

Nṛisimha Incarnation Images From Himachal Pradesh; Earliest to C. 1200 CE.

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The Nṛisimha incarnation is the fourth incarnation of the Lord Vishṇu. This incarnation is half man and half lion. In its representation invariably the face is depicted that of a lion and rest of the body is of a human. According to the *Purāṇic* texts lord Vishṇu assumed this incarnation to annihilate the demon Hiranyakaśipu and to rescue his devotee Prahlād from the atrocities of the demon. As the demon was bestowed with a boon that he will not be killed by any kind of weapon or by any kind of human, bird, animal or aquatic and neither in the morning, evening or during the dusk then lord Vishṇu assumed the Nṛisimha incarnation which literally means half man and half lion. Nṛisimha incarnation is always depicted in half man and half lion form unlike the Varāha, Kūrma and Matsya incarnation which are depicted in partial or complete animal form. In *Purāṇas* like the *Agni Purāṇa*, the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, the *Vishṇu Purāṇa*, the *Nṛisimha Purāṇa*, the *Harivamśa Purāṇa*, the story of Nṛisimha incarnation is explained without much change. The *Agni Purāṇa* mentions that mouth of Nṛisimha should be shown open. Hiranyakaśipu should be shown pressed under his left leg and Nṛisimha is tearing apart the chest of the demon. There is garland around the neck and discus and mace ought to be in the handsⁱ. According to the *Vishṇudharmottara Purāṇa* shoulders, waist and neck of Nṛisimha are well built and his face is of a lion and body of a man. He wears blue garments and has a haloⁱⁱ. He stands in *ālīḍha* pose and he is adorned with all kind of ornaments. Flames surround his face and manesⁱⁱⁱ. His complexion is like a blue lotus. Hirnyakaśipu who is placed on the knee of the lord should be shown as being severed by the sharp nails of the lord^{iv}. Hari in his Saṅkarshaṇa form assumes the man-lion form. Hari destroys the three kind of ignorance^v. Otherwise the Nṛisimha should be depicted as seated at ease on a throne, while his hands should rest on the top of the mace. His body is full of flames and he holds *śaṅkha* and *chakra*^{vi}. In another form Nṛisimha should be shown standing with his feet placed on the Pṛithvī in personified form. He should hold *śaṅkha*, *chakra*, *gadā* and *padma*. His body is covered in hair like curls of the flame. He cannot be seen because of the aureole and he has all the garments but ornaments should not be shown^{vii}. In the *Rūpamaṇḍana* it is mentioned that Nṛisimha has a face like a lion. His teeth are sharp and large and he is shown tearing apart the chest of

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Hiraṇyakaśipu with his both hands^{viii}. There are some beautiful images of the Nṛsiṃha incarnation which come down to us from Himachal Pradesh. These images are in stone, wood and metal and housed in different Museums, some of them are *in situ*.

Four handed wooden image of Nṛsiṃha is depicted on the left side of the door frame of the sanctum of Kamaksha Devi temple (plate 1). This image, for the first time, is published in the present work. The half man and half lion deity is shown in the act of tearing apart the stomach of Hirṇyakaśipu, lying on the lap of the deity, with both of his front hands. Nṛsiṃha is holding conch and disc in his rear right and rear left hands respectively. There is expression of ferocity and anger depicted by the frowning eyes of Nṛsiṃha and open mouth. He is wearing *yajñopavīta*, *vanamālā*, *ekāvalī*, armlets, bracelets etc. There is *śrīvatsa* mark on his chest. The proper left leg of the deity is placed straight on the ground while the proper right leg is bent and placed on the shield. His posture exudes strength and vigour. Head of Hirṇyakaśipu is tilted towards his proper right side and his limbs are listless showing that the demon has already died. The image is depicted in a niche with pilasters on both sides. C 10th century dating seems to be appropriate for this image.

Fountain slab from village Saho, Chamba has depiction of Nṛsiṃha on it (plate 2). It is a four handed image, the back hands are held aloft and with the front two hands he is tearing apart the stomach of the demon Hirṇyakaśipu who is kept on his lap. He is wearing *vanamālā*, necklace, bracelets, anklets, *kuṇḍalas* and horizontal striated patterned dhoti. The deity is shown seated but the posture is unnatural and at first glance one cannot distinguish that whether the deity is standing or seated.

Nṛsiṃha incarnation is depicted in a frieze of a fountain slab discovered from mohalla kashmiri, Chamba town (plate 3). It is a six handed image of Nṛsiṃha. With the front two hands he is tearing apart the stomach of the demon Hirṇyakaśipu. In his back left hand he is holding the demon from his leg and in the back right hand he is holding demon's head. Other back hands are held aloft, holding some indistinct objects. The face of the deity is broken but his manes are clear which are fashioned in striated pattern. The deity is wearing bracelets, sacred thread and *vanamālā*.

The image of Varāha in the Vaidyanath Temple, Baijnath discussed above flanks the left side of the miniature shrine on the right side exterior wall of the Temple. This image is published for the first time in the present work. On the other side of the miniature shrine i.e. on its right

side, Nṛisimha incarnation of Vishṇu is depicted (plate 4). The deity is shown standing in *samabhaṅga* posture and his position is frontal. It is a four handed image of the deity. With back hands the deity is holding the demon Hiranyakaśipu and with the claws of both his front hands he is killing the demon by tearing apart his stomach. The face of the deity is of a lion and rest of the body is in human form. However the face of the deity is eroded with the passage of time but the round leonine face can be easily make out. Behind the round face of Nṛisimha his hair are shown cascading down. The image is without heavy ornamentation, only the necklace around the deity's neck is noticeable.

There is an image of four handed Nṛisimha incarnation *in situ* in the Bhagavati temple at Swain Himgiri (plate 5). This image is four handed and in the back left hand the deity is holding a Conch and the back right hand is broken. In his front two hands which are joined together he is holding mace. This kind of depiction of Nṛisimha with mace in front two hands, joined together, is very common in Kashmir e.g. 9th Century CE sculpture discovered from Verinag, Kashmir and 7th Century CE Image of Nṛisimha also found from Verinag, Kashmir, both the sculptures are housed in S.P.S Museum, SriNāgar. The latter 7th Century CE Nṛisimha image from Verinag is four handed image and holding Conch and Lotus in his proper back left and proper back right hands respectively and in the front two hands the deity is holding mace. Similarly the Nṛisimha image from Swain Himgiri is four handed. In the proper back left hand the deity is holding Conch and the proper back right hand is broken and the mace is held in the front two hands. Though the mace is weathered out but from the contours its ribbed pattern is evident, ribbed patterned mace is a typical characteristic of Kashmir and Chamba during 8th to 10th century CE^{ix}. But as the Nṛisimha from Verinag is holding Lotus in his proper Back right hand therefore keeping in mind the other similarities between the two sculptures and the impact of Kashmir on Himachal especially the Chamba region it can be said that swain Himgiri image was actually holding Lotus in the proper Back right hand. Two hands on the mace are prescribed in the *Vishṇudharmottara Purāṇa* for Nṛisimha incarnation^x. J.L. Bhan explains the placing of the two hands on the mace as unique and a characteristic trait of the artist Gugga^{xi}. The crown of the deity is typical in Kashmir idiom with crescent moon pattern in the centre with floral pattern on both side, this kind of crown was common and is seen in many of the sculptures from Kashmir. The deity is wearing necklace, *vanamālā*, bracelets, anklets *etc.* The mouth of the deity is slightly open and his tongue is slightly coming out and touching his hands and also his teethes are visible. It seems that artist has chosen the moment when the deity is

taking rest and collecting his breathe after annihilating the demon Hiranyakaśipu. V.C. Ohri relates this sculpture with the Nṛsiṃha image from Verinag and Bharmaur and gives 9th century CE date to this sculpture^{xiii}. Contrary to the observation of Ohri, Swain Himgiri image is less expressive than Nṛsiṃha images from Verinag also the face of Swain Himgiri image is weathered out making its expressions difficult to read. This sculpture from Swain Himgiri, Chamba is in the Kashmir idiom and on the basis of its stylistic characteristics and its comparison with other sculptures the date of 9th century CE can be given to it.

Another magnificent example of Nṛsiṃha in metal can be seen in the Chaurasi complex at Bharmaur, Chamba (plate 6). This image is housed in the sanctum of the Nṛsiṃha temple. The deity is four handed and he is shown seated. The back hands of the deity are held aloft as about to tear the stomach of demon. Overall expression is of ferocity. The front hands are joined together with chin resting on it. Similar position of the hands is seen in many images of Nṛsiṃha from Verinag, Kashmir and Swain Himgiri, discussed above. The position of the front hands and other characteristics clearly shows Kashmir idiom. It is almost life size sculpture with fierce expressions. The teethes of the deity are rendered in realistic fashion and his hair are rendered in a stylistic fashion with manes in a sinuous line and curled in the end while hair cascading down and reaching on the shoulders with curls of hair in eddy around fashion. The eye brows are joined together and forms undulating line giving frowning expressions. The eyes are wide open with iris in the centre thus making the fierce expressions more intense. The deity is wearing crown having crescent moon in the centre and line of pearl at its rim with Curls of hair falls on the forehead this arrangement of the crown and hair is seen in many sculptures from Kashmir. The hairdo above the head is fashioned in striated pattern. The position of the front hands which are joined together with chin resting on it alludes to the presence of mace which must have existed once. V.C. Ohri also opines the same view. There are few sculptures of Nṛsiṃha from Kashmir and the Chamba region, discussed above, which are shown holding mace in the front hands in almost the same fashion. The pedestal on which Nṛsiṃha is shown seated, has mountainous range depicted on it in Central Asian style^{xiii}. Herman Goetz relates this pattern of mountains on the pedestal with east Turkistan and China^{xiv}. The deity is wearing sacred thread, mekhla, necklace, bracelets, armllets *etc.* He is wearing dhoti which covers his proper right leg almost down to the knee where it is discernible only by a sinuous double line as the dhoti is very much diaphanous below the knee portion while the proper left leg is covers only half thigh of the deity. This arrangement of dhoti in

which it covers one leg down to the knee and the other leg's half thigh, is very common characteristic of the Kashmir sculptures. The Nāgara style Temple in which the deity is housed is a later construction than the sculpture itself which was originally placed in a wooden Temple. Stylistically the sculpture is later than the Lakshana Devi, Nāndī and Gaṇapati images. It may be the case that when *Kiras* a Tibetan tribe attacked the kingdom of Bharmaur and annihilated the king of Bharmaur then as it was a sort of a raid they did not annexed the territory. When the kingdom was retained and rule was re-established the new king must have got this image made. According to Herman Goetz the wooden facade of the Lakshana Devi Temple actually belonged to the Temple dedicated to Vishṇu with image of Nṛisimha in it^{xv}. But the carving of the facade shows that it belongs to an early date and stylistic characteristics show that the Nṛisimha image belongs to a later date. M. Postel et al. Gives a date of 720 C E to this sculpture^{xvi}. V.C. Ohri opines that the image was executed in the last quarter of the 8th century CE^{xvii}. On the basis of the stylistic characteristics, its comparison with the sculptures of the Kashmir region and other evidences the date of 8th century CE is plausible for this sculpture. Kalpana Desai gives 9th century CE date to this sculpture and identifies the *mudrā* of the back hands as *tripataka-mudrā*^{xviii}.

Quadrimanous Nṛisimha is shown standing and tearing apart the stomach of Hirṇyakaśipu on the frieze atop the Vishṇu image from village Jayali, sub-division Chaupal, District Shimla. This image clearly shows Pratihāra idiom. His back hands are held aloft and with his principal hands he is doing the act of tearing apart of the stomach as mentioned above. His proper right leg is bent, slightly raised and placed on some unidentifiable thing while his proper left leg is also slightly bent.

On the left of the image discussed above, in the same temple, a fragment of an architectural member is placed. It has two vertical rows. In one row *śārdūla* and attendant figures are depicted while the other row has figures depicting Daśāvātāras of Vishṇu. In the third register from below Nṛisimha is depicted killing the Hirṇyakaśipu demon. His proper left leg is placed straight while his right leg is bent. He is depicted as tearing apart the stomach of the demon.

On the right side of the wooden facade of the inner shrine of the Markula Devi temple there is an image of quadrimanous Nṛisimha in seated position. The deity is depicted in theriomorphic form. The face of the deity is that of a lion while rest of the body is of human. He is shown seated on a pedestal. Nṛisimha is holding clockwise from the rear right hand the disc, the mace,

the conch and the lotus. The mace is depicted in ribbed pattern. He is wearing broad necklace, *yajñopavīta*, crown etc. He is depicted in a small niche with pilasters on both sides and exquisite pattern above. This is probably the only image of Nṛsiṃha in Himachal, where the deity is shown seated cross-legged.

ⁱ *Agni Purana.*, chapter 49, verse 4.

ⁱⁱ *Vishnudharmottara Purana*, III, 78, 2.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, III, 78, 3.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, III, 78, 4.

^v *Ibid.*, III, 78, 7.

^{vi} *Ibid.*, III, 78, 9-10.

^{vii} *Ibid.*, III, 78, 10-12.

^{viii} *Rupamandana*, chapter 3, verse 25

^{ix} M. Postel *et al.* *Antiquities of Himachal*, Bombay 1985, pp. 90-91

^x Bhattacharyya D.C. *Pratimālakṣaṇa of the Viṣṇudharmottara*, New Delhi 1991, p. 197

^{xi} Bhan J.L. *Kashmir Sculptures*, New Delhi 2010, p. 453

^{xii} Ohri, V.C., *Sculptures of Western Himalayas*, Delhi 1991, p. 99

^{xiii} M. Postel *et al.*, AOH, Bombay., p. 96

^{xiv} Goetz Hermann, *The Early Wooden Temples of Chamba*, Leiden 1955, p. 84

^{xv} *Ibid*, p. 85

^{xvi} M. Postel *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 97

^{xvii} Ohri, V.C., *op. cit.*, p. 99

^{xviii} Desai, Kalpana. S., *Iconography of Vishnu.*, p. 91



**Pl. 1. Nṛsiṃha, fountain slab, Saho,
Bhuri Singh Museum, Chamba.**



**Pl. 2. Nṛsiṃha, door-frame,
Kamaksha Devi Temple, Kao, Karsog.**



**Pl. 3. Nṛsiṃha, fountain slab, Mohall Kashmiri,
Bhuri Singh Museum, Chamba.**



Pl. 4. Nṛsiṃha,, Vaidyanath Temple, Baijnath.



Pl. 5. Nṛsiṃha, Bhagvati Temple, Swain Himgiri, Chamba.



Pl. 6. Nṛsiṃha, Nṛsiṃha Temple, Bharmaur.

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