

PART ONE

BRAHMANISM

Prehistoric Period

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| B.C. | c.2700-1700 | Indus Valley civilization and height of Harappa Culture. |
| | c.1500-1200 | Aryan invasions of the Indian subcontinent; composition of the earliest hymns of the <i>Rig Veda</i> . |

Vedic Period

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| | c.1200-900 | Composition of the <i>Rig Veda</i> . |
| | c.900 | The great war depicted in the <i>Mahābhārata</i> epic. |
| | c.900-500 | Period of later Vedas, Brāhmanas, and early Upanishads. |
| | c.800 | Aryans reach eastern Bihar and Bengal. |
| | c.600 | End of Brāhmana period. |

INTRODUCTION

Brahmanism, while not necessarily representing the most ancient religion of the Indian subcontinent, is that system of belief and ritual practice to which Indians have, historically, looked back as the source of their religious traditions. Whether in later Hinduism, which tenaciously holds to much of the Brahmanical tradition, or in Buddhism, which rejects much of it, there is presupposed this highly conscious and articulate cult, the central feature of a way of life made known through the ages by the earliest body of formal literature, the Veda.

As seen today, the earliest religious thought in India is known or deduced from archaeological evidence, such as seals, figurines, tablets, and other artifacts, belonging to a pre-Aryan civilization which existed in the valley of the Indus River during the latter part of the third millennium B.C. The only conclusions which may be drawn with any certainty, however, from materials associated with the culture uncovered at the site of Harappa, are a preoccupation with fertility symbols (e.g., terra-cotta figurines of pregnant females, stone phallic symbols, and the like) and the worship of a divinity similar to the god Shiva, the ascetic par excellence of historic Hinduism, who is frequently associated with a bull and is also often represented by a phallic symbol. Besides representations of fertility symbols, which imply the existence of a Mother or Earth Goddess cult, and the divinity reminiscent of Shiva, the Indus civilization also seemed to attach religious significance to certain animals, such as the tiger, buffalo, crocodile, elephant, and even multiheaded monsters and hybrid creatures, as well as trees and auspicious symbols, such as the swastika. Some seals point to religious motifs found in Mesopotamia, such as the Gilgamesh legend, the ibex, trefoil designs, and others, and suggest a possible origin of religious ideas even earlier than the datable artifacts of the Indus Valley civilization. Though it is difficult to establish a definite continuity in the development of religious ideas in India dating from the Indus civilization to modern times, it is, however, possible to

distinguish a clearly non-Aryan—which may or may not be pre-Aryan—source for many of the concepts which characterize that religion which is known as “Hinduism” in India today.

A second, and perhaps somewhat more significant, source of Indian religious ideas was introduced by the Aryans who invaded India from the northwest about 1500 B.C., or earlier, and who may themselves have been responsible for the destruction of the Indus civilization. These Aryan invaders brought with them religious concepts consisting mainly of a pantheon of naturalistic or functional gods, a ritualistic cult involving the sacrificial use of fire and an exhilarating drink called *soma*, as well as the rudiments of a social order. To a certain extent their religion derived from primitive Indo-European times; that is to say, some of the gods mentioned in the scriptures of these people are found to have mythological counterparts in other Indo-European traditions, particularly those of Iran, Greece, and Rome, and thus indicate a common origin of such gods in antiquity. In addition to such specifically Indo-European concepts, the religion of the Aryans involved other ideas which may have developed in the course of their eastward migrations or may have resulted from the assimilation of indigenous religious notions encountered in the Indian subcontinent itself. From a sociological standpoint, the religion introduced by the Aryan invaders was limited to persons of Aryan birth, though some non-Aryan beliefs seem to have been accepted in a modified form or at least tolerated by the priesthood of the conquering Aryans.

The religion thus developed by the Aryans from the time of their invasion of India until roughly 500 B.C. was embodied in a collection of hymns, ritual texts, and philosophical treatises, called the *Veda*. From Aryan times down to the present, Hindus have regarded the Veda as a body of eternal and revealed scripture. Its final authority is accepted to some extent by all Hindus as embodying the essential truths of Hinduism. The earliest portion of the Veda consists of four metrical hymns, known as *Samhitās*, being the *Rig Veda*, *Yajur Veda*, *Sāma Veda*, and *Atharva Veda*. The earliest of these texts is that of the *Rig Veda*, and it is this collection of hymns (*rc*) which constitutes the earliest source of knowledge concerning the Aryan religion. The most recent of these canonical collections is the *Atharva Veda*, which is somewhat more representative of the popular religion of Vedic times than are the other Vedas, which are more sacerdotal in character. The metrical hymns and chants of these texts gave

rise to elaborate ritualistic prose interpretations called *Brāhmanas* and *Āraṇyaka*s (“forest books”). Toward the end of the Vedic period, the earlier emphasis on ritual was translated symbolically. Thus, Vedic ideas of sacrifice and mythology were reinterpreted in terms of the macrocosm and microcosm. Cosmological inquiries of some of the later hymns of the *Rig Veda* were extended and an investigation of the human soul was undertaken. The speculations and interpretations along these lines were formulated by various philosophical schools in treatises collectively called *Upanishads*. Thus, the whole of Vedic literature consists of four Vedas or *Samhitās*, several expository ritual texts attached to each of these Vedas called *Brāhmanas*, and speculative treatises, or *Upanishads*, concerned chiefly with a mystical interpretation of the Vedic ritual and its relation to man and the universe.

Although the relationship between the various deities of the *Rig Veda* is not always clear, and different deities—often personifications of natural forces—may each in turn be regarded as the supreme god, nevertheless Indra (often referred to as *eka deva* “One God”) stands out as pre-eminent and the core myth of the *Rig Veda* recounts his deeds. In terms of this central myth, creation proceeded when Indra, the champion of the celestial gods, slew a serpent demon, Vritra, who enclosed the waters and the sun requisite for human life. When Indra split open the belly of this demon the essentials of creation—moisture, heat, light—were released and cosmic order (*rita*) was established under the administration of the god Varuna. Gods and men then had specific functions (*vrata*) to perform in accordance with this cosmic order. After death those individuals who had fulfilled their obligations under the cosmic order went to a heavenly realm presided over by Yama, the first mortal. Two mythical dogs guarded the righteous on the path to this region, but the sinful were fettered and, unprotected, fell prey to various demons.

Cult practices developed an elaborate ritual based on a fire sacrifice, personified as the god Agni, and included various oblations of clarified butter and the production of the soma juice, deified as the god Soma, from an unidentified plant known also from Iranian sources. This ritual naturally necessitated a highly specialized priesthood. Just as the crackling of the sacrificial fire was viewed as the voice of Agni, the priest par excellence, so, too, great significance was attached to the chanting of hymns and invocations by the human priesthood. Later the sacrifice itself

was viewed cosmologically and the correct performance of the sacrifice possessed a magical potency which could coerce even the gods. This magical power inherent in the sacrificial prayers thus developed into spells, called *brāhman*. He who recited them was a "pray-er" (*brahmán*), or one related to prayer (*brāhmaṇa*). From this concept developed the *brāhman*, or priestly, caste.

The spiritualization of prayer (*brahman*) and its relation to the gods and the universe through ritual sacrifice constitute the central conception of this early phase of Indian religious thought. When the Upanishads coupled this notion with an investigation of the individual self (*ātman*)—an idea closely allied to the earlier personification and deification of "Wind" or "Air" (*Vāyu*) and referring to human "breath"—the *brahman* came to be viewed, as a universal principle. Thus, an essential feature of Vedic ritual, the "prayer" itself, was given cosmological and cosmogonic implications and became the principal subject of later Indian philosophical inquiry. It is on the basis of these ritualistic Vedic concepts that the earliest definable religious thought of India is identified as Brahmanism.



CHAPTER I

THE COSMIC ORDER IN
THE VEDIC HYMNS

Long before they entered into India the Vedic Aryans must have started producing prayers and songs (*mantras*) relating to their religion. The character of this religion was determined by the kind of life they had been living. At that early stage of their cultural history, the Vedic Aryans lived close to nature—as a part of it, rather than apart from it. It was, therefore, the vastness and brilliance of nature, its blessings and maledictions; and, above all, the inexorable and subtly operating law which regulated all its manifestations, that dominated their religious ideology. The earliest hymns of the Vedic Aryans, accordingly, pertained to this cosmic religion, to which they gave expression through such mythological concepts as those of the divine parents, Heaven and Earth, the cosmic law (*rita*), and the sustainer of that law, Varuna. Side by side with this cosmic religion, the Vedic Aryans had also developed a kind of fire worship. The cosmic religion of the Vedic Aryans tended toward anthropomorphism, but it was not idolatrous. Fire was, therefore, regarded as the liaison between gods and men.

Sun worship, which also figures prominently in the Veda, is, in a sense, just an aspect of fire worship; but it has greatly influenced many mythological concepts in the Veda with the result that divinities like Vishnu, who had originally little to do with the solar phenomenon, came to be regarded as sun-gods at some stage in the evolution of their character.

In the course of time there occurred a change in the conditions of life of the Vedic Aryans and consequently in their religious ideology. They set out toward India on campaigns of conquest and colonization, fought on their way a series of battles with several antagonistic tribes, whom they collectively called Dāsas, and finally emerged as victorious colonizers of that part of India which was known as the land of seven rivers, the

present Punjab. In this epoch-making warlike enterprise the Vedic Aryans were apparently led by their heroic leader, Indra, whom they soon made into a god. Gradually history came to be transformed into mythology. In this process several elements were derived from an ancient primitive myth of the Hero and the Dragon. And later the Vedic Aryan war-god came to be invested with a cosmic character. This hero-religion eventually dominated the hymns produced by the Vedic poets, priests, and warriors.

Perhaps with a view to counteracting the growing influence of a mythology glorifying military prowess, the Vedic poets and priests deified the magical potency of their prayers and priestcraft in the forms of Brahmanaspati (Lord of Prayer), who is in some respects modeled after Indra, and Vāch, the goddess of Speech or Holy Word. He embodies prayer (*brahman*) itself, as well as ritual activity in general. Moreover, in the person of Brahmanaspati ritual and cosmological aspects are blended. He is often associated with Agni, the sacrifice personified, on the one hand, and Indra, the later cosmogonic principal (*tad ekam*), on the other. Thus the hymns dedicated to this god represent the emergence of prayer (*brahman*) as an extremely significant concept in early Vedic thought. It is not at all surprising then that the importance of ritual in Vedic religion should give rise to the central conception of later Vedic philosophical speculation regarding the true nature of the cosmological concept *brahman* and its relation to the human self.

Like many other primitive communities, the Vedic Aryans believed that the creation of the universe and the procreation of the human race were the result of a primeval sacrifice, namely of the self-immolation of a cosmic being. This cosmic being is represented in the Veda as the male, Pūruṣa. Apart from this concept of the primeval cosmic sacrifice as the starting point of creation, there are represented in the Veda other significant currents of cosmogonic thought. According to one of them the source of all powers and existences, divine as well as earthly, was conceived as the "golden germ" (*hiranyagarbha*)—a form assumed by an unnamed Ur-god. This "golden germ" is the precursor of the universal egg (*brahmāṇḍa*) of the later cosmogony. Another cosmogonic theory is far more profound. It seeks to controvert the view that the world has evolved out of "nonbeing" (*asat*). At the same time this theory asserts that the source of this world can-

not be, strictly speaking, characterized as "being" (*sat*). In the beginning there was neither "nonbeing" nor "being," nevertheless That One (*tad ekam*) breathed, though breathless, through its own inherent power. Besides it nothing existed. This idea may suggest the mythological creation of the world by Indra, the One God (*eka deva*), who destroyed the cosmic demon Vritra. Finally, in the *Atharva Veda* both "being" and "nonbeing" have *brahman* as their source.)

Side by side with the ritual, eschatology, mythology, and cosmogony of the upper classes among the Vedic Aryans there had also existed a religion of the non-Aryan subject peoples. This religion comprised a variety of charms, imprecations, and exorcistic practices which were primarily intended "to appease, to bless, and to curse." The motif recurring throughout this religion was, of course, magic.

Agni

The discovery of fire constitutes a significant landmark in the history of human civilization and it is not unnatural that fire should have been held in great awe from early times. The Aryans, however, developed the worship of Agni or Fire to an extraordinary degree.

The god Agni is the personification and deification especially of the sacrificial fire. He is the priest of the gods and the god of the priests. In the *Rig Veda* he is second only to Indra in prominence. (He has three forms: terrestrial as fire, atmospheric as lightning, and celestial as the sun.) Thus, his function as the sacrificial fire of the priests serves as a kind of liaison between man and the heavenly gods—specifically he carries the oblations which the brāhman priests pour into the fire to the gods. The correct propitiation of Agni in the Vedic ritual was thus of considerable importance to Aryan man.

[From *Rig Veda*, 1.1]

I extol Agni, the household priest, the divine minister of the sacrifice, the chief priest, the bestower of blessings.

May that Agni, who is to be extolled by ancient and modern seers, conduct the gods here.

Through Agni may one gain day by day wealth and welfare which is glorious and replete with heroic sons.

O Agni, the sacrifice and ritual which you encompass on every side, that indeed goes to the gods.

May Agni, the chief priest, who possesses the insight of a sage, who

is truthful, widely renowned, and divine, come here with the gods.

O Agni, O Angiras ["messenger"], whatever prosperity you bring to the pious is indeed in accordance with your true function.

O Agni, illuminator of darkness, day by day we approach you with holy thought bringing homage to you,

Presiding at ritual functions, the brightly shining custodian of the cosmic order (rita), thriving in your own realm.

O Agni, be easy of access to us as a father to his son. Join us for our wellbeing.

Heaven and Earth

As the divine parents, Heaven and Earth are symbolic of the vastness, brightness, and bounty of nature. The myth of their conjugal union dates from primitive Indo-European times and probably represents the earliest Vedic conception of creation based on an indissoluble connection of the two worlds, celestial and terrestrial.

Note the constant emphasis in these prayers on the hope of obtaining material rewards.

[From *Rig Veda*, 6.70]

Rich in ghee [i.e., clarified butter considered as fertilizing rain], exceedingly glorious among beings, wide, broad, honey-dispensing, with beautiful forms, Heaven and Earth are, in accordance with Varuna's cosmic law (dharma), held asunder, both ageless and rich in seed.

Nonexhausting, many-streamed, full of milk, and of pure ordinance, the two dispense ghee for the pious one. You two, O Heaven and Earth, ruling over this creation, pour down for us the seed [rain] which is wholesome to mankind.

The mortal, who, for the sake of a straightforward course of life, has offered sacrifice unto you, O Heaven and Earth, O Sacrificial Bowls, he succeeds; he is reborn through his progeny in accordance with the cosmic law. Your poured semen becomes beings of manifold forms, each fulfilling his own function.

With ghee are covered Heaven and Earth, glorious in ghee, mingled with ghee, growing in ghee. Wide and broad, these two have precedence at the time of the selection of officiating priests. The wise ones invoke these two with a view to asking them for blessings.

May Heaven and Earth, honey-dropping, honey-dispensing, with hon-

eyed courses, shower down honey for us, bringing unto the gods sacrifice and wealth, and for us great glory, reward, and heroic strength.

May Heaven and Earth swell our nourishment, the two who are father and mother, all-knowing, doing wondrous work. Communicative and wholesome unto all, may Heaven and Earth bring unto us gain, reward, and riches.

Varuna

Varuna is the administrator of the cosmic law (rita, dharma), which regulates all activities in this world, big and small. It is he, for instance, who has spread out the earth and set the sun in motion, and who pours out the rain but sees to it that the one ocean is not filled to overflowing by many rivers. He is, therefore, rightly called the world-sovereign. Naturally enough, this upholder of cosmic order is also regarded as the lord of human morality. It is the function of Varuna to ensure that there occurs no transgression of the law, cosmic or human.

[From *Rig Veda*, 5.85]

Unto the sovereign lord sing a sublime and solemn prayer (*brahman*), one dear unto glorious Varuna, who has spread out the earth, as the butcher does the hide, by way of a carpet for the sun.

Varuna has extended the air above the trees; he has put strength in horses, milk in cows, will-power in hearts, fire in waters, the sun in the heaven, and soma upon the mountain.

Varuna poured out the leather-bag, opening downward, upon the heaven and the earth and the mid-region. Thereby does the lord of the whole creation moisten thoroughly the expanse of earth, as rain does the corn.

He moistens the broad earth and the heaven. When Varuna would have it milked [i.e., would shower rain] then, indeed, do the mountains clothe themselves with clouds and the heroes, showing off their might, loosen those clothes [i.e., disperse the clouds].

This great magic-work (*māyā*) of renowned spiritual Varuna will I proclaim loudly; of Varuna, who, standing in the mid-region, has measured the earth with the sun as with a measuring rod.

No one, indeed, dare impugn this great magic-work of the wisest god, namely, that the many glistening streams, pouring forth, do not fill up one ocean with water.

If we, O Varuna, have offended against a friend, befriended through Aryaman or through Mitra [i.e., gods of hospitality and friendship], or if we have offended against an all-time comrade or a brother or an inmate—whether belonging to us, O Varuna, or a stranger—do you remove that offense from us.

If we have deceived, like gamblers in a game of dice, and whether we really know it or not, all that do you unbind from us, like loosened fetters, O god. Thus may we be dear unto you, O Varuna.

Dawn

In hymns such as this we find most movingly expressed the profound awe and sensitivity to the beauties of nature which underlie much of Vedic mythology. Here, however, there is less of the tendency to personify and deify natural forces which is so prominent a feature of Vedic religious thought, than a majestic description of the actual dawn itself in metaphorical language, giving us an insight into the cosmic harmony of man and nature. While later Indian philosophies often viewed nature and the visible world as in some sense evil or unreal, this loving appreciation of nature is characteristic not only of the more optimistic, life-affirming attitude of the Vedas but also of an important strain in Indian literature from the early epics and plays of Kālidāsa down to the modern works of Rabindranath Tagore.

We have chosen the excellent metrical translation of Professor Macdonell which suggests the stately rhythm and cumulative power of the original.

[From A. A. Macdonell, *Hymns from the Rigveda*, p. 38, hymn 1.113]

This light has come, of all the lights the fairest:
The brilliant brightness has been born effulgent.
Urged onward for god Savitar's uprising,
Night now has yielded up her place to morning.

Bringing a radiant calf she comes resplendent:
To her the Black One has given up her mansions.
Akin, immortal, following each other,
Morning and Night fare on, exchanging colors.

The sisters' pathway is the same, unending:
Taught by the gods alternately they tread it.
Fair-shaped, of form diverse, yet single-minded,
Morning and Night clash not, nor do they tarry.

Bright leader of glad sounds she shines effulgent:
Widely she has unclosed for us her portals.
Pervading all the world she shows us riches:
Dawn has awakened every living creature.

Men lying on the ground she wakes to action:
Some rise to seek enjoyment of great riches,
Some, seeing little, to behold the distant:
Dawn has awakened every living creature.

One for dominion, and for fame another;
Another is aroused for winning greatness;
Another seeks the goal of varied nurture:
Dawn has awakened every living creature.

Daughter of Heaven, she has appeared before us,
A maiden shining in resplendent raiment.
Thou sovereign lady of all earthly treasure,
Auspicious Dawn, shine here today upon us. . . .

Indra

Indra is the most prominent divinity in the *Rig Veda*. He is an atmospheric god often identified with thunder and wielding a weapon, called *vajra* ("thunder-bolt"). As such he destroys the demons of drought and darkness and heralds the approach of the rain so vital to life in India. In the Veda, the most significant myth which recounts his deeds centers about his slaying of the demon Vritra, who encloses the waters (i.e., the rains) and the sun, and who is the very embodiment of cosmic chaos. Historically considered, this myth may represent the conquest of India by the Aryans inspired by a warrior-champion, Indra. From a mythological standpoint, the destruction of Vritra and the subsequent release of the essentials of life—water, heat, light—may be allegorically regarded as an early cosmogonic theory.

[From *Rig Veda*, 1.32]

Indra's heroic deeds, indeed, will I proclaim, the first ones which the wielder of the vajra accomplished. He killed the dragon, released the waters, and split open the sides of the mountains.

He killed the dragon lying spread out on the mountain; for him Tvashtar fashioned the roaring vajra. Like bellowing cows, the waters, gliding, have gone down straightway to the ocean.

Showing off his virile power he chose soma; ¹ from the three *kadrukas* ² he drank of the extracted soma. The bounteous god took up the missile, the vajra; he killed the first-born among the dragons.

When you, O Indra, killed the first-born among the dragons and further overpowered the wily tricks (*māyā*) of the tricksters, bringing forth, at that very moment, the sun, the heaven, and the dawn—since then, indeed, have you not come across another enemy.

Indra killed Vritra, the greater enemy, the shoulderless one, with his mighty and fatal weapon, the vajra. Like branches of a tree lopped off with an axe, the dragon lies prostrate upon the earth.

For, like an incapable fighter, in an intoxicated state, he [Vritra] had challenged the great hero [Indra], the mighty overwhelper, the drinker of soma to the dregs. He did not surmount the onslaught of his fatal weapon. Indra's enemy, broken [-nosed], ³ was completely crushed.

Footless and handleless he gave battle to Indra. He [Indra] struck him with the vajra upon the back. The castrated bull, seeking to become a compeer of the virile bull, Vritra lay shattered in many places.

Over him, who lay in that manner like a shattered reed ⁴ flowed the waters for the sake of man. ⁵ At the feet of the very waters, which Vritra had [once] enclosed with his might, the dragon [now] lay [prostrate].

Vritra's mother had her vital energy ebbing out; Indra had hurled his fatal weapon at her. The mother lay above, the son below; Dānu ⁶ lay down like a cow with her calf.

In the midst of the water-streams, which never stood still nor had any resting place, the body lay. The waters flow in all directions over Vritra's secret place; Indra's enemy lay sunk in long darkness.

With the Dāsa as their lord ⁷ and with the dragon as their warder, the waters remained imprisoned, like cows held by the Pani. ⁸ Having killed

¹ Presumably the juice of soma was originally used for ritualistic purposes only. In view of the peculiar strength-giving, entrancing properties of the drink, however, the war-lord Indra later used it to inspirit himself for his heroic deeds.

² *Kadrukas* are traditionally explained as the three days in a six-day soma-sacrifice. Perhaps the word originally meant the three wooden bowls from which soma was drunk.

³ Or, the breaker of chariots.

⁴ Or, bull.

⁵ Manu. The exact meaning is unclear.

⁶ Vritra's mother.

⁷ Literally "having the demon as their lord" (*dāsapatnīs*). After Indra's victory over the demon, the waters became *arya-patnīs* (*Rig Veda*, 10.43.8), that is, "having the Aryans as their lord." Apart from its mythological significance, this fact may have an historical basis in the conflict of the Aryan invaders with indigenous tribal people.

⁸ That is, the leader of the Panis, a gypsy-like, nomadic, trading people, who stole the cows belonging to the Aryans.

Vritra, [Indra] threw open the cleft of waters which had been closed. ⁹ You became the hair of a horse's tail, O Indra, when he [Vritra] struck at your sharp-pointed vajra—the one god (*eka deva*) though you were. You won the cows, O brave one, you won soma; you released the seven rivers, so that they should flow.

¹⁰ Neither did lightning nor thunder, nor mist nor hailstorm, which he [Vritra] had spread out, prove efficacious when Indra and the dragon fought. And the bounteous god remained victorious for all time to come.

Whom did you see, O Indra, as the avenger of the dragon, that fear entered into your heart, after you had killed the dragon, and frightened, you crossed nine and ninety rivers and the aerial regions like the falcon? ⁹

¹⁰ Indra, who wields the vajra in his hand, is the lord of what moves and what remains rested, of what is peaceful and what is horned. ¹⁰ He alone rules over the tribes as their king; he encloses them as does a rim the spokes.

The Primeval Sacrifice

The origin of the universe from a primeval sacrifice, in which a cosmic being offers himself as an oblation, is not unknown in primitive mythological traditions. However, the sacrifice of the male Purusha here is not so much the primordial sacrifice of a world-giant or the type *Ur-mensch* found in Norse or Germanic mythology, as it is a cosmogonic idea based on ritual sacrifice itself as the origin of the universe. Thus, the nature of the Purusha is a secondary blend of characteristics derived from the Vedic deities Agni, the sacrifice personified and the typical male principle; Sūrya, the sun; and Vishnu, another solar deity who embraces earth, atmosphere, and sky. Emphasized here is the universality of Purusha and his function as the cosmic sacrifice. In this way the ritual sacrifice performed on earth by a priestly class eventually was translated into terms of cosmological significance by a process identifying microcosmic, with macrocosmic, elements.

This hymn makes the earliest reference to the four social orders, later known as castes. The passage is important in that it emphasizes the magico-ritualistic origin of castes. The *brāhmins* formed the highest social order, the literate intelligentsia which gave India its priests, thinkers, law-givers, judges, and ministers of state. The *rājanyas*, later called kshatriyas or rulers, were the

⁹ Does this refer to some temporary setback which Indra suffered in his battles with the Dāsas?

¹⁰ And, therefore, aggressive.

second social order, the Indian counterpart of feudal nobility: from this class were recruited kings, vassals, and warriors. The *vaishyas* formed the class of landowners, merchants, and moneylenders, while the *shūdras*, originally those peoples conquered by the Aryans, were workers, artisans, or serfs.

[From *Rig Veda*, 10.90]

Thousand-headed *Purusha*, thousand-eyed, thousand-footed—he, having pervaded the earth on all sides, still extends ten fingers beyond it.

Purusha alone is all this—whatever has been and whatever is going to be. Further, he is the lord of immortality and also of what grows on account of food.

Such is his greatness; greater, indeed, than this is *Purusha*. All creatures constitute but one quarter of him, his three quarters are the immortal in the heaven.

With his three quarters did *Purusha* rise up; one quarter of him again remains here. With it did he variously spread out on all sides over what eats and what eats not.

From him was *Virāj*¹¹ born, from *Virāj* the evolved *Purusha*. He, being born, projected himself behind the earth as also before it.

When the gods performed the sacrifice with *Purusha* as the oblation, then the spring was its clarified butter, the summer the sacrificial fuel, and the autumn the oblation.

The sacrificial victim, namely, *Purusha*, born at the very beginning, they sprinkled with sacred water upon the sacrificial grass. With him as oblation the gods performed the sacrifice, and also the *Sādhyas* [a class of semidivine beings] and the *rishis* [ancient seers].

From that wholly offered sacrificial oblation were born the verses [*ṛc*] and the sacred chants; from it were born the meters (*chandas*); the sacrificial formula was born from it.¹²

From it horses were born and also those animals who have double rows [i.e., upper and lower] of teeth; cows were born from it, from it were born goats and sheep.

When they divided *Purusha*, in how many different portions did they arrange him? What became of his mouth, what of his two arms? What were his two thighs and his two feet called?

¹¹ The precise meaning of *Virāj* is uncertain. Here it seems to represent a kind of cosmic source—perhaps the waters themselves—from which creation proceeds.

¹² The verses (*ṛc*), the sacred chants (*sāma*), and the sacrificial formula (*yajus*) may refer to the three Vedas.

(His mouth became the *brāhman*; his two arms were made into the *rājanya*; his two thighs the *vaishyas*; from his two feet the *shūdra* was born.

The moon was born from the mind, from the eye the sun was born; from the mouth *Indra* and *Agni*, from the breath (*prāna*) the wind (*vāyu*) was born.

From the navel was the atmosphere created, from the head the heaven issued forth; from the two feet was born the earth and the quarters (the cardinal directions) from the ear. Thus did they fashion the worlds.)

Seven were the enclosing sticks in this sacrifice, thrice seven were the fire-sticks made, when the gods, performing the sacrifice, bound down *Purusha*, the sacrificial victim.

With this sacrificial oblation did the gods offer the sacrifice. These were the first norms (*dharma*) of sacrifice.¹³ These greatnesses reached to the sky wherein live the ancient *Sādhyas* and gods.

The Origin of the World

In the early *Indra* creation myth, the demon *Vritra* had to be slain before creation could proceed. *Indra* as the personal demiurge brought order out of chaos (*asat*); that is to say, he brought about the *existent* (*sat*) from the nonexistent (*asat*). In later Vedic cosmogonic speculation, the personal creator, *Indra* as the One God (*eka deva*) is conceived of as an impersonal creative impulse called *That One* (*tad ekam*). When the question arises (vs. 1) as to "what enclosed all," the answer is no longer *Vritra* according to the old myth, but rather that creation proceeds from a principle motivated by desire outside, or over and beyond, "being" and "non-being." In terms of this new cosmological interpretation of creation, only the sages were able to fathom in their hearts the relation of "being" and "nonbeing." The hymn ends on a note of skepticism, which anticipates the questioning mood of the *Upanishads*—"he who is the highest overseer in heaven, he certainly knows, on the other hand, perhaps he does not."

[From *Rig Veda*, 10.129]

Neither not-being nor being was there at that time; there was no air-filled space nor was there the sky which is beyond it. What enveloped all? And where? Under whose protection? What was the unfathomable deep water?

¹³ The later sacrifices are modeled after the primeval cosmic sacrifice and are believed to be actually furthering the purpose of that sacrifice by ensuring the proper organization and functioning of the world and human society.

Neither was death there, nor even immortality at that time; there was no distinguishing mark of day and night. That One breathed without wind in its own special manner. Other than It, indeed, and beyond, there did not exist anything whatsoever.

In the beginning there was darkness concealed in darkness; all this was an indistinguishable flood of water. That, which, possessing life-force, was enclosed by the vacuum, the One, was born through the power of heat from its austerity.

Upon It rose up, in the beginning, desire, which was the mind's first seed. Having sought in their hearts, the wise ones discovered, through deliberation, the bond of being and nonbeing.

Right across was their [i.e., the wise ones'] dividing line extended. Did the below exist then, was there the above? There were the seed-planters, there were the great forces of expansion. Below there was self-impulse, above active imparting.

Who knows it for certain; who can proclaim it here; namely, out of what it was born and wherefrom this creation issued? The gods appeared only later—after the creation of the world. Who knows, then, out of what it has evolved?

Wherefrom this creation has issued, whether he has made it or whether he has not—he who is the superintendent of this world in the highest heaven—he alone knows, or, perhaps, even he does not know.

The Brahmachārī

The term *brahmachārī* means "going to, or according to, *brāhman* (the holy word)." Since the prayer or sacred word (*brahman*) came to be identified with the Vedic hymns or invocations themselves, a *brahmachārī* was regarded as a student of the Veda as well as a disciple of Brahman. In later Hinduism this remnant of early Brahmanism was preserved as the first prescribed stage (*āshrama*) of Aryan life, characterized by studentship under a competent teacher (guru) or authority on the Vedic texts, and adherence to a vow of celibacy. This stage itself is called *brahmacharya*. In this particular hymn, from the *Atharva Veda*, the *brahmachārī* is glorified in a cosmological sense as the sun "clothed in heat" and "with a long beard" (that is, with many rays), who is the primeval principle of the universe. The heat of the sun and the fervor generated through austerities are both called *tapas*, often seen as a factor in creation. Thus when Mahatma Gandhi later glorified *brahmacharya*, it was as a creative force sublimated by sexual continence.

[From *Atharva Veda*, 11.5.1-8, 17-26]

The *Brahmachārī* travels animating the two hemispheres; the gods become like-minded in him. He sustains earth and heaven; he fills his teacher with fervor.

The fathers, the god-folk, and all the gods collectively follow the *Brahmachārī*; the six thousand three hundred and thirty-three *Gandhāryas* went after him. He fills all the gods with fervor.

When the teacher accepts the *Brahmachārī* as a disciple, he treats him as an embryo within his own body. He carries him for three nights in his belly; when he is born, the gods assemble to see him. . . .

Born prior to Brahman, clothing himself in heat, the *Brahmachārī* arose with his fervor. From him were born Brahmanhood, the highest Brahman, and all the gods together with immortality.

The *Brahmachārī* goes forth, kindled by sacred fire-sticks, clothing himself with black-antelope skin, consecrated, long-bearded. Within one single day does he go from the eastern to the northern ocean; having gathered together the worlds, he fashions them repeatedly.

The *Brahmachārī*, begetting Brahman, the waters, the world, *Prajāpati* [Lord of Creatures], the most exalted one, creative force, having become an embryo in the womb of immortality, indeed, having become Indra, has shattered the demons.

The preceptor fashioned both these hemispheres, the wide and the deep, namely, earth and heaven. These two the *Brahmachārī* protects with his fervor; in him the gods become like-minded. . . .

Through *Brahmacharya*, through fervor, a king protects his kingdom. A teacher through *Brahmacharya* seeks a *Brahmachārī* for his student.

Through *Brahmacharya* a maiden finds a young husband. Through *Brahmacharya* a steer or horse strives to obtain food.

Through *Brahmacharya*, through fervor, the gods dispelled death. Through *Brahmacharya* Indra brought heaven to the gods.

Plants, past and future, trees, the year and its seasons were all born from the *Brahmachārī*.

Animals of the earth and those of heaven, wild and domestic, wingless and winged, were all born from the *Brahmachārī*. . . .

The *Brahmachārī* fashioned these things on the back of the waters. He stood in the sea performing austerities. When he has performed ritual ablution, he shines extensively over the earth, brown and ruddy.

A Charm Against Jaundice

The contents of the *Atharva Veda* relate mainly to what may be considered indigenous traditions of popular religion. This religion consists of charms and imprecations accompanied by certain exorcistic practices, for the proper knowledge of which one has to depend entirely on an ancillary text of the Veda, like the *Kausika Sūtra*. It is needless to add that the principal basis of these practices is symbolic magic.

[From *Atharva Veda*, 1.22]

Unto the sun let them both go up—your heartburn and your yellowness; with the color of the red bull do we envelop you.

With red colors do we envelop you for the sake of long life; so that this person may be free from harm and may become non-yellow.

Those cows¹ that have Rohinī [the Red One] as presiding divinity, as also cows which are red—their every form and every power—with them do we envelop you.

Into the parrots do we put your yellowness and into the yellow-green *ropanākā*-birds. Similarly into the turmeric [or yellow wagtail?] do we deposit your yellowness.

Exorcism of Serpents

The tradition designates this charm specifically to keep serpents away from the premises.

[From *Atharva Veda*, 6.56]

Let not the serpent, O gods, slay us with our children and with our men. The closed jaw shall not snap open, the open one shall not close. Homage to the divine folk [i.e., the serpents, by way of exorcistic euphemism].

Homage be to the black serpent, homage to the one with stripes across its body, homage to the brown constrictor [?], homage to the divine folk.

I smite your teeth with tooth, I smite your two jaws with jaw; I smite your tongue with tongue; I smite your mouth, O Serpent, with mouth.²

¹ Or herbs.

² Presumably the exorcist strikes the tooth, jaw, etc. of the symbolic figure of a serpent with the tooth, jaw, etc. of, perhaps, a dead serpent.



CHAPTER II

THE RITUAL ORDER IN THE BRĀHMANAS

To each of the four Samhitās or collections of hymns are attached certain expository liturgical texts called *Brāhmaṇas*. These somewhat bulky prose treatises give, in tedious detail, explanations of the Vedic ritual and its performance. Thus their principal concern is with the nature and use of the holy word, utterance, prayer, invocation, or divine power in the sacrifice; that is, *brahman*. The Sanskrit term *brāhmaṇa* means "relating to Brahman" or simply "brahmanic." Since the Veda contains both terms *brāhman* "prayer" and *brahmān* "pray-er," the *Brāhmaṇas* can be considered as either referring to the knowledge of *brāhman* or as belonging to the priesthood (*brāhmaṇa*), though the former interpretation seems more likely.

The *Brāhmaṇas* are significant for several reasons. First of all, they represent the oldest known specimens of Indo-European prose narrative; though earlier prose formulae are found in some of the hymn collections. Secondly, they constitute a fountainhead of information dealing with sacrifice, ritual, and priesthood. Thirdly, much of this ritualistic material is inspired and illustrated by numerous myths and legends of all types. Even though the personalities of the gods of the *Rig Veda* tend to lose their virility and become submerged in a maze of ritual formulae, still this mythological and legendary lore provides numerous themes for poets and other writers of later times. Thus the Vedic tradition is kept very much alive even in the minds of that vast majority of Indians belonging to social classes considered beneath the priesthood.

The *Brāhmaṇa* texts deal mainly with the theory and practice of sacrifice. The institution of sacrifice, elaborated by the brahmanic priests, is an amazingly intricate and complex affair. There are three principal categories of sacrifice—the cooked-food sacrifice, to be offered on the domestic fire, the oblation sacrifice, and the *soma*-sacrifice, the last two to be offered