

dra (often referred to as *eka deva* "One God") stands out as preeminent, and the core myth of the Rig Veda recounts his deeds. In terms of this central myth, creation proceeded when Indra, the champion of the celestial gods, slew a serpent demon, Vritra, who enclosed the waters that were requisite for human life. When Indra killed this demon the waters were released. Indra then set the sun in the sky, and cosmic order (*ṛta*) was established under the administration of the god Varuna. Gods and men then had specific functions (*ṛtāni*) to perform in accordance with this cosmic order. After death, those individuals who had fulfilled their obligations under the cosmic order went to a heavenly realm presided over by Yama, the first mortal. Two mythical dogs guarded the righteous on the path to this region, but the sinful were fettered and, unprotected, fell prey to various demons.

Cult practices developed an elaborate ritual based on a fire sacrifice, personified as the god Agni, and included various oblations of clarified butter and the production of the soma juice, deified as the god Soma, from an unidentified plant known also from Iranian sources. This ritual naturally necessitated a highly specialized priesthood. Just as the crackling of the sacrificial fire was viewed as the voice of Agni, the priest par excellence, so, too, great significance was attached to the chanting of hymns and invocations by the human priesthood. Later the sacrifice itself was viewed cosmologically and the correct performance of the sacrifice possessed a magical potency that could coerce even the gods. This magical power inherent in the sacrificial prayers developed into spells, called *brāhmaṇa*. He who recited them was a "prayer" (*brāhmaṇ*), or one related to prayer (*brāhmaṇa*). From this concept developed the *brāhmaṇ*, or priestly, caste.

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

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Chapter 1 COSMIC AND RITUAL ORDER IN VEDIC LITERATURE

The earliest surviving hymns of the Rig Veda, produced after the Aryans entered India, express a sense of the vastness and brilliance of nature, of its blessings and maledictions, and above all, of the inexorable and subtly operating law that regulated all its manifestations. The earliest hymns of the Vedic Aryans, accordingly, pertained to this cosmic religion, to which they gave expression through such mythological concepts as those of the divine parents, Heaven and Earth, the cosmic law (*ṛta*), and the sustainer of that law, Varuna. Side by side with this cosmic religion, the Vedic Aryans had also developed a kind of fire worship. Fire was regarded as the liaison between gods and men.

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

The Aryans were a nomadic, pastoral people, and it was probably the search for new grazing lands for their cattle that had led to their migration into India. The cow was their main source of wealth, and scholars have speculated that this was the basis of the later emphasis in Hinduism on the sanctity of the cow. As the Aryans moved into India from the northwest, they fought many battles with the original inhabitants of the land, a dark-skinned people whom they contemptuously called *dāsas*, a word that later came to mean slave. The Aryans finally emerged as victorious colonizers of that part of India known as the land of the seven rivers, the modern Punjab. Many of the hymns glorify the heroic and martial virtues of the conquerors, with an emphasis on success in battle as proof of divine favor. Particular reverence is paid to Indra, who, originally a god associated with thunder, was, because of his conquest of the snake Vritra and other de-

mons, seen as a supporter of the Aryans in their own battles. Indra is further invested with a more cosmic and general character and becomes a dominant figure in the hero religion of a society in which priests and warriors occupied a central place.

This emphasis on heroism and war is counterbalanced by a very important development within Vedic religion, that is, an assertion by the priests of the magical potency of their prayers. These prayers are deified in the forms of the gods Brahmanaspati (Lord of Prayer), and Vāch, the goddess of Speech or Holy Word. Brahmanaspati embodies prayer (*brāhman*) itself, as well as ritual activity in general. Moreover, in his person ritual and cosmological aspects are blended. He is often associated with Agni, the sacrifice personified, on the one hand, and Indra, the later cosmogonic principal (*ud ekam*), on the other. Thus the hymns dedicated to this god represent the emergence of prayer as an extremely significant concept in early Vedic thought. It is not at all surprising then that the importance of ritual in Vedic religion should give rise to the central conception of later Vedic philosophical speculation regarding the true nature of the cosmological concept *brāhman* and its relation to the human self.

The Vedic Aryans believed that the creation of the universe and the procreation of the human race were the result of a primeval sacrifice, the self-immolation of a cosmic being. This cosmic being is represented in the Veda as the male, Purusha. In addition to this concept of the primeval cosmic sacrifice as the starting point of creation, there are represented in the Veda other significant currents of cosmogonic thought. According to one of them the source of all powers and existences, divine as well as earthly, was conceived as the "golden germ" (*hiranyagarbha*). This "golden germ" is the precursor of the universal egg (*brahmāṇḍa*) of the later cosmogony.

Another cosmogonic theory seeks to controvert the view that the world has evolved out of "nonbeing" (*asat*). At the same time this theory asserts that the source of this world cannot be, strictly speaking, characterized as "being" (*sat*). In the beginning there was neither "nonbeing" nor "being"; nevertheless That One (*ud ekam*) breathed, though breathless, through its own inherent power. Beside it nothing existed. Finally, in the *Aṭharva Veda* both "being" and "nonbeing" have *brāhman* as their source.

Side by side with the ritual, eschatology, mythology, and cosmogony of the upper classes among the Vedic Aryans there had also existed the religion of the non-Aryan subject peoples. This religion comprised a variety of charms, imprecations, and exorcistic practices that were primarily intended

"to appease, to bless, and to curse." These practices were "magic" in the sense that if the correct ritual techniques and formulas were used, the supernatural powers, or the forces of nature, could be controlled by the practitioner, the priest.

Agni

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

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

[From *Rg Veda*, 1.1]

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

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

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

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

May Agni, the chief priest, who possesses the insight of a sage, who is truthful, widely renowned, and divine, come here with the gods.

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

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

Presiding at ritual functions, the brightly shining custodian of the cosmic order [*ṛta*], thriving in your own realm.

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

Heaven and Earth

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

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

[From *Rg Veda*, 6.70]

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

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

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

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

May Heaven and Earth, honey-dropping, honey-dispensing, with honeyed courses, shower down honey for us, bringing unto the gods sacrifice and wealth, and for us great glory, reward, and heroic strength.

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

Varuna

Varuna is the administrator of the cosmic law (*ṛta*, *dharma*), which regulates all activities in this world. It is he who has spread out the earth and set the sun in

motion, and who pours out the rain but sees to it that the one ocean is not filled to overflowing by many rivers. He is, therefore, rightly called the world sovereign. This upholder of cosmic order is also regarded as the lord of human morality. It is the function of Varuna to ensure that there occurs no transgression of the law, cosmic or human. He is the very image of the king as ruler and judge of his people and, as such, is the counterpart to Indra, the image of the king as warrior. According to this hymn, the poet has been suffering some affliction, which, he is told, is the punishment of King Varuna for an offense. He begs Varuna to accept his offerings and repentance, to forgive his transgressions, which, after all, were not intentional, and to restore him to prosperity and health. The hymn is notable for its personal and confessional tone, which resembles that of later devotional poetry.

[From *Rg Veda*, 5.86, trans. by Joel Brereton]

Wise are the races [of gods and men] through the greatness of him who propped apart the two wide worlds. He pressed forth the high, lofty vault of heaven and, likewise, the stars. And he spread out the earth [beneath].

In my own person, I speak this together [with him]: "When shall I be in [obedience to] Varuna? Might he take pleasure in my oblation, becoming free of anger? When shall I contentedly look upon his mercy?"

I ask about that trouble, Varuna, desiring to understand; I approach those who know to ask [about it]. The knowing say the same thing to me: "Varuna is now angry with you."

Was the offense so great, Varuna, that you want to crush your friend and praiser? O you who are impossible to deceive, wholly self-sustaining, you will explain this to me. I would swiftly humble myself before you with reverence to be free of guilt.

Release from us the deceits of our ancestors and those that we have done ourselves. Release Vasishtha, O King, like a cattle-stealing thief [from his bondage] or a calf from its rope.

This mistake was not my intention: it was liquor, pride, dice, ignorance. The elder is [laughed] in the offense of the younger. Even sleep does not ward off untruth.

Like a slave, I shall serve my master; I, without offending, [shall serve] the angry one. The civilizing god has enlightened those without understanding. The more knowing man hastens to the clever one for riches.

This praise is for you, Varuna, the self-sustaining: may it repose in your heart. May prosperity in peace be ours, prosperity also in war. Protect us always with well-being.

Indra

Indra is the most prominent god in the *Rig Veda*; nearly one-quarter of its hymns are dedicated to him. Above all, he is a warrior and king, through whose exploits the world has been ordered and who continues to be invoked to battle all those forces, both human and supernatural, that prevent Aryan prosperity. This hymn tells of his most significant victory, his triumph over the demon Vritra and the release of the waters. Vritra was a gigantic serpent who lay coiled around a mountain within which all the world's waters were entrapped. After a ferocious battle, Indra kills Vritra with his mace, the *vajra*,¹ breaks open the mountain, and lets the waters pour out. Vritra's name means "obstacle," and this victory over "Obstacle" is paradigmatic for Indra's conquest of all obstacles.

[From *Rg Veda*, 1.32, trans. by J. B.]

Now I shall proclaim the mighty deeds of Indra, those foremost deeds that he, the wielder of the mace, has performed. He smashed the serpent. He released the waters. He split the sides of the mountains.

He smashed the serpent, which was resting on the mountain—for him Fashioner² had fashioned a mace that shone like the sun. Like lowing cattle, the waters, streaming out, rushed straight to the sea.

Eager, like a rutting bull, he took for his own the soma. He drank the soma in the *trikadraka*-cups.³ The Provider⁴ took up his missile, the mace. He smashed him, the first-born of serpents.

When you, Indra, smashed the first-born of serpents, you overcame even the tricks [*mitryā*] of the tricky.⁵ Then you brought forth the sun, the heaven, and the dawn,⁶ and since then you have never had a rival.

With his mace, that great murderous weapon, Indra smashed Vritra, the very great obstacle, whose shoulders were spread.⁷ Like branches hewn away by an axe, the serpent lies, embracing the earth.⁸

A feeble warrior, in his drunkenness he challenged the great hero, the overwhelming, who drinks the silvery liquid.⁹ He did not withstand the attack of [Indra's] weapons. Broken completely, Indra's rival was crushed.

Handless and footless, he gave battle to Indra. [Indra] smashed his mace against his neck. A bullock who wished to be the measure of a bull, Vritra lay there, broken to pieces.

As he lay in that way, like a broken reed, the waters, consigning themselves to man,¹⁰ rushed over him. Whom Vritra in his greatness [had once] surrounded, at their feet [now] lay the serpent.

The strength of Vritra's mother ebbed: Indra had struck his murderous

weapon down upon her. The mother was above; the son, below.¹¹ Dānu lay as a cow with her calf.

In the midst of the currents that never stand still, never rest, the body sank. Over the private parts of Vritra the waters run. Indra's rival lay in the deep darkness [of death].

[Before this] the waters stood still—their husband had been the barbarian, their guardian, the serpent—entrapped like the cows by the Panis.¹² Indra opened up the hidden exit for the waters when he smashed Vritra.

You, the one god,¹³ became the tail of a horse when he struck his fangs at you. You won the cows, O hero, and the soma. You sent forth the seven rivers to flow.

Neither the lightning nor the thunder, neither the mist nor the hail that he scattered deterred [Indra] for him. After Indra and the serpent fought, [Indra], the Provider, became the conqueror for all time.

Whom did you see as the avenger of the serpent when fear entered your heart after you had smashed the serpent, when you, like a frightened falcon, fled through the air, across the ninety-nine rivers?¹⁴

Indra, holding the mace, is the king of both that which stands and moves, of the horned and the nothorned. So, as king, he rules over the peoples. As a rim the spokes of a wheel, he encompasses them.

The Sun

A characteristic feature of Vedic literature is the tendency to address natural forces as deities. These natural forces are not, however, anthropomorphized; they are not pictured as glorious human beings, as in later Greek religion, but remain what they are, forces of nature. In the hymns to the Sun, as in those to Dawn, Night, Thunderstorm, and the other gods of nature, the poets' attention is always on the visible phenomenon itself. The Sun is invoked in descriptions of its light and movement and by allusions to its mythology. Through these descriptions, the poets not only recapitulate its manifest power; they also communicate its meaning for human life and behavior. In this hymn, the Sun appears in the poet's imagination as the eye of the gods, which watches over human affairs, and as the visible sign of the presence of the gods. The sun retains today an important place in Hindu worship.

[From *Rg Veda*, 1.1.15, trans. by J. B.]

The bright face of the gods has arisen, the eye of Mitra, Varuna, and Agni.¹⁵ He has filled heaven, earth, and the space between; the Sun is the inner self of both the moving and the motionless.