

THE CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF FISH IN INDIAN WRITING: A LITERATURE ATTEMPT OF UNDERSTANDING THE MATSYA INCARNATION

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Abstract

Fish constitutes the most diverse and crucial part of the marine ecosystem. Not only it supports the economy and ecosystem but also has been a major influence in human culture and literature. Fishing is one of the most ancient professions and has been practiced for over 40000 years. Bay of Bengal is one such region which was initially at the heart of the fishing map but has been witnessing a gradual decline since the last century. Fishes have been a constant part of ritual and beliefs of worlds major culture and religions. Whether Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity or Jewism, fishes have been a part of the practice and scared epics of these religions. The cultural impact of fishes is enormous and inseparable. Fish have been mentioned in the context of savior, beauty, illusion, and monsters. The folk tales, stories, cinemas, novels and astrology, astronomy and fantasies have been deeply influenced by these organisms. Matsya is Sanskrit name for fish and the earliest textual reference of Fish in human culture comes from Matsyaavatar in Hinduism. A complete purana known as Matsyapurana revolves around Lord Vishnu's Matsyaavatar and preservation of the civilization during Pralaya or the great flood. The incarnation takes the form of half human and half fish (or a chimera), which is possibly the earliest reference to a Merman in any religious or non-religious text. In our study we have tried to understand the Matsyaavatar from the perspective of Fable genre of literature and its cultural influence on the society.

Keywords: Fish, Religion, Lord Vishnu, Matsya avatar, Merman, Matsya purana, Fable.

INTRODUCTION

Religion is the key ingredient that influences and drives social behavior in human society (Norenzayan & Shariff, 2008). Many religious beliefs have emphasized and practiced conservation and protection of species and ecosystems. Sacred species and sites are also concentrated in biodiversity-rich nations; in India, for example, there are several groups of sacred animals (e.g., lizards, snakes, frogs; Krishna, 2014), and more informal sacred sites than formal protected areas (Kala, 2011; Rutte, 2011). India is home to world's oldest culture and religions. Ecological beliefs have resulted in protection of forest areas, aquatic bodies, and various species (Yachkaschi & Yachkaschi, 2012). In Hinduism, many species are sacred and are worshipped due to their association with deities. Lord Shiva, one of the three trinities in Hinduism, is also known as Pashupatinath roughly translated as Lord of all animals or beings. Mahseer (Tor species) is regarded as the children of the goddess Parvati (Katwate et al., 2014), these fish are prominent in the Savitri River of the Western Ghats. The earliest reference to Fish in Indian writing is found in Vedas and Puranas. The fish are considered sacred as they are associated with Lord Vishnu, whose first incarnation on Earth was in the form of a fish. In this incarnation Lord Vishnu is believed to have saved the first human on Earth by informing him of the calamitous floods that were to follow (Gupta et. al., 2016). There is a whole Purana dedicated to "Matsya". One of the very prominent references comes from the Ancient epic Mahabharata, where the mother of the author of this epic viz. Satyavati is depicted as the daughter of a demigoddess Adrika who was condemned to a life of a fish due to a curse (Roy, 2004 as cited in Bagchi and Jha ,2011). The cultural significance of Fish in Indian context becomes highly important due to the fact that first reference of sexual dimorphism in fish comes from Panini ((Lahiri and Shastri, 1971 as cited in Bagchi and Jha 2011). Fish is an inseparable part of Indian culture. Fish has found its place as an Idol or Incarnation of the universal god, Lord Visnu, of mainstream Hinduism, in fact, shows the vast range of fish culture in Indian panorama. Another such reference comes from the Folk god Makala mentioned in Bengali literature and the other one as Goddess worshipped in Karnataka, Kaniamma. It's no wonder that fish has been simultaneously used as food, as totem, as a symbol of fortune, as an

art motif in sculpture, and as an object in literature and folksongs and it has been iterated that pisciculture may be part of the solution to the increasing need for food diversity and arresting the decline in per capita protein nutrition of the Indian populace in the years to come (Bagchi and Jha, 2011)

Although there are multiple references to the folklores available on impact of Fish in ancient texts and their influences on the culture. We have tried to describe the literary beauty of one such ancient and culturally significant, sacred Purana “Matsya Purana”. In this paper we try to understand the Lord’s incarnation as a Fish, who becomes a guide, a savior, and the creator of the world.

Matsya-avatara -

In Hinduism, which is predominantly the practice of living in India, the ancient reference to a Fish comes in the first of reference as an avatar of Lord Vishnu. His incarnation as a Matsya (Fish), which is his first incarnation of any form on Earth. According to history, the sage king Sathyavrath (or Manu), who was righteous and a follower of Dharma, found a tiny fish while performing his daily rituals. The fish spoke to him and requested refuge. The king at first couldn’t figure it out but later accepted and carried the fish to his palace in his Kamandalam (a small jug used by sages for carrying water). Seeing the fish to safety by his bedside, the king slept through the night. He woke up next morning to the voice of the fish. The king was a bit surprised to see the tiny fish grew up to the size of the jug and felt difficulty in breathing. The king ordered his servants to get a bigger vessel for the small refugee. The fish thanked the king and the king felt at peace. Within few minutes the Fish outgrew the new vessel as well, cried for help. The king who was about to leave for his routine morning rituals was puzzled and had some suspicion but still moved the fish to an even bigger vessel. The tiny fish was soon the size of a river. The king’s suspicion grew, and he was convinced that this was no normal refugee but his idol, Lord Vishnu. The once tiny fish now outgrew the river itself. Every time the habitat of the fish was changed, the Fish kept requesting the king not leave it alone, for it feared for the predators and the king obliged as it was his duty to protect those under his refuge. The Fish had now outgrown the river itself and was then transferred into the ocean. It was huge and occupied the complete ocean. A thought arose in the king’s mind while staring at the fish and he bowed down before the fish and prayed. He sang hymns in the praise of Lord Vishnu and thanked the lord for his presence. The Fish then took the form of the Lord, but the lower half remained that of the fish and blessed the sage king. The lord then spoke to the king and told him that due to upcoming pralaya (great flood or deluge); submerging of the world due to lapse good deeds and dominance of evil, he has incarnated as Matsya. He also informed the king that he needed to bring together the Saptarishis (the seven prominent rishis of Hinduism), seeds of all plants, food gains, a pair of all animals and birds, king of snakes Vasuki and reach the peak of the mountain far north where He will find a huge boat on which he needs to transfer everyone and everything, during the great flood. He didn’t have to worry about the boat and the boat would reach him. The Lord returned to his gigantic fish form and this time with horns between its eyes. The fish now moved towards the next mission. The other part of Matsya-avatar discusses the procuring the four vedas from Haygriva, a horse-human hybrid demon.

This context has been discussed in multiple purana’s and references in different formats although the base and ending remains the same. Our primary interest is to understand the beauty of the Matsya in relevance to English literature.

Scientific or practical reasons that have been referred several times for explaining the depth and significance of the Matsyaavatara – in few instances the progressive evolution path is consideration explaining Matsya as the first vertebrate animal and the next avatara’s gradually seeing evolutionary path as in Kurma-avatara (Reptile), Varaha-avatara (Mammal) and so on. In some instances, certain authors have put forward the understanding that Matsya was the only organism that was fast and powerful enough under water to slay Hayagriva and procure the Veda’s. Another version describes the evolution lifecycle of a fish citing the evolution of the fish from a tiny carp to a massive aquatic fish and later half god half fish representation. While most of the studies do derive insights into religion, philosophy, ethnology, history, and science we have tried to understand the literary beauty and significance of Matsya.

When Manu/Sathyavrata saw the carp fish (Saphari) for the first time it was too tiny as well as it spoke. This type of fish is highly restless. As we try to see the beauty of the conversation, the speaking fish seems like a delight along with the fact that it was also close to microscopic. Any organism with such quality can draw the attention of a Human being. The fish spoke seeking refuge, with an organism so minute we do think that it must have spoken in a sweet soft voice, which also can be one of the reasons that would have earned the king’s pity. The speaking animal may not actually have been an interesting turning point, as we do suspect that as per the Purana’s and Veda’s the cross-species conversation was accepted and possible. Another beautiful approach to understanding the King to provide refuge to the tiny fish can be a part of king’s duties to provide refuge to those who seek it from him, his strict adherence to dharma or the teachings that he must have received from the Gurukul to provide shelter and help those in need. The beauty of this context also lies in the fact that this was the First avatara of the lord Vishnu but adherence to dharma and discharge of king’s duties was established well before any avatara of Vishnu* and even though the evil was on its peak during this time. This suggests that darkness cannot eclipse the light forever.

The next conversation happens when the King brings the fish to his palace and keeps it in his Kamandalam (ritual pot) near his bed. The fish speaks when it starts suffocating due to the overnight growth resulting in the outgrowing the pot itself. The fish

again asks the king to save its life and requests the King to transfer it to a bigger pot. In this conversation, the growth of the fish is not a metaphor, but the tiny young fish grew measuring 16 fingers in length. This again describes the behavior of the carp, which is restless but not in literal meaning of motion instead we interpret that the dynamism lies in the size of the fish. The King listens and helps the fish. It's interesting that although he is surprised but he is not suspicious or concerned by the sudden growth of the fish. Even for such a small creature he empathizes and directs his helpers to transfer the fish to a bigger container. The King's nature and attitude to help the poor creature shows the kind nature which justifies his sage like nature. Both fish and King seem to have an invisible bond. Both trust each other. Despite the rise of evil, the bond of trust prevails. Further conversation takes place with the further growth of the Fish and every time the King puts the fish in a new habitat. The Fish outgrew big tank, the pond, the mighty Ganges as well the Gigantic Ocean (which should possible be the Bay of Bengal or the Indian Ocean itself). The King's suspicion of the true nature of the fish grew with the frequent change of its habitat. The tiny fish with growth keeps on becoming mightier and beautiful. Scary may not be the right adjective to define growth, as one can argue should we fear the dinosaur or admire it; should we fear the blue whale or applaud its might and beauty? The tiny fish has still not taken its place as the Lord's incarnation on earth. This fact is yet to be realized by King Manu and the world and has not yet been revealed by the fish as well. There seems to be a logical explanation of the same, the fish has been surprising the King with unimaginable growth in a very short span (in just less than week time), the fish is sentient creature and seems to be testing or examining the king with his vow to adhere to dharma and protection of those under his refuge at the same time the fish is also giving the chance to the king recognize its true form or purpose. When the fish becomes too large for the ocean itself, the king who had his suspicions but is not yet confident enough to confirm and thus he asks if the fish is a demon or the almighty Vishnu himself, as who else can have the power to do so? In this conversation, the king does suspect that a similar power can be displayed by the evil (demon) as well. But he suspects the creature to be more god-like as he knows in his heart that the demon (evil) although powerful cannot display such kind of act or play. Convinced in his heart, he prays to the lord and asks him to show his true form. This again describes the difference between a true sage and a pretender. The true sage can distinguish between good and evil. They will not discriminate or be biased but will decipher the true nature. Lord Vishnu appears but not in his true but half god and half fish form, this form of the lord is roughly known as the Matsya avatara or Matsya incarnation. This form is the sacred image which devotees in Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism worship and this form is found in the scriptures across the texts and places of worships.

Matsya becomes the chauffeur (Sculler) of the large boat during the great deluge. This brings the importance of seeing a fish before beginning the day or start of any task or event in Hinduism. The Fish was the remover of obstacles and the savior during the great deluge. It was also the one who preserved all the life forms and gave another chance to those aboard for a fresh start. We also interpret this in a different way – the boat is the vessel of righteousness which the lord wanted the deserving to board, the Seven Sages (Saptarishis) are bearers of knowledge, dharma, and stability. Manu himself is the follower of dharma under the guidance of the Seven Sages and unbiased administrator who will see through the establishment for the benefit of all living beings. The great flood is the path, full of obstacles and evil. The Matsya is the Sculler who will guide those who board the boat, to the destination. This also means that the King put his faith in Matsya and did as he was directed, and Matsya guided the vessel with boarders to safety. The Human-Fish form is the earliest reference to a merman. The beauty of the Matsya Avatara lies in the fact that Lord Vishnu himself has been referred as mesmerizing one and with bottom half the body with shiny scale and a dorsal tail. The Human form vanishes once the Lord reveals himself to the Sage King and once, he reverts to the fish form, horns appear under the eyes of the gigantic fish. These horns serve two purposes, firstly they cause fear in the heart of the evil (the demon Hayagriva) and secondly these acts as the hook to tie the ropes of the boat during the turbulent journey of the boat. The glorified fish serves as god's relation to the non-human animals, thus establishing the context that all life forms are sacred which is also a narrative articulated from the avatars of Vishnu and Shiva.

DISCUSSION

Although as per the Sanatan or Hindu literature, Lord Vishnu incarnation takes place “when there is a major uprising of evil (or decline of dharma), then to restore the balance of dharma the Lord appears on earth (in greater context instead of India). To protect the righteous, to destroy and annihilate the wicked and restore the ways of righteousness and dharma I appear on this earth, age after age”. This is not an exact but almost very close translation or understanding of the Shloka found in the 4th chapter of Shrimad Bhagvad Geeta (shloka 7-8)

यदा यदा हि धर्मस्य ग्लानिर्भवति भारत।
अभ्युत्थानमधर्मस्य तदात्मानं सृजाम्यहम्॥
परित्राणाय साधूनां विनाशाय च दुष्कृताम्।
धर्मसंस्थापनार्थाय सम्भवामि युगे युगे ॥

The Matsya-avatara had also taken place under the similar circumstances. Based on the Hindu literatures, it has been mentioned numerous times that the rise of evil and decline of righteousness causes pain and suffering to the mother Earth. This can be extrapolated into another fact that the decline of dharma or rise of evil can also correspond to ecological imbalance due

to malpractices of polluting the environment causing extinction of animal (hunting and over feeding or causing disruption of evolutionary food chain) and plant species (deforestation), degradation of non-renewable natural resources. If interpreted scientifically or philosophically this ultimately leads to the rise of sea level into an extinction level event which has been correctly described in the context of Matsya-avatara. This sheds light on the fact that conservation of each and every life form is one of the most crucial aspects in restoring the life on Earth. At the same time this also means to preserve and sustain all the species equally and nurture them to flourish so that situation like great deluge doesn't happen. In Matsya-avatara, the God fish guides the sage King to preserve and conserve the seeds and pair of all life forms so that the earth can be repopulated. This also signifies that in situations like great deluge fish is both a friend and a guide, and source of food as well. The over fishing in Bay of Bengal region has caused an ecological imbalance in marine life. Hence, it becomes crucial to form the balance between exploitation of marine life and their conservation.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we have put forwards honest efforts to develop an understanding of the beauty of Matsya avatar. As per the Vedas and Purana's the warrior fish slays the demon Hayagriva, who stole the Vedas and hid them in the ocean. Between the journey of the tiny carp fish from a small pot to the Ganges and followed by the Ocean, it seems highly likely that the Ocean may possibly be the Bay of Bengal or the Indian Ocean itself. While this fact needs to be proven scientifically and geographically, we feel that moving the Fish from Ganges to the Ocean would have been less tedious if it was Bay of Bengal as Ganges meets the Bay of Bengal near Ganga-Sagar in the present day Kolkata and travel or transport via the river route would be highly likely for the large fish specially when the river meets the larger ocean which would have been an ideal habitat for the growing fish. The Matsya also becomes the guide, preserver, and savior of all life forms during the great deluge. The translation from Sanskrit to English or any other language does injustice to the literary beauty of the actual text. Much remains to be understood about the morphological beauty of Matsya, from a tiny talking fish to the savior of the universe. Fish is a part of meal across the world but cultural representation in the form of worship is equally important. This helps with the ties to ecological balance and role for humans as a mediator and influencer in saving the environment. The textual reference where God's incarnation in fish-human like persona suggests the cycle of evolution and how humans are inseparable from other living beings in the nature. We also establish that Matsyaavatara is the first Merman reference, which has not been acknowledged in any literature or studies yet. There is a lot of knowledge that needs to be extracted and deciphered from Veda's and Purana's. In our short attempt we try to learn more about the significance of Matsya. We will try to learn and explain more on the beautiful creature which has ties across borders and religions and seems the like the right link to tie the whole world together.

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