Chapter IV

ASVINS AND THEIR DRINKS

The favourite drink of Aśvins is Madhu\(^1\) (honey). They are more closely associated with honey than any of the other gods of the Vedic pantheon, and their connection with it is mentioned quite frequently in the Ṛgveda\(^2\). They desire honey and are the drinkers of it\(^3\). Once they are

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1 This 'Madhu' is seldom mentioned in the Avesta but we find 'Madhu' in the IE period - the Sanskrit 'Madhu' is 'Mēde' in Avestā, 'Medu' in Greek, 'Madus' in Lithuanian and 'Mead' in English.


2 madhu priyam bharatho yat saraṁbhyaṁ
tabhirū ṣu utibhirāśvinā gatam. RV.I.112.21.
See also: RV.I.117.6; 157.4; IV.45.3.4; X.41.3; 106.10.

3 ... madhupatama ... RV.VII.22.17.
... mādhvi ... RV.I.184.4; IV.43.4-5; V.75.1-9;
VI.63.8; VII.67.4.7.
... madhuvya ... RV.V.73.8; 74.9.
said to have poured out hundred jars of honey from the hoof of a horse. The birds which draw Aśvins’ chariot abound in honey. Aśvins themselves are once compared with the honeybees.

This Madhu is honey as it is connected with the honeybees who collect the honey in their mouth from all around. The bees had invoked Aśvins for obtaining the madhu and they (Aśvins) created the favourite madhu for the bees. The honey which the bees collect, is the essence or nectar of the flowers. It is collected diligently with hard labour.

The priest to whom they are invited to come is called honey-handed. The worshipper extracts the madhu for them, and invites them to enjoy the delightful drink. Aśvins go together to drink this sweet madhu in the morning.

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1. सुषषुष्यास्वस्य वाजिनो जानया सतम कुम्भान असिन्ताम अधुनाम। RV.I.117.6.
2. हांससासो ये वाम मधुमान्तो अस्रिद्धो। RV.IV.45.4.
3. अरामगरे वा मधवर्गे येते RV.IX.106.10.
4. युवर्हा मक्षा पार्यास्विना मध्वसा भररता निष्रतम ना योगाना RV.IX.40.6.
5. अध्वर्यूम वा मधुपानी RV.X.41.3.
6. अश्या पिबतामास्विना युवम मदास्या कारुनाह RV.VIII.5.14.
7. मध्वह पिबाता उषासाह साचेथ RV.I.180.1.
kept ready in large quantities specially for these twin
gods. Oblations sweetened with honey arouse Áśvins in the
morning. Worshipper offers Áśvins the praises anointed with
madhu i.e. sweet songs. The invoker offers madhu to Áśvins
for regaining his lost friendship with these gods.

Being very much fond of madhu Áśvins carry it on their
chariot. And as the chariot is full of honey, it looks like
honey-hued. It is only the chariot of Áśvins which is known
as honey-hued. Áśvins yoke their chariot for madhu, and
they drink madhu with their sweet mouths. Their horses
lead Áśvins to the extracted madhu. The whip of Áśvins is
also honey-hued (madhukasa), with which they besprinkle
the sacrifice.

1 ... vām nidhayo madhunam. RV.III.58.5
See also: RV.I.138.4; VII.69.2.
2. Ud vām prkaśa madhumanta īrate rathā aśvāsa uṣasov-yuṣṭīga. RV.IV.45.2.
3. vatso vām madhumad vaco ... RV.VIII.8.11.
4. punaḥ kṛṇvānaḥ sakhya śivāni madhva madema saha nu samānāh. RV.III.58.6.
5. trayāḥ pavayo madhuvahane rathe ... RV.I.34.2.
See also: RV.X.41.2.
6. hiranyatvāmadhuvargo ... RV.V.77.3.
7. madhune yuṅgāthām ratham. RV.IV.45.3.
8. madhvaḥ pibatam madhupebhirasbhīḥ. RV.I.34.10.
See also: IV.45.3.
9. a vām vahantu sthaviraso aśvāḥ pibātho asme suṣuta
madhūni. RV.VII.67.4.
10. taya yajñam mimiksatam. RV.I.22.3.
Asvins got this madhuvidyā from the sage Dadhyan. When honey-bees invoked them for obtaining madhu, Asvins approached the sage Dadhyan. He then, impacted the knowledge to them through the horse's head which Asvins had replaced for his real head. This knowledge seems to be a mysterious doctrine which Asvins got after pleasing the sage.

Asvins having a skin of mead on their chariot are prayed to like Puṣan who carries a skin (grḥṇi = drṭi) full of curd on his chariot. This benevolent activity of Puṣan, mentioned in the Brhaddevatā similar to that of Asvins who are said to sprinkle the sacrifice, with honey. The suppliant approaches Asvins for the sweet mead as he lauds Puṣan for his similar generous deeds. There seems a touch of human characteristics in the portrayal of both the gods Asvins and Puṣan.

Sometimes honey mixed with milk is also offered as a

1 We shall deal with the story of Dadhyan in more detail in Chapter V.
2 ॐ vartanim madhunā jinvathaspatho drṭim vahethe madhumantamāsvīna. RV.IV.45.3. See also RV.IV.45.1.
3 trcvo viśveṣām devānām puṣṇa āghṛṇaye trcaḥ, āṣakto hi ghṛṇistasya dadhnāḥ pūrṇo drṭi rathe. āghṛnistatstutah puṣṇa kīribhi ribhyate tataḥ, yathā hi madhunāḥ pūrṇo drṭirarthtyeti caāsvīnau. ॐ vartanim madhuneti drṭireva ca drṭyate.

drink for Asvins.¹

There is another god in the Rgveda who is closely connected with honey. He is Viṣṇu. His famous three steps are said to be full of honey.² And in the highest or third step, which is like the third wheel of Asvins’ chariot, there is a spring of mead.³

Asvins are, however, also fond of Soma.⁴ They are invited to drink it along with Agni, Indra, Varuṇa, Viṣṇu, Adityas, Rudras, Vasus, Uṣas and Sūrya.⁵

The worshipper who has extracted the soma invokes Asvins⁶ to drink it because they are known as the eternal drinkers of soma in the sacrifices of their favourite

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¹ ima hi vam gorjīka madhuni ... RV.III.58.4.
² yasya tri pūrṇa madhunā padāṇi ... RV.I.154.4.
³ viṣṇoḥ pade parame madhva utsah. RV.I.154.5.
⁴ ... somam pibatamasridhā sudānū. RV.III.58.7.
⁵ See also: RV.III.58.9; VIII.35.1-3; 7-9; 16-18; 22.
⁶ Agninendra varuṇena viṣṇuna adityai rudairvasubhiḥ sacābhuva, sajoṣasā uṣasā sūryena ca somam pibatamaśvīnā.
    RV.VIII.1
⁷ kanvāso vam sutasomā abhidyavo yuvāṁ havante asvinā.
    RV.I.47.4
worshippers. These twin gods are invoked to drink soma in the third pressing of the soma sacrifice. Sometimes they are asked to drink that soma which has been extracted a day earlier. Great care is taken in extracting the soma and offering it to Āśvins. The intelligent worshipper extracts sweet soma with washed hands. Being fond of soma Āśvins come to the sacrifice to drink it like a thirsty pair of deer. They go to the soma sacrifice like buffaloes, or fly like swans to the extracted soma. The worshipper offers soma to Āśvins thrice a day. Sometimes soma, mixed with madhu is also offered to Āśvins, and because of this

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1. saśvat kaṇṭānaṁ sādasi priye hi kam somam pathuraāśvinā
   RV.I.47.10.
2. agacchatam nāsatya śacībhīridam tritīyam savanam
   pibathah. RV.VIII.57.1.
3. nāsatya tiro anhyam juśāna somam pibatamasridhā sudanu
   RV.III.58.7.
4. yanniktahastastaraṇirvicakṣaṇāḥ somam suṣava madhum-
   mantamadribhiḥ. RV.IV.45.5.
   See also: RV.VIII.8.1; 87.4.
5. nara gaureva vidyutam trśāṇa asmākamadyasavanopayatam.
   RV.VII.69.6.
6. somam suṭam mahiṣevāva gacchathah. RV.VIII.35.7.8.
7. haṃśaviva patatho ... RV.VIII.35.8.
8. ... trayāḥ āhavastredhā haviskṛtam. RV.I.34.8.
9. ... pibatam somyam madhu. RV.VIII.8.1.
sweetened soma, Asvins were able to find out Vṛtra, the demon.¹

Not only the worshipper but the press-stones also invoke Asvins to descend from the heaven to drink Soma.² The sound of the press-stones is itself considered as a prayer.³

But Hillebrandt finds some traces that Asvins were first excluded from the circle of the Soma drinking gods. In the Taittiriya Samhitā⁴ it is mentioned that Asvins did not drink Soma in the beginning and later on they acquired the drinking of Soma. In the Mahābhārata⁵ also it is said that Indra, the Lord of Celestials, did not acknowledge the divinity of Asvins and their right, as by birth they were Śūdras; but he was compelled by Cyavana to do so, because

1 ayam soma madhumān vājinīvasu yena vṛtram ciketathāḥ. RV.VIII.9.8.
2 a vam grāvaṇo aśvina dhībhirvipra acucyavuḥ nasatyā somapītaye nabhantāmanyake same. RV.VIII.82.8.
3 These stones have a voice, RV.X.76.6; they speak, RV.V.31.12; 37.2; VIII.34.2; they speak to the gods RV.VII.68.4. Abel Bergaigne, Vedic Religion, Vol.I.p.281.
4 II.1.10.
5 XII.7590.
6 According to the MBh. I.2599, Asvins, the offsprings of Tvāṣṭrī and Savitṛ, belong to Guhyakas.
V. Fousboll, Indian Mythology according to the MBh. in outline. p.129.
Cyavana had received perpetual youth from Aśvins. This idea, however, might have come on the basis that Aśvins, being divine physicians, mixed too much with their human proteges which the gods did not like and thus discarded them from their own group. But such ideas may be easily contradicted on the basis of the references occurring in the Rgveda itself where we see that soma is also offered to Aśvins besides madhu.

Another favourite drink of Aśvins is 'Gharma' (heated milk). According to Griffith this gharma is always the hot-milk offering in the Aśvin-Atri legend. It is that drink which these gods brought to the famishing sage Atri when they lifted him up together with his followers out of the burning pit. This gharma is said to be 'madhumantam'. It seems that the gharma was either sweet in taste or it was mixed with honey just as soma was mixed with honey and was called 'somam madhumantam' or 'somyam madhu'.

1. Ibid.
2. adāro vam matinām nāsātyā maīavacasā pātam somasya dhṛṣṭuyā. RV.I.46.5.
   See also: RV.I.22.1; 46.12.13; 47.1.3.5.10; 180.4; III.58.4.6.9; IV.44.4.5; VI.78.3; VIII.5.14; 8.3-5; 33.1-10.
3. pibatam gharman madhumantamaśvinā ... RV.VIII.87.2.
4. ... gharman yad vamarepasam ... RV.V.73.6.
5. rbīse atrimāśvināvanītamunninyathuḥ sarvagānāṃsvasti. RV.I.116.8.
This gharma is variously described in the Rgveda. It is said to be 'pitumati urja', 'ūrja', and 'vayah'. Furthermore, it is also said to be 'omyavanta' and 'omanvanta' respectively at the RV.I.112.7 and the RV.X.39.9.

Sura (wine) is yet another favourite drink of Asvins. Intoxicated by this drink Asvins helped Indra in his act of killing a demon called Namuci. In the Vājasaneyī Samhitā, XIX to XXI sections give the prayers for the Sautramani celebration. It is a remarkable sacrificial ceremony at which, instead of soma, brandy or sura is used and sacrificed to Asvins, to the goddess Sarasvatī and to 'Indra'.

1 RV.I.116.8.
2 RV.I.118.7.
3 RV.VII.69.4.
4 yuvam suramāsvīna namucāvāsura sacā vipipiṇa śubhaspatī indram karmasvāvatam. RV.X.131.4.
6 Winternitz takes 'sura' as brandy and not as wine. Ibid.
In this way these joy-giving and intoxicating juices or drinks are offered to please Āśvins but among all these, madhu is their most desired and favourite drink just as soma of Indra. And only for this reason, the epithets 'madhupau' or 'mādhvī' and 'somapā' are well-known epithets of Āśvins and Indra respectively.