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## LOTUS-BIRTH IN VEDIC AND PĀLI LITERATURE

By

(SMT.) SANTONA BASU

Renukoot, Mirzapur Dt.

At one place in the *Atharvaveda* it is said that one who offers the *viṣṭārin* (a kind of offering for the gods) enters the heaven and finds a place in the lotus-pond :

एष यज्ञानां विततो वहिष्णे विष्टारिणां पक्त्वा दिवमा विवेश  
आण्डीकं कुमुदं सन्तनोति बिसं शालूकं शफको मुलाली ॥  
एतास्त्वा धारा उप यन्तु सर्वाः स्वर्गे लोके मधुमत्पिन्वमाना  
उप त्वा तिष्ठन्तु पुष्करिणीः समन्ताः ॥४. ३४. ५॥

'This extended (*viṣṭārin*) is the best carrier of the sacrifices. Having cooked the *viṣṭārin*, (the offerer) has entered the sky. The bulb-bearing lotus spreads all over (in the pond, and also) the *bisa*, *śālūka*, *śaphaka* and *mulālī*. Let all these streams come to thee, and complete lotus-ponds swelling with honey let approach thee in the heavenly world.'<sup>1</sup>

The Vedic seers practically overlooked the aesthetic aspect of the lotus or the lotus-pond ; here, it does not signify a pleasure spot as it mostly does in the later literature.<sup>2</sup> Only once in the *Rgveda* has the

1. *Bisa* is the lotus stalk and *śālūka* is the edible root of the lotus. Sāyana explains *mulālī*, as *mṛṇāla*, 'lotus fibre', and *śaphaka* as 'the horse-shoe shaped water plant'. W.D. Whitney, (*Atharvaveda*, Pt. I, *Harvard Oriental Series*, 7, 1905, p. 206), translates the verse as follows : 'This extended, is of the sacrifices the best carrier ; having cooked the *viṣṭārin*, one has entered the sky ; the bulb-bearing lotus spreads the *bisa*, *śālūka*, *śaphaka*, *mulālī* : let all these streams come unto thee, swelling honeydly in heavenly world ; let complete lotus-ponds approach thee.' Whitney takes *āṇḍīkam kumudam* as the subject and *bisam*..... *mulālī* as the object. But, as these four words are in nominative singular, *saṃtanoti* must be added separately with each of them.

2. Cf. *vāpī cāsmīn marakataśilā-baddha-sopānamārgā*

*haimais channā vikaca-kamalaib snigdha-vaidūrya-nālaiḥ*

(*Meghadūta*, Uttaramegha, 16)

P.T.O.

lotus-pond been considered as the most beautiful place and kept at par with the palace of gods regarding picturesqueness: 'This house of hospitality is like a lotus-pond, is decorated like a wonderful palace of gods.'<sup>3</sup> In the Canonical Pāli literature, however, the beauty of the lotus is always in the mind of the narrator. King Śudhhodana laid out lotus-ponds to heighten the beauty of the surroundings of Prince Siddhārtha.<sup>4</sup> In the Atharvavedic verse, cited above, it is said that the meritorious deeds of a person earn for him a place in the lotus-pond in the heavenly world. As the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* explains, the Lotus is the 'immortal element' itself: "And that immortal (element), that which is a flame that is glowing, is this lotus leaf. Having laid down that which is lotus leaf he (the offerer) piles up the fire (constructs a fire altar). On that he prepares an immortal existence (for himself) consisting of *R̥k*, *Yajus*, and *Sāman*. He becomes immortal."<sup>5</sup> This passage from *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* serves as an exposition of the Atharvavedic idea, where the poet expresses it in a more significant and mysterious language: let complete lotus-ponds approach thee, which means 'let you be born on the lotus', i.e., on the immortal element.

In the Jātaka tales and Apadāna, the books of popular Buddhism, births on lotus flower as a result of being virtuous have been narrated. The nun *Uppalavaṇṇa* (Skt. *Utpalavarṇā*)<sup>6</sup> was conceived inside a lotus

*pokkharāṇi nāma yattha katthaci manussānāṃ kilitum ramitum katā hoti.*  
*Vinaya-Piṭaka*, (Ed. Pāli Text Society), Vol. 4. Bhikkhunī-Vibhaṅga, Pācittiya 41.

3. *bhojasyedam puṣkaraṇīva veśma pariṣkṛtam devamāneva citram /*  
(RV 10. 107. 10)

4. *Aṅguttara-Nikāya*, (Ed. Pāli Text Society), 3.38.1.

5. Cf. *athaitad amṛtaṃ yad etad arcir dīpyata idaṃ tai puṣkara-parṇam tad yat puṣkara-parṇam upadhāyāgniṃ cinoty etasmīn evaitad amṛta r̥mayam yajur-mayam sāmamayam ātmānam saṃskurute. so 'mṛto bhavati.*

(*Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 10. 5. 1. 5)

In *Jaiminīya Upaniṣad Brāhmaṇa* (4.3) a significant appellation has been given to lotuses by naming them 'flowers of immortality' (*amṛtasya puṣpāni*).

6. Cf. *disvā paccēkasambuddham pañcalājasatān ahaṃ /*  
*datvā paduma-channāni, pañcaputtasatān ahaṃ || 56 ||*  
*patthayiṃ tesu patthesu madhuṃ datvā sayambhuno /*  
*tato cutā araññehaṃ ajāyiṃ padumodare || 57 ||*

'Seeing the Paccekabudda I, having given five hundred fried corn covered with lotuses and honey in pots to the Self-born, prayed for five hundred sons. Separated from there (that life) I was born in the womb of a lotus in the woods.'

(*Therī Apadāna* 19) (Pāli Text Society)

as a result of giving a Paccekabuddha (Skt. Pratyekabuddha) fried corn (*laja*) covered with lotuses. The story of the birth of a being possessing merits inside a lotus has been narrated in the Jātakas.<sup>7</sup>

A contrast can be marked about lotus-birth on account of the philosophical idea on the one hand and folk belief on the other. In the Vedic literature lotus symbolises immortality. The idea of becoming immortal has been expressed by saying that immortal personages will be born on the lotus. Here, not an actual birth on a lotus flower in nature is meant but immortality. 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. A natural flower is meant and it does not signify anything further. Neither has it any connection with immortality, since in the stories of the Therī Apadāna and the Jātaka, the persons are born inside a lotus as mortal beings and hence evidently mortal. The *Mahāsukhāvāṭṭīvyūha* (40-41),<sup>8</sup> a Buddhist text of a much later period, reproduces the Vedic conception of lotus-birth in the heaven of meritorious persons.<sup>9</sup> In the Vedic literature lotus has a deep significance. As the birthplace of Agni in *Rgveda* 6.16.13 and the support of Prajāpati in *Taittirīya Saṃhita* 5.6.4.2-3, lotus symbolises the cosmic waters also.<sup>10</sup>

In the whole range of Canonical Pāli literature only once, in a Jātaka story, has lotus been mentioned as a support of Bodhisattva. In the *Khadirāṅgara Jātaka* it is told Bodhisattva was barred from his good intention of giving alms to a Paccekabuddha by Māra, the

7. *Jātaka*, edited by V. Fausboll, London, Vol. 3, p. 249.

8. *Larger Sukhāvāṭṭīvyūha* by F. Max Mueller (tr. of *Mahāsukhāvāṭṭīvyūha*, *Sacred Books of the East*, Vol. XLIX, Pt. II).

9. J. Schubert, (S. Morenz and J. Schubert, *Gott auf der Blume*, Ascona, 1954, pp. 107-8), furnishes the following reasons for the mention of lotus ponds in *Sukhāvāṭṭīvyūha*: (1) King Śuddhodana had many lotus ponds dug in his palace garden for Prince Siddhārtha. (2) In *Mahāsudarsana-sūtranta* king Sudarsana made his city beautiful with lotus ponds. (3) The story of king Senaka took place on the bank of a lotus pond. (4) In the *Bisa Jātaka* (488) prince Mahākaccāyana went to the bank of a lotus pond as a hermit. But these do not at all furnish any ground for the presence of lotus ponds in *Sukhāvāṭṭīvyūha*. It is evidently a continuance of the Vedic conception.

10. See my article, 'The lotus in the cosmogony of the Vedas', *Vishveshvaranand Indological Journal*, 4 (1966) 39 ff.

Satan in Buddhist mythology, who had created a pit of red hot embers before Bodhisattva's house. Bodhisattva, undaunted by this, strode right into the pit of fire. All of a sudden a very big lotus sprang up to support him: 'A big peerless lotus immediately received the feet of Bodhisattva; after, it (the flower) rose and grew up higher and higher through the depth of eighty cubits of burning pit.'<sup>11</sup> A very peculiar botanical characteristic of the lotus is that though it is a water-born flower it remains undefiled by it, that is to say, water does not cling to its leaves but glides away. Māra, the Evil One, symbolises a worldly phenomenon, while Bodhisattva is divine and stands above this phenomenon. As the footstool of Bodhisattva, the lotus, which comes out of the pit, indicates that though as a human being Bodhisattva belongs to the world, he is above it and remains undefiled by it. The role of the lotus as a support of gods, e.g., Agni, Prajāpati etc., in the Vedic literature has been referred to before. But by lotus, there, the Vedic seers did not mean the flower itself. Their sayings are the reflections of the philosophical conceptions. Contrary to that, in the Jātaka story a supernatural phenomenon was supposed to have occurred. It is the flower itself which has been taken as the support of Bodhisattva's feet. This basic difference is due to the fact that the Vedas are the revelations of spiritual relations and philosophical thoughts, whereas Jātakas are popular tales,<sup>12</sup> where supernatural happenings are told with a view to teach the folk about the fruit of the good deeds.

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11. Cf. *tāvad eva asitihathāya gambhīrāya angarakāsuyā talato upivūpari jātaṃ attasattamaṃ ekaṃ mahāpadumaṃ uggantvā bodhisattassa pāde paticci. Jātaka*, Ed. Fausboll, Vol. I, p. 233.

12 B.C. Līw, *A History of Pāli literature*, Vol. 1, (London 1933): "The Jātakas are highly important for the history of Buddhism, as they give an insight into popular Buddhism." (p. 272).