

In the Beginning

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0. In this paper I examine briefly the real situation regarding the religiophilosophical frame of belief in Ancient India and particularly in the Vedic period. While undoubtedly the worship of many different, as it seems, gods was paramount in the Rigvedic hymns, yet some of those hymns reveal a firm faith in the One Absolute of which the many are manifestations. A little deeper enquiry into the hymns and the Upanishads subsequently reveals that a philosophy like that of Adi Shankara's Vedānta was already in full operation beside the worship of the many, the sacrificial rituals and all the other religious practices of that period.

1. In the beginning was That One ...

ānīd avātām svadhāyā tād ékam; tásmād-dhānyān-ná parāḥ kīm canāsa 'That one breathed without air of its own power; there was nothing else beyond, other than That' RV (Ṛgveda) 10.129.2.

This, say many, is a late hymn from the last of the 10 Books of the RV. So we go to an earlier period, hymn 8.54 where the 2nd stanza says in successive parallel statements about one appearing as many: *éka evāgnīr bahudhā́ sámiddha, ékaḥ sūryo vísvam ānu prābhūtāḥ; ékaivóśāḥ sáravam idám víbhaty, ékam vā idám ví babhūva sáravam* 'Agni being one is kindled variously [in many places]; the sun being one has prevailed over all; Dawn being one, indeed, lights all this [creation]; This One has variously (vi) become all [and everything]'. But this too is somewhat late.

An even earlier hymn from the Viśvāmitra family Book 3 says: *éjad dhruvám patyate vísvam ékam cárat patatṛ víṣuṇam víjātám* 'Moving yet firm the One governs all – this generated multiplicity, what walks and flies', 3.54.8 cd. And I disregard here the syntax with its neuters which suggests that even this manifold (viṣuṇa) creation is a unity. But it is a superb statement.

And to dispel any lingering doubts in RV 1.164.46 Dīrghatamas tells us *ékam sád víprā bahudhā́ vadanti agnīm yamám mātariśvānam ahuḥ* 'Though being One, the wise speak of it with many [godly] names – Agni, Yama, Mātariśvan'. And I add, the wise do this because That One has become and appears as all these phenomena, divine and mundane, all worlds, all gods, all creatures that walk and fly.

Long before Moslem, Christian and Judaic monotheism, long before the philosophical traditions and schools in ancient India and long before the Upanishads declared the absolute Brahman, the Ṛgveda hymns revealed the Unity from which emerged the multiplicity. And the ṛṣis did this in an almost off-the-cuff, nonchalant manner, as though, despite the many gods praised and worshipped by the people, the idea of That One was not uncommon. For we find in the hymns no devotional, elaborate, repetitions or pompous descriptions of That One indicating a need to fill gaps in

knowledge and to explain its nature and power – as is done in subsequent works like most Upanishads and the Gītā.

Let us take another example from the early third Viśvāmitra family Book. The 22 stanzas of hymn 55 say *mahād devānām asuratvām ékam* ‘great is the single lordly-power of the gods’. The power of the asuras/devas is single and at a universal level, beyond each individual god, and they are asuras/gods by partaking of it. The idea is repeated elsewhere, as in 1.68.2 : *bhájanta víśve devatvām nāma* ‘all enjoy/share godhood indeed’. Again, they are gods by sharing in the universal abstraction ‘godhood’. And in 2.33.9 Rudra is made lord of this world by the *asuryá* which does not leave him – the mute implication being that the power **could** leave him!

2. So it is not only late “philosophical” hymns that know of the One [Absolute] from which arise all and everything. Early ones know of it also.

The primordial unity is differently presented in the (pantheistic) hymn *Puruṣa Sūkta*, 10.90. *Puruṣa* is the cosmic being/man who manifests the universe with only one quarter of himself becoming all things, while the other three remain immortal in heaven. (By the way, what is ‘heaven’ in the *RV*, and ‘midair’ *antarikṣa* and ‘earth’ *pṛthivī* and the three subdivisions of each making a total of nine worlds or levels?).

Th. McEvelley, an American scholar, finds antecedents for this hymn in the Egyptian Memphite Theology, where various deities are said to be parts of god Ptāh – even though Ptāh does not sacrifice himself, no worlds or creatures arise from his members and the text is not earlier than 1200 BCE. But he calls the *rigvedic* hymn “macranthropic” and sees in it influences not only from Egypt but also Mesopotamia, from the hymns to Inanna/Ishtar and Marduk, even though these again present no sacrificial evolution (2002: 24-27).

The *rigvedic* hymn is not “macranthropic” but cosmogonic and theogonic. It presents the evolution of the One into the multiplicity of the creation. Even Hesiod’s theogony, particularly the castration of Ouranos by his son Kronos, does not result in a large scale creation – only the rise of Aphrodite and various nymphs. In the *puruṣa* hymn the cosmogony is explicit. From his head arose the Sky; from his mind the Moon; from his eye the Sun; from his mouth Agni and Indra; from his breath Vāyu; from his navel the midair *antarikṣa*; from his ear the space-quarters. Then, his very mouth became the brāhmin *varṇa*, his arms the *rājanya* ‘aristocrats’, his thighs the *vaiśya* ‘producers’ and his feet the *sūdrá*, the servile *varṇa*.

Why does a scholar ignore the obvious so blatantly and finds influences and parallels where none exist? Unfortunately pedants do just this.

3. This question brings me to another aspect of deliberate ignorance on the part of highly respectable scholars. This time it is with regard to the well-known *Nāsadiya Sūkta*,

RV 10.129, which presents a yet different aspect of cosmogonic and anthropogonic creation.

In the RV often *Dyaus*, father Sky, and *Pr̥thivī*, mother Earth, are ‘the Parents’ who engender the gods and the worlds (e.g. 1.159.2 etc). Elsewhere (5.30.5) Indra does this. Also, *Brahmaṇaspati* is said to be the deities’ father (2.26.3), while in 10.72.6 he fashions the cosmos like a smith. Elsewhere Soma performs the function of fathering the deities (9.87.2) and in 1.113.9 *Uṣas* mothers the gods. Then, in 10.72 *Aditi* generates the gods and the *martāṇḍa* ‘the dead egg’ which is the sun – being born and dying again and again (st 8-9). And there are other creator-gods like *Tvaṣṭr*. Now, behind this apparent confusion and inconsistency lies presumably the idea that it does not matter what deity is given priority or fatherhood at any instance since each and every one is the expression of That One, the absolute Godhead, that is neither female nor male, beyond gender and *guṇas* ‘qualities’.

In 10.129 ‘the Creation Hymn’ as it is known in the West, in the beginning, before creation, where there was no existence or life and death, no day and night or space and air, there was only That One breathing airless of its own accord (*ānīd avātām svadháyā*). It was profound, unfathomable Potency (*āmbhas... gahánaṃ gabhīrám*), the first stanza states; and this was enveloped in darkness *támas* yet had *salilám* ‘fluctuating energy’ without any ‘distinct form’ *apraketá*; from it arose “what becomes/evolves (*ābhú-*)” which was ‘covered over by void’ *tuchyéna-ābhú-āpīhítam*! From That arose by the ‘power of transformation’ *tápas* ‘that which-becomes’ *ābhú* and upon that evolved ‘desire/love/will’ *káma*; described as ‘the first seed/flow of mind’ *mánaso rétaḥ prathamám*. But here we should note also the pun involving the *dhātu* *√prath* ‘spreading, extending out, being known, proclaimed’. The implication is that this seed will expand and be known as the creative process and its creation. Indeed, in stanzas 5 and 6 other forces appear and the gods and the ‘outpoured creation’ *iyám vísr̥ṣṭiḥ*. However, the rishi who envisioned (or “heard”) this evolution is humble enough to acknowledge that he does not really know ‘whence arose this ray of creation’ *kúta ājātā iyám vísr̥ṣṭiḥ*. The gods would not know either since they arose afterwards *arvāk*. Even ‘the supervisor of this creation who is in highest heaven’ *asyá-ādhyakṣaḥ paramé v́yoman* probably does not know the beginning and the exact procedure!

This hymn contains also an esoteric message. The divinities may not know precisely the beginning in its totality, even the highest among them. But stanza 4 says unequivocally that ‘the wise poets seeking in their heart with understanding discovered the bond/connection of the existent in the non-existent’ *sató bándhum ásati níravindan, hṛdí pratíṣya kaváyo manīṣá*. Here, the implication is that man (*puruṣa*), being a reflection of the One primordial *Puruṣa*, who, in that other description, becomes the multiplicity of the universe, can look into the heart of his mind and there, by returning to the beginning, discover the truth of the primordial being.

This hymn does not elaborate and explain the method and practices required for this internal investigation, this self-examination. But other hymns refer to it sporadically. Some describe the realisation of the truth quite explicitly if briefly. This is clearly evidenced by seer Kaṇva's second birth in 8.6.10: "Having received from my father the essential knowledge *medhā* of the Cosmic Order *ṛtá*, I was [re-]born like the sungod *Sūrya*". Elsewhere, this brilliant effulgence was discovered through "meditation/reflection": the sages 'found the expansive light while intensely meditating' *urú jyótir vividur dídhyanāh*.

Undoubtedly the larger part of the hymns in the *RV* offers devotional praises, worship and invocations for help to the various gods. Many hymns or parts of them, too, concern the sacrificial ritual. In those days, the vast majority of the people were absorbed in these religious practices, as in our days the common interest is with similar concerns though many more would be irreligious and atheists. But, obviously, on the evidence of many hymns and parts of others, like the ones we examined, some circles or families or sages followed philosophical or esoteric teachings and practices that later came to be formulated in the Upanishads, the *Yogasūtras*, the *Vedānta* etc.

4. In our days this aspect of the *RV* is almost wholly ignored by scholars who prefer to interpret everything in relation to the sacrificial ritual and "primitive" religion – whatever they understand by this term. Notable exceptions to the general academic rule are Jeanine Miller, D. Frawley and K. Werner in the West. There may be some few more whom I do not know, but these scholars certainly explored the themes I adumbrated in §§1-3. Otherwise modern scholars are still by and large under the spell of *Sāyana*, the medieval scholiast whose tradition saw the *RV* as a text for liturgy and ritual.

Since the early 1800's Western scholarship and most of Indian academia, which has been heavily influenced by the West, imported to the study of the *RV* and even the subsequent wider Indic culture, often unconsciously, the political, ethnic, religious and scientific notions prevalent in different periods: European supremacy, the christian missionary zeal, British colonial political and economic concerns, the theory of evolution, psychology in various new-fangled forms, anthropological views formed from superficial studies (equally prejudiced) of so-called "primitive" peoples, materialism, communism and whatever else. Thus one comes across polytheism, of course, fetishism, evolving religious ideas and forms, deities and demons representing forces of nature, theriomorphism and anthropomorphism and "arrested" or "opportunistic anthropomorphism" (Hiriyanna 33,39) animism, pantheism and the like. Most of these views are mentioned by that excellent vedist, A.B. Keith in the first seven chapters of his classic study, *The Religion and Philosophy of the Veda and the Upanishads* (1925). In the mid-twentieth century some new views appeared about the rigvedic gods: psychosomatic or spiritual forces within man (Shri Aurobindo 1956, Coomaraswami

1942, Frawley 1991, Kak 2002), and more recently forces of Thermonuclear Physics (e.g. Rajaram 1999 and several others).

The translations of the *RV* are so far all inadequate: in English R. T. Griffith, in French L. Renou, in German K.F. Geldner. There has been one in Russian by (Mrs) T. Elizarenkova based on Geldner. In 2014 came out at last the most recent one in English by Americans (Mrs) S. W. Jamison and J. P. Brereton and, frankly, I would not recommend it; Griffith's version, despite its Victorian diction and attitude, seems far closer to the original spirit of the *RV* than this concoction.

I shall not deal with all these issues and the translations. It is not worth our time and my effort. I shall deal only with this latest version of American scholarship and briefly at that.

5. For reasons unknown but easily understood, translators seem to feel the need to provide something original, something "their very own" often at the cost of a far better past translation. And this is what repeatedly happens here with Jamison and Brereton. I shall take only the first three stanzas and glance at A. A. Macdonell's almost literal translation from his *Vedic Reader* (1917) and W.O' Flaherty, then Brereton and Jamison. The Vedic text reads: –

1. *nāsad āsīn nó sād āsīt tadānīm; nāsīd rájo nó v́yomā paró yát;*
kim ávarivaḥ, kúha, kásya sármann; ámbhaḥ kím āsīd gáhanaṃ gabhīrám.
2. *ná mṛtyúr āsīd, amṛtaṃ ná tárhi, na rátryā áhna āsīt prakētáḥ ;*
ánīd avātáṃ svadháyā tát ékam; tásmād dhānyán ná paráḥ kiṃ canāsa.
3. *táma āsīt támasā gūḷhám ágre; apraketáṃ salilám sárvam ā idám;*
tuchyéna ābhú ápihitaṃ yád āsīt, tápasas tán mahinájāyataikam.

The first difficulty is *tadānīm* in 1a. It is translated by all as 'then' or 'at that time', a temporal adverb. But it is also spatial and conditional (thereat, at that level) since it is correlative of *yád* and *yátra*. The same holds for *tárhi* in 2a. Again all translate 'then' but this too is correlative of *yátra* and *yárhi* and has also the sense 'in that case'. The common thinking is past tense. But both adverbs could be referring to a higher level of being/existence/substance, not only past time. So they could also mean 'at that level, in that circumstance/instance'.

Then MacDonell translates 1c "What did it contain? Where? In whose protection?" He explains *á varivaḥ* as 3rd person singular, imperfect intensive of *ā + √vr* 'covering', where the prefix *ā* expands, intensifies and strengthens the main verb. (Mrs) Wendy O' Flaherty translates the same as 'What stirred? Where? In whose protection?' She explains that the verb often describes breathing (1981: 27-8). Jamison and Brereton translate similarly 'What moved back and forth? From where and in whose protection?' This last one is very problematic because there is no existing body to move and, no

space in which to move; then, why would it need protection and by what/whom? The preposition *ā* also reverses the meaning of the verb as with *ā-gam* = come, *ā-dā* = receive. In this case here the sense would be ‘reveal’ but this would be illogical in the circumstances, since no revelation follows. So we must take it as intensifying the basic meaning.

I assume that sage Prajāpati Parameṣṭhin was inspired and wise, not retarded or irrational. So he says “Thereat” *tadānīm*, in the beginning, before space, horizontal time and vertical being, before intelligence and substance, came to be, there was absolutely nothing. “How come?” ask we, who see all too clearly and solidly and colourfully this world. “What veiled, covered and concealed existence and space? Where? In the shelter of what/whom?” This seems to me to be the import.

Then, since there was absolutely nothing in existence, it is not likely that the seer would have wondered if in the beginning there was “water deep and profound” or “profound depth”. Modern scholars do so (MacDonell, O’ Flaherty and the recent two) because they cannot go beyond their prejudices. They assume, probably, that because Mesopotamian, Egyptian and some Greek traditions postulated “water” as the primary source whence all else arose, the Vedic rishis thought so as well. Of course, *āmbhas* and its cognates *abhrá* ‘cloud, rain’, *āmbu* ‘water’, all relate to water. But *āmbhas* means also ‘fecundity, potential power’ (so also Mayrhofer 1957-96). So our seer asks “Was it profound, unfathomable Potency (=potential, power)?” And he leaves the reply “Yes” hanging before us as the only probability!

The same difficulty is met in stanza 3 where *salilám* is translated by everybody as ‘water/ocean’. But since Parameṣṭhin was not an imbecile who grossly contradicts himself, we must assume that it is not ‘water/ocean’. Here it is the translators who contradict themselves. Because here the text is *apraketám salilám* ‘undistinguished/non-distinct/signless ocean’ which is really a bit non-sensical. Now, we know that *salilá* comes from *sal-/sar-/√sr > sarate, sisarti*. In the Dhātupāṭha the meaning for this is given as *gatau* ‘motion, going’. It is a thoroughbred Indo-European dhātu with cognates in Greek *hallomai*, Latin *salire* and Tocharian *salate* all meaning ‘leaping, rushing on’. So, not surprisingly one primary meaning of *salilá* is ‘fluctuating, surging’, then ‘flood, surge’. When we say “water”, we cut out the “surging, rushing, fluctuation”.

Now then, if nothing existed except That One which breathed and was pure Potency, the only *apraketám salilám* in st 3b would be imperceptible ‘fluctuating energy’, which by the will *svadháyā* of That One would generate the creation. That it was not water is indicated most clearly by the first pāda which states – “darkness was enveloped by darkness in the beginning”. And the third pāda reinforces the imperceptibility and non-materiality of *salilá* by describing it as *āpīhitam* ‘covered over’ *ābhú* ‘what-comes-to-exist’ by ‘vacuity/void’ *tuchyéna*. Surely vacuity could not possibly overlie or conceal “ocean/water”!

Such translations seem to be absurdly unreasonable.

6. However, the contradictions do not end here. Jamison and Brereton accept in their introductory comments that there is “That One” and that *ābhú* is ‘coming into being’. It has no substance, they say, but ‘it is beginning to have shape, since there is something that is “covered” by something’. And by a reference to Thieme (1964: 66-67) they agree that ‘it is the shape of an egg’ and that this “was born” or hatched by heat. And a little further down commenting on stanza 4, they explain ‘Here the key is the revelation that thought is the One, which is the ultimate source of creation’ (2014: 1608).

Please note all the disparate, incompatible and contradictory notions contained in the thinking of the two scholars: that One (st 2c), which could be water (st 1d) and is definitely ocean (st 3b), but takes the shape of an egg, finally turns out to be thought (st 4ab).

They translate 4ab *kāmas tād āgre sāmavartatādhi, mánaso rétaḥ prathamam yád āsīt* ‘Then, in the beginning, from thought there evolved desire, which existed as the primal semen’. And, hereafter, in stanza 5, we have sexual notions about male and female and the *mahimānaḥ* which is rendered as ‘greatnesses’ is (in the introduction) turned into “pregnancies”. I do agree that stanza 5 introduces active forces (= *retodhāḥ* ‘seed-giving’) and passive powers (*mahimānaḥ*) and thereafter follow the results of creation. But to have “thought” one needs the organ or means which produces it and this appears only in stanza 4 as *mānas* ‘mind’. And it is desire that breeds thinking and thought, not the other way round.

Certainly *rétas* means ‘semen/sperm’ and so it should be translated in *reto-dhā* in stanza 5. But semen is too gross to apply (except as metaphor) at the level indicated in stanza 4. The *svadhā* of st 2 ‘accord, self-power, nature’ appears in st 4 as *kāmas* ‘desire, love, will’ and this generates the rest, again through *tāpas* (st 3d).

This word *tāpas* which is translated as ‘heat’ deserves a note too. Heat also could not have existed before *ābhú*: it is too gross. But the dhātu *√tap* has also the meaning *aśvārye* ‘supreme power/will’, the power of *īśvara* which rules, commands and makes changes. When yogis or people practise *tapas* or, as is said ‘austerity’, religious or spiritual, they bring about transformations in their inner nature, desires, habits, powers, thinking. So *tāpas* is really ‘the power of transformation’, which may be some kind of heat/warmth but not of our common material world. Inner change is effected not only with mortification and suffering but also with happiness and joy.

7. This hymn 10.129 describes the different stages and levels of creation. It could well have formed the basis, the first sperm, for the later development of the Sāṅkhya system, as MacDonell says (1917: 207).

Here we have That One which alone is, without form or other quality. It breathes (metaphorically) of its own accord, with self-power; and, presumably, its exhalation is

the emergence of creation at all its different levels with all its different phenomena, and its inhalation is the re-absorption of all that.

There is absolutely nothing in the first three stanzas with which we are accustomed in our existence in the gross world we know. There is darkness and void and only the Potency to generate the creation – immense, unfathomable. By its own power of transformation arises that-which-evolves out of undifferentiated energy. And then desire arises and mind and all the other forces and elements.

This process naturally could not be observed in the evolution of the world outside and around us. It could only be observed in the world within one's consciousness.

But the poet warns us that the absolute beginning is not really seen or known, not even by the Overseer in the uppermost heaven!

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