

Meeting 14: Vṛtrahán Ánedyā  
Índra in Vedic & post-Vedic literature

Nikhil Surya Dwibhashyam

29 May 2022

# Meeting agenda

- (Re)introduction to discussion group
- Today's topic præsentation
- Free discussion

# Why a Vedá discussion group?

- What is Vedic literature?
  - Sámhitā-s
  - Bráhmaṇa-s
  - Others?
- Vedá-s vs. Vedánta & Upaniṣád-s
  - Later monism (ádvāita) vs. earlier dualism (dvāitá)
- Modern (religious, scholarly) fixation upon later literature

# What is there to discuss?

- History & linguistics
- Metaphysics of religion
- Exegesis (e.g. countering western narratives)
- Moral principles
- Nuances of Śrāutá ritual

# Our plans

- Weekly meetings on Sundays at 1200 EDT
  - Followed by more in-depth literature meeting at 1330 EDT
- Different topic/aspect/angle discussed in depth every week
- Format:
  - Præsentation
  - Free-form discussion
- Eventually something more

# WhatsApp group

<https://chat.whatsapp.com/IXCQEkhfrcwHI7CNY8Fgat>

# Let's introduce ourselves!

- Name
- School (if student)
- How you found this group
- Briefly: background/interest in Hinduism & Vedic literature

# Some questions to consider

- What was Índra's role in the original Vedic religion?
  - What aspects of His were subsumed by other Gods in later Hinduism?
- What are the chief contradictions between the Vedic & the post-Vedic depictions of Índra?
- When did this shift in views occur historically, & during what stage of literature is the shift evident?
- What philosophical motivations could lie behind the denigration of Índra?
  - political motivations?
- How might exposing this uniquely post-Vedic denigration of Índra be beneficial to a goal of reviving Vedic traditions?



# Who is Índra?

## ■ External view

- Etymology unknown (or nonexistent): perhaps  $\sqrt{ind}$
- Name very often trisyllabic: *Índara* or perhaps *Índṛa*
- Equivalent of sky-father in other IE religions, but not himself the Sky-Father
- Inimical to the Avestan faith (Vd. 10.9: *paiti-pərəne Inḍrəm*)
- Mentioned in Hittite–Mitanni treaty (14<sup>th</sup> c. BCE): *Indara*, *Intar*

# Who is Índra?

## ■ Internal view

- Most important (e.g. mentioned) God in Ṛg-vedá
- Born of Áditi; married to Indrāṇī
- Epithets: *Vṛtrahán*, *ánedya*, *mag<sup>h</sup>ávan*, *vajrín/vájrivan*, *śakrá* (cf. Buddhism), *śatá-kratu*
- Has golden skin, hair, beard, horses, weapon (ṚV 10.96)
- The One King (*eka-ráj*): ṚV 8.37.3
  - But follows the law of Savitṛ (ṚV 2.38.9)
- Most frequently paired with Agní; Víṣṇu is his helper

# Vedic mythemes about Índra

- Drank thirty seas of sóma as a newborn (RV 8.77.4)
- Slew Vṛtrá & released the waters (RV 2.11.2)
- Freed kine from the cave Valá (RV 2.24.3)
- Crushed the Dawn's chariot (RV 2.15.6)
- Slew the Dásyu-s & protected the Árya-s (RV 3.34.9)
- Mocked Vṛṣá-kapi (RV 10.86)
- Gave golden skin to Apālá (RV 8.91)
- Slew Árbuda with snow (RV 8.32.6)
- & countless more

# Índra in the Vedá

- Blemishless
- Uncriticized
- Primordial
- Supreme (though not omnipotent)
  - As opposed to Prajāpati, Víṣṇu, or Rudrá
- God of all 3 estates

# Índra after the Vedá

- Hedonistic
  - Drunken
  - Promiscuous & adulterous
- Ally but nuisance to more supreme God (e.g. Víṣṇu)
- Different Índra every æra (Manv-antara system)
- Frequently cast out of heavens, humiliated
  - Even by sages & animals
- Political association with Kṣatriya-s
- Nonetheless:
  - Still revered for strength & rulership, e.g. metaphorical *nar'-endra*
  - Still worshiped in many rituals

# An example of post-Vedic misinterpretation

- *Sahásra-muṣka*: “having thousand testicles”
  - Metaphor for virility
  - Used for Índra (RV 6.46.3), also Agní (RV 8.19.32)
  - Also cf. *sahasr'-ākṣá* (RV 1.23.3)
- *Muṣká*: unambiguously “testicle” in origin (little mouse)
  - But AV, TS, & beyond: also “vulva”
- Thus: “covered in thousand vulvæ”
  - Integrated with Ahalyā story, or with others
    - Itself misinterpretation of ŚB 3.3.4.18: *áhalyāyāi jārā*
  - Sometimes: becomes *klībá*
- In sum: transition from supreme masculinity to total humiliation

# The chronology of the Índra shift

- Some (e.g. Söhnen) claim shift began with Bráhmaṇa-s
  - Not necessarily true, at least until very late: cf. Jamison on *amed<sup>h</sup>yá*
- Shift certainly began by time of (Vāiṣṇavá) epics
  - Ahalyā story found in both R & MB<sup>h</sup>
- Shift complete by time of Purāṇá-s
  - Upaniṣád-s?
  - Outside Hinduism?

# The significance of Índra to Vedic revivalism

- To reiterate: *the* most important God
- Those who accept the Vedá-s as supreme must necessarily reject post-Vedic interpretations of His role.
- Índra: symbol of Vedic orthopraxy vs. mainstream, post-Vedic Hinduism
- An *Āindrā* movement?



# Some questions to consider

- What was Índra's role in the original Vedic religion?
  - What aspects of His were subsumed by other Gods in later Hinduism?
- What are the chief contradictions between the Vedic & the post-Vedic depictions of Índra?
- When did this shift in views occur historically, & during what stage of literature is the shift evident?
- What philosophical motivations could lie behind the denigration of Índra?
  - political motivations?
- How might exposing this uniquely post-Vedic denigration of Índra be beneficial to a goal of reviving Vedic traditions?

## Some interesting papers & articles

- Fournet, A. "About the Mitanni–Aryan gods." *J. Indoeur. Stud.*, 2010.
- Jamison, S. W. "The ravenous hyenas & the wounded Sun." 1991.
- Kazanas, N. D. "Indo-European deities & the Ṛg-vedā." *J. Indoeur. Stud.*, 2001.
- Söhnen, R. "Indra & women." *Bull. Sch. Orient. Afr. Stud.*, 1991.
- Venkatasubbiah, A. "On Indra's winning of cows & waters." *Z. Dtsch. Morgenl. Ges.*, 1965.