

## The Acclimatization of Narasimha Imageries into the Temple Murals of Kerala

**Sheena V.R. & Renjeshlal S.R.**

Assistant Professors (on contract)

Dept. of Archaeology, University of Kerala

Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, India

Email: vr.sheena@gmail.com; renjeshlalsr@gmail.com

### Abstract

*Narasimha, often considered as the most ferocious incarnation of lord Vishnu can be noted as the most frequently and most elaborately painted images in the temple murals of Kerala. Among the thirty-seven temple murals, which were extravagantly reviewed and studied, the twelve temple murals of Kerala have the panel of Narasimha. These temples are scattered in and around Kozhikodu, Malappuram, Thrissur, Kottayam, and Pathanamthitta districts. The esteem respect and fidelity through the fear-provoking facet of the lord Narasimha has been rendered aesthetically in the temple murals throughout different regions across Kerala. The acclimatization of the Narasimha image in the mural paintings across Kerala had been witnessed after the Bhakti movement, which occurred on and after the 15th century CE. Generally, the image is portrayed in two distinctive personalities of lord Narasimha, like the Yoga-Narasimha and Ugra-Narasimha. Ugra-Narasimha is the most commonly occurring theme. This paper gives brief discussions about the acclimatization and the iconographical nature of the lord Narasimha in Kerala murals and the veneration of the god among the present society.*

**Keywords:** Murals, Narasimha, temples, acclimatization, Iconography, Vishnu

### Introduction

Lord Vishnu is one of the three principal stalwart cults of Hinduism. He is often considered as the responsible force behind the function of preservation of the universe. He has taken ten avatars or incarnations for protecting and maintaining worldly peace in the universe on numerous arduous circumstances. Each of these incarnations has precise reasons and has different influences over the human society. In these incarnations, Narasimha is the fourth one of lord Vishnu, which has been venerated with an embodiment of valor and grace (Desai, 2013: 84). In this form the god is metamorphized into zoo-anthro-

pomorphic form with a human body and the face of a lion.

The name Narasimha shoots out from nara (human) and simha (lion), the word nara denotes the individuality of human and simha denote the character of lion, the god having literally materialized in to a figure with a lion like face with a human torso. There is no justifying tradition about the symbolic significance of the Narasimha in the Vedic literature. The popularity of the Narasimha avatara of Vishnu is demonstrated through various hymns. He is invoked and described in many Puranas such as Kurma-puranas, Saura-puranas, Vayu-puranas, Padma-puranas, and the great epic Mahabharata (Rao, 1914: 146)

The Bhagavatha-purana describes Hiranayakaśipu conquered the three worlds and no one is allowed to worship the god in his country. But Prahlada the son of Hiranyakasipu becomes a worshipper of Vishnu. Once he asked Prahlada if Vishnu was present everywhere, why he was not observable in the pillar. Hiranyakasipu broke the pillar then the lion faced avatara came out from the pillar and killed Hiranyakasipu (Desai, 2013: 85)

### **Narasimha in sculptural art**

Narasimha is one of the most preferred deity in the sculptural art of India. Though the antiquity of Narasimha in Indian images has been traced back to the times of Guptas and the oldest representation of Narasimha belonging to the Gupta period, which was executed on a seal found from Basarh. Other peculiar image of Narasimha during the Gupta period is from the chaitya windows of Deogarh Dasavatara Temple. The notable characteristic of Narasimha images in Gupta period is the absence of the demon Hiranyakasipu, ie, he is shown as single or Kevala Narasimha with two or four arms. Occasionally he is shown as seated in the uṭkuṭāsana pose with the forelegs are tied together by an yogapatta and traditionally known as Yoga-Narasimha. This form of Yoga-Narasimha is normally found in south rather than in the north (Desai, 2013: 88).

Unwavering representations of Narasimha images can be seen in the post-Gupta period. In these images, he is depicted as killing the demon Hiranyakasipu and popularly called as Ugra-Narasimha. The important sculptures of Narasimha belong to this period are from Rajivalocana Temple at Rajim in Madhya Pradesh and is datable to 7th century CE and another interesting image of Narasimha from Devanagana near Abu datable to 9th century CE (Desai, 2013: 90).

In South India, the sculpture of Narasimha was noticed from

the periods of Pallava, Chola, Chalukya and Vijayanagara (Dubreuil, 2001:77). The Narasimha form of Vishnu gained popularity at the time of Badami Chalukyas and Vijayanagara rulers.

The earliest, while considering the Narasimha sculptures in Kerala is a Yoga-Narasimha from Guhantaswami temple at Cape Comorin, belongs to ancient Travancore region dated to 13th century CE (Poduval, 1948: 73) and a remarkable representation of lord Narasimha of 14th century CE from Kattil Mekkathil Ponmana Temple in Kollam district (Poduval, 1948: 111). In the later periods, the worship of Lord Narasimha flourished with greater prominence and started to develop into an independent veneration and becomes a principal deity. Apart from being worshipped as a subsidiary deity as shown in the wall, pillars and brackets the lord Narasimha is, worship as a principal deity in about 17 temples. In addition to this, a large number of detached images, especially of Yoga- Narasimha are installed on the western side of the temple complex.

### **The acclimatization of Narasimha images in the Mural Paintings of Kerala**

The Narasimha incarnation of lord Vishnu have been noticed in the temple murals from the 15th century CE onwards. This acclimatization of the Narasimha imageries in the temple murals of Kerala has been happened during the onslaught of the Bhakti cult movement , which sweeps across the southern India on and after the 15th century CE. After surveying thirty-seven temple murals from different regions of Kerala, about twelve temples have the paintings of Narasimha and they are distributed in Pathanamthitta, Kottayam, Thrissur, Malappuram and Kozhikode district.

Generally, the Narasimha form of Vishnu is represented with a haloed lion face with a human body. He has an open mouth, furious fangs, protruding tongue, thick mane, stout neck, muscular shoulders, muscular chest, slender waist and sharp nail. The image is depicted as seated on a simhasana, with four, eight or sixteen hands. He is holding usual Vaishṇava emblems like conch and disc. The complexion of the body is crystal white, which represents Sattvaguna (Neeakandanassari, 2003: 9). The most popular iconographic form of Narasimha depicted in Kerala murals are the Yoga-Narasimha and Ugra-Narasimha.

### **Yoga-Narasimha**

In Yoga- Narasimha, the form the god is depicted in a meditative mood. Normally, this form is represented as a single figure, seated on

a simhasana with padmasana in the utkuṭika posture. The forelegs and the back of the body are gained together with yoga- patta. The image has four hands, the upper right hand and lefthand carry chakra and sanku respectively, and the other two hands being stretched forward and supported on the knee. Among the surveyed thirty seven temple murals, only two temple murals have the panel of Yoga-Narasimha.

One of the most extraordinary paintings of Yoga-Narasimha is noticed from the Thrikkodithanam Mahavishnu Temple in Kottayam district. Here the western wall of the srikovil has an exquisite panel of Yoga-Narasimha seated on a throne, which betray apparently all the similar iconographic representations of above discussed Yoga-Narasimha. He is shown as wearing red-coloured costumes and the body is richly bedecked with all ornaments. The colour scheme of this image is good and it provides elemental power and depth (fig. 1).



Figure 1. Yoga-Narasimha from Thrikkodithanam Mahavishnu Temple

Subsequent to Thrikkodithanam, stylistically and iconographically almost similar specimen of Yoga-Narasimha panel is noticeable from the srikovil walls of Thali Mahadeva Temple and Arpookkara Subramanyaswami Temple in Kottayam district. Here the image of Narasimha is less decorative with lighter colour (fig. 2).



Figure 2. Yoga-Narasimha from Arpookkara Subramanyaswami Temple

Srikovil wall of Chendamangalam Siva Temple at Calicut has a beautiful 18th century CE mural of Yoga-Narasimha panel depicted as seated on an inverted lotus pedestal. His body is adorned with minimum ornaments and costumes. He wears only lower garment which reaches up to the thigh and it is demarcated by using green colour.

### **Ugra-Narasimha**

The Ugra-Narasimha image is often represented as the lord killing the demon Hiranyakasipu. This image of Narasimha is customarily shown with eight handed, with a fierce looking lion face with a thick mane. He is seated on a throne and shown as tearing out the entrails of the demon. The image is generally holds two Vaishnava emblems sanku and chakra and the other hands are engaged in killing the demon. The front two hands are used for tearing the bosom of Hiranyakasipu, who is seen lying on his lap. The lower two hands used for holding the legs and hands of the demon and pulling out the entrails of the demon with other two hands.

The most exclusive depiction of Ugra-Narasimha is found from the paintings depicted on the srikovil walls of Thriprayar Sreerama Temple. Here the lord Narasimha is represented as killing the demon king Hiranyakasipu. Here Hiranyakasipu is depicted as lying on the lap of Narasimha. His head is seen on the right folded leg of the god. He is adorned with all suitable ornaments such as necklaces, bracelets and anklets. He is shown as wearing kiritamakuta. He has large opened bulging eyes, wide opened mouth and protruding teeth. His hands and legs are held in the hands of the god. The skin colour of the demon is dark, represents Tamo Guna or evil character and he wears red coloured lower and upper garments. The lower garment reaches up to the thigh and upper garment reaches up to the abdomen (figure 3).



Figure 3. Ugra-Narasimha from Thriprayar Sreerama Temple

This painting is remarkable for its enlargement of thematic illustrations and this obliteration scene is shown with the presence of spec-

tators like Prahlada, Brahma, Indra and Siva, with anjalihasta. These paintings have excellent visual unity and the themes co-exist within a large single panel without frame or borderline between them.

The srikovil wall of Panayannarkavu Bhagavathy Temple in Pathanamthitta district has an 18th century CE mural of Ugra-Narasimha. The iconographic illustrations are same as that of Thriprayar, but this painting is enhanced by the grandeur magic of colours and the themes are arranged in separate single panels. The demon Hiranyakasipu is laying on the lap of Narasimha, his head is on the left folded leg of the god. His hair is tied upward in a knot like fashion. His body is demarcated by using green colour represents Sattvik nature. Prahlada is depicted as standing on the right side of the god with anjalihasta, he is shown as wearing ornaments decorated with rosary beads and without garments (figure 4).

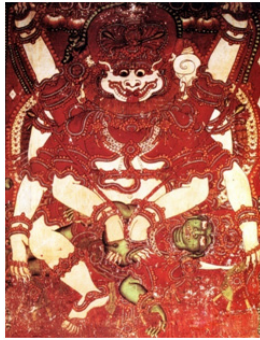


Figure 4. Ugra-Narasimha from Panayannarkavu Bhagavathy Temple

The outer wall of Sankaranarayana shrine of Trissur Vadakkumnatha Temple has a small beautiful panel of Narasimha belongs to 18th century CE (Vijayaraghavan 1998: 79). Here the image is shown as sitting in Yoga pose in varadamudra which is rarely seen in Kerala murals (figure 5)



Figure 5. Ugra-Narasimha from Vadakkumnatha Temple

The srikovil wall of Pallimana Siva Temple at Trichur has a wonderful depiction of Narasimha killing the demon Hiranyakasipu. He is depicted with sixteen hands among these six hands are used for attacking the demon and the other ten hands holding various weapons sanku, chakra, gada, padma, pasa, ankusa, khadga, kheta bow and arrow. The sixteen handed Narasimha is rarely seen in Kerala murals. This image is very distinguishable for its colour and decorations. White, ochre-yellow and shades of blue are predominant colours used here. The artists employed these tints very astonishingly with delicate lines. The costumes are decorated with round shaped designs which are very apparently confined to the viewers. The ornaments are adorned with sparkling stones and pieces of metals. Prahalada, is depicted as seated on his right side with anjali-hasta. All the other spectators of this panel like Brahma, Siva and Indra are also shown at the top with folded hands (figure 6).



Figure 6. Ugra-Narasimha from Pallimana Siva Temple

The interior of the eastern wall of Vadakkumnathan Temple has a 19th century panel of Ugra-Narasimha, which is completely faded and unable to identify the iconographic details. The demon is seen on his lap and Prahlada is shown on his left side with a folded hand (Vijayaraghavan: 85).

The north western wall of the srikovil of Manganam Narasimhswami temple at Kottayam district has a late 18th century mural of Ugra-Narasimha. The image of Narasimha is shown as strangling Hiranyakāśipu, who is lying on his folded legs. He is depicted as seated on a throne with large bulging globular shaped eye, strong shoulders, waist and neck. The middle part of the body and belly are lean. The body of Narasimha adorned with hārās, bhujavalaya, kankaṇa, upavita and pādasara. He wears karanṭamakuṭa, decorated with garlands and jewels.

These ornaments in the body are demarcated by using red and yellow colour. Hiranyaksipu is depicted as lying on the lap of Narasimha, his head is seen on the right folded leg of Narasimha. He is shown as wearing ornaments and costumes. The obliteration scene is shown with the presence spectators like Prahlada, Brahma, Indra and Śiva. Prahlada, the great devotee of lord Viṣṇu is depicted as a young boy seated on his right side with anjalihasta. Adjoining to the Prahlāda is Brahma and Indra, they are shown as standing with folded hands. Lord Śiva is depicted on his left side with four hands holding tanka and mriga in the upper hands and the lower hands are in anjalihasta.

Another most precious specimen of Ugra-Narasimha belongs to this period is conspicuously visible from the walls of the srikovil of Vakamoli Mahavishnu Temple at Calicut. This image is depicted with a grandeur workmanship with clear contours. Here the lord Narasimha is depicted as seated on a throne, he wears typical kathakali type kiritamakuta decorated with jewels and adorned with a sikhara like super structure on the top. He has large globular shaped bulging eyes, broad eyebrows, and mouth opened with long and sharp teeth, broad ears with pointed end, broad shoulder and slender hips. He has eight hands; the upper two hands are used for dragging out the entrails of the demon. The middle right hand carry chakra and left hand has sanku, the lower right hand holding the hand and left hand holding the leg of the demon and the other two hands are used for attacking the stomach of the demon. His body is adorned with ornaments and costumes. The colour of this mural is faded, the dark red coloured changes to ochre-white. The demon Hiranyakasipu is depicted as lying on the folded legs of Narasimha, the head of the demon shown on the right folded legs of the god and his body is demarcated by using dark colour represents the Tamasic quality, he wears kiritamakuta and the body is adorned with ornaments and costumes. Prahlada, the great devotee of lord Vishnu is absent in this panel (figure 7).

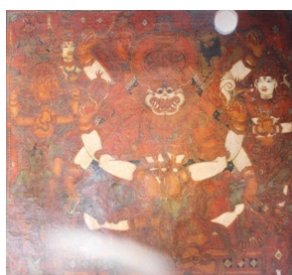


Figure 7. Ugra-Narasimha from Manganam Narasimhaswami Temple



The srikovil wall of Kottakkal Mahadeva Temple at Malappuram has a 19th century mural of Ugra-Narasimha. Here the lord Narasimha is depicted vibrantly as killing the demon Hiranyakasipu with his eight hands. The artist tried to portray the strength and vigor of the Narasimha by using a red background. The ornamental treatment of this panel is amazing, he wears a beautiful kiritamakuta decorated with shining stones and a many layered beaded chains with a pendant at the centre. He wears both lower and upper garments, the lower garment is red in colour and reaches below the knee and the upper garment is green in colour and reaches up to the abdomen. The treatment of ornaments and costumes enhances the beauty of this panel. Prahlada and other spectators are also absent in this panel (figure 8).



Figure 8. Ugra-Narasimha from Kottakkal Mahadeva Temple

## Conclusion

Narasimha, the fourth incarnations of lord Vishnu is one of the important manifestations which can be seen throughout the sculptural as well as murals art of Kerala. The most ferocious and fearsome incarnations of lord Vishnu, the lord Narasimha has been venerated with extreme reverence and pinpoint attention. The sculptural representation of the lord Narasimha can be noticed from the Gupta age itself; but the acclimatization and the integration of the lord Narasimha into the imageries of the mural tradition across Kerala has been commenced from the 15th century CE, which marks the initiation of the Bhakti cult movement which sweeps across the southern India in and after the then century. The significant gesture and the bodily approaches of these Narasimha depictions shows two distinctive personalities, such as Yoga and Ugra. In Yoga-Narasimha form the god is shown as a single with a mutely attitude. Only three temple murals have the panel of Yoga-Narasimha. However, in Ugra-Narasimha form the god is

seen associated with spectators depicting forceful attitude. This Ugra-Narasimha form the artist tried to impregnate the story behind the origin of this avatara. The notable feature of lord Narasimha in Kerala mural are depicting with a white coloured body representing Sattvic nature or envisaged as the character emphasizing peaceful power and strength. The body colour of the image in mural paintings are depends on the nature of the character mentioned in religious text.

This paper discussed about twelve Narasimha panels in various temple murals, among these four of them are from Thirssur, four from Kottayam, two from Kozhikodu, one from Malappuram and one from Pathanamthitta districts. Among these five district Kottayam and Thirssur districts have four temples with Narasimha panels, which means this image is commonly seen in central Kerala.

The image of Narasimha appears in Kerala murals only after the 16th century CE. Usually, the iconographic representations of lord Vishnu in Kerala murals become predominant during the 17th century CE onwards. It may be due to the influences of some devotional Malayalam works like Adhyatmaramayanam, Mahabharatam and Harinamakirtanam by Tunchat Ezhuthachan, which popularized the devotion for Vishnu and his forms (Menon, 1967:194). This clearly shows the selection of mural themes in a temple, as it is directly related with the popularity of themes and images sustained in the then society.

This study mainly focuses on the twelve temples which have the Narasimha panels and it shows an interesting feature as in the twelve temples, six of them have Vishnu as the principal deity and the other six temples has Siva and Bhagavathy as the principal deity. This clearly shows the dominance and popularity of the Narasimha incarnation of Vishnu over the other deities at that time in the society. Apart from the iconographic and imageries of the Narasimha murals, the integration of these aesthetically murals into the temples of Kerala have been discussed. The mural paintings are always showcasing a clear reflection of the relationship between the religious and socio-cultural traditions continued in the society, which can be ascertained by the huge incorporation of Vishnu murals in the Kerala temples. The mural paintings and the themes in these temples often reflected the nature and direction in which the then society has been beholding and thinking. The emergence of the bhakti movement and the repercussions which have been elaborately glanced, reviewed and acknowledged through these visually magnificent treasure troves which is plainly hidden in these temples.

### References

- Desai, Kalpana. 2013. *Iconography of Viṣṇu*. New Delhi: Abhinav Publications.
- Jayashankar, S. 1997. *Temples of Kerala*. Kerala: Directorate of Census Operations.
- Kramrisch, Stella and Vasudeva Poduval. 1948. *The Arts and Crafts of Travancore*, Cochi: Paico publishing house.
- Mahadevan, T.M.P. 1956. *Outlines of Hinduism*. Bombay: Sudhakar, S.Dikshit for Chetan Pvt.Ltd.Bombay.
- Menon, A. Sreedhara. 1967. *A Survey of Kerala History*, Kottayam: D.C. Books
- Nagar, Shantilal. 2006. *Vishnu the Preserver*. New Delhi: B.R.Publishing Corporation.
- Nayar, S.Vijayarakshavan. 1998. *Vadakkunathan Temple Complex, Trichur*. Mumbai: Manan Prakashan.
- Neelakandanassari, K. 2003. *Sreemanushyalaya Vidhi*. Kodungallur: Devi Book Stall.
- Ramachandran, A. 2005. *Painted Abode of Gods- Mural Traditions of Kerala*. New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts Vadehra Art Gallery.
- Rao, S. K. Ramachandra. 1988-1992. *Encyclopaedia of Indian Iconography (vol.1, 2 & 3)*, New Delhi: Indological and Oriental Publishers.
- Rao, T.A.Gopinatha. 1914. *Elements of Hindu Iconography (vol.I, part.I)*. New Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass Publishers Pvt.Ltd.
- Sastry, H.Krishna. 2003. *Indian Images of Gods and Goddesses*. New Delhi: Bharatiya Kala Prakashan.