PREFACE

Many scholars over the last one and a half century have deliberated on the various aspects of Indian sculptures. Those who have worked on the art heritage of Himachal Pradesh have dwelt mostly upon the architecture of the region. Works exclusively focussing upon the sculpture of Himachal Pradesh are rather scarce or cursorily discussed. Therefore, an in depth study and analysis of sculptures of Himachal Pradesh has remained a desideratum for long for better understanding of the art history of the region. The present work comprising a micro study of the art and iconography of the images of Vishṇu from earliest times up to 12th century CE in Himachal Pradesh has been taken as an attempt to fill this lacuna.

Himachal Pradesh is known as Devabhūmi or the land of gods with the pristine beauty of its lush green forests and snow covered mountains like the beautiful canvas of the nature itself. It is perhaps its beauty that has made numerous known and unknown artists to keep it an active and important centre of art activity through the ages. For more than two millennia numerous temples were constructed here and embellished with exquisite sculptures. These sculptures carved out of all possible material – stone, wood, metal, terracotta- speak volumes about the technical skill and perfection of the artists in the realm of art. Though impact of different idioms from the adjoining regions of Kashmir as well as far off land of the Gangetic plains can be seen on the sculptures of Himachal Pradesh over the period of many centuries but it happily mingled with the local ethos. The images of various deities were made in conformity with the textual sources. However, in certain cases departure from textual sources can be seen reflecting the freedom of expression exercised by the artists.

The entire land of Himachal Pradesh is dotted with scores of temples dedicated to various deities belonging to the mainstream Hinduism as also to the local devatas and folk deities, sometimes mixture of more than one faith, especially Buddhism and Hinduism. Vishṇu being one of the most important deities in Hindu trinity along with Brahma and Siva has many temples here exclusively dedicated to him, though
he is often seen sharing premises with other gods and goddesses. Many images of Vishnu housed in these temples or those which have been taken away to be housed in various Museums or to adorn private collections have been the focus of the present study of the Vishnu images.

An enormous literature covering various aspects of the past of Himachal Pradesh has accumulated over the last two centuries as the pristine beauty of the state has attracted numerous travellers and scholars, both European and Indian, from time to time. Some of them have simply recorded what they saw here in the course of their journeys while the others delved deep in scholarly pursuits to rebuild the past of the land. Stalwarts like Alexander Cunningham, J. Ph. Vogel, H. Hargreaves, H. L. Shuttleworth, J. Hutchison, Hermann Goetz, B. Ch. Chhabra, Jagannath Agrawal and Krishna Deva have done monumental work on this region. They have covered practically all aspects of art, history, archaeology, epigraphy, architecture, sculpture and iconography. Amongst the recent scholars, M. Postel, Michael W. Meister, Laxman S. Thakur, Cynzia Pieruccini, Doris Meth Srinivasan, Mian Govardhan Singh, T.S. Maxwell, V. C. Ohri, S. L. Nagar, O. C. Handa, Subhashini Aryan and Ashvini Agrawal may be mentioned. Most of their work does not have sculpture as the main centre with exceptions like V. C. Ohri who focuses on the sculpture of Western Himalaya including Himachal Pradesh. The approach of the latter is too general to focus on a specific aspect or detail required for deep study. None of the works so far produced concentrates specifically on the development of the Vaishnava cult, its images and iconography.

In order to provide a detailed and analytical account of the subject, the works of the modern scholars were studied to know their views, observations and findings. Thereafter the relevant textual sources were consulted so that it could be seen what injunctions are laid by these sources and how the various aspects of the deity are mentioned in the Vedic, Puranic and other classical texts. Several extensive field-work trips were undertaken to study various images in situ which also brought to light several hitherto unpublished images. I am especially indebted to my supervisor Professor Ashvini Agrawal who accompanied me on some of the field trips despite
his very busy schedule as it helped me in acquiring an insight through his on the spot
explanations and discussions on finer nuances of these pieces of art.

The entire thesis has been divided into nine chapters. In the first chapter which is
introductory, the origin of development of Vishṇu worship, the origin and
development of Vishṇu images and a general survey of Vishṇu images in Himachal
Pradesh has been undertaken to provide a scholarly essential backdrop of the
subject. Here, we have also tried to relate the sculptures of Himachal Pradesh to
those found in various parts of the country so that sculptures from Himachal can be
seen in better perspective. Introductory chapter deals with the origin and
development of Vishṇu worship. The second part of the introduction shed light on
the origin and development of Vishṇu images and in the third part of the same a
general survey of Vishṇu images from Himachal Pradesh is given.

The most popular form of Vishṇu images in Himachal Pradesh appears to be Vishṇu
Vaikuṇṭha as maximum number of images of Vishṇu to be found in the state are in
the Vaikuṇṭha form irrespective of the region. The second chapter has been entirely
devoted to study of this popular form of Vishṇu. Whereas a strong influence of
Kashmir idiom could be traced on these images, we noted a gradual development
from circa 6th century CE to the end of the period of our study in depiction of the
boar and lion heads of the deity as well as other features which help in assigning
approximate dates to these images. A comparison of Vaikuṇṭha images found
elsewhere in the country has also been fruitful for arriving at conclusion in this
regard.

The Viśvarūpa form of Vishṇu appears to be deep rooted in Indian mythology as
several texts from a very early period give interesting stories and depiction of the
same. Though this form does not appear to be very popular in Himachal Pradesh as
only two Viśvarūpa images have come to light so far from the state yet considering
its significance we have kept them separately in chapter three. What induced us to
do so was primarily because of the Vishṇu Viśvarūpa image from Bajaura which stands out for its beauty and iconographic significance.

The next chapter deals with various other images of Vishṇu from the region. Though the images discussed in this chapter do not always conform to Vishṇu-Nārāyaṇa form described in *chaturvinśatimūrti* forms in the texts, yet considering the popularity of this nomenclature we have entitled the chapter as Vishṇu-Nārāyaṇa images. The images in the forms of Achyuta, Vishṇu, Śrīdhara and Trivikrama have been included in this chapter. During our study of these images we noted that Trivikrama form of Vishṇu was very popular in the region as far the arrange of the attributes in his hands is concerned, despite the fact that only one Trivikrama image showing Vishṇu taking three strides is known from the entire state.

In the fifth chapter Lakshmī-Nārāyaṇa images are discussed. Large number of such images has been discovered from Shimla region and Karsog in District Mandi. Most of these images belong to post 9th century period and are shown the deities seated astride Vishṇu’s vehicle Garuḍa with Lakshmī seated on the left thigh of Vishṇu. There are only two examples of images where Vishṇu and Lakshmī are shown standing by each other, though right part, containing the image of Vishṇu which is in the collection of Dharamshala Museum, has almost completely disappeared. The other image, in the collection of Vaidyanatha temple, Baijnath is extremely worn out.

In the sixth chapter *Daśāvatāra* images of Vishṇu are discussed. The ten incarnation of Vishṇu are found from many places in Himachal Pradesh. There are some independent examples of the incarnations of the deity whereas in others all the incarnations have been shown on the stele of the parikara of a single image. One of the most exquisite, independent examples of an incarnation of Vishṇu is the metal image of Nṛsiṁha from Bharmaur, though Matsya form seems to be more popular. On the other hand the boar incarnation is very rare as only one image of Varāha has come to our notice.
Chapter number seven sheds light on the composite images which include Harihara and Ardha-Vishṇu-Lakshmī images. These images are very rare in Himachal Pradesh but interesting for their iconographic details.

Chapter number eight discus miscellaneous images related to Vishṇu, including those of Garuḍa, Āyudhapurūshas and other related images. Āyudhapurūshas mainly include Chakrapurusha, Gadādevi, Śaṅkhapurusha and Padmapurūsha. In the last chapter we have drawn conclusions on the basis of our detailed study of the images of Vishṇu images from Himachal Pradesh. We have highlighted our findings in this chapter.

Amit Sharma
Department of Ancient Indian History, Culture & Archaeology,
Panjab University, Chandigarh