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Ekam Sad Vipra Bahudha Vadanti : A Vedic Consciousness of God

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The Veda (derived from the root word 'vid' means to know/knowledge), is the oldest literary monuments of Hinduism and a source of Religion and Philosophy, which records the essential knowledge about God, universe and human. A study on the ancient wisdom of the Vedic hymns or mantras reveals an amazing discovery of the religious consciousness or consciousness of God or theism or beliefs in God. Though sometimes an expression of it many look so naive and primitive and one may find it difficult to describe them as strictly monotheism in a modern sense of theism.¹ We accept that later findings are certainly more developed than older of the Vedas with regard to the search of God/ultimate. The religious consciousness or search for higher power or god/s is certainly a higher form of human consciousness which goes beyond the blood relations or narrow kinship and of societal relationship.² The Vedic mantras speak of a passionate vision of God that rising from nature and transcending it.³ While exploring the mystery of God in nature; the most essential awareness the sages conceived, finds its expression in the words of the Rg Veda 'ekam sad viprā bahudhā vadanti.'⁴ An investigation of this Vedic consciousness of God will enhance our knowledge and clarify the doubts with regard to the Truth and concept of God. Most significantly, the perennial question of God as one or many in philosophy and religion will find out an answer that is worthy of appraisal.

The most insightful statement of the Rg Veda 'Ekam Sadviprā Bahudhā Vadanti' (एकं सद्विप्रा बहु धावदन्ति) is a unique knowledge in search of Truth, God/ultimate reality, theism, and Religion. The meaning of the word, 'Ekam': one, only, unity, 'Sad': truth, reality, eternally existent, God; 'Viprā': wise people, human knowledge, intelligence, 'Bahudhā':

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¹ Nicol Macnicol (1915): *The Religious Quest of India: Indian Theism; From the Vedic to Muhammadan Period*, Oxford University Press, London, p. 7.

² *Ibid.*, p. 8.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁴ Rg Veda 1:164-46.

many or numerous, and ‘Vadanti’: to speak. The literal meaning of ‘ekam sad viprā bahudhā vadanti’ is ‘God is one but the wise people/the sages speak of it variously’ or ‘Truth/ ultimate Reality is one, sage call it by many names,’ or ‘that which exists is One: sages call it by various names.’⁵

The knowledge of ‘ekam sad viprā bahudhā vadanti’ finds its reference in the context of the complete mantra; ‘*indram mitraṃ varuṇamagnimāhuratho divyah sa suparṇo garutmān |Ekam sadviprā bahudhā vadantyagnim yamaṃ mātariśhvānamāhuh;*’ इन्द्रं मित्रं वरुणमग्निमाहु रथोदिव्यः ससुपूर्णो गरुत्मान्। , कुं सद्विप्रां बहु धावदन्त्यग्निं यमं मातरिश्वानमाहुः॥ Rg Veda: 1:164-46) which is translated as, they call him Indra, Mitra, Varuṇa, Agni; and he is heavenly Garuda (Surya), who has beautiful wings. The truth is one, but the sages (or wise people) call it by many names or describe him in many ways; they called him Agni, Yama, Mātariśvan (Vayu). Explicitly, this Vedic concept of God/ultimate reality is the highest vision of the sages in the Rg Veda that is a matter of interest even to the modern mind.

The Vedic hymns address to Vedic God/s sometimes called as natural god/s too. By Vedic Gods means those divinities (devas) or gods mentioned in the four Vedas: Rg, Yajur, Sama, and the Atharva Veda. The Vedic origin gods are mainly thirty-three in number as mentioned in the Rg Veda namely; Dyus, Prithvī, Agni, Sūrya, Varuṇa, Indra, Soma, Yama, Ushas, Aśvins, Viśvakarma, Maruta, Ka-Kala, Rudra, Mitra, Vāyu, Vishnu, Pūsan, Vasus, Brihaspati, Ribhus, Manyu, Āditya, Bhaga, Rati, Puruṣa, Vashista, Ṛta, Parjanya, Saraswati, Dadhikravan, Prajāpati, Prāna.

These thirty-three Vedic gods/deities are further classified into twelve Ādityas (Sungods), eleven Rudras (Abstractions), eight Vasu (elements of nature) and two Ashwin (solar deities).⁶ All these gods belong to three regions; of the earth, heaven, intermediate space.⁷ It may so look to an outsider who is not able to correlate the relationship among the gods emerging from the Vedas that the mention of the thirty-three gods paves the way to polytheism. This appearance of external facts is only one type of view but the search of ṛisis/sages and the Rg Veda knowledge goes a step further in exploring the transcendental nature and unity of godheads.

It is obvious that the perceived Vedic Gods were certain forces of nature and known as the natural gods. The ancient sages saw the phenomenon of nature like Dyus, Prithvī, Agni (fire), Sūrya (the sun), moon, lightning, clouds, ... in their simple faith, it made them believe in the existence of God in phenomena of nature. That was the rudimentary

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Subodh Kapoor(2002): *Encyclopedia of Vedic Philosophy: The Age, Religion, Literature, The Interrelation of the Gods*, Volume 4, Published by Cosmo Publication, New Delhi, p. 101.

⁷ Vedic Mythology, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vedic_mythology. Accessed on 5 June 2020.

knowledge of theism. They realized in the forces of nature, the existence of conscious agents called devas/gods. But later these gods were considered as the manifestations of the one supreme God/ ultimate reality. It was a transition from many gods to one God, from polytheism to monotheism, from multiplicity to unity; and that which signifies the unity of godhead by discovering the greatest or highest of the Gods. It exclaimed ‘the wise call him Indra- Agni- Varuṇa-.to what is one, sage give many a name, they call him Yama, Agni,(Rg 1.164. 46).⁸

A study of the Ṛg Vedic hymns shows that none of the Vedic deities enjoyed or was held prominently important deity forever rather there was the prominent place of a deity and sacrifice were offered until its power displaces that with the other. Thus sometime in the earlier days, people worshipped Dyaus and Prithvī, then Agni-Sūrya- then Varuṇa becomes the most important and powerful God. To this type of theistic tendencies that are found in the Vedic hymns, Max Muller called kathenotheism or henotheism⁹ (the belief in an individual god/s, alternately regarded as the highest). A trend is seen where none of the gods enjoys permanently prominence called Kathenotheism explains the conscious search for the unity of godheads in the Vedic tradition. It is a process of unconscious move towards the monotheism.

It is not possible for us to distinguish how far the latter God prevails over the former. The implicit implication of growing and overtaking of the significance one God over the other does not set in denial of other Gods but for him this one God before whom he bows fill up his whole horizon. The Vedic seers were searching for the Truth, and very soon discovered that there is only one supreme reality of which the various gods worshipped by people are only partial manifestations. To this highest findings, sages called as ‘ekam sad viprā bahudhā vadanti.’ This idea that every God whom people worship is the embodiment of a limited ideal, that he is the symbol of one aspect of the absolute/ultimate has persisted down the ages and is in fact, one of the most fundamental and the treasured knowledge of the Vedas.

A philosophical understanding of ‘ekam sad viprā bahudhā vadanti’ is that if the metaphysical understanding or ideal is too advanced and abstract for human; then a theological ideal is set before them, at this stage impersonal absolute God becomes Personal God. It is worse than useless to teach abstract metaphysics to a human whose heart hungers for concrete gods. To understand an abstract idea it requires a level of higher intellectual reflection and meditation. Such a type of action called tapas or higher conscious level where the mind seeks to understand the higher reality in an abstract form. At the theological level, the human mind seeks

⁸ BN Singh (1988) : *The Dictionary of Indian Philosophical Concepts*, Published by Asha Prakashan, Varanasi, p. 98.

⁹ Nicol Manicol (1915) : p. 19.

to satisfy only the senses and emotions of the human person by looking for a concrete god to worship and receive blessings. Thus, God remains an abstract at the metaphysical level, known only to higher consciousness and in the theological stage, human seeks concrete gods to worship that is visible.

It is said during the Brāhamaṇa period they de-spiritualized and absorbed only in its gain; everywhere there is the priest-altar-sacrifice measuring the height and breadth of altars but giving no hint to fulfil the desires of the worshipers.¹⁰ All the same, we know that each one of all, that distinguished multitude had a heart and need of God that must have sought satisfaction elsewhere than the proud and exclusive hierarchy. One can dimly trace throughout the Brāhamaṇa that there arouse two processes of religious growth. First, there was the beginning of the more intellectual development for which sprung up the Upaniṣad; secondly, through poetry and legendary some more gods are furnished as found in Purāṇas-Epics.¹¹ It was the desire of human heart and longing of sincere worship of a god that went beyond the Brāhamaṇa period in finding many more concept of gods.

The mantras of the Vedas recognize a most astonishing development of the human mind from the worship of half-personified forces of nature, such as Dayus, Prithvī, Agni, Sūrya, Varuṇa, Indra, Soma, Yama, Ushas, Aśvins etc..to the concept of the absolute, the One. At first, there was no clear demarcation between one Vedic deity and another, since all were phenomena/forces of nature only. The same name was used to describe more than one deity, the same power was attributed to many gods. At the same time, the attributed qualities of deity Agni was also shared by deity Sūrya or Varuṇa or Indra, etc. In all its probability, this led the sages to the belief that all the Vedic gods are one in essence. Reality is one but its manifestations are many; 'ekam sad viprā bahudhā vadanti,' God is one but to the intellect it appears as many. Let's discuss some of the references from the Vedas.

The Puruṣasūkta¹² of the Ṛg Veda explains that a Puruṣa possessed of thousand heads, thousand eyes, and thousand feet... he exists pervading the whole universe. The universe, therefore, is his physical body, but immediately after this description, it further states that he extends beyond the universe or space. The sage shows his conception of the transcendental nature of the ultimate reality in this hymn. The

¹⁰ Ibid., p 29

¹¹ Ibid

¹² T. H Griffith (1896) : *The Hymns of the Rg Veda*, Translated, Kotagiri, p. 469, translates the Puruṣa sūkta hymn as 'A thousand heads hath Puruṣa, a thousand eyes, a thousand feet. On every side pervading earth he fills a space ten fingers wide. This Puruṣa is all that yet hath been and all that is to be; the Lord of Immortality which waxes greater still by food. So mighty is his greatness; yea, greater than this is Puruṣa.

same Puruṣa is described as the immanent in all this creation and yet he transcends all. The Puruṣa is said to be transcendental yet related to the world as its creator. It appears that the Vedic sages were in search of the ultimate unity or unitary principle and therefore they conceived of infinite and absolute power in this sūkta. This Absolute power which pervades the entire universe and beyond all the names and forms were later called /described as Tad Ekam (that One), that which is the primary cause of all creation and the transcendental reality beyond all limitations of the universe. The sūkta essentially tells about the knowledge of monism or monotheism but in a narrow sense pantheism, and polytheism as well.

In the conception of God, the Nāsadīyasūkta¹³ of the Ṛg Veda states supreme reality as both the impersonal and personal, unmanifest and manifest, existence as well as non-existence, the supreme indeterminable. The hymn asks that who has seen the firstborn when he that had no bones bore him that had bones? Where is the life, the blood, the self of the universe? Who went to ask of any who knew? This famous hymn provides the basis for a great deal of philosophical speculation for in it that God is both material and the efficient cause of the universe. This hymn shows that from the concept of God as a personal being, the Vedic seers passed on to the almost their final conception of him as utterly impersonal, so remote indeed from a resemblance to anything a human that no longer will they refer to him as he or him but only as ‘Tad ekam.’

In the conception of a metaphysical genesis of creation, the seer first caught a glimpse of Hiranyagarbha¹⁴ (cosmic mind), the great progenitor of the entire universe. In this hymn of Hiranyagarbha, the seer was contemplating on the theistic origin of creation.¹⁵ The Hiranyagarbha-Sūkta of the Ṛg-Veda declares that God manifested Himself in the beginning as the creator of the universe, encompassing all things, including everything within Himself, the collective totality, as it were, of the of creation, animating it as the supreme intelligence. The Hiranyagarbha-Sūkta brings out the unity of everything into one reality/source. It is a monotheistic view of reality.

Unity of Godhead is first, expressed in the conception Viśvakarma¹⁶ (maker of the world) or Prajāpati (the lord of creatures). The word Viśvakarma means the fashioner of the world or the creator of the world and signifies the God above all gods. The Ṛg Veda X: 82.3 says ‘who is our father our creator, our maker, whoever places both know and every creature, by whom alone to Gods their names were given, to him all other creatures go to ask him.’¹⁷ Here Viśvakarma is described as

¹³ Ṛg Veda X.129.

¹⁴ Ṛg Veda X.121.

¹⁵ B. N. Singh (1988) : p.107.

¹⁶ Ṛg Veda X: 81-82.

¹⁷ B. N. Singh (1988) : p. 98.

the efficient cause of the world. He who is the father of us all, the procurator (great provider), he who knows of the whole universe.

He is one, assumes many names of god. In many hymns, Viśvakarma is identified with Prajāpati. Again Prajāpati, Lord of Creatures appearing late in the Vedas, who is described as the creator, the means by which he carries out creation in different places. In R̥g Veda 10.121 he is described as Hiranyagarbha (golden embryo), whereas in R̥g Veda 10.90 Puruṣasūktaknown as Puruṣa (primal person) who is sacrificed by the gods. In later Hindu practice the name Prajāpati can also be used to refer to the god Brahma, as the fashioner of the universe or to gods Shiva and Vishnu as the universe's supreme deities.¹⁸ The conception of reality as One and its manifestation is established in the hymns of Viśvakarma/Prajāpati.

A comparison will show that the conception of God/ultimate of Nāsadīyasūktais different from Puruṣasūkta. The Puruṣasūkta promulgates a pantheistic view of creation whereas the Nāsadīyasūkta states the theistic view with all its logical implications. At the same time, Hiranyagarbha and Viśvakarma hymn differ from Nāsadīyasūkta. Both Hiranyagarbha and Viśvakarma hymn is monotheistic (supreme one) in nature, while Nāsadīyasūkta gives only an account of the first cause, where the whole universe is traced to a single cause. In this, it is to be noted that the Vedic sages realized the existence of a transcendental unity beyond all limitations of the physical world.¹⁹ In these hymns, the consciousness of God of the sages is the primary aim and its classification into monotheism, pantheism, or polytheism concerns are more of intellectual analysis of God's relation to the world and people.

R̥ta literally means 'the course of all things or the uniformity of nature.'²⁰ Seeing the nature, the phenomena of the world, like the Sun, rain, season, etc, the sages wondered about the role of some power being present inherently in the universe. The sages realizing the cosmic law or natural law that is inherent in nature, called 'R̥ta.' As the seers saw the presence of cosmic law in nature, they also realized certain cosmic order. That some higher power governs nature and everything that happens follows the cosmic order, beginning with birth, growth, and decay, etc. The seers understood that the higher cosmic power/order is possible due to the omnipotent God, the supreme spirit, who is the one ultimate substratum. God Varuṇa is the custodian of R̥ta. Therefore people offered sacrifices to god/s so that in turn God will preserve the cosmic, moral and natural order of nature.²¹ R̥ta as a

¹⁸ James G. Lochtefeld (2002) : *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, The Rosen Publishing Group, New York, pp. 518-519.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 184.

²⁰ B.N. Singh (1988) : p. 248

²¹ F. Max Muller (1964) : '*Origin in and Growth of Religion*' Published by Indological Book House, Varanasi, p. 244.

single reality unites all and enforces the knowledge of the conception of higher reality.

Other than the concept Rta, Viśvakarma and Prajāpati, Hiranyagarbha, Nāsadīyasūkta and Puruṣasūkta, the hymns of Ṛg Veda depicts that God alone is omnipresent and manager of the entire universe. He alone provides victory and eternal cause of the world. All souls should look up only to Him in the same manner as children look up to their Father. He alone provides for our sustenance and bliss (Ṛg Veda 10.48.1). God alone provides true knowledge to truth seekers. He alone is a promoter of knowledge and motivates virtuous people into noble actions to seek bliss. He alone is the creator and manager of the world. Hence, never worship anyone else except one and only God.²² *Yekho Viśwasya Bhuvanasyarājāh*,²³ The God of the universe is one and one only. All these types of statements conclude that by that time the sages had come to realize the essence of God in Monotheism.

It is true that the Ṛg Veda is the basis of the Vedic awareness of God but the search of God does not end there, rather it continues in the other Vedas, Smṛti literature and Darśana. The sages of Yajur Veda insistently claimed that this entire world is embedded within and managed by the One and Only, One God. Never dare do any injustice or god never desire riches through unjust means. Instead, follow the righteous path and enjoy his bliss. After all, He alone is the source of all bliss (Yajurveda 40.1). There is One and only One Creator and Maintainer of the entire world. He alone is sustaining the earth, sky and other heavenly bodies. He is Bliss Himself! He alone deserves to be worshipped by us (Yajurveda 13.4). God resides at each point in the universe. No space is devoid of Him. He is self-sustaining and does not need the help of any agent, angel, prophet or incarnation to perform His duties. The soul which is able to realize this One and only One God achieves Him and enjoys unconditional ultimate bliss or Moksha (Yajur Veda 32.11).

The Atharva Veda says that the reality is neither two, nor three, nor four, nor five, nor six, nor seven, nor eight, nor nine, nor ten. He is, on the contrary, One and Only One. There is no God except Him. All deities residing within Him and are controlled by Him. So He alone should be worshipped, none else. “There is no second God, nor third, nor is even fourth spoken of There is no fifth God or a sixth nor is even a seventh mentioned. There is no eight God, nor a ninth. nothing is spoken about tenth even. This unique power is in itself. That lord is only one the only omnipresent. It is one and the only one.”²⁴ These hymns of the Atharva Veda describes that type of consciousness of God when the sages had already reach the conclusion called monotheism.

²² Ṛg Veda 10.49.1.

²³ Ṛg Veda 6.36.4.

²⁴ Atharva Veda 13.4.16-20.

In particular, the Aitareya Upaniṣad holds that Brahman is One only without a second (*Aitareya Upaniṣad* 1.1.1). As a late Upaniṣad put it but nowhere it is suggested either that the world send forth from him or the Puruṣa, he formed were other than real. The Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad 3.2.8 gives an image of the supreme beings as the one ocean into which all the rivers of individual existence enter and with which they become one as their final goal. In the Chandogya Upaniṣad father Uddalaka explains to his son Svetaketu by saying ‘in the beginning, there was existence, One only, without a second. Some say that in the beginning, there was nonexistence only and that out of that the universe was born. But how could such a thing be? How could existence be born of non-existence? No, my son, in the beginning there was existence alone—one only, without a second.’²⁵ A similar view is found in the Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad that explains the reality as ‘pūrṇam adah pūrṇam idam pūrṇat pūrṇamudacyate pūrṇsya pūrṇamādaya pūrṇamevāvaśiṣyate,’²⁶ it is translated as this is full that is full, what comes out and what remains in it is fullness. It means that the ultimate reality is expressed in transcendental as well as immanent, the world is created out of that reality/ Truth/the self but there is no deficiency in Ultimate/Brahman. This knowledge of Upaniṣad is very unique in our effort to grasp the mystery of the nature of God as one and many.

Going beyond the Vedas, the Smṛiti text extends a similar consciousness of God. The Brahma Sutra of Hinduism defines God/reality as *ekaṃ Brahm̄ dviṭīya nāste neḥ nāste kinchan*, means there is only one God, not the second; not at all, not at all, not in the least bit. Again, a summary of Sankara’s philosophy ‘Brahm̄ Satyaṃ Jagat mithyā Jivo Bramaiva nāparaha’²⁷ meaning, Brahman is the only reality, the world is false and the individual self is non-different from Brahma. The Bhagavad-Gītā says that the Supreme Brahman is beyond existence and non-existence. It has hands and feet everywhere, heads, mouths, eyes everywhere, ears everywhere, and it exists enveloping everything. Undivided, it appears as divided among beings attributeless, it appears to have attributes in association with things. It is the Light of all lights, beyond all darkness, and is situated in the hearts of all beings.²⁸

A similar view is seen, the reality called Brahman is one and the same but the Vedantic philosophers explained it differently such as Advaita, Vishistadvaita, Dvaitadvaita, Sudhadvaita, etc. are an additional explanation in support of ‘ekaṃ sad viprā bahudhā vadanti.’ The modern philosopher Swami Vivekananda, deriving the consciousness of God from the Chāndogya and Muṇḍaka Upaniṣads explained that ‘all

²⁵ Chāndogya Upaniṣad 6:2:1, 2.

²⁶ Brhadāranyaka Up. 5.1.1.

²⁷ Swami Vireswarananda (1936): *Brahma Sūtra*, Published by Advaita Ashrama Mayavati, Almora, Himalaya, p. 3.

²⁸ Bhagavad Gītā, 13:1, 14:27.

the rivers are flowing, giving life to different people at different places, reaching to the same end, one ocean.²⁹ Being aware of the Upaniṣadic consciousness of God Swami Vivekananda says that God is one; as that of one ocean and as the rivers are many, the manifestations of gods are many. As the different rivers are satisfying the needs of people and leading towards the One ocean so also ultimately God is one but the many gods are the mere manifestation that is satisfying the needs of different temperaments of people.

In conclusion, if the human minds still struggle to resolve the issue of God as one or many. It is said that ‘He, the One, thought to himself: Let me be many, let me grow forth. Thus out of himself he projected the universe; and having projected out of himself the universe, he entered into every being. All that is, has its self in him alone. Of all things, he is the subtle essence. He is the truth. He is the Self. And that, THAT ART THOU (You are That).’³⁰ It is like the ‘ocean water’ which cannot be useful but has to be circulated or processed in order to be drinkable. In other words, if anything comes to us unlimited; we can not use them, therefore, it is to be channelized according to the needs of the individual. Similarly, the highest absolute, transcendental reality remains one reality and far away beyond the reach of human intellect but when it manifests itself in forms of personal gods; that Reality appears to be many.

The Vedic consciousness of God beneficence corresponds to varying stages of religious attainments and temperaments. First, the ordinary people are with a lower level of spirituality and the second type of people with a higher level such as the Seers, Sages, Ṛṣis, Saints. The Vedas teaches some to fly and some they must teach to walk. To the lower level offers Polytheism or many Gods; personal Gods. To that of higher stage offers Monotheism, a consciousness of God that is Impersonal devoid of description, the Ultimate.³¹ The ṚgVeda draws a clear distinction between the Ṛṣis who has knowledge of the Vedas as the revealed Truth directly and the ordinary being who has only faith and worship this revealed truth indirectly. In this way the Vedic findings ‘Ekam Sadviprā Bahudhā Vadanti: A Vedic consciousness of God’ fulfils the need of all people.

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²⁹ The Complete work of Swami Vivekananda, Volum -8, p.141-142.

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