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SRI AUROBINDO ON THE VEDIC GODS

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In traditional Bharat, the entire life of an individual, from birth to death, started and concluded with Vedic *mantra*-s. For thousands of years the Vedic hymns have touched every aspect of life in this land. The very philosophy of its people, the *Sanātana Dharma*, in its myriad expressions has its source in those sacred texts. Sri Aurobindo says, "At the root of all that we Hindus have done, thought, and said through these many thousands of years, behind all we are and seek to be, there lies concealed, the fount of our philosophies, the bedrock of our religions, the kernel of our thought, the explanation of our ethics and society, the summary of our civilization, the rivet of our nationality, a small body of speech, *Veda*."¹

The *Veda*-s have always been regarded as the ultimate books of knowledge in *Bharat*, "*Yasmin vijñāte sarvam vijñātam*," 'knowing which everything is known.' Yet various scholars have many a times questioned the credibility and contribution of these texts. Sayana, traditionally the most authoritative commentator on the Vedas, regarded the *Veda*-s solely as a detailed manual of rituals or *karmakāṇḍa*. His ritualistic interpretation therefore of the texts revolved around the material oblations offered by the *Rishi*-s, who he believed, sought mainly to appease the Gods with gifts and in return win their favour in the form of cows, horses, wealth, sons etc.

The European scholars were greatly influenced by Sayana's commentary initially but later on they derived their own etymology and preferred to give a historic interpretation to the texts. Scholars like Keith, Oldenburg and Max Muller concluded that the *Veda*-s lacked consistency of thought and expression and could be considered as the 'childish prattlings' of primitive barbarians who composed incoherent songs of pagan worship. To them, the *Veda*-s were a record of pastoral farmers and warring tribes praying to Nature Gods to grant them material prosperity.

Studying these two commentaries, one is surprised at the glaring contradiction that exists between the high status traditionally accorded to the *Veda*-s and the worth attributed to them. What then one wonders is the real nature of the texts? Who are the *Rishi*-s? What does the Sacrifice mean? Who are the Gods that are invoked? Were the hymns chanted merely for material gains?

The solution to this apparent paradox lies in Yaska's commentary. He states that the *Veda* can be interpreted from several angles depending on the understanding of the commentator. He said that the interpretations are namely of three levels, *ādhibhautika* (material), *ādhidaiivata* (occult) and *ādhyātmika* (spiritual). This possibility arises because the Vedic language, unlike the later classical one, where language had become crystallized to a definite form and shape, is complex and its structure is full of an amplitude and multiplicity and range of suggestions that coexist at different levels.

Sri Aurobindo declares that if the *Veda* is attributed a spiritual significance, it ceases to be only a manual for ritu-



als and becomes instead a priceless handbook for the soul-seeker on his journey to immortality. He based his interpretation on a new kind of philology, which he has explained in his books like 'The Secret of the Veda'. He insists that the language of the Veda is mainly symbolic full of secret words, *ninyāni vācāmsi* because the ancient mind was not deductive in its expression and understanding but associative. Therefore he concluded that if one gives a consistent psycho-spiritual sense to some key words like *'tam, gh'tam, dhi* etc, the hymns reveal invaluable secrets of the spirit to the seeker. The whole *Veda* that apparently deals with ritualistic sacrifices becomes then a narration of an inner sacrifice performed by the aspiring souls invoking the Gods to help them conquer the dark forces as he strives to exceed his mortality. Thus if the sacrifice implies a deeper, inner action, what is true nature of the Gods? Are they mere nature powers demanding to be appeased or have they a far more significant role to play in man's quest for immortality?

Sri Aurobindo says emphatically in his books 'The Secret of the Veda' and 'Hymns to the Mystic Fire', that the *Rishi-s*, the Seers of the Truth of the *Veda*, were very consistent in recording their spiritual experiences implying that if the substance of the *Veda* is spiritual in its essence, the Gods who are the key figures and the object of the hymns, must have a far greater role than ordinarily assigned to them. We find in the 'Hymns to the Mystic Fire' this passage about the Gods, "The Gods are not simply poetical personifications of abstract ideas or of psychological and physical functions of Nature. To the Vedic Seers they are living realities."² If it still were argued that the Vedic Gods are nothing more than Nature Forces, the answer is that a deeper study of the evolution of man's relation with God across the ancient civilizations of the world indicates clearly a change of function attributed to the Gods, initially Nature Powers, from material to psychological to even spiritual. Thus in Greek Mythology, Apollo, the Sun God, becomes a God of inspiration and Athene, Goddess of Dawn, becomes the Goddess of Knowledge. In the *Veda* too Saraswati, though associated with the river, is often unmistakably acknowledged as the Divine Word or Inspiration. It is therefore unfair to suppose that the Vedic Gods were limited to their material function alone. Sri Aurobindo says, "The Vedic Deities are names, powers, personalities of the universal Godhead and they represent each some essential puissance of the Divine Being. They manifest the Cosmos and are manifested in it."³ He acknowledges the objective existence of the Gods but he clearly states that they are not just external Forces of Nature but psychological realities in man's consciousness, Cosmic Powers that correspond to a very distinct psychological function in man's inner life.

There are thirty-three deities mentioned in the Rigveda of whom some are considered more important than the others based on the number of hymns addressed to them. One wonders if these Gods are randomly invoked or if there is a certain meaningful sequence about it. A closer analysis of the texts reveals that the *Rishi-s* tend to address hymns to some Gods always before addressing others. At times they even call upon a specific combination of Deities as Indra-Vayu or Mitra-Varuna. What then does this order signify? This paper proposes to understand the deeper significance of some important Vedic Deities and their relation to each other.

Man generally lives content with his worldly preoccupations, small pleasure, gains and losses, till the time of

his death. But a time comes when, saturated and dissatisfied with fleeting material riches, he thirsts for joys more permanent. This will and aspiration for a greater truth of existence is Agni, the Fire that is lit on the altar of his soul, in the depth of the Night, the ignorance of his being. But this path of inner discovery is dark and arduous and the aspirant has to steadily kindle within himself the Flame of Truth, Agni, through a constant inner sacrifice of all the wrong movements of his being that are prompted by the bartering forces, the *Pani-s*, from the root '*pan*', to barter, and the dividing forces, *dasyu-s*, from the root '*dah*'. The aspiring soul and Traveller on the path of Truth becomes the *Aryan*, a warrior of Light against the Powers of Darkness.

AGNI

Man's closest friend and ally is Agni, the Seer-Will, *Kavikratu*, whose mission is to uplift and to protect man's struggling soul from the clutches of Nature's obscure and devious grounds. An infallible worker, unhampered in his workings by the absence of the light of a guiding mind, he is the indispensable element of the sacrifice as well as the performer of the sacrifice, *hotā*.

The *Aryan* therefore places this Will of knowledge in front of him and appoints him as his spiritual representative, the *Purohita*, the Priest and Master of the Sacrifice. As the symbolic Priest, he takes upon himself various functions of the sacrifice, which include purifying the materials of the oblations and offering them to the invoked Gods. Sri Aurobindo writes, "That Flame of Agni is the seven-tongued power of a Will, a Force of God instinct with knowledge. This conscious and forceful Will is the immortal guest in our mortality."⁴ He is the *Dūta*, the mediator between Heaven and Earth, our Father and Mother. Heaven and Earth, Parents of the Gods, "sustain respectively in them the purely psychic and mental and the physical consciousness."⁵ Agni is said to carry upwards man's offerings to the higher Planes and in return he brings down to man, heavenly gifts such as Wealth, Cows, Horses, Sons etc. that respectively symbolize spiritual riches, divine illuminations, spiritual strength and ever-new revelations.

INDRA AND THE MARUTS

Having well kindled the Flame of Truth on the altar of the soul, the aspirant next invokes Indra who represents, "the power of pure Existence, self manifested as the Divine Mind."⁶ Just as Agni is believed to be one pole of Force instinct with knowledge that carries man's oblations of the sacrifice from Earth to Heaven, Indra is the other pole of Light instinct with force that descends from Heaven to Earth. A close ally and friend of his worshippers and God of the *Aryan-s*, the warriors, his most important functions are to rescue the divine Herds, spiritual illuminations, from the clutches of the darker forces, the *Pani-s* and the *Dasyu-s* and to bring down the rains, the heavenly waters or higher consciousness, to purify man's being because it is only with the help of an illumined mind can an aspirant recover the lights of divine Knowledge which have been hidden in the caves, dark nooks of his being. Furthermore, it is only that quality of mind that can contain the flow of the higher waters of Light.

This Lord of the Mental Forces, mounted on the horses dripping with *ghrta*, symbolizing the spiritual strengths accompanied with a clarified mind releases the mind of the seeker from the narrow limits and obscurations of nervous energy. Then accompanied by the Maruts whom Sri Aurobindo de-



scribes as, "the powers of the will and nervous or vital Force that have attained to the light of thought and the voice of self-expression"⁷, Indra becomes the Fashioner of Right thought and Right action, protecting the aspirant from the crooked ways and falsehoods of the senses, the *indriya*-s.

VAYU, ASHWINS AND RIBHUS

Another close companion of Indra is Vayu who is often invoked with him. Described as the Lord of the Winds, he is in his essential divine nature, the Lord of the universal Life-Energy, Vital Force or *Prāṇa*, which is the ensemble of the nervous activities in man. The *Rishi*-s recognized the intimate association between the forces of Life and Mind. For it is only with the full support of a strong Life-energy that the Mind can contain a greater Force. It is therefore natural that both Indra, Lord of the mental forces and Vayu, Lord of the vital forces, are invited in the same chariot, which symbolizes the movement of energy, to drink the Soma Wine, the drink of the divine *Ananda*.

But for the Bliss of the Soma to be established firmly in the nature of the seeker, a happy, enlightened and healthy condition of mind, life and body is necessary. This state of being is prepared by the Ashwins, the divine Twins who are "wedded to the daughter of the Light, drinkers of honey, bringers of perfect satisfactions, healers of maim and malady."⁸ Drunk with the Soma, Indra, the shaper of mental forms, mounts his Horses, fashioned by his artisans, the Ribhus who are described as, "human powers who by the work of sacrifice and their brilliant ascension to the high dwelling place of the Sun, have attained to immortality and help mankind repeat their achievement."⁹ With the power of their mind they are said to shape the Horses of Indra, the chariot of the Ashwins, the weapons of the Gods and to prepare the means of the journey and the battle.

Armed with the thunderbolt and full of the divine Ambrosia of ecstasy, Indra, the Illumined Mind, guided by Sarama, the divine Hound representing Intuition, charges into the dark caves of the being, defeats the *Pani*-s and releases the Sun of Truth which rises once more high in the heaven of man's mortality.

SOME FEMALE DEITIES

Sarama is one of the five Female Powers of the Truth-Consciousness who assist the *Aryan* towards his supreme goal. The others are Bharati or Mahi, Saraswati and Ila and Dakshina. Mahi or Bharati reveals to the seeker that the Truth is also a Largeness, *rtam brhat*, the Vast Word of the Truth-Consciousness. She brings with her Saraswati and Ila. Saraswati, generally considered a river Goddess, often reveals clearly her psychological function for she is associated with *Ceruti*, truth-audition, the inspired Word, who awakens the consciousness of the seeker to "the right thinkings or the right states of mind - *cetanti sumatinām*."¹⁰ Ila represents *āṇopi*, truth-vision, and comes to the sacrifice awakening the consciousness to the knowledge - *cetanti*, says Sri Aurobindo. Dakshina, daughter of Aditi is the discriminating Thought of the Divine Mind whose task is to distribute to the Godheads their portion of the sacrifice. Together these Goddesses hasten the seeker's advance to the heavens of the Sun, Surya.

SURYA

Surya, one of the most celebrated Gods of the Rigveda, has several hymns dedicated to him. The famous *Gāyatri Mantra* invoking the Sun God as Savit^o to increase our mind-power is a clear indication of the psychological

function of the deity. Sri Aurobindo defines Surya as, "the Master of the Supreme Truth, truth of being, truth of knowledge, truth of process and act and movement and functioning."¹¹ He is the Creator whose body is the Supramental Vastness called *Satyam*, *Rtam*, *Brhat*, the Truth, the Right and the Vast. His luminous supramental heaven, *Swar*, exists beyond Man's Heaven and Earth. No kind of division, which is itself a sign of falsehood, exists in him. Surya is also invoked in his various aspects. As Savit^o, he is the Creator. As Pushan, he is the Fosterer and Nourisher of man's spiritual wealth.

THE GUARDIANS OF LIGHT

When the seeker, protected by the Gods reaches this world, he is free from the crooked and divisive tendencies of his nature and experiences the all-embracing Truth-Consciousness. But for the Truth of Surya to be firmly established in his nature, there are previous inner conditions that are indispensable. The four Powers of Surya, Varuna, Mitra, Aryaman and Bhaga create these states of being. The *Aryan* having purified his *Prāṇa* and Mind experiences a state of "vast purity and clear wideness"¹² in his consciousness. This is the realm of Varuna, a mighty world-ruler, *samrāṇ*, a king who tolerates no kind of falsehood and frees his subjects from the dark forces, protecting them from sin. His inseparable ally, Mitra, is the Godhead of love and comprehension. While Varuna firmly guards the various aspects of the being on the side of the Truth, Mitra harmonises them towards a common goal, the *Swar* of Surya. Next comes Aryaman, representing, "the Force of sacrifice, aspiration, battle."¹³ He greatly assists the *Aryan* on his journey for he contains in himself man's aspiration to a "constant self-enlargement and self-transcendence" towards his divine perfection. Lastly Bhaga is the Force of Surya that spontaneously leads the seeker to the right enjoyment of all things, dispelling the evil forces of sin and error and suffering.

SOMA

Thus the *Aryan*, accompanied by the four Guardians of Light experiences the supreme Beatitude, Soma, the hidden Ecstasy of Existence, the immortalizing Nectar present even in our physical being, which one has to press out and offer to the Gods. Drinking the Soma, the Gods are increased in their strength and march to conquer the enemies of Light.

ADITI AND USHA

The aspirant too, full with Bliss of Soma and empowered by the Gods, realizes the Divine Dawn who is the force and face of Aditi. Aditi, the Mother of the Gods is "originally the pure consciousness of infinite existence, one and self-luminous". Usha on the other hand is described as young yet ancient, who is born again and again. This paradox corresponds to the inner experience of man where even after having seen the glorious Light of Surya, the Truth, he lapses into periods of ignorance or Night, but awakens inevitably to a new Dawn of spiritual realization. The *Rishi*-s declare that until the realization of the Supramental Truth is permanently established in his being and the alternating periods of darkness cease to recur, the *Aryan* continues to seek the help of Usha, for, she is the Queen of spiritual Riches, the Giver of the boons and Wealth represented by the Cows, Horses etc. With her complete support and with that of the three great Gods, Supervisors of this great endeavour of Man and God towards perfection, the Puranic Trinity, Brahmanaspati, the Creator, Rudra, the Destroyer and Vishnu, the Preserver, the *Aryan*



ultimately goes beyond his mortality and arrives at his glorious destination, the complete transformation of his limited human existence into that of the infinite Truth, Consciousness and Bliss, the *Sat-Chit-Ananda* which is the true nature of his original self.

CONCLUSION

In this way we have seen that the *Veda-s*, given a psycho-spiritual interpretation becomes an invaluable document, a carefully chartered roadmap for the soul-adventurer. Sri Aurobindo says, "To understand the scriptures, it is not enough to be a scholar, one must be a soul." Thus when one becomes a Seer of the Truth, a *Draṇpa*, one realizes that the *Aryan* ceases to be a racial feature or merely a priestly function but a seeker and warrior on the journey of Truth. In his battle for immortality, the Gods are not mere Nature Powers or autocratic celestial beings who seek to be appeased but become collaborators in the Supreme endeavour to establish a spiritual life on earth. Given a psycho-spiritual sense, even the absurd descriptions like the Sun as the eye of the duo Varuna-Mitra become meaningful. For then, the Sun which symbolizes the Truth, becomes appropriately the guiding principle of action for the seeker in the vast unexplored regions of consciousness, the realms of Varuna and Mitra. When accorded a deeper symbolic sense, the hymns too become a record of the aspiring man who, through his inner sacrifice, lifts himself out of the mire of the general human lethargy and unconsciousness, prepares all the parts of his being to be fit to be moulded by the deft hands of the all-knowing artisans – the Gods. The Gods too seek such perfected instruments that can be shaped to suit the requirement of the hour.

Thus understood, Man and God are no longer independent beings each seeking his own benefit but are comrades in arms fighting together the forces of ignorance and darkness to retrieve from them the divine illuminations that have been hidden in the dark caves. Having liberated the herds of the Sun both taste together the elixir of divine *Ananda*.

The fact remains that the Vedas have survived untainted for so many millenniums through both hostile and conducive environments. At times it gained great prominence while at others it was bluntly refuted. Sri Aurobindo believed that the secret of its survival lies in its essential contents – the saga of the eternal battle between the forces of Light and Darkness. So long as this conflict persists in the nature of Man the *Veda-s* will survive.

In this material and rational age if these sacred scriptures are facing neglect it is a temporary phase. Sri Aurobindo states emphatically that, "the recovery of the *Veda-s* is ... not merely a desideratum for our modern intellectual curiosity but a practical necessity for the future of the human race."¹⁴ Therefore even if the mass of humanity fails to recognize the true value of the mantric experience and are content to revere the Gods on the altar, these divine Deities rest not. They are ever vigilant for the lonely seeker who dares to look beyond the common horizons of life. Him, they make an ally and a friend and together they march determined towards their ultimate victory from Falsehood to Truth, from Darkness to Light and from Death to Immortality.

Asato mā sadgamaya.

Tamaso mā jyotir gamaya.

M^otyormām^o tam gamaya.