

## The Mythic Origin of Elephants

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Under veterinary science we have the treatises viz. Hastyāyurveda and Mātangalīlā (of 13<sup>th</sup> Century A.D.) which deal with the science of elephants. Hastyāyurveda of Pālakāpya, as its name implies is the Āyurveda or medical theory and treatment for elephants, while Mātangalīlā of Nīlakanmha deals with the elephant-lore in general. Pālakāpya in the introductory part of the first chapter (1.207-210, 218-221) and Nīlakanmha in the first chapter named Nāgotpatti (1.21-23), both have narrated a common myth which points out the miraculous origin of elephants depicting them as supernatural animals.

As the myth they have narrated that – ‘from the cosmic golden egg the creation of the sun took place. Then the great seers noticed it and showed the two halves of that egg-shell to Brahmā. He then solemnly took in his two hands the two gleaming half shells of that egg and started chanting seven *sāmans* at once. Thereupon from one shell in his right hand the elephant Airāvata was born and following to him seven other noble elephants of the quarters or regions were born through his chanting. Further, from that egg-shell in his left hand the eight female elephants as their consorts were born. Then in the course of time their sons and grandsons etc. endowed with great vigour were continuously created, who happily range over forests, rivers and mountains of the world’.

Pālakāpya has explained further that thus the elephants were created from the same cosmic egg which has given birth to the sun named Mārtana, and because of having the same origin, elephants are considered as uterine brothers of Mārtāna and hence named as Mātangajāh. Both the authors have asserted that the creation of elephants is especially holy and meant for the purpose of protection of the gods and the sacrifices as well.

After going through the details of this myth, we can justify that in order to highlight the unique importance of subject matter, both the authors who seem to be well versed in the ancient scriptures must have narrated about their mythic origin and supernatural element. However, considering the gradually developing aspect of mythology in general we cannot claim that the myth was solely composed by them. So if we try to trace its roots surprisingly we find the connecting links in the Vedic literature. In the earliest available literature of mankind, viz. *Zgveda* 10.72 which is a creation-hymn, there are two *rks* or mantras which express the seer’s deep thinking about the origination of immortal and mortal universe. Tradition records either Brhaspati or Aditi, the daughter of Dakca as the seer of

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this hymn. The creation of 7 Ādityas and of the 8<sup>th</sup> one viz. Mārtana is respectively related with the immortal and mortal creation. The *rks* read –

*astmaú putrâso áditer yé jâfâis tanvâs pari /*

*devân úpa práita saptâbhih párá mártândám âsyat // 8//*

*saptâbhih putraír áditir úpa práita pûrvyám yugám /*

*prajāiyai mrtyáve tvat púnar mártândám âbharat //9//*

They state that – ‘the goddess Aditi had eight sons born from her body. She with seven approached the gods in primordial aeon. But she sent the eighth Mārtāna far away. He is cast away by her with the purpose to be the source of mortal creation’.

It is noteworthy that the term Mārtāna has two constituents, Marta i.e. mortal and *ana* i.e. egg. So the term denotes that Mārtāna is the very source or basis for entire mortal creation. Aditi bore the 8<sup>th</sup> son, Mārtana for the repeated birth and death in the mortal world entitled as the earth. So the Mārtana is named further as Vivasvat, the progenitor of the world. The *rk* (10.115.1)– ‘*sūrya ātmā ñ jágatah tashúcaś ca*’ speaks out the same fact that sun is the very soul of sentient and non-sentient world. Another way to understand the word is to derive it from *mrta* and *ana*, which has sprung from a seemingly lifeless egg, the bird in the sky i.e. sun as Mārtana.

We find references of these *rks* and myth quoted in the Maitrāyanī Samhitā (4.6.9), Pañcaviṁśa Brāhmana (24.12.6), Śatapatha Brāhmana (3.1.3.2), and in the Taittirīya Āranyaka (1.13.2).

In the Taittirīya Samhitā (6.5.6.1), Kāmha Samhitā (28.6), and Kapicmhalakamha Samhitā (44.6) in the context of Ādityagraha of Agnicmoma sacrifice the same myth occurs but with certain variations. It reads that – ‘Aditi desirous of offspring cooked and offered a mess to the Sādhyā gods. But they gave her only the remnants from which she gave birth to 4 Ādityas. So she cooked another mess reflecting that, “instead of eating remnant if I eat first the stronger one will be born from me”. So she did likewise, she became pregnant but from her was born an undeveloped egg which was miscarried. Then she cooked a third mess for the Ādityas, then was born the Āditya Vivasvat. Men on the earth are his offsprings’.

The further development of this myth is traceable in the Śatapatha Brāhmana (3.1.3.2-4). The performance of Agnicmoma sacrifice is described there. In the Dīkcanīya-ismi, a subsidiary sacrifice of Agnicmoma, Śatapatha Brāhmana has mentioned that – ‘some people offer a rice-pap to the Ādityas. Śatapatha Brāhmana has narrated in that context some story on the support of above mentioned *rks*. The story reads that- ‘there are 8 sons of Aditi who were born from her body. But those that are called the gods were only seven, for the eighth, viz. Mārtana, she brought forth unformed or undeveloped. It was a mere lump of bodily matter as broad as it was high. According to some it was of the size of a man. The gods, seven sons of Aditi, then spoke that- “which was born after us must not be lost. Let us fashion it”. They accordingly shaped it as this man is fashioned. The flesh which was cut off him and

thrown down in a lump became the elephant. Now he whom they thus fashioned was Vivasvat, the Āditya and of him came all these creatures’.

Hence, it is said that one must not accept an elephant as a sacrificial gift, since the elephant has sprung from man.

We have observed that in the context of this particular myth, in the Rgveda only Aditi is mentioned, but in Mārkaneya Purāna Kaśyapa, Prajāpati is also involved in the myth (105.11-20). The story is— ‘Kaśyapa abused his wife Aditi, as if for destroying her heavenly embryo through arduous penances. She answered Kaśyapa that in fact she is not destroying it but because of her austerities it shall prove helpful for the destruction of all adversities. Then she gave birth to the child blazing brilliantly with glory. At that time a voice deep as a thunder-cloud’s from the air spoke to Kaśyapa that ‘he spoke of this egg as destroyed one it is called as Mārtāna i. e. Mata-ana’.

We can observe that on the basis of such details developed in the Brāhmanas and Purānas, the later texts like Hastyāyurveda and Mātangalīlā have narrated their own myths. They have added Prajāpati, Brahmā and Maharcis to play an important role in the creation of Mārtāna as well as of Mātangas. In the flow of narration, the authors have rightly explained that elephant is named as Hastin because the species is created from the Prajāpati’s *hasta* or hand holding halves of the egg-shell.

It is quite important to raise a doubt that there must be a certain reason suggesting the connection of elephants with *sāmans* which we find in synonymous terms like *sāmaja*, *sāmajāta*, *sāmayoni* etc. used for the elephants. In accordance with that, the addition of chanting of seven *sāmans* along with the creation of elephants is in the myth. It seems to be resulted mostly from the fact that Pālakāpya was the son of the sage Sāmagāyana. It is obvious therefore that Pālakāpya must be well aquatinted with the science of chanting of *sāmans*. In the story, only the number of *sāmans* is mentioned but not their names. However, considering the cosmological aspect of the myth these can be identified with the seven Vyāhrtis, the mystic words viz. Bhūh, Bhuvah, Svah, Mahah, Janah, Tapah and Satyam. The *sāmans* based on these Vyāhrtis (20.9.2.1.7) are especially considered as sacred, hence they are correlated with the origin of seven elephants of the quarters. The seven Vyāhrtis serially represent the seven regions or worlds which rise one above the other from the earth like mid-region, heaven etc. For the followers of the Sāmaveda the utterance of these Vyāhrtis is obligatory in the beginning of daily Sandhyā adoration and chanting of Gāyatra-saman. We can understand that the creation of eight quarter-elephants along with the sun, Mārtāna evidently indicates the manifestation of Cosmos with eight cardinal points or quarters. And the concept of honouring these quarter-elephants as the guardians of those points may reveal the evolutionary fact accepted by scientists following the Darwinian Theory that in the primordial aeon the earlier creation of vertebrates commenced with the gigantic animals like dinosaurs etc. The fossils discovered in different areas of the world lead to infer that in the hoary ancient days there were flying dinosaurs, viz. pterosaurs.

Quite relevant to these facts, Nīlakanmha has mentioned that— ‘formerly elephants had the power to go anywhere they pleased. They could roam as they liked in the sky and on the earth. But unfortunately once alighting after flying through air they broke off the branch of a banyan tree which fell on the hermit of the sage Dīrghatapas. He then in full wrath cursed the elephants and they are deprived

of the power of moving at will'. We suspect whether the mention in the myth that of elephant having the potency to fly indicate such evolutionary link though we are very much aware of its imaginary or fictitious trend.

The connection of the origin of sun, Mārtana and of elephants as uterine brothers not only focuses on the unique evolutionary status of elephants, but supports the biological fact that among the vertebrate animals, elephants possess brain of largest size and regarding the matter of brain-activities they rank next to that of man. It may not be wrong therefore, to justify the miraculous deed to affix elephant's head to his son accomplished by the Lord Śiva. And also to justify his apt and consequent epithets as Gajamukha, Gajānana, Gajavadana, Gajāśya etc. who is celebrated in the entire mythology as the foremost Lord of intellect and knowledge.

Thus while summing up on the basis of investigating minute additions and modifications in the myth primarily based on the Zgvedic verses we can evidently point out the various stages of developing mythology which have been contributed by number of treatises in the march of time. The study of mythology and mythological symbols have remained ever attractive and challenging to the scholars, historians, philosophers and scientists etc. It is believed that the profound study of mythology reveals the subtle complicated psychological process of human brain or mind to interlink ancient lore of human history, civilization and cosmology. We have to admit finally that the study of mythic origin of the species like elephants definitely proves informative and not just recreating.

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