Patrick S. Bresnan

Awakening

An Introduction to the History of Eastern Thought

SEVENTH EDITION

Praise for the Sixth Edition:

"The high praises attached to *Awakening* should not come as a surprise. This is the sixth edition of *Awakening*, and Bresnan has made significant changes in each edition—clarifying his presentations, honing the questions, and adding new elements.… [It] is truly a testament to a great educator who is well-versed in a wide range of Eastern traditions and philosophies."

—*Paul J. D'Ambrosio in* Teaching Philosophy

Awakening

Awakening: An Introduction to the History of Eastern Thought provides the reader with a thorough and valuable overview of the historical development of the major Eastern religious and philosophical traditions, primarily in India, China, and Japan. The book is written in an engaging style that contains a variety of anecdotes, analogies, definitions, and supporting quotes from primary and secondary sources. *Awakening* helps the reader to recognize the interrelationships that exist among the various traditions, to appreciate the relevance of these traditions to the concerns of modern times, and to understand the major issues of interpretation regarding these traditions. The primary focus of *Awakening* is Hinduism and Buddhism, and they serve as the broad umbrellas that include a number of specific schools, each of which is treated individually. Other schools—such as Confucianism, Daoism, and Shinto—are included at the appropriate place.

Awakening is for all students and interested readers, whether new to the study of Eastern thought or not.

New to the Seventh Edition:

- A new Introduction
- A clearer definition and explanation of "Yoga" (throughout Part I)
- A rewrite of the Aryan Migration section in Chapter 1, bringing it in line with current research
- An added sub-chapter to Chapter 6, dealing with Kundalini Yoga
- Some further clarification of the meaning of Anatman in Chapter 10
- Emphasis on the contribution of Daoism to Chan Buddhism
- Clearer presentation of the Life of Buddha (Legend vs. Reality)
- Updated Study Questions
- Two new videos added to the author's companion website: **www.patrickbresnan.com**

Patrick S. Bresnan is a retired professor of history and philosophy at De Anza College, Cupertino, California, where he created a four-quarter course, Introduction to Eastern Philosophy, dealing with the historical development of the major philosophical traditions of Asian countries. That, plus extensive travel and study in Asia, resulted in the production of the college-level text *Awakening: An Introduction to the History of Eastern Thought*.

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All images are available to view in color at www.patrickbresnan.com

Acknowledgments

And so we now have a Seventh Edition. As is always the case, the author understandably plays a significant role. But there are others who also play significant roles. Without the production team there would be no published book. Here's my opportunity to give them the thanks that they so richly deserve.

First in line is Andrew Beck. Andy is the Senior Editor for Philosophy at Routledge Publishing. He is the captain of the ship; without his navigation skills the ship goes nowhere. Thank you, Andy; you have my gratitude and my respect. Thanks also to Marc Stratton, the Editorial Assistant in Philosophy.

A huge thank you goes to Assunta Petrone, the Project Manager for this book. As Project Manager she is the person I have dealt with most closely and often. No words exist to adequately express my gratitude for your help, Assunta.

As always, and certainly not to be ignored, thanks go to my wife, Beth. Your insight, understanding, and patience have been a priceless help. As I mentioned in the Sixth Edition: "Elizabeth has been through this process with me six times, and we're still married!" Well, we still are.

Introduction to the Seventh Edition

It's hard to believe that twenty-two years have gone into the history books since the first edition of *Awakening* went to press. In the meantime, I have written seven Introductions, including this one. In all of those earlier ones I commented on the ghastly threats that had challenged the progress of civilization in the intervening time, but always with an optimistic nod to the future. That future has come and gone six times, and our world at least has seemed to continue to stumble forward. So, what can be said this time? Pretty much the same as before, except that the overarching problem of climate change, year after year, keeps getting closer to some sort of ultimate disaster.

So what role does *Awakening* play in all of this? Well, if humanity is to deal successfully with our global problems, especially climate change, it is essential that nationalist and separatist attitudes be replaced with a global consciousness. It is my intention that this book shall be helpful in that regard. *Awakening* hopes to raise awareness of the valuable contribution of the Asian part of the human family to the progress of civilization.

It is important to understand that *Awakening* is not simply an historical record. Rather, *Awakening* follows the millennia-long evolution of a tradition that is one of humanity's greatest achievements. From the very beginning, its central concern has been, and continues to be, the pervasive nature of human suffering—its cause and its solution. The beginning of that journey is to be found in ancient India, wherein the tradition that would come to be known as Hinduism first emerged and grew. It was out of Hindu India that Buddhism also emerged and grew. From its Indian homeland Buddhism continued to evolve and spread throughout all parts of East Asia, joining with other powerful native traditions, such as Confucianism, Daoism, and Shinto. All of us alive today are the beneficiaries of that evolution. We need only to look, and to understand.

* * *

Awakening is divided logically into four parts, which together present a broad overview of that millennia-long evolution. India is the setting for Part I. We

begin with the Vedas, the seminal scriptures that gave form to the culture and philosophy of early Hinduism. The Vedic Age gave way to the age of the Upanishads, mystical compositions that carried Hinduism far from the fundamentally theistic character of the Vedas. The following chapters in Part I expand on the evolution of Upanishadic thought, both philosophical and mystical, and carry us through the difficult centuries of the Muslim Conquest up to the present time.

Part II carries the story forward. Its primary concern is the formative period of Buddhism, which in many important ways grew out of Hinduism. We begin with the life and teaching of Buddha himself. Following that we will examine the first organized movements in Buddhism. The Theravada school of Buddhism developed first, followed by the vastly larger and more complex Mahayana. Many distinct schools of Buddhism developed within the umbrella of Mahayana, everything from the very "religious" to the decidedly philosophical.

In Part III, we will sidetrack a bit to examine three non-Buddhist traditions native to China and Japan, specifically Confucianism, Daoism, and Shinto. These would strongly influence the nature of developing Buddhism. That was especially true with regard to Daoism.

In Part IV, we return to the varied evolution of Buddhism, beginning with its early development in China. From there we climb up to the high country of Tibet to examine the unusual and entrancing world of Tibetan Buddhism (more correctly known as Vajrayana Buddhism). Returning to China proper, we next take up the highly important subject of Chan Buddhism. Chan Buddhism was strongly influenced by Daoism. And, in the final chapter we explore Zen Buddhism. Although Zen was originally a direct transplant of Chan Buddhism from China, over time it developed into a distinctly Japanese tradition. It is interesting to note that all of the traditions examined in this book are alive and well today, and are contributing in significant ways to the continuing evolution of human society.

A Note about Punctuation and Transliteration

Two systems exist for spelling Chinese words in the Western alphabet: pinyin and Wade-Giles. Pinyin, the more recently developed of the two, attempts to overcome some of the phonetic and spelling problems of the Wade-Giles system. In Wade-Giles, for example, Tao is spelled with a "T" even though it is meant to be pronounced more like a "D," which is the correct spelling in pinyin. Pinyin is rapidly replacing Wade-Giles, and shall be the system of choice in this book. In instances where it seems appropriate, I will include the Wade-Giles spelling in parentheses.

Part I

Hinduism and Related Traditions of South Asia

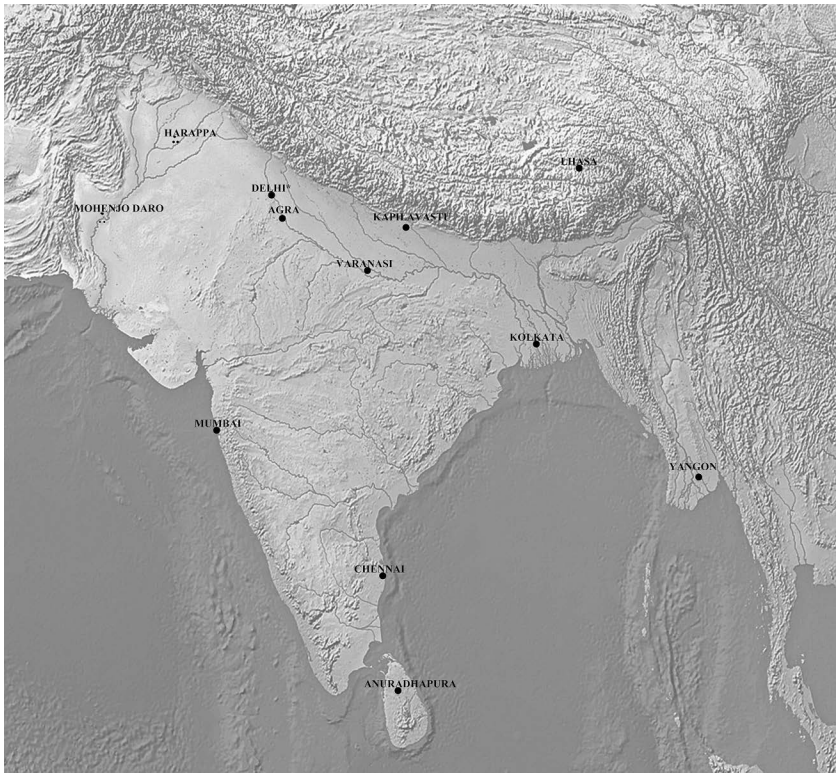

Figure 1.1 Map of South Asia.
Source: Map reprinted with permission of Kappa Publishing Group Inc.

Hinduism is a hard word to pin down. It refers to far more than a specific religion or philosophy. Some argue that the word *Hinduism* refers to the entire culture and traditional way of life of the people of India. For our purposes, the word *Hinduism* designates that tradition of thought that arises from and accepts the sacred authority of the Vedas, the earliest spiritual and philosophical

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compositions of Indian civilization. That leaves room for other "non-Hindu" traditions within the history of Indian thought, and we shall examine the most important of these in Chapter 6. The largest part of the story, though, concerns the evolving tradition that began in the Vedas and progressed through stages to the sublime mystic philosophy expressed in the Upanishads and the *Bhagavad Gita*. In Part I, we will concentrate on that main line of development.

Chapter 1

India before the Vedas

Veda is a powerful word. It is derived from the early Sanskrit word *vid*, which means "to know," as in the sense of knowing the truth. *Veda* thus means knowledge of truth. More specifically, it refers to a sacred, infallible truth, available to only a gifted few, who transmit that knowledge for the benefit of all.

In ancient times the Brahmin priests were the custodians of *Veda*; it was their responsibility to preserve that sacred knowledge and to use it for the well-being of the entire community. To a large degree, that was accomplished through the performance of religious ritual. Over time those ritual celebrations grew to include long chants which came to be known as the Vedas, religious compositions that expressed the essential truths of *Veda*. The Vedas, composed more than 3,000 years ago, are the earliest recorded expressions of the Indian tradition. They were, nonetheless, the product of a culture that was far older still.

The earliest evidence of urban civilization in India appeared approximately 5,000 years ago and even that grew out of still older roots. Of course, history knows little of what was going on in those early days. Our *historical* knowledge of that emerging tradition starts with the Vedas, and it is thus with the Vedas that our study properly begins. But before we get to that, though, it would be valuable to travel back in time and take a somewhat closer look at the background out of which the Vedas took form and that influenced them in many important ways. Most fundamental of all is the physical character of the Indian subcontinent—the stage, so to speak, on which the great drama would take place. And that is where we shall begin.

The Lay of the Land

The huge subcontinent of India appears on the map to hang gracefully from the southern flank of Eurasia. Its generally triangular shape extends for a thousand miles (1,609 km) into the Indian Ocean, dividing that sea into the Arabian Sea on the west and the Bay of Bengal to the east. Just off the southern tip of India, and almost connected to it by a land bridge, is the beautiful teardrop-shaped island of Sri Lanka. For centuries known as Ceylon in the

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West, Sri Lanka has always been closely connected geographically *and* culturally with India.

Approximately one-half the size of the United States, the Indian subcontinent is effectively isolated by geography from the rest of the Eurasian continent. In the south India confronts the sea. The vast Himalaya and their associated ranges stretch out across the entire northern frontier from west to east. On a map the northern mountains have the appearance of a great curtain gracefully draped across the entire reach of the Indian subcontinent. The mountains and the sea have defined India geographically and have, to a degree, isolated it from the rest of the world.

India has not always been a part of the Eurasian continent. Many millions of years ago all of the present-day continents were joined into one great landmass. At that time India was an integral part of what would eventually become the separate continents of Africa, Antarctica, and Australia. The ceaseless movement of the plates that form the earth's crust eventually broke loose the land we know as India, just as today the great rift system of East Africa is evidence that the slow process of plate movement is again separating another piece of that continent from the mainland.

Over millions of years the Indian plate moved in a generally northward direction, eventually colliding with the southern flank of Asia. There were no great mountains then, but as the Indian plate pressed relentlessly against the Asian plate the upper layers at the interface began to slowly fold and crumple into nascent mountain ridges, while the lower part of the Indian plate (many geologists believe) tunneled under the Asian plate, and the land began to rise.[1] In time, the high plateau of Tibet took form. The leading edge of what had once been a low coastal plain was eventually thrust almost 30,000 feet (9,144 m) into the sky. Over the ages, the forces of erosion have sculpted that geology into the magnificent chain of mountains we know as the Himalaya, which literally means "abode of snow."

Where there are great mountains there are great rivers. Many rivers flow out of the northern mountains. Eventually they merge into two great river systems. In the west is the Indus system, from which India derives its name. Several rivers gather in the northwest to form the Indus, which then flows to the south emptying into the Arabian Sea near the modern city of Karachi. In modern times the Indus flows almost entirely within the nation of Pakistan.

The other great river system is the Ganges, "Ganga" as the people of India call it. The Ganges gathers several major tributaries and flows in a generally eastward direction across the north of India, finally meeting the sea not far from the modern city of Kolkata (formerly known as Calcutta). For more than 1,500 miles (2,414 km) that great river winds its way through the fertile plain

1 The Great Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami of 2006 were dramatic evidence that the plate movement is still going on.

of North India. It is in the enormous Ganges plain that much of the history and most of the people of India are to be found. The Ganges, "Mother Ganga," is a sacred river in the Hindu tradition. Along its banks are to be found many hallowed sites in the history of Hinduism, including the holy city of Varanasi.

For more on this subject, go to the video "VARANASI" on the companion website for this book (www.patrickbresnan.com).

The great Ganges basin is known to geographers as the North Indian Plain. South of it the land rises somewhat, becoming a hilly plateau that extends for a thousand miles all the way to the southern tip of India. That plateau, which encompasses almost all of southern India, is called the Deccan. It rises gently in elevation from east to west extending almost all the way to the west coast, near which the Deccan abruptly erupts into a long line of low coastal mountains known as the Western Ghats.

India is, for the most part, a tropical country. It knows great heat. In the south the environment is lushly tropical and hot, but in the mountainous north a totally different environment is to be found. In fact, just about every kind of climate is to be found somewhere in India, but tropical heat is definitely the most common environment. From June to October, the wet monsoon winds from the south bring almost constant rainfall to much of India, but during the rest of the year dry winds from the north are the rule.

After merging with Eurasia, India became an integral part of its geology. For many millions of years that varied and beautiful subcontinent evolved in a perfect state of nature. Every conceivable kind of flora and fauna flourished in that land—every kind but one; and in the course of time that one too would come to India and establish itself there.

South Asia before the Vedic Age

No one knows when the first of our human ancestors entered India. Over the ages there must have been many waves of migrations. Eventually, a more or less stable human population took form. Aboriginal Indian culture was undoubtedly made up of many discrete groupings with different customs and distinctly different languages. One large language family, though, known as Dravidian, became widely distributed in the subcontinent, and hence it is often used as a label for the entire original Indian culture.

The one exception referred to above was indeed impressive. In the western part of the subcontinent, in the Indus and associated river valleys, social evolution did not languish at the level of the small farming community. Here, urban life germinated; genuine cities took form. Beginning in the 1920s, archaeologists have been uncovering numerous urban sites, not only in the vicinity of the Indus and its tributaries, but also along the banks of the Sarasvati River, east of the Indus. The Sarasvati, now almost entirely dried up, was a great river in ancient times, and is mentioned prominently in the Vedas. It

is customary to lump all of these sites together, referring to the whole as the Indus Civilization.

What is most exciting to the historian about those Indus Valley cities is the time when they came into being; they were among the earliest in human history! Much is known about early civilization in the Tigris-Euphrates Valley of Mesopotamia and in the nearby Nile Valley of Egypt. City life and the accompanying elements of civilization had taken shape in Mesopotamia before 3000 BCE and somewhat later in Egypt. Archaeological excavations in the Indus River Valley at such sites as Mohenjo-daro and Harappa are now revealing that early civilization in the Indus Valley was contemporaneous with those of Mesopotamia and Egypt. Mesopotamia is often referred to as the "cradle of civilization"; Egypt joined it in the cradle very early on. We are now discovering that there was a third baby in that cradle, the early civilization of the Indus Valley.

The excavations at Mohenjo-daro and Harappa give us a fascinating glimpse into the culture of those people, but only a glimpse. They did possess a pictographic form of writing, but it stubbornly, and maddeningly, resists being deciphered. Nevertheless, some things are clear. Their cities, constructed mostly of mud brick and fired brick, were marvels of engineering. They were especially clever in the technology of water management including municipal drainage systems that surpassed anything the world would see again until Roman times. The streets were broad and brick paved and laid out in a way that divided the city into an efficient pattern of blocks. It seems that the standard of living was generally high. Many decorative pieces have been recovered from these sites. A few of them suggest yogic themes that would become important later on in Indian history. The Indologist Romila Thapar makes reference to:

> …cities with a grid pattern in their town plan, extensive mud-brick platforms as a base for large structures, monumental buildings, complex fortifications, elaborate drainage systems, the use of mud bricks and fired bricks in buildings, granaries, or warehouses, a tank [sacred pool] for rituals, and remains associated with extensive craft activity related to the manufacturing of copper ingots, etched carnelian beads, the cutting of steatite seals, terracotta female figurines thought to be goddesses, and suchlike.
>
> (Thapar, 110)

It is a sad fact of history that this exciting and promising beginning in the Indus Valley eventually declined and died out. Civilization in the Middle East continued to flourish and spread, but in the Indus Valley it declined, and by the end of the third millennium BCE the once great cities were mostly abandoned and disintegrating. What happened? There are many possible explanations for that decline. One of the more plausible theories concerns the slow but relentless destruction of the natural environment by the generations of people who lived in those cities and towns. As the population continuously grew, and the resources of the environment were plundered without being restored, the

Figure 1.1 An Indus seal (No. 1) showing the mysterious pictographs.
Photo by the author

time must eventually have come when urban life would no longer have been tenable. (Sound familiar?)

The decline of the Indus Civilization (also referred to as the Harappan Period) was apparently accompanied by a deep cultural depression, but it was to be relatively short-lived. A new age was about to dawn in North India, and its defining feature would be the composition of the Vedas. The cities of the Harappan Age Period were in their final stage of decline around 1900 BCE. Scholars are in pretty general agreement that the composition of the Vedas began sometime around 1500 BCE (though, it should be noted that some would put that date as late as 1200 BCE).

For an excellent tour of the Mohenjo-daro site, check out https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FweuwWu5cCU.

The Aryan Migrations

The decline of the Indus Civilization (also referred to as the Harappan Period) was apparently accompanied by a deep cultural depression. The cities of the Harappan Age were in their final stage of decline around 1900 BCE. Eventually all traces of the once great cities would be lost.

Scholars are in pretty general agreement that the composition of the Vedas began sometime around 1500 BCE. Again, the big question is: what accounts for the rise of that new cultural age, the "Vedic Age"? Was the Vedic Age basically a continuation of the Harappan Age, albeit with far less emphasis on

urban development? Or were the Vedas a composite expression of the religious beliefs and practices of the Harappan Age carried over into the Vedic Age? If the latter, then both were created by an indigenous people who spoke a similar language and worshipped the same gods. In that scenario, the Vedas are the spiritual capstone of a native religious tradition that had been evolving for ages in India. Awareness of the Vedas, and hence a Vedic Age, to the extent that it was thought about at all, would have been that the so-called Vedic Age was a development from within India. Then something happened!

That something was an address delivered in 1786 to the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, India. The speaker was the Indologist, and Judge of the High Court of the British East India Company, Sir William Jones. Here's what he said:

> The Sanskrit language [the language of the Vedas], whatever may be its antiquity, is of a wonderful structure; more perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin, and more exquisitely refined than either, yet bearing to both of them a stronger affinity, both in the roots of verbs and in the form of grammar, than could possibly have been produced by accident; so strong, indeed, that no philologer could examine them all three, without believing them to have sprung from some common source which, perhaps, no longer exists.
>
> (quoted in Bryant, 15)

That address helped to open the eyes of linguists to the amazing fact that a huge family of related languages exists, stretching all the way from Europe across parts of the Middle East, and on to northern India. Sanskrit, for example, was seen to be a distant cousin of English. The name given to that aggregation is the Indo-European language family.[2] But a family implies a family tree, and a family tree implies a time and place where and when it all had its beginning. And so began the long search for the *Ursprache* and the *Urheim*, the mother tongue and the original source place of it all. One general theory, much respected by scholars, deserves our special attention. It does a good job of answering many of the most vexing questions. We have to go back in time a bit, though, to pick up the beginning of its thread.

The last great ice age ended approximately 10,000 years ago. Before that time it had been impossible for human migrations to penetrate very far north of the subtropics. But as the ice retreated the climate became milder, and as the animal herds roamed farther north human populations followed.

2 There are a great many cognates of Sanskrit words in English. The Sanskrit *namen*, for example, becomes "name" in English. *Tri* (three) is related to "triple." *Dama* in Sanskrit becomes "domus" in Latin and "domestic" in English. *Pad* (foot) becomes "pedis" in Latin and "pedal" in English. My favorite is *hekki*, the Sanskrit word for "hiccup" (but that's probably just onomatopoeia).

Migrations would eventually radiate throughout all of Eurasia, but the area that most concerns us is the region north of the Caucasus Mountains. Specifically, we are concerned with the area between the Black and Caspian Seas and the vast grasslands that spread out just above those two seas in what is today the northern Ukraine, southern Russia, and Kazakhstan. That broad region, known as the Pontic-Caspian area, was settled by a pastoral, nomadic people. Though widely distributed, they were presumably interconnected enough to maintain contacts among themselves and communicate using a common language. It is widely believed that it was that rough language which was destined to become the mother tongue of the Indo-European language family. That parent language, which no longer exists, is referred to as proto-Indo-European. Today, its descendants are the native languages of more than two billion people:

> We may imagine, then, that during the Mesolithic Age some of the communities occupying the banks of the great river valleys of the southern part of the European USSR [Russia] probably spoke languages that would later evolve into Proto-Indo-European.
>
> (Mallory, 187)

Proto-Indo-Europeans (PIE) were a hardy, pastoral folk. Although it would seem that they raised a little barley from time to time (perhaps to brew beer), agriculture was not to their liking; they preferred the nomadic lifestyle, following the herds. In time they came to possess herds of their own. They raised cattle, and they were horse breeders, which would give them a tremendous advantage in later struggles. At that time wealth was measured in horses and cattle, a way of life that bred a strong and adaptable people. With the passage of time the very success of their way of life created its own set of problems, most notably overpopulation. Their solution would be the same as countless other nomadic peoples facing that same problem: migration.

For centuries, slow-moving waves of migration rolled out into the regions adjoining the ancestral herding lands. Later migrants would often push the descendants of earlier migrations farther on. Beginning in the Balkan Peninsula, wave after wave eventually filled all of the European subcontinent. The Greeks of ancient times were their descendants; so too were the Romans, the Celts, the Slavs, and the Germanic people. Other proto-Indo-European peoples migrated south through the mountain passes and the eastern shore of the Caspian Sea into Asia Minor and the high plateau of Iran and Afghanistan. It was from the Iranian-Afghan highlands that the migration routes would have continued on into northern India. Their route would undoubtedly have followed the Khyber Pass, that famous pass through the Hindu Kush mountains that has witnessed the passage of so many would-be conquerors over the ages. Those Indo-Europeans who migrated into India are known specifically as the Indo-Aryans. Linguistic descendants of the proto-Indo-European parent stock

did indeed migrate to places distant from the source place (whether that was the region north of the Caucasus or someplace else). Based on evidence of strong similarity of language, it is surmised that a large part of that migration branched into an Iranian group and an Afghan group. Out of the Afghan group, some Indo-European speakers, now referred to as Indo-Aryans, continued to move farther eastward, entering the northwestern part of the Indian subcontinent in the early part of the second millennium BCE, possibly as early as 1900 BCE. But, far from being an organized military horde bent on conquest, those Indo-Aryans, for the most part, would have been pastoral folk in search of nothing more than a better place to live. That is not to say that they were entirely pacifist, not at all; the Indo-Aryans were presumably as capable as anyone of putting up a strong fight when that was called for. They had the horse and formidable weapons. The important point, though, is that they were not there for the purpose of conquest, but simply to take advantage of whatever opportunities might exist in their search for a better place to live.

One thing is clear. Those migrating Indo-Aryans were in no way bearers of a "superior" culture, as implied in the original "Aryan Conquest" theory The indigenous people, far from being uncivilized "lesser" beings, had created one of the world's earliest urban cultures, as we have seen. Excavations at Mohenjo-daro and other sites in the Indus Valley reveal that the Indus Civilization, evidence of which stretches back to at least 3000 BCE, was the equal of early civilizations in Mesopotamia and Egypt. Quite obviously, the native ability to create the works of civilization was present within the Indian people themselves.

But, significantly, the Indo-Aryans would have serendipitously happened upon the scene at a time very auspicious for themselves. North India would have been deeply into the final decline of the Indus Civilization at that time. One can easily imagine that it was a time of troubles for North India, much like western Europe experienced in the last days of the Roman Empire. And, continuing with that comparison, the Indo-Aryans might well have played a role similar to that of the Germanic barbarian tribes that overran much of what had recently been Roman provinces in the fifth century CE. In better days they would never have been able to get away with it. The bottom line is that those migrants did manage, one way or another, to infiltrate themselves throughout much of North India, and, given the disorder of the time, they were able (like the Germanic barbarian tribes in Europe) to achieve a position of dominance over the indigenous people in many places.

To sum up: the modern synthesis holds that the motive force behind the emergence of the Vedic Age, and the creators of the Vedas, was a non-indigenous population of Sanskrit-speaking Indo-Aryans whose not-so-distant ancestors had migrated into North India during the early part of the second millennium BCE and who, over a period of several centuries, had gained a dominant social position throughout much of North India.

Varna: The Caste System

India is famous for its caste system. Legally, though, it is now a thing of the past. After being the defining element of Indian social life for at least three millennia, the caste system was formally renounced in the Indian constitution of 1949. Discrimination due to caste is now against the law in India. The old ways die slowly, though; outside the cities life goes on more or less as it has for ages. During the Vedic Age, Indian society came to be divided into four great "castes." The word *caste* is something of a misnomer; "classes" would be a more accurate way of putting it. And that process is certainly not unique in history; virtually all evolving societies develop a class system, and in the early days it's pretty similar from one society to another.

The ruling class was the warrior nobility. They controlled the land, the weapons, and most of the wealth. In India that class, or "caste," was known as the *Kshatriya*. Presumably it emerged out of the tribal leaders among the original groups that had migrated into the subcontinent and established themselves as the dominant population, at least in northern India.

Sharing top honors with the Kshatriyas—in fact enjoying an even higher status—was the *Brahmana* caste; these were the priests, the Brahmins, a caste unto themselves.[3] Above the Kshatriyas were the Brahmins; below the Kshatriyas were the *Vaishyas*. That was the caste of the commoners, the artisans, and tradesmen. The Vaishyas, also presumed to be descended from the original Indo-Aryans, were very numerous, and over time they came to be divided into a huge number of subcastes arranged in a hierarchy of its own. A "subcaste" is known as a *jati*, which is a community of related families sharing a common type of livelihood. In the West, the word *caste* is often used when *jati* would be more appropriate. It would seem that every conceivable kind of work, no matter how specialized, came to be a *jati* unto itself. And the members of that *jati*, wherever they lived, inherited an exclusive monopoly in that area of work. That is somewhat similar to the guild system of medieval Europe, but in India the system was much less flexible. Over time, many non-Indo-Aryans were incorporated into the Vaishya caste for practical reasons.

These three classes ("castes," if you will)—the Brahmana, the Kshatriya, and the Vaishya—together constituted a privileged elite known as the *arya-varna*. Members of the *arya-varna* referred to themselves as *dvija*, "twice born," meaning that young men underwent a "coming of age" ceremony in which they were initiated into manhood and full participation in the spiritual life of their caste. The symbol of that "second birth" was the "sacred thread," worn over the shoulder and upper part of the body somewhat like a tiny sash. In modern times, it's usually easy to identify members of the Brahmin caste because they

3 The Brahmins were members of the *Brahmana* caste. Either "Brahmin" or "Brahman" is correct spelling. In this work, I will use "Brahmin" so as not to cause confusion with the name "Brahman," which will be used in a different context.

proudly wear the thread, often in full view. Originally, though, the Kshatriyas and the Vaishyas also received and wore the thread. For Kshatriyas it was a bow string; for Vaishyas a simple hemp string. It is presumed that the *arya-varna* were the descendants of the Indo-Aryans who had migrated into India and successfully established themselves in the upper echelons of the social order.

That is where the similarity to other class systems, such as that of medieval Europe, begins to break down. The reason for that is that below the *arya-varna*, far below, were the members of a fourth great caste, the *Shudra*. The Shudra caste was more technically known as the *dasyu-varna*, which leads to the speculation that the Shudras, vast in numbers, were the descendants of the survivors of the indigenous population, reduced to the status of a lowly serf class working for the Indo-Aryan upper castes who now controlled the land and the means of production. These were the folks engaged in tilling the land; they were essentially reduced to a class of landless serfs. Theirs was a life of never-ending toil in the heat and dust of land that belonged to feudal overlords. The Shudras were referred to as the "once born," meaning simply that they were not entitled to a ritual "second birth" and were thus forbidden to have any part in the Aryan religious sacrifice. Shudras were not allowed to study the Vedas. In fact, if a Shudra were even to overhear the chanting of Vedic hymns, the penalty could be death. The Shudras enjoyed very little in the way of rights; members of the *arya-varna* castes could even kill a Shudra, likely without penalty under law:

> The classic threefold Indo-European tribal division into priests, warriors, and commons quickly proved inadequate. While those three classes became the "twice born" brahmana, kshatriya, and vaishya varnas, the conquered Harappans were included quite early into the system as only once-born shudras. Or at least so we assume, for the origins of the shudras remain obscure and can only be inferred from their second-class legal status and from the fact that they were defined by the brahmans as "servants" of the twice-born who could be "exiled at will" or "slain at will." Shudras were not permitted to hear or study the Vedic hymns, which were considered potent magic and reserved for twice-born ears only; indeed, later legal texts prescribed "pouring molten lead" into the ears of any shudra caught secretly listening to Vedic mantras.
>
> (Thapar, 41–42)

Another reason for concluding that the Shudra caste was made up of the indigenous population is that the Sanskrit word *varna*, by which name the caste system was known, bears the meaning of "color" (among other things). That leads to the speculation that the caste system was based on skin color—the relatively light-skinned Indo-Aryans on the top and the brown-skinned Shudras at the bottom. The Shudras, though, were not exactly at the bottom

of the system. Below the Shudras was a class of people known as *Dalits*, the so-called "untouchables." These unfortunates, possibly made up of the very dark-skinned descendants of the most ancient inhabitants of the subcontinent, were so despised that they were permitted only to engage in what were considered to be the most filthy and degrading occupations, such as dealing with dead animals and the tanning of leather. As a rule, they were required to live on the outskirts of villages so as not to "pollute" the inhabitants. In many places, they were only allowed outside their hovels during the nighttime so that they cast no shadows. It was believed that even encountering the shadow of a dalit caused defilement, and the victim of that horrible experience must immediately undergo an elaborate purification ritual. (Can it get any worse than that!) The lowly Dalits were so far down the hierarchy that they were not even accepted in the caste system at all. They were "outcastes," regarded as being barely even human:

> As more and different tribal peoples were absorbed within the spreading boundaries of Aryan society, however, it soon became necessary to add still a lower class, one whose habits or occupations were so strange or "unclean" that shudras did not wish to "touch" them. Hence the emergence of those beyond the pale of the four-varna system: the untouchables, also called "fifths" (panchamas), or outcastes.
>
> (Thapar, 41–42)

It's hard to imagine being more dehumanized than the Dalits. In part that was due to the widespread belief that especially evil people accumulate such a great burden of negative karma that they are reborn as members of the untouchable class. That is their punishment, and it is only reasonable that the rest of society would despise them. Their only hope is to accept their degraded status, and thereby, hopefully, to be reborn next time in better circumstances. Not all, however, accepted that logic. Gandhi, for example, dedicated his life to abolishing the sin of untouchability. He always referred to the untouchables as *Harijan*, children of God. Even though the prohibitions against the Dalits have been outlawed in modern times, life is not especially kind to that large part of the population.

To recap, Varna (the caste system) consists of four great classes: the privileged *arya-varna*, which includes the Brahmins, the Kshatriyas, and the Vaishyas. And far below the *arya-varna* is the *dasyu-varna*, made up of the great toiling Shudra caste. And still much farther below, the dalits, the much-abused "untouchables," allowed to do only the most loathsome kinds of work. Within each caste, especially among the Vaishyas, were myriad "subcastes" (known as *jatis*), which were based on extended family relationships.

The caste was much more than just an economic thing, an area of work. The caste was economic, religious, political, social; it was a little world unto itself. One's whole life was bound up in the caste (or to be more precise, one's

jati). All marriages were arranged by the family and only among other families within one's caste. The men performed the work of the caste and no other; there was no such thing as social mobility. The concept of "bettering oneself" was unknown and would have seemed absurd. In times following the Vedic Age, it was believed that the only way to move to a higher *jati* was to die and be reborn in it. And that was believed to be virtually guaranteed to those who accepted the present life and did the best they could.

Varna, the caste system, certainly encouraged a stagnant and inflexible social order, but there are some positive things to be said about it. For one thing, it guaranteed a very stable social order. The individual, though presumably lacking the excitement of a more independent life, was at least spared its anxieties. There was little cause to worry about the future; the future was all laid out for a person from the time he or she was born. There was no anxiety about finding the right job, or the right spouse, or the right kind of home. The caste system sank deep roots in India. In some fundamental way, in fact, the caste system probably grew from very ancient Dravidian roots. There is some evidence that the Dalit class had already existed in its suppressed state in pre-Vedic times.

In the caste hierarchy, one part of the population was special, very special. That group of families was the highest of all of the castes, higher even than the Kshatriyas. Those were the Brahmins, and no one except the gods were above them. The reason for their lofty status was that the Brahmins were the priests. They were humanity's link to the gods, and the entire society depended on them.

The Brahmin Caste

The consolidation of *Brahmana*, the Brahmin caste, is an example of the kind of development that takes form within virtually every early human culture. A special group of individuals, call them priests or shamans, become the custodians of the sacred rites and traditions of the community. Seen through coldly practical modern eyes, these individuals might seem to be rather like parasites; they are not fighters or producers. And yet the priests, or shamans, are held in the highest esteem. In all cultures they have been supported, protected, and honored. Why? What is it that makes that special class so special? What do they do for the community that the others can't do perfectly well for themselves? Let's take a moment to look at this question.

The men and women of an early society—such as the early Indian society—would be acutely aware of the play of the forces of nature in their daily lives. By necessity they lived "close to nature." Unlike those of us who enjoy the way of life of modern times, they would indeed have been aware of how much they were at the mercy of the natural environment. (And we in modern times may be in for some hard lessons in that regard ourselves!) Sometimes things went well—the weather was fair and the food supply abundant—and sometimes things did not go well at all.

Perhaps it was the very fact that men and women of earlier times possessed a primitive technology, which gave them some small control that made them aware of how much more they did *not* control. But—and here is the critically important point—they would inevitably conclude that *somebody* did! Why make that assumption? Well, consider how the forces of nature operate; seen from the grand view they are not chaotic and unpredictable. On the large scale nature operates with great order and regularity. Patterns are the rule, not the exception, and from that comes the predictability without which there could be no science. The sun always rises in the east and moves with certain predictability throughout the daily cycle. So too for the moon, the tides, the seasons, and the life cycle of all things. Deer produce baby deer, and ducks produce baby ducks. A deer never gives birth to a baby duck, and the sun never rises in the west.

The point is that the regularity and predictability of the operations of the forces of nature can be seen to imply a grand order that simply cannot be explained by the working of blind chance. Modern science may take a different view, but to the minds of thinking men and women of the distant past, order in nature implied, of necessity, an order-giver. And thus out of the fertile human imagination the gods were born.

In this view, a god is simply a being who, by common consent, is the one responsible for the operation of any one or more of the forces of nature. There will be a god for rain, a god for wind, a god for the sun, a god for the moon, a god for birth, a god for death, and so on. In a fully developed pantheon there must be some god for every one of the myriad forces of nature. The "person" of the god need not be conceived in human form. Very often the god was imagined in the form of some animal whose character in some way suggested the particular power of the god—a hawk, for example, to guide a celestial body, or a snake, whose ability to molt suggested renewed life. But, of course, many of the gods, especially the most powerful, were created in the image and likeness of men and women.

So, in the worldview of ancient India, nature was organized into a vast hierarchy. At the bottom of the order was the world of brute animals. These had a hierarchy within themselves, ranging from the simplest creatures to the greatest, such as cattle and monkeys. Next came the world of human beings. The caste system with its myriad gradations was the reflection of the natural hierarchy among humankind. At the top of the pyramid were the gods. These too were organized into greater and lesser. The very greatest of the gods were synonymous with the tip of the pyramid. In later times, that "pyramid" would take the form of the mythical Mount Meru, an idealized golden mountain at the center of the universe, whose summit was the abode of the gods. Mount Meru was (and is) an analogue par excellence for the hierarchical order of nature: the gods on the top, humankind at the base, and the roots of the mountain representing the gradations of the animal kingdom—everything in its assigned place.

The immortal gods ruled their individual domains, each one manipulating that aspect of the natural order over which he or she held power. What they did they did for their own reasons; they were incomparably greater than the miserable creatures beneath them, from which they remained serenely aloof. At least that would seem to be the logical state of affairs in the early part of the story.

The difference between gods and humans was as great as the difference between insects and human beings. Consider, for example, the relationship between ourselves and ants. It is not that we despise ants, nor do we want them to suffer. It's just that we regard ants to be so far below us that we tend to ignore them; we're unconcerned about the affairs of their daily lives. But we may assume that the affairs of their daily life are as important to them as ours are to us. We may assume that they do not feel indifferent when a great rainstorm threatens to flood their nest. At the risk of sounding a bit foolish, I would like to continue this analogy in order to make the point.

If it were somehow possible for the ant colony to make contact with you, would you continue to remain aloof and uninterested in their affairs? Not likely. Most likely you would be glad to use your powers to help them out in a time of need, especially if they were very nice about the way they asked for help. Presumably they could persuade you to go out and cover the entrance to their nest during a downpour. People, like ants, were by and large at the mercy of the forces of nature. The gods controlled the forces of nature, and all too often seemed to be unconcerned about the effect on the lives of human communities. If only there were a way; *if only* there were a way to somehow make contact with the gods and persuade them to use their powers over the forces of nature in ways that would be beneficial to mankind—or, at the very least, to exercise their powers to prevent the worst disasters. If only that were possible, human beings could be free at last from the tyranny of fear. But how? Enter the priests.

The Brahmins were the priests. It was their job to make contact with the gods. So long as they succeeded in making that contact, and reasonably often getting the desired results, it is easy to see why they would be held in such high esteem. Their importance was second to none. And, of course, the great majority of their contemporaries did not question that the Brahmins were in fact able to establish contact with the gods. It is what the people *believe* that counts; belief, not necessarily truth, is what inspires action. So how did the Brahmins make contact? What did the people see them do that accounts for that great faith in their abilities?

As in virtually all early societies, the performance of ritual sacrifice was seen to be the most reasonable way of attracting the attention of the gods. An offering was made to the gods, consumed by fire so that the smoke could carry the gift to the heavens. Surrounding the performance of the sacrifice would be a ritual of some kind, which in time would become enshrined in tradition. Over the centuries, the Brahmins too evolved a great body of such tradition. There were appropriate rituals for everything imaginable.

Ritual, therefore, correctly performed, became the operative tool by means of which the Brahmins would make the all-important contact with the gods, and, if correctly performed, persuade the gods (and even in some cases *compel* the gods) to exercise their powers on the community's behalf. It's no wonder that the performance of ritual sacrifice came to be a matter of obsessive interest among these people.

But what gave real power—real, sacred power—to the ritual ceremony were the prayers spoken by the Brahmin priests. Throughout the entire ceremony the priests would loudly and passionately call upon the gods to witness and accept the sacrifice, to hear their prayers. Such prayers were designed to be sung, or chanted, in a long and repetitious fashion. Those sacred chants constituted the real lifeblood of the ritual.

Over the centuries, the most beloved of these sacred chants were preserved in great collections that were committed to memory by the Brahmins and passed on from generation to generation. Those collections came to be known as the Vedas. The Vedas laid out the prescription for correct performance of ritual and also the correct way for addressing the gods. The Brahmins created the Vedas, and they used the Vedas to establish their all-important connection with the gods.

Officiating at sacred ceremonies (which we shall look at shortly) was the most visible and active role of the Brahmin priests, but there was much more to the responsibilities of that caste as well. For one thing, kingship depended for its legitimacy on the Brahmin priesthood. Only the Brahmins, through the appropriate religious rites, could bestow divine right on the king. Also, in a much subtler way, it was the religious power and authority of the Brahmins that gave religious sanction to the institution of varna and its divisions. It was in dealing with the gods, though, that the Brahmin priesthood really earned its honored place at the top of the hierarchy.

Questions for Discussion

1 In general terms, describe the geography of the Indian subcontinent.
2 Who were the Dravidians?
3 What gives historical significance to Mohenjo-daro and Harappa?
4 How is it that Sanskrit links the languages of Europe and India?
5 In general terms, describe the nature of the Indo-Aryan Migration. Why were the Aryans so successful?
6 Describe the general nature of the caste system. What were its positive and negative features? How do you feel about that system?
7 What was (and is) the Brahmin caste? Why were the Brahmins held in such high esteem?
8 How did the Brahmins make contact with the gods?
9 What is the point of the story about ants and humans?

Chapter 2

Veda and the Vedas

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the word *Veda* is derived from the Sanskrit root *vid*, which means "to know." In the present context, it refers to knowledge of the highest sort, made available to all through the revelations of ancient seers. Ordinary truth emerges from the practical experience of the community, the stuff of daily life. It is added to by everyone over time. *Veda*, however, concerns matters of great moral and religious importance—the meaning of life and death, for example, and the proper relationship between gods and humans. *Veda* is sacred knowledge. By way of a rough analogy, we could say that in a Jewish or Christian community, knowledge about weather forecasting would be ordinary truth, but the Bible would be *Veda*.

Although it is probable that the roots of what would become the Vedas stretch far back into the distant past, the Vedas took on their mature form during the earliest historical period following the spread of the Sanskrit language in India, roughly between the years 1500 and 1000 BCE. That historical era is called the Vedic Age. With very few exceptions, the Vedas were produced by members of the Brahmin class and, in particular, by an elite group of scholars referred to as *rishis*. A rishi is an especially learned person who has become the teacher of others. Members of the Brahmin caste were the sole guardians and interpreters of the Vedas. Brahmins alone managed the great events at which the Vedas were chanted—events that were intended to result in a coming together of gods and humans.

The Vedas were organized into four great collections. They share much in common, but each of the four has its own general emphasis. The earliest, and by far the most significant, is the *Rig Veda*. The *Rig Veda* is a long and loosely organized collection of hymns and chants associated with sacrifices to the various gods. Composition of the *Rig Veda* probably began as early as 1500 BCE, but it's unlikely that it was organized into a comprehensive work until close to 1200 BCE.

The *Rig Veda* and the others that followed it were not meant to be literary works in the sense of epic books. The *Rig Veda* is an aggregation of *suktas* (hymns), each of which was a long collection of verses chanted aloud by Brahmin priests at sacrificial rites. When completed, the *Rig Veda* consisted of 1,028 separate suktas. These were organized into ten mega-sections called *mandalas*.

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That kind of organization was an aid to memorizing, much needed before the advent of writing.

The groundwork for the great sacrificial rituals was laid down in the *Rig Veda*, but it was followed in time by other Vedas. Two other Vedas closely associated with the *Rig Veda* are the *Sama Veda* and the *Yajur Veda*. In the *Sama Veda*, certain verses of the *Rig Veda* were arranged for chanting in the form of song. The *Yajur Veda* is essentially a collection of formulas and instructions concerned with the correct arrangement of the ritual. It was essential that everything be done absolutely correctly.

The fourth of the Vedas is the *Atharva Veda*. It stands apart from the other three and was composed considerably later than the others. The *Atharva Veda* is mainly concerned with shamanistic formulas, spells, and mystical incantations. It is widely believed that pre-Aryan Dravidian traditions are "peeking through" in the *Atharva Veda*. Nonetheless, that too came to be part of the great sacrifice rituals, and a priest called the *Atharvan* had the role of incorporating the appropriate chants from that *Veda*.

Thus, the Vedas—*Rig*, *Sama*, *Yajur*, and *Atharva*—provided the Brahmin priests with all the sacred verses they needed to properly conduct the great rituals of *yajna* (YAZH-na), the Vedic sacrifice. The Vedas were their link to the gods. And, in the Vedas, the gods are endlessly praised, invoked, flattered; it sometimes gets a bit monotonous to the modern reader. But behind all the praise, of course, is the real point of it all—the request.

Let's not lose sight of what that grand ritual was all about; the gods had something the people wanted—power over the forces of nature. And the Vedic rituals were their way of persuading the gods to use that power in the "right" way. But we must not assume that men and women of the Vedic Age were a dismal lot living in a state of constant worry. On the contrary, they seem to have been an optimistic, energetic people. They worshipped the gods in order to maximize the good things of life. True, they knew the weight of fear, and they prayed for freedom from illness and drought. But most of the time they were beseeching the gods for long life, success in battle, lots of healthy children, abundant food and drink—that sort of thing. The overall impression is of a people who enjoyed life.

For the most part, the Vedas are not concerned with what we would call philosophical matters; they are clearly religious works—but not *entirely* religious. Threaded throughout the Vedas are questions and speculations that are like the seeds from which the lush garden of Hindu thought will later grow. In other words, the Vedas are "square one."

Yajna: The Vedic Sacrifice

Our modern way of life is so scrubbed clean of ritual that it is difficult for us to imagine what life was like in earlier times when practically everything involved some sort of ritual. Vedic society, like most ancient cultures, was seemingly obsessed with ritual. There were ritual-laden ceremonies for virtually everything

of significance in life: for coming of age, for marriage, for death, for planting the crops, for going to war, for preparing food, and on and on. Ritual touched just about everything in life. The head of the family might officiate at minor rituals, but really important rituals were reserved for the Brahmin priests.

For sheer drama and excitement, nothing could have surpassed the great ceremony of *yajna*, the Vedic sacrifice. In a time of crisis, or perhaps on the occasion of some special celebration—when one or more of the gods was to be approached directly—the Brahmin priests could put together a very moving event. A sacred fire was the central element of those ceremonies, and therefore it is customary to refer to such an event as a Vedic Fire Sacrifice.

The place where the sacrifice was to occur was holy ground, a special piece of land presumably set apart from the living area of the community. In those early days, it was always an outdoor event; the familiar Hindu temple was still a thing of the distant future. It all began with the construction of a low platform made of mud bricks. That was the altar where the sacred fire would be located. Near the fire-altar, a great wooden stake was driven into the ground. The *Rig Veda* informs us that this sacred object would then be anointed and adorned with colorful ornaments. There is some evidence that this stake then became the fulcrum for a large circle etched in the ground, which was then highlighted with rocks or colored sand. The circle defined the sacred space, within which only the Brahmin priests were allowed to enter.

When all was ready the ceremony would begin with the kindling of the sacred fire and the sounding of large conch shell horns. The fire was the heart of the sacrifice. It was believed to be the living presence of the god Agni. The offering of the sacrifice would be given into the center of the fire, the "mouth" of Agni, to be consumed in the flames and carried as smoke to the gods. The fire might be small, but more likely it was a roaring bonfire. In the *Rig Veda*, we find references to the fire as the "bellowing" of Agni.

The priests were dressed in their ceremonial robes, possibly including headdresses of antler or bull's horns. The Brahmin who conducted the sacrifice was called the *Hotri.* He was the high priest and was assisted by priests of lesser rank, including the *Udgatri*, who chanted verses from the *Sama Veda* and whose special function was to summon the gods to the celebration with the hypnotic beauty of his song. The Brahmins believed that certain musical tones held magical qualities. The *Udgatri* was skilled in droning for a very long time in these tones. Another priest, the *Adhvaryu*, held the responsibility for overseeing the whole production. In a sense, he was the stage manager, and as he went about his work he chanted aloud verses from the *Yajur Veda.*

Yet another Brahmin, highly knowledgeable in the details of ritual procedure, actually presided over the ceremony, though he took no active part in it. He sat to the side and carefully observed everything, making sure that every detail was performed correctly. Correct performance was believed to be absolutely essential if the sacrifice was to be successful.

The victim-offering of the sacrifice would be ritually sacrificed and some part of it given to the flames so that the spirit of the victim could be carried to the gods. The rest would be consumed by the participants. There is some evidence that human sacrifice was practiced in the early days, but it would seem that it was not the usual form. Noblemen of the Vedic Age were horse-breeding people and cattle raisers. In their eyes, no sacrificial offering could be more valuable than a fine stallion or a bull. The ritual offering of a fine horse was known as *ashvamedha.* Given the great love that the Indo-Aryans felt for the horse, to sacrifice one would almost be on a par with human sacrifice. Only a king, successful in battle, was entitled to sponsor the *ashvamedha.* An excellent white stallion would be let loose to wander wherever it wanted for one year. It was followed by a group of warriors who made a note of where it traveled, for the king had a right to claim all of the land included in its wanderings. When the year was over the horse was driven back to the place of sacrifice, where it was ritually slain and cut up in preparation for the *ashvamedha.* There is some evidence that, as a part of the ceremony, the king's wife would join the just-killed horse under a cover and simulate sexual intercourse with it.

That was high drama; try to picture it—the great mandala marked out on the sacred ground, the roaring fire at its center, the Brahmin priests in their spectacular costumes, the endless droning of the chants summoning the gods to the celebration. What a spectacle it must have been! And that, of course, is what it was all about: elevating consciousness from the mundane to the transcendental so as to make contact with the gods. It was the gods who held power over the forces of nature. Men lacked that power, but needed it. It was the job of the Brahmins to make contact with the gods and influence their use of power. Ritual sacrifice, prescribed in the Vedas, was the way to make that contact.

Soma

One more element in these rituals remains to be considered. The modern reader might find it somewhat surprising, but to the Vedic priests it was the all-important ingredient. It played a major part in many of their sacred rituals. They called it *soma.*

Soma was a drug, a very powerful drug that produced states of ecstasy and of wildly expanded consciousness. We don't know for sure what it was. There are some clues in the Vedas, but nothing that pins it down for sure. Soma went out of use after the Vedic Age, and the source plant may have become extinct. Among still-existing possibilities, modern research has focused on a variety of the fly agaric mushroom as the best candidate. That fungus, although potentially very poisonous, produces a compound similar to psilocybin and could very well have produced the states described in the Vedas.

Whatever it was, the Brahmin priests loved it—and so too, according to them, did the gods. There was great ritual in its preparation as well as in its

consumption, all of it lovingly detailed in the *Rig Veda* and the *Sama Veda.* The Brahmins alone were entitled to use soma, though some of the precious liquid was shared with the gods, presumably by being dripped into the fire.

Use of the soma plant probably predates the Aryans in India. Soma was not a domesticated plant; it grew wild in hilly or mountainous country. Apparently, it was gathered only at night and, according to some, only by the light of the full moon. The Indologist A. L. Herman describes the method of its preparation:

> The plant was brought to the place where the soma ritual was to be carried out, and there it was washed and cleaned. Then the stalks of the plant were crushed in a stone mortar by a wooden pestle, and the bruised and crushed remains were laid between stones and pressed. As the pressing stones, or wooden boards, were brought together, the juices trickled out onto a cleansing sieve, usually lamb's wool. Next the juice was strained and, finally, consumed by the priest or priests. The priestly celebrants chanted exuberant hymns to the soma to accompany both the crushing and the pressing ceremonies, hymns which invited Indra to come to the sacrifice and partake of the sacred soma juice, and which ecstatically anticipated the drinking of the juice.
>
> (42)

Naturally, the soma plant was considered sacred, and the name was applied not only to the plant, but also to the god, Soma, who was the personification of the spirit of the plant. After drinking the juice of the plant, the spirit temporarily inhabited a person and took over his consciousness. The Brahmin priests were convinced that soma was a vehicle—*the* vehicle—that could take them spiritually to the place where contact with the gods was possible. In the incredible ecstasy of soma they were themselves like gods; soma made it possible for them to share in the divine mode of being—or so they believed. Thus, it was that soma became the heart of the ritual, the vital link between gods and humans. Consider these verses from the *Rig Veda*:

> Drink thou of this (soma)…for power and rapture.
> The men, the pressing stones, the cows, the waters
> Have made this soma ready for thy drinking.
> We have drunk soma …
> And in the wild raptures of the juice …
> We have become immortal;
> We have attained the light and discovered the Gods.
>
> (Herman, 43)

Apparently, it was not always an unmixed blessing. The bad trip was ever a worrisome possibility. The *Rig Veda* even seems to suggest the possibility of heart failure:

> Be kind and merciful to us, Soma;
> Be good to our heart, without confusing our powers in your whirlwind.
> King Soma, do not enrage us; do not terrify us;
> Do not wound our heart with your dazzling light.
>
> (*RV*: 8.79-7,8; p. 121)[1]

Soma became the *sine qua non* of the Vedic fire sacrifice. It produced ecstasy, and in that state of mind the Brahmin priest truly believed that he had achieved freedom from the mundane plane and had ascended temporarily to the realm of the gods:

> These glorious drops that give me freedom have I drunk.
> Closely they knit my joints as straps secure a chariot.
> The soma brings wild delight …
> In the wild joy of soma the Gods wrought their glorious deeds.
>
> (Herman, 43)

The verses quoted above are but a small sampling of the many paeans to the delights of soma found in the *Rig Veda* and the *Sama Veda*. So what are we to make of all of this? What was really going on at these gatherings of Brahmins?

One thing, I believe, is unarguable: the Brahmins did not take soma merely for the fun of it. No doubt they enjoyed it immensely, but to them it was a religious experience, not a social event. They were amazed beyond understanding that such an effect could be produced by consuming the juice of a simple little plant that grew wild in the hills. They concluded, reasonably enough, that the gods had infused the plant with a sacred nature, a spirit, and that that spirit could enter into them if they consumed the juice of the plant. They treated it with the greatest respect and limited its use solely to the sacred ceremony. In this they were much like other cultures, such as the Native Americans of the Southwest who use peyote for certain ritual purposes. The Brahmin priests believed that the state of mind produced by soma was a sort of god-consciousness in which they could commune directly with the gods. After all, that was their job.

After the Vedic Age, the use of soma declined and eventually died out altogether in India. Men became interested in other ways of achieving transcendent consciousness. Whether or not the Vedic priests really spoke to the gods is not the point. They believed that they did, and in connection with that belief they created a vast corpus of ritual prayer that was passed on from generation to generation. They called it *Veda*, sacred knowledge, and it is the solid foundation stone from which the tradition of Indian thought would develop.

All of that drama was designed to attract the attention of the gods and make contact with them. So who were these gods that were such important

1 Unless otherwise noted, all excerpts from the *Rig Veda* are taken from O'Flaherty. The page number at the end of the citation refers to the page in the O'Flaherty book.

characters in the lives of men and women of Vedic times? This would be the appropriate place for us to turn to a brief consideration of the major deities addressed in the Vedas.

The Vedic Pantheon

Hindu mythology is an incredibly complex subject. It includes a vast number of gods and goddesses, and their many stories are convoluted almost beyond imagining. But that fascinating story is not the subject of this study. My goal here is simply to introduce you to some of the major deities, ones that are prominently mentioned in the Vedas, and to include a sampling of pertinent verses from the *Rig Veda*.

In the Beginning

As you might expect, the creation story in Hinduism is wonderfully complex and allows for many variations. In its simplest form we can say that in the beginning was the One, the Ultimate Reality, which took the form of a golden cosmic egg, or embryo. The embryo became the earth and the sky, the most fundamental dual aspects of the one reality. The earth was personified as Prithivi, the mother of all, and the broad and luminous sky was personified as Dyaus, the male counterpart of Prithivi. From Dyaus and Prithivi were born the principal gods and, indirectly, all other things.

So we see that at this most fundamental level the dual character of nature, male and female, is honored in the personifications of earth and sky. They were not regarded as being distinct. The earth and sky were said to be like two hemispheres that were joined at the horizon to become one whole. The underlying unity of the two was often expressed by joining the two names together into one name, Dyausaprithivi.

Principal Gods of the Vedic Pantheon

Over time, a vast number of gods and goddesses came to populate the Hindu pantheon. Fortunately, only a relative few of these were prominent enough to be mentioned in the Vedas. But even among the prominent ones, the roles are a little blurry. By way of contrast, each of the Greek and Roman gods seemed to have fairly precise responsibilities. But the Indian deities are more casual about who does what. Among the chief gods it almost seems that everybody does everything. One sometimes gets the feeling that the people of India were more concerned with the personality of the god than with his or her actual "job description."

Agni

Agni, a son of Dyaus and Prithivi, is the god of fire. In fact, he is the personification of fire. As such, Agni is very special to humankind. You could even say

that of all the gods, Agni is the *most* special because his bright, warm presence is the center of every home and every ritual sacrifice. Whether he be a little candle flame or a roaring bonfire, Agni, the god of the long flowing red hair, is the friend and constant companion of men and women. It is fitting that the first of the ten "books" of the *Rig Veda* is dedicated to him.

Consider the importance of fire in the development of human society. At one time our distant ancestors lived pretty much like other wild animals. The taming of fire changed all that. Fire—the mystifying and beautiful flame—gave warmth, and protection, and light to the fearsome dark of night. It opened the door to a new way of life, a *human* way of life. We can easily imagine that it was while grouped around the communal fire that our ancient relatives developed the arts of language, and shared their first thoughts about the mighty forces of nature. The mysterious essence of fire might well have been the first of nature's powers to be thought of as divine.

Agni is associated with the sun, the ultimate life-giving fire, which descends to earth in the form of lightning, the most awesome and terrifying of nature's acts. Blazes started by lightning strikes—which the *Rig Veda* says "descends on trees like an angry bull"—were probably our distant ancestors' first encounters with living fire. What courage it must have taken to approach the fire and overcome the natural fear of it! From that time forward, it became a friend and a powerful helpmate.

The Brahmins felt especially close to Agni because he was the priest of the gods, as well as the messenger. It was Agni that carried the oblation to the heavens. Agni was said to be always young because his spirit was renewed each time a fire was created. The kindling of the sacrificial fire was an elaborate ritual involving the rubbing together of two wooden sticks.

Sometimes the fire was small, and sometimes it was not small at all; it was a huge roaring blaze. The sound alone must have been awesome. And Agni, the god of fire, was often symbolized as a great horned bull, roaring his message to the gods. The sacrifice would be consumed in the fire and taken in the rising smoke to the gods for which it was intended:

> To you, Agni, who shines upon darkness,
> We come, day after day, bringing our thoughts and homage.
> To you, the king of sacrifices, the shining guardian of Order,
> Be easy for us to reach, like a father to his son.
> Abide with us, Agni, for our happiness.
>
> (*RV*: 1.1. 7–9; p. 99)

> Now get dressed in your robes (of fire),
> Lord of powers and master of the sacrificial foods,
> And offer this sacrifice for us.
>
> (*RV*: 1.26. 1; p. 100)

Agni loved soma. Some would have been dripped into the fire at the appropriate time in the ceremony:

> Let Agni's bellowings reach to heaven
> As piercing weapons to destroy the demons.
> His angry glare breaks forth in the ecstasy of Soma.
> The obstacles of the godless cannot hold him back.
>
> (*RV*: 5.2. 10; p. 103)

Agni's presence in the fire of ritual sacrifice was the most dramatic of his visitations, but certainly not the only one. Agni was, and still is, ubiquitous in Hindu culture. As the domestic fire he is an honored guest in every home, and the funeral pyre at the time of cremation is a man or woman's final oblation to Agni.

Indra

Also a son of Dyaus and Prithivi, Indra held the title of first among the gods, though he was certainly not a king or ruler over the other gods. Indra was an awesome god, much like Zeus in the Greek pantheon. He was identified with great strength and sexual prowess, and thus he was often associated symbolically with the stallion and the bull. Indra carried the *vajra* with him as the symbol of his power. That has often been identified as a thunderbolt, but in fact a vajra is a short metal rod with a stylized trident head at both ends. Whether or not that was meant to be seen as a thunderbolt is debatable. Perhaps that assumption is due to the resemblance of Indra to Zeus, who did indeed carry a thunderbolt. According to some accounts Indra killed his father, Dyaus, taking over his place, including his identification with the bull and stallion, and even making a consort of his own mother, Prithivi (shades of Oedipus).

Indra's origins go far back into the tribal past. He was regarded as a great warrior god and remained the favorite deity of the Kshatriya warriors, who sought to be, like Indra, strong and courageous in battle:

> Ever young, Indra embodies all the virtues of youth: heroism, generosity, exuberance. He stands for action and service but also for the need of force which leads to power, to victory, and booty…[and what's more] Indra has numerous love affairs. Many instances are recorded of his lasciviousness, and his example is often referred to as an excuse for adultery. He sends celestial nymphs to disturb holy men and bring an end to the penances that give them a power which he fears.
>
> (Daniélou, 107–108)

If you found him in the right mood, Indra was tremendously generous. Many were the sacrifices performed to Indra beseeching him to grant numerous sons

and to increase material welfare. Perhaps most important of all was the need for Indra's help in time of drought. India is a land that has always known terrible recurring droughts. In times of such crisis the sacrificial fires would light the sky. It was Indra who had destroyed the power of Vritra, the demon who caused drought by welling up the river waters in the mountains. It was Indra who brought the monsoon rains on which everything in life depended. No wonder he was chief among the gods. In the *Rig Veda*, appeals to Indra are more numerous than to any other of the gods. Consider this sample:

> Indra is sovereign lord of earth and heaven;
> Indra is lord of waters and mountains.
> Indra is master of those who prosper and the wise;
> Indra must be invoked at work and at rest.
> Greater than days and nights;
> The Giver of all is greater than the earth and the ocean's waters,
> Greater than the limit of the earth and the wind's expanse,
> Greater than all rivers and all our lands;
> Greater than all of these is Lord Indra.
>
> (*RV*: VI.40.1,2,4) (Herman, 34)

Indra, like the other gods, was no stranger to the delights of soma. It would seem that he especially was fond of the experience:

> Wildly excited like a bull, Indra took the Soma for himself
> And drank the extract from the three bowls in the three day Soma ceremony.
>
> (*RV*: 1.32.3; p. 149)

Varuna

Varuna was much like Indra; they were equally ancient, and their powers were almost indistinguishable. But where Indra was more responsible for warring and "making things happen," Varuna's job was more a matter of "maintaining," especially maintaining the great Order of Nature.

It was believed that everything in nature behaved in accordance with an inner natural law known as *rita*. Varuna was responsible for maintaining *rita*, and as such, he was present everywhere, pervading everything. When applied to human behavior, *rita* becomes the inner moral law that properly guides all action. Thus, Varuna was the supreme maintainer of all law, natural and moral. Varuna watched over the affairs of men and punished those who violated the sacred law of *rita*:

> Keep fear away from me, Varuna,
> And hold fast to me, O emperor of Order [rita].

Set me free from anguish
As one would free a calf from a rope.
I cannot bear to live apart from you,
Not even for the blink of an eye.

(*RV*: 2.28.6; p. 218)

Sarasvati

The lovely goddess Sarasvati is mentioned several times in the Vedas. (Sarasvati is often spelled Saraswati.) Sarasvati shares her name with the Sarasvati River, regarded as a sacred river in the Vedic era. Hence, Sarasvati is properly regarded as a river goddess.

In modern times the mighty Indus River and its tributaries dominate the geography of western part of the Indian subcontinent, but that wasn't always the case. In ancient times the Indus shared center stage with a companion, the Sarasvati River. Like the Indus to its west, the Sarasvati was formed by the mingling of several mountain streams that tumbled out of the western Himalaya mountains. The two rivers gradually approached each other in the north, and then ran side by side, separated by only about 100 miles (161 km) in places. They then flowed south to a shared delta that emptied into the Bay of Bengal.

Surprisingly, the great Sarasvati no longer exists. Until modern researchers were able to prove that it had indeed existed long ago, many believed that the Sarasvati was a myth, and that references to it in the *Rig Veda* were made in that spirit. So how in the world did it simply vanish? Actually, it wasn't all that simple. River systems are very fluid (no pun intended); they're always wiggling around, though usually too slowly to be seen in one lifetime. The flow of water follows the path of least resistance, and all kinds of things can change that. With our modern technology—dams, levees, etc.— we appear to believe that we can gain control over rivers and prevent them from flooding or changing their course. (Well, yes…up to a point.) Presumably, during ancient times tectonic remodeling in the highly earthquake-prone Himalayan region caused feeder streams of the Sarasvati to change their course, leaving the main course to slowly dry up. It's possible that water which originally went to the Sarasvati was redirected into the Indus system.

Whatever the case, the Sarasvati River did indeed flow during the time of the Indus Civilization, and was still surging in the Vedic Age. Given its abundant supply of fresh water, the Sarasvati was an immensely important part of life to human society throughout all of that time. Many important Harappan sites have been discovered along what were formerly its banks, including the once great city of Kalibangan. Among the Aryans of Vedic times the Sarasvati was so important that it came to be designated a "sacred" river. Given that it was a sacred river, it was only logical that a deity would come to be associated

with it—in this case, a goddess of the same name, Sarasvati. Many verses in the Rig *Veda* are addressed to her.

During the Vedic Age the goddess Sarasvati was definitely important—even eventually being referred to as the "mother of the Vedas"—but she was not numbered among the major deities in the Vedas. That, however, would change significantly. In later centuries Sarasvati was identified with wisdom and learning. In her iconic representations, Sarasvati is represented holding a book in one of her four hands. She becomes the epitome of refinement and culture. Sarasvati certainly ought to be regarded as the patron deity of the humanities. Most significant of all, though, in later times Sarasvati came to be seen as the "wife" (*shakti*) of the mythical creator-god, Brahma.

Surya

Naturally the sun, ultimately the most important of all of the elements of nature, would be personified as a god. And that god is named Surya (also known as Savatar or Savitri). To be precise, Surya is not *identified* with the sun; rather, he *guides* the sun in its daily path. Nevertheless, that still ranks him as a highly significant god, and verses directed to him are among the most beautiful and poetic in the *Rig Veda*:

> His brilliant banners draw upwards the god who knows all creatures,
> So that everyone may see the sun.
> The Constellations, along with night, steal away like thieves,
> Making way for the sun who gazes on everyone.
> The rays that are his banners have become visible from the distance,
> Shining over mankind like blazing fires.
> Crossing space, you are the maker of light, seen by everyone, O Surya;
> You illumine the whole wide realm of space.
>
> (*RV*: 1.50.1–4; p. 189)

Ushas

Ushas, the goddess of dawn, is one of the few female deities of high status in Vedic times. The Indo-Aryans, whose influence is so much to be seen in the Indian pantheon, were originally a nomadic, warrior society. Like their distant cousins who settled in Greece, they were a male-dominated society, and this was reflected in their gods. Virtually all of the male gods did, however, have wives, which are generally referred to as "consorts." Sometimes these consorts were influential, but all in all, the Vedic goddesses get pretty short shrift in the Vedas. Nonetheless, Ushas is much beloved, and verses dedicated to her in the *Rig Veda* go beyond even those praising Surya in poetic beauty. The Indologist V. M. Aptel puts it this way: "In the case of Usas, the goddess of dawn, the

personification is light, the poet never losing sight of the beautiful physical phenomena behind the deity."

> Gaily attired like a dancer with a garment of light, she rises in the east and exhibits her graces. She is ever-youthful, being born again and again. Her association with the sun is naturally very close, He is her lover, but as she precedes him, she is also said to be his mother. She is the sister of the night.
>
> (in Majumdar, 372)

In the *Rig Veda*, it is put this way:

> Like a dancing girl, Usas puts on bright ornaments;
> She uncovers her breasts as a cow reveals her swollen udder.
> Creating light for the whole Universe,
> Dawn has opened up the darkness as cows break out from their pen.
> Her brilliant flame has become visible once more:
> She spreads herself out, driving back the formless black abyss.
> As one sets up the stake in the sacrifice,
> Anointing and adorning it with colored ornaments,
> So the daughter of the sky sets up her many-colored light.
>
> (*RV*: 1.92.4,5; p. 179)

Rudra

Almost the extreme opposite of Ushas was the god Rudra. Whereas Ushas was light and delicate and very feminine, Rudra was dark and fearsome and stormy-tempered. Like Indra, Rudra was a god associated with the storm clouds that brought the life-giving monsoon rains. The reason for that duplication is that Rudra was presumably a major Dravidian god of very ancient origins who was simply incorporated into the emerging pantheon of gods with Sanskrit names. We know that the Dravidians had worshipped a god of storms who carried the thunderbolt and was known as the "Red God." A rain-giver would be too important to pass up, so he may have been taken into the family and merely given a new Sanskrit name. But he was definitely not one of the group. Rudra had few, if any, friends among the gods or men. He lived away from the others; the mountains of the north were his haunt.

Rudra was the only member of the divine pantheon who could sometimes show a malevolent streak. True, Rudra could bring the life-giving rain, but sometimes, for no apparent reason at all, he would send the rain as fierce storms that indiscriminately devastated the countryside. The raging typhoons and floods of India were blamed on the unpredictable ferocity of Rudra's temperament. The people of storm battered Bangladesh know Rudra all too well. Rain, the very thing that made life possible, was also the thing that sometimes

devastated life. Rudra, the personification of that dichotomy, united within himself both the beneficent and the dangerous aspects of nature. To Vedic man, Rudra represented the unconquered and unpredictable character of raw nature.

Rudra was a fearsome god, dark and unpredictable; he was the embodiment of wildness in the male nature. Rudra was something of a misfit among the Vedic deities. He wore his black hair long and tied in braids. Rudra got around in a splendid chariot, but one gets the feeling that if Rudra were alive today, his vehicle of choice would be a Harley.

Everyone's life has its share of calamities—seemingly unexpected and undeserved blows. Rudra took the blame for every kind of disaster. Even the other gods feared his anger. Invocations to Rudra are most often directed simply at keeping his anger at bay:

> Praise him, the famous young god who sits on the high seat,
> The fierce one who attacks like a ferocious wild beast.
> O Rudra, have mercy on the singer, now that you have been praised.
> Let your armies strike down someone other than us.
> Let the weapon of Rudra veer from us;
> Let the great malevolence of the dreaded god go past us.
> O tawny and amazing bull;
> O God, do not become incensed or kill us.
> Be here for us, Rudra, and hear our call.
>
> (*RV*: 2.33.12,14,15; p. 222)

Rudra of the Vedic Age would become identified with the great god Shiva in later times. Although Shiva retains much of the character of Rudra, his nature becomes vastly expanded and includes much in addition to the fearsomeness of Rudra. The worship of Shiva is, therefore, a direct link with the Dravidian, pre-Aryan past of India.

Yama

Unlike the gods, who live until the end of time, men and women are mortals and must eventually know death. But the Vedas gave assurances of an afterlife, and *Yama* was the king of this afterworld. *Yama* was not exactly a god; he was the first mortal to die. The gods had granted him near-divine status and allowed him to find his way to the realm of the afterworld, over which he would preside until the end of time. His task was to conduct the dead to the realm of their ancestors.

Although *Yama* was the personification of death and the afterlife, he was not imagined as negative and morbid. *Yama*'s role was an important part of the total scheme of reality. Something of the notion of heaven and hell entered into the picture. Those who were faithful to the moral order of *rita* in their

lives could expect a happy place in *Yama*'s kingdom; the lot of those who had been unfaithful to *rita* was darkness and suffering.

It was not *Yama*, but the gods—particularly Varuna, the maintainer of *rita*—who decided what a person's fate would be. *Yama* merely carried out the judgment of the gods. But even if it should turn out to be a joyous afterlife, it was still death, and like people in all times, the men and women of the Vedic Age were terrified by death and begged their gods to help them:

> Go away, death, by another path that is your own,
> Different from the road of the gods.
> I say to you who have eyes, who have ears;
> Do not injure our children or our men.
>
> (*RV*: 10.18.1; p. 52)

> Let me not go to the house of clay [the grave], O King Varuna, not yet.
> Have mercy, great ruler; be merciful.
>
> (*RV*: 7.89.1; p. 216)

The good will of *Yama* was understandably very important to men and women of the Vedic Age. At the time of death, he could intercede for one with the gods, particularly Varuna. Perhaps for that reason, the Brahmin priests were especially generous with their soma where *Yama* was concerned:

> For Yama press the Soma; to Yama offer the oblation;
> To Yama goes the well prepared sacrifice,
> With Agni as its messenger.
> Offer to Yama this oblation rich in butter, and go forth,
> So may he intercede for us among the gods,
> So that we may live out a long lifespan.
>
> (*RV*: 10.14.13,14; p. 44)

An Overview of Vedic Cosmology

The men and women of early Vedic times were fundamentally no different from people in any other time. They yearned for security and meaning in a world that is often violent and unpredictable. The awesome forces of nature dominated their lives. But the forces of nature, uncontrollable though they may be, were seen to operate in orderly ways. That could be the key to finding an underlying meaning to the great drama of life.

In response to this very human need for meaning, the religious leaders of the society engendered the gods, personifications of the forces of nature whose control shaped the destiny of human life. Along with identifying the gods there were, of course, appropriate rituals of worship and sacrifice designed to entice the gods into using their powers in beneficial ways.

Over time, an elaborate body of religious tradition grew until it spread into every nook and cranny of life. Presiding over that scene were the Brahmins, the elite priest class of Vedic society. They were the custodians and preservers of the religious tradition, the essence of which was consolidated into a body of inspired knowledge known simply as *Veda*. *Veda* was given verbal expression in the sacred hymns, or chants, of the Brahmins—chants which we know as the Vedas.

Giving order and meaning to life is no casual concern. *Veda* proclaimed the truth with an authoritarian voice born of the belief in its divine source. And the truth proclaimed by *Veda* described a world organized into a rigid hierarchy of ascending levels of perfection. Humankind was in the middle, brute animals below, the gods above. And in each of these there was further classification by rank. In human life the caste system was seen as the natural order of society that conformed to essential differences of perfection among the member families that made up the larger community. Each had its place, guaranteed for all time, and appropriate responsibilities that went with that place. (Meaning and security has its price!) The highest place, of course, was occupied by the Brahmana caste. They alone spoke to the gods—but they did so on behalf of everyone.

The pantheon of the gods was a splendid creation of the human imagination. The Hindu pantheon represents humankind's poetic and mystical imagination at its best. In no way is this statement meant to imply that this was a foolhardy or erroneous pursuit. If *Veda* was to supply the much-desired order and meaning, the pantheon was its necessary capstone. And given the nature of human society at that time, it was both inevitable and reasonable.

The Vedas—practically our only source of information about the time—describe a society that was rigidly controlled by its own belief in a divinely inspired order. Altogether, life was seen to be like a great elaborate wheel slowly turning round and round. Everything and everyone, including the gods, had its proper place on that wheel, and its appropriate responsibilities corresponding to that place.

A person's sacred duty was to live his or her life in harmony with the customs and responsibilities of one's caste and to faithfully worship the gods in the ways prescribed by tradition. If one did that (and nurtured a generous supply of the virtue of acceptance), his or her hunger for order and meaning would be satisfied (probably) and from that would grow the all-important sense of security. Such a person was not a helpless twig tossed about in the chaotic stream of life, but rather a dignified and meaningful part of the whole. And that person's destiny, assuming that he faithfully played the part expected of him, or her, was a happy afterlife in the kingdom of *Yama*. Death must inevitably come, but even death was no cause for terror or despair.

To the people of Vedic times the gods were as real and as present as were other men and women. The stories of their adventures, and their involvement in human affairs, were endless. Invoking the favor of the gods—and staying

the malevolence of demons—was the warp and woof of daily life in Vedic times. There were numberless rituals addressed to a rich variety of gods. India, then as now, was a land passionately devoted to the worship of its many deities. We may safely assume that sacred shrines and images were an important part of every village. Celebrations, festivals, and ritual sacrifice were the highlights of an otherwise very mundane existence. Religion, richly laced with magic and superstition, was what gave daily life a special meaning and excitement.

What we have here is a relatively unsophisticated agricultural society that in Vedic times was really not significantly different from other early cultures. The above description would apply to many other human societies in historical times. Traditional forms of belief and worship were the stuff of life for the vast majority of Indian men and women in Vedic times. And it must be stressed that this situation has not substantially changed for the population at large even down to the present day.

Our concern in these pages, however, is not primarily with the religious beliefs of the common people. Rather it is with the contribution of a tiny minority of men and women who struck off on a different path. They hungered for something that could not be satisfied with the customary menu. Out of their search came new answers to old questions. Had the evolution of Indian thought ended with the Vedas, one could argue that the philosophical side of the Hindu tradition would not have come to occupy the especially important place in the history of human thought that it does. But it did not end there; the Vedas were just the beginning. Much, much more was to be built on that Vedic foundation.

Some argue that although the tradition of Indian philosophical thought did indeed begin in the Vedas, there was far more in the Vedic foundation than ordinarily meets the eye. The common modern view of the Vedas is inaccurate, they argue, and is based largely on the writings of the thirteenth-century Indian scholar, Sayana, which holds that the Vedas were "…the sacrificial compositions of a primitive and still barbarous race written around a system of ceremonial and propitiatory rites, addressed to personified Powers of Nature and replete with a confused mass of half-formed myth" (as described in Aurobindo, 1)

There is another interpretation, though, which holds that the hymns of the Vedas can be interpreted along two quite different tracks. The straightforward, obvious, literal meaning was for the uneducated common people. The other much less obvious track, something of a symbolic "secret teaching," was intended for the spiritually aware *cognoscenti* among the Brahmins. This is the view expressed incisively by the modern Indian philosopher Sri Aurobindo Ghose. Let's let him speak for himself:

> One of the leading principles of the mystics was the sacredness and secrecy of self-knowledge and the true knowledge of the Gods. This wisdom was, they thought, unfit, perhaps even dangerous to the ordinary human

> mind or in any case liable to perversion and misuse and loss of virtue if revealed to vulgar and unpurified spirits. Hence they favoured the existence of an outer worship, effective but imperfect, for the profane, and inner discipline for the initiate, and clothed their language in words and images which had, equally, a spiritual sense for the elect, a concrete sense for the mass of ordinary worshippers. The Vedic hymns were conceived and constructed on this principle. Their formulas and ceremonies are, overtly, the details of an outward ritual devised for the Pantheistic Nature-Worship which was then the common religion, covertly the sacred words, the effective symbols of a spiritual experience and knowledge and a psychological discipline of self-culture which were then the highest achievement of the human race.
>
> (6)

That's quite a proposition! The argument is intriguing, isn't it? Whether or not the Vedas were constructed in a hidden symbolism is a matter of dispute. What is not in dispute at all, though, is that these largely religious works did indeed sometimes step into the realm of genuinely philosophical speculation. Threaded throughout the Vedas are seminal questions and speculations from which later Hindu thought will develop. One of the most striking examples is to be found in the final book of the *Rig Veda*. The author confesses his hopeless ignorance regarding the real nature of Creation and suggests that everything has emerged from nothingness:

> Then even nothingness was not, nor existence.
> There was no air then, nor the heavens beyond it.
> Who covered it? Where was it? In whose keeping?
> Was there then cosmic water, in depths unfathomed?…
> But, after all, who knows, and who can say,
> Whence it all came, and how creation happened?
> The gods themselves are later than creation,
> So who knows truly whence it has arisen?
>
> (*RV*: X.129.1–7) (Thapar, 131)

Isn't that an extraordinary passage! So far ahead of its time. As a matter of fact, woven through all of the much-repeated proclamations and entreaties of the Vedas are some subtle philosophical themes that appear to evolve and become more important with the passage of time. Chief among these is the yearning for something that stands behind the myriad things of life—something that underlies it all and gives order and unity to existence. *Unity* is the key word here. A sense of underlying unity is the hallmark of so much of Eastern thought. Like seeds just beginning to sprout, that theme appears in the Vedas, but will not grow to maturity until a later age. Nevertheless, the interest is there and shows up in different ways.

We see in the Vedas that there was a developing awareness that the One is fundamentally more real than the Many. The universe began as the One and eventually would return to the primal state from which it had emerged. Between this alpha and omega, the One would propagate itself as the myriad creatures that temporarily make up the great hierarchy of being. That point of view is certainly not prominent in the Vedas, but here and there in the *Rig Veda* we find tantalizing little nuggets such as, "*To what is One, sages give many a title*." Or, in the same vein of thought, "*that One wherein abide all things existing*."

The Doctrine of *Rita* is another case in point. Many came to believe that there is a law, a natural law, that is immanent throughout all of creation. Even the gods do not exercise their powers capriciously. The gods, like all other creatures, must act in accord with the universal order of *rita*. The rising and setting of the sun was seen to be an example of *rita*; the changing of the seasons was *rita*; birth and death were the workings of *rita*. Applied to human behavior, the grand order of *rita* becomes moral law. Whatever one's caste, the proper goal of life was to live that life in accord with *rita*. *Rita* assures harmony and wholeness, the orderly evolution of life. *Rita* is the grand unifying order of Nature. In the concept of *rita*, the rishis gave form to the idea of a rational order that underlies and unifies all of Nature.

Again, I want to stress that, for the most part, the Vedas were not concerned with such philosophical matters. But still, there were stirrings—hints of what was to come. Undoubtedly, in the Vedas some were toying with the concept that the multiplicity of creation is really a secondary, ephemeral sort of reality. That is what we see with our unenlightened eyes, but at a more transcendent level of consciousness it is possible to see that fundamentally all of reality is One. That opened the door to a vastly richer meaning of *Veda*. In the age that followed, there were some who could not resist the maddening temptation to give up everything and dedicate their lives to the search for that higher truth.

Questions for Discussion

1 How do you distinguish between *Veda* and the *Vedas*? Considering that there are four Vedas in all, why do you suppose that, in modern times at least, the *Rig Veda* receives by far the most attention?
2 How would you describe the Vedic fire sacrifice? Why do you suppose they went to so much trouble, so much spectacle and drama in the creation of a great sacrifice?
3 Why was soma so enormously important? Did they really need it? Suppose that soma had never existed: how would that have affected the religious functioning of the Brahmins?
4 How did the gods feel about the use of soma?
5 What does the term *Dyausaprithivi* refer to? What is its significance?

6 How did the Hindu pantheon of gods come into existence? Why do you suppose that they were almost all male gods in Vedic times?
7 What do you make of Rudra? He seems like such a misfit among the Hindu gods—or was he? Would you like to have him for a friend?
8 Why is it argued that, beneath all the superficialities, the Brahmin rishis were deeply interested in finding a principle of unity standing behind the manifold experiences of daily life?
9 How does *rita* tie it all together—or does it?

Chapter 3

Introduction to the Upanishads

The Upanishads are an outstanding addition to humanity's search for meaning and beauty in life—and in death. The Upanishads have been a rich source of inspiration throughout the ages and seem to speak with special eloquence to men and women of modern times.

The word *upanishad* is a combination of three Sanskrit root words, *upa-ni-shad*, which literally means "sit down close to [a teacher]"—that is to be part of a group that "sits at the feet" of a master to learn from him (or her). For the most part, what we call the Upanishads were "secret teachings" in their early days. They were passed along orally within the groups that created them. It was a personal transmission not meant for the ears of others.

The Upanishads, like the Vedas, are part of a great body of sacred knowledge known as *shruti*. The word *shruti* originally meant "stream" in Sanskrit, but came to also carry the meaning of "revelation." *Shruti*, that "stream of revelation," began with the Vedas, those seminal works concerned mainly with invocations to the gods and guidance for proper ritual action, and reached its ultimate completion in the Upanishads. Over time, as will happen, questions arose concerning the correct interpretation of some passages in the Vedas. As a result, various interpretive commentaries were appended to each of the four Vedas. These commentaries—not at all in conflict with the traditional teachings of the Vedas—are known as the *Brahmanas*. By the late Vedic Age, *shruti*—at that time consisting of only the Vedas and the Brahmanas—provided Indian society with a complete, well-developed philosophy of life—a Vedic Paradigm, you might say. That paradigm was described in the concluding section of Chapter 2. It was a stable platform of belief and practice—but that was about to change!

It is reasonably safe to say that during the Vedic Age the only ones devoted to the search for transcendent knowledge were the rishis, almost all of whom were members of the Brahmana caste. That search was defined pretty narrowly by tradition; it consisted for the most part in studying the Vedas and participating in ritual sacrifice. The rishi was not a rebel; he was a functioning member of the social system. Not only was he shaped by tradition, he was also the *upholder* of that tradition. That situation was perfectly satisfactory for many, but definitely not for all, as we shall see.

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By the time of the late Vedic Age—which is to say, the time around the beginning of the first millennium BCE—evidence of a dramatic new movement began to emerge. It must have seemed unspectacular at first, but was destined to radically change the course of the stream of *shruti*. The thirst for transcendent knowledge, engendered in the Vedas, began to take a new turn. There were some few who were beginning to find the basically materialistic, world-embracing ideology of the Vedic Age to be woefully misguided. They saw the material world as the source of universal suffering, and fundamentally incapable of ever satisfying the human longing for unending transcendent bliss (or, to put it in everyday language, perfect happiness). Their one and only goal was total liberation from this world of suffering, and the achievement of eternal union with what they believed to be an unchanging, nonmaterial reality that transcends the ever-changing, imperfect reality of the material world. Significantly, they were to be the inheritors of the tradition of *shruti*, whose character was to change from a world-embracing ideology to one that was arguably world-renouncing. Such a quest held appeal for only a tiny minority of the population, but those who answered the call were willing to give up everything and totally dedicate their lives to a search for spiritual enlightenment.

Such a seeker of liberation is known as a *sadhu*, or by the English term "renunciate" He is willing to renounce everything—all material wealth, family, even his caste status—and go off into the wilderness, adopting an extremely austere lifestyle in order to dedicate himself fully to this all-consuming search.[1] The wilderness was essential for such men because they had voluntarily become "outcasts," and also because they wanted to get far away from the lures and distractions of ordinary life. Even today the Indian subcontinent is a land possessed of great tropical forests. In ancient times, though, the wilderness would certainly have been much greater, and would have been a starkly different world from that of the towns and their adjacent farming lands. Most people avoided the forest; if nothing else it was full of dangers—most people, that is, but not all. The renunciate freely chose to forsake the civilized world and take up residence in the fearsome wild lands of forests and mountains.

Many renunciate sadhus took the vow of *sannyas* and were thus known more specifically as sannyasis. A sannyasi is a disciple of a particular guru. But who were these renunciates? Where did they come from in the social order of the time? What explains such powerful motivation? Early on, some of them were Brahmins; many, though, were of the Kshatriya class. (Shakyamuni Buddha, the most famous of all renunciates, came from a Kshatriya family, but he would not appear on the scene until long after the tradition had matured.) These upper-caste renunciates were likely to be older men who had reached the final, part of their lives. In the Hindu tradition, a lifetime is divided into four parts

1 To be technically accurate with regard to spelling, "renunciant" would be preferred over "renunciate." However, "renunciate" is so widely used that it has become the customary spelling and is the one I shall use in this book (38).

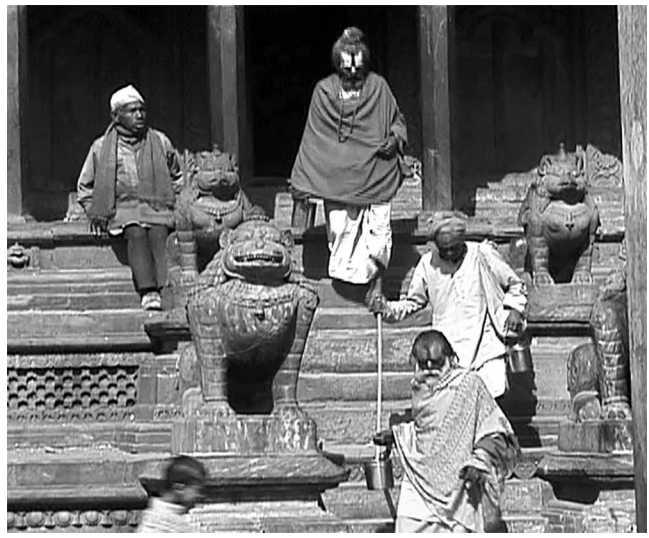

Figure 3.1 Sadhus leaving a temple in Nepal.
Photo by the author

(*ashramas*). The third and fourth parts apply to a man who is getting on in years, his children are grown, and he no longer is responsible for the duties of a householder. He then becomes free to devote all of his time to preparing for the inevitability of death (a very civilized tradition, in my opinion, and actually not morbid at all). Some may choose to renounce all of their worldly ties and go off to the forest, perhaps to join like-minded individuals in a spiritual community. Actually, that particular tradition was not all that new; it undoubtedly had been practiced to some extent for generations. These men, though, although genuine sadhus, would have played little if any role in generating the revolution that was about to occur.[2]

The deepest roots of the new renunciate movement would seem to be in the traditional culture of the long-suppressed Dravidian people. Though suppressed, Dravidian culture was far from extinguished, and in the declining years of the Vedic Age, there is a detectable resurgence of Dravidian beliefs and customs. What we see is a gradual fusing of the two cultures, the Aryan and the Dravidian. To a large degree, the growth of the renunciate movement may well have been the reemergence of a long-suppressed tradition among the Dravidian population, reaching back at least as far as the time of the Indus Civilization. As possible evidence of this, we can look to certain passages in the Rig *Veda* that seem to describe the Sadhu.

2 In ancient times women did not become renunciates—they simply did not have the opportunity—but that has changed in modern times.