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THE VEDAS AND ADHYÄTMA TRADITION

By Vasudeva S. Agrawala

It is now high time for Vedic scholars to realize, if they would redeem Vedic studies from stagnation, that the orthodox and traditional interpretation of the Vedas is essentially adhyātmic. The Brāhmaṇa writers of old look upon the Vedas as documents of spiritual culture. Modern scholars no doubt have spent infinite labour on handling the texts and interpreting them, but they were circumscribed in their scope mostly to sifting antiquarian material which had only by chance become incorporated in these works. Where the interpretation of Vedic thought confronts them with difficulty the language of the hymns is declared to be obscure, and most of the mystical expressions are taken to be incoherent on account of the imperfect understanding of the grammar of philosophic ideas behind them. There is only one solution to this difficulty. We should now begin to study more closely the explanations of the mystical Vedic terminology offered in the indigenous literature, specially the Brāhmaṇas and the Aranyakas, which are replete with interpretational material that has remained useless in the absence of the Adhyātma-vidâ School of Vedic interpreters. Unfortunately there are many today who could claim to represent the Aitahasikas and Ākhyānavidas of Yāska, but very few who could say that they are carrying on the torch of the Adhyātma-vidâs referred to in the Nirukta. The Asvâyamia sâkta of the Rigveda (I. 164) is a case in point. No rational explanation of this highly philosophic hymn has yet been offered. Even what little Śāyaṇa did in that way has been treated with indifference. This hymn offers little in the way of the material aspect of culture, but its importance for the elucidation of Aryan thought in respect of the philosophy of soul and the theory of creation cannot be over-estimated. For example, the oft-quoted verse 46 emphatically speaks of the one Supreme Spirit occupying the centre of all pantheistic conception:

इन्हें सिंच वस्थसमितमाजः
राज्यरिषिः स सुपर्वी सादासि।
एकं सतिरथि प्रकाशः वदनस्
धिं वर्म्य नातिरिष्यातिमाजः।

i.e., Indra, Mitra, Varuṇa, Agni, Garutma Ṣuparna, Yama, Mātariśvā, these are some of the names the sages apply to the One. The
Bālakhīya hymn in the eighth Māṇḍala of the Rigveda re-echoes the same idea:

वर्ष वा इर्ष विभृत्ति विभृत्ति।
‘The One has modified as the All.’

The One is the central entity, the object of all knowledge. In the recognition of this fact lies the paramount truth of Vedic metaphysics:

धनो जातं परने कौमन्
रजित्वा देवा भविष्यभवे विषेत।

Rig. I. 164. 39.

‘In the highest Akṣhara is the source of the Riks; there do all the Gods reside. Who know not Him of what use to them the Riks! But who know Him, theirs is the glory to sit in synods.’

Esoteric knowledge is extolled here in the most emphatic style. The belief in the fundamental unity of Vedic knowledge reverberates through the Upanishads and the Gitā:

वर्षे वर्षे स्वर्गसमानसि
समाकन्ति सवर्गमणि दर्शिनि।

Kaṭha Up., II. 15; Gitā, VIII. 11.

The highest entity, designated Īśvara is said to be the object of profound religious meditation.

Yāska is emphatic in censuring bookish learning in which there is no attempt to probe into deeper mysteries of meaning. ‘Dense as a block and a mere load-bearer is he who reads the texts without comprehending the secret meaning. But happy is he before whom the sense lies revealed, he of purified soul certainly attains to heavenly bliss.’ The author of the Śaṅkhāya Arāṇyaka is even more severe in his castigation of him who fails to realize the ādhyātmic truth behind the words of the texts. The particular portion of the book enunciating this point of view is called the Veda-sīrā Upanishad. It says: He who reads the Veda without understanding that secret which is the crown of the Riks, summit of the Yajus, head of the

Samans and cranium of the Atharvans is nescient, he is like a trunk with head detached.

श्रन्तं श्रन्तं पत्राण यजमानस्तमांम्
चार्येन भर्तरप्यं मुखस्याम्।

Śaṅkh. Arāṇyaka, XIV. 1.

It imparts to the adhyātmic point of view its true position as the essence of the Trayāṇī doctrine. Kalidāsa, whose works of genius were inspired by the best traditions of ancient Aryan culture, reiterates this position in the following immortal lines:

शंसः क्रोधवेत्रवर्धानो विचित्रविचित्र।


‘The Queen wearing an auspicious attire appears beautiful in the company of Kauśāki robed as a nun, just as the Trayāṇī knowledge would shine in the company of incarnate Adhyātma Vidyā.’

Let us illustrate by an actual example the difference in the meaning of a mantra interpreted in accordance with the adhyātmic (i.e. traditional) and non-adhyātmic points of view:

पत्राणसिद्धानुसारं मया ह्यस्तः पद्धति मया विद्यति।

Rīk. X. 177. 1.

Griffith’s rendering:—

‘The sapient with their spirit and their mind behold the Bird adorned with all an Asura’s magic might. Sages observe him in the ocean’s utmost depth; the wise disposers seek the station of his rays.’ We confess inability to make out sense from this muddle of words. Now let us turn to the meaning of the Brāhmaṇas. In the Jaiminiya Upanishad Brāhmaṇa this mantra is quoted and the following explanation offered:

प्रायो न दाक्षयः। परमेष्ठिः श्रवणवेष्ठिः परमेष्ठिः।

Rīk. X. 177. 1.
‘The discerning sages behold with their intuitional eye the prānic power functioning under the influence of the mind. Within their own body they seek and realize the powers of the various gods.’

A comparison of the two meanings is enough to bring home to us with conviction the wisdom of adopting the esoteric meaning wherever available. In the face of this clear enunciation of meaning free from obscurity or incoherence may we not in justice demand of our modern critical interpreters of the Veda to revise their exegetical canons? Indeed if properly explored the Brāhmaṇa literature will be rediscovered as the veritable mine of information in connection with the adhyātmic exposition of many Vedic terms.

What the old writers chiefly emphasize appertains to the spiritual (adhyātma) and the cosmic (adhidāśa) workings of creation, the secrets of the microcosm as explained in the light of the macrocosm. A clear grasp of the essential correspondence between these two orders as envisaged by the Vedic seers, is indispensable for a proper understanding of the numerous passages in the Brāhmaṇas. The microcosm within the body functions on the model of the external cosmos and both in turn throw light on the ritual of the vaidha sacrifice. The human body bears the likeness of Yajña, says a Brāhmaṇa passage:

वैद्यान् यज्ञ वशः।

The workings of the human system are only a small-scale representation of the vastly extended cosmic processes working on the virāt plane. In Vedic imagery the relation of the two is indicated by saying that the microcosm is related to the macrocosm as Vāmana is to Viṣṇu:—

यामनो र विष्णुस्वरूपः। श्व. ब्र. I, 2. 5. 5.
व च वैद्यान् यज्ञस्वरूपः। श्व. ब्र. V, 2. 5. 4.

If it is a fact that यामन and विष्णु are inter-related, it becomes indispensable for our purpose of interpreting the Vedic texts correctly to grasp this correspondence in terms of the ritual of the sacrifice as it seeks to interpret through its symbolism the microcosm and the macrocosm. True to this the Brāhmaṇas and the Upanishads emphasize the prānic aspect of Agniḥotra.

We have the famous passage in the Śāṅkhāyana Brāhmaṇa of the Rigveda:

Examples can be multiplied without effort. It is indeed possible to compile a whole volume of Vedic words and give their adhyātmic meanings from the Brāhmaṇas and the Aranyakas. This will be the first genuine step for the reconstruction of the lost tradition of the adhyātmic school, which once flourished so vigorously. With it the science of Vedic interpretation will also receive a new orientation and fresh impetus. The first essential thing is that scholars should cast off their prejudices against the adhyātma school. Then only can they redeem Vedic exposition from its present insipid state. Dr. E. J. Thomas lately remarked in his Foreword to Vedic Gods by Dr. V. G. Rele that the state of Vedic interpretation ‘looks like a case of stalemate, where no theory can claim general acceptance’. ‘Even when we think of German scholars, Ludwig, Kaegi, Pischel, Geldner, Oldenberg, or of the French school, Bergaigne, Regnault, Henry, it cannot be said that Vedic studies are in a healthy state’. Dr. Rele adds evidence in favour of the biological interpretation of Vedic deities, and referring to this new key or new angle of vision, Dr. Thomas appropriately remarked that ‘It will help the scholars of India to realize, as we are learning in the West, that the great problem is not yet solved’. Let us sincerely recognize that the adhyātma school of interpretation is most deeply rooted in the orthodox tradition of the ancient exegetical works, and that the copious material which they offer merits better treatment at our hands than that of cold neglect usually meted out to it. The various Brāhmaṇas like the Śatapatha, Aitareya, Taittirīya, and the voluminous Jaiminiya (now in course of publication from Lahore) have in the main followed the adhyātma tradition. We have only to apply our modern methods of critical research to reclaim that valuable material.

Indra, Agni, Śūrya, Viṣṇu, Prajñāpati, Soma, and many other words were once freely used to denote a host of physical and spiritual conceptions which await first to be duly recognized by modern Nairuktas and then to be applied in the course of their interpretations. To take only one example; we have a rich crop of meanings associated with Soma, and we cannot with justice restrict the meaning only to the Soma plant. The following is a list excerpted from the Vāidika Kosha of Pt. Bhagavad Datta and Pt. Hans Raja of Lahore:
In different contexts Soma stands as a synonym for vitality, strength, germ, food, glory, truth, lustre, moon, Vritra (enveloper), year, Prajāpāti, eagle, Vishnu, Pavamana, air, night, Indu, leaf, animal, curds, kingly power, fame, fluid, milk, etc. In further elaboration it is given in these texts that the male principle is Soma and the female Sūrā; or that the quality of dryness appertains to Agni and of humidity to Soma:

यष्टकूम्भ तदसिंहं

This rich material opens up a vast vista of research on the meaning of Soma. In face of this overwhelming evidence it is un-scientific to insist on only one meaning of Soma, viz. a kind of plant. It is impossible for any conscientious worker to overlook the much wider meanings of that word, and the test of scholarship lies in the capacity to judge rightly the application of a particular meaning in a particular context; we cannot in any case reject the entire evidence summarily. As a matter of fact no Vedic scholar, can do justice to his task without bringing under his control this rich store-house of terminology and its technical explanations from the Brāhmaṇical and Upanishadic literature. We should wherever possible supplement the Brāhmaṇical evidence with parallel passages from the Śrutis, the Epic and the Purāṇas. For example, the Mahābhārata says:

एकिदिरिकुष्ठे चार्म नेद्र चापाश्च स्वयम्

सम्बन्धिति चतुर्वर्ग चतुर्ब्रह्मचतुर्विशेषः

Sāntis, 341. 45.

चोयसकुष्ठेः...पोषितकवच्चस्

Sānti, 342. 9.

सुम: प्रतिरिक्षिकाधिकांतोवाकाचातः

Āśvamedhika, 19. 23.

So also the explanation of Daśahotri (Ch. 21) Saptahotri (Ch. 22), Pañcachotri (Ch. 23), Chāturhotra (Ch. 25) is contained in the
Așvamedha Parva and the dialogue of Brāhmaṇa-Brāhmaṇi (Manas-Buddhi) in the same place throws light on several kindred words.

Finally we must remember that the doctrine of Prāna is the key-note of the numerous mythical legends. Most of the explanations in the Brāhmaṇas converge on the exposition of the mysterious force called Prāna or Life. Prāna and Apāna are said to be the two celestial priests:

Prāṇaapānaṃ ṛṣeyuḥ śośarṣu! Ait. II. 4

They are the divine physicians (daivi bhishak, Artharva, VII, 53, 1, 2), and also the Prayājas and Anuyājas of a sacrifice. The vital airs indeed represent the highest substance:

Vedārṣaṇa bhavasya prāmaṇa uṇmada! Śat. VIII. 7. 7. 21

The Prāṇas are also spoken of as the primeval Rishis whose sacrifice initiates the cosmic process. It appears as if the Vedic metaphysicians interpreted all physical phenomena in terms of Prāna or the Vital Energy that functions at the root of each and every thing and is itself the foundation of all. Prāna is conceived as the paramount universal principle visible in all cosmic phenomena whether working on the universal plane or within the human body. Prāna is the mysterious something, the subtle principle which permeates gods and men, and distinguishes the immortal from the mortal. To the Vedic seers Prāna partaking of the nature of Brahman, represented the comprehensive metaphysical substratum to which they could trace the endless divergences of the external world. The manifold interpretations of the ādhyātmic school naturally concentrate on Prāna and they gain in importance from the light they are capable of throwing on one or the other aspect of this Vital Force.

But it is not possible to forestall all the lines of interpretation and research that may emerge in the course of the ādhyātmic approach to vedic texts. What we plead for is the recognition of the Ādhyātma-vid School and the readjustment of our canons of research to that end.