

Viṣṇu's *Avatāras*

The epic and puranic *Viṣṇu* does not exist without what is usually called his *avatāras*. The term *avatāra* is clearly a later designation for what was earlier simply called *prādurbhāvas* or manifestations. Regularly connected with *Bhagavadgītā* (4.5–7) even if there is no explicit mention of the term there (Malinar, 2007, 94–100), the concept of *avatāra* is linked to the conviction that *Viṣṇu* has to manifest himself age after age in order to restore a *dharma* that would otherwise collapse. From an anthropological point of view, these *avatāra* stories can also be interpreted as one of the multiple strategies used by the higher religion to incorporate and accommodate local folk religious material (Hardy, 1990, 78–83).

Up to now, the numbers of *avatāras* and their lists have varied too widely and have been dependent on too many variables for scholars to be able to establish a convincing picture of a linear development (e.g. Brinkhaus, 1992; Soifer, 1992). By way of illustration, let us simply note that the late *Nārāyaṇīyaparvan* of the *Mahābhārata* (12.326.72–90) has a list of six manifestations (Varāha, Narasiṃha, Vāmana, Rāma Jāmadagnya, Rāma, Kṛṣṇa), both Buddha and Kalki being added in (app. 31; crit. ed.). In the same passage (*MBh.* 12.337.35–36), there is also a list of four *avatāras* (Varāha, Narasiṃha, Vāmana, and Mānuṣa ["Human Being"]). Whatever the interpretations given here, it must not be forgotten that the sequence, Varāha, Narasiṃha, and Vāmana, already appears in *Mahābhārata* (3.100.19–21) and could correspond to a basic nucleus. The *Harivaṃśa*, a complement to the *Mahābhārata*, has a fairly long and markedly original list (ch. 31): Puṣkara ("Lotus"), Varāha, Narasiṃha, Vāmana, the sage Dattātreyā (later deified), Rāma Jāmadagnya, Rāma, Kṛṣṇa, and Kalki (Vedavyāsa appears in the vulgate of this text, but not in the reconstituted edition). *Brahmapurāṇa* (104) mentions the same list. The *Harivaṃśa* also contains lengthy presentations of four *avatāras*: Puṣkara, Varāha, Narasiṃha, Vāmana (*HV.* app. I, 41–42). The *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* (9th or 10th cent.) has an initial list of 22 *avatāras* in 1.3, of 22 *avatāras* in 2.7, and of 8 in 10.2.40 (and other lists in 6.8.13–19; 10.40.17–22; 11.4.17–22). But, perhaps more important than these specific lists, a remark that follows the first of these lists proves quite revealing:

Even as thousands of rivulets flow from a lake that never dries,
so are there countless descents (*avatāras*) of Hari [*Viṣṇu*],
who is a storehouse of *sattva* [that is, goodness, power, wisdom].

(*BhāgP.* 1.3.26; trans. by author)

Since there is no *daśāvatāra* set depicted or mentioned in an inscription in the 6th-century Gupta temple of Deogarh (Lalitpur district, Uttar Pradesh), as often claimed, one has to conclude that the illustration of a series of ten *avatāras* is probably much later.

Kṣemendra's *Daśāvatāracarita* (c. 1066 CE) contains the following description of ten *avatāras*, which today serves as the standard list: Matsya ("Fish"), Kūrma ("Tortoise"), Varāha ("Boar"), Narasiṃha ("Man-Lion"), Vāmana ("Dwarf"), Paraśurāma, Rāma, Kṛṣṇa, Buddha, and Kalki (or Karkī). I use this list here and add to it a few words about the manifestation of Puṣkara ("Lotus"). The summaries given here are provided for ease of reference and make no pretence of being either the only possible version or the earliest version (see also Couture, 1997). All these stories vary significantly depending on the sources considered. Each of them deserves to be studied in its own right.

Matsya Avatāra or the Manifestation of the Fish

At the end of the previous *kalpa* (see cosmic cycles), says sage Śuka in the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* (8.24), as Brahmā is overcome by sleep under the influence of time, the Vedas fall from his mouths into the ocean and are immediately stolen by the powerful Hayagrīva, a demon with the head of a horse. Luckily, Lord Hari (or *Viṣṇu*) has already anticipated the slyness of this *asura*. At that time, King Satyavrata is practicing austerities, subsisting on water alone. As he is offering handfuls of water to the ancestors (*pitṛs*) on the bank of a river, he unintentionally catches a small fish in his hands. When he is about to drop it, the fish says to him, “Why do you throw me into the waters among big fish that will swallow me?” Hearing this most pitiful appeal, the king decides to protect his guest, places it into his water pot, and brings it back with him to his hermitage. He is ignorant of the fact that it is *Viṣṇu* himself who is speaking through the fish and who wants to grant him a favor. In a single night, the fish grows so much that the ascetic has to move it to a bigger pitcher, and from there into a pond, and to ever larger lakes. Finally forced to confess that god Hari himself is deceiving him, Satyavrata throws the big fish back into the ocean. Still in the guise of the fish, *Viṣṇu* says to the king that the dissolution of the universe will take place within a week and that, at that time, he will send to him a big boat, which he must load with herbs, annual plants, seeds of all types, and every kind of animal species. Afterwards, accompanied by the seven seers, the king must climb into the boat and use the great serpent Vāsuki to attach the boat to the fish’s horn. Then *Viṣṇu* says that he will lead the king on the vast ocean as long as the cosmic night lasts.

Satyavrata was thus saved from the disaster by *Viṣṇu* in the form of a fish. Afterwards, the fish dives into the ocean and rescues the Vedas formerly stolen by Hayagrīva. King Satyavrata becomes the great Manu Vaivasvata, the seventh Manu of the present *kalpa*.

Kūrma Avatāra or the Manifestation of the Tortoise

The following narrative is taken principally from the *Viṣṇupurāṇa* (1.9). Once upon a time, the irritable sage Durvāsas presents a garland to Indra that he received from an *apsaras*. Indra places it on the head of his elephant Airāvata, who seizes it with his trunk and casts it carelessly to the earth. Highly incensed at this disrespectful treatment of his gift, Durvāsas gets angry and declares that Indra’s sovereignty over the three worlds shall be subverted. Soon after, the three worlds lose their vigor and are abandoned by prosperity. The gods, overcome by the *asuras*, their traditional enemies, resort to Brahmā, who promises them that the only way to escape the curse and restore their strength is to make an alliance with the *asuras*. Together, they will collect various kinds of medicinal herbs, cast them into the sea of milk, and churn the ocean using the mountain Mandara as the churning stick and the serpent Vāsuki as the rope. The gods do everything according to the instructions they have been given. They seize the tail of the serpent at the same time that *daityas* and *dānavas* (types of demons) grasp its head and neck. Scorched by the flames emitted from his inflated hood, the demons are shorn of their glory, while the clouds, driven towards his tail by the breath of his mouth, refresh the gods with revivifying showers. In the midst of the milky sea, just as Mount Mandara is becoming too heavy and is beginning to slip towards the bottom of the sea, Hari himself, in the form of a tortoise, serves as a pivot for the mountain as it is whirled around. As gods and *asuras* churn the ocean, various treasures are generated. Finally, a cup appears, containing the elixir of immortality. Quicker than their rivals, the *asuras* seize it and carry it off. *Viṣṇu* uses a second strategy to recover it. He disguises himself in the form of a tantalizing lady called Mohinī. Enticed by her beauty, the *asuras* forget the ambrosia, thus allowing *Viṣṇu* to return it permanently to the gods.

Varāha Avatāra or the Manifestation of the Boar

The story of the manifestation of *Viṣṇu* as a boar is usually short. This theme was already known in the Brāhmaṇas in connection with Prajāpati (see Gonda, 1969, 129–145). The *Harivaṃśa* (31.21–30) explains that the earth had sunk into the waters of the *ekārṇava* (primeval ocean). Desiring to restore the welfare of all beings, *Viṣṇu* assumes the form of a boar, an animal that loves to play in the waters and is described at length as containing all parts of the sacrifice. He dives into the sea, upholds the earth with the tip of his horn, raises it, and makes it float on the ocean like a boat. The *Viṣṇupurāṇa* adds the following:

Then, having leveled the earth, the great eternal deity divided it into portions, by mountains. He who never wills in vain, created, by his irresistible power, those mountains again upon the earth which had been consumed at the destruction of the world (*ViP.* 1.4.47–48; also *MBh.* 3.142, app. 16; *BhāgP.* 3.13, 18–19).

In the *Harivaṃśa* (31.22–27) and many Purāṇas (*MtP.* 248.67–77ff.), the boar is considered to be identical with the sacrifice (*yajñavarāha*), the various parts of his body being correlated with ritual and cosmic elements. Images of Varāha can be found in the Kushana period (1st–2nd cents. CE). The classical picture of the boar lifting the earth represented as a female appears at Udaigiri (cave 5, Vidisha district, Madhya Pradesh) from around the early 5th century.

Narasimha Avatāra or the Manifestation of the Man-Lion

The *Harivaṃśa* (31.31–67) already contained the summary of a story that soon became very popular. During the *ṛtayuga*, a leader among the *daityas* named Hiranyakaśipu practices severe austerities for 11,500 years, in hopes of pleasing Brahmā. Finally, Brahmā approaches him, ready to bestow a favor on him. Hiranyakaśipu asks that none should be permitted to kill him, not gods, *asuras*, *gandharvas*, *yakṣas*, *nāgas* (see sacred animals), *rākṣasas*, men, *piśācas*, nor ascetics with their fatal curses, nor weapons of any kind, not mountains, trees, nor dry or humid materials. He adds a request that he be permitted to take the place of all the deities. Brahmā agrees. All the deities are terrified as soon as they hear the news and ask to meet Brahmā, who tells them that Hiranyakaśipu had to reap the fruit of his austerities, but would eventually be killed by *Viṣṇu*. At once, all the beings take refuge in the god who is both sacrifice and *brahman*. Some time later, *Viṣṇu* goes to Hiranyakaśipu's meeting hall, assumes a bizarre form – the upper half of his body being a lion and the lower half a man – and kills the haughty *asura* with only one hand. With this body that is neither man nor beast, *Viṣṇu* sidesteps the promise Brahmā had made to his enemy. The *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* (7.3–8) has a much longer version in which the role of Prahlāda, Hiranyakaśipu's son, is developed (for analyses of the various versions, see Hacker, 1960; Soifer, 1992). Contrasting with the violence of the myth, Narasimha's royal shrines are all in the hands of Śrīvaiṣṇava priests in South India, where they have been converted into places of auspiciousness and purity (Biardeau, 1975).

Vāmana Avatāra or the Manifestation of the Dwarf

This narrative reproduces the episode of *Viṣṇu*'s three strides, which was already known in the *Ṛgveda*. What follows is a shortened version of a story, which became very popular in a number of different versions. In the *tretāyuga* (the second *yuga*), Bali – a king among the *asuras*, regarded as the grandson of Prahlāda and the great-grandson of Hiranyakaśipu – celebrates 100 horse sacrifices (*aśvamedhas*; see *yajña*) in order to ensure his triumph over

the three worlds. The gods, deprived of all their power, can find no other way of restoring their dignity except by appealing to *Viṣṇu*. In the meanwhile, goddess Aditi performs a 12-day observance under the instruction of her husband Kaśyapa and finally gives birth to *Viṣṇu*. When he learns about Bali's venture, *Viṣṇu* assumes the form of a dwarf-sized Brahman. The little Brahman introduces himself to Bali, who is sacrificing, and asks a favor of him, the patron of the sacrifice. Bali asks for a small strip of land, three paces long, as measured by his own stride (*BhāgP.* 8.19.16). Unable to understand why the Brahman is asking for so little, Bali does not listen to his counselors, who warn him to be suspicious of *Viṣṇu*'s accomplishments, and he promises to give the dwarf all he is asking for. All of a sudden, the body of the little Brahman increases in size and becomes similar to the body of the supreme Puruṣa, the one who is able to swallow all the worlds at the end of the *kalpa*. With the first stride he covers the earth, and with the second he reaches the sky. Unable to grant the Brahman a place for a third stride, and therefore failing to accomplish his promise, Bali is cast down to the infernal regions, and each of the deities recovers his own function. Written from different points of view, the studies of G. Tripathi (1968), C. Hospital (1984), and D. Soifer (1992) give different accounts of the evolution of the myth.

Paraśurāma Avatāra or the Manifestation of "Rāma with the Axe"

King Arjuna Kārtavīrya receives from Brahmā the favor of being equipped with a thousand arms. Instead of using them to protect the *dharma*, he takes advantage of this unprecedented power to spread confusion among all beings. *Viṣṇu*, when he becomes aware that Arjuna is sparing neither sage nor god, decides it is time to take action. At that very time, Satyawatī, King Gāndhī's daughter, is married to a Brahman. Making a mistake in performing the rites for obtaining a son, she inverts the preparations of food and performs a ritual to cause the birth of a Kṣatriya instead of a Brahman. Nevertheless, she succeeds in having the effect of this blunder deferred to her grandson. Satyawatī gives birth to Jamadagni, a son who is a Brahman and who marries Reṇukā. Jamadagni and Reṇukā give birth to four sons who are also Brahmans, and a fifth son who turns out to be the famous warrior Rāma Jāmadagnya, also called Paraśurāma ("Rāma with the Axe"). In the meantime, faithful to the prescriptions of the Veda, Jamadagni has left his kingdom, giving the throne to his son Rāma, and is practicing austerities in the forest with his wife. One day, Reṇukā goes to the river and steals a look at a *gandharva* who is bathing stark naked. Through his divine eye, Jamadagni sees all her faults. In his wrath, he requires his sons to decapitate their mother as a punishment. All except Paraśurāma refuse to perform this horrible act, and even he does so only under the strict condition that his father bestow a favor on him. He uses this skillful means to bring his mother Reṇukā back to life. Arjuna Kārtavīrya continues to live in the surrounding area and threaten all living creatures. One day he approaches Jamadagni's hermitage and robs the marvelous cow, which the Brahman uses to feed all his hosts. Paraśurāma takes advantage of the situation, runs after the robber, and cuts Arjuna's thousand arms off with his axe. The sons of Arjuna avenge their father and kill Jāmadagnya. Twenty-one times, Paraśurāma fights the terrible Kṣatriyas without being able to exterminate them. M. Biarreau (1968) has examined two different versions of this very complex narrative that are found in the *Mahābhārata*. A. Gail (1977) delineates a tentative evolution of the story, comparing its main versions with one another.

Rāma Avatāra or the Manifestation of Rāma

This second Rāma (or Rāmacandra) is the son of Daśaratha, who becomes the king of the city of Ayodhyā during the *tretāyuga*. He marries Sītā. He is considered to be one of the greatest manifestations of *Viṣṇu*.

Kṛṣṇa Avatāra or the Manifestation of Kṛṣṇa

Kṛṣṇa's manifestation takes place at the end of the *dvāparayuga*. Before taking part in the great war of the *Mahābhārata*, he manifests himself in Mathurā as a herder (*gopa*) who grazes King Kāṁsa's cows and finally relieves the earth of her burden.

Buddha Avatāra or the Manifestation of the Buddha

The Buddha ("The Awakened One") mentioned here is the same one known today as the founder of Buddhism under the name of Gautama, Gotama, or Siddhārtha. He was introduced late into the list of the ten *avatāras*. According to R.C. Hazra's survey of the Purāṇas (1975, 41), it is highly probable that he came to be regarded as Viṣṇu's *avatāra* from around 550 CE, becoming more popular around early 7th century CE. The Buddha was considered to be a *nāstika*, that is, a heretic: refusing the existence of *brahman* and denying the Veda and all Brahmanical values. His popularity was rapidly interpreted as a sign of the decline of the present age, the *kaliyuga* (HV. 116.15). How can the originator of a false doctrine be included in a list of the manifestations of Viṣṇu? It was possible thanks to the use of a rhetorical device that includes within Hinduism even elements that are in thorough contradiction with it. According to the short texts dealing with this *avatāra*, the only reason for Viṣṇu to assume the form of the Buddha was so that he could insidiously lead nonbelievers astray, thus destabilizing them and causing their complete ruin (Saindon, 2004).

Kalki Avatāra or the Manifestation of Kalki

This manifestation of Viṣṇu will occur at the end of the present *kaliyuga*. Its earliest description is found in the *Mahābhārata* (3.188.85–189.6), and the account of it found below closely follows J.A.B. van Buitenen's translation. As the *yuga* is closing amidst terrifying destruction, the world begins gradually to regenerate, beginning with the Brahmins. The *kr̥tayuga* will begin again. Then, a Brahmin by the name of Kalki Viṣṇuśāsa will arise, who is of great prowess, wisdom, and might. He will be born in the village of Sambhala, in an auspicious Brahmin dwelling, and at his mere thought all vehicles, weapons, warriors, arms, and coats of mail will wait on him. He will be king, a "turner of the wheel" (*cakravartin*), who triumphs through *dharma*, and he will restore this turbulent world to tranquility. That rising Brahmin will be the destruction of all, especially of the *mlecchas* (foreigners). Finally, Kalki will celebrate a horse sacrifice and retire to the forest.

Of course, many other *avatāras* would have deserved discussion here. Puṣkara ("Lotus") has long been considered to be an important one. It is mentioned several times in the *Mahābhārata*, and the *Harivaṁśa* narrates the story in detail (HV. 31.14–20; 42.14–33; app. I, 41). From the navel of Nārāyaṇa, who has slept for a thousand *yugas*, a lotus with a long stem grows, and on top of it, the flower Brahmā appears. As Brahmā, a god characterized by the quality of goodness (*sattva*), is sitting on the lotus, two *asuras* appear playing on the cosmic ocean: Madhu being born from obscurity (*tamas*) and Kaiṭabha from passion (*rajas*; see *guṇas*). Assuming they are alone in the world, the huge and ferocious *asuras* insult Brahmā. Thinking they deserve a favor from Hari-Nārāyaṇa, who is still lying on the ocean, the *asuras* are finally challenged by the supreme god, who places them on his thighs and kills them. Through this myth, Hari or Viṣṇu gives the assurance that, out of the three constituents of nature (*sattva*, *rajas*, *tamas*) – represented by Brahmā, Madhu, Kaiṭabha, respectively – *sattva* (or Brahmā) will always triumph. Taking place immediately after the apparition of a lotus containing all creatures *in nucleo*, in embryonic form this battle anticipates and summarizes, as it were, all the other *avatāras* (Couture, 2007).

As M. Biardeau observes in her study of the *avatāras* (1994), such stories illustrate the overarching nature of *Viṣṇu* as a god of devotion (*bhakti*) who, though standing beyond the world, is at the same time completely involved in the paradoxical dimensions of human society. In this new religious setting, liberation is no longer reserved to Brahmins, but is open to all castes. The *avatāra* comes into the world during a period of crisis to destroy evil and protect what is good. Every time *dharma* decays, a new form of *Viṣṇu* appears in the world to destroy the old world and create a new one. Embodying the paradox inherent in all sacrifices, the great *yogin Viṣṇu* arranges things so that he collaborates with Rudra-Śiva for the establishment of a renewed dispensation. He becomes Rudra to annihilate the ancient world, and finds he skillful means to prop up the world that has been formerly generated by Brahmā and is regularly threatened by all kinds of disorder. The *yogin Viṣṇu*, who reigns over the cosmos, is a universal god who surpasses every particular order, including the Brahmanical, which claims to isolate itself from the rest of the world. The myths of Paraśurāma and Kalki present Brahmins who are also Kṣatriyas, not in order to encourage confusion between *varṇas*, but as a way of asserting unwelcome, but necessary, royal interventions. Brahmins, who increasingly emphasize interiorized sacrifices and idealized values such as purity and nonviolence, and Kṣatriyas, who are sometimes tempted to renounce violence and need to be reminded of their duty to use it in order to protect society, are shown collaborating in a complementary manner. As deciphered by M. Biardeau, the stories narrating Viṣṇu's deeds are much more than entertaining folklore. They point to the new values proposed by the religion of devotion that is establishing itself in the first centuries of the Common Era.

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