



Symbolism of the Tortoise in Ancient Culture and Modern Practices

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ABSTRACT

The concept, precept and global orientation of tortoise have been incorporated in the many ancient cultures. The Jain and Buddhist literature, paintings and sculptures vividly depict such features. The caityas and stupas incorporate the Kurma concept of cardinal points. Now, Vastu experts exploit the concept of a tortoise. Turtles have played an important role in the mythologies of diverse cultures.

Keywords: Cultural, Religious, Myth, Turtle, Tortoise, Ancient, etc.

Introduction

A **myth** is a traditional story, usually involving supernatural beings or events, which explain how some aspect of human nature or the natural world came to be. A **creation myth** is a specific kind of myth that typically:

- describes how the universe, the earth, and life began
- explains the workings of the natural world
- supports and validates social customs and values

“**The World on the Turtle’s back,**” note the supernatural explanations it offers of the world’s origin. Think about how this myth serves the functions listed above here.

Indian author Gopal S. Hattiangdi notes that, one of the chief deities of the Hindu religion, Vishnu, descended to earth in the form of a tortoise to help the other gods churn the ocean in their search for the nectar of immortality. Several Indian paintings depict the tortoise as a pivot for the staff that churned the oceans. A tortoise also figures in **Hindu** writings as a famous sage, **Kasyapa**, also known as **Pajapati**, who assumed the form of a tortoise and who is thought to be the father of all human beings [1].

Hindu Mythology worships sea / oceanic turtles as incarnation of God. Thus, most fishing communities do not consume turtle’s eggs or meats for this reason. Modern science shows that sea turtles have been swimming the ocean for well over 100 million years even predating many Dinosaurs. It symbolizes in mythologies of many indigenous cultures. Thus, proving the antiquity of the tortoises and turtles. It represents creation, longevity and wisdom. It forms an integral part in maintaining marine eco-system. It is an indicator of the vitality of the overall marine environment. Even, in international turtle day and other depictions, the impact can be noticed that turtles and tortoises are always associated with the globe, cardinal points and oceans. But, all these factors are easily taken into account when they are made as God, that too, incarnation of Vishnu. That many saints, Ramanujacharya, Narahari Thirtha, Caitanya and others had been visiting these sacred places for centuries prove that all these eco-factors were already taken care of by them.

Several North American Indian tribes, including the Iroquois, Seri, and Mandans, believed that the earth rested on the back of a giant turtle. [9] And, thousands of miles across the sea, the Chinese regarded the turtle as sacred and as an emblem of longevity’s. [3]. The Burmese believed that turtles were divine and kept them in tanks in pagodas, where they were fed special foods, according to James J. Parsons, Department of Geography, University of California, Berkeley. Even today, many groups consider the turtle sacred and refuse to eat its flesh [11]. Temples are frequently located on rivers inhabited by turtles and include enclosures where turtles live and are fed by hand. One species, a black soft-shelled turtle, is found exclusively at a temple. Although numerous stories involving turtles concern the creation of earth, many also attribute to these reptiles a wily nature or focus on their seeming steadfastness. Even today, hundreds of poems, children’s stories, and works of art are inspired by turtles’ unique appearance and behavior. Turtles figure prominently in early Egyptian art and were used for medicinal purposes during the Middle Kingdom, although never taken internally.

Giant marine turtles, especially the green turtle, played a major role in the settlement of the New World. Because they could be kept on board ship for months without needing to be fed, they became a major staple for sailors.

The Galapagos tortoise became a major food staple for the New England whaling ships, which traveled for several years at a time in the Indian and Pacific oceans. These giant animals could be kept on board for up to a year without requiring food, according to Pritchard [12].

According to Herbert Friedmann, Department of Biology, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, the Egyptians believed that turtles possess special knowledge of medicinal herbs and other remedies [5].

- **Indians had their own educational methodology to teach difference audiences:**

That Indians had Vedas, Vedangas, Upanishads, Itihasas, Puranas, Siddhantas etc., prove that they had various audience or students for learning different subjects. The Puranas had / have been to address different types of common men with varied interests, avocations and vacations. Thus, the choice of a temple for Kurmam has been well thought of by the experts and accommodated in their religious sacraments, rituals and pujas, during the first centuries and well developed in the medieval period. Of course, the disturbances of the Mohammedans and Colonial forces have been more than that of the natural disturbances and disasters and hence, it has been very difficult to demythologize and understand and bring out history. Throughout the world, the tortoise has been used as a base or supporting the upper portion of statue, sculpture etc., can be seen in many monuments. Now, other people might forget their significance. But, in India, in the temple worship itself, it is preserved and continued. And that is why, if a careful study is conducted, the facts are being verified, confirmed and made matching with the ancient literature. In India, it is possible even today. The colonial forces and the western expertise in Indology knew very well about the scientific content couched inside the puranic garb. But they wanted to dub them as myth, characterizing the devout Hindus as four blind men describing an elephant idiotically. Whereas, the elephant and tortoise myth many more scientific studies conducted, but, perhaps, suppressed from or known less among Indians, as none of the material evidences are here.[10]

- **World ancient civilizations and cultures had the myth of earth supported by a turtle:**

According to the North American folklore, the continent of America is referred to as "Turtle Island," as they believed that the weight of the continent was carried on a turtle's back. The Wyandot thought that earthquakes were caused by the turtle's shifting of his weight when got tired. Iroquoian belief that earth is supported by a turtle has been discussed by many anthropologists. In Chinese mythology, the turtle is the only living sacred animal and considered a symbol of wisdom, longevity, and wealth. They also believed that the shell of a turtle has markings of heaven, earth and the universe. They even used turtle shells at ceremonies to predict the future. According to Converse and Parker, the Iroquois faith shared with Hindu and other religions the "belief that the earth is supported by a gigantic turtle." Here, the point has been that the turtles and tortoises resemble men, teach lessons and exhibit proof for their integrity and honesty. They live with the earth withstanding all-natural disturbances and disasters. They come to their places, lay eggs, hatch and go away, but, again come back to the same places. [10]

- **The exploitation of tortoise in modern days:**

The concept, precept and global orientation of tortoise have been incorporated in the many ancient cultures. The Jain and Buddhist literature, paintings and sculptures vividly depict such features. The caityas and stupas incorporate the Kurma concept of cardinal points. Now, Vastu experts exploit the concept of a tortoise. The conduct and celebration of "International Turtles Day" have been the commercialization of the periodical egg-laying acts of tortoises coming back to their places. Just like "Jallikattu," it is exploited, in the sense, as the supporters of "Jallikattu" eat beef etc., of cattle, they cannot be vegetarians and sathvigavdi. Irony has been, those who eat all sorts of meat and flesh propagate "Jeevakarunyam," i.e, showing utmost sympathy, empathy and feelings towards all living things on the earth. That "Turtle" celebrates eat turtles themselves has been pointed out above. Therefore, instead of making tall claims, at least one can show a little sympathy to living creatures or keep quite. [10]

- **The Global Positioning System (GPS):**

That turtles would return to the same place has already been pointed out as mentioned in the Indian literature, whereas, scientists have proved now. Scientists have long known that the turtles, like many animals, navigate at sea by sensing the invisible lines of the magnetic field, similar to how sailors use latitude and longitude. But they didn't know how the turtles were able to return to the very spot where they were born. They reported that it was because the turtles rely on Earth's magnetic field to find their egg-laying beach. Each part of the coastline has its own magnetic signature, which the animals remember and later use as an internal compass. Sea turtles use the earth's magnetic fields to navigate back to the area where they were born decades earlier, according to a new study that used loggerhead genetics to investigate their travels. The turtles can perceive the magnetic field's intensity and its inclination angle, the angle that the field lines make with respect to the Earth's surface, earlier research has shown. It is good that science and religion go together. [10]

- **Importance of Olive Ridley Turtle:**

Hindu Mythology worships sea / oceanic turtles as incarnation of God. Thus, most fishing communities do not consume turtle's eggs or meats for this reason. Modern science shows that sea turtles have been swimming the ocean for well over 100 million years even predating many Dinosaurs. It symbolizes in mythologies of many indigenous cultures. Thus proving the antiquity of the tortoises and turtles. It represents creation, longevity and wisdom. It forms an integral part in maintaining marine eco-system. It is an indicator of the vitality of the overall marine environment. Even, in international turtle day and other depictions, the impact can be noticed that turtles and tortoises are always associated with the globe, cardinal points and oceans. But, all these factors are easily taken into account when they are made as God, that too, incarnation of Vishnu. That many saints, Ramanujacharya, Narahari Thirtha, Caitanya and others had been visiting these sacred places for centuries prove that all these eco-factors were already taken care of by them. [10]



Image1: Shows Turtle and Tortoise made ahead of Temple it's cultural and religious sign.



Image 2. Shows people do worship of turtle at village level.

Above image 1 denotes in Hindu culture and their temples have in front of God there is compulsory presence of turtle and tortoise. It sometimes made up of different metals and stone. Its religious thought. In behind that presence of tortoise have religious thought and different stories also.

In the image 2 said that peoples, Tortoise or turtle are the sign of goddess laxmi devi. So that, people worship of these tortoises. They believe that, worship of tortoise means worship of goddess laxmi devi. Goddess bless to them this is also a cultural and religious thought.

In villages, tortoise and turtle are also used as to do black magic to others it's a negative thought or the negative myths in people.

Conclusion:

From the above study it's concluded that, Tortoise and turtles have mythological history. They have proofs and references also. But some have positive myths and some are negatives myths there.

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