

# The Enumeration of Viṣṇu's Manifestations in the Epic and Purāṇic Literature

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## Introduction

This paper aims to examine the enumeration of Viṣṇu's manifestations (*prādurbhāva*, *avatāra*) focusing on their different combinations within the Epic and Purāṇic literature. My approach to the topic is based on the study of passages that contain the lists of Viṣṇu's manifestations with an emphasis on their variation and development. The early stage the lists mainly in the Epics has been studied previously (Brinkhaus 1993, 2001), and the present paper offers a re-examination of this early stage based on new materials.

## 1. The Manifestations in the Epic Literature

### 1.1. *Mahābhārata*

In MBh 3.100.19–21, taking forms of a boar, a man-lion and a dwarf is merely mentioned as one of the deeds performed by Viṣṇu as the Creator in the past. A similar episode is preserved in MBh 12.326.71–73, where Viṣṇu “has taken forms” of a boar and a man-lion. In the meanwhile, it is stated in MBh 12.326.74–82 that Viṣṇu “will be born” as the twelfth son of Aditi and Kaśyapa at a specified time, he “will become” Rāma and “some *prādurbhāva*- will be born in Mathurā because of Kāṃsa.”

MBh 12.326.94ab *haṃso hayaśirāś caiva prādurbhāvā dvijottama /*

‘O best Brahman, [all of them as aforementioned including] **Haṃsa and horse-faced** (*hayaśiras*-) are manifestations.’

This marks a significant change. In MBh 6.26.6–9 (BhG 4.6–9), Kṛṣṇa states that he will manifest himself every *yuga*. Therefore, the worship of Kṛṣṇa has probably motivated the idea of Viṣṇu's manifestations.

## 1.2. *Harivaṃśa*

In HV, which is considered to have been composed in the first few centuries of the common era, Janamejaya is surprised that Viṣṇu has entered a human body (HV 30.3–8, 53–54). It seems that HV came into being after the significant change contained in MBh 12.326.94. Pauṣkaraka (Padmanābha), a boar, a man-lion, a dwarf, Dattātreyā, Paraśurāma, Rāma, Kṛṣṇa, Kalkin are all enumerated in HV 31.20–148 as forms taken by Viṣṇu.

HV 31.20ab *eṣa pauṣkarako nāma prādurbhāvaḥ prakīrtitaḥ /*

‘This one is known as a **manifestation named Pauṣkaraka.**’

Pauṣkaraka (Padmanābha) is often equated with Nārāyaṇa and is normally mentioned as the God or the Creator. This is probably the reason why Padmanābha gradually ceases to appear in the later lists in accordance with the development of the idea of manifestations, although Padmanābha frequently appears in the early lists in HV 31.20, HV 38.18 and HV 42.33. Taking forms of a boar, a man-lion and a dwarf is mentioned as one of Viṣṇu's deeds in the past in HV 30.9–13, HV 31.21–92 and HV 42.34–35, which is also the case in MBh 3.100.19–21. The manifestations as a boar, a man-lion and a dwarf are presumably distinguished from human manifestations such as Kṛṣṇa.

## 2. The Manifestations in the Purāṇic Literature

Ten manifestations are listed in VP 98.72–104, BnP 2.3.73.73–105 and MP 47.237–249ab as follows: (1) Vainya (2) man-lion (3) dwarf (4) Dattātreyā (5) Māndhātṛ (6) Paraśurāma (7) Rāma (8) Vedavyāsa (9) Kṛṣṇa (10) Kalki.<sup>1)</sup> Three of the ten manifestations, namely Vainya, a man-lion and a dwarf are considered to be divine, while the other seven manifestations are cursed to be born as a human.<sup>2)</sup>

## 3. Conclusion

Concerning the enumeration of Viṣṇu's manifestations, several manifestations such as Padmanābha and a dwarf are originally referred to as Viṣṇu's deeds in his past. However, there was a tendency to add various manifestations in human forms to this enumeration after the idea of Viṣṇu's manifestations in different forms at different times had permeated through the worship of Kṛṣṇa. In some parts of the Epic composed from the second to the third century, a boar, a man-lion, the twelfth son of Aditi and Kaśyapa, Paraśurāma, Rāma and Kṛṣṇa are mentioned. These manifestations are more standardized in the Purāṇic

literature such as VP and BnP from the fourth century to the sixth century. And eventually Buddha has been included in the enumeration by the eighth century (MP 47.247).

Periods	Manifestations	Words	Passages
2-3c.	boar, man-lion, dwarf	—	MBh 3.100
2-3c.	boar, man-lion, the twelfth son of Aditi and Kaśyapa, Paraśurāma, Rāma, Kṛṣṇa, Haṃsa, horse-headed	prādurbhāva-	MBh 12.326
2-3c.	He conquered the three worlds by three steps, Ekāṇava, boar, he conquered the earth for Puruhūta, lion, fire named Aurva, thousand-faced god, Padmanābha, Tārakāmaya	—	HV 30
2-3c.	Pauṣkaraka (Padmanābha), boar, man-lion, dwarf, Dattātreyā, Paraśurāma, Rāma, Kṛṣṇa, Kalkin	prādurbhāva-	HV 31
2-3c.	Padmanābha, man-lion, dwarf	—	HV 38
2-3c.	Padmanābha, boar, dwarf, Paraśurāma	—	HV 42
2-3c.	dwarf, lion, Bhava (Śiva), Śukra, boar, Mohinī, turtle, Rāma	—	HV 65
-3c.	boar, fish, turtle	—	MarkP 47
4-6c.	(1) Vainya (2) man-lion (3) dwarf (4) Dattātreyā (5) Māndhātṛ (6) Paraśurāma (7) Rāma (8) Vedavyāsa (9) Kṛṣṇa (10) Kalki	prādurbhāva-sambhūti-	VP 98
4-6c.	(1) Vainya (2) man-lion (3) dwarf (4) Dattātreyā (5) Māndhātṛ (6) Paraśurāma (7) Rāma (8) Vedavyāsa (9) Kṛṣṇa (10) Kalki	prādurbhāva-sambhūti-	BnP 2.73
5-6c.	boar, fish, turtle	—	ViP 1.4
5-6c.	Āditya, Paraśurāma, Rāma, Kṛṣṇa	avatāra-	ViP 1.9
5-6c.	fish, turtle, boar, horse, lion, human	—	ViP 5.17
4-8c.	boar, man-lion, dwarf, he was born in Mathurā (Kṛṣṇa)	avatāra-	MarkP 4
8-9c.	(1) <i>aṃśa</i> of Nārāyaṇa (2) man-lion (3) dwarf (4) Dattātreyā (5) Māndhātṛ (6) Paraśurāma (7) Rāma (8) Vedavyāsa (9) Buddha (10) Kalki	prādurbhāva-	MP 47.237-249
8-9c.	Viṣṇu lying on the water, Atri, Bhṛgu, Vaśiṣṭha, Brahmā, Kaśyapa, fish, turtle, boar, man-lion, dwarf, Rāma (Paraśurāma?), Rāma, Kṛṣṇa, Buddha, Kalki	—	MP 285
9c.	fish, turtle, boar, man-lion, dwarf, Rāma (Paraśurāma?), Rāma, Kṛṣṇa, Buddha, Kalkin	mūrti-	VarP 4
10c.-	(1) Sanatkumāras (2) boar (3) Nārada ( <i>devaṛṣi</i> ) (4) Nara and Nārāyaṇa (5) Kapila (6) Dattātreyā (7) Yājña (8) Rṣabha (9) Pṛthu (10) fish (11) turtle (12) Dhanvantari (13) Mohinī (14) man-lion (15) dwarf (16) Paraśurāma (17) Vedavyāsa (18) Rāma ( <i>naradeva</i> ) (19) Balarāma (20) Kṛṣṇa (21) Buddha (22) Kalki	avatāra-	BhP 1.3

## Notes

- 1) The reading is based on PPL 5C. 71-91cd.

2) PPL 5C. 74 = VP 98.88; BnP 2.3.73.87cd-88ab; MP 47.241 *etās tisraḥ smṛtās tasya divyāḥ sambhūṭayāḥ śubhāḥ / mānuṣyāḥ sapta yās tasya śāpajās tā nibodhata* // ‘These three [manifestations] are his divine splendid manifestations. His seven human [manifestations] were produced by curses. Listen to them.’

#### Abbreviations

- MBh *The Mahābhārata*. Vol. 3, *Āraṇyakaparvan, Part I: Being the Third Book of the Mahābhārata, the Great Epic of India*. Ed. Vishnu Sitaram Sukthankar. Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1942.  
*The Mahābhārata*. Vol. 7, *The Bhīṣmaparvan: Being the Sixth Book of the Mahābhārata, the Great Epic of India*. Ed. Shripad Krishna Belvalkar. Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1947.  
*The Mahābhārata*. Vol. 16, *The Śāntiparvan, Part III: Mokṣadharmā, B, Being the Twelfth Book of the Mahābhārata, the Great Epic of India*. Ed. Shripad Krishna Belvalkar. Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1954.
- HV *The Harivaṃśa Being the Khila or Supplement to the Mahābhārata*. 2 vols. Ed. Parashuram Lakshman Vaidya. Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1969–1971.
- MarkP *The Mārcaṇḍeyapurāṇa*. Ed. Krishna Mohan Banerjea. Bibliotheca Indica. Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, Bishop's College Press, 1862.
- VP *Śrīmaddvaipāyanamunipraṇītaṃ Vāyupurāṇam*. Ed. Ānandāśramasthapaṇḍitaḥ. Ānandāśrama Sanskrit Series 49. Poona: [s.n.], 1905.
- BnP *Brahmaṇḍa Purāṇa of Sage Kṛṣṇa Dvaipāyana Vyāsa*. Ed. J. L. Shastri. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1973.
- ViP *The Critical Edition of the Viṣṇupurāṇam*. 2 vols. Ed. M. M. Pathak. Vadodara: Oriental Institute, 1997–1999.
- MP *Śrīmaddvaipāyanamunipraṇītaṃ Matsyapurāṇam*. Ed. Ānandāśramasthapaṇḍitaḥ. Ānandāśrama Sanskrit Series 54. Poona: [s.n.], 1997–1999.
- PPL *Das Purāṇa Pañcalakṣaṇa: Versuch einer Textgeschichte*. Ed. Willibald Kirfel. Bonn: Kurt Schroeder Verlag, 1927.

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