The Lord on the Leaf

Devangana Desai

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...
Andal

It is a magnificent imagery: a baby reclining on the vata (banyan, Ficus indica) leaf that is floating on the primordial waters of the vast ocean. Who is this miraculous child?

The story is very vividly narrated in the Mahabharata ("Vanaparva": ch. 186), Matsya Purana (ch. 167), and the Bhagavata Purana (XII: ch. 8, 9). In the interlude between the Dissolution (pralaya) and the Recreation of the universe, Visnu sleeps like a spider that has drawn back the thread into itself. The god has consumed the web of the universe. The manifest world has been absorbed in him. Only the great sage Markandeya, who has a boon of immortality from Siva, roams endlessly in the universe inside the body of Visnu. At one point the sage slips from the open mouth of sleeping Visnu into the infinite sea, in the immense darkness.

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 of a banyan tree. The child speaks to him: "O Markandeya, I know that you are weary... I shall give you repose, I am pleased with you." And he opens his mouth. In the stomach of the divine child, the sage sees the world as it was before. He wanders for a hundred years but does not see any end to the child's body. He prays for protection, and is ejected from the boy's mouth.

The divine child reveals himself to the sage as Narayana, the Primeval Being, who is the source of the universe and who consumes the universe. In the Matsya Purana (1981) the child says: "I create the entire universe at the end of each yuga (eon) and then support it...I am Om." He suddenly swallows the sage. The sage rests there in his belly in peace. He hears the sound "Hamsa", with inhalation and exhalation of the divine being. "I am known as the eternal Hamsa" (ch. 167).

A different version is seen in the Bhagavata Purana (XII: 8, 9). Markandeya Rishi desires to have a vision of the maya (deluding power) of the Supreme. As soon as Nara and Narayana grant him
boon, there is a huge deluge, and all creatures are dead. The sage alone moves for millions of years in darkness. Then he sees a young banyan (nyagrodhapota) tree adorned with leaves and fruits. On its north-east branch on a hollow leaf, he is amazed to see a lotus-faced baby. The sage is joyous and goes closer to the child. The child gulps him in with an inhalation where the sage sees the universe in his belly. The child breathes him out with an exhalation, and he falls in the dark sea. There again he sees the banyan tree and the babe lying on a hollow leaf. The sage out of love tries to embrace the child, but the child disappears. The deluge too disappears and he finds himself in his own hermitage.

In the context of the sculptural and pictorial depictions of the theme, it is important for us to note that in the Mahabharata and the Matsya Purana, the child is seen on a branch of a banyan tree, while in the Bhagavata Purana he is lying on a leaf of the tree, formed in the shape of a cup (vatapatraputa).

Historically, the theme of vatapatra was popularized by the Alvars, the Tamil poet-saints of south India, who invoked the baby Krishna as the Lord of the Banyan Leaf in their hymns. In the eighth century, Periya Alvar adored Visnu as Vatapatrasayi, the god reclining on the banyan leaf, in the temple called by that name, at Srivilliputtur near Madurai. His foster daughter Andal composed passionate hymns addressed to Krishna of Gokul, referring to him in several verses as "One lying on the banyan leaf".⁴ Andal's Tiruppavai is a garland of verses for Krishna. It is Krishna of Gokul, Govinda, whom Andal invokes in her hymns. She does not make a clear distinction between Krishna and Visnu-Narayana (Yenkatesan 2010: 83). It may be noted that the sage Markandeya in the story in the Mahabharata and the Puranas does not feature in these hymns.

Curiously, such a theme of great cosmological, philosophical and devotional significance is not represented in the contemporaneous art of the Pallavas, Pandyas or Chalukyas. There was no representation of the infant Krishna as Vatapatrasayi in the early visual art of India. It is only in scattered examples in the ninth–tenth centuries that the theme appears in the sculptural art of the Chola temples of south India. Some more representations of the theme are seen in the sculptures of Vijayanagara and mural paintings of Lepakshi in the sixteenth century. However, the sage Markandeya does not appear along with the divine child in these representations.

Vata-Krishna in Painting

Balagopa-stuti

The first pictures of the divine child are seen in the manuscripts of the Balagopa-stuti in western India in the fifteenth century. The Balagopa-stuti is an anthology of Krishna-bhakti hymns of short four-line Sanskrit stanzas.

Fig. 2.1 Balagopa-stuti, c. 1450–1480, Wellcome Library, London. Courtesy: Wellcome Library, London.
composed or compiled by the south Indian saint-poet Bilvamangala or Lila-suka. He lived between c. 1220 and 1300 in Travancore region of Kerala, and travelled to religious centres from the south to the north, singing erotic-mystic hymns in praise of Balagopala and his sports (liyas) (Majumdar 1942: 1-3; 1947-48: 33-61). These devotional hymns, about 320 in number, became widely popular and swept across not only southern India, but also Bengal, Odisha and Gujarat. Both Chaitanya and Vallabhacharya, the foremost advocates of Krishna-bhakti, were moved by these devotional hymns.

Twelve illustrated manuscripts of the Balagopala-stuti have been recovered from Gujarat, dating from c. 1425 to 1625 (Gadon 1983; Agrawal, 1998-99; 2006: 59 ff). These are now dispersed in the museums and private collections of India and abroad. Gujarat formed a link between the south and the north in the transmission of Krishna-bhakti. Depiction of Vatasyai is seen in at least three of these manuscripts, namely, in the Baroda Museum and Picture Gallery (c. 1450), in the Bharat Kala Bhavan, Varanasi, Acc. No. 9400, (c. 1480), and the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine, London, (c. 1450-80) (fig. 2.1). This particular folio is missing in the earlier manuscript in the Boston Museum (c. 1425), and also in the manuscript of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalya, Mumbai.

The Balagopala-stuti paintings of Vatasyai are conventionalized and have almost the same iconography: the baby Krishna is shown lying on top of the banyan tree, as distinct from his representations on a solitary leaf generally seen earlier in the sculptural art of the Cholas, and later in the paintings of Nathdwara, Company School and others.

The waters of the primeval ocean are indicated by lines crossing at various angles and by the presence of turtles. But the theme of Markandeya’s vision is not represented in the Balagopala-stuti paintings.

On the other hand, the accompanying stanza reads (folio 25, recto, st. 128, 129. l, 38) (Wilson 1973):

"The moon is friend to the whole world, and his enmity with the lotus is strange;"

"thinks the magician who lies in his crib of fig tree leaves
and joins his lotus foot to his moon face to unite them as it were.

May he give you blessing."

Also another stanza (verse 106, Wilson: 127):

Why do great sages turn away from nectar and drink the water from my lotus feet? thought the baby, Gopala bala, and eagerly sucked his lotus foot.

May he bless you with good fortune.

Kalapustaka

The manuscript of the Kalapustaka (c. 1600) from Nepal illustrating the Bhagavata Purana episodes is thematically significant as it starts with the folio of Markandeya’s vision of Visnu-Krishna on a branch of nyagrodha tree. It is appropriately the first illustration of the book, for it symbolizes the beginning anew of creation, after Maha-pralaya (Great Dissolution). As in the story of the Mahabharata, the divinity is on a branch of the tree, not on its leaf (patra).

Markandeya Rishi is shown half immersed in water, with his hands raised, and also in a continuous narration seated on another branch of the tree, closer to the reclining two-armed Visnu-Krisna.

The next compartment shows four-armed Visnu, reclining on the serpent Sesa. Brahma emerges from a full-blown lotus springing from Visnu’s navel. The juxtaposition of Vata/pipali and Sesasi is significant indicating the beginning of the creation of the universe.

Jnanesvari

A very important representation of the theme is seen in the opening folio of the manuscript of the Jnanesvari, dated Shaka 1685, 1763 CE at Nagapattana, i.e. Nagpur, in Maharashtra. This, so far the only known illustrated copy of the Jnanesvari, originally belonged to the Pothikhana of the Bhonsle rulers. The Nagpur Museum published an article on it by its curator in 1964, when the Jnanesvari manuscript was with a private collector in Nagpur city (Rode 1964: 74). Presently the manuscript is in the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, United States (Dye III 2001: 70-74).

The Jnanesvari is a commentary on the Bhagavad Gita by the thirteenth-century saint-poet Jnanesvara, addressed to the common people in the regional Marathi language. The text of Jnanesvari starts with a line: Om Namoji (Sri) Adya Vedapratipadaya. “Homage to Adya, the First Principle, which is propounded by the Vedas.”

How does the eighteenth-century artist of Nagpur illustrate this line? The text is not narrative as in the case of the Ramayana, Bhagavata Purana, or the Sakuntala story, which the Nagpur artists have illustrated (Rode 1964: 73). The artist of the Jnanesvari has to elucidate abstract ideas and philosophical concepts. He very aptly puts a picture of
Vatapatrasayi to illustrate this first verse (fig. 2.2). The Vatapatrasayi is conceived of as Adya, the First Principle.

The sage Markandeya is shown in distress, with his jata (‘matted locks’) loose, and flowing beard, swimming in the ocean, moving towards the Blue God lying on the floating leaf. Krisna is shown as a boy rather than an infant. His hair is tied in a knot as well as his tresses kept loose on sides. He wears a long vanamala or garland, and sucks the toe of his left foot.

Significantly, the artist juxtaposes the two forms, Vatapatrasayi and Visnu-Sesasayi, and further points to the cosmic aspect of the theme. Both these forms appear at the time of Mahapralaya, the great deluge at the end of the eon. Visnu reabsorbs the universe at the time of deluge, and then creates anew. The Jnanesvari painting, like that of the Kalapustaka, points to the beginning of the creation of the universe.

LEFT Fig. 2.2 Jnanesvari painted in Nagpur 1763 CE, opening page. From Shatabda Kaumudi, 1964 (publication by the Nagpur Museum). Courtesy: Directorate of Archaeology and Museums in Maharashtra

RIGHT Fig. 2.3 Pahari painting, from a workshop at Mankot, mid 18th century. Govt. Museum and Art Gallery, Chandigarh. Courtesy: Govt. Museum and Art Gallery, Chandigarh. Photograph courtesy: Prof. B. N. Goswamy

Pahari Paintings
An altogether different treatment to the theme, a sophisticated and lyrical portrayal, is seen in the art of the Punjab Hills, mostly at Mankot and Guler. Compared to the rendering of the Balagopal-stuti and the Jnanesvari, the Pahari artists, possibly from a family workshop of Seu-Nainsukh, create works of refinement and great delicacy (Goswamy 1986). After all it was a court art for the small states of the Punjab Hills, where artists worked in close and intimate touch with their patrons.
Fig. 2.4 Nathdwara, c. 1900. Collection of Amit Ambalal, Ahmedabad. Courtesy: Amit Ambalal, Ahmedabad
Fig. 2.5 Pichhwai of Sarad Purnima, Sarabhai Foundation, Ahmedabad. Courtesy: Sarabhai Foundation, Ahmedabad.
LEFT Fig. 2.6 Cloth painting, Tirupati School, c. 1725, Obverse.
Jagdish and Kamla Mittal Museum of Indian Art, Hyderabad.
Courtesy: Jagdish and Kamla Mittal Museum of Indian Art, Hyderabad

RIGHT Fig. 2.7 Cloth painting, Tirupati School, c. 1725, Reverse.
Jagdish and Kamla Mittal Museum of Indian Art, Hyderabad.
Courtesy: Jagdish and Kamla Mittal Museum of Indian Art, Hyderabad

FACING PAGE Fig. 2.8 Kashmir Scroll depicting cakras, 19th century.
The format or composition of the Pahari paintings of Markandeya's vision is quite distinctive and different from its depiction in other regions. It is not just one leaf, but a five- or three-leafed branch of a banyan or pipal tree that is depicted by the artist. The baby Krishna does not wear any mukuta or headgear, but puts on a flower garland and ornaments on wrists and ankles. The waters swirling in the background indicate the deluge. Interestingly, this chaotic scene is enclosed by the Pahari artist, with decorative borders.

There are several separate folios of the theme of Markandeya's vision dating from the middle of the eighteenth century. A painting with a branch of three pipal leaves in the vast ocean (fig. 23), possibly from Mankot, in the Government Museum and Art Gallery, Chandigarh, is an uncommon representation. The baby Krishna is represented in profile, as also the sage Markandeya on another leaf below. The child is looking in a different direction, not towards the sage, but the sage stands with folded hands in anjali mudra, looking up towards the divine child. His black hair is tied up in a knot, unlike other depictions of the sage, where he is shown with white loose jata. The waves of the waters of Dissolution of the Universe are shown decoratively.

In another painting, No. 170, a solitary banyan tree is represented by five leaves and fruits in the tumultuous ocean of pralaya. Compared to the previous picture, there is more intimacy between the child and the bewildered sage, who look at each other. The child sucks his toe, holding his foot by two hands as described in the Bhagavata Purana. The waters are more realistic than in the previous picture. The painting is assigned to the fourth quarter of the eighteenth century (Goswamy 1986: fig. 177). Similar paintings are seen in the Bharat Kala Bhavan, Varanasi; the Indian Museum, Kolkata; the Rietberg Museum, Zurich, RVI 1372; and in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1955-11-1, c. 1775-1800.

There is yet another painting with a different composition in the Bharat Kala Bhavan, Varanasi, Acc. No. 66, and a similar one, but of a later date, in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1994-148-492, originally with Stella Kramrisch, who assigned it to Guler School, c. 1790? These show a five-leafed branch of a vata tree enclosed in the egg-shaped space or brahmanda, and decoratively bordered with floral design.

Nathdwara
The Vatapatrasayi Krishna or Bala-Mukunda is depicted from the eighteenth century in paintings of Nathdwara in Rajasthan, a great centre of Vallabha Sampradaya. One of the paintings of early twentieth century in my collection shows the haloed child lying on the banyan leaf, floating in the primordial ocean. He does not wear a crown or turban seen in some other paintings of Nathdwara. The sage Markandeya, standing half submerged in water, is shown praying to him.

There are several representations of the divine child reclining on the banyan or pipal leaf from Nathdwara. One of these, a drawing, of c. 1830 is in the collection of Amit Ambalal (Ambalal 1987: 37). Another image (fig. 24) of c. 1900, shows baby Krishna with a typical pagh or turban of the region, holding the right leg with two hands as described in the Bhagavata Purana. Interestingly, the lotus flowers and plants indicate a pond, rather than the cosmic ocean. These are placid scenes, rather than chaotic. The leaf is sharply divided by lines.

Pichhvais
Bala-Mukunda is represented in the pichhvais or wall hangings of Srinathji havelis, particularly in those used on the festival of Sarad Purnima, the autumnal full moon day, depicting Rasa-lila, the great circular dance. Significantly, the divine child on the leaf is shown on the top centre of the iconic Srinathji, along with twenty-four utsavas or seasonal festivals One of these pichhvais (fig. 2.5) in the collection of
The Lord on the Leaf

The Kashmîr Scroll depicting Cakras
This paper scroll of nineteenth century painted in folk style (fig. 2.8) from Kashmir, depicting cakras (Pal 2007) or various energy centres, now in the Victoria and Albert Museum (15.8-1987), is important; first, because the baby Krishna is shown on a ficus tree, rather than on its leaf, as in the Balagopala-stuti (see, fig. 2.1), and secondly, because the artist of the scroll, having realized the significance of this theme, begins his text with this scene, like the artists of the Jñanesvari (see, fig. 2.2).

The grey-haired sage Markandeya is shown clinging to the tree with his legs immersed in water. The Kashmir artist shows the sea like a lotus pond.

Company Paintings
The subject of the infant Krishna lying on the banyan leaf sucking his toe is widely seen in the paintings produced under the patronage of the British East India Company. Some of these are inscribed with titles in Telugu language. A painting on paper from Trichinopoly, c. 1825, in the Victoria & Albert Museum, (IM 438-1923), London, shows the baby on the banyan leaf floating on the waters, full with crocodiles and fish. The sage Markandeya, smaller in size than a crocodile, swims on top side of the picture (fig. 2.9). Interestingly, Krishna rests his head on a bolster, and has a foot-rest too. He holds a flower in his right hand. This painting is from a series of one-hundred drawings of Hindu deities created in south India (Archer 1992).

A pen and ink drawing from Tanjavur in the collection of the British Museum (Asia 1962, 1231.012.31) illustrates the infant Krishna on a banyan leaf sucking his toe, with a cushion to support his head. It is inscribed in Telugu and the translation is as follows: “Resplendent as a million suns Sri Krishna reclines on the vata leaf [floating] on the ocean.”

The Narayana aspect is clearly recognized in the Company paintings and drawings. E. Moor’s book illustrates a drawing of the divine child on the leaf (Moor 1810). Birdwood (1880) illustrated the same picture (plate C) in his book, The Industrial Arts of India. Both Moor and Birdwood called the child “Narayana”, and put it under the Puranic gods.

Is it the End of the Universe or the Beginning of New Creation? Cosmological Significance—The Narayana aspect:
In the Mahabharata and the Matsya Purana, the child reveals himself as Narayana. “Until Brahma is created, I take the form of a child, and when he is awakened, I become one with him to create the universe.” In the hymns of the Alvars,
the concept of Vatapatrasayi is closely associated with Visnu-Narayana. Champakalakshmi explains: “The sayana form... which symbolizes the highest or para aspect of Visnu and hence Narayana as para always takes either this [Sesasa yi] form or that of Vatapatrasayi, the latter being usually associated with Krishna” (1981: 69, 75).

The juxtaposition of the Vatapatrasayi and Sesasa yi, Visnu reclining on the coils of the serpent Sesha, seen in several illustrations of the theme, such as the Jnanesvari (fig. 2.2) and Kalapustaka, implies their close connection. In fact, in the Vatapatrasayi temple, the only temple by that name, at Srivilliputtur near Madurai, the sanctum has an image of Visnu who is reclining on the serpent, and shaded by a banyan tree.4 The infant form is not seen there. Again, a late eighteenth-century scroll from Telengana region depicts Visnu reclining on a pipal leaf (Cummins 2011: 107, fig. 35).

The inherent relationship of Vata-sayi and Sesasa yi continues and percolates in popular arts. In the Kalamkari of the coastal Andhra Pradesh of late eighteenth century, now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, Vata-Krisna and Visnu shaded by the serpent Sesha are shown near each other, as also in a recent appliqué work from Odisha in Tapi Collection, Surat.5

Referring to both these forms of Visnu, the distinguished iconographer T. A. Gopinatha Rao wrote in 1916: “It is interesting to compare this conception of God brooding upon the waters of chaos at the time of universal dissolution with that of Vata-patra-sayi, the infant god floating on a banyan leaf in the chaotic waters of the dissolved cosmos, assuring, as it were, that the dissolution of the cosmos is in fact the infancy of its evolution” (Rao 1916: 1, part 1, 264).

Significantly, the Vata-Krisna or Mukunda represents Adya, the First Principle in the Jnanesvari. We have noted that this manuscript from Nagpur, the Kalapustaka from Nepal, and the Kashmir scroll of cakras open with an illustration of Krisna/Visnu on the banyan leaf or tree.

Just as these texts begin with Vata-Krisna, the Bhagavata Purana ends with this episode of Markandeya’s vision of the cosmic Bala-Mukunda, in its twelfth skandha (section). He is Kala (Time) who devours the universe and is also the seed of creation. The pichhvais of Nathdwara symbolically show the Bala-Mukunda on a pipal leaf above the iconic Srinathji, symbolizing the creative principle. Sri Shyam Manoharji mentioned during a discussion the “pulsating theory of the universe”, which refers to the rhythmic expansion and contraction of the universe. It is not a linear but a circular process. Pralaya is not the final end of the Universe. Bala-Mukunda is the seed of new creation. He is the aksara-brahmana, indestructible Supreme Being. Pralaya is not an end; it is the beginning of a new creation.

Notes
5. The manuscript is in the Cambridge University Library. U.K. (Pal, 1985: 23, fig. 1). Commenting on the painting, Pal writes: “The reclining figure is none other than Vishnu who is described in the Mahabharata as floating on the Nyagrodha (banyan) branch and in whose mouth the sage Markandeya discovered the universe.”
8. My uncle D. S. Kothari had commissioned this painting in Nathdwara in 1930.
11. Personal conversation.
12. Welch 1985: 58; In his recent communication to me Jagdish Mittal confirmed that these cotton panels are not from Seringapatnam as he earlier mentioned, but belong to the Tirupati School, c. 1725.
13. I thank Dr Anna Dallapiccola for information on this drawing in the British Museum.
14. Personal observation on the visit to this temple.
15. I thank Dr Anna Dallapiccola for information on the V&A Kalamkari, and Shilpa Shah for information on Tapi Collection object.