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A brief study of cosmological myths in rig-veda

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Abstract

Myths and narratives, though, both associated with religious studies; but they are different, to some extent, when it comes to accounting past. Myths have a distinctive character of past-telling and they are often concerned with 'grand events' of ancient times like creation of world, Gods, human race etc. Ancient Indian culture and myths surrounding it, most of them could be traced back in Rig-Veda, are no exception. Patterns and Ideas that encompass Rig-Vedic myths of creations is our topic of discussion in this article. We have tried to decipher few paradoxical ideas underlying these myths. For example, we are persistently told, in Nasadiya hymn or other philosophical hymns, of all these things that created have come into exist from nothing: a pattern of many world-creation that largely relate with *ex nihilo*; creation of something out of nothing. This pattern of creation goes in contrast with Sankhya philosophy where it is said about creation that existence came out of existence (sato sajjayate). Metaphors and allegories have been characteristic elements for the cosmological myths. We have got that idea, too, covered in our discussion. Rig-Vedic seers perpetually resorted to metaphors in representing creation stories: as they narrated making of the world as making of a house for an individual. For that world house many metaphors have been used as material. In Rig-Veda measuring and propping the three worlds up are central Vedic cosmogonic act that almost great Gods are ascribed with.

Keywords: Myths, rig-veda, creation, idea, aditi, daksa, philosophical, existence, agni, indra, ribhus, tvashtar, varuna, world-house, workmen, metaphors, asvin, savitar

Introduction

The organization of history revolves around two related components – the purpose of action and the agency of action. These components are by no means of equal importance but an element at least of each resides in all historical tradition. By the purpose of action is meant that all recordings of what believe to history has an aim and the agency of action is ultimately human. Events that takes place in a remote past often takes the form of a myth. Romila Thapar suggests myth as prototype history^[1] since its selection of ideas composed in a narrative form. Myths are often associated with religious ceremony, in that sense Puranic narratives were supposed to be myths. Myth are different by folktales by its focus on the 'grand events' in the past. Those 'grand events' like creation of world, human race, origin of gods, justification of kingship, Whereas, folktales generally concerned with restricted social pre-occupations. Our study would be solely confined to the myths of creation in Vedas only.

This study aimed at discussing creation myths at a narrow extent. The ideas on how the world was formed. Shape and the very patterns that include those ideas will be our subject of study. These patterns are various according to the specific historical and social conditions of the culture that held them. In Rig-Veda, most ancient among Vedas and oldest Indian text, we could encounter many theories of creation, more or less compatible, which would be brought under light of our critical study. There are many paradoxical ideas in origin myths of Rig-Veda. We are here to analyse those ideas comprehensively. Like every myth of society, creation myths, too, sets the stage for all prevailing thoughts nurtured by it. Those reflected thoughts will also be our topic of discussion. Metaphors and analogies that used in Rig Veda while describing the making of the world have their significance. These require some attention to discuss. Besides all this, creation myths do tackle many problems on the ultimate origin of it all. Examining thoughts, ideas and patterns of any culture that reveals in creation myth always remain helpful for understanding imagery power of the people of the past

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Paradoxical ideas of creation in Rig Veda

At first we could examine a poem that combines the earthy details of a woman giving birth to a child with the philosophical question about the role of gods in creation of the universe. In these verses of tenth book of Rig-Veda, we could witness the paradox of mutual creation of gods: Aditi and Daksha creates one another^[2]. Though Sayana, a later commentator of Vedas, try to explain that by the dharma of the gods, two births can be mutually productive of one another. Then comes other contradictive idea that the earth born from the crouching divinity is also said to be born from the quarters of the sky that are born from her.

Basic problems with creation is getting something from nothing; this philosophical paradox that at the primitive time of creation something was created out of nothing is central theme of creation in Rig- Veda along with others. This doctrine of creation that existence was born from non-existence, that we saw as a known fact in the Aditi-poem, is quarried in the opening line of an another poem that is known, from its first ward, as the name suggest, 'Nasadiya' or 'there was not' poem. This short linguistically straight forward hymn, which explicitly lays out an opening attitude, has provoked many complex commentaries among later scholars for its raising up unanswerable question. 'who really knows'? The poem states- "who really knows? Who will here to proclaim? Whence was it produced? Whence is this creation? The gods came afterwards, with the creation of this universe. Who then knows whence it has arisen – perhaps it formed itself, or perhaps it did not – the one who looks down on it, in the highest heaven, only he knows – or perhaps he does not know.

The last line – or perhaps he does not know – seems to have mocked all the rhetoric of more typical hymns in which it occurs. The hymn starts with confusing statement – 'there was neither non- existence nor existence then' – and then ends with more open-ended suggestion, 'perhaps he does not know'.

This attitude of ignorance about creation becomes more powerful in Upanishads, the philosophical commentaries of Vedas.

Generations in Rig-Vedic cosmology

There are three principal applications of metaphor that could be seen as parentage in Rig-Veda, temporal, generic and local. In the temporal sense it expresses the appearance of one phenomenon before another; the dawn (Usha) is the mother of sun, and of the morning sacrifice^[3] the parent. In another hymn, Maruts, the gods of the storm-cloud, are said to give birth to darkness, or again to the material cause, expressing the transformation of one object into another when rain is said to be born of the cloud^[4]. In another hymn, father is head of the son's family and the mother of the daughter's; his personality is continued in them^[5]. Thus the metaphor obtains a generic sense; Vayu is the father of winds, or of the storm-gods, Rudra is the father of the Maruts and Rudras. Soma is said to be father of the plants and of the prayers; Saraswati is the mother of rivers. The sons might be considered as inheriting the qualities of the father, as when Tvastar's epithet Viswarupa form him and becomes the name of his son^[6]. The places of father may be occupied by an abstract quality, as when Agni, the Maruts and others are called 'the sons of strength'. The metaphors in creation myths has local sense. The quiver is called the father of arrows^[7] carrying them as father carries his child in his arms. The earth is the mother of the trees and all things that she bears on her bosom, and the

heaven, the father of all things that move on the sky. Thus we could trace ideas similar to generations in the cosmological passages of Rig-Veda.

Generation too. Here the children beget their parents. God Indra beget his father and his mother from his own body^[8]. The first-born of heaven and earth is the sun. This birth is one of the most frequent topics of the Rig-Veda.

The making of 'World-house'

The ethos of nature might be described as the classification of natural forces and agencies. While classification based on science is entangled with uniformity of principal discovered by analysis and inductive reasoning; unscientific classifications are characterized by superficial comparisons. The former we commonly call explanations, the latter resemblances, analogies or metaphors. But in an age when scientific reasoning reaches destitution to some extent, this distinction between scientific classification and unscientific classification vanishes: the metaphor partakes the nature of explanation. The importance and significance of metaphors employed in Rig-Veda is seen in the consistency of their application as compared with the figurative or descriptive metaphors of modern poetry. Fixed comparisons are consecrated to particular uses endowed with a sanction which can only be explained as the result of very special sense. Thus in describing the building of the world one can find the Vedic poets resorting perpetually to metaphor of building with all its particulars. They accepted this comparison as the form of expression most applicable to creation. One can goes to remember the Vedic houses which was made of wood. To erect these houses there were different stages: first the cutting of the trees for wood, and measuring of the site; next fixing of the main- posts in the four corners supported by leaning buttresses, the covering-in of the whole ceiling with cross-beams, rafters, laths, mud or thatch to fill up the crevices.

We shall see all these stages recurring in the allusion of formation of the world. However, seers of the Rig-Veda are at a loss to explain whence the divine maker obtained their undecayable materials to form that world house. Two hymns in the tenth mandala, referred to god Viswadevas and Viswakarman, curiously put these unanswered question.

"What was the tree, what wood in sooth produced it,
from which they fashioned out the earth and heaven?
Ye thoughtful men inquire within your spirit
where or he stood when he established all things."^[9]

We can find this poem resonated with another hymn dedicated to the god Visvakarman^[10]. When it comes to measuring the place of world-house, we have two perpetual ancient dwelling places: heaven and earth, a frequent occurring in description of the creation of the world. Indra, as the representative of the gods, often found with this attribution of measurement of the heaven and earth.

"He it is who measured the six broad spaces,
from which no existing thing is excluded;
he it is who made the wide expanse of
earth and the lofty dome of the sky."^[11]

Measuring out and establishing the three worlds the three worlds for all creatures to dwell in, is a central Vedic cosmogonic act that most Vedic gods like Vishnu, Indra, Varuna etc. are attributed to. The idea of cosmic measurement we find more developed in a short hymn addressed to god

Vishnu:

“Let me now sing the heroic deeds of Vishnu, who has measured apart the realms of earth, who propped up the upper dwelling-place, striding far as he stepped forth three times. He alone with but three steps measured apart this long, far-reaching dwelling-place. Alone, he supports threefold the earth, the sky, and all creatures.”^[12]

Hence we find the god Vishnu as measurer of the world *par excellence*. The traversing sun act as measuring instrument in this cosmic act of measurement. The god Varuna standing in the region of firmament meted out the earth with the sun as measuring rod. Naturally, surveying a house starts from its front place. A hymn addressed to god Indra seems to have resonated with this usual act of surveying-

“From front, as it were a house, he ruled and measured; pierced with his bolt the fountain of the rivers, and made them flow at ease by paths far-reaching, these things did Indra in the Soma’s rapture.”^[13]

Firmness and compactness of the structure of a house determines its excellence. So, we are repeatedly told of their cosmic house-making efforts; like holding the earth and heaven fast, leaving the act as perpetual source of wonder even to the human-builder. Indra, the king of gods is mostly attributed with this heroic and vigorous deed. “Thou hast spread out wide earth, a mighty marvel, and, high thyself, propped lofty heaven”, “he sundered heaven and earth,” “that which thou make secure is secure”^[14], Without certainty of foundation, the compactness of the building is useless.

Divine workmen and their role as artisan in myths of creation

The actions of building the cosmic house, corresponding to the rough work of the Indian peasant, is attributed for the most part to the gods in general, to Indra, as the representative of the gods, or to Agni as the ordainer of all that is in the world. But there are other gods, such as Tvashtars and Ribhus, whose special character is based on their skill in finer works of the joiner art, such as would be delegated by the peasant to the professional workmen. The god Tvashtar and Ribhus are deserve special mentions in this regard. The god Tvashtar are the skilful carpenter-god, who, in particular manufactured with his hatchet the thunderbolt of Indra, but also in general, formed the Earth and Heaven and the parents with all other worldly creatures.

Hotar more skilled in sacrifice, bring hither with speed to-day God Tvashtar, thou who knowest even him who formed these two, the Earth and Heaven the parents, with their forms, and every creature.^[15]

He joined and held all the things that is known in this world^[16]. He is the god with omniform. He creates, begets, and feeds mankind in various manner, he verily is all these living creatures. He praised to be great god in the gods supreme dominion. The Tvashtar is extolled to be one of the gods who created, engendered sacred fire with his mighty power^[17]. But chief contribution of this proficient workman is soma, the gods drink. In Rig-Veda thus said- Tvashtar, most deft of workmen, knew each magic art, bringing most blessed bowls

that hold the drink of gods. His axe, wrought of good metal, he is sharpening now. Wherewith the radiant Brahmanspati will cut.

His special function in the natural world is the formation of embryo in the womb. The celestial artist god is said to be creator and shaper of embryo inside a woman’s womb. RigVeda mentions him thus-

“Even in the womb, god Tvashtar, vivifier, shaping all forms, creator, made us consorts. None violates his holy ordinances: That we are his the heaven and earth acknowledge.”^[18]

For this attribute of his work Atharva-Veda calls him as ‘Garbha-pati’ or ‘The lord of the womb’.

Tvashtar the divine artist, lay within the body of his dame. A male germ with the noblest form for her in the tenth month, to bear.”^[19]

From here the god Tvashtar regarded as the giver of children and multiplier of cattles. The menial character of Tvashtars activity, and his association with the harem of the gods covered him with a certain ridicule in the eyes of the Rishis. There is no hymn devoted solely to his praise in the whole collection. The god Indra is pictured as surpassing him in his own special department, the making of the soma or the rain in clouds:

“I set within these cows the white milk which no god, not even Tvashtars self, had there deposited”.²⁰“... even from his birth-time Indra conquered Tvashtar, bore off the soma and in beakers drank it”.^[21]

While a baby Indra stole the soma out of the bowls in Tvashtars house, where he tried to conceal it.

The same view of menial service of divine workmen is seen in the ascription to the Ribhus of human birth in the conception that they obtained their immortality by serving gods. The Ribhus (rbhu – meaning clever, skilful, prudent, are the semi-divine beings in the Rig-Veda and the Atharva-Veda. Ribhu, Vaja and Vibhvan collectively called by the name of their leader as Ribhus). The praise of the Ribhus consist in enumerations of a certain number of actions, expressed in fixed mythological figures, the discussion of which lies outside the scope of this essay. They made hymns and Soma like Tvashtar; they produced the wonderful chariot of Asvins and Indra’s thunderbolt and horses. They are even in one place said to have fashioned the Asvins themselves^[22] and they shaped plenty of milk-cows and formed the pair of horses. Ribhus, the children of sudhanvan (good archer), made a single chalice to be fourfold by their dexterity and skill as craftsmen^[23]. They made their aged and decrepit parents youthful and even reunited their old cows to her calves. These acts gained them the path of the life of the eternal in the gods assembly. The renovation of their parents and cows would seem to refer to the new birth of the world through the recurrence of the seasons; and they are once to have made heaven and earth which they set apart.

Ribhus, who helped their parents and the Asvins, who formed the milch-cow and the pair of horses, Made armour set the heaven and earth asunder, -- far-reaching Heroes, they have made good offspring.^[24]

We have the names of three Ribhus; but the varied character of their workings in the different departments of nature is emphasized by the mystic number, thrice seven of their gifts and find the expression 'all the Ribhus' employed as if of an indefinite number.

May we as Ribhu with your Ribhus conquer strength with our strength, as Vibhu with Vibhus.
May Vaja aid us in the fight for booty, and helped by Indra may we quell the foeman. ^[25]

Ribhukshana, Indra figures as their chief, or, in phrase of the Rig-Veda, they are his sons; he as a Ribhu bestows gifts or man and beasts ^[26].

The legends concerning Ribhus deserves special mention: their contest with Tvashtar in making four cups of Soma from his one, and their production of grass by refreshing the earth with streams after resting twelve days in the house of Aghoya. In first case, Tvashtar's defeats may be represented as conquest of a combination of inferior beings over single-handed mighty power. Ribhus, as we shall see was the case with Tvashtar, are brought into special connection with the sun, the main agent of creation in nature. 'they are as bright as sun', the sons of sudhanvan, 'the good archer'; "with their fathers energy they gained his wealth and mounted up in to the region of heaven". It is, in particular, the god Savitar who befriends them and procures their immortality.

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