

## Unicorns in Ancient India and Vedic Ritual

by

Gautama V. Vajracharya

The art of the Indus Valley civilization is famous for diminutive steatite seals representing bull like unicorns. Did such unicorns really exist in ancient India? This question may not receive scholarly attention because most of the archeologists believe that the creatures are mythical.<sup>1</sup> Our recent investigation, however, indicates that a forest animal with a single horn did exist in ancient India. The name of the animal is *ṛśya* (*ṛṣya* in classical Sanskrit), which is mistakenly identified by previous scholars as a male deer or antelope thus blocking the path for further investigation. In order to explain our finding we first carefully observe the artistic representations of the unicorn bull, mainly its single horn, delineated in the seals. Then we will compare the representations with the textual descriptions of the *ṛśya* and its horn found in the epics and Buddhist literature. This will be followed by evidence derived from two different unexpected sources, material used for making Vedic ritual implements and the symbolic representation of the bifurcated bovine hoof in ancient Indian art.

### Representations of Unicorns in the Indus Seals

Despite the diminutive size, most of the Indus Valley seals depict the animals naturalistically; hence, viewers have no difficulties in distinguishing various species of animals. In fact, the characteristics of various animals such as short or long bushy tails, divided hooves, dewlap, arched, twisted or spiral horns, standing posture, attitude of lifting the head, and many other features of different animals are rendered in the seals so distinctively that a markhor never looks like a deer and a water buffalo does not resemble a bull. Besides, some of the seals are so well preserved they seem as if they were chiseled only yesterday.

Fig. 1 (Mohenjo-daro HR 743) is one of the well-preserved seals depicting a unicorn bull. Characteristically, the unicorn is shown here standing immediately below the inscription, facing the unidentified bulbous object. According to some archeologists this object is either a manger,

---

<sup>1</sup> To my knowledge the latest scholarly work on unicorn seal is E. C. L. During Caspers, “The Indus Valley 'Unicorn' A Near Eastern Connection?” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, vol. 34:2, 1991, p. 312—350. According to her “the Indus Valley 'unicorn' is a watered-down version, often recopied, of the commonly portrayed one-horned bovine of the late Protoliterate c-d and Early Dynastic times in Mesopotamia...” If she were familiar with our new discovery that we have presented here, I believe that she would have a different view regarding the Indus unicorn.

incense burner, or a ritual offering stand. Characteristically, it surmounts a post, which is erected on the ground. Note the fact that delineation of the ground is non-existent in the artistic vocabulary of Indus valley art, as well as in the pre-historic art of other ancient traditions. The pointed, curvilinear single horn emerges from the head of the animal, almost making an S-curve; hence, it differs from the arched horn of a bull and other creatures. Except at the tip and root, for the most part, the horn is ribbed. These features are also seen in many other Indus seals, with fig. 2 (Harappa H-9) being another example. In both examples, an erect earlobe overlapping the other is shown behind the horn. Is it possible that the horn is also overlapped, which might be why the animal looks like a unicorn? This question has been satisfactorily answered by the finding of three-dimensional terracotta figures of the unicorn<sup>2</sup>. It is true that the bovine hoof and long bushy tail of the unicorn bull remind us of similar features on a bull. However, the neck of this unicorn is much more elongated than that of a bull and bears some similarity to that of a horse or an ass. Apparently, the linear pattern we see around the shoulder of the animal (fig. 1) is a stylistic element of the Indus valley art. It may indicate fleshy but tight wrinkles of a healthy animal. The male genitalia, as usual, are shown emphatically—no doubt to indicate the procreative power of the animal.



Figure 1. Indus seal showing unicorn bull Mohenjo-daro (HR 743). Copyright J. M. Kenoyer, Courtesy Dept. of Archeology and Museums, Govt. of Pakistan



Figure 2. Indus seal showing unicorn bull, Harappa (H-9), after Asko Parpola, *Deciphering the Indus Script*, 1994, p. 231

Understandably, there are reasons why many scholars have difficulty accepting this animal as a real creature. First, the Indus seals depict not only real animals, such as water buffaloes, elephants, rhinoceroses and bulls, but also mythical animals, such as horned tigers and creatures sporting multiple heads. Reference to the unicorns of India can also be found in Greek and

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Mark Kenoyer, *Ancient Cities of the Indus Valley Civilization*. Karachi: American Institute of Pakistan Studies, 1998, p. 87.

Persian literature. In fact, the story of the unicorn in western world came from India through the writing of Greek authors who heard the story either in Persia or in India.<sup>3</sup> There too, mythical creatures are not distinguished from real living beings. Second, no archaeological remains of a horn that can be associated with the unicorn have ever been found anywhere. This is indeed the main reason that archaeologists consider the unicorn to be mythical. However, the horn of a rhinoceros has not been discovered either and they are certainly not mythical. Third, the *R̥gveda* and other early Vedic literature, the works chronologically closest to the Indus civilization, are devoid of any reference to *ekaśṛṅga*, the Sanskrit word for unicorn. The word is found only in classical Sanskrit and Buddhist literature of much later periods. Despite such valid arguments, here we endeavor to approach the subject in a different way using a wide range of materials, both visual and textual. They have, however, been known to South Asian study specialists for many generations.

### **Ṛśyaśṛṅga Known to Buddhists as Ekaśṛṅga**

The story of the young boy *Ṛśyaśṛṅga* is given in both the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata* with some variations. According to the story, *Ṛśyaśṛṅga* was the son of the great hermit Vibhāṇḍaka. Because the young boy was raised in the middle of a forest in isolation, even after he reached adulthood the son of the hermit was completely unfamiliar with the opposite sex. His mother was a *mṛgī*, a female forest animal. She conceived him as she happened to consume the river water mixed with the semen of the great hermit as he ejaculated it seeing a beautiful nymph bathing in the river. Consequently, the child was born as a composite creature. He wore a single horn growing out of his head. Besides that, the young boy was indeed a healthy human being. He was named *Ṛśyaśṛṅga* because of the horn. The *Mahābhārata* 3 (33.b), 5 explains it in the following stanza:

*tasyar̥śyaśṛṅgaṃ śirasi rājannāsīn mahātmanaḥ /*  
*tenar̥śyaśṛṅgamityeva tadā sa prathitobhavat //*

“O lord, there was a single horn of a *r̥śya* on the head of the great being. For this reason, he became known as *Ṛśyaśṛṅga*.”

It is important for our study to pay attention to the *taddhita* compound word *r̥śyaśṛṅgam* in this *Mahābhārata* statement. Since the intention of the author was to indicate “a single horn,” the word is used here in singular (*ekavacana*) in nominative case. The numeral word *eka* is avoided here because in Sanskrit literature the use of singular, or dual or plural is so strong that it is not

<sup>3</sup> Sir John Marshal, *Mohenjo-daro and Indus Civilization*, London: Probsthain, 1931, pp. 69, 369, 382.

mandatory to use the word for numerals particularly *eka* (one) or *dvi* (two), to imply singularity or duality. The Sanskrit grammarian Pāṇini clearly defines the grammatical rule for this in the following *sūtra*:

*dvaekayor dvivacanaikavacane* 1.4.22

“In the sense of duality and singularity, the dual and singular cases are employed respectively.”

Any Sanskritist aware of this basic grammatical rule would not translate the compound word *ṛṣyaśṛṅgam* into “ṛṣya’s two horns.” Admittedly, one can find *ekavacana* used in the literature to indicate entire class or group in general as in *kākaḥ kṛṣṇosti* “a crow is black.” If this sentence is used in Past Tense and includes a word in locative case the generalization entirely disappears: *tasya śirasi kākaḥ kṛṣṇa āsīt* means “there was a black crow on his head.” Thus, our translation “there was a single horn of a *ṛṣya* on the head of the great being” is not an interpretation but actually a verbatim rendering. Furthermore, in Buddhist literature *Ṛṣyaśṛṅga* is either called *Isiṅga* (Sanskrit *Ṛṣyaśṛṅga*) or *Ekaśṛṅga* (one who has a single horn).<sup>4</sup> The earliest Buddhist version of the story is found in the Pali text *Khuddaka Nikāya*.<sup>5</sup> According to Hiuen Tsiang, the well-known Chinese monk who visited India at the beginning of the seventh century, *Ekaśṛṅga*’s hermitage was near Peshawar in Gandhara:

“By the side of it is a *stūpa* built by Aśoka-rāja. This is the place which in old time was occupied by *Ekaśṛṅga* Rishi. This Rishi being deceived by a pleasure-woman, lost his spiritual faculties. The woman mounting his shoulders, returned to the city.”

(Samuel Beal (trans.), SI-YU-KI, Buddhist Records of the Western World, p. 113.)

In East Asian Buddhist literature, the story of the Indian sage has remained popular since Hiuen Tsiang recorded it in his travels. In Japanese drama, the sage became known as *Ikkaku Sennin*, meaning “one-horned sage.”

### **Ṛṣya’s Horn for Making an Implement for Vedic Rituals**

<sup>4</sup> Franklin Edgerton, *Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit Grammar and Dictionary*, vol. 2, Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass, reprint 1977, p. 153.

<sup>5</sup> Pali Canon Online Database, <http://www.bodhgayanews.net/tipitaka.php?title=sutta%20pitaka&action=previous&record=7640>

Such evidence from epic and Buddhist sources should have prodded South Asian study specialists to investigate the multiple references to *ṛśya* found throughout the history of Vedic literature and connect them with the artistic representations of unicorns in the Indus valley seals. Unfortunately, that did not happen, apparently because *mṛgī* is believed to be a female deer. It is, however, a well-known fact that the words *mṛga* and *mṛgī* are used in Sanskrit not only for male and female deer, but also for all male and female animals respectively. Even a monkey is known to the literature as *śākhāmṛga*, “the animal of tree branches.”

The *mṛgī* mentioned in the epic as R̥ṣyaśṛṅga’s mother was actually a female animal *rohit*, the male being called *ṛśya*. Similar to the female deer and antelope, chances are that the *rohit* was devoid of a horn. A second century AD Kuṣāṇa/Gāndhāra sculpture, representing R̥ṣyaśṛṅga’s story, depicts *rohit* in this manner.<sup>6</sup> However, because the R̥ṣyaśṛṅga was the male offspring of the *rohit* he inherited the single horn, a masculine feature of the *ṛśya*. This was the main reason he was given the descriptive name R̥ṣyaśṛṅga, a *Bahuvrīhi* compound meaning “one who has the horn of a *ṛśya*.” Previous scholars did not give any attention to such information derived from the *Mahābhārata* statement. As a result, they never tried to find the *ṛśya* being mentioned in Vedic literature as a unicorn. The authors of the Vedic Index (vol. 2, p. 115) summarize the Vedic scholars’ study regarding the animal in the following words:

“R̥śya -- This is the correct spelling of a word that occurs in the *R̥gveda* and the later literature meaning ‘stag,’ the feminine being Rohit. Apparently deer were caught in the pits (*ṛśya-da*). The procreative power of the stag (*āṛśya vṛṣṇya*) was celebrated.”

The earliest textual reference to *ṛśya* is found in the *R̥gveda* 8.4.10 “O Indra, visit us like the thirsty *ṛśya* which comes to drink water from *avapāna*.” Here, the creature is described as a forest animal, which comes occasionally near the Vedic settlement to drink water from *avapāna*, a small tank designed for supplying water for cattle. *Atharvaveda* 4.4, on the other hand, repeatedly refers to *ṛśya* as a virile animal, which indeed corresponds with the depiction of the unicorn in the Indus seals.

But our Vedic evidence, that helps us verify our view that *ṛśya* was a single-horned animal, comes from an unexpected source, material used for the Vedic ritual implement called *parīśāsau*. (Grammatically, this word is in dual form with the singular being *parīśāsa*). Eggeling explains the meaning of the word in a footnote to his translation of the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*:

<sup>6</sup> Sonya Rhie Quintanilla, “Observations on ‘The Representation of the Buddha’s Birth and Death in the Aniconic Period,’” in Pratapaditya Pal (ed.), *Buddhist Art, Form and Meaning*, Mumbai: Marg, 2007, pp. 46, 49.

“The ‘*parīśāsau* (also called ‘*śaphau*,’ XIV, 2, 1, 16) are two pieces of wood or laths apparently fastened together by a kind of clasp (or a cord) at one end, so as to serve the purpose of a pair of tongs (*parīśāsau samdamśakarau*, comm. on Kātyā. XXIV, 2, 10) for taking up the Mahāvīra pot, which must not be handled in any other way... at the end of the sacrifice, the Adhvaryu, by means of them, turns the pot upside down so as to pour the remainder of its contents into the offering spoon (see Kātyā. XXIV, 6, 17 with comm.)”<sup>7</sup>

This statement is correct except for the fact that the pair of tongs was not made of wood. My view is partially based on an interesting passage from the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 14. 2. 54, which explains that the implement was made of a material that could handle the temperature of the heated vessel if the vessel was made of clay rather than stone. I will quote Eggeling’s translation:

“If it [the Mahāvīra vessel also called *Gharma*] were made of wood, it would be burnt; and if of gold, it would dissolve; and if of copper, it would melt; and if of stone, it would burn the two handling-sticks [*parīśāsau*]; and that (*Gharma*) itself submitted to that (earthen vessel): therefore it is by means of an earthen one that he offers it.”

This statement echoes the real history of the Vedic experience of making two important ritual objects: the Mahāvīra vessel and the handling sticks. According to the *Ṛgveda* 5.30.15, the vessel, at that time, was made of metal (*ayasmaya*) and it was called *Gharma*, which is also the word for the milk poured into a heated vessel. In later Vedic texts, the vessel became known as *Pravargya*, which is initially the name of the ritual.<sup>8</sup> The *Pravargya* ritual is not directly mentioned in the *Ṛgveda*. However, its name is derived from the *Ṛgvedic* word *pravṛj* mentioned in the same hymn. Apparently this word means “ceremonial heating and boiling.” As we know from the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 14, 2, 1, 16, quoted below, the heated vessel symbolized the solar disc and the main significance of the *Pravargya* ritual was to create solar heat. Keeping this in mind, the Vedic priests heated the vessel to an extreme temperature. As a result, they must have actually witnessed the disastrous event of the melting metal vessel. Therefore, beginning from the time of the *Yajurveda*, they gave preference to the earthen vessel.<sup>9</sup> Such reality of Vedic

<sup>7</sup> Julius Eggeling (trans.), *The Śatapatha-Brāhmaṇa According to the Text of the Mādhyandina School*, Delhi: Motilal Banarasidas, reprint 1972, part 5, p. 458-459

<sup>8</sup> There are two excellent works on the *Pravargya* rituals; J. A. B. van Buitenen, *Pravargya*, Poona: Deccan College, Postgraduate and Research Institute, 1968, and Jan E. M. Houben, *The Pravargya Brahmaṇa of the Taittirīya Āraṇyaka, an ancient commentary on the Pravargya ritual*, Delhi: Motilal Banarasidas Publishers, 1991.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Witzel, in a response to a draft version of my work, kindly provided me with following information “The cooking pot” is the *Pravargya* vessel, in the *Ṛgveda* still made of metal, in the

experience helps us understand the choice of material for making the pair of tongs as well. Since the vessel was burning like fire, certainly, a wooden implement would not have been considered a good choice, although this is the case in contemporary Vedic rituals. Apparently, depending on the modern use of material for making such Vedic implements, Eggeling thought that the handling-sticks (or the pair of tongs) were made of wood.<sup>10</sup> There is, however, no textual reference that supports this view. On the other hand, we have good reasons to believe that Vedic priests solved the problem ingeniously by making the pair of tongs out of the *ṛśyas*' horns. The main point of our argument derives from following statement from *Atharvaveda* 5.14.3:

*ṛśyasyeva parīśāsam parikṛtya pari tvacaḥ /*  
*kṛtyāṃ kṛtyākṛte devā niṣkam iva prati muñcata //*

Whitney translates the hymn as follow:

“Having cut around out of [his] skin a strip (*parīśāsa*), as if it were of a stag, fasten, O gods, upon the witchcraft-maker the witchcraft, like a necklace.”

The word *parīśāsa* is translated here as a strip of skin. Bloomfield also believes that it means skin:

“Cutting out from the skin (of the enemy) as if (from the skin) of an antelope, do, ye, O gods, fasten the spell upon him that prepares it, as (one fastens) an ornament!”

The author translates the word *parīśāsa* into “the skin of the enemy.” He places the word “enemy” in parentheses to acknowledge that it was not given in the text. We have, however, difficulty accepting these translations mainly because both *parīśāsam* and *parīśāsau* derive from same root. The only difference between them is that the first is accusative singular and the second is dual, which could be either nominative or accusative. The authors were certainly familiar with this simple grammar. For some reasons, however, when they were translating the Atharva hymn, reference to *parīśāsau* in other Vedic texts escaped from their attention. Consequently, they did not raise an important question. If *parīśāsa* actually means “a strip of

---

*Yajurveda* of clay -- as it is heated until it is glowing red hot. The milk then poured in virtually explodes up to the roof! In that hot state it is taken out by the *śaphau*.”

<sup>10</sup> For a contemporary pair of tong, made of wood, see T. N. Dharmadhikari, *Yajñāyudhāni*, Pune: Vaidika-Samśodhana-maṇḍalam, 1989, P. 42.

skin,” how would it be possible to make *parīśāsau*, the handling sticks, or a pair of tongs out of such material? We have modified the translation as follows:

O gods, chop off the spell like the single horn (*parīśāsam*) of the *ṛśya* around its skin and fasten the spell upon him, who prepares it, as (one fastens) an ornament.

Keeping aside, for a moment, the differences in the translations of *parīśāsa*, if we study this brief statement carefully, it clearly informs us that *parīśāsa* was an object that grew out of the body of the *ṛśya* and that it could be chopped off above the skin. What could this single object be, which is so closely associated with the *ṛśya*'s physique? It cannot be either the tail or the earlobe of the animals, because neither of these organs is sturdy enough to make a pair of tongs to hold the heated earthen pot. On the other hand, if we compare this Vedic information with the *Mahābhārata* and the Buddhist evidence that *ṛśya* was a forest animal with a single horn, it becomes abundantly clear that *parīśāsa* was the single horn of the unicorn *ṛśya*.

According to Sanskrit Dictionaries, *khadga* is rhinoceros's horn; the word also means a scimitar-like knife and the rhino itself. Likewise, *parīśāsa* apparently was a word with double meaning: *ṛśya*'s horn and a weapon. *Pari/parī* is a prefix indicating “around” or “encircling.” The second word stands for a knife as in *śāsapāṇi*, “person with a knife in his hand.” Possibly, therefore, *parīśāsa* means not only the horn but also a sickle-shaped curvilinear knife. Except in the above given *Atharvaveda* statement, the word *parīśāsa* is always used in dual number. This observation is important, because it supports our view that *ṛśya* wore a single horn; but the pair of tongs had been made of two horns from two different unicorn *ṛśya* bulls.

Logically, the horns of domesticated animals such as a bull would have been more convenient and easily available for making the handling sticks or the pair of tongs. Ironically, however, the Vedic people chose the horn of a forest animal, which could provide them with only one horn at a time. There were several reasons for this choice. First, the horns of other animals like bulls and water buffaloes are too short to reach the heated vessel in the middle of the fire. Second, they are hollow and lacking the meandering double arches that are a mandatory feature for making the tongs correctly.

Pali literature tells us that just as the characteristic of a snake's tongue is bifurcation, the main feature of the *ṛśya*'s horn (singular) is its curvilinearity (*issasiṅgam iva viparivattāyo, uragam iva dujihvāyo*, Khuddaka Nikāya 1. *Jātaka* 5, Record 7740).<sup>11</sup> In a different sentence of the same Pali text, the *ṛśya*'s horn is described as *āvatta* or “winding,” an adjective also used in Pali literature to denote the undulating course of a river. Exactly as stated in Pali literature, the horn of the unicorn is almost always shown in the seals looking characteristically undulating like the meandering course of a river (figs. 1, 2).

<sup>11</sup> Pali Canon Online Database, <http://www.bodhayanews.net/pali.htm>



In order to examine the accuracy of our view, we made an image of the Vedic implement (fig. 3) placing crosswise two horns of two different unicorns, depicted in the Indus seals (Harappa H-9 and H-6). Promptly, I noticed that the image bears some similarity with Nandipada, the auspicious symbol frequently seen in ancient Indian art (fig. 4). The promptness of my observation is perhaps based on the fact that originally I was working on the relation between the Vedic word *Prauṣṭhapadā* and Nandipada symbol. This led me to investigate the unicorn. We will discuss the significance of *Prauṣṭhapadā* in detail in a different occasion. But here it is important to note that the main feature of the original Nandipada symbol of the earlier time is the circular upper part supported by two legs. In our image (fig. 3), one can clearly see the oval space, created by the inward facing tips of the S-curves of the horns, resembling the circular upper section of Nandipada, whereas the lower sections of the horns below the crossing point certainly look like the legs or the hands of the symbol. Thus, if our view that *parīśāsa* is the horn of a unicorn is correct the Vedic implement more or less has to look like a Nandipada symbol, which is the main point of the following discussion.



Figure 3 A conjectural image showing a pair of tongs of two horns of the unicorns crossing each other.



Figure 4. Stone sculpture from Bharhut showing two Nandipada symbols flanking stylized lotus flower (ca. 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC.). Courtesy American Institute of Indian Studies.

## Śaphau

As Eggeling has correctly noted, the pair of tongs were also called *śaphau*. His view is based on the following statement from the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 14, 2, 1, 16:

“You are *Gāyatrī* meter and you are *Triṣṭubh* meter” (while reading this *mantras*,) then he holds (two tongs) of the implement *śaphau*. Thus, he actually encompasses (the *Pravargya* vessel) with *Gāyatrī* and *Triṣṭubh* metre. “I will encompass you with heaven and earth.” Indeed, heaven and earth are (two tongs) of *parīśāsau*, and the sun is *Pravargya*.”

The solar symbolism of the *Pravargya* vessel is explained here using *śaphau* and *parīśāsau* alternatively, thus, indicating that they are synonyms. When Vedic rituals are performed in

modern time, one can expect to hear the word *śaphau* for the wooden implement; but *parīśāsau* seems to be almost forgotten.

*Śapha* in general means a hoof. Therefore, at first glance, the word *śaphau* as the synonym for *parīśāsau* appears to be problematic, perhaps, even threatening my argument. But, actually, the nomenclature provides us further evidence that proves our view more emphatically. The dual form *śaphau* is used specifically for a bovine hoof. Unlike the hoof of a horse, the bovine hoof is bifurcated. Thus, a horse has four *śaphas*, whereas a bovine animal has eight (*aṣṭau śaphāḥ*). Another Sanskrit word for the bovine hoof or footprint is *goṣpada*. A later Vedic text called *Suparṇādhyaḥya* 1.3-4 and Paṇini's *Aṣṭādhyāyī* 3.4.32 obliquely indicates that a bull's or cow's footprint (*goṣpada*) filled with rainwater predicts the end of a drought. The Vedic text refers to a story of Vālakhilyas who were so tiny that they were drowning in the water and mud settled in the footprint of a cow (*goṣpada*). In the legend of Garuda, this event plays an important role, because it is a predecessor of the birth of the sun bird who created severe drought. As a result, not only cows' footprints but even oceans dried up. Sanskrit literature has an expression *goṣpadapraṃ* (or *goṣpadapūraṃ*) *vṛṣṭo devaḥ*, "it rained so much that the footprint of the cow was filled with water." Above-mentioned Pāṇini's *sūtra* is actually based on such expressions.

In the artistic tradition of India, *goṣpada*, as an auspicious symbol, is more popularly known as Nandipada. Earliest epigraphic reference to Nandipada is found in a ca. second century BC stone carving representing the symbol identified by a label inscription as *naṃdipaam*.<sup>12</sup> The Sanskrit word Nandipada, as Taddhita compound, can be translated as "Nandin's footprint." Recently, however, a scholar has convincingly shown that Nandin is one of Śiva's *gaṇa* rather than his animal vehicle, which is almost always designated in Sanskrit literature either as *vṛṣa* or *vṛṣabha*.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, the nomenclature of the symbol can be understood properly only if we give an attention to the fact that the concept associated with the significance of a bull's footprint is much earlier than the classical period iconography and story of Śiva and his *gaṇa*. In Pali and Prakrit literature, *nandī* or *nandin* simply means a happy cow or a bull. Just as Nandipada, Nandiyāvatta (Sanskrit Nandyāvarta) is another auspicious symbol, not because it is a Śaiva or Buddhist symbol, but because it is associated with annually revolving growth (*āvarta*) of the cattle. Calves are born in the Indian subcontinent, particularly in the northern section, as I have seen in Nepal, at the very beginning of monsoon. According to the Ṛgvedic view, which is partially still alive in Nepal, celestial water descends to the earth together with domestic and

<sup>12</sup> A. K. Coomaraswamy, *Elements of Buddhist Iconography*, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1979, P. 15.

<sup>13</sup> Gouriswar Bhattacharya, *Essays on Buddhist Hindu Jain Iconography and Epigraphy*, Dhaka: The International Centre for Study of Bengal Art, 2000, pp. 149-172.

aquatic creatures.<sup>14</sup> Compare the word *nandyāvarta* with *puṣkalāvarta*, the monsoon cloud that returns every year with plenty (*puṣkala*). Evidently, the concepts related to these symbols are based on drought and rain phenomena, which are indeed the main focus of the pre-Hindu and pre-Buddhist aestivation/monsoon culture of the subcontinent. This culture believed that everything closely or remotely associated with water and rain is auspicious. Thus, ancient India was fascinated with these symbols and both men and women wore ornaments made of clay or gold, designed after these symbols not only because they are aesthetically pleasing but also because they are auspicious. For instance, a second century BC Bharhut stone sculpture (fig. 5) depicts a precious necklace adorned with two Nandipada symbols flanking the rectangular pendants in the middle. Here, again, the symbols are represented with the circular element surmounting the fishtail like legs.



Figure 5. Stone sculpture from Bharhut (ca. 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC.) showing ornaments designed after Nandipada symbol.



Figure 6. Nandipada symbol depicted in a copper coin (ca. 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC).  
Courtesy [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian\\_coinage](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_coinage)

This is not, however, the earliest representation of Nandipada. Punch marked coins of India, dating back to the pre-Mauryan period (before c. 321 BC), frequently depict the simple form of the original Nandipada symbol bearing similarity with cow's footprint.<sup>15</sup> This symbol is often designated as taurine, which is confusing because it has multiple meanings. We know for sure that the symbol does not pertain to the Taurus zodiacal sign. Frequent appearance of frogs in Indian coins that are shown sometime together with Nandipadas as well as our current

<sup>14</sup> Gautama V. Vajracharya, "The Creatures of the Rain Rivers, Cloud Lakes: Newars Saw Them, So Did Ancient India" *Asianart.com*, January 2009, <http://www.asianart.com/articles/rainrivers/index.html#i18>

<sup>15</sup> For early appearance of Nandipada symbols, see Shinji Hirano, *The Ghaghara-Gandak River Region, c. 600-300 BC, Archaic Silver Punchmarked Coinage*, Mumbai: IIRNS Publications, 2007, p. 138.

investigation on *goṣpada* and *śaphau* clearly suggests that the symbol is conceptually identical with *goṣpada* “cow’s footprint.” Variations of Nandipada, shown as having fishtail like legs and being situated more often in an inverted position, began to appear soon after the third century BC. But the simple original form of the symbol continued to survive in Indian numismatic tradition for many decades without being replaced by new variations. Figure 6 is a perfect example of the older version of a Nandipada symbol depicted in a Śunga period (ca. 185-75 BC.) copper coin. It is this original form of the symbol that resembles more closely with the crossed horns of the unicorns (fig. 3). Evidently, this is the reason that the Vedic people designated the pair of tongs as Śaphau.

## Conclusion

Presented here are multiple sources, both visual and textual, to demonstrate that the unicorns of the Indus seals are *ṛśyas*:

1. The unicorn’s curvilinear horn, almost in S-curves, is emphatically delineated in many Indus seals.
2. The *Mahābhārata* states that just like the male animal *ṛśya*, the mythical figure Rṣyaśṛṅga had a single horn. He is mentioned in Buddhist texts as Ekaśṛṅga, or “unicorn.”
3. Vedic people made a pair of tongs out of two objects called *parīśāsas*; hence, the implement was known to them as *parīśāsau*.
4. *Parīśāsa* (single in number) is described in the *Atharvaveda* as an object protruding above the skin of a *ṛśya*.
5. This object cannot be other than the single horn of the male animal, because, except the horn, other organs that protrude from the body of an animal are not sturdy enough to make a pair of tongs.
6. Pali literature tells us that characteristically, a *ṛśya*’s horn was curvilinear. This information corresponds with the shape of the horn of the unicorn shown in the Indus seals.
7. We created an image of the Vedic ritual implement crossing two horns of the different unicorns shown in the seals. More or less, the image appears like a Nandipada symbol.
8. In fact, we know for sure that the pair of tongs did look like a Nandipada because the implement was also known as *śaphau*, a Vedic word for Nandipada.

More importantly, our findings indicate that Vedic Aryans were familiar with some ecological aspects of the Indus Valley civilization, such as the animal habitats that existed around them. In our earlier work, we demonstrated that the popularity of the pipal tree in the Indus seals as a most important symbol of the civilization correlates with the significance of the tree mentioned in Vedic texts as a harbinger of monsoon. Vedic word for the pipal tree is *asvattha*, which was also the name of the early month of monsoon in the everyday language of ancient India, mainly in the upper Indus Valley.<sup>16</sup> Such correlation prods us to develop a research methodology based on the ecologically linked cultural aspects of the Indus and Vedic civilizations.

---

<sup>16</sup> Gautama V. Vajracharya, "Pipal Tree, Tonsured Monks, and *Ushnisha*," in Pratapaditya Pal (ed.), *Buddhist Art, Form and Meaning*, Mumbai: Marg Publication, 2007, pp. 16-17.