CHAPTER I

PRE-UPANIŚADIC THOUGHT

Our source of information for this chapter is two-fold: (i) the Mantras or metrical hymns composed by the Aryans after they had settled in their new Indian home, and (ii) the Brāhmaṇas, a certain other class of works which generally speaking belong to an age subsequent to that of the Mantras and may be broadly described as liturgical in character. The former have been preserved to us chiefly in what are known as the Rk- and the Atharva-samhītās. The first in its present form dates from 600 B.C. and the second from somewhat later. They are religious songs in praise of one or more deities and were intended generally to be sung at the time of offering worship to them. These songs, especially the earlier ones among them, are written in very old Sanskrit; and it is for that reason not infrequently difficult to determine what precisely their import is. The difficulty of interpretation arising from the archaic character of the language is increased by the break in tradition which seems to have occurred quite early—even before the composition of the Brāhmaṇas. To give only a simple instance: Nothing is more natural for a poet than to speak of the sun as 'golden-handed'; yet this poetic epithet appearing in a hymn is taken literally and explained in a Brāhmaṇa by a story that the sun lost his hand which was afterwards replaced by one made of gold. To these factors contributing to the difficulty of understanding aright the views of this early period, we should add the fragmentary nature of the Mantra material that has come down to us. The very fact that the hymns had been, for so many generations before they were brought together, in what may be described as a floating condition, shows that some of them must have been lost. When at last they were collected, not all of them were included in the collection, but only such as had a more or less direct bearing upon ritual,

1 See Max Müller: Ancient Sanskrit Literature, pp. 432–34.
which had by that time come to occupy the centre of real interest. The result is that the information that can be gathered from them is incomplete and one-sided. Unlike the Mantras, the Brāhmaṇas are written in prose. They profess to elucidate the earlier literature of the Mantras, but, as already stated, they misread it at times. Their chief aim, to judge from their present form, should have been the affording of practical aid in the performance of rites by getting together the sacrificial lore as known at the time when they were compiled. They indicate the prevalence then of a complicated ritual and their lucubrations have generally little bearing upon philosophy. But while explaining the nature of rites, the authors of the Brāhmaṇas sometimes indulge in speculative digressions which give us a glimpse of the philosophic thought of the age. As handed down traditionally, the Brāhmaṇas include the Upaniṣads, which usually form their final sections. But in their thoughts and sentiments they are essentially different. Moreover, the Upaniṣads are of very great importance, so much so that they have been viewed by some as the fountain-head of all Indian philosophy. For these reasons they require a separate treatment and we shall deal with them in the next chapter, confining our attention here to the Mantras and the Brāhmaṇas strictly so termed.

I

The origin of religion is shrouded in mystery and has given rise to much difference of opinion. We may take for granted that its earliest form consists in the worship of natural powers. Man, when he first emerges from mere animal consciousness, realizes that he is almost entirely dependent upon the powerful forces of nature amidst which he is placed; and, accustomed as he is in his own experience to associate all power with voluntary effort, he ascribes these forces to sentient beings working behind them unseen. In other words, early man personifies the powers of nature which in virtue of their great strength become his gods. He cultivates a spirit of awe and reverence towards them, sings
their praises and offers worship or sacrifice to them with a view either to propitiate them or to secure their favour. These deities, however, are divine only in a qualified sense, for, though called 'gods,' they are necessarily conceived in a human mould and are regarded as being actuated by the same motives and passions as the person that conceives them. They are in reality glorified human beings and are therefore neither wholly natural nor wholly supernatural. Though this faith looks simple and childlike, it is not altogether without a philosophic basis. It signifies a conviction that the visible world is not in itself final and that there is a reality lying hidden in it. It is also at bottom a seeking after an explanation of observed facts, implying a belief that every event has a cause; and to believe in the universality of causation is perforce to believe in the uniformity of nature. Unless primitive man had noticed the regularity with which natural phenomena recur and unless he were inwardly convinced that every event has a cause to account for it, he would not have resorted to the creation of such deities in explanation of them. It is true that he merely ascribed those phenomena to certain agencies supposed to be working behind them, and was therefore very far from explaining them in the proper sense of the term. Besides he was for the most part unaware that he was explaining at all. Nevertheless, there is clearly implied here a search for the causes of observed facts, however unsuccessful or unconscious it may be. Acquiescence in any kind of accidentalism is inconsistent with the spirit of such speculation.

We are not, however, directly concerned here with this early form of belief, for Aryan religion when it appears in India has already a history behind it. As an American scholar has paradoxically put it, 'Indian religion begins before it's arrival in India.' It is a continuation of the primitive faith of the Indo-Europeans to which the Aryans that came to India belonged. There are to be found even now in Sanskrit old words which serve as clear indications of this fact. The word 'deva' (div, 'to shine') for instance, which means 'god' in Sanskrit, is cognate with

1 Rel.V. p. 16.
Latin 'deus,' and points to a period when the Indo-European in his original home associated his conception of godhead with the luminous powers of nature. The spirit of veneration with which he regarded such deified powers is equally well indicated by the root *yaj*, 'to worship,' which is common to more than one Indo-European language. Again we have for example in the Vedic god Mitra the Indian counterpart of Iranian Mithra, whose cult was once in great vogue in Western Asia and Europe. These instances are sufficient to indicate what the antecedents of early Indian religion were. It had passed through the Indo-European stage as well as the Indo-Iranian in which the ancestors of the future Indians and Persians lived together and shared a common belief. The Vedic pantheon includes not only the old gods belonging to the two pre-Indian periods, but also several others whose conceptions the Aryan settlers formed in their new home, e.g. the river-deities like Sarasvati. The number of these gods—old and new—is indefinite. Sometimes they are reckoned at thirty-three and classified into three groups of eleven each according to their abode, viz.: (i) gods of the sky, like Mitra and Varuṇa; (ii) gods of mid-air, like Indra and Maruts; and (iii) gods of the earth, like Agni and Soma—a classification which, by the way, indicates a desire to discover the interrelations of the gods and arrange them systematically. They are all of co-ordinate power and no supreme God as such is recognized, although some of them are more imposing than others—particularly Indra and Varuṇa, the gods respectively of the warrior and of the pious devotee.

It is not necessary to dwell here at length upon the details of Vedic mythology. We may note only such of its characteristics as have a philosophic bearing. The first point to attract our attention in it is how surprisingly close to nature the Vedic gods are. There is for instance absolutely no doubt in regard to what constitutes the basis in nature of Agni and Parjanya. They are gods and at the same time natural objects, viz. 'fire' and 'cloud.' There are other gods, it is true, like the Aśvins and Indra, whose identity is not so transparent; but what we have to remember is that, unlike
Greek mythology for example, the prevailing type of Vedic gods is one of incomplete personalization. This is a remarkable feature seeing how far removed, comparatively speaking, Vedic religion is from its source. It is commonly described as 'arrested anthropomorphism'; but the expression is apt to suggest that the Vedic conception of divinity lacks a desirable feature, viz. complete personification, while in reality it points to an excellence—a frame of mind in the Vedic Aryan highly favourable to philosophic speculation. It may be that the particularly impressive features of nature in India, as has been suggested, explain this 'unforgetting adherence' to it; but it is at least as much the result of the philosophic bent of the Indian mind. The fact is that the Vedic Indian did not allow his conceptions to crystallize too quickly. His interest in speculation was so deep and his sense of the mystery hiding the Ultimate was so keen that he kept before him unobscured the natural phenomena which he was trying to understand until he arrived at a satisfying solution. This characteristic signifies a passion for truth and accounts not only for the profundity of Indian philosophic investigation, but also for the great variety of the solutions it offers of philosophical problems.

Another feature of early Indian religion equally remarkable is furnished by the conception of ṛta which finds a conspicuous place in the Mantras. Expressions like 'guardians of ṛta' (gopa ṛtasya) and 'practisers of ṛta' (ṛtāyu) occur frequently in the description of the gods. This word, which is pre-Indian in origin, originally meant uniformity of nature or the ordered course of things such as is indicated by the regular alternation of day and night, while in the Mantras it not only bears this significance but also the additional one of 'moral order.' The Vedic gods are accordingly to be viewed not only as the maintainers of cosmic order but also as upholders of moral law. They are friendly to the good and inimical to the evil-minded, so that, if man is not to incur their displeasure, he should strive to

1 Rel.V. p. 82.  2 Cf. Id. pp. 85, 151.  3 See Id. p. 12.  4 Contrast anṛta, which means 'untrue' or 'false.' This extension of meaning belongs to the Indo-Iranian period.
be righteous. This equal responsibility of divinity for the 
maintenance of cosmic as well as moral order is particularly 
clear in the conception of Varuṇa. He represents the sky and 
is the god of heavenly light. He is described as having fixed 
the laws of the physical universe which no one can violate. 
Through his power for instance, it is said, the rivers flow into 
the ocean without over-filling it. But his sway is not re-
stricted to the physical sphere; it extends beyond to the 
moral, where his laws are equally eternal and inviolable. He 
is omniscient so that the least sin even will not escape detection 
by him. To indicate the all-searching nature of his vigilant 
sight, the sun is sometimes poetically described as his eye. The 
conception of Varuṇa was soon superseded in Vedic mytho-
logy by that of Indra who, as we have stated above, is a 
god of battles rather than of righteousness. This has led 
some modern scholars to the conclusion that there was a 
corresponding lapse in the moral standard of the Indian.¹ 
But they forget the peculiar circumstances in which the 
conception of Indra came into prominence. The immigrant 
Aryans had to subdue the numerous indigenous tribes; and 
it was in the process of this subjugation in which Varuṇa 
—essentially a god of peace—could not well be invoked 
that the idea of this warrior-god as known to the Rgveda 
was developed. ‘Nations are never coarser,’ it has been 
said,² ‘than when they put their own nationality into 
antagonism against another nation.’ We may grant that 
during the period of Indra’s supremacy the self-assertion 
and violence which distinguish him were reflected in the 
character of his worshippers. But it was only a passing 
phase. Indra did not finally become the supreme God of the 
Indians, but had to yield place to others ethically more 
lofty so that it does not seem justifiable to conclude that in 
the Indian view might once for all replaced right. Indra 
besides is not altogether bereft of moral traits; nor is Varuṇa 
the only support of ṛta, all the sun-gods of whom he is one 
being regarded as equally so.³ Further, Varuṇa stands only 
for a certain type of theistic conception—the Hebraic, as it

¹ See e.g. Cambridge History of India, vol. i. pp. 103, 108. 
² Rel. V. p. 175. 
³ See Macdonell: Vedic Mythology, pp. 18, 65.
has been said. But the development of religious thought in Vedic India, as we shall presently see, proceeded on altogether different lines rendering the idea of divinity generally speaking more and more impersonal. The neglect into which the Varuna ideal fell in the course of the period may therefore be taken as indicating the gradual rejection then of that idea of godhead and it need not necessarily mean a fading away from the Aryan mind of the moral idea itself. That question has to be settled on independent considerations. Without entering into the details of this discussion, we may cite the opinion of Rudolph Roth, one of the deepest Vedic scholars of modern times, who in considering this question,\(^1\) reviews the fundamental conceptions of the Veda such as those touching the relation of man to god and the future state of departed souls, and concludes that it is impossible not to allow a positive moral value to them and 'esteem a literature in which such ideas are expressed.'

II

Early Vedic ritual was quite simple in its form as well as in the motive which inspired it. The gods worshipped were the familiar powers of nature, and the material offered to them was such as milk, grain and ghee. The motive was to secure the objects of ordinary desire—children, cattle, etc., or to get one's enemy out of the way. Occasionally the sacrifice seems to have served as thanksgiving to the gods for favours already won from them. The idea of sacrament also was perhaps present in some measure, the worshipper believing that he was under a sacred influence or in communion with the divine when he partook of the sacrificial meal. This simplicity soon disappeared; and, even in some of the early Mantras, we find instead of this childlike worship an organized sacrificial cult which is already hieratic. Yet the ritual in the early Vedic period cannot be said to have outgrown its due proportions. But it did so and became highly wrought in the age of the later Mantras and the Brāhmaṇas. As however the direct bearing of this development on Indian

\(^1\) JAOS. vol. iii. pp. 331–47. See also El. pp. 44, 61–62.
philosophy is not great, a detailed consideration of it is not called for here. It will suffice to indicate some only of its general features: One such feature is the great change that takes place in the character of the gods to whom offerings are made. In addition to the old ones, drawn chiefly from some sphere or other of natural phenomena, we now see honoured at the sacrifice several artificial deities. Thus the clay-pot used in a certain rite is made ‘the object of fervid adoration as though it were a veritable deity of well-nigh paramount power.’

The poet-priest, we sometimes find, chooses to glorify any insignificant thing, if it only happens to be connected in some way with a sacrifice. There is for example an entire poem devoted to the sacrificial post, and we have another which seriously institutes a comparison between the ornamental paint on it and the splendour of Uṣas or the goddess of Dawn. Symbolism also comes to prevail on a large scale. According to an old myth, Agni was the offspring of water. So a lotus leaf, betokening water, is placed at the bottom of the sacrificial altar on which fire is installed. More striking still is the change which comes over the spirit with which offerings are made. In the place of conciliation and communion as the motive, we now have the view that the sacrifice is the means not of persuading the gods, but of compelling them to grant to the sacrificer what he wants. Not only can the gods be compelled by the sacrificer to do what he likes; the gods themselves, it is thought, are gods and are able to discharge their function of maintaining the world-order by virtue of the offerings presented to them. In other words, the sacrifice is now exalted above the gods—a position the logical consequence of which is their total denial later in the Pūrva-mīmāṁsā system. It is now commonly held that in this new turn in the efforts of the Vedic Indian to accomplish his desire, we discover a distinctly magical element introduced into the ritual; and that priest and prayer henceforward become transformed into magician and spell. The relation of religion

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1 See Eggeling: Śata-patha Brāhmaṇa, (SBE.) Part V. p. xlvi.
2 RV. III. viii.
3 RV. I. 92, 5.
to magic and the extent to which magical elements enter into the Vedic ritual are matters of controversy; but we need not stop to discuss them as they are of little consequence to us here.

It should not be thought that ritualism in this extreme form was in any sense the creed of the people at large. The Mantras of the Rgveda and the Brāhmaṇas which have so far been the basis of our conclusions were the compositions of poet-priests who had developed a cult of their own, and unfold but an aristocratic religion. Even in the aristocratic circles, we may remark in passing, the excessive development of ritualism does not seem to have wholly superseded the older idea of sacrifice as what man owes to the gods, for we find that idea also persisting along with the other in later Vedic literature. Thus sacrifice is sometimes pictured in the Brāhmaṇas as a ṛna or ‘debt’ due to the gods. The creed of the common people continued to be simple and consisted, in addition to the more primitive forms of nature-worship alluded to above, in various practices such as incantations and charms intended to ward off evil and appease the dark spirits of the air and of the earth. We get an idea of these folk-practices from the Atharva-veda, which, though somewhat later than the Rgveda, records in certain respects a more ancient phase of religious belief.

III

The emphasis on rites which appears in the literature that has come down to us from this ancient period is due in part to its selective character, to which we have already referred, and therefore indicates more of the spirit of the age in which the selection was made than of the one in which that literature was produced. Yet there is no doubt that ritualism, with its implications of excess and symbolism, marks one characteristic development of early Vedic religion. There are other developments of it as well which also are attested by the same literature, though their features appear there rather faintly. We cannot, with the records at our disposal,
describe them as anything more than tendencies of thought showing themselves in the period in question. It is difficult to trace these tendencies to their proper source, because they appear in very close association with the sacrifice with the spirit of which they seem to be essentially in conflict. They may be due to speculative activity outside the circle of priests, or more probably they are the result of a reaction among the priests themselves against ritual which had become artificial and over-elaborate. Whatever their origin, they are of great importance to the student of philosophy, for in them are to be found the germs of much of the later thought of India. We shall now give a brief description of them.

(i) Monotheism.—The belief in a plurality of gods, which was a characteristic feature of early Vedic religion, loses its attraction gradually; and the Vedic Indian, dissatisfied with the old mythology and impelled by that longing for simplicity of explanation so natural to man, starts upon seeking after not the causes of natural phenomena, but their first or ultimate cause. He is no longer content to refer observed phenomena to a multiplicity of gods, but strives to discover the one God that controls and rules over them all. The conception of a unitary godhead which becomes explicit now may be said to lie implicit already in the thought of the earlier period. For, owing to the incomplete individualization of deities and the innate connection or mutual resemblance of one natural phenomenon with another (e.g. the Sun, Fire and Dawn), there is in Vedic mythology what may be described as an overlapping of divinities. One god is very much like another. Different deities thus come to be portrayed in the same manner; and, but for the name in it, it would often be difficult to determine which god is intended to be praised in a hymn. There is also to be mentioned in this connection the well-known habit of the Vedic seers of magnifying the importance of the particular deity they are praising and representing it as supreme, ignoring for the time being the other deities altogether. To this phase of religious belief Max Müller gave the name of ‘henotheism,’

\[1\] Cf. Rel.V. pp. 35, 212–220.
i.e. belief in one God as distinguished from monotheism or belief in one only God; and, regarding it as the instinct for unity asserting itself unconsciously, he represented it as a definite stage in the advance from polytheistic to monotheistic belief.¹ This view has not commended itself to many. Such overdrawing, it is thought, is natural to all religious poetry and does not consequently involve any necessary implication of progress from the thought of the many to the thought of the one. But yet this 'opportunist monotheism,' as the henotheistic tendency has been called, may be taken to have on the whole conduced to the formulation of a belief in a single God in place of the multiple deities of an earlier time.

To reduce the many gods of early mythology to one, the easiest course, we might suppose, is to elevate the most imposing of them to the rank of the Supreme. That was not the course followed in Vedic India. Varuṇa indeed at one time and Indra at another were on the point of fulfilling the conditions of a monotheistic creed in this sense; but neither did in fact become the supreme God conceived definitely as a personality. So we may say that monotheism in the ordinary sense of the term proved abortive in the Vedic period. The unity of godhead came to be sought after in a different manner then, and attempts were made to discover not one god above other gods but rather the common power that works behind them all. The basis of even this 'philosophic monotheism,' as it may be termed, can be noticed in the early Mantras, for the Vedic poets couple the names of two deities like Mitra and Varuṇa for example—sometimes of even more—and address them as if they were one. It is the outcome of this tendency that we find expressed in passages of a relatively later date like the following: 'What is but one, wise people call by different names—as Agni, Yama and Mātariśvan.'² The same is the significance also, no doubt, of the refrain of another hymn of the Rgveda: Mahat devānām asuratvam ekam: 'The worshipful divinity of the gods is one.'³ Though thus con-

¹ SS. p. 40.
² RV. I. 164. 46.
vinced that there is but one ultimate cause which accounts for the diverse phenomena of nature, the Vedic Indian felt perplexed for long as regards what its exact nature might be. He tried one solution after another, but could not rest content with any. One of the earliest ways of arriving at a unitary conception of divinity was by taking a collective view of the gods, designating them Viṣve-devas—an expression equivalent to ‘all-gods.’ Such a mode of unity may appear to be quite mechanical; but it is not really so, for it implies a consciousness of the harmony of purpose underlying the workings of nature. A more abstract way of arriving at unity was to select some one distinguishing feature of divinity—‘a predicate of several gods’—to personify it and regard it as the supreme God. Thus the word viṣva-karman, which means ‘maker of everything,’ originally appears as a descriptive epithet of Indra and the Sun. But later it ceases to be used as an adjective and becomes installed as God above all gods.\(^1\) A mere logical abstraction thus grows into a concrete god. The same thing happens in the case of several other predicative epithets. What is remarkable about these supreme gods is that none of them retains his supremacy long. ‘The god that takes hold of the sceptre lays it down soon.’ One conception is felt as inadequate and there quickly springs up another in its place, so that Vedic monotheism even of the philosophic type may be described as unstable and as continually shifting its ground. It is with the broken idols of this period, some one has observed, that in later times the temple of Purāṇic mythology was adorned.

There is no need to mention here all the gods that successively became pre-eminent during this long period. It will suffice to refer to only one of them—Prajā-pati, ‘Father god,’ the most important of them all, who is the personification of the creative power of nature. The origin of this god is similar to that of Viṣva-karman. His name signifies ‘lord of living beings’ and is first applied as an epithet to gods like Savitṛ, ‘the vivifier.’ But later it assumes the character of an independent deity which is responsible for the creation and

\(^1\) RV. x. 81, 82.
governance of the universe. This god occupies the first place in the Brāhmaṇa. There are, one Brāhmaṇa says, thirty-three gods and Prajā-pati is the thirty-fourth including them all.¹ Even in the Ṛgveda, where the references to him are not many, there is quite a sublime description.² One feels that such a deity should have satisfied the yearning of any people after a supreme God, and that Prajā-pati might well have constituted the goal in the Indian search after unity in godhead. But even he ceases to appeal to the philosophically fastidious Vedic Aryan and yields place in course of time to other principles like Prāṇa³ or ‘deified breath,’ the cosmic counterpart of individual life and Time,⁴ the maker and destroyer of all. To some of them we shall recur later.

(ii.) Monism.—The conceptions thus far described as monotheistic are often found mixed with monistic ones; and it is difficult to separate them. But yet in particular passages, the one or the other view is seen to prevail. That is our justification for speaking of them as two tendencies. Of them, the monotheistic conception, regarded purely as such, is bound to involve dualism. What it aims at is only unity of godhead—the reduction of the many gods to one who is above and apart from the world which he makes and guides. It regards nature as set over against God and can therefore satisfy the longing for unity only in a qualified sense. There is a higher conception of unity, viz. monism, which traces the whole of existence to a single source. It is fully worked out in the Upaniṣads, but is foreshadowed more than once in the literature of the period we are now considering. There are in it at least two distinct shades of such monistic thought. To begin with, there is the pantheistic view which identifies nature with God. One of its most notable expressions is found in a passage of the Ṛgveda where goddess Aditi (the ‘Boundless’) is identified with all gods and all men, with the sky and air—in fact with ‘whatever has been or whatever shall be.’⁵ The central point of the pantheistic doctrine is to deny the difference between God and nature which as we have shown is the necessary

¹ Sata-patha Brāhmaṇa, V. i. 2. 10 and 13.
² X. 121.
³ AV. XI. iv.
⁴ AV. XIX. liii and liv.
⁵ 1. 89. 10.