

“Concept of God in the Rgvedic Religion – A note”

BARNALI DEKA

The four Vedas, i.e. the *Rgveda*, the *Yajurveda*, the *Samaveda* and the *Atharvaveda* are the source of religion propagated by the Vedic seers to lead the entire humanity for the attainment of the fourfold goal of human life. According to the Dharmasastras, the sources of the knowledge of *Dharma* are the Vedas, the Smrtis, the practice of the virtuous and the approval of an enlightened conscience, cf. vedo'khilo dharmamulam smrtisile ca tadvidam/

acarascaiva sadhunamatmanastustireva ca // (Manu., 2.6)

vedah smrtih sadacarah svasya ca priyamatmanah/

etaccaturvidham prahuh saksaddharmasya laksanam// (Manu., 2.12)

These Vedas are the ultimate foundation of the knowledge of *dharmā*. The mythical poetry of the Vedas played a vital role in moulding the religious, philosophical and social systems of ancient Indian culture. Among the four Vedas, the most important as well as the oldest for it is the very foundation of all Vedic literature is the *Rgveda*. The *Rgvedasamhita* occupies a very important position in the study of the history of religions of the Vedic Aryans. It presents us an earlier stage in the evolution of beliefs based on the personification and worship of natural phenomena than any other literary monument of the world.

A new era emerged in the socio-religious history of India with the advent of the Aryans in the Sapta-Sindhu. During the process of Aryanisation, pre-Aryan elements also got mingled into Aryan beliefs which gave birth to popular Hindu Religion. *Dharma* or Religion is, as a matter of fact, a concept which a spirited man establishes in his behaviour by following certain practices, which according to him can develop not only the inner instincts and potencies of his own personality but that of all whosoever adopts that concept and follows those practices. Religion includes both the socio-moral duties as well as the religious commands. The word *dharmā* is derived from the root *dhr*-meaning to uphold, to support and to nourish. According to P.V. Kane, it is used in the sense of upholder, supporter or sustainer in the *Rgveda* (1.187, 10.92.2).¹ So, we can say that *Dharma* contains all the principles required to sustain and uphold human existence. Religion in its widest sense

¹ P.V. Kane, *History of Dharmasastra*, vol-1, p.1, Poona, 1930

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includes on the one hand the conception which men entertain of the divine or supernatural powers and, on the other, that sense of the dependence of human welfare on those powers which finds its expression in various forms of worship.² The religion of a nation, or of a race is bound to differ from other nations or races, because according to geographical, biological and sociological conditions every nation or race develops its own beliefs and behaviours which create a great difficulty in giving a true definition of religion. Moreover, the differences of opinions as regards the definitions of religion is due to the different conceptions of the higher object. Various definitions of religion have been proposed by different authors, which differ from one another.

It is said that religion is an attitude of reverence towards the higher object.³ About religion J. Frazer says - Religion is a propitiation or conciliation of powers superior to man, which are believed to direct and control the course of nature and human life.⁴ According to him, religion consists of a theoretical and a practical element, a belief in power higher than man and an attempt to propitiate or please them. This definition suits the purpose of the Rgvedic religion.

Among the different theories of the origin of religion, i.e. theory of Animism, theory of Spiritism, theory of Naturalism etc. the more convincing than the other theories about the origin of religion in general and the Rgvedic religion in particular is the ‘theory of Naturalism’ which is held by most of the scholars of the Vedas. Max Muller supports this theory. According to him, religion sprang from spontaneous emotional reactions of wonder, awe and fear, evoked in man by natural phenomena, such as the sun, the moon, rain, lightning etc. Impressed by these powerful and inexplicable forces of nature, early man reacted with the emotional attitudes and behaviour to which we have given the name of religion. Such natural phenomena inspired the Vedic seers to glimpse law in the world of nature. This attitude was the very spring of religion where from the Rgvedic religion got its origin. The Aryans discerned manifestations of powers in the striking phenomena of nature. By the method of personification natural phenomena were given the distinct personalities of gods. Hence, all the phenomena of nature, that helped for their sustenance, were the object of reverence, they became gods and goddesses, the objects of worship.

² A.A. Macdonell, *The Vedic Mythology*, p.1, Varanasi, 1963

³ B.B. Chaubey, *Treatment of Nature in the Rgveda*, p.30, Hoshiarpur, 1970

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.29

Theories regarding the problem of Gods -

In the Vedic age people had different religious concepts. Some believed in the plurality of gods and accordingly they worshipped many gods and goddesses. There were still others who did not believe in the plurality of gods and worshipped only one entity. Various theories have been put forward in modern times by scholars regarding the problem of gods in the Vedas. It is held that in the Veda, there is a progression from a multitude of gods to a single god and then to a unity of the world. (Polytheism to monotheism and then to monism)⁵

Henotheism - The important characteristics of Vedic worship is that every god of the Vedic pantheon was regarded as the supreme. In the older part of the *Rgveda*, the practice of the poets of invoking different gods as if each of them were paramount, gave rise to Max Muller's theory of Henotheism or Kathenotheism.⁶ Henotheism consists in the tendency to raise the particular god to the most exalted position. Kaegi also supports this view.⁷ According to this theory every god is independent and has no connection, whatsoever with the other. In the Vedic worship, Indra, Varuna, Agni, Savitr and many other gods have been spoken of as chief of the gods. But from the scholarly world this theory does not find much support.

Polytheism - According to this theory of Polytheism, gods are many. This theory finds ample support in its favour in the *Veda* itself, for we have so many deities being praised in the *Rgveda* which are supposed to possess supernatural powers.

Monotheism – As the number of gods increases all the gods were reduced to three, viz. Agni whose place is on the earth, Vayu or Indra, whose place is in the air and Surya whose place in the sky, cf. *tisra eva devata iti nairuktah / agnih prthivisthanah vayurvendro vantariksasthanah, suryo dyusthanah//* (Nirukta, 7.2.5) They realised that all these phenomena were the aspects of one and the same all pervading divine force which manifest itself in different ways. According to this theory god is one. He appears in many forms owing to his supernatural powers was the kernel of the monotheistic discussion. This theory can be supported by the

⁵ C.K. Raja, *Vedas, A Cultural Study*, p. 74, Andhra University Series No. 60, 1957

⁶ S.N. Sharma, *A History of Vedic Literature*, p.39, Varanasi, 1973

⁷ "This god alone is present to the mind of the suppliant., with him for the time being, is associated everything that can be said of a divine being ; he is the highest , the only god , before whom all others disappear, there being in this, however, no offence or depreciation of any other god". – Kaegi, quoted by B.B. Chaubey, op. cit., p. 139

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internal evidence of the *Rgveda* itself. The forces of nature were now different expositions of the one supreme power, cf. mahabhagyat devataya eka atma bahudha stuyate/ekasyatmano’nye devah pratyangani bhavanti. (Nirukta, 7.1.4). It is stated in the *Rgveda* that, though one, the god is called by the wise, by many names such as Agni, Yama, Indra, Mitra, Varuna or Matarisvan. (R.V., 1.164.46). The foundation of monotheism may be said to lie in this verse of the hymn of Dirghatamas in the *Rgveda*. In the famous Hiranyagarbha hymn, we find the mention of that one Hiranyagarbha as the first originator of the world, all powerful, lord of all. (R.V., 10.81.1) Moreover, in many contexts of the *Rgveda* we find the support of this view that god is one. (R.V., 3.55.1-22, 6.45.26). In the *Atharvaveda* also it is stated that one god alone is to be worshipped by all people. (A.V., 2.2.1). According to Yaska also, the soul of gods is one. Due to their performances they are worshipped as many forms. (Nirukta, 7.1.4)

The gods who shared certain functions in common, were formed into a compound with a dual termination in the *Rgveda* which became the name of a new deity, e.g. Agnisoma, Indravayu, Indragani, Indrapusana etc.

Later on, all gods came to be worshipped jointly in a group with the name of Visvedeva, all gods. The cause behind this is that all of the Vedic gods are personified phenomena of nature, and these phenomena are interrelated which prompted the Vedic Aryans to worship nature gods in a group. Keith also supports this view.⁸ According to him – “the result was that the tendency was certainly steadily growing throughout the period of the *Rgveda* to regard the gods as closely related”.⁹

We can say that by the end of the Rgvedic period the idea of polytheism had received a monotheistic tinge.

Vedic concept of God -

The poetry of the *Veda* is supposed to be the poetic manifestation of the seeric vision of the bright or *deva*. The word *deva* is derived from the root *div* meaning to shine or illuminate. From the root *div* the adjective *deva* or Latin *deus* is formed. It was an epithet which was applied to all shining phenomena of nature.

⁸ “The tendency to syncretism is also increased by the close connection of the elements in nature” – Keith quoted by B.B. Chaubey, *ibid.*, p. 60

⁹ *Ibid*

In the first stage, the word *deva* meant 'bright' which was used as an epithet to all shining phenomena of nature. In the *Rgveda* there are many passages where in the word *deva* is used in the sense of bright. (R.V., 1.19.6)

In the second stage the etymological meaning of *deva* became a mere comprehensive designation for all the bright powers of the day as opposed to all the dark powers of the night.

The word *deva* became a common designation for deity in this stage, cf. *agnih purvebhirsibhiridyo nutanairuta/ sa deva eha vaksati//* (R.V., 1.1.2)

In the third stage, the word *deva* was applied to other phenomena, such as earth (R.V., 4.56.2), wind (R.V., 1.19.3), waters (R.V., 10.9.4) and even the night (R.V., 10.127.1). In this stage it meant god and its feminine form *devi* meant goddess.

It is said in the *Nirukta* (Nir, 7.1) of Yaska that divinity of a mantra is the one to whom a seer addresses his panegyrics with some specific desire, and from whom he wishes to obtain the desired object. Yaska interprets the word *deva* in his seventh chapter of the *Nirukta* as the entity which confers some advantages upon us or which can illuminate things, i.e. explain or throw light upon them and that which is the source of light is *deva*, cf. *devo danad va dipanadva dyotanad va dyusthano bhavatiti va* (Nirukta, 7.4.15). Generally, western scholars translate the word *deva* or *devata* as a deity. But *devata* of a mantra is not meant deity, but the subject matter. In the *Sarvanukramani* it is stated by Katyayana that the subject matter of the mantra or hymn is called *devata*.¹⁰ Yaska in his *Nirukta* also says the something. When a seer, desiring to impart instruction about a particular object, describes its properties in a mantra, it is said to have that object as its *devata*, e.g. *Sraddha*, i.e. genuine faith (R.V., 10.151), *Danastuti*, i.e. praise of the gift (R.V., 10.117), *Daksina*, i.e. largess (R.V., 10.107) *Aranyani*, i.e. dense forest (R.V., 10.146), *Dyutaninda*, i.e. the censure of gambling (R.V., 10.34) *Ausadhaya*, i.e. herbs (R.V. 10.101) etc. are devatas. Thus, the devata of a hymn is the subject matter of particular aspects of physical science.

Yaska regards every object that is praised by a worshipper in a hymn or even in a single verse in his technical language as a *devata* (Nir., 7.1.1). In connection with those mantras whose divinity is not clearly specified, it is pointed out that such mantras relate to the divinity to whom that particular sacrifice, or a part of the sacrifice is offered (Nir., 7.4). According to Durgacarya and subsequent , commentators, a particular mantra is said to belong to a deity to whom seer addresses his reverence with a particular desire and from whom he wishes to obtain

¹⁰ ya tena ucyate sa devata / *Sarvanukramani*, 2.5

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his object. So, when a seer overcomes by the poetic emotion and employs a symbol to express a deeper meaning through his poetic hymn, the symbol becomes the *devata* of that mantra.

From the hymns of the *Rgvedasamhita* it is clear that the sense of reverence was at the root of the Rgvedic religion. Everything which is impressed by its sublimity, or is supposed capable of affecting us for good or evil, may become a direct object of adoration. The sense of reverence became so vital to religion, that it became a separate deity in the tenth *mandala* of the *Rgveda*, cf. *sraddham pratarhavamahe sraddham madhyandinam pari/ sraddam suryasya nibhruchi sraddhe sraddhapayeha nah //* (R.V., 10.151.5). This Vedic attitude towards reverence has been retained through the Brahmanas, Upanisads and the later Puranas. In the Rgvedic period existence of divinities was believed not only behind the natural phenomena but also in the stones and trees and the images of earth, wood etc. At that period plants and trees were divinely animated. The hymn 10.97 is devoted to the deification of the plants with their healing properties.

The Rgvedic hymn 10.146 describes the forest goddess, *Aranyani*. The cult of forest trees, *Vanaspati* is invoked along with the waters and the mountains (R.V., 7.34.23, 10.64.8). The *Apri* hymn (R.V., 3.8) applied in the Animal sacrifice where the post to which the sacrificial animal was tied is the Forest Sovran and it becomes an animated being. Moreover, heaven, earth, mountains, rivers might be supplied as divine powers. The goddess Prthvi plays a restricted part in the *Rgvedasamhita*. In the hymn 10.18.10 she is invoked to be tender to the dead as to a child and called mother earth. Mountains are divinely animated in the verse R.V., 3.53.1, 3.54.20. In the Rgvedic hymns the deity of the field, i.e. *Ksetrasypati* is also invoked (R.V., 4.57) to grant cattle with sweetness of heaven and earth, the plants and the waters. We have prayer to *Sita* - the furrow to grant rich blessings and crops (R.V., 4.57.6) She is described fully in the Sutras (PGS., 2.17.9) which deal with the operations of agriculture. In the verse R.V., 8.21.3 the god Indra is called *Urvarapati*, i.e. lord of the plough field. Similarly *Vastospati* or lord of the dwelling is invoked to bless man and beast to remove diseases, to make cattle prosper, to afford protection, and to grant a favourable entry (R.V., 7.54.1-3). Even objects fashioned by the hand of man, weapons, the war-car, the drum, the plough as well as ritual elements, such as the pressing stones might be adored. In the Vedas two implements, i.e. *Suna* and *Sira* are invoked (R.V., 4.57.5-8, S.B., 2.6.3.5). The warrior attributes divinity to his arrow (R.V., 6.75.11, 15, 16 ; 6.47.26). His armour, bow and quiver are also celebrated. Besides sacrificial post, the sacrificial grass (R.V., 2.3.4, 10.70.4) and the divine doors (R.V., 1.142.6) are celebrated. Similarly we have reference to pressing stone (R.V., 10.76, 94, 175), the mortar and pestle (R.V., 1.28.5, 6,

1.10.13). Moreover, the animals which surround man might be invoked. *Dadhikra* or *Dadhikravan* - the most famous horse is praised in the Rgvedic verse 4.38-40, 7.44, 4.40.5. A bull plays an obscure part in the legend of Mudgala and his wife (R.V., 10.102). Yama - the god of dead is called Sarameya (R.V., 10.14.11, Nir., 11.25) a name denoting descent from Sarama. Rgvedic hymns 2.42, 43 invoke a bird of omen to give auspicious signs. Even frogs are treated as having power to send prosperity through the rain (R.V., 7.103). In the *Rgvedasamhita* every idea of mind is capable of elevation to the rank of gods. They are abstract personifications, such as *Puramdhi*, i.e. abundance, *Aramati*, i.e. piety, *Asuniti*, i.e. blessedness, *Manyu*, i.e. wrath, or deified objects, such as Sarasvati and Sindhu which are at once rivers and goddesses. In the *Rgvedasamhita* many inanimate objects are invoked as if they are alive (R.V., 10.75.9, 10.94.2, Nir., 7.2.7). So, in the Rgvedic age everything that has capacity of exercising a good or evil influence on man became an object of adoration.

From the afore – said discussion it can be deduced that Rgvedic worship began from offering prayers to various gods and goddesses for their favour and bliss. They were looked upon as regulating the occurrences in nature. At that time prayers were believed not only to relieve various kinds of sufferings, but also to work out diverse other kinds of miracles. It is clear that nature worship in some shape or form was the earliest aspect of religion and the religion of the Rgvedic Aryans drew inspiration from nature. The seers of the Rgvedic age offer oblations to the deities through the god Fire, hoping in response, rewards in the form of cattle, sons, long life, peace and prosperity and also for spiritual and mundane well-being.

BARNALI DEKA
Research Scholar,
Gauhati University,
Assam