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SOME PROBLEMATIC WORDS AND PHRASES
IN THE HYMN OF CREATION

The hymn of creation of the R̥gveda (X.129) is one of the finest philosophical poems in the literature of the world. According to Macdonell this poem is «apart from its high literary merit, most noteworthy for the daring speculations which find utterance in so remote an age»¹.

The first two verses of this hymn, which describe in high philosophical tone but simple language the condition that existed before the creation, pose no problem. The remaining five verses, however, have been interpreted in different ways because of the obscurity of some of the words and the elliptical nature of some of the phrases occurring in them. Let us take these verses one by one.

In the third verse a few of the words which pose some problem are *ābhu* in the third pāda and *tadekam* and *ajāyata* in the fourth pāda. *Ābhu* is no doubt formed from the root *bhū*, 'to be'. Macdonell takes it to mean «coming into being»², but it is better to take it with Sāyaṇa as meaning «all-pervading», corresponding to the better known *vibhu* of classical Sanskrit. The *tadekam* of the fourth pāda appears to be the same as the *tadekam* of the third pāda of the preceding verse. But, if so,

1. A. A. MACDONELL, *A History of Sanskrit Literature*, p. 137.

2. A. A. MACDONELL, *A Vedic Reader for Students*, p. 209.

the question naturally arises how one who already existed according to the preceding verse is regarded as being born in this verse. This difficulty can be solved by interpreting *ajāyata* not as 'was born' but as 'manifested' or 'revealed'. The translation of this verse would thus be:

Darkness was in the beginning hidden by darkness. All this was an indistinct fluid. The all pervading one, who was surrounded by the void, manifested himself through the power of (his own) fervour.

In the fourth verse the poet expresses the idea that the bond between the non-existent and the existent was probably desire which in the beginning of creation came upon that one Being. The only word in this verse which has been misinterpreted is *kāma* which certainly does not mean 'sexual desire' as interpreted by Winternitz. The word is derived from the root *kaṃ*, 'to desire', and Sāyaṇa rightly interprets it as *sisṛkṣā*, the desire to create (not procreate, as Winternitz says).³

In the first hemistich of the fifth verse the word *eṣām* is really problematic. However, on a closer scrutiny it becomes clear that this pronoun is used in anticipation for the *retodhāḥ* and *mahimānaḥ* of the third pāda of this verse. The word *raśmi* (from which comes the Hindi word *rassi*) no doubt means string. The word *tiraścīna* which literally means 'oblique' or 'across' has here the sense of 'in the middle' as Sāyaṇa rightly interprets, for it can have no other meaning in the company of the other two words *adhaḥ* ('below') and *upari* ('above'). The poet is clearly thinking of the three regions into which the universe is believed to be divided. In the second hemistich the word *retodhāḥ* is contrasted with *mahimānaḥ* and similarly *prayati* is contrasted with *svadhā*. This contrast clearly implies that the poet has in his mind the two types of creation viz. the animate and the inanimate. The word *retodhāḥ* means 'the reproductive beings' while the word *mahimānaḥ* refers to the inanimate powers. Similarly the word *svadhā* means the inanimate creation and the word *prayati* means the animate creation. As for the words *avastāt* and *parastāt* they are certainly not the same as *adhaḥ* and *upari*. They really mean, as Sāyaṇa rightly interprets, inferior or lower and superior or higher respectively. The translation of the whole verse would thus be:

3. M. WINTERNITZ, *A History of Indian Literature*, Vol. I, p. 99.

Was the string of these (reproductive beings and inanimate powers) first extended in the middle or below or above? (Whatever the case) there came into being the reproductive beings, there came into being the (inanimate) powers. (Of these) the inanimate creation was lower, and the animate was higher.

In the first hemistich of the sixth verse the only problem that presents itself to us is the repetition of the word *kutaḥ*. According to Sāyaṇa the repetition refers to the efficient and the material causes of the creation. It is, however, probable that the repetition implies severality of material. In the second hemistich the word *asya* must refer to this material. The word *visarjanena* (from the root *visrj*) meaning 'to send forth', 'to emit', 'to evolve', should be taken to stand for evolution rather than creation. Thus the translation of the verse would be:

Who knows truly? Who shall here proclaim from which kinds of matter this creation has been produced? The gods came after the evolution of this (matter). Who then knows (the matter) from which (this creation) arose?

In the first hemistich of the last verse of this hymn the poet is wondering if the matter from which this creation arose was eternal or created by the Supreme Being: It is clear that we have to supply the word *tad* in the second pāda as antecedent of *yataḥ* (meaning 'from which' i.e. 'the matter from which') occurring in the first pāda. The word *dadhe* is to be taken as the perfect passive form of the root *dhā* meaning 'to cause', 'create', 'produce', 'generate', 'make'. In the second hemistich the word *asya* occurring in the first pāda is clearly related to *yataḥ* of the first pāda of the first hemistich and the word *adhyakṣaḥ* which follows it is to be understood as meaning 'controller' and not 'surveyor'. In the second pāda of the second hemistich the phrase *yadi va na veda* meaning 'if He does not know' is clearly elliptical. Ellipsis often becomes necessary in verse and there are many instances of this in the Ṛgveda. For example in hymn X. 121 the word *aparasmai* has to be supplied after *kasmai* in its burden *Kasmai devaya haviṣā vidhema* in order to complete the sense. Similarly in verse 10 of hymn IV. 50 the words *tvam ca* have to be supplied after *Indraśca* which is not nominative for vocative as under-

stood by Macdonell ⁴. In the case of the last pāda of the last stanza of the hymn of creation, the words occurring in the last pāda of the sixth stanza of this hymn viz. *atha ko veda* have to be supplied at the end. The translation of this stanza would thus be:

Whether (the matter) from which this creation arose was created or not, He alone knows who in the highest heaven is its controller. If He does not know (then who knows?).

It is thus clear that the poet of this hymn, though firmly believing in the existence of God as the supreme ruler of the universe, did not want to say dogmatically whether the matter from which this universe arose was eternal or created.

4. A.A. MACDONELL, *A Vedic Reader for Students*, p. 90.