
A Rare Image of Agni from the Musée Guimet, Paris, France

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Abstract: Agni, the fire god of the early pantheon is worshipped less as fire than as the purifier of sacrificial offerings and as such he is honored at all solemn ceremonies, such as those of marriage and death. Agni is the outcome of friction between upper and lower fire stick, a male and female. So, the god Agni is said to be the son of earth and heaven, Pritivi and Dyaus. We are hereby introducing a unique image of Agni preserved in the museum of Paris. The uniqueness of this image is his two heads. The two heads here represent domestic fire and sacrificial fire. He is assisted with his vehicle Ram standing behind him. We cannot think that to make two heads the artist has taken the liberty. It may be possible that the silp-text or Purana from where the artist has taken the guidance is not available to us.

Keywords: Agni, Deity, Visnu Dharmottar Purana, Myth, Vehicle, Musée Guimet, Paris

Introduction

Agni, the fire god, was another great deity of the early pantheon, a serious rival to Indra, who eventually got his favor to the detriment of 'Varuna'. The god of fire has a dominant position in Iranian mythology which developed from the same Aryan roots and this proves the rivalry of Agni towards Indra. Notwithstanding he obtained a mythology that to some extent similar to that of Indra.

Agni is the outcome of friction between upper and lower fire stick (Ions 1967), a male and a female so the god Agni is said to be the son of earth and heaven, Pritivi and Dyaus. Agni was not born as a babe but as a fully matured symbolized person. Offering of the pure butter to the sacrificial fire is the source of his sustenance. It is said that Agni has seven tongues for licking the poured butter with different names and thus, the obtained power is used to succor others. Though he consumes everything, but this destruction is requisite prelude to renewed creation. Agni being the originator of sacrificial rites; he is considered to be the oldest of all priests. A myth about his birth hints towards that tradition which made him the presiding deity of Earth. It is that he is thrice-born (Ions 1967): that is, he was born and constantly reborn in heaven as the flame of Sun. Second time he was born in the tempest clouds and descends to earth in the form of lightning and in the third time on earth, when he was lit up not only by the

priests but also by the hands of every man whom he warms and protects in the form of health fire.



Figure 1: Agni with his Companion Ram

With all these qualities and being the guardian deity of South East, we are going to describe a unique image of Agni preserved in Musée Guimet, Paris. The uniqueness of this image is his two heads. It is a matter of great sorrow that the place from where this image has been found and the period is unknown. This deity is carved on a sacred wood. The carving shows that it is not earlier than 13th CE. Perhaps this image could be a single piece ever found in Indian sculptural art. Both heads are coronated with pyramidal flame like design. Flames are emerging from the semi circle crown on the head. God is standing in sum bhang posture. He is four handed. The main right hand is in abhaya mudra and the left hand carrying an indistinct oval shaped object. With rest of his two hands he is holding a fan like object.

His vehicle Ram is standing behind him. Agni is adorned with pearl necklace, Katibandha, ear-rings and yajnopavita. He is wearing a dhoti designed in horizontal ripples with a long vertical piece of this dhoti attached with Katibandha. The deity is in smrit mudra and the eyes of both heads are closed. His two heads here represents the domestic fire and the fire of sacrifice (Figure 1).

According to Visnu Dharmottara Purana (Kramrisch 1928), one should make Vahani (the fire god), the lord of gods red with matted locks, with smoke colored garments, surrounded with flames, placid, three eyed, beautiful, four handed with four tusks. Vata (wind) as his charioteer and chariot is yoked by four parrots, with smoke as a banner. The yoked four parrots are the personification of four Vedas. Further the Purana guides about the attributes of Vahani. Flames and trident should be (held) in the right hands of Vahani and a rosary in the left, though these guidelines are absent in this deity.

Conclusion

One cannot say that for making this image the artist has taken the liberty of his own, because the carving of two heads cannot be done without any directions from the Silpa-text or Purana. It may be possible that the Silpa text or Purana from where the artist has taken the guidelines to carve this deity is not available within our limited knowledge. The artist, by the directions (source unknown to us) has carved this unique image of Agni which is conducive to the success of men and dispeller of sins.

References

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