The Image of the Oceans and the Rivers

The three riks of the third hymn of Madhuchchhandas in which Saraswati has been invoked, run as follows, in the Sanskrit:—

Pavakā naḥ sarasvatī, vājebhir vājinīvatī;
yajñam vaśtu dhiyāvasuḥ.
Codayitīṃ sunṛtanāṁ, cetanti sumatināṁ;
yajñam dadhe sarasvatī.
Mahā arṇaḥ sarasvatī, pra cetayati ketunā;
dhiyo viśvā vi rājati.

The sense of the first two verses is clear enough when we know Saraswati to be that power of the Truth which we call inspiration. Inspiration from the Truth purifies by getting rid of all falsehood, for all sin according to the Indian idea is merely falsehood, wrongly inspired emotion, wrongly directed will and action. The central idea of life and ourselves from which we start is a falsehood and all else is falsified by it. Truth comes to us as a light, a voice, compelling a change of thought, imposing a new discernment of ourselves and all around us. Truth of thought creates truth of vision and truth of vision forms in us truth of being, and out of truth of being (satyam) flows naturally truth of emotion, will and action. This is indeed the central notion of the Veda.

Saraswati, the inspiration, is full of her luminous plenitudes, rich in substance of thought. She upholds the Sacrifice, the offering of the mortal being’s activities to the divine by awakening his consciousness so that it assumes right states of emotion and right movements of thought in accordance with the Truth from which she pours her illuminations and by impelling in it the rise
of those truths which, according to the Vedic Rishis, liberate
the life and being from falsehood, weakness and limitation and
open to it the doors of the supreme felicity.

By this constant awakening and impulsion, summed up
in the word, perception, ketu, often called the divine percep-
tion, daivya ketu, to distinguish it from the false mortal vision
of things,—Saraswati brings into active consciousness in the
human being the great flood or great movement, the Truth-
consciousness itself, and illumines with it all our thoughts. We
must remember that this truth-consciousness of the Vedic Rishis
is a supra-mental plane, a level of the hill of being (adreśa sānu)
which is beyond our ordinary reach and to which we have to
climb with difficulty. It is not part of our waking being, it is
hidden from us in the sleep of the superconscious. We can then
understand what Madhuchchhandas means when he says that
Saraswati by the constant action of the inspiration awakens the
Truth to consciousness in our thoughts.

But this line may, so far as the mere grammatical form of
it goes, be quite otherwise translated; we may take maho arṇas
in apposition to Saraswati and render the verse “Saraswati, the
great river, awakens us to knowledge by the perception and
shines in all our thoughts.” If we understand by this expression,
“the great river”, as Sayana seems to understand, the physical
river in the Punjab, we get an incoherence of thought and ex-
pression which is impossible except in a nightmare or a lunatic
asylum. But it is possible to suppose that it means the great
flood of inspiration and that there is no reference to the great
ocean of the Truth-Consciousness. Elsewhere, however, there is
repeated reference to the gods working by the vast power of
the great flood (mahā mahato arṇavasya) where there is no
reference to Saraswati and it is improbable that she should be
meant. It is true that in the Vedic writings Saraswati is spoken
of as the secret self of Indra,—a n expression, we may observe,
that is void of sense if Saraswati is only a northern river and
Indra the god of the sky, but has a very profound and striking
significance if Indra be the illumined Mind and Saraswati the
inspiration that proceeds from the hidden plane of the supra-
mental Truth. But it is impossible to give Saraswati so important a place with regard to the other gods as would be implied by interpreting the phrase *mahā mahato arṇavasya* in the sense “by the greatness of Saraswati”. The gods act, it is continually stated, by the power of the Truth, *ṛtena*, but Saraswati is only one of the deities of the Truth and not even the most important or universal of them. The sense I have given is, therefore, the only rendering consistent with the general thought of the Veda and with the use of the phrase in other passages.

Let us then start from this decisive fact put beyond doubt by this passage — whether we take the great stream to be Saraswati itself or the Truth-ocean — that the Vedic Rishis used the image of water, a river or an ocean, in a figurative sense and as a psychological symbol, and let us see how far it takes us. We notice first that existence itself is constantly spoken of in the Hindu writings, in Veda, Purana and even philosophical reasoning and illustration as an ocean. The Veda speaks of two oceans, the upper and the lower waters. These are the ocean of the subconscient, dark and inexpressive, and the ocean of the superconscient, luminous and eternal expression but beyond the human mind. Vamadeva in the last hymn of the fourth Mandala speaks of these two oceans. He says that a honeyed wave climbs up from the ocean and by means of this mounting wave which is the Soma (*amśu*) one attains entirely to immortality; that wave or that Soma is the secret name of the clarity (*ghṛtasya*, the symbol of the clarified butter); it is the tongue of the gods; it is the nodus (*nābhi*) of immortality.

*Samudrād urmir madhumān udārad,*  
*upāṃśumā sam amṛtatvam ānāt;*  
*Ghṛtasya nāma guhyam yad asti,*  
*jihvā devānām amṛtasya nābhīḥ.*

I presume there can be no doubt that the sea, the honey, the Soma, the clarified butter are in this passage at least psychological symbols. Certainly, Vamadeva does not mean that a wave or flood of wine came mounting up out of the salt water of the Indian Ocean or of the Bay of Bengal or even from the fresh
water of the river Indus or the Ganges and that this wine is a secret name for clarified butter. What he means to say is clearly that out of the subconscious depths in us arises a honeyed wave of Ananda or pure delight of existence, that it is by this Ananda that we can arrive at immortality; this Ananda is the secret being, the secret reality behind the action of the mind in its shining clarities. Soma, the god of the Ananda, the Vedanta also tells us, is that which has become mind or sensational perception; in other words, all mental sensation carries in it a hidden delight of existence and strives to express that secret of its own being. Therefore Ananda is the tongue of the gods with which they taste the delight of existence; it is the nodus in which all the activities of the immortal state or divine existence are bound together. Vamadeva goes on to say, “Let us give expression to this secret name of the clarity,—that is to say, let us bring out this Soma wine, this hidden delight of existence; let us hold it in this world-sacrifice by our surrenderings or submissions to Agni, the divine Will or Conscious-Power which is the Master of being. He is the four-horned Bull of the worlds and when he listens to the soul-thought of man in its self-expression, he ejects this secret name of delight from its hiding-place.”

\begin{verbatim}
Vayam nama pra bravam ghratasya,
asmin yajne dharyam namobhih;
Upa brahma srnavac chasyamanam,
catuh srngo avamg avara etat.
\end{verbatim}

Let us note, in passing, that since the wine and the clarified butter are symbolic, the sacrifice also must be symbolic. In such hymns as this of Vamadeva’s the ritualistic veil so elaborately woven by the Vedic mystics vanishes like a dissolving mist before our eyes and there emerges the Vedantic truth, the secret of the Veda.

Vamadeva leaves us in no doubt as to the nature of the Ocean of which he speaks; for in the fifth verse he openly describes it as the ocean of the heart, \textit{hrdyat samudrāt}, out of which rise the waters of the clarity, \textit{ghṛtasya dhārāḥ}; they flow, he says, becoming progressively purified by the mind and the inner heart, \textit{antar hṛdā manasā pūyamānāḥ}. And in the closing
verse he speaks of the whole of existence being triply established, first in the seat of Agni — which we know from other riks to be the Truth-Consciousness, Agni’s own home, svam damam rtaṃ brḥat, — secondly, in the heart, the sea, which is evidently the same as the heart-ocean, — thirdly, in the life of man.

Dhāman te viśvam bhuvanam adhi śritam, 
     antah samudre hṛdyantar āyuṣī.

The superconscient, the sea of the subconscient, the life of the living being between the two, — this is the Vedic idea of existence.

The sea of the superconscient is the goal of the rivers of clarity, of the honeyed wave, as the sea of the subconscient in the heart within is their place of rising. This upper sea is spoken of as the Sindhu, a word which may mean either river or ocean; but in this hymn it clearly means ocean. Let us observe the remarkable language in which Vamadeva speaks of these rivers of the clarity. He says first that the gods sought and found the clarity, the gṛtam, triply placed and hidden by the Panis in the cow, gavi. It is beyond doubt that go is used in the Veda in the double sense of Cow and Light; the Cow is the outer symbol, the inner meaning is the Light. The figure of the cows stolen and hidden by the Panis is constant in the Veda. Here it is evident that as the sea is a psychological symbol — the heart-ocean, samudre hṛdi, — and the Soma is a psychological symbol and the clarified butter is a psychological symbol, the cow in which the gods find the clarified butter hidden by the Panis must also symbolise an inner illumination and not physical light. The cow is really Aditi, the infinite consciousness hidden in the subconscient, and the triple gṛtam is the triple clarity of the liberated sensation finding its secret of delight, of the thought-mind attaining to light and intuition and of the truth itself, the ultimate supra-mental vision. This is clear from the second half of the verse in which it is said, “One Indra produced, one Surya, one the gods fashioned by natural development out of Vena”; for Indra is the Master of the thought-mind, Surya of the supra-mental light, Vena is Soma, the master of mental delight of existence, creator of the sense-mind.
We may observe also in passing that the Panis here must perforce be spiritual enemies, powers of darkness, and not Dravidian gods or Dravidian tribes or Dravidian merchants. In the next verse Vamadeva says of the streams of the ghṛtam that they move from the heart-ocean shut up in a hundred prisons (pens) by the enemy so that they are not seen. Certainly, this does not mean that rivers of ghee — or of water, either — rising from the heart-ocean or any ocean were caught on their way by the wicked and unconscionable Dravidians and shut up in a hundred pens so that the Aryans or the Aryan gods could not even catch a glimpse of them. We perceive at once that the enemy, Pani, Vritra of the hymns is a purely psychological conception and not an attempt of our forefathers to conceal the facts of early Indian history from their posterity in a cloud of tangled and inextricable myths. The Rishi Vamadeva would have stood aghast at such an unforeseen travesty of his ritual images. We are not even helped if we take ghṛta in the sense of water, hṛdyā samudra in the sense of a delightful lake, and suppose that the Dravidians enclose the water of the rivers with a hundred dams so that the Aryans could not even get a glimpse of them. For even if the rivers of the Punjab all flow out of one heart-pleasing lake, yet their streams of water cannot even so have been triply placed in a cow and the cow hidden in a cave by the cleverest and most inventive Dravidians.

“These move” says Vamadeva “from the heart-ocean; penned by the enemy in a hundred enclosures they cannot be seen; I look towards the streams of the clarity, for in their midst is the Golden Reed. Entirely they stream like flowing rivers becoming purified by the heart within and the mind; these move, waves of the clarity, like animals under the mastery of their driver. As if on a path in front of the Ocean (sīndhu, the upper ocean) the mighty ones move compact of forceful speed but limited by the vital force (vāta, vāyu), the streams of clarity; they are like a straining horse which breaks its limits, as it is nourished by the waves.” On the very face of it this is the poetry of a mystic concealing his sense from the profane under a veil of images which occasionally he suffers to grow.
transparent to the eye that chooses to see. What he means is that the divine knowledge is all the time flowing constantly behind our thoughts, but is kept from us by the internal enemies who limit our material of mind to the sense-action and sense-perception so that though the waves of our being beat on banks that border upon the superconscient, the infinite, they are limited by the nervous action of the sense-mind and cannot reveal their secret. They are like horses controlled and reined in; only when the waves of the light have nourished their strength to the full does the straining steed break these limits and they flow freely towards That from which the Soma-wine is pressed out and the sacrifice is born.

\[ \text{Yatra somah sūyate yatra yajño,} \\
\text{ghṛtasya dhārā abhi tat pavante.} \]

This goal is, again, explained to be that which is all honey, — \( ghṛtasya dhārā madhumat pavante \); it is the Ananda, the divine Beatitude. And that this goal is the Sindhu, the superconscient ocean, is made clear in the last rik, where Vamadeva says, “May we taste that honeyed wave of thine” — of Agni, the divine Purusha, the four-horned Bull of the worlds — “which is borne in the force of the Waters where they come together.”

\[ \text{Apām anīke samithe ya ābhrṭas,} \\
\text{tam aśyāma madhumantam ta ūrmim.} \]

We find this fundamental idea of the Vedic Rishis brought out in the Hymn of Creation (X.129) where the subconscient is thus described. “Darkness hidden by darkness in the beginning was this all, an ocean without mental consciousness . . . out of it the One was born by the greatness of Its energy. It first moved in it as desire which was the first seed of mind. The Masters of Wisdom found out in the non-existent that which builds up the existent; in the heart they found it by purposeful impulsion and by the thought-mind. Their ray was extended horizontally; there was something above, there was something below.” In this passage the same ideas are brought out as in Vamadeva’s hymn but without the veil of images. Out of the subconscient ocean
the One arises in the heart first as desire; he moves there in the heart-ocean as an unexpressed desire of the delight of existence and this desire is the first seed of what afterwards appears as the sense-mind. The gods thus find out a means of building up the existent, the conscious being, out of the subconscient darkness; they find it in the heart and bring it out by the growth of thought and purposeful impulsion, pratiṣṭyā, by which is meant mental desire as distinguished from the first vague desire that arises out of the subconscient in the merely vital movements of nature. The conscious existence which they thus create is stretched out as it were horizontally between two other extensions; below is the dark sleep of the subconscient, above is the luminous secrecy of the superconscient. These are the upper and the lower ocean.

This Vedic imagery throws a clear light on the similar symbolic images of the Puranas, especially on the famous symbol of Vishnu sleeping after the pralaya on the folds of the snake Ananta upon the ocean of sweet milk. It may perhaps be objected that the Puranas were written by superstitious Hindu priests or poets who believed that eclipses were caused by a dragon eating the sun and moon and could easily believe that during the periods of non-creation the supreme Deity in a physical body went to sleep on a physical snake upon a material ocean of real milk and that therefore it is a vain ingenuity to seek for a spiritual meaning in these fables. My reply would be that there is in fact no need to seek for such meanings; for these very superstitious poets have put them there plainly on the very surface of the fable for everybody to see who does not choose to be blind. For they have given a name to Vishnu’s snake, the name Ananta, and Ananta means the Infinite; therefore they have told us plainly enough that the image is an allegory and that Vishnu, the all-pervading Deity, sleeps in the periods of non-creation on the coils of the Infinite. As for the ocean, the Vedic imagery shows us that it must be the ocean of eternal existence and this ocean of eternal existence is an ocean of absolute sweetness, in other words, of pure Bliss. For the sweet milk (itself a Vedic image) has, evidently, a sense not essentially different from the madhu, honey or sweetness, of Vamadeva’s hymn.
Thus we find that both Veda and Purana use the same symbolic images; the ocean is for them the image of infinite and eternal existence. We find also that the image of the river or flowing current is used to symbolise a stream of conscious being. We find that Saraswati, one of the seven rivers, is the river of inspiration flowing from the Truth-consciousness. We have the right then to suppose that the other six rivers are also psychological symbols.

But we need not depend entirely on hypothesis and inference, however strong and entirely convincing. As in the hymn of Vamadeva we have seen that the rivers, \textit{ghṛtasya dhārāḥ}, are there not rivers of clarified butter or rivers of physical water, but psychological symbols, so we find in other hymns the same compelling evidence as to the image of the seven rivers. For this purpose I will examine one more hymn, the first Sukta of the third Mandala sung by the Rishi Vishwamitra to the god Agni; for here he speaks of the seven rivers in language as remarkable and unmistakable as the language of Vamadeva about the rivers of clarity. We shall find precisely the same ideas recurring in quite different contexts in the chants of these two sacred singers.