A ceiling in the Gorresio building (DOST)
Tīrthayāṭrā

Essays in Honour of Stefano Piano

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Alessandria
tirhasevāsu satasaṅga satasaṅge nirmalā matiḥ
nirmalāyām matau jhānam jhāne muktis ca jáyate

Dalla permanenza presso i guadi sacri, si ha la compagnia dei buoni; essendovi la compagnia dei buoni, la mente si fa immacolata; divenuta immacolata la mente, vi è la conoscenza; quando vi sia la conoscenza, viene in essere la liberazione.

Śrīśaṅkarācārya-carīta II, 44 (traduzione di Mario Piantelli)
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Editorial Note

Con questa raccolta di saggi si vuole rendere omaggio a Stefano Piano, indologo eminente, maestro della scuola indologica torinese, già Direttore del Dipartimento di Orientalistica dell’Università degli Studi di Torino, Presidente del Centro di Scienze religiose “Erik Peterson” dell’Università degli Studi di Torino, fondatore e coordinatore del dottorato di ricerca in Studi indologici e tibetologici, confluito come indirizzo nella Scuola di Studi euro-asiali: indologia, linguistica, onomastica dell’Università degli Studi di Torino. L’opera testimonia la stima, l’affetto e la gratitudine di quanti, colleghi, discepoli e amici, hanno benevolmente accolto la nostra iniziativa.

Il nostro sentito ringraziamento va a quanti hanno contribuito con l’attivo interessamento e il concreto sostegno non solo finanziario alla realizzazione della Miscellanea, in primo luogo al Magnifico Rettore dell’Università degli Studi di Torino, Prof. Ezio Pelizzetti, al Provveditore della Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia dell’Università degli Studi di Torino, Prof. Lorenzo Massachio, e al Direttore del Dipartimento di Orientalistica dell’Università degli Studi di Torino, Prof. Alessandro Monti. Un ringraziamento va anche alla Regione Piemonte.

Il Comitato Promotore
The sanctity of the *audumbar* in Mahārāṣṭra

Antonio Rigopoulos

Botanical and Therapeutic Characteristics of the *udumbara*.

The cluster fig, Skt. *udumbara*, is a tree native to all of India. Identified as *Ficus glomerata* Roxb., it was subsumed under the larger group of *Ficus racemosa* Linn. in 1946. In Hindī it is known as *gilār* or *tāmar*, in Bengali as *jasā dumbar* (*jasā* = Skt. *yaśa*, reminiscent of its sacrificial import), in Tamil as *atti*. In Gujarāṭī and Marāṭhī the tree's name is *umbar* or, more commonly, *audumbar*. An almost entirely glabrous tree, with ovate leaf-blades three to eight inches long shining on both surfaces, the *udumbara* is a large fig without aerial roots. Its wood is greyish-white or reddish-grey, soft and light, not durable. By comparison with other woods it is a wet, sappy wood, and its sap is said to be *malky*. For this reason, the *udumbara* is called *kṣīrt or kṣīra-vṛkṣa* ("milky tree").

The tree produces an abundance of edible fruits two or three times a year. The way in which it bears its fruit is noteworthy: the downy, reddish figs are mostly borne in clusters from the trunk and larger branches, and they are not found on the twigs as is usual. The fruit does not hang from the tips of the leafy branches but is found in leafless clusters right against the main trunk of the tree itself. Typically, the fruit is full of crawling insects and is even said to be dangerous to eat. The medicinal use of these insects

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2. Whenever referring to the tree in the specific Marāṭhī milieu I will thus call it *audumbar* rather than *udumbara*.
The sanctity of the *udambara* in Maharashtra

reported to paralyse the crude matter and to be absorbent, lean, and extremely cleansing for the skin\(^4\).

With regard to the etymology of the term *udambara*, the *Śatā-patha Brāhmaṇa*, in connection with the preparation for the *agni-cayana* ritual, suggests the following: “Indra took his [Prajāpati’s] vigour away and went away to the north: it became the *udambara* tree” (7.4.1.39); “He said: ‘Verify this one has lifted me from out of all evil’; and because he said ‘he has lifted me out (udabhīṛtya)’, hence (the name) *udambharas*; *udambha* doubtless being what is mystically called *udambara*, for the gods love the mystic” (7.5.1.22)\(^5\). According to M. Mayrhofer, *udambhara* or *udambha* is to be derived from an Austro-Asiatic root *du₂b₂* meaning “to swell up” and, according to C. H. Warburg, from *dub-ba₂*- “fechte (d. i. saftige) Kraft habend/verleihend”\(^6\).

The *udambhara* in Vedic Literature.

Already in *Atharva Veda* 19.31 we find a *sūkṛta* to be used while fastening an *udambhara* mārī, an amulet which was worn to force away poverty and hunger and to confer offspring and riches\(^7\). The ritual importance of the *udambhara* wood has been masterfully scrutinised by Ch. Minkowski, in an article which appeared in 1989\(^8\). As he has shown, in Vedic literature the

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\(^12\) It is also believed to cure hysteria and prevent abortion; see K. D. Upadhyaya, *Indian Botanical Folklore*, cit., p. 15.

\(^13\) P. Oudhia, “Doornar or Gular (Ficus glomerata) as Medicinal Herb in Chhattisgarh, India”, cit.

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udumbara is consistently identified as a source of abundance and nourishing strength/sap, that is, ārj. Among all trees, such identification is specific to the udumbara. Of the 107 different passages in the Vedas and Brāhmaṇas in which the term udumbara appears, 93 of these make an association between udumbara and ārj. The exact phrase ārj vā udumbara occurs 25 times in Vedic texts. The udumbara is even said to have been born from ārj and, indeed, ārj refers to a nourishment of a liquid, vegetal kind. In the Brāhmaṇas, udumbara is also equated with anna/annidaya or rasa i.e. food, sustenance.

The udumbara wood was always considered suitable for ritual purposes. It was especially utilised to make thrones (āsana),unction cups and seasonal implements (to be used once and then burned) in sacrifices of royal import, such as the rāja-rāga, the vāja-peya, and the agni-cayana. The udumbara appears as the royal wood par excellence due to its attribute of providing wealth and abundance: even its fruit is said to be a food suitable for a king (Atireya Brāhmaṇa 7.32). In solemn sacrifices (brahuta yajñas) the udumbara was used in association with the royal patron, the yājāmāna, rather than with any of the brāhmaṇa priests. Given its association with fecundity, the udumbara played a central role in the anointing of a new king.

The udumbara staff (danda) is the deva’s might and also represents the kṣatriya’s prowess in war: by touching his chariot and praising it as udumbara, he guarantees the conquest of the regions (Atireya Brāhmaṇa 37.67). The staff was of varying lengths and different woods according to one’s hierarchical ranking. It was generally made of palāsa (Butea frondosa) or bilva (Aegle marmelos) for the brāhmaṇa, nyagrodha (Ficus indica) for the kṣatriya, and badara (Zizyphus jujuba) or udumbara for the vājīya. The udumbara was invoked by the vājīya as “life sap” (ārj), so that he may “put life sap in himself” (Paññāyana Gṛhya-sūtra 2.5.22-23). The udumbara staff was also reputed to be fit for kṣ atriya (Āśvalāyana Gṛhya-sūtra 1.19.13). In order to acquire longevity and descent, at the end of his studentship the brahma-cārin used to hide his girdle at the root of an udumbara, where also the cuttings of his hair and nails were placed (Apaśambha Gṛhya-sūtra 12.5).

The sanctity of the udumbara in Mahābhārata

The udumbara, the most prolific of trees, is said to belong to Prajāpati and to have sprung from the spot where Agni was created. Agni issued from Prajāpati’s head and the latter then wiped off whatever of his blood (lohitā) was left there: he wiped it off onto the earth and precisely there the udumbara was born. Therefore, the fruit of the udumbara turns red when ripe (Maitreyasūti Samhitā 1.8.1; Kāṭhaka Samhitā 6.1; Atireya Brāhmaṇa 5.24.4). Even later Brāhmaṇa such as the Pañca-viṣṇu and the Jainism relate the udumbara to Prajāpati: “Prajāpati distributed ārj to the gods. Hence was born the udumbara. The udumbara is Prajāpati’s” (Pañca-viṣṇu Brāhmaṇa 6.4.1); “When Prajāpati distributed ārj and sustenance to creatures, then whatever remnant remained became this tree” (Jainism Brāhmaṇa 2.183). Indra replaces Prajāpati in Sāta-patha Brāhmaṇa 12.7.1.9. Indra’s ārj is said to flow out from his flesh and to become the udumbara tree. The most elaborate story concerning the udumbara is the one told in Sāta-patha Brāhmaṇa 6.6.3.2-3, from which we learn that the udumbara has the ārj of all trees concentrated in it and thus it is always moist, the most fruitful of all.

The gods and the asuras, both of them sprung from Prajāpati, strove together. Now all the trees sided with the asuras; but the udumbara tree alone did not forsake the gods. The gods, having conquered the asuras, took possession of their trees. They said: “Come, let us lay into the udumbara tree whatever pith, whatever vital sap there is in these trees...”. Accordingly, they laid into the udumbara tree what pith and essence there was in those trees; and on account of that pith it matures (fruit) equal to all the (other) trees: hence that (tree) is always moist, always full of milky sap, that udumbara tree, indeed, (being) all the trees, is all food; he thus gratifies him (Agni) by every kind of food, and kindles him by all trees (kinds of wood).21

The identification of the udumbara with Soma is especially noteworthy: the deity-plant Soma, just like the udumbara fruits tied to a woman to promote fecundity, represents the life-giving power manifesting itself in the cyclical processes of fertility.22 Various texts identify Soma with the essence of waters, sap in trees, and seed in men and animals. The throne of King Soma is carved out of udumbara wood and the seat of Vivasvan, worshipped

20 Ibid., p. 9.
at the end of the Soma sacrifice, is made of it. Moreover, the udumbara is also linked to Yama as the prototype of the immortal. One of the god’s names as found in late Brahmanical literature is: “Coming from the udumbara tree”. Yama’s connection with the udumbara is intended to highlight his royal virility, he being exstolled as the first human and the first king.

In domestic rites the udumbara is consistently linked to fertility, as in the śūnanānayaṇa or “wearing of the hair” ceremony: a ritual performed by the husband during the first pregnancy of his wife, in the third or fourth month. The husband is to put the branch of an udumbara tree with an even number of unripe fruits (corresponding to the male children hoped for) round the neck of his spouse, and this is believed to transmit generative power and to protect the to-be mother ensuring an easy delivery (Śūnanānayaṇa Gṛhya-sūtra 1.2.210). Leaves of the udumbara were used in wedding ceremonies. During the three nights of chastity after marriage, an udumbara rod smeared with a fragrant substance and wrapped round with a cloth or thread was placed between the sleeping spouses. In the fourth night the husband gave it to his wife who accepted it by saying: “May I have offspring” (Baudhāyana Gṛhya-sūtra 1.5.17 ff.). According to various sources the rod would represent the Gandharva Viśvāvasu thought to possess the bride before marriage.

Another rite which a newly married couple was expected to perform was on the fifth day after wedding: having cut their hair and nails they were to go out of the village to pray to an isolated udumbara and pray for good fortune on their marriage (Baudhāyana Gṛhya-sūtra 1.8). Even in Mahābhārata 3.115 the udumbara is exulogized as generating the birth of sons. Just before the pun-savāna rite, the mother of Parāśurāma is to embrace an udumbara and the mother of Viśvāmitra an aśvāsthra. But then the trees are mixed up and the touching of the aśvāsthra produces a bṛāhmaṇa child who acts like a kṣatriya (= Parāśurāma), while touching the udumbara produces a kṣatriya child who acts like a bṛāhmaṇa (= Viśvāmitra).

The udumbara, being suitable for religious rites, should never be cut down. The consumption of the fruits of the udumbara, on the other hand, is approved of. Interestingly, from Vedic times the presence of certain trees in the vicinity of the chosen place for building a house is forbidden: in the Gṛhya-sūtras, the udumbara associated with Prajāpati is thought to cause bad eyes if placed on the north side of one’s house. Rather, various authorities stress that the udumbara should be planted in the south (perhaps because this is recognised as Yama’s direction).

The udumbara in the Guru-caritra and the Dattātreyya Cult.

I here focus on the significance of the udumbara in the Marathi cultural area, in which it figures as the favourite tree of the god Datta/Dattātreya. In modern iconography, he is often depicted as standing or sitting cross-legged in front of it, surrounded by three or four dogs said to represent the Vedaś by and a cow i.e. Kāmadhenu said to represent Mother Earth. To be sure, this tree is revered as his abode and is found at all Datta temples and pilgrimage places. Many bhasas even plant an udumbara in front of their houses in order to worship it daily. The tree is said to symbolise renunciation and higher wisdom. Believed to be the repository of nectar, Dattātreya is thought to always reside in its shade, albeit invisibly. In Marathi the

41 Dattātreya is a Purānic deity, in origin a Tantric animomor yogin later sanitized and adapted to the devotional milieu of the Purānams. For an overview, see A. Rigopoulos, Dattātreya: The Immortal Guru, Yogan, and Aivaśra, A Study of the Transformative and Inclusive Character of a Multi-Faceted Hindu Deity, State University of New York Press, Albany (N.Y.) 1998.
42 As trees and the udumbara in particular are linked with rivers, so are cows. In the Marathi area the Godāvāri is revered as Kāmadhenu; see A. Feldhaus, Water and Womanhood, cit., pp. 46-47.
43 The planting of any tree is viewed as a meritorious act. The planting of eight udumbaras is said to lead to a sūjran in Soma’s realm (Yṛṣṭyayurveda 12-8); see A. Nugteren, Belief, Bounty, and Beauty. Rituals around Sacred Trees in India, Brill, Leiden 2005, p. 81. Nonetheless the udumbara especially in North India is also believed to be an ancestry tree, possibly because it is regarded as the dwelling place of Yama; see W. Crooke, Religion & Folklore of Northern India, Oxford University Press, London 1926, p. 408.
advent of the Datta-sampadāya (“the tradition of Datta [followers]”) dates to the middle of the sixteenth century when the Marāṭhī Guru-caritra (“Life of the Master”), the sacred text of the movement, was written by Sarasvati Gaṅgādārī. Divided into fifty-one chapters (adhyāyās) containing more than seven thousand verses (ośvī), this hagiography presents the miraculous lives of Śripād Śrīvallabha (c. 1323-1353) and Nṛsiṃha Sarasvati (c. 1378-1458), the two seminal figures venerated as the first ‘historical’ avatāras of Dāttāreya. The Guru-caritra emphasizes brahmimala ritual orthodoxy, in an effort to counter Islamic dominance as well as Tantric excesses. Nṛsiṃha Sarasvati, the actual founder of the Datta-sampadāya, was apparently a brahma-gaṇa ascetic who had been ordained in the Sarasvati order of the Śāktaraṇa dāśa-nāmin tirthanics. Constantly on the move, he finally settled down in the village of Gāngāpārī about fifty miles south-east of Solāpur (presently in northern Karnātaka), the major pilgrimage centre of the tradition along with other sites such as Narsobāvāḍī and Audumbāra.

It is from the time of the Guru-caritra that Dāttāreya’s popular iconography incorporating the triad of Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva emerges. He is represented with three heads (tri-nukha) – the central one being that of Viṣṇu, his focal identity – and six arms holding the emblems of the tri-mūrti: the water-pot and rosary of Brahmā, the mace and conch of Viṣṇu, the drum and trident of Śiva. The icon captures and recapitulates Dāttāreya’s integrative force, embracing all functions as the manifestation of the fullness of the Godhead. In Gāngāpārī and other holy spots his presence is attested to also in the non-iconic form of the pāddās, the sands worn by Datta or one of his incarnations, emblem of the wandering ascetic and of the deity’s unfathomable omnipresence. Indeed, Dāttāreya is believed to be eternal and to manifest himself under a variety of forms. Attaining his vision is thought to be extremely difficult, a rare grace: Datta is unforeseeable in his transcendence and a rule unto himself.

The identification of the udombāra tree with Viṣṇu is the fundamental datum which should be kept in mind. In Mahā-bhārata 13.149.14-120, where the thousand names of Viṣṇu are cited, he is praised as udombāra in the 823rd (om udombāraś ca) nāmam; concomitantly, he is also identified with the aśvattha and the nyagrodha. Given the basic association of the udombāra with Viṣṇu, the peculiar sanctity of the udombāra/audumbāra tree


in the Dāttāreya cult is explained in chapter 19 of the Guru-caritra (verses 7-32), the “Bible” for all devotees set in the form of a dialogue between Siddhaṃuni and the disciple “Nāndāhārak”. Chapters 17 through 20 in various ways highlight the audumbāra’s central place in the tradition: herein, 19.7-32 is the core textual source giving the reason for the tree’s “greatness” (mahāman). The story runs as follows. Right at the beginning of chapter 19, Nāndāhārak questions Siddhaṃuni as to why Nṛsiṃha Sarasvati was always more fond of the audumbāra tree, whereas there are other holy trees such as the aśvattha, etc. He wishes to know what is the special significance of the audumbāra and why Nṛsiṃha Sarasvati chose to always sit under it. At his request, Siddhaṃuni explains that when Viṣṇu manifested as the Man-Lion Narsinhabi in order to protect his devotee Prahlāda and annihilate his arrogant father, the Dāitya demon-king Hiranyakaśipu, he had to tore open the latter’s stomach (pōt) with his sharp claws/horns (nākha). Consequently, his nails got drenched with the kāla-śāpa poison of which the Dāitya’s stomach was replete and, as a result, Narsinhabi found himself in excruciating pain. Seeing the suffering of her lord, the goddess Mahalakṣmi intervened and plucked a fruit (śeṣa) of an audumbāra tree which was nearby. She offered it to the fierce (svaṅga) Narsinhabi who could then stuck his nails deep into the fruit’s pulp. In this way his pain was instantly assuaged. The fiery poison abated and Narsinhabi, relieved, regained his peaceful composure (svaṃnya). Mightily pleased, the Man-Lion – now extolled with the epithet of Hṛṣikeśa – blessed the audumbāra saying that from then onwards it would be as powerful on earth as the kalpa-vrīka in heaven. In the kāli-yuga, he added, the audumbāra will be the kalpa-taru: whoever will worship the tree will get his desires fulfilled, both worldly (son, riches, cure from ailments) as well as spiritual. ‘I myself’, announced Narsinhabi, ‘will take my abode in the audumbāra together with Mahalakṣmi, as all deities abide in it’. Therefore, concluded Siddhaṃuni, this is the reason why Nṛsiṃha Sarasvati chose to always sit under the audumbāra tree.

Chapters 18-19 of the Guru-caritra tell us that Nṛsiṃha Sarasvati stayed under an audumbāra tree at the pahcā-gaṅgī-kṣetra, the sangama of the Krṣṇa and Pahcagāṅgī, for a period of twelve years. The place was known as Amarpur from the local Amareśvara temple, but due to Nṛsiṃha Sarasvati’s prolonged stay it came to be known, as it is today, as Narsobāvāḍī.

37 On Narsobāvāḍī, see P. Rāmānlalī Tere, Śrī Ksetra Nṛsiṃhāvāḍī Dāran, Gokhale
After the twelve years period, the saint decided to leave the village and to settle in Gāndhārīpura. Before leaving, he blessed the site saying that he would always be present in an invisible form at that āudumbar tree, and let there his wooden sandals for worship. To this day, the āudumbar and the gurā-pūḍukās enshrined therein are believed to shower Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī's power and grace. Previously, in chapter 17, the Guru-caritra narrates of Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī's stay in another nearby village, significantly known as Āudumbar due to the presence of many āudumbar trees. Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī is reported to have resided here under an āudumbar for the period of a catuṁśāsa, that is, the four months of the rainy season, after which he departed for Amamāra. Āudumbar lies on the western bank of the Kṛṣṇa river, in the vicinity of Bhālavādī, and is to date a most important pilgrimage centre for all Datta devotees.

The greatness of the āudumbar-sthān at the sangama of the Kṛṣṇa and Paścāgāṁga is highlighted in chapter 20 of the Guru-caritra: after Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī's departure, the worship of his pūḍukās coupled with the circumambulation (pradakṣīṇa) and abhiṣekha of the holy tree as summoned in a dream to a poor woman, is so powerful as to free her from a terrible ghost and grant her the blessing of giving birth to two children. References to the āudumbar are found in two other chapters of the Guru-caritra: in adhyāya 32, where a woman ready to burn herself on the funeral pyre of her husband approaches Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī seated under an āudumbar, asking for his blessings; and most notably in adhyāya 40, where the dry wood of an āudumbar puts forth twigs and grows into a tree thanks to Nṛsiṃha Sarasvatī's sprinkling water upon it from his water-jar.

As regards the famous episode of Nārāsiṁha killing the demon Hiranyakāsiṇī, the Purānic sources I have examined do not contemplate the story of Nārāsiṁha's claws being dripped with the kūla-kūla poison contained in the demon's belly, nor do they mention the soothing/healing power of the āudumbar fruit. This narrative is probably the original "creation" of the Guru-caritra's author, spelled out in order to emphasise the āudumbar's sanctity. The story is indeed very popular in the Marāthī area. R. E. Enthoven in his Folklore of the Konkan reports a variant of it told by a school master informant of Ratnagiri: with no aid from Mahākāśi, the burning sensation caused by the poison would have been assuaged by Nārāsiṁha himself, who thrust his 'hands' nails directly into the trunk of an āudumbar.

In this regard, it should be noted that the practice of driving actual nails into trees is common throughout the Deccan. Such practice is believed to cure fever and various kinds of diseases by coercing the jātī of the tree, 'extracting' its bountiful essence/sap. According to another variant, it would have been Anāṣṭāya i.e. Dāttāreya's mother to advise Mahākāśi to use the juice of the āudumbar leaves in order to relieve her lord from the pain caused by the poison: as a consequence, Nārāsiṁha would have had Dāttāreya's darśana.

Some Purānic accounts elaborate on the fact that Nārāsiṁha's claws are tainted with the demon's blood. In various māhātmyas when a deity kills a demon the former is considered to have committed brāhma-hatya, the murder of a brāhma. When Nārāsiṁha rips out the intestines of the brāhma demon Hiranyakāsiṇī, Nārāsiṁha's claws remain stained with his blood, the tangible representation of his violent deed. Nārāsiṁha then seeks help and finds a place where he can purify himself and wash off the blood, and finally finds such a place (for instance the Pīrṇa river; see Payosnī Māhātmya 16.15-18.21). In our story, however, there is no issue of expiation from having killed the demon. In lieu of the blood, of which there is no mention, Nārāsiṁha's claws are stained with the same burning poison which lies in Hiranyakāsiṇī's intestines and the whole issue is how to relieve himself from it.


Even in the extant Nārāsiṁha Purāņa one finds no trace of such story. On this text, see preliminarily L. Roche, The Purāņas, Otto Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden 1986, pp. 205-206.


For an overview of the main Purānic myths relative to Nārāsiṁha, see D. A. Sefter, The Myth of Nārāsiṁha and Vāmana. Two Avatars in Cosmological Perspective, State University of New York Press, Albany (N.Y.) 1991. See also A. C. Swain, A
An Analysis of the Guru-caritra’s Story.

1. The first thing which one cannot fail to observe is that Nrisinha Sarasvatī, whose name at birth was Narahari (an equivalent of Narasimha), bears the same name of the avatāra of Viṣṇu who is the protagonist of the narrative. Nrisinha Sarasvatī clearly comes to identify himself with Narasimha. His characterization as a Datta avatāra in the present kāl age encompasses the Narasimha avatāra, who appears to be at the same time subsumed within the former and identified with it. The lion-headed Narasimha is the deity of many brāhmaṇa families of southern Mahārāṣṭra whose main kṣetra is precisely Narsābēḷāndī near Kollāpūr, that is, the place sanctified by the twelve-year presence of Nrisinha Sarasvatī. Thus in Mahārāṣṭra the spread of Narasimha’s cult is largely due to the saintly impact of Nrisinha Sarasvatī’s life. Of the two historical avatāras of Datta which the Guru-caritra extols, Śrīpād Śrīvallabha was-born in Pīṭhapur in present day Andhra Pradesh, East Godavari District, whereas Nrisinha Sarasvatī was born in Kānālī, in the Kolā District of Mahārāṣṭra. Nonetheless, in the Guru-caritra Nrisinha Sarasvatī is regarded as none other than Śrīpād Śrīvallabha reincarnated. As is well-known, the cult of Narasimha is diffused in South India and particularly in Andhra Pradesh, where there are more than one hundred and sixty shrines dedicated to him. Narasimha’s cult is thought to have played a significant role in the “hinduization” of Andhra. It might be hypothesized that a way through which Narasimha’s cult was brought to southern Mahārāṣṭra was precisely from Andhra, via the migrating link of the first seminal avatāra of Dattātreya.

Dattātreya, though strictu sensu an avatāra of Viṣṇu, is glorified in the Dattā-sampradāya as the veritable Godhead. He is worshipped as the purāṇic guru, yogī, and avatāra and is believed to be an eternal, omnipresent “incarnation”. It is important to highlight the similarities between Narasimha and Dattātreya. If in its viṣṇuva-sātvā combination Dattātreya appears as the synthetic icon par excellence, Narasimha is also an integrative figure since his terrifying, ugra nature in annihilating Hiryāyakaśipū clearly evidences sātvā traits, most fitting in sanctifying the end of the satya age (akin to a pralaya and thus performing Viṣṇa’s function). Narasimha corre-

sponds to Viṣṇa’s shape of terror, and is the main avatāric exception to the preponderance of the bounteous traits of Viṣṇu. As in Dattātreya’s case, even in Narasimha’s portrait the inclusion of sātvā motifs points at the representational of the totality of the Godhead. Narasimha, who is popular among the esoteric Pāñcarātras, resembles Śiva Bhairava in character, to the point of emerging like Bhairava from the (sacrificial) pillar. But last not least, I should mention the fact that Narasimha, just like Datta, is extolled as a supreme yogī.

2. The kālā-kīta, also known as halā-halā, the black poison contained in Hiranyakaśipū’s stomach, is one of the substances which emerged from the churning of the ocean of milk (samudra-maṇthana) performed by devas and asuras in their effort to extract the nectar of immortality (amṛta). There are Purānic accounts in which the deadly poison is said to be the first substance to have emerged from the churning of the milky ocean, in lieu of the cow of plenty Kāṃcendra. Typically, it is Śiva who saves the world from destruction by swallowing the poison and stopping it at the level of his throat, thus becoming known as Nīlakanṭha. In another account, however, it is Prahlāda, the pious devotee of Viṣṇu and son of Hiranyakaśipū, who drinks the poison given to him by his own father wishing to kill him: Prahlāda digests it with no problem, having rendered it powerless through his invocation of the snake Ananta. In our story we clearly witness an opposition between the black and burning mortal substance, quintessence of evil with its pestilential vapours, and the bright red fruit of the avaṃbura with its refreshing, healing milky juice. As noted, the cooling effect of the avaṃbura’s sap, often utilised in cases of swelling, is one among the medicinal properties attributed to the plant. Even the juice of the avaṃbura’s root is believed to have a cooling effect and is used in cases of measles and rashes. Indeed, the avaṃbura is believed to contain the essence of all trees: as the one antidote, the avaṃbura...
bar fruit is here identified with the aneṣṭa and with Soma, which is also one of the substances said to emerge from the churning of the milky ocean. Viṣṇu is directly linked to the Soma plant/sap and explicitly identified with it (Sata-patha Brāhmaṇa 3.2.4.12, 3.6.3.19). Moreover, Soma is also comprised among the thousand names of Viṣṇu (Māhā-bhārata 13.149.67). We must recall that in Dattātreya’s Purānic mythology Soma/Chicago figures as Dattātreya’s brother, being an avatāra of Brahmā as he is of Viṣṇu (the third brother, Durvāsas, is revered as an avatāra of Siva). By the time of the Guru-caritra, when Dattātreya comes to incorporate the tri-mūrti, Soma/Brahmā is understood to be part and parcel of his supreme nature.

Mahālakṣmi’s role in plucking the udumbar fruit and offering it to Narasimha should not be overlooked. Her function as prompt helpmate of her spouse is a characteristic feature. Mahālakṣmi or Śrī-Lakṣmi is especially linked with fertility and the sap of life. The vegetative, procreative symbolism is dominant in the goddess’s portrayal. Her association with Viṣṇu comes about precisely in the context of the churning of the milky ocean albeit in later versions of the myth, since she also figures as one of the “products” emerging from it.

Besides fertility, another theme in Lakṣmi’s imagery is her connection with royal authority, which is intimately linked to the function of the udumbar, and, of course, to Viṣṇu. From around the 5th century CE Viṣṇu is viewed as the divine king par excellence and his primary role is to institute and maintain dharma through his avatāras. As ruler and protector of the universe, Viṣṇu is represented on a royal throne and the very name Narasimha, “lion among men”, is a royal epithet. Where Lakṣmi is present royalty waxes strong. Finally, Lakṣmi is associated and even identified with Soma.

We have thus come a full circle in establishing a series of identities or homologies. Besides the constitutive one of the udumbar with fertility and royalty and thus with Viṣṇu, we can appreciate its identification with aneṣṭa, Soma, and Mahālakṣmi. In our story the latter acts as a veritable trait d’union between the udumbar and Narasimha, who solemnly vows to abide in the holy fig tree along with his spouse and the host of the gods. Ultimately,

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Narasimha the avatāra is linked/identified with Nrisinha Saraswat. All these figures are understood as facets of the triadic Dattātreya, the supreme, inclusive Godhead.

3. As we know from Puranic accounts, Hiranyakasipu, contending with his son Prahlāda as to Viṣṇu’s omnipoience and omnipresence, demanded to know if the god was present in a stone pillar of the royal hall, and struck it violently. Consequently, in order to avenge Prahlāda and confirm his sovereignty, Viṣṇu came forth from the pillar as Narasimha and tore the arrogant Daitya king to pieces. What is interesting is the fact that many Datta devotees believe that the pillar from which Viṣṇu’s avatāra manifested himself was made of udumbar wood, which leads to an identification of the pillar with the tree and allows the recognition that the pillar/tree is the same as the cosmic, sacrificial pillar. After all, even the Bhāgavata Purāṇa narrative of the Narasimha-Hiranyakasipu story uses the term skambha, “stake,” for referring to the pillar, which clearly links us to a sacrificial context. I’m here reminded of an article of H. W. Bode´witz relative to the raising of the central pillar of the hat of the sacrificial assembly (saḍas) — a pillar made of udumbara wood — by the udgārī.56 We thus come back to our Vedic sources. The udumbara is identified with Prajapati and the udumbara tree/pillar is life-sap. Prajapati is understood to be the same as Viṣṇu and therefore the same as Dattātreya, who is equated with the essence of all the gods (who are said to reside in the tree). We witness a series of equivalences: udumbara = sacrificial pillar = Prajapati = Viṣṇu and his avatāra Narasimha = Nrisinha Saraswat = Dattātreya who is extolled as the tri-mūrti and equivalent to Brahmā. It can also be argued that the udumbara/udumbar as Dattātreya is first and foremost Viṣṇu’s essence (viṣṇuviṇa), which amounts to the Absolute, subsuming itself in all deities.

The series of identifications of Viṣṇu with sacrifice and Prajapati/Narasimha are well-known. Already by the time of the Brāhmaṇas, Viṣṇu came to be associated with the sacrifice and the sacrificial post (yajña).57 As the personi-


58 See J. Gonda, Aspects of Early Viṣṇuism, cit., pp. 81-84.
fication of sacrifice he maintains order in the universe, dharma, upholding the primacy of the brähmanas and the proper royal government of the earth. As the Bṛhaṇava Purāṇa account hints at, the Narasimha-Hiranyakashipu story can be read as the performance and consummation of a sacrifice sanctioning the end of the saiva-yoga: the murder performed by the Man-Lion who disembowelled Hiranyakashipu wearing his entrails as a garland assumes a redemptive value, in which the violence exercised upon the victim is justified as necessary, inherent to the performance of a sacrifice (yajña). In the association of Narasimha with the audumbara which is a sacrificial implement from Vedic times, we witness the strength of the brahmanical component, intertwined to Narasimha’s (and Viṣṇu’s) karmic portrayal. In the Datta-samanādiya the brahmanical nature of Dattatreya and his avatāras is especially underlined. One of the Gura-caritra’s concerns is varṇāśrama-dharma and the execution of the prescribed yajñas. The identification of Datta’s icon with the audumbar reinforces his priestly character, elevating him to the role of bulwark of ‘Vedic’ orthodoxy.

Furthermore, Dattatreya’s association with the audumbar highlights his ascetic nature: ab origine he is the prototype of the yogin, of the parama-hansa and avadhūta renunciant. Aṣṭama Upaniṣad 98–99 even mentions the existence of a class of forest-hermits called Audumbaras. G. Feuerstein thinks that these Audumbaras are a class of renunciants who sustain themselves by eating wild grain and fruit, especially figs (audumbara). In Dattatreya’s case what is sure is that his connection with the audumbar is aimed at stressing his ascetic character. When not naked (digambara) and Śṛṇḍa Śrīvallabha is typically eulogised as Digambara — the ascetics’ “clothes” are often said to be made of the bark of trees. The very name of one among the oldest Datta followers, Dālalāramuni, literally means “the silent one who subsists on leaves” (dala). In popular folklore the audumbar is assimilated to Dattatreya’s triadic nature: its roots are said to be Brahmā, its bark Viṣṇu, and its branches Śiva. The tree is also believed to be visited by Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva on occasions. As lord of ascetics (ādī-nāth) and embodiment of the tri-mūrti, Datta is worshipped as an immortal. By the same token, the audumbar is itself viewed as an immortal tree being the abode of all the gods and the receptacle of the highest sap of soma-amṛta. As Dattatreya is extolled as the giver of both bhūkti and mukti, mundane enjoyments and liberation from rebirth, in the same way the audumbar is worshipped as the celestial wish-yielding tree (kalpa-vṛkṣa). Datta devotees preferably observe their penances under it, and the practice of the so-called audumbar-dikṣā is thought to grant both the eight supernormal siddhis as well as mukti. It may be concluded that in the Marathi area Dattatreya and the audumbar, from at least the XVth century, have come to be thought of as one and the same.


40 Dālalāramuni is revered as the author of the Datta-lahari; a poem in Datta’s praise; see Dālalāramuni, Dattālaharī. L’onda di Datta. A cura di A. Rigopoulos, Ca’foscari, Venezia 1999.

41 See S. M. Gupta, Plant Myths and Traditions in India. With a Foreword by Late Dr. C. Sivaramanur誓, Munshiram Manoharlal, New Delhi 1991, p. 50.
