**LIGHTNING PROTECTION AND RITUALS IN ANCIENT INDIAN TEXTS**

K.G.SHESHADRI\*

***Abstract***—Lightning has been a natural source of electrical energy from time immemorial. Vedic literature and Post-Vedic literature term it as ‘Vidyut’, ‘Ashani’, ‘Stanayitnu’ and so on, although the meanings differ. Purported to be a cause of injury, the seers described means of protection from it through special rituals that are discussed in the paper.

***Keywords***- Lightning, Vidyut, Shanti, Tree, House

INTRODUCTION

Lightning was a natural Electrical phenomenon observed by man from ancient times that aroused his curiosity and reverence for this mysterious and still incompletely understood Divine power. Vedic literature refers to the term ‘Vidyut’ and it occurs in different contexts and meanings. From grammatical principles, it is a feminine gender word and is expressed as ivze;e[ \*aette, (viçeñeëa dyotate) ‘something having a special brilliance’. Yaska’s *Nirukta* and *säyaëäcärya’s Bhashya* consider these meanings. Although the word may not be directly associated with lightning in Vedic texts, in some contexts, Post-Vedic texts do certainly describe the natural phenomenon of lightning. Lightning is associated with a vast mythology and its devastating effect on people and property is calamitous. It may strike during any time, season or place and generally its strike is considered inauspicious during which some rituals are to be offered and protection is to be taken care of. Ancient Indian texts widely speak of lightning strike on trees, men, cattle, buildings, temples, palaces and granaries. They also describe the purificatory rituals to be done for them, the efficacy of the soil or tree struck by lightning.

LIGHTNING STRIKING A TREE, HOUSE OR PERSON

Several beliefs exist among ancient people about lightning strikes although they haven’t been well documented. Fruit bearing trees are driven by iron nails to prevent lightning from striking them. The Munda tribes kill enemies by a cotton seed sown on ground manured with ashes of a tree struck by lightning. When it grows, a bow is made from it and an effigy of the enemy is shot at1. The Birhors believe that bugs cease to infest a hut when it is smoked with smoke of fire kindled with wood of a tree struck by lightning2. Kannikars of Kallar believe that lightning ‘*äciyiòi*’ destroys trees and grass while ‘*kuøuriòi*’ does not destroy the tree but only peels off the bark3. There exists belief that a man struck by lightning is a great sinner. People also believe that a house will not be struck by lightning if a coconut tree stands in front of the entrance. In Orissan temples, obscene erotic postures on temples act as protectors of lightning as it is believed

 that Indra does not harm a couple in supreme enjoyment4. The Gonds of Central provinces believe that trees which exude milky juice are most likely to attract lightning. Cases of lightning striking Mahua trees (Madhuca latifolia) are reported5. Folk beliefs exist that one who survives a lightning stroke becomes rich6. Farmers in Dutch countries plant birch trees around houses to protect them against lightning. It is said that birch paper keeps writings safe7. Most of the manuscripts written on Bhurjapatra (Betula bhojpatra) may be because of this belief.

These beliefs of lightning strikes are echoed as early in certain Vedic literature. The *Taittiriya Brahmana* TB 1.1.3.12 says *sambhara* (7 items from earth and 6 items from trees) to be scattered at site of *Gärhapatya* sacrificial altar from a tree struck by lightning. The *Arthaväda* while glorifying it states that Maruts struck Agni with waters and grabbed his heart. It became lightning8. The same is echoed by the *äpastambha çrauta sütra* (V.2.4) which enumerates a tree struck by lightning as *sambhara* along with other trees in the *Agnyädhäna* ritual9 as well as in the *käöhaka saàhitä* 8.2.12 mentioning a tree struck by lightning10. The rite of house building represented by *Atharvaveda Samhita* AV 3.12 involves a *çyeëayäga* wherein a hymn addressed to the Divine eagle (lightning) says that the house shall not be struck by lightning, the eagle looking for a resting place shall come kindly together with his friend Indra. Here *Suparna* may be associated with Agni whose form is the Heavenly fire in the form of Lightning11. This meaning can be concluded as the *çatapatha Brähmaëa* SB 6.1.3.18 says that *Ashani* is one of the forms of Agni12. The *Baudhäyana çrauta Sütra* 9.17 says that if lightning strikes one should offer into *Gärhapatya* fire an oblation by means of spoon with one of the hymns from among as would suit the form (of lightning)13. The *Bhäradväja çrauta Sutra* also prescribes a similar ritual in context of Pravargya ritual when lightning strikes14. Many

Dharmasutras prescribe discontinuing of study (of Veda) during lightning strikes. The *Matsya Puräëam* (CCLVII.5-6) forbids the use of wood of a tree struck by lightning in the process of house building15.

TEXTS DEALING ON RITUALS PERTAINING TO LIGHTNING STRIKES

Dharmashastraic texts enumerate the rites to be performed when lightning strikes a tree, person or house. In this regard, several manuscripts exist in various repositories of which many have not been published. A brief detail of such works is listed below-

1. ***Açanihata çäntiù*** 16-

Acc. No. 3240

Folios- Begins on fol. 136a of mss Acc. No. 2898 (*Arkaviväha* of Vol.V- Dharmashastra), Complete

Size-

Pages- 4

Lines per page- 6

Language- Sanskrit

Script-Nandinagari

Details- Rites for averting inauspiciousness of lightning stroke (By Bodhayana) taken from *Ashanihatakalpa*

Beginning - vsNte ¢I:me zrid kale va devg&he àasade rajg&he ¢ammXye gaeóe jnsmUhe SvsmUhe xnxaNysm&Ïe (smUhe) b&Ndavne pnsnairke¦³muktévncUtvnaNtre Azinhte va zt³tusxane (Swane) yjmanSy ]eÇaiÉv&iÏ>

Ends - äaü[aNÉaejiyTva ywazi´ di][aNddait AacayaRy di][aNddaTyzinhtSy zaiNtÉRiv:ytITyah Égvan! baexayn>

 Colophon - #it baexaynae´azinhtzaiNt>.

1. ***Açanihata präyaçcittam*** 17–

Acc. No. 3469

Folios- Begins on Fol. 207b of mss Acc. No.1197 (*äpastambhagåhyaprayogadépikä* of Vol. II-Vedic literature), Complete.

Size-

Pages- 9 Pages

Lines- 15 lines per page

Language - Sanskrit

Script- Telugu

Details- Regarding purificatory funeral rites to be done when one is killed by lightning.

Beginning - Aagavae AGmÚut ÉÔm³NTsIdNtu ……… %peNÔ tvvIyeR, #TyNt< ctuòy vaKyE> àTy¨c< ju÷yat!, svRÇ gae\_yaimdm!, APsu mr[àayiíÄm!, #m< me vé[ tÅvayaimit Öa\_yam! AzinhtàayiíÄ< c,

 Ends - AòMya< va ctudRZya< pÂdZya< iÇjNmin, tEl< ma<s< Vyvay< c dNtkaó< c vjRyet!.

 Colophon - AzinhtàayiíÄivxan< smaÝm!.

1. ***Açanihata çäntiù*** 18***-***

Acc. No. 3536

Folios- Begins on fol. 14b of mss Acc. No.3239, Complete.

Size-

Pages- 4 Pages

Lines- 7 lines per page

Language- Sanskrit

Script- Nandinagari

Details- On shanti to be performed when houses, temples, palaces are struck by lightning. Beginning - Similar to Bodhayana’s text. Further adds Aa¶eYya< rajraò+ivnaznm!, yaMya< (My) Swane gaexnxaNy ivnaznm!,

 Ends - AacayaRy shödi][a< ddait, Azinht zaiNtÉRvtITyah Égvan! baexayn>,

 Colophon - #it AzinhtziNt smaÝm!.

1. ***Açanipätaçäntiù*** 19***-***

Acc. No.- 4011(i), 4423(m), 4664(m).

Script – Telugu

Details – Complete, Prayoga.

1. ***Açanipätapräyaçcittam*** 20- Several manuscripts
2. Acc. No. P4907/34, Palm leaf (PL), Grantha script, Size - , Fol. 150-152, 9 lines per page, Complete, From *Pauñkara saàhitä*.
3. Acc. No. P3481/1, Palm leaf (PL), Grantha script, Size-, Fol. 1-9, 10 lines per page, Complete, From *Pauñkara saàhitä*
4. Acc. No. P4984/45, Palm leaf (PL), Grantha script, Size- , Fol. 236-238, 7 lines per page, Complete, From *Pauñkara saàhitä*

 Beginning - àat> sNXyasu velaya< pUryeCDŒmev tu, tÄTkale c yCÀ‚Tva muCyte svR patkE>.

 àasade gÉRgehe c m{qpe zuknaiske, àakare gaepure va=w SvpIQe bilpIQke.

 Ends - %´ÔVye[ mitman! di][a< dapyeÄt>, äaü[an! ÉaejyeTpía\*wa ivÄanusart>. @v< ³me[

 ivàeNÔ àayiíÄ< smacret!, Ak«te )lhain> SyÚazyeTsvRmevtu.

 Colophon - #it paÂraÇe mhaepin;id paE:krs<ihtaya< AzinpatàayiíÄpql>.

1. Acc. No. P4977/21, Palm leaf (PL), Grantha script, Size- , Fol. 36-38, 7 lines per page, Complete, From *Pauñkara saàhitä.*
2. Acc. No. P4907/38, Palm leaf (PL), Grantha script, Size- , Fol. 153-155, 9 lines per page, Complete, From *Brahmasaàhitä.*

 Beginning - Awa=tSs<àvúyaim Azinàae][³mm!, narden puraàae´< zaô†ò(a ywaeidtm!.

 . Aalye gÉRgehe c gaepure muom{fpe. .

 Ends - tÍamae yjmaní raja raò+< ivnZyit, tSmaTsvRàyÆen àae][< c smacret!.

 Colophon - #itïIpaÂraÇe äüs<ihtaya< Azinpatàae][< nam pÂazae=Xyay>.

1. Acc. No. P3481/2, Palm leaf (PL), Grantha script, Size- , Fol. 9-19, 10 lines per page, Complete, From *Pauñkara saàhitä.*
2. ***Vaidyutägniçäntiù*** 21–

Acc. No. 3431

Folios- Begins on Fol. 39a of mss Acc. No.3232 (*Adhbhutotpataçäntiù* of Vol. 6 - Dharmashastra), Complete.

Size –

Pages- 3 Pages

Lines- 4 lines per page

Language - Sanskrit

Script –Telugu

Details- On shanti to be performed if lightning strikes a house. (according to Saunaka).

Colophon - #it zaEnkIye iv\*udi¶zaiNtSsmaÝa,

1. ***Vidyutpäta çäntiù*** 22–

Acc. No. 3422

Folios- Begins on Fol.23b of mss Acc. No.2898 (*Arkavivaha* of Vol. V- Dharmashastra), Complete.

Size -

Pages – 2

Lines - 6 lines per page

Language - Sanskrit

Script – Nandinagari

Details- Regarding ceremony for averting evil consequences of lightning striking a house.

 Ends - pavnae´en mÙe[ karyediÉ;ecnm!, ttStu àitmadan< k…yaRÓ+aü[Éaejnm!.

 Colophon - #it iv\*uÊTpatzaiNt>.

1. ***Vidyutpäta çäntiù*** 23–

Acc. No. 3423

Folios- Begins on Fol. 40a of mss Acc. No.2840 (*Aupäsanam* of Vol. V –Dharmashastra), Complete.

Size –

Pages – 2

Lines - 7 lines per page

Language - Sanskrit

Script - Grantha.

Details- Regarding ceremony for averting evil consequences of lightning striking a house.

1. ***Vidyudagninä Dagdhagåhaçäntiù*** 24–

From *çaunaka kärikä*, a medieval treatise on Hindu rites.

veZm]eÇaiddGxe;uvE\*utenai¶na yid te;a< zaiNt< àvúyaim zaEnkae=h< iÖjNmnam!.

tiSmNdeze janumaÇ< gÄ¡ oaTvaedk< isÂet! ïI)lmka<íEv inxay SviSt vacyet!.

gÄRSy piíme deze haem< k…yaRdœ iÖjaeÄm> #XmaxanaidpyRNt< y}tÙ< smapyet!.

%plepaidk< sv¡ mXy @vaJyÉagyae> AaJya÷tI> z<vtIiÉjuR÷yadi¶m¢t>.

s àÆwa shseit sU´en ju÷yaÏiv> tt> iSvòk«t< ÷Tva haemze;< smapyet!.

A¶eéÄrtiStón! SvSTyaÇey< jpeTpun> äaü[aNÉaejyeÄÇ ywazi´ c di][am!.

tdi¶dGx< ivÊ;e àd\*at! äaü[ay tu àai[dGxe;u sveR;u ihr{y< di][a Évet!.

1. ***Açanipätaçäntiù*** - The New Catalogus Catalogorum25 cites several other such manuscripts of which those with the title *Açanipätaçäntiù* are many and are listed below-

 a) Acc. No. 13437

Shastri, P. P. S., *Descriptive catalogue of Sanskrit mss. in Tanjore Maharaja Serfoji’s Saraswathi Mahal Library*, Tanjore.

b) Acc. No. 1418A-22 , Also 3007F-18, 8768C

 *A handlist of Sanskrit mss. acquired for Travancore University Manuscripts Library*, Trivandrum, see *Alphabetical Index of Sanskrit mss. in University Mss. Library*, Trivandrum, Vol. I (A to Na) 1957, Vol. II (Ta to Ma) 1965.

1. Acc. No. – MT. 437 Fol. (9b-10a), 1314 (h)

 *A* *Triennial Catalogue of Sanskrit manuscripts in Govt. Oriental Manuscripts library*, Madras. Rangacharya, M., Kuppuswami Shastri, S.

1. Acc. No. – PUL. I. p.78

*Catalogue of Sanskrit mss. in Punjab University Library*, Lahore. Vol. I, 1932 and Vol. II, 1941.

1. Acc. No. Udaipur. II.14, 51 (known as *Açanidagdhaçäntiù*).

 *A handlist of mss. in library of Nathdwara*, Udaipur, Mewar state.

1. ***Açanipätaprokñaëa*** 26 – Taylor. I. 144

William Taylor, *A Catalogue Raisonnee of Oriental manuscripts in library of the (late) College, Fort Saint George now in charge of Board of examiners*, Vols I-III., Madras, 1857, 1860, 1862.

A brief overview of all these manuscripts highlights that there were two schools of thought on rituals to ward off the inauspicious effects of lightning strikes- one by Bodhayana and another by Saunaka. A third school of thought is propounded in *Päïcarätra* texts speaking of the schools of

Narada and Paushkara. Bodhayana’s text is interesting as it reveals the places where lightning strikes occur for which shanti is to be performed. It also mentions the trees struck by lightning like *Panasa* (Artocarpus integrifolia), *Närikeøa* (Cocos nucifera), *Kramuka* (Symplocos crataegoides), *Cüta*/Mango (Mangifera indica) as in the first manuscript. The 7th, 8th and 9th Manuscripts cited above belong rightfully to the Saunaka school and states that the rites be performed at the site where lightning struck (*tasmindeçe*), by filling a pit with *çréphala* (Aegle marmelos) and chanting Svasti mantras. To the west of it, a sacrificial altar is to be set for performing the sacrifice offering *äjya* with chanting of mantras from *Rigveda* RV. 7.35.1-13 and RV. 1.96.1 *süktä*27. To the north of sacrificial altar, one has to chant the Svastis. This is to be followed by a feast to the Brahmanas with *dakñiëä*. If a person is killed by the stroke, the *dakñiëä* should be fully in terms of gold. Bodhayana’s texts stresses on other mantras like those of RV 6.28.1 and RV. 1.25.19.

POST-VEDIC LITERATURE ON RITUALS OF LIGHTNING STROKES

The *Båhat Saàhitä* of Varahamihira28 even as early as 6th c. A.D. speaks of Vajralepas in chapter 57. Although, the *çilparatna* of Srikumara, Bhoja’s *Samaräìgaëasütradhära* and *Mayämatam* give various methods of its preparations, its terming as vE\*utÉSm (vaidyutabhasma) suggests its relation to lightning. This can be traced to the *Matsya Puräëam* (II.9.31) which cites a plaster to avoid danger from a fire29 –

samuÔsENxvyva iv\*uÎGxa c m&iÄka, tyanuilÝm! yÖeZm nai¶na dýte n&p.

Elsewhere the text of *Båhat Saàhitä* speaks of the death omen when a crow caws seated on a tree struck by lightning30.

The *Bhadrabähu Saàhitä* of Jain Bhikshu Bhadrabahu31 dated earlier than the text of Varahamihira mentions of lightning striking a tree or house as-

yda ñeta=æv&]Sy iv\*uiCDris s<cret!, Aw va g&hyaemRXye vatv;¡ s&jeNmht!.

The *Adhbhuta Sägara* of Vallalasenadeva32 (11th c. A. D.), a text on portents etc speaks of rituals in chapter titled ‘*Vidyudadhbhutävarta*’ and highlights the performance of sacrifice with offerings poured in by chanting Savitri mantras ten lakh times.

The *BåhatSärìgadhara Paddhatté* of *Särìgadhara*33, a text of 14th c.A.D., speaks of the efficacy of the ashes of a tree struck by lightning for protection-

Aw Ô‚mr]a> -

iv\*udahtv&]Sy ÉUitmaday svRt>, r]at¡ ivikrede;a< twa n ihmbaxnm!, dIÝaePyi¶> zm< yaitv¿dGxÔ‚m ÉSmna.

Under the section titled ‘*Vidyudväraëam*’ it throws interesting details as follows-

jEiminí sumNtuí vEzMpayn @v c, pulSTy> pulhae iv:[u> ;fete v¿var[a>.

mune> kLya[mÙSy jEimneíaip kItRnat!, iv\*udi¶Éy< naiSt iliote tu g&haedre.

kdMbv&]sarStu iv\*upatinvar[>, iv\*uTpatSy nae ÉIitdeRvrajeit kItRnat!.

ramr]a< pQe\*Stu raÇaE va yid va idva, n tSy ÊòicÄe\_yae Éy< k…Çaip iv\*te.

It mentions that writing the names or mantras associated with sages- *Jaimini, Sumantu, Vaiçampäyaëa, Pulastya, Pulaha, Viñëu* on doors of houses wards of all fears of fires caused by lightning (stroke). It also highlights the efficacy in *sära* (essence) of Kadamba tree (Anthocephalus cadamba) as mentioned by Lord Indra. Chanting of *Rämarakñä* stotra protects one from all fears.

It is strange as to how these sages got associated with a lightning protection custom and the earlier Vedic literature may have to be studied to associate myths of lightning with them. Thus one can observe that lightning was a divine energy whose powers were understood by our ancient sages. Since, it had a devastating or destroying power that was considered inauspicious various *shanti’s* had to be performed.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the Hon. Secretary of Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Poona for providing me a photocopy of the book *AdhbhutaSagara* as well as the Secretary, Mythic Society, Bangalore for providing the necessary references.