

RTA as a Vedic God: An Analysis

Abstract

The word *rta* stand for the unerring order found in the course of natural phenomena which is defined in the vedas, and also, it is the moral order in obedience to which gods and men are to conduct themselves. The concept of *rta* is not a speculative abstraction but a concrete reality which is apprehended directly in the course of natural phenomena. Further, it is not a mythical concept for nowhere the deification or anthropomorphication of *rta* is found. It is rather discussed in man's relation with nature and with fellow men. The vedic idea of nature is not disconnected with man's social and personal experience and thus a complex idea of cosmic-moral order found in vedic rituals. The object of this research paper is to examine the exact meaning and significance of *rta* in the vedic cosmos.

Keywords: Anthropomorphication, Social, Analysis, Phenomena.

Introduction

Rta which expresses an idea that is fundamental to the vedic view of reality, The root-derivation method has been a favored method for establishing a core meaning for difficult terms. It is asserted that root suggests a certain idea which is embodied in the derivative. M.Monier-Williams derives *rta* from the root *r* which means "to go, rise, tend upwards, obtain to raise etc".¹ According to Abel Bergaigne, "the word *rta* is only an ancient past participle from the root *r* of which the meaning may be traced from the two principle meanings –'to rise and to adapt oneself to'.² *Rta* then meant originally 'what is adapted'. V.M. Apte asserted that *rta*'s primary meaning is to be taken in a physical sense. He argues that *rta*, as that which is gone over correctly is to be taken in a physical sense because the *RgVeda* shows that *rta* is described with attributes of spaciality location, boundary, extension and dimension.³ The root - derivation method, therefore, holds little promise for establishing a fully applicable core meaning for the term '*rta*'. Arguments on the word '*rta*' has led to a general consensus that it means 'Law/Order/Truth'. The full significance of *rta* cannot be accommodated by the semantic contents of either the English terms 'Law/Order/Truth' or their European "equivalents".⁴

Though *rta* is first found in the Veda, its origin, however, can be traced back to much earlier prehistoric age called Indo-Iranian period. The concept of *rta* is inherited from the age when Indian and Iranian Aryans were still one people. This conjecture about the prehistoric origin of '*rta*' is based upon the conceptual and linguistic similarities between Persian Zend Avesta and the Veda which inherited much in common from the Indo-Iranian period. The *rta* in the Veda corresponds to *asha* or *areta* of the Avesta which too means the cosmic order.⁵ The discoveries in the field of comparative mythology and ethnology suggest that Aryans had migrated in the pre-vedic times to the plains of Indus from Iranian highlands with some traditional ritual practices, ethical notions and prehistoric gods.

The Vedic cosmogony is the account of the origin of the established cosmos. It provides information on the character of those forces which represent the necessary preconditions for the birth of *rta* into the world of ordered being. The Vedic cosmogony is the account of the struggle between the forces of enclosure (forces which tend to inhibit the establishment of the ordered cosmos) and forces of freedom (forces which strive to establish the cosmos). The character of these forces, with which *rta* is either allied or opposed, will serve as the starting point from which the significance of *rta* can be understood. It is assumed that *rta* was established only after the forces of freedom and expansion gained victory over the powers of inhibition and enclosure. Thus, *rta* is associated with the powers of freedom, expansion and liberation. The references found in Vedic hymns that men and gods must sustain and protect the *rta* if the realm of *sat* is to be maintained, Man is assigned a unique place in the cosmos because it is by his performance of the sacrifice that the gods are strengthened and the *rta* is secured.

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Rta and the Vedic Gods

The Veda considers gods as luminous, benevolent and right minded devine entities. The Sanskrit word for gods devas, with its root div or dyu, suggests that gods are personified luminous manifestations of Nature. In the Veda, most of the gods represent ostensible natural phenomena. Though some of the gods are thoroughly anthropomorphized in course of time, yet there are some gods who are still not deprived of their transparent natural characters. Among such gods are Dyaus(sky), Agni(fire), Vayu(air), Prithvi(earth), Usha(dawn),Soma(plant named soma),Surya(sun). However, the most important Vedic gods are representatives of natural objects and phenomena. Nature as a whole, every natural object between the sky and earth found a place in the vedic patheon. Infact, Father Sky (Dyaus pitar) and Mother Earth are said to be the parents of all the gods.⁶ Hence, all the gods owe their origin to Nature.However, the idea of Father sky, appears to be much archaic, having its corresponding words in Greek Zeus Pater and Roman Diespiter or Jupiter.

The Nature-worship is common to all primitive peoples of the world. The Veda stands as the paradigm for understanding how natural phenomena acquire the status of deities through the primitive art of deification and myth-making."Deprived of hymns of the Rg-veda, a man can hardly know to this day that mythology is the first and fundamental adjustment of the individual human life to the outer active, interfering, dynamic world, which surrounds and influences man from the moment when he opens his eyes upon the wonders of its unexplained phenomena. In this sense, vedic mythology in its day what empirical science is in present day.⁷ In this regard, Thomson asserted,"...man's consciousness of the world around him is a social image or a product of society, Hence, an analytical study of a mythology provides us with, if not a detailed description, the broad outlines of the social reality.⁸

Rta as the order in the universe must also guide the gods. Precisely the Rgveda speaks of gods in relation to rta. Gods are intimately connected with rta throughout the Samhita. The epithets like Rtajala, Rtajna,Rtavrdh etc. are frequently given to gods. What is more remarkable is that nowhere gods are viewed as controllers of rta rather than followers or upholders of rta. Generally, all the gods, at one place or the other, are related to rta as its followers or upholders. Heaven and Earth are regarded as the mothers of rta,⁹ Goddess Dawn is said to be arising according to rta,¹⁰

Mitra and Varuna are said to have attained their mighty power through rta and by being lovers and cherishers of rta. They are the gods who by rta, upholds rta and are the lords of shining light of rta.¹¹ They are true to rta, born in rta and the strengtheners of rta. As guardians of rta, Mitra and Varuna are said to have caused the cows to stream, the plants to flourish and by scattering the swift drops, sent down the rain.¹² All the working of rta are ascribed to Mitra and Varuna in general. Varuna is regarded as the moral chastiser and is prayed for moral condonation

but Mitra is generally viewed as mere moral exhorter. This shows the relatively greater significance of Varuna over his partner.

Rta is the very form of Varuna, he is the principle guide of rta. He is the every alert observer of rta among men. He is an omniscient god who knows every act of men.¹³ Atharva-Veda speaks of Varuna as the god whom no one can conceal one's thoughts and whenever two people sit together and scheme, Varuna will be there as the third man in invisible form and knows it. He is omnipresent and is hidden even in a pretty drop of water. Even winking of men are counted by him¹⁴. Adityas are said to be the spies of Varuna who observe the moral conduct of men.

Rta as a Sphere/ Mode of Being

The realm of sat / rta represents both a sphere and mode of being Rta as a womb gives birth to the gods. The gods are said to be rtajata, rtaja, and rtaprajata. The idea expressed in this relationship is that the gods are connected to the rta in an intimate way. They come from rta, their foundation is rta and so, like the child and its parent, the gods bear the characteristics of rta.¹⁵ The gods function in a manner which conforms to the dynamic nexus of rta and take up, as their mode of being, the qualities of the sphere to which they belong. There are a number of epithets which indicates the close relationship between rta and the gods. Indra is said to have yoked by/united with rta when he destroyed vala. In giving birth to Mitra and Varuna, Aditi is called rtavari.¹⁶ Mitra and Varuna, who described as being tuvijata(strong by nature) and uruksaya (who possess a wide domain) are rataspr(connected to rta) The Adityas are called rtavan because they protect all creatures.¹⁷ The god Agni is described as ratasyagopah, because he destroys evil beings. The relation between gods and rta is the foundation for the power of the gods. In this context, the term rtavrdh may mean both, "one who strengthens rta" and "one who is strong by means of rta". The gods gain their strength from rta and through that strength they protect the rta from the assault of the forces of anrta.

Rta as the Order, Stability and Reliability of Phenomena

The connection between rta and the regular periodic movement of phenomena is indicated at RV 1.123 which states that the dawns possess the same daily form because they follow the statute of Varuna, which is the statute of rta. Rta, as the force which regulates the periodic movements of phenomena, is associated with the twelve-spoked wheel of the year, the wheel is called the chakram rtasya. The connection between rta and the order, stability and reliability of established phenomena is hinted at by the use of the term 'rtu' which like 'rta' is derived from the root r. According to V.M. Apte, rtu means a season, period of time, fixed order or rule. The relation between seasonal regularity and fixed order is transparent; one implies the other. Thus in RV 2.13.1, rtu represents the seasons, while at RV 1.162.19. it is the principle of cosmic order. The term rta functions in a similar manner.¹⁸

The regulating and stabilizing power of the rta is often effected through the rule of Varuna. Varuna derives the chariot of rta i.e. he rules by means of rta. This power of rule is manifested in holding things distinct, yet related, and in creating definite spheres of activity.¹⁹ Varuna established the rta by means of his own rta, which means that because his sphere and mode of being is rta, he brings all of the cosmos into conformity with rta. In RV 5.62.1. It is stated that Varuna established heaven and earth, caused the cows to stream forth, caused the plants to flourish, and made the rains fall. It is also stated in RV 7.87. 1-2 that varuna cut out a pathway for the sun and make great channels for the days to follow. The dynamic nexus of rta clearly foreshadows its role as the force of order and stability in the cosmos. Rta, as the agent of freedom, creates vast space for the cosmos to flourish in. Within this vast space, it establishes safe routes and pathways upon which individual entities may perform their functions. Thus, rta is manifested in the regular order of temporal and spacial phenomena.

Rta as the Sacrifice and the Effective Force of the Sacrifice

Rta is several times identified with the sacrifice in the Rg Veda. Rta and Yajna are also apparently used to designate the same practice in RV 7.21. which states that Indra is roused by the sacrifice, the gods come to the sacrifice and that they protect the sacrifice from those who are not worthy to participate in it. The term 'rta' is used to designate the sacrifice because it is the force which makes that rite effective. The sacrificer is able to purge the cosmos by burning up those demons who are against the god Indra. Agni, the luminous god of fire, who is the great envoy of the sacrifice, was established among men as a friend to work according to the rta. Accordingly, he makes the sacrifice agreeable to the god by taking it to them along the path of rta. At RV 4.3.4. the rsi implores Agni to "Be attentive to this our work, the rta, O Agni, You, who are the knower of rta."²⁰

In Rg Veda at several places, it is signified that those who observe, perform and maintain the rta and the yajna and thereby gain access to the freedom, safety, security, stability etc. Agni gives special wisdom or power to the one who is rtayat (who perform yajna). All aspects of life are sweet (madhu) for the rtayat, the sacrificer, who is able to persuade the Adityas to promote his welfare, is called rtacit (who has intimate contact with the rta). The ancient fathers (pitra), who were rsis, attained to the abode of light because they were rtasap (who perform the rta). 'rtavan' and 'rtavrdh' in RV 10.154.4. According to Monier Williams, the epithet 'rtasap' means 'who perform the sacrifice' when it is applied to men, but 'who accepts the sacrifice' when it is applied to gods²¹.

Rta as Satya and Truth in Speech

The meanings of both terms rta and sat are so intertwined that it is difficult to maintain a rigid distinction between them. Sat is 'being' manifested by the establishment of the cosmos, while rta is the mode of being which promotes the freedom, safety,

security and stability of the sat. Rta is also aligned with satya – a derivative of sat. According to J. Gonda, the meaning of satya can be grasped in a variety of related ways. Satya may be paraphrased by "what is real, true, essential, being in conformity with, belonging to, truthfulness in mind, speech of action." Verbal truth is only one side of the concept which is much more general. A being who is satya acts in accordance with real facts and unshakable norms, with that order and truth on which the cosmos is supposed to be founded, he is true to the validity of his own nature, and hence also reliable.²² it seems reasonable to understand the formal significance of satya as "the principle of conformity to sat."

Satya, when used an abstract substantive, is a principle as fundamental to cosmos as rta. The principle of being accord with sat (satya), and the principle of freedom, safety, security and stability appear to be two fundamental preconditions for the existence of the cosmos. Satya is sometimes used with words which signify conformity with rta. It is also expressed in Rg Veda that the truth/essence/reality of an entity is established by its association with rta and satya.

Rta and Satya appear to signify the same thing when used in connection with speech. Speech which conforms to rta or satya appears to have a compelling effect. The rsi at RV 1.185.10. declares that he has spoken the rta. On the basis of this, he then implores heaven and earth to protect him from reproach and affliction and let his true speech come to be fulfilled. It appears that in speaking or declaring rta or satya, one testifies to the fact that one has brought one's words, and perhaps one's entire being, into conformity with reality.

Rta and Satya are both principles upon which the cosmos is found. In this respect, they are forces which no entity can resist to do so would amount to violating that upon which any entity is established in its being. Rta like satya is used to denote 'truth' in speech.²³ In the context of dynamic nexus of rta, it can be mentioned that rta is associated with the sound which overcomes evil and dispells ignorance. Rta therefore, is 'truth' in speech because it is the effective force which, when embodied in the words of men, causes the speaker to commune with, and participate in that upon which the whole of reality is sustained the rta.

Rta and Dharma

Dharma regularly occurs with rta in Rgveda. These two terms are connected in such a way that rta is the foundation of dharma. This is exemplified by the fact that rta never governs the genitive of dharma although dharma does govern the genitive of rta. Both words play a vital role in the language of the order and stability of phenomena. The fact that rta's connection with stability and order is most clearly brought out when it occurs with root dhr and dharma is a signal that rta means something more than natural order. The specific force of stability and order is the dharma and dharma is founded upon rta. Thus dharma appears to pertain most directly to individual things, while rta pertains to the cosmos as a whole. The sun follows its course both according to the

dharma (RV 1.60.1) and rta (RV 1.136.2). In the first instance, the sun follows its course because it is its inherent nature to do so; in the second case, the sun follows its course because rta governs its place in the over all cosmic structure. Briefly stating that rta is the comprehensive world principle of freedom, safety, security etc. while dharma is the specific aspect of rta representing the power which supports, maintains and sustains the cosmos.

The ethical gravity of rta can be understood from various hymns of the Rg-veda, Which ostentate a high degree of moral rectitude. Rta provided moral security and an impetus for moral exertion. Rta offers stability through harmonious co-existence and collective social-life. Rta beyond doubt was the grand moral order which offered moral solace to the early vedic people. It entails not only yajna as an ethical practice but also a set of values cherished by Aryans. One hymn distinguishes yajna from witchcraft or foul magic in terms of rta.²⁴ While sacrifice invokes gods in accordance with rta, foul magic is contrary to rta. So, rta not only characterizes the moral aspect of yajna but also, by itself stands as a principle of rectitude. Rta is not a mere ideal set for human being but it is a grand order adhered to by gods also. Rta is a conception which has its roots in a particular form of life as reflected in the cosmos.

The most immediate moral principle observed among gods, the followers and upholders of rta, is harmony. As all of them work under the eternal law, they are unanimous or one-minded. The order in the universe is revealed through the harmonious working of the gods. They stand as a model for harmonious- collective life. In fact, the idea of harmony among gods itself is a cosmic reflection of the primitive collective life. This fundamental harmony and unanimity constitutes the gist of rta, the normal order of the early vedic people.

Conclusion

With the foregoing analysis, it is clear that rta was the moral order of the primitive collective homogenous communal living, which founded on fraternity, kinship and unanimity. The conclusion of the present study is that although no single image, association or specific application can adequately define rta, these, when melted together into a unified bond, provide the rationale for viewing this complicated term as a kind of 'force' or 'power' which

is the necessary precondition for the freedom, safety, security, stability, truth, order, law etc of the established cosmos. The last verse of the Rgveda is a fitting epitaph to define rta:

"One and the same by your resolve,
and be your minds of one accord.

United be the thoughts of all that all
may happily agree."²⁵

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