A STUDY ON THE CULT OF BRAHMA

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There was a well-known cult in ancient India, perhaps a pre-Vedic one, known as the cult of Brahmā. It was mainly and originally associated with a creator God. The name “BRAHMĀ” appears to have been the popular name of the creator god in the Aryavarta region. He assumed various forms and names in different parts of India in different ages. This is the wrong opinion that Brahmā was a post-vedic or Paurānic god and hence his cult cannot be said to have existed before the Vedic period. In fact, Brahmā was a most popular god of Vedic age. All Vedic text call Brahmā Svayamabhū i.e. self-born, and thus the first and oldest of the gods. The antiquity of Brahmā cult, Brahmā’s symbols in vedas, the method of worship, and whether there was really a sect of Brahmā will therefore be discussed in this study. The causes of fall of Brahmā cult are also included.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Brahmā was the earliest creator god of India. He was a pre-Vedic god. The name “BRAHMĀ” appears to have been the popular name of the creator god in the Aryavarta region. He assumed various forms and names in different parts of India in different ages. All religions and sects, however, have to acknowledge their debts to and accept the authority of god Brahmā. Even the Vedas are said to have been creation of Brahmā. This is the wrong opinion that Brahmā was a post-vedic or Paurānic god and hence his cult cannot be said to have existed before the Vedic period. In fact, Brahmā was a most popular god of Vedic age. All Vedic text call Brahmā Svayamabhū i.e. self-born, and thus the first and oldest of the gods. Jainism and Buddhism arose out of the cult of Brahmā. The Brahmā cult as known in the pre-Vedic days included the worship of various gods of elements such as Water, Earth, Fire, Wind and ether, which in the Vedas were defied and in the Sāmkhya Philosophy, considered as some of the Tattvas out of which creation arose. The absence of reference to Brahmā in the Veda need not therefore be taken as a proof of non-existence of his worship in the Vedic period, because Vedas do not really give us a full picture of the condition of India of that period. The review of Vedic literature clearly indicates that even in the early Vedic period, there was prevalent the worship of a god named Brahmā.

All the Hindus believe that the three gods, viz. Brahmā, Visnu and Siva are the principal gods to be worshipped. In spite of this belief, no sect is known to have existed in India worshipped Brahmā as its principal god. The Brahmā cult in a very early age had assimilated various other forms of worship and gods. Siva, Mother Goddess of Tantric nature, God Dharmā, Yama and Kāla were all associated with the cult of Brahmā. The five primary elements (Panchmahābhutas), the subtle elements (tanmātrah), Ahmkār, Buddhī (mind) and Avyakta (the unmanifest)- these five things are the Rātra (the body) of Purusa and are described as Pancharātra. Rātra were the body of Brahmā. The Pancharātra cult was originally the worship of five elements (Panchmahābhutas, Water, Earth, Fire, Wind and ether). These in a later age were worshipped as five forms of a creator God Brahmā. This religion may be said to be crude form of worship of Natural phenomena as manifestations of a creative spirit or force. With the advance of time and civilization, the idea of the divinity of those natural phenomena arose and this Vedic religion created the Devas (Gods) by anthropomorphising them.

The knowledge of the existence of a cult of Brahmā in ancient India will thus throw new light on various problems of Indian religions and traditions.

2. ANTIQUITY OF BRAHMA CULT:

Brahmā is the chief creator god of Vedic culture. In Vedas, He is known by various names—Hiranyakarshna, Aj, Purusa, Nārāyana, Ka, Vishvakarman, Brahaspati and Brahmaanaspati etc. The most famous of them was ‘Prajāpati’. According to Satapatha Brahmana there are many passages where Prajāpati recognised as the chief god. (Sat. Brā. 11/1/6,14/2/4,2/4/4/4/1). In Asvālayan Gṛhyāsūtra (3/4) and Chāndogya Upanisad (1/7/5), he is identified with Brahmā. Sāyanaśāstra (Atharva. 3/20/4, Sāyana Bhāṣya) also says—“Brahmānām esah devanam Prajāpatīm”. Prajāpati is the chief of the gods, and in special the father god who produces every thing, who is the father of the gods and also of the Asuras. Prajāpati is the hero of the cosmogonic myths of the wholes of the Brahmāna period; he creates the worlds, the Vedas and the castes. Prajāpati also occurs in the Rgveda (3/53/2) as an epithet of Savitr and as also of soma (9/59). In (10/121/1), he bears the title ‘Hiranyakarshna’, the golden germ.

In the Rgveda (2/1/3) Brahmaanaspati is invoked as ‘Brahmā’. In the hymns 8/16,10/112/8,10/141/3,3/12/3/2,10/72 Brahmat may be taken as a god. The above hymn indicates that Brahmaanaspati, Brahaspati or Prajāpati are really the Rgvedic equivalent of god ‘Brahmā’. The Atharva Veda (4/2,5/1,19,43,7/3/1 etc.) contains references to a god Brahmā. In the Atharva Veda (4/2/8) he appears as the embryo, which is, produces in the waters on the process of creation. This hymn (Atharva. 19/21) shows the supreme position of Brahmā—

Brahma jyestha sabhritah veeryani
Brahmāgre jyestham divam janāma tattān A
Bhūtānām Brahmā prīthamote jagye tenahita
Brahmān spardhitum kah AA

The Prasna Upanisad refers to the preparing of a sacrifice by Prajāpati for the purpose of creation. The Mundak Upanisad refers to Brahmā’s eldest son named Athervan who learned the Brahma—Vidya from his father. The Aitareya, Taittiriya, Kausítaki Upanisad also refer to Brahmā. In Sāmkhyāya Aranyaka Soma is addressed as, “Five mouthed Prajāpati”. Thus there is no doubt that in certain stage of his-
tory, especially in the Upanishads, Indians are familiar with Brahman. Therefore we may conclude that Brahman was a very ancient god and he assumed various forms and names in different parts of India. Regarding Purusa it may be said that he is the production of the philosophical tendency of the Rgvedic India. His name occurring in the Rgveda indicates his existence in the Rgvedic period.

The review of the Vedic period thus shows that even in the Rgvedic period god Brahman might have existed in India. Brahman was the main god not only of the Brahman period but also of the Upnishadic age.

3. BRAHMĀ’S SYMBOL:

Brahman was worshipped through symbols. The idea of his four-faced image is to be found for the first time in an interpolated verse in the Maitrayanī Samhitā. The Vedic Indians who had taken up the worship of Brahman in a modified form worshipped him in the form of the sacrificial ‘śita’ (altar). Swan was a favourite symbol of Brahman. Several animals like bull, lion etc. were also used to represent his symbols. A chariot or a pillar (Skambha) was also used as his symbol. One of the earliest symbol for Brahman was Asvattha tree (Kath. Upan. 2/5/8 & Rg. 10/97/5). In the Rgveda (10/81-82) it is said, “What was the tree out of which they fashioned heaven and earth?” The Taittiriya Brahmana (2/8/9/6) answers this query as, “Brahman was the forest, Brahman was that tree out of which they fashioned heaven and earth.” The Atharvaveda (10/7/38) relates, “Gods form part of the Skambha- Brahman, branches of a tree.” The Skambha Brahman was thus represented as the Asvattha tree. The Brahmanâyaka Upanishad, a tree is said to have the form of Kalā, a god relates to Brahman (Svet. Up. 3/9 and Katha Up. 2/3/1).

4. METHOD OF WORSHIP:

The Brahman cult was primarily a cult of Sanyasin and also of the original Brahmins. The philosophical minded people worshipped Brahman. The teachings of this cult were Samyama (self-control), Sātya (truth), Sreyas (real good), Brahman, Īta (welfare), dharma, artha and moksha. This cult gave much importance to pure life and good conduct. The Brahman cult has existed in the earliest known periods of Indian history is curiously not directly mentioned in the Vedas. The reason was not that it did not exist, but that the Vedas purposely suppressed it. The cult of Brahman after its suppression by the Vedic religion was considered as a religion of the Asuras. But the worship of Brahman continued in society in various forms, some incorporated into the orthodox religion and others limited to low class people. The saptaśatrī cult of Brahman appears to have been popular in several religions such as Kuruṣetra, Panchal, Banaras and eastern parts of India. In certain parts of Bengal (nabadvipa etc.) Brahman is still worshipped for seven days in the month of Bhadra, as a protection against fire. Very few temples were erected for this god. Hindus worship the god in the sandhyā rīs, in marriage ceremonies, on the eve of Hindu new year (chaitra śukla pratiṣad) etc.

Non-sectarian work of later periods indicate the popularity or continuity of Brahman’s worship. Brahman was the chief god worshipped during religious ceremonies performed at the time of building a house. In the Vastumandala Brahman occupies the central place according to all the Vastu texts. The non-sectarian Vastushāstra proves the antiquity of the worship of Brahman, and its popularity even in the historical period.

5. SECT OF BRAHMĀ:

Brahman was accepted as one of the Trinity, but his worshippers now formed no sect. Brahman continued to be worshipped by all Hindus on certain occasions only and as a minor god in all Puja ceremonies. The Varna system was at first based on the religion or the gods worshipped by various groups (or sects) of people of different locations of India and the Brahmana cast must have had a close relation with Brahman. Brahmins might originally have been worshippers of the pre-Vedic Brahman. The evidences of the existence of a real cult of Brahman in a very early period make it clear that absence of references in the Vedas to this god was not due to his non-existence but perhaps due to its pre-Vedic character. It was Brahman who, as gradually there was intermingling of the vedic and non-vedic people in various parts of India, was also worshipped by the Vedic people of a later period (i.e. Brahmana period) as Prajāpati (adherents of Vedic faith) first and then also accepted Brahman worship.

All religious sects of India ascribe creation of Brahman and even sectarian works refer to the creation legends being associated with Brahman. Infact, all known religious sects attempted to give authority to their religion and religious books by referring their origin to Brahman. It is also likely that the Vratyas, Yatis and Munis of the Vedic period, known to be following a non-Vedic cult were really following a cult allied to that of Brahman.

6. CAUSES OF FALL OF BRAHMĀ CULT:

The Brahmana and Pauranic tradition to the effect that Brahman died after creation indicates that with the rise of the Vedic religion Brahman’s direct worship had ceased among the people at least of the western parts of India. The rise of the Vaishnavism and Buddhism totally destroyed the older cults. The Brahman cult again made some progress after the fall of the heyday of Buddhism. But with the rise of Vaishnavism, Brahman cult was relegated to the position of a religion of the low class people. The Brahman cult was mainly considered, as a cult of Asuras is evident from the fact that in the Puranas most of the Daityas or Asuras are said to have achieved supernatural power by a boon from god Brahman. The reason for the disappearance of the cult was undoubtedly the rivalry of the cult with the Vedic religion.

7. CONCLUSIONS:

The Brahman cult was the cradle of all religions, and the Vedic culture was a development of the old Brahman cult of India. The Brahman cult were for a long time regarded as an Asuras or non-orthodox in character chiefly followed by the lower class people in some parts of India. But even then the
old religions gradually changed the character of the vedic religion. In eastern part of India, where the Vedic cult spread gradually and slowly, the majority of the people followed the Brahmac cult. In the north west, Krishna gave rise to the Vaishnava cult. In Eastern India arises Jainism and Buddhism which gave a death blow to both the Vedic and the non Vedic cults, including that of Brahmac. But Buddhism fell a prey to the old religions and Vaishnavism became the predominant religion. Along with that arose the worship of Siva, Sakti, Sun and other gods, which gave rise to the modern form of Hinduism. The Brahmac cult however, had mixed up thoroughly with all Indian religions and gave rise to the present day religion viz. Hinduism. The Samkhya philosophy was a philosophy of Brahmac’s Ratra cult and the Yoga was associated with Brahmac’s son Rudra-Shiva. Hence it is that these two systems were more or less adopted and accepted by all the religious sects and texts. Just as Buddhism was assimilated by Hinduism and disappeared from India, so was the Brahmac cult assimilated by the Vedic cult and the later religious systems of India and has altogether been forgotten by the Indians.

Many problems of Indian philosophy and religions may thus be solved if further investigation is carried out about the Brahmac cult.

REFERENCES: