

# ARTHUR ANTHONY MACDONELL

A HISTORY OF SANSKRIT  
LITERATURE

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# Arthur Anthony Macdonell

## A History of Sanskrit Literature

### Preface

It is undoubtedly a surprising fact that down to the present time no history of Sanskrit literature as a whole has been written in English. For not only does that literature possess much intrinsic merit, but the light it sheds on the life and thought of the population of our Indian Empire ought to have a peculiar interest for the British nation. Owing chiefly to the lack of an adequate account of the subject, few, even of the young men who leave these shores every year to be its future rulers, possess any connected information about the literature in which the civilisation of Modern India can be traced to its sources, and without which that civilisation cannot be fully understood. It was, therefore, with the greatest pleasure that I accepted Mr. Gosse's invitation to contribute a volume to this series of *Literatures of the World*; for this appeared to me to be a peculiarly good opportunity for diffusing information on a subject in which more than twenty years of continuous study and teaching had instilled into me an ever-deepening interest.

Professor Max Müller's valuable *History of Ancient Sanskrit Literature* is limited in its scope to the Vedic period. It has long been out of print; and Vedic research has necessarily made great strides in the forty years which have elapsed since its publication.

The only book accessible to the English reader on the history of Sanskrit literature in general has hitherto been the translation of Professor Weber's *Academical Lectures on Indian Literature*, as delivered nearly half a century ago at Berlin. The numerous and often very lengthy notes in this work supply the results of research during the next twenty-five years; but as these notes often modify, or even cancel, the statements of the unaltered original text of 1852, the result is bewildering to the student. Much new light has been thrown on various branches of Sanskrit literature since 1878, when the last notes were added to this translation, which, moreover, is not in any way adapted to the wants of the general reader. The only work on the subject appealing to the latter is the late Sir M. Monier-Williams's *Indian Wisdom*. That book, however, although it furnishes, in addition to the translated specimens, some account of the chief departments of Sanskrit literature, is not a history. There is thus distinctly a twofold demand in this country for a history of Sanskrit literature. The student is in want of a guide setting forth in a clear and trustworthy manner the results of research down to the present time, and the cultivated English reader looks for a book presenting in an intelligible and attractive form information which must have a special interest to us owing to our close

relations with India.

To lack of space, no less than to the scope of the present series, is due the exclusion of a full account of the technical literature of law, science, and art, which contains much that would interest even the general reader; but the brief epitome given in the Appendix will, I hope, suffice to direct the student to all the most important authorities.

As to the bibliographical notes, I trust that, though necessarily restricted in extent, they will enable the student to find all further information he may want on matters of detail; for instance, the evidence for approximate dates, which had occasionally to be summarily stated even in the text.

In writing this history of Sanskrit literature, I have dwelt more on the life and thought of Ancient India, which that literature embodies, than would perhaps have appeared necessary in the case of a European literature. This I have done partly because Sanskrit literature, as representing an independent civilisation entirely different from that of the West, requires more explanation than most others; and partly because, owing to the remarkable continuity of Indian culture, the religious and social institutions of Modern India are constantly illustrated by those of the past.

Besides the above-mentioned works of Professors Max Müller and Weber, I have made considerable use of Professor L. von Schroeder's excellent *Indiens Literatur und Cultur* (1887). I have further consulted in one way or another nearly all the books and

monographs mentioned in the bibliographical notes. Much of what I have written is also based on my own studies of Sanskrit literature.

All the quotations which I have given by way of illustration I have myself carefully selected from the original works. Excepting the short extracts on page 333 from Cowell and Thomas's excellent translation of the *Harshacharita*, all the renderings of these are my own. In my versions of Rigvedic stanzas I have, however, occasionally borrowed a line or phrase from Griffith. Nearly all my renderings are as close as the use of metre permits. I have endeavoured to reproduce, as far as possible, the measures of the original, except in the quotations from the dramas, where I have always employed blank verse. I have throughout refrained from rhyme, as misrepresenting the original Sanskrit.

In the transliteration of Sanskrit words I have been guided by the desire to avoid the use of letters which might mislead those who do not know Sanskrit. I have therefore departed in a few particulars from the system on which Sanskrit scholars are now almost unanimously agreed, and which I otherwise follow myself. Hence for *c* and *ch* I have written *ch* and *chh* respectively, though in the rare cases where these two appear in combination I have retained *cch* (instead of *chchh*). I further use *sh* for the lingual *ṣ*, and *ç* for the palatal *ś*, and *ri* for the vowel *ṛ*. I have not thought it necessary to distinguish the guttural *ṇ* and the palatal *ṇ̄* by diacritical marks, simply printing, for instance, *anga* and *pancha*. The reader who is unacquainted with Sanskrit will

thus pronounce all words correctly by simply treating all the consonants as in English; remembering only that the vowels should be sounded as in Italian, and that *e* and *o* are always long.

I am indebted for some suggestions to my friend Mr. F. C. S. Schiller, Fellow and Tutor of Corpus Christi College, who looked through the final proof of the chapter on Philosophy. To my pupil Mr. A. B. Keith, Boden Sanskrit scholar and Classical scholar of Balliol, who has read all the final proofs with great care, I owe not only the removal of a number of errors of the press, but also several valuable criticisms regarding matters of fact.

*107 Banbury Road, Oxford,  
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# Chapter I

## Introductory

Since the Renaissance there has been no event of such world-wide significance in the history of culture as the discovery of Sanskrit literature in the latter part of the eighteenth century. After Alexander's invasion, the Greeks became to some extent acquainted with the learning of the Indians; the Arabs, in the Middle Ages, introduced the knowledge of Indian science to the West; a few European missionaries, from the sixteenth century onwards, were not only aware of the existence of, but also acquired some familiarity with, the ancient language of India; and Abraham Roger even translated the Sanskrit poet Bhartrihari into Dutch as early as 1651. Nevertheless, till about a hundred and twenty years ago there was no authentic information in Europe about the existence of Sanskrit literature, but only vague surmise, finding expression in stories about the wisdom of the Indians. The enthusiasm with which Voltaire in his *Essai sur les Mœurs et l'Esprit des Nations* greeted the lore of the *Ezour Vedam*, a work brought from India and introduced to his notice in the middle of the last century, was premature. For this work was later proved to be a forgery made in the seventeenth century by a Jesuit missionary. The scepticism justified by this fabrication, and indulged in when the discovery of the genuine Sanskrit

literature was announced, survived far into the present century. Thus, Dugald Stewart, the philosopher, wrote an essay in which he endeavoured to prove that not only Sanskrit literature, but also the Sanskrit language, was a forgery made by the crafty Brahmans on the model of Greek after Alexander's conquest. Indeed, this view was elaborately defended by a professor at Dublin as late as the year 1838.

The first impulse to the study of Sanskrit was given by the practical administrative needs of our Indian possessions. Warren Hastings, at that time Governor-General, clearly seeing the advantage of ruling the Hindus as far as possible according to their own laws and customs, caused a number of Brahmans to prepare a digest based on the best ancient Indian legal authorities. An English version of this Sanskrit compilation, made through the medium of a Persian translation, was published in 1776. The introduction to this work, besides giving specimens of the Sanskrit script, for the first time supplied some trustworthy information about the ancient Indian language and literature. The earliest step, however, towards making Europe acquainted with actual Sanskrit writings was taken by Charles Wilkins, who, having, at the instigation of Warren Hastings, acquired a considerable knowledge of Sanskrit at Benares, published in 1785 a translation of the *Bhagavad-gītā*, or *The Song of the Adorable One*, and two years later, a version of the well-known collection of fables entitled *Hitopadeṣa*, or *Friendly Advice*.

Sir William Jones (1746–94) was, however, the pioneer of

Sanskrit studies in the West. It was this brilliant and many-sided Orientalist who, during his too brief career of eleven years in India, first aroused a keen interest in the study of Indian antiquity by his unwearied literary activity and by the foundation of the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1784. Having rapidly acquired an accurate knowledge of Sanskrit, he published in 1789 a translation of *Çakuntalā*, the finest Sanskrit drama, which was greeted with enthusiasm by such judges as Herder and Goethe. This was followed by a translation of the *Code of Manu*, the most important of the Sanskrit law-books. To Sir William Jones also belongs the credit of having been the first man who ever printed an edition of a Sanskrit text. This was a short lyrical poem entitled *Ṛitusamhāra*, or *Cycle of the Seasons*, published in 1792.

We next come to the great name of Henry Thomas Colebrooke (1765–1837), a man of extraordinary industry, combined with rare clearness of intellect and sobriety of judgment. The first to handle the Sanskrit language and literature on scientific principles, he published many texts, translations, and essays dealing with almost every branch of Sanskrit learning, thus laying the solid foundations on which later scholars have built.

While Colebrooke was beginning his literary career in India during the opening years of the century, the romance of war led to the practical knowledge of Sanskrit being introduced on the Continent of Europe. Alexander Hamilton (1765–1824), an Englishman who had acquired a good knowledge of Sanskrit in

India, happened to be passing through France on his way home in 1802. Hostilities breaking out afresh just then, a decree of Napoleon, directed against all Englishmen in the country, kept Hamilton a prisoner in Paris. During his long involuntary stay in that city he taught Sanskrit to some French scholars, and especially to the German romantic poet Friedrich Schlegel. One of the results of these studies was the publication by Schlegel of his work *On the Language and Wisdom of the Indians* (1808). This book produced nothing less than a revolution in the science of language by the introduction of the comparative and the historical method. It led to the foundation of the science of comparative philology by Franz Bopp in his treatise on the conjugational system of Sanskrit in comparison with that of Greek, Latin, Persian, and German (1816). Schlegel's work, moreover, aroused so much zeal for the study of Sanskrit in Germany, that the vast progress made since his day in this branch of learning has been mainly due to the labours of his countrymen.

In the early days of Sanskrit studies Europeans became acquainted only with that later phase of the ancient language of India which is familiar to the Pandits, and is commonly called Classical Sanskrit. So it came about that the literature composed in this dialect engaged the attention of scholars almost exclusively down to the middle of the century. Colebrooke had, it is true, supplied as early as 1805 valuable information about the literature of the older period in his essay *On the Vedas*. Nearly a quarter of a century later, F. Rosen, a German scholar, had

conceived the plan of making this more ancient literature known to Europe from the rich collection of manuscripts at the East India House; and his edition of the first eighth of the *Rigveda* was actually brought out in 1838, shortly after his premature death. But it was not till Rudolf Roth (1821–95), the founder of Vedic philology, published his epoch-making little book *On the Literature and History of the Veda* in 1846, that the studies of Sanskritists received a lasting impulse in the direction of the earlier and more important literature of the Vedas. These studies have since been prosecuted with such zeal, that nearly all the most valuable works of the Vedic, as well as the later period, have within the last fifty years been made accessible in thoroughly trustworthy editions.

In judging of the magnitude of the work thus accomplished, it should be borne in mind that the workers have been far fewer in this than in other analogous fields, while the literature of the Vedas at least equals in extent what survives of the writings of ancient Greece. Thus in the course of a century the whole range of Sanskrit literature, which in quantity exceeds that of Greece and Rome put together, has been explored. The great bulk of it has been edited, and most of its valuable productions have been translated, by competent hands. There has long been at the service of scholars a Sanskrit dictionary, larger and more scientific than any either of the classical languages yet possesses. The detailed investigations in every department of Sanskrit literature are now so numerous, that a comprehensive

work embodying the results of all these researches has become a necessity. An encyclopædia covering the whole domain of Indo-Aryan antiquity has accordingly been planned on a more extensive scale than that of any similar undertaking, and is now being published at Strasburg in parts, contributed to by about thirty specialists of various nationalities. By the tragic death, in April 1898, of its eminent editor, Professor Bühler of Vienna, Sanskrit scholarship has sustained an irreparable loss. The work begun by him is being completed by another very distinguished Indianist, Professor Kielhorn of Göttingen.

Although so much of Sanskrit literature has already been published, an examination of the catalogues of Sanskrit manuscripts, of which an enormous number are preserved in European and Indian libraries, proves that there are still many minor works awaiting, and likely to repay, the labours of an editor.

The study of Sanskrit literature deserves far more attention than it has yet received in this country. For in that ancient heritage the languages, the religious and intellectual life and thought, in short, the whole civilisation of the Hindus, who form the vast majority of the inhabitants of our Indian Empire, have their roots. Among all the ancient literatures, that of India is, moreover, undoubtedly in intrinsic value and æsthetic merit second only to that of Greece. To the latter it is, as a source for the study of human evolution, even superior. Its earliest period, being much older than any product of Greek literature, presents

a more primitive form of belief, and therefore gives a clearer picture of the development of religious ideas than any other literary monument of the world. Hence it came about that, just as the discovery of the Sanskrit language led to the foundation of the science of Comparative Philology, an acquaintance with the literature of the Vedas resulted in the foundation of the science of Comparative Mythology by Adalbert Kuhn and Max Müller.

Though it has touched excellence in most of its branches, Sanskrit literature has mainly achieved greatness in religion and philosophy. The Indians are the only division of the Indo-European family which has created a great national religion—Brahmanism—and a great world-religion—Buddhism; while all the rest, far from displaying originality in this sphere, have long since adopted a foreign faith. The intellectual life of the Indians has, in fact, all along been more dominated by religious thought than that of any other race. The Indians, moreover, developed independently several systems of philosophy which bear evidence of high speculative powers. The great interest, however, which these two subjects must have for us lies, not so much in the results they attained, as in the fact that every step in the evolution of religion and philosophy can be traced in Sanskrit literature.

The importance of ancient Indian literature as a whole largely consists in its originality. Naturally isolated by its gigantic mountain barrier in the north, the Indian peninsula has ever since the Aryan invasion formed a world apart, over which a

unique form of Aryan civilisation rapidly spread, and has ever since prevailed. When the Greeks, towards the end of the fourth century B.C., invaded the North-West, the Indians had already fully worked out a national culture of their own, unaffected by foreign influences. And, in spite of successive waves of invasion and conquest by Persians, Greeks, Scythians, Muhammadans, the national development of the life and literature of the Indo-Aryan race remained practically unchecked and unmodified from without down to the era of British occupation. No other branch of the Indo-European stock has experienced an isolated evolution like this. No other country except China can trace back its language and literature, its religious beliefs and rites, its domestic and social customs, through an uninterrupted development of more than three thousand years.

A few examples will serve to illustrate this remarkable continuity in Indian civilisation. Sanskrit is still spoken as the tongue of the learned by thousands of Brahmans, as it was centuries before our era. Nor has it ceased to be used for literary purposes, for many books and journals written in the ancient language are still produced. The copying of Sanskrit manuscripts is still continued in hundreds of libraries in India, uninterrupted even by the introduction of printing during the present century. The Vedas are still learnt by heart as they were long before the invasion of Alexander, and could even now be restored from the lips of religious teachers if every manuscript or printed copy of them were destroyed. A Vedic stanza of immemorial antiquity,



addressed to the sun-god Savitri, is still recited in the daily worship of the Hindus. The god Vishṇu, adored more than 3000 years ago, has countless votaries in India at the present day. Fire is still produced for sacrificial purposes by means of two sticks, as it was in ages even more remote. The wedding ceremony of the modern Hindu, to single out but one social custom, is essentially the same as it was long before the Christian era.

The history of ancient Indian literature naturally falls into two main periods. The first is the Vedic, which beginning perhaps as early as 1500 B.C., extends in its latest phase to about 200 B.C. In the former half of the Vedic age the character of its literature was creative and poetical, while the centre of culture lay in the territory of the Indus and its tributaries, the modern Panjāb; in the latter half, literature was theologically speculative in matter and prosaic in form, while the centre of intellectual life had shifted to the valley of the Ganges. Thus in the course of the Vedic age Aryan civilisation had overspread the whole of Hindustan Proper, the vast tract extending from the mouths of the Indus to those of the Ganges, bounded on the north by the Himālaya, and on the south by the Vindhya range. The second period, concurrent with the final offshoots of Vedic literature and closing with the Muhammadan conquest after 1000 A.D., is the Sanskrit period strictly speaking. In a certain sense, owing to the continued literary use of Sanskrit, mainly for the composition of commentaries, this period may be regarded as coming down to the present day. During this second epoch Brahmanic culture

was introduced into and overspread the southern portion of the continent called the Dekhan or “the South.” In the course of these two periods taken together, Indian literature attained noteworthy results in nearly every department. The Vedic age, which, unlike the earlier epoch of Greece, produced only religious works, reached a high standard of merit in lyric poetry, and later made some advance towards the formation of a prose style.

The Sanskrit period, embracing in general secular subjects, achieved distinction in many branches of literature, in national as well as court epic, in lyric and especially didactic poetry, in the drama, in fairy tales, fables, and romances. Everywhere we find much true poetry, the beauty of which is, however, marred by obscurity of style and the ever-increasing taint of artificiality. But this period produced few works which, regarded as a whole, are dominated by a sense of harmony and proportion. Such considerations have had little influence on the æsthetic notions of India. The tendency has been rather towards exaggeration, manifesting itself in all directions. The almost incredible development of detail in ritual observance; the extraordinary excesses of asceticism; the grotesque representations of mythology in art; the frequent employment of vast numbers in description; the immense bulk of the epics; the unparalleled conciseness of one of the forms of prose; the huge compounds habitually employed in the later style, are among the more striking manifestations of this defect of the Indian mind.

In various branches of scientific literature, in phonetics, grammar, mathematics, astronomy, medicine, and law, the Indians also achieved notable results. In some of these subjects their attainments are, indeed, far in advance of what was accomplished by the Greeks.

History is the one weak spot in Indian literature. It is, in fact, non-existent. The total lack of the historical sense is so characteristic, that the whole course of Sanskrit literature is darkened by the shadow of this defect, suffering as it does from an entire absence of exact chronology. So true is this, that the very date of Kālidāsa, the greatest of Indian poets, was long a matter of controversy within the limits of a thousand years, and is even now doubtful to the extent of a century or two. Thus the dates of Sanskrit authors are in the vast majority of cases only known approximately, having been inferred from the indirect evidence of interdependence, quotation or allusion, development of language or style. As to the events of their lives, we usually know nothing at all, and only in a few cases one or two general facts. Two causes seem to have combined to bring about this remarkable result. In the first place, early India wrote no history because it never made any. The ancient Indians never went through a struggle for life, like the Greeks in the Persian and the Romans in the Punic wars, such as would have welded their tribes into a nation and developed political greatness. Secondly, the Brahmans, whose task it would naturally have been to record great deeds, had early embraced the doctrine that all action and

existence are a positive evil, and could therefore have felt but little inclination to chronicle historical events.

Such being the case, definite dates do not begin to appear in Indian literary history till about 500 A.D. The chronology of the Vedic period is altogether conjectural, being based entirely on internal evidence. Three main literary strata can be clearly distinguished in it by differences in language and style, as well as in religious and social views. For the development of each of these strata a reasonable length of time must be allowed; but all we can here hope to do is to approximate to the truth by centuries. The lower limit of the second Vedic stratum cannot, however, be fixed later than 500 B.C., because its latest doctrines are presupposed by Buddhism, and the date of the death of Buddha has been with a high degree of probability calculated, from the recorded dates of the various Buddhist councils, to be 480 B.C. With regard to the commencement of the Vedic age, there seems to have been a decided tendency among Sanskrit scholars to place it too high. 2000 B.C. is commonly represented as its starting-point. Supposing this to be correct, the truly vast period of 1500 years is required to account for a development of language and thought hardly greater than that between the Homeric and the Attic age of Greece. Professor Max Müller's earlier estimate of 1200 B.C., formed forty years ago, appears to be much nearer the mark. A lapse of three centuries, say from 1300–1000 B.C., would amply account for the difference between what is oldest and newest in Vedic hymn poetry. Considering that the affinity

of the oldest form of the Avestan language with the dialect of the Vedas is already so great that, by the mere application of phonetic laws, whole Avestan stanzas may be translated word for word into Vedic, so as to produce verses correct not only in form but in poetic spirit; considering further, that if we knew the Avestan language at as early a stage as we know the Vedic, the former would necessarily be almost identical with the latter, it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that the Indian branch must have separated from the Iranian only a very short time before the beginnings of Vedic literature, and can therefore have hardly entered the North-West of India even as early as 1500 B.C. All previous estimates of the antiquity of the Vedic period have been outdone by the recent theory of Professor Jacobi of Bonn, who supposes that period goes back to at least 4000 B.C. This theory is based on astronomical calculations connected with a change in the beginning of the seasons, which Professor Jacobi thinks has taken place since the time of the *Rigveda*. The whole estimate is, however, invalidated by the assumption of a doubtful, and even improbable, meaning in a Vedic word, which forms the very starting-point of the theory. Meanwhile we must rest content with the certainty that Vedic literature in any case is of considerably higher antiquity than that of Greece.

For the post-Vedic period we have, in addition to the results of internal evidence, a few landmarks of general chronological importance in the visits of foreigners. The earliest date of this kind is that of the invasion of India by Alexander in 326 B.C.

This was followed by the sojourn in India of various Greeks, of whom the most notable was Megasthenes. He resided for some years about 300 B.C. at the court of Pāṭaliputra (the modern Patna), and has left a valuable though fragmentary account of the contemporary state of Indian society. Many centuries later India was visited by three Chinese Buddhist pilgrims, Fa Hian (399 A.D.), Hiouen Thsang (630–645), and I Tsing (671–695). The records of their travels, which have been preserved, and are all now translated into English, shed much light on the social conditions, the religious thought, and the Buddhist antiquities of India in their day. Some general and specific facts about Indian literature also can be gathered from them. Hiouen Thsang especially supplies some important statements about contemporary Sanskrit poets. It is not till his time that we can say of any Sanskrit writer that he was alive in any particular year, excepting only the three Indian astronomers, whose exact dates in the fifth and sixth centuries have been recorded by themselves. It was only the information supplied by the two earlier Chinese writers that made possible the greatest archæological discovery of the present century in India, that of the site of Buddha's birthplace, Kapila-vastu, identified in December 1896. At the close of our period we have the very valuable account of the country at the time of the Muhammadan conquest by the Arabic author Albērūnī, who wrote his *India* in 1030 A.D.

It is evident from what has been said, that before 500 A.D. literary chronology, even in the Sanskrit period, is almost entirely

relative, priority or posteriority being determined by such criteria as development of style or thought, the mention of earlier authors by name, stray political references as to the Greeks or to some well-known dynasty, and allusions to astronomical facts which cannot have been known before a certain epoch. Recent research, owing to increased specialisation, has made considerable progress towards greater chronological definiteness. More light will doubtless in course of time come from the political history of early India, which is being reconstructed, with great industry and ability, by various distinguished scholars from the evidence of coins, copper-plate grants, and rock or pillar inscriptions. These have been or are being published in the *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, the *Epigraphia Indica*, and various journals devoted to the study of Indian antiquities. The rise in the study of epigraphy during the last twenty years has, indeed, already yielded some direct information of importance about the literary and religious history of India, by fixing the date of some of the later poets as well as by throwing light on religious systems and whole classes of literature. Thus some metrical inscriptions of considerable length have been deciphered, which prove the existence of court poetry in Sanskrit and vernacular dialects from the first century of our era onwards. No direct evidence of this fact had previously been known.

The older inscriptions are also important in connection with Sanskrit literature as illustrating both the early history of Indian writing and the state of the language at the time. The oldest

of them are the rock and pillar inscriptions, dating from the middle of the third century B.C., of the great Buddhist king Aṣoka, who ruled over Northern India from 259 to 222 B.C., and during whose reign was held the third Buddhist council, at which the canon of the Buddhist scriptures was probably fixed. The importance of these inscriptions can hardly be over-rated for the value of the information to be derived from them about the political, religious, and linguistic conditions of the age. Found scattered all over India, from Girnar (Giri-nagara) in Kathiawar to Dhuli in Orissa, from Kapur-di-Giri, north of the Kabul river, to Khalsi, they have been reproduced, deciphered, and translated. One of them, engraved on a pillar erected by Aṣoka to commemorate the actual birthplace of Buddha, was discovered only at the close of 1896.

These Aṣoka inscriptions are the earliest records of Indian writing. The question of the origin and age of writing in India, long involved in doubt and controversy, has been greatly cleared up by the recent palæographical researches of Professor Bühler. That great scholar has shown, that of the two kinds of script known in ancient India, the one called *Kharoshthī* employed in the country of Gandhāra (Eastern Afghanistan and Northern Panjāb) from the fourth century B.C. to 200 A.D., was borrowed from the Aramaic type of Semitic writing in use during the fifth century B.C. It was always written from right to left, like its original. The other ancient Indian script, called *Brāhmī*, is, as Bühler shows, the true national writing of India, because all



later Indian alphabets are descended from it, however dissimilar many of them may appear at the present day. It was regularly written from left to right; but that this was not its original direction is indicated by a coin of the fourth century B.C., the inscription on which runs from right to left. Dr. Bühler has shown that this writing is based on the oldest Northern Semitic or Phœnician type, represented on Assyrian weights and on the Moabite stone, which dates from about 890 B.C. He argues, with much probability, that it was introduced about 800 B.C. into India by traders coming by way of Mesopotamia.

References to writing in ancient Indian literature are, it is true, very rare and late; in no case, perhaps, earlier than the fourth century B.C., or not very long before the date of the Açoka inscriptions. Little weight, however, can be attached to the *argumentum ex silentio* in this instance. For though writing has now been extensively in use for an immense period, the native learning of the modern Indian is still based on oral tradition. The sacred scriptures as well as the sciences can only be acquired from the lips of a teacher, not from a manuscript; and as only memorial knowledge is accounted of value, writing and MSS. are rarely mentioned. Even modern poets do not wish to be read, but cherish the hope that their works may be recited. This immemorial practice, indeed, shows that the beginnings of Indian poetry and science go back to a time when writing was unknown, and a system of oral tradition, such as is referred to in the *Rigveda*, was developed before writing was introduced.

The latter could, therefore, have been in use long before it began to be mentioned. The palæographical evidence of the Açoka inscriptions, in any case, clearly shows that writing was no recent invention in the third century B.C., for most of the letters have several, often very divergent forms, sometimes as many as nine or ten. A considerable length of time was, moreover, needed to elaborate from the twenty-two borrowed Semitic symbols the full *Brāhmī* alphabet of forty-six letters. This complete alphabet, which was evidently worked out by learned Brahmins on phonetic principles, must have existed by 500 B.C., according to the strong arguments adduced by Professor Bühler. This is the alphabet which is recognised in Pāṇini's great Sanskrit grammar of about the fourth century B.C., and has remained unmodified ever since. It not only represents all the sounds of the Sanskrit language, but is arranged on a thoroughly scientific method, the simple vowels (short and long) coming first, then the diphthongs, and lastly the consonants in uniform groups according to the organs of speech with which they are pronounced. Thus the dental consonants appear together as *t, th, d, dh, n*, and the labials as *p, ph, b, bh, m*. We Europeans, on the other hand, 2500 years later, and in a scientific age, still employ an alphabet which is not only inadequate to represent all the sounds of our languages, but even preserves the random order in which vowels and consonants are jumbled up as they were in the Greek adaptation of the primitive Semitic arrangement of 3000 years ago.

In the inscriptions of the third century B.C. two types, the

Northern and the Southern, may be distinguished in the *Brāhmī* writing. From the former is descended the group of Northern scripts which gradually prevailed in all the Aryan dialects of India. The most important of them is the *Nāgarī* (also called *Devanāgarī*), in which Sanskrit MSS. are usually written, and Sanskrit as well as Marāṭhī and Hindī books are regularly printed. It is recognisable by the characteristic horizontal line at the top of the letters. The oldest inscription engraved entirely in *Nāgarī* belongs to the eighth, and the oldest MS. written in it to the eleventh century. From the Southern variety of the *Brāhmī* writing are descended five types of script, all in use south of the Vindhya range. Among them are the characters employed in the Canarese and the Telugu country.

Owing to the perishability of the material on which they are written, Sanskrit MSS. older than the fourteenth century A.D. are rare. The two ancient materials used in India were strips of birch bark and palm leaves. The employment of the former, beginning in the North-West of India, where extensive birch forests clothe the slopes of the Himālaya, gradually spread to Central, Eastern, and Western India. The oldest known Sanskrit MS. written on birch bark dates from the fifth century A.D., and a Pāli MS. in *Kharoshṭhī* which became known in 1897, is still older, but the use of this material doubtless goes back to far earlier days. Thus we have the statement of Quintus Curtius that the Indians employed it for writing on at the time of Alexander. The testimony of classical Sanskrit authors, as well as

of Albērūnī, shows that leaves of birch bark (*bhūrja-pattra*) were also regularly used for letter-writing in early mediæval India.

The first example of a palm leaf Sanskrit MS. belongs to the sixth century A.D. It is preserved in Japan, but there is a facsimile of it in the Bodleian Library. According to the Chinese pilgrim Hiouen Thsang, the use of the palm leaf was common all over India in the seventh century; but that it was known many centuries earlier is proved by the fact that an inscribed copper-plate, dating from the first century A.D. at the latest, imitates a palm leaf in shape.

Paper was introduced by the Muhammadan conquest, and has been very extensively used since that time for the writing of MSS. The oldest known example of a paper Sanskrit MS. written in India is one from Gujarat, belonging to the early part of the thirteenth century. In Northern India, where ink was employed for writing, palm leaves went out of use after the introduction of paper. But in the South, where a stilus has always been employed for scratching in the character, palm leaves are still common for writing both MSS. and letters. The birch bark and palm leaf MSS. are held together by a cord drawn through a single hole in the middle, or through two placed some distance apart. This explains how the Sanskrit word for “knot,” *grantha*, came to acquire the sense of “book.”

Leather or parchment has never been utilised in India for MSS., owing to the ritual impurity of animal materials. For inscriptions copper-plates were early and frequently employed.

They regularly imitate the shape of either palm leaves or strips of birch bark.

The actual use of ink (the oldest Indian name of which is *mashi*) is proved for the second century B.C. by an inscription from a Buddhist relic mound, and is rendered very probable for the fourth century B.C. by the statements of Nearchos and Quintus Curtius.

All the old palm leaf, birch bark, and paper Sanskrit MSS. have been written with ink and a reed pen, usually called *kalama* (a term borrowed from the Greek *kalamos*). In Southern India, on the other hand, it has always been the practice to scratch the writing on palm leaves with a stylus, the characters being subsequently blackened by soot or charcoal being rubbed into them.

Sanskrit MSS. of every kind are usually kept between thin strips of wood with cords wound round them, and wrapped up in coloured, sometimes embroidered, cloths. They have been, and still are, preserved in the libraries of temples, monasteries, colleges, the courts of princes, as well as private houses. A famous library was owned by King Bhoja of Dhār in the eleventh century. That considerable private libraries existed in fairly early times is shown by the fact that the Sanskrit author Bāna (about 620 A.D.) had in his employment a reader of manuscripts. Even at the present day there are many excellent libraries of Sanskrit MSS. in the possession of Brahmans all over India.

The ancient Indian language, like the literature composed

in it, falls into the two main divisions of Vedic and Sanskrit. The former differs from the latter on the whole about as much as Homeric from classical Greek, or the Latin of the Salic hymns from that of Varro. Within the Vedic language, in which the sacred literature of India is written, several stages can be distinguished. In its transitions from one to the other it gradually grows more modern till it is ultimately merged in Sanskrit. Even in its earliest phase Vedic cannot be regarded as a popular tongue, but is rather an artificially archaic dialect, handed down from one generation to the other within the class of priestly singers. Of this the language itself supplies several indications. One of them is the employment side by side of forms belonging to different linguistic periods, a practice in which, however, the Vedic does not go so far as the Homeric dialect. The spoken language of the Vedic priests probably differed from this dialect of the hymns only in the absence of poetical constructions and archaisms. There was, in fact, even in the earlier Vedic age, a caste language, such as is to be found more or less wherever a literature has grown up; but in India it has been more strongly marked than in any other country.

If, however, Vedic was no longer a natural tongue, but was already the scholastic dialect of a class, how much truer is this of the language of the later literature! Sanskrit differs from Vedic, but not in conformity with the natural development which appears in living languages. The phonetic condition of Sanskrit remains almost exactly the same as that of the earliest Vedic.

In the matter of grammatical forms, too, the language shows itself to be almost stationary; for hardly any new formations or inflexions have made their appearance. Yet even from a grammatical point of view the later language has become very different from the earlier. This change was therefore brought about, not by new creations, but by successive losses. The most notable of these were the disappearance of the subjunctive mood and the reduction of a dozen infinitives to a single one. In declension the change consisted chiefly in the dropping of a number of synonymous by-forms. It is probable that the spoken Vedic, more modern and less complex than that of the hymns, to some extent affected the later literary language in the direction of simplification. But the changes in the language were mainly due to the regulating efforts of the grammarians, which were more powerful in India than anywhere else, owing to the early and exceptional development of grammatical studies in that country. Their influence alone can explain the elaborate nature of the phonetic combinations (called *Sandhi*) between the finals and initials of words in the Sanskrit sentence.

It is, however, the vocabulary of the language that has undergone the greatest modifications, as is indeed the case in all literary dialects; for it is beyond the power of grammarians to control change in this direction. Thus we find that the vocabulary has been greatly extended by derivation and composition according to recognised types. At the same time there are numerous words which, though old, seem to be new only because

they happen by accident not to occur in the Vedic literature. Many really new words have, however, come in through continual borrowings from a lower stratum of language, while already existing words have undergone great changes of meaning.

This later phase of the ancient language of India was stereotyped by the great grammarian Pāṇini towards the end of the fourth century B.C. It came to be called Sanskrit, the “refined” or “elaborate” (*saṃ-skṛi-ta*, literally “put together”), a term not found in the older grammarians, but occurring in the earliest epic, the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The name is meant to be opposed to that of the popular dialects called *Prākṛita*, and is so opposed, for instance, in the *Kāvyaadarṣa*, or *Mirror of Poetry*, a work of the sixth century A.D. The older grammarians themselves, from Yāska (fifth century B.C.) onwards, speak of this classical dialect as *Bhāṣā*, “the speech,” in distinction from Vedic. The remarks they make about it point to a spoken language. Thus one of them, Patanjali, refers to it as used “in the world,” and designates the words of his Sanskrit as “current in the world.” Pāṇini himself gives many rules which have no significance except in connection with living speech; as when he describes the accent or the lengthening of vowels in calling from a distance, in salutation, or in question and answer. Again, Sanskrit cannot have been a mere literary and school language, because there are early traces of its having had dialectic variations. Thus Yāska and Pāṇini mention the peculiarities of the “Easterns” and “Northerners,” Kātyāyana refers to local divergences, and Patanjali specifies



words occurring in single districts only. There is, indeed, no doubt that in the second century B.C. Sanskrit was actually spoken in the whole country called by Sanskrit writers Āryāvarta, or “Land of the Aryans,” which lies between the Himālaya and the Vindhya range. But who spoke it there? Brahmans certainly did; for Patanjali speaks of them as the “instructed” (*çishṭa*), the employers of correct speech. Its use, however, extended beyond the Brahmans; for we read in Patanjali about a head-groom disputing with a grammarian as to the etymology of the Sanskrit word for “charioteer” (*sūta*). This agrees with the distribution of the dialects in the Indian drama, a distribution doubtless based on a tradition much older than the plays themselves. Here the king and those of superior rank speak Sanskrit, while the various forms of the popular dialect are assigned to women and to men of the people. The dramas also show that whoever did not speak Sanskrit at any rate understood it, for Sanskrit is there employed in conversation with speakers of Prākṛit. The theatrical public, and that before which, as we know from frequent references in the literature, the epics were recited, must also have understood Sanskrit. Thus, though classical Sanskrit was from the beginning a literary and, in a sense, an artificial dialect, it would be erroneous to deny to it altogether the character of a colloquial language. It is indeed, as has already been mentioned, even now actually spoken in India by learned Brahmans, as well as written by them, for every-day purposes. The position of Sanskrit, in short, has all along been, and still is, much like that of Hebrew

among the Jews or of Latin in the Middle Ages.

Whoever was familiar with Sanskrit at the same time spoke one popular language or more. The question as to what these popular languages were brings us to the relation of Sanskrit to the vernaculars of India. The linguistic importance of the ancient literary speech for the India of to-day will become apparent when it is pointed out that all the modern dialects—excepting those of a few isolated aboriginal hill tribes—spoken over the whole vast territory between the mouths of the Indus and those of the Ganges, between the Himālaya and the Vindhya range, besides the Bombay Presidency as far south as the Portuguese settlement of Goa, are descended from the oldest form of Sanskrit. Starting from their ancient source in the north-west, they have overflowed in more and more diverging streams the whole peninsula except the extreme south-east. The beginnings of these popular dialects go back to a period of great antiquity. Even at the time when the Vedic hymns were composed, there must have existed a popular language which already differed widely in its phonetic aspect from the literary dialect. For the Vedic hymns contain several words of a phonetic type which can only be explained by borrowings on the part of their composers from popular speech.

We further know that in the sixth century B.C., Buddha preached his gospel in the language of the people, as opposed to that of the learned, in order that all might understand him. Thus all the oldest Buddhist literature dating from the fourth or fifth century B.C. was composed in the vernacular, originally

doubtless in the dialect of Magadha (the modern Behar), the birthplace of Buddhism. Like Italian, as compared with Latin, this early popular speech is characterised by the avoidance of conjunct consonants and by fondness for final vowels. Thus the Sanskrit *sūtra*, “thread,” and *dharma*, “duty,” become *sutta* and *dhamma* respectively, while *vidyut*, “lightning,” is transformed into *vijju*. The particular form of the popular language which became the sacred idiom of Southern Buddhism is known by the name of Pāli. Its original home is still uncertain, but its existence as early as the third century B.C. is proved beyond the range of doubt by the numerous rock and pillar inscriptions of Aṣoka. This dialect was in the third century B.C. introduced into Ceylon, and became the basis of Singhalese, the modern language of the island. It was through the influence of Buddhism that, from Aṣoka’s time onwards, the official decrees and documents preserved in inscriptions were for centuries composed exclusively in Middle Indian (Prākṛit) dialects. Sanskrit was not familiar to the chanceries during these centuries, though the introduction of Sanskrit verses in Prākṛit inscriptions shows that Sanskrit was alive during this period, and proves its continuity for literary purposes. The older tradition of both the Buddhist and the Jain religion, in fact, ignored Sanskrit entirely, using only the popular dialects for all purposes.

But in course of time both the Buddhists and the Jains endeavoured to acquire a knowledge of Sanskrit. This led to the formation of an idiom which, being in the main Prākṛit, was

made to resemble the old language by receiving Sanskrit endings and undergoing other adaptations. It is therefore decidedly wrong to consider this artificial dialect an intermediate stage between Sanskrit and Pāli. This peculiar type of language is most pronounced in the poetical pieces called *gāthā* or “song,” which occur in the canonical works of the Northern Buddhists, especially in the *Lalitavistara*, a life of Buddha. Hence it was formerly called the Gāthā dialect. The term is, however, inaccurate, as Buddhist prose works have also been written in this mixed language.

The testimony of the inscriptions is instructive in showing the gradual encroachment of Sanskrit on the popular dialects used by the two non-Brahmanical religions. Thus in the Jain inscriptions of Mathurā (now Muttra), an almost pure Prākṛit prevails down to the first century A.D. After that Sanskritisms become more and more frequent, till at last simple Sanskrit is written. Similarly in Buddhist inscriptions pure Prākṛit is relieved by the mixed dialect, the latter by Sanskrit. Thus in the inscriptions of Nāsik, in Western India, the mixed dialect extends into the third, while Sanskrit first begins in the second century A.D. From the sixth century onwards Sanskrit prevails exclusively (except among the Jains) in inscriptions, though Prākṛitisms often occur in them. Even in the literature of Buddhism the mixed dialect was gradually supplanted by Sanskrit. Hence most of the Northern Buddhist texts have come down to us in Sanskrit, which, however, diverges widely in vocabulary from that of

the sacred texts of the Brahmans, as well as from that of the classical literature, since they are full of Prākṛit words. It is expressly attested by the Chinese pilgrim, Hiouen Thsang, that in the seventh century the Buddhists used Sanskrit even in oral theological discussions. The Jains finally did the same, though without entirely giving up Prākṛit. Thus by the time of the Muhammadan conquest Sanskrit was almost the only written language of India. But while Sanskrit was recovering its ancient supremacy, the Prākṛits had exercised a lasting influence upon it in two respects. They had supplied its vocabulary with a number of new words, and had transformed into a stress accent the old musical accent which still prevailed after the days of Pāṇini.

In the oldest period of Prākṛit, that of the Pāli Aṣoka inscriptions and the early Buddhistic and Jain literature, two main dialects, the Western and the Eastern, may be distinguished. Between the beginning of our era and about 1000 A.D., mediæval Prākṛit, which is still synthetic in character, is divided into four chief dialects. In the west we find *Apabhraṃṣa* ("decadent") in the valley of the Indus, and *Çaurasenī* in the Doab, with Mathurā as its centre. Subdivisions of the latter were *Gaurjarī* (*Gujaratī*), *Avantī* (Western *Rājputānī*), and *Mahārāshṭrī* (Eastern *Rājputānī*). The Eastern Prākṛit now appears as *Māgadhī*, the dialect of Magadha, now Behar, and *Ardha-Māgadhī* (Half-Māgadhī), with Benares as its centre. These mediæval Prākṛits are important in connection with Sanskrit literature, as they are the vernaculars employed by the

uneducated classes in the Sanskrit drama.

They are the sources of all the Aryan languages of modern India. From the *Apabhraṃṣa* are derived *Sindhī*, Western *Panjābī*, and *Kashmīrī*; from *Çaurasenī* come Eastern *Panjābī* and *Hindī* (the old *Avantī*), as well as *Gujarātī*; while from the two forms of *Māgadhī* are descended *Marāṭhī* on the one hand, and the various dialects of Bengal on the other. These modern vernaculars, which began to develop from about 1000 A.D., are no longer inflexional languages, but are analytical like English, forming an interesting parallel in their development from ancient Sanskrit to the Romance dialects in their derivation from Latin. They have developed literatures of their own, which are based entirely on that of Sanskrit. The non-Aryan languages of the Dekhan, the Dravidian group, including Telugu, Canarese, Malāyalam, and Tamil, have not indeed been ousted by Aryan tongues, but they are full of words borrowed from Sanskrit, while their literature is dominated by Sanskrit models.

## Chapter II

# The Vedic Period

On the very threshold of Indian literature more than three thousand years ago, we are confronted with a body of lyrical poetry which, although far older than the literary monuments of any other branch of the Indo-European family, is already distinguished by refinement and beauty of thought, as well as by skill in the handling of language and metre. From this point, for a period of more than a thousand years, Indian literature bears an exclusively religious stamp; even those latest productions of the Vedic age which cannot be called directly religious are yet meant to further religious ends. This is, indeed, implied by the term “Vedic.” For *veda*, primarily signifying “knowledge” (from *vid*, “to know”), designates “sacred lore,” as a branch of literature. Besides this general sense, the word has also the restricted meaning of “sacred book.”

In the Vedic period three well-defined literary strata are to be distinguished. The first is that of the four Vedas, the outcome of a creative and poetic age, in which hymns and prayers were composed chiefly to accompany the pressing and offering of the Soma juice or the oblation of melted butter (*ghṛita*) to the gods. The four Vedas are “collections,” called *saṃhitā*, of hymns and prayers made for different ritual purposes. They are of varying

age and significance. By far the most important as well as the oldest—for it is the very foundation of all Vedic literature—is the *Rigveda*, the “Veda of verses” (from *rich*, “a laudatory stanza”), consisting entirely of lyrics, mainly in praise of different gods. It may, therefore, be described as the book of hymns or psalms. The *Sāma-veda* has practically no independent value, for it consists entirely of stanzas (excepting only 75) taken from the *Rigveda* and arranged solely with reference to their place in the Soma sacrifice. Being meant to be sung to certain fixed melodies, it may be called the book of chants (*sāman*). The *Yajur-veda* differs in one essential respect from the *Sāma-veda*, It consists not only of stanzas (*rich*), mostly borrowed from the *Rigveda*, but also of original prose formulas. It resembles the *Sāma-veda*, however, in having its contents arranged in the order in which it was actually employed in various sacrifices. It is, therefore, a book of sacrificial prayers (*yajus*). The matter of this Veda has been handed down in two forms. In the one, the sacrificial formulas only are given; in the other, these are to a certain extent intermingled with their explanations. These three Vedas alone were at first recognised as canonical scriptures, being in the next stage of Vedic literature comprehensively spoken of as “the threefold knowledge” (*trayī vidyā*).

The fourth collection, the *Atharva-veda*, attained to this position only after a long struggle. Judged both by its language and by that portion of its matter which is analogous to the contents of the *Rigveda*, the *Atharva-veda* came into existence



considerably later than that Veda. In form it is similar to the *Rigveda*, consisting for the most part of metrical hymns, many of which are taken from the last book of the older collection. In spirit, however, it is not only entirely different from the *Rigveda*, but represents a much more primitive stage of thought. While the *Rigveda* deals almost exclusively with the higher gods as conceived by a comparatively advanced and refined sacerdotal class, the *Atharva-veda* is, in the main, a book of spells and incantations appealing to the demon world, and teems with notions about witchcraft current among the lower grades of the population, and derived from an immemorial antiquity. These two, thus complementary to each other in contents, are obviously the most important of the four Vedas. As representing religious ideas at an earlier stage than any other literary monuments of the ancient world, they are of inestimable value to those who study the evolution of religious beliefs.

The creative period of the Vedas at length came to an end. It was followed by an epoch in which there no longer seemed any need to offer up new prayers to the gods, but it appeared more meritorious to repeat those made by the holy seers of bygone generations, and handed down from father to son in various priestly families. The old hymns thus came to be successively gathered together in the Vedic collections already mentioned and in this form acquired an ever-increasing sanctity. Having ceased to produce poetry, the priesthood transferred their creative energies to the elaboration of the sacrificial ceremonial.

The result was a ritual system far surpassing in complexity of detail anything the world has elsewhere known. The main importance of the old Vedic hymns and formulas now came to be their application to the innumerable details of the sacrifice. Around this combination of sacred verse and rite a new body of doctrine grew up in sacerdotal tradition, and finally assumed definite shape in the guise of distinct theological treatises entitled *Brāhmaṇas*, “books dealing with devotion or prayer” (*brahman*). They evidently did not come into being till a time when the hymns were already deemed ancient and sacred revelations, the priestly custodians of which no longer fully understood their meaning owing to the change undergone by the language. They are written in prose throughout, and are in some cases accented, like the Vedas themselves. They are thus notable as representing the oldest prose writing of the Indo-European family. Their style is, indeed, cumbrous, rambling, and disjointed, but distinct progress towards greater facility is observable within this literary period.

The chief purpose of the *Brāhmaṇas* is to explain the mutual relation of the sacred text and the ceremonial, as well as their symbolical meaning with reference to each other. With the exception of the occasional legends and striking thoughts which occur in them, they cannot be said to be at all attractive as literary productions. To support their explanations of the ceremonial, they interweave exegetical, linguistic, and etymological observations, and introduce myths and

philosophical speculations in confirmation of their cosmogonic and theosophic theories. They form an aggregate of shallow and pedantic discussions, full of sacerdotal conceits, and fanciful, or even absurd, identifications, such as is doubtless unparalleled anywhere else. Yet, as the oldest treatises on ritual practices extant in any literature, they are of great interest to the student of the history of religions in general, besides furnishing much important material to the student of Indian antiquity in particular.

It results from what has been said that the contrasts between the two older phases of Vedic literature are strongly marked. The Vedas are poetical in matter and form; the Brāhmaṇas are prosaic and written in prose. The thought of the Vedas is on the whole natural and concrete; that of the Brāhmaṇas artificial and abstract. The chief significance of the Vedas lies in their mythology; that of the Brāhmaṇas in their ritual.

The subject-matter of the Brāhmaṇas which are attached to the various Vedas, differs according to the divergent duties performed by the kind of priest connected with each Veda. The Brāhmaṇas of the *Rigveda*, in explaining the ritual, usually limit themselves to the duties of the priest called *hotṛi* or “reciter” on whom it was incumbent to form the canon (*ṣastra*) for each particular rite, by selecting from the hymns the verses applicable to it. The Brāhmaṇas of the *Sāma-veda* are concerned only with the duties of the *udgāṭṛi* or “chanter” of the Sāmans; the Brāhmaṇas of the *Yajur-veda* with those of the *adhvaryu*, or the priest who is the actual sacrificer. Again, the Brāhmaṇas of

the *Rigveda* more or less follow the order of the ritual, quite irrespectively of the succession of the hymns in the Veda itself. The Brāhmaṇas of the *Sāma*- and the *Yajur-veda*, on the other hand, follow the order of their respective Vedas, which are already arranged in the ritual sequence. The Brāhmaṇa of the *Sāma-veda*, however, rarely explains individual verses, while that of the *Yajur-veda* practically forms a running commentary on all the verses of the text.

The period of the Brāhmaṇas is a very important one in the history of Indian society. For in it the system of the four castes assumed definite shape, furnishing the frame within which the highly complex network of the castes of to-day has been developed. In that system the priesthood, who even in the first Vedic period had occupied an influential position, secured for themselves the dominant power which they have maintained ever since. The life of no other people has been so saturated with sacerdotal influence as that of the Hindus, among whom sacred learning is still the monopoly of the hereditary priestly caste. While in other early societies the chief power remained in the hands of princes and warrior nobles, the domination of the priesthood became possible in India as soon as the energetic life of conquest during the early Vedic times in the north-west was followed by a period of physical inactivity or indolence in the plains. Such altered conditions enabled the cultured class, who alone held the secret of the all-powerful sacrifice, to gain the supremacy of intellect over physical force.

The Brāhmaṇas in course of time themselves acquired a sacred character, and came in the following period to be classed along with the hymns as *ṛuti* or “hearing,” that which was directly heard by or, as we should say, revealed to, the holy sages of old. In the sphere of revelation are included the later portions of the Brāhmaṇas, which form treatises of a specially theosophic character, and being meant to be imparted or studied in the solitude of the forest, are called *Āraṇyakas* or “Forest-books.” The final part of these, again, are philosophical books named *Upanishads*, which belong to the latest stage of Brāhmaṇa literature. The pantheistic groundwork of their doctrine was later developed into the Vedānta system, which is still the favourite philosophy of the modern Hindus.

Works of Vedic “revelation” were deemed of higher authority in cases of doubt than the later works on religious and civil usage, called *smṛiti* or “memory,” as embodying only the tradition derived from ancient sages.

We have now arrived at the third and last stage of Vedic literature, that of the Sūtras. These are compendious treatises dealing with Vedic ritual on the one hand, and with customary law on the other. The rise of this class of writings was due to the need of reducing the vast and growing mass of details in ritual and custom, preserved in the Brāhmaṇas and in floating tradition, to a systematic shape, and of compressing them within a compass which did not impose too great a burden on the memory, the vehicle of all teaching and learning. The main

object of the Sūtras is, therefore, to supply a short survey of the sum of these scattered details. They are not concerned with the interpretation of ceremonial or custom, but aim at giving a plain and methodical account of the whole course of the rites or practices with which they deal. For this purpose the utmost brevity was needed, a requirement which was certainly met in a manner unparalleled elsewhere. The very name of this class of literature, *sūtra*, “thread” or “clue” (from *siv*, “to sew”), points to its main characteristic and chief object—extreme conciseness. The prose in which these works are composed is so compressed that the wording of the most laconic telegram would often appear diffuse compared with it. Some of the Sūtras attain to an almost algebraic mode of expression, the formulas of which cannot be understood without the help of detailed commentaries. A characteristic aphorism has been preserved, which illustrates this straining after brevity. According to it, the composers of grammatical Sūtras delight as much in the saving of a short vowel as in the birth of a son. The full force of this remark can only be understood when it is remembered that a Brahman is deemed incapable of gaining heaven without a son to perform his funeral rites.

Though the works comprised in each class of Sūtras are essentially the same in character, it is natural to suppose that their composition extended over some length of time, and that those which are more concise and precise in their wording are the more recent; for the evolution of their style is obviously in the direction

of increased succinctness. Research, it is true, has hitherto failed to arrive at any definite result as to the date of their composition. Linguistic investigations, however, tend to show that the Sūtras are closely connected in time with the grammarian Pāṇini, some of them appearing to be considerably anterior to him. We shall, therefore, probably not go very far wrong in assigning 500 and 200 B.C. as the chronological limits within which the Sūtra literature was developed.

The tradition of the Vedic ritual was handed down in two forms. The one class, called *Ṣrauta Sūtras*, because based on *ṣruti* or revelation (by which in this case the Brāhmaṇas are chiefly meant), deal with the ritual of the greater sacrifices, for the performance of which three or more sacred fires, as well as the ministrations of priests, are necessary. Not one of them presents a complete picture of the sacrifice, because each of them, like the Brāhmaṇas, describes only the duties of one or other of the three kinds of priests attached to the respective Vedas. In order to obtain a full description of each ritual ceremony, it is therefore needful to supplement the account given by one *Ṣrauta Sūtra* from that furnished by the rest.

The other division of the ritual Sūtras is based on *smṛiti* or tradition. These are the *Gṛhya Sūtras*, or “House Aphorisms,” which deal with the household ceremonies, or the rites to be performed with the domestic fire in daily life. As a rule, these rites are not performed by a priest, but by the householder himself in company with his wife. For this reason there is,

apart from deviations in arrangement and expression, omission or addition, no essential difference between the various Gṛihya Sūtras, except that the verses to be repeated which they contain are taken from the Veda to which they belong. Each Gṛihya Sūtra, besides being attached to and referring to the Çrauta Sūtra of the same school, presupposes a knowledge of it. But though thus connected, the two do not form a unity.

The second class of Sūtras, which deal with social and legal usage, is, like the Gṛihya Sūtras, also based on *smṛiti* or tradition. These are the *Dharma Sūtras*, which are in general the oldest sources of Indian law. As is implied by the term *dharma*, “religion and morality,” their point of view is chiefly a religious one. They are closely connected with the Veda, which they quote, and which the later law-books regard as the first and highest source of *dharma*.

From the intensely crabbed and unintelligible nature of their style, and the studied baldness with which they present their subjects, it is evident that the Sūtras are inferior even to the Brāhmaṇas as literary productions. Judged, however, with regard to its matter, this strange phase of literature has considerable value. In all other ancient literatures knowledge of sacrificial rites can only be gained by collecting stray references. But in the ritual Sūtras we possess the ancient manuals which the priests used as the foundation of their sacrificial lore. Their statements are so systematic and detailed that it is possible to reconstruct from them various sacrifices without having seen them performed.



They are thus of great importance for the history of religious institutions. But the Sūtras have a further value. For, as the life of the Hindu, more than that of any other nation, was, even in the Vedic age, surrounded with a network of religious forms, both in its daily course and in its more important divisions, the domestic ritual as well as the legal Sūtras are our most important sources for the study of the social conditions of ancient India. They are the oldest Indian records of all that is included under custom.

Besides these ritual and legal compendia, the Sūtra period produced several classes of works composed in this style, which, though not religious in character, had a religious origin. They arose from the study of the Vedas, which was prompted by the increasing difficulty of understanding the hymns, and of reciting them correctly, in consequence of the changes undergone by the language. Their chief object was to ensure the right recitation and interpretation of the sacred text. One of the most important classes of this ancillary literature comprises the *Prātiçākhyā Sūtras*, which, dealing with accentuation, pronunciation, metre, and other matters, are chiefly concerned with the phonetic changes undergone by Vedic words when combined in a sentence. They contain a number of minute observations, such as have only been made over again by the phoneticians of the present day in Europe. A still more important branch of this subsidiary literature is grammar, in which the results attained by the Indians in the systematic analysis of language surpass those arrived at by any other nation. Little has been preserved of the

earliest attempts in this direction, for all that had been previously done was superseded by the great Sūtra work of Pāṇini. Though belonging probably to the middle of the Sūtra period, Pāṇini must be regarded as the starting-point of the Sanskrit age, the literature of which is almost entirely dominated by the linguistic standard stereotyped by him.

In the Sūtra period also arose a class of works specially designed for preserving the text of the Vedas from loss or change. These are the *Anukramaṇīs* or “Indices,” which quote the first words of each hymn, its author, the deity celebrated in it, the number of verses it contains, and the metre in which it is composed. One of them states the total number of hymns, verses, words, and even syllables, contained in the *Rigveda*, besides supplying other details.

From this general survey of the Vedic period we now turn to a more detailed consideration of the different phases of the literature it produced.

## Chapter III

# The Rigveda

In the dim twilight preceding the dawn of Indian literature the historical imagination can perceive the forms of Aryan warriors, the first Western conquerors of Hindustan, issuing from those passes in the north-west through which the tide of invasion has in successive ages rolled to sweep over the plains of India. The earliest poetry of this invading race, whose language and culture ultimately overspread the whole continent, was composed while its tribes still occupied the territories on both sides of the Indus now known as Eastern Kabulistan and the Panjāb. That ancient poetry has come down to us in the form of a collection of hymns called the *Rigveda*. The cause which gathered the poems it contains into a single book was not practical, as in the case of the *Sāma*- and *Yajur-veda*, but scientific and historical. For its ancient editors were undoubtedly impelled by the motive of guarding this heritage of olden time from change and destruction. The number of hymns comprised in the *Rigveda*, in the only recension which has been preserved, that of the Çākala school, is 1017, or, if the eleven supplementary hymns (called *Vālakhilya*) which are inserted in the middle of the eighth book are added, 1028. These hymns are grouped in ten books, called *maṇḍalas*, or “cycles,” which vary in length, except that the tenth contains

the same number of hymns as the first. In bulk the hymns of the *Rigveda* equal, it has been calculated, the surviving poems of Homer.

The general character of the ten books is not identical in all cases. Six of them (ii.–vii.) are homogeneous. Each of these, in the first place, is the work of a different seer or his descendants according to the ancient tradition, which is borne out by internal evidence. They were doubtless long handed down separately in the families to which they owed their being. Moreover, the hymns contained in these “family books,” as they are usually called, are arranged on a uniform plan differing from that of the rest. The first, eighth, and tenth books are not the productions of a single family of seers respectively, but consist of a number of groups based on identity of authorship. The arrangement of the ninth book is in no way connected with its composers; its unity is due to all its hymns being addressed to the single deity Soma, while its groups depend on identity of metre. The family books also contain groups; but each of these is formed of hymns addressed to one and the same deity.

Turning to the principle on which the entire books of the *Rigveda* are arranged in relation to one another, we find that Books II.–VII., if allowance is made for later additions, form a series of collections which contain a successively increasing number of hymns. This fact, combined with the uniformity of these books in general character and internal arrangement, renders it probable that they formed the nucleus of the *Rigveda*,

to which the remaining books were successively added. It further seems likely that the nine shorter collections, which form the second part of Book I., as being similarly based on identity of authorship, were subsequently combined and prefixed to the family books, which served as the model for their internal arrangement.

The hymns of the eighth book in general show a mutual affinity hardly less pronounced than that to be found in the family books. For they are connected by numerous repetitions of similar phrases and lines running through the whole book. The latter, however, does not form a parallel to the family books. For though a single family, that of the Kaṇvas, at least predominates among its authors, the prevalence in it of the strophic form of composition impresses upon it a character of its own. Moreover, the fact that the eighth book contains fewer hymns than the seventh, in itself shows that the former did not constitute one of the family series.

The first part (1–50) of Book I. has considerable affinities with the eighth, more than half its hymns being attributed to members of the Kaṇva family, while in the hymns composed by some of these Kaṇvas the favourite strophic metre of the eighth book reappears. There are, moreover, numerous parallel and directly identical passages in the two collections. It is, however, at present impossible to decide which of the two is the earlier, or why it is that, though so nearly related, they should have been separated. Certain it is that they were respectively added

at the beginning and the end of a previously existing collection, whether they were divided for chronological reasons or because composed by different branches of the Kaṇva family.

As to the ninth book, it cannot be doubted that it came into being as a collection after the first eight books had been combined into a whole. Its formation was in fact the direct result of that combination. The hymns to Soma Pavamāna ("the clearly flowing") are composed by authors of the same families as produced Books II.–VII., a fact, apart from other evidence, sufficiently indicated by their having the characteristic refrains of those families. The Pavamāna hymns have affinities to the first and eighth books also. When the hymns of the different families were combined into books, and clearly not till then, all their Pavamāna hymns were taken out and gathered into a single collection. This of course does not imply that the Pavamāna hymns themselves were of recent origin. On the contrary, though some of them may date from the time when the tenth book came into existence, there is good reason to suppose that the poetry of the Soma hymns, which has many points in common with the Avesta, and deals with a ritual going back to the Indo-Iranian period, reached its conclusion as a whole in early times among the Vedic singers. Differences of age in the hymns of the ninth book have been almost entirely effaced; at any rate, research has as yet hardly succeeded in distinguishing chronological stages in this collection.

With regard to the tenth book, there can be no doubt that

its hymns came into being at a time when the first nine already existed. Its composers grew up in the knowledge of the older books, with which they betray their familiarity at every turn. The fact that the author of one of its groups (20–26) begins with the opening words (*agnim īle*) of the first stanza of the *Rigveda*, is probably an indication that Books I.–IX. already existed in his day even as a combined collection. That the tenth book is indeed an aggregate of supplementary hymns is shown by its position after the Soma book, and by the number of its hymns being made up to that of the first book (191). The unity which connects its poetry is chronological; for it is the book of recent groups and recent single hymns. Nevertheless the supplements collected in it appear for the most part to be older than the additions which occur in the earlier books.

There are many criteria, derived from its matter as well as its form, showing the recent origin of the tenth book. With regard to mythology, we find the earlier gods beginning to lose their hold on the imagination of these later singers. Some of them seem to be disappearing, like the goddess of Dawn, while only deities of widely established popularity, such as Indra and Agni, maintain their position. The comprehensive group of the *Viṣve devās*, or “All gods,” has alone increased in prominence. On the other hand, an altogether new type, the deification of purely abstract ideas, such as “Wrath” and “Faith,” now appears for the first time. Here, too, a number of hymns are found dealing with subjects foreign to the earlier books, such as cosmogony

and philosophical speculation, wedding and burial rites, spells and incantations, which give to this book a distinctive character besides indicating its recent origin.

Linguistically, also, the tenth book is clearly distinguished as later than the other books, forming in many respects a transition to the other Vedas. A few examples will here suffice to show this. Vowel contractions occur much more frequently, while the hiatus has grown rarer. The use of the letter *l*, as compared with *r*, is, in agreement with later Sanskrit, strikingly on the increase. In inflexion the employment of the Vedic nominative plural in *āsas* is on the decline. With regard to the vocabulary, many old words are going out of use, while others are becoming commoner. Thus the particle *sīm*, occurring fifty times in the rest of the *Rigveda*, is found only once in the tenth book. A number of words common in the later language are only to be met with in this book; for instance, *labh*, “to take,” *kāla*, “time,” *lakshmī*, “fortune,” *evam*, “thus.” Here, too, a number of conscious archaisms can be pointed out.

Thus the tenth book represents a definitely later stratum of composition in the *Rigveda*. Individual hymns in the earlier books have also been proved by various recognised criteria to be of later origin than others, and some advance has been made towards assigning them to three or even five literary epochs. Research has, however, not yet arrived at any certain results as to the age of whole groups in the earlier books. For it must be borne in mind that posteriority of collection and incorporation



does not necessarily prove a later date of composition.

Some hundreds of years must have been needed for all the hymns found in the *Rigveda* to come into being. There was also, doubtless, after the separation of the Indians from the Iranians, an intermediate period, though it was probably of no great length. In this transitional age must have been composed the more ancient poems which are lost, and in which the style of the earliest preserved hymns, already composed with much skill, was developed. The poets of the older part of the *Rigveda* themselves mention predecessors, in whose wise they sing, whose songs they desire to renew, and speak of ancestral hymns produced in days of yore. As far as linguistic evidence is concerned, it affords little help in discriminating periods within the *Rigveda* except with regard to the tenth book. For throughout the hymns, in spite of the number of authors, essentially the same language prevails. It is quite possible to distinguish differences of thought, style, and poetical ability, but hardly any differences of dialect. Nevertheless, patient and minute linguistic research, combined with the indications derived from arrangement, metre, and subject-matter, is beginning to yield evidence which may lead to the recognition of chronological strata in the older books of the *Rigveda*.

Though the aid of MSS. for this early period entirely fails, we yet happily possess for the *Rigveda* an abundant mass of various readings over 2000 years old. These are contained in the other Vedas, which are largely composed of hymns, stanzas,

and lines borrowed from the *Rigveda*. The other Vedas are, in fact, for the criticism of the *Rigveda*, what manuscripts are for other literary monuments. We are thus enabled to collate with the text of the *Rigveda* directly handed down, various readings considerably older than even the testimony of Yāska and of the Prātiçākhyas.

The comparison of the various readings supplied by the later Vedas leads to the conclusion that the text of the *Rigveda* existed, with comparatively few exceptions, in its present form, and not in a possibly different recension, at the time when the text of the *Sāma-veda*, the oldest form of the *Yajur-veda*, and the *Atharva-veda* was constituted. The number of cases is infinitesimal in which the *Rigveda* shows a corruption from which the others are free. Thus it appears that the kernel of Vedic tradition, as represented by the *Rigveda*, has come down to us, with a high degree of fixity and remarkable care for verbal integrity, from a period which can hardly be less remote than 1000 B.C.

It is only natural that a sacred collection of poetry, historical in its origin, and the heritage of oral tradition before the other Vedas were composed and the details of the later ritual practice were fixed, should have continued to be preserved more accurately than texts formed mainly by borrowing from it hymns which were arbitrarily cut up into groups of verses or into single verses, solely in order to meet new liturgical needs. For those who removed verses of the *Rigveda* from their context and mixed them up with their own new creations would not feel bound to guard

such verses from change as strictly as those who did nothing but continue to hand down, without any break, the ancient text in its connected form. The control of tradition would be wanting where quite a new tradition was being formed.

The criticism of the text of the *Rigveda* itself is concerned with two periods. The first is that in which it existed alone before the other Vedas came into being; the second is that in which it appears in the phonetically modified form called the Saṃhitā text, due to the labours of grammatical editors. Being handed down in the older period exclusively by oral tradition, it was not preserved in quite authentic form down to the time of its final redaction. It did not entirely escape the fate suffered by all works which, coming down from remote antiquity, survive into an age of changed linguistic conditions. Though there are undeniable corruptions in detail belonging to the older period, the text maintained a remarkably high level of authenticity till such modifications as it had undergone reached their conclusion in the Saṃhitā text. This text differs in hundreds of places from that of the composers of the hymns; but its actual words are nearly always the same as those used by the ancient seers. Thus there would be no uncertainty as to whether the right word, for instance, was *sumnam* or *dyumnam*. The difference lies almost entirely in the *phonetic* changes which the words have undergone according to the rules of *Sandhi* prevailing in the classical language. Thus what was formerly pronounced as *tuam hi agne* now appears as *tvam hy agne*. The modernisation of

the text thereby produced is, however, only partial, and is often inconsistently applied. The euphonic combinations introduced in the Saṃhitā text have interfered with the metre. Hence by reading according to the latter the older text can be restored. At the same time the Saṃhitā text has preserved the smallest minutiae of detail most liable to corruption, and the slightest difference in the matter of accent and alternative forms, which might have been removed with the greatest ease. Such points furnish an additional proof that the extreme care with which the verbal integrity of the text was guarded goes back to the earlier period itself. Excepting single mistakes of tradition in the first, and those due to grammatical theories in the second period, the old text of the *Rigveda* thus shows itself to have been preserved from a very remote antiquity with marvellous accuracy even in the smallest details.

From the explanatory discussions of the Brāhmaṇas in connection with the *Rigveda*, it results that the text of the latter must have been essentially fixed in their time, and that too in quite a special manner, more, for instance, than the prose formulas of the *Yajurveda*. For the *Çatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, while speaking of the possibility of varying some of these formulas, rejects the notion of changing the text of a certain Rigvedic verse, proposed by some teachers, as something not to be thought of. The Brāhmaṇas further often mention the fact that such and such a hymn or liturgical group contains a particular number of verses. All such numerical statements appear to agree with the

extant text of the *Rigveda*. On the other hand, transpositions and omissions of Rigvedic verses are to be found in the Brāhmaṇas. These, however, are only connected with the ritual form of those verses, and in no way show that the text from which they were taken was different from ours.

The Sūtras also contain altered forms of Rigvedic verses, but these are, as in the case of the Brāhmaṇas, to be explained not from an older recension of the text, but from the necessity of adapting them to new ritual technicalities. On the other hand, they contain many statements which confirm our present text. Thus all that the Sūtra of Çāṅkhāyana says about the position occupied by verses in a hymn, or the total number of verses contained in groups of hymns, appears invariably to agree with our text.

We have yet to answer the question as to when the Saṃhitā text, which finally fixed the canonical form of the *Rigveda*, was constituted. Now the Brāhmaṇas contain a number of direct statements as to the number of syllables in a word or a group of words, which are at variance with the Saṃhitā text owing to the vowel contractions made in the latter. Moreover, the old part of the Brāhmaṇa literature shows hardly any traces of speculations about phonetic questions connected with the Vedic text. The conclusion may therefore be drawn that the Saṃhitā text did not come into existence till after the completion of the Brāhmaṇas. With regard to the Āraṇyakas and Upanishads, which form supplements to the Brāhmaṇas, the case is different.

These works not only mention technical grammatical terms for certain groups of letters, but contain detailed doctrines about the phonetic treatment of the Vedic text. Here, too, occur for the first time the names of certain theological grammarians, headed by Çākalya and Māṇḍūkeya, who are also recognised as authorities in the Prātiçākhyas. The Āraṇyakas and Upanishads accordingly form a transition, with reference to the treatment of grammatical questions, between the age of the Brāhmaṇas and that of Yāska and the Prātiçākhyas. The Saṃhitā text must have been created in this intermediate period, say about 600 B.C.

This work being completed, extraordinary precautions soon began to be taken to guard the canonical text thus fixed against the possibility of any change or loss. The result has been its preservation with a faithfulness unique in literary history. The first step taken in this direction was the constitution of the Pada, or “word” text, which being an analysis of the Saṃhitā, gives each separate word in its independent form, and thus to a considerable extent restores the Saṃhitā text to an older stage. That the Pada text was not quite contemporaneous in origin with the other is shown by its containing some undoubted misinterpretations and misunderstandings. Its composition can, however, only be separated by a short interval from that of the Saṃhitā, for it appears to have been known to the writer of the *Aitareya Āraṇyaka*, while its author, Çākalya, is older than both Yāska, who quotes him, and Çaunaka, composer of the *Rigveda Prātiçākhyā*, which is based on the Pada text.

The importance of the latter as a criterion of the authenticity of verses in the *Rigveda* is indicated by the following fact. There are six verses in the *Rigveda*<sup>1</sup> not analysed in the Pada text, but only given there over again in the Saṃhitā form. This shows that Çākalya did not acknowledge them as truly Rigvedic, a view justified by internal evidence. This group of six, which is doubtless exhaustive, stands midway between old additions which Çākalya recognised as canonical, and the new appendages called *Khilas*, which never gained admission into the Pada text in any form.

A further measure for preserving the sacred text from alteration with still greater certainty was soon taken in the form of the *Krama-pāṭha*, or “step-text.” This is old, for it, like the *Pada-pāṭha*, is already known to the author of the *Aitareya Āraṇyaka*. Here every word of the Pada text occurs twice, being connected both with that which precedes and that which follows. Thus the first four words, if represented by *a, b, c, d*, would be read as *ab, bc, cd*. The *Jaṭā-pāṭha*, or “woven-text,” in its turn based on the *Krama-pāṭha*, states each of its combinations three times, the second time in reversed order (*ab, ba, ab; bc, cb, bc*). The climax of complication is reached in the *Ghana-pāṭha*, in which the order is *ab, ba, abc, cba, abc; bc, cb, bcd, &c*.

The Prātiçākhyas may also be regarded as safeguards of the text, having been composed for the purpose of exhibiting exactly all the changes necessary for turning the Pada into the Saṃhitā

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<sup>1</sup> vii. 59, 12; x. 20, 1; 121, 10; 190, 1–3.

text.

Finally, the class of supplementary works called *Anukramaṇīs*, or “Indices” aimed at preserving the *Rigveda* intact by registering its contents from various points of view, besides furnishing calculations of the number of hymns, verses, words, and even syllables, contained in the sacred book.

The text of the *Rigveda* has come down to us in a single recension only; but is there any evidence that other recensions of it existed in former times?

The *Charaṇa-vyūha*, or “Exposition of Schools,” a supplementary work of the Sūtra period, mentions as the five *çākhās* or “branches” of the *Rigveda*, the Çākalas, the Vāshkalas, the Āçvalāyanas, the Çāṅkhāyanas, and the Māṇḍūkeyas. The third and fourth of these schools, however, do not represent different recensions of the text, the sole distinction between them and the Çākalas having been that the Āçvalāyanas recognised as canonical the group of the eleven *Vālakhilya* or supplementary hymns, and the Çāṅkhāyanas admitted the same group, diminished only by a few verses. Hence the tradition of the Purāṇas, or later legendary works, mentions only the three schools of Çākalas, Vāshkalas, and Māṇḍūkas. If the latter ever possessed a recension of an independent character, all traces of it were lost at an early period in ancient India, for no information of any kind about it has been preserved. Thus only the two schools of the Çākalas and the Vāshkalas come into consideration. The subsidiary Vedic writings contain sufficient evidence to show that



the text of the Vāshkalas differed from that of the Çākālas only in admitting eight additional hymns, and in assigning another position to a group of the first book. But in these respects it compares unfavourably with the extant text. Thus it is evident that the Çākālas not only possessed the best tradition of the text of the *Rigveda*, but handed down the only recension, in the true sense, which, as far as we can tell, ever existed.

The text of the *Rigveda*, like that of the other Saṃhitās, as well as of two of the Brāhmaṇas (the *Çatapatha* and the *Taittirīya*, together with its *Āraṇyaka*), has come down to us in an accented form. The peculiarly sacred character of the text rendered the accent very important for correct and efficacious recitation. Analogously the accent was marked by the Greeks in learned and model editions only. The nature of the Vedic accent was musical, depending on the pitch of the voice, like that of the ancient Greeks. This remained the character of the Sanskrit accent till later than the time of Pāṇini. But just as the old Greek musical accent, after the beginning of our era, was transformed into a stress accent, so by the seventh century A.D. (and probably long before) the Sanskrit accent had undergone a similar change. While, however, in modern Greek the stress accent has remained, owing to the high pitch of the old acute, on the same syllable as bore the musical accent in the ancient language, the modern pronunciation of Sanskrit has no connection with the Vedic accent, but is dependent on the quantity of the last two or three syllables, much the same as in

Latin. Thus the penultimate, if long, is accented, e.g. *Kālidāsa*, or the antepenultimate, if long and followed by a short syllable, e.g. *brāhmaṇa* or *Himālaya* (“abode of snow”). This change of accent in Sanskrit was brought about by the influence of Prākṛit, in which, as there is evidence to show, the stress accent is very old, going back several centuries before the beginning of our era.

There are three accents in the *Rigveda* as well as the other sacred texts. The most important of these is the rising accent, called *ud-ātta* (“raised”), which corresponds to the Greek acute. Comparative philology shows that in Sanskrit it rests on the same syllable as bore it in the proto-Aryan language. In Greek it is generally on the same syllable as in Sanskrit, except when interfered with by the specifically Greek law restricting the accent to one of the last three syllables. Thus the Greek *heptá* corresponds to the Vedic *saptá*, “seven.” The low-pitch accent, which precedes the acute, is called the *anudātta* (“not raised”). The third is the falling accent, which usually follows the acute, and is called *svarita* (“sounded”).

Of the four different systems of marking the accent in Vedic texts, that of the *Rigveda* is most commonly employed. Here the acute is not marked at all, while the low-pitch *anudātta* is indicated by a horizontal stroke below the syllable bearing it, and the *svarita* by a vertical stroke above. Thus *yājñasyà* (“of sacrifice”) would mean that the second syllable has the acute and the third the *svarita* (*yajñásyà*). The reason why the acute is not marked is because it is regarded as the middle tone between the

other two.<sup>2</sup>

The hymns of the *Rigveda* consist of stanzas ranging in number from three to fifty-eight, but usually not exceeding ten or twelve. These stanzas (often loosely called verses) are composed in some fifteen different metres, only seven of which, however, are at all frequent. Three of them are by far the commonest, claiming together about four-fifths of the total number of stanzas in the *Rigveda*.

There is an essential difference between Greek and Vedic prosody. Whereas the metrical unit of the former system is the foot, in the latter it is the line (or verse), feet not being distinguished. Curiously enough, however, the Vedic metrical unit is also called *pāda*, or “foot,” but for a very different reason; for the word has here really the figurative sense of “quarter” (from the foot of a quadruped). Because the most usual kind of stanza has four lines. The ordinary *pādas* consist of eight, eleven, or twelve syllables. A stanza or *ṛich* is generally formed of three or four lines of the same kind. Four or five of the rarer types of stanza are, however, made up of a combination of different lines.

It is to be noted that the Vedic metres have a certain elasticity

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<sup>2</sup> The other three systems are: (1) that of the *Maitrāyaṇī* and *Kāthaka* Saṃhitās (two recensions of the Black *Yajurveda*), which mark the acute with a vertical stroke above; (2) that of the *Çatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, which marks the acute with a horizontal stroke below; and (3) that of the *Sāmaveda*, which indicates the three accents with the numerals 1, 2, 3, to distinguish three degrees of pitch, the acute (1) here being the highest.

to which we are unaccustomed in Greek prosody, and which recalls the irregularities of the Latin Saturnian verse. Only the rhythm of the last four or five syllables is determined, the first part of the line not being subject to rule. Regarded in their historical connection, the Vedic metres, which are the foundation of the entire prosody of the later literature, occupy a position midway between the system of the Indo-Iranian period and that of classical Sanskrit. For the evidence of the Avesta, with its eight and eleven syllable lines, which ignore quantity, but are combined into stanzas otherwise the same as those of the *Rigveda*, indicates that the metrical practice of the period when Persians and Indians were still one people, depended on no other principle than the counting of syllables. In the Sanskrit period, on the other hand, the quantity of every syllable in the line was determined in all metres, with the sole exception of the loose measure (called *çloka*) employed in epic poetry. The metrical regulation of the line, starting from its end, thus finally extended to the whole. The fixed rhythm at the end of the Vedic line is called *vṛitta*, literally “turn” (from *vṛit*, Lat. *vert-ere*), which corresponds etymologically to the Latin *versus*.

The eight-syllable line usually ends in two iambics, the first four syllables, though not exactly determined, having a tendency to be iambic also. This verse is therefore the almost exact equivalent of the Greek iambic dimeter.

Three of these lines combine to form the *gāyatrī* metre, in which nearly one-fourth (2450) of the total number of stanzas in

the *Rigveda* is composed. An example of it is the first stanza of the *Rigveda*, which runs as follows:—

Agním ĩle puróhitam  
Yajnásya devám řitvíjam  
Hótāram ratnadhātāmam.

It may be closely rendered thus in lines imitating the rhythm of the original:—

I praise Agni, domestic priest,  
God, minister of sacrifice,  
Herald, most prodigal of wealth.

Four of these eight-syllable lines combine to form the *anushṭubh* stanza, in which the first two and the last two are more closely connected. In the *Rigveda* the number of stanzas in this measure amounts to only about one-third of those in the *gāyatrī*. This relation is gradually reversed, till we reach the post-Vedic period, when the *gāyatrī* is found to have disappeared, and the *anushṭubh* (now generally called *çloka*) to have become the predominant measure of Sanskrit poetry. A development in the character of this metre may be observed within the *Rigveda* itself. All its verses in the oldest hymns are the same, being iambic in rhythm. In later hymns, however, a tendency to differentiate the first and third from the second and fourth lines, by making the former non-iambic, begins to show itself. Finally,

in the latest hymns of the tenth book the prevalence of the iambic rhythm disappears in the odd lines. Here every possible combination of quantity in the last four syllables is found, but the commonest variation, nearly equalling the iambic in frequency, is [short][long][long][shortlong]. The latter is the regular ending of the first and third line in the post-Vedic *çloka*.

The twelve-syllable line ends thus: [long][short][long][short][short]. Four of these together form the *jagatī* stanza. The *trishṭubh* stanza consists of four lines of eleven syllables, which are practically catalectic *jagatīs*, as they end [long][short][long][shortlong]. These two verses being so closely allied and having the same cadence, are often found mixed in the same stanza. The *trishṭubh* is by far the commonest metre, about two-fifths of the *Rigveda* being composed in it.

Speaking generally, a hymn of the *Rigveda* consists entirely of stanzas in the same metre. The regular and typical deviation from this rule is to conclude a hymn with a single stanza in a metre different from that of the rest, this being a natural method of distinctly marking its close.

A certain number of hymns of the *Rigveda* consist not merely of a succession of single stanzas, but of equal groups of stanzas. The group consists either of three stanzas in the same simple metre, generally *gāyatrī*, or of the combination of two stanzas in different mixed metres. The latter strophic type goes by the name of *Pragātha*, and is found chiefly in the eighth book of the *Rigveda*.

# Chapter IV

## Poetry of the Rigveda

Before we turn to describe the world of thought revealed in the hymns of the *Rigveda*, the question may naturally be asked, to what extent is it possible to understand the true meaning of a book occupying so isolated a position in the remotest age of Indian literature? The answer to this question depends on the recognition of the right method of interpretation applicable to that ancient body of poetry. When the *Rigveda* first became known, European scholars, as yet only acquainted with the language and literature of classical Sanskrit, found that the Vedic hymns were composed in an ancient dialect and embodied a world of ideas far removed from that with which they had made themselves familiar. The interpretation of these hymns was therefore at the outset barred by almost insurmountable difficulties. Fortunately, however, a voluminous commentary on the *Rigveda*, which explains or paraphrases every word of its hymns, was found to exist. This was the work of the great Vedic scholar Sāyaṇa, who lived in the latter half of the fourteenth century A.D. at Vijayanagara (“City of Victory”), the ruins of which lie near Bellary in Southern India. As his commentary constantly referred to ancient authorities, it was thought to have preserved the true meaning of the *Rigveda* in a traditional

interpretation going back to the most ancient times. Nothing further seemed to be necessary than to ascertain the explanation of the original text which prevailed in India five centuries ago, and is laid down in Sāyaṇa's work. This view is represented by the translation of the *Rigveda* begun in 1850 by H. H. Wilson, the first professor of Sanskrit at Oxford.

Another line was taken by the late Professor Roth, the founder of Vedic philology. This great scholar propounded the view that the aim of Vedic interpretation was not to ascertain the meaning which Sāyaṇa, or even Yāska, who lived eighteen centuries earlier, attributed to the Vedic hymns, but the meaning which the ancient poets themselves intended. Such an end could not be attained by simply following the lead of the commentators. For the latter, though valuable guides towards the understanding of the later theological and ritual literature, with the notions and practice of which they were familiar, showed no continuity of tradition from the time of the poets; for the tradition supplied by them was solely that which was handed down among interpreters, and only began when the meaning of the hymns was no longer fully comprehended. There could, in fact, be no other tradition; interpretation only arising when the hymns had become obscure. The commentators, therefore, simply preserved attempts at the solution of difficulties, while showing a distinct tendency towards misinterpreting the language as well as the religious, mythological, and cosmical ideas of a vanished age by the scholastic notions prevalent in their own.



It is clear from what Yāska says that some important discrepancies in opinion prevailed among the older expositors and the different schools of interpretation which flourished before his time. He gives the names of no fewer than seventeen predecessors, whose explanations of the Veda are often conflicting. Thus one of them interprets the word *Nāsatyau*, an epithet of the Vedic Dioskouroi, as “true, not false;” another takes it to mean “leaders of truth,” while Yāska himself thinks it might mean “nose-born”! The gap between the poets and the early interpreters was indeed so great that one of Yāska’s predecessors, named Kautsa, actually had the audacity to assert that the science of Vedic exposition was useless, as the Vedic hymns and formulas were obscure, unmeaning, or mutually contradictory. Such criticisms Yāska meets by replying that it was not the fault of the rafter if the blind man did not see it. Yāska himself interprets only a very small portion of the hymns of the *Rigveda*. In what he does attempt to explain, he largely depends on etymological considerations for the sense he assigns. He often gives two or more alternative or optional senses to the same word. The fact that he offers a choice of meanings shows that he had no earlier authority for his guide, and that his renderings are simply conjectural; for no one can suppose that the authors of the hymns had more than one meaning in their minds.

It is, however, highly probable that Yāska, with all the appliances at his command, was able to ascertain the sense of many words which scholars who, like Sāyaṇa, lived nearly two

thousand years later, had no means of discovering. Nevertheless Sāyaṇa is sometimes found to depart from Yāska. Thus we arrive at the dilemma that either the old interpreter is wrong or the later one does not follow the tradition. There are also many instances in which Sāyaṇa, independently of Yāska, gives a variety of inconsistent explanations of a word, both in interpreting a single passage or in commenting on different passages. Thus *çārada*, “autumnal,” he explains in one place as “fortified for a year,” in another as “new or fortified for a year,” and in a third as “belonging to a demon called Çarad.” One of the defects of Sāyaṇa is, in fact, that he limits his view in most cases to the single verse he has before him. A detailed examination of his explanations, as well as those of Yāska, has shown that there is in the *Rigveda* a large number of the most difficult words, about the proper sense of which neither scholar had any certain information from either tradition or etymology. We are therefore justified in saying about them that there is in the hymns no unusual or difficult word or obscure text in regard to which the authority of the commentators should be received as final, unless it is supported by probability, by the context, or by parallel passages. Thus no translation of the *Rigveda* based exclusively on Sāyaṇa’s commentary can possibly be satisfactory. It would, in fact, be as unreasonable to take him for our sole guide as to make our understanding of the Hebrew books of the Old Testament dependent on the Talmud and the Rabbis. It must, indeed, be admitted that from a large proportion of Sāyaṇa’s

interpretations most material help can be derived, and that he has been of the greatest service in facilitating and accelerating the comprehension of the Veda. But there is little information of value to be derived from him, that, with our knowledge of later Sanskrit, with the other remains of ancient Indian literature, and with our various philological appliances, we might not sooner or later have found out for ourselves.

Roth, then, rejected the commentators as our chief guides in interpreting the *Rigveda*, which, as the earliest literary monument of the Indian, and indeed of the Aryan race, stands quite by itself, high up on an isolated peak of remote antiquity. As regards its more peculiar and difficult portions, it must therefore be interpreted mainly through itself; or, to apply in another sense the words of an Indian commentator, it must shine by its own light and be self-demonstrating. Roth further expressed the view that a qualified European is better able to arrive at the true meaning of the *Rigveda* than a Brahman interpreter. The judgment of the former is unfettered by theological bias; he possesses the historical faculty, and he has also a far wider intellectual horizon, equipped as he is with all the resources of scientific scholarship. Roth therefore set himself to compare carefully all passages parallel in form and matter, with due regard to considerations of context, grammar, and etymology, while consulting, though, perhaps, with insufficient attention, the traditional interpretations. He thus subjected the *Rigveda* to a historical treatment within the range of Sanskrit

itself. He further called in the assistance rendered from without by the comparative method, utilising the help afforded not only by the *Avesta*, which is so closely allied to the *Rigveda* in language and matter, but also by the results of comparative philology, resources unknown to the traditional scholar.

By thus ascertaining the meaning of single words, the foundations of the scientific interpretation of the Vedas were laid in the great Sanskrit Dictionary, in seven volumes, published by Roth in collaboration with Böhtlingk between 1852 and 1875. Roth's method is now accepted by every scientific student of the Veda. Native tradition is, however, being more fully exploited than was done by Roth himself, for it is now more clearly recognised that no aid to be derived from extant Indian scholarship ought to be neglected. Under the guidance of such principles the progress already made in solving many important problems presented by Vedic literature has been surprising, when we consider the shortness of the time and the fewness of the labourers, of whom only two or three have been natives of this country. As a general result, the historical sense has succeeded in grasping the spirit of Indian antiquity, long obscured by native misinterpretation. Much, of course, still remains to be done by future generations of scholars, especially in detailed and minute investigation. This could not be otherwise when we remember that Vedic research is only the product of the last fifty years, and that, notwithstanding the labours of very numerous Hebrew scholars during several centuries, there are, in the Psalms and

the Prophetic Books of the Old Testament, still many passages which remain obscure and disputed. There can be no doubt that many problems at present insoluble will in the end be solved by that modern scholarship which has already deciphered the cuneiform writings of Persia as well as the rock inscriptions of India, and has discovered the languages which lay hidden under these mysterious characters.

Having thus arrived at the threshold of the world of Vedic thought, we may now enter through the portals opened by the golden key of scholarship. By far the greater part of the poetry of the *Rigveda* consists of religious lyrics, only the tenth book containing some secular poems. Its hymns are mainly addressed to the various gods of the Vedic pantheon, praising their mighty deeds, their greatness, and their beneficence, or beseeching them for wealth in cattle, numerous offspring, prosperity, long life, and victory. The *Rigveda* is not a collection of primitive popular poetry, as it was apt to be described at an earlier period of Sanskrit studies. It is rather a body of skilfully composed hymns, produced by a sacerdotal class and meant to accompany the Soma oblation and the fire sacrifice of melted butter, which were offered according to a ritual by no means so simple as was at one time supposed, though undoubtedly much simpler than the elaborate system of the Brāhmaṇa period. Its poetry is consequently marred by frequent references to the sacrifice, especially when the two great ritual deities, Agni and Soma, are the objects of praise. At the same time it is on the

whole much more natural than might under these conditions be expected. For the gods who are invoked are nearly all personifications of the phenomena of Nature, and thus give occasion for the employment of much beautiful and even noble imagery. The diction of the hymns is, generally speaking, simple and unaffected. Compound words are sparingly used, and are limited to two members, in marked contrast with the frequency and length of compounds in classical Sanskrit. The thought, too, is usually artless and direct, except in the hymns to the ritual deities, where it becomes involved in conceit and mystical obscurity. The very limited nature of the theme, in these cases, must have forced the minds of the priestly singers to strive after variety by giving utterance to the same idea in enigmatical phraseology.

Here, then, we already find the beginnings of that fondness for subtlety and difficult modes of expression which is so prevalent in the later literature, and which is betrayed even in the earlier period by the saying in one of the Brāhmanas that the gods love the recondite. In some hymns, too, there appears that tendency to play with words which was carried to inordinate lengths in late Sanskrit poems and romances. The hymns of the *Rigveda*, of course, vary much in literary merit, as is naturally to be expected in the productions of many poets extending over some centuries. Many display a high order of poetical excellence, while others consist of commonplace and mechanical verse. The degree of skill in composition is on the average remarkably high, especially

when we consider that here we have by far the oldest poetry of the Aryan race. The art which these early seers feel is needed to produce a hymn acceptable to the gods is often alluded to, generally in the closing stanza. The poet usually compares his work to a car wrought and put together by a deft craftsman. One Rishi also likens his prayers to fair and well-woven garments; another speaks of having adorned his song of praise like a bride for her lover. Poets laud the gods according to knowledge and ability (vi. 21, 6), and give utterance to the emotions of their hearts (x. 39, 15). Various individual gods are, it is true, in a general way said to have granted seers the gift of song, but of the later doctrine of revelation the Rigvedic poets know nothing.

The remark which has often been made that monotony prevails in the Vedic hymns contains truth. But the impression is produced by the hymns to the same deity being commonly grouped together in each book. A similar effect would probably arise from reading in succession twenty or thirty lyrics on Spring, even in an anthology of the best modern poetry. When we consider that nearly five hundred hymns of the *Rigveda* are addressed to two deities alone, it is surprising that so many variations of the same theme should be possible.

The hymns of the *Rigveda* being mainly invocations of the gods, their contents are largely mythological. Special interest attaches to this mythology, because it represents an earlier stage of thought than is to be found in any other literature. It is sufficiently primitive to enable us to see clearly the process

of personification by which natural phenomena developed into gods. Never observing, in his ordinary life, action or movement not caused by an acting or moving person, the Vedic Indian, like man in a much less advanced state, still refers such occurrences in Nature to personal agents, which to him are inherent in the phenomena. He still looks out upon the workings of Nature with childlike astonishment. One poet asks why the sun does not fall from the sky; another wonders where the stars go by day; while a third marvels that the waters of all rivers constantly flowing into it never fill the ocean. The unvarying regularity of sun and moon, and the unfailing recurrence of the dawn, however, suggested to these ancient singers the idea of the unchanging order that prevails in Nature. The notion of this general law, recognised under the name *ṛita* (properly the “course” of things), we find in the *Rigveda* extended first to the fixed rules of the sacrifice (rite), and then to those of morality (right). Though the mythological phase presented by the *Rigveda* is comparatively primitive, it yet contains many conceptions inherited from previous ages. The parallels of the *Avesta* show that several of the Vedic deities go back to the time when the ancestors of Persians and Indians were still one people. Among these may be mentioned Yama, god of the dead, identical with Yima, ruler of paradise, and especially Mitra, the cult of whose Persian counterpart, Mithra, 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.



Various religious practices can also be traced back to that early age, such as the worship of fire and the cult of the plant *Soma* (the Avestan *Haoma*). The veneration of the cow, too, dates from that time. A religious hymn poetry must have existed even then, for stanzas of four eleven-syllable (the Vedic *trishṭubh*) and of four or three eight-syllable lines (*anushṭubh* and *gāyatrī*) were already known, as is proved by the agreement of the *Avesta* with the *Rigveda*.

From the still earlier Indo-European period had come down the general conception of “god” (*deva-s*, Lat. *deu-s*) and that of heaven as a divine father (*Dyaus pitā*, Gr. *Zeus patēr*, Lat. *Jūpiter*). Probably from an even remoter antiquity is derived the notion of heaven and earth as primeval and universal parents, as well as many magical beliefs.

The universe appeared to the poets of the *Rigveda* to be divided into the three domains of earth, air, and heaven, a division perhaps also known to the early Greeks. This is the favourite triad of the *Rigveda*, constantly mentioned expressly or by implication. The solar phenomena are referred to heaven, while those of lightning, rain, and wind belong to the air. In the three worlds the various gods perform their actions, though they are supposed to dwell only in the third, the home of light. The air is often called a sea, as the abode of the celestial waters, while the great rainless clouds are conceived sometimes as rocks or mountains, sometimes as the castles of demons who war against the gods. The thundering rain-clouds become lowing

cows, whose milk is shed and bestows fatness upon the earth.

The higher gods of the *Rigveda* are almost entirely personifications of natural phenomena, such as Sun, Dawn, Fire, Wind. Excepting a few deities surviving from an older period, the gods are, for the most part, more or less clearly connected with their physical foundation. The personifications being therefore but slightly developed, lack definiteness of outline and individuality of character. Moreover, the phenomena themselves which are behind the personifications have few distinctive traits, while they share some attributes with other phenomena belonging to the same domain. Thus Dawn, Sun, Fire have the common features of being luminous, dispelling darkness, appearing in the morning. Hence the character of each god is made up of only a few essential qualities combined with many others which are common to all the gods, such as brilliance, power, beneficence, and wisdom. These common attributes tend to obscure those which are distinctive, because in hymns of prayer and praise the former naturally assume special importance. Again, gods belonging to different departments of nature, but having striking features in common, are apt to grow more like each other. Assimilation of this kind is encouraged by a peculiar practice of the Vedic poets—the invocation of deities in pairs. Such combinations result in attributes peculiar to the one god attaching themselves to the other, even when the latter appears alone. Thus when the Fire-god, invoked by himself, is called a slayer of the demon Vṛitra, he receives an attribute

distinctive of the thunder-god Indra, with whom he is often coupled. The possibility of assigning nearly every power to every god rendered the identification of one deity with another an easy matter. Such identifications are frequent enough in the *Rigveda*. For example, a poet addressing the fire-god exclaims: “Thou at thy birth, O Agni, art Varuṇa; when kindled thou becomest Mitra; in thee, O Son of Might, all gods are centred; thou art Indra to the worshipper” (v. 3, 1).

Moreover, mystical speculations on the nature of Agni, so important a god in the eyes of a priesthood devoted to a fire-cult, on his many manifestations as individual fires on earth, and on his other aspects as atmospheric fire in lightning and as celestial fire in the sun—aspects which the Vedic poets are fond of alluding to in riddles—would suggest the idea that various deities are but different forms of a single divine being. This idea is found in more than one passage of the later hymns of the *Rigveda*. Thus the composer of a recent hymn (164) of the first book says: “The one being priests speak of in many ways; they call it Agni, Yama, Mātariṣvan.” Similarly, a seer of the last book (x. 114) remarks: “Priests and poets with words make into many the bird (*i.e.* the sun) which is but one.” Utterances like these show that by the end of the Rigvedic period the polytheism of the Rishis had received a monotheistic tinge.

Occasionally we even find shadowed forth the pantheistic idea of a deity representing not only all the gods, but Nature as well. Thus the goddess Aditi is identified with all the deities, with men,

with all that has been and shall be born, with air, and heaven (i. 89); and in a cosmogonic hymn (x. 121) the Creator is not only described as the one god above all gods, but is said<sup>3</sup> to embrace all things. This germ of pantheism developed through the later Vedic literature till it assumed its final shape in the Vedānta philosophy, still the most popular system of the Hindus.

The practice of the poets, even in the older parts of the *Rigveda*, of invoking different gods as if each of them were paramount, gave rise to Professor Max Müller's theory of Henotheism or Kathenotheism, according to which the seers held "the belief in individual gods alternately regarded as the highest," and for the moment treated the god addressed as if he were an absolutely independent and supreme deity, alone present to the mind. In reality, however, the practice of the poets of the *Rigveda* hardly amounts to more than the exaggeration—to be found in the Homeric hymns also—with which a singer would naturally magnify the particular god whom he is invoking. For the Rishis well knew the exact position of each god in the Soma ritual, in which nearly every member of the pantheon found a place.

The gods, in the view of the Vedic poets, had a beginning; for they are described as the offspring of heaven and earth, or sometimes of other gods. This in itself implies different generations, but earlier gods are also expressly referred to in several passages. Nor were the gods regarded as originally immortal; for immortality is said to have been bestowed upon

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<sup>3</sup> In verse 10, which is a late addition; see p. 51, footnote.

them by individual deities, such as Agni and Savitṛi, or to have been acquired by drinking soma. Indra and other gods are spoken of as unaging, but whether their immortality was regarded by the poets as absolute there is no evidence to show. In the post-Vedic view it was only relative, being limited to a cosmic age.

The physical aspect of the Vedic gods is anthropomorphic. Thus head, face, eyes, arms, hands, feet, and other portions of the human frame are ascribed to them. But their forms are shadowy and their limbs or parts are often simply meant figuratively to describe their activities. Thus the tongue and limbs of the fire-god are merely his flames; the arms of the sun-god are simply his rays, while his eye only represents the solar orb. Since the outward shape of the gods was thus vaguely conceived, while their connection with natural phenomena was in many instances still evident, it is easy to understand why no mention is made in the *Rigveda* of images of the gods, still less of temples, which imply the existence of images. Idols first begin to be referred to in the Sūtras.

Some of the gods appear equipped as warriors, wearing coats of mail and helmets, and armed with spears, battle-axes, bows and arrows. They all drive through the air in luminous cars, generally drawn by horses, but in some cases by kine, goats, or deer. In their cars the gods come to seat themselves at the sacrifice, which, however, is also conveyed to them in heaven by Agni. They are on the whole conceived as dwelling together in harmony; the only one who ever introduces a note of discord

being the warlike and overbearing Indra.

To the successful and therefore optimistic Vedic Indian, the gods seemed almost exclusively beneficent beings, bestowers of long life and prosperity. Indeed, the only deity in whom injurious features are at all prominent is Rudra. The lesser evils closely connected with human life, such as disease, proceed from minor demons, while the greater evils manifested in Nature, such as drought and darkness, are produced by powerful demons like Vṛitra. The conquest of these demons brings out all the more strikingly the beneficent nature of the gods.

The character of the Vedic gods is also moral. They are “true” and “not deceitful,” being throughout the friends and guardians of honesty and virtue. But the divine morality only reflects the ethical standard of an early civilisation. Thus even the alliance of Varuṇa, the most moral of the gods, with righteousness is not such as to prevent him from employing craft against the hostile and the deceitful man. Moral elevation is, on the whole, a less prominent characteristic of the gods than greatness and power.

The relation of the worshipper to the gods in the *Rigveda* is in general one of dependence on their will, prayers and sacrifices being offered to win their favour or forgiveness. The expectation of something in return for the offering is, however, frequently apparent, and the keynote of many a hymn is, “I give to thee that thou mayst give to me.” The idea is also often expressed that the might and valour of the gods is produced by hymns, sacrifices, and especially offerings of soma. Here we find

the germs of sacerdotal pretensions which gradually increased during the Vedic age. Thus the statement occurs in the *White Yajurveda* that the Brahman who possesses correct knowledge has the gods in his power. The Brāhmaṇas go a step farther in saying that there are two kinds of gods, the Devas and the Brahmins, the latter of whom are to be held as deities among men. In the Brāhmaṇas, too, the sacrifice is represented as all-powerful, controlling not only the gods, but the very processes of nature.

The number of the gods is stated in the *Rigveda* itself to be thirty-three, several times expressed as thrice eleven, when each group is regarded as corresponding to one of the divisions of the threefold universe. This aggregate could not always have been deemed exhaustive, for sometimes other gods are mentioned in addition to the thirty-three. Nor can this number, of course, include various groups, such as the storm-gods.

There are, however, hardly twenty individual deities important enough in the *Rigveda* to have at least three entire hymns addressed to them. The most prominent of these are Indra, the thunder-god, with at least 250 hymns, Agni with about 200, and Soma with over 100; while Parjanya, god of rain, and Yama, god of the dead, are invoked in only three each. The rest occupy various positions between these two extremes. It is somewhat remarkable that the two great deities of modern Hinduism, Viṣṇu and Śiva, who are equal in importance, should have been on the same level, though far below the leading deities, three

thousand years ago, as Vishṇu and Rudra (the earlier form of Ṣiva) in the *Rigveda*. Even then they show the same general characteristics as now, Vishṇu being specially benevolent and Rudra terrible.

The oldest among the gods of heaven is Dyaus (identical with the Greek Zeus). This personification of the sky as a god never went beyond a rudimentary stage in the *Rigveda*, being almost entirely limited to the idea of paternity. Dyaus is generally coupled with Pṛithivī, Earth, the pair being celebrated in six hymns as universal parents. In a few passages Dyaus is called a bull, ruddy and bellowing downwards, with reference to the fertilising power of rain no less than to the lightning and thundering heavens. He is also once compared with a black steed decked with pearls, in obvious allusion to the nocturnal star-spangled sky. One poet describes this god as furnished with a bolt, while another speaks of him as “Dyaus smiling through the clouds,” meaning the lightening sky. In several other passages of the *Rigveda* the verb “to smile” (*smi*) alludes to lightning, just as in classical Sanskrit a smile is constantly compared with objects of dazzling whiteness.

A much more important deity of the sky is Varuṇa, in whom the personification has proceeded so far that the natural phenomenon which underlies it can only be inferred from traits in his character. This obscurity of origin arises partly from his not being a creation of Indian mythology, but a heritage from an earlier age, and partly from his name not at the same time



designating a natural phenomenon, like that of Dyaus. The word *varuṇa-s* seems to have originally meant the “encompassing” sky, and is probably the same word as the Greek *Ouranos*, though the identification presents some phonetic difficulties. Varuṇa is invoked in far fewer hymns than Indra, Agni, or Soma, but he is undoubtedly the greatest of the Vedic gods by the side of Indra. While Indra is the great warrior, Varuṇa is the great upholder of physical and moral order (*ṛita*). The hymns addressed to him are more ethical and devout in tone than any others. They form the most exalted portion of the Veda, often resembling in character the Hebrew psalms. The peaceful sway of Varuṇa is explained by his connection with the regularly recurring celestial phenomena, the course of the heavenly bodies seen in the sky; Indra’s warlike and occasionally capricious nature is accounted for by the variable and uncertain strife of the elements in the thunderstorm. The character and power of Varuṇa may be sketched as nearly as possible in the words of the Vedic poets themselves as follows. By the law of Varuṇa heaven and earth are held apart. He made the golden swing (the sun) to shine in heaven. He has made a wide path for the sun. The wind which resounds through the air is Varuṇa’s breath. By his ordinances the moon shining brightly moves at night, and the stars placed up on high are seen at night but disappear by day. He causes the rivers to flow; they stream unceasingly according to his ordinance. By his occult power the rivers swiftly pouring into the ocean do not fill it with water. He makes the inverted cask to pour its waters and to moisten the

ground, while the mountains are wrapt in cloud. It is chiefly with these ærial waters that he is connected, very rarely with the sea.

Varuṇa's omniscience is often dwelt on. He knows the flight of the birds in the sky, the path of ships in the ocean, the course of the far-travelling wind. He beholds all the secret things that have been or shall be done. He witnesses men's truth and falsehood. No creature can even wink without him. As a moral governor Varuṇa stands far above any other deity. His wrath is roused by sin, which is the infringement of his ordinances, and which he severely punishes. The fetters with which he binds sinners are often mentioned. A dispeller, hater, and punisher of falsehood, he is gracious to the penitent. He releases men not only from the sins which they themselves commit, but from those committed by their fathers. He spares the suppliant who daily transgresses his laws, and is gracious to those who have broken his ordinances by thoughtlessness. There is, in fact, no hymn to Varuṇa in which the prayer for forgiveness of guilt does not occur, as in the hymns to other deities the prayer for worldly goods.

With the growth of the conception of the creator, Prajāpati, as a supreme deity, the characteristics of Varuṇa as a sovereign god naturally faded away, and the dominion of waters, only a part of his original sphere, alone remained. This is already partly the case in the *Atharva-veda*, and in post-Vedic mythology he is only an Indian Neptune, god of the sea.

The following stanzas from a hymn to Varuṇa (vii. 89) will illustrate the spirit of the prayers addressed to him:—

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

*Thirst has come on thy worshipper  
Though standing in the waters' midst:<sup>4</sup>  
Have mercy, spare me, mighty Lord.*

*O Varuṇa, 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.*

There are in the *Rigveda* five solar deities, differentiated as representing various aspects of the activity of the sun. One of the oldest of these, Mitra, the “Friend,” seems to have been conceived as the beneficent side of the sun’s power. Going back to the Indo-Iranian period, he has in the *Rigveda* almost entirely lost his individuality, which is practically merged in that of Varuṇa. With the latter he is constantly invoked, while only one single hymn (iii. 59) is addressed to him alone.

Sūrya (cognate in name to the Greek Hēlios) is the most concrete of the solar deities. For as his name also designates the luminary itself, his connection with the latter is never lost sight of. The eye of Sūrya is often mentioned, and Dawn is said to

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<sup>4</sup> A reference to dropsy, with which Varuṇa is thought to afflict sinners.

bring the eye of the gods. All-seeing, he is the spy of the whole world, beholding all beings and the good or bad deeds of mortals. Aroused by Sūrya, men pursue their objects and perform their work. He is the soul or guardian of all that moves and is fixed. He rides in a car, which is generally described as drawn by seven steeds. These he unyokes at sunset:—

*When he has loosed his coursers from their station,  
Straightway Night over all spreads out her garment (i. 115, 4).*

Sūrya rolls up the darkness like a skin, and the stars slink away like thieves. He shines forth from the lap of the dawns. He is also spoken of as the husband of Dawn. As a form of Agni, the gods placed him in heaven. He is often described as a bird or eagle traversing space. He measures the days and prolongs life. He drives away disease and evil dreams. At his rising he is prayed to declare men sinless to Mitra and Varuṇa. All beings depend on Sūrya, and so he is called “all-creating.”

Eleven hymns, or about the same number as to Sūrya, are addressed to another solar deity, Savitṛi, the “Stimulator,” who represents the quickening activity of the sun. He is pre-eminently a golden deity, with golden hands and arms and a golden car. He raises aloft his strong golden arms, with which he blesses and arouses all beings, and which extend to the ends of the earth. He moves in his golden car, seeing all creatures, on a downward and an upward path. He shines after the path of the dawn. Beaming

with the rays of the sun, yellow-haired, Savitṛi raises up his light continually from the east. He removes evil dreams and drives away demons and sorcerers. He bestows immortality on the gods as well as length of life on man. He also conducts the departed spirit to where the righteous dwell. The other gods follow Savitṛi's lead; no being, not even the most powerful gods, Indra and Varuṇa, can resist his will and independent sway. Savitṛi is not infrequently connected with the evening, being in one hymn (ii. 38) extolled as the setting sun:—

Borne by swift coursers, he will now unyoke them:  
The speeding chariot he has stayed from going.  
He checks the speed of them that glide like serpents:  
Night has come on by Savitṛi's commandment.  
The weaver rolls her outstretched web together,  
The skilled lay down their work in midst of toiling,  
The birds all seek their nests, their shed the cattle:  
Each to his lodging Savitṛi disperses.

To this god is addressed the most famous stanza of the *Rigveda*, with which, as the Stimulator, he was in ancient times invoked at the beginning of Vedic study, and which is still repeated by every orthodox Hindu in his morning prayers. From the name of the deity it is called the *Sāvitrī*, but it is also often referred to as “the *Gāyatrī*,” from the metre in which it is composed:—

*May we attain that excellent  
Glory of Savitṛi the god,  
That he may stimulate our thoughts* (iii. 62, 10).

A peculiarity of the hymns to Savitṛi is the perpetual play on his name with forms of the root *sū*, “to stimulate,” from which it is derived.

Pūshan is invoked in some eight hymns of the *Rigveda*. His name means “Prosperer,” and the conception underlying his character seems to be the beneficent power of the sun, manifested chiefly as a pastoral deity. His car is drawn by goats and he carries a goad. Knowing the ways of heaven, he conducts the dead on the far path to the fathers. He is also a guardian of roads, protecting cattle and guiding them with his goad. The welfare which he bestows results from the protection he extends to men and cattle on earth, and from his guidance of mortals to the abodes of bliss in the next world.

Judged by a statistical standard, Viṣṇu is only a deity of the fourth rank, less frequently invoked than Sūrya, Savitṛi, and Pūshan in the *Rigveda*, but historically he is the most important of the solar deities. For he is one of the two great gods of modern Hinduism. The essential feature of his character is that he takes three strides, which doubtless represent the course of the sun through the three divisions of the universe. His highest step is heaven, where the gods and the fathers dwell. For this abode the poet expresses his longing in the following words (i. 154, 5):—

May I attain to that, his well-loved dwelling,  
Where men devoted to the gods are blessèd:  
In Vishṇu's highest step—he is our kinsman,  
Of mighty stride—there is a spring of nectar.

Vishṇu seems to have been originally conceived as the sun, not in his general character, but as the personified swiftly moving luminary which with vast strides traverses the three worlds. He is in several passages said to have taken his three steps for the benefit of man.

To this feature may be traced the myth of the Brāhmaṇas in which Vishṇu appears in the form of a dwarf as an artifice to recover the earth, now in the possession of demons, by taking his three strides. His character for benevolence was in post-Vedic mythology developed in the doctrine of the Avatārs (“descents” to earth) or incarnations which he assumed for the good of humanity.

Ushas, goddess of dawn, is almost the only female deity to whom entire hymns are addressed, and the only one invoked with any frequency. She, however, is celebrated in some twenty hymns. The name, meaning the “Shining One,” is cognate to the Latin *Aurora* and the Greek *Ēōs*. When the goddess is addressed, the physical phenomenon of dawn is never absent from the poet's mind. The fondness with which the thoughts of these priestly singers turned to her alone among the goddesses, though she received no share in the offering of soma like the other gods, seems to show that the glories of the dawn, more splendid in

Northern India than those we are wont to see, deeply impressed the minds of these early poets. In any case, she is their most graceful creation, the charm of which is unsurpassed in the descriptive religious lyrics of any other literature. Here there are no priestly subtleties to obscure the brightness of her form, and few allusions to the sacrifice to mar the natural beauty of the imagery.

To enable the reader to estimate the merit of this poetry I will string together some utterances about the Dawn goddess, culled from various hymns, and expressed as nearly as possible in the words of their composers. Ushas is a radiant maiden, born in the sky, daughter of Dyaus. She is the bright sister of dark Night. She shines with the light of her lover, with the light of Sūrya, who beams after her path and follows her as a young man a maiden. She is borne on a brilliant car, drawn by ruddy steeds or kine. Arraying herself in gay attire like a dancer, she displays her bosom. Clothed upon with light, the maiden appears in the east and unveils her charms. Rising resplendent as from a bath, she shows her form. Effulgent in peerless beauty, she withholds her light from neither small nor great. She opens wide the gates of heaven; she opens the doors of darkness, as the cows (issue from) their stall. Her radiant beams appear like herds of cattle. She removes the black robe of night, warding off evil spirits and the hated darkness. She awakens creatures that have feet, and makes the birds fly up: she is the breath and life of everything. When Ushas shines forth, the birds fly up from their nests and



men seek nourishment. She is the radiant mover of sweet sounds, the leader of the charm of pleasant voices. Day by day appearing at the appointed place, she never infringes the rule of order and of the gods; she goes straight along the path of order; knowing the way, she never loses her direction. As she shone in former days, so she shines now and will shine in future, never aging, immortal.

The solitude and stillness of the early morning sometimes suggested pensive thoughts about the fleeting nature of human life in contrast with the unending recurrence of the dawn. Thus one poet exclaims:—

*Gone are the mortals who in former ages  
Beheld the flushing of the earlier morning.  
We living men now look upon her shining;  
They are coming who shall in future see her* (i. 113, 11).

In a similar strain another Rishi sings:—

*Again and again newly born though ancient,  
Decking her beauty with the self-same colours,  
The goddess wastes away the life of mortals,  
Like wealth diminished by the skilful player* (i. 92, 10).

The following stanzas from one of the finest hymns to Dawn (i. 113) furnish a more general picture of this fairest creation of Vedic poetry:—

This light has come, of all the lights the fairest,  
The brilliant brightness has been born, far-shining.  
Urged onward for god Savitṛi's uprising,  
Night now has yielded up her place to Morning.

The sisters' pathway is the same, unending:  
Taught by the gods, alternately they tread it.  
Fair-shaped, of different forms and yet one-minded,  
Night and Morning clash not, nor do they linger.

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

There Heaven's Daughter has appeared before us,  
The maiden flushing in her brilliant garments.  
Thou sovran lady of all earthly treasure,  
Auspicious Dawn, flush here to-day upon us.

In the sky's framework she has shone with splendour;  
The goddess has cast off the robe of darkness.  
Wakening up the world with ruddy horses,  
Upon her well-yoked chariot Dawn is coming.

Bringing upon it many bounteous blessings,  
Brightly shining, she spreads her brilliant lustre.  
Last of the countless mornings that have gone by,  
First of bright morns to come has Dawn arisen.

Arise! the breath, the life, again has reached us:  
Darkness has gone away and light is coming.  
She leaves a pathway for the sun to travel:  
We have arrived where men prolong existence.

Among the deities of celestial light, those most frequently invoked are the twin gods of morning named Aṇvins. They are the sons of Heaven, eternally young and handsome. They ride on a car, on which they are accompanied by the sun-maiden Sūryā. This car is bright and sunlike, and all its parts are golden. The time when these gods appear is the early dawn, when “darkness still stands among the ruddy cows.” At the yoking of their car Ushas is born.

Many myths are told about the Aṇvins as succouring divinities. They deliver from distress in general, especially rescuing from the ocean in a ship or ships. They are characteristically divine physicians, who give sight to the blind and make the lame to walk. One very curious myth is that of the maiden Viṣṇalā, who having had her leg cut off in some conflict, was at once furnished by the Aṇvins with an iron limb. They agree in many respects with the two famous horsemen of Greek mythology, the Dioskouroi, sons of Zeus and brothers of Helen. The two most probable theories as to the origin of these twin deities are, that they represent either the twilight, half dark, half light, or the morning and evening star.

In the realm of air Indra is the dominant deity. He is, indeed, the favourite and national god of the Vedic Indian. His

importance is sufficiently indicated by the fact that more than one-fourth of the *Rigveda* is devoted to his praise. Handed down from a bygone age, Indra has become more anthropomorphic and surrounded by mythological imagery than any other Vedic god. The significance of his character is nevertheless sufficiently clear. He is primarily the thunder-god, the conquest of the demon of drought or darkness named Vṛitra, the “Obstructor,” and the consequent liberation of the waters or the winning of light, forming his mythological essence. This myth furnishes the Rishis with an ever-recurring theme. Armed with his thunderbolt, exhilarated by copious draughts of soma, and generally escorted by the Maruts or Storm-gods, Indra enters upon the fray. The conflict is terrible. Heaven and earth tremble with fear when Indra smites Vṛitra like a tree with his bolt. He is described as constantly repeating the combat. This obviously corresponds to the perpetual renewal of the natural phenomena underlying the myth. The physical elements in the thunderstorm are seldom directly mentioned by the poets when describing the exploits of Indra. He is rarely said to shed rain, but constantly to release the pent-up waters or rivers. The lightning is regularly the “bolt,” while thunder is the lowing of the cows or the roaring of the dragon. The clouds are designated by various names, such as cow, udder, spring, cask, or pail. They are also rocks (*adri*), which encompass the cows set free by Indra. They are further mountains from which Indra casts down the demons dwelling upon them. They thus often become fortresses (*pur*) of the

demons, which are ninety, ninety-nine, or a hundred in number, and are variously described as “moving,” “autumnal,” “made of iron or stone.” One stanza (x. 89, 7) thus brings together the various features of the myth: “Indra slew Vṛitra, broke the castles, made a channel for the rivers, pierced the mountain, and delivered over the cows to his friends.” Owing to the importance of the Vṛitra myth, the chief and specific epithet of Indra is *Vṛitrahan*, “slayer of Vṛitra.” The following stanzas are from one of the most graphic of the hymns which celebrate the conflict of Indra with the demon (i. 32):—

I will proclaim the manly deeds of Indra,  
The first that he performed, the lightning-wielder.  
He smote the dragon, then discharged the waters,  
And cleft the caverns of the lofty mountains.

Impetuous as a bull, he chose the soma,  
And drank in threefold vessels of its juices.  
The Bounteous god grasped lightning for his missile,  
He struck down dead that first-born of the dragons.

Him lightning then availèd naught, nor thunder,  
Nor mist nor hailstorm which he spread around him:  
When Indra and the dragon strove in battle,  
The Bounteous god gained victory for ever.

Plunged in the midst of never-ceasing torrents,  
That stand not still but ever hasten onward,

The waters bear off Vṛitra's hidden body:  
Indra's fierce foe sank down to lasting darkness.

With the liberation of the waters is connected the winning of light and the sun. Thus we read that when Indra had slain the dragon Vṛitra with his bolt, releasing the waters for man, he placed the sun visibly in the heavens, or that the sun shone forth when Indra blew the dragon from the air.

Indra naturally became the god of battle, and is more frequently invoked than any other deity as a helper in conflicts with earthly enemies. In the words of one poet, he protects the Aryan colour (*varṇa*) and subjects the black skin; while another extols him for having dispersed 50,000 of the black race and rent their citadels. His combats are frequently called *gavisṭi*, "desire of cows," his gifts being considered the result of victories.

The following stanzas (ii. 12, 2 and 13) will serve as a specimen of the way in which the greatness of Indra is celebrated:

---

Who made the widespread earth when quaking steadfast,  
Who brought to rest the agitated mountains.  
Who measured out air's intermediate spaces,  
Who gave the sky support: he, men, is Indra.

Heaven and earth themselves bow down before him,  
Before his might the very mountains tremble.  
Who, known as Soma-drinker, armed with lightning,

Is wielder of the bolt: he, men, is Indra.

To the more advanced anthropomorphism of Indra's nature are due the occasional immoral traits which appear in his character. Thus he sometimes indulges in acts of capricious violence, such as the slaughter of his father or the destruction of the car of Dawn. He is especially addicted to soma, of which he is described as drinking enormous quantities to stimulate him in the performance of his warlike exploits. One entire hymn (x. 119) consists of a monologue in which Indra, inebriated with soma, boasts of his greatness and power. Though of little poetic merit, this piece has a special interest as being by far the earliest literary description of the mental effects, braggadocio in particular, produced by intoxication. In estimating the morality of Indra's excesses, it should not be forgotten that the exhilaration of soma partook of a religious character in the eyes of the Vedic poets.

Indra's name is found in the *Avesta* as that of a demon. His distinctive Vedic epithet, *Vṛitrahān*, also occurs there in the form of *verethraghna*, as a designation of the god of victory. Hence there was probably in the Indo-Iranian period a god approaching to the Vedic form of the Vṛitra-slaying and victorious Indra.

In comparing historically Varuṇa and Indra, whose importance was about equal in the earlier period of the *Rigveda*, it seems clear that Varuṇa was greater in the Indo-Iranian period, but became inferior to Indra in later Vedic times. Indra,

on the other hand, became in the Brāhmaṇas and Epics the chief of the Indian heaven, and even maintained this position under the Puranic triad, Brahmā-Vishṇu-Śiva, though of course subordinate to them.

At least three of the lesser deities of the air are connected with lightning. One of these is the somewhat obscure god Trita, who is only mentioned in detached verses of the *Rigveda*. The name appears to designate the “third” (Greek, *trito-s*), as the lightning form of fire. His frequent epithet, *Āptya*, seems to mean the “watery.” This god goes back to the Indo-Iranian period, as both his name and his epithet are found in the *Avesta*. But he was gradually ousted by Indra as being originally almost identical in character with the latter. Another deity of rare occurrence in the *Rigveda*, and also dating from the Indo-Iranian period, is Apām napāt, the “Son of Waters.” He is described as clothed in lightning and shining without fuel in the waters. There can, therefore, be little doubt that he represents fire as produced from the rain-clouds in the form of lightning. Mātariçvan, seldom mentioned in the *Rigveda*, is a divine being described as having, like the Greek Prometheus, brought down the hidden fire from heaven to earth. He most probably represents the personification of a celestial form of Agni, god of fire, with whom he is in some passages actually identified. In the later Vedas, the Brāhmaṇas, and the subsequent literature, the name has become simply a designation of wind.

The position occupied by the god Rudra in the *Rigveda* is



very different from that of his historical successor in a later age. He is celebrated in only three or four hymns, while his name is mentioned slightly less often than that of Viṣṇu. He is usually said to be armed with bow and arrows, but a lightning shaft and a thunderbolt are also occasionally assigned to him. He is described as fierce and destructive like a wild beast, and is called “the ruddy boar of heaven.” The hymns addressed to him chiefly express fear of his terrible shafts and deprecation of his wrath. His malevolence is still more prominent in the later Vedic literature. The euphemistic epithet *Çiva*, “auspicious,” already applied to him in the *Rigveda*, and more frequently, though not exclusively, in the younger Vedas, became his regular name in the post-Vedic period. Rudra is, of course, not purely malevolent like a demon. He is besought not only to preserve from calamity but to bestow blessings and produce welfare for man and beast. His healing powers are mentioned with especial frequency, and he is lauded as the greatest of physicians.

Prominent among the gods of the *Rigveda* are the Maruts or Storm-gods, who form a group of thrice seven or thrice sixty. They are the sons of Rudra and the mottled cloud-cow *Prīṇi*. At birth they are compared with fires, and are once addressed as “born from the laughter of lightning.” They are a troop of youthful warriors armed with spears or battle-axes and wearing helmets upon their heads. They are decked with golden ornaments, chiefly in the form of armlets or of anklets:—

*They gleam with armlets as the heavens are decked with stars;  
Like cloud-born lightnings shine the torrents of their rain* (ii. 34, 2).

They ride on golden cars which gleam with lightning, while they hold fiery lightnings in their hands:—

*The lightnings smile upon the earth below them  
What time the Maruts sprinkle forth their fatness.*—(i. 168, 8).

They drive with coursers which are often described as spotted, and they are once said to have yoked the winds as steeds to their pole.

The Maruts are fierce and terrible, like lions or wild boars. With the fellies of their car they rend the hills:—

*The Maruts spread the mist abroad,  
And make the mountains rock and reel,  
When with the winds they go their way* (viii. 7, 4).

They shatter the lords of the forest and like wild elephants devour the woods:—

*Before you, fierce ones, even woods bow down in fear,  
The earth herself, the very mountain trembles* (v. 60, 2).

One of their main functions is to shed rain. They are clad in a robe of rain, and cover the eye of the sun with showers. They

bedew the earth with milk; they shed fatness (ghee); they milk the thundering, the never-failing spring; they wet the earth with mead; they pour out the heavenly pail:—

*The rivers echo to their chariot fellies*

*What time they utter forth the voice of rain-clouds.*—(i. 168, 8).

In allusion to the sound of the winds the Maruts are often called singers, and as such aid Indra in his fight with the demon. They are, indeed, his constant associates in all his celestial conflicts.

The God of Wind, called Vāyu or Vāta, is not a prominent deity in the *Rigveda*, having only three entire hymns addressed to him. The personification is more developed under the name of Vāyu, who is mostly associated with Indra, while Vāta is coupled only with the less anthropomorphic rain-god, Parjanya. Vāyu is swift as thought and has roaring velocity. He has a shining car drawn by a team or a pair of ruddy steeds. On this car, which has a golden seat and touches the sky, Indra is his companion. Vāta, as also the ordinary designation of wind, is celebrated in a more concrete manner. His name is often connected with the verb *vā*, “to blow,” from which it is derived. Like Rudra, he wafts healing and prolongs life; for he has the treasure of immortality in his house. The poet of a short hymn (x. 168) devoted to his praise thus describes him:—

Of Vāta's car I now will praise the greatness:  
Crashing it speeds along; its noise is thunder.  
Touching the sky, it goes on causing lightnings;  
Scattering the dust of earth it hurries forward.

In air upon his pathways hastening onward,  
Never on any day he tarries resting.  
The first-born order-loving friend of waters,  
Where, pray, was he born? say, whence came he hither?

The soul of gods, and of the world the offspring,  
This god according to his liking wanders.  
His sound is heard, but ne'er is seen his figure.  
This Vāta let us now with offerings worship.

Another deity of air is Parjanya, god of rain, who is invoked in but three hymns, and is only mentioned some thirty times in the *Rigveda*. The name in several passages still means simply "rain-cloud." The personification is therefore always closely connected with the phenomenon of the rain-storm, in which the rain-cloud itself becomes an udder, a pail, or a water-skin. Often likened to a bull, Parjanya is characteristically a shedder of rain. His activity is described in very vivid strains (v. 83):—

The trees he strikes to earth and smites the demon crew:  
The whole world fears the wielder of the mighty bolt.  
The guiltless man himself flees from the potent god,  
What time Parjanya thund'ring smites the miscreant.

Like a car-driver urging on his steeds with whips,  
He causes to bound forth the messengers of rain.  
From far away the lion's roar reverberates,  
What time Parjanya fills the atmosphere with rain.

Forth blow the winds, to earth the lightning flashes fall,  
Up shoot the herbs, the realm of light with moisture streams;  
Nourishment in abundance springs for all the world,  
What time Parjanya quickeneth the earth with seed.

Thunder and roar: the vital germ deposit!  
With water-bearing chariot fly around us!  
Thy water-skin unloosed to earth draw downward:  
With moisture make the heights and hollows equal!

The Waters are praised as goddesses in four hymns of the *Rigveda*. The personification, however, hardly goes beyond representing them as mothers, young wives, and goddesses who bestow boons and come to the sacrifice. As mothers they produce Agni, whose lightning form is, as we have seen, called Apām Napāt, "Son of Waters." The divine waters bear away defilement, and are even invoked to cleanse from moral guilt, the sins of violence, cursing, and lying. They bestow remedies, healing, long life, and immortality. Soma delights in the waters as a young man in lovely maidens; he approaches them as a lover; they are maidens who bow down before the youth.

Several rivers are personified and invoked as deities in the

*Rigveda*. One hymn (x. 75) celebrates the Sindhu or Indus, while another (iii. 33) sings the praises of the sister streams Vipāç and Çutudrī. Sarasvatī is, however, the most important river goddess, being lauded in three entire hymns as well as in many detached verses. The personification here goes much further than in the case of other streams; but the poets never lose sight of the connection of the goddess with the river. She is the best of mothers, of rivers, and of goddesses. Her unfailing breast yields riches of every kind, and she bestows wealth, plenty, nourishment, and offspring. One poet prays that he may not be removed from her to fields which are strange. She is invoked to descend from the sky, from the great mountain, to the sacrifice. Such expressions may have suggested the notion of the celestial origin and descent of the Ganges, familiar to post-Vedic mythology. Though simply a river deity in the *Rigveda*, Sarasvatī is in the Brāhmaṇas identified with Vāch, goddess of speech, and has in post-Vedic mythology become the goddess of eloquence and wisdom, invoked as a muse, and regarded as the wife of Brahmā.

Earth, Pṛithivī, the Broad One, hardly ever dissociated from Dyaus, is celebrated alone in only one short hymn of three stanzas (v. 84). Even here the poet cannot refrain from introducing references to her heavenly spouse as he addresses the goddess,

Who, firmly fixt, the forest trees  
With might supportest in the ground:

When from the lightning of thy cloud  
The rain-floods of the sky pour down.

The personification is only rudimentary, the attributes of the goddess being chiefly those of the physical earth.

The most important of the terrestrial deities is Agni, god of fire. Next to Indra he is the most prominent of the Vedic gods, being celebrated in more than 200 hymns. It is only natural that the personification of the sacrificial fire, the centre around which the ritual poetry of the Veda moves, should engross so much of the attention of the Rishis. *Agni* being also the regular name of the element (Latin, *igni-s*), the anthropomorphism of the deity is but slight. The bodily parts of the god have a clear connection with the phenomena of terrestrial fire mainly in its sacrificial aspect. In allusion to the oblation of ghee cast in the fire, Agni is “butter-backed,” “butter-faced,” or “butter-haired.” He is also “flame-haired,” and has a tawny beard. He has sharp, shining, golden, or iron teeth and burning jaws. Mention is also often made of his tongue or tongues. He is frequently compared with or directly called a steed, being yoked to the pole of the rite in order to waft the sacrifice to the gods. He is also often likened to a bird, being winged and darting with rapid flight to the gods. He eats and chews the forest with sharp tooth. His lustre is like the rays of dawn or of the sun, and resembles the lightnings of the rain-cloud; but his track and his fellies are black, and his steeds make black furrows. Driven by the wind, he rushes through the wood.

He invades the forests and shears the hairs of the earth, shaving it as a barber a beard. His flames are like the roaring waves of the sea. He bellows like a bull when he invades the forest trees; the birds are terrified at the noise when his grass-devouring sparks arise. Like the erector of a pillar, he supports the sky with his smoke; and one of his distinctive epithets is "smoke-bannered." He is borne on a brilliant car, drawn by two or more steeds, which are ruddy or tawny and wind-impelled. He yokes them to summon the gods, for he is the charioteer of the sacrifice.

The poets love to dwell on his various births, forms, and abodes. They often refer to the daily generation of Agni by friction from the two fire-sticks. These are his parents, producing him as a new-born infant who is hard to catch. From the dry wood the god is born living; the child as soon as born devours his parents. The ten maidens said to produce him are the ten fingers used in twirling the upright fire-drill. Agni is called "Son of strength" because of the powerful friction necessary in kindling a flame. As the fire is lit every morning for the sacrifice, Agni is described as "waking at dawn." Hence, too, he is the "youngest" of the gods; but he is also old, for he conducted the first sacrifice. Thus he comes to be paradoxically called both "ancient" and "very young" in the same passage.

Agni also springs from the aërial waters, and is often said to have been brought from heaven. Born on earth, in air, in heaven, Agni is frequently regarded as having a triple character. The gods made him threefold, his births are three, and he has three abodes



or dwellings. "From heaven first Agni was born, the second time from us (*i.e.* men), thirdly in the waters." This earliest Indian trinity is important as the basis of much of the mystical speculation of the Vedic age. It was probably the prototype not only of the later Rigvedic triad, Sun, Wind, Fire, spoken of as distributed in the three worlds, but also of the triad Sun, Indra, Fire, which, though not Rigvedic, is still ancient. It is most likely also the historical progenitor of the later Hindu trinity of Brahmā, Viṣṇu, Śiva. This triad of fires may have suggested and would explain the division of a single sacrificial fire into the three which form an essential feature of the cult of the Brāhmaṇas.

Owing to the multiplicity of terrestrial fires, Agni is also said to have many births; for he abides in every family, house, or dwelling. Kindled in many spots, he is but one; scattered in many places, he is one and the same king. Other fires are attached to him as branches to a tree. He assumes various divine forms, and has many names; but in him are comprehended all the gods, whom he surrounds as a felly the spokes. Thus we find the speculations about Agni's various forms leading to the monotheistic notion of a unity pervading the many manifestations of the divine.

Agni is an immortal who has taken up his abode among mortals; he is constantly called a "guest" in human dwellings; and is the only god to whom the frequent epithet *grihapati*, "lord of the house," is applied.

As the conductor of sacrifice, Agni is repeatedly called both a

“messenger” who moves between heaven and earth and a priest. He is indeed the great priest, just as Indra is the great warrior.

Agni is, moreover, a mighty benefactor of his worshippers. With a thousand eyes he watches over the man who offers him oblations; but consumes his worshippers’ enemies like dry bushes, and strikes down the malevolent like a tree destroyed by lightning. All blessings issue from him as branches from a tree. All treasures are collected in him, and he opens the door of wealth. He gives rain from heaven and is like a spring in the desert. The boons which he confers are, however, chiefly domestic welfare, offspring, and general prosperity, while Indra for the most part grants victory, booty, power, and glory.

Probably the oldest function of fire in regard to its cult is that of burning and dispelling evil spirits and hostile magic. It still survives in the *Rigveda* from an earlier age, Agni being said to drive away the goblins with his light and receiving the epithet *rakshohan*, “goblin-slayer.” This activity is at any rate more characteristic of Agni than of any other deity, both in the hymns and in the ritual of the Vedas.

Since the soma sacrifice, beside the cult of fire, forms a main feature in the ritual of the *Rigveda*, the god Soma is naturally one of its chief deities. The whole of the ninth book, in addition to a few scattered hymns elsewhere, is devoted to his praise. Thus, judged by the standard of frequency of mention, Soma comes third in order of importance among the Vedic gods. The constant presence of the soma plant and its juice before their

eyes set limits to the imagination of the poets who describe its personification. Hence little is said of Soma's human form or action. The ninth book mainly consists of incantations sung over the soma while it is pressed by the stones and flows through the woollen strainer into the wooden vats, in which it is finally offered as a beverage to the gods on a litter of grass. The poets are chiefly concerned with these processes, overlaying them with chaotic imagery and mystical fancies of almost infinite variety. When Soma is described as being purified by the ten maidens who are sisters, or by the daughters of Vivasvat (the rising sun), the ten fingers are meant. The stones used in pounding the shoots on a skin "chew him on the hide of a cow." The flowing of the juice into jars or vats after passing through the filter of sheep's wool is described in various ways. The streams of soma rush to the forest of the vats like buffaloes. The god flies like a bird to settle in the vats. The Tawny One settles in the bowls like a bird sitting on a tree. The juice being mixed with water in the vat, Soma is said to rush into the lap of the waters like a roaring bull on the herd. Clothing himself in waters, he rushes around the vat, impelled by the singers. Playing in the wood, he is cleansed by the ten maidens. He is the embryo or child of waters, which are called his mothers. When the priests add milk to soma "they clothe him in cow-garments."

The sound made by the soma juice flowing into the vats or bowls is often referred to in hyperbolical language. Thus a poet says that "the sweet drop flows over the filter like the din

of combatants.” This sound is constantly described as roaring, bellowing, or occasionally even thundering. In such passages Soma is commonly compared with or called a bull, and the waters, with or without milk, are termed cows.

Owing to the yellow colour of the juice, the physical quality of Soma mainly dwelt upon by the poets is his brilliance. His rays are often referred to, and he is frequently assimilated to the sun.

The exhilarating and invigorating action of soma led to its being regarded as a divine drink that bestows everlasting life. Hence it is called *amṛita*, the “immortal” draught (allied to the Greek *ambrosia*). Soma is the stimulant which conferred immortality upon the gods. Soma also places his worshipper in the imperishable world where there is eternal light and glory, making him immortal where King Yama dwells. Thus soma naturally has medicinal power also. It is medicine for a sick man, and the god Soma heals whatever is sick, making the blind to see and the lame to walk.

Soma when imbibed stimulates the voice, which it impels as the rower his boat. Soma also awakens eager thought, and the worshippers of the god exclaim, “We have drunk soma, we have become immortal, we have entered into light, we have known the gods.” The intoxicating power of soma is chiefly, and very frequently, dwelt on in connection with Indra, whom it stimulates in his conflict with the hostile demons of the air.

Being the most important of herbs, soma is spoken of as lord of plants or their king, receiving also the epithet *vanaspati*, “lord

of the forest.”

Soma is several times described as dwelling or growing on the mountains, in accordance with the statements of the *Avesta* about Haoma. Its true origin and abode is regarded as heaven, whence it has been brought down to earth. This belief is most frequently embodied in the myth of the soma-bringing eagle (*çyena*), which is probably only the mythological account of the simple phenomenon of the descent of lightning and the simultaneous fall of rain.

In some of the latest hymns of the *Rigveda* Soma begins to be somewhat obscurely identified with the moon. In the *Atharvaveda* Soma several times means the moon, and in the *Yajurveda* Soma is spoken of as having the lunar mansions for his wives. The identification is a commonplace in the Brāhmaṇas, which explain the waning of the moon as due to the gods and fathers eating up the ambrosia of which it consists. In one of the Upanishads, moreover, the statement occurs that the moon is King Soma, the food of the gods, and is drunk up by them. Finally, in post-Vedic literature Soma is a regular name of the moon, which is regarded as being consumed by the gods, and consequently waning till it is filled up again by the sun. This somewhat remarkable coalescence of Soma with the moon doubtless sprang from the hyperbolical terms in which the poets of the *Rigveda* dwell on Soma's celestial nature and brilliance, which they describe as dispelling darkness. They sometimes speak of it as swelling in the waters, and often refer to the sap as a “drop” (*indu*). Comparisons

with the moon would thus easily suggest themselves. In one passage of the *Rigveda*, for instance, Soma in the bowls is said to appear like the moon in the waters. The mystical speculations with which the Soma poetry teems would soon complete the symbolism.

A comparison of the *Avesta* with the *Rigveda* shows clearly that soma was already an important feature in the mythology and cult of the Indo-Iranian age. In both it is described as growing on the mountains, whence it is brought by birds; in both it is king of plants; in both a medicine bestowing long life and removing death. In both the sap was pressed and mixed with milk; in both its mythical home is heaven, whence it comes down to earth; in both the draught has become a mighty god; in both the celestial Soma is distinguished from the terrestrial, the god from the beverage. The similarity goes so far that Soma and Haoma have even some individual epithets in common.

The evolution of thought in the Rigvedic period shows a tendency to advance from the concrete to the abstract. One result of this tendency is the creation of abstract deities, which, however, are still rare, occurring for the most part in the last book only. A few of them are deifications of abstract nouns, such as Çraddhā "Faith," invoked in one short hymn, and Manyu, "Wrath," in two. These abstractions grow more numerous in the later Vedas. Thus Kāma, "Desire," first appears in the *Atharva-veda*, where the arrows with which he pierces hearts are already referred to; he is the forerunner of the flower-arrowed

god of love, familiar in classical literature. More numerous is the class of abstractions comprising deities whose names denote an agent, such as *Dhātṛi*, “Creator,” or an attribute, such as *Prajāpati*, “Lord of Creatures.” These do not appear to be direct abstractions, but seem to be derived from epithets designating a particular aspect of activity or character, which at first applying to one or more of the older deities, finally acquired an independent value. Thus *Prajāpati*, originally an epithet of such gods as Savitṛi and Soma, occurs in a late verse of the last book as a distinct deity possessing the attribute of a creator. This god is in the *Atharva-veda* and the *Vājasaneyi-Saṃhitā* often, and in the *Brāhmaṇas* regularly, recognised as the chief deity, the father of the gods. In the *Sūtras*, *Prajāpati* is identified with *Brahmā*, his successor in the post-Vedic age.

A hymn of the tenth book furnishes an interesting illustration of the curious way in which such abstractions sometimes come into being. Here is one of the stanzas:—

By whom the mighty sky, the earth so steadfast,  
The realm of light, heaven’s vault, has been established,  
Who in the air the boundless space traverses:  
What god should we with sacrifices worship?

The fourth line here is the refrain of nine successive stanzas, in which the creator is referred to as unknown, with the interrogative pronoun *ka*, “what?” This *ka* in the later Vedic literature came to be employed not only as an epithet of the

creator Prajāpati, but even as an independent name of the supreme god.

A deity of an abstract character occurring in the oldest as well as the latest parts of the *Rigveda* is Bṛihaspati, “Lord of Prayer.” Roth and other distinguished Vedic scholars regard him as a direct personification of devotion. In the opinion of the present writer, however, he is only an indirect deification of the sacrificial activity of Agni, a god with whom he has undoubtedly much in common. Thus the most prominent feature of his character is his priesthood. Like Agni, he has been drawn into and has obtained a firm footing in the Indra myth. Thus he is often described as driving out the cows after vanquishing the demon Vala. As the divine *brahmā* priest, Bṛihaspati seems to have been the prototype of the god Brahmā, chief of the later Hindu trinity. But the name Bṛihaspati itself survived in post-Vedic mythology as the designation of a sage, the teacher of the gods, and regent of the planet Jupiter.

Another abstraction, and one of a very peculiar kind, is the goddess Aditi. Though not the subject of any separate hymn, she is often incidentally celebrated. She has two, and only two, prominent characteristics. She is, in the first place, the mother of the small group of gods called Ādityas, of whom Varuṇa is the chief. Secondly, she has, like her son Varuṇa, the power of releasing from the bonds of physical suffering and moral guilt. With the latter trait her name, which means “unbinding,” “freedom,” is clearly connected. The unpersonified sense seems



to survive in a few passages of the *Rigveda*. Thus a poet prays for the “secure and unlimited gift of *aditi*.” The origin of the abstraction is probably to be explained as follows. The expression “sons of Aditi,” which is several times applied to the Ādityas, when first used in all likelihood meant “sons of liberation,” to emphasise a salient trait of their character, according to a turn of language common in the *Rigveda*. The feminine word “liberation” (*aditi*) used in this connection would then have become personified by a process which has more than one parallel in Sanskrit. Thus Aditi, a goddess of Indian origin, is historically younger than some at least of her sons, who can be traced back to a pre-Indian age.

Goddesses, as a whole, occupy a very subordinate position in Vedic belief. They play hardly any part as rulers of the world. The only one of any consequence is Ushas. The next in importance, Sarasvatī, ranks only with the least prominent of the male gods. One of the few, besides Pṛithivī, to whom an entire hymn is addressed, is Rātrī, Night. Like her sister Dawn, with whom she is often coupled, she is addressed as a daughter of the sky. She is conceived not as the dark, but as the bright starlit night. Thus, in contrasting the twin goddesses, a poet says, “One decks herself with stars, with sunlight the other.” The following stanzas are from the hymn addressed to Night (x. 127):—

Night coming on, the goddess shines  
In many places with her eyes:

All-glorious she has decked herself.

Immortal goddess, far and wide  
She fills the valleys and the heights:  
Darkness with light she overcomes.

And now the goddess coming on  
Has driven away her sister Dawn:  
Far off the darkness hastes away.

Thus, goddess, come to us to-day,  
At whose approach we seek our homes,  
As birds upon the tree their nest.

The villagers have gone to rest,  
Beasts, too, with feet and birds with wings:  
The hungry hawk himself is still.

Ward off the she-wolf and the wolf,  
Ward off the robber, goddess Night:  
And take us safe across the gloom.

Goddesses, as wives of the great gods, play a still more insignificant part, being entirely devoid of independent character. Indeed, hardly anything about them is mentioned but their names, which are simply formed from those of their male consorts by means of feminine suffixes.

A peculiar feature of Vedic mythology is the invocation in

couples of a number of deities whose names are combined in the form of dual compounds. About a dozen such pairs are celebrated in entire hymns, and some half-dozen others in detached stanzas. By far the greatest number of such hymns is addressed to Mitra-Varuṇa, but the names most often found combined in this way are those of Heaven and Earth (*Dyāvāprithivī*). There can be little doubt that the latter couple furnished the analogy for this favourite formation. For the association of this pair, traceable as far back as the Indo-European period, appeared to early thought so intimate in nature, that the myth of their conjugal union is found widely diffused among primitive peoples.

Besides these pairs of deities there is a certain number of more or less definite groups of divine beings generally associated with some particular god. The largest and most important of these are the Maruts or Storm-gods, who, as we have seen, constantly attend Indra on his warlike exploits. The same group, under the name of Rudras, is occasionally associated with their father Rudra. The smaller group of the Ādityas is constantly mentioned in company with their mother Aditi, or their chief Varuṇa. Their number in two passages of the *Rigveda* is stated as seven or eight, while in the *Brāhmaṇas* and later it is regularly twelve. Some eight or ten hymns of the *Rigveda* are addressed to them collectively. The following lines are taken from one (viii. 47) in which their aid and protection is specially invoked:—

As birds extend their sheltering wings,  
Spread your protection over us.

As charioteers avoid ill roads,  
May dangers always pass us by.

Resting in you, O gods, we are  
Like men that fight in coats of mail.

Look down on us, O Ādityas,  
Like spies observing from the bank:

Lead us to paths of pleasantness,  
Like horses to an easy ford.

A third and much less important group is that of the Vasus, mostly associated with Indra in the *Rigveda*, though in later Vedic texts Agni becomes their leader. They are a vague group, for they are not characterised, having neither individual names nor any definite number. The Brāhmaṇas, however, mention eight of them. Finally, there are the Viṣvedevās or All-gods, to whom some sixty hymns are addressed. It is a factitious sacrificial group meant to embrace the whole pantheon in order that none should be excluded in invocations intended to be addressed to all. Strange to say, the All-gods are sometimes conceived as a narrower group, which is invoked with others like the Vasus and Ādityas.

Besides the higher gods the *Rigveda* knows a number of

mythical beings not regarded as possessing the divine nature to the full extent and from the beginning. The most important of these are the Ribhus who form a triad, and are addressed in eleven hymns. Characteristically deft-handed, they are often said to have acquired the rank of deities by their marvellous skill. Among the five great feats of dexterity whereby they became gods, the greatest—in which they appear as successful rivals of Tvashṭri, the artificer god—consists in their having transformed his bowl, the drinking vessel of the gods, into four shining cups. This bowl perhaps represents the moon, the four cups being its phases. It has also been interpreted as the year with its division into seasons. The Ribhus are further said to have renewed the youth of their parents, by whom Heaven and Earth seem to have been meant. With this miraculous deed another myth told about them appears to be specially connected. They rested for twelve days in the house of the sun, Agohya (“who cannot be concealed”). This sojourn of the Ribhus in the house of the sun in all probability alludes to the winter solstice, the twelve days being the addition which was necessary to bring the lunar year of 354 into harmony with the solar year of nearly 366 days, and was intercalated before the days begin to grow perceptibly longer. On the whole, it seems likely that the Ribhus were originally terrestrial or ærial elves, whose dexterity gradually attracted to them various myths illustrative of marvellous skill.

In a few passages of the *Rigveda* mention is made of a celestial water-nymph called Apsaras (“moving in the waters”), who is

regarded as the spouse of a corresponding male genius called Gandharva. The Apsaras, in the words of the poet, smiles at her beloved in the highest heaven. More Apsarases than one are occasionally spoken of. Their abode is in the later Vedas extended to the earth, where they especially frequent trees, which resound with the music of their lutes and cymbals. The Brāhmaṇas describe them as distinguished by great beauty and devoted to dance, song, and play. In the post-Vedic period they become the courtesans of Indra's heaven. The Apsarases are loved not only by the Gandharvas but occasionally even by men. Such an one was Urvaçī. A dialogue between her and her earthly spouse, Purūravas, is contained in a somewhat obscure hymn of the *Rigveda* (x. 95). The nymph is here made to say:—

Among mortals in other form I wandered,  
And dwelt for many nights throughout four autumns.

Her lover implores her to return; but, though his request is refused, he (like Tithonus) receives the promise of immortality. The *Çatapatha Brāhmaṇa* tells the story in a more connected and detailed form. Urvaçī is joined with Purūravas in an alliance, the permanence of which depends on a condition. When this is broken by a stratagem of the Gandharvas, the nymph immediately vanishes from the sight of her lover. Purūravas, distracted, roams in search of her, till at last he observes her swimming in a lotus lake with other Apsarases in the form of

an aquatic bird. Urvaṇī discovers herself to him, and in response to his entreaties, consents to return for once after the lapse of a year. This myth in the post-Vedic age furnished the theme of Kālidāsa's play *Vikramorvaṇī*

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