Life, Death, and the Gods in Aryan India

10 THE RIG VEDA

Until fairly recently, historians generally credited the Aryans with conquering and destroying a vigorous Harappan civilization. The evidence now suggests that these Indo-European immigrants moved into a region whose civilization was already in shambles, due probably to a series of natural disasters that occurred around 1700 B.C.E. What is clear is that by 1500 the Aryans were ruling northwestern India as an illiterate warrior aristocracy, and the arts of writing and statecraft had disappeared. India would not reemerge into the light of recorded history until around 600 B.C.E.

Because the early Aryans were a preliterate people, what little we know about them we derive from their oral tradition, which survives in four great collections of priestly hymns, chants, incantations, and ritual formulas known as the Vedas, all of which were composed in the Aryans’ sacred language, Sanskrit. Veda means “wisdom” or “knowledge,” and the Aryans accepted these collections of sacred poetry as the eternal word of the gods. For modern historians, however, the Vedas provide tantalizing glimpses into the historical dynamics of the era from roughly 1500 to about 600 B.C.E., a near millennium that is often referred to as India’s Vedic Age.

As is common in preliterate societies, Aryan priests, known as Brahmans, were trained to perform prodigious feats of memory. Generation after generation they sang these songs and passed them on to those who followed. As a result, although the Vedas would not be written down until around 600 B.C.E., many of their songs reflect the religious, social, and political realities of Aryan life around 1500 or earlier. Conversely, other Vedic hymns were the products of much later centuries and mirror the more sophisticated culture of an emerging Indo-Aryan civilization. It is the historian’s task to identify and make sense out of these different elements.

The most celebrated and earliest of the four Vedic collections is the Rig Veda (Verses of Knowledge), a compilation of 1,017 songs, which probably was largely put together in the form we know it between 1200 and 900 B.C.E., although it contains many elements that stretch back to long before the Aryans arrived in India. This Sanskrit masterpiece remains, even today, one of the sacred books of Hinduism. It is also, as far as we can determine, the earliest extant major work of literature in an Indo-European tongue, predating by several centuries the Homeric Greek epics.

The following three poems from the Rig Veda illustrate the evolution of Indo-Aryan religious thought. The first celebrates the victory over Vritra, the dragon of drought, by Indra, the early Aryans’ chief deity. A lusty god of war, Indra was noted for imbibing every morning large amounts of Soma, a sacred hallucinogenic drink reserved for the gods and their priests, and for his military victories over the Dasas (slaves), the indigenous people of northern India whom the Aryans were subduing. In this particular hymn, however, Indra conquers another foe, Vritra, known as the Encompasser, and liberates the universe, which Vritra has swallowed. In his conquest, Indra releases life-giving monsoon rains, irrigating waters that were vital to the Aryans, who were now settling down and farming the land. As the Aryans were absorbed into the rich cultural fabric of India, their forms of reli-
gious expression also changed. Indra, whose worship was the central reality of early Vedic religious life, largely fell out of favor as a major deity in post-Vedic India, becoming simply the god of weather. Our second hymn hints at the change in religious perception that was taking place in later Indo-Aryan society as some Aryans even dared to doubt the very existence of this ancient god of battle. As this second hymn also indicates, the Aryans had originally envisioned Indra as the creator-god. Our third hymn, which is clearly one of the last Vedic songs to be crafted, presents another vision of creation. In this poem the gods create the universe (and themselves) by sacrificing Purusha, the Cosmic Man, to himself. The paradoxical view of reality presented in this hymn would become a hallmark of classic Hindu thought, as we shall see in Chapter 3 and elsewhere.

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

1. The hymn regarding the victory over Vritra is the earliest of the three poems. What sort of god is Indra? What does your answer suggest about the society that worshiped him as its chief deity?

2. Compare the first hymn with the second hymn. Do you perceive any differences in tone or substance? What are they, and what do they suggest to you about changes in Indo-Aryan society?

3. What are the clues in the hymn to Purusha that point to its late composition?

4. What evidence is there in the third hymn for the emergence of what would become the Hindu caste system (Chapter 3, source 15), and how is that system explained and justified?

5. Can you find in the hymn to Purusha evidence of the basic Hindu concept of the unity of all life?

6. Compare Indra and Purusha as deities. In what ways do they represent significant historical changes that took place within Indo-Aryan society?

VICTORY OVER VRITRA

I will declare the many deeds of Indra, the first that he achieved, the thunder-wielder.

He slew the dragon, then disclosed the waters, and cleft the channels of the mountain torrents.

He slew the dragon lying on the mountain: his heavenly bolt of thunder Tvashtar1 fashioned.

Like lowing cows in rapid flow descending, the waters glided downward to the ocean.

Impetuous as a bull, he chose the Soma, and quaffed in threefold sacrifice the juices.

Maghavan2 grasped the thunder for his weapon, and smote to death this firstborn of the dragons.

When, Indra, you had slain the dragon's first-born, and overcome the charms of the enchanters.

Then, giving life to sun and dawn and heaven, you found not one foe to stand against you.

Indra with his own great and deadly thunder smote into pieces Vritra worst of Vritras.3

As trunks of trees, what time the axe has felled them, low on the earth so lies the prostrate dragon.

1The divine artisan.
2Lord Bountiful — another name for Indra.
3"Dragon, worst of dragons."
He, like a mad weak warrior, challenged Indra, the great impetuous many-slaying hero.

He, brooking not the clashing of the weapons, crushed — Indra’s foe — the shattered forts in falling.4

Footless and handless still4 he challenged Indra, who smote him with his bolt between the shoulders.

Emasculated yet claiming manly vigor, thus Vritra lay with scattered limbs dismembered. . . .

Nothing availed him. Lightening, nothing, nor thunder, hailstorm or mist which he had spread around him.5

When Indra and the dragon strove in battle, Maghavan gained the victory for ever. . . .

Indra is king of all that moves and moves not, of creatures tame and horned, the thunder-wielder.

Over all living men he rules as sovereign, containing all as spokes within a rim.

WHO IS INDRA?

The god who had insight the moment he was born, the first who protected the gods with his power of thought, before whose hot breath the two world-halfes’ tremble at the greatness of his manly powers — he, my people, is Indra.

He who made fast the tottering earth, who made still the quaking mountains, who measured out and extended the expanse of the air, who propped up the sky — he, my people, is Indra.

He who killed the serpent and loosed the seven rivers, who drove out the cows that had been pent up by Vala,6 who gave birth to fire between two stones,7 the winner of booty in combats — he, my people, is Indra.

He by whom all these changes were rung, who drove the race of Dasas down into obscurity, who took away the flourishing wealth of the enemy as a winning gambler takes the stake — he, my people, is Indra.

He about whom they ask, ‘Where is he?’, or they say of him, the terrible one, ‘He does not exist,’ he who diminishes the flourishing wealth of the enemy as a gambler does — believe in him! He, my people, is Indra.

He who encourages the weary and the sick, and the poor priest who is in need, who helps the man who harnesses the stones to press Soma, he who has lips fine for drinking — he, my people, is Indra.

He under whose command are horses and cows and villages and all chariots, who gave birth to the sun and the dawn and let out the waters, he, my people, is Indra.

He who is invoked by both of two armies, enemies locked in combat, on this side and that side, he who is even invoked separately by each of two men standing on the very same chariot,10 he, my people, is Indra.

He without whom people do not conquer, he whom they call on for help when they are fighting, who became the image of everything, who shaves the unshakeable — he, my people, is Indra.

He who killed with his weapon all those who had committed a great sin, even when they did not know it, he who does not pardon the arrogant flints. He is also the creator of lightning (the fire between [the stones of] Heaven and Earth) and Soma, which is crushed between stones. He also created the sun, another fire between Heaven and Earth.

10Two persons rode in a war chariot, the priest/charioteer and the warrior-noble (see Chapter 3, source 15).
man for his arrogance, who is the slayer of the Dasu, whom he, my people, is Indra.

He who in the fortieth autumn discovered Sambhara living in the mountains, who killed the violent serpent, the Danu, as he lay there, he, my people, is Indra.

He, the mighty bull who with his seven reins let loose the seven rivers to flow, who with his thunderbolt in his hand hurled down Rauhin as he was climbing up to the sky, he, my people, is Indra.

Even the sky and the earth bow low before him; and the mountains are terrified of his hot breath; he who is known as the Soma-drinker, with his thunderbolt in his hand, with the thunderbolt in his palm, he, my people, is Indra.

He who helps with his favor the one who presses and the one who cooks, the praiser and the preparer, he for whom prayer is nourishment, for whom Soma is the special gift, he, my people, is Indra.

You who furiously grasp the prize for the one who presses and the one who cooks, you are truly real. Let us be dear to you, Indra, all our days, and let us speak as men of power in the sacrificial gathering.

TO PURUSHAA

A thousand heads had Purusha, a thousand eyes, a thousand feet.

He covered earth on every side, and spread ten fingers’ breadth beyond.

This Purusha is all that yet has been and all that is to be;
The lord of immortality which waxes greater still by food.
So mighty is his greatness; yea, greater than this is Purusha.

All creatures are one-fourth of him, three-fourths eternal life in heaven.

With three-fourths Purusha went up: one-fourth of him again was here.

Thence he strode out to every side over what eats not and what eats.

From him Viraj was born; again Purusha from Viraj was born.

As soon as he was born he spread eastward and westward o’er the earth.

When gods prepared the sacrifice with Purusha as their offering,

Its oil was spring, the holy gift was autumn; summer was the wood.

They bathed as victim on the grass Purusha born in earliest time.

With him the deities and all Sadhyas and Rishis sacrificed.

From that great general sacrifice the dripping fat was gathered up.

He formed the creatures of the air, and animals both wild and tame.

From that great general sacrifice Richas and Samahymns were born:

smallest of spaces. In an act celebrated by this poem, Purusha is simultaneously the sacrifice and the sacrificer.

A demon who kept Soma from Indra in mountain forests.

An obscure enemy about whom nothing else is known.

Those who press and those who cook Soma.

Purusha, the all-pervading universal spirit and source of all life, is conceived as a god with countless eyes, hands, and feet. Purusha is both limitless and able to be enclosed in the

special grasses and other fire

The constituent elements of the Rig Veda.
Therefrom the meters were produced, the Yajus had its birth from it.

From it were horses born, from it all creatures with two rows of teeth:

From it were generated cows, from it the goats and sheep were born.

When they divided Purusha how many portions did they make?

What do they call his mouth, his arms? What do they call his thighs and feet?

The Brahmin was his mouth, of both his arms was the Rajanya made.

His thighs became the Vaisyas, from his feet the Sudras was produced.

The Moon was gendered from his mind, and from his eye the Sun had birth;

Indra and Agni from his mouth were born, and Vayu from his breath.

Forth from his navel came mid-air; the sky was fashioned from his head;

Earth from his feet, and from his ear the regions. Thus they formed the worlds.

Seven fencing-logs had he, thrice seven layers of fuel were prepared.

When the gods, offering sacrifice, bound, as their victim, Purusha.

Gods, sacrificing, sacrificed the victim: these were the earliest holy ordinances.

The mighty ones attained the height of heaven, there where the Sadhyas, gods of old, are dwelling.

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24 The verses of the Sama Veda. It is largely a collection of parts of the Rig Veda arranged for religious ceremonial use.
25 The ritual formulas of the Yajur Veda. It was compiled a century or two after the Rig Veda and served as a collection of sacrificial chants.
26 An Aryan priest.
27 The Rajanya, or Kshatriya, comprised the ruling or warrior class, which later became a caste.
28 This class initially encompassed free herders and farmers; later, when it was a caste, it included traders and artisans.
29 The slave and servant class, which later became the fourth and lowest caste. The term was originally applied to the Dasas, the native people whom the Aryans conquered and subjugated when they entered India.
30 The god of fire and sacrifice. This Sanskrit word is cognate with ignis, the Latin word for “fire” (hence, ignite in English).
31 The wind.
32 For a sacrificial fire.

A Journey to the Underworld

14 - Homer, THE ODYSSEY

By 1600 B.C.E., history's first identifiable Greeks, a people who called themselves the Achaeans, had created in the Balkan Peninsula a decentralized warrior civilization, which we term Mycenaean. The name derives from Mycena, a city that exercised a loose leadership over the petty principalities of southern and central Greece. Around 1450 B.C.E., the Achaeans were masters of the island civilization of Crete (source 8) and, as accomplished pirates and maritime merchants, a major force in the eastern Mediterranean. It is against this background that we must place the Achaean expedition against Troy, a city in Anatolia, which took place around 1200.

The sack of rival Troy was the high-water mark for the Achaeans. Within a century Mycenaean civilization was collapsing, in part, at least, because of internecine wars among the various Achaean principalities. What other factors were involved remains a mystery. By 1100 B.C.E., the highly specialized arts and crafts, including