



Electronic Journal  
of Vedic Studies

Volume 25 (2019), Issue 1

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**and Viṣṇu's First Incarnation**

Diwakar Acharya

ISSN 1084-7561

# Dolphin Deified: The Celestial Dolphin, an Upaniṣadic Puzzle, and Viṣṇu's First Incarnation\*

Diwakar Acharya  
Oxford University

## **Abstract:**

This paper argues that early in the Indian tradition the dolphin was deified and elevated to heaven as a constellation that housed the old polestar Thuban in its tail. It was venerated in different ages as the constant and ultimate *brāhman*, Brahmā Prajāpati, and Viṣṇu. The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (ŚB) tells the story of the rescue of Vaivasvata Manu from a devastating flood by a dolphin that is regarded in Indian tradition as a kind of fish. This fish is identified in the *Mahābhārata* as Brahmā Prajāpati in disguise, but in Purāṇic and other similar sources it is depicted as the foremost incarnation of Viṣṇu. After briefly discussing this story, the present paper reads the story of elevation of Śarkara the dolphin to heaven from the Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa (JB) before presenting Vedic and Puranic evidence for the worship of the celestial dolphin. It also reads an enigmatic passage from the *Bṛhad Āraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (BĀU) and shows that this passage equates the celestial dolphin with the central vital function in the human body. In its efforts to understand the saga of the dolphin, this paper also examines iconography and realia.

**Keywords:** celestial dolphin, Manu's rescue, Viṣṇu as dolphin/fish, old polestar, *Bṛhad Āraṇyaka Upaniṣad*

## **Dolphin as the Saviour Fish**

A myth of an extra-ordinary fish appears first in the ŚB (Mādhyandina version I.8.1.1-6 ≈ Kāṇva version II.7.3.1-4).<sup>1</sup> This myth tells about Vaivasvata Manu's chance-discovery of an extra-ordinary baby fish that asks him to rear it at first in a big jar and then in a furrow and, when it has outgrown that furrow, to take it down to a sea or any vast expanse of water. In return it promises to save him from a flood it predicts will carry away all creatures (*prajāḥ*)<sup>2</sup>. When reared, it gradually becomes bigger and bigger and finally

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\* I am grateful to Phyllis Granoff for her comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

<sup>1</sup> The Kāṇva and Mādhyandina versions of the myth differ from each other at a few places. These differences, however, are limited to linguistic elements and all details of the myth remain unaltered. Therefore, I am not discussing these differences in this paper.

<sup>2</sup> The expression *prajāḥ* specifically means people or progeny. When Vedic texts bless a man of meritorious acts or special knowledge, they say that he exceeds with his progeny/people, cattle, and brilliance of *brāhman*. But in non-specific statements like this it can mean all creatures. For instance, Prajāpati is the lord of creatures; he creates all of them. In any case, our myth is mainly concerned with humans.

becomes a dolphin (*jhaṣá*)<sup>3</sup>, the strongest among fishes, and following its instructions Manu releases it into a vast expanse of water. At the time of the flood, it comes and leads Manu's ship to safety to the foothills of a mountain in the North.<sup>4</sup> After the flood, all of mankind is carried away except Manu and he has to create the world anew. After the savior dolphin returns, lonely Manu offers a sacrifice, practices *tapas*, and obtains the quintessence of oblation in the form of a lady called Idā. On her he eventually begets humans and all other living beings.

As it has been elaborated in Magnone 2001, the ŚB myth is fundamentally different from the Sumero-Akkadian deluge myths.<sup>5</sup> In the latter, the deluge is caused by the supreme god to punish humans, in which the minor gods, too, have to suffer, but in Manu's myth such a motive is completely absent. In the ŚB story, Manu is not bothered to secure goods and beings for the future world either. The ŚB simply records that in a flood a dolphin saves a certain human being and he creates the human world anew in the post-deluge time through sacrifice and *tapas*. Thus, the focus and highlight of this myth appears to be the rescue of a man by a dolphin that once as a baby fish was saved and reared by him.

My identity of the aquatic creature of this myth as a dolphin needs some discussion. Already in 1975 Bernhard Kölver suggested that the word *jhaṣá* means the river dolphin. Scholars have nonetheless consistently translated the term in the above passage as a big fish.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, I would like to present more evidence to substantiate Kölver's proposal. The ŚB myth states that the fish eventually became a *jhaṣá*, makes a remark that it is the strongest fish, and also leaves sufficient clues to identify it as a dolphin. The text associates it with the sea or any large body of water. It is an aquatic animal of good size, strength and intelligence. The myth depicts the fish as having an elongated snout (*śṛṅga*).<sup>7</sup> As the text

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<sup>3</sup> If we add the fact that this fish is atypically for a fish kindly disposed to humans, we might see behind the myth of Manu an awareness of dolphin's behavior, such as posited in footnote 22 on the *sārkara* chant. Furthermore, the instructions of the baby 'fish' to Manu how to rear it might actually be telling us how baby dolphins were reared and trained in the ancient past, though there is no concrete evidence to prove this assumption.

<sup>4</sup> For a full account of the myth, see Eggeling 1882: 216-218, van Buitenen 1975: 582-583.

<sup>5</sup> Readers interested to read different versions of the Indian deluge myth should consult Surya Kanta 1950. The point of this paper is to discuss the central theme of this myth, Manu's rescue from a deluge by a particular type of fish called *jhaṣa*, and I am not going to discuss the other themes added into the Puranic versions of the myth. Nevertheless, it must be mentioned that many scholars in the past had hypothesized a relationship or affiliation of the Indian deluge myth with Sumero-Akkadian myths, whereas in recent times Gonda and other scholars have spoken in favour of the independence of the Indian deluge myth (cf. Magnone 2001:139). The most recent of them, Paolo Magnone, has systematically compared the elements and structure of the ŚB myth with the Akkadian myth (2001:140-143) and shown that the theme and structure of the two myths "diverge almost entirely." He has also explained how different are the motives and agendas of the two myths. He is right to say (p.139), "we should hardly be justified in grounding any presumption of a common origin on the strength of similarities pertaining to such elements as could scarcely be dispensed with by any deluge myth by reason of its very internal structure."

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Kölver 1975. Mayrhofer 1992: 608, s.v. *jhaṣa*. The AVŚ (XI.2.25) lists both *śiṣumāra* and *jhaṣa* (but spelt as *jaṣa*) side-by-side in a list of aquatic animals and so obviously distinguishes one from the other. Perhaps, when people wanted to be precise, they distinguished among species of dolphin.

<sup>7</sup> Something erect, elevated, or protruding can be figuratively described in Sanskrit as *śṛṅga*, for example, a peak, a pinnacle, the female breast, and also the tusks of a wild boar or an elephant. Many herbs are called *śṛṅgin* or *X-śṛṅgin* after their appearance. For example, the boar incarnation of Viṣṇu is praised as *ekaśṛṅga* (cf., e.g., *Mahābhārata* XII.33.27). Therefore, in the context of an aquatic animal it is safe to

states, Manu tied his ship to the elongated snout of the fish and swimming upstream it took him to the northern mountains.<sup>8</sup> As we gather all these points, the description of Manu's *jhaṣá* 'fish' appears as follows: it is an aquatic animal that is powerful, it can swim fast upstream, and has an elongated snout.

The original ŚB myth does not identify Manu's fish as a divine being, but when the same myth is retold in the *Mahābhārata* it is identified as the creator god Brahmā Prajāpati in disguise, and when retold again in a number of Purāṇas it is described as an incarnation of Viṣṇu.<sup>9</sup> In these retold accounts, too, the dolphin-like characterization of the fish remains intact. Of our interest here is one more characterization of this 'fish' found in the *Jayottara Tantra*, one of the earliest available Vaiṣṇava Tantra, and also in the *Jayākhya Saṃhitā*.<sup>10</sup> When this text refers to the first incarnation of Viṣṇu, it says that the divine fish has closed eyes.<sup>11</sup> It fits the river dolphin that is virtually blind,<sup>12</sup> and in the Indian subcontinent at least one species of such river dolphins is still found in the river systems of the Ganges, Brahmaputra, and Indus.

In a deeper level of symbolism, dolphin symbolizes the element of water. Traditional water conduits are built since long time in the shape of a dolphin's mouth, its elongated snout raised and curled and the flow of water running through its mouth. Although these sculptures become more and more complex over the centuries as artists use their freedom, the curled-up snout remains intact<sup>13</sup> and allows us to identify the creature as a dolphin. Numerous examples of such conduits can be found still in use in the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal, built from the early centuries of the first millennium till as late as the 19th century. Here are a few images:

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interpret it as an elongated snout. I cannot be happy with the imagination that in myths fish can have a real horn like that of a cow or antelope.

<sup>8</sup> These characterizations are found also in the later versions of the story. The *Mahābhārata* says that Manu recognized the extra-ordinary fish by its elongated snout (III.185.35-36); the *Matsya Purāṇa* (2.17) tells that Viṣṇu appeared as a fish with an elongated snout; and the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (VIII.24.44-45) depicts it with snow-like appearance and an elongated snout.

<sup>9</sup> For details, see pp. 17-18 below.

<sup>10</sup> The *Jayottara Tantra* is the Urtext or the foundational text on which the *Jayākhya Saṃhitā*, one of the three jewels of Vaiṣṇava Pañcarātra, is built. Although in its present form the text should be dated in the early ninth century, it contains some archaic elements. For example, beyond the five vyūha-deities, it mentions Mīna, Kūrma, Vāmana, Trivikrama, Varāha, Narasiṃha, Hayagrīva, Dāmodara, Rāma, Mohinī, Haṃsa forms of Viṣṇu, but remains aloof to the standardized list of the ten incarnations. Early tantric texts survived in remote places and esoteric environments have the tendency of conserving archaic elements. I can cite the five Vaiṣṇava *brahmamantras* and the veneration of eight Viṣṇu heroes from the *Aṣṭādaśavidhāna* (see Acharya 2015: li-liii) as other examples of conservation of archaic elements in early Vaiṣṇava Tantras.

<sup>11</sup> *Jayottara Tantra* 9.61c: Also [I venerate] the Fish, whose eyes are closed (*mīnaṃ nimīlitākṣaṃ ca*). *Jayākhya Saṃhitā* 2.11a: You are the Fish with closed eyes (*mīno nimīlitākṣas tvam*).

<sup>12</sup> Cf., e.g., Braulik et al 2015:32.

<sup>13</sup> In the fourth image shown above one can see a bird's beak at the tip of the curled snout, but the snout is still recognizable.



Above and below: water conduits showing dolphin's mouth decorated with artistic imagination from Kathmandu Valley, various time periods



Some of these water conduits bear inscriptions. One of these which can be dated to the 5th century CE on paleographical grounds describes the conduit itself and speaks of the stream of water falling from the mouth of a dolphin in the following way:

*udyotakākhye satataṃ manojñe surālayasyādhvani sadvihāre  
hāreva dhāreyam atiprasannā jhaṣasya vaktrāt patatī virājate* ||<sup>14</sup>

In this monastery called Uddyotaka which is throughout beautiful and lies on the way to the house of gods, this extremely clear stream of water, falling from the mouth of a dolphin, looks spectacular like a string of pearls.

This inscription confirms that *jhaṣa* is the long-snouted creature depicted in the mouth of these water conduits.<sup>15</sup> On the basis of this evidence and all characterizations I discussed before, I think, we should not have any inhibition to accept *jhaṣa* as dolphin.

<sup>14</sup> Regmi 1996: 5-6. He reads *udyotakārakhye* (unmetrical) for *udyotakākhye* and *hāreya* for *hāreva*. I regard these as typographical errors of Regmi.

<sup>15</sup> At this point, if we return back to the world of books, we can find another short description of such a water conduit in a simile in the seventh century poet Bāṇa's *Harṣacarita* (1: 17), but here the word *makara* is used instead of *jhaṣa*:

*golokagalitadugdhavisaravāhini dantamayamakaramukhamahāpraṇāla ivāpūrayituṃ pravṛtte  
payodhim indumaṇḍale ...*

## Saviour Dolphins in 2004 Tsunami

It is said about both sea and river dolphins that they are intelligent and self-aware, and are also aware of others, they can sense and react to others' emotions and even show compassion, they can coordinate and organize their actions, they even have unique whistle signatures individually and use them like our names in their communication.<sup>16</sup> Now and again, we hear that sea dolphins are involved in rescue of humans and even whales.<sup>17</sup> Here I quote from an online report of a striking incident that occurred during the 2004 tsunami:

The earthquake [occurred] around 8:30 a.m., and around 10:30 most of the boats on the west side of one of the main islands, the waters were still acting the same.... And some boats were going around the ropes. We were wrangling each other. We told each other, "Let's cut the ropes."... all of a sudden there were dolphins jumping right in front of our boats. They were just jumping, playing, jumping, jumping. And I'd been there for two years in the Similan islands and I've never seen dolphins that close to the boat.... So what came to play in my mind were folk stories in the Philippines.... So I told one of the dive masters, "We probably have to radio some of the diving instructors, some of the captains.... Let's order the captain to follow the dolphins." ... [S]o we all followed the dolphins.... Then we realized the dolphins at that point were trying to lead us westward, farther away from the island—not the mainland, but the islands.... When we came back we realized some of the tents, some of the kitchen utensils, the restaurant tables and chairs, sleeping facilities, they were all destroyed and taken out in the water. Which meant that if we [hadn't] followed the dolphins we would have smashed into the island.<sup>18</sup>

Incidences like this might have occurred many times in different places and time-periods. It is therefore not hard to imagine that in such an incidence, either in a dangerous tsunami or a flood caused by heavy rain, a dolphin rescues a lucky person, whereas all other members of his community are swept away, and he is thus left alone to create his world anew. Such an extra-ordinary incidence gradually becomes a myth. And, in the process of myth formation, easily the lucky forefather of the narrator is identified as the father of the human race. I think this is the case with our ŚB myth, which aims apparently to conserve the memory of the rescue of a distinguished man by a dolphin.

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At a time when the lunar disc had begun to fill the ocean as if it was a grand water conduit in the shape of a dolphin made of ivory and was carrying an abundant flow of milk trickling from the heavenly world of cows, ...

<sup>16</sup>These are some points I gathered from a documentary titled *Saved by Dolphins*, aired in the BBC Two Natural World Programme on the 8th, 9th, and 14th February 2008.

<sup>17</sup> For example, a report in BBC website tells that a dolphin came to the rescue of two whales which had become stranded on a beach in New Zealand. See, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/7291501.stm>, last updated 2008.3.12, last retrieved 06.05.2018.

<sup>18</sup><http://www.pbs.org/wnet/nature/can-animals-predict-disaster-chris-cruz/136/> Last retrieved on 06.05.2018. The same report can be found on some other pages.

## The Celestial Dolphin

Back to the world of texts, there is a passage in the *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa* (III.193-194), which tells an interesting story of a dolphin elevated to heaven as a constellation as it explains why a certain Sāmavedic chant is called after Śārkara the dolphin:

One among those [chants<sup>19</sup> sung in the tradition of the *Sāmaveda*] is the Śārkara chant. All beings praised Indra. Śārkara the Dolphin did not wish to praise Indra. Indra said: ‘Praise me.’ He answered: ‘I will not praise you; I roam in a vast expanse of water (*samudrā*),<sup>20</sup> in the waters, diving deep down immersed. With this much [to do], would I still praise you?’ [In response,] Parjanya by means of heavy rain forced him to swim upstream, through the wastes. He showed him nothing but water [everywhere], but dried him up completely with the north wind. Lying there completely dried up, he realized: ‘Since I have thus got into this state, it must be Indra who has done this to me.’ He said, ‘Well! I shall indeed praise Indra. Being praised, he will definitely make me float downstream again to a vast expanse of water.’ He visualised that mantra, [the Śārkara chant], and praised him with it: ‘Who has in the past brought for us one after the other good things here, him, Indra, I shall praise on your behalf, o friends, for help’ (*Jaiminīya Saṃhitā* I.2.4.7 = *Kaṭhuma Saṃhitā* I.400 = ṚV VIII.21.9). To him [Indra] said: ‘What do you want to get by praising me?’ ‘Please float me downstream to that same vast expanse of water,’ he said. Parjanya floated him downstream with rain again to the [same] vast expanse of water.... By means of that very mantra, he (namely, Śārkara the dolphin) ascended to the world of heaven. He is the Śārkara [constellation] that rises over there [in the sky].... It is the celestial form of that [dolphin]. Who thus knows attains the celestial world.

The Chandoma (rites) represent a vast expanse of water. The dolphin is in fact able to take one across a vast expanse of water. That there [in the text] is the Śārkara chant for this very purpose of crossing the vast expanse of water [over there in heaven]....

As Śārkara the dolphin saw this chant, therefore it is called Śārkara. “Friends, sit down closely; as he is being purified sing forth for him” (SV I.568a = RV IX.104.1a), as this much is sung the [Chandoma] rites become inclined forward. They attain the very form of the initial ritual (*prāyaṇīya*). That day is the initial one. “Like a child for the sake of excellence attend to him” (SV I.568b = RV IX.104.1b) as this much is sung, they attain precisely the form of cattle. And, the cattle surely have youngling.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> An internal reference to the book of songs collected from the *Sāmaveda*.

<sup>20</sup> I translate *samudrā* as ‘a vast expanse of water,’ which is closer to its literal meaning ‘water (*udān/udār*) accumulated from all around (*sam*).’ It can be a big river, a confluence, lake, sea or even ocean, although the range of its meaning in the Ṛgveda is disputed. See, Mayrhofer 1992: s.v. *samudrā*.

<sup>21</sup> JB III.193-194: *tāsu śārkaram indram vai sarvāṇi bhūtāny astuvan taṃ śārkaras śiṃśumāra stotum nākāmayata tam abravīt stuhī meti so ’bravīn nāhaṃ tvāṃ stoṣyāmi samudre vā aham apsv antaś carāmy upanimajjann etāvato ’haṃ tvāṃ stuyām iti taṃ parjanyaṃ vṛṣṭyordhvam udaplāvayad dhanvābhir apo haivāsmāi darśayām cakāra tam uttarād vātena paryaśoṣayat so ’vet pariśuṣkaś śayāno yad vā aham idam itthaṃ nyagām indro vāva medam ittham akṛd dhanta tam eva stavāni sa eva mā stutas samudraṃ punar abhyavaplāvayīsyatīti sa etaṃ mantram apaśyat tenainam astaud yo na idam-idam*

This myth equates the Chandoma rites to be performed on the 8-10th days of the twelve-days-long Soma sacrifice with the vast expanse of water outside in the world, and the origin of the chant is attributed to the stranded dolphin.<sup>22</sup> This chant is then said to be capable of leading the performer of the ritual across the rites, the vast expanse of water. Much interesting is the second portion, *pāda* b, of the actual chant cited at the end of the passage above, and the remark following it. There is a play on the word *śiśu*: *śiśu* as a child and as a youngling is linked here, if not equated, with *śiṃśu/śiśu* the dolphin.<sup>23</sup>

## Veneration of the Celestial Dolphin

We have some more information about the celestial dolphin from the *Taittirīya Āraṇyaka*, and also from a few more late Vedic and Purāṇic texts. These texts tell us about the veneration of the celestial dolphin in three different contexts and in three different ways. The *Taittirīya Āraṇyaka* (TĀ) II.19 presents a prayer and a description of the celestial dolphin. According to the commentarial tradition, this prayer meant for the daily veneration of *brahman* (*brahmopasthāna*) should be muttered at dusk facing the circle of the polestar (*dhruvamaṇḍala*). One who knows this celestial dolphin, the overlord of all existent entities, wards off re-death and gains the world of heaven, the text says. Here the celestial dolphin is named Śākvara, which is clearly a variant of the name Śārkara found in the JB passage read in the previous section. This text tells that the celestial dolphin is made of stars, a fact already implied in the JB passage above, and identifies individual stars in its body as prominent Vedic deities. Further, it identifies the celestial dolphin as *brahman* and equates various early and late Vedic deities to the stars on the body of this dolphin—Viṣṇu/Nārāyaṇa is among them, situated at its heart. This passage ends by praising the dolphin (*śiśumāra*) as Dhruva, the constant or fixed one, namely, the constellation hosting the polestar. Here is my translation of the text:

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*purā pra vasya ānināya tam u va stuṣe sakhāya indram ūtaye iti tam abravīt kiṃkāmo mā stauṣīti imam eva mā samudraṃ punar abhyavāplāvayety abravīt taṃ parjanyaṃ vṛṣṭyā samudraṃ punar abhyavāplāvayat ... sa tenaiṃ mantreṇa svargaṃ lokam udakrāmat sa evaiṣa śarkara udeti tad vā asya svargyam aśnute svargaṃ lokam ya evaṃ veda samudro vai chandomāḥ śiṃśumāro vai samudram atipārayitum arhati tad yad atra śārkaram bhavati samudrasyaivātīpāraṇāya...*

*yad u śarkaraḥ śiṃśumāro 'paśyat tasmāc chārkaram ity ākhyāyate sakhāya ā ni śīdata punānāya pra gāyata iti pravatīr bhavanti prāyaṇīyarūpam evaitad upagacchanti prāyaṇīyaṃ hy etad ahaḥ śiśum na ya jñaiḥ pari bhūṣata śriye iti paśurūpam evaitad upagacchanti paśūnāṃ vai śiśur bhavati.*

My translation benefits from Caland's who has translated a large portion of this passage in German (1919: 267-268) and also English (1931: 362-363, fn. 3), but both times he has left out the later part of the above text (the last paragraph in my translation), which is of utmost importance for my purposes. A much shorter account of the same story is found in the *Pañcaviṃśa Brāhmaṇa* (14.5.14-15).

<sup>22</sup> It is tempting to see behind this myth an awareness of the actual behavior of dolphins. If we put the plot of divine intervention aside, the above myth becomes a tale of a stranded dolphin in need of help. The narrator of this myth has apparently observed that dolphins can swim upstream in search of safety, particularly when the water is rising. This fact is evidenced in Manu's myth also: Manu's dolphin (*jhaṣa*) takes him to the mountains in the north and leaves him in a mountain there with the advice that he should slide downwards following the receding water lest he would be stranded. Thus, the fear of being stranded away from water, too, is evidenced there. Dolphins do indeed swim upstream and may get stranded on a riverbank or shore, requiring assistance as the dolphin in the above myth indeed does. See also footnote 3 above.

<sup>23</sup> This type of equation of two similar-sounding names is common in Brahmana texts; for example, *nyagrodha* is interpreted as *nyagroha* in AiB 7.30.4 and *dhūma* as *dhuna* in JB 1.49.

I resort to the earth. I resort to the firmament. I resort to the heavens. I resort to the earth, firmament, and heavens. I resort to *brahman*. I resort to the veil of *brahman*. I resort to immortality. I resort to the veil of immortality. ‘The veil of *brahman* made of four nets which death cannot see,’ I resort to that [veil]. I resort to the gods. I resort to the city of gods. Encircled, enveloped, by *brahman*, by the armour, I am, by the brilliance of Kaśyapa.

That is [its] head to which [I pay] obeisance.<sup>24</sup> Dharma [inhabits its] forehead. Brahman is its upper jaw, and Sacrifice the lower. Viṣṇu is its heart, Saṃvatsara the genitals. Aśvin twins are its front legs. Atri is the middle [trunk]. Mitra and Varuṇa are the other two legs. Agni is the first section of the tail; then Indra, then Prajāpati, [and] Abhaya is the fourth.

This is the celestial Śākvara dolphin over there. Whoever knows it in this way he will keep re-death off and win the world of heaven. He does not die on the way, does not die in fire, does not die in water, does not die without having progeny, [and] he obtains food very easily.<sup>25</sup>

You are Dhruva! You are Dhruva’s abode! You are the overlord of all beings! You are the most excellent! Around you all beings rotate. Obeisance to you! All this is yours. Obeisance again and again! Obeisance to the Dolphin!<sup>26</sup>

It appears that the TĀ has borrowed this passage from some earlier source defectively. For, it comes with some textual problems: the reading *dharmo mūrdhānaṃ* needs a matching verb, perhaps *āśritaḥ*, which is found in the Purāṇa passage given below. Just a copula does not work as in the subsequent statements. Likewise, bits and pieces of the passage are metrical, but they are elliptical, or rather incomplete. For example, *caturjālaṃ brahmakośaṃ yaṃ mṛtyur nāvapaśyati* is a half-verse cited from some metrical text and *taṃ prapadye* is appended to it so that it fits into the praying context, but the TĀ text does not say anything more about the veil of *brahman* and its four nets mentioned in this half-

<sup>24</sup> This is just a possible interpretation of the elliptical expression, *yasmai namas tac chiraḥ*. Malamoud (1977: 177) compounds *tacchiraḥ* and translates this sentence together with the following *dharmo mūrdhānaṃ* in the following way: “Celui à qui on fait hommage a pour tête le *dharmo* (qui forme son) culminant.”

<sup>25</sup> Pāṇini (IV.4.85) tells that *ānna* is derived from *anna* in the sense of ‘the one who received food.’ I am taking *laghu* preceding *ānna* as an adverb. Bhāskara’s commentary apparently takes *laghvānna* as a compound and resorts to the *nirukta* way of interpretation paraphrasing *laghvānno bhavati* with *labdhānno bhavati*.

<sup>26</sup> TA.II.19.1-5: *bhūḥ prapadye bhuvāḥ prapadye svaḥ prapadye bhūr bhuvāḥ svaḥ prapadye brahma prapadye brahmakośaṃ prapadye ’mṛtaṃ prapadye ’mṛtakośaṃ prapadye caturjālaṃ brahmakośaṃ yaṃ mṛtyur nāvapaśyati taṃ prapadye devān prapadye devapuraṃ prapadye parivṛto varivṛto brahmaṇā varmaṇāhaṃ tejasā kaśyapasya |*

*yasmai namas tac chiro dharmo mūrdhānaṃ brahmottarā hanur yajño ’dharā viṣṇur hṛdayaṃ saṃvatsaraḥ prajānanam aśvinau pūrvapādāv atrir madhyaṃ mitrāvaruṇāv aparapādāv agniḥ pucchasya prathamāṃ kāṇḍaṃ tata indras tataḥ prajāpatir abhayaṃ caturtham |*

*sa vā eṣa divyaḥ śākvaraḥ śiśumāras taṃ ha |*

*ya evaṃ vedāpa punarmṛtyuṃ jayati jayati svargaṃ lokaṃ nādhvani pramīyate nāgnau pramīyate nāpsu pramīyate nānapatyāḥ pramīyate laghv ānno bhavati |*

*dhruvas tvam asi dhruvasya kṣitam asi tvam bhūtānām adhipatir asi tvam bhūtānām śreṣṭho ’si tvām bhūtāny upaparyāvantante namas te namaḥ sarvaṃ te namo namaḥ śiśukumārāya namaḥ |*

verse. Likewise, the line *parivr̥to ... kaśyapasya* is based on AVŚ XVII.1.27ab: *prajāpater āvr̥to brāhmaṇā vārmaṇāhām kaśyapasya jyōtiṣā vārcasā ca*.

This passage depicts the creature with four legs and a tail, and therefore a number of scholars have opted for its identification as a crocodile. As it appears, by the time of this text the profiles of dolphin and some other animals, aquatic or otherwise, had been undoubtedly conflated. It is even plausible that early enough the celestial dolphin is imagined that way to assign it extra features and give it a non-mundane appearance. However, it is precipitous to decide positively in favour of the Ganges crocodile,<sup>27</sup> because the creature is never sculpted as a crocodile<sup>28</sup> but as a fish in its hind part and as an elephant, horse, or cow in its front (see the last section of this paper for early iconographic representations).<sup>29</sup> Like the artists making sculptures of *śiśumāra/makara*, I suggest, the

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<sup>27</sup> According to Lüders (1942: 66-69), *śiśumāra* definitely means dolphin in earlier Vedic texts but in the *Taittirīya Āraṇyaka* passage it means the Ganges crocodile, which is consistent with the depiction of the creature with four legs. His explanation for this judgement is that the *Taittirīya Āraṇyaka* was written outside the area where the river dolphin was present. This explanation, however, does not really work because, as Hoffmann (1975[1960]: 107-108) explains, in the *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa* itself (I.176) and in the *Pañcaviṃśa Brāhmaṇa* (8.6.8-10) *śiśumārī* is depicted as an animal lying in a narrow place of a river with its mouth open. Hoffmann says that this behavior is typical of a crocodile, not a dolphin, and therefore proposes a new explanation. Since the Indian crocodile living in the Indian rivers inhabited by the river dolphin looked similar to the latter, people thought that this creature was simply a female of the latter. Therefore, *śiśumāra* means dolphin and *śiśumārī* the Ganges crocodile. Although theoretically I agree on the point of confusion and regard Hoffmann's suggestion a good workable hypothesis, I see that the issue is a bit complicated. The expression 'lying on the way with its mouth open' may just mean that it is ready to attack. If one is told, for example, 'Do not go to the forest! There is a lion with its mouth open,' s/he understands that there is a man-eater lion walking free. The same way the JB statement may mean that there is a man-eater *śiśumārī*; it does not mean there is a basking crocodile. A possibility among others is that the JB passage in question had the sea dolphin in view and used *śiśumārī* to distinguish it from *śiśumāra* the river dolphin.

Moreover, in the past there must have been more species in sea-bound big Indian rivers and their tributaries. Even now, the Ganges shark, also known as *magar* in local languages, and even the bull shark, is found in the Ganges and other big Indian rivers. All dreadful-looking aquatic animals were then seen as different types of *makara*, sometimes distinguished and specified but not generally. Thus, there is a good chance that many of them would be conflated with each other including the river dolphin. In any case, as stated above, iconographic representations of the *makara* do not allow us to decide positively in favour of the Ganges crocodile as the creature in the *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa* or the TĀ.

<sup>28</sup> It is true that some folk traditions venerating crocodile existed in the past in some areas in India, and they might still exist there in certain forms (cf. Parpola 2011:21). Parpola (cf. *ibid.* 25-26) tells that this kind of crocodile cult goes far back to the Indus valley civilization, and restates earlier claims that even in Vedic texts, like the TĀ, written in the areas where river dolphins were not present *śiśumāra* or *makara* is understood as a crocodile (cf. Parpola 2011:21). However, existence of crocodile cults in India in the past cannot independently prove that *śiśumāra* or *makara* in the TĀ passage we read above means crocodile. Nor can it explain why words derived from *śiśumāra* or *makara* in many Indian languages mean dolphin, whale, and shark (cf. footnote 59 below).

<sup>29</sup> It is still possible that some people had indeed seen the river dolphin but mistaken its two pectoral fins for two front legs. While in the water, dolphins use the pectoral fins to balance their speed, to stop and turn, and when they are sometimes on the shore, they move these fins in such a way as if they are using them to move forward. When they raise their head from the water and their fins are lowered, their pectoral fins look like short legs. Actually the pectoral fins, unlike flukes or other fins, contain bones similar to those found in the human arm, wrist and hand.

composer of the TĀ passage above does not understand *śiśumāra*<sup>30</sup> as a crocodile, even though he depicts it with four legs.

We have another description of the celestial dolphin preserved in the *Vāyu* and *Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇas* that is very similar to the one from the TĀ presented above.<sup>31</sup> It appears to come from a source different but related to the source of the TĀ passage and can help us solve the textual problems in the latter. This passage does not mention hind legs but hind thighs. Here is the passage:

That dolphin (*śiśumāra*) over there in the sky that comprises all stars, the Constant one (*dhruva*), everyone should know. What vice a man commits by day, all that is cleared after seeing that dolphin at night. And more, as many of those stars situated in the body of the celestial dolphin one is able to see, so many years and even more he lives.

And, one should know [the celestial] dolphin called Śākvara<sup>32</sup> section by section. Uttānapāda should be recognized as its upper jaw and Sacrifice as the lower. Dharma is situated in its head, [and] Narāyaṇa in its heart. Furthermore, Aśvin twins are its forefeet, Varuṇa and Aryaman its hind thighs, [and] Saṃvatsara its genitals. Mitra is situated in its anus, and in its tail Agni, Indra, Mārīca Kaśyapa, and Dhruva. [These are] the stars belonging to the [celestial] dolphin, and the [last] four [situated in its tail] never set.

This passage may help us understand the initial portion of the TĀ we read earlier. It does not provide the formulas available in the TĀ for the veneration of *brahman* in the constant star Dhruva, but it states that one should know the celestial dolphin section by section, and names the deities housed in different parts of its body. This account provides the additional information that four stars in the tail of the dolphin do not set at all, which means that the author of this account was situated not very far north and so the entire

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<sup>30</sup> In the presently available form, the prayer concludes with a bow to *śiśukumāra* instead of *śiśumāra*. It is either a corruption or a play on the word, but there cannot be any doubt that the word behind is *śiśumāra* that is correctly used in the same passage a few sentences before.

<sup>31</sup> *Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇa* 1.23.99cd-104 ≈ *Vāyu Purāṇa* 53.90-95 ≈ *Puruṣārtha Samuccaya* 73-78:  
*eṣa tārāmāyo jñeyāḥ śiśumāro dhruvo divi | yad ahnā kurute pāpaṃ dr̥ṣtvā tan niśi mucyate ||*  
*yāvatyāś caiva tās tārāḥ śiśumārāśritā divi | dr̥ṣtvā tāvanti varṣāṇi jīvaty abhyadhikāni ca ||*  
*śākvaraḥ śiśumāraś ca vijñeyāḥ pratibhāgaśaḥ | uttānapādas tasyātha vijñeyo hy uttarā hanuḥ ||*  
*yajño 'dharas tu vijñeyo dharmo mūrdhānam āśritaḥ | hṛdi nārāyaṇas tasya pūrvapādāv athāśvinau ||*  
*varuṇaś cāryamā caiva paścime tasya sakthīnī | śiśnaḥ saṃvatsaras tasya mitro 'pānaṃ samāśritaḥ ||*  
*pucche 'gniś ca mahendraś ca mārīcaḥ kāśyapo dhruvaḥ | tārakāḥ śiśumārasya nāstam eti catuṣṭayam ||*

These verses are included in the *Puruṣārtha Samuccaya*, a text preserved in a 12th century manuscript that promises to collect important verses from the *Mahābhārata*. As notified above, these verses are found in the *Brahmāṇḍa* and *Vāyu Purāṇas* but not in the *Mahābhārata*. The latter nevertheless mentions that Dhruva Auttānapādi and the Seven Sages dwell together in the northern sky (cf. *Mahābhārata* XIII.3.15).

<sup>32</sup> In the TA version the celestial dolphin is called Śākvara but in different Purāṇas this name is corrupted further and changed into *śāsvata*, *sākṣara*, or *sākāra*. All these variants result from orthographic confusion and imagination of the copyings combined. Perhaps, it is no longer treated in these texts as a name but as an adjective. I however propose to emend it back to Śākvara as in the TĀ parallel and treat it as the dolphin's name. In fact, even the name Śākvara as found in the TĀ is a corruption. In the JB, the earliest text mentioning this celestial dolphin, it is named as Śarkara.

circumpolar region was not in his sight throughout the year. This account is however somehow different, in its later part, from the account of the TĀ, but it is possible to reconcile the two. In both versions, the first two out of four divinities housed in four sections of the celestial dolphin's tail are the same. The third in the TĀ version is Prajāpati while it is Mārīca Kaśyapa in the Purāṇic version. But these two can be reconciled because Mārīca Kaśyapa is one of the Prajāpatis listed in the Mahābhārata.<sup>33</sup> According to the TĀ, the last divinity housed at the tail of *śiśumāra* is Abhaya, and according to the Puranic account it is Dhruva. The TĀ account names the dolphin itself Dhruva, and so it cannot call a divinity in its tail with the same name. In any case, Abhaya can be linked to Dhruva in more than one way. First, according to the Purāṇic legend, Prince Dhruva, a son of King Uttānapāda, was initially feeling insecure, fearful of his stepmother, but later became fearless (*abhaya*) by the grace of Viṣṇu or Brahman, his kingship was secured, and in the other world he became the never-setting polestar.<sup>34</sup> Second, when *dhruva* is understood as *dhruvapada*, the ultimate state of *brahman*, this is the state of fearlessness attained after enlightenment.

Let me also record that immediately before the above account in the *Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇa* there are a few verses (I.23.91-99 ≈ *Vāyu Purāṇa* 52.83-90) that tell us more about the circle of the celestial dolphin (*śiśumārācakra*). These verses depict it as the nave of constellations. The dolphin makes all celestial bodies move as it moves, because all of them are bound to it with the 'reins' of the cosmic Pravaha wind (*vātaraśmi*). A very similar account is found also in the previous chapter of the same text (*Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇa* I.22.6-12 ≈ *Vāyu Purāṇa* 51.6-12). A similar but shorter account is found in the *Brahma Purāṇa* also (24.1-6).

From two other later Vedic texts beyond the TĀ, the *Mantrapāṭha*, also known as *Ekāgnikāṇḍa*,<sup>35</sup> and the *Hiraṇyakeśi Gṛhya Sūtra* (1.22-1.23), we get some more information on the veneration of the constant constellation of the northern sky. In the first text, two among the mantras of the marriage ceremony (I.9.6-7) concern Dhruva, the Constant star, and Arundhatī, the female associate of the Seven Sages whom they have brought closer to Dhruva. According to the tradition, after the newly married wife enters the husband's home the husband shows her Dhruva and Arundhatī, and they venerate the two stars one after the other, reciting these two stanzas. The stanza of Dhruva praises it as the central post to which all constellations are hitched; its constancy, too, is praised but here it is not equated to *brahman*. The other text, the *Hiraṇyakeśi Gṛhya Sūtra* (I.22-1.23), provides a variation of the same ritual. Here the newly married couple worships *brahman*,

<sup>33</sup> According to the Purāṇic tradition Kaśyapa is the son of Marīci and so is specified as Mārīca Kaśyapa (cf., e.g., MBh I.7.9, XII.200.21, XIII.85.17; HV 3.49; and VP 1.15.129). Allegedly, he produced the Ādityas and other gods in the womb of Aditi, the foremost of his wives and one of the daughters of Dakṣa. Mārīca Kaśyapa is designated as Prajāpati in a number of other places in the MBh, for example, in the *Suparṇopākhyāna* (MBh I.27). According to an account found in the MBh (XII.201.1-14), Svayambhū Brahṁā created seven human sages including Marīci and they created Prajāpatis.

<sup>34</sup> *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* I.11-12 and *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* IV.8-9 narrate Dhruva's story in detail and state that by the grace of Viṣṇu he gained the polar position, but some other texts such as *Harivaṃśa* (2.9-13) and *Brahma Purāṇa* (2.10-13) briefly mention that Brahman installed Dhruva in his celestial position.

<sup>35</sup> The last two *praśnas* of Āpastamba's *kalpasūtra* constitute the *Mantrapāṭha*. Scholars agree that Āpastamba has included a pre-existing collection of mantras in his corpus and so cannot be regarded as its compiler. Gonda (1977: 579) and Winternitz (1897: XLV) have similar views on this. Citing the latter the former states that this text "can hardly be much later than 400 B.C."

praising it as Dhruva the constant and Acyuta the immovable, together with Prajāpati as its [foremost] son, the Trāyastriṃśa gods as its sons, and Aṅgiras-es as its grandsons. But *brahman* is addressed here as the middle (*madhya*), the hitching post (*methī*), the one belonging to the nave (*nabhya*), and also the cord (*tanti*). This indicates that the *Hiranyakeśi Gṛhya Sūtra*, too, is aware of the polestar’s connection with the wind-ropes. A third late Vedic text, the *Maitrāyaṇī Upaniṣad*, is aware of the wind-ropes (*vātarajju*) and perhaps also of their connection to the polestar (I.4). It is interesting to note that all these texts identify the polestar as Dhruva, the Constant; the first two texts recognize the whole constellation as the Abode of Dhruva or as the Abode of Acyuta, but none of these recalls its identity as the celestial dolphin.

In the *vaiśvadeva* mantras found in the Gṛhyasūtras of the Yajurvedic tradition (cf., e.g., *Bodhāyana Gṛhya Sūtra* II.8.9), and in the *Mahānārāyaṇa Upaniṣad* (67.1) Dhruva features as Dhruva Bhūma—which can be rendered as the Constand-and-Opulent.<sup>36</sup> These are the mantras used to pay homage to a number of deities every morning and evening before the meal. Here, homage is paid to Agni, Soma, All-Gods, then to Dhruva Bhūma, and then to the Abode of Dhruva the Constant (*dhruvakṣiti*) and the Abode of Acyuta the Immovable (*acyutakṣiti*). Here its identity as the celestial dolphin has not been invoked—something that we may not expect in every case—but the Abode of Dhruva is definitely referring to the whole constellation. This actually tells that as time passed Dhruva rose to prominence, and then the identity of the constellation as Dhruva’s abode was more important than its imagination as a *śiśumāra* in terms of its shape. In fact, the rituals that invoked this imagination were hardly performed by those late Vedic days.

With all of this in mind, I would like now to go back to the older Vedic texts and read a small section of the *Bṛhad Āraṇyaka Upaniṣad* in an effort to solve an enigma that has persisted in the scholarly literature. I think that *śiśu* in the beginning of this section refers to the celestial dolphin (I will explain below), and the entire section of II.2 is an Upaniṣadic explanation of its veneration.

## The enigma of *śiśu* in BĀU II.2

When I published my study of the *Bṛhad Āraṇyaka Upaniṣad* II.1 and II.3, I had remarked that the motivation for the insertion of the puzzle-like II.2 between two segments of the Gārgya-Ajātaśatru discourse remains opaque for me (cf. Acharya 2013: 17). But now I realize that it is here because it deals with the veneration of *brāhman* in the form of the constant celestial dolphin, the constellation thought to be in the centre of the universe and driving all heavenly bodies. For those who knew the ritual of *brahmopasthāna* this text would have been quite relevant here because it would have provided an esoteric meaning to the said ritual and thus would not really have disturbed their reading of the Gārgya-Ajātaśatru discourse explaining *brāhman* philosophically. It is not altogether uncommon that, in early Upaniṣads, in the middle of a philosophic discussion a certain ritual phenomenon somehow associated with the theme of that discussion is explained.

<sup>36</sup> Haradatta reads the same *vaiśvadeva* mantras together with the *pariṣecana* and *baliharaṇa* mantras and even comments on them (see *Sṛnivāsāchārya* 1902: 1-4), before reading and commenting on the *Mantrapāṭha*. He also informs us that the teachers read these mantras in the beginning of the *Mantrapāṭha* text.

Brereton (1991) has analysed the whole of the BĀU II.2 insightfully, and particularly the stanza at the core of this section he has interpreted in relation to Ursa Major. Citing the *Hiranyakeśi Gṛhya Sūtra* I.22.14 and I.23.1 he has also discussed the relationship of the Seven Sages or Ursa Major/Big Dipper and “*brāhman* as the center around which the Seven Sages move” (cf. Brereton 1991: 5). He has argued that “[a]lthough the Upaniṣad does not know the polestar it does know the unchangeability of the *brāhman* and the timelessness of the world of the *brāhman* and could have projected it into space, into the area of the Seven Sages” (ibid.). He is also aware (id. 2) of the fact that “[i]n the middle of the first millennium B.C., the celestial North Pole was not located at Polaris, which is mentioned for the first time in the Gṛhya Sūtras. Rather, it was not far from the “bowl” of the Little Dipper in the direction of the Big Dipper.” Nevertheless, he thinks that (1991:13) “the inverted beaker is the sky and the head,” and he has not considered that *śíśu* in the opening of the BĀU II.2 could be the constellation of the celestial dolphin that housed the ancient polestar.

Witzel (1996) has treated the AV stanza cited in the BĀU II.2.4 together with a part of its Upaniṣadic commentary. According to him, the bowl in the sky or the heavenly casket described in some Vedic texts including that stanza is “the great ladle, or the Big Dipper, on which the seven Ṛṣis sit according BĀU” (1996: 541). Determined to sincerely look for the heavenly casket, he begins with the point that it must be at the top of the sky, and after rejecting other possibilities he comes to the conclusion that it “is the actual highest, but unmovable point in the night sky, the region near the polestar or the polestar itself.” “As it is well known,” he says, “the star Polaris became our polestar only recently” (1996: 536), and tells us about the polestars of the past.<sup>37</sup> Thus, he identifies the casket/bowl rightly as the Big Dipper but does not go further to explain the BĀU version of the stanza thoroughly or set the heavenly casket in the bigger picture.

Brereton has translated *śíśu* in the beginning of the BĀU II.2 as a young animal and interpreted it as the sacrificial fire and the sun. It is true that already in the *Ṛgveda* both the sacrificial fire and the sun are metaphorically designated as *śíśu*, and also that the microcosmic entity of ‘the vital breath in the middle,’ that is, the central vital function can be equated with the macrocosmic entity of the sacrificial fire or the sun because of their centrality or prominence. However, in our passage that is discussing stars and the night sky, specifically in association with the Seven Sages it is better to interpret *śíśu* as the celestial dolphin. Once we interpret *śíśu* as the celestial dolphin the whole section of BĀU II.2, I think, becomes more coherent and it will be possible to show a full correspondence between the microcosmic and macrocosmic realms. So, in the following I read and discuss the whole of this section following the Mādhyandina recension:

1-2. *yó ha vai śíśuṁ sādhanam śapratyādhānam śasthūnam śādāmaṁ véda saptá  
ha dviṣató bhráṭṛvyān ávaruṇaddhi  
ayám vāvá śíśur yò 'yám madhyamáḥ prāṇás tásyedám evādhānam idám  
pratyādhānam prāṇáḥ sthūṇānam dáma*

<sup>37</sup> Witzel (1996:536) informs us further that “[b]efore this time, at c. 2800 B.C., the pole had been near the bright star Thuban, and at c. 2000 B.C. S.W. and W. of the Great Wain, west of three bright stars in that region, [...] at 1200 B.C. directly between the stars Kochab of Ursa Minor and Dubhe of Ursa Maior and since then moved towards the present pole at Polaris.” For the identification of the celestial dolphin and the polar of early Vedic days, see pp. 19-21 below.

Who knows the dolphin, together with its foundational position and frontal position and together with its [hitching] post and the rope, he will undoubtedly hold off all hating rivals.

This dolphin is, definitely, this one [here in the body] which stands as the central vital function. Its foundational position is precisely this here. [*The speaker points at a certain part of his or his pupil's body, perhaps navel.*] Its frontal position is precisely this here. [*The speaker again points at a certain part of his or his pupil's body, perhaps mouth.*] Its [hitching] post is the breath, [and] food its rope.

Let me first comment on the enigmatic use of *śíśu* in the beginning of this passage. Although *śíśu* and *śi(ṃ)śumāra* are certainly not synonymous, that very portion of the JB which tells us the story of the chant of Śarkara the dolphin relates this chant to a stanza (SV I.568 = RV IX.104.1) that contains the word *śíśu*.<sup>38</sup> This JB passage further tells us (see above, p. 7) that when the chant is sung during the *dvādaśāha* sacrifice the Chandoma rites take the very form of cattle, and consequently the sacrificer's cattle have younglings (*śíśu*). Thus, *śíśu* and *śi(ṃ)śumāra* are enigmatically connected in this JB passage. It is well known that Vedic texts like to make esoteric enigmatic connections between phonologically similar but semantic distinct words (cf. footnote 23 above). This BĀU passage (II.2), too, is presenting a complex enigma in the middle of a discourse on *brāhman* in the preceding and following sections of the BĀU (II.1 and II.3). It begins with a statement about some enigmatic *śíśu* and solves the enigma in different levels. In accordance with this kind of associative scheme of the Brahmana texts, we can take *śíśu* in BĀU II.2.1 in the sense of the celestial dolphin fitting the ritualistic context, and also as a young child in the context of the microcosmic representation of *púruṣa* in the right eye.

At this point, we should recall two relevant facts. First, there is a possibility that *śíśuká* is used in the sense of dolphin already in the *Atharvaveda* (AVŚ VI.14.3).<sup>39</sup> Second, it is plausible that the word *śi(ṃ)śumāra* is indeed a compound of *śi(ṃ)śu* and *māra*,<sup>40</sup> because words for dolphin in Pali, Prakrit, and other Indian languages are derived from both *śi(ṃ)śu* and *śi(ṃ)śumāra*.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>38</sup> The JB passage obviously presents this stanza, too, as a chant of Śarkara the dolphin. For the actual passage and translation, see above, p. 2, the last paragraph of the cited passage.

<sup>39</sup> AVŚ VI.14.3ab reads *nír balāsetáḥ prá patāśuṅgáḥ śíśukó yathā* which Whitney (1905: 291) has rendered as “Fly out from here, O *balāsa*, like a young *āṣuṅgá*.” A note to this translation reads that the commentary “explains *āṣuṅgá* as an ordinary adjective, ‘swift-going,’ and, instead of *ṣiṣuka*, reads *ṣuṣuka* “a wild animal so called.” Whitney has not argued for or against this interpretation. Since the poet wants *balāsa* to fly out, the analogy of a swift-going dolphin is much better than a young animal of unknown kind. This original reading preserved in AVŚ was apparently quite difficult and ambiguous, and so in the Paippalāda version the whole of *pāda* b was revised to *suparṇo vasater yathā* (AVP 19.13.9b).

<sup>40</sup> It has been suggested long ago that *māra* in *śi(ṃ)śumāra* is a contraction from *makara-* (*makara* < *maara* < *māra*); see Coomaraswamy 1931 II: 52 n. 2, Lüders 1942: 80-81, Parpola 2011:20. In this way, *śi(ṃ)śumāra* could be interpreted as the *śi(ṃ)śu* type of *makara*. Mayrhofer (1992: s.v. *śiśumāra*) enlists Lüders' publication but does not comment on this hypothesis. This, however, looks possible to me, particularly in the light of the above mentioned AVŚ usage of *śiśuka*, without *-māra*, and availability of cognates of *śi(ṃ)śu* in Pali, Prakrit, and NIA languages.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Parpola 2011: 19-20, Turner 1966: 719, entry no. 12426.

The constellation of celestial dolphin is hitched to the polestar in its tail as the hitching post, and as it moves it moves and vitalizes all constellations around. Its correlative in the body, the central vital function, is hitched to the post of breath, which is in fact identical to it, and as it moves it vitalizes all other vital functions. All constellations in the northern sky are seen as bound to the dolphin with wind-ropes (see above, p. 12), and in the body all vital functions are seen bound to the breath by means of food.

There is the celestial dolphin in the divine realm, and because it is constant it is venerated as *bráhman*. The Seven Sages standing close by it are its rivals because Speech (*vác*),<sup>42</sup> the eighth among them, seen as a lady, has advanced towards it, but the Seven Sages do not want to lose her. Now in the microcosmic realm, in the body, the central vital function (*madhyamá prāṇá* (masculine)) is in the place of the celestial dolphin/*bráhman* whose frontal position is in the mouth and there Speech (*vác* (feminine)) unites with the central vital function (*madhyamá prāṇá* (masculine)). This causes rivalry between the central and other vital functions; they also envy its centrality (cf. ChU V.5).

In the next level, the text shows how seven divinities of never diminishing splendor situate themselves near the central vital function. This is necessary to show for the sake of homology, because in the heavenly sky the Seven Sages situate themselves near the celestial dolphin. The essence situated in the right eye is interpreted as the reality of all vital functions (cf. BĀU II.1.23, II.3.9&11). On this basis, we can understand that through the eye the seven divinities relate themselves to the central vital function. This time we may interpret *síśu* as a young man, the *púruṣa* in the eye, but perhaps the usual analogy between the eye and fish is also in place.

2-3. *tám etāḥ saptākṣitaya úpa tiṣṭhante*  
*tád yá imá akṣám̐l lóhinyo rájayas tábhir enam̐ rudrò 'nváyattó 'tha yá akṣánn*  
*ápas tábhiḥ parjányo yá kánīnakā táyādityó yác chuklám̐ ténāgnír yác kṛṣṇám̐*  
*ténéndró 'dharayainam̐ vartanyā pṛthivy ànváyattā dyaúr úttarayā*  
*nāsyānnam̐ kṣīyate yá evám̐ véda.*

These seven divinities, never diminishing [in their splendour], situate themselves near it.

By means of these red streaks, which are there in the eye, Rudra attaches himself to that [vital function]. Further, Parjanya by means of the water that is there in the eye, the Sun by means of the pupil, Agni by means of the white [content there], Indra by means of the black<sup>43</sup> [content there], the Earth by means of the lower eyelashes, and the Sky by means of the upper [eyelashes] are attached to it. Whoever knows this, his food will never diminish.

<sup>42</sup> The eighth entity is described here as *Vác*, whereas it is described as *Arundhatī* in many other, basically later, texts. In both cases, however, the eighth one is considered feminine. It is interesting to note that in AVP XVI.135.5 as the primordial female principle *virāḍ* reaches the Seven Sages they call her *brahmaṇvatī*, the one owning *brahman*.

<sup>43</sup> In the Kāṇva recension the black is associated to Agni and the white to Indra.

In the second-half of the section presented below, the text cites a Vedic stanza and, by way of its interpretation, identifies the Seven Sages in both microcosmic and macrocosmic levels and tells further about the eighth, the female associate of them.

4-5. *tád eṣá ślóko bhavaty*

*arvāgbilāś camasá ūrdhvābudhnaś tāsmin yāśo nīhitaṃ viśvárūpaṃ  
tāsyāsata ṣṣayaḥ saptá tīre vāg aṣṭamī brāhmaṇā saṃvidānēti*

*arvāgbilāś camasá ūrdhvābudhna itīdām tāt chīra eṣá hy àrvāgbilāś camasá  
ūrdhvābudhnaś tāsmin yāśo nīhitaṃ viśvárūpaṃ itī prāṇā vai yāśo nīhitaṃ  
viśvárūpaṃ prāṇān etād āha tāsyāsata ṣṣayaḥ saptá tīra itī prāṇā vā ṣṣayaḥ  
prāṇān etād āha vāg aṣṭamī brāhmaṇā saṃvidānēti vāg ghy aṣṭamī brāhmaṇā  
saṃvittē*

In this connection there is this stanza:

There is a bowl with its opening below and its bottom above. The glory of all forms is set in it. The seven seers sit on its rim, [while] speech, the eighth one, harmonizes with *brāhman*.

As for the statement “there is a bowl with its opening below and its bottom above,” it is indeed this head here [in the body]. For, that is “a bowl with its opening below and its bottom above.” As for the statement “the glory of all forms is set in it,” “the glory of all forms” surely stands for the vital functions, [and the stanza] declares the vital functions that way. As for the statement “The seven seers sit on its rim,” the seers are surely the vital functions [and the stanza] declares the vital functions that way. It is stated, “speech, the eighth one, is in harmony with *brāhman*,” because speech, the eighth one, harmonizes with *brāhman*.

6. *imāv evā gotamabharadvājāv ayām evā gótamo ’yām bhāradvāja imāv evā  
viśvāmitrajamadagnī ayām evā viśvāmitro ’yām jamadāgnir imāv evā  
vasiṣṭhakaśyapāv ayām evā vasiṣṭho ’yām kaśyāpo vāg evātrir vācā hy ānnaṃ  
adyaté ’tir ha vai nāmaitād yād ātrir itī sārvasyāntā bhavati sārvaṃ asyānnaṃ  
bhavati yā evām véda*

Gotama and Bharadvāja are in fact these two [ears/stars]—Gotama is this one and Bharadvāja is this one. Viśvāmitra and Jamadagni are in fact these two [eyes/stars]—Viśvāmitra is this one and Jamadagni is this one. Vasiṣṭha and Kaśyapa are in fact these two [nostrils/stars]—Vasiṣṭha is this one and Kaśyapa is this one. Atri is in fact [the organ of] speech, for food is eaten by [the organ of] speech. So this one which is named as Atri is in fact “the eater.” Who knows this he becomes the eater of this all; all here becomes his food.

The last unit of the above text has a problem: it equates speech with the seventh sage Atri, but the Vedic stanza and commentary immediately following the stanza clearly identify speech as the eighth. There is actually, as Brereton noted (1991: 3-4), another version of this stanza in the AVŚ (X.8.9) that reads the secondhalf of it differently and simply mentions the Seven Sages, without the eighth. The explanation in BĀU II.2.6 can

go well with this version of the stanza, because both acknowledge only seven entities. The equation of seven sages with the vital functions in seven apertures of the head is attested elsewhere in Brāhmaṇa texts, for example, ŚB VIII.4.3.6 and IX.3.1.21, PB 22.4. Therefore, the idea in BĀU II.2.6 is clearly old. But, since this interpretation does not count speech extraneously as the eighth, it does not fit the enigma of the BĀU II.2. With the AVŚ version of the stanza and the macro-micro correspondence of seven entities in BĀU II.2.6 all the valuable components of the enigmatic lines—Speech’s advance towards *brāhman*, the resulting rivalry of the Seven Sages with the latter, nevertheless their submission to it because of its excellence—are lost.<sup>44</sup>

Now let me recapitulate the points from all the passages read above. The story of Manu’s rescue from the ŚB attests to the facts that the dolphin needs human help and it can help humans in crossing the floodwaters to safety. The passage from the JB provides us evidence for the deification of the dolphin, with its capacity to lead people across the sea and big rivers, here identified with the rituals. It also includes the motif of the stranded dolphin, which required help. The enigmatic passage from the BĀU provides a bodily, namely, microcosmic interpretation of the veneration of the celestial dolphin. At the same time, this passage tells us about connection of the celestial dolphin (*śīśu*) with the Seven Sages and Alcor, a star in their proximity depicted here as Speech. This passage also implies the equation of the celestial dolphin with *brāhman*. All this gives an impression that by the age of early ritual and esoteric speculations the Vedic sages had knowledge of a dolphin-shaped constellation in the northern sky, and because it was always visible and remained in the same place, they believed that it was the constant and imperishable *brāhman* in the heavenly sky.

But when we move to later Vedic texts, we can observe more sophisticated imaginations of this constellation. The TĀ and some Puranic passages provide us evidence for the veneration of the celestial dolphin as *brahman* in the daily ritual to venerate in the form of the celestial dolphin that housed a number of Vedic deities in its body. Some Gṛhya Sūtras attest the veneration of the polestar, now called Dhruva, which we know from the TĀ and related sources as housed in the tail of the celestial dolphin, in two different rituals: the daily *vaiśvadeva* ritual performed at dusk to pay homage to All-Gods, and the ritual of viewing and veneration of Dhruva the polestar and Arundhatī, the female associate of the Seven Sages stationed in proximity to Dhruva, by the newly married couple in the first night at their new home. In these texts we can observe that Dhruva the polestar acquires prominence and the celestial dolphin retreats slowly in the background to prepare for a metamorphosis.

### **The Fish Incarnation of Viṣṇu**

The original ŚB myth of Manu’s rescue does not identify the fish that rescues him as a divine being, but this is definitely the case when the same myth is retold in the *Mahābhārata* and a number of Purāṇas. In the *Mahābhārata*, it is identified as the creator

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<sup>44</sup> Brereton (1991) does not recognise this problem. He perhaps saw speech and *brāhman* already united: “In the B[Ā]U verse, the *brāhman* is the center of the celestial sphere and is united to speech, which is here singled out as the chief vital function.” Even with this interpretation the problem of BĀU II.2.6 does not go away, because speech is described here as the seventh of the Seven Sages.

god Brahmā Prajāpati in disguise (cf. MBh III.185.48; van Buitenen 1975: 582–583),<sup>45</sup> but in the *Matsya Purāna* (Chapter 2), *Viṣṇudharmottara* (1.75.9-16), *Bhāgavata Purāna* (VIII.24), and a number of other Purāṇic or literary texts<sup>46</sup> it is described as an incarnation of Viṣṇu.<sup>47</sup> Soon forgotten is the *Mahābhārata* identification of the saviour fish as Brahmā Prajāpati, while its identification as Viṣṇu remains stable in Purāṇic and Vaiṣṇava narratives. Clearly, by the time of the *Viṣṇu Purāna* and other Purāṇic texts Brahmanism was losing out to Vaiṣṇavism. By the middle of the sixth century CE, the fish has been regarded as the foremost of Viṣṇu’s incarnations.<sup>48</sup>

As Lüders pointed out long ago (1942: 68), a shorter and different description of the celestial dolphin (*śiśumāra*) but basically similar to the one presented earlier in this paper is found in the *Viṣṇu Purāna* (II.9.1-7) and *Brahma Purāna* (24.1-6).<sup>49</sup> These texts describe the celestial dolphin as the celestial representation of Viṣṇu. These are the same texts which retell the story of Manu’s rescue<sup>50</sup> as the story of the fish incarnation of Viṣṇu. We have, however, an indirect indication that the *Harivaṃśa* and *Brahma Purāna* relate the celestial dolphin to Brahmā, as they credit Brahmā with the task of installing Dhruva as the polestar (cf. footnote 33 above).

From the perspective of ancient Indian authors it is not in fact entirely incorrect to view all aquatic animals as various types of fish.<sup>51</sup> Given that the dolphin was a kind of fish for them, it was natural that it would be denoted by a word that means ‘fish’ in the myth of Manu’s rescue in the ŚB, *Mahābhārata* and Purāṇas. This generalization may even have been intentional, because many people living beyond the coastal areas and big rivers would

<sup>45</sup> According to the *Mahābhārata* account, the fish advises Manu to gather the Seven Sages as well as all seeds on board, and saves him together with all of them. This account speaks of the rising tide of the sea inundating the world, and of Manu’s escape to a mountain in the north.

<sup>46</sup> For references, see Magnone 2001:138-139.

<sup>47</sup> I cite here typical statements from the *Matsya Purāna* and *Viṣṇudharmottara* which identify the fish as Viṣṇu:

MP 2.17: *śṛṅgī prādurbabhūvātha matsyarūpī janārdanaḥ |*

Then Janārdana appeared in the form of a fish with an elongated snout.

VDU I.1.75.11cd-12ab: *matsyarūpadharo viṣṇuḥ śṛṅgī bhūtvā jagatpatiḥ ||*

*ākaraṣati tu tāṃ nāvaṃ sthānāt sthānaṃ sa līlayā |*

Viṣṇu [at that time] assumes the form of a fish that has an elongated snout and playfully pulls that ship [of Manu and the Seven Sages] from one place to another.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Bhavya’s *Madhyamakahr̥daya* 9.74, 76ab: *anyaivāsau harer mūr̥tiḥ śivā yadi vikalpyate | dṛṣṭvā hi yatayo yāṃ na punar yānti punarbhavam || ... matsyādīmūr̥teḥ (-mūr̥taiḥ edn.) sānyā ced anyatvād acyutā na sā |*

If it is postulated that the auspicious form of Hari is really different, that is, the form which the self-restrained ones see and because of this do not have rebirth again. ... If that form is different from the Fish and other forms [of him], then by the very fact of being different, it cannot be unchangeable (*acyutā*).

<sup>49</sup> This account is almost identical in both texts, the first verse of which is here with a translation:

*tārāmayam bhagavataḥ śiśumārākṛti prabhoḥ | divi rūpaṃ harer yat tu tasya pucche sthito dhruvaḥ ||*

The starry form of Viṣṇu in the sky has the shape of a dolphin, and in its tail is the polestar.

<sup>50</sup> In these later versions of the myth, unlike in the ŚB version, Manu is not rescued alone. The Seven Sages are saved together with Manu, and following the instruction of the saviour fish, Manu also takes all different seeds with him. This makes the task of post-deluge creation easier. It also reflects the more ancient connection of the celestial dolphin with the seven sages.

<sup>51</sup> For example, as the *Vasiṣṭha Dharma Sūtra* enumerates animals whose meat should not be eaten, it lists (14.41) dolphin, crocodile, crab, and still more as varieties of fish.

have never seen a dolphin, and so storytellers resorted to describing it as a huge monstrous fish.

In any case, the epico-Purāṇic texts on the one hand preserve the memory of the celestial dolphin and in the other they facilitate metamorphosis of the saviour dolphin that rescued Manu into a divine fish. Purāṇas also provide evidence for the fact that there were also some old stories about the personified polestar Dhruva, which were gradually transformed after the advent of Vaiṣṇavism and Śaivism. Like the Indian river dolphin, the celestial dolphin gradually became a rarity, an archaic phenomenon. The divine fish took its place and appeared as the formost incarnation of Viṣṇu, a mighty god, but its direct equation with the Upanisadic principle was lost.

### **Identification of the celestial dolphin**

The texts treated in this paper confirm that the celestial dolphin is situated in the northern sky near the Seven Sages, that is, Ursa Major. Further, the BĀU passage tells that Speech, that is, Alcor, is in alignment with *brāhman*, which I propose to identify as the constant polestar of the bygone days. The Puraṇic accounts tell that four stars in the tail of the celestial dolphin do not set at all and one of them serves as the polestar. All this information indicates that the constellation now known by the name of Draco is the celestial dolphin of these texts.<sup>52</sup> Jacobi had pointed out long ago in 1894<sup>53</sup> that the ‘constant/fixed’ star of early Indian texts is not Polaris situated in Ursa Minor but in all probability it is Thuban lying in the tail of the adjacent constellation Draco. Greek tradition depicts this constellation as a dragon or snake and narrates myths relating this dragon to Heracles or other mythical characters of ancient Greece but none of these, even in part, corresponds to the Indian myths of the celestial dolphin.<sup>54</sup> Greeks, as we know, received much of their knowledge of constellations from the Babylonian/ Mesopotamian as well as Mediterranean traditions<sup>55</sup> but the mythological interpretations are basically their own. Indians received new astronomical knowledge from the Greeks later, but as Pingree wrote (1997: 31), “the influence of Babylonian astronomy on Indian thought is already perceptible in Sanskrit texts of the first half of the last millennium B.C.” Given this fact, it is interesting to note that the scanty information about MU.BU.KESH.DA (Thuban) obtained from the Babylonian tradition looks comparable to certain elements in the Indian myth of the celestial dolphin. Indian tradition describes this constellation very positively as the

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<sup>52</sup> Ancient Greeks, too, have elevated the dolphin to heaven as the constellation Delphinus for a similar reason. But they situate it in a different region. The constellation of dolphin Indians conceived is in the circumpolar region and houses the old polestar Thuban. So, it is not the same as Delphinus of Greeks.

<sup>53</sup> Iyengar 2011 collects a few Vedic and Puraṇic passages either describing or mentioning *dhruva* or *śiśumāra*, criticising Whitney and other scholars who rejected Jacobi’s thesis, and says (ibid. p. 37) that there is positive evidence “in the ancient Sanskrit texts to identify the Hindu Dhruva with the star Thuban.” He further writes, “We have to accept, at the least minimum, that votaries of a particular Vedic group in India beheld and preserved a sky picture of a dolphin like figure with fourteen stars, the last star on the tail looking fixed without any observable motion with respect to other stars, some time in the 4th-3rd millennium BC.” This last statement I find disputable, because Thuban was almost exactly at the pole in 2700 BC (cf. Kaler 2002: 191, see text above), and further we do not have any positive proof to claim that those people who beheld a sky picture of 4th-3rd millenium BC were votaries of a particular Vedic group. Besides, Thuban was seen as polestar as late as until 1900 BC. See also footnote 58 below.

<sup>54</sup> For these stories, see Allen 1899: 202-212.

<sup>55</sup> See Rogers 1998a and 1998b.

ever-spinning centre of the universe. It imagines a whirling dolphin in this centre, equates it to the highest god Brahmā Prajāpati or the ultimate principle *brahman*, and postulates that bound to its centre are all stars and planets with the reins of cosmic wind. The BĀU enigma appears to view the polestar as the hitching pole. The Babylonian tradition, too, appears to view the star positively and assigns it a similar function as it calls the star ‘the hitched yoke’ beside ‘the great Anu of Heaven.’<sup>56</sup>

We cannot yet be sure of the origin and antiquity of this belief. No doubt, this tradition of venerating the constellation of dolphin that housed the old polestar as the Supreme Being or a divinity must have started at a time when Thuban was seen as the polestar. Kaler (2002: 191) calls Thuban “the best ever” polestar, “which lay almost exactly at the pole in 2700 BC. It remained better than Kochab up to around 1900 BC.” The textual evidence discussed or indicated above comes from Brāhmaṇa texts but not from anything earlier, and it is very difficult to know how old this tradition is. On the one hand, there is a possibility that from the beginning Indian speculators saw the sky in this way; on the other hand, there is another possibility that the picture we see in the texts examined here entered the Indian tradition from some foreign tradition, Mesopotamian, Mediterranean, or even Chinese.<sup>57</sup> All is nonetheless mere speculation; what is certain is that the texts providing evidence of this tradition belong to various ages and need not be as old as the tradition itself.

### **Iconographic Representation of the Dolphin**

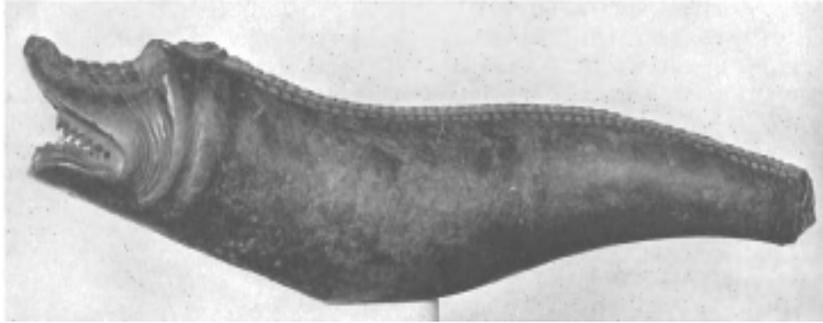
I have argued in this paper that our earliest texts that describe a celestial dolphin are closely reflected in later myths of the ‘fish’ rescuing Manu; traces of the dolphin can even be found in the period when the rescuing creature is decidedly a fish and an incarnation of Viṣṇu. Archaeological evidence, too, lends support to our conclusion that the deified fish was originally a dolphin, and before concluding I would like to review some of this evidence.

I start with an Indian sculpture of the dolphin that belongs to the third century B.C. Ananda Coomaraswamy, who published and described it twice in 1931 and 1936, describes it as ‘an Indian crocodile,’ even though he agrees that its ‘form on the whole is more fish-like than reptilian’ (see Coomaraswamy 1936: 26). Let me first reproduce the image of that sculpture from Coomaraswamy’s article published in the *Bulletin of the Museum of Fine Arts* (Boston), and read a paragraph from his description of the creature in the sculpture:

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<sup>56</sup> Rogers 1998a: 18; Hunger & Pingree 1999: 59, 273.

<sup>57</sup> On the hypothesis of the influence of foreign, particularly Mesopotamian, astronomy on Indian thought and traditions, the following statement of the Pingree (1963: 229-230) is relevant: “One may point to the statement that the year consists of 360 days as a possible trace of Babylonian influence in the *Ṛgveda*, but there is little else which lends itself to a similar interpretation. It has often been proposed, of course, that the list of the twenty-eight *nakṣatras* which is given for the first time at the beginning of the last millennium before Christ in the *Atharvaveda* and in various Brāhmaṇas is borrowed from Mesopotamia. But no cuneiform tablet yet deciphered presents a parallel; the hypothesis cannot be accepted in the total absence of corroborative evidence.”



A dolphin (*makara/śiśumāra*) from Mauryan India, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston  
(after Coomaraswamy 1936: 26)

“The fish-like body undulates in a life-like way, and is complete except for the greater part of the caudal fin, which was probably heterocercal; there is a broad dorsal or low ridge of reptilian scales. The mask is wrinkled by the open jaws, bristling with sharp teeth; the tip of the snout is reverted and provided with barbels indicated by engraved lines; the ears are pointed and directed slightly forward. The eyes, inserted in excavated sockets, are made of chalcedony with inlaid crystal pupils.” (ibid.)

At one place in the same paper, Coomaraswamy says that “[t]he Indian *makara* is in any case the analogue of the Greek dolphin, as it is also of the Zoroastrian *kar*-fish and Assyrian and Sumerian “goat-fish,” original of the Capricornus sign of the Zodiac” (Coomaraswamy 1936:26). He also notes in a footnote (ibid. footnote 2) that “the recurvature of the tip of the nose” in his sculpture “is uncrocodilian,” and that “must surely correspond to the “horn” of the *jhaṣa*, to which “horn” the rope of the Ark is attached in the Flood Legend (*Śatapatha Brahmana* 1.8.1).” Despite these insights, he is unable to move away from the idea that *makara* is the Ganges crocodile. Rather, upon his identification of the sculpture, Coomaraswamy has the following statement:

“We speak of a “crocodile,” for although in the present example there are no legs, and the form on the whole is more fish-like than reptilian, the representation is certainly that of a *makara*, modern vernacular magar, in nature the Ganges crocodile, but in art a formal symbol represented indifferently in reptilian or fish-like form, with or without two or four legs, and when without legs, then either as smooth or with fins. Synonymous with *makara* are the designations *śiśumāra* and *jhaṣa* found in the oldest literature.” (Coomaraswamy 1936: 26).

As Coomaraswamy states, “the *makara* has played a large and significant part in Indian symbolism.” He relates ‘the *makara*’ with the Indian love-god Kāma and his Vaiṣṇava equivalent Pradyumna, the River Goddess Gaṅgā, and also mentions that the *makara* is thought of “also as the symbol and vehicle of Varuṇa.” Indeed, *makara* is depicted with these divinities, as the vehicle of the last two and as the emblem of the first on his banner.

With Coomaraswamy, many scholars identify the *makara* with a crocodile. For example, Parpola (2011:18) writes: “While Kāma, the Indian god of love, is connected with the crocodile, the totem animal of the goddess of love in Hellenistic culture was the dolphin.” On the other hand, the Indian tradition generalizes *makara* as a fish, and the love-

god Kāma is called sometimes *mīnaketana*, the fish-bannered one, alongside *makaradhvaja*, the one with a *makara* on his banner. In this situation, it is useful to look at how the animal is depicted in sculptures.



Gaṅgā on a dolphin with attendants, c. 5th century from Besnagar M.P., (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)



Gaṅgā on a dolphin with a decorated jar, terracotta, c. 5th century from U.P. (Indische Kunst Museum, Berlin)



Varuṇa and Varuṇānī on a dolphin, c. 7-8th century (Prince of Wales Museum, Bombay)

It is possible that the *makara* combines the profiles of a shark and a sea dolphin. We know that some sharks in fact look similar to dolphins, and also that a male sea dolphin, though very rarely, can behave aggressively like a shark. This conflation of the two can be the reason behind ambivalent descriptions of the *makara*: on the one hand, *makara* was imagined as a mythical monstrous aquatic animal attacking humans, but on the other hand, it was seen as a symbol of water, rescue/help, and love. This ambivalence is extended to *śiṃśumāra*, the river dolphin, because after all the two dolphins are mutually related and reminded one of each other.<sup>58</sup> At a later time when people saw a crocodile in the Gangetic plains and needed a name for this monstrous aquatic animal, *makara* fitted the bill and, though rarely, also *śiśumāra*, as a term related to the former. Thus, in my understanding, only secondarily are the words *makara* and *śiśumāra* employed to refer to the crocodile. In Hindi and some other Indian languages the word *magar-macch* (Sanskrit \**makara-matsya*), which literally means ‘a *makara*<sup>59</sup> kind of fish,’ denotes a crocodile. This usage itself is telling that it was originally employed to denote a fish-looking aquatic animal, not a crocodile.

In the same article mentioned above, Coomaraswamy has published one more sculpture of a dolphin that is damaged and contains only the frontal part of the creature. According to Coomaraswamy, like the complete one, this sculpture belongs to “the third century B.C., or more probably a little earlier, and in any case not later than the second century B.C.” This sculpture is very similar to the one reproduced above except the fact that it shows the creature with pectoral fins a bit exaggerated and looking like short legs. But if we pay attention to the ends of these so-called legs we can see that they are not exactly intended as legs. Above all, its body is round and smooth.

Another beautiful sculpture of a dolphin almost equally old, dated to the second century B.C., is preserved in the National Museum, Allahabad. According to the museum website, it was found in Kausambi, Uttar Pradesh. Although this sculpture is damaged in the mouth and the snout is broken off, we can still see its elevated forehead and the bottom of the snout. The front is bigger and the back smaller, the tail is curled up, and the mouth is open showing sharp teeth. As in the sculpture described immediately before, two pectoral fins are projected like legs. This sculpture exaggerates the eyes and ears of the creature. Its eyes are depicted wide-open with elaborate eyebrows. Its big elephantine ears are attached to the body and adorned with pendants. The nicely cut flat bottom of the sculpture suggests that it was fitted on top of a pillar standing, perhaps in front of a Vaiṣṇava site.

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<sup>58</sup> See above, footnotes 40 and 41.

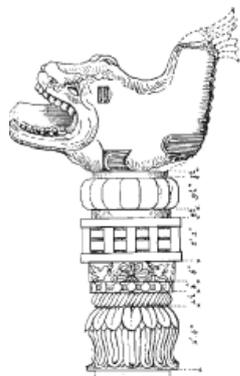
<sup>59</sup> Turner (1966: 554, entry no. 9692) gives ‘crocodile’ as the primary meaning of *makara*. As Parpola has noted, “Turner (1966: no. 9692) considers this to be a non-Aryan etymon, comparing it to Santali *maṅgar* ‘crocodile’ (although this may actually be a loan from Indo-Aryan).” Parpola (2011: 17-18), too, who has collected more data on the usage of the cognates of *makara*, retains ‘crocodile’ as the primary meaning of the term. But the data they both provide proves that the original meaning of the term is a fish-looking sea-monster. As they report, in Pali and Prakrit it means ‘sea-monster/porpoise’ and ‘shark.’ In old Sanskrit text it means the same as in Pali and Prakrit, and only in the texts composed around the end of the twelfth century we can be sure of the other meaning ‘crocodile’ (cf. Parpola 2011: 18). Its cognates in all NIA languages except Hindi and Gujrati mean ‘shark’ ‘whale’ or ‘a kind of sea fish.’ Balochi *māṅgar* and Santali *maṅgar* mean ‘crocodile,’ but as Parpola pointed out, they are loanwords, and so they cannot be judgemental. The situation with the usage of *śi(ṃ)śu/śi(ṃ)śumāra* and their cognates is very much similar.



A dolphin (*makara/siṣumāra*) from Kausambi, U.P.: both digital images, above and below, showing two sides of the same sculpture are available at the Museum of India website: [http://museumsofindia.gov.in/repository/record/alh\\_ald-AM-SCL-59-3541](http://museumsofindia.gov.in/repository/record/alh_ald-AM-SCL-59-3541)



In the same paper Coomaraswamy (1936: 27) presents one more representation of the *makara*: the *makara*-capital from Besnagar, which he dates to the second century B.C. In this sculpture, too, the creature is depicted with a clearly visible row of teeth and a tail, and further, with two pectoral fins on both sides of the frontal part and two more in the hind part. Thus, the creature does not look at all like a crocodile; now it does not look even like a dolphin but more like a fish. Behind the eyes in the place of ears sizable holes are visible. It is possible that these holes are made for the sake of fixing ears built separately using wood and/or metal. I reproduce below the sketch of this sculpture from Coomaraswamy's 1936 article, and also a photograph of the actual object now kept in Gwalior Museum (photo credit: Peter Skiling, EFEO at Bangkok). As I have learnt, it was not possible to take a better photo of this object because in the museum many objects were displayed so closely:



In the Vedic rite of the *puruṣamedha*, in which a distinct animal is allocated to each of the major Vedic deities, the dolphin (*śiśumāra*) is allocated to Sindhu or Samudra,<sup>60</sup> respectively the personified forms of the waters and the sea or an accumulated body of water. Already in the Ṛgveda (VI.116.18) we find the bull and dolphin pulling the chariot of Aśvin twins who need to drive swiftly and unhindered on land and water as well. Aśvin twins are the gods of rescue, relief, healing, and care. They often rescue people in the water; therefore the dolphin's association with them may not be incidental.

It is no surprise that some imaginative features are included when the dolphin is depicted as a symbol or vehicle of one or the other phenomenon or deity. It appears to me that, as in the case of the lion, iconographic representations of *makara* or *śiśumāra* included imaginative features, because for many people it was rarely possible to see a dolphin, and even less so to examine it properly. Those people who had only heard of it or seen it from a distance described and sculpted it with a tinge of imagination. They sometimes added legs of a tiger or an elephant as in the two images reproduced below (both from Bharhut gateway and railings now preserved in Indian Museum, Kolkata), but in most cases only the front legs. But still, it is impressive that most of these *makara* sculptures regularly show the creature with a snout, either rolled up or in some other way. In the first image from Bharhut the tail of the creature is coiled up, but the pattern of scales and the small fins attached on its body, in place of ears indicate that the artist was still thinking of it as a fish, despite the presence of the legs. In the second image, though its leg and head appear elephantine, its snout, teeth and tail tell us that the artist is working on an image of dolphin.



Here below I have another image from Kankali Tila which is equally old and very similar to the first Bharhut image above. In this one, the fishtail is clearly visible. In short, even though extra artistically inspired elements are added, all older *makara* images are uncrocodilian. Rather, they are either fish-like or dolphin-like.

<sup>60</sup> Cf., e.g., TS V.5.11.1, VSM XXIV.21 and 30.



(Source: American Academy of Benares, Photo Archives Accession no. 182)

## Conclusion

To sum up, the Indian tradition of venerating the celestial dolphin goes back to an ancient Vedic past. The dolphin was deified as a constellation in the northern hemisphere. At this early date stargazers had conceived of the rotating nave of the universe in the polar region and the constellation of the dolphin was seen as whirling around, with all the celestial bodies the sun, moon, and others tied to it. It was thus seen as parallel to the principle controlling the whole universe and equated to the mystical philosophical principle of *bráhma*. We cannot be sure of the age or original source of these ideas, which are clearly attested only in late Vedic, Puranic and astrological texts.

The celestial dolphin was equated with certain ritual elements in Vedic sacrifices, and also venerated as *bráhma*, then in due course of time, as the lord of creatures Brahmā Prajāpati and comparatively much later in Hinduism, as the savior and protector Viṣṇu. Because of its association with water, particularly wellbeing and safety in the waters, the dolphin was depicted in iconography in many different ways.

The dolphin had always been considered a kind of fish and eventually it is replaced in Puraṇic myths by a fish. As worship of Brahmā Prajāpati declined by early mediaeval times, the divine fish was exclusively identified with Viṣṇu. Thus, the same dolphin myths provided ground for the advent of the fish incarnation of Viṣṇu.

The Vedic people were apparently aware of the nature and features of dolphins, and perhaps knew both sea and river dolphins. They knew possibly the first as *makara* and the latter as *śi(m)śumāra*, *jhaṣá*, and most probably just as *śi(m)śu*. Classical Sanskrit sources, however, described the dolphin as a sea elephant (*mātaṅganakra*)—because of its elongated snout, or as an abnormal mythical fish, and sometimes simply as a fish. All such descriptions were an outcome of approximation, generalization, and then a fanciful imagination. Sculptures mirrored the altered imagination of people and those developments in classical literature, but still, they preserved one or more of dolphin-like features of the creature; most of the time its elongated snout and sometimes its tail, were sculpted.

In classical Sanskrit texts of late mediaeval period onwards, all the terms referring to dolphin are often used to refer to crocodiles. As I suggest, in later times, the river dolphin which was previously present in many rivers had disappeared from most of them, but crocodiles were plentiful. In time the dolphin disappeared not only from the landscape but also from the lexicon, with the words for dolphin now taken to denote the crocodile or simply the fish.

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