
Sūrya Worship in Vraja in Ancient Times

19

with Special Reference to a Rare Kuṣāṇa Lintel of a Sūrya Temple

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When the Vedic seers thought of a divine power to protect them from all the darkness, to provide them the energy of life, they had the first and foremost saviour at their disposal in the form of Sūrya, the Sun God. He was the most important of all the natural powers that were directly visible to their eyes. The light rays of the sun were one of the aspects of divine nature by which they could get the blessings of the Supreme Being and which helped in their perception of the later Brahma, in the form of the self realization as the light rays of the sun drives away the evil forces and the darkness of the night.

“Ten entire hymns of the Ṛgveda”, says Prof. Macdonell (1968: 40), “may be said to be devoted to the celebration of Sūrya specifically. ... Since his name designates the orb of the sun as well, Sūrya is the most concrete of all the solar deities, his connexion with the luminary never being lost sight of.” Sūrya, or the sun as the orb that is seen in the sky, was not only the Vedic deity, but he is also imagined as a god of light. He supports the world in the form of Viṣṇu (*RV* I.21, 154; see Wilson 1850, II: 79-80; also Pandey 1989: 3) and, as Prajāpati, he is the lord of all creatures, the supporter of the sky and the world, and is entreated to hasten his worshippers with the same eagerness as cattle to a village, as warriors to their horses, as a cow to give milk to her calf, and as husband to his wife (*RV* IV.53, 2; 54, 4; X.149, 1, 4; see Wilson 1850, III: 310-14; also Pandey 1989: 3). He is the Preserver and Soul of all things, stationary as well as moving (*RV* I.115, 1; see Wilson 1850, I: 369-370; also Pandey 1989: 3). The Vedas refer to him and his various aspects as Savitr, Puṣan, Bhaga, Vivasvat, Mitra, Aryaman and Viṣṇu. All these deities seems to be the various states of the sun throughout the day (or twelve months as some believe) with some exceptions. Epic and Purāṇic texts refer to them as Dhātṛ, Mitra, Aryaman, Rudra, Varuṇa, Sūrya, Bhaga, Vivasvan, Puṣan, Savitā, Tvaṣṭā and Viṣṇu (Banerjea 1956: 428). These are the names of the Dvādaśa Ādityas, and Sūrya was important among these twelve. During the Upaniṣadic period Viṣṇu became the most important deity in place of Sūrya but Sūrya still maintained his important status as a deity. It is clear from the *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā* (X.21) where Lord Kṛṣṇa identifies himself as Viṣṇu among the Ādityas but among *jyotis* he identifies himself as the Sun (*Ādityānām aham Viṣṇu jyotiṣānām ravianśumān*).

While all other chief deities of the Vedic period became unimportant and subsidiary to the main deities in the Upaniṣadic and later Vedic period, Sūrya continued to be important. It is clear from the references in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (III, 1, 1) where Satyayajña Paulisi meditates on the sun as the *Self*, and the same *Upaniṣad* bears evidence of the idea that “That golden person who is seen within the Sun – is the lord of all the worlds.” In *Mahānārāyaṇa Upaniṣad* (1968: 18, stanzas 3 and 4 of section One) also Sūrya has been described as unborn, being the Self of all. In the next stanza are the salutations to the Sun God as the son of

the Parabrahman. In the epics there are a number of incidences where Sūrya has been invoked as a deity, like by Kuntī when she conceives Karna, when Kṛṣṇa announces a curse on his son Sāmba, a Vṛṣṇi hero. Besides, the ruling dynasty of Ikṣvāku in the *Rāmāyaṇa* definitely draws its origin from Sūrya as Sūrya-vamśi Kṣatriyas. Kṛṣṇa is also of half solar descent from his father Vasudeva's side (Growse 1882: 53).

The Vraja region, which is famous for its Bhāgavata and Śaiva inclinations, was very important for the Sun worship as well. The important city of the region, Saurapura, is considered synonymous with Mathura by some scholars.¹ According to me this Saurapura can be identified with Soron on the bank of river Gaṅgā in district Etah. This seems probable considering the linguistics of Braj dialect (by delving in the etymology of local names). Besides here is situated a Sūrya Kuṇḍa which is considered of utmost importance for religious activities. This definitely indicates towards the importance of this city as a popular Sūrya *kṣetra*. Whether this identification of Saurapura with Soron and another such identification of Ariṣṭapura with it (Gupta 2007) are correct or not, this area had certain instances of Sūrya worship. The site of Bateshwar near Firozabad along the Yamunā is also identified with Saurapura by the Jaina religious followers but there is no such evidence to prove that the ruler Śura Singh who is credited to have founded the city was actually the ruler of the Yadu lineage. This site also seems to be related with the Sun worship. Although most of the ancient ponds and water sources were used to offer *arghya* to Sūrya, there are some more important places linked with the Sun worship which still retain some name or reference of that ancient tradition when Sūrya was one of the important deities of Brāhmaṇism.

Besides Soron, Karnavasa along the river Gaṅgā near Narora is also an important Sūrya *kṣetra* which is well related in popular tradition with Karna, the son of Sūrya. The Dvādaś Āditya Tila in Vrindavana should be a very important centre of Sūrya worship as its name indicates. At this site is situated the famous Madan Mohan temple and the antiquity of the site dates back to at least the Kuṣāṇa period. Śāntanu Kuṇḍa at Satoha is also very important for Sūrya worship. Here king Śāntanu is said to have worshipped the Sun God to get his son Bhīṣma, one of the most famous characters of the *Mahābhārata*. A Gupta-period inscription tells about the temple of Sūrya at Indor in Bulandshahar district (Sircar 1965: 318-320). Mahrauli (ancient Mihirapuri in my view) and the nearby Surājkuṇḍa also seems to have some strong solar connection. These sites definitely lie within the greater Vraja region in terms of cultural affinities. In the *Varāha Purāṇa* (175.39.47-49) Sāmba is said to have worshipped Mitra, the Sun God, at three important Sūrya temples: Udayācala (on the southern side of the Yamunā), Kālapriya and Mūlasthāna. Mūlasthāna is well identified with Multan in Pakistan, but Kālapriya possibly has not been identified. Rosenfield (1967: 195) has talked about three major centres of Sun worship, viz. Muṇḍīra, Kālapriya, and Multan, drawing references from the *Sāmba* and *Bhaviṣya Purāṇas*. He identified Muṇḍīra with Konarak and Kālapriya with Mathura. About Konarak being called as Muṇḍīra we have no information but Mathura definitely was never known as Kālapriya. It seems that Kālapriya is the famous site of Kalpi in district Jalaun, famous for the Parāśara-Vyāsa *tīrtha* and its Chandella remains. There is also a temple of Śiva by the name of Kālapriya Mahādeva.

In Mathura district proper, at the sites of Jasondi, Bachagaon, Unchagaon and Chhata, *kuṇḍas* named *Sūrya-kuṇḍas* still exist. Near Govardhan and Gantholi, there is a famous *Sūrya-kuṇḍa*. The *Sūrya-kuṇḍa* at Kaman is also of significance. At Barsana a *kuṇḍa* named Bhānokhara (*Bhānu-puṣkara*) should also relate to the Sun worship. The names of the Mitra rulers of northern India, especially at Mathura, like Sūryamitra and Bhānumitra also indicate the importance of the Sun cult at Mathura. From various places in Mathura like Saptasamudri *kūpa*, Yamunā *ghāṭ* at Sadar Bazar, etc., Sun images have been found. From Pali-Khera,

Sanora (ancient name Śanipura or Sahanpura) three important Sūrya images have been found. All these find places along with Mat, Maholi and Ayara Khera would have served as important places for the Sun worship, as will be described now onwards.

Now, one very important factor must be kept in mind, namely that prior to the Kuṣāṇa period no Sun image from the Mathura region has been found. During the Kuṣāṇa period the number of Sun images at Mathura might outnumber the number of images of most of the Brahmanical Gods (possibly except Balarāma). Even during the Kuṣāṇa period the maximum number of Sūrya images have been found from Pali-Khera village (at least twelve in number), which is situated on the outskirts of Mathura and is famous for its Buddhist and other remains. Such a high number of Sun images from a single site and that too from two of its wells² indicates that most of these images were cult images and were thrown into the wells for some specific purpose, perhaps as part of a religious ceremony. At Mathura also, three of the images have been found from ancient wells – one from a well at Kankali and the other two from Saptasamudri Kupa at the museum compound. Most of the early images are from those parts of Mathura district, from where evidence of the existence of people from the northwestern region has been found. For this examples can be given from Pali-Khera, Maholi, Kankali Tila, Girdharpur, Shahpur Ghosana, Mat, the Yamunā river bed, etc. As the distribution of Buddhist sites throughout Mathura is not even, more interesting is the case of Sūrya images which are more limited to some specific sites. Even though the images of Sūrya from the Mathura area seem to be related with the people from the northwestern region, these were not subsidiary in nature to some other divinities like Buddhist or others. These were cult icons in most of the cases except for the images which formed part of some Buddhist architecture like the Kuṣāṇa lintel kept in the Lucknow Museum (acc.no. B.208; see Frenger 2005: 444-445, fig. 2).

The earliest evidence of the Sun in Indian art is found as a symbol on punch-marked coins. Parmeshwari Lal Gupta (1969: 18) has identified the Sun symbol on the punch-marked coins of the Magadhan series as part of the coins of the universal Magadhan series. These coins would also have formed a part of the Śurasena region as it was a part of the greater Magadhan empire. As far as the early iconography of the Sun images is concerned scholars differ in their views about its origin. Although the Sun images at Bodhgaya and the Bhaja cave are considered to be the earliest Sun images of India belonging to the 2nd-1st century BC (Pandey 1989: 68-72; also see Banerjea 1956: 432), the chariot of the god with four horses is considered to be an adoption from Greek art tradition (Cunningham 1873: 97). Dr. Pandey has been successful in proving the tradition of representing four horses in Sūrya images as Indian (Pandey 1989: 67-68). All these images are truly indigenous in nature based on ancient Vedic tradition with seemingly no foreign influence. Besides, the image of Sūrya in the Anantagumpha Jaina cave at Khandagiri in Orissa is also considered to be one of the early images of Sūrya.

In the Bhaja relief (**Plate 19.1**), Sūrya is shown driving a chariot drawn by four horses. The chariot is shown with one wheel only. There is no Aruṇa represented as a charioteer. The Sun God is accompanied by his wives Rājñī and Svarṇā on the chariot. Besides there are two other persons shown as riding two horses and they appear to be female because of the ornaments in their hands which are generally worn by females only. In this case, they should be the two other wives of Sūrya, Chāyā and Suvarcā. The chariot is shown running over a great demon that appears to be the demon of darkness, being run over by the Sun God. This description matches with the details given in the *Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa*.³ Although the *Matsya Purāṇa* and the *Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa* are not considered works pre-dating the Gupta period, still some

of the references in them might have been earlier as the similarity between the description and the Bhaja relief indicates. Besides, the Sun God is seen riding on a one-wheeled (*ekacakra*) chariot drawn by four horses on an 'upright' of the old stone railing (*prācīnaśilāprākāra*) at Bodhgaya (Banerjea 1956: 432).

During the Kuṣāṇa period it is again at Mathura where a new iconographic formula of Sūrya images is observed with some foreign influences. This influence is more Greek in nature than Iranian, in spite of the fact that the Iranian Mithra has almost the same characteristics as the Vedic Mitra. J.N. Banerjea (1956: 438) wrote, "It has been assumed by some that the early north Indian Sūrya image had its prototype in the Iranian Mithra. But the ancient Iranians themselves did not represent the Sun god in human form in the earliest times, and like the ancient Indians used to represent him by means of such symbols as 'a solar disc', 'a wheel' etc."

In the Sun images of Mathura which are not earlier than the Kuṣāṇa period, the god is not represented with his two wives, Uṣas and Pratyūṣas. He is generally shown seated on his haunches. His chariot is drawn by four or two horses and the charioteer Aruṇa is absent. He wears a round Persian cap and is shown with moustache. He is shown in *udīcya veśa* wearing long boots and a coat and tunic as well as long earrings in his ears (*kavaca* and *kuṇḍala* of the epics). He holds a club in his right hand and a dagger or a sword in his left hand. He wears a torque in his neck. This description holds true for the Sūrya image in the Mathura Museum, acc.no. 12.269 (**Plate 19.2**).

In one of the images of the 3rd century AD in the Mathura Museum (**Plate 19.3**),⁴ Sūrya is shown standing with his two attendants Daṇḍa and Piṅgala holding a floral wreath in his hands. A nimbus is also shown round the head of the God. The image was found from Barsana in Mathura district and is made of black schist stone, which is a definite import from the Gandhāra region. This specimen definitely indicates the role of the northwestern countrymen in the development of Sūrya iconography during the Kuṣāṇa period. It is probably the earliest image from India, of about 200 AD, showing Daṇḍa and Piṅgala with the Sun God.

The new finding of a headless Kuṣāṇa image of Sūrya from Mat (**Plate 19.4**), lying at a village shrine, belongs to this kind of typical Mathura Sūrya image like **Plate 19.2**. It is significant from the point of view of its find spot, as the nature of the Mat *devakula* is still not clear, especially the deity to whom it was dedicated. The Mat *devakula* was not a habitation site; it was only a religious spot of the famous Belavana.⁵ The importance of the place should also be looked upon from the present-day scenario. The main deity at the Belavana near Narora⁶ at the Gaṅgā is a female deity and the same is the case at this Belavana at Mat where the presiding deity is goddess Lakṣmī.⁷ From the site of Tokri Tila a female deity in much broken condition was found (Mathura Museum acc.no. 214A; Rosenfield 1967: fig. 9). Of it only the lower portion was available, on the basis of which the nature of the deity as a female associated with her mount lion was identified. It might have been an important deity at the *devakula* but it seems that the chief deity of the shrine was none other than the possible *kuladevatā* of the Kuṣāṇas, Sūrya. The finding of a number of Kuṣāṇa Sūrya images at Mat and the area in and around Mathura supports this fact. Also, there remains some possibility that the name of place Mat or Mant has some relation with word Mithra or Mihir which can only be confirmed when some evidence in this regard is found from the place.

The famous image at the Gokaṛṇeśvara Mahādeva temple (**Plate 19.5**) in Mathura appears to be of Sūrya, the only doubtful feature being the two lions carved at the base. The god who is sitting in *utkuṭikāsana* (sitting on haunches) is holding a dagger with his left hand. His right hand is probably holding a wine cup

or a small *musala*. A sword is hanging along his waist. He is shown haloed, which indicates the divine nature of the image. Gail (1994: *passim*, fig. 2) has also identified the image as that of Sūrya. Besides, Frenger (2005) has pointed out that, during the Kuṣāṇa period, showing the two lions in the pedestal of Sūrya images was an important and popular practice. Hence out of the two *devakula* sites in Mathura district, we have Sūrya as a chief cult image at the Gokarṇeśvara temple, and for Mat we suggest the same. Even if the Gokarṇeśvara image is of a Kuṣāṇa king instead of Sūrya, it also makes it clear that Sūrya was their *kula-devatā*, which they tried to copy even in their images. Another important fact about the site of the Mat *devakula* is that on certain occasions a special class of Brāhmaṇas comes to this site to offer their worship, and I suggest them to be Magi Brāhmaṇas. If it is confirmed, then this point of considering Sūrya as the presiding deity of the *devakula* would become more substantial.

At Ayara Khera, about 4 km distant from Raya, a Sun image (**Plate 19.6**) of c. 4th century AD was observed at a religious shrine at the outskirts of the village. The image is more indigenous in nature than the above mentioned image from Mat (**Plate 19.4**). The image is in a much deteriorated condition, so a proper description is not possible. But it is an evolved example of a Sun image as the chariot is drawn by three (visible) horses. This is a feature which is not observed in the early Kuṣāṇa images from Mathura but is followed in some post-Kuṣāṇa images (cf. Frenger 2005: figs. 4-5).

The finding of a part of a lintel from a temple at a shrine in the village Maholi (ancient Madhupurī, also known as Madhuvana) is very important (**Plate 19.7**). It is being considered a lintel because it can not be a part of a *stūpa* architecture, and for being some architectural part other than a lintel its horizontal position with a central deity and such a naïve carving, poses a number of questions. It seems to be the earliest lintel of such type till now found in India. This lintel should date back to the 2nd century AD or slightly later on the basis of its treatment. There have been found a number of evidences of the existence of temples from the 2nd century BC onwards and even some archaeological remains have been discovered at Nagari in Rajasthan, at Sonkh in Mathura, etc., but no such art piece has been found which has a deity carved in the centre of the lintel. **Plate 19.7** clearly indicates the nature of early lintels which is quite plain except for the three lenticular holes which seems to have been made to put some wooden blocks as part of the temple architecture. The use of wooden models in the early architecture is well known and this lintel further supports this view. The total length of this lintel is around 32 inches (c. 81.3 cm); when complete it would have measured about 56 inches (c. 142 cm), which is quite a wide entrance for an early temple. On closer examination of the figure in the centre of the lintel (**Plate 19.8**), the deity is identifiable as Sūrya as it follows the iconographic pattern of the typical Kuṣāṇa Sūrya images. In the broken sculpture some characteristics can be identified with precision. He is shown sitting on his haunches and wearing long boots. The other important feature is the tunic or the *udīcyā veśa* which he is wearing at his chest like a *kavaca* (cf. the Kuṣāṇa image of Sūrya in Rosenfield 1967: fig. 44). It is the major characteristic feature of the sun images in northern India. Whether horses of his chariot were represented or not, is not clear because of the poor state of the sculpture. He is holding a garland in his two hands as is the case with the Gandhāran Sūrya sculpture in standing pose in the Mathura Museum (**Plate 19.3**). His hands are broken at the palms, so it is not clear whether he was holding some object or not. Maholi is well known for its Buddhist finds like the famous bacchanalian scene in the National Museum, New Delhi (acc.no. 2800; Agrawala 1951: 95-97), a Bodhisattva image in the Mathura Museum (acc.no. 38.2798; Sharma 1976: 38, 48), a Buddha image wearing a chequered robe in the Mathura Museum (acc.no. 15.514; Josī 1965: 67, *citra* 50), a headless Buddha image in the Mathura

Museum (acc.no. 18.1557; Sharma 1984: 66), a Kuṣāṇa Śivaliṅga in the Mathura Museum (acc.no. 15.657; Mitterwallner 1984: 20-21, pls. 2-3), and others. A number of mounds there, in and outside the village, definitely had a number of *stūpas* and monastic settlements. But the existence of such an important Sun temple at the site is quite interesting.⁷

All photographs are by the author.

Notes

1. *Āvaśyaka Cūrṇi* 1928-29: 192-193; *Vasudevahindi* 1930-31, vol. I: 10-11, indicates that Mathura is different from Soriyanagara = Saurapura, as does the statement of vol. II: 356f., that Śoripura was founded by Śori (Śauri) of the Yadu lineage. This negates B.C. Law's statement: "The Jainas knew it as as Śauripura or Sūryapura" (see Law 1954: 106-110). The reference to Sauryapura in the *Uttarādhyana Sūtra* (1895: 112) may also refer to Śauripura and not to Mathura.
2. Kuṣāṇa: acc.nos. 886, 920, 922, 936, 938, 1006; Gupta: acc.nos. 888, 895, 930, 1007; early medieval: acc.nos. 1013, 890, 928. See Agrawala 1951: 67-68, 71.
3. *Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa* (śloka 10 and 11, 3rd part, Adh. 69); see Pandey 1989: 41. Gopinatha Rao 1914, I, II: 88 has mentioned the same reference from the *Matsya Purāṇa*, but it could not be verified in the same *Purāṇa*.
4. Acc.no. 16.1256; Rosenfield 1967: fig. 45. [V.S. Agrawala (1949: 170; 1951: 69) notes "a striking similarity with the solar image from Khair Khaneh near Kabul"; he therefore suggested a date between 309 and 386 AD for the Sūrya image. R.C. Sharma (1976: 82, 102, fig. 74) assigns it to the post-Gupta period. It may even date from 8th- or 9th-century Kashmir; cf. Pal 1992. GM, Editor.]
5. The whole area around Mathura has been divided in 24 sacred forests or gardens and this Belavana is one of them. Early references to such forests are found in ancient Indian literature, e.g. to Madhuvana in the *Rāmāyaṇa* and to Bhāṇdiravana in a Jaina text (see also Gupta 2007).
6. This area lies on a very important ancient route going towards large sites in the Gaṅgā basin from Mathura and the areas south and southwest of Mathura.
7. It might be a changed form of the Kuṣāṇa deity Nana or Ardoksho.
8. I do not agree with M. Frenger (2005: 448) that the Sūrya images at Mathura were not cult icons during the Kuṣāṇa period. Considering the dimensions of the Gokaṛṇeśvara image (lifesize) and the Kuṣāṇa lintel described above, it is very clear that these were used for cult worship, specifically to the Sun God. If one considers her argument that the images were of more royal character following the art tradition of Bharhut and Sanchi, than of Gods, then one has to keep in mind that most of the Indian deities have royal characteristics, whether they represent Kṛṣṇa, Balarāma, Bodhisattvas, Jinas, or others. Solar descent is also called for the only purpose of showing the royal lineage as the divine one because most of the great personalities of ancient India claim to be of some divine origination. There is no such proof to indicate that the indigenous people of Mathura (the majority of them) participated in the public worship of the Sun God during the Kuṣāṇa period. It is quite probable that this form of Sūrya worship was accepted by the local people only after the Magi Brāhmaṇas had well mixed with the Indian society, and that's why there is certain evidence of Indianization in the iconography of the Sun images after the 3rd century AD. Before this, which form of Sūrya worship the local people followed is not clear, but the Sūrya image of the Kuṣāṇa period was definitely a feature from outside of India which came with the people from that region. Those people would have considered to put the images in a well or such other water body as a religious ritual as most of the Sūrya images have been recovered from wells. Many large sculptural pieces of other deities have also been found from such wells but those were thrown to protect them from the all devastating attacks. These Sūrya images were so small in dimension that they could have been protected easily without throwing them into wells.

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Plate 19.1: Sūrya relief in Bhaja Cave, Maharashtra, 2nd-1st century BC.



Plate 19.2: Sūrya image from Kankali Tila, Mathura Museum (acc.no. 12.269), early 2nd century AD.



Plate 19.3: Sūrya images from Barsana, Mathura Museum (acc.no. 16.1256), 3rd century AD.



Plate 19.4: Sūrya image in a village shrine at Mat, 2nd century AD.



Plate 19.5: Sūrya image in the Gokarṇeśvara Mahādeva temple, Mathura, 2nd century AD.



Plate 19.6: Fragment of Sūrya image at Ayara Khera, near Raya, Mathura, c. 4th century AD.

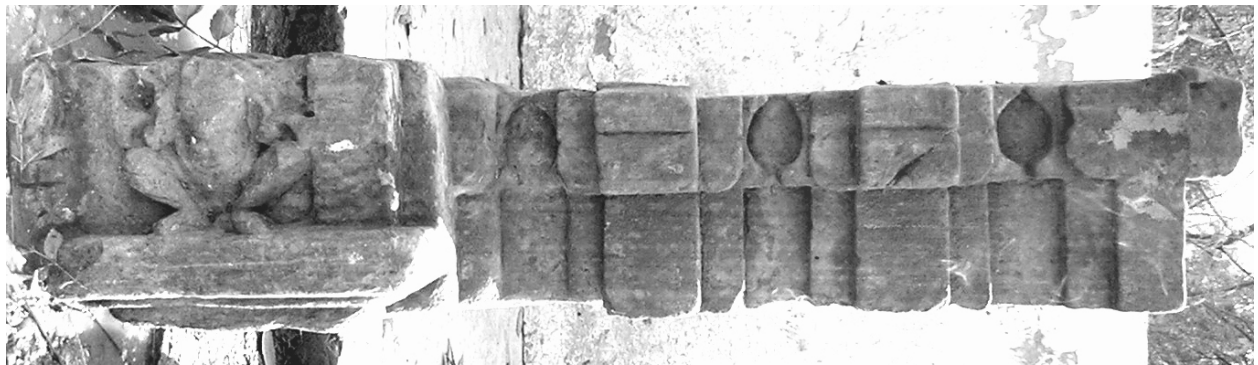


Plate 19.7: Part of a lintel from a temple with Sūrya image, in a village shrine at Maholi, 2nd century AD or later.



Plate 19.8:
Detail of
Sūrya image
in Plate 19.7.