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## THE LOTUS IN THE COSMOGONY OF THE VEDAS

SMT. SANTONA BASU

Renukoot, Mirzapur Dt.

The Lotus, which plays a very important role in ancient Indian sculptures and paintings as seats and nimbus of gods and goddesses as well as decorative motif, has had deep symbolical meanings attached to it from the time of the Vedas. Though the lotus is not frequently mentioned in the Vedic literature, the available references to it lead to the conclusion that this flower was very highly esteemed by the Vedic ṛṣis. The present article attempts to trace its relation to cosmogony and its role and function.

One of the earliest references is found in connection with Agni in the *Rgveda*. *Puṣkara*, the oldest name of this water-born flower is mentioned as the birth-place of Agni in *RV* 6. 16. 13 :

त्वामग्ने पुष्कराद् अध्यथर्वा निर्मन्थत । मूर्ध्नो विश्वस्य वाचतः ॥

The underlying ideas connected with different words of this *mantra* give us a symbolical significance. According to the cosmogonical conceptions there was only chaotic water before the creation of the universe : "All this was water."<sup>1</sup> In the above verse lotus as a water-born flower embodies the cosmic water. *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 6. 4. 2. 2, while providing a commentary to this verse, gives the meaning *prāna* for *atharvā* : "O Agni, Atharvan rubbed thee out of the lotus flower. Lotus flower is indeed water. Breath of life is *atharvan*. Indeed the breath of life rubbed it out of the water in the beginning."<sup>2</sup>

In *RV* 10. 121. 7 *Prajāpati* has been named *ekah asu*, which has been translated by scholars as 'vital spirit'<sup>3</sup> 'Lebensgeist'<sup>4</sup>.

1. सलिलं सर्वं आ इदम् । *RV* 10. 129. 3.

2. त्वामग्ने पुष्कराद् अध्यथर्वा निर्मन्थतेत्यापो वै पुष्करम् प्राणोऽथर्वा वा एतमग्ने-  
द्भ्यो निरमन्थत् । *ŚB* 6. 4, 4 2.

3. F. D. K. Bocsh, *The Golden Germ*, 's-Gravenhage, 1960, p. 54.

4. K. F. Geldner, *Der Rigveda*, Göttingen, 1923, Vol. 3. p. 348.

'Lebenshauch, Lebeaskryft'<sup>5</sup> and 'prāna'.<sup>6</sup> So, *asu* and *prāna* have the same meaning and, here, *atharvā=prāna=asu* denotes Prajāpati.

Geldner<sup>7</sup> takes *vāghataḥ* is the sense of 'priests', and Grassmann<sup>8</sup> and Roth in *Petersburg Wörterbuch (PW)* say that it means 'one who offers'. Most probably it is derived from the root *vah* as Grassmann in his *Wörterbuch zum Rgveda*, supposes. *Vāghataḥ* is ablative singular of *vāghat*, meaning 'carrier', by which the cosmic water, the carrier of all is meant. *viśvasya vāghataḥ* is in apposition to *puṣkarāt*. Sāyaṇa too takes *vāghataḥ* in the sense of *vāhakāt*, i. e., 'from the bearer', 'from the carrier'.

*murdhan* means beginning and in (PW) Roth says that in the locative and the ablative *murdhan* also means 'in the beginning' (in Anguing).<sup>9</sup> According to cosmogonical myths Prajāpati in the beginning gathered Agni from the water.<sup>10</sup> Agni is characterised in other verses as germ or foetus of water.<sup>11</sup> His further name is 'son of waters' (*apam napāt*).<sup>12</sup> Now, the verse may be translated as follows ;—

"O Agni, in the beginning Atharvan (i. e., *prāna*) churned thee out of the lotus (i. e., from the cosmic water), the bearer of all".<sup>13</sup>

5. Grassmann in *Rig-Veda*, Leipzig, 1876, and in *Wörterbuch zum Rgveda*. Wiesbaden, 1955, respectively.

6. Sāyaṇa, *Bhāṣya* on *RV* 1. 121. 7.

7. See below, footnote 13.

8. *Ibid.*

9. Geldner and Grassmann, however, translate it as 'head' (*Haupt*), while Sāyaṇa as 'receptacle like head' (*murdhavād dhāraḥ*).

10. See *infra*, *Taittirīya Saṃhitā*, 5. 6. 4. 2-3.

11. *garbhah yah apam*, *RV* 1. 70. 3; also, 3. 1. 12, 13; 7. 9. 3; 104. 45. 1; *AV* 13. 1. 50 etc.

12. A. A. Macdonell, *Vedic Mythology*, Strassburg, 1897. p. 70.

13. This verse has been translated by many scholars, but none seems to be convincing. Here are quoted the translation of Geldner and that of Grassmann : "Thee, O Agni, the Atharvan rubbed out of the lotus flower, (thee) the priests from the head of the whole world." (Dich, Agni, rieb Atharvan aus der Totus-blume, (dich) die Priester aus dem Haupt der ganzen Welt.—Geldner *Der Rgveda* II, p. 110).

"Dich, Agni, zog Atharva her  
durch Reiben aus dem Himmelskelch,  
Dem Haupt jedes Betenden,"

(H. Grassmann : *Rig-Veda*, I, p. 244)

In the *Taittiriya Samhitā* the same theory is retold, but in a clearer language, where Agni is taken as the previous stage of the earth : "In the beginning this was (moving) water. Prajāpati becoming wind reeked on the lotus leaf<sup>14</sup> (cosmic water). He could find no support. He saw that nest of waters. On it he piled Agni. That became this (earth). Then indeed he had support."<sup>15</sup>

*Puṣkara parna* and *salila*, both indicate water, *salila* to its moving state, i.e., to its unsteadiness<sup>16</sup> and *puṣkara-parna* to its function as the support of Prajāpati. *TS* 5. 6. 4. 5 explains that *apāṃ kulāyam* is Agni 'Nest of water' is the name of Agni's unmanifested form, when it was one with the water, i.e., when it was not divided and had no separate existence. 'Prajāpati piled Agni on the nest of waters' means that with the help of Prajāpati Agni became manifested from its unmanifested form, and then became this earth. In a passage in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (7 4 1.8) Agni and earth have been identified (*iyam hy agniḥ*).

It would be obvious from the above that the cosmogonical myth of the *Taittiriya Samhitā* is a variation of that of Agni's birth as told in the *Rgveda*. In the *Rgveda* Atharvan churned Agni from water. In the *Taittiriya Samhitā* Prajāpati piles Agni on the nest of waters.<sup>17</sup>

Variations are observed in the successive stages of this myth. The *Taittiriya Āraṇyaka* has an elaboration of the story told in the *Taittiriya Samhitā* : This (world) was water that was moving. He, Prajāpati, alone appeared on the lotus leaf. Within his mind

14. Not 'on a lotus leaf' as translated by A. B. Keith in *Veda of Black Yajus School*, Vol. II, 1914, p. 458.

15. इदमग्रे सलिलमासीत् । स प्रजापतिः पुष्करपर्णे वातोभूतोऽलेलायत् । स प्रतिष्ठं नाक्विदत् । स एतदपां कुल्यामपश्यत् । तस्मिन्नग्निमचिनुत् । तदियमभवत् । ततो वै स प्रत्यतिष्ठत् । *TS* 5. 6. 4. 2-3.

16. See Monier-Williams, *The Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, for *salila*, 'flowing, surging, fluctuating, unsteady' etc.

17. Schubert, (S. Morenz and J. Schubert: *Gott auf der Blume*, (Ascona, 1954, pp. 128-29), opines that the association of Prajāpati and the lotus first appears in the Brāhmaṇas. But the passage from the *Taittiriya Samhitā* discussed above is a sufficiently positive indication that the association of Prajāpati and the lotus existed already during the Samhitā period.

originated a desire : 'May I create this (world)'.<sup>18</sup> In the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 14. 1. 2. 11, Prajāpati did not rest on the 'lotus leaf', but, assuming the form of a boar, raised the earth on the cosmic water. He is named as her lord.<sup>19</sup> It means that the cosmic water executed its function as *puṣkara-parṇa*, viz., as the support to the earth. The story in the *Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa* clearly names the lotus as the support of the earth : "In the beginning, this (world) was water that was moving. Prajāpati grew tired by that. 'How can it be' he said. He saw the lotus leaf standing. He thought, 'Indeed there must be something on which it rests'. Having taken the form of a boar he dived near. He obtained the earth below. Having taken a fragment of it he came out. That he spread on the lotus leaf."

'Prajāpati saw the lotus leaf standing' means that in the moving and unsteady cosmic water Prajāpati perceived the latent possibility of supporting the creation. He dived and discovered that the cosmic water's potentiality as support for the earth below, i.e., the cosmic water could be a support of the earth. Hence he spread a fragment of it on the *puṣkara-parṇa*, the cosmic water. Both in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* and the *Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa* versions the pre-existence of the earth below the cosmic water is supposed. In all these stories earth is said to have a firm establishment in the cosmic water. The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* says at one place that before getting a firm establishment the earth tossed on the cosmic water like a lotus leaf indicating its helpless condition in the vast ocean. The *Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa* says that it was made stable by the support

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18. आपो वा आसन्त्सलिलमेव । स प्रजापतिरेकः पुष्करपर्णे समभवत् । तस्यान्तर्ममसि कामः समवर्तत 'इदं सृजेयम्' इति । *TA* 1. 23. 1.

The appearance of Prajapāti on the lotus culminated in the Hindu mythology by conferring on him attributes like *svayambhū* ('self-born'), *kamalayoni* ('lotus-born') etc.

19. आपो वा इदमग्रे सलिलमासीत् । तेन प्रजापतिरश्राम्यत् । 'कथमिदं स्याद्' इति । सोऽपश्यत् पुष्करपर्णं तिष्ठत् । सोऽमन्यत् 'अस्ति वै तद्यस्मिन् इदमधितिष्ठती'ति । स बराहो रूपं कृत्वोपन्यमज्जत् । स पृथिवीं अध आच्छत् । तस्य उपहृत्योदमज्जत् । तत् पुष्करपर्णोऽप्रथयत् । *TB* 1. 1. 3. 5-6.

20. हेयं पृथिव्यलेलायद् यथा पुष्करपर्णमेव । *SB* 2.1. 1. 8.

Here the lotus does not have great significance. It is merely the object to which the helpless condition of the earth is compared.

of the lotus : "That he (Prajāpati) saw in the midst of the heaving sea. He saw the wide earth (*urvī*),—the stability of the moving one (*jagat*),—that was indeed born of the support of the lotus."<sup>21</sup> *Puṣkara* or lotus signifies the cosmic water's role of support to the earth by making it steady at one place.

Obviously, the cosmogonic myth with all its variations is a modified form of the birth of Agni from the lotus. Agni or earth was the first visible form, *viz.*, lotus, that emerged from the water. In these myths the lotus embodies that thing which supports a new development, whether in the form of Agni (*RV*), or in the form of Prajāpati (*TS* 5. 6. 4. 2-3) or in the form of the earth which was created or placed on the lotus.

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21. यत्पर्यपश्यज् सरिरस्य मध्ये ।

उर्वीमपश्यज् जगतः प्रतिष्ठाम् ।

तत्पुष्करस्यायतनाद्धि जातं..... ॥ *TB.* 1. 2. 1. 4.