

EARLY INDIAN RELIGIOUS THOUGHT

AN INTRODUCTION
AND ESSAY

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The personality in heaven consists of "manas" the soul, "asu" the spirit (=breath, not spirit in the modern sense of the word) and the luminous, heavenly "śarīra" or body. It is welcomed, on arrival, by the Fathers and Gods. Soma is drunk and immortality attained. Family reunion with the departed, sainted parents, friends, wife and children takes place, and blessedness and perpetual felicity reign supreme (Atharva Veda VI.120.3; XII.3.17.)

Such a belief may have been one of the powerful hidden forces responsible for the vigorous survival of the Indian peoples and their way of life.

Although there are doubts expressed regarding the existence of the gods, and there are a few speculations tending to lead the mind towards the concept of an impersonal That or It as the ultimate reality, Vedic religion, in its literal aspect, is on the whole a clear-cut system with simple doctrines and well defined ritual. It is remarkable, and significant, that though the hymns were composed over a period of several centuries by seers and poets belonging to different families, perhaps widely separated from each other in habitation, there is unanimity in the descriptions of the gods and their functions. Of course, there is henotheism, which indicates the particular slant of individual Rishis. But there is no usurpation of function or dereliction of duty. Agni is Agni and Soma is Soma, every inch faithful, dutiful and majestic gods. The conduct of the celestial host is ethical, and the ethic laid down for man is undoubtedly high.

It is not surprising, then, that there is no dogmatic assertion of individual freedom: of the dignity, worth and rights of the individual as an individual. There seems to be no obvious struggle to win and to express the freedom of the mind and spirit of man, or of the right to make mistakes, to challenge established beliefs, to explore new avenues. There is no rebel angel, no Promethean conquest, tragedy and emancipation. The lordly Ādityas rule; the priests celebrate the holy rites; man obediently fulfils duty. All is well.

There is only one hymn (Rig Veda X. 100.) in which the first eleven of its twelve verses end with the refrain, "We ask for freedom and complete felicity" [Griffith translates it as "We

long for the universal Aditi," (the infinite, the un-fettered)]. An examination of the context shows that the purport of the hymn is to obtain freedom from illness, loss, sin's consequence and unhappiness.

In practice, Vedic man remained dependent, therefore, upon the gods. His constant endeavour was to win their favour by prayer and sacrifice, and store up merit in heaven by the good life here.

And yet, there is an assertion of inward personal freedom, the magnitude of which is proportional to the profundity of the question asked and the daring limit to which the agnostic thinker rose. This is the famous Creation Hymn in the Rig Veda, X.129. Though not concerned directly with religious thought, the philosophical speculation in this hymn is of the utmost importance. It was the greatest forerunner of the monistic trend which culminated some centuries later in the Upanishads, in that greatest of all concepts, the concept of Brahman. In this hymn, the speculative search for the first origin of creation did not, however, crystallize into a concept, but remained as a question, as a tentative suggestion. The monism of the Rig Veda is a tendency not an accomplishment. Yet it is undoubtedly the true seed whence grew the tree and fruit of the Upanishadic concepts of Brahman and Ātman. The Nāsadiya hymn expresses what is probably the crowning glory of the Rig Vedic speculative thought:

1. Then was not non-existent nor existent :
there was no realm of air, no sky beyond it.
What covered in, and where? and what gave shelter?
Was water there, unfathomed depth of water?
2. Death was not then, nor was there aught immortal :
no sign was there, the day's and night's divider.
That One Thing, breathless, breathed by its own
nature: apart from it was nothing whatsoever.
3. Darkness there was: at first concealed in darkness
this All was indiscriminated chaos.
All that existed then was void and formless :
by the great power of Warmth was born that Unit.
4. Thereafter rose Desire in the beginning,
Desire, the primal seed and germ of Spirit.

Sages who searched with their heart's thought discovered the existent's kinship in the non-existent.

5. Transversely was their severing line extended :
what was above it then, and what below it ?
There were begetters, there were mighty forces,
free action here and energy up yonder.
6. Who verily knows and who can here declare it,
whence it was born and whence comes this
creation ?
The gods are later than this world's production.
7. He, the first origin of this creation,
whether he formed it all or did not form it,
Whose eye controls this world in highest heaven,
he verily knows it, or perhaps he knows not.

This poem bears the influences of several lines of thought—naturalistic, psychological, philosophical, speculative and agnostic. The poet begins in the mood of enquiry. What is the ultimate underlying both existent and non-existent? Dyaus Pitar himself is abolished. Life, death, night, day, and hence process, action, growth and consciousness are all non-existent. Then, comes the assertion, "That One Thing, breathless, breathed by its own nature: apart from it was nothing whatsoever." Anthropomorphism and monotheism are transcended. Reality is felt objectively. The terms are "it" and "itself" for the one-ness. Even further, other than "it" there was nothing. All manifestation is but the one, the ultimate "it", undergoing continuous transformation. Since there is no other than it, then surely the manifestation of it is indeed a universe. "Breathed without breath". The poet cannot put into mere words the light that gave him vision. He could have said "It was". But he belongs to a naturalistic, vitalistic tradition, to a day which regarded all the universe as "living", with no sharp cleavage between dead matter and living creations. So he uses the term "breathed", perhaps indicating the potentiality within the ultimate for action, growth and being.

"Darkness there was". Symbolic of non-differentiation—symbolic too of matter and of un-consciousness. "All that existed then was void and formless"! Again, portraying non-differentiation, absence of organization, control or direction or

of law in operation. The poet next uses naturalistic language. He draws upon his own life-experience when he says "Thereafter rose Desire in the beginning, Desire the primal seed and germ of Spirit". And immediately afterwards he plunges into profundity when he says "Sages who searched with their heart's thought discovered the existent's kinship in the non-existent". Herein lies a suggestion of looking inwards to find reality. Intellectual examination is an out-turned activity, touching the periphery of experience. So much escapes sense and brain, but is nevertheless there, part and parcel of active being. Searching the heart means searching the hidden depths. The later poets of the R̥ig Veda had insight and intuitive perception as proved by the poets' words: "discovered the existent's kinship in the non-existent". For indeed the roots of the seen lie in the unseen; knowledge slumbers in the womb of ignorance; and the substantial emerges out of the seemingly non-substantial. This is not to deny the dictum "ex nihilo, nihil fit", but rather to indicate the relationship between the factual and conceptual, the complex organism and its seed, between the concrete result of process and the original forces giving rise to the process.

Magnificent is the agnostic frame of mind in which the poet asks: "Who verily knows and who can here declare it whence it was born and whence comes this creation? The gods are later than this world's production. Who knows then whence it first came into being?" With great daring he asserts that the gods came later than the world, and so could not be makers of heaven and earth. Perhaps he wants to suggest they were born out of men's minds, that primitive animism was the parent of a more sophisticated anthropomorphism, and that even the exalted conception of Varuṇa or Viśvakarman was only a shadow of the substance of underlying reality. But the poet does not yet personally seek reality. He still looks for some other, man or god, who may know. Although he has abolished the gods de jure he has not dethroned them de facto. Although he seeks inward reality, essential truth, he is still looking outwards, himself remaining a separate entity from the all-inclusive one-ness, despite his own previous assertion: "That One

Thing, breathless, breathed by its own nature ; apart from it was nothing whatsoever." The climax comes in the last verse : " He the first origin of this creation, whether he formed it all or did not form it, whose eye controls this world in highest heaven, he verily knows it, or perhaps he knows not ". " It " is replaced by " he " and the vitalist triumphs over the objective transcendentalist of the earlier verse. The question whether the ultimate is a first cause, a being, fashioning already present matter into a universe, or is the impersonal, unknowable absolute out of which emerges the universe, remains unanswered. The earlier search for the absolute ends up with the poet wondering whether even the highest seer in the highest heaven knows. And even he may not know. The greatest of the gods is fearlessly challenged ! Gone is the day of blind faith, of baseless trust in the unverified or unverifiable. The individual right to question without fear or favour, is asserted. The spirit of selfless, objective search for truth is born, the new flame to light man's path on his quest, to lead him to spiritual freedom. That the path lay through his own inner being was the discovery which fell to the lot of a later generation.

Prajāpati Parameṣṭhin, poet of the Nāsadiya hymn, was an ancestor of the scientific spirit and method. To him belongs the honour of being the first liberator of the mind and spirit of man from the shackles of fear and superstitious propitiation of unknown gods, of being the first champion of free individuality. The mind and spirit of man had come of age.

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Generations later, the poets of the Atharva Veda take up the theme. In a dialogue between Varuṇa and Atharvan, the primeval priest after whom the Atharva Veda is named,

Atharvan says :

O self-dependent Varuṇa, wise director,
thou knowest verily all generations.
What is, unerring one ! beyond this region ?
What more remote than that which is most distant ?

Atharva Veda V.11.5.

Varuṇa answers :

One thing there is beyond this air, and something
beyond that one, most hard to reach, remotest.
I Varuṇa, who know, to thee declare it.

But Atharvan does not proceed to reveal the secret, except that further on, in verse 10, he says : " One origin, Varuṇa ! one bond unites us : I know the nature of that common kinship." This may be a hint that the ultimate origin, IT, is un-knowable and indescribable. Yet IT is the ground of the indissoluble link of the kinship between man and god. And so, only the nature of that kinship can be known.

The first hymn of Book II of the Atharva Veda begins thus :

1. Vena (the rising sun) beholds that Highest (the Supreme First Cause) which lies hidden, wherein this All resumes one form and fashion.
Thence Priṣni (the creative power of Nature) milked all life that had existence ; the hosts that know the light with songs extolled her.
2. Knowing Eternity, may the Gandharva (Vena, or, according to Weber, the sage) declare to us that highest secret station.

In the second hymn of Book X, the poet asks many questions about Purusha or Primeval Man : Who made his heels, ankles, feet, legs, hips, thighs, stomach, breast, arms, head—in short every part of his body—and how ? Who gave him form, shape, motion, consciousness ? How is he made up of the pleasant and unpleasant, want, evil, suffering, success, opulence, prosperity, truth and falsehood, death and immortality ?

Further, by whom was this earth disposed and heaven placed above, the expanse of air lifted on high and stretched across ?

The answer is Purusha himself identified with Brahman the phenomenal Creator. Man's body is called Brahman's castle, or " fort girt about with immortality " (Verse 29). And a little further on :

32. Men deep in lore of Brahman know that Animated
Being which
Dwells in the golden treasure-chest that hath
three spokes and three supports.