

Towards a Concept of the Poet in the Vedic Aesthetics

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The remarkable truth about the Indian civilisation is that it has had its beginning in poetry. The incipient stages in the establishment of the civilisation had the potent contribution of the poets. And through the ritualistic pattern the Vedic poets regulated the life of the community, and, through poetry, lent a shape to the Indian culture. It must be noted that till now hardly anything that is solemn and serious begins in India without singing a song, and, to adapt a Tennysonian phrase,² to our purpose, the Vedas sang the subcontinent into a nation. Just as the Greek tragedy had its origin in the religious ceremonials, in similar fashion and perhaps, more intimately, singing a song and reciting new poetical compositions were parts of the community rituals. The rituals bound the members of the community together and as such ritual was religion. Etymologically, the word religion is derived from the Latin *religere* which means to bind together. For the Vedic man rituals and poetry were close companions; each complemented the other. It may be difficult to find an example of 'pure poetry' in the *Rg Veda* since the atmosphere of ritualism pervades the poems, so much so that poetry formed an integral part of the rituals. So the social dimension of poetry cannot be confuted. The poet was socially committed. He was not lonely, idiosyncratic or aberrant as our modern poets are. He manifested a profound concern for human destiny and communication for him never posed a problem. He could engineer an admirable unification of the factors of rituals of community, poetry, and song as art forms, and philosophy that encompassed the grave subject of the origin of the world and man's relation to it. We are reminded of a remark of Pierre-Simon Ballanche: 'It is always a religious truth that the poet has to transmit. Religion and poetry are but one and the same. The poet is the priest.' (Furst 1980:78) Such a unique blend formed the quiddity of the Vedic culture. Indeed it was a large enough task that cannot be expected of a modern poet. But it must not be supposed that all the poets of the *Rg Veda* were cast in the same mould and their poetry was monolithic. Diverse philosophical thinking such as scepticism, agnosticism, pantheism have been at work behind the poet's speech. In fact the Vedic poets thrived in and were nurtured by a philosophical environment. Heraclitus, who breathed his thoughts into his fragmentary poems in the company of the argumentative Plato and Aristotle, may amaze us but a Bṛhaspati or a Dirghatamas need not have the similar impact. In the context of the *Rg Veda* there is a close relation between philosophy and poetry. For a student of culture it is a point worth noticing that a philosopher in the Vedas is a poet. The truth in man is acknowledged when it sees the light of day through the vehicle of poetic speech. So truth needs the body of poetry to express itself. The philosophy in the Vedas is not epistemology or metaphysics alone, it is the philosophy of language and a philosophy of poetry as well.

Also the *Rg Veda* is the glorious repository of high-quality poetry and canons of literary criticism of stupendous merit. The claim may sound tall but it is hardly so for the statement of the claim is fully substantiable. For an example we may refer to Eliot's distinction between the man who suffers and the man who creates which was anticipated thousands of years ago by the imagery of the two birds perched on the same tree; one busies itself in pecking about grains and fruits while the other simply looks on disinterestedly. ('Two birds, friends joined together clutch the same tree. One of them eats the fruit; the other looks on without eating'. I.164.20 O'Flaherty 1994:78. The metaphor of the two birds occur in the *Atharva Veda* IX.ix.20, *Mundakopaniṣad* III.1.1, *Kathopaniṣad*. VI.1, *Gītā* XV.1. So art, religion, literature, and philosophy formed the potent co-ordinates in the genius of India. The commingling of intellect and emotion in man is instrumental to his complete satisfaction and importantly his satisfaction is in the satisfaction of all the elements. This forms a significant sector in the domain of the Vedic poet's philosophy.

We may now turn to Dirghatamas who was a stalwart poet and one of the profoundest philosophers of the Vedas. He has twenty-five poems to his credit in the *Rg Veda* collection. They are full of philosophy and abound in mysticism and symbolism. The Vedic people had the desired familiarity with the set of symbols quite unlike the modern reader who is baffled by the jumble of paradoxes and the sinuous matrix of symbols. It must be remembered that Dirghatamas recited his poems before a gathering of learned listeners. In one of his verses, Dirghatamas enquires about the existence of any person who has seen the creation of the world. He thus makes us confront the pregnant relation that exists between the mysterious basic universe and the evolved world of experience. It is in this knowledge that real wisdom resides and the knowledge of the basic universe is achieved through a vision. The wise poets explore their hearts and by dint of their power of intuition come to know a lot about the stages of origination. 'Poets seeking in their heart with wisdom found the bond of existence in non-existence' (10.129.4 O'Flaherty 1994:25) Remarkably enough, it is only the power of the language of the poet that can stir the hidden universe to break forth with a meaning. If one can understand the language of the poet then he can also understand the mystery of the universe and Dirghatamas appears to suggest that it is the poets who comprehend the mystery. (It reminds us of Novalis for whom the poet and the priest are one. 'Only an artist can divine the meaning of life.' Furst 1980:70.) Śunahṣepha, one of the prominent Vedic poets, finds himself in bondage and embarks on a self-exploration to discover the illumination that would provide him with the clue to the mystery of the world. In fact light, wisdom, freedom, and poetry form the pith of Śunahṣepha's philosophy. The state of 'freedom' emboldens him to behold his father and mother (wisdom and poetry). Interestingly, it is the unique 'vision' that begets wisdom, the power that enables our inner faculties to see through the apparent opacity and understand the true law of things. 'Let him who really knows proclaim here the hidden place of that beloved bird.' (1.164.70 O'Flaherty 1994:76) The 'beloved bird' can come to mean truth or illumination that is concealed from the ordinary view. It is only the poet who by an 'inner height' discerns the position of the bird. So,

‘unknowing, ignorant, I ask for knowledge about it from the poets who know’. (1.164.6 ibid) The omniscient intellect enables them to grasp the Truth of the universe. There is the emphasis on *yaturvidyā* and it may be observed that the poets in *Atharva Veda* use the root *vid* about two hundred and fifty times, *cit* about thirty five times and *jna* about eighty times in the sense to know and *dr̥ś* about eighty times in the sense to see, to observe. They have the ability to realise the forces that guide nature’s operations and with this knowledge they want to control and command them. It may be mentioned in this context that Dadhyane, a very important poet of the pre-Ṛgvedic times had the wisdom about *madhu* or honey—*Madhuvidyā* or knowledge of the great mystery.

Thus have I, an illumined sage, by my thoughts and utterances spoken to thee, who knowest. O Fire, O Creator, secret words of guidance, seer-wisdom that speak out their sense to the seer. (Vāmadeva’s hymns. IV. 3.16 Aurobindo 1991:174)

So the seer is expected to look beyond the apparent reality and bring the ‘secret’ to light by the dint of his wisdom. Indeed the illumined *ṛṣi* has access to the secret words – *ninya vacānisi* and possesses the wisdom to utter the hidden meaning – *kavyāni kavaye nivacana*. And Dirghatamas feels that the *ṛiks* exist in a supreme ether, imperishable and immutable in which all the gods are seated. He adds ‘One who knows not That what shall he do with the Ṛk? – 1.164.39 (6) The poets have spread the seven threads and they ask him to weave them into a cloth. (‘An ignorant fool, I ask in my mind about the hidden footprints of the gods. Over the young calf the poets stretched out seven threads to weave.’ (1.164.5) (O’Flaherty 1994:76) Here we find the seed of the postmodern critical theories where the poem, exists as a *text* and nothing else. There are two words in one of the verses of Bṛihaspati: *sirih* and *tantra*. The word *tantra* is related to *tantu*, and *tantu* means thread and the word *sirih* must be the accusative plural of *siri*. Either they spin cotton into yarn or weave clothes out of yarn. They put the words lengthwise and crosswise. The word ‘text’ has its origin in the art of weaving. Just as a piece of cloth has its *texture* so is the poem a text woven out of different strands of thought. It has been suggested that the seven threads given to Dirghatamas to weave were the poetry of the earlier poets. The number seven is mystical. The Vedas speak of the symbolism of seven sisters singing in chorus. There is also a reference to the weaving of the cloth in the poem of another Vedic poet Bṛihaspati. The Kavis in *Atharva Veda* fashion seven boundaries (5.1.6) being wise and deft. They may be called *Ṛṣabha* having thousand eyes. They are *tapasvins* and hence they protect Sūrya (Sun) (18.2.18)

It is worth noting that speech becomes identified with the creator and the absolute godhead – ‘I am the one who blows like the wind, embracing all creatures’ (10.125.8) O’Flaherty 1994:63). But speech who knows all does not move all. The love of speech is lavished on the poet – ‘whom I love I make awesome; I make him a sage, a wise man, a Brahmin’ (10.125.5) (ibid). Thus wisdom is bestowed which gets wedded to speech to give

birth to poetry. Wisdom is the father and language is the mother. Timidity could be the initial reaction but an aesthetic relish is what awaits the ripening of the marriage. 'The mother gave the father a share in accordance with the Order, for at the beginning she embraced him with mind and heart. Recoiling, she was pierced and flowed with the seed of the embryo. The reverent came to praise.' (1.164.8) (76) Here the seed of the embryo is the poetic composition. Again, 'The mother was harnessed to the chariot pole of the priest's cow; the embryo remained within the cowpens. The calf lowed and looked for the many coloured cow on the three stages of the journey.' (1.164.9)(ibid) The cow is the language and poetry takes its birth from the union of language and wisdom which is meant by the word calf. It may be observed that the word *vacas* (speech, spell) is used more often than *vac*. It is the speech-ability of the poet (4.4.2, 1.29.5) that has its own inherent power, haying the voice of the bull and the intensity of the thunder. The *vacas* of the poet (conferred by Varuna) stubs out all poison (5.13.1), decimates the enemy (5.23.2) and most often the vices (7.78.3). By *vac* the poet slugs it out with the messengers of death and removes all *yaksma* (6.85.2).

In a poem of Br̥haspati language is spoken of as revealing her charms like a wife wearing fine robes ('One who looked did not see speech, and another who listens does not hear it. It reveals itself to someone as a loving wife, beautifully dressed, reveals her body to her husband.' 10.71.4 O'Flaherty 1994:61) This metaphor is basic to the theory of the language of poetry that was subsequently developed in India by such thinkers as Abhinavagupta (10th c. A.D.) and Ānandavardhana (9th c. A.D.). This theory would reject Mallarmé's dictum that poetry is written with words and not with ideas. What Br̥haspati says in his poem and what later on was canonised by Abhinavagupta is the view that meaning is incarnate in the language of poetry. Language is the body while meaning is the soul. Neither of these can be dissociated from the other. This view has found its paradigmatic expression in the opening verse of Kalidasa's *Raghuvamśa* (1.1)

Interwelded as words and meaning
 Pārvati and the Lord of the Lords (Brough 1968:51)

As a matter of fact, Br̥haspati has strongly rooted for the phenomenon of poetry being the offspring of language and wisdom. The world of forms bear reference to the language and in the process of becoming poetry, language with its innate malleability, assumes diverse forms in relation to the various objects in the world. So what distinguishes the ordinary language from the language of poetry requires a careful introspection.

There is one absolute language, *vāk*, and on no account can the poet's language be cut off from it. In the case of ordinary language the meaning is conventional or stratified or used as a result of semantic habit. In case of poetry, language crosses the frontiers of conventional meaning and reaches out to the transcendent source of meaning. The thoughts of the poet cannot be communicated through propositional statements and the obliquity of poetry contributes to its aesthetic profundity. Poetry transcends the fixed contours of a

linguistic construction and its meaning illuminates in a flash by meaningful sentence-units in Bhartrhari's philosophy of Sanskrit grammar. This brings to the fore the doctrine of suggestion (*dhvani*). (*Dhvani* is the principle which is derived by Anandavardhana. Every analysable linguistic element in poetry is *vyañjaka* or revealer in regard to *rasa* which must be regarded *ipso facto* as *vyañgya* or 'revealed' par excellence. [It is the poet who comprehends the aesthetic suggestivity and can fathom the multi-layered symbolism to infuse the intended *rasa*. Also Kuntaka's *Vakroktijivita* should not go unmentioned. *Vakrokti* is an unusual statement, more elevated, ornamented and appealing than our ordinary language which is fit enough to make its presence felt in the domain of poetry. Nilakantha Dikshita calls it *Vinyasa Visesa* in *Siva Lilarnava*. Ruyyaka uses the term *Praudhokti* in *Alamkara Sarvasva*.] Indeed the Vedic poet sees through the ordinary usage and gets the suggested meaning (*vyañjana*) incarnate in the language. It is owing to this power that the poet enjoys a special position in the Vedic sociology.

I Ching makes us aware of the 'right' man who takes up the words, ponders their meaning under the fixed rules that reveal themselves. It is to the right man that the meaning manifests itself. Here the 'right' man could be the poet or the man with the vision of truth and wisdom.

He is the one who knows how to stretch the thread and weave the cloth; he will speak the right words. He who understands this is the guardian of immortality; (6.9.3) (O'Flaherty 1994:116)

Thus it is only the 'inspired' poets who know how to harness the plough and stretch the yokes on either side (to fashion the composition with deftness and delicacy). By this they win favour among gods. Moreover, Dirghatamas draws a distinction between those who have eyes to see (endowed with wisdom) and those who are blind (people who understand nothing). Precisely, the real sight is the sight of the poet. It is further maintained that those who possess wisdom attain immortality. It appears from Dirghatamas' manner of speaking that wisdom consists in expressing the truth in appropriate metres. Also it is essential to remain cognisant about the proper occasion for the different metres. The concept of metre is so important an affair that the holiest of truths is taken to be expressed in *Gāyatrī* metre. Poetry has different metres and one should know what metre is to be resorted to for a particular song.

With the *Gāyatrī* foot they fashion a hymn; with the hymn, a chant; with the Triṣṭubh foot a strophe; with the strophe of two feet or four feet they fashion a speech. With the syllable they fashion the seven tones. (1.164.24) (O'Flaherty 1994:78)

Even the Atharvanic hymns are bound by metres. *Arka* (a song) is measured by *Gāyatrī* metre and in fact the *ṛks* have similar metre and from these *ṛks* the *sāmāns* are

fashioned. The poets sing *arka* (*arkam abhyarcanti*, 13.1.13) The true poet knows what poetry is and by knowing the truth turns immortal. The question as regards the relation between the true poet and immortality remains. The question would surface since 'wisdom' has become a suspect word in today's atmosphere. Eliot has been hesitant in admitting that Goethe is a great poet though he admits that Goethe is a sage. This Eliotian hesitation is symptomatic of the hour of disbelief. But for the Vedic man nothing is less than the loss of wisdom. Here, wisdom cannot be a mere intellectual equipment. In fact poetic language becomes the glorious medium for 'truth' to express itself and is the sole manner by which immortality is achieved. This is the Vedic philosophy which Dīrghatamas represents where to be a poet is the highest goal and with poethood comes bliss and immutability. Also the Angirasas are said to have discovered 'light'. By being associated with the exploits of Indra in the release of the cows after killing Vala, the Angirasas have released 'light'. In fact Yama who found the Path achieved wisdom in the company of the Angirasas. Their 'light', Yama's Path and Manu's system of moral life leave its synergistic impact on the unification of civilisation.

Here we may make an effort to understand the reasons that make a true poet know what metre will suit a particular kind of poetry. Dīrghatamas gives a description of the metres and their application. He says that the Gayatrī metre is related to the three worlds and is not confined to any region and for this reason it has a greatness of its own. Dīrghatamas highlights the contrast between the condition of the poet and the condition of the common man. In the poet there is something that is externally seen and at the same time there is something which resides inside him. It is the truth about him. What is external is what is in him common with the ordinary man. Quite unlike the common man there is something in the poet that runs briskly; it is his talent. The mind of the poet is compared with a fast-paced steed and the immortal spirit in the poet moves about with his own will power. Thus the poet combines two factors, the mortal and the immortal, and both form an integral part of his personality. Dīrghatamas suggests that on becoming a poet he is blessed with a new parentage; he becomes the son of the heaven as father and of the earth as mother. With poetry appearing as the supreme expanse of the world, he settles confidently at the altar and proudly faces the abode of language. The rituals of which his poetic self is a vital ingredient reveal the world-force and the world activity. This is a pointer to aesthetic comprehensiveness in the Atharvanic poet. For him there is *varcas* (splendour) that takes into account the aesthetic charms of the earth – *gandha*, odour of the world (*Prithivī*) and *ruchi*, charm with its subtlety and refinement and the *ugra*, the warty or vulgar – in the same sweep. This is peculiarly the all comprehensive and the all encompassive self of the poet.

So Kavi is the man with *prajñavat* or *dhyānavat*, *medhā*, and *maniṣā*. He is the *krāntadarśin* (loosely translated as transvisionary) as suggested in *Atharva Veda* 19.53.1 possessed of *prajñā* (understanding). Here *dhṛa* (wisdom) is related to *medhā* (intellect). This *medhā* is closely allied with *tapas*, *indriya* (the power of senses, 6.133.4), *śradhā* and

dikṣā (19.64.1; 19.40.3). The *medhā* in the kavi orders the thought process and regulates the flow of ideas, imparting the requisite artistic finality. In the true poet, *medhā* flows unabated and the mind is without *chidra* (here it means the breach in comprehension or ideation). The poet is, thus, the *medhāvin* or *sumedhas*. Further Dirghatamas is struck by amazement at the metamorphosed state in which he finds himself.

'I do not know just what it is that I am like. I wander about concealed and wrapped in thought. When the first born of Order came to me, I won a share of this Speech.' (1.164.37) (O'Flaherty 1994:79)

The discrepancy between the old and the new selves is quite conspicuous and Dirghatamas as a poet shrugs off his old self but cannot explain the dynamics of this transformation. Indeed the split in the poet's personality is multi-directional. It is to the ultimate truths of the world that the personality of the poet is directed. This runs counter to the personality of the ordinary man that gravitates towards the prosaic order of the extraneous world – the world that is too much with us, getting and spending. Here the double personality in Dirghatamas is a case in point. He uses both the singular and the dual number while speaking of himself.

Very clearly, the *ṛks* or the syllables of poetry are the supreme abode of language. The Atharvanic poet acts as the *purohita* (priest) of the kings as he wrestles against the messengers of Yama who have come to take away the life of a person, declaring himself as *brahmacārin* of *Mṛtyu*. In contrast to the ordinary language that relates itself to the objects of this experienced world, the language of poetry establishes itself as the real language where the gods can find their refulgent mansion – 'the undying syllable of the song is the final abode where all the gods have taken their seat' (1.164.39) (O'Flaherty 1994:80) What follows from it is the importance of understanding the syllables – an understanding that sustains the relation between language of poetry and the presence of god therein. Also, what finds a durable niche is the fact that through the understanding of poetry man can achieve a communion with the gods. It must be mentioned that the poet with the gift of imagination (*pratibhā*) shares an aesthetic sensibility with the ideal critic (*sahajaya* or *rasika*). Importantly, in Dirghatamas the critic who understands the essence of poetry, and the creator called poet, lose all distinctions.

Dirghatamas juxtaposes two concepts *kṣara* and *akṣara*. The word *kṣara* means what sheds down and the word *akṣara* means what cannot be shed or what is indestructible. The implication of the contrast is what obtains between the empirical and the transcendent or between that what is conditioned and that what is unconditioned. The world beyond can only be spoken of by language. The world of experience is rooted in or allied with the transcendent. When Wordsworth (in his poem "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey") speaks of the unknown modes of being he was thinking what had already been thought by Dirghatamas so long back.

‘Speech was divided into four parts that the inspired priests know. Three parts, hidden in deep secret, humans do not stir into action; the fourth part of speech is what men speak.’ (1.164.45) (O’Flaherty 1994:80)

So it is the poet who with the benison of imagination (*kavi pratibhā*) has free access to all the four quarters. He wields language in such a way that ‘the unknown modes of being’ are made known. (One can profitably refer to the *Agni Purāṇa* which maintains that words attain preeminence in science [*śāstra*], meaning in epic history [*Itihāsa*] and suggestion in poetry. In *Dhvani Kāvya* [*Dhvanīśloka*, I.13] we find that the apparent meaning delightfully eases into another territory of meaning and manifests that [other suggested] sense.

One of Dirghatamas’ major poems is addressed to his Muse, the river goddess Sarasvatī. (It may be noted that there is only one Muse in Indian theory of poetry as distinguished from the nine Muses of the Greeks). The word Sarasvatī denoted a river and connoted a goddess. The river is spoken of in the Vedas as the greatest of the rivers and also as the greatest of the mothers: *nadītame, ambītame*. Sarasvatī as a goddess is the apotheosis of a river held in high esteem by the Vedic people. As a goddess she incarnates the sacred divine knowledge, *Brahmavidyā-svarūpiṇī*. She is the fountainhead of all faculties (mental and spiritual), the purifier and bestower of pure reason, the recompenser of worship and is the source of inspiration and accomplishment for all our benevolent acts. She sets in motion all the energies of the soul and intellect. She imparts deep knowledge to all who are seekers of truth. It was in the valley of the river Sarasvatī that the Aryan civilisation had originated and flourished in India. In the poem the poet is the child of Sarasvatī. She is thought of as a mother who nurses the poet on her breasts: ‘Your inexhaustible-breast, Sarasvatī that flows with the food of life, that you use to nourish all that one could wish for, freely giving treasure and wealth and beautiful gifts – bring that here for us to suck’. (1.164.49) (O’Flaherty 1994:81) It is implied that what a poet can give to a man is what a mother gives to a baby. But the difference is important for us to note. The milk available in the mother’s breasts is only for a particular period of time; but the milk from Sarasvatī’s breasts is everlasting. It keeps on nourishing the poet unconditionally.

One has to admit that the mysticism, symbolism, and the enigma of the poem baffle the modern reader with a near impenetrable density. But what cannot be disclaimed is the fact that the poem is a work of high quality dappled with exquisite images evincing a deft handling of language. It is crowned by a laudable artistic unity achieved through a remarkable commingling of contrasts.

The line of argument cannot be strengthened without an adequate discussion of Brihaspati (also known by the appellation of Brahmanaspati meaning lord of poetry). He is also called *pathikrti*, ‘path-preparer’ (the *Kavīm Kaviḥ*). He was a ‘creation and at the same time a personification of the priestly activity, to which later priestly poets ascribed the

deeds of might for which formerly other gods, notably Indra, were praised. He is the harbinger of joy for the gods and men and through his wisdom one can obtain a share in the sacrifice. He is the Pontifex, the preparer of the way to the heights of heaven. There is a mention of poetry as a very prominent feature in him. Symbolically it is said that he has seven mouths and is endowed with seven songs. Although in the *Atharva Veda*, the poet can be the divine kavi where Agni (5.12.1; 8.3.20; 19.4.6). Bhūmi (12.1.63). Vena (5.1.6) Varuna (5.13.1). Sāvitrī (7.14.1) Rohita (13.1.11) are omniscient and possessed with extraordinary abilities. Their skill is in the creation of the universe – *devasya kāvyam* – separately categorised from their human counterpart. It can be convincingly argued that Bṛhaspati is essentially a man who was deified on account of his superior talents and achievements. Here one may note that deification of poets is a matter well known to aestheticians. If we go back in history we shall find that the poet and the priest were united originally in the same person, which means that the poet was he who was conscious of the world of spirit as well as that of sense, and was the ambassador of the gods to men. This was his highest function and this is the reason for giving him the name of 'seer'. Thus Bṛhaspati combines the dual identity of a god and a singer (divine singer). As a matter of fact in the *Rg Veda* (X 91.3) God is depicted as a poet.

Most skilful with Thy powers, most wise with wisdom,

O God, Thou art a Poet knowing all with thy poetic wisdom.

Master of good things, Thou, the One, art the Lord

Of what the heaven and the earth produce. (Bose 1960:119)

We should also note that the concept of the poet as a divine singer is a happy person. The 'happiness' of the poet is related to 'immortality' – a state devoid of existential anguish or ennui. And this happiness emerges out of a deliverance from the murky quarters of ignorance, and immortality is conjoined to the attainment of wisdom. Atharvan, as the preeminent poet in *Atharva Veda* has a direct correspondence with Varuṇa who bestowed a speckled cow to him. This is *kavitā-sakti*, the poetic inspiration. When Atharvan was asked what made him the poet, he responded confidently saying that his omniscience made him know everything that is created. *Kāvya* (poetry) has made him profound in intelligence and seems to suggest that the *go* (cow) presented to him is nothing but the *kavitā-sakti*. So poethood is a spiritual achievement. Interestingly Yama, who in the later mythologies became the lord of Death, is described in the *Rg Veda* as the pathfinder to immortality. Indeed the discovery of the Path has come in the company of the poets. The journey to illumination cannot be completed in the sole capacity of a powerful rex but by being a part of the community of the poets. Also, being endeared to poetry, the destination may be reached.

When a formidable ruler like Yama lovingly seeks the realm of poetry and song, finds illumination in the camaraderie of poets, and associates himself with the valiant exploits of Indra, the question of effeminacy of the Vedic poets is easily ruled out. Rather a unique combination of power and wisdom emerges. The heroism suggested here cannot border on barbarism but has beauty about it for the Vedic civilisation demands an extraordinary intrepidity to break through the frontiers of darkness and evil to savour a triumph which flows into poetry. So for the harmony and security of a civilisation, the dual functions of wisdom and power assume mammoth significance.

When language enters into a true poet it transforms itself into true poetry called *mantra* or a *brahman*. Poetry in *Atharva Veda* is referred to as *Maniṣā*, *Śaṁsa Mati* (prayer) or *Gāthā* and *Gā* (song). It is the *Ukthā* (song) to which Agni responds and *Stotra* (song of praise) for which Varuṇa blessed Atharvan. Indra comes to the poet owing to his *dhi* (prayer) as also the *Aśvins* render assistance to him. Language in the wondrous hands of the poet assumes an unusual and deviant form as the poet loses his status of a mere composer and escalates to the pedestal of a seer of *mantra* and is a *brahmaṇa* as well. The beauty inherent in the language of poetry requires the genius of a poet to manifest itself. In Agni's fashioning of the hymns of *Angiras* we find the word *klp* that suggests an artistic design in poetry. Here one may mention the forging of the joints of the chariot by *Rbhus* who use their physical adroitness to join the parts of the chariot much in the same way the *kavi* fashions out the *Kāvya Śarṛa*. Like the ploughman who levels the deep furrows and dishevelled earth, the *kavi* smoothens the rough edges of language and with choice of words, selection and arrangement (*electio, indicium, dispositio*) beautifies the whole *Kavi-vākya*.

Inspired with poetry I have fashioned this hymn of praise for you whose very nature is power, as the skilled artist fashions a chariot. (*Rg Veda* 5.2.11) (O'Flaherty 1994:103)

In Sanskrit poetics, *Dandin* uses the term *Atisayokti*, the term and concept being derived from *Bhāmaha*. *Atisāya* or *Adbhuta* is wonder and he refers to the wonderful 'transmutation' by which language blooms into poetry when handled by the creative genius of the poet. It is only the poet who can put his fingers on the inner tissues of language and mine the hidden wealth. Language can be a burden for those to whom the innate beauty remains hidden. *Bṛhaspati* believes that the person who has realised the true beauty of poetic language and has successfully ferreted beauty out is well protected. So a true poet or *rṣhi* can consider himself secure for poetry has endowed him with the power and strength to ward off all perils and stub out all evils. The difference in the matter of inner wealth is what finds an implicit elucidation in the difference between the lakes. One of the lakes have water rising only up to the chest while the other can have sufficient water for a complete bath. Water exists in all; but the difference is in depth. Some pry into the inner resources of

language but cannot exhaust the limits of it; the true poet comprehends the meaning in totality and surfaces with the entire chest of beauty. Also, the difference lies in the 'mobility' of the mind. Added to that is the insight into the truth and an outstanding intellectual ability that combines religion, philosophy, science, and art. This catapults the poet to the elevated station of a leader of a nation.

In fact presentation of good poetry is accompanied by some music and good poetry recited in an assembly adds to the development of art. In this regard beauty and rhythm can be aligned for it is through the rhythmic corridors of language that beauty can come to the fore. Br̥haspati says that we sing about the origin of the gods in the form of a poem. This is a very significant statement. Sri Aurobindo could be said to have been looking back to Br̥haspati's declaration when he christens Book I of his *Savitri* as the Book of Beginnings: 'It was the hour before the Gods awake'. (Aurobindo 1996:1) Br̥haspati then blows out the birth of the gods. This act of blowing out the birth of the gods is imaged by a simile: a smith blows the wind through the bellow. Poetic creation is suggested to be creating *de novo* . making there arise what is from what was not. The simile is significant for the fact that Br̥haspati is not prepared to make any distinction between craft and the fine art. This should remind one of Michelangelo who also did not make such distinction. Also one should not forget the simile of leaving. Indeed the distinction has gained currency since Kant's *Critique of Judgement* and is celebrated by Hegel in his *Lectures on Fine Arts*. We may further consider the simile and march into some interesting areas. Br̥haspati as a poet, is taking up the philosophical concepts of Being and Non-Being. If Being comes out of Non-Being by the miracle of the poet's creation then it must be rationally incomprehensible. The alleged rational incomprehensibility is the miracle of creation. The wind does not appear to be there before the smith's blowing: it comes into being when the smith blows his bellows. The gods who did not appear to be in existence are brought into being by the power of Br̥haspati. He is the great poet singing about the truths of the world. This brings light to humanity which was concealed under the cloud of ignorance. Shall we not take Br̥haspati as suggesting further that in bringing the gods into existence, by singing about them, he is creating himself as well? Poetry creates the poet along with the beings he sang about.

The poet then is the creature who is free; no causal explanation can tell why someone is a poet. His freedom may be an enigma but it is nonetheless a fact. His wisdom or illumination comes from within; the poet evolves from within. The inward vision, which Patānjali enunciates, finds a perpetual flow of pure consciousness that incarnate sound and meaning. It is the poet who knows the secret of speech and thus visualises *Brahman*, the ultimate reality. This brahman is the highest principle, the inner protection and the poet speaks of it with power and unites with its magical potency. This inwardness of the mystery of language convinced Bhartṛhari (in *Vākya Padya*) to seek the final junction of beatitude. It is with the transformation of language that the world begins to evolve. The doctrine of

śabda Brahman or language as Brahman goes back to the system of thought represented by a poem of Bṛhaspati in the *Rg Veda*. Throughout the Vedic literature the word *brāhmaṇa* in the neuter gender means the poetry of the Vedas and in the masculine it means the poet. It is only in the Upanishad of the later times that the word came to denote the highest truth or Reality or the Absolute. The other synonyms of the English word poet that occur in the *Rg Veda* besides *brāhmaṇa*, are *Kavi* and *Vipra*. (also *Kāru*, *Jaritr*, *Gṛṇat*, *Stuvat*, *Gāyat*, and *Stotr* in the *Atharva Veda*) All these words have mystico-cognitive connotations.

Historical imagination is Janus faced. It looks back and it also looks up to the future. As-yet and the not-yet are both encompassed by the imagination. As a matter of fact, in dealing with the Vedas we have to take recourse to reconstruction or hermeneutics. Here the attempt has been made to ideate the concept of the poet in the *Rg Veda* from a two fold source. First, the profound poetic quality of most of the *ṛks* cannot be doubted. The *Nasadya Śukta* may be linguistically simple but is conceptually provocative. Despite the mosaic of answerable questions, perplexing challenges and paradoxes, the whirligig of time has failed to attenuate a fraction of the beauty of the creation hymn. Max Muller in quoting this śukta in *Six Systems of Indian Philosophy* appropriately comments that language blushes at itself in this composition. The beauty of Uṣā is not Time's fool; it is unimpeachable. The myth of the Urbaśi and her fugitive charm have found handsome adoration in Kalidasa. It is interesting to note that as Dirghatamas, Bṛhaspati, Sunahsepha, Kaṇva, Kutsa, Uṣāna, Atri, Bhṛgu, Rbhus, Atharvaṇ, Aṅgiras, Bharadvāja are poets so also Agni, Indra and Varuṇa are honoured as poets. This interchange of the person of the poet and god is a pointer to the basic truth about poetry – the truth about the divine quality of poetic speech. Indeed many a time the poets have announced themselves: *aham kavīn Uṣāna pasyatauma* (*Rg Veda*, 4.26.1) – I am the poet Uṣāna, behold me. (*Kavīmām Uṣānā Kavīh*; the *Gā* 10.37 looks back to the Vedas)

Secondly, we have seen poetry as inextricably welded with divinity and language has been apotheosised (*Vāgdevī*, the goddess of speech). The Vedic people looked at nature as the poetry of gods – *devasyakāvyam* which does not undergo mutation – *namamara na jirjati*. That the poet can accompany the gods is a thing that has been surfacing itself in the cultural history of India and elsewhere in the world.

In banishing all evil spirits to a dark hole the poet in the *Rg Veda* seizes the opportunity to heap evil on the head of the rival priest, a 'sorcerer' (7.104). (Similar reference exists in the *Atharva Veda* where the evil spirits run away at the sight of the Atharvanic poet.) The poet's special gift to create or his role of being a transvisionary with a creative insight may be misinterpreted by being compared to the awesome wielding of the magician's wand. But his special faculty cannot be connived and his luminous status is thoroughly established. Only the poet with his extraordinary ability has access to that 'sweet fruit' and perceives the 'beloved bird'.

'The birds that eat honey nest and brood on that tree on whose tip, they say, is the sweet fruit. No one who does not know the father eats that.' (1.164.22) (O'Flaherty 1994:78)

Here the father is the wisdom. It may be mentioned that the corresponding faculties for Truth-consciousness are *dr̥ṣṭi*, *śruti*, *viveka*, the direct vision of truth, the direct hearing of its word, the direct discrimination of the right. Whosoever is in possession of this Truth-consciousness or open to the action of these faculties is the ṛṣi or Kavi, sage or seer. So the riddle of sacrifice (*Asya Vamasya*), a long and complex hymn whose meaning remains primarily hidden in labyrinthine symbolism, is only known to the poet. He knows the answers to the questions that are asked in the hymn. He commands a power that transcends all limit and privacy. A true poet is said to be a ṛṣi or *voyant* as Rimbaud wanted to become.

Je dis qu'il faut être voyant, se faire voyant

I say that one must be a seer, make oneself a seer. (Bernard 1962:10)

With a mind pouring the light, the rishi can see the inner experience and Dirghatamas is proud to belong to that category. Incidentally he was born blind. His name means 'one in long darkness'. This darkness can refer to the umbra of ignorance or the lack of wisdom or the want of insight into the mysteries of the universe. Dirghatamas, like the philosopher in Plato's *Republic*, emerges from the cave and looks up at the sun, the source of light. He reminds us of the celebrated prayer in the Upanishad to lead the blind from darkness to light, from death to immortality. With *Darsana* (vision), *Varṇana* (the power of objectification) and *Pratibha* (the creative genius), the poet is the person to whom the prayer is granted.

The poet's fashioned seven boundaries: he who was trapped went to only one of them. The pillar of life's vigour, he stands in the nest of the Highest, among the supports at the end of the paths. (*R̥g Veda* 10.5.6) (O'Flaherty 1994:118)

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