



**The Varaha Avathara of Vishnu worship in South India as gleaned
from the archaeological evidences**

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Abstract

Hinduism believes in one supreme God but allows the Hindus to worship in any form that one likes. They believe that one can reach God by various means. This can be attained through devotion (Bhakti marga) through Knowledge (Jnana marga) and good deeds (Karma marga). The Trinity of Hindu religion Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva, have the duties of Creation, Protection and Destruction. The Creation and Destruction are done at certain phase while the act of Protection is a long process that falls between the two acts. It is believed that Viṣṇu takes incarnation or avatāra to destroy the evil Asuras and protect the earth from destruction whenever the need arises. The popular avatāras of Vishnu such as Varāha, Narasmiha, Kṛṣṇa and Rāma gained importance in India from Kashmir in the North to Kanyakumari in the South. A general Historical study is carried out on Varāha avatāra all over India, wherein the study and survey of the archaeological and literary source revealed the existence of Varāha worship in Kashmir in the North, Assam in the North Eastern region, Madhya Pradesh in Central India and Andhra, Karnataka, in South India from ancient times. This paper focus on Varaha worship in South India.

Key words: Avatara, Vishnu, Varaha, South India.



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Introduction

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The term 'avatāra' is applied to the act of the God coming down in the form of man or animal to the earth and living there in that form till the purpose for which he had descended on the earth was accomplished. It is a coming, a decent or a manifestation of the divine in human form. Although the number of avatāras are considered to be more, only ten avatāras of Viṣṇu are traditionally accepted.

Varāha is worshipped in Zoomorphic, Zoo anthropomorphic, and Vaikuṇṭha forms. The depiction of boar in its full form is known as zoomorphic while in the zoo anthropomorphic image, the God is shown with human body and face of a boar. The composite image of gods like Lion, Human and Boar's face all together called as Vaikunda. All these three iconographic aspects are commonly worshipped in the temples.

The Golden age of Gupta rule was felt in all walks of life even after the fall of Gupta's. The art and architectural development paved way for the growth of Hinduism in the post Gupta period and the regions beyond their control. In Vengi (the present Krishna district of Andhra Pradesh) the Sālankāyanas were followed by the Vishnukundins, Kadambas and Vākāṭakas, and the Ganga in Southern part of India. The social, religious and cultural condition of this period could not be traced due to the lack of evidences. The three powers, such as the Chālukyas of Bādāmi, the Pallavas of Kānchi and the Pāndyas of Madura tried to gain prominence and extend their territory at the expense of one another in the 6th century CE. This period saw the revival of Hinduism and remarkable advances were registered in architecture, sculpture, painting and other arts.



The Varāha avatāra of Viṣṇu revealed from Chālukyas inscriptions

The inscriptions of Chalukyas found in the Karnataka region contain the Mangalaslokas or the verses in praise of Varāha avatāra of Viṣṇu. The Chālukyas had the Varāha as their emblem (lachana). This might have been shown to suggest that how the king had taken pride in shouldering the responsibility of the vast realm on earth under his sway, like Varāha who raised the almost submerged Prithvi. Dr. K.V. Soundara Rajan, one of the renowned art Historian says that “the Chālukyan art was one of the striking aspects of the religious art of the early Brahmanical cave temples of the Deccan. It is the well-developed nature of both the cults and the iconography mentions about Varāha. Brahmanical art, which brought for the first time at Ellora and elsewhere in the Deccan, gave cave art a new drive and dynamism, different tranquil and beatific composure of the Chālukyan sculptural traditions and religious élan”.

The Modlimb copper plates of the Chālukya king Pulakesin II opens with the auspicious word Svastri and praises the Boar form of Lord Viṣṇu in the words, ‘Victorious is Varāha who possesses the complexion of the blue lotus the sky covered with a group of clouds, who is adorned with the garland made of splendorous precious stones around his neck, who is having his waist encircled with a shining belt as the cloud which is covered with lighting and who has his face full of sweat due to the burden of carrying the earth like the cloud which emanates water when it is confronted with a mountain..

The early Chalukya kings were devotees of the Sapthamathikas, the god Kartikeya and to Lord Varāha. They had the title Sri-Prithivi Vallaba (which literarily means that he is the husband of Sri and Prithivi) seems to allude to their claim to have been incarnation of Viṣṇu the husband of Sridevi and Bhūdevi. The Chalukya king Mangalesa (597-610 CE) was a great patron of art and created some magnificent caves and temples in his capital. He is described as a



Parambhāgavata. The Vaishanvā cave at Ellora, cave No 4, represent the principal forms of Viṣṇu like Varāha, Trivikrama, Narasimha, Bhogāsanā Viṣṇu. The Kailāsa temple at Ellora also depicts a panel of Bhū varāha, which has its own importance from inscriptional point of view and artistic merit.

After the Chālukyas of Bādāmi, the whole country south of the River Tungabhadra were occupied by the dynasties like Rāshtrakūtas, Chālukyas of Kalyāni, Hoysalas of Dōrasamudra, Kākatiyas of Warangal and Yādava rulers of Devagiri from 12th century to 13th century CE up to the coming of the Vijayanagar kingdom. Varāha was considered as god who protects the earth and the territories under the control of the kings. Hence the kings had the passion for the worship of Varāha and most of the royal emblems of the Southern Kingdoms had Varāha as their emblem such as the Western Chalukayas, Kakatiyas, Hoysalas and Vijayanagara kingdoms.

The Varāha avatāra of Viṣṇu under the Rāshtrakuta dynasty

The Rāshtrakuta king Amoghavarsha I (814-80), claims himself as the rescuer of his kingdom from the grip of the Chālukyas and was thereby known as Viranaryana as his exploits resembled that of the god Naryana (Viṣṇu) who in his Varāha incarnation up lifted the earth submerged in the ocean.

The temples dedicated to Varāha worship

Varāha worship is still prevalent in South India. There are temples dedicated to Varāha at Simhachalam temple, Pushpagiri in Andhra Pradesh, Aihole and Belur in Karnataka and Cheri at Kerala. The presiding deity of Simhachalam temple is Varāha Lakshminarasimha, combining the iconographic features of Varāha and Narasimha. The image resembles a Shivalingam covered with sandal paste. It is only once a year, during the Chandana Visarjana that the sandal paste is removed, and the image is seen by pilgrims. There are a number of inscriptions present in this



temple. There are as many as 525 inscriptions in this temple. The Chola king Kulottunga Chola I (1070-1122 CE) made endowments to this temple, as evidenced from inscriptions dating back to the year 1087. The Vengi Chālukyas of Andhra Pradesh renovated the original shrine in the 11th century CE. Narasimha I, of the Eastern Ganga dynasty, carried out renovation work and constructed the structures of outer prakara in the second quarter of the 13th century CE. Krishna Deva Raya, of the Vijayanagar dynasty also visited the temple in the year 1516 as evidenced from the inscription of this temple. This temple boasts of a beautiful stone chariot drawn by horses. The Kalyana Mandapa within the temple has 16 pillars with sculptural representations of various incarnations of Viṣṇu. Even the pillars of the temple are adorned with the sculptures of Dasavatāra particularly of Varāha.

The Varāha temple at Cherai, near Cochin in Kerala, was constructed in the year 1565 CE, by the families who migrated to Cochin from Goa in 16th century CE settled in Azheekal in the Vypeen Island near Cochin. A wealthy merchant Krishna Prabhu of the seven families migrated was in possession of two idols of Sri Varāha and Sri Vithoba. Both these idols were temporarily installed and worshipped at Azheekal. Later on Sri Varāha became the Gramadevata of the Azeekal community. Then the above said Krishna Prabhu purchased extensive plots of land at Vypeen from Paliyath Achan who was the representative of the Mahārāja of Cochin. A new temple was constructed at Azheekal and the idol was consecrated in 1565 CE by Sri Yadavendra Tirtha Swamiji, the first pontiff of Kashi Mutt. The temple came to be known as Sri Varāha temple. Presiding Deity of this temple are Sri Varāha moorthy, Sri Venkatāchalapathy with Lakshmi Devi and Bhū Devi as the consorts on left and right side. As the temple at Azheekal was close to sea shore, due to continuous sea erosion the temple was shifted to the present place at Cheri in the year 1866 CE. The present exquisite temple was reconstructed in 1869 CE. This is the



only temple in India where both the deities of Sri Varāha and Sri Venkatesvara are installed side by side and worshiped as single god.

Conclusion

Varāha worship was prevalent throughout the ages and this has been proved from the existing of Varāha temples in South India under worship till date.

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