



THE CAT IN ANCIENT INDIAN LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

The cat is known as a popular domestic animal. It is an integral part of the mythology of different cultures all over the world. In world history the mummified cat in Egypt is considered as the earliest evidence of domestication of cats which is dated 1600 BCE. In India, the domestication of the cat is dated back to the Harappan period. Gokhale B.G., 1952 describes the Harappan site in India called Kalibangan (310 Km. to the northwest of Delhi) where he claims that a brick having the paw-prints of cat and dog is found which proves the existence of cat in India¹. It is interesting to study the textual references of cat in ancient Indian literature. An attempt is made in this paper to study the textual references of cat, and identify the status of cat in ancient Indian animal kingdom.

Keywords: Various words used for cat are *otu, chatta, biḍāla, mārjāra, ākhubhuk, caturāśramin, dīptākṣa, dīnalocana, gātrasankochin, jihvāpa, vṛṣadamśaka, vṛṣadatī, śāli, hriku* etc.

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Introduction

oturbidālo mārjāro vṛṣadamśaka ākhubhuk AmaK². The Lexicon Śabdakalpadruma explains the word *Otu* as *avati gṛhamākhubhyaḥ* and derives it from *√ava- rakṣaṇe* (i.e. one who protects from the rats)³. This word is also mentioned by Siddhanta Kaumudi⁴ while explaining P.vi.6.20. The word *mārjāra* is derived from *√mṛj* meaning to cleanse. Probably

cat is called *mārjāra* from its habit of constantly cleaning itself. Purāṇa Encyclopaedia refers to this word as the name of the son of *Jambavān*. Giving the reference of Brahmap. It further says that the cats have their origin from this mythological character *Jambavān*.

ākhubhuk, vṛṣadamśaka, are nothing but the adjectives of cat given on the basis of the activities a

common cat does i.e eating a rat. Abhidhānamañjari of Bhiṣagārya 153.3 gives some more adjectives for cat and those are *māyāvi*, *diptākṣa* and *gātrasaṁkoci*. Word *hriku* is prescribed for cat by Paramānandīyanāmamālā 1256 and Kośakalpataru. 4473.

vṛṣadati and *śāli* are two more words used for cat. Word *vṛṣadati* is used by *AV.(P.)* i.18.4 and *AV. (Śau.)* 20.18.7. Viśvabandhu's Vedic Padānukramakośa explains this word as *vṛṣasyeva dantā yasyāḥ sāvṛṣadati*, *sthūladantā nārī*. (*vṛṣa* is a rat.)⁴ *śāli* as cat is also given by Monier monier William's Sanskrit English Dictionary and Medinikośa but this word is very rarely used in the language.

Kośakalpataru refers to six different types of cats.

*grāmyo vanyastāpajātaḥ pakṣamārjāravidgarau⁶
sugandhivṛṣaṇā⁵śceti ṣaṇmārjārabhidaḥ smṛtāḥ||*

rural, wild, one born in waters, one having wings, one having poison, one having fragrant scrotum are the six types of cats.

Unwanted animal: By and large, cat is referred in the list of unwanted animals or the animals causing problem. [MahāBhā.xii.159.53; BrahmāṇḍaP.ii.7.177; ii.7.305; ii.7.319 ; ii.44.4 ; ii.51.119] considers cat in the list of unwanted harmful animals.

Cat and mongoose: Most of the times cat is referred along with mongoose (*Viverra Ichneumon*) (*Rāmā. Vi.26.27*); *Adhyārā.6.5.31* ;

BṛYamaSm.3.48 prescribes fasting for a night and purification with the five products of cow (*pañcagavya*) if someone touches a cat and other animals like dog, cock, crow etc. Eating the flesh of a cat is condemned by *KūrmaP.571.11(2.17)* the animals which are to be avoided are lion, tiger, dog, jackle, monkey and donkey. *KūrmaP. 684.16(2.34)* prescribes an expiation for eating the flesh of a cat. *Tantrākhyā. 10.16* refers cat as a useful animal as it kills the mice

Cat now a days is known as the most popular domestic animal but *ViṣṇuP.ii.6.21* condemns the profession of petting cats, cocks and horses etc.

Wild or Domestic?: The status of cat as a domestic animal is doubtful. Cat shows all the characteristics of a wild animal. It has got sharp nails⁶, poison and it is the carnivorous animal.

Rāmā.iv.2.11 and *iv.26.3*, *PauṣkS.27.189* ; *AṣṭaSam.1.7.34 (1)* ; *1.8.47(7)* ; *6.10 (219.18)* refer cat in the list of wild animals like lions, deer found on the mountain.

Poison of a cat: *IśānŚiPa.i.40.123* , a tantric text gives a remedy for the poison of a cat. The text goes like this: *niśābhṛṅgāśvagandhānām lepādotorviṣam haret⁷*. Word *Viḍgara* meaning 'the one having poison' is given as a synonym for cat by *Kośakalpataru*.

Very few references in Vedic literature: *Gṛhya Sūtras* like *BaudhGS.iv.9.9* ; *VaikhāGS.6.1(89.16)* prescribe the expiations which are to be performed if the unwanted animals come in between the way of the sacrificer, if these animals walk on the fire place or if they go between the teacher and the student, expiations are to be performed.

Expiation and a cat: Even though cat is considered as an unwanted animal, killing a cat or even coming in contact with a cat is not considered to be a good thing. *JayāSam. 25.84* mention that expiation for killing a cat is 10 times to that of killing a rat.

Expiations are prescribed by *Dharma Śāstra* books for a person who comes in contact with a cat or who kills a cat. *KūrmaP.682.4(2.33)* prescribes an expiation for killing a cat or mongoose. *Atri S.19.227 (=KātySm.790)* prescribes a special type of expiation (*kṛcchra*) for killing the animals like mongoose, cat etc. A person expiating should survive on milk only.

ParāSm.11.6 prescribes an expiation which is to be observed if the cat or mongoose touches the cooked food. This food is to be sprinkled with the water purified by putting sesame seeds and sacrificial grass (*darbha*)

If a student busy in study comes in contact with a cat, he is supposed to stop his studies for one day and one night as expiation (*ManuSm.4.126*). *ViṣṇuSm.50.31* prescribes one day fasting with eating saline food (*kṛsarānna*) and iron rod is to be given as a donation as an expiation for killing a cat. (*AtriSm.19.227*; *YajnaSm.3.270*; *ParaSm.6.9*) *BṛParaSm.8.167* prescribes a little variation in this rite and sugary food is to be consumed by the killer of cat but the donation of iron rod is still there. *KātyāSm.790* prescribes a fine of 12 *pañas* for killing the animals like snake, cat, mongoose, horse and pig.

SamvaSm.148b Prescribes fasting for three nights and feeding Brāhmaṇas as an expiation for killing cats and other mentioned animals like snake, rat, frog etc. Kurma P. 682.4(2.33) prescribes walking for one *yojana* (which is a measure of distance) as an expiation for killing a cat. MahāNirvāT.11.140 prescribes fasting for a day as expiation for killing a cat.

Effects of killing a cat: ŚātāSm.2.63 mentions that if cat gets killed by a person, his eyes turn reddish brown. Such a person should donate *Vaidūrya* gems *.(māṛjāre nihate caiva jāyate piṅgalocanaḥ tena vaidūrya ratnāni dātavyāni svasaktitaḥ)*

Qualities of Cat: Playing with the mouse: RājTa. (Jo.) 345 refers to a situation where a cat is chasing a rat and when the rat enters the hole, cat waits silently there to catch the rat.

Speed: Cat can run with a great speed as that of the wind (Matsya P. 118.57)

Cat fight: two cats fighting with each other (MahāBhā.iv(App).25.10 while describing the fight between Kīcaka and Karṇa compairs it with the cat fight) or the cat chasing a mouse and having a fight with a mouse is referred by MahāBhā.iv.606*.

Bad conduct: cat is said to be having a bad conduct. *durvṛtta* is the word used by NitiSā.3.19. GaneP. Refers to a story where a demon attacked Ganeśa in the form of a male cat. Ganesha being the powerful god killed the demon in cat form.

Habits of Cat: The behavioral patterns and habits of cat are found to be described very commonly. Cat likes to scratch it's partner when the partner is lying on the ground with the belly facing the sky. This scratching doesn't harm the partner. However it's a pleasure giving activity which both the cats enjoy (Matsya P. 209.20)

Tantrākhyāyikā. 101 contains cat as a character in the story. The cat in this story is a learned, old, wise and it knows the religious practices *(sakalaśāstrapāragascirajīvī dharmāśāstravid)* and guides the partridge and the rabbit.

Stealing: Cat is associated with stealing as it is said to be stealing food. Mārka P. 15.20 mentions that the person who steals food gets his next birth as a cat. *(hṛtvānnantu)*

Cat eating its own offspring RāmC.28.34 refers to the fact that cat eats it's own offspring

(otunevāmatokāni tvayā tṛptimavindatā) ; ManuSm.12.59(470.9) refers to the big cat eating the small cat.

Cat has got a special power :ViṣṇuSm.23.53 while prescribing the rules for purity , lists out certain things and animals which are always pure. Cat is one of the animals listed there. *(makṣikā ... māṛjāraśca sadā śuciḥ)*. ŚankhaSm.16.14 (390) mentions that if cat is around while performing some rite, it is auspicious.

They are considered either sacred or demonic. The Dharma Sutras and Dharma Śāstra literature prescribes an expiation if a cat gets killed by someone. This indicates that it was considered that Cat should not be killed.

The comparison of the status of cat and in Ancient Indian scriptures and in other mythologies could be very interesting. Some of the references like the cat goddess Bastet is the deity representing protection, fertility and motherhood in Egyptian mythology are giving me the clues for the further studies. I intend to take up this topic further to study the status of cat comparatively in world mythologies in future.

After examining the references of Cat in Ancient Indian literature, we can say that the cat is rarely referred by the Vedic literature but the later literature considers the cat as an important domesticated animal. After being domesticated, it is referred to quite a number of times compared to the other animals like lion and tigers and is an important animal that has become a part of the Indian belief system. There is no reference of going to Kāśī as expiation for killing a cat till Purāṇa literature which is a famous belief at a later period.

Notes

1. Balkrishna Govind Gokhale ,1952: *Ancient India: history and culture*, P.18, Popular Prakashan, Pune.
2. //AbhidhāRaMā.//ParyāRaMā
3. Word *otu* is also found in Vedic literature. RV.vi.9.3, AV.xvi.2.51 and TaiS.vi.1.1.4 contain the word *otu*. But the meaning of this word here is cross threads of web. Sāyana used word *tantu* to explain this word and this doesn't have any connection with the cat.
4. *jaratvarastrivimamāmupadhāyaśca* P.vi.6.20; *avatestunikṛte oturiti darśanāt SiddhantaKaumudi* 2654, *PadMañ.* ; *LaŚabdeŚe*.107.3 ; *Prasā*.II.601.15 ;

- CāndraVyā.*v.1.97 ; *KātanVṛ.*i.2.7 ; *ŚākaṭāVyā.*i.1.88 ; *SiddhaHeCan.*i.2.17 ; *Mugdhabo.*2.7(4.13)
5. Whitney and Bloomfield don't translate this word as cat but I got a secondary reference saying that Word *vṛṣadaṭī* means cat.
 6. One who has the poison.
 7. One who has got fragrant scrotum.
 8. *Mitā.*1.177 (59.25) refers cat as an animal with five nails.
 9. *niśa* means a type of turmeric popularly known as *dāruhaḍa*, *bhṛṅga* and *aśvagandhā* are the Fragrant plants.
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