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**Narasimha, the Supreme Lord of the Middle: The  
*Avatāra* and *Vyūha* Correlation in the *Purāṇas*,  
Archaeology and Religious Practice**

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*Avatāra* is a theologically significant term associated with Vishnu, due to his role as protector and maintainer of balance between evil and good in the universe. Hence, each *avatāra* of Vishnu indicates a divinely inspired cosmic role of Vishnu. However, the incarnation of Narasimha is significant, because this incarnation is a dual representation of the God Vishnu within the creation. It is this dual representation that is central to the projection of Narasimha as the Supreme Lord in Hinduism. Therefore, this paper examines the dual roles of Vishnu as the *avatāra* and *vyūha* in his interaction with the universe in his incarnation as Narasimha in texts, religious practice and iconic representation.

**Keywords:** Narasimha; Vishnu; incarnation; *Vyūha*; *avatāra*; Prahlada; Hiranyakasipu; Bhita; Kondamotu; Pancavira; Caturvyuha

## **1. Introduction**

Narasimha is the most preeminent theriomorphic deity of Hinduism (Meister, 1996). Temples of Narasimha

predominate the sacred landscape of southern India and central India (Vemsani 2009; 2016a; 2016b). Narasimha is the boundary-defying deity symbolically associated with the liminal stage signifying transitions between different levels of existence within the created and cosmic world. Narasimha's existence within and beyond creation is reflected in his representation as an *avatāra*<sup>1</sup> (incarnation) and a *vyūha* (emanation) simultaneously. The *avatāra* and *vyūha* forms of identities connected to Narasimha also emulate such boundary-defying characteristics of the deity. Therefore, the explicit goal of this paper is to examine the divine forms of *avatāra* and *vyūha* from the classical texts, archaeology and religious practice in connection with the God Narasimha. This would facilitate understanding the complex nature of Narasimha known as the *guhya* (cryptic or

mysterious) deity of Hinduism. The implicit goal of this paper is to explain the theological and religious implications of these traditional identities of Narasimha that may have resulted in unique religious practice. Hence, my examination of the God Narasimha in this paper helps illustrate the distinct relationship between the *vyūha* and *avatāra* forms of the deity Narasimha according in the Hindu cosmology. Therefore, my study in this paper contributes in two important ways to existing scholarship on the complex roles of Hindu God Vishnu within and beyond the created universe: firstly, to understand the cosmic role of Narasimha in connection with the *avatāra* and *vyūha* forms; secondly to illustrate the resulting theological and religious practice.

Even though the Narasimha story is briefly narrated in the *purāṇas* it is filled with deep theological and cosmological symbolism. Hence, it is important to study the Narasimha story for holistic understanding of its symbolic meaning rather than analyzing the narrative components and events separately. Therefore, I propose to study the three major components of the Narasimha story together (pre-Narasimha incarnation events; Prahlada and incarnation of Narasimha; post-Narasimha incarnation events) to examine the deep symbolism embedded in the Narasimha story, which in turn help shed light on the reasons for the preeminent theological importance of Narasimha in religious practice.

The unique incarnation of Narasimha is preconditioned upon strange cosmological events, which unraveled during the last part of *Kritayuga*<sup>2</sup> (Zimmer,

1942; Balslev, 1983; Gonzales-Reimann, 2002). Therefore, this paper attempts to analyze not the circumstances or the characteristics of the demon, but how the inverted world order has a bearing upon the incarnation of Narasimha in simultaneously representing the *avatāra* (incarnation) and *vyūha* (emanation) forms of Hindu God Vishnu. In this paper I begin my analysis of the *avatāra* and *vyūha* concepts with the Hindu classical texts, especially the story of Prahlāda in section 2, a symbol of reversal, followed by an examination of the *avatāra* of Narasimha in section 3. I will then continue to examine the overlapping identities of *avatāra* and *vyūha* on the deity Narasimha in archaeological sources as well as religious practice in section 4. In addition to the Hindu texts, archeological sources, and religious practice noted here, I will also

examine in section 5 relevant information on Narasimha from the Jaina *purāṇas*, which preserve important evidence. Even though fragmentary the Jain sources reveal close affinity between Narasimha and Samkarshana/Balarāma, an important deity in Jainism categorized as one of the *śalākapuruṣhas* (preeminent beings). In section 6, I will consider the theology and religious practice incorporating the *avatāra* and *vyūha* forms of Narasimha. Lastly, the conclusion summarizes the findings of my research discussed in this paper.

## **2. Inverted World Order: A Demon Turns**

### **Devotee akin to Nārada**

Narasimha, as the fourth incarnation (*avatāra*) of Vishnu, is sequentially located between animal-form incarnations and human-form incarnations indicative of

the transitional nature of this deity. Prior incarnations of Vishnu before Narasimha are in animal forms known as Matsya, Kūrma, and Varāha (Fish, Tortoise, and Boar) *avatāra*; after Narasimha the subsequent incarnations are human forms known as Vāmana, Paraśurāma, Rāma and Krishna (Gupta 1974). In combining human and animal physical appearances, Narasimha connects the animal and anthropomorphic forms. The placement of Narasimha within the scheme of incarnations itself is indicative of the transitional nature of Narasimha, a transitional form in itself, with half lion-half man.

The story begins before Narasimha is even incarnated on Earth. Except for the single instance in which Narasimha appears from the pillar to vanquish Hiranyakaśipu, Vishnu functions beyond the created world to ensure its balance. This fulfills the conditions of



Brahma's boon, while remaining outside the sphere of Hiranyakaśipu's influence. The protection of Brahma's boon ends when Narasimha kills Hiranyakaśipu, and Vishnu assumes his *vyūha* persona to restore the world to its original state.

The central thrust of the Narasimha story is that the God Vishnu is incarnated (*avatāra*) in the form of the man-lion to rescue Prahlāda (rescue the inverted world) and kill the demon Hiranyakaśipu. The most basic account of Narasimha incarnation (*avataraṇa*) is preserved in the *Mahābhārata* (3.272.56-600); recounted again in the *Mahābhārata* (12.326.72-84; and 12.337.36). Only four verses long in the *Mahābhārata* vulgate text, it is further reduced to one and a half verses in the critical edition of the *Mahābhārata* text. A complete version of the Narasimha story is preserved in

the *upapurāṇa*, the *Narasimhapurāṇa* (Joshi & Trivedi 2003; Jena 1987), which has been also translated into a number of the regional languages of India<sup>3</sup>.

Detailed versions of the Narasimha story are also recounted in the *Vishnupurāṇa* (1.16-20), the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* (II.7.14), and the *Agnipurāṇa* (4.2-3). The Narasimha story in the *Mahābhārata*, the *Agnipurāṇa*, and the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, is very short and does not provide information on the boon Hiranyakaśipu obtained from the God Brahma, which was central to the Narasimha stories in the *Brahmāṇḍapurāṇa* (2.5.3-29) and the *Vāyupurāṇa* (67.61-66). A more fully-developed Narasimha story, along with the Prahlāda legend, is narrated in the *Harivamśa* (Harivamśa. 41), the *Brahmāpurāṇa* (213.44-79), the *Vishnudharmottarapurāṇa* (I.54), and the

*Bhāgavatapurāṇa* (VII). Detailed descriptions of Narasimha which compare him to Vishnu are also noted in the prayers of Prahlāda recounted in the *Padmapurāṇa* (5.4284-85) and the *Matsyapurāṇa* (161-163).

The Narasimha story in the *purāṇas* brings forward two important points: first, that the world is inverted, and second, that the Narasimha form represents a liminal stage representing the ‘betwixt-and-between’ (Turner, 1995: 94-95; Van Gennep, 2011)) features associated with his incarnation in an inverted world (Rosen 2005: 24-27). In an inverted world, values and life styles are also inverted. As an example of this, the demon Hiraṇyakaśipu’s son, Prahlāda, unlike his father, is born with *sātvika* attributes and worships Vishnu, the deity of *sātvika* nature, while the god Vishnu appears in the form of Narasimha, with a lion face commonly

associated with demons, especially that of the family of Hiranyakaśipu<sup>4</sup>. The birth of Prahlāda being without the qualities of demons is crucial to the narrative, which indicates that the *yugadharmā* is completely reversed (Holdrege, 2004). Prahlāda is not merely an ordinary devotee of Vishnu, but an exceptional devotee akin to Narada<sup>5</sup>. Even though constantly surrounded by demons, Prahlāda continuously chants the names of Vishnu and relentlessly advocates that everyone else follow his path. Prahlāda's prayers for Vishnu to come teach proper dharma to Hiranyakaśipu follows the usual pattern of the incarnation story. However, what is unique to the incarnation of Narasimha is the simultaneous combination of the *vyūha* form following the *avatāra* form noted in the classical accounts of Narasimha story. Examining the aspect of multiple expressions of the

divine within the Narasimha accounts is crucial to understanding the theological and ritual processes associated with Narasimha. I will limit my examination of multiple aspects of divinity of Narasimha in this paper to Vaishnava aspects. The Śaiva aspects of the divinity of Narasimha are to be treated in another paper<sup>6</sup>.

According to the *purāṇa* accounts, Hiranyakaśipu obtains a boon of conditional immortality from Brahma, subsequently reversing the three worlds and usurping the role of Vishnu as the maintainer of the balance within the three worlds (Soifer 1991; Vemsani 2016a, 2016b; Otto, 1942). As a consequence Hiranyakaśipu's, son Prahlāda, is born with exactly the opposite qualities of him in his nature, and hence Hiranyakaśipu orders that Prahlāda be killed unless he changes his nature. Due to the grace of Vishnu, Prahlāda survives numerous tortures

inflicted on him. First, royal cooks feed him poisoned food (*Vishnupurāṇa* 1.18.2-3), which Prahāda easily digests and survives (*Vishnupurāṇa*. 18.8-9). Prahāda is then thrown into the fire (*Vishnupurāṇa* 1.18.32-38) from which he escapes unscathed. At this point Hiranyakaśipu calls Prahāda to inquire about the reasons for his impunity to which Prahāda answers that “it is a simple matter for any one whose heart is filled with Acyuta (Vishnu)”. Prahāda continues to praise Vishnu as the true lord of the world and urges Hiranyakaśipu to return the world to Vishnu (*Vishnupurāṇa* 1.19.3-9). Such sweeping disobedience from his own son in full court deeply infuriates Hiranyakaśipu and he orders his guards to throw Prahāda from the top of a high mountain (*Vishnupurāṇa*.1.19.11). This time the goddess Earth

herself catches Prahlāda and he is uninjured (*Vishnupurāṇa*.1.19.13), Following that Hiranyakaśipu's deputy, Sambarasura uses magical tricks to attempt to kill Prahlāda (*Vishnupurāṇa*. 1.19. 16-18). Instead, Sambarasura succumbs to the Sudarśanacakra (divine wheel of Vishnu) which Vishnu had used to save Prahlāda (*Vishnupurāṇa*1.19.10). Hiranyakaśipu then orders Vāyu (the wind god) to kill Prahlāda, who also fails (*Vishnupurāṇa*.1.19.21-23). Hiranyakaśipu then has his guards tie Prahlāda with rope in tight knots and throw him into the deep ocean (*Vishnupurāṇa*. 1.19.52-57). Prahlāda survives this too and comes to the court of Hiranyakaśipu to plead with him one more time to return the world to its original course and to Vishnu, its leader, explaining that the whole world is within Vishnu and Vishnu is within everything/nothing in the world

(*sarvāntaryāmi*). As if to test this assertion of Prahlada's, Hiranyakaśipu hits a pillar in the court hall with his mace (*gada*), demanding that Narasimha appear from (nothing) inside of a pillar. Vishnu indeed appears out of nothing (vacuum) from inside that pillar, kills Hiranyakaśipu immediately and saves Prahlāda. Hence, Narasimha is recognized as the God of rescues, renewals and new beginnings, an understanding represented in religious practice (Vemsani 2016b).

I will examine below in section 3 the *avatāra* (incarnation) of Narasimha to understand the central purpose of Vishnu's incarnation within the inverted creation.

### **3. *Avatāra* Narasimha: Vanquishing the Evil**

The primary role of Vishnu's incarnations in the world is to end evil, which is also the principle role of Narasimha



as the *avatāra* of Vishnu. Hence, almost all the classical accounts of Narasimha in the *purāṇas* are narrated as part of the *avatāra* lore along with the other incarnations. As such, the Narasimha *avatāra* performs this role of ending evil within creation, while the God Narasimha also accomplishes the cosmic role of Vishnu beyond creation in his role before and after the expression of the Narasimha *avatāra*. Since the role of Narasimha as an *avatāra* is well established and that numerous earlier academic studies have been exclusively and exhaustively devoted to the study of Prahlāda legend (Hacker 1959) and the incarnation of Vishnu as Narasimha (Biaerdau, 1975; Swain, 1971; Soifer, 1991), I will not dwell more on this topic, but continue with my examination of Narasimha as a *vyūha* of Vishnu.

In order to examine the *avatāra* and *vyūha* correlation of Narasimha, and his identification with more than one form (*avatāra* and *vyūha*) of the representation of the divine expressions of Vishnu, it is important to examine relevant sections of the Narasimha story from the *purāṇas*, which depicting him as *vyūha* Samkarshana, the first emanation of Vishnu.

#### **4. *Vyūha* Narasimha: Righting the Wrong**

##### **Turn of the World**

It seems that the dual identity of Narasimha with the *avatāra* (incarnation) and *vyūha* (emanation) forms of Vishnu is integral to the theological depiction intended to support the dual nature of Narasimha as a composite deity defying established notions of the divine and the demonic. It is plausible to understand that Narasimha and the lion motif emerged within the dual divine

framework of Vaishnavism, considering the fact that, sans the Narasimha story in the *Mahābhārata* (300 B.C.E-300 C.E), there is a lack of deities or accounts centered on *simha* (lion) or the Narasimha (man-lion) form, either in Hinduism or the folk religion in India. Narasimha is symbolically represented as the first *vyūha* of Vishnu, Samkarshaṇa, whose incarnation Balarāma is also commonly referred to as Samkarshana (Vemsani 2006: 5-15; 2015: 45-68). Hence, as the incarnated forms of *vyūha* Samkarshana, Narasimha and Balarama represent alternative identities of the same divinity, widely noted across classical texts, historical sources and religious practice. The close affinity of Balarāma with lion symbols can only be understood in the context of the identity of both Narasimha and Balarāma through the mediation of the *vyūha* Samkarshana. Balarāma

(Samkarshana) is described as *Simhalānguli* (lion-plow) and his weapon, the plough, is topped with a lion head (Joshi 1979: 46-7; Joshi, 2004; Agrawala 1976: 281-283). In a further extension of the lion theme and composite imagery, Balarāma (Samkarshana) is symbolically represented also by a combined emblem of half lion and half elephant image (Vemsani 2006: 9-10). Close affinity of Narasimha with Balarāma through the internal linkage of Samkarshana is also seen in the temples of Vishnu, such as in Puri, Tirupati, Varahuru, Tanjavuru, and Melatturu, to name a few. In these temples the Narasimha shrine is placed directly in front of the main *garbhagriha* in which the central deity is located. It is also clearly evident in the Puri Jagannatha temple, in which the Narasimha *mantra* is used in the *Navakalevara* ritual in the Jagannatha temple (Tripathi,

1987; Misra, 1971). This further affirms the connection of Narasimha with Balarāma/Samkarshana, one of the presiding deities at this temple (Vemsani 2015). This ritual also connects theologically to Narasimha as the lord of renewals, transitions, and new beginnings.

That Narasimha is identified with the first *vyūha*, Samkarshana consistently and not with any of the rest of the three *vyūhas*, is in itself indicative of the theological projection of Vaishnavism, demonstrating the centrality of Narasimha in representing his divinity within Vaishnavism. The fact that it is not an isolated reference, but a well-established theological practice, is clearly established through the common association of Samkarshana and Narasimha expressed widely in the *purāṇas* and sculpture as well as in folk tales and local practice. Identification of Narasimha with the *vyūha*

Samkarshana is consistent across a variety of sources, which will be examined in detail in the section below.

The earliest evidence of Narasimha's identity as the *vyūha* Samkarshana is datable to as early as 300 B.C.E. The *caturvyūha* (four *vyūhas*) Vishnu image from Bhita (200 B.C.E.) depicts a seated lion-like figure (resembling a cat) identified with Narasimha, on the south side, the side that is generally associated with Samkarshana/Balarāma (Srinivasan, 1979: 39-55). This brings forward two aspects: firstly, identification of Narasimha with Samkarashana the first *vyūha*, by the placement of the figure, and secondly, depiction of well-known deities Narasimha as well as Samkarshana in a form reminiscent of a cat.

The depiction of Samkarshana/Balarāma in lion form (replaced with a cat in Bhita) can only be

understood in this context: correlation of the *avatāra* Narasimha with the *vyūha* Samkarshana/Balarāma should have been well-established before the appearance of the Bhita *caturvyūha* image, which was roughly dated to about 200 B.C.E. Therefore, depiction of the *vyūha* Samkarshana as a cat might indicate the association of Narasimha and the *vyūha* Samkarshana at a date at least a hundred years prior to second century B.C.E. Therefore, it could be deduced that the *vyūha* and *avatāra* correlation established in the Bhita image earlier religious practice indicates the dual nature of Narasimha was well-established by the third century B.C.E. The appearance of Narasimha in multi-form imagery, rather than singular depiction as noted in the archeological sources, supports establishing the multiple identity of

Narasimha as a *vyūha* in addition to an *avatāra* of Vishnu.

Representation of Narasimha in cat-form is widely acknowledged in folk and local religious practice in east the coast of India and southern India, although it might have been an unusual form of depiction in the case of Samkarshana noted in the Bhita sculpture from northern India discussed above. Therefore, the depiction of Samkarshana as a cat in the Bhita image can be understood in the context of an identity of Narasimha with Samkarshana, since Narasimha is known to have been depicted as cat in more than one popular example as in Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, and Karnataka. An important point to note here, in connection with this evidence, is that the phenomenon is not localized but occurs in northwestern India as well as southern India at



such an early date. I will consider below the sculptural as well as folk evidence depicting Narasimha as a cat.

Although literary evidence is lacking for the identification of Narasimha and his portrayal in the image of the cat, this motif finds expression in folk tales, sculptural depictions and practice. Narasimha is depicted as a cat on one of the pillars of the *mandapa* in the Narasimha temple at Simhachalam in Andhra Pradesh (Narasimhacharya, 1989: 7, 424; Subbalaxmi, 1981). The local folk legends mention that Narasimha was chased by local tribals who mistook him in that form to be a trespasser, an intruder (Sontheimer 1989; 2004). Narasimha at that juncture showed them his true form (*nija rūpa*) and asked them to worship him symbolically as a cat. The cat on the Bhita *caturvyūha* image representing Samkarshana, may be understood in the

light of this local story connected to Narasimha (Srinivasan, 1979; Gail, 1983). Therefore, given the changeable identity of Narasimha he might be worshipped in regional religious practice as a lion, man-lion and also a cat...

Similar types of depictions are also noticed in folk worship practices in the state of Orissa in connection with God Narasimha (Eschman, 1978: 97-114). In the eastern coastal states of India including Orissa, Andhra Pradesh and Tamilnadu, the hand-made paper-mache images of Narasimha with the lion-face — which may sometimes resemble a cat-face — are worshipped during folk festivals and religious theatrical festivals in make-shift shrines. While Narasimha is worshipped in outdoor spaces only during the *Narasimha Jayanti* celebrations (Guy, 2015; Vemsani

2016b), the lion-faced female goddesses (*Mātrikas*) are commonly worshipped in open air make-shift shrines and informal rituals any time of the year (Eschmann, 1978). The *avatāra* and *vyūha* correlation of Vishnu is also clear in the depiction of the *Vaikuntha* form of Vishnu. Placement of Narasimha on the *Vaikuntha* form of the Vishnu images might not be premeditated, but indicates the cosmic role of Narasimha within and beyond creation. The Vaikuntha form of Vishnu image consists of boar and lion heads, of which the lion head is identified as representing Samkarshana (Pal, 1973).

A carved limestone panel depicting Narasimha (Khan 1964), commonly known as the Kondamotu panel ([http://dla.library.upenn.edu/cocoon/dla/fisher/search.html?fq=image\\_resolution\\_facet%3A%22High%20%28fo r%20PPT%29%22%20AND%20title\\_facet%3A%22Nar](http://dla.library.upenn.edu/cocoon/dla/fisher/search.html?fq=image_resolution_facet%3A%22High%20%28fo r%20PPT%29%22%20AND%20title_facet%3A%22Nar)

[asimha%20with%20Pancavira%20from%20Kondamotu%22](#)), found in excavations in the state of Andhra Pradesh depicts Narasimha with the *vyūhas* identified variously as *vyūhas* and *pancavīras*. However, it seems plausible that this panel represents *vyūhas*, since, it provides crucial historical evidence for the worship of Narasimha as the *vyūha* Samkarshana alongside his already popular form of worship, the *avatāra* Narasimha. Samkarshana is the first image from the left side on the panel. Samkarshana is represented akin to Balarāma holding his usual weapons, the pestle in his right hand and the plow topped by the composite half lion-half elephant symbol in his left hand. This image brings together features associated with Narasimha and Balarāma (a form of Sankarshana). The Kondamotu panel further emphasizes that the *vyūha* and *avatāra*

correlation is well-known and that Narasimha is connected to the *avatāra* as well as the *vyūha* concepts of Vishnu.

Identification of Narasimha, the *avatāra* of Vishnu with the *vyūha* Samkarshana has left unique theological thought expressed variously in practice (see section 6 below for religious practice). Narasimha is the only theriomorphic deity to be popularly worshipped across India. Narasimha is the central deity in numerous temples in South India, while Narasimha is declared the state god of Telangana; the largest Narasimha temple in India is located in Simhachalam in Andhra Pradesh (Sriramachandracharya 1998; Sundaram 1969). Such preeminent position of Narasimha can be understood based on the dual theological presentation as *avatāra* and *vyūha* simultaneously.

I will consider below Jain sources which further support the identification of Narasimha with Baladeva (Balarāma), also known as Samkarshana.

### **5. Narasimha as Samkarshana in the Jain *Purāṇas***

Baladeva, also referred to as Samkarshana, is the Jain representation of Balarāma, and is also the name of a category of divine beings in Jainism known as *śalākapurushas*. Although the Jain sources are cryptic with regards to information on Baladeva's identification with Narasimha, it is emphatic on the affinity of Samakarshana with Narasimha and might have been an unquestionable fact by the time of the composition of the Jain texts. Since the information on the identity of Samkarshana with Narasimha is brief, it can be surmised

that the Jain texts have recounted information that was already well extant.

The Jain purānas further exemplify this traditional association of Samkarasana (Balarāma) with Narasimha, and explicitly call him as Narasiṃha (Harivamśapurāna.63-65). However, the explanation that the Jain purānas provide is different: due to his being surrounded by lions at the time of his death, he was referred to as Narasimha, out of reverence by the people. The Jain purānas also mention that his mother, Rohinī, had a number of dream visions indicating the birth of a *śalākāpuruṣa*, one of which involved a vision of a lion entering her mouth before the birth of her son, Balarāma (Harivamśapurāna.33). Thus, although the explanation for the identification of Samkarshna with Narasimha differs, the Jain texts preserve the trend commonly

noticed in the Vaishnava *purānas*. According to the Jain *purāṇas* Narasimha designates another name for Samkarshana/Balarāma (*Harivamsapurāṇa*. 63-65), which also supports the identification of Narasimha with Samkarshana as not merely superficial, but of serious theological implication, fully established as early as 300 B.C.E.

## **6. The *Vyūha* and the *Avatāra* Correlation in Religion and Practice**

The *avatāra* is the most important theologically infused term in Vaishnavism. Although pervasive use of the term ‘*avatār*’ in popular culture gave rise to its distorted understanding. Although the TV series, *Avatār, the Last Airbender*, utilized a number a concepts associated with the Hindu concept of *avatāra* associated with Vishnu, it is a distorted version of the concept loosely depicting



rebirth. This gave rise to popular use of the word *avatar*, applied to any concept of rebirth devoid of its original theological conception and early use. The *avatāra* strictly denotes incarnation (a full or partial rebirth) of Vishnu for cosmological purpose of balancing the creation (*Bhavagadgita.4.7* ). Hindu texts are cautious to employ the word in connection with the cosmogonic role of Vishnu, referring to rebirths or appearances of other deities including Shiva as appearance (*pratyaksha*)<sup>7</sup>.

The *vyūha* and *avatāra* correlation of Narasimha is not merely representative of two different divine identities of Vishnu but also two different theological concepts in Vaishnavism. While the *vyūhas*, Samkarshana and Vāsudeva are connected with the process of creation, as *avatāras* they are born in the

evolved world in order to destroy evil (Grunendahl 2005) and thereby restore/create good. When a deity is represented as a *vyūha* and an *avatāra* simultaneously the theological implications are immense and the influence of the deity extends beyond the created world. The only other instance in Hindu theology where a deity is represented simultaneously as a *vyūha* and an *avatāra* is in the case of Krishna Vasudeva. Therefore, as a *vyūha*, Narasimha's sphere of activity is confined to the cosmic process of creation of the world and its balance, while as an *avatāra* Narasimha is involved with the world, albeit momentarily accomplishing the death of Hiranyakaśipu. Narasimha's momentary presence limits the interaction of Narasimha within the worldly sphere, when compared to the other anthropomorphic *avatāras*, who are born in an evolved world as they live and

participate in the life on Earth. Therefore, the correlation of the *avatāra* Narasimha with the *vyūha* Samkarshana essentially eliminates this dilemma and helps his interaction with the created world, and simultaneously with the cosmic sphere. This, too, indicates the fluidity of Narasimha as a deity with influence not only in the human sphere of the Earth, but also the cosmic order involving other worlds including the underworld (demons) and the upper or divine world (gods). Samkarshana is the first *vyūha* to appear at the beginning of creation to facilitate the evolving universe. Identification of Narasimha with the *vyūha* Samakarshana might indicate his cosmogonic role in returning the universe to its original harmony. Identifying Narasimha as *avatāra* and *vyūha* simultaneously indicates that the god Narasimha

prevailed theologically over both within and beyond creation. Such an *avatāra* and *vyūha* correlation is seen again only in the case of Krishna. This demonstrates the significance of the deity Narasimha within Hinduism as representing a balance of *dharma* and cosmology.

Identification of Narasimha as an *avatāra* and a *vyūha* of Vishnu simultaneously is important and has significant implications for theological and religious practices centered on Narasimha. Although, the Narasimha *avatāra* is identified for the purposes of ritual and religious practices, it is the *vyūha* Narasimha that is appealed to for problems that seem to make life on Earth unlivable, and to end religious persecution (Gogulapati 1983; Krishnamacarya, 1968). The preeminent position of Narasimha in the sacred landscape of India especially that of the Telugu regions, Andhra Pradesh and

Telangana, may be attributed to the simultaneous presentation of Narasimha as *avatāra* and *vyūha*.

*Narasimhamantra* (Vemsani 2016a) contains an invocation to Narasimha as Vishnu and also recounts his role beyond the world as death to death (*mrityurmrityum*). This is the central feature associated with Narasimha rituals and vows. Popularly, Narasimha is worshipped in order to find relief from close-to-death or end-of-life crises (disease, accidents etc.). *Narasimha Jayanti*, celebrated at the beginning of the year marking beginning of the year and the changing of seasons signify renewal and new life.

### Conclusion

The God Narasimha as demonstrated in section 2, is predominantly depicted as an *avatāra* of Vishnu, and

also that his role beyond the created world presents him as the the *vyūha* Samkarshana, the first *vyūha* as demonstrated in section 3. I have examined archaeological sources and regional religious practices in section 4 to emphasize the pervasiveness of the dual identity of Narasimha. I also examined relevant sections of the Jain *purāṇas* that emphasize the dual nature of Samkarshana as Narasimha, and in section 6 have examined the significance of Narasimha's dual identity for religious practice. This paper examined classical texts, archaeological sources and popular religious practice in India to understand the *avatāra* and the *vyūha* correlation of Narasimha. My examination of classical Hindu literature in this paper revealed that the incarnation of Narasimha is unique and complex, which is also corroborated through evidence from historical

sources as well as the Jain *purāṇas*. A number of cosmological projections are reflected in the conceptualization and simultaneous representation of Narasimha as *avatāra* and *vyūha*. This helps understand the immense popularity of Narasimha in Hinduism, paralleling the anthropomorphic incarnations of Vishnu-- unlike any of the other theriomorphic incarnations.

My research in this paper shows that the narrative of the dual-natured Narasimha, even though briefly told in the *purāṇas*, is not a superficial story but has important implications for the theological understanding and religious practices centered on Narasimha. All across India, deeper theological content is embedded in the popular worship of Narasimha.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Translation of the word *avatāra* as incarnation led to its interpretation as rebirth leading to its loose usage in connection with alternative representation of an individual (as in the case of referring to a picture or digital representation as avatar) or the stories of rebirth of demons or humans from traditional lore to be interpreted as *Avatāra* (reincarnation) rather than rebirth. Such usage only indicates misunderstanding of the theological significance of the term as it is used in relation to the God Vishnu in Hinduism. Appearance of other deities of Hinduism is also referred to as appearance, birth or descent, but not as avatara, which has limited use in Hindu theology and Vaishnavism. Such loose interpretation of the word *Avatāra* indicates mistaken understanding of the theological significance of this world in Vaishnavism.

<sup>2</sup> *Yugadharma* is cosmically ordained and functions to connect the divine cycles of time to the created universal cycles of time in the earthly realm. Gonzalez-Reimann, Luis. 2002. *The Mahabharata and the Yugas: India's Great Epic Poem and the Hindu System of World Ages*. Asian Thought and Culture, vol. 51. New York: Peter Lang.

<sup>3</sup> Manuscripts of regional translations of Sanskrit *Narasimha purāṇam* are noted since the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards, though only a few of the manuscripts have been edited and published. *Nrisimhapurāṇa* (Oriya). Pitamabara Dasa (18<sup>th</sup> Century). Kataka: Dharmagrantha Shtora, 1973; *Nrisimhapurāṇamu* (Telugu).



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<sup>4</sup> One person in the family of Hiranyakaśipu is consistently described as possessing a lion face. It is the sister of Hiranyakaśipu, known as Simhika; her children are referred to as *Simhikeyas* (Bd II.6.20; Va. 68.19-20). Simhika is the daughter of Kasyapa and Diti and sister of Hiranyaksha and Hiranyakaśipu (Bd, II.5.12-13; Va. 67.60).

<sup>5</sup> Narada is recognized as the most preeminent devotee of Vishnu. In fact, the tradition of Vaishnava devotion is attributed to Narada. *Narada Bhakti Sutras*. Trans. Satsvarupadasa Goswami. Bhakti Vedanta Book Trust, 1998.

<sup>6</sup> Manuscript under preparation, Lavanya Vemsani, “God Narasimha as End of Time (*Kālānta*): Śaiva and Śākta Correlation of an *Avatāra* of Vishnu”.

<sup>7</sup> Although Shivapurana mentions twenty-eight avatars of Shiva it was only considered to be a comparative conflation in comparison with Vishnu, but not a true representation of Shiva’s incarnations, but only earthly appearance.

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