

*Īśvarōpāsanam*

**BY**

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In the Vedic culture, worshipping of *Īśvara* – *Īśvarōpāsana* – is very characteristic and unique, and probably slightly different from what we come across today in the Hindu society. Here, *Īśvara* is worshipped in a form, which is readily available for our perception as part of the Nature before us. For example, *Īśvara* is worshipped as the Fire. The *R̥g Vēda*, the foremost of the Vedas, starts with the invocation:

अग्निमीडे पुरोहितम् ।

*Agnimīdē purōhitam.*

I praise the glory of *Agni*, who is the foremost as a benefactor.

Here *Agni* is *Īśvara*. Aurobindo explained the word *Agni* as the Divine Will and Wisdom. In the Vedic culture, fire is universally taken as the symbol of *Īśvara*. We relate to, or worship *Īśvara* in the form of fire. Another such altar described in the *Vēdas* is the Sun. Vedic people regularly practise a particular mode of worship called *Sandhyā vandana*. It is the most well-known mode of worship in the Vedic culture even today.

*Vandana* is *upāsana* or worship. *Sandhyā* means the junction between the night and day when the Sun rises, or between day and night when the Sun sets. *Vaidikas* worship *Īśvara* at that time in the form of the Sun. They offer water (*arghya*) thrice to the rising and setting Sun, and then meditate upon *Īśvara* as the

presiding deity of the solar orb by reciting the famous *Gāyatrī mantra*.

*Gāyatrī* is the name of a meter. In the *Gītā* (10-35), *Bhagavān* says:

गायत्री च्छन्दसामहम् ।

*Gāyatrī cchandasāmaham.*

I am the meter *Gāyatrī* among the meters.

The meter *Gāyatrī* has three lines of eight syllables each. Thus, it has twenty four syllables in all. Every *mantra* describes the glory of a *dēvatā*. *Dēvatā* means a particular manifestation of That *Para Brahman* (or *Īśvara*). Thus, the recitation of a given *mantra* amounts to the worship of *Īśvara* in the manifestation of that particular *dēvatā*. The *dēvatā* of the *Gāyatrī mantra* is the Sun.

तत्सवितुर्वरेण्यं भर्गो देवस्य धीमहि । धियो यो नः  
प्रचोदयात् ॥

*Tatsaviturvarēṇyaṃ bhargō dēvasya dhīmahi,  
Dhiyō yō naḥ pracōdayāt.*

We meditate upon that supreme light (Awareness) of the Lord, who creates and nourishes this universe. That Lord alone illuminates and inspires our thoughts.

*Para Brahman* is essentially without any form or shape, because intrinsically it is not possible for the Supreme Reality to have a given form or shape. If Brahman were to have a given form, then It would become yet one more form subject to the limitations of time and space, and hence unreal. If *Īśvara* were to

have a given form, however exalted that form may be, it would be limited in space and time. Space and time are always together. Whatever is limited in space is necessarily limited in time. *Īśvara*, who is the originator of space and time, can not be really folded into space and time. Therefore, *Īśvara* is the attributeless infinite Awareness. *Bhargah* means that *caitanya*, Awareness. It is the origin of the *kriyā śakti* (energy, potential or expressed in the form of action) and *jñāna śakti* (the power of knowledge). This entire universe is nothing but a combination of *kriyā śakti* and *jñāna śakti*. All the matter comes under the category of *kriyā śakti* alone. *Bhargah*, the Awareness is the origin of these two. *Bhargah*, the *caitanya* which is *Para Brahman* is called *tat*, *tat bhargah*. *Tat* is *sarvanāma*, a pronoun. The word *sarvanāma* means the name of every thing. Everything is a manifestation of *Para Brahman*. Hence, the name of everything also represents the origin of every thing. Worship of the *Para Brahman* in a given altar is called *saguṇa (sākāra) upāsana*. *Saguṇa* means having attributes; *sākāra* means having a particular form. There is a problem in worshipping the *Para Brahman* in its attributeless formless nature. *Bhagavān* says in the *Gītā* (12-5):

क्लेशोऽधिकतरस्तेषामव्यक्तासक्तचेतसाम् ।  
अव्यक्ता हि गतिर्दुःखं देहवद्भिर्वाप्यते ॥

*Klēśo'dhikatarastēṣāmavyaktāsaktacētasām,*  
*Avyaktā hi gatirduḥkhaṃ dēhavadbhiravāpyatē.*

The affliction is greater still for those whose minds are committed to what cannot be objectified, because an end which cannot be objectified is reached with difficulty by those who are identified with the body.

For a limited being (*jīva*) rooted to the body, identified with the body, appreciation of formless attributeless *Para Brahman* straightaway is a very hard task, for the mind is accustomed to dwell upon names, attributes and forms. Therefore, *Bhagavān* advises that the devotees may start with the worship or meditation of the *saguna*. *Saguna* meditation is also called as *Apara Brahma upāsana*, in contrast to *Para Brahma jñāna* (knowledge of *Para Brahman*). So, to make meditation easy by taking to an altar of worship, *saguna sākāra* has to be superimposed on the attributeless *Para Brahman*. This idea is summarised in the statement:

न ते रूपं न चाकारो नायुधानि न चास्पदम् ।  
उपासकानां कार्यार्थं ब्रह्मणो रूपकल्पना ॥

*Na tē rūpaṃ na cākārō nāyudhāni na cāspadam,*  
*Upāsakānāṃ kāryārthaṃ brahmaṇō rūpakalpanā.*

O Lord, You do not have fixed attributes, or form. You do not really wield any weapons. There is no location for you. Yet, for the benefit of meditation upon You by the devotees, a particular form is superimposed on the attributeless *Brahman*.

Meditation on the *Saguna* helps the seeker to purify the mind and thereby gain a higher level of understanding of the *Para Brahman*.

In the *Gāyatrī* mantra, the Sun god is introduced as *Savitur devasya*. This word *Savitā* appears in the *Āditya Hṛdayam* also. *Īśvara* is called *Savitā* because he creates, protects and sustains the entire life in this universe. For this reason, the *Gāyatrī* mantra is also called *Sāvitrī*. With reference to meter it is *Gāyatrī*, and with reference to *devatā* it is *Sāvitrī*. There is one more point of interest in *Gāyatrī* in the context of *Śrīmadrāmāyaṇam*. If we divide this great epic of 24,000 verses into 24 units of 1000 verses each, then each unit starts with a successive syllable of *Gāyatrī*. This incorporation of *Gāyatrī* in the verses of *Śrīmadrāmāyaṇam* makes the latter particularly auspicious. Quite often people ask me a question: Swamiji, can women recite *Gāyatrī* mantra? I quote a verse from *Yama Smṛti* as the answer to that question.

पुरा कल्पे तु नारीणां मौञ्जीबन्धनमिष्यते ।  
अध्यापनं च वेदानां सावित्रीवचनं तथा ॥

*Purā kalpē tu nārīṇāṃ mauñjībāndhanamiṣyatē,  
Adhyāpanaṃ ca vēdānāṃ sāvitrīvacanaṃ tathā.*

In the earlier times, the investiture with the sacred thread, teaching of Vedas and recitation of the *Gāyatrī* was allowed (desired) for the women.

*Sītādēvī* was described by *Vālmiki* as performing the *sandhyā* meditation in the *aśoka* forest, where she was held captive by *Rāvaṇa*. One should relate to *Īśvara* every morning at the time of sunrise, irrespective of the situation in which one finds oneself, whether one is in prosperity or in adversity. This daily

worship called *sandhyā vandana* should not be dispensed with.

The Cosmic Person (*Īśvara*), who brought out this universe out of himself, is often called in the Vedic literature by the name *Hiraṇyagarbha* from the standpoint of the Universal Power and Omniscience. In the Puranic literature, *Īśvara* is referred to as *Viṣṇu* (one who pervades all) or as *Śiva* (the auspicious). That *Hiraṇyagarbha* is worshipped in the altar of the Sun, because, in this Solar system where we live, it is the Sun that is the source of all energy, all activities and all life. That *Īśvara*, who is manifest in the form of the Sun before us, is also present in us in the form of *Ātman*, the Awareness, thereby illuminating our thoughts, and making all varieties of knowing possible. If that Awareness were not to manifest, then there would have been no faculty of thinking. The power of thinking (*dhī śakti*) is the basis of human existence. A human being is nothing but his ideas and understanding (*buddhi*). The difference between a person in coma and a normal person is the power of thinking alone. In fact, all the metabolic processes such as regulation of body temperature, heartbeat etc go on even for a comatose person. The only difference is that his intellect is not functioning. That is also the reason why he is not moving or doing anything. We think that the *buddhi* is present inside the body. But that is wrong. The body exists in the *buddhi*, and that *buddhi* exists in *Ātman*, the Awareness, which is that *Para Brahman*. That Awareness (*caitanya*) manifesting in this body-mind-sense complex in the form of consciousness, inspiring the *buddhivṛtti*-s, is also present before us in the form

of the solar orb, the abode of *Hiraṇyagarbha*. That is the meaning of *Gāyatrī mantra* in a nutshell.

In *Rudrādhyāya* (1-7), Lord *Śiva* is presented as *Nīlakaṇṭha* (the one with a blue neck):

असौ योऽवसर्पति नीलग्रीवो विलोहितः ।

*Asau yō'vasarpati nīlagrīvō vilōhitaḥ.*

Lord *Śiva* is blue in the neck, but red in the rest of the body. That Lord is rising before us as the Sun.

There is a popular story in the *purāṇas*. When the ocean of milk was churned by the gods and the demons, what initially arose was the most virulent poison. On their request, Lord *Śiva* devoured it and held it in his throat without gulping it, imparting blue color to the neck. But, we may not cite a Puranic story to explain a Vedic usage, since it is the *purāṇa* that follows the *Vēda*, and not the other way round. The word *Nīlagrīva* can be understood differently from the point of view of the Cosmic Person. The words *nīla* and *lōhita* respectively refer to the blue and red colors of the sky. In fact, Lord *Śiva* is the Cosmic Person *Hiraṇyagarbha*, and the Sun is the *Adhibhūta* (the gross or the physical) or *Adhidaiva* (pertaining to the presiding deity) symbol of the Lord. This *mantra* is describing the rising Sun (*Asau yō'vasarpati*). At the time of sunrise and also sunset, the horizon is all red with patches of blue. That horizon is visualised as the neck of the Cosmic Person.

It is normally understood that *Īśvara* is known only to a select few called *ṛṣis*. Common people are not



