

Chapter I

BEGINNINGS OF INDIAN PHILOSOPHY

1. Indian philosophy has slowly emerged from the briny waters of the ritualistic religion of the Vedas, and though in later times it could very largely concentrate on problems which may be deemed purely philosophical, yet it could not at any time completely dissociate itself from religious tendencies. The Rigveda consists mainly of hymns dedicated to Nature-Gods, such as the fire, the sun, the dawn, Indra, the God of rains, etc., and there is sometimes much poetry in them; but the prayers that are contained therein are very simple and often refer to the material needs and comforts of the adorers. It is difficult to say whether in the earliest times these Vedic hymns were used as charm verses at different sacrificial performances, or whether they were simply shot forth through the minds of the Vedic poets, embodying their rapturous delights or their simple prayers to Nature-Gods who, they believed, could give them what they wanted. But the practice of sacrifice was probably accepted from very early times in Vedic circles, and these hymns were used, sometimes torn from their contexts and sometimes in their entirety, as having peculiar magical values, in relation to the particular operations of the sacrifices, by virtue of which the adorers could attain their ends when in need of any special favour from the gods to whom the hymns were dedicated. This idea of sacrifice is entirely different from anything found in other races, for to the Vedic people the sacrifices were more powerful than the gods, who might be pleased or displeased, but if the sacrifices were duly performed the prayers were bound to be fulfilled. The utterance and

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chanting of the stanzas of the Vedic hymns with specially prescribed accents and modulations, the pouring of the melted butter in the prescribed manner into the sacrificial fire, the husking of rice in a particular way, all the thousand details and rituals—often performed continuously for days, months and years with rigorous exactness—formed a Yajña (frequently translated into English “Sacrifice”).

2. The introduction of this type of sacrifice gradually weakened the might of the gods who have been extolled in the hymns. It has rightly been pointed out that though a belief in a multitude of gods may naturally be styled polytheism, yet the fact that each god was in turn praised as the ultimate god having the highest powers naturally distinguishes the Vedic religion from the polytheism as ordinarily accepted, and the special name of henotheism has been accorded to it. But if the prayers were fulfilled not by the special favour of the gods but as an unalterable efficacy of the magical operations of the sacrifice, the gods are naturally put into the shade and the sacrifice becomes the most important thing. A belief in the power of the sacrifices performed for the satisfaction of mundane wants and interests cannot be regarded as a high type of religion, and it is curious that this idea of sacrifice assumed such an importance in the minds of the early Vedic people that they could not think of anything else as deserving their attention as the supreme duty than the duty of the study of the Vedas and the performance of sacrifices. The term Dharma, which in later days is used in the sense of righteousness, law, religion, etc., is exclusively used in the Vedic sense as meaning the benefits accrued from sacrifices; the term Karma, which is used in later days in the sense of any kind of deed that is performed, is definitely restricted to the performance of Vedic sacrifices. And no other duty is recognised in the Vedas

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but the due performance of their injunctions, and these injunctions have almost always a bearing on the performance of sacrifices. The main interest which a student of the history of Indian philosophy may have in this sacrificial culture is the fact that it introduces into the Indian mind a notion that duly performed sacrificial operations must produce the desired results. The substitution of all kinds of deeds for sacrificial ones was an easy thing in the process of time; and the unalterability of efficacy that was associated with sacrificial deeds was thus easily transferred to deeds in general. It is here that we have the beginning of the law of karma. The law of karma is almost universally regarded as an ethical law, by which each person was bound to reap the good and bad effects of his deeds. But it seems to me that the law of karma had its origin in the belief in the magical efficacy of the sacrificial performance, and it was therefore valid by itself before its application in the moral field. It was not because of our moral expectations that a good man should not suffer or that a bad man should not prosper that the law of karma was formulated, but the law of karma was a mere corollary of the belief in the unalterable efficacy of the sacrificial operations to produce good and bad effects. When in later times Indian moral consciousness began to rise to a high eminence, it was not only the sacrificial deeds that were regarded as important; but the great importance of moral and immoral deeds was also universally recognised, and thus the law of karma was expanded along with the expansion of the meaning of karma and it was formulated as a law that controlled the relation of human conduct with human sufferings and enjoyments. The law of karma was thus rooted in the Indian mind from the earliest stages in the trivial belief in the efficacy of magical operations, incantations and the like, and it was only extended at a later stage into the ethical field.

3. But the Rigveda and the Atharvaveda not only contain hymns in the praise of different Nature-Gods, but they also contain at least some hymns where the notion of a universal being seems to have been definitely reached. Thus in Rigveda 129 we have the following verse:

“Then there was neither Aught nor Nought, no air nor sky beyond.

What covered all? Where rested all? In watery gulf profound?

Nor death was then, nor deathlessness, nor change of night and day.

That One breathed calmly, self-sustained; nought else beyond It lay.

Gloom hid in gloom existed first—one sea, eluding view.

That One, a void in chaos wrapt, by inward fervour grew.

Within It first arose desire, the primal germ of mind,

Which nothing with existence links, as sages searching find.

The kindling ray that shot across the dark and drear abyss,—

Was it beneath? or high aloft? What bard can answer this?

There fecundating powers were found, and mighty forces strove,—

A self-supporting mass beneath, and energy above.

Who knows, who ever told, from whence this vast creation rose?

No gods had then been born,—who then can e'er the truth disclose?

Whence sprang this world, and whether framed by hand divine or no,—

Its lord in heaven alone can tell, if even he can show.”

Again, the famous *Purusha Sukta* runs as follows:

“Purusha has a thousand heads, a thousand eyes and a thousand feet. On every side enveloping the earth, he transcended it by a space of ten fingers. Purusha himself is this whole, whatever has been and whatever shall be. He is also the lord of immortality, since through food he expands. Such is his greatness; and Purusha

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is superior to this. All existing things are a quarter of him, and that which is immortal in the sky is three-quarters of him. With three-quarters Purusha mounted upwards. A quarter of him again was produced here below. He then became diffused everywhere among things animate and inanimate, etc.”

Again, in Atharvaveda we have another hymn on Skambha and Brahmā, in which it is said:

“Skambha established both these (worlds), earth and sky, the wide atmosphere and the six vast regions; Skambha pervaded this entire universe. Reverence to that greatest Brahmā, who, born from toil and austere fervour (*tapas*), penetrated all the worlds, who made Soma for himself alone. How is it that the wind does not rest? How is not the soul quiescent? Why do not the waters, seeking after truth, ever repose? The great being is absorbed in austere fervour in the midst of the world on the surface of the waters. To him all the gods are joined as the branches around the trunk of a tree. Say, who is that Skambha to whom the gods with hands, feet, voice, ear, eye present continually an unlimited tribute. By him darkness is dispelled; he is free from evil.”

Again, the next hymn runs as follows:

“Reverence to that greatest Brahmā, who presides over the past, the future, the universe, and whose alone is the sky. These worlds, the sky and the earth, exist supported by Skambha. Skambha is all this which has soul, which breathes, which winks. That which moves, flies, stands, which has existed breathing, not breathing and winking; that omniform entity has established the earth; that combined is one only....I regard as the greatest That whence the sun rises and That where he sets; he is not surpassed by anything...Knowing that soul calm, undecaying, young, free from disease, immortal, self-sustained, satisfied with the essences, deficient in nothing, the man is not afraid of death.”

These and other similar hymns indicate that at least among some persons of the Vedic circle a new intellectual star had dawned. There breathes here a freshness of thought, a bold advance of imagination, an ambitious

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ideal of going beyond the visible aspects of nature and ordinary mundane interests that is extremely startling. It is almost inexplicable how thought refuses to be shut up within the narrow grooves of desires and their satisfaction, and how the man through its innate inner movement tries to soar above the prejudices, beliefs and limited interests of an immature age. We find here people who shook off the popular beliefs in the supremacy of the Nature-Gods and tried to speculate about the origin of the world, about some master-deity who forged this world into being, who was alone in himself when nothing else existed. It is here probably for the first time in the history of human thought that a thinker hit upon the view that all was God but God was above all, that it was by the spiritual philosophy of His own thought, His own self-contained austerity and self-abnegation that He manifested himself in the glorious diversity of this manifold world, that if there were gods superintending over the diverse parts of nature, there was at least someone who was above them all and He was the creator not only of man and animals but also of the gods. Yet the mystery of this world may yet be inscrutable, for it may be a mystery even to the Lord himself. It is here that we find for the first time the vain spirit of enquiry that wishes to go to the bottom of all things and make a beginning at the very beginning; here is that one penetration of philosophic vision the unsophisticated thinker begins with, a negation—a negation not only of air or sky but also of death and deathlessness, of night and day. Yet this negation could not be merely a negation, and the thought of this was forced in by something that breathed calmly, self-sustained. And it was by the inner fervour of this great being through his will power, the primal germ of mind, spaceless and timeless, with all the mighty forces, that has created the world and helped it to come into being.

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It is, therefore, this creation that has ultimately to be traced to the primal deity who stands self-sustained and through whose spiritual fervour everything has come into being, and yet the mystery remains unexplained. I shall not give a long philosophical annotation and interpretation of these hymns; for though they reveal great philosophic insight and wisdom they do not contain that systematic unity and coherence of thought which technical philosophy requires. But yet they undoubtedly tend to show that the philosophic activity of the mind that tries to penetrate deeper and deeper to the foundations of experience is a unique gift of human nature; and that though hemmed in by the crude prejudices of a people who were immersed in ritualistic ideas, the searching mind was not inactive; and it is this searching mind that could not rest contented merely with mundane interests of the concrete facts of nature in their merely concrete bearings on life.

4. It has been said that the "*sine qua non* of magic is a human operator, materials, rites and an aim that borders on the impossible, either in itself such as predicting the future or curing incurable diseases or becoming invisible or in relation to the apparently inadequate means employed".¹ I have attached the term magic to the Vedic rituals in the sense that the Vedic people in general believed in the operations of nature, the condition of human bodies, the efficiency of enemies; as a matter of fact, everything that concerns us in our daily life could be changed, modified or influenced by the performance of sacrifices, provided there were duly qualified priests, the Vedic *mantras* were duly and properly uttered or chanted in their proper accents and the elaborate sacrificial details were performed in strictest accuracy. With the growth of thought and

¹ Thorndike's *A History of Magic and Experimental Science*, vol. 11, p. 974.

changes of conditions the idea of sacrifices became so far modified that it was believed that the magical value of the sacrifices could be attained also by particular kinds of meditation, and that in such a case the actual performance of the sacrifices could be dispensed with. It was also believed that deep meditation, self-mortification or asceticism could win for us whatever we wanted. This was, in my opinion, a belief in a new kind of magic, where the performance of mystical operations was replaced by self-centred energy of thought and self-sought sufferings and penances. Thus it was believed that just as a man could attain whatever he wanted by the performance of sacrifices, so he could also achieve his end, however extravagant it might be, by the performance of tapas involving meditation and self-imposed sufferings and mortifications. Thus in the later day Purāṇas we hear many stories of how the gods were forced to give even such boons to the ascetics by which they themselves would come to grief. The story is related how a demon had a boon granted to him by the god Śiva through his own tapas or self-mortification, by which the demon could reduce to ashes anyone on whose head he would rest his palm. The demon wanted to perform the experiment on the god Śiva himself, and the poor god was followed from place to place until by a trick the demon was made to rest his palm on his own head and was thus reduced to ashes. We heard of Viśvāmitra, who though a king was worsted in his quarrel with the priest Vaśiṣṭha who had a magical cow. Desirous of being a Brahmin he performed tapas, but as he was being refused again and again he had the daring plan in his mind of creating a new world in which he could install himself as a Brahmin, and the god Brahmā, being anxious to soothe him, granted him a boon and he became a Brahmin; and the description of the power of tapas goes to show that one could attain the mastery of all the

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worlds and achieve all impossible things through it. It has also found a place in the scheme of *yoga* practices, which are supposed to be capable of performing miracles by which one could become as small or as large as one wished, may become invisible, fly through the air, or dive into the ground. Thus from the early Vedic times two kinds of magic, viz. that of rituals, and that of tapas, which involved meditation and asceticism, were regarded as being omnipotent, and even the powers of gods were regarded as belonging to a much lower rank. Consistently with this we find that some of the Vedic sages, impelled by the demands of their philosophic nature, could conceive the idea of a great being when nothing else existed and could think of his creating activity as being due either to self-immolation and self-sacrifice or to the fervour of tapas. The idea of this great external being either as Purusha or as Brahmā oscillates between an ill-defined pantheism and monotheism, but it still smacks of the magical elements of sacrifice and tapas which were the prevailing creeds of the time, and even the best minds could not shake them off. It is interesting to note, however, that both the sacrifice and the tapas could at best be regarded as being non-moral. One could perform the sacrifice or the tapas for the most immoral ends and yet one could attain them. We find here the unalterability of the law of karma, where karma stands for sacrifices or tapas; but this law of karma is yet only magical and therefore non-moral and non-ethical. It is only at a later stage that the law of karma becomes formulated as a moral law.

5. In the Prajāpati hymn from Rigveda (10, 121) we read:

A golden germ arose in the beginning,
 Born he was the one lord of things existing,
 The earth and yonder sky he did establish—
 What god shall we revere with our oblation?

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Who gives life's breath and is of strength the giver,
 At whose behest all gods do act obedient,
 Whose shadow is immortality and likewise death—
 What god shall we revere with our oblation?

The king, who as it breathes and as it shuts its eyes,
 The world of life alone doth rule with might,
 Two-footed creatures and four-footed both controls—
 What god shall we revere with our oblation?

Through whose great might arose these snow-capped mountains,
 Whose are, they say, the sea and heavenly river,
 Whose arms are these directions of the space—
 What god shall we revere with our oblation?

Prajāpati, thou art the one—and there's no other—
 Who dost encompass all these born entities!
 Whate'er we wish while offering thee oblations,
 May that be ours! May we be lords of riches!

(Bloomfield's translation.)

Another interesting hymn on Time runs as follows:

“Time carries us forward, a steed, with seven rays, a thousand eyes, undecaying, full of fecundity. On him intelligent sages mount; his wheels are all the worlds. This Time moves on seven wheels; he has seven naves; immortality is his axle. He is at present all these worlds. Time hastens onward, the first god. A full jar is contained in Time. We behold him existing in many forms. He is all these worlds in the future. Time generated the sky and these earths. Set in motion by Time, the past and the future subsist. Time created the earth, by Time the sun burns, through Time all beings exist, through Time the eye sees. Time is lord of all things, he who was the father of Prajāpati. That universe has been set in motion by him, produced by him and is supported on him. Time, becoming divine energy, supports Parameshthi Prajāpati.”