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Abstract

### **The Chariot in Philosophy and Sanskrit Literature**

By

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The Chariot has assumed an integral position in the Vedic literature, philosophy and the classical Sanskrit literature. The Vedic hymns contain many a reference to chariot more as a vehicle of the deities. Savitā, the Sun-god travels in it, looking at the mortal and immortal beings in the universe. His chariot is also, elsewhere, described as being drawn by seven horses. Many words are used to denote the chariot such as ‘*cakī*’, ‘*yāna*’, ‘*śatānga*’, ‘*syandana*’ and so on. ‘*Ratha*’ undoubtedly is very popular. Difference is drawn in lexicons like Amarakośa between pleasure chariots (*puṣyaratha*) and others meant for battle and hunting. The hide of elephants and tigers was used as a canopy.

Yāska discusses the etymology of the word *Ratha*, as that which moves (*gati*), or as that which the king occupies for a pleasure ride (*ram+stha*) or as a reverse formation of the word ‘*sthira*’ which means that the rider is on a firm ground. In the four-fold division of army (*caturanga sena*) also, *Ratha* has the pride of place. Ramayana, the famous epic speaks of Mahāratha. One of its principal characters was Dasaratha, whose chariot literally had access to all the ten regions. In Mahābharata, the other great epic, terms such as Atiratha, Mahāratha have different connotations referring to the rank of the warriors.

*Ratha* seems to have great links not only with battles but also with Indian philosophy. In Mahabharata, Arjuna instructs Kṛṣṇa to take his chariot and position it in between the two arrays of army. It was in the immediate presence of the chariot that a great philosophical text was born in the form of the Bhagavadgītā which is one of the three authoritative texts of Indian philosophy. The chariot was a direct witness to the dialogue between the teacher and the taught. Earlier in the Kathopaniṣad, a beautiful equation is given by way of a chain of Metaphor, speaking of the relative position of the Soul, the physical body, the mind, the intellect, the sense organs and the sense objects. It is the Metaphor involving the Chariot that has enabled so many subtle factors to be discussed and accommodated in a single conceptualization.

In the classical Sanskrit literature, Bhāsa, the pre-Kālidasa dramatist describes the speed of the chariot traveled by Bharata. When Dasaratha was told that the chariot carrying Rāma, Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa has returned with Sumantra alone, he says that his desires (*ūūū*), in that case are shattered and it is obviously the chariot sent by the lord of

Death to take him away. Kalidasa also describes the chariot of King Dilipa in Raghuvamśa, and of King Duṣyanta in Śākuntala. Duṣyanta's hunting expedition, seated in the chariot, in chase of the deer is poetry in its best. In the other drama of Kālidāsa, it is the chariot which, as a common substratum, provides for the love between King Purūravas and Ūrvaśī. Poet Bāna speaks of training imparted to prince Candrāpida on chariot riding as part of the curriculum in education. In prosody, Rathodhdhatā is name of one of the metres. Poets use the term '*rathānganāma*' to refer to the Cakravāka bird, by way of fanciful etymology.

Works which are didactic in character cite the instance of the chariot which moves on two wheels, to show that human effort is a must should the favour come from fate. Among festivals, '*Rathasaptami*' is observed even today. It is well-known that the Rathayātrā of Lord Jagannātha, Balarāma and Subhadrā are very popular. There are also parallels for other deities in other parts of the country. The chariot, as purported to be shown in this paper has had an abiding influence on the Indian philosophy, literature and customs.