

The Mythic Origin of Elephants

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ABSTRACT

Under veterinary science we have the treatises viz. Hastyāyurveda and Mātāṅgalīlā which deal with the science of elephants. Hastyāyurveda of Pālakāpya, as its name implies is the Āyurveda or medical theory and treatment of elephants, while Mātāṅgalīlā of Nīlakaṅṭha deals with elephant lore in general. ‘Nāgotpatti’ in its first chapter discusses about the origin of elephants. There, Nīlakaṅṭha has narrated a myth which points out the miraculous origin of elephants depicting them as supernatural animals.

It is quite interesting to note that the sources of that myth are traceable in the Vedic treatises right from the Ṛigveda, Taittirīya, Saṁhitā, KāṭhakaSaṁhitā, Maitrāyaṇi Saṁhitā, even further in the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa, Pañcaviṁśa Brāhmaṇa and in the Mahābhārata, Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa etc.

A thorough investigation of different versions of that myth with a view to find out the reasoning behind reveals a number of surprising aspects. These are significant from the point of view of cosmology, theory of evolution, striking biological traits of elephants, justification of elephant-faced god viz. Gajumukha or Ganesha, ritualistic aspects of sacrificial fees and the unique role of singing of certain 7 Sāmavedic chants about the origin of elephants etc.

The paper seeks to focus on such interesting aspects.