

THE VEDIC GODS AGNI, INDRA AND SOMA AS INTERRELATED:
A STUDY OF SOMA

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The early Aryans were foodgatherers with grass-seeds as stable foodstuff. This was turned into flour, then into dough and baked in warm ashes, when fire became most essential. Without fire there would be no edible foodstuff, Fire, was now deified as Agni.

To generate fire was also a problem. This was achieved rubbing two pieces of wood. Hence arose the idea of progenitor of Agni, the actual generator of fire. This was conceived as Indra. Etymology confirms the position of Indra. Root *Indh* means, to kindle, and kindling precedes the actual state fire. *Indh-na* became Indra signifying Fire generator, the progenitor. Thus Agni and Indra belonged to the period when Aryans discovered fire as food-gatherers and occasionally as hunters which would be c. 10,000 B.C.

Later Aryans became mainly hunters. Hunting being strenuous they welcomed ephedra as an antifatigue drug. Its juice was an energizer which means bestower of physical strength as also of euphoria. It was consumed thrice a day so that the Aryan actually lived upon it. It is called Soma in *Rgveda*. Then if Agni gave edible food indirectly acting as cook. Soma gave foodstuff likewise indirectly acting as grocer. To the Aryan as hunters Soma became more important than Agni. *Rgveda* was composed by Aryans as nomads, first as hunters and later as pastorals. The word Soma then entered Sanskrit c. 4000 B.C. if not even earlier: We can now realize how Agni, Indra and Soma are mutually related.

Indra was fire-generator and Agni fire-god who together gave the edible form of stable food which was grass-seeds. Soma came as the energizer of the hunter who with its help could best procure food as meat. Roughly stated Agni was cook in disguise and Soma, a grocer. The importance of Agni and Soma was associated with food supply.

Even a preliminary study of *Rgveda* would show that it is Soma to whom most hymns have been dedicated, and collected together in book IX. Besides there are others isolated in the other books of *Rgveda*. The one authority who had appreciated this was Hillebrandt. Keith (1925, p. 171) writes that "he argues that the god Soma was the greatest and most popular of all Vedic gods and ranked even above Indra and far above the sun gods". Such a position can only be due to Soma proving to be most useful and beneficial to the Aryans. The problem takes us to the early history of the Aryans who later on came to appreciate Soma deifying the plant as god Soma.

The earliest man was a food gatherer but later on he became a hunter. While he gathered his main foodstuff it was of vegetable origin. Human dentation leaves us in no doubt as to the nature of foodstuff he used to consume. Early in the history of civilization he gathered grass seeds, ground them between stones, turned such flour into dough, which he baked in warm ashes. It was impossible to consume raw seeds. Lively (1959, p. 47) writes that "fuel was an important item in Mesopotamia" where agriculture began first. On p. 48 he continues saying that the "dough was placed in hot ashes and also covered with them, a method still in use by Bedouins". Meat on the contrary could be eaten as raw flesh. Here Filliozat (1956, p. 38) informs that Herodotus refers to some Indians finding "the best way to treat corpses.... the above mentioned Indians ate their dead relatives. They must have probably belonged to some tribe since then extinct". The raw flesh was eaten is mentioned even in *Rgveda*. Max Muller (1891 (a); p. 98) translates RV. VII. 104.2 thus: "Indra and Soma, slay the glutton villan who eats flesh and looks abominable". On the other hand for consuming seed-flour fire was necessary.

Man at the time was a cave dweller. In the West there was the Neanderthaler and his contemporary in the Far East was the Peking Man, *Sinanthropus pekinensis*. Cheng Te-Khun (1959, Vol. 1, p.24) writes about him as follows:

"The earliest stone implement was found associated with a few burnt bones, chopping tool with fluted edge (p. 20). Like all other Lower Paleolithic peoples *Sinanthropos* was a food-gatherer and hunter. His favourite food was venison. He hunted gazelle and horse. The extensive traces of fire found in his settlement indicate that he probably cooked his food over the open fire. Fire was a basic item in his life and he kept it burning with the wood of a shrub, the red bud. The discovery of thick layers of grain-husks in the cave point that he enjoyed vegetable diet" (p. 24). The point to be noted is that a dough of grass seed-flour can be best baked in ashes as Levy has described and not in open fire. But Cheng does emphasize that the Peking man found fire as a "basic item", in fact so necessary that he kept it always burning. Fire was generated by rubbing two pieces of dry stick and this in effect was more difficult to achieve than keeping fire always burning for which there was no scarcity of fuel. This custom then may have finally given rise to fire-worship and then to keep it always burning. We can now conclude that as prerequisite of edible food there was to be fire in the kitchen. If food was the first requirement for preserving life, fire became the second. In as much as baked foodstuff alone was edible, food and raw foodstuff was not, fire became the immediate producer of edible foodstuff. Thus arose its early importance. Here Max Muller (1891 (a); p. 121) writes that in the *Veda* we can watch the god of fire long before he is god at all and then a god above all others, a creator and ruler of the World" All this because he was the final food offerer.

Let us go deeper into the problem and consider the most pressing demands of primitive man. An Eskimo has correctly indicated these to be two: On leaving his tent *cold would be first and food next*. To the early man fire in the cave kept him warm besides providing him with baked foodstuffs. This would fully indicate that Agni

became the god first in importance or as Max Muller states “the god above all others”. Now if there is fire it has to be kindled. It was by no means easy to rub one stick against another to generate it. Then if Agni was god of fire there was to be another as his precursor. This became Indra. To appreciate the mutual relationships between Agni and Indra we have to etymologize their names. We begin with *Agni*. The root is “Ag,” which Bhide (1926) renders correctly as “to move in a zigzag way”. As derivative of “Ag” would be Agnis in Latin which Max Muller (1891; 1, p. 25) translates as “moving here, moving there,” amounting to zigzag way, recalling Bhide’s translation of the root “Ag.” In fact fire spreads itself everywhere by actually moving in a zigzag way. Max Muller finally writes (p. 125) that “Agni means Mover and no more.” Next comes the name of Indra. Griffith (1889, p. 60) writes, “*Indu*, literally Drop, from the same root as Indra, the Rainer, a name of the Moon as rain-giver and of Soma which is identical with it”. If there are three names Agni, Indra and Soma, let us first consider their origin or etymology and next how they are interrelated. Agni is fire-god, characterized by extreme mobility, as the name itself suggests. Indra comes as Rain-god from *Indu* as drop. Then Indra as Rain-god becomes the opposite of Agni, the Fire-god. Rain-god would be one whom the cultivator would need most while the hunter least of all. Moreover there would be the absence of a god who actually generates fire. Once Agni comes as fire god he cannot but create a position for a fire generating god as his predecessor and senior and this would be Indra. There is the root *Indh*, meaning “to kindle”, given by Suryakanta (1975, p. 161). Then *Indh*, Kindle, rather than *Indu*, Drop, would give as derivative *Indh-ra*, or *Ind-ra*, *Indra*, the Fire generator, whom the early Aryans would have most appreciated. The etymology of Indra and of Agni makes them both fire gods and related as progenitor and issue. Since nothing was required as an earlier stage than kindling fire Indra became the Chief god of the Aryan pantheon. And we know Indra is the Chief-god and not Agni.

We are now to visualize how these names Agni and Indra have been conceived and when. Both are fire-gods and as such both were conceived soon after man discovered fire. But even at that time although he was mainly a vegetarian and a food gatherer he did indulge in hunting. Cheng clearly mentions finding of grain husks and also charred bones of animals. Whereas grass seeds could be collected throughout the day hunting successfully depended upon an organised attack. My friend G.M. Mehkri has read a scientific article describing wolves and even dogs hunt in a group. The game animals spend their nights in a forest and appear with dawn to graze outside in the open ground where grass grows due to sunlight. Here the hunters, also organized in a group, have to be previously present occupying strategic positions. As soon as the animals are seen issuing from the forest hunting operations would begin. Now the crucial point for the hunters would be to rise early and occupy the strategic positions before the animals appear. What then gives the hunters the proper signal to leave their cave. It is the eastern sky that gives the warning to start for hunting. And this resulted in assigning Indra the position of *Prāci-pati*, given in Bhide’s Dictionary p. 773. Indra is also distinguished by the epithet *Prāci-pati*, *Prāci* = East and *Prāci-Pati*, Master-of-the East, becomes Indra. First the sky is bright and white, later it becomes yellow and very soon reddish. The sky thus reveals two main colours, whiteness to begin with and redness as the latest

and impressive. Max Muller (1891, (a): p. 19) observes that "Spiegel in Zend (Avesta) translates *Aruṣa* = White so that original meaning of *Aruṣa* = Bright, then bright like fire" when it has just started burning. But the same word *Aruṣa* as used in Vedic literature particularly as an adjective frequently applied to Soma" (p. 17). "We can only translate *Aruṣa* by the Red, understanding by this the name of the deity of the morning sun, the later *Aruṇa*". Since the sky is at first white and finally red the same word *Aruṣa* for Dawn, in Avesta means white and in Sanskrit Red. This removes the apparent discrepancy between the two different meanings assigned to the same word. In as much before the sun is actually seen above the horizon the sky is red, *Aruṣa* would be best rendered as Red. Even in New Testament St. Mathews (16:3, p. 3), we read that it "in the morning the heaven is red." What is interesting is to find in this connection reference to the Hero of Dawn. RV. III. 61.7 says "the hero in the depth of the heaven yearning for Dawn has entered the great sky and the earth".

Max Muller (1891a, p. 146) notes that "he who yearns for the Dawn is generally Indra." Then what qualifies Indra in this connection would be that RV.X. 43.9 says, "let the Red god shine with refulgent ray", and the Red god is Indra. All this goes to show the relative importance of Indra as compared with Agni. Nevertheless both as fire gods have become sky gods where their respective colours are to be seen. If fire was discovered say about 10,000 B.C. the names Agni and Indra could not be much later.

We have now to consider Soma. About 4000 B.C. the Aryans took to regular hunting. This was a very strenuous task. As nomads they came in contact with Chinese ascetics who have been using ephedra juice as energizer which bestowed physical strength as also euphoria. This has been explained in the monograph on Indian alchemy, (Mahdihassan, 1977). Finding hunting a tiresome task they welcomed ephedra as an anti-fatigue drug of which the juice proved a blessing. The hunter's life depended upon consuming ephedra juice which he drank thrice a day, which meant he actually lived upon it. If Agni offered food as cook, as explained earlier, Soma offered food as grocer, for without an energizer there could be no hunting and no foodstuff. Thus Soma came to supersede Agni, as Hillebrandt maintains because by the time Aryans composed *R̥gveda* they were hunters and were no longer food gatheres to whom Agni was the more important.

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