

Intellectual Freedom in Ancient India : Some Random Thoughts

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रुक्मिणीमहाभागा अत्यन्तसरलया प्रवहन्त्या च शैल्या निबन्धेऽस्मिन्
निरूपयति यत् विश्वस्य प्राचीनतमे वेदोपरिषद्-वाङ्मये प्रतिबिम्बितं
वैचारिकं स्वातन्त्र्यम् अद्यतमविज्ञानिनां विशेषतः समाजशास्त्रिणां मनस्सु
आश्चर्यमुपजनयति। अत्यन्तसुदूरे प्राचीनकाले एव ऋत-सत्ययोः, धर्मस्य,
वर्णाश्रमव्यवस्थायाः, कर्मणः, पुनर्जन्मनः, पुरुषार्थचतुष्टयस्य, विशिष्य च
मोक्षरूपपरमपुरुषार्थस्य, अभ्युदय-निःश्रेयसयोः च सङ्कल्पनं, तेषां निर्वचनं
विश्लेषणं च ऋषिभिरधिष्ठितायाः अत्यन्तोन्नततमप्रज्ञाभूमिकायाः
परिचायकं सत् अद्यतनवैचारिकाणाम् आदर्शरूपं चकास्ति। सूक्ष्माति-
सूक्ष्मशरीरस्य परममहच्छरीरेण सह सावयवसारूप्यस्य प्रत्यक्षीकरणम्
मानवीयेतिहासे अनितरसाधारणं सत् जीवब्रह्मैक्यरूपदुरुहसिद्धान्तस्य
उन्नायकं वर्तते इति च सविस्तरं प्रतिपादयति।

Intellectual freedom is the right to freedom of thought and of expression of thought. As defined by Article 19 of the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights**, it is a human right. Article 19 states:

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

Introduction,

In today's world, intellectual freedom as defined above in the Human Rights Charter has been accorded primary importance and is enshrined in one form or another in the constitutions of many countries including that of India. But what is noteworthy is that while most of the western world was still living in uncivilized conditions, these ideas of freedom of

expression and thought were already present in Vedic society. The famous verse *saṃgacchadhvam, saṃvadadhvam* etc., in the ṛgveda, calls for people to come together and exchange views freely and harmoniously. The rise of dissenting schools of thought like Jainism, Buddhism, Pāñcarātra, Kāpālīka, Cārvaka etc., in the post-Vedic period and their coexistence with Vedic schools points to a society that allowed freethinking and intellectual freedom. When one is reminded of Socrates being accused of corrupting the minds of youth in Greece or of Galileo being denounced and incarcerated by the Church for going against the cosmological theories of the Bible, one realizes that this respect for divergent views in ancient Vedic society was indeed a great achievement. Since the topic is wide, my attempt in this paper is to focus on the ancient period in general, wherein the patterns of intellectual freedom were in the making and which left traces or set the tone for future developments as well. I would like to argue that India opting to be a secular, democratic republic after Independence even when more than 80% of the population at that time was Hindu, may in some small measure be due to this early foundation of intellectual freedom laid in the Vedic period.

Going back to the ancient Vedic world view one witnesses this freedom especially in the approach to religion and philosophy. Knowing as we all do today the potential that conflicting religious views have for fermenting trouble and chaos in society, this is an amazing accomplishment of the Vedic ṛṣis. In the field of religion and philosophy the following stand out as unique expressions of the Vedic intellectual freedom: (1) the freedom to hold many views on the concept of ultimate reality, (2) a holistic vision wherein all that exists in the universe command equal consideration and (3) a willingness to admit that one cannot know for certain some of the higher metaphysical principles and the ultimate meaning of life. The first avoided religious conflicts and created an atmosphere for later religions like Buddhism and Jainism to appear on the scene which questioned the very authenticity of the Vedas. The second holistic vision was at the basis of the environmental and ecological ethics which in my view also led to rethink the act of animal sacrifice and also paved the way for the introduction of

vegetarianism. These are all ideas which the world has started to recognize in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. And the third which acknowledged the inability to know for certain the larger meaning of life and its metaphysical foundations enabled different schools of philosophy to exist side by side each propounding its own version of the meaning of life. It is amazing to see that what is taken for granted today and achieved after hundreds of years of struggle in many parts of the world and is still a dream in some other parts of the world was taken for granted in the Vedic worldview.

Intellectual freedom implies an exercise of the intellect or reason. It assumes that things or ideas are not accepted on blind faith and there is a tendency to arrive at conclusions after due reflection. In India the period starting from ancient Vedic times to the Upaniṣadic and *Dharmasūtra* period is important, as many of the foundations of intellectual development were laid at this time. One is not arguing that this period is characterized solely by intellectual freedom and harmonious coexistence as opposed to other human tendencies as well. But the thrust of the paper is to point out that there was a strong inclination towards reasoning and reflection in early times as evidenced in available texts of the period. This is particularly visible in the domain of religion in ancient India, wherein one finds the tendency to question and critique many views on the nature of reality and which also advocates different cosmological theories.

It is important to note that the foundations of Indian culture were arrived at not blindly, but by a combination of faith and reason and perhaps intuition born out of continuous reflection on the mysteries of life and one's place in it. The ultimate intuitive insight expressed in the Upaniṣadic verse *pūrṇamadaḥ pūrṇamidam pūrṇādpūrṇamudacyate, pūrṇasya pūrṇamādāya pūrṇamevāvaśiṣyate* did not happen all of a sudden and must have started very early in the Vedic period of thought.

I would like to draw a distinction between the date of the ṛgveda (RV) for instance and the thought process which must have antedated the codification of those *mantras* by a long time. Even by the most conservative reckoning the RV can be dated to by about 2500 BCE. So the thought process that led to the

contents of the RV were there for a long time in the making. It appears that the families of sages who composed the *mantras* of the Saṃhitas engaged sincerely and intensely to understand the riddle of the universe. Their thoughts as seen in the RV, which is the oldest extant literature in the world, gives us a glimpse of how their minds worked. What strikes one in the RV is the absence of a tacit acceptance of a religious or philosophical idea, based purely on blind faith. There is a sustained effort to arrive at foundations after exploring the many dimensions of a problem. It is this fact, perhaps, that led E.W.F. Tomlin to say that “Indian thought arrives at subtleties of distinction so varied and acute that the uninitiated and unprepared reader may well receive the impression that Indian philosophers enjoy the use of half a dozen intellects instead of one.” (Tomlin, 1968:152)

Let us look at the question of the Vedic deities themselves. They are called *devas*, a Sanskrit word derived from the root *div* which means to shine. Thus the *devas* were not gods in the way that god or gods are understood in the Abrahamic religions or in the Greek religion i.e. they are not totally anthropomorphic. Hiriyanna used the word ‘arrested anthropomorphism’ for this phenomenon. The word Advaitist Theism was coined by A.C. Bose to describe this approach to the divine. Man is not the measure of the *devas* here and they are not measured in terms of what it takes to be a human being. Early orientalist scholars like Max Müller have also tried to describe this phenomenon, in keeping with their own understanding, by using words like Henotheism or Kathenotheism. Polymorphism is doing the rounds these days. Not used to this kind of a unique approach to the divine, the West has invariably described the *devas* as many gods and the general perception is that Hinduism is a polytheistic religion. The Vedic ṛṣis were conscious of the divine essence present in all the *devas*, some of whom were imagined as natural phenomena and others were not. What is important to bear in mind is that each of the *devas* is also the Supreme Being and therefore the Vedic religion contemplates the One in the Many and the Many in One. In fact there are hymns addressed sometimes not just to one *deva* like Agni or Indra but to a duality like Dyāvāpṛthivī, or even to a collective group like the Maruts.

We find the same deity is addressed as Agni, Āditya, Vāyu etc., i.e. the one as the many, and sometimes we find all *devas* identified with one divine essence as *ekam* (the One) in the neuter gender or *tat sat* (that reality). We have the famous oft-quoted statement *ekam sat viprāḥ bahudhā vadanti* in the first *maṇḍala*; the same sentiment being repeated in the 3rd *maṇḍala* and also in the refrain of the 55th hymn in the 3rd *maṇḍala* i.e. *mahad devānām asuratvam ekam* (great and single is the divinity of the gods) (A.C. Bose, 1966:19-20). Thus the habit of thought that identifies the same Supreme being or essence in the one or in the many, was developed very early in the Vedic period. Surely this profound observation could only have come about by deep thought and reflection. What the ṛṣis were striving at was to arrive at a perfect concept of the divine essence or in other words, to free the idea of divinity from all error.

Parallel with this unique concept of *ekam sat* or one reality, we find two more concepts that play a large part in the religion and philosophy of the Vedas. While *Sat* in a metaphysical sense denotes Existence, Truth, or Reality, in a moral sense it denotes truthfulness and integrity (ibid:7-8). Not only was there one single truth but there was also one single *ṛta* which governed the physical and moral order of the universe. In fact the words *sat*, *satya* and *ṛta* were interchangeable. The ṛṣis developed a holistic vision wherein adherence to *ṛta* or *satya* contributed to the orderliness seen in the universe. We will follow the path of *ṛta* like the sun and the moon says a Vedic ṛṣi and Indra is mentioned as destroying Vṛtra who obstructs the working of *ṛta*. So also the *devas* were very often called *ṛtavān*, *ṛtāvāri*, *gopā-ṛtasya* and *ṛtāyu*. The ṛṣis were also confident that it was possible to realize *ṛta* by the performance of *yajña* with devotion. It is not the mere utterance of the *mantras* that matter. The *mantras* were to be recited with the necessary devotion and used in the act of *yajña* to achieve perfection says RV 1.164.39. The *yajña* conforms to the laws of order i.e. they are part of *ṛta*. Thus if performed according to the moral law of *ṛta* it had to yield a glimpse of the eternal *ṛta* (Pandey, Vol.I 1990:24-26). This elaborate structure and attention to the various religious, moral and spiritual dimensions could not have been possible without engaging in an intellectual exercise of the highest order.

An intellectual engagement is possible if there is an atmosphere that encourages contemplation and freethinking. We get ample evidence in the RV for the presence of a tradition of free thinking and questioning as well as an adaptability to changing social conditions. After all it is the courage to think freely and to question existing beliefs that is the basis or is the beginning of philosophy. As examples of free thinking and questioning we can cite the famous hymn which ends with the refrain 'which *deva* shall we adore with our oblation' (*kasmai devāya haviṣā vidhema*). (RV.X.121). (To my mind "ka" is not a *deva* as some argue, and "kasmai" is the dative of "kaḥ"). Our mind boggles to think of the courage of the ṛṣi who is willing to question the very concept of *deva* that must have been widely accepted in society. So also the *nāsadīya-sūkta* (RV.X. 129) crosses all boundaries in asking the most difficult questions regarding the ultimate truth. Is it existence or non-existence asks the seer and of course ends by stating "Who verily knows and who can here declare it, whence it was born and whence comes this creation.". The next line is even more bold when the ṛṣi continues "No *devas* had then been born- who then can ever the truth disclose" (cited in Hiriyanna 1951:42). Thus even the *devas* are not the ultimate beings but are considered to be later. The ṛṣi continues on the same lines and ends the hymn by doubting whether even the first one knows the secret of the coming into being of the universe.

The Vedic ṛṣis have speculated on different models of the ultimate truth. Thus we find examples of pantheism, monotheism, monism and sometimes the ṛṣi lapses into even skepticism in the RV. Similarly the origin of the universe has also found many models. If the *nāsadīya-sūkta* gives rise to both the ideas of creation of the universe from nothing or from some real entity, the *puruṣa-sūkta* introduces a model wherein the ultimate divides itself into all that inhabits the world (RV.X.90). While some might identify that with pantheism, the statement that *puruṣa* manifested all this with one fourth of himself and the other three fourths transcend that, makes us wonder whether it can fit the model of pantheism. Thus the beginnings of the idea that the ultimate being is both a transcendent and an immanent truth is expressed in the *puruṣa-sūkta*. We have another model of

creation in the Yama/Yamī *sūkta* which speculates on the origin of the world in terms of the worldly model (RV. X.10).

The importance of these intellectual speculations in the early period is the many sided development of these different ideas into a rich tapestry of religious, moral and philosophical schools in later times. We see the changes happening almost soon after when we read the Brāhṃaṇas. The theory of *bandhutā* or relating the microcosm with the macrocosm in its various permutations and combinations was also carried to perfection at the time of the Brāhṃaṇas. In the *puruṣa-sūkta* of the RV, one can find an attempt at this micro/macro relationship or holistic vision. Thus we see that the *puruṣa* when sacrificed is the material from which the entire universe comes into being. The moon was born from his mind, from his eye the sun; from his mouth Indra and Agni and from his breath Vāyu, etc, etc. Bandhutā is the “belief in the presence of some subtle, secret and mystic bond connecting a thing and its *bandhus* and the *bandhus* amongst themselves.” (Belvalkar & Ranade, Vol.2, 1927:62-67). The funeral hymn of the RV also brings in this micro/macro connection when it says that the eye of the dead man goes to the sun, the breath to vāyu and so on (RV. X.16). This micro/macro paradigm will also be developed further in later times and we see the micro/macro resemblance further unfolding in the Kuṇḍalinī Śakti.

One has also to note that of the three principles of *satya*, *ṛta* and *yajña* the Brahmanas developed the *yajña* aspect in all its dimensions. Thus it was the instrumental value of *yajña* which received highest importance in the Brāhṃaṇas. However, the reward sought through correct performance of *yajña* was not the vision of the unitive principle of *ṛta* but the continuation of a life in *svarga* in order to reap the benefits of the *yajña* performed. This dilution of both the exalted nature of *yajña* as well as the displacement of *ṛta* from its paramount position gets rectified in the Upaniṣads which carried some of the nuclear ideas, in particular the philosophical ones, given in the RV to their logical conclusion.

The Upaniṣads, in Hiriyanna’s words represent “the earliest efforts of man at giving a philosophic explanation of the world

and are as such invaluable in the history of human thought” (1951:52). In the Upaniṣads we find the Vedic idea that the one divine essence is spoken of variously by the wise gradually giving rise to the doctrine of the ultimate reality being one called Brahman, and to the corollary that everything else including one’s self called *ātman* is identical with Brahman. Briefly one could say that a subjective search to unravel the mystery of the inner self got identified with the objective search for the true nature of the world by a leap in thought and thus ended the ṛṣis’ constant effort to reach a satisfactory end to the search for unity started in the RV. The *mahāvākya tat tvamasi* in the Chāndogya Up (Chānd.Up) expressed this profound truth.

The formulation of the theory of *karma* is perhaps one of the great achievements of the ancient Indian mind. Though one does not find specifically the theory of the *ātman* being eternal and subject to many births and deaths in the RV there is mention in it of a person after death going to a different realm in accordance with his *iṣṭāpūrta* (Hiriyanna, 1951:80). This is expanded further into one facing repeated deaths in an after world like *svarga* in the Brāhmaṇas which implies that there was an idea of the permanence of whatever constituted the person. Since the notion of reaching *svarga* or otherwise depended on one’s own action, there was already the theory of *karma* in a nascent form in this early literature. It was however left to the Upaniṣads to develop the permanent nature of *ātman* and the *karma* theory into their full-fledged forms as we know today.

The concept of *ātman* as a permanent entity helped in the formulation of the *karma* theory in all its dimensions. Since not all *karma* was seen to lead to its result in one life it was also perhaps at the basis of assuming the permanent nature of the *ātman* transmigrating through many lives, reaping its just fruit in many births till such time as the effects of *karma* had been exhausted and *mokṣa* achieved.. More than anything else the *karma* theory shifted the responsibility for moral behaviour solely on the individual himself/herself. By the time of the Upaniṣads the ‘telos’ has changed from *ṛta* to *dharma*, and the theory of *karma* in the moral context, transferred the result of good moral conduct in one life to be rewarded in future lives and thus the freedom to choose between what is ‘good’ and ‘not good’ now

devolves on the individual himself. I would argue that the concepts of *dharma* and the theory of *karma* are unique intellectual contributions in the field of social civic sense and moral responsibility. Never mind the misuse of these concepts and the rigidity that it acquired in the later *dharmaśāstra* texts. One is witness to this happening to any innovative idea in the long run in the world. But what is important is that such an idea was even possible during the time that it was formulated. It is in the formulation of ideas such as *dharma* and *karma* that one realizes the importance accorded to individual decision making and intellectual freedom in society. *Dharma* is an improvement on the earlier *ṛta* concept where *ṛta* was an external metaphysical entity. By making *dharma* as the overall principle of how one leads life in all spheres of activity both secular and religious, *dharma* was lifted to a level wherein the individual takes care of life in the world keeping the ultimate spiritual goal in mind. One need not sacrifice the one for the other.

The Upaniṣads also affirm that one can realize the identity of the *ātman* and Brahman in a state known as *mokṣa* which can be achieved through right knowledge. Instead of treating philosophy as merely a theoretical exercise the *ṛṣis* linked philosophical inquiry to the achievement of the highest value of *mokṣa* i.e. to realize the identity between *ātman* and Brahman. *ekameva advitīyam* is the clarion call of the Upaniṣads and can be interpreted to mean that narrow self interest known as *ahaṁkāra* or ego, is the basis of all conflict. In order therefore to get rid of this ego and behaviour based on that, the Upaniṣads advocate cultivation of *vairāgya* or detachment/dispassion. The world currently is experiencing the evils of gross egocentric behaviour and crass materialism which is a byproduct of selfishness. In recognizing this human weakness and to warn society against this natural tendency and to advocate the cultivation of *vairāgya* as an antidote to it, is indeed remarkable.

One other important development in the Brāhṁmaṇas is to question the morality of animal sacrifice in a *yajña*. This led to the introduction of rice cakes (*purodāśa*) as substitutes for animals as mentioned in the Brāhṁmaṇas. Even though there is no discussion on the evil of meat eating in the Brāhṁmaṇas it is reasonable to speculate that a consideration of the harm caused to animals in

sacrifice must, in turn, have led to a reflection on the evil of consuming flesh. Texts belonging to the classical period (500BCE-500 CE) which followed soon after like the Mahābhārata is replete with statements on the evils of flesh eating and on the paramount importance of *ahiṃsā* (MHb.XIII.114, 8-19; 115. 10, 14,16,19, 22, 29, 34). It declares *ahiṃsā* itself as the highest *dharma* (MHb.XIII. 115. 23,69; 116. 38-39).

Values such as *mokṣa* and depiction of sages who dedicated their lives solely in pursuit of *mokṣa* are the ideals that the Upaniṣads represent. But it is good to remember, in this context, that texts very often present an idealistic picture of society, which need not necessarily correspond to reality. There is bound to be a disjunction between theory and practice when dealing with actualities on the ground. But as Tucker and Grim remark “such disjunction cannot be used to invalidate the rich perspectives that these conceptual resources provide” (2000: xx). While *mokṣa* was the highest value in the Upaniṣads, by its very nature, it can only be aspired for by a small minority. Thus the Kaṭhapaniṣad and the Bhagavad-Gītā (Gītā) point out that such persons are very rare indeed (Kaṭh. Up I.2.7; Gītā II.29). One has to believe that the general population was more in tune with living within *dharma* which is the ‘telos’ guiding their lives. This is still true for an average Hindu who while following *dharma* in daily life also aspires for *mokṣa* in whatever way he/she internalizes it. Support for this approach is found when Saṅkarācārya mentions in his Introduction to the Gītā that *dharma* is of both kinds – one leading to *abhyudaya* and the other leading to *niḥśreyas* (liberation) (*dvividho hi vedokto dharmah pravṛttilakṣaṇo nivṛttilakṣaṇah ca*). The only difference is that while on the one hand one can achieve *mokṣa* gradually by leading a *dhārmic* life within the world, adopting *sannyāsa* or total renunciation of worldly goods is the special path to *mokṣa*.

The sages continued to exercise their intellectual freedom and tried their hand at the classification of society by dividing the stages of life of an individual into the four *āśramas* as well as laying down the goals of life as the four *puruṣārthas*.

From the point of view of society the *ṛṣis* who can be called social scientists in modern terminology, classified society based

on *varṇa* (*brāhmaṇa*, *kṣatriya*, *vaiśya* and *śūdra*) and *āśramas* (*brahmacarya*, *grhastha*, *vānaprastha* and *sannyāsa*) which took care of the specific *dharma* of each individual within a *varṇa* as well as within society. The *āśramas* that are directly concerned with those following *dharma* as the highest value are those of the *brahmacarya* (student) and *grhastha* (householder); the *vānaprastha* (forest dweller) can be clubbed with the *sannyāsin* (renouncer) aiming at *mokṣa* as the highest value. One should not lose sight of the fact that the formulation of the human goals as the pursuit of *dharma*, *artha*, *kāma* and *mokṣa* and enclosing *artha* and *kāma* within a general regulation of *dharma* gave some meaning and guidance for living in the world. That along with the structuring of society in terms of *āśramas* in such an early period, is worthy of praise.

While these are achievements of a very high order, since these classifications were applied mainly to men in society and also only to the three groups of *brāhmaṇa*, *kṣatriya* and *vaiśya* one may question how far the society was fair towards those who were left out in the system. It further raises the question as to whether this discrimination can be justified as an act of intellectual freedom. This is specially true when *dharma* is depicted as a mental attitude of fairness and consideration towards all that exists if we look at the way the origin of *dharma* is described in the following episode of the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (Bṛ.Up):

Brahman after creating all the four *varṇas*, says the *Upaniṣad*, was still not happy and then fulfilled itself by projecting *dharma* (Bṛ. Up. I.4.14). The *Upaniṣad* then identifies *dharma* with *satya* (truth) thus emphasizing the moral virtue of truth embedded in *dharma*. This is mentioned specifically within the context of a *ksatriya* who represents the ruler, and points to a higher principle or *dharma* by which the king rules i.e., *rājadharmā*. Śaṅkara tellingly comments that *dharma* rules even the ruler. (*dharmam tadetat śreyorūpam sṛṣṭam kṣatrasya kṣatram kṣatrasyāpi niyantr, ugrādapyugram (bhāṣya on Bṛ.Up. I.4.14)*).

It is thus something right, implanted internally, which guides human conduct, to do the right thing. And in the very next passage the Bṛ. Up. extends the notion of *dharma* to the

fulfillment of one's obligation to one's cultural heritage (*brahmayajña*), to the *devas* (*deva-yajña*) to one's ancestors (*pitṛ-yajna*), to one's fellow beings (*manuṣya-yajña*) and to all living beings (*bhūta-yajña*), which is called the *pañcayajñas*. (Br.Up. I.4.16). The Upaniṣad thus makes the point that one's behavior is to be correct not only towards other fellow beings but has to extend to animals, beasts, birds and ants. Built into this is the ethics of compassion and sympathy for all that inhabits the world. By leading a life of *dharma*, we are told that one attains well being (*abhyudaya*) in this world as well as after death. So behavior in accordance with *dharma* has an end value as well.

Given this background of the origin of *dharma* and its definition in the MBh as 'conduct that sustains oneself' or 'conduct that behooves a human being' (*dhāryate iti dharmah*), questions as to whether the sages exercised their intellectual freedom in a fair and equitable manner to all members in society is bound to arise. Much like the Greeks who came up with grand philosophical ideas and moral philosophy in spite of the presence of slaves in society, the Vedic ṛṣis also came up with grand concepts notwithstanding certain social and historical pressures. It is here that one realizes that great ideas and concepts can still arise in spite of ground conditions not being ideal. In a patriarchal atmosphere even intellectual freedom is exercised to benefit men. Even though ṛgvedic society was comparatively an egalitarian society and women enjoyed relative freedom, this was not because of the men supporting it but in spite of patriarchy itself. This is clear when one sees the preference for male offspring. However it is in the post-Vedic period that a downgrading of women became the norm and in the period of the epics and later, intellectual freedom will be serviced to keep the women down completely. While *dharma* was one of the unique contributions of the freedom to think, it fell a prey to prevailing social norms. For instance in the case of women *dharma* was degraded from the concept of ideal human conduct to just serving the husband (*pativratā-dharma*). This is a travesty of the highest order. We as yet do not understand the circumstances of why this happened.

One wonders whether one should condemn the intellectual freedom which resulted in many a grand idea in different fields

because of succumbing to social pressures or should we credit the *ṛṣis* for their contributions while acknowledging their shortcomings. When we recall that Indian civilization has had a continuity of over five thousand years when other civilizations have melted away, maybe we need to pause and perhaps give some credit to the ancient *ṛṣis* who laid the foundation of that civilization. It is especially in the family values that one particularly witnesses these contributions of the *ṛṣis*. When parents, teachers and elders in society are being neglected due to the growth of selfishness and greed in today's world, it is appropriate to recall the wisdom of the Upaniṣadic sages who rated these individuals as worthy of the highest respect in society. The respect shown to elders and to teachers/*ācārya* in Indian culture even today, is an echo of the instruction given as early as in the Vedic period and expressed eloquently in the Taittirīya Upaniṣad (Taitt.Up).

One is used to convocation addresses at Universities these days. But to find a *brahmacārin* being told how he has to conduct himself when he goes out into the outer world in the Taitt.Up is truly amazing. The teaching in the Taitt.Up is still relevant and as a student of Delhi University (DU) I remember it being part of the convocation address at DU in my student days. I do hope it is still continuing. The duty to continue the race, respect for elders and the teacher, charity along with the right attitude of humility without any arrogance, the modesty on the part of the teacher to admit that even the teacher need not be followed blindly but only his good deeds are to be emulated, and of course the advice to be guided by wise men in society whenever one is in doubt, are all virtues which are relevant for all times.

The Taitt.Up. is also an unique text to point out that it is not possible to measure human happiness. While the passage in question i.e., II .8. 1 – 4 is intended to glorify the bliss of the knower of *brahman*, the message it conveys is that there is no end to the concept of happiness as it is a relative concept.

While presenting many ideas on religion, philosophy and moral virtues the *ṛṣis* were also aware of the difficulty of comprehending spiritual messages like the identity of *ātman* and Brahman for one immersed in the world. They therefore tried to

guide the individual gradually towards the highest goal. The Taitt.Up is seized of this problem and guides the spiritual aspirant gradually to ascend from one level to another by classifying the human being as having gross, subtle and subtler levels of existence called *kośas* or coverings (Taitt.II.1-5). The lowest of the levels is the sheath of matter (*annamayakośa*), higher than that is the *prāṇamayakośa* (life sheath), next is the *manomayakośa* (mind sheath), succeeded by the *vijñānamayakośa* (intelligence sheath) leading to *ānandamayakośa* (sheath of bliss). Spelt out in such clarity, the aspirant is enthused to reach the higher levels of existence. He is familiar with matter, life, mind and intelligence and is assured that it is possible to reach beyond to a state of *ānanda* and then to self realization. This can be described as progressive self enlargement that the Upaniṣadic sages present before us.

In the above description I have tried to present some examples of what the Vedic ṛṣis accomplished particularly in the fields of religion and philosophy and to a small degree in the organization of society. I have tried to demonstrate the tendency of the Vedic ṛṣis to pursue a question rationally and without error as far as possible by which they arrived at some of the most astounding ideas on the concept of divinity, on the idea of an after life, the belief in a moral and physical order (*rta*) and the interdependence of all that inhabits the world, a holistic vision of the universe and a micro/macro relationship between the individual and the cosmic forces. They also related one's deeds with an after life and suggested the eternal nature of the self. Each one of these ideas became enriched and enlarged by the time of the Upaniṣads and continue to be relevant to the present day. Thus one can assert that the foundations of intellectual freedom in India had its beginnings in the remote past in the time of the Vedas and it continued to have its impact in the subsequent periods of Indian religious and philosophical development.

** I have used some material from my earlier publications in this paper.

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