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## SAMDHYA: The Time of Prayer and the Prayer of time

### *Introduction*

Alexis Carrel, the Nobel Prize winner in medicine says that prayer is the most powerful form of energy one can generate. "It is a force," he says, "as real as terrestrial gravity." Prayer like radium, he adds, is a source of luminous self-generating energy and when we pray we link ourselves with inexhaustible moving power that spins the universe.<sup>1</sup> Probably never before in the living memory of mankind was this cosmic dimension of prayer felt more vividly by the world at large than when America's Apollo thirteenth manned space mission to the moon, ended up in a tragic failure some years ago. In spite of the advanced scientific knowledge and computer technology available at that time, the lives of the three men on board the space-ship—James Lowell, Fred Hais and John Swigert—were seriously at stake due to some irreparable technical snag which developed at some point during the onward flight. And then the hearts of men and women the world over rose as one, praying for their safe return. Instances of prayer coupled with penance and sacrifice during the anxious and agonizing hours of human existence, regardless of nation, religion and ideology, are too numerous to quote. Somehow a 'miracle' happened, in the case of Apollo and after their safe return what John Swigert, one of the space crew, said to the crowd of media reporters amply testifies to this. He said: "If you are asking me whether I prayed, yes certainly I did; and I have no doubt that my prayers and the prayers of the rest of the world did an awful lot for us getting back."

That was indeed a unique time of prayer as well as a great prayer of time, of all that is time-bound, a cosmic prayer. This article tries to reveal this double aspect of prayer based on the concept of *samdhya*, as understood in the Indian tradition.

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1. Cf. "Prayer" *Bhavan's Journal* (June 8, 1975), p. 47.

## 1. SAMĀDHYĀ : Its Meaning and Significance

The word *samdhya* is generally considered to be derived from the prefix *sam* denoting cumulation, synthesis,<sup>2</sup> and the root *dhā*, "to put/place"<sup>3</sup> and so these together mean "to put together/unite/meet together" etc. Therefore *samdhya* literally means "holding together/union/meeting point/junction..." Instead of the root *dhā*, sometimes the root *dhya*, "to meditate/ponder/pray" is associated with *sam* and thus the definition of the term *samdhya* is given as "on what account meditation/prayer is done well—that is *samdhya*" (*samyak dhyayati anaya samdhya*). Whatever be the case, both these meanings will be of interest to us in our reflections on the concept of *samdhya* as we shall see in what follows.

In a cosmotheandric perspective<sup>4</sup> *samdhya* is a holding together, meeting-point and junction in a variety of ways: Spatially it refers to the atmosphere or middle region (*antarikṣa*) where the sky or heaven (*dyu*) and earth (*pṛthvi*) meet and merge giving rise to the horizon, the symbol of human hopes and possibilities. Temporally, it refers to the present (*vartamana*) where the past (*bhūta*) and the future (*bhavin*) make their point of departure. And this meeting of the three great times (*kalas*) present-past-future, is signified in another meeting (*samdhya*) of the three juncture moments—morning, evening and noon—of every day and of every time span, since the day is an image of man's life span and the unifying element of human temporal life.<sup>5</sup> Further, it can also denote all *dvandva*'s or pairs of polar opposites in nature and life, namely, sun and moon, day and night, light and darkness, man and woman, God and world etc.

Viewed in an anthropocosmic perspective the concept of *samdhya* connects nature and human life in a very real way. In the words of

2. Compare Greek *syn* and Latin *cum*.

3. Compare Greek *tithemi* and Indo-European *dhe*-.

4. 'Cosmotheandric' or 'theanthropocosmic' perspective means that vision of reality which sees the divine, the human and the cosmic as the three ultimate factors present in whatever there is. For a detailed exposition of it see R. Panikkar, "La visione cosmotheandrica: il senso religioso emergente del terzo millennio", in *vecchi e nuovi dei*, ed. by R. Caporale (Torino: Valentino, 1976), pp. 521-544.

5. Cf. R. Panikkar, *Vedic Experience*, (DLT: London, 1977) pp. 781-94.

R. Panikkar, "*Samdhya* refers to the two privileged moments of sunrise, when everything can still become everything, and of sunset, when all has been said and done and there is nothing else to do; or of dawn, when man can still hope because the whole day lies in front of him, and of dusk, when he can simply live because the day is already over and nothing else remains to be done."<sup>6</sup> Finally, *samdhya* not only refers to but really *is* the most suitable prayer-time, the implications of which we shall discuss presently.

## 2. *Samdhya*: The Time of Prayer

We have seen that *samdhya* symbolizes the meeting, union, in a variety of ways, of the polar realities in the universe. Hence we can say that it also symbolized the meeting of God and man, life and death, grace and sin and thus a call to prayer insofar as it is prayer is essentially a meeting of God and man. It is indeed the *muhurta*, auspicious time of prayer, —namely the "meeting" (*samdhya*), when in the whole universe there takes place a series of meetings (ontic prayers: *samdhya's*) at various levels, all for the happy and harmonious "holding together" (*samdhya*) of the reality. That is why every pious Hindu gets up early in the morning and after his/her ablutions sits in prayer ready to greet the rising sun. In this action man joins hands with the entire universe to celebrate the meeting of God and man, and this is *samdhya*: the prayer—that is a meeting. As the sun emerges majestically from behind the eastern horizon the sleeping cosmos is also awakened. There is movement, life and flow of energy everywhere. This external movement and outer awakening beckons man to interior awakening and inner enlightenment which is the fruit of prayer. At the meeting of night and day or of father sky and mother earth cosmic enlightenment is effected; at the meeting of God and man inner enlightenment is the result. In other words, inner enlightenment of man is the fruit of prayer, even as the rising sun is the child of *samdhya*.

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6. *Ibid.*, p. 782.

7. In the annual cycle related to the earth and the sun, there are first of all the two solstices (summer and winter), when the sun appearing farthest from the equator seems to pause before changing direction, and secondly, two equinoxes (spring and autumn), when the sun crosses the equator. These cosmic passages of the sun as well as other planets are considered to be responsible for the annual, seasonal, monthly and daily cycles in man's life.

At every meeting there is also a crossing over from one side to the other, from one plane to the next, whether or not this meeting and crossing be real or mythical. Of all such events based on the annual cycle due to the inter-related movements of the cosmic bodies<sup>7</sup>, *samdhya* is the basic model at which day meets and crosses over to night, and vice versa. It is one of humanity's oldest beliefs that every 'territorial' passage, be it real or mythical, is a risky step. Every passage from the known to the unknown, from the familiar to the unfamiliar, from the old to the new, from death to life is a 'sacred' step full of challenges. Hence this passage is to be properly initiated and 'sacrificed' (made sacred) through ritual/prayer.<sup>8</sup> Being the basic model of these passages *samdhya* necessitates some ritual/prayer. In other words, *samdhya* is the auspicious time of prayer, as it is also a unique prayer by itself.

### 3. *Samdhya*: The Prayer of Time

*Samdhya* is equally the prayer of time, of time not considered as a series of successive chronological moments, without a 'soul' or connecting link between moments, but of time that is to be 'sacrificed', conquered and transcended in order to discover its inner core. This time springs from cult, liturgy prayer, and dies with it as well.<sup>9</sup> Underlying many religious traditions is the concept that man, a prisoner of time, overcomes his temporal limitation by participating in an act which in itself has transtemporal significance. Human imitation of this act is the ritual/prayer which *saves* him from being drowned in the everyday 'temporocity'. For example, in Hinduism this act reaches beyond the present into the bottom of the past, even to the end of time where time itself is the creation of the original divine act. And so by positing that act man *saves* himself from the grip of time and reaches the 'further shore'. Similarly in Christianity, this is an act which transcends time-space continuum. It is an act which can 'forgive' past sins and treasure up future grace. Every Christian who shares in the mystery of Christ by means of this act lifts up his

8. Thus we have, in many cultures, various rites and prayers related to these cosmic passages. For example, in India we have festivals for the New Year (more than one), for the Solstices (Makarasamkranti), for the various months (for example, Chaitra Purnima) etc. Cf. Swamy Sivananda, *Hindu Fasts and Festivals*, (DLS: Tehri-Garhwal, 1983). On the importance of the rites of passages, socio-religious and cosmic, see Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passages*, (London and Henley Routledge and Kegan Paul: 1977), especially ch. IX.

9. On the intimate connection between cult/prayer and time, read R. Panikkar, *Le mystere du culte dans l' hinduisme et le christianisme* (Cerf: Paris, 1970), Ch. III,

life into that of Christ himself. Of course, this may also serve to gain some particular earthly desire, but ultimately it differs from every other human action, as it stretches beyond the ordinary time-span and makes man share in the mystery of the entire cosmotheandric dynamism of the universe.<sup>10</sup>

Now, when man is engaged in this trans-temporal act, which we call prayer<sup>11</sup>, he is not performing a private, individual action, rather he is performing a priestly action in the name of the whole of reality. He stands here as mediator, the living link between the pairs of opposites and extremes we have noted above. Man at prayer is the meeting point (*sam̐dhya*) of God and world, the Timeless and the time-bound. And prayer of time is the quest or craving of the time-bound to reach their timeless core. This quest is the spiritual element which links up the otherwise disconnected moments of the temporal process. This link is the 'spirit of prayer' that unfolds in the mind and heart of man, the man of enlightenment. And then for him *sam̐dhya* is not only the auspicious time of prayer but also and more especially the prayer of time, prayer itself becoming the human action *par excellence*. Prayer then is not merely a *mantra*, a ritual but also a *tantra*, the right way of doing anything. That means, my sincere efforts to increase the welfare of my fellow-men, my concern for the well-being of my neighbours, my selfless actions to enhance the quality of human life in the world at large, for the transformation of social lives, for the advancement of cultures, etc.—all these are models of this action-centred prayer, prayer of the secular (not profane, however) man.

Thus, that *sam̐dhya* is the prayer of time means that in it the entire creation is involved, that in it man discovers himself as the authentic

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10. Cf. R. Panikkar, "Time and Sacrifice—the Sacrifice of Time and the Ritual Modernity", in *The Study of Time III*, ed. by J. T. the Fraser *et al.*, Springer-Verlag : N. Y. Heidelberg-Berlin, 1979), pp. 683-726.

11: It is to be noted here that a religious ritual *qua* ritual is not fundamentally different from a prayer-act. For, religious rite as a symbolic act is a point of contact between man and God; it establishes the contact, at which God descends and man ascends, is transformed and 'divinized', which is what also prayer does as we have explained. But it is also to be remembered that ritual act is quite different from ritualism, which is an aberration of the former.

mediator between the Timeless and the time-bound and that he is in communion with the rest of the universe. In this sense prayer at *samdhya*, at that particular moment of 'cosmic meeting', is the becoming conscious on the part of man of his ontic fullness; not only is he in the universe, but with the universe he is rooted in God. Thus *samdhya* as the prayer of time leads man to a profound awareness of this cosmotheandric communion.

#### 4. Gayatri: The Model Samdhya Prayer

Our discussion of the *samdhya* prayer in both its aspects as the time of prayer and the prayer of time may be concluded most appropriately with some reflections on the famous Gayatri prayer as a unique model *samdhya* prayer. In its original form it reads thus:

tat savitur vareṇyam  
bhargo devasya dhīmahi  
dhiyo yo naḥ pracodayat<sup>12</sup>

We meditate upon the glorious  
splendour of the Vivifier divine  
May he awaken our minds.

This is perhaps the most renowned *mantra* of the Vedas. Manu says: "There is nothing more exalted than the Gayatri"<sup>13</sup> The *mantra* gets its name from the meter in which it is composed, the *gayatri*, being a Vedic poetic meter of three lines, each of eight syllables. As it is addressed to the divine life-giver as supreme God, symbolized in Savitur (the Sun), it is also known by the name Savitri.<sup>14</sup> It is recited or chanted daily at the two *samdhya*'s (sunrise and sunset), usually with the ritual bath. As it stands now in the Hindu tradition, the prayer is preceded by *Om bhūr bhuvah svaḥ* (OM earth, atmosphere, sky) and followed by *Om Śanti Śanti Śanti* (OM peace, peace, peace.)<sup>15</sup>

Underlying these three utterances (*vyahṛti*'s): *bhūr bhuvah svaḥ* is a three tiered cosmological conception. Namely, the universe is conceived to be made up of three concomitant parts or layers—earth-middle

12. *Rgveda* III, 62, 10.

13. *Manu* II, 83.

14. Cf. *Rv* I, 159,5; v, 82, 1; *Yajurveda* III, 35; XXII, 9; XXX,2; XXXVI,3; *Gita* 10, 35 suggests that it is the best *mantra*

15. Already in the Upanishadic period this practice seems to be prevalent, cf. *Br. Up.* V, 5, 4. For later practice see *SB* XI, 16, 3 and *Manu* II, 76-81.

region-heaven—and their utterance is meant to evoke a sense of totality and inter-relatedness of everything.<sup>16</sup> Even otherwise the idea of totality is already implied in the opening syllable OM. As it is made up of three letters—AUM, to which a variety of symbolism has been ascribed by tradition.<sup>17</sup> —to produce a single sound, this syllable OM is identified with the entire reality as *Śabda-brahman* in its manifested form.<sup>18</sup> It is not only the sound of OM which is significant, but also the silence following its utterance, and it is this ontic silence of OM which is spoken of as the soundless unmanifested Brahman.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, the *Gayatri mantra* as such is a symbol of totality with respect to space and time. Being composed of three lines, each having eight syllables, the *mantra* points to the three realms of the cosmos and the eight directions thereof, thus signifying spatial totality. Because of its twenty-four syllables (three times eight), it denotes the twelve months with their bright and dark halves.<sup>20</sup>

Thus we find that the entire *mantra* is invested through and through with the totality idea, and this undoubtedly goes quite well with the concept of *samīdhya* as the prayer of time as explained above. *Gayatri* prayer is indeed a participation in the systole and diastole of the whole universe, and when a pious Hindu on getting up early in the morning recites it, he is trying to assume, realize and become the whole reality, for “the *Gayatrī* indeed is the whole universe, all that has come to be . . .”<sup>21</sup> It is to be noted that this prayer originated precisely in the cosmic context of the *samīdhya*, when the sage first uttered it as he was overwhelmed with sentiments of wonder, praise and love, watching the marvellous effects that the rising sun (*savitṛ*), symbol of the supreme God, brought to bear upon the whole visible reality. And as he uttered it, it was not, for him, a mere mental and emotional act, but a real prayer, that is an existential self-disposing, a placing of his total self before God,

16. Cf. Subhash Anand “A Pre-Christain Easter Prayer”, *Vidya Jyoti*, XLVII/3, April, 1983, pp. 135-148.

17. That the three letters A U M stand for the three Vedas : Rv-Sama-Yajus; three Kalas; past-present-future, three divine activities : srsti-stiti-samhāre, Adi-Madhya-Anta of everything that is, etc.

18. Cf. *Katha Up* II, 16

19. Cf. *Mait. Up* VI, 22

20. Cf. *Br. Up.* VI, 14, 1. Also see Subhas Anand, art. cit., p. 137 and R. Panikkar, op. Cit., pp. 406.

21. *CUp* III, 12, 1.

so that he also (like the rest of creation outwardly) may be awakened from within, being filled with God's graceful light.<sup>22</sup>

## 5. Concluding Remarks

*Samdhya* is a profound concept of prayer, where prayer is seen as an existential self-disposing of man before God who awakens man's inner self. This meeting of man and God, which is prayer, is to be seen against the background of a variety of cosmic meetings, especially at the *samdhya*, the sunrise and sunset, the most auspicious prayer-times. Further, it is the time of prayer, in which man discovers himself as the authentic mediator, the living link between all that is time-bound and the Timeless beyond. It may be further observed here that in a very real sense, for Christians at least, Jesus Christ is *samdhya*: Prayer Incarnate. He is the perfect meeting-point of the human and the divine, of God's grace and man's weakness, of the Timeless and the time-bound. The above concept of *samdhya* is well exemplified by the beautiful prayer Gayatrī, even as metaphors like "Light of the world", "Star of the East", "Invincible Sun" point to Jesus Christ, the Incarnate *samdhya*.

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22. Possibly the word *dhimahi* of the Gayatri can be also derived from the root *dha*, as its deponent or middle form with a reflexive meaning. Then *dhimahi* will mean "we place ourselves (before...)". Being set before the rising sun the whole world is awakened to a new life. Similarly man also would dispose himself freely before God for interior awakening, which is prayer, Cf. Subhash Anand, *ibid.* p. 139-149.