

CHAPTER-IV

SURVEY OF RELATED MYTH

It is most interesting that a myth generally does not stand in isolation. Many parallel myths are created for describing the functions of a mythical object or creature. Now, we have to discuss here about Garuḍa myth. In Hindu mythology, Garuḍa is a lesser Hindu divinity usually the mount (*vāhana*) of Viṣṇu. After a meticulous investigation we have to add to the mythical bird, garutmat Suparṇa, the lord of the feathered race, the fire-bird. Garutmat or Gurutmān was the original form of the mythical bird Garuḍa, the *vāhana* of Viṣṇu. But primarily garutmat was not a bird but on the other hand, was the Sun himself. He is compared with a flying eagle and sometimes seems to be directly called an eagle.¹ Dikshit points out that both in the *R̥gveda* and *Atharvaveda* and in later literature, the appellations of the Sun are *Pataṅga* (bird) *Haṁsa* (goose), *Suparṇa*, *Suparṇa Garutmān*, *Śyena* (Falcon) and *Tārksya*.²

¹ *The Vedic Mythology*, Macdonell A.A., Page-31

² *The Mother Goddess*, Dikshit S.K., Page-92

It is supposed that the identity of Sun with Garuḍa is obviously a reflection of the eternal enmity of the said bird and serpent. It is also found that in primitive ages, the people of the tropical regions were very much exposed to the danger of snakes, which are generally frequent at night and remain concealed when the Sun rises. Eagle was also identified as *Sun-bird, the devourer of snakes, gave origin to Garuḍa from Garutmat (the sun), the half-giant and half-eagle, the enemy of snakes.*³

The non-Aryan element which probably immigrated from the Western Asiatic countries seems to have played an important role in the transformation of Garutmān to Garuḍa. Both the Zu, the storm demon and the *Etana, the eagle demon and slayer of serpents, of Sumer* have much similarity with Garuḍa.⁴ In the mythology of Sumeria culture and Assyria culture the eagle received much prominence as the sun-bird which is supposed to be the cause in moulding Garutmat to Garuḍa.⁵ The eagle can traverse the heavens flying so high that it almost appears close to the sun and so we can come to a conclusion that in ancient world the

³ *Animal motifs in Ancient Indian Art*, Page-97

⁴ *Myths of Babylonia and Assyria* by D.A. Mackenzie, Page- 74-75

⁵ *Animal motifs in Indian Art*, Ch-VIII, the evolution of the symbol of bird, page-97

identification of eagle was to be a sun-bird.⁶ The sun can speedily traverse the sky like a brilliant celestial bird. So it seems that the eagle is an apt symbol of the sun, the heavenly bird and of the ascending spiritual principle. In the myths this bird seems to be the enemy of snakes and they are like antithetical forces.

In Babylonian mythology, it is believed that the giant eagle lived on a big tree, fighting with a huge snake living at its bottom. In various

⁶ The Eagle's appearance as a symbol probably occurs first in the East in Sumeria. Since it was a symbol of the Sun-King, it became a royal insignia, signifying authority and power, in several countries, "from Siberia to South America, from Iceland to Mesopotamia". The Greeks assigned it to the most powerful of their Gods, as a sign of their omniscience and omnipotence. It was the vehicle of contact between the earth and Olympus. The Romans adopted it as military symbol. When Rome was later subdued by oriental culture, the military eagle merged with the religious eagle of the Eastern world. "With the advance of the Sun religion which for a short period under Aurelian even became the state religion of the Roman empire and the elevation of the Emperors to the 'Sun-gods'. The eagle became the symbol of the Emperor from then on was not to be separated from the idea of Imperial Roman Authority. Under the successors of the Roman Empire, with Charlemagne and the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire it was passed on to various Estates" Otto Von Simon, *Man through his Art – Man and Animal* (London, 1965) PP 42-44.

lands the mythology of the bird varies to some extent. In Old Persian myth the conflict is between the bird *Śyena* and the monster lizard. According to German legends, Odin was an eagle and lived on a world-tree known as Ygdrasil who fought with a dragon.⁷ The Simurgh and the Dragon motif that is typical of the Persian carpet designs is a derivation from this ancient pair of opposites.⁸ The eagle has been considered as a symbol of the Sun by the Aztec myths while the Jaguar represents the power of darkness. In Indian legends, the Garuḍa and the Nāga are the offsprings of Kaśyapa, born of his co-wives, Vinatā and Kadrū. They are born enemies in the biological sense. Garuḍa represents the solar energy and Nāga is water and their enmity is ceaseless and unending. Garuḍa is identical with Sun and it is also supposed to be identical with Agni, and water may be taken as the opponent of Agni. So, Garuḍa and Nāga are the solar energy and water respectively. H. Zimmer comments : “Heaven and earth, the sovereign spirit and the tenacious, vigorous life-force, are opposed Principles and their opposition is symbolized in the dualism of the eagle and the snake. The former typifies the immortality of the spiritual principle, freed from the bondage of the earth, flying into the

⁷ *Animals in Indian Sculpture*, Page-52

⁸ Camman Schyuler, “*Ancient Symbols in Modern Afghanistan*”, *Ars Orientalis*, Vol-II (Smithsonian, 1957), P-9.

stainless and translucent ether, to enter a timeless sphere of divine, eternal being beyond the stars, while the latter is an animal that is supposed to be particularly tenacious of life”.⁹

The *R̥gveda* refers to the Sun as the celestial bird Garutmān. Garutmān is also Suparna (strong-winged). The term Garuḍa is derived from Garutmān and it is a celestial bird, the Sun. The shape of the vedic altars are like Garuḍa, probably this bird could soar upto heaven and it is supposed to mean that one who performs a sacrifice, he gains much merit and could soar up to heaven, like Garuḍa, the celestial bird with great strength and it is hoped that the ‘performer of the sacrifice is to fly up it having much merit.’¹⁰ In ancient world this view appears to have wide present in its course.

Sūrya, the Sun god merged into Viṣṇu. At proper time Garuḍa becomes His *vāhana*. As the mount of Viṣṇu and the elaboration of Viṣṇu myth, Garuḍa assumed the status of an *avatāra* under the name of *vihaṅgama* and *pīyūṣaharaṇa*.¹¹ Though Garuḍa is half-man, half-bird,

⁹ H. Gimmer, *the Art of Indian Asia*, Vol-I, New York, P-51-1955

¹⁰ A.K. Mitra, “*Garuḍa the carrier of Viṣṇu in Beṅgal and Jāvā*”, Rupaṅ, Vol-I, Calcutta, 1920, PP-2-7

¹¹ J.N. Banerjee, *the development of Hindu Iconography* (Calcutta, 1956), P-529

he can fly up to heaven and so he is *vihāṅgama* and the other name *pīyūṣaharaṇa* is because he had brought nectar from heaven to rescue his enslaved mother Vinatā from Kadrū, his step mother. From many heroic deeds of Garuḍa, his role as a seizer of *amṛta* (elixir that confers immortality) from Indra's city, is well known. This has already been discussed in the previous chapter.

Garuḍa's skill as the bearer of *soma* from Indra¹² reminds us about one of the Babylonia legend of the eagle carrying Etana to Ishtar to obtain the plant of rebirth.¹³

It is interesting to note that though the enmity between Garuḍa and the Nāga is apparent, in the presence of Viṣṇu they work as complimentary forces and their conflict is also resolved. Lord Viṣṇu himself is Ananta, the great cosmic serpent as well as Garuḍa, the Supernal Sun. Lord Viṣṇu rests on the endless coils of the world-serpent, riding on Garuḍa. The re-union and fixed determination of the conflict evidenced in the Garuḍa figures adored with snake hoods, the hoods are sometimes spread over Garuḍa's head like a crown or serpent coils round the neck. In the cylinder seals of the Sumerian preliterate period (3500 –

¹² *Animals in Indian Sculpture*, Page-51

¹³ S.S. Hooke, *Middle Eastern Mythology* (Pelican, 1963), P-60

3000 B.C.) an eagle with outspread wings and another with a lion head is found. The deity of rain and fertility is symbolized here. The lion-headed eagle was represented as holding two stags in its talons. In Sarmatian art, the eagle is the symbol of the thunderbolt¹⁴ and it emphasizes the symbol of the thunderbolt.

In the goblet of king Gudea of Lagash (2600 B.C.) a representation of the Sun-bird occurs with the face of a lion and the talons of an eagle. It is a winged creature and thus it is a combination of the Solar bird and Solar lion.¹⁵

In a seal referred by Piggot from the Nal Cemetery (3000 – 2500 B.C.) we find the figure of a vulture with its foot on a snake.¹⁶ Often it is found that vulture features are present in Garuda figures.¹⁷ On the Sanchi east gateway (inner side) earliest representation of Garuda is found as

¹⁴ J.E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols* (London, 1962), P-87

¹⁵ *Sacrificial Goblet Sumer, 2600 B.C.*, After H. Gimmer.

¹⁶ S. Piggot, *Prehistoric India* (Penguin, 1950), P-91

¹⁷ So many are the forms in which it is depicted, A Donald Mackenzie points out, “in a local natural form or as a ‘composite wonder beast’, or wonder man’. Sometimes it resembles the Eagle, sometimes the hawk, or falcon, or even the vulture.”

one amongst a large congregation of animals, present around the Bodhi tree. It signifies the attendance and worship of the Buddha in the wilderness. It has a parrot beak and human ears, adorned with earrings and a snake hood on its head. At Mathurā, the later Garuḍa of Kankāli Tilā is essentially the same but with a slightly more humanized head and engaged in the act of devouring a three-headed snake which has coiled around it. It has the legs and paws of a lion.¹⁸

Representation of Garuḍa, the Sun bird, in different mythologies such as, Christian, Egyptian, Thai art, Chinese, Japanese etc. vary to some extent. But in almost all mythologies it is described as Sun-bird or like an eagle. We will now try to investigate what Garuḍa is like in different mythologies.

In ancient Egypt and in classical antiquity phoenix is a fabulous bird associated with the worship of the Sun. The Egyptian phoenix was said to be as large as an eagle. With brilliant scarlet and gold plumage and a melodious cry, phoenix existed at any time, was very long-lived. Ancient authority gave it a life-span of less than 500 years. When its ends come the phoenix prepared a nest of aromatic boughs and species and set it on fire, and was consumed in the flames. It is seen that from

¹⁸ *Animals in Indian Sculpture*, Page-52

the pyre miraculously sprang a new phoenix, which embalms its father's ashes in an egg of myrrh, and flew with the ashes to Heliopolis (The city of the Sun). It is to be noted that in Egypt where the new phoenix deposited the ashes on the altar in the temple of the Egyptian god of the Sun, RE. A variant of the story made the dying phoenix fly to Heliopolis and immolate itself in the altar fire from which the young phoenix then rose.

It is found that the Egyptians associated the phoenix with immortality and that symbolism had a wide-spread appeal in late antiquity.¹⁹

In Rome, the phoenix was compared with undying thought and it appears on the coinage of the late Roman Empire as a symbol of the eternal city.

In Christianity also it is found that as an Allegory of Resurrection and life after death the phoenix was selected as rising again from the grave and imperishable.²⁰ We have to keep confidence in the process of rising again from the grave, as Christ himself showed the character of phoenix : "I have power to lay down life and to take it up again." We can

¹⁹ Merriam – Webster's *Encyclopaedia of World Religion*, Page-855

²⁰ *Ibid*

take Christ life as an example and one can live a similar learning of life to grow young again.

In Islamic mythology the phoenix was identified with the 'anqa' and it is the Sun-bird.²¹

In Persian mythology it is Simorgh, a huge mysterious bird probably a heron and it is thought that – it was created by God with all perfections but had thereafter become a plaque and was killed.

In Chinese mythology, phoenix, the Sun bird is named as Feng-Huang-Pinyin Fenghuang and it is a creature whose rare appearance is said to indicate some great event or bear testimony to the greatness of the ruler. The tradition which recounts an appearance of the Feng-Huang before the death of the legendary yellow Emperor (Huang-ti) who ruled China in the 27th century B.C. The latest appearance of it is said to have taken place at Annwei Province at the grave of the father of Huang-Wu, founder of Mingh dynasty in 1368. Also it is said that the song of the phoenix is exceptionally beautiful and meaningful and that the animal has a special appreciation of human music.

The Shuo-Wen dictionary (1st & 2nd century A.D.) describes the bird as having the breast of a goose, the hindquarters of a stag, the neck

²¹ *Ibid*

of a snake, the tail of a fish, the forehead of a fowl, the down of a duck, the marks of a dragon, the back of a tortoise, the face of a swallow and beak of a cock. In systematized mythology, the phoenix, the Sun-bird is the female counterpart of the male dragon.²²

In Buddhist pantheon it was adopted as a protector deity. In Japan, *Garuḍa* is named as *Karura* an enormous fire – breathing eagle with golden feathers and magic gems crowning its head.²³

In Indian mythology *Garuḍa* is depicted anthropomorphically with wings and hawk like feathers. Especially in South Indian temples to Viṣṇu, *Garuḍa* may often be seen resting a top pillar that faces the *sanctum*. *Garuḍa* travelled with the spread of Hinduism to Nepal and to South East Asia where he is frequently depicted on monuments. He is also associated with royalty in several South-East Asian countries.²⁴

One *mūrti* of *Garuḍa* is there carrying Viṣṇu and Laxmī, South Indian Bronze image, 18th century in the Guimet Museum, Paris. (Cliché Musces Nationalise, Paris).²⁵

²² *The New Encyclopedia Britannica*, Vol.4, Page-725

²³ <http://www.crystalinks.com/phaenix.html>

²⁴ *Marriam's Webster's Encyclopaedia of Word Religion*, Page-367

²⁵ *Ibid*

Garuḍa may be thought by the scholars as the early origin of the Sun-deity.²⁶

According to South Indian legend, an ardent devotee of Viṣṇu was a sculptor. He curved a Garuḍa image out of wood in Kāñchīpuram̃. After completion, having been correctly curved as determined by the shilpa sastras, it came to life and went out to the south. It is also narrated that at Parakkai village, in front of the temple, Garuḍa took bath and exclaimed with delight. Around the deity he hovered as if doing Pradakṣiṇa.

Then an artisan saw the bird, who was working on a pillar of the temple and due to some reason he threw his chisel with violence at it and hunt his right wing. Then the bird fell to earth crying “Madhusūdana”, to the disbelief of the man. On the spot, the four-armed stone image of Viṣṇu was later curved. In the Kālacakra tradition Garuḍa bears the speech cakra. Ch-Khyung (bird Garuḍa) was a mountain deity of Rebkong, Tibet, and area on the west side of the river in Amdo Province. He became a worldly protector being controlled by Padmasambhava.

It is found that in Indonesia, around the first century A.D., when sailors and traders from southern India first came to the shores of the

²⁶ *Ibid*

fertile islands for their rice and riches, the origin of Garuḍa is narrated. The people with them brought their literature also. With the carrying literatures, there were stories of the origins or Purāṇas, with the story of Garuḍa among them. In the earliest text of this literature, the Ādiparva (10th Century A.D.), the story of mighty Garuḍa is found.²⁷

It is found that Garuḍa is related to the Sun in most of the myths. It is a popular belief that it has the power to cure those from snakebites. The *mantra* (hymn) which is effective in such cases, reads thus – “*Oṃ Tārksya (Garuḍa) cast down my enemies, trample the diseases and venom that might invade me.*” The emerald stone which is believed by tradition as the antedote of poison is also related with Garuḍa. It is true that Garuḍa is not worshipped as an independent god. He is worshipped together with Viṣṇu. In temples and in pictures, his image is placed near Viṣṇu and is shown as carrying Viṣṇu in the sky on its back.

As the remover or destroyer of obstacles Garuḍa is also known as Vināyaka, which is the another name of Gaṇeśa.

After surveying comprehensively the various mythologies relating to Garuḍa, it is found that in all mythologies Garuḍa is a divine being, that is part-man and part-bird. He is a solar bird or Sun-bird and lord of

²⁷ <http://goarchi.com/archo/mag/garuda.html>

birds and the mythological enemy of nāgas and the battle steed of Lord Viṣṇu carrying the Lord on his shoulders and simultaneously fighting against the god's enemies.

We can come to conclusion that the solar bird or the Sun bird is Garuḍa and in many civilizations it is eagle.

In Hindu mythology we have found Garuḍa is one of the four principal animal deities, that has evolved after the vedic period in Indian history. It is a combination of animal and human beings, but all are famous for their strength. The other three are Nṛsimha, an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu, Gaṇeśa, the elephant headed son of Goddess Durgā and Lord Śiva and Hanumāna, the devotee of Lord Rāma.

All these four deities are endowed with two combinations. The upper portion of the body is animal and the lower portion is the human being.

In Nṛsimha *avatāra* we have found Viṣṇu in his fourth *avatāra*. It is Viṣṇu in the shape of Nṛsimha. In Agni Purāṇa, it is found –

simhasya kṛtvā vadanam murāriḥ sadā

karālañca suraktanetraṃ |

ardham vapurvai manujasya kṛtvā yayau

sabhāṃ daityapateḥ purastāt.

The body is half-man and half-lion. While most of the Purāṇas have mentioned the Narasimhāvatāra as one of the *avatāras* of Lord Viṣṇu, some of them have described the story behind the *avatāra* in details.

The Vayupurāṇa describes the story as follows –

Hiranyakaśipu practised penance for hundred thousand years without food and with his head bent down. Being pleased with his penance Lord Brahmā wanted him to ask for boons. Hiranyakaśipu wanted that (1) he should not be killed by any being and (2) Dānavas, Asuras and Devas should be put on equal footing. Brahmā granted the boons. Thus, Hiranyakaśipu attained the position of an important divinity. He defeated the gods and wherever he went, gods along with sages bent down before him. However, Hiranyakaśipu was killed by Lord Viṣṇu in his Man-lion form using his nails which were neither wet nor dry.²⁸ The story of Narasimhāvatāra is found in the Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇa, the Harivaṃśa, the Brahma Purāṇa²⁹, Viṣṇudharmottara

²⁸ *Vāyu Purāṇa*, 67, 61-66

²⁹ *Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇa* - 11.5, 13-17 ; *Harivaṃśa* – 1.31, 31-67 ; *Brahma Purāṇa*, 213. 43-79

Purāṇa³⁰, the Bhāgavata Purāṇa³¹, the Matsya Purāṇa³², the Śiva Purāṇa³³, the Padma Purāṇa³⁴, the Narasimha Purāṇa³⁵ and the Viṣṇu Purāṇa³⁶ also in a varied way.

Gaṇeśa, the elephant headed son of Śiva and Pārvatī comes next as to the related myths of Garuḍa. Sir W. Jones says that³⁷ – “Gaṇeśa, the Indian god of wisdom, has the same characteristic as Janus of the Latins. All sacrifices and religious ceremonies, all serious compositions in writing, and all worldly affairs of importance are begun by pious Hindus with an invocation to Gaṇeśa ; a word composed of Īśa, the governor or leader, and gaṇa, a company (of deities). Instances of opening business auspiciously by an ejaculation to him might be multiplied with ease. Few books are begun without the words, ‘Salutation to Gaṇeśa’, and he is first

³⁰ *Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa* – 1.54, 1-52

³¹ *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, VII.1, 35-46

³² *Matsya Purāṇa*, 161, 34-38

³³ *Śiva Purāṇa Jñānasamhitā*, 61. 54-55

³⁴ *Padma Purāṇa, Bhūmikhaṇḍa*, 5. 26-33

³⁵ *Narasimha Purāṇa* 40. 1-14

³⁶ *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* 1.17, 75-76

³⁷ *Asiatic Researches*, 1.227

invoked by Brāhmaṇas who conduct the trial by ordeal, or perform the ceremony of the homa or sacrifice to fire.

“Gaṇeśa is the Hindu god of prudence and policy. He is the reputed eldest son of Śiva and Pārvatī (the ‘Padma Purāṇa’ alone declares that he was the actual child of these deities) ; and is represented with an elephant’s head – an emblem of sagacity – and is frequently attended by, or is riding upon a rat. He has generally four hands, but sometimes six, or eight or only two.³⁸

In Brahmvaivarta Purāṇa there is a story in Gaṇapati Khaṇḍa, that how an elephant-head is joined to a bālaka. It is found that –

haristanmastakaṁ chitvā yuyojatena vālake |

gajāsyayajanāyāśca kāraṇaṁ pāpanāśanaṁ ||³⁹

In the Brahmaivarta Purāṇa the birth story of Gaṇeśa is found that – Pārvatī after her marriage with Śiva, strongly desired to have a son and so her husband Lord Śiva advised Pārvatī to perform the Paṇyakavrata. This is the worship of Lord Viṣṇu, to be begun on the thirteenth day of the bright fortnight of Māgha, and continued for a year,

³⁸ Moor’s ‘Hindu Pantheon’, p-169

³⁹ Brahmavaivarta Purāṇa (Gaṇapati Khaṇḍa), Ch-20, page-438)

on every day of which flowers, fruits, cakes, vessels, gems, gold are to be presented, and a thousand Brāhmaṇas fed ; and the performer of the rite is to observe most carefully a life of inward purity, and to fix his mind on Hari (Viṣṇu). As the directing priest, Sanat Kumāra, helped Pārvatī and accomplished the ceremony on the banks of the Gaṅges, and after some interval when she returns sees Kriṣṇa, first as a body of light, and afterwards as an old Brāhmaṇa, came to her dwelling. The reward of her religious zeal being delayed, Pārvatī is plunged in grief, then only a viewless voice tells her to go to her apartment, where she will find a son who is the lord of Goloka, or Kṛṣṇa.

In another part of the same Purāṇa, the story is given in a varied form. Śiva, offended with Āditya (the Sun), slew him, and though he restored him to life incurred the wrath of the Sage Kaśyapa, who doomed his (Śiva's) son to lose his head. The elephant whose head was placed upon Gaṇeśa's body was Indra's elephant, which was decapitated because Indra threw over his neck the garland of flowers which was given by the sage Durvāsa to him, and as result of disrespect Indra's degradation is noticed on various Purāṇas. Indra was no loser of an elephant by this transaction, as Viṣṇu, moved by the prayers of his wife, gave him another in place of that which he took away.

The different accounts of the origin of Gaṇeśa are found in the *Matsya Purāṇa* and in the *Varāha Purāṇa*. The *Matsya Purāṇa* story is that in the purāṇic legend it is said that Śīva's host of Gaṇas were frolicking on the mountain and one of them who was most conspicuous form appeared as elephant headed (Gajānana and Vināyaka), Pārvatī was charmed with him and wished to have a son like him. Then Śīva said she might take him to be her son, she agreed.⁴⁰ In the *Skanda Purāṇa* also the origin and purpose of Gaṇeśa's existence are fully taught in the chapter, Gaṇeśa Kāṇḍa. In the *Varāha Purāṇa*, in Gaṇeśotpatti Kāṇḍa, the story of Gaṇeśa is found.⁴¹

Regarding Hanumāna, who is mainly devoted to Rāma, several stories are there. Hanumāna had also an unbelievable strength and power. This devotee of Rāma having a head of monkey and a body of human beings. Valuable service to Rāma, such as Garuḍa had done to Viṣṇu. It was Hanumāna, who discovered Śītā's abode, and carried a message to her from Rāma. Hanumāna set fire to Laṅkā and caused fear

⁴⁰ *Matsya Purāṇam*, Ch-160, Page-257

⁴¹ *Varāha Purāṇam*, 23rd Ch., Page-124

to enter the hearts of the Rākṣasas dwelling there. It was Hanumāna who bore Rāma on his shoulders as he crossed over from India to Laṅkā.⁴²

He has got the status of divinity among the Hindus. To this day Hanumāna is regarded as divine, and in some parts of India, he is largely worshipped. Living monkeys are regarded as his representatives ; hence many temples swarm with them, and it is regarded as meritorious act to feed them, and a sacrilegious act to injure them.⁴³

⁴² *Rāmāyaṇa*, Sundarā Kāṇḍam

⁴³ *Ibid*