

VEDIC CONCEPT OF ṚTA

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Abstract: The term 'ṛta' is used in the specific sense in the RG Veda. The term "ṛta" occurs in the RG Veda approximately four hundred and fifty times. The methods employed in this paper deal with only a limited percentage of the actual occurrences of ṛta in the RG Veda. Hence the conclusion or findings will not be finally validated until all of the usages of ṛta have been examined.

It is a mode of "Being" because the gods, who are *ṛtajāta*, provide light, wide space, safety, security, freedom, stability, visions etc., through their association with, and by means of the power of *ṛta*. It is the foundation for the functions of gods and men through which these entities maintain both their relation with *ṛta* and the security of the cosmos as well. The sacrifice is identified with *ṛta* because that rite harnesses the power of *ṛta* by which men are able to gain the freedom, safety, security etc., which are necessary for the persistent existence in the cosmos. Sacred speech is *ṛta* because it is the mark of the *ṛṣi*; this type of speech is the result of an *alaukika* or supernormal vision of that which is real; Ṛṣi brings his acts and intentions into conformity with *ṛta* in such a way that he, like gods, is able to sieve upon *ṛta* as his mode of being. Therefore, *ṛta* may be regarded as the necessary pre-condition for the safety, freedom, reliability, truth, law, order of the sat which manifested through the intentions and acts of men and gods. The paper contains three sections. The first section deals with general concept of value, the second section deals with the concept of *ṛta*, according to the *RG Veda* and the third one deals with the concluding remarks from my own standpoint.

I. Meaning of Value

The term "value" has different meanings in different contexts. Value is the intrinsic worth of an object. An object of better quality gets higher value. Man has two types of needs. The need for food, clothing and shelter is known as lower or basic needs. Higher needs like the need to pursue truth, goodness, beauty, self-esteem, etc., are called values. Values are inner imperatives which make us seek particular goals. Value is an abstract symbol; it does not appease our hunger. That is to say, "values" by themselves have no value, it is the reality behind them which is important.¹ Generally, a man or woman who has a good moral character, kind, virtuous, helping to others, sympathetic is regarded as a man of high value. He or she may be rich or poor, Brahmin or non-Brahmin or *Sudra*, but that does not matter. This type of person has a special regard in our society. In a society where majority gives priority to the

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values will naturally become a value-based society and this is urgently required for better and longer survival of human being in the world.

II. Definition and Meaning of *ṛta*

Ṛta is related to all creatures of the universe. *Ṛta* may be defined as a kind of “force” or “power” which is the necessary precondition for the freedom, safety, security, truth, order, and law of the established cosmos. M. Monier-Williams derives the word “*ṛta*” from the root √*r* which means “to go, move, rise, tend upwards, to go towards, meet with, fall upon, reach, obtain, to excite, to erect, to raise.” He then gives the meaning of *ṛta* as “proper, right, fit, apt, suitable, able, brave, honest; fixed or settled order, law, rule, sacred or pious action or custom, divine law, divine truth”. (Monier-Williams, 1960: 223) Research on the word “*ṛta*” has led to a general consensus that it means law, order, and truth. Bergaigne, Roth, Grassmann and Ludders certainly endorse this understanding, and W. Norman Brown seems to accept it without contest.¹ *Ṛta*, the Eternal Moral Order in different Indian Systems: Indian Philosophy has often been criticized as pessimistic. But after analysis of this statement we shall find that pessimism is not final. Radhakrisnan also points out that pessimism in the Indian systems is only initial and not final.⁷ (Radhakrishnan, 1997: 49-50) The outlook which prevents the Indian mind from ending in despair and guarantees its final optimism is what may be described as spiritualism, according to William James “Spiritualism means the affirmation of an eternal moral order and letting loose of hope.... This need of an eternal moral order is one of the deepest needs of our breast. And those poets, Dante and Wordsworth, who live on the conviction of such an order, owe to that fact the extraordinary tonic and consoling power of their verse.” (James, 1995: 106-107) The belief in an ‘eternal moral order’ in the universe is a common character of the Indian Systems (except the Cārvāka), Vedic and non-Vedic, theistic and atheistic. It dominates the entire history of Indian philosophy. The faith in an order—a law makes for regularity and righteousness and works in the gods, the heavenly bodies and all creatures—pervades poetic imagination of the seers of *ṚG-Veda* which calls this inviolable moral order *ṛta*. The *Mīmāṃsā* calls this idea *apūrvā*, the law that guarantees the future enjoyment of the fruits of rituals performed now. This idea shapes itself into the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika theory of *adr̥ṣṭa*, the unseen principle that controls even upon the material atoms and brings about objects and events in accordance with moral principles. Again it gradually forms itself into the general conception of *karma*, which is accepted by all Indian systems. The law of *karma* in its different aspects may be regarded as the law of the conservation of moral values, merits and demerits of actions. The law of conservation signifies that there is no loss of the effect of work done (*kṛtapraṇāśa*) and that there is no happening of events to a person except as the result of his own work

¹ Bergaigne, III, PP. 216-219; H. Luders, *Varuṇa* (Göttingen, 1959, II, PP. 420-485; W. Norman Brown, “Duty as Truth in the *ṚG Veda*,” in J. Ensink and p. Gaeffke eds., *India Mior*, (Leiden, 1972) p. 60.

(*akṛtābhyupagama*). The law of *karma* is admitted by the six orthodox systems and even the Jainas and the Bauddhas.

III. The Law of *Karma*

Generally, the law of *karma* means that all actions, good or bad, produce their proper consequences in the life of the individual who acts, if they are performed with a desire for the results thereof. This law helps us to explain particular differences in individual beings, which cannot be explained by the familiar circumstances of their lives. In this world we find that men who are born and brought under the similar circumstances differ very much in case of their developments and enjoyments in life. Some persons are happy, some suffers, some wise and some are ignorant. We see that some virtuous men suffer and many wicked persons prosper in this world. How can we explain these differences in our worldly life? We find that some of them are certainly due to various actions done by us in this present life. But many actions cannot be interpreted by reference to the works of this life. In these circumstances, provided some good or bad actions are found to produce certain good or bad effects in the present life, we have every reason to mention that all actions i.e. past, present and future will produce their appropriate results in this or another life of the agent. The law of *karma* is this general moral law that leads not only to the life and destiny of all individual beings, but even the order and arrangement of the natural world.

IV. The Status of Karm

According to Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika, the law of *karma* is under control and the guidance of God who creates the world in accordance with the law. It is regarded that the *adr̥ṣṭa* (i.e. the stock of merits) and demerits of *karmas* of the individual self, cannot by itself lead to their proper effects, for it is an unintelligent and unconscious law. It is the Supreme Being or God who controls our *adr̥ṣṭa* and distributes all the joys and sufferings of our life in accordance with our *karma*. Systems like the Jaina, the Bauddha, the Mīmāṃsā and the Sāṃkhya advocate that the law of *karma* is autonomous and works independently of the will of God. These systems advocate that the source or origin and order of the world may be explained by the law of *karma* without the presupposition of God.

V. Limited Application of the Law of *Karma*

Law of *karma* has a limited application to the world of actions performed with the influence of the normal passions and desires of our life. All actions, of which the motives are desires for certain gains here or hereafter, are controlled by the law. Disinterested actions (*niṣkāma karma*) do not produce any effect or bondage just as a fried seed does not germinate. Therefore, this law is applicable to the individuals who work with selfish motives and are influenced by the ordinary passions and impulses of

life and hanker after worldly desires or gains. The performance of *niṣkāma karma* or disinterested actions do not produce fettering consequences and it also assists us to exhaust and destroy the accumulated (*sañcita*) effects of our past actions performed under the influence of attachment, hatred and infatuation or of interested hopes and fears and accordingly leads to liberation. With the attainment of liberating knowledge, the self rises above the law of *karma* and lives and acts in the state of freedom. The liberated self acts for the good of mankind i.e. for the *lokasamgraha*. But he is not bound by his *karma* because he is free from self-interest and all attachment.

VI. Fatalism is a Misinterpretation of the Theory of *Karma*

The faith in 'an eternal moral order' inspires optimism and leads man to make the master of his own destiny. It interprets the present wrongness of an individual as consequence of his own action and hope for a better future through the recent moral and spiritual development of himself. Hence there is every chance or reason for free will and there is a great role of personal endeavor (*puruṣakāra*) for individual prosperity. So determinism (fatalism) is a misinterpretation of the theory of *karma*. Destiny (*daiva*) or fate is obviously the collective force of one's own actions done in past lives. This fate can be overcome by efforts of this life, provided they are sufficiently strong just as the force of old habits of this life can be counteracted by the cultivation of opposite and new habits² with firm determination.

VII. The Universe as the Moral Stage and *Rta* as the Order of Phenomena

Closely connected with this law, we may regard the universe as the moral stage, where all living beings get the dress and the part that befit them and are to act well to deserve well in future. After birth an individual gets the body, the senses, the motor organs and the environment in which he finds himself. According to the inviolable law of *karma*, these are endowments of nature or God. The connection between *ṛta* and the regular periodic movement of phenomena is indicated at *ṚG.Veda*. 1.123, which states that the dawns possess the same daily form (*sadr̥ṣir adya*; v. 8) because they follow the statute of Varuṇa (*sacante varuṇasya dhāma*; v. 8), which is the statute of *ṛta* (*ṛtasya dhāma*; v. 9). Similarly, in *RV* 4.51.8, the dawns begin their journey from the dwellings of *ṛta* (*ṛtasya sadasaḥ*.) and, thus, they do not miss the directions (*na sarga usaso jarante*). *Rta*, as the force which regulates the periodic movements of phenomena, is associated with the twelve-spoke wheel of the year; the wheel is called

² In *Mahābhārata* (śāntiparva), Bhiṣma says, "I consider personal effort to be above all; believe in fate makes man dull." (*Pauruṣam hi param manye; daivam niścītya muhyate.*) Among the conditions responsible for the success of any work Bhagavad-Gītā (18-14) mentions both *ceṣṭā* and *daiva*. Pañcadaśī (6.158) says: "God in man is transformed into effort." Yājñavalkya-Smṛti (1.351) also says: "Just as a chariot cannot move on one wheel, so fate (*daiva*) without personal Endeavour (*puruṣakāra*) cannot lead to success."

the “cakrāmṛtasya” (Wheel of *ṛta*; RV 1.164.11).³ The regulating and stabilizing power of the *ṛta* is often effectuated through the rule of Varuṇa. Varuṇa drives the chariot of *ṛta* (*ṛtasya rathyaḥ*; RV 7.66.12); i.e., he rules by means of *ṛta*. His power of rule is manifested in holding things distinct yet related, and in creating definite spheres of activity. In RV 5.62.1, it is stated that Varuṇa established the *ṛta* by means of his own *law*, which means that because his sphere and mode of being is *ṛta* he brings all of the cosmos into conformity with *ṛta*. According to the same *sūkta*, Varuṇa established heaven and earth (*prthivī/dyu*), caused the cows (*go*; i.e., cows, rays of light, hymns, etc.) to stream forth, caused the plants: (*auśadhi*) to flourish, and made the rains (*vr̥ṣṭi*) fall (v. 3). In RV 7.87.1-2, it is said that Varuṇa cut out a pathway for the sun and make great channels for the days to follow. The dynamic nexus of *ṛta* clearly foreshadows this term's role as the force of order and stability in the cosmos. *Ṛta*, as the agent of freedom, creates a vast space within which for the cosmos to flourish. Within this vast space it establishes safe routes and pathways upon which individual entities may perform their functions. Thus, *ṛta* is manifested in the regular order of temporal and special phenomena.

Ṛta as the Sacrifice: *ṛta* is several times identified with the sacrifice (*yajña*) in the Veda. For instance, the sacrifice is clearly intended in RV 10.179.3 where the *ṛṣi* (or *Rishi*) declares: “*susrātam manye tad ṛtam naviyah* (well cooked I think, is this new *ṛta*)”. *ṛta* and *yajña* are also apparently used to designate the same practice in RV 7.21 which states that Indra is roused by the sacrifice (*yajña*; v. 1) the gods come to the sacrifice (*yajña*; v. 2) and that they protect the sacrifice (*ṛta*; v. 5) from those who are not worthy to participate in it. The term “*ṛta*” is used to designate the sacrifice because it is the force which makes that rite effective. At RV 1.133.1, the sacrificer is able to purge the cosmos by burning up those demons who are against the god Indra (*ubhe punāmi rodasī ṛtena druho dahāmi sam mahīranindrah*). *Ṛta* as the effective force of the sacrifice is clarified in connection with the god Agni. Agni the luminous god of fire who is the great envoy of the sacrifice was established among men as a friend to work according to the *ṛta* (RV 3.5.3). Accordingly, he makes the sacrifice agreeable to the gods by taking it to them along the path of *ṛta* (*ṛtasya pathā namasā miyedho devebhyo devatamaḥ susūdat*; RV 10.70.2). At RV 4.3.4, the *ṛṣi* implores Agni to “Be attentive to this our work, the *ṛta*, O Agni, you who are the knower of the *ṛta* (*tvam cin na samya agne asya ṛtasya bodhya ṛtacit svadhīḥ*).”⁴ This injunction is followed by a series of declarations which praise the power of the *ṛta*: *ṛtena hi sma vr̥ṣabhas cid*

³ The connection between *ṛta* and the order, stability and reliability of established phenomena is hinted at by the use of the term “*ṛtu*” which, like *ṛta*, is derived from the root √r. According to V.S. Apte, *ṛtu* means “a season, period of time, fixed order or rule” (p. 490). The relation between seasonal regularity and fixed order is transparent; one implies the other. Thus, in RV 2.13.1, *ṛtu* represents the seasons, while at RV 1.162.19 it is the principle of cosmic order. The term “*ṛta*” functions in a similar manner.

⁴ This translation is according to H. Aguilar, *The Sacrifice in the Rgveda*, (Delhi, 1976), Aguilar is so impressed by the close relationship between *ṛta* and *yajña* that he argues that the two terms are virtually synonymous (pp. 26-27).

*aktaḥ pumān agniḥ payasā pṛṣṭhyena.*⁵ By the *ṛta* certainly the bull, the male Agni, anoints with milking the mountains (v. 10). *ṛtenādrim vyasanabhidantaḥ sāma añgirasasāvanta gobhiḥ I sunam naraḥ pari sadannusasamaviḥ svarabhavaj jate agnau.* By the *ṛta* the Añgirasas, cleaving the mountain, opened it out. They cause their voice to resound with the cows. The heroes happily take their seats on the dawn Light appears after the birth of Agni (v. 11). This *sūkta* seems to say that *ṛta*, in the form of the sacrifice, is the fundamental force through which men and gods perform their functions in the cosmos. Those who observe, perform and maintain the *ṛta* and the *yajña*, and thereby gain access to the freedom, safety, security, stability, etc. which the sacrifice provides, are signified by several epithets in the *Rg Veda*. Agni gives special wisdom or power (*medhā*) to the one who is *ṛtayat* (who keeps the *ṛta*/sacrifice) in *R. V. 5.27.4*. All aspects of life are ‘sweet’ (*madhu*) for the *ṛtayat* (*RV 1.90.6*). Soma gives prosperity/happiness to the *ṛtayat* (*RV 1.91.7*). The sacrificer in *RV 7.85.4-5*, who is able to persuade the Ādityas to promote his welfare, is called *ṛtacit* (who knows/has intimate contact with the *ṛta*). The ancient fathers (*pitṛ*), who were *ṛṣis*, attained to the abode of light (*sva*) because they were *ṛtasap*⁶ (who perform the *ṛta*), *ṛtāvāna* and *ṛtavṛddha* in *RV 10.154.4*.

VIII. *Ṛta* as Truth in Speech

A close conceptual relation between *ṛta* and *sat* has been maintained. The meanings of both terms are so intertwined that it is difficult to maintain a rigid distinction between them. Thus, *sat* is being manifested by the establishment of the cosmos, while *ṛta* is the mode of being which promotes the freedom, safety, security, and stability of the *sat*. *ṛta* is also closely aligned with *satya*--a derivative of *sat*. According to J. Gonda, the meaning of *satya* can be grasped in a variety of related ways: (Gonda, 1962: 72) *satya* ... may be paraphrased by "that what is real, true, essential; being in conformity with belonging to characterized by, sticking to what is really existent, reality, being, to what is verity; being essence of the universe, of nature, of (one's) nature etc.; truthfulness in mind, speech of action." Verbal truth is only one side of the concept which is much more general. A being who is *satya* acts in accordance with real facts and unshakable norms, with that order and truth on which the cosmos is supposed to be founded; he is true to the validity of his own nature and hence also reliable. Thus on Gonda's terms, it seems reasonable to understand the formal significance of *satya* as "the principle of conformity to the *sat*". *Satya*, when used as an abstract substantive is a principle as fundamental to the cosmos as *ṛta*. For instance, *RV 10.190.1* indicates that *ṛta* and *satya* first arose from *tapas* (fervor/heat) and that the night (*rātri*) and the ocean were established after these. Similarly, *RV 10.85.1* states that *satya* upholds the earth (*satyenottabhitā bhūmiḥ*) while the Ādityas stand secure because of the *ṛta*

⁵ Translation according to *Bergaigne*, III, 243.

⁶ According to Monier-Williams (p. 223) the epithet *ṛtasap* means "who performs the sacrifice" when it is applied to men, but "who accepts the sacrifice" when it is applied to gods.

(*rtenādityāstiṣṭhanti*). The principle of being in accordance with *sat* (*satya*) and the principle of freedom, safety, security and stability (*ṛta*) appear to be two fundamental preconditions for the existence of the cosmos.

IX. Conclusive Remarks

The concept of *ṛta* is the synthesis of images of light, wide space, safe pathways, nurturing womb, evil destroying sound etc. The term '*ṛta*' is used in the specific sense in the text of the *Rg Veda*. *Rta* is a mode of being because the gods the gods, who are *ṛtajāta*, provide light, wide space, safety, security, freedom, stability, visions etc., through their association with , and by means of the power of *ṛta*. *ṛta* is the basis for the functions of gods and men through which these entities maintain both their relation with *ṛta* and the security of the cosmos. The sacrifice is identified with *ṛta* because that rite harnesses the power of *ṛta* by which men are able to gain the freedom, safety, security etc which are necessary for the persistent existence in the cosmos. Lastly, sacred speech is *ṛta* because such speech is the mark of the *ṛṣi* (this type of speech is the result of an *alaukika* or supernormal vision of that which is real) who has brought his acts and intentions into conformity with *ṛta* in such a way that he, like gods, is able to siege upon *ṛta* as his mode of being. Therefore, *ṛta* may be regarded as the necessary pre-condition for the safety, freedom, reliability, truth, law, order of the *sat* which manifested through the intentions and acts of men and gods. If the Vedic literature, which includes *Rg Veda*, is the foundation of Indian thought and *ṛta* represents a key concept in this foundational literature, then one would expect to find that the ideas expressed in *ṛta* have had a direct influence on the philosophy of post-Vedic literature. The *Bhagavadgītā* is concerned with the significance of world order /truth/law and the order of men with the cosmos; so this document would provide a good place for testing the hypothesis that the ideas expressed in *ṛta* are reflected in post-Vedic philosophy. In this connection we can state that the concept of *ṛta* will be enriched with the discussion and investigation of the relation between *RG Veda* and the *Bhagavadgītā*, and the relation between *ṛta* and *mokṣa* (liberation).

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