Chapter IX

ASVINS AND THE OTHER GODS

It is a common characteristic of the Vedic Gods that they are possessed of very few specific qualities and other qualities they derive from each other. Thus, most of the gods have the common features of being luminous, dispelling darkness, appearing in the morning and helping their worshippers at the time of need. Therefore, a stage comes where we can compare them with each other. But in this process one difficulty crops up and that is the determination of the independent origin of the gods. Similar is the case with Asvins about whom we shall deal here.

First of all, Indra, the most important of all the Ṛgvedic gods, may be compared with Asvins. Asvins are the companions of Indra as they are called Indra-yantā. Along with Indra, Asvins killed the enemies of their devotees.¹

¹ nirahatam ducchunā indravanta
prthuśravaso vrṣaṇavartatih. RV.I.116.21.
They are said to be very much like Indra - Indratama. And there are some epithets which are shared by both of these gods as maghavan, mayin, mayavin, sacipati, sakra and satakratu. However, some references in the Rgveda show the superiority of Aśvins even above Indra. Once, with the association of Sarasvatī and their miraculous powers they helped Indra in his battle with the demon Namuci. Aśvins, like Indra, help the cows by releasing them from a cavern. They are invoked together to come to the help of the worshippers. Aśvins conduct across the ocean (sindhu) while Indra, across the rivers like the Vipās and Śutudrī.

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1 yuvam suramamaśvina namucavāsura saca vippipāna subhaspati indram karmasvāvatam
RV.X.130.4.

and also: RV.X.130.5.

2 yabhiraṅgro manasa niraṇyatho - agram gacchatho vivare gojārṇasah.
RV.I.112.18.

3 ā me asya pratīvya indraṇāsatya gatam.
RV.VIII.28.8.

4 gaveva śubhre mātara rihāne vipāṭcchutudrī payasa javete.
RV.III.33.1.
Aśvins, however, are once associated with Indra in fight, thus receiving the epithet 'vṛtra-slayers'.

Both the gods, Aśvins and Indra are represented as great healers and deliverers in the Ṛgveda. But the difference, however, is that, the help which has been rendered by Aśvins is mostly a peaceful manifestation, while in the case of Indra it is mostly a deliverance from the foes in battle. If this is so, the identification between the twin Aśvins and Indra may appear to be contradictory about the peaceful nature of Aśvins, which represents a contrast to the fighting nature of Indra. But inspite of this contrast, a trait of resemblance may be noticed between the warrior god and the two physician gods, this trait being that they are equally benevolent towards their worshippers. It must be added that if Aśvins assume, only very rarely, the warlike qualities of Indra, the latter god also fulfils very often functions similar to those which characterise Aśvins.

Indra, like Aśvins, is a healer of diseases and a resuer also; he cures the blind and the lame and gives

1 vṛtrahantā ... RV.VII.89.22.
2 nīca santamudanayaḥ parāvrjam
   prāndham śroṇam śravayan ...
   RV.II.13.12.
vigour to the exhausted and to the emaciated. The lame one reminds us of Viśpala to whom Āśvins gave an iron-leg.

Like Āśvins, Indra presides over marriages. In II.17.7, where a supplicant of Indra compares himself to a girl who grows old in her father's house, we can find an allusion to the myth of Ghoṣa who was helped by Āśvins in getting husband.

Indra enables his protégés Turvaśa, Yadu, Turvīti and Vayya and Sudās to cross the waters and Āśvins help Bhujyu to cross the ocean. The name of Daśadyu (daśa, 'ten' and dyu 'day'), yet another protégé of Indra reminds us of a minor detail of the story of Rebha, who remained in the midst of water nine days and ten nights and who was saved on the tenth day by Āśvins. Finally, the legend of Āśvins, viz. that of a gift of a horse to Pedu to one of their favourites is well-known to the legend of Indra also.

Āśvins are related to Agni also, the god who held the second prominent place in the Rgveda. Āśvins make their appearance at the blazing of Agni, in the morning. Āśvins

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1 yo radhrasya codita yah kṛṣasya ... RV.II.12.6.
2 amajuriva pitroḥ saca satī samānādā sadastvāmiye bhagam. RV.II.17.7.
3 RV.I.33-.14; VI.26.4.
are invoked along with Agni in many hymns. They are invoked
to drink soma along with Agni. At the marriage of Śūryā,
Aśvins were the bridegrooms and Agni led them. Again, Agni
is said to be a mediator between the worshipper and Aśvins.

However, Aśvins are often associated and even identified
with Indra and Agni also. In RV.I.109.4 Indra and Agni are
formally called 'Aśvins'. It might not be a mere epithet
there but mean 'who have a horse' or 'possessed of horses'.
But if we observe that the word 'aśvin' (singular) has been
used of Agni in RV.VII.1.12, and of Indra in RV.I.53.4,
and that this has not been done in the case of any other god,

1 RV.I.181.9; III.29.6; IV.2.4 etc.
2 aghinendreṇa ... somam pibatamaśvīṇā.
   RV.VIII.35.1.
3 śūryā aśvīṇā vara āgnirāśīt purogavaḥ.
   RV.X.85.8.
4 RV.VII.9.5.
5 yamasvī nityamupayāti yajñam ...
6 ... nirundhāno amatim gobhiraśvīṇā.
it becomes probable that the Rṣis have really indicated to us the similarity between the two pairs of Aśvins and of Indrāgni. And lastly, the inimical fathers of the gods against whom Indra and Agni fight, correspond especially with the 'malevolent father', whom we find in the legends of Rṛāśva, Vandana and Rebha.

Thus, in support of the identification of Aśvins with Indra and Agni a number of arguments may be employed. As a result of these correspondences, these two pairs of gods have been sometimes treated as similar. But it is certain that the pair of Aśvins had an independent origin, although it may be similar to the pair of Indra and Agni, as we have said before that it is a common feature of all the Vedic gods to share the attributes of each other, except with a few of their own. They may be compared with each other but definitely they are different as it becomes clear when these gods are invoked separately in the same hymn.

Aśvins share some characteristics with Viṣṇu also. Viṣṇu has three strides and Aśvins also have three strides (padas). In the case of Viṣṇu the two padas are seen while

2 hataso vam pitaro devaśatrava
   indrāgni jīvatho yuvam.   RV.VI.59.1.
3 kasyāśvināvindro agniḥ sutasyām –
   śoḥ pibanti manasaśvivenam.   RV.IV.25.3.
4 trīniḥpadānyaśvinorāviḥ santi guhā paraḥ.   RV.VIII.8.23.
the third one is beyond the ken of mortals; whereas in the case of Āśvins it is their chariot, one wheel of which was lost at the time of Śūryā's marriage, and which is also said to be hidden at one place. Moreover, Āśvins are closely connected with madhu and Viṣṇu's three steps are said to be full of madhu and the third one is said to have a spring of madhu.

Āśvins are also associated with Uṣas, the goddess of Dawn. She is their sister. She is born at the yoking of their chariot. But sometimes she also awakens Āśvins, and when Uṣas appears and shines along with the Sun, the chariot of Āśvins goes to the house of the worshippers. Once Āśvins appear simultaneously with Uṣas. These various perplexing references show that the Rṣis themselves were not very clear about the phenomenon of Āśvins.

1 ... athaikam cakram yadgūhā ... RV.X.85.16.
2 viṣṇoḥ pade parame madhva utsaḥ. RV.I.154.5.
3 svava yadvam viśvagūrtī ... RV.I.180.2.
4 pra bodhayoso aśvinā pra devi sunṛte mahi. RV.VIII.9.17.
5 RV.VIII.9.18.
6 RV.IV.45.2; V.76.1; VII.69.5.
Next comes Sūryā with whom Aśvins are very intimately related. She is their wife and the third seat of their chariot is specially meant for her. Sūryā does not stand for any definite natural phenomenon. She could mean the essence of Savitṛ (being his daughter), the essence of light, and probably she symbolises the strength of Aśvins.

Aśvins are invoked to come along with Mitra and Varuṇa and protect their worshippers from all sins.\(^1\) Again, they come to the sacrifice along with Varuṇa and Viṣṇu.\(^2\) They are also invoked together with Aryaman, Varuṇa, Mitra, Indra, Viṣṇu, Maruts and Agni.\(^3\)

Along with Agni, Indra, Varuṇa, Viṣṇu, Ādityas, Rudras, Uṣas and Sūrya, Aśvins are invoked to drink the soma.\(^4\)

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1 RV.I.112.25.
2 RV.I.156.4.
3 aryamaṇaṁ varuṇaṁ mitrameṣā -
   mindrāviṣṇū maruto aśvinota.
   RV.IV.2.4.
4 agninendreṇa varuṇena viṣṇuṇā -
   dityai rudrairvasubhiḥ sacābhuva. 
   sajoṣasa uṣasa suryeṇa ca 
   somam pibatamasvinā.
   RV.VIII.35.1.
Once Aśvins are asked to come with Indra in the chariot, and they are also said to have stayed in the same house with Vāyu; they are said to be friendly with the Ādityas and Rbhus and they are also said to have stayed in the strides of Viṣṇu.¹

Furthermore, Aśvins are asked to come with all the thirty-three gods and drink soma². Aśvins' name occurs in many Viśvedēva hymns also.³

Thus, Aśvins, though sometimes compared with other gods, had their separate origin, as they are seen to have been invoked separately in the same hymns. This invocation of various gods together in the same hymn indicates towards the polytheism of the Rgveda when different gods were invoked for different purposes.

1 yadindrena saratham yatho
   yad va vayuna bhavathah samokasa
   yadaṇḍityeḥbhιṛṇbhubhiḥ sajoṣasa
   yad va viṣṇorvikramanēṣu tiṣṭhathah

RV. VIII.9.12.

2 viśvairdevaistribhikekadāṣairihā -
   dbhirmarudbhīrbrgubhiḥ sacābhuvā.
   sajoṣasa ugasā sūryeṇa ca
   somam pibatamaśvina. RV. VIII.35.3.

3 RV. I.64.27; 89.3; II.31.4; III.20.1; 54.16; V.41.3;
   42.18; 43.17; 46.2.4; 49.1; VI.50.10; VII.35.4;
   VIII.25.10; 57.4; X.35.6; etc.