

THE PURUṢASŪKTA

AN EXEGESIS

PREFACE

Chanting of the Vedic mantras, especially the Śāntimantras and some of the Sūktas, is very common even now during the performance of the Hindu rituals-be they in a temple or in one's own home. And, almost always, the *Puruṣasūkta* finds a place in such recitations.

Common and popular though it is, very few persons-including most of the priests who chant it-know its meaning and much less, the beauty and sublimity of its philosophy.

A humble attempt has been made in this monograph to present the abstruse, but sublime, teaching of this important Sūkta in as simple a manner as the subject permits.

We earnestly hope that this attempt will enable the readers to be enlightened, at least to some extent, in understanding this difficult text.

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Introduction

Man loves to live a happy and peaceful life. He hankers for the freedom that can enable him to get this. The sages of India, over the millennia, have intuitively perceived that tattvajñāna, a knowledge of the Truth, resulting in a mystical experience of the same, can alone vouchsafe this peace and bliss. Tattvajñāna must needs be preceded by tattvavicāra or the inquiry into the basic principles of life. These principles cover three aspects: the jīva or the individual self, the substratum of the 'I' consciousness; the jagat or the external world which is the datum for its experiences; and, Īśvara or the Supreme Being considered as the primeval cause and controller of the former two.

The Vedas, the basic scriptures of Hinduism, are primarily concerned with this tattvavicāra and tattvajñāna. They deal with the esoteric wisdom that can help us to unravel the mysteries of life, which are ever beyond the ken of the senses and the sensuous mind. The *Puruṣasūkta* is not only an integral part of this Veda, but also one of the most important expositions of its teaching.

The Seeker and His Qualification

As in the case of the other fields of knowledge, anyone desirous of knowing and experiencing the truths given in the Vedas is expected to possess some basic qualifications. Tattvajñāna, the same as ātmajñāna or Self-knowledge, cannot be obtained by the powers of the intellect. It can be got only by the refinement and the purification of the entire psyche, the antaḥkaraṇa ('the internal organ') comprising the four aspects-manas or the mind, buddhi or the intellect, citta or the seat of memory and ahaṅkāra or the ego-sense. When these are purified by spiritual disciplines and made to flow towards the inner Self, that Self stands revealed.

The process of such refinement, called tapas or sādhanā, has four steps: Viveka or discrimination between the pleasant or the apparently good and what is really good for ever; vairāgya or the spirit of detachment towards the apparently good; saṁyama or self-control including forbearance; and, mumukṣutva or an intense desire for spiritual illumination, ultimately resulting in liberation from transmigration.

This leads us to an important question: What is the role of the Vedas in this quest for Self-realisation?

The Role of the Vedas

Works on the Vedānta-the Upaniṣads and the allied literature-recognise āptavākya or the testimony of reliable persons, as an important source of knowledge. The faith that a child has in its mother makes it eat the food served by her unquestioningly. It gradually learns that the food has helped it to grow healthy and strong. A patient who trusts his physician and consumes the medicine given by him discovers that he has regained his lost health. In both these cases, an initial but firm faith, has been of great help. This is exactly the philosophy behind the principle of āptavākya. What can be more reliable than the Word, the Vedas, believed to be the inspired word of God, revealed to the sages and the seers in their quest for the Truth?

This takes us to the corollary that the Vedas have to be approached with faith and reverence. And, those who lack in this, better keep themselves away from the same, lest they do more harm than

good by misinterpreting them. The *Bhagavadgītā* (18.67) specifically forbids teaching its esoteric doctrines to the faithless ones.

One more point relevant to the study of the Vedas may be mentioned here. It concerns the correct chanting of the Vedic mantras by proper listening and faithful repetition. It is obligatory to learn it directly from a competent teacher and *not* in any other manner because, faulty chanting can lead to the distortion of the purport of the words. And, only an expert teacher can correct the mistakes committed while chanting.

The *Puruṣasūkta*

Proligomenon

The *Puruṣasūkta* is one of the most commonly used Vedic hymns even now, in almost all rituals, or religious ceremonies. Whether it is the worship of the deity (either in a temple or in one's own home) or the daily recitation of religious scriptures or Vedic rites establishing the sacred fire or even the cremation of the body of a dead brāhmaṇa, this *Sūkta* invariably finds a place. A wellknown ancient text, the *Ṛgvidhāna* of Śaunaka, deals with its usage (viniyoga), the fruits it can give (phalaśruti) as also its greatness and importance (māhātmya). For instance, a couple desirous of begetting a worthy son is advised to perform worship and homa (ceremonial oblations into the duly consecrated fire) with the first sixteen mantras of this *Sūkta*. It can also be utilised in ṣoḍaśopacāra-pūjā (worship with 16 items) to Śrīhari or Viṣṇu.

The hymn can be used for meditation too, on Nārāyaṇa.

The *Puruṣasūkta* is an integral part of the *Ṛgveda Saṁhitā* (10.7.90.1-16). It also appears in the *Taittirīya Āraṇyaka* (3.12,13), the *Vājasaneyī Saṁhitā* (31.1-6), the *Sāmaveda Saṁhitā* (6.4) and also the *Atharvaveda Saṁhitā* (19.6). Apart from this, an explanation of some parts of this hymn is also found in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, the *Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa* and the *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad*. The *Mudgalopaniṣad* gives a nice summary of the entire *Puruṣasūkta*. The contents of the *Sūkta* have largely been reflected in the *Bhāgavata* (2.5.35 to 2.6.1-29) and in the *Mahā-bhārata* (*Mokṣadharmā Parva* 351 and 352) also.

The text as is now most commonly used has 24 mantras or stanzas. It appears in the *Taittirīya Āraṇyaka* as stated above.

The first 18 mantras are designated as the *Pūrvanārāyaṇa* and the rest as the *Uttaranārāyaṇa*. Sometimes 6 more mantras are added.

This part is called *Vaiṣṇavānuvāka* since it has been taken from another wellknown hymn, the *Viṣṇusūkta*, a part of the *Ṛgveda Saṁhitā*. Though the mantras of the *Uttaranārāyaṇa* and the *Vaiṣṇavānuvāka* do not seem to have any coherence with the 16 mantras of the *Ṛgveda Saṁhitā*, tradition has somehow clubbed them together.

There is some perceptible difference in the order of the mantras as found in the extant texts of the *Ṛgveda Saṁhitā* and the *Taittirīya Āraṇyaka* of the *Yajurveda*. The first 6 mantras are identical. The 7th mantra of the *Yajurveda* (saptāsyāsan pari-dhayaḥ) is the 15th in the *Ṛgveda*. The 18th mantra of the former (yajñena yajñamayajanta) is shown as the 16th in the latter. The 16th and the 17th mantras (vedāhametaṁ, dhāta purustāt) of the *Yajurvedic* text are not found in the *Ṛgvedic* reading.

Every Vedic mantra-for that matter, even the other mantras of the Āgamas and the Tantras-has a ṛṣi (the seer, to whom the mantra was originally revealed), a chandas (the metre in which it is

composed) and a devatā (the deity to whom it is addressed). Before Chanting the mantra one has to reverentially repeat these three and also state the viniyoga or the purpose for which the mantra is being uttered. Though the reverence shown to the ṛṣi and the devatā is understandable, the same towards the chandas may appear a little intriguing. Since each of the chandas or metres is believed to be presided over by a deity like Agni, by whose grace only that metrical composition is possible, this reverence is really towards that deity.

As applied to the *Puruṣasūkta* of the *Ṛgveda*, the ṛṣi is Nārāyaṇa, the devatā is Puruṣa and the chandas is triṣṭubh (16th mantra) and anuṣṭubh (the rest).

Whether this ṛṣi Nārāyaṇa was a human being like Gautama, Atri, Vasiṣṭha or Viśvāmitra, it is difficult to say. May be, that the name of the original ṛṣi had been forgotten and later substituted by this word which indicates the subject-matter of the *Sūkta*. This method has sometimes been followed in naming the ṛṣi of a *sūkta* in the *Ṛgveda*. * Since the description of the Puruṣa here and that of Nārāyaṇa as given in another famous hymn, the *Nārāyaṇasūkta* of the *Yajur-āraṇyaka*, are identical, it can be assumed that they are one and the same. Hence, the statement that the ṛṣi is Nārāyaṇa is based on this principle.

'Sūkta' means that which is 'well-said,' a 'true description'. The *Puruṣasūkta* is a hymn that gives the true description of the Puruṣa, the Primeval Being or God, the Creator.

A Free Translation of the Text

Pūrvanārāyaṇa:

1. The Puruṣa (or the Primeval Being) has a thousand heads, a thousand eyes and a thousand feet. He has enveloped this world from all sides and has (even) transcended it by ten aṅgulas or inches.
2. All this is verily the Puruṣa. All that which existed in the past or will come into being in future (is also the Puruṣa). Also, he is the Lord of immortality. That which grows profusely by food (is also the Puruṣa).
3. So much is his greatness. However, the Puruṣa is greater than this. All the beings form only a quarter (part of) him. The three-quarter part of his, which is immortal, is established in heaven.
4. The Puruṣa with the three quarters (of his being) ascended above. His one quarter here became (this world) again (and again). Then he pervaded this world comprising a variety of sentient beings and insentient objects.
5. From Him (The Ādipuruṣa or the Primeval Being) was born the Virāṭ (the immense being). Making this Virāṭ as the substratum (another) puruṣa (or being) (was born). As soon as he was born, he multiplied himself. Later, he created this earth and then, the bodies (of the living beings).
6. When the devas (gods or beings of light) performed a yajña (or sacrifice), using the puruṣa as the havis (or sacrificial material), for that yajña (or sacrifice), the Vasanta (spring) became the ājya (ghee), the Grīṣma (summer) served as idhma (faggots of

wood) and the śarad (autumn) filled the place of havis (oblatory material like the puroḍāśa or rice-cake).

7. For this (yajña or sacrifice) there were seven paridhis (fuel pieces serving as borders). And, twentyone items were made the samit or sacrificial fuel sticks. When the devas were performing this yajña or sacrifice, they tied the puruṣa (himself) as the paśu (sacrificial animal).
8. The devas, the sādhyas and the ṛṣis performed the sacrifice by using that Puruṣa as the means of yajña, the Puruṣa who had been born in the beginning, after sprinkling him with water by the barhis (or sacrificial grass).
9. From that yajña (or sacrifice) wherein the Cosmic Being was himself the oblation, was produced the pṛṣadājya (or curds mixed with ghee). Birds flying in the air, wild animals of the forest as also the domesticated animals of village were also produced.
10. From that yajña (or sacrifice) wherein the Cosmic Being was himself the oblation, were born the ṛks (the mantras of the *Ṛgveda*) and the sāmans (the mantras of the *Sāmaveda*). From that (yajña) the metres (like Gāyatrī) were born. From that (yajña, again) the yajus (the *Yajurveda*) was born.
11. From that were born the horses, as also animals (like donkeys and mules) which have two rows of teeth. From that were born the cattle. From that (again) were born goats and sheep.
12. (Now, some questions are raised by the sages:) When the gods decided to (mentally) sacrifice the Virāṭpuruṣa (and produce further creation) in how many ways did they do it? What became of his face or mouth? What became of his two arms? What became of the two thighs? What were (the products of) the two feet called?
13. His face (or the mouth) became the brāhmaṇa. His two arms became the rājanya (or the kṣattriya). His two thighs became the vaiśya. From his two feet, the śūdra was born.
14. From his mind was born the moon. From his two eyes was born the sun. From his mouth were born Indra and Agni. From his breath was born the air.
15. From (his) navel was produced the antarikṣa (the space between the earth and the heaven). Dyuloka (or heaven) came into existence from his head. The bhūmi (or the earth) evolved out of his feet, and dik (or spacial directions) from his ears. Similarly (the gods) produced the worlds (too).
16. "I know (through intuitive experience) this great Puruṣa (the Primeval Being), the wise one, who, having created the various forms and the nomenclatures (for those forms) deals with them by those names, and who is beyond darkness and is brilliant like the sun."

17. In the ancient days, Prajāpati praised him. Indra who knows all the four quarters also spoke about him. Anyone who knows him thus, will become immortal even in this life. For attaining liberation there is no other path (than a knowledge of this Puruṣa).
18. The gods worshipped (Prajāpati in the form of) yajña through yajña (or sacrifice). Those very processes became the primary dharmas (or laws guiding mankind). Those great ones attain that heaven where the ancient devas and sādhyas live.

Uttaranārāyaṇa

19. The Virāṭpuruṣa manifested himself from out of (the all-pervading) water as also the essence of the element of earth. This Virāṭpuruṣa was (actually) born out of the greatness of the Paramapuruṣa, the Creator. The (Parama-puruṣa known as) Tvaṣṭā engaged himself in the act of creating (the fourteen worlds), (which form the expanded) figure (of the Virāṭpuruṣa). (Thus) the entire creation (related to the Virāṭpuruṣa) came into existence in the very beginning of creation.
20. "I have known that great puruṣa who is brilliant like the sun and who is beyond all darkness. One who knows him thus becomes immortal (even) here. There is no other path for liberation than this."
21. Prajāpati (the Lord of all beings) moves inside the cosmic womb. (Though) unborn he takes birth in a variety of ways. The wise ones know his (real nature) as the origin (of the universe). The (secondary) creators desire to attain the positions of Marīci and others.
22. Obeisance to him, the self-luminous Brahman, who shines for the gods, who is the leader of the rituals of the gods and who was born even before the gods.
23. In the beginning of creation, the gods, manifesting the light of Brahman, addressed Brahman thus: "That brāhmaṇa who realises (you) thus, all the gods will come under his control!"
24. "O Puruṣa! the goddesses Hrī (modesty) and Śrī (wealth) are your consorts. Day and night are your lateral limbs. The stars are your form. The Aśvins are your widely opened (mouth). (O Puruṣa!) Fulfil our desire for Self-knowledge as also our desire for the enjoyments of this world (like longevity, cows and horses). Give us all that we need!"

Some Salient Concepts

The *Puruṣasūkta* is a rather difficult text to comprehend and hence to expound in a way that appeals to the modern mind accustomed as it is, to the ways of physical sciences. The difficulty arises mainly out of three factors:

- a. It is a part of the *R̥gveda* which itself appears to be an enigmatic text, due to its hoary antiquity.

- b. As an extension of this, is the archaic language which does not lend itself easily to interpretations based on the grammar of classical Sanskrit.
- c. Our difficulties are further compounded by the various terms and concepts, which, though closely allied to the Vedic rituals, appear to be symbolic and esoteric.

An attempt may now be made to list the more important concepts, including the ones that appear to be recondite, for a detailed exposition. They are: Puruṣa; Virāt; Puruṣa-yajña by the devas, the sādhyas and the ṛṣis; birth of the four Varṇas; further creation; jñāna, mokṣa and the nature of realisation; cardinal dharmas and prayer for the fulfilment of desires.

Let us now try to explain and expound each of them.

THE PURUṢA

In the most general sense the word `puruṣa' means a man. By extension, it can mean a human being. However, in the Vedas, the Upaniṣads and the allied scriptures it is applied to God.

Derived from the root ' (= to protect, to fill up) the word `puruṣa' represents that principle or power which has filled the whole universe and is protecting it. What else can it be than God himself?

Sometimes it is also defined as `puriṣete' (one who lies in the body of a living being). Hence, Puruṣa is the being immanent in all creation, especially the living beings.

Puruṣa is the manifested state of the unmanifested Brahman, the origin and substratum of the universe. Ādipuruṣa (the primeval being), Parama-puruṣa (the highest being), Paramātman (the greatest self), Parameśvara (the supreme lord), Nārāyaṇa (the refuge of all the human beings) and Bhagavān (the being endowed with immensely great qualities)-these are some of the other names by which he is known.

The description of the Puruṣa as given in the *Puruṣasūkta* is simply awesome. Possessed of thousands of heads, eyes and feet, he has enveloped this universe on all sides and has also transcended it. He himself being this entire universe, he is also immanent in it. Not only the present creation but also the ones of the past and the future are verily he. He is the master of immortality. What appears as the living beings, sustained by food, are also he. Though all this (the manifested world) reveals his greatness, the Puruṣa himself is far greater than it.

In fact, the entire manifested universe of living beings and lifeless objects is only a fraction of his, whereas his major part is concealed in heaven.

PRIMARY CREATION-THE VIRĀṬ

The question of creation of this world in which we live and move, has ever remained a mystery to the human mind.

According to the Hindu religious traditions, the Vedas are the ultimate and sole authority to enlighten us in this regard. Though the several descriptions of creation given in the Vedic works including the Upaniṣads appear to differ from one another, there is a basic agreement also in regard to Brahman (here called Puruṣa) being the original, and the one and the only, cause of the whole creation. The *Puruṣasūkta* being one of the earliest of such descriptions sticks to the same pattern.

Creation needs two fundamental objects: matter and living beings. The Puruṣa created these in the first phase. This can be termed primary creation. He manifested out of himself, the Virāt, the immense being, the totality of all objects in their seed or root form. He, again, entered into it and

brought out the devas or the 'bright ones', the gods, who would carry on further or secondary creation as entrusted or directed by him. He also manifested out of himself the five subtle elements like the bhūmi or the earth and the bodies of beings.

Who are these beings, called devas, sādhyas and ṛṣis? They are the various centres of power and action (indriyas and prāṇas) in the body of the Virāt, energised by the further infilling of life-force and consciousness by the Puruṣa himself. They are called 'devas' because of their power of consciousness (div = to shine), 'sādhyas' because they are capable of bringing about further creation (sādh = to bring about) and ṛṣis because of their intuitive knowledge (ṛṣ = to know).

These devas-who themselves are the sādhyas and the ṛṣis-now take on the task of secondary and tertiary creation.

SECONDARY CREATION-THE PURUṢAYAJÑA

The *Puruṣasūkta* describes the secondary creation as carried out by the devas or gods as a yajña or sacrifice.

In the ancient days, yajñas or yāgas-Vedic sacrifices-were extremely common and were the major or the primary aspect of religion in practice. Comprising the three parts-dravya (materials needed), devatā (the deity to be propitiated) and tyāga (oblation)-they were not only popular but also frequently resorted to, for fulfilling any desire or for bringing about a great result, where human efforts were considered to be too inadequate to achieve the task and divine intervention alone could accomplish it. Any task which needed great efforts and sacrifice was being termed a yajña-though symbolically-and the practice continues to the present day.* Even the *Bhagavadgītā* (3.9) calls all good deeds of service as a yajña. Hence, it is but natural that the *Puruṣasūkta* describes the secondary creation resorted to by the gods as a yajña.

Since it was *before* creation when no materials were available for such a sacrifice, these gods performed it *mentally*, by imagining the various parts and processes involved in it. For them the body of the Virāṭpuruṣa himself was the sole basic material out of which they had to conduct the sacrifice. Since this Puruṣa was everything, including the paśu (or animal for immolation), in that sacrifice, we can call it 'Puruṣayajña'.

Then follows a very interesting description of the yajña or sacrifice. A yajña needs several things for performing it such as havis (sacrificial materials like puroḍāśa or rice-cake), ājya (ghee), idhma (fuel), paśu (an animal like a goat for immolation and offering into the fire) and so on. The process itself includes several acts-all performed with appropriate mantras or incantations-such as fixing the paridhis or borders for the sacrificial fires, bandhana or tying the animal to the yūpastambha or the sacrificial post, prokṣaṇa or sprinkling water on the animal with sacrificial grass and many other items. Once a yajña is performed with all its accessories and perfectly, it has to produce its results, either here or hereafter.

The mental sacrifice performed by the gods as described in the *Sūkta* using a language that appears as a riddle, needs to be understood in a proper perspective. It is a matter of our experience that a reality of today was only a concept yesterday. A concept of today can become a reality tomorrow. However, the worth and greatness of the person who conceives such ideas is an important factor in the whole process.

Here, it is the devas-the divine beings who are all emanations from the Puruṣa himself and hence endowed with parts of his powers-that are performing the sāṅkalpika or mānasa yajña (mental sacrifice, upāsanā or deep meditation). Hence their mental activities must result in physical products, whether subtle or gross.

The *Sūkta* says that in the mental sacrifice the gods offered the Vasanta-ṛtu (spring season) as ājya or ghee into the sacrificial fire. It is a wellknown fact that during the spring season the whole flora and fauna will be at its best. Domestic animals, especially the cows, can eat plenty of grass and hence can yield milk in profuse quantities. So, milk, curds and ghee will be available in good quantity, for being used in the sacrificial rites. This gives us a clue as to the selection of the Vasanta or the spring for being offered as ājya (ghee-oblation) in that sacrifice. However, neither ghee nor the spring season existed then, at the time of this mental sacrifice! How then could the gods perform it? Here, we have to stretch our powers of imagination a little. These gods remembered the previous cycle of creation and the last created world, remembered its spring season, mentally converted it into ājya and poured it as oblation into the fire of the present mental sacrifice. And, this oblation instantly resulted in the physical production of the Vasanta-ṛtu or the spring season of this creation. This logic or mode of explanation can now be extended to the other items of the sacrifice in a similar manner.

Thus were produced the seven chandas or Vedic metres, the twelve months, the three worlds, the five seasons, all objects of pleasure and enjoyment, various types of animals and the four Vedas. In other words, every conceivable object of creation was produced out of that great mental sacrifice of the gods.

It is interesting to note that in this act of creation, man comes last. But, he is undoubtedly, the pinnacle of the whole process.

The *Sūkta*, while narrating the creation of the human beings, puts it in a picturesque way. When the gods offered the various limbs of the Virāṭpuruṣa who himself had been treated as the paśu or animal for the sacrifice, into the sacrificial fire-of course, all in imagination since it was a mental or symbolic sacrifice-there came out of that offering, the people of the four varṇas or groups-the brāhmaṇa, the kṣattriya, the vaiśya and the śūdra. The brāhmaṇa emerged out of the face (or the mouth) of the Virāṭpuruṣa, the kṣattriya (called rājanya) was produced out of his arms, the vaiśya was created out of his two thighs whereas the śūdra sprang from his feet. In other words, these people of the four varṇas were produced when the respective limbs of the Virāṭpuruṣa were offered in that symbolic, mental, sacrifice.

The creation process continued further when the moon and the sun were born out of his mind and eyes. Indra and Agni emerged out of his mouth. So also Vāyu or air was produced out of his prāṇa or vital breath. This was followed by the appearance of antarikṣa (intervening space) from the navel, heaven from the head, earth from the feet, directions from the ears as also all the worlds.

The creation of the human beings as belonging to the four wellknown varṇas or social groups and describing their emergence from the different limbs of the Virāṭpuruṣa, especially of the śūdra from the feet, has raised bitter controversies and heated debates. The statement has even been construed as a machination of the brāhmaṇas to subdue and enslave the others, especially the śūdras. The rancour generated by such polemics based on a misunderstanding of the text, coupled with or nurtured by unhappy social environment has done enough damage to the solidarity of the Hindu society. Hence the subject needs a more extensive treatment.

THE VARṆA SYSTEM AND THE PURUṢASŪKTA

Choosing a vocation as per one's desire and aptitude is a common phenomenon seen in all civilised societies. It is the duty of the society to provide suitable opportunities for the citizens to choose and pursue those vocations that conform to their nature. This is the principle and philosophy behind the varṇa system. It is prakṛti or nature that brought it into being and not the *Puruṣasūkta*, which has not only recognised its existence but has also described it picturesquely, in a highly poetical and symbolic language.

It is sometimes alleged that the varṇa system did not exist in the early Vedic society but appeared at its fag end. Since the *Puruṣasūkta* refers to it, this work must be, chronologically speaking, a later composition added on to the earlier part. But this is not correct since there are enough references in other parts of the *Ṛgveda* to the already existing varṇa system (vide *Ṛgveda Samhitā* 8.35.16.7; 1.10.8.7).

The brāhmaṇas were the custodians of Vedic knowledge and culture. The organ of speech was their forte. Hence the depiction of their birth as from the mouth or the face of the Virāṭpuruṣa is, symbolically speaking, correct. Similarly, the birth of the kṣattriyas or the rājanyas (fighters and kings) from the arms of the Virāṭpuruṣa is also meet since physical strength and military skill were their speciality. The vaiśyas were the main segment of the population supporting and sustaining the whole society by their economic activities. Hence the description of their being born out of the thighs of the Virāṭpuruṣa is proper. Without the feet, the body cannot stand erect, in a state of balance. So too the society cannot exist without the supply of physical labour, which was the chosen occupation of the śūdras since they were not fit for the other three occupations. Therefore the description that they were born out of the feet of the Virāṭpuruṣa is in order. One more factor to be kept in mind is that all the persons of all the four varṇas were born out of the body of the Virāṭpuruṣa (an aspect of God) and *not* from a lesser entity or a mortal like us. Hence all are equally divine. Are not the feet of a sugar doll as sweet as its head?

Throughout the history of the human race, such divisions have existed. Sociologists have discovered this system existing among the people of ancient Greece, China and Persia. Germany, Japan and Russia too have had it. Other countries of Europe were no exception. It may be interesting to note that untouchables existed even in a Muslim country like Arabia though they were also local Muslims!*

Social hierarchy is an inevitable fact of life which cannot be wished away. It exists even today in all societies including the socialist or the communist.

Much of the discontent roused by the *Puruṣasūkta* among the śūdras was, mainly, due to two factors: the notion that the 'head' is superior and the 'feet' are inferior in status; the nasty treatment that they have sometimes received at the hands of the upper classes of the society.

The former is a notion that does not stand close scrutiny. Except in the game of football, where the head and the feet may be of equal importance, in all other situations of our life, the relative importance of our limbs varies as the occasion demands. For instance, while doing abhiṣeka or giving a ceremonial bath to the deity in a temple, or, laying the foundation stone for a building it is the hand (amṛtahasta?) that gets precedence and not the head. While honouring the elders, especially the religious leaders, pūja (or worship) is done to the feet and not to the head! While tending little children

with love, we keep them in our lap (thighs?) and not on our crown! A cripple will perhaps consider the possession of feet as more important!

As regards the latter, the mistake lies mainly with the first two varṇas who sometimes have misused their position to harass or oppress the last group. Such oppression, however, has happened in all the societies of the world in its long history. But in India, this has been more of an exception than the rule. In fact, important religious works like the *Mahābhārata* (vide *Vanaparva* 181.20-26) have declared that the brāhmaṇahood depends not on the accident of birth but on the possession of godly virtues.

Once the basic truth, that diversity is a fact of life brought about by nature, is realised and serious attention is directed towards achieving unity and harmony, co-operation and coordination, in spite of that diversity, so that all human beings can live in peace, the problem stands dissolved. The Hindu seers had foreseen the need for such efforts. They were apprehensive of the possibilities of the first varṇa misusing its privileges and status. That is why attempts had been made to offset such tendencies by prescribing that a brāhmaṇa could take food in the house of a śūdra who was serving him in some form (vide *Manusmṛti* 6.253; *Yājñavalkyasmṛti* 1.166; *Parāśarasmṛti* 11.19).

More than everything else, the śūdras had never been denied spiritual knowledge and wisdom, which was the birthright of every human being. There have been many great saints from among the śūdras and even from the untouchables as illustrated by Vālmīki, Vyāsa, Dharmavyādha, Vidura, Nandanār, Raidās, Kanakadāsa, Tiruppāṇ Āḷvar and a host of others who are being highly venerated even now, by all sections of the Hindu society.

One more fact may be noted here. Is it not rather remarkable that the brāhmaṇas, eventhough they had neither the military power, nor the economic power, were respected and obeyed for over five thousand years by the Hindu society? Could it be for any other factor than their devotion to satya and dharma (truth and righteousness), to their sublime character? Is it not equally noteworthy that in the dharmasāstras (scriptural works dealing with the conduct of people) they composed, they have voluntarily bound themselves with more stringent rules than they have prescribed for others?

It is nevertheless, an undeniable fact that the caste system as it obtains today has very little in common with the original spirit of the varṇa system. The evils generated, including the animosity amongst the people of various castes-seem to far outweigh the advantages. The Hindu society in this post-independence era, characterised by tremendous advancement in science and technology, throwing open all professions to all persons, is absolutely free to bring about healthy changes. The fact has been well- recognised by the ancient sages who composed the smṛtis and dharmasāstras that when people dislike a custom or a social system they can give it up and substitute it by better ones (vide *Manusmṛti* 4.176; *Yājñavalkyasmṛti* 1.156).

In spite of its several shortcomings and even aberrations, if the caste system based solely on birth, has survived for five to six thousand years, there must undoubtedly be something good in it. Perhaps, the psychological sense of belonging to a recognised social group and the consequent security it has offered may be the main reasons for the same. Hence, it is much wiser to attempt reforming it or even replace it with a better system than totally uprooting it, or, substituting it with a worse system like the one based on the power of money or ethnic differences or political patronage.

It may be useful to remember here the declaration of Swami Vivekananda, the great prophet of modern India, that the giving of good education which includes culture, will go a long way in the levelling up of the society.

SECONDARY CREATION-FURTHER DETAILS

The *Sūkta* goes on to describe further creation by the devas from the Virāṭpuruṣa. From his mind emerged the moon. The sun was born out of his eyes. Indra and Agni emanated from his face or mouth. So also Vāyu (air) came out of his prāṇa (life-force or vital air). Dyuloka or the heaven, bhūmi or the earth and antarikṣa or the intervening space were born respectively out of his head, feet and the navel. Similarly all the other worlds and their beings were also created.

With this, practically, ends the description of creation from the Puruṣa.

One notable thing in this description is, perhaps, the relationship between the moon and our minds. Since our minds are parts of the cosmic mind and the moon is also a product of that cosmic mind, the influence of the moon on our minds cannot be ruled out. The very word 'lunacy' used as a synonym for insanity (Luna = moon) and the aggravation or subsidence of symptoms with the changing phases of the moon, confirm this.

The human mind has always been interested in knowing how this creation has come about. Since it itself is a product of the created world it can never succeed in knowing this secret. The Śruti or the Vedas, are the only authority for knowing it. However, the descriptions given in the Vedas, including the Upaniṣads, are so variegated that we do not get a clear-cut picture of the same. Neither do the attempts made in the works like the *Brahmasūtras* to give a coordinated picture, help us much. Hence, the only way of resolving the problem is to concede that the main purpose of the Śruti is to draw our attention to the Creator, (and not to the creation as such which is only a projection from out of himself), the need to know him and the consequent beatitude we attain.

This attainment of beatitude has been expressed in exquisitely enchanting terms by a ṛṣi in the *Puruṣasūkta* to inspire and guide the spiritual aspirants.

BLISS OF REALISATION

One of the most important questions discussed by the Hindu philosophical works is the final goal of human life. According to the Vedas and the Vedānta, this goal is mokṣa or liberation from transmigration. This mokṣa, according to them, is rediscovering our eternal relationship with that Puruṣa variously called as Paramapuruṣa, Paramātman, Īśvara, Parameśvara, Brahman, Ātman and so on. This is possible only through jñāna or knowledge which is anubhava or direct experience or realisation and not just intellectual understanding.

The *Puruṣasūkta* teaches us this fundamental truth by describing the ecstatic experience of realisation of a ṛṣi and an unequivocal declaration that there is absolutely no other path to immortality than the knowledge or the direct experience of that Puruṣa who is brilliant like the sun and is beyond tamas, darkness of ignorance. Though karma or Vedic rituals have been eulogised and prescribed, they are only aids in the spiritual path and are of secondary importance.

This statement can also serve the purpose of guiding an aspirant in the path of meditation on the supreme Puruṣa.

SPIRITUAL WISDOM AND SPIRITUAL TEACHERS

Hindu sampradāya or tradition vehemently asserts that all knowledge, especially spiritual wisdom, generally called 'adhyātmavidyā', has to be obtained personally from a competent guru or spiritual preceptor. And, who else can be a better guru than the Puruṣa himself? The *Puruṣasūkta* automatically stresses this point when it declares that this wisdom was first taught by the Puruṣa to Dhātā (the four faced Brahmā, the creator) who taught it to Śakra or Indra. Indra then spread it in all directions through worthy ṛṣis or sages.

PRIMARY DHARMAS OR DUTIES

Though the *Puruṣasūkta* has accorded primary importance to the description of the Puruṣa and the process of creation, as also to spiritual knowledge, as the sole means of mokṣa or liberation, it has not forgotten to stress the significance of performing one's allotted duties in life. While declaring that the devas worshipped the Puruṣa through yajña or sacrifice, the *Sūkta* has also proclaimed that these dharmas became the primary or the cardinal ones contributing to the sustenance of the world. This statement needs a little amplification.

The devas had been allotted the task of secondary creation by the Puruṣa, who had also supplied them, the raw-material, in the form of the Virāt. They used this raw-material, performed the mānasayajña or mental sacrifice and completed the task of creation as allotted to them. It goes to their credit that they found out their respective duties and performed them with single-minded devotion. This itself became their worship of the Puruṣa.

This has a great lesson for us, the human beings. God has given us a ready-made world. It is well-regulated by the cosmic laws. Even the gods worked-and are still working-within the ambit of these laws, for the good of the whole world. A yajña, in spirit, means just this, offering the individual good into the cosmic or the universal good, by performing one's duties to the best of one's ability and always keeping in mind the cosmic good.

The day the devas performed the very first mānasa-yajña or mental sacrifice, that very day were born the 'prathama-dharmas' or the first karmas, which became a model to the human beings after creation. The *Bhagavadgītā* (3.9-16) describes the jagaccakra or the universal cycle in which all beings and things are linked with one another, because of which the world runs smoothly. If each person performs his svadharma or allotted duty, not only does the world run smoothly but also that very svadharma-karma becomes a worship of the Lord leading to siddhi or spiritual fulfilment.

ATTAINMENT OF HEAVEN

Being full of desires as they are, the human beings aspire for the attainment of heaven after death. The Hindu scriptures do contain plenty of references to such higher lokas or abodes, of which the svargaloka is the one most sought after. The *Puruṣasūkta* also refers to this as Nāka, the world free from all sorrow, the heaven, where the ancient devas and sādhyas live and to where the noble ones who contemplate on the Puruṣa, go. Then there are others too, who wish to attain the status of the Prajāpatis (pro-genitors or secondary creators) like Marīci, Atri and others.

However the main stress of the *Sūkta* is on mukti or liberation through the knowledge of Puruṣa.

OBEISANCE AND PRAYERS

The *Sūkta* ends with an obeisance to the self-luminous Puruṣa by the gods who also declare their subservience to any person who succeeds in knowing that Puruṣa.

The hymn closes with a beautiful description of the Puruṣa, as identified with Nārāyaṇa, with his two consorts, Hrī and Lakṣmī. Day and night are his lateral limbs. The stars (along with the moon) form his body as it were. Heaven and earth seem like the two halves of his open mouth.

Generally, Bhūdevī (the earth) and Śrīdevī (Lakṣmī, the goddess of wealth) are projected as the two consorts of Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa whereas here Bhū has been replaced by Hrī. Hrī is the goddess of modesty. It is to impress upon us, perhaps, that wealth, beauty and other embellishments, if not controlled or tempered by hrī or modesty, will lead to disaster, that these two have been stated together.

The *Sūkta* concludes with a prayer to the Puruṣa to give the supplicant all objects of pleasure and happiness, here and hereafter, as also the knowledge of the Self.

Finis

To sum up, the *Puruṣasūkta* gives us in a capsule form, the philosophy of not only the Vedas and the Vedānta, but also of the *Bhagavadgītā*, giving equal importance to upāsana (meditation), jñāna (knowledge), bhakti (devotion) and dharma or karma (rituals and performance of one's duties). No wonder then that it is highly venerated and extensively used even today in all our religious observances.

APPENDIX

Śāntimantra

In the traditional chanting of the *Puruṣasūkta*, a śāntimantra or a peace invocation, is invariably added both in the beginning and at the end. The text, transliteration, translation, and an explanation of the same are appended here. Apart from fulfilling the requirements as set forth by our Vedic tradition, it also helps in understanding the *Sūkta* better, by creating a fine mood conducive to its study.

The Text

Om | taccham̐yorāvṛṇīmahe | gātuṁ yajñāya | gātuṁ yajñapataye | daiṁ svastirastu naḥ | svastir
mānuṣe-bhyaḥ | ūrdhvaṁ jigātu bheṣajam | śaṁ no astu dvipade | śaṁ catuspade
Om śāntiḥ śāntiḥ śāntiḥ

The Translation

We pray to God who dispels our sorrows and gives us the fruits of our rituals. We pray to Him to get the results of our yajña (rites and rituals) as also for the good of the yajamāna or the sacrificer. May we attain the same kind of good that the gods (in heaven) get! May all the human beings also attain to auspiciousness! In future also, let all the evils of life be dispelled! May the human beings as also the domestic animals under our care be happy!

Om! Peace! Peace! Peace!

Comments

This is a very common peace-chant, recited both at the beginning and at the end of the *Puruṣasūkta*. It is also classed among the ten peace-chants, generally called the *Daśasāntis* used in important religious ceremonies like abhiṣeka (ceremonial bath to the deity in ritualistic worship) and during the performance of śāntikarmas or auspicious rites, to ward off evil. It may also be used during the sandhyā ritual as an upasthāna-mantra (prayer to God, recited in the standing posture).

The first word *śamyoḥ* is also interpreted as 'diseases, troubles and difficulties which have come as a result of our past evil deeds and those which may come in future.'

Though the performance of yajñas is in our hands, it is God who grants their results to us. Hence the prayer to Him for the attainment of the fruits of yajña and the fulfilment of the desires of the yajamāna, the performer of the sacrifice.

It is interesting and instructive to note that the mantra includes a prayer for the welfare of *all* human beings and even the animals in one's care.

Chanting the word 'śāntiḥ' three times is meant to ward off three types of troubles: ādhyātmika (those pertaining to the body like physical diseases), ādhibhautika (troubles caused by other living beings like wild animals or reptiles) and ādhidaivika (calamities caused by natural disasters like earthquake, floods, famine etc.).

APPENDIX

Puruṣasūktam Text with Transliteration and Translation

*Om | Sahasra-śīrṣā puruṣaḥ | sahasrākṣaḥ sahasrapāt | sa bhūmim viśvato vṛtvā | atyatiṣṭhad
daśāṅgulam*

The Puruṣa (or the Primeval Being) has a thousand heads, a thousand eyes and a thousand feet. He has enveloped this world from all sides and has (even) transcended it by ten aṅgulas or inches.

Puruṣa evedaṁ sarvam | yad bhūtaṁ yac ca bhavyam | utāmṛtatvasyeśānaḥ | yadannenā tirohati

All this is verily the Puruṣa. All that which existed in the past or will come into being in future (is also the Puruṣa). Also, he is the Lord of immortality. That which grows profusely by food (is also the Puruṣa)

Etāvānasya mahimā | ato jyayāṁśca pūruṣaḥ | pādo'sya viśvā bhūtāni | tripādasyāmṛtaṁ divi

So much is his greatness. However, the Puruṣa is greater than this. All the beings form only a quarter (part of) him. The three-quarter part of his, which is immortal, is established in heaven.

Tripādūrdhva udaitpuruṣaḥ | pādo'syehābhavātpunaḥ | tato viṣvaṁ vyakrāmat | sāśanānaśane abhi

The Puruṣa with the three quarters (of his being) ascended above. His one quarter here became (this world) again (and again). Then he pervaded this world comprising a variety of sentient beings and insentient objects.

Tasmād virāḍajāyata | virājo adhi pūruṣaḥ | sa jāto atyaricyata | paścād bhūmimatho puraḥ

From Him (The Ādipuruṣa or the Primeval Being) was born the Virāṭ (the immense being). Making this Virāṭ as the substratum (another) puruṣa (or being) (was born). As soon as he was born, he multiplied himself. Later, he created this earth and then, the bodies (of the living beings).

Yatpuruṣeṇa haviṣā | devā yajñamatanvata | vasanto asyāsīdājyam | grīṣma idhmaś śaraddhaviḥ

When the devas (gods or beings of light) performed a yajña (or sacrifice), using the puruṣa as the havis (or sacrificial material), for that yajña (or sacrifice), the Vasanta (spring) became the ājya (ghee), the Grīṣma (summer) served as idhma (faggots of wood) and the śarad (autumn) filled the place of havis (oblatory material like the puroḍāśa or rice-cake).

Saptāsyāsan paridhyaḥ | trissapta samidhaḥ kṛtāḥ | devā yadyajñam tanvānāḥ | abadhnan puruṣam paśum

For this (yajña or sacrifice) there were seven paridhis (fuel pieces serving as borders). And, twentyone items were made the samit or sacrificial fuel sticks. When the devas were performing this yajña or sacrifice, they tied the puruṣa (himself) as the paśu (sacrificial animal).

Tam yajñam barhiṣi praukṣan | puruṣam jātamagrataḥ | tena devā ayajanta | sādhyā ṛṣayaśca ye

The devas, the sādhyas and the ṛṣis performed the sacrifice by using that Puruṣa as the means of yajña, the Puruṣa who had been born in the beginning, after sprinkling him with water by the barhis (or sacrificial grass).

Tasmād yajñāt sarvahutaḥ | sambhṛtam pṛṣadājyam | paśūmstāmścakre vāyavyān | āraṇyān grāmyāśca ye

BT From that yajña (or sacrifice) wherein the Cosmic Being was himself the oblation, was produced the pṛṣadājya (or curds mixed with ghee). Birds flying in the air, wild animals of the forest as also the domesticated animals of the village were also produced.

Tasmād yajñāt sarvahutaḥ | ṛcassāmāni jajñire | chandāmsi jajñire tasmāt | yajustasmād ajāyata

From that yajña (or sacrifice) wherein the Cosmic Being was himself the oblation, were born the ṛks (the mantras of the Ṛgveda) and the sāmans (the mantras of the Sāmaveda). From that (yajña) the metres (like Gāyatrī) were born. From that (yajña, again) the yajus (the Yajurveda) was born.

Tasmād aśvā ajāyanta | ye ke cobhayādataḥ | gāvo ha jajñire tasmāt | tasmājjātā ajāvayaḥ

From that were born the horses, as also animals (like donkeys and mules) which have two rows of teeth. From that were born the cattle. From that (again) were born goats and sheep.

Yatpuruṣam vyadadhuḥ | katidhā vyakalpayan | mukham kimasya kau bāhū | kāvūrū pādā ucyete

(Now, some questions are raised by the sages:) When the gods decided to (mentally) sacrifice the Virāṭpuruṣa (and produce further creation) in how many ways did they do it? What became of his face or mouth? What became of his two arms? What became of the two thighs? What were (the products of) the two feet called?

Brāhmaṇo'sya mukhamāsīt | bāhū rājanyaḥ kṛtaḥ | ūrū tadasya yad vaiśyaḥ | padbhyām śūdro ajāyata

BT His face (or the mouth) became the brāhmaṇa. His two arms became the rājanya (or the kṣatriya). His two thighs became the vaiśya. From his two feet, the śūdra was born.

Candramā manaso jātaḥ | cakṣossūryo ajāyata | mukhād indraścāgniśca | prāṇād vāyur ajāyata

From his mind was born the moon. From his two eyes was born the sun. From his mouth were born Indra and Agni. From his breath was born the air.

Nābhya āsīd antarikṣam | śirṣṇo dyaus samavartata | padbhyām bhūmir diśas śrotrāt | tathā lokām akalpayan

From (his) navel was produced the antarikṣa (the space between the earth and the heaven). Dyuloka (or heaven) came into existence from his head. The bhūmi (or the earth) evolved out of his feet, and dik (or spacial directions) from his ears. Similarly (the gods) produced the worlds (too).

Vedāhametaṁ puruṣam mahāntam ādityavarṇam tamasastu pāre | sarvāṇi rūpāṇi vicitya dhiraḥ nāmāni kṛtvā bhivadan yadāste

"I know (through intuitive experience) this great Puruṣa (the Primieval Being), the wise one, who, having created the various forms and the nomenclatures (for those forms) deals with them by those names, and who is beyond darkness and is brilliant like the sun."

Dhāta purustād yamudājahāra śakraḥ pravidvān pradiśaścatasraḥ | tamevaṁ vidvān amṛta iha bhavati nānyaḥ panthā ayanāya vidyate

In the ancient days, Prajāpati praised him. Indra who knows all the four quarters also spoke about him. Anyone who knows him thus, will become immortal even in this life. For attaining liberation there is no other path (than a knowledge of this Puruṣa).

Yajñena yajñamayajanta devāḥ tāni dharmāṇi prathamānyāsan | te ha nākaṁ mahimānas sacante yatra pūrve sādhyās santi devāḥ

The gods worshipped (Prajāpati in the form of) yajña through yajña (or sacrifice). Those very processes became the primary dharmas (or laws guiding mankind). Those great ones attain that heaven where the ancient devas and sādhyas live.

Adbhyas sambhūtaḥ pṛthivyai rasācca viśvakarmaṇas samavartatādhi | tasya tvaṣṭā vidadhad rūpameti tatpuruṣasya viśvamājānamagre

The Virāṭpuruṣa manifested himself from out of (the all-pervading) water as also the essence of the element of earth. This Virāṭpuruṣa was (actually) born out of the greatness of the Paramapuruṣa, the Creator. The (Paramapuruṣa known as) Tvaṣṭā engaged himself in the act of creating (the fourteen worlds), (which form the expanded) figure (of the Virāṭpuruṣa). (Thus) the entire creation (related to the Virāṭpuruṣa) came into existence in the very beginning of creation.

Vedāhametaṁ puruṣaṁ mahāntam ādityavarṇaṁ tamaśaḥ parastāt | tamevaṁ vidvān amṛta iha bhavati nānyaḥ panthā vidyate'yanāya

“I have known that great puruṣa who is brilliant like the sun and who is beyond all darkness. One who knows him thus becomes immortal (even) here. There is no other path for liberation than this.”

Prajāpatiścarati garbhe antaḥ ajāyamāno bahudhā vijāyate | tasya dhirāḥ parijānanti yonim marīcīnām padamicchanti vedhasaḥ

Prajāpati (the Lord of all beings) moves inside the cosmic womb. (Though) unborn he takes birth in a variety of ways. The wise ones know his (real nature) as the origin (of the universe). The (secondary) creators desire to attain the positions of Marīci and others.

Yo devebhya ātapati | yo devānām purohitaḥ | purvo yo devebhyo jātaḥ | namo rucāya brāhmaye

Obeisance to him, the self-luminous Brahman, who shines for the gods, who is the leader of the rituals of the gods and who was born even before the gods.

Rucaṁ brāhmaṇaṁ janayantaḥ | devā agre tadabruvan | yastvaivaṁ brāhmaṇo vidyāt | tasya devā asanvaśe

In the beginning of creation, the gods, manifesting the light of Brahman, addressed Brahman thus: `That brāhmaṇa who realises (you) thus, all the gods will come under his control

Hrīśca te lakṣmīśca patnyau | ahorātre pārśve | nakṣatrāṇi rūpam | aśvinau vyāttam | iṣṭaṁ maṇiṣāṇa | amuṁ maṇiṣāṇa | sarvaṁ maṇiṣāṇa Oṁ śāntiḥ śāntiḥ śāntiḥ

O Puruṣa! the goddesses Hrī (modesty) and Śrī (wealth) are your consorts. Day and night are your lateral limbs. The stars are your form. The Aśvins are your widely opened (mouth). (O Puruṣa!) Fulfil our desire for self-knowledge as also our desire for the enjoyments of this world (like longevity, cows and horses). Give us all that we need!

Key to Transliteration and Pronunciation – sounds like

अ, a-o in son,	ठ ṭh-th in ant-hill
आ , ā-a in master,	ड ḍ-d in den
इ i-i in if,	ढ ḍh-dh in godhood
ई ī-ee in feel,	ण ṇ-n in under
उ u-u in full,	त t-t in French
ऊ ū-oo in boot,	थ th-th in thumb
ऋ ṛ-somewhat between r and ri, द d-th in then	ध dh-the in breathe
ए e-ay in May,	न n-n in not
ऐ ai-y in my,	प p-p in pen
ओ o-o in oh,	फ ph-ph in loop-hole
औ au-ow in now,	ब b-b in bag
क k-k in keen,	भ bh-bh in abhor
ख kh-ckh in blockhead,	म m-m in mother
ग g-g (hard) in go,	य y-y in yard
घ gh-gh in log-hut,	र r-r in run
ङ ṅ-ng in singer,	ल l-l in luck
च c-ch in chain,	व v-v in avert
छ ch-chh in catch him,	श ś-sh in reich (German)
ज j-j in judge,	ष ṣ-sh in show
झ jh-dgeh in hedgehog,	स s-in sun
ञ ñ-n (somewhat) as in French,, ह h-in hot	
ट ṭ-t in ten,	
• ढ ḍ-m in sum,	:ḥ-h in half