The cult of Vishnu, the religious system with Vishnu and his forms as the objects of worship and otherwise called Vaishnavism, has been one of the entrancing subjects drawing the attention of scholars from the last century. Vishnu is a god of the Hindu triad and Vaishnavism is one of the major religious sects of India even today. Consequently, the works dealing with the religions of India have invariably devoted a chapter or two or more for the study of this religious system, contributing variously to our knowledge of the nature and history of its constituents.
The study of Vaishnavism has traversed basically in three stages. The first stage is marked by the works of Western scholars like Berth, Hopkins and Wilson. The main store of their study was ancient literature of India. Some writings of the western scholars like Weber are, however, imprinted with a bias for tracing the influence of the West; for instance, the impact of Christianity on Krishna legends and teachings. But Schrader's Introduction to the Pancharatra and the Ahirbudhnya-samhitā is an exceptional work in that it concentrated exclusively on the various aspects of the theology contained in the Samhitās of the Pancharātra school of Vaishnavism. In the second stage mainly Indian scholars were at work. This stage is characterized by a tendency to correlate literary data with the archaeological, especially epigraphic. The works of R.G. Bhandarkar and R.P. Chanda may be cited as examples. About the same time a deviation path taken in the study is noticed in the works of Gopinatha Rao and Krishnasastri. Their main concern was iconography of the Hindu divinities. Thus two distinct, yet complementary branches of study came to the fore: one dealing with the nature of the deities of the Hindu pantheon as revealed by the interpretation of literary and archaeological data and the other trying to examine the sculptural specimens against textual
prescriptions. The study of Vaishnavism was placed on a proper footing in this stage, culminating in Raychaudhuri's treatment of materials for the study of the early history of the Vaishnava sect. The renowned scholar handled the evidence pertaining to Vaishnavism alone and viewed them in a historical perspective, countered the theory of influence of Christianity on Krishna legends, and sketched an outline of the life of Krishna recognising him as a historical personage and a religious preacher. The third stage has witnessed specialized studies in the two branches incepted in the previous stage. Gonda's scholarship has given a deep insight into the nature of Vishnu and his forms as well as reflections on the beliefs and practices of Vaishnavas and Śaivas in a comparative backdrop. Suvira Jaiswal's study has resulted in a re-examination of the history of Vaishnava pantheon in the light of epigraphic, literary, numismatic and iconographic material with a view to tracing the origin of the deity in addition to the development of Vaishnavism up to the sixth century A.D. P. Banerjee and Chattopadhyaya have also sought to examine the evidence relating to Vaishnavism in their recent works. Insofar as iconography is considered, J.N. Banerjea's learned work surveys in a masterly way a variety of evidence relating to the Hindu iconographic developments,
thereby drawing a cohesive picture of the Hindu iconography from a historical viewpoint. Another work by the same scholar, entitled *Religion in Art and Archaeology*, presents in outline the constituents of Vaishnavism, again in a historical perspective, with more stress on archaeological finds. It also attempts a study of the ramifications of Vaishnavism in the Gupta age. Of the iconographic studies, mention may be made of *Iconography of Vishnu* by Kalpana Dega which deals with iconographic aspects of Vishnu and some of his forms in North India in the light of textual prescriptions. In addition to these, there are numerous articles by learned scholars in different journals.

While their value and abundant contribution to enhance our knowledge of Vishnu and Vaishnavism should not be underestimated, it has to be remarked that in these works South India is given only a secondary place and Karnataka finds scant mention here and there. The writings of Nilakantha Sastri, Srinivasan, Soundara Rajan, and Champakalakshmi among others, have secured a fitting place for South India, but they usually confine themselves to the Tamil land; though it cannot be gainsaid that their gleanings are in no way relevant to contemporary Karnataka.

Of the work that has been done in Karnataka to bridge the gap, three works stand out distinctly. These are of
Nandimath, Chidanandamurti and Panchamukhi. Nandimath has surveyed the various religious systems which flourished in Karnataka including their philosophical aspects but his work lacks in historical approach to the development of Vaishnavism proper. Chidanandamurti's brief survey is impressive but he relies on a few selected epigraphic references only. The work of Panchamukhi also restricts itself to epigraphy and covers a shorter period than that of Chidanandamurti. The merit of each of these works in Kannada, must however, be recognised; their limited approach springs from the very complex nature of the subject-matter they deal with. A survey of religions under the Hoysalas has been made recently. Of late, the historicity of Ramanuja's visits to and stay at places in Karnataka has been examined on epigraphic grounds by B.R.Gopal. All these works, providing useful information as they do on aspects of Vaishnavism in Karnataka, suffer from one limitation or other. They restrict themselves to one set of evidence alone or are limited to a particular period of history. And above all, none of these is dedicated to the study exclusively of Vaishnavism.

Gopinatha Rao's work on iconography, which cites many examples from Karnataka, still serves as a standard guide for iconographic study. R.D.Banerji's work on Basreliefs of Badami examines the Cave sculptures of the place in a mythological setting. The study of iconography of the Hindu
sculptures of Badami, Mahakuta, Pattadakal and Aihole
against four iconographic texts, viz., the \textit{Brihatsamhita},
Vaikhānasāgama, Vishvudharmottaram and Matsya Purāṇa, by
K.L. Mankodi has not been a very fruitful one probably
because it presupposes the existence of all these texts in
Karnataka in their present form during 6th-8th centuries A.D.\textsuperscript{27}
Carol Radcliffe's recent exhaustive work on early Chālukya
sculpture is descriptive in nature, but it provides a useful
chronological framework for the sculptures within the
Chālukya regime itself.\textsuperscript{28} The Brāhmaṇical caves of Ellora
have been studied by D.N. Varma from the iconographical point
of view.\textsuperscript{29} The later Chālukya period is a less explored
field insofar as the sculptural art and iconographic studies
are concerned.\textsuperscript{30} On the other hand, the Hoysala monuments,
replete with sculptural depiction, have been subjected to
detailed study in the \textit{Mysore Archaeological Reports}. There
are some monographs on Vaishnava temples like those at Belur
and Somanathapura.\textsuperscript{31} So far as regional studies are concerned,
one work which deserves special mention is that of P. Gururaja
Bhatt. He has exhaustively surveyed South Kanara region,
bringing out Vishnu icons of various periods and has attemp-
ted their classification.\textsuperscript{32} In addition to these, numerous
articles reporting stray images have appeared but they are
confined usually to descriptions and iconographic identifi-
cation. Noteworthy among these are of A. Sundara, which have
brought to light some rare images of Vishnu, like those found at Kontapala in North Kanara District (Fig.1), Narasimha at Halsi (Fig.56), Kuppaturu, Talagunda, etc., to mention a few. To some extent he has analysed his finds too. As this brief survey indicates, it goes without saying that none of these works deals exclusively with Vaishnava iconography alone, while they restrict their study to a particular period.

2. A Case for the Study

Karnataka, as is well known, abounds in epigraphic and sculptural wealth. Inscriptional records belonging to various periods are found in a large number through the length and breadth of this state, the earliest being those of Asoka Maurya. The different dynasties which ruled over this land have left behind a legacy of multitudes of lithic and copper-plate records which unveil the political, cultural, and religious aspects of the respective regime. Researches so far have focussed on political aspects and, save a few works already mentioned, epigraphic sources have not been properly tapped from the point of view of reconstructing the development of the cult of Vishnu in Karnataka. Thus there is no clear picture as yet of the diverse stages through which the cult had traversed in Karnataka before the advent of Śrī-Vaishnāvism of Rāmānuja followed by the Tattvavāda of Madhvāchārya. Similarly, except for a few works like those
of Mankodi and Varma, no tangible attempt has been made to compare the actual specimens found in this state with the iconographic texts. Thus what we now know is simply about the forms of Vishnu and not which prescriptions - āgamic or otherwise - if at all, these specimens really adhere to. The developmental aspect of Vaishnava themes in sculpture is also a neglected subject.

Hence, while there is no dearth of material for study, an effort to put together the available evidence, to compare, classify, analyse and consolidate it in an appropriate framework for obtaining a tangible picture of the development of the cult of Vishnu in Karnataka is a desideratum.

3. Nature and Method of the Study

From the foregoing survey it is clear that there is ample scope for a perusal of epigraphic and sculptural wealth of Karnataka in a chronological perspective, in order to understand the development of the cult of Vishnu on the one hand and the iconography of that deity on the other. The present work is an humble endeavour in this direction. Here, principally two sources which can be classed as archaeological, viz., epigraphic and sculptural, are examined in the main to build up a connected history of the Vishnu cult in Karnataka, with special reference to iconographic
developments, from the period of the Mauryas down to the fall of the Hoysalas (1336 A.D.).

The study comprises three parts. The first part consists of six chapters which are dedicated to the developmental aspects of the Vishnu cult in the Deccan in general and in Karnataka in particular. The second part is devoted completely to iconography of Vishnu and his forms. And the third part attempts a resume of the conclusions that can be drawn from the study made in the first two parts.

The first chapter of the first part provides the background for the study that follows in the remaining part of the work. In it are covered two aspects: (A) Vaishnava pantheon and Vaishnavism and (B) Politico-religious outline. In the first, the developmental aspect of Vaishnava pantheon and the ultimate amalgamation of its constituents into the fold of Vaishnavism are dealt with under different heads. This is of relevance to our subject because, as we see in the second chapter, some of these elements were still at work in Karnataka in the early stages. Secondly, under the same head an outline of Pancharatra concepts and practices is also given. This has been one of the most influential systems of Vaishnavism which has had its impact on the Vaishnavism of South India as a whole. This is revealed in the fact that the two great acharyas, Ramanuja and Madhva, considered
the āgamas of that system as conforming to the Vedic precepts through and through. Under a third sub-head an outline of the Vaikhānasas is attempted. The followers of this system, definitely different from the Pāncharātra school, though influenced by the latter, played an important role in the Vaishnavism of South India especially in the early stages. This is revealed in our study. The fourth and fifth sub-heads consider the two systems of philosophy of Vaishnavas, viz., Śrī-Vaishnavism and Tattvavāda, developed in South India, one in the Tamil land and the other in Karnataka. The former has had considerable influence in the southern portions of Karnataka, but the latter, which came slightly later is now dominant in northern Karnataka and South Kanara. Both of them were dominated by the Pāncharātra beliefs, but gave different approaches to the nature of God and the world around us on the basis of the scriptures and thoroughly militated against the Doctrine of Māyā propounded by Śāmkara, another South Indian āchārya.

The second part of the same chapter gives an out-line of the political history with general remarks on the creeds extant and their position in each period. This is to serve basically as a chronological frame for the further study of the evidence. Here, perhaps, it would be appropriate to make certain clarifications. First, the geographical loca-
tion of Karnataka. It must be pointed out in this respect that today's Karnataka is covered on its west side by the Arabian sea, and on the north by Maharashtra, on the east by Andhra and on the south-east and south-west by Tamil Nadu and Kerala respectively. But Karnataka has not been the same in respect of political boundaries all during the past. It was still larger in extent. Its northern border was the Narmada river during the Early Chalukya period. As such, the society of this region had been susceptible to be influenced from the three quarters - north, south and east. This is demonstrated by the art remains especially in the early Chalukyan context. Perhaps this phenomenon has to be extended to the religious domain also. Clear evidence in this respect is the influence of Śri-Vaishnavism in the southern parts of Karnataka. Second, the role of political situation. The extension of the frontiers of the kingdom necessarily means bringing a large geographical area under the sphere of influence with one central controlling authority, which in its turn leads to the uniting of a larger group of people with various beliefs and practices. Such a thing facilitates the free movement of ideas including religious beliefs and practices. What we want to stress here is the fact that the political environment has a bearing on the contemporary religious beliefs and eases the process of give-and-take in this respect. As such it is necessary to take into
account the political developments of a region in order to comprehend the development in the domain of religion. It is with this view that the political outline is given here.

In the second chapter, entitled the "Vishnu worship in early South India", a study of the evidence pertaining to the period 3rd century B.C. to 4th century A.D. is made, extending the sphere to practically the whole of South India. This is basically for three reasons: firstly, that the whole period covered here yields less evidence; secondly, that the Vaishnavite beliefs of the period appear to be still deriving or continuing the already derived practices revealed in North India; and thirdly, that no independent kingdom under a political authority had been founded yet in Karnataka before the end of that period. This, as will be evident, has helped us comprehend the position better than what would have issued had we been confined to Karnataka alone.

In the third chapter, the period considered is that from the 4th century to the founding of the house of the Imperial Chalukyas of Vatapi. Here too, we have taken into account the additional literature of the Tamils for the simple reason of gaining a better picture of the Religion of the days.

The fourth chapter covers an important epoch in the history of Karnataka, viz., that of the Chalukyas of Vatapi.
It has been an important one because of numerous reasons. But of them two are worth noting from our angle: (i) the expansion of the sphere of political influence which brought it in contact with other regions of India, especially the north; and (ii) its contribution to religion by way of patronage to temple building. Both, as will be evident, are important aspects for our study as already pointed out above.

For the same reasons, the epoch of the Rāṣṭrakūṭas is also important and is considered from the point of view of our study in the fifth chapter. However, it is a period which has been less rewarding in our study except in certain respects, but it does give us important clues to bridge the development of the Viṣṇu cult for the period ending with the Vātāpi Chālukyas to the beginning of the Kalyāṇa Chālukyas.

In the sixth chapter, the discussion is on the period from the last quarter of the 10th century to the end of the Hoysaḷas (1336 A.D.) and, here, the concentration is on epigraphical sources. The study has been confined to Kārṇa­taka's more or less present boundaries because of the epigraphic mass. Since the picture for the remaining part of the Deccan, which was also being ruled by the Karnataka dynasties at the time, would have been no different, the discarding of that evidence has not hampered our study of
this period. Nevertheless, whenever it has been felt necessary the evidence of epigraphs of other regions is taken into account occasionally, but not invariably. The evidence of sculpture has been given only secondary importance in this chapter because those aspects have been dealt with in the section on iconography and they subscribe only to what can be known from the epigraphs themselves. However, in order to discern any specific feature that may be existing in the southern part of Karnataka distinct from the northern, South and North Karnataka evidences have been examined separately. To avoid repetition, the references to Vishnu and his allied forms have been enlisted in chronological order. Although different dynasties ruled during the period considered, because of the uniformity in the nature of the evidence no dynastic separation is made in the study.

The fall of the Hoysalas marks the beginning of a new era in the history of Karnataka. The two features are the rise of the Hindu kingdom of Vijayanagara on the one hand, and the political influence of the Muslims on the other. From the religious viewpoint, it saw the rejuvenation of Hinduism. For our study it serves as a convenient terminating point. As the study will show, all the basic elements of the Vaishnava religion had been formulated by this time. All forms of Vishnu began commanding worship in temples. For
that matter, even the worship of Hanumān. The two major schools of Vaishnava philosophy of the south had been founded and were secure for further development. What we see in the Vijayanagara period and after is only the enlargement of the same philosophy. For a detailed enquiry into that we have a vast body of literature. As such it would be a subject-matter for study which can be separated from the one undertaken here.

Now as to the second part of our study. This does not need much elaboration. Here, the study has been focussed on the iconographic aspect of Viṣṇu in Karnataka. Actual specimens from Karnataka have been examined and viewed against the textual prescriptions in a chronological perspective. It is sub-divided into various heads, such as the Pañcavīras, Śānakāmūrtis, Āsanāṁūrtis, Śayānamūrtis, etc. Each sub-division carries an introductory note as a background for its development on the one hand and the regulations laid down in iconographic texts on the other. This is followed by a description of appropriate examples in a particular proforma. In the remark column of each specimen considered, the implications are recorded when found necessary. Many specimens have been illustrated with the help of photographs which are arranged typewise in chronological order conforming to the textual part. Thus, the second part of our study
concerns the iconography of various forms of Vishnu as well as their iconographic development in the course of the period of our study.

The third part is self-explanatory. It gives a bird's eye view of the whole study. In addition to the resume, it attempts a summary of the conclusions.

There are two appendices: the first deals with the problem of Narayana-bali as used in the Badami cave III inscription of Managalëśa, 578 A.D. and the second gives the excerpts on the iconography of Vishnu from the Manasollása of Sōmeśvara.

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