Naturalistic concept of Agni Vaiśvānara in Ṛg Veda

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Abstract. Many epithets are ascribed to Agni like Vaiśvānara ,Tanunapāt, Grhapati, 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.

O1-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(vishpati). 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 son 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 (agráṇi). Again he quotes the opinion of his predecessor Śākapūni who is of the view that the word has been derived from three roots like √vi, √anj/dah and √ni with the meaning going, burning and leading. So the word Agni has been formed taking a from √e, g from √aṅj and ni as per Yāska.

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. RgVeda. Here the words like purohitam, yajñya devam, ritvijam etc. show the reverence of the seer towards this god. Many epithets are seen being ascribed to Agni like Vaiśvānara, Tanunapāt, Grhapati, 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 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.

0.2. ETYMOLOGY AND MEANING OF VAIŚVĀNARA

However the epithet Vaiśvānara occupies an important place among the epithets of Agni in RgVeda. It is seen that Vaiśvānara occurs nearly sixty times in fourteen hymns of Rg 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 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. lightening 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 Vaiśvānarah

ii) Viśvā enam narā nayanti iti Vaiśvānarah

Vaiśvānara is so called because he leads all men or all men lead him.
Another definition is also given by Yāska- ‘api vā Viśvānara eva syāt I prayuta sarvāṇi bhutāni tasya Vaiśvānarah.’

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

ii) prayuta sarvāṇi bhutāni (Who reaches all men) tasya(apatyāṃ) Vaiśvānarah. (His son Vaiśvānarah)

On this definition,Durgāchārya, the renowned commentator of Nirukta opines that it may be a deity named Vis‘vanara and his son is Vaiśvānara . Again Śāyaṇa adds a point here that, the word tasyāpatyam may have been after bhutāni and Vaiśvānara is the son of Viśvānara, who may be deity. 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 (ādhidaivika 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

Mimāṃsakas are of the opinion that Vaiśvānara is Āditya and to add further, Saunaka treats Vaiśvānara as Surya. 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. Again in one of the verses of RgVeda, 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 footnotes. The same view has been expressed by Śāyaṇa. Again in RgVeda, X.88.12, the same idea i.e sun, has been expressed by the seer. 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’ (anham ketuh) is surely the sun since day begins only after the rise of the sun. Śāyaṇa also agrees with the view and says that Vaiśvānara extends (vistārayati) Usā 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 RgVeda(VI.8.2,X.8812 etc.).

0.4. VAIŚVĀNARA AS AERIAL FIRE (VIDYUT).

In RgVeda 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 RgVeda(I.59.6),\textsuperscript{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(āvarakasasya 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 (vaidyutagni). 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 RgVeda.VI.8.4, the idea of lightning is described.\textsuperscript{14} “The mighty Maruts have seized upon him on the lap of waters(in the firmament) and men have acknowledged him as their adorab sovereign Mōtarisvān, 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 RgVeda.

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 (6\textsuperscript{th} & 7\textsuperscript{th}) 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 havinirupyate ayameva so’gni Vaiśvānarah, (Nirukta, 7.31).

In excess of the views of Yāska, some verses of RgVeda, 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 RgVeda, is I.59. But here this fire has been described as the fire of digestion (jathara 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 RgVeda,
Ill.2 13,a clear picture of terrestrial fire is seen. 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 chitrayāmam is seen, Sāyaṇa explains it as nanāvidhagamananam 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 pingalārchiśam or reddish in colour, is no doubt the flame of fire. Similarly the word sudiptam is explained by Sāyaṇa as sobhandiptim 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, 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 kuṣikas always kindle Vaiśvānara” draws our attention. It is explained by Sāyaṇa as hotrādibhiḥ ....ājya 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. 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”. Yāśka 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 (tasmādakamadadhuh) ‘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, purohitā, 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. 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 Brahmāsūtra, Upaniṣads and Gītā, 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. parj Prajat krtv babhuth bhuv dvahan pitt putrah san || 1.069.02

2. Nirukta, Nir.7.14

3. Gonda, J, ‘Epithets in Rg Veda’, P.7


5. Nir., 7.6.1, a & b.

6. Ibid., 7.6.1, c.


8. surya vaiśvarāgnināmekatvamiha drṣyate

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

9. vaiśvānaradvādaśakapālah. Satapatha Brāhmaṇa, 6.6.1.5.

10. vajśvānaraḥ pratnathā nākāmārūhaddīvasprṣṭham bhanda māṇaḥ

sūmanmabhīḥ |

sa pūrvāvajjanyānjantave dhanāṁ samānāmayāṁ paryeti jāgrīvīḥ ||

R.V, III.2.12


Cf. Sā. Bh. sūryarupeṇa gachati

11. Sā. Bh. sadā pravrddhah samānāṁ sarveśāṁ devānāṁ sādhāraṇamajmaṁ

ākāśārāgam gachati

12. vīśvāsmā agnim bhuvānāya dēvā vaiśvānāram keśumahāmakṣvan |

ā yastātāntosās vībhātīrapō ūnōtī tamō arciṣā yan || R.V. X.88.12
13. pra nū māhītvāṁ vṛṣabhasyā vocāṁ yaṁ pūravo vṛtrāhanāṁ sacānte |
   vaiśvānarō dasyūmagnirjaghaṁvā ṛdhūṅtkaśṭhī avā sambārāṁ bhet ||
   R.V, I.059.06

Cf. Sā. Bh. atra vaiśvānaraśavadena madhyamasthanasto

   vaidyutognirabhidyate |

14. apāmupasthe mahīśā āgrbhnaṁ vaśo rājāṇamupā tāsthurgmīyāṁ |
   ā dūto agnimābhāradyāvivasvāto vaiśvānarāṁ mātṛiśvā parāvatāḥ ||
   R.V, VI.8.04

15. ṛtāvānāṁ yajñīyaṁ viprāmukthaṁ jñāṁ yaṁ dādhe mātṛiśvā divi kṣayām |
   taṁ cītrayāmaṁ harikeśamīmahe sudētimagnīṁ sūvītāya navaṁya || R.V, III.2.13

16. aṣvō na kraṇḍaṁjanibhuṁ samīdhyate vaiśvānaraḥ kūṣīkebhīryugeyuge |
   sa no agnih svāvyāṁ svasvyaṁ dadhātu ratnāmamṛṭeṣy jāgriṁh || R.V, III.26.03

17. tiṣro yahvasya samīdhaḥ pariṁmano'gneraṁpunannuṣiṣyo amṛtyavah |
   tāsāmekāmadadhurmartye bhujāmu lōkāmu dve upā jāmimīyatuḥ || R.V, III.2.09