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FEMALE DEITIES IN THE RIGVEDA

Writing in the 'Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics', A. A. Macdonell remarks that 'Goddesses play an insignificant part in the Vedas, taking no share in the Government of the World.'¹ Earlier, Max Müller, the doyen of Indologists, held the view that 'not all the Vedic female deities are purely abstract creations', since some of them have their physical prototypes such as *Āpas*, the Waters, whether in the earth or in the sky, *Uṣas*, the Dawn, *Prithivī*, the Earth, *Apsarases*, the Water-nymphs, *Sarasvatī*, the River, *Aditi*, the Beyond, and *Prśni*, the Cloudy sky, the mother of the Maruth.² How these pioneers of Vedic scholarship revelled in the results of comparative philology while interpreting the hoary Vedic hymns, and how tracing a nature personification for every deity became an obsession with them is illustrated in A. B. Keith's observation given below regarding *Indrāṇī* :

One of the most obscure hymns of the Rigveda (X. 86) tells us of a dispute between Indra and *Indrāṇī* over a being styled *Vṛṣākapi* 'male ape.' To seek in it a naturalistic interpretation is rendered from the outset almost hopeless when we recognise that the Chief figure in the dispute, the angry *Indrāṇī*, is clearly not a nature personification in any sense.³

This distinction of deities into concrete and abstracts is a modern phenomenon. It was not known to Yāska, Pāṇini or Śaunaka, even if we leave out Sāyaṇa. To Yāska, a deity (*devatā*) means something quite different from what it means today. Every object that is praised by a poet-seer in a hymn or even in a single verse is *ipso facto* a deity (*devatā*) in his technical language. According to Max Müller, this

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1. Cf. also, A. A. Macdonell, *A Vedic Reader for Students* (Madras : Oxford University Press, 1972), p. xxii.
 2. Max Müller, *Contributions to the Science of Mythology* (London : Longman Green & Co., 1897), Vol. II, p. 818 f.
 3. A. B. Keith, *The Religion and Philosophy of the Veda*, (Cambridge : 1925), Vol. I, p. 61.

is a proof of the existence of fetish-worship in the Veda. Otherwise, he asks, how could a bird or a horse or frogs or a stone, a chariot, a bow, or a whip, be put down as *devatās*?⁴

Some modern mystics, like Sri Aurobindo, would go to the other extreme and hold that all the deities in the Rigveda are allegorical and symbolic of esoteric truths visualised by the seers of yore. But even among traditional interpreters, there is no consensus. As Sādhu Śāntinātha observes :

The nature of *devatās* has been conceived in different ways by different religious schools. According to some, the *devatās* are supernatural powers presiding over the different departments of nature and having influence on human destinies. According to others, they are supernatural personal beings possessing definite bodily forms and having extraordinary powers over the affairs of the world. According to yet another school (*Pūrva-mīmāṃsakas*) they have no definite bodily forms but are the conceptual embodiments of the Vedic Mantras.⁵

It is indeed unambiguously stated in the Rigveda itself that "in the immutable and ultimate region of Vedic hymns, all the gods have their abode. To one who does not know this, what avail is the hymn? To those who know, indeed, the best rewards belong."⁶

The Vedic seers are inspired poets, expert priests and esoteric philosophers—all in one. To isolate their functions is to misunderstand them. The *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* throws light on the Vedic Godhead in these words :

Though One, and without form, He assumes by His *Śakti* or Power innumerable forms hiding his essence. He withdraws them all into Himself at will. May he endow us the right understanding.

That is Agni and that is Āditya;
That is Wind and that is the Moon;
That is effulgent Prayer and That Waters,
and That indeed is the Creator too !

4. *Ibid.*, p. 473.

5. Sādhu Śāntinātha, *The Critical Examination of the Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. I (Amalner : 1938), p. 28.

6. *RV.* I. 164.39.

Thou art male and Thou art female;
 Thou art boy as well as girl;
 Thou foolest like an old man too with a stick!
 Thou art born and also all-pervading!⁷

In this spiritual sense, the plethora of Vedic deities were wont to be understood in the past and thus the perplexities and paradoxical descriptions relating to them resolved. Even Yāska illustrates this by indicating how the goddess *Aditi* may sometimes be called the daughter of *Dakṣa* and sometimes the mother of *Dakṣa*.⁸

*Aditi*⁹ is a highly remarkable goddess in the Rigveda. Yāska crisply states that *Aditi* is *Dākṣāyaṇī* a name which is celebrated in Purāṇic lore as the spouse of Śiva, who later regenerated herself as *Pārvatī*, to wed him again after her self-immolation in the sacrificial fire kindled by her father *Dākṣa* as she could not stand the insult of being an uninvited guest. One might almost hazard the guess that *Aditi* in the Rigveda foreshadows the Mother-Goddess *Śakti* in the later Purāṇas. The glory and power of each and every god is this *Śakti* in the feminine gender. The Rigvedic poets may use the masculine gender or the feminine gender or the neuter gender as their fancy dictates; but one need not on that account rush to the conclusion that they are deliberately personifying one or the other natural phenomenon. The instance cited by Yāska is very significant. Any act that involves superior strength (*bala*) should indeed be ascribed to *Indra*, the god of strength.¹⁰ But 'strength' (*śaci*) is in the feminine gender; that is how *Aditi* is the mother or consort or daughter or sister of most of the gods of the Vedic pantheon. A literal interpretation of the mythical relationship is not called for. These myths follow and do not precede the name *Aditi* whose grammatical gender is feminine. It seems that in the Vedic vocabulary, most of the words denoting beauty, lustre, charm, wisdom, intelligence, generosity, action, etc. were in the feminine gender.

7. Śv. Up. IV. 1-3.

8. *Nirukta*, xi. 2-3 commenting on RV. VI. 50·2.

9. Variouslly interpreted as 'sinlessness' (Benfey, *Orient and Occident*, I. 133); 'Infinity' (Max Müller, *Vedic Hymns*, note on RV. I. 166·12); 'emancipation' (Bergaigne, *La Religion Védique d'après les hymnes du Rigveda*; and Neisser, *Zum Wörterbuch des Rigveda*, Leipzig, 1924); 'a fixed point in the Zodiac' (V. M. Apte); 'universal nature' (J. Muir) and 'earth' (*Sāyaṇa*), etc.

10. 'yā ca kā ca balakṣtirindrakarmaiva tat'; *Nirukta*, VII. 10.

We have a story in the *Kena Upaniṣad* (I. 3) that *Vidyā* or knowledge, Absolute appeared in the form of goddess *Umā* to test the strength of contending gods like *Agni* (Fire) and *Vāyu* (Wind). *Ācārya Śaṅkara* states in his *Bhāṣya* thereon that *Vidyā* appeared before the gods in the form of a goddess deliberately, because “among all beautiful objects, *Vidyā* is the most beautiful.”¹¹ The *Gīta* too explicitly supports this stand when it states that whatever is extraordinary, beautiful or noble is a manifestation of the Godhead’s own infinite potency, in howsoever small a measure.¹² The *Rigveda* too explains this as the omniform of *Indra* due to his *māyā* or immense and inscrutable power.¹³ The tradition is so ingrained in classical Sanskrit literature that a poet from *Mithilā*, as late as the 17th century, described it thus in a lovely stanza :

Sattvādīsthairagaṇitaguṇairhanta
viśvaṃ prasūya
vyaktam datte prahasanakarī yā
kumārīti samjñām,
mohadhvāntaprasaraviratir-
viśvamūrṭiḥ samantād-
ādyā śaktiḥ sphuratu mama sā
dipavad dehagehe !¹⁴

“Though She has brought forth the entire universe by her own constituent elements, like a comedian, she styles herself by the name ‘Virgin’ ! It is only She, the universal who can put an end to the spreading darkness of ignorance ! Like a lamp, may that primordial goddess shine in the home of my body !”

If some scholars are still allergic to this traditional philosophical explanation of the One Goddess transforming herself into many divine forms, it is because earlier Indologists have stressed time and again that the process of historical development is traceable in Vedic mythology; and that philosophical and such other perspectives go against the idea of historical progress. But the truth of the matter is that the division of Vedic gods into Indo-European, Indo-Iranian and Indian eras or periods is itself an unproven hypothesis, based on the shifting sands of verbal etymology as evidenced by the varying interpretations

11. *Vidyā Umārūpiṇī prādurbhūt strīrūpā* :—*sarveṣāṃ hi śobhamānānāṃ śobhanatamā vidyā*—Loc. cit.

12. *The Gītā*, X. 41.

13. ‘*Indro māyābhiḥ pururūpa iyate*’—RV VI. 47. 18.

14. *Jha Commemoration Volume* (Poona : 1937), p. 377.

offered by expert philologists. The stand that Vedic religion was unsupported by an underlying philosophy is as dogmatic as its converse.

However, in Indian tradition, the hymn to Lakṣmī or *Śrisūkta* is authoritative as any other Rigvedic hymn, though present-day scholars usually regard it as apocryphal.¹⁵ Here we have the invocation to the Goddess of Wealth, radiant with gold, refreshed from a bath, not only seated in a lotus but also beaming with the complexion of a lotus.¹⁶ She is said to be the goddess commanding all creatures, every one of them (*iṣvarīm sarvabhūtānām*).¹⁷ Gold, cows, maid-servants and men-servants are all said to be her gifts.¹⁸ Horses, cars and elephants are all in her retinue.¹⁹ It is accompanied by Sāyaṇa's Commentary, unlike other hymns in this group of *Khila* or apocryphal verses.

We have in this *Khila* section a prayer to goddess Durgā also :²⁰

*tā magnivarṇāṁ tapasā jvalantiṁ
vairocaniṁ karmaphaleṣu juṣṭāṁ
Durgāṁ devīm śaraṇamahāṁ prapadye
sutarasi tarase namaḥ.*

I seek as my refuge the goddess Durgā, who is of the colour of fire, burning with austerity, daughter of the Sun, and who is sought after for the reward of rites; adoration be to thy energy, O impetuous goddess !²¹

Similar to these goddesses is *Vāc* or the goddess of Speech, who is celebrated in several verses of the Rigveda besides having an exclusive hymn devoted to her in Book X.²² W. Norman Brown has brought out the creative role of the goddess *Vāc* in a very illuminating article.²³ The following are some of the outstanding features collected by him :

On the top of yonder sky, they say, is *Vāc* who knows all but does not enter all (I. 164.10).

15. See Rigveda, *Vaidik saṁśodhan Mandala* ed., Poona, Vol. IV. 1946; p. 928

16. *Ibid.*, verse 4.

17. *Ibid.*, verse 9.

18. *Ibid.*, verse 14.

19. *Ibid.*, verse 3.

20. See page 957, last line, of edition mentioned above in note 15; same as *Taittirīya Āraṇyaka*, Bibliotheca Indica ed., Calcutta, p. 788.

21. See J. Mait, *Original Sanskrit Texts*, Vol IV, (London : 1873), p. 427.

22. *RV. X* 125.

23. See *Pratidānam* (Moutan ; 1968), p. 393 f.

Vāc was divided in four parts. These are known to Brāhmaṇas with insight. But three parts are hidden and mortals cannot activate them; only the fourth part they speak (I. 164.45).

She is a buffalo cow, who lowed and thus fashioned the tumultuous chaotic floods (I. 164.41).

After *Vāc* had fashioned the floods, the (heavenly) oceans flowed forth from her; in consequence of which the four directions exist, and then the *akṣara* flowed forth; on it this entire universe has its existence (I. 164.42).

The wise have fashioned speech out of their minds like corn winnowed from its chaff. Friends of speech understand its essence. In their speech does good always reside (X. 71.2).

That *Vāc* hidden in the vision of sages was attained by the wise after great search. Having got, they spread out the *Vāc* in myriad ways. The seven metres follow *Vāc* like winged birds (X. 71.3).

One sees *Vāc* and yet sees not! One hears *Vāc* and yet hears not! He is indeed rare to whom *Vāc* herself reveals herself even like a bride to her lover' (X. 71.4).

The hymn of *Vāc* (X. 125) is like a soliloquy of the goddess and its poetic imagery is almost unparalleled in Vedic literature. Here are a few specimens :

I move as I please with Rudras and Vasus, with Ādityas and Viśvedevas. It is I that bear aloft Mitra and Varuṇa, Indra and Agni, and the Aśvins (X. 125.1).

I am the all-commanding goddess, the giver of bounty to men; I am the all-knowing one to whom sacrifices are made. The other gods make me enter diverse forms and places (X. 125.3).

One eats through me; one sees because of me; one breathes or hears by my will. Those who ignore me get lost. Listen to what I say in truth (X. 125.4).

I shall myself declare now what is accepted by gods as well as men. Whomsoever I want, him I shall make great, I shall make divine, I shall make sage-like and I shall make wise (X. 125.5).

Even like the Wind that bloweth as it listeth, I bring up all the worlds myself without external aid. All this vastness beyond heaven and earth is of my own making ! (X. 125.8).

The whole hymn breathes a spirit of out-and-out pantheism, which is a far cry from polytheism or henotheism.

Now we might turn to the goddess Dawn (*Uṣas*), whose beauty and majesty, freshness and power, bounty and kindness, have attracted unflinching all modern scholars because of the unique poetic imagery instanced in most of the hymns addressed to her. She is eulogised in as many as twenty hymns and mentioned some three hundred times. The hymns addressed to her are among the most attractive in the whole of the Rigveda. She is pictured as a maiden decked by her mother in gay attire, and who reveals her bosom to mortal eyes. She is Young, being born again and again, and yet ancient; Her light is, amid all lights, the brightest. She awakens and quickens to life every living creature. She is the beauty who, as if conscious of her bright limbs after bathing, stands erect, desiring that we should behold her. Like a dancer she enrobes herself in glittering garments which both veil and reveal her form. She shines now, and shall shine in the future as in former days. She represents at once the last of the days that have dawned and the first of the days that have yet to come. On her coming, the birds fly up from their nests, and men start their work. She illumines the paths, and drives away the spirits of darkness and evil. She opens the gates of darkness as the cattle their stall.

Uṣas is borne on a shining swift chariot drawn by steeds. The Sun follows her like a lover. She may be either the beloved wife of the Sun or his daughter, because they follow each other day after day.²⁴

Jawaharlal Nehru observes that in these hymns we find "the first outpourings of the human mind, the flow of poetry, the rapture at nature's loveliness and mystery."²⁵

But one need not stop at the poetic level of the Dawn hymns. More often than not, the dawns are depicted in the plural (*uṣāsaḥ*). They herald the beginning of each day consecrated to rituals of sacrifice. They are often described as motherly in gifts and bountiful like cows. In later Āgamas and Tantras, the colour of the All-goddess

24. RV. I. 48—5; I. 123; 10; I. 123; 11; V. 80—5.

25. J. Nehru, *Discovery of India* (Calcutta : 1946), p. 78.

to be contemplated upon by an aspirant is *aruṇa* or orange-red. Śaṅkarācārya in his *Saundaryalaharī* often makes mention of this; and it may not be a wild guess if we suggest that the *Devī* illumines with her red sheen not only the universe outside man, but also the inner heart of a devoted spiritual seeker. The Dawn might thus symbolise inner illumination when taken allegorically. The saffron robe prescribed for Indian ascetics is also reminiscent of this inner truth.

Equally important is the female deity called *Āpah* or Waters in the pantheon of Rigvedic divinities. As a random specimen, we might take hymn X. 9 verses 1-3, which usually form part of the daily Sandhyā ritual of religious people even today :

O goddess of Waters ! You always shower joys on one and all !
May you bestow food upon us; so that we might have a vision of
the Highest Beauty (*mahe raṇāya*) !

You have within you the immortal life-giving sap. May you
feed us with that even like mothers giving breast-milk to their
children !

May we approach you soon, as you are hurrying to relieve us of
our sins. O Waters, do bestow the gift of progeny on us.

May the Goddesses of Waters grant us good luck. May them
serve for our drink. May they cleanse us by their flow.

Harbingers of growing food or fruit and providers of home to
men, O Waters, I seek the joy of sinlessness.

Soma himself has assured me that all medications and joy-giving
fire too are hidden within yourselves, O Waters !

Please grant me the medicine that would cure me of all bodily
ills. May I see sunlight for ever !

Even these few verses are enough to indicate how the Goddesses
of Waters eulogised here are not just physical but custodians of meta-
physical and ethical truths since the devotee seeks to wash away his
sins which obstruct his path of eternal light.

We have so far considered female deities who are really conspicuous
in the Rigveda as understood in the tradition of ancient Indian authors.

The others are not so imposing or all-pervading. Yet even they are more than mere natural phenomena.

For example, the goddess of the Night (*Rātri*) is invoked to dispel the fears of the dark. She is described not as devoid of light, but as decked with starlight. In one hymn (RV X. 127), she is besought to ward off the she-wolf, the he-wolf, and the robbers. She is said to drive away darkness and gloom with her light. Like birds hurrying to their nests, the singer of this hymn is eager to reach home because the goddess is filling the valleys and the heights alike. The bright starlit Night of the Rigveda easily lends itself to be construed as the 'Dark Night of the Soul' familiar to us in mystic lore.

Finally, some abstract concepts which appear like goddesses in the Rigveda because of their grammatical gender may be briefly recounted. These are *medhā* 'prudence,' *aramati* 'good mind,' *purandhi* 'plenitude,' *bhūti* 'prosperity,' *sāmā* 'exertion,' *Yajā* 'action of sacrifice,' *Śradhā* 'Faith,' *rākā* 'munificence,'¹⁵ *sinivālī* 'fertility,' *dhiṣaṇā* 'insight,' *sūnṛtā* 'bounty,' *Nirṛti* 'misfortune,' *idā* 'sacrificial food,' *Bhāratī* 'offering of Bharatas,' etc.

Some of the rivers deified as female goddesses are Sarasvatī, Vipāṭ, Śutudrī and Sindhu.

Prthivi or Earth-goddess is most often spoken of as a dual divinity with her spouse *Dyaus* or Heavenly sky. *Araṇyānī* is the goddess of the Woodland.

The names of the consorts of some major Vedic gods are no more than grammatical verbal exercises, derivatives from masculine terms : *Indrāṇī*, *Varuṇānī*, *Agnāyī*.

Prśni, the speckled cloud, *Saranyū*, the daughter of *Tuaṣṭr* in horse-form, *Suramā*, the divine bitch, etc., appear only sporadically in the Rigveda though they gather importance in later myths and legends.

The above survey is enough to show how the Rigvedic idea of *devatā* was comprehensive enough to provide equal room for male as well as female deities. In fact the genders too were interchangeable at times. Yet there are some major goddesses like *Aditi*, *Vāc* and *Uṣas* to suggest that in the Vedic religion the benign, bounteous and beautiful elements of the Godhead were preferably regarded as femi-

nine, which reminds us of the dictum of Classical literary theorists, like Kuntaka, that a name with a feminine suffix is more delightful to the ear than one with a masculine suffix—" *nāmaiva strīti peśalaṃ*."²⁶ And it is not impossible that there might be hints of some mystic or esoteric experiences within the reach of inspired Vedic seers in at least some of the female deities eulogised by them.

26. *Vakroktijivita*, (ed. K. Krishnamoorthy), (Dharwar : Karnatak University, 1977), II. 22 cf. Also Abhinavagupta—' *strīti nāmāpi madhuraṃ*'—*Locana* (Varanasi ; 1965), p. 393 (ed. J. Pathak).