

The Vedic Schism

By Harischandra Kaviratna

Somewhere in the third millennium BC a great conference was held on the slopes of the Himalayas to discuss a problematic Vedic injunction which was threatening to bring about a serious schism in the ceremonial religion. At that time there were two schools of thought, one upholding animal sacrifice, and the other vehemently protesting it. The orthodox Brahmins maintained that it was the sole means of propitiating the gods, while the opposing party, the advocates of nonviolence (ahimsa), argued that this bloody ritual was a perversion of the Vedic command and was merely a practice adopted from the uncivilized native inhabitants.

This famous controversy is known generally as the Ajina Yashtavyam Vada, for it focused on the explanation of the phrase Ajina Yashtavyam -- which means that one should sacrifice with "aja." Around this three-letter word the wide-ranging dispute now centered. While the group dominated by the orthodox priests proclaimed that the ceremony should be executed with goats (for in Sanskrit the word *aja* means "goat"), those favoring nonviolence contended that one should make the offering with non-germinating grain -- for etymologically the same word can be derived from the negative prefix "a" and "ja," from the verb *jan*, "to give birth."

The adherents of the Ahimsa Vada, the thesis of non-injury, were convinced that the Vedas originally were based on this principle and that the priests, through the years, had either destroyed or purposely disregarded those religious works which dealt with rituals not demanding the killing of animals. It is interesting and surprising to note, by the way, that the ahimsa movement was led by the Kshatriya class of royal and noble warriors. In any case, the discord was so deep-rooted that it finally developed into an eternal rivalry which divided the great Aryan community in two. The followers of the heretic thinkers moved to the eastern Ganges valley, while the orthodox Brahmins isolated themselves so completely that the priests in their ranks were strongly admonished not to visit the eastern country under any circumstances. Polemical works condemned the dissenters for their liberal views as well as for the corruption of the Sanskrit phonetical science.

The members of the ahimsa cult, on the other hand, found freedom and assistance in their new home, where they began to interpret the Vedic mantras allegorically, encouraged in their efforts by the ruling princes of Kasi, Kosala, Videha and Magadha. Their philosophical speculations and independent inquiry went deeply into the age-old riddles regarding the universe and man. Within a few centuries after the separation from their orthodox forebears, the Eastern Aryans had produced an impressive system of religio-philosophy known as Atma-vidya (knowledge of self), with the ahimsa principle as its supreme tenet.

Animal sacrifice was transformed into the offering of vegetables and fruits, such as rice cakes, sweets, pieces of sugar cane, flowers and fried grain. However, within a relatively short time even this was replaced by a more elevated form of oblation, called jnana yajna (inner knowledge-sacrifice). It consisted of austerities, penance, introspective meditation and trance (samadhi). Self-control and renunciation of worldly pleasures were regarded as the requisite virtues of one who sincerely aspired to realize absolute Truth. Forest retreats sprang up in many places. Here the highest esoteric wisdom was promulgated, and thousands of students from far and near flocked to these hermitages to receive instruction from the great seers in this new spiritual knowledge. These enlightened sages or rishis taught that the ultimate truth

transcends conceptual thinking and can be grasped only by intuition. Thus they imparted their marvelous idealism of Atma-vidya in a special symbolical form, the Samadhi-bhasha, literally "trance-language" in which they were able to express in a semipoetic way their highly mystical experiences. Viewing the merging of the individual self (atman) with the universal Self (Brahman) as the ultimate goal, they strove to liberate themselves through contemplation and self-purification from the great illusion of the phenomenal world.

The spiritual teachings and experiences of these youthful sages of the new progressive mysticism are embodied in the Upanishads, which became the basis of the Vedanta philosophy, so named because its philosophical treatises not only come last in the order of the Vedas but also contain the quintessence of the esoteric wisdom, i.e. the 'end' or 'acme' (*anta*) of the vedas. It exhorts man to establish himself firmly on truth and to embark upon the investigation of Brahman, the universal the all-pervading Self, which resides not in temples or in heaven, but in the heart of every human being. For this realization of Self (atman) one has to practice rigorous self-discipline and concentration. Emphasizing knowledge (jnana) instead of 'works,' the Upanishads have exerted a powerful influence on Hindu philosophy through the centuries, giving metaphysical soundness and depth to all its streams of thought.

At this stage of religious development, with the Upanishadic seers seeking spiritual illumination and a glimpse of Brahman (the transcendent Ultimate Principle, not to be confused with Brahma, the creator and the first god of the later post-Vedic triad), there arose simultaneously some strong nihilistic movements. These atheistic and materialistic groups were eager to eradicate all religious cults which stemmed from the Vedas, including the newly formulated religion of the Upanishads. Spiritual pursuits and religious practices, of whatever kind, were bitterly condemned and derided as crude forms of superstition. Materialism, sophistry and skepticism preached a readily acceptable gospel of egoistic hedonism and began to disrupt the spiritual growth of northern India during the period extending from the eighth to the sixth century BC.

The theories of the materialistic school known as Charvaka darsana were first expounded by Brihaspati, who lived perhaps as early as the eighth or seventh century BC. It is evident from references made in still extant works dealing with the various systems of philosophy, that the writings of this great materialistic philosopher must have been voluminous. None of these have survived; they must have perished or been destroyed by the hostile Brahmins who were for so many centuries the custodians of Indian wisdom. However, we do possess some fragments, mainly from quotes used in works by his opponents, giving us insight into this earliest form of materialistic philosophy. A close scrutiny reveals that there are definite parallels with modern European dialectical materialism. Both systems express similar views with regard to spiritual values, after-death existence and rebirth. It seems worthwhile to look at some of the reasoning behind these nihilistic doctrines which had such a profound and almost fatal influence upon the old religion of India.

The materialists were led by a powerful group of nobles and warriors who boldly proclaimed that the authors of the three Vedas were buffoons, knaves and demons. With great vehemence they opposed the supreme authority of the scriptures because these, in their view, contained nothing but falsehoods and contradictions. They argued that if an animal, sacrificed on the altar, goes straight to heaven, why should one not do the same with one's old father, for in that manner he would then also directly enter heaven. If the offering made after the death of a relative gratifies the departed, why could not a person offer food downstairs to satisfy the hunger of those who are living upstairs? "While life remains, let a man live happily, let him feed on ghee (sacrificial butter) even though he runs in debt." For once the body

becomes ashes, how can it ever return?

The adherents of materialism upheld the theory that the consciousness cannot exist without the physical body and brain, and that at the destruction of this body everything that religious thinkers term consciousness, soul or spirit, will perish at the same time. At death the earthy element will return to earth, the fluid to the water, the heat to the fire, the breath to the air, and the senses pass into akasa (space). It involves the annihilation of all sensation, mentation, perception and cognition. In this way these materialists refuted every philosophical concept such as individual continuance, metempsychosis and karma. But above all, they denounced the dogmatism, ritualism and animal sacrifice of the established religion. In some ways they promoted logical thinking and reasoning, thereby inserting a liberalizing factor into the rigid orthodox structure. However, we must not close our eyes to the fact that Charvaka darsana brought about as a monstrous aftermath a moral degeneracy that almost shattered the promising edifice of spiritual wisdom that was about to be constructed by the early sages of the Upanishads.

We now arrive at a critical historical crossroads. Many peculiar religious creeds and thought systems vied for the veneration and loyalty of the people, causing a tremendous upheaval. The intellectual standard of the race had reached an enviable height in the then known sciences and arts. Both the logical acumen of the dialectical materialists and the contemplative discipline of the Vedanta mystics effected a complete metamorphosis in the ancient spiritual values of those Aryans who had separated from their brothers in the western part of the Ganges valley. Vedic polytheism with its old, ritualized formalisms obviously was no longer able to answer the spiritual needs of the race, and was attacked from several sides, although during the Epic Period the Brahmin poets strenuously engaged themselves in an effort to regain the lost vitality of the priestly rule of yore. But their attempts proved futile, for the discriminating thinkers among the population realized that the Brahma-jnana or Atma-vidya, as a sober and unalloyed philosophical system, afforded them far greater spiritual illumination.

As said, agnosticism and skepticism, engendered by the Charvaka doctrine, though appealing to the intelligentsia by their rational assertions, caused at the same time a sharp decline in racial morality, undermining it to the point where conditions were outright pitiable. And the Kshatriya critics from their side, busily at work in their forceful crusade against Vedic theism, were not able to satisfy the religious hunger of the community. The Aryans, after all, were ever a spiritually minded people who through the ages had deified the forces of nature and regarded even insentient objects as ensouled. Thus there grew a keenly felt need in every quarter for a philosophical renaissance of spiritual and ethical values.

The seventh century BC marks this new historical epoch in the religious evolution of northern India. The racial intellect of that time was compelled to face two psychological trends that were diametrically opposed to each other. The only solution to this cataclysmic conflict lay in the emergence of a magnetic personality who would successfully synthesize the realism of the physical philosophers with the idealism of the ancient Vedas, one who would preserve the best of the old and simultaneously incorporate the vital and constructive elements of the new.

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