

The Heaven, The Earth And The Tortoise

Dr B Rambilass (PhD. Sanskrit)

Ex Head of Department – Sanskrit: University of Durban-Westville, Academic Director Hindi Shiksha Sangh (S.A.)

Founder & Director: Westville Hindu School; Director – School of Vedic Studies (South Africa)

President Emeritus – Arya Samaj South Africa, 87 Harbottle Rd, Sydenham, Durban, 4091, South Africa

Abstract

Many of the myths that constitute the *Purāṇas* have their origins in earlier Vedic literature viz. the *Samhitās* and the *Brāhmaṇas*. The incarnations or *avatāras* of *Viṣṇu* are one of the main themes of the *Purāṇas*. This paper looks briefly at the concept of “*avatāra*” and examines some of the myths of the *Purāṇas* which have their origin in Vedic literature. It pays particular attention to the “*kūrmāvatāra*” or tortoise incarnation. While the source of this myth has been commonly ascribed to the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, this paper suggests that the myth has its roots in the *Ṛgveda Samhitā* where the description of the heaven and earth as world-bowls, in all likelihood, inspired the form of the “*kūrmāvatāra*”

Keywords

Kūrmāvatāra; Tortoise Incarnation; Viṣṇu; Vedic literature; Purāṇas; Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa; Ṛgveda Samhitā; Theriomorphism; Camū; world-bowls; Dhiṣaṇā; Kapāla; Dyāvāpṛthivī; heaven and earth; Avatāra; incarnation; Mythological origins; Cosmology in Vedic literature; Anthropomorphism vs. theriomorphism

1. Introduction

The thematic basis of the *Purāṇas*, from a *Vaiṣṇava* viewpoint, is the series of incarnations (*avatars*) of *Viṣṇu*, who is one of the three important deities in orthodox Hinduism. These three - *Brahmā*, *Viṣṇu* and *Maheśa*, represent the continuous tripartite cyclic operation of Creation, Sustenance and Dissolution. Since *Viṣṇu* is the one who sustains the world, his is the primary role of the prosecutor against the forces of evil. He is therefore exalted in the *Vaiṣṇava Purāṇas* to the position of Deity Supreme. In order to fulfil his obligations to his devotees, *Viṣṇu* has to descend to the mortal world, at different times, in appropriate incarnations, to destroy the evil that torments the world and to save his devotees from suffering. One such incarnation is the *kūrma-avatāra*. Here, as a tortoise, his shell supports the mountain, *Mandarācala*, which serves as the centre pole for the churning of the ocean by the gods and demons. The serpent *Śeśa*, is used as the rope and after much churning a concentrated potion is extracted

which is so potent that it could destroy the entire world. After securing the deadly draught from the demons the gods approach *Śiva* to help dispose of the venom; *Śiva* gallantly swallows the potion in one gulp. So potent is the draught, however, that even *Śiva*'s throat turns blue; thus he is called *Nīlakaṇṭha* - the Blue-Throated One. This briefly is the story of the Tortoise Incarnation. It is a popular story in ancient Indian mythology and is narrated in the *Mahābhārata*, *Narasimha Purāṇa* and other *Purāṇas*.

The origins of the myth have been ascribed to the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* where we find the very first trace of the theriomorphism embodied in the myth of the turtle or tortoise. This paper suggests that the notion of the tortoise may be traced further to the poetic imagery of the heaven and earth in the *Rgveda*.

2. Vedic Literature

A summary of the divisions of the Vedic literature will be of some help since the growth of the myth is directly related to the evolution of this ancient class of Indian literature. Vedic literature begins with the metrical litanies or *Chandas* of the *Rgveda*, includes the remaining Vedas i.e. the *Yajus*, *Sāma* and *Atharva*, and incorporates in its progressive stages of transition, bodies of literature known as the *Brāhmaṇas*, *Āraṇyakas* and *Upaniṣads*. The four *Vedas* or *Samhita* are made up of hymns or *Sūktas* that deal with the different deities - they are *Śruti* or knowledge of an esoteric nature compiled by the *ṛṣis* or seers by virtue of their severe austerities and attainment of a higher realisation. The *Brāhmaṇas* are mainly liturgical texts that are prescriptive for the performance of rituals. The *Āraṇyakas* and *Upaniṣads* are philosophical and metaphysical speculations couched in the form and style that epitomised the Indian penchant for philosophical discourse in elegant literary style.

3. Anthropomorphism

In the *Rgveda* the trend towards the anthropomorphism of divinities is not very pronounced. The ascribing of human features or characteristics to the elements, for instance, need not be regarded as evidence for a nascent anthropomorphism but should be viewed in the light of literary conventions and techniques that abound in the poetry of the *Vedas*. The lack of a clearly defined anthropomorphism in the *Vedas* has led to interesting and divergent interpretations of the *Rgveda*. For the early school of Indologists, such as MacDonnell (1974:2), this lack of anthropomorphism reflects the primitive or rudimentary nature of the poetry of the text. For those like Dayānanda (1958) and Aurobindo (1964) who argue in favour of a more sophisticated theism in the Vedas, the lack of anthropomorphism is rather interestingly used to good advantage. For them, the lack of a clearly defined anthropomorphism does not prove that the speculation of the divine was primitive; on the contrary the absence of clearly pronounced physical attributes serves as proof of the abstract nature of God. Needless to say, the debate is an unending one, not only for those with deep rooted religious convictions, but also for academics who are confounded by texts such as Yāska's *Nirukta* which make possible a wide range of speculations on the etymologies of Vedic vocabulary.

4. Myths Originating In Vedic Literature

It is generally accepted that two myths connected with Viṣṇu can be traced to the Ṛgveda. The two myths and the “dwarf” and “boar” incarnations (MacDonnell 1974:40).

A famous episode associated with Viṣṇu is his taking of the three steps. The three steps are a figurative expression of the light of the sun permeating the three worlds, and the three steps are taken for the devotee in distress (Ṛgveda 6.49.13). This poetic imagery of the three steps develops through the *Brāhmanas* culminates in the *Purāṇas* in the incarnation of the “dwarf”; here, as a dwarf, Viṣṇu secures three steps of land from the king, Bali. The latter did not consider this gift of land measuring three steps of a dwarf to be of any particular worth and therefore liberally granted the request. Viṣṇu then revealed his true colossal form and with three steps covered the earth, heaven and the nether regions.

Similarly, there is a reference in the *Ṛgveda* to *Viṣṇu* and *Indra* slaying the boar which resulted in the release of the hundred buffaloes together with the milk (Ṛgveda 1.61.7; 8:66:10). This again is a figurative reference to the release of rainwater (milk) and rain clouds (the buffaloes). In the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (14.1.2.11), the boar raises the earth from the waters and in the *Purāṇas*, the boar becomes an incarnation of Viṣṇu. The germ of the other two *avatāras* is found in the *Brāhmanas*. They are the “fish” and “tortoise” incarnation. In the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* the fish, at this stage not connected with *Viṣṇu*, delivers Manu from the flood (1.8.1.1), in the *Purāṇas* becomes an incarnation of *Viṣṇu*.

Tripathi. In his *Vaidik Devatā Udbhav aur Vikās* deals in greater detail with the various incarnations deriving from Vedic literature (1981:264). This book is a tremendous contribution to Vedic Studies. As the title suggests, the book is a penetrating study of the origin and evolution of Vedic deities. While earlier scholars have made references to the evolution of the *Ṛgvedic* deities found in later texts, Tripathi traces this evolution by listing the various texts and explains the metamorphosis in great detail.

5. The Tortoise In Ancient Mythology

Tripathi (1981:368) contends that the myth of the earth resting on the shell of the tortoise is not unique to Indian mythology. Traces of this myth can also be found in Chinese, Japanese and Red Indian folklore. In ancient Taoism, God made a Heaven of five islands for the virtuous souls; these were abodes of total bliss. To steady these islands which swayed with the rolling barley fields, three tortoises were appointed to each of the five islands to make them firm. In Almonkin Red Indian lore, the tortoise enjoys a position of importance as the sustainer of the earth and, at places, the earth is even described as the shell of the tortoise.

6. The Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa And The Tortoise

Tripathi's study of the tortoise incarnation begins with the earliest references to the

tortoise in the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa:

Prajapati, having assumed the form of a tortoise created this world - *prajā*. It is for the reason of having created the world in this form that the very form itself is called *kūrma* i.e. it derives from the root *kr-* to do plus the affix *manin* (*kr* + *auṇādika* = *kur* + *manin* = *kurma*). Another name for *kūrma* is *kaśyapa* thus all of humanity is said to be the progeny of *kaśyapa* (7.5.1.5).

The etymological derivation is meant to emphasise the meaning of the root *kr-* (to make or do) and the suffix *manin* (endowed with) which brings out the sense of *kurma* as Creator. In the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa (7.5.1.1) *kūrma* is said to be the very essence, the *rasa* of the three worlds (*raso vai kūrma*); *kūrma* emerged from the ethereal waters as the three worlds. Just as the *rasa* is said to be the aggregate of all that constitutes it, similarly, *kūrma* is the very soul of the three worlds. Verse 6.1.1.12 deals with a similar idea.

7. Theriomorphism As Evidenced In The Manifestation Of The Tortoise

As stated earlier the comparisons made in the *Ṛgveda* between the elements and human or other life forms remain at the level of poetic simile; they have not yet evolved to the level of anthropomorphism or theriomorphism. In the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa, however, and particularly in the case of the tortoise, there is a clear description of the physical form of the tortoise as the embodiment of the three worlds of heaven, earth and the inter-sphere. The shell of the tortoise which resembles an inverted vessel, *kapāla*, is the sky, the base or floor of the shell is the flat earth and between the two exists the life form, the living substance of the tortoise, just as between the earth and dome of heaven exist all life forms (7.5.1.2). The Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa continues in this vein to make the tortoise the very embodiment of Creation, investing the tortoise imagery with a grandeur that equals even the *Ṛgvedic* hymns of Creation. In verse 7.5.1.7 *kūrma* is described as the *prāṇa* - the soul force and the power of consciousness of all sentient beings - *prāṇaḥ vai kūrma prāṇoḥ himāḥ sarvaāḥ prajāāḥ karoti*. Tripathi meticulously traces the evolution of this myth as it progresses through the *Brāhmaṇas*, the *Mahabharata* and finally through the *Viṣṇu* and other *Purāṇas*.

The *Taittiriya Āraṇyaka*, in tandem with the philosophical dialectics of such literature, discusses the primordial nature of *kūrma*. *Kūrma* in a dialogue with *Prajapati*, claims to have existed in the form of the eternal waters even before *Prajapati*. The language used here is very much akin to the imagery of the *Puruṣa Sūkta* in the *Ṛgveda*. Here *kūrma* acquires the status of the thousand-headed and thousand-eyed *Puruṣa* of the *Ṛgveda* 1.23.3,4. Philosophically, then, *kūrma* derives its basis as the earliest form of Creation directly from the *Puruṣa Sūkta* (10.90) of the *Ṛgveda*.

8. World Bowls In The Ṛgveda

For the purpose of this paper, the theriomorphism embodied in the tortoise in the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa is of great significance. The *Ṛgveda* describes the two worlds of heaven and earth as two hemispheres constituting a globular universe, figuratively the two world-bowls. It is in the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa that the world bowl becomes transformed into the shell of the tortoise, which becomes, in the *Purāṇas*, the

incarnation of *Viṣṇu*

Dyāvāprthivī, the *Ṛgvedic* dual compound, refers to the "twoness" of the *prthivī* (earth) and *dyaus* (heaven). These two worlds are portrayed as world halves; the heaven is the dome or the upper inverted vessel, and the earth is the lower bowl upon which the heaven rests. Since the word *kapāla* which means a cup, jar or dish is used in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* to denote the shell of the tortoise I have looked for the equivalent of this imagery in the *Ṛgveda*. It may be noted that the *kapāla* was used particularly for the *Purodāsa* or *Soma* offering in Vedic ritualism.

The words *camū* and *dhīṣana* are used in the *Ṛgveda* in association with *Soma*. A study of the usage of these words shows that while *camū* clearly denotes a vessel or vessels in which *Soma*, was prepared, collected or drunk from, and *dhīṣana* refers to the boards between which the *Soma* was pressed, both words in certain instances also echo the meaning of world bowls as does *kāpala* in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*. The following examples clearly illustrate these usages.

9 Camū

Camū is derived from the root *cam* – to sip or drink. L Sarup in Nirukta 10.12 also explains the derivation of *camasa* – a vessel used at sacrifices for the drinking of *Soma* – as a cup, from the root *cam* (1984:157). According to Monier Williams, *camū* is used in the *Ṛgveda* to mean a vessel or part (two or more) of the reservoir into which the *Soma* is poured. It occurs six times as *camū*; in verse 10.91.15 as *camvī*; in 3.55.20 as *camvā*; in 8.2.8 as *camvoḥ* and *camvāḥ* and in the locative case as *camūṣu*. As *camvau* in the feminine dual, it is explained by the Naighaṇṭika 3.30, using verse 3.55.20 of the *Ṛgveda* as reference, as the two great receptacles of all living beings – heaven and earth (1979:388).

MacDonnell and Keith (1982:255) quote and concur with Roth's (St Petersburg Dictionary) interpretation of *camū* which "appears to be right in the taking the normal sense to designate a vessel into which the *Soma* was poured from the press". Hillebrandt (1965:164-175) goes further and does a detailed study of the use of *camū* in the different cases and numbers. Thus in the singular it is used in 9.107.18 (*camū*) and 10.91.15 (*camvī*) to denote the bowl in which the soma is purified. In the plural, [seldom as *camvāḥ* (Nom, 8.2.8) and mainly as *camūṣu*] it is also used in the sense of the vessels "corresponding to the *Graha-pātras* of the latter ritual". In these verses the *Soma* is described as already pressed and "resting in the vessels" from which it is drunk. In the dual it is the locative denoting the flowing of the *Soma*, after being pressed, into the two vessels. Hillbrand interprets *camū* and *camvoḥ* as the mortar in which the *Soma* was pressed.

In the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* *camū* denotes a trough as translated by Eggeling (1899:430).

Camū in all the verses listed above is used clearly in the sense of a vessel or bowl. There are, however, certain verses in the *Ṛgveda* where the word depicts the imagery of the worlds being vessels or inverted vessels as expressed in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*. This imagery can be traced to the *Ṛgveda*.

10. Camū - World Bowls

The second line of verse 1.164.33 of the *Rgveda* reads as follows:

Between the widespread world-halves is the birth place : the Father laid the Daughter's germ within it. (Griffith : 1973 : 112)

The world halves (*camū* in the dual) referred to literally mean bowls or vessels into which the *Soma* is poured, a figurative expression for heaven and earth. The firmament or space between these two are, as the region of the rain, the womb of all beings. The Father is *Dyaus* and the daughter is Earth whose fertility depends upon the germ of rain laid in the firmament (Griffith : 1973 : 112).

Uttānayoḥ, *camvoḥ*, in the dual, is translated as world halves and *yonih* as the space or region between the two. *Yonih* also means 'womb' in the sense of being the region where all life form is conceived. The word *uttāna* is used in the sense of 'inverted' and *camū* as vessel. We also have other verses which are translated in a similar vein.

Griffith (1973 : 194) translates 3.55.20

The two great meeting Bowls hath he united: each of the Pair is laden with his treasure.

The Hero is renowned for gathering riches. Great is the Gods' supreme and sole dominion.

In his footnotes he explains the two great meeting bowls as:

“the heaven and earth, hemispherical in appearance, which meet at the horizon. So the author of *The Witness of the Sun* speaks of the great bowl of the earth, which hollowed to the horizon.”

In 9.69.5 apart from his own translation of the second half of the verse Griffith (1973: 498) also notes that Sāyṇa offers a different explanation. Sāyṇa takes “*camvaḥ* - bowls or beakers into which the *Soma* juice is poured, as meaning metaphorically the two great receptacles of all living beings, or heaven and earth...”.

Similarly, the second part of verse 9.71.1 reads:

Gold-hued, he makes the cloud his diadem, the milk his carpet in both worlds, and prayer his robe of state.

Griffith, here, translates *camvoḥ*, as "in both worlds".

It is also important to note that in the verses listed above, where *camū* is either literally for the bowl or metaphorically for the hemisphere, in instances the *Soma* is most often the wealth (both material and spiritual), strength and kine that the singer wishes to be blessed with. The *Soma* is wealth, the *rasa* of *prakṛti* that fills the receptacles, and the elements bounties of nature that the hemispheres provide for the singer. It becomes clearly evident from the verses given above, that *camū* is not only the meant for drinking *Soma*., but that it also takes on the meaning “world-bowl”.

11. Dhiṣaṇā

The meaning of dhiṣaṇā is given in the Nirukta 8.3 as "speech". The word comes

from the root *dhiṣ* used in the sense "to hold". Durga explains the relation between the verbal root *dhiṣ*- "to hold" and the meaning "speech" as the inherent quality of "speech to hold the meaning", the connection between speech and the meaning being eternal. The *Nirukta* further explains that as speech, *dhiṣaṇā* distributes or procures intelligence (Sarup: 1984: 131).

The context in which the derivation is explained in the *Nirukta* is that of the drinking of *Soma*. In this instance the cup or vessel *neṣṭra* is placed at the altar where the recital takes place. *Soma* is here associated with the nectar of wisdom. Our concern, however, is with those verses in the *Ṛgveda* which use the word *dhiṣaṇā*, to denote a bowl or vessel, as indicated by its root meaning "to hold" and those verses which use it in the sense of "world-bowl". Monier Williams notes that it is used in *Ṛgveda* as a sort of *Soma* vessel, a cup or goblet, and figuratively, as the *Soma* juice and its effects; in the dual it is used to denote the two bowls or worlds and in the plural it refers to the three worlds i.e. it includes the intersphere (1979 : 516).

Macdonell and Keith (1982: 399) clearly explain that *dhīṣaṇā*, can mean an implement used in the preparing of *Soma* i.e. the "bowl" or "vat" (St Petersburg Dictionary). Several verses of the *Ṛgveda* indicate this usage. Or it could also mean the *Soma* draught itself.

12. *Dhiṣaṇā* -World bowl

Dhiṣaṇā when used in the dual, as a metaphor, like *camū*, expresses the "two worlds" heaven and earth (Macdonell: 1982: 400).

In *Ṛgveda* 1.160.1 *dyāvāprthivī*, the heaven and earth are *dhiṣaṇe* - the "Two Bowls" which Griffith says are so described because of their hemispherical appearance. The verse that follows i.e. 1.160.227 endorses this simile where *rodasī* are the "two world-halves".

In 6.8.3 *rodasī* (the heaven and earth) are *dhīṣaṇe* (two bowls), a description Griffith ascribes to the hemispherical appearance of the heaven and earth. In 6.50.3 both *dyāvāprthivī* and *rodasī* are *dhiṣaṇe*, - "literally 'two bowls' a frequently occurring expression for heaven and earth". Monier Williams (1979: 516) and MacDonell and Keith (1982: 400) both use 5.69.2 as an example of *dhīṣaṇā* used in the plural to indicate the three worlds - heaven, earth and intersphere.

Hillebrandt also discusses this term in detail (1965: 175 181). He suggests that the word means "earth". In the dual it means the heaven and earth (see above) and in the plural, it denotes the triad; earth, atmosphere and heaven.

Dhiṣaṇā is also a synonym of *Vāk*, the Goddess of Speech (1.22.10); the two worlds (3 56 6); the Goddess presiding over prosperity or the Goddess of speech (5.41.80; 6.11.3; 10.35.7.) Both *camū* and *dhīṣaṇā* also share a similarity with *adhiṣavaṇa* or *adhiṣavaṇa-phalake*, the planks between or over which pressing of the *Soma* tool place (vide: definition of these terms in MacDonnell and Keith – 1982:255 & 400)

In employing the use of these two words, *camū* and *dhīṣaṇā* the cosmology of the *Ṛgveda* uses the simile of a spherical division of the two worlds of heaven and earth as hemispheres. Just as the hemispheres of the earth constitute the globe of the earth, the

hemisphere of the earth forms a bowl and the hemisphere of the heaven is a second inverted bowl forming greater global universe. This simile gets transformed into a simpler and more poetic image of the tortoise representing the two world halves or hemispheres i.e. the shell is one hemisphere, the dome of heaven, and the bottom of the tortoise is the other hemisphere, the flat earth, the only difference being that the second hemisphere becomes reduced from a sphere to a flat expanse. The image of the dome of heaven resting on the flat bottomed earth is the heaven and earth as we see it. The image of the world as a globe in the Vedas becomes, in the Brāhmaṇas and the Purāṇas as, the dome of the heaven and the flat earth as is visible to the naked eye. This is common feature of the transition of the more abstract imagery of the Ṛgveda into a simpler and more visible form in the later texts.

It is also interesting to note that the Atharva Veda Pariśiṣṭa and Varāmiḥira's Bṛhat Samhita use the word kūrma vibhāga to mean a division of globe or semi-globe of the earth. In Varāmiḥira's Yogayātrā the word kūrmaḥga means the globe of the earth (Monier-Williams 1979 : 300).

13. Conclusion•

The foregoing discussion, which admittedly demanded a somewhat tedious formalistic approach, clearly vindicates the belief that the word kapāla meaning a vessel and denoting the shell of the tortoise in the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa, encapsulates in its imagery the heaven and earth as world-bowls. The words camū and *dhiṣaṇā* connote the hemispheres of the heaven and the earth as world bowls; these words are paralleled by *kapāla* of the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa where creation is said to have derived from the waters in the form of a tortoise (*kūrma*), *kapāla*, meaning a vessel, is used to describe the shell of the tortoise; in the *Purāṇas*, *kūrma*, which symbolises the initial form of creation in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* becomes a full blown avatar of Viṣṇu.

Bibliography

- Aurobindo Sri. *On The Veda*. 1964, Sri Aurobindo Ashram.
- Bloomfield, Maurice. *Vedic Concordance*. Delhi. 1964. Motilal Banarsidass.
- Bohtlingk, Otto & Roth, Rudolph, *Sanskrit Worterbuch*, Delhi. 1990. Motilal Banarsidass.
- Dayananda Sarasawati, Swami. *Introduction to the Commentary on the Vedas*. Translated by P T Ghasi Ram. Delhi. 1958. Sarvadeshik Arya Pratinidhi Sabha.
- Eggeling, Julius. *Sacred Books of the East*. 5 Vols on *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 12, 26, 41, 43, 44. Oxford 1899
- Garret, John. *A Classical Dictionary of India*, Graz, Austria. 1971. Akademische Druck-u, Verlagsanstalt.
- Griffith, Ralph T H. *The Hymns of the Ṛgveda*. Delhi. 1973. Motilal Banarsidass.
- Hillebrandt Alfred. *Vedische Mythologie*, 2 vols. 1965. Hildesheim.
- Hillebrandt Alfred. *Vedic Mythology*. Translated into English by S Rajeswara Sarma. Delhi. 1981. Motilal Banarsidass.
- Macdonnel, A A. *Vedic Mythology*. Delhi. 1974. Motilal Banarsidass

- Macdonnel, A A & Keith A B. *Vedic Index of Names & Subjects. Vol 1.* Delhi. 1982. Motilall Banarsidass
- Muller, F Max. *A History of Ancient Sanskrit Literature*, Varanasi. 1968. Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series. Vol 15.
- Rambilass B. *Heavenly Deities of the Ṛgveda*. Meerut. 1992. Unpublished Doctoral Thesis
- Sarup Lakshman. *The Nighaṇṭu and the Nirukta*. Delhi. 1984. Motilall Banarsidass
- Tripathi, Gayacharan. *Vaidik Devatā Udbhav aur Vikās (Hindi)*. Delhi. 1981. Bharatiya Vidya Prakashan.
- Williams, M Monier. *A Sanskrit English Dictionary*. Delhi. 1979, Motilall Banarsidass.