

# 'READING THE RIG VEDA'



Furthering J.L. Mehta's Essay

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## FURTHERING J.L. MEHTA'S ESSAY ON 'READING THE RIG VEDA'

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**“In the interpretation of the Vedic text, it is not only religious and cultural-anthropological prejudices that have been at play during two centuries of Western Vedic scholarship; philosophical pre-suppositions too have wrought havoc here, especially through the unquestioning importation of Western conceptuality into another tradition.”**

From 'Reading the RigVeda' by J.L. Mehta

In his essay on 'Reading the Rig Veda', J.L. Mehta critically questions the idea introduced by Western scholars that the Vedic 'gods' are mere mythical personifications of ideas – of abstract concepts such as 'Contract' (*Mitra*), 'True Speech' (*Varuna*), 'Hospitality' (*Aryamana*) or 'Victory' (*Indra*). The same idea could be applied to the later and partly derivative 'Hindu' and Greek gods. If *Sophia* not only means 'wisdom' but names a 'Goddess of Wisdom', is 'Wisdom' the defining quality and property of this goddess - or is the goddess herself but a mythical personification of it? And if *Shiva* is ultimately but a name for a Universal Consciousness, and *Shakti* a name which - as a noun - means 'potency' or 'power of action', then why mythologise or give mythic names to these abstract nouns in the first place, let alone personify them as gods or goddesses in human form? On the other hand, we can question whether abstract nouns such as Wisdom, Compassion, Consciousness etc. refer merely to concepts in our heads or minds, and understand them instead as pointing to profound dimensions of ultimate reality as such – of what in the Vedas went by the name of 'Truth'? For as Mehta reminds us, Truth (*Rita*) was the one 'concept' that was *never* named or personified as a god in the Vedas.

In this commentary I wish to emphasise how Mehta's questioning hinges on the hidden word 'mere'. Furthering his essay, I argue that to imply that the gods are 'mere' mythic personifications of abstract ideas and verbal concepts is to fail to recognise the most profound of all religious experiences and the understanding they gave rise to. This is the

understanding that it is the Divine as such – and *not we* – that manifests, personifies and individualises itself in different forms, both natural and human – that materialises itself as nature, and that also metaphorises and mythologises, poetises and dramatises itself in religious words and dramas. From this viewpoint, it is not merely ‘we’ who humanise and personify Nature or God in the form of mythical ‘gods’. Instead we ourselves are *living* humanizations and personifications of that ultimate, *trans-personal* and *trans-human* reality that is ‘God’, the latter being the divine source not only of nature and humankind but of the gods themselves in their essence – as *living dimensions of Divinity*.

Here it is relevant to recall that the Sanskrit word for ‘gods’ – *devas* - means ‘shining ones’. This implies that they too - like the sun and like the stars that shine forth at night - are expressions of light *as such* - of that light that is the essence or ultimate truth of light. Ontologically, the ultimate truth of light is itself a dimension of the light of ultimate truth as such. Phenomenologically, we cannot even know light as a phenomenon, let alone understand or experience its ultimate truth or essence, except *in the light* of an awareness of it - that awareness without which no-thing can be experienced, known or named in the first place. Yet it is falsely believed that if we speak of ‘the light of truth’ or the ‘light of awareness’ the word ‘light’ is being used in some artificially poetic way, as a ‘mere’ sensory metaphor for something else, whether an idea or sensory phenomenon. This belief or idea contradicts language itself, for the very root of the term ‘phenomenon’ is to ‘shine forth’ (*phainesthai*), just as the root of the term ‘idea’ is the verb ‘to see’ (*idein*). Could it not be then, that light *itself*, as an experienced phenomenon, is a *phenomenal metaphor* of its own deeper reality or truth, shining forth that ‘light of awareness’ in which all things alone come to shine forth, to be and be visible as ‘phenomenon’? The argument here is that supposedly metaphorical or poetic phrases such as the ‘light of truth’ or ‘light of awareness’ are not *mere* poetic metaphors of the sort that happen to characterize religious discourse, but rather truer, indeed far more *literal* ways of expressing the nature of ultimate reality itself - pointing us in the direction of an *experience* of phenomena such as ‘light’ and activities such as ‘seeing’ that is deeper, truer and *more* real than our ordinary experience of ‘light’ or of any sensory phenomenon. As Mehta sums it up so well:

**“The Vedic seers’ attention is turned towards the light itself, with its multitude of facets, rather than to the things illumined by it, as also to that in man which responds to light, the power of seeing and the awareness of the shining forth, the *phainesthai* itself.”**

Here is implied in the Vedas an anticipation of the later Indian understanding of all phenomena as a ‘shining forth’ of the light of pure awareness itself. It was such philosophical understandings that emerged via those commentaries on the Vedas called the *brahmanas* - of which Mehta’s essay is itself a modern yet exemplary example. In it he explicitly questions the whole Western-Platonic tradition that privileges *logos* over *mythos* - from which comes the whole idea of ‘demythologising’ symbolic languages or reducing the gods to personified ideas. Here we find another small but significant ‘mere’ in the Western understanding of *mythos*. This is the naïve and unaware use of expressions such ‘mytho-poetic’ or *mytho-poiesis* in Western *academic discourse* – as if these were mere useful designatory ‘terms’ for describing particular types of *religious discourse*. In this way the meaning of equivalent expressions such as *brahman*, *vak* or *logos* within religious discourse itself (not least that of the Vedas) is totally passed over. For within religious discourse itself, what academics understand as *logos*, *poiesis* or *mytho-poiesis* is not seen as a mere attribute of language or *human discourse* but rather as the *defining activity of the divine* itself – as *its* creative speech (Gr. *logos* Skt. *vak*). This ‘speech’ is no mere form of human language use or ‘discourse’, but is that activity or process by which whole *worlds* continuously and creatively form and ‘emerge’ from the divine awareness in the same way that *words* take shape and emerge in human awareness – both worlds and words, things and thoughts, gods and human beings being physical manifestations, symbols or ‘marks’ (*linga*) of the divine.

The term ‘physics’ is rooted in the Greek *physis* – meaning something like ‘emergence’ or ‘manifestation’. Similarly, the Sanskrit root of the word *brahman* means ‘to swell’ - like a swelling womb within which something can form and from which it can emerge. In Mehta’s hermeneutics, the word *brahman* refers, *in the Vedas*, to the activity of *wording the world*. *Brahman* is both the divine creative *process* as such (ultimately a process of giving birth to whole *worlds* in a manner akin to speech or utterance) and to its *product* in

divinely inspired *words* – not least those *of* the Vedas themselves. Such words could only *emerge* from the awareness of the Vedic seers within the localized earthly plane of our *human* world by virtue of their divine origin in higher worlds or *loka*. Thus, whilst the word *brahman* is similar in many senses to the Greek *poiesis*, it is used in a deeper, more aware way in the Vedas than the word *poiesis* is in Western thought - both ancient and modern. Mehta shows us in his essay how in the Vedas the word *brahman* refers both to the activity of verbal formulation or *wording* and to its poetic result, the fully formulated word. In the single word *brahman* then, lies a recognition of the unity of a threefold: the human speaker, the word as product of speech, and the process of speaking or wording - all with their origin in a fourth - that *divine source* which came to be named as *The Brahman*. Belonging to *The Brahman*, the quintessential role of human beings is to be poetic vehicles and priestly guardians of its speech – *Brahmanas* or ‘*Brahmins*’.

Taking Mehta’s questions and references further, the whole false dualism of *Mythos* and *Logos* falls down. For if we heed the words of Heraclitus (*‘Listen not to me but to the Logos’*), those of Heidegger (*‘Language speaks’*), and their extension by Lacan - who in effect goes so far as to suggest that language *speaks us* - then why should it be an illogical or mythical fancy to *hear* this speech speaking to us in the *1<sup>st</sup> person*, that is to say addressing us *per-sonally* (‘through sound’) and in the mask or *persona* of a god or goddess, such as *Vak*, the goddess of speech? And if, as we all know, words are not made by us (*poein*) but come to us, why should we not receive her discourse in (and *as*) the Vedas as anything but the expression of *speech speaking*, and thus also the highest expression of what Heidegger saw as the task of ‘meditative thinking’ – that of bringing language itself *to speech*? What better alternative here however, than to leave the last words of this essay to *Vak*, the Vedic ‘goddess of speech’ herself – albeit with the understanding that this little word ‘of’ is the source of great confusion. For *Vak* is the goddess ‘of’ speech only in so far as she is the *per-sonification* of it - the *speech of speech* itself - its *logos* addressing us in the *1<sup>st</sup> person*. Yet what then is ‘her’ message - the message of speech speaking? What does *Vak* herself – *speech itself* – have to *say to us*? To answer this question we need only draw on the same quotation from the Vedas cited by Mehta in his essay:

**“Listen, my learned friend, what I tell you deserves putting your faith in. I myself say this, which gods and men alike must find welcome. Whom I love, I make awesome; I make him a *Brahmana*, one endowed with poetic creativity; I make him a *Rishi*, a sage; I stretch the bow for *Rudra* so that his arrows will strike down the hater of *brahman*. I incite conflict among peoples. I have pervaded heaven and earth. I gave birth to the father at the top of the world ... Beyond heaven, beyond the earth, such am I in my greatness.”**

**References:** J.L. Mehta *Reading the Rig Veda / The Rig Veda: Text and Interpretation*  
In *Phenomenology and Indian Philosophy* and *Philosophy of Religion*  
Indian Council of Philosophical Research (1990/1992)