The beast symbol in the Puranic and other religious literature

The Puranic literature is that most important religious literature of India of the post Vedic period. The Puranas have described a number of gods and goddesses.

Many of these gods and goddess are completely new. They are not found in the Vedic literature. The beast symbol plays a significant part in the description of some of these gods and goddesses of the Puranic literature.

Indra is described as the king of gods in the Purana. Indra rides on the “Airāvata” elephant which is the most beautiful elephant in the universe. In ancient days, kings and rich men rode on elephants. They were common elephants, but their bodies were decorated in order to make them look more beautiful. Elephant was a symbol of richness. The “Airāvata Gaja” of Indra which was a splendid beast signified the pomp, dignity and the grateness of Indra. It may be noted here that pearls are prescribed by astrologers when jupiter becomes a mellific planate of a man. Actually the padmarāga gem should be prescribed for counting the ill effect of jupiter but jupiter or Bhāspati is the preceptor of Indra. Pearl is supposed to grow on the head of “Airāvata”. It is on this notion pearl is prescribed by astrologer for jupiter and nothing else. The horse is a symbol of richness. Richman’s horses are decorate with different ornaments to make them look beautiful. Indra’s
"Ucchassrava" is a white beautiful Horse. A second to which, is not found in the whole universe. This horse is also a symbol of richness and greatness of Indra.

Lord Mahādeva or Śiva always rides on a bull. The bull is described as a symbol of Dharma in the Mahābhārata as-

'Vṛṣo hi bhagavān dharmah'.

Mahādeva riding on the bull symbolises that he is the real adhikārin of Dharma or virtue. The bull is always quite. It never disturbs anybody if not provoked. A righteous man also a quite and non harmful person. Mother Goddess Durgā always rides on a lion. In the "Mārkandeya purāṇa", the Lion of Durgā engages itself in a terrible battle with Mahiṣāsura. The Lion is the symbol of Sakti or power. According to Sanskrit poets the lion always overpower of mighty elephants. In the Durgāsaptasati of the "Mārkandeya purāṇa", the buffalo "Mahiṣāsura" is the chief opponent of the lion. Mahiṣāsura is the symbol of the destructive forces in the society. The lion is associated with mother goddess Kāmākhyā also. In the symbol of Kāmākhyā, the lion is none else than Viṣṇu as it has been stated in the Kālikā purāṇa. It holds the "Kubjikāpīṭha" of Kāmākhyā together with Brahmā and Śiva. The deadbody is the symbol of Kāmākhyā represents of Śiva and the red lotus there is the symbol of Brahmā. It may be mention in the context the word hari means Viṣṇu and a lion also.

Yama rides on a buffalo. The buffalo which is apparently an
innocent animal moves slowly but when the buffalo is angry, it becomes a terrific one. It cannot be controlled by shooter. In jungle life the wild buffalo sometimes confront even a lion and creates a serious problem for the lion. In the duel between the two animals, the lion overpowers the buffalo.\(^9\)

*Yama* is the god of death. Death moves slowly. A man with a sound body is gradually occupied by death. Thus the buffalo symbol is highly significant in the symbol of *Yama*. It should be remembered here that in World literature the black camel or the camel also sometimes represents death. It reminds us of the story of camel, which in a cold night gradually entered into the tent and kicked out its owner.

*Kāmadeva* or Lord Cupid is described as “*Makaraddhaja*” or “*Makaraketana*”. He always ride on a makara. The makara is a symbol of sexhunger. It is apparently for the season makara is selected as the vehicle of *Kāmadeva*.

Godess *Śitalā* always moves on an ass. *Śitalā* is thought to be cause of the disease known as smallpox. The ass is a nasty animal. An ass and a dog are always treated as a impure animals in Sanskrit literature. The ass carries the dirty garments of washermen. It is naturally thought to the carrier of germs also It is probably for such reasons, the ass is described as the vehicle of *Śitalā*\(^10\).

According to Sanskrit religious literature, Agni or the Fire-god always rides on a goat\(^11\). It has been describes as “*ajadhara*” in the
Now, the goat is a greedy animal. It eats all kinds of plants and leaves including some poisonous plants. Agni also destroys everything by means of its limping flames. Agni does not spare anything. It is for this reason the goat is rightly selected as the vehicle of Agni.

Lord Ganeśa is worshipped first among all gods in any religious worship. The god's vehicle is a rat. Ganeśa was probably regarded as the lord of agriculture in the beginning. Rats remain constantly associated with agriculture. It is probably for this reason Hindu worshippers have selected the rat as its vehicle. Similar is the case of Lakshmi whose vehicle is an owl which destroys rats, the chief enemy of agriculture.

Indian astrology has recognised nine planets including the sun. The sun is, however, not a planet but a star. According to a stotra of the sun-god, the god moves in a chariot driven by seven horses (saptaghoṭakavāhana). These seven symbolical horses represent the seven colours of the vibgyor.

Three famous Indian rivers of India viz, the Gaṅga, The Yamuna and the Brahmaputra also appear as the riders of three distinct animals. Gaṅgā rides on the vehicle of a crocodile, Yamunā rides on a tortoise and Brahmaputra rides on a porpoise. There are some distinct reasons for this. There were many crocodile in the Gaṅgā at one time. There are many tortoise even today in the Yamunā river. Brahmaputra is best known as the habitat of Gangetic porpoise. The population has now decreased due to erratic
poaching. It is for these reasons the vehicles of the rivers have been chosen accordingly.

The symbol of the (demon) Mahiṣa and the lion of the goddess Durgā carry some philosophical meaning in the Durgāsaptasati (or Candi) of the Markandeya purāṇa. There is a fight between Mahiṣa and the lion for a short while. Mahiṣa assumes the form of an elephant and attacks the lion. The lion represents the power of Mother Durgā. It is a power of the good which tries to save the world from destruction. Mahiṣa, on the other hand is a symbol of the evil force, the force of war and destruction.

The elephant caught hold of by a crocodile in the famous story of the Bhāgavata purāṇa also are two distinct beast symbols in the purāṇa. The elephant enjoyed its life to the full, but never meditated upon Visnu, the Supreme Being, and the cause of salvation. The elephant gained a robust body and enough physical strength. The elephant represents a man with a purely materialist out which cannot save him from worldly ties and impart deliverance. When one day the elephant entered into a lake, it was suddenly caught by a crocodile. The crocodile in this puranic story is a symbolical crocodile which represents sex-hunger, greed, violence and anger, which are the legacy of living a purely materialistic life. These passions resulting from materialism cannot save a man from worldly ties and give him salvation, for which the meditation upon Visnu, and the grace of the Lord are essentially required.
Sometimes, some beast symbols in *purāṇa* possess a satirical sense. It has been said in a story of the *Śivapurāṇa* that sage Nārada completely controlled Cupid, the god of Love, and boasted of his success before Viṣṇu\(^{20}\). But after sometime, Nārada desired to marry a beautiful princess. His face was reduced to that of a monkey by the desire of Viṣṇu. The princess thought Nārada to be a new creature occupying a seal in the *svayamvara* assembly, and rejected him and married Viṣṇu. The entire *svayamvara* affair was unreal. It was the maya of Viṣṇu. The monkey symbol used by the author in this context is a satirical affair which mocks at sage Nārada who boasted of conquering Cupid. Dakṣa Prajāpati carrying the head of a goat in the puranic legend also contains a similar satire\(^{21}\). Dakṣa unduly rebuked Śiva and met the punishment. His head was severed and the head of a goat was fixed on his body to complete the sacrifice. In our society we have often rebuke a man as a goat for talking in a senseless and irresponsible manner. Dakṣa also criticised and condemned Śiva for no fault of the great god. The puranic author, therefore, reduces Dakṣa to a creature with a goat’s head which possesses a bit of sarcasm.

The beast symbol plays an important part in animal sacrifices also. This has been clearly observed in the *Kālikāpurāṇa*. It has been said in this *Purāṇa* that animals like the rhino, the sarabha and kṛṣnasara (antelope) are sacrificed before goddess Kāmākhyā\(^{22}\). The rhino is called khadga in Sanskrit literature. Another meaning of “*khadga*” is a sword.
Kalikāpurāṇa describes that a rhino is sacrificed before the goddess with the aim that it will destroy all intruders like a sword destroying the enemies. Thus, there is a symbolical meaning of the “khadga” (rhino) in the particular context.

Kṛṣnasāra or the antelope is the representative of Brāhmaṇ. It increases the Brahmnical power. It is for this reason a kṣatriya cannot sacrifice an antelope.

A sarabha is an eight-footed animal which is non-existent present. The sarabha symbolises Lord siva who killed Yañjyavarāha by assuming thus form. It is for this reason, a sarabha is sacrificed in the worship of Kāmākhya with the aim of destroying the worshipper’s enemies through this religious act.

Reference note:
1. “mataḥ kimairāṇavatukumbhakaitavapragalbhapānastanadigdhavastava”
   v.52,Nc, 6th canto, p.426
2. “vṛṣo hi bhagavīn dharmo yastasya kurute hyalaṁ.
   vṛṣalāṁ tain vidurdevēstamāṅdharmanī vivardhayet.”
   v.16, Mb., Śānti Parvan, Chapt.-90, p.4654
3. “mumocāsurateheṣu śāśvāṇyastraṁi ceśvarī.”
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soap kṛdho gutasaṭo devyā vāhanakesari:"

(Sloka no-51) Mārkandeya purāṇa, chapt.-II, Collected from Śridurgāsaptaśati, p.80, Chapt.-II

4. "tataḥ śīṁhaḥ samutpatya gajakumbhāntare sthitaḥ
bāhuyuddhena yuyudhe tenoccaistṛiśāriṇā."

v.14, Śridurgāsaptaśati, Chapt.-III, p.90

5. avaṁ saviṁs īyamāne tu svasainye mahiṣāsuraḥ.
mahiṣeṇa svarupeṇa trāsayāṁśa tāṁ ganāṁ.

v.21, Śridurgāsaptaśati, Chapt.-III, p.92

6. "tvam hariḥ sīṁharupeṇa jagatpratyuharūpinam.
jaghāṇa yena satyena hiranyakaśipuṁ haran.

Kp. Chapt.-67, p.496

7. "kāmesvāri vidmahe tvāṁ kāṁkhyāyai ca dhīmahi.
tanna kubji mahāṁyē tataḥ paścāt pracodayat".

v.73, Kp. Chapt.-64, p.477

8. "sitaprato mahādeo brahma-lohitapaṅkajanāṁ.
Harirharistu vijñeyo vāhanāṁ mahaijasāḥ".

v.66, Kp. Chapt.-58, p.421

9. "Om vaivasvataṁ mahākāyaṁ daṇḍapāsakaradvayāṁ.
pingordhvakesaṁ dhyāyecca mahiṣopari samsthitāṁ.

PD. p.690

10. "om namāmi śītalāṁ deviṁ rāsabsthāṁ digamvar īṁ
mārjan īkālasopetām surpānamakṛtamastakāṁ.”

Scandapurāṇa, Collected from PD. p.731

11. “Om pingabhṛuṣmaśrukeśakṣāḥ pinaṁgajatharoharunāḥ. chagasthaḥ saksasutroagni saptarccih Śaktidharakaḥ.

Ibid, p.201

again-

“Om agnirvibhāvasurbahnirhabyabhokūdhanjayaḥ. vaisvānaro jātavedaḥ citragurmēṣavāhanāḥ.”

Stav kavac mālā, p.502

12. “devaḥ patirvidusi! naiṣa dharājagatyā nirniyate na kimu na vryate bhavatya

nayaṁ nalaḥ khalu tavatimahanalabho yaddyenamujjasi varah katarah paraste”

According to comm.(Bahnipakse-)dharatīti dharo vahanam sa casavajasca mesah, dhara iva pavatatulyo va yo mesastena kṛtvā ya gatiḥ dharayaṁ bhumau ajena kṛtva yagatistyopalaksitah.

pakadikaranadvara tailokyaraksyanat patiḥ, devo dyutimanamarasca vahnih na niscayata iti na, api tu nisciyata iva”. Ne. canto-13, v.34 pp.554-555


lambodaraṁ caturbāhuṁ vyālajñō pavītinaṁ. Śurpakarṇaṁ vṛhacchunḍamekadaṁṭraṁ ṁrthudaraṁ.”
svadantaṁ daksinakare utpalanca tathāpare.
modakaṁ paraśuncaiva vāsataḥ parikalpayet.
vrhatvāt kṣiptavadanaṁ pīnaskndhamghri pānicaṁ.
yuktanaṁ ṛddhibuddhibhyāsacastāṁ muṣikānvitam.”
PD. p.784.
tapanaḥ pāpnaścāiva sūcīḥ saptāśvāvāhanaḥ.”
Ibid. pp. 700-701.
Again-
“losākṣi trilokeśaḥ kurttā hutttā tamisrahā.
tapanastāpanaścāiva sūcīḥ saptāśvāvāhanaḥ.”
Ibid., p.699
yatralapattamidamali! yanam manye tvadekvalinakanadyaḥ”
v.69 Canto no-VI, Ns p.70
16. “ōṁ lauhaṁ raktāgaurāṁgam nīlavastrabhisūtim
ratnamālāsamāyuktaṁ caturbāhusamnvitam.
pustakam śvetapadmaṁca vidhiṁtām daksīne kare
vāme śaktidharanāṁcaiva śīśumārāśiraḥ sthitam.”
PD. p.1156.
17. Sri Madbhāgavatam Mahāpurāṇam, Aṣṭamaskanda, Chapt-2,3,4;
pp.13,26,43
18. "tāṁ tatra kaścinṛpaivaṁ padaivacodito
gṛāho vatiyāṁscaraṇe ruṣāgraḥīt.
yadṛcchyaivaṁ byasanaṁ gato gajo
yathāvalaṁ心动o vicitvata vicitvata.

v.26, Sri Madhāgavatāṁ Mahāpurāṇaṁ, Aṣṭamaskanda, Chapt.-2, p.22.

19. "tāṁ vikṣya pūjitamajaḥ sahasāvatīrya
sa gṛāhamāṣu sarasah kṛpayojjahāra.
gṛāhādvipājitamukhaṁ kṛśnagajendraṁ
saṁpuṣyataṁ hariṁmucaducchriṇāṁ.


20. Śaṅkṣhipta Śivapurāṇa, pp. 90-96

21. Ibid., Chapt-42, pp. 218-220

mahiso bodhika gavacchago rurusca sukaraḥ".(Sloka no-3)

"Khadgasca kṛśnasarasca godhika sarabho hariḥ.
sardulasca nascaiva svamatrarudhiram tatha".(Sloka no-4)

Kp, Chapt. -67, p.492

23. "Kṛśnasāra brahmamurte brahtejovivardhana"

Ibid, Chapt-67, p.496

24. Ibid, Chapt-67

25. Ibid, Chapt-67