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*The Original Hindu Triad.*—By Dr. HERBERT W. MAGOUN,  
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THE number three is indissolubly connected with the religious history of India. Its sacred character appears conspicuously in the Rig-Veda, and the modern Hindu triad—Brahma, Viṣṇu, Śiva—is familiar to all who have even a slight acquaintance with India or its people. But there have been other groups of three gods in the religious history of the Hindus; and, while the origin of the divine triad, as well as that of the sacredness of the number three, may never be fully known, it is interesting to note whatever may throw any possible light on the subject.

In one of the early Brahmanical writings, the Vedic investigator Yāska tells of certain scholars, more ancient than himself, who maintained that there were but three gods, although many names were used in speaking of them. The only gods whom these scholars admitted to exist were, a deity located on the earth, Agni; a deity dwelling in the atmosphere, to whom they allotted two names, Indra or Vāyu; and a deity whose home was in the heavenly regions, Sūrya. These three, then, constituted a triad, the earliest of which there is any mention; for, although groups of three gods can be found as far back as the Rig-Veda itself,—as, for example, Varuṇa, Mitra, and Aryaman, and the three Ṛbhus,—an ordinary group of three gods can hardly be called a triad, since a triad should possess marked differences, either in their field of action or in their characteristics.

In speaking of this early Brahmanical group of gods, a recent writer (Macdonell, *Vedic Mythology*, p. 69) says that the second member of the group was probably originally Trita, whom he further regards as a god of lightning. Later on in the book (p. 93), he concludes that the mystical threefold nature of Agni, as fire, lightning, and sun,—for the identification of Agni with the sun is also Vedic,—was the prototype of the groups, Sun, Wind, Fire, and Sun, Indra, Fire, which, though not Vedic, are ancient. He also calls attention to Agni's three dwelling places, in the order usually given, heaven, earth, and the waters, i. e., the rain-clouds. The position here taken must at once strike the reader as a reasonable one, on the whole; and it must be accepted, unless

a simpler and more natural one can be found. The notion that the light and heat of the sun came from the same source as the light and heat of a fire is based on a simple association of ideas, and need, therefore, produce no difficulty. By a similar process, Agni Vāidyuta and Trita may have also come to be identified as lightning, or the "middle Agni." It may be an interesting question, however, whether there are not other possible elements in the problem, and whether the origin of the groups mentioned cannot be pushed still further back. It is the object of this paper to consider briefly a few points looking in that direction.

The position has already been taken, in the preceding paper, "Apām Napāt in the Rig-Veda," that Apām Napāt and Agni were originally distinct gods, and that Apām Napāt was the name given to that phenomenon of the thunderstorm which is commonly spoken of as chain lightning. It may not be out of place to briefly refer to the reasons for this belief.

The name Apām Napāt is very old. If it is not Aryan, it is at least Indo-Iranian; for it appears not only in the Rik but also in the Avesta as the name of a god. In the Avesta, he is "the tall lord," or "the swift-horsed, the tall and shining lord";<sup>1</sup> or, as another translator has it in other portions of the Mazdean scriptures,<sup>2</sup> he is spoken of as "lofty," "kingly and brilliant," "glittering-one," etc.

In the Rik, he is a "driver-of-horses," ii. 35. 1, and vii. 47. 2; he is a god "whom stallions swift-as-thought convey," i. 186. 5; he "shines in the waters (rain-clouds, or rain-in-the-clouds) witho-need-of-kindlings," ii. 35. 4, and x. 30. 4; "his birth (is) in heaven, (and) no wrongs can reach (him) in his cloud-strongholds yonder," ii. 35. 6; he "shines far-and-wide with divine flame, in the waters," *l. c.*, 8; "(standing)-erect, clothed with light, (he) seeks the bosom of the oblique-ones (the streaming-rain); bearing his preeminent majesty, the golden streams press around (him)," *l. c.*, 9; "golden-colored," he descends from a golden seat, *l. c.*, 10; "here (on earth), he is-active in another's body (fire?), so-to-speak," *l. c.*, 13; and, "bringing (him) food, the waters, of-their-own-accord, quickly veil (him) standing on the highest station with undimmed (rays)," *l. c.*, 14. It is hardly necessary to say more, so perfectly does the whole description fit

<sup>1</sup> Darmesteter in *Sacred Books of the East*, xxiii. pp. 5-6, 14, 36, 38, etc.

<sup>2</sup> Mills, *ib.*, xxxi. pp. 197, 204, 219, 319, 326, etc.

the distant descending bolt. His food is supposed to be clarified butter, *l. c.*, 11 and 14, probably because of the sudden flame which it produces when poured into a fire; while the swift veiling by the waters doubtless refers to the sudden withdrawal of the bolt from sight. Apām Napāt, then, is a god of lightning pure and simple, and he seems to have had that character from the beginning.

Turning now to Agni, it will be observed that he is essentially the god of fire, and the antiquity of his fire character is attested by the Latin *ignis* whose proper meaning is simply 'fire.' But that he was originally the lightning-kindled-fire is to be inferred from the fact that the Grecian myth, according to which fire first came from heaven, is to be traced in the Rig-Veda (Hopkins, *Religions of India*, pp. 108-110), and also from the fact that Agni has, in parts of the Rik, a lightning character. Agni, then, from his original character as the lightning-kindled-fire, or, better, the lightning-stroke-which-results-in-fire, developed, as a Vedic god, a twofold nature, i. e., he became both fire and lightning; but, by a later extension, he also came to include the sun, and this gave him his mystical threefold character as fire, lightning, and sun.

Such a genesis seems, at least, to account most readily for all his peculiarities, even to the function of 'spook-killer,' *rakṣohān*, x. 87. 1, etc.; for the ancient Hindus, like their modern brethren, believed that the air about them was infested with spooks and goblins of various kinds. To suppose that fire is fatal to evil spirits, seems, under ordinary circumstances, like a strange notion; but, to one who has seen the stroke, the lightning-kindled-fire becomes a most natural death-dealer to the goblins of the air. As a rule, such a stroke is simply a terrible blinding flash; for a distant observer can hardly be aware of the stroke at all, except by inference. Occasionally, a sudden streak of dazzling light, more or less approaching the horizontal, may be seen by some one looking in the direction taken by the bolt; and its effect upon the mind can hardly be described. The sudden passage of a large swift-winged bird just over the head may sometimes produce a startled sensation akin to that produced by the flight of the lightning's bolt; but nothing else in nature approaches it. For this reason, it is not strange, perhaps, that Agni, in his lightning character, is sometimes the 'eagle' in the Rik (see M. Bloomfield, in *JAOS.*, xvi. 1 ff.); and, if his name means 'Agile-one,' as is supposed, it was certainly appropriate.

No wonder that the superstitious Hindu observer, or his ancestors, felt that such a stroke must have proved fatal to many a spook, and this original idea of the lightning-stroke-in-the-fire can still be traced in passages to Agni, the 'goblin-smiter'; as, for example, "pierce him (the sorcerer) thou slinger with (thy) dart, (thou) keen-one," *tám ástā vidhya śárvā śiṣānah*, x. 87. 6. To the lightning side of his nature, doubtless, is also to be traced the epithet *vṛtrahán*, 'dragon-slayer,' which is applied to Agni alone with any frequency, if Indra be omitted. The blinding flash does not always strike, nor does it always leave fire behind it when it strikes; but it would very soon tend to be regarded, for the most part, as Agni just the same, and, if some chance beholder were to see a tree cleft by a sudden thunderbolt, it would be a very simple and a perfectly natural bit of reasoning which would lead to the conclusion that Agni could and actually did smite the 'cloud-dragon' also in like manner. Whether the *Vṛtra*, i. e., the 'cloud-dragon,' myth arose from a lack of rain or from a fear lest the light was to be snatched from men, would not affect the question; for, when the blinding flashes begin to come, not only does the rain descend but the heaviest clouds also pass over and the light begins to return.

But close observers must soon have noticed that there was a third form of lightning no less conspicuous than the other two; and the wonderful play of the cloud-bolts in the sky, which also often produce a blinding flash, may well have excited the wonder and admiration of a primitive people in a land of violent thunder-storms such as both the Hindus and their ancestors seem to have inhabited. Very soon also the question must have suggested itself whether this third form of lightning was not after all the god who destroyed the 'cloud-dragon,' since he always appeared so high up in the air where the 'sky-dragon' was, and since he always seemed to be smiting something there just as Agni was sometimes seen to do on the earth. Speaking of him as the 'third-one,' he may soon have come to be simply 'Third,' and it is possible that this was the way in which Trita got his name.

As the conviction grew that Trita, 'Third,' was the real smiter of the 'cloud-' or 'sky-dragon,' the myth would naturally tend to become attached to him even more strongly than it was to Agni; and, when Indra at length displaced him and became the supreme god of the storm, it was to be expected that he would also usurp the function of 'dragon-killer'; for it must be remem-

bered that Trita, as well as Apām Napāt, was probably an Indo-Iranian god, while Indra seems to have been purely a Hindu creation.

Just here it may be noted that Apām Napāt never appears in the role of a 'fiend-smiter' in either the Rik or the Avesta. In the latter, to be sure, when Ātar, 'Fire,' and Azhi Dahāka (the Avestan sky-dragon) are battling for "the awful Glory that cannot be forcibly seized, made by Mazda," i. e., the light (physical and sacerdotal); Apām Napāt seizes the "Glory" when it flees to "the sea Vouru-Kasha," or the upper air (see SBE. vol. iv., *Introd.*, pp. lxii–lxiii, and vol. xxiii. pp. 297–9); but he takes no other part in the fight. If, now, Apām Napāt is the lightning form of Agni, as is commonly supposed, and if the epithet *vṛtrahān* was transferred to Agni from Indra, as is commonly held, it is difficult to understand, on *a priori* grounds, why Apām Napāt never has the character of a fiend-smiter, even if he does not receive the epithet *vṛtrahān*; for assuredly it is the lightning side of Agni which is most prominent in both Agni Vṛtrahan and the dual divinity Indrāgnī. See RV., iii. 20. 4, i. 59. 6, x. 69. 12, etc., and i. 108, v. 86, vi. 59, vii. 93, etc. Again, since the Zend word Verethraghna, from its etymology, must originally have been an adjective, and since the Avestan god Verethraghna is identified with the sacred fire of the Parsis, which was the great spook-killer of the Magi, it appears that Agni Vṛtrahan and Verethraghna were, in all probability, closely related; but Verethraghna and Apām Napāt have no connection in the Avesta. In short Agni and Apām Napāt must have been decidedly distinct in the early days.

It is perfectly clear to us, to be sure, that the two kinds of lightning are really identical; but to assume that the early Vedic Hindus or the Indo-Iranians possessed the same knowledge is to attribute to them a degree of intellectual power in the analysis of natural phenomena which their whole religious history belies. If they ever discovered the actual identity of the two, it must have been the result of some accidental combination of circumstances, the full force of which they would be very slow to admit. In fact, just such an accident might account for the statement which appears in ii. 35. 13, "Apām Napāt is-active here in another's body, so-to-speak," i. e., when he appears on earth, he looks like Agni; but this does not prove the identity of the two.

Turning again to Trita, it will be noticed that he is called *āptyá*, 'dwelling-in-the-waters,' i. e., the clouds; and the title is significant. If the three gods are grouped together, we shall have: 'Agile-one,' the fire-producing-stroke or the blinding-flash, who is active on the earth; 'Son of the Waters,' the distant-descending-bolt, who is born in heaven and descends from his golden seat, and is therefore a god located in the air; and 'Third Whose-home-is-in-the-clouds,' a divinity of the sky. In other words, the three will constitute an incipient triad which must be very ancient.

It may not be unreasonable to suppose that the original Hindu triad, or an Indo-Iranian triad, was so constituted. But, since the blinding flash came down from the clouds as well as the distant bolt, Agni was occasionally spoken of as a "son of the waters," and this fact may have ultimately led to a confusion of the two. Whatever the cause may have been, Apām Napāt seems to have been so overshadowed by the remarkable development of Agni that he lost his character as a distinct god and was then practically absorbed. In the meantime the light and heat of the sun had come to be attributed to Agni; and, as the sun is evidently higher than the lightning, it was a natural step forward to assign to the sun the highest position, while Trita dropped back into second place. In time, Trita's turn also came; and, as he yielded his chief feats and characteristics to Indra in other things, he may well have been displaced, as god of the atmosphere, by his more popular rival.

Just what connection Vāyu had with the matter when the triad finally emerged from the nebulous state into a well recognized group, cannot be determined, beyond the mere fact that, as god of the wind, he was naturally the god of the atmosphere; but, in any case, his connection with the latter triad came rather from his relation to Indra than from any association with the other gods concerned.