

# CHAPTER 1

## THE EARLIEST TIMES OF WHICH WE HAVE THE GLIMMERINGS OF RECORD

Let us try to take our minds back to the days— and this, of course, cannot be other than conjecture—when humanity first evolved for itself a language; when, out of the various sounds proceeding from the mouth, people started to create a system of communication, some way they could make other people understand their thoughts. Let us think of those days, and try to imagine what the process must have been like.<sup>1</sup>

No doubt the evolution of language took place, not all at once, but over centuries and millennia; and no doubt, too, that it took place independently in several different locations on the globe. The people living in the territory known today as China must have evolved their language independently of the Aryans, and they independently of the Semites; the African peoples must have their own language evolution, and so must the native people of the Americas. However, one conclusion seems inescapable, no matter where language evolved: the first words of humanity must have conveyed their meanings *by their very sounds*.

It seems also most likely that the first words of any language were very simple, and therefore short; most of them were probably monosyllabic, and a few bisyllabic; not too many could have started out as polysyllabic tongue-twisters. The commonest “word” in this regard is, of course, one of the first we all learn as infants to speak and to recognise: **ma**, arising most probably from the action of sucking at the breast.<sup>2</sup> The word for “mother” is similar in so many languages and even groups of languages that there seems to be little doubt that it evolved in such a fashion; for we find it with a **-m-** sound in a great many different parts of the world: in Hebrew it is **אִמָּא imā**, in Arabic it is **umm**, in Chinese it is **mu**, while in almost all Indo-European languages it is derived from the Vedic **मात्रं mātr**, which in Hindi and Gujarati becomes **माँ mā**, in Italian and Spanish **madre**, in German **mutter**, in Russian **мать mât**, in French **mère**, and in the mouths of children—in most European countries at least—**mamma**, **mummy**, **maman**, **mom**, **mum**, **ma** and so on.

This word is somewhat unusual, in that it is common not only to different languages but even to different groups of languages. However, a similar phenomenon is exhibited by most basic words within any one language group.<sup>3</sup>

The earliest words of human beings, then, would have had to

<sup>1</sup> The work I have attempted in this book is perhaps best described as what the ancient Greeks called a **history**, which term in their minds meant simply an *inquiry* (into anything). I have, however, tried to keep to a chronological scheme as well, working forwards in time. This does not mean, of course, that I have neglected to conduct an inquiry into other, non-chronological aspects of life; and indeed I have ranged over a very wide spectrum of subjects, for I am by temperament a dilettante or amateur (in the original senses of these words), and delight in delving into this and that as whimsy may dictate, without much regard for the neat classification schemes of professional scholars (whose works I find boring, mostly). The reader may not find here, perhaps, the kind of fare for which a university professor would give good grades; but if you love life and are interested in virtually every aspect of it, you will probably find this treatise quite enjoyable—and perhaps provoking as well.

<sup>2</sup> When I originally drafted these words I had not yet become a father; and so it came as something of a surprise to me to observe that my first son, when he started to speak, said “daddy” before he said “mummy”. However, one baby does not a linguistic generalisation make, and it would be interesting to find out what other infants first say (our son’s first sounds—not meaningful words but simple noises—contained a lot of hard **-g-** sounds in them; and he also did not breast-feed for long after his birth, which might have had some effect on his vocalisations). In any case the existence of the **-m-** sound in so many words for “mother” surely indicates something. —Note, too, that we do not say that the word for “mother” is the *first* one babies utter: all we are saying is that it very often contains the **-m-** sound, and that this might be because of breast-feeding.

<sup>3</sup> It may interest people to know—if they do not already—that by far the largest such group is the Aryan (or Indo-European, as most western linguists prefer to term it): it includes most of the languages of Europe and India, as well as the languages of Persia with all their variations through the ages. It is a fascinating thing to see Norwegian words reflected, for instance, in Bengali, or the great similarities between modern

convey their meaning by their very sound: at a time when not only dictionaries, but even education as we know it, did not exist, only such a process could enable newly-coined words to gain wide acceptance. And this is where “mere” conjecture ends and fascinating evidence begins: for some of the clearest examples we have of this process actually taking place is to be found in the Indo-Iranian Hymns: the *Vedas* and the *Gathas*.

So we find, for instance, the Vedic word for “arrow”: इषु **ishu**—one might almost hear the arrow whizzing past: “ishoo!” Or the word तत् **tat** “that”: one might almost visualise the speaker pointing something out to another person and saying “tat!”—“That’s what I’m talking about!” Or the word हन् **han** “to smite”, “to kill”—the very sound made by the killer, no doubt, as he brought his club down with a forceful exhalation of breath on the head of his enemy.<sup>4</sup> The Sanskrit word जलम् **jalam** “water” is a veritable one-word-sonata, mimicking, of course, the soft tinkle of water as it flows over stones in a brook. The Vedic भ्रक् **bhrk**, as its sound echoes, signifies “the blazing of the fire”; while the Avestan **druj** or **drug**, which means “liar”, “villain”, “evil one”, finds itself reflected in our own English “dark” as well as the slang term “dreck”.

These, then, are some of the origins of our words—even our English words. The term धातु **dhātu** “element” was, by later Indian linguists, given to the (mostly) monosyllabic “roots” of Indo-European words; and the Vedic and Avestan tongue is based upon a common system of such elements or roots,<sup>5</sup> which are used in various ways to build up the words of the language as it evolved, attaining greater and greater complexity.

So we find the element धृ **dhr** “to hold”, “to sustain”, “to support”—giving rise to the words धरति **dharati** “earth” (for she *supports* us all); धर्म **dharma** “the moral and spiritual code or law (which *sustains* society)”; and धारणम् **dhâranam** “holding”, “wearing”. In like manner we find the root शृ **shr** “to hear”, which gives rise to the words श्रुति **shruti** “that which is heard” (*viz.*, the *Vedas*, which were *chanted* or *sung*, and therefore *heard*), and the Iranian **sraoshem** which means, more or less, “devotion”, “obedience”, “willingness to *listen*<sup>6</sup> (to the Voice of the Deity)”—a word which, in later Iranian theology, became indeed the name of one of the highest angels. We find the element पृ **pr** “to fill”, which gives rise to the Sanskrit पुर्ण **pūrṇa** “perfect” or “complete”, and to the Iranian **pouru** which also means the same thing; we find इष् **ish** “to wish” (in which English word the sound of the original root still resonates, even after all these millennia), giving rise to the Sanskrit इच्छा **ichchâ** “desire” and the Iranian **aeshem** “passion”. We find the root या **yâ** “to pray” giving rise to the Vedic यान्य **yânya** and the Avestan cognate **yanim**, both signifying “worshipful”, “adorable”,

Lithuanian and ancient Sanskrit—the more astonishing when one remembers the enormous territorial and chronological spread of Aryan geography and history. Such wide distribution is not found, for instance, in Africa; the various peoples of South Africa alone speak at least fifteen different languages, most of them mutually unintelligible. (Of course, research on African languages has not been carried out with anything like the intensity it has been on Aryan or Semitic tongues; and with further study, who knows but links hitherto undiscovered may well be found.)

<sup>4</sup> And from which sound, perhaps, the **Huns** derive their well-deserved name! The **Hungarians** are their descendants; and they had close contact with the Vedic people also, who more often called them by their alternative name, **Tur**—whence the term **Turks**. The Romans called their chief, Attila, “the scourge of heaven”; and they had a reputation no less fearsome among the Vedic folk, who must have thought their name well suited them.

<sup>5</sup> The word “root” is somewhat of a misnomer here, for it is derived from the peculiar fashion in which Semitic (*not* Indo-European) languages construct their words: from different vowels tacked on to tri-consonantal combinations. This system—we shall have cause to study it further later on—is obviously a much more sophisticated development than the ancient Aryan monosyllabic *elements*. However, when western linguists began to study Indian languages—which was relatively recently, as compared to their study of Semitic tongues—they carried over the terminology already familiar to them from their study of Hebrew and Arabic; and this included the term “root”. Since their work was the pioneering such effort, the term has stuck; so we too will be using it from time to time, even though the alternative term “element” (as Indian linguists used to call it) is perhaps more appropriate.

<sup>6</sup> The imagery is very apt, even for speakers of Semitic tongues: for in Hebrew the word for “discipline” is מִשְׁמָע **mishma’at**, deriving from the triconsonantal Semitic root ש-מ-ע **sh-m-’a** “[to] listen”. In English too a frustrated parent will often chide a disobedient child with “Why don’t you *listen*?”; and the similarity between the Italian words **udire** “to listen” and **ubedire** “to obey” may also be telling us something.

“sublime”. The element वस् *vas* “to cover”, “to protect” has given rise to the Indian वस्त्र *vastra* “clothes” and the Iranian *vas-tarem* “protector”, as well as the Latin *VESTITURA* again meaning “clothes”; while नृ *nr* has given rise, on both sides of the Indus, to नर *nara* “man”, to नृप *nrüpa* (*naripesh* in Persia) meaning “king” or “prince”, and even to नारायण *Nârâyana* in Sanskrit, and *Naroish-naro* in the Zend, which connotes something like “the Supreme Man”, or “the Best of Men” (literally “the Man in men”)—that is to say, God.

An examination of the Vedic and Gathic Songs leaves no doubt whatsoever that both of them are based on a common linguistic foundation.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, as we shall see, from references in later writings we can deduce that the Iranians were able to understand, even if they did not speak, the version of this common speech used by the Indians, and *vice versa*. This being so, it is also understandable that the legends of the two peoples are based on common foundations.

One of the oldest and most remarkable of these legends, found in slightly differing versions both in India and Iran—and also, to a smaller extent, in Greece and Northern Europe—concerns a personage known in Sanskrit as यम *Yama*. In Iran he was called *Yima Kshaeta*, the latter part of this name derived from the root क्षि *kshi* “to rule”.<sup>8</sup> The name *Yima Kshaeta* means, therefore, “Yima, the King”. In India he is often called simply *Yama*, although at times he is also referred to as a King, यम राज *Yama Râja*. Iranians of a later age compressed his double-barrelled name into one: “*Jam-shed*”. *Jamshed* is also at times called a *Paighambar*, that is, a Messenger (of God), or Prophet. According to Indian legend, *Yama* was, with his twin sister *Yami*, the first of mortals. (The Aryan word *Yama* literally means “twin”, and this is reflected in the cognate Græco-Latin term *GEMINI* “the twins”, who also occupied the Greek and Roman pantheons.) As a result of being the first man to die, *Yama* found the way to the world beyond, the पितृयान *Pitryâna*, “the Way of the Fathers”; and having found the Way, became the King of the Dead. He figures prominently in the *Katha Upanishad*,<sup>9</sup> in which he teaches a young Brahmin by the name of नचिकेतस् *Nachiketas* (*Nasi Kshaeta* in Iranian) the ultimate secret of the Life Beyond. In this *Upanishad* the name *Yama* is synonymous with Death: thus he is at times addressed as मृत्यु *mrütyu* “Death”. But his teachings are those of a Seer, a *Rishi*;<sup>10</sup> indeed, the entire *Katha Upanishad* is devoted to his spiritual teaching as imparted to young *Nachiketas*. Therefore, although not specifically referred to as a Prophet in the Indian tradition, his rôle in this *Upanishad*, and also elsewhere, is certainly sufficient to confer upon him that status *de facto*; as a matter of fact one of his numerous epithets is धर्म राज *Daharma Râja*, “the King of *dhar-*

<sup>7</sup> There is, as many people living in Europe know, something of a difference between *dialects* and *languages*, though at times it seems more like a quantitative difference than a qualitative one. Thus, for instance, although the Neapolitan dialect is almost unintelligible to many Florentines, a few weeks’ sojourn in Naples sets the matter right to a large extent, even without additional schooling—something that cannot be said for a sojourn in Zürich or even in Paris. The ambiguity is illustrated, however, by the Piedmontese dialect; for it is at times unclear whether it is a dialect of Italian or of French—or of both. It is perhaps best—given these parallels—to look upon the Vedic and Gathic tongues as two *dialects* of the same basic *language*.

<sup>8</sup> This element survives in Europe too, where it was used even in ancient times, forming part of such terms as the Latin *REX* “King” and the Gaulish suffix *-rix* “chief” (as in “*Vercingetorix*” and “*Astérix*”). The *-r-* sound in these European terms also finds its way into Indian languages, as in the terms *Râjâ* and *Râñi* (“King” and “Queen” respectively), and in the word *Rakshâ* “protection” (for it was the king’s or chief’s duty to *protect* his people): whence also the name *Gurkhâ*—a contraction of *go-rakshaka* “protector of cows”. Both the *-r-* and the *-x-* sounds, therefore, were used royally by the Aryans: the latter, in a hardened version *-c* or *-ck*, surviving to our own days in such names as “*Frederick*”.

<sup>9</sup> The *Katha Upanishad* is one of the 108 *Upanishads* of Hinduism. I haven’t the faintest idea why it is so called; but no doubt I shall in due course receive letters from well-informed readers dispelling my ignorance. It is a powerful work though, and contains some memorable lines (some samples are given later). For our work its importance lies, however, principally in its references to *Yama*.

<sup>10</sup> Ancient Indian Sages were called *Rishis*: a more accurate romanisation, however, would be *Rûshi*. Nevertheless, because it is used so often as *Rishi*, in the rest of this book we shall leave it as such. The term is derived from the Indo-European root *rta* “right” (of which English word it also happens to be the origin). The term *Rishi* as well as its Iranian version *Ratu* thus means “[a] Righteous [person]”. Zarathushtra is the only Sage exalted enough in the Iranian tradition to have earned the title *Ratu*; however in Indian lore the equivalent term *Rishi* was applied to hundreds of notables; in fact anyone whose compositions merited inclusion in the Vedas was called so, and there were many post-Vedic *Rishis* too. (The term *Mahârishi*—rendered popular in the West by the followers of Mahesh Yogi of *TM* fame—simply means “great *Rishi*”).

ma”, or sometimes simply **Dharma**.<sup>11</sup>

**Yama**, then, was a King who was also a Seer, a Sage, a **Rishi**, a “Righteous Person”. It is he who is said to have established the Iranian New Year, which is called after him **Jamshedi Navroz**, and which is celebrated to this day, even by some Muslims in Iran, and certainly by many Zarathushtrians all over the world, on the 21st of March, the day of the spring equinox, when all Nature puts forth her festive garments after the cold of the winter. The fact that his calendar is based on the Solar and not the Lunar cycle is no surprise, for Yama is the son of **विवस्वत Vivasvata** (Sanskrit) or **Vivanghato** (Iranian), the Sun. He therefore is also called at times **वैवस्वत Vaivasvata**, “the son of the Sun”. According to Iranian tradition, he lived forty-two generations before Zarathushtra, and was the originator of several of the customs of the Vedic people, many of which were taken over unchanged by Zarathushtra into the religion he founded. One of the most important of these was the worship of the Sun as a symbol of the Supreme Being.

**Yama**, according to Indian legend, also had a brother, whose name was **मनु Manu** (and as a matter of fact it is from his name that the word “man”—in north-European as well as in north-Indian languages—is derived). **Vaivasvata Yama** and **Vaivasvata Manu** were, therefore, among the earliest ancestors of whom the Aryans had any collective memory. From **Manu** are said to have descended the Kings of India, and from **Yama** the Kings of Iran. Zarathushtra, the “Prince of **Râjî**”,<sup>12</sup> who is said to have been born in a Royal family, is said to have descended from **Yima Kshaeta**.<sup>13</sup>

The name **Manu** also finds its way into the Iranian as **Manu Chihar**, another ancestor of Zarathushtra (although not, obviously, the same person as the original **Manu Vaivasvata**.) The name **Manu Chihar** has come down to us as **Minocher**, a common name among Parsis to this day. **Manu Vaivasvata** is also considered, in the Indian tradition, to have been a Seer: for among Hindus he is the original Law-giver, and his Code is the famous **मनु समृति Manu Smṛiti**, which, although not as highly revered as the **Shruti** or Vedas, nevertheless commands very high respect: so much so that the very term “mind” (**मनस् manas** in Sanskrit, **manangho** in Gathic) is derived from his name.

These, then, are legends which were themselves legendary at an epoch which to us is itself legendary: that is, they are among the oldest legends in the world. For they were current, obviously, at a time when the ancestors of the Indo-Iranians had not yet quite separated into an eastern or Indian branch on the one hand, and a western or Iranian branch on the other. So it might be interesting to speculate on the approximate dates of the epoch referred to in these tales. As we shall see, this period goes back

<sup>11</sup> The word **धर्म dharma** is in Indian philosophy a very rich one, and the evolution of its meaning is almost a vignette on the evolution of the Sanskrit language as a whole. Originally (as we said already on page ...) it derived from the term **धृ dhr** “to hold”, “[to] sustain”; and thus became the general term for what in the West one would call “religion” (indeed in ancient times the term “Hinduism” did not exist, and what we now call “Hinduism” was simply referred to as **dharma**—or sometimes **sanâtana** (“eternal”) **dharma**. Later, when Buddhism hit the scene with philosophical concepts refined to a degree never before—nor since—attained, it stretched the meaning of the term **dharma** (in its original sense of “that which sustains”) to its logical limit, and began to refer to (literally) anything and everything as **dharma**: for, it argued, even the most evanescent and ephemeral dream sustains at least the illusion of reality—which in any case is what “real” reality also appears to be, when examined minutely enough. Indeed the word **dharma** (or rather its Pali equivalent, **dhamma**) is used precisely in this way in the very opening line of the **Dhammapâda** (a book whose title itself means “Path of **Dhamma**”: it is the most important scripture of the **Theravâda** or Southern School of Buddhism. To quote:

**मनोप्युद्भक्त्वा धम्मा मनोसेत्था मनोमया ।**

**Manopubbangamâ dhammâ manosethhâ manomayâ** “[All] things emerge from the mind; [they are] sustained by the mind [and are] created by the mind.”

<sup>12</sup> **Râjî** being the name of the city where he was born. We shall have a lot to say about this city later, which has not gone unmentioned in the West (from references to it in the Apocrypha of the Bible). We need not go deeper into it at this point, but it is well to keep our eyes open for further references to it later on in this study.

<sup>13</sup> The legends of **Yama** or **Yima**, the son of the Sun—and it is to be re-emphasised that stories about him are indeed just that: *legends*, even if they could well be based, as we may reasonably assume, on some actual facts—these legends seem to have spread (in somewhat more drastically altered form) even to Japan; for in Japanese mythology the first mortal as well as the first Emperor of Japan was **Jimmu**, born of the Sun-goddess. Since we know that the original inhabitants of Japan were a fair caucasian-like people—gradually pushed northwards by later arrivals, the ancestors of the Japanese of today, who came from China and/or Mongolia—the descendants of which aboriginal race, the Ainu, live to this day in Hokkaido, the northern-most island of the Japanese archipelago: and since it is not at all certain that the Japanese did not borrow to some extent from the Ainu (they appear to

much farther than has hitherto been imagined by most people.

In the early years of the 20th century **Lokmānya** Bal Gangadhar Tilak, the celebrated Indian patriot, took upon himself to carry out a landmark-setting labour of love: he conducted an immense amount of research on the dating and the epoch of ancient Aryans in general and of the Vedic Hymns in particular, and his conclusions are set forth in several books, of which one of the most pertinent for our present purpose is entitled *Orion: or Research into the Antiquity of the Veda*. In this study, which is extremely intricate and detailed, he has made some highly interesting correlations between certain astronomical phenomena mentioned in the Vedic Chants, and the actual occurrences of these phenomena as determined by modern science; and he has analysed these correlations in the light of internal evidence derived from the language and subject matter of the Hymns.<sup>14</sup> According to these calculations (and leaving out for the moment the detailed analysis by which these conclusions are arrived at, although we shall return to the subject later), Tilak determined that the earliest Vedic Hymns were composed at least six thousand, and perhaps as far back as ten thousand thousand years ago. (Vedic Hymns were not all composed at the same time; in fact some of them are likely to be, not just several centuries, but several millennia, removed from others. The present arrangement of the Vedas, which according to tradition is the work of the Sage **Vyāsa**, is not chronological, so it is a little hard to tell which Hymns are the earlier ones and which the later; however, the language of several of them appears to be far more “primitive” than that of others, and closely approaches the most basic roots of the Aryan tongues, while the terminology of other Hymns is more complex and derivative in nature: a feature which enables a rough chronological arrangement to be made, into “early”, “middle period” and “late” Vedic Hymns).<sup>15</sup>

Now Tilak’s method of dating the Vedic Hymns—which has been subsequently further elaborated and refined by more recent scholars—is rather hard to challenge, based as it is on easily verifiable astronomical calculations; and on this basis alone, if on no other, one may say that the beginnings of Vedic composition go at least as far back as the earliest works of ancient civilisations anywhere in the world.

But the legends of Yama and Manu speak of a time anterior even to the dates arrived at by Tilak, and in order to determine the epoch of these Kings, we have to go back to the legends themselves for a clue.

One remarkable feature of the legend of Yima as recounted in Iran is the prediction by King Jamshed of the Ice Age. It is said that Yima the son of Vivanghat was King of a fair and pleasant land—one which, although snowy in winter, became a de-

have borrowed from everyone else!), it should not be too farfetched to conjecture that the legend of **Jimmu Tenno** (“**Jimmu** of Heaven”) was taken over by the Japanese from this very Aryan-looking folk. (There is not much doubt as to the racial identity of the Ainu with the Europeans, and their racial distinctness from the Japanese and Chinese of today: which can only mean that both the Ainu and the Europeans descended from common ancestors—perhaps originally living, as we shall have cause to show, in central Siberia. It is, by the way, surprising to see how surprised some Europeans are at being asked to believe that Aryans wandered all over Eurasia from Pacific to Atlantic, when they know very well that the Huns—referred to later also—had in later ages roamed over virtually the same vast territory! Indeed in recent times skeletons more than nine millennia old, bearing what anthropologists think are distinctly “Caucasoid” characteristics, very distinct from the bone structure of the aboriginal inhabitants of North America as we know them today, have been unearthed even in the “New World”—the most recent among them being one washed up along the shores of the Columbia River in Canada—which shows that at least some Aryans may actually have gone over from Asia to Alaska during or just after the Ice Age).

<sup>14</sup> One criticism levelled—and fairly, I admit—against this method of dating is that we cannot be completely certain as to the interpretations of ancient astronomical terms, which were quite different from ours. However, there are a number of such references, and they cannot *all* have been misinterpreted; and moreover they are supported by other, non-astronomical clues as well. Even though each single such clue is perhaps inadequate to establish our conclusions “beyond reasonable doubt”, when taken all together they weigh upon our sense of admissible evidence rather heavily. We shall be developing this theme as we go along; for even though the jury is still out (at least in the West) on the subject of the antiquity of the Vedas, we hope by the end of our testimony to enable it to reach a fairly conclusive verdict.

<sup>15</sup> It is to this relatively recent (*circa* 1500 BCE?) arrangement that we owe the idea that the Vedas are four in number. Originally, however, the entire body of Vedic material formed part of just one vast undifferentiated lore; and for this reason the word denoting it is often used in the singular (as **Veda**), making it clear that this is how it all started out. We shall therefore be employing in this book both the singular as well as the plural forms of the term **Veda** for denoting the same thing; for it is simply a matter of viewpoint.

lightful and glorious garden with the onset of Spring, with the coming of the New Year. However, because of the sins of the people—against which Yima the Righteous had warned them—nature, in a terrifying demonstration of Divine Judgement, turned the entire realm into an icy and bleak wilderness, where snow lay thick and heavy from the tops of mountains to the deepest valleys, and living things were killed off by fierce deadly frost. Some of the inhabitants, who fled south, escaped the wrath of Nature; but many perished under the Ice.

It would appear, therefore, that the country described in these legends is neither India nor Iran; in fact, it must have been considerably to the north of both, very possibly the inner heart of what we now refer to as Siberia, perhaps the area around Lake Baykal: the deepest, clearest, most capacious and most unique lake in the world.<sup>16</sup> And the catastrophe to which they refer may be no less an event than the Ice Age, which covered Siberia (as well as many other parts of both Eurasia and North America) with enormously thick and vast glaciers.

And if the legends do indeed refer to the Ice Age—and, as we shall see further on in this study, there is a lot of additional evidence to support this hypothesis—we may say that Yama Vaivasvata lived anything from ten to eighteen thousand years ago:<sup>17</sup> for that, according to the best geological evidence we possess, is when the most recent great glaciation of the northern hemisphere occurred!

Again, therefore, we are drawn back into the womb of Time: to an age when, as we pointed out earlier, language itself was taking form: a time when human sounds came to be ascribed meanings, a time when people began to speak for the first time in history. It is *this* which makes the Vedas so profound, so splendidly, deeply beautiful: sacred in their very sounds themselves. Their words are themselves filled with power, vitality, music. The Chants express, in sound made almost tangible, some of the deepest, most fundamental and inner-most thoughts, emotions, aspirations and experiences of man. Listen, for instance, to these words of a company of **Soma**-drinkers,<sup>18</sup> as recorded in the *Rigveda*:

अपाम	सोमं	अमृत	अभूम्
apâma	somam	amrita	abhoom
अगन्म	ज्योतिर्	अविदाम	देवान्
aganma	vyotir	avidâma	devân

We have drunk the **Soma**, and become immortal;  
We have seen the Light, and have known the gods.

<sup>16</sup> During the course of this book I shall work up the theory that Lake Baykal is indeed the original “**Mâna-sarovara**, beyond the Himalayas”—the sacred Lake on the shores of which the Vedas are traditionally thought to have been composed. In more recent epochs another lake beyond the Snowy Mountains, lying however much closer to India—in what is now Chinese-controlled Tibet—began to be called “**Mâna-sarovara**”: for by then the Indians had almost forgotten that they originated in the heart of Siberia (on which theory too we shall throw some light in our treatise). This lake in Tibet is obviously not the original “**Mâna-sarovara**”, for it lies in a desert, and does not possess anything like the lush flora and fauna with which the Vedic Sages appear to have been familiar; and it is also not situated in an Aryan land. Many archaeological and other data reinforce this hypothesis, which we shall discuss several times in our pages.

<sup>17</sup> Recent scientific evidence has indicated that around 10,000 years ago—well after the major Ice Age had come to an end—there was a “mini-Ice-Age” lasting a few decades, which was caused by a large amount of meltwater flowing down the St Lawrence Basin (in North America) into the Atlantic, thus causing the Gulf Stream to sink down below the surface of the ocean: fresh water being lighter than salt water. As a result, Europe was deprived of the warming waters of the Gulf Stream, and this plunged Eurasia into a (relatively) brief period of intensely cold weather once again. It is quite possible that this is the event referred to in the legend of **Yima Kshaeta**; and if so, it would bring forward the date of this King considerably more than the real Ice Age. Even so, however, it would still push his date far enough in the past to antedate any other Prophet or Sage ever mentioned in any other legend or religion.

<sup>18</sup> We shall have quite a bit more to say about **Soma** further on in this book™. Just at this stage it is perhaps sufficient to mention—for those new to this term—that **Soma** was a kind of beverage (alcoholic or not we do not know) whose effect was apparently quite mind-blowing. The art of brewing it has been lost now; and we really have no idea even of the ingredients that went into it (though some claim it was extracted from a plant known to modern botanists as *ephedra vulgaris*): but there can be no doubt, from the numerous references to it in both Indian and Iranian legend, that it was in Vedic times quite a real psychotropic potion, and no mere figment of the imagination. (And many of my friends—especially western—would dearly love to uncork a bottle: for I have often been asked if I know how to concoct the stuff!)

Mark the sound of the word **अभूम् abhoom** “we have become”. The concept “to be” is expressed, in English no less than in Sanskrit, by two roots: the root **भु bhū** gives rise to our word “be”, while the root **अस् as** gives rise to our word “is”. Could there have been a better selection than **abhoom** for the singers’ ecstatic “high”, their feeling of having almost *exploded* as a result of this psychedelic experience? “What mortal can now harm, or foeman vex us more? For we beyond alarm, as gods immortal soar!”

किं नूनं अस्मद् कृणवद् अराति ।  
किं उ धूर्तिः अमृते मर्तस्य ॥

The Veda is the most sacred of Indian sacred lore. It cannot accurately be termed “scripture”,<sup>19</sup> for the word “scripture” is derived from the Latin word **SCRIBERE** “to write”. But the Veda was not written down; in fact, for millennia it was considered to be a grave sin to put to writing a single line of the Vedas—they were to be *heard*, to be *listened to*. All the sacred writings of India are considered to be less sacred than the Hymns; and even the *Bhagavad Gītā*,<sup>20</sup> in which the Supreme Lord Himself in His own words points out to Arjuna the path of duty on the battlefield of the Kurus, is considered by Hindus to be **स्मृति smṛiti**, the sanctity of which is lesser than that of the Vedic **श्रुति shruti**. Not even the *Upanishads*, which according to one tradition are **shruti** no less than the Vedas—and of which the most important, the *Īshopanishad*, is taken bodily from the 40th chapter of the *Yajurveda*, are considered quite as holy as the Chants. Even in the matter of philosophical inquiry into the Nature of the Divine—a field in which the Upanishads excel, perhaps more so than any other scripture of any other religion—even in this arena of thought is the Veda traditionally considered superior. I confess I myself doubted this tradition at one time, having found in the Upanishads such unforgettably beautiful lines as these:

न तत्र सूर्यो भाति न चन्द्र तारकम्  
नेमा विद्युतो भान्ति कुतो अयमअग्निः ।  
तमेव भान्तमनुभाति सर्वम्  
तस्य भासा सर्वमिदं विभाति ॥

“There [that is, in the Divine Realm] the Sun shines not, the Moon has no splendour and the Stars are blind; there these lightnings flash not: how then shall burn this earthly fire? All that shines is but a shadow of His Shining; by His Shining all this shines.”

... and I used to wonder whether any more profoundly ex-

<sup>19</sup> It is not often appreciated how greatly Semitic religions have influenced European thought (*via* the impact, of course, of the Bible). Thus it surprises modern Europeans to find that the sacred texts of India are not *scriptures* at all, but rely solely upon an oral record and tradition—the surprise so great that for such materials no truly appropriate word—like **shruti** in Sanskrit—even exists in European languages. This astonishment, by the way, provokes even greater astonishment in our own minds when we recall that most of the ancient religions of Europe relied upon precisely this sort of unwritten lore: for Homer, in whose works we first find the Greek gods mentioned, wrote nothing, simply singing his poems as he wandered from place to place; and we have it on the testimony of Julius Caesar (in his *Gallic Wars*) that the Celtic Druids used to “commit to memory vast quantities of poetry (**MAGNUM NUMERUM VERSUUM**)”. How well the Europeans of today have forgotten their own ancestors, and their works!—We shall also discuss, in Chapters 4 and 18, just why this has happened.

<sup>20</sup> The *Bhagavad Gītā* (often simply called the *Gītā*) is the most popular of all Indian scriptures. A comparatively short text (142 verses in all, capable of inclusion in a booklet fitting into the tiniest pocket), it is perhaps the most violent exhortation to non-violence in all the world’s literature; for its basic purport is to persuade Arjuna, the **Pāndava** prince, reluctant on the battlefield to take up arms against his own kith and kin even though they had wronged him, to fight: which persuasion is undertaken by **Sri Krishna**—revered by Hindus as an incarnation of The Supreme Being Himself—by pointing out that the soul is immortal, and can never be slain. The message of the *Gītā* has been succinctly put into terms accessible to western minds in a short work composed by the American poet Ralph Waldo Emerson, entitled *Brahma*, and reproduced here below for illustration’s sake:

“If the red slayer thinks he slays,  
Or if the slain think he is slain,  
They know not well the subtle ways  
I keep, and pass, and turn again.  
“Far and forgot to me is near;  
Shadow and sunlight are the same;  
The vanished gods to me appear;  
And one to me are shame and fame.  
“They reckon ill who leave me out;  
When me they fly, I am the wings;  
I am the doubter and the doubt,  
And I the hymn the Brahmin sings.  
“The strong gods pine for my abode,  
And pine in vain the sacred Seven;  
But thou, meek lover of the good!  
Find me, and turn thy back on heaven.”

pressive lines could be found in any scripture—until one day I came across these Rigvedic verses, speculating on not just the Creation of the Universe but on its state *before* its Creation, by which I was bowled over completely:

नासदासीन्नो सदासीत् तदानीम्  
नासीद्भ्रजो नो व्योमा परो यत् ।  
किमावरिव कुह कस्य शर्मन्  
अम्भः किमासीत् गहनं गभीरम् ॥

Then was there neither Non-being nor Being;  
Earth was not, nor were there Heavens beyond.  
What covered all? Where? What Shelter existed?  
Was it all water—unfathomed and awesome?

Death was not, nor was there aught that was Deathless.  
No Sign had been set up between Day and Night.  
The One Self-Created, alone aspirated;  
Aside from That nothing had any existence.<sup>21</sup>

At one bound the Veda takes us beyond anything the Upanishads even dare to speculate upon: beyond Reality, beyond Existence, beyond even the Supreme Being Himself—to the very origin of Being, the very source of Truth; for even though the *Mundakopanishad* says:

सत्यमेव जयते नानृतम्  
सत्येन पन्था विततो देवयानः ।  
येनाक्रमन्त्य्क्षयो ह्याप्तकामा  
यत्र तत्सत्यस्य परमं निधानम् ॥

It is Truth that prevails<sup>22</sup> and not unrighteousness; by Truth was stretched out the path of the journey of the Gods: by which the Sages winning their desire ascend there where Truth has Its supreme abode.

ब्रुहच्च तत् दिव्यं अचिन्त्यरूपम्  
सूक्ष्माच्च तत् सूक्ष्मतरं विभाति ।  
दूरात्सुदूरे तदेहानतिकेच  
पष्यत्स्विहैव निहितं गुहायाम् ॥

Vast is That, its form unimaginable; it shines out subtler than the subtlest; very far, and even farther than farness, it is yet here close to us; for those who have Vision it is even here, hidden in the secret heart.

*Mundakopanishad 3.1.6,7*

<sup>21</sup> This here is my own translation—as opposed, for instance, to the Upanishadic verses rendered above and on the next page, which are by Sri Aurobindo. I have tried, in my interpretation, to give an idea not only of the *meaning* of the poem, but also of its *rhythm*: for my English version also attempts to mimic the metre of the Sanskrit, thus helping those ignorant of that magnificent ancient tongue to at least imagine, if not actually experience, some of the extremely *aural* beauty of this marvellous speech.—As regards this Hymn itself (which contains a total of ten verses, and can be found in numerous translations in many western texts), it is in my opinion the most intellectually honest of all theories of Creation, not excluding even those of modern science; for it refrains from answering, leaving the question open...which is perhaps the best humanity can ever really hope to do. (Modern cosmological theories are hardly much more satisfactory than Biblical ones; for if one accepts the “Big Bang” hypothesis, it seems hard to understand why the newly-created universe—at one time smaller than a pea, theoretically—was not swallowed up again by its own enormous gravitational force, the way a black hole is supposed to swallow up the very matter which causes it to come into being; while if one does *not* believe in the Big Bang, it seems hard to explain the microwave background radiation, which seems to pervade space uniformly and omni-directionally—and which is conjectured to be the residual “heat” of the initial explosion—nor is it easy to explain the increasing red shift of distant galaxies, which indicates an expanding universe). Even to say “God alone knows” how the Universe was created presumes a tad too much: for as the last verse of this Hymn (not quoted here) pointedly points out, *what if He doesn't?*

<sup>22</sup> This is the celebrated **सत्यमेव जयते satyameva jayate** (“Truth Is Victorious”), the national motto of India, which appears below the three-lions crest on Indian passports (among other documents). The word for “truth” in ancient Vedic is **सत्य satya**, a term having an ancient English cognate as well: viz., “sooth”. The word is itself derived, apparently, from a still more basic linguistic element, **as** or **ast** (whence also the Latin **EST**, the German **ist** and, as we already said—page ...—our own English “is”): thus indicating, in the words of Mahatma Gandhi, that “what *is*, is Truth”. In Indian scriptures a key term, **Satya** or Truth was equated by more than one Indian sage with God Himself, the most prominent among them being, of course, the Father of

...yet the Veda takes us beyond, beyond even “Truth’s supreme abode”, beyond even “very far and farther than farness”:

नासद आसीन्नो सद आसीत् तदानीम्  
Nâsad âsinno sad âsit tadânîm

“Then existed neither Non-truth nor Truth (neither Non-being nor Being, neither Unreality nor Reality).”

The bold leap of imagination, of abstraction, is breathtaking—especially so when one considers the context in which the verses were composed: when one remembers that it is one of the earliest philosophical and spiritual speculations attempted by the mind of any person anywhere in the world.

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The importance to the ancient Aryans of the sound of Vedic Chants was so great, in fact, that the total essence of all the Vedas was said to be expressible by one single sound: ॐ Om.<sup>23</sup> This most holy of holy syllables is actually considered to be made up of three parts: अ -a-, उ -u-, and म् -m-. By the normal action of **sandhi**—the rules of Sanskrit devised for ease of pronunciation when certain sounds are juxtaposed—these three sounds fuse into one: ओ Om. (And when ओ is written in a flowing or cursive script, its lines round off into the familiar ॐ). It is known in India, variously, as the प्रणव Pranava, the उद्गीथ Udgîtha or the ओंकर Onkara.

The **Pranava** is as old as the Vedas; so it would be exceedingly surprising, given its enormous importance in the Indian system of religious thought, if it did not occur in the Iranian branch of the Aryan religion as well. And indeed, so it apparently does: it is found in its aspirated form Hon. The Iranians called it **Hon-vara** instead of **On-kara**, and their descendants later pronounced this as **Honover**.<sup>24</sup> They analysed it, after the Indian manner, as consisting of the three sounds -h-, -u-, and -n-, which by the normal operation of the rules of **sandhi** become **Hon**. This form of the **Pranava** was not completely unknown in India either; it has been adopted by the **Shaiva** and **Tantra** cults, who use it without the operation of **sandhi** as हँ Hun in place of the more commonly used ॐ Om, on the grounds that the -h- sound is “stronger” than the -a- sound:

अकारः सर्ववर्णाग्रः प्रकाशः परमः शिवः ।  
हकारः व्योमस्यः स्याच्चक्ष्यामा संप्रकीर्तितः ॥

The sound -a- is the foremost of all sounds and is the supreme [or auspicious] light. The sound -h- [however] is of the nature

the Nation: whose adherence to this principle was, as a matter of fact, one main reason why सत्यमेव जयते (**Satyameva jayate**) was chosen to grace India’s government stationery—in retrospect, perhaps the most outrageous misuse of this noble concept perpetrated.

<sup>23</sup> **Om**. In Indian scriptures—not merely Hindu, but Buddhist, Jain and Sikh as well—this syllable is accorded a spiritual rank unrivalled by anything in western theology: the Hebrew Tetragrammaton יהוה YHVH perhaps approaching it closest in degree of sanctity (though not quite matching it). **Om** however—unlike **YHVH**—has no specific *meaning*: or it may be better described as being *beyond* all meanings and concepts, denoting Something so exalted that to speak of it in words or even think of it in thoughts is not only impossible but inconceivable. Even the Supreme Being Himself is not, in Hinduism, quite as supreme as **Om**, which is the origin of the Creator no less than of His Creation. It has been, in point of fact, compared at times with “the Word” or Λογος **Logos** of St. John’s Gospel, which was “in the beginning”, and “was with God, and was God” (**John 1.10**)—a concept some think was borrowed by the Evangelist (*via* Greek philosophy, as I have discussed later) from Aryan religions of the East; in which, though, it was carried to heights even more vertiginous than in Christianity. Whether this is true or not—and it is a matter of some debate—the **Pranava** or **Om** certainly does possess in Aryan religions a holiness higher than anything—or anyone—else; and the point we are trying to make is that it could not, thus, have possibly been absent from Zoroastrianism at its inception, even though its use as a sacred syllable has in modern Zoroastrianism disappeared, and its very name applied to quite another **manthra** (see *ff*).

<sup>24</sup> **Honover** is the term most Zoroastrians of today equate with one of their most fundamental prayers, the **Yatha Ahu Vairyo**. However, as I shall argue later on, this appears to be the result of a wilful change of meaning; and in origin the term seems quite clearly to have designated the Iranian form of the Sacred Syllable, and nothing else. To Zoroastrian readers, whose eyebrows are already rising well above their foreheads, I pray, bear with me for the moment; I shall come to the subject anon.

of space, and is said to be made of pure energy.

*Shiva Purâna*<sup>25</sup>, *Kailâsha Samhitâ 11.39*

...and

हूँकारोच्चारणेनैव समुत्थाय पराम् शिवाम् ।

By uttering the sound of Hun the supreme [energy of] Shiva is upraised.

*Gandharva Tantra 11.35*

... and the Tibetans have retained both **Om** and **Hun**, the Indian and Iranian forms of the **Pranava**, in their celebrated formula **Om Mani Padme Hun**.

In fact the Iranian form of the **Pranava** was very well known indeed in India; and this inference is lent support by the fact that the *Chhândogya Upanishad* contains a very interesting story about a dispute between the Deva-worshippers and the Asura-worshippers<sup>26</sup> as to which of the two, **Hon** or **Om**, should be adopted. The Asuras, according to this tale, wanted to change the form of the **Pranava**—to “pierce it”, as the Upanishad poetically puts it—by replacing the original **-a-** and **-m-** by **-h-** and **-n-** respectively, the middle **-u-** remaining unchanged. It is noteworthy that the Upanishad declares the Asuras to have been successful in “piercing” the “old” **Pranava**: that is to say, they adopted **Hon** instead of **Om** as their **Pranava**. The **-s-** sound in India was pronounced **-h-** in Iran, so the term “**Asura-worshippers**” would be “**Ahura-worshippers**” in Iranian; and the story would thus seem to hint at a doctrinaire confrontation that may have actually taken place at one time between the two rival cults, the Ahura-worshippers and the Deva-worshippers, with the former winning out in their homeland. It would seem to be clear, then that the Indians and Iranians had very close links even at the time the *Chhândogya Upanishad* was composed.

Now this brings us to the very interesting question as to the locality in which the Vedas, and perhaps even some of the Upanishads, were composed.<sup>27</sup> As we saw, the earliest Hymns of the Vedas go back more than six thousand years, perhaps much more. However, up to about five thousand years ago a flourishing non-Aryan civilisation was spread all over the Indus Valley and north-western India, extending as far south as Gujarat: the ruins of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa are only its most spectacular remains, many of which have been found in scattered archaeological sites all over that part of the Indian sub-continent—a clear indication that the Aryans had not yet arrived! The Aryan migrations into India started, according to the best evidence we possess, around 3,000 B.C.; and we are, in fact, faced with the

<sup>25</sup> “**Puranas**: The Sanskrit word *purana*, in its earliest sense, means ‘old narrative and ancient lore’ ... The term is often associated with *itihasa* (‘so indeed it was’, i.e., traditional or historical accounts), and both *purana* and *itihasa* have been used sometimes with separate senses and at other times with the same sense. Gradually, *purana* came to designate a body of works, encyclopedic in scope, incorporating legends, myths, and customary observances”. (From *The Encyclopedia of Religions* edited by Prof. Mircea Eliade, already referred to earlier). Traditionally there are eighteen major and eighteen minor *Purânas*, although there seems to be little agreement as to their titles. The *Shiva Purâna* is, of course, one of the major ones.

<sup>26</sup> **Devas** and **Asuras**: two more terms of great importance to Hinduism. As we shall have cause to see further, the present meanings of these terms—“gods” and “demons”—are contrived and artificial corruptions of their original meanings, and arose (I shall argue) as a result of Zarathushtra’s work in Iran. For our study at this point it is perhaps enough to remark upon the fact that the **Devas** and the **Asuras** came to be looked upon by ancient Aryans as rivals for spiritual supremacy; and in India the former came to be considered the “good guys” and the latter the “bad guys”, while in Iran the roles were reversed. Indeed the dispute grew so desperate that the Indians had to push it into mythology, and to poetically describe this clash of doctrines as a “war in heaven between the gods and the devils”: a conflict which was to have a lasting impact upon world history, and whose after-effects—as we shall see—are felt even by us. The subject will be elaborated at some length in our inquiry.

<sup>27</sup> In order to give a pictorial representation of the region where I believe the Vedas were composed, I have thought it fit to show a map here below. However, it is perhaps as well for me to state that this map is by no means authoritative, and other scholars may feel differently from me. My personal advice to the reader is, *don’t you think it would be best to make up your own mind about the subject?*

*{When this book is finalised, a map of the locality in which the Vedas are believed by me to have been composed will be given here.}*

inescapable conclusion that at least part of the Vedic literature was composed outside India: in what is today Afghanistan, southern USSR and, of course, Iran. The Vedas are, in fact, no less Iranian than Indian—a fact which scholars like the celebrated German Sanskritist Brunnhofer are at pains to point out. The Iranians have as much right to be proud of the Vedas as the Indians: they are the glorious heritage of both these lands.<sup>28</sup>

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We have seen that **Vaivasvata Yama** founded a system of worship which came to be known as the **पितृयान Pitryâna**, “the Way of the Fathers”. This, apparently, was the oldest form of the religion of the Aryans; and the “Fathers” referred to here were in all likelihood these very Ice Age Aryans, some of whose descendants subsequently migrated south into Iran and India. As we shall see further on, Zarathushtra, the Prophet of Iran, infused a renewed strength into the **Pitryâna** which somewhat before his time had begun to face challenges from a rival system, viz., the **देवयान Devayâna**, or “the Way of the Gods”.

One of the most basic characteristics of the **Pitryâna** was immense reverence for the two most precious warmth-giving things on earth: the Sun and Fire. (This is hardly surprising, if we remember that the **Pitryâna** originated in freezing Siberia!) The most sacred verse in the Vedas, which in all probability goes back to the pre-Indo-Iranian period, is the celebrated **Gâyatrî Mahâ Mantra**, a meditation verse in praise of the Sun:

ॐ भूर्भुवः स्वः । तत्सवितुर् वरेण्यम् ।  
भर्गो देवस्य धीमहि । धियो यो नः प्रचोदयात् ॥

**Om bhur bhuvah svah. Tat savitur varenyam.  
Bhargo devasya dhîmahî. Dhiyo yo nah pracho dayât.**

Let us meditate on the brilliant glory of that venerable Sun:  
May he illumine our consciousness.

This **mantra**<sup>29</sup> is, in spirit, as Iranian as it is Indian; perhaps more so, for while the ancient Aryan reverence for the Sun has diminished somewhat in the more tropical climate of India, the Zoroastrians of cooler Iran retained much more of their ancestral Siberian-period attitude in this regard. It is quite possible, therefore, that this verse was at one time recited in Iran with as much reverence as it is now in India.

The Veda, in another celebrated verse, is careful to point out that reverence for **Agni** (Fire), for **Yama** (the son of the Sun) and for others who may have been awarded the status of deity, is by no means polytheism in disguise:

<sup>28</sup> It is possible that some Vedic hymns were in fact composed in India; but the majority of them describe a land very much cooler than the sub-continent. Indeed some Indian myths describe regions that may have well lain as far north as the arctic circle, for their authors were apparently not unacquainted with the fact that somewhere up there the days and nights were six months long.—The word **arctic** is also interesting, at least for our study; for it derives from a Greek term meaning “bear”, and in ancient Indian lore the arctic was supposed to be the “home of the gods”: providing a fascinating correlation with the worship of bears by the ancient Ainu of Japan (a practice which survived among some arctic peoples till fairly recently, and which was in prehistoric times prevalent in Central Europe too: again pointing to some degree of kinship between the Europeans and the aboriginal inhabitants of Japan).

<sup>29</sup> The word **मन्त्र mantra** (Indian) or **manthra** (Iranian) basically means “that which is held in the *mind*” (both the word “mind” and the word **mantra** being derived from the same linguistic root or element). Ancient Aryans (as opposed to ancient Semites, ancient Chinese, and probably ancient anybody) ascribed great importance to a concept we now regard, somewhat mistakenly, as universal: the concept of *mind*. This idea does not, in its precise form, exist in Semitic languages; and in Chinese too, the word **hsin**, which after Buddhism’s impact on the Far East began to be translated as “mind”, was in pre-Buddhistic Chinese texts more accurately equated with the *heart*—indeed the ideogram itself in its original form depicted a heart-shaped figure. “Mind” is an idea so very Aryan—and later, specifically Indian—that the Buddhist philosophers, very perceptively, added it to the Five Elementals of Nature (earth, water, fire, air and space), and called it the Sixth: realising that without the mind to realise the reality of the other Five, these others might as well not exist. (It was the Indians—the originators of the idea of zero or nothingness—who had included **vyoma** (“sky” or “empty space”) among the Five Elementals; the ancient Greeks, who didn’t know nothing, had only the first four in their list: which once again underlines the great subtlety Indian thought had attained even in ancient times; and which feature of the Indians we shall have cause to remark upon again and again in our study).

एकं सत् विप्रा बहुधा वदन्ति ।  
अग्निं यमं मातरिश्वानमाहुः ॥

**Ekam sad viprâ bahudhâ vadanti  
Agnim yamam mâtarishvanam âhu.**

Reality is One: the Wise  
By different names do call it:—  
Fire, Sun, Wind ...

*Rigveda 1.164.46*

This is the reason Max Müller points out that the so-called polytheism of the Veda is not real polytheism; he prefers to call it by the coined term **henotheism**—that is to say, polytheism in appearance but monotheism in reality. (At another time he calls it **kathenotheism**,<sup>30</sup> a form of faith in which now one, now another, deity is considered to be divine, but not all of them together). But the line is a thin one, and both henotheism as well as kathenotheism can easily pass into full-blown polytheism. Zarathushtra, the founder of the world's first—and, as we shall see, in some respects its strictest—monotheistic system of belief, did not countenance even henotheism. However, in spirit if not in the letter, the above-quoted Rigvedic dictum is also acceptable to the Iranian religion.

Further correlations between the Indian and Iranian systems of Vedic thought are not lacking. One very significant such line, this time from the closing **mantras** of the *Yajurveda*, is the following:

अग्ने नय सुपथा राये अस्मान् ।  
Agné naya supathâ rayé asmân

O Agni<sup>31</sup> (Fire), lead us on the good path to spiritual felicity.

*Yajurveda 40.17*

As we shall see later on in our research, this line seems to have had a profound influence on Zoroastrianism, and through it, possibly on Islam as well. We shall come to this point in due course.

In addition to reverence for Fire and the Sun, an importance characteristic of the **Pitryâna** was its opposition to iconolatry, or the worship of the Divine through the medium of images and idols. This is evident from the history of the two words **Deva** and **Asura** in the speech of the early Aryans. Let us now turn to an examination of this point.

When the Aryans were living together in the northern forests,

<sup>30</sup> The term **kathenotheism** is composed of the Greek terms **καθ' ενα** *kath' ena* "one by one", and **θεος** *theos* "God". The idea is, in the words of Max Müller who coined this term (as well as the related term **henotheism**, which means more or less the same thing): "a phase of religious thought in which the individual gods invoked are not conceived as limited by the power of others." The "phase" however in Hinduism has lasted to this day; and in some ways it is not absent from the Christian religion either, if you count the Son to be God equally with the Father and the Holy Spirit. It is more or less a question of the degree of reverence you hold in your heart for your religion; for if you are a Christian you don't like to be called anything less than a strict monotheist, and thus can appreciate that the Hindu harbours exactly the same idea about his own faith.

<sup>1</sup> **Agni**, the ancient Vedic term for fire, is echoed in the Latin **ignis** which (as the English cognate "ignite" attests) is also a term for that very first of man's steps on the path of technological innovation. (An alternative word in Sanskrit for **Agni** is **प्रमति** *Pramati*, the cognate of the Greek **Prometheus**, who in mythology stole fire from heaven and brought it down to earth). This term was so important to Vedic people, and even to their later descendants both in India and Iran, that when the Rigveda was "edited" and arranged in the form we know it today—comprising 10 **manadals** or Volumes—each **manadala** (except the ninth) begins with Hymns addressed to **Agni**. (The ninth **manadala** is exclusively addressed to **Soma**—a drink the Greeks used to call **ambrosia**, and which they like their eastern brethren thought conferred immortality). And as for the Iranians: why, the Zoroastrians are to this day (mistakenly) regarded as "fire-worshippers" (the mistake lies in equating symbol with substance: such thinking would make of Catholic Christians "Crucifix-worshippers"!)

that is to say, before their migration into Iran and India, *both* the words **Deva** and **Asura** were terms of respect. Thus we find that in the older Hymns of the *Rigveda*, all the prominent Gods, as for instance **Varuna**, **Rudra**, **Agni** and even **Indra**, have at times been described by the word असुर **Asura**; while in the *Gathas* of Zarathushtra, the terms **daibitana** “divine”, **debanjangha** “possessing divine lustre”, and **debanjyati** “exalts” testify to the honourable character of the term **Daeva**<sup>32</sup> in Iran. However, as we are aware, the words subsequently acquired an opposite connotation: the terms **Asura** in the Indian scriptures, and **Daeva** in the Iranian, came to mean “demon”.

Both, the honourable as well as the dishonourable derivations of the term **Deva** persist to this day in European languages:<sup>33</sup> in English we have the words “Divine” and “Deity” on the one hand, and “Devil” and “Deuce” on the other, reminiscent of the original exalted status and the subsequent fall.

The word itself has its origin in the root **div**, which originally meant “to shine”. The term **Deva**, therefore, originally signified “the Shining One”, and was probably used for such objects as the stars and the planets, and very likely also for the Moon and the Sun.

The meaning of the word **Asura** is not so easily derived. Later on in this study we shall go into this matter further, and shall also point out a derivation which, according to some scholars, is a result of Aryan-Semitic interaction. However, at this point it is pertinent to note that a principal attribute of the **Asuras** of the Vedic period was that they had *no forms*:

ये स्याणि प्रतिमुञ्चमानाः असुराः सन्तः स्वधया चरन्ति ।

Those who, casting off their forms, have become **Asuras**, and now move about by themselves [as spirits] ...

*Yajurveda 2.20*

The Vedic **Asura**, therefore, was an *invisible* god. The **Deva**, on the other hand, had to be *visible* (else how could he shine?) And here we have a clue to the cause of the original fall from grace of the terms **Asura** in India and **Daeva** in Iran. For this phenomenon, being in opposite directions in the two sister lands, points to a wilful rather than a natural degradation.

The difference seems to have arisen over the use in worship of the icon or idol (termed **mûrti**<sup>34</sup> in both Sanskrit and the Zend). Some people preferred to worship via the medium of a **mûrti**; these came to be called the **Devayânists**, “worshippers of the **Devas**.” Others opposed this tendency; their cult was known, in Iran, as **Ahura-tkaesha** at first, and later on as **Mazda Yasna**.

The **Ahura**-worshippers (or, as one might say in Indian pro-

<sup>32</sup> The Iranian word is romanised as **Daeva** and not as **Deva**, because the earliest Iranian system of writing possessed the peculiarity of often adding a vowel after a consonant, even when it was followed by another vowel as well. Thus we find the Iranian words **puru**, **zaota** and **haithim** written पुरु **puru**, होतार **hotâr** and सत्यम् **satyam** in the Indian style. In the matter of pronunciation, however, it is quite possible that in Iran, this additional (and obviously superfluous) vowel was silent, and that the Iranians and the Indians enunciated all these words in more or less the same fashion, except of course for the interchange of the **-s-** (or **-z-**) sound with the **-h-**.

<sup>33</sup> The Latin **DEUS** and the Greek **Θεός Theos** are also cognates of **Deva**, and indeed our English equivalents and derivants come to us from these old European tongues: as do most other English words derived in the ultimate analysis from Vedic originals. This feature of the English language—i.e., its harking back to Vedic roots—is a relatively recent discovery; and for some strange reason, occidental etymologists don't like to admit it except when they feel they jolly well better, or lose all self-respect. We'd like in our book to set the record straight—or at least straighter. We shall say much more about the subject in Chapter 7.

<sup>34</sup> The word in the romanised Iranian is written **murthi**—the **-t-** softened to **-th-**—a phenomenon carried over to Greek too, where we find two letters for this consonant, **θ theta** and **τ tau**. India, on the other hand, went as usual much farther, and developed *four* sounds similar to our English **t**: viz. **त् -t-**, **थ -th-**, **ट -T-** and **ठ -Th-** (these last two so hard and palatal that they have no precise equivalent in any European tongue, and the basic **त् (-t-)** being more like the Italian equivalent than the English or German—which latter does not exist, precisely as such, in Indian languages). Peculiarly enough, in the Dravidian languages of South India—which are in a class by themselves, not related to either the Semitic or Aryan groups—the word **mûrti** is often romanised as **murthi**, indicating a softening process that may have begun many millennia ago, when the Aryans and the Dravidians first came into contact with each other; and which may strengthen the hypothesis—upon which we shall expand later—that among the first Aryans to have done so were quite a few Iranians. (The very hard **-T-**, **-Th-**, **-D-** and **-Dh-** sounds of Indian languages, not being found in western Aryan tongues, are probably the result of Aryan-Dravidian interaction; for they exist in all Dravidian languages, where indeed they are pronounced with such explosive force that even Indians from the North of the sub-continent—who normally speak Aryan tongues—find it hard to imitate them accurately).

nunciation, the Asura-worshippers) were very well known in India. The Sage **Bhrigu**—whose name derives from the root **bhrk** which, as mentioned earlier, means “the blazing of the fire”—is said to have been the “Preceptor of the **Asuras**”. He is considered to be one of the “Mind-born sons of **Brahmâ**”,<sup>35</sup> and therefore must have been one of the earliest of the Aryan **Rishis**. His epithet **Shukra** “bright”, which is a variant of the term **Shukla** “white” or “fair”—and which probably described his physical complexion—also indicates his northern (that is, pre-Indo-Iranian) origins. He is known to have been extremely intolerant of idolatry: indeed, one of his more notable recorded actions is that of having kicked **Vishnu** in the breast, as related in the *Padma Purâna*:

तं दृष्ट्वा मुनिशार्दूलः भृगु कोपसमन्वितः ।  
स्वयं पादं विचिक्षेप विष्णोर्वक्षसि शोभने ॥

Setting eyes upon him [that is, upon **Vishnu**], that Tiger among Sages, **Bhrigu**, became highly enraged; with his own left foot he landed a kick on the breast of **Vishnu**.”

*Padma Purâna, Uttara Khânda 255.48*

The cause of **Brigu**’s annoyance seems to have been **Vishnu**’s very possession of a body (and logically speaking, he *must* have possessed a body, to have had a breast on which a kick could be landed!) Apparently for the same reason, **Bhrigu** is reputed on an earlier occasion to have hotly scolded his own father, **Brahmâ**, and **Shiva** as well—each in his own heaven, at that! (Truly a “Tiger among Sages”, what?)

The **Ahura-tkaesha** was also called in Iran the **Paourya-tkaesha** “the original [or earlier] mode of worship”. It is, by all accounts, the older form of Aryan worship, anterior to the **Deva Yâna**. This would also appear from a line in the **Mahâbhârata**<sup>36</sup> which declares that “the **Asuras** are the elder brothers, [while] the **Devas** are the younger”:

असुराः भ्रातरो ज्येष्ठाः देवश्चापि यवीयसाः ।  
*Shanti Parva 33.25*

The *Amara Kosha* also points out that

सुक्रशिष्याः दितिसुताः पूर्वदेवाः सुरद्विषः ।

The pupils of **Shukra** [that is, the **Asuras**] who are the sons of **Diti**, were born before the gods, whom they hate.”

... while the *Brihad Âranyaka Upanishad* says:

<sup>35</sup> As most students of Hinduism know (I am writing this for westerners of course: Indians surely don’t need this note), **Brahmâ**, **Vishnu** and **Shiva** constitute the **Trimûrti** or Indian Trinity: in which the first is regarded as the Creator, the second the Sustainer and the last the Destroyer or, more accurately, the Re-creator (for **Shiva**’s mighty destructive acts are immediately followed by an equally mighty renewal process). This Triad of Principles, or Three Aspects of The One Supreme Being, are—as we shall show later on also (Chapter 9)—definitely a post-Vedic idea; and in its present form does not seem to have existed in Vedic times (since it is not mentioned or even hinted at in the Hymns). However, **Vishnu** is mentioned in the Vedas, wherein He is referred to as a **deva**; and thus the concept that the **Trimûrti**—as the very term indicates—was composed of gods who possessed *forms*, became firmly entrenched in the subsequent development of Hinduism (perhaps the best-known representation of the Triad is the one carved out of solid basalt in the Elephanta caves near Bombay, reproduced in endless illustrations in books on India). This Triad can, of course, no more be taken as “proof” of Hindu polytheism than the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Ghost be taken likewise for the Christians.

<sup>36</sup> The longest epic poem in the world—about seven times as long as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* put together—is the **Mahâbhârata**, which is in scope and scale so grand that in comparison *War and Peace* seems like a short story. Legend has it that its author, the Sage **Vyâsa**, dictated it non-stop to the god **Ganesha**, who had stipulated as a prerequisite for serving as amanuensis that his pen not pause from beginning to end: a condition accepted by the composer, with the counter-stipulation however that **Ganesha** understand the purport of every verse before setting it down. The original composition—like the *Iliad*, it is basically a historical tale, though much embellished of course—was probably not nearly as long as the version we possess, for it seems to have been added unto *ad infinitum*; but even at its inception it must still have been quite some piece. In my opinion—and I am not alone—it is certainly the most magnificent “novel” I have read, even though I am acquainted with it mostly in a highly abridged English version written for children by **Shri Chakravarty Rajagopalachari**, the honoured Indian freedom-fighter. Not the least of its several points of superiority over any western work (I already anticipate my European audience’s blood boiling, but I’m afraid they will have to bite the bullet) is its inclusion as an integral part of it the *Bhagavad Gîtâ*: a Song so Celestial that millions deem it Divine—literally. It has always amazed me that people ignorant of the very names of masterpieces like the **Mahâbhârata**

कनीयसा एव देवा ज्यायसा असुराः ।

The **Devas** are the younger, the **Asuras** are the older.

*Brihadâranyakopaniṣad 3.1*

In Iran the term **Paourya-tkaesha** was opposed to the term **Daeva-Yasna**, and in India these same terms became **Pitryâna** and **Devayâna**. In these terms the Sanskrit suffix यान् **-yâna** was very likely a contraction of the Iranian **yasna**, which in turn is derived from the Vedic यज्ञ **yajña** (more accurately pronounced **yagña**) meaning “sacrifice”. For the **yajña** or sacrifice was the most ancient form of worship among the Aryans, dating back to the times of King Yima himself. (Animal sacrifice, except in rare and isolated instances, is no longer practised in the Hindu religion; and Zarathushtra himself put a stop to it in Iran; but it is obvious, from a perusal of both the Vedas and the Gathas, that among the ancient Aryans it was common enough).<sup>37</sup> The words **pitr-yâna** and **deva-yâna** would therefore appear to mean, respectively, “sacrifice unto the fathers” and “sacrifice unto the gods”.<sup>38</sup> At all events, the worship offered up by the Pitr-yânists was before an altar of fire, as the following words of the *Rigveda* testify—and fire is used in religious rites only to sacrifice something, even if it be but a piece of wood to fuel it:

यं त्वा द्यावापृथिवी यं त्वा आपः त्वष्टा यं त्वा सुजनिमा जजान ।  
पन्थामनु प्रविद्वान् पितृयानं द्युमदग्ने समिधानो विभाहि ॥

May **Agni**, the Fire—born of heaven, earth and water, and kindled by **Twashta**—burn brightly in the **Pitryâna**.

*Rigveda 10.2.7*

The worship of a Formless Spirit via the medium of the Fire is, therefore, an ancient custom practiced by many Aryans, not only by the Zoroastrians. It is a way of worship that even non-Aryan peoples followed, and in some of these cases, as we shall see, it could very likely have been taken over by them from Aryan neighbours. The Zoroastrian “fire-worship” is, at all events, none other than an **अग्निहोत्र agnihotra**, a practice common to this day among the Hindus (who are certainly not, on that account, accused by unthinking people of being “fire worshippers”, as are the unfortunate Zoroastrians!)

Numerous lines of the Veda point out, as we said earlier, that the term **Asura** was at one time an honourable one among the Vedic Sages. One of them is the following mantra in praise of **Indra**:

*ta* should seriously assert such supercilious statements as: “Shakespeare’s supremacy as a writer is unchallenged by any author in any language”. But then, to ignorance—as to *chutzpah*—there is no end, is there?

<sup>37</sup> It is perhaps not widely known that among even the strictly vegetarian brahmins of South India there still persists a ceremony, rather rarely performed it is true, in which a goat is sacrificed to **Soma**, with recitations from the Vedas forming the bulk of the scriptures chanted as the poor beast is slaughtered—the survival of a custom so ancient and primitive (in the worst sense of this overworked term) that the blood curdles even to read about it. (We modern folk shouldn’t feel too self-righteous however, for it is probably no worse than what goes on in many slaughter-houses, and is very likely far exceeded in cruelty in many chemicals-testing labs). In the cult of **Kâlî**, of course, animal sacrifice is blatantly open—at least in some localities; but this seems to have been derived not from ancient Vedic custom but from practices of the aboriginal tribal peoples of India, with whom the Aryans have always had some contact since they entered the sub-continent.

<sup>38</sup> In my writing I have sometimes spelled the word “god” with a lower-case “g” and at other times with a capital “G”. The reason for this is not mere caprice, but an attempt to translate into English the idea underlying the original **mantra**: for whenever the word **Deva** is employed in a sense which appears to signify one Supreme and unchallenged Deity, I have translated it as “God”, with an upper-case “G”, while where it is used in a sense more or less like the Greeks used their cogeneric term **theos**, as signifying one of several heavenly immortals, I have written it as “god”, with a lower-case “g”. The distinction however is not at all easy to make, and at times it has been touch-and-go which version should be used, for Vedic ideas of gods or God were by no means uniform. This is quite understandable when one remembers that hundreds of hymnists have been found worthy enough to get their works specified as **shruti**; and there is no doubt that some at least of them were indeed out-and-out polytheists (despite the fact, which we mentioned earlier, that the general theme of Vedism was “kathenotheistic” and at times even strictly monotheistic. In Indian minds in any case, these matters are not self-contradictory; or rather, the Indian **Rishi** seems to say, like Walt Whitman:

“Do I contradict myself?

Very well then I contradict myself!

I am large, I contain multitudes.”

देवश्चित्ते असुर्याय पूर्वे अनुक्षत्राय ममिरे सहांसि ।

All the ancient gods, [O **Indra**], submitted their powers to thy lordly dominion”

*Rigveda 7.21.7*

(Note that the term translated as “lordly dominion” is given as **असुर्याय क्षत्राय asuryâya kshatrâya**, thus proving that the term **Asura** was a respectable one in those days).

As we mentioned earlier, the Vedic word **Asura** was pronounced **Ahura** in Iran. As we noted above, in the Vedas we find the term **Asura** (with an honourable connotation) mentioned quite often; and in one isolated case, we find the word **Ahura** (the Iranian pronunciation) as well. It occurs in the *Sâma Veda*:

→ अहुर इदं ते परिदाम्यहम् ।  
Ahura idam te paridadâmi aham

O **Ahura**, I now give thee [this-or-that], {or}  
O **Ahura**, I now dedicate this to thee.

*Sâma Veda, Mantra Brâhmana 1.6.21*

Here, it is very clearly **Ahura** who is mentioned by name! There can be no question, therefore, of the fact that Indian Aryans of the Vedic period knew about, and probably even participated in, the Iranian cult of **Ahura-tkaesha**.<sup>39</sup>

And, as if to lay all enmity to rest between the two rival cults, the **Pitryâna** and the **Devayâna**, the *Rigveda* addresses a Hymn to **Rudra**, “who is both **Deva** and **Asura**”:

तम् उ ष्टुहि यः सुइषु सुधन्वा यो विश्वस्य क्षयति भेषजस्य ।  
यक्ष्वामहे सौमनसाय रुद्रं नमोभिर्देवमसुरं दुवस्य ॥

Pray unto him who wields the good arrow and the good bow;  
who rules over all and is the only source of bliss.  
For the sake of the good mind, worship **Rudra**; all hail to him  
who is both **Deva** and **Asura**.

*Rigveda 5.42.11*

(This **Rudra**, moreover, is not—as we shall see later on in this book—merely one god among many, but the One and Only Deity who does not so much as tolerate a second. However, for the present we may leave it at that.)

<sup>39</sup> The whole point of these illustrations—and of those that follow for quite a few more chapters—lies in showing just how closely related the Hindu and the Zoroastrian religions were at one time, and indeed still are. Neither the Hindus nor the Parsis of today—I am writing this for those unacquainted with either—admit for a moment that their respective faiths are sisters in origin, and to a large extent remain so in this very here-and-now: more so, for instance, than even Judaism and Christianity; they think of Zoroastrianism as being totally distinct from Hinduism—itsself a totally erroneous impression. It comes sometimes as a shock even for scholars to realise the kinship between the two creeds, and the vast majority of scholarly works on the subject play down this closeness (perhaps out of a mistaken sense of one or the other’s “superiority”). We shall therefore in our work play it *up*, and throw some light upon this fascinating facet of Aryan history.