

[Keynote Address]

Vasudeva Sharan Agrawala Centenary

Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan

The late Dr. Vasudeva Sharan Agrawala, the thin, fragile human frame, contained within his mind oceans, mountains, rivers and pools of scholarship, rare and precious insights which facilitated looking deep into the ocean of tradition, ascend peaks of thought, follow the contours of the flow of rivers and pause to look at pools of local cultures. His journey was slow, steady and inspired by an unflinching commitment to investigating each and everything along the path: the 'word' and grammar were the constant walking sticks. Through them he could uncover the hidden meanings of all material manifestation, stones (architecture or sculpture), coins, texts, and also unravel the hidden symbolism of any form. He was a pilgrim in search of perennial value.

Today after a hundred years, it is time to assess the unique contribution of this giant among scholars of his generation. An outstanding grammarian, he was at the same time an archaeologist, an epigraphist and numismatist. His command of Sanskrit-(at both the Vedic and Classical phases) - was not restricted to grammar. Through philosophy and etymology, he delved deep into the essence of meaning. Hindi, Avadhi and Braj were his inheritance. Thus he explored and navigated freely with ease in the texts of Sanskrit as also Avadhi and Braj. The corpus of vocabulary of oral literature engaged him. His interests extended far and wide without ever becoming superficial. The width of his span was matched by a depth of understanding and sudden insights of illumination.

His education in a manner of speaking was normal and ordinary. But he made the normal and ordinary into the extraordinary. In two seminal letters written to the late Pt. Banarasidasa Chaturvedi (on 1.6.1966 and 9.6.1966), he has given straightfor-ward account of his family, his upbringing and education. He acknowledged his deep debt to his grandfather, an ordinary villager and farmer who was known for his commitment to truth and justice. The grandfather instilled in the young Vasudeva a 'value system', which was to guide the grandchild forever. If the grandfather was the shaper of character and giver of values, the grandmother who nurtured the young Vasudeva (after his mother's death when he was only six)

was the fund of knowledge and wisdom in the oral traditions. The interest in *jānapadīya* vocabulary, proverbs and narratives was her gift. She embraced him with love and affection. With her love she planted in the little boy the seeds of everlasting quest for the riches of the oral traditions.

From the village *madarsā*, the young Vasudeva moved to Lucknow with his father. The subsequent education was all completed there, until the final D. Litt. However, along with formal schooling he also received training in the oral narration of the epics, particularly the *Mahābhārata*. It was this training, he acknowledges, which ignited in him the desire to explore the rich and varied world of 'orality', at another level in the Indian intellectual tradition. His essays in *Madhukar* and *Lokavārtā* bear testimony to his interest, and the fruits of the investigation are evident in his monumental commentary on the *Mahābhārata*, called '*Bhārata-Sāvitrī*'. He mentions in his letter to Pt. Banarasidasa Chaturvedi that he has commented on 24,000 ślokas.

Fairly early in his life (i.e. 1915) his father met Pt. Jagannath and requested him to teach his son Vasudeva. Pt. Jagannath accepted him as his disciple and trained him thoroughly in Sānskrit grammar. It was Pt. Jagannath who introduced young Vasudeva to Pāṇini's *Aṣṭādhyāyī* and taught him the text through the traditional methodology of 'memorisation', analysis and interpretation. This gave Vasudeva Sharan Agrawala solid as rock foundation for his entire life.

Thus very early in Vasudeva's life three streams co-mingled: (I) the oral and local through the grandmother, the epic tradition in narration, (II) the formal education in school and (III) the traditional method of learning the text through Pt. Jagannath.

These influences and training in Vasudeva's formative years give us a very valuable insight into the very special point of view, which informs much of Dr. Vasudeva Sharan's writing. From a reading of his writing from the first to the last it is clear that he is neither a textual scholar, e.g. P.V. Kane, arguing his case, nor an archaeologist in the tradition of a Madho Sarup Vats or Adris Banerjee, interested only in the material evidence, nor a Vedic scholar like Lakshman Shastri Joshi (another extraordinary giant), nor a conventional reader of the *Kāvya*s, nor a historian even after his teacher Radha Kumud Mukerjee, or an art historian who was concerned only with stylistic issue or a folklorist doing field work in the anthropological mode. He is a class by himself, setting forth a new methodology

without asserting that he is a pathfinder or an articulator of new theoretical models for comprehending the Indian tradition.

However, despite the modesty and reticence, he does make explicit his intent and method. As mentioned at the outset, his primary tools of investigation continued to be 'words', meaning, context and symbolism. Indeed, he admits that he has endeavoured to bring together Sanskrit *vidyā* and Indian art. He asserts, 'I have restored countless words and terminology pertinent to Indian archaeology and art through a study of Sanskrit literature'. 'I have tried to narrate the story of Indian art through Indian concepts and words'. 'I firmly believe that the efficiency and appropriateness of this methodology will be acknowledged in decades to come.'

In other words, Dr. Agrawala is arguing for a distinctive methodology for evaluating the visual culture of India. He advocates applying 'criterion', which emerges from the literary and visual data. Further, he pleads for the application of technical terminology from within the tradition. These statements assume importance today because his successors have either followed the purely linear chronological path based on archaeological data, or have analysed the forms of Indian Art on the basis of what are called universal categories. Today he would be happy to find that there is acceptance of his particular approach. For his vision, scholarship and method we owe a sense of gratitude, almost a debt, to him for laying the foundations for a distinctive approach to the study of Indian traditions as exemplified in literature, architecture, sculpture and much else.

It would be impossible to cover all aspects of his scholarship in a single essay. Different people, both his contemporaries as also his students, have paid rich tributes, from the point of view of the particular discipline, as also their personal interaction with him.

The book *Jñānamūrti Ācārya Vasudeva Sharan*, edited by Krishna Vallabha Tripathi (Vasudev Jnanpeeth, Lucknow), gives a glimpse of the multifaceted personality of Dr. Vasudeva Sharan Agrawala. It also traces the principal milestones of his long and arduous journey. The scholars present here are all his students, either direct or those who consider him as their *Vidyā Guru*. Each one of them will deal with his contribution in specific fields and disciplines. It is therefore not necessary for me to anticipate their critical evaluation of Dr. Vasudeva Sharan's contribution in specific disciplines.

Let me confine myself to the overarching *dr̥ṣṭi* (vision and approach) of

Dr. Vasudeva Sharan Agrawala and illustrate this through his writing in different domains. Naturally this can only be highly selective, almost sketchy.

We are all aware that he began his career as the Curator/Director of the Mathura Museum. He is acknowledged as a cataloguer par excellence. He improved upon Dr. Vogel's catalogue, after examining thousands of images, which lay un-catalogued and unidentified. So far archaeologists had understandably confined themselves to dating and establishment of chronologies. Dr. Vasudeva Sharan painstakingly does that, but goes further. He attempts not only to see the image in its linear chronology, instead he goes behind and around the image by identifying textual sources which illumine the image. In doing so he enables the spectator to appreciate the cultural context of the image. Besides, his catalogues were based on solid research from a variety of primary sources. He placed 'terracottas' centre stage in contrast to his predecessors. Terracottas, as we know, became his life interest.

As far as Mathura art is concerned, he loved it, and brought out its essence in several essays. His masterly essay on the *Śālabhañjikās*, in which he classifies the several pillar figures, will remain a watershed in Indian Art History. His elucidation of the *Aśoka dohada* motif was an eye opener for many. He also followed A.K. Coomaraswamy by concentrating attention to *Yakṣa* and *Yakṣī* figures. Also, long before the terracottas of Sishupalgarh had attained international fame, he drew attention to them. His work on Ahicchatra is ofcourse universally acknowledged. He goes into ecstasies over the Pārvatī and Śiva head and ofcourse, Gaṅgā and Yamunā figures.

Gupta Art held his special attention. His monograph on *Gupta Art* is truly an inspired piece of writing. Between 1933 and 1951 he wrote many essays, short and long, which exhibit his capacity to look at the image, and to relate it at the level of content to Sanskrit literature and at the level of form to Indian aesthetic theories.

His monograph on the evolution of temple forms is important for more than one reason. Like A.K. Coomaraswamy and Stella Kramrisch, he elucidates on the essentials of the *vāstu puruṣa maṇḍala*. However, the value of his work lies in his meticulously tracing the history of the evolution of the temple structure. He forcefully argues that there is a direct connection between the Vedic ritual, the *vedī* and *vedikā* and the establishment of the cella (*garbhagrha*). Almost like A.K. Coomaraswamy, he moves from the concrete image and its literary source and cultural context to theory and *śāstra*.

From 1951 onwards begins a period of great creative activity and phenomenal productivity. Vasudeva Sharan Agrawala addresses himself concurrently to many theoretical issues. In each case he proceeds from an examination of words - terminology - and moves to context and from context to the perennial Vedic sources. His concern is with the beauty of the word and meaning (*śabda saundarya* and *artha saundarya*). Naturally he is drawn to exploring the relationship between the manifest and unmanifest. (the *mūrta* and *amūrta*), or deeper still *vyakta* and *avyakta* of Upanishadic thought.

In his words,

“शब्द-सौन्दर्य और अर्थ-सौन्दर्य दोनों एक दूसरे के साथ जहाँ समन्वित रहते हैं, उसी श्रेष्ठ स्थिति को कवि ने वागर्थ से संपृक्त काव्य का आदर्श कहा है। जैसे काव्य में वैसे कला में भी आभ्यन्तर अर्थ और बाह्य रूप दोनों का जहाँ एक समान रमणीय विधान हो, वहीं श्रेष्ठ कला की अभिव्यक्ति होती है। गुप्त कला इसका उदाहरण है। उसमें बाह्य रूप की पूर्ण मात्रा को अनुप्राणित करने वाला जो अर्थ-सौन्दर्य है, वह शब्द का अद्भुत या विलक्षण रूप प्रस्तुत करता है।

शिल्पी या चित्राचार्य अलंकरण संभार से संनतांगी कलाकृतियों का निर्माण करके ही परितृप्त नहीं हुए। उनकी कृतियाँ उस सविशेष अर्थ से प्राणवन्त हैं, जो बुद्ध के अनुत्तर ज्ञान एवं शिव की समाधि से अथवा लोकसंरक्षण से परमेष्ठी विष्णु के अहर्निश संवेदनशील स्वरूप से भावापन्न या ओजस्विनी बनी है। उन कलाकृतियों में कितनी रमणीयता, कितनी सजीवता और कितना अनन्त अक्षुण्ण आकर्षण है, इसे किस प्रकार कहा जाय। उनके सान्निध्य में स्थूल सीमा-भाव विगलित हो जाता है और मन दिव्य भावों के लोक में विलक्षण आनन्द, शान्ति और प्रकाश का अनुभव करता है। इस अमृत आनन्द या रस तक जो पहुँचा सके, वही चिरन्तन काव्य और कला है।”

Vasudeva's journey in a manner of speaking had just begun or perhaps reached half way. So far he was exploring the oceans and retrieving different facets of Indian art through architecture, sculpture, coins and inscriptions. Now he begins to ascend Vedic heights. Again his walking stick is words, and their multiple meanings and significance. For the journey he found a pathfinder in the person of Pt. Madhusudan Ojha. Dr. Vasudeva Sharan Agrawala considered the Pandit his *guru*, and the *guru* felt that he had found a disciple, as Ramakrishna had found Vivekananda. It was Pt. Madhusudan Ojha and Sir Motilal Shastri who opened Dr. Agrawala's perceptive eye to the symbolic meaning of the Veda-s. As a consequence of revisiting the Veda-s, Vasudeva wrote two seminal works. *Sparks from the Vedic Fire* and *A Vision in the Long Darkness*. Each of these books is a conglomeration of Himalayan rocks. In his characteristic fashion, he takes up each word and phrase, or a *mantra*, as in the *Sparks from the Vedic Fire*, and then unpeels layers upon layers of meaning and significance. His elucidation of *Gaurī* and tracing it to the root *Gau* (Cow) is as convincing as it is unconventional. *Agni* of course is central to his concern. No paraphrasing or quotations from these works

can do justice to the insights of this genius. The *Asyavāmīya Sūkta* (RV I.164) draws his particular attention. Each verse is explained in terms of its intrinsic 'symbolism'.

This examination enables Vasudeva Sharan to then address himself to the issue of Vedic cosmology. Although Dr. A.K. Coomaraswamy had written essays on the subject, now collected together under the title of *Vedic Exegesis* (IGNCA publication), Dr. Agrawala's exposition stands on its own. Dr. A.K. Coomaraswamy also began with words, but his probe took him to comparison with Greek-Latin roots. Vasudeva Sharan Agrawala restricts himself to the Indic tradition, and reconstructs the entire structure of cosmology, which he calls *Sṛṣṭi Vijñāna*.

A detailed examination of the Vedas, particularly some hymns from the *Ṛgveda* and *Yajurveda*, enables him to expound brilliantly on seminal concepts, Prajāpati, Agni, Hiraṇyagarbha, Suparṇā. In each case he penetrates deeply into the symbolism inherent in these concepts. He analyses the *Nāsadīya Sūkta* (RV I.129) in detail, both as a hymn of cosmology, as also the system of establishing correspondences. *Manas* is the individuating principle of the Mind, *Kāma* the seed of the Mind. He comments brilliantly on the kinship of *sat* and *asat*. He decodes the riddles, specially of Ṛṣi Vasukra (RV X.27 and X.28). Most illuminating is his explanation of the allegory of the blind daughter. Once again his explanation is based on the exploration of the unmanifest and manifest. In his words,

'The mutual relationship of the preceding stages of Formless Manifestation (Varuna's Dark Deep) and the subsequent stage of Formal manifestation (Indra or Sūrya), is further brought out in bold relief by the allegory of the Blind Daughter: He whose daughter is blind since birth, does not become worth with her on this account. Which of the two will loose on him his anger - the man who leads her home or he who woos her (X.27.11)? The Blind Daughter (*anakṣa duhitā*) is the unmanifested *Prakṛti* concealed within the womb of *Mahat* or *Parameṣṭhī* (Universal). *Akṣa*, *Cakṣu*, *Jaṅgama*, *Kṣobha*, *Sṛṣṭi*, *Ahah*, *Śukla Rajas* and *Jyoti* stand for creation or manifestation. As opposed to these are *Acakṣu*, *Tamas*, *Rātri*, *Nidrā*, *Kṛṣṇa Rajas* symbolising the unmanifested universal, *ab intra*. Cosmic consciousness, unless descended to the manifest material level, is conceived of as a blind girl'.

Sparks from the Vedic Fire, (A New Approach to Vedic Symbolism),

Banaras Hindu University, 1962, p. 82-83.

Further he traces the origin of the *Aṣṭamūrti Śiva* mentioned by Kālidāsa in the prologue to *Abhijñāna Śākutala* as also the first verse of *Mālavikāgnimitra* to the Vedic principles of the eight *Vasus*. Phrase by phrase he analyses Kālidāsa's verse and relates it to the Vedic source.

Finally, he asks the question, why was *Agni* called *Rudra*? His answer is:

The reason lies in the etymology of रुद्र-यदरोदीत् तस्माद् रुद्रः, i.e. Agni becomes afflicted with 'hunger' (अशनाया) for Soma which is its food, and this is comparable to the crying of the child for food (*Śatapatha*, VI.1.3.10). Both become quiet when satiated, but that is only temporary, and the need for food returns again and again so long as life lasts. Agni is अन्नाद and Soma is अन्न; deprived of सोम Agni becomes घोर, where as provided with सोम it becomes शिव,

Sparks from the Vedic Fire, (A New Approach to Vedic Symbolism),

Banaras Hindu University, 1962, p. 119).

He extends his investigation to the Brāhmaṇas, especially the *Śatapatha* to show that Agni has eight names. He concludes his exposition by smoothly moving to the Purāṇas, and quotes from the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa* (Page 120). It is this kernel of perception which later flowers into the inspired book *Śiva Mahādeva, the Great God*.

A vision in *Long Darknes* is a masterly study in cosmic symbolism as expounded in the verses of the famous *Asya-Vāmiya Sūkta* of Ṛṣi Dīrghatamas (RV I.164.1-52). Dr. V.S. Agrawala lucidly explains in the introduction the intent of Ṛṣi Dīrghatamas. The Ṛṣi was grappling with the perennial question of the Mystery of Creation. 'Where is the teacher knowing the solution? Where is the pupil coming to the teacher for revelation of the Mystery? Who has seen the first cause from which emanated the primeval creation?' Dr. V.S. Agrawala comments : The Ṛṣi 'takes quick snaps of the cosmos itself pointing to many symbols that carry the tale of its secret. The seer seems to take the confident view that the imprisoned divine splendour, although a veritable mystery, is present in every manifest form and is open to understanding'. (Introduction to *A Vision in Long Darkness*).

Thereupon Dr. Agrawala investigates with remarkable insight and sharpness to decode the language of symbols. The language of symbols, he tells us, the ancients called *Nidāna Vidyā*. The method identifies objects, or phenomenon of Nature, and invests each with many layers of significance. He points out that, for example, the ancients conceived of the generative potencies of Mother Nature and of the cow and identified the two through a symbolic meaning, creating the picture of the thousand fold universal cow who is the same as the Thousand Syllabled speech. From their point of view each created object, both natural and human, or activity or a thought, becomes a typical symbol pregnant with meaning. Dr. V.S. Agrawala concludes: 'A complete analysis of the *Rg Veda* and other Vedic texts

places in our hands a comprehensive dictionary of symbolic language.' Pertinently he points out, 'the dictionary meanings are quite all right as found in the scholars of the *East and the West*, but the recovery of the consistent metaphysical ideas of the Vedic thinkers has to be accomplished if a full justice is to be done to the authors of these hymns'. (p.11 of Introduction).

Addressing himself to the question, why Vedic thinkers selected the method of symbolism which appears obscure to us today, Dr. Agrawala's answer is that this was a deliberate choice. Perhaps it is best to recall his explanation in Dr. Agrawala's words:

'In order to explain the problem regarding the creation of the Cosmos and of the three primeval entities of which it is constituted, viz. Mind, Life and Matter, the Vedic thinkers seized upon the working of the Cosmos itself as manifested in the several categories and objects of creation. The Ocean, Sky, Earth, Air, Water, Fire, Sun, Moon, Mountains, Rivers, Forests, Trees, Animals, Men, Clouds, Rain, Each one of these and many more are objects in Nature which stand out as the alphabets of world language robed in silence, yet eloquent with exploding meaning that can be deciphered according to the intellectual attainment of each thinker. The human body, eyes, ears, hands, feet, in-breath, out-breath, light, sound, movement - all these introduce us to a rich world of symbolical significance.

There are several advantages with respect to this method of conveying the cosmogonical ideas; firstly, this language is lasting through time and space. It is for man everywhere, already within his comprehension. He understands its meaning as a matter of course, being familiar with the concrete aspect of symbols in life, e.g. the significance of the cow is well known as the reproductive mother giving milk. Once the mind begins to think on this pattern, it enters an expanded orbit of meaning and recovers several isolated strands, which build up a rich picture of the truth apprehended by each symbol.

The language of symbols is elastic and susceptible to decoding its multiple meaning. This is an advantage for it is possible to present a comprehensive world of thought through simple and minimum use of the words; e.g. the identity of the Earth with the Mother confers rich ideas of wide application at several levels relating to plants, animals, and men. Universal Nature or infinity is Archetypal of the principle of Motherhood. For the penetrating vision of the Seers the real objective is the deep meaning inherent in the cosmic creation, which was termed as *Veda*, *Ṛṣi* or *Chandas* principle. Words are mere symbols of ideas like the manifest dependent on the unmanifest substratum. According to the Seer of this Hymn, Spoken Speech is only one-fourth in relation to the inspirational world of Ideas, which is three-fourths. Thus the Vedas are couched in a terminology, which is invested with meaning that is universal, elastic and concretised in the natural objects ever present before us. The divine Brahman has identified himself with creation, called *Vāk* and Man is tackling *Vāk* with his mind for the meaning behind it. The ordinary meaning of *Vāk* is human Speech but it is the highest manifest faculty in Man and is accepted as the concretised symbol of the mystery of the

Mind. The problem of the meaning of the *R̥g Veda* thus lies in the hands of a unique language deriving in the fullest measure from the divine creation itself. The ancient belief in the divinity of the Vedas rationally signifies that the meaning behind words is drawn from the cosmic source. Whereas words belong to the level of Matter (*martya*), the meaning is ever radiating and coming from a transcendent source that is immortal. The two concepts of *Devam Manah*, God as Mind, and *Sahasrākṣarā Vāk*, Speech of Thousands syllables, are the highest contribution of Ṛṣi Dīrghatamas to the world of metaphysics. It is hardly possible to make a bolder or more eloquent statement about the nature of human Mind and human Speech, both flashing as unknown Mysteries.

From Preface to the *Vision in Long Darkness*, Dr. V.S. Agrawala,
Vedaranyaka Ashram, Varanasi, 1963, p. iii-iv.

With this explanation, V.S. Agrawala proceeds to unravel the several layers of meaning and significance of the verses of the hymn. His concern is with the identification of the esoteric meaning (*parokṣa*). He does so by breaking up each word into its semantic etymologies in order to arrive at the inner core meaning. For example, *Akṣara* is derived from *Akṣaya*, the inexhaustible one. Later in the book Dr. V.S. Agrawala elucidates brilliantly on the relationship of *kṣara* and *akṣara* and opens up a whole cosmology from the two words.

Of special interest to him is the word *Vāk*. Dr. V.S. Agrawala offers multiple explanations, quoting chapter and verse. The symbolism of the cow engages Dr. V.S. Agrawala in much of his writing. Here he offers a wide spectrum of meaning and the many layers of the significance of the 'Cow' as a symbol.

An examination of the words, the verses and the metres, enables Dr. V.S. Agrawala to interpret integral vision of the hymn.

In the book '*Spark of the Vedic Fire*' he had taken particular words; here he takes each verse (RV I.164, 1-52) and then deftly uncodes the meaning behind the principal symbol.

Dr. V.S. Agrawala's explanation of each verse exemplifies the piercing perspicacity of his won vision and skill. *Mantra 2*, which centres around the metaphor of the chariot, wheel, the three naves, and the seven horses, is explained with unparalleled lucidity to convincingly argue the relationship of the macro- and micro-dimensions; the one source and the three dimensions of Matter, Life and Mind, the seven horses. Together the incessant dynamic movement of the Time (*Kāla*) is the essence. It is clear from V.S. Agrawala's commentary that he has been able to uncode the 'symbol' at multiple levels of meaning. Again, it is the extension of this interpretation, which leads him to write the important and oft quoted monograph called the *Cakradhvaja*.

Most revealing is his explanation of *Mantra 42* where he explains the significance of hair and locks, *Keśava, Keśī*, etc. One is tempted to give the full text of his explanation, because V.S. Agrawala's ability to make uncanny connections through an analysis of the semantic etymologies is itself an integrated wrap and woof of the fabric he reconstructs.

Symbolism occupied him with intensity. In the short monograph on the solar symbolism of the Boar *Varāha*, he continues with his very special method. This time his textual base is principally the *Matsya-Purāṇa*. He examines the various versions in the *Viṣṇu-Purāṇa* and the *Bhāgavata* and other texts. After a textual analysis and comparison, he expounds on the symbolic meaning. In V.S. Agrawala's characteristic fashion, he traces the first references to *Varāha* to the Ṛgvedic *Emuṣa, Varāha* and to legend in the *Atharvaveda* (XII. 1.48). For V.S. Agrawala the legend has definite cosmological significance :

'There are two stages in the conception, firstly that the Goddess Earth was concealed in the depth of the Primeval Ocean, and secondly that She was rescued from there by the Divine power of Viṣṇu in his Boar incarnation.'

From the preface to the volume *Solar Symbolism of the Boar*,

Banaras Hindu University, 1963.

It is the detailed analysis of the verses in the *Purāṇas - Vāyu, Matsya, Bhāgavata* and other texts, that V.S. Agrawala offers his comments on the symbolism of the legend and the significance of *Yajña Varāha* and *Varāha*. As always, V.S. Agrawala begins with 'words' and etymologies (e.g., *vara* and *ahaḥ*) and appellations used. Each word is analysed in detail to reveal the hidden meaning. A number of questions are asked, and then interconnections are made, before reconstructing the import of the whole. This is not textual criticism. It is the penetration into the ocean of meaning and allusions. Everyone is familiar with the legend of the Boar and his rescuing the Earth. However, it required the keen insight of a V.S. Agrawala to make the connection with the first principle of turmoil as *Vāyu* and *Varāha* and secondly of *Varāha* and *Agnī*, and finally as Sun. The slim volume is an excellent example of a very distinctive methodology, hard to emulate, because it requires the command of language, words and a critical eye of the visual representation, and the intuitive insights of one immersed in texts ranging from the Vedas to *Purāṇas*. Of great importance is the fact that through this analysis and interpretation Dr. Agrawala clearly demolishes the view of some scholars that the *Purāṇas* were narratives, half historical, half mythological, without

any conceptual continuity with the Vedas. He convincingly makes the connections between concepts and mythology and the visual image.

Indeed, at this point I might permit myself the liberty of being personal. I recall vividly Dr. Agrawala, my *guru's* ecstasy as one day he exclaimed to me in sheer joy. 'Oh, Kapila, wonders have happened today. I have just discovered that the *Purāṇas* are not just narratives of mythology, meaningful no doubt, but are in fact restating and re-articulating Vedic cosmology and symbolism in a narrative form; further they are as if coded icons of philosophic principles'. He was then immersed in the *Garuḍa Purāṇa*, and set forth to explain the symbolism of *Garuḍa* and *Garuḍa* as the *Vāhana* of Viṣṇu in terms of philosophic schools. Patiently he explained to me the significance of *Garuḍa* as *vāhana* in terms of Sāṃkhya philosophy. Had he been a modern scholar, he would have begun by asserting a new theoretical position; but Dr. Agrawala was himself a creator. It was the text and the intuitive insights that came to him which were his fulfilment.

It is these insights which illumine his Critical Studies of the *Purāṇas*, specially the *Matsya* and *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*. Unlike some other scholars, he does not concentrate on the *Purāṇas* as socio-historical documents to draw conclusions on state formations and social structure. He is instead engaged in penetrating deep into the symbolism of the countless myths and legends. Naturally, as an archaeologist and art historian he extends his investigation into the visual representation of the myths in sculpture and painting.

However, socio-economic aspects were of deep interest. This is evident from his magnum opus, *India as known to Pāṇini*. Here his analysis focuses on these dimensions. As culling out cultural history from a text, his work remains unsurpassed over these five decades.

This dimension of life continued to interest him, even when he was totally engrossed in the Vedas and the *Purāṇas*. In fact Dr. Agrawala's interests were not sequential, but concurrent. As has been remarked by many, such as respected Rai Krishnadasa, and as witnessed by his students, he undertook to pursue several subjects concurrently. If the Vedas were of interest and the *Brāhmaṇas*, concurrently he worked assiduously on *Jāyasi Padmāvat*, to produce another magnum opus. Earlier he had displayed his capacity for reconstructing cultural histories from *Harṣacarita* and *Kādambarī*, *Meghadūta* and others.

But no assessment of Dr. Agrawala's work would be complete, even in a

cursory manner such as this, without a mention of Dr. Agrawala as a scholar of numismatics, and above all as an explorer and elucidator of the vast and varied world of the vocabulary of the *Janapadas*. As mentioned in the very beginning, the influence of his grandmother was abiding. She had opened to him the world of oral literature and oral narratives and terminology. He made that into a rigorous discipline. In so doing he could once again make connections between the high and the popular, the textual and the oral. This was also another implicit new theoretical position.

In that jewel of a book, *Ancient Indian Folk Cults*, he vividly describes *Giri Maha* (Festival of the Mountain), *Nadī Maha* (Festival of the River Goddess), *Sāgara Maha* (Festival of the Ocean) and others. Here through textual references he recreates popular practice. The ecological significance of the festivals is made explicit.

Little need be added in regard to his competence and skill as Curator of the Central Asian Antiquities in the Archaeological Survey and as the selector with an impeccable eye of that Indian Art exhibition held in London in 1948. As is well known, the objects of that exhibition constituted the first core of the present National Museum.

Understandably, and almost logically, Vasudeva Sharan Agrawala became the *guru* and guide for scholars in different fields. Fortunately, we have amongst us many present here who are today acknowledged as specialists in their particular fields. Singly and together let us pay a tribute to this extraordinary scholar of our times. In acknowledging our debt and expressing our deep gratitude, we also have a solemn responsibility. While there are many welcome fresh developments in the study of the Indian literary and artistic traditions, there continues to be a need for re-enforcing a multi-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary approach, which was intrinsic to the vision and methodology of Vasudeva Sharan Agrawala. Equally important is the need for greater insistence on a rigorous training in methodologies and skills of research. As teacher, Vasudeva Sharan Agrawala was a hard and strict taskmaster, an austere though loving disciplinarian to the core. Can we aspire to measure up to him!