

CHAPTER-II

THE ORIGIN OF THE GARUḌA MYTH

We get ample references of Garuḍa in the Purāṇas as well as the great epics. But whatever is stated in the Purāṇas and the great epics, which are otherwise known as itihāsa, are basically found in the Vedas itself. Thus it is said *itihāsa-purāṇābhyāṃ vedāṃ samupavṛṇhayet*. Thus whatever is elaborately stated in the Purāṇa and the Itihāsa, may be expected to be traced back to the Vedas. In the present case the whole concept of Garuḍa can be traced back to *Rgveda*, the Sun God is referred to as Garutmān.¹ As found in the *Amarakoṣa*, Garutmān is also just another name of Garuḍa.² Thus Sun and Garuḍa are identical. Garuḍa is described as the vehicle of Viṣṇu, and Viṣṇu is identical with Sun God Sūrya. Explaining the symbolism of the weapons and vehicles etc. of the deity, Yāska says that attributes like weapons, vehicles, etc. belonging to any deity are actually identical with the deity itself.³ Even an ancient

¹ *Rgveda* – 1.164.46

² *Amarakoṣa* – 1/20, page-23

³ *Nirukta* - 7/4

authority like Yāska could realize that a myth is a symbolic representation of a factual object or situation. Garuḍa is called the king of birds with the head and wings of eagle and sometimes with the rest of the body like that of a man and he is the carrier of God Viṣṇu.

Numerous mythological stories in *Mahābhārata* and other Purāṇas are found about Garuḍa. In the *mantra* 1.164.46 which has already been referred above, Garuḍa is also mentioned as Suparṇa, as one having beautiful wings. The hymn runs as follows –

*indram̐ mitram̐ varunamagni.māhuratho divyaḥ sa suparṇo garutmān
ekam̐ sadviprā vahudhā vadantyaagniṁ yamaṁ mātarisvānamāhuḥ||*

Meaning thereby that – they call him Indra, Mitra, Varuṇa, Agni and he is heavenly nobly-winged Garutmān to what is one, sages give many a title. They call it Agni, Yama, Mātarisvān.

Hence, there is every possibility that we can trace out the seed of the concept of Garuḍa in the Vedas itself. In the present chapter it is proposed to find out if there is any reference of Garuḍa in the vedic literature. *Atharvaveda* speaks of Suparṇa Garutmān with reference to the antidotes of poison.

Cf: *suparṇastvānvavindat sukarastvākhanannasā |*

prāśam̐ pratipāśo jahyarasān kṛṇvośadhe ||⁴

Abundant mention of Garuḍa is found in Purāṇic literature and *Garuḍa Purāṇa* is full with the details of the deity.

In another place Garuḍa is referred to with the name Śyena, where this mighty bird is said to have brought nectar to earth from heaven.

Cf: *pra su ṣa vibhyo maruto virastu pra śyenaḥ śyenebhya āśupatvā |*

acakrayā yat svadhayā suparṇo havyam̐ bharanmanave devajuṣṭam̐||

bharadyadi virato vevijānaḥ pathoruṇā manojavā asarji |

tūyam̐ yayau madhunā somyenata śrāvo vivide śyeno atra ||

rjīpī śyeno dadamāno aṁśum̐ parāvataḥ śukano mandram̐ madam̐ |

somam̐ bharaddādhāṇo devāvāndivo amuṣmāduttarādādāya ||⁵

According to Dr. J. N. Banerjee, the Brahmanical character of the symbols are found on punch-marked, tribal and local coinages. According to him, the wheel symbols and its numerous variants represent Śūrya, the Sun God. These symbols prolonged to be used till the

⁴ *Atharvaveda*, 2.5.2

⁵ *Rgveda* – 4.26.4-6

anthromorphic representation of the Sun God. Garuḍa symbol is associated with Viṣṇu.⁶

From Mohenjodaro, an interesting seal impression on a round tablet, having the depiction of an orb with flames shooting forth from it is found. The increasing moon resembling half-risen morning Sun appears on the pottery of Amri, a sherd of Harappa and also on post Harappan potteries from Navadatoli, Navasa and Lothal. On the potteries of Mohenjodaro, a lotus – like design is also found.⁷

In later Hinduism the lotus was a regular cult-symbol of the Sun-God. According to Vedic literature the Sun-God is Garuḍa, the mount of Viṣṇu. The Sun in disc-form appears on the potteries discovered at Kalibangan, Amri, Kulli, Jhukar, Lothal and Navadatoli. The spoked wheel, which later on represented the chariot of the Sun-God, is described on the potteries of Mahenjodaro.⁸

It has been proposed by some that unicorn bull found abundantly on the *Indus Seal*, might have been a symbol of the Sun-God. Significantly, it is to note that the bull symbol is found in association

⁶ *Coins and Icons, a study of the myths*, pp.26-27

⁷ *Ibid*, p.30

⁸ *Ibid*, Ch. Religious Symbolism, p.30

with the Sun disc. Viṣṇu, the Sun-God of the Vedic mythology is called “*ekaśṛṅga*” i.e. one horned and the unicorn of the Indus Seal practically reminds us of this attribute of the Sun-God.⁹ On the Indus Seals and potteries there are descriptions of the Eagle or the falcon which may be thought as the fore-runner, the Sun-bird Garuḍa of later times. There is a symbol consisting of conventional description of the Sun with a flag (*dhvaja*) fixed in a triangular or a circular vase may be seen on an Indus Seal.

A study of the primitive tribes comes to a belief that the worship of the Sun-God is taken to be significant in tracing the origin of the solar symbol. The primitive tribes are to be divided into classes viz., the Kolarians and the Dravidians. In the Kol pantheon the Sun and the moon were the great father and mother deities.¹⁰

In the pre-Aryan and pre-Vedic society the Sun is worshipped with devotion by the primitive tribes. It is found from the archaeological evidence the description of the solar symbol. From the archaeological evidence drawn from the Neolithic potteries and paintings as well as

⁹ *Ibid*, Ch. Religious Symbolism, p.31

¹⁰ *Ibid*, Ch. Religious Symbolism, p.31

chalcolithic seals and potteries with the description of the solar symbol as the disc, orb with rays, the wheel, the *swastika* and the lotus, it is seen that the worship of the Sun is animistic and fetishistic. It is mostly inferred that the idea of Garuḍa is found behind the Sun-God, the solar symbol.¹¹

Regarding the deities we find different animals were recognized as the '*vāhana*' or vehicles in the historic period. For instance, the bull was the '*vāhana*' of Śiva, the lion of Goddess Durgā, Garuḍa of Viṣṇu etc.

The animal motifs were used as symbols of religious beliefs. Various bird symbols are found to be associated with different Gods and Goddesses. But the human bird Garuḍa is found to be the '*vāhana* of God Viṣṇu'. The bird Garuḍa is identified with the Sun traversing the space and is held to be arch-enemy of the serpents. In Indian mythology, the peacock is also considered as the Sun bird and is depicted in the epic as the eater of snakes. Among the findings of Mohenjodaro and other Indus valley sites, the worship of the peacock is found among the *Dravidians* and *Kolarians*.¹²

¹¹ *Ibid*, pp.30-31

¹² *Ibid*, pp.46-47

Most probably a coin of the Vriṣṇi-Rājanya-Gaṇa of the 1st century B.C. shows on the obverse a pillar on the top by an animal, suggested to be half-lion and half-elephant which seems to be really an immature representation of Garuḍa and a Cakra on the reverse.¹³

A wheel is seen on the copper coin attributed to king Achyuta of the 4th century A.D., on which the varied representations on early Indian coinage may symbolize the Sun-God. Originally, Viṣṇu, of course was recorded as an experience of the solar energy covering the universe. In the *Atharvaveda* also Viṣṇu is asked to bestow heat.

Cf: *viṣṇuryunaktu vahudhā tapāṅsyaṣmin yajñe suyujah svāhā ||*¹⁴

In the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* Viṣṇu's cut-off head becomes the Sun.¹⁵

“The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* says that when Viṣṇu attained the pre-eminent position among the gods, the other gods became envious of him and through machinations managed to have his head cut off. Soon,

¹³ *Development of Hindu Iconography*, page-132,

¹⁴ *Atharvaveda*, v.26.7

¹⁵ *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*-XIV.II.

however, they became alarmed at the loss of Viṣṇu and desired to have him, restored to them.” (*Elements of Hindu Iconography*, Page-75)

In post-Vedic literature Lord Viṣṇu’s weapon is a rolling wheel, his vehicle Garuḍa, the Sun-bird and the breast-jewel which he wears is clearly the Sun.¹⁶

The traditional religious beliefs of the people from pre-historic times are very important and it is difficult to leave the idea of animal motifs.

It is noted that due to the excessive influence of the religion of the Vedic Aryans the idea of anthropomorphism was subdued. But it received a great impulse on the rise and development of theistic cults. It has been observed by some that the practice of image worship was the result of the adoration of Buddha by his followers.¹⁷ Due to the emphasis of the sacrificial rites and rituals of by the Vedic Aryans, the growth of anthropomorphism was not allowed in the religious life of the people.

It will be discussed about the birth story of Garuḍa, in different Purāṇas and in the great epic *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata* etc. The

¹⁶ A.B. Keith, *the religion and philosophy of the Veda and Upaniṣads*, p-109.

¹⁷ *Coins and icons*, Ch-Numismatics and iconography, pp.274-275

earliest reference of the Garuḍa myth comes from the *R̥gveda*, already mentioned. Now we have studied about the origin of Garuḍa myth in iconographic and sculptural representation based on historical background.

It is found that around the first century A.D. the sailors and traders came from Southern India to the shores of fertile islands looking for rice and riches, with their goods and techniques, they brought also their literature.

In this literature there were the stories of the origin of Garuḍa among them. Soon the people made the stories of their own in a Sanskrit derived language called Kawi. Probably, it is in the earliest text of this literature, the *Ādiparwa* (10th Century A.D), that the story of the mighty Garuḍa bird is found.¹⁸

In the beginning of the creation of the world, when the gods had fought with the giants for the control of the holy water of life, *amṛta* ; at that time Garuḍa came into existence.

In the Hindu Javanese period Garuḍa is found as popular as his rider Viṣṇu. Everywhere the theme of Garuḍa is represented. Garuḍa

¹⁸ <http://goarchi.com/archo/mag/garuda.html>

battle array, Garuda beak shaped arrows, Garuda banners, Garuda motifs of sculpture and Garuda shaped elements of costumes and puppets.¹⁹

Garuda of dramatic performance is ranked first which performs alongside the myths of Indo-Javanese epics. There is a related Garuda iconography, the Garuda Mungkur motif of headdresses, the Garuda wing motif on batik, etc.

Then we have to discuss Garuda in modern times. How much *importance of Garuda in modern times ? In modern Indonesia Garuda is the official emblem of the Indonesian state. So it is embedded in the coat of arms containing the principles of the state, the Pañca Śila, and its motto (Bhinneka Tunggal Ika).*

When Islamisation came he gradually lost his godly quality while *relating his function of guardian of a still sacred power. After independence (1945) he has become both the emblem and the instrument of cohesion and power of a modern nation.*²⁰

Now, we have found that the origin of Garuda myth with variation in modern times comes to our knowledge that besides the traditional

¹⁹ *Ibid*

²⁰ *Ibid*

concept of *amṛta*, there is a sense of religious immortality. Indonesia is a non-secular state. So it is hoped that immortality in the political sense. Indonesia has to survive through history.

In the old-Javanese tradition, Garuḍa is the carrier of the elixir of immortality. Now in modern representation, Garuḍa carries in his claws a sentence which reads – “*Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*”, the official translation is – “*Unity in Diversity*”. This is meant for national unity.²¹

In all deeds we may come to a conclusion that the celestial bird Garuḍa which is like half-man, half-bird, the representation of Garuḍa is suggested for strength and power. National strength and stability, which are symbolized by Garuḍa being immortal, and by the elixir of life carried by Garuḍa depend on tolerance particularly in ethic and religious tolerance. Tolerance depends on the strength of Garuḍa as the vehicle of political power, i.e. the government, Garuḍa carrying Viṣṇu. It is also to be noted that Garuḍa is philosophically a symbol of wisdom. Garuḍa is as powerful as Fire God and Garuḍa represents the Sun-God.

²¹ *Ibid*