Chapter XI

ASVINS IN THE LATER VEDIC AND OTHER LITERATURE

Religion and Mythology always go hand in hand; and every religion at every stage has a corresponding stage in its development of mythology. Thus the Rgvedic mythology, the Brahmanic mythology and the Epic and Paurānik mythology correspond to what we call the Rgvedic religion, the Brahmanic religion and the Epic and Paurānik religion.¹

Here we shall give a very brief picture of Āśvins as depicted in the later Vedas, Brāhmaṇas, Upaniṣads, Purāṇas and the Mahābhārata.

(i) In the Yajurveda

In the Yajurveda, Āśvins held a high place and were quite popular among deities. But they were gradually losing popularity. In this ritualistic period they were called the

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¹ G.V. Devasthali, Religion and Mythology of the Brāhmaṇas with particular reference to the Ś.Br, p.145.
sacrificers of gods 'devanam adhvaryu'.

They are represented as divine twins appearing in the morning. Here again, they are famous as divine physicians as they are in the Rgveda, who help worshippers by curing the blindness.

Being closely related to sacrifice, they are said to have cured sacrifice by replacing its head. Their paths are golden showing their time of appearance in the morning. Soma, Madhu, Gharma and Sura are the drinks offered to Aśvins. They are the bounteous gods who give all the riches. Among various gods they are closely associated with Sarasvatī.

1 prataryujau. TS.14.7.1.
2 ... yuvam caksurā dhattamakṣaryo. TS.2.2.5.4.
3 ... tau yajnasya śirah pratyadhattam. TS.4.4.9.1.
4 hiranyavartani ... Kāls.22.57; 21.79.
5 MS.2.3.8; 3.11.7.
6 madhu madhvibhyam ... MS.4.9.6.
7 aśvina gharmaṃ pātam ... MS.4.9.6.7.
8 VS.19.5-8.
and she is said to be their wife. They are wanderers among men. Because of too much mixing with men and performing miracles, which was considered to be impure, they gradually started losing their position and gods looked down upon them.

But the phenomenon of Asvins became more mysterious and four interpretations of their names were given like this -- the Heaven and the Earth, the Day and the Night, the Asvayuja constellation and the Prāna and the Apāna.

(ii) In the Atharvaveda:

As in the Rgveda, so in the Atharvaveda, Asvins are the sons of Vivasvat and Saranyu. They are invoked only in the morning. They are 'lotus-wreathed,' and are associated


1. sarasvatīryonyāṁ garbhāmanatarasvibhīyāṁ
2. patni sukṛtam vibharti

3. ... imau manusyacarau ...
4. ... dyāvapṛthivī vā aśvinau ...
5. ... ahoratre vā aśvina ... 
6. ... aśvayujau naksatramaśvina...
7. ... aśvinau ... praṇāpāna ...
8. apaguhannamṛtāṁ martyebhya

9. kṛtva savarnāmadadhurvivasvate.
10. utaśvīnāvabharad yat ... saranyuḥ
with honey. Their honey-whip has the impregnating powers. They are the physicians who restore the eye-sight and cure other diseases. But the greater emphasis has been given to their fertility aspect. They are invoked to unite loving couples for successful conception, and are known to increase the newly bride with offsprings. Like the Rgveda, in the Atharveda also, there is a mention of Aśvins' help to Indra at the time of slaying the demon Namuci. All the drinks of the Rgveda, madhu, soma, gharma etc are offered to Aśvins. They are the lords of wisdom and intellect, and are the removers of all miseries thus leading their worshipper to knowledge. They are also invoked for the production of crop and fruit. Again, in this Veda Aśvins are presented as the lords of perfection.

1 AV. VI.69.2; IX.1.10.24.
2 AV. II.29.6; VII.53.1.
3 garbham te aśvinobhā dhattām ... ŚS.7.53.1.
4 ŚS.14.2.13.
5 ŚS.20.123.4.
6 ŚS.7.73.4.5.
7 dhiye samaśvīnā prāvatam na uruṣyā na urujmannaprayumčan. ŚS.6.4.3,
8 aśvīnā phalam kalpayetām. PS.8.18.6.
The most prominent characteristic of the mythology of the Brahmāṇas appears to be its connection with sacrifice. Everything including the deities is connected with sacrifice directly or otherwise. Connection of the deities with sacrifice is noticeable in another way also. Thus Agni, Aśvins and Brhaspati are said to be the Hotṛ, the Adhvaryu and the Brahmāṇa respectively of sacrifice among gods, thus making them all subordinate to it.¹

In the Brahmāṇas, Aśvins are not addressed by their other names — Nasatya and Dasrā, and the story of their birth is also not found therein. Aśvins are said to be handsome, possessed of brilliant form; they wear lotus garlands.² They are inseparable and are compared to two ears and two nostrils.³ They are possessed of wisdom and intellect and called Brahmas.⁴ Being powerful, they are called 'nara'. They appear in the morning, yoke their chariot in the morning and start their journey early in the morning.⁵ Thus they are called essentially morning deities,

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¹ G.V.Devasthali, Religion and Mythology of the Brahmāṇas with particular reference to the S.Br, p.145.
² S.Br. V.5.4.1.
³ ... puṣkarasrajāviti. S.Br.IV.1.5.16.
⁴ ... śrotre aśvinau ... nāsike aśvinau ... S.Br.XII.9.1.13-14.
⁵ ... yuvam vai brahmāṇau ... S.Br.XII.7.1.10-11.
⁶ ... prataryāvaṇā ... Ait.Br.II.15.
and the path on which their chariot rolls is golden.

Asvins' most peculiar feature is, again, their medical and surgical skill. Thus they are called the 'physicians', and 'divine physicians'. They are described as wandering about the earth performing cures, and stated to have cured and healed whoever suffered from malady. Thus they healed the sage Cyavana and with the help of goddess Sarasvatī, cured Indra of the evil of soma-effects. They are the lords of fertility or creation and are the dispellers of darkness. They are also said to be associated with the two seasons - the spring and the summer are the gods of Asvini constellation; and they are also said to be the Heaven and the Earth. And lastly, along with being divine physicians,

1 yuvam vai brahmāṇau bhisajau ... Ś. Br. VIII.2.1.3.
3 Ś. Br. 4.1.5.
4 Ś. Br. 12.7.1-3.
5 ... vasantaṅgrīṣmāvevāśvinābhyaṁ ... Ś. Br. I.2.8.2.34.
6 ... aśvinoraśvayujau ... Tait. Br. I.5.1.5.
7 ... dyāvapṛthi-vi ... Ś. Br. IV.1.5-16.
Asvins are said to be the sacrificers. Thus we see that Asvins were gradually losing their popularity on account of their surgical power which was considered to be an impure act by the gods.

(iv) In the Upaniṣads:

The Samhitas and the Brāhmaṇas are called the 'karmakaṇḍa', and the Upaniṣads, the 'jñānakaṇḍa'. The Upaniṣads are absolutely in opposition with the rituals and we find there One Supreme Being, the absolute Truth. We may say that the Polytheism of the Ṛgveda had turned into Henotheism or Kathenotheism in the Upaniṣads.

The name of Asvins, in the Upaniṣads, is mentioned sparingly, but wherever they are referred to, they are said to be connected with procreation.

They are connected with madhu, and they are the knowers of the madhuvidyā, which they learnt from the sage Dadhyań.

As the Upaniṣads deal with only One Being, naturally Asvins also, are termed as the Supreme Being, i.e. the Self.

Being the gods of fertility, they are requested for the safe delivery of the child in the tenth month.

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1 asvināvadhvaryu. Ś. Br.III.9.4.3.
Thus, on the whole, we may say that being the gods of creation and light (wisdom in the Upaniṣadas), the physical basis of Āsvins was simply solar in its dual aspect of fertility and light and since both the aspects were quite important, they were treated as twin deities.

(v) In the Purāṇas:

In this section we shall see what the Purāṇas say about Āsvins.

In the Varāha Purāṇa, we get the following information about Āsvins. Samjñā turned herself in the form of a mare as she was unable to bear the lustre of Mārtanda. She went away keeping behind her Chāya. Mārtanda begot Śani and Tapati from Chāya. Chāya began to behave towards the children within an attitude of difference. Once the son Yama of Samjñā complained against Chāya. Thereupon Chāya asked Yama to become 'pretarāja' but the father Mārtanda made him a 'lokapāla' and blessed him to remain in heaven. Mārtanda cursed Śani, the son of Chāya, to be of evil eye. After that Mārtanda met Samjñā in the form of a mare. He turned himself into the form of a horse, and thereby Ravnidana and Narottama, the two sons were born to them. They are known

1 Ch.XX.vv.1-36.
as Aśvinīkumāras. They asked from Prajāpati, equal share among the gods as a result of their performing Vṛata. Brahmā gave them best form and capacity to heal every living creature.

Like the Rgveda, the Varāha Purāṇa also considers the two Aśvins as very beautiful.

If we are to compare the descriptions about the two Aśvins in the Varāha Purāṇa, the Vedas and the Brahmāṇas, we find that they have a good deal of diversity. The Varāha Purāṇa says that when Martanda goes to meet Saṃjña, at that time she was of the form of a mare and therefore Martanda assumes the form of a horse. Here Ravinandana and Narottama, the two Aśvinīkumāras are born of this horse and the mare. According to the Varāha Purāṇa one who wishes to obtain beauty has to perform uninterruptedly and with piousness a 'vrata' (fast) for one year, sustaining himself on food consisting of fruits and such a person possesses the qualities of Aśvins among men. The 'dvitiyā tithi' is especially suspicious to Aśvins. The Varāha Purāṇa pertains to 'Kanitavrata'. Herein it is said that moon was suffering from consumption. The moon performs this

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1 VP. Ch.20, v.36.
2 Ch.57.
'kanitavrata' and is cured of consumption. The tithi for 'kanitavrata' is 'dvitiya'. The 'dvitiya tithi' sacred to Āśvins is, therefore, quite appropriate.

In the Markandeya Purāna we find that on seeing Samjña in the form of a mare, the Sun also assumes the form of a horse. He then touches the nose of Samjña with his own nose. Thereupon Samjña conceives and gives birth to Nasatya and dasra.

In the Matsya Purāna the story about Āśvins' birth and that given in the Markandeya Purāna is very much similar and thus compared to the Varāhapurāna, is with greater detail and is much more specific and clear.

In the Devībhagavat Purāṇa, there is a 'katha' about Āśvins but that 'katha' does not throw any light on the birth of Āśvins as we find in the Varāha Purāṇa and other Purāṇas. The Devībhagavat Purāṇa lays great stress as regards Āśvins who become satisfied on getting a share in drinking

1 Ch. 105.
2 The story about the birth of Āśvins occurring in this Purāṇa has been dealt with in Ch. II.
3 Adhyaya VIII, Skanda 7.
soma whereas other Purānas lay stress on their (Asvins') birth.

Thus we see that in the Purānas the stories related with Asvins mainly deal with the birth of Asvins whereas in the Ṛgveda and other Vedas there is not even a single 'detailed' story which deals with their birth. Main stress, there, has been given to their miraculous deeds, i.e. the helps given to different persons and animals.

(vi) In the Mahābhārata

In the Mahābhārata, the two divine Asvins, tridāsāśvinau, 'Nasatya' and 'Dasra' by name who are distinguished by their personal beauty, are the heavenly physicians, who restore the beauty and youth of men, as they say themselves, "We are the two excellent divine physicians, we will make your (Sukanya's) husband young and beautiful." As in the Ṛgveda, so in the Mahābhārata, Asvins are well known for their beauty and succouring power.

The story of the old sage Cyavana, which is already related in the Ṛgveda, whom Asvins made young again is found

1 'Āvam devabhīṣagvarau yuvānam rūpasampannam kariṣyavaḥ patim tava'. M.Bh.III.10356.
in the Mahābhārata also, but in different versions. The story there (M.Bh.10345) is like this:

Once, the Āsvins happened to behold Sukanyā, when she had just bathed and when her person was bare. They fell in love with her and asked who she was. She answered that she was the daughter of King Śaryāti and wife of Cyavana. Being asked by Āsvins why she was serving an old decrepit husband, she answered that she was devoted to her husband. Āsvins said that they were the celestial physicians and if she chose one of the two Āsvins they would make her husband young and graceful. They asked her to bring her husband and let him enter into the lake together with them. Cyavana and Āsvins entered the lake and the next moment they all came out quite alike and in the dazzling beauty of youth. Then Āsvins asked Sukanyā to choose anyone whosoever pleased her most. She deliberated. At last, after ascertaining the identity of her husband, she chose him. Cyavana, in return for having

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1 Part of this story has been related in Ch.V, p.71.
2 "The Ś.Br. knows nothing of the fact that the Āsvins also step into the lake. But the Jaim. Br records that Cyavana had already previously given Sukanyā a sign by which she would recognise him." M. Winternitz. History of Indian Literature, Vol.I, p.391.
been rejuvenated and obtained his wife, promised to make Aśvins the drinkers of Soma in the presence of Indra, the Lord of Celestials. At a great sacrifice which he performed for Śaryāti, offered Soma to the Aśvins. Indra, however, did not concede Aśvins to be worthy of the Soma on account of their mixing with the mortals. But Cyavana took no notice of Indra's objections, and continued to sacrifice to the Aśvins. The enraged Indra wanted to hurl the thunderbolt upon him. At that moment, however, the saint paralysed the arm of the god, and in order to humble him thoroughly, by virtue of his asceticism, he created, a terrible monster, 'Mada', 'Intoxication'. With his huge mouth, he approached Indra and threatened to swallow him. Trembling with fear, Indra implored Cyavana to have mercy, and the latter, satisfied, let intoxication vanish again, dividing him among the intoxicating drink Sura, women, dice and chase.

Thus from this above story we can say that through the instrumentality of Cyavana, Aśvins got their share of

1 In the S.Br, there is no such humiliation of the god Cyavana only provided the Aśvins with the means by which they were voluntarily made participators in the Soma-drink by Indra and other gods." M. Winternitz, History of Indian Literature, Vol.I, p.392.

2 Please see Appendix No.4.
drinking Soma. Moreover, if we observe this story carefully, we shall notice that the two Aśvins are said to be separate as they ask Sukanyā to choose one of them. But one thing is certain and that is they stay together.

Another interesting feature of the Mahābhārata is that the twin brothers Nakula and Sahadeva are the sons of twin Aśvins. There is a fantastic story in the Mahābhārata according to which the five Pāṇḍavas, are supposed to have been begotten not 'by', but 'on behalf of' Pāṇḍu. Pāṇḍu killed a pair of antelopes at the time of compulation. In reality, it was a rṣi who had assumed the form of an antelope in order to enjoy love. So he cursed that Pāṇḍu would die during the enjoyment of love. Pāṇḍu, therefore, determined to lead the life of an ascetic and to renounce sexual pleasure. In order to provide descendants, however, Kuntī, the first wife, invoked the gods to beget children with her. Dharma, the god of justice, begot Yudhiṣṭhira with her, Vāyu, the god of the wind, begot strong Bhīma, and Indra, the king of gods, begot Arjuna. At Kuntī’s request, the twin Aśvins cohabited with Mādrī, the second wife of Pāṇḍu, and begot the twins Nakula and Sahadeva with her.¹

Ultimately, we may say that, though in the Puranas we find that Asvins are connected with rejuvenation and they make others beautiful, the main stress has been given there on their (Asvins) birth. In the Vedas and in the Mahabharata, they appear mainly as the divine physicians, who make their worshippers young, beautiful and happy, and also as the lords of procreation; whereas in the Upanishads, they are treated as the One Supreme Being, the knower of the Self or Truth.