Ritual Symbolism in the Āraṇyakas

Dr. B. Chandrika

Āraṇyakas are the prelude to the Upaniṣads and are the extensions of the Brāhmaṇas. Regarding the emergence of the term 'Āraṇyaka', different views are expressed by various scholars. The Orthodox view on the origin of it is that the grammarian Kātyāyana had defined the word in the sense that chapter or treatise relating to forest. Sāyaṇa in his Aitateyāraṇyaka says: Āraṇyakas are the Brāhmaṇas but to be studied in the forest. [*āraṇyakavratarūpam brāhmaṇam*]. Again he observes that the Aitateyāraṇyaka form part of the Aitareya Brāhmaṇa and it is studied in the forest so it is Āraṇyaka. (*Aitareyabrāhmaṇesti kāṇdam Āraṇyakābhidhānam Araṇye eva pathyam sat Āraṇyakamitīryate*). This can be regarded as the orthodox view regarding the origin of the name Āraṇyaka.

Modern view:

The modern scholars also associate the Āraṇyakas to the forest and at the same time attributes to these texts mysticism and symbolical features. They argue that the Āraṇyakas contain the discussions on the explanations of the rituals and allegorical speculations on them and remain as the substitute for actual sacrificial observations in the solitude of the forests. They at the same time admit that the contents of the Brāhmaṇas, Āraṇyakas and Upaniṣads are overlapping and the dividing line between them is arbitrary.

These are the two views regarding the name of the Āraṇyakas. It is true that metaphysical ideas in the form of crude philosophy or symbolism are occasionally found in the Āraṇyakas. But on analyzing the content of the Āraṇyakas we can find that Symbolism is not the only and essential feature of them. The illustration of bad omens, ceremonies to be initiated

for the diseased are described in them. For example Aitareya III 2/4 and the Sānkhāyana IX /3/4 etc have nothing to do with the concept of symbolism. We cannot therefore fully accept either of the two views, orthodox or modern, so far as the true definition of the Āraṇyaka is historically and in contents concerned. Neither of them can give us a satisfactory and precise answer as to the question; what is an Āraṇyaka? What is its actual scope? What prompted the Vedic students to read the texts of Āraṇyakas in the forest?
Actually Āraṇyakas are the preambles of the Upaniṣads.The topics discussed in the Upaniṣads are Ātman, Supreme soul, the creation of the Universe, Knowledge especially, the eternal Knowledge of the self, Karma and Upāsanā. The initials of the very same is dealt within the Āraṇyakas. Apart from this the Āraṇyakas also contain the metaphysical as well as the philosophical elements of the rituals. In the Aitareya, Śatapatha, Tāndya and Gopatha, the rituals are symbolized for Brahma or Viṣṇu. The philosophical element of Yajña is nothing but the nature of Brahman itself.

Prāṇa Vidyā.

There are so many instances of the importance of PrāṇaVidyā. The detailed description is given in the Aitateyāraṇyaka. In the Ṛg Veda there is an aphorism ie *Ayrnah Prāṇa* (1/66/1) , Another one *Punah prāṇamiha no Dhehi* (10/49/6). In the AtharvaVeda also there is a full sūtra denoting the importance of Prāṇa(11/4/1-26). In this Sūkta, Prāṇa is mentioned as the controller of the Earth. Aitareyāraṇyaka says *Sarvāṇi bhūtāni āpipīlikābhyah Prāṇena brhatya* vistabdhāni(*2/1/6)*

An Account of the available Āraṇyakas :

At present there are six Āraṇyakas which are unearthed. Among them Aitareya and Sānkhāyana are related to ṚgVeda. Another one, Brhadāraṇyaka - there are two recensions for this. They are Kāṇva and Mādhyandina sects. This belongs to ŚuklaYajurveda.There is only one Āraṇyaka for the two sects of Taittirīya and Kāthaka sects of Krṣṇa Yajurveda.ie Taittirīya Āraṇyaka. For Maitrāyaṇīya sect there is an Āraṇyaka Maitrāyaṇīyāraṇyaka. This is also known as Maitrāyaṇīyopaniṣad.This is the concluding portion of the Maitrāyaṇīya Samhita. For Sāma Veda, there is an Āraṇyaka for Jaiminīya Śākha named Talavakāra which is otherwise called JaiminīyopaniṣadBrāhmaṇa. Certain parts of the Chāndogyopaniṣad

are considered as the Āraṇyaka of the Kauthuma sect. There is no separate Āraṇyaka for the AtharvaVeda. But certain portions related to the Brahmavidyā of Gopatha Brāhmaṇa are considered as the Āraṇyaka portion of The AtharvaVeda.

Major topics dealt within the Āraṇyakas

Aitareyāraṇyaka

The description of PrāṇaVidyā, importance of Prajñā, the nature of Ātman, the greatness of ladies, code of conduct for the whole people living on this Earth- these are the major topics dealt within the Āraṇyaka.

Sāṅkhāyana Āraṇyaka

The major portions dealt with in this Āraṇyaka are- the metaphysical element of Agnihotra , the explanation of the great two Mahāvākyas- *tattvamasi* and *Aham Brahmāsmi* ,the importance of *Arthajñāna* while studying the Vedic hymns and the genealogy of sages.

Brhadāraṇyaka

The last fourteen khaṇda of the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa is regarded as the Āraṇyaka. This is considered more the Upaniṣad rather than an Āraṇyaka.

Taittirīya Āraṇyaka

The five great Yajñas , the need for *Svādhyāya*, *ābhicāra* elements, philological notations, importance of *Sūryanamaskāra* and the way in which this is to be done etc are described elaborately in this work.

Maitrāyaṇīya Āraṇyaka

The importance of Aumkāra, the ,manifold nature of Brahman ,the various aspects of the mind, the hindrance of Knowledge Mokṣa through purification of the mind etc are the major topics of discussion here. This is perhaps the one Āraṇyaka which deals with the aspects of mind in detail. The scholars of Psychology can study a good deal from this.

The chief enthusiasm which the Āraṇyakas possess at present age consists of their philosophy. The philosophical chapters well-known under the name of the Upaniṣads are almost the only portion of the Vedic literature

which is extensively read to this day. Not only the philosophy of Vedānta, who by its very name professes its faith in the ends and objects of the Vedas, but the philosophical aspects of the Sānkhya, the Vaiśeṣika, the Nyāya and the Yoga also can be found in the Upanisads . The very name Vedānta first occurs first in the Taittirīya Āraṇyaka thus:

Vedāntavijñānasunśicitārthāh samnyāsayogādyatayah śuddhasattvāh

Te brahmalokeṣu parāntakāle parāmrtāh parimucyanti sarve. [X /12]

The original Upaniṣads had their place in the Brāhmaṇas and in the Āraṇyakas.There is only one instance the Samhitā contains the Upaniṣad i.e. the Vājasaneya Samhitā which contains the Īśopaniṣad forms the 40th book.

The excessive ritualism of the Brāhmaṇas produces a natural reaction. It is natural that the excessive use of anything creates some sort of detachment for the users for the thing. The same thing happened in the case of the Brāhmaṇas. The Āraṇyaka texts are themselves virtually an admission that the correct performance of a compulsory ritual could not be expected from all, irrespective of age, status etc. There were again some parts of sacrificial lore which were of an account of mystical nature and which could be imparted only in the privacy of the forest. They do not lay down rules for the performance of sacrifice nor do they comment on the ceremonial in the Brāhmaṇa style. They are mainly devoted to the exposition of the mysticism and symbolism of the sacrifice and priestly philosophy. Meditation ion the performance is the sprit of their teaching.

But it must be admitted that the Āraṇyakas or forest texts came in exceedingly handy ,as ideally suitable for the daily study of the forest hermits as distinguished on the one hand ,from the student and householder who could do justice to the cult of the Vedic sacrifice set forth in the Brāhmaṇas ; and on the other ,from the other ,from the ascetic who could delicate the rest of his life in the forest.

Symbolization means to communicate a greater whole of information by means of a smaller part. Naturally there will be two main features in the symbolic expression.

1. The unknown factor which one tries to perceive and it is the object symbolized die the object of our cognition.

2. The known factor and it is the symbol. It gets from our own environment and helps us to get into the unknown world by manse of identification. Actually symbol may be a word, a sign, a picture or an object or anything else. In symbolical interpretation, the concept of analogy is important. Through the analogous cognition the symbol ultimately establishes an essential relationship to their object it signifies.

The origin of symbolization can be traced back to the nature worship of the Vedic sages who treated the natural phenomena as well as cosmic forces as God. Thus the Supreme self began to be worshipped symbolically through the medium of Sun, Uṣas, Wind, and Thunder etc. We are not certain that they knowingly or unknowingly, did the same, but it is a fact that the sages, whomever evoked a deity, they took him as the highest of all. From the Samhitā, the symbolical interpretations went on and in the Brāhmaṇas and Āraṇyakas; it is observed that the symbols have been derived from nature, rituals and physical and psychological elements.

Symbols are only the medium of meditation or Upāsanā of the transcendental. Upāsanā means *Nairantaryeṇa tātparyapurassaro vyavahārah* (Ait Āra.II. 6. 1.) Vedic texts assume that though the craving for the greater knowledge springs up from the sacrifice and charity, but still the importance of attentive mind is also to be appreciated- '*Dṛśyate tvagryayā buddhyā*' (Sāyaṇa in his introduction to his commentary on Ait.Ā.II.1.2.). Upāsanā is only a preliminary step for realizing the truth.

There are two types of *Upāsanās—Brahmopāsanā* and *Pratīkopāsanā*. .The first means the meditation on the qualified Brahman. (*Brahmaṇa eva guṇaviśiṣtatvena cintanam)*. The second requires a medium — a symbol for meditation. Sāyaṇa himself clarifies the same. The pratīka or symbol is of two types- something related to sacrifice and not related to sacrifice.

When we read the Samhitās through the historical point of view, it will become clear to us that the idea of withdrawal from the sacrifice —seeing fruitlessness cropped up among the sages but actually they could not withdraw themselves from the sacrifice and so they uttered the mantras full of metaphor and allegories. The Śrāddhahoma of the Ait. Bra. V. 25.2 it is mentioned that the 2222 is the pillar, the Earth is the altar, the plants the barhis, water the sprinkling water and the quarter the Paridhis. . There are such innumerable instances of symbolic expressions in the Vedic literature. The analogous

cognition that forms the essential elements of symbolical interpretation is found in the types of Brāhmaṇa expression called rūpasamrdhi. Symbolic or allegorical expressions reached its zenith in the post Brāhmaṇa literature- Āraṇyakas and Upaniṣads.

The Aitareya Āraṇyaka [II 1.2] opens with the meditation of Ukthas. Uktha is the Niṣkāvalya Śāstra of the Mahāvrata sacrifice. It is sometimes associated with the earth, sometimes with the sky or sometimes with the heaven. When the identification changes the presiding deity will also change. When the Uktha is meditated as the earth, the associated deity is meditated as Agni, when Uktha is sky the presiding deity is meditated as Vāyu and when it's Heaven its presiding deity

Not only in this Āraṇyaka, but Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad also instructs to meditate Prāṇas as Uktha. Symbolical usages are abundantly framed in this Upaniṣad. This text opens with the symbolic meditation in the sacrificial horse as the cosmic form of Prajāpati. In the Fifth Adhyāya, the meditation of Brahmā is prescribed. The mystical significance of Gāyatrī Mantra is brought about in this Adhyāya. The three feet of Gāyatrī are made identified with the triad of Earth, Sky and Heaven, three Vedas –three breaths [*Prāṇa, Apāna* and *Vyāna]*

All these kinds of expressions show that the worship coming accord of the common ritualistic ideas concentrated on a higher level and gets absorbed in the atmospheric gods. Finally man establishes a link between these gods and his own Self. So this meditation helps the mediators in two ways. First it helps to attain more concentration and secondly it forces him to the path of Bliss by instigating him struggling to achieve it.

Not only allegorical or symbolical expressions found in the ideas but symbolical sacrifices are found in the Āraṇyakas. In the Aitareya Āraṇyaka III/2/6, it is mentioned that kāvaseya ,a sage puts the question: what is the use of repeating the Vedas? What is the use of sacrifice? It is because he thinks that a perennial sacrifice is carried out by speaking and by being silent. When a man speaks out the breath takes rest in speech and the sacrifice of breath thereby performed. On the other hand when he becomes silent the speech takes rest in breath and then the sacrifice of speech is performed. Similar symbolic sacrifice is also found in Sānkhāyana Āraṇyaka. Here the continuous process of breathing and speaking is symbolically imagined as

sacrifice and named as Antaragnihotra [Sānk.Āra-X]. Mystical Agnihotra is also described in Ch.Up. [V.19-23] .Here the taking of food by the worshipper is mystically interpreted as the Agnihotra to the Universal Soul. The meditation on digestive fore is also indicated in the Br.Up. [V.9]

Life is a duty and a responsibility is the central ethical teaching of the Brāhmaṇas. Man is born with certain ṛna or depts., which he must discharge in his life. He has dept to pay to the gods, to the Ṛṣis , to the manes ,to men and to the lower creatures. And he discharges these debts, if he worships the Gods, studies the Vedas, perform funeral ceremonies, hospitable to guests and offer oblations to the *Bhūtas.* Thus there is no lack of high moral sense and noble sentiments. Selflessness must characterize all our actions. The Brāhmaṇas have a remarkable sacrifice –*Sarvamedha*-wherein everything is to be sacrificed to attain the freedom of the spirit. Prayer or good works constitute godliness which is the first requisite of a good life. Truthfulness in utterance and actions is the foundation of moral life. These are hints in the Brāhmaṇas that excessive ritualism was bringing on a reaction. For instance, knowledge rather than sacrificial gifts or asceticism is valued in the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa [X 5.4.16], although asceticism is also held up as a great ideal elsewhere [Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa III/ 12/3]. The theory that confession implying repentance somewhat mitigates the guilt is seen in the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa. Inner purity was insisted on as much as external purity.

The important service was rendered by the Āraṇyakas when they stress the efficacy of the inner or mental sacrifice as distinguished from the outer or formal sacrifice, consisting of oblation of rice, barely or milk. They thus helped to bridge the gap between the way of works [*karmamārga*] which was the sole concern of the Brāhmaṇa and the way of knowledge [*Jñānamārga]* which the Upaniṣads advocated. The Āraṇyakas further lay down *Upāsanās* [or courses of meditation] upon certain symbols and austerities for the realization of the Absolute, which by now and superseded the 'heaven of the Brāhmaṇa works as the highest goal of the devout'. These symbols form the link between the Brāhmaṇas and the Upaniṣads as they are borrowed from the sacrifices. Finally, the compromise between the two ways of karma and jñāna was made subsidiary to and a preparatory stage for *jñāna* in the Āraṇyakas and Upaniṣads.

The subject matter of the Āraṇyakas was neither the performance of the rituals nor the symbolical worship. Actually Symbolism in the present day was unknown at the time of the Āraṇyakas. In the Brāhmaṇical period, performance of the ritual in the rigidly prescribed manner was believed to result in the inevitable bestowal of the besought boons by the Gods. .Thus, this rigid ritualistic cult had made the Gods subservient to the proper performance of the ritual and the Gods of the Samhitā period their independence and inherent benevolence. Thus the task of the Āraṇyakas was basically to re-establish the supremacy of the Godhood. Not only this, they also reconstructed the identity between the individual soul and the Supreme one. However, the elaborately evolved ritualism had taken deep roots in the minds of the Āryans at that time. Hence these Āraṇyakas could not very prudently, openly denounce the ritualism and values held high by it. On the contrary the seers of the hermit had not only hard time to face, but they had to use very cautious language so as to offend the protagonists of the ritualistic cult and also to propagate successfully and re-crown the supremacy of the godhood. Symbolism has sparingly been imported in to the Āraṇyakas that too is confined to the use of symbolical language only which is deeply surcharged with mysticism.

Notes and references:

List of major books referred in addition to major Āraṇyakas

1. Wisdom in Indian tradition, Prof K.P Jog Felicitation Volume, Ed.
2. The Vedic origin of Karma, Herman W.Tull, Sri Sat guru Publications, New Delhi1990.
3. Vaidika Sāhitya Evam Samskrti, Dr.Kapildev Dwivedi, Viswavidyalayaprakāsan Varanasi, 2000
4. Mysticism in Upaniṣads, ed by Sādhu Śāntideva, Cosmos Publications, India. 2000.
5. Dharmasūtrīya Ācārasamhitā, Dr.Narendrakumar, Vidyanidhi Prakasan, New Delhi, 1999.
6. Outline of Indian Philosophy, M.Hiriyanna, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi 1997.