CONCEPTS, SYMBOLS AND BEYOND

Hindu Cosmology

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Continuing our series on Concepts, Symbols and Beyond, we explore the macro-view of Hinduism starting from the concept of cosmic theories.

How was the world created? Who is the omnipotent? These two questions have been the cause of deep contemplation and speculation since days of nature worship. Every religion searched the cause of everything and finally accepted the existence of one divine being. Swami Vivekananda reminds us, "That which exists is one. Sages call it by various names".

In Hinduism, starting from the Rig Veda up to the present age, there are unending interpretations which continue to conceptualize the cosmic conundrum in vivid dimensions. Though at times there are contradictions in mythology, the essence remains the same which declares that the universe was created from nothing and the earliest state was "gloom hidden in gloom" as declared in the Vedas (ancient scriptures).

To understand the journey of myths of creations we should first look at what the oldest Rig Veda has propounded which remains the basic essence of Hindu cosmology:

Then there was neither light nor Naught, no air nor sky, nor bound.
What covered all? Where rested all?
In watery gulf profound?
Nor death was then, nor deathlessness, nor change of night and day.
That one breathed calmly, sustained; naught else beyond it lay.
Gloom hid in gloom existed first — one sea, eternating view.
That one, a void in chaos wrath, by inward forlorn grew.

Within it first arose desire, the primal germ of mind...
Which Nothing with Existence links, as sages searching find,
The kindling ray that shot across the dark and darkness.
What was the living light?
What can consciousness — the self, unifying power, unity of body, soul, and mind — force speed?
A self supporting mass beneath, and energy above.
Who knows, who ever told from whence this first creation rose?
No God had then been born, who then can ever the truth disclose?
Whence sprung this world, and whether framed by hand divine or no, Its lord in heaven alone can tell, if
even he can show. (Rig Veda X 129).

Explaining this particular hymn Swami Vivakshananda wrote, "It existed unmoved, without vibration, and when this creation began, this began to vibrate and all these creations came out of it, that one breath, calm, self-sustained naught else beyond it".

So, from the first vibration the universe was created which later can be co-linked with the concept of seed mantra or sacred sound azum. However, first we should try to understand the Vedic viewpoint to fathom Hindu cosmology.

Vedic philosophy of creation mainly centres around Purusha or the creative force. The Puranic encyclopaedia elaborated the Vedic concept that "it is avoided in the declaration that mother Aditi is everything and brings forth everything by and from herself though, in another place it is said that Aditi brought forth Daksha and Daksha generated Aditi. Here Aditi is apparent a mythological expression for the female principle in creation and Daksha for the male principle in creation. The latter is more directly called Purusha, man or male spirit, and is conceived as the primeval male who is transformed or who transforms himself in the world".

This concept of Purusha is vividly elaborated in the Purusotaka (Rig Veda X 90, translated by J. Muir): "Purusha has a thousand heads, a thousand eyes and a thousand feet. On every side enveloping the earth, he transcended (it) by a space of ten fingers. Purusha himself is this whole (universe), whatever has been and whatever shall be. He is also the lord of immortality... such is his greatness... And existing things are a quarter (or foot) of him and that which is immortal in the sky is three quarters of him... He then became diffused everywhere among things animate and inanimate. From him Viraqj was born and from Viraqj, Purusha. As soon as he was born, he extended beyond the earth, both behind and before. When the gods offered up Purusha as a sacrifice, the spring was its clarified butter, summer its fuel and autumn the (accompanying) oblation... From that universal oblation were produced cards and clarified butter. He (Purusha) formed those aerial creatures and the animals, both wild and tame. From it were produced horses and all animals with two rows of teeth, cows, goats and sheep. When they divided Purusha, into how many parts did they distribute him?... The Brahma was his mouth; the Rajanya became his arms; the Vaisyaka his thighs; the Sudra sprang from his feet. The moon was produced from his soul; the sun from his eye; Indra and Agni from his mouth; and Vayu from his breath. From his navel atmosphere; from his head arose the sky; from his feet came the earth; from his ear the four quarters; so they formed the worlds."

This significant hymn is also found in the Atharva Veda with slight variations. Nevertheless, Purusha is the ultimate. He is the creator and one quarter of his creation can be seen while the rest of him is immortal. Likewise, the theory of the universe which encomgrades Purusha who is both god and matter was propounded.

Rig Vedic seers had another cosmological question about existence before creation. They believed that the universe was created through the united and harmonious efforts of the gods. However, the Rig Veda also mentions one who is unborn and placed above all gods. This title of the creator was given to Visvakarma, the architect of the universe.

The Rig Veda also refers to Prajapati as the Lord of the Creatures. With the passage of time, Prajapati became Brahma. However, Prajapati remained the force of eternal divinity. He created all beings and the universe after dividing himself. After this creation he disintegrated and differentiated all the phenomena through the performance of rites. He is thus identified with the rites.

After the Vedic period, the concept of the cosmos was interpreted in detail by the authors of the Brahmanas and the Upanishads. However, the Brahmanas treated cosmogonic myths from a liturgical point of view, detailing the ceremonial aspect as well as introducing some legends to explain the rituals. On the other hand, the Upanishads used the cosmogonic myths to illustrate the transcendent oneness of Brahma and his creations. The Brahmanas propounded the aquatic origin of cosmos. The Satapatha Brahmana mentions: "In the beginning, this universe was water nothing but water. The waters desired: How can we produce? So saying, they toiled, they performed austerity, a golden egg came into existence... From it in a year a male came into existence who was Prajapati... he divided this golden egg... In a year he desired to speak. He uttered bhurbhava shvar. Bhar which means earth; shvara which became figment and sour which became the sky... He was born with a life of thousand years. Desiring an offspring he (toiled)... He conceived progeny in himself with his mouth he created the gods".

This story has many variations in the Brahmanas and the Upanishads. For instance the Chhandogya Upanishad adds a new dimension to the theory of the universe. "In the beginning this was non-existent. It became existent, it grew, it turned into an egg. The egg lay for the time of a year. The egg broke open. The two halves were one of silver, the other of gold. The silver one became this earth, the golden one, the sky, the thick membrane (of the white) the mountains, the thin membrane (of the yoke) the mist with the clouds. The small veins the rivers, the fluid the sea. And what was born from it was Aditya, the sun".

The cosmogonic myths from the Vedas received detailed treatment in the Puranas which synthesized old and new thoughts. The most significant Puranic phenomenon contemplated a secondary creation through elements of destruction and renovation. The Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics says, "the highest godhead, Brahma or Atman, identified with Narayana and Vishnu Samhita... from the primeval waters or darkness, the Purusha or Hiranyagarbha, who sprang up therein, the world egg which brought forth Brahman (or Prajapati), the lotus, from which sprang Brahma, the lotus itself came either from water or from the navel of Vishnu, the intermediate
creators, or mental sons of Brahma numbering seven or eight: The successive creation and destructions of the world.

Sankhya philosophy gave concepts of cosmogony another dimension as it revolves around two independent concepts, Purusha or soul and Prakriti or nature. Prakriti consists of three elements — kamas (darkness), rajas (activity) and sattva (goodness). The equilibrium of Prakriti is disturbed by the interaction of Purusha. Purusha acts out of this disturbed equilibrium and intellect or buddhi originates. From buddhi (intellect), ego or ahankara is born. From ego, manas or mind emerges. This was the basic creative cycle of kalpa of the Sankhya concept of cosmogony.

Poets from the epic era deviated from the Sankhya concept, believing that Brahma came first while Prakriti and Purusha were mutually dependent. Epic poets identified Purusha with Prakriti (nature), Hiranyakarsha (golden egg) with buddhi (intellect) and Brahma or atman (soul) with ahankara (ego). Thus the polarization of Prakriti and Purusha is evident.

In the Manu Smriti, the concept of the cosmos is thus defined: “this (universe) existed in the shape of darkness, unperceived, destitute of distinctive marks, unattainable by reasoning, unknowable, wholly immersed, as it were, in deep sleep. Then the divine self-existent, Svayambhu himself indiscernible (but) making (all) this, the great elements and the rest, discernible, appeared with irresistible (creative) power, dispelling the darkness... He desiring to produce beings of many kinds from his own body, first with a thought created the waters and placed his seed in them. That (seed) became, a golden egg, the himself was born as Brahman, the progenitor of the whole world.”

Manu explained cosmogony and even addressed the lower orders of earth in the hierarchical development of the universe and its creatures. These were the initial thoughts which preceded the Puranic concept of cosmogony. However, the idea of the cosmos developed further during the Epic era and the concept of Trinity was incorporated into the Hindu pantheon.

The three gods who represent the cosmic phenomenon of the cycle of life are Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwar. Brahma is the creator of the universe, Vishnu sustains the universe and finally Maheshwar of Shiva destroys and absorbs the universe and thus paves the way for recreation.

So we see in Hindu dharma, the concept of cosmology grew from the ‘ought and naught’ and evolved the concept of Purusha and Prakriti and then manifested the idea of Golden egg or Hiranyakarsha from the standpoint of aquatic cosmogony. Then again we see the birth of Trinity, which encapsulates the philosophy of creation, sustenance and destruction paying the ‘path’ of recreation. The essence, however, remained the same for each school of thought and mythology was added from time to time in order to enhance the comprehensiveness. However, the cosmic concept at the level of rationalization and worship is encapsulated in the five elements or Panchabhuta. Those five elements in the philosophic, mythologic and creative perspective will be discussed in the next issue.