

## Chapter II

# A Retrospect of Vedic Theory

VEDA, then, is the creation of an age anterior to our intellectual philosophies. In that original epoch thought proceeded by other methods than those of our logical reasoning and speech accepted modes of expression which in our modern habits would be inadmissible. The wisest then depended on inner experience and the suggestions of the intuitive mind for all knowledge that ranged beyond mankind's ordinary perceptions and daily activities. Their aim was illumination, not logical conviction, their ideal the inspired seer, not the accurate reasoner. Indian tradition has faithfully preserved this account of the origin of the Vedas. The Rishi was not the individual composer of the hymn, but the seer (*draṣṭā*) of an eternal truth and an impersonal knowledge. The language of Veda itself is *Śruti*, a rhythm not composed by the intellect but heard, a divine Word that came vibrating out of the Infinite to the inner audience of the man who had previously made himself fit for the impersonal knowledge. The words themselves, *dr̥ṣṭi* and *śruti*, sight and hearing, are Vedic expressions; these and cognate words signify, in the esoteric terminology of the hymns, revelatory knowledge and the contents of inspiration.

In the Vedic idea of the revelation there is no suggestion of the miraculous or the supernatural. The Rishi who employed these faculties, had acquired them by a progressive self-culture. Knowledge itself was a travelling and a reaching, or a finding and a winning; the revelation came only at the end, the light was the prize of a final victory. There is continually in the Veda this image of the journey, the soul's march on the path of Truth. On that path, as it advances, it also ascends; new vistas of power and light open to its aspiration; it wins by a heroic effort its enlarged spiritual possessions.

From the historical point of view the Rig Veda may be

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regarded as a record of a great advance made by humanity by special means at a certain period of its collective progress. In its esoteric, as well as its exoteric significance, it is the Book of Works, of the inner and the outer sacrifice; it is the spirit's hymn of battle and victory as it discovers and climbs to planes of thought and experience inaccessible to the natural or animal man, man's praise of the divine Light, Power and Grace at work in the mortal. It is far, therefore, from being an attempt to set down the results of intellectual or imaginative speculation, nor does it consist of the dogmas of a primitive religion. Only, out of the sameness of experience and out of the impersonality of the knowledge received, there arise a fixed body of conceptions constantly repeated and a fixed symbolic language which, perhaps, in that early human speech, was the inevitable form of these conceptions because alone capable by its combined concreteness and power of mystic suggestion of expressing that which for the ordinary mind of the race was inexpressible. We have, at any rate, the same notions repeated from hymn to hymn with the same constant terms and figures and frequently in the same phrases with an entire indifference to any search for poetical originality or any demand for novelty of thought and freshness of language. No pursuit of aesthetic grace, richness or beauty induces these mystic poets to vary the consecrated form which had become for them a sort of divine algebra transmitting the eternal formulae of the Knowledge to the continuous succession of the initiates.

The hymns possess indeed a finished metrical form, a constant subtlety and skill in their technique, great variations of style and poetical personality; they are not the work of rude, barbarous and primitive craftsmen, but the living breath of a supreme and conscious Art forming its creations in the puissant but well-governed movement of a self-observing inspiration. Still, all these high gifts have deliberately been exercised within one unvarying framework and always with the same materials. For the art of expression was to the Rishis only a means, not an aim; their principal preoccupation was strenuously practical, almost utilitarian, in the highest sense of utility. The hymn was to the Rishi who composed it a means of spiritual progress

for himself and for others. It rose out of his soul, it became a power of his mind, it was the vehicle of his self-expression in some important or even critical moment of his life's inner history. It helped him to express the god in him, to destroy the devourer, the expresser of evil; it became a weapon in the hands of the Aryan striver after perfection, it flashed forth like Indra's lightning against the Coverer on the slopes, the Wolf on the path, the Robber by the streams.

The invariable fixity of Vedic thought when taken in conjunction with its depth, richness and subtlety, gives rise to some interesting speculations. For we may reasonably argue that such a fixed form and substance would not easily be possible in the beginnings of thought and psychological experience or even during their early progress and unfolding. We may therefore surmise that our actual Sanhita represents the close of a period, not its commencement, nor even some of its successive stages. It is even possible that its most ancient hymns are a comparatively modern development or version of a more ancient<sup>1</sup> lyric evangel couched in the freer and more pliable forms of a still earlier human speech. Or the whole voluminous mass of its litanies may be only a selection by Veda Vyasa out of a more richly vocal Aryan past. Made, according to the common belief, by Krishna of the Isle, the great traditional sage, the colossal compiler (Vyasa), with his face turned towards the commencement of the Iron Age, towards the centuries of increasing twilight and final darkness, it is perhaps only the last testament of the Ages of Intuition, the luminous Dawns of the Forefathers, to their descendants, to a human race already turning in spirit towards the lower levels and the more easy and secure gains — secure perhaps only in appearance — of the physical life and of the intellect and the logical reason.

But these are only speculations and inferences. Certain it is that the old tradition of a progressive obscuration and loss of the Veda as the law of the human cycle has been fully justified

<sup>1</sup> The Veda itself speaks constantly of "ancient" and "modern" Rishis, (*pūrvah . . . nūtanah*), the former remote enough to be regarded as a kind of demigods, the first founders of knowledge.

by the event. The obscuration had already proceeded far before the opening of the next great age of Indian spirituality, the Vedantic, which struggled to preserve or recover what it yet could of the ancient knowledge. It could hardly have been otherwise. For the system of the Vedic mystics was founded upon experiences difficult to ordinary mankind and proceeded by the aid of faculties which in most of us are rudimentary and imperfectly developed and, when active at all, are mixed and irregular in their operation. Once the first intensity of the search after truth had passed, periods of fatigue and relaxation were bound to intervene in which the old truths would be partially lost. Nor once lost, could they easily be recovered by scrutinising the sense of the ancient hymns; for those hymns were couched in a language that was deliberately ambiguous.

A tongue unintelligible to us may be correctly understood once a clue has been found; a diction that is deliberately ambiguous, holds its secret much more obstinately and successfully, for it is full of lures and of indications that mislead. Therefore when the Indian mind turned again to review the sense of Veda, the task was difficult and the success only partial. One source of light still existed, the traditional knowledge handed down among those who memorised and explained the Vedic text or had charge of the Vedic ritual, — two functions that had originally been one; for in the early days the priest was also the teacher and seer. But the clearness of this light was already obscured. Even Purohitas of repute performed the rites with a very imperfect knowledge of the power and the sense of the sacred words which they repeated. For the material aspects of Vedic worship had grown like a thick crust over the inner knowledge and were stifling what they had once served to protect. The Veda was already a mass of myth and ritual. The power had begun to disappear out of the symbolic ceremony; the light had departed from the mystic parable and left only a surface of apparent grotesqueness and naivete.

The Brahmanas and the Upanishads are the record of a powerful revival which took the sacred text and ritual as a starting-point for a new statement of spiritual thought and experience. This movement had two complementary aspects, one,

the conservation of the forms, another the revelation of the soul of Veda, — the first represented by the Brahmanas,<sup>2</sup> the second by the Upanishads.

The Brahmanas labour to fix and preserve the minutiae of the Vedic ceremony, the conditions of their material effectuality, the symbolic sense and purpose of their different parts, movements, implements, the significance of texts important in the ritual, the drift of obscure allusions, the memory of ancient myths and traditions. Many of their legends are evidently posterior to the hymns, invented to explain passages which were no longer understood; others may have been part of the apparatus of original myth and parable employed by the ancient symbolists or memories of the actual historical circumstances surrounding the composition of the hymns. Oral tradition is always a light that obscures; a new symbolism working upon an old that is half lost, is likely to overgrow rather than reveal it; therefore the Brahmanas, though full of interesting hints, help us very little in our research; nor are they a safe guide to the meaning of separate texts when they attempt an exact and verbal interpretation.

The Rishis of the Upanishads followed another method. They sought to recover the lost or waning knowledge by meditation and spiritual experience and they used the text of the ancient mantras as a prop or an authority for their own intuitions and perceptions; or else the Vedic Word was a seed of thought and vision by which they recovered old truths in new forms. What they found, they expressed in other terms more intelligible to the age in which they lived. In a certain sense their handling of the texts was not disinterested; it was not governed by the scholar's scrupulous desire to arrive at the exact intention of the words and the precise thought of the sentences in their actual framing. They were seekers of a higher than verbal truth and used words merely as suggestions for the illumination towards which they were striving. They knew not or they neglected the etymological

<sup>2</sup> Necessarily, these and other appreciations in the chapter are brief and summary views of certain main tendencies. The Brahmanas for instance have their philosophical passages.

sense and employed often a method of symbolic interpretation of component sounds in which it is very difficult to follow them. For this reason, while the Upanishads are invaluable for the light they shed on the principal ideas and on the psychological system of the ancient Rishis, they help us as little as the Brahmanas in determining the accurate sense of the texts which they quote. Their real work was to found Vedanta rather than to interpret Veda.

For this great movement resulted in a new and more permanently powerful statement of thought and spirituality, Veda culminating in Vedanta. And it held in itself two strong tendencies which worked towards the disintegration of the old Vedic thought and culture. First, it tended to subordinate more and more completely the outward ritual, the material utility of the mantra and the sacrifice to a more purely spiritual aim and intention. The balance, the synthesis preserved by the old Mystics between the external and the internal, the material and the spiritual life was displaced and disorganised. A new balance, a new synthesis was established, leaning finally towards asceticism and renunciation, and maintained itself until it was in its turn displaced and disorganised by the exaggeration of its own tendencies in Buddhism. The sacrifice, the symbolic ritual became more and more a useless survival and even an encumbrance; yet, as so often happens, by the very fact of becoming mechanical and ineffective the importance of everything that was most external in them came to be exaggerated and their minutiae irrationally enforced by that part of the national mind which still clung to them. A sharp practical division came into being, effective though never entirely recognised in theory, between Veda and Vedanta, a distinction which might be expressed in the formula, "the Veda for the priests, the Vedanta for the sages."

The second tendency of the Vedantic movement was to disencumber itself progressively of the symbolic language, the veil of concrete myth and poetic figure, in which the Mystics had shrouded their thought and to substitute a clearer statement and more philosophical language. The complete evolution of this tendency rendered obsolete the utility not only of the Vedic

ritual but of the Vedic text. Upanishads, increasingly clear and direct in their language, became the fountainhead of the highest Indian thought and replaced the inspired verses of Vasishtha and Vishwamitra.<sup>3</sup> The Vedas, becoming less and less the indispensable basis of education, were no longer studied with the same zeal and intelligence; their symbolic language, ceasing to be used, lost the remnant of its inner sense to new generations whose whole manner of thought was different from that of the Vedic forefathers. The Ages of Intuition were passing away into the first dawn of the Age of Reason.

Buddhism completed the revolution and left of the externalities of the ancient world only some venerable pomps and some mechanical usages. It sought to abolish the Vedic sacrifice and to bring into use the popular vernacular in place of the literary tongue. And although the consummation of its work was delayed for several centuries by the revival of Hinduism in the Puranic religions, the Veda itself benefited little by this respite. In order to combat the popularity of the new religion it was necessary to put forward instead of venerable but unintelligible texts Scriptures written in an easy form of a more modern Sanskrit. For the mass of the nation the Puranas pushed aside the Veda and the forms of new religious systems took the place of the ancient ceremonies. As the Veda had passed from the sage to the priest, so now it began to pass from the hands of the priest into the hands of the scholar. And in that keeping it suffered the last mutilation of its sense and the last diminution of its true dignity and sanctity.

Not that the dealings of Indian scholarship with the hymns, beginning from the pre-Christian centuries, have been altogether a record of loss. Rather it is to the scrupulous diligence and conservative tradition of the Pandits that we owe the preservation of Veda at all after its secret had been lost and the hymns themselves had ceased in practice to be a living Scripture. And

<sup>3</sup> Again this expresses the main tendency and is subject to qualification. The Vedas are also quoted as authorities; but as a whole it is the Upanishads that become the Book of Knowledge, the Veda being rather the Book of Works.

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even for the recovery of the lost secret the two millenniums of scholastic orthodoxy have left us some invaluable aids, a text determined scrupulously to its very accentuation, the important lexicon of Yaska and Sayana's great commentary which in spite of its many and often startling imperfections remains still for the scholar an indispensable first step towards the formation of a sound Vedic learning.

### THE SCHOLARS

The text of the Veda which we possess has remained uncorrupted for over two thousand years. It dates, so far as we know, from that great period of Indian intellectual activity, contemporaneous with the Greek efflorescence, but earlier in its beginnings, which founded the culture and civilisation recorded in the classical literature of the land. We cannot say to how much earlier a date our text may be carried. But there are certain considerations which justify us in supposing for it an almost enormous antiquity. An accurate text, accurate in every syllable, accurate in every accent, was a matter of supreme importance to the Vedic ritualists; for on scrupulous accuracy depended the effectuality of the sacrifice. We are told, for instance, in the Brahmanas the story of Twashtri who, performing a sacrifice to produce an avenger of his son slain by Indra, produced, owing to an error of accentuation, not a slayer of Indra, but one of whom Indra must be the slayer. The prodigious accuracy of the ancient Indian memory is also notorious. And the sanctity of the text prevented such interpolations, alterations, modernising revisions as have replaced by the present form of the Mahabharata the ancient epic of the Kurus. It is not, therefore, at all improbable that we have the Sanhita of Vyasa substantially as it was arranged by the great sage and compiler.

Substantially, not in its present written form. Vedic prosody differed in many respects from the prosody of classical Sanskrit and, especially, employed a greater freedom in the use of that principle of euphonic combination of separate words (*sandhi*) which is so peculiar a feature of the literary tongue. The Vedic



Rishis, as was natural in a living speech, followed the ear rather than fixed rule; sometimes they combined the separate words, sometimes they left them uncombined. But when the Veda came to be written down, the law of euphonic combination had assumed a much more despotic authority over the language and the ancient text was written by the grammarians as far as possible in consonance with its regulations. They were careful, however, to accompany it with another text, called the *Padapatha*, in which all euphonic combinations were again resolved into the original and separate words and even the components of compound words indicated.

It is a notable tribute to the fidelity of the ancient memorisers that, instead of the confusion to which this system might so easily have given rise, it is always perfectly easy to resolve the formal text into the original harmonies of Vedic prosody. And very few are the instances in which the exactness or the sound judgment of the *Padapatha* can be called into question.

We have, then, as our basis a text which we can confidently accept and which, even if we hold it in a few instances doubtful or defective, does not at any rate call for that often licentious labour of emendation to which some of the European classics lend themselves. This is, to start with, a priceless advantage for which we cannot be too grateful to the conscientiousness of the old Indian learning.

In certain other directions it might not be safe always to follow implicitly the scholastic tradition, — as in the ascription of the Vedic poems to their respective Rishis, wherever older tradition was not firm and sound. But these are details of minor importance. Nor is there, in my view, any good reason to doubt that we have the hymns arrayed, for the most part, in the right order of their verses and in their exact entirety. The exceptions, if they exist, are negligible in number and importance. When the hymns seem to us incoherent, it is because we do not understand them. Once the clue is found, we discover that they are perfect wholes as admirable in the structure of their thought as in their language and their rhythms.

It is when we come to the interpretation of the Veda and seek

help from ancient Indian scholarship that we feel compelled to make the largest reserves. For even in the earlier days of classical erudition the ritualistic view of the Veda was already dominant, the original sense of the words, the lines, the allusions, the clue to the structure of the thought had been long lost or obscured; nor was there in the erudite that intuition or that spiritual experience which might have partly recovered the lost secret. In such a field mere learning, especially when it is accompanied by an ingenious scholastic mind, is as often a snare as a guide.

In Yaska's lexicon, our most important help, we have to distinguish between two elements of very disparate value. When Yaska gives as a lexicographer the various meanings of Vedic words, his authority is great and the help he gives is of the first importance. It does not appear that he possessed all the ancient significances, for many had been obliterated by Time and Change and in the absence of a scientific Philology could not be restored. But much also had been preserved by tradition. Wherever Yaska preserves this tradition and does not use a grammarian's ingenuity, the meanings he assigns to words, although not always applicable to the text to which he refers them, can yet be confirmed as possible senses by a sound Philology. But Yaska the etymologist does not rank with Yaska the lexicographer. Scientific grammar was first developed by Indian learning, but the beginnings of sound philology we owe to modern research. Nothing can be more fanciful and lawless than the methods of mere ingenuity used by the old etymologists down even to the nineteenth century, whether in Europe or India. And when Yaska follows these methods, we are obliged to part company with him entirely. Nor in his interpretation of particular texts is he more convincing than the later erudition of Sayana.

The commentary of Sayana closes the period of original and living scholastic work on the Veda which Yaska's Nirukta among other important authorities may be said to open. The lexicon was compiled in the earlier vigour of the Indian mind when it was assembling its prehistoric gains as the materials of a fresh outburst of originality; the Commentary is almost the last great work of the kind left to us by the classical tradition

in its final refuge and centre in Southern India before the old culture was dislocated and broken into regional fragments by the shock of the Mahomedan conquest. Since then we have had jets of strong and original effort, scattered attempts at new birth and novel combination, but work of quite this general, massive and monumental character has hardly been possible.

The commanding merits of this great legacy of the past are obvious. Composed by Sayana with the aid of the most learned scholars of his time, it is a work representing an enormous labour of erudition, more perhaps than could have been commanded at that time by a single brain. Yet it bears the stamp of the coordinating mind. It is consistent in the mass in spite of its many inconsistencies of detail, largely planned, yet most simply, composed in a style lucid, terse and possessed of an almost literary grace one would have thought impossible in the traditional form of the Indian commentary. Nowhere is there any display of pedantry; the struggle with the difficulties of the text is skilfully veiled and there is an air of clear acuteness and of assured, yet unassuming authority which imposes even on the dissident. The first Vedic scholars in Europe admired especially the rationality of Sayana's interpretations.

Yet, even for the external sense of the Veda, it is not possible to follow either Sayana's method or his results without the largest reservation. It is not only that he admits in his method licences of language and construction which are unnecessary and sometimes incredible, nor that he arrives at his results, often, by a surprising inconsistency in his interpretation of common Vedic terms and even of fixed Vedic formulae. These are defects of detail, unavoidable perhaps in the state of the materials with which he had to deal. But it is the central defect of Sayana's system that he is obsessed always by the ritualistic formula and seeks continually to force the sense of the Veda into that narrow mould. So he loses many clues of the greatest suggestiveness and importance for the external sense of the ancient Scripture, — a problem quite as interesting as its internal sense. The outcome is a representation of the Rishis, their thoughts, their culture, their aspirations, so narrow and poverty-stricken that, if accepted, it

renders the ancient reverence for the Veda, its sacred authority, its divine reputation quite incomprehensible to the reason or only explicable as a blind and unquestioning tradition of faith starting from an original error.

There are indeed other aspects and elements in the commentary, but they are subordinate or subservient to the main idea. Sayana and his helpers had to work upon a great mass of often conflicting speculation and tradition which still survived from the past. To some of its elements they had to give a formal adhesion, to others they felt bound to grant minor concessions. It is possible that to Sayana's skill in evolving out of previous uncertainty or even confusion an interpretation which had firm shape and consistence, is due the great and long-unquestioned authority of his work.

The first element with which Sayana had to deal, the most interesting to us, was the remnant of the old spiritual, philosophic or psychological interpretations of the Sruti which were the true foundation of its sanctity. So far as these had entered into the current or orthodox<sup>4</sup> conception, Sayana admits them; but they form an exceptional element in his work, insignificant in bulk and in importance. Occasionally he gives a passing mention or concession to less current psychological renderings. He mentions, for instance, but not to admit it, an old interpretation of Vritra as the Coverer who holds back from man the objects of his desire and his aspirations. For Sayana Vritra is either simply the enemy or the physical cloud-demon who holds back the waters and has to be pierced by the Rain-giver.

A second element is the mythological, or, as it might almost be called, the Puranic, — myths and stories of the gods given in their outward form without that deeper sense and symbolic fact which is the justifying truth of all Purana.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> I use the word loosely. The terms orthodox and heterodox in the European or sectarian sense have no true application to India where opinion has always been free.

<sup>5</sup> There is reason to suppose that Purana (legend and apologue) and Itihasa (historical tradition) were parts of Vedic culture long before the present forms of the Puranas and historical Epics were evolved.

A third element is the legendary and historic, the stories of old kings and Rishis, given in the Brahmanas or by later tradition in explanation of the obscure allusions of the Veda. Sayana's dealings with this element are marked by some hesitation. Often he accepts them as the right interpretation of the hymns; sometimes he gives an alternative sense with which he has evidently more intellectual sympathy, but wavers between the two authorities.

More important is the element of naturalistic interpretation. Not only are there the obvious or the traditional identifications, Indra, the Maruts, the triple Agni, Surya, Usha, but we find that Mitra was identified with the Day, Varuna with the Night, Aryaman and Bhaga with the Sun, the Ribhus with its rays. We have here the seeds of that naturalistic theory of the Veda to which European learning has given so wide an extension. The old Indian scholars did not use the same freedom or the same systematic minuteness in their speculations. Still this element in Sayana's commentary is the true parent of the European Science of Comparative Mythology.

But it is the ritualistic conception that pervades; that is the persistent note in which all others lose themselves. In the formula of the philosophic schools, the hymns, even while standing as a supreme authority for knowledge, are yet principally and fundamentally concerned with the Karmakanda, with works, — and by works was understood, preeminently, the ritualistic observation of the Vedic sacrifices. Sayana labours always in the light of this idea. Into this mould he moulds the language of the Veda, turning the mass of its characteristic words into the ritualistic significances, — food, priest, giver, wealth, praise, prayer, rite, sacrifice.

Wealth and food; — for it is the most egoistic and materialistic objects that are proposed as the aim of the sacrifice, possessions, strength, power, children, servants, gold, horses, cows, victory, the slaughter and the plunder of enemies, the destruction of rival and malevolent critic. As one reads and finds hymn after hymn interpreted in this sense, one begins to understand better the apparent inconsistency in the attitude of

the Gita which, regarding always the Veda as divine knowledge,<sup>6</sup> yet censures severely the champions of an exclusive Vedism,<sup>7</sup> all whose flowery teachings were devoted solely to material wealth, power and enjoyment.

It is the final and authoritative binding of the Veda to this lowest of all its possible senses that has been the most unfortunate result of Sayana's commentary. The dominance of the ritualistic interpretation had already deprived India of the living use of its greatest Scripture and of the true clue to the entire sense of the Upanishads. Sayana's commentary put a seal of finality on the old misunderstanding which could not be broken for many centuries. And its suggestions, when another civilisation discovered and set itself to study the Veda, became in the European mind the parent of fresh errors.

Nevertheless, if Sayana's work has been a key turned with double lock on the inner sense of the Veda, it is yet indispensable for opening the antechambers of Vedic learning. All the vast labour of European erudition has not been able to replace its utility. At every step we are obliged to differ from it, but at every step we are obliged to use it. It is a necessary springing-board, or a stair that we have to use for entrance, though we must leave it behind if we wish to pass forwards into the penetralia.

<sup>6</sup> Gita XV.15.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. II.42.