

## Vaṭapatraśāyī: Lord of the Banyan Leaf in Temple Sculpture

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During the interlude between the dissolution (*pralaya*) and the recreation of the universe, Viṣṇu sleeps like a spider that has drawn back the thread into itself. The manifest world has been absorbed in him. It is the silent moment when the whole cosmos is at rest. Only the great sage Mārkaṇḍeya, who has a boon of immortality from Śiva, lives and roams endlessly in the universe inside the body of Viṣṇu. At one point, the sage slips from the open mouth of the sleeping Viṣṇu into the infinite sea. As he moves about for hundreds of years in the vast waters, all alone and exhausted, there is a ray of hope as he sees a radiant child on a branch (or leaf) of a banyan (*ficus indica*) tree. The child reveals himself to the sage as Nārāyaṇa, the Primeval Being, who is the source of the universe and who consumes the universe. Different versions of the myth are narrated in the *Mahābhārata* (*Āraṇyaka-parva*, 186), *Matsya-purāṇa* (167), and the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* (XII.8-9).<sup>1</sup>

It is important for us to note that in the *Mahābhārata* and the *Matsya-purāṇa*, the child is



seen on a branch (*śākhā*) of a banyan tree, while in the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* (XII.9.22), as a baby (*bālaka*) he reclines on a leaf (*patra*) of the tree formed in the shape of a cup (*vaṭapatrapuṭa*). This change from the branch to the leaf of the banyan tree could be attributed to the influence of the Āḷvārs, the poet-saints of South India, who lived during the seventh to ninth centuries.

The theme of Vaṭapatrasāyī, the divine child reclining on the banyan leaf, was popularized by the Āḷvārs, who invoked the baby Kṛṣṇa as the 'lord of the banyan leaf' in their hymns. The first Āḷvār, Poighāi, in his work, *Mutal Tiruvantati* (v. 92) wonders how, even after swallowing all the seven worlds at the time of *pralaya*, Kṛṣṇa still steals butter from the houses of cowherds as his hunger is not satisfied. Here, the concept of Kṛṣṇa (Viṣṇu) on the leaf at the time of *pralaya* is fused with that of the child Kṛṣṇa of Gokul. In another early work, *Puraṇānūru* (v. 198), a prayer is addressed to Kṛṣṇa resting on the banyan leaf.<sup>2</sup>

In the eighth century, Periyāḷvār adored Viṣṇu as Vaṭapatrasāyī in a temple known by that name at Srivilliputtur near Madurai. Āṇḍāl, his foster daughter, composed passionate hymns addressed to Kṛṣṇa of Gokul, referring to him in several verses as 'one lying on the banyan leaf': "Love incarnate Lord, blue-sapphire-coloured One, O Lord of the Banyan Leaf... Long ago as an infant you slept on the cosmic ocean upon the banyan leaf" (v. 26). Āṇḍāl's *Tiruppāvai* is a garland of verses addressed to Kṛṣṇa. It is Govinda, Kṛṣṇa of Gokul, whom Āṇḍāl invokes in her hymns. She does not make a clear distinction between Kṛṣṇa and Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa. In the *Nācciyār Tirumolī*, "The anguish of separation," she says: "Do not break our sandcastles. You slept on the banyan leaf...Eternal Lord, do not dampen our desire. Long ago, as an infant, you slept on the cosmic ocean upon the banyan leaf."<sup>3</sup>

The influence of the hymns of the Āḷvārs on the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* is demonstrated by Friedhelm Hardy in his study of the early history of Kṛṣṇa

devotion in South India (Hardy 1983, 488ff., 524-52). Hardy cites 50 parallel passages in the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* and Āḷvār hymns in the *Prabandham* (Appendix XII). The two episodes of the Kṛṣṇa story in the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, namely, the butter theft (X.8) and the taking away and hiding of clothes (*vastra-haraṇa*) of the *gopīs* (cowherd women) in a Kadamba tree while they were bathing (X.22), are unknown to the *Viṣṇu-purāṇa* but well known to the Āḷvārs (Gail 2014). Adalbert Gail refers to a passage from the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* (I.5.38-41) that could be considered as an allusion to the Āḷvārs "formulated as a prophecy postfestum." The *Purāṇa* states that "in the Kaliyuga, there will be devotees of Nārāyaṇa particularly among the Drāviḍas who drink the waters of South Indian rivers such as Tāmraparṇī, Kṛtamālā etc. and who preferably become peaceful *Bhaktas* [devotees] of Bhagavān Vāsudeva" (Gail 2014, 36; also Hardy 1983, 645). Gail rightly points out: "Kṛṣṇa on the banyan leaf, not belonging to the story of his childhood, is also shaped by the emotional legacy of these Vaiṣṇava mystics" (Gail 2014, 36).

Curiously, Vaṭapatrasāyī, a theme of great cosmological, philosophical, and devotional significance, is not represented in the contemporaneous art of the Pallavas, Pāṇḍyas, or Calukyas. Incidentally, the birth of the first Pallava ruler is shown reclining on a leaf (*pallava*) in the Vaikuṅṭha Perumāl temple of Kanchipuram (latter half of the eighth century). But a representation of the infant Kṛṣṇa resting on a leaf is not seen in the early visual art of India. We find the theme of Vaṭapatrasāyī in temple sculptures from the ninth century onwards, all in South India, pointing to the possibility of Āḷvār influence in the adoption of this motif in temple art.

The earliest known sculpture of Vaṭapatrasāyī is seen on the *adhiṣṭhāna* (base mouldings) of the Nāgeśvara temple in Kumbakonam (886 CE) in the Tanjore district of Tamil Nadu (Fig. 22.1). This temple, like other early Cōḷa temples, has *Rāmāyaṇa*



Fig. 22.1. Vaṭapatraśāyī, *adhiṣṭhāna* of the Nāgeśvara temple, Kumbakonam, 886 CE. Courtesy: Anna Dallapiccola.

imagery in the main panels on the *adhiṣṭhāna*. In the panel on the lower row of the *adhiṣṭhāna*, child Kṛṣṇa is shown with his raised left foot, which he holds with his right hand. The banyan leaf (*vaṭapatra*) is clearly carved there. David Sanford, who has worked on the narrative panels of Cōḷa temples, points to the location of the Vaṭapatraśāyī panel in the lower series of the *adhiṣṭhāna* reliefs on the northern side, facing east (Sanford 1975, 120). It is paired with Kāliyadamana-Kṛṣṇa taming the snake Kāliya in the waters of the river Yamunā. Both these themes are associated with water. Importantly,

this depiction on the temple suggests that the sculptor was possibly familiar with the Āḷvārs and their devotional hymns about Vaṭapatraśāyī.

Significantly, Kumbakonam is among 10 of the 97 temple sites frequently referred to by the Āḷvārs. Also, the Kanchipuram cluster of temples, where we find a representation of the Vaṭapatraśāyī (as we note below), was under Āḷvār influence (Hardy 1983, 257-59, 261). The eighth-century hymns of Tirumaṅgai Āḷvār, who travelled from shrine to shrine, celebrate the Vaikuṅṭha Perumāḷ temple at Kāñcī (Dehejia 1988).

A lovely depiction of Vaṭapatraśāyī is seen on the Brahmapurīśvara temple in Pullamangai (Paśupatikoil, c. 910 CE).<sup>4</sup> It is carved on the *toraṇa* (symbolic and ornamental arch) above a Brahmā image in the cardinal *devakoṣṭha* (niche) facing north (Fig. 22.2, Col. pl. 12). The divine child is shown reclining on a *vaṭa* leaf but he is not sucking his toe. His hair is arranged in the same style as that seen in the image of child Kṛṣṇa at the Nāgeśvara temple, Kumbakonam. A sage sits to the left. Could it be Mārkaṇḍeya Ṛṣi or is he an Āḷvār? Some of the Āḷvārs have their hair dressed high in a *jaṭā* in their images and paintings. The sage Mārkaṇḍeya is generally portrayed in paintings with a beard and



Fig. 22.2. Vaṭapatraśāyī in a tympanum above Brahmā (a), detail (b), north wall of the Brahmapurīśvara temple, Pullamangai, c. 910 CE. Courtesy: Adalbert Gail. [Col. pl. 12].

a *jaṭā*, and as standing or swimming in the waters (Fig. 22.9). He is described in literature with his loose *jaṭās* amidst the turbulent waters of the sea at the time of *pralaya* (*Bhāgavata-purāṇa* XII.9.16-17) and is not shown seated quietly like a devotee as in this sculptural relief. Moreover, sage Mārkaṇḍeya in the context of the Vaṭapatrasāyī theme hardly features in Āḷvār literature.<sup>5</sup> The positioning of this Vaṭapatrasāyī relief above a Brahmā image at Pullamangai is noteworthy. Adalbert Gail says: “It is definitely not accidental that baby Kṛṣṇa appears together with Brahmā.”<sup>6</sup> Creation begins anew with Vaṭapatrasāyī when Brahmā appears on the scene, as mentioned in the *Mahābhārata* (III.187.45,ff.).

There is a depiction of Vaṭapatrasāyī in the arch above the *devakoṣṭha* of Liṅgodbhavamūrti in a small shrine, probably of the Cōḷa period (c. 9th-10th century), within the Ekāmranātha temple complex at Kanchipuram.<sup>7</sup> There are other temples of the early Cōḷa period at several places, such as at Srinivasanallur, Kilaiyur, Kilappaluvur, Erumbur, and Gramam, but the depiction of Vaṭapatrasāyī is not known from there. Even the *torāṇa* over the Brahmā reliefs of these temples do not show this

theme. The Bilvanātheśvara temple at Tiruvallam built during the third phase of the Cōḷa temple art (c. late 10th-11th century) contains a sculptural relief of Śiva-Bhikṣāṭana and a *ṛṣi-patni* (wife of a sage) in the arched space above the Brahmā relief, but not Vaṭapatrasāyī (Barrett 1974, 106, pl. 73).

Thus, we can say that it is only in scattered examples of the 9th-10th centuries that the Vaṭapatrasāyī theme appears in the sculptural art of the Cōḷa temples of South India. But being the earliest known representations of the theme in temple art, and in the context of Āḷvār influence, these are of importance. In this connection, we may note the Cōḷa metal sculptures of child Kṛṣṇa sucking his toe, though in these he is not shown on the banyan leaf. These could possibly represent the “Santāna-Gopāla” figures worshipped by young women in temples for begetting children. Such images are found from the 12th century, i.e. the late Cōḷa period onwards.<sup>8</sup>

There is an interesting depiction of Vaṭapatrasāyī on the Cennakeśava temple at Belur (c. 1117 CE). It is seen in the *makara-torāṇa*<sup>9</sup> above the image of Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa (Fig. 22.3). The child



Fig. 22.3. Vaṭapatrasāyī within a *makara-torāṇa* above the image of Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa (a), detail (b), Cennakeśava temple, Belur, 1117 CE. Courtesy: Saili Palande-Datar.

is reclining on a *vaṭa* leaf, holding his right foot with two hands and sucking his toe. His stomach is quite big and noticeable, reminding us of the Āḷvār hymn quoted above, in which it is mentioned that he swallowed all the seven worlds at the time of *pralaya*.

Some more representations of the Vaṭapatraśāyī theme are seen in the 16th-century sculptures of Vijayanagara and mural paintings of Lepakshi. However, sage Mārkaṇḍeya does not appear near the divine child in these representations. At Vijayanagara, on the grand Kṛṣṇa temple built by Emperor Kṛṣṇadevarāya (1510-29 CE), there is a depiction of child Kṛṣṇa standing and sucking his toe, but a leaf is not shown and the child does not wear a crown (Fig. 22.4). The temple is dated to 1515 CE, so this is the earliest known image of Kṛṣṇa sucking his toe at Vijayanagara. Notably, Emperor Kṛṣṇadevarāya was an ardent devotee of Āṇḍāl and wrote a Telugu poem, *Amuktamalyada*, on her life. So, he could have been influenced by Āṇḍāl's devotional hymns on Vaṭapatraśāyī.

Another representation of the theme at Vijayanagara, some years later than that of the Kṛṣṇa temple, is on the plinth of the *maṇḍapa* (hall) of the Viṭṭhala temple of 1554 CE, in which Kṛṣṇa is shown reclining on a banyan leaf (Fig. 22.5). He has raised his left leg up and holds it with his right hand (Vergheese 2000, 251-57). In this context, we may



Fig. 22.4. Bālakṛṣṇa sucking his toe, Kṛṣṇa temple, Vijayanagara, 1515 CE. Courtesy: K.K. Maheshwari.



Fig. 22.5. Vaṭapatraśāyī, Vijayanagara, Viṭṭhala temple, plinth of the *maṇḍapa*, 1554 CE. Courtesy: Anila Vergheese.

note that a 10-day festival for the recitation of the *Prabandham*, hymns of the Āḷvār, was introduced in the Viṭṭhala temple in 1554 CE. Images of the Āḷvār were also consecrated in the temple. Besides the shrine of the Āḷvār within the Viṭṭhala temple complex, there is also inscriptional evidence of the existence of shrines of the first three Āḷvār, and of the Āḷvār Tirumaṅgai, Nammāḷvār, and Tirumaliśai around the Viṭṭhala temple complex (Vergheese 2000, 174-75).

We may mention that Vaṭapatraśāyī Kṛṣṇa has been depicted in a painting on the Vīrabhadra temple at Lepakshi of around 1530-40 CE, during the time of the Vijayanagara king Acyutadevarāya.<sup>10</sup> Here, the child Kṛṣṇa is not portrayed in small size as in the sculptural reliefs, but in the same size as that of his human devotees, possibly donors, standing nearby, thus giving him considerable importance in the composition. In the Vijayanagara period again, there is a sweet and tiny sculpture of Vaṭapatraśāyī on the plinth of the Khetapai Nārāyaṇa temple at Bhatkal in coastal Karnataka (Fig. 22.6).<sup>11</sup> It is dated to c. 1540 CE.

There is a depiction of Vaṭapatraśāyī on a pillar of the Ādināthasvāmī temple at Āḷvār Tirunagari (Fig. 22.7) in the Thoothukudi district of Tamil Nadu. The temple is dedicated to Viṣṇu as Ādināthasvāmī and its present structure is built in



Fig. 22.6. Vaṭapatraśāyī on the plinth, Khetapai Nārāyaṇa temple, Bhatkal, c. 1540 CE. Courtesy: Anila Verghese.

medieval Pāṇḍya style (c. 1500 CE). This is situated on the Tāmraparṇī river, 20 miles east of Tirunelveli. The Tāmraparṇī river reminds us of the passage from the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* (1.5.38-41) mentioned above, referring to Vaiṣṇava mystics (Āḷvārs). It was the birth place of Nammāḷvār, whose shrine exists from the time of the Pāṇḍya ruler Jaṭāvarman Kulaśekhara (1190-1220 CE) (Champakalakshmi 1981, 244).

The Jalakanteśvara temple (Jvarakhaṇḍeśvara in an inscription) at Vellore (Michell 1995, 82-84) in North Arcot district, datable to c. third quarter of the 16th century, preserves a very significant representation of the Vaṭapatraśāyī theme. Not only are there three depictions of Vaṭapatraśāyī on the colonnades of the outer *prākāra* (walled enclosure) of this temple but, as Dr. Anila Verghese informs me, one of these is carved on the same pillar and in the proximity of a sculptural relief of Śeṣaśāyī Viṣṇu (Fig. 22.8). This reminds us of the positioning of Vaṭapatraśāyī and Śeṣaśāyī in the paintings of the *Kalāpustaka* of Nepal (c.1600 CE; cf. Pal 1985, 22-23, fig. 1; Desai 2013, 32, 40, note 5) and the *Jñāneśvarī* of Nagpur, dated 1763 CE (Fig. 22.9; for a colour reproduction, see Desai 2013, 33-34, fig. 2.2), which point to the cosmic aspect of the theme. The juxtaposition of Vaṭapatraśāyī and Śeṣaśāyī indicates the beginning of the creation of the universe. The

*Jñāneśvarī* presents Vaṭapatraśāyī along with an invocation to *Oṃ* (sacred syllable and sound). The artist of this manuscript elucidates the abstract idea of *Ādyā*, the First Principle, by including a picture of the divine child on the banyan leaf. Vaṭapatraśāyī is conceived of as *Ādyā*. At Gingee (Senji) in Villupuram district, the east *gopura* (gateway) of the Veṅkaṭaramaṇa temple (mid-16th century) has a depiction of the Vaṭapatraśāyī at the commencement of the panel (Fig. 22.10) similar to what the *Jñāneśvarī* manuscript has in its opening page, indicating the beginning of creation. This scene is followed by a sculptural relief of the goddess Lakṣmī anointed by elephants.

By this time, the theme was depicted in several paintings in many regions of India (Desai 2013). Its early appearance in painting is noteworthy in the *Bālagopālastuti* manuscript illustrated in western India in 1450 CE (Desai 2013, 31, fig. 2.1). We have mentioned its representation in the *Kalāpustaka* of Nepal, and in the *Jñāneśvarī* on a starting page, recognizing Vaṭapatraśāyī as “*Ādyā*”. The world of Mārkaṇḍeya Ṛṣi and his *darśan* (devotional act of seeing) of Bāla-Mukunda is colourfully and vividly depicted by the artist Sahibdin of Mewar in his rendering of the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* in 1648 CE.

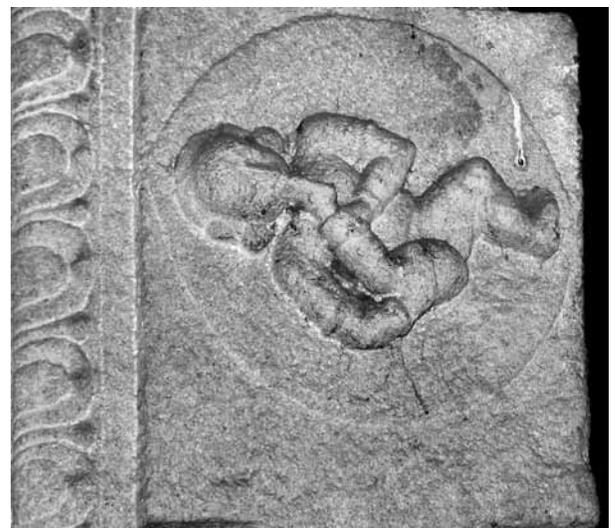


Fig. 22.7. Vaṭapatraśāyī on pillar, Āḷvār Tirunagari, Ādināthasvāmi temple, c. 1500 CE. Courtesy: Archana Venkatesan.

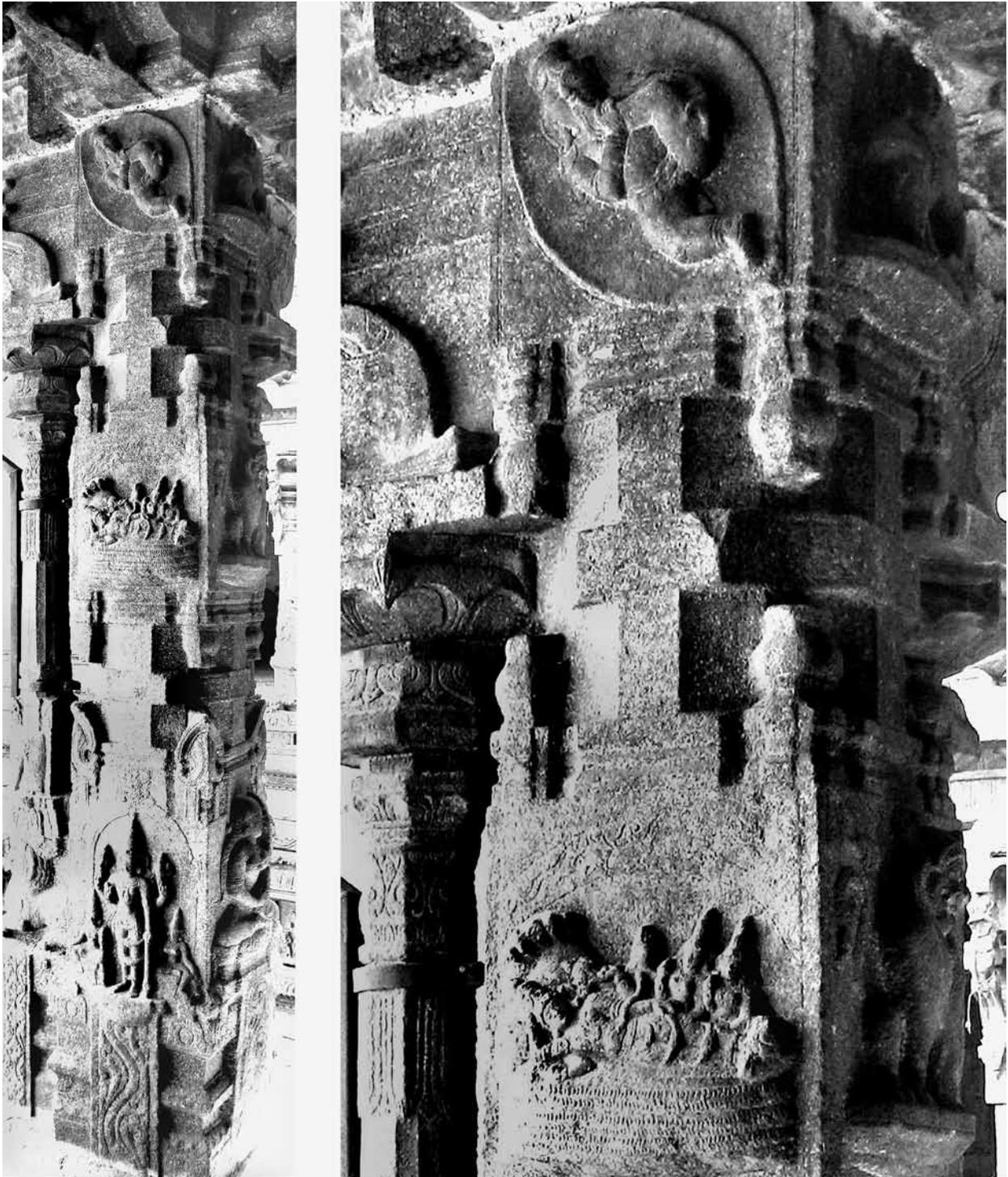


Fig. 22.8. Vaṭapatraśāyī, Vellore, Jalakanteśvara temple (a), detail (b), c. third quarter, 16th century. Courtesy: Anna Dallapiccola.

The theme is beautifully presented in the Pahari paintings of the 18th century and in devotional paintings and *pichavais* of Nathadvara (Desai 2013, 31, fig. 2.2-2.5).

Moreover, what is significant to note is that the temple sculptures do not seem to represent the vision of sage Mārkaṇḍeya, as for instance presented in the Pahārī paintings, in the *Jñāneśvarī*,



Fig. 22.9. Vaṭapatraśāyī and Śeṣaśāyī, copy of a painting on the starting page of *Jñāneśvarī* from Nagpur, 1763 CE, published by the Central Museum, Nagpur, in *Śatābda Kaumudī Centenary Volume*, edited by P.M. Joshi, V.V. Mirashi, and M.G. Dikshit, 1964.

and other manuscripts. A devotee is shown near Kṛṣṇa reclining on the banyan leaf only on the Brahmapurīśvara temple at Pullamangai, but not in other portrayals in sculpture. The inspiration is not the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* or the *Matsya-purāṇa*, but possibly Āḷvār *bhakti*. In the devotional hymns of the Āḷvārs, the sage Mārkaṇḍeya is hardly mentioned. Also, it is noteworthy that sculptors depict only the *vaṭa* leaf on which the child rests, whereas painters show the child reclining on either the *vaṭa* or the *pīpal* (*ficus religiosa*) leaf.

We can see that even when, from the 15th century onwards, there were widespread depictions of the theme in the medium of painting in many regions of India, both in the South and in the North, we come across very few representations of the theme in the sculptural art of temples, and those too are restricted to southern India. So far, I have not come across the representation of Vaṭapatraśāyī in any North Indian temple.

But we would like to mention the belief prevalent at Prayāg (Allahabad) on the confluence of the rivers Gaṅgā and Yamunā, and at Gaya in Bihar, that at the time of *pralaya*, the cyclical dissolution of the universe, Viṣṇu sleeps on the leaf of the immortal banyan tree, the Akṣayavaṭa. In



Fig. 22.10. Vaṭapatraśāyī in the east *gopura* of Veṅkaṭarāmana temple (a), detail (b), Gingee, mid-16th century. Courtesy: Anna Dallapiccola.

mythology, sage Mārkaṇḍeya has a *darśan* of the divine child on the banyan leaf near the Akṣayavaṭa. At Prayāg, Brahmā and his sons are worshipped on the roots of the Akṣayavaṭa. Even so, the Nāgara temples of northern India do not represent this cosmological theme of Vaṭapatraśāyī.

The sculptural depictions of Vaṭapatraśāyī in South India are small, in relief, and seen on the base mouldings, *toraṇas*, or pillars. But, as worshipped in

the shrine of Vaṭapatraśāyī at Srivilliputtur, which is associated with Periyālvār and Āṇḍāl, the present image in the sanctum is that of Viṣṇu reclining on Śeṣa, with a miniature *vaṭa* tree at the base of the image. The temple dedicated to Āṇḍāl (present structure, c. 17th century) is adjacent to it and is crowded by devotees. The infant Kṛṣṇa reclining on a leaf is seen on a pillar in one of the *maṇḍapas* (halls) of the Āṇḍāl temple.<sup>12</sup>

#### NOTES

1. See Desai (2013). The sections and numbers of the epic and purāṇic texts cited here are as per the following editions: Sukhthankar (1942) for the *Mahābhārata*; *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, in *Poṭhi* format, 1867; and Vasu *et al.* (1972) for the *Matsya-purāṇa*.
2. See Venkatachari (2006, 84-88) for the Ālvār hymns discussed in this paragraph. The Ālvārs sang 4000 hymns of Viṣṇu, which are collected under the title *Dīvyā Prabandham*.
3. For the translated verses quoted in this paragraph, see Dehejia (1990, 79, 136): 'the baby lies on the banyan leaf', vv. 14, 15, 79, 135, and 136; and Venkatesan (2010, 76, 133): *Tiruppāvai*, v. 26: 'lord who floats upon a banyan leaf'.
4. See Harle (1958a and 1958b); Barrett (1974, 70-71); and Gail (2014, 37-38, 44-45, figs. 9-10).
5. Based on personal communication in 2013 with Dr. Archana Venkatesan, who has researched on Āṇḍāl hymns.
6. Gail (2014, 38) refers to *Mahabharata* (III.187.38-40), and Buitenen (1975, 592).
7. The photograph and information have been given by Dr. Anila Verghese and Dr. Anna Dallapiccola. But as the figure is in very low relief, the photograph is not sharp and it is not reproduced here.
8. Nagaswamy (1983, 162, figs. 174-76) shows a 12th-century bronze of baby Kṛṣṇa sucking his toe, in the collection of the State Archaeology Department, Tamil Nadu. Also, I saw three such late Cōḷa bronzes with a private collector in Mumbai.
9. Arch emerging from the jaws of hybrid crocodilian creatures.
10. Dr. Anna Dallapiccola has given me a picture of the depiction of Vaṭapatraśāyī at Lepakshi. See also Gopala Rao (1969, 80), Sivaramamurti (1968, 85; 1985, 32-33), and Hanumantha Rao (2004, 79 and fig. 4, A2) for its location on the ceiling of the *nātyamaṇḍapa*. The latter author refers to another painting of the Vijayanagara period in the Srirangam temple (Hanumantha Rao 2004, 79, 96, note 21).
11. Information and photo by Dr. Anila Verghese.
12. Based on personal communication with Dr. Archana Venkatesan in 2014, and also my visit to the temple in December 2011 with her.

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