

SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE RELATIONS
BETWEEN “GODS” AND “POWERS” IN THE VEDA,
A PROPOS OF THE PHRASE
SŪNUḤ SAHASAḤ

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J. GONDA

I

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I

Authorities seem to be almost unanimous with regard to the interpretation of the well-known Vedic phrase *sūnuḥ sahasaḥ* which, applied to Agni, admits of the literal translation “son of power”: this name is generally held to have been given to the god because he, i.e. fire, is produced by ‘the powerful friction’ of the kindling sticks.¹ Macdonell,² who does not subscribe to this explanation without some reserve, refers, like other scholars, in substantiation of this view to a passage of the Ṛgveda stating that Agni – the god of fire who is never separated from the element which he represents – “rubbed with strength is produced by men on the surface of the earth” (ṚV. 6,48,5 *sahasā yo mathito jāyate nṛbhiḥ pṛthivyā adhi sānavi*). It must be admitted that at first sight this reference seems a convincing argument, more convincing in any case than ṚV. 1,27,2 *sa ghā naḥ sūnuḥ śavasā* “he (Agni) our son by (with, through) ‘power’” which is interpreted by Geldner³ as: “er, unser Sohn durch (unsere) Kraft”, which is a possibility, not a necessity. A closer examination of all the data relative to Agni – who being one god, exists in innumerable flames –, to his birth, the conception of birth in general, *sahas* and similar powers, and the interrelations between ‘gods’ and ‘impersonal powers’, may however induce us to ask ourselves whether the traditional view should be accepted integrally.

As a correct understanding of this rather frequent phrase used in connection with one of the main deities of the Vedic pantheon is of some

¹ See e.g. Petrograd Dict. VII, 867 (“Agni als der durch Kraft der Reibung er, zeugte”); R. Roth, *ZDMG*, 43, p. 593; H. Oldenberg, *Die Religion des Veda* (1923)-p. 120; A. B. Keith, *The religion and philosophy of the Veda and Upanishads* (Harvard, 1925), who makes, in this connection, mention of Agni’s being credited with ten mothers, because friction is engendered by the action of both hands. Compare also K. F. Geldner’s translation of ṚV. 1,27,2 “unser Sohn durch (unsere) Kraft”. For Agni’s other births which can be left unmentioned here, see e.g. Oldenberg, *o.c.*, p. 107f., and *Ṛgveda, Textkritische und exegetische Noten*, I (Berlin, 1909), p. 6 f.; 239 ff.

² A. A. Macdonell, *Vedic Mythology* (Strassburg, 1897), p. 91. (On p. 12 the same author is, as far as I am able to see, nearer to the truth.) A similar cautious formulation was chosen by L. Renou, *L’Inde classique*, I (Paris, 1947), p. 325, and by V. M. Apte, in *The history and culture of the Indian people*, edited by R. C. Majumdar and A. D. Pusalker, I (London, 1951), p. 373.

³ K. F. Geldner, *Der Rig-veda übersetzt*, I (Harvard, 1951), p. 29.

importance, for the interpretation of similar expressions occurring in the Veda as well as for our knowledge of the rather complicated ideas entertained by the ancient Indians with regard to the interrelations between gods and men and the way in which the former displayed their activities on behalf of the latter, an ample discussion of the phrase itself and of some problems raised by it may be justified.

It can hardly be said that the particular manifestation of Agni known as ‘son of strength’ has attracted the attention which it deserves. What strikes us in perusing those Ṛgvedic passages in which it occurs is in the first place the comparatively frequent references to the god’s protective power, his victoriousness, his readiness to help and assist his worshippers, his ability to ward off influences and circumstances inimical to success and prosperity. RV. 1,58,8 (the poem is of course addressed to Agni) “extend, O son of strength, uninterrupted protection to us, who praise (Thee). . .” (*achidrā sūno sahaso no . . . stotṛbhyah . . . śarma yacha*); 5,4,8 “have pleasure in our sacrifice, O son of strength . . . ; watch over us with threefold protection”; 6,15,3 “extend wealth and extensive protection”;⁴ 7,3,8; 10,142,1. The priest who calls himself Agni’s father, because he kindles fire, and his son because he implores his protection nevertheless addresses him: “O son of *sahas*” (5,3,9). The son of strength is, at night, gracious to that man whom he assists in order to arrive at a state of well-being (RV. 4,11,6 *doṣā śivaḥ sahasaḥ sūno agne yaṃ deva ā cit sacase svasti*). The reciter has recourse to him: 10,142,1, cf. 6,1,10; he is watchful with his splendour (or ‘power, strength’: 3,24,3 *dyumnena jāgrve*); he annihilates distress, providing those praying with riches: 6,11,6; cf. 13,4. The feature mentioned last is often emphasized: 6,5,1 “I invoke, on your behalf, the son of strength, the youth . . . who has the disposal of (and advances) property and all good things . . .” (*huve vaḥ sūnum sahaso yuvānam . . . | ya invati draviṇāni . . . viśvavārāṇi*); 8,71,11 “(our songs of praise should reach) Agni, the son of strength, in order to make him present us with treasures” (. . . *agniṇi sūnum sahaso . . . dānāya vāryāṇām*); 10,45,5 the same god is called “son of strength” as well as “bearer of possessions” (*dharuṇo rayiṇām*).

Curiously enough, the same characteristic is mentioned in the stanza 6,18,11 where the phrase under discussion is, by way of exception, attributed to the god Indra: “approach, O Indra, son of strength, with wealth on a thousand paths which abound in *vāja*- (vigour)”.⁵ It is also Indra who,

⁴ For the idea of broadness or extensiveness see the author’s *Aspects of early Viṣṇuism* (Utrecht, 1954), p. 61 ff.; 68 ff.; etc.

⁵ For *vāja*-, a term expressing a complex of ideas, beliefs, conceptions, experiences

in 6,20,1, as a son of strength, is eagerly implored to give that wealth which brings thousandfold benefit, which wins fertile land, conquers inimical powers, and with heroic valour defeats other men in battle. Power, victory, gain, *vāja*-, children, food, enjoyments, are also the objects of the poet’s efforts to prevail on Agni in 6,13,6: *vadmā sūno sahaso no vihāyā agne tokam tanayaṃ vāji no dāḥ* etc.; 7,1,21; 7,7; 16,4; 8,71,11; 10,45,5; cf. 1,127,1. Elsewhere Agni, the son of *sahas*, magnifies the abodes by his assistance (3,25,5 *sadhassthāni mahayamāna ūti*). Whoever worships the god and glorifies him with songs of praise will be rich and renowned (6,5,5; 10,11,7). He is implored to extend his favour and broad protection to individual men: 7,16,4 (cf. 6,15,3). A remarkable passage is 6,13,5 where Agni, the son of *sahas*, is asked to bestow favours upon his worshippers through his (heroic) power (*śavasā*). He is implored to conduct the gods to the sacrifice: 6,50,9; 7,16,4. The poet and his patrons hope that they will not incur the god’s displeasure: 7,1,22. The son of *sahas* has proved able to make sacrifices effective: 10,50,6; cf. also 3,11,4; 28,3. Compare also 6,6,1; 12,1; 8,19,7; 25; 60,2. It is clear that these deeds, performances and favours could easily be expected from a being who is strong and powerful himself; being a “son of power” does not – at least to the mind of modern man – a priori imply these abilities.

This enumeration is not to deny that the epithet can also be given to the god in other contexts: 1,143,1; 3,1,8; 28,5; 6,4,1. It is also given to Indra: 6,21,11; and – elliptically – *dyukṣam sahasas* “the celestial (son) of *sahas*”: 9,71,4, to Soma.⁶

A perusal of a large number of texts will show that expressions for filial relations interchange with other attempts to indicate and clarify the relation between the unseen powers. Soma for instance is variously associated with other powers – he is united with the Fathers (ṚV. 8,48,13), his origin is in heaven, being born on high: “child of heaven” (*divaḥ śiśuḥ*: ṚV. 9,38,5) etc. –, but ṚV. 9,82,4 he is child (*garbha*-) of Pajrā, who according to the Indian tradition is the earth. Parjanya is once said to be Soma’s father (ṚV. 9,82,3), but elsewhere the latter is called a buffalo increased by, or grown up through, Parjanya (ṚV. 9,113,3): in both cases the meaning of course is, that the growth of the soma plant depends on rain.

An interesting place is ṚV. 10,10,2 = AV. 18,1,2 “the sons of the great

converging in a special power which manifests itself in animal and vegetable life, in the capacity for life, growing, lasting etc., see *Aspects of early Viṣṇuism*, p. 48 ff. etc.

⁶ See L. Renou, *Études védiques et pāṇinéennes*, I (Paris, 1955), p. 39,1; cf. also ṚV. 10,115,7; 8,102,7.

asura, his heroes, sustainers of the firmament (*dyaus*), look widely about”. Here the unnamed agents or spies of heaven or of the great god residing in the heavens whose task it is to watch man and to notice his sins are called his sons.

Although it would be beyond the scope of this publication to discuss all allusions to physical life, biological processes, and relationship used by ancient Indian authors in expounding their views of the connection between the phenomena of this world and their relations to the unseen, some notes may in addition to the above observations find a place here.

The ultimate principle or original source of creation, the One, is already RV. 1,67,5 referred to as the “Unborn One” (*aja-*) and the poet of 1,164,6 inquires about the identity of the One in the form of the Unborn One. Cf. also 8,41,10. In 10,82,6 we come across the phrase “navel of the Unborn One”, a place bearing the One on which rest, or depend, all creatures.

That persons – living beings or beings conceived as possessed of physical life – were born from the mind is, in Vedic and post-Vedic literature, a frequent statement: RV. 7,33,11 *utāsi maitrāvaruṇo vasiṣṭhorvaśyā brahman manaso 'dhi jātaḥ* “... and thou, O V., art the offspring of M. and V. brought into the world from mind by U.”: “die Idee des geistigen Sohnes”.⁷ In the epics and the purāṇas mention is made of Brahman’s mind-born sons (e.g. Mbh.1,65,10), the great ṛṣis, Marīci etc.; in the Bhagavadgītā 10,6 Kṛṣṇa-Bhagavat declares that the great sages and the four Manus are of his nature and born from his mind (*manas*), but according to Muṇḍ. Up. 2,1,3 *manas* itself was produced from the Highest Person (*Puruṣa*).

Similar remarks could be made with regard to phrases such as *balād jātaḥ*: RV. 10,153,2 Indra is said to have been born from physical strength, from overwhelming power, from creative energy: *tvam indra balād adhi sahaso jāta ojaṣaḥ*. In an interesting passage a poet gives evidence of his scepticism about the origin of the same god: 10,73,10 in contradistinction to those who hold Indra to have originated in the horse, the poet is inclined to the belief that he was born from *ojas*. In 8,62,10 Indra’s “born *śavas*”, his *kratu-* and the god himself are put on a par, being co-ordinated in a copulative asyndeton.

Living beings, lifeless substance, ideas or concepts and powers may be variously connected and associated: RV. 1,164,42 for instance the cow, which is identified with Vāc (Speech), is considered the source of the seas,

⁷ Geldner, *o.c.*, II, p. 213.

on which live the quarters of the sky; from them flows the imperishable, on which lives everything. In one and the same stanza (RV. 1,148,1) Agni is called a priest (*hotar-*) and stated to have been kindled. Cf. 1,149,2. Sky and earth are on the one hand widely capacious and on the other, a couple of parents.

There are gods in the Vedic pantheon whose “sonship” rests largely upon their reputation of being representatives or manifestations of certain aspects of their ‘father’, although they have, at least in the eyes of pre-scientific man, a certain independent existence.⁸ Parjanya, i.e. Rain, who impregnates everything and by whose activity the plants spring up, is a son of the sky – or of Dyaus, if it should be preferred to emphasize the personal aspect of this divine power –: 7,102,1. This god is also theriomorphically conceived as a bull (cf. e.g. 7,101,6); in this respect as well as in his relation to rain, lightning, and thunder, he resembles in character his father, i.e. the Sky, Dyaus, himself (cf. also 2,27,15; 10,45,4 etc.). Parjanya is *vr̥ṣṭimat-* “raining” (e.g. 8,6,1), rain comes from him (9,22,2) or from Dyaus (2,27,15; 5,84,3 etc.). The Maruts, who are likewise shedders of rain and are often associated with thunder, lightning and the roaring of the wind are not only the heroes of the firmament, but once also its (or: his) sons (10,77,2).

It is clear that the Sun, Sūrya – it is often doubtful whether the ‘god’ or the natural phenomenon is meant – is called the son of Dyaus, the sky or light of heaven (10,37,1). Remarkably enough, the great luminary was not only placed in the firmament by other gods, but also given light by Soma (6,44,23 *ayaṃ sūrye adadhāj jyotir antaḥ*; 9,97,41), another instance of the belief that essential qualities are a sort of accretions.

As will be seen in later sections of this publication cases are not rare in which a definite ‘power’ is conceived as an ‘impersonal potency’, and sometimes as a ‘divine person’. A good example is *dakṣa-* which is ‘personified’ as “the Clever or Dexterous One” i.e. “Cleverness”, or “Dexterity”, a deity associated with Aditi with whom he constitutes a pair of universal parents,⁹ although he is also said to have sprung from that goddess. It is significant that Mitra and Varuṇa are in the selfsame stanza RV. 7,66,2 spoken of as *dakṣapitarā*, i.e. “those whose father is *dakṣa-* (or *Dakṣa-*)” and as *sudakṣa-* “very clever” (*devāḥ sudakṣā dakṣapitarā*), whereas in 8,25,5 they are termed *sūnū dakṣasya*, an expression which obviously is comparable to *sūnuḥ sahasaḥ*. Those who unlike

⁸ That the characteristics of a ‘father’ and a son were not rarely confounded was already observed by A. Bergaigne, *La religion védique*, III (Paris, 1883), p. 356 s.v. *père*.

⁹ For particulars see Macdonell, *o.c.*, p. 46.

the present author consider the personal aspect as secondary might argue that these passages help to clarify the transition from ‘personal’ to ‘impersonal’ representation of power. It would be better to hold that the Indians in these matters very easily shift their ground, drawing no hard and fast line between both aspects of the unseen.

The gods may also be called “the sons of *dakṣa*–”, a ‘concept’ not easy to determine. Etymologically connected to Gr. δεξιός “(on) the right (hand, side); dexterous, ready, skilful, clever” and the Lat. *dexter* – the relationship of which to other words can be left undiscussed here¹⁰ –, it denotes, adjectivally and substantivally, in reference to persons, actions, and phenomena, and in a great variety of applications, such ideas as “able (ability), adroit, clever, dexterous; energy, strength of will, etc. etc.”. ṚV. 8,25,5 it reads: “the two children of great heroic power (*napātā śvaso mahah*), the sons (*sūnū*) of *dakṣa*–, those of great strength of mind (*sukratū*), whose fattening gifts are extensive, inhabit the place of refreshment”. Here the poet has in view Mitra and Varuṇa, to whom the same power-substance is attributed in ṚV. 1,15,6 “Ye, O M. and V., have obtained *dakṣa*– which is not easy to destroy. . .”; 1,2,7; 1,24,7; 1,139,2 “when you, M. and V., separated falsehood from truth by your own ardour (*manyu*–), by the ardour of your *dakṣa*–”; 3,62,17 where they rule through the greatness of their *dakṣa*–; cf. also 5,60,10; 66,4. Elsewhere, ṚV. 1,2,9 M. and V. are stated to grant “efficient working-power” (*dākṣam* . . . *apāsam*) to those praying. ṚV. 1,23,4 the same gods are said to have been born with *dakṣa*–. But in the Atharvaveda, 1,35,1–2 the expression *dākṣāyanāḥ* “descendants of Dakṣa” clearly is of wider application. A difficult place is ṚV. 3,27,9: mentioning the generation of fire the poet adds that “he (it) received the embryo of existences, the child (the word is nom. fem.) of Dakṣa, the father” (acc.: *dakṣasya pitarām tanā*). The words “received the embryo of existences” are quite clear AV. 5,25,2 and 6,17,1 in connection with the earth. Here the word “father” must be an apposition to “embryo”; the father, Dakṣa, probably being regarded as the cosmogonical ‘principle’ which he is to become in later times. This is possible, the poet holds, although Agni himself is a son of Dakṣa: one of the mystic paradoxes appreciated by the Vedic public. In the next stanza Agni is indeed called Dakṣa’s (son). Agni is ṚV. 1,95,6 called the lord of *dakṣas* (*dakṣāṇām dakṣapatiḥ*). “Lord (*pati*–) of *dakṣa*–” is on the other hand Indra: ṚV. 1,56,2 (cf. also 5,38,4), although his power-substance is elsewhere attributed not only to Mitra and Varuṇa

¹⁰ See A. Walde-J. Pokorny, *Vergl. Wörterb. der indogerm. Sprachen*, I (Berlin-Leipzig, 1930), p. 784.

(see above), but also to Agni: Thou art worthy of our devotion “durch die Einsicht und Bereitwilligkeit deines Willens” (Geldner): *kratvā dakṣasya manīhanā* 5,10,2. Cf. also 5,18,2.

Beside *dākṣa-* we find the neuter *dākṣas*. The most probable interpretation of ṚV. 6,48,1 might be: “with every offering and every word of praise addressed to Agni who is *dakṣas* we will...”.

There is another point which deserves a brief comment. As already stated the name Agni is far from being alone in designating not only a ‘deity’, but also a ‘phenomenon’. With regard to the phenomenon the phrase ‘son of strength’ may therefore be taken to have expressed the correct view that fire is a manifestation of ‘victorious power’, a thought not incomparable to the daily birth of Dawn (Uṣas), the daughter of the heavens (cf. e.g. ṚV. 10,39,12), i.e. a manifestation of their essence.

The combination of “son”, being a term applying to organic life, and “victorious power”, which in the opinion of modern man should be considered an ‘abstract idea’, might easily be paralleled by many similar instances. In Vedic terminology a large variety of ideas and anorganic entities can be said to have been born like men or animals: 10,72,2 existence from the non-existent; 4 the quarters of the heavens from the earth; 87,13 bow-shots of anger (i.e. fits of anger) born from the mind; 10,90,5 Virāj (the female principle of creation) from Puruṣa, and Puruṣa from Virāj; 12 the śūdra from the feet of the Primeval Being; cf. also 10,190,1 f. Here also any thought of birth and a physical relation can be almost completely absent: ṚV. 1,97,4. The sun, or the sun god is the son of Heaven and earth: ṚV. 1,160,3. But these entities have themselves been generated by the most capable of the capable deities (1,160,4), probably an anonymous Primeval Being¹¹ (the verb used is *jajāna*).¹²

In a curious Atharvanic text (AV. 1,35,2) a potent amulet is called “the first-born force of the gods” (*devānām ojaḥ prathamajam*).

It is generally agreed that the word “father” is, in Vedic terminology, often ‘metaphorically’ given to gods. However, in this case also the idea of procreation and physical relationship is not so much stressed as other aspects and implications of fatherhood. Agni for instance is addressed as “the providence and father”, who gives strength to those praying, who consider themselves to be the god’s relatives (ṚV. 1,31,10 *tvam agne pramatīs tvam pitāsi nas tvam vayaskṛt tava jāmāyo vāyam*). Especially

¹¹ But compare Geldner, *o.c.*, 1, p. 219.

¹² In describing the creation of a horse the poet of ṚV. 1,161,7 uses, on the other hand, the verb *takṣ-* “to form by cutting, fashioning”.

the term *pramati*- “providence, care” is not rarely connected with *pitar*-; cf. 1,31,14.

No real difficulty lies in the fact that Agni is, on the other hand, described as being procreated by the mortal men who kindle the fire: 1,31,11; 2,5,1 “the hotar (Agni) has been born, the father, in order to bring aid to his fathers” (*pitā pitṛbhya ūtaye*). These passages only show, in addition to the well-known predilection of these poets for ‘plays’ upon words and thoughts, that various aspects of fatherhood could be present to their minds at the same time.

It is therefore hardly necessary to dwell on other passages where Agni is addressed as a father of his worshippers, as well as their son: cf. ṚV. 2,1,9 where he is also a protector and friend; 1,31,16 friend, father and providence. Agni, indeed, “vereinigt alle Verwandtschaftsgrade in sich”;¹³ that is to say, he is in any case a procreative power and a manifestation of that power.

Whereas such statements as for instance that found ṚV. 2,26,3 where Bṛhaspati is said to be the father of the gods must be taken to mean that the lord of brahman is their source, that without him they would not exist, in other texts the term “father” may be taken to refer to the older and wiser generation: “who knows them shall be the father’s father” (ṚV. 1,164,16; AV. 2,1,2 etc.) means something like: “shall be very wise”.

Let it therefore, for the present, suffice to suggest that these terms of relationship mainly serve to clarify the connections and relations existing, or supposed to exist, between the various and complex phenomena in nature. There is nothing to surprise us in finding that the same deities are believed to have had a plurality of fathers or mothers:¹⁴ these statements simply reflect various possibilities looming in the minds of these poets, various tentative answers to the difficult problem of the origin and relationship of the phenomena with which they were confronted.

II

If there is a son, there must be a father, although remarkably enough the latter does not always seem to have attracted the attention of religious man before the former.¹ Now, “father” is also a term of extensive sig-

¹³ Geldner, *o.c.*, I, p. 276.

¹⁴ See e.g. Macdonell, *o.c.*, p. 78, with regard to the Maruts. Cf. e.g. also ṚV. 1,164,12.

¹ J. E. Harrison, *Epilegomena to the study of Greek Religion* (Cambridge, 1921),