

## Narasimha: Myths and Legends

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Despite holding a subordinate status in the Ṛg Veda,<sup>1</sup> Viṣṇu was really a great deity in his own place whose personality was "by no means unimportant" (Macdonell 1971: 37; Vyas 1987: 9; Gaurisankar de 1987: 69; Dasgupta 1985: 105-106, fn. 2; Bhandarkar 1965: 33). Besides the Ṛg Veda dedicated five or six hymns exclusively to him, he enjoyed great powers and functions that allude to his greatness even in the earliest Vedic Age (Macdonell 1971: 71; Gaurisankar De 1987: 69; Vyas 1987: 9ff.). His celebrated three strides earned him grandiose titles "*vi kram*", "*uru krama*" and "*tri vikrama*" — epithets usually applied to sun covering the earth, atmosphere and the heavens (Macdonell 1971: 37-38). Śākapuṇi, an old Vedic commentator, remarks that Viṣṇu has manifested himself in the three-fold form of fire (Agni) on the earth, lightning (Indra or Vāyu) in the atmosphere and the solar light (Sūrya) in the sky (Rao, I, i, 1914: 73; Banerjea 1956: 385).

In the *Brāhmaṇa* and Epic ages, he rose to the position of a supreme god (Stutley 1977: 336; Gaurisankar De 1987: 69). His later preeminence and prestige was, perhaps, the outcome of his three strides and sacrifice (Bhandarkar 1965: 33 ff.; Das Gupta 1985: 104 ff.; Macdonell 1971: 38-39). The *Śatapatha* and *Aitareya Brāhmaṇas* also mention amongst gods his eminent place he secured with his sacrifices on earth as his abode (Vyas 1987: 14, 15; Banerjea 1956: 385).

In the Epic and Purāṇic ages, Viṣṇu is regarded as the most influential member of later Brahmanical triad—Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva. Viṣṇu's heaven Vaikuṇṭha, with a circumference of 80,000 miles, is on the slopes of Mount Meru, which is entirely made of gold and jewels (Ions 1986: 46). He has a thousand names, the repetition of which is a meritorious act (Ibid.: 48; Banerjea 1956: 388; Hopkins 1968: 203). Out of them, twenty-four are the most important and are recited by the *brāhmaṇas* in their daily prayers (Rao, I, i, 1914: 227).

Faint references to the antiquity of the later Epic and Purāṇic *avatāras* of Viṣṇu can be found in the Ṛg Veda (Macdonell 1971: 39; Hopkins 1968: 207-12). Gonda mentions his four incarnations—Varāha, Narasimha, Vāmana and Kūrma as primary *avatāras* (Gonda 1969: 124). Although we do not find any systematic account, yet the later Epics preserve the stereotyped ten *avatāras* (Hopkins 1968: 210, 217; Bhaṭṭaśāli 1929: 95). "The theory of Avatars is still developing in the epic and since, after the epic, it continued till the epic ten became twenty or more" (Hopkins 1968: 211). Despite the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* enumerating twenty-two, the ten-incarnations (*Daśavatāras*) of Viṣṇu gained greater popularity (Rao, I, i, 1914: 123). Others count them to sixteen, twenty-two, twenty-three, twenty-four, twenty-nine or, as the *Satvata Saṃhitā* gives, even as many as thirty-nine (Banerjea 1956: 391; Khan 1998: 16; Stutley 1977: 95). Gopinath Rao maintains that Viṣṇu has countless *avatāras* "like the rivulets flowing from an inexhaustible lake" (Rao I, i, 1914: 123). Apart from the *avatāras*, Pandit Bidyabinod has recognized twenty-four different forms of Viṣṇu on the basis of sundry arrangement of the usual attributes in his four hands (Bidyabinod 1991: 23-33). Śāstri (1916: 22) put forth that out of his ten *avatāras*, merely five (Varāha, Narasimha, Vāmana, Rāma and Kriṣṇa) are regularly worshipped in temples, while the rest of them did not receive the status of being the chief gods.

*Garuḍa*, the Ṛg Vedic *garutmat* and *suparṇa*, the chief of birds in the Hindu mythology, is the *vāhana*, vehicle, of Viṣṇu (Macdonell 1971: 39, 152; Bhaṭṭaśāli 1929: 108; Ions 1986: 102). Iconographically, he is represented as having a head, wings, talons and a beak of an eagle, and a body and limbs of a man (Ions 1986: 102; Stutley 1977: 95). He is the ninth (*Vihāṅgama*) and the eighteenth (*Amtaharaṇa*) *avatāras* of Viṣṇu in the *Satvata* list of thirty-nine incarnations (Banerjea 1956: 529). He is the personification of valour and his *mantara* is more effective for removing sins, warding off evil-spirits and healing snake-bites (Stutley 1977: 96). In the developed mythology of the Epic and Purāṇic periods, he is the son of the ṛṣi Kāśyāpa and Vinata, and is described as the brother of Aruṇa, the charioteer or foregoer of Sūrya (Banerjea 1956: 530; Gonda

1969:102). Bhaṭṭaśāli (1929:108) derives the name from two words—*guru* (heavy) and *uḍa* (flying)—suggestive of once his flying with a great load perhaps *amṛta*.

Considered as the preserver and sustainer of the Universe in the Hindu trinity, Viṣṇu takes various forms to uphold life and virtue on the surface of the earth. In the Hindu mythology, evil or demonic forces, sometimes, succeed to bring severe penance and austerities even on the supreme gods of the trinity. This they do in the wake of special powers attained as the divine boons and which they use to persecute men on the earth and gods in heavens. One such myth illustrates the heroic deed of Viṣṇu by assuming the incarnation of a man-lion (*Narasimha*) to overpower the demon Hiraṇyakaśipu, the *asura* king. Nowhere do we find an exhaustive account of this episode but piecemeal. We have attempted to bring the fragmentary information in a single body to present a detailed picture *ab initio*.

The entire story of the *Narasimha avatāra* of Viṣṇu and his slaughtering the *asura* king Hiraṇyakaśipu revolves, like his other incarnations, round the extirpation of evil, re-establishment of the good and safety of the mankind on the earth. The theme is aptly given in the *Bhagavatagītā* as follows (Pal 1985: 21; cf. Gonda 1969: 125):

"Whenever dharma or righteousness declines and adharma or evil prevails, I become manifest or assume visible form, from age to age, to save the good, destroy evil and to re-establish dharma".

In the present context, we have three main characters of the myth—Hiraṇyakaśipu (symbolizing evil or *adharma*), Prahlāda (his son, personifying good or *dharma*) and Viṣṇu in the *Narasimha* form to act as *coup de grace* to the former. Since the *raison d'etre* of the descent of Viṣṇu is to grace Prahlāda and to crush the uprisings of Hiraṇyakaśipu, it would be appropriate to begin with the creation of the last and his rising to power which ultimately led to his final annihilation.

Out of fifty daughters of Dakṣa, thirteen including Diti were married to ṛṣi Kāśyāpa (Stutley 1977: 66). One of the aboriginal tribes of ancient India generally known as the Daityas owe its origin to Diti. From Diti, Kāśyāpa had two sons—Hiraṇyakaśipu and Hiraṇyakṣa—the ancestors of the Daityas (*Ibid.*: 80). Hiraṇyakṣa (meaning golden-eyed) threw the earth into primeval ocean to submerge all the creatures on its surface. But Viṣṇu assumed the form of Varāha (the third *avatāra*), killed the demon and rescued the earth. The scene, better portrayed in sculptures, shows the god lifting the earth-goddess (*Bhū*) as a young lady stuck to his tusk from being drowned in the ocean. This form of the god is also called as *Bhū-Varāha*.

A legend in the *Bhagavata Purāṇa* narrates Jaya and Vijaya the two *dvārapālas* of the main gate of the Viṣṇu's palace (Garrett 1987:680). Once upon a time, the Purāṇic legend alludes, Sanaka, a great hermit (*muni* or sage) visited Viṣṇu but Jaya and Vijaya did not pay much heed and treated him rudely (Bhan 1987: 389).<sup>2</sup> On his complaint to Viṣṇu, the master cursed and transformed them into *asuras*, who subsequently turned his opponents. As a result, they were born on the earth in the form of various *asuras* such as Madhu and Kaiṭabha, Hiraṇyakṣa and Hiraṇyakaśipu and in the Mahābhārata time as Śiśupāla and Datavakra (*Ibid.*; cf. Rao I, i, 1914: 147; Hopkins 1968: 51). Interestingly, in all their forms, they were killed by Viṣṇu.

Gopinath Rao (*Ibid.*), on the authority of *Vāyu Purāṇa*, relates a legend serving as the base for the name "Hiraṇyakaśipu". Before the birth of Hiraṇyakaśipu, Kāśyāpa while offering *yajña* (sacrifice) had brought precious gifts for priests. The gifts included for the "*hotri* priest" a "gold-platted wooden seat", which was covered with *kuśa* grass. During the sacrificial rites, Diti gave birth to a babe who instantly stood and walked to the spot of sacrifice where he sat on the gold-platted seat and started reciting from the sacred books. The performers, greatly amazed by the child, pleasingly named him "Hiraṇyakaśipu" and predicted his future power. Another source seeks the name to have been derived from his always being clothed in costly robes (Stutley 1977:113; cf. Zimmer 1953:180 fn.).

When he attained the age, Hiranyakaśipu became the king of the *asuras*. As a devotee of Śiva, he used to worship his favourite deity with great religious fervour (Hopkins 1968:211). Sectarian bias turned him against Viṣṇu and his followers. The slaying of his brother, Hiranyakṣa, by Viṣṇu further added fuel to fire. Now he became a stern opponent of Viṣṇu and feared insecurity of his life from that deity.

To make his life safe and secure, he practised great austerities to Brahmā for a long period and obtained numerous exalted boons from him. Albīrūnī expatiates, when Hiranyakaśipu prayed for an eternal life, it was declined because of its being "a quality of the Creator alone" (Sachau, I, 1962: 487-8). After turning down his pray for eternity and immortality, Hiranyakaśipu craved for longevity and immunity in the sense that he "could not be killed either by day or night by god, man or beast" (Basham 1956: 303). He was, however, granted this boon on the condition that it will be ineffective for Viṣṇu but in strict observance of Brahmā's divine grant. With the attainment of these boons and thereby having secured his life, Hiranyakaśipu now began to persecute not only men on the earth and his own subjects, but also gods to the extent that he dislodged Indra from his heavenly abode (Ray 1985: 378; Hopkins 1968: 140-1). The gods prayed to Brahmā for redressing of grievances and retrieval of their heavens. Brahmā directed them to go to Viṣṇu, who could help them out of this disastrous situation (Rao, I,i, 1914: 145-6; Garrett 1987: 680).

Hiranyakaśipu had a son whose name was Prahlāda. He is said to have been a Brāhmaṇa in his previous birth and, although now born as son of the ferocious king of the *asuras*, still was strictly devoted to Viṣṇu (Rao, 148). The father gave his son to an erudite teacher of the age to impart him basic education. After some time, the father wished to know about the progress of his son. At query, the son recited before him a poem which meant "that only Vishnu exists, whilst everything else is illusion" (Sachau, I, 1962: 488). This earned him a bitter and disfavoured status in the eyes of his father. Hiranyakaśipu foresaw that Prahlāda's intentions were totally against his expectations and, as he thought, was growing his enemy.

Although Hiranyakaśipu had forced all persons to direct their adoration to him alone and required them to recite "Om Hiranya", and punishments were ordained on non-compliance. When he asked Prahlāda to obey, he, instead, recited "Om namah" (Garrett 1987: 418). This added to his wrath and ordered to teach him an instructive lesson because of his disobedience to the supreme king of the three worlds (Stutley 1977: 113, 205).

Severe corporal punishments were given to Prahlāda in an unsuccessful attempt to kill him. He was, therefore, subjected to poisonous serpents to bite his whole body, but he continued praising Viṣṇu and praying for mercy on him whereby his body remained immune (Dutt 1912: 87). He was made to be trampled by a huge elephants, but in vain; he was cast into blazing fire, but it did not burn him; he was given deadly poisonous food, but it could not harm either his body or mind. A magically-created fierce female struck him at the breast with a "dart", but failed to produce the desired result. When Hiranyakaśipu observed that all these punitive measures fell ineffective, he became anxious about the final destruction of Prahlāda who remained persistent and did not feel reluctance in his belief and devotion to Hari. Now his father hit upon another plan and threw Prahlāda from the summit of his palace into the ditches and rugged hilly area but he remained unhurt (Dutt 1912: 88-112). Having pleased with his unshaken belief in him, Viṣṇu granted Prahlāda the highest boon in the form of *moksa* or emancipation from rebirth (Dutt, 1912, 102).

Yet Gopinath Rao, referring to the *Kurma Purāṇa*, has an almost different story to tell that Prahlāda was not a devotee of Viṣṇu right from his childhood but was later inclined to his worship (Rao I,i,1914: 145-7). He further relates that at the time when gods became helpless before the harassing attitude of Hiranyakaśipu and requested Brahmā for help. Brahmā, taking along all of them, implored Viṣṇu for redressal. Viṣṇu first created a "strong warrior" whom he sent with *Garuḍa* and a number of other troopers to mar the vanity of the *asura* king, but this expedition bore no fruits. Now Viṣṇu himself determined to shatter the self-fabricated might of the *asuras*.

We find minor variation in the myths associated with the way of the descent of Viṣṇu and the mode of final extinction of the demon king. It is generally unanimously held that once in the course of their hot reasoning about the omnipresence and omniscience of Viṣṇu, Hiraṇyakaśipu pointed to the column of his palace to investigate in a humiliating way Viṣṇu's presence in it. On receiving Prahlāda's positive reply, Hiraṇyakaśipu "jumped against the column and beat it" (Sachau 1962, I: 489). Garrett (1987:418) says that Prahlāda struck the column. Gopinath Rao (1914, I,i: 148) records two traditions: Prahlāda struck the pillar with his fist while the other account, according to him, informs that Hiraṇyakaśipu himself outrageously kicked at the pillar. Banerjea (1956:415) and Ions (1986: 49) advocate Hiraṇyakaśipu's kicking at the pillar. Śāstri (1916: 260) records that Hiraṇyakaśipu split the column into two parts with a heavy blow of sword. Whatever the case might have been, the main theme was to show the emergence of the god to fight the demon-king, help his own devotee and make him crowned publicly. Not only this, it was also destined to publicise the ultimate victory of the good over evil.

Appending to the above variation in the connected myths, it is also said that Hiraṇyakaśipu, his son Prahlāda and a host of other *asuras* came to check Viṣṇu. But how could they be able bodily and materially to withstand before the might of the god, therefore, in a short fight that ensued they were subdued. Prahlāda had already realised that fighting against so valiant a figure as Viṣṇu is meaningless and instantly comprehended him to be the lord of the Universe. He tried his best to convince his father to acknowledge the might and sight of Viṣṇu but he, paying no heed, continued to contest. As a result, Hiraṇyakaśipu lost his life and the heavens were restored to Indra, other gods and *ṛṣis* (Rao, I,i,1914: 145-7; Sachau, I, 1962: 489).

With the striking and splitting of the column of the verandah of Hiraṇya's palace, Viṣṇu appeared from it in the form of Narasiṃha (*nara* = man, *siṃha* = lion; thus means man-lion, having head of a lion and body of man. It is therianthropic rather than theriomorphic and started fighting Hiraṇyakaśipu. This particular scene, showing both being engaged in an open contest, depicted in some relief sculptures, is called "Nṛsiṃha-Hiraṇya yuddham" (Gopalakrishnan 1996: 422, fig. 10; cf. Bhaṭṭaśāli 1929: 101). It was a war tactic to let pass the day-time, keep the prey busy till *samdhi* (twilight or sunset) and to honour thereby the boon of Brahmā. In sculptures and paintings, Narasiṃha is shown throwing Hiraṇyakaśipu in his lap and tearing out his entrails. The destined hour came in when the king was slain by Narasiṃha (neither man nor god or beast), at sunset or twilight (neither day nor night) and at the doorsil of the verandah of the king's palace (neither inside nor outside the palace). Albīrūnī, however, adds that the god raised the king into the air and killed him there, therefore, "not on the earth nor in heaven" (Sachau, I, 1962: 489). By doing so, not a single article of the immunity charter of Brahmā was violated but rather well-honoured.

The *Kurma Purāṇa* further elaborates that apart from killing Hiraṇyakaśipu, Narasiṃha's help also was sought in "abstracting" from the *Mātrikās* their destructive attitude while living in *Pātāla-loka* (the abode of the tamasic and ugra-Narasiṃha). Actually these *Mātrikās* were bent on teasing the men on the earth to provide them food (Rao, I,ii, 1914: 381-2).

The sectarian bias is rigidly embedded in the mythology of Narasiṃha and Hiraṇyakaśipu. There is a strong contest between the devotee of Śiva (Hiraṇyakaśipu) and that of Viṣṇu (Prahlāda). Either sect claims its upper hand. The Vaiṣṇavas appease their thirst and feel themselves victorious on the killing of Hiraṇyakaśipu. While, on the other hand, Śaiva accounts claim their own superiority to their Vaiṣṇava opponents mentioning that having killed Hiraṇyakaśipu, Narasiṃha became haughty and harsh. Thereupon Śiva desired to punish him for killing Hiraṇyakaśipu and assumed the form of a *Śarabha* (*Śarabhamūrti* or *Śarabhesamūrti*, a mythical animal partly bird and partly lion) "tore up Narasiṃha and wore his skin as a garment, using his face as an ornament on the chest" (Rao, I,i, 1914: 45, 155, Pl. E; Blurton 1992: 123; Stutley 1977: 113 fn., 269). Banerjea (1956: 486), while discussing Śiva as "great destroyer", maintains that he not only destroyed a number of demons but also inflicted punishment on some gods including Narasiṃha for killing Hiraṇyakaśipu, the "Śiva-bhakta Daitya king". In some iconographic reliefs, as a consequence of

sectarian bias, "a god of one sect is sometimes shown lying prone under the feet of a deity belonging to different sect. In the Śarabhamūrti of Śiva, Narasiṃha is shown underneath the curious hybrid form of Śiva as Śarabha" (Banerjea 1956: 275).

Being personification of valour as a divine attribute, Narasiṃha is usually worshipped by kings and warriors (i.e. the *Kṣatriyas*). He is invoked to protect his adorers from the *mantras* of the enemies. His worship is also prescribed two days before starting the battle (Stutley 1977: 205). Gonda (1969: 243) recommends, in a similar way, the worship of Narasiṃha to destroy enemies and barbarians and to be invincible. Stutley (*Ibid.*), on the authority of *Agni Purāṇa*, further adds that when frog-fat is consecrated with Narasiṃha's *mantra* and rubbed on the body, it enables one to walk unhurt through the fire. The *Mayamata* states that the *Ugra-Narasiṃha* should be installed on mountain-tops, caves, forests or the enemy's realm whom has to be destroyed (Śāstri 1916: 26,30). One should not install *Ugra-Narasiṃha* in towns and cities but away from the civic life (Rao, I, i, 1914: 19). Similarly, his *yoga-mūrtis* must also be treated in the same manner (*Ibid.*, 20).

According to *Viṣṇudharmottara*, the worship of Narasiṃha increases one's knowledge of the Supreme Being and that of Hiraṇyakaśipu is a personification of evil and ignorance (*Ibid.*, 153-4). Banerjea (1956: 416) remarks that Viṣṇu and most of his aspects were gods of love, and deeds of destruction associated with them were actually acts of grace and deliverance and were rarely depicted in sculptures. The *Viṣṇudharmottaram Purāṇa* prescribes the worship of Narasiṃha for removal of all obstacles, ill omen of stars and the terror of enemies, wild beasts and thieves (Bhan 1987: 378).

As stated above, literary references to the antiquity of Viṣṇu glorified as deity are ascertained back to the Ṛg Vedic times (Vyas 1987:9-10) or even to the pre-Aryan cultures of the Indian subcontinent (Swati 2001: 84; cf. Kantawala 1987: 25-26). Archaeological evidences support the worship of Viṣṇu with deep religious devotion right from about the first half of the second century BC (Chanda 1991: 152) or its early second half (Brown 1959: 37) which is an indicator to presume that his worship must have been started earlier than that time (Chanda 1991: 154). This assumption is also seconded by the erection of the *Garuḍadhvaja* at Beśnagar (in Central India) and an associated Viṣṇu temple (Brown 1959: 37, 40, 47) which must have contained his image in conjunction with *Garuḍa*, his *vāhana*, on the capital of the pillar in front of it (Chanda : *Ibid.*).

Evidences to the cult of Narasiṃha are available from Orissa and the eastern Deccan. Āndhradeśa has yielded one of the earliest depiction of Narasiṃha (Blurton 1992: 123; Huntington 1985: 181-2) which inclines to suggest that the people of this area were well-acquainted with the worship of Narasiṃha in his theriomorphic form since the early centuries of Christian era (ca. 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD). The Narasiṃha cult is suggested by Blurton (1992: 123-5) to be the amalgamation of the local aboriginal cult of Āndhradeśa with oral traditions. He asserts that the tribal deity Narasiṃha is a god of Central Indic jungles. His devotees in the Āndhra region still give sacrifices of ram or goat to him once a week (*Ibid.*: 125).

Separate temples are reportedly constructed in honour of Narasiṃha both in the North (Ohri 1991: 84-5) and South India (Venkatachari 1987: 269). The latter examples are reputed for their power and attainment of worldly pleasures. But, now they occupy subsidiary position in the temples of other gods and, therefore, the practice of erecting separate temples in his honour seems to have been abandoned. Because it requires worship with full dedication and devotion; and if not properly worshipped, it burns down villages or causes harm to the people (Rao, I, i, 1914: 40).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Viṣṇu is mentioned 100 times in Ṛg Veda, 59 in the Yajur Veda and 66 in the Atharva Veda.

<sup>2</sup> Bhoothalingam (1986:54) rather suggests four boy sages, the Sanakas, whose love and devotion for Viṣṇu was reflecting from their shiny faces. Garrett (1987: 546-7) mentions Sanaka as one of the four sons of Rudra. Sanakadi, he maintains, is a Vaiṣṇava sect who worship Kriṣṇa and Rādhā conjointly. They are numerous in Mathura and Bengal.

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