

Vedic Rites and Supreme Knowledge.

BY BASANTA KUMAR CHATTERJEE, M. A.

Western scholars fancy that there is a contradiction between Vedic rituals and the knowledge of Brahma. Thus Dr. Winternitz writes, "When the Brahmans were pursuing their barren sacrificial science, other circles were engaged upon those highest questions which were at last so admirably treated in the Upaniṣads" (*History of Sanskrit Literature*, page 231). Mr. Macdonell writes, "Though the Upaniṣads generally form a part of the Brāhmaṇas being a continuation of their speculative side (Jñāna-Kāṇḍa), they really represent a new religion which is in virtual opposition to the ritual or practical side" (*Sanskrit Literature*, p. 218). The learned professor did not pause to consider how two portions of the same book can be in opposition to each other. Foreigners who are not born and bred up in the traditions of Indian culture may be pardoned for committing such a mistake. They have a natural prejudice against the elaborate rituals prescribed in the Vedas. They think that these rituals were based on superstitions and can have nothing to do with the knowledge of Self. But what are we to say of our foremost Indian scholars of the modern school who have repeated the verdict of western scholars regarding the contradiction between Vedic rituals and the knowledge of Brahma? Did it not strike them that geniuses like Śankarāchārya and Rāmānuja must

have possessed that little common sense which is necessary to discern that if there were any contradiction between the portions of the Vedas dealing with the rituals and the Upaniṣads dealing with the knowledge of Brahma both of them could not be true. For it must not be forgotten that according to Śankarāchārya and Rāmānuja (in fact according to all ancient Indian scholars) the Vedas including the Upaniṣads were revealed by God and therefore absolutely true.

If we examine the grounds on which is based this theory of imaginary contradiction between the Vedic rituals and the Upanishadic knowledge we shall be surprised to find how so many famous scholars have made such a fundamental mistake. It is claimed on behalf of the Vedic rituals that by performing them properly one can attain heaven. This statement is nowhere contradicted in the Upaniṣads. On the other hand it is confirmed in many passages of various Upaniṣads. We shall quote two passages below:

तये ह वै तदिष्टापूर्त्तं कृतमित्युपासते ते चान्द्रमसमेव लोकमभिजयन्ते ।

(*Prasnopanishad* I. 9)

"Those who perform Vedic sacrifices, dig tanks and wells, and plant gardens, etc., attain the region of the moon (one of the heavens)."

एतेषु यश्चरते भ्राजमानेषु यथाकालं चाहुतयो ह्याददायन् ।
तं नयन्त्येताः सूर्यस्य रश्मयो यत्र देवानां पतिरेकोऽधिवासः॥

(*Mundaka* I. ii. 5)

“Those who offer oblations at the proper time in the blazing fires are taken by the sun's rays to heaven where the King of gods resides.”

The *Muṇḍakopaniṣad* clearly asserts that the Vedic rituals are true, that is to say they are efficacious:

‘तदेतत्सत्यं मन्त्रेषु कर्माणि कवयो यान्यपश्यन् ।’

(*Muṇḍaka I. ii. 1*)

“The rituals which the seers saw in the Mantras are true.”

First the Mantras were revealed. Then were revealed the methods of performing the Vedic rituals with these Mantras. These methods are incorporated in the Brāhmaṇas which are a portion of the Vedas and were based on revelation. We thus find that the Vedas consist of both the Mantras and the Brāhmaṇas as laid down by Mahārṣi Āpastamba in the *Yajñaparibhāṣāsūtra*:

‘मन्त्रब्राह्मणयोर्वेदनामधेयम् ।’

“The name Veda is applicable to both the Mantras and the Brāhmaṇas.”

That the so-called contradiction between the Vedic rituals and the Upaniṣads exists merely in the imagination of modern scholars will appear also from the fact that the Upaniṣads in many places quote passages from the Mantra portion of the Vedas as authoritative introducing them with phrases like ‘तदेतद्वाच्युक्तम्’ or ‘तदेष श्लोकः’. (“Thus it is stated in the R̥g or the Vedic verse”.)

The *Muṇḍakopaniṣad* describing the glory of Brahma sings thus:

तस्माद्ब्रह्मः साम यजूषि दीक्षा यज्ञश्च सर्वे क्रतवो दक्षिणाश्च ।
संवत्सरश्च यजमानश्च लोकाः सोमो यत्र पवते यत्र सूर्यः ॥

(II. i. 6)

“From that Supreme Being have appeared the *R̥gveda*, the *Sāmaveda*, the *Yajurveda*, the ceremony of initiation, the Vedic sacrifices, the gifts made to the priests, the years, the man who performs the sacrifice, the various worlds, the gods Soma and Sūrya.”

We find in the *Kāthopaniṣad* that before Nachiketā was given lessons on Brahmajñāna he was taught how to perform the Vedic sacrifice by means of which one can attain heaven.

From the above facts it will be abundantly clear that the Upaniṣads have in many places clearly asserted that one can attain heaven by performing Vedic sacrifices.

It may however still be thought that the Upaniṣads might state that one could attain heaven by performing Vedic sacrifices. But as the aim of the Upaniṣads is to attain liberation and not heaven, it cannot be the intention of the Upaniṣads, that one should waste one's time and labour in the performance of sacrifices. But this is not correct. The Upaniṣads clearly enjoin on the necessity of performing sacrifices. Thus in the famous parting message of the tutor, he enjoins on the student not to neglect the rites to be performed for the Devas and the Pitṛs.

‘देवपितृकार्याभ्यां न प्रमदितव्यम् ।’

(*Taittirīyopaniṣad I. xi. 2*)

In the concluding portion of the *Mundakopaniṣad* it is stated that the knowledge of Brahma is not to be imparted to a person who has not performed a particular Vedic rite:

‘तेषामेवैतां ब्रह्मविद्यां वदेत शिरोव्रतं विधिवच्चैस्तु चीर्णम् ।’

(*Mundaka* III. ii. 19)

The story of the *Kaṭhōpāniṣad* by putting lessons on Vedic sacrifice before lessons relating to the knowledge of Brahma illustrates the necessity of the performance of Vedic sacrifice as a condition precedent to the acquisition of divine knowledge.

It may be asked, if Vedic rites merely enable persons to attain heaven, why should it be necessary for a person to perform these rites if he does not want to attain heaven but wants liberation instead? The reply is to be found in the following passage of the *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad*:

‘तमेतं वेदानुवचनेन ब्राह्मणा विविदिषन्ति यज्ञेन दानेन तपसानाशकेन ।’

(IV. iv. 22)

“It is this Brahma whom Brahmans want to know by the study of the Vedas and also by means of sacrifice, charity and austerities, performed without attachment.”

The word अनाशकेन (without attachment) is significant. The acts mentioned above if performed *with attachment* enable a person to attain heaven. But if the same acts are performed without attachment they serve to purify the mind of the doer by removing desire, anger and other evil passions. This is clearly stated in the following verses of the *Gītā*

which elucidate the passage of the *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad* quoted above:

यज्ञदानतपःकर्म न त्याज्यं कार्यमेव तत् ।
यज्ञो दानं तपश्चैव पावनानि मनीषिणाम् ॥
एतान्यपि तु कर्माणि सङ्गं त्यक्त्वा फलानि च ।
कर्तव्यानीति मे पार्थ निश्चितं मतमुत्तमम् ॥

(*Gītā* XVIII. 5, 6)

“Sacrifice, charity and austerities are not to be given up. They should be performed as they purify the doers. They should be performed without attachment and without desire for the fruit.”

The word अनाशकेन of the Upaniṣad has been explained as सङ्गं त्यक्त्वा फलानि च in the *Gītā*.

We shall now refer to a passage in the Upaniṣads which has given rise to the misapprehension referred to above that Upaniṣads have condemned the performance of Vedic rituals. It will however appear on a careful consideration of the passage that what is condemned in the Upaniṣads is not the performance of the Vedic sacrifices, but the desire of enjoying the pleasures of heaven as a fruit of the performance of the sacrifices:

प्लवा ह्येते अदृढा यज्ञरूपा अष्टादशोक्तमवरं येषु कर्म ।
एतच्छ्रेयो येऽभिनन्दन्ति मूढा जरामृत्युं पुनरेवापि यन्ति ॥

(*Mundaka Upaniṣad* I. ii. 7)

“The sacrifices are like frail crafts. Those who consider them to be the best thing are ignorant and become again a prey to old age and death.”

Here the sacrifices are called frail crafts because they do not enable men to cross the ocean of death. Knowledge of Brahma is the

only means of crossing the ocean of death. But it is not to be inferred from this passage that sacrifices have no efficacy; because in the two preceding verses it has been stated that those who perform sacrifices go to heaven after their death. Nor is it to be inferred from this passage that the performance of sacrifices itself is condemned. For in other passages (quoted above) the Upaniṣads have insisted on the performance of sacrifices. All that is said here is that performance of sacrifices is not the highest thing.

It may be doubted by the modern mind, how can the performance of Vedic rites purify the mind. To this doubt it may be replied that the impurities of the mind consist chiefly of various kinds of desire and proceed out of inability to exercise self-control. An elaborate programme of rituals increases our power of self-control. Such external conduct is of course not sufficient. There must be an earnest desire for self-purification and the attainment of true knowledge. Where there is such desire regulation of external conduct is greatly helpful. A man consists of the body as well as the soul. He cannot attain spiritual progress unless his body is properly trained. There is another way in which the question can be viewed. Our mind has become impure because of wicked deeds. For the removal of these impurities, it is necessary to perform good deeds. And this is what is aimed by the Vedic rituals. The *Īsopaniṣad* says that for the

attainment of liberation both Vidyā and Avidyā are necessary. Mere Avidyā without Vidyā will not suffice; mere Vidyā without Avidyā is worse. Rāmānuja has interpreted Vidyā to mean knowledge, *i. e.*, the theoretical side of Sādhanā and Avidyā to mean the acts prescribed in the Śāstras, *i. e.*, the practical side. By performing the Shastraic acts the mind becomes pure and then lessons on the nature of Brahma can bear good fruit. Such lessons are not useful to a mind which is not pure. The efficacy of Vedic rituals in the attainment of the supreme knowledge is established by Vedavyāsa in the *Brahmasūtras* III. iv. 26 (सर्वापेक्षा च यज्ञादिश्रुतेरश्वत्). "The rituals prescribed in the Vedas are necessary for the attainment of the supreme knowledge. With the help of a horse we can go from one place to another. But for this purpose we require not merely a horse but also other accessories like the saddle and the bridle. So also for the attainment of the knowledge we require not merely lessons on Brahma, but also the rituals prescribed in the Vedas."—(Rāmānuja's *Śrī Bhāṣya*). In the following Sūtras it has been stated that the rules prescribed in the Śāstras in the matter of taking food and other external conduct are also helpful in the attainment of the knowledge of Brahma. Similarly the duties prescribed for the different Āśramas (Viz., Varṇāśramadharmā) are also useful in the attainment of knowledge (विहित्वाच्च आश्रम-कर्माणि III. iv. 32 सहकारित्वेन च III. iv. 33. Constant meditation on Brahma is of course the immediate means of

attaining knowledge of Brahma. Desire, anger and other passions interrupt our attempt for constantly meditating on God. The Vedic rituals including the duties prescribed in Varṇāśramadharmā enable us to subdue desire, anger, etc. It is true that even without performing the rules of Varṇāśramadharmā it is possible to attain Brahmajñāna by means of Japa, fasting, charities, etc. Thus Raikva in the *Chhāndogyopaniṣad*, Vāchaknavī in the *Bṛhadāraṇyako-paṇiṣad*, Bhīṣma in *Mahābhārata* acquired Brahma-vidyā although they did not perform the duties prescribed in the Varṇāśramadharmā as they did not belong to any particular Āśrama. In fact it has been stated in the *Manusamhitā* (and therefore accepted as authoritative by Vedavyāsa himself

in *Brahmasūtras* III. iv. 37 “अपि च सर्यते”) that even if a Brahman performs Japa without performing the other duties prescribed for the particular Āśrama to which he belongs, he can attain supreme knowledge thereby.

जप्येनापि च संसिद्धयेद् ब्राह्मणो नात्र संशयः ।

कुर्यादन्यन्न वा कुर्यान्मैत्रो ब्राह्मण उच्यते ॥

(*Manusamhitā* II. 87)

But the performance of the duties of the Varṇāśramadharmā are more efficacious in the attainment of Brahmajñāna than Japa or charities.

अतस्त्विदतरज्ज्यायो लिङ्गाच्च ।

(*Brahmasūtra* III. iv. 37)

It will thus appear that for the attainment of the supreme knowledge regulation of external conduct is necessary as well as mental discipline.