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THE VEDAS AND ADHYĀTMA 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 *ādhyātmic*. 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 *Adhyātmavid* 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-vidas referred to in the Nirukta. The *Asyavāmīya sūkta* 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 Sāyaṇa 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:

इन्द्रं मित्रं वरुणमग्निमाङ्ग-

रथो दिव्यः स सुपर्णो गरुत्मान् ।

एकं सद्विप्रा बहुधा वदन्त्य-

भिं यमं मातरिश्वानमाङ्गः ॥

i.e., Indra, Mitra, Varuṇa, Agni, Garutmā Suparna, Yama, Mātariśvā, these are some of the names the sages apply to the One. The

Bālakhilya hymn in the eighth Maṇḍala of the Rīgveda re-echoes the same idea:

एकं वा इदं विबभूव सर्वम् ।

'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:

ऋषो अक्षरे परमे शोमन्

यस्मिन् देवा अद्विषिन्ने निषेदुः ।

यस्तन्न वेद किमृचा करिष्यति

य इत्तद्विदुस्त इमे समासते ॥

Rig. I. 164. 39.

'In the highest Akshara 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 Gītā:

सर्वे वेदा यत्पदमामनन्ति

तपांसि सर्वाणि च यद्वदन्ति ।

यदिच्छन्तो ब्रह्मचर्यं चरन्ति

तत्त पदं संग्रहेण ब्रवीन्मोमित्येतत् ॥

Kāṭha Up., II. 15; Gīta, VIII. 11.

The highest entity, designated Om 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 Śāṅkhāyana Āraṇyaka 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-śīrā 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.

ॐ ऋषां मूर्धानं यजुषामुत्तमामं

साम्नां शिरोऽधर्वणां मुखमुण्डम् ।

नाधीतेऽधीते वेदमाङ्गसामञ्चं

शिरश्चित्त्वाऽसौ कुरुते कबन्धम् ॥

Śāṅkh. Āraṇyaka, XIV. 1.

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

मंगलालङ्कता भाति कौशिक्या यतिवेशया ।

त्रयी विद्यङ्गवत्त्रेव सममध्यात्मविद्यया ॥

Māl. I. 14.

'The Queen wearing an auspicious attire appears beautiful in the company of Kauśikī robed as a nun, just as the *Trayī* 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 *ādhyātmic* (i.e. traditional) and non-*ādhyātmic* points of view:

पतंगमत्तमसुरस्य मायया हृदा पश्यन्ति मनसा विपश्चितः ।

समुद्रे अन्तः कवयो विपश्चिते मरीचोनाम्पदमिच्छन्ति वेधसः ॥

Rik. 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:

प्राणो वै पतंगः । पतन्निव श्लेष्मिन्नेति रथसुदीक्षते । पतंग इत्याचक्षते । असुरस्य मायनेति । मनो वा असुरम् । तद्ग्रसुषु रमते । तस्यैव मायया अन्तः । हृदा पश्यन्ति मनसा विपश्चित इति । हृदैव श्लेते पश्यन्ति यन्मनसा विपश्चितः । समुद्रे अन्तः कवयो

विचक्षते इति । पुरषो वै समुद्र एवं विद उ ऋषयः । त इमां पुरषेऽन्तर्वापं विचक्षते ।
मरीचीनां पदमिच्छन्ति वेधस इति । मरीच्य इव वा एता देवता यदभिर्वायुरादित्यश्चन्द्रमाः ।

'The discerning sages behold with their intuitional eye the *prāṇic* 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 *ādhyātmic* exposition of many Vedic terms.

What the old writers chiefly emphasize appertains to the spiritual (*ādhyātma*) and the cosmic (*adhidaiva*) 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:

पुरषो वाव यज्ञः ।

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 *Vishnu* :—

वामनो ह विश्वरास । Śat. Br. I, 2. 5. 5.

स हि वैष्णवो यद्वामनः । Śat. Br. V, 2. 5. 4.

If it is a fact that वामन and विश्व 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 *prāṇic* aspect of Agnihotra.

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

पुरषो वै यज्ञस्तस्य शिर एव हविर्घनि मुखमाह्वनीयः उदरं सदोऽन्नमुक्थानि बाह्व
मार्जालीयश्चाऽऽग्नीध्रीयश्च...तस्य मन एव ब्रह्मा, प्राण उद्गाताऽपानः प्रक्षोता, श्वानः प्रति-
हर्ता, वाग्धोता, चक्षुरध्वर्युः, प्रजापतिः सदस्यः, आत्मा यजमानोऽंगानि ह्योत्राशंसिनः ।

Śāṅkh. Br., XVII. 7

Examples can be multiplied without effort. It is indeed possible to compile a whole volume of Vedic words and give their *ādhyātmic* meanings from the Brāhmaṇas and the Āraṇyakas. This will be the first genuine step for the reconstruction of the lost tradition of the *ādhyātmic* 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 *ādhyātma* 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, Regnaud, Henry, it cannot be said that Vedic studies are in a healthy state'. Dr. Rele adduces 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 *ādhyātmic* 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 Jaiminīya (now in course of publication from Lahore) have in the main followed the *ādhyātma* tradition. We have only to apply our modern methods of critical research to reclaim that valuable material.

Indra, Agni, Sūrya, Vishṇu, Prajāpati, 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 *Vaidika Kosha* of Pt. Bhagavad Datta and Pt. Hans Raja of Lahore:

प्राणः सोमः । अ० ७।३।१२
 प्राणो वै सोमः । अ० ७।३।१०५
 प्राणो हि सोमः । ता० ६।६।१, ५।
 सोमो वै वाजपेयः । तै० १।३।३।३
 रेतः सोमः । अ० १।६।२।६।२।५।१।६।३।५।२।
 सोमो वै वृषाणो अश्वस्य रेतः । तै० ३।६।५।५।
 अश्वं सोमः । कौ० ६।६। अ० ३।३।३।२।५।
 श्रीर्वै सोमः । अ० ३।१।३।६।
 सत्त्वं श्रीः ज्योतिः सोमः । अ० ५।२।२।१०।
 राजा वै सोमः । अ० १।३।१।३।१२
 चन्द्रमा वै सोमः । अ० १।२।१।१।२।
 वृत्रो वै सोम आसीत् । अ० ३।३।३।३।३
 पिबलोकः सोमः । कौ० १।६।५।
 संवत्सरो वै सोमः पिबमान् । तै० १।६।५।२।
 सोमो हि प्रजापतिः । अ० ५।१।५।२।६।
 यदाह श्येनोऽसौति सोमं वा एतदाह । गो० अ० ५।१२।
 यो वै विश्वः सोमः सः । अ० ३।३।३।३।३।
 सोमो वै पवमानः । अ० २।२।३।३।२।२।
 योऽयं वायुः पवत एष सोमः । अ० ७।३।३।३।
 सोमो वा इन्द्रः । अ० २।२।३।३।३।
 सोमो रात्रिः । अ० ३।३।३।३।३।
 सोमो वै चतुर्होता । तै० २।३।३।३।
 सोमो वै पर्णः । अ० ६।५।३।३।
 पशुर्वै प्रत्यक्षः सोमः । अ० ५।३।३।३।
 सोमो वै दधि । कौ० ५।६।
 सोमो वै आट् । अ० ३।३।३।६।
 वर्षः सोमः । अ० ५।२।५।३।
 क्षत्रं सोमः । अ० ३।३।३।३।
 यज्ञो वै सोमः । अ० ३।२।३।६।

अश्वः सोमः । ता० ६।६।६।
 रसः सोमः । अ० ७।३।३।३।
 प्रमान् वै सोमः स्त्रीसुरा । तै० १।३।३।३।
 सोमः पयः । अ० १।२।७।३।३।

In different contexts Soma stands as a synonym for vitality, strength, germ, food, glory, truth, lustre, moon, Vritra (enveloper), year, Prajāpati, eagle, Vishnu, Pavamāna, 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 Surā; or that the quality of dryness appertains to Agni and of humidity to Soma:

यच्छुष्कं तदाग्नेयं

यदाद्रिं तत्सौम्यम् ।

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 Brāhmanical and Upanishadic literature. We should wherever possible supplement the Brāhmanical evidence with parallel passages from the Sūtras, the Epic and the Purānas. For example, the Mahābhārata says:—

पुत्रिरित्युच्यते चाङ्गं वेद आपोऽमृतं तथा ।

ममैतानि सदा गर्भः पुत्रिर्गर्भस्ततो ह्यहम् ॥

Sāntis, 34I. 45.

यः सोमस्तद्ब्रह्म... योऽभित्तत्तत्रम् ।

Sānti, 342. 9.

मुञ्जं ग्ररौरमित्याङ्गरिभौकामात्मनि श्रिताम् ।

Āśvamedhika, 19. 23.

So also the explanation of *Daśahotri* (Ch. 21) *Saptahotri* (Ch. 22), *Pañchahotri* (Ch. 23), *Chāturhotra* (Ch. 25) is contained in the

Aśvamedha Parva and the dialogue of Brāhmaṇa-Brāhmaṇī (Manas-Buddhi) in the same place throws light on several kindred words.

Finally we must remember that the doctrine of प्राण 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 Prāṇa or Life. Prāṇa and Apāna are said to be the two celestial priests:—

प्राणापानौ वै दैव्या होवारा । Ait. II. 4

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

तस्मादस्य सर्वस्य प्राणा उत्तमाः । 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 Prāṇa or the Vital Energy that functions at the root of each and every thing and is itself the foundation of all. Prāṇa is conceived as the paramount universal principle visible in all cosmic phenomena whether working on the universal plane or within the human body. Prāṇa is the mysterious *something*, the subtle principle which permeates gods and men, and distinguishes the immortal from the mortal. To the Vedic seers Prāṇa 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 Prāṇa 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 *Adhyātma-vid* School and the readjustment of our canons of research to that end.