DIVINE CHILD
Sage Markandeya and the Divine Child in the 17th century Illustrated Manuscripts

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An important episode in the *Mahabharata* describes the interlude between the Dissolution and the Recreation of the Universe as a silent moment when the whole cosmos is at rest. Lord Vishnu sleeps like a spider that has drawn the thread back into itself. In the form of a child, he rests on a tree in the ocean after completing the miraculous act of swallowing the Universe for its safe keeping. Only sage Markandeya, who has the boon of immortality, lives roaming endlessly in the universe inside the body of Vishnu. At one point the sage slips from the open mouth of the sleeping Vishnu into the infinite sea. As he moves about for thousands 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 (*Mahabharata, Razmnama*) or a leaf (*Bhagavata Purana*) of a banyan tree. The child reveals himself to the sage as Narayana, the Primeval Being, who creates the universe and also consumes it. The child says, “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” (*Mahabharata and Matsya Purana*). In the *Bhagavata Purana* (XII: 8, 9) Markandeya Rishi has a vision of the Divine Child as a result of the *Maya* of the Supreme. It represents a different version of the story.

This paper discusses the depiction of this episode in three 17th century illustrated manuscripts: the *Kalapustaka* (Book of Pictures) of Nepal (c. 1600) in the Cambridge University Library, UK, ADD 864,1 the *Razmnama* (CE 1605) in the Birla Academy of Art and Culture, Kolkata,2 and the *Bhagavata Purana* (CE 1648) in the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute (BORI), Pune.3 The first two manuscripts feature the story from the *Mahabharata* (*Vana Parva*, chapters 187-189), and the third one employs the narration from the *Bhagavata Purana* (XII, 8, 9).

Among early illustrated manuscripts, Bilvamangala’s *Balagopalastuti* (c. 1450-80)4 from Western India shows the infant lying on a banyan tree, surrounded by the ocean (Fig. 1). There is no mention or depiction of Markandeya Rishi. The verse says: “The moon is a 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 blessings.”5

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Fig. 1

*Balagopalastuti*, Western India, c. 1450-80 CE, Coll.: Wellcome Library, London
The Kalapustaka (Book of Pictures) is a manuscript with illustrations but no text. The folio illustrating the story of sage Markandeya is divided into horizontal panels. The upper panel features five divinities. The lower panel is divided into two compartments. The compartment on the left depicts sage Markandeya swimming in the primordial ocean of deluge and moving towards the crowned two-armed Vishnu-Krishna reclining on the branch of a tree (Fig. 2). The divinity is crowned, wears ornaments and yellow robes. His left leg is folded but he is not sucking his toe. Markandeya Rishi wears a tiara and ornaments. He is half immersed in water, with his hands raised in awe. He is also shown again – through the device of continuous narration – seated on a branch of the tree praying to the reclining Vishnu-Krishna. The Mahabharata describes Vishnu-Krishna as sitting on the shakha (branch) of the tree, not on its patra (leaf). Pratapaditya Pal who has illustrated this folio of the Kalapustaka writes: “The reclining figure is none other than Vishnu who is described in the Mahabharata as floating on the Nygrodha (banyan) branch and in whose mouth the sage Markandeya discovered the universe.”

The accompanying compartment shows the four-armed Vishnu, sleeping on the serpent Shesha. From his navel emerges a full-blown lotus on which Brahma sits. This is the beginning of the creation of the universe. The Divine Child tells Markandeya in the Mahabharata that when Brahma emerges he becomes one with him to create the universe.

It is significant to note that these two shayana (reclining) forms of Vishnu-Narayana – Vatapatrashayi and Sheshashayi – are revered together in Tamil devotional literature from the 8th century onwards. The saint-poet Periyalvar who worshipped in the Vatapatrashayi temple at Srivilliputur mentions: “The charming Lord... who lies on the banyan leaf, who sleeps (yoga-nidra) on the bed of Shesha in the blue sea...” Tirumoli, 2.6.6.

Also Tiruppan Alvar, a devotee of Ranganatha of Srirangam, sings his glory: “As infant you lay upon a leaf of the banyan tree devouring the seven worlds. You slumber upon the serpent couch at Srirangam.”

But in the visual arts, both in sculpture and painting, it is only during and after the 16th century that these two forms of Vishnu-Narayana are placed next to each other in the same composition. In this context it is noteworthy to refer to a sculptural representation of Vatapatrashayi and Sheshashayi juxtaposed together on a pillar of the Jalakanteshvara temple at Vellore in North Arcot district, Tamil Nadu, datable to c. third quarter of the 16th century.

A comparable conception is encountered in an illustration in the Jnaneshvari manuscript, originally from Nagpur in Maharashtra, dated CE 1763, which also juxtaposes the two forms of Vishnu-Narayana (Fig. 3). It is important to note that when placed together, the two forms of Vishnu – Vatapatrashayi and Sheshashayi with Brahma emerging from the blooming lotus – assume iconological significance, because the composition emphasizes the cosmic aspect of the theme.

We are reminded of a legend of the Srirangam temple noted by Ratan Parimoo in his book on Sculptures of Sesasayi Visnu. It describes Ranganatha (Vishnu) as Adi Purusha in blissful slumber, floating on the banyan leaf during the cosmic deluge, before setting in motion the cosmological process of creation.

Fig. 2 Kalapustaka, Nepal, c. 1600 CE, Coll.: Cambridge University Library, U.K.
Razmnama, The Birla Manuscript, CE 1605

*Razmnama*, a Persian translation of the Sanskrit text of the *Mahabharata*, was sponsored by the Mughal Emperor Akbar (c.1542-1605). Akbar encouraged translations into the Persian language of Sanskrit manuscripts such as the *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana* and *Rajatarangini*. Abdul Qadir Badauni (CE 1540 – 1615), historian and translator of the Hindu epics, mentions how the process of translating manuscripts into Persian involved several specialists and how Akbar assigned to him the translation of the *Mahabharata*.

This translation began in CE 1582 and the first draft was completed in 18 months in CE 1584. After about four years it was ready to be presented to Akbar in four lavishly bound volumes containing paintings by leading masters of the atelier. Akbar called the Persian translation of the *Mahabharata*, “*Razmnama* (The Book of War)”. Several copies of the *Razmnama* were illustrated. It has been estimated that the complete copy contained nearly 200 illustrations. The Imperial copy preserved in the Maharaja Sawai Man Singh II Museum in Jaipur has 168 illustrations. But, it does not contain the depiction of the theme of Markandeya Rishi.

The episode of sage Markandeya occurs only in the Birla copy of the *Razmnama*. This copy is bound in three volumes. The chapter corresponding to the Vana Parva of the *Mahabharata*, in which the story is narrated, is in the first volume of this manuscript. There are 81 illustrations in the Birla manuscript, less than half the 168 images in the Imperial copy. The subjects vary widely between the Imperial copy and the Birla manuscript. Asok
Fig. 4 Razmnama, Birla manuscript, folio 95v, Artist: Ghulam Ali, 1605 CE, 30.9 x 17.9 cms, Coll. and Photo Courtesy: Birla Academy of Art and Culture, Kolkata
Kumar Das states that “the makers of the Birla copy did not have any information about the Akbari manuscript and the illustrations were planned without referring to any previous miniature cycles.”

Importantly, the Birla manuscript contains a full-page illustration of the story of “Markandeya and the Great Deluge” (Fig. 4). The folio 95v and its inscription amal Ghulam Ali indicates that the artist was Ghulam Ali. The narration in the painting begins from the bottom and proceeds upwards. The sage is swimming in the waters of the primeval ocean of pralaya, surrounded by fish and crocodile. He sees a banyan tree and a child on its branch. The sage is shown standing, looking up at the Divine Child, who is lying on a cot tied to the branch of the banyan tree. The child’s head lies on a bolster (pillow), and the bedcover has a floral design. He is not sucking his toe, as this is not mentioned in the text of the Mahabharata. He is clad in yellow robes. Asok Kumar Das says in personal correspondence: “I don’t think the artist followed the text properly and used ‘artistic licence’.” Unlike the depictions of Krishna or Vishnu in the other folios of the Razmnama, surprisingly, the complexion of the child is not dark blue.

In the top portion of the painting Markandeya Rishi is seen again standing waist deep in water, with his hands joined in anjali-mudra, bowing to the deity. According to the Mahabharata: “He sees again the radiant child, attired in yellow robes, with the entire jagat (universe) in his stomach, seated on the branch of the same banyan tree.” The Razmnama painting shows the deity on the tree, seated on a low platform stool, with a pillow back-rest, conversing with the sage. The raised forefinger of the left hand points upwards to convey a message. Here he does not look like a child, but a youth. He is shown with a swollen stomach, as he has swallowed the universe. He has “faint details of the living universe painted on his abdomen”.

The waves below are shown interestingly. The fish and crocodile do not distract the viewer. The leaves of the banyan tree are meticulously painted.

The picture-space in the Razmnama folio is clearly divided into two planes: that of the vast ocean and that of the banyan tree. This is the most unique and unusual depiction of the episode. Its vertical format and sober and harmonious colours are in conformity with the Mughal Style.

The relationship of the sage and the child is more intimate in the Razmnama than for instance, in a composition of the Company style (19th century), in which the Divine Child is given great prominence while the sage, a small figure, in the right upper corner is seen swimming towards the child Krishna (Fig. 5).
Another notable manuscript relevant to our theme is the illustrated Bhagavata Purana from Mewar, dated 1648. The preserved four illustrated skandhas, VIII, IX, XI, XII, contain 334 folios, 128 paintings of which 88 are full-page illustrations, 21.5 x 39 cm, while some others are half and quarter page illustrations. This manuscript records the name of the scribe Jasavanta; and the place where it was copied: Udayapura or Udayapuranagara. Two illustrations are inscribed with the name of the artist Sahabadi or Sahabaji, identified with Sahibdin. Chitara Sahibdin’s name dominated the Mewar School during the first half of the 17th century, along with that of Manohar.

This manuscript was executed under the patronage of the Mewar ruler, Maharana Jagat Singh (1628-52), who, in addition to the Bhagavata Purana, sponsored the illustrated manuscripts of the various kandas of the Ramayana, and also built the magnificent Jagdish temple at Udaipur in 1651. Dr. Moti Chandra, writing on the Mewar painting in the 17th century, says: “The period of Jagat Singh I was the culminating period of this style…. The true glory of Mewar painting belongs to the period 1600-1700 AD, and forms a most notable chapter in the history of Indian Art.”

The Bhagavata Purana in its last Skandha XII, chapters 8 and 9, gives a detailed version of the story of Markandeya Rishi which differs from that of the Mahabharata as seen in the Kalapustaka and Razmnama.

In this illustrated Bhagavata Purana, the narration of the Markandeya episode is spread across five paintings. The costumes of the figures in these paintings are indigenous. The apsaras wear saris, and the dancers sport a tight fitting pyjama (lower garment), a blouse and an odhni (veil) covering their head. Female musicians play on cymbals and mridanga. The male vina player wears a dhoti. The brilliant colours make the paintings very rich and attractive. The illustrations closely correspond to the text. The correlation between word and picture or text and visuals is clearly noticeable in the following examples.

Text: The Bhagavata Purana (Skandha XII, chapter 8) describes the great achievements of the sage Markandeya, his austerities and study of the Vedic lore. It mentions his tapas (penance) performed for millions of years in a forest on the banks of the River Pushpbhadra near the Himalayas. Indra, the king of gods, is alarmed and fears that his kingdom will be taken away. To interrupt the sage’s penance, he sends his troupe of apsaras (celestial maidens) and gandharvas (celestial musicians) (verses 22-24). Kamadeva, the god of love, creates the ambiance of Vasanta (the Spring season) and the scented Malaya breeze. The apsara Punjikasthali plays with a number of kandukas (balls) “with her waist greatly challenged by

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Fig. 6  Markandeya Rishi is in penance and Indra tries to disturb him, Artist: Sahibdin or his workshop, Mewar, 1648 CE, Coll. and Courtesy: BORI, Pune
her heavy breasts". Running after the balls, with her eyes wandering here and there, the belt of her thin garment gets loosened (verses 26-27). The wreath of flowers falls from her hair. At this moment, Kamadeva is about to shoot his arrow, but fails to disturb the sage (verse 28).

Illustration: In the centre of the painting (Fig. 6) is sage Markandeya with long jatas, seated in padmasana and immersed in meditation. There is kakshavibhaga (zonal divisions) in the painting. In the top corner on the right, the space is painted blue, representing the sky, where Indra – with many eyes painted on his body – instructs the apsaras and gandharvas to go and disturb the sage. The narration then shifts to the earth where Markandeya sits meditating. Members of Indra’s retinue are accompanied by experts in vocal and instrumental music who play on the mridanga, lute and horns. The sage is surrounded by apsaras and the singers. The entire atmosphere is charged with Vasanta, the Spring. The trees bear new sprouts and blossoms. The artist has shown flowering trees and creepers with birds around. It is a colourful picture with the sage sitting unmoved by the advances of apsaras and musicians.

Text: When the sage concentrates his mind on the Lord by means of penance, to show him His grace, the Lord manifests Himself in the form of sages Nara and Narayana (verse 32). One of them is white and bearded and the other is dark and does not have a beard. They are clad in bark garments, and deerskin. They carry a water pot and a straight bamboo staff in their hands and have three-stranded sacred threads. Markandeya Rishi greets them by respectfully bowing to them (verses 33-34).

The Supreme Lord said: “We are perfectly satisfied about your steady adherence to the great vow... Please choose a boon to your liking...” (Skandha IX, verse 4). The venerable sage said: “You oh Lord of Lords....I am perfectly satisfied with having seen Your good Self. Nonetheless, I would like to have a vision of your Maya... (verses 5,6). The Nara and Narayana said with a smile to him, “tathastu” (So be it).

Illustration: The painting (Fig. 7) is divided into two registers, separated by the diagonally flowing river. In the upper register the artist shows the sage Markandeya seated in padmasana on the bank of the River Pushpabhadra and the manifestation of the dual gods, the four-armed Nara and Narayana.

In the bottom register of the painting, we see the gods seated. The hand gesture of the sage suggests his satisfaction and joy of having their darshana, but he wishes to see the Lord’s wondrous power, Maya. The hand gestures of gods seem to say “tathastu”, granting the fulfillment of the wish of the sage.
When the sage was performing his evening rituals on the bank of the Pushpabhadra, there started roaring blasts of wind, deafening claps of thunder and the oceans overflooded the earth, with fierce alligators moving around the sage. Markandeya alone survived (verses 10-15).

Illustration: The painting (Fig. 8) depicts the sage seated in meditation on a hillock while a storm is raging around him: trees are crashing, waves are rising high and fish are agitated.

Text: The sage moves in the stormy ocean with his matted locks scattered (verse 16). Suffering hunger and thirst, threatened by the presence of monstrous crocodiles and whales, and plagued by the winds, he moves about indefinitely in the infinite darkness. Hundreds and thousands of years pass with him in bewilderment wandering around in that Maya, that deluding energy of Vishnu (verse 19).

One day, as he is roaming about in the waters, he spots upon a raised mound of earth a beautiful young banyan tree with fruits and blossoms (verse 21). Upon a branch of it toward the northeast he sees an infant boy lying within the fold of a leaf swallowing the darkness with his brilliant splendor. He has a beautiful lotus face, conch shell-striped throat, broad chest, fine nose and beautiful eyebrows. ...His beautiful shell-shaped ears have pomegranate flowers as earrings... he sees how the infant with the graceful fingers of his two hands grabs one of his lotus feet and places it in his mouth (verse 26). When he sees the baby his weariness is dispelled instantly....He asks himself who that wonderful appearance could be and goes straight to the child to find an answer (verse 27).

Illustration: In the painting (Fig. 9) the sage is shown swimming in the vast ocean, and sees a banyan tree, and the infant on a fold of a leaf (patra). He climbs up to see the wonderful child. The artist depicts the child wearing pomegranate flowers as earrings (as in the text). He is sucking his toe, holding his foot with one hand, though in the text the child holds his foot with both hands. The leg is not bent as in paintings of the later period, i.e. the Pahari, Nathdwara, and other Schools. Earlier, in the Balagopalastuti of c. 1450-80 (Fig. 1), the child is shown sucking the toe of his left foot without bending it. The Bhagavata Purana illustration of CE 1648 is also an early depiction of the child sucking his toe without bending the leg. In the Razmnama, which is a translation of the Mahabharata, the child does not suck his toe, as it is not mentioned in that text.

Text: The sage goes near the child (Fig. 9). Like a mosquito he is engulfed in the stomach of the child (verse 27). He is utterly surprised to see the entire universe the way it was before (verses 28-29). By the exhalation of breath by the infant he is thrown outside again, he falls back into...
the ocean of dissolution (verses 31-32). And there, on the raised stretch of land in the water where the banyan grows, is the child again lying in the fold of its leaf, smiling and glancing at him from the corner of his eyes. Placing the vision of the infant within his heart he runs to embrace it, who was the Lord Vishnu (verse 33). At that very instant He, the Supreme Lord, the master of yoga in person who is hidden in the heart of all living beings, suddenly becomes invisible to the sage... (verse 34). Oh brahmin, following Him immediately also the banyan and the cosmic waters
Fig. 10  Markandeya Rishi meditates, released from Vishnu’s Maya, Artist: Sahibdin or his workshop, Mewar, 1648 CE, Coll. and Courtesy: BORI, Pune
of the annihilation of the world disappeared and he found himself in front of his hermitage as before.

The artist depicts the sage released from the Maya of Vishnu (Fig. 10). He is seated on the deer skin on the rock near the River Pushpabhadra and meditating with his eyes concentrating on the tip of his nose. The tree and creepers are again blooming.

To conclude, we have seen the episode of Markandeya and the miraculous child depicted in the Newari, Mughal and Mewar style paintings of the 17th century. Markandeya Rishi is the hero in the Mewar Bhagavata Purana, and the artist brings out his importance in his paintings. In the Razmnama, though the sage is depicted three times in the folio, it is the Divine Child (Krishna) who dominates the scene. In the Kalapustaka, it is Vishnu-Krishna who gets importance, while Markandeya is shown swimming and then seated on a tree to have darshana of the god. The cosmological significance of the Kalapustaka folio can be noticed, as we have mentioned earlier, in comparison with the illustration of the opening page of the Jnaneshwari manuscript of Nagpur.

END NOTES

1 Pratapaditya Pal, Vaisnava Iconology in Nepal, 1985, The Asiatic Society, Calcutta, p. 23, Fig. 1.
3 The first scholar to report the existence of this BORI manuscript from Udaipur was P. K. Gode, “An Illustrated Manuscript of the Bhagavata-Purana Copied in A. D. 1648 ” in 1938-39, New Indian Antiquary, Vol. I, pp. 249-259, which was later followed by studies, among others, from Karl Khandalavala, “Leaves from Rajasthan” in Marg, 1951, Vol. 33, Bombay, pp. 2-24, 49-56.
4 Elinor Gadon, Abstract of Ph. D. dissertation “The Balagopalastuti and Early Krishnabhakti in Gujarat”, 1983, University of Chicago. Twelve illustrated manuscripts of the Balagopalastuti have been recovered from Gujarat, dating from c. 1425 to 1625.
5 Rashmi Kala, Agrawal, Early Indian Miniature Paintings (c. 1000-1550 AD), 2006, Sundeep Prakashan, New Delhi, pp. 59 ff.
7 Collection: Cambridge University Library, UK, ADD 864.
8 Pratapaditya Pal, p. 23.
11 Jnaneshwari, originally belonged to the Pothikhana of the Bhonsle rulers. The Nagpur Museum published an article on it by its curator in Shatabda Kaumudi, 1964, when the Jnaneshwari manuscript was with a private collector in the Nagpur City. Currently the manuscript is in the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, United States. Dye III, Joseph M., The Arts of India – Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, 2001, Timeless Book, New Delhi, pp. 70-74.