Q 1. Although many Pallava rulers were devotees of Vishnu, there was a phenomenal growth of Saivism in Tamilnadu in later period. How do you then account for the popularity of Vishnu-Narasimha in Tamilnadu?

It was in the Vijayanagar period that Vishnu – Narasimha’s popularity grew, although the deity existed much earlier. 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. The Vijayanagar dynasty played a vital role in later periods towards the development of Vaishnavism in Tamilnadu. The temples praised in the Nālayira Divyapprabhandham received immense royal patronage. We find various forms of Vishnu in these temples, including the Narasimha icon, either in the sanctum or in a sub shrine. During the Vijayanagar period much importance was given to Narasimha and this can be inferred from the inscriptive and material evidences cited.

The prominent temples of Narasimha found in Tamilnadu were the Narasimha shrine in the Parthasarathi Temple complex Triplicane; Thiruvelukkai near Kanchipuram; Singaperumalkoyil near Chengalput; Thiruneermalai near Chengalput; the Narasimha shrine in Varadaraja Perumal Temple complex Kanchipuram; Sholingar or Thirukatigai near Arakonam; Thirukoshtiyur near Sivagangai; Narasimha cave temple in Namakkal; Yoga Narasimha temple in Anaimalai near Madurai; Tanjayali near Tanjavur; Kondirajapalayam near Tanjavur; Thiruvali – Thirunagari near Seerkali; Thirunagai in Nagappattinam; and Mettu Aļagiya Singar shrine in Srirangam Temple complex. All the above temples received continuous royal patronage. The Vijayanagar kings renovated many of these temples during their rule and donated generous grants for the worship of Narasimha.
Q 2. Would you agree with me if I say that Vishnu – Varaha was more popular in India than Vishnu – Narasimha? If you agree how do you justify it?

Yes, it was. Both in literature as well as from the archaeological material we find that the Varaha incarnation of Vishnu precedes the Narasimha form. In the Puranic period, the incarnations of Vishnu were standardized and ten primary incarnations were formed. In these primary ten incarnations Varaha precedes Narasimha and the legend of Hiranyaksha and Hiranyakasipu confirms it. When we analyze the iconic representations of Varaha and Narasimha, we could find that, in the early periods, the Varaha incarnation gained importance among the rulers and we get several zoomorphic and anthropomorphic representations of him starting from the Kushana period. Later, the Vijayanagar rulers contributed much towards the reconstruction of Vaishnavism and constructed many temples for Narasimha, but Varaha was still their chosen royal emblem.

Q 3. When Megasthenes, the Greek Ambassador of Seleucos to Paraliputra, refers to Hercules, the Greek Hero who later became a god, being worshipped by Indian tribes, was it a mere confusion between Hercules and Krishna?

Megasthenes, a Greek historian and geographer came to India in the 3rd c. B.C as an ambassador to the court of Chandragupta Maurya. He travelled to many parts of the country and documented the cultural and religious practices of the people. Alexander left behind Greek colonies on the north western frontiers, in the lands he had conquered. So, the influence of Hellenistic art prevailed in these regions. When Megasthenes visited the great city of Mathura, he saw people worshipping Vasudeva Krishna and Balarama. He documented the religious customs and mythological stories behind these gods for compiling his work “Indica”. The heroic character of Krishna and his power were explained through his legendary stories. Krishna killed many demons sent by Kamsa and protected the people of Virundavan: the multi hooded snake Kaliya; the man-eating crane Bakasura; the monster bull Arishtaremi; the fire-breathing horse Keshi; and Trinavarta, a demon. Hercules also destroyed many demons in his famous twelve labours; the Hydra of Lerna (a multi hooded snake), Symphalian birds with bronze beaks and metal feathers, Cretan bull, Mears of Diomedes, and the earth born giant Antaeus. The similarity between the exploits of the two heroes probably prompted Megasthenes to identify Krishna with Herculers.
The similar heroic natures of Krishna and Hercules drew him to the conclusion that the Indian tribe Suraseni (Shurasena) worshiped Hercules. But they were actually followers of Krishna. The archaeological findings also help us to know the cross cultural influences and understandings. Krishna and Balarama were depicted on bronze coins issued by the Indo-Greek ruler Agathocles (c.180-165 BC), which were discovered at the site of Ai-Khanum, along the border of the then Soviet Union and Afghanistan. These coins, bearing legends in the Greek and Brahmi scripts, show Vasudeva-Krishna on one side, carrying a chakra and a conch. The other side depicts a two handed Balarama, carrying a club in his right hand and a plough in his left. Both brothers are dressed as warriors, wearing ornate headdress and earrings, and have sheathed swords hanging from their belts.