



Naturalistic concept of Agni Vaiśvānara in Ṛg Veda

Satyanarayan Rath

Phd.Scholar,Sanskrit,Sambalpur University,Odisha

Abstract. (Many epithets are ascribed to Agni like *Vaiśvānara* ,*Tanunapāt*, *Gṛhapati*, *Jātaveda*,*Hotā* etc. Vedic poets have employed different epithets to bring out a clear-cut picture of Vedic gods. Threefold nature of Agni Vaiśvānara is remarkable in the ṚgVeda whereas his naturalistic concept is much discussed by western indologists.The expressions like *pitā*, *nābhi*, *hotā*, *kavikratu*, *purohita*,*dūta* etc. very well indicate it's earthly nature.But the concept of Vaiśvānara is very vast and he can't be limited only to earth or terrestrial fire, as propounded by Yāska etc.)

Keywords-Vaiśvānara Agni,Threefold nature ,Epithets,Natural concept.

01-PROLOUGE:

Agni,the fire god in the Vedas occupies an important place in the lives and religion of Vedic people. It is seen that in Vedic literature Agni has been described both as an ordinary fire and as well as a Vedic deity. The ancient people might have witnessed the tremendous power of fierce lightening, forest fire burning everything into ashes, the scorching rays of sun etc and a sense of awe engulfed their minds. Since these powers were beyond their control , there was a bare need to propitiate them by any means. Fire was an important element for them as they needed the help from it, like cooking, lighting, protecting themselves from wild animals etc.On this back ground the act of sacrifice was thought of where all gods were invoked and offered oblations. But the very interesting thing that has happened is that fire was chosen to intermediate between gods and humans.This importance was attached to it as man was being mostly helped and benefited by fire in his daily activities.So a close association of fire with humans is found in Vedic literature and in ṚgVeda, he has been prayed in nearly two hundred hymns,next to Indra.In that way he has been rightly called as the lord of the house(*viśpati*).He is called as the son of heaven and earth,having a tawny bread, sharp jaws ,burning teeth, employed by gods as an envoy, invoker(*hotṛ*), sage etc.Also some peculiar aspects of Agni is seen in ṚgVeda like ,he is an envoy of gods rather than a god,

more earthly, rarely represented to drink *Soma* with other gods, father of gods though son¹ and many other, which makes him unique. Then coming to the etymology of the word *agni*, it is seen that Yāska has taken the word in the sense of leader (*agraṇī*). Again he quotes the opinion of his predecessor Śākapūni who is of the view that the word has been derived from three roots like √ *i*, √ *anj/dah* and √ *ni* with the meaning going, burning and leading. So the word *Agni* has been formed taking *a* from √ *e*, *g* from √ *añj* and *ni* as per Yāska.²

In this way it is seen that *Agni* occupies very important place among Vedic gods which is very clear from the assignment of the first verse of the first veda i.e. *R̥gVeda*. Here the words like *purohitam*, *yajñsya devam*, *ritvijam* etc. show the reverence of the seer towards this god. Many epithets are seen being ascribed to *Agni* like *Vaiśvānara*, *Tanunapāt*, *Gr̥hapati*, *Jātaveda*, *Hotā* etc. It may be seen that the Vedic poets have employed different epithets to bring out a clear-cut picture of Vedic gods. An epithet acts as a picture by itself, adds clarity to the idea, throws light upon the exact intention of the poet. An epithet may typify and express an opinion, beautify and add to the intelligibility of a passage without interrupting the course of the narrative or the movement of the poem by a long parenthesis or burdening them by a cumbersome description.³

0.2. ETYMOLOGY AND MEANING OF VAIŚVĀNARA

However the epithet *Vaiśvānara* occupies an important place among the epithets of *Agni* in *R̥gVeda*. It is seen that *Vaiśvānara* occurs nearly sixty times in fourteen hymns of *R̥g Veda*. As per *Anukramaṇi*, *Agni-Vaiśvānara* is the deity spoken of in these hymns. Curiously enough it may be noted that in Vedic mantras the word *Vaiśvānara* is never unaccompanied by the name of *Agni*. So the concept of *Vaiśvānara* needs some attention and an attempt is made in the short span of this paper to expose some of its basic ideas. The earliest definition of the word is seen in the *Jaiminiya Brāhmaṇa*⁴ where it is stated that, he pervades all worldly beings, so he is *Vaiśvānara*. But here, the idea of duality of *Vaiśvānara* (*Vaiśvānarayoh*) is not clear whereas to some, it may mean the two upper fires i.e. lightning and sun. Now coming to the opinion of Yāska, it is seen that he has derived the word as follows-

i) *Viśvān narān nayati iti Vaiśvānaraḥ*

ii) *Viśvā enam narā nayanti iti Vaiśvānaraḥ*

Vaiśvānara is so called because he leads all men or all men lead him.⁵

Another definition is also given by Yāska- '*api vā Viśvānara eva syāt | pratyuta sarvāṇi bhutāni tasya Vaiśvānarah.*'⁶

i) *api vā Viśvānara(viśvān+ arah) eva syāt* (He is available(arah) to all men).

ii) *pratyuta sarvāṇi bhutāni* (Who reaches all men) *tasya(apatyam) Vaiśvānarah.*⁶ (His son *Vaiśvānarah*)

On this definition, Durgāchārya, the renowned commentator of *Nirukta* opines that it may be a deity named *Viśvanara* and his son is *Vaiśvānara*. Again Sāyaṇa adds a point here that, the word *tasyāpatyam* may have been after *bhutāni* and *Vaiśvānara is the son of Viśvānara*, who may be deity.⁷ So the point is clear that it is a deity concept of Agni and an active agent.

Various interpretations of *Vedic mantras* like natural, ritual, spiritual, secular etc. are found extended by different scholars. Regarding naturalistic interpretation, it is seen that the interpretation which is made in accordance with the objectives, scheme of reality of nature, is known as natural interpretation (*ādhydaivika vyākhyā*). It may be seen that this is a concept where it is thought that the Supreme Reality first revealed in the form of nature like mountain, tree, sun, flower etc. and later on in the Upaniṣadas, it took a concrete shape. (*Sarvam khalvidam brahma. - Chāndogya Upaniṣad 3.14.1 & etc.*)

0.3.VAIŚVĀNARA AS CELESTIAL FIRE-SUN

Mīmāṃsakas are of the opinion that *Vaiśvānara* is *Āditya* and to add further, Saunaka treats *Vaiśvānara* as *Surya*.⁸ Traditionally the morning, mid-day and evening libations are given to deities according to the ascending order, like earth, sky and heaven. In the *Agni-Marut* book, it is instructed that the evening oblation is to be offered with the hymns to *Vaiśvānara* and it is for the deity of the heaven. The ritualists opine that since the sun is from heaven, he is *Vaiśvānara*. The oblation for *Āditya* is in twelve pot-surds (*kapāla*) so also has *Vaiśvānara*. They further strengthen their point with the statement of some *Brāhmaṇas*.⁹ Again in one of the verses of *ṚgVeda*, *Vaiśvānara* is described as sun. As per Wilson, *Vaiśvānara* is being glorified by his adorers, has ascended the heaven, that is above firmament and bestows wealth upon his worshipers, as in former times. He also travels vigilantly the common path of gods. Clarifying 'common path of gods', he opines that *Vaiśvānara* is the sun, which he clarifies in the foot notes¹⁰. The same view has been expressed by Sāyaṇa. Again in *ṚgVeda*, X.88.12, the same idea i.e. sun, has been expressed by the seer¹². The views of Wilson may be quoted here "The gods made Agni *Vaiśvānara*, the indicator of days, for the sake of whole world, who stretched out the radiant dawns, and he moves along scatters the darkness with his light". The word 'indicator of days' (*anhām ketuḥ*) is surely the sun since day begins only after the rise of the sun. Sāyaṇa also agrees with the view and says that *Vaiśvānara* extends (*vistārayati*) *Uṣā* or dawn and when he sets, the entire world gets submerged in darkness. So if the verse is taken into consideration, it is clearly seen that *Vaiśvānara* is thought of as sun here. Similarly in VII.5 7, he has also been prayed as sun. It is described here that *Vaiśvānara* being born in

the far world or highest heaven drinks soma like Vāyu(Wind god) ,grants the desired material things etc.Sāyaṇa explains the word 'born in highest heaven ' as born as '*sūryarupeṇa prādurbhavan*' which indicates sun.So many a times he has been thought of as sun in ṚgVeda(VI.8.2,X.8812 etc.).

0.4.VAIŚVĀNARA AS AERIAL FIRE(VIDYUT).

In ṚgVeda it is seen that in some places *Vaiśvānara* has been described as aerial fire, commonly known as lightning.In *Nirukta*, Yāska has quoted the verse of ṚgVeda(I.59.6),¹³ to strengthen his views regarding *Vaiśvānara* as aerial fire.In this verse it is described that *Vaiśvānara* is the showerer of rain, destroyer of Vṛtra,slayer of the stealer of waters and sender of waters to earth.The word *Vṛtrahanam* is explained by Sāyaṇa as “ the destroyer of cloud which obstructs water(*āvarakasya meghasya hantāram*)” .Again in the beginning of his commentary on this verse Sāyaṇa has made it clear that this word *Vaiśvānara* means the fire of the middle region (*vaidyutogni*). However, in this verse, through different words the destroyer of obstruction to rain or water is described, which is no other than lightning. Seeing the heavy lightning, rain is expected .So here the seer's intention is very clear regarding *Vaiśvānara* that it is the lightning ,the natural element. Similarly in another verse i.e ṚgVeda.VI.8.4, the idea of lightning is described.¹⁴ “The mighty Maruts have seized upon him on the lap of waters(in the firmament)and men have acknowledged him as their adorable sovereign *Mātariśvān*,the messenger of the gods has brought Agni *Vaiśvānara* (hither) from the distant sphere of sun” Wilson.Here it is seen that *Vaiśvānara* is being received by Maruts on the lap of waters (*apāmupasthe*) i.e firmament and lightning is generated there.Of course Sāyaṇa makes the point very clear saying that “having known *Vaiśvānara* as lightning”. In this way many verses are found regarding the description of *Vaiśvānara* as aerial fire in ṚgVeda.

0.5. VAIŚVĀNARA AS TERRESTRIAL FIRE

in *Nirukta* ,Yāska has expressed his views regarding *Vaiśvānara* as the fire of the earth. To prove his point, he initiates a long discussion in *Vaiśvānara* chapter (6th & 7th) and refutes the idea of taking *Vaiśvānara* as sun or lightning i.e the fire of sky and firmament. He quotes *Śākapuni* to further strengthen his point, who states that both the above fires(sun and lightning) are *Viśvānara* and as the terrestrial fire is produced from them, it is designated as *Vaiśvānara* .However in the end Yāska has established that the deity of *Vaiśvānara* hymn to whom oblation is given, is terrestrial fire (*yastu sūktam bhajate,yasmai havirnirupyate ayameva so'gni Vaiśvānaraḥ*, (*Nirukta*, 7.31).

In excess of the views of Yāska ,some verses of ṚgVeda,where *Vaiśvānara* has been treated as terrestrial fire, are discussed below.The very first hymn where the name of *Vaiśvānara* is found first in the ṚgVeda, is I.59.But here this fire has been described as the fire of digestion (*jaṭhara Agni*). Gods rejoice in it and other fires are the branches of this one.Also this fire supports the world, like a pillar supports a house.Sāyaṇa also takes the same view and considers it as digestive fire.But when we come to ṚgVeda,

III.2.13, a clear picture of terrestrial fire is seen.¹⁵ According to Wilson the worshiper desires riches from *Vaiśvānara*, the mighty, venerable, wise (*kavi*), adorable, tawny rayed, resplendent, who has been brought to earth by *Mātariśvān* (the wind god) etc. Here if the adjectives of *Vaiśvānara* are seen, these will throw some idea of its terrestrial nature. Firstly if the word *chitrāyāmam* is seen, Sāyaṇa explains it as *nanāvidhagamanam* or moving in various ways. In ordinary life it is seen that when some spark of fire is added to fuel like dry wood, leaf, liquid fuel etc, it covers the entire fuel immediately, going all-round. So it means terrestrial fire only. Again the word *harikeśam*, is explained by Sāyaṇa as *pingalārchiṣam* or reddish in colour, is no doubt the flame of fire. Similarly the word *sudiptam* is explained by Sāyaṇa as *sobhandīptim* or lustrous. So if we analyze all these words it points to the earthly form of fire. Similarly in another verse of RgVeda, III.26.3,¹⁶ the terrestrial form of fire is seen. In this verse the worshiper is desirous of mighty horses, valuables as usually from him. But the words of the first line like “the *kuśikas* always kindle *Vaiśvānara*” draws our attention. It is explained by Sāyaṇa as *hotrādibhiḥājya havi prapakṣepena samyak dipyate* or which blazes when oblations are thrown into it by the invoker (*hotā*). Also a simile is given of an infant horse and mother. As the infant horse after being born makes sound (*krandana*), and nourished by the mother, in that way the fire is done by the invoker. The sound of neighing definitely is the crackling sound of oblation being burnt. So it clearly indicates the earthly nature of fire.

A very interesting verse is in RgVeda, where the threefold nature of fire is seen but a bit clearly.¹⁷ As per Wilson “The immortals, desirous (of his presence) sanctified the three radiances of the great circumbient Agni: one of them they have placed in the world of mortals as nourisher (of all): the other two have gone to the neighboring sphere”. Yāska while discussing the word *Vaiśvānara* has often quoted the three fold nature of Agni. This verse is very clear about concept of *Vaiśvānara* as the fire of earth. The first word is *tisra* (three fold body of Agni) which is explained by Sāyaṇa as the fires of sky, firmament and earth. But the second line is very important as it clarifies the point. The words (*tasmādekamadadhuḥ*) ‘from among them, kept one’ is explained by Sāyaṇa as the gods kept one of the fires, on earth. So it is no other than *Vaiśvānara*, the terrestrial fire. Of course Sāyaṇa gives another explanation of the word *tisra* as the three *samidhas* (two *ādhāra samidhas* and one *anuyāja samidha*), two went upper worlds and one remained on earth. But the earlier view seems more appropriate.

In this way although the threefold nature of Agni is seen in the RgVeda but the naturalistic concept is much discussed and upheld by western indologists. The expressions like *pitā, nābhi, hotā, kavikratu, purohita, dūta* etc. very well indicate its earthly nature. But the concept of *Vaiśvānara* is very vast and he can't be limited only to earth or terrestrial fire. The interpretation of Vedic gods only as some phenomena of nature, which has been widely published by some Indian and foreign ideologists, seems to be one sided and it needs further research. An important concept of *Vaiśvānara* is found in *Brahmasūtra, Upaniṣads* and *Gīta*, which testifies it as the inner essence of everything.

Interpretation of Dayanandanda and Aurovinda on the verses of Vedas is very much interesting as it exposes the inner meaning of Vedas. Of course the contributions of foreign scholars towards the study of Vedas are undeniable and praiseworthy. So a combined effort is needed with the help modern technology to explore the hidden knowledge of Vedas, which can help the humanity a lot, in the long run.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1.pari prajātaḥ kratvā babhūtha bhuvō devānām pitā putraḥ san || 1.069.02

2.Nirukta, .Nir.7.14

3.Gonda,J,'Epithets in RgVeda',P.7

4.Jai.Br.,3.8, yat bhutam avārayat tatvaiśvānarayorvaiśvāratvam.

5.Nir.,7.6.1,a & b.

6.Ibid.,7.6.1,c.

7.Verma,Siddheswar: 'The Etymology of Yaska ',VVRI,Hoshiarpur.

8. surya vaiśvarāgnināmekatvamihā dṛśyate

Bṛhaddevata,2/18,Rai.Ramkumar,Chaukhamba.1963

9. vaiśvānaradvādaśakapālah.Satapatha Brāhmaṇa,6.6.1.5.

10.vaiśvānaraḥ pratnathā nākamāruhaddivaspr̥ṣṭham bhandāmānaḥ

śumanmābhiḥ |

sa pūrvavajjanayāñjantave dhanām samānamajmaṁ paryēti jāgr̥viḥ ||

R.V,III.2.12

Cf.Wilson,H.H,R̥gVeda, Eng.Tr. Vol.II.Astekar,Poona,1925,p.347

Cf.Sā.Bh. sūryarupeṇa gachati

11. Sā.Bh. sadā pravṛddhah samānam sarveṣām devānām sādharmaṇamajmam

ākāśamārgam gachati

12.viśvāsmā agniṁ bhuvānāya devā vaiśvānaram ketumahnāmakṛṇvan |

ā yastātānoṣasō vibhātīrapō ūr̥noti tamō arcīṣā yan || R.V,X.88.12

13.pra nū mähitvaṁ vṛṣabhasyā vocaṁ yaṁ pūravo' vṛtrahaṇaṁ saçante |
vaiśvāṇaro dasyūmagṇirjaghānvā□ adhūṇotkāṣṭhā avaśambāraṁ bhet ||

R.V,I.059.06

Cf.Sā.Bh. atra vaiśvānaraśavdena madhyamasthanastho

vaidyutognirabhidhīyate |

14.apāmupasthē mahiṣā aḡrbhṇatā viśo_rājānamupā tasthurrgmiyaṁ |
ā dūto agnimābharadvīvasvāto vaiśvānaraṁ mātariśvā parāvataḥ ||

R.V,VI.8.04

15.ṛtāvānaṁ yajñīyaṁ vipramukthya lṁā yaṁ dadhe mātariśvā divi kṣayaṁ |

taṁ cītrayāmaṁ harikeśamīmahe sudītimagnīm sūvitāya navyāse || R.V,III.2.13

16. aśvo na krandañjanibhiḥ samidhyate vaiśvānaraḥ kuśikebhīryugeyūge |

sa nō agniḥ suyīryaṁ svaśvyaṁ dadhātu ratnāmamṛtēṣu jāgṛviḥ || R.V., III.26.03

17. tiśro yahvasyā samidhaḥ pariḥmano'gnerāpunannuśijo amṛtyavaḥ |

tāsāmekāmadādhūrmartye bhujāmu lokamu dve upā jāmimīyatuh || R.V,III.2.09

