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THE CONCEPT OF GOD IN ITS VARIOUS FORMS IN HINDUISM

PROFESSOR MATHEW ULAKAMTHARA

SEERI - Kerala

A study on Hinduism is not easy. Although a cultural heritage pervades it all throughout, to find order and logic one has to come up to the Indian schoolmen; but to understand Indian schoolmen, one has to begin with the early Vedas. What schoolmen did was mainly to systematize the early Vedic lore, comment on it and develop it into different systems.

According to the concept of God, we make an attempt to connect together all the scattered thoughts regarding the same. I quote: Hinduism includes worship of the infinite Godhead, of one God, Many Gods, all Gods, and worship of no God, as well as no worship at all, for its final goal is not Heaven, but self-realization. The centre and source of Hinduism is not a God in Heaven in the usual western sense, but Brahman, the ultimate reality that is the self (Ātman) of all, i.e., not God-centric but Ātman-centric. It is not theological in its approach but philosophical1.

“When we are embodied and are within the phenomenal universe and look outside of ourselves, we ultimately feel the existence of a Supreme Power or

Being as the cause of the cosmic universe. In fact, the same infinite Brahman is
the source and ground of all and whose presence we feel within us as the Ātman
intimately. We do not recognize that both Jeevātma (The Ātman within us) and
Paramātma (the universal Ātman) are the same one indivisible Parabrahman
appearing through the veil of Māya (illusion) looked at from two different
standpoints empirically. From this point of view we can pray to him for our
secular and spiritual good and for grace to attain Moksha from embodiment by
realizing our integral relationship with him... He being the only worthy object of
worship, and to establish living relationship with Ishwara (God) who is neither
He nor She being without definite form, and omnipresent, we conceive of Him
in a somewhat condensed manner as God or Goddess (Deva/Devi) ... According
to our needs or as given by the scriptures, legends or tradition we give Him/Her
different names and forms such as Vishnu, Shiva, Devi, Durga etc.... Again
when the power and glory of Ishwara is specially manifested in and through a
great personality like Sri Rama, Sri Krishna etc. He is called an incarnation
(Avatāra) of Ishwara and is worthy of worship as a representation of Ishwara
(Bhagavān) and for establishing living personal relationship¹.

The roots of Hindu religion lie in Vedās and Upanishads. They are called
Sruthi (hearing). Vedās, they say, are revealed. Upanishads are, in a sense,
interpretations of Vedās. They are also revealed and the last words on Vedas and
hence called Vedānta. They are handed down from generation to generation by
hearing from teachers and learning by heart. The word Upanishad means, sitting
down near the teacher. According to many Indian scholars like Sankara, the
Great exponent of the Upanishads, the sense of the word is that which destroys
ignorance and helps us to approach Brahman, the Supreme God. (Upa = near;
Ni= certainly; Shad= destroying ignorance and helping to get near that which
exists).

The revealed truths are interpreted in Smruthi (Recollection). Smruthi
contains Dharma (laws), the Darsanās (different philosophical schools),
Purānās (Legends) and Ithihāsās (epics) and the Bhagavat Gita (song of the
Lord).

Though Upanishads are said to be one hundred and twelve in number, the
most important classical Upanishads are thirteen. They are: the Brihad
Āranyaka, the Chandogya, the Katha, the Isa, the Kena, the Prasna, the
Mundaka, the Mandukya, the Thaithiriya, the Aithareya, the Kausithaki, the

¹. Ibid., page 26-27.
Maitri and the Swethāswathara. The first ten are included in the following traditional couplet:

"Isa-Kena-Katha-Prasna-Munda-Mandukya-Tittari
Aithareyam cha Chandogya Brihadaranyakam thatha"\(^1\)

Now we make a small search through these important *Upanishads* to find out the concept of God in them.

As an introduction, we have to say something about the four *Vedās* the first and foremost part of *Sruthi* literature. The four *Vedās* are: the *Rigveda*, the *Sāmaveda*, the *Yajurveda* and the *Atharva Veda*. The Āryans brought these Vedas to India. The *Upanishads* (*Vedānta*) were written later in India itself. They are the work of the Indo-Aryan thinkers between 1000 B.C. and 300 B.C. These thinkers got some sublime truths during their meditations by intuition. Actually they were in search of the extreme truth of the Universe. Knowingly or unknowingly they prayed the Almighty to reveal the truth. This we can see in the famous prayer of the *Brihadaranyakopanishat* (I,3.27).

*Asato ma sat gamaya*
(From the unreal lead me to the real)

*Tamaso ma Jyothish gamaya*
(From the darkness lead me to light)

*Mrithyor ma Amritham gamaya*
(From death lead me to immortality)

The sages got some answer to these prayers, which reveal the existence of God and eternal life. But we cannot arrange them in a systematic or a logical order. In spite of all their attempts to keep their mind in limits, they failed to resist thrusting of reason. They lost their balance and made a blunt attempt to explain fully the ultimate reality and consequently fell into a kind of pantheism. A telling example we can see in *Brihadaranyakopanishat*, where Gārgi the wife of Yagnavalkya asks him to explain further, he says "Gārgi do not question too much, lest your head fall off. In truth you are questioning too much about a divinity about which further questions cannot be asked. Gārgi do not over question"\(^2\).

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2. Br. Up. III 6.1
Actually, the usual questions of the *Upanishads* are seen in *Kenopanishad* and *Chandogyopanishad*. They are: “At whose command does the first breath go forth? At whose wish we utter this speech? Which God directs the eye or the ear?"¹ What pervades the whole world?"² What makes the unheard heard, the unconsidered considered, and the unsettled settled?"³ But the *Upanishads* do not aim at a pure speculation of the ultimate reality. As we know thinkers from time immemorial asked these questions and the answer found in *Vedism* is a kind of polytheism. We have no literature to examine what was the *Āryan* concept of the supreme reality of God before the Vedic polytheism. Indian *Vedas* and the Iranian *Vesta*, both begin with polytheism. All the same it is an undisputed fact among the Orientalists from the concluding part of the nineteenth century, that the Vedic polytheism was preceded by monotheism. Maxmuller says: “the most important discovery which has been made during the nineteenth century, with respect to the ancient history of mankind, I would answer by the following short lines: “Sanskrit – Dyauṣpīthār, Greek- Jupiter and Latin-Zeus Pater. Do you know what this equation implies? It implies not only that our own ancestors and those of Homer Cicero, Greeks and Romans, spoke the same language as the people of India…. but it implies and proves that they had all once the same faith and worshipped for a time the same Supreme Deity under exactly the same name, a name that meant Heavenly Father.”⁴

Besides this philological grounds there is the striking fact that there pervades throughout the entire polytheistic period the idea of a Supreme Being, a sort of movable divine unity which is called now by one name, now by another.

The *Vedic polytheism* is of a special type. There is no stable hierarchy of deities in it. No God remains the Supreme all the time. Gods, one by one, in turn, hold supremacy. At one time, God *Indra* holds supremacy and all the other Gods come under him⁵. At another time it is God *Varuna* who is supreme and all the gods including the very same *Indra* comes under him⁶. The same can be said of other Gods also.

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3. *Ch. Up.* 1,2,3.
5. Cfr. *Rigveda* 17, 101, 131 etc.
6. Cfr. *Rigveda* 1, 24, 25 etc
The special Vedic polytheism appears to be a vestige of a pre-Vedic monotheism and indicates that the Indo-Aryans did not lose completely in the Polytheistic period their preceding monotheistic concept. It implicitly survived in all their expressions. Maxmuller writes: "which precedes the polytheism of the Vedas and even in the invocations of their innumerable gods, the remembrance of a God breaks through the mist of an idolatrous phraseology, like the blue sky that is hidden by the passing clouds"\textsuperscript{1}.

It is quite likely that the Vedic people had fallen into polytheism before their entry into India. The deities like Varuna, Mitra, Soma and Sāvītri held in common by Indian Vedās and the Iranian Avesta suggests that the Āryan fall into polytheism had taken place before their separation from their central home. After their entry into India, the manifestations of nature in India turned their polytheism into a kind of Pantheism. Frequent lightning, terrific thunderclaps, scorching heat of the sun and the heavy rush of rain and the wind during the monsoon times are not only imposing but awe-inspiring. The poetic mind of the Āryans saw souls in such things of nature and began to worship them. Slowly they must have (probably) lost the monotheistic idea of God. They found their refuge in submitting to the forces of nature and worshipped them.

Monier Williams writes: "To our Āryan fore-fathers in their Asiatic home, God's power was exhibited in the forces of nature even more strikingly than to ourselves. Lands, houses, flocks, herds, men and animals were more frequently than in the western climates at the mercy of winds, fire and water, and the sun's rays possessed a potency quite beyond the experience of any European country. We cannot be surprised, then that these forces were regarded as the actual manifestations of either of one deity in different moods or separate rival deities contesting for supremacy\textsuperscript{2}.

Slowly this tendency evolved into Henotheism, i.e. the worship of single gods as the supreme, one god after the other as the supreme. It is a queer mixture of monotheism and polytheism. The tendency of extolling gods one after another as the Supreme led to the logical conclusion that God was one and was called by different names. They call the one by various names, Agni, Yama, and Mathriswan. "But the worshipful divinity of God is one".

In B.C. 650 the great sage Yaksha in his famous book Nirukta wrote: "There is but one God. On the earth He appears as the fire (Agni) and in the mid region

\textsuperscript{1} Lectures on The origin of the religions, p. 279.
\textsuperscript{2} Cfr. Hinduism, p.9.
He appears as Indra and in the celestial regions He appears as Sāvitrī. The various Gods in each of three plains are only aspects of these manifestations of the one God”. Some sages made a distinction between the Supreme God and the particular gods like this: The particular gods always remain agents of particular forces in nature. They do not become the Supreme by twins any more. They always depend on the Supreme God nay is produced by the Supreme God.

In the later parts of Rigveda, the Supreme God is known mostly by the names of “Hiranya Garbha” (golden germ), Viswa Karma (maker of the universe) and Prajāpathi (Lord of creatures). In Rigveda, there is a hymn describing Hiranyakagarbha’s qualities. He is the first being, He made this earth and Heaven; to Him we offer our sacrifices; He gives us our breath and strength, His shadow is immortality etc. In the earlier part of Brahmanās the Supreme God is called Prajāpathi (Lord of all creatures). But in the later part of the Brahmanās, Prajāpathi is neglected. Another name to denote the Supreme God came into prominence by this time. This name is Brahman. Looking at the cosmic world with an ardent desire of finding out Brahman the attention of the sages turned to the sensible objects of the universe. Since Brahman was the Supreme, they thought that the object, which presented itself as the greatest among sensible objects, should be Brahman. Finally they took the whole sensible universe for Brahman and single objects as parts of Brahman. In conclusion, every being became a part of Brahman and the Brahman became the totality of beings. Here they gave a new name to Brahman “Virād Purushan” – the universal God.

The Upanishadic sages did not stop there. They found the rational faculties above the senses and examined the rational faculties to find out Brahman: The faculty of determination (Sankalpa) and the faculty of desire & consideration. They found both are two parts of mind (Manas). They called it Chitta and Brahman was called Chittswaroopam – the supreme mind. In their meditations, they found that Brahman is the final truth, the supreme mind of knowledge and the eternal bliss (Ānanda). These three qualities gave Brahman another name “Satchidānandan”. Truth, knowledge and bliss are three factors of a “trinity” which is Brahman. Then the sages extended the search into the soul of things. The soul of things is called Atman. Individual souls are part of universal soul. The universal soul is called Paramātman i.e. Brahman. Individual soul is called Jeevātman. Both being the same, they made a great saying (Mahāvakyā): Tatwamasi = it is you. (The God is in you. The God is none other than you). Sree Sankara says that the visible world - all creatures are mere illusions (Māya)

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1. Cfr. Satapatha Brahmana II, 2,4 etc. Taitirīya Samhita II 1,1.
created by the invisible, nameless, formless, infinite being *Brahman*. In the final stage, all visible things, or creations will be absorbed into the invisible infinite God i.e. *Brahman*. This school of thought is called *Adwaita* or non-dualistic philosophy. There are other schools of philosophy called *Dwaita*, dualistic, which sees creator and creations separately, and *Visistādwaita* i.e. qualified non-dualistic as a compromise of the two philosophies and so on. Since *Vedaś* (including *Upanishads*) were considered as revealed by God the orthodoxy of the Indian philosophical systems was judged by their acceptance of the authority of *Vedaś*. The philosophical systems, which recognized the authority of the *Vedaś*, were called *Āsthika* (orthodox) and those that did not recognize the authority of the *Vedas* were called *Nāsthika* (heterodox). The *āsthika* schools are six in number and the heterodox systems are principally three in number. *Budhist, Jainist* and *Charvāka* belong to these heterodox schools. But we cannot go deep into these systems now.

As you saw, the Hindus believed in the existence of one God and worshipped him in different names. Any name can be given to Him as *Rigveda* says: *Ekam sat vipra bahudha vadānti*  
(God is only one and learned people call him in different names). This saying of the *Rigveda* gives Hinduism a firm foundation of catholicity and religious tolerance. This tolerance is expressed in a famous hymn as follows:

Ākasal Patitam toyam-Sagaram Prati gacchati

Sarva deva namaskaram Kesavam prati gacchati

All the raindrops fallen from the sky form into a stream and flow to the ocean. Likewise the worshipers given to any god will finally reach the real Supreme God. Taking this great saying into consideration, Mahatma Gandhi sung in his famous prayer song “*Īshwar Allah tere nam*” (All names like *Īshwar* or *Allah* are your names) and *Mandir, Masjid tere vas* (Temple and Mosque are your own houses), *subco sanmathi de Bhagavan* (O God give all people the grace to realize this truth). The great sage *Manu* declared: “One ought to know the supreme spirit who is the ruler of all, subtler than the subtlest of resplendent glory, and capable of being realized only by the meditation of pure-minded ones. Some call Him *Agni* (Fire); others call Him *Manu* (Thinker) and some others *Prajāpathi* (Lord of Creatures). Again, some call Him *Indra* (the Glorious), and others *Prāna* (the source of life) and still some others the eternal *Brahman* (The Great). Hence all believers belonging to any nation or faith are the people of God – they belong to the same family. Remember the great saying “*Vasudhaiva

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1. Cfr. *Rigveda* 1, 164/46
Kudumbakam” (The whole world is an inseparable family). Thus is the tolerance envisaged by the Vedic Sages who laid the foundations of Hinduism.

Now we come to the goddess concept in Hinduism starting with a fundamental question: who was there before creation? The logical reply will be that only the Creator or God was there. What was God like before creation? Then Hinduism’s reply will be that God was in transcendental state of existence before creation. It is meant by the word transcendental that God’s existence is beyond our time, space and causation. Hinduism holds that when God created the world He created time and space along with it. His pre-creation existence must therefore have been beyond time and space, since they pertain only to this world. In Hinduism, God in this transcendental state of existence is called “Nirguna Brahman”, the supreme spirit or the impersonal and attributeless God, neither male nor female. Neither the pronoun He nor She can be used to denote Nirguna Brahman. Since Īswara (God) is sexless, Hindus can look upon Īswara as both father and mother. Sometimes they call God mixing both qualities “Amme Nārāyana” [Amme (Amma) - Mother; Nārāyana – God]. Nārāyana is a masculine name. The great Malayalam poet laureate Vallathol Nārāyana Menon in a famous poem about Lord Krishna (the incarnate God) like this:

Amma than Mei Chari nilpone, lokangalkammayum-achanumayavane

(Though you are leaning on your human mother, you are really the mother and father of all the worlds). Actually Nirguna Brahman does not create anything. The creative power is in Him. This creative power or active power is called the goddess. Later the creative power of God was personified and feminine names were given according to the various actions. The Goddess of wealth and prosperity is called Lakshmi; the goddess of art and letters is called Saraswathy; the goddess of creation and maintenance is called Pārvathy and the goddess of destruction is called Durga. As God is called Parabrahman, His active power is called goddess Parāsakthi. Hindus worship the goddess in a famous hymn with all the attributes altogether.

Lord Shiva, originally a Dravidian God, later considered as a person in the Hindu Trinity, is pictured as two in one flesh “Arāha Nāreeswaran” (half male and half female). They say: Shiva Sakthya Yukta prabhāvati [God can only act when he is with goddess of action (power)].

In Devīhīgavatham and other Purānās (legends) there are many interesting stories about the origin of the goddess. In Mandukyopanishat also there are certain stories. One of them goes like this: When God Mahāvishnu was in deep sleep before the creation of the world, two evil spirits came out of his ears. They were called Madhu and Kaidabha. They angrily rushed to kill Lord Brahma who
was seated in a lotus flower, which sprouted from the navel of Lord (Maha) Vishnu. The frightened Lord Brahma approached Lord Vishnu and finding him in deep sleep awakened goddess Parāsakthi from his eyes. Goddess Parāsakthi incarnated in the female shape and destroyed the evil ones in a tough fight.

In the early Purānās (legends), the goddess is pictured in five forms. They are known as Pancha Mahādevis (five great goddesses). They are: Durga, Lakshmi, Saraswathy, Sāvithri and Rādha. She (the goddess) was attributed various forms later like Gangādevi (goddess of river Ganges), Tulasidevi (goddess of medicinal herbs), Mānasadevi (goddess of human mind), Mangalachandikadevi (goddess of all prosperity), Bhoomidevi (goddess of earth) etc.

One has to admit and admire the meditative thinking of the Hindu sages who lived several thousand years ago. Their insight into the visible and what is beyond it is truly remarkable. For those who have different traditions and convictions, many aspects of Hinduism may remain incomprehensible. But no fair-minded, thinking person can reject Hindu thought as mere superstition or idolatry. The Hindu sages reached the apex of human thought. Only God who takes the opposite direction and comes down to meet man at his own level can teach him the truth and manifest the reality that is beyond his query mind and limited comprehension.