

Role of Purusha-sukta in Philosophy of Vishishtadvaita*

Ruzana Pskhu

Department of History of Philosophy
Peoples' Friendship University of Russia (RUDN)
Moscow, Russia
E-mail: r.pskhu@mail.ru

Abstract—The study of the philosophical doctrine of Vishishtadvaita uncovers some logical difficulties of this system. Particularly, the concept of God and his relationships with the world and souls cannot be rationally explained and systemized in a non-contradictory way (as we can see for example in Advaita-Vedanta system). The basic word-combination which is used by Ramanuja to name such a relationship between God and the World is “*sharira-shariri-bhava sambandha*”. This metaphorical description presents three different ontological entities (God-world-soul) as the inseparable unity (*aprthaksiddhi*). The metaphysical core of this philosophical doctrine is closely connected with the religious images and patterns, developed in Vaishnava religious tradition. The theological doctrines of Pancaratra and the poetical hymns of alvars can help us to put an order on the history and structure of the ontological doctrine of Vishishtadvaita. The paper deals with the reception of the cosmological model of the famous hymn “*Purusha-sukta*” (“*Rigveda*”, X, 190) by the philosophical system of Vishishtadvaita. Our assertion is that a creation myth provides a philosophical system with a matrix of its theological and cosmological doctrines. The above mentioned explanation of the God-world-soul relationship in Vishishtadvaita is rooted in “*Purusha-sukta*”, but it is accepted not through the *smṛti*-texts, but through the ritualistic tradition of Pancaratra. The other issue which it is planned to clear up is the historical relationship of Vishishtadvaita and Pancaratra.

Keywords—*myth; philosophy; Purusha-sukta; Ramanuja; Vishishtadvaita; Vedanta; Pancaratra*

I. INTRODUCTION

The scientific investigation of Rāmānuja philosophy should take into consideration its two basic principles: the first one is that the main task, which is pursued by Rāmānuja is to give a philosophical and systematical description of God, His essence and His relationship with the world and souls; the second one is that the only source of any possible knowledge of God is the sacred texts or *śruti*: neither sensual perception (*pratyakṣa*), nor logical argumentation (*anumāna*) can give us such a knowledge.

The basic doctrine of Rāmānuja philosophy is

*The investigation is prepared in the frames of the project, supported by the Russian Science Foundation (RSF) № 16-18-10427.

represented in the Sanskrit word-compound “*śārīra-śārīri-bhāva sambandha*”, which includes three different essences (God-world-souls) in their indivisible unity (*aprthaksiddhi*). The other specific feature of Viśiṣṭādvaita is identification of the Absolute of Upaniṣads with the personal god of the concrete religious tradition. Here also God can be presented in three forms: the Highest Principle, possessing with endless splendid attributes, omnipotent and omniscient, who has the divine form, whose body is the whole totality of the worlds and the Inner Ruler who lives in the heart of every living creature (*antaryāmin*).

My basic assumption is that the philosophical matrix of the cosmological and theological doctrines in Vedānta is provided by a myth of creation, rooted in the Vedic hymns. The myth of Great Sacrifice of Puruṣa from “*Rgveda*” (X, 90), which is in the foundation of the metaphysical doctrine of Viśiṣṭādvaita, can serve as an example of this idea. In this case the next question will arise: why and how this hymn has provided this philosophical system with the key-structure-scheme of body-soul-relationship? Why did the other hymn, which is evidently more appropriate for philosophical tasks, and which can be regarded in its turn as a philosophical matrix for Advaita ontology, not play the same role for Viśiṣṭādvaita (I mean the famous hymn of creation — “*Nāsadiya-sūkta*” (“*Rgveda*”, X, 129)?

II. ROLE OF PURUṢA-SŪKTA IN PHILOSOPHY OF VIŚIṢṬĀDVĀITA

The cosmogonic doctrines of “*Rgveda*” can be taken from the two aspects: the mythological (the images of a craftsman, a parent, a cosmic man and so forth) and the philosophical one (e.g., “*Nāsadiya-sūkta*”).

The hymn “*Puruṣa-sūkta*”, which is usually regarded in connection with origination of theistic elements in India [1], is a mythological representation of the cosmological doctrine of “*Rgveda*”. It gives the figurative description of God as a Master of everything, who possesses thousands of heads, eyes and so on, who penetrates the world, but at the same time is beyond it, whose part is all being, including the earth and so forth.

This hymn is connected with Viṣṇu; its 16 verses are also found in *Yajurveda*, but expanded with 6 verses, the last one

of which mentions spouses of Viṣṇu (śrīśca te lakṣmīśca patnyā) (31 ch.). The hymn is attributed to ṛṣi Nārāyaṇa and its other name is Nārāyaṇa anuvāka.

Some verses of this hymn are commented in “Brahma-sūtra”. In “Vedāntasāra”, the short commentary of Rāmānuja on “Brahma-sūtra” this hymn is mentioned, when the question of applicability of the name Indra to the Highest Brahman is discussed. Further it is said that this cause of the world which is described in “Brahma-sūtra” (1.1.25) is the highest Puruṣa, which is described in “Puruṣa-sūkta” [2].

If we examine the occurrence of the use of the hymns of “Ṛgveda” by Rāmānuja in his works, we note that the number of the citations is rather small. For example, in “Vedārthasaṃgraha” he refers mainly to the tenth maṇḍala of “Ṛgveda”, which has the evident philosophical character. Rāmānuja uses “Puruṣa-sūkta” (“Ṛgveda”, X, 90) when he describes the nature of Brahman (“Vedārthasaṃgraha”, § 127-128, 131) [3], when he rejects his opponent’s position that there is a difference between the instrumental and the material causes of the world (“Vedārthasaṃgraha”, § 165) [4], he mentions it in § 105 of “Vedārthasaṃgraha” for confirmation of the idea that Puruṣa is an agent of realization of nāmarūpa (“names and forms”). By contrast, he refers to the hymn “Nāsadiya-sūkta” in “Vedārthasaṃgraha” only twice (“Vedārthasaṃgraha”, § 127, 128) [5].

“Puruṣa-sūkta” was created a century after the creation of the Ṛgvedic corpus and the division into Ṛg-, Sama- and Yajurveda, and after the appearing of the idea of sacrifice of the Highest Creature in Hinduism. This idea, which forms the content of the hymn, is apparently shown in the first two verses of it, which are also used in “Brahma-sūtra”. The world of the existent objects (cit and acit) is regarded as a body of Puruṣa, which is the Highest Essence which is more than this world — the last one is only His part. Thus, Puruṣa sacrifices himself and creates the visible world. He exists in all forms simultaneously. But apart from this material form He exists also in an immaterial form.

sahasraśrīṣā puruṣaḥ sahasrākṣaḥ sahasrapāt/
sa bhūmiṃ viśvato vṛtvātyatiṣṭhaddaśāṅghulam//1//
puruṣa evedaṃ sarvaṃ yadbhūtaṃ yacca bhavyam/
utāmṛtatvasyeśāno yadannenātirohati//2//

The next following verses describe the relations between the world and the Highest Being. The phenomenal world is a part of Brahman, his essence, which in every pralaya takes it inside and gives birth at the beginning of every kalpa. In the 3rd mantra the theory of vivarta and pariṇāma is present in its hidden form.

etāvānasya mahimāto jyāyāṃśca pūruṣaḥ/
pādo’sya viśvā bhūtāni tripādasyāmṛtaṃ divi//3//
tripādūrdhva udait puruṣaḥ pādo’syehābhavatpunaḥ/
tato viṣvaṃ vyakrāmat sāsānānaśane abhi//4//

The last fragment is mentioned by Russian Indologist Pavel Grinzer as an example of the technical tricks which characterize the mysterious language of “Ṛgveda” [6].

The other hymn of “Ṛgveda”, referred by Rāmānuja in “Śrībhāṣya”, but interpreted by him in the Advaitic manner, is “Nāsadiya-sūkta”. The seven mantras of this hymn, according to the scholars, represented the logical formulation of the metaphysical doctrine of the world-origin in Veda. All the other hymns are merely the development of the theoretical principles contained in this hymn. And the earliest commentary on it is a passage from “Śatapatha-brāhmaṇa” (X.5.3). From the philosophical point of view this hymn is more important and more ‘matured’ than “Puruṣa-sūkta”, which is loaded with the visionary images. Moreover, this hymn contains some lexical units, which became later the foundation of the terminological system of Indian philosophy [7].

It is rather strange that, despite the philosophical productivity of “Nāsadiya-sūkta”, the Viśiṣṭādvaita system took the hymn “Puruṣa-sūkta” as a philosophical matrix of resolving the problem of the correlation of God and the world/souls. And, though the interpretation of this hymn in the Srūti-tradition and in “Brahma-sūtra” explains the Vedānta aspect of the reception of the basic ideas and images, contained in this hymn, nevertheless it is unclear why this hymn (not the hymn “Nāsadiya-sūkta”) became the key-structure image for Viśiṣṭādvaita philosophy. In my opinion, to resolve this question we should take into consideration the fact that Pāñcarātra tradition had great influence on Yāmunācārya, the predecessor of Rāmānuja.

The word *Pāñcarātra* occurs for the first time in “Śatapatha-brāhmaṇa”, where it is said that the Highest Puruṣa, Nārāyaṇa, decided to become everything through the sacrifice of Puruṣa, which was also named as Pāñcarātra. In other words, the word “Pāñcarātra” was initially connected with the sacrifice of Puruṣa (puruṣa-medha), but later it was used irrelatively to it. The process of reception of the schematic image of “Puruṣa-sūkta” is more evident, though hypothetically and textologically unproved, if we take into consideration that this hymn is used in the most important rituals of Vaiṣṇavism till nowadays [8]. The fact that Rāmānuja in his works doesn’t refer to the Pāñcarātra texts (as Yāmunācārya does) doesn’t mean that he didn’t agree with them or that they were unimportant for him. This fact demonstrates only that he had his own tasks, the most important of which was the task of including the Viśiṣṭādvaita doctrine into Vedānta tradition, and this task demanded from him to be careful with the texts, which were not recognized by Vedānta tradition as “orthodox”.

The following facts create such a very interesting situation: Yāmunācārya openly defends Pāñcarātra - he wrote the separate treatise on it (“Āgamāprāmaṇya” – “On the Validity of Āgama”)¹. He rejects the opinions of Advaita, Nyāya and Mīmāṃsā that “Brahma-sūtra” criticizes pāñcarātric tradition (“Brahma-sūtra”,

¹ On problems of the reception of the ritualism of Pāñcarātra into the philosophical system of Viśiṣṭādvaita see: [10].

Utpattayasambhavādhikaraṇa, II.ii.40-43). Meanwhile Rāmānuja shows absolute indifference to this question. And that is strange, because in other questions he completely follows and develops the ideas of Yāmunācārya. Moreover, we see that after Rāmānuja the question of the importance of Pāñcarātra is again aroused and there occur many commentaries on Yāmunācārya's treatise in defense of the validity of Pāñcarātra.

Here we should transfer from the firm ground of the facts to the hagiographical information of Rāmānuja and Yāmunācārya to clear up our hypothesis. The first hagiographical fact is a reference to the event from Rāmānuja's life, when he reveals the secret mantra to everyone, explaining it by his willingness to suffer in hell, if the rest of the Vaiṣṇava people would be saved by this. In this episode it is important to remember that before Rāmānuja there was discrimination between those who were initiated and those who were not. It means that some practices were transferred only aurally at the moment of the initiation.² This explains why for Yāmunācārya and his grandfather Nathamuni the hymn "Puruṣa-sūkta", which was more meaningful for ritualistic practice than for example "Nāsadiya-sūkta", gained the most important philosophical position in Viśiṣṭādvaita. And that also explains the silence of Rāmānuja towards the question of the status of Pāñcarātra. He mentions in passing that "Brahma-sūtra" does not talk about Pāñcarātra, when it criticizes the tradition as an opposite to Sruti text (Utpattayasambhavādhikaraṇa, II.ii.40-43). But it looks like an element of the strategy, which pursuits to present the non-orthodox (if not to say 'dubious') Vaiṣṇava system into the sphere of the Vedānta tradition. For Rāmānuja, who was an orthodox brahman, it was impossible to have a dialogue with the vedāntists being a definitely and openly pāñcarātric.

The other consideration is that the etymology of the word "Pāñcarātra" is diverse. The detailed investigation of the etymology of this word was carried out by J.A.B. van Buitenen [9].³ Usually the word "Pāñcarātra" is regarded as connected with cult of Nārāyaṇa in the context of the 13th book of "Śatapatha-brāhmaṇa", where the sacrifice of Nārāyaṇa is described and which is connected with "Puruṣa-sūkta". That gives us a possibility to understand the identification of Puruṣa and Viṣṇu- Nārāyaṇa which later emerged as a basic philosophical model, explaining the

origin of the world and its relationship with Brahman. The additional instrument of such a process was the term "the inner ruler" ("antaryāmin"), which is understood by the "orthodox" systems of Vedānta (e.g., bhedābheda) as the highest Atman (Paramātmā).

III. CONCLUSION

Thus, we can make a hypothetical conclusion which needs the further textual confirmation, that the model of explanation of relationship between God and the world/souls in Viśiṣṭādvaita is rooted in the Vedic hymn "Puruṣa-sūkta". Moreover this model has come to Viśiṣṭādvaita not (only) through the Vedāntic tradition, but most probably through the ritualism of Pāñcarātra.

REFERENCES

- [1] Vidyarthi, D.B. Early Indian Religious Thought. A study in the Sources of Indian theism with special reference to Rāmānuja. New Delhi. 1976. P. 85.
- [2] Rāmānuja. Vedāntasāra. Edited by Pandit V. Krishnamacharya with English Translation by M.B. Narasimha Ayyangar. 2-nd Edition. Adyar. 1979. Pp. 44, 58-59.
- [3] Rāmānuja. Vedārthasamgraha // Pskhu R.V. "Vedārthasamgraha" of Rāmānuja and becoming of Viśiṣṭādvaita. Moscow: RUDN-University. 2007.
- [4] Rāmānuja. Vedārthasamgraha // Pskhu R.V. "Vedārthasamgraha" of Rāmānuja and becoming of Viśiṣṭādvaita. Moscow: RUDN-University. 2007.
- [5] Rāmānuja. Vedārthasamgraha // Pskhu R.V. "Vedārthasamgraha" of Rāmānuja and becoming of Viśiṣṭādvaita. Moscow: RUDN-University. 2007.
- [6] Grinzer, P.A. Mysterious language of "R̥gveda". Moscow: Russian State Humanitarian University. 1998
- [7] Vasudeva, S. Agrawala. Hymn of Creation (Nāsadiya-sūkta, X, 219). Varanasi. 1963. Passim.
- [8] Safina, N.A. (2018) The Śrīvaiṣṇava Way of Life: The Value of Initiation (Pañcasamskāra) in the Art of Liberation // Proceedings of the 4th International Conference on Arts, Design and Contemporary Education (ICADCE 2018). Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research, vol. 232. [Internet-resource:] <https://www.atlantis-press.com/proceedings/icadce-18/25900141>
- [9] Buitenen, van J.A.B. The name 'Pāñcarātra' // Studies in Indian Literature and Philosophy: Collected Articles of J.A.B. van Buitenen. Edited by Ludo Rocher. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas. 1988. Pp. 191-200
- [10] Pskhu, R.V. Reception of the Ritualism of Pāñcarātra in the Philosophical System of Viśiṣṭādvaita // ASIATICA. Collection of the articles on the Eastern philosophy and culture. № 11(1). Edited by Tigran Tumanyan. Saint-Petersburg: State University of Saint-Petersburg. 2017.
- [11] Rastelli, M. The Religious Practice of the Sādhaka According to the Jayākhyasamhitā // Indo-Iranian Journal 43: 319-395. 2000.
- [12] Czerniak-Drozdowicz, M. Pāñcarātra Scripture in the Process of Change. A Study of the Paramasamhitā. Vienna: The De Nobili Research Library. 2003.
- [13] Rastelli, M. The Religious Practice of the Sādhaka According to the Jayākhyasamhitā // Indo-Iranian Journal 43: 319-395. 2000. P. 338.
- [14] Buitenen, van J.A.B. The name 'Pāñcarātra' // Studies in Indian Literature and Philosophy: Collected Articles of J.A.B. van Buitenen. Edited by Ludo Rocher. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas. 1988. Pp. 198-199.

² On the religious practice of the sādḥaka according Pāñcarātra texts see: [11] [12]. It rather interesting, that, for example, "... the sādḥaka must not tell anybody but his teacher, otherwise his siddhi will disappear and he will suffer pain" [13].

³ Van Buitenen concluded that "originally it [the word 'pāñcarātrika'] referred to an itinerant religious recluse, who followed the characteristic five-nights rule, by which he was bound to move out of town after every five nights to stay a night in a village... Such wanderers need not belong to any particular school or system, though they would as pilgrims, be guided by special devotions to deities. But devotional religion often went philosophical, and it then acquired a set of doctrines which more and more identified the wanderers in a culture where the desire for clear group identification is paramount... The name pāñcarātrika was then re-analysed as 'follower of the Pāñcarātra system' and a name Pāñcarātra derived from pāñcarātrika as the name of that system which pāñcarātrikas followed" [14].