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THE SYMBOLISM OF LOTUS FROM THE VEDIC AND POST-VEDIC LITERATURE

The esoteric conceptions, philosophical speculations and religious thoughts are represented in complex symbols in the Indian Literature. Lotus is just one of such symbols but highly popular and frequently referred.

To the Indian taste the lotus has always been the fairest flower; it has enjoyed an unparalleled popularity throughout India from the Vedic times down to the present day as is shown by its predominance in literature and art. It plays a prominent part in the mythology of India.

Vedic Period

Beginning to be mentioned in the *Ṛgvēda*¹ where it is named as *Puṣkara* and is mentioned with increasing frequency in the later *Samhitās*. Two varieties, *Puṣkara* and *Puṇḍarika* occur at several places and in *Atharvavēda*² in which the human heart is compared with *Puṇḍarika*. The blue variety named *Puṣkara* occurs several times in the *Ṛgvēda*.³ The *Ṛgvēdic* twin gods *Aśvin* are found wearing lotus garland (*Puṣkara - Sraṅ*) just for personal adornment.⁴ Not only the

lotus, but lotus garland (*Puṣkaraṇi*) were also considered beautiful by the Vedic poets. The *R̥gvēda* notes: 'This house of hospitality is decorated like a lotus pond, like a wonderful dwelling of gods'.⁵ Another kind of lotus, the *Kumuda*, is mentioned together with its various edible parts in *Atharvavēda*.⁶

Lotus is closely associated with the cosmogonic myths, which are based on different characteristics and symbolical meanings of the lotus. The lotus expresses the idea of emergence of first created object from the primordial waters of chaos. *Puṣkara*, the oldest name of this water-born flower, is mentioned as the birthplace of *Agni*.⁷

According to the cosmogonical conceptions, there was only chaotic water before the creation of the universe. *Taittirīya Saṃhitā*⁸ very clearly says that "In the beginning this (world) was moving water. *Prajāpati* becoming wind, reeked on the lotus leaf. On it he piled *Agni*. That became earth. Here lotus is called the support of the creation. Variations are observed in the successive stages of this myth. According to *Taittirīya Brahmana*⁹ *Prajāpati* saw the lotus leaf standing in the moving water.

This means that *Prajāpati* perceived in the moving cosmic water the latent possibility of supporting the creation in the form of lotus leaf. The *Śatapatha Brahmana* relates that the earth tossed on the cosmic water and was made stable by the support by the support of lotus.¹⁰ Thus this

ancient flower plant known to the Vedic people from remote past is very support of creation. Hence the use of a lotus leaf is prescribed in the ritual of the construction of *Agnicayana* the layers of which represent the different worlds.

The *Maitrāyaṇi Saṃhitā*¹¹ refers to the origin of the lotus itself and says that it was created from the splendour of the heavenly bodies. The *Satapatha Brahmana*¹² is tantamount to this reference. Now, heavenly bodies should comprehend all that is in the heaven, the sun, the moon, the constellations. The *Pañcaviṃśa Brahmana*¹³ clearly says that from the shining of stars, the lotus springs up. This statement is rested, doubtless, upon the observation of the phenomenon of the blooming of the lotuses during day and night. The flower opens when the sun and the moon rise and close at sunset and moonset, so as to suggest to the primitive mind the idea that the flower might be residence of the sun during its nocturnal passage and of the moon and the stars during the day passage. So for them the flower might be revivifier or regenerator of the fresh or refreshed sun and the moon and stars of the next day.

Lotus is further associated with power and virility. lotus blooming in the water symbolizes Varuṇa's luster and power, which entered water when he was consecrated. So wearing lotus garland is prescribed for the king in the Rājasūya sacrifice.¹⁴ Lotus as the best of water plants, symbolizes Varuṇa's power, which the king restores by putting on a lotus water.¹⁵ Indra the powerful war-god, having

smitten Vṛtra, thought that he was not dead and sought asylum in the waters. The waters gathered up their essence (*rasaḥ*) upwards and made a stronghold for Indra. That was lotus therefore it is so called (pushkar-strength giver). Now the best part of something is considered as (*rasaḥ*). In Gīta¹⁶ Kṛṣṇa the divine god of incarnation, identifies himself with 'rasa' in the waters. The glorious lotus flower is an offspring of mud and water¹⁷ but appears to spring not from the sordid earth but from the surface of the water and is always pure and unsullied, no matter how impure may be the water of the lake. Thus, as an emblem of divine purity, the lotus expresses the idea of the 'essence' and thereby the idea of supernatural or divine birth, not representing the parents. The further development of the concept of divine birth is the lotus-birth i.e., birth on lotus.

A verse from *Atharvavēda* (IV.34.5) says that 'let complete lotus pond approach you', which means let you be born on the lotus. *Satapatha Brahmaṇa* relates that the lotus is the immortal element itself. In *Jaiminiya Upaniṣad Brahmaṇa* (4.3) a significant appellation has been given to lotus by naming them flowers of immortality (*Amṛtasya Puṣpāṇi*). Thus the lotus-birth of Vedic literature is associated with immortality.

Rasa on the other hand stands for *Jīvanrasa* the elixir of life. So it could be the embodiment of that nourishment or elixir of life. Yakṣa's etymological explanation of the word viz., *poṣati bhūtāni*¹⁸ confirms this idea.

This also can be traced back to *Atharvavēda* where a variety of lotus named *Kumuda* with all its edible parts is mentioned. Lotus as a nourisher may be indicting here the real life practice of actually consuming different parts of lotus, which was a common delicacy of the Vedic times.

Lotus, the symbol of creative force and superhuman and divine birth gains one more dimension of fertility as it gets associated with *Śrī* the goddess of, beauty, abundance and fortune, invoked in the Khila hymns of the *Ṛgvēda*.¹⁹ Her epithets are *Padmahasta*, *Padmashitā*, *Padmavarṇā*, *Puṣkariṇi*, *Padmamātini*, *Padmini*, all suggestive of her close association with lotus. Lotus is already support of creation and is identified with the earth in the cosmogonic myths. Now with the association of the feminine divinity of abundance and fortune, it becomes the emblem of fructification and fertility.

In the epic poetry of the *Mahābhārata* the Lord creator is described as having sprung from the lotus that grew out of *Viṣṇu*'s navel when he lay absorbed in meditation. Hence one of the epithets of Creator is (*abja-ja*, *padma-yoni*) lotus-born. The flower is regarded as the matrix of the creator who is described as reclining or seated upon a lotus. The lotus is thus connected with *Viṣṇu* one of whose name is *Padma-nābha*, lotus-naveled.

The *Ṛgvēdic* goddess *Śrī* becomes here *Lakṣmi-Viṣṇu*'s wife who came out of a lotus, which sprang up from his forehead. She is called (*Padmā*) Lotus-hued. She

is portrayed sitting or standing on a lotus and holding up in each hand a lotus flower, which is watered by two elephants from the pots, raised aloft by their trunks. This ancient view is found all over India at the present day. The device of lotus flower in the hands of goddess *Śrī* or *Lakṣmi*, seems to have symbolized not merely divine birth but the possession of life everlasting and the preservation and procreation of life.

According to *Purāṇas* lotus and its petals are meant to indicate highest knowledge. A gift of lotus, original or in metal, is marked in vows. Many beliefs are seen associated with lotus. The lotus figures in ritual baths bestowing on the performer liberation from all types of sins (*Varaha Purāṇa* 211.26). Seeing lotus in dream is indicative of prosperity and fortune (*Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa* 77.34). Thus, lotus seems to have reached highest popularity in rituals by the time of *Purāṇas*.

The lotus seat and pedestal have an almost universal application in connection with the figures of Hindu Mythology. To the later Sanskrit poets it is the emblem of beauty to which they constantly compare the faces of their heroines.

Buddhist Literature

The symbolism of the lotus flower (*padma*, *puṇḍarīka*, *utpala*) further travelled in the Buddhist literature and as an emblem of divine birth and purity has been rubricated and applied to historical Buddha, *Śākyamuni*. In the *Atharvavēdic* verse²⁰ (referred to above), it is said that the meritorious deeds of a person earn for him a place in the lotus pond in the

heavenly world. This concept has been profusely used in the Buddhist Literature.

A form of this myth of divine lotus-birth is probably the myth, which invests Buddha with the miraculous power of imprinting the image of a lotus flower on the earth at every step that he took. The reference to this are innumerable in the Pāli literature.

In the Buddhist paradise of *Sukhāvati*²¹ the goal of popular Mahāyāna Buddhists, where no woman exists, every one is born as a god upon a lotus-flowers of *Maṇi*-gems. In Tibet, the lotus is the special emblem of the founder of the Order of Lamas viz., *Padmākar Padmasambhava* - the lotus-born.

Lotus-birth mentioned in the canonical Pāli Literature seems to have lost its philosophical substance, which we find in the Vedic literature and the residue remains in the form of a belief.

In the Jātaka tales and *Avadāna*, the books of popular Buddhism, births on lotus flower as a result of being virtuous, have been narrated. In them the persons are born inside a lotus as a mortal being and hence evidently mortal and nothing further. In some Jātaka stories the miraculous existence of lotus, which becomes the support of Bodhisattva's feet, has been introduced.²² This difference is due to the fact that the Vedas are the revelations of spiritual relation and philosophical thoughts whereas Jātakas are

popular tales. The idea of lotus-birth is further reflected in art where different divinities are either standing or sitting on a lotus.

In Buddhist mythology the lotus gives its name to two out of twenty four previous Buddhas of the Pāli-canon, namely *Pāduma* and *Pādumuttara*. Also some Nāgas in Buddhist hells are named after *Paduma*. The white lotus *Puṇḍarīka* gives it name to one of the great canonical texts of Mahāyanist Buddhism, the *Saddharma Puṇḍarīka*. This is a theistic development of the Buddha theory, which represents *Sākyamuni* as the supreme god of the universe and possessor of everlasting life.

The lotus moreover enters into Indian art²³ of all ages and all religions as a conspicuous decorative element. It appears thus on the oldest architectural monument of Buddhism as well as later on those of Jainism as the sixth *jina* and Hinduism all over India.

In its simplest form, the expanded lotus is very frequent at Sāñchi Bharhut, Amarāvati and Bōdh Gaya. Lotuses growing on stalks also occur in the sculptures of Gāndhāra and of Mathurā and often figure in elaborate floral designs at Sañchi and Amarāvati.

The lotus is found from the earliest times conventionalized either as a seat or a pedestal on which Āryān gods rest in sitting and standing position. After Buddha began to be represented in sculpture, his image

appears constantly sitting cross-legged on a lotus seat. The lotus seat has been extended to images of *Bōdhisattavas* not only in India but in Buddhist Countries beyond its borders. The lotus is intimately connected with *bōdhisattva*, for he is represented as born from a lotus, and he regularly holds a lotus in his hand, whence, is derived his epithet *Padmapāṇi*-lotus-handed. To him moreover refers the Buddhist formula *Om Maṇi Padme Hum* (Yea! O Jewel in the lotus! Amen) which at present day is the most sacred prayer of the Buddhist in Tibet. In the hand of *Maitreya*, the next coming Buddha and *Bodhisattvas*, the lotus in the hand may have had a metaphysical meaning and have denoted the preservation of the life of the law and the revivifying of the same. It was possibly in this sense we find that a lotus flower adorns the hands of many of the images of Buddhas and *Bodhisattvas* who do not specially possess the attribute of a lotus in the hand.

CONCLUSION

It may, thus be seen that lotus as a symbol goes back to the *Vēdās*. It appears in the cosmogonic myths of the *Vēdās* and the *Brahmaṇās* as a symbol of creative force, divine purity and immortality.

In the epic poetry and in the *Purāṇās* we come across many more beliefs associated with the lotus. Here it appears as a symbol of fertility and fortune. The device of lotus flower in the hands of different gods seems to have symbolized not merely divine birth but the possession of life everlasting and the preservation and procreation of life.

Buddhism, later, gave wider currency to the symbolism of lotus by incorporating all above ideas. As an emblem of divine birth, it is the commonest motif in the Buddhist literature and art. As regards its application in religious art, the lotus figures with the rise of that art in India, on all the monuments of Buddhism, as well as on those of Jainism and Hinduism all over India and also outside India.

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