

# The Peacock Cult in Asia

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## Introduction

Doubts were entertained about India's wisdom when Peacock was adopted as her National Bird. There is no difference of opinion among scholars that the original habitat of the peacock is India, or more precisely Southern India. We have the authority of the Bible\* to show that the peacock was one of the 'commodities' that India exported to the Holy Land in ancient times. This splendid bird had reached Athens by 450 B.C. and had been kept in the island of Samos earlier still.

The peacock bridged the cultural gap between the Aryans who were

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\* I Kings 10:22 For the king had at sea a navy of Thar'-shish with the navy of Hiram: once in three years came the navy of Thar'-shish bringing gold, and silver, ivory, and apes, and peacocks.

II Chronicles 9: 21 For the King's ships went to Tarshish with the servants of Hu'-ram: every three years once came the ships of Tarshish bringing gold, and silver, ivory, and apes, and peacocks.

Job 39: 13 *Gavest thou* the goodly wings unto the peacocks? or wings and feathers unto the ostrich?

the invaders and the original inhabitants, the Dravidians. Dravidians all over India worshipped the peacock as Mother Earth. Skanda, the war-god of the Aryans, was fused with the Dravidian supreme god, Muruga or Subramania, the deified peacock. This cultural synthesis took place some time in the 7th century A.D.

The Dravidian tribes inhabiting the different parts of India have interesting stories about the origin of the first peacock, the reasons why the peahen looks less attractive than her lordly lover, how did the bird lose its golden voice and beautiful feet, and how did it get the hundred eye-designs, etc.

The peacock's meat was eaten by kinds all over the world. How did the bird become sacred not only to the Hindus but to all other religions of the world? The gradual process of the deification of the peacock is interesting. The antiquity of the peacock worship can be traced from sculptures and numismatics. What role did the bird play in history? Does the bird figure prominently in Sanskrit literature? The peacock provided a constant source of inspiration to Kalidasa, Bhavabhuti and other poets. The peacock has carved a niche for itself in Indian folklore. It appears that the doubts entertained in some quarters about India's wisdom in adopting the peacock as her National Bird was unfounded. The peacock is the perfect specimen of Indian culture. How this ambassador of Indian culture or the peacock cult was adopted by the followers of the major religions of Asia and Europe is an interesting chapter in the history of Ornithology. We shall trace the origin of this worship, the comparative mythology of the peacock and explain the beliefs connected with it on the basis of available literature.

### I. Origin of the first Peacock

The peacock has fired the imagination of the people all over the world. But there are few people who can account for its origin. Ornithologists simply say that the peacock is the most beautiful pheasant. Of course, it is the most beautiful bird and is in the natural course of evolution. The tribal people of India who are full of vigour and imagination have many a fascinating story to account for its origin and it is instructive to narrate some of them. Though we are reproducing the stories here, no attempt is made to give an interpretation of the true meaning of the myths in the light of the customs and practices of the tribes concerned.

The peacock is called *Mor* in Hindi, *Mayil* in Tamil and Malayalam, *Monara* in Sinhalese, *Mayura*, *barhin*, *barhi*, *bhujangabhuk*, *shikaval*, *shikaval*, *shikhi*, *keki* and *meghanadatul* in Sanskrit. *Mor* is a contraction of *Mayura* which is Tamil-Malayalam *Mayil* Sanskritised, for the last syllable *l* and *r* are interchangeable in that language. How did the word originate according to the Binjhwar tribesmen of Dhaurabhata, Raipur District? "A village carpenter called Musraha was making a plough. As he was working, a blue jay flew by and cried *kach-kach*. The carpenter was annoyed and threw some shavings at it. *Dekho-dekho*, he cried. When the shavings touched it, the jay turned into a peacock and flew into the air trying to say *Dekho*, but all it could manage to say was *Tegho-tegho*. Presently it returned and sat by the carpenter.

"Musraha said, 'You were made by my hands and you belong to me. So your name is *Mor* (=mine, or the peacock). Your beauty will be wonderful, and all men will love you".<sup>1</sup>

This gallinaceous bird belongs to the pleasant family *Phasianidae*, *Pavo Cristatus*, and is the native of Southern India, though widely distributed in Asia and the neighbouring countries. The bird is found all over Tamil Nadu villages and towns. The peafowl is seldom seen in the Sunderbans and other parts of West Bengal. It is found along the Outer Himalayas up to an altitude varying from 2000 and 5000. They frequent the fields in the immediate vicinity of man's habitation and even roost in village trees in the Indus and Gangetic Valleys. The distribution of the bird seems to be scanty in the Assam Himalayas and Nepal. In Ceylon the peafowl inhabits the low country dry zone, being commonest in the wilder coastal districts of the north-west, east, and south-east; but it is also found around the larger tanks. It avoids dense forest but delights in a mixture of jungle with open country, scrub-land, *chena*, etc. and the grassy borders of tanks.

There are two species of peacocks besides the *Pavo Cristatus*. The green one, *Pavo muticus*, is widely distributed in Burma and Malaysia. It is a mutant species of the *Pavo Cristatus*. The white peacock, of which two I have seen in the Zoological Gardens of Calcutta, is not at all a beautiful bird. The discovery of the solitary African species, the Congo Peacock (*Afropavo Congenesis*) in 1936 was hailed as the greatest bird news of the 20th century. Naturalists believed for a long time that all typical pheasants were natives of India. Dr. James P. Chapin, the fore-

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1. Elwin, Verrier—MYTHS OF MIDDLE INDIA, Ox. U.P., 1949, pp. 196-197.

most authority on the birds of the Belgian Congo startled the scientific world in 1936 by describing an African species, the Congo Peacock. Chapin had found two or three feathers of an unidentified pheasant-like bird in the headdress of a Congo chieftain as early as 1913. Many years later he discovered two old mounted birds in a Belgian museum, long believed to be young peacocks, really examples of an undescribed peacock like pheasant living in the Belgian Congo. Hastening to Africa, he soon succeeded in bringing back some of these birds—Congo Peacock. The male of this species is largely gleaming black with an ornamental tuft of white plumes on its crown. The brown and green female has an even more obvious resemblance to the peacock group of pheasants.<sup>2</sup>

The female of the species all over the world are the most beautiful, of course, perhaps, with the solitary exception of peacock. All over the globe the female folk goad their person with the most eye-pleasing colours in order to enhance their natural beauty and thus entice the males, but the peacock has itself foolishly done so. The origin of the first peacock explains why the male happens to be more handsome than the female.

The Kuttia Konds of Rangaparu, Ganjam District, believe that the first peacock was created by their high god Nirantali. While Nirantali was pissing in her garden, a fly sat on her vagina and the mischievous moth reported the size of the genital organ to an elephant and then flew into the nose of a tiger. The tiger sneezed violently and the fly flew into a hole of a tree. Nirantali, who had sent her men after the fly, wanted to kill it. The two men whom Nirantali had sent after the fly, reported to her: "It is hidden in the tree. What are we to do?". Nirantali said, "Go, cut down the tree, and the fly will come out; catch it and bring it to me". They did as she wished and got some wax made by the fly. Nirantali made the wax into a model of a peacock and struck some small bits of bamboo leaf in its head and little silvers of bamboo as its tail, and covered its body with bamboo shavings. She took her silver nose-ring, broke it up and scattered it over the body. It shone brightly and there was the first peacock".<sup>3</sup>

The Baigas of Bohi, Randari Zamindari, believe that the peacock originated from the saliva of their ancestor Sanaha Dano which had fallen from his mouth while dancing. The story goes thus: "Sanaha

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2. Drimmer, Frederic (Ed.)—THE ANIMAL KINGDOM, New York, 1954, Vol. I, pp. 987-89.

3. Elwin, Verrier—TRIBAL MYTHS OF ORISSA, 1954, p. 330.

Dano was born of a hemp plant (*San*). His son's name was Kohalohi. His younger son's name was Kilko. Manjhu Dano was born in the middle of a house. He had two daughters—Tengo and Badbadhi. Sanaha Dano came one day and danced with the daughters of Manjhu Dano. As he danced, saliva fell from his mouth to the ground, and Badbadhi ate it. She conceived, and when the child was born Sanaha Dano considered what to do with it. He broke off a lot of hemp stalks and stuck them into the child's body and a bunch of them in his hair. He sprinkled the hemp with magic water and the stalks turned into feathers. Then the child crying *tengo-tengo* flew into the air with his wings flapping *bad-bad, bad-bad*. This was the first peacock".<sup>4</sup>

Why does the peahen look less attractive than her lordly male when the female folk the world over are more beautiful? The answer is given by the charming Sherdukpen tribesmen who inhabit the Rupa Village in the Kameng Frontier District of Arcenachal Pradesh. An old man, they say, who had a very beautiful daughter, brought a boy to his house for her husband. The boy used to go daily to work in his father-in-law's fields and came home in the evening. The boy and girl fell in love with each other and thought of nothing in the world but their love.

"The old man was a great lover of birds, and used to go to the forest and talk to them. But he was sad whenever he thought there was no such thing in the world as a peacock. One day he decided to make one and prepared a cloth with patches of many different colours. When his daughter saw it, she said, 'What are you making this cloth for?'. Her father replied, 'It is not for anyone special, but just for whoever can wear it. The girl said, 'Then let me wear it'. But her father replied, 'No, I would rather give it to my son-in-law'".

"The old man put the cloth out in the sun to dry and that evening when the boy came home from work, told him to pick it up and bring it to the house. The boy thought what a lovely cloth it was, and instead of bringing it back, put it around his shoulders. As he did so he turned into a peacock.

"When he saw his changed shape, he began weeping for love of his wife and his father-in-law beat him and drove him away to the bank of the stream.

"That evening when it got late and the boy had not come home, the girl asked where he was. When her father told her what had happened, she abused him as a sorcerer and ran weeping after her peacock-

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4. Elwin, Verrier—MYTHS OF MIDDLE INDIA, p. 196.

husband. She cried to him, "I am a human being and you have become a bird, so how can we be husband and wife? Tomorrow morning leave your droppings on the bank of the stream and when I come to bathe I will eat them. Then I myself will become a bird and we can live together as before".

"Then the girl went home. Next morning when she went to bathe she ate the peacock's droppings and became a peahen. At that time she was wearing a dirty cloth and that is why the wife of the peacock looks less beautiful than her husband".<sup>5</sup>

Why did the peacock take up its residence in the forest, when it was made by man? The Konds of Koklanga, Ganjam District, have offered an explanation. "Formerly there were no ploughs, for no one knew how to make them. One day Bura Pinnu gave a dream to Rondama and said: 'Make a plough and cultivate a field'. Rondama asked, 'What wood shall I use?' Bura Pinnu said, 'Go to Kandabar Hill and there get Sal wood and make your plough'. Next day Randama went to the hill and started work. Randama's hair was long and shining. Five days passed as he worked. The wind blew his hair into his eyes. He lost his temper with his hair and pulled it out and threw it away. From his hair was born a peacock, and its hen. The cock's tail spread out like hair on the wind and flashed like lightning. When Randama saw the lovely birds he called them Middu and Talimiddu and told them to live in the forest."<sup>6</sup>

The peacock is a very intelligent bird. "A very wary bird, endowed with keen sight and hearing, it is not easily approached, usually running for cover at the first suspicion of danger from man; but towards carnivorous mammals, snakes, etc., it shows considerable curiosity. When suspicious the peahens will erect the feathers of the neck, bottle-brush fashion, and raise the crest as they peer in the direction of the enemy", says G.H. Henry.<sup>7</sup>

E.H.N. Lowther, who was in India for a number of years, has left us a good account to show how shy the peacock is. He says: "During the long years when I was stationed in different parts of the United Provinces in the early part of my service, numerous nests of this species (peafowl) came to my notice, many of them in fairly open situations, so that if I had taken a little trouble I feel I ought to have succeeded more

5. Elwin, Verrier—MYTHS OF THE NORTH EAST FRONTIER OF INDIA, Shillong, 1958, Pp. 349-350.

6. Elwin, Verrier—TRIBAL MYTHS OF ORISSA, pp. 328-29.

7. A GUIDE TO BIRDS OF CEYLON, Ox. U.P., 1955, pp. 255-57.

than once in photographing the bird at home. When, therefore, I found myself back at Allahabad, in 1938, I made up my mind to leave no stone unturned in an attempt to photograph the peahen at home. The bird, however, turned to be a more difficult subject than anticipated, even though its nest, a hollow scraped in the ground and lined with two or three straws, was situated in a bajra crop close to a village which it is not improbable the bird was in the habit of visiting at other seasons for roosting purposes. The hide, as usual, was first placed at some distance from the nest and moved nearer the following morning. The peahen was allowed to incubate for some hours and had apparently accepted the new situation. But in the afternoon, when the lens was introduced, she gave ample proof of what a shy bird this species can be, and walked round and round the nest before finally settling down. Although I did not photograph her for some considerable time, even then the peahen was all suspicion. The noise of the shutter going off the second time caused the bird to leave the nest for nearly half an hour, and when finally she returned, it was not to settle down but to move the eggs further away and rather to the side, a distance of nearly five feet. This she did by levering them towards herself with the chin applied to the fore side of each egg, and moving backwards. No further attempt was made to photograph the bird, and when my shikari turned up to release me, the peahen was sitting the eggs hard in the new 'nest' ".<sup>8</sup>

The peacock makes itself the most conspicuous object in any landscape with its bright blue of the neck, green and black of the back and wings, and varied colour of the tail. The gorgeous plumage is acquired gradually. The females or peahens are dull creatures as compared to their lordly males, because they lack the ornamental tail, but they know that they do not need any make up, for this Grand Moghul of the Bird Kingdom often invites them to admire its green and blue and golden glory of wonderful feathery train.

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8. Lowther, E.H.N.—A BIRD PHOTOGRAPHER IN INDIA, Ox. U.P., 1949, pp. 84–85.

## II. Grand Moghul of the Bird Kingdom

The peacock is often called the Grand Moghul of the Bird Kingdom. To justify the appellation Grand Moghul, the cock keeps a harem of peahens, but unfortunately they treat it in an off-hand manner, for they, the not-so-lovely ladies, know that the Moghul is incapable of satisfying their nymphomania. Is it not the strangest creation of Nature?

Look at the peacock—its majestic body, its graceful movements—and contrast its foul feet! Does the voice of the peacock accord with its magnificent appearance and its lovely wings? Its crowing is a shrill discordant shriek. Did the cock have a fine voice in olden times, when the world was young? If so, how did it lose its golden voice?

According to an old English folktale, once upon a time, there lived a king in one of the islands of the South Seas. Pango, a jolly rogue, also lived in the same island and learnt of the king's proclamation that he would offer anyone a room full of food, a room full of gold and a room full of fine clothes if he could find a voice for his dumb son. On his way to the king's palace, Pango met an old man, whom he helped by relieving the burden of his faggot. The old man, upon the request of Pango, divulged the secret of finding a voice for the prince in these words: "It is quite simple. All you have to do is to find a beautiful voice, which has the power to charm all who hear it and make sure the prince hears it, too. It will charm him also so much that he will feel he must imitate it and the moment he opens his mouth to try the voice will belong to him". He tried the voice of a pig, a goat, and a hen, but found them unfit for a prince. A dull grey peacock whom Pango met on the way told him: "I should say nothing for I would only have to open my mouth and sing and my voice would charm them all into silence". The peacock opened its mouth and sang a song so beautiful that even the wind stopped rustling the leaves and fell silent. A contest was held in the palace in the presence of the king, queen, and the courtiers. The little dumb prince was placed out of sight by Pango and told to listen carefully to the song of the peacock. Pango advised the prince: "When you hear a voice which charms you, you must open your mouth and imitate it". The peacock sang a song so beautiful that the whole court was silent and still. The prince had never heard anything so beautiful and he opened his mouth to imitate the song. The peacock's song was repeated from a different corner and to the utter surprise of the king, he found his son singing. Alas! the peacock opened its mouth again,

but now only an ugly croak came out. "You have tricked me", it cried in fury. The king was pleased with Pango for giving voice to his son, but at the same time punished the rogue for tricking the peacock. "You shall have the room full of food and the room full of gold, but the room full of clothes shall go to the peacock. In future he shall always be a most beautiful bird to make up for the loss of his voice", he decreed. Thus the peacock lost its golden voice but became the most beautiful bird.<sup>1</sup>

"The peacock hath fair feathers, but foul feet", says an English proverb. Why is it so? According to a Kangra legend, the peacock had the legs of the mynah when it was originally created by God and asked for a change. The bird was granted its prayer and when it was dissatisfied with the result God did not allow it to retake its own legs. The result is that to this day when dancing before its mate, the bird seems its ugly feet and screams through agony.<sup>2</sup> The cock weeps and the lady bird catches its tear-drops and generates eggs.

Most beautiful among the pheasants, the crest of the peacock consists of feathers devoid of wanes except at the tip. The face is naked and its white colour contrasts sharply with the brilliant blue of the body. How did the peafowl get fine tufts on its head? The Hill Saoras of Potta, Koraput District, tells us this story:

"One day Kittung (supreme god of the Saoras) quarrelled with his wife and she ran away and stayed with some one.

"Kittung searched for her for seven days and seven nights. When he could not find her he started home: at the midday he came to Baround Hill. There he found a peacock and its hen. He called to them but they did not answer. He was annoyed and caught hold of the peacock. He said, 'Have you seen my wife anywhere?' 'No', it said. Kittung was now really angry and pulled out his pubic hairs and put them on the bird's head and cut a handful of branches of a bushy shrub and pushed them into the cock's backside.

"After Kittung had gone away, his wife came along the road and found the peacock sitting under a tree weeping. She asked what the matter was and when she heard the story, she said, 'But this will be fine clothing for you, and you'll look most beautiful. And so it was, for

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1. The story of Pango is abridged from CHANDMAMA (Children's Magazine), Published in Madras, January 1971.

2. Fitzpatrick, J.—'Folklore of Birds & Beasts of India', JOURNAL OF BOMBAY NATURAL HISTORY SOCIETY, Vol. 28 (1923) Part 1 & 2, pp. 562-63.

a great tail grew behind and fine tufts on the head".<sup>3</sup>

The iridescent plumage of the peacock outshines the rainbow and this proud bird is very fond of displaying its own feathers when rainbows appear on the sky. Peacock's dance heralds the advent of rains, it is believed, all over India. In fact, the bird seems have intuitive power to forecast rain, people say, for its call means 'come rain'. The plumage of the bird is of brilliant metallic green and blue. The splendid plumes which form the gorgeous train of the male cock are not tail feathers as people would often mistake, but the upper tail coverts enormously elongated forming the train—bronzy green and blue in colour. These coverts are capable of being erected in the form of an open fan, supported by the true tail quills. The normal size of this tail is 4-6 ft. Each of the covert feathers is ornamented with brilliantly coloured eye-spots or ocelli. Does this train cause a burden to the bird? According to Stuart Baker, "It is wonderful the way the cock peafowl in all the pride of plumage and gorgeous lengthy train will slip through jungle which one would imagine dense enough to stop his movements altogether with such an encumbrance. He seems to be as sinuous as a snake in his movements, as stealthy as a cat in his tread and as wary as an old bull bison in watching for foes".

The true tail of the peacock is of normal size and is obscured beneath the mass of ornamental feathers. These tail feathers are very plain and ordinary but are stiff and, as we have already stated, serve to support the train when it is lifted and spread to form a huge fan. The bird drops its wings and takes a few steps, then turns abruptly leaning forward the female, meanwhile quivering the feathers of the fan.

The peacock is prepared to keep the hen in good humour by displaying its glorious feathery train and at the climax of the display, the tail feathers are vibrated, giving them a shining appearance and imparting a rustling sound. The train of the peacock is erected vertically above the bird's back, being supported by the tail feathers in courtship.

This display is not solely associated with courtship. The peacock goes through this elaborate performance willingly for attracting the admiration of human beings as well. This display of the male before it mates is a common sight in captivity. The peacock is a polygamous bird and keeps a harem of 4 to 5 hens.

The male birds fight fiercely for the possession of more hens, using

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3. Elwin, Verrier—TRIBAL MYTHS OF ORISSA, Ox. U.P., 1954, p. 330.

their metatarsus as the spur. According to Milne, "among the peafowl, the wonderful tailful of eyed plumes celebrated in the male is used at least as much in contests between birds of like sex as in courtship antics before a peahen. Peacocks face one another with tails raised, quivering with a sound half-way between a rustle and a rattle, while the breast is inflated, the head held well back in the slender neck in a position suggesting that of a snake about to strike. The wings are spread slightly but stiffly, their tips dragging on the ground and providing further noise as the peacock alternately walks and hops towards his rival. The first to lose courage collapses his display with the suddenness seen in the tumbling of a house of cards, and off he goes without a blow having been struck. Usually the greatest casualty in these battles is self-esteem. Relatively little physical damage is done before one of the competitors yields. And the contest is normally brief enough that neither male loses sight of the female who is the object of their fracas".<sup>4</sup>

The male cock utters a raucous harsh cry during the breeding season. The breeding season in Ceylon is from December to May; it commences soon after the cocks have grown their trains after the autumn moult. Then hen generally lays 4 to 5 whitish, sometimes spotted, eggs in some secluded place in long grass or under shrubs in jungles as the cock is peculiarly jealous and will break the eggs as well as the chicks if he discovers them. Usually a cock and two to five hens constitute the flock.

G.M. Henry says that in Ceylon, the peahens generally lay their eggs in a slightly hollow scraped in the ground in a well-hidden situation in dense shrubby; often in an isolated patch of bushes growing among long grass. The three to five eggs are glossy, pale, buff, thick-shelled and pitted, and they measure about 69×55 mm. The chicks are at first clothed in greyish yellow down; their wing-feathers soon grow, and the crest begins to appear when they are about a month old.<sup>5</sup>

On the testimony of Lowther, we can say that three to five eggs are the rule in India; clutches of six, however, are not uncommon. "Normally these are laid on the ground, in some standing crop, or in a thicket. Occasionally they are deposited at some heights from the ground, as for example, in an old nest of a vulture. I myself once came across a peahen's nest in a mango tree, about 12 feet from the ground, in the

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4. Laurus J. & Margarey J. Milne—THE MATING INSTINCT, London, 1955, pp. 73-74.

5. Henry, G.M.—A GUIDE TO THE BIRDS OF CEYLON, Ox. U.P., 1955, pp. 255-57.

space formed by the junction of a number of branches with the main trunk. Not only was the site unusual but the 'nest' contained nine eggs. I have also seen a perfectly wild peahen incubating her three eggs under a pile of faggots placed on the roof of a hut in the centre of a village. Another nest of this species which I inspected was situated in the heart of an aloe bush along-side a railway line. Passing by again a few hours later I was surprised to see a wild cat jump out of the bush. Only one of the five eggs remained and the shell of this had been perforated by the animal's teeth".<sup>6</sup> The Grand Moghul of the Bird Kingdom is not at all a good husband and it does not mind to be cuckold as well.

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6. Lowther, E.H.N.—A BIRD PHOTOGRAPHER IN INDIA, Ox. U.P., 1949, pp. 84–85.

### III. How Did the Peacock Get the Hundred Eye-Designs?

What distinguishes the peacock from other pheasants is its hundred-eyed feathery train. These eye-designs or ocelli are what attracts the peahens as well as the human beings to this bird. How did the peafowl get this hundred peacock-designs is difficult to explain scientifically as our knowledge of colour perceptions is still imperfect. The ocelli have fired the imagination of the Romans, Greeks and tribal people of India.

Hera, according to the Greek mythology, was the great goddess of the pre-Hellenic matriarchal society, and was so fond of her peacocks that it was she who first adorned their tails with the hundred eyes of her lover Argus. The story goes that Argus, son of Agenor and Inachus, possessed one hundred eyes. When Zeus, the king of the gods, became enamoured of the nymph Io, his wife Hera became extremely jealous of the latter. Fearing that Hera would slay Io, he transformed the nymph into the form of a heifer. But the queen of the heavens was equal to the occasion, and suspecting that her husband would again metamorphose the nymph into another form, set the hundred eyed Argus to keep watch and ward over Io. But Zeus sent Hermes, the messenger of the gods, to lull Argus to sleep by the music of his lyre, and then to slay the latter. Hermes carried out his orders to the very letter. After Argus had been killed by Hermes Hera took the former's one hundred eyes and placed them on the tail of the peacock which bird was sacred to her.<sup>1</sup>

The Gadaba tribesmen of Challanguda, Koraput District, have a more fascinating story about the peacock's tail than the Greeks. "One day an old shaman sacrificed a cow to Jaker Deota. Afterwards he put some strip of the flesh on the roof of his house to dry. Next morning, as the shaman's wife was sweeping her veranda with her broom, a kite crying *kiorey-kiorey* swept down and carried off a strip of meat. The old woman throw her broom at the kite and hit it. The broom turned into a peacock in the air and flow away after the kite, crying *kiorey-kiorey*. This was a very good broom, made with flowering grass, and that is why the peacock's tail is like a flower".<sup>2</sup>

The Khasis of Meghalaya have a very interesting story to account for the beautiful feathers of the peacock, which in short, is as follows.

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1. Mitra, S.C.—'Studies in Bird Myths No. XII—On Three Aetiological Myths about the spots on the peacock's feathers', *QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF THE MYTHIC SOCIETY*, Vol. XVII, No. 2 (1926).

2. Elwin, Verrier—*TRIBAL MYTHS OF ORISSA*, Ox. U.P., 1954, p. 328.

*Ka Sngi* (Sun), the beautiful maiden, who ruled over the Blue Realms, was feeling lonely after the creation of the world when all animals spoke the language of the mankind. *U Klew*, the peacock, was then but an ordinary grey feathered bird without any pretensions to beauty. One day the birds held a great darbar and sent *U Klew* as their ambassador to *Ka Sngi*. She accorded him the most hearty welcome, gave unstinted attention and showered on him unparalleled love which the cock received with cold indifference considering that all this was due to his own personal greatness rather than to the gracious and unselfish devotion of his consort.

As *Ka Sngi* was so absorbed in attending to *U Klew*, she forgot to shed her light on the earth as a result of which rains and darkness lashed the world. Animals sought the advice of mankind in bringing back *U Klew* and learning the reason of *Ka Sngi's* negligence of duty begged *Ka Sabuit*, a wise lady, to bring *U Klew* back. *Ka Sabuit*, the clever woman she was, shaped her mustard bed like unto the form of a woman; the seeds sprouted and shaped like a woman, became covered with glistening green leaves; yellow flowers appeared on all the mustard plants so that the plot of land looked like a beautiful maiden wearing a mantle of gold that dazzled the eyes. As *U Klew* became arrogant, despotic and insatiable, he wandered forth from the magnificent palace of *Ka Sngi*. His eyes suddenly fell on the lovely maiden and earth dressed all in gold lying asleep. On seeing this maiden, *U Klew* deserted *Ka Sngi*, and returned to his original home.

“As he went away *Ka Sngi* followed him, weeping; as she wept her tears bedewed his feathers, transforming them into all colours of the rainbow. Some large drops falling on his long tail as he flew away were turned into brilliant hued spots which are called *Ummat Ka Sngi* (Sun's tears) by the Khasis to this day. *Ka Sngi* told him that they were given for a sign that wherever he might be and on whomsoever his affections might be bestowed, he would never be able to forget her, *Ka Sngi*, the most beautiful and most devoted of wives”.<sup>3</sup>

*U Klew* was welcomed to the garden of *Ka Sabuit* where he beheld, not a beautiful maiden as he had imagined, but a bed of common mustard cunningly shaped. The Khasis say that the peacock can be seen every morning stretching forth its neck towards the sky and flapping its wings to greet the coming of *Ka Sngi*, and the only happiness left to him

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3. Rafy, Mrs. K.U.—FOLKTALES OF THE KHASIS, London, 1920, pp. 9-17.

is to spread his lovely feathers to catch the beams which she once more sheds upon the earth.

The peacock spreads its myriad ocelli when it is in mood, i.e., when it dances. In courtship display the cock erects the train vertically and spreads it into a great semicircular fan, in the centre of which the head, with beak open and pointed downwards, forms the focal point, says Henry. He adds: "The wings are drooped and constantly 'waggled' behind the train and frequent gusts of vibration cause the many-end, and multi-hued apparition to shimmer and scintillate in a marvellous fashion. It is difficult to discover whether the main biological purpose of this amazing performance is to excite the jealousy of other cocks or to excite sexual desire in the hen—often she appears to be utterly indifferent to it. The instinct of displaying is very strongly developed in the peafowls, not only cocks but young hens and even quarter-grown chicks, will go through all the motions of display before almost anything that excites them; I have seen one do it to a tortoise".<sup>4</sup>

The flamboyant courtship antics of the peacock by displaying its wonderful iridescent golden and green feathery train is unparalleled and this dance has caught the imagination of the people all over the world. The peacock dance\* portrayed in classical, folk and movies has deep roots in symbolism throughout the East, but it has nothing to do with *Pavane* (dance of appearance), according to Mr. A.S. Barnes. "The secret basis can be traced in the usage of all-pure-white swan, as against the chromatic bird called peacock, with its fantastic tail feathers. The usage in Greek shows the peacock as the symbol of Hera, known as "Argus, of the Hundred Eyes", who could see anywhere and everywhere. This bird depicts the 'soul out-turned' or the concentration of the ego or sense data, on the outer world. Thus the peacock feather is used as a crest by Krishna in his dance; it is used in royal fans (even in European churches), while it is superstitiously 'deemed unlucky' to the ordinary man—because the terrible eyes always see him! On the contrary the pure *Kalhansa* (Swan of Time) is divested of all colour, is indifferent to all worldly attractions, and thus becomes the 'clear unspotted soul' (among other arcane meanings). The peacock is thus given to display (especially about the mating season), while the white swan is evasive. This bird appears in heraldry (as at Cleves), not the peacock, and these stories

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4. Henry, G.M.—A GUIDE TO THE BIRDS OF CEYLON, Ox. U.P., 1955, pp. 255–57.

\* See section VIII for a description of the peacock dance.

wax into legends, such as the pervasive story of the Twelve Swans (or the Dancing Princesses) held in the power of a highly chromatic magician—sometimes the Rot-Bart (Red-light or Red Beard—the colour-displaying Sun-rays) and pursued by a prince of this ordinary world”.<sup>5</sup>

That the peacock’s dance has some biological function is undeniable, but does the peacock perform any sexual coitus? This is doubtful. The tribal people of India believe that the peacock reproduces itself by letting its seed fall from its mouth during the dance. The Kotas of the Nilgiris of Tamil Nadu believe that this is the result of a curse, a punishment on the bird for failing to prevent a certain couple from having intercourse. “I have put a curse upon your privates. They will certainly not rise up. Instead of that,—when those black monsoon clouds come covering the land, to you two joyfulness will come. At that time, your wife must be thinking about you: I want him to join with me, and suffering toil and suffering extreme fatigue and going around you. Instead of you for your part joining with her and going through the movement of sexual intercourse, when you are dancing beautifully on that mountain with the tail which I have given to you, because of the fatigue of your dancing, the seeds which are in your penis will not come through there but will come through your mouth. At that time, when you dance with sweat covering your face, that seed will without fail come by itself from your mouth with a cough. At that time, your wife must come with desire and eat the seed which you coughed out. From that day she also will without fail become pregnant”.<sup>6</sup>

This tradition is not confined to the Kotas; in fact the belief is widespread among the Dravidian-speaking peoples all over India. For instance, the Gonds of Baihar, Balaghat District, have a beautiful story in this connection. “In Hyderabad, Drupti Mata was trembling with anger. She devoured some of the people and made the rest poor and miserable. She sent disease to the crops and cattle, and there was weeping everywhere. In the jungle lived Nanga Baiga and Nanga Baigin. The Nizam sent for them and said: “Drupti Mata is troubling everybody; come and stop her”. Nanga Baiga took dirt from his body and made a peacock; he got a lot of little mirrors and coloured a great tail green and red and yellow. He made a crown for it and beautiful feathers. He gave it everything but a penis. When all was ready he took it to Drupti Mata. When

5. Banes, A.S.—W.G. RAFFE’S DICTIONARY OF DANCE, New York, 1964, p. 376.

6. Emeaneau, M.B.—KOTA TEXTS, Vol. I, p. 115, Elwin, Verrier—MYTHS OF MIDDLE INDIA, Ox. U.P., 1949, p. 183.

she saw it she was very pleased and made the poor people rich. The houses turned to gold and the Nizam became the richest man on earth. But the peacock, though it is beautiful gets no pleasure. When it dances, its seed falls from its mouth and the peahens run to eat it".<sup>7</sup>

The peacock's feathers are reputed to have medicinal properties and are an indispensable ingredient in Ayurvedic treatment. Indigenous medical shops in Kerala and Tamil Nadu keep a sufficient stock of these feathers as the physicians prescribe them in *Kashayams* (concoctions). Smoked peacock feathers are capable of healing snake-bites, it is believed.<sup>8</sup> This belief is so strong among the people of Punjab that they smoke the feathers in a tobacco pipe as an antidote to snake-bite in the first instance. The feathers are also waved over the sick all over India, to scare demons and diseases.<sup>9</sup> They are tied on the ankles to cure wounds. The use of knots or knotted strings in protective magic is common. In Hoshangabad, a thread, if possible, knotted to a bit of some magical root, was worshipped by burning *ghee* before it and it was tied round the ankle as a remedy for fever; a peacock's feather tied in the same way caused the wound to heal.<sup>10</sup> *Mayurpiccha* (feathers of the peacock) are held sacred in Buddhism and are used for sprinkling water on altars.<sup>11</sup>

Peacock feathers\* are considered sacred and are an indispensable items in temple festivals of South India. No temple festival of Kerala is complete without a richly caparisoned elephant on which a golden umbrella is hoisted and an *alavattam* (a fan made from peacock feathers and encased in a silver handle) is fanned and a fly-flap made of yak hairs is flown. The sight of richly caparisoned elephants standing in a row with their golden standards and *alavattams* during the summer months in rural Kerala is unforgettable. The priest of Bhaironath, the Kotwal or spiritual magistrate of Banaras, whose chief temple is situated not far from the Town Hall, is armed with a wand of peacock's feathers with which he punishes the worshippers for the sins they have committed

7. Elwin, Verrier—TRIBAL MYTHS OF ORISSA, London, 1920, p. 198.

8. Mitra—'The Peacock in Asiatic Cult and Superstition', JOURNAL OF THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF BOMBAY, Vol. IX, pp. 530-544.

9. Crooke, W.—THE POPULAR RELIGION & FOLKLORE OF NORTHERN INDIA, 2 Vols. 1896, Vol. II, pp. 45, 250.

10. Crooke, W.—RELIGION & FOLKLORE OF NORTHERN INDIA, 1926, One Volume Edition, p. 306.

11. Jobes, Certrude—DICTIONARY OF MYTHOLOGY, FOLKLORE & SYMBOLS, p. 1246-47.

\* The auspiciousness of the peacock feathers is explained in section IX.

and at the same time absolves them of sins.<sup>12</sup> The Varlis, a forest tribe of Maharashtra, fix peacock feathers in a brass pot, dance round them, and represent Hirva, their household godling, by a bunch of it.<sup>13</sup> The nomad Bauris or Bawariyas, who caused coins to be counterfeited and committed robberies kept with them a small quantity of wheat and sandal seeds in a tin or brass case, which they called the Devakadana or god's grain, and a tuft of peacock's feathers.<sup>14</sup> Peacock's feathers are sold in South India and the burnt ashes thereof are used as a remedy for vomiting.<sup>15</sup>

The fat of the peacock is the panacea for stiff joints and necks. The application of the *Mayilenna* (oil obtained from the fat of the peacock) on the body makes the limbs viable and flexible and acrobats who show their feats in circus are believed to apply them regularly during their training period.

Nature has endowed the peacock with hundred-eyes and let us not destroy them for the supposedly medicinal value of the feathers. People should desist from killing the bird for plucking its feathers. The wanton destruction of the peafowl has made some parts of India less colourful to tourists and lovers of nature.

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12. Mitra, S.C.—Peacock in Asiatic Cult....

13. Crooke, W.—RELIGION & FOLKLORE OF NORTHERN INDIA, 1926, One Volume Edition, pp. 374-75; BOMBAY GAZETTEER XIII, Part I, p. 188.

14. Mitra, S.C.—Peacock in Asiatic Cult....

15. Thurston, E.—OMENS & SUPERSTITIONS OF SOUTHERN INDIA, p. 88.

## IV. Peacock Meat—A Table Delicacy

Does it not sound strange how peacock, whose meat was the capital eating of kings all over the world,<sup>1</sup> has been adopted the National Bird of India. It is paradoxical how could India afford to adopt the peacock as the National Bird which was daily eaten by Emperor Asoka and adopt his pillar as the national emblem. Doubts were expressed in certain quarters as to India's wisdom in adopting the peacock as her National Bird. In order to set this controversy at rest, we shall examine the propriety of adopting peacock as India's National Bird and the prevalence of the practice of eating the meat of the peacock. In fact the people of India have done the greatest honour to their ancient emperor Asoka by selecting the peacock as the National Bird whose killing he stopped.

The eating of the meat of the peacock in ancient India was confined to kings and some aboriginal tribal people. The Rajahs believed in the maxim of like produced the like—a norm in Sympathetic Magic. Indian epics and Puranas bear ample testimony to the eating of the peacock's meat. The Jataka Stories testify that the peacock's sanctity among the royal houses was due to the belief that anyone who ate its head became a Rajah, and those who ate its flesh became young and immortal living as gold because of the bird's golden colour.<sup>2</sup> A peacock's bone was a prize among the lovers and Vatsyayana has recommended in his *Kamasutra* that if the bone of the peacock be covered with gold and tied on the right hand it made a man lovely in the eyes of beholders!<sup>3</sup>

The serving of the peacock as a delicacy at great feasts in former times in Europe was part of a housewife's superstition, still powerful, namely that anything that looked beautiful must taste good.<sup>4</sup> It is on record that in Rome and later in medieval Europe, peafowls were raised for the table. Hortensius, the legendary orator whose eloquence took kings and empires by storm, was the first to make a table delicacy of the bird at a feast given to the College of Augurs, a band of ancient intel-

1. The Roman Emperor and his court used to eat the peacock's brain and tongue—Richard's TOPICAL ENCYCLOPAEDIA (1958 edition), Vol. 4, p. 191.

2. Crooke, William—RELIGION & FOLKLORE OF NORTHERN INDIA (one volume edition), 1926, pp. 374–75, Jataka II 25.

3. & 4. Funk & Wagnall's—STANDARD DICTIONARY OF FOLKLORE, MYTHOLOGY & LEGEND, Vol. 2, p. 849.

lectuals.<sup>5</sup>

Pericles has testified that peacocks fetched high prices during his day and kings raised them for selling abroad.<sup>6</sup> Emperor Charlemagne was believed to have served thousands of peacocks at a single state banquet.<sup>7</sup> The popularity of the peacock began to wane with the introduction of turkey to Europe from Mexico.

The peacock is the vehicle of Muruga or Subrahmanya, the supreme god of the Dravidians of Tamil Nadu and, therefore, none dares to kill it. Pavolatry, the worship of the peacock, originated among the Dravidian-speaking peoples. The autochthonous Dravidians who were scattered all over India had the peacock as their totems. The broad tail and the general build of the two bird-models excavated from Mohenjo Daro represented the peacock. There is no doubt that the peacock was worshipped by the Harappans and the bird appears in the art of Indus Valley as models in clay or painted on pottery. Though we do not want to claim that the Indus Valley people were Dravidians, there is no difference of opinion among scholars that they were not Aryans. Kartik Swami, the pre-Aryan god of war of most of the Dravidian tribes of Central India such as Gonda, Bhils, etc., was worshipped all over India and he was none other than the high god of Tamilians—Lord Muruga.

The Vedic conception of Saraswati is quite different from the one we find today in Hinduism. Her original vehicle was the swan which she changed for the peacock according to the conception of the tribal people of Western India. This accounts for the fact that the peacock was not one of the sacred birds of the Aryans and its killing for flesh was permitted. If we bear this fact in mind, we can explain why ancient Indian epics, Puranas, medical treatises, Dharma Sastras, etc., freely prescribed peacock's meat as nutrients. The medicinal value of the peacock's flesh was also not overlooked.

Charaka Samhita, the Bible of Ayurvedic physicians, enumerates the following qualities of peacock's flesh: "The flesh of the peacock is exceedingly beneficial for the eye, the ear, intelligence, the digestive fire, the consequences of age, complexion, voice, and period of life. It is besides, strength-giving and wind destroying. It increases also the semen".<sup>8</sup>

5. & 6. Lall, Inderjit—'Peacocks have a place in History', *AMRITA BAZAR PATRIKA*, June 9, 1968.

7. *ENCYCLOPAEDIA BRITANICA* (1968 edition), Vol. 17, pp. 500–501.

8. *CHARAKASAMHITA* (Translated by Avinash Chunder Kaviratna, Chapter 27, p. 341).

Susruta, the ancient Indian surgeon-physician, has stated that "the flesh of the *Mayura* is astringent and saline in taste, and is beneficial to the skin, helps the growth of hair, improves the voice, intellect, appetite, and relish for food, and imparts strength and vigour to the organs of sight and hearing."<sup>9</sup> He classified birds such as the *Lava*, *Tittiri*, *Kapingala*, *Vartira*, *Vartika*, *Vartaka*, *Napptrika*, *Vatika*, *Chakora*, *Kalavinka*, *Mayura*, *Krakara*, *Upachakra*, *Kukkuta*, *Saranga*, *Shata-Patrika*, *Kutittiri*, *Kiruvahuka* and *Yavalaka* into *VISHKIRA* species (so called because they pick up their food after scattering it at first with their bills and claws). The flesh of the *VISHKIRA* species is generally light, cooling, sweet and astringent in taste and tends to pacify the deranged humours of the body.<sup>10</sup>

Susruta has prescribed that a king should "drink regularly every day such wholesome cordials as honey, clarified butter, curd, milk and cold water and use in his food the meat and soup of the flesh of a peacock, mongoose, *Godha* (a species of lizard) or *Prishata* deer."<sup>11</sup>

There is no denying the fact that the peacock's meat was one of the delicacies of the people of India, thought it was rather the prerogative of the princes. Both *Charaka* and *Susruta* in their treatises on medicines describe peacock's flesh under chapters on food and drinks, and not on medicines. They recommended its consumption regularly on account of the superior quality of the flesh. Various kinds of meat are prescribed for the speedy recovery of a patient suffering from tuberculosis. *Charaka* advises that a patient who is not in the habit of taking meat preparations made from the flesh of vultures and other obnoxious birds should be given them in the name of the peacock's flesh. This will make it easy for the patient to consume any kind of meat without causing any nausea.

*Charaka* has warned that the flesh of the peacock should never be roasted with castor-plant wood. Peacock's flesh roasted on a pit made of the castor-plant twigs or prepared in castor oil, if eaten, will cause death. The use of the peacock's flesh in preparing a special kind of soup for gaining strength is noticed in *Charaka*. Sparrows cooked in the meat-juice, or partridge cooked in the meat-juice of cock, or the cock cooked in the meat-juice of peacock, or peacock cooked in the meat-juice of swan, in fresh ghee, acidified with fruit acids and sweetened according to one's liking and mixed with fragrant articles should be taken for pro-

9. *SUSRUTA SAMHITA* (translated by Kaviraj Kunjalil Bhishagratna, Second Edition—Varanasi), Chapt. 46, *Sutrasthana*, pp. 481–83.

10. *SUSRUTA SAMHITA*, Vers 31 (p. 481–83).

11. *SUSRUTA SAMHITA*—p. 683.

moting strength. Sustruta has recommended that the meat and soup of peacock's flesh should be taken regularly by a king, for it neutralised the effect of poisoning.<sup>12</sup>

There is no prohibition against the eating of the flesh of the peacock in the Apasthamba, Gautama, and Vasistha Dharmasutras. In fact Baudhayana Dharmasutra says that the peacock can be eaten. Manu and Yajnavalkya have not prohibited the eating of the peacock's meat. Matsya, Vayu, Brahmanda and other Puranas mention the peacock. Peacock's flesh is one of the delicacies mentioned along with chicken, deer and mutton in the feast given by Bharadvaja in honour of Bharata. Ramayana also mentions peacock's meat in the banquet hall of Ravana. Buddhaghosa has stated that the flesh of a peafowl is delicious to the people of Madhya Desha (including Magadha).<sup>13</sup> Puranic and epic evidences show that the peacock's flesh continued to be a delicacy and there is nothing strange in finding the peacock on the table of Asoka. In fact credit should go to him for restricting its slaughter and gradual abolition.

Asoka restricted the slaughter of peacocks to two and one deer every day for the royal kitchen. His Rock Edict I says: "This religious edict has been caused to be inscribed by His Sacred and Gracious Majesty:

"Here not a single living creature should be slaughtered and sacrificed. Nor should any samaja be held. For his Sacred and Gracious Majesty sees much objection in such samaja.

"But there are also certain varieties of some which are considered commendable by His Sacred and Gracious Majesty.

"Formerly in the kitchen of His Sacred and Gracious Majesty, daily many hundred thousands of living creatures were slaughtered for the purpose of curries. But now when this religious edict is being inscribed, only three creatures are slaughtered, two peacocks and one deer, too, not regularly. *Even these three living creatures afterwards shall not be slaughtered*". (Italics added).<sup>14</sup>

The Pillar Edict V of Asoka does not enumerate the name of peacock as one of the protected creatures: "Thus Saith His Sacred and Gracious Majesty the King: By me consecrated twenty-six years, the following creatures were declared as not to be killed, such as parrots, maina, adjutants(?), ruddy geese, wild geese, nandimukhas, gelatas (probably

12. Chattopadhyay, Dr. Aparna—'Ancient Indian Practice of Eating Peacock's Flesh', MODERN REVIEW, April 1970, pp. 268-70.

13. Mookerji, R.K.—ASOKA (1954 edition), p. 178 Note.

14. Mookerjee, R.K.—Ibid., p. 178.

cranes), bats, queen ants, terrapins, prawns, veda veyakas, ganjapuputakas (a kind of fish), skate, tortoise and porcupine, tree-squirrels, Barasing stags, bulls set free, okapimdas, rhinoceroses, white doves, domestic doves, and all quadrupeds which do not come into use, nor are eaten."<sup>15</sup>

It is evident from the Rock Edict I that Asoka was planning to dispense with peacocks. It may be safely concluded that the peacock's meat ceased to be a table delicacy towards the end of Asoka's life and Guptas extended protection to this bird.<sup>16</sup> The Mauryas had their totem as *Mor*, the peacock, and the totemistic animal is sacred and inviolable. There is no difficulty in asserting that the peacock's flesh ceased to be a table delicacy. Kautilya<sup>17</sup> prescribed the punishment of first amercement for those who molested the peacock and other auspicious birds. He says: "Elephants, horses or animals having the form of a man, bull or an ass living in oceans, as well as fish in tanks, lakes, channels and rivers; and such game birds as kraunch (a kind of heron), utkrosaka (osprey), datyuha (a sort of cuckoo), hamsa (swan), chakravaka (a brahmany duck), jivanjivaka (a kind of pheasant), bhringraja (Lankis Malabaricus), chakora (partridge), mattakokila (cuckoo), peacock, parrot, and madanasarika (maina) as well as other suspicious animals, whether birds or beasts, shall be protected from all kinds of molestation. Those who violate the above rule shall be punished with first amercement."

The declaration of peacock as India's National Bird has added a new feather in its train, for its killing is punishable under the law. In fact a 10-year old boy was fined Rs. 500 (Rupees Five hundred) by the Sub-Divisional Magistrate of Jhansi on May 27, 1969 for killing a peacock.<sup>18</sup> The judgment of the Magistrate is important, for the boy could not get an acquittal even on the plea of tender age.

A sample census of the peacock population of Gujarat and Rajasthan, where the peacock abounds, has been undertaken in April 1970 by the National Sample Survey. The idea behind the survey, it is stated, is to establish the market for their feather abroad with a view to earning foreign exchange.<sup>19</sup> If that be so, the survey should be stopped, as export of feathers would involve large scale killing of these beautiful birds. The very intention of adopting the peacock as India's National Bird will

15. Mookerjee, R.K.—Ibid., p. 178.

16. Mookerjee, R.K.—Ibid., p. 20.

17. KAUTILYA'S ARTHASASTRA (Trans. Dr. R. Shama Sastri—second edition, 1923, Madras), Book II, Ch. XXVI, p. 148.

18. HINDUSTAN STANDARD, May 28, 1969 (P.T.I. Report).

19. SUNDAY STANDARD, April 26, 1970.

be defeated if people start slaughter of the bird and start earning foreign exchange by exporting the iridescent plumage. Moreover, the mad men behind this fantastic ideas do not know that there is a strong prejudice against peacock feathers in Christendom as it portends Evil Eye.

Steps should be taken to conserve the peacock population by all means. A bird sanctuary about 5 kilometres away from Calcutta city is being planned for attracting peacock and other birds which have become scarce in West Bengal.<sup>20</sup> People are conscious of the sacredness of the bird and the not-so-religious folk desist killing the peacock on account of its aesthetic value. No right-thinking person in India can tolerate any harm being done to her National Bird. Letters appear in newspapers and one among so many appeared recently in a Madras Daily is reproduced here to show the anguish of the people of India to her National Bird.

“Sir,-Our National Bird, the peacock, is undergoing harassment at Tirupparankundram, the holy hill temple of Lord Muruga, whose vehicle it is in mythology. When I was going round the hill the other day near the Saravana Poigai-tank, I found a number of peacocks dancing in the open with their full-spread wings. The multi-coloured plumes presented a grand sight. But such a happy moment did not last long. All on a sudden, I noticed some Kuravas, stealthily moving nearby, catch the peacocks and pluck their plumes.

“When I questioned the Kuravas, they said they had taken the lease from the temple authorities for plucking the feathers. They also informed me that the feathers were used for medicinal purposes though this end use is discounted by some. Thus the Kuravas seem to be carrying on their profession of plucking the plumes and even killing the peacocks.

“This crime should be prevented and watchmen should be appointed by the temple authorities to keep watch over the birds. It is high time that the Government and others concerned took special steps to save our National Bird” (S.A.P. Varadhan, Madurai—Letter to The HINDU dated 12.1.71)

We shall conclude that the peacock-flesh was a table delicacy in ancient India and Asoka set himself as an example for the people of India by stopping its killing after his conversion to Buddhism. The spread of the peacock worship from South to North India helped con-

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20. Sengupta, Satyen—‘This Sound of Music Must not be stilled’, AMRITA BAZAR PATRIKA, August 9, 1970.

servation of the species. The bird enjoyed some popularity in Europe till the discovery of the New World when turkey was introduced from Mexico for the table. Today the bird enjoys complete inviolability in India.

## V. Peacock in Sculptures and Numismatics

Nepal's archaeology department has recently unearthed a two-thousand year old copper peacock from Tilaurkot in the areas of Buddha's birth place.<sup>1</sup> The peacock has found its place in Hindu iconography and sculpture as vehicle of Kartikeya, who is variously called Skanda, Shanmugha, Subramanya, Kumara, Muruga, Kartik Swami, Velayudha, Muthu Kumara, Kandaswami, etc. Kartikeya is seldom portrayed without his favourite *vahana*, the peacock. There is some reason to believe that Kartikeya is the deification of the peacock. There are seventeen forms of Subramanya, of which Kartikeya, Shanmugha, Kraunchabhedana and Vayudisiskanda have the peacock for their vahana as described in the Saivagama.<sup>2</sup>

Subramanya is almost exclusively a South Indian deity. There are few temples dedicated to him in Western India, except the one at Abbattabad in the Hazara District (now in Pakistan).<sup>3</sup> Contrary to this, there is not a village, however small, which does not possess a shrine for Subramanya in South India. In fact the popularity of the deity with the South Indian is so great as to induce him to build shrines for him in all places, such as towns, villages, gardens, mountain tops, and other odd places. There are not many temples dedicated to Subramanya exclusively in Kerala, but he is worshipped along with God Siva in almost all villages of the State.

According to Gopinath Rao,<sup>4</sup> the seated figure of Subramanya is either on a Padmasana or on a peacock. It is laid down as a rule that if the figure is a seated one, it should have only two arms, if a standing one four, and lastly, if it is seated upon a peacock, it may have six, eight, or twelve arms.

Subramanya's *dwarapalakas* (gate-keepers) are Surya and Siva, (who is the same as Agni or Rudra). A *dhya-sloka* current in some parts of South India actually describes him as Surya. All these facts

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1. UNI Report dated Kathmandu, March 7, 1971 published in NAGPUR TIMES, March 9, 1971.

2. Sarma, M.V. Sridatta—'Our National Bird: The Peacock', QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF THE MYTHIC SOCIETY, Vol. LXI Nos. 1-4 (April-December 1970) p. 48.

3. Chatterjee, Asim Kumar—THE CULT OF SKANDA-KARTIKEYA IN ANCIENT INDIA, Calcutta, Chapter II.

4. Rao, T.A. Gopinath—ELEMENTS OF HINDU ICONOGRAPHY, Vol. II, Part II, p. 214.

clearly point to the Sun-myth as the origin of Subramanya; his six heads perhaps represent the six *ritus* or seasons, the twelve arms, the twelve months; the *kukkuta* or the bowl the harbinger of the rising sun and the peacock whose feathers display a marvellous blending of all colours represent the luminous glory of the sun; the Saktyayudha is also of solar origin.<sup>5</sup>

According to the Sritatvanidhi, Kartikeya should have one face with three eyes, ten arms, and the complexion of the rising sun. There should be a fruit (or leaf) of the bilva tree on the head and on the right hands the *sula*, the *chetya* and *ankusa* and the *vajra* and *varada*. He should have his peacock vehicle by his side. The complexion of this aspect of Subramanya should also be that of the rising sun.<sup>6</sup>

Shanmukha: The colour of Shanmukha should be that of Kumkuma (saffron) and he should be seated on the peacock.<sup>7</sup>

*Desika-Subramanya*: This is the aspect on which Subramanya taught Siva, his own father, the significance of the sacred syllable *om*. As a teacher he should be represented as possessing one face, six arms and as seated upon the peacock.<sup>8</sup>

Gopinath Rao has incorporated four plates in his book, viz: (1) Subramanya with Valli and Devasena, his wives: Stone: Nagesvaraswamin temple, Kumbhakonam—the peacock is behind the idol—Plate CXXII, P. 441; (2) Subramanya with his consorts Devasena and Valli—Bronze at Siva temple, Tiruvottiyur, plate CXXIII, P. 445; (3) Shanmukha—stone, at Siva temple, Pattisvaram, where the peacock is sculptured behind the image; Plate CXXVII, Page 447; and (4) Tarakari Subramanya—stone-temple of Aihole, Plate CXXVIII(a), Page 448, Kartikeya killing the demon Tarakari, riding on his peacock.

According to Dowson, Kartikeya was born for the purpose of destroying Taraka, a Daitya, whose austerities had made him formidable to the gods. He is represented riding a peacock called Paravani, holding a bow in one hand and an arrow in the other. His wife is Kumari or Sena.<sup>9</sup>

A number of Kartikeya stone/bronze/sandstone images are preserved in India and abroad. At the Mathura Museum (No. 446) the

5. Rao, Op. cit., pp. 431-432.

6. & 7. Rao, Op. cit., pp. 436-437.

8. Rao, Op. cit., p. 443.

9. Dowson, John—A CLASSICAL DICTIONARY OF HINDU MYTHOLOGY & RELIGION, GEOGRAPHY & LITERATURE, London, 1913, 5th Edition, p. 152.

deity rides on a beautifully carved peacock. The same Museum (No. 466) contains a two-armed image of Kartikeya riding on his peacock. At the State Museum, Lucknow, Skanda is seated in the Lalitasana pose on the peacock, feeding grapes to the peacock.<sup>10</sup>

Six or twelve-armed images of Kartikeya are popular in Western India as he is the Aryan war-god. Thus, the Nagpur Museum preserves an image of Kartikeya having six heads and twelve arms. The god is not seated on his favourite vehicle, but the bird is seen besides him. The Saraswati Bhandar (Museum), Kotah, has a beautiful sculpture of Kartikeya with six heads and six arms, seated on the vahana, peacock, which the deity is feeding with a ball of sweets held in the lowermost left hand.<sup>11</sup> The twelve armed image of Kartikeya at the shrine of Khermai (modern village of Tewar, capital of the Haihayas) stands on the ground and the peacock is to be seen behind him. Kartikeya with six heads stands under a tree with a fringe of mangoes in front of the Maharajah's palace at Rewa. The peacock stands on his left. In the central niche of the northern side of the temple of Baijnath (near Garur, Almorah district) the god is seated on the peacock.<sup>12</sup>

The peacock is prominent with Kartikeya in the cave temples of Ajanta, Elephanta and Badami. A large two armed figure of Kartikeya is available in the Elephanta cave.<sup>13</sup> There are a number of sculptures at the cave temples of Badami. Kartikeya is seated on his vahana, the peacock, in cave No. 1. The god is standing besides Parvati in cave No. 4 and on the E-shaped corridor of the same cave is represented Kartikeya with his peacock.<sup>14</sup> The peacock is present in the Ajanta frescos. In the cave of Ajanta the Badhisattva is in the background of peacocks. Against a conventional line of hills, suggested by red bands monkeys frolic and a pair of peacocks coy with joy. The male peacock has raised his neck, his beak being open, while the female listens in an amorous attitude to the note of her mate.<sup>15</sup> In the Ellora image of Kartikeya (4 arms, single face), the god lovingly embraces the peacock, his vahana, with one hand.<sup>16</sup>

10. Chatterjee, *Op. cit.*, pp. 117, 118, 119.

11. Chatterjee, *Op. cit.*, p. 122.

12. Chatterjee, *Op. cit.*, p. 126.

13. Chatterjee, *Op. cit.*, quoting BOMBAY GAZETTEER, Vol. XIV, p. 69.

14. Chatterjee, *Op. cit.*, p. 132.

15. Zimmer, Heinrich—THE ART OF INDIAN ASIA, New York, 1955, Vol. I, Text, pp. 48-49.

16. Chatterjee, *Op. cit.*, p. 131.

Kartikeya is represented with one head and two arms in Eastern India. Thus, the god sits astride a peacock on an image discovered from Dhudhua. At the temple of Parameswara (Bhubaneswara) the god sits on a throne, covered with a peacock.<sup>17</sup>

An image of Kartikeya obtained from Dinajpur seated astride a peacock is available at the Asutosh Museum, Calcutta. The peacock of another bigger, four armed, image at the same museum is broken. Unfortunately the peacock of the four-armed standing Kartikeya at the Indian Museum, Calcutta, is broken, though the sculpture is a lovely one.<sup>18</sup>

There are a few sandstone specimens of Kartikeya at the Rajsahi (Bangladesh) Museum. One of them is a standing sandstone image, with the right hand holding a weapon, resting on the mutilated figure of his vahana, the peacock. Another corroded sandstone image of Kartikeya is seated on a beautiful figure of a peacock with its plumage expanded. Another image recovered from the Vaishnava monastery at Abdullapur, the god sits in the Maharajalila posture on the back of his vehicle, the peacock; the bird with its spreading plumage forms a halo behind the deity.<sup>19</sup>

Asim Kumar Chatterjee has recently noticed a two-armed medieval image of Kartikeya seated on his vahana, the peacock, in a modern temple at Raghunathganj, Murshidabad.<sup>20</sup>

Shrines dedicated to Kartikeya are numerous in Tamil Nadu. Behind the rock, bearing the Trimurthi shrine, are executed the figure of a peacock, an elephant and a monkey carved in half relief at Mahabali-puram. At the Nageswaraswamin temple, Kumbhakonam, Kartikeya is represented with his two spouses, Devasena and Valli. The peacock is seen behind the deity.<sup>21</sup>

Kartikeya in Madras Museum sits on his peacock. At Worcester Art Museum, there is a Skanda image and the plumage of the peacock is very softly graded. At Musée Guimet the four-armed, one headed figure of Kartikeya rides on his favourite vahana, the peacock.<sup>22</sup>

The peacock is a recurrent motif in rich ornamentation at the Sanchi stupas. The peacock figures very prominently in the Gateway decorations at Sanchi (second century B.C.). On the backside relief works on the northern and eastern gates of Stupa I, the figures of a pair of peacocks arranged symmetrically against flowering trees, etc.,

17, 18, 19 & 20. Chatterjee, *Op. cit.*, pp. 124, 125.

21. & 22. Chatterjee, *Op. cit.*, pp. 132, 135 (quoting F.M. Atkinson, 'ASIATIC MYTHOLOGY,' P. 129).

reveal clearly the fineness of details showing the beautiful 'eyelets' on the fan-tail. The beautifully spread out tail of the bird is represented in a medallion from Stupa II at Sanchi. A garden on a park scene of the Sunga period (2nd century B.C.) on a pilaster from Gwalior, now in the National Museum, shows peacocks in their natural surroundings and environments. A Kushana sculpture from Mathura of the 2nd century A.D., Sridevi, the goddess of fortune and prosperity, has a beautiful pair of peacocks carved at the back, symbolising beauty, rhythm and fulfilment. The birds form a part of the composition laid out against a brimming pond of lotuses, the habitat of Lakshmi. It establishes the symbolic significance of the bird in Indo-Scythian art in this region.<sup>23</sup>

Several years ago a red sandstone pillar was found at Dehrapur Tahsil of Kanpur district. Various scenes are found depicted on the pillar. It bears a very short inscription Kumara. This obviously refers to god Skanda-Kartikeya. The same pillar bears a beautiful image of a peacock, the vahana of Kartikeya. The figure has been given much prominence in the pillar. Artistically it is one of the triumphs of the early Indian sculpture, opines Chatterjee.<sup>24</sup>

The peacock is represented on seals. Father Heras has found two words, *Murugan Adi*, in one of the seals of Mohenjodaro.<sup>25</sup> Some of the seals of the Gupta Age testify to the popularity of the cult of Skanda-Kartikeya. An oval seal bearing a peacock standing to left with uplifted tail and legend was found by Marshal at Bhita.<sup>26</sup> Another seal of Vyaghrabala depicting a fan-tailed peacock was found at Basrah by Spooner. A fine silver matrix was discovered at Rajghat (Banaras). It shows a fan-tailed peacock with the inscription, 'Sura Gupta' in Gupta script. There cannot be any doubt that the representation of the peacock on the above-mentioned seals connect them with Kartikeya worship. In lines 5-6 of the undated Apsad inscription of Adityasena (later Guptas), Kumara Gupta, son of Jivita Gupta I, is compared with the son (*tanaya*) of Hara who rides upon a peacock (Sikhivahana), who is obviously

23. Zimmer, H. Op. cit., p. 235. Bhattacharya, A.K. 'The Indian National Bird in Art and Literature', CULTURAL FORUM (January 1964, Vol. VI, No. 2, pp. 110-119).

24. Chatterjee, Op. cit., pp. 34-35, quoting the JOURNAL OF THE UTTAR PRADESH HISTORICAL SOCIETY, Vol. IV, Part II (July 1930), pp. 38-41.

25. Chatterjee, Op. cit., p. 65 quoting Father Heras in 'NEW INDIAN ANTIQUARY I, P. 352 and Journal of the University of Bombay, Vol. I.

26. Chatterjee, Op. cit., P. 46 quoting ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY OF INDIA ANNUAL REPORT for 1911-12, p. 58, No. 83.

Kartikeya.<sup>27</sup>

The Satavahana inscription of the Nanaghat record (c. 1st century B.C.) mentions Kumara along with other gods (*Namah Kumara varasa*) and this is the earliest epigraphic reference to Skanda found anywhere in India.<sup>28</sup>

The sculpture on the right wall of the temple of Tiruchiralaivai (modern Tiruchendur, 18 miles southeast of Srivaikuntham in the Tinneveli district) shows Muruga sitting on a peacock and engaged in war with the demon Surapadma.<sup>29</sup>

The peacock, according to Bhattacharya, continued through the succeeded ages as a successful favorite of artists in stone, sculpture, bronzes and terracota figures. It was accepted in life as an indispensable companion of man, and in art an almost universal motif. In the early medieval period, the peacock continued to be depicted both independently and as a vahana of Skanda or Kartikeya. In an exquisite 7th century sculpture showing Kartikeya, in the Bharat Kala Bhavan, the bird as the vahana of the deity is very artistically drawn. A Kartikeya figure from Someswvara temple, Mukhalingam, pertaining to the 9th-10th century A.D. reveals the vahana, peacock, in beautiful form with the eyelets on the fan-tail very finely carved. During the time of the Cholas in the 10th century A.D. bronzes depicting beautiful peacocks as vahana of Skanda were made, where sometimes the bird standing majestically holds the snake in its beaks. In the Vijayanagara art of the 14th-15th centuries A.D., Kartikeya is depicted as riding on a finely carved fantailed peacock.<sup>30</sup>

## IN NUMISMATICS

The peacock is well represented in coins issued by various rulers of India. From about 600 B.C. the punch-marked coins of India bear, among other symbols, a figure of peacock on five-arched hillocks. Yaudheyas were the only ancient (3rd, 4th century A.D.) Indian tribe who regarded Skanda-Kartikeya as their guardian deity. A large number of their coins have been found in Rajasthan, Punjab and U.P., and some of them have the figure of Kartikeya standing, facing, holding a spear in the right hand, the left hand in hip; peacock is also represented

27. & 28. Chatterjee, *Op. cit.*, pp. 47, 67.

29. Chatterjee, *Op. cit.*, p. 61.

30. Bhattacharya, *Op. cit.*

on the left of the deity, the legend is immensely interesting. It reads: *Yaudhyayeyaganasya Jaya*.<sup>31</sup> The Guptas who had the peacock as their totem (Mayura—hence adjectival Maurya) glorified the bird by featuring it in their gold and silver coins. Their very names such as Skanda Gupta, Kumara Gupta, etc., indicate their very adherence to the peacock cult. Their connection with the peacock is treated here a little elaborately.

According to Nilakanta Sastri,<sup>32</sup> the Buddhist writers do not regard Maurya as a metonymic. They invariably represent it as the name of a clan the members of which ranked as Kshatriya since the days of the Buddha. Even Kshemendra who speaks of Chandra Gupta as *purva-nandasuta* in his version of the Brihatkatha, distinctly mentions Asoka as born in the solar race in the Avandanakalpalata. The antiquity of Moriya or Maura as a clan name is clear from the Mhaparinibhanasutta which represents the people in question as Kshatriyas and the Republic of Pippalivana, probably lying between Rumminda in the Nepalese Terai and Kasia in the Gorakhpur district.

The Brihatkatha and the Mudrarakshasa connect the founder of the Maurya dynasty with the Imperial Nanda dynasty of Magadha, and Buddhist commentators with the ruling family of Moriyaganara, perhaps identical with Pippalivana of early Pali texts, members of which had to take shelter in Pippapura (Pataliputra) when the last monarch of the line had been put to death by a certain powerful Paja. The queen consort of Moriyaganara, we are told, gave birth to Chandra Gupta, and the child is said to have been reared by a herdsman and a hunter.<sup>33</sup>

A variant form of the story is given by the Burmese. The foundation of the Maurya city (Moriyanagara) is there attributed to princes of Vaisali that had escaped from the massacre of Adzatathat (Ajatasastu).<sup>34</sup>

According to a Jain tradition recorded in the Parisishtaparvan, however, Chandra Gupta was born of the daughter of a peacock tamer (Mayuraposhaka) who lived in an obscure village.<sup>35</sup> The Buddhist tradition connects the name Moriya with Mora (Peacock, Malalasa-kara—Dictionary of Pali Proper Names II 673).

31. Chatterjee, Op. cit., pp. 35–36.

32. Sastri, K.A. Nilakanta (Ed.)—THE AGE OF THE NANDAS AND MAURYAS, Banaras 1952, Pp. 141–42.

33. Sastri, Op. cit., pp. 142–43.

34. Sastri, Op. cit., p. 143 quoting Bigandet, LIFE & LEGENDS OF GAUTAMA, II, pp. 126.

35. Sastri, Op. cit., quoting Pali Text VIII, 231.

There is no wonder why the Guptas had recognized the peacock as their royal bird as it was their totem. Kumar Gupta I (413–35 A.D.) issued a type of gold coin in which he showed himself as feeding a peacock with grapes, on one side, and depicted Kartikeya on peacock, on the other. Here is Allen's description of this 'a' series of coins: Obverse: Ring nimbate, standing left; wearing waist cloth, with long sashes and jewellery, feeding peacock from a bunch of fruit, held in the right hand, and left hand behind him, the legend uncertain and incomplete; it begins *Jayati sva bhuman gunasri* (Allen himself corrected this reading latter with the help of a better preserved coin. The actual reading is *Jayati svagunairguna* followed by 5 more characters on right and ends with Mahendra-Kumarah in left). Reverse: Kartikeya nimbate, three quarters to left, riding on his peacock Paravani holding spear in left hand over shoulder with right hand sprinkling incense on altar on right(?): the peacock stands on a kind of platform; border of dots Mahendra-kumarah. There is no doubt that the peacock is the favourite of this king.<sup>36</sup>

In the silver series of coins of Kumara Gupta I based on the Western Kshatrpa types, he issued a variety where the fan-tailed peacock occupies the entire central field with legends in circle around. These coins with outspread wings and tail were meant for circulation in the Central Provinces.<sup>37</sup> This Horseman and Tiger-slayer class of coins of Kumara Gupta only connect the Guptas with the Kartikeya cult through his vahana, the peacock. The peacock type of silver coinage was continued by Skanda Gupta (455–80 A.D.) and Buddhagupta. Mukhari Isanavarman, and Siladitya Harshavardhana of Thaneswar in the seventeenth century A.D. had also a type of their coinage showing the peacock with wings and tails outspread., Toramana the Huna king, had his coins based on this type showing with outstretched fan-tail on the reverse.<sup>38</sup>

Recent numismatic evidence shows that the party played by the Kalabras in the popularisation of the Kartikeya cult is no mean. S. Ramayya<sup>39</sup> has come across Kalabra coins Kaveripumpattinam rulers which shed new light on the dark age of south Indian history. He has given enlarged pictures of the two sides of a copper coin, somewhat round in shape. The coin was found in the Madura area. On the obverse there

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36. & 37. Chatterjee, Op. cit., pp. 42–43 quoting Allan, GATALOGUE OF COINS OF ANCIENT INDIA, p. 75, Plate XVIII, 1–15.

38. Bhattacharya, Op. cit.

39. S. Ramayya—'Coins prove Popularisation of Muruga Cult in the South by Kalabras', the MAIL (Madras), February 14, 1971 (Sunday magazine).

is a stylised figure of a standing deity in bold relief; makuta on head, single face, six hands, feet turned to right and left. Below there is a curved serpent with head on the left and tail on right. On the top left of the coin there is a single peacock feather and above some weapon, probably an axe. The attributes identify the image as that of Muruga or Subramanya. It also looks like the representation of a wooden icon worshipped in the temples of those days.

“On the reverse of the coin, in the lower portion in an incuse, there are four thin elongated letters in Brahmi, reading ‘Kalabra’. The ‘La’ is put sideways and it is the biggest letter. The script reminds one of the fourth or early fifth century Salankayana and Pallava scripts. On palaeographical evidence the date of the coin can be approximately fixed at between 400–450 A.D. The Kalabras were war bands from the North and the Deccan, made up of old Kshatriya clans like Yaudheyas, Malavas and domiciled foreign invaders like Sakas, Adhiras, etc., all mixed up and completely Indianised. The collapse of the Kushana empire of the north and the Satavahana empire of the Deccan in the middle of the 3rd century A.D. let loose these bands to the far south in search of adventure. The Sangam Tamil Kingdoms weakened by their constant internecine warfare, and Satavahana raids in the second century, fell an easy prey to these invaders. They apparently set up a loose military confederacy like the earlier tribal republics of the north. This is attested by the fact that the coins are issued in the name of the Kalabras, and do not mention the name of any king though literary evidence mentions the name of one Achyta Vikranta.

The most remarkable thing about the coins is the popularisation by the Kalabras of the cults of the Hindu pantheon like that of Subramanya and Vinayaka in the south. Kumara or Skanda worship is one of the Shanmathas of modern Puranic Hinduism. Skanda is not known to the Vedas; but by the time of the epics he is well known and a lot of legends gather around him. Suckled by six mothers he developed six heads, Shanmuga. He is easily identified in figures by his cock flag and peacock mount and a spear. As Mahasena, the Generalissimo of the gods, he was the favourite deity of the northern warlike tribal republics like the Yaudheyas and kings of warlike dynasties like the Guptas, the Chalukyas, the Kadambas etc. Econographic representation of this god is seen on the coins of the Kushana Emperor Huvishka and the slightly later Yaudheya coins where he is seen with six heads sometimes, and varying number of hands. In the 5th and 6th centuries, in the Gupta period, there are a number of sculptural representations of this god with peacock

mount. In the Yaudheya coins he is described as Brahmanya Deva and that is why he is called Subramanya in post-Sangam days in the South.

“Murugan was and is one of the most popular deities of the Tamil-speaking area and his origin and evolution can be traced from prehistory, down Neolithic ages to the Sangam period and later. He was the ancient god of the hunting tribes of the south, the Kuravars. In the Megalithic excavation from Adichanallur, of about 800 B.C., bronze cocks and tridents were found and Prof. K.A. Nilakanta Sastri sees in them Muruga-cult. In the Sangam age he was the Lord of Kurinji, the hilly country and his temples and worship, both primitive and ritualistic, are described in detail in that famous work, ‘Thirumurugatrupadai’. Even in the Sangam period Murugan and Skanda cults were getting synthesised and the Skandapurana legends were becoming popular. By the 5th century, as seen from the coins, the Kalabras would appear to have made the synthesis complete and popularised the Subramanya name brought from the North and strengthened his existing worship already prevailing in the south”.

Thus we notice that the peacock enjoyed an unrivalled position in Indian iconography, epigraphy and numismatics. The peacock was a perennial source of inspiration to our artists throughout the ages and continues to be even now.

## VI. Peacock's Place in History

The peacock is part and parcel of the history of mankind. Everyone knows that the most fabulous throne in the world was named after the peacock. A number of empires in the Indo-Ceylonese subcontinent was named after this most beautiful pheasant. Even British monarchs did not hesitate to take oaths by this native bird of India.

Peacock was one of the commodities that was exported from Muziris (Muyiricode in Malayalam, probably a corruption of Mayilincadu—where peacocks roamed in forests), the ancient port of Kerala, the present Cranganore. The Bible mentions that King Solomon imported the gorgeous peafowl to the Holy Land through Judea and they wandered about the grounds of his great temple.<sup>1</sup> He raised a whole drove of them.<sup>2</sup> This bird was no doubt, introduced to the Holy Land by the Phoenicians who were the masters of the Arabian and Indian Oceans and whose privilege it was to trade with Muziris.<sup>3</sup> They introduced it to the Pharaohs of Egypt and kings of Asia Minor, who kept them in their gardens. The Hebrews kept these birds in captivity.<sup>4</sup> In Greece the peacock was associated with Hera and kept in her temple.<sup>5</sup>

Alexander, the Great, took two hundred of these magnificent birds to Macedonia.<sup>6</sup> From Greece they were carried to Rome and the palaces of Caesars.<sup>7</sup> The Romans used the peacock for ornamental purposes. In fact, the Greeks and Romans prized the peafowl on account of its beauty and its meat. Aristophanes has confirmed that a peacock was taken to Europe from India via Persia.<sup>8</sup>

The peacock has played its humble role in Indian history. The ancestors of the Mauryas seem to have originally been worshippers in *Mayura*, for the word Maurya itself is etymologically connected to *Mor* (peacock). Peacock was probably their totemistic bird. This explains why

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1. ENCYCLOPAEDIA INTERNATIONAL (1st Edition) 1964 New Vol. 14, p. 135.

2. Lall Inderjit—'Peacocks have their Place in History' Sunday AMRITA BAZAR PATRIKA, June 9, 1968.

3. ENCYCLOPAEDIA BRITANICA (1968 Edition) Vol. 17, pp. 500-501.

4. RICHARD'S TOPICAL ENCYCLOPAEDIA (1958 edition) Vol. 4, p. 191.

5. Funk & Wagnall's STANDARD DICTIONARY OF FOLKLORE, MYTHOLOGY & LEGEND, Vol. 2, 1950, New York, p. 849.

6. Lall, Inderjit—Ibid., ENCYCLOPAEDIA BRITANICA, p. 500-501.

7. RICHARD'S TOPICAL ENCYCLOPAEDIA, p. 191.

8. Lall, Inderjit—Ibid.

the Mauryans and Guptas used the peacock as their emblem in their coinage.<sup>9</sup> Peacocks were supposed to guard the palaces of Rajas in India. Five peacocks, eight ospreys and nine water-fowls kept watch over queen Koklan's palace according to one version of the legend of Raja Rasalu.<sup>10</sup>

Though Indian epics, Puranas and other religious works mention the peacock, no king was privileged to use the peacock his flag except Bana of Mahabharata fame. The origin of the erstwhile Mayurbhang State (now in Orissa) is patent. The tradition current in the family is that their prime ancestor sprang up from the egg of a pea-fowl.<sup>11</sup> It was for this reason that the emblem of the chief of Mayurbhang was a pea-fowl, and that the killing of the peacock was prohibited in his state. There have been numerous other royal families taking their names after the peacock in India and abroad. To cite one example: The earliest kings of Tamluk (ancient Tamralipta kingdom of West Bengal) belonged to the peacock dynasty<sup>12</sup> and were originally Rajputs. Under their rule, the royal palace and grounds covered an area of 8 square miles, though today Tamluk has sunk into a wretched subdivisional headquarters.

The Moghuls glorified the peacock. Shah Jahan who built Taj Mahal found himself unable to keep the tons of gold and precious stones in the royal treasury. It occurred to the emperor that the possession of such rare jewels as rubies, garnets, pearls, emeralds, diamonds and other gems in the treasury should be utilised for adorning the throne of the empire so that His Majesty might shine with increased splendour and the peacock should be given a permanent place in history. He lost no time, commissioned hundreds of goldsmiths to make a throne that should be a wonder in the world, and gave them seven years' time. These craftsmen put their heart and soul in the making of a throne and supported it by twelve emerald columns. They made a canopy for the throne made of an exquisite piece of silk embroidered with diamonds.

Two peacocks were thickly set on the throne with gems and be-

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9. See Section V on Peacock in Iconography and Numismatics, Grünwedel —JOURNAL OF THE BOMBAY BRANCH OF THE ASIATIC SOCIETY, Vol. XXI, p. 21.

10. Mitra, S.C.—'The Peacock in Asiatic Cult & Superstition', JOURNAL OF THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF BOMBAY, Vol. IX, pp. 530-544. Swynnerton—RAJA RASAIU, Calcutta, 1884, pp. 219-220.

11. Mitra, S.C. Obid; THE NATIVE STATES OF INDIA AND THEIR PRINCES, Christian Literature Society, Madras, 1894, p. 45.

12. IMPERIAL GAZETTEER OF INDIA, Oxford, 1908, Vol. 23, p. 217.

tween them was a tree with foliage of rubies, diamonds and pearls. The magnificent Shah diamond, presented to one of the predecessors of Shah Jahan by the Persian king Shah Abbas was set in the centre of the throne. The peacock throne cost the Moghul Emperor Rs 71 million at that time. Tavernier who had an opportunity to see the throne in the making valued it at six million pounds sterling. This costliest handiwork of man was fashioned out of one and a quarter tons of gold, a quarter ton of precious stones.

The fate of the fabulous peacock throne<sup>13</sup> is shrouded in mystery after it was plundered by Nadir Shah in 1739. The plunderer was way-laid by the Kurds on his way home. What happened afterwards is a mystery.<sup>14</sup> The throne fell into the British hands along with Kohinoor, and was sent to the Crown aboard the ill-fated ship, *Grosvenor* in June 1782. The ship sailed from Madras and reached Trincomalee on July 13. She ran into a heavy storm near the rocky coasts of East Africa and foundered there on August 4. The throne is believed to have been buried in the bottoms of Indian Ocean.. Sixteen unsuccessful attempts have been made hitherto to recover the lost treasure. Search has not been abandoned and in 1962 a yacht was reported to have nearly sighted the wreck of a ship, off the cost of Durban. Perhaps we may get news of this fabled throne one of these days!

The present Peacock Throne<sup>15</sup> on which Shah Mohammed Reza sat at his coronation (1967) at Teheran is not the original one built by Shah Johan, as is often mistaken. It is stated that this is not the throne which Nadir Shah carried away from Delhi. According to Jalal Abdoh, the Persian Ambassador to India in 1967, the "Takhti-taus" was made by Fateh Ali Shah Qajar long ago. It is no doubt a replica of the

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13. ILLUSTRATED AGRA GUIDE. Lal Chand & Sons, Delhi (No date) "Emperor Shah Jahan made for himself the marvellous *Takht-i-Taus* at the cost of 9 crores of rupees which specify his glory and grandeur. The throne itself was 6 ft. and was built of 1 lakh tolas. Its upper portico was inlaid with diamonds, rubies, emeralds, sapphires and other valuable gems and the lower one was of gold, set with topazes. On an enamelled tree one wonderful peacock adorned with bright gems was constructed. The ceiling of the throne was also set with diamonds with a border of glorious pearls. Some fancy verses were written in it with green enamel. The throne was supported by twelve emerald coloured stones and ascending to the throne a beautiful silver-made staircase was prepared (p. 13).

14. Yusuf, K.M.—Peacock Throne—Letter to AMRITA BAZAR dated 14.11.1967.

14. Swamy, K.R.N.—The Peacock Throne, HINDUSTAN STANDARD, 19-1-1969.

15(a) HINDUSTAN TIMES November 30, 1967 'New Light on Peacock Throne'.

original built by Fateh Ali Shah who became the Persian ruler in 1797. It was a private couch of the Emperor's consort Taus Khanum. No canopy is attached to it. The one which was taken to Persia by Nadir Shah never reached Iran, it is stated. According to Dr. Abdoh, the original peacock throne of Shah Johan was dismantled by the Kurds and the precious stones distributed. This writer's own belief is that this fabulous throne is secure somewhere. Nadir Shah never allowed the Peacock Throne to part with him. Moreover, he was not foolish enough to expose such a priceless treasure.

Place names associated with the peacock is a legion in South India. India's third largest city is the leader in this respect. Mylapore<sup>16</sup> which enshrines the sacred relics of St. Thomas is famous in Hindu religious lore from time immemorial as the place where goddess Parvati performed penance having taken the form of a peacock or *mayil*. Mylapore is older than Madras itself. Thiruvalluvar who was born at Mylapore 2,000 years ago, seems to have been a votary of Lord Muruga and has left us his legacy in the form of *Thirukural*.

The Pallava Ruler Nandi Varman III bore the tile, *Mylai Kavalan*, or the protector of the city of Peacock (i.e., Mayilapore=Mylapore).

Though not a native of China, the peacock has found a place in the history of China from time immemorial. It is an emblem of beauty and dignity among the Chinese. According to C.A.S. Williams,<sup>17</sup> the use of the handsome tail feathers to designate official rank was commenced in the Ming dynasty, and ceased with the dawn of the Republican Era (1912). "The decoration of the peacock's feather was granted for meritorious services, and like many other orders, was also obtainable by purchase or as a reward for contributing to charity. These feathers had either three, two or a single eye or circular marking, according to the grade conferred. No doubt this use of the plumes caused a large annual consumption of the bird.

"The beautiful daughter of Tou I—a military Commander in A.D. 562—painted a peacock on a screen, and offered to marry the man who was able to hit the bird twice running with an arrow. The first Emperor of the T'ang dynasty put out both the eyes of the bird with his

15(b). TRIBUNE, 17.11.1967 Letter of G.S. Lally on Peacock Throne.

15(c). TRIBUNE, 14.11.1967 Letter of Sewa Singh & Prof. N.D. Ahuja.

16. Nayudu, W.S. Krishnaswami—OLD MADRAS, Madras 1965, pp. 41-42.

17. Williams, C.A.S.—ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF CHINESE SYMBOLISM, & ART MOTIVES, New York, 1960, pp. 313-4.

shots, and was therefore declared the successful suitor. Hence "selection by hitting the bird screen" has become a synonym for choosing a husband in China.

As the peacock is considered an inauspicious bird by the Englishmen, its association with the royal dynasties and kings is practically nil. However, I am reminded of this anecdote about King George II. When the King had partly recovered from one of the attacks of insanity, his Ministers got him to read the King's Speech and he ended every sentence with the word peacock. The Minister who drilled him said that the word peacock was an excellent one for ending a sentence, only kings should not let subjects hear it, but should wisper it softly. The result was a perfect success and the pause at the close of each sentence had an excellent effect<sup>18</sup>!

Though there have been frequent references to peacock by poets and novelists in English literature, Shakespeare has not omitted to immortalise the bird in his COMEDY OF ERRORS (IV, iii, 181). Shakespeare has put these words into the mouth of Dromio of Syracuse: "Fly pride says the peacock: Mistress that you know". The English expression as 'proud as a peacock'<sup>19</sup> means that this vain bird is very much aware of its own beauty, because it will often go through its elaborate performance for admiring humans just as willingly as for its dull-coloured hen. The English expression, 'peacock feathers' in a literary style refers to borrowed ornamentation; the allusion being to the jay who decked herself in peacock's feathers and became an object of ridicule.

Besides the Renaissance Latin *Penna quidem variis me pictis coloribus, sed doleo turpes laude carere pades' Sincerum nihil est, & ab omni parte beatum: Et vitius virtus, & male mista bonis*, there are few English riddles about the tail of the peacock, possibly with the exception of this old one: "What is it (that) more eyes doth weare then forty men within the land which glisten as the christall cleare against the Sunne when they doe stand?"<sup>20</sup> (orthography unchanged)

Peacock is perhaps the only bird which has attracted the attention of people all over the world. No foreign traveller in India has omitted

18. Brewer's DICTIONARY OF PHRASES & FABLES (10th Edition) 1963, pp. 686-7.

19. Frederick Drimmer (Ed.)—THE ANIMAL KINGDOM (Vol. II), New York, 1954, p. 987.

20. Taylor, Archer—ENGLISH RIDDLES FROM ORAL TRADITIONS, 1951, p. 18.

to mention it. Claudius Aelianus,<sup>21</sup> who flourished in the second/third century A.D., has written two books, one of which entitled *ON THE RECUILIARITIES OF ANIMALS*, was the most authoritative book on birds and animals of India. He noted that tame peacocks were kept in Indian parks. Foreign tourists in India do not omit to see this bird in its natural habitat. Americans are delighted to see the peacocks roaming all over the Sterling Gardens in New York State unmindful of the visitors in summer months. They are housed in specially heated cages in winter and brought out to the Gardens in summer. The domesticated peafowls are allowed to roam in zoos and parks all over the world.

Peacocks may become troublesome to people. People living near a park in East London asked their local council to move three peacocks to a bigger park in July 1970 as the birds' mating calls kept them awake. A woman resident said that if the birds were not moved she would petition for action to be taken under a local bye-law against animals. "The mating calls are long, loud shrieks that often go on all night", she said. A park superintendent, who lived at the edge of the park said that the three peacocks and four peahens in the animal corner were popular with visitors. "Their mating season usually lasts from April to June, but this year, probably because of the hot weather, it has lasted longer", he added.<sup>22</sup>

There were bickerings among Indian naturalists about the wisdom of the selection of the peacock as her National Bird. Mr. Zafar Futehalily, the distinguished ornithologist, expressed the sentiments in these words: "A few years ago the Peacock was selected as the National Bird of India. At that time there was a lively controversy among naturalists, both in India and abroad, about the merits of selecting the peacock. Some said that the Great Indian Bastard should have been given the honour because it would help in the conservation of this fine, rare bird, endemic to India. It was pointed out that the Nene Goose was selected for the same reason in Hawaii, and the publicity which it thus received assisted the effort of conservationists. Others referred to the fact that the Robin was the National Bird of England, which was not endangered by any means".<sup>23</sup> The common man has the right to ask the question, 'Why should we go in for a bastard, when we have an Indian bird?'

21. Majumdar R.C.—*THE CLASSICAL ACCOUNT OF INDIA*, Calcutta, 1960, p. 419.

22. *AMRITA BAZAR PATRIKA* dated 30-7-1970 A-ANS report.

23. Kirthisingha, P. Buddhadasa—'Peacock, the National Bird of India', *MODERN REVIEW*, June 1970, pp. 456.

Peacock is the only bird which commands the respect and admiration of Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Parsees, Christians, Buddhists, Jains and followers of other major religions of India and abroad.

The place of the peacock in the history of India is an honoured one. The people of India are divided by parochialism, regionalism, casteism and other vices, but when it comes to the question of peacock, they, whether they are from Kashmir or Kerala, are united. This bird has been a great integrator in Indian history. Its influence has been so powerful that Aryans had to adopt the deified peacock in the guise of Skanda into their fold and elevate him as the second son of Lord Siva with honorific titles of Muruga, Subrahmania, Kartikeya, etc. It is in the fitness of things that the peacock has been adopted the National Bird of India.

## VII. Peacock in Sanskrit Literature\*

The peacock has fired the imagination of India's ancient poets. The Sanskrit literature is resplendent with the beauty of the peacock. If we take all the hues of flowers and birds all over the world, the beauty of the hills and dales, the rhythm of the folk dancers in the primitive lands, the grace of the female species and put them together we have the peacock. How can the poets who live in the dizzy heights of fancy forget the peacock that is so conspicuous in the hills and dales. The bird has provided our poets, novelists, dramatists and artists with ample material for kindling their imagination throughout the ages. No poet worth his salt has omitted to tell us something about the peacock. The peacock is part and parcel of the landscape of the countryside of India.

Valmiki, Kalidasa, Bhavabhuti, Bhairavi and other major immortal bards have left us a vivid imagery of the bird. Since these poets lived in an age uncontaminated by the industrial civilization, their communion with the nature was perfect. They have chosen the peacock for narrating the perfect harmony of man and nature. Peacock's variegated colour, its rhythm of gait, its close akinness to the green vegetation of its immediate environs, and above all, its keen response to the changing nature and the seasons, has drawn itself closer to the poets than any other bird. The peacock has always been described in classical literature as the friend of those who are in need.

In the words of Sri Aurobindo, "It is an unfortunate tendency of the English mind to seize what seems to it grotesque or ungainly in an unfamiliar object; thus the elephant and the peacock have become almost impossible in English poetry because the one is associated with lumbering heaviness and the other with absurd strutting. The tendency of the Hindu mind on the other hand is to seize on what is pleasing and beautiful in all things and turn to see charm where the English mind sees a deformity and to extract poetry and grace from the ugly".<sup>1</sup>

\* This part of the essay is adapted from Mr. M.V. Sridatta Sarma's paper, 'Our National Bird: The Peacock' (QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF THE MYTHIC SOCIETY, Vol. LXI (Nos. 1-4, April-December, 1970) and Mr. A.K. Bhattacharyya's study, 'The Indian National Bird in Art & Literature' (CULTURAL FORUM, Vol. VI, No. 2, January, 1964). These articles were found lacking in sequence and the author has put them in their proper order. Paragraphs adapted from Mr. Sarma and Mr. Bhattacharyya are numbered.

1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 8, 10, 11, 13, 14, 15, 17, 18, 21, 22, 24, 25 (footnote), 26, 27 & 29.—Sarma Sridatta.

We shall begin with sage Valmiki. The sage has never omitted to seize an opportunity to describe the peacock in the Ramayana. He has stated that the Mayurakas, peacock catchers, were among the followers of Bharata when he went in search of Rama in exile (Ayodhya Kanda, Chapter 73). Valmiki in the Aranya Kanda of the Ramayana gives a picturesque description of the dense forests through which Rama passed during his peregrinations. These parts were in close proximity with the pools and reservoirs of water, where the scenery was pleasing. The hermitage of Agastya near the mountain valleys echoing with the sound of peacocks is unforgettable. The hillocks looked charming with trees bearing blossoms.

Mayuranadita ramyah pramsavo bahu kandrh.

Drsynate girayassaumya phullaistarubhiravrtah.

(Canto XVI-4-5)

We see that in such surroundings the calmness of the nature permeated the consciousness and was really conducive to bring about a soothing effect on the restless state of one's mind with the result that all warring tendencies were transformed as if by alchemy into the peaceful.<sup>2</sup>

Rama feels the agony of his separation from Sita (who danced like a peacock when Rama strung the bow for getting her in marriage), when he sees the peacock with its splendid plumage and tail, moving with its entourage and indulging in its dance. The crested peahens being afflicted by love follow their mates on the table-lands. Having widened the radiant wings as though in jest, they move about. Rama says that no friend ever abducted the peacock's mate. He addressed his brother in a spirit of agony thus: 'Oh Lakshmana, even in animal nature, there is affection. The peahen abides with its mate (leads a family life), (Kishkinda Kanda, Canto I, 36-42).<sup>3</sup>

In the Uttarakanda of the Ramayana, Rama beholds the peacock in company with his mate singing after a dance with the fan-tail outspread, perched on the Kadamba tree, with the pang of separation from Sita greatly enhanced at the sight. (Bhavabhuti in his Uttararama-charita, Act III 20, make Rama recollect certain incidents connected with his life in the forests on seeing the Kadamba trees and speaks in exalting terms of Sita thus: 'This Kadamba tree was looked after and reared by Sita and now we see it well developed with the branches, yielding bunches (bouquets). The peacock which has perched on the lofty branch is recollecting in gratitude the many kindnesses of Sita like

2, 3. See note p. 135.

kinsmen'). The dance in whirls by the peacock is described as being accompanied by the clappings of the leaf-like palm of Sita at every step and circling eyeball of that charming lady, while in exile in the woodlands of Panchavati. Rama remembers the peacock as dearly as his own son.

Bhumishu krithaputanthamandalavrithickshu  
Prchilithachathurabhuthandavaimandayanthya  
Karakisalalayalathalairmugdhiya narthyamanam  
Suthamiva manasa thwam valsalainasmarami

(Uttar III, 19)<sup>4</sup>

Valmiki has also described the ostentatious display of tapestry of peacocks in another passage in the Kishkindha Kanda. He says that the inebriated peacocks with their feathers spread rendered the taverns glitter (Mayuramattabhiruta pranirttairapana bhumi pratima vibhati—Canto XXVIII 34).<sup>5</sup>

In the Asvamedhaprakarana of the Taittiriya Samhita (Kanda V), there is a mention of the peacock along with other fauna dwelling in the forest (Sauri balakarsyo mayurah syenaste gandharvanam).<sup>6</sup>

Kalidasa, in his Raghuvamsa, Meghaduta, Ritu Samhara and other works has immortalised the peacock. His imagery of the peacock is brighter than the ocelli of the bird itself. When describing the Grishma (summer), the autumnal seasons, Kalidasa gives in his Ritu Samhara a clear perspective of the scorching sun in summer with the whirling gyres of dust forcing the snake to drag its coils under the peacock with the face hung downwards. The peacock in turn does not kill its enemy—the snake, though it places its mouth near its tail (I-13 & 16). In autumn, the bird gives up its dance. This period is favourable to the swans. (II-18). The great poet who has made a study of the life of this bird in the six seasons commencing with summer, has given descriptions of its activities. For this bird, the rainy season serves as the period of jubilant activity, when it extends its tail (feathers) and indulges in the dance. He pities the peacock in the heat of the summer and relates how under its shade in that season the snake, its natural enemy, receives shelter. During the rains, on the dancing peacock, with outstretched fans, the bees sit mistaking the 'eyes' of the fan-tail of the bird for the young blue-lotus<sup>7</sup>.

Vipannapushpam Malinim Samulsukah

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4, 7, 9, 12, 16, 19, 20.—Bhattacharyya,

Vihaya Bringah Srutiharinisvamah  
 Patanthi moota sikhinam pranuthyamam  
 Kalapchakreshu navolpalasaraya.

The rains serve as an inducement to this bird for indulging in its exalted dance (Kalapinam udhata nritya hetoh). "The beauty of mountains streaked everywhere with waterfalls, while their high rocks were kissed by the stooping clouds, and their sides presented a gorgeous chaos of peacocks" (Canto II-6).<sup>8</sup> Kalidasa has also referred to domesticated peacocks going over house-tops in *Abhijnana Sakuntalam* (Act VI).<sup>9</sup>

Raghuvamsa (the House of the Raghus) has painted many a picture of the peacock. While describing the journey of king Dilipa to the hermitage of sage Vasishtha, Kalidasa says that the noise of the axles of the chariot, which resembled the roaring voice of the clouds, drew the attention of the birds which in turn produced the keka (Canto I 39).<sup>10</sup>

Kalidasa has drawn the picture of the bird with its perch on the lofty trees on the banks of a river thus: "The peacocks which have their habitat near the banks of the river, having their tails erect and expanded would gather strength (would become intense or powerful) to the hearers being full of affection, while the sound of the waves in the waters follow the musical notes (in harmony) like the sound of the tambourine" (Raghuvamsa XVI 64).<sup>11</sup>

The peacock has been the constant companion of the Indian lover and the beloved in bliss and in happiness. The same sweet cry of the peacock which in the company of Sita during the exile in forest was pleasant and sustaining to Rama became intolerable without her.

Snigdhascha kekah sikhinam bhabhuvu  
 yirskinnasahyani vina twaya men (Raghu. XIII. 27)

Rama remembered with extreme pain those very hills where during his stay in exile with Sita, the peacocks danced to his great delight.<sup>12</sup>

When Dasaratha entered the forest on horseback on a hunting expedition, it chanced that a peacock brushed by his side displaying its feathers. Though the bird was noticed by the king, he did not give any heed towards it. But his recollections were instead directed towards his spouse's locks (which were decorated with coloured flowers). So he let the bird scot free in the woodlands.

"Api turagasameepadutpatantam mayuram

For footnotes see p. 135.

Na sa ruchirakalpam bana lakshyichakara  
 Sapadi gatamanaskaschitramalyanukirne  
 Rati vicalita bandhe kesapase priyay" (Raghuvamsa IX 67)<sup>13</sup>

When Lakshmana under the directions of Rama left Sita in the forests (near Valmiki's hermitage), it is described by the poet (with pathos) that "the peacocks gave up the dance: the trees refused to blossom; the deer dropped down the blades of darbha grass which they had held for chewing. It looked as though all participated equally in the sorrows of Sita, and even in the forest, the feeling had become excessive or strong".

Nrityam mayurah kusumani vriksha darbhanupattan vijahur  
 harinyah.  
 Tasyah prapanne samadukhabhavam atyantamasit ruditam  
 vane api (Raghuvamsa XIV 69)<sup>14</sup>

Kalidasa has also not spared to seize an opportunity to say something about the peacock in his Meghadutam. Who can forget the golden perch of the peacock in Yaksha's house? The Yaksha gives directions to the cloud messenger regarding the spot where his abode is located in the city of Alaka (where domesticated peacocks with ever-glittering plumage lift up their necks for the purpose of crying—kekolkantah bhavana sikhino nrityabhasvalkalapah—Megh II-3) thus: "In between the Asoka and Bakula trees is a golden perch having a crystal stand and built at the bottom with jewels (emeralds) as shining as young bamboos; on which at the close of the day, sits thy blue-necked friend the peacock made to dance by my wife with the clappings of the hands rendered charming by her jingling bracelets".<sup>15</sup>

Tanmadhye cha sphatikaphalaka kanchani vasayashti:  
 Bhule baddha manibharanathiproudhasaprasai:  
 Talaih sinjalayashubhagainiirithithah kanthaya me  
 yamadhyasthe divasavigame neelakantah suhaldhrava  
 (Meghdoota II-18)

While describing the journey of the cloud-messenger through celestial mountains Kalidasa says that its thunderings rendered deep by being re-echoed by the mountain wall cause the peacock of Skanda to dance, the outer corner of whose eyes are brightened by the lustre of Siva's moon, and whose fallen plume covered with circles of streaks of lustre

For footnotes see p. 135.

Parvati wears in her ear in place of a lotus petal, out of affection for her son, —

Jyotirlakhavalayigalitam yasya bhaham bhavani  
 putrapremna kuvalayadalaprapi karnam karoti  
 Dhowthapatunga harasasirucha pavakaistham mayuram  
 paschadadri guhanarubhigarjithai narthayedha  
 (Meghadootam I 44)<sup>16</sup>

In the message conveyed to his spouse, the Yaksha says: “In the shrub of the Priyangu creepers, I imagine or visualise the body, in the glance of the timid deer thy glance, in the moon the beauty of the face, in the tufts of the peacock’s feathers thy hair and in the small ripples of the rivers, the sporting of thy eyebrows” (Meghadootam II 43).<sup>17</sup>

Before we leave Kalidasa for whom the peacock was something like a celestial being, let us turn to his Vikramorvasiya. The megalomaniac Pururavas, who was separated from the celestial nymph, roams about in the wilds and institutes enquiries with the peacock for tidings. “Oh Sapphire throated bird, I beseech you kindly to let me know if you had any occasion to meet my beloved queen in this woodland. She resembles the moon in her face and the swan in her movements. By these features (characteristics), you will be able to recognise her”. The bird keeps silent without giving any answer to his query, but continues to triumph with its gorgeous mass of plumes, which stream with splendour in the wind. The hero then soliloquises to himself with the conclusion that the queen must be dead with the result that the bird must be feeling proud in the absence of the rival. In his woes, he thinks that the bird rejoices while others suffer pain (Vikramorvasiya, Act IV).<sup>18</sup>

Bhavabhuti and Bhairavi, two other major poets, have also drawn pen portraits of the peacock. Bhavabhuti, the great poet of emotions, has delineated Rama’s plight after Sita’s abduction by Ravana. “These are the hills”, Rama says, in the agony of separation from Sita, “where the peacocks once sang and (these are) the desolate meadows where once dwelt the deer made with joy”.

Ethe tha eva girayo viruvan mayura  
 sthanyeva mathaharinani vanashthalani (Uttaramacharita II)<sup>19</sup>

Bhavabhuti has referred to hill peacocks (smarati girimayura esa devyah—Uttaramacharita III 20) as recalling that divine lady, Sita.

For footnotes seep p. 135.

Bhairavi in his Kiratarjuneeya, referring to the domesticated peacocks in the courtyards of the cowherds, describes how the birds were delighted at the sound of the churning of the milk-pots, resembling the thunderings of the rainy clouds.

Vrajireshvambudanadasargikani  
Sikhantinamunmadayalsu yeshitha.  
Muhu pranunnesu madham vivarthanai  
nedalsu kumbheshu mridangamantharam  
(Karatavadahm IV, 16)<sup>20</sup>

Indicating that the roostings of the peacock were attractive even to the deer, Bhairavi elsewhere says that the songs of the cowherdesses which surpassed the peacock's roostings made the herd of deer so enchanted that they did not move to eat the vegetables. (Kiratarjuneeyam, IV, 33).

Sudraka in his Mrichchakatika (Toy Cart, Act V, 23) has described the peacock whose dexterous notes resembling the clarion call (get up, get up) awakened the ruddy geese (cranes) from their slumber, when they in turn flew their wings wide, embracing each other as if they were tsartled.<sup>21</sup>

Ehyehiti sikhandinam patutaram kekabhirakranditah  
Proddiyeva balakaya sarabhasam sotkatnhamalingitah."<sup>21</sup>

The poet Sarangadhara addresses this bird thus: 'Oh, peacock, your note is pleasing to the poets. Your feathers look like the locks of women decorated with flowers. Like the neck of Isvara, yours is also dark and pleasing to the eye. You have established friendship with the king of clouds. I cannot locate or attribute (the cause) by what particular merit you attained this unique position as your reward' (Subhasita ratna Bhandagara).<sup>22</sup>

Kalhana has not omitted to speak of the peacock though there is little scope for introducing the bird in Rajatarangini. He has referred to the peacock dance as well. "He who has a taste for variegated colour objects, who is in love with the bow of Indra though it is unsubstantial, on seeing my fan-tail what favour might he not grant me?", thus displaying the glory of the fantail he dances, but the cloud drops nothing else but particles of water on the peacock; who else is there save him

23. Kalhana's RAJATARANGINI—edited and translated by Ranjit Sitaram Pandit, Allahabad, 1935, P. 75.

20, 21. See p. 135.

who has an empty heart?" asks Kalhana (Third Taranga 218; Also Third Taranga 334).<sup>23</sup>

Madhava pining for Malati expresses his grave concern and soliloquises that the blue-necked peacock refuses to answer his queries about Malati but indulges in dance expanding its heavy tail and plumage like a fan (Kekabhirnilakantastira—yati vacanam tandavaduchhi khandah—Malati Madhav IX 30).<sup>24</sup>

There are several *Sandesakavyas* (ballads in which the poet takes the help of a medium to send messages) in Sanskrit and other languages of India in which the hero (lover), who is separated from his beloved under peculiar circumstances (due to curse or other causes) selects his envoy and sends a message. Thus, Rama sends his messenger in the form of the monkey (Hanuman) to Sita while she was a captive at Lanka. Nala selects the swan to deliver his love letters to Damayanti before the Swayamvara. In the Meghaduta, as we have seen, the Yaksha sends his message to his spouse from the Ramagiri Asram. These lyric poems gave fillip to subsequent writers, who in their poems depict the transmission of messages on such analogies. In Mayura Sandesa of Udaya and in the Mayuradoota of Munidhurandhara (a Jain work), we see that the peacock is selected the conveyor of the message. The poets of Kerala selected birds for carrying the messages of their heroes to their heroines, in their Kavyas. Thus, in Griddhrasandesa, Sukasandesa, Kokila Sandesa, Chataka Sandesa, Garuda Sandesa, Bhramara Sandesa and Koka Sandeas, the birds selected are the vulture, parrot, cuckoo, Chataka, Garuda (sacred eagle), butterfly and the Chakravaka (ruddy goose) respectively. Mayurasandesa of Keralavarma Valiya Koithamburan uses the peacock as the medium. Vedanta Desikar or Venkatanatha (1268–1369) in his Hamsa Sandesa sends the message of Rama to Sita through a swan.<sup>25</sup>

Udaya in his Mayura Sandesa sends the message of a languishing lover, who is separated from his spouse at a stage of despondency, through the peacock. The peacock messenger is thus addressed: "With a view to cause satisfaction (acquiescence) to the world, you indulge in your dance, thereby creating happiness at a time when it withers being stricken or afflicted by the scorching sun. So, I approach you, who are the descendant of that race of Indra (crest Jewel) who are the only solace to those oppressed by grief, in the same manner as the sun is approached as a friend of the lotus".

26, 27, 29. See p. 135.

So ahamy atah saranamadhuna twam vipannaika mitram.  
 Mitram padmakara iva patatirindravamsavatamsam”  
 (Mayura Sandesa, Purvabhaga, Sloka 15)<sup>26</sup>

So also Munidhurandhara, the author of Mayuraduta (wherein the subject matter relates to the despatch of a message by Vijayamritasuri to his preceptor) addresses or describes the bird thus: “When oppressed by the scorching sun, people hanker after your voice. As you are always of a courteous nature, you send your note to please those who are oppressed as a matter of obligation. In response to your note, the clouds shower rains. You have great affection and love towards the people. This may be the reason, why you do not fly up in the air; but always prefer to remain on the ground. Being a great devotee of the Muses, you have earned for yourself great esteem and regard. By constant meditation on the Muses, your life has been rendered pure (or bright character)”.<sup>27</sup>

We shall conclude this part of this essay by quoting the another of Mayuraduta who sums up the case of the peacock thus: “Your greatness is unmeasurable or incomprehensible. After great deliberation, the creator has blessed you with a beautiful form. You have established yourself in the land of merit (Punyabhumi),<sup>28</sup> because men of merit (or good behaviour) cannot be had in other lands.”<sup>29</sup>

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28. Bharata or the abode of the noble or excellent Aryans is termed Punya Bhumi or the land of merit—particularly north of the tract extending from the eastern to the western ocean and bounded on the north and the south by the Himalayas and Vindhya mountains respectively (MANUSMRITI).

23, 24, 25. See p. 135.

## VIII. Peacock in Aesthetics and Fine Arts

The peacock has carved out its niche in the Indian aesthetics and fine arts. The music, the dance, painting, applied arts, etc., of India are associated with the peacock.

The peacock is sometimes a simple domesticated bird perched on the terrace or portico, and in some compositions of the Ragas and Raginis, it is an essential part of 'melody'. Symbolising thirst for love and dancing at the roaring clouds, the peacock forms an important accessory in the Malhara Raga.

Nrityanmayura Jalavahakale  
 Vasatumgasam slistanithambhinika.  
 Varnena nila sukhageetarakto  
 Malhararaga kathitho munindrai.<sup>1</sup>

The peacock is sometimes shown as quenching thirst, symbolically of love as it were with the falling rain drops. The Raga Vasanta is not complete without the plumage of the peacock decorating the crown of the hero who is conventionally represented as Krishna.

Sikhantabahorchvayabaddha choota  
 Pushyan pikam choothalathatam kurna  
 Bhumanmuda raagamandoogamurthi  
 Matho mathadam gasya vasanta raga.<sup>2</sup>

The advent of the peacock with its dance harbingers the coming of the monsoons (*varshakala*). A lady who is separated from her lover pines for her lord in soliloquy thus: "The rains are showering uninteruptedly. The peacocks have indulged in the dance. Either my Lord or the God of Death himself can put an end to my sorrow".

"Patatyaviratam vari nrityanti cha kalapinah  
 Adya kantah kritanto va dukkhasyantam karishyati".<sup>3</sup>

Dandin, who is one of the authorities on Indian aesthetics, observes thus: "During the rainy season, the peacocks make a ring of their

1, 2, 7, 9, 19 & 13.—Battacharyya, A.K.—"The Indian National Bird in Art & Literature, CULTURAL FORUM, Vol. VI, No. 2 (January 1964), pp. 110-119.

feathers by spreading them wide and with their sweet notes indulge in the dance”.

“Mandalikrita Barhani kantairmadhuragitibhih  
Kalapinah pranrityanti kale jimootamalini”.<sup>4</sup>

The whirling gyres of dust besides the scorching sun cause great affliction in summer. So, the cooling showers would be a cause of relief. In pictorial descriptions of the Megha Raga which is allied with the emotion of exuberant joy as a sequel to the monsoons, we see that the artist invariably gives a portrayal of the peacocks indulging in their graceful dance amidst the silva along with a background of the deer as also the cloudy horizon. This raga is supposed to produce the rain. According to an account given by H.E. Popley, it is stated that a dancing girl drew from the clouds with this raga a timely refreshing shower at a time when draught and pestilence prevailed in Bengal and thus was able to save the rice crop. (Music of India, P. 67).<sup>5</sup>

In musical treatises, we see that note C of the gamut (European scale) corresponding to the Sadja is associated with the voice of the peacock (sadjam rauti mayurastu—*Narada* or Sadjam mayuro vadati). The note of Sadja is defined in the texts as that which originates from or touches six positions or organs connected with utterance; the nose, throat, tongue, palate and the teeth (Nasakanta murastala jihva dantamsca samsprisan. Sadjassanjayate yasmata tasmata sadja iti smritah). The seven svaras or notes generate from the voice box (cord) or from the strings. (Tantri kantajanma svaravisesah). The primary notes of the Indian gamut other than the sadja are: Nisada (B), Risabha (D), Gandhara (E), Madhyama (F), Panchama (G), and Dhaivata (A).

Nisadarsabha gandhara sadja madhyama dhaivatah  
Pancamascetyami sapta tantri kanthothitah svarah” (*Amara*)<sup>6</sup>

A major Ragini, the Kakubha Ragini, requires a pair or more of peacocks flanking a maiden with garlands—a subject of a number of miniature paintings throughout the period from the 7th century.<sup>7</sup>

A musical instrument known as Taush or Mayuri fiddle which is similar to the sitar takes its name from its peacock-like resonator. Veena

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3, 4, 5, 6, & 14.—Sarma, Sridatta, M.V.—‘Our National Bird: The Peacock’, QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF THE MYTHIC SOCIETY, Vol. LXI, Nos. 1–4, April–December, 1970. 7. See p. 144.

with its head shaped like the peacock's head is very popular and one such exhibit is available in the recently added Musical Instruments Room of the Indian Museum, Calcutta.

The peacock dance in which the danseuse or dancer decks himself/herself with the splendid plumage of the bird is really a veritable treat to the eyes. Sitara Devi, Vijayantimala and others have shown their skill in performing the peacock dance on the silver screen and stage. In fact the peacock dance is a lively item in the Kathak style of India, besides the tribal folk. In Bhutan the folk dancers assemble at one place for performing community peacock dance and sing songs in praise of the bird. The peacock dance has degenerated into a street dance on festival days.

“A man dresses in peacock blue cloth and covers his head and shoulders with a realistic head of paper and cardboard. The long neck and face extend high above the dancer. The head is studded with shiny bits of brass and mirrors. At the arms are slits in the cloth which serve for wings. At the back of the dancer's body is an enormous tail of real feathers which is operated by a string to open out fan-like or to close as the dancer wishes. The dancer wears bells on his feet to emphasise the rhythmic footwork. The costume prevents any arm motion; so the foot movements are doubly important. The dramatic interest of the dance lies in the depiction of different aspects of the peacock's nature. The dancer enacts in all the various bird-like motions the peacock's pride and vanity. The neck resolves on its socket and the peacock stares behind; the head juts forward and backward in synchronized movements of the feet; frequently one leg is stretched backward and as the dancer slowly kneels he sustains a rattling sound of the bells until he slowly resumes his standing position. From time to time, the peacock tail is opened and closed. At one point a cup of coffee is humorously fed to the peacock who inserts his beak into the cup and drains it, apparently by magic. A white loin cloth is rolled up and folded to look like a baby peacock and placed in the centre of the arena. The peacock dances about it enviously and finally (usually with a little help from the audience) pushes it into his beak and shakes it until it loses the peacock shape and dangles like an ordinary cloth. During all these actions the dancer continues to move around the arena. When these dances are performed through the streets at night, a tall assistant carries a gas light on his head, which serves as a portable lighting unit and illuminates the

circle on which the dancers perform”<sup>8</sup>.

As a domestic bird the peacock receives a very delicate fondling at the hands of the maids and love-lorn young damsels, sometimes dancing to the beats of their clappings and sometimes fed by their hands. Medieval paintings of the various schools in Rajasthan and Pahari regions in the 17th and 18th centuries A.D. are replete with such homely scenes.<sup>9</sup>

The peacock, according to the Indian erotic science, is the symbol of the absent lover, before whom the beloved does her toilet, and waits in silent agony to get united with him who is far away in a distant land. The Madhu Madhavi Ragini shows this ‘musical mode’, or melody sometimes in a very suggestive way. The Gem Palace set of Ragmal paintings from Mewar of the late 17th century A.D. now preserved in the National Museum, reveals the heroine in the Madhu Madhavi Ragas lovingly fondling the peacock with her outstretched arm, the peacock representing the lover, the composition thus satisfies the requirements of the ‘melody’ that the heroine wearing a blue skirt should be deeply attached to the hero. This is one variety of the Ragini where the hero is represented symbolically; the other being where he is personally present.<sup>10</sup>

The peacock, as such, is not the motif in any school of Indian painting, but the bird’s presence is felt desirable by artists when love, rain, separation and other scenes are drawn. If landscape is given in the background, the artist invariably tries to give a portrait of the peacock to make the scene perfect.

The ‘Kangra Paintings on Love’<sup>11</sup> features the peacock prominently in treating rain, separation of lovers and other such themes. Figure 62 shows the utter desolation of *virahini* and the peacock is present there. Similarly the peacock makes its presence felt when ‘grief on separation from the lover’ (figure 65) is painted. ‘The Sheltering from rain’ is incomplete without the peacock. (Figure 74). The figure 76, ‘How delightful the clouds’ is a delightful drawing showing lovers’ happiness on the advent of rains. ‘An atmosphere is created by the activity which is going on in the rooms below the pavilion; a lady is decorating her forehead; and another one is emptying stale water from a flask. On

8. Bowers, Faubian—THE DANCE OF INDIA, New York, 1953, pp. 152–53.

9. See p. 144.

10. See p. 145.

11. Randhawa, M.S.&KANGRA PAINTINGS ON LOVE, National Museum, New Delhi, 1962, pp. 109, 113, 123, 125, 130, 144, 178, 180, 190.

the shade above the window is a restless peacock about to fly. His mate is shouting on the roof of the pavilion'.

The plate 'Sheltering from rain', shows a peacock, the lover of the clouds, on the crown of a tree, shouting exultingly. 'Admiring the rain clouds' (Plate XVI) shows the lady pointing towards the skein of *saras* cranes cleaving the dark clouds with their golden legs, while the peacock is on the ground.

Months such as Magha, Sravana, Bhadon, etc., are associated with the peacock. Thus, forests and gardens echo the notes sweet of peacock, pigeon, *koel* and *papiha* (Figure 88) in Magha. In the painting of the 'Month of Bhadon' the artist has shown only a single peacock (Plate XXIII). 'The Month of Sravana' (Plate XXII) is a delightful illustration of the rainy month:

The streams look so lovely as they rush to meet the sea,  
 The creepers enchant the eye embracing young trees lovingly.  
 The lightning flashes restlessly as she sports with rolling clouds.  
 The peacocks with their shrill cries announce the matings of  
 earth and sky.  
 All lovers meet in this month of Savah, why forsake me than,  
 love? (From *Kavipriya* of Keshav Das).

'Sawan is the month of Lovers' (Plate 34) in Basohli paintings.<sup>12</sup> The divine lovers, Radha and Krishna, are shown together admiring the play of lightning in the dark purple clouds, the sight of golden mangoes on the tree. On hearing the clouds rumbling, the papeeha bird in the mango tree began "*Pi kahan! Pi kahan!*" (where is my beloved, where is my beloved). The peacock on the cornice, longing for his mate, raised his head, and began shouting. Govardhana mountain abounded with peacocks if we are to believe the artist who drew the 'Krishna lifting the mountain Govardhana (Plate 10).

In the applied arts of India such as ivory, glass, metals, etc., the peacock has supplied the decorative motif to a great extent. There is an ivory boat carved in the form of a peacock. And, miniature peacocks decorate ivory chariots, or tops of paper-knives. Numerous legends in Bengal refer to Mayurapankhi boats, the more famous one being of Chand Saudagar, the merchant. In the chain-stitched skirt and blouse pieces from Kathiawar and Saurashtra, the design consists of a con-

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12. See p. 144.

spicuous a peacock, sometimes with outspread tails. In the folk and unsophisticated art of the Kanthas from Bengal and Saurashtra, the peacock design finds great favour. Bengal Kanthas of the late 19th and 20th centuries reveal the same design embroidered with coarse threads from discarded cloth-pieces in variegated colours. Similarly, in the temple lamps of brass from Tanjavur and other centres of metalware manufactures from the South, the peacock stands holding the lamps. In such designs, the peacock partakes of the sanctity which attaches to the accessories meant for divine worship.<sup>13</sup>

In works relating to Yoga Sastra, a posture styled Mayurasana or peacock posture is described. This comes under the group of Asanas which begin with face downwards. According to Earnest Wood, this posture resembles the *plant balance of Western gymnastics*. The directions are: "Keeping the legs stiff and straight and the head up, balance the body on the elbows, parallel with the ground. The position may be retained from a few seconds up to about two or three minutes". In Sureswara's Manasollasa (II 24-26) mention is made of this Asana along with others. This Asana is said to be favourable to Rudra. In Dattatreya Kalpa, the Mayurasana is described thus: With the head and legs raised up towards the sky (in an erect posture like a stick) one wards off all sins (by way of bodily ailments, etc.).<sup>14</sup>

The peacock is a favourite motif with the publicity men. Outdoor hoardings, greeting cards, trade-marks, brand names, monograms, display advertisements in newspapers, etc., abound with this bird as its mere presence is bound to catch the eyes of the beholders. Seldom one can find a lorry or truck in North, Western and Middle India without this bird on the back. Punjabi drivers seem to have had good luck with this peacock-motif. Philatelic representations of the peacock are also abundant. International hotels have restaurants named after the peacock. Thus, the Asoka Hotel in New Delhi has the Peacock Restaurant which is the only for royal Persian cuisine as the authorities claim. Hotel Hindustan International in Calcutta has the 'Golden Peacock'.

The Government of Haryana,<sup>15</sup> in its bid to attract more tourists, has recently named a number of bars and restaurants after birds. This

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12. Randhawa, M.S.—BASOHLI PAINTINGS, Publications Division, New Delhi, 1959, Pp. 56 & 104.

13. See p. 144.

14. See p. 145.

15. Advertisement in the TIMES OF INDIA dated 26th March 1973 in the feature on Travel & Tourism.

is part of a drive to arouse people's interest in birds and in the conservation of various species. Thus the Mayur (restaurant, tourist huts, rest house, angling and boating facilities), 32 kilometres from Delhi on the Delhi-Mathura Road, has been established in the Badkhal lake. The Blue Jay (Samalkha), the Whistling Teal (Uchana), the Parakeet (Pinjore Gardens), the Red Bishop (Panchkula), the Golden Oriole (Pinjore Gardens), the Flamingo (Hissar), the Bulbul (Jind), the Sandgrouse (Karnaul), and the Jungle Barbler are the other restaurants established in this chain by the Tourism Department of Haryana.

Calcutta which was not in the tourist map of India from 1969 to 1972 on account of Naxalite activities has again started attracting sight-seers and tourists, with the advent of law and order. The part played by the peacock in restoring confidence among tourists is not to be underestimated. Big hoardings are found all over the city with the outstretched wings of a peacock in the important thoroughfares. It seems that the peacock has brought goodluck to Calcutta.

## IX. Peacock's Place in Indian Folklore

Peacock has played an important role in the folklore of the people of India. Unfortunately, no attempt has been made to collect these oral traditions or gather the published material from different vernacular periodicals.

The voice of the peacock is termed *keka* in Sanskrit literature and consists of two syllables *ke* and *ka* and is onomatopoeical (*Keyavani Mayurasya*). The tribal people of India consider the peacock's call sweet whereas naturalists call it a 'loud shriek'. On taking flight, the cocks utter this loud *kok kok kok*. The call note is the familiar loud trumpet like *pehawn pehawn*: this is produced by both sexes but especially by the male, who utters it most frequently during the breeding season, and even at night if the bird becomes suspicious. The true alarm note, according to Henry,<sup>1</sup> is an extra-ordinary, loud, hollow grunt preceded by a squak. Loneliness is expressed by a mournful cry *aw-h aw-h*. Chicks, until half grown, utter a whistling cheep like that of turkey poults. Lowther<sup>2</sup> states: "Everybody is familiar with the peafowl's normal call, a loud, screaming *mee-ow*; few, however, are aware that it has another note which sounds as somebody were blowing down a reed".

Peacock is believed to be the harbinger of clouds and its call heralds the rainy season. The peacock loves the cloud; hence the verse:

*Bharit neh nau nir nit basarat suras athor;  
Jayati apurab ghan kau, lakhi nachat men mor.*

"Glory to the cloud which is full of moisture and sheds the refreshing rain. Whatever that wondrous cloud may be, my heart dances with joy beholding it".

Lightning gleams in the dark clouds,  
The sky is overcast with dense clouds,  
Peacocks are cooing in the Borda Hill<sup>3</sup>!

The Rabaris, cattle breeders of Pachhatardi, a village in Bhanwal Mahal of Jamnagar district of Rajkot Division in the State of Gujarat,

1. Henry, G.M.—GUIDE TO BIRDS OF CEYLON, Ox. U.P., 1955, pp. 255-57.

2. Lowther, E.H.N.—A BIRD PHOTOGRAPHER IN INDIA, Ox. U.P., 1949, p. 85.

3. Trivedi, R.K.—CENSUS OF INDIA 1961 Vol. V, Part VI, No. 1, GUJARAT Village Survey Monograph on Pacchatardi, p. 16.

who sing the above song consider the call of the peacock as 'cooing'. Every Rabari village has a sanctified place or temple for the worship of Jog Maya, their supreme deity. "The peacock feathers appear to have special significance for the Rabaris and are carried with them by the *dhupedis* while moving from family to family for collecting the *madh* contribution".<sup>4</sup> *Madh* ceremony is meant for invoking the goddess and the persons who collect contributions for the same are known as *dhupedis*. *Ras*, which is a circular folk dance, vigorous and rhythmic in movement, is performed by them and folk songs in which the peacock is praised are sung on the occasion.

A favourite mode of divination used by rural sorcerers is to draw the figure of a peacock and to direct the man who wants his fortune told to place a blade of grass on some part of the bird. According to the following verse the result is foretold:

*Chonch dukh, punchh dhan, mastak pawe raj;*  
*Jo shubh lakshaen pag pare, ghar baithe mangal char.*

"If the person making the test puts the grass on the bill of the bird, he will be put to trouble; if on the feathers he will die; if on the throat he will meet with success; if on the stomach he will get food; if on the tail he will get riches; if on the head he will be a Raja; if on the feet there will be rejoicings at his house".

A great walker, the peafowl wanders over a large area in the course of a day. The cocks carry their long trains, which are surprisingly light, well above the ground level with his body. The peafowl uses its wings for flying up to, and down from, the nightly roost, and for escaping from sudden attack; but the bird flies readily when it is faced with an obstruction, such as a river. The flight is slow and heavy at first, but once it gathers momentum the birds are good speedmasters. Generally the birds seldom leave the ground and only the approach of an enemy or obstruction can induce them to rise with laborious noisy flapping. The feathery train of the bird is compressed into a narrow bundle when it takes to flight.

The peafowl eats whatever it gets. It is an omnivorous bird. Vegetable shoots, gram, grass-blades, leaves of certain plants, termites, grasshoppers, small reptiles, etc., are eaten with relish. The bird strips the seeds from grassheads by drawing the stem through its beak. The bird is not at all a good scratcher of the soil. The principal feeding times, accord-

4. Trivedi, R.K.—Ibid., p. 8.

ing to Henry, are in the early morning and for an hour or so before sunset; at these periods the birds leave the shelter of the jungle and visit open plains or scrub-land. After feeding they repair to some stream or water-hole to drink, and then, in the day-time, return to the jungle to preen or dust-bathe in sandy-soil. "About sun-set they fly into some tall tree which gives an uninterrupted view of the country, to roost; not infrequently a top branch of a dead tree is chosen, where they are exposed to all the vicissitudes of the weather. These they do not seem to mind, and the only effect a night of rain seems to have upon them is that the cocks delay their descent in the morning until their trains have dried sufficiently to be manageable". The flocks droop down to the water after the sun is fairly high up and also in the late afternoons, tripping gingerly and with utmost circumspection.<sup>5</sup>

The peafowl is possessed of phenomenally keen sight and hearing and is exceedingly wary and slink away through the undergrowth on the least suspicion. The peacock is the first to detect the presence of larger cats on the prowl and follows their progress through the jungles with its ugly *may-aweing*, "a warning well understood by the other denizens". The birds are found in abundance where they are considered sacred and auspicious, but they are inordinately shy in places where they are not considered sacred and suspicion and cunning are written on every look, on every movement of the peafowl.

The peafowl is supposed to indicate the proximity of tigers.<sup>6</sup> Col. Tyler has narrated an interesting story in this connection. He once came upon a bird that was so taken up with watching something else, that it allowed him to come quite near. He found that the peacock was looking intently at a leopard that was slowly crawling up to it. Just as he raised his gun to shoot the animal, it suddenly threw up both its paws and shrieked out, "No Sir, No Sir, don't fire", and the supposed leopard turned out to be a professional hunter in a leopard's skin.<sup>7</sup> The shikaris know very well that the easiest way to get near a peacock is to pose for a leopard by which means they go near the bird and shoot it. The peacock's habit of gazing with stupefaction at any object makes them easy prey to leopards.

The peacock is considered an auspicious bird among Hindus and it

5. Salim, Ali—The BOOK OF INDIAN BIRDS, Bombay 1941, pp. 272.

6. Evans, A.H.—THE CAMBRIDGE NATURAL HISTORY, Vol. IX, BIRDS, 1957, p. 207.

7. Kirthisingha, Buddhadasa P.—'Peacock, the National Bird of India', MODERN REVIEW, June 1970.

is an auspicious omen if one comes across the bird while going out on any important business. Hindus believe that a Brahman, a cow, fruits, flowers, milk, pearls, jewellery, a prostitute, an elephant, an umbrella, meat, fish, a gun, a bayonet, a mirror, a mongoose, a peacock with its plumage expanded, girls singing songs, band players and washermen carrying washed clothes, etc., are good omens if one comes across them.<sup>8</sup> The peacock's feathers are considered auspicious on account of the same reason. This belief is not confined to Hindus, tribal people and Buddhists, but also to immigrant African Negro tribes settled in India. That is why the Sidis, a secluded tribe believed to be of African origin living in Junagadh, tie peacock feathers to their musical instruments. The Siddis living in Jambur, a village only a few miles away from Gir forest, perform the Dhamal dance. This dance is their most popular item of amusement and entertainment and is generally held every week wherein the members of the community, young and old, participate. This dance, more or less, resembles the tribal dance of African Negroes.<sup>9</sup> The Selani, their fiddle-like musical instrument used on the occasion, is made of dried gourd with a stiff cat-gut string adorned by a bunch of peacock feathers at the end and glass beads and shells all over it. The Dangs living in Ghadvi in Gujarat also adorn their musical instrument Tadpu with peafowl's feathers.<sup>10</sup>

After this description of the distinguishing characteristics of the peacock, let us see its place in folksongs.<sup>11</sup> The peacock is one of the loveliest birds of Nature's creation. Its gay colour, plaintive cry and charming dance spreading its multi-coloured plumage in a circle has attracted the tribal poets. The peacock finds an important place in the carvings and pictorial arts of the tribal folk. A Dhangar song refers to a dumb pea-hen laying eggs on the Dhawlagiri mountain. In a Punjabi song a *bhawaj* is seen depicting a peacock on the walls of the house on the occasion of her *dewar*. In Maikal Hills, a lover reminds a maid of the dancing peacock in her braided hair. In a Tharu song a lover is tempted in the forest where a peacock cries.

A peacock in Bhojpuri folksongs, according to Ganesh Chaubey,

8. Jackson, M.T. (Ed. R.E. Enthoven)—FOLKLORE NOTES, Vol. I, GUJARAT, p. 127.

9. Trivedi, R.K.—CENSUS OF INDIA, Vol. V, Part VI, No. 10, GUJARAT Village Survey Monograph, No. 10—Village Jambur, pp. 2, 37.

10. Trivedi, R.K.—CENSUS OF INDIA, Vol. V, Part VI, No. 7, GUJARAT Village Survey Monograph: Village Ghadvi, p. 47.

11. This portion of this article is based on Ganesh Chaube's article on peacock in Bhojheuri Songs (Folklore, Vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 58–58), 1956.

symbolises an ideal lover and the Hindi term 'mor' (peacock) in its different forms has been used as the refrain of songs.

"Behind my house is a bamboo clump,  
There a wild peacock is crying, O wild peacock!  
Don't kill my peacock with brick-bats,  
The pair will be parted, O wild peacock".

"During the Ashwin Navaratra, a ballad in the praise of the Mai (Mother Goddess), said to be one among the six sisters of Jagadamba, is sung by her votaries, accompanied with drums and cymbals, which runs as follows:-

"Oh, the mother took with her the seven hundred witches  
She went to hunt deer.  
Mother did not kill deer, did not kill partridges,  
Searching, searching she killed the peacock.  
The wild pea-hen began to weep, bewail:  
Oh mother, revive my vermilion.  
Oh, pea-hen, if I revive your vermilion,  
What gift you will give me?  
During the whole night I will show you my dance  
In the morning I will let you hear my songs".

Though the song is silent whether the mother goddess brought the peacock back into life or not, it is generally believed that the peacock was revived by her and the song is a triumph of the peacock's dance and melodious cry which has enchanted the folk-poet to give it a place in the soft corner of his heart.

"There is another song in which the plaintive cry of a peacock reminds a blooming girl of her husband and she asks her father to send her to her husband's house shaking off all etiquette which a girl in a conservative Hindu society is expected to maintain.

"From the eastern country comes a goldsmith.  
He is burning the charcoal in the courtyard.  
Burning the charcoal, blazing the gold,  
Bit by bit he is making the bracelet.  
I wore the bracelet and went to market.  
In the forest the peacock is crying,  
The peacock crying and tempting my heart,

O when my father will do my *gauna*.<sup>12</sup>  
 Have patience, patience this year, O my daughter.  
 In the month of Phagun I shall do your *gauna*  
 Bangles have braced, the slip has tightened  
 In my father's house to what extent  
 I have to remain modest?

“The inner feelings of a newly married bashful girl have selected the medium of the song for their expression and it is in my opinion, of the finest among the Bhojpuri erotic songs.

A wife whose husband has gone to another land, asks a writer (a Kayastha) to write a letter to her husband in the following manner:

“Tearing, tearing the *anchal*<sup>13</sup> the blank paper  
 The eye's collyrium the inkpot  
 Write in the margin, O writer, the peacock, O peacock  
 In the middle the wife's pangs of separation”.

“Here in this song the peacock has been depicted as a decorative figure in the love-letter. Similarly, in several marriage-songs, we find a relation of the bridegroom or bride depicting the figure of a peacock either on the walls of the ‘Kohabar’<sup>14</sup> or on the floor of the courtyard or marriage booth, all because the peacock is considered to be a symbol of an ideal lover.

Mr. Chaubey concludes that from the songs given above, it is evident that the theme of almost all folk-songs in which the peacock has been referred to, is the separation of lovers. “The classical poets while describing peacocks in the seasonal rain-songs have connected them with the theme of the sexual frustration and the folk-poetry does not go far from the classical one although it has not associated them with rains so frequently as has been done by the classical poets”.

It is indeed a revelation that the people of Magadha, which corresponds to southern Bihar today, in their Bhojpuri songs, have depicted the peacock as an ideal lover, which is in sharp contrast to the polygamous nature of the bird and its rude behaviour to poults. Seetha is

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12. Gauna—the first ceremonial visit of a newly married wife to her husband's house (Sanskrit—*Canan*).

13. Anchal—front portion of the Sari used to cover the breast.

14. Kohabar (Sanskrit Koutuk Griha)—Sleeping room in which the newly married couple sleep ceremoniously on the first night.

described in the Ramayana as dancing with joy like a peacock. Perhaps the peacock was her favourite bird as she was the daughter of Magadha and the Bhojpuri poets had an altogether different conception about the bird. The fancy of the tribal bards elevated the bird as an ideal lover, without any relevance to its nature.

## X. Peacock Worship in India

The cult of the peacock, pavolatry, is a distinct cultural contribution of the Dravidians to Hinduism. This cult is very ancient and is traceable to the Harappan culture. Marshall and Mackay have described peacock models on Indus Valley pottery.<sup>1</sup> The peacock represented the Earth Goddess<sup>2</sup> to the Dravidians and the cult of this bird spread from South India to the world over. The Aryanisation of the peacock is a later development. We shall examine the esoteric significance of the peacock in different religions of the world.

According to Mackay, "the broad tail and the general build of the two bird-models in Pl. LXXX 21 on 22 suggest that they represent the peacock, which is said to be indigeneous to India. It is a sacred bird, especially among the Jats, and its feathers are carried in certain ceremonies to ward off evil and are even smoked in pipes as a charm against snake bite. There are two species of peacock in India, but we cannot distinguish which these pottery models represent. The bird appears in the art of Indus Valley as models in clay or painted on pottery, and as far as I am aware it is not depicted in the early art of other countries, though its feathers were worn by a Minoan prince, as a crest. In later times it was frequently represented in Greek and Roman art". Marshall has described a model in pottery, 4.2 inches long of a bird with long and wide spreading tail and eyes represented by oval pellets, made of a high red clay, which probably was intended to represent a peacock.

The Harappans were not Aryans, though we cannot equate them with the present-day Dravidians. As it is customary to designate all the pre-Aryans of India excepting the people of Assam as Dravidians, there is nothing wrong in stating that the peacock-cult originated among the Dravidians. The non-Aryan tribes of Northern and Southern India are conveniently called Dravidians. The Dravidian-speaking tribes of India worship the peacock as their sacred bird. Some of the Dravidian clans have the peacock as their totem.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the Mori clan of the Bhils of Central India worship the peacock as their totem and make periodical

1. Mackay, E.J.H.—FURTHER EXCAVATIONS AT MOHENJO DARO, Vol. I, pp. 296–297. Marshall, Sir John—INDUS VALLEY CIVILIZATION.

2. Hopkins, E.W.—THE RELIGIONS OF INDIA, 2nd edition, New Delhi, 1970, p. 528.

3. Jackson, M.T. (Ed. R.C. Enthoven)—FOLKLORE NOTES, Vol. I GUJARAT, Bombay 1914, p. 145.

offerings of grain. The members of the clan believe that were they even to set foot on the tracks of a peacock, they would afterwards suffer from some disease, and if a woman sees a peacock she must veil her face and look away.<sup>4</sup> The non-Mori clans of the Bhils summon the Barva, their hereditary priest, when demons beset them and cause sickness. The sorcerer exorcises the demon by identifying him or her by performing various rites by means of music and waving a bunch of peacock feathers round the patient's head.<sup>5</sup>

The Jats who have played so glorious a role in the history of India hold the peacock as their sacred bird and have it as their totem.<sup>6</sup> The bird is protected in their villages and sportsmen who shot them have been attacked. The bird is sacred among the Ahirs and Khandhs, who have pavonine totems.<sup>7</sup> The Koyis who inhabit the district of Godavari in Andhra Pradesh erect a pandal under a Nim tree beyond the precincts of their village when they desire to propitiate Sitala Mata, or Mariamma, the goddess of Cholera and Small Pox. The image of the goddess of small pox, made with earth from a white-ant-hill, is placed within the pandal on a three-legged stool fashioned from the wood of the silk cotton tree after tying the image with a cloth or two round it and adorning its neck by a few peacock feathers.<sup>8</sup>

The peacock has always been associated with the Mother Earth among the tribal people of India. The Khonds worship the bird as symbol of earth and before describing their notorious Meriah sacrifice, let us trace the traditional origin of this practice among the Dhimar tribesmen of Lakati, Mandala District, who share the beliefs of their neighbours. An old Gond and Baiga living on Garhparbat wanted to please Mother Earth. She was not satisfied with the offer of anything. "In the Under World, in Jalalpur, lived Logundi Raja's wife; she had a peacock in her belly. The Baiga took a gourd full of aconite and his

4. Frazer, J.G.—THE GOLDEN BOUGH—Abridged 1 Volume Edition, New York, 1953, p. 550.

5. Crooke, William—RELIGION & FOLKLORE OF NORTHERN INDIA, Ox. U.P., One Volume edition, 1926, p. 426.

6. Crooke, William—THE POPULAR RELIGION & FOLKLORE OF NORTHERN INDIA, 2 Vols., 1896, Vol. II, p. 250, Crooke's One Volume Edition, pp. 374-75.

7. Hastings, (Ed.)—ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF RELIGION & ETHICS, Vol. I, p, 524.

8. Mitra, S.C.—'The Peacock in ASIATIC CULT AND SUPERSTITION', JOURNAL OF THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF BOMBAY, Vol. IX, p. 530-544. THURSTON, E.—OMENS, SUPERSTITIONS, pp. 36, 41.

pellet-bow and went to the Under World, riding on a horned tiger. When he got to Jalalpur he fought Logundi's Rani and cut the peacock out of her belly. The bird came crying, *Kehu-Kehu*. The Baiga pulled out some of its feathers and offered them to Mother Earth and she was pleased".<sup>9</sup>

The Meriah sacrifice, which was suppressed by the British Government, was performed in honour of Peacock. "The only instance I have come across of an Indian deity being worshipped under the guise of a peacock is that of Thadha Pennoo who is worshipped by the Maliahs (a sect of the Khonds) of Goomsur under the effigy of a bird intended to represent a peacock for the purpose of coaxing him into the granting of favourable seasons and crops. To this deity were offered human sacrifices, the victims whereof were known under the name of Meriahs. On the occasion of the offering of a human sacrifice to this deity, the celebrants went in procession around the village and its boundaries headed by a band of musicians, carrying the victim and a pole to the top of which was attached a tuft of peacock's feathers. On returning to the post, which was always placed near the village deity called Zakaree Pennoo, and represented by three stones near which the brass effigy in the shape of the peacock was buried, they killed a pig by way of sacrifice, and having allowed the blood to flow into a pit prepared for the purpose, the victim who if it had been found possible, had been previously made senseless from intoxication, was seized and thrown and his face pressed down until he was suffocated on the bloody mire amid the noise of instruments. The Zanee (or priest) then cut off a piece of the flesh from the body and buried it with appropriate ceremony near the effigy and village idol as an offering to the earth".<sup>10</sup>

The peacock is worshipped on the occasion of the Pongal by the Dravidians all over India. The Tamilians have Mattu Pongal (worship of the cattle) as well. During the Pongal the image of Ganesha is the only one seen, and his worship is rather perfunctory. On the evening of the last day (i.e., Mattu Pongal), the women have a party, paying obeissance to a peacock and indulging in a family reunion of very simple character.<sup>11</sup> This cattle tending ceremony is not confined to the Tamilians. The Maun Charaun or silent tending of the cattle is performed by the people of Central India at the time of Diwali. "The celebrants

9. Elwin, Verrier—MYTHS OF MIDDLE INDIA, Ox. U.P., 1949, p. 197.

10. THURSTON, E.—OMENS & SUPERSTITIONS OF SOUTHERN INDIA, Madras, pp. 199–201, Mitra, *Ibid.*, Op. cit.

11. Hopkins—*Ibid.*, p. 450.

rise at day-break, wash and bathe, anoint their bodies with oil and hang garlands of flowers round their necks. All this time they remain silent and communicate their wants by signs. When all is ready they go to the pasture in procession in perfect silence. Each of them holds a peacock's feather over his shoulder to scare demons".<sup>12</sup>

The Dulhadeo (bridegroom deity) is the household godling in the Central parts of India. He is worshipped on the occasion of Diwali, when a man becomes possessed. Dulhadeo, people say, has come and he runs about, stretching at anything he sees. Two men catch the man who has been possessed, fix peacock's feathers on his neck and arms, and he dances in an excited way.<sup>13</sup> Some of the tribes of Chotanagpur too have the peacock as their totemistic bird. Thus the Bhars (or Bharatas) have tortoise, bamboo, *bel*-tree and peacock as totems.<sup>14</sup> However, the Mangis and Kols regard it as a particular prize.<sup>15</sup>

The worship of the peacock is nowhere more pronounced than in Tamil Nadu where the deified peacock becomes Lord Murugua. Lord Murugua, the supreme god of the Tamilians is called Kartik, Kartikeya, Kartik Swami, Muttu Kumara Swami, Kandaswami, etc., in different parts of India. He is the god of wars and is worshipped all over India, in one form or another. He has the peacock as his vehicle.<sup>16</sup> The peacock is therefore sacred to him and the birds are allowed to roam in and around temples dedicated to them without molestation. No Hindu or tribesman, therefore, dares to do harm to the peacock.

*Kavatiyattam* is the most important ritual in temples dedicated to Lord Muruga in Tamil Nadu. As Lord Muruga is the patron deity of the Tamilians, temples dedicated to him are found in almost every nook and corner of Tamil Nadu. The most celebrated among these temples is at Palani Hills which attracts thousands of pilgrims every year from all over India and dancing with *Kavati* is a vow which every devotee fulfils. The *Kavatiattam* (dancing with the *Kavati*—the arch-shaped emblem of Lord Muruga) is in imitation of the peacock's dance. The *Kavati* is decorated with peacock feathers and is carried on shoulders by every devotee who visit the temple of Palani. The *Kavatiyattam* by thousands

12. Crooke, William—THE POPULAR RELIGION & FOLKLORE OF NORTHERN INDIA, 2 Vols., 1896, Vol. II, p. 233.

13. Crooke, William—Ibid., P. 102 (Nelson, RAIPUR DISTRICT GAZETTER, Vol. I, p. 74).

14. Hopkins—Ibid., p. 536.

15. Lowther, E.H.N.—A BIRD PHOTOGRAPHER IN INDIA, Ox. U.P., 1939, pp. 84–85.

16. Jackson, M.T.—Ibid., p. 145.

of devotees in unison to the accompaniment of music and dance is a veritable treat to the eyes. Lord Muruga's devotees call on Hindu households in South India for collecting alms. Seldom does a Hindu refuse alms to a suffron-coloured devotee of Lord Muruga if his *Kawati* is on, lest he invites the wrath of the Lord. Some of the presentday devotees of the Lord pretend to be such for collecting alms.

The elevation of the tribal godling Muruga of Tamil Nadu as god Subrahmania, second son of Lord Siva, was effected in the post-Vedic period, as it is evident from the fact that goddess Saraswati, the patron of letters and learning, has also the peacock as her vehicle in North India.<sup>17-19</sup> Goddess Saraswati and god Subrahmania are considered children of Lord Siva in Hinduism and both of them cannot claim the same bird for conveyance if they were originally consanguines. Goddess Lakshmi and god Ganapati, two other children of Lord Siva, have different vehicles.

Just as god Subrahmania is shown in South Indian temples, pictures and sculptures seated on a peacock, with a serpent coiled on its claws, goddess Saraswati is shown in a similar manner in North India. Goddess Saraswati has her vehicle swan in South India, and Bengal. Curiously enough, Kartik is the patron deity of the prostitutes of Bengal and his pictures adorn the walls of their houses in the red light areas of Calcutta. Kartik, they say, is an eternal bachelor and his youth is perpetual. They pray God that they be visited by bachelors of the calibre of Kartik. Another explanation offered by the practitioners of this world's oldest profession is that they cannot have children in this birth, but would like to have sons in the next birth, so that they are redeemed. The artisans (Banias) of Bengal also worship Kartik in their shops and houses. He is their favourite. The Bengalis do not omit to pay obeissance to Kartik during their Durga Puja which lasts for ten days. His image along with that of goddess Durga, Lakshmi, Saraswati and Ganapati, is worshipped in community Durga Puja pandals in Calcutta. Kartik is not separately worshipped in community pandals, but he is worshipped in households. He has his day, Kartik Purnima, in Bengal.

The peacock as vehicle of Subrahmania or Saraswati represents wisdom, and the coiled serpent is symbolic of man's egoism. The peacock keeps the serpent in check to proclaim to the world that Man

16. Enthoven, R.E.—FOLKLORE OF BOMBAY, Ox. U.P., 1924, p. 229.

17. Enthoven, R.E.—FOLKLORE OF THE KONKAN, Bombay, p. 84.

18. Jackson—Ibid., p. 145.

19. = 17., 18.

should similarly keep his pride and egoism under control. Though the peacock and serpents are enemies proverbially, the bird that keeps the serpent under control, does not kill him. This is an act of toleration and is symbolic of the Hindu philosophy of *Ahimsa*. God has denied the right of killing another creature even if that be one's own enemy. That is why there was a ban on catching, not to speak of killing, a peacock or causing annoyance to it in Kutch.<sup>20-21</sup> Lord Muruga is the patron deity of Kaikolars in South India and Tuesdays are considered sacred to him.<sup>22</sup>

It is impossible to imagine Lord Krishna as a boy without his crown stuck with a peacock feather. A peacock feather with its ocelli is the symbol of cowherd Krishna all over India. Brindavana, his birth place, contains about 1,000 temples and the peacocks and monkeys with which the neighbourhood abounds even today, enjoy special endowments.<sup>23</sup>

Worship of the peacock is now deep-rooted in Hinduism. They hold the bird in deep reverence and would never think of harming it. The story goes that when Ravana, the demon king of Lanka, invaded the heavens for the purpose of conquering the gods, they fled away. Indra, the kind of gods, came across a peacock, while he too was fleeing. He hid himself under the wings of the peacock in order to protect himself from Ravana and his onslaughts. The peacock was then a plain-plumed dull-coloured bird. Indra, in gratitude, conferred upon the bird the following boon: "I am Sahasraksha, or a thousand-eyed. As you saved my life from the onslaughts of Ravana, you too will possess one thousand eyes".<sup>24</sup> The peacock got its gorgeously coloured plumage and ocelli as a result of this boon. Aryanisation and deification of the peacock took centuries in which process the cult of the peacock spread to other lands as well.

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20. Funk & Wagnall's STANDARD DICTIONARY OF MYTHOLOGY, FOLKLORE & LEGEND, Vol. 2, 1950 New York, p. 849.

22. Richards, F.J.—MADRAS DISTRICT GAZETTEERS, SALEM, Vol. I, Part I, Madura, 191, 114.

23. IMPERIAL GAZETTEER OF INDIA, Vol. IX, p. 17, Oxford, 1908.

24. Mitra, S.C.—'Studies on Three aetiological myths about the spots on Peacock's Tail', QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF THE MYTHIC SOCIETY, Vol. XVII, No. 2, 1926.

### XI. The Peacock Worship in Persia & Other Lands

Peacock is worshipped by the followers of the Prophet. Nowhere is the worship more deep rooted than in Persia. The Yezidis who inhabit Armenia, Kurdistan and Caucasus mountains are the staunchest votaries of the peacock.

The high god of the Yezidis is the Malik-e-Ta'us which is a redeem devil in the semblance of the peacock. Writers on Persia have testified to the existence of this peacock cult from time immemorial.<sup>1</sup> Mrs. M.E. Home-Griffith, writing in 1909, says: "The symbol of their religion is the *Malek-e-Taus*—a peacock, and is held in great reverence". All accounts testify that the *Malek-e-Taus* (King Peacock) of the Yezidis is shaped like a bird; it has a hole in the middle of the back with a lid to it.

The Malik-i-Ta'us is brought by the head of a village, wrapped in linen, and filled with water. The priest kisses the image and sips water through the beak, others following his example. "Five bronze images are sent round continually and every Yezidi must visit the figure three times a year. An equation, Ta'us=Tammuz, has been proposed, which explains the rites as a survival of Tammuz worship, the peacock coming in through a piece of folk etymology though the Yezidis themselves hold that Malik Ta'uz revealed himself in the form of a handsome youth in peacock's tail when he appeared in a vision before Sheikh Aadi, the prophet of the faith".

Crowfoot writing in 1901 has explained the rites connected with the peacock worship in these words: "The head of the village came in which saddlebags hanging over his shoulders. From the bag in front, which was over his chest, he took the bronze figure of the Malek Taus which was wrapped and the wrappings removed. The figure was shaped like a bird with a hole in the middle of the back covered by a lid, and a base like the stand of a candlestick. The bird was then filled with holy water through the hole, and while this was going on all sang songs in Kurdish. Next, the priest approached it, kissed the basis first and then the other parts until he came to the beak. This was pierced, and the priest put his lips to it and sipped a drop of the water, and all those who were present, except of course, the Armenian, 'received the sacra-

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1. Hastings (Ed.)—ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF RELIGION & ETHICS, Vol. I, p. 524.

ment' in the same way, for so we must describe it".<sup>2</sup>

According to Sir George Birdwood<sup>3</sup> the *Malik-e-Ta'uz* may indeed be an actual relic of Babylonian or Assyrian art. "More interesting to anthropologists than these speculations about origins will be, perhaps, the recurrence of the same figure among the Tachtadji in Lykia, a phenomenon to which writers on the Yezidi do not refer. Among the Tachtadji, however, the Malik Tauz, so far, at least, as the reports of von Luschan and Bent carry us, has no bronze embodiment; the natural peacock with them is regarded as the incarnation of evil. The Tachtadji speak Turkish only, the Yezidi Kurdish and a little Arabic. They live very far apart. To what, then, are we to attribute the common element? Two possibilities seem to be open to us. It might conceivably be an independent survival in each case of the Tammuz-Thoas worship once extended to the whole area. Or there may in more recent times have been some connection between the two peoples, which has now been lost or else has completely eluded the observation of travellers".<sup>4</sup>

The beliefs of the Yezidis concerning the peacock are shared by Muslims elsewhere in the world with slight variations. The Arabs believe that the Malik Tauz symbolised the sun god supported by the universal axis.<sup>5</sup> A Javanese Muhammedan myth, on the other hand, tells us that the peacock was the guardian at the gate of Paradise and ate the devil, thus conveying him within the gate.<sup>6</sup> The peacock is regarded as the embodiment of evil in some parts of Asia. The common motif of two peacocks symmetrically disposed on either side of the Cosmic tree or *hom*—a feature which is evidently taken from Persia and which subsequently reached Spain and the West—denotes the psychic duality of man (related to the myth of the Gemini) drawing its life force from the principle of unity.<sup>7</sup>

The credit for spreading the cult of the peacock from India to the West goes to Alexander the Great, for it is he who took the bird by the land route. That the peacock reached the Hellenic world much earlier

2. Mitra, S.C.—'The Peacock in Asiatic Cult and Superstition', JOURNAL OF THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF BOMBAY, Vol. IX, pp. 530–534.

Home Griffith, M.E.—BEHIND THE VEIL IN PERSIA AND TURKISH ARABIA, London 1909, pp. 286–7.

Crowfoot, J.W.—A Yezidi Rite, MAN, Vol. I, 1901, p. 122.

3. Birdwood, Sir George—ATHENAEUM, September 30, 1899.

4. Crowfoot—Ibid.

5. Jobes, Gertrude—DICTIONARY OF MYTHOLOGY, FOLKLORE & SYMBOLS, pp. 1246–47.

7. Cirlot, J.E.—A DICTIONARY OF SYMBOLS, London, 1926, p. 239.

is undoubted, for the bird was sacred to Hera. It is well known that like Aryans who adopted tribal godlings into their religion, the Christians adopted pagan types for giving them a fresh meaning. Thus, the peacock, which in Greek art belonged to Hera, became to Christians a symbol of resurrection, probably because its flesh was supposed not to decay.<sup>8</sup>

The peacock in Christian art was also an emblem of the ever-vigilant church for it was an attribute of Christ and Saint Barbara. Furthermore, the bird symbolised the grace of sacrament and heavenly glory.<sup>9</sup> Figurines of peacocks are found in Christian churches in India and abroad. The Cathedral of St. Mark in Venice<sup>10</sup> has a beautiful and graceful carving of a peacock which according to the Church authorities symbolised the immortality of the soul and incorruptibility of the soul as well. The fabled incorruptibility of the flesh of the peacock was the cock feeding on grapes was the symbol of the Christian eucharist. The cause of the bird being adopted as the type of resurrection. The peabird with olive leaf, similarly, symbolised Christian church bringing peace. The peacock with dragon meant sky and earth and carried the same symbolism as bird and serpent—winged serpent.<sup>11</sup>

The concept of the immortality of the soul in the figure of the peacock was borrowed by Christians from the Romans. The peacock was an emblem or symbol of the Romans and the Christians adopted it as a beautiful ornament for their tombs as well.<sup>12</sup> However, the peacock on Roman coins designated the apotheosis of princesses, just as the eagle that of victors.<sup>13</sup>

Though the peacock and its feathers are sacred in Buddhism and Jainism, it is not so in Christianity. *Mayura* (peacock) is sacred in Buddhism. A Jataka story tells us how the princess selects the peacock as her husband, but he is so elated that he dances in an unseemly fashion and so, like Hippoclydes, loses his bride.<sup>14</sup> Mendicants all over India

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8. Hastings, (Ed.)—ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF RELIGION & ETHICS, Vol. XII, p. 141.

9. Jobs, Gertrude—Ibid., Pp. 1246–47.

10. Richards—TOPICAL ENCYCLOPAEDIA, Vol. II (1958, p. 446 for the photo of the Cathedral of St. Mark.

11. Jobs, Gertrude—Ibid., pp. 1246–47.

12. Richards—TOPICAL ENCYCLOPAEDIA, Vol. II, p. 74.

13. Cirlot, J.E.—Ibid., p. 239.

14. Crooke, W.—RELIGION & FOLKLORE OF NORTHERN INDIA, Ox. U.P. (One Volume Edition) 1926, pp. 374–75, JATAKA I 84, Herodotus VI, p. 129.

carry peacock feathers in their stock-in-trade. The Jain mendicants are ordained to carry one feather at least.

The reason why the feathers of the peacock are not held sacred in Europe is that it is an emblem of Evil Eye or an ever-vigilant traitor. Many animals, particularly those with remarkable eyes are still considered possessors of Evil Eye. The peacock, Juno's own bird, full of eye, symbolise that most envious and ill-natured of the deities and it has always been held to be a potent mischief-maker in the European lore. Even well-educated Englishmen are reported to be shocked at the sight of the peacock's feather's being put up as ornaments. The English people believe that death or at least some evil will happen if the feathers of the peacock are brought home.<sup>15</sup> The export of peacock's feathers from India for ornamental purposes to Europe during the Middle Ages suffered a setback on account of this superstition.

Why do the English people consider the peacock as an inauspicious bird? Cox has answered this query in his INTRODUCTION TO FOLKLORE (1897, p. 17) thus: "When God created the peacock, the Seven Deadly Sins looked with feelings of envy upon its gorgeous plumage, and complained of the Creator's injustice. The Creator said: 'You are quite right; I have been unjust for I have already bestowed too much on you; the Deadly Sins ought to be black as Night, who covers them with her veil'. Thereafter he placed the yellow eye of Envy, the red eye of Murder, the green eye of Jealousy, and the rest belonging to others, on the peacock's feathers and set the bird free. Thus deprived of their eyes, the Sins pursued the peacock with a view to recover their lost eyes from it, but their efforts proved unavailing. This is the reason why, when a man adorns himself with a peacock's feathers, misfortune dogs his steps and overwhelms him in every way". The conservative English cannot dislodge this freak of mythology!

The peacock, in short, symbolised the all-seeing, arrogance, beauty, court life, dignity, immortality, luxury, magnificence, ornamentation, pompousness, regality, resurrection, worldly pride, etc., in different parts of the world.<sup>16</sup> In medieval hermetics the bird was the symbol of the soul. The peacock's feather is an emblem of vainglory and in Asian countries a mark of rank. The peacock's tail appears in the eightyfourth emblem of the *Ars Symbolica* of Bosch as the blending together of all colours and for the idea of totality. The bird corresponds to dusk in

15. Hastings—ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF RELIGION AND ETHICS, Vol. 6, p. 610.

16. Jobes—Ibid., Op. cit.

mystic horology. The patterns on its wings resembling innumerable eyes are taken to represent the starry firmament in Hindu mythology.<sup>17</sup>

The peacock with its full tail signified, in dream, pride misplaced in Europe. The folded tail of a peacock similarly signified remorse. The peacock's tail elsewhere means the star-studded sky or the ever watchful Evil Eye. Pavo is a constellation in the Southern Sky. The peacock is also a bird by which blasphemous oaths were taken in Europe. "Peacock, by the peacock" is now an obsolete oath. The peacock, it must be emphasised here, has all along been a non-tantric symbol.

The ancients believed that the peacock was the destroyer of serpents, thus the releaser of fertilising moisture. The bird is worshipped as the phoenix in some European localities. In short, it represented the Mount of Etruscan Uni, Greek Hera, Hindu Maya, Japanese Benten, and Roman Juno. It was the emblem of a Byzantine empress. In Chinese and Japanese art it was a companion of the peony. In China it is called *ling*; in a drama peacock feathers worn in a headdress signified a warrior.

The worship of the peacock as the vehicle of god Subrahmanya or Muruga and goddess Saraswati is deep-rooted in India. Pavolatry, originally confined to India, spread to the nearby lands in Asia and Europe and the bird today is part and parcel of the major religious systems of the world. Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. India can legitimately feel proud of adopting the peacock as her National Bird and contributing its cult to the cultural enhancement of Asia and Europe.

### Conclusion

The peacock cult is a distinct cultural contribution of the Dravidians to the cultural panorama of Asia. The Biblical *tukkiyyim* is none other than *tokei*, which is Tamil. The Sanskrit word for peacock, *Mayura*, is Mayil, which is Tamil-Malayalam. Philologically, epigraphically and sculpturally peacock is part and parcel of Indian history. The Dravidian tribes living in South India and isolated pockets of Middle and Central India are the staunchest votaries of pavolatry.

Non-Aryan tribes like the Khonds and Baigas, both of Orissa State, say the first peacock was created by their respective high gods. The Sherdupken of Arunachal Pradesh say that the peahen is dull and drab

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17. Cirlot—Ibid., Op. cit.

as it wore dirty clothes at the time of its transformation into the first peahen whereas the cock wore the most beautiful dress at the time of creation. The reason for the peacock's living in forests is accounted for by the Konds. The people of the Kangra Valley say that the peacock lost its beautiful legs as it once exchanged them with that of the mynah. It was Kitting, the supreme god of the Saoras, that gave the fine tufts to the bird.

The Indian epics say that the peacock got its beautiful eye-designs from Indra, the lord of the heavens. The tribesmen of Orissa have a different story altogether. The most fascinating explanation about the origin of the ocelli comes from the Khasis of Meghalaya.

The Dravidian tribes like the Kotas of the Nilgiris and the Gonds believe that the peacock reproduces itself by letting its seed fall from its mouth during the dance. The esoteric significance of the peacock dance, apart from its cultural and aesthetic values, is worth bearing in mind in this connection. The beliefs connected with the peacock feathers show that it served as an antidote to vomiting, snake-bite, etc.

The peacock was not a sacred bird among the Aryans and consequently its meat was eaten for medicinal and other purposes. The consumption of the peacock meat was confined to the kings and non-Dravidian tribesmen of India. The Dravidians worshipped the bird as Mother Earth and the deified peacock becomes their supreme god, Murugan or Kartik. It was Asoka who restricted the slaughter of the peacock for its meat and gradually abolished it. Today the bird enjoys complete inviolability in India as it is the National Bird.

The peacock, as such, is seldom represented on sculptures, paintings and coins. The bird appears everywhere as the mount of the war god Muruga/Skanda. There is ample epigraphic and numismatic testimony to establish the antiquity of the peacock worship in India.

The peacock worship in India can be traced from the hoary past of Harappa. The worship of the bird as Mother Earth is deep-rooted among the Khonds and Koyis. The dreaded Meriah Sacrifice was performed by the Khonds to propitiate the Mother Goddess under the guise of a peacock. Periodical offerings to Mother Earth were performed by the Dravidian tribes. The custom is still observed at the time of the Diwali festival all over India. The worship of the peacock is deep-rooted among the Dravidians as it is their totemistic bird. The worship is more pronounced among the Tamilians. Their supreme god, Murugan, is a deified peacock. No village in Tamil Nadu is without a temple dedicated to Muruga. The conception of Krishna with his crown de-

corated with the peacock feathers is very widespread. The bird is considered an auspicious one in India, but it is not so among the Europeans

The peacock worship is not confined to India. The followers of the Prophet are also votaries of this bird. The high god of the Yezidis, Malik-i-Ta'us, is king peacock. The Christians adopted the peacock from the Greek art and made it a symbol of resurrection.

The peacock has found a place among the followers of Gautama, the Buddha. They hold the peacock feathers in high veneration. The bird has found a place in the history of China. The decoration of the peacock feathers to designate official rank, recommenced in the Ming dynasty, fell into disuse with the dawn of the Republican Era. The history of the selection of the bride by 'hitting the bird screen' is interesting.

In conclusion, we need not hesitate to say that the peacock is the only bird that has commanded respect from people all over the Orient irrespective of their caste, colour and creed affiliations. Peacock enjoys inviolability in most of the countries of Asia and it is in the fitness of its contribution to the cultural panorama of Asia that India adopted the bird as her National Bird.