

Sun in Symbolic Form at Varanasi

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The worship of the Sun as a prominent deity was prevalent among almost all the ancient civilizations of the world. In India too, the celestial luminary was being worshipped as early as in the Neolithic period. Its worship in symbolic forms was an integral part of the religious life of the prehistoric people of India. The Ṛgvedic hymns refer to many such epithets of Sūrya which reflect his consequent traits in the post vedic age. Vedic Āryans adored it under the names such as Sūrya, Savitr̥, Mitra, Viṣṇu, Pūṣan, Aśvins, Ādityas, Rohit, Vivasvat etc. There are direct references to the symbolical depiction of Sun in the *Brāhmaṇa* works.¹ In the *Upaniṣads* Sun is regarded as the best manifestation of the supreme power. In the *Purāṇas*, like Viṣṇu, Vāyu, *Brahmāṇḍa* and *Mārkaṇḍeya* although there is no direct reference to the solar vows, yet penances, austerities and fasting in honour of the Sun-god are severally encountered with.² The *Sauravratas* are, however, mentioned for the first time in certain later chapters of the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*.³

On the basis of literary references⁴ and actual specimens of solar representation⁵ of Sun-god in human form was preceded by his symbolical representations on coins, seals, potteries, amulets and even beads and ornaments where he is represented mostly either in geometrical or in naturalistic forms such as rayed orb (of various kinds), circle with triangular rays, simple circle, wheel, swastika, etc.⁶ Sun in a naturalistic form as a lotus like design is found on the Indus Valley potteries from Mohenjodaro.⁷ Subsequently the lotus was regarded as distinct cult symbol of the Sun.⁸

The tradition of worshipping the Sun-god by means of lotus as displayed by the *sauravratas* definitely hint to a period which was earlier than his adoration in human form, subsequently conceived with some Iranian features.⁹ The early *Purāṇas* allude to a number of *sauravratas*,¹⁰ one of which is called *Kalyāṇasaptamī vrata* in which the observer of the vow should draw eight pictures of the Sun-god having eight names on different eight corners, just as in the case of the *Aṣṭadikpālas*, of the eight petals of the lotus. Similarly in the *Viśokaspatamī* vow the observer should worship the golden lotus as *arka*¹¹ and in the *Phalasaptamī vrata*¹² the Sun should be worshipped by means of a golden image and golden lotus under various names. Likewise we find

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a reference to the drawing of a lotus on an altar in honour of the Sun in the *Sarkarāsaptamī vrata*.¹³ Also in the *Kamalasaptamī vrata*,¹⁴ Sun should be adored in the form of a golden lotus. In the *Mandārasaptamī vrata* Sun is to be invoked in the form of a golden image alongwith eight petalled lotus¹⁵ and in the *Sūryasamkrānti vrata*¹⁶ merely by drawing eight petalled lotus. Besides these occasions, the worship of the Sun on Sundays is envisaged by drawing twelve-petalled lotus with red sandal.¹⁷ In various domestic rites Sun-worship played predominant part and the twelve-petalled lotus was particularly associated with the Sun-god in such domestic rites. The worship of the Sun as a lotus is referred to in many inscriptions of the medieval period.¹⁸ It was due to this invariable association of lotus with Sun that when visualized in human form he was provided with long stalked lotus in both of his hands. Further, there is deep symbolic meaning behind the association of lotus with Sun. The lotus blossoms with Sun rise symbolises vitality and fullness of life which begins with Sunrise.

On some of the earliest coins in the Punch-marked series and also on local coins of Eran the depiction of lotus is frequently found.¹⁹ The device continued to be represented on later Punch-marked coins of Magadh.²⁰ Its importance could be realised from the fact that detailed instructions are being given in texts for the representation of lotus²¹ which denote fructifying aspect of Sun.²²

It is, however, surprising to note that the examples of Sun images and temples are found from all over the country in abundance but the examples of symbolical renderings of Sun are rarely encountered with after Kuśāṇa period. Thus evidently the image worship had overshadowed the earlier symbolic worship. One of the later examples of symbolic worship of Sun is known from Chola art, close to a temple (10th century C.E.) at *Gaṅgaikoṇḍacolapuram* there lies a large stone piece which represents a big lotus, symbolic of Sun, with the figures of several divine beings, *grahas* Ushā, Pratyūṣā carved around the lotus and apparently suggesting their association with Sun.

Recently I have come to know of a Sun temple where Sun is being represented as a big twelve-petalled lotus having a diametre of 2.5 ft. The temple, located in Sūrya Kuṇḍa Mohallā, near Naisarak area of Varanasi, is presently known as Sūrya-Nārāyaṇa temple.

M.A.Sherring (1868) in his book 'Sacred City of Hindus' has referred to this temple as Sāmbāditya temple.²³ He also mentions a tank (*kuṇḍa*) known as Sūrya Kuṇḍa and twelve wells dedicated to Sun. However, at present there is no trace of

the wells but the tank still exists with stone steps on the east and west sides with several stone platforms. Possibly these platforms were twelve in number, corresponding to the twelve wells as mentioned by Sherring.

Kāśī (Varanasi) is well known for the worship of the twelve Āditya or Āditya Yātrā. The places of Āditya worship are still be traced at different places in the city.²⁴ The Ādityas are represented mainly in the forms of lotus or disc (*cakra*) or disc with rays having the face of Sun in the centre. The twelve Ādityas are known as Aruṇāditya, Draupadāditya, Gaṅgāditya, Keśavāditya, Khakholkāditya, Lolārka, Mayūkhāditya, Sāmbāditya, Uttarārka, Vimalāditya, Vṛddhāditya and Pramāditya who are said to be the protector of Kāśī. The *Kāśī-khaṇḍa* of *Skanda-Purāṇa* gives different stories related to the origin of these Ādityas. It seems that the visual forms of Ādityas in Kāśī were based on the literary descriptions as well as their symbolic renderings as lotus, disc, *svastika* etc. are found on the ancient coins, seals, ornaments etc.

Excepting the Sāmbāditya Sun temple, under reference all other Āditya figures are found represented mainly in different Śiva temples. Likewise, Keśavāditya is represented in the temple of Keśava (Viṣṇu), near Rajghat. The pilgrims pay visit to different Ādityas mainly in the months of *Agrahaṇa* (November-December), *Pauṣa* (December-January) and *Māgha* (January-February). In the months of *Vaiṣākha* (April-May) and *Jyeṣṭha* (May-June) as well the pilgrimage to these places is in vogue.

The antiquity of the present Sāmbāditya or the Sūrya-Nārāyaṇa temple does not go long back but the big lotus in the sanctum is original and datable to c. 12th century C.E. The bulk of sculptures available in the temple premises and its vicinity are also assignable to 11th-12th century C.E. These sculptures representing Umā-Maheśvara, Brahmā with Śakti, Navagrahas and animal figures, besides a few decorated architectural fragments, prove that there existed a large and imposing temple of medieval times in the area which was consequently destroyed by the Muslim invaders alongwith the other religious edifices in Varanasi. The temple was apparently dedicated to Sun with big lotus in the sanctum and beautiful sculptures and decorative motifs on its limbs. The architectural and sculptural vestiges of the original temple may be seen in the residential houses of the locality as well. A portion of the plinth of the original temple with huge stone blocks with beautiful carvings, is still visible in the compound of a private house in the area. Several images and the fragmentary stone pieces have been unearthed accidentally from the foundations of the neighbouring locality during construction and repairing works. The temple also finds mention in

the *Bhaviṣya* and *Sāmba Purāṇas* as Sāmbāitya temple built by Sāmba, the son of Jāmavantī. The *Kāśī Khaṇḍa* of *Skaṇḍa-Purāṇa* also alludes to the temple of Sāmbāditya.²⁵

According to the story given in the *Purāṇas*, *Sāmba*, the son of Jāmavantī, was suffering from leprosy owing to the curse of his father. His mother Jāmvanti requested her husband to tell the way to get rid of the disease. At her request the father asked Sāmba to go to Kāśī and built a tank and install an image of Āditya along its side. By the worship of this Āditya image he would get rid of the diseases. Sāmba did accordingly and got rid of the curse. Since the image of Āditya was installed by Sāmba it was named after him as Sāmbāditya. It is mentioned in the *Purāṇas* that the people may get rid of the diseases like leprosy and may also be blessed with child after taking bath in the tank and worshipping the image of Sāmbāditya.

The existing Sāmbāditya temple and the tank were built by the *Mahārājā* of Bundī-Koṭā of Rajasthan in 18th century A.D. The temple is a plane and simple example of architecture without any decoration. Architecturally, it consists of *garbhagr̥ha*, *pradakṣiṇāpatha* and *maṇḍapa* (on west) containing the figures of two-faced Vināyaka and a goddess (unidentifiable) in the small niches. The main shrine with two entrances respectively on east and west has a north Indian style of *śikhara* with four small *śikharas* at four cardinal points.

The inner portion of the main shrine is simple and contains the symbolic form of Sun as a twelve-petalled lotus appeared all along the floor of the temple. The temple is in active worship and the devotees come to the temple every Sunday. Close to this temple, a few other Sun discs in the form of lotus are also lying uncared which show eight-petalled double lotus (possibly incomplete), 18-petalled double lotus with twelve-petalled lotus in the centre and 16-petalled double lotus with eight petalled double lotus. Diana Eck has rightly identified these examples as Sun discs.²⁶ These examples prove beyond doubt that during the medieval times Sun was worshipped in lotus form at Varanasi. On the testimony of the symbolic renderings of Sun it may be concluded that during the medieval times (11th-12th century C.E.). Varanasi has been an important centre of Sun worship where the symbolic as well as the figural representations were running parallel and hand in hand.

Notes and References

1. *Satapath Brāhmaṇa* VIII. 4.1.10; *Pancaviṃśa Brāhmaṇa* XVIII. 99.
2. *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa* CIX. 49, CX. 26; *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* III.5.14.

3. *Matsya Purāṇa*, Chaps. 74-80.
4. Sāmba Purāṇa 29.2-6. The Sun god appeared at first as a fireball and later on displayed in human form - *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* IV.13.12-15. Before showing his human form the Sun appeared in his natural form to Aditi - *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa* 105.1-3.
5. No human representation of the Sun in India of a date earlier than the Mauryan period has been traced so far, while the symbolical representations of the Sun have been discovered on prehistoric objects.
Journal of Indian Society of Oriental Art, III, No. 2. p. 125.
6. See for detail, V.C.Srivastava, *Sun-Worship in Ancient India*, Allahabad, 1972, pp. 23-32.
7. John Marshall, *Mohenjodaro and Indus Civilization*, Vol. 3, pl. LXXXVII, 4, pl.XC, 19, 22; pl.XCI-27, 33; pl.XCIII-27.
8. *Matsya Purāṇa*, Chaps. 74-5-9, 15, 16 and 18, 75-4, I,12, Chaps.77, 78, 79, 85-89 and 98. J.N.Banerjea *Development of Hindu Iconography*, Kolkata, 1957, p.109. *Pañcaviṃśa Brāhmaṇa* XVIII.9.6-8. It is significant to remind that the worship of the Sun by means of twelve-petalled lotus, was a prominent feature of *Purāṇic* Sun-worship; cf. V.C.Srivastava, *Purāṇic Record on the Sun-Worship*, *Purāṇa*, No. 2, pl.XI, pp. 40-42.
The Āśvins are associated with Sun due to their light giving and fertility producing aspects. *Āśvalāyana Gṛhyasūtra* I.15.2; *Parāskara Gṛhyasūtra* II.4.8; *Hiranyakesina Gṛhyasūtra* 1.2.6. The association of the lotus and the Sun is indicated in the *Atharvaveda* also. *Atharvaveda XIII.3.10*.
9. See for dating of the *Sauravratas* - V.C.Srivastava, *op. cit.*, p. 225.
10. *Matsya Purāṇa* 74.2.3; 98.
11. *Matsya Purāṇa* 75
12. *Matsya Purāṇa* 76
13. *Matsya Purāṇa* 77
14. *Matsya Purāṇa* 78
15. *Matsya Purāṇa* 79
16. *Matsya Purāṇa* 98
17. *Matsya Purāṇa* 97.5-9.
18. N.G.Majumdar, *Inscriptions of Bengal*, Vol. III, p. 126; V.V.Mirashi, *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, Vol. IV, pt. I. p. 119.
19. J. Allan, Catalogue of Indian Coins in the British Museum, Coins of Ancient India, pp.141-43, No. 5,6, 16-25.
20. P.L.Gupta, *Coins*, p. 187, pl.II. 29.
21. *Viṣṇudharmottar Purāṇa* II.8.4.
22. J.N.Banerjea, *op.cit.*, p.109
23. M.A.Sherring, *The Sacred City of the Hindus*, London, 1868, p.47.
24. Kamal Giri, Kāśī mein Dvādasa Āditya, *Uttara Pradesh (Kāśī Aṅk)*, Vol. 10-1, 1983, pp.60-63.
25. *Kāśī Khaṇḍa*, Chap. 48.51-58.
26. Diana L.Eck, *Banaras City of Light*, Newyork, 1982, pp. 180-81. ●