



GARUDA: THE DIVINE STEED AND DEVOTEE OF LORD VISHNU

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Abstract

Garuda, the legendary bird-like creature which has supernatural powers and is a notable creature in Hindu mythology. It is also said that Garuda is faithful to his lord Vishnu and known for being a loyal disciple and mount of lord Vishnu. It unveils the origin of his birth, divine attributes and his crucial role in Hindu scriptures, such as the Garuda Purana and the famous epic Mahabharata. Besides Hinduism it also explores into the cultural significance of Garuda, including his presence in art, observance in various festivals and his influence in other religious traditions. Garuda possess a transcendent and heavenly body that bridges a gap between the physical world and divine dimensions. Garuda motivates the devotees by enduring the symbol of faith, courage and divine protection.

Keywords - divine attributes, iconography, obstacles , procession

Introduction

Garuda, the legendary creature which has a well known place in Hindu mythology serves as a key figure in the group of deities. Being the mount of Lord Vishnu he is a devoted follower, symbolizing strength, devotion, and loyalty. According to Hindu mythology Garuda is said to be the son of Sage Kashyapa and Vinata one of the daughter of king Dhaksha. In Tamil tradition, the bird is often called as Garudalvar. He is thereby implanted with the Alvars. Alvars are the twelve mystic saints who sang the glory of Vishnu in their literature called Naalayiram. Alvars are historical personalities and Garuda is mythical. By virtue of his immeasurable strength he has the status of vehicle of Lord Vishnu.

Iconography of Garuda

Garuda is called as King of Birds. He is known by many names by his deities like Pakshiraja, Khagaraja, Garutman, Vinatasunu, Khagesvara, periya thiruvadi, Bhujangari and yet many. Through there are several epithets of Garuda, Vinatasunu is famous as he was fond of his mother. In Hindu mythology, Garuda is visible as half man and half bird like creature. He has an eagle like head with big opened eyes and bluish dark beak .The wings are big golden yellow colored which is slightly opened so that they are ready to fly. He has two or four hands. If Lord Vishnu is mounted on his back then his rear hands will be holding Vishnu's feet otherwise he will be carrying jar of Amrita known as the immortal nectar and an umbrella in his front hands and at the rear his hands shown as Namaste posture. Garuda wears Nagas as his ornaments. He wears Naga Vasuki as his sacred thread, Padma and Mahapadma as his earrings, Karkota as his necklace, Shankha and Gulika as his jewels and Naga Takshaka in his Girdle. Other Nagas serves as messengers and his servants.

Garuda in Hindu Scriptures

Garuda, the celestial bird is represented in two greatest Hindu epics like Mahabharata in its Adiparvan and Ramayana. Various Puranas that deals with Garuda are Garuda Purana, Narada Purana, Vayu Purana, Vishnu Purana, Bhagavata Purana, Linga Purana, Skanda Purana and so on. It is known that in Garuda Purana got an important place in Hindu religion. Garuda is equated with Vishnu which exerted a tremendous impact on the arts and thoughts of generations of Vaishnavism. The Ramayana of Valmiki traces the pedigree of Garuda came from Brahma. Brahma was a descendant of Vishnu. From Brahma came the Marici and Kasyapa. Kasyapa was the father of Aruna and Garuda and so the children of Kasyapa were the great grand children of Brahma. Likewise Mahabharata relates the birth story of Aruna and Garuda.

Puranic story of Garuda

Kasyapa one among the Prajapatis had twenty one wives, of them Vinata and Kadru were his favourites. Vinata and Kadru were the daughters of another Prajapati called Daksa. Vinata and Kadru rendered a great service and pleased with service Kasyapa offered them a boon they desired. Kadru wished to have thousand nagas and Vinata desired to have two sons who are more powerful than thousand nagas. Kadru laid hundred eggs and Vinata two eggs. On the 500th year Kadru hatched her eggs, but Vinata's egg did not hatch yet. Vinata was pained much at the sight of Kadru was playing with her children. So in curiosity broke open one of her eggs in secret and a semi-grew child came out of it, which was Aruna the charioteer of the Surya. Aruna enraged in anger as his mother Vinata forced opened the egg in its prematurity. So Aruna cursed his mother Vinata to be a slave of Kadru. But later Aruna granted her the redemption from the curse that after five hundred years the other egg will hatch and a powerful son will be born through it. "Garuda your son will release you from the clutches of Kadru", Aruna said. Vinata became Kadru's slave in contest to find out the color of the Indra's horse tail. The former lost in the contest as Kadru's naga children hang on the tail of the horse. Originally the color of the tail was white, but Kadru tricked and won the contest. Then after Vinatā became the slave of the later.

By this time five hundred years passed the other egg hatched, Garuda came out with blazing effulgence, shone like the Surya, and rose into the sky with incredible speed. Garuda was much worried about the serfdom of his mother and requested his aunt Kadru and her children, what he should do to release his mother from their custody. They demanded the amrta from the devaloka, which was under the control on Indra. Garuda immediately wanted to fulfill the job, informed his decision to his mother, and requested her guidance to reach devaloka. Vinata gave him the suggestions to eat the Nisadas on his way to devaloka, if he feels hungry not to eat the brahmans. Garuda did it as his mother suggested. One the way Garuda reached the forest where his father Kasyapa was engaged in tapas. Kasyapa blessed his son Garuda and advised to prey on the elephant and tortoise living in the pond. Garuda took the preys in his beak. He was looking for a place to sit and consume his food. He found a huge fig tree and landed on one of its branches. As the huge Garuda landed on the branch, unable to bear the weight, it started breaking. Uneventfully upon this branch were hanging the Balakhilya risis of the height of a thumb and engaged in tapas. It would be a great sin to disturb them and so Garuda caught the great branch on his beak and flew to the place where his father was living. Knowing Garuda's plight, Kasyapa the teacher of Balakhilya risis, asked them to move to some other place. Pleased with Kasyapa's request they did so and blessed Garuda with success in his mission.

Even before the arrival of Garuda in devaloka, bad omens began appearing to Indra and other celestial beings. Brahaspati with his divine eyes saw Garuda, son of Kasyapa approaching the heaven to snatch the amrita kalasa. So Indra and devas stood guard over the kalasa, but Garuda defeated them all and performed the amrtakalasa paharanam. Indra followed Garuda and requested him to make friendship with him and give back the amrita. Garuda relates the sad state of affair of his mother and the need for the amrta. Garuda made alliance with Indra to snatch back the kalasa. As planned Garuda gave the amrtakalasa to Kadru and released his mother. Soon after Indra snatched back the kalasa, because of this victory Vishnu gave the permission to be his vahana. Therefore, Garuda became Vishnu's mount after this heroic encounter with Indra.

The Fig tree upon which the Balakhilyas were residing is noted in the Ramayana of Valmiki. Ravana is said to have observed the risis upon its branch. Due to Kasyapa's request, the Balakhilyas abandoned the branch, and Garuda was advised by his father to drop the broken piece of wood in the sea. It is supposed to have later become the island Lanka,

the abode of Ravana. Garuda received a boon from Indra to the effect that he should be permitted to prey on snakes, so avenge the nagas for ill treating his mother. The request was granted and there upon he went on preying snakes.

Garuda was preying on the innocent snakes, he was a kind- hearted person. In order to stop the indiscriminate killing of snakes by Garuda, Vasuki entreated him for an agreement. Accordingly, one snake was every day sent to Garuda to be his food. One day a mother who had only one snake-son had to offer him to be the food for Garuda. They met a good natured king called Jimutavahana who hearing the sad story of the old mother, agreed to offer himself to Garuda. Garuda took him to the top of the mountain and started eating but from the taste of the flesh, he thought, it could not be a snake. He came to know the Jimutavahana was a gandharva but in the mean time, he had died. His chaste wife came there and prayed to Devi to give life to her husband. Devi brought him back to life and made him king of gandharvas. Jimutavahana spoke to Garuda on behalf of the nagas and requested him not to eat snakes. There upon Garuda gave up eating nagas.

Biography of Garuda

The biography of Garuda is listed in various events as follows,

- (1) When Krishna lost his crown to a demon, Garuda recovered it.
- (2) The vanaras who went in search of Sita visited the place of Garuda.
- (3) Garuda got married to the sixteen daughters of Dakṣa Prajapati.
- (4) During the war with Ravana, Rama and his warriors were affected by the effect of the nagastra, sent by Indrajit, at which Garuda came and relieved them.
- (5) Garuda attended the birth-day celebrations of Arjuna.
- (6) Garuda's son was Mayura 'peacock', who was presented to Skanda when he was born.

Miracle of Kal Garudan



fig 1 kalgarudan at naachiyar temple

Figure1 represents statue of Kal Garudan which is made of a Saligrama stone located in Srinivasa perumal temple which is about 10 kilometers away from Kumbakonam. This temple is also known as Naachiyar temple which is named after goddess Lakshmi as Naachiyar (Thayaar) who always stands ahead lord Vishnu. It is one of the 108 divyadesams . This temple has rich religious culture from ancient period. There is a separate premise for garudan here. Every year the kal garudan festival is celebrated with huge number of devotees in the tamil month of margazhi(decemer-january) as brahmotsavam and Garuda sevai in the Tamil month of Panguni(march -april). During these festivals garuda is taken out around the premises of the temple. It is said that Garudan helped lord Vishnu is tracing Mahalaksmi here. In turn Vishnu

blessed Garuda with a special status in this temple. The honor is given in the form of dresses and ornaments. The kal Garuda is worshipped by devotees and he offers his profound blessing who worships him for nine consecutive Thursdays. He blesses people with nagadhoshams, obstacles removed in late marriages and couple who is willing to have children.

Miracles at Garuda sevai:

During Garuda sevai, every year miracles occur here. When the idol of Garuda is ready to take out of the shrine by four devotees initially and the weight of the statue seems increasing and it is carried by 8,16,32,64 devotees and later when they take inside the shrine finally it is decreased as 64,32,16,8,4 devotees who places the idol back into the shrine. Another amazing miracle is the sweat drops noted on the statue of Garuda during the six hour long journey of procession.

During procession the swan mount of Thayaar moves forward the mount of Vishnu because of the weight of Garuda Vahana. This unexplained miracle is happens every year and it is worshipped by many devotees and celebrated as a festival. It is believed by devotees that some supernatural forces acts upon the mount in accordance with the increasing and decreasing weight of the statue when moved forward and away from the shrine without adding any external forces.

Garuda in Other Religious Traditions

Other than Hinduism, Garuda is notable in Buddhism and Jainism.



Figure 2. garuda image facing chennakeshava temple at belur with gopura (entrance tower)

Figure 2 represents the statue of Garuda that stands opposite to the Chennakeshava temple at Belur. The statue was implanted during the period of Vijayanagara empire.



Figure 3. the balinese wooden statue of vishnu mounted on garuda located at purna bhakti pertiwi museum, mini indonesia indah, jakarta.

Conclusion

Among the various attributes of Vishnu, his most favourite is his Vahana, the Garuda. In view of his important status in the Vaishnavism of the Tamil country, it may appear an overemphasis which has been given to his personality. Garuda helps in unifying devotees by eradicating the evilness through the procession. The procession which is colourful and beautifully decorated upholds the heart of devotees and profound with greater knowledge and divinity by increasing faith among the devotees between heaven and earth. This plays a vital role in Hindu religion and culture especially in Vaishnavism.

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