

Myths of Indra in the Mahābhārata

Dr. Kartik Pandya^१

Indra is the king of gods. He is the favorite son of Aditī. He has yellow eyes and yellow beard. He rides in a yellow chariot drawn by yellow steeds and wears golden chains. He is surrounded by one hundred youths, who sing and chant for him and Indra himself looks like a youth of 25 years in appearance.^२ He is seated in an ineffable throne having a diadem, red bracelets, white robes and variegated garlands.^३ He guards the eastern quarters.^४ He is armed with the thunderbolt which has six faces, and is capable of splitting, is terrible in nature and is made up of the bones of Dadhīchi.^५ He gives rains to all and owns the rain (Ambudeśvara). He slays Vṛtra and releases the waters to the people. His archrival is Vṛtra and Indra fought with him. Indra fought with Tvastr and also with Viśvarūpa. The epic deals with the clash of Viśvarūpa and Indra, Indra and Tvastr and Indra and Vṛtra in an exhaustive manner.

Tvastr is referred to as Indra's father in Ṛgveda.^६ Indra kills Tvastr in a Ṛgvedic myth. He is the father of Vṛtra, an archrival of Indra. Vṛtra's parents are Tvastr and Danu^७. They had a number of sons and one among them was

^१ Research Officer, Shree Somnath Sanskrit University, Rajendra Bhuvan Road, Veraval.
Dist. - Gir Somnath, Gujarat (India)

^२ *Mahābhārata*, III.57.24 & *Ṛgveda*, III.5.5

^३ *Mahābhārata*, II.7.41

^४ *Daśaśatākṣa*, *Mahābhārata*, VII.184.47

^५ *Mahābhārata*, XII.285.11f

^६ *Ṛgveda*, IV.18 and VIII.77 cf Brown (1950 and 1942)

^७ *Ṛgveda*, I.32.9

Puloman.^१ His daughter was Paulomī whom Indra married and kills his father-in-law.^२

Indra against Tvastr: Tvastr superseded Indra. Then Indra thought, "If he rejects me now from this sacrifice, I will always be rejected. I will slay him". With his thunderbolt in his hand, Indra closely follows him there. The former took refuge with his wives. Indra did not follow him there. Later Indra drank Soma. Tvastr came afterwards and asked, "Is anything left". The Śeśa was given to them, Tvastr threw it into the fire and Vṛtra was born.^३

What was the secret behind Tvastr taking refuge with the wives? An episode in the Ṛgveda makes it clear: 'Ṛbhus, the artisans among mortals, fashioned out four divine cups and brought it to the heaven. Tvastr being jealous of Ṛbhus took shelter among the wives and later planned to kill them. But he was prevented from doing this heinous act by his daughter who was a common property of the mortals and gods.'^४

Indra against Viśvarūpa: Tvastr, the lord of the creatures and the foremost of the celestials, was engaged in practicing rigid austerity. Tvastr, out of enmity with Indra created a son having three heads. He had three faces compared with the sun, moon and fire, Viśvarūpa, being his name. He read the Vedas with one mouth drank wine with the other and saw the world with the third face. He was interested in religious practices and austerity and did lot of penance. Indra was afraid of his penance and of his own seat. So he thought of killing him. He deputed a band of celestial nymphs to seduce Trīśiras or Viśvarūpa. They went to Trīśiras and tempted him with various gestures and with dancing and revealing

^१ *Mahābhārata*, I.65.21

^२ *Harivaṃśam app. 1 no.*, V.1.116

^३ *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa*, II.1.55

^४ Doniger Wendy, *The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology*, MBS, Reprint, New Delhi, Edition 1988, p. 78

their beautiful bodies. They moved wantonly but Viśvarūpa engaged in meditation did not experience an erection. He controlled his senses like a calm ocean. The heavenly nymphs returned to Śakra and informed him of their unsuccessful mission. Then Indra thought of hurling down the thunderbolt upon Triśiras. He said to himself, "A strong man must not disregard even a weak enemy who is increasing in strength". And thus reflecting upon this, he struck his thunderbolt against Triśiras who fell like a peak of mountain thrown upon the surface of the earth. But Viśvarūpa had a blazing and effulgent appearance and looked like one alive.

At that moment Indra saw a carpenter approaching the region and he requested the carpenter to cut off Viśvarūpa's head. The carpenter refused to kill Viśvarūpa because his axe was not strong enough, besides it was an act condemned by good people. The carpenter came to know that he was Indra and asked him, "How is it Śakra, that you are not shameful of this wicked act?" Indra replied that he would perform some difficult religious acts for the sake of expiating the sin. Indra promised the woodcutter as a reward that in future, he would be given the heads of the sacrificial beasts by me and demanded him to behead Viśvarūpa. Then the woodcutter cut off the head of Triśiras with an axe. There came forth a number of birds such as hen, cocks, partridges, sparrows, from the head of Triśiras. Then Indra went back happily to heaven and the woodcutter also went home".^१

Viśvarūpa appears only for a brief period in the Ṛgveda.^२ He is a priest. Initially priest of the Rods and a sister's son of the Asuras, Viśvarūpa, the son of Tvastr̥, was the family priest of the gods. Viśvarūpa gave a part of the sacrifice in secret to the Asuras. While in public he served the gods. The Asuras complained this to their mother and said that they were growing weak because of his act. Triśira's mother found him in Nandana grove and persuaded him to join Hiraṇyakaśipu, who made Triśiras as the royal priest having disbanded Vaśiṣṭa.

^१ *Mahābhārata*, V.9.3-52/5, *Mahābhārata*, V.10.1-46/a & *Ṛgveda*, V.9.17

^२ *Ṛgveda*, I.32.7, *Ṛgveda*, X.8.8-9 & *Mahābhārata*, XII.243.28 f

Vaśiṣṭha cursed Hiranyakaśipu. Meanwhile, Indra became alarmed at Trīśira's ascetic power and tried to seduce him through a nymph. Trīśiras enjoyed the nymph but kept his power and began to drink the gods' soma with one mouth, eat sacrifice with another and consumed the gods' power with the third mouth. On the advice of Brahman, the distracted gods got Dadhīchi to give up his bones. Dhātṛ made a thunderbolt and Indra killed him with that weapon".^१

Summary: 1. The myth of Indra and Tvastr̥ indicates the classic clash of father and the son. Tvastr̥ was the father of Indra. But Indra tried to kill his father as he was afraid of the former's hegemony and superiority. He engaged himself in an eternal conflict with Tvastr̥ but could not kill him. Indra further decides to kill his sons. "The clash is originally one of psychological significance, based on kinship but later foreshadowed by partisan opposition".^२

2. Further, Tvastr̥'s sons Viśvarūpa and Vṛtra oppose Indra but Tvastr̥ supports them. Indra is afraid of his usurpation of seat. Indra is a power monger like our present day politicians, prepared to stoop down to any level to defend his throne. Viśvarūpa although the son of a demon, is aping and feeling the gestures of the gods. Indra decides to put an end to his glorious ambition and kills him with his thunderbolt. By this action, he fulfills two of his objectives:

a. temporary threat to the throne is allayed

b. instead of killing the father he has killed the son and satisfies his alter-ego.

3. Tvastr̥ creates Vṛtra with the sole intention of killing Indra and to avenge the death of his son, Viśvarūpa. Indra has a natural hatred towards his cousins, the

^१ Hopkins E. W., *Epic Mythology*, MBS, Reprint, Delhi, Edition 1988, p. 130

^२ Doniger Wendy, *The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology*, MBS, Reprint, New Delhi, Edition 1988, p. 102

demons. He behaves like a demon by despising a Brahmin, Viśvarūpa.^३ In the process, he gains the role of a Demon whereas Viśvarūpa with his noble thinking behaves like a god. It is surprising to note that later Viśvarūpa is given a godly status and becomes an Iconographic form of Viṣṇu in the later Hindu mythology.

^३ *Janmanā jāyate śudraḥ karmaṇā jāyate dvijaḥ*, Bhagavad Gītā, IV