

The Lotus Attribute of Viṣṇu

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In a very interesting and thought-provoking article, the well-known German art-historian Professor Adalbert J. Gail has published an article, entitled 'The Earth and the Lotus : A Contribution to Viṣṇu's Iconography in India' (Gail 2009). In this illuminating article Prof. Gail has pointed out how uneasy and insecure the Indian art-historians are in their identification of the 'round object', the attribute held by Viṣṇu in his lower right hand. It is very unfortunate that the foreign journal in which this article was published is not easily available to the Indian scholars, and hence, this consideration has encouraged me to write these pages to bring to notice to my Indian colleagues the argument of Prof. Gail as regards the aforesaid attribute of Viṣṇu.

For a couple of years Prof. Gail has been engaged in the research work on Cambodian art and iconography. In comparing the Viṣṇu images with those of Cambodia, he writes (p.83), "From the early 5th century of the Gupta period up to the 7th century Viṣṇu holds a round object in his lower right hand.¹ This object is mentioned neither in narrative texts (epos, purāṇa) nor in so-called iconographic verses (pratimālakṣaṇa).

So there was rich opportunity for scholars to utter their individual opinion.² Most of them saw a fruit or citraphala ('bright or spotted fruit', Joshi 1972, p.19) or a bijapūraka [sic] (Chandra 1970, p.72). P. Pal, however, thought, that it represents the seed of the lotus (Pal 1974, p.65).³

In Nepal, I heard the opinion that the object held by Viṣṇu Jalaśayana in Būḍhānilkaṇṭha [...] represents the ball of ashes carried by yogīs and called vibhūti⁴ [...].

My own opinion was, in respect of the Būḍhānilkaṇṭha image, that it could well be the 'bela' fruit (bilva, Aegle marmelos) also called śrīphala and particularly sacred to Lakṣmī, the consort of Viṣṇu (Gail 1984, p.68f.).

From the 7th century onwards we are witnesses of the fact that the round object in question is being replaced by a lotus flower in India (padma, kamala; [...]).

In Khmer art, the interpretation of such a type of object, also held in the lower hand of Viṣṇu [...], is by all accounts clear since widely attested by inscriptions : it is mahī or dharāṇi, the earth (Bhattacharya 1961, pp.103-105).”

In the iconography of Viṣṇu in Peninsular (southern) Thailand, earth (bhū, same as mahī) occurs as an attribute instead of a lotus. To quote a specialist, Piriya Krairiksh (1980, 28), “Apart from stylistic variation, all the figures [of Viṣṇu] share the same iconography. The god holds the gadā [sic] in his anterior left hand, bhū in anterior right hand, the cakra in the posterior right hand and the śaṅkha in the posterior left hand.” See also Krairiksh 1980, 84-85, pl.3 and 98-99, pl.10.

Very rationally Gail asks (p.84), “Now the question comes up, naturally, why the Khmer should have changed the meaning of that object inherited , no doubt, from the Indian Viṣṇu and why they never accepted the transformation of the round object into a lotus flower [...].”

Gail, however, gives the answer to the question put by himself, “Key to a solution of our problem should be the consideration : is there any intrinsic connection between the round object on the one hand and the lotus flower on the other hand? Such a connection can be found in purāṇa passages dealing with the creation by Viṣṇu that is to say by Brahmā acting on behalf of Viṣṇu.”

Gail quotes two relevant passages, one from the Bhāgavatapurāṇa (III.10.7-8), the other from the Matsyapurāṇa (169.1-3 and 10-14).

In the Bhāgavatapurāṇa (III.10.7-8), Brahmā himself reflects :

tad vilokya viyad vāpi [sic]5 puṣkaram yad adīṣṭhitam |
anena lokān prāglinān kalpitāsmīti acintayat ||7||

padmaśoṣaṁ tadāviśya Bhagavat-karma-coditaḥ |
ekaṁ vyabhāṅkṣid urudhā tridhā bhāvyaṁ dvisaptadhā ||8||

“Then considering that lotus, filling the sky, on which he was seated he thought : with that (lotus) I shall create the earth that was earlier drowned. Then he entered the sheath of the lotus, directed to his work by Bhagavat (Viṣṇu), and divided the one (lotus) in various ways, namely into three and later into fourteen parts” (Translation by Gail).

The Matsyapurāṇa verse no. 169.3 says :

tac ca padmaṁ purāṇajñāḥ pṛthivī-rūpam uttamam |
nārāyaṇa-samudbhūtaṁ pravadanti maharṣayaḥ ||

“The great seers, who know the purāṇic tradition declare that this lotus, produced by Nārāyaṇa, is the highest form of the earth” (Translation by Gail).

Gail comments further (p.86), “The knowledge gained from this example paves the way for identifying the round object in Viṣṇu's lower right hand, also in India, as the earth, an object that could easily be replaced by a lotus, since they both are substantially equal. In Cambodia, however, the tradition of depicting the earth instead of a lotus persisted throughout the existence of Hinduism in Angkor [...].”

Now our problem is with the early Viṣṇu images from India. Gail has pointed out (mentioned by us above) how the Indian art-historians are confused to describe the 'round object' in the lower right hand of the deity. It is also quite surprising that none of the so-called iconographic texts of India had any knowledge of mahī or dharaṇi (earth ball) as an attribute of Viṣṇu. It appears to us to be a pure invention of the Cambodian Sanskrit scholars. Of course, the earliest Indian text known so far, which has a chapter on Hindu iconography, viz. the Bṛhatsamhitā (c. 6th century CE), describes the four-armed form of Viṣṇu showing śāntida-mudrā and holding gadā in the right hands and holding śaṅkha and cakra in the left hands (V.57.34). Nevertheless, in his eight-armed and two-armed forms, in one of the right hands Viṣṇu should show śānti-mudrā (V.57.33, 35). This śāntida or śānti-mudrā has been translated as 'assurance pose (abhaya-mudrā)' by Haque (1992, 41). It is to be noted that the Bṛhatsamhitā does not mention the lotus (padma), which is a later element, as an attribute of Viṣṇu. Haque quotes the Agnipurāṇa (ch.44), which no doubt is aware of the lotus (padma) as an attribute of Viṣṇu; for example, V.47 :

dakṣiṇe tu kare cakram adhasṭāt padmam eva ca |
vāme śaṅkhaṁ gadādhasṭad vāsudevasya lakṣanāt [sic] ||

i.e., “Here Vāsudeva has four arms carrying, on the right, from bottom to top, padma and cakra. On the left, from top to bottom, śaṅkha and gadā” (Haque 1992, 43). No doubt this is the late prescribed form of Viṣṇu.

The Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa (ch.85), while describing Janārdana, refers to utphulla-kamala (full-blown lotus) in the right hand of the god and the conch (śaṅkha) in the left hand. The other two attributes (āyudha-s) have the anthropomorphic forms (gadā-devī and cakra-puruṣa). Vanamālā or the garland of forest flowers appears for the first time in this text (V.9a-10); for example,

vanamālā ca kartavyā deva-janvavalambitā |
(Haque 1992, 42, wrongly ... deva-jānvalambito |)
utphulla-kamalaṁ pāṇau kuryād devasya dakṣiṇe |
vāmapāṇi-gataṁ śaṅkham [...] ||

The Hayaśirṣapañcarātra prescribes padma for Vāsudeva (Haque 1992, 44) :

vāsudevaṃ prakurvīta caturbāhuṃ sureśvaram |
dakṣiṇopari cakraṃ tu padmam cādhaḥ prakalpayet ||

Although the Matsyapurāṇa prescribes the four conventional āyudha-s of Viṣṇu, the expression śāntam in the verse is ambiguous. The expression no doubt reminds one of śāntida and śāntikara of the Bṛhatsaṃhita referred to above. For example (ch.258, V.4b) :

śaṅkha-cakra-dharam śāntam padmahastaṃ gadādharam ||

And in V.9 it describes Vāsudeva as :

dakṣiṇena gadā padmam vāsudevasya kārayet |
vāmataḥ śaṅkha-cakre ca kartavye bhūtim icchatā ||

It appears Viṣṇu and Vāsudeva are identical in the Matsyapurāṇa.

And finally, the Śāradātilakatantra describes Viṣṇu with śaṅkha, gadā, paṅkaja and cakra (ch.15, V.22) or with śaṅkha, rathāṅga, gadā and ambhoja (V.41a).

All the above passages are quoted from Haque 1992, 41-47. All these texts are no doubt post-Gupta texts where the lotus attribute of Viṣṇu is an accomplished fact.

Now the important question arises : How come that the earth (mahī or dharaṇi) as an attribute of Viṣṇu (rather Vāsudeva) was not known to the Indian authors, which was a known fact to the Cambodian Sanskrit epigraphists? From which source the Cambodian authors borrowed the mahī or dharaṇi attribute of Viṣṇu? A direct answer to this question cannot be given. But, that the earth or the earth-ball was compared to a lotus was not unknown in India. Gail comments (pp.86-87), “The testimonies of the Bhāgavatapurāṇa and of the Matsyapurāṇa are corroborated by various other purāṇic sources. The Brahmapurāṇa also calls the axial Mount Meru the pericarp of the earth-lotus (bhū-padmasyāsya śailo 'sau karṇikākāra-saṃsthitaḥ, 18.15).

Willibald Kirfel in his bhuvanavinyāsa quotes a parallel text from the Varāha and the Vāmanapurāṇa, where the division of the earth-lotus (pṛthivi-padma) or world-lotus (loka-padma) – our texts sometimes confound earth and world : the correct form would be bhūr-loka-padma – is carefully exposed.”

Although the Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa is not aware(?) of the fact that in the earlier images of Vāsudeva-Viṣṇu the 'round object' in the lower right hand of the deity is supposed to be mahī or dharaṇi, which developed into a lotus (padma), it nevertheless equates padma with mahī; for example VD (ch.46, V.14) :

viṣṇunābhau samutpannam yat padmaṃ sā mahī dvija |
merus tu karṇikā tasya vijṣeyā rājasattama ||

i.e., that lotus which has come out of Viṣṇu's navel, oh twice-born one (i.e. Brahmin), (is) the earth, (and) Meru, the axis of the world, is to be known as the pericarp of that (lotus), oh the best of the kings.

This is exactly the argument of Gail as mentioned above. Also compare VD (ch.45) (padmarūpa-nirūpaṇam nāma), which describes in detail a lotus; it says in V.9a, padmam samagrā vasudhā niruktā, i.e., the lotus is called the whole earth.

In this connection, we compare the enigmatic figure of a 12th century stone image of Viṣṇu from Sarisadah, now in the Indian Museum, Kolkata (Fig. 7). The image has been published by several scholars but not quite satisfactorily. The figure is enigmatic because of the fact that the personification of the two attributes (āyudha-s) of Viṣṇu, viz. gadā and cakra, a Gupta-period innovation given up in the later period, has reappeared in this sculpture. Prof. Claudine Bautze-Picron, who lately published this interesting image, writes (2009, 275, pls. 26.1-26.3), “Viṣṇu lowers his four hands; while two are laying on the club and the disc, the other two ones present a fruit, as he does on early images from the Gupta to the early Pāla period (pls. 26.10, 26.12),⁶ and the conch, in the right and left hands respectively, a late element being here the tiny lotus also held in the right hand.”

In note 16 of her article she remarks, “I shall not discuss here anymore the identity of this attribute; see Bautze-Picron 1985, 452-465. Banerjea 1956, 403 identifies the attribute as being a lotus-bud; however, the presence of the tiny lotus held by the same hand prevents us from agreeing to this identification.”

If it be possible to identify the round object in the front right hand of Viṣṇu as mahī or dharaṇi (following the Cambodian Sanskrit inscriptions), instead of a fruit together with the 'tiny lotus' as identified by Claudine Bautze-Picron, then in that case, the argument of Adalbert Gail, viz. lotus developing out of the earth (mahī or dharaṇi) is quite plausible.

Gail also illustrates two images of Viṣṇu, one in the Vidisha Museum, the other in the Varendra Research Museum, Rajshahi, in which the deity holds a round object together with a small lotus (Gail 2009, figs.4-6).⁷

Bimal Bandyopadhyay is not right in describing the circular object in the lower right hand of Viṣṇu as a lotus bud in two pre-Pāla images, now in the Kooch Bihar Palace Museum (Bandyopadhyay 2009, 295, pls.29.2, 29.3).

We are very sorry to point out here that the trouble started with the Indian authors who, without any scrutiny and consideration of time-factor, accepted the late traditional arrangement of Viṣṇu with the four attributes, śankha, cakra, gadā and padma, viz. the caturviṃśati or 24 forms of Viṣṇu. In this connection we refer to the monumental and welcome volume of Enamul Haque (1992). In this praiseworthy and

hard-working volume, Prof. Haque has discussed elaborately the Viṣṇu images of Bengal (undivided) from the beginning to a later period following the scheme of the caturvīṃśati forms of Viṣṇu, i.e. of the later PCGS order. At the same time, Haque has illustrated the earlier images of the deity where the attribute padma has not yet appeared. In our discussion below we will illustrate a few of these important early images.

At the end of his article, Gail remarks (p.89), “Nevertheless it is a rather astonishing circumstance that the round object in Visnu's hand remains absolutely unnoticed in India until its replacement by the lotus flower.”

No doubt, the Indian scholars were biased with the descriptions of the later Sanskrit texts and the round object was wrongly taken as a lotus bud.

At the end Gail says (p.89), “Finally I would like to repeat the most revealing śloka from the Matsyapurāṇa :

tac ca padmam purāṇajṣāḥ pṛthivī-rūpam uttamam |
nārāyaṇa-samudbhutam pravadanti maharṣayaḥ ||169.3||

'And the great seers, well versed in the Purāṇas, call this lotus that originated from Nārāyaṇa, the highest form of the earth.'”

References

1. In his footnote 1, Gail remarks, “The only exception seems to be Fig.1. The Unchadih sculpture holds the object in the upper right hand, the lower right, originally touching gadādevī, is completely destroyed.” See our Fig.3.
2. Gail is absolutely right in his remark. The Indian scholars differ in identifying this object.
3. Perhaps Pal identifies 'lotus seed' with the Sanskrit expression bijapūraka (Pal 1974, 65). Elsewhere Pal identifies the object in a very popular way as 'a boss' (Pal 1978, 57). Haque, however, translates bijapūraka as 'lotus bud' (Haque 1992, 58).
4. This popular identification is without any foundation. Slusser and Vajracharya (1973) are wrong in accepting the popular identification which leads one to an irrational iconographic conclusion.
5. Correctly vyāpi.
6. The image illustrated in her pl.26.12 is a black slipped terracotta image now in a private collection; it has been restored and holds a round object in the upper right hand. The damaged black slipped terracotta image from Rajakpur, Bogra district, illustrated in her pl.26.11, formerly in the Bangladesh National Museum, also held a round object in the upper right hand. Unfortunately, the image was completely destroyed after having been stolen.
7. Gail's illustration of the damaged Viṣṇu image from Besnagar, Vidisha district, now in the Vidisha Museum, c. 7th century CE (his figs.4-5), is a perfect example of the mahī-padma relation, but the illustration of the deity from Rajshahi, now in the Varendra Research Museum, Rajshahi, Bangladesh, dated c. 11th century CE (his fig.6), is not a convincing example of Viṣṇu holding a lotus (padma).

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Illustrations

Fig.1 : Viṣṇu with the earth (mahī or dharāṇi) in the lower right hand, end of the 9th century CE. From Bakong Temple, Roluos (early Angkor period). National Museum Phnom Penh. Gail 2009, fig.9; photo after Angkor 2007, Nr.32.



Fig.1



Fig.2

Fig.2 : Viṣṇu with the earth (mahī or dharāṇi) in the lower right hand, 12th century CE. From Province Kandal (Angkor period). National Museum Phnom Penh. Gail 2009, fig.10; photo after Angkor 2007, Nr.66.

Fig.3 : Viṣṇu with the globe in the upper right hand (lower right missing), early 5th century CE. From Unchadih, District Allahabad, Allahabad Museum. Gail 2009, fig.1; photo after Chandra 1970, pl.LXXX.



Fig.3



Fig.4

Fig.4 : This is the earliest image of Viṣṇu (Vāsudeva) from Bengal, from Narhatta, Kahalu, Bogra District, now in the Varendra Research Museum, Rajshahi (inv.2912) and is often illustrated. It is dated in the 4th century CE. The object in the lower right hand is no doubt round, but it has a stem on top. According to Gail's interpretation (2009, 85) it should be the globe (mahī) surmounted by Meru, axis of the world, held by Viṣṇu. This novel identification is yet to be accepted. So far various scholars, including the present author, have had different identifications. The image was first published by Rahman (1969, 28-29, pl.XI) who described the round object in the lower right hand as padma. Haque (1992, 58, pl.3; also 2008, 194, cat.173, pl.6) described it as a lotus bud (bijapūraka). Photo : G. Mevissen 2011.

Fig.5 : A 7th century figure of seated Viṣṇu on Garuḍa (Viṣṇu Garuḍāsana), most probably from Bihar, now in the Cleveland Museum of Art, Ohio. The round object with a pointed top held by Viṣṇu in his front right hand has been described by Gail (2009, 85), “The Meru, axis of the world could well be indicated by the small circular disc on top of the globe held by Viṣṇu in Fig.3.”

This beautiful image was published by Pratapaditya Pal (1978, 113, cat.65, with further references to previous publications) where he described the attribute as 'a boss'. For another standing image of Viṣṇu of the 4th century, from Uttar Pradesh, Mathura region, now in the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, The Avery Brundage Collection, see Pal 1978, 17, cat.3, where the object is also called 'a boss'. Photo : A.J. Gail.



Fig.5

Fig.6 : We illustrate the stone image of the so-called Viṣṇu-Lokeśvara from Kalandarpur, Panchbibi, District Joypurhat, Bangladesh, now in the Varendra Research Museum (inv.661), to be dated in c. 12th century. The deity holds in the front right hand an oval-shaped object which may be identified as mahī or dharaṇi, although at this late period it should have developed into a padma or lotus. Haque (1992, 79, pl.39) describes the image conventionally as of the PCGS order, that means the oval-shaped object is padma or lotus. Gail described the oval-shaped object in the lower hand of the deity as (Gail in Haque & Gail 2008, 190, cat.162, pl.2), “His lower hands, supported by lotus flowers, carry a fruit (r.) and a conch (l.) [...]”. Maybe he will change the identification of the round object now to mahī or dharaṇi, although in this late period we expect a lotus or padma. So we have enough scope now to think over the relation of mahī and padma. Photo : G. Melzer 2011.



Fig.6

Fig.7 : Viṣṇu image from Sarisadah, a village near Dakshat Barasat, Jayanagar Thana (see Bautze-Picron 2009, 273), Dakshin 24 Parganas District, West Bengal, now in the Indian Museum, Kolkata (inv.2592), c. 12th century. We illustrate a full view and a detail photo of the upper right hand holding the round object with the tiny lotus. Bautze-Picron failed to notice that the spiral of the śaṅkha in the upper left hand of Viṣṇu is on top and not below, as is usually the case in the Pāla period. Photos : G. Melzer 2011.



Fig.7



Detail of Fig.7