



## Sun Worship in Early Medieval Rajasthan: A Literary and Archaeological Study

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### ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to discuss the Sun worship in early medieval Rajasthan. Literary and archaeological sources of the period refer that Surya was worshipped by large sections of the contemporary society. He was worshipped under various names like, Ravi, Aditya, Prabhakar, and Martanda. The contemporary ruling powers of that period including feudatories also took deep interest in Sun worship and propagated it to a greater extent by means of building temples dedicated to Surya as well as by providing grants, installing images within temples. Epigraphical sources of the aforesaid period also extol the popularity of sun worship in Rajasthan. Further, Several sculptures of this deity discovered from different places of Rajasthan also provide evidence regarding the striking progress and popularity of Sun worship in early medieval society in Rajasthan.

**Keywords:** Sun Worship, Rajasthan, Epigraphy, Sculptures, Society

Sun worship was quite popular and sun temples were built in different places of early medieval northern India. Sun was worshipped under various names like Ravi, Aditya, Prabhakar, Martanda etc. In *Harshacharita*<sup>i</sup> Harsha along with his ancestors is referred to have worshipped Sun. The same fact has also been testified through Bansakhara Plate of Harsha,<sup>ii</sup> according to which Rajyavardhana, Adityavardhana and Prabhakaravardhana belonging to Vardhana dynasty were great followers of Surya.<sup>iii</sup> It is well known that in the quinquennial (a period of five years) assembly called by Harsha, the image of Surya was installed along with the images of Buddha and Shiva.<sup>iv</sup> The most renowned shrine was the Martanda temple of Multan in early medieval period. According to Alberuni's description, "it was of wood and covered with red *cordovan* (a fine leather originally made in Cordoba, Spain) leather, in its two eyes were two red rubies. It is said to have been made in the last *kritayuga*. The Hindus of Multan had a festival called *Sambapurayatra* in honour of Sun deity."<sup>v</sup> Al-Istakhari also narrates how the temple was deeply respected by the Hindus. He observes, "when the Indians make war and endeavour to seize the idol, the inhabitants bring it out, pretending that they will break it and burn it; upon this the Indians retire; otherwise they would destroy Multan."<sup>vi</sup> The *Kuvalayamala* refers to the current belief that a visit to the Bhattarka of Mulasthana could cure leprosy.<sup>vii</sup>

According to Varamihira, the sun was to be dressed in the northern style; his whole body was to be covered and he was to be represented as holding two lotuses in his hands, bearing a crown on his head and a pair of *kundalas* in his ears, having a long necklace of pearls and a girdle round his waist.<sup>viii</sup> A sun image showing the god seated on the lotus seat, holding a lotus in the right hand and keeping the left on his knee in the *asan-mudra*, has been discovered from Jodhpur. The image now known as Tonkeshvara has been ascribed by D.R. Bhandarkar to the 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> century AD.<sup>ix</sup> The famous sun temple of Osian has been generally ascribed to the 10<sup>th</sup> century AD.<sup>x</sup> The Jagatswami's shrine at Bhinmal was also one of the old temples of sun in northern India.<sup>xi</sup>

The contemporary ruling powers including feudatories also took deep interest in sun worship and propagated it to a greater extent by means of building temples dedicated to Surya as well as by providing grants, installing images within temples. Some of the rulers adopted Surya as their personal God. Chauhan Chandamahasena<sup>xii</sup> of Dholpur, who ruled in VS 898, was perhaps a follower of the Sun-god for whom he had a temple built in the forest adjoining Dholpur.<sup>xiii</sup> The Chauhan ruler Indraraja (who belongs to the Pratagarh line of Chauhan's) constructed the grand shrine of Indradityadeva (Sun-god) in 942 AD at Ghotarshi.<sup>xiv</sup> *Maharajadhiraja* Bhartripatta,<sup>xv</sup> ruler of Ahar in 942 AD, Madhava a great feudatory chief and a leader of army at Ujjain in 946 AD, and other officers such as Devaraja, and Shrisharman are also known to have made grants to this temple.<sup>xvi</sup> Durgaraja, the local chief of Pushkar region under the Chauhan ruler Simharaja of Shakambhari is referred to have made certain donations in favour of god Rannaditya, (Sun). He worshipped this deity either at Thanwala or in its neighbourhood within the Pushkar region and other people including the common men also provided gifts to this deity in VS 1013.<sup>xvii</sup> Pratagarh inscription of the time of Pratihara King Mahendrapal II of Mahodaya dated VS 1003 records that the Maharaja Ramabhadra Deva (son of *maharaja* Nagabhata Deva) and Vinayakapala Deva (son of *maharaja* Mahendrapala), were devotees of the sun-god (*Paramadityabhakta*).<sup>xviii</sup> This inscription is in four parts; First part is related to a grant of a village in the favour of Vata Yakshinidevi issued by Mahendrapala II of Kanauj dated VS 1003; Second part is related with a grant of a village to Indraditya-deva by Madhava, the provincial governor of Ujjain (Under the same king), at the request of Chauhan Indra-Raja, a feudatory chief, undated; third part is related with a grant of a field in the favour of Indradityadeva by Bhartripatta, son of Khommana dated VS 999 (AD 942), fourth part is related with minor grants to different deities by different people.

The above survey reveals that the sun deity was a prominent figure in ancient Indian society, revered and worshipped widely. This veneration continued into the early medieval period, particularly in Rajasthan, where the worship of the sun god was prevalent. A substantial portion of society engaged in regular worship practices, viewing the sun as an embodiment of power and strength. This deity was more than just a religious symbol; he symbolized a greater cultural and societal ideal of life and power. The persistent worship of the sun god in this region highlights the enduring significance of solar deities in shaping religious and social structures during this period.

## REFERENCES

- <sup>i</sup> Parab, K.P. (1925), ed, *Harshcharita of Bana*, Bombay; Eng. tr. Cowell, E.B. and Thomas, F.W. (1961) Delhi, IV, p.123.
- <sup>ii</sup> *Epigraphia Indica*, IV, p. 210, hereafter EI.
- <sup>iii</sup> *EI*, IV, p. 210.
- <sup>iv</sup> Beal, S. (1914) *The Life of Hiuen Tsiang*, London, p.186. According to his description, “on the first day of the first period, they installed the image of Buddha within one of the thatched buildings on the field of charity. They then distributed precious articles of the first quality, and clothing of the same character, and offered exquisite meats, whilst they scattered flowers to the sound of music. At the close of the day they retired to their tents. The second day they installed the image of *Aditya-deva*, and distributed precious things and clothing in charity, to half the amount of the previous day. The third day they installed the image of *Isvara-deva*, and distributed gifts as on the day before.” (Beal, S., op.cit.).
- <sup>v</sup> Sachau, E.C. (1914) *Alberuni's India*, London, I, p.116; About the Sun worship in MU-LO-SAN-P'U-LU (MULASTHANAPURA), Hiuen Tsiang gives a vivid description, According to him, “This country is about 4000 li in circuit; the capital town is some 30 li round. It is thickly populated. The establishments are wealthy. This country is independence on the kingdom of Cheka (Tse-kia). The soil is rich and fertile. The climate is soft and agreeable; the manners of the people are simple and honest; they love learning and honour the virtuous. The greater part sacrifice to the spirits; few believe in the law of Buddha. There are about ten *sangharamas*, mostly in ruins; there are a few priests, who study indeed, but without any wish to excel. There are eight Deva temples, in which sectaries of various classes dwell. There is a temple dedicated to the sun, very magnificent and profusely decorated. The image of the Sun-deva is cast in yellow gold and ornamented with rare gems. Its divine insight is mysteriously manifested and its spiritual power made plain to all. Women play their music, light their torches, offer their flowers and perfumes to honour it. This custom has been continued from the very first. The kings and high families of the five Indies never fail to make their offerings of gems and precious stones (*to this Deva*). They have founded a house of mercy (*happiness*), in which they provide food, and drink, and medicines for the poor and sick, affording succour and sustenance. Men from all Countries come here to offer up their prayers; there are always some thousands doing so. On the four sides of the temple are tanks with flowering groves where one can wander about without restraint” (Beal, S. (1884) *Siyuki, Buddhist Records of the Western World*, II, London, reprinted 1969, pp 274-75).
- <sup>vi</sup> Elliot, H.M. and Dowson, J. (1866 – 77) *History of India As Told By Its Own Historians, (HIED)*, London, I, pp. 27-28.
- <sup>vii</sup> Sharma, S.R. (1996) *Society and Culture in Rajasthan (c.AD 700-900)*, Delhi, p.101.
- <sup>viii</sup> B.N. Sharma, *Social Life in Northern India*, p. 158.
- <sup>ix</sup> *ASI, Annual Report*, (1909-19), p.94.
- <sup>x</sup> *ASI, Annual Report*, (1908-09), pp.101-115.
- <sup>xi</sup> Ojha, G.H. (1936) *Jodhpur Rajya ka Itihas*, Ajmer, p.22.
- <sup>xii</sup> Dasharatha Sharma suggests that Chandamahasena was probably a feudatory of Bhoja I, (Sharma, Dasharatha (1959), *Early Chauhan Dynasties*, Delhi, p.19).
- <sup>xiii</sup> Jain, K.C. (1972), *Ancient Cities and Towns of Rajasthan*, Delhi, p. 526; Sharma, Dasharatha, op.cit., p.19.
- <sup>xiv</sup> *EI*, XIV, pp.180-181; also see *EI*, XIV, pp.178-181.
- <sup>xv</sup> The Bhartipatta in *Pratapgarh inscription (Part III) is Bhartipatta II (IA, XXXIX, p.191)*, son of Kommana III of Mewar, of Guhila Family, *EI*, XIV, p.181.
- <sup>xvi</sup> *ARRMA*, 1914, p. 2.
- <sup>xvii</sup> *EI*, XXXV, p. 239.
- <sup>xviii</sup> *EI*, XIV, pp.177-78.