CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

The origin of image worship in India appears to be very ancient. The earliest evidences of image worship in India are from the Indus Valley Civilization. There are few references to idol worship during the Vedic period. People worshipped natural forces, like Akasha (Sky), Surya (Sun), Indra (Thunder), Varuna (Rain), Prithvi (Earth) etc. and they conceived these gods in human forms. Every householder was a priest and recited the hymns before the sacred fire. The gods slowly lost their natural forms and took the shape of superhuman forms in the minds of the people. Thus, the intellectual conception of God was left with a handful of ascetics and philosophers (Krishna Iyer, 1994:22).

Iconography is the tangible expression of religious symbolism. As such it puts into visual form the abstract concepts and attributes associated with deities. It supplies, therefore, a large volume of material for the study of religious history. It is interesting to delineate the successive stages in the growth of religious ideas which are reflected from the icons and their attributes. Iconography provides a vital tool and also paves the way for the interpretation of the socio-economic changes occurring at the macro and micro levels. While a study of Hindu iconography as a whole would present a complete picture portraying the hold of the faith on its followers through the ages at the micro level, a region wise study would bring out the peculiarities of a particular area in relation to its socio-religious context in great depth and detail. Further, regional differences and chronological variations both in conception and execution make such a study impressive (Champakalashmi, 1981: 1).
Narasimha, one of the ten avatāras of Vishnu, is always represented in hybrid form. As the name itself indicates, it is a combination of nara (man) and simha (lion). He is always represented with a human body and the head of a lion. There are several variations of the Narasimha icon, each of which relate to the god as he is known in that particular part of the country in a particular period. A study of the icons is vital for understanding its origins and its historical development, for they indicate changing patterns, whereby changing times have added new symbols to the depiction of an ancient deity in order to fulfill the vision and desires of his worshippers. These variations in depiction illustrate the varying socio-cultural influences that either existed or entered India.

There are several references found in stories connected with the origin of the deity in Sanskrit and Tamil literature, some of which are common and some of which are contradictory. A detailed study has been made to the references in Sanskrit and in Tamil literature, juxtaposing the different descriptions of the deity in order to study the origins and development of his iconography. He is also worshipped in different forms in different parts of India. Narasimha is a protector, god of wisdom, and a folk deity.

Vishnu is a much studied god and there are several books, journals and periodicals available pertaining to him. The present study of the Narasimha avatāra has concentrated on a single incarnation to find the origin and various regional developments in art, iconography and literature. Moreover, this study has a totally different approach, utilizing ethno-archaeology to correlate the various aspects of the icon of Narasimha to his worshippers over the centuries.
Studies of Indian iconography, largely forming a part of art history, have generally been confined to the identification, description and interpretation of divine images and their attributes. They have hardly taken into consideration the historical background of the various regional trends, variations and their significance, although some of them have made an attempt to search for origins and to explain the development processes of a given pantheon, Brahmanical, Buddhist or Jain. Lack of regional studies on iconographic development has hindered any meaningful analysis of the evolution of concepts and their impact on different socio-cultural groups and their religious systems. Hence, the present study concentrates on the regional development of the Narasimha icon and its socio-cultural importance.

Sources

The source material available for the present research study is includes both literary and archaeological materials.

(i) Literary Sources (Sanskrit and Tamil)

The sources for the study include the Vedas, Brahmanaśas, Epics, Puranas and Upa-Puranas and non-religious literatures in Sanskrit. In the Rig Veda, there are a few passages which highlight the existence of the Man-lion concept that developed later into the cult of Narasimha. The Narasimha avatāra was directly mentioned for the first time in the Taittiṛya Āranyaka. Starting from the Epic age, we get several references to the Narasimha avatar in literatures such as the Rāmāyana, Mahābhārata, and in Puranas like Vishnu, Bhāgavatha, Agni, Brahmanda, Vayu, Harivamsha, Brahma, Vishnudharmottara, Kurma, Matsya, Pādma, Linga, Shiva, and Skanda. The Iconographical references found in the Āgamas and Puranic literatures were culled out and described in the present study.
In Tamil literature, Sangam and post Sangam literary works like Eṭṭutogai (eight anthologies) and Pattupāṭṭu (anthology of ten poems) and Silappadikāram furnish details about the Narasimha concept of Vishnu. The earliest reference to the Narasimha story with the mention of Prahalada has been gleaned from the Parippāṭal. The Bhakti literature NālāyiraDivyaprabandam gives a detailed account of the god, his temples, method of worship and the importance of his insignia.

(ii) Archaeological Sources

The position of the lion in the Indus valley civilization and in ancient religions like Jainism and Buddhism has been discussed and interpreted. Archaeological data such as temples, sculptures, inscriptions, paintings and coins have provided fruitful information for the purpose of study. To understand the origin and development of the Narasimha imagery, various sources from ancient civilizations like sculpture, painting and the description of mythological stories have been discussed and analysed. Numerous images of Narasimha obtained from different parts of the country from the second century CE down to the end of the medieval period have been studied.

In the Tamil country, the earliest epigraphic reference to the Daśāvatāra (the ten incarnations) is found at the Ādi Varāha cave temple in Mamallapuram in the Pallava grantha inscription. In Tamilnadu, the earliest known image of the two-armed seated figure of Narasimha was found along with other divinities such Brahma, Siva as linga, Siva’s consort Parvati and Skanda from a stone slab found at Munnur village in Villupuram district and belongs to the Pallava period.

Previous Published works

Vishnu is a much studied god and there are several books, journals and periodicals available about him. The present study of the Narasimha avatāra has concentrated on a single incarnation to find the origin and various regional developments in art, iconography and literature. Moreover, this study has a totally different approach, utilizing ethno-archaeology to correlate the various aspects of the icon of Narasimha to his worshippers over the centuries.

**Aim of the Study**

The aim of the present study is:

i. To examine the references and representations of Narasimha in literature, sculpture and inscriptions.

ii. To assess the nature and popularity of Narasimha based on his sculptural distribution.

iii. To understand the development of the icon of Narasimha from his different forms such as seated and standing, angry and peaceful.
iv. To examine the origins of the deity from an ethno-archaeological point of view, and to analyse the popular iconographical forms of Narasimha; human body with lion head, a ferocious incarnation of Vishnu, fighting against evil, protector, benevolent and guardian, tribal god and associated with folk culture.

v. Why, when and how did these associations take place? Does he have an Indian origin or did he arrive from a different part of the world? Who were his worshippers who revered these various aspects that have added myth and mystery to the god over the ages?

vi. To determine the role and nature of Narasimha as a deity in the pantheon of Hindu Gods.

Hypothesis

(i) The hypothesis of the study is that the iconography of Narasimha is an amalgam of Vedic ideas and folk concepts.

(ii) Narasimha was immensely popular because his concept and form have appealed to a variety of worshippers.

(iii) Narasimha has both northern and southern connections. He is also a tribal god. His mythical background and power transformed him into the position of a saviour of a particular sect (Vaishnavism) with the mystical attributes of a principal deity.

(iv) This study gives a new dimension to Narasimha, utilizing existing materials to understand the god in specific times and contexts.
Study Period

The present study starts from the Vēdic period onwards and ends with the fifteenth century CE, till which period there were changes in the development of the icon which occurred. Thereafter, the various forms of the icon became standardized and we do not see much variation. The iconographic development of the god gave way to stylistic changes.

Chapterization

For the convenience of the study and analysis, the collected materials have been divided into six chapters; Chapter I – Introduction; Chapter II - Origin and Development of Narasimha Iconography from Sanskrit and Tamil Literature; Chapter III - Archaeological Sources; Chapter IV - Narasimha in Iconography and Sculpture; Chapter V - Development of Narasimha Iconography and Worship in Tamilnadu; Chapter VI - Discussion and Conclusion.

Chapter – I – Introduction

It is divided into four sections, Section one is an introduction to the Narasimha incarnation of Vishnu as found in the Sanskrit and Tamil literature. Section two gives the history of previous research in brief. Section three comprises of the aim of the research work. Section four consists of chapterization.
Chapter – II– Origin and Development of Narasimha Iconography from Sanskrit and Tamil Literature

The second chapter deals with the origin and development of Narasimha iconography as found in Sanskrit and Tamil literary sources. Sanskrit literature like the Vēdas, Brāhmaṇas, Epics, Upanishads, eighteen major Purāṇas and Upa-Purāṇas, Sarphitās and Āgamas have been analysed. Further, Tamil literary works such as the Sangam anthologies like Purāṇanuru, Akananuru, Ainkurunuru, Kalittokai, Purippātal, Kuruntokai, Narrinai, Patirruppattu and Patthupattu and post Sangam literature like Silapadikaram are works which contain several references to Vishnu. Besides, more information related to the Narasimha incarnation have been found in Bhakti and post Bhakti literature.

Chapter – III – Archaeological Sources

The third chapter discusses the Narasimha icons (stone and metal images) found in various archaeological sources. The archaeological material is the other major resource for the present thesis. The data which I have collected for analysis is from two types of different sources. One is the primary source in which I have dealt directly with the antiquities, and the other is collected from published reports.

The material evidences of the lion and its deification in India and its representations found in pre-historic rock paintings and sculptures have been discussed and analysed to explain its importance in Indian religion and mythology. The lion-headed gods found in early civilizations are also cited. The pre-historic rock paintings, Indus valley civilization, and Jainism and Buddhism in India have been analysed and discussed with the intention of finding the worship of animal-head ed gods, especially the lion head deity in Indian mythology and religion.
Chapter – IV – Narasimha in Iconography and Sculpture up to the Vijayanagar Period

The fourth chapter deals with the iconographical and sculptural features of Narasimha in India up to the Vijayanagar Period. Section I comprises of the historical background of the Indian sub continent starting from the Early Historical period onwards. Section II discusses the earliest representation of the Narasimha icon and its continuous growth found in northern and central India and its importance in the development of the art and iconography of Narasimha. Section III explains the growth of the Narasimha icon and its worship in south India under varied dynasties up to the Vijayanagar period.

Chapter – V– Development of Narasimha Iconography and Worship in Tamilnadu

The fifth chapter furnishes details of the development of Narasimha iconography and worship in Tamilnadu. The iconographic elements have been analyzed to understand the deity and its local cults, particularly in Tamilnadu. This chapter has been divided into five sections; they are Pallava, Pandya, Adiyaman, Chola and Vijayanagar. These have been described in the early sculptural representation of Narasimha in Tamilnadu and its regional variations. It also explains the iconographic development of the deity under each dynasty and the important temples dedicated to Narasimha in each dynastic period.
Chapter – VI – Discussion and Conclusion

A synthesis of this study has been attempted in this chapter. As far as the Narasimha incarnation of Vishnu is concerned, although he was popular and there are a number of temples dedicated to him, so far not much research study has been done on his origin and imagery that is his iconographical form, with the help of the archaeological material.

The worship of Narasimha in India, and particularly in Tamilnadu, is a continuing process starting from early historic times. The present study is an attempt to find the continuity of the worship of this deity, origin and his iconographical development.
References


