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The Vedic legend of Naciketas: A study

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Abstract

The Vedic legend of Naciketa is very well-known and it has a great spiritual significance and a metaphor of quest of immortality. The Rgveda, Taitriya Brāhmana and Kathaponisad constitute the genesis of the legend of Naciketas. In Mahābhārata and Varāhapurāna also we get the reflection of this legend. In our present attempt we want to make a study of R.V. (10/135) & K. Up and thereby try to discover a co-relation between two. While doing so we would take help of the general story-line of Naciketā available in Varāha-purāna.

Keyword: Vedic legend of naciketa, rgveda, taitriya brāhmana, kathaponisad

Introduction

The Rgveda (R.V., 10/135), Taitirīya Brāhmaṇa (T.B.3/8/11) and Kathaponisad (K.Up) constitute the genesis of the legend of Naciketas. In the 13th parva or the Anusāsana parva of the Mahābhārata (M.B.) and also in the section III or the Dharma-saṁhitābgāga of the Varāha-purāna (V.P.) we get the reflection of this legend. However, the afore-said Rgvedic hymn cannot be said for certain to be Naciketā legend, because such a name is not found there. The hymn has a reference to Kumāra and Yama. In R.V. 10/135/3&4; the name, Kumāra is in vocative and in R.V.10/135/5 it is in accusative. Since T.B. (3/8/11) and K.Up also uses the word ‘Kumāra’- “taṁ ha kumāraṁ santam”(K.Up, 1/1/2) we may say that the Rgvedic Kumāra may be Naciketā, commenting on R.V.,10/135 Sāyana also presents two interpretation - 1) Kumāra is Naciketas, the son of Vājaśravas and 2) he is an ṛṣi.

R.V does not give any hint of the parentage of Kumāra. T.B. (3/11/8/11) declares him as the son of Vājaśravas. In K.Up the clan of Naciketā is hinted in different places. Therefore, we accept the lineage to be- Gautam- Vājaśravas-Aruṇa- Uddālōka (i.e. Aruṇi) - Naciketas. M.B. (13/70/2) declares Naciketas as the son of Uddālōka. So also does V.P. (193/12-13). The Kathaponisadic Naciketā-legend has a great spiritual significance and is a metaphor of man’s incessant quest for immortality.

In our present attempt we want to make a study of R.V. (10/135) & K.Up and thereby try to discover a co-relation between two. While doing so we would take help of the general storyline of Naciketā available in Varāha-purāna.

There are many striking similarities between the Rgvedic sūkta and K.Up. In both the text we find Yama’s connection with the region of Gods. In the jurisdiction of the Tree of death Yama has eternal hobnobbing with the Gods- “Yasmin vṛkṣe supalāśe debaihsampivte yamaḥ” (R.V, 10/135/1). No doubt Yama has dwellings in a region lower than the Gods. But he has a constant communication with the higher souls in the higher regions- “yaṁ kumāra prāvartayo ratham viprebhyaspari.” (R.V., 10/135/4) The seventh mantrā of this sūkta clearly indicates that the habitat of Yama is made of divine fabrics- “i daṁ yamasya sādanaṁ devmanaṁ yaducyate.” (R.V., 10/135/7). In K.Up also Yama’s connection with the region of God is affirmed once and again. It is Yama who knows the secret sacrifice which fetches the kingdom of Gods to a man. Through that sacrifice one attains heaven and immortality. Therefore, Naciketā asks Yama for the knowledge of that secret sacrifice-

“sa tvamagniṁ svargamadhyeṣi mṛtyo
prabruhi taṁ śraddadhānāya mahyam” (K.Up., 1/1/13)

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Yama knows the mystery of life and death which is even not known to all Gods. Therefore, Gods are subservient to Yama - “devairatrāpi vicikitsitaṃ purāna hi suvijñeyamañureṣa dharmah.” (K.Up 1/1/21). From the divine connection and divine power of Yama it is proved that he is able of giving the heavenly things like divine, chariots, horses and those things which are normally not available to human beings-

“ye ye kāmā durlabhā marttyaloke
sarvān kāmān śchandataḥ prāthayasa/
imā rāmāhsarathāhsatūryā
na hīdṛśā iambhanīyā manuṣyaiḥ/” (K.Up., 1/1/25)

Yama has the secret knowledge about *Brahman* and he knows the secret spiritual path to know the Supreme Being, which proves his divinity. He knows- “taṃ durddarśaṃ gūḍhamanuprabiṣṭhaṃ guhahitaṃ gahvareṣṭhaṃ pūrānaṃ/ adhyātmāyogādhiḡamena debaṃ matvā dhīro harṣa-śokau gahāti/” (K.Up, 1/ 2/12). He teaches Naciketā that the secret of Brahma hood is ‘aum’ itself^[1]. Through the spiritual teachings that Yama gives are the proof for his being a high divinity. Thus on the score of divinity of Yama both *R.V.*, 10/135 and *K.Up* have parallel thinking. This can be a clue to think that the story of Naciketā in *K.Up* has its genesis in *Rgveda*.

Is Kumāra Naciketā

In the *Yamasūkta* of *Rgveda* (10/135) we find a Kumāra has been mentioned thrice (*R.V.*, 10/135/3, 4, 5). This Kumāra is approaching the death and is also coming back from the kingdom of death (*R.V.*, 10/135/2, 6). Kumāra’s approaching death and coming back from Yamaloka is actually elaborated in *K.Up*. Therefore, the Naciketā of *K.Up* may be this Kumāra of *R.V.* We also find references to Naciketā as Kumāra in two *mantras* of *K.Up*^[2]. In order to understand the Vedic Kumāra none but Naciketā we need to search there are similarities between the two texts on the point of death, immortality, soul, Supreme Being etc.

Tree; The Symbol of Death

In *Yamasūkta* (*R.V.* 10/135) we notice the description of a leafy tree where *pitṛs* live and where Yama rejoices with God with the pleasure of drinks. This tree is actually a symbol of death and is a dwelling place of departed souls^[3]. The dead men of the oldentimes are the indwellers of the kingdom of death. They are the souls that have no divine elevation because they have no exposure to the knowledge of the Supreme Being- “yasmin vṛkṣe supalāśe debaiḥ sampivate yamaḥ” (*R.V.*, 10/135/1). Death welcomes the departed souls with its mouth outstretched to the incomers. It has been hinted in the phrase it has hinted in the phrase- “purastād budhna ātata”- (*R.V.*, 10/135/6). Just as in the first and seventh *mantras* we notice reference to dwellings of Yama which has divine fabrics and this indicates the Death has a direct connection with the possibility of progress towards the divinity. The mystic indications in this said *mantra* may be more understood through *K, Up*.

In *K.Up* also we notice a secret relation between Death and divinity. One, who is able to know the truth about the soul he gets free from the mouth of the death- “anādyanantṃ mahataḥ

paraṃ dhruvaṃ nicāryya tanmṛtyumukhātpramucyate” (*K.Up*, 1/3/15). On the other hand one who finds the Supreme Being as many he does not know Him and jumps from one death to another – “mṛtyoḥ sa mṛtyumapnoti ya iha nāneva pśyati” (*K.Up* 2/1/10). The tree of the firs mantra of *R.V.*, (10/135) is almost referring to the *pitṛloka* which is also refer to in *K.Up*- “yathādarśe tathātmani yathā svapne tathā pitṛloke” (*K.Up* 2/3/5). So, we can say that *Yamasūkta* of *Rgveda* and *K.Up* deals with the same thinking about death and immortality.

The Allusion of Chariot

In the said-*sūkta* we find allusion to chariot as the body of the encaged souls. We can find the word ‘*ratha*’ in third, fourth and fifth *mantra* of this hymn. This chariot is nothing but a combination of body and mind. Such a Vedic allusion is expanded in *K.Up* - “ātmānaṃ rathinaṃ biddhi śrīraṃ rathameva tu/buddhantu sārathinṃ biddhi manaḥ pragrahavevaca/” (*K.Up*, 1/3/3).

Sāman: The Aum

In *R.V.*, (10/135) we see the reference to *sāman* by which Kumāra returns from the jurisdiction of Yama. The power of *sāman* brings back Kumāra from the death to the region of sages, who symbolises divinity, immortality and realizations. Therefore the *sāman* understood as having a special power in the *K.Up*. The *sāman* appears as the *Aum* - “sarve vedā yat padamānanti tapāṃsi sarvāṇi ca yad vadanti/ yadicchanto brahmacaryyaṃ caranti tatte padaṃ saṃgrahēṇ brabrūmi-omityetat/” (*K.Up* 1/2/15).

The Three Questions

In the fifth *mantra* of *Yamasūkta* we find three questions- 1) who gave birth to birth to Kumāra? 2) Who returned the chariot of the chariot of the Kumāra from death to the world of sages? 3) Who can say us how the return from death is possible?^[4] Here the birth of Kumāra as a soul cannot be affected by a human body that is why Naciketā as a soul is eternal. There is a reference to Yama who returned Naciketā to his human world. Thirdly the whole process of return was mysterious as it is done by the power of secret *sāman*. On the other hand we know that the *K.Up* relates to the three questions asked by Naciketā to Yama.

Character of Yama and Naciketā

Yama’s character in *R.V.*, 10/135 was as the king of Death who has olden souls in his possession. But he has friendship with God (*R.V.*, 10/135/1, 7). He creates anguish in individuals souls and is regarded as ‘*pāpaḥ*’ (*R.V.*, 10/135/2). In this hymn he is also described as a lover of music and is pleased with good poetry ((*R.V.*, 10/135/7). *K.Up* also describes him as a lover of music, beauty and wealth^[5].

On the other side Naciketā is just a Kumāra who at first is annoyed of going to death but then goes to Him^[6]. His luck by Yama who addresses him as child and gives him secret knowledge of spirituality^[7]. He is described here as a brave child who goes to Death and returns back. In *K.Up* Yamais also compassionate and respectful to Naciketā. We find intelligence of Naciketā who refuses to accept all mortal gifts.

Table 1: A Brief Word-study between Yamasūkta and K.Up

Yamasūkta		K.Up	
1.	Kumāra (R.V, 10/135/3,4,5)	1.	Kumāra (K.Up 1/1/2)
2.	Kaḥ svit (10/135/3)	2.	Kim svit (K.Up 1/1/5)
3.	Vipralokaḥ (viprebhyaḥ) (R.V, 10/135/4)	3.	Svargaloke (K.Up 1/1/18)
4.	Mṛtyuḥ pāyāmuyā (R.V, 10/135/2) bunda (R.V, 10/135/6)	4.	Mṛtyuḥ (mrtyapāśānpurataḥ) (K.Up 1/1/18) mṛtyuḥ (K.Up 1/1/5), mṛtyave (K.Up 1/1/4) janmamṛtyuḥ (K.Up 1/1/17)
5.	Ratham(rathamācakram, ratham, kumāramajanayadratha m) (R.V, 10/135/3,4,5)	5.	Ratham(śarīram rathameva tu) (K.Up 1/3/3)
6.	Purānām (R.V, 10/135/1,2)	6.	Purāno(K.Up 1/2/18)

Story of Naciketā in Varāpurāṇa

V.P also presents the story of Naciekṭā. But it gives more importance to description of the kingdom of death (Yamapurī). Although the *Yamasūkta of Rgveda* does not clearly hints about the lineage of Naciekṭā, but both *K.Up and V.P* inform us that he was the son of Uddāloka. V.P describes him as practitioner of Yago. This explains how he could go to the kingdom of death and to be back although a small child. However, yogic power of Naciekṭā has no Vedic or Upanisadic reference. Unlike *Yamasūkta and K. Up*, *V.P* describes that Yama was pleased with the prayer of Naciekṭā. So he offers a boon to the child. But Naciekṭā desired to know about Th goings in the kingdom of death. It is announced at the end of *K.Up* the sins of the listeners of this text are neutralised and they proceed to the parlance of *Brahman*. V.P also announced that the listeners of this story of Naciekṭā get rid of their sins.

Thus it seems that the *Yamasūkta* of *Rgveda* constitutes the seed of the story of Naciekṭā which is sprouted in the *K.Up* and has become a huge tree of a spiritual story in the *M.B. and V.P*.

References

1. Sarve vedā yat padamānanti tapāṃsi sarvāṇi ca yat vadanti/yadicchanto brahmcaryyaṃ caranti tatte padaṃsamgraheṇ brabr̥mi-omityetat (K.Up 1/2/15)
2. Yasmiin vṛkṣe supalāṣe debaiḥ sampivate yamaḥ/ atrā no viṣptiḥ pitā purānām anu venati (R.V, 10/135/1)
3. Kaḥ kumāramajanayadrathaṃ ko niravartayat/
4. Ye ye kāmā durlabhā marttyalke Sarbbān kāmān śchandataḥ prāthayasva/Imā rāmāḥ sarathaḥ satūryā Na hīdṛśā lamhānīyā manuṣyaiḥ// (K.Up., 1/1/25)
5. Purānām anuvenantam carantam pāpayāmuyā/ asūyannabhyacākaśam tasmā asṛghayam punaḥ// (R.V., 10/135/2)
6. Yaṃ kumāra prāvartayo ratham viprebhyaspari/taṃ sāmṃnu prāvartayo samito nāvyaḥhitam// (R.V., 10/135/4)