Chapter VIII

EPITHETS OF AŚVINS

The entire Rgveda is concerned mainly, with the praise and glorification of gods. They are the defication of certain phenomena of nature. As a result of this process it is quite natural to expect the use of adjectives or epithets with regard to these gods. The epithets aim at bringing certain qualities that are found remarkable and outstanding by the poet-seers. These adjectives also aim at eulogizing these gods through the medium of the small, yet significant, qualifying terms. Some of these adjectives like deva, ḍajan, asura etc. are common to most of the gods while others are peculiar to the gods alone; e.g. dhūmakedu, havyavahana, jātavedas, devavahana etc. of Agni, śacipati, sompā, sātakratu, vṛtrahan of Indra, maghonī, sūnarī, yuvati of Uṣas, and piyūṣa, amṛta and vanaspati of Soma.

Like these gods, Aśvins too, possess distinguishing
and qualifying epithets, which reveal their physical as well as mental nature. Here we shall take some of the very important epithets of Asvins.

The twin Asvins (ubhā) are, first of all, the sons of the Ocean (sindhu-mātāra). They are born in water (apsujātā), and they are also said to be the bearer of ocean (sindhu-vahasa). Probably this epithet is applied to them because their chariot, in the form of a boat traverses the ocean and protects their protégés, or this may be the celestial water also as they are also said to have been born of heaven (divo ajātā). But they are also said to the grandsons of heaven (divonapātā), and are nobly born (sujātā). However, at times they are said to be born 'here and here' (iheha jātā) and born variously (nānajātā). Probably these epithets show their all-pervasiveness or omnipresence as they are also called visvā.

One very important distinguishing characteristic of Asvins is their twinship. They are twins (mithunā, yamā). They are joined together (sakamyujā).

These gods (devau) are divine (divyā), and are associated

1 Please see Appendix No.3 for the detailed list of Asvins' epithets.
with other gods also (devayuktā). They are first-born (purajā) and ancient (purāṇā pratnā, arvacīnā, yuga) but surprising thing is that even then they are young (yuvānā) and handsome, (valgū), are possessed of undecaying youth (ajarau, ajarayū). Being young they are bright (śubhrā) in appearance and possessed of golden-brilliance (hiraṇyapēśāsa). They have acquired this brightness from the flames (dīyagnī) of the sacrifice. They are also 'lotus-wreathed' (puṣkara-sṛjā).

The poet-seers have anthropomorphised Aśvins as having nimble hands (dravatpaṇī). Their hands are beautiful (supaṇī), mighty (vilupaṇī, bhujī), long (purubhuja) and auspicious as well (bhadrāhasta). Probably this signifies their manifold activity and as hands are symbolic of creation, Aśvins are also known as creators (vedhasa).

Aśvins are immortal (amṛtā, amartyā), eternal (sāna), and being divine, they are the knower of heaven or themselves (svarvida) and can, therefore, reach the heaven (divisprśa).

Though Aśvins are gods, they are said to be the lords of men (nṛpatī) or kings (rajanau) who are very strong and thus called the 'leaders' (nara), the divine leaders (divo nara), so they are capable (śakrā) and powerful (ugrā) and
are the best killers of demons (vṛtra-hantamā) and the destroyer of enemies (ṛṣadasa). Being possessed of various abilities, they are also called 'doers' (kara), the doers of hundred deeds (satakratu). They are the most powerful (śaciṣṭha); they are skilful (sudakṣa) and possess unsurpassable capabilities (aturtadakṣa). Though they are the heroes (rudra), they are not hostile but noble who are religious-minded (dharmavanta) and performers of holy acts (śucivaśa, sukṛte).

These kingly heroes travel in the heaven, mid-air, earth and water in their wonderful chariot. Therefore, they are called not only the charioteers (rathāsahā, rathirā, rathyā and sarathā) but also the best charioteers (rathītama) because they won the race run by the celestial gods at the wedding of Sūryā. Their chariot is not an ordinary one, but well-built by the Ṛbhus; therefore, Āśvins are also called 'surathā' i.e. having a good chariot.

1 In YV. 'Rudrā' in dual, is used as an epithet of Āśvins, in the sense of 'heroic':
'gomadu su nāsatya āśvavad yātam āśvinavartī rudrā nrpāyam.'

Visveśaranand, IJ. p.323.
The path on which Aśvins chariot goes is of 'golden' or 'red' colour. Thus the attributes 'hiranyavartanī' and 'rudravartanī' are peculiar to these gods only. These epithets also show that Aśvins are the harbinger of dawn (Uśas). They appear before all morning deities (Usrā), and yoke their chariot early in the morning (prātaryujā).

Aśvins are extremely fond of Madhu (honey). In the Rgveda, none of the other god, is so closely associated with madhu as Aśvins. They are the drinkers of madhu (madhupau, madhupātama, madhvi). Both the Aśvins drink madhu together (madhuyū, paraspa); they are young because of drinking madhu (madhuyuva); and because of drinking too much madhu, they have become honey-hued (madhuvargā).

Aśvins hear the invocation of the sacrificer (havanāsruta). They are the ruler of sacrifice (adhvarāṇam rājanta); and therefore, they are the knower of sacrifice (kratuvidā, kratumantā). They are the bearer or performer of sacrifice (yajñavāhasā) and also help in the progress of sacrifice (ṛtavṛdhā).

Aśvins come to the sacrifice to fulfil the desires of their worshipper. So they are called the fulfiller of desires (vrṣaṇa). They are very bounteous (dānunospatī,
maghavanā, sudanu) and the givers of wealth (rayidau).

Various epithets to show their bounteous nature are –
jenyavasu, rayiṣam manotara, śācīpati, śācīvasu, vajaratna,
vajasatama, vajavanta, vajinivasu and vṛṣanvasu. They abound
in wealth (puruvasu), are the lords of ample wealth
(purubhojasā), and are the knowers of wealth (vasuvida).
Because of giving excessive wealth (māmhiṣṭhā) they are
praised by all (ukthya, vipanyū). They not only give wealth
but pleasure also at the time of war (mṛlayattamā); they
destroy the injurious persons (ṛṣadasā) as well as protect
the houses of their worshippers (chardispā). They take their
protégés to their destination (pārayanta) and they are
attached to the worldly people (adhopriyā); they are
pleasure-giver (purumandrā), nourishment-giver (bhuraṇā,
bhuraṇyū); and they are the protectors (jagatpā, avitarā,
purutra). But Aśvins are the givers of mental peace also
(sāmbhaviṣṭhā, sāmbhuva).

Now, the two epithets of Aśvins 'vṛṣanā' and 'śācīpati'
'sācīvasu' may be interpreted in another way also. 'Vṛṣanā'
is used to show the bounteous nature of Aśvins but at times,
it also shows their power or strength. Secondly, 'śācīvasu',
indicating the same benevolent nature, also suggests the
miraculous powers of Aśvins with which they perform the
wonderful deeds and render great help to their worshippers.

Because of their beauty and benevolence Aśvins are loved by many (purumantū, purupriyā, puruścandra) and are praised not only by many (purusprha) but by everybody (viśvavāra). Therefore, they are invoked by many (puruhūta) as well as by all (viśvagūrtī).

Aśvins are all-knowing gods (viśvavedāsā). They are possessed of vast knowledge or wisdom; therefore, they are called the poets (kavi); they are the promoters of intellect (dhījavana) as they are intelligent themselves (dhīṣṇyā). They are wise (navedasā) and are endowed with an enlightened mind (bodhinmanasa). They are very learned (vidvamsa) and are possessed of profound wisdom (gambhiracetasā, vicetasa). Therefore, they are praised or respected by intelligent persons (vipravahāsā). Being possessed of such strong mental qualities they are not deceived by anyone (adabdha, adabhya). Thus they are free from blemishes (arepasa, aripra) and their body is spotless (arepasa tanva).

Aśvins are omnipresent gods i.e. all pervasive gods (viśva), they remain present at many places (purubhū), and they are known to be appearing frequently in many regions (purubhūtama). They have to travel all over the universe;
therefore, they assume various forms (purutama) and according to their will they can assume any form whenever they want (mayavina, mayina).

Lastly, we come to the most important epithets of Asvins 'Dasra' and 'Nasatyā'. These two epithets are exclusively applied to these twin gods. 'Dasra' means 'wonder-workers', and Asvins are well-known for their wonder deeds. They are not only wonder-workers but are rich in such types of works, so they are called 'purudamsasa'. However, these deeds are noble, not hostile. Therefore, they are called the performers of 'noble-deeds' (sudamsasa). But Satavalekar takes the word 'dasra' in the sense of 'destroyer of enemies'. Swami Dayananda gives philosophical meaning to this word and takes it to mean 'the destroyer of maladies'.

Much more important than 'dasra' is the epithet 'nasatya'. This is so exclusively applied to Asvins that they are sometimes called Asvins and sometimes nasatyas, and very often by both names at the same time. Therefore, nasatya, instead of a mere epithet of Asvins, has almost become their designation. This epithet either means 'not-untrue' (na + asatya) (as shown by the double-negative), or born of nose.\(^1\) (nasa + tya) Shri Aurobindo gives to this

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\(^1\) As we see in the Matsya Purana etc.
epithet a philosophical touch. In his view, it is derived from "nas, meaning 'to move'; and thus explains them as the lords of 'movement' or 'energy'.

Thus, in brief, Asvins are the twin companions (sacabhuva), twin protectors (gopa mithuna) and are of one mind (samanasa).

In this way, we see that the epithets of Asvins play a significant role and help us immensely to draw a picture of Asvins as the lords of perfection who are possessed of all good qualities, physical as well as mental.

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1 M.P. Pandit, Key to Vedic Symbolism, p.52.