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THE HISTORY AND CULTURE  
OF THE INDIAN PEOPLE

# THE VEDIC AGE

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## INDO-IRĀNIAN RELATIONS

It has been shown in the preceding chapter that the undivided Indo-Irānians, as suggested by their already specifically characterized *Satəm* dialect, must have left their original Indo-European home after the Hittites and the proto-Tocharians, but before any other Indo-European tribe. After some wanderings they settled down in what may be called the Indo-Irānian original home which was situated in the Pāmīr region (Eduard Meyer) or more probably in the plains of the Oxus and Jaxartes (Ernst Herzfeld). The latter says: "From time immemorial, at least from the third millennium down to the middle of the second, the Aryans inhabited, as an undivided ethnical group, the vast plains of the Oxus and Jaxartes, the land *Erānvēj* of the two rivers Vahvī-Datīyā and Ranhā."<sup>1</sup> It is also quite clear that the Aryan principalities appearing about 1400 B.C. in Mesopotamia and Syria were "the successful creation of a group of *condottieri* and their troops who had detached themselves from the main body, while the wandering tribes passed through eastern Irān towards India."<sup>2</sup>

The undivided Indo-Irānians must have passed a long time in their Central Asian common home, for here grew up a specific Indo-Irānian culture and religion that may be reconstructed, at least partially, by comparing the Veda with the Avesta. Before the occupation of the Irānian plateau by tribes from the Indo-Irānian original home, the high land, to all appearance, was the seat of a culture that was probably matriarchal, and the people worshipped snake-gods like the primitive non-Aryans of India. It is very probable, therefore, that the pre-Aryan cultures of North-West India and Irān were of the same spirit and origin.<sup>3</sup>

This old cultural link between pre-Aryan Irān and pre-Aryan India, instead of being strengthened as a result of the migration of the Aryans into these two countries, as could be normally expected, was to all appearance completely severed, for there is nothing to show that the Vedic Aryans of India maintained an active cultural relation with their brethren in Irān.

In the earliest days the Aryans of India must have been connected with the Aryans of Irān, either as friends or as foes, but "actual historical contact cannot be asserted with any degree of probability."<sup>4</sup> The two peoples turned their backs upon each other as it were, and developed their distinctive civilizations apparently without the least mutual

influence, although in language,<sup>5</sup> culture, and religion their similarity in the earliest period was little short of identity. When later in history,<sup>6</sup> under the Achaemenids, Greeks, Bactrians, and Śakas, the Irānians and the Indians were forced to meet as citizens of the same empire, they met as complete strangers, not as cousins of the same family.

Geographical barriers are no doubt to some extent responsible for this apparent mutual oblivion, as also the fact that from the Indo-Irānian common home the pre-Indians and the pre-Irānians expanded in two almost opposite directions. All this, however, cannot explain the complete cessation of cultural contact between Irān and India even as early as the Rigvedic age. The Irānians had retained a distinct memory of the Indo-Irānian common home (Erānvēj) in their mythology, but the Indo-Aryans, who must have developed their distinctively Indian Rigvedic culture about 1500 B.C. at the latest, have nothing to say on this point. It is indeed difficult to get away from the idea that the silence maintained by the earliest Vedic Indians on Irān and the Irānians was at least partly intentional, for some of the geographical names prove beyond doubt that the period of immigration had not been so long as to have completely obliterated all memory of the land they left behind. Thus the names Rasā, Sarasvatī and Bāhlika, not to speak of others, must have been brought to India from Irān by the Aryans and applied to two Indian rivers and one Indian province.<sup>7</sup> The reticence maintained by the Vedic Aryans about immigration from Indo-Irānia was, therefore, at least partly intentional, for otherwise it would seem that those parts of the *Rigveda* in which possible or probable Irānian names occur, were composed already in Irān, as Hillebrandt actually suggested.<sup>8</sup>

Incompatibility of some sort between the earliest Aryans of India and Irān has to be assumed to explain this camouflaged indifference, and it is also clear that this incompatibility was the cause of their divergent movements from their common home and ultimately destroyed the cultural unity between Irān and India of the pre-Aryan days. Seeds of such incompatibility which later developed into mutual hostility can be clearly seen already in the oldest Aryan religion and cult of these two countries. The primitive Indo-European religion recognized only nature-gods (sky, sun, wind, etc.) and a fire-cult.<sup>9</sup> But already the undivided Indo-Irānians knew a soma-cult beside the older fire-cult, and abstract deities<sup>10</sup> beside the older nature-gods. Indo-Irānian society had therefore ceased to be culturally homogeneous even before the forefathers of the Indian and Irānian Aryans parted company, and it is hardly to be doubted that their parting was more the effect than the cause of the cultural contrast revealed in religion. The old Indo-European term *\*deivo* (= Indo-Irānian *\*daiva*) was apparently considered inappropriate for the new abstract and ethical deities, and a new term, *Asura*, perhaps borrowed from a higher civilization,<sup>11</sup> came to be used as their designa-

tion. Varuṇa was the chief of these ethical deities just as Indra was the chief of the older nature-gods.<sup>12</sup>

The fact that about 1400 B.C., in the well-known treaty-record discovered at Boghaz-köi, the *Daiva*-gods Indra and Nāsatya appear side by side with the *Asura*-gods Varuṇa and Mitra, clearly suggests, as Christensen<sup>13</sup> has pointed out, that the antagonism between the worshippers of the *Daiva*-gods and the *Asura*-gods—which is the central feature of early Indo-Irānian history—had not yet broken out. But it was in full blast long before the advent of Zarathustra whose Gāthās should be dated about 1000 B.C. on linguistic grounds, as shown in the preceding chapter.

The antagonism between the worshippers of the new gods and the old must have been one of the main causes of the estrangement and subsequent secession of those Aryans who later conquered India, but their antagonism was not confined to the field of religion alone. Christensen<sup>14</sup> has suggested that the *Asura*-religion was practised by the more cultured and steadier elements of the primitive Indo-Irānian society whose chief occupation was agriculture and cattle-breeding, while the older *Daiva*-religion continued to find favour with the more vigorous but less civilized portions of the people to whom the primitive predatory habits were more congenial: the former were content to remain behind in Irān, but the latter, urged by the spirit of adventure, advanced farther east and at last entered India. But all of those who remained behind were not *Asura*-worshippers, nor all of those who braved the hardships of the forward march into India were adherents of the *Daiva*-religion. The *Daiva*-inscription of Xerxes,<sup>15</sup> discovered in 1935, clearly shows that even so late as the fifth century B.C. *Daiva*-worship had to be forcibly suppressed within the Achaemenian empire. And in India we meet with the curious situation that in the oldest period all the great gods received the title *Asura* as a decorative epithet, though later it came to be used exclusively as a term of abuse. In innumerable passages in the Brāhmaṇas the *Asuras* have been represented as superior to the *Devas* in the arts of civilized life, and both in Vedic<sup>16</sup> and Puranic tradition they are regarded as the elder brothers of the gods. They are as far above the *Dāsas* and *Rākshasas* as the *Devas* themselves.

All things considered, it seems difficult to deny that along with the great horde of *Daiva*-worshipping Aryans came to India also a culturally superior strong minority of *Asura*-worshippers, whose cult and religion was slightly different from that of the former and who were for that reason ceaselessly cursed and condemned by the Vedic Aryans, more out of jealousy, it would seem, than out of contempt. For if the Vedic Aryans intentionally suppressed all reminiscence of the Indo-Irānian original home, as suggested above, would they not also have suppressed the memory of the *Asura*-worshippers in the same way if they could? But

this they could not, because some *Asura*-worshippers were physically present among them.

The earliest Indo-Aryan society, too, like the earliest Indo-Īrānian society, was therefore not quite homogeneous culturally. It was predominantly—but not exclusively—*Daivic*, while the contemporary Īrānian society was predominantly *Asuric*. After a period of conflict and adaptation there was peace which proved successful to the extent that even the foremost of the *Daiva*-gods, namely Indra, not only came to be regarded as an *Asura* in the oldest parts of the *Ṛigveda*, but was also credited with possessing *māyā*, which was a special property of the *Asuras* and probably signified “magical power.”<sup>17</sup> It is hardly an accident that in Hindu mythology the architect of the gods is an *Asura* whose name is Maya: the rude *Daiva*-worshippers apparently regarded the superior arts and crafts of their rivals as achieved by magic.

In spite of the *Daiva*-bias of the Indians and the *Asura*-bias of the Īrānians their culture and religion continued to be essentially the same till the advent of Zarathustra in Īrān. Zarathustra's position is more or less analogous to that of the Buddha in India and Orpheus in Greece, both of whom protested effectively against the ceremonial slaughter of animals in the name of religion, but not by far so vehemently as Zarathustra.<sup>18</sup> In his *Gāthās* Zarathustra condemns in bitter terms the orgiastic festivities at which the *Daiva*-worshippers, inebriated with Soma, offer bloody sacrifices to their gods, extinguishing amidst shouts of revelry the life of the innocent bull.<sup>19</sup> It is clear that the ritual practices against which Zarathustra directed his homilies closely resembled those of the Vedas. A large number of common cult-words such as *haoma* (= *soma*), *zaotar* (= *hotā*), *athravan* (= *atharvan*), *manthra* (= *mantra*), *yazata* (= *yajata*), *yašna* (= *yajña*), *āzūiti* (= *āhūti*), etc., and also the whole sacrificial cult, leave no doubt that Vedic and Avestan ritual are of one and the same origin.<sup>20</sup> Evidently, the Zarathustrian reform could not materially alter the essentially Vedic character of the Soma cult cherished in Īrān from ages before his time.

In the field of religion and mythology, however, Zarathustra was more successful. But here, too, the points of similarity are striking enough to prove previous identity. The ceremony of *Upanayana* is practically the same in the Veda and the Avesta, and in both the conventional number of gods is the same, namely thirty-three. Both in the Veda and the Avesta the picture of the gods is primarily that of an heroic Aryan warrior riding in a chariot drawn by powerful steeds. Like the Vedic gods those of the Avesta too hold up the sky to prevent its falling down, and image-worship is equally unknown in the Avesta and the Veda. Varuṇa, like his Avestan opposite number Ahura, assisted by Mitra (Avestan Mithra), is the supreme guardian of moral law, and the conception of cosmic order is represented in both by the same abstract deity, the Vedic

Ṛita = Avestan Aša.<sup>21</sup> Even the notorious discrepancy between the Vedic and Avestan Indra will disappear if the history of this god, as reconstructed by Benveniste and Renou,<sup>22</sup> is kept in view. Their ingenious theory may be summarized as follows: In the Indo-Irānian epoch there were two different gods, Indra<sup>23</sup> and Vṛitrahan (*vṛitra* = resistance, *vṛitrahan* = resistance-breaker). Indra was nothing but a concrete personalization of mere physical prowess, known in the legends of most primitive civilizations, but he was too *Daivic* to suit the taste of the stern reformer Zarathustra who did not hesitate to send him to Hades. But the Lord Resistance-breaker, i.e. Vṛiθragna, whose function it was to break the resistance put up by evil, continued his glorious career within the Irānian pantheon. Indra and Vṛitrahan were united in the same person only later in the Vedic age. In short, Vedic Indra is the Indo-Irānian Indra (mentioned at Boghaz-köi) *plus* Vṛitrahan, whereas Avestan Indra is the Indo-Irānian Indra *minus* Vṛitrahan. There is no discrepancy, therefore, between Vedic Indra and Avestan Indra if it is remembered that the history of Indra is in reality the history of two different gods who influenced each other in two different ways in Irān and India.

The Nāsatyas who in the Boghaz-köi inscription are mentioned side by side with Indra and Varuṇa also appear in the Avesta, though as a demon<sup>24</sup> like Indra, and even the minor Vedic god Apāñ-ñapāt is represented in the Avesta by a god of the same name. To the Vedic Gandharva corresponds the Avestan Gandarəwa, and to the Vedic Kṛiśānu the Avestan Kərəšāni.<sup>25</sup> In the Veda, Yama, the son of Vivasvat, is the ruler of the dead, in the Avesta, Yima, the son of Vivanhant, is the ruler of paradise.<sup>26</sup> Examples can be multiplied to show that in spite of the Zarathustrian reform, the Irānian religion continued to be much the same as before. On the whole it seems that Zarathustra's reform was not so much a break with the past as a determined and partly successful effort to reassert the principles of the old Asura religion by ridding it of all *Daivic* contaminations.<sup>27</sup> This is suggested pointedly by the curious fact that not content with consigning to Hades the prominent *Daiva*-gods like Indra, he changed the name also of the chief *Asura*-god Varuṇa into Ahura Mazdāh.<sup>28</sup> That Zarathustra dropped the name while retaining and raising to the highest honour the personality of this god is apparently because in the previous age—at the time of the Boghaz-köi tablets at any rate—he had lived in the corrupt company of the *Daiva*-god Indra. For a similar reason Zarathustra avoided the word *Baga* "god" of Indo-European origin, though it occurs in the pre-Zarathustrian parts of the Avesta and in the Old Persian inscriptions,<sup>29</sup> for an Indo-European word of religious connotation could not but have *Daivic* associations.

So long as it was believed that the *Gāthās*, because oldest in language, give also the oldest picture of the Aryan civilization of Irān, it was by no means possible to see that the society described in the Veda and the Avesta

is essentially the same. But it has now been fully established that the civilization of the Gāthās is a later reformed civilization of Irān, of which a much older phase is reflected in the Yašts, particularly the so-called heathenish Yašts, i.e. the Yašts which have suffered least from Zarathustrian revision.<sup>30</sup> And the culture reflected in these pre-Zarathustrian heathenish Yašts is essentially that of Vedic India. The very Haomacult, which is rightly regarded as the chief indicator of Indo-Irānian cultural unity, is not only pre-Zarathustrian but definitely anti-Zarathustrian, and could be retained in the post-Zarathustrian religion of Irān only because the prophet—clearly out of policy—did not specifically mention Soma in prohibiting intoxicating drinks: from this omission it was argued by Avestan theologians that all other intoxicants are impure, but not Haoma.<sup>31</sup> Benveniste has demonstrated that the Persian religion of the Achaemenian age, as described by Herodotus, agrees not at all well with that of the Gāthās, but shows significant points of similarity with the Vedic religion.<sup>32</sup>

The notorious difference in burial customs between Irān and India entirely vanishes on scrutiny. The custom of exposing dead bodies in *dakmas*, which is unknown in India, was not of Persian origin, but a Median custom confined to the Magi. It became the customary funeral rite of Irān only in the Arsacidan age, and is mentioned for the first time in the Videvdāt, a product of the Arsacidan period. The Achaemenian monarchs, whose Zarathustrianism cannot be seriously doubted, were placed in elaborate grave-chambers after death, and it is nowhere recorded that the corpse of any one of those mighty emperors had been thrown to birds and beasts.<sup>33</sup>

The ancient Aryan culture of Irān was thus hardly distinguishable from the ancient Aryan culture of India. And that is as it should be, for both were derived from one and the same Indo-Irānian culture.

1. *Iran in the Ancient East*, 1941, p. 190.

2. *Op. cit.*, p. 192.

3. *Op. cit.*, pp. 11, 177.

4. *Ved. Ind.*, I, p. 505.

5. Linguistic affinity between the earliest Aryans of India and Irān has been discussed by the present writer in *Linguistic Introduction to Sanskrit*, pp. 26-47 and *IC*, VII, pp. 343-59.

6. For the history of later Indo-Irānian relations see *CHI*, I, pp. 323 ff.

7. See *Vedic Index* under these three names. Zimmer was even of opinion that Vedic *Rasā* directly refers to Irānian *Ranhā*, i.e. Jaxartes (*AL*, p. 16).

8. *Ved. Myth.*, first ed., Vol. I, pp. 99 ff.; Vol. III, pp. 372-8. Older attempts to read Irānian history and geography in the Veda have been briefly dealt with by Jackson in *CHI*, Vol. I, pp. 322 ff., and more recently by Keith in *Woolner Comm. Vol.* (1940).

9. Cf. the fires of the Prytaneia in Greece, Vestal fire of Rome, Gārhapatya fire of India (Keith, *RPVU*, II, pp. 625-6).

10. Like Vedic *Rita* = Av. *Aša* (to be pronounced *arra*, from *arta*).

11. As I have suggested elsewhere (*IC*, VII, p. 339), this term is probably nothing but the personal designation of the tutelary deity of Assyria used as a generic



- name by the Indo-Irānians who must have come in direct or indirect contact with the Assyrians during the period of Kassite ascendancy, for the Kassites on the one hand borrowed from the Indo-Irānians the word *sūrya* and on the other conquered Assyria. Cf. Thomas, *JRAS*, 1916, pp. 362-6.
12. Varuṇa was originally a nature-god no doubt, since the equation Skt. *Varuṇa* = Gr. *Ouranos* has to be accepted (see Keith, *IC*, III, p. 421). Yet the natural basis of this god had been usurped by *Dyaus pitā* = *Zeus patēr* already in Indo-European times, and as a result he became a pronouncedly ethical god. Varuṇa's associate Mitra, too, was originally a nature-deity—a sun-god—as I have tried to show before (*IC*, III, p. 63), but he too had to lose his natural basis to the more powerful *Sūrya*.
  13. *Kulturgeschichte des Alten Orients*, p. 211.
  14. *Op. cit.*, pp. 211-12
  15. See Sukumar Sen, *Old Persian Inscriptions*, pp. 148-56.
  16. See Keith, *RPVU*, II, p. 457.
  17. See *IC*, VII, pp. 61-62. Benveniste has shown that the conception of *Māyā*, by means of which Indra and his Irānian opposite number *Vṛiθragna* could assume different forms at will, dates from the Indo-Irānian epoch (*Vṛitra et Vṛθragna*, pp. 32 ff., 194).
  18. Irānian tradition would make Zarathustra more or less a contemporary of Buddha and Orpheus (if, as is generally thought, they were historical persons), but according to Eduard Meyer (*Geschichte des Altertums*, second edition, third volume, p. 110, fn. 3) it is an inexplicable thing that anybody should think so. That Eduard Meyer was right can be hardly doubted, although weighty opinions have been raised against his view. The mention by Assurbanipal about 700 B.C. of Assara Mazaš along with seven good angels and seven bad spirits is a clear indication of acquaintance with the reformed Zarathustrian pantheon (see *CHI*, I, p. 76). It is impossible therefore to suggest that the *Kavi Vištāspa* mentioned in the *Avesta* as the patron of the prophet was no other than the father of Darius I (522-486 B.C.), for in that case the Zarathustrian pantheon could not have been known in Assyria in the days of Assurbanipal.
  19. See Christensen, *op. cit.*, p. 220.
  20. See Hillebrandt, *Rituallitteratur*, § 2.
  21. See footnote 10.
  22. In *Vṛitra et Vṛθragna*, Paris, 1934.
  23. The name of this god is to be derived from Hittite *innar*—"strength."
  24. *Avestan Naonhaithya*, to be pronounced *Nōhaithya*.
  25. To be pronounced *Kṛiṣāni*.
  26. See Macdonell, *VM*, § 5.
  27. I expressed a different view in *IC*, VII, p. 338.
  28. Darmesteter has aptly said that Ahura Mazdaḥ is no more different from Varuṇa than Zeus is from Jupiter (*SBE*, IV, p. lii).
  29. See Herzfeld, *Altpersische Inschriften*, p. 106.
  30. See Christensen, *op. cit.*, pp. 214 ff.
  31. *Op. cit.*, p. 229.
  32. *The Persian Religion*, Ratanbai Katrak Lectures, Paris 1929, pp. 32 ff.
  33. See Herzfeld, *Iran in the Ancient East*, 1941, pp. 216-17.