

Kurma (Tortoise) in Indian Culture

Manisha Pravin Shete*

*Email: manisha.shete@jnanaprabodhini.org

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Abstract: The tortoise appears in Indian culture with a variety of symbolic meanings. Many ideas in mythology, literature, customs and practices in Indian culture are related to tortoise symbolism. While archaeological evidence and zooarchaeological records can sparsely give information on this animal's association with humans, literature and other scattered information are useful for appreciating the tortoise and human interactions. This paper is an attempt to understand the conceptualization of the tortoise in local legends, myths, and religion in the Indian cultural context.

Introduction

The tortoise is a well-known and famous reptile all over the world. The famous hare and tortoise story is an age-old one, and every generation repeats it with some love. The patient tortoise who wins the race has also won the race of life. Many creatures and reptiles have come and gone extinct on this planet. But, tortoise is one of the oldest reptiles on earth, i.e., 200 million years older (Grizmek 1984). It belongs to the Testudinidae family. There are approximately 200 to 250 genera of this reptile. They live in different climatic conditions and are differentiated according to their living styles.

Three types are there:

- 1) Turtles: The turtle strictly lives in the water and visits the shore only for hatching. Its legs are like flippers. Marine turtles belong to this group.
- 2) Terrapins: The terrapins have hard shells and are mainly freshwater reptiles. They live on both land and water.
- 3) Tortoises: The tortoises are strictly land-dwelling, with a tomb-like shell. They have rounded and clawed feet to make it easier for them to walk on land.



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Are tortoise tombs like shells, and some strange tortoise habits, behind the tortoise symbolism all over the world? We find many great ideas in mythology, literature, and customs and practices in Indian culture that are related to tortoise symbolism. Studying tortoises in these aspects gives us a chance to explore tortoise and human relationships in many ways.

Why Tortoise?

Due to human interference in the ecosystem, many members of the living world other than human beings are losing their natural habitats. The IUCN Red List publishes a list of species that are in the danger zone and may become extinct due to human interference. This list contains some species of turtles and tortoises that are in danger.

As we have observed over the last many years, a movement is being run all over the world to save turtles and tortoises. Many leading newspapers publish news about turtle conservation programmes. Olive Ridley, Leatherback, Green Turtle, Hawksbill, and Loggerhead are the species that visit Indian coastal areas for hatching. But they are killed for their eggs, oil extracts, meat, and shells. Industrialization, mechanization, and changing fishing practices are creating problems for the life of this reptile.

When the author was working as a researcher for the Vedic Ecology Project, she came to know about tortoise conservation stories. In 2007, the project team visited Tambaldeg, a small village on the seashore in Maharashtra's District Deogad. In this small village, the forest department conducted a turtle conservation programme for Olive Ridley turtles. The team worked on this and distributed some flex showing the *Kurmavatar* of *Visnu* and used the idea of *Navvidha Bhakti* to create awareness among people about turtles. *Navvidha Bhakti* means "nine ideas provided to save the turtles."

As a student of Indology, it peeped into the author's mind that, in Indian culture, the tortoise is praised as "*Kurmavatar* of God *Vishnu*". In the temple, the tortoise is generally found before the deity. In the *Vastu Shastra* too, a unique role for the tortoise can be seen. Many people keep crystal or stone tortoise images in their houses. Tortoise rings are used by many people to bring prosperity. An interesting book on marine turtles and their conservation programme by Shankar and Choudhary (2007: 318) refers to the fact that "...there is a need to re-emphasize the historical and mythological significance of turtles in India. The *Kurmavatar*, the *kacchapa asana* and other historical linkages to turtles in India, and the reverence for these animals, based on ancient traditions, are perhaps the most important reasons for their survival in such large numbers on the Indian coast until today."

Methodology

This research paper is based mainly on library work. Literary and customary evidence was collected by visiting different libraries, mainly the Deccan College Scriptorium and Library, the Bhandarkar Oriental Institute, and the Vedic Samshodhan Mandal, which were the primary sources. Books, research papers, articles, encyclopaedias, and online

sources were studied for the same. The evidence was collected to find the answer to the following question: "What is the role of tortoises in Indian culture?"

Tortoise Symbolism, Philosophy, and Mythology

The tortoise takes various forms in Indian culture, and it changes its role frequently. This calm creature is carrying many myths on its hard shell for a long back. It can be seen in literature, art and artefacts, archaeology, numismatics, rock art, iconography, mythology, philosophy, traditional medicines, and many more. The tortoise appears in Vedic literature, mythology, folklore, the epics, the *Puranas*, and saintly literature with unique symbolism. In the earlier literature, we can trace the tortoise symbolism in the *Taittiriya Samhita*, i.e., the Black Yajurveda school, the *Shatapatha Brahmana*, *Taittiriya Aranyak*, *Agni Purana* and other *Puranas*, *Varahmihir's Bruhat Samhita*, *Mahabharata*, and *Bhagavad Gita*.

The tortoise is not mentioned in the *Rigveda*. In the *Yajurveda* or *Atharvaveda*, it is not clearly mentioned. The tortoise appears in the *Panchatantra* fables by Aesop and *Jatak Katha* as well as in tribal mythology and their stories about totems. There are some Sanskrit *Subhashitas* and proverbs in local languages. In the literary evidence, one can gain knowledge about tortoise symbolism, philosophy, and other related subjects.

Tortoise or Turtle (*Kurma*): Unique Names in Sanskrit and Indian Languages

There are many names for tortoises, and they are mostly based on their physiology and habits. In Sanskrit, *Kurma*, *Kashyapa*, *Kameratha*, *Kacchapa* or *Kachhapak*, and *Akupa-Aditya* are synonyms of this animal. *Aditya* means "sun" in Hindu ideology, *Kurma* symbolises the sun (Dange 1973: 27). *Kurmpati*, *Krodpada*, *Panchanga*, or *Panchang Gupta* all refer to tortoises with the ability to extract and retract limbs and heads.

Other than Sanskrit, the local names of tortoises are also very interesting. They are also based on their biological features and habits, like *Samudra Kainccho*, *Chilka Tambelu*, *Metta Thabelu* (Star Tortoise), *Kadal Amma*, *Kacchukumma*, *Samudra Kacchuwa*, *Muru*, etc. In Sanskrit and Arabic, *Kachhapa* is a common name for the tortoise. Tribals call it by different names; "*Dhelki Khariya*" tribals from Chota Nagpur call it "*Muru*", and Gonds call it "*Kacchibose*." The tortoise is a totem of more than 23 tribal clans, and there are some rituals to pay respect to this totem god.

Tortoise: Archaeozoological Evidence

Archaeological evidence directly helps to understand the human-animal relationship. We get archaeological evidence of tortoises in the form of broken pieces of plastrons, carapaces, and bones. Tortoise remains have been found all over India. They belong to different periods like the Mesolithic, Neolithic, Chalcolithic/Harrapan, Iron Age, and Early Historic periods. Examples of some sites from which we have evidence of tortoises include Mahadaha in Uttar Pradesh that can be dated from 5000 to 3000 BCE (Joglekar et al. 2003), Langhnaj in Gujarat during 2000 BCE (Deo 1976), Kaothe in Maharashtra (Thomas and Joglekar 1990), Budhihal in Karnataka (P.P. Joglekar, *personal*

communication), etc. Zooarchaeological evidence of tortoises in these early cultural phases predominantly reflects the use of tortoises as food.

Tortoise in Art

The tortoise appears in rock art. At Harappa, researchers have found three tortoise figurines. Some pieces of pottery from the Kaothe Sawalda culture have been discovered with tortoises depicted on them. In temple architecture, the tortoise is mostly carved as a vehicle of the river Yamuna on the temple doors, for example, at Verul (Maharashtra), Udayagiri (Madhya Pradesh), and Jabalpur.

In the *Samudra Manthan Katha* (churning of the ocean), a tortoise holds Mountain Mandar on its back. This can be seen in several places in India as well as at Angkor Wat in Cambodia. Sometimes it simply appears around the idol of the deity as a small creature. The tortoise appears in Buddhist and Jain iconography as well. Art reflects the philosophy or symbolism of the tortoise. Tortoise idols appearing in the temples suggest a different meaning. The famous connotation is 'How a tortoise withdraws its limbs and neck under its roof like a shell, likewise, a devotee or one who expects spiritual bliss must restrain oneself from worldly affairs.'

Tortoise: A Symbol of Heaven and the World

In Hindu mythology, it has been believed since ancient times that the earth is supported by an elephant. The elephant named *Mahapadma* is standing on the back of a tortoise named *chukwa* and the earth is resting on its trunk. Another concept is that the tortoise brought the earth out of the water, but he felt that in the hot sun, it might roll up, so he kept eight elephants facing eight directions on the earth (Eliade Mircea 1987). This reference can be found in the *Taittiriya Samhita* (Black Yajurved) of *Yajurved*, where, at the place of *Agnichayan*, it is said that the tortoise should be placed there as the earth is also standing on the tortoise, and so it is stable, which means the tortoise is a symbol of stability. *Taittiriya Samhita* 5.2.8.6 (Bapat 1994) and *Shatapatha Brahman* elaborate on tortoise symbolism very specifically. In this literature, it is a source of origin, a creator, and a guide to heaven. In *Taittiriya Samhita*, the story of Angiras Rishi appears (Bapat 1994).

अपश्यन् पुरोडाश कूर्म...क्षो नुपाक्तः॥ तैत्तिरीय संहिता २.६.३.३ (Agashe 1980)

Angiras started from earth towards heaven, and he saw a deity in the form of *purodash*. He requested the deity to stop. However, *Purodash*, in the form of *Kurma*, followed him. In *Taittiriya Samhita*'s description, it is given that the tortoise knows the way to heaven, so the one who keeps a tortoise at the place of *Agnichayan* leads the host towards heaven. The host (*yajman*), who performs the *Yajnya* with the goal of heaven during *Somayaga*, also performs the *Agnichayan* ritual (Bapat 1994).

Tortoise is also symbolised by the earth and sky. This symbolism again comes in the *Shatapatha Brahman*.

तस्य यदधरम कपालम|...यदन्तरा तदन्तरिक्षं स एष इम एव लोका इमानेवैतल्लोका नुपद्धाति ॥ 7.5.1.2

The plastron of the tortoise is the earth or the world; its tomb-like shell is the sky; and the place between the plastron and shell means space. And so, as the tortoise is a symbol of all three things, it is kept near a sacred fire (Eggeling 1963).

Tortoise: A Symbol of Life Sap and Creation

The tortoise is also symbolised by Prajapati, i.e., the god of creation. The tortoise is a symbol of reproductive power. In the *Shatapatha Brahman* too, this story repeats (Eggeling 1963: 1.6.2.3). There tortoise also comes as a life sap रसो वै कूर्मः| "... the tortoise means life sap" or प्राणो वै कूर्मः| (Shat.Brah.7.5.1.1) or प्राणो वै कूर्मः | प्राणो हिमाः सर्वाः प्रजा करोति | (Shat.Brah.7.5.1.7 to 7.5.1.10). It is translated as "And again, why he puts down a tortoise (*Kurma*), the tortoise (*Kurma*) is the breath, for the breath maker (*kar*) of all the creatures (Chaubey 1989).

Tortoise: The Symbol of Control of Mind and Body (Controlling the Self Organ)

Kshurikopniasad of Black Yajus School explains self-control with the symbol of the tortoise. This is a very famous idea that appears in Indian philosophy (saintly literature). One who expects spiritual bliss must restrain oneself from worldly affairs. The tortoise can withdraw its limbs and mouth under its tomb-like shell whenever needed, which means it has a quality of self-control. This quality of tortoises is used every time to explain self-restraint.

कुर्माङ्गानीव संहृत्यमनो हृदि निरुध्यच | मात्रा द्वादश योगेन प्रणवेन शनैः शनैः| (Sharma 1993: 92)

This Upanisadic idea becomes quite famous in the later literature, and we can trace it in *Vayupuran*, *Agnipurana*, *Mahabharat*, *Bhagvadgeeta*, as well as in the saintly literature like *Dnyaneshwari*. In the Tamil literature '*Tirukkural*' by Saint Tiruvalluvar, to explain patience, he used tortoise symbolism. The same idea comes in the text '*Loukik Nyaykosha*' where it is called as 'कुर्माङ्गन्याय' (Lalye 2006).

In the Konkani dialect it is explained as '*kasav maman gatre aawulali*' (कासव मामान गात्रे आवुळली) . But here the meaning is different; it means that as a tortoise withdraws its limbs and mouth beneath its shell, a frightened person also behaves like this (Date and Karve 1942). In the *Yogshastra*, for the concentration of mind and at the time of meditation, 'कुर्मासन' is suggested, where the sitting position is like a tortoise.

In the *Mahabharat* and *Kautilya's Arthashastra*, this symbolism is used to guide the king. In the *Shanti Parva*, Bhishma explains king should have to be always alert, as tortoise always keeps its organs under the shell so no one can see them. The king must keep his secrets likewise (Walimbe 1886).

Tortoise and Stability

Tortoise symbolism is also used to explain the stability of the mind, wealth, etc. In the *Brahama Vaivart Puran*, when "*peeth puja*" is done, ॐ कमठाय नमः| mantra is suggested for chanting. If anyone expects specific *siddhi* by performing *sadhana*, it is suggested that one

should sit in the position of *Kurmasan* (Chaturvedi 1981: 42). While building a temple, it is built on the tortoise-shaped ground, and while installing the new idol, it should be placed on the *Kurmapeeth*. Nowadays, a tortoise in the temple is a very common thing, but before 1200 CE, it was not common. In the temple, before the deity, '*rangsheela*' was there, but for the time being, it was replaced by a tortoise idol, which is now placed before the deity. It is placed for two reasons: one is that when a devotee enters the temple, he or she should restrain the *shadripu*, i.e., lust, anger, jealousy, arrogance, temptation, and greed, and then only submissively bow before the deity. In the *Dnyaneshwari*, self-restraint is explained like this.

देखे कूर्म जियापरी | उवाइला अवयव पसरी | ना तरी इच्छावशे आवरी | आपणपेची || 2.352

The second idea behind the tortoise in the temple is that a mother turtle, after laying the eggs, never comes on the shore to take care of her hatchlings, but she feeds and protects them with her eyesight only. The deity also protects its devotees only with their eyesight, though the devotee never sees it in its real form (Dandekar 1986).

The third concept is quite unique. The tortoise in the temple is said to be a symbol of Vishnu's *Kurmavatar* in the *Samudra Manthan* story (the churning of the ocean). The top of the temple is a symbol of Mountain Mandara, and to support it, there is a tortoise symbol of Vishnu's *Kurmavatar* on the ground.

Therefore, the tortoise's shell and its habit of withdrawing are mentioned prominently in the various texts. In the *Vastushastra*, tortoise is a symbol of wealth and stability. In Varaha Mihira's *Bruhat Samhita* (64.1, 2, 3), it is mentioned that if a king keeps the tortoise in the well or his palace, it will bring him success and wealth (Athalye 1874: 361). The churning of the ocean (*Samudra Manthan*) story is a very good example where the tortoise is symbolised by the deity Vishnu. This story is explained vividly by many authors. In the *Puranas*, this is the story of Vishnu's *Kurmavatar* to support the mountain Mandara. Tortoise shell is extremely hard, so the idea of resting the Mandara on the tortoise's back to provide support is an ideal one. The role of this tortoise is not related to the creation or origin of the world; it is different, and it is philosophical as well as social. According to Apate (2003) or Athavale (1988), the churning of the ocean is the churning of social customs, laws, and structures. It is a *Kurma-Purush* who, at a time of chaos in society, firmly and steadily handles the situation and finds a way.

According to Swami Nityanand (1983), it is actually "*Manas Manthan*," or "Churning of Ideologies," or "Psychological Churning." A person who is torn between right and wrong, good and bad, becomes steady through meditation, and God firmly supports him as Kurma supports Mandara. Veronica Ions (1967) elaborates, "when doomsday appears in the world. It means it is a loss of ambrosia, and so to support the world, Vishnu takes the *Kurmavatar*...".

Sadashiv Dange (1974: 45) explains that in the *Amrutmanthan* story, the ocean represents the sky, and the sun represents the tortoise (Kurma) in this ocean. This entire story is about Vishnu's *Kurmavatar*. A Sanskrit poet named Jaydev questions why there are marks on the tortoise's back. Then he answers this question, which is very interesting. He writes that at the time of the churning of the ocean, Shreehari took the *Kurmavatar*, Mandara rested on his back, and the churning started. Due to Mount Mandara's weight, as it rests on the tortoise shell, it was marked, i.e., the reason for the

round design on the tortoise shell. Thus, *Kurmavatar* has become a source of inspiration in many ways.

Tortoise: Its Appearance in Customs and Stories

Many customs and traditions are related to tortoise symbolism. On the date of *Kurmavatar*, several predictions exist. According to Bahari (1994: 86), the date of *Kurmavatar* is *Kurma Dwadashi (Poush Shuddha Dwadashi)*, and one who keeps fast on this day becomes wealthy.

In the *Agnipurana*, offering tortoise meat to manes is symbolised by their satisfaction. It is stated there that if tortoise meat is offered to manes, they will be satisfied for seven months (Za and Tripathi 1986: 623). Nambudiri Brahmans use wooden *Kurmasan* for sitting at the time of *puja*, ritual, or at the time of meal. In the marriage ceremony, the bride and groom sit on the *Kurmasan* as it is a symbol of purity and sacredness (Moses 1927-28).

Among the tribal people (Gond, Bhuiya, Koshti, Oran, Marpachi, etc.) all over India, the tortoise is treated as a totem. They symbolise the tortoise as a friend, protector, and their originator. It also appears in folk stories from Andamani and Santhal. Sometimes it is mischievous or a friend. In the Bouddha Jataka Katha, the tortoise takes on Buddha's disciple's role (Bhagwat 1991). Sometimes the tortoise is innocent, lazy, wise, or clever. In the same way, it appears in Aesop's fables.

In the *Hitopadesh*, in one story, a tortoise named *Mantharak* is very wise and helpful, and in the other story, it is talkative, due to which it faces death. Tortoise symbolism can also be found in Sanskrit (*Subhashitas*) poetry. *Bhartuhari* compares a gentleman with a tortoise; he says that as the tortoise holds the earth on its back without making any complaint, likewise, a gentleman completes his work, though it is tough, and he never gives it up.

Tortoise symbolism appears in the Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, Islamic, and Sikh religions. Mostly, it is treated as a good omen. In Christian belief, there is no specific finding about tortoises. According to Hindus, Buddhists, and Jains, the tortoise sign symbolises a great man or philosopher. Jain muni Suvrat's symbol is the tortoise.

Tortoises are considered "*haram*" in Islam, which means "unlucky," but when they appear in dreams, they are interpreted as scholars or worshippers who read the holy Quran. According to Ibn-i-Seerin, the turtle represents the woman who likes to adorn herself for a man. Eating turtle meat in a dream means profit, benefit, or money. If one sees a turtle inside the house or if a person owns one in a dream, it means that he will benefit from the company of a learned person who is acquainted with ancient manuscripts (Islamic Dream Interpretation 2023).

Conclusion

The tortoise plays a very interesting role, as is revealed by observing the relationship between the tortoise and human beings. It serves as a friend, philosopher, and guide in various cultures. Humans always need some type of relationship with the animal world. Human beings' various emotions like love, affection, loneliness, peacefulness, and friendship are shared with the animals. It has become a source of inspiration for humans;

many creative ideas are born from the tortoise-human relationship. The tortoise symbolism reflects society's changing faiths. In today's context, it can be observed that people love tortoise rings, tortoise symbols in jewellery, tortoise cushions, toys for their children, the crystal tortoise image in their homes, wooden tortoise seats, and so on.

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