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WATER IN THE *ṚG VEDA*

In this dismal and senescent end of the second millenium, International Water Day was practically ignored by the majority of the cybernauts and the remote-controlled beings which populate the fragile crust of the earth, pressed between news of macroeconomics, the violent demonstrations of the dispossessed and the almighty pollution which permeates every corner of our planet. The fact that some one billion four hundred million people in the world have no access to drinking water and that within fifteen years some three billion people will be deprived of water seems to be of little importance.

But when the world was young...

When the world was young, some five thousand years ago, and the Aryan nomads swarmed over the land and the sown plots of Saptasindhava¹, water occupied a special and very important place in their scale of values. These Aryan people, whose principal means of subsistence were cattle raising and pillage, means which demanded great mobility, held water in great esteem. conscious of the fact that their well-being and that of their animals depended on it. Perhaps

1. "Seven rivers". In the *Ṛg Veda*, the name of a region. The "seven rivers", according to Max Müller, could be the five rivers of the Penjab plus the Indus and the Sarasvatī. Others consider that instead of the Sarasvatī, the Kubha (the Kabul river) should be added.

because they lived closer to nature than the vast urban population of today, the Aryans were aware that without water there is no life.

These nomads, in their long migration, brought with them what today we consider their greatest treasure (which is now ours), the *Ṛg Veda*, one of humanity's oldest books. Of course, in that remote antiquity, their priests and bards brought it with them in their memory and therefore orally, as writing had not yet appeared among them.

From the thousand twenty-eight hymns contained in the *Ṛg Veda* distributed in ten books or *maṇḍalas*, the well-informed reader of today, can gather much about the every-day life of the Aryans or Rigvedic man. Today we know, for example, that they had thirty-three principal gods, but we must clarify that they were part of the One, the only God, as it says in the *Ṛg Veda* in various parts, among them hymns I.164 and X.114. Of these thirty-three gods, eleven inhabited heaven, eleven the earth and eleven the waters². The very fact that a third of their gods inhabited the waters is indicative of the importance of these in their culture. Furthermore, in the *Ṛg Veda* there are six hymns dedicated exclusively to the waters.

But let us have a look at some of the gods which in the *Ṛg Veda* are mentioned in connection with water. We shall begin with Varuṇa, which of these was the god king of the universe, the god of natural order and sometimes moral order, the closest, perhaps, to the modern idea of a supreme god. In the oldest part of the *Ṛg*³ in a hymn dedicated to him, number 28 of *maṇḍala* II, fourth stanza:

*He made them flow, the Āditya, the Sustainer:
the rivers run by Varuṇa's commandment.
These feel no weariness, nor cease from flowing:
swift have they flown like birds in air around us.*⁴

2. *Ṛgvedasamhitā*. Translation from the Sanskrit into Spanish, with an analytic study by Juan Miguel de Mora. First edition: Colección de Estudios Orientales, Editorial Diana, Mexico, 1974, p. 95.

3. The specialists in these matters agree that *maṇḍalas* II to VII are the oldest, followed by I, VIII, IX and X, which is considered the most recent.

4. For this paper. I have used the translation from Sanskrit into English done by Ralph T. H. Griffith. See *The Hymns of the Ṛg Veda*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1973.

Further on, we see Varuṇa once more, this Varuṇa who in post-Vedic times will be connected more and more with the waters and the oceans, until he almost totally disappears. Hymn 87 of *maṇḍala* VII, dedicated to him, begins thus:

*Varuṇa cut a path way out for Sūrya,
and led the watery floods of rivers onward.
The Mares, as in a race, speed on in order.
He made great channels for the days to follow.*

In another hymn to Varuṇa, I.25, stanza number 7 reads.

*He knows the path of birds that fly through
heaven, and, Sovran of the sea,
He knows the ships that are thereon.*

The Maruts, sons of Rudra, the dark clouds, are, in the *Ṛg Veda*, the storm gods and they gallop across heaven on their fallow deer or antilopes in seven troops of seven Maruts each. Various hymns, particularly those from V.52 to 61, are dedicated to them. We read, for example, in V.53.6,7:

*Munificent Heroes, they have cast heaven's treasury
down for the worshipper's behoof:
They set the storm-cloud free to stream through both
the worlds, and rainfloods flow o'er desert spots.*

*The bursting streams in billowy flood have spread abroad.
like milch-kine, o'er the firmament.
Like swift steeds hasting to their journey's resting-place.
to every side run glittering brooks.*

But it is not only the Maruts who bring rain water to man. Parjanya is the Vedic god of rain, he is the personification of rain and is usually represented as a bull. In hymn V.83 dedicated to him, we read in the first stanza, wherein reference is made to rain as semen or seed:

*Sing with these songs thy welcome to the Mighty,
with adoration praise and call Parjanya.
The Bull, loud roaring, swift to send his bounty,
lays in the plants the seed for germination.*

In VII.101.2, again, as so many other times, Parjanya is spoken of in conjunction with water:

*Giver of growth to plants, the God who ruleth over
the waters and all moving creatures,
Vouchsafe us triple shelter for our refuge, and
threefold light to succour and befriend us.*

Now one cannot speak of water in the *Ṛg Veda* without mentioning the “household priest”, Agni, the god of fire. Someone who is not versed in Rigvedic theology could very well ask: “What does fire have to do with water? Anyone knows these are two opposing elements.”

To discuss this subject we must remember that Rigvedic man was among the most advanced and most observant of his time, and regarding water, he was already aware of the immensity of the sea. In hymn VII.33.8a we read:

*Like the Sun’s growing glory is their splendour, and like
the sea’s is their unfathomed greatness.*

Also, in X.109.1a, the incalculable volume of the sea is mentioned:

*These first, the boundless Sea, and Mātariśvan,
fierce-glowing Fire, the Strong, the Bliss-bestower.*

Rigvedic man was also aware that rivers flow toward the sea:

*Some floods unite themselves and other join them:
the sounding rivers fill one common storehouse. (II.35.3a)*

*When his wrath thundered, when he rent Vṛtra to pieces,
limb by limb,
He sent the waters to the sea. (VIII.6.13)*

*Let the drops pass within thee as the rivers
flow into the sea... (VIII.81.22a)*

We are told that these same rivers never fill the sea to which they flow in hymn 85 of *maṇḍala* V, stanza 6, which refers to Varuṇa:

*None, verily, hath ever let or hindered this
the most wise God's mighty deed of magic,
Whereby with all their flood, the lucid rivers fill
not one sea wherein they pour their waters.*

Griffith's "lucid rivers" become "rivières chatoyantes" in Louis Renou's translation, one of the meanings of "chatoyantes" being "changing," and "rios cambiantes" in Juan Miguel de Mora's translation, "cambiantes" meaning "changing", "variable", because rivers move and their reflections are forever changing.

We would like to open a parenthesis here to point out that the "changing rivers" of the *Ṛg Veda* were ahead of those of Heraclitus by many centuries, if we consider that the oldest *maṇḍalas* of the *Ṛg*, by a very conservative estimate, date back to some 2,000 years before the Common Era, and that Heraclitus flourished between the 6th and 5th centuries B.C. Let us recall that Heraclitus says:

*You cannot embark twice in the same river, for new waters run
behind the waters.⁵*

Juan Miguel de Mora, in the introductory study which prologues his translation from Sanskrit into Spanish of some of the hymns of the

5. Gaos, José, *Antología de la filosofía griega*. El Colecio de México, 2nd corrected edition, 1968, p.26.

*Rg*⁶ compares this text by Heraclitus with some verses from the tenth *maṇḍala* hymn 37.2:

*All else that is in motion finds a place of rest: the waters
ever flow and ever mounts the Sun.*

Which proves, without a shadow of a doubt, that the idea of the changing rivers” has a continuity within the *saṃhitā*, from the oldest period to the most recent. This idea is endorsed a new in the same *maṇḍala*, hymn 89.2 to Indra, owed, according to Griffith, to the ṛṣi Renu:

Like a stream resting not but ever active...

Rigvedic man had not missed the fact that water evaporates either. This is underlined by De Mora (page 108) and he offers hymn V.55.5 as proof:

*Maruts, from the Ocean ye uplift the rain, and fraught
with vaporous moisture pour the torrents down.*

Well this same Rigvedic man, who was so observant of nature to which he was so intimately tied, was aware, regarding Agni, fire, that in the form of lightning he goes forth from amid the rain-laden clouds and in doing so releases the rain and sets fire to the trees below. Let us examine some of the verses which mention this phenomenon, of the many contained in the Rigvedic *saṃhitā*. We shall begin with an example from the oldest *maṇḍala*, number II. In hymn number 35, stanza 1, the ṛṣi sings to Agni Apāṃnapat, Agni “son of the Waters”:

6. De Mora, Juan Miguel: *op. cit.*

*Eager for spoil my flow of speech I utter: may the
Floods' Child accept my songs with favour.
Will not the rapid Son of Waters make them lovely.
for he it is who shall enjoy them?*

In the following *maṇḍala*, hymn 9 dedicated to Agni, he is spoken of again in the same fashion:

... the young plants hath he entered, Child of Waters. (3b)

In the most recent portion of the Ṛg, we also find Agni as “Son of the Waters.” Hymn I.95 which is dedicated to him reads:

*Three several places of his birth they honour, in mid-air,
in the heaven, and in the waters. (3a)*

*The germ of many, from the waters' bosom he goes
forth, wise and great, of Godlike nature. (4b)*

In a curious hymn in dialogue form from the tenth *maṇḍala*, X.51, Agni is reproached by the gods for having hidden himself in the waters, wrapped in a large and strong membrane.

So we have seen how an apparent contradiction, that fire is born of water, has a logical foundation. And Rigvedic man repeated this in his hymns four thousand years ago.

But there is another fact which is repeated over and over again in the *Ṛg Veda* regarding water, and that is the battle between Indra, the ideal warrior of the Aryans become god, and the demon, the dragon, Vṛtra, who has seized it. Needless to say, Indra, throughout some two hundred and fifty hymns in this first of four *saṃhitās*, always defeats Vṛtra. We can trace the battle from the oldest *maṇḍala*. In *maṇḍala* III, for example, in hymn 41.4, the ṛṣi Viśvāmitra sings to Indra in the *triṣṭup* metre:

*Vṛtra-slayer, be thou pleased with these libations,
with these hymns,
Song-loving Indra, with our lauds.*

Further on, ṛṣi Śunahotra, also in the *trīṣṭup* metre, evokes the combat between Indra and Vṛtra in hymn VI.34.5:

*To him this mighty eulogy, to Indra hath this our laud
been uttered by the poets,
That in the great encounter with the foemen, Loved of
all life, Indra may guard and help us.*

One can trace the struggle between Indra and Vṛtra throughout the whole collection of hymns, to the last *maṇḍalas*, the most recent ones:

*Through his own strength Indra with bolt of thunder cut
piece-meal Vṛtra, drier up of waters.
He let the floods go free, like cows imprisoned, for glory,
with a heart inclined to bounty. (I.61.10)*

*What Splendid One, Loud-voiced, Far-striding, dost thou,
well-knowing, urge us to exalt with praises?
What give we him? When his might dawned, he fashioned
the Vṛtra-slaying bolt, and sent us waters. (X.99.1)*

But what is the true significance of the fight between Indra, one of the principal gods of the Ṛg, and Vṛtra, the “baddy” par excellence, whose name is used as a synonym for “enemy” in many hymns?

Several indologists of the past generation believed that Indra and Vṛtra were no more than symbols, of good and evil in the last analysis. But there are now many more recent indologists who believe that the battle between Indra and Vṛtra is more connected to reality than one would think, the Ṛg *Veda* being such an ancient text. Damodar D. Kosambi, for example, is of the opinion that

... it must be about the destruction of a dike, with all the metaphors one will. The word *vṛtra*, as the philologists have demonstrated, means “obstacle” or “barrier,” and not exactly “demon”... Flooded fields, blocked rivers: all of that complicated the task of the Aryan nomads who had to get their cattle to graze.⁷

Juan Miguel de Mora seems to coincide with Kosambi, believing that

In its origins, the myth of the fight between Indra and Vṛtra and the victory of the former was surely associated with a great flood, a freshet, or heavy rains after a period of drought, or perhaps with the irrigation channels of the Indus Valley culture which blocked the passage of the herds of the Bharatas, but obviously related to water somewhere, because it is thus, based on a fact, perhaps minimal, that great myths are born.⁸

We have seen throughout all the quotations contained in this text that water was an extremely important element for Rigvedic man. But it would be interesting for him to tell us why it was so important for him. His reasons are easy to trace in the Ṛg. Let us look at a few, starting with the most obvious and simple ones and going on to the more complex ones.

The most basic reason is that water is benign and brings richness with it. In hymn X.9.1,2, dedicated to the waters, we read:

*Ye, Waters, are beneficent: so help ye us to energy
That we may look on great delight.*

*Give us a portion of the sap, the most auspicious
that ye have,
Like mothers in their longing love.*

Hymn X. 124.7b is even clearer in this regard, as it speaks of “the waters that bring prosperity.” And IX.33, dedicated to Soma, as are

7. *Culture et civilisation de l'Inde ancienne*, translated from English into French by Charles Malamoud, « Textes à l'appui » collection, François Maspero, Paris, 1970, p. 108.

8. De Mora, Juan Miguel, *op. cit.*, 3rd edition, “Cien del Mundo” collection, Consejo Nacional para La Cultura y las Artes, Mexico, 1989, p. 78.

the majority of the hymns in the second to last *maṇḍala*, makes the following petition in its stanza 6:

*From every side, O Soma, for our profit,
pour thou forth four seas
Filled full of riches thousandfold.*

Let us remember that the two principal means of subsistence of the Aryan nomads were cattle raising and pillage warfare. And cattle need water, not only to drink but also for periodic bathing which guarantees their health. Livestock must be fed and the plants it eats, in their multiple forms, cannot exist without water. So cattle eat and drink, grow and multiply, and with them the wealth of their owner also multiplies. In Rigvedic hymns there are many references to the waters quenching the thirst of the cattle and feeding plants which, thanks to them, can grow.

Now the Rigvedic *ṛṣis* could be very precise and specific when singing the praises of the waters. Many, for example, praised the healing power of water, specifying that it contains a balm that cures. Among them was *ṛṣi* Medhātithi who, in his hymn dedicated to Vāyu, the wind, and to others, hymn 1.23, said in stanzas 19 and 20, written in the *pura-uṣṇih* and *anuṣṭup* metres respectively:

*Amrit is in the Waters, in the Waters there is
healing balm:
Be swift, ye Gods, to give them praise.*

*Within the Waters -Soma thus hath told me-
dwell all balms that heal,
And Agni, he who blesseth all. The Waters
hold all medicines.*

The Seven *Ṛṣis*, in X. 137 dedicated to the Viśvedevas, are even more precise in stanza 6:

*The Waters have their healing power, the
Waters drive disease away.
The Waters have a balm for all: let them
make medicine for thee.*

Other poets spoke in their compositions of the medicine contained in the waters:

*O Waters, teem with medicine to keep my
body safe from harm,
So that I long may see the Sun. (X.9.7)*

Ṛjīśvan, in VI.50 dedicated to the Viśvedevas, calls the waters physiciens, which is a step forward within the metaphor. Let us see stanza 7:

*Give full protection. Friends of man, we Waters, in peace
and trouble, to our sons and grandsons.
For ye are our most motherly physiciens, parents of all
that standeth, all that moveth.*

The next step that is taken within the thought process of the Rigvedic poet is very important because it goes from the immediate physical realm of the health of the human body to the realm of moral health, of cleanliness, of spiritual purity. There are four stanzas in hymn I.23 (20 to 23) dedicated to Vāyu, which are repeated word for word in hymn X.9 (6 to 9) dedicated to the waters. The first hymn is attributed by Griffith to Medhātithi and the second to Triśiras or Sindhudvīpa. The stanza which interests us at this moment is number 22 of I.23 which is the same as number 8 of X.9.

*Whatever sin is found in me, whatever evil
I have wrought.
If I have lied or falsely sworn, Waters,
remove it far from me.*

The use of water as a moral purifier in Vedism is a distant reminder of the use of holy water in Christian baptisms which washes away original sin. The difference is that in Hinduism there is no sin similar to that found in the Judaeo-Christian tradition.

For Saint Augustine, for example, sin was “what is said, done or desired against eternal law,” this last being divine will (*Contra Faustum* XXII, 27). Saint Thomas accepted this definition, noting that eternal law is twofold for man: “one near and homogeneous, that is reason, and another distant and primary, that is eternal law, which is like the reason of God himself” (*Summa Theologica* II, lq. 71 a.6). Closer to the present, we find that for Kant sin was “the transgression of moral law as divine commandment” (*Religion*, section IV; section Ic).

I have in my possession three translations of X.9.8 from the Sanskrit into Spanish by Juan Miguel de Mora, Francisco Villar Liébana and Fernando Tola. The word “sin” is not used by any of the three. Instead they employ “error”, “evil” and “injustice” respectively. However, Griffith does use “sin” in his translation into English (page 534). This is surely due to a tendency, in the English of the 19th century to impose the English pattern on all foreign cultures. England was then the mistress of the entire world. As had occurred before with Spain, the sun never set on her dominions. This fact led many Englishmen (not all, fortunately) to behave with arrogance and to consider themselves the measure of all things.

But getting back to our subject, the concept of water as the origin of everything on earth is very advanced and complex and more difficult to clarify. It is an idea whose genesis has not yet been explained, but the fact is that it is found in the *Rg Veda*. We have just seen the waters as the ancestors of all that is still and all that moves in *maṇḍala* VI which is among the oldest. In the following *maṇḍala*, also among the oldest, we see in hymn 34, stanza 2:

*The waters listen as they flow along; they
know the origin of heaven and earth.*

Griffith, in his commentary on this fragment, quotes Wilson who says: “An allusion, perhaps, to the subsequently received cosmogony,

as in *Manu*, that water was the first of created things.”

In *maṇḍala* X the references to water as the origin of everything are more numerous. For example, X.82.5 and 6 asks and replies:

*That which is earlier than this earth and heaven,
before the Asuras and Gods had being,
What was the germ primeval which the waters
received where all the Gods were seen together?*

*The waters, they received that germ primeval wherein
the Gods were gathered all together.
It rested set upon the Unborn's navel,
that One wherein abide all things existing.*

We should observe that “the Gods” are not the One, the creator, but rather that it comes before them, as the primeval germ precedes the later differentiation.

Juan Miguel De Mora, in commenting on the fact that Rigvedic man considered the waters as the origin, says that if indeed Thales of the Milesian School of Greek Philosophy (624-548 B.C.) coincided with him, identifying fundamental matter with water “without which, he states, there can be no life,” modern scientists have the same idea about water as the origin of life, and he quotes John D. Dylwin in *Animals I*:

... the sea is supposed to be the cradle of all life. All those beings which presently live on earth are considered descendants of forms which lived in the sea.

But getting back to the *Ṛg*, we must not think that X.82, dedicated to Viśvakarman, “he who creates all,” contains the only mention of this theory or belief. Let us see what hymn X.121, dedicated to Prajāpati, “lord of all creatures” (and only God), says in its stanzas 7 and 8:

*What time the mighty waters came, containing the
universal germ, producing Agni,
Thence sprang the Gods' one spirit into being. What
God shall we adore with our oblation?*

*He in his might surveyed the floods containing productive
force and generating Worship.
He is the God of gods, and none beside him. What
God shall we adore with our oblation?*

Of all these last quotations, we can gather why the waters were so important to Rigvedic man. He had reasons so simple and direct as that water is the bearer of wealth and health, and more complex reasons as that waters bring with them moral purity and are the origin of everything on earth. Perhaps hymn X.9, which we have already mentioned, perfectly expresses what the waters are both for Rigvedic man and for post-modern man:

*I beg the Floods to give us balm, these Queens
who rule o'er precious things,
And have supreme control of men. (5)*

Without water life could not have come to be, at least not on Earth. We would do well, we, the inhabitants of this small planet, to obey the call that comes to us from remotest antiquity, to acquire a profound awareness of the importance of water and to act in consequence, peacefully, in a united effort, and never through violence.

Unfortunately, we have seen throughout all of human history, that it is easier for man, much easier, to use a stick than to use his reasoning powers.