CHAPTER II

ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF NARASIMHA INCARNATION IN LITERATURE

Sanskrit Literature

The antiquity of Sanskrit literature in India starts with the poetry of the RigVēda, which is an oral tradition that is in practice since time unknown. The Rig Vēda consists of 1028 suktas or hymns which are distributed in ten mandalas or books. The approximate date of this composition is between 1500 BCE. to 600 BCE. This is followed by the Yajur, Sama and AtharvaVēdas. The Sama Vēda consists of hymns taken from the Rig Vēda for the purpose of religious singing during the yajnas or sacrifices. The Yajur Vēda contains the hymns and rituals that reflect the social and political situation of the times. The AtharvaVēda speaks of the charms and spells to ward of evil sprits and diseases.

All the Vēdas are divided in to four parts such as the Saṃhitās, Brāhmaṇas, Āraṇyakas and Upanishads. The Saṃhitās contain the principle text or mulamantras. The Brāhmaṇas mentions about their application to religious rituals. The Āraṇyakas have portions meant for deep meditation. The Upanishads form the concluding part of the Vēdas and are referred to as the Vēdanta, the quintessence of Vēdic thought, vision and wisdom.

Vēdas

Religious practice during the Vēdic period was principally of natural phenomena which were personified and worshiped as Gods. Yajnas were conducted to satisfy their Gods by chanting mantras and making offerings. Vishnu in the
Vēdic period was worshipped as a deity of war who assists Indra in his task of protecting the Devas from the Asuras and sometimes he himself as protector of the Devas and Manu.

In the Rig Vēda there are only a few hymns that are addressed to Vishnu alone (I.22.16 ff.; 154-156: VII. 100); nevertheless, they offer a well-drawn portrait of the god; these hymns are not rich in characteristic traits or myths but sufficient to show that Vishnu was no longer at the preliminary stage of mythological evolution (Alfred Hillebrandt, 1990: 200). Though there is no definite idea of the avatāra concept of Vishnu in the Vēdic literature, there is a pre-figuration of several later stories, including the story of Narasimha and the Vamanavatāra or Trivikrama (Rig Vēda, Chapter I, 154, 1-2).

The five major characteristics of Vēdic Vishnu developed in either in the avataric nature or in one particular avatar are benevolence toward humankind, an alliance with Indra, the deed of taking three steps, pervasiveness and the ability to change into any form. The avatāra concept develops just these benevolent and pervasive qualities both as “doctrine” and through mythology (Soifer, 1991: 17).

His benevolence is praised in the Rig Vēda I.156.3b: “you knowing even his name, have told it forth: may we, Vishnu enjoy the grace of thee the Mighty one.” In verse VII.100.2a: “thou, Vishnu, constant in thy courses, gave good-will to all men and a hymn that latest.” Vishnu is referred to as protector and guardian in verse I.22.18: “Vishnu, the guardian, he whom non deceived, made three steps.” Rig Vēda I.155.4a: “we laud this manly power of him the Mighty one, preserver, inoffensive, bounteous and benign.” Rig Vēda VIII.25.2a: “may we, unharmed, serve bountiful
Vishnu, the God who slays none.” That this benevolence and willingness to help is directed toward mankind is made clear in the hymns such as the Rig Veda VII.100.4a: “Over this earth with mighty step strode Vishnu, ready to give it for a home to Manu.” Rig Veda VI.49.13a: “He who far man’s behoof in his affliction thrice measured out the earthly regions, Vishnu, when one so great as you afford shelter, may we with wealth and with ourselves be happy.” When the avatāra concepts evolved at a later date these same concerns remained as a central point. The avatāras of Vishnu incarnated with the intention to benefit mankind and maintain order and safety for him.

The hymn VII.100.6. of Rig Veda mentions, “what was there to be blamed in thee, O Vishnu, when you declared, I am Sipivishta? Hide not this form from us, nor keep it secret, since you wore another shape in battle.” From these verses we come to know that he could take different forms and also he can change the form during his battles. These Vēdic roots may provide the way for the avatāra concept of Vishnu in the later period.

The Hymn I.154.1-2 of Rig Veda mentions, “I will declare the mighty deeds of Vishnu, of Him who measured out the earthly regions, who propped the highest place of congregation, thrice setting down his foot step, widely striding. For this his mighty deed is Vishnu lauded, like some wild beast, dread, prowling, mountain roaming; he within whose three wide extended paces all living creatures have their habitation”(Griffith, 1920: 207).Vishnu is here described as a huge beast and as striding over the universe, planting his step in three places. The Hymn I.155.6a of Rig Vēda mentions, “He, like a rounded wheel, hath in swift motion set his ninety racing steeds together with the four. Developed, vast in from, with those who sing
forth praise, a youth, no more a child, he comes to our call” (Griffith, 1920: 208). Here he is showed as a solar deity, as a youth with a vast body, as having traversed the universe in three steps.

While analysing these two verses which come one after another, we observe that there are small deviations in the nature of Vishnu. In the earlier verse he is mentioned as a ‘wild beast, dread, prowling, mountain roaming’, and in the second verse he is stated to be a ‘solar deity, youth, no more a child’. In both the verses there is no direct sign of killing or subduing any Asura or demon. So, these above said qualities of Vishnu and contradiction between the two verses may be have pre-figured his different avatāras, the Narasimha (beast and man) and the Vamana/Trivikrama (youth / with three steps). Bergaigne explains this as “mythological multiplications” (Bergaigne, 1972: 201).

There is a reference or an allusion to knowledge of Namuci story in RV.VIII 14.13: "With waters' foam you tore off, Indra, the head of Namuci, subduing all contending hosts." This short reference is believed to have culminated in the full Puranic story of this highly popular Narasimha form ((Soifer, 1991: 25).

Brāhmanaṣas

In the Brāhmanaṣas, Vishnu’s role as aid to Indra in demon vanquishing continues, but becomes more active and explicit. In the TaittiriyaSaṁhitā VI.5.1 Vishnu’s part is still somewhat vague: Indra, when raising his bolt at Vṛtra, was “supported” by Vishnu. In the AitareyaBrāhmaṇa 27.7, as Indra and Vishnu fight the Asuras and conquer them, Indra arranges Vishnu to win back the worlds. Fighting with the enemies and recapturing the land are the important natures of Vishnu as mentioned in this period.
There is no clear reference to the Narasimha form of Vishnu in Brāhmaṇa literature, but the Indra-Namuci story which is discussed in detail must be considered as the prototype of the Narasimha story which attained his complete evolution during the Puranic period. As Devasthali believes, “The story of the man-lion incarnation also appears to have its roots in the Namuci legend of the ŚatapathaBrāhmaṇa” (Devasthali, 1965: 10).

The legend of Namuci in ŚatapathaBrāhmaṇa, XII.7.3.1-4 reads:

1. By means of the Surā-liquor Namuci, the Asura, carried off Indra’s (source of) strength, the essence of food, the Soma-drink. He (Indra) hasted up to the Asvins and Sarasvatī, crying, ‘I have sworn to Namuci, saying, "I will slay thee neither by day nor by night, neither with staff nor with bow, neither with the palm of my hand nor with the fist, neither with the dry nor with the moist!" and yet has he taken these things from me: seek ye to bring me back these things!’

2. They spoke, ‘Let us have a share therein, and we will bring them back to thee.’- ‘These things (shall be) in common to us,’ he said, ‘bring them back, then!’

3. The Asvins and Sarasvatī then poured out foam of water (to serve) as a thunderbolt, saying, 'It is neither dry nor moist;' and, when the night was clearing up, and the sun had not yet risen, Indra, thinking, 'It is neither by day nor by night,' therewith struck off the head of Namuci, the Asura.
4. Wherefore it has been said by the Rishi (Rig Vēda VIII, 14, 13), 'With foam of water, Indra, didst thou sever the head of Namuci, when thou wert subduing all thine enemies.' Now, Namuci is evil: having thus, indeed, slain that evil, his hateful enemy, Indra wrested from him his energy, or vital power. Let him who has an enemy perform the Sautrāmanī: he thereby slays that evil, his hateful enemy, and wrests from him his energy, or vital power. In his (Namuci's) severed head there was the Soma juice mixed with blood. They loathed it. They perceived that (means of) drinking separately (one of) the two liquids,—'King Soma, the drink of immortality, is pressed;'—and having thereby made that (Soma) palatable, they took it in (as food).

From the above verses we can find many similarities between the Namuci and the Narasimha stories. Namuci and Hiranyakāśipu both are Asuras. Both of them fight against the Devas, particularly with Indra. In the early story there is nothing told about the boon given to Namuci, but Indra takes the oath that he will slay the demon “neither with the palm of my hand nor with the fist”. In the story of Narasimha, Hiranyakasibu receives a powerful boon from Brahma for his immortality and thereafter becomes evil. Vishnu takes this avatāra by breaking all the points in the boon received by the Asura; just before he destroys the demon, he claps his hands together, striking neither with the palm of the hand nor the fist. Further he tears apart the Asura with his nails or claws, said to be neither wet nor dry. Soifer states that, “as its basic structural elements are present in the Brāhmaṇas but the man-lion does not appear until the Purāṇas, at least in the context of the myth.”
Narasimha, Narayana, and Vasudeva occur for the first time in the *TaittirīyaĀranyaka* (X. 1.6-7). Kalpana Desai says, “The earliest reference to Narasimha is his invocation in *TaittirīyaĀranyaka*. He is invoked and described as possessed of sharp claws and fangs” (Desai, 1973: 84). According to Surabhi Sheth, “It refers to a popular legend of Vishnu killing in the form of a man lion, the demon Hiranyakasipu – a legend which is alluded to once in the Vedic literature, i.e. *TaittirīyaĀranyaka*” (Sheth, 1979: 242).

**Epics**

The *Ramanayana, Aranya Parva*, verse III.30.28. mentions the killing of Khara a chieftain of Ravana and his army by Rama. It says, “As with the fall of the demon Vritta or fall of the demon Bala who are eliminated by Indra with his Thunderbolt, or as with the collapse of the demon Namuchi who is eliminated by the same Indra just with forth or foam, Khara too is brought down.” These are the examples Valmiki gives from the Rig Veda and *SatpataBrāhmaṇa* which we discussed earlier. As we know in both the cases Vishnu played an important role in subduing the demons.

In verse III-31-10 he mentions Akampana, a spy of Ravana, who says, “He is a youth whose shoulders are mighty, arms round and lengthy, built like that of a lion, who is the son of Dasharatha and known as Rama.” This verse compares Rama with a lion to show his supremacy.

When Ravana seeks the help of Mareecha to capture Sita, Mareecha explains the powers of Rama which reminds us of the incarnations of Vishnu, and advises Ravana to be content with what he has. Here Valmiki states in a verse III. 31- 47:
The giant hosts were brave and strong,
   Good at the bow and spear:
   But Râma slew the routed throng,
       A lion 'mid the deer.
No lion's tooth can match his sword,
   Or arrows fiercely shot:
He sleeps, he sleeps--the lion lord;
   Be wise and rouse him not.

(Griffith, 1874: 267)

Valmiki here directly calls Rama as the lion lord, a further example. When he says that the lion which sleeps inside Rama should not be awakened he is obviously compares Vishnu’s previous incarnation as Narasimha to Rama.

The Epic Mahabarata (3.272.56-61) refers to the form of Narasimha in the Vana Parva, where all the avatāras of Vishnu highlighted. The half lion-half man form of Vishnu is described here for the first time. Chronologically this is the earliest evidence of the Narasimha avatāra myth mentioned in the Epic-Puranic literature.

Again assuming a wonderful form, half-lion, half-man, the mighty armed Lord, squeezing his hand, went to the court of the king of Daityas. The first man of the Daitya race, the enemy of the celestials, the son of Diti (3.272.56-57).

Beholding this wonderful form, became worked up with anger and his eyes became red; Hiraṇyakaśipu, the heroic son of Diti, and the enemy of the celestials adorned with garlands and looking like a mass of dark clouds, rushed on that being half lion-half man, with an uplifted mace in his hand (3.272.58-59).
Then approaching him, that king of beasts, half lion-half man, immediately rent him with his sharp claws. Having thus slain the king of Daityas, the killer of his enemies, for the behoof of creatures, the lotus eyed, effulgent lord (3.272. 60-61). (Dutt, 1988: 389)

These verses have not given us the complete story about the boon of Hiraṇyakaśipu, the devotion of Prahlāda, and where Narasimha come from. But they give a clear description of this form of Narasimha is and how he killed the Asura. These aspects show some relationship with the early Vedic and Brahmanical stories of Vishnu.

**Purāṇas**

References to Narasimha are found in a wide variety of the Puranic scriptures, some in more detail than others. The *VishnuPurāṇa* is one of the most important of all the Purāṇas. It deals with the events of Varahakalpa and contains twenty three thousand hymns. The theme is the ten incarnations of Vishnu. The method of narration is in the form of teaching his disciple Maitreya by sage the Parāśara.

The *VishnuPurāṇa* hymns I.16 – 20 refer to the complete legend of Prahlāda in narrative form. The devotion of Prahlāda and the evil character of Hiraṇyakaśipu are explained well. It makes but a passing reference to the man-lion incarnation of Vishnu. Verse I.20 of *Vishnu Purāṇa* reads, “Whilst with mind intent on Vishnu, he thus pronounced his praises, the divinity, clad in yellow robes, suddenly appeared before him. Startled at the sight, with hesitating speech Prahlāda pronounced repeated salutations to Vishnu, and said, "Oh thou who removest all worldly grief,
Keśava, be propitious unto me; again sanctify me, Achyuta, by thy sight." The deity replied, "I am pleased with the faithful attachment thou hast shown to me: demand from me, Prahlāda, whatever thou desirest." Prahlāda replied, "In all the thousand births through which I may be doomed to pass, may my faith in thee, Achyuta, never know decay; may passion, as fixed as that which the worldly-minded feel for sensual pleasures, ever animate my heart, always devoted unto thee." Bhagavān answered, "Thou hast already devotion unto me, and ever shalt have it: now choose some boon, whatever is in thy wish." Prahlāda then said, "I have been hated, for that I assiduously proclaimed thy praise: do thou, oh lord, pardon in my father this sin that he hath committed. Weapons have been hurled against me; I have been thrown into the flames; I have been bitten by venomous snakes; and poison has been mixed with my food; I have been bound and cast into the sea; and heavy rocks have been heaped upon me: but all this, and whatever ill beside has been wrought against me; whatever wickedness has been done to me, because I put my faith in thee; all, through thy mercy, has been suffered by me unharmed: and do thou, therefore, free my father from this iniquity." To this application Vishńu replied, "All this shall be unto thee, through my favour: but I give thee another boon: demand it, son of the Asura." Prahlāda answered and said, "All my desires, oh lord, have been fulfilled by the boon that thou hast granted, that my faith in thee shall never know decay. Wealth, virtue, love, are as nothing; for even liberation is in his reach whose faith is firm in thee, root of the universal world." Vishńu said, "Since thy heart is filled immovably with trust in me, thou shalt, through my blessing, attain freedom from existence." Thus saying, Vishńu vanished from his sight; and Prahlāda repaired to his father, and bowed down before him. His father kissed him on the forehead, and embraced him, and shed tears, and said, "Dost thou live, my son?" And the great Asura repented of
his former cruelty, and treated him with kindness: and Prahlāda, fulfilling his duties like any other youth, continued diligent in the service of his preceptor and his father. After his father had been put to death by Vishṇu in the form of the man-lion, Prahlāda became the sovereign of the Daityas” (Wilson, 1989: 219-221). In the Vishnu Purāṇa the man-lion form of Vishnu is not explained in detail as in the other later Purāṇas and also the act of killing has only a passing reference.

The hymns II.7.14 of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa speak about the Narasimha form as the twelfth avatāra of Vishnu which comes after the tortoise (Kurma) and precedes Gajendra Anugrahamoorty. It says, “The Lord then assumed the form of Nṛsimgha and tore into pieces with his nails the Lord of the Daityas, Hiranayakasipu by name, who was approaching the celestials with a dreadful club in his hand. Hari thus removed a great fear from the minds of the gods. In this form his face worn (sic) a very dreadful sight by reason of the rolling eye-brows and grinding teeth.”

The earliest detailed story of the Narasimha avatāra coming out of a pillar is found in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa 7.2-10.47. It is there said that Hiraṇyakaśipu asks his son, why, if Vishnu is everywhere, he is not visible in a pillar in the hall, where they were assembled. He then rises, and strikes the column with his fist; on which Vishnu, in a form which is neither wholly a lion nor a man, issues from it, and a conflict ensues, which ends in Hiraṇyakaśipu's being torn to pieces (Wilson, 1989: 221, fn.2). Here the main act of coming out of the pillar and killing the demon for the sake of protecting the child is mentioned clearly. It is also tells how Hiraṇyakaśipu was torn into pieces and how Vishnu rid the torments of the gods.
The Agni Purāṇa IV.2-3 mentions the avatāra forms of Vishnu in order. Here Narasimha comes in fourth place, after the Boar incarnation. Only two hymns describe the story of Narasimha. It reads, “Hiraṇyākṣaḥ had a brother by name Hiraṇyakaśipu. Having vanquished the celestials he occupied all their possessions and monopolized their share in the sacrificial offerings. Having assumed the form of a man-lion he killed them together with all the Asuras and re-established the suras in their own stations. Narasimha was then worshiped by the celestials.” Here the Narasimha form of Vishnu is shown as a protector of the celestials. The verses clearly state that Narasimha saved the celestials from the evil hands of the Hiraṇyakaśipu and regained for them whatever they had lost.

The Pāḍma Purāṇa (Uttara-khanda 5.42), Brahma Purāṇa (213.44-79), Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇa (2.5.3-29), Shiva Purāṇa (2.5.43 & 3.10-12), Vayu Purāṇa (67.61-66), Linga Purāṇa (1.95-96), Skanda Purāṇa 7 (2.18.60-130), Matsya Purāṇa (161-163), Kurma Purāṇa (1.15.18-72), Harivamsa (41 & 3.41-47) and Vishnudharmottara Purāṇa (1.54), all contain legends of the Narasimha avatar with small variations in their narration.

Before we conclude, the contents of the Narasimha Tapaniya Upanisad must be studied, even though it’s a minor work of later period; it gives a detailed story of Narasimha. One interesting point to note in this Upanishad is that it describes Narasimha as the one who protected all the three worlds with his feet. Champakalaskshmi says, “Wherein it is said that the worshipper praises Vishnu as the all pervading (Vis), for the removal of avidya, as the purusa of terrifying form, as that one who encompassed the entire world in his three steps. Thus he is called Narasimha.” (Champakalaskshmi, 1981: 93)
The prefiguration of Narasimha as we saw in the Vēdic literature and the Namuci legend in the *Satapata Barahmana*, gives some idea about the evolution of the Narasimha legend. The *TaittirīyaĀraṇyaka* and *MahanarayanaUpanishad* are the works which come before the Brāhmaṇas and comes after the Vēdas, giving some clue about Narasimha as seen earlier. In the *Mahabaratath* the form of Narasimha avatāra is mentioned clearly, but the devotion of Prahlāda is missing. The legend of Prahlāda is inserted in detail in the *VishnuPurāṇa, BhāgavataPurāṇa* and in the *Uttara Khandā* of the *PādmaPurāṇa*: it is adverted to more briefly in the other Purāṇas.

During the Vēdic period Vishnu was not a major deity; he now posseses an important place in the trinity of Hinduism. When Brahmanic culture developed and sectarianism evolved, Vishnu becomes a main god and his followers formed Vaishnavism. He is filled with many powers to show him as a supreme god. The main concept that developed at a later date is that of Vishnu as Preserver and his duty as that of destroying evil and protecting his devotees and the world.

According to these Sanskrit literary works starting from the Vēdas, Vishnu could change his form as he liked and has taken many avatāras to protect the world from evil, one of which is the Narasimha incarnation, i.e., half man-half lion. As cited above he took this man-lion form for a particular reason and he killed the demon in a particular style. The initial references of Narasimha killing the Hiraṇyakaśipu are purely in the nature of destroying evil. Later on, the theme was modified, that is from the Puranic age the devotion of Prahlāda the son of Hiraṇyakaśipu is highlighted. Kalpana Desai says, “These different accounts show the common origin of the myth” (Desai, 1973: 85). She particularly mentions the Purāṇa stories. Wilson is probably justified in presuming that the Narasimha myth is a popular legend adapted by the worshippers of Vishnu to serve their purpose.
Iconography of Narasimha in Āgama and Puranic Literatures

The reason for this incarnation as given in the Purāṇas (as for instance in Bhāgavata, 7,8, Harivamśa, 3,41-47, and Vishnu-Purāṇa, 20) is to save the world from the disastrous hold of the demon Hiraṇyakaśipu, son Kaśyapa-prajāpati and Diti: and more especially to protect Prahlāda, the devout son of the demon. Hiraṇyakaśipu's brother, Hiraṇyāksha, was killed by Vishnu in his Varaha incarnation, and Hiraṇyakaśipu had therefore nurtured hatred for Vishnu. When his son Prahlāda grew up as a devotee of Vishnu, the demon naturally threatened his son, and subjected him to all kinds of terrible punishments. But Prahlāda was unswerving in his devotion to Vishnu. Vishnu had to appear in order to protect this young b Baktha (devotee). Hiraṇyakaśipu, however, had performed penance and obtained from Brahma the boon that he could not be killed by god, man or beast, by any weapon known to man, during day or night, inside his palace or outside it. Therefore, Vishnu had to appear as man-beast (man-lion, nara-simha) and tear the demon’s entrails with his claws (which were not weapons) during dusk (which was neither day nor night) and seated upon the threshold of the palace (which was neither inside nor outside).

The legend further narrates that when Hiraṇyakaśipu challenged his son Prahlāda to show Vishnu, whom the boy claimed to be everywhere, in one of the pillars of his palace, Vishnu revealed himself as the ferocious man-lion bursting out of that pillar. He fought the demon king with his bare hands and killed him with his neither dry nor wet nails.
Narasimha’s iconography incorporates all the details of this legend. The deity is shown variously as emerging from the pillar, rushing upon Hiranyakāśipu, fighting with him, tearing open the demon’s belly and pulling out the entrails, having held the demon prostrate on his lap, and offering protection to Prahlāda. He is shown in all the three conventional posture: seated (asana), standing (sthanaka), and striding (yanaka). He is shown in his aspect of benevolence to his devotee (saumya, varada). He is alone (kevala) or in the company of Lakshmi, or of Prahlāda, or both.

Therefore there are numerous forms of Narasimha we could find in the temples as sculptures and painting and they are in vogue and in worship. The Vihagendra-Saṃhitā (4, 17) enumerates more than seventy varieties of Narasimha. Texts like Pādma-Saṃhitā (kriyā, 17, 22) mention that only a few come in for description (Nṛsimha-mūrtir bahudhā tatra, kāchit pradarśayet). There are iconographic descriptions provided in many texts of Pāñcharātra and Vaikhānasa divisions of the Āgama (Pādma-Saṃhitā, kriya 17, 22041, Īśvara-Saṃhitā 4, 73,75, Parāśara Saṃhitā 25, 10, Pārameśvara-Saṃhitā 23, 48-49, Sāttvata-Saṃhitā 17, 73-99, Śesha-Saṃhitā Chaps. 24,27 and 28, Vaikhānasagama 58th patala) as well as in several Purāṇas (like Vishnu-dharmottara, 3,78, Matsya, 269, 31-34 and Agni, 49,4). There are iconometric details given in Sāttvata-Saṃhitā (24, 180-227), Īśvara-Saṃhitā (17, 181-227) and Sri-prasna-Saṃhitā (13, 96-142).

Most of the Varieties of Narasimha given in Vihagendra-Saṃhitā appear to be little more than names. The text says that the distinction between the forms lies in the weapons held (chatuhsaptati-vigraham syād āyudhānām vibhedakam). But
few names are particularly refer to the deferent actions of the Narasimha in the
tale like *Stambha*-Narasimha (coming out of the pillar), *Svayam*-Narasimha
(catching hold of Hiranyakasipu), *Vidarana*-Narasimha (ripping open the belly of
the demon), *Samhara*-Narasimha (killing the demon) and several other.

*Ghora*-Narasimha, *Ugra*-Narasimha and *Chanda*-Narasimha refer to the
ferocious aspect of the incarnation. To show his unlimited anger, a hallow of flames
of fire circle the head of *Jwālā*-Narasimha. *Āveśa*-Narasimha is the ferocious form,
while *Attahāsa*-Narasimha is the form that in the action of destroying the evil. The
pacific forms are Lakshmi-Narasimha, who is accompanied by Lakshmi; Prasāda-
Narasimha who is in the benign aspect of protecting Prahlāda, also known as
Prahlāda-*varada*-Narasimha; Chhatra-Narasimha who is decorated by a five-hooded
serpent serving as an umbrella; and Yoga-Narasimha who is the form in which the
god is seated in meditation to control his anger and to attain peace. (Ramachandra
Rao,1998:152)

*Vishnu-dharmottara Purāṇa* (3,78(2), 5-7) identifies Narasimha with the
Saṅkarshaṇa form of Vishnu (*haris saṅkarashṇāmsena Narasimha-vapurdharah*),
and explains that the demon Hiranyakasipu represents ignorance (*Hiranyakasipur
daiyah tam ajñānām vidur budhāh*) and that Narasimha destroys him
(*saṅkarshaṇātmā bhagavān ajñānasya vināśanah*). By destroying the ignorance
Narasimha destroys the sins of the world, arising from speech, mind and body
(*vāṅgamānasakāyasambhūtam trividham jagatām malam sadā pāṭayati*). The text
says that the Narasimha form was taken by the God to destroy all ignorance
(*sarvājñāna-vināśinī*). *Sāttvata-Satphitā* (1, 80) says the same concept of the man-
lion incarnation of Narasimha incorporates pure-knowledge and the undoing of the

The man-lion with the human body and lion head, which composes the Narasimha incarnation is explained in detail in the following āgamas and Purāṇas. Vishnu-dharmottara (3, 78(2), 3), mentions that the head was surrounded by a thick and heavy mane resembling a circle of flames (jvālāmalākua-mukho jvālākesaa maṇḍalalah). Śesha-Saṃhitā(23,19) describes the three eyes of the lord are large and round (vartule netre) emit sparks of fire (tryakshair visphurantam). Vishvakṣena-Saṃhitā(21,60) adds that the eyes are glow like fire and sun put together (bibharti netrāṇi hutāśanarka prabhānchitāni). (Ramachandra Rao, 1998: 155)

Vishnu-tantra(17,3) describes the Nara-simha composition of the incarnation as the body of a man and the face is of a lion (galānta-nararūpaṁ māhasimham atah para; galādadhastā nara-rūpa-dhāri parata simhānana-bhṛt svarūpaṁ). It further mentioned in Vishvakṣena-Saṃhitā (21,60) that the body is a mass of crystal white, resembling a big mountain (śveta-parvata-saṅkāṣam, śuddha-sphaṭika saṅkāṣam). Īśvara-Saṃhitā(4,64) mentions that his body shines like snow, jasmine flower or moon (hima-kundendu-sannibha). While describing about the ferociousness of the man-lion form Sāttvata-Saṃhitā(12,74) mentions the body generates burning sparks of fire due to his anger (jvalad-agni-sphuliṅgābhis svadehotthābhir āvṛtam). Hayasirsha-Saṃhitā (23, 15) says his eye-brows are knitted and twisted with fury (bhruvau hyākuṇchitavakre) and the tongue is thrust out and is eager to lap up blood (lelihāna-jīhvā) and a tall tapering and splendid crown adorns his head (kīrtak-mukutojjvala) and the form is richly bedecked with all ornaments(sarvābharanā-
vibhūshita), especially Śri-vatsa and Kaustubha on the chest. There is a serpent dangling from the left shoulder forming the sacrificial cord (sarpa-yajñopavīta).

Pādma-Saṇhitā(17,22 – 41) prescribes that Narasimha must be shown as wearing a red-coloured bodice (rakta-kañchuka-samyukta), while many of the texts only mention that his garments are red in colour (rakta-vastra-dhara). Few other texts mentions different colours for Narasimha; dark blue clothes (nīla-vāsah, Vishnu-dharmottara, 3, 78, 2), yellow (Sāttvata-Saṇhitā, 12, 73) and Vishvakṣena-Saṇhitā describes the deity’s body as daubed with red sandal paste (rakta-chandana liptaṅgam, rakta-chandana-charchitam).

In the Narasimha form he is commonly shown with a single head (dhyāyed eka-vaktramSāttvata-Saṇhitā, 12,80), but Īśvara-Saṇhitā(4, 76 – 81) describes a form of Narasimha with five heads and ten arms (pañchānana-suṣobhita, pañcha-vaktra). There is a head facing each of the four directions, and is brilliant like the blazing fire (ūrdhvam agni nibham mukham). The heads facing east, west, south and north (purvādi-chottarāntam) are said to shine like the moon (white), collyrium (black), gold (yellow), and red-coloured insect (indra-gopa) respectively (chandraṇjana-suvarṇābham indragopa-nibham tathā). The hands carry rosary, mace, lotus, conch, bow, ploughshare, discus, arrow, gesture of boon-bestowal and sword. This form of Narasimha is called Meru; it is worshipped to get rid of all diseases (etam merur iti khyātam sarva-vyādhi-vināśanam).
Vihagendra-Saṃhitā (4, 7 – 17) mentions two broad types of Narasimha forms: girīja (kevala) or mountain dweller and sthunaja (sthauna) or standing or coming out of pillar. Ramachandra Rao explains this as, “The former expression suggests Narasimha rushing out of a mountain-cave (giri) to protect his devotee; he is shown as a lone figure, seated in easy or yogic posture, bestowing a boon or offering protection. The latter expression, on the other hand, signifies Narasimha bursting out of the pillar (sthūna) of Hiraṇyakaśipu’s palace, split into two. He is ferocious in aspect, and is shown as fighting with the demon or as ripping open his belly. He stands or dances, struts about or sits; but the demon is shown along with him. Or, to calm his fury, Lakshmi, Prahlāda or Garuda are also shown with him” (Ramachandra Rao, 1998:158).

Vaikhānasāgama which distinguishes between Kevala-Narasimha and Sthaūna- Narasimha points out that the former is benign, while the later is terrible. In the former variety, the deity sits on a lotus-seat (pādma-pīṭhopari), with legs crossed (dvau pādau vyatayayena nyasya) or in the ‘utkūṭikāsana’ posture. He is bedecked with all ornaments. He has only four hands, upper ones holding discus (right) and conch (left), and the normal hands stretched over the knees (jānūparishṭhāt prasāritau). Or he may sit on a lion-seat (simhāsana) with the left leg bent and placed across the seat (vāmam dakṣiṇam prasārya). His lower right hand assumes the gesture of protection (abhaya) and the left hand kept on the hip (kaṭyavalambita) or is placed on the thigh (ūru-stham vā).

It further mentions the form of Narasimha killing the demon king Hiraṇyakaśipu is comes under the sthauna variety. According to the Vaikhānasagama, Narasimha should have a frightening look and look frightening
against evil (dhushṭānāṁ atibhishaṇam). His mouth is wide open (vikasaya) and his eyes are round, blood-shot and terrible (rakta-vṛttogra-drṣṭikam) Narasimha in this form has many arms, eight or sixteen being usual (ašṭābhir dvirāṣṭābhir vā bhujair yuktam bhayāṇakam daitya-vadhāṇurūpam nṛsimham sthūṇa-jam kārayet). The demon must be shown as held prostrate on the left thigh of Narasimha (utsaṅge) and kept unmovable by the two of the lower hands of the god, while the two upper hands should be in the action of pulling out the entrails from the demon’s belly, holding them as garlands around his own neck.

In the seated and standing form, Narasimha has been classified into two varieties: svatantra (alone) and devī-sahita (accompanied by consort). In the form of accompanying the consort, it is usual that Lakshmi alone is shown seated on his lap or standing next to him. But there are icons where both Lakshmi and Bhū-devī (goddess of earth) are shown on his sides: this form is known as Saumya – Narasimha (Śesha – Saṃhitā, 27 – 6).

Parāśara-Saṃhitā (15, 160) says that when Lakshmi alone is shown, she is seated on his lap. It further states that this form of Narasimha is known as Lakshmi-Narasimha. The deity is imagined to dwell in the midst of the milky-ocean and represents reality, consciousness and bliss (satya-jñāna-sukha-svarūpam amalam kshīrbhdhi-madhya-sthitam). He is adorned with numerous ornaments (bhūṣā-sahasrojjvalam), and his face is extremely pleasant (ati-prasanna-vadanam). He has three eyes (tryaksham). His skin texture is white like the moon (indu-dhavalam) and his brilliance is like that of the sun (arka-cchhavim). (Ramachandra Rao, 1998: 160 - 161)
Vishnu-tantra mentions that yoga Narasimha should be in the yogic posture, with crossed and uplifted legs (utkudika) held firm by a band (yoga-patta samāyuktam āśīnam amyag āsane, 17, 7 – 8). In the same form, when he sits at ease, he will be shown with the left leg bent and touching the ground. Some times Lakshmi is shown seated on his left lap. Above Narasimha’s head, Adi-Śesha spreads out his hoods like an umbrella (chhatrī-bhūta-phaṇīndram). He is four-armed, the upper two arms carrying the cakra in the left and bow in the right, while his lower right is in abhaya and left embraces Lakshmi.

Vaikhānasagama explains that the presence of Lakshmi, sometimes the Bhū-devī also with the god, indicates that Narasimha is benevolent in aspect because of pacifying by the goddesses (kopa-śāntyarthan pārśvayoh śrī māhyau). When Prahlāda also is present, Narasimha is known as Prahlāda-varada and is included under the Devi-sahīta variety. It is usual for the Lakshmi-Narasimha form to have Lakshmi on the god’s left lap. But when both the goddesses are shown, Lakshmi or Śrī-devī is on the right side and Bhū-devī on the left. Lakshmi is golden yellow coloured (suvarṇābhā) and is seated in sukhasana; she holds a red lotus (pādana) in her left hand. Bhū-devī is dark-coloured (śyāmābhā) and she sits in sukhasana; she holds a blue lotus (nilotpala) in her right hand. (Ramachandra Rao, 1998: 162 – 163)

In Īśvara-Saṁhitā (4, 62 – 66), the Yoga Narasimha form is described as follows: he is seated upon a lotus seat in a typical yogic posture, with the two legs held up, crossing each other and with the feet closer together but facing opposite directions (vyatyasta-charana-dvandvam āśīnam pādana víṣṭare) and with a band securing the position of the legs (yoga-paṭṭikā-dṛḍha-bandhanam). This form has
three eyes and four arms. The hands in front rest on the knees, stretching out
(prasārya jānunoh, jānvārūdha-srasta-bhuja, or jānu-dvayopari prasārayet). This
text further says that in this form Narasimha is shown alone, sometimes with
Lakshmi seated on his left lap. This form of Narasimha is said to symbolize
omniscience (sarva-jñāna-mayam parah).

Another form of Yoga-Narasimha is seen behind the Sudarśana cakra when
the latter is worshiped in a sub-shrine. This form is popularly known as Sudarśana-
Narasimha. Pādma-Saṭṭhitā(charyā, 31, 259) says the form of Yoga-Narasimha
involved in the Sudarśana motif is located in the centre of a six-angled magical
diagram surrounded by a flaming circle known as Sudarśana (sudarśanasya ḫṛdaya
visṣṭitam). According to Śesha-Saṭṭhitā (24, 15 – 16) he should have four or eight
hands, in all of which he carries only the discus (Sudarśana cakra). On the reverse
of the magical diagram will be a representation of Sudarśana with eight or sixteen
arms, standing or moving. This is said to symbolize the Visva-rupa aspect of
Vishnu (viṣvarūpa udārāṅgam, viṣvatomukham).

Īśvara-Saṭṭhitā (4,73-78) mentions a form of Narasimha with only two
hands and a prominent tail (hence called Pucchha-Narasimha). The god is red like a
hibiscus flower (japāpushpa-saṅkāśa) and his eyes are blood-shot (rakta-lochana).
He has both hands pressed against the ground (karau bhūmau pratisṭhāpya), and is
shown as loudly lashing the ground with his tail (āśphotya bhūmau laṅgūlam). He
is terrible in this aspect (sarva-loka-bhayaṅkara) and is about to lap up the world of
living beings and all matter (lelihanas sacharācharam).
Another variety of Narasimha is Varaha-Narasimha, a composite form involving the Varaha and Narasimha incarnations of Vishnu, assumed in order to free the world from the terror caused by the two demon-brothers, Hiranyaksha and Hiranyakashipu. Śesha-Saṃhitā (28, 19) describes this form as fierce (ugra-vigraham) as well as benevolent (saumyam) with eight hands in each of which a discus is held (chakra-asha-dharam).

According to Parāśara-Saṃhitā (30, 26) this conjoint form has four hands carrying in each of them a discus (chatus-chakra-dharam), and is accompanied by three consorts: Lakshmi, Bhu and Nila (śrī-bhū-nīlādhipam). The text, however, does not provide iconographical prescriptions about how the two forms (Varaha and Narasimha) are to be conjoined. It further says that Varaha-Narasimha is invoked for victory and for securing the kingdom (rājya-jaya-prada, 30, 21).

Pārameśvara-Saṃhitā (23, 48-49) mentions the weapons which must be carried by this form of the eight-armed Narasimha. In the circumambulatory order beginning with the normal right hand (mukya-daksha-karādikiah kramāt): lotus, goad, ploughshare (musala), discus, conch, bow and arrow (sa-śaram chāpam), noose and mace.

According to Matsya-Purāṇa (269, 31, 34), when Narasimha is shown with eight-hands, the demon Hiranyakashaipu must be shown on his lap and as being killed by him (dārayantam dites sutam). Śilpa-ratna (cantor. 25) describes the terrible aspect of the killing of the evil, as the demon must hold in his two hands a sword and shield and be represented as vomiting blood, his entrails coming out (hiraṇyakaśipum dārayantam nakhāṅkuraiḥ uror upari, vinir-gatāntra-jālam).
dānavam paikalpayet, vamantam rudhiram ghoram). It further states that in the
disposition of Narasimha’s eight hands, the two hands on top are shown as holding
the entrails pulled out of the demon’s belly as a garland (tasyāntra-mālām
nishkṛṣhya bāhu-yugmena), two hands are engaged in ripping open the demon; the
other four hands carry the discus, lotus, mace and conch.

Narasimha with sixteen arms is a popularly known icon and there are
descriptions available in some agama texts. The multiplicity of arms is suggestive
of various weapons that increase the ferocity of the deity. The icon in this form is
characteristically destructive of the demon Hiraṇyakaśipu, and hence among the
sixteen arms, two secure the body of the demon on the god’s left thigh, the right
hand holding the legs and the left the head of the demon; two engage themselves
with their sharp nails in ripping open the stomach of the demon; two of the upper
hands pull out the entrails from the demon’s belly and throw them as a garland
round the god’s neck; and one of the hands is about to administer a blow to the
demon (chhapeṭikā-mudrā).

The weapons carried in the sixteen hands of Narasimha are described in
Vaikhanasāgama, Pārameśvara-Saṃhitā (kriya, 23, 45-47). It makes no mention of
the demon and in circumambulatory order the weapons are: sakti, sword, fire, goad,
cudgel, lance, axe, discus, bow, arrow, noose, ploughshare, vajra, mace, pestle and
trident. Pādma-Saṃhitā (kriya, 17, 22-41) also prescribes almost same weapons: in
the right hands are the discus, sword, axe, spear, arrow, goad and vajra and the left
hands hold the conch, shield, mace, sakti, bow, noose and club. The remaining two
natural hands are placed on the knees (śishta karau sthāpayej jānunor dvayoh). The
description does not include the demon Hiranyakasipu. A different description is
found in the *Parāśara-Saṃhitā* (25, 10), making this form assume a standing posture (*pratyālidha*), having three eyes, protruding tooth, and tawny-red hair (*piṅga-kesā*).

Vaikhanasāgama describes the image of *Sthauna*-Narasimha as follows: the image may be with twelve or sixteen hands, and there should be three bends in the body (*tribhanga*). On the left thigh thereof Hiranyakaśipu should be stretched out, with the belly ripped open by two of the hands of Narasimha. One of the right hands should be in the abhaya pose, and another has to carry a sword so as to make its point reach up to the kundala in the ear. One of the left hands of Narasimha should hold the makuta of Hiranyakaśipu, and another should be shown as lifted up for administering a blow to the demon. The legs of the asura are to be taken hold of by a right hand, and two other hands, one right and one left, should be lifted up to the ears of the image, holding the drawn-out entrails of Hiranyakaśipu in the form of a garland. The figure of Hiranyakaśipu should be sculpted so as to indicate that he has been attempting to kill his opponent, and for this purpose may be armed with a sword and a shield. As if to appease the highly excited wrath of Narasimha while engaged in destroying this demon, Śridevi, Bhudevi, Narada with his vina and Prahlāda with his hands in the anjali pose should all be shown as standing on his right and left. Above these should be sculpted Indra and the other celestials with their hands in the anjali pose (Gopinatha Rao, 1985: 152 – 153).

It further states that if the deity is sculpted with eight hands, two of them should be employed in tearing open the belly of Hiranyakaśipu, while four others should carry the śankha, club, cakra, and the lotus. The remaining two should be holding the drawn out entrails of the demon as a garland above his head. The neck
of the image must be thick; the shoulders and the hip must be comparatively large in size and the abdomen as well as the waist must be notably thin. The whole of the image should be painted golden yellow, yellowish brown, blue or scarlet red. The Vishnudharmottara mentions that Narasimha, when worshipped, increases one’s knowledge of the Supreme Being and that Hiraṇyakaśipu is a personification of evil and ignorance (Gopinatha Rao, 1985: 153 – 154).

Pātala-Narasimha is another variety of Narasimha incarnation mentioned in Vaikhanasāgama (kriya, 11, 52-58). In this form he is shown seated with the left knee raised and the right resting upon Garuda, who is four-armed, keeping the two normal hand on the chest in an act of supplication (ḥṛdayāṅjali samyutam) and carrying Adi-Śesha in the two upper hands (dadhānam śesha-vigraham). Adi-Śesha must be shown as spreading his many hoods on Narasimha’s head as an umbrella (uttamāṅgam samuddṛtya phaṇā-ṃandala-ṃṇditam, kalpayet tat phaṇādhaṣṭam nārasimham). Narasimha must be shown as placing his right foot on Garuda, but his left foot, bent, must be placed on the body of Adi-Śesha (kuṇchitam vāmapādam tu śesha-bhoge nidhāya cha; āśīnam dakṣiṇam pādam viśaskandha praśārya cha).

The god has eight arms, the normal right hand assuming the gesture of protection and the other three hands on the right carrying discus, dart and sword, while the four hands on the left side hold conch, bow, sword, and mace.

Tamil Literature

The Tamil literary works can be broadly classified into Sangam and post Sangam literature, Bhakti literature and post Bhakti literature. The early Tamil literary works are called Sangam classics. Eṭṭutogai a collection of eight anthologies,
and *Pattupāṭṭu*, an anthology of ten poems, are two major Sangam classics. They reflect the social, political, economic and religious life of the Tamil people. They describe natural sources like landscape, seasons, flora, fauna, love life, conjugal life, kingship, war, religion, festival, etc. The date of the Sangam literature is generally considered among the scholars as second century CE to fourth century CE. The epics *Silappadikāram* and *Manimekalai* also furnish detailed information about the early activities of the people.

The flowering of the Bhakti movement in the Tamil country from sixth to ninth century CE resulted in the writing of volumes of religious literary hymns by the saints Alvars and Nayanmars of Vaishnavism and Saivism respectively. *NālāyiraDivyaprabandam* by the Alvars of the Vaishnava sect and *Panniru Thirumurai* by the Nayanmars of the Saiva sect are the religious literary works which throw valuable light on cult worship. The post-Bhakti literature like *Bharani Ula, Kamba-Rāmāyanam, PeriyaPurāṇam* etc., also gives information regarding the religious life of the people in those days.

**Sangam Literature**

The people of Sangam age in the Tamil country had well established religious practices. They followed nature worship and different gods and goddess were worshiped. According to R.Champakalakshmi, “the early Tamils had evolved an interesting pattern of worship in which, besides the totemistic and animistic beliefs, each of the five major geographical divisions mentioned in this literature, came to the associated with a particular deity. Māyon (Vishnu – Krishna) was the deity par excellence of *mullai* (pastoral) Vēndan (equated with Indra) of
marudam (plains), Varunan of neytal (god of the coastal region), Sēyon (or Muruga equated with Karttikeya or Subrahmanya) of kurinji (hilly) and Korravai (Durga) of palai (desert)” (Champakalashmi, R. 1981: 32). The above information clearly shows the practice of multi god worship by the Sangam age people and their knowledge of nature based worship.

Tolkappiyam, the earliest grammatical work in Tamil, mentions Vishnu as Māyon, God of Mullai in Porūlathikāram, Purathinaiyal, 5. The Sangam anthologies like Purāṇanuru, Akanānuru, Aiṅkurunūru, Kalittokai, Parippāṭal, Kuruntokai, Naṛṭinai, Patiruppattu and Pattupāṭṭu are the works which have several references about Vishnu. Māyon, Tirumāl, and Māl are names found identified with Vishnu. The avatāra concept of Vishnu is also found in the Sangam literature, but only a few avatars are repeatedly mentioned. Most of the early Sangam works frequently mention the Vamana-Trivikrama avatāra of Vishnu. Parippāṭal (v. 4, 11. 11 – 21) and Silappadikāram (XVII, Muṅgilaipparaval, 34) are the two works which also speak of Narasimha avatāra of Vishnu.

The Parippāṭal is one of the eight anthologies of Eṭṭuttogai (collection of eight poems). It is one of the important sources for the study of Vaishnavism in Tamil Nadu. Of the seventy poems of this collection, only twenty two and a few fragments are available. Out of them six songs are about Vishnu and his avatāras, eight are about Murugan and eight of them are about Vaiyai river (Vaigai) (Srinivas Iyengar, P.T. 1982: 583). While most of the avatāras and specific features of Vishnu are already referred to in other works, the Parippāṭal enlarges the themes and provides a wider variety of concepts by referring to numberless forms, “ēn varambu ariyā yakkiyāi” (Parippāṭal, v. 3, 1.45).
Thy divine for resembles a fine dark sapphire,
Waveless sea, and impregnant cloud.
Golden in contrast is Thy robe,
Militating against the enemies the disc Thou hast.
Oh! Thou spotless red-eyed!
Prakalatan eulogized Thee.
Lo! Smoldering anger at heart
And with the dried sandal paste on chest,
Hiraniyan tortured him with many afflictions.
Prakalatan of expanding fame
Suffering a lot, and tremulous at heart
did not speak ill of him.
For he was his father.
Thou belittled Hiraniyan
but embraced Prakalatan’s fair heart.
Who showed great love towards Thee.
And on the hill like chest of Hiraniyan
who got the boon along with Thee-
Thou pounced smashing the enemical might!
Accompanied by hapless ill-omens of nature
Hiraniyan’s war drum thundered!
Thou appeared thro’ the splits of broken pillar,
The torn body of Hiraniyan fell scattered
Such fierce fangs Thou hast!

(Parippāṭal, v. 4, 11 – 21)
In the above invocation song, the poet Kaduvan Illaveiyinanar describes various incarnations (avatāra) taken by Vishnu to protect the world and his devotees from evil. This particular verse narrates the story of Prahlāda, an adherent devotee of Vishnu. The poet explains how much of deep faith Prahlāda had on Vishnu and for that how he was punished by his father Hiranyakaśipu an asura king. While describing the fierce form of Narasimha the poet says that he came out of the pillar with tremendous force, so that the pillar was broken into many pieces, his eyes were red with anger, he kicked the chest of the demon king and tore his body into several pieces with his sharp nails.

The *Silappadikāram* was written by the poet Elango Adigal (a Sangam age Chera prince). This was celebrated as one of the five epics of the Tamil language. It deals with the life story of Kannaki and Kovalan. The poet describes the story by narrating various aspects that prevailed in the life of the people during his time. Landscapes, rivers, towns and cities, architectures, temples, festivals, religion etc., are vividly explained in this work. *Aichiyarkuravai* of *MaduraiKandam* in *Silappadikāram* narrates Vishnu’s exploits in a sweet rhythm. The Krishna avatar a favorite god of the shepherd community is praised in these *kuravai* verses. One of the verses in *Munnilaiparaval* of *Aichiyarkuravai* mentions the Narasimha avatar of Vishnu.
Sea-coloured god, long ago you churned the ocean-depths,
The northern mountain your pestle, the great snake Vasuki your rope.
Yet Yashoda imprisoned those hands with a churning cord.
Lord, you who wear the lotus, how shall I fathom this mystery?

Changless one, all the gods worship you and sing your praises,
You who swallowed the entire universe.
Yet, in play, you stole the butter from the cowherds’ churns.
Lord of tulasi-garland, how shall I fathom this mystery?

Lord Tirumal, in two strides your lotus feet
Encompassed the three worlds and banished darkness.
Yet those feet walked this earth, messengers for the Pandavas.
Lion-god! How shall I fathom your mystery?

(Silappadikāram., XVII, Munnilaipparaval, 34)

(Lakshmi Holmstrom, 1996: 61)
In these verses the poet explains the various deeds of Vishnu in an elegant manner and the only one sharp call he gives at the end as “ho! lion god”; it shows how firmly he believed in the Narasimha avatar of Vishnu.

According to R. Champakalakshmi, “The Narasimhaavatarā is known to the Parippāṭal and the Silappadikāram, both of which represent the culmination of the spread of the Vaishnava concept in the Tamil country during the period. The concept originated from the story of the man-lion incarnation assumed by Vishnu for killing Hiranyakasipu who could not tolerate the intense devotion of his son, Prahlāda, to Vishnu. The particular reference in the Parippāṭal is to the nails of the Man-lion tearing open the chest of the asura. In later sculptural representations of this form, the act of Narasimha tearing open the entrails of Hiranyakasipu is a favourite theme. The story is sometimes told in the narrative sculptures representing, the actual appearance of Narasimha from the pillar, his fight with Hiranyakasipu and the final act of killing the asura” (Champakalashmi, 1981: 44).

The Parippāṭal and Silappadikāram have both not mentioned the name Narasimha or Narasinga which is the name found in later literature, particularly in Bhakti literature. Parippāṭal only refers to how ferocious the deity is and how he tears open the body of Hiranyakasipu with his sharp nails. It has not mentioned any name for the deity. But the story clearly tells us that it is about the Narasimha form of Vishnu. In Silappadikāram there was no story about Narasimha avatāra or Prahlāda or Hiranyakasipu but it was a song sung in praise of the lord Vishnu. While the poet mentions the different forms that Vishnu took to protect his devotees, he calls him as madangalai. Literally, it means lion but when we see it as one of the forms of Vishnu, we should understand that it refers to Narasimha.

**Bhakti Literature**

In the sixth century CE the Tamil country faced many changes politically as well as culturally. Jainism and Buddhism had a strong hold in Southern India. Due to the political changes that occurred during the fifth to sixth century CE, that is the rise of the Pallavas in the northern part of the Tamil country and the Pandyas in the southern part, new strength was given to Vedic religion. The early Pandya and the Pallava kings were followers of Vaishnavism and/or Saivism. The Vedic reaction to the apparent decline of their religion was growing and reached its peak during the later part of the seventh century. There was a widespread Vedic revival during which a huge body of Saiva and Vaishnava literature was created.

The hymns sung in praise of Vishnu by the Alvars throw valuable light on Vaishnava iconography. Their songs were collected later into the four thousand sacred hymns (*Nālayira Divyaprabhandham*). The Poygai, Pudam and Pey Alvar are said to be the early Vaishnava Alvars of fifth to sixth century CE. Tirumalisai Alvar (sixth to seventh century CE), who was a contemporary of the Pallava king Mahendravarman I, wrote works such as *Thiru Chanda Viruthham*, etc. Tirumangai Alvar who lived in the eighth century CE was a more prolific writer and his works
constitute about a third of the Divyaprabandam. Nammalvar, who lived in the ninth century, wrote Tiruvaimoli. It comprises one thousand one hundred and one stanzas and is held in great esteem for its elucidation of the Upanishads. Periyalvar and his adopted daughter Andal contributed nearly six hundred and fifty hymns to the Vaishnava canon. Andal symbolised purity and love for the god and wrote her hymns addressing Vishnu as a bridegroom. Among the twelve Alvars some of them travelled to many holy places of Vaishnavsim and sang in praise of the god; later, these holy places were called DivyaDesams (padal perra sthalam or abhimana sthalam). There are 108 DivyaDesams wherein the respective gods of those places were eulogised and the anthologies called as mangalasasana.

The Narasimha avatāra of Vishnu had a great influence on the hymns of the Alvars. The Poygai, Pudam, and Pey Alvars mention this form of Vishnu in many of their hymns. They praise him as the savior of the world. They also highlighted important movements in the story of Prahlāda, like the appearance of the god, how Hiranyakāśipu faced his death, when and where he was killed, etc. This indicates that the story of the Narasimha avatar was so popular even before the fifth century CE in Tamil Nadu. Because of that familiarity, the Alvars made very casual references to the details of the story in their hymns.

Poigai Alvar in his hymns praises the lord Vishnu and his many forms which compiled in mudhal Thiruvandhadi in Iyarppa of Nālāyira Divyaprabandam. He explains the story of Prahlāda in his hymns and one of his verses specifically mentions how Vishnu took this form to kill Hiranyakāśipu.
The above lines describe the legend as Hiranyakaśipu was not willing to worship the lord because of his boon. He thought of himself as a powerful person, but Vishnu took the form of lion and killed him.

Pudham Alvar mentions the Narasimha form in his hymns as

(Nālayira Divyaprabandam, Thiruvandhadi, verse: 90)

Pudham Alvar particularly mentions in the above verses that Hiranyakaśipu refused to worship the Vishnu because of his ignorance, strength of the boon he possesses and madness. He also states specifically that naramkalanthasingamay, that is Vishnu, took the combined form of Nara and Simha to kill the demon king.

Pey Alvar mentions the Narasimha form in his hymns as

(Nālayira Divyaprabandam, Thiruvandhadi, verse: 42)
In the above verses he praises Vishnu who took the form of lion and killed Hiranyakasipu by tearing open his chest with his sharp nails.

Pey Alvar also mentions some important features of the legend in another hymn as

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(NālāyiraDivyaprabandam, Thiruvandhadi, verse: 95)

Pey Alvar says that Narasimha killed Hiranyakasipu in the twilight (just before nightfall). He also says that when Narasimha tore open the chest of Hiranyakasipu the act was so forceful that, pieces of his entrails fell all over the place.

Thirumangai Alvar made several references to the Narasimha legend in his hymns. His Periya thumoli and Periya thumadal consist of much information about the legend of Narasimha and his important temples.

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(NālāyiraDivyaprabandam, Periya thumoli, verse: 1.7.1)
“Sending spine chilling shivers to everyone in this beautiful world, with his thunderous sound and ferocious roar, with the shining mane, and luster, Lord Narasimhan appeared and tore the body of Hiranyakasipu with his sharp nails- The place where He appeared and still stays there for protecting us- which is that place? The place is the hill of Singavelkunram where the red eyed fiery lions offer the ivory tusks of elephants (whom they had killed), to the lotus feet of Lord Narasimha with bhakti”.

“The one, who has a wide large mouth licking the corner of his mouth (with tremendous anger) with his tongue;- who has the bright, sharp, white teeth - who killed Hiranyakasipu with his sharp nails alone- He is Lord Narasimha and is present at Singavelkunram - the place where the sounds and noises of people quarrelling and yelling when they (while walking through this place) are stopped and robbed by hunters; the place where hunters’ bows twang and drum beats are heard”.

(NālāyiraDivyaprabandam, Periya thumoli, verse: 1.7.2)

(NālāyiraDivyaprabandam, Periya thumoli, verse: 1.7.3)
“Large mouth, sharp spear like teeth, majestic appearance, ferocious look, the unbounded, unparalleled Lord -Sri Narasimha tore the chest of Hiranyakasipu and killed him- such greatest Lord is present at Singavelkunram - where the animals, where the mountains and small hills, where there are burnt (due to forest fires) bamboo trees and nothing else”.

“The one who has the sharp spear in his hands that give trouble and suffering to everyone; the enemy of devas, - Hiranyakasipu was killed by Lord Narasimha, tearing his chest with his sharp nails. Such a great Lord lives in Singavelkunram - where hunter dogs, the deadly eagles, the hot windy air that goes around with scorching sunny rays, the place where no human being can reach, except celestial bodies”.

“The mouth and lips that are slightly bent and folded by the sharp teeth, due to the anger, sharp sword like bright white teeth, - The lord Narasimha appeared like that and tore the chest of Hiranyakasipu and killed him. Such greatest lord shows
himself at Singavelkunram, where the whirlly hot wind raises itself everywhere till
the sky due to which none can approach and pay obeisance to this greatest Lord
Narasimha”.

“The eyes that emanate fiery sparks, the huge large mouth, and the sharp
teeth in it, - the form of Lord Narasimha is so scary and what a form! - like that even
devas run in all directions- such greatest Lord Narasimha is present at
Singavelkunram - where tigers hide themselves behind the dense bushes, and
identify the whereabouts of elephants with their footprints on the ground (to kill
them)”.

“The anger that was on Hiranyakashipu grew up to such an extent for the sins
committed on his son (Prahlāda) that the flame and intensity of anger reached and
spanned everywhere in the sky went even beyond the sky to all three worlds; Such a
great Lord Narasimha is here at Singavelkunram; where the forest fires make great
sounds, in which stones burst and make further noise; where the hunters go around
with sharp deadly bows and arrows; the place which can not be accessible to others, even for a second”.

“The place where Brahma and Siva keep praising the Lord Narasimha (with the result there is even a scar on their tongues) - such a great Narasimha stays at Singavelkunram, where the trees make scary sounds with the movements of their twigs in the air, with the deadly noises from the movement of bamboo trees and the flames of fire that emanate from such frictions of bamboo trees. - such a place where the Lord Narasimha stays is Singavelkunram”.

“Oh mind! You are very good. Let us go to this place Singavelkunram, where the birds screech with their beaks with a sound "cheeeet", where the tall trees make scary noises with their leaves, where the dense trees grow so as to even break open the rocks that are on the way, where Lord Narasimha - the thousand-handed lord, who hugs the "malar mangai" the Goddess born from lotus flower – Lakshmi - who is our chief and master- stays permanently".
“The fiery reddish eyed, valiant ferocious lions, offer bhakti to the Lord Narasimha at Singavelkunram - the Lord Narasingan - stays here permanently. About him, Thirumangai mannan has composed this garland of ten verses and those who are able to recite them will live with no sorrows and worries”.

The above ten verses of Thirumangai Alvar praise the Narasimha form of Vishnu at Singavelkunram is identified with Ahobilam in the Kurnool district in Andhra Pradesh. His poem describes the geographical nature of the mountain and flora and fauna along with the description of the Lord Narasimha in Singavelkunram.

In another context, when praising the Lord of Tiruvallikeni in Chennai, he describes the devotion of Prahlāda and how Hiranyakashipu reacted and got killed by the Narasimha.
In the above hymns Thirumangai Alvar says, “The child Prahlāda came back from school after completing his education and praised Vishnu in front of his father Hiranyakaśipu. But Hiranyakaśipu did not enjoy the divine name of Narayana; he shouted and became terribly angry at Prahlāda and asked "Where is your Narayana? is he in this pillar?" and he hit the nearby pillar. There came the ferocious reddish eyed lion faced human form of Lord Narasimha out of the pillar with a huge wide red mouth – such a great awesome beauty - I have seen at Tiruvallikeni (Triplicane)”.

Thirumangai Alvar beautifully explains the high point of the Narasimha legend in his hymns in Periya thirumoli while praising the Lord of Thiruvenkadam and Thiruvelliyankudi.

The above verses Alvar mentions Vishnu as thunāi, in the form of pillar, and ariyai, when coming out of the pillar as a lion. These words show that the worship of the pillar symbolizing god is a very ancient practice and has been continued (tolvali milai-iya anangudai nedunilai, Maduraikkanchi, I.353). According to Champakalashmi, “Kandu and nedunilai are two such words indicating the pillar or the deity in the pillar being worshiped. It has been suggested that a deity is
supposed to reside in the tall pillar to which the small variety of mustard and ghee are applied during the worship of the deity in it. This belief is also said to be the same as the worship of the *kandu* or the stump. The puranic story of Narasimha coming out of the pillar is perhaps another development of a simple pillar worship of earlier days. For, the pillar is also said to house a frightful god” (Champakalashmi, 1981: 49).

The above hymn of Alvar describes Narasimha’s action of tearing the chest of Hiranyakasipu and throwing him across his lap.
In the above verses a specific description of Narasimhaavatāra has been found, wherein it is stated that Narasimha, while fighting with Hiranyakasipu, caught him by the hair and threw him across his lap and tore his chest with his nails.

Namalvar’s descriptions of Narasimha avatāra in his Thiruvaymoli in Divyaprabandam are noteworthy.

(NālāyiraDivyaprabandam, Periya thumadali, verse: 55-56)

55
The above verses of Namalvar mention about the Narasimha form of Vishnu and how he killed Hiranyakasipu.

Periyalvar in his *Tirumoli* mentions an interesting description of Narasimha avatāra, wherein it is stated that as soon as Hiranyakasipu hit the pillar, Narasimha came out of the pillar ferociously with sword-like sharp nails, and tore the chest of Hiranyakasipu.

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\begin{align*}
\text{NālāyiraDivyaprabandam, Tirumoli, verse: 1.6.9)}
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In another hymn, while praising the Lord of Thiruvarangam, he states that the Lord had taken many incarnations to protect the world residing here in Thiruvarangam.

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\begin{align*}
\text{(NālāyiraDivyaprabandam, Tirumoli, 409)}
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In the above verses, Periyalvar mentions that Vishnu had taken the incarnation of Varaha (boar) and fought against Hiraṇyāksha (elder brother of Hiraṇyakaśipu) and protected the Mother earth and as Narasimha (lion) against Hiraṇyakaśipu, the same one who is residing at Thiruvarangam. The Alvar further says that the Lord of Srirangam (Thiruvarangam) had taken the forms of fish, turtle, boar, Narasimha, Vamana, Parasurama, Dhasaratharama, Balarama, Krishna and Kalki.

In the period of the Alvars, the Narasimha incarnation of Vishnu was an extremely popular one as evidenced by their hymns. The details of the story as mentioned by these Alvars are found in the BhāgavataPurāṇa (BhaktiVēdanta Swami Prabhupada, A.C. 1988: Contor: 1, Capters. II, III, VII). The story is narrated with minor variations in almost all of the Purāṇas. This is amply borne out by the sculptures and epigraphic records of the period. The fact that many of the Pallava rulers bore the name of Narasimha is itself significant, and in contemporary records, they are often compared to Vishnu as Narasimha. Independent temples of Narasimha which were also built for this avatāra from this period can be seen in many parts of the Tamil country.

The Alvars do not merely include this form among the avatāras but give graphic descriptions of the god and the story of his fight. Many important features of the Narasimha legend are highlighted in their hymns. The essence of the Alvars hymns can be seen as the sculptural panels of the Narasimhavata on the pillars and walls of the temples. The sculptural panels represent the scenes like the appearance
of Narasimha from the pillar which is shown as breaking open, the fight between the
two, the god catching the asura by the hair, followed by the scene of the killing of
Hiranyakasipu on the lap of Narashimha. This indicates that the story of the
Narasimha avatāra was so popular that the Alvars made very casual references to the
details of the story in their hymns on account of their long familiarity with these
legends. From the hymns of the Alvars and the contemporary records by the kings
of their period, it is evident that there is a continuation in the worship of Vishnu as
Narasimha and his worship was so popular at that time.

**Post Bhakti Literature**

The Bhakti movement contributed great wealth to the Tamil religious
literature. In continuation of the tremendous work done by the Alvars and
Nayanmars, many small and large literary works appeared in the later periods.
These works are called Post-Bhakti literature, and belong to the period between the
late ninth and fourteenth centuries CE. The emergence of the Chola dynasty as a
political entity around the ninth century CE greatly benefitted Tamil literature. The
age of the Chola Empire in the Tamil country is mentioned as a golden age for art
and literature. They ardently patronized all sort of arts, crafts and literature. The
*prabandha* type of literature, which includes *Kalambakam, Ula, Parani* and *Kovai,*
were written during this period. These poems possess some historicity and narrate
kingly exploits, conquests, and the characters of their royal patrons who were mostly
the heroes of their poems.

The *Prabhandha* became the dominant form of poetry. The religious canons
of Saiva and Vaishnava sects were beginning to be systematically collected and
categorised. Nambi Andar Nambi, who was a contemporary of Rajaraja Chola I, collected and arranged the books on Saivism into eleven books called *Tirumurais*. The hagiology of Saivism was standardised in *Periya Purāṇam* (also known as *Tiruttondar Purāṇam*) by Sekkilar, who lived during the reign of Kulothunga Chola II (1133–1150 CE). Religious books on the Vaishnava sect were mostly composed in Sanskrit during this period. The great Vaishnava leader Ramanuja lived during the reigns of Athirajendra Chola and Kulothunga Chola I, and had to face religious persecution from the Cholas who belonged to the Saiva sect.

Kongu Velir, a Jain author wrote *Perunkathai* (Big story) based on the Sanskrit *Brihat-katha by Gunadhya*. It is a literary work based on a king called Udayana. In this work the poet makes an important reference to the avatars of Vishnu. He states that Nediyon (Vishnu) has three types of iconographic representations that are human, animal and water-based creatures.

There were biographical and political works such as Jayamkondar's *Kalingattupparani*, a semi-historical account of the two invasion of Kalinga by Kulothunga Chola I (Nilakanta Sastri, K.A. 1984: 668). Jayamkondar was a poet-laureate in the Chola court and his work is a fine example of the balance between fact and fiction the poets had to tread. Ottakuttan, a close contemporary of Kamban, wrote three *Ulas* (Moovar Ula) on Vikrama Chola, Kulothunga Chola II and Rajaraja Chola II. One of the best known Tamil works of this period is the *Ramavatharam* by Kamban who flourished during the reign of Kulottunga III (1163-1216 CE). *Ramavatharam* is the greatest epic in Tamil Literature, and although the author states that he followed Valmiki, his work is not a mere translation or even an adaptation of the Sanskrit epic.
Ramavatharam also known as Kamba-Rāmāyanam contains several references to the avatāra or incarnations of Vishnu. In the Hiranyan vathai padalam in yudha kandam of Ramavatharam, the poet gives a detailed story of the Narasimha avatāra in one hundred and fifty verses, each containing four lines. This chapter was not in the original Valmiki Rāmāyana but it was included by Kamban with special interest and love. There is a saying that when he sung this chapter in front of Mettazhagar shrine (Narasimha) in the Sri Ranganathar Temple in Srirangam, the Lord appreciated the poet by shaking his head (Swaminathaiyar, U.V. 1962: 133). The poet narrates this chapter as Vibhishana telling the Hiranyakaśipu’s story to his elder brother and king Ravana.

The whole chapter explains beautifully the Bhakti of Prahlāda, evil of Hiranyakaśipu and how he cruelly punished his own son to make him forget the name Narayana. While the poet mentions the Narasimha avatāra, he gives many examples from Puranic stories and explains how the Lord is powerful and invincible. The poet says that sengattsiyam, the red eyed lion appeared out of the pillar as soon as the pillar was hit by Hiranyakaśipu.

(KambaRāmāyanam, yudhakandam, Hiranyan vathai padalam, 256)
“This is good, very good”,
And raising his (Hiranya) mighty arm,
For victory famed,
At the pillar smote he!
And lo! at that very moment,
Tearing open the universe,
Wildly laughed the red-eyed lion!

(Mudaliyar, 1970: 287)

The act of killing the demon king Hiranyakaśipu was beautifully executed by the poet with all the important details about his boon and the form of Narasimha as:

(KambaRāmāyanam, yudha kandam, Hiranyan vathai padalam, 303)

At dusk,
At the door of the golden palace,
Holding Hiranya firm on his thighs,
The great Vishnu in lion’s guise,
With his sharp claws,
His iron heart ripped open!
And rid the gods of their misery!

(Mudaliyar, 1970: 289)
The period from 1300 CE to 1650 CE was a period of tremendous change in the political situation of Tamil Nadu. The Tamil country was invaded by the armies of the Delhi Sultanate and defeated the Pandya kingdom. Later, the collapse of the Delhi Sultanate triggered the rise of the Bahmani Sultans in the Deccan. On the banks of the river Tungabhadra, the Vijayanagar Empire arose from the ashes of the kingdoms of the Hoysalas and Chalukyas and eventually conquered entire southern India. The Vijayanagar kings appointed regional governors to rule various territories of their kingdom. Tamil Nadu was ruled by the Madurai Nayaks, Thanjavur Nayaks and Gingee Nayaks. This period witnessed a large output of philosophical works, commentaries, epics and devotional poems. A number of monasteries (Mathas) were established by the various Hindu sects and these began to play a prominent role in educating the people. Numerous authors were of either the Saiva or the Vaishnava sects. The Vijayanagar kings and their Nayak governors were ardent Hindus and they patronised these mathas. Although the kings and the governors of the Vijayanagar Empire spoke Kannada and Telugu, they encouraged the growth of Tamil literature, as we find no slowing down in the literary output during this period. These small and large literary works contributed much of the religious literature during this period. Many of these works speak about the incarnations of Vishnu.

The evidence of the above literary sources in Tamil literature, starting from the Sangam age, proves that the worship of Vishnu and his incarnations was popular among the Tamil people. Particularly, the form of Narasimha was highly appreciated and found an important place in their religious practices. As described in the hymns
of alvars, the entire story of Narasimha is believed to have taken place in Singavelkunram, modern Ahobalam (“great strength”) or Ahobilam (“great cave’, where the garba griha is situated). The stone pillar through which Lord Narasimha appeared can also be seen at Ahobilam. This raises the question as to why Ahobilam alone has been associated with the Narasimha Avatar of Vishnu.

Located in Ahobilam is the Chenchu tribe, who were followers of Lord Narasimha. In fact, according to local legend, after killing Hiranyakashipu, Narasimha went to Nallamalla forest (in the Eastern Ghats) in his ugra incarnation. The deities were very worried about this form and prayed to goddess Lakshmi to pacify Narasimha. She took the form of Chenchu Lakshmi, a tribal girl who lived in the same forest. Lord Narasimha saw her and asked her to marry him. Finally, Lord Narasimha was pacified by the tribal girl. The repetition of his association with the Chenchu girl is found in literature and iconography.

Ahobilam is situated in Nallamalla forest which is in the Eastern Ghats. As one goes further North, we come to Simhachalam near Visakhapatnam, believed to have been the kingdom of Prahalada, son of Hiranyakashipu. It is apparent that the Eastern Ghats were the stage for the drama of the Narasimha avatara of Vishnu.

This is further reinforced by the fact that Narasimha was worshipped from a very early period in the Tamil country and appears in both Sangam literature and in the epic Silappadikaram. Narasimha was therefore a combination of the Vedic idea of a divine incarnation combined with a locally important folk deity.
References


19. *Silappadikāram*, XVII, Munnilaipparaval, v.34.


