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## Facets of Agni

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The worship of gods in the Vedas is largely personifications of the powers of nature. The hymns are mainly invocations of these gods and are usually stated in the Ṛg Veda to be thirty-three in number, being divided into three groups of eleven distributed in earth, air, and heaven, the three divisions of the Universe. They are the celestial gods, atmospheric gods and terrestrial gods and Agni fall under the third category.

The gods were conceived as human in appearance. Thus the arms of the Sun are nothing more than his rays; and the tongue and limbs of Agni merely denote his flames. Some of the gods appear equipped as warriors, especially Indra, others are described as priests, especially Agni and Bṛhaspati. All of them drive through the air in cars, drawn chiefly by steeds, but sometimes by other animals.

### Agni in Vedas

Agni occupies a prominent place in the Vedas and particularly in the Brāhmaṇas. The ancient Indians recognized it as the power of heat and light and the will-power united with wisdom which they believed that this power could be strengthened by the Ṛg Vedic chants to Agni. The first line of the Ṛg Veda begins with an invocation to Agni - I magnify Agni, the domestic priest, the divine ministrant of the sacrifice, the invoker, best bestower of treasure.

अग्निमीले पुरोहितं यज्ञस्य देवमृत्विजम् । होतारं रत्नधातमम् ॥

The Vedic people developed the worship of Agni, personified and deified Agni as the banner of sacrifice, as the first domestic priest. Men have kindled Agni in the three fold abode. Coming on the same car with Indra and the Gods, may that most wise invoker sit down on the sacrificial grass for sacrifice.

यज्ञस्य केतुं प्रथमं पुरोहितम् अग्निं नरस्त्रिषधस्थे समीधिरे ।  
इन्द्रेण देवैः सरथं स बर्हिषि सीदन्नि होता यजथाय सुक्रतुः ॥ <sup>1</sup>

Agni became the messenger, who through yajña carries the oblations to the gods, to ensure the continuance of conditions favourable to mankind. In choosing Agni they choose one who has the wisdom of seer.

अग्निर्दूतो अभवद्भव्यवाहोऽग्निं वृणाना वृणते कविक्रतुम् ॥ <sup>2</sup>

Agni rules over the sacrifices, the shining guardian of the order growing in his own house. Agni is the guardian of the ṛta in the ritual sense, because the sacrificial fire is regularly kindled every day;

राजन्तमध्वराणां गोपामृतस्य दीदिविम् । वर्धमानं स्वे दमे ॥ <sup>3</sup>

In Vedic deities, Agni occupies after Indra, the most important position. In the Ṛg Veda there are over 200 hymns addressed to in praise of Agni. Agni is the ṛṣi (hymn-seer) of Sūkta of the Ṛg Veda, and along with Indra and Sūrya makes up the Vedic triad of deities.

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**Various names of Agni**

Amarakośa enumerates the various names of Agni. <sup>4</sup> Yāskācārya explains that the fire-god is called अग्नि (Agni) because he is अग्रणी (Agraṇī), the forward leader who is the ever awake, disseminator of knowledge and the first principle of thought which manifests as Speech; it is carried at the front in all ritualistic undertakings (yajñas).

अङ्गति ऊर्ध्वं गच्छति इति । अणि गतौ । तेजः पदार्थविशेषः । <sup>5</sup>

Thirteen names of Agni are enumerated in the Nighaṇṭu - द्रविणोदाः, इध्मः, तनूनपात्, नराशंस, इलः बर्हिः, द्वारः, उषानक्ता, दैव्याहोतारा, तिस्रोदेवीः, त्वष्टा, वनस्पतिः, स्वाहाकृतयः इति त्रयोदश पदानि ।<sup>6</sup>

Nārada describes to Yudhiṣṭhira that the assembly hall of Indra named Puṣkaramālini of the deity of one thousand sacrifices, which is full of lustre, obtained by him as the fruit of his actions. There in the eastern point, the twenty seven fires conveying the sacrificial ghee, Agni, Soma, the fire of Indra, Mitra, Sāvitrī and Aryama wait on Indra.

प्राची दिग् यज्ञवाहाश्च पावकाः सप्तविंशतिः ।  
अग्नीषोमौ तथेन्द्राग्नी मित्रश्च सवितार्यमा ॥ <sup>7</sup>

Nārada speaks about the twenty-seven fires conveying the sacrificial butter, which are:-

Angira – Angiras, son of Bharata, himself became Agni whom he surpassed when Agni began to practise penance, Dakṣhināgni- consecrated fire taken from the house-hold fire and placed in the southern side, Gārhapatya – the perpetual house-hold fire, Āhavanīya – consecrated fire taken from the house-hold fire and placed in the eastern side, Laukika – classical, belonging to the world of men, Vibhāvasu – one of the eight vasus, Soma – nectar, etc.

**Agni in Upaniṣads**

Īsopaniṣad focuses on this tradition of Agni as the Divine Will which motivates and executes. Here the Lord of fire has been solicited for enabling to know the mortal body and leading to aim of life through the best route.

O Agni, Lead us on an even, good way to prosperity, O God, you know all the ways. Keep far away from us crooked-going sin. We render most ample expression of adoration to you.

अग्ने नय सुपथा राये अस्मान्निश्चानि देव वयुनानि विद्वान् ।  
युयोध्यस्मज्जुहुरागमेनो भूयिष्ठां ते नम उक्तिं विधेम ॥ <sup>8</sup>

Pippalāda, the sage of the Pṛāśnopaniṣad, tells Kābandhi Kāṭayāna as to when creatures are born. The Sun rises in the East and illumines the Southern, the Western, the Northern, the Lower, the Upper, the intervening quarters, thereby it collects all living beings in its rays.

स एव वैश्वानरो विश्वरूपः प्राणोऽग्निरुदये तदेतदृचाभ्युक्तम् ।

"That Sun is in all forms, basis of all, and full of beams, Omniscient, loyal to penance and unique. That Sun with its thousand rays existing in hundreds of forms rise as the Pṛāṇa form to all living beings. That very one, Sūrya who is Āditya, rises up, who is Pṛāṇa and Agni, is identified with all creatures and is possessed of all fame."

विश्वरूपं हरिणं जातवेदसं परायणं ज्योतिरेकं तपन्तम् ।

सहस्ररश्मिः शतधा वर्तमानः प्राणः प्रजानामुसयत्येष सूर्यः ॥ <sup>9</sup>

In the Kenopaniṣad, Agni reveals his identity as the heat energy and the ever-burning flame of the conscious force in matter that makes up the entire world. The gods sent first Agni to find out the nature of Brahman, which means it is Agni that releases the energy which is latent in all beings. When the Yakṣa asked the Fire god about his powers he replied- I am Agni, Indeed, I burn everything here, and whatever there is here on the Earth.

सर्वं दहेयं यदिदं पृथिव्यामिति । <sup>10</sup>

Moreover, the sage of the Kenopaniṣad refers to the functional differentiation and specialization of body parts on which account the life-stream progresses when he speaks of Agni becoming the speech and entering the mouth and Vāyu becoming breath and entering the nostrils. And from Katopaniṣad becomes known about Yama taught Nachiketa the secrets of the fire that leads to heaven and what bricks were required to build the altar. Agni, the all-knower (jātavedas), hidden away in the two fire-sticks, like the embryo well borne by pregnant women, worthy to be worshiped day by day, by watchful men with oblations.

अरण्योर्निहितो जातवेदा गर्भं इव सुभृतो गर्भिणीयः ।

दिवे दिव ईड्यो जागृवद्भिहविष्मद्धर्मनुष्येभिरग्निः एतद्वै तन् ॥ <sup>11</sup>

Yama explains to Nachiketetas that like absolute soul (Paramātman) the fire etc. elements also get universal form through detachment.

अग्निर्यथैको भुवनं प्रविष्टो रूपं रूपं प्रतिरूपो बभूव ।

एकस्तथा सर्वभूतान्तरात्मा रूपं रूपं प्रयतिरूपो बहिश्च ॥ <sup>12</sup>

The ancient seers had divided Agni into three parts – gārhapatya (for general domestic usage), āhavanīya (for inviting and welcoming a personage or deity) and dakṣināgni (for fighting against all evil).

Before Satyakāma Jābāla, in bodily form arose the Three Sacrificial Fires to instruct him, the three fires were –

i) the गार्हपत्यः- the householder's fire instructed him that the ultimate reality was to be found in the sun, अथ हैनं गार्हपत्योऽनुशशास पृथिव्यग्निरन्नमादित्य इति य एष आदित्ये पुरुषो दृश्यते सोऽहमस्मि स एवाहमस्मीति ।

ii) the अन्वाहार्यपचनः- the southern sacrificial fire told him that it was to be found in the moon, and अथ हैनमन्वाहार्यपचनोऽनुशशासापो दिशो नक्षत्राणि चन्द्रमा इति य एष चन्द्रमसि पुरुषो दृश्यते सोऽहमस्मि स एवाहमस्मीति ।

iii) the आहवनीयः the eastern fire told him that it was to be found in the lightning, अथ हैनमाहवनीयोऽनुशशास प्राण आकाशो द्यौर्विद्युदिति य एष विद्युति पुरुषो दृश्यते सोऽहमस्मि स एवाहमस्मीति ।<sup>13</sup>

The three fires explained to Upakośala that the ultimate reality was to be found not in these three but in the image of the person reflected in the human eye.

The Chāndogyopaniṣad conceives the whole universal activity of creation as a kind of Yajña (sacrifice) where everything is connected; this sacrifice or knowledge is known as the Pañcāgni vidyā.

अथ ह य एतानेवं पञ्चाग्नीन्वेद न स ह तैरप्याचरन्पाप्मना  
लिप्यते शुद्ध पूतः पुण्यलोको भवति य एवं वेद य एवं वेद ॥ 14

The activity of creation (or of manifestation of any object) begins with the birth of the child (or with the production of an atom or molecule) whom the cosmos produces and not parents alone, then the child's presence is felt everywhere mainly because the universe is intimately inter-connected.

#### Agni as Purifier and Witness

In the Agniparīkṣā or 'the Fire ordeal' of Sītā, Agni acts as the witness. Afraid of popular ignominy Rāma suspects on Sītā's chastity to prove and record how pure Sītā was. Hence Rāma asks her to prove herself by entering into the fire. When Sītā was forced to undergo the ordeal to prove her virtue, she requests Agni to protect her and testify her purity.

त्वमग्नेः सर्वदेवानां शरीरान्तर गोचरः । त्वं साक्षी मम गेहस्यस्त्राहि मां देव  
सत्तम ॥

When Rāma questions Sītā as to how men acquainted with moral duty, accept for even a moment a woman carried off by another.

परहस्तगता नारीं मूर्हतमपि धारयेत् । कथं ह्यस्मद्विधो जातु जानन्  
धर्मविनिश्चियम् ॥

Vāyu, Agni and Brahma testify the purity of Sītā. O Scion of Raghu's race, I am in the body of every creature. O descendent of Kākutsa, the princess of Videha is thoroughly guiltless.

अहमन्तः शरीरस्थो भूतानां रघुनन्दन । सुसूक्ष्ममपि काकुत्स्थ मैथिली  
नापराध्यति ॥<sup>15</sup>

Vibhāvasu (the deity of fire) brings her out and says to Rāma-

अब्रवीत्तु तदा रामं साक्षी लोकस्य पावकः । एषा ते राम वैदेही पापमस्यां न  
विद्यते ॥

नैव वाचा न मनसा नैव बुद्ध्या न चक्षुषा । सुवृत्ता वृत्तशौटीर्यं  
त्वामत्यचरच्छुभा ॥<sup>16</sup>

Neither by words, mind, understanding nor eyes, She, good natured and beautiful has not deviated from you, who has got a good character and is heroic. With these words Agni testified the purity of Sītā and redeemed her from the wrath and condemnation of her husband Rāma.

#### Agni in the Mahābhārata

Agni's facets are interspersed throughout the epic and well laid in the Upākhyānas of the Mahābhārata. He acts as a physician, an examiner, a protector of the Śāraṅgakas, the destroyer of the Khāndavavana etc.

#### Agni as a doctor

There was once a sage called Dattātreya who had a son called Nimi. Nimi had a son who died after thousand years. The bereaved sage performed a Śrāddha which was attended by all devas. The feast was so sumptuous that all the devas had severe indigestion. Consulting Brahma, Agni prescribed a remedy for their indigestion.

He said "Whenever you take any food make me also a participant in that. If you do so, you will never get indigestion". That is why in a Śrāddha in making offering, a share is first offered to the God of fire. This is told by Bhīṣma to Dharmaputra on the origin of Śāradha.

सहितास्तात भोक्ष्यामो निवापे समुपस्थिते । जरायिव्यथ चाप्यमानं मया  
सार्धं न संशयः ॥<sup>17</sup>

#### Agni tests Uśīnara

In the Syenakapotopākhyānam of the Mahābhārata, King Uśīnara was tested for his generosity and compassion by Agni and Indra. Accordingly Agni took the form of a dove and Indra took the form of a hawk. The dove took refuge in the lap of King Uśīnara when he was chased by the hawk as its prey. When the King promised to protect the dove, the hawk demanded a portion of the flesh of the King equal to that of the dove. The King then cut his flesh and when he found that the flesh of the dove weighed more than his flesh, and no more flesh was left on his body, he himself mounted on the scale. Then the Gods revealed their true form and told him that they had come to test his virtuous merit and blessed him.

इन्द्रोऽहमस्मिधर्मज्ञ कपोतो हव्यवाडम् । जिज्ञासमानौधर्मं त्वां  
यज्ञवाटमुपागतौ ॥<sup>18</sup>

#### Agni-the protector and destroyer

In the "Khandava-daha Parva" of the Mahābhārata, Agni in the guise of a Brahmin approached Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna seeking sufficient food for gratification of his hunger; and on being asked about the kind of food which would gratify, Agni expressed the desire to consume the forest of Khandava protected by Indra for the sake of Takṣaka, the chief of the Nāgas, Agni wanted to regain his own nature, who having drunk clarified butter for twelve years had dulled at the sacrifice of Swetaki. Aided by Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna, Agni consumed the Khāndava forest, which burnt for fifteen days, sparing only Aśwasena, Maya, and the four birds called Śāraṅgakas; later, as a boon Arjuna got all his weapons from Indra and also the bow, Gāndiva, from Varuṇa.

In the Śāraṅgakaopākhyānam, Sage Mandapāla wanted to get off-springs within a short period to enjoy the fruits of his penance as only a son rescues the father from hell.

पुनामो नरकात् पुत्रस्त्रायते पितरं श्रुतिः ।<sup>19</sup>

Hence sage Mandapāla took the form of a Śāraṅgaka and through a female Śāraṅgika named Jaritā got four sons who were all utterers of Vedas. Leaving those sons with their mother Jaritā in the forest while they were still within the eggs the sage went to Lapitā to beget more children..

Sage Mandapāla while wandering in the forest with Lapitā, saw Agni coming towards the Khāndava to burn it. The sage knowing the intention of Agni and remembering that his children were young, gratified Agni.

O Agni you are the mouth of all the worlds, you are the carrier of sacrificial ghee.

त्वमग्ने सर्वलोकानां मुखं त्वमसि हव्यवाट् ।

The wise perform their sacrifices before you and they consider you as having eight mūrtis. The great ṛṣis say that this universe is erected by you.

त्वावष्टया कल्पयित्वा यज्ञवाहमकल्पयन् । त्वया विश्वमिदं सृष्टं वदन्ति परमर्ष्यः ॥

O effulgent deity, this universe is created by you. The Vedas are your words, all creatures, mobile and immobile depend on you.

दहन्ति सर्वभूतानि त्वत्तो निष्क्रम्य हेतयः । जातवेदस्त्वयैवेदं विश्वं सृष्टं महाद्युते ॥

Water primarily depends upon you. Whole universe also depends upon you. All offerings of sacrificial ghee and all libations of food offered to the Pitṛs have also been established in you.

तवैव कर्म विहितं भूतं सर्वं चराचरम् । त्वयाऽऽपो विहिताः पूर्वं त्वयि सर्वमिदं जगत् ॥ 20

Being pleased by the words of sage Mandapāla, Agni promised to spare the lives of the four Śāraṅgakas during the burning of Khāndhava vana.

Later when Agni in haste and with fearful flames came to the spot where the sons of Mandapāla were, the sons of Mandapāla with reverence uttered an eulogistic hymn to Agni. O Agni, we are in great distress, Protect us with your auspicious form and with your seven flames. We pray for your protection.

यदग्ने ते शिवं रूपं ये च ते सप्त हेतयः । तेन नः परिपाहि त्वमात्तान् वै शरणैषिणः ॥

O deity, O carrier of the sacrificial ghee, O Agni, you are the giver of heat, you alone give heat, you alone give heat to the rays of the Sun.

त्वमेवैकस्तपसे जातवेदो नान्यस्तप्ता विद्यते गोषु देव ।

O Agni you are everything. The whole universe is established in you. You uphold every creature and you support the worlds.

सर्वमग्ने त्वमेवैकस्त्वयि सर्वमिदं जगत् । त्वं धारयसि भूतानि भुवनं त्वं विभर्षि च ॥

O Agni you are the carrier of sacrificial ghee, you are the great sacrificial ghee itself. The wise know you to be One and at the same time Many.

त्वमग्निर्हव्यवाहस्त्वं त्वमेव परमं हविः । मनीषिणस्त्वां जानन्ति बहुधा चैकधापि च ॥

O carrier of the sacrificial ghee, you create the three worlds and you again destroy them when the time comes for their destruction by swelling your body to a fearful dimension. You are the pro generating mother of the whole universe; you are the essence also in which the universe dissolves.

सृष्ट्वा लोकांस्त्रीनिमान् हव्यवाह काले प्राप्ते पचसि पुनः समिद्धः ।

त्वं सर्वस्य भुवनस्य प्रसूतिस्त्वमेवाग्ने भवसि पुनः प्रतिष्ठा ॥

Having being addressed by the utterers of Vedas, Agni being well pleased and remembering his promise to Mandapāla, Agni spared the lives of the Śāraṅgakas and devoured the Khāndava vana.<sup>21</sup>

### Conclusion

According to Agnipurāṇa, which is the eighth in the list of eighteen Purāṇas, no god is approachable without the medium of Agni, and no divinity is obtained without the presence of Agni; his element is earth. At the command of Bṛghu, Agni was brought down from the heavens for man's use by Mātariṣvan, in the later writings Agni is described as a son of Aṅgiras who happened to discover fire and its uses. Agni as the immortal guest is the witness of all actions, supremely powerful, all consuming and irresistible but who commands all earthly and heavenly riches i.e. all temporal good.

The Vedas, Itihāsas and Purāṇas are the chief treatises and the various facets of Agni as a chief officiating priest, Examiner, Purifier, Protector, Destroyer revealer of truth are projected here. Various references from other literary resources may further show the role of Agni in various contexts and is quite thought provoking.

### Notes

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3. Rg Veda Agni.1.8
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6. Nighantu Ch.V
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13. Chandogya Upanisad.Ch IV-Part11.13
14. ibid.Ch V-Part10.10
15. Mahabharata Vana parva Ch.291 12,28
16. Ramayana Yuddha Khanda Ch.118.5,6
17. Mahabharata Anusasana Parva Ch.92.10
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