TRIFUNCTIONAL ELEMENTS IN THE MYTHOLOGY OF THE HINDU TRIMŪRTI *

G. M. BAILEY

It is no exaggeration to suggest that the bulk of the mythology found in the Hindu epics and Purāṇas is about Viṣṇu, Śakti, Brahmā and the group of gods closely associated with them. The divinities of the earliest strata of Vedic literature—Indra, the so-called group of thirty-three gods and the various groups of demons—play a role in many of these myths, but they do not dominate, as they did in Vedic mythology. This is not to say that the main themes of Vedic mythology or the images occurring in it are necessarily absent from myths which occur in post-Vedic literature. Indeed, the richness and variety of epic and Purānic mythology is in part a result of the transformation of Vedic images and themes under the influence of socio-religious values not current during the early Vedic period (till about 800 BC), or, if current, not represented in the extant literature. Of these values, the most important have been those associated with the rise of asceticism as a creative and abiding force within Indian religions and bhakti.

The trimūrti of Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva first appear in Indian literature in the Maitri Upaniṣad where they are correlated with the three guṇas. 1 They are not yet depicted as creator, preserver and destroyer of the triple world (triloka) as they are so frequently in the Purāṇas. Significantly, they are only mentioned in this capacity once in the Mbh., and there, in a passage regarded by the editors of the critical edition to be an interpolation. 2

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* The following abbreviations have been used throughout this article. BhP. — Bhāgavata Purāṇa; H. — Harivamśa; Mbh. — Mahābhārata; MkP. — Mārkan-deya Purāṇa; Sp. — Śiva Purāṇa; VāmP. — Vāmana Purāṇa.

1 Maitri Upaniṣad, 5, 2. These gods do not constitute the only, or indeed, the earliest triad in Indian literature. Lists of others are given by J. Gonda, “The Hindu Trinity,” Anthropos, 63 (1968), pp. 215-19.

2 Mbh. 3, App. 1, No. 27, lines 35-36. Referring to Viṣṇu this passage says:

srjate brahmamūrtistu rakṣate pauruṣi tanuḥ raudribhāvena śamayettisa "vasthāḥ prajāpateḥ.

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are frequently depicted as creator and preserver respectively, sometimes as both. Śiva, too, is implicitly present as destroyer in several myths, but he is not so strikingly presented in this role as the other two are in their specific roles. Thus, their frequent appearance as a collective in the cosmogonic sections of the Purāṇas would seem to be a logical development from their roles in the Mābh.

The Purānic portrayal of the trimūrti is not just in terms of their cosmogonic roles. They are included as expressions of Āum, along with other triads such as the three fires, and three Vedas and the three worlds, or, the three gods are correlated with the Vedas; Brahmā is the Śrī, Viṣṇu the Yajus and Śiva the Sāma. Like other triads in Indian literature, the trimūrti could be used as an expression of any other triad or important concept.

At the level of narrative Indian mythology consists largely of interactions between divine figures and themes such as the conflict between the gods and demons, Agni’s withdrawal of his flame, the incest of the creator with his daughter and many others. Beneath this grouping of interactions which make up the narratives lie value systems and ideologies which are expressed through and shape the narratives. These value systems and ideologies occur explicitly and implicitly in the epics and Purāṇas and provide an overarching framework within which the exploits of the gods, especially the trimūrti, can be placed. The most important value systems relevant to the mythology of the trimūrti are those designated by the terms pravṛtti and nivṛtti and the set of values associated with bhakti. Also of importance is the tripartite

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3 Examples of this are the events involved in the destruction of Dakṣa’s sacrifice, the disastrous dice game between Yudhiṣṭhira and Duryodhana which leads to so much carnage, and the episode of Āśvatthāma’s night raid against the Pāndava’s camp. Each of these has been studied from the perspective of Śiva’s destructive role by A. Hillebeitel, The Ritual of Battle: Krishna in the Mahābhārata, (Ithaca and London, 1976), chs 4 and 12.
4 Mkp. 42, 10; 102, 19.
5 See Agni Purāṇa, 92, 41-5; MkP. 88, 12-18.
6 I do not intend to concern myself here with the distinction between “value system” and “ideology.” I have used the term “value system” in a sense akin to the meaning of “ideology” as an abstract system of ideas embodying a distinct vision of the world.
7 The exact nature of the set of values associated with bhakti, or, indeed, even whether such a set of values even exists, remains unclear. However, there is a whole series of myths in the Purāṇas (KP. 1, 9; 5-87; SP. 1, 6-8; 3, 8ff.; Matsya Purāṇa, 183, 81ff.; Vāmp, 2, 3, 4-104) where the members of the trimūrti act