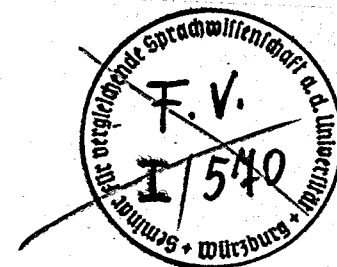


ASPECTS OF EARLY VISNUISM

BY

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god's helpful and loving interest in our planet and its occupants. The avatāras not seldom proved to be, in the history of the Indian people, living myths: because for instance the re-establishment of a definite country resembled the renowned deed of Viṣṇu's boar-incarnation it was henceforth called *Kroḍadeśa*—“Hog-country”⁶). The power inherent in the myth manifested itself once again⁷).

XVIII. THE TORTOISE; THE CHURNING OF THE OCEAN.

After the collections of data concerning the character of the tortoise published by Meyer¹) and Ruben²) Viṣṇu's second avatāra hardly needs comment. The animal played, and still plays, an important rôle in the cosmogonic, cosmographic, and genealogical conceptions of Indian peoples. It is, to begin with, often believed to serve as a fun-

⁶) M. N. Srinivas, *Religion and society among the Coorgs of S. India*, Oxford 1952, p. 245.

⁷) Some of the avatāras gave occasion for speculations on ethnic substrata, geographical names etc. (see e.g. A. P. Karmarkar, *The Matsyāvatāra of Viṣṇu*, Geographisch Kane, p. 253 ff.) which we cannot consider here.

In accordance with the conception of Viṣṇu's pervasiveness — which no doubt largely contributed to his ascendancy in the high position of God and personal aspect of brahman which is expressly defined as all-pervasive — is the comparatively late theory of his *āveśas*. The Pāñcarātra philosophers hold that Viṣṇu's manifestations are of various character. The so-called *āveśāvatāra* is either a *svarūpāveśa*— (as in the case of the avatāras like Rāma) or a *śaktyāveśa*— (when there is an influx of special powers or functions of God). These *āveśas* are by God's will produced in the form of human beings, animals, trees. Other manifestations, *sākṣādavatārāḥ*, are of a transcendent nature, being derived directly from the Supreme Being just as a lamp is lighted from another. As the term *āveśa* expresses such ideas as “entering, taking possession (often of states of mind taking possession of a person), devotedness to an object, obsession (by evil spirits)” the underlying idea is clear. (For particulars see: F. O. Schrader, *Introd. to the Pāñcarātra*, Madras 1916; S. Dasgupta, *Hist. of Ind. Phil.* III, p. 38 f.; M. Das Gupta, *IHQ*: 8, p. 64 ff.).

A few words may be said on the well-known passage BhG. 10, 19 ff., where Kṛṣṇa, the Bhagavat enumerates his prominent *vibhūtis* or ‘manifestations’. Although the tenor is to show that the Lord, though omnipresent and manifesting himself everywhere, is especially identical with the most eminent individuals of their respective classes, it may strike us that many figures and entities occurring in the list may have been living realities to the mind of the Indians of that period (see also Radhakrishnan, *Bhag.*, p. 263). They play also an important rôle in early Viṣṇuism: the Bhagavat is, inter alia, identified with Viṣṇu, the sun, Indra, Kubera, Agni, the *aśvattha*, Nārada, the king, the vajra, Kāma, Vāsuki, Ananta, Varuṇa, Garuḍa, Rāma, Vāsudeva etc. One might be tempted to conclude that the author in drawing up this list made ample use of existing ‘identifications’ of a god who in Viṣṇuite circles had already much advanced in his career towards the position of a Highest Being.

¹) Meyer, o.c., III, p. 221 ff.

²) Ruben, *Eisenschmiede*, p. 241 ff.

dament on which the earth rests. It warrants the stability of the world³). The purāṇic account of Viṣṇu supporting India in the form of a tortoise (MārḱPur. 58) may, like the god's appearance in the shape of this animal to be the base or pivot of the mountain Mandara when the gods and asuras churned the ocean (Kūrma-avatāra), be considered a Viṣṇuite adaptation of an old mythical function attributed to the animal in popular belief: in Rām. S. 1, 45 and ViPur. 1, 9, 87 the tortoise is Viṣṇu, in Mbh. 1, 18, 11 f.; Rām. N. rec. (G. 1, 46) and elsewhere it is not (not yet) identified with the god. This aiding and supporting function of the tortoise coincided with the conceptions entertained by Viṣṇu's devotees of the purpose and significance of the god's incarnations to such a degree that they could identify the animal of folklore with their god in the phenomenal form of a helpful living being. Other beliefs regarding the tortoise may have contributed to this identification. Its shells are sky and earth, what is between the shells, the air; it thus is these worlds (ŚB. 7, 5, 1, 2). Viṣṇu on the other hand, was rather early associated with the three divisions of the universe (cf. e.g. also Mbh. 5, 10, 6 ff.). In ancient mythology the tortoise belonged to Varuṇa, the lord of the waters; it was the lord of the waters (ŚB. 7, 5, 1, 9)⁴). It did duty for Varuṇa himself lying as a husband beside a representative of the earth (ŚB. 7, 5, 1, 6; cf. 6, 5, 3, 1). Viṣṇu is also the earth's husband. The tortoise is also able to exert fertilizing influences⁵). In accordance with the nature of the animal Kaśyapa “the Tortoise” enters the earth (Mbh. 13, a. 154). The tortoise was, moreover, considered the father of all creatures, and Prajāpati, in creating, assumed the form of this reptile (ŚB. 7, 5, 1, 5). It is able to draw in all its limbs and serves, in later times (e.g. MārḱPur. 39, 33 f.) as a model for the man who wishes to repress all emotions and to restrain the activities of his senses, “always delighted in soul, self-collected, and seeing soul in soul”. Has this curious habit of the reptile, in addition to other factors, led man to consider it ‘breath’ or ‘life’ of the world (cf. ŚB. 7, 5, 1, 7; 1), and a representative of the self-sufficient High God and Universal Soul? Whatever causes have contributed to this result, it is not surprising that this queer animal, which always played so important a part in folklore, should have become a representative of the aiding and supporting Viṣṇu at the moment he enabled the gods to acquire the draught of life.

³) Ruben, o.c., and *Liter. vorar. Stämme Indiens*, p. 52; Kramrisch, *Hindu temple*, p. 111; 113.

⁴) Meyer's opinion (p. 222), that Varuṇa originally was nothing but a tortoise cannot be substantiated.

⁵) For particulars see Meyer, o.c., p. 222.

A brief comment on the famous event, the churning of the ocean, will not be out of place here. The churning staff is, according to the various versions of the story, the 'immeasurable' Meru⁶⁾ or a similar mountain, the Mandara, or also Śiva's liṅga, all of them representing the axis of the world⁷⁾. The basis of this axis is in Further India sometimes placed in a *kumbha*-⁸⁾. It is made to rest on the tortoise or Viṣṇu, who thus occupies the centre of the world. The snake Ananta, a manifestation of Nārāyaṇa (Mbh. 1, 18, 15) serves as a rope. The beings and objects arisen from the ocean are also highly significant. There is some variety in the order and number of articles⁹⁾, but among them are the moon, i.e. the lord of plants, which is closely connected with fertility, vegetative life, and the souls of the deceased¹⁰⁾; ghee which is of an erotic and magic character, identified with *retas* and used in fertility ceremonies¹¹⁾; Śrī-Lakṣmī sitting on a lotus and holding a water-lily in her hand; Surā or Vāruṇī, the goddess representing spirituous liquor — which is usually drunk on the occasion of religious festivities¹²⁾ —; the great horse and the *kaustubha*-jewel which are discussed in other sections of this book; the *pārijāta*- or coral tree (*erythrina indica*), the delight of the nymphs of heaven which perfumes the world with its blossoms and which served as an aphrodisiac (Varāh. BS. 77, 37) on the strength of its presumed 'erotic' i.e. fecundating character; the *apsarases*, fertility spirits who are not seldom mentioned as a kind of Indian houris of paradise¹³⁾; Surabhi the renowned cow of plenty, a very fountain of milk and curds; Dhanvantari the instructor in medical science and divine physician; the *amṛta* itself, to gain which the churning was undertaken; the elephant Airāvata which came to be Indra's vehicle; sometimes also the tulasi; the bow and conch of Viṣṇu; the famous ear-rings of Aditi¹⁴⁾; the white horse of the sun; and the umbrella taken by Varuṇa, which are likewise objects of an auspicious character.

Another observation was made by Miss Auboyer¹⁵⁾ with regard to

⁶⁾ I refer to W. Kirfel, *Die Kosmographie der Inder*, Bonn-Leipzig 1920, p. 375; 379.

⁷⁾ See section X.

⁸⁾ I refer to Auboyer, *Trône*, p. 97.

⁹⁾ See e.g. ViPur. 1, a. 9; Wilson-Hall, o.c., I, p. 146 ff.; Baldaeus, o.c., p. 47 ff.

¹⁰⁾ See Meyer, o.c. III, p. 311.

¹¹⁾ Ibidem, p. 319.

¹²⁾ Compare also the use of spirits in the *vājapeya* and in wedding ceremonies (see Meyer, o.c., III, p. 184).

¹³⁾ For particulars see Meyer, o.c., III, p. 288, and *Sexual life in ancient India*, London 1930, p. 568.

¹⁴⁾ See section XV.

¹⁵⁾ Auboyer, o.c., p. 96 ff., to which I refer for particulars.

this event which impresses us as a creation myth. When the churning staff is turned round, the Khmer iconography of Further India makes Viṣṇu ascend to the top of it on which is Brahmā's seat. This must be, the French scholar holds, a representation of the god traversing the universe.

XIX. THE BOAR.

The next point to be discussed concerns the very important *varāha*-*avatāra*. Viṣṇu, as a boar, delivered the world from the power of a demon called *Hiranyākṣa*, who had seized the earth and carried it down into the lowest depths of the sea. The god, after having dived into the abyss slew the monster and raised the earth. Before entering into a discussion of this myth in connection with the character of the god it may be useful here to expatiate upon the rôle played by boars and pigs in popular belief, the more so as some particulars bearing upon this point do not — as far as ancient India is concerned — seem to have been explained in a satisfactory way.

Much has been written on the pig — which may, generally speaking, be called the animal of the farmer and the planter — and on the boar which can justly claim to be one of the bravest wild animals and one of the best-armed¹⁾. In the folklore of the peoples of central and northern Europe the grunting hogs and boars which root and grub in the earth were very often believed to represent storm- or thunder clouds, cyclones etc. Their tusks were identified with lightning²⁾. They were also supposed to be on friendly terms with evil powers such as witches. With the Celts and the Germans they were apt to be regarded in a sinister light and might well be the embodiment of demoniac beings, haunting and walking about³⁾. They are supposed to know about the weather and to have foreknowledge of it. Sometimes they are "Seelentier". Often parts of their bodies are used in popular

¹⁾ Compare e.g. J. G. Frazer, *Spirits of the corn* etc., = *The Golden Bough* V, 1, London 1912, p. 298 ff., and *passim*; L. Herold, s.v. *Schwein*, in *Handwörterbuch d. deutschen Aberglaubens* VII, Leipzig 1935 f., 1470 ff.; O. Schrader, in *Hastings' Encycl. of Rel. and Ethics* II, 38; and other books and papers to be mentioned in the following notes.

²⁾ See also W. Mannhardt, *Die Korndämonen*, Berlin 1868. In Indian texts the grunting or roaring of the boar is often mentioned and sometimes compared to the sound of thunder-clouds: cf. Mbh. 3, 272, 54 Viṣṇu assumes the form of a boar roaring like big clouds and being as black as these.

³⁾ See e.g. J. A. Macculloch, *Celtic myths*, in L. H. Gray, *The myths of all races*, III, Boston 1918, p. 126; E. Hull, *Folklore of the British isles*, London 1928, p. 144 ff.