

SALAGRAM SHILA

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The Ananta salagram shila which has fourteen chakras engraved on it

Salagram shilas, it is said, originated from the different parts of Vishnu's body. They are also believed to represent Vishnu's principal avatar. Salagrans are fossilised shells of some extinct species of molluscs now solidified into stone. Found especially in the bed of the Gandaki river, a tributary of the Ganga, according to an evidence recorded in 1590, salagram shilas were also found in the Sone river.

Salagrans are small stones, mainly black in colour with a cloudy temperature, though occasionally one does find some in different hues as well. The stones have one or more holes, with spiral grooves on the sides which resemble the chakra or wheel of Vishnu. According to the *Encyclopaedia of Religion*, these salagram shilas are ammonite fossils.

Geologists claim that ammonite fossils can generally be classified under the cephalopda class which is roughly 425 million years old. The dictionary explanation also specifies that ammonites are coiled, flat chambered shells of any of the various now extinct cephalopod molluscs of the subclass Ammonoidea found in Mesozoic formations.

In the beginning ammonite fossils were simple in form, the earliest of which had curved shells. Later they tended to straighten out or remained only slightly curved. According to Dr PC Jain and Dr MS Anantharaman, ammonite fossils have many subclasses and are distributed over a wide geographical area.

While only traces of ammonite fossils dating back to the Upper Cambrian period (around 580 million years ago) have been found, geological evidence shows that in the Mesozoic period or the medieval life of our planet, which goes back to about 240 to 135 million years from the present, these were found in abundance.

For geological convenience, the Mesozoic period, the third era of geological time, is further subdivided into the Triassic, Jurassic and Cretaceous periods. Interestingly, traces of dinosaurs were found in the Triassic period which begins from approximately 240 million years after inception of our planet. Geologist Henry Wood wrote that four types of ammonite fossils were found in this era. These are Ceratites which are

disoidal shells, Trachyceras flattened shells, Arcestes and Pinacoceras.

Jurassic, the next period, is roughly 150 million years old. Traces of birds and reptiles were found during this era. Finally we reach the Cretaceous period which is 135 million years old. During this period, geologists claim, dinosaurs reached their peak and then became extinct. Also, birds as we know them, appeared for the first time. Twenty five types of salagrans or ammonite fossils were found, which date back to the Jurassic and Cretaceous periods, for example the Phylloceras, Lytoceras, Psiloceras, Schlotheimia and so on. These are of different shapes and sizes and are ornamented with smooth or striated surfaces, occasionally with ribs as well.

Just as the lingam is associated with phallic worship, from the religious point of view the salagram is sometimes referred to as the yoni or generative symbol. In the Congress of History of Religions in 1899 (sic), Gustav Oppert, a German pandit, read a paper on salagram shilas. He traced the origin of salagram worship to that of the emblem of the female generative principle. He further tried to establish the connection between the worship of the lingam with that of the yoni. Swami Vivekananda, who represented Hinduism at the same conference, refuted Oppert's views and said that though he had heard of such ridiculous explanations about the Siva lingam and other theories about the salagram shila, they were rather strange and seemed groundless to him.

According to MA Canny's *Encyclopaedia of Religion*: 'Salagram is God and... Tulsi plant is goddess, and in some parts of India the Tulsi is married annually to the salagram. To indicate this union a salagram stone is handed down from father to son as a precious heirloom. Even the water in which they have been washed in is precious.'

Hobson-Jobson noted that the salagram shila was never passed on to a female child, and in the absence of a male heir is handed over to Brahmins. In 1885, Sundrabai from Punjab recorded that 'My father had one salagram. It was a round, rather flat, jet black, small, shining stone. He paid it the greatest reverence possible, and allowed no one to touch it, but worshipped it with his own hands. When he became ill, and as he would not allow a woman to touch it, he made it over to a Brahmin ascetic with money present.'

Females are thus barred from worshipping salagram shilas. Vettam Mani wrote in his *Pauranic Encyclopaedia* that 'On no account should a woman worship the salagram. If by ignorance, a woman, (although being) good natured or of higher status, happens to touch a salagram, all her merits earned by good deeds will be lost and she will go to hell.' But when it comes to a male, MA Canny records that even the sins of crime can be washed away merely by touching the water in which a salagram has been washed. The *Padma Purana* (Patala Khanda, chapter 20) refers to the salagram as the *padmtra* or celestial nectar of the worlds. It is said that one drop of water of the salagram equates all the merits obtained from bathing in every tirtha as well as performing every yagna.

Today, spiritualism still prevails despite the emphasis of modern technology. Salagram shilas continue to be worshipped in millions of Hindu homes. Dr NR Roy, a veteran Vaishnavite, says that no worship of

god is possible without the worship of the salagram shila. He further elaborates that in the worship of Durga, it is mandatory to first worship the salagram. Thus all Hindu ritual and worship centres around the salagram shila.

Since ancient times man has been governed by two basic urges, spiritualism and materialism. As the *Shastras* stress, the place where a salagram is kept always becomes a place of pilgrimage. According to the *Tulsi Mahimanmrta*, the worshipper of the salagram shila automatically gains emancipation from life and becomes the purest of creatures. Its worship thus caters to a man's spiritual urge. However, it is also said that Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, resides with the salagram, giving the devotee a combination of the spiritual and the materialistic.

Whether in a temple or house, the salagram shila is generally worshipped twice a day. According to Omkarnath, a renowned spiritual leader, a salagram is always worshipped together with the tulsi plant. It is a common belief that the man who separates the tulsi from the salagram will suffer the same fate and will be separated from his wife in every rebirth.

As a pujari once said, punyas or fruits are achieved through the performance of yagnas, donations or *daana* and meditation or *upavasa*. But the devotee of the salagram shila achieves every punya simply by his worship.

The origin of the salagram shila goes back to Pauranic days. As the *Pauranic Encyclopaedia* says, Vishnu had three wives, Saraswati, Lakshmi and Ganga. Saraswati and Lakshmi once had a terrible quarrel and cursed one another. Saraswati's curse transformed Lakshmi into a tulsi plant, forced to live on earth forever. However, Vishnu intervened and said, 'Lakshmi you will live in the world as a holy tulsi and when the curse has been completed you will come back to

The Lakshminarayana salagram shila which has a single hole and a line shaped like a garland. Below it is an unidentified salagram

me. On that day a river named Gandaki will start from your body which will be in the shape of the holy tulsi plant. On the bank of that river, I will remain as a stone image. There will be many worms with strong tusks and teeth, which will pierce the stone into the shape of the Sudarshan Chakra and will create numberless salagramas.'

Worship of the salagram shila has been practised in every devout Hindu house, in their socio-religious functions since the Pauranic era. It is said that those who worship the salagram shila with the symbol of the chakra engraved on it need not have any further rebirths. But its devotee should abstain from arrogance and always maintain a charitable spirit. It is also said that whosoever worships the salagram shila should not attach importance to women or another's wealth.

Pauranic sources indicate that there are nineteen classes of salagram shilas which have also been mentioned by V

Mani in his celebrated *Pauranic Encyclopaedia*. The salagram shila which has one hole and a line shaped like a garland, with four chakras engraved in its cloudy colour is called the Lakshminarayana. Another variety, the Laksmijanardana is similar, except that it does not contain any trace of the garland or vanamala.

The Raghunatha has two holes, four chakras as well as a mark which resembles the hoof of a calf. On the other hand the Vamana has two small wheels and a cloudy colour. However, neither a garland nor any indication of holes are visible. The Sridhara is similar to the Vamana with the addition of the garland. It is said that its owner will be showered by great prosperity.

The Damodara is large and round with two chakras embossed on it. The salagram which is round and of medium size is called the Ranarama. This has two chakras and marks which resemble a child's kick, a bow and a quiver. The Rajarejeshvara, which is of the same size as the Ranarama, has seven chakras and the mark of an umbrella. It is believed that this salagram grants its owner the wealth of kings.

The Ananta salagram is black in colour with fourteen chakras. It enables a person to attain his life's object and helps in the performance of one's duty, earns wealth, fulfils desires and ultimately leads to salvation.

The Madhusudana is of ordinary size, cloudy in colour and has the shape of a wheel, with two chakras and the impression of a cow's hoof embossed on it. The Sudarsana salagram has only one chakra on it. Similarly, the Gadadhara also has one chakra, but the quality of stone is not so bright. The Hayagriva has the face of a horse as well as two chakras. The Narasimha has two wheels and is of an odd shape. It is believed that its worshipper will achieve self renunciation. The Lakshminarasimha has a wide mouth with two chakras

and a vanamala. It prescribes comfort to the householder. The Vasudeva has two chakras near the region of the hole. It is bright, round in shape and helps its devotee fulfil his desires.

The Pradyumna has one small chakra and a hole which has a number of cuts. The Sankarasana has two chakras enjoined face to face. Its forepart is thinner than its hind. Finally the Aniruddha salagram which is yellow in colour, round in shape and bright in appearance and gives comfort to the householder. (Primary sources: *Devi Bhagavata Skandh 9, Agni Purana*, chapter 46)

The spell of the salagram shila spread with the patronage of various Vaishnavite sects. In time, however, its worship no longer remained the prerogative of the Brahmin. According to HH Wilson, it was Rai Das, a chamar and disciple of Ramanand, who revolutionised the worship of salagrams. A dream inspired Rai Das to build a temple dedicated to the salagram shila and proclaim himself its high priest. As his fame grew, the infuriated Brahmins complained to the king: 'A chamar, Oh king, ministers to the salagram and poisons the town with his prasad; men and women, everyone will become an outcast; banish him to preserve the honour of your people.'

The king sent for Rai Das and asked him to abandon the sacred stone. Rai Das agreed but requested that he do so in the royal presence, since, he said, 'If after being given to them (Brahmins) it should return to him, they would accuse him of stealing it.'

The king consented. The salagram was brought to the palace and placed on a cushion before the king. The Brahmins attempted to remove it but in vain. They sang hymns and chanted, read passages from the *Vedas*, but the stone refused to budge.

Rai Das addressed the stone with this particular *pada*: 'Lord of Lords, thou art my refuge, the root of Supreme

Different salagram shilas

happiness art thou, to whom there is none equal; behold me at thy feet; in various wombs have I abided, and from the fear of death have I not been delivered. I have been plunged in the deceits of sense, of passion and illusion, but teach me to place no reliance on what the world deems virtue. Accept Oh God, the devotions of thy slave Rai Das, and be thou glorified as the Purifier of the sinful.'

As this chanting came to an end, the salagram, along with the cushion, flew into his arms. The king, reassured by his holiness, commanded the Brahmins to cease their opposition. This is perhaps the first time that non Brahmins were allowed to perform the worship of the salagram without fear or opposition from the higher castes.

With the worship of salagram shilas as its focal point, Vaishnavism prospered and thrived. The holy stone is not merely a spiritual symbol: it manifests mystical and magnetic powers, containing, as it does, a people's faith ♣