

Religious and Philosophical Background of Pre-Buddhistic India

Pre-Vedic Religions in India

India is the birthplace of many religions including four major existing religions today such as Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, and Sikhism. Many of its religions have died out from the Indian soil in the course of time. Early India was a perfect place for free thinkers, speculators, recluses and ascetics for observation and practice. This freedom paved the way for the origin of many religions in its early history. Archaeological findings in the Indus Valley Civilization show that the ancient people, who lived in those cities, were the worshipers of the Mother Goddess (**Jagan Mātā, Mātṛdevi**). But this city culture was vanished and lay hidden under the Indian soil for over several thousand years until modern archeologists excavated and showed its unrevealed mysterious history to the world in the early 19th century. Among the liturgical artefacts found in the Harappan Civilization, the images with cross-legged posture and a hermit like image show the early stage of Yoga practice. What we learn through these instances is that the city culture of Indus Valley Civilization was rich in terms of religious beliefs and social norms.

The Vedic Religion

According to archeologists and prominent scholars in religious studies, the Vedic religion, which has been prevailing for more than five thousand years, has been recognized as the oldest living religion in the world and the Vedic texts as the most ancient religious records of humankind. The term '*Veda*' implies the meaning that the sacred lore. It derives from the root 'vid' which means 'to know'. Mahadeva states: "Veda means knowledge. The Veda is the repository of spiritual wisdom or God-knowledge or God-science."¹ Some other names used to designate the Vedas are:

- i. *Ārya dharma* (Professed by Āryan or Noble Teaching)
- ii. *Sanātana dharma* (Eternal Law or Immortal Law)
- iii. *Bharat dharma* (The Law of Bharata)
- iv. *Mānava dharma* (The Religion of Human Beings)
- v. *Viśva dharma* (The Universal Religion)

According to A. L. Herman, the "Vedas are collections of poetical, mythological and liturgical compositions that record the cultural belief of the Āryan Ṛṣīs, or seers, and priests who remembered and used them".² The definite period of its origin is cannot be correctly identified. Unlike in some other religions, there is no a founder for Veda. Therefore, the Vedic religion does not owe its origin to a historical person or a prophet. So, we can say that the Vedic religion is a result of the development of

¹ Dr. Asha Kumari, Hinduism and Buddhism, p.3

² A.L.Herman An Introduction To Buddhist Thought – A Philosophical History of Indian Buddhism, p.31.

Vedic people's thoughts for thousands of years. Nobody can exactly say that it developed and completed within such and such time period. In the course of time it gradually developed and came to being known as the *Caturveda* or Four Vedas. In Early Buddhist scriptures we do not find four Vedas but only three Vedas (*tayo vedā*). The fourth category, the *Atharvaveda* is a later addition after **Gotama** or the Buddha *Śākyamuni*. The *Ṛg-Veda* is the oldest among four Vedas. The other three Vedas are: the *Yajur*, the *Sāman* and the *Atharvan* which come as number 2, 3, and 4 respectively. Each *Veda* is divided into four categories namely, the *Mantra* or *Samhitā*, the *Brāhmaṇa*, the *Āraṇyaka* and the *Upaniṣad*. The *Samhitā* means hymns which used for invoking devas or gods. The *Brāhmaṇas* are guide books for Vedic teachings such as sacrifices. Philosophical interpretations of *Vedic* rituals are the *Āraṇyakas*. The *Upaniṣads* offer philosophical portions of the *Vedas*. These four Vedic literature sections divide into three parts as *Karma Khandha*, *Upasana Khandha* and *Jñāna Khandha*. The *Samhitā* or *Mantras* and the *Brāhmaṇas* constitute the *Karma Khandha* while the *Āraṇyakas* and the *Upaniṣads* constitute the other two, the *Upasana Khandha* or the **meditation section** and the *Jñāna Khandha* or the **knowledge section**, respectively.

The Vedic religion is commonly known as **Hinduism** today. The word '*Hindu*' is generally used to refer to the Hinduism. **Persians** or Vedic Āryans found it difficult to pronounce the word '**Sindhu**'. Therefore, they pronounced the word **Sindhu** as **Hindu**. Because of the Indus River (**Sindhu Gaṅgā**), this land was called Indus Land or Sindhu-Land and its modern name India also derived from the word **Sindhu** (**Sindhu**> **Hindu**>**Indus**>**India**). Today India is also called Hindustan by Indians and it's a Persian name.

The *Ṛg-Veda* is the most philosophical and important part of the Vedas. There are 1028 hymns in the *Ṛg-Veda*. A.L. Basham says as follows. "*Ṛg-Veda* which is the oldest religious text in the world still looked on as sacred, and which was probably composed between 1500 and 900 B.C..."³ The heart of the *Veda* comprises of sacrifices, rituals or rites. Therefore, it is clear that the Vedic people had performed sacrifices. Trained Brahmins had conducted those rituals for them. By performing sacrifices what did they request from gods? According to hymns of *Ṛg-Veda*, the Vedic people wished for blessings of the gods and expected numerous offspring, long life, victory in battle, and abundance of material possessions, cattle, land, rain, all sort of beneficial effects, forgiveness for wrong doings etc. For instance, the following quotation from the *Ṛg-Veda* can be shown here. "*Rich in horses, in chariots, in garments, in gold, in fodder, in wool, and in grass, the Sindhu, handsome and young, spreads over a land that is flowing with honey;*"⁴ In return gods received abundant of offerings from their devotees, like songs of praise, which please the divine ears, *Soma* drinks, meat, blood of sacrificed animals.

³ A. L. Basham, *The Wonder That Was India*, p.137.

⁴ F. Max Müller, *Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religion*, p.202.

The Period of Animism

The Pre-Vedic people believed in animism. The nature and natural objects such as the sun, the moon, the dawn, the wind, the rain, the thunder, the sky, the fire etc. were personified and deified as gods. The Mother Nature helped their survival beside thunder and lightning which frightened them. Therefore, they asked protection from dangerous gods while invoking blessings, happiness and prosperity from friendly gods.

These people astonished and wondered about the regularity of the appearance of the Sun, the Moon and seasons. It is an unchanging law prevails in the world. When they observed their daily routing of appearance and disappearance they thought that there must be something which controls this regular order. The idea of gods came into being as a result of such beliefs.

Sūrya (Sun) was a god for Vedic people. When he appears the light comes with heat and when it disappears the light and the heat too disappear but the darkness comes. The Sun comes and goes every day. It was extremely perplexing. In the *Ṛg-Veda* there are many poems about the Sun god and its mighty power. “*With the light O sun thou overcomst darkness, and rouseth the whole world in splendor, with that light drive away from us all weakness, all negligence, all illness, and sleepiness.*”⁵ The Sun gives the life to the world. Therefore, Vedic people knew the magnificent power of the Sun. With the sunrise darkness, sleepiness, and negligence go out.

The fire also worshiped as a god. They named it god **Agni**. Agni appears in every home and was very useful friend but harmful as well. Sometimes it burns everything including its worshipers and burns forest by conflagrations. After burning it disappears. Where it comes from and where does it go? When it contacts with water it extinguishes suddenly. Later on fire became a messenger between man and god because when people put oblations into fire (*homa*) in order to please the god it makes smoke and reaches the god.

As a result of such kinds of beliefs Vedic people started to worship the nature and composed hymns, lyric poetries and verses to honour the gods. They composed thousands of *ślokas* and compiled them into four collections which are known as the *Vedas* today. Almost all the teachings in Hinduism, including rituals, rites, and rules can be seen in the *Vedas*.

The Period of Polytheism and Henotheism

According to the *Ṛg-Veda* in early Vedic period Āryans believed in polytheism. For instance, gods such as **Indra**, **Varuṇa**, **Marut**, **Rudra**, **Vāyu**, and **Soma** were their superior gods. Indra is like a thunder in the battle field and he is the mark of victory. He was the god who brought life and victory for Āryans in the battle field when they encountered with war. We find many hymns and poems used for **Indra** in the *Ṛg-*

⁵ F.Max Müller, Lectures on the On the Origin and Growth of Religion, p.67

Veda. The Vedic people always wished and expected help and protection from heavenly power. When they had any problem in their life, they invoked deities and requested their help to overcome the difficulties. This human nature can be seen even in the modern world today. When people encounter with problems, they pray for gods for help. This is because common people are on the view that there are some beings above them who are superior to them. So it is no wonder that the Vedic people had such a primitive belief.

Varuṇa is the sky god who sometimes recognized as the creator of the world. He maintains the cosmic order and protects moral action and prevents the world from falling into physical and moral chaos. He is the god of righteousness and the guardian of all that is good and worthy, the knower of truth and falsehood in man. As guardian of physical world, he supports the heaven, leads the sun across the sky, bestows rains, regulates the seasons, and causes the ocean not to overflow, in spite of the continuous flow of rivers into it. Besides the knowing sins of man, *Varuṇa* is also able to forgive for misdeeds. A lot of hymns indeed are the prayers for forgiveness.⁶ Sometimes they asked *Varuṇa* to bring them to the World of Fathers or *Pitr-loka* without falling them into the **House of Clay** (*Mṛtyuloka*) or the World of Yama (*Yamaloka* – the Hell).

Among number of gods, sometime one god becomes higher than the others and it is called **henotheism**. That means while believing in many gods, one god is considered as the superior one. For instance god *Indra* is regarded as the most important among all gods due to his stupendous prowess and physical proportions. But sometimes we see in the Ṛg-Veda, the god Indra is replaced with the god Varuna and then the latter becomes superior to the former. This period is called henotheistic period. This nature can be seen among Hindu followers even in the modern day.

The Period of Monotheism - The Creator God

At the end of the Ṛg-Vedic period the concept of a creator of the universe and beings was gradually developed and the idea of many gods or polytheism was not so powerful. This paved the way to develop a new concept, which is called the almighty creative god. This is how Brahmā or the supreme God or Prajāpati, the Lord of beings came into existence. Prajāpati is the absolute or the cosmic person as well as the primeval man who existed before the world is created by him. According to the *Puruṣa Sūkta* Prajāpati's incomparable superior qualities and mighty power are elaborated as given below.

The cosmic person is endowed with countless heads, countless hands and countless feet. Heads, hands and feet of all creatures are His. He pervades the entire macrocosm through and transcends it. The whole universe visible and invisible is his body. He is the Past

⁶ K.S.Ch'en, Buddhism, The Light Of Asia by Kenneth, 1968, p.3

and Future. He is the Controller of the gods and goddesses. This phenomenon is not his ultimate form, as He has left His real nature and became this for the enjoyment of the creatures. All this is His glory. But he is infinitely greater than His glory. All beings existing in the three divisions of time are his one quarter and his remaining three quarters are untouched by creation. Three quarters of His being are above, beyond time, space and causation...⁷

The above elaboration of the *Brahmā* looks interesting. There is no any person or anything which is similar to him and he is supreme to all. The figure he has is not the real one; it is just for pleasing the human beings. His real form is cannot be explained using language. It is beyond the language. The *Brahmā* not only created the world and human beings but also everything including sentient beings flora and fauna. The cosmic order is due to the Bhrama, Prajāpati or the Creator God. Therefore, it's a duty of a human being to obey the God and perform sacrifices to make the God happy. If it is not followed in a correct manner the cosmic process will cease and lot of chaos would come to the world. People cannot think or act beyond the divine order and they must accept the whole process without any changing.

One of the strict points of the creation is the cast system. It is a fixed and unchangeable phenomenon. Prajāpati created four castes, brāhmaṇa, kṣatrīya, vaiśya and śūdra from the different parts of his body, namely, mouth (mukha), arms (bahu), thighs (ūrū) and feet (pāda) respectively. The caste system is called *Catur Varṇa*.

The Brahmin was his mouth,
Of his arms was made the warrior,
His thighs came the vaiśya,
Of his feet the śūdra was born.⁸

Having created these four categories they were given their own duties. The most top social class is Brahmin. Therefore, they enjoyed privileges. Learning and teaching, conducting sacrifices and performing sacrifices, receiving alms and advising kings and etc. are the duties they enjoyed. The Kṣatrīyas were given learning, ruling the country and performing sacrifices etc. For the Vaiśyas learning, farming, handling economy and performing sacrifices were the duties. These three castes were fortunate categories whereas the *Śūdras* were considered as low castes or outcasts. They were untouchables and considered as a half of human beings or animals. They got neither social nor religious rights. Within their whole life they had to work as slaves for above mentioned three castes.

⁷ Dr.Asha Kumari, *Hinduism and Buddhism*, p.10

⁸ Ibid.

Brahmins were like divine beings (*bhūṣura*) on the earth. They could do anything because they claimed themselves as messengers between the God and human beings. The life of a Brahmin is divided into four periods according to their age. These four stages are called *catur āśrama dharmas*. From about 11-19 years called *Brahmacāri* or celibacy period. This period he stays under a teacher called *Upadhyāya* (*Upajjhāya*). After studying *Vedas* and other required studies he can go home and enter household life or marriage life called *Gr̥hastha*. Then when he is about 50 years old he should go to the forest and have a wandering life which is called *Vānahprastha*. If he likes he can live with his wife in this stage. Then comes absolute reclusive life which is called *Saṇyāsi*. On this stage he does not possess any material thing except his walking stick and water container.

In the course of time the Vedic thought was turning to different direction and gradually the faith in the god was lost. As a result of this the Vedic pantheon of gods lost their greatness and became less important. This period is called *Upaniṣad* in which the thinkers developed their insight instead of performing sacrifices and rituals. The concept of the circle of life and death or *Saṃsāra* and rebirth appeared as new views.

The Vedic thought which was originated over thousand years ago worshipping to natural things and gradually came over thousands of years facing changing and developing its form. It transformed from animism to polytheism, from polytheism to henotheism, from henotheism to monotheism, from monotheism to self-realization or self-understanding. Although they tried to understand the reality of the world and the human being or self-understanding they couldn't forget the idea of cosmic power. In other words every time they were hanging on a supernatural power which is considered higher than them. Therefore we cannot say that they were full free thinkers because they always depend on a creator or a universal controller of the world and human beings. Around six century B.C. more than 62 heretical views had been prevailing in India and some of them like six heretic teachers were more popular and they vehemently criticized the Vedic religion. The Gautama Buddha also appeared in this time whose teaching was a revolution which went against the teachings of both *Brāhmaṇa* and *Śramaṇa* traditions.