

Iconography of the Narasimha Temple in Anantapur District

Dr.P.Venugopal Reddy¹

¹*Teaching Assistant, Department of History S.K.University Anantapuramu – A.P*

Abstract—Rayalaseema is a distinct geographic area located in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, encompassing four southern districts. Narasimha, an avatar of Vishnu, is depicted in a hybrid form. Four-armed sculptures of Narasimha can be found in the temples situated in the Anantapur and Kadapa districts. The temples dedicated to Narasimha illustrate a variety of forms, including Kevala, Girija, Yoga, Sthauna, and Lakshmi Narasimha, all of which are represented iconographically. Additionally, other forms of Narasimha, such as Prahladanugrahamurti, Yogananda Narasimha, Varaha Lakshmi Narasimha, and Narasimha courting Chenchita—though not mentioned in the Agama sastras—are also well represented in the temples examined. Among these, the form of Lakshmi Narasimha is notably more prevalent than the others. Furthermore, an analysis of the iconographic characteristics of the various forms of Narasimha indicates that while most sculptures align with the iconographic texts, some deviate partially from the prescribed standards. This suggests that the sculptors exercised a degree of creative freedom rather than strictly following the textual guidelines.

I. INTRODUCTION

Rayalaseema is a geographic area located in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh. It originally consisted of four southern districts—Kurnool, Anantapur, YSR, and Chittoor—prior to the reorganization of districts in 2022. Following this reorganization, four new districts were established: Sri Sathya Sai, Nandyal, Annamayya, and Tirupati. According to the 2011 census of India, the original four districts of this region had a combined population of 15,184,908 and spanned an area of 71,060 square kilometers (27,440 square miles). The term "Rayalaseema" translates to "The Seema" or "The Land" governed by the Rayas of Vijayanagara in Telugu.

It is among the largest districts in Andhra Pradesh, covering an area of 10,205 square kilometers (3,940

square miles). To the north, it is bordered by Kurnool and Nandyal districts, while to the east lies Kadapa district. The southern boundary is marked by Sri Sathya Sai district, and to the southwest and west, it is adjacent to Chitradurga and Bellary districts in the state of Karnataka. This district is situated within the Rayalaseema region of the state.

In iconography, Narasimha, also known as Nrisimha, is one of the avatars of Vishnu and is consistently depicted in a hybrid form. The name itself signifies a fusion of Nara (Man) and Simha (Lion). This Man-Lion incarnation of Vishnu enjoys greater popularity than the Varaha incarnation. In Tamil, the name has evolved into Singa (derived from Sanskrit Simha) or Singa-Perumal, while in other regional languages, it is referred to as Narasa, a shortened version of Narasimha. The narrative surrounding this incarnation of Vishnu is recounted in texts such as the Padma Purana and Vishnu Purana, summarized as follows:

Hiranyaksha and Hiranyakasipu were two demon brothers who were inherently antagonistic towards Vishnu. Hiranyaksha was slain by Vishnu in his Varaha form. Following this, Hiranyakasipu ascended as the king of the demons and vowed to wage an eternal conflict against Vishnu. However, his young son Prahlada became a devoted follower of Vishnu, consistently extolling him as the omnipresent lord of the universe. Frustrated by this devotion, Hiranyakasipu challenged his son, questioning whether his god Vishnu, being all-pervasive, could be found within the pillar before him. In a fit of rage, he struck the pillar with his sword. To his astonishment, the pillar split open, and from it emerged the furious deity in the form of a Man-Lion, who promptly vanquished Hiranyakasipu with his claws during the twilight¹.

Images of Narasimha can be categorized into five distinct types, each exhibiting slight variations:

Girija, Yoga, Sthauna, Anugraha, and Devisahita. Furthermore, these types can be classified into four categories based on posture: Sthanaka (Standing), Asma (Seated), Yanaka (Riding), and Nritya (Dancing)². All the aforementioned forms of Narasimha are present in the temples being examined. A notable aspect of Narasimha's iconography is that early medieval sculptures depict the lion face in a naturalistic manner, whereas during the Vijayanagara period, this representation becomes more stylized.

The iconographical characteristics and the aforementioned forms found in the temples under examination are detailed below.

I. Kevala Narasimha (Standing): As per the Vaikhanasa Agama, the singular representation of Narasimha may possess either two or four arms. In the four-armed depiction, the upper right hand wields a cakra (disc), while the upper left hand holds a sankha (conch). The lower two arms are positioned resting on the knees³. According to the Silparatna and Padmasamhita texts, the sankha and cakra are featured in the two outstretched hands, while the remaining hands grasp a gada (mace) and a padma (lotus)⁴.

The two-armed sculptures of Narasimha can be observed in the temples of Pennahobilam and Kadiri, located in the Anantapur District. A notable four-armed representation of Narasimha is situated on a pillar within the kalyanamandapa of the Pennahobilam temple, measuring 1'-3" inches in height and oriented towards the east. These sculptures exemplify the artistry of the Vijayanagara period.

II. GIRIJA NARASIMHA

Also referred to as Asina or Seated, signifies the emergence of the lion from a mountain cave⁵. In this depiction, the deity is portrayed seated on a simhasana in a virasana posture. According to the Silparatna, the seated image of Narasimha may possess either two or four arms. In the case of four arms, the deity is depicted holding a cakra and sankha in the upper hands, while the lower right hand is positioned in abhaya and the lower left hand may hold a kati, gada, or padma. The Padmapurana provides a detailed description of the deity, noting that he has the face of a lion and the body of a

human, with three eyes and a fierce expression. He is depicted with four arms, holding a cakra in the upper right hand and a conch in the upper left hand, while the lower hands rest upon his knees⁶. The Vishnudharmottara offers a similar description, highlighting the flamboyant⁷ hair and the body enveloped in flames.

The four-armed representations of Girija Narasimha can also be observed in the temples located in Pennahobilam and Kadiri within the Anantapur district.

III. YOGA-NARASIMHA

In the Yoga-Narasimha representation, the deity is depicted seated in padmasana within the utkutika posture, with the forelegs secured in position by a yoga-patta that encircles them and the back of the body⁸. Additionally, there exists a distinctive four-armed sculpture of Yoga Narasimha located on a pillar in the Lakshmi Narasimha temple at Kadiri. In this depiction, the deity is seated with crossed legs, holding a cakra in the upper right hand and a sankha in the upper left, while the front two hands rest upon the knees. Adorned with a kiritamakuta and various ornaments, this sculpture features an intriguing iconographic element: the deity is accompanied by his two consorts, Sridevi and Bhudevi, who are portrayed in a standing position. The goddesses are depicted in dvibhanga, each holding a flower in one hand while the other hand hangs down. The aforementioned sculptures of Narasimha can be dated to the 15th century A.D.

IV. STHAUNA NARASIMHA

The term Sthauna is derived from the word Sthuna, which translates to 'pillar' or 'stambha.' As Narasimha emerged from a pillar, he is referred to as Sthauna Narasimha. According to the Vaikhanasagama, Sthauna Narasimha is depicted in a tribhanga posture and is characterized by either twelve or sixteen arms. On his left thigh, Hiranyakasipu is depicted as being stretched out, with Narasimha's hands tearing open the demon's belly. One of Narasimha's right hands is positioned in abhaya, while another wields a sword, its tip reaching towards the kundala in Hiranyakasipu's ear. One of Narasimha's left hands grasps the makuta of Hiranyakasipu, while another is

raised to deliver a blow to the demon. The asura's legs are held by one right hand, with two additional hands—one right and one left—lifted to the ears of the figure, holding the drawn-out entrails of Hiranyakasipu as a garland. The deity's form is sculpted to convey an active attempt to vanquish the demon, armed with a sword and shield. If the deity is represented with only eight arms, two are dedicated to tearing open Hiranyakasipu's belly, while the other four hold a sankha, gada, cakra, and padma. The remaining two hands are depicted as holding the entrails of Hiranyakasipu in a garland-like fashion.

In temples, numerous sculptures illustrate either the battle between the deity and the demon or the latter's demise at the hands of the former. Additionally, temple sculptures often depict Narasimha emerging from a column. The Sthauna Narasimha is represented in three distinct stages within temples: (a) Stambodbhava Narasimha, (b) Narasimha in combat with Hiranyakasipu, and (c) Vidarana Narasimha, which portrays Narasimha slaying the demon. The description of 'Stambodbhava Narasimha' is found in the Narasimha and Matsya Puranas, as well as in the Narayaniyam, Andhra Bhagavatham by poet Potana, and the Tamil hymns of Tirumangai Alvar. The Matsya Purana provides a detailed account of this depiction.

Five stone images of SthaunaNarasimha are described below: Another representation of Sthauna Narasimha can be found in the sanctum of the Lakshmi Narasimha temple located in Kadiri, within the Anantapur district. This image stands at a height of 2 feet and is oriented towards the east. The deity is depicted seated on a pedestal, with his feet crossed and toes resting on the same pedestal. The demon is illustrated lying horizontally across the deity's lap, with its head positioned on the right thigh and its legs on the left lap. The god is portrayed in the act of disemboweling the demon with his fingernails. Sthauna Narasimha possesses eight arms; in his right arms, the first two hold a discus and a sword, while the first two left arms carry a conch and a shield, respectively. His third right arm grasps the demon's head, and the left arm holds its two legs. The final two arms, equipped with fingernails, are engaged in the act of tearing the demon's entrails. The deity is characterized by a mane around his neck, wide-open eyes, prominent cheeks, raised ears, a protruding tongue, and a moustache. He is adorned with

markings, a tall crown (kiritamakuta), a sacred thread (yajnopavita), a waist cord (udarabandha), and necklaces (haras). An inscription dated 1352 A.D. indicates that the Lakshmi Narasimha temple in Kadiri was constructed by a Nayaka during that year, suggesting that this image of Sthauna Narasimha likely dates back to the 14th century A.D.

Stambodbhava Narasimha: In the kalyanamandapa of the Lakshmi Narasimha temple located in Pennahobilam, Anantapur district, there exists a sculpture of Stambodbhava Narasimha, measuring one foot in height and oriented towards the north. The deity is depicted emerging from the pillar, with his form visible only up to the waist. He possesses four arms, with the upper arms holding a cakra and a sankha, while the lower arms rest upon the pillar. The figure is characterized by a mane encircling his neck, prominent eyes, and pronounced cheeks. He is adorned with a round kiritamakuta, a necklace, a hara, and an udarabandha. To his left, a demon is depicted kicking the pillar with his left leg, brandishing a sword in his right arm in a threatening stance, while a shield is held in his left arm. The expression of the deity is one of ferocity. To the right of the god, Prahlada is positioned in an anjalimudra beneath the deity's lower arm.

Additionally, a sculpture of Stambodbhava Narasimha can be found on a central pillar to the left of the mukhamandapam of the Lakshmi shrine within the Narasimha temple at Kadiri, also in Anantapur district. This sculpture, standing at one foot tall, portrays the god emerging from the pillar, revealing only the left side of his body as he advances with his left leg directed towards the demon. The deity is likely depicted with eight arms, although the four left arms are clearly defined. He wields various formidable weapons in his upper three arms, while the front arm hangs down at an angle with fingers extended. To the left of the deity, Prahlada stands with his hands folded. Adjacent to Prahlada, the demon is shown with an outstretched sword in his right arm. The god is characterized by a thick mane, prominent eyes, bulging cheeks, and an open mouth. He is adorned with a pointed likuta, katibandha, and a cloth draped around his waist. The representation of the deity conveys an ugra-rupa. This sculpture is attributed to the early Vijayanagara art of the 14th century A.D.

V. LAKSHATI NARASIMHA

The depiction of Sri Lakshmi Narasimha is elaborately detailed in the Skanda Purana, Naradiya Mahapurana, and Rupadhyana Ratnavali, where he is portrayed seated with his consort, Lakshmi, in his lap. The latter text describes him as being embraced by Lakshmi, possessing four arms. In his upper right and left hands, he holds the cakra and sankha, respectively, while his lower right hand is positioned in abhaya and his lower left hand is in varada posture. The garbhagriha of the Lakshmi Narasimha Swamy temple, located on the hill at Gooty in the Anantapur district, houses an image of Lakshmi Narasimha that stands at 2 feet 6 inches tall and faces east. This deity is depicted with a five-headed Naga serving as a canopy, resembling an umbrella and a nimbus behind his head. He is seated in lalitasana, with four arms, holding the cakra and sankha in his upper right and left hands, respectively. His lower right hand is in abhaya, while his lower left hand encircles the waist of Lakshmi. The figure features open eyes, prominent cheeks, and a wide-open mouth, with both the deity and his consort adorned with crowns and various ornaments. This image is believed to have been consecrated by King Bukka (1344-77 A.D.), thus dating it to the 14th century A.D.

Additionally, there exists another image within the sanctum of the Lakshmi Narasimha temple at Pennahobilam, also in the Anantapur district. This image, measuring 5 feet in height and facing east, is depicted in a seated posture. Its posture, facial features, and hand positions closely resemble those of the previously mentioned image. According to tradition, the Lakshmi Narasimha temple was constructed by Aliya Ramaraya, the son-in-law of Krishnaraya, and this particular image can be dated to the 16th century A.D.

VI. CONCLUSION

The temples dedicated to Narasimha illustrate a comprehensive representation of the various forms of Narasimha, including Kevala, Girija, Yoga, Sthauna, and Lakshmi Narasimha, through iconographic depictions. Additionally, other forms such as Prahladanugrahamurti, Yogananda Narasimha, Varaha Lakshmi Narasimha, and Narasimha courting Chenchita, which are not referenced in the Agama

sastras, are also prominently featured in the temples examined. Notably, the form of Lakshmi Narasimha enjoys greater popularity compared to the other manifestations. Furthermore, an analysis of the iconographic characteristics of these various forms indicates that while the majority of Narasimha sculptures align with the iconographic texts, some deviate partially from the established guidelines. This suggests that the sculptors exercised a degree of creative freedom rather than strictly following the textual prescriptions.

REFERENCES

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- [2] KamesvaraRao, V. Select Vijayanagara Temples of Rayalaseema (Hyderabad, 1978) p. 173; The various forms of Narasimha are not mentioned clearly by GapinathaRao. He mentions only three types of images namely Girija, Sthauna and Yanaka and does not bring out the difference between GirijaNarasimha and Yoga Narasimha. He states that there are a few other varieties whose descriptions are not found in the Sanskrit texts available to us. Elements of Hindu iconography, Vol. 1, Part -1, pp. 149-154.
- [3] Vikhanasagama, patala 58, p. 198.
- [4] GopinathaRao. T.A.; Elements of Hindu Iconography Vol. 1, Part, II, Appendix-C, p.34.
- [5] Gopinatha Rao, T.A.: Elements of Hindu Iconography, Vol.I, Part.1, p. 151.
- [6] Padma Samhita, Kriyapadam, Saptadasodhyaya, Slokas 22-26.
- [7] Vishnudharmottara, III, 78 (2).
- [8] Vaikhanasagama, patala 58, P. 198; Elements of Hindu Iconography Vol. I, Part.1, pp.149 - 54.
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- [12] Matya purana, 269, 31-34.

- [13] Vishnudharmottara Purana, 111,78(2).
- [14] Skandapurana, Vaishnavakhanda, Purushottama Mahatya, Adh 28,27-19.
- [15] Naradiya Mahapurana, Purvakhancia, Adh 71, 51-55,
- [16] Rupadhyana Ratnavali, S.No.14, p. 211.