

On the Cosmologies of Vedic, Sankhya And Vedantic Philosophies

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Abstract:

This paper primarily discusses the cosmologies of Vedic, Sankhya and Vedantic philosophies and the resultant impact the cosmologies have on the corresponding metaphysical views of the respective philosophical traditions. The paper begins with the mythological account of cosmogony in Vedic tradition followed by the dualist account of the cosmos in Sankhya and then finally the shift from cosmology to autology in Vedantic tradition i.e. its focus on the *self* as the centre piece of investigation.

INTRODUCTION

The characteristic feature of Indian Philosophical tradition is the focus on embodied wisdom. Philosophy is pursued to directly realize the Truth itself (*tattvadarsana*)¹ and not just “know” it. “Indian Philosophy...has always emphasized the need of practical realization of truth. The word [for Philosophy in Indian tradition] ‘darshana’ means vision... It stands for the direct, immediate and intuitive vision of Reality”². Realization of truth entails intersection of *knowledge* with *being* itself. The division of Philosophy into different subjects/fields like Metaphysics, Epistemology, Ethics and Aesthetics in Indian philosophical traditions is not as sharp as that in western philosophical tradition³.

A consistent focus on the “absolute” and the notion of the *Sacred* in Indian Philosophical tradition gradually translates into an increased emphasis on metaphysics. The radical shift of Western Philosophical tradition in the post-Cartesian era from metaphysics to epistemology (or even further from epistemology to language in the 20th century) is not to be found in the Indian tradition in equivalent terms. Philosophy in Western tradition, therefore, gradually narrowed down from metaphysics to a limited focus on language where as the centrality of *Transcendence* in Indian philosophy remained largely unaffected. However, this is not to indicate that Indian philosophy lacks the emphasis on language, logic and epistemology, the strong presence of which we find in the example of Nyaya school.

NASADIYASUKTA AND THE SYMBOL OF THE INVERTED TREE

In Indian philosophical tradition, the question of the origin of existence/reality i.e. “cosmogony” is expressed through mythology⁴. Modern mind more often than not misunderstands mythic accounts and the value they offer. Mythic accounts are not to be translated or interpreted literally but rather they are symbolic representations of higher orders of reality. Stories/myths are best descriptions of events that escape ordinary language. A myth does not mean a historical lie. It has nothing to do with factual history and hence whole judgment of calling it factually incorrect is a category mistake. An ancient myth of “man flying horses in sky”, for example, is not “nonsense” but rather it refers to a man if “in control of his desires (horses) i.e. lower self” can attain spiritual/intellectual “flight”. Myth has “saving” value, not historical value. Myth does not teach history, it teaches wisdom. Maroof Shah in his article⁵ quotes one of the towering mythologists of our times, Joseph Campbell, on myths that “the goal of life is to make your heartbeat match the beat of the universe, to match your nature with Nature”. Myths are nothing but expressions for such a connection. This, Shah says⁶, restates Ananda Coomaraswamy’s statement in his great little classic *Hinduism and Buddhism*⁷ regarding myths as “penultimate truths”. “Penultimate” because the “ultimate” cannot be put into words.

This brings us to the important hymn of creation known as *NāsadiyaSukta*, the 129th hymn of the 10th mandala of Rigveda which deals with the cosmology and the origin of the universe⁸ in mythical terms. It begins with the statement “Then even nothingness was not, nor existence, there was no air then, nor the heavens beyond it. What covered it? Where was it? In whose keeping? Was there then cosmic water, in depths unfathomed?”⁹ This points towards another important characteristic feature of almost all mythical

¹ Chatterjee, Satischandra, and Dhirendramohan Datta, *An Introduction to Indian Philosophy*, Rupa Publications, 2007. p. 2

² Sharma, Chandradhar, *A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy*, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, Delhi, 2016. p. 13

³ Chatterjee, Datta *ibid*, p. 3

⁴ Chatterjee, Datta *ibid*, p. 366

⁵ Shah, Maroof, *Understanding Myths as Saving Truths*, <https://www.planetshiftere.com/myth/2530> Retrieved on 25 Feb 2021

⁶ *Ibid*.

⁷ Coomaraswamy, K Ananda. *Hinduism and Buddhism*, New York: Philosophical Library, 1943

⁸ Swami Ranganathananda, *Human Being in Depth*, SUNY Press, p. 21

⁹ A.L Basham, *The Wonder That Was India*

traditions and that is they are shrouded in deep powerful mystery. Reality in essence is considered a mystery, immune to anthropocentric rational blade. We see in *NāsadiyaSukta*, non-existence is given prominence over existence. This can be particularly noted in the notion of “absolute” which across all wisdom traditions is depicted by *nothingness* or “no-thingness” to be precise. Since absolute is the source of all existence, therefore, it contains all possibilities (in the implicate order). It is intensively infinite. But at the same time it is not any particular “thing” per se because the moment it is reduced down to *something* it ceases to be other things. The best description of absolute is therefore no description. It is only the colorless that can produce all colors. A red or a blue color which is *ontologically* so cannot give birth to other colors. This is where myths come into the picture as mentioned above, that is, the myths are penultimate truths as ultimate truth is beyond description.

NāsadiyaSukta, therefore, does not present any definite answers but rather celebrates mystery. It concludes that even gods may not know the origin of the reality since they came after creation. The origins or the beginning of universe is better described by *silence*. *Seyyed Hossein Nasr* comments¹⁰ that although the Bible says “in the beginning was word”¹¹ but “word” can only find its disclosure from the belly of *silence*.

Pertinent to mention here another mythic account is “the inverted Banyan tree” which represents the origins of the cosmos/reality from Brahma (represented by the roots that are above in the heavens). The inverted tree on the one hand signifies that the reality has common roots and those lie in the heavens i.e. higher orders of reality. This alludes to a certain “hierarchy of being”. Inverted tree, therefore, signifies that this world in front of us is nothing but a reflection of a higher order of reality. And on the other hand it tells us that there is something illusory about the world (owing to its upside down image). This may also refer to the *indescribability* of the relation between *Brahman* and *Maya* as maintained by Shankara¹² as well.

“The Blessed Lord said: there is a banyan tree which has its roots upward and its branches down and whose leaves are the vedic hymns. One who knows this tree is the knower of the Vedas”¹³. Another important representation in the inverted banyan tree is the entanglement with the material world signified by the branches. “For one who is entangled in fruitive activities, there is no end to the banyan tree. “He wanders from one branch to another, to another, to another. The tree of this material world has no end, and for one who is attached to this tree, there is no possibility of liberation”¹⁴.

VEDIC METAPHYSICS: RTA AND DHARMA

We have seen the dominance of *cosmocentrism* in Indian philosophy. Reality is hierarchical and has cosmic undertones and overtones. Holism and holistic approach is more dominant in Indian philosophy than its Western counterpart. The whole universe in *vedic* tradition is considered to be regulated by one cosmic order known as *rta*. *Rta* is the principle of natural order which regulates and coordinates the operation of the universe and everything within it¹⁵. Vedic ethics is intricately tied to *rta*.

Rta as an ethical principle is associated with the notion of cosmic retribution. Since *rta* maintains all order and harmony in the cosmos, it attaches specific duties to specific beings according to their natures, which if accordingly fulfilled will lead to order and harmony. If instead *rta* is violated then it leads to aberrations in cosmic order, creating calamities and suffering¹⁶. Committing oneself to the requirements of *rta*, therefore, becomes one’s *dharma*. It is the duty of *purusha* to protect *rta* and thus *dharma* gradually replaced *rta*. *Dharma* is a duty-centric approach and human being who is the only sentient being capable of violating *rta* is enjoined to maintain and protect it to ensure a good healthy life.

Dharma of a man is therefore a manifestation of *rta* on an individual plane. Although *dharma* initially was understood as an applied sub-ordinate component of *rta* (higher metaphysical principle), it gradually eclipsed the notion of *rta* in later vedic life as mentioned above. This happened due to the utility of *dharma* as an “instruction manual” for religious, moral and social regulations and moreover *rta* remained confined to vedic texts where as *dharma* became part and parcel of common vedic literature¹⁷.

Dharma only entails basic life duties of an individual to ensure a good, healthy, harmonious life. *Dharma*, therefore, is a practice based on tried and tested wisdom. It is not any dogma and therefore is different from religion. There are ten *dharmic* values which are considered to be universal and eternal which if practiced on daily basis leads to *dharmic* life (i.e. a life of good health, integrity and beauty of character). Those ten values are; 1) *Dhrti*: Firmness of resolutions, determination, strength of will power 2) *Kshama*: Compassion and forgiveness 3) *Dama*: Discipline/control of the vagaries of the mind 4) *Asteyam*: non-stealing, absence of theft 5) *Shaucha*: cleanliness of body and mind 6) *Indriya-nigraha*: Discipline/control of senses 7) *Dhi*: *Buddhi* 8) *Vidya*: Knowledge, education. (True knowledge results in humility, discrimination and detachment) 9) *Satyam*: Truthfulness in thought, word and deed 10) *Akrodha*: Absence of anger.

¹⁰ Nasr, S.H. “Sacred Silence in Sufism and the Vedanta”, Youtube, <https://youtu.be/QTjomW02un4>,

Retrieved on 25 Feb 2021

¹¹ Bible, *John* 1:1

¹² Chatterjee, Datta *ibid*, p. 353

¹³ Bhagavad-gita 15.1, Translation by Srila Prabhupada

¹⁴ The Upside down Banyan Tree, Bhagavad Gita Daily, <https://medium.com/@gitadaily/the-upside-down-banyan-tree-b2881cab3a65>, Retrieved on 25 Feb 2021

¹⁶ Day, Terence P, *The Conception of Punishment in Early Indian Literature*, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1982, p. 28

¹⁷ Day, 1982, p. 42

Developing dharma may not be easy and may require determined consistent effort but there is no room for discouragement as even a little effort towards dharma can drastically increase one's quality of life¹⁸

Sankhya Dualism

Let us now move onto our second philosophical tradition i.e. *Sankhya*. The sage Kapila is known as father of Indian cosmology and his system of *Sankhya* elaborates on a dualistic cosmology resting on two principles of *Prakrti* and *Purusa*¹⁹. Their doctrine of *Prakrti* mainly rests on their 'theory of causation' which is known as *satkārya-vada*²⁰ which describes the relation between an effect to its material cause. According to this theory the effect already pre-exists in the material cause which unfolds only after its manifestation. This theory of causation logically leads to the concept of *prakrti* as the ultimate cause of the world of objects.²¹

Prakrti, therefore, is regarded as the first cause (to avoid infinite regress²²), eternal and all pervading. It is the source and sink of all creation. It first explicitly manifests itself through evolution followed by its withdrawal or returning of the world back to *prakrti* through dissolution. Evolution and dissolution depend upon the nature of change in *gunas* (the three constituents of *prakrti*)²³. All the objects of the world from the intellect down to the ordinary objects of perception, are found to possess three characters capable of producing pleasure, pain and indifference (effects of *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* respectively – the *gunas*)²⁴.

These *gunas* are ever active. *Prakrti* initiates the evolution of the world when the *gunas* undergo a heterogeneous change (*virupa parinama*)²⁵ which happens in the presence of *Purusa* (*samyoga*)²⁶. *Prakrti* is unconscious/unintelligent and therefore requires a conscious self which is *purusa*. *Purusa* according to *sankhya* is not a substance with the attribute of consciousness but rather it is pure consciousness²⁷ itself. *Gunas* produce pleasure, pain and indifference but it is only *purusa* (with the help of *manas*/mind) who can feel pleasure, pain and indifference. Therefore *prakrti* and *purusa* need each other.

Let us now briefly discuss Sankhya cosmology through its exposition of the evolution of *Prakrti*. The evolution of *prakrti* is initiated into *mahat* or *budhi* which is first principle of individuation. *Mahat* then evolves into *ahamkara* which is ego and which cannot distinguish between *prakrti* and *purusa*. *Ahamkara* is of three types depending upon the relative composition of *gunas*. *Sattvik ahamkara* as the name suggests is dominated by *sattvas* and produces 11 evolutes i.e. mind/*manas*, five sense organs (*gyan indriya*) and five motor organs (*karam indriya*). *Tamsik ahamkara* produces 10 evolutes viz; 5 *tanmatras* and 5 *mahabhutas* (this particular account is provided in *Sankhya-karika* and is accepted by *Vacaspati Misra*)²⁸.

Vedantic Monism

Moving on to Vedantic metaphysics: 'Vedanta' literally means 'the end of the vedas'²⁹ not just because they were the last literary products of the vedic period but more importantly they mark the culmination of the vedic speculation. Whereas *Mimamsa* focuses on rituals and practices, Vedanta outlines the metaphysical foundations of vedic wisdom. The main question that Vedanta focuses upon is: what is the nature of relation between self (*jiva*) and Brahman? The answer to this question decides the whole texture of a particular school within vedantin philosophy. As we know that Vedantic metaphysics is not a monolith. It is quite diverse with multiple opinions on the most important metaphysical questions. To the above quoted question, Madhva answers in the form of *dvaita*/dualism whereas Shankara considers *jiva* and *Brahman* as absolutely identical in his "unqualified monism"/*advaita*, Ramanuja on the other hand maintains that the relation between the two is like that of whole and part in his "qualified monism"/*visistadvaita*³⁰.

The Vedantic philosophy of the Upanishads shifted its centre of interest from the Vedic gods to the "Self" of man³¹. They discovered that the *Real Self* is pure consciousness and every particular consciousness is only its limited manifestation. The *Real Self* is called *Atman*. As infinite conscious reality, the self of man is identical with the self of all beings and therefore with Brahman. Realization

¹⁸ Gita(II/40)

¹⁹ C.D Sharma *ibid*, p. 149-57

²⁰ Chatterjee, Datta *ibid*, p. 238

²¹ *Ibid* p. 241

²² CD Sharma *ibid*, p. 152

²³ *Ibid*, p. 157-59

²⁴ Chatterjee, Datta *ibid*, p. 244

²⁵ C.D Sharma, p. 157-59

²⁶ *ibid*

²⁷ Chatterjee, Datta, p. 246-49

²⁸ *Ibid*, p. 252

²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 317

³⁰ Chatterjee, Datta, p. 319

³¹ *Ibid*, p. 326

of the Self (*atmajnana*) is regarded as the highest of all knowledge (*para-vidya*)³². The understanding that only Self is real and all other than that as unreal is called *Tattva-vivek*.³³

Consciousness, therefore, attains fundamental and foundational importance in Vedantic Monism. Consciousness is absolute awareness which leads to unconditional happiness called as bliss. The *Mandukya* Upanishad which is listed as number six (6) in the Muktika canon of 108 Upanishads³⁴ mentions four states of consciousness. The first state is the waking state which is called as the *vishva* which is characterized by outward knowing (*bahish-prajnya*) represented by the gross body. The second state of consciousness is called *taijasa* i.e. dream state; dream state is characterized by inward knowing (*antah-prajnya*) and is represented by subtle body. The third state of consciousness is called *susupti* or *prajna* which is deep sleep state; at this level both outward and inward knowing are gone. This is because mind as mind is not functioning at this level. Both the body and the senses are present in the waking state. In the dream state they are absent and in the deep sleep state even the mind is absent but consciousness is present at all the three levels of experience. It is consciousness which witnesses these various modes. Therefore consciousness itself cannot be known under the knowledge-situation just as tongue cannot taste itself or one cannot jump out of one's own skin. This is where the fourth level sets in which is called as the *turya* which is pure consciousness without any differentiation. It is the background that underlies and transcends all the three common states of consciousness. At this stage there are no categorizations, binaries or differentiation. The *atman* is completely identified with Brahman. Atman i.e the 'I' becomes the absolute (*Aham Brahmasmi*). *Aham Brahmasmi* is one of the main *Mahavakyas* – the short statements known as the 'great utterances' from the Upanishad. This unity of individual self with Brahman (the absolute) is the pinnacle of Vedantic Monism. A complete unity without any qualifications, binaries or differentiations. Since absolute is bliss, therefore, for individual to attain liberation/bliss it has to see through ignorance/*avidya* and realize its unity with the absolute.

Conclusion

We have seen in the beginning of this paper that the *vedic* sages expressed their vision of the *absolute* through myths and metaphors in their hymns like *nasatiasukta* as we had mentioned. This tendency manifests their yearning towards the absolute which evoked a sort of a devotional response from them. A very important point to register is that in a tradition like that of Vedas there are two important realizations. First being that there is only one Truth/absolute and the second is that this absolute needs to be absorbed/realized. There are various ways outlined for the process of this realization.

Broadly we can find three dimensions of this realization and that is the *psychological*, the *cosmological* and the *theological*. Under psychological, we can initiate the journey of realization by analyzing our own internal selves (*antahkarana*) and find the inroads to the absolute. Under the cosmological, we contemplate upon the external world and try to establish an absolute causality operating in nature. And lastly under theological, we may contemplate on God as the ultimate unifying force between the inner world and the outer world.

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³² *ibid*

³³ *Tattva Bodha* of Adi Shankaracharya with commentary by Swami Tejomyananda, Central Chinamaya Mission Trust, Mumbai, India, 2000, p. 27-31

³⁴ Paul Deussen, *Sixty Upanishads of the Veda*, Volume 2, Motilal Banarsidass, p. 556-557