birthplace of several major religions and has been a cradle for spiritual philosophies that have had a profound impact globally. Art has been a powerful medium for religious expression and propagation across various cultures and religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, and Christianity. Hinduism has a rich tradition of religious art that includes intricate temple carvings, sculptures, paintings, and various art forms. Temples across India depict stories from Hindu mythology through elaborate sculptures of deities, mythological figures, and scenes from epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata. These artworks serve as visual aids for devotees to connect with the spiritual teachings and stories of their faith. In addition to that the Mughals, Muslim Nawabs, and the British had made a significant influence on Indian art and culture, contributing to the rich tapestry of India's heritage.

The quest for understanding the purpose and meaning of life has been a cornerstone of many ancient philosophies and religions. In the Indian subcontinent, the teachings and insights of great sages and thinkers led to the development of profound philosophical systems and spiritual practices, ultimately giving rise to religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism. Indeed, Hinduism is often considered one of the oldest religions in the world, with roots tracing back several thousand years. Hinduism does indeed embrace a wide spectrum of beliefs, rituals, and practices, fostering a significant degree of tolerance and diversity within its framework. This inclusivity has historically allowed for the coexistence of various religious beliefs and practices on Indian soil. One of Hinduism's remarkable characteristics is its openness to multiple paths for spiritual realization. It acknowledges that individuals have unique inclinations and diverse paths to seek truth or achieve spiritual fulfillment.

### **The Dashavatara Temple**

The Dashavatara Temple indeed holds significant historical and architectural importance in Hindu temple architecture. Dating back to the Gupta period, it stands out for its simplicity yet intricate details, marking it as one of the surviving stone temples from that era. The temple's distinctive feature of having only one cell in a plain square form is a departure from the later, more complex temple structures seen in subsequent periods. Despite its apparent simplicity, the execution and precision in its construction during the Gupta

period are commendable. Dedicated to Lord Vishnu, the temple incorporates images not just of Vishnu but also includes representations of other Hindu deities like Shiva, Parvati, Kartikeya, Brahma, Indra, as well as river goddesses Yamuna and Ganga. This amalgamation of deities within a Vishnu temple reflects the inclusive nature of Hindu worship and the syncretic practices prevalent during that time. The Dashavatara Temple stands as a testament to the architectural prowess and religious inclusivity of the Gupta period, showcasing not only exquisite craftsmanship but also a rich tapestry of Hindu mythology and spiritual beliefs within its walls.

The Gupta period in ancient India was indeed a pivotal time in terms of cultural, artistic, and scientific advancements. The emergence of the Gupta Empire, starting in Bihar and expanding its dominion over North Central India, marked a significant era of prosperity and cultural flourishing. Chandra Gupta II, also known as Vikramaditya, ruled during what is often considered the zenith of the Gupta Empire. His reign from 375 to 415 A.D. was characterized by a flourishing of artistic endeavors, scientific innovations, and literary achievements. The artistic achievements of the Gupta period in architecture, painting, and sculpture were indeed extraordinary and often seen as reaching the pinnacle of artistic excellence in ancient India. These accomplishments were not sudden developments but rather evolved from pre-existing artistic traditions, particularly from the Mathura and Gandhara schools. Gupta sculptures exhibit a heightened sense of realism and naturalism. Artists during this period developed a deep understanding of anatomical proportions, creating figures that exuded a sense of lifelike vitality. The representation of the human body in Gupta sculptures showed a mastery of depicting realistic features, harmonious proportions, and a sense of dynamism. Moreover, Gupta sculptures often convey a sense of inner grace and dignity. The figures exude a serene and tranquil aura, reflecting a sense of spiritual depth and emotional subtlety. There's a refined sense of expression that goes beyond mere physical form, portraying a deeper sense of emotional and spiritual content. The sculptures of the Gupta period are renowned for their emphasis on spirituality and inner serenity rather than physical prowess. The portrayal of figures related to spirituality in Gupta art transcends mere physical representation; it delves deeper into capturing the essence of spiritual enlightenment and inner peace. This approach in Gupta sculptures encourages viewers to contemplate the deeper spiritual aspects of existence, transcending the mere physicality of the figures. It aims to evoke a sense of reverence and introspection, inviting observers to connect with the inner, intangible aspects of humanity rather than focusing solely on the external, material aspects. The Gupta period witnessed a significant emergence and evolution of various Hindu icons alongside the existing Buddhist art. This period marked a turning point in the balance of artistic representation, leading to the growth of Hindu art in more enduring forms and a gradual decline in the prominence of Buddhist art.

The Dashavatara Temple at Deogarh stands as a testament to the exceptional craftsmanship and artistic brilliance of the Gupta period. Located approximately seventy miles south of Jhansi, this temple is renowned for its exquisite relief sculptures adorning its exterior walls. Among the relief sculptures presented on the exterior of the Dasavathara temple, Nara-Narayana relief is considered to be one of the best among them.

### **Nara-Narayana**

The Hindu scripture Mahabharata identifies the prince Arjuna with Nara, and the deity Krishna with Narayana. The legend of Nara-Narayana is also told in the scripture Bhagavata Purana. Hindus believe that the pair dwells at Badrinath, where their most important temple stands. The Mahabharata indeed identifies Arjuna with Nara and Krishna with Narayana. The story of Nara-Narayana, depicting a divine pair of sages, is prominent in Hindu mythology and is also recounted in the Bhagavata Purana. According to Hindu belief, Nara and Narayana are two aspects of the same divine entity. Nara represents the human aspect of the sage, while Narayana represents the divine or the deity aspect. They are believed to reside in Badrinath, a significant pilgrimage site in the Himalayas, where the revered Badrinath Temple stands. The temple is dedicated to Lord Vishnu in his form as Badrinarayan and is considered one of the Char Dham pilgrimage sites in India. The association of Arjuna with Nara and Krishna with Narayana symbolizes the divine-human partnership, with Arjuna being a mortal prince and Krishna being an incarnation of Lord Vishnu, guiding and supporting him during the events of the Mahabharata. In iconography, Nara-Narayana can be depicted both jointly and separately in images. When depicted separately, Nara is often portrayed with two hands, holding a bow and arrows, and wearing deer skin or simple ascetic attire. He's typically fair-complexioned. Narayana, representing Vishnu, is depicted in his usual form with four arms, holding characteristic attributes such as the conch (shankha), discus (chakra), mace (gada), and lotus (Padma). He is often shown with a dark complexion. At the same time when depicted jointly they might be shown together in a single form, conjoined or standing side by side, symbolizing the divine partnership of the sage (Nara) and the deity (Narayana). The contrasting complexions, attire, and attributes of Nara and Narayana symbolize their distinct identities while emphasizing their complementary roles in Hindu mythology and philosophy.

The Dasvatara temple at Deogarh provides an excellent relief of the Nara and Narayana image on the exterior wall. They are shown sitting under the Badari tree, an element that signifies their sacred presence and association with spiritual practices. Lalitasana is a relaxed and elegant sitting posture in which they sit gracefully, signifying a state of ease and divinity. They are depicted wearing jatamakutas, crowns made of matted hair, which is a typical attribute associated with ascetics and sages engaged in deep meditation and spiritual practices. Narayana holds a string of prayer beads (aksamala), symbolizing meditation,

repetition of mantras, and devotion. One of Narayana's hands is in the chin mudra, a gesture representing instruction through silence or contemplation, indicating wisdom and divine knowledge. The lower left-hand holds a kamandalu, a water vessel typically associated with rishis or sages, symbolizing purity and the ascetic way of life. This sculpture not only captures their physical attributes but also symbolizes the spiritual essence, portraying their roles as divine beings engaged in meditation, teaching, and ascetic practices under the sacred Badari tree. Both Nara and Narayana are depicted wearing clinging, transparent garments that conform to their bodies. This portrayal might symbolize simplicity, purity, or a state of being beyond material concern. Above them, flying apsaras (celestial nymphs) intertwine with the Badari tree, perhaps signifying a celestial or divine atmosphere associated with their presence. At the top of the sculpture, Brahma seated on a lotus is depicted, possibly representing the divine or cosmic aspect of creation, as Brahma is often regarded as the creator deity in Hindu mythology. Flying couples flanking Brahma could represent celestial beings or divine entities surrounding the cosmic order. Below the seat of Nara and the chin mudra of Narayana, there are indications of deer and lions, suggesting a forested or natural setting. The intricacy and symbolism in this sculpture convey not only the physical presence of Nara and Narayana but also the celestial and divine ambiance surrounding them, along with elements symbolizing the cosmic order, nature, and spiritual purity.

### **Conclusion**

Indian art and philosophy often emphasize the transient nature of material pleasures and advocate for a balanced, disciplined life that encompasses both the material and spiritual aspects. The concept of 'dharma', prevalent in various Indian scriptures, emphasizes the idea of living a righteous and virtuous life while fulfilling one's responsibilities. The pursuit of eternal happiness involves transcending the fleeting nature of material desires and finding fulfillment through spiritual growth and inner peace. This often involves practices like meditation, self-discipline, and understanding the impermanent nature of the material world. Art, in various forms like paintings, sculptures, dances, and even storytelling, has been a medium to convey these philosophies and spiritual truths. They serve as a reminder of the impermanence of worldly pleasures and the pursuit of a deeper, lasting happiness that comes from within. The Nara-Narayana concept in Hinduism indeed illustrates the divine-human relationship, often showcasing the interconnectedness between the mortal and the divine. Nara represents the human aspect while Narayana symbolizes the divine or the cosmic aspect. The belief in previous births or incarnations of Arjuna and Krishna as Nara-Narayana emphasizes the cyclical nature of existence and the journey towards spiritual realization across lifetimes. The pursuit of 'moksha' or liberation is a central theme in Hindu philosophy. Nara and Narayana, believed to reside in Badri (Badrinath) under a tree, signify the importance of righteous living and spiritual discipline as a means to attain liberation. Their presence at such a sacred site signifies its significance as a place conducive to

spiritual growth and enlightenment. The relief at Deogarh portraying Nara-Narayana showcases not just the historical or mythical aspect but also serves as a reminder of the spiritual journey and the teachings associated with it. It represents the interconnectedness between human existence and the divine realm, urging individuals to strive for a righteous life to attain spiritual liberation or 'moksha'. The Nara-Narayana relief sculpture from Deogarh is indeed a masterpiece that embodies the exceptional skill and artistic finesse of Indian sculptors. Its brilliance lies not just in technical precision but also in its ability to convey profound philosophical and spiritual themes. The mastery displayed in modeling the figures, depicting nuanced expressions, and crafting the overall composition is truly extraordinary. Beyond its aesthetic beauty, the sculpture serves as a conduit for contemplation on fundamental principles of life. Nara-Narayana, representing the divine-human relationship and the pursuit of spiritual enlightenment, invites viewers to reflect on the interconnectedness between mortals and the divine. The relief's ability to provoke introspection and evoke contemplation on the deeper aspects of existence underscores its significance. Through this artistic presentation, viewers are encouraged to explore themes of righteousness, the pursuit of 'moksha' or liberation, and the cyclical nature of life and rebirth. In the landscape of Indian art, the Nara-Narayana relief sculpture from Deogarh undoubtedly stands as a brilliant testament to the artistic mastery and the ability of art to transcend mere visual representation, leading viewers toward a deeper understanding of life's fundamental truths.

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