

ON THE BEGINNINGS OF INDIAN PHILOSOPHY

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The oldest monument of Indian poetry is, at the same time, the oldest monument of “Indo-European” poetry. It is the Ṛg-Ve-da, “The Knowledge that consists in Verses.”

The “Indo-European” languages constitute one of the now best known old languages of the world (beside the “Semitic” languages). Its members cover the greatest part of Europe: the Celtic languages, the Germanic languages, the Romance languages (all of them are daughters of Latin, one—and the most important—of the old Italic languages). They include Greek, Albanian, and, further the Baltic and Slavonic language families; some of its members are spoken in parts of Asia: Armenian, Iranian, and Indo-Asian languages and, now not any longer alive: Hittite in Old Asia Minor and so-called Tocharian in Turkestan, both of them discovered and deciphered only in this century.

The language of the Ṛgveda is the oldest known form of Sanskrit, the sacred language of India, spoken by Indian scholars as a language of instruction and on the occasion of learned discussions up to the present day and documented in a vast literature running through at least three thousand years.

The Ṛgveda (RV), not the oldest, but one of the oldest literary documents of the world, holds a high position among the essential documents of the history of mankind that tell us about its intellectual past.

In fact, the scientific interest of the RV is of a complex nature. It has a number of aspects that provoke and fetter our attention.

First, there is its linguistic interest. Ṛgvedic Sanskrit is of utmost importance for the early history of the Indo-European languages. Together with old Greek, but also with other old Indo-European languages, in particular with old Iranian, it offers the greatest help in the attempt to get a clear and comprehensive picture of the grammatical and lexicographical build-up of the mother of our Indo-European languages, which we call the Proto-Indo-European language, and of which we have no direct testimonies, but

which we can within certain well-defined limits, reconstruct by comparing the languages of our oldest texts, that is, documents preserved in a language derived from Proto-Indo-European.

Sanskrit, in particular its oldest form: Vedic Sanskrit, has been of decisive assistance in deciphering the Old-Persian text of the cuneiform inscriptions of Darius the Great (reigned 522-486 BC) and his successors (one of the great achievements of historical linguistics of the past century). Of equal help it was also in deciphering and understanding the sacred texts of the Zarathustrians, the so-called Avesta, one of the great religions of Western Asia in an old East-Iranian language (the language of the cuneiform inscriptions is South-West-Iranian).

It was my interest in the linguistic phenomenon Sanskrit-in Vedic Sanskrit—in particular—that was responsible for my adding the study of the Old-Indian language Sanskrit to my study of Classical philology, that is of Greek and Latin languages and literatures, in the early phases of my University studies (in the early twenties).

Soon, however, I could not but detect that the linguistic interest of Sanskrit is not its only, and by far, not its most important and attractive one for a young scholar.

This Sanskrit language proved to be not only a heap of highly interesting grammatical forms and lexicographical items—it was the vehicle of a variegated and long literary tradition, which, starting about the middle of the second millenium BC, stayed alive not only for centuries, but for millenia, flourishing in several branches: as poetry in verse and prose, lyrical and epic, in expression of sentiments and in tale-telling; in the tradition of ethical values and in the development of scientific literature: philosophical, epistemological, logical, metaphysical, and linguistic literature: grammatical and lexicographical.

It was a literature of great religions: Vedism, Brahmanism, Hinduism, of Mahāyāna Buddhism, a literature branching off into vernacular literatures in languages derived from Sanskrit but of equal or similar literary dignity: in Pāli, as the holy language of Hīnayāna-Buddhism, in Mahārāṣṭrī and Apabhraṃśa as the languages of Jainism and Jaina literature. All of this rich development having its eventual germ in Old Vedic literature, in particular the RV, that collection of a bit more than a thousand poems of various length, the shortest one with three verses, the longest one counting 52 verses.

While learning in the course of my studies to look at things in this way, I started to exchange my interest in the reconstruction of the Proto-Indo-European language, for my interest, if I may say so, in the prehistory of the Ṛgvedic language—for the interest in the RV as the starting point of a great literature, as the beginning of a religious and philosophic culture that had not only lived and flourished in India, but had spread out beyond its borders and had a tremendous impact on the culture and the ideas of the greatest part of Asia, especially on what in Europe is called the Far East.

There was an exciting feeling of intellectual adventure, of widening my personal horizon. It was coupled with the ever growing conviction that the European intellectual world knows too little of the world outside Europe, that we are prone to talk of “humanities”, mistaking, at the same time, European culture and civilization as the culture and civilization of humanity, of which we form but a small part.

In the first instance, Ṛgvedic poetry is religious. Poetry intended—chiefly, if not exclusively—to accompany the rites and rituals of a particular religion. Understanding the RV means not only to understand its language—which, by the way, is itself a rather difficult task; it is, grammatically and lexicographically, often quite different from what we call “classical Sanskrit,” the sacred language of the Indian Middle Age, which we know quite well thanks to a number of indigenous grammars and lexica, which we owe chiefly to Buddhist and Jainist monks—understanding the RV, I was saying, means not only to understand its language, but much more to understand the religion that forms the background of its poetry.

I need not enter, here, into a discussion of how and in which complicated manner the ideas of this religion and the way in which they are interconnected were first to be drawn out of the wording of the verses and how these verses receive their full, meaningful sense on their part.

But allow me to say a few words on some characteristic features of the Old-Vedic religion, as they stand now, after many years of study, before my eyes.

The Old-Vedic religion—the Vedism, as I shall say in short henceforth—is a polytheism. One verse of the RV (3.9.9 = 10.52.6) speaks of 3339 gods, obviously meaning to call them innumerable.

Yet, it is a polytheism of a rather peculiar kind: it is a polytheism without

temples and idols. By this peculiarity Vedism is distinguished from by far the most of all polytheisms known to us—not least from modern Hinduism, which yet is nothing but the result of development of this very Vedism.

In modern Hinduism, the temple is the *mandir*, the house of God, where he is visited by worshipping man.

In Vedism the gods are called *devas*, i. e. “heavenly ones.” It is not man who pays them a visit in order to show them respect and to worship them. It is the gods, who live in heaven, that visit man, who lives on earth, in order to be worshipped by him, to give him occasion to come into contact with them.

The sacrificial act accompanied by verses and poems of the RV is according to the *original* idea—a hospitable reception, it is a stylized meal to which the gods are invited by poems of invitation and during which they are praised by poems that celebrate their great deeds, their beneficial actions, their greatness, and power.

The very words *arya* and *ārya* by which the old Iranians and the old Indians designate themselves, serve as their ethnical self-denominations, originally mean: “friendly to strangers,” “hospitable,” which, accompanied by the connotations “helpful” and “good,” later on develops into “noble.”

The sacrificial act, in other words, is an act of hospitality, an act by which the Arian Indians show their noble sentiments towards strangers when they come to them as guests.

All this is, by the way, likewise true in the case of the religion of the old Iranians, as far as it is known from the Avesta and from the reports of the Greek historian Heródotos (484-425 Be).

Likewise, the gods of Vedism and the gods of old Iran are closely related, often they bear the same name.

In both old religions the gods are, originally, of two types. They form two groups. It seems, they existed side-by-side in peaceful coexistence, later on they are looked upon to be in rivalry, or even opposition or hostility.

The first group consists of personified powers or objects of nature. We have a personified sun, a sun god, a personified earth, a personified fire, water, sky, morning, dawn, and so on.

By personifying and worshipping the powers and objects of nature, seemingly

blind forces are turned into moral beings. Vedic nature worship clearly stands for the idea that nature does not act willfully or capriciously, but rather is in the hands of beings that act according to moral, ethical standards: lightning will hit the liar and traitor, but spare the just and pious; the monsoon wind will bring rain and fertility to him who acts in accordance with divine, that is ethical, concepts; the sun will shine for the benefit of the good.

The gods that appear and work in nature and natural events are called the *devas*, that is “the heavenly ones.”

The second group of divine beings consists of personified ideas, social or moral concepts, essential for man, not in his dependence on natural forces and happenings, but—in his relation to other men, his social environment, his requirements and duties as a member of human society. They are the guardians of a rightful, just and peaceful life.

Some important representatives of this group, called—not *devas* “heavenly ones,” but—*asuras* “lords,” are:

The male god *Mitra*—, a personification of the neutral concept *mitra*—“contract, treaty,” the male god *Aryaman*, a personification of the neutral concept *aryaman*— “hospitality,” the god *Bhaga*—a personification of the concept *bhaga* — “fair share” —a god of “just distribution, justice” ; then—

the god *Varuṇa* a personification of “truth, true speech” . . .

As the other *asuras* watch over:

the keeping of a contract or treaty, over the duties of hospitality, over the justice in the distribution of deserved shares and so on, respectively-

Varuṇa watches over the truth of solemnly spoken words: the words of a promise or a vow, the keeping of an oath, the words of a poet—who is, according to worldwide-spread conceptions, a speaker of truths: poetry is—for archaic thinking—essentially the art of formulating truths, of revealing the true nature of things, earthly or heavenly, of happenings and events, of human and divine persons.

In every religion, accepted by a civilized society that feels itself to be bound together by the same spiritual and ethical values, there is one moral idea that stands out prominently and commands a particular dignity and rank.

In Mosaic religion, as manifested in the Thora and the other books of the so-called Old Testament, it is the idea of Justice: God is just; in the religion founded by

the preaching and teaching of the Old-Iranian prophet Zarathuštra it is the idea of wisdom: God is Wisdom (Ahura Mazdā: “Wisdom the Lord”); in Christianity it is the idea of love: God is Love; in Islam it is the idea of exclusive obedience shown to the one and only one almighty God: “there is no god but God”; in “Mahāyāna Buddhism” it is the idea of Compassion, personified in figures like Amida Buddha and Avalokiteśvara.

In Vedism it is this very idea of *truth*, watched over jealously by the great God-King Varuṇa, the god “Truthfulness,” if I may translate his name literally.

In the religions derived and developed from Vedism, the idea of truth has kept its prominent place.

When the dead body is carried to the pyre on the banks of the Ganges, the bearers chant in Hindi:

Rām nām sat hai
sat bolnā gat hai

“The name of God is Truth; speaking the truth is salvation.”

The most famous and serious of all Hindus of this century, Mahātmā Gāndhi, has called his autobiography: “The story of my experiments with truth.”

Truth is the basis of all human social relations. It is one of the basic moral entities.

For archaic man, and in particular for the Vedic Indian, it is more than that. There exists in truth a *magic force*. Man uses this force when swearing and cursing, but also when composing and reciting sacred poetry. For “sacred poetry,” that is higher truth, hidden to common man, but revealed to the poet's eye when it “in a fine frenzy rolling doeth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven.”

Truth as a magic force even has a cosmic function. Through the magic force of truth cosmic order was established and preserved, that is, for example, through true predictions and solemn promises of the gods:

RV 4. 42. 4 *ṛ téna putró áditer ṛ tāvā*

utā tridhātu prathayad vi bhūma

"Through truth the truthful son of Beginninglessness (*aditi*) [that is the asura Varuṇa] has spread out the threefold world (i. e. earth, space and firmament);

RV 1. 67. 3 [ajó ná ksām] dādhāra pṛ thivīm
tastāmbha dyām mántrebhiḥ satyaiḥ

"[Like a goat the ground] he (Agni) has made the earth firm, he has propped up heaven by true sayings."

A late Vedic text (Mahānārāyaṇa-Upaniṣad 63. 2) says:

satyena vāyur āvāti | satyenādityo rocate divi |
satyaṃvācaḥ pratiṣṭhā | satye sarvaṃpratiṣṭhitam |

"Through truth wind blows hither, through truth the sun shines in the sky; truth is the basis of speech; on truth everything is based."

These ideas about the magic power of truth were clearly discerned, first, by significance for the character of vedic theology and cosmology by H. Lüders. His classic treatment of the subject was made by the introduction to H. Lüders' work "Varuṇa" by the editor, his pupil L. Alsdorf. I confess it changed basically, I may say, revolutionized my conception of vedic religion when I first read it (in the beginning of the fifties). It should be made or considered compulsory reading for every vedologist.

By words that reveal the true nature of things by naming them according to their characteristic quality, the poet reveals the true nature of the world—of the world that is before our eyes, but also of the higher world that is beyond sensual perception: the world of the gods and powers that determine the destiny of man. The poet interprets the world.

Interpreting means looking for causes and origins. Mythology personifies and

deifies origins: The cause of light is the sun; hence we get a male god Sūrya “the one in the sun” (derived from *s(u)var-/sūr-n.* “sun”). The sun is preceded by dawn: we get a female goddess: *uṣ as-* f. “Dawn.” The monsoon rains, essential for the fertility of the land and hence responsible for the nourishment of man and beast, are brought by the winds blowing from the sea: the male “Mar-ut” (literally: “blowing from the sea”). Fire provides warmth in wintery coolness and is essential for the preparation of food: it is personified as *agni-*, the male god “Fire”; rivers and streams offering water for irrigation the year through, giving occasion for washing and bathing, forming, in many cases, protection against hostile attacks—themselves sources of manifold benefit, thank their origin, their direction, their regular flow to the victory of a hero vanquishing evil powers that grudge them to the living world: Victory is personified and deified and then replaced by the deification of the hero who once won the victory decisive for the preservation of life.

In a religion without idols and statues, sacred poetry must flourish as in old India: it is the word of the poet that puts the figures of the gods before the imagination of the listener, it has to replace the works of the painter's brush and the sculptor's chisel.

The quest for origins and the attempt to divine them by creating imaginative symbols will, eventually, lead to the quest of an origin of origins, the origin of existence, the origin of the universe.

It is now when unreflected mythology is becoming questionable. The poet suddenly feels himself confronted by doubts. He detects contradictions in his fanciful constructions. He starts feeling less sure about the reliability of his visionary imagination.

With this, philosophy is born. The oldest philosophers are poets, philosophy is the child of mythology, and its direction is towards cosmology.

This is so in old Greece: after Hesiodos, the great poet of mythology follows the representatives of natural philosophy: Heraklitos, Empedokles, Anaxagoras, Demokritos and so on.

And that is so in Old India.

The oldest philosophical texts of India we possess are some poems in the RV, that is in its youngest layer.

Already in my student days—in the twenties, almost 65 years ago—I became acquainted with them in a seminar held by my great teacher Heinrich Lüders, in Berlin:

“Philosophische Hymnen des RV”:

“Philosophical hymns of the RV.”

This seminar was one of the highlights of my student days.

Of course, I did return to these interesting texts again and again and made myself familiar with similar old philosophical texts, as e. g. the *Iśa-Upaniṣ ad*, a poem added to the *Samhitā* of the White Yajurveda—that collection of sacrificial formulae used by a special priest, the *adhvaryu* at the sacrificial ceremonies.

The understanding of these vedic philosophical poems is a hard job.

Philosophy in verses, philosophy as poetry—

who would seriously deny that poems are not the most suitable vehicle for abstract thoughts?

The historical development in India—as well as in old Greece—gives an affirmative answer in a most distinct language: the philosophical poems of the RV, the poetry of the *Iśa-Upaniṣ ad* are followed by the great prose *Upaniṣ ads*, the prose discussions of the *Chādogya*—and *Bṛ had-Āraṇ yaka-Upaniṣ ads*—gems of Sanskrit prose, culminating points in philosophical world literature.

The oldest verse-*Upaniṣ ad*, the *Iśa-Upaniṣ ad*, if taken as a unified statement would be a jumble of contradictory statements. Over 20 years ago, I have tried to show that the *Iśa-Upaniṣ ad* in fact is not a statement, but a discussion—and a rather lively one, between thinkers opposing each other by taking and defending different standpoints. It is a dialectic dialogue—like the philosophical discussions of Plato—only shorter, and in its argumentation much more concise.

The same is true of certain philosophical poems of the RV.

What was considered, in my student days and what was considered by myself for many years after to be somewhat awkward attempts at harmonizing standpoints that

in reality cannot be brought into harmony, turned out to be meant as discussions of thinkers opposing each other, from which there did emerge, in the end, a final truth—a “*siddhānta*”—triumphantly superior to all former views and formulations—yet containing an element of each one of them.

Let me refer here, in all modesty, to my treatment of an often treated and talked of cosmogonic poem of the RV, RV 10. 72 (Festschrift Ernst Risch, Berlin 1986).

Hermann Oldenberg, one of the leading—or rather the leading vedologist of the generation preceding my own, spoke with reference to this poem of a “mystisches Wirrsal” —a “mystical jumble” or “confusion.”

I have tried to show that this judgment rests on a misunderstanding of the character of the poem. The key to a fair appreciation of it lies in a correct understanding of the first verse, which clearly announces the intention of the poet. He did not want to offer a coherent statement on the origin of the gods and the world—as was taken for granted by the great Indian commentator Sāyaṇa (14th cent. AD) and, as far as I can see, by all Western interpreters, too. He wanted to depict a discussion between several thinkers:

RV 10. 72. 1 *devānāṃ nū vayāṃ jānā*
 prá vocama vipanyáyā |
 ukthéṣu śasyámāneṣu
 yáḥ páśyād úttare yugé |

“We here, we want to proclaim the origins of the heavenly ones—by competitive effort in spoken pronouncements, [in order to see] which one [of us] will see/recognise them in this later age.”

No less than *seven* different speakers can be distinguished in the following eight verses, each of them offering his own view on the sequence of events at the time of creation. It is a discussion, in which mythological statements and ideas of natural philosophy are confronted and brought to a concluding view, to a *siddhānta*, a synthesis. Unfortunately I can, at this occasion, not unfold the details of this rather complicated—but by no means jumbled—discussion. It would take me at least two

hours to clear up all the difficulties and intricacies of this most interesting dispute.

But I shall give you another example of this kind of discussion, which perhaps is simpler and easier to deal with. Let us take RV 10. 129, a famous poem, too, and, looked at from the philosophical point of view, the very summit of R̥g-vedic thought. The poem deals with the mystery of original beginning, the mystery of how existence came into existence.

10. 129

(as understood by Dr. R. Söhnen and myself in a recent discussion)

1 *nāsad āsīn nó sād āsīt tadānīm*
nāsīd rájo nó V(i)yóma paró yát |
kím ávarīvaḥ kúha kásya sárman?
ámbhaḥ kím āsīd? -gáhanaṁgabhīrám||

“There was not anything non-existing, nor was there anything existing at that time [of creation] : there was no space, nor was there a firmament [that could have been] beyond it.

What was there covering? Where, in whose protection was there anything? Was there water? —A deep thicket (impenetrability)!”

The verse asserts, at some long passed time, there was absolutely nothing existing, not even anything non-existing. The idea is: you cannot speak of anything non-existing if nothing does exist that could be negated. Darkness, e. g., is just the negation of light. If there is no light, you cannot even talk of darkness. Any answer, how from this absolute nothingness the would of life could have arisen, cannot be given: there is no way out of this thicket, this deep intellectual impenetrability.

The second verse offers a somewhat different conception:

2 *ná mṛ tyúr āsīt amrtám ná tárhi*
ná rátr(i)yā āhna āsīt praketaḥ |

*ánīd avátáṃsvadháyā tād ékaṃ
tásmād dhányán ná paráḥ kīṃcanása||*

“There was no death, consequently no life either; there was no distinguishing mark of night and day (that is: neither darkness nor light).

There breathed without wind, by its own strength, that single one: beyond that there was certainly nothing else.”

A second speaker, as we should presume, opposes his own conception: You are right (he is saying), in denying the existence of anything at that time: neither death nor life, neither darkness nor light did exist.

But one thing, single and alone, did breathe and hence did exist—though it did not live in the sense we think of living: it “breathed” —but paradoxically without wind / air (which would have been a second thing); and by breathing it “lived,” but paradoxically without death.

And now there comes a third speaker maintaining that beyond that *one* thing certain other basic entities must have existed from eternity—even before creation:

*३ táma āsīt támasā gūḍhám ágre
'praketáṃsaliláṃsárvam ā idám |
tucchi(i)yenābh(ú)v ápihitaṃyád āsīt
tápasas tám mahinājāyataikam ||*

“There did exist, in the beginning, darkness covered by darkness (that is: darkness without light); all this (what is now the universe) did exist as undifferentiated saltwater/brine;

that germ that did exist covered by emptiness was born by the mightiness of heart (i.e.: it was hatched like an egg).”

That means: beside the one germ the last speaker spoke of, there must have been certain other things: darkness, saltwater/brine, and heat.

We see: the discussion going on, the number of things to be postulated as original is growing. The next speaker increases it further:

4 *kāmas tād āgre sām avartatādhi*
mānaso rétaḥ práthamaṇyád āsīt |
sató bándhum ásati nir avinden
hṛ di pratiṣyā kaváyo manīṣa ||

In the beginning desire developed into this heat, [desire] that was the first seed (result) of thinking.

The poets found the origin of what exists in that what not exists, having searched in their heart with spiritual rapture.”

In the last verse it was affirmed that the germ, presupposed already by the last but one speaker “was born by the mightiness of heat.” Our verse, or rather: the speaker of our verse, tries to answer the question whence this heat came. The answer is: the heat came from desire and desire from thinking. We get then, a genealogy: *manas* “thinking” → *kāma*- “desire” → *tapas*- “heat.”

That desire presupposes thinking or a thinking mind seems self-evident and in Sanskrit expressions for “desire” like *manoja*-, *manobhava*-, *manasija*-, all “born from or in the mind” is abundantly documented.

More difficult to understand is that *tapas*- “heat” presupposes “desire.” Yet—we ourselves speak of a “hot passion,” an “ardent desire,” etc. The birth of heat out of desire is quite common in India just in theistic reports on creation. I call to mind a typical story from the later Brāhmaṇ as:

“Prajāpati (the Lord of creation) was alone. He desired: Might I become many, might I procreate. He became hot (*sa tapo 'tapyata*).

In natural philosophy there is, of course, no room for a “lord of creation.” What remains, after his elimination, are abstract entities like: “thinking,” “desire,” and “heat.”

If the poets found the origin of “existing” in the “non-existing,” as it is said in

our verse, the poet seems to want to say: the “concrete,” as that which is actually perceivable, is younger than the “abstract” as that which exists only in thinking.

Perhaps we cannot be quite sure on this particular point. Anyway, essential for us is that the following verses strictly contradict all the preceding positive statements, that is verses 2-4. We have a return to the purely negative statements and the agnosticism of verse 1. Dr. Söhnen consequently recommends to understand verses 5-7 as spoken by the speaker of verse 1, and I think this quite a convincing proposition.

Verse 5 starts: *tiraścīno vītato rāsmīr eṣ ām*

“there was a rope stretched athwart those [poets] (hindering them to proceed further, stopping them) —

and the following verses deny in clear words that anything can be known for sure with regard to the origin of the world.

6 *kó addhá veda ká ihá prá vocat
kútaājātā kúta iyám viṣṭ ṣ ṭ ih |
arvāg devā asya visárjanena
athā kó veda yáta ábabhūva ||*

“who knows for certain, who will proclaim it here [for certain], from where this creation [is] :

On this side of the creation of the world are the gods (they being created themselves). Then, who knows from where (from which original beginning) it has come?”

7 *iyáṁ viṣṭ ṣ ṭ ir yáta ā babhūva
yádi vā dadhé yádi vā ná |
yó asyādhyak ṣ aḥ paramé v(i)yóman
só aṅga veda yádi vā ná véda ||*

“From where this creation has come, whether it was done [by some agent] or not—

He who is the overseer of this world in highest heaven, *he* certainly knows, or

does he not know?”

With this there is reached, already in the oldest document of Sanskrit literature, a philosophical standpoint—the insight into our own ignorance—that in Old Greece was reached only by the great Socrates († 399 BC), who had to die because of his agnosticism which seemed impious to his contemporaries, and which Plato, his pupil, makes him formulate in the famous words:

Σύνοισα ἔμᾶντώ οὐσἔ ν εἰσότι

“I know that I do know nothing.”