CHAPTER VI
CONCLUSION

The lion was known in India as early as the Indus Valley Civilization, where terracotta figurines of the majestic animal have been found. It has also been mentioned in Vedic literature, particularly the *RigVeda*, where we find the germ of the Narasimha avatara in the story of Namuci; where the benevolent Vishnu is described as a wild beast, dreaded, prowling and mountain roaming. When the later syncretisation of Narasimha with the solar deity Vishnu came about, the Vedic allusions were extremely useful. According to these Sanskrit literary works starting from the Vedas, Vishnu could change his form as he liked and has taken many avatars to protect the world from evil. One of the avatars is Narasimha, that is, half man-half lion. He took this man-lion form for a particular reason, and he killed the demon in a particular style. The pre-figuration of Narasimha as we saw in Vedic literature and the Namuci legend in the *SatapataBarahmana* gives an idea of the evolution of the Narasimha legend. The *Taittirīya Āranyaka* and *Mahanarayana Upanishad* appear before the Brahmanas and after the Vedas, giving some clue about Narasimha.

In the *Mahabarata*, the Narasimha *avatāra* is mentioned clearly, but the devotion of Prahlāda is missing. The legend of Prahlāda appears in detail in the *VishnuPurāṇa*, *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and the *Uttara Kāṇḍa* of the *Padma Purāṇa*: it is referred to briefly in the other Puranas. The initial references to Narasimha killing Hiraṇyakaśipu are purely in the nature of destroying evil. Later, the theme was modified, and the devotion of Prahlāda, the son of Hiraṇyakaśipu, is highlighted.
The study of the origin and development of Narasimha iconography in historical perspective gives us a clue to the early life and condition of his worshippers. The worship of animal-headed gods in world civilizations and in India throws valuable light on the origin of Narasimha. The communities which migrated into the region brought their own ideas, which were adopted by the indigenous people in addition to their own. They equipped their deity with a superior version of the instruments and implements they employed, for their god was but a super-human reflection of themselves. That was how several foreign influences permeated Indian society.

The present study reveals the initial literary evidences, while the early sculptures found so far bring to light the fact that Narasimha was a god composed of both tribal and indigenous elements, which were later influenced by the several foreign ideas which entered into India. The early iconography of Narasimha depicts him with a lion head on a human body, with two hands and the sharp nails his only weapon. He conquers his enemy with his natural powers and not with any weapons. This character of the god and his lack of attributes take his origin to a very primitive stage in human history. He is still worshipped by the Chenchu tribes in India who claim that he is their’s, indicating that he was also a god of the indigenous tribes of India, and was adopted by successive groups of people.

In early rock art and in the Indus valley civilization, we have not yet come across any lion-headed human figure. But there are animal-headed human figures represented in many rock art sites in India. Mythical animals and human-headed animal figures are found aplenty on Indus seals. These prove that the idea of nature and animal worship were present in India. However, we do not have any example of
a lion god or a lion-headed anthropomorphic form in India before second century CE, unlike Mesopotamia and Egypt, where lion-headed human figures were revered as gods.

Aker, Maahes and Nefertum are lion-headed male deities of ancient Egypt, while Sekhmet and Beset are lioness-headed female deities. Sekhmet’s male form, known as Sekhmet Min, is one more lion-headed male god. It is most likely that the idea of an anthropomorphic figure with a lion’s head and a man’s body was transferred to India among the ideas which roamed around the ancient world. The symbol of Egypt is the massive sphinx where the pharaoh reversed the anthropomorphic form to plant his own head on a lion’s body, to commemorate himself as the lion of Egypt.

However, it is in the comparison with the proto-Aryan god Ahriman in the religion of Mithra of ancient Iran that we find the greatest similarities with Narasimha, both of whom were solar guardian deities and monarchs of the heavens. Ahriman was a warrior with a lion’s head and human body, a trait inherited by Narasimha. Sometimes he had wings to indicate flight, just as Narasimha, as Vishnu, was served by the eagle. Ahriman was wrapped within the coils of the snake, while Narasimha is seated on the snake and hooded by the reptile. Both are wrapped by the snake (Figures 28 and 45). Just as Mithra stood on the globe as the creator and protector of all living beings, Vishnu is the Protector of the world. As Mithra came out of a rock, Narasimha came out of a pillar. Ahriman wears a thunderbolt on his chest and Narasimha wears the Srivatsa, a symbolic representation of Goddess Lakshmi. Mithra’s temples are found in underground cellars and caves. Narasimha too is a cave dweller, with his shrines situated in caves.
and dark recesses. Ahriman holds a scepter, while some early sculptures of Narasimha hold the scepter too. Mithra is escorted by two figures, Cautes and Cautopates, torch bearers of Mithra. Vishnu’s doorkeepers were Jaya and Vijaya who were born as the demons Hiranyaksha (killed by Varaha) and Hiranyakashipu (killed by Narasimha). Thus, in the Narasimha avatara, we see the Indian version of an ancient Iranian deity. He was identified with the solar Vishnu who took several incarnations.

The political situation which prevailed in India played a vital role in the iconographical development of Narasimha. India was invaded and ruled by Central Asian tribes, Persians and Greeks. With them came ideas of protector deities. Narasimha, a guardian deity, attained popularity during this period. Several temples and sculptures are found all over India in historically significant places.

The earliest icons of Narasimha were probably theriopomorphic figures seated like human beings. It was not long before the two forelegs were replaced by two arms. It was in the Gupta period that the Narasimha figure evolved greatly. Yet, the Mithraic idol of the two-armed lion-headed man was retained for a long time. Unlike the other deities who were multi-armed very early in their iconography, the earliest four and multi-armed figures of Narasimha belong to the Gupta period (fifth – sixth century CE).

If the earliest theriopomorphic Narasimha was found in the second century CE at Kousambi, the earliest Narasimha in South India belonged to the third century CE (Satavahana period), where he stands amidst five Vrisni heroes – Krishna, Balarama, Satyaki, Pradyumna and Aniruddha, suggesting that the Panchaveera cult
appropriated him very early, thereby paving his way for inclusion as an incarnation of Vishnu. Narasimha became such an important figure that he was identified with the Chaturmurti, the four important forms of Vishnu in Pancharatra Vaishnava theology. The Pancharatra Agamas teach that God (Narayana or Vasudeva) manifests the whole world from one fourth of himself. Therefore three parts of the supreme are immortal nectar that can be attained by liberated beings. Modern Vaisnavism evolved from the Pancharatra and its theories.

In South India, the icon of Narasimha developed massive appropriations and was also executed with great beauty and dexterity. The Western Chalukyas of Aihole, Badami and Pattadakkal, Pallavas of Thondaimandalam and Rashtrakutas of Ellora contributed greatly to the icon of Narasimha.

A very important development in the iconography of Narasimha is his association with the Chenchu tribal girl, who, as the story goes, pacified the furious lion and eventually married him. This girl was identified with Lakshmi. The iconographic forms such as Yoga Narasimha and Lakshmi Narasimha appeared very early in South India, probably derived from this association of Chenchu Lakshmi with Narasimha. In fact, the Chenchu tribes still consider Narasimha to be their deity and are given special privileges and duties during the annual festival of Narasimha at Ahobilam, the centre of the Narasimha cult in Vaishnavism. In time, the cult of Narasimha picked up and became so strong and there were nine official forms: Prahlada varada or Lakshmi Narasimha, Chatravata Narasimha, Karanda Narasimha, Yoga or Yogananda Narasimha, Guha Narasimha, Kroda Narasimha, Malola Narasimha, Jwala Narasimha and Pavana Narasimha, each with its own iconographic details was recorded in the agamas. We do not know how the Narasimha cult became so closely associated with the Chenchu tribes, but their
importance cannot be underestimated, since they populated the entire Eastern Ghats where the Narasimha cult was extremely strong, between Ahobilam in the South and Simhachalam (Visakhapatnam) in the North.

According to literary evidence the complete form of the icon had been established by the Epic age. In later Puranic literature, several new features were added to give it its present shape to the icon. The environment, culture and religious beliefs of the worshippers create the characteristics of the god and his different manifestations. The available archaeological materials reveals the regional variations of the icon. There might be some earlier icons of Narasimha made of perishable and non-perishable materials, but, as their iconographical features and forms are unknown to us, we have to derive a conclusion only on the basis of the available materials. In North India, the ferocious forms like Narasimha fighting and killing the demon king Hiranyakasipu gained importance. We also come across Yoga Narasimha images and the narrative panels depicting the story of Prahlāda. Narasimha has even been depicted with twelve hands, to establish his valour: the more the hands the greater the power. In the South Indian icons, he has been portrayed with multiple hands and many of his representations are ferocious. But in the Vijayanagar period, many of his icons are represented in pacific forms like Yoga Narasimha and Lakshmi Narasimha, particularly the main deity in the sanctum.

The lion is a majestic animal and its flowing mane gives an aura of royal kingship. The seated lion of the Mauryan Ashoka pillars was the crouching lion that was Narasimha, who became the anthropomorphic form of the deity. Yet, the seated lion has remained in India and Indian history. The Pallavas and Pandyas used it for the base of their pillars and even as late as the Vijayanagar period, the seated lion appears on pillars and as yali heads, which were basically lion masks.
The greatest tribute to Narasimha was made by the Vijayanagara Kings who were not only his followers, but spread his cult all over the lands they conquered and nurtured. In their capital of Vijayanagara itself (modern Hampi), a massive Narasimha greets visitors. The seated lion is a popular symbol of the Vijayanagar period, found in almost all the temples renovated and built by them throughout southern India. If we closely examine the icon, we can find that the legs and hands are human and sometimes decorated with armlets, bracelets and anklets, and a sacred thread runs across his shoulder. These features help us to identify this symbol of the seated lion as Narasimha. We can consider it as a completion of the cycle of the iconographic development of Narasimha. It is interesting to see that the earliest-known sculpture of the zoomorphic Narasimha of the Kushana period is almost similar to the seated or crouching lion-man, that is Narasimha of the Vijayanagar period.

The contribution of Tamilnadu to the icon of Narasimha is considerable. Starting from the Sangam age till the Vijayanagar period we find enormous material both in literature and in art. Literary works like the Parippāṭal mention the different avatāra concepts of Vishnu, including the Narasimha incarnation. The Silappadikaram, a Tamil epic, mentions the Narasimha incarnation in one of its verses. The Nālayira Divyapprabhandham. poetical compositions sung by the Alvars in praise of Vishnu between the fifth and ninth centuries CE, contains valuable information about Narasimha and his temples in Tamilnadu and in other states. During the post-Bhakti period, Ramavatāram, popularly known as Kamba – Rāmāyanam composed by poet Kamban, gives information about the Narasimha avatāra and his story.
The archaeological sources found so far of the Narasimha icon in Tamilnadu belong to the early Pallava period. Almost all the major dynasties, like Pallava, Pandya, Chola, and Vijayanagar, patronized the worship of Narasimha, as evidenced by the temples and sculptures they have left behind. Even petty chieftains like the Adiyamans contributed the iconographic development of Narasimha by making beautiful cave temples at Namakkal. We can find various forms of Narasimha images as mentioned in the āgama and silpa texts in the temples of Tamilnadu. The Chola period multi armed Narasimha statue found on top of the Raja Rajan thiruvayil (entrance gopura) of Brahadeeswarar temple, Tanjore, is again an excellent specimen of Narasimha fighting with the demon king (Fig.158). The Lakshmi Narasimha form prefigured in the early Pallava plaques, later emerging as a complete form with Lakshmi seated on his lap during the Chola period, and attaining its peak in the Vijayanagar period in the Tamil country.

These iconographical features could not have evolved without patronage and support. It is likely that the primitive god worshipped by tribal communities of India later attained the status of a cult deity with the influence of various cultural exchanges and with the patronage of kings and spiritual leaders.

The early images of Narasimha are two handed, but, as his worship expanded, the iconography became complex, growing into multiple hands with different attributes. He occupies the position of a cult deity rather than remaining a mere incarnation of Vishnu. As we look at this figure, we realize what an enduring visual it was. An ancient proto-Aryan Mithraic deity, in combination with a solar deity and a folk deity, combined to appear as this all-powerful protector who promises his devotees eternal succor from the machinations of evil and demons who appear on this world from time to time.