

The Vision of the Vedas

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The hymns of the Vedas, the four collections of hymns of which the Rgveda is the oldest and the basis of the three others, which Western scholarship dates back to about 1500 to 1200 B.C. form the original source book of Indian religion. Revered till today, the Rgveda is at present little known to India.

The Vedas are the legacy of a whole civilization, a mirror into man's psyche and its vision of life in all its intricacies. Undeniably, the Vedic hymns are deeply imbued with the poetry of and feeling for nature, and this constitutes part of their charm. But behind the mythological vision of the cosmos emerges a remarkable insight into the workings of the universe, the underlying oneness of all life behind the multiplicity of forms and forces that hide it, the one law of transformation, of growth and decay, of evolution and involution, of order and adjustment whereby all things are kept more or less in equilibrium, all disorders being restored back to order, this causing friction, conflict, and in man's case, suffering.

Vedic man conceived life as a web of divine forces, each object focussing, in varying degrees, the same divine force as he himself, all governed by the law of equilibrium, hence, that every deed of his had repercussions extending far beyond his present awareness. At the cosmic level the Cosmic Order which he called *rta* evidences the Law of Harmony; at the human level, the Law of truth, righteousness, justice; at the personal level, it manifests as integrity, the voice of human conscience, the silent voice that guides conduct and points to the right.

Vedic man visioned manifestation as a dynamic process of unfoldment at every level; the universe manifests in accordance with an inherent law which is the very basis of its structure; therefore not in a haphazard way, but in a strict order, a progression, all other laws being but the development of and therefore subordinate to this one fundamental law: this is the law of becoming, of transformation, whereby the unmanifest becomes the manifest, the transcendent the actual, chaos cosmos; a "becoming" that conduces to harmony. The panorama of the world shows a conflict and a tension between polar opposites, but also a movement in togetherness and a co-operation. All are striving towards the light, towards unfolding their potential, towards fuller life. The many forms that enshrine life, in their constant appearing and disappearing on the mundane scene, may give the impression of disorder, of opposing forces that strive against one another to gain the upper hand. The trees in the forests vie with each other for the light. So do men in the jungles of cities, for success which is their light. The strongest survive or rise above the others. The weakest disappear. The survival of the fittest is a law of nature.

Underlying this fever of activity is the law of becoming, of transformation by means of which all unfold, adjust and evolve. Becoming, transforming, and in the process adjusting, are the very expression of evolution, the dynamics of life. The vast movements of the heavens and of nature's varied forms are outer expressions of an underlying orderly process that sweeps all forward unrelentingly, whose regulator is the Law, *rta*. The very constancy of the universal movement along regular lines marks an underlying stability, which is the settled order, what Vedic man called *rta*. Motion and stability meet in *rta*.

This whole idea was summed up in a verse from the Atharvaveda:

"Vast truth, mighty Order, consecration, spiritual-exertion, prayer, sacrificial offering, these uphold the world."
(Athv.XII.1.1)

Our very earth is considered based, shaped and maintained on a 'holy foundation', that foundation of spiritual values that make for holiness. "Truth", "order", "consecration" "prayer" and so on, are expressions of a spiritual venture that translates the divine order into human terms and spell out man's calling on earth, for earth and man are one in the vision of Vedic man.

The Vedic vision of *rta* is one of cosmic integrity: all the various kingdoms of nature, visible and invisible and their denizens work together in concerted action, whether consciously or unconsciously, towards a common purpose, towards establishing in all the spheres of manifested existence a perfect wholeness, ordered activity, oneness, the reflection of the Transcendent. "All gods, one-minded, one-intentioned, unerringly proceed to the one purposeful accomplishment". (Rgv.VI.9.5)

"One is the mighty godhood of the shining ones".(Rgv.III.55.1)

"One whole governs the moving and the stable, that which walks and flies, this variegated creation". (Rgv.III.54.8)

The vision of the godly realm is on the whole one of splendour. Like

"Dawn, the shining daughter of Heaven ... dispelling gloom of the night, ushering in the light" (Rgv.VII.81.1)

so the Rishis, in their contemplation, lifted the veil upon a luminous world seldom envisaged by the human mind. Above all and in spite of certain disruptive forces and one or two discordant notes, it is a vision of cosmic harmony and solidarity, the wonder of the working in unison of all the great energising powers of the universe as they shape the ideal thought of the Supreme Ordainer. These energising powers,

the devas or shining ones, cause the universe to manifest according to certain patterns of progressive unfolding and harmonious expression in which every realm of activity, supervised by god, develops in perfect concordance with every other realm. The infinite manifestations of nature all converge, in the poet's heart, into one mighty paean of beauty. Harmony is beauty, beauty is harmony. In the gods' realm we catch glimpses of the human psyche's reaction to the wonders of nature; we are caught back into the fountain-source of our roots, our own psyche, there where our bond with Nature is at its strongest - for through the millennia psyche has grown nurtured by those divine principles which are themselves the fashioners of Nature, which psyche projected and anthropomorphised into the figures of the gods who in the Vedas appear as the bright gods of the Vedic firmament, "sons of the Infinite", "herdsmen of the Supreme Law, whose decrees are truth", who ruled the cosmos in their innocence and purity, long before the human mind degraded them to its own petty level. The devas remain

"Celestial denizens of heaven, flame-tongued, thriving through the law, abiding brooding in the womb of law." (Rgv.X.65.7)

"The devas revel in the sacred-song of Cosmic Order." (Rgv.I.147.1)

At the human level, the establishment of harmonious relationships in society is man's answer to the cosmic order; it is the expression of his understanding of it. Such relationships imply a common code of ethics, justice and honour, acceptable to all. Moral codes and sacrificial rites are reflections of man's response to the law inherent in his deepest nature, his conduct and his participation and commitment being indicative of his understanding of the cosmic order. Man first submits to the law as reflected in social and moral order established by the wise ones who have received the vision and understood its meaning, and then re-enacts it in his ritual worship. The power of the latter lies in its calling men together for a holy purpose and in this togetherness of making it easier for men to enter into a higher state of awareness, of communion with the loftier powers, a state of illumination, the drawing more closely of men and gods is thereby furthered and the law of harmony deliberately actuated by man in this sacred work. In conforming to this universal harmony man finds his true self, meaning and purpose. His achievement of integrity heralds his integration in the cosmic order. "Sweet blows the breeze for the righteous one, sweet flow the ocean-deeps". (Rgv.I.90.6)

Vedic man probed the human condition, faced its dark and its light side, accepted it as part of the course of all things, and firmly placed man as an inherent constituent of the Order which he, as well as the gods, helps to further. The struggles, the pitfalls, the progress and the drawbacks, are all essential steps in the vast field of experience offered by the cosmic order, the means being conflict, the friction of opposite polarities, the end being complete harmony of all the integral parts. At this juncture man is the epitome of the darker side of the cosmic order for he stands at that stage where the conflict prevails prior to that further stage where the deva commands, where harmony has been achieved and the tension between the polarities resolved. It is INDRA, the Lord of Mind, who found for man the way to "fulfillment" through "conflict" (Rgv.X.49.9). But man has it in himself to become the epitome of the lighter side of the cosmic order, by integrating himself in the harmony, hence uniting in himself the whole and thereby being the perfect mirror of that whole which he contains potentially in himself. The keynote of this search for himself and its result, the bursting of man from his bonds and the call to freedom, is well expressed in a hymn from the Atharvaveda:

"Open yourself, create free space; release the bound one from his bonds!

Like a new born child, freed from the womb, be free to move on every path". (Athv.VI.121.4)

Beyond this world which is the playground of a multitude of experiences that forge man's soul and constitutes a path that leads to the infinite, the Vedic bards could also offer a goal far beyond this manifestation of opposing forces through which we learn to grow:

"Seven landmarks have the Wise established. For one of these may be the troubled mortal set out. Thence, liberated from the paths, verily a pillar of life, he stands on firm foundations in the abode of the Most High." (Rgv.X.5.6.)

This could be fruitfully compared with Revelation:

"Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out." (Rev.3.12)

Both the Rgveda and Revelation point to a pilgrimage, the goal of which is the abode of the Most High whence there can be no more going out.