

I. *The Cultural Background of the Veda*

IT is generally believed—and, to a large extent, rightly believed—that a proper understanding of the Veda affords the master-key which unravels many a problem relating to ancient Indian culture and civilization. Every serious student of ancient Indian civilization, therefore, begins, naturally enough, by asking himself the question: What is the Veda? Let me also then, by way of a general introduction to my lectures, today begin by posing such broad questions as: What exactly is connoted by the term, Veda? What is its real nature? What is its extent and what its cultural background?

When we speak, in more or less general terms, of Sanskrit language and of Sanskrit literature, we are actually speaking of two languages and of two literatures. In other words, there are, strictly speaking, two Sanskrit languages, the Vedic Sanskrit and the Classical Sanskrit, the one being distinct from the other in respect of several essential linguistic characteristics. Correspondingly, there are two Sanskrit literatures, the Vedic literature and the classical Sanskrit literature, the one being distinct from the other in respect of nature, extent, and cultural background. I shall try briefly to elaborate this point. In what way is the Vedic language distinct from the classical Sanskrit? It is well known that the science of comparative philology has established the position of Sanskrit as a very important member of the family of Indo-European languages. It is, however, not so very well known that by 'Sanskrit' is here meant principally the Vedic language and not so much the classical Sanskrit. The implications, from the linguistic point of view, of what I have just now said are indeed manifold. Without, however, going into the details of this question, I shall only emphasize what is pertinent to our present purpose, namely, that, so far as the study of Indo-European linguistics is concerned, the Vedic language has all along been distinguished from the classical Sanskrit. The second point of distinction, to which I shall now refer, is perhaps more tangible. I shall put it like this: The classical Sanskrit, as we know it, is essentially a static language. It is completely tied down by the rules of grammar—the grammar of Pāṇini and, to a certain extent, of his immediate successors. Accordingly there is, in that language, absolutely no scope for dialectical developments and no possibility of dialectical differences. For instance, the Sanskrit, as spoken and written in Kashmir, has been quite the same as the Sanskrit as spoken and written in the southernmost parts of India. Similarly the Sanskrit, as it was spoken and written in the days of Kālidāsa or Śaṅkarācārya, was not in any way different from the Sanskrit as it is today spoken and written by a Pandit of Banaras. To resort to a mathematical metaphor, Sanskrit has remained an 'invariable' in the time-space-context. As against this, the Vedic language had been growing and changing throughout its career.

It had, indeed, been a 'living' entity. The Vedic language as represented in the Ṛgvedic *mantras*, for instance, shows certain linguistic peculiarities which are absent in the Vedic language, as represented in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*. Again, the occurrence, in the Vedic language, of what are technically called 'prakritisms' would justify our positing the existence of several Vedic dialects. Such a language, with its proneness to change and growth, could not have failed to evoke significant psychological reaction from the speakers of that language. Another distinctive feature of the Vedic language, as against the classical Sanskrit, is the important role played in it by accent or *svara*. Apart from ensuring the rhythmic, musical character of the Vedic language, accent also governs the sense of a Vedic word. A story is told in Vedic literature of how an incorrectly accented word yielded a sense radically different from the one which was intended by the speaker and thus brought disaster on him, when he was, naturally, most unprepared for it. Gods and demons were, as usual, locked in battle—gods under the leadership of Indra and demons under that of Tvaṣṭā. For the time being, gods appeared to be in the ascendancy. Tvaṣṭā, who, incidentally, had already lost his only son, therefore, performed a sacrifice with a view to securing for himself another son who would vanquish Indra. He offered oblations into the sacred fire pronouncing his wish with the formula, *indraśatruṃ vardhasva*,—may a son grow who will be *indraśatru*. Now, as we all know, the word, *ināraśatru*, is a compound and can be interpreted either as a genitive *tatpuruṣa* compound, that is to say, as *indrasya śatruḥ*, meaning one who is the slayer of Indra, or as a *bahuvrīhi* compound, that is to say, as *indraḥ śatruḥ yasya*, meaning one whose slayer is Indra. Tvaṣṭā, of course, wanted his son to be *indraśatru* in the *tatpuruṣa* sense—he wanted him to be the slayer of Indra. Now, according to the rules governing the accent of Vedic compounds, in a *tatpuruṣa* compound, the second member of the compound is accented, while in the *bahuvrīhi*, the first member is accented. As it happened, in his great excitement, Tvaṣṭā pronounced the word, *indraśatru*, in the formula, *indraśatruṃ vardhasva*, with an accent on the first member and thus made that word yield the *bahuvrīhi* sense. The sacrifice performed by Tvaṣṭā was otherwise perfect. As the result of it Tvaṣṭā did obtain a son—whom, incidentally, he called Vṛtra—who did indeed become *indraśatru*—but in the *bahuvrīhi* sense, and not in the *tatpuruṣa* sense as Tvaṣṭā had desired. Accordingly, Vṛtra, instead of becoming the slayer of Indra, became one whose slayer was Indra. I have recounted this interesting story in order to underline the important role of accent in the Vedic language and the scrupulous care which people were expected to take in respect of it. In classical Sanskrit, on the other hand, accent hardly plays any significant role. It will now become clear, from what I have said so far, why, from the linguistic point of view, the Vedic language has to be regarded as distinct from classical Sanskrit.

Far more striking, however, than the points mentioned above in connection with the two languages, are the points which distinguish Vedic literature from classical Sanskrit literature. The most distinctive claim made on behalf of the Veda is that it is *apauruṣeya*. Let us, for the time being, stick to the traditional view in this regard. According to that view, no human agency has been responsible for the creation of the Veda. The Veda is not man-made; it is god-given. There are, no doubt, frequent references, in the Vedic literature itself, to several *ṛṣis* who are said to be responsible for the various Vedic *mantras*. But we have to understand this their responsibility in a limited sense. In order to make this point clear, the Vedic *ṛṣis* may well be compared to Columbus. Columbus did not create America; he only discovered that land. Similarly, the Vedic *ṛṣis* did not create or compose the Vedic *mantras*; they only 'saw' or discovered the *mantras*, which had been in existence from times immemorial. A *ṛṣi*, indeed, is one who 'sees': *ṛṣir darśanāt*. What the *ṛṣis* were able to see through their intuitive 'vision' is the Veda—the word, *veda*, being linguistically connected with Lat. *video* (= to see). That is, really speaking, why the Veda is also called *darśana*—that is to say, the object of immediate vision and not of mediate knowledge.

There is another imagery employed to bring out this character of *apauruṣeyatva*. The Veda is not infrequently called the *śruti*—that is, 'what is heard'. The music of the infinite, which is the Veda, had been going on since eternity. The ancient sages heard it and transmitted it to posterity as their richest heritage. The Veda is *śruti* in the sense that it is 'the rhythm of the infinite heard by the soul'. Obviously no such claim can be made on behalf of classical Sanskrit literature.

This traditionally accepted *apauruṣeyatva* of the Veda led to some very important consequences. It was argued that, being *apauruṣeya*, the Veda represents the most complete and the most perfect expression of truth. For, it is only what is created by man, which is most likely to be characterised, in one way or another, by defects and imperfections. The *apauruṣeya* Veda, which is naturally free from such defects and imperfections, must then be regarded as the most infallible authority in every walk of life. The *apauruṣeyatva* of the Veda thus logically led to *veda-prāmānya*, that is, to the concept of the unimpeachable validity of the Veda. Indian logic usually speaks of three main *pramānas* or means of knowledge—*pratyakṣa* or direct perception, *anumāna* or inference, and *śabda* or the Vedic authority. Of these three the first two, namely, *pratyakṣa* and *anumāna*, are likely to be vitiated by the natural deficiencies and imperfections of human sense-organs and intellect. Accordingly, their validity is only relative. The third *pramāna*, namely, *śabda* or the Veda, on the other hand, being *apauruṣeya*, is free from such deficiencies and imperfections and must, therefore, command absolute validity. Such faith in the absolute validity of the Veda is indeed one of the main planks

of Brahmanic ideology. Verily it is this criterion which demarcates the two main currents of thought—the *āstika* and the *nāstika*—which have flown side by side throughout the cultural history of ancient India. The *āstikas* (usually called the orthodox) are not, as popularly understood, the theists—those who believe in the existence of god; they are those, who have perfect faith in the absolute validity of the Veda, while the *nāstikas* (the heterodox) are those, who challenge this claim of absolute validity made on behalf of the Veda.

Another distinctive claim made on behalf of the Veda—a claim, which, in a sense, originates from its *apauruṣeyatva*—is that the Veda is the fountain-head of all knowledge. Religion and philosophy, law and history (*itihāsapurāṇa*), fine arts and natural and technical sciences—the beginnings of all these branches of knowledge are traditionally traced back to Vedic sources. This fact would not surprise us if we should take into account the vastness of the extent of the Veda. Setting aside the traditional view regarding the *apauruṣeyatva* and looking at things from a strictly historical point of view, one would easily realise that the Veda could not have been produced by one author—not even by one generation of authors; it must have been the outcome of the intellectual labours of generations of authors through centuries. What is true in the context of time and authorship is also true in the context of space. It is not possible to assign the production of the Veda to any restricted geographical locality. Indeed, without being guilty of exaggeration, one may say that the activity which gave rise to the Veda did, in a sense, extend from the Volga to the Gaṅgā. All this vastness of extent, from the points of view of chronology, authorship, and geographical locality, naturally resulted in the manifold character of the form and the contents of the Veda. Though, therefore, the Veda is popularly regarded as the sacred scripture of Hinduism, in the sense in which the Koran is regarded as the sacred scripture of Islam and the Bible of Christianity, we have necessarily to distinguish the Veda from the other two works. It is well and truly said that the Veda is not one single book, it is verily a whole library and literature.

And this brings us to perhaps the most characteristic feature of the Veda—a feature, which clearly distinguishes it from classical Sanskrit literature. In spite of its great complexity and diversity in the matter of form and contents, the Veda, as a whole, is actually found to be characterised by a remarkable unity. As will be shown in the sequel, this unity is a kind of logical unity—that is to say, a unity brought about by the logical development of thought from one period of Vedic history to another. Of perhaps no other literature than the Veda can it be said that it so faithfully reflects and is so deeply influenced by contemporary life. Throughout the cultural history of the Vedic age, Vedic literature and Vedic life have vitally acted and reacted on each other. The thread of historical development which runs through Vedic

life also binds together, in a unified whole, the various literary works, which are collectively called the Veda. Consequently, the importance of the Veda as a valid source of ancient Indian cultural history is far far greater than that of classical Sanskrit literature.

A reference may be made in passing to two other peculiarities of Vedic literature. The first is that the entire volume of the literature, which is known as the Veda, has been handed down, from generation to generation, through oral tradition. The Veda was not written and read; it was recited and heard. This is another reason why the Veda is known as *śruti*. The fact that such an extensive literature has been preserved intact, through the ages, without being reduced to writing must indeed be regarded as the most unique phenomenon in the literary history of the world. It may, however, be added that, perhaps, it was the oral tradition itself, which helped to preserve the Vedic texts perfectly intact. For, as the students of textual criticism know, it is in the written-out texts that corruptions, omissions, and interpolations creep in and, in course of time, become rampant. And how wonderful are the devices, which the Vedic poet-priests had developed to facilitate the memorising and the perfect preservation of their texts! A single *mantra* from the *RV.*, for instance, was studied in at least five—originally, perhaps, there were many more—modes of recitation. Various kinds of permutations and combinations of the words in a *mantra* were ingeniously thought out and marshalled into service. There is the normal mode of recitation, governed by the rules of metre and rhythm, which is called the *samhitā-pāṭha*. Then there are the *pada-pāṭha*, where each word in a *mantra* is pronounced separately without coalescence or *saṁdhi* and with its own specific accent; the *krama-pāṭha*, where the words are recited in the order: ab, bc, cd, de . . .; the *jaṭā-pāṭha* (ab, ba, ab; bc, cb, bc; . . .); and the *ghana-pāṭha* (ab, ba, abc, cba, abc; bc, cb, bcd, dcb, bcd . . .). And all these complicated labours of the Vedic poet-priests did yield marvellous results. For, to take an example, the entire *Rgveda*, which consists of 1,028 hymns (about 10,560 *mantras* or about 74,000 words), has, through over three millenia, remained perfectly free from *veriae lectiones*—except in one passage (= VII. 44.3), where the reading is either *bradhnam māṁścator varuṇasya babhrum* or *bradhnam māṁścator . . .*

But there is also another side to this peculiarity, namely, the oral transmission of the Veda. It is more than probable that, owing to the fact that the Veda had not been reduced to writing, a considerable amount of literature produced by the Vedic poet-priests was lost in course of time. Again, there are clear indications that there did exist, in those early days, certain literary traditions which had not been given a fixed literary form, which, in other words, continued to remain in a fluid and floating condition, and which, accordingly, must have become lost to us. In other words, the Vedic literature, which is available to us today, does not represent the entire literary output

of the Vedic age. I am often tempted to compare the literature of the Vedic age—indeed, the entire Sanskrit literature—with an iceberg. Just as a major portion of the iceberg is submerged under waters, only a smaller portion of it being visible to us, even so, perhaps a major part of the literature of the Vedic age is buried in the abyss of time and only a small part of it has become known to us. A historian of the Vedic age can ill afford to ignore this fact.

Though what I have said so far relates mostly to the externals of the Veda, I believe that it has helped to prepare the ground for my main task today, which is to analyse the cultural background of the Veda. For such an analysis, it would be convenient to divide the literature of the Vedic age into certain distinct periods. These periods may either be chronological or they may be logical. As it is, in the case of the Veda, as I shall endeavour to demonstrate presently, the chronological periods correspond perfectly well with the logical periods.

The history of the antecedents of the Vedic Indians¹ shows that certain tribes from the common Indo-European stock migrated from their primary Urheimat in the Ural-Altai region towards the south-east and, in course of time, settled down in the region round about Balkh. Here they seem to have lived for quite a long stretch of time—indeed, for so long a time that they soon began to regard that region itself as their original home. These people, who are generally known as the Aryans, were the ancestors of the Vedic Indians and the ancient Iranians. It was in the region round about Balkh that these Aryans developed the Aryan language, which must be regarded as the parent of the Vedic language and the ancient Iranian language, and the Aryan religio-mythological thought, which eventually gave rise to the religions and the mythologies of the Veda and the Avesta. In course of time there occurred further migrations of these Aryans—some warlike, adventurous tribes from among them left the region of Balkh and advanced towards the land of seven rivers in their quest for fresh fields and pastures new, while other tribes of a more quiet and peaceful temperament gradually moved to the south-east and finally settled down in a land, which later came to be called *āryāṇām* (of the Aryans)—Iran, that is the land of the Aryans. We are of course here concerned with the warlike tribes who advanced—often aggressively—towards the land of the seven rivers—the tribes who were the immediate forefathers of the early Vedic Indians. One of the main features of the Aryan religio-mythological thought, which constituted the common heritage both of the early Vedic Indians and the ancient Iranians, was its cosmic character. The Aryans, like their other Indo-European brethren, always lived close to nature. Their early religious thought was, therefore, conditioned by the peculiar way in which they reacted to the vastness and brilliance of nature. Like their other Indo-European brethren, the Aryans also gave expression to their sense of awe, occasioned

1. For a detailed statement on the subject see *PIHC X* (Bombay, 1947), pp. 24-55.

by the vastness and brilliance of nature, through the mythical concept of the Father Sky—Vedic *Dyauh* or Greek Zeus, Vedic *dyauh pitar* or Roman Jupiter. What must, however, be regarded as a unique contribution of the Aryans to mythological ideology is the striking advance which they made over this ancient Indo-European concept. The Aryans seem to have realised—and this realisation on their part, indeed, marks a distinct stage in the development of human thought—that the universe or nature, vast as it is, is not an unregulated, haphazard entity but that it is governed by some definite law. In other words, the universe is not chaos; it is cosmos. The concepts of this cosmic law (the Vedic *ṛta* and the Avestan *asa*) and of the dispenser of this law, the cosmic magician Asura Varuṇa or Ahura Mazda, are essentially Aryan and, to a large extent, constitute the main theme of the common mythological heritage of the early Vedic Indians and the ancient Iranians. The *mantras* relating to this, what may be called, cosmic-worship—in both its aspects, the *Dyauh*-aspect and the *Ṛta*-*Varuṇa*-aspect—which were produced by the early Vedic Indian poet-priests may be said to represent the beginnings of the Veda. Another important feature of the Aryan religion was fire-worship. A comparative study of the Indo-European religions would show that the worship of fire, as such, is found only in the Vedic and the Avestan religions. Ignis, the Latin counterpart of Agni, has no religious significance whatsoever, and the worship of Roman Vesta (= the goddess of the hearth) and Greek Hestia can hardly be said to correspond with the fire-worship as it had been developed among the Aryans. The Vedic poet-priests, like their Iranian compeers must have produced several *mantras* relating to fire-worship. In addition to these two types of *mantras*, which owe their origin to the common religio-mythological ideology developed by the Aryans, the Vedic Indians produced *mantras* relating to a religio-mythological ideology, which was essentially their own. The early Vedic Indians were an aggressive, warlike people. From their secondary Urheimat in the region round about Balkh they set out on an adventurous campaign in the south-eastern direction. This their onward march was by no means smooth or uneventful. They had to face, on the way, strong opposition from various antagonistic tribes, whom they collectively called the *dāsas* or the *vṛtras*. But under the leadership of their heroic leader, Indra, they successfully overcame all that opposition and eventually entered the *saptasindhu* country. To suit this new phase in their cultural life, the early Vedic Indians evolved, in the course of their victorious campaign, a new type of religion. It was the religion of what may be called hero-worship.

Broadly speaking, therefore, while living in the region of Balkh and during the course of their progress towards Saptasindhu, the Vedic poet-priests produced *mantras* or prayers mainly relating to the three aspects of their religion—the cosmic-worship, the fire-worship, and the hero-worship. But this three-fold religious thought cannot certainly be said to constitute the entire religious thought of the Vedic Indian community. By its very nature it must

have been restricted to the classes of poets, priests, and warriors. Side by side with it, there must have been in existence, as among other primitive peoples so too among the Vedic Indians, the usual religion of the masses—religion, that is to say, embodying magic, witchcraft, superstition, etc. Naturally enough, there were produced *mantras* relating to this religion of magic as well. The word, *mantra*, is indeed a very remarkable word. It is employed with reference to both the above-mentioned currents of the Vedic religious thought. In relation to the religion of cosmic-worship, fire-worship, and hero-worship, *mantra* means a prayer, while, in relation to the religion of magic, it means a magical formula or incantation. These two types of *mantras*, relating to the two currents of religious thought, which the Vedic Indians produced in the region of Balkh and in the course of their victorious march towards Saptasindhu represent the beginnings of what, in later times, came to be called the Veda. In a sense, therefore, the Veda must be said to have been born outside India. These *mantras* thus constitute the first period of the literature of the Vedic age. As I have tried to indicate, the character of the contents of the literature of the Vedic Indians, during this period, was directly influenced by their peculiar way of life and thought. Not only this. The form of that literature also was conditioned by their way of life. During this long stretch of time, the Vedic Indians lived, as should be quite obvious, a nomadic, unstable life. Their literary creation, namely, the various *mantras*, also were correspondingly more or less fluid in form. They were not then given a fixed literary form. They were being continually revised and modified. These *mantras*, again, were all scattered about in an unorganised form. In other words, the unsettled, unstable way of the life of the Vedic Indians was reflected in the fluid and scattered condition of these *mantras*.

As the culmination of a series of victorious battles which they fought on their way from Balkh to Saptasindhu under the behest of Indra, who had by this time been transformed from a heroic leader into the national war-god, the Vedic Indians entered the land of seven rivers (which, incidentally, seems to have included the present Afghanistan, the N.W.F., and West Panjab) avowedly in order further to conquer, to colonise, and to civilize. It may be presumed that they were greatly impressed by the natural richness of Saptasindhu. Fertility of the soil, abundance of water, regularity of seasons, invigorating sunshine—all these geophysical factors must have been responsible for the decision of the Vedic Indians to settle down in that country. Accordingly, in course of time, there arose in Saptasindhu various settlements and colonies of the Vedic Indians. Now they began to lead a more or less settled life. And this change in their way of life had its inevitable effect on their religious thought, practices, and literature. The old *mantras*, produced by their immediate ancestors were already there, though in a scattered condition. Many of these were being revised and refined and generally given a fixed literary

form. New *mantras* also were being produced. But what was perhaps most significant in this connection was that the Vedic poet-priests now thought of collecting together all the old and new *mantra* material and organise and arrange it properly. This tendency to collect and arrange the large mass of scattered *mantras* only reflects the comparatively stable, settled, organised way of life which the Vedic Indians had developed by this time. All the old and new *mantras* were first brought together into two collections according to the character of the *mantras*—the *mantras* relating to cosmic-worship, fire-worship, and hero-worship formed one collection or *samhitā* and the *mantras* relating to magic, witchcraft, etc. formed the other collection or *samhitā*. It is needless to add here that we can speak of such classification of the *mantras* only in a very broad sense and only for the sake of the convenience of understanding. It may, however, be emphasized that the characterisation of the *mantras*, included in the two collections, as belonging to one kind of religious pattern or the other is by no means exclusive; it is necessarily representative. Incidentally it may be pointed out that even the term, 'religion', employed in this context is, strictly speaking, not quite apposite. A critical student of the history of human thought—particularly in so far as it pertains to man and his place in the universe—knows very well that that thought has, until now, developed through three distinct stages—the stage of magic, when man regarded himself essentially as a part of and not apart from the universe; the stage of religion in which man and universe (that is, spirit and matter) came to be differentiated from each other and both made subservient to a third entity, namely, god; and, finally the stage of science, which has again emphasized the peculiar kind of identity of the differentiated entities, namely, spirit and matter. However tantalizing this subject might be, I can hardly be justified in allowing myself such digression. I shall, therefore, only say this much, namely, that the early Vedic thought seems to oscillate between magic and religion—and now revert to my main theme. The bringing into being of the two collections of *mantras*—this process is technically known as the *samhitīkaraṇa*—must be said to represent the second period of Vedic literature. It is the *samhitā*-period succeeding the *mantra*-period—both logically and chronologically. The *samhitā*, which was mainly a collection of *mantras* relating to cosmic-worship, etc.—in other words, relating to the religious ideology which had developed among the classes of poets, priests, and warriors—was called the *Rgveda*; and the *samhitā* which was mainly a collection of *mantras* relating to magic, etc.—in other words, relating to the religious ideology of the masses—was called the *Atharvaveda*. It was, of course, natural as also inevitable that some *mantras* of one kind should have come to be included in a collection of the other kind—that the so-called Rgvedic prayers should have been included in the *AV* and the Atharvanic magical formulas included in the

RV. It is, therefore, only in a representative and not an exclusive sense that the *RV* can be characterised as the Veda of the classes and the *AV* as the Veda of the masses. Within these *samhitās* also, the *mantras* were not collected in a haphazard manner. A definite scheme was evolved and more or less scrupulously stuck to. The *mantras* in the *RV* which were grouped together to form various hymns, were first classified according to their authorship. It is interesting to note how, in this respect also, a feature of the life of the Vedic Indians has significantly influenced their literary activity. The scattered *mantras* in the *mantra*-period were regarded as essentially belonging to the community as a whole. This was just as it should be when people lived a truly communal life. After their early settlements in Saptasindhu, and, perhaps, as a result of these however, the Vedic Indians seem to have developed a new pattern of social life in which family, in a larger sense, became the recognised social unit. It was, therefore, the authorship of a particular family which served as the criterion for classifying the hymns of the *Rgveda*. These hymns were no longer regarded as belonging to the community as a whole; they now came to be recognised as the literary production of specific families of Vedic poet-priests. The *RV-samhitā*, accordingly, came to be divided into ten family books (which are called *maṇḍalas*). Within these *maṇḍalas*, again, there was further a fixed order of arrangement of hymns—technically known as the *maṇḍalādi-paribhāṣā*—which is governed by the consideration of the *devatās* and the extent of the hymns. We can speak of such *samhitīkaraṇa*, which implies the collection and the arrangement of the scattered *mantras* according to certain fixed criteria, only in respect of the *RV* or the Veda of the classes. It is well known that what is known as the family-consciousness is not so very predominant among the masses. The principle of family-authorship has, therefore, not been applied to the *AV* or the Veda of the masses. The names of two ancient seers, Bhṛgu and Aṅgiras, are, no doubt, closely associated with that Veda. But a careful study will show that it is not so much to assert the authorship of their families that the names of Bhṛgu and Aṅgiras are organically connected with the *AV*; it is rather to emphasize the fact that the *AV* embodies the two types of magic which had been traditionally associated with the names of Bhṛgu and Aṅgiras—the wholesome (that is, *bhaiṣaja*, *śānta*, and *pauṣṭika*) magic of the Bhṛgus and the black or exorcistic (that is, *ghora* or *ābhicārika*) magic of the Aṅgirasas. It is indeed on account of this two-fold magic that the *mantras* of the *AV* can claim to possess the power 'to bless, to appease, and to curse'.

The *samhitā* period saw the growing prosperity of the Vedic Indians—both in political and social spheres. Their original tribal settlements assumed, in course of time, the form of territorial states and monarchical kingdoms. Prominent among these latter were the kingdoms of the five tribal leaders—Puru, Anu, Druhyu, Turvaṣa, and Yadu. The political

prestige of these five kingdoms indeed became so great that the entire Vedic Indian community—as against the original inhabitants of Saptasindhu—came to be characterised as *pañca janāḥ*—the five peoples—that is to say, the peoples coming under the political domination of the above-mentioned five states. At the same time, new and more adventurous tribes of immigrants were still pouring into the land of the seven rivers. One such tribe was the tribe of the Bharatas, who were making rapid progress under the military leadership of Sudās and the priestly guidance of Viśvāmitra. Sudās was a very ambitious person. It was his ambition to bring all the earlier Vedic Indian kingdoms and settlements, including the five ones of Puru, Anu, etc., under the political supremacy of the Bharatas. Between the newly founded settlement of the Bharatas and the earlier five kingdoms of Puru, Anu, etc. there lay the powerful principality of the Tṛtsus, who, presumably, were once closely connected with the Bharatas. Sudās, who was a great military leader, was also a shrewd politician. He soon realised that, if he could win over the Tṛtsus to his side as his military and political allies, his campaign against the five states would be considerably facilitated and the chances of his dream of political supremacy coming true would be brighter. He, therefore, started taking steps in that direction. The most influential personality among the Tṛtsus was their *purohita* (or priest), Vasiṣṭha. Sudās offered Vasiṣṭha the office of the *purohita* of the valiant tribe of the Bharatas and in return demanded the political and military alliance of the Tṛtsus. To cut a long story short, Sudās eventually dismissed his original *purohita*, Viśvāmitra, and appointed Vasiṣṭha in his place. As the result of this strategy the Bharatas and the Tṛtsus came to form a single political and military unit with Sudās as their leader and Vasiṣṭha as their *purohita*. The germs of the notorious antagonism between the families of Vasiṣṭha and Viśvāmitra are, perhaps, to be found in this ancient episode. Viśvāmitra was naturally enraged at this summary treatment given to him. He was certainly not a man to take things lying down. He, accordingly, went over to the five older kings and prepared them strongly to resist the aggressive plans of Sudās. A military confederation of ten prominent kings was eventually formed for this purpose—a confederation, which comprised Vedic Indian as well as non-Aryan Indian elements. The battle between the Bharatas and the Tṛtsus on the one side and the confederation of ten kings on the other is traditionally known as the *dāśarājñayuddha* (or, the battle of ten kings). In this battle, which constitutes an important landmark in the early political history of the Vedic Indians, Sudās was ultimately victorious and the Bharatas attained political domination—a domination, which, incidentally, they continued to enjoy for a long time afterwards and which, perhaps, gave India her name, Bhāratavarṣa. It was claimed that it was not only the military might of Sudās that was responsible for this victory. Far more efficacious, perhaps, in this connection was the

magical potency of the *mantras* of Vasiṣṭha (*satyā tṛtsūnām abhavat purohitih—RV VII. 83.4*). All these and allied details regarding the battle of ten kings have found their rightful place in the *RV*.

Far more significant, from our present point of view, than these political developments was the marked change in the social and economic life of the Vedic Indians. Agriculture and cattle-breeding were vigorously practised and these eventually paid good dividends. People as a whole were becoming generally rich and contented and their way of life also was becoming more complex. The new economy created in them a sense of security and, what is more pertinent, afforded them enough leisure. As is well known, it is this sense of security and leisure which helps to make a simple religion complex. That is exactly what happened in respect of the Vedic religion. The religion of the *samhitā*-period—both of the classes and of the masses—must indeed be said to have been comparatively simple, particularly so far as its practices were concerned. But the changed conditions in the life of the Vedic Indians did not fail to react on the character of their religion. The character of the religion of a people is determined by the way of life of that people. Accordingly, the sense of prosperity and security newly achieved by the Vedic Indians and the ample leisure which they had now at their command encouraged them to make their older simple religion more elaborate and complicated. As a matter of fact, quite a new religious cult came to be evolved—the cult of Vedic sacrifice, which gradually superseded the religion of cosmic-worship, hero-worship, etc. It must be emphasized, at this stage, that the concept of sacrifice as such was not new to the Vedic Indians. Like all other primitive peoples they too had their own kind of sacrifice. What, however, they did in the latter part of the *samhitā*-period was to load the institution of sacrifice with innumerable and exceedingly complicated details relating to such items as the number of sacred fires, the number of officiating priests, time and place of the performance, formulas to be recited, oblations to be offered, utensils and other material to be used, etc.—details, which were, indeed, quite unheard of in connection with the primitive Aryan sacrifice and which were governed more by the rules of magic than of logic. They thus transformed the ancient ritual into a kind of mechanical sacerdotalism. This new, complex institution of Vedic sacrifice naturally demanded a literature of its own—a literature, that is to say, which would be devoted more or less exclusively to the discussion of the theory and practice of Vedic ritual. And such literature had, indeed, been in the making and it soon dominated the literary world of the Vedic Indians. It comprised the *Yajurveda* and the *Sāmaveda*, which, though traditionally characterised as *samhitās*, are, so far as the main trends and tendencies of their contents are concerned, actually subservient to Vedic ritual, and more particularly the *brāhmaṇas*. It is after these latter texts that I propose to call the third period of the history of the Veda as the *brāhmaṇa*-period. The

brāhmaṇas, as literary works, are as complex and complicated in character as the theme with which they deal, namely sacrifice. In them, all the minute details of sacrifice were marshalled and discussed thread-bare—and this with such egregious earnestness as to imply that nothing else mattered in the world. And, in a sense, nothing else but sacrifice did, indeed, matter so far as the Vedic Indians, in that period, were concerned. For, sacrifice had become almost the centre of their entire social life. It was no longer regarded as a means to an end; it became the end in itself. The authors of the *brāhmaṇas* seem to wax eloquent when they have to debate even a petty point relating to the sacrificial procedure. Indeed, the pettier the point the more eloquent and earnest was the discussion about it. But, as a matter of fact, in the way of thinking of the Vedic poet-priests of this period, nothing relating to sacrifice could at all be petty or trifling. For, according to them, a sacrifice could either be perfect and blameless in all its minutest details and thus become completely efficacious or it could be deficient in one single minor detail and thereby become not only a failure, negatively, but positively operated as a source of danger and disaster. There was, in this respect, no half measure. It was because they failed to appreciate this peculiar ideology of the Vedic poet-priests that scholars like Max Müller were tempted to remark, that the *brāhmaṇas* were a twaddle and, what was worse, they were a theological twaddle. And does such a remark not ignore other significant features of the *brāhmaṇa* texts, such as, for instance, those which pertain to the literary history of ancient India? It seems to have been the claim of the authors of the *brāhmaṇas*—a claim, which, incidentally, it is impossible to uphold—that almost every Vedic *mantra* was primarily intended for being employed in connection with some or other item of sacrifice. While, therefore, discussing the ritualistic purpose, which the various *mantras* were expected to serve, the authors of the *brāhmaṇas* have incidentally given their own interpretations of those *mantras*. Tendentious though these interpretations may have often been, the fact cannot be gainsaid that, in a sense, the *brāhmaṇas* constitute the earliest commentaries on the *samhitās*. Another significant feature of the *brāhmaṇas* is that, with the *Yajurveda*, they represent the first specimens of Sanskrit prose. The fact that the *brāhmaṇas* have been written in prose is easily understandable; for, prose is often found to be more suitable for complex hair-splitting. The importance of the *brāhmaṇas* as a repository of ancient legends must also not be overlooked in this context. For our present purpose, however, it is the consideration of the social repercussions of the institution of sacrifice and of the *brāhmaṇa* texts that is more important. Sacrifice had been loaded with so many details and its procedure had become so very complex and elaborate that it became absolutely impossible for an ordinary person to master those intricacies of ritual and adopt it as a form of worship on his own. The natural consequence of this was that an independent class of priests

gradually came into being. The character and functions of these new ritual-priests were obviously different from those of the poet-priests of the *mantra* and the *samhitā* periods. These new ritual-priests now assumed the position of the inevitable intermediaries between man and god. A worshipper (or, to be more precise, a sacrificer) was now more or less a passive factor in the entire sacrificial procedure. Preparations for the sacrifice were made, formulas were recited, and oblations were offered by the various officiating priests, while the sacrificer himself was there only in name, for, all this was apparently being done in his name. As has been already pointed out, sacrifice had become almost the centre of the social life of the Vedic Indians in that period. In some ways, therefore, sacrifice may have promoted various other social activities incidental to it. But all that was only incidental. The more serious repercussions of this all-pervading power of sacrifice are indeed to be seen elsewhere. The master-key to the whole sacrificial system was in the exclusive keeping of the newly arisen class of priests, who indulged vociferously in the intricate details of that cult and whomust have, in their own interest, continued to multiply those details. It was, therefore, but natural that, in course of time, this class should have dominated and, to a certain extent, exploited the credulity of the other classes in the Vedic society. People were not entitled to ask questions regarding the validity or significance of the various sacrificial details. For, as the priests claimed, every one of those details was duly prescribed and sanctioned by the scriptures. And the correct interpretation of those scriptures was, of course, the one which the priests themselves offered. This state of things engendered among the people at large a sort of intellectual slavery—an attitude of blind acceptance. The *brāhmaṇa*-period thus saw the social and intellectual domination of the priestly class over the other classes of society.

The next period, namely, the *upaniṣad*-period, is essentially a logical consequence of the *brāhmaṇa*-period. History has shown us that the domination of one class of people over the other classes cannot continue for a long time. Sooner or later a violent reaction against that domination is bound to make itself felt. There did, accordingly, arise, in the *upaniṣad*-period, a band of new thinkers who boldly challenged the spiritual validity of the sacrificial system and even the authority of the scriptures, on which that system was claimed to have been based. The attitude of inquiry now prevailed in the place of the attitude of acceptance. The banner of free thinking was raised and people were encouraged to think for themselves and to ask questions. And questions they did ask with an exuberance which was but natural after a long period of intellectual confinement. Their questions extended from such naïve ones as : ' if the cow is red, why should her milk be white ? ' to such profound ones as those relating to the nature of man, universe, and the ultimate reality. Though the *upaniṣads* deal with these latter questions more

or less exclusively and thus mark, in a sense, the beginnings of the philosophical literature of India, they cannot be said to embody any system of philosophy in the strictest sense of the term. They indeed constitute but ' the songs before sunrise '. The teachers of the *upaniṣads* brought about the shifting of emphasis from the mere form of religion to the true spirit of religion. Brahmanical ritualism made place for upaniṣadic spiritualism. The teachers of this new spiritualism did not come necessarily from the older priestly class. Indeed, there were instances where members of the priestly class went over to the members of the non-priestly classes and the members of socially higher classes went over to members of lower classes for instruction and enlightenment. This certainly helped to liberalise, at least to a certain extent, the exclusive social order of the earlier period. In view of what has been said so far, and only to the extent indicated, the *upaniṣads* may be characterised as the harbingers of a social and an intellectual revolt. The upaniṣadic teachers threw open to all classes, without any distinction, the doors of philosophical knowledge and religious practice. In a sense, they may be said to have promoted what may be called a spiritual democracy.

So far, however, as the history of Vedic life and thought, as such, is concerned, all this achievement of the *upaniṣads*, remarkable as it is, seems to have been outweighed by certain peculiar weaknesses of their teachings. For one thing, the teachings of the *upaniṣads* cannot be said to have been quite adequate for the common man. For, their understanding and realisation demanded a high intellectual level and an austere spiritual discipline. The absence in the *upaniṣads* of any consistent system of thought and the generally mystic character of their teachings were hardly likely to appeal to the people. Again, the upaniṣadic teachings were far too individualistic to be able to hold people together even in a spiritual brotherhood. The upaniṣadic period did not produce any one single leader of thought under whose banner people could muster and forge ahead in their spiritual quest. A multiplicity of teachers and thinkers—all equally great—more often than not, proves a disadvantage. Similarly the emphasis put by the upaniṣadic teachers on abstract metaphysical thought and the ideal of renunciation made them entirely neglect the practical aspect of the spiritual life of the people. In other words, the *upaniṣads* gave to the people some philosophy but no religion. Though, therefore, what the *upaniṣads* aimed at and what they actually achieved was really great, their influence as a whole seems to have been short-lived. Consequently, from the point of view of the evolution of Vedic thought and life, the upaniṣadic period was followed by a break in the continuity—by an interregnum.

This interregnum saw the growth of what are usually called the heterodox systems of thought—particularly of Jainism and Buddhism. It is possible to trace the beginnings of many of the essential tenets of these systems to

pre-Vedic proto-Indian thought-complex. This latter, as we saw, was, in the meantime, superseded—though superficially—by the Vedic Aryan thought. Now, however, in the peculiar circumstances created by the upaniṣadic period, that thought began to assert itself in various ways and forms. The *upaniṣads* had already inaugurated an era of free-thinking. They had challenged the traditionally accepted authority of the Vedic scriptures. They had also helped to liberalise, to some extent, the exclusive social order sponsored by Brahmanism. This was indeed a most propitious background for the promotion of the heterodox systems of thought. These systems not only took advantage of that background but considerably strengthened their own position by avoiding the weak points from which the *upaniṣads* suffered. For instance, in contrast with the *upaniṣads*, they offered a more or less consistent teaching. By laying perhaps a greater emphasis on ethical conduct than on abstract metaphysical thought they made their appeal truly all-comprehensive. They had realised the importance of missionary activity in the field of spiritual life and, through their *saṅghas*, they approached the people at large with the message that religion and philosophy, in their broadest sense, do not constitute a preserve intended only for a select few but that every one, who possesses the necessary earnestness and faith, can avail himself of them. And, above all, these heterodox movements of thought had the unique advantage of the inspiring leadership of outstanding personalities like Buddha and Mahāvīra. The Vedic way of life and thought, which had, by then, developed up to the upaniṣadic period, suffered greatly on account of these new forces. Though it cannot be said to have been completely overwhelmed by them, it did receive a set-back. Apart from the growing strength of the heterodox systems of thought, this period of set-back also saw the reaction to the ideal of complete renunciation from this worldly life, sponsored by the *upaniṣads*, in the form of the enunciation of new ideals in polity and social regeneration.

But, after all, this period proved to be only an interregnum. There had still remained many enthusiastic adherents of the Vedic way of life and thought though they had become temporarily dormant. They now consolidated their forces with a view to resuscitating their ancient heritage. They had learnt from experience that, in order to accomplish this resuscitation, it would be necessary to reorganise, systematize, simplify, and popularise the entire Vedic way of life and thought. Fresh literary efforts were, accordingly, made in this direction—efforts, which must be said to have inaugurated the fifth and the last period of Vedic literary history. The principal literary works of this period, which are obviously meant to be ancillary to the Veda, are characterised by the unique literary form which had been developed about this time, namely the *sūtra*-form. This period may, therefore, be called the *sūtra-vedāṅga* period. The Vedic teachers started by producing three kinds of *sūtras*—the *śrauta-sūtra*, the *grhya-sūtra*, and the *dharma-sūtra*, which may,

broadly speaking, be said to relate respectively to the religious aspect, the personal and domestic aspect, and the social and political aspect of the life of the Vedic Indians. They also produced several other works, which served as efficient aids to the study and understanding of the Veda. The history of ancient India shows that this comprehensive cultural movement, which was started with a view to reorganising, consolidating, and popularising the Vedic way of life and thought, yielded very striking results.

Such then are the extent, the nature, and the cultural background of the Veda. I have so far spoken of the various periods of the history of the Veda. Let me, however, hasten to add that these periods can by no means be demarcated in a hard and fast manner. I am, indeed, often tempted to compare the Veda with a rainbow. Just as it is not possible precisely to mark out where one colour of the rainbow ends and the other begins—one colour almost imperceptibly fades out into the other—even so it is not possible to say where one Vedic period ends and the other begins, for the trends and tendencies of one period, not infrequently, pass on to the next and then gradually become extinct. There is also another significant aspect of this metaphor. Does the Veda, like a rainbow, not constitute one of the most remarkable examples of unity in diversity?

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