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INDIAN MYTH AND
LEGEND

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Donald A. Mackenzie

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SITA FINDS RAMA AMONG LOTUS BLOOMS
From the painting by Warwick Goble

PREFACE

This volume deals with the myths and legends of India, which survive to us in the rich and abundant storehouse of Sanskrit literature, and with the rise and growth of Brahmanism, Buddhism, Jainism, &c. The reader is introduced to the various sacred works of the Hindus, including the ancient invocatory hymns of the four Vedas, the later speculative and expository “Forest Books” in which “the Absolute is grasped and proclaimed”, and those great epic poems the *Rámáyana*, which is three times longer than the *Iliad*, and the *Máhábharata*, which is four times longer than the *Rámáyana*. In no other country have the national poets given fuller and finer expression to the beliefs and ideals and traditions of a people, or achieved as a result wider and more enduring fame. At the present day over two hundred million Hindus are familiar in varying degrees with the legendary themes and traditional beliefs which the ancient forest sages and poets of India invested with much beautiful symbolism, and used as mediums for speculative thought and profound spiritual teachings. The sacred books of India are to the Hindus what the Bible is to Christians. Those who read them, or hear them read, are believed to be assured of prosperity in this world and of salvation in the next. To students of history, of ethnology, and of comparative religion they present features of peculiar interest, for they contain an elaborate sociology of the ancient Aryo-Indians, their political organizations, their codes of laws, their high ethical code, and above all their conceptions of God, the soul, and the Universe. Some knowledge of them is necessary for those who desire to approach with sympathy the investigation of the religious beliefs of our Hindu fellow men and to understand their outlook upon life and the world.

The Introduction deals with various aspects of the study of these ancient myths and legends which have been the inspiration of a national literature infused with much grandeur and sublimity. The historic Aryan controversy, of which the science of comparative mythology is a by-product, is passed under review, and it is shown to what extent philological theories regarding race problems have been modified during recent years as a result of the adoption of broader and more exact methods of ethnic and archæological research and the ever-extending study of comparative mythology. There has also been condensed much important data dealing with the early phases of Aryo-Indian civilization accumulated for historical purposes by industrious and painstaking Sanskrit scholars who have been engaged in investigating and systematizing the internal evidence of the various religious poems and treatises. It will be found that no general agreement has yet been reached regarding Aryo-Indian chronology, but it now appears to be well established that although there were early cultural as well as racial “drifts”, fresh invasions, which had far-reaching results in the social and religious life of northern India, occurred at a late period in what is known as the Vedic Age. In consequence, the problem presented by this ancient civilization tends rather to grow more complex than to become simplified. Its origin is still wrapped in obscurity. At the very dawn of history Aryo-Indian culture had attained a comparatively high state of development, and a considerable period must be allowed for its growth. Even some of the ancient Vedic hymns, addressed by priests to the deities, are styled “new songs”, which suggests the existence of an older collection. Many of them also afford indications that immemorial beliefs were in process of change and fusion. The sublime deities, Varuna and Mitra (Mithra), for instance, were already declining in splendour. Yet they must have been closely associated with Indra, king of the gods, in the unknown Aryan homeland, as is made evident by an inscription recently deciphered at Boghaz Köi, in Asia Minor, which refers to them as deities of the mysterious Mitanni people who were of Aryan speech like the settlers in the Punjab. There is no evidence, however, that the Mitanni rulers gave recognition to the fire god Agni, who in India was exalted as the twin brother of Indra. The problem involved may not be devoid of ethnic significance, although the identity of the Agni-worshipping section of the early raiders remains obscure.

During the early Vedic Age in India prominence was given to the gods: the social organization was of patriarchal character; the goddesses remained shadowy and vague, some being, indeed, little

more than figures of speech. A great change took place, however, after the invasions of the Bharata and other tribes who are now referred to as “late comers”. Profound and speculative thinkers attained to the pantheistic conception of the world soul; new doctrines, which are not referred to in the Vedic hymns, regarding the ages of the universe and transmigration of souls, received wide acceptance as the result of missionary efforts: the Vedic gods were reduced to the position of minor deities and new goddesses rose into prominence, one indeed being Bharati, the tribal deity of the Bharatas, who became associated with the Saraswati river and under her new name was ultimately made the wife of the supreme god Brahma. It is significant to note that the new culture radiated from the “Middle Country”, the area controlled by the “late comers”. That it contained elements which were not of Indian origin is made clearly evident when we find that the doctrines of the ages of the universe and transmigration of souls were shared by other peoples, including the Greeks and Celts and a section of the ancient Egyptians. Sumero-Babylonian and Egyptian resemblances may also be traced in post-Vedic religious literature, the former, for instance, in the Deluge legend, and the latter in the myth regarding the avenging goddess Kali, who slaughters the enemies of the gods like Hathor-Sekhet, and has similarly to be restrained by one of the deities. The worship of goddesses was also prominent among the Sumerians, Egyptians, Greeks, and Celts, as contrasted with the worship of gods among broad-headed mountain and wandering peoples. In this connection special interest attaches to the conclusions of prominent ethnologists, who include in the Mediterranean or “Brown” race of brunet “long heads” the early Egyptians and Neolithic Europeans, the Sumerians and present-day “Aryan” types in India, and especially in the old “Middle Country” and Bengal. On the other hand, a broad-headed type is still prominent in the Punjab, the area occupied by the earliest invaders who worshipped the Vedic gods. Dr. Haddon suggests that these pioneers of civilization were mixed with peoples of Mongolian and other affinities. Some such ethnic explanation must be urged to account for the differences between Vedic and post-Vedic mythologies. The invasions of the “late comers”, who entered India by a new route, no doubt stimulated thought and promoted culture after settled conditions were secured, as was undoubtedly the result of the mingling of races elsewhere.

“It may be put down as an axiom”, says Professor Jastrow, “that nowhere does a high form of culture arise without the commingling of diverse ethnic elements. Civilization, like the spark emitted by the striking of steel on flint, is everywhere the result of stimulus evoked by the friction of one ethnic group upon another”: and he supports his theory with the evidence afforded by Egypt, Babylonia, Greece, Rome, France, Germany, and Great Britain, as well as the present-day United States of America, “the melting pot” of many peoples.

Throughout this volume comparative evidence is provided to assist the reader towards the study of this most interesting aspect of the Aryan problem. We trace the cremation custom, which has prevailed in India since Vedic times, to countries as wide apart as Great Britain, into which it was introduced during the Bronze Age, and Southern Siberia, where it is still practised by the Mongolian Buriats. Over the areas occupied by representatives of the Mediterranean race it was unknown prior to the invasions of unidentified fire-worshippers. Special interest also attaches to the horse sacrifice, which was also an Aryo-Indian ceremony even in Vedic times. It is not yet unknown among the Buriats. At one time the horse sacrifice was widely prevalent. White horses were sacrificed to the sun in Ancient Greece; the sun horses are referred to with horror by Ezekiel; the ceremony was also connected with the mysteries of Aricia grove. Indeed, as is pointed out in [Chapter V](#), various ancient peoples offered up this domesticated and historic animal. In the Indian epics and religious treatises there are illuminating references to the horse sacrifice which throw much light on the significance of the immemorial practice. White and black horses were alternately favoured, and it is evident that the practice was not only associated with solar worship, but was also intended to secure fertility—crops, and therefore rain in the first place, increase of flocks, herds, human offspring, &c.—as is undoubtedly the case among the modern-day Buriats. In India the horse was also offered up as a sin offering, a late conception, evidently. A prominent feature of this sacrifice in most countries was the

decapitation of the sacrificial victim. Recent evidence from Egypt suggests that the sacrifice of the ass may have preceded the sacrifice of the horse. Professor Flinders Petrie has found in a triple tomb in the early dynastic Tarkhan cemetery the skeletons of three asses with the heads cut off and placed beside them. He suggests that the animals were killed to accompany their owner to the other world. The Buriats still sacrifice horses at graves, professedly for the same reason. As this custom was not prevalent throughout Ancient Egypt, it may have been an importation, connected, perhaps, with the myth about the sun-ass which gallops round a hill-surrounded world followed by the pursuing night serpent. An isolated reference is also made to the sacrifice of the ass in a Twelfth Dynasty story about a Naga-like demigod, a fact which emphasizes the historical importance of the material embedded in folk tales and mythologies. In this connection it may be noted that certain developed myths suggest there may have been either a cultural contact of Ancient Egypt with India, through an unidentified medium, or an infusion of religious ideas into both countries from a common source. In an Indian creation myth Prajapati weeps creative tears like the Egyptian sun-god Ra, whose rays are tears from which all things spring, as Maspero shows.

In India the juice of the soma plant was identified with the vital principle, and the demons were the poisoners of crops and plants; in Egypt honey-flowers and sacred trees sprang from the fertilizing tears of deities, while the tears of demons produced poisonous plants, diseases, &c. Like the Egyptian Horus, the Indian Prajapati, or Brahma, sprang from a lotus bloom floating on the primordial waters. The chaos-egg myth is also common to both mythological systems. Brahma issues from a golden egg like Ra, and a similar myth is connected with the Egyptian Ptah and Khnumu, and with the Chinese P'an Ku, while the egg figures in Eur-Asian folk tales which contain the germs of the various mythologies. All mythologies have animistic bases; they were, to begin with, systematized folk beliefs which were carried hither and thither in various stages of development by migrating and trading peoples. Each separate system bears undoubted traces of racial or local influences; each reflects the civilization in which it flourished, the habits of thought and habits of life of the people, and the religious, ethical, and political ideals of their rulers and teachers. When well-developed myths of similar character are found in widely separated districts, an ethnic or cultural contact is suggested. Such myths may be regarded as evidence of remote racial movements, which, although unsupported by record or tradition, are also indicated by ethnological data. It is hoped that the reader will find much suggestive material in this connection in their study of the myths and legends of India. They will also find that many of the tales retold in this volume have qualities which make universal appeal, and that some are among the most beautiful which survive from the civilizations of the ancient world.

Not a few, we are assured, will follow with interest the development from primitive myths of great and ennobling ideas which have exercised a culturing influence in India through many long centuries, and are still potent factors in the domestic, social, and religious life of many millions of Hindus.

DONALD A. MACKENZIE.

To My Indian Friends

INTRODUCTION

The triangular sub-continent of India is cut off from the rest of Asia by the vast barriers of the Himalayas, the Hindu Kush, the Suleiman mountains, and the Indian Ocean. Its population comprises about two hundred and ninety-five millions, and is of greatest density on the fertile northern plain, which is watered by three river systems, the Indus and its tributaries on the west, and the Ganges and Brahmaputra with their tributaries which pour into the Bay of Bengal. South of the Vindhya mountain ranges is the plateau of the Deccan. The climate varies from temperate on the Himalayan slopes to tropical in southern India, and over the entire country there are two pronounced annual seasons, the dry and the rainy.

Our interest abides in this volume chiefly with the northern plain and the people who are familiar in varying degrees with the sacred and heroic literature passed under review; that is, with the scenes of the early Indian civilization known as Aryan and those numerous inheritors of Aryan traditions, the Hindus, who exceed two hundred and seven millions of the population of India. Modern Hinduism embraces a number of cults which are connected with the early religious doctrines of the Aryanized or Brahmanized India of the past; it recognizes, among other things, the ancient caste system which includes distinct racial types varying from what is known as the Aryan to the pre-Dravidian stocks. Other religious organizations may be referred to in passing. Buddhists are chiefly confined to Burma, Sikhs number two millions, the Mohammedans nearly sixty-three millions, while the Parsees number roughly ninety-five thousand; less than three million natives and half-castes are Christians.

Like Egypt, India is a land of ancient memories, but its history, or rather pre-history, does not begin until about a thousand years after the erection was completed of the great pyramids at Gizeh. Between 2000 B.C. and 1200 B.C. tribes of pastoral and patriarchal peoples of Aryan speech were pouring over the north-western frontier and settling in the Punjab. There are no written or inscribed records, or even native traditions, of this historic migration, but we are able to follow vaguely, from the references found in religious compositions, the gradual conquest of northern India, which covered a period of several centuries. To what extent this invasion was racial, rather than cultural, it is extremely difficult to discover. But no doubt can be entertained regarding the influence exercised by the ancient military aristocracy and their religious teachers. Certain of the Aryan gods still receive recognition in India after a lapse of over three thousand years. This fact makes Indian mythology of special interest to the ever-increasing number of students of comparative religion.

Indian mythology also possesses particular attractions for us on account of its intimate association with what is known as the "Aryan problem". Scholars of a past generation held pronounced views on Aryan matters, and produced a considerable literature of highly controversial character. In fact, theories regarding the Aryan languages and the Aryan "race" are as varied as they are numerous; the wordy warfare which occupied the greater part of the nineteenth century, was waged ever strenuously and not infrequently with much brilliance; occasionally, however, it was not wanting in the undesirable elements of personal feeling and national antipathy. But, happily, we appear to have reached a time when this fascinating and important problem can be considered dispassionately in the proper scientific spirit, and without experiencing that unnecessary dread of having to abandon decided opinions which may have been formed when the accumulated data had less variety and bulk than that which is now available. This change has been brought about by the extended study of comparative religion and the wonderful and engaging results which have attended modern-day methods of ethnic and archaeological research.

The Aryan controversy had its origin at the close of the eighteenth century, when that distinguished Oriental scholar Sir William Jones, who acted for a period as a judge of the Supreme Court in Bengal, drew attention to the remarkable resemblances between the Sanskrit, Greek, Latin,

German, and Celtic languages. In 1808, Schlegel published his *Language and Wisdom of the Hindus*, and urged the theory that India was the home of an ancestral race and a group of languages that were progenitors of various European ones. Other scholars subsequently favoured Zend, the language of Persia, and transferred the “racial beehive” to that country; rival claims were afterwards set up for Asia Minor and the Iranian plateau.

The science of Comparative Philology was a direct product of these early controversies; it was established in the “thirties” when Bopp published his Comparative Grammar in which a new term, having a racial significance, was invented: he grouped all European languages, except Basque, Magyar, Turkish, and Finnish, as “Indo-Germanic”. After the study of Sanskrit literature revealed, however, that the Aryans occupied but a small part of India when their sacred hymns, the Vedas, were composed, the cradle of the Aryan race was shifted to some uncertain area beyond the Himalayan mountains.

Max Müller, the distinguished Sanskrit authority, who in the words of an Indian scholar “devoted his lifetime to the elucidation of the learning, literature, and religion of ancient India”,¹ abandoned Bopp's patriotic term “Indo-Germanic” and adopted Aryan, which he founded on the Sanskrit racial designation “Arya”. At first he accepted the theory of an Aryan race and especially of an Aryan civilization which originated on the Central Asian plateau, but, as will be seen, he subsequently modified his views in this regard.

A new theory regarding the Aryans, who are now more commonly referred to as Indo-Europeans, was strongly advocated in 1851 and later by Dr. Robert Gordon Latham, who devoted many years to the study of ethnology and philology. He argued that as the major part of the peoples speaking Indo-European tongues was found in Europe, the cradle of the race might, after all, be transferred westward. This theory was supported by the fact (among others) that the Lithuanian language was no less archaic than Sanskrit.

The European hypothesis found in time many able supporters, and the advocates of rival Teutonic and Celtic claims waxed eloquent and heated over the exact location of the Aryan homeland. An industrious search was meanwhile conducted for words common to all Aryan languages which described the natural features of the racial “cradle”. This work of reconstruction was certainly not lacking in picturesque results, for attractive visions were presented of Aryan Arcadias in which the simple and contemplative ancestors of many bitter controversialists dwelt together in exemplary unity and peace. The question of location might remain unsettled, but it was generally agreed that the ancient people were surrounded by cows, sheep, and goats; sometimes they rode their horses or yoked them in rough rumbling carts, and sometimes they ate them. No asses were admitted to the fold because of their decided partiality for Central Asian plains, which seemed quite reasonable. Trouble was occasionally caused by wolves and bears, or, mayhap, a stray lion, but these and other worries associated with the simple life might be compensated for by the fact that the primitive people, as one writer² put it, “understood the art of drinking”. Mead, brewed from honey, was found to be “dear to the hearts of the ancient Aryans”; had the Brahman ever forgotten his “madhu”, the Welshman his “medhu”, or the Lithuanian his “medus”? Problems arose regarding the ancients' knowledge of trees: it was found that “bhaga” was applied indifferently by the family groups to the beech and the oak, and more than one ingenious explanation was suggested to account for this apparent discrepancy. Then, suddenly, Professor Max Müller swept into the background the rival Aryan homeland pictures, pointing out the while that it is “almost impossible to discover any animal or any plant that is peculiar to the north of Europe and is not found sporadically in Asia also”. Destructive criticism proceeded apace, until now nothing has been left to us of the ancestral Arcadia but “air, water, heat and cold”. In his review of the widely accepted philological “evidence” regarding the Aryan homeland, Max

¹ Romesh C. Dutt's *Ramáyana* dedication.

² Rydberg's *Teutonic Mythology*.

Müller declared it to be so pliant that it was possible “to make out a more or less plausible case for any part of the world”. The advanced group of philologists held, indeed, that no racial centre could be located. Ultimately “Delbrück went so far,” says Professor Ripley, “as to deny that any single parent language ever existed in fact”.³

Meanwhile ethnologists and archæologists were engaged accumulating important data. It was found that Europe had been invaded at the close of the Stone Age by a broad-headed (brachycephalic) people, who brought no culture and even retarded the growth of civilization in their areas of settlement. A new problem was thus presented: were the Aryans a brachycephalic (broad-headed) or a dolichocephalic (long-headed) people? Its solution was rendered all the more difficult when it was found that living representatives of both racial types were peoples of Aryan speech. The idea that skull shapes, which are associated with other distinct physical characteristics, were due to habits of life and the quality of food which had to be masticated, was in time advanced to discredit new methods of ethnic research, but it has since been thoroughly disproved. In many ancient graves are found skulls which do not differ from those of modern men and women, living under different conditions and eating different food.

Patriotic controversialists were not awaiting again in dealing with the problem of varying skull shapes. French scientists, for instance, have identified the “broad heads”, now generally known as the Alpine race, with the ubiquitous Celts, but as present-day Hindus are mainly “long heads”, the Aryan racial connection here suggested remains obscure. A clue to the mystery was sought for in Asia Minor, but no satisfactory result could be obtained there to support philological theories, because the Armenians, who are “broad heads”, and their enemies and neighbours the Kurds, who are “long heads”, are both peoples of Aryan speech. A scornful scientist has dismissed as a “prehistoric romance”, the theory that the fair Scandinavian “long heads” are identical with the brunet “long heads” of India. Both the Celtic (Alpine) and Indo-Germanic racial theories are as inconclusive as they are diametrically in opposition.

The science of philology, which, at its inception, “dazzled and silenced all”, has been proved to be no safe guide in racial matters. We must avoid, as Professor Ripley says, “the error of confusing community of language with identity of race. Nationality may often follow linguistic boundaries, but race bears no necessary relation whatever to them.”⁴

By way of illustration, it may be pointed out in this connection that English is spoken at the present day by, among others, the Hong Kong Chinamen, the American Red Indians and negroes, by the natives of Ireland, Wales, Cornwall, and the Scottish Highlands, besides the descendants of the ancient Britons, the Jutes, the Angles, the Saxons, the Norsemen, the Danes, and the Normans in England, but all these peoples cannot be classified in the racial sense simply as Englishmen. Similarly, the varied types of humanity who are Aryan in speech cannot all be regarded as representatives of the “Aryan race”, that is, if we accept the theory of an “Aryan race”, which Virchow, by the way, has characterized as “a pure fiction”.

Max Müller, in his closing years, faced this aspect of the problem frankly and courageously. “Aryas”, he wrote, “are those who speak Aryan languages, whatever their colour, whatever their blood. In calling them Aryas we predicate nothing of them except that the grammar of their language is Aryan.... I have declared again and again that if I say Aryas, I mean neither blood, nor bones, nor hair, nor skull; I mean simply those who speak an Aryan language. The same applies to Hindus, Greeks, Romans, Germans, Celts, and Slavs. When I speak of these I commit myself to no anatomical characteristics. The blue-eyed and fair-haired Scandinavians may have been conquerors or conquered, they may have adopted the language of their darker lords or their subjects, or vice versa. I assert nothing beyond their language when I call them Hindus, Greeks, Romans, Germans, Celts, and Slavs,

³ *The Races of Europe*, W. Z. Ripley, p. 481.

⁴ *The Races of Europe*, W. Z. Ripley, p. 17.

and in that sense, and in that sense only, do I say that even the blackest Hindus represent an earlier stage of Aryan speech and thought than the fairest Scandinavians.... To me an ethnologist who speaks of an Aryan race, Aryan blood, Aryan eyes and hair, is as great a sinner as a linguist who speaks of a dolichocephalic dictionary or a brachycephalic grammar.”⁵

Aryan, however, has been found to be a convenient term, and even ethnologists do not scorn its use, although it has been applied “in a confusing variety of signification by different philologists”. One application of it is to the language group comprising Sanskrit, Persian, Afghan, &c. Some still prefer it to “Indo-European”, which has found rivals in “Afro-European”, among those who connect the Aryan languages with North Africa, and “Afro-Eurasian”, which may be regarded as universal in its racial application, especially if we accept Darwin's theory that the Garden of Eden was located somewhere in Africa.⁶ We may think of the Aryans as we do of the British when that term is used to include the peoples embraced by the British Empire.

In India the Aryans were from late Vedic times divided into four castes—Brahmans (priests), Kshatriyas (kings and warriors), Vaisyas (traders, &c.), and Sudras (aborigines).

Caste (Varna) signifies “colour”, but it is not certain whether the reference is to be given a physical or mythological application. The first three castes were Aryans, the fairest people; the fourth caste, that comprising the dark-skinned aborigines, was non-Aryan. “Arya”, however, was not always used in the sense that we have been accustomed to apply “Aryo-Indian”. In one of the sacred books of the ancient people it is stated: “The colour of the Brahmans was white; that of the Kshatriyas red; that of the Vaisyas yellow; and that of the Sudras black”.⁷ This colour reference connects “caste” with the doctrine of yugas, or ages of the universe ([Chapter VI](#)).

Risley, dealing with “the leading castes and tribes in Northern India, from the Bay of Bengal to the frontiers of Afghanistan”, concludes from the data obtained from census returns, that we are able “to distinguish two extreme types of feature and physique, which may be provisionally described as Aryan and Dravidian. A third type, which in some respects may be looked upon as intermediate between these two, while in other, and perhaps the most important, points it can hardly be deemed Indian at all, is found along the northern and eastern borders of Bengal. The most prominent characters are a relatively short (brachycephalic) head, a broad face, a short, wide nose, very low in the bridge, and in extreme cases almost bridgeless; high and projecting cheekbones and eyelids, peculiarly formed so as to give the impression that the eyes are obliquely set in the head.... This type ... may be conveniently described as Mongoloid....”⁸

According to Risley, the Aryan type is dolichocephalic (long-headed), “with straight, finely-cut (lepto-rhine) nose, a long, symmetrical narrow face, a well-developed forehead, regular features, and a high facial angle”. The stature is “fairly high”, and the body is “well proportioned, and slender rather than massive”. The complexion is “a very light transparent brown—‘wheat coloured’ is the common vernacular description—noticeably fairer than the mass of the population”.

The Dravidian head, the same authority states, “usually inclines to be dolichocephalic”, but “all other characters present a marked contrast to the Aryan. The nose is thick and broad, and the formula expressing its proportionate dimensions is higher than in any known race, except the Negro. The facial angle is comparatively low; the lips are thick; the face wide and fleshy; the features coarse and irregular.” The stature is lower than that of the Aryan type: “the figure is squat and the limbs sturdy. The colour of the skin varies from very dark brown to a shade closely approaching black.... Between these extreme types”, adds Risley, “we find a large number of intermediate groups.”⁹

⁵ *Biographies of Words and the Home of the Aryas*, pp. 120 and 245.

⁶ *The Descent of Man*, Charles Darwin, chap. vi, p. 155 (1889 ed.), and *The Ancient Egyptians*, G. Elliot Smith, pp. 63, 64 (1911).

⁷ Muir's *Original Sanskrit Texts*, vol. 1, p. 140.

⁸ *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, H. H. Risley, vol. 1, xxxi.

⁹ *ibid.* xxxii-xxxiii.

Of late years ethnologists have inclined to regard the lower types represented by hill and jungle tribes, the Veddas of Ceylon, &c., as pre-Dravidians. The brunet and long-headed Dravidians may have entered India long before the Aryans: they resemble closely the Brahui of Baluchistan and the Man-tse of China.

India is thus mainly long-headed (dolichocephalic). We have already seen, however, that in northern and eastern Bengal there are traces of an infusion of Mongolian “broad heads”; another brachycephalic element is pronounced in western India, but it is not Mongolian; possibly we have here evidences of a settlement of Alpine stock. According to Risley, these western broad heads are the descendants of invading Scythians,¹⁰ but this theory is not generally accepted.

The Eur-Asian Alpine race of broad heads are a mountain people distributed from Hindu Kush westward to Brittany. On the land bridge of Asia Minor they are represented by the Armenians. Their eastern prehistoric migrations is by some ethnologists believed to be marked by the Ainus of Japan. They are mostly a grey-eyed folk, with dark hair and abundant moustache and beard, as contrasted with the Mongols, whose facial hair is scanty. There are short and long varieties of Alpine stock, and its representatives are usually sturdy and muscular. In Europe these broad-headed invaders overlaid a long-headed brunet population, as the early graves show, but in the process of time the broad heads have again retreated mainly to their immemorial upland habitat. At the present day the Alpine race separates the long-headed fair northern race from what is known as the long-headed dark Mediterranean race of the south.

A slighter and long-headed brunet type is found south of Hindu Kush. Ripley has condensed a mass of evidence to show that it is akin to the Mediterranean race.¹¹ He refers to it as the “eastern branch”, which includes Afghans and Hindus. “We are all familiar with the type,” he says, “especially as it is emphasized by inbreeding and selection among the Brahmans.... There can be no doubt of their (the Eastern Mediterraneans) racial affinities with our Berbers, Greeks, Italians, and Spaniards. They are all members of the same race, at once the widest in its geographical extension, the most populous and the most primitive of our three European types.”¹²

Professor Elliot Smith supports Professor Ripley in this connection, and includes the Arabs with the southern Persians in the same group, but finding the terms “Hamitic” and “Mediterranean” insufficient, prefers to call this widespread family the “Brown race”, to distinguish its representatives from the fair Northerners, the “yellow” Mongolians, and the “black” negroes.

North of the Alpine racial area are found the nomadic Mongolians, who are also “broad heads”, but with distinguishing facial characteristics which vary in localities. As we have seen, the Mongoloid features are traceable in India. Many settlers have migrated from Tibet, but among the high-caste Indians the Mongoloid eyes and high cheek bones occur in families, suggesting early crossment.

Another distinctive race has yet to be accounted for—the tall, fair, blue-eyed, long-headed Northerners, represented by the Scandinavians of the present day. Sergi and other ethnologists have classed this type as a variety of the Mediterranean race, which had its area of localization on the edge of the snow belt on lofty plateaus and in proximity to the Arctic circle. The theory that the distinctive blondness and great stature of the Northerners were acquired in isolation and perpetuated by artificial selection is, however, more suggestive than conclusive, unless we accept the theory that acquired characteristics can be inherited. How dark eyes became grey or blue, and dark hair red or sandy, is a problem yet to be solved.

The ancestors of this fair race are believed to have been originally distributed along the northern Eur-Asian plateaus; Keane's blonde long-headed Chudes¹³ and the Wu-suns in Chinese Turkestan

¹⁰ *The People of India*, H. H. Risley, p. 59.

¹¹ *The Races of Europe*, W. Z. Ripley, 450 *et seq.*

¹² *The Races of Europe*, W. Z. Ripley, p. 451.

¹³ *Man, Past and Present*, A. H. Keane, p. 270.

are classed as varieties of the ancient Northern stock. An interesting problem is presented in this connection by the fair types among the ancient Egyptians, the modern-day Berbers, and the blondes of the Atlas mountains in Morocco. Sergi is inclined to place the “cradle” of the Northerners on the edge of the Sahara.

The broad-headed Turki and Ugrians are usually referred to as a blend of the Alpine stock and the proto-Northerners, with, in places, Mongolian admixture.

As most of the early peoples were nomadic, or periodically nomadic, there must have been in localities a good deal of interracial and intertribal fusion, with the result that intermediate varieties were produced. It follows that the intellectual life of the mingling peoples would be strongly influenced by admixture as well as by contact with great civilizations.

It now remains for us to deal with the Aryan problem in India. Dr. Haddon considers that the invading Aryans were “perhaps associated with Turki tribes” when they settled in the Punjab.¹⁴ Prior to this racial movement, the Kassites, whose origin is obscure, assisted by bands of Aryans, overthrew the Hammurabi dynasty in Babylon and established the Kassite dynasty between 2000 B.C. and 1700 B.C. At this period the domesticated horse was introduced, and its Babylonian name, “the ass of the East”, is an indication whence it came. Another Aryan invasion farther west is marked by the establishment of the Mitanni kingdom between the area controlled by the Assyrians and the Hittites. Its kings had names which are clearly Aryan. These included Saushatar, Artatatama, Sutarna, and Tushratta. The latter was the correspondent in the Tel-el-Amarna letters of his kinsmen the Egyptian Pharaohs, Amenhotep the Magnificent, and the famous Akhenaton. The two royal houses had intermarried after the wars of Thothmes III. It is impossible to fix the date of the rise of the Mitanni power, which held sway for a period over Assyria, but we know that it existed in 1500 B.C. The horse was introduced into Egypt before 1580 B.C.

It is generally believed that the Aryans were the tamers of the horse which revolutionized warfare in ancient days, and caused great empires to be overthrown and new empires to be formed. When the Aryans entered India they had chariots and swift steeds.

There is no general agreement as to the date of settlement in the Punjab. Some authorities favour 2000 B.C., others 1700 B.C.; Professor Macdonell still adheres to 1200 B.C.¹⁵ It is possible that the infusion was at first a gradual one, and that it was propelled by successive folk-waves. The period from the earliest migrations until about 800 or 700 B.C. is usually referred to as the Vedic Age, during which the Vedas, or more particularly the invocatory hymns to the deities, were composed and compiled. At the close of this Age the area of Aryan control had extended eastward as far as the upper reaches of the Jumna and Ganges rivers. A number of tribal states or communities are referred to in the hymns.

It is of importance to note that the social and religious organization of the Vedic Aryans was based upon the principle of “father right”, as contrasted with the principle of “mother right”, recognized by representative communities of the Brown race.

Like the Alpine and Mongoloid peoples, the Vedic Aryans were a patriarchal people, mainly pastoral but with some knowledge of agriculture. They worshipped gods chiefly: their goddesses were vague and shadowy: their earth goddess Prithivi was not a Great Mother in the Egyptian and early European sense; her husband was the sky-god Dyaus.

In Egypt the sky was symbolized as the goddess Nut, and the earth as the god Seb, but the Libyans had an earth-goddess Neith. The “Queen of Heaven” was a Babylonian and Assyrian deity. If the Brown race predominated in the Aryan blend during the Vedic Age, we should have found the Great Mother more in prominence.

¹⁴ *The Wanderings of Peoples*, A. C. Haddon, p. 21.

¹⁵ *Vedic Index of Names and Subjects* (1912), p. viii.

The principal Aryan deities were Indra, god of thunder, and Agni, god of fire, to whom the greater number of hymns were addressed. From the earliest times, however, Aryan religion was of complex character. We can trace at least two sources of cultural influence from the earlier Iranian period.¹⁶ The hymns bear evidence of the declining splendour of the sublime deities Varuna and Mitra (Mithra). It is possible that the conflicts to which references are made in some of the hymns were not unconnected with racial or tribal religious rivalries.

Indra, as we show ([Chapter I](#)), bears resemblances to other “hammer gods”. He is the Indian Thor, the angry giant-killer, the god of war and conquests. That his name even did not originate in India is made evident by an inscription at Boghaz Köi, in Asia Minor, referring to a peace treaty between the kings of the Hittites and Mitanni. Professor Hugo Winckler has deciphered from this important survival of antiquity “In-da-ra” as a Mitanni deity who was associated with Varuna, Mitra, and Nasatya.

No evidence has yet been forthcoming to indicate any connection between the Aryans in Mitanni and the early settlers in India. It would appear, however, that the two migrations represented by the widely separated areas of Aryan control, radiated from a centre where the gods Indra, Varuna, and Mitra were grouped in the official religion. The folk-wave which pressed towards the Punjab gave recognition to Agni, possibly as a result of contact, or, more probably, fusion with a tribe of specialized fire-worshippers.

If we separate the Indra from the Agni, cremating worshippers, it will be of interest to follow the ethnic clue which is thus suggested. Modern-day Hindus burn their dead in accordance with the religious practice of the Agni worshippers in the Vedic Age. It is doubtful, however, if all the Aryan invaders practised cremation. There are references to burial in the “house of clay”, and Yama, god of the dead, was adored as the first man who explored the path to the “Land of the Pitris” (Fathers) which lay across the mountains. Professor Oldenberg considers that these burials referred to the disposal of the bones and ashes of the dead.

Professor Macdonell and Dr. Keith, however, do not share Professor Oldenberg's view in this connection.¹⁷ They hold that the epithet *Agni-dagdah*, “burnt with fire”, “applies to the dead who were burned on the funeral pyre”; the other custom being burial—*An-agni-dagdah*, “not burnt with fire”. They also refer to *Paroptah*, “casting out”, and *Uddhitah*, “Exposure of the dead”, which are expressions of doubtful meaning. These authorities add: “Burial was clearly not rare in the Rigvedic period: a whole hymn (x, 18) describes the ritual attending it. The dead man was buried apparently in full attire, with his bow in his hand, and probably at one time his wife was immolated to accompany him.... But in the Vedic period both customs appear in a modified form: the son takes the bow from the hand of the dead man, and the widow is led away from her dead husband by his brother or nearest kinsman. A stone is set up between the dead and the living to separate them.”

The Persian fire-worshippers, on the other hand, did not cremate their dead, but exposed them on “towers of silence” to be devoured by vultures, like their modern-day representatives the Parsees, who migrated into India after displacement by the Mohammedans. In Persia the sacred fire was called Atar,¹⁸ and was identified with the supreme deity Ahura-Mazda (Ormuzd).

Agni of the Vedic Age is the messenger between gods and men; he conducts the deities to the sacrifice and the souls of the cremated dead to Paradise; he is also the twin brother of Indra.

Now, it is of interest to note, in considering the racial significance of burial rites, that cremation was not practised by the western representatives of the Brown race. In pre-Dynastic Egypt the dead

¹⁶ A convenient term to refer to the unknown area occupied by the Vedic Aryans before they invaded India.

¹⁷ *Vedic Index of Names and Subjects*, A. A. Macdonell and A. B. Keith, Vol. I, pp. 8, 9 (1912).

¹⁸ Compared with the Latin *atrium*, “the room that contained the hearthfire”. Agni is cognate with the Latin *ignis*, cf. Lithuanian, *ugnis szwenta*, “holy fire”—*Early Religious Poetry of Persia*, Professor Moulton, pp. 38, 39.

were interred as in Babylon,¹⁹ with food vessels, &c. Neolithic man in Europe also favoured crouched burials, and this practice obtained all through the Bronze Age.

The Buriats, who are Mongols dwelling in the vicinity of Lake Baikal, still perpetuate ancient customs, which resemble those of the Vedic Aryans, for they not only practise cremation but also sacrifice the horse (see [Chap. V](#)). In his important study of this remarkable people, Mr. Curtin says:²⁰ “The Buriats usually burn their dead; occasionally, however, there is what is called a ‘Russian burial’, that is, the body is placed in a coffin and the coffin is put in the ground. But generally if a man dies in the Autumn or the Winter his body is placed on a sled and drawn by the horse which he valued most to some secluded place in the forest. There a sort of house is built of fallen trees and boughs, the body is placed inside the house, and the building is then surrounded with two or three walls of logs so that no wolf or other animal can get into it.” The horse is afterwards slain. “If other persons die during the winter their bodies are carried to the same house. In this lonely silent place in the forest they rest through the days and nights until the first cuckoo calls, about the ninth of May. Then relatives and friends assemble, and without opening the house burn it to the ground. Persons who die afterwards and during the Summer months are carried to the forest, placed on a funeral pile, and burned immediately. The horse is killed just as in the first instance.”

When the dead are buried without being burned, the corpse is either carried on a wagon, or it is placed upright in front of a living man on horseback so as to ride to its last resting place. The saddle is broken up and laid at the bottom of the grave, while the body is turned to face the south-east. In this case they also sacrifice the horse which is believed to have “gone to his master, ready for use”.

Cremation spread throughout Europe, as we have said, in the Bronze Age. It was not practised by the early folk-waves of the Alpine race which, according to Mosso,²¹ began to arrive after copper came into use. The two European Bronze Age burial customs, associated with urns of the “food vessel” and “drinking cup” types, have no connection with the practice of burning the dead. The Archæological Ages have not necessarily an ethnic significance. Ripley is of opinion, however, that the practice of cremation indicates a definite racial infusion, but unfortunately it has destroyed the very evidence, of which we are most in need, to solve the problem. It is impossible to say whether the cremated dead were “broad heads” or “long heads”.

“Dr. Sophus Müller of Copenhagen is of opinion that cremation was not practised long before the year 1000 B.C. though it appeared earlier in the south of Europe than in the north. On both points Professor Ridgeway of Cambridge agrees with him.”²²

The migration of the cremating people through Europe was westward and southward and northward; they even swept through the British Isles as far north as Orkney. They are usually referred to by archæologists as “Aryans”; some identify them with the mysterious Celts, whom the French, however, prefer to associate, as we have said, with the Alpine “broad heads” especially as this type bulks among the Bretons and the hillmen of France. We must be careful, however, to distinguish between the Aryans and Celts of the philologists and archæologists.

It may be that these invaders were not a race in the proper sense, but a military confederacy which maintained a religious organization formulated in some unknown area where they existed for a time as a nation. The Normans who invaded these islands were Scandinavians²³; they settled in France, intermarried with the French, and found allies among the Breton chiefs. It is possible that the cremating people similarly formed military aristocracies when they settled in Hindustan, Mitanni, and in certain other European areas. “Nothing is commoner in the history of migratory peoples,”

¹⁹ The theory that certain Babylonian graves show traces of cremation has been abandoned.—*A History of Sumer and Akkad*, L. W. King, pp. 20, 21 (1910).

²⁰ *A Journey in Southern Siberia*, Jeremiah Curtin, p. 101.

²¹ *The Dawn of Mediterranean Civilization*, A. Mosso, London Trans., 1910.

²² *British Museum Guide to the Antiquities of the Bronze Age*, pp. 23, 24.

²³ Associated, some authorities urge, with Germans from the mouth of the Elbe.

says Professor Myres,²⁴ “than to find a very small leaven of energetic intruders ruling and organizing large native populations, without either learning their subjects' language or imposing their own till considerably later, if at all.” The archæological evidence in this connection is of particular value. At a famous site near Salzburg, in upper Austria, over a thousand Bronze Age graves were discovered, just over half of which contained unburnt burials. Both methods of interment were contemporary in this district, “but it was noticed that the cremated burials were those of the wealthier class, or of the dominant race.”²⁵ We find also that at Hallstatt “the bodies of the wealthier class were reduced to ashes”.²⁶ In some districts the older people may have maintained their supremacy. At Watsch and St. Margaret in Carniola “a similar blending of the two rites was observed ... the unburnt burials being the richer and more numerous”.²⁷ The descent of the Achaens into Greece occurred at a date earlier than the rise of the great Hallstatt civilization. According to Homeric evidence they burned their dead; “though the body of Patroklos was cremated,” however, “the lords of Mycenae were interred unburnt in richly furnished graves”.²⁸ In Britain the cremating people mingled with their predecessors perhaps more intimately than in other areas where there were large states to conquer. A characteristic find on Acklam Wold, Yorkshire, may be referred to. In this grave “a pile of burnt bones was in close contact with the legs of a skeleton buried in the usual contracted position, and they seemed to have been deposited while yet hot, for the knees of the skeleton were completely charred. It has been suggested in cases like this, or where an unburnt body is surrounded by a ring of urn burials, the entire skeleton may be those of chiefs or heads of families, and the burnt bones those of slaves, or even wives, sacrificed at the funeral. The practice of suttee (sati) in Europe rests indeed on the authority of Julius Cæsar, who represents such religious suicides as having, at no remote period from his own, formed a part of the funeral rites of the Gaulish chiefs; and also states that the relatives of a deceased chieftain accused his wives of being accessory to his death, and often tortured them to death on that account.”²⁹ If this is the explanation, the cremating invaders constituted the lower classes in Gaul and Britain, which is doubtful. The practice of burning erring wives, however, apparently prevailed among the Mediterranean peoples. In an Egyptian folk-tale a Pharaoh ordered a faithless wife of a scribe to be burned at the stake.³⁰ One of the Ossianic folk tales of Scotland relates that Grainne, wife of Finn-mac-Coul, who eloped with Diarmid, was similarly dealt with.³¹ The bulk of the archæological evidence seems to point to the invaders, who are usually referred to as “Aryans” having introduced the cremation ceremony into Europe. Whence came they? The problem is greatly complicated by the evidence from Palestine, where cremation was practised by the hewers of the great artificial caves which were constructed about 3000 B.C.³² As cremation did not begin in Crete, however, until the end of period referred to as “Late Minoan Third” (1450-1200 B.C.)³³ it may be that the Palestinian burials are much later than the construction of the caves.

²⁴ *The Dawn of History*, J. L. Myres, p. 199.

²⁵ *British Museum Guide to the Antiquities of the Bronze Age*, p. 98.

²⁶ *British Museum Guide to the Antiquities of the Early Iron Age*, p. 8.

²⁷ *ibid.* p. 6.

²⁸ *ibid.* p. 8.

²⁹ *British Museum Guide to the Antiquities of the Bronze Age*, pp. 16, 17.

³⁰ *Egyptian Myth and Legend*, p. 143.

³¹ *Campbell's West Highland Tales*, vol. iii, p. 55.

³² *A History of Civilization in Palestine*, R. A. S. Macalister.

³³ *The Discoveries in Crete*, Professor R. M. Burrows, p. 100. Dating according to *Crete the Forerunner of Greece*, C. H. and H. B. Hawes, p. xiv.



1
Photo. Johnson and Hoffmann
THE CREMATION GHAT, BENARES

It seems reasonable to suppose that the cremation rite originated among a nomadic people. The spirits of the dead were got rid of by burning the body: they departed, like the spirit of Patroklos, after they had received their “meed of fire”. Burial sites were previously regarded as sacred because they were haunted by the spirits of ancestors (the Indian *Pitris* = “fathers”). A people who burned their dead, and were therefore not bound by attachment to a tribal holy place haunted by spirits, were certainly free to wander. The spirits were transferred by fire to an organized Hades, which appears to have been conceived of by a people who had already attained to a certain social organization and were therefore capable of governing the communities which they subdued. When they mingled with peoples practising other rites and professing different religious beliefs, however, the process of racial fusion must have been accompanied by a fusion of beliefs. Ultimately the burial customs of the subject race might prevail. At any rate, this appears to have been the case in Britain, where, prior to the Roman Age, the early people achieved apparently an intellectual conquest of their conquerors; the practice of the cremation rite entirely vanished.

We have gone far afield to find a clue to assist towards the solution of the Aryan problem in India. The evidence accumulated is certainly suggestive, and shows that the conclusions of the early philologists have been narrow in the extreme. If the long-headed Kurds are, as Ripley believes, the descendants of the Mitanni raiders, then the Aryans of history must be included in the Brown race. As, however, cremation was not practised by the Berbers, the Babylonians, the early Cretans, or other representatives of the ancient brunet dolichocephalic peoples, it may be that the custom, which still lingers among the Mongolian Buriats, was not in the narrow sense of Aryan origin. It may have been first practised among an unknown tribe of fire-worshippers, who came under the influence of a great teacher like Zoroaster. We cannot overlook in this connection the possibility of an individual origin for a new and revolutionary system of religious doctrines. Buddhism, for instance, originated with Buddha.

As we have said, the Vedic religion of the Aryans in India was characterized by the worship of male deities, the goddesses being of secondary and even slight importance. A religious revolution,

however, occurred during the second or Brahmanical Age—the age of priestly ascendancy. Fresh invasions had taken place and the Aryans were divided into tribal groups of Westerners and Easterners, on either side of a central power in Madhyadesa, the “Middle Country” which extended between the upper reaches of the Saraswati and the Ganges and the Jumna rivers. The Westerners included the peoples of the Punjab and the north-western frontier, and the Easterners the kingdoms of Kasi (Benares) and Maghadha as well as Kosala and Videha, which figure prominently in the *Ramáyana* epic, where the kings are referred to as being of the “Solar race”. The Middle Kingdom was the centre of Brahmanical culture and influence: it was controlled by those federated tribes, the Kuru Panchalas, with whom were fused the Bháratas of the “Lunar race”. It is believed that the military aristocracy of the “Middle Country” were late comers who arrived by a new route and thrust themselves between the groups of early settlers.³⁴ The Bharatas worshipped a goddess Bharati who was associated with the Saraswati river on the banks of which the tribe had for a period been located. Saraswati became the wife of Brahma, the supreme god, and it would seem that she had a tribal significance.

If the Bharatas of the “Lunar race” worshipped the moon and rivers, it is possible that they belonged to the Brown race. The folk-religion of the tribe would be perpetuated by the people even although their priests became speculative thinkers like the unknown authors of the *Upanishads*. It is significant to note, therefore, that the goddesses ultimately came into as great prominence in India as in Egypt. This change took place during the obscure period prior to the revival of Brahmanism. In the sixth century before the Christian era Buddhism had origin, partly as a revolt of the Kshatriya (aristocratic) class against priestly ascendancy, and the new faith spread eastward where Brahmanic influence was least pronounced. When the influence of Buddhism declined, the Pantheon is found to have been revolutionized and rendered thoroughly Mediterranean in character. The Vedic gods had in the interval suffered eclipse; they were subject to the greater personal gods Brahma, with Vishnu and Shiva, each of whom had a goddess for wife. Brahma, as we have said, had associated with him the river deity Saraswati of the Bharatas; the earth goddess, Lakshmi, was the wife of Vishnu; she rose, however, from the Ocean of Milk. But the most distinctive and even most primitive goddesses were linked with Shiva, the Destroyer. The goddess Durga rivalled Indra as a deity of war. Kali, another form of Durga, was as vengeful and bloodthirsty as the Scottish Cailleach, or the Egyptian Hathor, who, as the earlier Sekhet, rejoiced in accomplishing the slaughter of the enemies of Ra.³⁵ Kali, as we shall see ([Chapter VIII](#)) replaced the Vedic king of the gods as a successful demon slayer. As the Egyptian Ra went forth to restrain Hathor, so did Shiva hasten to the battlefield, flooded by gore, to prevail upon his spouse Kali to spare the remnant of her enemies.

³⁴ *Vedic Index of Names and Subjects*.

³⁵ See *Egyptian Myth and Legend*.



2

KALI

From a bronze in the Calcutta Art Gallery

The rise of the goddesses may have been due in part to the influence of Dravidian folk-religion. This does not, however, vitiate the theory that moon, water, and earth worship was not unconnected with the ascendancy of the Brown race in India. The Dravidian brunet long heads were, as we have said, probably represented in the pre-Aryan, as well as the post-Vedic folk-waves, which mingled with pre-Dravidian stocks. Mr. Crooke inclines to the view that the Aryan conquest was more moral and intellectual than racial.³⁶ The decline of the patriarchal religion of the Vedic military aristocracy may thus be accounted for; the religious practices of the earlier people might ultimately have attained prominence in fusion with imported ideas. If the Aryan racial type was distinctive, as it appears

³⁶ *The North-Western Provinces of India*, 1897, p. 60.

to have been, in colour at any rate, the predominant people who flourished when the hymns were composed, may have greatly declined in numbers owing to the ravages of disease which in every new country eliminates the unfit in the process of time. Even if Aryan conquest was more racial in character than Mr. Crooke will allow, the physical phenomena of the present day can be accounted for in this way, due allowance being made, of course, for the crossment of types. In all countries which have sustained the shock of invasion, the tendency to revert to the aboriginal type is very marked. At any rate, this is the case in Egypt and Crete as present-day evidence shows. In Great Britain, which was invaded by the broad heads of the Bronze Age, the long-headed type is once again in the majority; a not inconsiderable proportion of our people show Stone Age (Mediterranean) physical characteristics.

In this connection it is of interest to refer to immemorial beliefs and customs which survive in representative districts in Britain and India where what may be called pre-Aryan influences are most pronounced. A people may change their weapons and their language time and again, and yet retain ancient modes of thought. In Devon, which the philologists claim to be largely Celtic like Cornwall, the folk-lore shows marked affinities with that of Ireland, Wales, and Scotland, suggesting the survival of ancient Mediterranean racial influence, for much of what we call Celtic links with what belongs to ancient Greece and the Egyptian Delta. Mr. Gomme has shown³⁷ in an interesting summary of recorded folk-practices that the “ram feast” of Devon resembles closely in essential details similar ceremonies in ancient Greece and modern India. At the beginning of May the people of Devon were wont to sacrifice a ram lamb to the deity of waters. The animal was tied to a pillar, its throat was cut, and young men scrambled to obtain pieces of its flesh for girls. The devourer was assured of good luck during the year. After the ceremony, dancing, wrestling, and drinking were indulged in. A comparison is drawn between this and similar rites among the ancient Semites and ancient Greeks. In India a Dravidian Paria acts as the temporary village priest. He uses a whip like the “gad whip” in Lincolnshire, and kills the lamb by tearing its throat with his teeth. A scramble takes place for the flesh, the people circulate the village, as some communities in our own country still perpetuate the ceremony of “riding the marches” of ancient burghs; then universal licence prevails. Similarly law was suspended at the ancient Scottish Hallowe'en celebrations; in some districts even in our own day Hallowe'en and New Year practical jokes and rowdyism is still prevalent. Herodotus refers to the universal licence and debauchery which characterized the Isis festival in Egypt.

A remarkable feature of post-Vedic religion in ancient India is the prominence given to the doctrine of metempsychosis (transmigration of souls) and the conception of the yugas or ages of the universe.

In the *Rigveda* the soul of the dead proceeds at once, or at any rate after burial, towards the next world. In one passage only is it spoken of “as departing to the waters or the plants”, and this reference, Professor Macdonell suggests,³⁸ “may contain the germs of the theory” of transmigration. In the speculative prose treatises, the *Upanishads*, which were composed in the Middle Country, the doctrine of metempsychosis is fully expounded. It does not follow, however, that it originated in India although it may have obtained there unrecognized by the priestly poets who composed the hymns to the deities, long before it became an essential tenet of orthodox or official religion. Other representative communities of the Brown race professed this doctrine which appears to have evolved from the vague belief shared by more than one primitive race, that the souls of the dead, and especially of dead children, were ever on the outlook for suitable mothers. Even in Central Australia a particular tribe has perpetuated “the germs of the theory”, which may also be traced in the widespread custom of visiting standing stones at a certain phase of the moon to perform a ceremony so that offspring may be obtained. The Upanishadic doctrine of metempsychosis is less likely to have been

³⁷ *Ethnology in Folklore*, George Laurence Gomme, p. 34 *et seq.*

³⁸ *A History of Sanskrit Literature*, p. 115.

so much coincidental as racial when we find that it is restricted to those areas where definite racial influences must have been at work. The Greeks believed in transmigration. So did also a section of the Egyptian people as Herodotus has stated and as is proved by references in folk-tales, temple chants and inscriptions.³⁹ As we show ([Chapter VI](#)), the Irish conception closely resembled the Indian, and it also obtained among the Gauls. There is no trace, however, that the Teutonic peoples were acquainted with the fully developed doctrine of metempsychosis; the souls of the dead departed immediately to Valhal, Hela, or the loathsome Nifelhel.

The doctrine of the world's ages is common to the Indian, Greek, and Irish mythologies, but is not found in Teutonic mythology either.⁴⁰ There are indications that it may have at one time obtained in Egypt, for there was an Age of Ra, then a deluge, an Age of Osiris, an Age of Set, &c.; but the doctrine, like other conceptions in Egypt, probably suffered from the process of priestly transformation in the interests of sectarian propaganda.

In India the ages are called the yugas, and this term has a totally different meaning in Vedic and Upanishadic times. Evidently the Bharata invasion and the establishment of the middle country power of their allies, the Kuru-Panchalas, was not unconnected with the introduction of the doctrines of metempsychosis and the yugas, and the prominence subsequently given to the worship of female deities.

If this theory can be established, we are confronted by an extremely interesting problem. It would appear that the mythology of the Vedic period bears a close resemblance to Teutonic, while that of the post-Vedic period connects more intimately with Greek, Celtic, and Egyptian. Assuming that the Vedic people were influenced by what we recognize as Teutonic modes of thought, do we find here proof that the Aryans came from Europe? In [Chapter II](#) it is shown that the Norse Heimdal displays points of resemblance to Agni. The former, however, has been developed almost beyond recognition as a fire god, and it is evident that we find him in northern Europe in his latest and most picturesque form. On the other hand, there is no dubiety about the origin of the Vedic Agni.

The evidence afforded by archaeology is highly suggestive in this connection. Scandinavia received its culture from the south at a comparatively late period in the Bronze Age, and it certainly exercised no intellectual influence in Europe in earlier times. Bronze is, of course, of less ethnic significance than beliefs, but it is difficult to believe, at the same time, that an isolated and poorly armed people could have imposed its intellectual culture over a wide area without having received anything in return. It is more probable that the northern Germanic peoples were subjected to the same influences which are traceable in their mythology and in the Vedic hymns, from a common source, and there may be more than mere mythology in the persistent tradition that the ancestors of the Teutons immigrated from Asia led by Odin. We need not assume that the movement was so much a racial as a cultural one, which emanated from a particular area where religious conceptions were influenced by particular habits of life and "immemorial modes of thought". Among the settled and agricultural peoples of the Brown race, the development of religious ideas followed different lines, and were similarly controlled by early ideas which sprang from different habits and experiences.

In the opening chapters we present various phases of Aryan life and religion in India, beginning with the worship of Indra, and concluding with the early stages of modern Hinduism. From the ancient tribal struggles of the Middle Country accumulated the hero songs which received epic treatment in the *Mahábhárata*, while the traditions of the "Easterners" were enshrined in the *Rámáyana*. Although neither of these great works can be regarded as historical narratives, they contain a mass of historical matter which throws much light on the habits and customs and beliefs of the early peoples.

³⁹ See *Egyptian Myth and Legend*.

⁴⁰ The "Golden Age" of the gods, and the regeneration of the world after Ragnarok, do not refer to the doctrine of the world's ages as found in other mythologies.

These epics were utilized by Brahmanical compilers for purposes of religious propaganda, and survive to us mainly as sacred books. In our pages we have given prominence to the heroic narrative which remains embedded in the mass of doctrinal treatises and mythological interpolations. The miraculous element is somewhat toned down in the accounts of conflicts, and the more dramatic phases of the heroic stories are presented in as full detail as space permits, so as to afford our readers glimpses of ancient life in northern India at a time when Vedic religion still held sway. This applies especially to the *Mahábhárata*, the kernel of which, no doubt, contains the hero songs of the Bharata and other tribes. The mythical conflicts of the *Rámáyana* appeal less to western minds than its purely human episodes. We cannot help being impressed by the chivalrous character of the leading heroes, the high sense of honour displayed by the princes, and the obedience shown by sons to their parents. We may weary of Rama's conflicts with giants and demons, but will long remember him as the child who pronounced his name as "Ama" and cried for the moon, or sat on his father's knee at meetings of the State Council. Our interest will also abide with him as a lover and a faithful husband who suffered wrong. His brothers are noble and heroic characters, worthy of Shakespeare. But even the Bard of Avon never depicted more wonderful and fascinating women than the heroines of the *Mahábhárata* and *Rámáyana*. Our gallery includes, among others, the noble and self-sacrificing Savitri, who rescued her husband from the clutches of death by exercise of her strong love and devotion; the faithful and virtuous Sita, and the sorrowful and constant Damayantí, and beautiful Shakuntalá. In western literature romance usually ends with marriage; in India the devotion of wives is of more account than the yearnings of love-smitten Juliets on moonlight nights.

Another aspect of Sanskrit literature is the feeling of the poets for Nature. These voluminous writers revelled in the luxuriant loveliness and splendour of Indian forests, and the charms of gleaming valleys and serene, snow-capped mountains; even the gods loved to hear the hum of insects and the songs of melodious birds, and, like mortals, to gather flowers of sweet scents and brilliant colours. Hundreds of songs were sung in praise of the lotus blooms that gemmed the clear waters of lakes and ponds, and Paradise was pictured as a jungle of beauty, fanned by soft winds, radiant with blossoms, and ever vocal with music and song. To illustrate this phase of India's classic literature, we reproduce at length the representative story of Nala with much of its poetic details.

The civilization revealed by the narrative poems was of no mean order. The ancient Aryans were chivalrous knights. No such barbaric incident occurs in the *Mahábhárata* battles as when in the *Iliad* the victorious Achilles drags behind his chariot the body of the slain Hector. When Arjuna, the Indian Achilles, slays Karna, the Indian Hector, he honours his fallen foe and performs those rites at the funeral pyre which assures the dead hero immortal bliss in Paradise. When, again, Arjuna mortally wounds Bhishma, he procures water to quench the thirst of his dying opponent. Even the villains are not without their redeeming qualities. Duryodhana of the *Mahábhárata*, who consents to the slaughter of his sleeping rivals, dies with grief because the innocent children of his enemies were slain. Rávana, the demon king of Ceylon, touches us in the *Rámáyana* by his grief for his son, who was slain fighting against Laksmana, brother of Rama.

To appreciate fully the sacred and romantic literature of India, we should follow the advice of Robert Louis Stevenson. "To learn aright from any teacher," he wrote, "we must first of all, like a historical artist, think ourselves into sympathy with his position." And if in endeavouring to understand the religious conceptions of the ancient forest sages, we, at times, find ourselves in difficulties, it may be that "if a saying is hard to understand, it is because we are thinking of something else"—we are looking on India with European eyes and with European prejudices. "There is always", said Stevenson, "a ruling spirit behind the code of rules, an attitude, a relation, a point of the compass, in virtue of which we conform or dissent."⁴¹

⁴¹ *Lay Morals*.

We are confident that our readers who peruse with sympathy and, we hope, with enjoyment, the chapters which follow, will feel themselves drawn closer than hitherto to the millions of our fellow subjects in the great dependency of the British Empire, by whom Rama and Yudhishtira are regarded as ideal types of strong manhood, and Savitri and Sita as perfect women and exemplary lovers and wives.



3
A VYASA, OR PUBLIC READER, RECITING THE MAHABHARATA

CHAPTER I

Indra, King of the Gods

Types of Hammer Gods—The Aryan Indra—Chinese World Shaper—Scottish Hunting Deity—Egyptian Artisan God—Greek and Roman Thunder Gods—Thor—Hittite, Assyrian, and other types—A Wail from Palestine—Babylonian Influence—Indra's Indian Character—A Nature Myth—Drought Demon slain—Gods and Demons in conflict—Origin of Indra's Thunderbolt—Demons' plot to destroy Universe—Babylonian Creation Myth—How Indra Shaped the World—Elfin Artisans in India, Egypt, and Germania—Babylonian Artisan God—Indra the Harvest God—The God of Battle—Comparison with Thor—Aryan Cattle Lifters—Indra's Queen and Attendants.

The ancient Eur-Asian “hammer god”, bearing the tribal name of Indra, accompanied the earliest invading bands of hunting and pastoral Aryans, who hailed with joy the “fresh woods and pastures new” of the Punjab, the green country of “Five Rivers”. This deity of wanderers and invaders was already of great antiquity and wide distribution; his attributes were in accord with the habits and ideals of his worshippers; they multiplied with the discoveries of man and were ever influenced by the conditions prevailing in new areas of localization. He was the Thunderer who brought rain to quicken dried-up pasture lands; he was the god of fertility, and he became the corn spirit; he was “the friend of man”; he was the artisan of the Universe which he shaped with his hammer, the dragon slayer, the giant killer, the slaughterer of enemies, the god of war. His racial significance must ever remain obscure. We cannot identify his original home, or even fix with certainty the archæological period in which he first took definite shape. It is possible that he may have been invoked and propitiated by Neolithic, or even by Palæolithic, flint knappers who struck fire from stone long ere they suspected the existence of metal; the primitive hunting and pastoral wanderers may have conceived of a thunder deity engaged in splintering the hills with his stone hammer, and fighting demons in the rude manner in which they themselves contended against beasts of prey. Memories of the Stone Age cling to the hammer god. Indra's bolt was “the all-dreaded thunderstone” of Shakespeare's lyric; until recently Palæolithic and Neolithic artifacts were reputed to be “elf bolts” and “thunder bolts” which fell from the sky; in Scandinavian folklore “the flint hills” are the fragments of the weapon wielded by the thunder giant Hrungner. The bolt or hammer ultimately became an axe; and according to the modern Greeks, lightning flashes are caused by the blows of the “sky axe” (astropeléki); Scottish Gaelic retains an immemorial reference to the “thunder ball” (peleir-tarnainach).

The hammer god's close association with hilly countries suggests that he was first worshipped on the steppes and then distributed by the nomads whose migrations were propelled by changing climatic conditions. He is found as far east as China, where, as P'an Ku, the dwarfish “first man”, he smites primeval rocks with his thunder hammer while engaged in the work of shaping the hills; he is found as far west as Scotland, where, as the hunting giant Finn-mac-Coul, “in height sixty feet”, he strikes with his hammer, “Ord na Feinne”, such mighty blows on his shield that he is heard by his followers in Lochlann (Scandinavia). From ancient Egypt come distant echoes of the world artisan Ptah, now a dwarf and anon a giant, who hammers out the copper sky, suggesting the presence in Memphis of early Asian settlers at the very dawn of history. In southern Europe the deity is Zeus-pater (Jupiter), the sublime wielder of the thunderbolt; in northern Europe he is lusty Thor, hurling Mjolner through the air against Jotuns, or cleaving valleys with it in the mountain range which he mistook for the giant Skrymer. We find the hammer god as Tarku among the Hittites; he is Indra in Mitanni as in the Punjab; he is Rammon, or Adad, who is carried aloft in triumph by the soldiers of Assur-banipal, the Assyrian Emperor; he is remembered in Palestine by the wail of Naaman, who

cried: “When my master goeth into the house of Rimmon to worship there, and he leaneth on my hand, and I bow myself in the house of Rimmon: when I bow down myself in the house of Rimmon, the Lord pardon thy servant in this thing...”⁴² The thunder god is also known in Babylon, which received many of its settlers from the hills of Elam and where Kassites, associated with Aryans, established a dynasty after successful invasion, prior to the discovery of the Punjab. The authorities are agreed that Aryan culture shows traces of Babylonian influence; it does not follow, however, that Indra is of Babylonian origin.

But although his name, which has been deciphered as “In-da-ra” at Boghaz-Köi in Asia Minor, may belong to the early Iranian period, the Vedic “King of the gods” assumed a distinctly Indian character after localization in the land of the “Five Rivers”; he ultimately stepped from his chariot, drawn by the steeds of the Aryan horse tamers, and mounted an elephant; his Heaven, called Swarga, which is situated on the summit of Mount Meru, eclipses Olympus and Valhal by reason of its dazzling Oriental splendour; his combats are reflections of the natural phenomena of Hindustan.

When the hot Indian summer draws to a close, the whole land is parched and athirst for rain; rivers are low and many hill streams have dried up; man and beast are weary and await release in the breathless enervating atmosphere; they are even threatened by famine. Then dense masses of cloud gather in the sky; the tempest bellows, lightnings flash and thunder peals angrily and loud; rain descends in a deluge; once again torrents pour down from the hills and rivers become swollen and turgid. Indra has waged his battle with the Drought Demons, broken down their fortress walls, and released the imprisoned cow-clouds which give nourishment to his human “friends”; the withered pastures become green with generous and rapid growth, and the rice harvest follows.

According to Vedic myth, Indra achieved his first great victory immediately after birth. Vritra, “the encompasser”, the Demon of Drought, was holding captive in his mountain fortress the cloud-cattle which he had harried in the approved manner of the Aryan raiders.⁴³ Mankind entreated the aid of the gods, “the shining ones, the world guardians”:

Who will take pity? Who will bring refreshment?
Who will come nigh to help us in distress?
Counsels the thoughts within our hearts are counselling,
Wishes are wished and soar towards the highest—
O none but them, the shining ones, are merciful,
My longing wings itself towards the Eternals.

⁴² 2 *Kings*, v, 18.

⁴³ One of the sections of the epic *Mahabharata* is called “Go-Harran”, which signifies “cattle harrying”.^[47] Like the giants and demons of Teutonic mythology, who fought with the gods in the Last Battle.



4

INDRA

From the Indra Temple, Ellora

Indra arose heroically to do battle for the sacrificers. Impulsively he seized the nectar of the gods, called Soma, and drank a deep draught of that intoxicating juice. Then he snatched up his thunderstone which had been fashioned by the divine artisan Twashtri, who resembles the Germanic Mimer, the “wonder smith”. His “favourite bays”, named the Bold and the Brown, were yoked in his golden chariot by his attendants and followers, the youthful Maruts.

Now, at the very beginning, Indra, the golden child, became the king of the three worlds. He it was who gave the air of life; he gave strength also. All the shining gods revered him and obeyed his commands. “His shadow is immortality; his shadow is death.”

The Maruts, the sons of red Rudra, were the spirits of tempest and thunder. To each of their chariots were yoked two spotted deer and one swift-footed, never-wearying red deer as leader. They

were stalwart and courageous youths, “full of terrible designs like to giants”; on their heads were golden helmets and they had golden breastplates, and wore bright skins on their shoulders; their ankles and arms were decked with golden bracelets. The Maruts were always strongly armed with bows and arrows and axes, and especially with gleaming spears. All beings feared those “cloud shakers” when they hastened forth with their lightning spears which “shattered cattle like the thunderstone”; they were wont to cleave cloud-rocks and drench the earth with quickening showers.

When Indra drove forth to attack the Drought Demon, the “hastening Maruts” followed him, shouting with loud voices: in “a shower” were the Maruts “let loose”; they dashed towards the imprisoned cows of the clouds and “chased them aloft”.

The dragon Vritra roared when Indra drew nigh; whereat heaven shook and the gods retreated. Mother Earth, the goddess Prithivi (prit’hi-vee), was troubled regarding her golden son. But Indra advanced boldly with the roaring Maruts; he was inspired by the hymns of the priests; he had drunken deeply of Soma; he was strengthened by the sacrifices offered on earth’s altars; and he wielded the thunderstone.

The Drought Demon deemed itself invulnerable, but Indra cast his weapon and soon discovered the vulnerable parts of its writhing body. He slew the monster; it lay prone before him; the torrents burst forth and carried it away to the sea of eternal darkness. Then Indra rejoiced and cried out:

I have slain Vritra, O ye hast'ning Maruts;
I have grown mighty through my own great vigour;
I am the hurler of the bolt of Thunder—
For man flow freely now the gleaming waters.

On earth the worshippers of the god were made glad; the Rishi hymned his praises:

I will extol the manly deeds of Indra:
The first was when the Thunder stone he wielded
And smote the Dragon; he released the waters,
He oped the channels of the breasted mountains.

He smote the dragon Vritra in its fortress—
Twashtri had shaped for him the thunder weapon—
Then rushing freely like to bellowing cattle
The gladsome waters to the sea descended.

Bull-spirited did Indra choose the Soma,
He drank its juices from the triple ladles;
Then clutched the Bounteous One his thunder weapon,
And fiercely smote the first-born of the Dragons.

The smitten monster fell amidst the torrents,
That pause nor stay, for ever surging onward;
Then Vritra covered by the joyful billows
Was carried to the darksome deeps of Ocean.

—*Rigveda*, i. 32.

A post-Vedic version of the encounter between Indra and the demon Vritra is given in the “Vana Parva” section of *Mahābhārata*. Although it is coloured by the change which, in the process of time, passed over the religious beliefs of the Aryans, it retains some features of the original myth

which are absent in the Vedic hymns. It should be understood that, at the period referred to, the belief obtained that the gods derived their powers from the saintly Rishis,⁴⁴ who fed them with sacrifices and underwent terrible penances, which enabled them to support or destroy the Universe at will.

It is related that in the Krita Age (the first Age of the Universe) a host of Dānāvas (giants and demons) were so strongly armed that they were invincible in battle. They selected the dragon Vritra as their leader, and waged war against the gods, whom they scattered in all directions.

Realizing that they could not regain their power until they accomplished the death of Vritra, the Celestials appeared before their Grandsire, the Supreme Being, Brahma, the incarnation of the Soul of the Universe. Brahma instructed them to obtain the bones of a Rishi named Dadhicha, from which to construct a demon-slaying weapon. So the gods visited the Rishi and bowed down before him, and begged the boon according to Brahma's advice.

Said Dadhicha: "O ye gods, I will renounce my body for your benefit."

Then the Rishi gave up his life, and from his bones the artisan god, Twashtri, shaped Indra's great weapon, which is called Vajra.⁴⁵

Twashtri spake to Indra and said: "With this, the best of weapons, O exalted one, reduce that fierce foe of the gods to ashes! And, having slain the foe, rule thou happily the entire domain of heaven, O chief of the celestials, with those that follow thee."⁴⁶

Then Indra led the gods against the mighty host. They found that Vritra was surrounded by dreaded Danavas, who resembled mountain peaks. A terrible conflict was waged, but once again the gods were put to flight. Then Indra saw Vritra growing bolder, and he became dejected. But the Supreme Being protected him and the gods endowed him with their strength, so that he became mightier than before. Thereupon Vritra was enraged, and roared loudly and fiercely, so that the heavens shook and the earth trembled with fear. Deeply agitated, Indra flung his divine weapon, which slew the leader of the Danavas. But Indra, thinking the demon was still alive, fled from the field in terror to seek shelter in a lake. The Celestials, however, perceived that Vritra had been slain, and they rejoiced greatly and shouted the praises of Indra. Then, rallying once more, the gods attacked the panic-stricken Danavas, who turned and fled to the depths of ocean. There in the fathomless darkness they assembled together, and began to plot how they would accomplish the destruction of the three worlds.⁴⁷

At length the dread conspirators resolved to destroy all the Rishis who were possessed of knowledge and ascetic virtue, because the world was supported by them. So they made the ocean their abode, raising billows high as hills for their protection, and they began to issue forth from their fortress to make attacks on the mighty saints.

In the Babylonian Story of Creation the female dragon Tiawath (Tiamat), whose name signifies "the sea",⁴⁸ desired to possess the world, and plotted against the gods with her horde of giant serpents, "raging dogs, scorpion men, fish men, and other terrible beings". The gods then selected Belus (Bel-Merodach) as their leader, and proclaimed him their king. He slew Tiawath and covered the heavens with one part of her body, and fashioned the earth with the other half. Then he set the moon and the stars in the sky, and afterwards created man: "he divided the darkness, separated the heavens from the earth, and reduced the universe to order".⁴⁹ The sun was the offspring of the moon.

⁴⁴ The deified poets and sages. See [Chapter VIII](#).

⁴⁵ Adolf Kaegi says: "Also Vadha or Vadhar", which he compares with German, *Wetter*; O.H. German, *Wetar*: Anglo-Saxon, *Weder*; English, *Weather*. The original word signifying the sudden change in atmospheric conditions caused by the thunderstorm was ultimately applied to all states of the air.

⁴⁶ Roy's translation of *Mahabharata*.

⁴⁷ Like the giants and demons of Teutonic mythology, who fought with the gods in the Last Battle.

⁴⁸ Like the giants and demons of Teutonic mythology, who fought with the gods in the Last Battle.

⁴⁹ *The Religion of Babylonia and Assyria*, by T. G. Pinches, LL.D.

The Indian Vedic and Epic dragon-slaying stories have evidently no connection, however, with a lost Creation myth. It is possible that they are part of the floating material from which Babylonian mythology was framed. At the same time Babylonian influences may not have been absent in the post-Vedic Age. Indra bears points of resemblance to Bel-Merodach, but he is not a Creator in the sublime sense; he is rather an artisan god like the Chinese P'an Ku, the lonely hammerman, and the Egyptian Ptah, who acquired a potter's wheel, in addition to his hammer, in the Nile valley.

Indra fashioned the universe in the simple manner that the early Aryans built their wooden houses.⁵⁰ How he obtained the requisite material puzzled the Vedic poets. It may be that there was a World Tree, however, like the great ash Ygdrasil of Teutonic mythology. After measuring space with the sun, Indra set up four corner posts and constructed the world walls; the roof was the cloud-thatched sky. The wide doors of the world opened to the east, and every morning they were opened to admit the sun, which Indra flung at evening into the darkness as a Neolithic man may have flung out a house torch. These doors are the “gates”, celebrated in the Vedic hymns, through which the gods entered to partake of the sacrifices and libations. Indra, who is called “an accomplished artisan”, is lauded as the god who “firmly secured the dominion of air in the frame of heaven and earth”. In another hymn it is told: “Indra measured six broad spaces, from which no existing thing is excluded: he it is who made the wide expanse of earth and the lofty dome of the sky, even he”. (V. i, 47:3, 4.)



5
INTERIOR OF A TEMPLE TO VISHNU (BRINDABAN)

In the work of shaping the universe Indra is assisted by the shadowy deities Savitri, who merged with Surya, the sun god, Brihaspati, “Lord of Prayer”, who merged with Agni, god of fire, and Vishnu, god of grace. He was also aided by the Ribhus, the artisans of the gods, who dwelt in the region of mid-air. Their number is given variously as three or the multiples of three; they were the sons of Sudhanvan, who was apparently identical with Indra, because “Indra is a Ribhu when he confers gifts”; indeed, the artisans are referred to as the children of the Thunder god. They make grass and herbs, and also channels for streams. In some respects they resemble the earth-gnomes, the Khnumu,

⁵⁰ *Cosmology of Rigveda*, Wallis.

“the modellers”, the helpers of the Egyptian artisan god Ptah, who shaped the world. “Countless little figures of these gods are found in Egyptian tombs; for even as once the Khnumu had helped in the making of the world, so would they help to reconstruct in all its members the body of the dead man in whose tomb they were laid.”⁵¹ The Ribhus similarly renovated aged and decrepit parents; “they reunited the old cow to the calf”; they are also credited with having shaped the heavens and the earth,⁵² and with having fashioned the “cow of plenty”, and also a man named Vibhvan.⁵³

According to the *Oxford Dictionary*, they are “the three genii of the seasons in Hindu mythology”. The Sanskrit word “Ribhu” is sometimes compared with the Germanic word “Elf”. Professor Macdonell considers it “likely that the Ribhus were originally terrestrial or aerial elves”.⁵⁴ They are evidently of common origin with the Teutonic elfin artisans who are associated with Thor, the Germanic Indra.

The mother of the Ribhus was Saranyu, daughter of Twashtri, “the Hindu Vulcan”, the “master workman”. Twashtri forms the organism in maternal wombs and supports the races of man.⁵⁵ As we have seen, he was the fashioner of Indra's thunderbolt: similarly the Teutonic elfin artisan Sindre makes Thor's hammer.⁵⁶

The two groups of Teutonic wonder-smiths were rivals; so were the Ribhus and Twashtri. The elfin artisans prove their skill in both cases by producing wonderful gifts for the gods. Loke acts as a mischief-making spy in Germanic myth, and Dadyak in Indian, and both lose their heads for wagers, but save them by cunning.

The Ribhus had provided the Celestials with horses and chariots, but Twashtri fashioned a wonderful bowl which filled itself with Soma for the gods. In the contest that ensued the Ribhus transformed the bowl into four cups. “This bowl”, says Professor Macdonell, “perhaps represents the moon, the four cups being its phases.” One of the Ribhus was a famous archer, like the elfin artisan Egil of Teutonic mythology.

The artisan of Babylonian mythology is Ea, father of Bel-Merodach. He is “King of the abyss, creator of everything, lord of all”. He was the god of artisans in general, and is identified with the sea-deity of the Persian Gulf—half-fish, half-man—who landed “during the day to teach the inhabitants the building of houses and temples, the gathering of fruits, and also geometry, law and letters”. His pupils included “potters, blacksmiths, sailors, stonecutters, gardeners, farmers, &c.”⁵⁷

The Ribhus and Twashtri were the artisans of nature, the spirits of growth, the genii of the seasons, the elves of earth and air. Indra's close association with them emphasizes his character as a god of fertility, who brought the quickening rain, and as the corn god, and the rice god. He was the son of Father Heaven and Mother Earth, two vague deities who were never completely individualized, but were never forgotten. Heaven was the sky-god Dyaus-pita (from div = to shine), the Zeus pater of the Greeks, Jupiter of the Romans, and Tivi⁵⁸ (later, Odin) of the Germanic peoples, whose wife was the earth-goddess Jord, mother of Thor. The Hindu earth-mother (Terra mater) was Prithivi. Dyaus is sometimes referred to as a ruddy bull, whose bellowing is the thunder; as the Night heaven he is depicted as a black steed decked with pearls which are the stars; in one of the Vedic hymns reference is made to his “thunderstone”. Prithivi, who is sometimes symbolized as a cow, is the source of all vegetation, the supporter of earth, the female principle. She never assumes the importance of the

⁵¹ *Religion of the Ancient Egyptians*, Professor A. Wiedemann, p. 137.

⁵² *Rigveda*, iv, 34. 9.

⁵³ *Cosmology of Rigveda*, Wallis.

⁵⁴ *A History of Sanskrit Literature*, pp. 106, 107.

⁵⁵ *Rigveda*, ii, 53; iii, 55.

⁵⁶ *Teutonic Myth and Legend*, pp. 35-9.

⁵⁷ *The Religion of Babylonia and Assyria*, T. G. Pinches, LL.D.

⁵⁸ An old Germanic name of Odin related to Divus. Odin's descendants were the “Tivar”. (Pronounce *Dyaus* as one syllable rhiming with *mouse*.)

Assyrian Ishtar, or the north Egyptian “earth-mother” Neith, or the “earth-mothers” of Europe. The Vedic Aryans were Great Father worshippers rather than Great Mother worshippers: their female deities were Night, Dawn, Earth, and the Rivers, but they were not sharply individualized until late; they are vague in the Vedas.

As the Greek Cronus (Roman Saturn) slew his father Urānus (Heaven), so did Indra slay his father Dyaus (Heaven). His earth-mother addresses him, saying: “Who has made thy mother a widow? Who has sought to slay the sleeping and the waking? What deity has been more gracious than thou, since thou hast slain thy father, having seized him by the foot?”⁵⁹

The Indian father-slaying myth appears to be connected with the doctrine of reincarnation. In the *Laws of Manu* it is stated that “the husband, after conception by his wife, becomes an embryo and is born again of her; for that is the wifeness of a wife, that he is born again by her”.⁶⁰ In the famous story of Shakuntālā, the husband is similarly referred to as the son of his wife, the son being a reincarnation of the father.⁶¹ This belief resembles the Egyptian conception which is summed up in the phrase “husband of his mother”.⁶²

At the barley harvest in spring and the rice harvest in autumn offerings were made to the gods. A sacrificial cake of the new barley or rice was offered to Indra and Agni, a mess of old grain boiled and mixed with milk and water was given to the other gods, and a cake was also offered to Father Heaven and Mother Earth in which clarified butter was an important ingredient; or the offering might consist entirely of butter, because “clarified butter is manifestly the sap of these two, Heaven and Earth; ... he (the offerer) therefore gladdens these two with their own sap or essence”.

The reason for this harvest offering is explained as follows: The gods and the demons contended for supremacy. It chanced that the demons defiled, partly by magic and partly by poison, the plants used by men and beasts, hoping thus to overcome the gods. Men ceased to eat and the beasts stopped grazing; all creatures were about to perish because of the famine.

Said the gods: “Let us rid the plants of this.”

Then they offered sacrifices and “accomplished all that they wanted to accomplish, and so did the Rishis”.

A dispute then arose among the gods as to who should partake of the offerings of the firstfruits—that is, of the new plants which replaced those the demons had poisoned. It was decided to run a race to settle the matter. Indra and Agni won the race and were therefore awarded the cake. These two gods were divine Kshatriyas (noblemen), the others were “common people”. Whatever Kshatriyas conquer, the commoners are permitted to share; therefore the other gods received the mess of old grain.

After the magic spell was removed from the plants by the gods, men ate food and cattle grazed once again. Ever afterwards, at the beginning of each harvest, the first fruits were offered up to Indra and Agni. The fee of the priest was the first-born calf “for that is, as it were, the firstfruits of the cattle”.⁶³

The popular Thunder god of the Vedic period bears a close resemblance to the hard-drinking, kindly, and impulsive Thor, the Teutonic god of few words and mighty deeds, the constant “friend of man” and the inveterate enemy of demons. In the hymns Indra is pictured as a burly man, with “handsome, prominent nose”, “good lips”, and “comely chin”; he is “long-necked, big-bellied, strongly armed”, and has a weakness for ornaments. He is much addicted to drinking “sweet, intoxicating Soma”; he “fills his stomach”; he quaffs “thirty bowls” at a single draught ere he hastens to combat

⁵⁹ *Rigveda*, iv, 18. Wilson, vol. iii, p. 153.

⁶⁰ *The Laws of Manu*, ix, 8; p. 329. (*Sacred Books of the East*, vol. xxv.)

⁶¹ *Adi Parva*, sect. lxxiv of *Mahabharata*, Roy's translation.

⁶² See *Egyptian Myth and Legend*.

⁶³ *The Satapatha Brahmana*, translated by Professor J. Eggeling, Part I, pp. 369, 373. (*Sacred Books of the East*, vol. xii.)

against “hostile air demons”. Sometimes he is placed in a difficulty when two tribes of his worshippers are in conflict: both cry to him for victory, but—

The god giveth victory unto him
Who with generous heart pours out
The draught he thirsts for—
Nor feels regret in giving;
Indra joins with him upon the battlefield.

Rigveda, iv, 24. 2-6.

The Aryans, who were as notorious cattle lifters as the Gauls and the Scottish Highlanders, were wont to invoke the god ere they set out on a raid, chanting with loud voices:

Indra, whose riches are boundless, O grant us
Thousands of beautiful cows and horses:
Destroy, thou mighty one, all who despise us,
Visit with death all those who would harm us, and
Indra, whose riches are boundless, O grant us,
Thousands of beautiful cows and horses.

Wilson's translation.

In other hymns the Thor-like character of Indra, the war god, is naively depicted. A sceptic is supposed to say: “Many men declare that there is no Indra. Who ever saw him? Why should we adore him?”

The god makes answer: “O singer, I *am*: behold me! I am here now, and I am greater than any living being. I delight in the performance of holy rites. I am also the Destroyer; I can hurl creation to ruin.” *Rigveda, viii, 89.*

I never knew a man to speak so to me,
When all his enemies are safely conquered;
Yea, when they see how fierce the battle rages,
They even promise me a pair of bullocks.

When I am absent in far distant places,
Then all with open hands their gifts would bring me ...
Lo! I will make the wealthy niggard needy,
Seize by the foot and on the hard rock dash him.

Rigveda, x, 27.

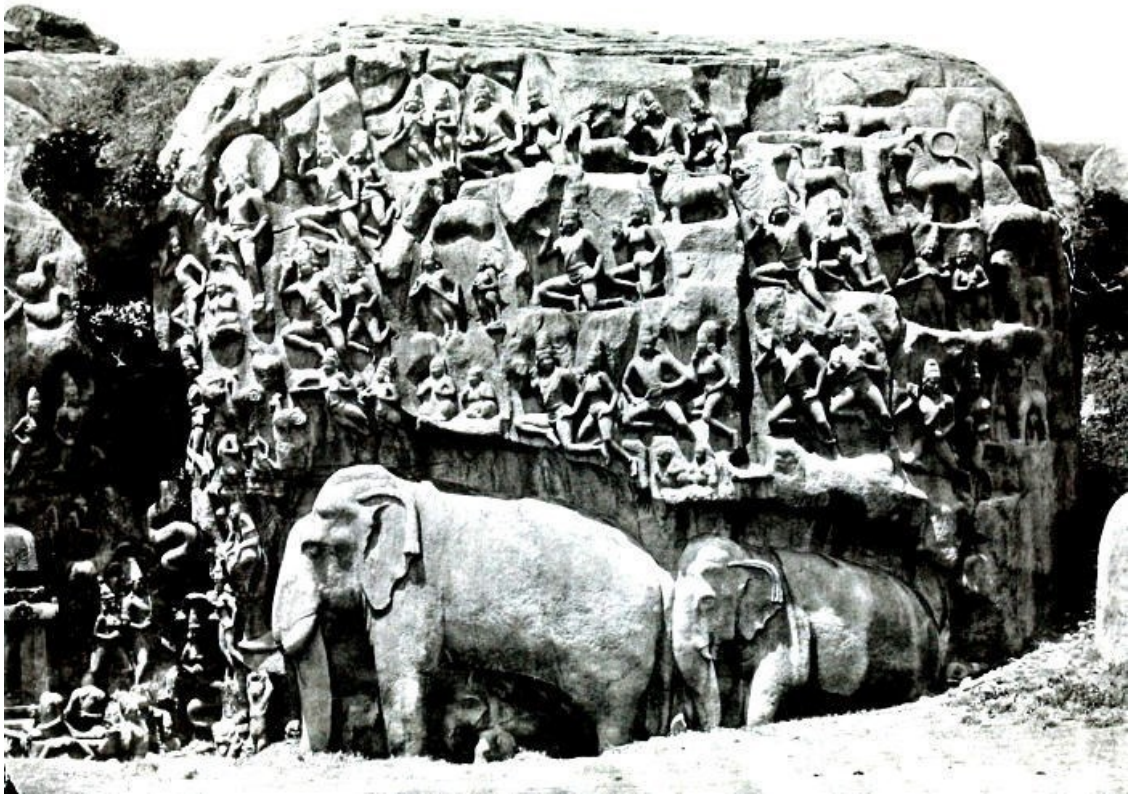
The lord of both the worlds hates all the haughty,
He cares for those who feel themselves but human.

Rigveda, vi, 47.⁶⁴

These verses recall: “Silence, thou evil one,” roared Thor, “or else with my hammer shall I strike thy head off and end thy life.”

⁶⁴ Arrowsmith's translation.

Then did Loke answer humbly: “Silent indeed I shall be now, O Thor, for I know full well thou wilt strike.”⁶⁵



6

THE PARADISE OF INDRA

From a Rock Sculpture at Mâmallapuram

The human qualities of Indra are illustrated in epic narrative. Arjuna, the Indian Achilles, is his son, and pays a visit to the brilliant Celestial city on the summit of Mount Meru, where flowers are ever blooming, and pretty nymphs dance to pleasure battle-slain warriors.

Arjuna saluted his divine sire. “And Indra thereupon embraced him with his round and plump arms. And taking his hand, Shakra (Indra) made him sit on a portion of his own seat.... And the lord of the Celestials—that slayer of hostile heroes—smelt the head of Arjuna, bending in humility, and even took him upon his lap.... Moved by affection, the slayer of Vritra touched that beautiful face with his own perfumed hands. And the wielder of the thunderbolt, patting and rubbing gently again and again with his own hands, which bore the marks of the thunderbolt, the handsome and large arms of Arjuna, which resembled a couple of golden columns and were hard in consequence of drawing the bowstring and shooting arrows, began to console him. And the slayer of Vritra ... eyeing his son of curling locks smilingly and with eyes expanded with delight, seemed scarcely to be gratified. The more he gazed, the more he liked to gaze on. And seated on one seat, the father and son enhanced the beauty of the assembly, like the sun and moon beautifying the firmament together.”⁶⁶

Indra was attended in his heaven by vague spirits, called Vasus, who appear to have acted as his counsellors. When Bhishma, a hero of the great Bhārata war, was slain in battle, he was given a place among the Vasus. The Thunder god's queen is a shadowy personality, and is called Indrani.

⁶⁵ *Teutonic Myth and Legend*, p. 173.

⁶⁶ *Vana Parva* section of *Mahābhārata*, sect. xliii, Roy's translation.

Indra was attended by a dog, as befitted a deity of primitive huntsmen. After the early Aryan period, he showed less favour for his bays and chariot, and seated himself upon a great white elephant, “the handsome and ever victorious”, named Airavata; it “was furnished with four tusks” and “resembled the mountain of Kailasa with its summits”.

CHAPTER II

The Great Vedic Deities

Agni the Fire God—Source of Life—The Divine Priest—Myths regarding his Origin—The Child God—Resemblances to Heimdall and Scyld—Messenger of the Gods—Martin Elginbrodde—Vayu or Vata, the Wind God—Teutonic Vate and Odin—The Hindu “Wild Huntsman”—Rudra the Howler—The Rain God—Sublime Varuna—The Omniscient One—Forgiver of Sins—Mitra, an ancient Deity—Babylonian Prototype—A Sun God—A Corn God—Mitanni Deities—Surya, the Sun God—The Adityas—Ushas, Goddess of Dawn—Ratri, Night—Chandra, the Moon—Identified with Soma—The Mead of the Gods—A Humorous Hymn—Sources of Life—Origin of Spitting Ceremonies.

Agni, the fire god, was closely associated with Indra, and is sometimes called his twin brother. The pair were the most prominent deities in Vedic times: about 250 hymns are addressed to Indra and over 200 to Agni.

Indra gave the “air of life” to men; Agni symbolized the “vital spark”, the principle of life in animate and inanimate Nature; he was in man, in beast, and fish; he was in plants and trees; he was in butter and in intoxicating Soma. The gods partook of the nature of Agni. In one of the post-Vedic Creation myths he is identified with the Universal soul; Brahma existed in the form of Agni ere the worlds were framed and gods and men came to be. Agni was made manifest in lightning, in celestial sun flames, in the sacred blaze rising from the altar and in homely household fires. The fire god was the divine priest as contrasted with Indra, the divine warrior.

In the Vedic invocations there are evidences that several myths had gathered round the fascinating and wonderful fire god. One hymn refers to him as a child whose birth was kept a secret; his mother, the queen, concealed him from his sire; he was born in full vigour as a youth, and was seen sharpening his weapons at a distance from his home which he had forsaken.⁶⁷ Sometimes he is said to have devoured his parents at birth: this seems to signify that he consumed the fire sticks from which holy fire was produced by friction. Another hymn says that “Heaven and Earth (Dyaus and Prithivi) fled away in fear of (the incarnation of) Twashtri when he was born, but they returned to embrace the lion”.⁶⁸

Agni was also given ten mothers who were “twice five sisters”,⁶⁹ but the reference is clearly explained in another passage: “The ten fingers have given him birth, the ancient, well-loved Agni, well born of his mothers”.⁷⁰

Dawn, with its darkness-consuming fires, and starry Night, are the sisters of Agni; “they celebrate his three births, one in the sea, one in the sky, one in the waters (clouds)”. Typical of the Oriental mind is the mysterious reference to Agni's “mothers” owing their origin to him. The poet sings:

Who among you hath understood the hidden (god)?
The calf has by itself given birth to its mothers.

⁶⁷ *Rigveda*, v, 2.

⁶⁸ *Rigveda*, i, 95.

⁶⁹ *Rigveda*, iv, 6. 8.

⁷⁰ *Rigveda*, iii, 23. 3.

Professor Oldenberg, who suggests that the waters are the “mothers”, reasons in Oriental mode: “Smoke is Agni, it goes to the clouds, the clouds become waters”.⁷¹



7

AGNI, THE FIRE GOD

From a painting by Nanda Lall Bose

(By permission of the Indian Society of Oriental Art, Calcutta)

In his early humanized form Agni bears some resemblance to Heimdal, the Teutonic sentinel god, who has nine mothers, the daughters of sea-dwelling Ran, and is thus also a “son of the waters”; he is clad in silvern armour, and on his head is a burnished helmet with ram's horns. Horsed on his swift steed, Gulltop, he watches the demons who seek to attack the citadel of the gods.... His sight

⁷¹ *Rigveda*, i, 95. 4, and note, Oldenberg's *Vedic Hymns (Sacred Books of the East, vol. xlvi)*.

is so keen that he can see by night as well as by day.... Heimdal is loved both by gods and by men, and he is also called Gullintani because his teeth are of gold. There was a time when he went to Midgard (the earth) as a child; he grew up to be a teacher among men and was named Scef. Scef is identified as the patriarch Scyld in *Beowulf*, who came over the sea as a child and rose to be the king of a tribe. Mankind were descended from Heimdal-Scef: three sons were born to him of human mothers—Thrall, from whom thralls are descended; Churl, the sire of freemen, and Jarl from whom nobles have sprung.⁷²

In *Mahabharata* there is a fragment of an old legend which relates the origin of Karna, the son of Queen Pritha and the sun god: the birth of the child is concealed, and he is placed in a basket which is set afloat on the river and is carried to a distant country.⁷³

One of the Vedic references to Agni, as we have seen, suggests an origin similar to Karna of the epic period. He was connected with the introduction of agriculture like the Teutonic Scef, which signifies “Sheaf”. Agni is stated to have been “carried in the waters.... The great one has grown up in the wide unbounded space. The waters (have made) Agni (grow)”.⁷⁴ Agni is “sharp faced” (i, 95); he is “the bright, brilliant, and shining one” (iv, i, 7); he is “gold toothed” (v, 22); he sees “even over the darkness of night” (i, 94, 7); he “makes all things visible”; he conquers the godless, wicked wives; he sharpens his two horns in order to pierce Rakshasas (giants) (v, 2). “O Agni, strike away with thy weapons those who curse us, the malicious ones, all ghouls, be they near or far” (i, 94, 9). Heimdal blows a trumpet in battle; Agni is “roaring like a bull” (i, 94, 10).

As Heimdal, in his Scef-child form, was sent to mankind by the gods, “Matarisvan⁷⁵ brought Agni to Bhrigu as a gift, precious like wealth, of double birth, the carrier, the famous, the beacon of the sacrifice, the ready, the immediately successful messenger.... The Bhrigus worshipping him in the abode of the waters have verily established him among the clans of Ayu. The people have established beloved Agni among the human clans as (people) going to settle (establish) Mitra” (i, 60). Oldenberg explains that people going anywhere secure safety by ceremonies addressed to Mitra, i.e. by concluding alliances under the protection of Mitra. Another reference reads, “Agni has been established among the tribes of men, the son of the waters, Mitra acting in the right way”. Oldenberg notes that Mitra is here identified with Agni; Mitra also means “friend” or “ally” (iii, 5, 3, and note). Scyld in *Beowulf*, the mysterious child of the sea, became a king over men. Agni “indeed is king, leading all beings to gloriousness. As soon as born from here, he looks over the whole world.... Agni, who has been looked and longed for in Heaven, who has been looked for on earth—he who has been looked for has entered all herbs” (i, 98).⁷⁶ To Agni's love affairs upon earth there are epic references, and in the “Vishnu Purana” he is mentioned as the father of three human sons.

The reference to the Bhrigus, to whom Agni is carried, is of special interest. This tribe did not possess fire and were searching for it (*Rigveda*, x, 40, 2). In another poem the worshippers of Agni are “human people descended from Manush (Manu)” (vi, 48, 8). The Bhrigus were a priestly family descended from the patriarch Bhrigu: Manu was the first man. Two of the Teutonic patriarch names are Berchter and Mannus.

Agni was the messenger of the gods; he interceded with the gods on behalf of mankind and conducted the bright Celestials to the sacrifice. The priest chanted at the altar:

⁷² *Teutonic Myth and Legend*, pp. 16 and 187-9.

⁷³ See [Chapter X](#).

⁷⁴ Oldenberg, *Rigveda*, iii, 1.

⁷⁵ A demi-god.

⁷⁶ *Vedic Hymns*, trans. by Oldenberg. (*Sacred Books of the East*, vol. xlvi.)

Agni, the divine ministrant of the sacrifice, the greatest bestower of treasures; may one obtain through Agni wealth and welfare day by day, which may bring glory and high bliss of valiant offspring.

Agni, whatever sacrifice and worship thou encompassest on every side, that indeed goes to the gods. Thou art King of all worship.... Conduct the gods hither in an easy-moving chariot.⁷⁷

Like Indra, Agni was a heavy consumer of Soma; his intensely human side is not lost in mystic Vedic poetry.

Agni, accept this log, conqueror of horses, thou who lovest songs and delightest in riches....

Thou dost go wisely between these two creations (Heaven and Earth) like a friendly messenger between two hamlets....

His worshippers might address him with great familiarity, as in the following extracts:—

If I were thee and thou wert me, thine aspirations should be fulfilled.

Rigveda, xiii, 44. 23.

If, O Agni, thou wert a mortal and I an immortal, I would not abandon thee to wrong or to penury: my worshippers should not be poor, nor distressed, nor miserable.

Rigveda, viii, 19.

These appeals are reminiscent of the quaint graveyard inscription:

Here lie I, Martin Elginbrodde.
Hae mercy on my soul, Lord God,
As I wad dae were I Lord God,
And ye were Martin Elginbrodde.

The growth of monotheistic thought is usually evinced in all mythologies by the tendency to invest a popular deity with the attributes of other gods. Agni is sometimes referred to as the sky god and the storm god. In one of the hymns he is entreated to slay demons and send rain as if he were Indra:

O Agni, overcome our enemies and our calamities;
Drive away all disease and the Rakshasas—
Send down abundance of waters
From the ocean of the sky.

Rigveda, x, 98. 12.

⁷⁷ *Rigveda*, i, 13 and i, 26 (Oldenberg).

Indra similarly absorbed, and was absorbed by, the wind god Vayu or Vata, who is also referred to as the father of the Maruts and the son-in-law of the artisan god Twashtri. The name Vata has been compared to Vate, the father of the Teutonic Volund or Wieland, the tribal deity of the Watlings or Vaetlings; in old English the Milky Way was “Watling Street”. Comparisons have also been drawn with the wind god Odin—the Anglo-Saxon Woden, and ancient German Wuotan (pronounced Vuotan). “The etymological connection in this view”, writes a critic, “is not free from difficulty.”⁷⁸ Professor Macdonell favours the derivation from “va” = “to blow”.

The Indian Vata is invoked, as Vayu, in a beautiful passage in one of the hymns which refers to his “two red horses yoked to the chariot”: he had also, like the Maruts, a team of deer. The poet calls to the wind:

Awake Purandhu (Morning) as a lover awakes a sleeping maid...
Reveal heaven and earth....
Brighten the dawn, yea, for glory, brighten the dawn....

These lines recall Keats at his best:

There is no light
Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown....

Ode to the Nightingale.

A stirring hymn to the wind god loses much of its vigour and beauty in translation:

Sublime and shining is the car of Vata;
It sweeps resounding, thundering and crashing;
Athwart the sky it wakens ruddy flashes,
Or o'er the earth it sets the dust-clouds whirling.

The gusts arise and hasten unto Vata,
Like women going to a royal banquet;
In that bright car the mighty god is with them,
For he is rajah of the earth's dominions.

When Vata enters on the paths of heaven,
All day he races on; he never falters;
He is the firstborn and the friend of Ocean—
Whence did he issue forth? Where is his birthplace?

He is the breath⁷⁹ of gods: all life is Vata:
He cometh, yea, he goeth as he listeth:
His voice is heard; his form is un beholden—
O let us offer sacrifice to Vata.

Rigveda, x, 168.

Another wind or storm god is Rudra, also the father of the Maruts, who are called “Rudras”. He is the “Howler” and “the Ruddy One”, and rides a wild boar. Saussaye calls him “the Wild Huntsman

⁷⁸ Art. “Aryan Religion”, Hastings' *Ency. Rel. and Ethics*.

⁷⁹ The air of life = the spirit.

of Hindu Mythology”. He is chiefly of historical interest because he developed into the prominent post-Vedic god Shiva, the “Destroyer”, who is still worshipped in India. The poets invested him with good as well as evil qualities:

Rudra, thou smiter of workers of evil,
The doers of good all love and adore thee.
Preserve me from injury and every affliction—
Rudra, the nourisher.

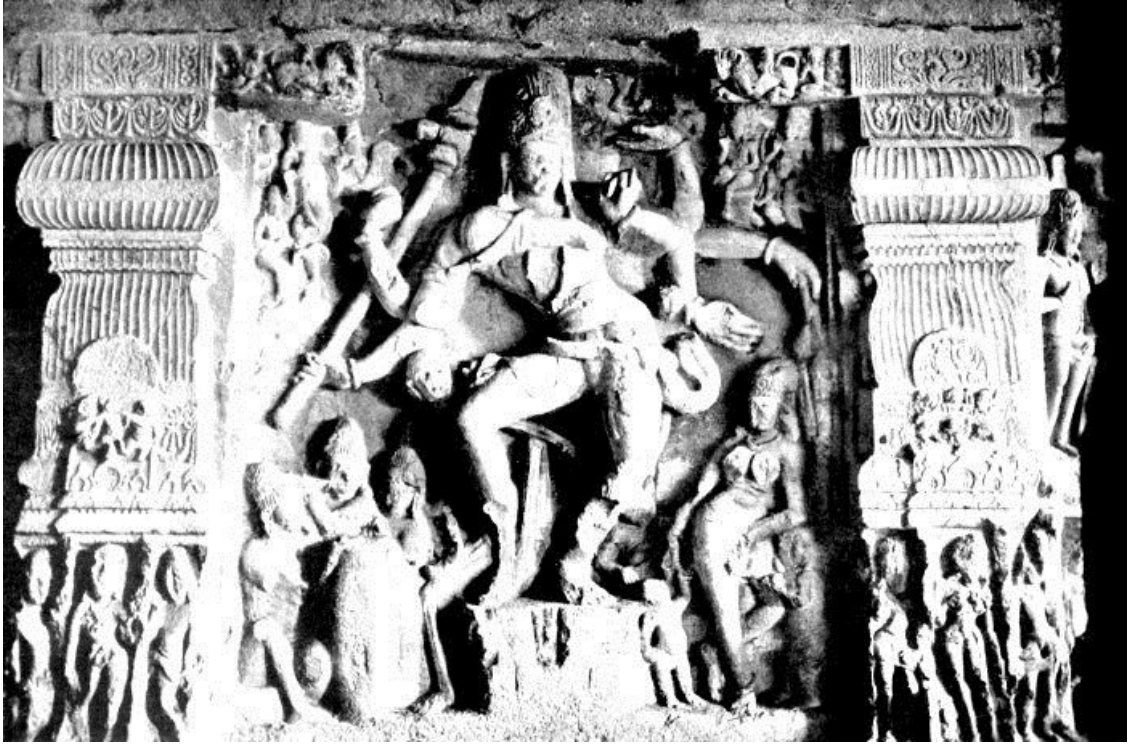
Give unto me of thy medicines, Rudra,
So that my years may reach to a hundred;
Drive away hatred, shatter oppression,
Ward off calamity.

Rigveda, ii, 33.

The rain cloud was personified in Parjanya, who links with Indra as the nourisher of earth, and with Agni as the quickener of seeds.

Indra's great rival, however, was Varuna, who symbolized the investing sky: he was “the all-enveloping one”. The hymns impart to him a character of Hebraic grandeur. He was the sustainer of the universe, the lawgiver, the god of moral rectitude, and the sublime sovereign of gods and men. Men worshipped him with devoutness, admiration, and fear. “It is he who makes the sun to shine in heaven; the winds that blow are but his breath; he has hollowed out the channels of the rivers which flow at his command, and he has made the depths of the sea. His ordinances are fixed and unassailable; through their operation the moon walks in brightness, and the stars which appear in the nightly sky, vanish in daylight. The birds flying in the air, the rivers in their sleepless flow, cannot attain a knowledge of his power and wrath. But he knows the flight of the birds in the sky, the course of the far-travelling wind, the paths of ships on the ocean, and beholds all secret things that have been or shall be done. He witnesses men's truth and falsehood.”⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Muir's *Original Sanscrit Texts*, v, 58, ff.



8

SHIVA'S DANCE OF DESTRUCTION, ELLORA (see pages [147-8](#))

He is the Omniscient One. Man prayed to him for forgiveness for sin, and to be spared from the consequences of evil-doing:

May I not yet, King Varuna,
Go down into the house of clay:
Have mercy, spare me, mighty Lord.

O Varuna, whatever the offence may be
That we as men commit against the heavenly folk,
When through our want of thought we violate thy laws,
Chastise us not, O god, for that iniquity.

*Rigveda, vii, 89.*⁸¹

His messengers descend
Countless from his abode—for ever traversing
This world and scanning with a thousand eyes its inmates.
Whate'er exists within this earth, and all within the sky,
Yea, all that is beyond, King Varuna perceives....
May thy destroying snares, cast sevenfold round the wicked,
Entangle liars, but the truthful spare, O King!

*Rigveda, iv, 16.*⁸²

⁸¹ Professor Macdonell's *A History of Sanskrit Literature*.

⁸² *Indian Wisdom*, Sir Monier Williams.

In contrast to the devotional spirit pervading the Varuna hymns is the attitude adopted by Indra's worshippers; the following prayer to the god of battle is characteristic:—

O Indra, grant the highest, best of treasures,
A judging mind, prosperity abiding,
Riches abundant, lasting health of body,
The grace of eloquence and days propitious.

Rigveda, ii, 21. 6.

The sinner's fear of Varuna prompted him to seek the aid of other gods. Rudra and the Moon are addressed:

O remove ye the sins we have sinned,
What evil may cling to us sever
With bolts and sharp weapons, kind friends,
And gracious be ever.
From the snare of Varuna deliver us, ward us,
Ye warm-hearted gods, O help us and guard us.

Associated with Varuna was the God Mitra (the Persian Mithra). These deities are invariably coupled and belong to the early Iranian period. Much controversy has been waged over their pre-Vedic significance. Some have regarded Mithra as the firmament by day with its blazing and fertilizing sun, and Varuna as the many-eyed firmament of night, in short, the twin forms of Dyaus. Prof. E. V. Arnold has shown, however, that in the Vedas, Mithra has no solar significance except in his association with Agni. The fire god, as we have seen, symbolized the principle of fertility in Nature: he was the “vital spark” which caused the growth of “all herbs”, as well as the illuminating and warmth-giving flames of sun and household hearth.

Mitra as Mithra with Varuna, and a third vague god, Aryaman, belong to an early group of equal deities called the Adityas, or “Celestial deities”. “It would seem that the worship of these deities”, says Prof. Arnold, “was already decaying in the earliest Vedic period, and that many of them were then falling into oblivion.... In a late Vedic hymn we find that Indra boasts that he has dethroned Varuna, and invites Agni to enter his own service instead. We may justly infer from all these circumstances that the worship of the ‘celestials’ occupied at one time in the history of the race a position of greater importance than its place in the *Rigveda* directly suggests.”⁸³

The following extracts from a Mitra-Varuna hymn indicate the attitude of the early priests towards the “Celestial deities”:—

To the gods Mitra and Varuna let our praise go forth with power, with
all reverence, to the two of mighty race.

These did the gods establish in royal power over themselves, because
they were wise and the children of wisdom, and because they excelled
in power.

They are protectors of hearth and home, of life and strength; Mitra and
Varuna, prosper the mediations of your worshippers....

⁸³ *The Rigveda*, by Professor E. Vernon Arnold, p. 16 (*Popular Studies in Mythology, Romance, and Folklore*).

As the sun rises to-day do I salute Mitra and Varuna, and glorious Aryaman.... The blessings of heaven are our desire....

Prof. Arnold's translation.

In Babylonian mythology the sun is the offspring of the moon. The Semitic name of the sun god is Samas (Shamash), the Sumerian name is Utu; among other non-Semitic names was Mitra, “apparently the Persian Mithra”. The bright deity also “bears the names of his attendants ‘Truth’ and ‘Righteousness’, who guided him upon his path as judge of the earth”.⁸⁴

It may be that the Indian Mitra was originally a sun god; the religion of the sun god Mithra spread into Europe. “Dedications to Mithra the Unconquered Sun have been found in abundance.”⁸⁵ Vedic references suggest that Mitra had become a complex god in the pre-Vedic Age, being probably associated with a group of abstract deities—his attributes symbolized—who are represented by the Adityas. The Mitra-Varuna group of Celestials were the source of all heavenly gifts; they regulated sun and moon, the winds and waters and the seasons. If we assume that they were of Babylonian or Sumerian origin—deities imported by a branch of Aryan settlers who had been in contact with Babylonian civilization—their rivalry with the older Aryan gods, Indra and Agni, can be understood. Ultimately they were superseded, but the influence exercised by their cult remained and left its impress upon later Aryan religious thought.

The Assyrian word “metru” signifies rain.⁸⁶ The quickening rain which caused the growth of vegetation was, of course, one of the gifts of the Celestials of the firmament. It is of interest to note, therefore, in this connection that Professor Frazer includes the western Mithra among the “corn gods”. Dealing with Mithraic sculptures, which apparently depict Mithra as the sacrificer of the harvest bull offering, he says: “On certain of these monuments the tail of the bull ends in three stalks of corn, and in one of them cornstalks instead of blood are seen issuing from the wound inflicted by the knife”.⁸⁷

Commenting on the Assyrian “metru” Professor Moulton says: “If this is his (Mithra's) origin, we get a reasonable basis for the Avestan (Early Persian and Aryan) use of the word to denote a ‘contract’, as also for the fact that the deity is in the Avesta patron of Truth and in the Veda of Friendship. He is ‘the Mediator’ between Heaven and Earth, as the firmament was by its position, both in nature and mythology: an easy corollary is his function of regulating the relations of man and man.”

The character of an imported deity is always influenced by localization and tribal habits. Pastoral nomads would therefore have emphasized the friendliness of Mithra, who sent rain to cause the growth of grass on sun-parched steppes. Both Mithra and Varuna had their dwelling-place in the sea of heaven, the waters “above the firmament” from which the rain descended. Ultimately the Indian Mitra vanished, being completely merged in Varuna, who became the god of ocean after the Aryans reached the sea coast. In post-Vedic sacred literature the priestly theorists, in the process of systematizing their religious beliefs, taught that a great conflict took place between the gods and demons. When order was restored, the various deities were redistributed. Indra remained the atmospheric god of battle, and Varuna became the god of ocean, where, as the stern judge and lawgiver and the punisher of wrongdoers, he kept watch over the demons. In the “Nala and Damayanti” epic narrative, the four “world guardians” are: Indra, king of the gods; Agni, god of fire; Varuna, god of waters; and Yama, judge of the dead.

It may be that the displacement of Varuna as supreme deity was due to the influence of the fire-worshipping cult of Agni, who was imported by certain unidentified Aryan tribes that entered India. Agni did not receive recognition, apparently, from the other Aryan “folk-wave”, which established

⁸⁴ *The Religion of Babylonia and Assyria*, by Dr. T. G. Pinches, p. 68.

⁸⁵ Frazer's “Golden Bough” (*Adonis, Attis, Osiris*, p. 255, n., third edition).

⁸⁶ Professor H. W. Hogg, in Professor Moulton's *Early Religious Poetry of Persia*, p. 37.

⁸⁷ “The Golden Bough” (*Spirits of the Corn and Wild*, vol. ii, p. 10).

a military aristocracy at Mitanni in Mesopotamia, and held sway for a period over the Assyrians and some of the Hittite tribes. An important inscription, which is dated about 1400 B.C., has been deciphered at Boghaz-Köi in Asia Minor by Professor Hugo Winckler, who gives the names of the following deities:

“Mi-it-ra, Uru-w-na, In-da-ra, and Na-sa-at-ti-ia”—

Mitra, Varuna, Indra, Nasatya. The latter is Nasatyau, the Vedic Aswins, twin gods of morning, who have been compared to the Greek Dioskouri (Castor and Pollux), sons of Zeus.

A Vedic triad, which suggests a rival cult to that of the worshippers of Varuna and other Adityas, is formed by Vayu (wind), Agni (fire), and Surya (the sun).

The Indian sun god Surya, like the Egyptian Ra, had three forms. The rising sun was Vivasvat; the setting sun was Savitri.

Vivasvat was the son-in-law of Twashtri, the artisan of Nature; he was an abstract deity, and apparently owed his origin to the group of Adityas.

Savitri, who had yellow hair, was of pre-Vedic origin. He was the “Stimulator”. When he commanded Night to approach, men ceased their labours, birds sought their nests, and cattle their sheds.⁸⁸

During the long centuries covered by the Vedic period many “schools of thought” must have struggled for supremacy. The Vivasvat myth belongs, it would appear, to the time before the elephant was tamed by the Aryans. Aditi, the mother of the Adityas, who is believed to be of later origin than her children, had eight sons. She cherished seven of them; the eighth, which was a shapeless lump, was thrown away, but was afterwards moulded into Vivasvat, the sun; the pieces of the lump which were cast away by the divine artisan fell upon the earth and gave origin to the elephant, therefore elephants should not be caught, because they partake of divine nature.

⁸⁸ *Rigveda*, ii, 38.



9

SURYA IN HIS CHARIOT

From the Kailâsa Temple, Ellora

Surya is an Aryanized sun god. He drives a golden chariot drawn by seven mares, or a mare with seven heads; he has golden hair and golden arms and hands. As he is alluded to as “the eye of Varuna and Mitra”, and a son of Aditi, it is evident that if he did not originally belong to the group of Adityas, he was strongly influenced by them. In his Savitri character, which he possesses at morning as well as at evening, he stimulates all life and the mind of man. One of the most sacred and oldest mantras (texts) in the Vedas is still addressed by Brahmans to the rising sun. It runs:—

Let us meditate on that excellent glory of the divine Vivifier,

May he enlighten (or stimulate) our understandings.⁸⁹

The feeling for Nature pervades the ancient religion and literature of India. Priests were poets and singers in early Vedic times. A Rishi was a composer of hymns to the gods, and several are named in the collections. Every great family appears to have had its bardic priest, and its special poetic anthology which was handed down from generation to generation. Old poems might be rewritten and added to, but the ambition of the sacred poet was to sing a new song to the gods. The oldest Vedic hymns are referred to as “new songs”, which suggests that others were already in existence.

These Rishis looked upon Nature with the poet's eye. They symbolized everything, but they revelled also in the gorgeous beauty of dawn and evening, the luxuriance of Indian trees and flowers, the serene majesty of Himalayan mountains, the cascades, the rivers, and the shining lakes. The wonder and mystery of the world inspired their hymns and their religion. Even the gods took delight in the songs of birds, the harping of forest winds, the humming of bees, the blossoming trees, and the flower-decked sward. Heaven has its eternal summer and soft scented winds, its lotus-gemmed lakes and never-fading blooms.

The effulgence and silence of dawn inspired some of the most beautiful Vedic hymns. Dawn is Ushas, the daughter of Dyaus; she is the Indian Aurora:

Hail, ruddy Ushas, golden goddess, borne
Upon thy shining car, thou comest like
A lovely maiden by her mother decked,
Disclosing coyly all thy hidden graces
To our admiring eyes; or like a wife
Unveiling to her lord, with conscious pride,
Beauties which, as he gazes lovingly,
Seem fresher, fairer, each succeeding morn.
Through years and years thou hast lived on, and yet
Thou'rt ever young. Thou art the breath of life
Of all that breathes and lives, awaking day by day
Myriads of prostrate sleepers, as from death,
Causing the birds to flutter from their nests,
And rousing men to ply with busy feet
Their daily duties and appointed tasks,
Toiling for wealth, or pleasure, or renown.⁹⁰

The Vedic poets “looked before and after”. One sang:

In ages past did mortals gaze
On Ushas veiled in gleaming gold.
We who are living watch her rays,
And men unborn will her behold.

Rigveda, i, 113. 11.

Night, Ratri, is the sister of Dawn. The one robes herself in crimson and gold; the other adorns her dark raiment with gleaming stars. When benevolent Ratri draws nigh, men turn towards their

⁸⁹ *Indian Wisdom*, p. 20.

⁹⁰ *Indian Wisdom*, Sir Monier Williams.

homes to rest, birds seek their nests, cattle lie down; even the hawk reposes. The people pray to the goddess to be protected against robbers and fierce wolves, and to be taken safely across her shadow:

She, the immortal goddess, throws her veil
Over low valley, rising ground, and hill.
But soon with bright effulgence dissipates
The darkness she produces; soon advancing
She calls her sister Morning to return,
And then each darksome shadow melts away.

*Rigveda, x.*⁹¹

The moon is the god Chandra, who became identified with Soma. Among ancient peoples the moon was regarded as the source of fertility and growth; it brought dew to nourish crops which ripened under the “harvest moon”; it filled all vegetation with sap; it swayed human life from birth till death; it influenced animate and inanimate Nature in its periods of increase and decline; ceremonies to secure offspring were performed during certain phases of the moon.

Soma was the intoxicating juice of the now unknown Soma plant, which inspired mortals and was the nectar of the gods. The whole ninth book of the *Rigveda* is devoted to the praises of Soma, who is exalted even as the chief god, the Father of all.

This Soma is a god; he cures
The sharpest ills that man endures.
He heals the sick, the sad he cheers,
He nerves the weak, dispels their fears;
The faint with martial ardour fires,
With lofty thought the bard inspires,
The soul from earth to heaven he lifts,
So great and wondrous are his gifts;
Men feel the god within their veins,
And cry in loud exulting strains:
We've quaffed the Soma bright
And are immortal grown:
We've entered into light
And all the gods have known.
What mortal now can harm,
Or foeman vex us more?
Through thee beyond alarm,
Immortal god, we soar.⁹²

“The sun”, declared one of the poets, “has the nature of Agni, the moon of Soma.” At the same time Agni was a great consumer of Soma; when it was poured on the altar, the fire god leapt up joyfully. The beverage was the “water of life” which was believed to sustain the Adityas and the earth, and to give immortality to all the gods; it was therefore called Amrita (ambrosia).

As in Teutonic mythology, the Hindu giants desired greatly to possess the “mead” to which the gods owed their power and supremacy. The association of Soma with the moon recalls the Germanic belief that the magic mead was kept for Odin, “the champion drinker”, by Mani, the moon god,

⁹¹ *Indian Wisdom*, Sir Monier Williams.

⁹² Muir's *Original Sanskrit Texts*, v, 130.

who snatched it from the mythical children who are the prototypes of “Jack and Jill” of the nursery rhyme.⁹³ Indra was the discoverer of the Soma plant and brought it from the mountains. The Persian mead (mada) was called Haoma.

The priests drank Soma when they made offerings and lauded the gods. A semi-humorous Rigvedic hymn compares them to the frogs which croak together when the rain comes after long drought.

Each (frog) with merry croak and loudly calling
Salutes the other, as a son his father;
What one calls out, another quickly answers,
Like boys at school their teacher's words repeating...
They shout aloud like Brahmans drunk with Soma,
When they perform their annual devotions.

*Rigveda, vii, 103.*⁹⁴

There are references in the *Rigveda* to the marriage of Soma, the moon, and Suryá, the maiden of the sun.

In Vedic religion many primitive beliefs were blended. We have seen, for instance, that life was identified with breath and wind; the “spirit” left the body as the last breath. Agni worshippers regarded fire as “the vital spark”. Soma worship, on the other hand, appears to be connected with the belief that life was in the blood; it was literally “the life blood”. The “blood of trees” was the name for sap; sap was water impregnated or vitalized by Soma, the essence of life. Water worship and Soma worship were probably identical, the moon, which was believed to be the source of growth and moisture, being the fountain head of “the water of life”. In Teutonic mythology the “mead” is taken from a hidden mountain spring, which issued from “Mimer's well” in the Underworld. Odin drank from Mimer's well and obtained wisdom and long life. The “mead” was transported to the moon. The “mead” was also identified with saliva, the moisture of life, and spitting ceremonies resulted; these survive in the custom still practised in our rural districts of spitting on the hand to seal a bargain; “spitting stones” have not yet entirely disappeared. Vows are still taken in India before a fire. References to contracts signed in blood are common and widespread.

⁹³ See *Teutonic Myth and Legend*.

⁹⁴ Kaegi's *Rigveda*, Arrowsmith's translation. This was apparently a rain charm; its humour was of the unconscious order, of course.

CHAPTER III

Yama, the First Man, and King of the Dead

Burial Customs—Inhumation and Cremation—Yama the First Man—The Discoverer of Paradise—His Twin Sister—Persian Twin Deities—Yama and Mitra—Yama as Judge of the Dead—The “Man in the Eye”—Brahman's Deal with Dharma-Yama—Sacrifice for a Wife—Story of Princess Savitri—Her Husband's Fate—How she rescued his Soul from Yama—The Heavens of Yama, Indra, and Varuna—Teutonic, Greek, and Celtic Heavens—Paradise denied to Childless Men—Religious Need for a Son—Exposure of Female Infants—Infanticide in Modern India—A Touching Incident.

In early Vedic times the dead might be either buried or cremated. These two customs were obviously based upon divergent beliefs regarding the future state of existence. A Varuna hymn makes reference to the “house of clay”, which suggests that among some of the Aryan tribes the belief originally obtained that the spirits of the dead hovered round the place of sepulture. Indeed, the dread of ghosts is still prevalent in India; they are supposed to haunt the living until the body is burned.

Those who practised the cremation ceremony in early times appear to have conceived of an organized Hades, to which souls were transferred through the medium of fire, which drove away all spirits and demons who threatened mankind. Homer makes the haunting ghost of Patroklos exclaim, “Never again will I return from Hades when I have received my meed of fire”.⁹⁵ The Vedic worshippers of Agni burned their dead for the same reason as did the ancient Greeks. “When the remains of the deceased have been placed on the funeral pile, and the process of cremation has commenced, Agni, the god of fire, is prayed not to scorch or consume the departed, not to tear asunder his skin or his limbs, but, after the flames have done their work, to convey to the fathers the mortal who has been presented to him as an offering. Leaving behind on earth all that is evil and imperfect, and proceeding by the paths which the fathers trod, invested with a lustre like that of the gods, it soars to the realms of eternal light in a car, or on wings, and recovers there its ancient body in a complete and glorified form; meets with the forefathers who are living in festivity with Yama; obtains from him, when recognized by him as one of his own, a delectable abode, and enters upon more perfect life, which is crowned with the fulfilment of all desires, is passed in the presence of the gods, and employed in the fulfilment of their pleasure.”⁹⁶

Agni is the god who is invoked by the other deities, “Make straight the pathways that lead to the gods; be kind to us, and carry the sacrifice for us”.⁹⁷

In this connection, however, Professor Macdonell says, “Some passages of the *Rigveda* distinguish the path of the fathers or dead ancestors from the path of the gods, doubtless because cremation appeared as a different process from sacrifice”.⁹⁸

It would appear that prior to the practice of cremation a belief in Paradise ultimately obtained: the dead walked on foot towards it. Yama, King of the Dead, was the first man.⁹⁹ Like the Aryan pioneers who discovered the Punjab, he explored the hidden regions and discovered the road which became known as “the path of the fathers”.

⁹⁵ *Iliad*, xxiii, 75.

⁹⁶ Muir, *Original Sanskrit Texts*, v. 302.

⁹⁷ *Rigveda*, x. 51 (Arnold's translation).

⁹⁸ *A History of Sanskrit Literature*, p. 117.

⁹⁹ As was also Manu of a different or later cult.

To Yama, mighty king, be gifts and homage paid.
He was the first of men that died, the first to brave
Death's rapid rushing stream, the first to point the road
To heaven, and welcome others to that bright abode.

*Sir M. Monier
Williams' translation.* ¹⁰⁰

Professor Macdonell gives a new rendering of a Vedic hymn¹⁰¹ in which Yama is referred to as follows:

Him who along the mighty heights departed,
Him who searched and spied the path for many,
Son of Vivasvat, gatherer of the people,
Yama the king, with sacrifices worship.

Rigveda, x, 14. 1.

Yama and his sister Yamí, the first human pair, are identical with the Persian Yima and Yimeh of Avestan literature; they are the primeval “twins”, the children of Vivasvat, or Vivasvant, in the *Rigveda* and of Vivahvant in the *Avesta*. *Yama* signifies twin, and Dr. Rendel Harris, in his researches on the Greek Dioscuri cult, shows that among early peoples the belief obtained widely that one of each pair of twins was believed to be a child of the sky. “This conjecture is borne out by the name of Yama's father (Vivasvant), which may well be a cult-epithet of the bright sky, ‘shining abroad’ (from the root *vas*, ‘to shine’)”.... In the *Avesta* ‘Yima, the bright’ is referred to: he is the Jamshid of Fitzgerald's Omar.¹⁰²



¹⁰⁰ From *Indian Wisdom*.

¹⁰¹ *A History of Sanskrit Literature*, p. 117.

¹⁰² *Early Religious Poetry of Persia*, Professor J. H. Moulton, p. 42.

THE KAILASA TEMPLE OF SHIVA, ELLORA

Yima, the Iranian ruler of Paradise, is also identical with Mitra (Mithra), whose cult “obtained from 200-400 A.D. a world-wide diffusion in the Roman Empire, and came nearer to monotheism than the cult of any other god in paganism”.¹⁰³

Professor Moulton wonders if the Yama myth “owed anything to Babylon?” It is possible that the worshippers of Agni represented early Iranian beliefs, and that the worshippers of Mitra, Varuna, and the twins (Yama and Yima and the twin Aswins) were influenced by Babylonian mythology as a result of contact, and that these opposing sects were rivals in India in early Vedic times.

In one of the hymns¹⁰⁴ Yami is the wooer of her brother Yama. She declares that they were at the beginning intended by the gods to be husband and wife, but Yama replies:

“Who has sure knowledge of that earliest day? Who has seen it with his eyes
and can tell of it? Lofty is the law of Mitra and Varuna; how canst thou dare to
speak as a temptress?”

Arnold's translation.

In the Vedic “land of the fathers”, the shining Paradise, the two kings Varuna and Yama sit below a tree. Yama, a form of Mitra, plays on a flute and drinks Soma with the Celestials, because Soma gives immortality. He gathers his people to him as a shepherd gathers his flock: indeed he is called the “Noble Shepherd”. He gives to the faithful the draught of Soma; apparently unbelievers were destroyed or committed to a hell called Put. Yama's messengers were the pigeon and the owl; he had also two brindled watch-dogs, each with four eyes. The dead who had faithfully fulfilled religious ordinances were addressed:

Fear not to pass the guards—
The four-eyed brindled dogs—that watch for the departed.
Return unto thy home, O soul! Thy sin and shame
Leave thou behind on earth; assume a shining form—
Thine ancient shape—refined and from all taint set free.

Sir M. Monier

*Williams' translation.*¹⁰⁵

Yama judged men as Dharma-rajah, “King of righteousness”; he was Pitripati, “lord of the fathers”; Samavurti, “the impartial judge”; Kritana, “the finisher”; Antaka, “he who ends life”; Samana, “the leveller”, &c.

In post-Vedic times he presided over a complicated system of Hells; he was Dandadhara, “the wielder of the rod or mace”. He had a noose with which to bind souls; he carried out the decrees of the gods, taking possession of souls at their appointed time.

In one of the *Brahmanas* death, or the soul which Death claims as his own, is “the man in the eye”. The reflection of a face in the pupil of the eye was regarded with great awe by the early folk; it was the spirit looking forth. We read, “Now that man in yonder orb (of the sun) and that man in the right eye truly are no other than Death; his feet have stuck fast in the heart, and having pulled them out, he comes forth; and when he comes forth then that man dies; whence they say of him who has passed away, ‘he has been cut off’ (life or life-string has been severed)”.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ *A History of Sanskrit Literature*, Professor Macdonell, p. 68.

¹⁰⁴ *Rigveda*, x, 10.

¹⁰⁵ From *Indian Wisdom*.

¹⁰⁶ *Satapatha Brahmana*, translated by Professor Eggeling, Part IV, 1897, p. 371 (*Sacred Books of the East*).

Yama might consent to prolong the life of one whose days had run out, on condition that another individual gave up part of his own life in compensation; he might even agree to restore a soul which he had bound to carry away, in response to the appeal of a mortal who had attained to great piety. The Vedic character of Yama survives sometimes in Epic narrative even after cremation had become general. The following two touching and beautiful stories, preserved in *Mahabharata*, are probably very ancient Aryan folk tales which were cherished by the people and retold by the poets, who attached to them later religious beliefs and practices.

THE BRAHMAN AND HIS BRIDE

Once upon a time Menaka, the beautiful Apsara (celestial fairy), who is without shame or pity, left beside a hermitage her new-born babe, the daughter of the King of Gandharvas (celestial elves). A pious Rishi, named Sthula-kesha, found the child and reared her. She was called Pramadarva, and grew to be the most beautiful and most pious of all young women. Ruru, the great grandson of Bhrigu, looked upon her with eyes of love, and at the request of his sire, Pramati, the virgin was betrothed to the young Brahman.

It chanced that Pramadarva was playing with her companions a few days before the morning fixed for the nuptials. As her time had come, she trod upon a serpent, and the death-compelling reptile bit her, whereupon she fell down in a swoon and expired. She became more beautiful in death than she had been in life.

Brahmans assembled round the body of Pramadarva and sorrowed greatly. Ruru stole away alone and went to a solitary place in the forest where he wept aloud. "Alas!" he cried, "the fair one, whom I love more dearly than ever, lieth dead upon the bare ground. If I have performed penances and attained to great ascetic merit, let the power which I have achieved restore my beloved to life again."

Suddenly there appeared before Ruru an emissary from the Celestial regions, who spake and said: "Thy prayer is of no avail, O Ruru. That one whose days have been numbered can never get back her own life again. Thou shouldst not therefore abandon thine heart to grief. But the gods have decreed a means whereby thou canst receive back thy beloved."

Said Ruru: "Tell me how I can comply with the will of the Celestials, O messenger, so that I may be delivered from my grief."

The messenger said: "If thou wilt resign half of thine own life to this maiden, Pramadvara, she will rise up again."

Said Ruru: "I will resign half of my own life so that my beloved may be restored unto me."

Then the king of the Gandharvas and the Celestial emissary stood before Dharma-rajah (Yama) and said: "If it be thy will, O Mighty One, let Pramadarva rise up endowed with a part of Ruru's life."

Said the Judge of the Dead: "So be it."

When Dharma-rajah had spoken thus, the serpent-bitten maiden rose from the ground, and Ruru, whose life was curtailed for her sake, obtained the sweetest wife upon earth. The happy pair spent their days deeply devoted to each other, awaiting the call of Yama at the appointed time.¹⁰⁷

STORY OF SAVITRI

There was once a fair princess in the country of Madra, and her name was Savitri. Be it told how she obtained the exalted merit of chaste women by winning a great boon from Yama.

¹⁰⁷ From *Adi Parva* section of *Mahabharata*.

Savitri was the gift of the goddess Gayatri,¹⁰⁸ wife of Brahma, the self-created, who had heard the prayers and received the offerings of Aswapati, the childless king of Madra, when he practised austere penances so that he might have issue. The maiden grew to be beautiful and shapely like to a Celestial; her eyes had burning splendour, and were fair as lotus leaves; she resembled a golden image; she had exceeding sweetness and grace.

It came to pass that Savitri looked with eyes of love upon a youth named Satyavan “the Truthful”. Although Satyavan dwelt in a hermitage, he was of royal birth. His father was a virtuous king, named Dyumatsena, who became blind, and was then deprived of his kingdom by an old enemy dwelling nigh to him. The dethroned monarch retired to the forest with his faithful wife and his only son, who in time grew up to be a comely youth.

When Savitri confessed her love to her sire, the great sage Narada, who sat beside him, spoke and said: “Alas! the princess hath done wrong in choosing for her husband this royal youth Satyavan. He is comely and courageous, he is truthful and magnanimous and forgiving, he is modest and patient and without malice; honour is seated upon his forehead; he is possessed of every virtue. But he hath one defect, and no other. He is endued with short life; within a year from this day he must die, for so hath it been decreed; within a year Yama, god of the dead, will come for him.”

Said the king unto his daughter: “O Savitri, thou hast heard the words of Narada. Go forth, therefore, and choose for thyself another lord, for the days of Satyavan are numbered.”

The beautiful maiden made answer unto her father the king, saying: “The die is cast; it can fall but once; once only can a daughter be given away by her sire; once only can a woman say, ‘*I am thine*’. I have chosen my lord; once have I chosen, nor can I make choice a second time. Let his life be brief or be long, I must now wed Satyavan.”

Said Narada: “O king, the heart of thy daughter will not waver; she will not be turned aside from the path she hath selected. I therefore approve of the bestowal of Savitri upon Satyavan.”

The king said: “As thou dost advise, so must I do ever, O Narada, because that thou art my preceptor. Thee I cannot disobey.”

Then said Narada: “Peace be with Savitri! I must now depart. May blessings attend upon all of you!”

Thereafter Aswapati, the royal sire of Savitri, went to visit Dyumatsena, the blind sire of Satyavan, in the forest, and his daughter went with him.

Said Dyumatsena: “Why hast thou come hither?”

Aswapati said: “O royal sage, this is my beautiful daughter Savitri. Take thou her for thy daughter-in-law.”

Said Dyumatsena: “I have lost my kingdom, and with my wife and my son dwell here in the woods. We live as ascetics and perform great penances. How will thy daughter endure the hardships of a forest life?”

Aswapati said: “My daughter knoweth well that joy and sorrow come and go and that nowhere is bliss assured. Accept her therefore from me.”

Then Dyumatsena consented that his son should wed Savitri, whereat Satyavan was made glad because he was given a wife who had every accomplishment. Savitri rejoiced also because she obtained a husband after her own heart, and she put off her royal garments and ornaments and clad herself in bark and red cloth.

So Savitri became a hermit woman. She honoured Satyavan's father and mother, and she gave great joy to her husband with her sweet speeches, her skill at work, her subdued and even temper, and especially her love. She lived the life of the ascetics and practised every austerity. But she never

¹⁰⁸ Saraswati's rival. Brahma took Gayatri, the milkmaid, as a second wife, because his chief wife, Saraswati, despite her wisdom, arrived late for a certain important ceremony, at which the spouse of the god was required.

forgot the dread prophecy of Narada the sage; his sorrowful words were always present in her secret heart, and she counted the days as they went past.

At length the time drew nigh when Satyavan must cast off his mortal body. When he had but four days to live, Savitri took the *Tritatra* vow of three nights of sleepless penance and fast.

Said the blind Dyumatsena: "My heart is grieved for thee, O my daughter, because the vow is exceedingly hard."

Savitri said: "Be not sorrowful, saintly father, I must observe my vow without fail."

Said Dyumatsena: "It is not meet that one like me should say, 'Break thy vow,' rather should I counsel, 'Observe thy vow.'"

Then Savitri began to fast, and she grew pale and was much wasted by reason of her rigid penance. Three days passed away, and then, believing that her husband would die on the morrow, Savitri spent a night of bitter anguish through all the dark and lonely hours.

The sun rose at length on the fateful morning, and she said to herself, "*To-day is the day.*" Her face was bloodless but brave; she prayed in silence and with fervour and offered oblations at the morning fire; then she stood before her father-in-law and her mother-in-law in reverent silence with joined hands, concentrating her senses. All the hermits of the forest blessed her and said: "Mayest thou never suffer widowhood."

Said Savitri in her secret heart: "So be it."

Dyumatsena spoke to her then, saying: "Now that thy vow hath been completed thou mayest eat the morning meal."

Said Savitri: "I will eat when the sun goes down."

Hearing her words Satyavan rose, and taking his axe upon his shoulder, turned towards the distant jungle to procure fruits and herbs for his wife, whom he loved. He was strong and self-possessed and of noble seeming.

Savitri spoke to him sweetly and said: "Thou must not go forth alone, my husband. It is my heart's desire to go with thee. I cannot endure to-day to be parted from thee."

Said Satyavan: "It is not for thee to enter the darksome jungle; the way is long and difficult, and thou art weak on account of thy severe penance. How canst thou walk so far on foot?"

Savitri laid her head upon his bosom and said: "I have not been made weary by my fast. Indeed I am now stronger than before. I will not feel tired when thou art by my side. I have resolved to go with thee: do not therefore seek to thwart my wish—the wish and the longing of a faithful wife to be with her lord."

Said Satyavan: "If it is thy desire to accompany me I cannot but gratify it. But thou must ask permission of my parents lest they find fault with me for taking thee through the trackless jungle."

Then Savitri spoke to the blind sage and her husband's mother and said: "Satyavan is going towards the deep jungle to procure fruits and herbs for me, and also fuel for the sacrificial fires. It is my heart's wish to go also, for to-day I cannot endure to be parted from him. Fain, too, would I behold the blossoming woods."

Said Dyumatsena: "Since thou hast come to dwell with us in our hermitage thou hast not before asked anything of us. Have thy desire therefore in this matter, but do not delay thy husband in his duties."

Having thus received permission to depart from the hermitage, Savitri turned towards the jungle with Satyavan, her beloved lord. Smiles covered her face, but her heart was torn with secret sorrow.

Peacocks fluttered in the green woodland through which they walked together, and the sun shone in all its splendour in the blue heaven.

Said Satyavan with sweet voice: "How beautiful are the bright streams and the blossoming trees!"

The heart of Savitri was divided into two parts: with one she held converse with her husband while she watched his face and followed his moods; with the other she awaited the dread coming of Yama, but she never uttered her fears.

Birds sang sweetly in the forest, but sweeter to Savitri was the voice of her beloved. It was very dear to her to walk on in silence, listening to his words.

Satyavan gathered fruits and stored them in his basket. At length he began to cut down the branches of trees. The sun was hot and he perspired. Suddenly he felt weary and he said: "My head aches; my senses are confused, my limbs have grown weak, and my heart is afflicted sorely. O silent one, a sickness hath seized me. My body seems to be pierced by a hundred darts. I would fain lie down and rest, my beloved; I would fain sleep even now."

Speechless and terror-stricken, the gentle Savitri wound her arms about her husband's body; she sat upon the ground and she pillowed his head upon her lap. Remembering the words of Narada, she knew that the dread hour had come; the very moment of death was at hand. Gently she held her husband's head with caressing hands; she kissed his panting lips; her heart was beating fast and loud. Darker grew the forest and it was lonesome indeed.

Suddenly an awful Shape emerged from the shadows. He was of great stature and sable hue; his raiment was blood-red; on his head he wore a gleaming diadem; he had red eyes and was fearsome to look upon; he carried a noose.... The Shape was Yama, god of death. He stood in silence, and gazed upon slumbering Satyavan.

Savitri looked up, and when she perceived that a Celestial had come nigh, her heart trembled with sorrow and with fear. She laid her husband's head upon the green sward and rose up quickly; then she spake, saying, "Who art thou, O divine One, and what is thy mission to me?"

Said Yama: "Thou dost love thy husband; thou art endued also with ascetic merit. I will therefore hold converse with thee. Know thou that I am the Monarch of Death. The days of this man, thy husband, are now spent, and I have come to bind him and take him away."

Savitri said: "Wise sages have told me that thy messengers carry mortals away. Why, then, O mighty King, hast thou thyself come hither?"

Said Yama: "This prince is of spotless heart; his virtues are without number; he is, indeed, an ocean of accomplishments. It would not be fitting to send messengers for him, so I myself have come hither."

The face of Satyavan had grown ashen pale. Yama cast his noose and tore out from the prince's body the soul-form, which was no larger than a man's thumb; it was tightly bound and subdued.

So Satyavan lost his life; he ceased to breathe; his body became unsightly; it was robbed of its lustre and deprived of power to move.

Yama fettered the soul with tightness, and turned abruptly towards the south; silently and speedily he went upon his way....

Savitri followed him.... Her heart was drowned in grief. She could not desert her beloved lord.... She followed Yama, the Monarch of Death.

Said Yama: "Turn back, O Savitri. Do not follow me. Perform the funeral rites of thy lord.... Thine allegiance to Satyavan hath now come to an end: thou art free from all wifely duties. Dare not to proceed farther on this path."

Savitri said: "I must follow my husband whither he is carried or whither he goeth of his own will. I have undergone great penance. I have observed my vow, and I cannot be turned back.... I have already walked with thee seven paces, and the sages have declared that one who walketh seven paces with another becometh a companion. Being thus made thy friend, I must hold converse with thee, I must speak and thou must listen.... I have attained the perfect life upon earth by performing my vows and by reason of my devotion unto my lord. It is not meet that thou shouldest part me from my husband now, and prevent me from attaining bliss by saying that my allegiance to him hath ended and another mode of life is opened to me."

Said Yama: “Turn back now.... Thy words are wise and pleasing indeed; therefore, ere thou goest, thou canst ask a boon of me and I will grant it. Except the soul of Satyavan, I will give thee whatsoever thou dost desire.”

Savitri said: “Because my husband's sire became blind, he was deprived of his kingdom. Restore his eyesight, O mighty One.”

Said Yama: “The boon is granted. I will restore the vision of thy father-in-law.... But thou hast now grown faint on this toilsome journey. Turn back, therefore, and thy weariness will pass away.”

Savitri said: “How can I be weary when I am with my husband? The fate of my husband will be my fate also; I will follow him even unto the place whither thou dost carry him.... Hear me, O mighty One, whose friendship I cherish! It is a blessed thing to behold a Celestial; still more blessed is it to hold converse with one; the friendship of a god must bear great fruit.”

Said Yama: “Thy wisdom delighteth my heart. Therefore thou canst ask of me a second boon, except the life of thy husband, and it will be granted thee.”

Savitri said: “May my wise and saintly father-in-law regain the kingdom he hath lost. May he become once again the protector of his people.”

Said Yama: “The boon is granted. The king will return to his people and be their wise protector.... Turn back now, O princess; thy desire is fulfilled.”

Savitri said: “All people must obey thy decrees; thou dost take away life in accordance with divine ordinances and not of thine own will. Therefore thou art called Yama—he that ruleth by decrees. Hear my words, O divine One. It is the duty of Celestials to love all creatures and to award them according to their merit. The wicked are without holiness and devotion, but the saintly protect all creatures and show mercy even unto their enemies.”

Said Yama: “Thy wise words are like water to a thirsty soul. Ask of me therefore a third boon, except thy husband's life, and it will be granted unto thee.”

Savitri said: “My sire, King Aswapati, hath no son. O grant that a hundred sons may be born unto him.”



11

YAMA AND SAVITRI

From a painting by Nanda Lall Bose

(By permission of the Indian Society of Oriental Art, Calcutta)

Said Yama: “A hundred sons will be born unto thy royal sire. Thy boon is granted.... Turn back, therefore, O princess; thou canst not come farther. Long is the path thou hast already travelled.”

Savitri said: “I have followed my husband and the way hath not seemed long. Indeed, my heart desireth to go on much farther. Hear my words, O Yama, as thou dost proceed on thy journey. Thou art great and wise and powerful; thou dost deal equally with all human creatures; thou art the lord of justice.... One cannot trust oneself as one can trust a Celestial; therefore, one seeketh to win the friendship of a Celestial. It is meet that one who seeketh the friendship of a Celestial should make answer to his words.”

Said Yama: “No mortal hath ever spoken unto me as thou hast spoken. Thy words are indeed pleasing, O princess. I will grant thee even a fourth boon, except thy husband's life, ere thou dost depart.”

Savitri said: “May a century of sons be born unto my husband and me so that our race may endure. O grant me this, the fourth boon, thou Mighty One.”

Said Yama: “I grant unto thee a century of sons, O princess; they will be wise and powerful and thy race will endure.... Be without weariness now, O lady, and turn back; thou hast come too far already.”

Savitri said: “Those who are pious must practise eternal morality, O Yama. The pious uphold the universe. The pious hold communion with the pious only, and are never weary; the pious do good unto others nor ever expect any reward. A good deed done unto the righteous is never thrown away; such an act doth not entail loss of dignity nor is any interest impaired. Indeed, the doing of good is the chief office of the righteous, and the righteous therefore are the true protectors of all.”

Said Yama: “The more thou dost speak, the more I respect thee, O princess. O thou who art so deeply devoted unto thy husband, thou canst now ask of me some incomparable boon.”

Savitri said: “O mighty One, thou bestower of boons, thou hast already promised what cannot be fulfilled unless my husband is restored unto me; thou hast promised me a century of sons. Therefore, I ask thee, O Yama, to give me back Satyavan, my beloved, my lord. Without him, I am as one who is dead; without him, I have no desire for happiness; without him I have no longing even for Heaven; I will have no desire to prosper if my lord is snatched off; I cannot live without Satyavan. Thou hast promised me sons, O Yama, yet thou dost take away my husband from mine arms. Hear me and grant this boon: Let Satyavan be restored to life so that thy decree may be fulfilled.”

Said Yama: “So be it. With cheerful heart I now unbind thy husband. He is free.... Disease cannot afflict him again and he will prosper. Together you will both have long life; you will live four hundred years; you will have a century of sons and they will be kings, and their sons will be kings also.”

Having spoken thus, Yama, the lord of death, departed unto his own place. And Savitri returned to the forest where her husband's body lay cold and ashen-pale; she sat upon the ground and pillowed his head upon her lap. Then Satyavan was given back his life.... He looked upon Savitri with eyes of love; he was like to one who had returned from a long journey in a strange land.

Said Satyavan: “Long was my sleep; why didst thou not awaken me, my beloved?... Where is that dark One who dragged me away?”

Savitri said: “Yama hath come and gone, and thou hast slept long, resting thy head upon my lap, and art now refreshed, O blessed one. Sleep hath forsaken thee, O son of a king. If thou canst rise up, let us now depart hence for the night is already dark....”

Satyavan rose up refreshed and strong. He looked round about and perceived that he was in the midst of the forest. Then he said: “O fair one, I came hither to gather fruit for thee, and while I cut down branches from the trees a pain afflicted me. I grew faint, I sank upon the ground, I laid my head upon thy lap and fell into a deep slumber even whilst thou didst embrace me. Then it seemed to me that I was enveloped in darkness, and that I beheld a sable One amidst great effulgence.... Was this a vision or a reality, O fairest and dearest?”

Savitri said: “The darkness deepens.... I will tell thee all on the morrow.... Let us now find our parents, O prince. The beasts of the night come forth; I hear their awesome voices; they tread the forest in glee; the howl of the jackal maketh my heart afraid.”¹⁰⁹

Said Satyavan: “Darkness hath covered the forest with fear; we cannot discover the path by which to return home.”

¹⁰⁹ Unfaithful wives were transformed into jackals after death.

Savitri said: “A withered tree burneth yonder. I will gather sticks and make a fire and we will wait here until day.”

Said Satyavan: “My sickness hath departed and I would fain behold my parents again. Never before have I spent a night away from the hermitage. My mother is old and my father also, and I am their crutch. They will now be afflicted with sorrow because that we have not returned.”

Satyavan lifted up his arms and lamented aloud, but Savitri dried his tears and said: “I have performed penances, I have given away in charity, I have offered up sacrifices, I have never uttered a falsehood. May thy parents be protected by virtue of the power which I have obtained, and may thou, O my husband, be protected also.”

Said Satyavan: “O beautiful one, let us now return to the hermitage.”

Savitri raised up her despairing husband. She then placed his left arm upon her left shoulder and wound her right arm about his body, and they walked on together.... At length the fair moon came out and shone upon their path.

Meanwhile Dyumatsena, the sire of Satyavan, had regained his sight, and he went with his wife to search for his lost son, but had to return to the hermitage sorrowing and in despair. The sages comforted the weeping parents and said: “Savitri hath practised great austerities, and there can be no doubt that Satyavan is still alive.”

In time Satyavan and Savitri reached the hermitage, and their own hearts and the hearts of their parents were freed from sorrow.

Then Savitri related all that had taken place, and the sages said: “O chaste and illustrious lady, thou hast rescued the race of Dyumatsena, the foremost of kings, from the ocean of darkness and calamity.”

On the morning that followed messengers came to Dyumatsena and told that the monarch who had deprived him of his kingdom was dead, having fallen by the hand of his chief minister. All the people clamoured for their legitimate ruler. Said the messengers: “Chariots await thee, O king. Return, therefore, unto thy kingdom.”

Great was their wonder to find that Dyumatsena was no longer blind.

So the king was restored to his kingdom, in accordance with the boon which Savitri had obtained from Yama. And sons were in time born unto her father. Thus did the gentle Savitri, by reason of her great piety, raise from misery to high fortune the family of her husband and her own father also. She was the rescuer of all; the bringer of happiness and prosperity.... He who heareth the story of Savitri will never endure misery again....

The beauties of Yama's heaven are sung by the sage Narada in the great epic poem *Mahabharata*.¹¹⁰ “Listen to me,” he says. “In that fair domain it is neither too hot nor too cold. Life there is devoid of sorrow; age does not bring frailties, and none ever hunger or thirst; it is without wretchedness, or fatigue, or evil feelings. Everything, whether celestial or human, that the heart seeks after is found there. Sweet are the juicy fruits, delicious the fragrance of flowers and tree blossoms, and waters are there, both cold and hot, to give refreshment and comfort. Nymphs dance and sing to the piping of celestial elves, and merry laughter ever blends with the strains of alluring music.

“The Assembly House of Yama, which was made by Twashtri, hath splendour equal to the sun; it shines like burnished gold. There the servants of the Lord of Justice measure out the allotted days of mortals. Great rishis and ancestors await upon Yama, King of the Pitris (fathers), and adore him. Sanctified by holiness, their shining bodies are clad in swan-white garments, and decked with many-coloured bracelets and golden ear-rings. Sweet sounds, alluring perfumes, and brilliant flower garlands make that building ever pleasant and supremely blest. Hundreds of thousands of saintly beings worship the illustrious King of the Pitris.

¹¹⁰ *Lokapala-Sabhakhyana* section of *Sabha Parva*.

“The heaven of Indra was constructed by the great artisan-god himself. Like a chariot it can be moved anywhere at will. The Assembly House has many rooms and seats, and is adorned by celestial trees. Indra sits there with his beautiful queen, wearing his crown, with gleaming bracelets on his upper arms; he is decked with flowers, and attired in white garments. He is waited upon by brilliant Maruts, and all the gods and the rishis and saints, whose sins have been washed off their pure souls, which are resplendent as fire. There is no sorrow, or fear, or suffering in Indra's abode, which is inhabited by the spirits of wind and thunder, fire and water, plants and clouds, and planets and stars, and the spirits also of Prosperity, Religion, Joy, Faith, and Intelligence. Fairies and elves (Apsaras and Gandharvas) dance and sing there to sweet music; feats of skill are performed by celestial battle heroes, auspicious rites are also practised. Divine messengers come and go in celestial chariots, looking bright as Soma himself.

“The heaven of Varuna was constructed by Vishwakarma (Twashtri) within the sea. Its walls and arches are of pure white, and they are surrounded by celestial trees, made of sparkling jewels, which always blossom and always bear fruit. In the many-coloured bowers beautiful and variegated birds sing delightful melodies. In the Assembly House, which is also of pure white, there are many rooms and many seats. Varuna, richly decked with jewels and golden ornaments and flowers, is throned there with his queen. Adityas¹¹¹ wait upon the lord of the waters, as also do hooded snakes (Nagas) with human heads and arms, and Daityas and Danavas (giants and demons) who have taken vows and have been rewarded with immortality. All the holy spirits of rivers and oceans are there, and the holy spirits of lakes and springs and pools, and the personified forms of the points of the heavens, the ends of the earth, and the great mountains. Music and dances provide entertainment, while sacred hymns are sung in praise of Varuna.”



12

THE CITY OF THE GODS, PALITANA

These heavens recall the Grecian “Islands of the Blest” and the Celtic Otherworld, where eternal summer reigns, trees bear blossoms and fruit continually, and there is no wasting with age. Indra's

¹¹¹ Sons of the goddess Aditi. They are attendants of Varuna, their chief, as the Maruts are attendants of Indra.

Assembly House is slightly reminiscent of the Teutonic Valhal, but is really more like the gardens of the underworld Hela. The Indian heroes do not feast on pork like those of Teutonic and Celtic myth; in the Assembly House of Kuvera, god of wealth, however, fat and flesh are eaten by fierce sentinel dwarfs. The fairy-like Apsaras are wooed by Indra's favoured warriors as well as by the gods.

One of the conditions which secured entry to the heaven of Yama was that a man should have offspring. A rishi, named Mandapala, devoted himself to religious vows and the observance of great austerities, but when he reached the region of the Pitris, he could not obtain "the fruit of his acts". He asked: "Why is this domain unattainable to me?"

Said the Celestials: "Because thou hast no children.... The Vedas have declared that the son rescueth the father from a hell called Put. O best of Brahmans, strive thou to beget offspring."¹¹²

A father could only reach Heaven if his son, after performing the cremation ceremony, poured forth the oblation and performed other necessary services to the dead. Consequently, all men showed great anxiety to have sons. In the Vedic period the exposure of female children was not unknown; indeed, this practice is referred to in the *Yajurveda*. "It is sorrowful to have a daughter," exclaims the writer of one of the *Brahmanas*.

One reason for infanticide in modern India is associated with the practice of exogamy (marriage outside of one's tribe). Raids took place for the purpose of obtaining wives and these were invariably the cause of much bloodshed. In 1842 members of the Kandhs tribe told Major Macpherson "that it was better to destroy girls in their infancy than to allow them to grow up and become causes of strife afterwards". Colonel MacCulloch, Political Agent for Manipur, stamped out infanticide in the Naga country by assuring the people of a tribe that they would be protected against the wife-hunting parties of a stronger tribe. "Many years afterwards a troop of Naga girls from the weaker tribe paid a visit of ceremony to Colonel MacCulloch, bearing presents of cloth of their own weaving in token of their gratitude to the man who had saved their lives."¹¹³

¹¹² *Adi Parva* section of *Mahabharata*, Roy's trans., p. 635.

¹¹³ *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*. H. H. Risley (1892), vol. i, lxxv, *et seq.*

CHAPTER IV

Demons and Giants and Fairies

Indian Asuras as Demons—Persian Ahura a God—Indian Gods as Persian Demons—Theory of Assyrian Influence—Indra's Battle with Asuras—Like Thor's Conflict with Giants—The Sun and Moon Devourer—Giants and Demons of Ocean—The Flying City—Destruction of World by Fire—Teutonic Parallel—Serpent Demigods—Man's Special Enemies—The Corpse Eaters—Demons of Disease, Unbelief, and Robbery—Elves and Fairies—The “Good People”—Celestial Musicians and Dancing Girls—Origin of Mythical Beings—Story of a Love-sick King—His Fairy Bride—The Echoing Forest Nymph—The “Language of Birds”—Birds as Spirits and Ghosts.

The gods are the Suras and the demons the Asuras or “non-gods”. This distinction, however, did not obtain in the early Vedic period. Originally the deities, and especially Varuna and Mitra, were called Asuras, but in the later part of the *Rigveda* the term is applied chiefly to the enemies of the gods. In the *Atharvaveda*, as in subsequent Epic literature, the Asuras are simply demons and giants and goblins.

No conclusive explanation can be offered as to how this remarkable change took place in the course of the centuries embraced by the Vedic period. It may have been due primarily to sectarian strife between the religious teachers of those tribes which had been influenced by Babylonian modes of thought and those which clung tenaciously to the forms of primitive Aryan nature worship, and perhaps also the worship of ancestors (Pitris). In the old Persian language, which, like Greek, places “h” before a vowel where “s” is used in Sanskrit, Ahura (= Asura) signifies “god”. The Zoroastrian chief god is called Ahura-Mazda, “the wise Lord”, as Varuna is addressed in early Rigvedic hymns, “wise Asura and King”, and “the all-knowing Asura who established the heavens and fixed the limits of the earth”. On the other hand “daeva” in the Iranian dialect, which is cognate with Sanskrit “deva”, “god”, came to mean “demon”. “Asura” is derived from the root “asu”, which signifies “the air of life”, and “deva” from “div”, “to shine”, or “deiwo”, “heavenly”.

The view has been urged that the revolt against “Asura” in India was due to the hatred cherished towards the Persians who had become subject to the Assyrians, the worshippers of Ashur. It was originally based on the assumption that Assyrian aggression caused the migration of Aryan tribes towards India. Subsequent research, however, has tended to dispel this theory. It has been found, for instance, that Aryans were associated with the Kassites who overthrew the Hammurabi dynasty of Babylon prior to the invasion of the Punjab, and that the Assyrians were for a period vassals of the Mitanni kings, who had Aryan names and worshipped Indra, Varuna, and Mithra in Mesopotamia and Asia Minor. The weak point in the Ashur-Asura theory is that it throws no light on the process which caused the Persian “daeva” to be applied to demons instead of to gods. How the gods of the Indian Aryans became the demons of Persia and the demons of Persia became the gods of India is a problem for which a solution has yet to be found.

The expository and speculative books of the priests—the *Brahmanas* and *Upanishads*—which are attached to the Vedic hymns, do not help us greatly in accounting for the change. We read that “the gods and Asuras contended together, and that the former, being less numerous than the latter, took some bricks, and placing them in a proper position to receive the sacrificial fire, with the formula, ‘Thou art a multiplier’, they became numerous”.¹¹⁴ In one of the *Brahmanas* we are informed:

¹¹⁴ Muir's *Original Sanskrit Texts*, v, 15.

“The Asuras performed at the sacrifice all that the Devas performed. The Asuras became thus of equal power with the Devas, and did not yet yield to them. Thereupon the Devas had a vision of the ‘silent praise’. The Asuras, not knowing it, did not perform the ‘silent praise’. This ‘silent praise’ is the latent essence of the hymns. Till then, whatever weapons the Devas used against the Asuras, the Asuras used in revenge against them; but when the Devas had a vision of the ‘silent praise’ and raised it as a weapon, the Asuras did not comprehend it. With it the Devas aimed a blow at the Asuras, and defeated them, for they had no comprehension of this weapon. Thereupon the Devas became masters of the Asuras. He who has such a knowledge becomes master of his enemy, adversary, and hater.”¹¹⁵

This explanation is but an echo of the Indra-Vritra combat. Another statement is to the effect that “the Devas gave up falsehood and adopted truth, while the Asuras gave up truth and adopted falsehood”. Further, we learn that when a sacrifice was performed the Asuras put the offerings into their own mouths, while the Suras (gods) gave the offerings they received to one another.

The Asuras became completely identified with the demons and giants; they symbolized evil, darkness, and drought. In Epic literature we read that “in ancient times the gods and Asuras were very active in destroying one another. And the terrible Asuras always succeeded in defeating the gods.” ... Indra goes forth with his thunderbolt against Kesin, the leader of the Asuras, who wielded a great mace; this mace the demon hurled against the god, but Indra “cut it up in its course with his thunderbolt. Then Kesin, furious with rage, hurled a huge mass of rock at him.” Indra “of a hundred sacrifices rent it asunder with his thunderbolt, and it fell down upon the ground. And Kesin himself was wounded by that falling mass of rock.¹¹⁶ Thus sorely afflicted he fled”. Indra rescues a beautiful lady who had been seized by the Asura, and she informs the god that her sister had previously fallen a victim to the demon...¹¹⁷

The Asuras obstructed sacrifices; they were ever hovering round altars to discover if rites were properly performed; if a priest did not perform a ceremony in orthodox fashion, the sacrifice was of no avail, because the Asuras devoured it; if a man neglected a part of a ceremonial performance, a demon might take possession of him and accomplish his ruin.

One of the terrible Asuras is the demon Rahu, who causes eclipses by swallowing the sun and the moon, like the Chinese dragon, the wolf Managarm of Teutonic mythology, and the Grecian demons who devour Helena, the sun maiden, sister of the twin Dioscuri. In the Vedic period Rahu was represented by the demon Svarbhanu.

¹¹⁵ Professor E. Vernon Arnold's *The Rigveda*, p. 54.

¹¹⁶ In the combat between Thor and the giant Hrungner, the thunder-hammer similarly cleaves a mass of flint hurled by the enemy. —*Teutonic Myth and Legend*.

¹¹⁷ *Mahabharata*, *Vana Parva* section, pp. 679-80, Roy's trans.



13
DURGA SLAYING GIANTS AND DEMONS
From a sculpture at Mámallapuram

The Asuras of Ocean are the Daityas and Danavas, the descendants of the chaos hags Diti and Danu, and Kasyapa, a superhuman sage. These are the giants and demons who fought against the gods like the Titans, the Irish Fomorians, and the Norse Jotuns. Indra confined them in this region, which is called Patala, and they remain there “afflicted by Time”,¹¹⁸ and subject to the sway of Varuna. Like the Norse giants, they will be let loose to take part in the “Last Battle”. An “Asura fire” burns constantly in Patala, fed by water; it is “bound and confined”, but cannot be extinguished; when the end of all comes, it will burst forth and burn up the three worlds.¹¹⁹ In Teutonic mythology the Universe is similarly doomed to be consumed by fire at Ragnarok, “the Dusk of the Gods”.

The abodes of these giants and demons are exceedingly beautiful; they are agleam with gold and precious stones; seats and beds are provided in the mansions, and there are also recreation grounds, and forests and mountains resembling clouds. Indeed, the Daityas and Danavas live pretty much in the same manner as the gods, for “the gods and Danavas are brothers, although ever hostile to one another”.¹²⁰ The Danava women are of gigantic stature, and wear jewels as large as mountain boulders; when terrified by the attacks of the gods, they “bemoan like unto cranes in Autumn”. One of the Daitya tribes reside in the moving city named Hiranyapura, which they constructed for their protection; sometimes it sinks below the sea, or under the earth; at other times it soars across the heavens like the sun. Indra, as we have seen, has a similar aerial city.

In the Underworld dwell also the Nagas, the demoniac Cobras; they are of human form to the waist, the rest of their bodies being like those of serpents. Their king is Shesha, who is also named Vasuki and Karkotáka; he is sometimes represented with a thousand heads, and resembles

¹¹⁸ “Overwhelmed by misfortune” (Roy).

¹¹⁹ Heaven, Earth, and the Underworld.

¹²⁰ *Mahabharata*.

Typhon, who fought with Zeus. In the *Ramayana* he is Ravana, the Demon of Ceylon. The prototypes of Shesha and his hosts are the dragons Vritra, “the encompasser”; Ahi, “the confiner”; and fierce Kushna, “the scorcher”, who spits out the sunset fires and burns up day.

When serpent worship became prevalent among the Aryans, the Nagas were regarded as demigods. They were occasionally “the friends of man”, and to those they favoured they gave draughts of their nectar, which endowed them with great strength. Their city was the Paradise of serpent worshippers. The female Nagas were beautiful nymphs, who were sometimes wooed by mortals.

As the Asuras are the enemies of the gods, the Rakshas or Rakshasas are the enemies of man.¹²¹ These demons are “night prowlers”; they have greatest power after “the first forty seconds of grey twilight preceding nightfall”. They travel faster than the wind, and go through the air; they have also power to change their shape. Sometimes they appear in the guise of tigers, bears, or great monkeys; and their hues vary from yellow to red, and blue to green. In the *Ramayana* they are found associated with the Asuras of Ceylon; a spy enters a demon dwelling and sees them in all their shapes, some frightfully deformed, with small bodies and long arms; some as grotesque dwarfs, others as horrible giants with long projecting teeth; some with one eye, others with three eyes; some with one leg, two legs, or three, or even four; and some with heads of serpents, horses, or elephants. In the *Mahabharata* the Rakshasas are like gorillas; they have arrow-shaped ears, big red eyes, and red hair and beards, and mouths like caves; they feast on human beings and cattle. The heroic Bhima, like Siegfried Dietrich of Bern, Beowulf, and Finn-mac-Coul, is a mighty slayer of these man-eating demons. They are impervious to weapons, but Bhima wrestles with them and breaks their backs or tears them asunder, after lively combats with trees and boulders. Female Rakshasas sometimes fall in love with human beings, and transform themselves into beautiful women. Bhima takes one for his bride, and she carries him through the air to a Celestial retreat among the mountains.

The most loathsome Rakshasas are the goblin-like Pisachas,¹²² who are devourers of dead bodies in cemeteries, and are exceedingly vile and malignant fiends. They are the bringers of diseases and wasting fevers. In the *Atharvaveda* Agni is invoked by the priests, who mutter charms over suffering and “possessed” mortals, to take the Pisachas between his teeth and devour them. They are “those who hound us in our chambers, while shouting goes on in the night of the new moon ... the flesh devourers, who plan to injure us, and whom I overcome”. The priest declares: “I plague the Pisachas as the tiger the cattle owners. As dogs who have seen a lion, these do not find a refuge.... From villages I enter Pisachas fly away.... May Nirriti (a goddess of destruction) take hold of this one.”¹²³

Kali, a demon who holds friendly converse with the gods in the “Story of Nala”, is attended by Dwápara, a flesh-eater like the Pisachas. The Panis are aerial demons, who are hated by bluff, honest Indra, because they are the inspirers of foolish actions, slander, and unbelief, and the imps who encourage men to neglect homage to deities. The black Dasyus are repulsive of aspect and jealous-hearted; they are the stealers of the cloud cows who are held captive for Vritra in the cave of the demon Vala. The Darbas, “the tearers”, are a variety of Pisachas. Reference is made in *Mahabharata* to “ugly Vartikas of dreadful sight, having one wing, one eye, and one leg”; when they “vomit blood, facing the sun”, a dreadful happening is known to be at hand, because they are fiends of evil omen.

Among the supernatural beings who are sometimes the enemies, but in most cases the friends of mankind, are the Yakshas, the Gandharvas, and the Apsaras (Apsarasas).

The Yakshas are occasionally referred to as the Punyajanas, “the good people”; they may be of human stature, with big benevolent eyes, or powerful giants who can fight as fiercely as Rakshasas. They are guardians of hidden treasure, like the dwarfs and giants of Teutonic legend, being associated

¹²¹ Asuras are sometimes called Rakshasas also.

¹²² *Pron.* pe-shatch'as.

¹²³ Bloomfield's *Atharvaveda* iv, 36 (*Sacred Books of the East*, vol. xlii).

with Kuvera, god of wealth, whose abode is situated among the Himalayan mountains. In Kuvera's domain are found “multitudes of spirits” who do not visit the world of men as a rule, but remain near the treasure for purposes of defence; “some are of dwarfish stature, some of fierce visage, some hunchbacked, some of blood-red eyes, some of frightful yells; some are feeding upon fat and flesh, and some are terrible to behold; and all are armed with various weapons, and endued with the speed of the wind”.¹²⁴



14
THE CELESTIAL FAIRIES (APSARAS)
Sculpture on a modern Hindu Temple, Benares

The Gandharvas are grouped in tribes, and number over six thousand individuals. They are all of the male sex. They haunt the air, the forests, and the mountains, and, like the Rakshasas, have power to work illusions in the grey twilight before nightfall. References are made in the Epics to their combats with human beings. To warriors who overcome them they impart instruction in religious matters; those whom they conquer they carry away, like the Teutonic elves and dwarfs. The Gandharvas are renowned musicians and bards and singers. When they play on their divine instruments the fairy-like Apsaras, who are all females, dance merrily. In the various Aryan heavens these elves and fairies delight and allure with music and song and dance the gods, and the souls of those who have attained to a state of bliss. The Apsara dancing girls are “voluptuous and beautiful”, and inspire love in Paradise as well as upon earth. Their lovers include gods, Gandharvas, and mortals. Arjuna, the human son of Indra, who was transported in a Celestial chariot to Swarga over Suravithi, “the Milky Way”, was enchanted by the music and songs and dances of the Celestial elves and fairies. He followed bands of Gandharvas who were “skilled in music sacred and profane”, and he saw the bewitching Apsaras, including the notorious Menaka, “with eyes like lotus blooms, employed in enticing hearts”; they had “fair round hips and slim waists”, and “began to perform various evolutions, shaking their deep

¹²⁴ *Mahabharata*, Roy's trans. (*Sabha Parva*, p. 32).

bosoms and casting their glances around, and exhibiting other attractive attitudes capable of stealing the hearts and resolutions and minds of the spectators”.¹²⁵

In the *Rigveda* there is a water-nymph, named Apsaras; she is the “spouse” of Gandharva, an atmospheric deity who prepares Soma for the gods and reveals divine truths to mortals. They vanish, however, in later times; the other Vedas deal with the spirit groups which figure so prominently in the Epics. No doubt the groups are older than Gandharva, the god, and Apsaras, the goddess, who may be simply the elf-king and the fairy-queen. The “black” Dasyus are sometimes referred to by modern-day writers as the dark aborigines who were displaced by the Aryans; a tribal significance is also given to the Rakshasas and the Gandharvas. But this tendency to identify the creatures of the spirit world with human beings may be carried too far. If “Dasyus” were really “dark folk”,¹²⁶ it should be remembered that in Teutonic mythology there are “black dwarfs”, who live in underground dwellings, and “white elves” associated with air and ocean; there are also black and white fairies in the Scottish Highlands, so that black and white spirits may simply belong to night and day spirit groups. It may be that the Indian aborigines were referred to contemptuously as Dasyus by the Aryans. The application of the names of repulsive imps to human enemies is not an unfamiliar habit even in our own day; in China the European is a “foreign devil”, but Chinese “devils” existed long before Europeans secured a footing in the Celestial Kingdom. Those who seek for a rational explanation for the belief in the existence of mythical beings should remember that primitive man required no models for the creatures of his fancy. He symbolized everything—his ideals, his desires, his hopes and his fears, the howling wind, the low whispering breeze, the creaking tree, the torrent, the river, the lake, and the mountain; he heard the hammer or the trumpet of a mighty god in the thunderstorm, he believed that giants uprooted trees and cast boulders down mountain slopes, that demons raised ocean billows in tempest, and that the strife of the elements was a war between gods and giants; day and night, ever in conflict, were symbolized, as were also summer and winter, and growth and decay. If the fairies and elves of Europe are Lapps, or the small men of an interglacial period in the Pleistocene Age, and if the Dasyus and Gandharvas of India are merely Dravidians and pre-Dravidians who resisted the Aryan invasion, who, then, it may be asked, were the prototypes of the giants “big as mountains”, or the demons like “trees walking”, the “tiger-headed” Rakshasas, “ugly Vartikas” with “one wing, one eye, and one leg”? and what animal suggested Vritra, or the fiery dragon that burned up daylight, or Rahu, the swallower of sun and moon? If the redhaired and red-bearded Rakshasas are to be given a racial significance, what of the blue Rakshasas and the green? The idea that primitive man conceived of giants because he occasionally unearthed the bones of prehistoric monsters, is certainly not supported by Scottish evidence; Scotland swarms with giants and hags of mountain, ocean, and river, although it has not yielded any great skeletons or even a single artifact of the Palæolithic Age. Giants and fairies are creations of fancy. Just as a highly imaginative child symbolizes his fears and peoples darkness with terrifying monsters, so, it may be inferred, did primitive man who crouched in his cave, or spent sleepless nights in tempest-stricken forests, conceive with childlike mind of demons thirsting for his blood and giants of wind and fire intent on destroying the Universe.

In India, as elsewhere, the folk of the spirit world might woo or be wooed by impressionable mortals. A Gandharva related to Arjuna, the Pandava prince, by whom he was defeated in single combat, the “charming story”, as he called it, of King Samvarana and the fairy-like Tapatī, a daughter of the sun god, Surya. Tapatī was of all nymphs the most beautiful; she was “perfectly symmetrical” and “exquisitely attired”; she had “faultless features, and black, large eyes”; and, in contrast to an Apsara, she “was chaste and exceedingly well conducted”. For a time the sun god considered that no husband could be found who was worthy of his daughter; and therefore “knew no peace of mind,

¹²⁵ *Vana Parva* section of *Mahabharata*.

¹²⁶ Dasyu and Dasa are “applied in many passages of the *Rigveda* to superhuman enemies”. The colour reference in Dasa is probable, but it is also used in other senses. For a full discussion on conflicting views regarding Dasyu and Dasa see *Vedic Index of Names and Subjects*. Macdonell and Keith, vol. i, pp. 347-9 and 356-8.

always thinking of the person he should select”. One day, however, King Samvarana worshipped the sun, and made offerings of flowers and sweet perfumes, and Surya resolved to bestow his daughter upon this ideal man.

It came to pass that Samvarana went a-hunting deer on the mountains. He rode swiftly in pursuit of a nimble-footed stag, leaving his companions behind, until his steed expired with exhaustion. Then he wandered about alone. In a secluded wood he beheld a maiden of exquisite beauty; he gazed at her steadfastly for a time, thinking she was a goddess or “the embodiment of the rays emanating from the sun”. Her body was as radiant as fire and as spotless as the crescent moon; she stood motionless like to a golden statue. The flowers and the creepers round about partook of her beauty, and “seemed to be converted into gold”. She was Tapatī, daughter of the sun.

The king's eyes were captivated, his heart was wounded by the arrows of the love god Kama; he lost his peace of mind. At length he spoke and said: “Who art thou, O fair one? O maiden of sweet smiles, why dost thou linger in these lonely woods? I have never seen or heard of one so beautiful as thee.... The love god tortures me.”

That lotus-eyed maiden made no answer; she vanished from sight like to lightning in the clouds.

The king hastened through the forest, lamenting for her: he searched in vain; he stood motionless in grief; he fell down on the earth and swooned.

Then, smiling sweetly, the maiden appeared again. In honeyed words she spoke, saying: “Arise, thou tiger among kings. It is not meet that thou shouldst lose thy reason in this manner.”

Samvarana opened his eyes and beheld Tapatī. Weak with emotion he spoke and said: “I am burning with love for thee, thou black-eyed beauty, O accept me. My life is ebbing away.... I have been bitten by Kama, who is even like a venomous snake. Have mercy on me.... O thou of handsome and faultless features, O thou of face like unto the lotus or the moon, O thou of voice sweet as that of singing Kinnaras, my life now depends on thee. Without thee, O timid one, I am unable to live. It behoveth thee not, O black-eyed maid, to cast me off; it behoveth thee to relieve me from this affliction by giving me thy love. At the first sight thou hast distracted my heart. My mind wandereth. Be merciful; I am thy obedient slave, thy adorer. O accept me.... O thou of lotus eyes, the flame of desire burneth within me. O extinguish that flame by throwing on it the water of thy love....”¹²⁷

Tapatī replied: “I am not mistress of mine own self. I am a maiden ruled by my father. If thou dost love me, demand me of him. My heart hath been robbed by thee.”

Then, revealing her identity, Tapatī ascended to heaven, and once again Samvarana fell upon the earth and swooned.

The ministers and followers of the king came searching for him, and found him “lying forsaken on the ground like a rainbow dropped from the firmament”. They sprinkled his face with cool and lotus-scented water. When he revived, the monarch sent away all his followers except one minister. For twelve days he worshipped the sun constantly on the mountain top. Then a great Rishi, whom he had sent for, came to him, and the Rishi ascended to the sun. Ere long he returned with Tapas, the sun god having declared that Varanasi would be a worthy husband for his daughter.

For twelve years the king lived with his fairy bride in the mountain forests, and a regent ruled over the kingdom.

But although the monarch enjoyed great bliss, living the life of a Celestial, the people of the kingdom suffered greatly. For twelve years no rain fell, “not even a drop of dew came from the skies, and no corn was grown”. The people were afflicted with famine; men grew reckless, and deserted their wives and children; the capital became like to a city of the dead.

Then a great Rishi brought Varanasi back to his capital with his Celestial bride. And after that things became as they were before. Rain fell in abundance and corn was grown. “Revived by

¹²⁷ *Mahabharata*, Roy's translation (*Adi Parva*, section, pp. 495-6).

that foremost of monarchs of virtuous soul, the capital and the country became glad with exceeding joy.”¹²⁸ A son was born to the king, and his name was Kuru.

There are many other uncatalogued Celestial beings like Tapati in Indian fairyland. In the *Atharva-veda* there are numerous named and nameless spirits of good and evil, and throughout the Epics references are made to semi-divine beings who haunt streams, lakes, forests, and plains. A *Rigveda* hymn is addressed to the forest nymph Aranyani. She echoes the voices of man and beast and creates illusions:

She mimics kine that crop the grass,
She rumbles like a cart at even,
She calls The cow, she hews down wood,
The man who lingers says, “Who calleth?”

O Aranyani will not harm
If one will not invade her dwelling,
When, having eaten luscious fruit,
At her sweet will she turns to slumber.

The singing birds are all singing spirits in India as in Europe. The “language of birds” is the language of spirits. When Siegfried, after eating of the dragon's heart, understood the “language of birds”, he heard them warning him regarding his enemies. Our seafarers whistle when they invoke the spirit of the wind. Sir Walter Scott drew attention, in his *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, to the belief that the speech of spirits was a kind of whistling. As we have seen, the wives of Danavas had voices like Cranes; Homer's ghosts twittered like bats; Egyptian ghosts were hooting owls. In India the croaking raven is still a bird of evil omen, as it is also in the West. In the Scottish Highlands the spirits of the dead sometimes appear as birds; so do fairies. The Irish gods and the Celestial Rishis of India take the form of swans, like the “swan maidens”, when they visit mankind. In the Assyrian legend of Ishtar the souls of the dead in Hades “are like birds covered with feathers”. Numerous instances could be quoted to illustrate the widespread association of birds with the spirit world.

¹²⁸ Like an Egyptian Pharaoh, the rajah is here a god among men. His presence was necessary to ensure the success of rain-bringing ceremonies.

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