

## Characteristic features of the Rgvedic Gods- A Reappraisal

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The poetry of the Veda is supposed to be the poetic manifestation of the seeric vision of the deva. The word deva is derived from the root div, meaning to shine or to illuminate. He who has shined through the mantra is called a deva. Yaska interprets the word deva in his seventh chapter of the Nirukta.<sup>1</sup> Here deva or god is so called for making gifts (from the root da) or from being shining (from the root dip), from being radiant (from the root dyut), or because his sphere is heaven.<sup>2</sup> In the Sarvanukramani, it is stated by Katyayana that the subject matter of the mantra or hymn is called Devata.<sup>3</sup> Yaska in his Nirukta says the same thing.<sup>4</sup> A particular stanza is said to belong to a deity, to whom a seer addresses his panegyrics with a particular desire, and from whom he wishes to obtain his object.<sup>5</sup> So, 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. 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.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, it can be said that when a seer overcomes by the poetic emotion and employs a symbol to express a deeper meaning through a hymn, the symbol becomes the devata of that mantra.

### Characteristics of the Rgvedic Gods

The Rgvedic deities bear some characteristic features, which are mentioned below-

**1) Common Characteristics-** Gods are said to have brilliance, power, benevolence, wisdom, infinity, omnipotence, righteousness, holiness and mercy. Besides

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<sup>1</sup> devo danadva / dipanadva / dyotanadva / dyusthano bhavatiti va / Nir., 7.15

<sup>2</sup> See, Sarup, Lakshman, (ed.) *The Nighantu and the Nirukta*, p. 121, New Delhi, 1967

<sup>3</sup> ya tena ucyaate sa devata / Sarvanukramani., 2.5

<sup>4</sup> yatkama rsiryasyam devatayamarthapatyamicchanstutim prayunkte taddaivatatah sa mantrabhavati // Nir., 7.1

<sup>5</sup> See, Sarup, Lakshman, op.cit., p. 113

<sup>6</sup> athato daivatam / tadyani namani pradhanyastutinam devatanam tad daivatamityacaksate // saisa devatopapariksa // Nir., 7.1

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the function of creation, preservation and destruction are ascribed to them. They are said to extend the earth and prop the air and the sky.

**2) Immortality** – In the Vedic religion, gods are characterized as immortal (amrtah)<sup>7</sup> and unaging (ajarah)<sup>8</sup>. Savitr is said to be the bestower of immortality on the gods.<sup>9</sup> From the interpretation given by Sayanacarya, it is known that Savitr bestowed on the gods Soma and other means to attain immortality.<sup>10</sup> Savitr also gave immortality on the Rbhus.<sup>11</sup> Agni is implored to confer immortality.<sup>12</sup> To obtain immortality gods also drank soma.<sup>13</sup> It is inferred from a verse of the Rgveda that gods attained immortality by drinking amrta or celestial Soma juice.<sup>14</sup> The undecaying nature of the gods is alluded to in the Rgvedic verses. Indra is described as ever youthful (yuna) and undecaying (ajuryata).<sup>15</sup> The concept of immortality and unagingness of the gods arose from the observation of the regular recurrences of the phenomena of nature. Nature repeating itself in unbroken regularity made gods eternal.

**3) Benevolence** – Gods are said to be exclusively beneficent beings, bestowers of prosperity and immense wealth<sup>16</sup>, who grant happiness in life. They protect against enemies and destroy the enemies of the human beings.<sup>17</sup> They are friends of the sacrificer. They came to earth to be present at the worship of the devoted people and partook of their offerings. That gods bring bliss is stated thus: 'Blessed is all that Gods regard with favour.'<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> R.V., 1.90.3

Also vide, Ibid., 2.1.14, 10.66.13

<sup>8</sup> a svamadya yuvamano ajarastrsvavisyannatasesu tisthati // Ibid., 1.58.2

Also vide, Ibid., 6.5.7

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 4.54.2

<sup>10</sup> devebhyah...amrtatvam tatsadhanam uttamam utkrstatamam bhagam somadilaksanam  
suvasi anujanasi.../  
Sayana, Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 1.110.3

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 6.7.4

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 9.106.8

<sup>14</sup> sato nunam kavayah sam sisita vasibhiryabhiramrtaya taksatha /  
vidvamsah pada guhyani kartana yena devaso amrtatvamanasuh // Ibid., 10.53.10

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 3.46.1, 6.24.7, 5.42.6

<sup>16</sup> agnina rayimasnavatposameva divedive /  
yasasam viravattamam // Ibid., 1.1.3

<sup>17</sup> Vide, Chaubey, B.B., (ed.) *The New Vedic Selection*, part II, p. 77, Delhi, 1986

<sup>18</sup> visvam tadbhadram yadavanti deva brhadvadema vidathe suvirah / R.V., 2.35.15

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4) **Morality** – In the Rgvedasamhita, a well developed conception of ethical conduct is noticed. The word used to denote the conception of the order of the world is rta. Everything in the Universe which is conceived as showing regularity of action may be said to have the rta for its principle. In its most general application the conception expressed by the word occupied to some extent the place of natural and moral law, fate, or the will of a supreme God.<sup>19</sup> Rta or ethical order is the principle of Rgvedic religion. Rta is said to be the highest truth and all beings are supposed to follow its laws. Those laws are vratas<sup>20</sup> and if someone violates them, he would become avrata and would face the consequences which would lead him to the dark region. The character of the Vedic gods is moral.<sup>21</sup> Gods were the embodiments of the human values and ideals of human character. They were described as the guardians of honesty and virtue. They were holy ones and wise. Gods were guileless (adruha)<sup>22</sup> and are never remiss.<sup>23</sup> They were the furtherers of Law, pure in spirit and infallible.<sup>24</sup> The Eternal law makes Indra mighty. It is stated that the offerers of sacrifice magnify Indra by their praises, i.e. rtasya satyasya yajnasya va pradisah pradestaro vidvamsah stotrah vardhayanti.../<sup>25</sup> It is stated that Indra is purified by the sastras.<sup>26</sup> In the first mandala of the Rgvedasamhita, Agni is called the guardian of Eternal Law (gopamrtasya).<sup>27</sup> Varuna and the Adityas were considered as the founders and protectors of moral order, i.e. Rta. Varuna is the great upholder of physical and moral order (rta), the punisher of sin.<sup>28</sup> He is called dhrtavrata, i.e. whose laws are established.<sup>29</sup> He is well-knowing. If someone acts against the law of Rta, is liable to be bound in the fetters or pasas of Varuna and only Varuna can release him from that sin.<sup>30</sup> It is seen that none can escape from the spies of the gods to save

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<sup>19</sup> Vide, Griffith, R.T.H., *The Hymns of the Rgveda*, on 1.1.8, p. 1, Delhi, 1986

<sup>20</sup> R.V., 2.28.8

<sup>21</sup> Vide, Macdonell, A.A., *A History of Sanskrit Literature*, p. 59, Delhi, 1962

<sup>22</sup> R.V., 2.1.14

<sup>23</sup> aprayucchatah apramadyatah visvan sarvan devan.../ Sayana, Ibid., 10.66.13

<sup>24</sup> rtasya vo rathyah putadaksanrtasya pastyasado adabdhan / Ibid., 6.51.9

<sup>25</sup> Sayana, Ibid., 8.100.4

<sup>26</sup> indra suddhah asmadiyaih samabhih sastraisca parisuddhastvam.../ Sayana, Ibid., 8.95.8

Also vide, Ibid., 8.95.9

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 1.1.8

<sup>28</sup> kimaga asa varuna jyestham yatstotaram jighamsasi sakhayam /pra tanme voco dulabha svadhavo'va tvanena namasa tura iyam // Ibid., 7.86.4

<sup>29</sup> pra su na etvadhvarogna devesu purvyah /

adityesu pra varune dhrtavrate marutsu visvabhanusu // Ibid., 8.27.3

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 6.74.4

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himself from sin.<sup>31</sup> Agni is invoked to free from guilt.<sup>32</sup> Indra too is a punisher of sin.<sup>33</sup> It is said by Max Muller that 'The consciousness of sin is a prominent feature in the religion of the Veda, so is likewise, the belief that the gods are able to take away from man the heavy burden of his sin.'<sup>34</sup>

**5) Anthropomorphism** – The physical aspect of the Rgvedic gods is anthropomorphic. Gods are often addressed as men. Various qualities and virtues of human being are attributed to them. Agni is called *nrnam nrtama*<sup>35</sup>, i.e. the manliest hero.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, from the appellations of the Gods as *nrpesasa*<sup>37</sup>, as having the form of men, it can be said that Vedic seers represented the gods in a sensible manner. A Rgvedic verse of the first mandala appears to be a sensible representation.<sup>38</sup> Head, face, eyes, arms, hands, feet, shoulders, belly and other portions of the human body are ascribed to the Vedic gods. Gods are described as beautiful. Agni is wondrous.<sup>39</sup> The twin pair, i.e. Day and Night are called the twin beauties that adopt various forms. One of them shines brightly, and the other is black.<sup>40</sup> The Maruts are handsome like Kings, decked with bright adornment, like spotless gallants.<sup>41</sup> Varuna is said to be the sage who cherishes the acts of sages, as the heaven cherishes numerous forms, i.e. *sah varunah kavih prajnah san kavya kavyani kavikarmani puru bahuni rupam dyauriva pusyati*<sup>42</sup> Indra has been the model for every figure. He moves multiform by his illusions.<sup>43</sup> He presents himself as Agni, Visnu or Rudra, or any other deity and is identifiable with each as referred to in the Sayanacarya's commentary- *indrasya tat praptamagnyadidevatas-varupam praticaksanaya pratiniyatadarsanaya ayamagnirayam visnurayam rudra*

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 4.4.3, 6.6.7.5

<sup>32</sup> Vide, Macdonell, A.A., op.cit., p. 98

<sup>33</sup> R.V., 2.12.10

<sup>34</sup> Vide, Phillips, M., *The Teaching of the Vedas*, p. 140, New Delhi, 1976

<sup>35</sup> R.V., 1.77.4

<sup>36</sup> Vide, Griffith, R.T.H., op.cit., on 1.77.4, p. 50

<sup>37</sup> *nrpesasah nararupah ...* / Sayana on R.V., 3.4.5

<sup>38</sup> *bibhradrapim hiranyayam varuno vasta nirnijam / pari spaso ni sedire* // Ibid., 1.25.13

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 6.6.7

<sup>40</sup> *yamya yamarupe mithunabhute ahasca ratriscetyete nana nanavidhani vapumsi suklakrsnadini rupani cakrate kurutah* / Sayana, Ibid., 3.55.11

<sup>41</sup> *rajano na citrah susamdrsah ksitinam na marya arepasah* / Ibid., 10.78.1

<sup>42</sup> Sayana, Ibid., 8.41.5

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 6.47.18

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ityevamasamkirnadarsanaya bhavati/<sup>44</sup> According to Wilson, Indra is here identified with Paramesvara, the supreme first cause, identical with creation.<sup>45</sup> Gods are associated with things seen in human society. Some of the gods appear as warriors, wearing coats of mail and helmets and armed with spears, battle-axes, bows and arrows. Such as, Indra is armed with a bolt (vajra).<sup>46</sup> They all drive through the air in luminous cars. They are said to have wearing garments, such as, Dawn is described as decked in bright attire. The limbs or parts are often simply meant figuratively to describe their activities. A god is the most father-like or mother-like and best friend etc. Agni is regarded as a father, as a kinsman, as a brother and as a constant friend.<sup>47</sup> The worshippers seek Agni as a father with their prayers, who acts as a son to them, who duly worship him, and as a trusty friend he guards from attack.<sup>48</sup> Vata is called the father, brother and friend of the worshipper.<sup>49</sup> Sarasvati is called the most motherly.<sup>50</sup> Similarly Day and Night are imagined as the twin sisters.<sup>51</sup> Thus, they are associated with family members. Such as wives, sons, brothers etc.<sup>52</sup> Yaska also supports this view.<sup>53</sup> Different gods are described as performing human acts. Yaska furnishes four different views in this context –

- a) That the gods are anthropomorphic.
- b) That the gods are not anthropomorphic.
- c) That the gods may be both anthropomorphic and unanthropomorphic.
- d) That the unanthropomorphic appearance of the gods, who are really anthropomorphic, is their counterself in the form of action.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Sayana, Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Vide, Griffith, R.T.H., op.cit., on 6.47.18, p. 313

<sup>46</sup> R.V., 1.32.3

<sup>47</sup> agnim manye pitaramagnimapimagnim bhrataram sadamitsakhayam / Ibid., 10.7.3

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 2.1.9

<sup>49</sup> uta vata pitasi na uta bhratota nah sakha / Ibid., 10.186.2

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 2.41.16

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 3.55.11

<sup>52</sup> apah somamastamindra pra yahi kalyanirjaya suranam grhe te / Ibid., 3.53.6

<sup>53</sup> athakaracintanam devatanam / purusavidhah syurityekam / cetanavadvaddhi stutayo bhavanti /

tathabhidhanani // athapi paurusavidhikairangaih samstuyante / athapi

paurusavidhikairdravyasamyogaih /

athapi paurusavidhikaih karmabhih // Nir., 7.6

<sup>54</sup> purusavidhah syurityekam / ...apurusavidhah syurityaparam / ...api vobhayavidhah syuh / api va

purusavidhanameva satam karmatmana ete syuh / Ibid., 7.6,7

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It can be said that god never appears before the worshipper, though mentally the seers imagine his approach and sometimes his features. One who doubts his existence Indra says- 'Here I am, worshipper, behold me here.'<sup>55</sup> It is stated that the Deity does not make a physical appearance; the worshipper is expected to follow Vibhuti-yoga and find him in the glory of the universe and the working of Rta. In other words, the Divinity is to be apprehended in terms of moral and aesthetic values.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> ayamasmī jaritah pasya meha visva jatanyabhyasmi mahna / R.V., 8.100.4

<sup>56</sup> Vide, Bose, A.C., *Hymns from the Vedas*, p. 24, New Delhi, 1966

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