

Sri Aurobindo's Aswapati : Negotiating the Vedic 'Horse' as a Symbol

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Abstract

The horse has occupied a pride of place among the animals in most civilizations since ancient times, more so in the Vedic age where it was not only used as a military asset but also as a powerful symbol that concerned the kings and the subjects alike. However, it is in its symbolic context that the horse or *aswa* in Sanskrit has generated multiple interpretations. This study focuses on some of the symbolic aspects of the horse as evident in early Vedic Sanskrit texts and highlights the interpretation of Sri Aurobindo which served in significantly bringing down semantic differences in the context of the horse symbol. Aswapati, an important character in Sri Aurobindo's epic *Savitri* is an elaborate illustration of Sri Aurobindo's reading of the *aswa* as representative of 'prana' or life energy. This study illustrates that Sri Aurobindo's approach essentially harmonized the varied and often conflicting nuances which were generated as different systems of interpretations approached the symbol in accordance with their limited range of belief systems.

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It is perhaps universally accepted that the horse has occupied a primal place among animals in the context of the classical Sanskrit texts right up to the puranas. *Aswa*, as it was so termed, was a prized creature since the early Vedic age largely because of the leverage it gave to humans in terms of its mobility, agility and resilience. In other words, the internecine conflicts of tribes since the earliest days of our history demanded that horses were to be nurtured as military assets both to maintain peace through deterrence and also to act as aid in the movement of troops in the battlefield. It would therefore be appropriate to class the *aswa* as an animal whose use was specialized to the ruling and the warrior class, unlike the *go* or cattle which was commonly associated with the nuance of domesticity or the priestly class generally as units of wealth.

A corollary of the horse as a unit of royalty and power is evident in its use as the sacrificial animal in a royal ritual meant to perpetuate the prosperity and fortune of a king. In fact, the *aswamedha*¹ was one of the four most important rites in the ancient Vedic tradition, the other three being – *agnikitya* – building of the fire altar; *vajapeya* – a soma sacrifice; and *rajasuya* or royal inauguration. The ceremonies associated with the *aswamedha* were elaborate, lasting for over a year and it culminated in the sacrifice of the horse with the king as the sacrificer. *Satapatha Brahmana*² required that the sacrifice could be conducted only by a king and its object was to assert territorial sovereignty as well as to pray for general prosperity of the kingdom. As such the implication of a

successful sacrifice was that the sacrificer, here a king, had unquestioned domination of neighbouring kingdoms as well as material prosperity within his territory.

However, it was this markedly material side of this ritual with the *aswa* that brought into sharp focus a serious inadequacy of the scope of a horse as an asset of the royalty. While it stood for material power and military force, it would have hardly made a difference to the mystical traditions of the Vedic age unless it was invested with qualities which would have had a relevance to the priestly class and the sages. It is perhaps in this context that the *aswa* assumed a cosmologic status in ancient Sanskrit literature.

Brhadaranya Upanishad,³ considered as one of the most important Upanishad, begins with a passage that reinforces the cosmic symbolism of the *aswa*. The first chapter, titled 'The World as a Sacrificial Horse' begins with a sustained correlation between the physiology of the horse and the external world order and the mysticism of the correlation cannot be missed:

"Aum, the dawn, verily, is the head of the sacrificial horse, the sun the eye, the wind the breath, the open mouth the *vaishvanara* fire; the year is the body of the sacrificial horse, the sky is the back, the atmosphere is the belly, the earth the hoof, the quarters the sides, the intermediate quarters the ribs, the seasons the limbs, the months and the half-months the joints, days and nights the feet, the stars the bones, the clouds the flesh; the food in the stomach is the sand, the rivers are the blood vessels, the liver and the lungs are the mountains, the herbs and trees are the hair. The rising (sun) is the forepart, the setting (sun) the hind part, when he yawns then it lightens, when he shakes himself, it thunders, when he urinates then it rains; voice, indeed, is his voice."⁴

While the correlation between the horse in its parts and the external nature can be understandable, the intricate detail of the *aswamedha* takes this physical correlation further and stretches it into the realm of the mystical. *Yajur Veda*⁵ mentions that among the rituals of the horse sacrifice one involves the chief queen lying with the corpse of the sacrificed horse till the next morning when the priests raise her from the place. With very few Vedic rituals requiring the physical presence of the queen, the need of the queen to undergo a rather macabre rite of having to lie with the sacrificed horse for the night takes the horse's role clearly beyond the merely symbolic. Even as a fertility rite the presence of a dead animal can be considered a rarity in comparative mythology, and it is this problem that points to the role of the *aswa* as a symbol of life force or *prana* with the ritual implication being that the *prana* of the sacrificed horse goes to the chief queen as it dies, and permeates through her to the subjects of the kingdom with the expectation of 'manly offspring'. In fact the *aswamedha* rituals concluded with the following prayer:

"May this Steed bring us all-sustaining riches, wealth in good kine, good horses, manly offspring.

Freedom from sin may Aditi vouchsafe us: the Steed with our oblations gain us lordship!"⁶

Incidentally, Monier-Williams defines *prana* as 'the breath of life, breath, respiration, spirit, vitality'.⁷ If the theme of the Vedic prayers are any indication, advancement or perfection of the spirit and its vitality, was a basic concern of the sacrificers. In other words, when the *Taittiriya Upanishad*⁸ maintains that 'from *prana* alone are these creatures born and being born they live by *prana* and to *prana* they go hence and return'⁹ If *prana* is taken as the force that governs life, clearly, it is mired in imperfection in case of the person who is yet to attain Brahman. Effectively therefore, all human beings operate through imperfect *prana*-s. This perhaps explain why *aswa*, when taken to imply *prana* often have physical features which are strictly not of perfect horses. The *Rig Veda* refers to *Ashwins*, twin sons of the sky and brothers of *Usha*, the dawn. They are described as gods with heads of horses. Again, the first prototype of the *aswa* was the *Uchchaihshravas* who arose from the churning of the ocean of nectar - *amrita*. Literally meaning either 'long ears' or 'neighing aloud' or even both, the mythical animal had seven heads and could fly. The legend has it that Indra took it to heavens and returned the prototype after robbing it of the ability to fly. The fact that the animal could fly, unlike a normal horse, would in itself symbolically signify an imperfection or at least incompleteness. Interestingly, horses with unnatural physical features have been a common motif in most myths across the world. Examples include 'hippocampus' which has the foreparts of a horse and the hind part a scaly fish; Pegasus, white in colour and winged; the eight-legged Sleipnir of Norse mythology and the Centaur or Hippocentaur with the head, arms and torso of a human and the body and legs of a horse. All such myths ascribe certain powers to the unnatural or paranormal horses which are beyond the scope of either individual human beings or individual horses with natural features. As such when a *rishi* prays for a gift from *Agni* that has the form of a horse with a cow -*go* - in front, he is effectively asking for a great body of spiritual power or *prana* led by light or wisdom, since the word *go* often meant 'light of wisdom' in Vedic hymns.

Be that as it may, an interpretation of the *aswa* as a symbol of life's energies, though perhaps inevitable in the context of the Vedas and the *sandhya-bhasha* – the twilight language¹⁰ – of its hymns, has its own special set of problems. For a contemporary reader of the classical Sanskrit texts, the greatest challenge is not of comprehension but of relevance. While 'meanings' of the hymns can be generated independently, relating the semantics to a wider practical nuance poses issues which are not easily resolved. Added to this is the evolution that concepts underwent in the course of centuries of use in the Vedic age. A classic example of such a problem lies in a query as to how many horses pulled the chariot of Arjuna in the battle of *Mahabharata*. While the *Bhagavad Gita* is silent on this issue, commentators have traditionally ascribed Arjuna's chariot as having five horses. The source of the number is the *Kathopanishad*, 1.3.4 which says: 'The senses they say are the horses; the objects of sense the paths (they range over); (the self) associated with the body, the senses and the mind – wise men declare – is the enjoyer.'¹¹ Clearly, since the number of senses normally attributed to humans are five, it was naturally assumed that Arjuna's chariot had five horses. Again, when Surya is described as having a *sapta-vahana*, the semantics of the 'senses' give way to the days of a week, the implication being that the sun is a witness to us for all the days of the week.

Interpretations of convenience often face similar ambiguities, especially in the context of literal comprehension of what the hymns ‘mean’.

Sri Aurobindo, while interpreting the hymns of the Vedas was acutely aware of the ambiguity that some of the hymns might generate in the minds of the modern reader. In his Foreword to ‘Hymns to the Mystic Fire’ Sri Aurobindo asserts:

“We must take seriously the hint of Yaska, accept the Rishi’s description of the Veda’s contents as ‘seer-wisdoms, seer-words’, and look for whatever clue we can find to this ancient wisdom. Otherwise the Veda must remain forever a sealed book; grammarians, etymologists, scholastic conjectures will not open to us the sealed chamber.”¹²

Sri Aurobindo was referring to Yaska, an almost forgotten Sanskrit commentator who preceded Panini and is traditionally known to be the author of the treatise *Nirukta*.¹³ Though not explicitly stated, Sri Aurobindo might have been referring to the *naigama* aspect of Yaska’s thesis wherein he developed an elaborate structure of interpretation involving terms and symbols special to the Vedas. Unlike those of other commentators, Yaska’s position was holistic, his stress being on the collective meaning of hymns seen in contexts rather than a grammarian’s isolationist approach.

That Sri Aurobindo adopted Yaska’s approach to the interpretation of the Vedas is evident from his reading of what the elaborate horse symbol at the beginning of the *Bṛhadaranyaka Upanishad* might have implied. Having individually analyzed the physiological metaphor of the horse, he says, by way of making a contextual, collective meaning:

“We are reminded that it is some Force manifesting in matter which the Horse symbolizes; the material manifestation constitutes the essence of its symbolism. The images used are of an almost gross materiality.... The first image is an image of knowledge expressing itself in matter, the second is an image of power expressing itself in matter. The third, the image of the rain, suggests that it is from the mere waste matter of his body that this great Power is able to fertilize the world and produce sustenance for the myriad nations of his creatures. Speech with its burden of definite thought, is the neighing of this mighty horse of sacrifice; by that this great Power in matter expresses materially the uprush of his thought and yearning and emotion, visible sparks of the secret universal fire that is in him – *guhahitam*.”¹⁴

By leaving out specific connotations and instead focussing on the collective holistic implication of the horse symbol at the beginning of the *Bṛhadaranyaka Upanishad*, Sri Aurobindo was effectively generating a nuance of the *aswa* that sustained his arguments at greater length in his epic *Savitri*.

The story of Savitri narrated by Rishi Markandeya to Yudhisthira appears as a minor episode or *upakhyana* in seven Cantos (291-297) of the *Vana Parva* (Book of the Forest) of Vyasa’s *Mahabharata*. The immediate purpose of the narration seems to be the alleviation of grief of the eldest of the Pandavas, Yudhisthira, who was afflicted by the

plight of Draupadi, as she was sharing the hardships of exile of the Pandavas. During their wanderings in a forest, the Pandavas meet a *rishi* named Markandeya. Yudhisthira, asks the Rishi, 'O mighty sage, I do not so much grieve for myself or these my brothers or the loss of my kingdom as I do for this daughter of Drupada....Hast thou ever seen or heard of any chaste and exalted lady that resembleth this daughter of Drupada?'¹⁵ In answer, Markandeya narrates the story of Savitri and says that just as her husband Satyavan was saved from Death through the virtues of Savitri, the virtues of Draupadi is going to carry the Pandavas through all their difficulties.

It is the 'symbol' aspect of the tale that carries the importance in Sri Aurobindo's interpretation of the Mahabharata episode. Each of the main characters of the tale is re-created by Sri Aurobindo and they become vehicles of his philosophy concerning the status of man and nature. For example, Satyavan literally means 'one who possesses or carries the Truth-satya'. ¹⁶ In man it is his soul which carries the truth, since Indian philosophical systems consider each individual soul as a part of the Supreme soul or *paramatma*. As the soul descends to earth in a body, it comes in contact with death. In other words, since Satyavan is born, he has to die. The etymology of 'Savitri' has two meanings, both equally significant in Sri Aurobindo's epic. In one, Savitri is a puranic God-the wife of Brahma, the divine Creator, and as such she carries the power of a creator herself. Sri Aurobindo says that Savitri is the 'Divine Word', i.e., the word of Divine command that brings the universe into existence. The other association of the word 'Savitri' is one of the names of the Sun-traditionally considered in Indian traditions as the source of all energy and existence. Specifically, Savitri's name refers to the sun before it has risen above the horizon, and symbolically it indicates new possibilities of power, with the added significance that there is an element of inevitability in the descent of power and truth on earth. Indeed, one can detect in this association, an idea of a flame- *agni*-that has been considered by Sri Aurobindo as a Vedic symbol that acts as a bridge between the human and the Divine. Aswapati - Lord of the Horse - and Savitri's human father is described by Sri Aurobindo as the 'Lord of Tapasya, the concentrated energy of spiritual endeavour that helps us to rise from the mortal to the immortal planes'. Clearly, they have an element of restlessness in them. Aswapati, as the name signifies, is the lord of energy, i.e., one who has full control of his energy and makes them carry him in the path of spiritual endeavour from the normal human level of consciousness to higher planes of existence. We see in the epic how Aswapati travels from one plane of consciousness to another higher plane, until at last he reaches the Supreme Divine Mother and begs her to come down to earth. The spiritual efforts of Aswapati, Savitri's human father are rewarded as the 'Divine Mother' (as Sri Aurobindo refers to 'Truth' in the epic) descends on earth to be born as Aswapati's daughter. Almost half of the twenty-four thousand line epic is taken up by Aswapati's spiritual pursuit in quest of a successor and the fact that he has been rewarded is an evidence of his 'Lordship' over his *prana* or life energy as the root of his name – *aswa* - suggests.

It is significant that Sri Aurobindo makes Aswapati take the rigours of the spiritual travel and we find Aswapati experiencing, much as in Dante's famous work, both the bliss of the 'Truth-world' as well as the agony and suffering of the nether world. Since he had

mastered his *prana* or life energy, Aswapati could remain agile, active and perceptive. The fact that he could easily realize that the bliss of the ‘Godheads of the Greater Mind’, however complete they may seem, is not the highest level of ascension available to a spiritual quest, and decide to move on, is evidence of the power that mastery of *prana* can give to a being. Aswapati finds his quest complete as he encounters and recognizes the ‘Divine Mother’ and takes from her the promise of Savitri’s birth in human form.

It is therefore appropriate that Aswapati forms the central character in Sri Aurobindo’s epic both in terms of the space that he occupies as well as in terms of being a pioneer in a spiritual quest that his daughter, the earthly Savitri would undertake later as she followed the God of Death to reclaim Satyavan’s soul and reverse his mortality. What marks Sri Aurobindo’s interpretation of the symbolism of the *aswa* or horse is a consistency that is carried over into his epic both for an artistic recreation of the Savitri legend as well as for an illustration of the might that comes to a man who has mastered the powers which a horse stands for in Vedic parlance.

Notes

¹ Literally, ‘sacrifice of a horse or steed’.

² *Satapatha Brahmana* (lit. ‘one hundred paths to Brahmana’) is a prose text, elucidatory in nature, dealing with the Vedic rituals mentioned in the *Yajur Veda*.

³ *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad* (lit. ‘great forest of knowledge’) is one of the older Upanishads and is ascribed to the sage Yagnavalkya.

⁴ Translation of S Radhakrishnan, p. 149.

⁵ *Yajur Veda* (lit. From *yajus* – ‘sacrificial formula’) contains details required to perform sacrifices, including the *mantra*-s or hymns to be chanted in the process.

⁶ Ralph T H Griffith’s translation of the *Rg Veda*, titled ‘The Hymns of the *Rgveda*’, 1896, p. 87. A copy of the Second edition is available at www.sacred-texts.com/hin/rigveda/index.htm.

⁷ M Monier-Williams, p. 705.

⁸ *Taittiriya Upanishad* is one of the primary Upanishads, dealing with the various degrees of bliss enjoyed by beings. A Mahadeva Sastri ascribes the name to Tittiri, a pupil of the Vedic commentator Yaska.

⁹ Radhakrishnan translates the lines as ‘For truly, beings here are born from life, when born they live by life, and into life, when departing they enter.’ Clearly, when he translates ‘prano brahmeti vyajanat’ as ‘he knew that life is Brahman’, he takes ‘prana’ to mean ‘life’, p. 554. For the present hymn from the Upanishad, I go by M P Pandit’s rendering in his *Gleaning’s from the Upanishads*, p. 153.

¹⁰ The concept of the 'twilight language' has been studied at great length by Bucknell and Stuart-Fox. Though their work was meant specifically for Buddhist texts, the concept can be used with equal validity in the context of the Vedas.

¹¹ Trans. S Radhakrishnan. p. 624.

¹² *Hymns to the Mystic Fire*, Foreward. p. 5.

¹³ *Nirukta*, literally meaning 'etymology', is one of the earliest Sanskrit texts dealing with semantics in general and the methodology of the interpretation of the Vedas in particular. It is commonly assumed that Yaska, its author, preceded Panini and lived in the 6th century BC.

¹⁴ *Kena and Other Upanishads*, p. 283.

¹⁵ The author followed Kisari Mohan Ganguli's translation of the *Mahabharata*.

¹⁶ Sri Aurobindo's 'Note' on the epic *Savitri* has comments on the symbolic significance of the main characteristics of the epic.

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