POET-PHILOSOPHERS OF
THE RGVEDA

VEDIC AND PRE-VEDIC

BY
DR. C. KUNHAN RAJA

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

ASYA VAMASYA HYMN
(Riddle of the Universe)

Rgveda (i. 164). Sanskrit text with the Bhayas of Sāyaṇa and Ātmānanda, with their English translation and notes.

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C. Kunhan Raja

Naimisham

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Cultural Centre for World Harmony

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such stories must have got currency through poetry. Then they are alluded to in other poems also.

66. In such stories that are alluded to in the Rgveda the poem is now assigned to certain characters appearing in the poem. It is likely that the characters lived far earlier and some one composed a poem introducing such characters. Then the characters went down as authors of the poems. There is the story of three poets, Ekata, Dvita and Trita, having been on a journey through the desert; they felt thirsty and they came to a well. Trita went down the well and brought water to the top for the others to drink. They all drank the water. Then the other two pushed Trita into the well and closing the well they took away his wealth and went away. Trita prayed to the gods and the gods saved him from the well. The author is given either as Trita, son of Āpta (Āptya) or Kutsa of the Āṅgiras family. It may be a poem of Kutsa in which Trita is only a character. Kutsa in his poems in the first Book of the Rgveda alludes to a large number of such stories. The commentators have preserved the skeleton of the stories. The stories indicate the antecedent state of the civilization prior to the Rgveda times. But they cannot be included in this book.

VIII. FORMATION OF THE WORLD

1. The Rgveda is full of evidences regarding a deep philosophy relating to the Form and also to the Formation of the world. There are innumerable references to this topic throughout the text of the Rgveda. There are a few poems in which there is a definite description of the topic. They are primarily poetry and they are poetry with a philosophical topic. In the other places we have poetry with a philosophical back-ground. We have only poetry in the Rgveda and we never have a text book on any philosophical topic. There are a few poems within the Atharvaveda collection that are of equal interest from a philosophical point of view; but I confine myself to the Rgveda in this book. In the case of many of them, we do not know who the poet is; the names given are fictitious and in some, the theme and the poet are the same.

i. Evolution

2. There is a poem of seven verses which contains a very profound philosophy regarding the origin of the world in its evolved condition. The poem deals with the condition prior to the evolution and diversification. The doctrine may not be that there is a real beginning for the world in its evolved condition and that the condition of the world in that prior state is something like what has been described in the poem. The thoughts of the poem are deep and the language is grand.

3. The Rgveda refers to the two conditions in the world. There is a condition of movement and change and there is also
a condition in which there is no movement and no change. They are known by such pairs of words like Śātvī śaratham, Jagatā tathūṣas and Amṛtam martyrām. There is an infinity and there is also a finite state with changes and movements. The unmoving, unchanging condition, where it is all still, where there is no diversification, is the basis for the changing and moving world with diversifications. The process is an eternal one, and it is continuous and simultaneous in the different parts forming the finite world. It is very difficult to say whether there is a change in the infinite, and if there is no such change, how the finite world came at all into being. If the finite world is also there as a distinct and independent reality, then the infinite is not infinite; there is the finite world which is a limitation on the infinity of the infinite world; the infinite becomes finite through such a limitation. If the finite world is not distinct from the infinite world, then there is change and movement within the infinite world and this too is a contradiction in terms. Finite units can never form an infinity. In the infinity there can be no numerical or other measuring units possible.

4. A finite is a finite because there is a beyond. Thus a finite reality is known as “this much and something more”, which “something more” is indefinite. If that “something more” in relation to a specific object is also known, then that “something more” within that original condition comes within such a “this much”, and there is another “something more”. In the infinity there is no element of a “thus much” and it does not also have that “something more”. An infinity is neither a “thus much” nor a “something more”, nor even a combination of the two. The infinite is known by itself. There is no knowing nor a knowledge nor a knower, and as such, it is not an object of a knowledge, through a process within some subject. From the point of view of the finite, it can be designated as what it is not.

5. The poem starts with a statement about that infinite. At that time, there was neither a non-being nor a being. There is no absolute non-being nor is there an absolute being within the infinite world. A thing “is not” when there is something else and a thing “is” in relation to something else. Thus we cannot say whether the infinite “is” or “is not”. The word used in the text is “tadānim”; this means “at that time”. Really it must mean “in that state”. We take that infinite as related to the world in the same way in which a thread is related to the final cloth. So in the case of a cloth we speak of the threads as in a certain state “at that time”; that is the time when it was a bundle of threads. But in the case of the finite and the infinite, the term “at that time” is not appropriate. There is no time factor for the infinite in the way in which the threads have a time factor. The cloth is the time limitation for the threads. But the finite world is not a time limitation for the infinite; the infinite remains as infinite even when the finite is formed; it does not terminate like a bundle of threads when the cloth is formed.

6. We speak of the finite things as being in space; in the condition of the infinite, there is no space where the infinite “is”. The infinite “is” just in an absolute way, not here or there. Space is what is either limited by the measurable objects or is not so limited, as the vast space beyond what we see as the substrate of the finite objects. This latter is the supreme expanse, para vyaman. The infinite does not exist even in that expanse. There is no space at all as the substrate of the infinite space.

7. In the case of the finite objects we say that there is space all around it. Then what is it that covered the infinite in that condition of infinity? Where does it rest? Where is it? Was it the deep, the mighty water? The
position is that the infinite has no resting place either in the limited space or in the unlimited expanse, nor does it have a resting place in the deep and mighty ocean.

8. We speak of a thing as such since we know also the state when it was not, either prior or later. We can say that such and such a thing has a beginning and an end and then we can also say as a contrast to it that another thing has neither a beginning nor an end; such a thing is immortal in contrast to the thing having a beginning and an end. In that primal state we cannot say anything about the beginning or the end, and so we cannot also deny the beginning and the end. We experience a phenomenon called light and we speak about the night and the day. In that state, there is no mark, no sign of this distinction of day and night. There was no time at all in that state.

9. There was that One, just by itself. But even in that state, it cannot be said that there was no "life" in it. The "Life Infinite" is there. But when we live, there is the breath as its sign, as a mark; we find some air being blown out. In the case of the infinite, there is "Life", but no sign of that life. So, there is nothing other than that, beyond of that. The infinite has life; but it does not breathe. It is there just as "One", and there is nothing other than itself, beyond of that. There is no "this and that"; there is no "here and there". It is just as "One", and it has life from within its own power. We live through external factors like food and water and air. But the infinite has life through its own power.

10. In that primal state at the beginning of all, it was all darkness encompassed in darkness. It may be said that darkness is "what is not", the absence of light. Then we can even speak of it as something else, what we know as positive. As among the things known to us within the finite world, it is better to speak of it in terms of what are known to us as positive things. So we can say that it is like an expanse of water without anything to mark it out as water. It cannot be known as water. The term was used only to suggest that the infinite is of a positive nature. We know a thing as something positive on account of its being marked out by some sign. We say that a thing is a jar because it has marks which are found in some other things and it does not have features that are found in some other things. The infinite has no such marks, either what are common with others or what are distinct from others. The entirety of this infinite may be spoken of as such an expanse of water without any distinguishing mark in it.

11. That all-encompassing (Ābau) infinite was concealed all around by something which is what cannot be imagined (Tucchya), by something which cannot be there and which, yet is there to shroud it. What is infinite cannot be covered up. To say that the infinite has something around it, something covering it, is a contradiction. Yet there was something which kept it hidden. Such an infinity which was hidden became manifest, came into being through its own inherent power. There is the word Tapas used, which is what enabled the infinite to become a unit. How is it that it is a unity in itself and how is it that it is hidden from our knowledge? Both its unity and its incognisability are due to the greatness of its own power (Tapas). There is the word Ajāyata, which means "it was born". There is no birth or origin. What it means is that it is there in that state always; there is no time nor a state when it was what it is not. The word "Born" is used in the Ṛgveda in many places in this sense. There is no indication of a birth nor of an origin. It simply means
"always, by its very nature." Thus when it is said that "Indra was born without a foe," what it means is that never was there a time when he had a foe. There was no enemy born to him. Here too, what the passage means is that it was never other than "One," other than what is concealed from our knowing. It is not like a cloth that covers an object and prevents it from being seen; this is what is meant by the term "Tucchya", what cannot be described, what cannot be even thought of. Its entire nature is from within; there is life (Ānīt), there is some power (Svadhā), there is some force (Tāpas).

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12. This life and this power and this force imply a "Will." Thus along with these inherent features, there was also the Will. On that infinity there arose a Will. It does not mean that there was a time when that Will was not there. It is there in the beginning (Āgri), that means, there was no time when it was not there. This Will was the original (Prathamam) seed for the mind or, rather, for the mental function. In the infinite nature, it had no mental function. There was not only the Svadhā; there was also the life (Ānīt). There was Tāpas too, in the infinite state. What was not in the infinite state is this mental activity. What is called the will (Kāma) is not an inherent nature of the infinite. Nor is it a produce; it was always there.

13. I notice some affinity between the theory found in this poem and the theory of evolution found in the Sānkhya system. In the Upaniṣads we find only the Sānkhya system, though the latter has undergone many changes in details. The general line is traceable to the Upaniṣads, and that can be traced farther back to this poem. This poem shows that the theory was current at that time, and this theory is the background for the Rgveda; for this poem, it is also the subject

matter. It is said that in the beginning there was darkness, encompassed in darkness. That is the Tamo-guṇa or the material aspect in the basic fundamental of the universe. Then there is the life, what is called the breathing without the breath, the power within. That is the Sattva-guṇa or the Light or sentience aspect. Then the Tāpas is the Rajo-guṇa, the activity. On account of these aspects, there was the Will, which corresponds to the Buddh. This primal feature is the seed for the activity of what is known as the Antahkarāṇa or the internal thinking faculty; that is the Manas.

14. In itself, it cannot be called either as "is" or as "is not". From the empirical point of view, it has to be termed as "not existing"; what is existing is what has features, what has the factor of being known. Yet, it is not the "non-being" in our empirical experience. From the empirical point of view, the "being" side is nearer in relationship to the infinite than the "non-being" side. So the poets who have the necessary intuition and the necessary training, are able to realise this "non-being" as a relation of what is experienced as "being", in their hearts, through their imaginative intuition, after close search.

15. When the poets with trained intuition make the search in their hearts, and when they apply their intuition, then they are able to locate in the "non-being", the infinite, something akin to what is experienced as "being" in the empirical world. That infinite is not a being in the sense in which the beings in the empirical objects come within our experience; yet when they search deeper they find in the infinite something that is more akin to what is experienced as "being" than what is experienced as "non-being". Their doctrine is that the entire universe is real, is positive. There is a positive basis for this positive world and there is also the "Life" as a fundamental in this universe, which is an inherent constituent of the positive, real infinite.
16. There was Tapas, the Rajo-guna, the aspect of activity; there was also the "Life" and the Svadha, the life aspect, the Sattva-Guna. It is on account of them that the mental function started, there being the Will always in the infinite. There must have been rays of light and rays of activity when the internal organs began to function. These rays of activity began to spread about; one wonders whether they were below or whether they were above, in the beginning. How did they begin to stretch all around, where did they come? This is a mystery unknown to anyone. When this activity started there arose activities which bore the seeds for organic life, also the greatness for the inorganic matter with volume. Spatial extension and life activity are the two factors that arose in the infinite when there was the first activity of the mind. That is the nature of diversification. There arose power from within, there arose movement, below and above. That means that at this stage, there grew up a process of change and movement from within, from below and from above. There was no agent for this process.

17. Was there any one at that time to know this process? Was there any one to explain it to us so that we can know it here? What is it that is to be known and to be explained? The point is the problem whence there was this origination, whence there was this diversification. It was one, and now it has been thrown off in various ways. How can the diverse arise from what was One? It cannot be the gods, who could have known it and who could have explained it; they came into being only after diversification. Then who could know whence this originated, whence it came about?

18. There was no agent for this diversification; it was from within. There was also no agent to know this; there was no one to explain this. There is no primal Teacher who is Omniscient, to know and to explain the event of the diversification of what was just One. This is a definite Atheism. This is what is found in the Sānkhya system also. In the Classical Sānkhya there is no original agent for the diversification of the uniform basic fundamental. There is no Omniscient person also, One among the many. All the Puruṣas (Self) were alike. There is no supreme Self.

19. There is something from which there is this diversification. Was it a process of active creation, did he create the diversification or did he not? Was it a natural evolution from within the infinite or was the infinite an active agent in producing the finite world? Perhaps there is some wise being as a witness, as a supervisor, sitting in the highest heaven; he might have been the Lord to control this whole process, to know the process from the very beginning. Sir, if there is such a Lord, then he might know. Perhaps he too does not know. The implication is that there is no such Super Being above to control the process. There is no one who knows it as an eye-witness. The wise poets make a search in their hearts and they know something about that stage of origination through their own powers of intuition.

20. The Sānkhya philosophy makes reasoning as the only way to know the truth. There are factors that transcend the powers of reason, and such matters have to be known through intuition and one has to depend on the revelations by such persons having the necessary intuition. There is no God sitting in the highest heaven to work out the process of the change of the infinite into the finite, nor even to control the process; he does not also know that process.

21. The philosophy that can be understood from this poem is what must have been there as the basis of the system
known as the Śāṅkhya in later times. That is the philosophy that is found in the Upaniṣads. Here we find no trace of Self, distinct from matter, and what we find is only the infinite that became diversified into matter and activity in the empirical world; the life principle, as an absolute reality was there in that infinite. There was no duality in that infinite; the infinity was a unity in what could later become matter and life. The dualism between matter and spirit is a later accretion in Indian thought when the idea of salvation, final release, became a powerful factor in the Indian mind. The release must be for something and must be from something. So there must be a Self to gain release; the release so gained must be from the bondages of matter. The strongest point in the later texts on Śāṅkhya for the establishment, through syllogistic reason, of a Self, distinct from matter, is that there is a universal activity with salvation, release, isolation (Kāivalya) as the goal. In this grand poem we find the Rgvedic stage of the Śāṅkhya system of thought.

22. The atheism is very patent and this is the atheism of the Śāṅkhya system; there is no Creator for the world process. The evolution is from within some infinite, which infinite contains within itself the powers of life for the evolution of the world with change and movement. As for some Omniscient Being, who is there, but who is inactive, there is only an Agnosticism. If there is, let Him be there; the probability is that He is not. The uncompromising realism and positivism is also very patent. The infinite which "is not" in the sense in which an empirical fact "is", is yet more akin to what "is" in the empirical world than to what "is not" in the empirical world. There are certain fundamental concepts in philosophy which are persistent in Indian thought. The world is real and its basic fundamental, the infinite, is also real. A positive thing can never be created from a "no-thing." The evolution of the diversified world is from within and there is no external agent. Life is a fundamental in the universe. These are the persistent elements in Indian philosophy and we find all of them in this poem.

23. Here is the root of Indian philosophy; in the Upaniṣads we find only the stem far above the root of the tree. The root goes down far below the time when the Rgveda was being composed. This is definitely pre-Vedic. The author is not known. In the ancient indices, Parameśthi (sitting in the supreme abode) Prajāpati (lord of the people) is given as the poet. But he is not a poet. Some poet must have given it as the teaching of the Prajāpati who sits in the highest abode. And it is rather surprising that in that poem there is a doubt, a touch of agnosticism, regarding such a Being who could know the truth, the real beginning of the evolution. It was an old and anonymous poem and it came down with a fictitious authorship.

ii. TRANSFORMATION

24. There is a poem in the Rgveda where the process of the formation of the world is dealt with as one of a transformation from an Absolute, thought of as a Person. In this poem there is a clear indication of active agents functioning in the process of this formation. There is also a hint that the Absolute had the awareness of such a process as planned, regulated, controlled and effected by itself as a person. Some real, active agents come into the picture even at the earliest stages of the process, like gods and wise men and demi-gods. The process is pictured as one similar to the process of conducting a ritual of worship by many persons in collaboration. It is even expressly stated in the end that the process of the formation of the world from the Absolute is a ritual of worship, the primal Law of moral life in the universe. The poem is one among the most sacred within the Vedas; people recite the poem as a part of their daily worship. Most of the people
X—154

1. soma ekebhyaḥ pavate
   gḥṛtam eka upāsate
   yebhyaḥ madhu pradhāvati
   tāṁś cid evāpi gamyatāṁ

somaḥ Soma. ekebhyaḥ for some. pavate is being pressed.
gḥṛtam ghee (cooked butter) eke some. upāsate long for. yebhyaḥ
towards whom. madhu honey. pradhāvati rushes forth. tāṁ
them. cit verily. eva alone. api. even. gamyatāṁ may go.

2. tapasā ye anādhrṣyās
   tapasā ye svar yayuḥ
   tapo ye cakrire mahas
   tāṁś cid evāpi gamyatāṁ

tapasā with penance. ye who. anādhrṣyāḥ irresistible. tapasā
with penance. ye who. svah heaven. yayuḥ went. tapaḥ penance.
ye who. cakrire performed. mahāḥ great.

3. ye yudhyante pradhāneṣu
   sūrāso ye tanutyajah
   ye vā sahasradakṣināḥ
   tāṁś cid evāpi gamyatāṁ.

ye who. yudhyante fight. pradhāneṣu in battles. sūrāsaḥ
valiant heroes. ye who. tanutyajah abandoning their body. who
sacrifice their body. ye who. vā or. sahasradakṣināḥ making
a thousand gifts.

4. ye cit pūrva ṛtasāpa
   ṛtāvāna ṛtāvṛdhaḥ
   pīṭḍn tapasvato yama
   tāṁś cid evāpi gamyatāṁ

ye who. cit verily. pūrve ancient. early. ṛtasāpaḥ guardians
of the law. ṛtavānaḥ possessors of the law. ṛtavṛdhaḥ promoters
of the law. pīṭḍn forefathers. tapasvataḥ performing penance.
yama O Yama.

5. sahasraṇīthāḥ kavayo
   ye go pāyanti sūryam
   ṛśin tapasvato yama
   tapoṇā api gamyatāṁ

sahasraṇīthāḥ giving a thousand leads. kavayo poets. ye
who. go pāyanti protect. sūryam the sun. ṛśin sages. tapasvataḥ
who perform penance. yama O Yama. tapoṇān who are born of
penance. api even. gamyatāṁ may he go.

VIII. i. Evolution

X—129

1. nāsad āśin no sad āśit tadānīṃ
   nāsid rajo no vyomā paro yat
   kim āvarīvaḥ kuha kasya śarmann
   ambhaḥ kim āśid gahanāḥ gabhirām
   na not. asat non-being. āśit there was. no not. sat being.
   āśit there was. tadānīṃ at that time. na not. āśit there was.
   rajaḥ space. na not. vyoma expanse. parāḥ supreme. yat which.
kim what. ā avarīvaḥ covered up. kuha where. kasya whose.
śarman in the support. ambhaḥ water. kim what. āśit there was.
gahanām deep. gabhirām great.

2. na mṛtyur āśid aṁṛtan na tarhi
   na rātryā ahna āśit praketaḥ
   āṇid avātām svadhayaḥ tad ekam
   tasmād dhānyan na parāḥ kiṁ canāsa
na not. mṛtyuḥ death. āsit there was. amṛtam immortality. na not. tārhi then. na not. rātryāḥ of the night. ahuḥ of the day. āsit there was. praketaḥ sign. ānit breathed. avātam without wind. svadhayaḥ with its own power. tat that. ekam one. tasmāt from that. ha indeed. anyat different. na not. paraḥ another. kiṁ cana something. āsa there was.

3. tama āsit tamasā gūlam agre
   'praketaṁ salilam sarvam ā idam
tucchyena bhv apihitam Yad āsit
tapasas tan mahinājāyataikam

tamaḥ darkness. āsit there was. tamasā with darkness. gūlam shrouded. agre in the beginning. apraketaṁ without a mark. salilam expanse of water. sarvam all. āḥ there was. idam this. tucchyena with what is imponderable. ābhya all-encompassing. apihitam covered up. yat which. āsit there was. tapasas of power. tat that. mahinā by the greatness. ajāyata was born. ekam one.

4. kāmas tad agre sam avartatādhi
   manaso retaḥ prathamam yat āsit
   sato bandhum asati nir avindan
   hrīḍi pratiṣyā kavayo maniṣā

cāmaḥ will. tat then. agre in the beginning. sam avartata there arose. adhi ever. manasaḥ of the mind. retaḥ seed. prathamam in the beginning. yat which. āsit became. sataḥ of what is. bandhum companion. asati in what is not. nir avindan they secured. hrīḍi in the heart. pratiṣya after searching. kavyāḥ poets. maniṣā with intuition.

5. tiraścino vitato raśmir esām
   adhaḥ svid āsid upari svid āsit
   retodhā āsan mahimāna āsant
   svadhā avastāt prayatiḥ parastāt

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APPENDIX

tiraścinaḥ in various directions. vitataḥ spread out. rāśmiḥ the ray. esām of these. adhaḥ below. svid either. āsit it was. upari above. svid or. āsit it was. retodhāḥ bearing the seeds. āsan they became. mahimānaḥ greatnesses. āsan they became. svadhā its own power. avastāt below. prayatiḥ activity. parastāt above.

6. ko addhā veda ka iha pra vocat
kuta ājātā kuta iyam viśṛṣṭiḥ
   arvāg devā asya visarjane-
nāthā ko veda yata ābabhūva

kaḥ who. addhā verily. veda knows. kaḥ who. iha here. pra vocat explains. kutaḥ whence. ājātā was born. kutaḥ whence. iyam this. viśṛṣṭiḥ manifolding. arvāk later. devāḥ gods. asya of this. visarjanena than the manifolding. atha then. kaḥ who. veda knows. yataḥ whence. ābabhūva there came about.

7. iyam viśṛṣṭir yata ābabhūva
   yadi vā dadhe yadi va na
   yo asyādhyakṣaḥ parame vyomant
   so aṅga veda yadi vā na veda

iyam this. viśṛṣṭiḥ manifolding. yataḥ whence. ābabhūva came about. yadi if. vā either. dadhe created. yadi if. vā or. na not. yah who. asya of this. adhyakṣaḥ controller. parame highest. vyomant in the heaven. saḥ he. aṅga Sir. veda knows. yadi if. vā or. na not. veda knows.

ii. Transformation

X—90

1. sahasraśīrṣā puruṣaḥ
   sahasrākṣaḥ sahasrapāt
   sa būmim viśvato vṛtvā
   aty atiṣhad daśāṅgulam