The Purusha Suktam

The Vedic Hymn on the Supreme Being

Origin of the Purusha Suktam

Hindu religious sources are classified as the ‘srutis’ or the ‘smritis’. The sruti is that which is heard, is of the nature of a divine revelation. We believe that the Vedic hymns composed by seers and sages beginning as best as we can date them to 3000 BC, were sung under divine inspiration, ‘heard’ by the sages from the divine. Smriti is that which is remembered, and includes a large part of the commentary of the Vedas, different Puranas, epics, and other sources. The Purusha Suktam is one of the Pancha Suktams of the Sri Vaishnava sampradaya or tradition. The other four are the Narayana Suktam, Sri Suktam, Bhu Suktam, and the Nila Suktam.

The Purusha Suktam is seen earliest in the Rig Veda, as the 90th suktam of its 10th mandalam, with 16 mantrams. Later, it is seen in the Vajasaneyi Samhita of the Shukla Yajur Veda, the Taittiriya Aranyaka of the Krishna Yajur Veda, the Sama Veda, and the Atharvana Veda, with some modifications and redactions. The Purusha Suktam is seen in all Vedas and Veda Vyasa in the Mahabharata cites it as the essence of all srutis. Saunaka, Apastamba, and Bodhayana have also written concerning the use of the Purusha Suktam.

The central theme of the Purusha Suktam

The Purusha in the title of the Purusha Suktam refers to the Parama Purusha, the Purushottama, and the Narayana, in his form as the Viratath Purusha. He was the source of all creation. It describes this form of his, as having countless heads, eyes, manifested everywhere, beyond any comprehension. All creation is but a fourth part of Him. The rest is un-manifested. In a way, this is a message of love, that the Purusha would consume himself (like mother) in the fire of creation, to create all the worlds. From this sacrifice, all of the creation emanates. This is central to the message of the Purusha Suktam.

1. The word ‘Purusha’ in its most literal sense means man. This is not a generic term for humans, but includes the masculine sense and principle of the world. In one way, it is interpreted that Narayana alone is Purusha, and all the rest of Prakriti, the creation, is feminine. Purusha may also be split as pura + usha -- the dawn-light (usha) of the city of the body (pura). Or Pu + rusha, one whose passions are refined, or even puru + sha, filled with wisdom and happiness. Which purusha is referred to here?

Man - is a simple answer, with some merit for its arguments. Man was created first, and he is a creature that knows not its own glory, and he is sacrificed for the rest of creation -- a humbling thought for us. However, theistic and mystic sources tend to interpret purusha as Parama Purusha, the Supreme Purusha, the Purushottama, the best among purushas, the Sriman Narayana. He is the source and the basis of all creation. He manifests himself in all of it. All creation is his body -- the Vishvaroopam mahakaaya. He encompasses it. So why does this Purusha have thousands of feet, hands, eyes? One must remember that large numbers, like a thousand, can refer to a fuzzy ‘uncountable’. Saayanhaachaarya interprets this as the Purusha manifesting himself in all that lives. And since all was created from his body, as we shall see, all heads are his heads, all eyes his eyes, and all feet are his feet.

And then we see that the Purusha extends beyond ten fingers. Rather limited that seems -- until we read Saayunanha again. The ten fingers here are the digits, the ten fingers of human hands. They are the basis of count, of all mathematics, of all the logic and science built on mathematics. However, they are all limited when it comes to analyzing purusha. He is transcendent, and beyond such limited understanding.

2. Purusha is creation, this we know. In time, he is all that is, all that was, and all that is to be. Does he have an end, like death? No. He is Lord of immortality, of the eternal that dies not (a-mrita). Creation feeds on itself. It requires food to grow, to flourish. What is food but other life? Life feeds on life, be it plant, or animal life. This is why we say the world grows on food, the world is full of food (annamayam jagat). All that is hidden in creation, and all that emerges, to show it and be food, all this is purusha. He sustains creation as food.

3. This world of name and form (naama-roopa-bheda- jagat) is but one part of Purusha. Sat (truth), Chit (being) and Ananda (bliss) are the other three parts that rest in the Narayana alone, and are eternal in Him. As Sri Krishna says in the Gita (10-42), mayy’eka amsena sthito jagat -- By a fraction of my yogic powers alone I sustain this world. And he is the one whose sport is this world, which sports without distinction of name or
form, (Roopa naama vibhedena jagat kreedati yo yatha). Ranganatha muni comments on the greatness of the Purusha - who looms above all creation. He is filled with grace and all joy, knowledge, and goodness. He is eternal, and the basis of all. The world's sustenance is but his sport. His joy is himself, as he is all. That besides, even the Vedas wonder about his greatness. He alone knows -- or may be he knows not.

4. The way ‘yad annenaatirohati’ and ‘sa asana anasane abhi vyakramat’ are interpreted is a point of some discussion. Peterson, Renou, and Le Mee, who give simply ‘man’ for Purusha, interpret these as ‘man, who grows by food’, ‘a part of man was made into all things that eat and eat not, and advanced towards these/as these, outwards’. Saayanhaa's interpretation, as given above is preferable. Not only is the importance of food stressed, two verses before, but now Purusha is also that which eats not, life and non-life. This is in conformity with the Visistadvaita view of Brahman manifest as Chit and Chit, the living and the inert.

5. From Purusha came forth the universe. The creative aspect of his, Brahma, came forth, and grew to include everything in him. This is why the universe is called ˝brahmaanda˝, the egg/sphere of Brahma. ‘Bramhaanda’ is also an adjective indicating magnitude. This image of extending above and on all sides of the earth is in concordance with Ranganatha muni. What did this Brahma do after he was born? Saayanhaa gives the following interpretation. He grows very large after being born (sa jato atyaricyata). And then (pashchaad) he (sa) creates the earth (bloomim) and then (atah), (purah) -- cities -- bodies for creatures to live in. ‘Viraat vyaktriko deva-tiryag-manushyaadi roopo bhoot’. He became large and became the bodies, or gave form to devas, animals (tiryak) and humans.

There is support for the former view from the saakalya brahmanha, however. In this work, Aniruddha Narayana, one of the four aspects of Narayana in the first tier of the Vishaka Yupa, appears to Brahma. This Brahma, engorged with growth as it were, is inactive, he does nothing. Aniruddha asks him the reason for his inactivity ‘Brahman kim tooshnheem bhavasi - iti’ and Brahma replies, ‘Because of not knowing’ – ‘ajnaanaat - iti hovaacha’. However, Brahma has to create. This is his nature. So to remove his ignorance, Aniruddha Narayana instructs him to perform srishthi yajna, the sacrifice of creation.

In the brahmanha, this is termed kaanchana yajna, the rite of gold. ‘Brahman shriyartham kaanchana yajnam kuru’. By this means will you be able to create the worlds, as you have done in kalpaks past. The rest of Aniruddha Narayana's instructions and the details of the srishthi yajna are given in the verses to come.

What sort of yajna is this srishthi yajna? Nothing exists but Brahma-purusha, who envelops all. Logically, none of the ritual paraphernalia, the materiel, exist. It does make consistent sense, to us, to look at this as an actual rite of ‘sacrifice, where the gods sacrificed a giant to create the world’, as this has sometimes been described. This was in a comparative work that compared the Purusha Suktam to the Norse tale of how the Aesir made the world from the body of Ymir, the frost-giant.

6. The srishthi yajna was Purusha's alone. He was havirbhokta, he who enjoys/eats the havis -- burnt offerings to the fire. His senses were the devas, the gods, who were the ritvik-priests of this sacrifice. Nothing but him existed to sacrifice. And so he sacrificed himself (purushenha havisha) as the offering into the creative fires of his heart. A sacrifice of his self, to himself, for what or who existed but he? So the devas bound Brahma as the beast of sacrifice, and made ready for the rite.

Clarified butter, or ghee, is what is poured on the fire to make it burn brighter. The fire of course, is an essential part of any sacrifice. Fire is what speeds between heaven and earth carrying the food of sacrificial havis offerings to the gods. Spring brightens creation as the ghee brightens fire. Samit (palaash or flame of the forest) twigs are fed to the fire, to make it hotter -- these samit brands are summer. Autumn with its brilliant hues was offered into the fire as havis.

7. The yaagaagni, the sacred fire of the sacrifice, is invoked on a vedi, or altar, that is always sheathed, or fenced. Saayanhaa gives us this: ‘aishtika’syaavaahavan’eeyasya trayah paridayah uttara vedikaastrayah Aadityaacha saptamah paridhi pratinidhi roopah’. Three fences are in the uttaravedi part, three in the aavaahaneeya, and Aditya is the seventh sheath, or fence.

Nothing had been created at this point. So what were the paridi-s? The seven chandas, or metres, Gaayatri, trishhup, brihatee, panty, ushnhuk, anushhup, and jagatee may be the seven here. The maitraayanhi Upanishad suggests prthvi (earth), apah (water), tejas (fire), vaayu (air), Akaasha (space), ahankaara (ego), and buddhi (intellect) as these seven. The five elements or panchabhootas among these, (prthvi, apah, tejas, vaayu, Akaasha), along with the five subtle principles or tanmaatras, the five active senses or karmendriyas, the five
discerning senses or jnaanendriyas, combined with antahkaranham, darkening, are said to be the twenty one samit firebrands.

8. Here is the Purusha himself bound as the beast of sacrifice. This beast has to be sanctificed, on a sacred bed of straw, with holy water. The word barhis indicates this straw. According to the Yogaratna, viraat (the all), barhis and prakriti are synonyms. In this sense, all of nature is the stage for this sacrifice, and Purusha the sacrifice to be offered. He was firstborn and foremost of creation. The word saadhyaah according to Ranganatha muni includes all devas, rishis, suras, and dwellers of Vaikuntha. However, in other places, it has been interpreted to mean something like an analogue to ‘bodhisattva’ -- those who have the potential of freedom from time, but have not yet actually achieved it. In that sense that saadhyaam indicates possibility of achievement

9. There is no holding back in the srishthi yajna; it is ‘sarva-hut’, the offering of all. At yajnas, what is called by sources like Renou and LeMee as ‘the clotted fat’ or ‘the oil of the sacrifice’, curds mixed with ghee (clarified butter) was collected. Ranganatha muni is of the opinion that for this yajna, the prishadaajyam was ‘potency’ of wondrous hue (praanhi janana hetu-bhoootam vichitra varnham jagat kaaranka hetu bhootham veeryam prishadaajyam bhavati) --- appearing as a means by which animals might be born, of wondrous hue, a potency that appeared as a means of the cause of the world --- this was the prishadaajyam, the seed of all creation. The exact synonym of semen, retas, is not mentioned, but in this case we may safely assume this is what is meant. With this did Brahma create the birds, and wild and tame animals.

10. Saayanha gives this derivation for sarvahuth ‘sarvaatmaka purusho yasmin yajne hooyate so ayam sarvahutah’ -- that yajna in which Purusha, the soul of all, is offered as sacrifice, that rite is sarvahut. Of the Vedas, the Rig concerns itself with recited hymns, in praise of nature and its deities, such as Agni, Indra, the Adityas, the Maruts, and so on. The Saama chants are those of song, the basis of music. Yajus, the Veda of the adhvaryu priests, is that of the methods, and formulae for the rite. Along with these comes forth Chandas, the metre or rhythm of hymning.

11. The most common interpretation to be seen for ‘ye ke cho-ubhayaadatah©© is all animals with two rows of teeth. However, as for animals with one row of teeth, one cannot think of any except whales with their baleen. Someone with a better knowledge of zoological orthodontia may be able to help us here. All the animals specifically mentioned here, presumably had been tamed, and were counted as wealth in Rig Vedic society. Thus, horses, beasts, cattle, sheep and goats, all were created.

12. This verse begins a series of questions and answers as to how the purusha was divided up, and what each of the parts of his body (kosha roopa - the form that contained all) became, in the sarvahut rite of creation. Aniruddha Narayana had advised Bramha that to make his body the havis, Aniruddha the havirbhokta, and meditating on Narayana, merge himself, offer himself up to Narayana's form of fire. (Maam cha havirbhuhujam dhyaatvaa manmanaabhootva mayyagnau nivaachaye) And by just feeling the touch (mad anga sparsha maatrenha) of his, Bramha's body in which all of the worlds are contained (jagat-kosha bhootas-tvt-kaayo) would become huge (brmhishyate) and become the bramhanda, the great all. The different classes of animals that came forth from this (tasmaat udbhootaani praanhi jaataani), Bramha would be able to establish for them different and appropriate forms (yathaa puram nirmaaya) and assume the role of creator (srashthaa bhavishyasi) that he had in previous eons.

These samskrit quotes are from the P.S. samhita of the saakalya braamhanham, referred to before. Like most braamhanha verses, this ends with ‘evam srishthi yagnyam yo jaanaati sa janmaneeha mukto bhavati’ - Who knows the rite of creation thus, will be liberated in this very birth.

So now the details of this 'ritual dismemberment' of the purusha's body, the bramhaanda, are given in the next few verses as an account of this creation rite.

13. Any commentary on this has, to say the least, significant possibilities of spinning out of control as a discussion on the role and system of the varnha-jaati system. I think it best to let the verse speak for itself, as a record of the world-view of its time, and let thinkers draw their own conclusions. We may recall the Bhagavad Geetha verse (IV-13) ‘Chaturvarnhyam maya sristam’ by Srimaan Veda Vyasa here as a fulcrum for any debate.

14. The natural phenomena mentioned in this verse are synonymous with their deities, who govern them. This sort of 'double' reference is common throughout the Rig Veda, especially in hymns addressed to various
deities that also contain some breathtaking images of nature and are beautiful poetry. The Purusha is the source of these deities too. Saayanyaacharya says "yathaa dadhi-Aajya-Aadi-dravyaanhi gaavadayah - Chandra-Adayo devah api tasmaat iva utpanna ityaaah "Just as essences like yogurt and ghee come forth from undifferentiated, but essential milk, different in nature, yet identical in source, similarly did the Gods, like Chandra, come forth from the Purusha. He is indeed the basis of all things. Praanha is just one of the breaths recognized by the vedic people. Aapaana, vyaaana, samaana, and udaana are some of the others.

15. This verse is the conclusion of the details of the establishment of the worlds by the devas, and the saadhyas. Some texts mention the verse "saptasyaan paridhayah (07)" after this. This is common in most Rigsangrahas. The last verse of the PS redaction in these texts (eg. Le Mee, Chanana) is 'yagnyena yagnyam.' which curiously, is found elsewhere in the Rigveda. However, the next three verse of the southern redaction are pregnant with meaning, and relevant to our inquiry.

16. This verse is probably closest to the Sri Sampradaya visualization of Sriman Narayana, as creator and maintainer of all, (refer back to 'namo bhagavate tasmai krishhaya aadbhuta karmanhe roopa naama vibhedena jagat kreedati yo yatah"), full of kalyaanha gunhas such as mahimaa, brilliant as the sun, and beyond all darkness. What is the advantage of knowing this then? This is explained in later verses. Also, in Saayanya's commentary is 'mantradrashtaa svakeeyam dhyaaanaubhavam prakatayati'. This mantra is how to visualize him for meditation, and thus to know him. Compare this to Vishvamitra in the Ramayana ‘Aham vedami mahaatmaanam Raamam satya-paraakramam / Vasishto api mahaatejo ye cheme tapasi shhitah’ - I know the great soul Rama, of deeds beyond measure, powerful in truth, more brilliant than Vasishta, who protected my yagnya well. Or Mandodari's praise of Rama as Mahavishnu in the same, 'tamahas paramo dhaataa shankachakra gadaadara’ - O Creator, who bears the Conch, the Disk, and the Mace as weapons, who is Supreme above all darkness. The metaphorical image of the sun here is especially effective, as the tamas referred to here is the darkness of the soul, ignorance and inactivity.

17. In the beginning, Brahma said to the Purusha, ‘you are who was before me. You are my guide in this’, naming him the cause of himself, and all. Indra learnt of the glory of the Parama Purusha from vaamadeva, and from the four directions – Ranganatha muni.

The object of almost all Vedic rites was to make life, or death, a as little less dangerous as possible (see, eg. Wendy Doniger-O'Flaherty). The refrain of the mantras for these rites is 'Who knows this conquers death'. Even the stories in several brahanhas involve seers 'seeing and praising with this hymn or metre, and thereby conquering death'. It is interesting to note that the goal is not life eternal (chiranjeevitva) but a-mrita, or not dying. This is a matter of the soul rather than the body, a difference worth appreciating.

The Purusha is manifested by the chanting of this mantra, to those who chant this, in their heart. This is the beginning - of the world, of contemplation of the worlds, of knowledge. In this knowledge, in knowing this by the heart, by the soul, is the beginning of liberation. To know of no other way but this reflects mahaavishvaasa - great faith. This, 'naanyah panthaah vidhyate ayanaayaa' refrain is also found in several upanishadas.

18. Here then is the importance of the sacrifice. The two words yaaga and tyaaga are both related, and may be translated as the one word, sacrifice, giving us a clue to the nature of the rite. The world is established by sacrifice - the Purusha giving his all, which is his self, his body, to form this world, the lives on it, giving them name and form. Why did this happen? The naasadiya sookta relates, when neither being nor non-being was (na sat aaseet, na asat aaseet), the One breathed, without air. But then, ‘kaamastadagre samavartataati’ - desire first moved it, the desire to be. And in it’s being the world is. This One, we call Purusha, Sriman Narayana, and God. And this is Sat - Existence, along with Knowledge and Bliss, part of the nature of the divine. So the next time someone tells you St. Augustine was the first to define God as the verb "to be", you can refute them with this!).

All that is, is born of this love, this desire. And all was given (sarvahut) to bring this about. This is the nature of this being. This is the sacrifice, whose results were the beginning of all. This is why the verse says ‘taani dharmamaani prathamamaani aasan’ - these dharmas became the first. They are the fruits of the sacrifice that provide us the means to our own liberation, our very own stairway to heaven.
Sri Purusha Suktam dviteeya anuvaaakam

1. The waters of destruction are again the waters of creation, and from them does the earth reveal itself after pralhaya. From these elemental materials is the universe formed, and into these it dissolves. Ashes to ashes, and dust to dust. Tvashthaa was the smith who forges Indra's vajra, thunderbolt, from the bones of the rishi Dadeechi. Vishvakarma is the divine architect who planned and built, among other cities, Kubera's Alakaapuri and also Lanka, and Indra's city.

2. This is a re-working of shlokas 16 and 17 in the first lesson, or prathama anuvaaaka.

3. We must go to Saayanha for commentary on this rather obtuse verse. What is this womb prajaapati resides in? 'Bramhaanda roope garbhe antah madhye prajaapatir vigrahavaan bhootva charati'. Viraat, the shining universe, the female principle that Purusha gave birth to, which in turn gave birth to Purusha who has now been formed into the Bramhaanda, and is compared to a womb, in which prajaapati, lord of his subjects, Purusha manifested as a fertility deity invoked in weddings etc., resides. Purusha does not need to be born to manifest himself as all. That process begins before he appears from, in and as Viraat. He encompasses Satyam, Gnyaanam, and Anantam - truth, knowledge, and infinity. Since he gives birth to all, he is yoni, the mouth of the womb. His form is a yoni, from which all is born. 'Tasya prajaapater yonim jagatkaarharoopam vaastavam svaroopam'. Who knows this? 'Dheera dhairyavantaa yogenad jitendriyaa mahaatmaano jaananti' - the brave, the courageous, those who have made their senses steadfast in yoga, those great ones know this truth. Such is the compulsion of this truth that even the srishtikartaas of this world, those that purusha has manifested himself as in order to create, desire nothing but to worship him as 'tam eva upaasya mareechenaam mareechy'atri-pramukhaanaam' - the sage Mareechi, and sages led by Mareechi, atri (among the seven rishis) - as these sages do.

4. Purusha was, 'hiranhyagarbhah samavartataaagre' - before the golden shining womb of all, Viraat, was established. He is first of all the Gods, their priest, their guide to immortality, and the essence of their divinity. Verily is he worthy of our salutations. This is one answer to the question "kasmai devaaya havitaa vidhema?" - Which God shall we worship by our offerings?

5. The Gods taste (experience) of Brahman. This "rucham braamham" is yet another food metaphor for the joining, or the union of the seeker and the sought. Even as he who eats food tastes it, so shall you taste Brahma, and enjoy him. The Gods are in the Brahma- Vidyaa-Sampradaaya, and they are our teachers, our gurus too. They declare this in the beginning, as a sort of 'phalasthuti', or list of fruits of knowing the Purusha thus. - Who, with heart steadfast on the Purusha knows him thus, him even we will serve. Compare the Taittiriya Upanishad, that talks about he who knows Brahman - 'sarve asmai devaa balim-aaharanti' - All the Gods bring him offerings.

6. Hree is the Goddess that grants Modesty, and Lakshmi she who grants Wealth. (Hreer-lajjaabhimaaninee devata, Lakshmeer Eishvaryaabhimaaninee devataa - iti Saayanha) The Day and the Night are even such opposites. Sriman Narayana is the conciliation of all such opposites, even as Sesh, the snake, and Garuda, the eagle, worshipping him together signifies. He is brilliant as the stars, and healing comes from him.

Asking him to grant as ishtham, amum, sarvam, is an analogue to asking for Sat, Ananda, and Chit. All we ask is to know Him.

Concluding Invocation

The Purusha Sooktam closes, as it began, with that unique and wonderful invocation to peace. In peace all begins, and in peace all ends. All we work for is to ensure peace prevails and flourishes.

Tat Tvam Asi