



RTA AND TAO : A STUDY

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Introduction

Nature was a vital source of inspiration for the Vedic seers. The religions and the philosophic conceptions, which they have developed, were the outcome of the observation of the various physical phenomena of nature. The beauty and sublimity of these phenomena inspired the feelings which found expression in the form of beautiful lyrics, addressed to gods and goddesses. In reality, they were deeply emotional descriptions of the various phenomena of nature.

Nature is the power underlying all the phenomena of the physical world as well as inner world- the power by which all objects of the world are regulated. For the term 'nature', the word 'prakṛti' has been used by the post Vedic philosophers and the literateurs in a conventional sense. But the Vedic seers used the term '*Rta*' to convey the sense of nature. This Vedic term '*Rta*' is appropriate for the totality of the physical phenomena as well as of the spiritual phenomena. This '*Rta*' is called as prakṛti or nature.

Meaning of Rta

The term *Rta* has variously been interpreted by the ancient as well as modern scholars.

1. The Nighantu reads the words '*Rtaw*'¹ and '*Rtasya yowh*'² as synonyms of water and the former as also the synonym of *sarya*³ i.e. truth.
2. Yaska in his Nirukta takes it to mean water and accordingly derives it from the root \sqrt{r} means 'to go'. Water is called *Rta* because it goes to all lands.⁴

¹ Nighantu, I.12.68

² Ibid, I.12.70

³ Ibid, III.10.6



3. All the Indian commentators such as Skandasvāmin, Udgītha, Venkata Mādhava, Mādhava Bhaṭṭa, Śrīyaṅga etc. have taken *ṛta* as to mean sacrifice or water or truth.⁵
Skandasvāmin says that though the term *ṛta* isn't read as a synonym of sacrifice in the Nighaṅṭu, yet in the vedic passages it has been frequently used in the sense of sacrifice (*yajña*).⁶
4. Among the modern scholars Roth defines *ṛta* as 'order'- order in nature, order in ritual, order in human life; in short, order everywhere.
5. According to Lüders, *ṛta* as truth appears as wonderful power subduing the spirits as well as material world.
6. Max Müller says that *ṛta* is a straight, direct or right line and in a mere general sense the law of nature.⁷
7. Oldenberg, Griffith etc. invariably take *ṛta* as to mean 'Cosmic Law' or Law Eternal.

Conception of *Ṛta*

The Rgvedic seers were conscious of the fact that *Ṛta* as nature is the primary cause of the universe. It produces and regulates the sky, the fire, the earth etc. It was born first in the beginning of the universe. In the Rgveda it is stated that from *tapas* were born *Ṛta* and *Satya* and *Rātri* and then the watery fluid.⁸

From the statement that *Ṛta* was born first, it is also implied that it is the most subtle wherefrom the gross or material world took its existence. Subtle regulates the material because it is omnipresent and omniscient. Due to its pervasiveness, all its different phenomena invariably observe its order. There is nothing in the universe which doesn't obey its order.

This conception of *Ṛta* is borne out by the utterances of the Rgvedic seers themselves. They frequently call that gods are the followers of *Ṛta*. They are described as born of *Ṛta*. Agni

⁴ *Ṛtam ityavakāśāna | pratyakṣe bhavati | Nirukta, II.25*

⁵ *Ṛtasādo 'pi yajñavedāna nākanāna vā | ... arāvaḥ Ṛtaḥ śi saṃyāna | R.V. I.2.8, Skandasvāmin
... saṃyāna | yajñe vadakṛya ṅraṃarāḥ | R.V. I.1.8, Mādhava
Uśāna saṃyāna yajñāna vā | R.V. I.70:4, Śrīyaṅga*

⁶ *Ṛtasādo āyapāhite 'pi bhūtyāna yajñāna dṛṣṭe | R.V. I.1.8, Skandasvāmin*

⁷ Max Müller: India. What can it teach us, Longmans Green and co., London, 1899, pg. 243

⁸ *Ṛtam ca saṃyāna cābhāḥkāṃpāna āhīyāyāna |*

Tāva nīrjāyāna tasyā āvāna arāna || R.V. X.190.1



is born of *Ṛta* (R.V. I.189.6); Sun is born of *Ṛta* (R.V. IV.40.5); Bṛhaspati is born of *Ṛta* (R.V. II.23.15); Maruts are born of *Ṛta* (R.V. III.54.13); Usas are born of *Ṛta* (R.V. I.113.12).

All the passages wherein gods are said to have been born from *Ṛta*, bear out the fact that gods are born of nature which is characterized as having a procreative power in itself.

Ṛta as nature includes all the things of the universe – the sun, moon, heaven, earth, air, cloud, the course of the sun, year, month, days and nights and so on. The sun rising upwards has been described as the pure and lovely face of *Ṛta* (R.V. VI.51.1). In another verse, the sun is described as shining in the seat of *Ṛta* (R.V. IV.5.9). The dawn like other luminaries starts her journey from a fixed point in this *Ṛta* (R.V. IV.51.8). She perfectly follows the path of *Ṛta* (R.V. V.80.4). The vast earth and heaven belong to *Ṛta* (R.V. IV.23.10). The names of the sun and Agni dwell in *Ṛta* (R.V. V.44.2). Various phenomena of nature are seen in their changing form in different seasons, which are mainly connected with *Ṛta*. Owing to this connection of seasons with *Ṛta*, the former is called *Ṛtas*. The year is the wheel of *Ṛta* with twelve spokes (R.V. I.164.11). In short, all things are the forms of *Ṛta*.

The concept of *Ṛta* as nature has been expressed by the seer Vāmadeva in three verses (8-10) of R.V. IV.28. According to Sarvajñatmamañi, *Ṛta* is the deity of these verses.⁹ In these verses, Sāyana takes *Ṛta* as to mean Indra or Āditya or truth or sacrifice.¹⁰ The verses are as following-

Ṛtarya hi śaradhaḥ santi pūrvṛtṛtasya dhātūrvejśūni hanta |
Ṛtarya śloka badhīrā tarada karṣā budhānah śacawāna āyoh ||¹¹

Ṛtasya dṛbhā dharuṇāni santi parūni candrā vapishī |
Ṛtasa dīrghamīṣaṇata pṛkṣha r̥tasa gāva r̥tasā vīveśuh ||¹²

Ṛtāḥ yewāna r̥tamiddhanotyatar̥ya śaṃmantar̥yā n̄ gavaȳh |
Ṛt̥ya p̥thvī bakule gabhīre r̥t̥ya dh̥vāḥ parame dūh̥te ||¹³

In the first stanza, it is said that many are the comforts of nature or *Ṛta*. It is nature which gives comforts to all. It gives water, heat, air and everything that a man requires for his

⁹ Kathoplit̥yāst̥ira Ṛtadevya vī | Sarvajñatmamañi, 22

¹⁰ Aṛa Ṛtābdenandro vīdītyo vī s̥t̥yāḥ vī yaj̥to voc̥yate | R.V. IV.23.8, Sāyana

¹¹ R.V. IV.23.8

¹² Ibid, 23.9

¹³ Ibid, 23.10



existence. If a man enjoys the things which have been granted to him by nature, he is called 'righteous'; but when he disobeys nature, he is 'unrighteous' and for this unrighteousness he is punished. A man whatsoever inattentive he may be, when hears the chirping of birds in the morning, doesn't remain unmoved. He at once gives his ear to the sounds coming through the sweet throat of the birds. In the figurative language of the Rgvedic poet it is called the workful and pure sound of nature that opens the deaf ears of man.

In the second stanza, it is said that the work of nature is firm-footed. Everybody knows that each action or each phenomenon of nature is regularly governed by certain principles and the principles which once governed will ever be governing. All beautiful things that attract the senses and fulfil the requirements, are forms of nature. It is nature which provides abundant food to every creature, animate or inanimate. The rays of the sun are said to have entered into nature by nature, that is to say, they are produced from nature and move in nature.

In the third stanza, it is said that one who controls nature, wins nature. This is the principle of modern science that nature can yield much, when it is controlled. For example, light which is a function of nature, when controlled, works on the accord of man; but when uncontrolled it follows the order of nature. The power of nature is very swift. It gives all things that are desired. It is said that the vast and deep earth and heaven belong to nature. Here earth and heaven are *apalaksaya*. They indicate all things in the universe between earth and heaven. Whatever we receive from any object between earth and heaven, we receive from nature. Here heaven and earth are called two milch-kine.

The word *Rta*, originally being expressive of a subtle sense of the term, was so ambiguous that it developed various senses. In the first stage, *Rta* was used as a term conveying the sense of nature. It is derived from √*r* 'to go'. Every phenomenon of nature is characterized as moving constantly. For example, the sun, moon, stars, year, seasons, day and night and so on, are moving constantly. They have been moving from time eternal and will be moving up to eternity. This constant movement without rest was the main reason why the Rgvedic seers called it *Rta*.



In the Rgveda, flowing waters and rivers are called *R̥d̥vartī*.¹⁴ *Usās* is called *R̥d̥vartī*.¹⁵ *R̥d̥vartī* doesn't mean 'full of waters' or 'holy one' or 'truthful'. It only means one who moves constantly. This constant movement in the realm of nature yielded a new sense to the word *R̥tā*. The movement which nature undergoes, is not irregular. Thus, in the second stage *R̥tā* conveyed the sense of regularity or order. Under this sense, *R̥tā* is said to have ruled all the universe. All gods are said to have followed this eternal law of nature. The epithets *R̥tāpā* and *R̥tājñā* mean the protector of eternal law and the knower of eternal law respectively.

The regularity, found in the realm of nature, happened to be found in the worship of gods at the sacrifices. Gods were requested to attend the sacrifices regularly; oblations were offered to them in fire regularly and sacrificial fees were given to the priests regularly. Besides, many other regulations were observed in the sacrifices. That is why sacrifice is called as being conducted by *R̥tā* i.e. eternal law. And not only this, but the name *R̥tā* was given to the sacrifice itself.

Another reason of *R̥tā* as being called sacrifice was this that a symbolical sacrifice was also being performed in the nature itself and of that symbolic sacrifice in nature, the spring season was clarified butter (*ghṛta*), the summer was fuel (*idhāna*) and the autumn season was the oblation (*havīṣ*).¹⁶ The primordial self (*paraśa*) was the sacrificial animal to be sacrificed in that sacrifice.¹⁷

In the sacrifices some rules of morality i.e. *Vratā* or vow were strictly and necessarily observed by the priests as well as the sacrifice. Thus, the word *R̥tā* then conveyed the sense of morality and righteousness and its opposite sense was being conveyed by the word *Anṛtā*. The word *anṛtā* is used in classical Sanskrit in the sense of lie or false or untruth. Hence *R̥tā* as being opposite of *anṛtā* began to be used in the sense of truth (*satya*). But fundamentally, there is difference between *R̥tā* as truth and *satya* as truth.

¹⁴ *Rasadhvān ne vacare saṁyāya R̥d̥vartīr̥pā suh̥t̥amavāṣī* | R.V. III.33.5
Sī no v̥h̥t̥ā aś d̥v̥gāḥ svap̥r̥vāy̥ R̥d̥vartī | *am̥n̥ak̥ena s̥t̥yāḥ* | R.V. VI.61.9

¹⁵ *R̥d̥vartī d̥ivo ar̥k̥at̥r̥v̥d̥h̥y̥ r̥v̥at̥ r̥v̥at̥ c̥tr̥am̥v̥t̥āḥ* | R.V. III.61.6
An̥ap̥r̥v̥āy̥ ś̥b̥h̥t̥ak̥y̥c̥t̥r̥v̥t̥āḥ | R.V. VIII.73.16

¹⁶ *T̥ap̥r̥v̥āy̥a h̥av̥ṣī d̥ev̥ y̥j̥ñam̥av̥at̥ā* |
Vas̥to ay̥ś̥t̥āḥ̥j̥y̥at̥ gr̥īṣo id̥h̥v̥āḥ ś̥r̥ad̥h̥v̥āḥ | R.V. X.90.6

¹⁷ *S̥ap̥r̥v̥āy̥as̥ p̥ar̥id̥h̥v̥āy̥as̥p̥ā s̥an̥id̥h̥v̥āḥ̥j̥y̥at̥* |
D̥ev̥ y̥aj̥ñāḥ̥ s̥av̥d̥āḥ̥ ś̥b̥h̥v̥āḥ̥ p̥ar̥v̥āḥ̥ p̥āḥ̥v̥ā | R.V. X.90.15



In the Rgveda, Varuṇa is closely related to *ṛsa*. In the later and post-vedic literature, Varuṇa has been regarded as the presiding deity of the waters. This led the commentators and the authors of the Nighantu and the Nirukta to think that *ṛsa* is water. In this way, the concept of *ṛsa* has been explained lucidly in the Vedas.

Now the concept of *Tao* is going to be discussed.

Taoism and Meaning of Tao

Different Chinese philosophers, since 6th century B.C, presented some major ideas and a way of life that are now-a-days known under the name of Taoism. Taoism is the way of correspondence between man and the tendency or the course of natural world.¹⁸

The concept of *Tao* has long since fascinated the Chinese mind. Etymologically speaking, *Tao* is composed of two elements – the one signifying a head and the other signifying the act of running or walking along. Together they signify a path or a way for a person or something to run upon or to go along and on which to lead his sights. Used as a verb, the word *Tao* means 'to direct', 'to guide' and something 'to say', 'to tell' or 'to be hold of'.

Lao Tzu, an eminent Chinese philosopher or sage, has pushed the meaning of *Tao* to its most speculative level. Thereby the concept of *Tao* became neither the way followed by something or some person, nor a way out of social, political and spiritual crises, but the Way itself, the Ultimate Reality or the Being of beings.

Lao Tzu, the legendary author of the *Tao Te Ching*, was the first to provide a comprehensive treatment of *Tao*. The religion based on the concept of *Tao* is known as Taoism. Lao Tzu taught that "He who follows that *Tao* is one with the *Tao*" and "Being at one with the *Tao* is eternal. Though the body dies, the *Tao* will never pass away".¹⁹

Understanding Tao

The universe (Earth) as a whole reveals a high level of complex, order, creativity and or organization. The beauty of the unspoilt regions of the world: the harmonious complexity of the

¹⁸ Alan Watts, *Tao: The Watercourse Way*

¹⁹ *Tao Te Ching*, verses-16 & 23



natural ecosystems have a just so quality, an integrated wholeness that the ancient Chinese called *Tao*. *Tao* is the way of heaven, a way of natural harmony; of truth, beauty and justice. Lao Tzu contrasts this Great Way with the way of human beings –

*"The Tao of heaven is to take from those who have too much and give to those who don't have enough. Man's way is different. He takes from those who don't have enough to give to those who already have too much."*²⁰

Lao Tzu characterizes the Way of Man as one in which force is applied without the attainment of desire results –

*"Whenever you advise a ruler in the way of Tao, counsel him not to use force to conquer the universe. For this would only cause resistance. Thorn bushes spring up whenever the army has passed. Lean years follow in the wake of war. Just do what needs to be done. Never take advantage of power. Force is followed by loss of strength. This is not the way of Tao. That which goes against the Tao comes to an early end."*²¹

All mankind's troubles on the Earth are caused by his having forgotten the Great Way. Remembering the Great Way or *Tao* is a spiritual awareness of one's deep connection with the entirety of creation. This involves the adoption of a mode of 'non-action' that isn't inaction but rather a harmonization of one's personal will – otherwise tending towards egoism –with the natural harmony and justice of *Tao*.

*"Tao abides in non-action yet nothing is left undone. If kings and lords observed this, the ten thousand things would develop naturally... Without form there is no desire. Without desire there is tranquility. And in this way all things would be at peace."*²²

*"The greatest virtue is to follow Tao and Tao alone. The Tao is elusive and intangible... This essence is very real and therein lies faith. From the very beginning till now its name has never been forgotten. Thus I perceive the creation. How do I know the ways of creation? Because of this."*²³

Lao Tzu sought to account for the origins of the 'ten thousand things' and their manner of growth and development.

"All things arise from Tao. They are nourished by virtue. They are formed from matter. They are shaped by environment. Thus the ten thousand things all respect Tao and honour virtue. Respect of Tao and honour of virtue are not demanded. But they are in the nature of

²⁰ Tao Te Ching, verse-77 (Trans. by Gia Fu Feng)

²¹ *Ibid*, verse-30

²² *Ibid*, verse-37

²³ *Ibid*, verse-21



*things... Creating without claiming; doing without taking credit; guiding without interfering, this is Primal Virtue.*²⁴

*"The great Tao flows both to the left and to the right. The ten thousand things depend upon it; it holds nothing back. It fulfils its purpose silently and makes no claim... The ten thousand things return to it, yet it is not their lord. It is very great. I don't show its greatness, And is therefore truly great."*²⁵

*"Yield and overcome; bend and be straight; empty and be full; wear out and be new; have little and gain; have much and be confused. Therefore wise men embrace the one and set an example to all... Therefore the ancients say – 'yield and overcome'. Is that an empty saying? Be really whole and all things will come to you."*²⁶

Characteristics of Tao

Tao is basically indefinable. It has to be experienced. It refers to a power which envelops, surrounds and flows through all things, living and non-living. The *Tao* regulates natural processes and nourishes balance in the universe. It embodies the harmony of opposites (i.e. there would be no love without hate, no light without dark, no male without female).

There is a flow in the universe and it is called *Tao*. *Tao* flows slowly; however, it is never stagnant and is incredibly powerful and keeps things in the universe balanced and in order. It manifests itself through change of seasons, cycle of life, shifts of power, time and so forth. *Tao* has a strong and deep connection with cosmology and the natural world. *Tao* is the law of nature.

When one follows *Tao*, he becomes one with it. And it is the best to also understand '*Qi*', because *Qi* and *Tao* go hand in hand. *Qi* is breath, vapour and energy. Because *Qi* is the energy that circulates the universe, it can be said that *Tao* is ultimately a flow of *Qi*.

The concept of *Tao* is based upon the understanding that the only constant in the universe is change²⁷ and that we must understand and be in harmony with this change. The change is a constant flow from non-being into being, potential into actual, yin into yang, female into male. The symbol of the *Tao*, called the *Taijitu*, is the *Yin-Yang* confluent flowing into itself in a circle.

²⁴ *Ibid*, verse-51

²⁵ *Ibid*, verse-34

²⁶ *Ibid*, verse-22

²⁷ *I Ching*, Book of changes



The Tao is the main theme discussed in the *Tao Te Ching*, an eminent Chinese scripture attributed to Lao Tzu. This book doesn't specifically define what actually *Tao* is, but it depicts its nature.

*The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao;
The name that can be named is not the eternal name.
The nameless is the beginning of heaven and earth.
The named is the mother of ten thousand things.
Ever desireless, one can see the mystery.
Ever desiring, one can see the manifestations.
These two spring from the same source but differ in name;
This appears as darkness.
Darkness within darkness.
The gate to all mystery.²⁸*

This book points to some characteristics of what could be understood as being the Tao. Below are some excerpts from the book-

- Tao as the origin of things :

"Tao begets one; One begets two; Two begets three; Three begets myriad creatures."²⁹

- Tao as an inexhaustible nothingness :

*"The Way is like an empty vessel.
That yet may be drawn from
Without ever needing to be filled."³⁰*

- Tao is omnipotent and infallible :

*"What Tao plants can't be plucked,
What Tao clasps can't slip."³¹*

Thus, the Tao is described beautifully in the Chinese texts.

²⁸ Tao Te Ching. Trans.by Gia-Fu Feng & Jane English

²⁹ Tao Te Ching, verse-42

³⁰ Ibid, verse-4

³¹ Ibid, verse-54



Conclusion

From the above discussions, it may be concluded that nature or prakṛti or ʒta as described in the Vedic scriptures, is the natural or universal law that governs the whole universe. Similarly in Taoism, it is *Tao* which regulates the whole universe by its immanent powers. Now-a-days scientists' view is that Nature, through its inherent natural powers, controls the universe and universe is moving in a stable and systematic way. Prakṛti or Nature is nothing but the five elements viz. water, wind, fire, earth and ether. Or we can say in modern terms, it is the matter or energy. Energy is the ultimate reality and truth. Energy is changing to form numerous identities which are seen in this material world; but in its true essence, it is indivisible and invisible. So, in Vedic age, it was stated as ʒta for natural governing forces or powers or elements; and in Taoist culture, it remained as *Tao* for the same. Finally, we may state that *Tao* symbolizes Energy and ʒta represents the elements of matter which are also nothing but the manifestations of that same Energy.

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