THE CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE OF THE SUN -WORSHIP

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The most transparent among the gods, Surya or the Sun, is the luminary articulator of our solar family. The word Sūrya is derived from svar, light similar to Avestic Hvare. In Avestic literature Hvare is the Sun God, He is the eye of Ahuramazda and his horses are swift. To Yaska the word Sūrya is derived from śr (to move) or from su (to stimulate) or from Suir (to promote well.)[1]. He is called savitṛ because he is the stimulater of everything: सर्वस्य प्रसविता [2].

Yaska also explains the word Āditya, meaning the sun, in three ways: The word Āditya is derived from a-da literally that which takes;[3] i.e 'draw up water in the form of vapour 'or that which takes away the light of other stars on account of its superior effulgence Yaska explains the divinity[4] of sun and maintains the Vedic tradition of sun-god as traveling in a single wheeled car drawn by single horse having seven names[5]. In ceremonies connected with sacraments and sacrifices sun and savitṛ are generally invoked by the sacrificer to grant him boons and blessing and to help him in getting rid of difficulties. In Vedic literature he is depicted as the eye of varuna, mitra and agni .The word sun is developed from old English. In Germanic paganism, the sun personified as a goddess, represents an extension of an earlier proto-Indo European deity due to Indo European linguistic connection. In many pre-historic and ancient cultures, the sun was thought to be a solar deity or other supernatural phenomenon. The single wheeled car of the Sun is considered to be the forerunner of the sudarśanachakra of Viṣṇu because Sun worship of Vedic times was an aspect of Viṣṇu and Sūrya later came to be called Sūryanārāyaṇa.

The earliest stratum of gods in the Indo-European pantheon was Dyāus, Sūrya, Mitra, Savitṛ, Yama, Bhaga, Dakṣa, Aryamān, Vivasvāt, Mārthānda, the Aśvins, Aditi etc.[6] Sūrya is the developed form of Savit.

He is also called a bird who surveys the whole atmospheric regions[7]. The same image of the bird has been attributed to the Sun in the later period in the Ṛgvedic hymns Sūrya is discribed as the beautiful winged celestial bird garutmat or as 'a white brilliant steed brought by uṣas.'

"सूर्य आत्मा जगतः तस्थुषश्च"

'The sun is the soul of all that moves and is stationary'.[8]

The concept of Sun worship is traceable to as far back as the origin of humanity itself. India was acknowledged as the treasure house of ancient knowledge both scientific and spiritual. The facts presented to us can be said as of two types, one proved through experiments in laboratories and the other proved through experience. It is astonishing that thoughts on various aspects connected with the celestial bodies as well as many other related things are in perfect agreement with that of the modern science and to exaggerate in realistic manner even it goes beyond that. In the Vedic period different elements of nature were defined and prayed as Gods and Goddesses. The Sun had also occupied a prominent position in the things of worship. In societies which were primarily agricultural and depended on the sun for life and sustenance, it is no wonder that the sun became deified. Sun was indeed the symbol of the Supreme. He was an embodiment of natural and supernatural powers. The Sun God has been identified with the vital element in man and the cosmos.

Before any cult was developed the worship of Sun was carried on by various symbols which represented the Sun. Symbols such as solar disc, a wheel, a round golden plate , a Swasthika etc. and a lotus flower were commonly used by the Vedic ritualizes in the sacrifices. Sūrya as an object of worship appeared since very early times, as is clear from the tribal coins of India where he is represented as the solar wheel and not in any anthropomorphic forms. The anthropomorphic representation of the Sun does not figure in early Indian coins; but are present on coins issued by the alien rulers of India i.e. the Indo-Greek and Kuśānas. These representations of the sun in the form of an image are referred to by their Greek and Kuśāna name such as Helios or Mihira and not by their Indian name of Sūrya. Kanishka I, who reigned during the Ist C. B. C, displayed a representation of the Sun God on his

coins with the name Mihira, which is a corrupt form of Mitra. In later periods the Purānas laid down the principles for carving Sun images[9].

The worship of Sūrya in the later periods became so important that separate temples were built for worship. Amongst the actual images of the sun found in different places, the seated sun images from Madhura are of great interest. Sūrya is seen here seated in a chariot drawn by four horses. The deity is provided with small shoulder wings[10].

Another image of the Sun, holding dagger is shown with long coat and boots[11]. The wings form a Ṛgvedic element while the boots show the effect of the Iranian cult of the Sun God Mihira. One of the earliest Sūrya images of the South Indian style is the one found in the Paraśurāmeśwara Temple at Gudimallam. Another piece of Sūrya icon is found in Ellora. The Sun God is shown in a standing pose. The chariot is driven by the charioteer Aruṇa and the seven horses is very distinct. The sculpture of the Sun God at Konark is carved in stone. Today we find all over India different Sun-shrines and Sun images which are of worth mention. There are three earliest Sun shrines are recorded in the Purāṇas. According to these it is conveyed that Samba, son of Krishna, erected three temples for the Sun God, one on the eastern mountain, second on Kālapriya at the banks of Yamuna and third at Mulasthāna on western mountains[12]. The mythological, socio political conditions were the basis of the creation of the images.

The Sun -Worship in India in ancient times.

About 10 hymns of Rgveda are devoted to Sūrya and he is described as the son of Kaśyapa and Aditi. His charioteer is Aruṇa, the son of Kaśyapa and Vinitha. The Sun God is also referred to as Āditya. It is said that in the beginning of the creation the solar phenomenon came to be called Āditya not because he was the son of Aditi, but because he was the first born[13]. The Sun travels in a single wheeled golden car drawn by seven horses in order to see the three worlds.

आकृष्णेन रजसावर्तमानो निवेशयन्नमृतं मर्त्यं च

हिरण्मयेन सविता रथेन देवो याति भुवनानि पश्यन्।।

The well-known gayathri Mantra in the Rigveda is regarded as the valuable mantra in praise of Sun God. Numerous hymns ad-

dressed to him are found in all the four vedas for eg. Saurasūkta of Ṛgveda, Aruṇa Praśna of Taittirīya Āraṇya, Sūryanamaskāra Mantras, the Sūryopaniṣad of Atharvaveda etc. In the Atharvaveda he is invoked many times and is described as "shining with brightness of the fore-knowing quarters, well winged flying swift in the ocean" One entire hymn of the Atharvaveda is devoted to the 'Ruddy Sun' or 'Rohita'[14]. These hymns describe the celestial body as the source of energy and sustainer of all life on the earth.

Sun, the supreme deity of the Vedas, with Agni and Vāyu constitutes the earliest Hindu Triad. His ancient title is Prajapati, 'Lord of creatures', because he was regarded as the great source of light and warmth and therefore the Lord of life itself.

People from the very early period itself were aware of the beneficent nature of the solar energy. This God has not only the power of dispelling darkness, but also of curing such diseases as blindness, leprosy, Jaundice, Asthma etc. and of removing poverty and of healing and illuminating the world. And there is a belief that the beneficent nature of the sun which carries the dead of the far path to the forefather and to the abodes of bliss to the next world, i.e. he is the ethical God who guides man in his journey of life.

The germ-killing power of the rays of the sun was also known in the vedic period onwards. In Ṛgveda Sūrya has been invoked as a great healer: He is capable of giving relief from leprosy and all kinds of skin and mental diseases and jaundice:

उद्यन्नद्यमित्रमह आरोहन्नुत्तरांदिवम्।

हृद्रोगं मम सूर्य हरिमाणं च नाशय [Rgveda.I 50,11-13]

It also says that sound health is something that one has to demand from the Sun- आरोग्यं भास्करादिच्छेत्. So for the physical and mental health of the family the Lord Sun is worshipped. The idea connected with leprosy and Sun is not a new one. The ancient people also believed that the affliction of leprosy was the result of sinning against the Sun; and there is also a popular belief that a god who could bring about contagious disease up on men must surely be able to take them away.

In the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad the Sun is described as the honey or the most enjoyable thing of all beings

अयमादित्यः सर्वेषां भूतानां मध्वस्यादित्यस्य सर्वाणि भूतानि मधु. Br. Up.II

In Chāndogyopniṣad, the rays of the Sun are treated as a reservoir of water and that this forms the main source of the world"[15]. In Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa also we can see the same conception of the reservoir of water, present in the rays of the Sun[16]. This is the Vedic idea that fire was born of the waters and from this was born, the first germ of *life*.

Since Sun is surrounded in many positions by the revolving planet, it is believed to shed its influence in the destinies of human beings on earth. In Vedas and Purāṇas many stories on the Sun and Moon are given. In the Indian scientific approach of mathematical astronomy, the Sun is a globe of fire. "अग्निमयं गोलाकारमुक्तयोजनप्रमाणं आदित्यमण्डलम्" १७

The Sun is the source of life to the plant and animals. Biological science has proved the role of the sun for the development of the organic world. Sun is an inevitable source for photosynthesis and without photosynthesis there can be no existence of the organic world. To be more scientific and reasonable, it can be claimed that the Sun is the only object responsible for the creation, preservation and destruction of the world. The trimoorthi image was meant for the worshipper who had faith in the triple form of the Sun God. Skandapurāṇa states that the Sun god is Śiva, Viṣṇu and Brahma. He has combined all these three in his form.

अयं हि रुद्र अदित्यो हरिरेष दिवाकरः ।

रविर्हिरण्यरूपोऽसौ त्रयीरूपोऽयमर्यमा।। १८

This same view can be seen from a part of a mantra-

ऊं सूर्यं सुन्दरलोकनाथं अमृतं वेदन्तसारं

शिवं ज्ञानं ब्रह्ममयं सुरेश विमलं

इन्द्रादित्य नराधिपं सुरगुरुं त्रैलोक्यचूडामणिं।

ब्रह्माविष्णुशिव स्वरूप हृदयं वन्दे सदा भास्करं।

In another place Sun god has been divided into five forms which are Viṣṇu, Śiva. Śakti, Ganeśa, and Sūrya-19

अहंविष्णुश्च शिवश्च देवी विघ्नश्वरस्तथा
एकोऽहं पञ्चधा जातो नाट्ये सूत्रधरो यथा।
अस्माकं सर्व एवैते भेदाविविद्धिखगोचरः
तस्मात्सौरेश्च गाणैशैः शाक्तैः शैवैश्चौष्णवैः ।।

The fundamental Indian spiritualism lies in the concept of self awareness and consciousness of the universe and also in the cells of living body. Sun is the Universal truth. He is the soul of all movable and immovable. The mantra 'Sūrayatmanave' explains that all living beings are originated from the Sun because he is Ādideva.

The countries of Greece, Mesopotamia, China, Egypt, Europe, India etc. seemingly worship the Sun in some way or the other even now also. The chanting of Gāyathri Mantra and Sūryanamaskāra(Prostration before the Sun has been practiced in India from the very early period to get physical and mental relief with the blessing from Sūrya. In Vedas the Sun has been identified with the supreme spirit or parabrahma. This Vedic religious philosophy can be seen also in all the Upanishads also. The power which underlies the physical Sun is invoked by the Vedic seers. In the Gāyatri Mantra the Sun god has been invoked to impel human intellect. Therefore it can rightly be said that the Sun, Savitr is not the physical sun we see in the skies, but the supreme effulgence in the highest position, when the Vedic seers call the Sun Brahma, they actually refer to the power behind this physical orb of the sun, But modern science has proved the effect of Gāyatrijapa and Mantrajapa by knowing the meaning and keeping the faith works better and produce chemical changes in the brain. The rays of the Sun can stimulate the thoughts of human mind as in Gāyatri mantra.

In Taittiriīiya Āraṇyaka there is a mantra referring to the golden puruṇa in the Āditya.-

"य एष आदित्ये पुरुषः स परमेष्ठि ब्रह्मऽऽत्मा " I.10.63

From the Iśāvāsyopaniṣad, we came to know that the evil minded people after death go to these regions where there is no light of the Sun and where it is always dark.

असूर्यं नाम ते लोकं अन्धेन तमसाऽऽवृतः।
तांस्ते प्रेत्यभिगच्छन्ति ये के चात्महनोजनाः [20]

Again it teaches the 'well known person who resides in the prāṇa also dwells in His devotees as whom and asmi, i.e, He is in Pūsān, Yama Ekarsh and Prajapathi. He as taught in all these is one alone, and does not become differentiated owing to the difference of beings in whom he resides.

The relation of the Sun to the battle and victory would remind us that Sun is a God of war and victory. The Aśvamedha sacrifice in India was related to Sun worship. The presiding deity of Aśvamedha sacrifice was the Sun god and the sacrifice was just a way of worshipping the Sun-god for various objects, such as victory over his enemies, attainment of prosperity and good progeny. The horse in its sacrifice was itself a symbol of the Sun-god.

In Mahābhārata Yudhistira is said to have obtained Akṣayapātra from the Sun by worshipping him In this connection 108 names of the Sun god are given अष्टोत्तरशतनामस्तोत्र and have more details about the Sun worship. Again, in Rāmāyaṇa the sage Agasthya advices Rāma to worship the Sun god before going to fight with Rāvaṇa. Rāma recites this Agasthyahṛdaya mantra thrice and feels reinforced.[21]

एतत् त्रिगुणितं जत्वा युद्धेषु विजयिष्यसि।
आदित्यं प्रेक्ष्य जप्त्वा तु परं हर्षमवाप्तवान्।।

Sun is the progenitor of the line of kings the Suryavamśa; and He is the prime ancestor of the kings of the Ramayana. In Meso-American cultures also the sun was associated with kingship and many rulers claimed divine rights by way of their direct descendance from the Sun.

If one is engaged in worshipping the sun god one or thrice during day and night with a practice of fasting without any desire, he must

merge in the supreme soul. If he is worshipping with any desire it will be satisfied.

उपावृतस्तु पापेभ्यो यस्तुवासो गुणैः सह।

उपवासः सविज्ञेयः सर्वभोगविवर्जितः। २२

According to Manu the performance of daily sandhyavandana and Gāyatri in thrisandhyas the ṛṣis became what they were.

ऋषयो दीर्घसन्ध्व्याप्नुयुः। प्रज्ञां यशश्च कीर्तिं च ब्रह्मवर्चसमेव च। ४.९४

The Bhaviśyapurāṇa and Samba purāṇa give more details about the Sun-worship in its sectarian form influenced by the advent of the Magas in ancient India.

The Sun-Worship in other countries.

The fundamental facts connected with the Sun such as the source of light and heat and the producer of food and vegetation must have impressed the human mind since very early period. It was probably because of this fact that Sun worship found a place in almost every ancient culture and civilization like Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Greek, Roman, Iranian, Mexican, Indian etc. The Sun worship prevailed in Egypt from the earliest pre-historic times. The Sun was worshipped in Egypt under many names and in many aspects such as Ra, Re, Aton, Horus, Hather Tum etc. The Assyrians worshipped him under the name Marduk and the Babylonians named him Shamasha, speaking him as the source of human life and joy. The sun god was worshipped in Greek also. According to Plato "both Hellenes and Barbarians were accustomed to greet the rising sun with prostrations and kissing of hands". In the Greco-Roman culture he was worshipped under the names of Helios and Apollo. Romans worshipped him in the form of mithras. In early times the Iranians represented him by symbols and gave him full antropomorphic form.

Sun worship in Kerala:

In Kerala Temples dedicated to the Sun god are very rare. King Śatasoma of Kolathiri dynasty had built a temple of Vaidyanatha at Kanjiramkkad[23]. There is a stotra in Sanskrit named "Kāraskareśāṣtaka" about Śiva in this Temple[24]. According to a legend one of the twelve

Ādityas had got relief from leprosy after propitiating Śiva in this temple, who in his eight fold forms consists of the Sun also. Even today the devotees come to worship in this temple on Sundays in order to get relief from sickness. Kottayam and Alappuzha districts in Kerala are famous for Sun -worship Sun temples Ādithyapura, Sūryanārāyaṇapura, in Kerala also have various specialties, daily offerings and rituals are done there as in other temples. Sūryanārāyaṇa moorthy temple in Kannur District, Padmapura Temple in Chertala, Iramathoor Temple in Mannar are famous for Sun worshippers.

It is interesting to note that a special type of Sun worship is still prevailing in Central Kerala, in the form of "Udayam pooja" (morning worship) without any Temple. It is performed by the people of Ezhava caste of Kerala who are said to be coming from Ezhadesa i.e. Sri Lanka. This worship is performed in an open air paddy field after the harvest by a group of people. They salute the Sun with recitation of mantras such as सूर्यदेवा नमस्ते नमोऽस्तुते etc. It is usually done by the one who want to be healthy.

One of the first peerson to offer a scientific and philosophical explanation for the Sun was the Greek Philosopher Anaxagorus of the 5th B.C. who reasoned that Sun was a mass of red-hot iron larger than peloponnesus rather than the chariot of Helios, and that the Moon reflected the light of the Sun with the invention of telescope, Galileo Galilee and others almost simultaneously discovered spots on the surface of the Sun, but it was Galeeli who recognized that their true nature as solar phenomena. Varāhamihira in the 6th century A.D. discourses on the spots on the Sun which indicate blessings in the form of good rainfall, or plentiful crops, and also foretell such evils as famine, disease, death, war or loss of a king. Since he is surrounded in many positions by the revolving planets the Sun, the sole supporter of the universal space, is believed to shed his influence on the destinies of human beings on earth.

Relevance of Sun Worship in Modern Context:

Sūuryanamaskāra is a kind of yogic prostration since prevailed in ancient times is somewhat similar to sun gazing programmes of the modern world. Chanting of Gāyatrimantra and Sūryanamaskāra are

found to help the worshippers to maintain mental and physical health. Nowadays sunbath occupies an important place in man's health and well-being. Sūryanamaskāra is one of the all-round yoga exercises in 12 steps to salute the Sun. Yogāsanas have been advocated for many types of physical and mental disorders. Breathing exercise is an important factor in the Sūryanamaskāra. By controlling the breathing rate, one can regulate the oxygen supply to the body, complete or partial removal of the air from lungs is possible under this step. 'Lactic acid accumulated in the muscles will get easily decomposed and oxidized and it can release the muscular fatigue.'

In developed countries negative waves on the side effects of modern experimental sciences are blowing. They have started to look in to the experience of ancient thinkers. The Sun-bathing craze of the people is only a modern version of Sun-worship. 'During the winter or spring if we go to the South West or Hawaii or some other sunshiny area, we feel our elation, a stimulation we breathe easier, our traumatized joints stop aching, our post nasal drip stop. We may feel so invigorated and refreshed that we lie down and go to sleep. We all feel instinctively that sun light is in general a health promoting factor'. That is why our ancient people asked आरोग्यं भास्करादिच्छेत् . There are many extensive reviews of the effects of ultraviolet light of different wave lengths on organisms in general and human skin in particular. The principal known effects of visible and ultraviolet light on human beings are vision, heating and synthesis of vitamin D.

According to Dr. Mercole "sun bath for 30 minutes produces about 20,000 IUS vitamin D as much as that which exists in 200 glasses of milk, or the equivalent of about 50 typical multivitamins". It has been frequently reported that these who are regularly exposed to ultraviolet radiation (UVR) due to their occupation have a reduced risk of developing melanoma.

Some Australian researchers have found that sun light could reduce Asthma[25]. Jacob Liberman says that we potentially harm ourselves when we hide from sun light[26]. He also explains how to utilize the therapeutic benefits of light. To him "Light is the basic component from which all life organisms, develops, heals and evolves". Everything that humans do is affected in some way by light. Scientists have started to

discover that vitamin D played an important role in all the cells in the body and they hypothesized that a lack of this could increase the risks of cancer; and here the editorial that accompanies the study results in the journal of the national cancer institute. In addition to the Harward study, two others came out to demonstrate increased incidents of breast cancer in women with low levels of vitamin D. These were presented at the annual meeting of the American Association for Cancer Research. The experts now recommend a minimum of 1000 units of vitamin D per day. But we can get 1,000units of vitamin D by spending 10 minutes in the Sun in the middle of the day with arms and face exposed".

According to the national Cancer Institute reports, life time exposure to sun light may reduce the risk of some of the most common types of cancer. Sun bath does not cause skin cancer but chronic sun burn on skin containing free radicals leads to skin cancer, wrote Dr. Michael Gray. Further more, fats and oils applied to the skin in suntan lotions and other cosmetics are source of free radicals which can lead to skin cancer.

Exposure to Sun-light may be the newest method of easing pain. Sun gazing will actually change the neural path ways in the brains. The yogic experiences have ample evidence for the changes created in the Brain. They could create enough endomorphins in the brain through yogic pathways especially Sūryanamaskāra and mantrajapa to get relief from pain, stress etc.

The Vedic science may contribute much to promote the efforts of the physical science. The Vedic concept of Ādityopāsana is gaining more acceptances in modern times. Modern science has accepted that many diseases which could not be cured by medicines have better remedies in the form of treatment by sun light. Sun is the one manifesting as Brahma, Viṣṇu and Maheśvara who are the Gods of srṣti, sthiti and samhāra respectively - Creation, Preservation and destruction. As sun is the first born, he is the father and mother of the Universe. We are all coming from the sun, he nourishes us and finally we will have to return to the Sun. This thought will lead us to live here without sectarianism. This kind of awareness will bring forth a holistic view of development, interconnection among all the animate and inanimate, mutual co-operation self control and lack of greed. All these if we put into practice can lead a sustainable development.

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