

Chapter 2

The Giant Swing (*Lo Ching Cha*): Brahmanical Origins and Its Significance to the Religious Culture of Thailand

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1 Introduction

Stately, silent, motionless, and majestic are two towering teak wood pillars reaching to the sky in the center of Bangkok symbolizing a gateway to another time and another world. What was once a center piece for pomp and ceremony attended by kings and queens is now only a bare reminder of the once grand royal ceremony that invited the Hindu gods to visit earth.



Giant Swing, Bangkok Thailand (Photo by Van De Bogart)

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This is the Giant Swing, an enigmatic symbol that has been interpreted in many different ways but is for certain one of the most venerated historical sites in Thailand.

The origins of this stately historical landmark have taken me on a research adventure, much like a pilgrimage to a sacred site, causing me to wonder how in fact the humble swing became such a spiritual icon for the Nation State of Thailand. The many descriptions which are offered to explain what the swing is used for does not, as I have discovered, tell the whole story on how a swing could become Thailand's most important spiritual symbol with the exception of the emerald Buddha. Be that as it may, I believe that after reviewing the historical literature mentioned below and the current research related to swinging in the Hindu culture, a new appreciation for this landmark in Thailand will be gained.

2 Historical Perspective

Before I repeat any of the popular definitions of the Giant Swing, a short survey of the magical and spiritual uses of swings both ancient as well as in recent times is in order.

There have been a few other researchers who have also been curious about the origins of swinging. Most notable is James G. Fraser (1919) who wrote "Swinging as a Magical Rite," and Mircea Eliade (2004), who devoted extensive time researching how shamans used swinging in their rituals and referred to it as "Magical Flight." More recently, two Russian researchers (Sharapov and Nesanelis 1997) went to North Russia's Komi Republic and Tumen region and analyzed the theme of swinging used by shamans in their folklore and ritual texts. Their ethnographic research lends insight into the rhythmic perception in traditional worldview, as well as rhythm as a cultural and creational mechanism. The insights to rituals connected with the swinging motion were found to be associated with symbols of cyclical time, purification, sexuality, and the banishment of evil forces. The migration of the Akha tribe from the Yunnan region in Western China into Thailand brought with them their own swinging festival (Kacha-ananda 1971). In India, practically every region has an annual swinging festival, the oldest being in Orissa (Bhattacharya 2010) as well as references to swinging in the Vedic scriptures (Tandya Maha Brahmana, Vol. V, Chapter 1, Verse 10) of which we can take some clues and cover later to further our understanding of swinging.

Why swinging had been created by all these ancient cultures would take more space than this chapter allows, but there are certain features about swinging which can be discussed so that a clearer view of the act of swinging can be understood in the context of a cosmological framework.

Eventually, we will arrive at the doorstep of an ancient temple in Ayutthaya, Thailand, where a swing was offered as a gift to King Ramathibodi II, the 11th King of Siam (1491–1538), by two Brahman priests from South India (Van Vliet 1640). Let us first consider what swinging could represent and take our cues from Sharapov and Nesanelis (1997). These authors suggest that swinging originally came from an

interpretive sense of the cosmos as it was seen by our earliest ancestors spread out before them in the heavens, but they did not have a developed language to communicate what the heavens meant or how to describe what it was they actually saw. The world must have appeared to our ancestors as some sort of magical symphony composed of all the elements in the natural world presented as a myriad of kaleidoscopic imagery. We could probably assume that the number of physical events which affected our earliest ancestors either caused them to become entranced by what they saw or extremely fearful of what they heard. Obviously, both forms of emotional responses were elicited by a reaction to the unknowingness of what constituted the makeup of the physical world. However, once our ancestors became accustomed to the repetition of these natural events, they then could be accepted and integrated into the existing social fabric. The symbolic significance of the phenomena of heavenly bodies is what eventually evolved into rituals and much later into religions. It was the inception of these natural phenomena into the cognitive framework of man's perceived world that prompted him to be very curious as to why stars and other celestial events moved in the heavens the way they did.

Obviously, this process of merging mind and heaven has been going on for thousands of years, as is evidenced by recent archaeological discoveries of fire altars, dated 3000 BCE, in the Harappan civilization (Feuerstein et al. 1995). Trying to imagine how events that were taking place in the heavens became part of everyday rituals for early civilizations may be difficult to understand. However, accepting the proposition that heaven and earth were connected in the minds of our early ancestors as one cosmocentric whole, which offered meaning and sustenance to their existence, then what we see today with rituals and ceremonies most assuredly originated from a time unknown; a time when language began and meaning was being developed.

Saraswati (1995: 1) suggests that the traditional vision of man is cosmocentric. In his introduction to the oral tradition, he states:

Man is made up of four of five cosmic elements. The cosmic order that governs the dynamism of all reality, envelops human life, creates awareness, and signifies patterns of culture. As a result, the cosmic equilibrium is maintained both in nature and in culture. This primal vision is incontestable and fully integrated in two different but related traditions; the textual and the oral. The textual tradition offers a complete and systematic analysis of the universe. Reflections of the oral tradition are more concentrated in practice than systematic in analysis.

Within this oral or pretextual tradition, we can only imagine how the early personifications with nature were implemented within small tribal groupings. Since the origin of the swing is our main concern, we need to look at what the natural phenomena, comprised of the five elements, and the nature of being human have in common. What aspect to the integration of man and nature exhibit swinging? I pose a simple question of what exactly is swinging. What function was experienced initially in the hoary past which could be demonstrated by something suspended in the air only to be watched and witnessed moving with the wind? Clues to answering this question are many. Trees move in the wind, comets move across the sky, birds fly in the air, the breath moves in and out of the human body, the sun and moon move back and forth across the sky, and the heavens show a rhythmic oscillation with the stars. In a sense, everything in nature is swinging and nothing is static.

Swinging was a part of life, and the imaginings of nature's movements were built into the creation stories of these early oral cultures and eventually acceptance on how certain relationships of the forces of nature could be explained led to performing sacrifices and rituals.

Of the many phenomena that could be witnessed by our earliest ancestors, none could be more dramatic than seeing a solar eclipse or a comet streaking across the heavens with thunderous explosions in its wake. The water that fell out of the sky produced most all of the creation myths that were populated with gods who represented these sounds of thunder and bolts of lightning which most certainly caused fear and trembling and a deep respect for the forces of nature. But, it was in the evening, with no observable sun or moon that another sight unfolded, one which we of today still observe no differently than in times past, which is none other than the star studded canopy in the heavens.

This star-studded canopy is our template to work with as we try to understand how our ancient ancestors perceived the heavens. What kind of inner reflections of the universe were imagined when trying to formulate ideas and postulate concepts of existence? At this point, we have to consider the primal elements affecting those distant people in a time when only sensual data was experienced and from those assumed sensual impressions try to understand how a complex social order developed where obeisance to all these celestial phenomena took on a self-organizing principle on how people would interact among themselves and the world around them. This was the birth of a cosmocentric lifestyle where everything had meaning and was integrated into every aspect of daily living.

To offer an explanation on how swinging began from this cosmocentric worldview, I will suggest, as Saraswati (1995) states, that they originated out of this cosmocentric lifestyle, which permeated the early tribal cultures, and in an attempt to describe their world began with the natural forces comprising earth, air, fire and, water. When early man became conscious of his contact with nature, he personified the phenomena of nature (Chaubey 1998). These early cultures also created gods who became supernatural and have been part of all tribal and orthodox rituals up to the present day.

3 Tribal Swinging

3.1 *Origins of Hook Swinging*

Included in these cosmocentric cultures were stories and beliefs where a central pole or pillar would be installed in the center of the village symbolizing a connection between the upper world and the underworld thus establishing their center in the universe. How this central pole (stamba) and swinging (dola) were combined can be seen in the very ancient act of the charak-puja (Fig. 2.1), better known as "hook swinging."

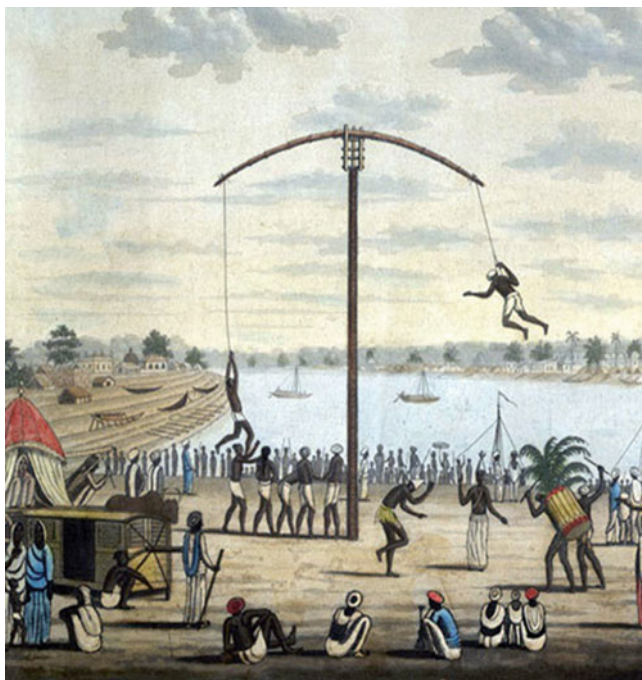


Fig. 2.1 Churruck Poojah on the banks of the Ganges by James Moffat, c. 1806

The relationship of hook swinging to the classical forms of swinging has not been discussed at great length in the literature. However, in 1914, a lengthy description of hook swinging was published suggesting it may be a direct link to an earlier form of human sacrifice (Powell 1914).

Sacrifice as a way to identify with the cosmic order was a way early humans could identify with the larger macrocosm and how the original cosmic man (Purusha) came into existence from out of the primordial waters where only the intention of existence was vibrating in the universe (Feuerstein et al. 1995). Anthropologists distinguish two streams of traditions in India called the “high” tradition which uses the legitimacy of the Vedic scriptures and the “low” traditions which are dependent on oral traditions and myths (Khubchandani 1995). Obviously, the Brahmins followed the high tradition and conducted rituals to the gods utilizing swinging which was not associated with bodily sacrifices. Both forms of swinging, aboriginal and caste, did exist side by side for centuries. But, the swinging performed by the lower tradition was a syncretic ritual combining both nature and man representing a cosmocentric worldview.

The liturgical and scriptural forms of swinging were created to have more access to the gods rather than be dictated by them. This is clearly demonstrated in the Thiruppavai and Thiruvempavai ceremony in Thailand where the gods are actually invited to come down to earth. The scriptures which show more direct access to the

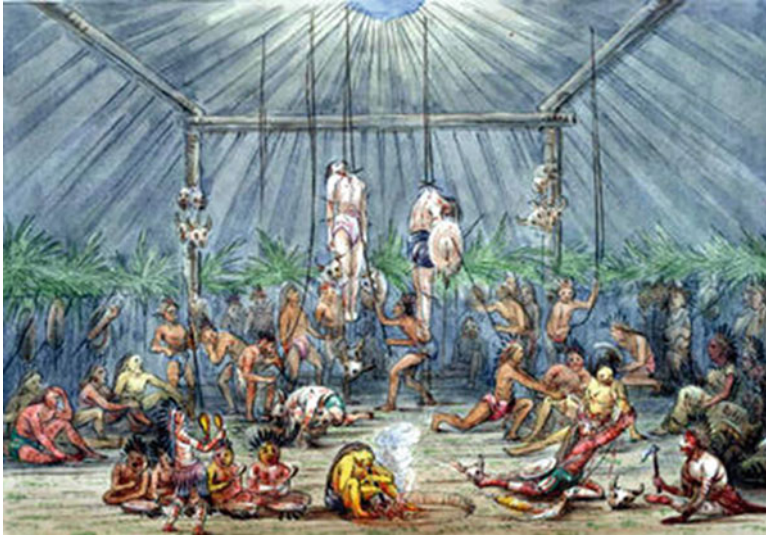


Fig. 2.2 Native American Indians in a Sundance suspension ritual

gods were associated with astronomy and the meaning given to the stars in order to explain creation which eventually became the origins of all the creation myths.

Two other forms of ancient swinging are worth mentioning briefly, one suspension swinging by the Native American Indians and the airborne swinging by the Akha tribe in Northern Thailand. I include these two types of swinging to show how placing the body in the air was an act of sacrifice and a form of ritual which seems to be pervasive in all tribal cultures most likely being reminiscent of a very ancient memory of some event that took place in the distant past. I will cover this aspect of an ancient memory and the symbols which can still be found related to ancient Hindu scriptures in the last section (Fig. 2.2).

Piercing the flesh and being suspended in the air was a sacrifice performed by the Native Americans in order to reach a trance state so as to receive spiritual guidance from the invisible spirits and a way to offer the physical body in exchange for a spiritual life (Campos 2010). The Sundance ceremony recognized the sun's new rise every day representing rebirth after a symbolic death. This is a clear example of how powerful the impressions of nature held over the minds of these native people.

3.2 *Ethnic Swinging in Thailand*

The Akha tribe in the north of Thailand installs four poles in the ground (Fig. 2.3), and by attaching a single cord at the apex they can swing out into the air.

The history of the Akha swing ceremony suggests that Appremiere, the Akha's god, created the world. The gods Umsa and Umyae were also created representing

Fig. 2.3 Akha swing ceremony Chiang Rai Province, Thailand



the rain and sunshine. These gods were man and wife and had one son, Umsahyee, and one daughter, Umsahyeh. It is told that the swing ceremony was started by Umsahyeh to honor the godparents and assure plenty of rain and sunshine. All three depictions of the tribal swing exhibit a cosmocentric relationship to the natural forces (Kacha-ananda 1971).

4 Swinging in Ancient Temples of India

4.1 Archaeological Evidence for Swinging

The rural communities of the coastal and central areas of Orissa perform the Danda ritual devoted to the Shiva-Shakti cult; however, among the more orthodox Hindus, Durga or Devi is far more popular (Citaristi 1995). It is interesting to note that in these Danda rituals, self-punishments were performed whereby swinging was done upside down over burning ashes and known as the ritual of Ugra Pata. I mention this because burning coals will be made clearer when the archaeological research by Godbole (2010) is cited where he refers to meteors hitting the earth.

It is in the Eastern province of Orissa that we find the oldest swing ceremony dating as far back as the second century CE (Bhattacharya 2010). The name given to this swing ceremony is the Rajo (menstruation) which coincides with the summer solstice in the northern hemisphere. The ancient name associated with this ancient geographical area of India is Kalinga. Rajo (menstruation) is a 3-day “menstrual period” for mother earth and a date coincident with the Gemini asterism (*mithuna*). At the geo-location of Orissa, the Rajo is held on the second day where the sun touches the ecliptic with the Gemini asterism and is called *Sankranti* and is the main day of the swing festival. In this same geo-location, on the full moon during spring

equinox the swing ceremony is called the “*Dola Purnima*.” This full moon is in syzygy with central Orissa and is the location of the Lord Jagannath temple dated between the nineteenth and fifteenth centuries CE. At the Eastern gate of the temple is an engraving of a large ship in sailing mode, showing Kalinga, the great sovereign, sitting on a swing seat. The main significance of these two festivals in ancient Kalinga is that of the king sitting on the seat of a swing and traveling on a ship in the sacred temple. This makes the Rajo directly related to astronomical indicators giving us more clues that the swing has more symbolism associated with it than was initially recognized by earlier scholars, i.e., Gerini, Frazer, and Wales.

Another astronomical indicator at Lord Jagannath’s temple is a carved relief of Nataraja (Fig. 2.7) which acts like a celestial compass (Fig. 2.8) (Bhattacharya and Nail 2008). The discovery was made by showing how *alpha Orionis* (Rudra-star Betelgeuse) moves away from the ecliptic and celestial equator, now at 7° north of the equator. In 60 more years, Rudra will move south of the equator and be closer to *beta-Orionis* (Gouri -star Rigel) in the Gemini asterism as it begins to move north. This Hara-Gouri conjunction is how precessional movement brought these two stars together creating the concept of swinging. These findings and others came from noticing how the temple complexes at Bhubaneswar were built to reflect the position of the stars. In particular, the Parasurameswara temple acted as the center forming a star pattern (Taraka) formed by radial lines drawn out and connected to other temples in the area. A similar radial pattern could be found directly above in the heavens with *alpha Orionis* (Rudra-Betelgeuse) being the center. The Orion constellation was, therefore, a very significant part of this temple complex in the *Siddhantic* (naked eye viewing) astronomy texts with *beta-Orionis* (Rigel) given the Puranic name of *Bana Raj*, meaning “King with Arrow.” The relationship between Parasurameswara and Lingaraj temples is noteworthy. The star Sirius is called *Lubdhaka* and in the Siddhanta the consort of Rudra is *Lubdhaka*, which corresponds to the temple on the ground identified as Gouri, which is located directly next to Parasurameswara. Prior to the tenth century CE, Siva was the presiding deity of the Parasurameswara temple and would travel with a priestly entourage to the Gouri temple thus mirroring the Siddhantic connection of the stars of Rudra and Lubdhaka. This ceremony is still held today with a swing ceremony indicating its celestial origins. In fact, the most ancient Hindu temple art in Bhubaneswar depicting a swing is from the late eighth century CE and is in the Mukteswar temple (Fig. 2.4) as well as the elaborately carved Torana (arched gateway) used for swinging (Fig. 2.5). The swing at Mukteswar could have been used as a celestial reference for the movement between these two stars of Rudra and Gouri.

This being the case, it is entirely possible that the act of swinging was a way to travel the entire arc of heavens and also a way to understand the position of the stars. The swing could have acted as a celestial dial with the arms and legs of Lord Shiva (*Anirudha* – synonym of Siva) fixing a center place in the universe among the stars (much like the *Stamba*) but using *alpha Orionis* as the center. The swing would then symbolize the inclination of the ecliptic approaching and receding from the celestial equator mimicking the movement of Orion over time as well as the precessional cycle of 26,000 years, thus making Nataraja a candidate as a precessional marker.

Fig. 2.4 Eighth century CE carving depicting swinging

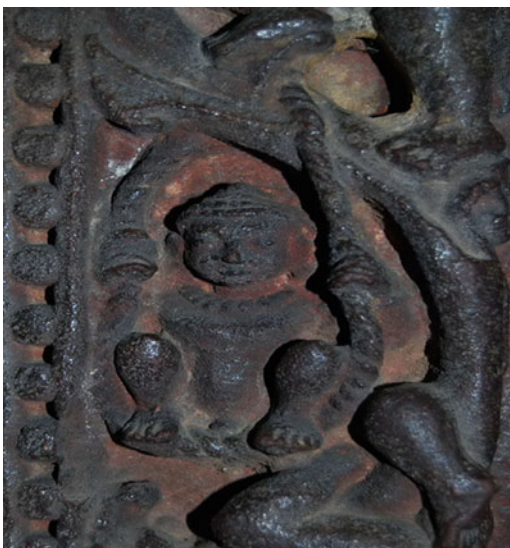


Fig. 2.5 Torana at Mukteswar temple



The Giant Swing Ceremony in Thailand, which invites Lord Shiva to earth once a year, shows a direct relationship to this ancient ceremony in Kalinga, India, where the center of the universe is symbolized by a swing. The name Taraka was taken from the *Thiruvachagam* and *Koyil purana* where it mentions the “Forest of Taraka” where Lord Shiva, in his Nataraja form, is said to have appeared on earth for the first time indicating the center of the universe. The star *Anirudha* (Siva) is the central member of the Orion constellation known as *Kalapurusha* (embodiment of time) giving the Nataraja its symbolic reference to other stars.

Fig. 2.6 Nataraja at Lord Jagannath temple with compass overlay

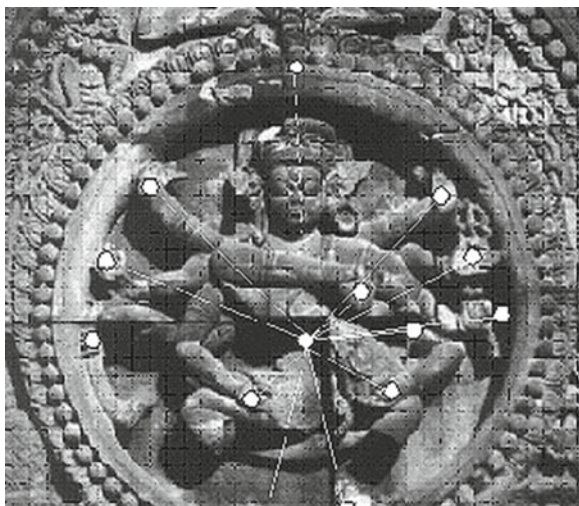
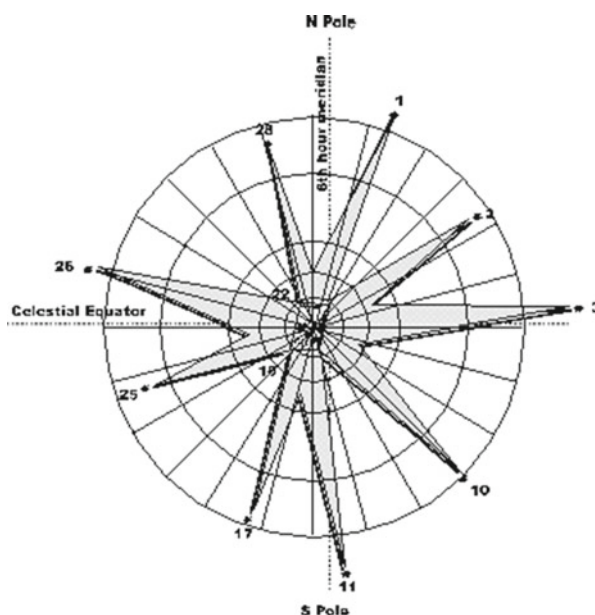


Fig. 2.7 Star pattern over compass



The term Taraka also means falling star indicating Shiva's footstep on earth was none other than a celestial citing. More on this aspect of a falling star will be covered later in the paper (Figs. 2.6 and 2.7).

The heights to which swinging became a significant part of the temple complexes in India is best shown at the Chittuldroog temple in Chamondee (Fig. 2.8). The three worlds of Hindu cosmology comprised of hell, heaven, and earth were always connected by a central pillar which can be seen at the tenth century Chittuldroog



Fig. 2.8 Pillar and swing in the court of Chamundi Temple, Chitradurga

temple. Placed directly in front of the pillar is a swing carved from solid stone. By juxtaposing the swing next to the cosmic pillar is a significant indication to its inherent celestial symbolism. Similarly, a central pillar and swing were installed at the founding of the new capital of Bangkok. There can be no question as to the influence the Vedic swing ceremony had on how the Chakri dynasty would use both these Hindu artifacts to symbolize a relationship to the heavens as well as securing a way to communicate with the gods.

But, the Chamundi temple is not the only temple with a stone structure still standing indicating that swinging was a major part of the rituals and ceremonies of these ninth to tenth century temple complexes. The ancient Vitthala temple of Hampi in old Vijayanagara is a beautifully carved swing made from granite (Fig. 2.9). This swing is referred to as a *mandapa* with two cylindrical columns. Metal hooks attached to the beam above held a swing in which a sacred image was placed when it was removed from the Hoysalas (marriage hall) named Kalyana Mandapam when gods and goddesses were united on festive days. It is noteworthy to mention that there is a ceremonial avenue starting from the main temple gate where a chariot process takes place and the gods are transported to the swing. This is exactly what is meant by a “ship bound to heaven” which I will discuss further on.

4.2 *Astronomical References to Swinging*

Another example is the Hindola Torana at the Mala Devi temple in Gyaraspur (Fig. 2.10) built during the medieval period, in Madhya Pradesh. Mala Devi temple – sixteenth century – is constructed on the eastern slope of the hill. The temple

Fig. 2.9 Swing at Vitthala temple in Hampi

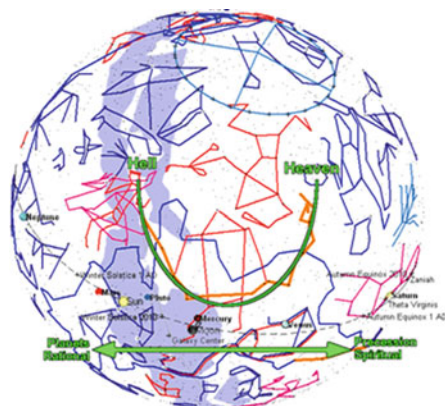


Fig. 2.10 Hindola Torana – Gyaraspur



is partly rock-cut and partly structural. The sanctum door jambs have Ganga, Yamuna, and other Hindu deities. Inside the sanctum are placed four Jain Tirthankar images, seated on padmasana. There is a sikhara above the sanctum, where Vaishnavi, seated on Garuda, is placed. What can we deduce from these symbolic deities? Most significantly is the river Ganga also referred as the celestial river or the Milky Way and Vishnu mounted on Garuda who is ready to take flight. The double arches sitting on top of the cross beam could very easily symbolize the swinging path of the stars during the long precessional cycle as (Allen 2008) has indicated on the planisphere diagram (Fig. 2.11) which also shows the celestial river (Ganga), Milky Way galaxy. Allen (2008) sees the study of precession as a study of time and represents the longest swing period which is the truly great swing across the heavens. The essence of oscillations, such as swings, is that they

Fig. 2.11 Celestial gates
(Allen 2008)



represent the return to origins. For Allen, the giant swing in the heavens symbolizes the restoration of the cognition of creative intent which is the same as (Reiser 1978) with his intent of creation.

5 Swinging Mentioned in Tamil Lyrics

Accompanying rituals were human sounds which are now classified as chants, mantras, and songs (Staal 1996: 191–362). The integration of all these elements are beyond the scope of this chapter, but the seeds for the origin of swinging most certainly comes from these primal observances and enactments of human behavior through sound.

Much later on in the evolution of tribal cultures, the oral traditions were translated into written form. This process of human sounds leading to a meaningful exchange of language for communication took thousands of years to develop. The symbolism is quite extensive when we approach the pathways of the gods with their descent to earth and return to their heavenly abode, which has been a recurring theme in all cosmogonic myths. In Indian music, we have terms signifying going from a low pitch to a high pitch (Aarohanam) and from a high pitch to a low pitch (Avarohanam) (Ramaswamy 2010). In the Dasaavataara stotram mentioning the Matsya Avataaram (Vishnu as fish), the interpretation is as follows:

ChaDaa Dola AarOha sadOhaLam bhagavatha

The ebb and flow of the waves of the Ocean seemed to be a swinging cradle that soothed and almost lulled Him into a comfortable reverie (Ramaswamy).

The word avatara is taken from this descending pitch to symbolize the gods coming down to the earth. Krishna is the eighth avatar of Vishnu and is always placed in a swing in many fertility rites throughout India. And all these rites have been well described in the Upanishads. English translations of Carnatic lyrics by (Dasu 2010) from the composer Annamacharya provides us with these lyrics relating to the swing.

In this song, *alara chanchala maina – madhyamAvati* – Adi describes symbolically the cycle of creation as the divine sport of the Almighty. He visualizes the swing as the cosmos with Dharma as base:

Oh Lord, You shine in all souls and also in the air we breath. The transient nature of creation is your divine leela and splendor. It is the divine swing.

The dawn and dusk are mountain-like pillars and the sky itself is beam across, bearing the swing-like cosmos.

The Vedas are golden chains holding the swing safely. The seat of the cradle is Dharma. It is indeed an amazing swing.

The panoramic clouds enhance your brilliance, shining like a blue mountain. The clouds are your ornaments.

Beautiful women feared that the cosmos would tilt but they continue to push the swing swiftly. The scary movement of the swing made you embrace your consort. The celestial women found your delight and happiness in the swing. It is a rare feast to Brahma and other celestials to worship you. The magnificent Lord of Venkatadri is extremely delighted with the swing.

Venkatadri is in reference to a hill which was a seat of the worship of Vishnu near the temple of Tirumala in Tirupati. When Vishnu incarnated as Krishna it inspired Saint Andal, 1 of 12 *alvars* (saints) of India, to write her 30 Thiruppavai stanzas in the seventh century CE of which the last two are chanted at the Giant Swing Ceremony in Bangkok. The significance of the Giant Swing Ceremony to be called the Thiruppavai can only be appreciated when the meaning of these stanzas are put into perspective as being composed by Sri Andal the quintessence incarnation of Sri Bhumi Devi the Divine Consort of Sriman Narayana (Swamy 2010; Padmanabhan 1999).

When a marrying couple is seated on a swing, it is called Oonjal or Oonchal. During the Jhulan Yatra festival, people celebrate the divine love between Lord Krishna and Radha (Fig. 2.12). Songs are sung when the bride and groom swing for the first time on a decorated swing. This is not simply a ritual but a divine message to be one with nature. All throughout India, the swing ritual praises Vishnu or Krishna. These are two translated stanzas by (Ramachander 2010: 1 on blog):

After erecting the magical pillars of red coral,
After hanging the hooks made of emerald,
On the very pretty swing made of nine gems,
Abhimanyu and Vathsala, please swing.

One side swung by Indra and his wife Sasi,
And another side swung by Lord Shiva and Parvathi,
With the accompaniment of Veena played by Dumburu and Narada, Please swing along
with Sri Ranga Natha

6 Perspectives on the Meaning of Swinging

The swing referred to as a “ship bound for heaven” was mentioned by Eilade (1958: 103) and is found in the Tandya Maha Brahmanas. The chariot pulled along the ceremonial avenue at the Vitthala temple in Hampi was also a ship bound for heaven

Fig. 2.12 Lord Krishna and Radha



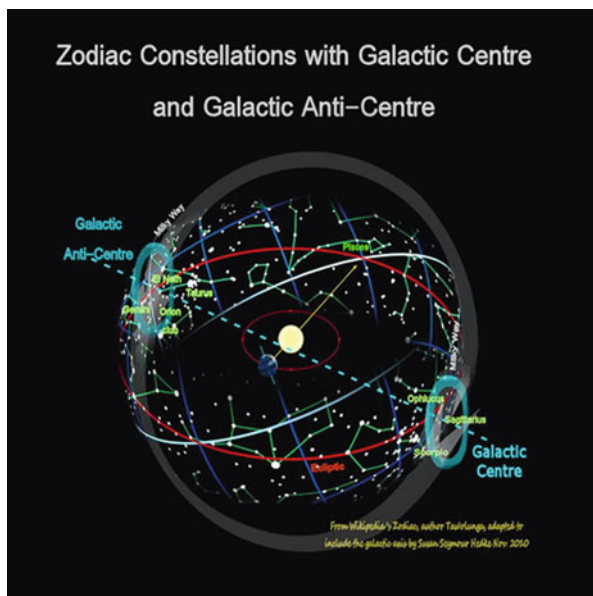
as it was transporting the gods out to the swing to travel among the stars. A more complete interpretation of this ship sailing across the Milky Way is expressed by Gerini (1892: 39) who states that

In the cosmogonies where the sky is held to be a liquid mass or celestial ocean (something like the 'waters that are above the firmament') as in the Egyptian, all planetary bodies and stars – personified as gods or animal deities- are floating on it and sailing across in it boats.

The celestial story becomes even more interesting when we consider that a ship is carved on a wall at Lord Jagannath temple in Orissa carrying a swing on its deck, which can be none other than a ship sailing (swinging) on the eternal ocean. Gerini (1892) located the ship on the Hindu planisphere in the seventh Nakshatra (*Punarvasu*) which is identified as the same ship where Vishnu took on the image of a fish (*Matsya*). It is here that there are two rivers which Gerini explains are on the northern and southern parts of the Hindu planisphere forming the Milky Way and are called the *Akasa Ganga* (perennial sky stream). It is at either end of these rivers that there are two gates. The southern gate is the one through which Vishnu and Shiva pass through to visit the human world during the swing ceremony. This celestial drama is demonstrated in (Fig. 2.13) where on either side of the planisphere a dotted line is shown connecting the gates of man and the gates of gods. Recognizing how our earth aligns with the sun and the galactic center was a reason why the ancients held rituals and built monuments so as to harmonize with the universal will and movements of the heavens (Hedke 2008).

On January 11, 2011, the gates of the gods were directly above in the heavens and the Giant Swing Ceremony in Bangkok, held on the second lunar month, was the time when the gates of Kailash were opened by the royal priest at the Devasthan Bosth Brahman temple inviting Shiva and Vishnu to visit earth. Slowly, a more complete picture of the hidden cosmology behind this ancient ceremony of swinging was beginning to fall into place.

Fig. 2.13 Galactic axis
– northern and southern gates
(Susan Seymour Hedke 2008)



Eliade (1958) explains how solstice rites mentioned in the Mahavrata were composed by Sivaistic ascetics and would have priests (hotrs) placed on swings referred to as the breaths of *prana*, *yvana*, and *apana*. Likewise, shamans also partake in some form of flying or swaying of their body under the influence of mind-altering substances (Whitten 2007) similar to the ancient Soma ritual that included the ingestion of Ephedra (Lamberg-Karlovsky 2002). Ephedra is the well-known substance used in the drink of the gods called “amrita” and was used in these same rituals by the Sivaistic ascetics to reach the abode of the gods, and residues of it have even been found in the fire altars at Harappa.

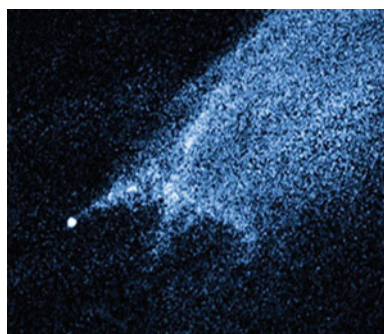
The recent discovery of a Harappan script containing an unusual spiral image next to a unicorn has been uncovered by Godbole (2010). The Harappan scripts are still largely undeciphered, but there is no question there where symbolic references being made to various aspects of their civilization leading many scholars to believe they did possess a spoken language (Parpola 2005). Rituals where reference to swinging has been recorded in the Vedas that reflect celestial events have been interpreted by Godbole (2010) who associates this “starfish script” (Fig. 2.14) with a spiral image produced by a comet when it enters earth’s atmosphere (Fig. 2.15). Godbole interprets the Vedic scriptures to emphasize his beliefs and, as a chemist by training, analyzed the faience (coatings on the Harappan seals) to determine that they were made from a clay-like substance whose composition was altered due to these meteor impacts. His discovery has led to a new interpretation of the Vedic verses revealing they were eyewitness accounts of celestial phenomena.

The Mahavrata is a very ancient tradition with much of its meaning having been lost. However, in the first and fifth chapters of the *Aitareya Aranyaka* of the *Rig*

Fig. 2.14 Harappan seal
– 2000 BCE



Fig. 2.15 Asteroid – NASA
Jan 29, 2010



Veda there is a detailed description of the Mahavrata rituals where Godbole explains how the “*Hotra*” sits on the swing and chants. In *Aitareya Aranyaka* (1.2.3) there is an explanation of the swing:

“They ask, why is swing a swing?” he, who blows is the swing.

Then in *RgVeda* (7.87.5) mentions the swing as quoted:

On him three heavens rest and are supported, and the three earths are there in six-fold order.

The wise King Varuna hath made in heaven that Golden Swing to cover it with glory.

He swings forward in these worlds and then a swing is a swing.

The interpretations Godbole (2010) offers are very extensive and worth reading. Another example offered is where the wise King Varuna (who comes from the sky in a golden swing) and the Falcon (which represents Indra) are symbolic of celestial objects. And from *RgVeda* (10.178) called the “*Tarkshya Sukta*” which is chanted to avert evil astral bodies. There is not enough space to cover all these translations, but they show how new interpretations of the Vedas are a direct result of comparing geological, astronomical, and Vedic scriptures as a way of seeing history through the eyes of the ancient sages who only knew of their universe from a cosmocentric view point as was mentioned earlier.

It was the work of two British astronomers who had researched the roles giant comets play to develop a new theory of “coherent catastrophism” (Napier 2010). Our solar system periodically passes through the orbit of the Taurid belt of asteroids, as

it is doing so in our present era, which can eventually cause debris to enter the inner solar system. These findings are what led Godbole (2010) to infer differently on the soil samples analyzed by researchers such as Sana Ullah (Cook 1994) in and around the Mohenjo-Daro region in the Indus Valley. The seal in Fig. 2.11 containing a spiral-like shape is what Godbole claims is the depiction of an eyewitness account of a meteor. The image NASA's Hubble space telescope captured lends credence to Godbole's assertion.

7 Interpretations of the Giant Swing in Thailand

We finally arrive at the point in this chapter where we can now look upon the Giant Swing in Bangkok with a little more understanding of why it is held in such high esteem as one of Thailand's most venerated icons. Brahmanic influences are undoubtedly the source for the idea of swinging as a ceremonial ritual, and throughout India these rituals go by many names: Dolatsava, Jhula Yatra, Jhoola, Oonchal, Onnchilla, the well-known Hindola which takes place in the month of Shravan, and finally the Rajo swing festival in Orissa.

The Giant Swing Ceremony in Bangkok was originally 1 of 12 royal ceremonies held in each of the months of the Thai lunar calendar in the Sukhothai Kingdom and officiated over by Brahman priests. Therefore, we are on safe ground when we compare the meaning of this swinging ritual held once a year in the Tamil lunar month of Margazhi with the Giant Swing Ceremony in Bangkok. And when we begin to look more closely at what is taking place in the swinging ritual, it will be possible to also speculate, with some degree of certainty, the symbolic significance that the Giant Swing represents for Thailand. Interestingly, it was only in 1931 that any definitive description of the swinging ceremony held in Thailand was first made available to the outside world (Wales 1931: 238–255). Although Wales considered the main reason the swing ceremony took place was to reflect the sun's passage in the sky, that view now can be seen as not being the only symbolic function, but in fact the swing ceremony represents much more than just a solar passage. The other author to offer his description of the Giant Swing Ceremony was Gerini (1895) whose interpretation was somewhat different than Wales, prompting Wales to discard them in favor of his own solar interpretation. So, let's look at these two authors' comments as they are the only two authoritative interpretations on record for the meaning of the Giant Swing Ceremony in Thailand.

If we consider the new interpretations from Godbole (2010) with a comet impacting the earth around 3100 BCE and read the Vedic verses with these celestial phenomena in mind, we find that the solar reference can be equated with a comet and not the sun as Fraser (1919), Wales (1931), and Gerini (1895) had implied. Fraser was the first to mention that in the RgVeda, the sun is called "the golden swing in the sky" claiming it helps us understand Vedic rituals by showing how a priest sat in a swing and touched, with the span of his right hand, at once the seat of the swing and the ground. In doing so, Fraser goes on to say that "the great Lord has united himself

with the great lady; the god has united himself with the goddess” (p. 280). This explanation is where Wales took his cue for the solar interpretation of the swing because Fraser offers the explanation that the author of the Vedic scripture meant to indicate that the sun had reached the lowest point on its course closest to earth. Fraser takes his information from (Griffith 1891).

Wales quotes the same passage in his description of the swinging festival, but uses a reference to Fraser rather than the original translation by Griffith. Wales’s interpretation for the Giant Swing Ceremony, as being identified as a sun ceremony, is based on three assumptions. His first is that it takes place during the winter solstice; secondly, the swing goes from East to West, the same direction as the course of the sun; and, thirdly, the circular dancing around the base symbolizes the revolution of the sun. Wales also adds that the swing ceremony was intended to force Lord Surya (sun god) to fulfill his function.

Gerini (1895) states exactly the same as Wales, but does so 35 years earlier mentioning that it is a solstice festival and that the swinging and dancing represent the revolution and birth of the sun. He also mentions that the swing goes from East to West in the direction of the course of the sun. So far, Gerini is saying exactly the same as Wales but doing so in 1895. Gerini also makes an association with the Hindu Dola Yatra festival admitting that the significant features of the meaning of the swing were lost in India’s legendary past. Where Wales disagrees with Gerini is when Gerini makes the association of the swing ceremony representing the churning of the Ocean of Milk affected by the gods. Both of these interpretations are made from a familiarity with Hindu mythology available at that time and were the only descriptions available to the outside world. If we consider Godbole’s interpretation we find ourselves needing to consider an entirely different scenario for the meaning of the Vedic scriptures. Quoting from the Mahavrata ceremony, Godbole (2010: 9) offers this interpretation:

The swing is made from the wood of an Umbar tree. It is supported by erecting two poles in the ground. The right to occupy the seat is only that of the *Hotra*. He approaches the swing, sliding like a serpent and puts his chin on the seat of the swing. Then he uses his hands to grip the ropes of “*darbha*” and assumes a sitting posture. While taking swings he is supposed to keep one foot hanging down so as to brush the ground as the swing descends, however, he is not allowed to touch the ground with both the feet simultaneously.

Godbole asks the question what is symbolized by this *Hotra* swinging in from above, sliding one foot on the ground, and then swinging upwards again. His interpretation comes from RgVeda 10.120 and believes it symbolizes the birth of the terrible one and the destruction he caused indicating an awe inspiring fleeting Falcon (comet) with the *Hotra* climbing on the swing, sliding like a serpent (moving in the air) and begins taking swings. He touches the ground with one foot symbolizing speedy movement or bright celestial objects approaching or even occasionally touching the surface of the earth. This interpretation is very close to Fraser’s mentioning: “The great Lord has united himself with the great lady, the god has united himself with the goddess” (p. 280).

If we seriously consider the geological record indicating a meteor impacting the earth in 3100 BCE or earlier and also associate these events with Godbole’s

interpretation of the Vedic scriptures, we can then begin to see how the language stemming from a cosmocentric world view is full of poetic metaphors providing us with new insights as to why swinging was held in such high regard. The swing then could also be looked at as a bright burning comet streaking and crisscrossing against the sky, touching the earth and causing reverence and obeisance to its awesome power and presence. These celestial events were recognized as actions fostered by the gods prompting sacrifices and offerings which would last for thousands of years to come in order to appease their wrath and ask for their blessings. Many of the rituals which are performed today are done so without any cognizance of the fact that they were spawned at the inception of witnessing ancient celestial events, which I contend, are still embedded in our collective memories allowing the swinging ceremony to still be faithfully performed and imbued with the same sacred intentions that were held in the past.

I could easily offer the thought that these celestial events were not a onetime happening in the heavens, but repeated themselves cyclically throughout the millennia. To quote Eliade (1954: 3):

If one goes to the trouble of penetrating the authentic meaning of an archaic myth or symbol, one cannot but observe that this meaning shows recognition of a certain situation in the cosmos and that, consequently, it implies a metaphysical position.

If I could offer my opinion about the return of these “bright ones” from the depth of space, as related to the winter solstice of 2012, I would say that our archaic memories are causing the alarm and the concern worldwide concerning a natural cataclysm whether from a comet, earthquake, or volcano. For if in fact the Vedic Falcon returns (Mayan Quetzalcoatl), he will surely bring about a similar fate as witnessed and recorded by our ancient ancestors in myths and star lore the world over.

8 Witnessing the Thiruppavai/Thiruvempavai

Understandably, after researching the meaning of swinging rituals worldwide, especially in India, attending the Giant Swing Ceremony on January 11, 2011 in Bangkok, it gave me an exhilarating feeling knowing I was entering a very ancient realm and would be witness to how Brahman priests communicated with the gods. From my first impressions of this royal ceremony gained from reading the account that Wales (1931) provided to witnessing a symbolic sacrifice which I understood was done to appease the gods as Godbole (2010) had indicated caused me to feel as if I had been caught between an ancient world of sensual imaginings, mythic musings, and a rational world seeking answers attending a Brahmanical ritual. The difference between my Western mindset and that of an Eastern mindset could not have been more apparent. On the evening of January 11, the mythical gates of Kailash were opened by Phra Rajaguru Vamadevamuni, and Lord Shiva was invited to visit earth for 10 days.

Fig. 2.16 Raja Guru opening the gates of Kailash



Fig. 2.17 Raja Guru receiving Lord Shiva



The auspiciousness of this ceremony dedicated to the Hindu gods made me realize how ingrained these ancient beliefs still hold sway over the spiritual foundation of the Kingdom of Thailand. The gods Lord Surya, Lord Chandra, Goddess Ganga, and the earth goddess were invited in the early morning hours as shown in (Fig. 2.16), and in the evening Lord Shiva was invited to visit earth (Fig. 2.17). Lord Ganesh was also invited to earth, but this ceremony, which is similar to inviting Lord Shiva, was done in a separate temple dedicated to Lord Ganesh. And although the King was not observing this most auspicious event as in times past, prayers were still

Fig. 2.18 Hamsa with shrine for the gods



offered to the royal family. There was no ceremony around the giant swing; however, smaller swing posts installed inside the Devasthan Bosth Brahman temple were used to suspend Hamsa (Brahma's mount) where small replicas of the gods are placed in a shrine on his back and swung in a gesture to return the gods back to Mt. Kailash when the moon was full (Fig. 2.18). Incidentally, the full moon in the previous month was a full eclipse connected to Lord Shiva as it took place in the constellation of Mrigashira to the north of Orion in the antelope's head and considered by Hindus to be the most important celestial event in the 26,000-year cycle of the great year (Frawley 2010).

It takes many hours of preparation by the Raja Guru before the swinging actually takes place lending an atmosphere of sanctity which could only be achieved with all the ritual details needing to be attended to for preparing the gods for their journey back to Kailash. This is a very rare ceremony to see because the final sending of the gods does not happen until the very early hours of the morning shortly after midnight. When the swing begins its movement, the conch shells are sounded and chanting lasts for over an hour. This then is the very crucible of the swing ceremony in the early twenty-first century, but what is a very reduced ceremony compared with the pageantry that accompanied the Giant Swing Ceremony in the past still has the accoutrements of a ceremony that fixates on exact procedures which have been mastered by the royal priest to give to the gods a welcome and a departure fitting the most austere refinements of respect for the sacredness of these deities.

9 Discussion and Conclusion

The journey from the beginning of time when speech was first being formulated in the recesses of our ancestors minds to a small replica of Lord Brahma's mount carrying the miniature replicas of the gods on its back to return to the sacred mountain, covers a span of time lasting at least a quarter turn of the great year of some 26,000 years. The only evidence of civilizations existing prior to this time are stone megaliths and monuments scattered about the surface of the planet and under coastal waters (Hancock 1998). What I have covered in this chapter is a story of devotion to nature mimicking the forces impacting the earth leading to poetic expressions that have been forever saved in rituals and monuments which has led to the idea that our ancestors were guided by the stars and personified them with names and actions through verse and song giving us a clue to our shared heritage. By the time the swing reached the ancient city of Sukhothai, with King Lithai in the early thirteenth century to ancient Ayutthaya in the early seventeenth century with King Ramathibodi II and then King Rama I in 1784 in Bangkok, the swing transformed itself many times but it was still honored as a sacred way to pay homage to the gods. This could not be shown more dramatically than at the elaborate ritual performed at the Devasthan temple on the full moon of January 20. And as mentioned above, although King Rama IX (Maha Bhumibol – the present King of Thailand) was not in attendance, prayers for his well-being and the Kingdom of Thailand were still offered. If we are to learn from what has been left on this earth reminding us of our celestial heritage, then the wisdom that is transmitted through the ritual, which uses the swing as a metaphor to communicate with the gods could, therefore, be considered a direct link to understanding our shared mythologies. And now that we are at the threshold of another moment in time when the great year once again returns to its starting point and is about to begin another long swing of the ages, it would be prudent to listen and give respect to that wisdom that has been given to us, which is embedded in the ancient swinging rituals still being performed in Thailand and across all of India attracting millions of devotees who set out on their annual pilgrimages (Fig. 2.19).



Fig. 2.19 Author with Raja
Guru Jan 20, 2011

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