CHAPTER ONE

VISNUISM IN NEPAL

Vaiṣṇava tradition in Nepal associates the creation of the valley of the Bagmati with Viṣṇu. The Vaiṣṇavas believe that the gorge at Chauvar in the south of the valley, through which the river Bagmati rushes out and which according to the Buddhists was cleft by the sword of Mañjuśrī, was created by Viṣṇu’s discus. According to a medieval inscription, the country of Nepal is situated in vāsukīkṣetra (Vāsuki being closely associated with Viṣṇu) in the Himavatkhanda of Bhāratavarṣa.¹ Curiously also the names of the two principal rivers of the valley, Bagmati (Vāgmati) and Viṣṇumati are associated with Viṣṇuism.

Archaeologically, the history of the religion goes back to the fifth century. The two earliest dated icons, portraying Vaiṣṇava themes—and, indeed, these remain the earliest known dated sculptures in the country—are the Viṣṇu vikrānta reliefs consecrated by king Mānadeva in honour of his mother. Both images are inscribed with identical inscriptions, which state that king Mānadeva established in a temple an image of Viṣṇu vikrānta, who is admired by the suras and the munis and who is the lord of all the worlds, for the incessant increase of the piety of his mother ². Both the inscriptions are dated in 389 corresponding to A.D. 467 ³.

Earlier, in the year 386/A.D. 464, a long panegyric was caused to be inscribed by Mānadeva on a stone pillar in front of the temple of Chaṅgu Nārāyaṇa. The opening verses of the inscription invoke Hari who resided in Dolādri and was constantly worshipped ⁴. In subsequent verses of the inscription the parents of Mānadeva, Śrī
Dharmmadeva, who is described as dhārmmika and a dharminiṭmā, and Rājyavatī, are compared with Hari and Lakṣmī. There seems little doubt that Mānadeva as well as his parents were Vaiṣṇavas, although there is no explicit declaration of this. We also have in this inscription the earliest allusion to a Vaiṣṇava temple in Nepal, that of Hari in Dolādri, which is the name of the hill on which the present temple of Chaṅgu Nārāyaṇa is situated. Mānadeva may have been responsible for erecting the inscribed pillar, but the temple was most likely already an existing shrine. The fact that he chose a pillar in a Vaiṣṇava temple to record his achievements would probably indicate his Vaiṣṇava inclinations as well as the popularity of the shrine. It would thus seem that the shrine of Chaṅgu Nārāyaṇa was older than A.D. 464, although the present structure is comparatively of a more recent origin. Three years later Mānadeva built another temple and consecrated therein an image of Viṣṇu vikrānta.

Apart from Mānadeva’s inscriptions those of his successors until the usurpation of Amśuvarman at the beginning of the seventh century reveal nothing of their religious faith. However, there are reasons to believe that they too were inclined towards Viṣṇuism, although Jayadeva II claims that his predecessors were Śaivas. But we know that at least two other monarchs of the Licchavi dynasty were Vaiṣṇavas. An edict of Dhruvadeva, who belonged to the Licchavi dynasty and appears to have reigned as a nominee of the powerful Jīṣṇugupta who became the de facto ruler after Amśuvarman, begins with verses that are now fragmentary but which seem to invoke Viṣṇu ⁵. His Vaiṣṇava affiliation is also tacitly suggested by another inscription where is recorded a grant made to Bhagavān Nārāyaṇa-svāmī in the village of Nuppunna ⁶. His successor Bhīmārjunadeva was definitely a Vaiṣṇava for one of his inscriptions begins with an invocation to the Jalaśayana form of Viṣṇu and he was probably the donor of the image now lying at Budhā Nīlkanṭha ⁷.

It seems significant that Amśuvarman, on assuming power almost blatantly declares his affiliation to the god Paśupatinātha (bhagavat Paśupatibhaṭṭaraka pādamudhyāto…) ⁸. Yet, in all the inscriptions, where he is mentioned together with the Licchavi monarch Śivadeva, he is less assertive of his Śaiva leanings. Only once before, in an
inscription of 520/A.D. 598, while he was still a mahāsāmanta under Śivadeva but had already extinguished all his foes by his own might (svabhājayugabalotkhāta(khi)lavairivarggena), do we find him guardedly admitting his Śaiva faith (bhagavad Bhavapadaṃkajaprāṇāma). Bhava is a well-known name of Śiva. It is not impossible that the early Licchavis were Vaiṣṇavas, which may have resulted in their unpopularity with the Śaivas, and, in his struggle for power, Amśuvarman may have been aided by the priests of the temple of Paśupatinātha, which was already a rich and powerful Śaiva shrine. It must be remembered that the Śaivas in Nepal belonged to the Pāśupata sect and friction between the Pāśupatas and the Pāñcarātrins may not have been unknown. Interference in court politics by powerful religious establishments is nothing surprising, and this may have been the reason why, centuries later, Jayayakṣamalla entrusted the functions of the temple of Paśupatinātha to Brahmins from South India, who were not allowed to marry into local Brahmin families.

In this atmosphere of sectarian strife it was, perhaps, in an attempt to achieve syncretism that a noble named Svāmivārta consecrated an icon of Śaṅkara Nārāyaṇasvāmī in the year 489/A.D. 567. Similarly, although Amśuvarman was an avowed Śaiva, soon after assuming power, he astutely made grants to religious establishments of all the principal sects. In his inscription of the year 30/530/A.D. 608 his first donation is to the temple of Śrī-devī, which is natural since she is the goddess of fortune. In the inscription issued two years later, presumably after his coronation, among the various temples and monasteries to which he made donations, for us the following are relevant: Dolāśikharasvāmin, Narasimhadeva and Jalasayana of Bhumbhukkika.

Thus, by the seventh century, the important Vaiṣṇava shrines in Nepal, according to existing epigraphic records, were the temples of Dolāśikharasvāmī at Dolādri, the present Chaṅgu Nārāyaṇa, of Viṣṇu vikrānta, founded by Mānadeva, of Narasimha, of Jalasayana at Bhumbhukkika and of Nārāyaṇasvāmī at Nuppunna. In a later inscription we have another allusion to a shrine of Jalasayana Viṣṇu. This is the shrine referred to in Bhīmārjunadeva’s inscription of
the year A. D. 642 situated in the village of Dakšīn-Koli, perhaps the present Budhā Nilkanṭha. It appears that this is a different shrine from that mentioned in Anuśvarman’s inscription and thus there must have been two such Jalaśayana temples in Nepal, only one of which is now known to us. The remaining shrine at Bālāju came into existence only in the seventeenth century.

The temple of Satya Nārāyaṇa at Harigāon must also have been founded at this period for an early Licchavi inscription is carved on a pillar standing within the present temple precinct. The very name of this village attests its Vaiṣṇava association and it must have been an important town in the Licchavi times. Many of the fragmentary sculptures lying in the temple area today (Fig. 96), some of which are of considerable antiquity, stand testimony to both its Vaiṣṇava affiliation and its past glory.

(ii)

Outside the valley of the river Bagmati, the most famous spot of Vaiṣṇava pilgrimage in the kingdom of Nepal, is Varāhachatra (Varāhakṣetra) at the confluence of the rivers Kośi and Kokā; the spot still draws many pilgrims from India. The god par excellence of this place, known as Kokāmukhasvāmin, was already renowned in the Gupta period as he is alluded to in the Damodarpur inscription of the time of Budha-Gupta (c. 475-495). The word kokā actually means a ‘wolf’ but is given as a name of Viṣṇu by the ancient lexicographers. The name of the river Koṅkā and that of the god are here obviously inter-related.

The Damodarpur inscription relates that two shrines dedicated to Śvetavarāhāsvāmin and Kokāmukhasvāmin were located in the Himalayas (himavacchikhare). As has been suggested, the shrine of Kokāmukhasvāmin refers to the well-known and ancient Varāhakṣetra or Varāhachatra, as it is locally known, on the bank of the river Sun-Kośi at the confluence of that river and Kokā. The earliest allusion to the shrine of Kokāmukhasvāmin is found in the Mahābhārata, and according to the Brahma Purāṇa it is situated on the bank of the river Kokā. The purāṇa also states that the
image there is of Varāha and describes it as follows: *Varāhadamaṇḍra-
saṅgānāḥ pitarāḥ kanokojjvalaḥ, Kokāmukhe gatabhayaḥ Kṛta devena Viṣṇuna* (118, 38).

A more elaborate description is given in the *Varāhapurāṇa*, where a whole chapter entitled *Kokāmukhamāhāmanavaranāḥ* is devoted to the shrine. It locates the *tīrtha* at the confluence of the rivers Kauśikī and Kokā and the extent of the sacred area is given as five *Yojanas* (*pañcayojananistaraṁ kṣetram kokāmukham mama...*). It also gives a description of the god, who is seen in human form with his head turned high to his left and displaying prominent fangs (*Varāharūpamadaya tiṣṭhami puruṣākṛtih, vāmomnatamukham kṛtvā vāmadamaṇḍrasamumnam*).

The sanctuary of Śvetavarāhasvāmin may also have been situated in this holy area, although the *Varāhapurāṇa*, which mentions other shrines on the spot, does not describe that of Śvetavarāhasvāmin. On the other hand, it may have been located elsewhere in Nepal. As we shall see later, there is a neglected shrine in the Bagmati valley known as Dhum-Vārāhi, obviously a corruption of Dhumra Varāha, where an imposing sculpture of Varāha of the early period (Fig. 5) and executed in a light coloured stone still stands within a dilapidated structure. This god may have been known in the later Gupta period as Śvetavarāhasvāmin.

Art-historically what is of interest to us is that the Damodarpur inscription also states that an inhabitant of northern Bengal, a merchant named Ṛbhu-pāla, went on a pilgrimage to the shrines of Śvetavarāhasvāmin and Kokāmukhasvāmin in the Himalayas and on his return established two temples in his native district, installing therein two images of Varāha that were copies of the originals. In fact, the Himalayan Śvetavarāhasvāmin and Kokāmukhasvāmin are specifically referred to as ṉādyā (original). This is a lucid commentary on how an iconic type, and with it stylistic features, travelled from one place to another. It is also generally assumed that Nepal has always been at the receiving end of the flow of art, but the Damodarpur inscription clearly indicates that famous Nepali images were also copied in India.
Two factors appear to have contributed largely to the phenomenal growth and popularity of Viṣṇuism in India by the Gupta period. One was the rise of bhaktivāda or the cult of personal devotion as outlined in the Mahābhārata, including the Bhagavadgītā, and the Rāmāyaṇa. This doctrine that salvation was within the reach of all if only one could be exclusively devoted to a god must have had considerable effect on the masses. The other factor was the heroic character of Viṣṇu and the myths that evolved around him which appealed particularly to ambitious monarchs such as the Guptas and inspired in them a new zeal for the religion. This resulted in remarkable wide-spread activities of temple building and consecration of images, particularly of the heroic aspects of the god. We may also add to this the eclectic character of Viṣṇuism, its more liberal outlook within the limits of orthodoxy, which allowed it to incorporate within its folds a wide variety of prevailing cults and widened its door for even foreigners such as the Greeks and others.

The spread of Viṣṇuism during the Licchavi period in Nepal must be accounted for as much by the royal patronage extended to the sect, perhaps in emulation of the imperial Guptas, as by the swelling popular tide of the cult of bhakti. The religious history of Nepal throughout the centuries constantly echoes, at times belatedly, the sounds of changes that were frequently being perpetrated by important religious movements in the plains. The bhakti cult in India was primarily responsible for moulding the Pāñcarātra ideology with its doctrinaire concepts of vibhava and vyūha. Already by the Gupta period the Pāñcarātra cult gained wide popularity and in systematisation of its beliefs and ideology displayed a remarkable catholic spirit by enfolding many other prevailing ideas and concepts.

It is generally admitted that the Bhāgavata-Pāñcarātra cult, in its complete form, is a synthesis of three older and major conceptions, those of Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa, Nārāyaṇa and the vedic Āditya Viṣṇu. Although the cult is commonly known as Vaiṣṇavadharma,
derived from Viṣṇu, the principal deity of Bhāgavata-Pāṉacarātra theosophy is Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa, the deified hero of the race of the Sāttvatas or the Viṣṇus. In the Chāndogya Upaniṣad he is mentioned as Devakīputra and is said to have learnt some precepts from Ghora Aṅgirasa, which became basic to the ideology of the Bhāgavatas as expounded in the Bhagavadgītā.24 The antiquity of the cult of hero-worship, which included both Vāsudeva and Arjuna, was already attested by Pāṇini.25 Both the other concepts that merged in the developed Bhāgavata-Pāṉacarātra cult are of vedic origin, one of them being the vedic solar divinity of Āditya Viṣṇu and the other Nārāyaṇa. As a cosmic deity Nārāyaṇa is frequently alluded to in later vedic texts and in the epics.

Scholars are also inclined to identify the primordial Puruṣa, eloquently described in the Puruṣasūkta of the tenth maṇḍala of the Rgveda, as Nārāyaṇa. As a matter of fact, the Uttaranārāyaṇa portion of the ŚuklaYajurveda, to be read immediately after the Puruṇasūkta, mentions both Śrī and Lakṣmī as the two wives of Puruṣa and this may have facilitated the later theologians to identify Viṣṇu and Puruṣa.26 A still later concept, probably of non-Aryan origin, to be absorbed in the Vāsudeva-Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa cult is that of the child Kṛṣṇa, the boy-hero of the cowherds, a cult that was particularly popular in Mathura, where it may have ousted and/or incorporated the existing and earlier beliefs associated with the nāgas. Thus, the nucleus was formed with the cult of Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa, the hero-cum-teacher of the Sāttvatas as his character is delineated in the Mahābhārata. To this was grafted in due course (a) the concept of the solar divinity, Āditya-Viṣṇu, of the vedic literature, (b) Nārāyaṇa or Puruṣa, the cosmic deity, also of vedic origin, and finally (c) Kṛṣṇa, the cow-herd boy of Mathura, made easier perhaps due to the identity of the names.

It is significant that in the inscription, dedicating an icon of ŚaṅkaraNārāyaṇasvāmī of the year A. D. 567, we find the assimilation of both the concepts of Āditya Viṣṇu and Nārāyaṇa. In invoking the composite god, at the beginning of the inscription, the composer has used the epithet Ardhamātāsvara.27 We know of no other such early epigraphic document, even from India, where Viṣṇu has
been so unambiguously addressed as Śaura or Saura, the Sun\textsuperscript{10}. This is obviously a blatant assertion of his solar character which is really a legacy of the vedic Āditya Viṣṇu. Apart from Saura and Nārāyaṇa, three other names of Viṣṇu have been employed at several places in the text by the composer of the inscription, who was quite familiar with his subject. These are Śāṅgapāṇi, Keśava and Murārī, the last being repeated in Bhīmārjunadeva’s inscription\textsuperscript{39}. The name Nārāyaṇa also occurs in Dhruvadeva’s inscription, mentioned above, and, in another fragmentary epigraph, Vāsudeva has been addressed as guru\textsuperscript{30}. We have already seen that the name Hari was employed by the eulogist over a hundred years ago in Mānadeva’s Chaṅgu Nārāyaṇa pillar prāṣasti, while Aṁśuvarman made donations to a temple of Narasimha. The name Viṣṇu occurs for the first time in Bhīmārjunadeva’s inscription, while in Jayadeva’s Paśupatinātha inscription of the year 159/A.D. 737 we find both Viṣṇu and Padmanābha\textsuperscript{31}.

Of these names, Hari, Keśava, Narasimha, Nārāyaṇa, Vāsudeva, Viṣṇu and Padmanābha are seen in the list of names of Viṣṇu’s caturviṁśatimūrtis, but the names here have not been employed to denote any one of his emanatory aspects, as will be discussed later. Both Murārī and Śāṅgapāṇi as names of Viṣṇu appear only in kāvyā literature, although the story of Kṛṣṇa destroying the dānava Mura is recounted in the Mahābhārata, where the word sāṅga is mentioned as the name of Viṣṇu’s bow. The knowledge of so many synonyms, however, reveal the familiarity of the composers of these inscriptions with Vaisnava literature in the Licchavi period. That both the Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata were well-known is evident from many contemporary inscriptions\textsuperscript{32}.

Even if the early Licchavis were not all Vaiṣṇavas, almost certainly Mānadeva, his parents, Dhruvadeva and Bhīmārjunadeva were subscribers to that faith. That they issued epigraphs in emulation of the imperial Guptas is also evident, but, curiously, nowhere in their inscriptions do we find the use of the titles bhūgavata or paramabhūgavata, terms of frequent occurrence in epigraphs of Vaiṣṇava monarchs in contemporary India. In the Chaṅgu Nārāyaṇa pillar prāṣasti of Mānadeva, where his parents are compared with
Hari and Lakṣmi, Dharmadeva is styled a dhārmamika and a dharmamātmā (religi ously inclined), whereas Rājyavatī is said to have been a devotee of Śrī (Śrīr evānugatā) and a bhaktā. Once or twice only the epithet bhagavān has been prefixed to Viṣṇu’s name. Still there can be little doubt that the prolific output of Vaiṣṇava images in this period attests the impact on the country of the growing Bhāgavata cult that was sweeping across India during the early centuries of the Christian era and particularly during the Gupta period.

The vibhava and the vyūha doctrines are the two pillars, so to say, upon which the entire edifice of the Pāñcarātra ideology stands. These two aspects will be dealt with at length in subsequent chapters. Suffice it here to say that the vyūha or emanatory aspect explains the cosmic nature of Vāsudeva, while vibhava emphasizes his incarnatory aspect. Naturally, the vyūha aspect is concerned with more peaceful emanations, while the vibhava aspect, by the very nature of the concept, reveals his heroic qualities in his role of a saviour. The Pāñcarātra cosmogony states that the god in his ‘para’ aspect is responsible for all creation although the actual creation is done by his Śakti, an obvious influence of the dualism of the Śāmkhya ideology. The Pāñcarātrins then divide this para Vāsudeva in a hierarchical fashion into four vyūhas and then further into twenty-four emanations.

The development of the vibhava or the incarnatory idea, the most succinct expression of which is found in the Bhagavadgītā—where it is stated that the god will appear from time to time to deliver the good from the evil—is an inevitable corollary of the cult of bhakti. The idea of a saviour was also to influence the cult of Avalokiteśvara in Buddhist theosophy around the beginning of the Christian era. In India, the vibhava aspect of Viṣṇu, as manifested in the avatāras, became extremely popular in the Gupta period. The heroic feats of Varāha, Narasimha or Trivikrama appealed to the imagination of the imperial monarchs, who must have compared their own prowess and achievements with those of the divine saviour and hero. The same spirit may have inspired Mānadeva to
consecrate icons of Viṣṇu vikrānta, as we shall discuss later, and it can hardly be an accident that all the Vaiṣṇava sculptures of the period portray the heroic character of the god.

(iv)

By about the tenth century we find that the icons of Viṣṇu have become stereotyped and conform to the more conventional forms found in northern India. It is possible that by this time the descriptions of the caturvīṁśatimūrtis, as given in the Pāñcarātra, purānic and āgama texts, were also in vogue in Nepal and led to their plastic visualisation. But even here, as we shall see, the Nepali artists maintained certain distinctive traditions of their own and tāntric ideologies played a considerable role in giving a pronounced esoteric flavour to the cult.

The Ṭhākuris and the Malla kings were for the most part Hindus and quite liberally worshipped various divinities. At the same time, their Śaiva leanings are apparent from the virudas prefixed to their names in inscriptions and manuscript colophons. The story of religion in Nepal after the tenth century can be described as one of continuous and growing ascendancy of Śivaism, centering around the temple of Paśupati, the god par excellence. There is thus nothing surprising in the fact that in a manuscript of Mahārāvaṇavadha Nāṭaka, copied in the year 457/A. D. 1337, the reigning monarch, Jayārimalla, is described as paramavaiṣṇava, paramadevataṇḍhitava and paramamāheśvara. Later still, the great Jayasthitimalla, whose devotion to Viṣṇu is indicated by the use of such virudas as Daityanārāyaṇa, Asuranārāyaṇa and Daityanārāyaṇavatāra, was also a worshipper of Śiva and Māneśvarī. This is perhaps the first instance in Nepal where a king categorically claims himself to be an incarnation of Viṣṇu, a claim that was also adopted by the Gurkhā kings, the present monarch being still considered an avatāra of Viṣṇu. His sons Dharammalla and Jyotirmalla adopted the virudas Vīranārāyaṇa and Daityanārāyaṇa respectively, while his equally illustrious grandson Jayayakṣamalla describes himself as Śrī Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇavatāra. In another manuscript written in NS 640/1520 A. D. the king Jayaratnamalla is styled Karṇānārāyaṇavatāra.
There is a large number of Vaišnava temples and images of the god, some still in worship, whose history can be traced back to the period of the Ṭhākuris and the early Mallas and these testify to the growing popularity of the cult. Among these may be mentioned the temple of ŚikharaNārāyaṇa at Pharphing, ĀdiNārāyaṇa at Thankote, Tilamādhava and Garuḍa Nārāyaṇa at Bhatgaon, and of Nārāyaṇa at Icaṅgu. In a later inscription of the year NS. 527/A.D. 1407, Śikharapurī or Śikharapattana, ancient names of Pharphing, is considered to be a famous place of pilgrimage for Vaišnavaṇas. Śikhara Nārāyaṇa along with Chaṅgu Nārāyaṇa, Iśāna Nārāyaṇa (modern Icaṅgu Nārāyaṇa) and Viṣṇa Nārāyaṇa are the four protector divinities of the valley. An inscription on a pillar in front of the Tilamādhava temple at Bhatgaon tells us that the temple was already in existence in the year NS. 283/A.D. 1163. The temple of Nārāyaṇa at Icaṅgu was consecrated during the reign of Vijayakāmadeva in the year NS. 320/A.D. 1230.

The importance and antiquity of the temple of Tilamādhava is also vouchsafed by its inclusion as a sacred shrine for pilgrimage in the Nepālamāḥatmya section of the Skandapurāṇa. The story narrated there about its origin is as follows. A merchant named Dharmadatta used to trade in tila (sesumum indicum) and was a devout Vaišnava. On the day of Uttarāyānasamkrānti he went to the shrine of Maṅgalesvara and opened a shop in front of the temple. Just as the people approached to buy tila from him, Viṣṇu wearing a yellow garment and holding the conch, the discus, the mace and the lotus, emerged from the pile of tila (tilarāśau samudbhūtastava- ddevo Janārdandḥ, āṁśhacakra gadāpadaṁdhiṁ pītavāsasam). The merchant and the people rejoiced and thus was established the shrine of Tilamādhava. It may be mentioned here that tila is supposed to have originated from Viṣṇu’s sweat-drops, as mentioned by Bāṇabhaṭṭa in his Harṣacarita. Thus the association of tila with Viṣṇu appears to have been quite old and this must have formed the basis for the later fabrication of the myth in Nepal.

Of the Malla rulers both Jayasthitimalla and his grandson Jayayakṣamalla were avowed devotees of Viṣṇu. Jayayakṣamalla built many Vaišnava temples, including that of Dattātreya at
Bhatgaon (Fig. 97), and others must have emulated their king, for a large number of the epigraphs of his reign records consecration of images and temples of Viṣṇu. Among these a great many were images of the conjoint form of Lakṣmi-Nārāyaṇa, which may be seen at Deo Patan, Kathmandu, Patan and Bhatgaon. Of the later Mallas, the two kings who particularly patronised Viṣṇuism were Pratāpamalla of Kathmandu and Siddhinarasimhamalla of Patan. Pratāpamalla not only dedicated a Vaikuṇṭha image in the palace and built at least two Vaiṣṇava temples, but also recovered a very important Vaiṣṇava sculpture and installed it in the palace, as we shall see later. His equally enlightened contemporary, Siddhinarasimhamalla of Patan, built the magnificent Kṛṣṇa temple (Fig. 101), which is today one of the chief attractions of the Darbar Square in that city. There is little doubt that the temples were built out of pure devotion, at the same time it also seems as if these two kings vied with one another in beautifying their Darbar Squares with lofty edifices.

( v )

Manuscripts of many important Vaiṣṇava texts were copied in this period, some of which are illustrated. The Mahābhārata, the Rāmāyaṇa and the Harivaṁśa were already popular texts, but so was the Viṣṇudharma, of which a large number of copies of different times has come down to us. The earliest known dated manuscript of the Viṣṇudharma appears to be that copied in NS. 167/A.D. 1047 now in the Bir Library at Kathmandu. The wooden covers of this manuscript are profusely illuminated with unusual representations of Vaiṣṇava themes, as we shall discuss later. Another manuscript of Viṣṇudharma was copied during the reign of Abhayamalla in NS. 320/A.D. 1220, which too has illustrated covers. It is curious, however, that on one of the covers of a Śivadharma manuscript, probably of the same date and copied by the same scribe, we have representations of the twelve sub-vyūhas of Viṣṇu. This clearly demonstrates the spirit of tolerance and syncretism that characterized the religious history of Nepal, a point that will receive repeated emphasis in this book. Thus, Viṣṇudharma appears to have been a particularly popular purāṇa with the Nepāli Vaiṣṇavas.
This is of course different from the *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa*, which also was a well-known text in the country.

Many dramas were written during the medieval period, based chiefly on the stories of the *Rāmāyana*, such as *Mahīravāṇavadha Nāṭaka*, the *Hanumān Nāṭaka*, etc. Apart from the fact that these manuscripts were often richly illuminated, the dramas were frequently performed and must have contributed considerably in popularising the myths and legends connected with Viṣṇuism. In the Malla and the Shāh periods particularly, lesser Vaiṣṇava works, concerned with various rites and rituals as well as the stories of the life of Kṛṣṇa, were translated into Newari. We do not only have manuscripts of such works but in several scrolls the stories are inscribed in the Newari language. The practice of translating into Newari tales and scriptural materials of a more popular character seems to have been prevalent especially after the growing patronage of the native language since the time of Jayasthitimala. The literary value of such works, however, is yet to be assessed.

A rite or *vṛata* that was particularly popular in Nepal during the last few centuries is known as *anantavrata*. Many of the Vaiṣṇava paintings were dedicated by common persons as well as kings to commemorate the successful performance of this rite. The *anantavrata* is a popular Vaiṣṇava ceremony and is of considerable antiquity as it is mentioned in purānic literature. The rite is to be performed on the fourteenth day of the bright fortnight of the month of Bhādra and the day is called *anantacaturdāsi*. As a matter of fact all the paintings commemorating the performance of this *vṛata* were consecrated on that day. During the performance of the *vṛata* Ananta is to be worshipped and an important part of it is the ceremony of wearing a sanctified strap of thread of cotton or silk dyed with saffron on the right hand of a man and the left one of a woman. The strap has to be twisted and tied into fourteen knots. According to the *Agnipurāṇa* an image of Hari as Ananta is to be made of *darbha* grass, placed in a vessel for water and worshipped. A graphic representation of the performance of the rite may be seen in a scroll (Figs. 74-75), which illustrates a story extolling the merits of performing this rite as recounted by Hemādri. The *purāṇa*
adds that during the performance of the _vrata_ beside a river one should listen to edificatory tales about Hari and then a prayer is given in which the identity of Ananta and Vāsudeva is emphasized.

(vi)

Kṛṣṇa is represented in art in Nepal as early as, perhaps, the sixth century, but it is only during the medieval period, particularly under the later Mallas, that his cult appears to have become more popular. In medieval India a new factor considerably reoriented Viṣṇuism and this was the Sahajiyā ideology of later Buddhism⁴⁸. Although the adherents of the Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyā cult did not represent Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa in actual physical union (sa-mithuna) in their art as the Buddhists did with their divinities, and, although the Sahajiyā doctrine of the Vaiṣṇavas evolved around the theory of parakiyā love of Rādha and Kṛṣṇa, the essence of the conception, that of Sahaja-prema, spontaneous love, was already rooted in the _Bhāgavatapurāṇa_ and other early texts⁴⁹. The idea that Lakṣmī is the śakti of Viṣṇu is already an integral part of the Pāñcarātra doctrine and was no doubt inspired by the Sāṃkhya ideology of Puruṣa and Prakṛti. At the same time the theologians took particular care to declare the identity of the two, thereby revealing their monistic attitude, probably as a result of Saṅkarāchārya’s exposition of advaita. This monistic ideology resulted in the conception of composite images of Arddhanārīśvara in Śivaism and Vāsudeva-Kamalajā in Viṣṇuism. We will later see how the Nepali artists gave form to this idea and have thus preserved for us an iconic type as well as the ostensible embodiment of a concept that is known only from texts in India.

The cult of Rāma does not seem to have enjoyed a great deal of popularity, certainly nowhere near the extent to which it is popular in northern India. Images of Hanumān, however, exist and he is generally considered a protective deity as he is seen guarding the entrance to the old palace at Kathmandu, the gate being known as the Hanumān-ḍhoka⁵⁴. Bhīmasena, the second of the Pāṇḍavas, also enjoys considerable popularity in the country and there are several temples dedicated to his worship. He is usually portrayed
as a warrior, wearing a coat of mail, and holding a sword and a shield, as he stands in *pratyālīḍha*. This may be taken as the only remnant today of the ancient cult of the heroes, which must have included the Pāṇḍavas. Needless to say the cult of Hanumān is also a form of hero-worship. It may be of interest here to mention that the cult of Bhūmasena was also popular at this period in Java.

Of the other minor Vaiṣṇava cults, Śrī-Lakṣmī, of course, is worshipped domestically, but it appears that there were independent shrines dedicated to her. We have already referred to Mānadeva’s mother being considered a devotee of Śrī, and the temple to which Amśuvarman first made his grant was of Śrī. A commemorative image of Lakṣmī was dedicated in the year NS. 625/A. D. 1505, which must then have been enshrined⁸⁸. To the north of the village of Balambu lie the ruins of a sanctuary that is known as Mahālakṣmī pīṭha, but this may of course have been a shrine of Mahālakṣmī as a form of Devī. Bhūdevī or Vasudhā, who, in her quintessence, may also be identified with Lakṣmī, was nevertheless, a separate entity, and in medieval Indian icons of Viṣṇu, along with Śrī-Lakṣmī, she often is seen to accompany the god. In Nepal, however, she is seen seldom with Viṣṇu, but a fifteenth century copper plate inscription throws considerable light on her conception. Significantly, the copper-plate is attached to the front wall of the palace at Bhatgaon to the right of the well-known golden gate⁸⁸. The inscription records the occasion of the completion of the town’s fortification by Jayayakṣamalla in the year A. D. 1453. In the introductory verses of the inscription the goddess Vasundharā is invoked. She is considered as the goddess Earth, who was lifted by Viṣṇu’s arms, is said to conceal within her many objects and is implored to protect the enclosing rampart (*varaṇaśāla*).

Another consort of Viṣṇu, Sarasvatī, was of course worshipped separately as the goddess of learning. She is known popularly in the country as Sāradā and many medieval inscriptions record consecration of her images or shrines. A large number of her sanctuaries is still under worship, but she was not commonly associated with Viṣṇu in Nepal. A fourteenth century inscription calls her the mother of the world and describes her image as
Kāmnārtī. In a fifteenth century inscription her association with Viṣṇu is unambiguously declared and she is considered to be the sakti of Madhuripu, a name of Viṣṇu. She is also described as holding the rosary and the manuscript, while the two other hands display the varada and the abhaya-mudrā. As a matter of fact this is how she is commonly portrayed in Nepal (Fig. 88).

There can be little doubt that after the tenth century the growing popularity of tāntrism in the country had a significant effect on all the major sects, particularly Śivaism and Buddhism. Tāntric rituals were freely adopted by the Śaivas and the Buddhists alike and, as we shall see, equally zealously by the Vaiṣṇavas. Numerous sculptures and paintings of this period, particularly after the fifteenth century, reveal curious forms that cannot be explained with the existing and known Vaiṣṇava literature. In painting particularly we find the depiction of elaborate Vaiṣṇava maṇḍalas which indicate their tāntric character. It must be remembered that tāntric rites and maṇḍalas had a deep esoteric significance and often their symbology or meaning was not committed to writing. Of course, the Pāñcarātra texts, which do provide clues to the understanding of these maṇḍalas, had already been permeated by tāntric ideologies. But whether we can properly decipher these maṇḍalas or not, it is undeniably true that during the medieval period Viṣṇuism in Nepal had come to be deeply influenced by tāntrism, even to a greater degree than in India.

Tāntric rites and rituals are very similar no matter whether they are associated with Buddhism, Śivaism or Viṣṇuism. A graphic testimony of this is the representation of the scene of performance of homa, including the figure of a dancer and musicians, below Vaiṣṇava paintings (Fig. 16) exactly as we find in Buddhist paubhās. This similarity may have contributed considerably to the closer assimilation of the principal cults in Nepal, and, hence the belief that the four faces adorning the liṅga of the temple of Paśupatināthā represent Śiva, Śūrya, Viṣṇu and the Buddha. In fact, it is this spirit that is behind the unqualified reverence that a Buddhist
displays towards a Hindu temple or a Hindu towards a Buddhist shrine. Although there are several iconic types that manifest a gross sectarian bias, such as Hari-hari-hari-vāhana Avalokiteśvara, this is only academic, and in point of fact, whether the image is actually of Viṣṇu astride his Garuḍa or Avalokiteśvara astride Viṣṇu, the often illiterate devotee fails to distinguish the two and sees in the image the tangible manifestation of 'a god' and as such worthy of reverence. So the Buddhists claim that the god who resides in the ancient shrine of Chaṅgu Nārāyaṇa is really Avalokiteśvara and give their version of a story as to how this image originated⁰⁰. Again they believe that the Jalaśayana Viṣṇu at Buḍhā Nilkanṭha is really Nilakanṭha Lokeśvara, which is incidentally a transfer in the Vajrayāna pantheon of Nilakanṭha Mahādeva, and, hence, the origin of the name Buḍhā (Buddha) Nilakanṭha.

This spirit of assimilation is also evident in the Nepālāmāhātmya section of the Skandapurāṇa, where it is stated that Janārđana in the form of Buddha came to Nepal from Saurāṣṭra and established a liṅga known as Kārunikeśvara⁵¹. There is of course nothing surprising in the fact that the Buddha is identified with Janārđana or Viṣṇu, for the former is an accepted avatāra of the latter. But here we meet something that can be said to be a typically Nepali contribution to the religious thought of the period—the identification of the Buddha, Viṣṇu and Śiva. The Nepālāmāhātmya is replete with references to liṅgas being established by Viṣṇu, which reveal both a sectarian bias as well as a spirit of syncretism. This Śaiva bias is not at all unusual in Nepal where all the major divinities have been indentified with Śiva at some time or other. So we are told that Govinda founded a liṅga named Gopāleśvara, which is also referred to as Śivanārāyaṇa⁶². Curiously, here Viṣṇu not only establishes the liṅga but it represents both him and Śiva. Obviously at the popular level there was no distinction between the two divinities. We will subsequently observe how the urge to synthesize, but usually with a Śaiva bias, is reflected in the art of Nepal.

A few words here about Viṣṇu's association with Buddhism will not be out of place. In the representation of the miracle of the Descent from the Tuṣita heaven, where the Buddha had gone to
preach to his parents, Viśnu, along with Brahmā and Indra, is occasionally seen to accompany the Buddha. This is not textually prescribed and is probably an innovation on the part of the artist. In these instances, Viśnu is, of course, shown as an attendant. In the Dharmadhātuvagīśvara mandala of the Niśpannayogāvali he has been included among other Brāhmaṇical divinities. But, at the same time, we must remember that he is considered as a māra, and is often seen being trampled below the foot of a Vajrayāna deity. In the Nārāyaṇaparipṛchchā, however, a text of the dhāraṇī class, he is described as a Bodhisattva of the Sambara group and reference is made to his having taken three steps. Thus, it is interesting, that while some theologians were busy denouncing the Brāhmaṇical gods, others were occupied in incorporating them in the Buddhist pantheon.

A still more interesting example of how there were mutual borrowings from one tradition to another in the medieval period is furnished by two ślokas in the Ekallavīra Cāṇḍa Mahāroṣaṇa Tantra, a Vajrayāna text. In both instances the Buddha declares that in whichever form people worship, in that very form does he reside for the good of all sentient beings. One can have little doubt that the idea must have been borrowed from very similar passages in the Bhagavadgītā, where Kṛṣṇa says almost the same thing to Arjuna on several occasions.

(viii)

Among the donors of the images were kings, nobles and the ordinary people; and the inscriptions provide us with much data as to the reasons why images were consecrated. In a twelfth century epigraph, issued during the reign of king Amṛtadeva, it is recorded that Śrī Viśākha and others, who were exclusive followers of Kṛṣṇa-rites (Kṛṣṇasya-vidhivadbhaktvā), at the command of their mother Madhukāsī, (Madhukāsirīyāḥ ājñāmsrajamivadhaya) dedicated an image of Viṣṇu (Viṣṇorarccā niveditā) at the summit of Dolācala (mūrdhṇā dolācalasthiteh), for the attainment of heaven (svargga samprāpti hetave) of Vijayadeva, their deceased brother (bhṛṭur-Vijayadevasya). The inscription clearly declares that the image was donated to commemorate the death of Vijayadeva so that he
may attain heaven. It is interesting that the aim is not for him to attain ‘mokṣa’ (liberation) but ‘heaven’. The inscription further states that the virtue attained by this deed should fall always on all beings (punyenājenalokoyan sukhi bhavatu sarvadā) and that desire is great which inspires an act for the benefit of others (parārtha karaṇiyaiva pravṛttihi mahātmanāṁ). Thus, Madhukārī and her sons were dedicating this image for the benefit of the deceased and not for their own welfare. This is curiously the same idea implied in the Mahāyana Buddhist dedicatory formula, which is commonly found in inscriptions or manuscript colophons: yadatra punyaṁ tad bhavatvācāryopādhyāyaṁ atāṁpūrtāṁ purvaṅgamāni Kṛtvā sakalasattva etc. Buddhist influence on Vaiṣṇava donors in the twelfth century is nothing surprising as this was particularly a glorious period of Mahāyāna Buddhism in Nepal.

In another epigraph, which is a royal edict issued by the reigning monarch Jayayakṣamalla, we are told that the king was pleased to dedicate a golden image of Hṛṣikeśa along with a golden toraṇa to commemorate his son Jayarājamaṇa who had died that year. It is of considerable interest also that the image was made according to the proportions of the body of the deceased prince (Jayarājamaṇadeva kumārasya śarīra pramāṇa pratiṁ). The inscription further states that ‘by this gift let the deceased son attain Śivaloka, Viṣṇuloka, and Brahmaloka’ (anena dānena divaṅgata putra Jayarājamaṇadevakumāraṁ Śivalokam Viṣṇulokam Brahma-lokaṁ samprāpto bhavatu). At the same time a prayer is also appended for the increasing life, health, wealth, prosperity and good fortune of the family and kingdom of Jayayakṣamalla (ŚrīśrīJayayakṣamalladevānāṁ putraputra āyurārgya eśvarya jaya-dhana mahārājya lākṣmīyuddhirmatu).

Thus, one of the purposes for which an image was donated was to commemorate the death of someone as well as for the good of his soul after death. At the same time prayer was made for the attainment of temporal benefits for the survivors and for the donor’s family or for every living being. A similar wish is also expressed at the end of another inscription at Bhatgaon carved on the pedestal of an image of Mādhava. Such instances could be multiplied
but it is evident that the desire for earthly gains was the most potent factor that led a devotee to consecrate an icon. According to the Pāñcarātra classification such images would be considered to belong to the bhoga variety. We also have in Jayayakṣamalla’s inscription a definite assertion that images were made according to the physical proportions of a person. This has important art-historical bearings and presumably many of the images in India as well may have simulated the proportions of particular persons and may even have been portraiture. A typical instance of syncretism is found in the fact that although the image donated is that of Viṣṇu, Jayayakṣamalla hopes that his son will attain the heavens of all the three divinities of the Trinity, Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva.

In the twelfth century inscription of Viśākha, already discussed, he declares himself as a Kṛṣṇasya-vidhivad-bhakta. Obviously this refers to his being a follower of the Kṛṣṇa rites and testifies to rather an early familiarity in Nepal with such rites. Elsewhere an image is said to have been consecrated according to the trayavidhi, which shows that vedic rites were known and performed. Even as late as the fifteenth century, when tāntric rituals must already have been predominantly prevalent, a donor claims that he is consecrating an image according to the vedic rites (vedoktenavidhānena). We shall subsequently see that several late images of Kṛṣṇa and Viṣṇu bear on the forehead the distinctive sect mark of the Vaḍakalai branch of the Śrī Vaiṣṇavas of South India. The sect is therefore well-known in Nepal and its rites are probably observed by a number of Vaiṣṇavas.

This brief survey of Viṣṇuism in Nepal only touches upon the many interesting facets of the history of the religion in that country. Many of these points will receive further emphasis in the following chapters. While this cursory sketch will help to provide a historical perspective for the discussion of the images, the images in their turn will reveal a wealth of material which will help to form a clearer picture of the peculiar character of Viṣṇuism in Nepal.
CHAPTER TWO

VIBHAVA IMAGES

The theory of vibhava or avatāra, embodying the incarnatory forms of Viṣṇu, is one of the principal tenets of the Pāñcarātra cult. It is certainly an older concept than that of the vyūha and is already foreshadowed in the later vedic texts. The essence of the concept, however, is most succinctly described in the following śloka of the Bhagavadgītā (IV, 7-8):

Yadā yadā hi dharmasya glānirbhavati Bhārata
Abhyutthānamadharmasya tadātmānaṁ srjāmyaham /
Paritṛṇyāyāsādhūnām vināśāya ca duṣkṛtām
Dharmasamsthāpanārthāya saṁbhavāmi yuge yuge /

‘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.’

Neither the concept of multiplicity nor of the saviour is new and both are already found in the Rgveda¹. More specifically in the brāhmaṇa and the samhitā literature we are told that Prajāpati on different occasions assumed the form of a fish (matsya), a tortoise (kūrma) and a boar (varāha) ‘for the furtherance of creation and the well-being of the created’.² There can be little doubt that some of these early ideas were merely transferred to Viṣṇu and synthesized in the later Bhāgavata-Pāñcarātra ideology.

In course of time this general concept was embodied in specific forms and the epic and purānic literatures furnish us with a number of lists of the svatāras. Both their number as well as their names vary considerably, but, in art, by the Gupta
period, the number came to be stereotyped into ten, known collectively as *daśāvatāra*. Ten incarnations already occur in the *Mahābhārata*, but there Buddha of the later stereotyped list is yet to appear. The *Vāyupurāṇa* list of ten is also different and in the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* the number is twenty-two. In the *Matsyapurāṇa* Viṣṇu is said to have been born only seven times and only in the *Agni*-and the *Varāha-purāṇa* are we provided with the names of the ten conventionally represented in art. These are: Matsya, Kūrma, Varāha, Narasiṁha, Vāmana, Paraśurāma, Rāma, Balarāma, the Buddha and Kalkin. In the *Pāñcarātra Sāṁhitās* the list is further increased to thirty-nine, which include, among others, Vāgīśvara and Lokanātha, two principal divinities of the Mahāyāna pantheon, reflecting the continuous process of absorption and assimilation in the concepts and iconography of the principal sects in medieval India. A still further offshoot of the doctrine of vibhava or avatāra, as formulated by the *Pāñcarātra* theologians, is the theory of āvesās, but this need not concern us here.

In Nepal the three avatāras which appear to have been popular which are by definition ‘classic’ avatāras are those of the Vāmana, the Varāha, and the Narasiṁha. Their images seem to have been independently worshipped in the early Licchavi period from which we have no evidence of the representations of the ten stereotyped avatāras. However, in a number of paintings of the later period, they are all included, as we shall see subsequently.

I. KURMA AVATĀRA

The Kūrma avatāra of Viṣṇu is generally represented simply by a kūrma or a tortoise. No early representation of this avatāra is known. But in a sixteenth century manuscript, now preserved in the Cambridge University Library, the myth of the Kūrma avatāra or Samudramanthanasa (Churning of the Ocean) has been depicted in considerable detail. The story of the tortoise supporting the earth is intimately connected with Indian cosmogony and cosmography, both in tradition and literature, and in the *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* it is associated with Varuṇa, the lord of the waters. As in many other instances this too was transferred to Viṣṇu when he rose to eminence,
and in purānic mythology an elaborate story developed around this kernel.

In the manuscript illuminations (Fig. 1) we find first a two-armed figure, reclining on the branches of a tree, and being adored by an emaciated sage, who is shown again as jubilant in the water. The reclining figure is none other than Viṣṇu who is described in the Mahābhārata as floating on the Nyārodha (banyan) branch and in whose mouth the sage Mārkandeya discovered the universe. One of the avatāras or vibhavas in the AhirodayaSānhitā is therefore called Nyārodhaśayin. In the following composition a four-armed Viṣṇu with the four usual attributes is shown sleeping (yoganidrā or seṣaśayana) on the serpent Śeṣa. From his navel emerges a full-blown lotus on which is seated Brahmā.

According to the story, the asuras once defeated the devas, who approached Brahmā for advice. The latter sent them to Viṣṇu who was then asleep and on being awakened was told of the predicament of the gods. Viṣṇu advised them to befriend the asuras and to persuade them to agree to churn the ocean which would yield amṛta, which would bestow immortality to the gods and hence they would be invincible. He also told them to make Mandara mountain the churning stick and to use the nāga Vāsuki as the rope, and further admonished them to agree to any requests made by the asuras. The devas followed the instructions, brought the mountain to the ocean, tied it with Vāsuki and so began the churning. But slowly the mountain started sinking and Viṣṇu, assuming the form of a tortoise and descending to the bottom of the ocean, supported it on his back.

In the illuminations (Fig. 2) the scene of the churning is represented on the upper folio. On the back of the turtle is the mount Mandara, rendered conceptually by jagged peaks of bright colours, on which sits Indra, the lord of the heavens. He can be identified because of his distinctive crown and the third eye marked horizontally across his forehead. The ocean below the tortoise is also delineated conceptually with fishes swimming about as in the previous illustrations (Fig. 1). The tail-end of the nāga, which
eniorcles the mountain, is held by the gods Brahmā, Viṣṇu and, possibly, Bhairava or Śiva, while a few others idly watch from the top. The asuras hold the other end of the nāga as it is related in the text. According to the Bhāgavatapurāṇa the asuras voluntarily chose the head of the nāga as they felt it was ignominous to hold the tail. Viṣṇu had anticipated this and knew that once the churning began fire would emerge from the serpent’s mouth which would exhaust the asuras. It must be remembered that Vāsuki was not altogether impartial as he too was to get a share of the amṛta.

The artist has indicated the triumph of the gods by making them stand firmly in the ālīdha posture, whereas the asuras appear to be stumbling and falling as the nāga breaths fire. It is interesting that Viṣṇu should join the gods engaged in the churning when he is supposed to have assumed the form of the Kūrma to support the mountain.

The churning yielded many gems, chief among them being Dhanvantari with the pot of amṛta in hand, Śrī-Lakṣmī, the horse (pāṇḍura-turaga), the elephant Airāvata, the jewel kaustubha, and vārunī (spirituous liquor). But first it yielded the fatal poison, halāhala or kālakuṭa. Everyone was frightened of the poison and Śiva, on the request of the gods and with the permission of Bhavānī, drank it, which turned his throat blue and hence he came to be known as Nilakaṇṭha. Of the gems, Viṣṇu appropriated kaustubha and Śrī-Lakṣmī, Sūrya took the horse and Indra the elephant, while the asuras received vārunī.

All this is depicted in considerable detail by the Nepali artist (Fig. 2). Viṣṇu is seen taking Śrī-Lakṣmī, and both the horse and the elephant are shown, with Sūrya added in an inset. To the right we see Śiva taking the poison, which has turned his throat blue. The multi-armed Bhavānī is portrayed in the top centre and the other two gods of the Trinity, Brahmā and Viṣṇu, are seen kneeling and adoring Śiva.

The last to emerge from the ocean was Dhanvantari with the pot containing amṛta (Fig. 3), and one of the asuras, with a naked sword, is seen snatching it away. Viṣṇu then assuming the form of
a beautiful damsel (Mohini) charmed the intoxicated asuras, who allowed her to distribute the amṛta. The devas and the asuras are shown seated in two registers, and Mohini is busy distributing the nectar, all of which fell to the share of the devas. Among the devas we notice Chandra and Sūrya between them holding a fierce looking figure. This is no doubt Rāhu for it is narrated in the texts that he was the only asura who managed to sit among the devas and almost received a share of the nectar. But Sūrya and Chandra discovered him and Viṣṇu severed his head. Because his head had touched the pot containing amṛta, it became immortal, and Brahmā made it a planet. This is why Rāhu has continued to pursue the sun and the moon ever since. The unfair distribution of nectar enraged the asuras who again began fighting with the devas, as shown on the lower folio. But this time, fortified with the amṛta, the gods overwhelmed their rivals. Among the gods can be recognized Viṣṇu, Indra, Varuṇa and even Brahmā with a sword.

The illuminations naturally reflect the prevailing style of the period, and although the miniaturist has adhered to the canons in the representation of the gods, in general, his rendering is considerably more free and vigorous. Certain conventions are always resorted to, particularly in the postures of the fighting gods and asuras, in the arrangement of the seated figures, in the fair and handsome disposition of the divine beings, while the asuras are shown as fearsome. This fierce appearance is not only indicated by painting their eyes in such a fashion that they appear to wear coloured glasses but also by the curious headgear, which seems to have been derived from a Greek helmet, and is probably a survival from the repertoire of the artists of an earlier period.

In some later Vaiṣṇava paintings, however, in representations of the stereotyped ten avatāras we often see a four-armed Viṣṇu in his anthropomorphic form emerging from the mouth of a tortoise (Figs. 16-17). He holds the four usual attributes, padma, gadā, śaṅkha and cakra. No textual description of this form is known to us, but images of such hybrid forms also occur in India, where, however, the upper portion shows Viṣṇu holding the four usual attributes, while the lower is that of a kūrma. In the Nepali
paintings the form is not really hybrid for the god appears to emerge from the mouth of the tortoise.

II. VARĀHA AVATĀRA

The Varāha or the Boar incarnation is one of the most important of the vibhava forms. The theme proved to be very popular with Indian artists, especially from the Gupta period, and, as V. S. Agrawala has suggested, the concept was given a political twist and appealed to the imagination of such ambitious monarchs as Chandragupta II or Mihira-Bhoja. Gonda has ably discussed the universal popularity of the boar motif in the mythologies of several countries and it appears particularly to have had a fertility aspect in agrarian societies from very early times. Both in Indian folklore of the tribal people and in ancient Indian literature, the boar or the hog is implicitly or explicitly associated with the concept of fertility.

The earliest reference to the association of the boar and the earth is to be found in a passage in the Atharvaveda: ‘Bearing the fool, bearer of what is heavy (or: important, wise, venerable?), patiently enduring the settling down (? or: destruction) of the excellent and of the evil (or, rather, of the prosperous and the unfortunate), the earth, in concord with the boar, opens itself to (or: becomes expended for) the wild pig (sukaraya). Gonda correctly suggests that this passage from the hymn to Prthivī cannot be construed as to imply the existence of the Varāha-avatāra as early as the vedic period, but there can be little doubt that the myth must have germinated in some such early allusions. Certainly there are many other elements in the myth such as the primordial waters (ekārṇava) and the Golden Egg (hiruṇyugurba) that are vedic in character, if not of vedic origin.

The nucleus of the myth, however, was already formed in the period of the brāhmaṇa literature. Both in the Śatapathabrāhmaṇa and in the Taittiriyasamhitā it is related that Prajāpati went into the water as a boar and lifted the earth to the surface. Like many others, subsequently, this myth was also transferred to the repertoire of the Vaiṣṇava theologians and Viṣṇu was substituted for Prajāpati.
In the Mahābhārata this transference is already completed and we are told how Kṛṣṇa-Viṣṇu assuming the form of a roaring boar descended into the waters and rescued the earth oppressed by the asuras and the dānavaś. Further, in the purāṇas, this same primeval Varāha is referred to as Yajña-varāha and an elaborate explanation of the symbology of his form is given.

The sixth century sculpture from Nepal, standing in a shrine in Dhum Vārāhi outside Kathmandu (Figs. 4-5), is a magnificent rendering of the Boar incarnation. Except for the oval nimbus behind the head it is a sculpture carved fully in the round. There is tremendous power and determination in his posture, known technically as ālidha or pratyālidha, as he stands on the intertwined coils of the serpent. His right hand rests on his hip in a logical and natural attempt to balance his own vigorous movement, while the left holds a conch. The earth personified as a female appears to have been raised by his snout and is supported by his elbow.

The image conforms to the description of the god in the Viṣṇudharmottara-purāṇa in a number of aspects. The text states that the god should stand in the ālidha posture on the serpent Śeṣa (ālidhas-thānasamsthānastapṛṣṭhe Bhagavān bhavet), although Śeṣa is described as four-armed and gazing admiringly at Vasundhara. Varāha also is given four arms but it is stated that he should lift the earth with the tip of his tusk (dasmstrāgrasamuddhṛtavasundharāh) and the same arm that supports her should hold a conch (yasminbhuje dharā devī tatra saṅkhāḥ kare bhaved), as we find in the sculpture. The earth or Vasundhara is described as follows: vāmāraṇīgata tasya yosīḍrāpā Vasundhara | namaskāraparā tasya kartavyā dvibhujā śubhā. Indeed in the representation Vasundhara is shown as a female with her two hands in namaskāramudrā. The text also describes many other forms of the avatarā and declares that he may be shown two-handed (dvibhujastvathā vā kāryah...), although there he is to hold the globe (piṇḍa) of the earth.

There is nothing known from India to which this Nepali version is comparable. Although the massive proportions and the vast composition of the Udayagiri relief make it one of the most monu-
mental representations of the theme, the Nepali example is no less striking. In the Udayagiri relief, however, and indeed elsewhere in Indian art, the physique of Varāha is that of a deva of gigantic proportions. But in the Nepali sculpture in the bulky volumes of the swelling plane of the massive chest, the rotund belly and the thick and heavy thighs, the sculptor appears to have attempted to visualize the primeval boar itself. This indeed is the auspicious supporter of the world who emitted a low murmuring sound, like the chanting of the Sāmaveda; and the mighty boar, whose eyes were like the full blown lotus, and whose body, vast as the Nila mountain, was of the dark colour of the lotus leaves, uplifted upon his ample tusks the Earth from the lowest regions...”

III. NARASIMHA AVATĀRA

We have already stated that in an inscription of Aṁśuvarman a temple of Narasimha is mentioned, thus testifying that this avatāra of Viṣṇu was familiar by the sixth century. Although there are no ways of knowing the form of the image installed in that temple, possibly the much later sculpture, now standing within the precincts of the Chaṅgu Nārāyaṇa temple, is modelled after it, for it appears to have been common practice in Nepal to make copies of ancient icons. This image (Fig. 6) cannot be placed earlier than the twelfth century, and remains one of the earliest representations of this manifestation.

The story of this vibhava as narrated in purānic literature is as follows. Hiranyakaśipu, the king of the asuras, was an avowed enemy of Viṣṇu, but of his sons, Prahlāda was a devotee of the god. On learning of this, Hiranyakaśipu chastised his son and asked him where Viṣṇu was. To this Prahlāda replied that he was everywhere and could even be in the pillar before them. Hiranyakaśipu struck the pillar, and with a deafening sound it fell to pieces and out came Viṣṇu in the form of half man and half lion. In the fight that ensued the god tore open the asura’s belly with his nails.

The Nepali sculpture is interesting for more reasons than one. The base of the sculpture shows stylized rocks, which may indicate the locale, viz. a cave, although the action commonly takes place in
a palace, or it may have been a mannerism of the artist. It is interesting that the Viṣṇu vikrānta sculpture of Śikhara Nārāyaṇa (Fig. 10) which may have been the work of the same school, if not by the same artist, shows a similar predilection for rendering the base as a rocky surface, and yet there it can hardly be taken to indicate a cave. There is no allusion in the literary versions to nāgas being present on the occasion and yet we see a couple on the pedestal in a devotional attitude. Amongst others included in the stele are Garuḍa and Śrī-Lakṣmī to the right of Narasimha and Prahāda to his left, while in the stylized clouds above Brahmā, Iudra and Śiva are watching the miraculous event.

In contrast to the rigid and frontal representations of all the attendant figures, the main theme, the killing of Hiraṇyakaśipu, is depicted with considerable dramatic quality. Narasimha holds Hiraṇyakaśipu in a vicious grip from which the latter tries hopelessly to extricate himself. The interlocking of the arms and legs of the two figures and the limp left hand of the asura king emphasize his helplessness as the enraged god with his mane flying like flames mercilessly tears open his belly. It is interesting to recall that the Matsyapurāṇa states that “the god and the demon should be shown fighting with their legs interlocked”.

In fact, the artist appears to have followed the description of the Matsyapurāṇa in fashioning this sculpture. The text further relates that “the altar or seat should be made formidable, his face terrible, the eyes should be split, the mane should be raised, and the scene of ripping the breast of the demon Hiraṇyakaśipu with blood gushing from it, as well as the angry looks of the Lord should also be well depicted ... and the images of Indra and the other Devas in praying posture should be made near Nṛsiṁha”. Perhaps, in an attempt to make the seat formidable the artist has employed the motif of rocks on the pedestal. Indra and others are delineated in the clouds as already mentioned. As a naturalistic touch the artist has added the asura’s fallen crown and the broken bits of his club below the left foot of Narasimha. Of the attributes in the two upper hands of the god, that in the left is undoubtedly a lotus, while the right hand seems to hold a stone-sling, marked on the
side with a cakra. This may have been a misinterpretation on the part of the artist of the attribute in the original image, which he has no doubt copied, or possibly, in the early icons of Narasimha, he was shown holding a sling, attesting the primitive character of the conception. It is not impossible that Narasimha originally was worshipped by some tribal people and was subsequently incorporated in the Vaišṇava pantheon and mythology.

S. Levi published another sculpture of Narasimha from Patan which too belongs to the medieval period. Curiously, there the right leg of Hiraṇyakaśipu is raised as if he was attempting to kick Narasimha in the face. In it also the god is seated securely as he tears open the demon’s belly, and Hiraṇyakaśipu’s club lies next to the god’s right foot. In a still later example in wood we see Narasimha standing as he destroys the demon who falls helplessly on the ground. While the god is conceived almost completely as a lion, the demon is attired in the manner in which the asuras and dānavas are portrayed in paintings after the sixteenth century. The continued popularity of this avatāra is also attested by the Vaiṣṇava Valis where we are told that in the seventeenth century Pratāpamalla consecrated an icon of Narasimha, which may still be seen in the old palace at Kathmandu.

IV. VIŚṆU VIKRĀNTA OR VĀMANA AVATĀRA

Four sculptures in Nepal, of different periods, depict the theme known commonly in Indian literature as Trivikrama (Figs. 7-10). The nucleus of the legend as well as the conception of the three strides are to be found in vedic literature. As a matter of fact, his taking the three strides is one of the most significant features of vedic Viṣṇu. The more elaborate myth, which appears to have formed the basis for these visual representations, is found in the purāṇas.

Bali, the king of the asuras, became over-ambitious and began making preparations to gain overlordship of the heavens. This alarmed the gods who approached Brahmā for protection and he sent them to Viṣṇu. The ever agreeable Viṣṇu, in order to curb Bali’s
ambition, incarnated himself on earth as the dwarf (vāmana) son of Kāśyapa and Aditi. On hearing that Bali was about to perform the horse sacrifice (aśvamedha yajña) the dwarf Brahmin went to attend it. Aware of Viṣṇu's guile, Śukrācārya, the high priest of the asuras, warned Bali to be careful. But the proud king, heedless of the wise counsel, offered the dwarf anything the latter wanted. Vāmana modestly asked for only that much land that he could cover with three steps. No sooner was his wish granted, to the amazement of the asuras, the dwarf was metamorphosed into a cosmic giant and only with two steps covered the three worlds. With the remaining step he despatched Bali, who was tied up with Varuṇa's rope by Garuḍa, to the nether world (sutala of Pātālaloka).

Of the four sculptures portraying this myth, two bear on their pedestals identical inscriptions of Mānadeva with the same date. The date given is 389 which when referred to the Śaka era corresponds to A. D. 467. One of these now stands under an improvised shelter at the confluence of the rivers Tilganga and Bagmati, near Mṛgasthali (Fig. 7) and the other, from Lajimpat, is preserved in the Bir Library at Kathmandu (Fig. 8). A third example stands within the precincts of the temple of Chaṅgu Nārāyaṇa (Fig. 9), while the fourth is set up outside the shrine of Śikhara Nārāyaṇa at Pharphing (Fig. 10).

Although they differ stylistically, all four sculptures have the same compositional scheme and similar iconographical traits. The following incidents of the myth have been portrayed, with a varying degree of naturalism and dramatic intent, in all four reliefs: the scene of the performance of the aśvamedha yajña at the lower left corner of the stele, in the centre the ceremonial bestowing of the gift by Bali, in the company of his wife Vindhyāvalī and Śukrācārya, to Vāmana, to the right the worship of the foot of Viṣṇu by the nāga royal couple and the futile attempt by Namuci to dissuade the god. Higher up in the composition we see the adoration of the left foot of Viṣṇu by Rāhu and a curious acrobatic figure suspended in mid-air, the entire composition being dominated as well as unified by the striding figure of Viṣṇu. Both Garuḍa and Śrī-Lakṣmi are represented on Viṣṇu's right, and we can presume from the two undated steles that
the top of the Mānadeva reliefs was also adorned with clouds, the sun, the moon and vidyādharas.

Despite the damaged and effaced state of the two inscribed reliefs, we can distinguish some of the attributes held by Viṣṇu. In the Mṛgasthali relief (Fig. 7), his crown, although disfigured, appears to have three peaks, and among his ornaments are śankhapatras, karnakundalas, a broad hāra, equally broad keyūras and valaytas. He wears a dhoti, which is marked by striations, with a broad embroidered border that spans the two thighs and gives the impression of a vanamālā. Of the four right hands of Viṣṇu, one has a clenched fist and may have held a round object, a curious trait of early Nepali icons, both Hindu and Buddhist, as we find in the corresponding right hand of the Śikhara Nārāyaṇa relief (Fig. 10). In this particular context it would represent the seed of the lotus, which is a distinctive attribute of Viṣṇu. Often in Indian art, instead of representing the flower, the artists have placed a seed in his lower right hand, or have merely delineated a lotus mark on the palm. The second outstretched right hand, which also has a clenched fist, probably held a mace (gadā) as we can reconstruct from the Lajimpat example (Fig. 8). The other two hands must have been similarly disposed and one of them most likely held the cakra. The remaining hand in all four examples is fully outstretched and probably signifies the patāka or patākā-mudrā. On the other hand, the gesture may simply denote that he is the overlord of the universe. It is of interest to recall that in the Amaravati relief of the Chākravarti Rājā his right hand displays a similar gesture.

The uppermost left hand in all three early reliefs holds a shield, which is sufficiently well preserved in the Mṛgasthali stele (Fig. 7) to enable us to discern its form. The centre is decorated with a petal-like design encircled by a row of pearls, and along the outer circumference the artist has, by means of very fine incisions, indicated the flaming quality of the shield. But what is interesting is that while there is an attempt on his part to treat this quite naturalistically, the same idea has been transformed into a stylized design by the sculptor of the Chaṅgu Nārāyaṇa relief (Fig. 9). The next left hand
is too mutilated in both the inscribed images, but from the outline there can be little doubt that the attribute held was the conch. The third left hand displays the tarjanimudrā, a gesture of threat—no doubt here warning Bali specifically, and all evil-doers in general. The remaining fourth hand as we have already discussed must have held the bow.

A slightly different distribution of the attributes is seen in the relief from Chaṅgu Nārāyaṇa (Fig. 9). The two upper hands, in a symmetrical fashion, hold the discus and the shield. Similarly, another pair of hands with an equal stress on symmetry holds the sword in the right and the mace in the left. The third right hand is fully outstretched while the fourth is broken, and may have held the lotus seed, as we find in the Śikhara Nārāyaṇa relief (Fig. 10). One of the left hands is also broken and may have either displayed the tarjanimudrā or held a conch, while the hand raised to the shoulder probably held a bow. The dhoti that Viṣṇu wears in this sculpture is completely diaphanous and clings closely to the body. If it were not for the borders below the knee and the hanging pleats in the front it would be entirely indistinguishable. The sash or belt around the waist (udarabandha) hangs down on either side, as in the Lajimpat stele (Fig. 8), but has become far more stylized. His head is adorned with a pointed crown, and among his ornaments are the kunḍala, the hāru, the keyūra and simple valayas. The necklace consists of three strings of pearls and his upavīta is a string with gems at the lowest tip.

The attributes in the hands of Viṣṇu in the Śikhara Nārāyaṇa relief (Fig. 10) are as follows: the discus, the sword, the lotus seed, patākāmudrā, the mace, the conch, the thunder-bolt (vajra) and the tarjanimudrā. Thus the shield here is replaced with the thunder-bolt or the vajra, which is rather an unusual attribute of Viṣṇu. His dhoti is of some printed material, and both ends of the udarabandha or the sash flutter on the same side. His hāra or necklace is the ekāvalī or a single string of pearls, but his upavīta consists of double strings. The keyūra is also of pearl but emulates the form of the sarpavalaya seen on the arms of Bodhisattva figures. The valaya
is more elaborate than those in the earlier sculptures, but the kundalas are more simple, while the head is adorned with a three peaked crown.

Despite the fact that both the Chaṅgu Nārāyaṇa and the Śikhara Nārāyaṇa reliefs must have been eighth and fourteenth century copies respectively of the two inscribed steles of the fifth century, not only are there differences in the disposition of the attributes in the hands of the principal figure but at times the artist even selected different attributes. That they were modelled after the older icons, which probably had yet a still earlier prototype, possibly in India, is also evident not only from the fact that all four sculptures portray identical incidents of the myth but in general all follow the same compositional scheme. At the same time there are enormous differences as well.

(ii)

Iconographically, the same incidents are portrayed in all four examples with minor modifications. There are three separate groups of figures along the lower section of the reliefs. The group around the right foot of Viṣṇu includes the nāgarāja, very definitely indicated by his serpent canopy, and his wife, both adoring the foot. This adulation is more clearly expressed by the sculptor of the Chaṅgu Nārāyaṇa relief (Fig. 9), where the king holds the foot, while his queen is busy emptying a basket of flowers and fruits. They no doubt signify that the foot is resting in pāṭāla. The figure that clutches the right foot, as if in an attempt to dissuade him, presents us with greater difficulty. A similar figure also occurs in the Badami relief (Fig. 11), where he is stout, wears an elaborate crown and is seated on his haunches. J. N. Banerjea hesitantly suggested that it may be a second representation of Bali, while Alice Boner writes that ‘this is supposed to be the guardian of the pāṭālaloka trying to stop Viṣṇu and cause him to fall’! But it is difficult to accept both these suggestions. In none of the sculptures, whether from Nepal or India, has Bali ever been shown as a pot-bellied crowned figure. Moreover, the fact that in the Nepali examples the ‘guardian of pāṭālaloka’, who is none other than
nāgarāja, has been additionally represented precludes us from accepting Boner’s suggestion. It is interesting to note that in all the Nepali sculptures the figure is delineated exactly like the other asuras below Viṣṇu’s left leg and we may conclude that he represents an indignant asura. In the description of the theme in the Bhāgavata-purāṇa it is stated that the asuras were annoyed at the treachery of the Dwarf and one of them, Numuci, a high ranking member, attempted to dissuade the god, but was hurled into the air. The other person who protested, at least verbally, was Bānāsura, the son of Bali, but the figure clutching Viṣṇu’s leg in all five representations probably represents Namuci. Immediately below the central figure of Viṣṇu is depicted the incident of Bali donating the gift to the Dwarf, rendered symbolically by the act of pouring water from an ewer. This is delineated very naturalistically in the two inscribed examples (Figs. 7-8), where we see Bali actually pouring the water into the hands of the Dwarf, the stream of water being represented as well, exactly as it is described in the Vāmanapurāṇa. In the Chaṅgu Nārāyaṇa relief (Fig. 9), however, Bali holds the pitcher with his right hand and a basket in the left, from which the Dwarf is seen to accept the gift. This again is no doubt an innovation on the part of the sculptor. In the fourth relief (Fig. 10) there is no attempt at a naturalistic representation. Instead, both stand frontally, the Dwarf on a pedestal, holding a staff in his left hand and a rosary in the right, his divinity being asserted by the prabhā behind his head. According to the Vāmanapurāṇa, the staff was given to him on his birth by Māricī and the rosary by Vāruṇī. A noteworthy feature is that in all these sculptures as also in the Badami relief (Fig. 11) Bali is represented as he is described in the Vāmanapurāṇa in the attire of one performing a sacrifice. He is said to have worn a white garment, a white garland, a deer skin and was annointed with white sandal-paste. In three of the Nepali reliefs he is accompanied by his preceptor Śukrācārya, except in the Chaṅgu Nārāyaṇa Stele (Fig. 9) where the priest has been omitted.

Below Viṣṇu’s left leg, in the bottom corner, is a group of demons and a horse, delineated partially in the two inscribed reliefs, but more fully in the other two. This is no doubt the
sacrificial horse as is clearly indicated in the Chańgu Nārāyaṇa example (Fig. 9) by the additional altar of bricks where an asura is engaged in making preparations, while another behind the horse has raised his sword to decapitate it. In both the Lajimpat (Fig. 8) and the Śikhara Nārāyaṇa steles (Fig. 10) the locale and the occasion are further indicated by a swaying pillar with a fluttering flag (dhvajāstambha), which can only be faintly discerned in the Mr̥gasthali relief (Fig. 7) but is omitted by the sculptor of the Chańgu Nārāyaṇa image.

Śri-Lakṣmī and Garuḍa have been included in all the sculptures to Viśṇu's right. In the three earlier reliefs Garuḍa is seen to fly through the air, once again emphasizing the sense of movement in these sculptures, whereas in that from Śikhara Nārāyaṇa (Fig. 10), he stands rigidly on a rocky pedestal. To Viśṇu's left the most arresting figure is that of the acrobat in all four sculptures. A similar figure also appears in the Badami relief, (Fig. 11) and it has been suggested that he represents king Triśaṅku who, on a previous occasion, was cursed by Viśṇu to hang in mid-air. It is difficult to see why Triśaṅku should be represented here, for nowhere in the purāṇas or the āgamas is he mentioned in this context. In the Mr̥gasthali relief (Fig. 7) the figure performs only a summersault, and, if his hands held any attributes, they are no longer visible. In the Lajimpat stele (Fig. 8) he appears to hold some sort of a rattle—drum or a weapon. In the Chańgu Nārāyaṇa example (Fig. 9) his right hand is in vismayamudrā and he is accompanied by another similar figure displaying the namaskāramudrā. In the Śikhara Nārāyaṇa relief (Fig 10) the figure is seen completely upside down with arms uniformly outstretched and legs bent at the knee as if he is plunging down. But here too, along with the other suspended figure with palms enjoined, he and the asuras are identically attired. It appears as if the clue to our identification of the summersaulting figure lies in its disposition in the Chańgu Nārāyaṇa relief (Fig. 9), where the vismayamudrā can be interpreted as an expression of his amazement at the cosmic manifestation. This together with the fact that in all the sculptures he is portrayed just as the asuras are leads us to suggest that he is an asura, probably
Namuci, who was hurled into the atmosphere by the expanding god.

The ferocious head in the clouds, which also appears in the Badami relief (Fig. 11), is no doubt of Rāhu as suggested by R. D. Banerji. In this context its presence could be interpreted as indicating that the left leg of Viṣṇu had reached the heavens (svargaloka) corresponding with the pātālaloka symbolized by the nāga couple below the right foot. In the case of the Badami sculpture, Boner suggests that the mask-like face represents Sūrya, but we clearly notice in both the Chaṅgu Nārāyaṇa and the Śikhara Nārāyaṇa reliefs that the sun and the moon are separately indicated by two discs on either side of the top of the stele, accompanied by vidyādharas bearing garlands and/or other divine beings. Thus the face in the Badami relief must also be of Rāhu.

The two fifth century images from Nepal are at least a century earlier than the Badami relief which embellishes a cave that was carved in A. D. 578. The incidents represented in all these sculptures indicate that the artists used the purānic versions of the myth as recounted in the Vāmanapurāṇa or the Bhāgavatapurāṇa. They also demonstrate that the story with all its elaborate ramifications had already become popular by the fifth century, and at least that section of the purāṇas that recounts this myth must have been already composed.

( iii )

By far the most vital and dynamic representations are the two inscribed steles, whereas the most rigid and formal from Śikhara Nārāyaṇa. The Chaṅgu Nārāyaṇa relief probably lies somewhere in between and although it exhibits a certain amount of formalism in the sculptor's obsession with symmetry and balance, at the cost of vitality, it is nonetheless imbued with a sense of drama that is altogether wanting in the example from Śikhara Nārāyaṇa. Considerable activity goes on in the two fifth century sculptures, and although this is less spirited in that from Chaṅgu Nārāyaṇa, in the Śikhara Nārāyaṇa example the figures merely stand rigid and erect as if by magic they were frozen in their present positions. Following Klaus
Bruhn's classification of Indian iconography we can say that while the three earlier sculptures manifest 'epic' qualities, that from Śikhara Nārāyaṇa would belong to the 'Non-epic' class.

The heroic quality of the two fifth century sculptures (Figs. 7-8) is easily perceptible. A tremendous sense of dynamism as well as physical strain is conveyed by the outstretched legs, particularly where they split, and incidentally divide the panel roughly into two triangular halves. The flow of movement from the strained right toes to the left foot is uninterrupted, and the same sense of vigour and movement is also conveyed by the outstretched arms, only two of which are orientated towards the body. Nothing or no one is static in these two sculptures and the involvement in the drama is total and complete. In contrast, the sculptor of the Chaṅgu Nārāyaṇa example (Fig. 9) displays a much greater predilection for symmetry and spatial organisation. His sense of composition is considerably more orderly, although the narrative intent and the dramatic quality are still in evidence. The figures are more gracefully proportioned and better disposed. The rather crude but more vital delineation of the right foot of Viṣṇu in the two earlier sculptures is here eschewed for a more comfortable and firm position. This is also true of the disposition of Śrī-Lakṣmī who stands more elegantly and comfortably on her lotus in the Chaṅgu Nārāyaṇa relief than in the other two, where she appears to be falling off the swaying lotus. In the Śikhara Nārāyaṇa relief, (Fig. 10) although the same incidents are portrayed, the rendering is altogether devoid of the narrative intent and a stereotyped mannerism pervades the entire composition.

(iv)

It may be pertinent at this stage to raise the question as to why Mānadeva chose this particular form of Viṣṇu's incarnary aspects for the temple erected in honour of his mother. In the Chaṅgu Nārāyaṇa pillar inscription, where Mānadeva recalls his predecessors, he merely refers to them, including his father, as kings (nrpa) and makes no mention either of the extent or the power of the kingdom. On the other hand the inscription is replete with
allusions to his own conquests and certainly asserts his independent status. From Hariśena’s prāṣasti on the Allahabad pillar we know that Nepal was a frontier state (pratyantarājya) of Samudragupta’s empire. It probably did not form an integral part of the Gupta empire, but certainly paid tribute to the emperor, and the Nepali king, along with many others, had to be present at important imperial ceremonies. Thus it is not impossible that Mānadeva was responsible for overthrowing this imperial yoke and celebrated both his independent status as well as his role of a conqueror by installing an image of Viṣṇu vikrānta.

It is interesting that instead of the later designation of Trivikrama the inscription uses the appellation Viṣṇu vikrānta. Vikrānta—is a word that was used along with other variations more commonly in vedic literature. In the Vājasaneyasamhitā we are told that with three steps he pervades the whole universe and in the Taittiriyasamhitā this is further elaborated as ‘in that he strides the god’s strides, the sacrificer becoming Viṣṇu wins (abhi jayati) these worlds’⁵⁰. This all-pervading quality of Viṣṇu is probably signified by the outstretched right hand in the sculptures. In performing the three strides, the sacrificer is identified with Viṣṇu, whose functions he imbibes. As Gonda has pointed out, ‘these strides are also conducive to the annihilation of evil influences; they overcome hostility (...viṣṇoḥ kramo ‘sy abhimāṇih), slay rivals (sapatnahā), destroy enemies (śatāyato hantā), kill the malignant or envious one (arātīyato hantā)⁵¹. Further, in the Atharvaveda, many formulas stress the idea of conquest in association with Viṣṇu’s three strides⁵². Elsewhere too we find the formulation of such ideas that the one who made Viṣṇu’s strides was victorious against his enemies: ‘Viṣṇu’s stride art thou, rival slaying, earth—(atmosphere—etc.) sharpened, possessed of Agni’s (Vāyu’s etc.) bright energy (agnitejāḥ) ; along the earth (etc.) I stride out (vi krame) ; from earth (etc.) we exclude him who hates us, whom we hate ; let him not live, let breath go away from him⁵³. In view of this, not only does the use of the epithet vikrānta in the inscription gain added importance, but we are also told that he is sarvvalokaikanātham, the lord of all the worlds⁵⁴. It is also significant that the rite of the strides,
performed on the tiger’s skin, was an integral part of the ceremony of royal consecration ‘the purport of which’, as Gonda has suggested out, ‘is the endowment of the sacrificer with the variety of powers and energies inherent in kingship’.

The heroic and protective qualities of Viṣṇu are already implicit in the Rgveda and both these traits are intimately connected with the three strides. ‘I now would speak of the heroic deeds of Viṣṇu who traversed (or: measured) the spaces of the earth, who established the upper abode striding out triply, he the wide-going one’. In another verse in the Rgveda this striding Viṣṇu is called narya—‘manly, strong, heroic’. There are several allusions in the Rgveda to his powers of protecting as has been collected by Gonda. Thus, it would appear that it was this heroic Viṣṇu that appealed to Mānadeva in his choice of an appropriate myth to be visually transformed into an image for his temple. He may here have been emulating his imperial predecessors of India, the Guptas, who also were inspired by the valour and heroism of Viṣṇu. Certainly, heroic themes of Viṣṇu predominate in the art of the Gupta period, particularly the Varāha aspect, which has a similar significance.

En passant it may be remarked that the myth of Trivikrama or Vāmana avatāra combines in it both the vibhava or avatāra (incarnatory) and the vibhuti (manifestational) aspects of the god as delineated in Pāṇcarātra philosophy. As we shall see later (vide section VII of this chapter) the concept of vibhuti or manifestation is outlined in the Bhagavadgītā. To prevent Bali from gaining supremacy over Indra’s dominion, Viṣṇu incarnated himself as the Dwarf but to frighten him into submission he manifested his cosmic form (virāṭrūpa). Thus, in a single myth both the vibhuti and the vibhava aspects have been amalgamated in a very convincing manner.

It is also interesting that in contradistinction to the basic philosophy underlying the idea of avatāra—as stated in the Bhagavadgītā: that the god incarnates himself to rid the earth of evil and to re-establish dharma—he is in this instance really coming to the aid of
the gods. It is not Bali's domination over the earth that disturbs
and alarms the gods, but his bid to usurp Indra's position and power.
Had Bali remained content with his supremacy over the earth, the
question of an incarnation would not have arisen. In the purānic
versions Bali's integrity and character are of a dharma-abiding
king and he is a devotee of Viṣṇu. Perhaps, this is why he was not
totally destroyed by Viṣṇu—as he destroyed the evil and its embodi-
ment in most of the other vibhavas—but was merely banished to
pātālaloka. As a special concession, Bali was given the boon that
he would become in his next birth the eighth Manu named Sāvarṇī.
In a previous incarnation as well, viz. the Kūrma avatāra, Viṣṇu
assumed the form of the tortoise to save the gods.

(v)

It can be generally asserted that these sculptures from Nepal
of the fifth century were modelled after some Indian prototypes,
although no Indian sculpture portraying this theme can be definitely
dated earlier than the Badami example. It may be instructive,
however, to compare these Nepali versions of the story with some
of the early representations of the theme in India. Apart from the
Badami sculpture (Fig. 11), two other equally well-known examples
are that in Mamallapuram (c. 7th century) [A. Boner, Principles of
composition in Hindu Sculpture, pl. IX] and another in the Daśāvatāra
Cave at Ellora (c. 8th century) (Fig. 12). All these sculptures share
with the Nepali representations the same heroic quality and narra-
tive intent, rather than the later stereotyped manner of delineation
of medieval icons.

In all three Indian reliefs the artist chose to represent Viṣṇu
more or less in an erect posture, the right leg firmly planted in line
with the rigid verticality of the body like a solid column. Some of
the attributes in his hands are common with the Nepali examples,
but a significant omission is the outstretched right hand. Of course,
there are other differences in the ornamentations, the dress, and the
composition, which are due to the prevailing style of the period and
the region as well to the personal predilection of the artists. But
we shall confine ourselves to discussing the differences only in their
choice of the particular incidents of the story.

Rāhu occurs only in the Badami relief (Fig. 11), while in that at Mamallapuram Brahmā is seen adoring the left foot of Viṣṇu, following the Vaikhānasāgama. Śri is not portrayed in any of the three and Garuḍa occurs only in the Ellora relief, where he is seen pulling Bali by the hair in an attempt to tie him up with Varuṇa's rope, following the purāṇic tradition. The acrobatic figure appears in both the Badami and the Mamallapuram reliefs, and his disposition in the Badami example is very similar to that seen in the early Nepali steles.

In the Badami relief (Fig. 11) the space below the raised left leg of Viṣṇu is devoted to the incident of Bali making the gift to the Dwarf, who holds an umbrella with the left hand, an attribute not seen in Nepali sculptures. This act is depicted in the Ellora example (Fig. 12) as well where also Vāmana holds the umbrella, which is described in the purāṇas, and appears to have been the most distinctive and popular of his attributes. The king is accompanied by his queen, his preceptor and a number of other attendants. The right leg of Viṣṇu is being pulled by a crowned, pot-bellied figure, while Rāhu is adoring his left foot. As in the two early Nepali icons an asura with a drawn sword and about to challenge Viṣṇu also occurs in Badami.

In the Mamallapuram relief neither Bali nor the act of bestowing the gift is shown. Instead, Viṣṇu stands triumphant like a giant hero among a few scattered asuras overawed by the cosmic might. In contrast to the agitated movement of the asuras, the colossal Viṣṇu stands calm and unperturbed, and this was no doubt the psychology behind the artist's emphasis of this particular moment to the exclusion of other incidents—to show the constancy and the immoveability of the god in the midst of universal flux. The Ellora example (Fig. 12) is the least complex of the three but, despite its brevity, tells the story graphically. Only Bali's gift, the cosmic manifestation and Bali's punishment are considered sufficient to recall the myth.

It is evident that there is far greater detail in the Nepali examples,
which are the earliest, than in the Indian plastic representations of the theme. It also seems that as we move along the arrow of time fewer details are portrayed and the composition becomes brief and simple. Ultimately, in medieval icons, the theme is depicted with hieratic rigidity and without any dramatic intent. Purely in terms of iconography and narrative documentation the Badami relief is no doubt the closest of the three to the Nepali versions of the fifth century and possibly they had a common origin.

A significant conclusion that suggests itself from a comparison of all these versions of the same theme, both in Nepal and in India, is that the sculptors enjoyed considerably greater freedom in the execution of even a religious theme than is usually admitted. It was no doubt a limited freedom in the sense that he was given a particular story to tell and he had also to tell it within certain artistic conventions that he inherited traditionally. But how effectively he told that story or what details he emphasized seems to have been his prerogative. It also appears that at this early period there were different traditions current for the attributes of Viṣṇu, and even when the artist was making a copy, as in the Nepali versions, he not only changed their disposition but also the very attributes. Although our knowledge of the textual material is inadequate, there can be little doubt that, at least in the early period, the artists were relatively more free in the rendering of such dramatic themes. What Louis Reau said in the context of Christian iconography, and as emphasized by Klaus Bruhn, is equally pertinent to Indian iconography: '...the texts do not provide the key for all the iconographic problems; deviations are very common'. Indeed, if all artists followed all texts faithfully, how dull that art would be, and these variations on the theme provide us with the clues to the understanding of the psychology of the style as well as the psychology of the artist.

A fairly elaborate painted version of the theme may be seen in one of the folios of the Cambridge kalāpustaka (Fig. 62). On the lower folio we first see the scene of the yajñā with Bali sitting reverentially behind the emaciated Śukrācārya who is offering oblations to the fire as Vāmana approaches them. The next composition is naturally
dominated by the striding Viṣṇu whose complexion is white. His right foot rests on the hands of the nāgarāja, while the left stretches into the heavens, where are portrayed both Brahmā and Rāhu. Below the left leg Bali is seen pouring water into the hands of Vāmana and the composition is balanced by the flying figure of Garuḍa in the diagonally opposite corner. The eight-armed Viṣṇu displays with the right hands the sword, the discus, the mace and the varadamudrā, and with the left the shield, the conch and the noose, while the fourth is not recognisable. The attributes therefore are different from those seen in the stone sculptures. Interestingly, Vāmana is shown as a richly attired and ornamented person holding the umbrella. In the third composition a four-armed but three-headed Viṣṇu watches as Garuḍa ties Bali with Varuṇa’s rope.

V. RĀMA AVATĀRA

The Rāma avatāra of Viṣṇu does not seem to have been as popular in Nepal as it was in northern India. We know of only one image in the country where he is represented by himself. The image discussed and illustrated by Goetz, is fixed into a wall of one of the terraces leading down to the river at Mṛgasthali. Four figures ensconced in a cave, indicated by jutting, pointed rocks, are shown in the composition. The surface of the relief is much corroded but from what remains there seems little doubt that Goetz is partly correct in his identification.

The centre of the composition is dominated by a male figure standing in a slight tribhaṅga. Of his attire and ornaments only a pointed crown and the dhoti can be clearly discerned, although there appear to be ear-rings and an udarabundha. Of his two hands the left holds a giant bow, and the right appears to hang down, probably displaying the varadamudrā. The graceful female figure to his left holds a vessel in the left hand, while the object in her right hand is identified by Goetz as a fan, but may also be a mirror. This is probably Sītā and the male standardbearer to the right Lakṣmaṇa. The capital of the standard shows an animal, possibly Garuḍa, thus emphasizing that Rāma here is an avatāra of Viṣṇu. The female figure, kneeling at Rāma’s feet, has been identified by Goetz as
Prithivi or the earth goddess whose presence has been explained by her ‘relationship to Sītā and as representative of the earth ruled over by Rāma, symbol of royal power and justice’.

While such an identification is not impossible, it seems more probable that, considering the narrative intent of the sculpture and the fact that the figures are set against a cave background, the kneeling figure represents Ahalyā, who had been frozen into stone, centuries ago, by her husband’s curse and was waiting for Rāma to break the spell and release her.

The stereotyped form of Rāma, included in the representations of daśāvatāra, will be discussed elsewhere (vide section VI of the same chapter), but here we may describe some illuminated folios depicting scenes from the Rāmāyaṇa from a sixteenth century manuscript. The manuscript is of the kind known as a kalāpustaka, where the illustrations are of primary importance, the brief textual portions being limited to the bottom of the folio functioning merely as labels. We will illustrate here only a few of the episodes painted on the folios.

The narration begins with Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa bidding farewell to Daśaratha and Kaikeyī and proceeding to the forest along with Sītā (Fig. 13). In the next folio we see Sītā pointing out the golden deer, which is given chase by Rāma, and the appearance of Rāvana in the guise of an ascetic. The rest of the story then unfolds before us with all the dramatic intensity of the various episodes of the epic. The artist has naturally chosen only those episodes that appealed to his interest and seemed significant for following the story of the epic. Among these may be mentioned the abduction of Sītā by Rāvana, the fight with Jāṭayu, the duel between Bali and Sugrīva (Fig. 14), Hanumān’s visit to Laṅkā with all its flaming consequences, the setubandha, the duel between Meghanāda and Lakṣmaṇa, the battle with Kumbhakarna, the final duel between Rāma and Rāvana, Sītā’s agniparikṣa (Fig. 15), Vibhīṣaṇa’s coronation as the king of Laṅkā and ultimately the return to Ayodhyā.

The story unfolds before us in comic strip-like compositions, each being demarcated by trees and containing two or three figures.
Although the figures are portrayed following certain conventional schemata, there is nothing of the hieratic quality that is apparent in a religious work. The function of the illuminations was to tell a story graphically and the miniaturist has done this in a convincing fashion. The colours are employed with an expressionistic flair, and in deference to the accepted practice the artist has always shown Rāma as a dark figure. Both the linear quality of the style and the decorative character of the illuminations are enhanced by the use of the rich, ornamental background consisting of floral and scroll motifs. But in no way does this exuberant background impede the progress of the dramatic movement of the episodes, and it is obvious that, although the theme here is taken from a religious work, the artist’s freedom is limited only by artistic conventions and not by theological injunctions.

VI. STEREOTYPED REPRESENTATIONS OF DAŚĀVATĀRA

No examples of the stereotyped representations of the daśāvatāras are known to us in Nepali sculpture, but several Vaiśāvaya paṭas portray them in their conventional forms. In the seventeenth century paṭa illustrated here (Fig. 16), we find the ten avatāras depicted along the top of the painting. The first is the fish incarnation, but rather unusually a dark four-armed Viṣṇu is emerging from the mouth of the fish. His hands hold the four usual attributes and it is not quite the hybrid form found in India. Similar is the representation of the Kūrma avatāra which has already been discussed. Then Varāha in his hybrid form is shown standing in ādīdhā and is four-armed, which hold the four distinctive attributes as is described in the texts. Although here Pṛthivi is not delineated it is interesting that the artist has retained the posture of Varāha and also the disposition of the upper left arm as if he was supporting the goddess. Narasimha, also of the hybrid form, is shown tearing open the asura Hiranyakaśipu in the conventional manner.

Next is Vāmana, the dwarf, with a beard, his hair tied in a bun and holding the umbrella. Curiously he is fully clothed in the contemporary style and quite unlike his common representations in earlier
Nepali or Indian Art, where he is invariably shown with a shaven head, wearing a simple dhoti and a deerskin as befitting a Brahmin. Parasurama is a dark figure holding a paraśu in his right hand. Rāma holds the bow but the attribute in Balarāma’s hand is not discernible. Buddha, dressed as a monk, is seated in paryankāsana with a pot in his hands which are in the samādhimudrā and Kalki, the last avatāra, stands before his horse with a sword in his hand.

A more spirited and varied representation of the daśāvatāras may be seen in a long scroll painted on cloth now in the Denver Art Museum (Fig. 17). The other paintings being maṇḍalas of Viṣṇu, the depiction is not unexpectedly more formal and rigid, but here the narrative intent becomes apparent. Displaying, however, typical Śaiva bias, the centre of the scroll portrays within an elaborate shrine a multi-headed and multi-armed Śiva seated with Pārvatī on his lap.

The slightly damaged condition of the scroll makes it difficult to recognize the forms of the first two avatāras on the left of the upper row, but both appear to have been shown in a hybrid form, the upper portion being a conventional four-armed representation of Viṣṇu. Varāha is shown as four-armed and standing in ātīṭha, his left foot resting on an asura attempting to escape. The lower left hand appears to hold the asura by the hair, whereas the upper left holding a conch is bent at the elbow. It is curious that here also Pṛthivī or Vasundharā is not portrayed as in the seventeenth century pāṭa just discussed. A further deviation by the artist is that the god steps on a fleeing asura and pulls him by the hair who no doubt represents Hiraṇyākṣa, destroyed by Varāha to rescue the earth. Equally curious are the two fleeing asuras in the representations of the two previous avatāras. The two right hands of Varāha hold the conventional discus and the lotus.

The next avatāra is that of Narasimha who is four-armed and possesses the head of a lion. He has just emerged from the pillar which is shown behind him split into two halves. Had the artist painted a seat, the god’s posture would have been that of lalitāsana, but as it is, he appears to be dancing in ardhaparyaṅka, as we find in
numerous representations of Vajrayāna divinities of the period. Of the four hands of Narasimha two are engaged in ripping open Hārīyakaśipu’s belly, while the other two stretch out the entrails of the asura in garish display of savagery. As a further realistic touch Hārīyakaśipu’s helmet-like headgear is seen slipping off his head. In the representation of the Vāmana avatāra the expanded form of the god is portrayed but here too certain novel features are introduced. Although he is four-armed, he is given a third leg to emphasize the idea of his taking three strides. The right leg is firmly planted on the ground, while the second leg stretches towards the clouds where it is being adored by Brahmā. The third leg is despatching Bali, whose hands are in namaskāramudrā, to sutala of pātālaloka. The female confronting Viṣṇu with palms clasped is probably Śrī Lakṣmī. His hands hold the four conventional attributes, śanīkha, cakra, gadā and padma. The artist here obviously intended to show all three strides of the god and hence added a third leg. In the last composition of the upper row we see Paraśurāma, with a battle-axe in his right hand, about to destroy a multi-armed figure, who must represent one of the many kṣatriya princes he killed.

The second register begins with the representation of Rāma avatāra, where, accompanied by Hanumān, he is fighting Rāvaṇa, who has already fallen. A couple of other monkeys behind Rāma add to the narrative character of the representation. Rāma of course in the traditional manner fights with the bow and arrows. Next, Balarāma, with a khaṭṭvāṅga in his right hand, is about to destroy the fallen asura whose hair he holds with his left hand. He is wearing a vanamālā and his anger is very vividly expressed by the way the artist has delineated his eyes. The two remaining avatāras are separated from Balarāma by the shrine containing the seated figures of Hara-Pārvatī, flanked by Gaṇeśa to the right and Kārttikeya to the left. In keeping with the general temper of the vibhava scenes the artist has depicted both Gaṇeśa and Kārttikeya in a militant attitude. The ninth avatāra, the Buddha, is shown seated, and, although he is clad in monastic robes, he is crowned and wears a long garland. Three figures wearing the curious helmet-like-headgear and long skirt-like dresses are busy adoring him, reminiscent of the Magi arriving before
the new-born Christ. These three warrior-like persons probably represent kṣatriya kings, many of whom, along with the mercantile class, accepted the Buddha. The monk behind holding a sort of a staff and a bowl must represent one of the disciples, probably Ānanda. Kalkī has been portrayed as a militant figure, as he is described in the texts (dhanustuṇṇānvitaḥ Kalkī mlecchosādkaro āvijāḥ), riding a horse which tramples beneath its hoofs the evildoers of the Kali age.

The numerous deviations and innovations in this beautiful scroll testify to the imagination and inventiveness of the artist. The rich mountainous background with its snowy peaks and birds flying at regular intervals in no way interferes with the formal character of the representation but, in fact, enhances the picturesque quality of the painting, apart from giving continuity to the composition. At the same time he has infused his work with an expressive quality, often lacking in such paintings, by emphasizing the garish character of the Narasimha myth, where the god brings out the entrails of the asura, or by rolling the eyes of Balarāma or again by showing Kalkī’s horse trampling mercilessly the mlecchas beneath its hoofs.

It is also of considerable iconological interest that despite the conventions of iconography, the artists of both the paintings have visualized the gods in terms of the prevailing styles of the period. In the seventeenth century paṭa (Fig. 16), Rāma, Balarāma and Kalkī are portrayed as young Rajput princes clad in the contemporary mode of attire. They all wear the long jāmā, held together by a belt or sash tied in front, and the pāţāma; only the turbans are replaced with crowns. In the seventeenth century, Nepali painting was considerably influenced by the Rajput-Mughal styles of India, and the artists unhesitatingly employed the figural types of the extraneous traditions even to represent the gods and goddesses.

We have already mentioned the peculiarity of Vāmana’s dress and appearance. But the dress prescribed in the purāṇic texts was obviously a Brahmin’s attire current at the time the texts were compiled. In seventeenth century Nepal the Brahmins too clothed themselves fully in the prevailing mode and this is evident if we look at
the priest depicted at the bottom of the pāṭa (Fig. 16). Thus the artist here saw nothing amiss in clothing Vāmana as a well-dressed Brahmin of the contemporary period. If we then look at another painted folio, now in the Nepal museum at Kathmandu (Fig. 18), we will find the astonishing phenomenon of the two ṛṣis, Mārkaṇḍeya and Janamejaya, conversing clad in a dhoti, an uttarīya, even complete with the rudrākṣamālā, but wearing bowler hats. His dependence on the texts was therefore limited only to the attributes in the hands, particularly in such paintings, but for other traits he must have drawn from other visual sources as well as his imagination. This is also evident in the Denver Museum scroll (Fig. 17) where we have already seen how the artist employed the prevailing mode of delineating a mountainous landscape, which appears as an undulating back-drop, probably to relieve the monotony of a dull, plain background as well as to add to the pictorial quality of the painting. He was equally inventive in clothing his figures and has shown considerable variety using both the conventional as well as the current modes. It has been said that no artist is absolutely original, but it is equally true that no artist is a blind imitator. No matter how strong the chains of iconographical injunctions, art cannot remain in perpetual bondage.

VII. VIŚVARUPA FORMS OF VIŚṆU

(i)

Although a manifestation (vibhūti) is not an incarnation (vibhava) we have already seen that the two concepts are closely related and are synthesised in the story of the Vāmana avatāra. An entire chapter in the Bhagavadgītā (X), entitled Vibhūti Yoga is devoted to this them. There Kṛṣṇa declares how he is immanent in every being and object in the universe, how pervasive is his from, how diverse his nature and how varied his manifestations. In all humility Arjuna accepts this divine self declaration and says: ‘What Thou hast said now know I to be truth, O Keśava! that neither gods nor men nor demons comprehend Thy mystery made manifest!’1. He then requests the Lord to reveal to him the mystery of his manifestations and the Lord complies, and in the following chapter, entitled Viśvarūpapadarśanam he reveals his universal form.
It is this vibhūti, this cosmic and universal manifestation, that forms the subject of a remarkable sculpture in Nepal now standing within the precincts of the Chaṅgu Nārāyaṇa temple (Fig. 19). But before we discuss this magnificent work of art, let us see how this manifestation is described in the Bhagavadgītā.

‘Gaze, then, thou Son of Pritha!’ declares Kṛṣṇa. ‘I manifest for thee those hundred thousand thousand shapes that clothe my Mystery.’ Then Saṅjaya describes eloquently the cosmic manifestation beheld by Arjuna:

‘Then, O King! the God, so saying,
Stood, to Pritha’s Son displaying
All the splendour, wonder dread
Of His vast Almighty-head.
Out of countless eyes beholding,
Out of countless mouths commanding,
Countless mystic forms enfolding
In one from: supremely standing
Countless radiant glories wearing,
Countless heavenly weapons bearing...

Beholding this manifestation the awestruck and bewildered Arjuna exclaimed:

‘Yea! I have seen! I see!
Lord! All is wrapped in Thee! ...
I see
Thy Thousand thousand arms, and breasts, and faces,
And eyes,—on every side
Perfect, diversified; ...
Thy central Self, all-wielding, and all-winning!
Infinite King! I see
The anadem on Thee,
The club, the shell, the discus;
O Mystic, Awful One!
At sight of Thee, made known,
The Three Worlds quake; the lower gods draw nigh Thee;
They fold their palms, and bow
Body, and breast, and brow,
And, whispering worship, laud and magnify Thee!
Rudras, who ride the storms,
The Aditya's shining forms,
Vasus and Sadhyas, Visvas, Ushmapas;
Maruts, and those great Twins
The heavenly fair, Aswins,
Gandharavas, Rakshasas, Siddhas, and Asuras—
These see Thee, and revere
In sudden-stricken fear; ...'

In one of the boldest attempts made in sculpture, this is what the artist has attempted to portray in this unique stele (Fig. 19). The multi-armed and multi-headed from of Viṣṇu dominates the entire composition as he stands as firm as a pillar stretching from pāṭāla to svargaloka. Along the lower section of the stele is the supine figure of a four-armed male on a cushion of the intricately intertwined coils of a massive nāga whose hoods from a canopy behind the crowned head of the male. Except for the attributes he is identical to Viṣṇu, and, in fact, stretches, with his legs crossing, exactly as Viṣṇu does in his Jalaśayana images. The attributes in this hands, however, are not the four usual that Viṣṇu holds. The two right hands bear a flower and a musala or pestle, while the two left hands a conch and the plough or lāṅgula. This is exactly how Ananta is described in the Viṣṇudharmottara⁷⁸, with snake hoods, four hands, his hands carrying these same attributes, and richly ornamented. Ananta in this sculpture no doubt symbolizes the nether regions, for as the Viṣṇudharmottara states Ananta represents the celestial ocean⁷⁸. But, at the same time, here he is identified with Viṣṇu and in the Sātvatasamhitā of the Pāṇcarātrins, Ananta is considered to be an avatāra⁷⁴.

Three figures support Viṣṇu's feet, the female between which is no doubt the personification of the earth, for in the Viṣṇudharmottara we are told that 'the earth in the form of a woman should be shown in the middle of the space between his feet, which should be placed in her hands. She should be amazed with the sight of the
god and should look within’⁷⁸, as she is doing in the sculpture. The other two figures, with ferocious miens, are obviously two nāgas. They are flanked on either side by two pairs of elephants, the digga-jas, who symbolize the four directions. In the next row the flying female to the right holding a stalk with a flower in her left hand and another flower in her right is probably Śrī-Lakṣmī, while to the left she is balanced by a flying apsaras. Behind Śrī-Lakṣmī the standing male, clad in armour, with a bow and a quiver of arrows, and his hands in namaskāramudrā, is Arjuna, overwhelmed with the divine manifestation. On the other side Garuḍa with his wings beautifully spread behind his head glides through the air with his hands displaying the gesture of adoration.

To the right of the god, in the first tier above Arjuna, is a pair of males with enjoined palms, depicted like the other divine figures above. These two may represent the two twins, Aśvinīkumāras, who were among those who witnessed the cosmic manifestation. It is interesting to note that groups of figures are arranged in parallel registers in four major areas, demarcated by a formal flame-shaped design that may stand for stylized clouds. In the next zone are four figures, the two in the upper register being crowned. That along the side carries a staff in his hand, while his companion holds a vajra or the thunderbolt in his left hand, the object in the right not being clearly recognizable. He must represent Indra in which case the staff-bearing figure is of Yama. Of the two figures below them that with a noose (pāśa) in the right hand is probably Varuṇa and the remaining character with a tassel flowing down from his hair and carrying a pot in the left hand is Kubera. Thus these four together would be the four Dikpālas or the guardians of the cardinal directions. In the next zone are eight identical figures, their hair done in a bun and with their hands in namaskāramudrā, and these may be the eight Vasus who also were watching the manifestation in amazement. Also displaying the namaskāramudrā are eleven identical figures, all with the same hair style, delineated in the next zone, and no doubt they represent the eleven Rudras. At the top of the stele is the disc of the sun and Śiva seated on a lotus, his upper hands holding the rosary and the trident, while the lower left holds a pot
and the right a mātulungā, which, according to the Viṇṇudharmottara, is a distinctive attribute of Śiva and symbolizes the seed of the world.

Unfortunately the left side of the stele is badly damaged, but we can presume that the top was adorned with the disc of the moon and the effigy of Brahmā, corresponding to that of the sun and the representation of Śiva to the right. From the portion that remains we see a number of emaciated and bearded figures with rather fierce mien, with the left arm folded to the shoulder and the right hand displaying the vismaya-mudrā, the gesture of amazement. We know from the description quoted above from the Bhugavadgītā that among others the nakṣatras, the siddhas and the asuras also beheld the cosmic revelation and perhaps these emaciated figures represent the siddhas. The asuras and the rākṣasas may have been rendered in that portion which is now broken. It is interesting to note that in the Udayagiri relief of the Mahāvarāha avatāra we have the Vasus, Rudras et al. witnessing the vibhava of the god. The Rudras, the Ādityas and the Bhairavas also occur in the Viśvarūpa relief from Kanauj, as we shall presently see.

The main god here is shown ten-armed and ten-headed, although the top-most head is damaged. All the heads are similarly crowned and the ears are adorned with ratna kuṇḍalas, and all the faces have a placid expression except that on the right in the lowest tier which is horrifying. This is of course following the description in the Bhāgavadgītā, 'faces both wrathful and tender', as exclaimed by Arjuna. It is also interesting that just below the two mouths of the side faces in the lowest tier are portrayed two tiny armoured figures with bows and arrows and in the next two tiers we see the mouths actually devouring other beings. This too is described in the Bhagavadgītā (XI, 27F) as follows: 'I see our noblest ones', says Arjuna, 'the kings and chiefs drawn in':

That gaping gorge within; ...
Between Thy jaws they lie
Mingled full bloodily,
Ground into dust and death!
Like moths which in the night
Flutter towards a light,
Drawn to their fiery doom, flying and dying.
So to their death still throng,
Blind, dazzled, borne along
Ceaselessly, all these multitudes, wild flying!

Indeed, the sculptor could not have chosen a more complex and difficult subject and could not have given a more convincing plastic representation of that theme. The entire composition has been rendered with a predilection for precise orderliness and harmonious proportions and yet with a vitality and dynamism that are essential to the subject. All is brought to order in the presence of the Lord, who is the very embodiment of pervasiveness and immovability. The artist has visualized him as the cosmic pillar, supporting the sky, just as this pillar connects heaven and earth 'like an axle two wheels'\(^7\). He is the centre and represents 'the totality of the parts distributed over the four quarters'\(^7\), here rendered symbolically by the four diggajas. Viṣṇu is the synthesis between the devas and the asuras, who stand each for one of the two moieties only, and hence everyone partakes of this cosmic manifestation. He is the dhruva dik and stands for the unity of both the upper and the nether world. He is the 'typical madhyastah', the connecting link between the two cosmic moieties, bestriding both like a cosmic pillar (skambha)\(^8\).

We have already remarked that this is a unique attempt, known to us, to render in plastic from the Viśvarūpadarśana theme of the Bhagavadgītā. An exquisite copy in metal of the main image, without however the multiple heads, is now preserved in a museum (Fig. 20). Both figures are similarly attired and ornamented except for the additional sarpavalayas on the arms of the metal example. An additional kṛtimukha adorns the crown in the metal version and one of the left hands bears an ankusā instead of the cāmara held by the Chaṅgu Nārāyaṇa icon. The disposition of the mace is also different in the two images. Despite these differences, one may assert with reasonable certainty that the handsome gilt metal image is a close and perhaps a contemporary copy of the stone sculpture. The same proportions, similar stylistic features and the same sense of
symmetry and balance characterise both the images. At the same
time, the differences must be attributed to the individuality of the
artists.

A contemporary representation of the theme in India is the
well-known sculpture from Kanauj (Fig. 21). But there we find the
central figure of Viṣṇu represented as the conventional iconic type
of Viṣvarūpa as described in the purāṇas. Projecting from his neck
are the heads of a fish, a tortoise, a boar and a lion, representing the
four avatāras, Matsya, Kūrma, Varāha and Narasimha. The other
avatāras are depicted separately above these heads. It must however
be admitted that even this image does not quite follow the descrip-
tions of Viṣvarūpa as given in either the Agnipurāṇa or the Viṣṇu-
dharmottara. Obviously there were many other literary descriptions,
although it is not impossible that the artist was relatively free to
use his own imagination.

The iconography of the Kanauj image only in a general way
agrees with that from Nepal. Here too a nāga is represented below
Viṣṇu’s feet, symbolizing no doubt the nether world, while Brahmā
is shown at the top of the stele indicating it to be the brahmaloka81.
Among the other divinities watching the manifestation are the eleven
Rudras, one of the Āśvinikumāras, the twelve Ādityas, and the eight
Bhairavas, represented along the edge of the aureole. Thus, the
Nepali version is far more detailed and agrees more closely with the
description as given in the Bhagavadgītā. It is also a more articulate
version, one that reflects a greater narrative intent.

An artist of the Kangra valley also attempted to give expres-
sion to this idea and his treatment of the subject is again somewhat
different. The sculpture (Fig. 22), now in two fragments, stands
outside the temple of Bāsheśvar Mahādeo at Bajaura and is probably
a work of the eighth century. Although Viṣṇu here is only four-
armed, one of which is broken, the heads of the Matsya, the Kūrma
and the Sīṁha are added on either side of the elegantly crowned
human head. He wears a long vanamālā and the hands, only one
of which is raised, display with those on the right the lotus and the
discus and with that on the left conch; the remaining left hand,
which is lost, must have held the mace. From what remains on the pedestal it seems that the discus and the mace were personified into Cakrapuruṣa and Gadānāri. On the halo behind the head are carved, in very shallow relief, tiny figures of suras and asuras watching the manifestation, and curiously, along the edge of the halo, are a number of heads, probably twenty. Similar heads also appear on the halo of the Kanauj relief (Fig. 21), but there the number is eight, and indubitably they represent the eight Bhairavas. Here the heads are too effaced to be clearly recognizable. Possibly, however, both the Kanauj and the Kangra sculptures have a common origin, while the Nepali example may belong to an altogether different tradition.

This common source appears to have been Mathura. In the museum in that city is preserved a fragmentary sculpture in red sandstone (Fig. 23) discovered from Bhaukhari (Aligarh). It belongs to the Gupta period and depicts the theme in a manner similar to that in the Kanauj stele (Fig. 21). From what remains the Varāha and the Narasimha heads are clearly distinguishable. The suras display the vismayamudrā as they do also in the Nepali sculpture (Fig. 19). One of the figures with a halo behind the head, ornamented and displaying the abhayamudrā with the right hand, appears to be of the Buddha, judging especially by the hair-style (Fig. 24). In the Kanauj sculpture all the avatāras have been represented on the aureole, and so the presence of the Buddha here is not surprising. It is generally held that the Buddha came to be accepted as an avatāra by the fifth century. The present sculpture certainly cannot be placed later than the fifth century. On the contrary, judging from the treatment of the lion, which has a remarkable affinity with lions in early Indian art, the delineation of the figure of the Buddha, the design of the crown of Viṣṇu and the curious head-dress of the uppermost head along the edge of the aureole, the fragment may possibly belong to the fourth century, in which case this will be the earliest document revealing the acceptance of the Buddha as an avatāra. Another feature that this sculpture shares in common with those from Kanauj and Kangra (Figs. 21–22) is the manner of representation of the heads along the edge of the aureole. Thus, it seems reasonable to suggest that these two eighth century reliefs
were modelled after such (Fig. 23) or similar Mathura prototypes. Although the crown of the Nepali Viśvarūpa Viṣṇu (Fig. 19) is derived from that of the Mathura image and the suras in both display the viṣamayamudrā in a similar fashion, it appears to portray a different conception.

It is clear that the known texts are not quite in agreement in their descriptions of the Viśvarūpa form. The Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa\(^8\) states that the four basic faces should be Viṣṇu, but does not indicate what specific forms. Above these should be the faces of Maheśvara, excepting that of Iśāna, and above them those of Brahmā. It further prescribes that one can include faces of animals as well as those of other gods sideways and upwards. This vagueness is also evident in the description of the hands, where the number and attributes are left to the artist, although he is enjoined to have a knowledge of the nṛttaśāstra for the various poses, and it is suggested that the hands may carry such weapons as, yajñadanda, śilpabhāndṣa, kalābhāndas, even vādyabhāndas; the underlying idea being that his activities are all extensive. Interestingly, however, the purāṇa adds, following undoubtedly the Bhagavadgītā, that he should be swallowing all sentient beings in the company of all terrifying creatures\(^8\). The Agnipurāṇa states that he should have four heads and twenty arms, although it specifies the attributes to be held by the hands\(^8\). Both the Rūpamaṇḍana and the Aparājītaśṛccā give similar descriptions\(^8\).

The Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa\(^8\) alternatively suggests that Viṣvarūpa may be represented in his Vaikuṇṭha form. Vaikuṇṭha is described as having four faces, the placid central face is that of a human, the southern face of a lion, the western face should be terrifying, but nothing is said about the northern face. Elsewhere we are told that the northern face should be of a boar. It is possible that the sculptor of the Kanauj relief combined both the Viṣvarūpa and the Vaikuṇṭha forms, and added others viz. those of a fish and a tortoise, which are important Viṣṇu, faces. It may also be pointed out that the prescribed hands for Vaikuṇṭha, both in the Rūpamaṇḍana and the Aparājītaśṛccā, are eight, as has been depicted in the Kanauj sculpture, although the attributes are slightly different\(^8\).
While discussing the Kanauj stele, Maheshwari Prasad has suggested that such images must have been affiliated to the Tantrāntara sub-sect of Viṣṇuism. Yet, there seems little doubt that the Kanauj sculpture, like the Nepali version, was inspired by the Viṣṇudhar-mottāra description of Viśvarūpa Viṣṇu as well as by the Viśvarūpa-darśana chapter of the Bhagavadgītā. The presence of Arjuna is indubitable in the Nepali image (Fig. 19), and he seems also to be present in the Kanauj relief. Maheshwari Prasad has offered no suggestion for the identification of a seated figure, holding what looks like a bow, at the lower right of the stele (Fig. 21). Moreover, the fact that he looks up at the cosmic manifestation, as if amazed, would tempt us to identify him as Arjuna. We may further note the standing figure, parallel to the left leg of the god; the tilt of his head and the gesture of his right hand are certainly expressive of his amazement at beholding the universal manifestation. It is possibly true that the principal image worshipped by the followers of Tantrāntara Viṣṇuism was of multiheaded forms of Viṣṇu, but neither the Nepali image nor, perhaps, the Kanauj icon, can be considered to be affiliated to that cult. The Mathura fragment (Fig. 23) is a still earlier example, and it is doubtful if the Tantrāntara sect had been formed by the Gupta period. This, however, is not to deny the importance of Prasad's surmise about the Tantrāntara sampradāya, which will be taken up later.

Two other representations of the Bhagavadgītā theme occur in Nepal. One of these is an illumination (Fig. 65) and has been discussed later with other scenes of the Mahābhārata. The other is a much later but complex wooden image in a private collection in England and on loan to the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford (Fig. 25). Here the god has seven heads which are arranged in a pyramidal formation of two rows of three with the seventh at the summit. The number of hands, however, is thirty-two which is not a multiple of seven. The heads are all crowned, and the expression on each face is benign with the faintest trace of a smile, particularly on the principal face. The god is rather sparsely ornamented, is given a vanamālā, but curiously wears an animal skin, which is most unusual for Viṣṇu. As he stands in pratyātiṣṭha, hi
right foot rests on the tails of Garuḍa and the left on a nāga, representing probably Śeṣa. The attributes in the hands are so summarily delineated that it is almost impossible to recognise all of them.

The two principal hands are poised in the position of holding a veṇu, and, among the other attributes, the following can be recognised: lotus, discus, mace, conch, thunderbolt, noose, goad, bow, vase and manuscript. Two other hands hold the discs of the sun and the moon, and eight of the hands carry tiny effigies of eight figures, all of whom appear to be two-handed humans. It is significant that very similar is the form of Mahāsambara in Vajrayāna iconography, and there too the deity holds a large number of figures in his hands. Some sort of transference seems obvious here, also indicated by the large flaming aureole behind, which often forms a common background for terrifying tāntric divinities of the Buddhist pantheon.

The sect mark on the forehead of each face is especially noteworthy, and once again reveals the association with the Śrī-Vaiṣṇavas of south India. The two principal hands, disposed as if holding the veṇu or the flute, unquestionably indicate that the basic figure is that of veṇudhara Kṛṣṇa. The additional arms would signify once more that the form represents the universal manifestation. The nāga below the left foot in that case would symbolize the pātalaloka, and the eight figures in the eight hands may represent the aṣṭadik-pālas, thus emphasizing the all-pervasive character of the god. This would also explain the sun and the moon in his hands, signifying that the firmament is pervaded by the divine manifestation. Of course, multiple heads and arms are essential elements of the universal manifestation. The universe in that case is symbolized by the flaming prabhā as we find in images of Naṭarāja. A curious iconographic feature is the little kūrma or tortoise delineated at the base of the pedestal. This probably follows such precepts as laid down in the Agnipurāṇa with regard to images of Puruṣottama, a form of Viṣṇu, that ‘on a pedestal composed of the tortoise, etc., is a lotus on which is the Garuḍa……’ (kūrmādikālpite pīṭhe padmaśhāṁ garuḍopari). Here both the
tortoise and Garuḍa are present, but the image does not agree with the description of Puruṣottama. Another tiny figure, with a human body but the head of a bird, is seated on the pedestal with his hands in the namaskārmudrā, where usually we may expect an effigy of the donor. Here it may be another representation of Garuḍa.

Of the four representations of the Viśvarūpadaṁśana theme in Nepal, the first two (Figs. 19-20), which are contemporaneous, belong to the same tradition and probably to the same workshop. But the sixteenth century illumination (Fig. 65) and the eighteenth century wooden image (Fig. 25) are of altogether different styles and iconographic traditions. It is amazing how differently the artists have visualized the theme. While the artist of the Chaṅgu Nārāyaṇa stele (Fig. 19) has remained more faithful to the Bhagavadgītā description and has displayed a remarkable narrative intent, the sixteenth century illuminator has emphasized the terrifying aspect of the manifestation. The carver of the wooden image (Fig. 25), on the other hand, has chosen to portray the supremacy of Kṛṣṇa, and, despite the many arms and heads, has given us a placid version. It is doubtful if there ever were texts describing these different images exactly as they are delineated here. In all probability the artists were left to themselves to give form to this cosmic manifestation. Certainly, this is implied by the Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa, as well as the two later representations, where the artists seem to have borrowed ideas from more common icons of terrifying and multi-limbed Vajrayāṇa deities to represent such images of Viṣṇu.