

Theism in the Vedic Tradition

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Abstract

The term "Theism" refers to the ideas of God and divinity found in the Vedic literature, particularly the Rigveda, Yajurveda, Samaveda, and Atharvaveda. The Vedas present an distinctive theological viewpoint that brings forth and praises a variety of deities while consistently affirming an underlying unity. The divine is seen as both personal (via different Devas) and impersonal, the ultimate cosmic essence. This study examines the nature, evolution, and intellectual depth of Vedic theism. The central hypothesis of this study is that Vedic religion is not merely polytheistic, but fundamentally henotheistic and monistic in orientation, emphasizing the unity of ultimate reality behind the diversity of gods. Comprehending the Rigveda's understanding of God and examining how Vedic philosophy transitions from the worship of multiple gods to the concept of a single ultimate Reality are the goals of this research.

A textual and analytical methodology is used in the study. Examples of primary sources include a selection of Vedic hymns. Philosophical and comparative approaches are utilized to comprehend the evolution of religion.

Keywords: Vedic Theism, Devatattva, Devas, Henotheism, Monism, Ṛta, Brahman.

1. Introduction

The concept of "Theism" refers to the philosophical and beliefs that there are divine beings or a Supreme Spiritual reality, as described in the Vedas, the oldest book in the Hindu faith. It is the first manifestation of theism in Indian spiritual philosophy and is the basis of numerous later developments in Hinduism.

According to the Vedic perspective, the representation of natural, moral, and cosmic powers by different Devas (gods) is how divinity is conveyed. These gods are brilliant spiritual entities that rule the cosmos rather than just being personifications of nature. The Vedic seers highlight the oneness underlying this multiplicity, arguing that the numerous divine forms are expressions of a single ultimate Reality, even though many gods are worshipped. Therefore, a dynamic shift from polytheistic worship to a more profound philosophical understanding that recognises the unity of truth characterises Vedic theism. It establishes the framework for further advancements in Indian philosophy and theology, particularly the Upanishadic tradition's conception of Brahman.

2. Introduction to Theism

The idea that one or more deities exist and are actively involved in the cosmos is known as theism. In general, it suggests that God or gods have a part in human creation, preservation, and occasionally interpersonal relationships.

“Theism we generally understand to connote at least three things. First, belief in Gods as a spiritual Being; second the faith that His power is sufficient to secure that at the last the good will conquer; and third, a conception of the nexus that binds together god and His worshippers as mainly moral” ([1] Nicol Manicol, 1915, p.8).

It includes a range of theological viewpoints. From faith in a formless ultimate reality to devotion to a personal god, Hinduism accepts a wide range of theistic views. The main forms of theism present in Hindu religions are listed below.

- **Polytheism** - Belief in many gods
- **Henotheism** - Worship of one main god while accepting the existence of other gods
- **Monotheism** - Belief in one supreme God
- **Monism** - Belief in formless, impersonal absolute reality (Brahman)

Etymology of Theism

The term "Theism" is derived from two components:

- The element “**Tho**” is a form a “**Theo**” a Greek root meaning “**god**” or “**deity**”
- Suffix – “**ism**” A common English ending used to denote a system of **belief or ideology**

(Used in nouns that refer to specific doctrines or beliefs)

Thus, Theism essentially means “**the belief in god**” or “**the doctrine of a god or gods**”. It is used to describe religious beliefs that affirm the existence of a divine being (or beings) who is (or are) personal, active, and involved in the world. (Atheism is the belief that no gods exist. The prefix "A" means "not" or "without".) The term theism was first used by Ralph Cudworth (1617–88).

3. Theism : **īśvaravāda (ईश्वरवाद)** or **Devatāvāda (देवतावाद)** in the Veda

In the Vedas, the ancient Hindu texts, theism is the belief in a divine existence. People in the Vedic era had distinct ideas on religion. Some people worshipped numerous gods and goddesses because they believed in the plurality of gods. Others continued to worship a single entity and reject the idea that there were multiple gods. Scholars in the contemporary era have proposed a number of hypotheses to address the issue of gods in the Veda. It is held that in the Veda, there is a progression from a multitude of gods to a single god then to a unity of the truth.

A slow development of theistic thought can be seen in the Vedic tradition, which is based on the four Vedas. It starts with ritualism and polytheism and progresses slowly to monism, henotheism, and monotheism.

4. Significant aspects of Vedic Theism

In the Vedic age people had different religious concepts. Some believed in the plurality of gods and accordingly they worshipped many gods and goddesses. There were still others who did not believe in the plurality of gods and worshipped only one entity. Various theories have been put forward in modern times by scholars regarding the problem of gods in the Vedas. It is held that in the Veda, there is a progression from a multitude of gods to a single god and then to a unity of the world (Polytheism to Monotheism and then to monism) ([2] Raja C.K., 1957, p.74).

5. Concept of the Divine

- Indra, Agni, Varuna, and other deities are mentioned in the Vedas, although they frequently allude to a single, supreme reality (Brahman or Ishvara).

- The ultimate formless truth that existed prior to creation is mentioned in the Rgveda (10.129).
- This concept is further developed in the Upanishads, which describe Brahman as the ultimate, all-encompassing divine principle.

6. Forms of theism in the Vedic tradition

6.1. Polytheism : बहुदेवतावाद - Bahudevata-vāda-Belief in and worship of many gods

According to this theory of polytheism, gods are many. This theory finds ample support in its favour in the Veda itself, for we have so many deities being praised in the Rgveda which are supposed to possess supernatural powers. The term polytheism is derived from Greek words 'poly' which means 'many' and 'theos' which means 'God'. Thus, term polytheism is used where plurality of Gods is acknowledged and/or worshipped.

- Bahu (बहु) = Many .
- Devata (देवता) = deity / god .
- Vada (वाद) = Doctrine, belief, or theory.

So, "**Bahudevata-vāda**" literally means "**The doctrine of many gods**", which is the Sanskrit expression for polytheism.

6.1.1.Characteristics of Rgveda polytheism

- Nature Based Deities
- Hymns of praise
- Sacrificial worship (yajñas)
- Personal and Anthropomorphic God

6.2. Henotheism : प्राधान्येन एकदेवतापूजा - Prādhānyena eka-devatā-pūjā -Worship of one supreme deity while accepting other gods

The important characteristic of Vedic worship is that every god of the Vedic pantheon was regarded as the supreme. In the older part of the Rgveda, the practice of the poets of invoking different gods as if each of them was paramount gave rise to **Max Muller's theory of Henotheism or Kathenotheism** ([3]Sharma S.N., 1973, p.39).

Henotheism consists in the tendency to raise the particular god to the most exalted position. Kaegi also supports this view (**Kaegi,quoted by B.B. Chaubey. Op.cit,p.139**). According to this theory every god is independent and has no connection whatsoever with the other. In the Vedic worship Indra, Varuna, Agni, Savitar and many other gods have been spoken of as chief of the gods. But from the scholarly world this theory does not find much support.

Henotheism is the **belief in and worship of one god** without denying the existence of other gods. It sits between polytheism (belief in many gods) and monotheism (belief in only one god). Henotheism is derived from the Greek word 'henos' (one/ single) and 'theos' (god). Henotheists worship only one God, while accepting the existence of other deities that may be worshiped by other people or groups

- Prādhānyena (प्राधान्येन) = primarily, with prominence, or by giving priority.
- Eka-devata (एक-देवता) = one deity.
- Pūjā (पूजा) = worship.

So, "**Prādhānyena eka-devatā-pūjā**" literally means "**Devotional focus on one supreme deity**" which is the Sanskrit expression for Henotheism .The Vedic texts, especially the Rgveda, contain many

examples of henotheistic worship. Different hymns praise various deities as the supreme being in their specific context.

“एकम् सद्विप्रा बहुधा वदन्ति ।”

(Rgveda: 1.164.46)

(Truth is one but the wise call it by many names).

This suggests that while many gods are worshipped, they may all be aspects of a singular divine reality. Indra, Agni, Varuna and others: In different hymns, each of these deities is praised as the highest and most powerful, depending on the context of worship.

Other Henotheistic hymns:

- Rgveda 2.1 (to Agni): Agni is praised as the supreme deity.
- Rgveda 3.32 (to Indra): Indra is hailed as greater than all the gods.

Each hymn gives primacy to a different deity, showing how the Vedic rishis practiced what modern scholars label Henotheism.

6.3. Monotheism : एकदेवतावाद . - Eka-devatā-vāda - One personal God

The term monotheism comes from the Greek word ‘monos’ which means ‘one’ and ‘theos’ which means ‘God’. Thus, monotheism is the belief in the existence of a single God. Because monotheism is founded upon the idea that there is only one God, monotheists also believe that this God is omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, created all of reality and is totally self-sufficient without any dependency upon any other being.

- Eka (एक) = one
- Devata (देवता) = Deity
- Vāda (वाद) = Doctrine, belief or philosophy

So, “**Ekad - evatāvāda**” refers to “**the belief in and worship of one supreme deity**”, which is the Sanskrit expression for monotheism. It is often within a broader religious framework that acknowledges other deities. This concept is especially prominent in certain Bhakti (devotional) traditions of Hinduism. As the number of gods increases all the gods were reduced to three viz monotheism is the belief in a single creator and the lack of belief in any other creator. According to this theory god is one. He appears in many forms owing to his supernatural powers was the kernel of the Monotheistic discussion. This theory can be supported by the internal evidence of Veda itself.

- The foundation of Monotheism may be said to lie in this verse of the hymn of Dirghatamas in the Rgveda. In the famous Hiranyagarbha hymn, we find the mention of that one Hiranyagarbha as the first originator of the world, all power, lord of all (Rgveda:10.81.1).
- “ईशावास्यमिदं सर्वं यत्किञ्च जगत्यां जगत् ।”-“The entire world is embedded with and managed by one and only one Ishvara”(Yajurveda :40.1).
- “यो विद्याद्भुवनं सभि प्रणीतो विश्वस्यैका जनिता राजति ।” -"Ishvara alone is greatest and worth being worshipped! He is the source of all knowledge and activities" (Atharva Veda:13.4.18).

Yaska (Nirukta,7.2.5) (probably the oldest commentator on the Vedas) gives the following classification of the Vedic gods.

“There are three deities, according to the expounders of the Vedas; Agni, whose place is on the earth; Vayu or Indra, whose place is in the air; and Surya, whose place is in the sky.....In the Rig Veda itself this number is creased to thirty-three, of whom eleven are said to be in heaven; eleven on earth; and even in mid-air” ([4]Wilkinings W.J.,p.9).

6.3.1. Major God in the Rgveda

The Rgvedic gods can be classified based on their domains.

6.3.1.1. Gods of the sky and cosmic order

- **Indra**- The most prominent deity in the Rigveda, god of water, thunderstorms, and rain. He is celebrated for slaying the serpent Vritra, releasing the waters.

“इन्द्रः पुरंधिर्युधये सधस्थे |
अहन्नहिं पर्वते शिश्रियाणम् ॥ ”

(Rgveda: 1.32)

- **Varuna**- Guardian of cosmic law (Rta) associated with moral order and the vast ocean.

“यत्ते त्वं वरुण वरं यच्छामि।

मृडं विपाश्वतां विमोचय ॥ ”

(Rgveda: 7.86.3)

6.3.1.2. Gods of Fire and Sacrifice

- **Agni**- The fire god, the divine messenger who carries offerings to the gods. He is central to Vedic rituals.

“अग्निमीळे पुरोहितं यज्ञस्य देवमृत्विजम् ।

होतारं रत्नधातमम् ॥”

(Rgveda: 1.1)

(Agni as the first God invoked).

- **Soma**- The deity of the sacred drink (Soma) which was consumed in rituals and believed to grant divine insight.

“सोमं राजानं वरुणमग्निमन्वारभामहे ।

आदित्यं विष्णुं सूर्यं ब्रह्माणं च बृहस्पतिम् ॥”

(Rgveda:9.1)

6.3.1.3. Gods of Wind and Atmosphere

- **Vayu**- The wind god, associated with life force and breath.
- **Rudra**- A storm god, later associated with Shiva, feared for his destructive power but also revered as a healer.

6.3.1.4. Solar Deities and Gods of Light

- **Surya**- The sun god, the source of light and life. Surya is invoked for health, prosperity and spiritual enlightenment. (Rgveda: 1.50.1)
- **Savitar**- A solar deity associated with movement and guidance (Gayatri mantra - Rgveda:3.62.10).
- **Pushan**- Protector of travelers and cattle.
- **Ushas**- Representing new beginning (Rgveda: 1.113).

6.3.1.5. Dual and Healing Deities

- **Ashwins**- Twin gods of healing and medicine, rescuers of those in distress.

The gods who shared certain functions in common, were formed into a compound with a dual termination in the Rg veda which became the name of a new deity, e.g, **Agnisomu, Indravayu, Indragni, Indrapusana** Etc. Later on, all gods came to be worshipped jointly in a group with name of **Visvedeva**, all gods. The case behind this is that all of the Vedic gods are personified phenomena of nature, and these phenomena are interrelated which prompted the Vedic Aryans to worship nature gods in a group. Keith also supports this view ([6]Keith quoted by B.B,ibid.,p.60).

The Rigveda contains hymns that suggest a monotheistic understanding of the divinity:

- Nature was worshipped in the early Vedic period (they loved nature and worshipped nature).
- Then they worshipped nature by giving divine name (e.g., Varuna, Marut etc).
- The came polytheism (the 33 deities were divided into three groups).
- There was a confusion as to who is the greatest of these deities and to whom one should give (Avi) sacrificial items and prayer.
- When this question is asked a times, the answer is that we pray to Prajapati himself.
- It was only after this stage that the concept of a single supreme deity emerged, leading toward **monotheism**.

6.4. Monism :एकत्ववाद-Ekatvavāda- Only One Reality

Monism in the Vedic tradition refers to the philosophical idea that all **ultimate reality is one without a second**, that everything in the universe is an expression or manifestation of a single, unifying principle.

- Ekatva (एकत्व) = Oneness / Unity
- Vāda (वाद) = Doctrine / Philosophy

So, **Ekatvavāda** literally means “**the doctrine of oneness**” or **Monism** - the philosophical view that ultimate reality is one.

“एकम् सद्विप्रा बहुधा वदन्ति ।”

अग्निं यमं मातरिश्वानमाहुः ॥ ”

(Rgveda:1.164.46)

“Truth is one, the wise call it by many names such as Agni, Yama, Indra, Mitra, Varuna or Matarisvan.” Different deities like Agni, Yama, Indra, Mitra, Varuna, and Matarisvan are understood as diverse manifestations or names of the same supreme Reality.

This concept gradually developed within the Vedic texts, especially in the Upanishads, which form the latter part of the Vedas and are more philosophical in nature. Monism holds a very prominent position in Advaitic Hinduism too.

7. Evolution of the Vedic Theism in Hindu traditions

As Vedic thought evolved, particularly in the Upanishadic and post-vedic period, the focus shifted from the worship of multiple deities toward an understanding of a singular divine principle, Brahman and the individual soul (Atman). This culminated in the development of various philosophical schools within Hinduism, such as Vedanta, which further refined the understanding of theism and identity. The Vedic theism offers a foundation for later complexities Hindu belief systems. blending polytheism ritual practice and philosophical inquiry into the nature of the divine and its relation to the world.

8. Conclusion

The Vedic Theism holds that although though the Rigveda worships a large number of gods, they all ultimately stand for the same ultimate Reality. The Vedic seers articulated the notion that Truth is one but goes by many names, acknowledging the unity that lies underneath multiplicity. Vedic Theism, which served as the basis for later Hindu intellectual ideas, is a harmonious synthesis of polytheism and monism.

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