



Electronic Journal  
of Vedic Studies

Volume 25 (2020), Issue 3

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Vedic Evidence: Dolphin Deified – A Review  
Article**

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ISSN 1084-7561

## Sculpted Spouts of Nepalese Fountains and Vedic Evidence: Dolphin Deified – A Review Article

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### Introduction

In a recent issue of the *Electronic Journal of Vedic Studies* (Volume 25, Issue 1, pp. 1–30), Diwakar Acharya published an article titled “Dolphin Deified: The Celestial Dolphin, an Upaniṣadic Puzzle and Viṣṇu’s Incarnation.” This work is a further development of earlier multidisciplinary studies on similar subjects primarily by Coomaraswamy, Lüders, and Parpola.<sup>1</sup> The association of these studies with zoological and astrological observation is beyond the scope of my investigation. Nonetheless, for many years, I have carefully studied both the representations of mythical creatures in South Asian art and Vedic references to the creatures. Thus, I am offering the following novel insights into the subject.

The crucial points of Acharya’s arguments are based on his view that the aquatic creature *jhaṣa*, described in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (1.8.1.1–6) as a big fish equipped with a horn (*śrṅga*), can be identified as a dolphin because the horn is actually its snout. He derives his evidence both from Vedic sources and Puranic reference to the fish regarded as Viṣṇu’s incarnation and, more important, the fifth-century inscription<sup>2</sup> in which the word *jhaṣa* is used to describe the sculpted stone spout of a Nepalese water fountain. It is true that Nepalese water fountains are usually designed based on the mythical creature *makara*. This is why the seventh century Sanskrit poet Bāṇa, who was familiar with such water fountains, refers to them as *makara mahāpraṇālī*.<sup>3</sup> Acharya, however, does not believe that the *makara* is a crocodile-like creature. According to him, the terms *makara* and *jhaṣa* both refer to a dolphin, not only because the abovementioned Licchavi inscription designates the *makara* fountain as a *jhaṣa* fountain, but also because the vertical, curvilinear, trunk-like element that we see on the spouts of Nepalese fountains (Fig. 1) is actually a dolphin’s snout or horn. With this view, he examines Vedic and classical Sanskrit texts for various aquatic creatures and the artistic representations of the fish-tailed creatures in ancient South Asian art and comes to the conclusion that the *śiṃśumāra* or *śiśumāra* mentioned in Vedic literature (including the well-known story of Śarkara Śiṃśumāra found in the *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa* (3. 193–194) are dolphins; because dolphins gradually disappeared from many Indian rivers, but crocodiles managed to survive, from the late medieval period onward, all the original Sanskrit words for a dolphin became synonymous with crocodile.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Yakṣas*, 2 parts, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1971 (reprint), part 2, pp. 47–62; Heinrich Lüders, “Von Indischen Tieren,” *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 96, 1942, pp. 23–81,

<http://menadoc.bibliothek.uni-halle.de/dmg/periodical/pageview/75779>

Asko Parpola, “Crocodile in the Indus Civilization and later South Asian tradition” in T. Osada and H. Endo (ed.): *Linguistics, Archaeology and the Human Past*, Occasional Paper 12, Kyoto: Indus Project, Research Institute for Humanity and nature, 2011, pp. 1–57.

<sup>2</sup> See Appendix A for the photograph of the inscription and its reading and translation.

<sup>3</sup> Vasudeva S. Agrawala, *The Deeds of Harsha, Being a Cultural Study of Bana’s Harsacarita*, Varanasi: Prithivi Prakashan, 1969, p. 20.

<sup>4</sup> Diwakar Acharya, “Dolphin Deified: The Celestial Dolphin, an Upaniṣadic Puzzle and Viṣṇu’s Incarnation,” *Electronic Journal of Vedic Studies*, Vol. 25, Issue 1, p. 26.



I will explain what I found in our critical observation of Acharya’s work in the following order. First, we will demonstrate how he ignored the difference between the regular *makara* fountains (see Fig. 3) of Nepal and the exceptional *jhaṣa* fountain (see Fig. 2) described in the fifth century Licchavi period inscription (Appendix A). Then, we will familiarize readers with the century-old debate regarding the identity of *śiṃśumāra* and *śiśumāra* and present my view. This will be followed by our discussion about the crocodilian image on the architrave of the Lomash Rishi cave portal attributed to the Maurya emperor Aśoka (c. BCE 271–232)—the earliest appearance of a *makara* in Indian art after its representation on Indus valley seals. I will also demonstrate how the symbolism of the Maurya-period portal provides us with a rare opportunity to see a link between the Vedic concept and artistic representations of the mythical creature. Next will be a discourse on the symbolic significance of the fish-tailed images of *makara* and other mythical creatures of post-Mauryan art and their meaningful association with the lotus vine. I will conclude by explaining how the *makara* fountains of Nepal are actually associated with the phenomenon of monsoon rain and cow-related Vedic rituals rather than with the *jhaṣa* story from the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (1.8.1.1–6).

I

Acharya illustrates his work with four images of the spouts of the Nepalese fountains. Because the images are important for our discussion as well, we will borrow the illustrations from his article:



Above and below: water conduits showing dolphin's mouth decorated with artistic imagination from Kathmandu Valley, various time periods

Fig. 1. Images of Nepalese water fountains illustrated in Diwakar Acharya's "Dolphin Deified ..."

In the caption in the middle of the illustrations, Acharya identifies the mythical creatures as dolphins and acknowledges that the works of art belong to various periods. Then, immediately below the illustrations, he writes, "Some of these water conduits bear inscriptions. One of these which can be dated to the 5th century CE on paleographical grounds describes the conduit itself and speaks of the stream of water falling from the mouth of a dolphin."<sup>5</sup> This statement is misleading because none of these conduits bear the fifth-century inscription he mentions. Although he does not give us the location of these water fountains, we know that the metal fountain on the upper-right corner (Fig. 1) is actually the famous golden fountain (dated 1688) inside the medieval-period Bhaktapur palace. This fountain is the contribution of the king Jitāmitra Malla (c. 1673–1696).<sup>6</sup> Two other spouts, illustrated on the upper left and lower right (Fig. 1), belong to the Patan Mangal Bazar water fountain, locally known as Maṅga Hiti. From an art historical point of view, neither of these spouts can be assigned to the Licchavi period (c. 200–879 CE). They belong to the late Malla period (c. 1482–1769 CE) or early Shah period (1769–2008) of Nepalese history. It is true that a Licchavi-period inscription was found in this

<sup>5</sup> Diwakar Acharya, "Dolphin Deified ... p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> Bholānātha Paudela. "jitāmitra mallakā kirtiharū," *Purnimā*, Vol.1, No. 2, 1964, pp. 14–15.  
[http://himalaya.socanth.cam.ac.uk/collections/journals/purnima/pdf/Purnima\\_01\\_02.pdf](http://himalaya.socanth.cam.ac.uk/collections/journals/purnima/pdf/Purnima_01_02.pdf)

location,<sup>7</sup> but the inscription does not speak of the stream of water falling from the mouth of a dolphin, as Acharya suggests. The remaining illustration of the water fountain, visible on the lower left (Fig. 1), is distorted, and I have not been able to identify it. However, we know for sure that this fountain cannot be associated with the Licchavi inscription that refers to the *jhaṣa* because the Licchavi inscription is in a town called Bagiswari, located about seven kilometers northeast of Bhaktapur city (see Appendix A for the photograph, text, and translation of the inscription.) The *jhaṣa* fountain mentioned in the inscription is still there (Fig. 2) and differs considerably from the regular water fountain that Acharya illustrates. The creature carved on the spout of the *jhaṣa* fountain is a ferocious fish rather than a regular image of a *makara*. Because the fish is depicted here with fangs, the fountain is locally called Baghhiti, or “tiger fountain.”<sup>8</sup> However, a careful observation of this sculpted stone spout reveals that the creature has big eyes and, immediately below them, leaf-like pectoral fins, with triangular larger fins behind the eyes that may represent dorsal fins. In my opinion, this *jhaṣa* fountain, more than likely, is inspired by the famous *Bhagavadgītā* statement (10.31), according to which *makara* is a *jhaṣa* as well, but the most significant one. Thus, the unknown artist renders the creature on the spout with greater emphasis on the *jhaṣa* aspect of *makara* and paying less attention to the *makara*’s prominent features such as the erect trunk. In fact, the artist does delineate the curled trunk of the creature minimally in shallow relief rather than in a prominent three-dimensional sculpture. Consequently, the linier trunk is detectible only with closer observation.<sup>9</sup> Compare this exceptional Licchavi period *jhaṣa* spout (datable to the fifth century CE) with the regular spout of the *makara* fountain (dated 621 CE) of the same period (Fig. 3).<sup>10</sup>



Fig. 2. Jhaṣa fountain, Bagiswari (Bhaktapur), fifth century CE. Photo: Purushottam Lochan Shrestha.



Fig. 3. Makara fountain, Bhotahiti (Kathmandu), 621 CE. Photo: athour.

<sup>7</sup> Dhanavajra Vajracharya, *Licchavikālākā Abhilekha*, Kirtipur: Institute of Nepal and Asian Studies, pp. 208–210. <https://archive.org/details/LicchavikalakaAbhilekhaDhanavajraVajracharya/page/n223/mode/1up>

<sup>8</sup> An account of the discovery of the Licchavi inscription and the correct reading of the inscription is published in Purushottam Lochan Shrestha, *Dhanavajra Vajrācārya Smṛti*, Kathmandu: Jñānaguṇa Prakāśana, 2012. Shrestha is a prolific writer and well-known scholar from Bhaktapur. I am grateful to him for providing me with excellent photographs of the fountains and inscription.

<sup>9</sup> One may argue that originally the *jhaṣa* fountain did have a free-standing trunk, although now it is missing. Such argument will not be considered logical because a free-standing snout or trunk in addition to its representation in relief would have been an immediately noticeable redundancy. The unknown accomplished artist responsible for sculpting the spout would not make such a mistake.

<sup>10</sup> Dhanavajra Vajracharya, *Licchavikālākā Abhilekha*, Kirtipur: Institute of Nepal and Asian Studies, pp. 208–210. *Ibid.*, pp. 378–379.

The latter (Fig. 3) was discovered in Bhotahiti near the northwest corner of Tundikhel and is now preserved at the Chauni National Museum.<sup>11</sup> According to the inscription carved on its spout, the fountain was commissioned by a royal officer, Vibhu Varman, during the reign of King Aṃśu Varman in the bright half of the Jyeṣṭha month of *saṃvat* 45 (622 CE; see Appendix B for the photograph, text, and translation of the inscription). The *makara* is represented here with large crocodilian legs and its lower body fading into a meandering foliage motif known in Sanskrit literature as *abhrapatra* or *meghapatra*, “cloud foliage” (Fig. 3; see below for the significance of these technical terms). The *jhaṣa* spout (Fig. 2), however, has neither the legs nor the foliated tail. More important, the fish fountain does not have the vertically protruding snout or trunk typical of *makara* fountains. If the sculptor of the *jhaṣa* spout was endeavoring to convey the idea that the *sr̥ṅga* of the *jhaṣa* is actually its snout, as Acharya has suggested, the artist would have represented the snout/*sr̥ṅga* of the *jhaṣa* much more emphatically, delineating it as erect and three dimensional. Acharya’s main point of argument is however based on this absent three-dimensional snout/*sr̥ṅga*, which makes me wonder how the fifth-century Nepalese inscription can be used as evidence to prove that the big, horned fish mentioned in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* is the same as the *makara* of the Nepalese fountains. The underlying problem that I see here is this: Acharya did not even try to see the existing fish fountain described in the inscription but proceeded with his critical analysis of *jhaṣa/makara* on the basis of his erroneous assumption.

Before we continue our discourse, it will be advantageous to provide the reader with certain basic information about an important traditional belief related to our study. According to this belief, cloud is water and they are populated with the creatures that we see both in water and land. The popularity of this belief in the classical age of India is testified not only by a series of Sanskrit terms such as *jalamānuṣa*,<sup>12</sup> or “aquatic man,” *jalaturaga*, or “aquatic horse,” *jalebha* or *jalahastin*, “aquatic elephant,” and *jaladhenu*, “aquatic cow,”<sup>13</sup> but also their representation in art as cloud creatures. Although not much attention is given to this view, it is indeed closely related to a much earlier Vedic story of celestial water (i.e. cloud) inhabited by a giant snake and an aquatic creature called *gargara* that we will be discussing shortly. During the classical period of South Asian history, the most popular cloud creature was the elephant, artistically delineated in many different ways, most of the time as a composite creature sharing various features of fish, crocodile and elephant. In Prakrit literature, the creature became known as *soṇḍā-magara*, “*makara* with a trunk,”<sup>14</sup> because this mythical creature has a snout that appears like an elephant’s trunk. It is this trunk that we see vividly rendered on the *makara* fountain of Nepal showing parallel, linear patterns under the erect curvaceous component of the spout (Fig. 21). One can observe such patterns in reality when an elephant raises his trunk to spray water.

## II

Following his delphine theory, Acharya, throughout his writing, translates the word *śiṃśumāra* or *śiśumāra* as “dolphin” and suggests that *jhaṣa* and *śiśumāra* are synonyms. He is aware that the *Atharvaveda* (11.2.25) has a list of aquatic creatures in which *śiṃśumāra* is clearly differentiated from *jhaṣa* (spelled here as *jaśa*) and that the two terms are juxtaposed in the list.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Gautama V. Vajracharya, *Nepalese Seasons: Rain and Ritual*, New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 2013, pp. 33, 36.

<sup>13</sup> Coomaraswamy, *Yakṣas*, pp. 50–51, Lüders “Von Indischen Tieren,” p. 69; *Mahābhārata* 13, 71, 41; *Matsya Purāna* 3, 13.

<sup>14</sup> Lüders, “Von Indischen Tieren,” p. 80.



This textual evidence flatly denies Acharya's attempt to identify the *makara* of the Nepalese fountain as a *jhaṣa* dolphin. But Acharya insists that “perhaps, when people wanted to be precise, they distinguished among the species of dolphin.”<sup>15</sup> Although this is possible, it is not supported by any reliable evidence. On the other hand, we have substantial evidence indicating the horned *jhaṣa* of the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* is a crocodilian creature rather than a dolphin. The evidence derives not only from Vedic literature but also from an unexpected source that will be presented shortly.

Both *śiṃśumāra* and *śiśumāra* are found not only in Vedic literature but also in classical Sanskrit literature. In early Vedic texts, including the *Rgveda* and *Atharvaveda*, the name of the creature is *śiṃśumāra*. In later Vedic and classical Sanskrit texts, most of the time it is spelt *śiśumāra* but without replacing the preexisting word. Some of the statements found in these texts indicate that *śiṃśumāra/śiśumāra* is a crocodilian creature. But in many places, sometimes within a single text, these words also mean a dolphin. For instance, in the first chapter of the Āyurvedic text, *Suśruta Saṃhitā* (1.46.109), as we know from Lüders work, *śiśumāra*, is classified as a *pādin*, or “legged” creature. But in the fourth chapter of the same book (4.26.19), *śiśumāra*'s fat is prescribed for cooking aphrodisiac round cake called *śaṣkultī*. This is confusing because, unlike crocodiles, dolphins are devoid of legs and are known for their fat. Even in the present day, people fish for dolphins, not crocodiles, for their fat. Thus, the identity of *śiṃśumāra* or *śiśumāra* has been a subject of scholarly debate for almost a century. In 1942 Lüders assiduously collected almost all textual and linguistic materials related to these words and studied them analytically. Although in Sanskrit *śiśu* means a child or a baby, similar Vedic words such as *śiśūla* and *śuśulūka* in *Rgveda* 10.78.6 and 7.104.22, respectively, and *śiśuka* in *Atharvaveda* 6.14.3 do not necessarily denote a child or a baby. Analytical study of these terms in light of various words for a dolphin in modern Indic languages, such as *sūnsar* in Sindhi, *sisār* or *siṃsār* in Lahnda, and *śiśuk* or *śiśu* in Bengali, suggests that *śiṃśu*- or *śiśu*-related Vedic words derive from native languages.<sup>16</sup> According to Lüders, originally in Vedic literature *śiṃśumāra* means dolphin primarily because in the famous story of Śarkara Śiṃśumāra of the *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa* (3.193–194), *śiṃśumāra* is delineated as a creature of the *samudra*, “ocean” (*śiṃśumāro vai samudram atipārayitum arhati*). As we know from Witzel's recent investigation, the real meaning of *samudra* as ocean is, however, questionable.<sup>17</sup> It is true that in the early Vedic texts *samudra* has multiple meanings—a lake, river, cloud, or any big body of water. One example may suffice. According to the *Rgveda* 6.62.6, Bhujyu was rescued by Aśvins from *samudra*. But in other Rgvedic hymns, he is described as being rescued by the same gods either from *udamegha* (*Rgveda* 1.116.3), “the raincloud,” or from *āpas* (*Rgveda* 1.182.6). The Rigvedic word *āpas* literally means “water.” But it is used in the Vedas for rivers, lakes, and clouds.

The most troubling to *śiṃśumāra*'s identity as a dolphin is, however, a statement found in the *Taittirīya Āraṇyaka* (11.19.2) in which *śiśumāra* is vividly described as a legged creature (*aśvinau pūrvapādāv atrir madhyaṃ mitrāvaruṇāv aparapādau*). Lüders made an endeavor to solve this enigma, explaining that in this *Āraṇyaka* text, *śiśumāra* means crocodilian creature

<sup>15</sup> Acharya, “Dolphin Deified ...” p. 2, footnote 6.

<sup>16</sup> Parpola, “Crocodile in the Indus Civilization ...” p. 19.

<sup>17</sup> Michael Witzel, “A maritime Rigveda? — How not to read ancient texts”

<http://www.hinduonnet.com/thehindu/op/2002/06/25/stories/2002062500030200.htm>



because this text was composed in the region that lies outside the distribution area of the river dolphin. With this view, Lüders concludes his study with an etymological explanation of the Vedic term *śimśumāra/śiśumāra*. I quote his explanation in the English translation:

... *śimśu*, *śiśu* could also be the words for the dolphin, borrowed from a native non-Aryan language, which was compounded with *māra*. One could be tempted to understand this *māra* as a secondary form of *makara*, which is most likely also a loan word from a non-Aryan language; therefore, *śimśumāra* would mean the “*śimśu* dolphin.”<sup>18</sup>

My investigation indicates that this explanation is partially correct. *Śimśu* is certainly non-Vedic. As Lüders has mentioned, the word *śiśu* or *śiśuka* (AV. 6.14.3) denoting a creature rather than a child is non-Vedic as well. However, the second word *māra*, in my opinion, has nothing to do with *makara*. Despite the fact that Coomaraswamy also believed that *māra* derives from *makara*,<sup>19</sup> there is no evidence that support this view. On the other hand, like the Atharvavedic terms *kṣudhāmāra* “killer hunger” and *trṣṇāmāra* “killer thirst” (AV 4.17. 6–7), *śimśumāra* actually means “killer *śimśu*.” Although we do not know the exact meaning of *śimśu*, we have reason to believe that when the word *śimśu* is used alone, it means dolphin or crocodile-like large aquatic and semi-aquatic creatures, both dangerous and harmless. For the ancient people, who lived near the bank of a river, it was, however, absolutely necessary in their everyday life to be careful before they went to bathe in water where they saw large creatures. This seems to be a reason that the word *śimśumāra* came into existence. It alerts that the large aquatic creature is “a killer *śimśu*” rather than a dolphin-like harmless creature. Compare the Ṛgvedic word *śimśumāra* with the Pali word *caṇḍamaccha*, “sinister fish,” for a dangerous aquatic creature.<sup>20</sup> Just as *caṇḍamaccha* connotes that there are two kinds of fish, regular fish and “sinister fish,” the word *śimśumāra* also indicates the existence of two different kinds of *śimśu*, regular *śimśu* and killer *śimśu*.

The unexpected source that I mentioned earlier is *On the Nature of Animals*, written in Greek by the Roman author Aelian, (full name Claudius Aelianus, born c. 170 in Italy and died c. 235).<sup>21</sup> According to this author, the Gaṅgā River fostered two kinds of crocodilian animals, “Some of them are perfectly harmless, but others eat flesh with the utmost voracity and ruthlessness, and on the end of their snout they have an excrescence like a horn. These the people employ as agents for punishing criminals, for those who are detected in the most flagrant acts are thrown to the crocodiles, and there is no need of a public executioner.”<sup>22</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Lüders, “Von Indischen Tieren,” p. 81.

<sup>19</sup> Coomaraswamy, *Yakṣa*, part 2, p. 52, footnote 3.

<sup>20</sup> Lüders, “Von Indischen Tieren,” pp. 72–73

<sup>21</sup> *Encyclopaedia Britannica* <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Aelian>

<sup>22</sup> A. F. Scholfield, *Aelian: On the Nature of Animals*, 1958, <http://www.attalus.org/translate/animals12.html>, Parpola’s “Crocodile in the Indus Civilization ...” p. 9.



Fig. 4. *Makara* with horns, Bharhut, ca. second century BCE. Photo: Ken Kawasaki, <https://www.photodharma.net/Guests/Kawasaki-Bharhut/Bharhut.htm>

If this statement is based on real observation, which seems highly possible, the differentiation of the harmless and dangerous large crocodilian creature recorded here is in harmony with our etymological explanation of *śimśumāra*. More important, the statement enlightens us as to how the excrescent or protuberance on the end of the killer crocodile's snout appeared like a horn not only to Vedic people but also to the Roman author. In addition, we do have a piece of visual evidence indicating ancient India's fascination with crocodile's horns. A second century BCE stone medallion from Bharhut records the fascination showing goaty horns emanating from the excrescent of the crocodilian snout of a fish eating large composite creature (Fig. 4.).<sup>23</sup> Undoubtedly, this artistic imagination is inspired by the hornlike excrescent. Unlike the crocodiles, dolphins are devoid of the excrescent on the end of their snout. Thus, one can

<sup>23</sup> I am grateful to Michael Witzel for information regarding this Bharhut medallion.

logically argue that the horned *jhaṣa* described in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* is actually a crocodilian creature of the river rather than a dolphin, as Acharya has insisted.

### III

At first glance, our etymological explanation of *śiṃśumāra* may appear to be in disagreement with the story of Śarkara Śiṃśumāra described in the *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa* (3. 193–194). But if we pay attention to the word *śarkara* used as the epithetic name of the protagonist of the story, it becomes much easier to understand the real significance of the story of the aquatic creature. According to the story, Śarkara Śiṃśumāra thinks that he has the quality of a superior god and refuses to pray to Indra, frankly telling him, “I will not pray to you. Submerged in water, I go around the big body of water (*samudra*); in fact, [just as a superior great god] “I move inside the water.” I am so great that how can I pray to you? (*nāhaṃ tvāṃ stoṣyāmi samudre vā aham apsv antaś carāmy upanimajjann etāvato 'haṃ tvāṃ stūyām iti.*) The Vedic statement for “I move inside the water” is *apsu antaścarāmi*. This expression is closely associated with a popular Vedic concept that the great god-like Agni resides inside the water (*apsu antaḥ*). Compare this to *Ṛgveda* 3.1.3. As an aquatic or semiaquatic creature, *śiṃśumāras* literally move inside the water. This is the main reason that the creature in the story thinks himself divine and refuses to pray to Indra. But for Indra and his devotees, a *śiṃśumāra* is nothing more than a creature that one can expect to see on a sandy beach rather than inside the water. Thus, the creature was nicknamed Śarkara Śiṃśumāra, “Sandy Crocodile.” This nickname remained intact even after the creature became a *ṛṣi* and eventually a constellation when he accepted Indra’s greatness and composed a hymn praying to the god. Because we do not expect to see dolphins out of water on a sandy beach, the *śiṃśumāra* cannot be a dolphin.

The *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa* (1. 176) has another passage that supports our view. It relates an interesting story of a female crocodile, *śiṃśumārī*. According to the story, the *śiṃśumārī* stays in a narrow section of a river, facing opposite to the current and keeping her mouth wide open (*eṣā ha vā ekāyane śiṃśumārī pratīpaṃ vyādāya tiṣṭhati*). The way the story is related here indicates that the author of this passage was familiar with such an incident. Both Lüders and Hoffmann<sup>24</sup> refer to this passage in their works, noting that such behavior is associated with a crocodile rather than a dolphin. Because Hoffman was in agreement with Lüder’s view that *śiṃśumāra* as a creature of *samudra* is a dolphin, the crocodilian behavior of *śiṃśumārī*, so vividly described in the *Brāhmaṇa* text, became problematic. This peculiar behavior is also delineated on the abovementioned Bharhut sculpture (Fig. 4) showing the fish entering the open mouth of a large makara like creature and indicates that this was a crocodilian tactic for catching fish without much difficulty. Hoffmann, however, explains that due to the difficulty in seeing the difference between a dolphin and crocodile in water, ancient people might have thought that a crocodilian creature is a female version of a dolphin. This explanation is not supported by any reliable evidence. On the other hand, the real meaning of Śarkara Śiṃśumāra as sandy crocodile and reference to *śiṃśumārī* as a female crocodile in this *Brāhmaṇa* text clearly indicates that throughout this text, *śiṃśumāra* or *śiṃśumārī* are used for a crocodilian creature with consistency.

<sup>24</sup> Lüders, “Von indischen Tieren,” p. 65; Karl Hoffmann, *Aufsätze Zur Indoiranistik*, band I. Wiesbaden: Dr. Ludwig Reichert Verlag, 1975, pp. 107-108.

Undoubtedly, the *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa* is a text composed after the early Vedic texts such as *R̥gveda* and *Atharvaveda* but certainly before the *Āraṇyaka* texts. Thus, it should not be surprising that this *Brāhmaṇa* text forecasts a new development in the legend of *śiṃśumāra/śiśumāra*. Note that just as in the early Vedic texts, the name of the creature is spelled here as *śiṃśumāra* rather than *śiśumāra*. But in the text, we do see a tendency to associate *śiṃśumāra* with the Sanskrit word for “a baby or calf.” As Acharya has correctly noticed, the *Brāhmaṇa* text tells us that chanting the Vedic mantra assigned to Śarkara Śiṃśumāra provides people with babies (*paśūnām vai śiśur bhavati*).<sup>25</sup> This was just a beginning of a drastic change. The early Vedic texts do refer to *śiṃśu-* or *śiśu-*related words for the aquatic creature but without any attempt to Sanskritize the words showing their relation with *śiśu* “baby.” Much clearer development of Sanskritization is found in the *Taittirīya Āraṇyaka* (2.19.5), in which the divine *śiśumāra* is eulogized as *śiśukumāra*, “baby boy.” (*namo namaḥ śiśukumārāya namaḥ*). This etymological invention indicates that when the Sanskrit authors used the word *śiśumāra* for a dolphin, from time to time, they might have had *śiśukumāra* in mind. In a sixth century Sanskrit inscription in Nepal, the word *kumāra* is used as a synonym for *māra*. Thus, in the inscription, Buddha Śākyamuni is described as *kumāravijayin* rather than the regular *māravijayin*.<sup>26</sup>

Soon after the Sanskritization of *śiṃśumāra* as *śiśukumāra* or *śiśumāra*, the killer *śiṃśu* is not a killer anymore but an aquatic creature that has the characteristics of an innocent baby (*śiśu*) such as a dolphin, which is well-known for its friendly behavior to humankind and behaves like a puppy. This new development did not replace the original meaning of the word *śiṃśumāra*. In South Asian culture, quite often, a change takes place without completely abandoning the origin. If we are looking a Sanskrit terminology for such development, the change should be designated as *āgama* rather than *ādeśa*. In my opinion, such *āgama style development* is the main reason that in later Vedic Sanskrit and classical Sanskrit, both *śiṃśumāra* and *śiśumāra* sometimes denote a crocodile-like creature and, at other times, a dolphin-like creature.

#### IV

Acharya finds more support for his dolphin theory in the representation of the fish-tailed mythical creatures depicted in ancient Indian art and makes the following statement, “... it is precipitous to decide positively in favor of the Ganges crocodile, because the creature [*śiṃśumāra/makara*] is never sculpted as a crocodile but as a fish in its hind part and as an elephant, horse, or cow in its front.”<sup>27</sup> In the footnote of this statement, Acharya clarifies his view: “In any case, as stated above, iconographic representations of the *makara* do not allow us to decide positively in favor of the Ganges crocodile as the creature in the *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa* or the TĀ [=Taittirīya Āraṇyaka].”<sup>28</sup>

Despite Acharya’s assertion that the *śiṃśumāra* or *makara* “is never sculpted as a crocodile,” we do see a *makara*-like mythical creature depicted in early Indian art with clearly discernable crocodilian features. Only because Acharya’s work on *śiṃśumāra* and *makara* is largely based on the investigations of earlier scholars (mainly Lüders and Parpola), he, like them, failed to pay any attention not only to the important image of the creature carved on the portal of the Maurya-

<sup>25</sup> Acharya, “Dolphin Deified ...,” p. 7.

<sup>26</sup> D. Vajracharya, *Licchavikalakā Abhilekha*, p. 372.

<sup>27</sup> Acharya, “Dolphin Deified ...,” p. 9.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, footnote 27.



period Lomash Rishi cave at Barabar Hill (Fig. 5) but also to the ancient nomenclatures for the portals that we find in contemporaneous literature.



Fig. 5. Portal of the Lomash Rishi Cave, Barabar Hill, third century BCE. Photo: Wikipedia.



Fig. 6. Detail of the portal in Fig 5, showing the crocodile-like mythical creature at the left end of the architrave.

The Lomash Rishi cave is a man-made cave designed to look like freestanding wooden architecture. On the portal of this cave, *śiṃśumāras* or *makaras* are clearly delineated as composite creatures endowed with elephantine and crocodilian characteristics (see Figs. 5, 6). The upper part of the creature's forehead certainly bears a similarity to the globe-shaped prominence of the elephant's head known in Sanskrit literature as *kumbha* (footless round water pot), and its large body and legs are those of a seated elephant. The toothed saw-like elongated tail of this creature certainly belongs to a crocodile. Its raised and upturned snout, however, is rendered in such a way that it reminds us not only of a crocodile's snout but also of an elephant's trunk. Such imagery of the crocodilian snout is the reason that in literature, the *makara* is designated sometimes as *mātāṅganakra* (*Raghuvamśa* 13.11), "elephantine *makara*," and other times as *soṅḍā-magara*, "*makara* with a trunk."<sup>29</sup> Admittedly, the earlobe of the creature at the Lomash Rishi cave looks like a fin, but this feature is not enough to identify this creature as a dolphin.

In ancient India, it was customary to have city gates. As we know from their representations in stone sculptures, these gates were made of timber and bamboo. The end of the wooden architraves of some of these magnificent gates, as exemplified by the portals of the Lomash Rishi cave (see Fig. 5, 6) as well as Bharhut stūpa, was decorated with crocodilian aquatic creatures. Very likely, the creature was known to ancient Indians as *śiṃśumāra*. The *Mahābhārata* refers to an important city named after a city gate called Śiṃśumāraśirā, which literally means "endowed with the *śiṃśumāra* on its head (*śiras*)."<sup>29</sup> The Sanskrit word *śiras* is a technical term. Like the word *uṣṇīṣa* for the coping of a stone railing, it is used in architecture to refer to the uppermost

<sup>29</sup> Lüders, "Von Indischen Tieren," p. 80.



component. Thus, we can surmise that the fabulous gate became known as Śiṃśumārasirā because the gate was surmounted by an architrave decorated with images of *śiṃśumāra*.<sup>30</sup> Because the Lomash Rishi cave is not exactly a cave but a monolithic giant sculpture rendered in imitation of the wooden architecture of the Maurya period, the portal of the Lomash Rishi cave with the mythical creature carved on the architrave cannot be much different from the freestanding Śiṃśumārasirā of the *Mahābhārata*.

In another instance, a city gate is designated as *godhāmukha gopura*, “a city gate adorned with a *godhā*’s mouth.” Although the exact identification of the aquatic *godhā* is a subject of scholarly discourse, the nomenclature of the city gate after this creature deserves special attention because it is found in the *Kauṭīlyā Arthaśāstra* (2.3.31) of Viṣṇugupta, the well-known minister of the Maurya emperor Candra Gupta (c. BCE 321–297). The time difference between Candra Gupta and his grandson Aśoka (c. BCE 271–232) is about twenty-seven years. Thus, Viṣṇugupta’s reference to the city gate is almost exactly contemporaneous with the portal of the Lomash Rishi cave. According to Lüders, who studied *godhā* in detail, “*go-dhā*” literally means “cow-swallower.” Although it is highly possible that *godhā* is another example of Sanskritization of a local word, on the basis of the visual and textual sources, we can safely deduce that the *godhā* is a large, crocodile-like, creature. More than likely, people in ancient India alternately identified the composite, mythical creature depicted on the architrave of the Lomash Rishi either as a *śiṃśumāra* or a *godhā*.

The portal of the Lomash Rishi cave is, however, significant not only because it displays the earliest images of this crocodilian creature but also because the symbolism of this Mauryan contribution is linked with Vedic thought. I will summarize what I wrote in my previous works on this portal<sup>31</sup> with some modification based on new findings.

In the *Yajurveda*, a frog is considered an appropriate sacrifice for the cloud god Parjanya for an obvious reason; both the god and the frog are associated with rain. In ancient India it was believed that it rains when frogs start croaking. Likewise, the *śiṃśumāra* is considered an appropriate sacrifice for Samudra because both the deity and the creature symbolically represent celestial and terrestrial water, described in the *Ṛgveda* (10.98.5–6) as *uttara* and *adhara samudra* “upper and lower *samudra*.” The lower *samudra* turns into desert when the gods block the flow of water from the upper *samudra*. Clearly, this is a story of rain and drought. The Puranic story of Bhagīratha, the prince who brought a heavenly river to the earth, seems to be inspired by this Vedic origin.

As we mentioned earlier, throughout history, people in South Asia have believed that clouds are water. This is why, in ancient India, people thought that clouds as waters were populated by aquatic or semiaquatic creatures. A late Vedic text entitled *Atharvaveda Pariśiṣṭa* and several other astrological texts of the classical period tell us that the appearance of aquatic or semiaquatic creatures such as fish, *makara*, elephants, serpents, and water buffaloes in the cloud

<sup>30</sup> Vasudeva S. Agrawala, *Studies in Indian Art*, Varanashi: Vishwavidyalaya Prakashana, 1965, pp. 98–101.

<sup>31</sup> Gautama V. Vajracharya, “*Mattavāraṇa*: Key Word for Understanding the Significance of *Toraṇa* in South Asian Art,” *Jñāna-Pravāha*, No. 15, 2011–2012, pp. 53–54.

formations, indicates water in the womb of the pregnant clouds. For this reason, such phenomena were known to the astrologers as *garbha-lakṣaṇa* “symptom of [atmospheric] gestation.”<sup>32</sup>

The seed of this concept certainly goes back to the early Vedic period. *Atharvaveda* (4.15) refers to serpents called *ajagara* “goat-swallower” and dragon-like creatures called *gargara* that reside in the thundering monsoon clouds and make a hissing sound (*śvasantu gargarāḥ*). Due to the popularity of this notion of the cloud as river and vice versa, it is very likely that the modern-day Ghaggar river of the Punjab was named after the creature. It is true that in the *Rgveda*, the word *gargara* is used for a musical instrument. Undoubtedly, however, this musical instrument bore some similarity to the creature either in physical appearance or in sound. As Sāyana has noticed, *gargara* is onomatopoeic (*gargaradhvani*).<sup>33</sup> According to the *Suśruta Saṁhitā* (1. 46. 118), the *gargara*, like the *makara*, is a creature of the ocean (*timitiṅgala ... makaragargara ... prabhṛtayaḥ sāmudrāḥ*). Thus, the representation of two crocodile-like composite creatures at the ends of the architrave of the portal or *torāṇa* of the Lomash Rishi cave echoes the Vedic story of the upper and lower *samudra*.

These two *samudras* are interconnected not only because the upper *samudra* descends to the earth in the form of rainwater but also because terrestrial water evaporates and turns into cloud water.<sup>34</sup> According to the *Rāmāyaṇa* (4. 28. 3), the sky conceives when she draws the essence of water (*rasāyana*) through the sunlight. The epic also describes the appearance of the elephants in the cloudscape. Traditionally, this animal and the rain cloud are so closely interrelated that sometimes it becomes difficult to understand whether the authors of Sanskrit literature are talking about a cloud or an elephant. According to the *Hastyāyurveda* (1. 54), people saw cloudscape-like large figures, moist but not dripping, when the cloud elephants first descended from heaven. Even in the eighteenth-century Rajput painting, a royal elephant called Bādali Sanagara “Cloud Ornament” is depicted as floating above the ground to indicate its atmospheric nature.<sup>35</sup> Once we are familiar with this deeply rooted concept about elephants, it becomes easier to understand that the representation of the elephants emanating from the mouth of the *śiṃśumāras* or *godhās* on the architrave of the Lomash Rishi cave is actually an artistic expression of the ancient concept of *garbhalakṣaṇa*.

It is also important to note that the elephants are shown here juxtaposing the elephant posts bound with ropes, but the elephants detached from the ropes and freely moving. As I explained

<sup>32</sup> Vajracharya, *Frog Hymns and Rain Babies*, pp. 120–122.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>34</sup> If evaporation means upward flow of waters, it does not happen naturally. But Vedic people, as Witzel has shown, tried to make it happened through rituals. The Yātsattra, for instance, is a pilgrimage toward the Himalaya on the bank of the Sarasvatī river against the flow of the water. Because the Sarasvatī river is believed to be same with the milky way, the ritual is scheduled in accordance with the yearly movements of the milky way as well as the annual flood of the river. Around summer solstice, the river start flooding heavily as result of snowmelt of the Himalaya and monsoon rain. The flood coincides with the descending movement of the milky way. The pilgrimage, however, does not take place around this time but from the winter solstice to the summer solstice, when the milky way is in the ascending mode. Thus, I find Witzel’s following explanation convincing: “For the “ascent” of the Milky Way - between the winter solstice and the summer solstice - a force is needed, but not for the “descent.” One can find this force not only in the Yātsattra but also in the Gavām Ayana ritual. (Michael Witzel, “Sur le chemin du ciel.” *Bulletin des Etudes indiennes*, vol. 2, 1984, pp. 213-279, fig. 3, a-c).

<sup>35</sup> Gautama V. Vajracharya, *Watson Collection of Indian Miniatures at the Elvehjem Museum of Art*, Madison: Elvehjem Museum, University of Wisconsin, 2002, pp. 12–13, 104–105.

in my previous work,<sup>36</sup> such a display symbolizes the unrestrained atmospheric elephants (*uddāma diggaja*, or “unbound directional elephants”), responsible for making rain. We find reference to *uddāma diggaja* not only in Kālidāsa’s *Raghuvamśa* but also in Pali literature. Due to the prevalence of this view in ancient India, the architrave on which the scene is carved was known as *mattavāraṇa* “the intoxicated elephants.”<sup>37</sup> In a later period, even after the elephants were replaced by lotus vine, which is actually another cloud symbol discussed below, the original term for the architrave remained intact. Because of its association with rainwater, having a *darśana* of the architrave was considered auspicious.

## V

Acharya correctly noticed that in post-Mauryan Indian sculptures, a mythical creature is rendered “as a fish in its hind part and as an elephant, horse, or cow in its front.”<sup>38</sup> According to Acharya, the fish tails make them dolphin-like. He writes, “. . . the fishtail is clearly visible. In short, even though extra artistically inspired elements are added, all older *makara* images are uncrocilian. Rather, they are either fish-like or dolphin-like.”<sup>39</sup>

This sweeping generalization indicates that Acharya is not familiar with the century-old discourse on these mythical creatures. Although the discourse began with Coomaraswamy’s work, it became much more intensified after his death. Not only art historians but also renowned Sanskrit scholars such as Kuiper<sup>40</sup> and Bosch<sup>41</sup> participated in the discourse and realized that the symbolism of the creatures is meaningfully expressed more with the lotus vine emerging from the body of the creatures than any other artistic features associated with them. In my earlier works, I endeavored to understand the symbolism more precisely in light of much textual and visual evidence unnoticed by previous scholars.<sup>42</sup> What was completely missing in their discussion was the association of the creatures and plants with cloud imageries vividly described in Sanskrit literature primarily in the *Atharvaveda Pariśiṣṭa* and astrological texts, discussed elaborately in my monograph.<sup>43</sup>

Fig. 7 is a medallion from Bharhut that is illustrated in Acharya’s article as well.<sup>44</sup> In this medallion, we see an elephant-headed, fish-tailed *makara* with a lotus vine bearing two fully blown lotuses and a bud issuing from its mouth. We see such creatures in ancient Indian art not only from Bharhut but also from Sanchi.

<sup>36</sup> G. Vajracharya, “*Mattavāraṇa* . . .,” pp. 53–54.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Acharya, ““Dolphin Deified . . .,” p. 9.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, p. 25.

<sup>40</sup> F.B.J. Kuiper, *Ancient Indian Cosmogony*, New Delhi: Vikas, 1983, pp. 23–40.

<sup>41</sup> F.D.K. Bosch, *The Golden Germ, An Introduction to Indian Symbolism* (The Hague: Mouton, 1960).

<sup>42</sup> Vajracharya, *Frog Hymns and Rain Babies*, pp. 114–140.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Acharya, ““Dolphin Deified . . .,” p. 25



Fig. 7. Elephant-headed *makara*, Bharhut, ca. second century BCE. Photo: American Institute of Indian Studies.



Fig. 8. Elephant-headed *makara*, Sanchi ca. first century BCE. Photo: American Institute of Indian Studies.

For instance, a slightly damaged medallion carved on the stone railing that surrounds the Sanchi stūpa II depicts a similar elephant-headed *makara* with a meandering foliated lotus vine emanating from its mouth (Fig. 8). Another sculpture carved on the vertical post of the same stone railing shows a turtle (Fig. 9) with a similar lotus vine gushing from its mouth. In addition to the variety of such mythical creatures, an auspicious symbol called Śrīvatsa is also shown linked to lotus vines (Fig. 10).



Fig. 9. Turtle with lotuses emerging from its mouth, Sanchi, ca. first century BCE. Photo: American Institute of Indian Studies.



Fig. 10. Śrīvatsa with lotus vines, Bharhut, ca. second century BCE. Photo: American Institute of Indian Studies.

A lotus does not grow like a vine, but in Indian art it is often represented that way. Obviously, the vine is symbolic. If we compare these artistic expressions juxtaposing them with Sanskrit words for cloud, lightning, and raindrop, it does not require much effort to realize that the lotus vine actually symbolizes the auspicious phenomenon of rain. According to the well-known Sanskrit lexicon, the *Nāmaliṅgānuśāsanam* (2. 9; 2. 11) *meghamālā* is the word for the elongated cloudscape. Likewise, the Sanskrit word for “raindrop” is either *meghapuspa*, “cloud flower,” or

*dhārāṅkura*, “rain bud.” The author of the *Atharvaveda Pariśiṣṭa* (64.1.10) tells us that when Varuṇa himself shakes the atmospheric flowering lotus vine, the thundering sky becomes covered with the raindrops (*dhārāṅkura*) that appear like the petals of the blue lotus. In the astrological texts, the rain cloud is described as *meghataru*, or “cloud tree.”<sup>45</sup> The well-known poet Śudraka, in his Sanskrit drama *Mṛcchakaṭikam*, compares the sky covered with dark clouds to artwork with a foliage motif, hence called *patracchedya*.<sup>46</sup> Evidently, the flowering lotus vine that we see in Indian art symbolizes rainwater. This is why the fish-tailed creatures and turtle-like semiaquatic animals, which were expected to be seen in the rain cloud, are depicted in Indian art with the floriated lotus vine gushing from their wide-open mouths (Fig. 11, 12). For the same reason, the lotus vine is associated with Śrīvatsa, an auspicious symbol related to water, cloud, and mud. The last item is described in the *Śrīsūkta* as Śrī/Lakṣmī’s baby (*vatsa*).<sup>47</sup>



Fig. 11. *Makara toraṇa*, Udayagiri, Orissa, ca. first century CE.  
Photo: American Institute of Indian Studies.



Fig. 12. Detail of Fig. 11.



Fig. 13. *Makara toraṇa*, Ajanta, ca. fifth century CE.  
Photo: American Institute of Indian Studies.



Fig. 14. Detail of Fig. 13.

<sup>45</sup> *Bṛhatsaṃhitā*, 47. 23.

<sup>46</sup> Vajracharya, *Frog Hymns and Rain Babies*, p. 121.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, p. 136–137.



Admittedly, not all fish-tailed creatures are shown in ancient Indian art with the lotus vine. But it is important to note that beginning in the Gupta period (ca. C.E 320–647.), the fish tails of the mythical creatures are regularly replaced by a spiral pattern known to art historians as a scroll or foliage motif. For instance, while the *makaras* represented at the *torana* of the Udayagiri, Orissa have fish tails (Fig. 11, 12), the same creatures on the Ajanta *torana* (Fig. 13, 14) are shown with their lower body turning into a spiraling foliage pattern. Such a foliage motif is known in Sanskrit literature either as *meghapatra* or *abhrapatra*, “cloud foliage.”<sup>48</sup>



Fig. 15. Māyā's dream, Bharhut, ca. second century BCE.  
Photo: American Institute of Indian Studies.



Fig. 16. Māyā's dream, Indian Museum, Calcutta, ca. first century CE. Photo: Indian Museum.

Perhaps the better example, closely related to both the fish tail and foliage motif, is the representation of the elephant in the scene of Queen Māyā's dream in Indian and Nepalese art. In the famous Bharhut medallion, the dream elephant is rendered naturalistically (Fig. 15). But in a Shunga period work (Fig. 16), the elephant is rendered as a fish-tailed creature not because the creature is considered as a dolphin but because the elephant was a cloud elephant. The story of Māyā's dream is actually based on the preexisting cloud story closely related to the abovementioned story of the cloud elephant described in the *Hastyāyurveda*. Although we do not know much about the pre-Buddhist version of this story in detail, surprisingly, the story was not completely forgotten even in the nineteenth century as exemplified by a Nepalese drawing in which an elongated foliated object instead of the elephant is shown hovering over the supine figure identified by a label inscription as Queen Māyā (Fig. 17). We know for sure this foliated

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 118–124. The identification of the foliage motif as *meghapatra* or *abhrapatra* is based on the fact that in Indian and Nepalese art, the crown of a royal figure is sumptuously adorned with a foliage motif. This motif is designated in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (23. 212–213) as *abhrapatra* “the cloud foliage.” Stylistically, the delineation of the foliage motif differs considerably in a different period of time and place. Compare the motif used as a tail of the *makara* in Bhotahiti *makara* (fig. 3) with the foliage carved on the stone bearing the inscription that refers to *jhaṣa* fountain (Appendix A). According to the *Aparājitaprcchā* (227. 28-34), the motif is rendered in the art of the subcontinent with many stylistic variations.

object is a stylized cloud not only because it is labeled in the drawing as *megha*, “cloud,” but also because the classical Newari word for such a stylized cloud is *lahpva*, “water pouch,” which is almost exactly synonymous with the Sanskrit *abhrapatra*.<sup>49</sup> We do find the elephant of the Māyā’s dream represented as a cloud creature in Tibetan paintings as well.<sup>50</sup>



Fig. 17. Māyā’s dream, nineteenth century Nepalese drawing, Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Photo: author.

Thus, it becomes evident that in pre-Gupta period Indian art, the cloud creatures are shown with fish tails, not because they are dolphins, but because the cloud is water, and the creatures that live in this water are fish. Beginning in the Gupta period, the cloud creatures are represented in art with cloud foliage most of the time replacing the fishtail. Throughout the history of Indian art, it was believed that seeing any object or creature directly or indirectly related to the arrival of monsoonal rain either in a dream or in artistic representation is auspicious. This is why they are depicted on the portal of Indian and Nepalese shrines and temples. I see no reason why all these creatures have to be dolphins.

Although I have written on this subject in my earlier work,<sup>51</sup> in light of recent findings, I would like to discuss the representation of cows in the Bharhut and Ajanta ceiling painting with better understanding. The cow in the Bharhut sculpture is represented with a fish tail (Fig. 18), but the

<sup>49</sup> Vajracharya, *Frog Hymns*, p. 119.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, p. 173.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, p. 122.



same creature on the Gupta/Vākāṭaka-period ceiling at Ajanta, as expected, has a foliated tail (Fig. 19).

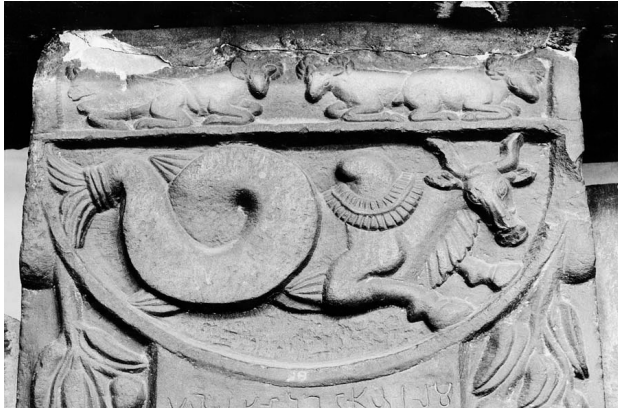


Fig. 18. Fish-tailed cow, Bharhut, ca. second century BCE.  
Photo: American Institute of Indian Studies.



Fig. 19. Fish-tailed cow, Ajanta ca. fifth century CE.  
Photo: Benoy K. Bhel.

By nature, a cow is neither aquatic nor semiaquatic. Thus, in some astrological texts, the cow is not listed as a cloud creature. However, the depiction of this domesticated animal as a cloud creature in Indian art tells us a somewhat different story. The artistic representation of the cow with a fish tail or cloud foliage is based on the idea that domesticated animals descend from the atmosphere together with the shower of rain. This idea is as old as the *R̥gveda* and perhaps even older. In the ritual of making the *soma* juice propounded in the ninth chapter of the *R̥gveda*, the stream of juice is deified, and this deified juice is described here as a Parjanya-like cloud god (*R̥gveda* 9.2.9, *parjanyaḥ vṛṣṭimān*). The deity is frequently requested to descend with the stream of rainwater that brings cattle and other creatures (*prajā*) down to the earth. A similar view is also expressed in the *Atharveda* 11.4.3–5, which tells us that *prāṇa*, “life,” descends from heaven when it rains. The author of *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (7. 10. 1) uses the same word *prāṇa* in the plural to indicate various creatures who suffer due to the failure of seasonal rain (*yadā suvṛṣṭir na bhavati vyādhyante prāṇāḥ*).

In the *R̥gveda*, the word used for the stream of descending water is *dhārā*, ritually interpreted in the ninth chapter of the Vedic text as pouring *soma* juice. Elsewhere in the same text (2.34.1), the stormy rain clouds are described as *dhārāvāra*, “fond of rain shower.” In addition, in classical Sanskrit literature, *dhārā* means “rain shower;” hence, in the literature, a synonym for cloud is *dhārādhara*. But in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the word *dhārā* is used as a synonym for the *makara*, the animal vehicle of Gaṅgā, clearly because the mythical creature stands for the cloud and rain shower.<sup>52</sup> This view is strongly supported by the delineation of the cloud foliage (*abhrapatra*) as the elongated tail of the *makara* on the spouts of Nepalese fountains (Fig. 3, 20). This is also in harmony with the fact that in Nepalese languages, the word for the *makara* fountains is *dhārā* “shower of rain.”

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, pp. 129–130.



Fig. 20. Sculpted stone spout showing *makara* spewing out of a cow, Changu, Kathmandu Valley, ca. ninth century CE. Photo: author.



Fig. 21. Golden metal spout showing *makara* spewing out of a cow, Bhaktapur, Kathmandu Valley, dated 1688 CE. Photo: author.

The Gaṅgā's descent (Gaṅgā Daśaharā, the tenth lunar day associated with Gaṅgā) is celebrated in South Asia exactly when pre-monsoonal rain for planting rice seed is expected; hence we know that the story of Gaṅgā's descent is actually the story of pre-monsoon rain. Nepalese fountains of the medieval period regularly include an image of Bhagīratha below the spout to associate the fountain with the story of Gaṅgā's descent. This association is, however, a secondary development. The original significance of Nepalese fountains is more closely related to the Vedic view that life descends from the heavens together with the rain (*dhārā*). This is why, on the spout of the Nepalese *dhārā*, a calf or a goat is repeatedly shown surging out of the mouth of the rain symbol *makara* (Fig. 20, 21). Such iconographic features of the water fountain are not related to Bhagīratha's story at all. In the medieval period examples, the entire spout is sometimes decorated with a stream of creatures such as elephants, frogs, ducks, and half-bird, half-human beings known as *jalamānuṣas* (Fig. 21).

I have shown in my recent works that some aspects of cow-related Vedic culture, such as *vṛṣotsarga*, “the release of bulls,” a *practical* ritual designed for the impregnation of cows in autumn with the expectation that calves will be born approximately 290 days later at the beginning of the monsoon, are still alive in Nepal, particularly in the annual cow festivals of the Kathmandu Valley.<sup>53</sup> Almost certainly, the representation of a calf emerging from the mouth of the *dhārā/makara* on Nepalese fountains is directly related to the autumnal and monsoonal rituals of the Vedic period and the Ṛgvedic expression (9. 49. 2) “Flow with that *dhārā* of yours with which cows came along here.” As I have explained elsewhere, although many Vedic deities and rituals faded into oblivion even before the Gupta period, some aspects of monsoon culture recorded in the Vedas are still discernable in the art and culture of South Asia, more vividly in Nepal than in India.

## Conclusion

Our discussion can be summarized by the following points:

<sup>53</sup> Gautama V. Vajracharya, “Nepal Saṃvat and Vikrama Saṃvat: Discerning Original Significance,” <https://asianart.com/articles/gvv-lecture/index.html>

1. The water fountain described in the fifth-century Nepalese inscription as a fountain cascading from the mouth of a *jhaṣa* is still extant and differs significantly from a typical *makara* fountain. The *jhaṣa* fountain is devoid of the three-dimensional erect trunk, a main characteristic of the *makara* fountain, described by Acharya as “the horn like snout.” Unexpectedly, however, this absent feature is a main point of Acharya’s argument for identifying *makara* as the horned dolphin described in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* as *jhaṣa*.
2. Acharya’s argument that *jhaṣa* is a dolphin because the word is synonymous with *śimśumāra* is not a proven fact. Etymologically, *śimśumāra* means “killer *śimśu*,” indicating the existence of two different *śimśu*, harmless and ruthless. This is in harmony with Aelian’s statement indicating the existence of harmless and ruthless crocodiles in the river Gaṅgā. In fact, almost certainly, the *jhaṣa* of the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* was a crocodilian creature because the protuberance on the end of the killer crocodile’s snout appeared like a horn not only to Vedic people but also to the Roman author. Unlike crocodiles, dolphins are devoid of the protuberance on the end of their snout.
3. The nickname of the sage mentioned in the *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa* is Śarkara Śiśumāra “sandy crocodile.” This sandy creature cannot be a dolphin. Same *Brāhmaṇa* text refers to a female crocodile as *śimśumārī*.
4. Acharya’s claim that the *makara* is never represented as a crocodile indicates his unfamiliarity with the earliest representation of crocodilian *makara* on the portal of the Lomash Rishi cave. This portal, known to ancient people either as *śimśumāraśirā* or *godhāmukha*, is significant not only because a pair of *makaras* is shown here with crocodilian features but also because the iconography of the portal is directly related to the *śimśumāra*’s symbolic association with the Vedic concept of *uttara* and *adhara samudra*.
5. The fish-tailed creatures of Indian art do not support Acharya’s dolphin theory either. Such representations of mythical creatures in ancient Indian art are based on the belief that the creatures are the denizens of mythical water, both celestial and terrestrial. This is why the lotus vine symbolizing the rain and cloud became part of the iconography of *makara* and other mythical creatures. This is also the reason that the fishtail was later replaced by “cloud foliage.” When monsoon arrives, all these creatures, including the cow, descend from the atmosphere to the earth. It is this view that we see clearly depicted on the spout of Nepalese fountains, rather than the flood story narrated in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*.

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## Appendix A



Inscription Describing the *jhaṣa* Fountain. Photo: Purushottam Lochan Shrestha.

The inscription is carved on the rectangular smooth surface of a stone (28 x 58 cm) attached on the wall of a small unpretentious shrine about ten feet in front of the water fountain. Immediately below the inscription, we see a sumptuously rendered meandering foliage motif.

## Text

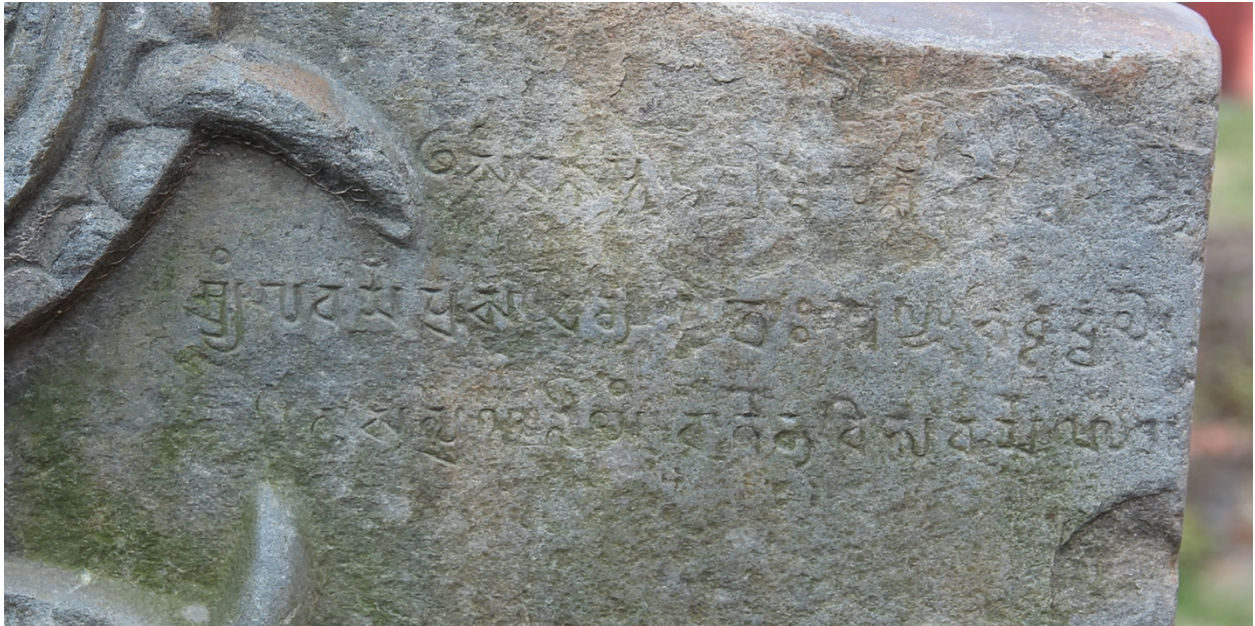
1. udyotakākhye satataṃ manojñe surālayasyādhvani sadvihāre |
2. hāreva dhāreyamatiprasannā jhaṣaṣya vaktrāt patatī virājate ||

## Translation

This beautiful excellent monastery called Udyotaka [is situated] on the way to heaven. [In this monastery,] an extremely clear jet of water that appears like a string of pearls cascades down from the mouth of a fish [*jhaṣa*].

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## Appendix B



Inscription Carved on the Spout of the Bhotahiti Fountain. Photo: author.

This inscription is carved on the stone spout of the water fountain, which was found buried in Bhotahiti near the northwest corner of the famous Tundikhel playground. Currently, it is housed in the National Museum, Chauni.

Text

1. saṃvat 45 jyeṣṭha śukla ...
2. śryaṃśuvarmaprasādena pituḥ puṇyavivṛddhaye kāritā satpraṇālīyaṃ vārtena vibhuvarmaṇā

Translation

During the bright half of the Jyeṣṭha month (May/June) of year 45 (CE 621) [inspired] with King Aṃśu Varman's grace, this excellent water fountain (*praṇālī*) was commissioned by Vārta Vibhu Varman for the enhancement of his father's religious merit.

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