Chapter III

THE CHARIOT OF ĀŚVINS

The chariot of Āśvins is as much important in the Rgveda as Āśvins themselves. It carries them to the sacrifice from heaven or far off places within few minutes. Although other gods too have their chariots, the chariot of Āśvins is well known because it has some peculiar characteristics of its own.

First of all, it is designed by the three divine artificers, the Ṛbhus. The detailing of the chariot's construction has been spelled out in the Bṛh. D. like this - Sudhanvan, the son of Aṅgiras, had three sons - Ṛbhu, Vibhvan and Vāja. These three Ṛbhus became pupils of Tvaṣṭṛ, who instructed them in various arts. The All-Gods (visvedevas), who were also well-versed in the different arts,

1 \[\ldots\] ratham yam vāṃśbhavaścakruraśvina.  
RV.X.39.12.
challenged the Rbhus. The Rbhus then worked wonderful feats and built a splendid chariot with three seats for the use of Aśvin pair. This chariot is also said to have been born of 'Ṛta'.

Another characteristic of Aśvins' chariot is that it is peculiar in construction. It is triangular, three-wheeled, three-canopied and three-seated. At one place it is said to be made of three metals.

This number 'three' corresponds well to the two Aśvins and their common bride Sūryā. There is an interesting story about the marriage of Aśvins with Sūryā to Soma. Sūryā was desirous of giving his daughter Sūryā to Soma, but everyone of the rest of the gods desired her as a wife for himself.

---

1 sudhanvan aṅgirasasyaśsan putrāstrayaḥ purā, ribhurvibhvā ca vajaśca sīṣyāstvasṭusca te abhavan. sīksāyamasa tāṇstvāsta tvāstram yatkarma kimocana. parinīṣṭhitakarmano visvē devā upāvhyan.

.............

bṛhaspaterathāśvibhīyam ratham divyam trivandhuram. Bṛh.D.III.83.84.86a

2 ratho hi vāṃrtajā ... RV.III.58.8.

3 trivandhureṇa trīrvṛṭa ratheṇa tricakraṇa suvṛṭa yātamarvāk. RV.I.118.2.

4 ..... yenopāyātahā sukṛto duroṇam tridhātunā patatho-virna parṇaiḥ. RV.I.183.1.
They agreed that he who reaches the Sun first, will wed Sūryā. Aśvins were victorious and Sūryā, delighted by their success, rushed immediately to their chariot, as if it were a winning pole. Thus the third seat of Aśvins' chariot is specially meant for Sūryā.

After the seats of the chariot we come to its wheels. Just as it has three seats, it has three wheels also and hence it is called 'tricakrah'. Probably these three wheels signify that the chariot can travel over three regions, the heaven, the mid-air and the earth. Due to these courses of chariot it is known as triple-rolling 'trivṛṭā'.

But one of its wheels is said to have been lost when Aśvins came to the wedding of Sūryā. In the opinion of Bergaigne, one of these three wheels is hidden and the two others are known only to the priests. B.G. Tilak also thinks the same but only with a little variation. In his

1 ... triṣṭham vam sûre duhitā ruhad ratham.

RV.I.34.5.

See also: I.117.3; 118.5; 119.5; IV.43.2.6; 44.1; V.73.5; VI.65.5; VIII.18.10; X.85.12.

2 a vam ratham duhitā sūryasya kārṇmevātiṣṭhadarvatā jayantī.

RV.I.116.17.

3 RV.I.34.9; 118.2; 157.3; 183.1; IV.36.1; X.41.1.

4 kvaikam cakram vāmāsīt kva deṣṭraya tasthathuḥ.

RV.X.85.15.

view the third wheel is represented as deposited in a cave or a secret place, like the third step of Viṣṇu, which is beyond the ken of mortals. Elsewhere in the Rgveda, it is said that one of the three wheels is fixed at the top of the mountain while the other goes round the worlds. There is no mention of the third wheel here.

The chariot is sun-like or golden, like the chariot of Indra and of Savitṛ (RV.I.35.2). All its parts such as wheels, axle, fellies, supporting shaft, pole and reins, are golden. In one word, it is completely golden. But in

1 B.G. Tilak, Arctic Home In The Vedas. p.310.
2 nyaghnasya mūrdhani cakram rathasya yemathuḥ pari dyamanyadiyate.
   See also: RV.V.73.3.
3 ..... rathena suryatvaca
   See also: VIII.8.2.
4 pruṣayante vam pavayo hiranyaye rathe dasrā hiranyaye
   RV.I.139.3.
   See also: I.139.4; IV.44.4.5; V.77.3; VII.69.1; VIII.5.35; 22.9.
5 rathe hiranyaye ratheṣṭā
   RV.VI.29.2.
6 ratham hiranyavandhuram hiranyabhīṣumaśvina...
   RV.VIII.5.28.
   Again: hiranyayi vam rabhirīṣa akṣo hiranyayah
   ubhā cakra hiranyaya...
   RV.VIII.5.29.
   See also: RV.I.180.1; VIII.22.5.
the RV.VIII.5.29, we observe that only two wheels of Aśvins' chariot are golden and not the third one (ubha cakraḥ hiranyaḥ).

This characteristic of the Aśvins' chariot, viz. being made of gold, can be explained on the basis of the solar hypothesis. The repetition of the word 'hiranya' in this connection reminds us of the golden deity savitr, a sun-god, whose chariot is also said to be golden. Aśvins' chariot is the associator of solar rays. It extends over five countries. It moves round the heaven and earth within moments, like the chariots (mares) of the Sun and Usās. Moreover, just like the Sun, Aśvins' chariot scatters the

1 hiranyaḥ savita rathena ... RV.I.35.2.
See also: I.35.5.

2 esa sya bhūnurudiryati yujyate rathah pariṃdā divo asya śanaśi.
RV.IV.45.1
See also: RV.IV.44.1.

3 sa paprathāno abhi paśca bhūma ...
RV.VII.69.2.

4 ratho ha.... pari dyāväprithivi yāti sadyaḥ
RV.III.58.8.

5 bhadrā aśvā haritah suṛyasya ...
parsi dyāväprithivi yanti sadyaḥ.
RV.I.115.3.

6 yuyam hi devīrṛtayugbhiraśvaih pariprayāthas bhuvanāni sadyaḥ.
RV.IV.51.5.
surrounding darkness and spreads bright radiance over the firmament.  

But the solar attributes of Aśvins' chariot ought not to make us neglect their metrological attributes. Their chariot which is clad in dawn, is also called 'sahasraṁrīṇija' in the RV VIII.8.11.14 (having thousand ornaments) and it also has thousand banners. Perhaps these thousand banners represent the resplendent rays emanating from the chariot. This chariot of Aśvins is immortal. It travels in the ocean and in the rivers of heaven.

Having dealt with the construction of the chariot, we shall take up different animals which are yoked to this

1 apornuvantastama a parivṛṭam	svarṇa sukram tanvanta a rajaḥ
    RV.IV.45.2.


3 a vam ratham ... sahasraketum.
    RV.I.119.1.

4 ... vam ratho dasravamartyaḥ. RV.I.30.18.

5 ... vam ratho ... samudre aśvinyate. Ibid.

6 aritram vam divasprthu tīrthe sindhūnām.
    RV.I.46.8.

7 uru vam rathah pari nakṣati dyāmā yat samudrādabhi vartate vam.
    RV.IV.43.5.

See also: RV.I.180.1; IV.43.6.
wonderful chariot of Āśvins. The chariot is drawn by powerful horses, more commonly by birds or patatrin, swans, eagles, bird steeds or eagle-steeds, bull, and even by a crocodile or a single ass.

Now, having mentioned their names we shall deal with these animals in more detail.

The horses which draw Āśvins’ chariot are pure; drinkers of water, swift as the wind, heaven-born, quick-moving, quick as thought, vigorous and possessed of strong backs. These

---

1 a vam ratho ... vṛṣabhīryatvasvaiḥ. RV.VII.69.1. See also: RV.I.117.2. etc.
2 pra vam vayah vapuse anu paptan ... RV.VI.63.6.
3 .... patatribhiḥ. RV.VI.62.6.
4 hamsāso ye vam ... RV.IV.45.4.
5 ye apturo divyasa na grdhra ... RV.I.118.4.
6 a vam vayo asvāso ... RV.VI.63.7.
7 ...... śyenebhirusubhīḥ yatamaśvebhiraśvinī. RV.VIII.5.7.
8 revaduvāha sacano ratho vam vṛṣabhāśca śimśumāraśca yukta. RV.I.116.18.
9 Ibid.
10 kada yogo vajino rasabhasya ... RV.I.34.9. See also: RV.I.116.2.
11 a vamaśvasaḥ ācayah payaśpa. vataramhasa divyaśo atyah. manojuvo vṛṣano vitapraṣṭhā. eha svarājo āśvinā vahantu. RV.I.181.2.
horses have a shining form. They are bright like the Sun and they spread their glow around when they travel through the regions. They have red-colour. Being vigorous they are burthen-bearing, and are good as well.

The horses of Asvins chariot are very swift. They are swift as falcons. Because of their great speed they are given many epithets as 'swift like the wind', fleet as mind, fast moving, and having deft-limbs. Being

1 sindhurha vam rawaya simcadasvan.
   ghrna vayorusasah pari gman. RV.IV.43.6
2 akenipaso ahabhiravidhvatah svarna sukram tantanta rajah.
   surascidasvan yuyujana iyate visvan anu svadhaya cetathaspathah. RV.IV.45.6.
See also: RV.IV.45.2.
3 pari vamasva vapusah patamga vayo vahantvarusah abhike.
   RV.I.118.5.
See also: RV.IV.43.6; V.73.5.
4 ..... vahistha. RV.VI.63.7.
5 ..... svasva ..... RV.VII.68.1.
6 a vam vayo asvaso. RV.VI.63.7.
See also: RV.I.118.5; V.75.6; VI.63.6; VIII.5.33 etc.
7 ..... vibhihit ayleneva diyatam. RV.V.74.9.
8 ..... vataramhasah. RV.I.181.2.
9 ..... sasvadasvaih manojavebhih. RV.VI.62.3.
10 makgyubhirnarah hayebhiraśvina. RV.VII.74.4
11 ..... dravatpanibhiraśvaih. RV.VIII.5.35.
strong these horses are called 'bulls'.

As these horses are yoked by the gods, they do not get
tired, and at one yoking they go round the seven streams.

But we see that once for victory Aśvins drove their
chariot without yoking horses to it. This shows that Aśvins
are very good charioteers.

Though the chariot is drawn, usually, by horses, very
often the word 'horses' is substituted by the word 'birds'.
Sometimes they are the 'water birds' whose wings are
glistening and sometimes they are the shining or red-coloured
bird.

1 ...... vrṣabhīrystvasvaiḥ. RV.VII.69.1.
See also: RV.I.181.2.
2 ekasmin yoge bhuraṇā samāne.
    pari vām sapta śravato ratho gat. RV.VII.67.8.
3 anāśvam rathamāvatam jiše. RV.I.112.12.
4 pra vām vayo vapoṣe anu paptan. RV.VI.63.6.
    See also: RV.VI.63.7; VIII.5.33.
5 eha vām pruṣitapsavo vayo ... RV.VIII.5.33.
6 pari vamaruṣā vayo ghrṇā varanta ātapo.
    RV.V.73.5.
Swans also draw Āśvinī's chariot. They are rich in store of meath, are gold-winged, strong to draw, wakers at dawn, dispensers of water and shipping the meath-draughts.

After swans come eagles which are yoked to draw the chariot of these celestial twins. These birds draw the chariot with their great velocity. They have endless strength and travel unfatigued in the course of their journey. Quite often 'celestial vultures' are also seen to have been yoked to the chariot. Sometimes this word 'bird' is substituted by an epithet which merely suggests the idea of a bird like 'vīḻupatman' i.e. 'of powerful flight'.

After birds, the chariot is said to be drawn by a bull. This bull destroys enemies and brings nourishment to the

---

1 hamsāso .... RV.IV.45.4.
2 hamsāso ye vām madhumanto asridho hiraṇyaparṇa uhuva uṣārbudhaḥ
   udapruto mandino mandinisprśo madhvo na maṅ̄kaḥ
   savanāni gacchataḥ. RV.IV.45.4.
3 a vām āyenāso āśvinā vahantu rathe yuktāsa āsavaḥ
   pataṃgaḥ. RV.I.118.4.
4 patatribhiraśramairavyathibhirdamsanābhirasvina
   parayanta. RV.VII.69.7.
5 ye apturo divyaso na grdhra. RV.I.118.4.
   See also: RV.I.118.1.
6 RV.I.116.2.
worshippers. At some places this word 'bull' is replaced by another word 'kakuha'. Sometimes not only one but many 'kakuhas' are said to be yoked to the chariot. These 'kakuhas' are said to have been born of the waters. During their journey, mighty roar of the fierce 'kakuhas' can be heard. Macdonell takes 'kakuha' as a buffalo. But Bergaigne is of opinion that the word 'kakuha' in the hymns to Aśvins denotes the celestial Soma and not any animal. But most probably it is an Indian bullock which has a hump on its shoulders. This hunch-backed animal is mentioned at various places.

Another interesting animal is seen to have been yoked

1 pra vam śaradvān vṛṣabho na niśat pūrvirisascarati madhva isnan  
   RV.I.181.6
2 uta vām kakuho ...  RV.V.74.4.
3 vacyante vām kakuhaśo ...  RV.I.46.3
4 ... vām kakuha apsu jata.  RV.I.184.3.
5 ugro vām kakuho yayih śrove yameṣu santanih.  RV.V.73.7
6 Vedic Mythology, p.50.
7 Vedic Religion, Vol.II, p.44.9.
8 RV.I.158.3; 181.5.6; 184.3; IV.44.2; V.73; 75.4.
to the chariot of Āśvins. It is an ass but it is very mighty at the same time. By yoking this ass to their chariot, Āśvins were able to overcome thousands of enemies to the delight of Yama. The Bhāddevata states an ass as the mount of Āśvins. In the Yajurveda we find that asses as well as horses carry Āśvins to the sacrifice.

Sometimes we see a strange combination of animals. Once the chariot of Āśvins is said to have been drawn by an ox and a crocodile together side by side. Probably, this shows that Āśvins create harmony even in discordance.

Āśvins travel through the air, over the land and in the water. Perhaps for this purpose they require different types of animals. Being equipped with such a variety of animals, Āśvins travel everywhere within no time.

1. tad rāsabhō nāsatya ... RV.I.116.2.
2. kada yogo vajino rāsabhasya ... RV.I.34.9.
3. tad rāsabhō nāsatyaḥ sahasramajā yamasya pradhane jīgaya. ... RV.I.116.2.
5. tavaśvina rāsabhāśvā havam me ... YV.I.10.3.
6. revaduvaha sacano ratho vam vṛṣabhaśca śimsumārāśca yuktā.
   RV.I.116.18.
And to control these animals, Āśvins have a peculiar type of whip. It is called honey-whip, ‘madhukāśa’.\(^1\) With this whip Āśvins are prayed to sprinkle the sacrifice.\(^2\) In the Atharvaveda\(^3\) reas 1-10 and 21-22 are sung in praise of this wonderful honey-whip. It is said to have been born of heaven and earth and mid-air. It derives its origin from the Wind and the Agni. It is the first-born daughter of the Maruts but it is also the daughter of Vasus and is the mother of Ādityas. It is the centre of nectar and breath of living creatures. In the Vājasaneyī Samhita\(^4\) also the whip of Āśvins is said to be honey-hued. This whip perhaps signifies the stimulating and life-giving morning breeze which accompanies the first appearance of Āśvins, the Lords of Light.

Āśvins do not travel in only one chariot. There is a mention of three chariots also which have hundred wheels and six horses.\(^5\) Once, Āśvins, flying in these chariots over the

---

1 \(\text{ya vam kaśā madhumatyasvina} \ldots \text{RV.I.22.3.}\)

and also:

2 \(\text{ā na ērjam vahatamaśvina yuvam madhumatyaḥ naḥ kaśayā mimikṣatam. RV.157.4.}\)

3 \(\text{... taya yajñam mimikṣatam. RV.I.22.3.}\)

4 \(\text{yā vam kaśā madhumatīti. VS.VII.11.}\)

5 \(\text{... tribhi rathaiḥ satapadbhiḥ śadasvaih. RV.I.116.4.}\)
oceans for three nights and three days without any stoppage protected Bhujyu from the calamity that had fallen upon him, amidst the waters. At one place Aśvins are requested to come in their various chariots - in the best ones, in the medium ones and in the inferior ones. It is clear that Aśvins possess more than one chariot.

Apart from the chariot, we also see the mention of a boat or boats. With the help of these boats Aśvins rescue their proteges who have to face difficulties amidst the waters. Their boat, possessed of hundred oars rescued Bhujya from the Ocean where there was no support. This boat can be very easily compared to the chariot of Aśvins. The boat has hundred oars and the chariot has hundred wheels. Again, the same protege, Bhujyu, the son of Tugra, was protected by

1 tisraḥ kaśapastrirahātivrajadbhir
nasatyā bhujyumuhathuḥ patamgaiv
samudrasya dhanvannārdraśya pare
tribhī rathaś satapadbhiḥ sadasāvaiḥ. RV.I.116.4.
2 a paramabhīrata madhyamabhīr
niyudbhīryatamavamabhiravak. RV.VI.62.11.
3 anārambhāpe tadāvīrayēthamānāsthāpe agrabhāpe samudre
yadaśvīnā uhaθhurbhujiyumastam satākritam navamāta-
sthivāṃsam. RV.I.116.5.
4 ... satapadbhiḥ ... RV.I.116.4.
Aśvins with the help of their four boats. It appears that the word boat is used to show that Aśvins can travel over the waters with as much ease as they do on the skies. But one thing we notice here that the chariot of Aśvins is said to be golden but such is not the case with their boat or boats. On this point Tilak refers that "We read of a golden boat also in the Lettish mythology; and Prof. Max Müller, referring to it says, 'What the golden boat is that sinks into the sea and is mourned for by the daughter of the sky, however doubtful it may be elsewhere, is not to be mistaken in the mythology of the Lets. It is the setting sun, which in the Veda has to be saved by the Aśvins; it is the golden boat in which Helios and Heracles sail from west to east. Sometimes it is the Sun-daughter herself that is drowned like Cyavana in the Veda, and as Cyavana and similar heroes had to be saved in the Veda by the Aśvins, the Lets also call upon the Gods to row in a boat and save the sun-daughter.' In connection with this, it may be here observed that the Aśvins are described in the Rgveda as saving their protégés in boats, and that though Aśvins' boats are not

1 avaviddham taugryamapsvantaranārambhaṇe tamasi-praviddham
catasro nāvo jaṭhalasya juṣṭā udāśvibhyāmiṣitah-pārayanti. RV.I.182.6.

2 RV.I.116.3; 182.6.
described as golden, their chariot is said to be hiranyayi\(^1\) or golden.\(^2\) 

This chariot of Āśvins is immortal\(^3\). It has a golden colour, it is honey-hued and is dipped in ghee.\(^4\) All its parts are beautiful.\(^5\) It rolls beautifully\(^6\) because its wheels move very smoothly,\(^7\) and hence it is a very comfortable chariot.\(^8\) It gives a pleasant ride.\(^9\) No place is far or inaccessible for Āśvins when they travel in their chariot.\(^10\)

The chariot is famous for its great speed by which it can travel in all the three regions in the twinkling of an eye.\(^11\) Because of its great speed many epithets have been given to the chariot like its horses. It is swift as a hawk.\(^12\)
swifter than thought, swifter than the twinkling of an eye, and swiftest of all the chariots of the gods. It can assume any shape as that of a chariot or of a boat and urged by the press-stones it goes round the heaven and the earth within a few moments.

Aśvins yoke their chariot in the morning. Savitr sends this chariot before the dawn of the day. Aśvins mount it and go to the worshipper when Uṣas goes with the light and shines with the Sūrya. Thus the golden and gallant chariot of Aśvins, drawn by powerful horses, giving ghee on its way, shining by the glaze of its spokes, carrying the food on the right place and resounding the heaven and the earth like a mighty king surrounded by his army reaches the worshipper.
And finally, Aśvins' chariot is the harbinger of numerous types of gifts. It is the carrier of 'madhu'\textsuperscript{1}, the favourite drink of Aśvins. It has a leather vessel which is full of madhu\textsuperscript{2}. Only the chariot of Aśvins is said to be honey-hued i.e. 'madhuvarnaḥ'\textsuperscript{3} and the honey-bearing i.e. 'madhvaḥanaḥ'\textsuperscript{4}. Therefore, when it moves, its golden wheels, its spokes become wet by the dripping madhu\textsuperscript{5}. Even the 'worshippers' songs are connected with the chariot of Aśvins\textsuperscript{6}. This chariot carries on it wealth consisting of cows, horses and riches\textsuperscript{7} etc. It brings all fortune, happiness, prosperity and even property for the bipeds as well as the quadrupeds\textsuperscript{8}. In brief, it is possessed of all rich rewards\textsuperscript{9}.

\text\underline{\textsuperscript{1} pūrṇam ratham vahethe madhva acitam. RV.I.182.2.} \\
\text\underline{\textsuperscript{2} ... dṛśṭisturiyo madhuno vi rapsate. RV.IV.45.1.} \\
\text\underline{\textsuperscript{3} RV.V.77.3.} \\
\text\underline{\textsuperscript{4} RV.I.34.2.} \\
\text\underline{\textsuperscript{5} hiranyaya vām pavayaḥ pruṣāyan madhvah pibanta uṣasah sacethe. RV.I.180.1.} \\
See also: I.139.3. \\
\text\underline{\textsuperscript{6} sustubho vām vrṣanvaḥ rathe vanīcyāhita RV.V.75.4.} \\
\text\underline{\textsuperscript{7} a gomatā nāsatya rathenaśvavata puruṣcandraṇa. RV.VII.72.1.} \\
See also: RV.IV.44.1. \\
\text\underline{\textsuperscript{8} ... trivandhuro maghavā visvasaubhagaḥ sam na a vakṣad dvipade catuspade . RV.I.157.3.} \\
\text\underline{\textsuperscript{9} ghṛtavartaniḥ pavibhi rucana iṣam volahā nrpatirvajinīvan. RV.VII.69.1.}
In this way, the chariot of Āśvins occupies a unique position in the Ṛgveda. It is designed by the Ṛbhus, the divine artificers. It is triangular. All its parts are triple and it has three seats, two for the two Āśvins and one for their common bride Sūryā. It is completely golden, 'hiraṇyatvāk' or 'suryatvāk'. Various types of animals are yoked to it. These animals are horses, birds, falcons, swans, eagles, bull, ass and crocodile etc. which are controlled by a wonderful whip known as 'honey-whip'. The chariot is yoked at the break of the dawn. And lastly, it is the harbinger of all types of riches,¹ benevolent to the worshipper. Due to all these qualities, the chariot of Āśvins is known to be the best of all the chariots of the gods and therefore the worshippers invoke this widely-travelling and firm-built chariot like the name of a father.²

In the conclusion of this Chapter we can say that Āśvins' chariot represents the arrival time of Āśvins. The

1 About the 'riches' we have dealt in the Chapter VI.
2 yo vām pariṣma suvṛdaśvinā ratho doṣamuṣāso havyo-
haviṃmatā.
śāsvattamāstamā vāmidam vayam piturṇā nāma suhavam-
havamahe

RV.X.39.1.
chariot with all its parts, its rolling path and its various yoked animals are said to be of either red-colour or golden-colour, which (red-colour) may be seen at the end of the night. The honey-whip represents the morning breeze. All these details suit well with that of early morning. These descriptions also help us to determine the nature of twin Asvins as representing the natural phenomenon, especially appearing in the very early morning.