

Helping the Cosmos: The Indian *Avatāras*

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ABSTRACT. *The Sanskrit term avatāra means the coming down from heaven of a god, usually Viṣṇu, in a form not his own, to perform on earth a specific task that will benefit the universe, usually rescuing the earth from some kind of catastrophe. Several of the ten avatāras figuring in the developed codification perform a cosmogonic function, and some of the tales attached to avatāras also provide interesting early examples of international narrative motifs; but in the case of the fully anthropomorphic examples, their role as avatāras does not entirely correspond to their modern popular religious function.*

KEYWORDS: avatāra, Viṣṇu, cosmogony, narrative motifs, bhakti

A necessary starting-point for this essay is to define the term *avatāra*, because it is frequently misunderstood in the West.¹ The *avatāra*-concept is fundamental to Vaiṣṇava doctrine, but it is not limited to Vaiṣṇavas (those who revere Viṣṇu), nor is it Hinduism's equivalent of the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation, although there are some analogies. What the Sanskrit word actually means is, literally and physically, "descent": in this case, the coming down of a god, usually but not exclusively Viṣṇu, in a form not his own, from heaven (thought of as up above) on to the earth beneath, to perform a specific task which will benefit the universe, usually seen as rescuing the earth from some kind of catastrophe. The development of the term, and the related concept of "unburdening" the earth, were charted by Paul Hacker (1978 [1960]).

The concept is not found in the earliest phases of Indic religion, where the systems now named "Hinduism" had not yet emerged.² Absent from Vedic thought, it begins to develop in the epics, the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*, only in their very latest stages (from perhaps the third century AD onwards), and the word itself is not applied to the concept until considerably later (Brockington 1998: 277-89, 460-3; Brinkhaus 1993). It was then gradually codified with

varying numbers of *avatāras*, from four to twenty-nine, but the number settled down relatively early as ten, although not always the same ten individuals; it was not until the eighth century AD that general acceptance was accorded to the standard list:

- (1) Matsya: “fish”
- (2) Kūrma: “tortoise”
- (3) Varāha: “boar”
- (4) Narasiṃha: “man-lion”
- (5) Vāmana: “dwarf”
- (6) Rāma Jāmadagnya: “Rāma son of Jamadagni”
- (7) Rāma Dāśarathi: “Rāma son of Daśaratha”
- (8) Kṛṣṇa (sometimes replaced by his brother Balarāma: “Strong Rāma”)
- (9) Gautama Buddha: “Gautama the enlightened one” (alternatively the Jina)
- (10) Kalki[n]

The first five and sometimes the last one are all non-human figures (or are at least not fully human) and tell cosmological stories, sometimes using early examples of narrative motifs analogous to those found in later international tale-types. The first three, and arguably the tenth, are examples of the familiar motif of the Animal Helper (the animal who has greater powers than his human or demonic apparent superior); indeed, in the fullest versions the fish-*avatāra* plays the role of a Grateful Animal. Numbers 6, 7 and 8 are all human heroes whose stories were made popular by the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*.

Our sources of knowledge of the *avatāras* are early texts (the epics and the Purāṇas for the developed form of the stories), but more valuable sources are sculptural, usually in the form of carvings on temple façades. To take only one example, the narrative frieze from the sixth-century AD Daśavatāra (“Ten *avatāras*”) temple at Deogarh in Madhya Pradesh, south of Jhansi (now in the National Museum, New Delhi), antedates any extant manuscripts by several centuries, so it is all the more regrettable that such valuable evidence is so often overlooked, or admired for its artistic qualities rather than studied for its narrative content. Sculptures or paintings of the *avatāra*-figures of various dates can be found in most collections of South Asian art, and are reproduced in all the standard textbooks, catalogues and guides,

so I will mention only three that deserve to be better known: the detailed investigation and reproduction of fourteenth- to sixteenth-century sculptures at Vijayanagara in Karnataka, southern India; the catalogue of an album of gouaches painted before the middle of the eighteenth century in the south-east of the neighbouring state of Andhra and now in Warsaw University Library; and the catalogue of an exhibition of eighteenth-century paintings at the Museum Rietberg, Zürich (Dallapiccola and Verghese 1998: 45-54, figures 25-35 and plates 43, 44 and 46; Jakimowicz-Shah 1983: particularly pages 70-103, 112-22 and 160; and Holm, Fischer and Fischer 2006 respectively).

The *avatāra*-figures were not invented or developed *ex nihilo* along with the concept: they all had some previous existence in a form which was not always entirely compatible with the use to which it was now being put. This process of adaptation and codification also enables us to chart the rise in significance of Viṣṇu, the Preserver, and the corresponding decline of the earlier “helper” figure, the Creator-god Brahmā or Prajāpati, who had been the original protagonist in the first three stories. In this essay I limit myself to the formative stages, but the concept is still very much alive (Schreiner 1999: 275), although the word is also often used loosely as if it were the equivalent of “reincarnation” (e.g. Smith 1991 *passim*). In some cases the *avatāra* figure has developed a prominent local cult, which may even overshadow his status as an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu; a particular example is the popularity of Narasiṃha in Karnataka, which perhaps reflects and preserves some archaic significance antedating his acceptance into the *avatāra*-scheme.

An introductory element to a relatively early form of *avatāra*-story is that the gods, worried by the depredations of some anti-god, approach Brahmā for help, and he issues appropriate instructions to Viṣṇu (e.g. *Rāmāyaṇa* 1,14.4-15.7 and *Mahābhārata* 3,260.1-5;³ both are versions of the birth of Rāma Dāśarathi). In the more developed forms the gods approach Viṣṇu himself and implore him to intervene; see for example *Brahmapurāṇa* 213.72-5 and 73.9-22 (Narasimha and Vāmana)(trans. Soifer 1991: 164-5 and 193 respectively).⁴ When this scene is represented in painting, rather than verbally, the artist may seize the opportunity, no doubt for sound commercial reasons, to enhance his patrons’ prestige by including them in the deputation;⁵ by doing so, he incidentally emphasises the dual nature of the *avatāra*’s role, to protect gods and to protect mankind. That it was usually

Viṣṇu who should be chosen as saviour is probably due to the generally benevolent role as Preserver that he was to assume in the *trimūrti* concept – the other two members of this divine triad being Brahmā, the creator, and Śiva, the destroyer. Śiva too can generate *avatāras*, but these are of far less prominence, for he is viewed as an outsider, living in the Himālaya, associated with asceticism and destruction and haunting cremation grounds. Whether he and his wife are portrayed as beautiful or ugly, their activity is always fearsome.

(1) MATSYA: “FISH”

The first *avatāra* is usually Matsya, the Sanskrit common noun for “fish”. This story goes back to the sixth century BC or earlier (*Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 1.8.1; Brockington 1998: 279), but according to the *Mahābhārata* version composed a few centuries later the seer Manu cares for a little fish until it grows huge and warns him of an impending flood which will cleanse and destroy the world; instructed by the fish, Manu builds an ark and takes into it Seven Seers and the seeds of all creatures. The fish is conveniently provided with a horn on its head which Manu lassoes using a snake as rope, and tows the ark across the flood to the highest peak of the Himālaya, where it reveals itself to be a god: Prajāpati or Brahmā in the earlier sources, Viṣṇu in later ones. Manu then re-creates the world and all its creatures (*Mahābhārata* 3,185, cf. *MBh* 12,300; tr. van Buitenen 1975: 583-85 and Fitzgerald [forthcoming] respectively). The story is developed in various Purāṇas, chiefly the *Matsyapurāṇa* (Brockington 1998: 279).⁶ One later extension of the myth involves no fewer than two Viṣṇu-*avatāras* in the same story: Hayagrīva, a demon with a horse’s head, steals the Vedas, and Viṣṇu takes on a similar form to recover them. The outline of this cosmogonic story is familiar from the early literature of many cultures, and its precise relationship to the Hebrew, Mesopotamian and Classical Flood Myths is a matter of debate among Indologists. The Biblical story is complicated by the fact that Yahweh must be portrayed as all-powerful, but this leads to him contradicting himself twice: he sends the Flood to destroy the earth, but saves the righteous Noah, then repents and promises not to do it again (Genesis 6-8). The position of Indian gods is more ambivalent, and here at least they are subject to

natural forces: it is important to note that the Indian flood has not been sent by the gods.

(2) KŪRMA: “TORTOISE”

In the second cosmogonic story the gods and their opponents churn the ocean, hoping to produce the *amṛta*, the nectar of immortality; in doing so they produce all sorts of objects, many with a cosmological significance, including Lakṣmī the goddess of wealth and fortune who in later developments became the consort of Viṣṇu. They use a mountain as churning stick, and turn it in Indian fashion, but with a snake, not a rope. To stop the mountain sinking into the ocean bed, they pivot it on a tortoise (*kūrma*), an animal with a significant role in Vedic ritual. Early versions of the story found in the Brāhmaṇas again identify the tortoise with Prajāpati; at *Mahābhārata* 1,16.10-11 it is Akūpāra, king of tortoises, but Viṣṇu is introduced to direct operations; not until *Viṣṇupurāṇa* 1,9.86 does Viṣṇu become the tortoise himself (Brockington 1998: 279-80; van Buitenen 1973: 73-4).

(3) VARĀHA: “BOAR”

Viṣṇu’s form as Varāha, a boar, can be shown with a gigantic anthropomorphic body and a boar’s head, but sometimes wholly as a boar.⁷ A huge rock-cut example of the first type can be seen at Udayagiri near Vidisha in Madhya Pradesh, and impressive figures of the wholly animal type are preserved in the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford (acc. no. 1969.43), in a shrine facing the Lakṣmaṇa temple in the western group at Khajurāho, and in the museum at the bottom of the ridge at Gwalior. This myth blends together several different stories of a boar raising the goddess Pṛthivī (the earth) from the depths of the ocean; again, at an early stage of development the protagonist is Prajāpati, though the *Mahābhārata* text already identifies him as Nārāyaṇa, a figure later himself to become identified with Viṣṇu (*Śatapatha Brāhmāṇa* 14,1.2.11; *Mahābhārata* 3,100.19-22; van Buitenen 1975: 420; Brockington 1998: 280-1, citing Brinkhaus 1991 and Gail 1977b). In a third- to first-century BC passage the *Rāmāyaṇa* preserves an early form of the myth in which the earth is raised from the primeval waters by Brahmā as boar as part of creation (*Rāmāyaṇa* 2,102.2-3, trans. Pollock 1986: 303;

Brockington 1998: 461-2), while other sources have the earth sunk post-creation by various demons; later still (post fourth century AD), the earth has been sunk by the weight of over-population, and death has to be introduced to regulate the numbers (*Mahābhārata* 3 App. 16). Some iconographic texts require the Varāha figure to be shown with one leg placed upon a tortoise (*kūrma*) (Rangarajan 1995), but this prescription probably reflects the animal's importance in Vedic ritual rather than a direct reference to Viṣṇu's Kūrmāvatāra role. In the case of these non-human *avatāras* it is hardly appropriate to talk about a "descent", for the setting is mostly some kind of mythical area, not corresponding to a geographical reality. In the case of the boar-*avatāra* it depends to a certain extent on whether the narrative is expressed in verbal or visual terms, that is to say, whether the earth is thought of as a material place or as a goddess; and whether men or gods are being helped depends largely on how great a measure of reality is given to the metaphor. In practice these niceties are largely irrelevant.

(4) NARASIṂHA: "MAN-LION"

Unlike the other *avatāra* myths, we do not know the first form of the Narasiṁha story, but it must antedate the earliest extant reference at *Mahābhārata* 3,100.20c, since that is a summary (trans. Van Buitenen 1975: 420; Soifer 1991: 73; Brockington 1998: 281-2; for translations of Purāṇic versions see Soifer 1991: 161-91). Hiraṇyakaśipu, secure in the possession of a boon of invincibility, is wreaking havoc, usurping the gods, dominating the cosmos, and eventually ignoring the advice of his pious son. He cannot be killed by god or man or animal, with any weapon, by day or night, by dry or wet, so Viṣṇu appears at twilight, in a form half man, half lion, and tears out his entrails with his claws. This man-lion story is not found in the Vedas, but what is interesting about these later accounts is that they incorporate and develop the motifs associated with the Paradoxical Task, motifs adapted to different contexts in widely collected oral narratives, but first recorded in India in a different Vedic story in the first half of the first millennium BC (Thompson 1955-58: motifs H 1050-77 and M 367.1; *Ṛgveda* 8, 14.13, trans. O'Flaherty 1981: 160; *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 12,7.3.1-3, trans. Soifer 1991: 38-9).

In that story Indra has promised not to kill the anti-god Namuci in any one of a number of possible ways, including “neither dry nor wet”, and “neither with the palm of my hand nor with my fist”; when it becomes necessary for him to take action, Indra wraps his thunderbolt in foam and kills Namuci at twilight. The “neither dry nor wet” proviso appears incongruously in the Narasiṃha story, where it is no longer apposite, and the passage from *Brahmāṇḍapurāṇa* 2.5.3-29 (tr. Soifer 1991: 162) makes a self-conscious effort to relate Viṣṇu’s use of his claws as a weapon to this proviso rather than to the appropriate but here unexpressed “neither with the palm of my hand nor with my fist”. This particularly ferocious form of justice is reproduced with gusto on the pillars of many temples in Karnataka, where the medium of sculpture has enabled its practitioners to represent with dramatic force and accuracy a scene found only at a late stage in the verbally-expressed texts: Narasiṃha appears to be bursting out of the pillar of a temple verandah, as if circumventing a new guarantee that the monster would be killed “neither within a building nor outside” (Soifer 1991: 97, 103). Narasiṃha is widely revered in Karnataka, and is also found depicted as a sage deep in meditation (Dallapiccola and Verghese 1998: plates 45-6), implying the existence of some variant tradition, possibly an archaic local cult; Soifer points out that Narasiṃha is an ambivalent character who also has links with the cult of Śiva, the Destroyer, and in some texts remains a threat (Soifer 1991: 89-93) – an Indic equivalent of letting the genie out of the box.

(5) VĀMANA: “DWARF”

The demonic King Bali had also contrived to dominate the whole of the three worlds, so when an innocent-looking dwarf (Vāmana simply means “dwarf”) came and asked for as much land as he could cover in three strides, the unsuspecting Bali granted the request without hesitation. Vāmana asked to be sprinkled with holy water, and then suddenly turned back into the gigantic figure of Viṣṇu. With one stride he covered the whole earth, with a second he covered the heavens. In some versions he won the underworld too for the gods with his third stride, in others he forbore to take the third stride and left lordship of the underworld to Bali (Soifer 1991); versions which later rehabilitate Bali have been studied by Clifford Hospital (1984). A striding exploit, this time ascribed to Viṣṇu from the beginning,

had been known from as early as the *Ṛgveda* (perhaps 1000 BC), but there it is a simple creation myth; he strode through the universe to subdue it and bring it into the power of the gods. Subsequently the striding was adapted to the defeat of a demon, but the element of deception by a dwarf to achieve this end was not incorporated till later still (*Rāmāyaṇa* 1,28.2-11; Goldman 1984:179; *Mahābhārata* 3.100.19-22, van Buitenen 1975: 420 [and 3 App. 27.64-82, but no deceptive dwarf is found at 12,326.74-6]; Brockington 1998: 282-3 and 462, citing Tripathi 1968). This is a very early record of the Deceptive Land Purchase motif (Thompson 1955-58: K 185), which takes many forms throughout the world, the most famous in Europe being the ox-hide cut into strips by Dido to enable her to acquire enough land to found Carthage.

(6) RĀMA JĀMADAGNYA: “RĀMA SON OF JAMADAGNI”

Rāma Jāmadagnya (also known as Rāma Bhārgava: “Rāma descendant of Bhṛgu” and Paraśurāma: “Rāma with the axe”) is a complex character with many different narratives attached to him, including a cosmogonic episode in which he created a tract of land around Sūrpāraka (near Mumbai) by frightening the sea into retreating. It is not clear why he became associated with Viṣṇu (or sometimes with Śiva) and included in purāṇic lists of *avatāras*, but the episode that has become accepted as the reason, and has been rationalised as a beneficial action in relieving the overpopulated Earth of a large part of its burden, is that in order to avenge the murder of his father he killed many thousands of men of the warrior class (*kṣatriyas*), repeating the slaughter twenty-one times in a genocidal frenzy. He is particularly noted for his extreme reactions; in another, and later, demonstration of his filial piety, he unhesitatingly beheads his mother in obedience to his father’s over-hasty command.⁸

(7) RĀMA DĀŚARATHI: “RĀMA SON OF DAŚARATHA”

Rāma Dāśarathi is a very different kind of warrior, and a contrasting exemplar of filial piety; he is the hero of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the person usually meant when the name “Rāma” is used on its own. In order to fulfil a rash vow made by his father, the virtuous prince Rāma insisted on leaving his comfortable life at court in favour of a life of hardship in the forest, eventually defeating a demon, Rāvaṇa, who has

abducted Rāma's wife Sītā. This heroic romance, probably composed around the fifth century BC, was developed by later generations into a religious epic in which, by about the third century AD, Rāvaṇa was seen, in addition to being Rāma's private enemy, as the enemy of the gods, threatening the stability of the whole cosmos, and invulnerable to all supernatural beings; only a man would be able to defeat him, so Viṣṇu became incarnate, technically taking on the fourfold manifestation of Rāma and his three brothers, although only Rāma is seriously considered to be the *avatāra*-figure. Rāma, today popularly known as Rāmacandra, "Rāma the moon", or simply as Rām, has as it were outgrown his earlier position as a manifestation of Viṣṇu and now achieved the role of god in his own right. The contrast between this Rāma and the preceding Rāma Jāmadagnya is brought out at Rm 1,73-5, a passage probably incorporated into the *Rāmāyaṇa* in about the third century AD, in which the two *avatāras* illogically but dramatically confront each other, and the young Rāma Dāśarathi triumphs defiantly over his fearsome previous incarnation.

(8) KRṢṂA (SOMETIMES REPLACED BY HIS BROTHER BALARĀMA: "STRONG RĀMA")

Kṛṣṅa is another character whose origin is difficult to unravel. He is not even the hero of the epic in which he is first recorded, the *Mahābhārata*, where he plays a non-combatant role as adviser and comforter to the heroes, as charioteer to Arjuna, and most famously, but only in the later stages of redaction, as expounder of the *Bhagavadgītā*; what gave rise to his *avatāra*-status, and possibly to the *avatāra*-concept as a whole, was the inclusion, at a late stage, of his theophany in the *Bhagavadgītā* (which is itself a late part of the *Mahābhārata*).⁹ His story was subsequently expanded in other directions, notably in the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, and so elevated is his status now that it is sometimes thought inappropriate for him to appear merely as one among the *avatāras*, and his place in the scheme is then given to his elder half-brother, Balarāma. Kṛṣṅa can even generate *avatāras* of himself, as Peter Schreiner has noted for recent times, although understanding of the concept and its major figures can sometimes be hazy (Schreiner 1999: 275; Smith 1990: 6).

(9) GAUTAMA BUDDHA: “GAUTAMA THE ENLIGHTENED ONE”
(ALTERNATIVELY THE JINA)

By contrast, *avatāra* number 9 is a semi-historical figure. To find the Buddha, or sometimes the Jina (the founder of the Jain faith), reckoned among these incarnations of a Hindu god seems rather strange, but their role is to preserve the purity of Hinduism by leading the unwary to perdition (Brockington 1998: 286-7; Gail 1969); these leaders of heterodoxy have been turned into “helpers” of orthodoxy.

(10) KALKI / KALKIN

Kalki, the last *avatāra*, has not yet appeared. Viṣṇu will again descend to earth, this time as a swordsman riding a white horse, alternatively just as the white horse, to purge and destroy the world at the end of this present degenerate age in a process which might be thought to stretch the usual definition of “help”, but nonetheless contributes to the overall cosmological plan. This millennial figure may have been inspired by the idea of Maitreya, the future Buddha, an idea itself influenced by Zoroastrian sources brought into northwest India during a period of invasions between the second century BC and the second century AD (Brockington 1998: 287). Unlike the eschatological events in other cosmological schemes such as Christianity or Scandinavian religion, this destruction is not final, for the Indian view of time is not linear but cyclical. Viṣṇu spends some time sleeping on the cosmic snake before a lotus stem springs from his navel and from its bud there emerges again the creator-god Brahmā, ready to restart the whole process of creation, degeneration, intervention, dissolution and re-creation.

The term “helper” pre-supposes a second party, the person or group to be “helped”. In the context of Brahmanical observance under which the *avatāra*-concept was developed, the implicit understanding is normally that the status, needs or interests of the “helped” are superior to those of the “helper”; the “helper” is an “assistant” rather than “one who confers a benefit”: bottom-up, rather than top-down. The human *avatāras*, though gifted with superhuman strength, have voluntarily given up their divine attributes when they take birth on earth, and the process by which they are made aware of their divinity is a complex one, given that the outline plot and characterisation of

their stories had been fixed several centuries before the whole concept of the *avatāra* emerged. Given too the stature of the *avatāras*, the situations remedied are of correspondingly cosmic importance, a threat to the universe as a whole (not even just to humanity), for instability and lack of order on earth are bound up with instability and lack of order in the natural world. The gods' fears of domination by the anti-gods do not spring from class-selfishness alone, and even the Buddha or the Jina have a valid role to play in this process. In the *avatāra*-system, Viṣṇu himself appears to be above the problems of the cosmos, acting not on his own behalf, but in response to the supplication of the other gods, as if he is not quite one of them.

The *avatāras* do not intervene in private struggles, however great their impact on individual human beings. This causes something of a problem in the case of both Rāma and Kṛṣṇa, the most prominent of the human *avatāras*. Accordingly, Rāma's quarrel, originally personal and lacking even national implications, was transformed into a cosmic struggle when it was adapted to accommodate Viṣṇu's descent on to the scene,¹⁰ and Kṛṣṇa's actual deeds, whether his participation in the action of the *Mahābhārata* or his vengeance on his wicked uncle, make little contribution to his status as *avatāra*.

It is the contrasting mediaeval *bhakti* devotional tradition that reverses the process and introduces the top-down element, the gracious, approachable god, Rāma or Kṛṣṇa, who intervenes to help individual worshippers overcome their personal difficulties. From almost the earliest stages of the *Ramāyaṇa*'s development some of Rāma's military exploits had raised uneasy moral questions: eventually in 1932 the Hindi poet Maithilīśaraṇ Gupta published *Sāket*, presenting a *bhakti*-influenced view of Rām as born to show people the right way to a fulfilled existence, while accommodating this view to Rām's epic role with the underlying implication that this will involve freeing India from British rule (Stasik 2002).

In the developed form of the Kṛṣṇa story as presented by the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, Kṛṣṇa is first a rascally, adorable baby growing up *incognito* among a group of cow-herders, then a wild, defiant and charming teenager with whom all the young wives of the area fall helplessly in love. He is physically precocious and accomplished too, and defeats a number of deadly demons before killing his uncle, a tyrant who has usurped Kṛṣṇa's father's throne. His popular charm and graciousness as a herdsman flute-player have led to him, like

Rāma, becoming one of the major gods of modern Hindus; whether his romantic and erotic escapades are to be taken at face value or interpreted as an allegory of the soul's union with the divine is largely a matter for the devotee.

As with Rāma, the dichotomy between the concepts of *avatāra* and *bhakti* is not complete. Kṛṣṇa's personal victories are supplemented by an episode reflecting the triumph of a new form of religion over the old Vedic gods. The youthful cowherd persuades his tribe to stop worshipping Indra, the rain god, in favour of the mountain Govardhana; Indra, outraged, retaliates with storms and floods, so Kṛṣṇa picks up the mountain, balances it on the tip of the little finger of his inauspicious left hand – a studied insult – and shelters people and cattle beneath it like an umbrella until Indra acknowledges the boy's superiority; this protective gesture is minor compared to the exploits of the true *avatāras*, but it reflects a considerable development from his original *Mahābhārata* role as non-combatant charioteer and adviser of his friend Arjuna in a devastating but essentially personal battle; it was the incorporation into that epic, at a late stage, of his *Bhagavadgītā* theophany that gave rise to his *avatāra*-status, a starting-point which can act equally as the summation of the whole concept: "Whenever there occurs a decline in righteousness and a surge in unrighteousness, then I send forth myself. To protect the good and to destroy evil-doers, in order to establish righteousness, I come into being from age to age." (*Bhagavadgītā* 4.7-8, trans. Brockington 1998: 273; cf. van Buitenen 1981: 87)

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Notes

- 1 This essay is an amplified version of a talk first presented at a joint conference of the Traditional Cosmology Society and the Katharine Briggs Club at the School of Scottish Studies, University of Edinburgh, October 2000, on the theme of "Supernatural Helpers".

- 2 Using the term “Hinduism” to denote Indic religion before the 4th century AD at the earliest is no more appropriate than using the terms “Protestant”, “Catholic”, or “Orthodox” for Christianity at a similar date.
- 3 Tr. Goldman 1984: 153-5 and van Buitenen 1975: 730-1 respectively.
- 4 The Purāṇas are a class of sprawling, religiously-oriented texts compiled over a long period after the epics were largely complete.
- 5 A good example is provided by a miniature by an eighteenth-century painter at the court of the Mewari princes in Rajasthan; it is preserved in the City Palace Museum, Udaipur. The same technique was frequently used in European mediaeval religious painting.
- 6 See also Brinkhaus (2000) for the relationship of the seer Mārkaṇḍeya to a developed form of the episode.
- 7 For detailed iconographic prescriptions see Rangarajan (1995).
- 8 The complexities of the traditions surrounding him are explored in Gail (1977a) and Fitzgerald (2002).
- 9 The *Bhagavadgītā* was probably not incorporated into the *Mahābhārata* until the first and second centuries AD, with the theophany being added at the end of this period.
- 10 I explored this situation a little more fully in my contribution to a related conference on Supernatural Enemies (Brockington 2001: 56-7).

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