

The Sculptures of Varahava in Rayalaseema, Andhra Pradesh

Dr. Govindulu Dasari

Academic Consultant, Department of History Sri Venkateswara University

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.909000276>

Received: 04 September 2025; Accepted: 11 September 2025; Published: 08 October 2025

ABSTRACT

The Varaha sculpture depicts Vishnu taking the form of a boar to rescue Bhudevi, the Earth goddess, from the cosmic ocean. The Varaha avatar of Vishnu is prominently located in the main areas: Mahabhalipuram, Tamilnadu, Badami caves, Karnataka and the Udayagiri Caves near Vidisha, Madhya Pradesh states, and the Varaha Temple in Eran, also in Madhya Pradesh. The Udayagiri Caves feature a large sculpted panel of Varaha rescuing Bhudevi, while the Eran temple houses one of the largest Varaha idols in India. The Varaha avatar is the third incarnation of Lord Vishnu, where he takes the form of a boar to rescue Bhumi, the Earth goddess, from the depths of the cosmic ocean. A demon named Hiranyaksha had plunged the earth into the water, and Vishnu, in his boar form, dove in to retrieve her. He slain the demon with his tusks and then used them to lift the earth back to its rightful place. The present paper appraises the sculptures of Varaha Avatara in the temples of Rayalaseema, Andhra Pradesh, India.

Keywords: Sculptures of Varaha Avatara, Temples in Rayalaseema, Andhra Pradesh

INTRODUCTION

The Varaha avatar is the third incarnation of Lord Vishnu in the Hindu tradition. The boar incarnation was first mentioned in the Rigveda in two passages. The piercing of the boar (clouds) by Indra and Vishnu was mentioned in one passage. The other passage mentions that Vishnu was sent by Indra to carry off the buffaloes and rice cooked with milk, which belonged to the Boar Emusha. Basically, two versions of Varaha myth are known from different puranas. The first version is, according to Vishnu purana, Varaha purana, Linga purana, Prajapati Brahma took the form of a boar and lifted up the Earth to help creation. The other version in the Agni purana, the Harivamsa, the Bhagavata purana etc. bring in an episode of asura named Hiranyaksha stole away the Earth to the nether world where he hid Earth and Vishnu in Sveta Varaha avatara killed Hiranyaksha and brought up the earth¹. The Lord Vishnu demonstrates his unwavering commitment to protecting the universe and upholding righteousness. The story of Varaha serves as a reminder of the triumph of good over evil and the ultimate victory of divine forces.

While Lord Vishnu's Varaha (boar) avatar is not as widely worshipped as some other avatars like Rama or Krishna, albeit it is still a significant deity in Hinduism, particularly in certain regions and traditions. While some may see a decline in its popularity due to cultural factors, but some others might view it as a deity not as readily advertised or as prominent in mainstream narratives. The popularity of Varaha as a deity varies, with some seeing a decline due to cultural or historical factors, while others recognize his significance in specific traditions and his role in Hindu mythology.

The Satapatha Brahmana reveals that the Boar Emusha had risen the Earth whose Lord was Prajapati. In the Taittiriya samhita, the boar is identified with prajapati himself. The final stage in the solution of the myth is represented in the epics and puranas. The boar is made an incarnation of Vishnu². After killing of asura, the form of Varaha was terrible that was being prayed by the Devas, Munis, Lokapalas etc. Vishnu consented to assume the saumya form and gave assurance to them that he liked Venkatadri (this hill is at present in Rayalaseema region) more than Vaikunta and promised to rest with Sridevi and Bhudevi on that hill and grant the prayers to all men³. Above two versions reveal that the first version appears to be the earlier one while the Hiranyaksha episode is a later interpolation. In early sculpture no depiction of Varaha slaying the asura is found⁴.

Sculptures Of Varahava In Rayalaseema

The first detailed account of the Varaha myth of rescuing the Earth is found in the Harivamsa, while Varaha is initially incorporated into the cycle of Vishnu avatars in the Mahabharata. Different forms of Varaha are described in various texts including the seated forms or his battle against the demon Hiaranyaksha. Varaha in the iconographical forms may be represented in the theriomorphic or in anthropomorphic form with the head of a Boar. In anthropomorphic form, when he rescues the Earth, he has head of the boar and assumes the heroic alidha pose standing on the serpent while lifting up the Earth goddess. In the early sculptures, Varaha is generally shown with two hands without any Vaisnavite weapons and in the images of the late Gupta period, he is provided with an additional pair of hands to carry the Vaisnava emblems. The huge 11 feet high, statue of Varaha is the Wild Boar, avatar of Vishnu at Eran. One of the oldest mints of India was at Eran in Sagar district of Madhya Pradesh. Varaha is considered a powerful symbol of divine intervention, cosmic strength and the restoration of balance in the universe. The four handed images of Varaha are described in Matsya purana, Agnipurana, Vishnudharmottama purana and Skandapurana, Silparatna, Vishvakshena samhita, Padma samhita and Vaikhasanagama. Generally, these texts prescribe abhaya and varadha mudra besides the sankha and chakra in the other two hands of Varaha.

The Vaikhanasagama states that the Bhavaraha image should have been the face of the boar, the body of a man. There should be sankha and chakra in two hands. The right leg should be made to rest upon the head of the serpent adishesha. Of the remaining two hands, the left should be shown supporting the legs Bhudevi while the right should be passed round the waist of the Goddess.⁵

Yajnavaraha should have four hands and should carry chakra and sankha in two hands. He should be seated with the figure of Lakshmi seated on the right side. On the left of varaha, there should be seated Bhudevi. The image of Pralaya Varaha should also be a seated one. Bhudevi is to be shown to the right of the God on the same seat.⁶ "The fully theriomorphic representation of the Varahavata comes from Eran in Central India"⁷ and belongs to the Gupta period. Next, in importance is the colossal Varaha relief at Udayagiri near Sanchi belonging to the Gupta period. There are two representations of Varaha at Badami. One important panel of the Pallava period is present at Mahabalipuram. The Varaha avata was a favourite subject with the artists of the Rashtrakutas, Cholas and the Rayas of Vijayanagara.

The instances of Varaha sculptures described hereunder are almost in the entire Rayalaseema region and belong to Vijayanagara period.

Bhavaraha

In the Rayalaseema sculpture, where Varaha is represented only in his anthropomorphic form with a human body and the head of a boar, he is depicted in alidha pose with slightly raised left foot either trampling below Adishesha or without him. The other mode of representing him is in seated form with the goddess Bhudevi comfortably seated on his left thigh.

This is an excellent picture of Vishnu as Bhavaraha. The karnakudu and the Salai at the feet of the Lord are typical. The Goddess is represented as seated in the left lap of the Lord who has a face like the Varaha. The right hand of the Lord is in Varada posture and the left two hands hold the Shankha and Chakra. The face of the Lord is turned towards the Devi as prescribed in the Vaikhanasa agama. Some of the sankas are shown as being trampled by the Lord to indicate that he rescued the Goddess from the Nagaloka. The Lord wears a kirita mukuta. This is an excellent and rare piece of sculpture of Bhavaraha.

Ahobilam temple

An example is from the lower Ahobilam temple. The form of Varaha with boar head is shown as seated with right leg hanging and left leg bent at the knee and resting on the pedestal. He has four hands and carries chakra in the upper right hand and sankha in the upper left. He keeps the lower right hand in abhaya mudra, passes the lower left hand round the back of the Devi, and rests it on the left thigh of Devi. He wears kirita mukuta, graiveyakas, yajnopavita, purnoruka and padavalayas. The Devi has two hands and keeps her right hand in

abhaya and rests her left hand on the left knee of the God. She wears karandamukuta, chakra kundalas, kuchabandha, purnoruka etc.

In another instance, Varaha with Bhudevi is found in the second tala of the south side of vimana of the garbhagriha. In this example, Varaha is seated on simhasana along with goddess Bhudevi seated on the lap of Varaha. Varaha is decorated with kiritamakuta, kundalas, haras, bhujabhahuvalayas, yajnopavita, channavira, udarabandha, keyura, kankanas etc. The lower part of body is bedecked with purnoruka. He has four arms and upper right hand holds chakra and the upper left hand holds sankha. The lower right hand held in abhaya and the lower left hand surpasses around the back of Devi and holds the left hand of Devi. The tusk of the bore and the nostrils are seen clearly. The goddess holds nilotpala in her right hand. The goddess is also bedecked with ornaments. Thus, this Varaha image comes under Bhuvaraha form.

Another example is found on one of the pillars of mukha-mandapa. Here Varaha is shown with four arms and Bhudevi is shown seated on the left shoulder of Varaha in lalitasana pose. The god holds chakra in upper right hand and sankha in the upper left hand. The lower right hand holds the feet of the goddess and lower left hand surpasses around the goddess and holds the waist. The snout touches the right arm of Devi. The Goddess is shown with two hands in anjali. Both are spruced with ornaments in a pleasing and in an appealing manner.

Govindaraja temple, Tirupati

There is an image of Bhuvaraha on a pillar in the pavilion of the kalyanamandapa of the Govindaraja temple, Tirupati. Here in this sculpture, the God is having the face of a boar and the body of a human being. He is standing with right leg bent at the knee and raised above the level of the other knee, on which the Goddess is seated. He is having four hands and holds chakra in the upper right, sankha in the upper left and the lower left passes round the back of the Goddess. He is adorned with ornaments. Lakshmi is seated with both legs hanging.⁸ The carving is enchanting with two figures of Bhuvaraha, one at Tirumala and another at Tirupati found as relief figures are described here. In both of them, Varaha having the sankha and chakra, and a third in abhaya pose and other hand embraces Bhudevi who sits on the lap. A representation of Varaha in a seated form is seen on the door-jamb of the gopuradvara at Tirupati.

Varaha in Tirumala Tirupati

A pillar in the Tirumalaraya mandapa at Tirumala is an example of Bhuvaraha. In this sculpture, Varaha stands on his right leg with Bhudevi seated on his left thigh. As prescribed in the Vaikhanasa agama, the face of Varaha is turned towards the Devi. To indicate the nagaloka from which the Earth Goddess was saved, the snake is shown beneath the left foot of the God. A sage is looking at this with admiration. In the early sculptures as at Mahabalipuram, Varaha is shown with jatamakuta but here he wears a kiritamakuta.

Chennakesava temple, Pushpagiri

The north wall of the garbhagriha of the Chennakesava temple, Pushpagiri, is a figure of Bhuvaraha in standing posture. He is shown with his right leg bent at the knee and resting on its toe. The left leg is also slightly bent at the knee and kept forward by placing firmly on the ground. Varaha has four hands and holds chakra and sankha in the upper two-hands. The lower left hand holds club, while the lower right is in abhaya. He is lifting up Bhudevi with his long snout. The figure of Varaha is adorned with kiritamakuta, graiveyaakas, yajnopavita, udarabandha and ardhoruka. Bhudevi, the Earth Goddess is shown seated within a round sphere that indicates the Earth. As in the example from Tirumala, the god is shown with kiritamakuta. Bhudevi holds a flower in her right hand and keeps the left hand on her left leg. She is also adorned with karandamakuta and other ornaments. These features correspond with the description found in the Silparatna. The most interesting and unique feature of this sculpture is that Bhudevi is represented in the centre of a circle.

PralayaVaraha

On the same wall of the temple, an example of Pralaya Varaha is depicted. In this panel, the man boar is shown seated on a pedestal with his right leg hanging down. He has four arms and carries chakra and sankha in the

two upper hands and keeps the lower right hand in abhaya and embraces the Devi, with his lower left, who is shown seated on his left lap. The God is decorated with kiritamakuta and other ornaments. The figure of Bhudevi, seated on his lap, has two arms. She embraces her Lord with the right hand and keeps the left hand on his leg. This image partly agrees with the description found in the texts. The sculptures of Chennakesava temple including the Varaha, are considered a pinnacle of Vijayanagara art, with stylistic elements suggesting Hoysala influence. The sculptures of Chennakesava Swamy temple are more intricate compared to other temples in Rayalaseema region, showcasing minute details with remarkable precision. More exquisite sculptural heritage is found in the Chennakesava Swamy temple at Pushpagiri in Kadapa district. The Pushpagiri temple presents key episodes across the temple's base and four directional walls, split into five segments. This unique presentation, he believes, was the sculptor's way of engaging viewers with the narrative. The temple houses an impressive array of sculptures, ranging from 6 to 10 inches in height, including intricate depictions of Lord Vishnu, Vrishabharudha Murti, Nataraja, Andakasura Murti, Natya Ganapati, Rama and Lakshmana and Varaha Murti. Describing the sculptures as a pinnacle of Vijayanagara Art, Rao pointed out the fusion of Hoysala and Chola styles in the work. He felt that the temple sculptors might be from the adept Hoysala Vishwakarma community of Karnataka, based on the stylistic elements⁹

Chintala Venkataramana Temple, Tadipatri

There is another beautiful sculpture of seated Varaha on one of the pillars of mukhamantapa in Chintala Venkataramana temple, Tadipatri. Here, the Lord is depicted with four hands, i.e. his upper right hand carrying sankha, upper left chakra, and the lower right hand in abhaya and the lower left in varada. His right leg is bent and placed on the ground. The left leg is folded and placed on the pedestal. He turns his head towards his left. The profile shows the snout and tusk clearly. There appears life in the face. The traditional ornaments of Vishnu are neatly carved.

There is a sculpture, in which Varaha is shown fighting with the demon Hiranyaksha. One such example is appeared on a pillar in the mahamandapa of the Venkataramana temple, Tadipatri. The god with the face of a boar is standing with the right leg placed the ground and the left leg slightly raised and lifting the demon Hiranyaksha up above the level of his head with his two hands. The demon holds a sword in the right arm and shield in the left. The second example is appeared on the south wall of the sanctum of the Rama temple at Penukonda. The image of Vishnu with a human body and boar's face is shown in standing pose. He holds chakra and sankha in the two upper arms and with his lower left arm he catches the right hand of Hiranyaksha. The god hits the demon with a club held in his lower right hand. The god's face is turned to the left. The demon that stands to the left of the god is holding a shield in the right hand and sword in the left.¹⁰

Soumyanatha Temple, Nanadalur

Another example is found on one of the pillars of mukha-mandapa of Soumyanatha temple at Nanadalur. Here, Varaha is shown with four hands and Bhudevi is shown seated on the left shoulder of Varaha in lalitasana pose. The god holds chakra in upper right hand and sankha in the upper left hand. The lower right hand holds the feet of the goddess and lower left hand surpasses around the goddess and holds the waist. The snout touches the right hand of Devi. The Goddess is shown with two hands in anjali. Both are adorned with ornaments in a pleasing and appealing manner.

Ranganatha Temple, Gandikota

The Ranganatha temple at Gandikota appraises a Vishnu sculpture of Varahavatara on a pillar of the mahamandapa. In this image, Bhudevi is not shown. The image of Varaha has the body of a man but head like a boar. The deity is shown in the act of movement. He has four hands and carries chakra in the upper right hand, sankha in the upper left. He keeps the lower right hand in abhaya and the lower left hand in varada.

There are also seated images of Bhavaraha in association with Bhudevi. For instance, we can see a figure of this type on a pillar in the mahamandapa of the Madhavarayaswamy temple at Gorantla. The god has the face of a boar and the body of a human being and seated on a pedestal in virasana poses. Bhudevi is seated on the bent leg of the god with both her legs hanging. He holds chakra in the upper right arm and sankha in upper left

arm, while the lower right arm in abhya poses. The lower left arm passes round the back of Bhudevi. He is bedecked with kiritamakuta and other usual ornaments.¹¹

Rama Temple, Penukonda

There is another sculpture found on the south wall of the sanctum of the Rama temple at Penukonda of Anantapur district. Here, the god is seated on a pedestal in virasana and has four arms. The upper right arm is held up and supports the goddess represented with a halo round the head. The upper left arm holds the sankha, the lower right arm is in abhaya pose and the lower left arm holds club. There is a woman standing before the god.¹²

CONCLUSION

Varaha is the boar incarnation of Vishnu. He appears to rescue the Earth (personified as the goddess Bhudevi) from the depths of the cosmic ocean after it is submerged by the demon Hiranyaksha. Narasimha is the half-man and half-lion incarnation of Vishnu. He appears to protect his devotee Prahlada from his demon father Hiranyakashipu, who had been granted a boon making him virtually invulnerable. In Rayalaseema, Andhra Pradesh, the Varaha sculpture, representing Vishnu's boar incarnation, is prominently featured in the Chennakesava temple in Kadapa. This sculpture, along with others, showcases the artistic style of the Vijayanagara period, blending Hoysala and Chola influences. The temple also houses sculptures of other deities like Vrishabharudha Murti, Nataraja and Rama and Lakshmana. As per local Hindu legend, after saving the earth from the asura Hiranyaksha, Vishnu's boar avatar Varaha stayed on this hill on the northern bank of Swami Pushkarini. Hence Tirumala Hills is also referred to as Adi Varaha Kshetra. Above all, Varaha is the boar who saves the Earth, while Narasimha is the man-lion who protects his devotees from a different demon.

REFERENCES

1. Srinivas V.Padigar (1996), Vishnu cult in Karnataka, Mysore, 1996, p.178.
2. N.Ramesan (2009), The Tirumala Temple, TTD, Tirupati, 2009, p.178.
3. R.Champakalakshmi (1981), Vaisnava Iconography in the Tamil Country, New Delhi, 1981, p.84.
4. Srinivas V.Padigar, Op. Cit, p.178
5. Gopinath. A, Hindu Iconography. I-1, pp.128-138.
6. Ibid, pp.132-136.
7. R.Champakalakshmi, Op. Cit., p.87.
8. K.V. Raman (2006), Temple Art, Icons and culture of India and South-East Asia, Delhi, 2006, p.31.
9. K Mrutyunjaya Rao (2024), Sculptural heritage of Chennakesava temple needs attention, Express News Service, Updated on 15th July, 2024
10. V.Kameswara Rao, Op. Cit., p.173
11. V.Kameswara Rao- Op.Cit., pp.172-173.
12. Ibid