

A Historical Explanation of the Etymology of the Word Asvattha

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I

Several etymologies of the word *asvattha* have been suggested.¹ These draw on the botanical,² mythological³ or philosophical⁴ associations of the word. The most generally accepted etymology in modern discussions of the subject seems to be the one which understands the word to mean “(the tree) under which the horses stand”.⁵

When the word is thus understood, then the need to explain the etymology arises: why is the *ficus religiosa* so named—as the tree under which the horses stand?

The usual response to this question is to refer to the “*brāhmaṇa* and commentarial story of Agni, the fire-god, taking refuge in the tree in the form of a horse—hence *asvattha* < *asvastha*, the standing-place of the horse”.⁶

But is this explanation adequate? M. B. Emeneau has suggested that “Agni is supposed to be in the tree, since . . . a piece of *asvattha* wood forms the upper of the two fire-sticks used in twirling out fire. The horse-shape of Agni seems, however, to be nothing more than an invention for the sake of etymology.”⁷

It appears to this writer that the suggestion made by M. B. Emeneau—that the *brāhmaṇa*⁸ and commentarial story of Agni may be in the nature of *ex post facto* rationalization needs to be taken seriously, as the word *asvattha* already occurs in the *Rg Veda*⁹ (though in the “later” first and tenth books). It will now

1 See Manfred Mayrhofer, *Kurtzgefasstes Etymologisches Wörterbuch des Altindischen* (Carl Winter, Heidelberg, 1953), p. 61.

2 For etymologies based on the botanical aspects of *asvattha* see Lassen, *Indische Alterthumskunde*, Vol. I (2nd edition, Leipzig, 1867), p. 304, n. 1; M. B. Emeneau, *The Strangling Figs in Sanskrit Literature* (University of California Press, 1949), p. 370.

3 For an etymology based on mythological aspects see J. G. Arapura, “The Upside Down Tree of the Bhagavadgītā”, Ch. XV, *Numen*, XXII, Fasc. 2, pp. 132-133.

4 See *ibid.*, p. 133.

5 See H. Grassman, *Wörterbuch zum Rigveda* (Otto Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden, 1964), p. 142.

6 M. B. Emeneau, *op. cit.*, p. 369; also see J. G. Arapura, *loc. cit.* For the difficulty in explaining the form *ttha* for *stha* see M. B. Emeneau, *loc. cit.*

7 *Ibid.*, pp. 369-370.

8 *Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa* 3.8.12.2, etc. Also see *Mahābhārata*, Anuśāsana Parva, 85, etc.

9 *Rg Veda*, I.135.8 and X.97.5.

be further suggested that instead of an *ex post facto* mythological rationalization it may be possible to offer an *ex-ante* historical explanation of the etymology of the word *āsvattha* as "(the tree) under which the horses stand".

II

Central to this explanation is the position of Sir John Marshall that the horse was not known to the Indus Valley people.¹⁰ This has been contested,¹¹ but there can be little doubt that the horses are to be associated with the incoming Aryans who are believed to have supplanted the Indus Valley culture around the middle of the second millennium B.C. rather than with the people of the Indus Valley civilization itself. Stuart Piggott has pointed out that although one cannot "hold that the Aryans were the first people to domesticate the horse", "they were certainly among the first to introduce the idea of rapid transport made possible by its use. For their farm work, ox-drawn four-wheeled carts seem to have been used, and horses bred solely for use with the light two-wheeled chariot for sport or warfare."¹²

This two-wheeled chariot drawn by horses¹³ as used by the Aryans seems to have been the ancient equivalent of Hitler's motorized Panzer divisions. The Aryans seem to have overwhelmed the contemporary world with this military innovation.¹⁴

It is interesting in this context to note that *Rg Veda* I.135.8 refers to the company of "those who meet under the *āsvattha* tree as victors".¹⁵ If all these bits and pieces are put together the jigsaw puzzle of the explanation of the etymology of *āsvattha* seems to fit. The following picture emerges—the *āsvattha* tree is so called because it was under these trees of the Indus Valley that the conquering Aryans pulled their victorious chariot-drawing horses presumably for rest. Hence the trees came to be known as *āsvattha*—the tree under which the horses stand. After all, "the pipal with its wealth of hanging leaves constantly fluttering in the wind" is a distinctive feature of the Indian landscape to this day¹⁶ and seems to have been distinctly so in the Indus Valley period if the depictions on the Indus seals are any indication.¹⁷ Indeed, the

fluttering leaves may have appeared most inviting to the horses and the charioteers for a moment of repose.¹⁸

To conclude: It seems possible to offer a historical instead of a mythological explanation of the etymology of the word *āsvattha* as the tree under which the horses stand in terms of the circumstances of the advent of the Aryans into India.

10 See Sir John Marshall, *Mohenjodaro and the Indus Civilization* (A. Probsthain, London, 1931), *passim*.

11 See R. C. Majumdar (ed.), *The Vedic Age* (Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, 1965), p. 198.

12 Stuart Piggott, *Prehistoric India* (Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1952), p. 267.

13 For details, see *ibid.*, pp. 276-281.

14 See *ibid.*, Chap. VII, *passim*.

15 See K. F. Geldner, *Der Rig Veda*, Vol. I (Harvard University Press, 1951), p. 190.

16 R. C. Majumdar, *op. cit.*, p. 113.

17 *Ibid.*, Plate VII and p. 192.

18 This feature of the fluttering leaves of the tree is so impressive that Lassen derives the word *āsvattha* from *a-svastha* so that the "reason for the name is given as the poplar-like continual shivering of the leaves, which is a feature of the tree mentioned by botanists" (M. B. Emeneau, *op. cit.*, p. 370).