Daśāvatāras in Tamil *bhakti* literature and programme of sculptures in Vijayanagara-Nāyaka art

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Abstract

The term *daśāvatāras* stands for the ten incarnations of Viṣṇu. They are Matsya, Kūrma, Varāha, Nṛsimha, Vāmana / Trivikrama, Parasurama, Rama, Balarama, Krishna and Kalki. These are noted in the hymns of Ālvārs in orderly or disorderly pattern. The first part of the article discusses the significance of a set of *daśāvatāra* images in the Kaḷḷarpirāṇ temple at Śrīvaikuṇṭham in Tirunelveli district. Such images in separate enclaves were set in Vijayanagara-Nāyaka period (15th–18th centuries CE) temples in Tamilnadu, e.g. Tātikkompu and Aḷakarkōyil. To this milieu the images examined in the article add a new dimension.

Keywords: Ālvārs, Śrīvaikuṇṭham, Viṣṇu, *daśāvatāra*, *Matsya*, *Kūrma*, *Varāha*, Nṛsimha, Vāmana / Trivikrama, Parasurama, Rama, Balarama, Krishna, Kalki, Vijayanagara-Nāyaka.

During the Vijayanagara-Nāyaka period the *daśāvatara* sculptures came to be programmed in a continuous array.¹ *Śāstras* may talk of the *daśāvatara*s in a sequential order², starting with *Matsya* and ending with Kalki but sculptural representations in such an order may be rare. An early example of such a fixation may be found in the Pāpanāseśvara temple at Alampūr of the Eastern Cālukyan denomination, dated around the 8th century CE (Kalidos 2006: I, 187–88). Set within a square *maṇḍala*, the Buddha appears in the center.³ Such a setting of the *daśāvatāra* images acquired popularity in Vijayanagara-Nāyaka art.⁴ The present communication examines such a group of sculptures from Kaḷḷarpirāṇ temple at Śrīvaikuṇṭham. This huge temple complex takes its origin during the later Pāṇḍya period in the 12th–13th century CE but most of the *maṇḍapas* therein are Vijayanagara-Nāyaka additions (Ganeshram 2010: Chap. III). The *daśāvatāra* sculptures under note are set in one of the *maṇḍapas*. The same type of images appear in the Viṣṇu temples at Tātikkompu⁵ near

¹ The *daśāvatara*s are *Matsya* (Fish), *Kūrma* (Tortoise), *Varāha* (Wild Boar), *Nṛsimha* (Man-Lion), *Vāmana*-Trivikrama (the Dwarf and Virāt), *Paraśurāma* (Rāma with the Battleaxe), *Balarāma*, *Kṛṣṇa*, *Dāśarathi*-Rāma and *Kalki* (Basham 1971: 304–49).

² See the *Śrītattvanidhi* (1.2. 47–57) for such an order. The list includes both *Kṛṣṇa* and the Buddha. It is possibly cited from the *Padma Purāṇa*. At the end of the list the *varṇa* of each *avatāra* is given. The personalities (colour within parentheses) listed are the following: *Matsya* (*sphaṭika*), *Kūrma* (*svaṛṇa*), *Varāha* (*nīla*), *Nṛsimha* (white as moon), *Prahlāda* (golden), *Vāmana* (*nīla* or black), *Paraśurāma* (*svaṛṇa*), *Rāghava* (green), *Bharata* (green), *Lakṣmaṇa* (golden), *Satrugna* (red), *Sītā* (*svaṛṇa*), *Māṇḍavī* (red), *Ūrmilā* (green or blue), *Sṛtakīrtī* (white), *Hanumat* (*kanaka*, pale red), *Aṅgada* (red), *Sugrīva* (*svaṛṇa*), *Jāmbavat* (of the colour of *nīlotpala*), *Guha* (*kanaka*), *Bibhiṣaṇa* (black), *Balarāma* (milk white), *Revatī* (red), *Kṛṣṇa* (*megavaṛṇa*), *Rukmiṇī* (*kanaka*) and *Kalki* (white). The Buddha is not brought under this list.

³ The Māmallapuram Pallava inscription includes the Buddha among the *daśāvatāra*s of Viṣṇu (Srinivasan 1964: 173) and omits *Kṛṣṇa*. Others are *Matsya*, *Kūrma*, *Varāha*, *Nṛsimha*, *Vāmana*, the three Rāmas and *Kalki*.

⁴ Raju Kalidos (1989: 338–40, figs. 35, 43; cf. 1988: 98–125) has reported not less than 47 occurrences in the temple cars of Tamilnadu. Most of these temple cars are of the Nāyaka or post-Nāyaka period.

⁵ This temple is noted for its artistically set *maṇḍapa* with sculptural pillars in the shrine for Lakṣmī (Gopalakrishnan 1996: 415–31). The temple was rebuilt during the period of Veṅkaṭpati Rāya and is dated in *Sālivāhana* era 1551 (CE 1629) that falls during the time of Tirumalai Nāyaka (CE 1623–59) of Maturai.

Tiṇṭukkal, and Aḷakarkōyil⁶ near Maturai, both called Saundararāja and both are of the Nāyaka period. The canonical setting for the presentation of the images may be found in the Tamil *bhakti* hymns of the Ālvārs of the early medieval period (c. CE 550–850)⁷, which literature had a far reaching impact on the arts of the land.

Daśāvatāras in Tamil Bhakti Literature

Before taking up the images for an examination, the literary mandate may be discussed to begin with. Tirumaḷicai, Nammālvār, Periyālvār and Tirumaṅkai Ālvār make a note of the clusters of the *daśāvatāras*. Casually it may be noted here that the works of the Ālvārs is collectively called *Nālāyirativviyappirapantam*, shortly *Nālāyiram* “the 4,000”. Among the above mentioned four Ālvārs, Tirumaṅkai is said to have converted the Pallava Emperor, Nandivarman II (CE 731–96) to Vaiṣṇavism, who in his work *Periya Tirumoli* notes the sequential order of the *daśāvatāras* in a number of places. Periyālvār seems to have converted the Pāṇḍyan Emperor Śrīmāra Śrīvallabha (CE 815–62). Tirumaḷicai and Nammālvār belong to an early group and may be dated in the 7th or early 8th century CE.

Nammālvār notes not less than five of the *avatāras* in an order. They are *Matsya* (Tamil *Mīṇ*), *Kūrma* (Tamil *Āmai*), Nṛsiṃha (Tamil Naraciṅkam or Ciṅkappirāṇ – Periyālvār *Tirumoli* 5.2.4), Vāmana (Tamil *Kuṛaḷ* means “dwarf”, also called *Māṇikkuraḷaṇ* – Periyālvār *Tirumoli* 1.4.1, 5.2.5, *māṇi* means *brahmacāri*, *Kuṛaṭṭpiramaccāri* – Periyālvār *Tirumoli* 4.9.7), *Varāha* (Tamil *Ēṇam*) and Kalki (Tamil Kaṭki):

Mīṇāyāmaiyumāy naraciṅkamumāy kuṛaḷāy

Kāṇārēṇamumāy kaṭkiyāy (*Tiruvāymoli* 5.1.10).

Periyālvār notes the *Haṁsa*, *Matsya*, *Siṃha*, Vāmana and *Kūrma* in a sequence:⁸

⁶ During the historic past, the place was known as Māḷiruncōlai (the place where Māl/Viṣṇu) resides, noted in ancient Tamil literature such as *Paripāṭal* and *Cilappatikāram* (Rajarajan 1996).

⁷ For a comprehensive picture of the *Nālāyiram* bearing on Vaiṣṇava iconography see Kalidos 2006: Chap. I.

⁸ The *aṁśāvatāras* according to the *Devī Bhāgavata* are Sanaka, Sanandana, Sanādana, Sanatkumāra, Nārada, Nara-Nārāyaṇa, Kapila, Dattātreya, Yajna, Ṛṣabha,

Aṇṇamum mīṇuruvu māḷariyum kuṛaḷum

Āmaiymāṇavanē... (Tirumoli 1.7.11).

In these references the *avatāras* are not noted in the set order. Tirumaḷicai in two stay occurrences notes the Mohinī and *Matsyāvatāras*. Mohinī is called *aḷakiyaṇ* “He, beautifully she”.⁹ The Fish is one that gives life, *mīṇāyuyiraḷikkum* (*Nāṇmukaṇ Tiruvantāti* v. 22). The Vāmana and Trivikrama (Tamil Tirivikkiramaṇ – Periyālvār *Tirumoli* 1.8.9) *avatāras* are beautifully coagulated in the phrase, *Ċiriyāṇ mikapperiyaṇ* “the small (Dwarf) but at the same time very big (Virāt)” (*Nāṇmukaṇ Tiruvantāti* v. 71). Periyālvār brings the ten in a hymn as noted in the following order: *Mīṇ*, *Āmai*, *Ēṇam*, *Ari* (*Simha*), *Kuṛaḷ*, the three Rāmas¹⁰, *Kaṇṇaṇ* (Kṛṣṇa, Prākit Kanha) and *Kaṛki*:

Tēvuṭaiya mīṇamā yāmaiyaṇ

Ēṇamā yariyaṇk kuṛaḷāy

Mūvuruvilirāmaṇāk kaṇṇaṇāy

Kaṛkiyaṇ muṭippāṇ... (Tirumoli 4.9.9).

Prṥthu, Mohinī, *Garuḍa*, Dhanvantari and Vyāsa (Kalidos 1986: 183n). Haṁsa as an *avatāra* appears often in the *Nālāyiram*. The hymns note a “dancing bird”, called *Āṭarparvai* (PT 9.9.10, *Tiruvāymoḷi* 8.2.4, 8.8.9). It is not clear whether this is *Garuḍa* (Chandramohan 2008: cover plate) or *Haṁsa*. Besides, the *Rāmayāṇam* (*Bālakāṇḍam*, 5. *Tiruavatārapaṭalam*, v. 22) of Kampar considers Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa, Bharata and Satrugna as the *avatāras* of Viṣṇu Ādiśeṣa, *śaṅkha* and *cakra*. Another *avatāra*-like form of the Lord is Hayagrīva (Kalidos 2006: I, 16), the Horse-headed. He is said to have admonished a horse-headed demon: *Pariyōṇ mārvaḱam paṛrippiḷantu* (PT 7.7.5) “Caught hold of the chest of the horse (-demon) and cleaved it (cf. Nṛsimha and Hiranya);” *Nālvēṭapporuḷaiyellām paṛimukamāy aruḷiyaperumāṇ* (PT 7.8.2) “The Lord who divulged the meaning of the four-*Vedas* as the Horse-faced (*hayaśīras* or *hayagrīva*).”

⁹ *Aḷaki* means a damsel. *Āṇ* is a masculine suffix. Nammālvār adds: *Āṇallaṇ peṇṇallaṇ* “He is neither a man nor a woman” (*Tiruvāymoḷi* 2.5.9). Again it is added he is neither a man, nor woman and eunuch: *āṇallaṇ peṇṇallaṇ allāl aliyaṇmallaṇ* (*ibid.*, 2.5.10). Tirumaḷicai adds: *Āṇiṇōṭu peṇṇumāki allavōṭu nallavāy* “He is both man and woman and neither of these, i.e. eunuch.”

¹⁰ The Vēlūr temple car houses an image of the three Rāmas appearing in a row (Kalidos 1989: fig. 43). The order is Paraśurāma (holds the *paraśu*), Dāśarathi-Rāma (carries the *dhanus* and *bāṇa*) and Balarāma (carries the *halā* “ploughshare”).

Tirumaḷicai in his *Nāṇmukan Tiruvantāti* notes the *Matṣya* and *Haṁsa* *avatāras* of the Lord. The *Haṁsa* is one who ordained the precious Scriptures:

Aṇṇamāki arumaṇikaḷ aruḷ (*Periya Tirumoḷi* hereinafter PT 5.1.9).

Aṇṇamākiyaṇṇaru maraikaḷ payantavaṇ (PT 5.3.8, 5.7.3).

Periyāḷvar (*Tirumoḷi* 1. 10) elaborates the mythology saying that the gloom of *pralaya* encircled the cosmos. The four *Vedas* disappeared. The Lord incarnated as *Haṁsa* in order that the gloom vanishes and that the *Vedas* are recovered.

Tirumaṅkai quite often brings the *avatāras* in clusters. The Swan, Fish, Lion, Dwarf and Tortoise appear in a disorderly order:

Aṇṇamum mīṇurumāḷariyum kuṇḷum

Āmaiyumāṇavaṇē... (PT 1.7.11).

The word that denotes *avatāra* in this statement is *āṇavaṇ* “he became”.¹¹ In another context the Boar, Fish, Tortoise, Lion and the Dwarf listed:

Ēṇamīṇāmaiyōṭariyum cīrukūḷumāy

Tāṇumāya... (PT 5.4.8).

Tāṇumāya here means “he himself became”. Tirumaṅkai calls the Boar *Paṇṇi* “pig” in another context. The *avatāras* listed here are Pig, Fish and Lion:

Paṇṇiyāy mīṇāki yariyāyp

Pāraippaṭaittuk kāttuṇṭumīṇta paramaṇ (PT 7.8.9).

“The Eternal He came as the Pig, Fish and Lion to create the worlds, sustain, swallow and spit.”¹²

¹¹ The Tamil equivalent of *avatāra* is *avatāram* (cf. *avatari* in *Kampa-Rāmāyaṇam*, *Bālakāṇṭam*, 5. *Avatārappaṭalam*, v. 20). The *Maṇimēkalai* (17. l. 9), a 6th century Tamil epic, deploys the word *mayāṅki* (contextually transform, literally “swoon”): *Neṭiyōṇ maṅkinilamiciattōṇṇi* (“The Tall [Trivikrama] transformed himself and appeared on earth”).

¹² The *pañcakṛtyas* (*śṛṣṭi/tōṇṇam* “creation”, *sthiti/kāttal* “sustenance”, *saṁhāra/caṅkāram* “destruction”, *tirodhana/maṇaittal* “embodiment” and *anugraha/anukkarakam* or *viṭuvittal* “release”) are attributed to Viṣṇu in this hymn. Cf. the *Bhagavat Gīta* (Chap. IV, vv. 7–8) version: *Yadā yadā hi dharmasya glānirbhavati*

The Lion, usually called Ari, is called *Cīṅkam*, transcription of the Sanskrit *simha*, in a hymn:

Mīṇōrāmaiyumāy...cīṅkavuruvāy... (PT 8.4.4).

“The forms are Fish, Tortoise and Lion.”¹³

Besides these cryptic references, Tirumaṅkai has a hymn each on Varadarāja, Mohinī and Kṛṣṇa that appear in PT (8.9):

v. 1. *Kaimā matayāṇi yiṭar tīrtta karumukil*

“The black cloud that removed the hardship of the elephant (Varadarāja).”¹⁴

v. 2. *Tirumālai yammāṇai yamutattaik kaṭarṇiṭanta perumāṇai*

“Tirumāl/Viṣṇu, the Father, the Dignified who extracted the ambrosia from the ocean (Mohinī).”

v. 3. *Viṭaiyēḷaṇ ṛaṭarttu vekunṭu vilāṅkaluṛa*

Paṭaiyāḷi taṭṭa paramaṇ Parancōti

“That day he admonished the seven wild bulls, the Eternal he holds the armed-disc, He is the Eternal Lamp (Kṛṣṇa).”

Another decad (PT 9.1) brings the *Matsya*, *Varāha*, *Vāmana*/Trivikrama and Paraśurāma in four hymns in an order:

v. 3. *Mīnurvāki viripuṇalvariya kaṭṭatolittōṇ...*

“As a Fish he contained the inundating waters within his shell (Matsya).”

v. 4. *Paṇṇiyāy aṇru pārmakaḷ payalai tīrtavaṇ...*

“That day he removed the hardships of the Earth Maid, Bhūdevī (Varāha).”

Bhārata/ Abhyutthānamadharmasya tadātmānaṁ srujāmyaham// Paritrāṇāya sādḥūnāṁ vināśāya ca duṣkṛtām/ Dharmasamthāpanārthāya sambhavāmi yuge yuge// “Bhārata (Arjuna) whenever *dharma* is destroyed and *adharma* shoots up, I make me born again. In order to protect the righteous, to admonish the evil and to establish righteousness, I am born again and again.”

¹³ For a comprehensive picture of Nṛsimha from the Tamil *bhakti* hymns see Kalidos 1999: 168–78.

¹⁴ This form is counted under the *līlāvatāras* in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (Kalidos 2006: I, pp. 39–40).

v. 5. *Maṇṇavaṇ periyavēlvīyir kuṛaḷay mūvaṭi nīroṭuṇkoṇṭu*

Piṇṇumēḷulaku mīraṭiyākap perunticaiyaṭaṅkiṭanimirntōṇ...

“He appeared as a Dwarf (Vāmana) in the big sacrifice of the King (Mahābali) and got sanctified the gift of three spaces of land; later grew Tall and compressed (measured) the seven worlds in two strides.”

v. 6. *Maḷuvīṇal avaṇiyaracai mūvēḷukal maṇimuṭi poṭipaṭuttu utirak*

*Kulavuvār puṇaluḷkuḷittu veṅkōpam tavirttavaṇ...*¹⁵

“For twenty-six generations he (Paraśurāma) toppled the crowns of kings on earth and punished them with a battleaxe and got himself appeased.”

Kulacēkara Ālvār (*Perumāḷ Tirumōḷi* 10) compresses the entire *Rāmāyaṇa* from the *Bālakāṇḍa* to the *Uttarakāṇḍa* in decad bearing on the *Cittirakūṭam* (*Citrakūṭa*) of Citamparam.¹⁶ Tirumaṅkai extols the *Rāmāyaṇa*’s little heroes in his PT 10.3. The personages do exalted are Sugrīva (called *Sūrya-putra*), sons of Sugrīva, the *vānaras* (monkey horde), Hanumat, Aṅgada, Nala, Kumbhakarṇa, besides Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa. The pride of the demons Rāvaṇa and Indrajit were curbed.

Tirumaṅkai in his PT (8.8) summarizes the *daśāvatāra* activities in each of the hymns of a decad.¹⁷ The conventional order followed is *Matsya*, *Kūrma*, *Varāha*, Nṛsimha, Vāmana/Trivikrama, Paraśurāma, Śrī Rāma, Balarāma, Kṛṣṇa and Kalki. The *sthala* is Kaṇṇapuram in Cōḷanādu. The summary of the ideas may be presented as follows:

1. The lotus-eyed he appeared a Fish and rescued the gods when the primeval waters inundated the cosmos. He was the same Lord who appeared as Kṛṣṇa.

¹⁵ Elsewhere it is said he cut the shoulders of 1,000 kings with the *paraśu*: *Maṇṇanccavāyirantōḷ maḷuvil tuṇittamaintā* (PT 7.2.7).

¹⁶ For a summary of this decad see Kalidos 1997.

¹⁷ This decad deploys the following terms to mean an *avatāra* (cf. n. 9): *vantu* “came”, *āy*, *āki* or *āṇāṇ* “became”, *eṭuttu* “took (contextually appeared)”, *tōṇṇi* “appeared”, *vantutōṇṇi* “came and appeared” and *piṇṇantu* “born”.

2. He appeared as a Tortoise when the Ocean of Milk was about to be churned and supported the Manthara mountain on his back.
3. When the primeval waters engulfed the worlds, the Lord appeared a Boar (in order to protect the Goddess of Earth).
4. The Lord presented himself a ferocious lion (*agnilocana* “fire-emitting face” NA 8 or *jvālāmukha* NA 23) mixed with the form of a man at which the gods were terrified. He cleaved the chest of Hiraṇya with his sharp diamond-like nails (*vajranakha* NA 54 or *mahādamṣṭra* NA 30).
5. He appeared a Dwarf whose form arrested the reverence of those that viewed the Lord and bagged three strides of land as a gift.
6. He appeared Paraśurāma carrying the dreadful weapon battleaxe and for twenty-six generations admonished the race of kings (*kṣatriyas*).
7. He appeared Rāma when the mass of the worlds adored his sacred feet and he being the Lord worships none. He staged a war with Laṅkā and extradited the evil-beings.
8. He wears a *kuṇḍala* in an ear and holds the ploughshare, his arm. It was he who appeared as Balarāma (name not mentioned) and sent the soldiers (*kṣatriyas*) at war with him to the heavens.
9. He (Kṛṣṇa)¹⁸ was born in midnight to ward of the perils to which the Goddess of the Earth (metaphorically Draupadī) was subjected and staged the Bhārata war.
10. He became the Fish, Tortoise, Boar (*kēḷal*), Ari (Lion), Rāma (*Paraśu*) the First, Rāma (Dāśarathī) the Second, Dāmodhara¹⁹ and Kalki. He is the Lord of Kaṇṇapuram.²⁰

¹⁸ Kṛṣṇa is the most popular hero in the hymns of the Ālvārs (Kalidos 2006: I, 11–16). Kṛṣṇa and Dāmodhara are again equated in PT 10.5.3.

¹⁹ Dāmodhara (cf. the KA epithet 96 Dāmodhara) is the equal of Kṛṣṇa. He is one among the *dvādaśa* and *caturviṃśati* forms of the Lord. Interestingly both Kṛṣṇa and Dāmodhara do form members of these two groups of Vaiṣṇava iconography (*Caturviṃśatimūrtilakṣaṇa*, p. 5). The *dvādaśa* are clustered in few of the *Nālāyiram* decades (e.g. *Tiruvāymoḷi* 2.7. all hymns).

²⁰ Each of the hymn in this decad is addressed to the Lord of Kaṇṇapuram (Kannan 2007). K. Kannan 2007 deals with the following Viṣṇu temples in the Kāviri delta: Kaṇṇapuram, Kaṇṇamaṅkai, Cīrupuliyūr and Nākaṭṭiṇam.

Tirumāṅkai repeats the sequence of *avatāras* in PT 11.4. In this order Balarāma and Kalki are omitted and *Hamsa* included. The summary of ideas forthcoming from the decad may be summarized in the following account.

1. The waters of *pralaya* engulfed the worlds in such a way that there was not even a span of land to stand. The gods trembled and reported the matter to the Lord, seeking refuge under him. The Lord assured them *lebensraum* and drew all the waters into his stomach.²¹ He is the Lord *Mīṇ/Matsya*.
2. The gods churned the Ocean of Milk having tied the mighty Vāsuki to the Manthara. In order that the churn-stick, the Manthara, may stand firmly the Lord provided a basement to it as *Āmai/Kūrma*.
3. During the primeval times the Lord appeared as *Ēṇam/Varāha* in order to protect the Earth.²² Sūrya, Candra, the *devas*, the celestials worlds seven, the Meru hill, six mountains and seven seas constituted the hoof of the Boar.²³
4. Garlands of flowers hung on either side of his (Nṛsimha) eyes that emitted fire (cf. NA epithets *supra*). He is the most ferocious Lion who cleaved the chest of the demon (Hiraṇya).
5. As though a genuine Vēdi (Vāmana), he went to the *yāgaśālā* of Mahābali and begged three strides of land. Once the grant was sanctioned his (Trivikrama) striding leg rose up above the

²¹ This is part of his Viśvarūpa activity. Periyālvār in his *Tirumōḻi* adds: *Aṇṭamum nāṭu maṭaṇka viḷuṇkiya* “He gulped the cosmos and the lands” (cf. Maxwell 1983: 213–34, 1993: 97–110, Gail 1983: 297–307). The *Nālāyiram* in a number of places sheds light on the Viśvarūpa of the Lord. T.S. Maxwell and A.J. Gail may not have an idea of the Tamil vision (cf. Kalidos 2006: I, p. 19).

²² This event is said to have occurred during the *Varāhakaḷpa*. In Hindu cosmogony “the cosmos passes through cycles within cycles for all eternity” (Basham 1971: 325–26). The basic cycle is *kalpa*, a “day of Brahmā” that constitutes 4,320 million human years. The night of Brahmā is of equal length. A year of Brahmā consists of 360 such days and nights. He lives for 100 such years. The present Brahmā is said to be his 51st year. Each *kalpa* consists of four *manvantaras* that last for 306,720,000 years. We are now in the seventh *manvantara* of Manu Vaivasvata. Each *manvantara* consists of 71 *mahāyugas* or aeons. A *kalpa* consists of 1,000 *manvantaras*. Each *mahāyuga* consists of four *yugas* or ages, called Kṛta, Treta, Dvāpara and Kali, each of 4,800, 3,600, 2,400 and 1,200 “years of the gods”. Each year of the god is equal to 360 human years.

²³ Cf. the colossus of zoomorphic Varāha from Eran (Williams 1983: figs. 198–200).

summit of the Manthara Mountain, which was worshipped by the God seated on flower (Brahmā).

6. He (Paraśurāma) admonished the rulers of the earth on twenty-one occasions by employing the terrific weapon, *paraśu*. He is the Lord of Nilamaṅkai (Bhūdevī), Malarmaṅkai (Lakṣmī) and Pulamaṅkai (Nīlādevī).²⁴
7. He (Śrī Rāma) is our Guard who identified the *māyāmr̥ga* (Mārīca) and shattered the army of the King of Laṅkā.
8. Once upon a time the seven worlds were immersed in darkness. The gods could not find out where the beginning is and where end is (*ādi* and *anta*). The *Vedas* disappeared. The Lord (*Aṇṇam/Haṁsa*) took pity on the gods and sages, appeared as Swan and preached the Scriptures.
9. At one point of time the Lord (Kṛṣṇa) sucked the teats of the ogress (Pūtānā) and when he stole butter he was tied to a mortar that he pulled and caused the two *maruta*²⁵ trees to fall (Yamalārjunabhaṅga).
10. This hymn ends with exaltation of Kṛṣṇa as the Lord who admonished Kuvalayapiṭha and Rāma who shattered Laṅkā to pieces.

From the above account it is clear the Ālvārs on a number of occasions refer to the *daśāvatāras* in clusters. It is not clear whether the Sanskrit literary sources meet such a need for bringing together the *avatāras* into a capsule.

Sculptural Presentations

The images in the Śrīvaikuṇṭham temple are arranged in the following conventional order: *Matsya*, *Kūrma*, *Varāha*, Nṛsiṃha, Vāmana, Paraśurāma, Dāśarathi-Rāma, Balarāma, Kṛṣṇa and Kalki.

²⁴ This is a rare instance of the Lord associated with three Devīs (cf. Kalidos 2010). Prof. Raju Kalidos has reported an image of Garuḍārūḍa-Viṣṇu with three Devīs and identifies the third with Nappiṇṇai.

²⁵ Queen's flower tree (*Terminalia arjuna*). According to the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (*Skanda* 10, Chap. 10), Kṛṣṇa pulled down the *Arjuna* trees that were the *guhyakas*, Nalakubara and Maṇigrīva, cursed to be trees and redeemed them (Kalidos 2006: I, 43).

Matsya and *Kūrma* are in zoomorphic form. The images being under active worship, it was not possible for us to remove the garments that cover the images. *Matsya* has the big head of a local variety of carp fish, Tamil *keṇṭai* (*supra*) (fig. 1). The head alone is visible. *Kūrma* is also zoomorphic. The head peeps out of its shell (fig. 1). *Varāha* is theriomorphic (fig. 1). The Lord is seated in *sukhāsana*. He has a human body, fitted with the head of a Boar. The head is decked with a *karaṇḍamakuṭa*. The hands are four. The *parahastas* bear the *cakra* and *śaṅkha*. The *pūrvahastas* are in *abhaya-* and *varada-* *mudrās*. Bhūdevī is missing. This type of *kevala* image is called *Pralaya-Varāha* that appears in the *garbhagrha* of the Śrīmuṣṇam temple (Rajaraman 2006: 70–72).

Figure 1. *Matsya*, *Kūrma* and *Varāha*, Kaḷḷarpirāṇ temple, Śrīvaikuṇṭham.

Figure 2. Nṛsiṃha, Vāmana and Paraśurāma, Śrīvaiṣṇava temple.

Nṛsiṃha is cast in the same mould as *Varāha* (fig. 2). Theriomorphic, he has a lion head and human body. The mane around the face is arranged in a circular fashion. The head is fitted with a *karaṇḍamakuṭa*. Seated in *sukhāsana*, the hands are four. The *parahastas* hold the *cakra* and *śaṅkha*. The *pūrvahastas* are in *abhaya*- and *varada*-mudras. Lakṣmī is missing and so he may be called Yoga-Nṛsiṃha or Kevala-Nṛsiṃha.

Vāmana is a Dwarf (cf. the other images of Paraśurāma to Kalki iconometrically). His head is shaven like a *brahmacāri* (fig. 2). Two-armed, he seems to hold a *puṣṭaka* in the right hand and *kamaṇḍalū* in left hand. The image is *samapāda-sthānaka*.

Paraśurāma is also two-armed (fig. 2). He holds the *paraśu* in right hand and the left is in *ūruhasta* mode. He wears a *karaṇḍamakuṭa*. The image is *samapāda-sthānaka*. Śrī Rāma holds the *dhanus* and *bāṇa* is two of his hands (fig. 3). The image is slightly *dviḥaṅga*. The Lord wears a *kirīṭamakuṭa*. Balarāma holds the *halāyudha* in his right arm. The left hand is rested on a *gadā*. He wears a *kirīṭamakuṭa*. The image is *samapāda-sthānaka*.

Kṛṣṇa is also two-armed (fig. 4). The right arm seems to hold a *ceṇṭu* “horse-whip”. The right arm carries a lump of butter. The headgear is peculiar and arranged like a bun. It is called *kṛṣṇaṅkoṇṭai* (bun of Kṛṣṇa) in Tamil. This type of bun became popular in the art of the Vijayanagara-Nāyakas. The images of Āṇṭāl are set with this type of headgear in Tamilnadu (Rajarajan 2006: II, pl. 72: Āṇṭāl in Kālamēkap Perumāl Temple, Tirumōkūr, near Maturai).

Kalki is horse-faced (fig. 4). His body below neck is human. He is two-armed and carries the *khaḍga* and *kheṭaka* in right and left hands. He wears a *kīrīṭamakuṭa*.

Figure 3. Dāśarathi-Rāma, Śrīvaikuṇṭham temple.

Figure 4. Balarāma, Kṛṣṇa and Kalki, Śrīvaikuṇṭham temple.

It is interesting to note that excepting *Varāha* and *Nṛsimha* all others are *dvibhuja*. Very interestingly, the Tamil *bhakti* hymns associate Paraśurāma with three Devīs. In sculptural art, he is never accompanied by Devīs.

The images in the Tāṭikkopu temple are housed close to the *tirumatil* (wall of the inner *prākāra*) at the edge of the *Raṅgamaṇḍapa* of the Tāyār shrine (Gopalakrishnan 1996: Plan 2).²⁶ *Matsya* and *Kūrma* are zoomorphic. *Varāha* is fitted with the face of a boar and theriomorphic. He is four-armed and carries the *cakra* and *śaṅkha* in *parahastas*. *Vāmama*, Paraśurāma, Śrī Rāma, Balarāma and Kṛṣṇa are cast in the same mould as in the Vaikuntam temple. It appears the same *śilpācāryas* have worked in the two temples. Kalki is seated on a galloping horse, carrying the sword and shield in hands.

It is very interesting to note that in the place of *Nṛsimha*, *Hayagrīva* with horse-face appears. He is theriomorphic. Seated in *sukhāsana*, he carries the *cakra* and *śaṅkha* in *parahastas*. *Hayagrīva* replacing *Nṛsimha* is an iconographic marvel that has its roots in the Tamil *bhakti* hymns (*supra*).²⁷

In conclusion it may be added that the type of *Daśāvatāra* images in a sequence has its roots in the Tamil *bhakti* tradition. One set of stone images alone could be reported with photographic evidence in the present article since the other images in the Tāṭikkopu and Aḷākarkōyil temples are strictly prohibited for photography. Few clusters have been reported from the temple cars of Tamilnāḍu (Kalidos 1989: fig. 36 of *Matsya*, *Kūrma* and *Varāha* & 43 the three Rāmas). More such images could be discovered if a systematic survey is undertaken.

²⁶ The temple has undergone drastic renovation since S. Gopalakrishnan wrote his article in 1995, published in the *East and West* 1996. Another wall has been added and some modern buildings built. The original temple's format has not been altered in any way. Dr R.K.K. Rajarajan is working with another paper on the changing phase of the Tāṭikkopu temple.

²⁷ The temple administration did not allow us to make a photo during a recent visit.

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