

Panch Kanyā: An Evolving Civilization's Codified Nature Worship

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Abstract

Nature worship has been integral to most civilizations. The roots of Vedic nature worship and its mythification can be traced right from the R̥gveda up-till the Itihāsas. However the manifestation is vastly different, it is more embroiled; not through the simplistic forms of pure nature worship but through archaic human symbolism encasing it. The most evolved stage of this symbolism is through women characters famously referred to as 'Panch Kanyā' in the oral tradition. Among several female characters of rich attributes and engaging story and moralistic lines that appear in the Itihāsas, the following five have been singled out, encased in a 'shlok' and have divinity attached to them. अहिल्या द्रौपदी सीता तारा मंदोदरी तथा | पंचकन् नाम स्मरे नित्यं महापातक नाशनाम् || The invocation of afore-mentioned five names will wash away all the sins of the invocator. This shlok is recited in 2 variants in the sub-continent. In the variant Sitā's name is replaced by Kunti. All the five (six) women mentioned above have been heralded as women of great power and deeply enigmatic natures. However their exclusive selection may have arisen from the vital connection of their mystical feminine with the forces of nature linked to their birth. A study of their characters render an understanding that their life and choices are governed by the nature of the elements that they are born from. By looking at literary sources regarding the Panch Kanyā; the purpose here is to understand the codified link between ancient nature worship and its more modern version through creation of; especially female characters; that can be easily transmitted through oral tradition and help maintain a link to the primary attempts at understanding the notion of divinity.

Keywords: Nature worship (5 natural elements), Vedas, Purāṇas, Panch Kanyā and mythification

1. Introduction

Nature worship has been integral to most ancient civilizations. It is possible to trace deification of such forces of nature as were a source of life and also unfathomable for man. One can see an organic development of nature deities which are then further codified in forms of myths, rituals and cultural practices. The interesting aspect of this kind of codification is that it can be seen evolving over time as well as the level and range of development (geographic as well as socio-cultural and economic) of a said civilization.

The scope of this paper is to understand the nature worship from Vedic times till Purāṇic times and how a holistic development of the Saravati (Hindu) civilization must have affected its codification and its rising complexity.

This paper will help researchers to study the rise of the Hindu civilization and how it could remain relevant through all times with the use of effective codification and making certain cultural beliefs a part of social and personal reality from Vedic to Purāṇic times.

1.2. Objectives

- 1) To understand the nature of Vedic Nature Worship
- 2) To study the journey of Nature Deities from Vedic to Purāṇic Times
- 3) To trace codification of deities done through myths and their increasing complexity as well as social need of the evolving civilization to do so

1.3. Literature review

Hillebrandt (1990): the two volumes discuss the mythology in Vedas and deification of natural elements in the Vedic times. The author also studies the evolution of nature worship and how with changing social and physical realities the form of worship and the objects of worship have changed. He also justifies the need that contemporary people must have felt to worship those specific natural elements.

Rajwade (2010): the article discusses the importance of Agni for Vedic people and its possible causes. He also discusses its further codification and mythification. How agni worship is still prevalent in covert (myths) and overt (rituals) forms has been discussed.

Bhattacharya (2001): discusses the concept of Panch Kanya and its evolution and significance. He studies these women in depth and states the possible causes for their popularity in Purānic as well as current times.

Karve (1968): discusses the characters from the Itihāsas and does a critical analysis of Purānic period's life style, socio-political realities and how it affected their process and ideas of mythification.

1.4 Discussion

Every early civilization has identified varied natural forces that they have in their independent fashion prayed to. The Rgveda makes references to several Gods who can be easily identified and directly seen to be natural elements, reference to Agni (fire), Sūrya (sun), Varuna (alternatively understood as God of water and later as God of Ocean), Uṣas (dawn), Nishā (night) are common, their relationship with one another keeps varying. E.g. in some places Uṣas is Sūrya's mother and in some wife. Such alternating can be found in mentions of these deities in Rgveda and other Vedic texts (1). It is interesting to observe however the life cycles of nature Gods. We see them assume varied forms, their roles morph, and change and in some cases become more integrative and/or specific over time. E.g. Varuna earlier regarded as God of water and ocean was later regarded specifically as the God of ocean. (2) On the other hand Indra finds an extended role from God of thunder and rains to King of Gods. This change can be understood by studying the social evolution of Sarasvati river valley peoples. One can see that some Gods seem to go out of vogue. Several things can be a reason for the same. E.g. Uṣas who is a popular Vedic goddess has almost disappeared by Puranic times, at the same time Vaç (speech) who is another significant Vedic goddess and one who co-exists with Saraswati (Goddess of knowledge) in Rgvedic period seems to have a separate entity later only in Upanishads and doesn't have a separate place in Puranas, she is amalgamated into Sarawati in Puranic texts. These can serve as some representative examples of change in Gods and their statuses with changing needs of the society in which they were formed and the change can be correlated to development and growth of these clans. We can see that as Vedic society moved from simplistic agrarian civilization to a more complex and developed one; the amount of complex codification of their Gods increased as well. This codification can be seen in non-deified elements as well. A great example of the same can be Apsarā (celestial dancers in the court of Indra the King of Gods). Apsarā were known for their beauty, grace and above all as tools Indra used to spoil the 'tapasyā' (austerity) of sages and at times demons who threatened his supremacy as King of Gods. The Apsarā with their charm and beauty would entice the sages and thus make their austerity fruitless where-by securing Indra's position. The example of Menakā (an apsarā) and Visvamitr (sage) is quite well known and representative. This clan of celestial dancers was hence quite controversial for contemporary society; however they were understood to be far away and disparate from human realm and those who only entered it for special and specific purposes. This definition of the term Apsara and all imagery attached to it is from the post Vedic period. The word Apsara originates from the word Aṣas. Aṣas originally meant 'River/water body'. Eventually it came to mean 'Apsaras' (water nymphs) and finally evolved to be called apsarā and understood in their current context. Though at first glance one can see transformation of water body to a woman, one can at closer inspection find that apsarā retained most qualities in codified form of the natural element they originally meant. A river has many curves in her flow (which is the way apsarā is described 'curvaceous like a river'), is a life giver but doesn't belong to any specific person (an apsarā too is employed by Indra but they do not have permanent marital/societal relations with anybody) and both have fluid and detached nature that allows them to remain among disparate beings and yet separate from them. As a river was to the civilization's economy; later an apsarā was to their myths and stories.

While there are many Vedic Gods and Goddesses who's codification and evolutionary journey can be thus traced, one can see that with changes in social realities of Vedic people they felt a need to bring about changes to their Gods as well which would increase the functionality of their Gods. V.K.Rajwade in his research article on Agni talks at length about the primary reason for which Agni became a tremendously important deity in the Hindu pantheon and how till date, though the immediate and essential requirement of Agni for day to day living is long gone, he has become a part of the social DNA

and hence irreplaceable. The importance of Yajñā (sacrificial fire) and rituals and ceremonies related to it (and centred on it) played a significant role in further spreading and establishing the importance of Agni in Vedic society. However, the reduction of his practical usage has led to deep codification of Agni's presence in daily life and hence has been more ritualized and limited only for extremely important and socially significant purposes, e.g. a Hindu wedding is not sanctified till the bride and groom take seven vital vows around Agni and the dead are still burned so that Agni can help the ascentation of their souls to heaven. (3) Though there are several such Gods whose traverses can be discussed I will limit my analysis to the Panch Mahā Bhūtas. The Panch Mahā Bhūtas are Prithvi (earth), Apas (water), Agni (fire), Vāyu (air) and Akash (sky/cosmic space). These five elements hold high significance in all aspects of Hindu life. They held an important place in Vedic ritual, Upanishdic philosophy and Yoga traditions. A large part of cosmology and mystic beliefs also revolve around them, stories about them are available a-plenty. However the most interesting presence of theirs can be found in codified forms in the Itihāsas and the Purāṇic Literature.

It is in this context that this paper will take a look at the Panch Kanya; five Godly women who are revered till date.

अहिल्या द्रौपदी सीता तारा मंदोदरी तथा |

पंचकनू नाम स्मरे नित्यं महापातक नाशनाम् ||

Ahilyā Draupadi Sītā Tārā Mandodari tathā |

panchkan-nām smre nityam mahā pātaka nāshnām ||

It means: Ahilyā Draupadi Sītā Tārā and Mandodari, any person who remembers and reverts these ladies daily shall have all his sins washed away/destroyed.

All the five ladies mentioned above are extremely unique and special, their story is central in the Itihāsas: Rāmāyana and Mahābhārata. They are also (in some cases) controversial women, their lives unique, and their approach to it equally difficult for a commoner to understand. They also have another common thread, they are all 'ayonijas' (not born from a woman's womb). Ahilyā was created by Brahma using the loveliest elements in all nature. Draupadi/ Yadnyaseni, is born from sacrificial fire. Sītā is a child found in untilled land in a chest and hence is referred to as Earth's daughter. Mandodari was given birth to by a frog and Tara is said to have been born from the churning of the ocean. A comprehensive look at each of these women shall be essential to understand codification.

Ahilyā was created by Brahma Dev to teach a vain apsarā a lesson that she was not the most beautiful being in the universe and hence he took the finest things from nature and created Ahilyā. Once the purpose of her birth was served, her father handed her over to an old sage Gautama, who raised her in his āshrama and returned her to her father once she reached puberty. Impressed by his stoic commitment to the task and for not falling in love with the most beautiful being in the universe, Brahma gave her away to Gautama as his wife. This angered Indra who always imagined that she shall be his wife because he was the King of Gods and only he should have had the right to possess the most beautiful woman. He lusted for her and made furtive plans to claim her. Ahilyā's reaction to being given away as a wife to a man she once revered as a father figure is not mentioned in the Puranas. They had a fulfilling married life. Once Indra seduced her by assuming the form of Gautama Rishi, not ready to believe her innocence Gautama cursed her and Indra and turned her into a stone. Though later versions of this story claim that Ahilyā was unaware of Indra's true identity, Vālmiki Rāmāyan states that she was well aware of who he was and after their coitus she addressed him as 'Dev Rāj' and urged him to leave before her husband returned. (4) This clearly indicates that Ahilyā made a conscious yet bold choice to have coitus with a man who was not her husband. The way her character is built till that point in time, it is clear that she is a woman of piety and of deeply moral values, she is idealised in every way, this behaviour of hers hence comes as quite a surprise. Her polarised behaviour which in one place is the peak of socially idolized behaviour and on the other hand that of conscious and self-willed choices makes her like nature from which she had been created. All beautiful elements of nature that were used to create her have this trait, on most days they are tameable, useful, and glorified however they can be equally unpredictable and can make sudden situations/behaviours that are outside of the scope of human understanding and that disturb the human life as it is till that point.

Draupadi is the lady protagonist of Mahābhārata. She was born from the sacrificial fire, she married five men. Events in her life seem like a sinusoidal wave. She was fiery, impatient and had the courage to question men and rules of a man's world. Her intelligent argument in the Kuru court in which she was humiliated speaks volumes of her strength of mind and will. (5)

In one place she states 'I am like the fire in a yogi's (ascetic's) hut, I am pure myself but I also have control on the impurities of this world'. Draupadi fought for her rights, for all things that are sanātana dharma (eternal truths) and was a catalyst for destruction of all people who are personification of the evil. Interestingly this is also the description (bringer of light, protector of the right and destroyer of evil) of Agni in the Vedas. Draupadi in her own right holds these deep resemblances with Agni from which she was born.

Mandodari and Tārā are characters from the Rāmāyan. They were both born from water element. They were married first to evil persons (Rāvana and Vālī respectively) and later married their brothers-in-law (Vibhishan and Sugreev respectively) who were of pious nature. Both counselled their respective husbands well and did not mutely allowed injustice or bad governance to happen. They ensured that their respective children ascend the throne after their husband's death. While Mandodari successfully kept Rāvana from harming or raping Sitā, Tārā successfully calmed down the angry Laxman and saved her husband's life. Both these women display an astute political understanding and are good counsellors. They took the responsibility to care for their families in every practical manner, ensured that their children's rights were safeguarded. They came to terms with their husband's death and agreed to marry his younger brother which was also a custom and also a firm step to ensure that their children ascend the throne. They could have refused to fall in line, they need not have agreed to the counsel of their husband's slayer (Rāma) but they cited the right side and amicably achieved their ends rather than start another war. They show good sense and adaptability to circumstances. Mandodari and Tārā's is the perfect picture of extremely judicious and practical women. They achieve their ends by adopting ways that are a win-win situation, they safeguard all and choose paths that are dangerous but of minimum friction. Their fluid and malleable nature makes them like water they are born from. Both are adjusting, they will take the shape of the vessel (situation) in which they are put but will retain their own properties. Though both these characters don't have an exhaustive presence in Rāmāyan, their significance is no less and hence revered.

Sitā is the lady protagonist of Rāmāyana. She is chastity, morality, commitment, fortitude and tolerance personified. Sitā's life from her discovery in a chest right up to being kidnapped by Rāvana seems like an idyllic fairy tale. She does not see constant strife from day one the way Draupadi does. Sitā had royal upbringing. She was the only one who could lift Lord Shiva's bow. She then married Rāma who was the only person beside her to achieve the said feat. Then a twist in her idyllic life, she was kidnapped by Rāvana and was surrounded by scary looking demons and ogresses. She had to also see the cruel wounding of her only protector Jatāyū. Then meeting Hanumāna she got to know of her husband's activities to recover her. The war was won and she has to give an Agni Parikshā to prove her innocence and purity. Later she was sent away while yet pregnant based on a washer man's vile remark and finally chose self-immolation. Unwilling to bear the injustice any more she invoked her mother Prithvi (Earth) who swallowed her whole. Sitā too holds uncanny resemblances to the element from which she is born, she is powerful, and has tremendous potential but most of her life she shows deep love and commitment to her husband. Sitā is the daughter of earth and just like her mother she is tolerant, nurturing someone who needs assistance to fight off evil. Someone essential to all but always taken for granted.

1.5 Inference and Conclusion

A careful look at these five women will reveal that though they are born from different forces of the Panch Mahā Bhutas they actually seem to be codified versions of them. Though Agni, Prithvi also hold a separate existence in the Purānas and the Itihāsas they are on a celestial realm, these women however function in the earthly realm. As the complexity of codification increased it must have been felt that personifying a God in human form is not enough, he/she also needs to become an active 'person' in the society. Hence we see such human personifications further humanised. The Purānas and Itihāsas are believed to be created to make the complex ritualistic Vedic ideology and Upanishadic philosophy easy for common man to understand, re-tell and relate to. It is hence no surprise that the most important and vital of Hindu Gods find a ritualistic, philosophic and mythic presence in the evolving civilization. The fact that stories are more convenient to transmit and that they have greater impact must mean that such codification was not just made to help the deities thrive but also to make them more approachable and easier to assimilate to for their audiences.

Hindus today do not practice of Yajñā (sacrifice) to the extent to which it was done and expected to be done each day by each person in the Vedic period, nor is the Upanishadic philosophy entirely understood and practiced on a mass conscious level today. However, these stories still survive and enjoy immense popularity and have found firmer place in people's heart through broadcast and digital media. Every society has strived to retain the wisdom of its collective pasts. It will be safe to say that the Hindus have managed it quite well through effective codification of their deities who even in this modern day and age; and possibly in an abstract form remain a firm part of their realities.

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