

## CHAPTER 4

### THE “DEVA-ASURA WAR”: ITS CAUSE AND OUTCOME

Now at this point, before we go further into the matter of the historical outcome of the “Deva-Asura War”—as we have figuratively termed this conflict of ideals—let us try to imagine what the principal considerations of the protagonists on either side must have been, and to examine the evidence for our inferences.

As we have mentioned, the original mode of Aryan worship was aniconic fire-sacrifice; and this is also understandable, for the art of making a statue or idol must of necessity have developed later than the relatively simpler art of rubbing two sticks together to make a fire.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps in other, warmer cultures—like the Semitic or the Egyptian—nature’s objects, such as stones and trees, were also worshipped; but in frosty Siberia, surely the the Fire—and the Sun, which is after all “the Fire in the Heavens”—must have seemed the holiest thing the ancestors of the Indo-Europeans had ever witnessed, far more worthy of adoration than anything else. And, as we have pointed out, fire requires *sacrifice*, at least of the fuel to keep it burning; and hence the **Yajna** or sacrifice is of necessity associated with any type of fire-worship.

All the same, the human mind has a tendency to become attracted to *forms*, and to arrive at conceptions of the *Formless* a human being has often to grow *through* forms, at least to begin with. Now fire does not have much of a form—at least not a static one; and for praying unto the fire, and through it unto a Higher Power, the mind of a person is taxed somewhat heavily. The Sun admittedly does have a fairly static form, although a little hard to gaze directly upon except at sunrise and sunset; however, neither the fire nor the Sun is anthropomorphic, and many people find it easier to transfer their love to a form that looks human, than to something as flickeringly evanescent as fire or as blazingly eye-searing as the Sun. For a man<sup>2</sup> must *love* the Power he worships; otherwise his worship is no better than a cowardly submission to a greater force, and is assuredly not a willing and worshipful surrender; a man would never go for *refuge*<sup>3</sup> to a Power he cannot love. And from everyone’s childhood experience, it is easier for a human being to love another human being—or at least a human form—than to love something inanimate. Thus we get, in the first instance, the anthropo-

<sup>1</sup> Although it is true that cave drawings and figurines tens of thousands of years old have been unearthed in several parts of the world, there is no indication that these were *worshipped*. And though it is true that there is no indication that fire was worshipped at that time either, it would still appear to be a more ancient “invention” than drawing and sculpture (indeed even to see, and thus presumably to draw, some of these cave drawings requires artificial illumination, which presupposes the existence of fire before ever the artist put charcoal stick—or whatever instrument he used—to cave wall. In any case it is the general consensus among those who have studied these things that the earliest form of worship among the *Aryans*—whatever it may have been among other cultures—was indeed fire-worship: which is all that we are trying to say.

<sup>2</sup> In this day and age authors tremble in trepidation every time they have to employ such words as “mankind” and “policeman”, for womankind and policewomen are ever standing by, ready to pounce on them in a flash at the teeny-weeniest such slip. For fear of more than half the world’s population I too have tried my best to expunge any words that so much as hint at a sexist attitude; but language being what it is, it is hard to always avoid such allusions, and the non-sexist words coined recently do not always fit the mood of the passage or phrase as the case may be. (I do understand and appreciate the viewpoint of women, for if we never start with such reform we shall merely prolong and perpetuate prejudice; but at times I wish the women would understand mine too, and appreciate that we still have a long way to go to completely liberate language).

<sup>3</sup> There is a deep, and indeed unbridgeable, difference between the concept of *Surrender* (as epitomised, for instance, in the word **Islam** which literally means “Surrender Unto God”), and that of *submission* (which is what really happens when one “surrenders” in a battle or a war): the former is totally voluntary while the latter is just as totally compulsory. The concept underlying Surrender (in the spiritual sense) is perhaps best expressed by the Buddhist formula **शरणं गच्छामि Sharanam gachchhāmi** “I go for refuge” (to the Buddha,

morphisation, or ascribing of a human form, to such natural phenomena as **Agni** (the Fire) and **Savitur** (the Sun), along with **Vāyu** (the Wind), **Prithivi** (the Earth) and **Dyaus** (the Heavens), and even **Soma** (the plant or the beverage—it is hard to say which of the two exactly!)

Nevertheless, anthropomorphisation of what already exists in nature and is visible to the eye is not, at times, a very satisfactory process. One might readily imagine a disciple protesting to his teacher: “But the Sun doesn’t *look* like you just described him!<sup>4</sup> There—take a look for yourself!” And such a confrontation puts the **guru** in a pretty embarrassing position, leaving him little alternative except the choice—which always remains, of course—of soundly thwacking the cheeky lad on the behind and packing him off to bed without supper for having dared to question a Higher Authority: a procedure which may *silence* the young fellow, but is hardly likely to *convince* him. And when he is grown up, and freed from his teacher’s tutelage, he may not consider the Sun so very worthy of worship after all. And then, to fill the emptiness in his heart, which cannot countenance a state of affairs in which *no one* and *nothing* is to be worshipped,<sup>5</sup> he may well make unto himself a *likeness* or an *image*, an anthropomorphic god who does *not* exist in nature, and in the worship of whom no such conflict can occur. In this fashion, in all probability, were born many of the **Devas** or gods of the Aryans, the Chief of whom in Vedic times was, as we already remarked, **Indra**.

**Indra** was the most anthropomorphic of the Vedic gods. He had his heaven, he had his wife, he had his parents (different ones at different times, however, since he was himself a different individual filling the post); he had his Thunderbolt which was manufactured for his exclusive use by the Artisan of the gods, **Twashtra** or **Vishvakarma**. From his consort, **Indrâni**, he even had a son, **Chitrugupta** by name, who is said to write down each and every deed performed by each and every person who has ever lived. (His filing system must be quite something!) This is very likely a post-Vedic addition; but even in Vedic times Indra would gladly quaff the **Soma** cup proffered to him by his devotees, as a result of which he used to feel most graciously disposed towards them, ready to grant whatever boon they asked. At times, fortified by the heady draught, and urged on by the hymns of his devotees, he would go forth to challenge the great enemy he is best known for having vanquished: **Vritra**, “The Surrounders”.<sup>6</sup> **वृत्र Vritra** (**Verethra** in the Avesta) is also supposed to be, in Indian lore, the Drought; and in India where drought is a much-to-be-feared natural calamity, it was considered to be the special glory of **Indra** that he defeated and annihilated **Vritra**, and thus came to be known as **वृत्रहन् Vritrtahan**

and the **Dharma**, and the **Sangha**). Such a thing is impossible if one does not—as proclaimed by Moses—“Love the LORD thy God with all thy heart and all thy soul and all thy might”; for this, as pointed out by Jesus, is truly the “greatest commandment”...of virtually every religion under the sun: its immense importance in Hinduism, for instance, underlined by **Sri Krishna**’s words in the **Bhagavad Gîtâ**—words which are said to express in brief the entire teaching of all the Hindu scriptures:

सर्वं धर्मान्परित्यज्य मामेकं शरणं व्रज ।  
अहं त्वा सर्वं पापेभ्यो मोक्षयिष्यामि मा शुच ॥

“Abandoning all [other] supports, come unto me alone for refuge; I shall liberate thee from every sin—grieve not”. (*Gîtâ 18.66*).

<sup>4</sup> The description of **सूर्य Surya**, the Sun, in Hinduism has become so elaborate over the ages that he is hardly recognisable. He is depicted with golden hair and golden arms, driving a chariot pulled by seven horses, the husband of **Usha**, the Dawn, as well as her son. His father is the Sky, **Dyaus**. and he is said to have arisen from the eye of **Purusha**, “The Lord of Being”. There’s more—much more!—but why go into it all? Suffice it to say that the description hardly fits the observable facts.

<sup>5</sup> The idea that agnostics and atheists worship *nothing at all* is of course false, if by “worship” one means “[to] esteem”, “[to] revere”, “[to] honour”, “[to] extol”, “[to] adore” and/or “[to] glorify” (as **Webster** puts it); for even those who do not believe in God do believe in *something*—Truth, Beauty, Dialectical Materialism, or whatever—which to them is worthy of esteem, reverence, honour, *etc.* These feelings are so universal that those in whom they appear to be lacking are often locked up in institutions; for no sane person can go through life without *some* set of values, and *some* value or values at the top of this set. And in ancient times—as we already indicated earlier and shall have cause to expand upon later (Chapter 17)—the distinction between abstract and concrete concepts was not so clearly marked as now: which made the personification of one’s set of values much easier than it is today

<sup>6</sup> The word **वृत्र Vritra** seems to be derived from **वृ vr** “[to] envelop”, “[to] cover”; and the name appears to have acquired its pejorative connotation with some association of a claustrophobic nature. The association was not always pejorative, however; for the same root gave rise to the highly honourable names **वरुण Varuna** and **Ουρανός Ouranos** (or **URANUS**—as we saw earlier). The Iranian form of the name **Vritra** underwent some strange metamorphoses, about which we shall speak in greater detail in Chapter 16.

“the Smiter [or Slayer] of **Vritra**”. Owing to this great feat he became best known as the god of storms, thundershowers, rains and rainbows.<sup>7</sup> However, Indra is not The Rains personified (as **Agni**, for instance, is the Fire personified, or **Savitur** the Sun). **Indra** exists by himself, a deity in his own right, and has no need of the thundershowers to give him existence.

Now such a deity, obviously, had to be capable of being *described*—and following a description, very naturally, also of being *depicted*. A picture could easily become, specially in those days, an *icon*—maybe even a statue, a **mûrti**. The **mûrti** or idol had the advantage that it could be kept before the worshipper’s eyes, who as a result of the psycho-visual effect of the icon on his thought-forms, could immediately, and with much greater ease, concentrate upon the Great Power represented by it.

As long as the worshipper bore in mind that it was not the idol but the Power it represented which he worshipped, it was all right. But not everyone is capable of keeping in mind this rather fine distinction. And then again, not everyone wants the same sort of icon: and one worshipper may prefer one deity while his neighbour prefers another; and from the plethora of different icons and idols representing different deities and even the same deity in different forms, a society can easily break down, with quarrels (and worse) arising between the different worshippers. Aside from the deeper ontological question of whether there really is only one God or not, this sort of thing certainly doesn’t make for unity among the people—and assuredly not the unity necessary for building a nation.

Now Zarathushtra, in addition to being a highly spiritual person, seems to have also been a very practical man.<sup>8</sup> This feature of his personality is apparent from even a cursory glance at the **Gathas**: they do not, like most of the **Upanishads**, as well as the Vedantic literature of **Shankara**’s<sup>9</sup> time, go in for abstruse philosophical questions about This, That and The Other (especially The Other); they rather ask how a man should best live his very present life upon this very material earth:

Asha kat thwa daresani  
manas cha vohu vaedemno  
gatum cha Ahurai sevishtai  
sraoshem Mazdai  
ana manathra mazhishtem  
vauroimaidi khrafstra hijva

O Righteousness [**Asha**], when shall I see thee? The Loving Mind [**Vohu Mano**] too, I would know—and also Obedience [**Sraoshem**], the way unto the most beneficent **Ahura Mazda**. And when, with the help of this prayer [**manthra**] of our tongues

<sup>7</sup> The association of **Indra** with thundershowers grew so poetic that, in fact, the rainbow in Indian languages is called **इन्द्र धनुष Indra-dhanush**, “The bow of **Indra**” which, with the lightning for a string, is used by the deity to smite and slay the Drought. All this imagery is, however, plainly post-Vedic accretion, for in Vedic literature itself there seems to be no such allusion.

<sup>8</sup> It is perhaps this trait in Zarathushtra’s personality which sets him most apart from other Vedic Sages; and his keenness, and indeed almost unrelenting efforts, to convert a major politician of his times—viz. King **Vistasp** of **Balkh**—to his way of thinking, underlines his practical bent of mind perhaps most forcefully. His monotheism (as we shall see anon) may have at least partially stemmed from this cast in his character; for as we saw earlier, Vedic **Rishis** were not, in theory at least, opposed to holding different and at times even self-contradictory views regarding the number of the Gods. In comparison, the Indian mind, although (or perhaps I should say *because*) it is—and always has been—the most imaginative in the world, was not overly *practical* (I think it was Prof. Mircea Eliade who wrote “The Indian thinks *fabulously* where the European thinks *historically*”); and thus India has almost always fallen behind other civilisations in such things as warfare, where practicality is at a premium. This same trait, however, promises to enable India to forge far ahead of all other nations—Japan included—in the 21st century, as the “software of civilisation” (*i.e.* the skilful manipulation of *information*, which of course requires a great deal of imagination) becomes more and more important in comparison to “hardware” (*i.e.*, manufacturing and industry).

<sup>9</sup> **Shankara** or **Shankarâchârya** (9th century CE?) was perhaps the most brilliant philosophical thinker India ever produced, and certainly the most precocious: for much of his most significant philosophical work was carried out by him while still in his teens (he died quite young too, in his thirties). His philosophy, **अद्वैत Advaita** (literally, and to coin a term in English, “Not-two-ism”) goes far beyond monotheism, and asserts not only that is there only One God, but that there is only One, period. The appearance, according to **Shankara**, of the manifold nature of the universe is **mâyâ**, “illusion”: and the world (including ourselves in it) is not “other” than God; and our only fault lies in not realising this fact—in the very depths of our being. His work, though so relatively recent, is yet so highly revered by Hindus that it is often termed **वेदान्त Vedânta**, “The end (*i.e.*, the ultimate consummation) of the **Vedas**”; and to this day wizened old men take pride in calling themselves, after him, **Shankarâchâryas**. In his philosophy

shall we be able to mightily [or extensively] reclaim the ignorant, and those who have gone astray?

*Gatha 28.5*

Zarathushtra was not content to realise the Supreme Being for himself; he wanted to “mightily reclaim” the rest of humanity too: even “those who have gone astray”. And he was aware that, from a practical point of view, this would entail social organisation: in other words, *nation-building*.

And monotheism is a most powerful force for this purpose, and has been so employed time and again. Moses, within the relatively short period of 40 years, built a nation of the most fearsome and undefeatable warriors out of a bunch of recently-liberated slaves, and his message was also monotheism. Muhammad, with his **La ilahi il’Allah**,<sup>10</sup> transformed a loose conglomeration of bickering, idolatrous Arabian tribes into the most powerful military and political force of his times. And even the Romans, who started off polytheistic, eventually adopted the monotheistic creed of Christianity—which in its origins is not even an Aryan religion—when the Emperor Constantine was told in a vision, and proved to himself in practice, that in the Sign of the Cross he would win (“**IN HOC SIGNO VINCES**”). It would appear, in fact, that some more or less strict form of monotheism has been historically necessary for the foundation of any sizeable empire: for even in the Chinese, Japanese, Inca and Aztec empires, the Emperor himself was worshipped by all his subjects as “The Son of Heaven”, or God.<sup>11</sup>

At any rate it was clear to Zarathushtra, from all accounts, that for the good of the nation, **Indra** with his court of numerous gods had to go. Now this was a momentous decision—a decision that affected the history of humanity for ever. Humankind heard for the first time a definite, decided, resolute proclamation of monotheism from the foremost Prophet of the Indo-Iranians—indeed, of all humanity of that time. This proclamation has been, and is still being, echoed in different times and climes, right up to the present day.

But the **Deva Yanists** were assuredly not going to take it lying down. They formed a distinct group determined to obstruct the spread of **Mazda Yasna** at all costs. The Indo-Iranians became divided into two groups of people on the basis of the method of worship. And it is apparently *this* division that led to the break up of the original Aryan Land into two parts, Iran and India.

And moreover, both countries lost something in the process. Iran, on the one hand, lost the **Rig Veda**, with its two-hundred-and-fifty Hymns in praise of **Indra**—and naturally, along with it the **Sâman** and **Yajus** as well, which as we saw are liturgical compilations from the **Rik**.<sup>12</sup> India, on the other hand, lost half

Hinduism and Buddhism, for long rival schools of thought, achieved a near-synthesis, and indeed some Hindus for this reason accuse him of being a crypto-Buddhist; but his skill with words and perspicacity with ideas are not questioned even by his most vehement critics, the most important of whom are the followers of his contemporary, **Ramânuja**.

<sup>10</sup> **La ilahi il’Allah**, “there is no god other than **Allah**”, is the most important statement a Muslim can make, following it up with **Muhammad ar-Rasul Allah** “Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah”. The two together constitute the **Kalima**, the profession of Faith by the True Believer; and their sincere utterance immediately makes a man a **Muslim**, “one surrendered utterly unto God” (the word **muslim** being derived from the term **aslama**, “surrender to God”). The concept of **Allah** in most Muslim minds is somewhat different than that of “God” in, say, Christianity—no orthodox Muslim, for instance, ever dares call anyone a “Son of **Allah**”, or address **Allah** as “Father”—but for the purposes of the point we are trying to make here these differences are not too relevant, especially since the word **Allah** was obviously taken by **Hazrat Muhammad** to mean exactly the same thing as the Jewish term **Elohim**, which in turn is unfailingly translated into English as “God”.

<sup>11</sup> The Roman Caesars too, after Augustus—the very first real Roman Emperor—began to require their subjects to worship them as God...proving that you just can’t run an Empire on unadulterated polytheism.

<sup>12</sup> When used by themselves, the prefixes **Rig-**, **Yajur-** and **Sâma-** are actually pronounced **Rik**, **Yajus** and **Sâman** respectively, and their more familiar forms are the result of the operation of **sandhi** when they are used in conjunction with the word **Veda**. Some traces of this phenomenon—*i.e.*, the modification of some sounds when juxtaposed by others—survive in almost all languages; in English for instance we have the word “intelligence” from “intellect” (where the **-c-** sound has become a **-g-**, somewhat like the **Rik-Rig** transformation).

of the *Atharva Veda*, namely the *Bhârgava* portion—or, if you will, the fifth Veda taught in secret by the Sage *Vyâsa* to his son. For as we shall see from certain Indian references recorded in the *Mahâbhârata*, it is highly likely that the *Zend Avesta* is the original *Bhrâgava Samhitâ* or *Bhârgava Veda*. Those who consider the present Indian *Atharva (Agirasa) Veda* to contain the entire text of the original Veda of the Fire-Priest may not be quite correct in their belief: for as we have seen earlier, the *Mahâbhârata* as well as the *Gopatha Brâhmana* declare that there were five Vedas, not four.

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In the *Nârâyaniya* section of the *Shânti Parva* of the *Mahâbhârata* we find references to a most marvelous scripture which was revered in India even then, being “as good as the *Vedas*”, and the “storehouse of eternal laws” (*Shânti Parva* 335.28, 40, 53). This new “Divine dispensation” was “adorned with the Grace of the *Om-kara*” (read that *Hon-vara* in Iranian—*Shânti Parva* 335.25, 27). *Nârada*, “the Messenger of the Gods”, apparently became inquisitive about this “novel” cult, which according to the text was practised in *श्वेत द्वीप* “*Shweta Dwîpa*”, lying to the north near “Mount *Meru*” close to the “*Kshiroda* Sea” (read that, if you will, as “the land of the white people”<sup>13</sup> lying around “Mount *Damavand*” adjacent to “the *Caspian Sea*”). *Nârada* went there to see for himself, and heard this wonderful scripture from the mouth of *Nârâyana* in person. In the context of the above reference, the term “*Nârâyana*” is not, as in other portions of the Indian scriptures, used as a synonym for God, but as an appellation for a very wise man, *द्विपदां वरिष्ठं द्विपदाम् वरिष्ठम्* “the greatest of the bipeds”, as he is referred to in the very first verse of this chapter.<sup>14</sup> Having learned and memorised this magnificent teaching, *Nârada* returned to India and recited it before a large audience in the “Court of *Brahmâ*”:

इदं महोपनिषदं चतुर्वेदसमन्वितम्  
सांख्य योगकृतं पञ्चरात्रानुशुद्धितम् ।  
नारायणमुखोक्तीतं नारदो अश्रावयत् पुनः  
ब्रह्मणो सद्ने तात यथादृष्टं यथाश्रुतम् ॥

It is a great scripture, containing the summary of all the four *Vedas* and the gist of the *Sânkhya* and *Yoga* philosophies; it is known by the name of *Pancharâtrâ* [*lit.* “prayers five times a day”<sup>15</sup>—a practice common among Zoroastrians even now]. From the mouth of *Nârâyana* did *Nârada* hear it sung; and he repeated it in the Court of *Brahmâ*, exactly as he had heard and seen it.

*Shânti Parva* 339.111, 112

<sup>13</sup> The term *श्वेत shweta* means “white”, so *Shweta Dwîpa* could well be taken to mean “The land of the white-complexioned people”. Since Indian Aryans, due to their intermarriage with the aboriginal inhabitants of India, have always been darker than Aryans outside India, this too could be a telling clue as to where this place lay.

<sup>14</sup> The term *Nârâyana* and its Iranian cognate *Nar-oish-Naro* signifies, in root, a “Supreme Man”; and if Friedrich Nietzsche actually read Zarathushtra, it may have been this allusion in the Zoroastrian scriptures that gave rise in the mind of that German philosopher to the idea of the “Superman”, which he outlined in his *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (and which the Nazis justified beyond belief). This idea in the Persian Prophet’s own Hymns, however, seems to be one of a constant improvement in man’s character, through righteousness, benevolence and heroic disdain for the consequences thereof: *Asha*, *Vohu Manah* and *Kshathra Vairya* respectively (see especially the next chapter). In this sense he too may be said to have advocated—if one were to interpret his teaching in that light—a “Superman” of sorts: though obviously not the kind Hitler had in mind (nor, of course, the Man of Steel of Metropolis and Lois Lane’s beloved, who may perhaps be called the most important figure of the myths and legends of the United States of America—even though he was actually the creation of a couple of Jewish Canadians).

<sup>15</sup> The practice among Hindus is to pray *three*, not *five*, times a day, which however is not practised by the Hindus who follow the *Pancharâtrâ*. (This is a practice followed even today by certain Hindus, though not, obviously, by all.) As this paragraph shows, this could well be a custom introduced into Hinduism *via* the influence of Zoroastrianism. About this influence we shall have much more to say later on in this book.

That it was indeed in Iran, and was indeed a Zarathushtrian scripture, can be deduced from the following several clues which are also mentioned in the *Nârâyanîya* section of the *Shânti Parva*:

—Narada had to travel *north-west* in search of it (आलोकयन् उत्तरपश्चिमेन *Ālokayann-uttarapashchimena—ibid, 335.7*), and when he arrived there, he found the religion to be *monotheistic* (एकान्तिन् *ekântin—ibid, 334.44*). It was also a *सात्वत* *sâtвата* faith, that is, it laid great stress on the *सत्व गुण* *satva guna* or holiness (*Spenta*<sup>16</sup> *Mainyu* in the Avesta). It was *aniconic*—indeed *Brihaspati* (or *Angirasa*, the Preceptor of the *Devas*), who had been invited to one of the sacrifices being performed in *Shweta Dwîpa*, had flown into a rage at this practice; standing up with the ladle in his hand, he had declared that he was not going to tolerate the fact that an “unseen deity” would take the libation:

अदृश्येन ह्यतो भागो हरिमेधसा  
बृहस्पतिस्ततः कुद्धः सुचम् उद्यभय वेगितः ।

*Shânti Parva 339.111,112*

He had thereupon to be pacified by some of the other Sages present, by their pointing out that this form of worship was very much current in *Shweta Dwîpa*, thus implying that *Brihaspati* as a foreigner might as well be courteous and accede to his hosts’ custom in their own land.

The One God worshipped in “thought, word and deed”<sup>17</sup> (*Shânti Parva 336.46*) by these “highly spiritual” (*ibid, 335.13*), “cap-wearing”<sup>18</sup> (छत्राकृतिशीर्षा *chhatrâkritishîrshâ—ibid, 335.11*), “white-complexioned” people, who were *not* divided into different castes as were those in India, but “were equal to each other” (*ibid, 336.39*), is called by *Nârada* by the name of *हरिमेधस* *HariMedhas*. Now this appears to be nothing other than a later-period Indianisation or Sanskritisation of the Iranian name *Ahura Mazda* (or *Ahuramazda* as it came to be pronounced in Achamænian times). At the time of the *Mahâbhârata* the term *Asura* (*Ahura*) had already acquired its highly dishonourable connotation in India, and the author of the *Mahâbhârata*, the Sage *Vyâsa*, must surely have disliked using such a term to refer to the Highest Lord. He evidently hit upon a smart substitution: he replaced it with the name *Hari* which happens to be very close to “*Ahura*” in pronunciation and is at the same time most honourable in Indian ears. In addition, as we have ready seen, the sounds *Medhas* and *Vedhas* are, according to the *Nirukta*, interchangeable; and we also know that *Vedhas* came to be called *Mazda* in Iran. The term *Hari Medhas*, then,

<sup>16</sup> The word *Spenta* is, to the philologist, highly interesting; for it is the older form of the Sanskrit word शान्त *shânta* “peaceful” (found in the Rigveda, for instance, in its more ancient Indian form: शान्त *shvânta*). It holds in Indian texts a position more or less analogous to the term שלום *shalom* “peace” in the Hebrew scriptures; many Hindu prayers end with the words शान्ति शान्ति शान्ति: *shânti shânti shântih* “Peace, peace, peace”. The word thus acquires overtones of “holy” or “sacred”—after all, one doesn’t use mundane terms to end prayers, now does one?—and in the Lithuanian language, which seems to have retained its Vedic heritage more than most other European tongues, the older form of this word has survived: *szventa* (pronounced “shventa”), which does indeed signify “holy”. We shall have a great deal more to say about the word *spenta* (its Iranian form) in the next chapter.

<sup>17</sup> An interesting allusion to the three principles of Zoroastrian ethics: *humata, hukhta, huvarshta* “good thoughts, good words, good deeds” (we spoke about this earlier too). The three as such are not too common in the Indian scriptures, and thus a reference to them in these passages is a further indication that the religion referred to in them was in all likelihood Zoroastrianism.

<sup>18</sup> The Zoroastrian custom of always keeping the head covered, especially in holy places, has already been mentioned earlier. The Jewish custom in this regard is rather obviously a takeover from the Achamænian Persians, for it is not mentioned in the early part of the Law of Moses; indeed even when Moses himself first entered the LORD’s presence at the Burning Bush, he was told merely to take off his shoes, not to cover his head. We shall have much more to say of the Persian-Jewish interaction later in this book. The custom itself—in more ancient days among the Zoroastrians it was not just a simple cap but a turban-like padded headgear—is probably a remnant of a Siberian-period Aryan habit; for it is often claimed that in cold weather a person loses a large portion of the body’s heat through the head.

is obviously the Zarathushtrian name **Ahura Mazda** in its Sanskritised form current in India at the time of **Vyâsa**.

That “**Hari Medhas**” is a coined name, invented in imitation of “**Ahura Mazda**”, is evident also from the fact that among Indians “**Hari**” alone suffices to denote the Highest Lord, and there is no reasonable reason to append “**Medhas**” to it. Moreover, “**Hari Medhas**” is not an alternative name for any of the deities mentioned in the Vedas or the Purânas. It is found only six times in the entire collection of Indian sacred texts: five times in the *Nârâyanîya* Chapters of the *Mahâbhârata*’s *Shânti Parva* and once in the *Vishnu Purâna*;<sup>19</sup> and in each case, in keeping with the Zarathushtrian connotations of the name **Ahura Mazda**, it denotes the Supreme Being, and not a minor deity.

It is much too evident from the foregoing that the *Nârâyaniya* Chapters of the *Mahâbhârata* refer to the religion founded by Zarathushtra; they cannot possibly refer to anything else. It is surely as faithful an account of the **Mazda Yasni** religion as can be expected from a poet writing in a distant age about a distant country.

That **Nârada** was able to recite the Scripture of the **Shweta Dwîpa** in India यथाश्रुतम् *yathâshrutam* “exactly as he had heard it” also testifies to the identity of the languages of India and Iran. He apparently did not have to hear it—or even to make it understood to others in India—in translation.

It is therefore as clear as can be that Zarathushtra’s scripture was known in India at a period as relatively recent as that of the *Mahâbhârata*.<sup>20</sup> That it was so highly praised,<sup>21</sup> as the above passage demonstrates, and that too by the rival sect—the **Devayânists**—goes far to show that in those days (as, indeed, even now) the Indians had a very broad-minded attitude towards other religions. It is one more tribute to the eminent sensibility of the ancestors of the Indians of today.

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As we said earlier, **Vyâsa** himself<sup>22</sup> regarded the number of the Vedas to have been *five*, not four; and says in the Epic that he taught the fifth Veda to his son. Whether this fifth Veda was the one **Nârada** brought back from **Shweta Dwîpa**, or not, is not mentioned one way or another in the *Mahâbhârata*; but we do have references in *other* Indian literature to the *Bhârgava Samhitâ* of the *Atharva Veda*.

Thus the *Gopatha Brâhmana*, which as we said also counts the Vedas as being five in number (the *Atharva Veda* being considered by it to be actually *two* Vedas, the *Angirasa* and the *Bhârgava*), declares that the latter is better than the former, comparing the *Bhârgava* to sweet, and the *Angirasa* to brackish, wa-

<sup>19</sup> “**Hari Medhas** is the Soul of Consciousness and the Root of Knowledge. He is both personal and impersonal, [being] One Who ever surveys the world—we bow down to Him.” (*Vishnu Purâna* 14.34). A clearer description of **Ahura Mazda** can hardly be imagined!

<sup>20</sup> It often brings a smile to the lips of a western reader, especially one living in North America, to read about the “relatively recent” times of the *Mahâbhârata*, which probably antedates Homer himself, the very earliest of European authors. It should be appreciated, however, that the Homeric Epics as well as the *Mahâbhârata* portray highly sophisticated peoples, capable of constructing Trojan Horses and even—if the fertile Indian imagination is to be believed—nuclear weapons (“**Brahmâstras**”) and aircraft (“**vimânas**”). Such imagery is obviously many millennia closer to us than that of the far more “primitive” Vedic Hymns, with their forests, waters and shining streams—and the total absence in them of the trappings of “civilisation”.

<sup>21</sup> ततः ब्रह्मा नमस्करो देवाय हरिमेधसे ।  
धर्मं चाग्र्यं यं स जन्माह सरहस्यं ससंग्रहम् ॥

“Then **Brahmâ** [the Creator Himself, no less!] bowed down before the Glorious **Hari Medhas** [*i.e.*, **Ahura Mazda**], and learned from him the best of religions, with all its principles and secrets.” (*Shânti Parva* 348.30). Could higher praise have been penned?

<sup>22</sup> It is to be noted here that it is not just any Tom, Dick or Hare Krishna follower asserting this, but the very “editor” of the Vedas himself (if he is to be taken, as tradition avows, as also having authored the *Mahâbhârata*). It was he who gave us the arrangement of the Vedic Hymns as we know them today; and so surely his assertion should be given more weight than any one else’s!

ter (*Gopatha Brhâmana 1.1.1.15*). The *Sânkhyayâna Sutra (16.1)* agrees, calling the *Bhârgava Veda* भेषज *bheshaja* “genial” while describing the *Angirasa Veda* as घोर *ghora* “rough”. *Sâyana*<sup>23</sup> too, in the introduction to his commentary on the *Atharva Veda*, uses the term घोर *ghora* “rough” to describe the *Angirasa*, while he considers the *Bhârgava* to be शान्त *shânta* “calm”.<sup>24</sup>

It was the difference between the *Bhrigus* and the *Angirasas* that led to the compilation of a supplementary *Veda*: the *Atharva Veda*; for the name *Atharva* can also be derived from the root ऋ -*ri* giving rise to ऋच्छति *richchhati* “to go”, and thereby connoting “that which goes [or comes, as we say in English] afterwards”—in other words, it *supplements* the first three *Vedas*, the *Rik*, *Sâman* and *Yajus*. The other derivation of the word *Atharva* was, as we saw, from the term अत्र *Atr-* or *Athar* “Fire”, and meant “The *Veda* of the Fire-priest”; and it is perhaps so called because it is more concerned with the preservation of the domestic fire, both in its literal sense and its more social sense (“hearth and home”, meaning the discharge of domestic duties), than the performances of elaborate and spectacular sacrifices like the *Jyotishtoma* and so on.<sup>25</sup>

Even the *Bhavishya Purâna* contains a veiled reference to the Zoroastrians, in that it describes the *Atharva Veda* to be the *Veda* of the *Mâghas*. As we have seen—and as we shall further elaborate later on—the *Magha* was the name given by Zarathushtra to the Church he founded for the spread of the Message of *Mazda*.

That the *Bhârgavas* and the *Angirasas* used to worship in different ways is mentioned even in the *Mahâbhârata*:

भृगुभिरङ्गिरोभिश्च हुतं मन्त्रैः पृथग्विधै ।

The *Bhrigus* and the *Agirasas* use altogether different *mantras* in their prayers.

*Vana Parva 223.14*

It is clear, then, that the original *Atharva Veda*, containing as it did the *Bhârgava* as well as the *Angirasa* portions, was in reality *two* books, not one; and the *Bhârgava* portion—which has been lost to India—could well have been the *Zend Avesta* or छन्द अपिस्तक *Chhanda Apistaka*, the Hymn Book of Zarathushtra.

This inference is strengthened by the observation that whatever *Bhârgava* writings we do possess in India—like the *Bhrigu Valli* of the *Taittiriya Upanishad*, for instance—do reflect quite accurately the teachings of Zarathushtra. We shall touch upon this subject in greater detail in a subsequent chapter; but before

<sup>23</sup> *Sâyana*, the great commentator of the Vedas: paralleled, perhaps, by Rabbi Shim'on Yitzhaki or ר'שמ"ן *Rashi*, the commentator of the *Torah*. Much might be written about him, and in the final edition of this book I intend to do so; suffice it here to say that among Hindu theological scholars he is as highly regarded as St. Augustine, for example, among the Catholics, or Nâgârjuna among the Buddhists.

<sup>24</sup> It may be remembered that we wrote earlier regarding the Iranian word *Spenta*. This is one more finger pointing in the direction of the *Bhârgava Veda* being the Indian name for the *Zend Avesta*, for the word *Spenta* in Zoroastrian scripture signifies a very high level of blessedness indeed.

<sup>25</sup> The sacrifice or यज्ञ *yajna* must originally have been quite simple, but with time it grew very elaborate and complicated. Of course this happened to all things in India—it has been said that in sharp contrast to the Greeks, who believed in the principle of “Nothing to excess”, the Indians espoused the opposite principle, namely “Everything to excess”.

we do that it will be necessary to outline the significant tenets of Zarathushtra's teachings, and to understand a little of what he said in the first place.

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However, before we come even to that, let us examine in greater detail the historical outcome of the "**Deva-Asura War**". One may say that in a sense *this ideological "War" had more far-reaching consequences on the history of humanity than any other war*—whether of arms or ideas. For upon India having won it for the **Devas** and Iran for **Ahura**, it determined forever the subsequent, specifically *Indian* development of the original Vedic religion, which, although it had the potential to spread all throughout the Aryan Land—ultimately to the very shores of the Atlantic, and even beyond<sup>26</sup>—became confined, as a result of the **Asuric** victory in Iran, to the Indian sub-continent. It is only necessary to visualise how easily Vedic teaching could have spread to the Greeks, Romans, Celtic and Nordic peoples, with their great similarities to the original Vedic peoples with whom they shared their languages and even their very genes, to realise how narrowly Europe escaped being brought into the fold of the Vedic religion. And had the *kathenotheism*, and enormously superior breadth and depth of outlook of an evolved and elaborated emanation from the Vedic tradition, replaced the polytheism of pre-Christian Europe, it is inconceivable that Christianity<sup>27</sup> could have made appreciable inroads into the West, just as it has not been able to make any significant inroads into India; for as the Irish Sage points out in his *Preface to Androcles and the Lion*:

Hindus...and Buddhists...have, as a prophylactic against salvationist Christianity, highly civilised religions of their own. ...To offer a Hindu so crude a theology as ours in exchange for his own, or our Jewish canonical literature as an improvement on Hindu scripture, is to offer old lamps for older ones in a market where the oldest lamps, like old furniture in England, are the most highly prized.

There is little question, then, that one of the outcomes of the **Deva-Asura War** was *the confinement of the Vedic tradition, and its entire subsequent higher development, to India*; and this left the ancient Europeans open to the onslaught of Christianity, with its completely Semitic background, which took Europe over *faute de mieux*.<sup>28</sup> However, Western Aryans were not so very different from the Eastern, and had they been offered the choice would very likely have taken to Vedism like fish to water. This

<sup>26</sup> People brought up on the idea that it was either Columbus or Leif Ericson who "discovered" America are just now beginning to learn, from archaeological evidence unearthed on both shores of the Atlantic, that Europeans had been there several thousands of years ago; for very ancient tools and artifacts of similar shape and design have recently been found in Maine, Newfoundland and Norway. What happened to these early European settlers in North America is as yet unknown; and we do not even know how they managed the crossing—perhaps they reached there by accident, their ship having been caught up in some storm which they managed to weather, but only just, and maybe they never returned to Europe to tell the tale; but whatever the answers to these questions, it seems clear that Europeans had been in the New World long before historical times.

<sup>27</sup> It should be borne in mind that Christianity is not only a Semitic religion, but was originally intended by its Founder for Jews alone. Several of Jesus's earlier statements support this view—for instance his instructions to the twelve apostles as he sent them forth to evangelise: "Go not into the way of the Gentiles, and into any city of the Samaritans enter ye not; but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (*Matthew 10.5,6*). It would appear, from a critical reading of the Gospels, that it was only towards the end—when Jesus became convinced that many orthodox Jews were inflexibly opposed to him and his teaching—that he changed his mind about this matter, and said to the disciples "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature" (*Mark 16.15*).—By the way, my Indian readers may find it interesting to learn that the term **gospel**, or rather its Greek original **εὐαγγέλιον eu-angel** or "evangel"—which literally means "good message" or "good news"—has its roots in the Sanskrit term **सु-अंजलि su-anjali** "good greetings"; and my European readers may find it interesting to learn that the way such greetings are expressed in India is with the hands folded as if in prayer, a gesture with which westerners are familiar through movies and illustrations of India. This gesture is not by any means universal for worship; Zarathushtra himself, from a reading of the Gathas, appears to have worshipped "with hands outstretched" (**ustana jasta**); and the orthodox Jews to this day follow yet another custom: that of **davaning**, or repeatedly bowing ever so slightly at the waist. The hands-folded way of worship, common in Christendom today, seems in fact to have arrived in Europe from India.

<sup>28</sup> It is not to be understood from this that Europeans had *no* religion; just that the religions they had were inadequate to satisfy the soul that hungers and thirsts after righteousness. One thing that really brings this

is so obvious from everything we know about the two groups: the Thunderbolt wielded by **Indra**, so similar to the one brandished by **Zeus-JUPITER** (among the Græco-Romans) and by **Thor** (among the Nordics); the close affinity of the Saxon, Iberian and Baltic languages to Sanskrit and Zend; the flavour of the Germanic and Celtic legends (such as those of **Siegfried** in Germany and **Cuchulain** in Ireland, to give just two examples), so very akin to those of India; the chariots, feasting, fighting and Druids of the Gauls and Brythons, so similar to scenes evoked by the verses of the *Mahâbhârata*; even the resemblance, in Swedish and Norwegian, for the names of these two countries, **Sverige** and **Norge**, to the Sanskrit terms **स्वर्ग Svarga** “heaven” and **नरक Naraka** “hell”, which may not be accidental, considering the geographical differences between these two Scandinavian lands—the easy, rolling, fertile flatlands and forests of Sweden contrasted with the mountainous, desolate, rocky and fjord-crossed Norwegian terrain—for under the technological limitations of those times, these differences must have seemed as great as the gap between paradise and perdition.<sup>29</sup> These and a thousand other similarities between the Asian and European Aryans indicate that a sophisticated emanation out of the Vedic tradition would have been just the right religion, socially, culturally and from the logical point of view *historically*, to have spread to Europe. Think of the similarity between the **menhirs** of the ancient inhabitants of France and Britain and the **lingams** of the Indian **Shaivites**; think of the Homeric epics and their similarities with the ones composed by **Vâlmîki** and **Vyâsa**; think of the Bards of both continents singing their tales of valour in the courts of kings ... and of the other member of the court, the jester or **wit**, so called in both old English and Sanskrit: **वित vit**. The words “sun”, “moon” and “stars” have all come down to us straight from the Iranian **hweng**, **maon** and **stare**; and when the entire voice of a people sings of both heaven and earth from a common linguistic source, there can be no doubt as to the affinity of these people for the religion that emerged out of and evolved from this very voice (**वाच vâcha**).

That this did *not* happen—there appears little doubt now—was due to the victory of **Ahura-tkaesha** in Iran. **Indra** and his **Devas** were sealed in, so to speak, east of the Hindu Kush. And along with them were the **Rik**, **Sâman** and **Yajur Vedas**, upon which depended all subsequent development of the religion of which they were the foundations. *All* the **स्मृति smṛiti** literature of the Hindu religion, vast as it is, is founded upon the authority of the **श्रुति shruti** or Vedic Chants. **Smṛiti** scriptures were permitted to be written down; they did not *have* to be memorised and sung, though this was also done. They were—and are—sacred, but *not* as sacred as the Hymns. They have to this day

home to the modern person is viewing the performance of a Greek tragedy, such as **Oedipus Rex** or **Antigone**: the awesome depth of doom and despair portrayed therein—the protagonists regarding themselves as having no hope of redemption, or peace for their tormented souls, whether in this life *or in a future existence*—making even **King Lear** or **Hamlet** appear downright cheerful in comparison.

<sup>29</sup> Even though this derivation appears to me rather fanciful, and seems to fall under the heading of so-called “folk etymology” or etymological explanations made up by common people, it still shows that Indian and European cultures stem from the same root.

enormous popular appeal, in fact far greater than the *shruti*; but in the hierarchy they were—and are to this day—regarded *below* the spiritual stature of the Chants. So: no Vedas, no Vedic religion. No matter that the two most well-beloved and highly revered of Hinduism's **Avatâras** or Incarnations of the Supreme Being Himself, namely **Râma** and **Krishna**,<sup>30</sup> appeared on the scene *after* the Vedic period; no matter that far more Hindus of today know the tales of their exploits as recounted in the *Mahâ-bhârata*, *Râmâyana* and *Srimad Bhâgvatam* than know even the more important *sûktas* of the *Rigveda*: in degree of sanctity the Chants are at the very top. And it is right, as I have tried to show in this book (see specially Chapter 17), that it should be so, for they of all the world's literary works, sacred or profane, are absolutely unique: they are the expression in sound of the innermost, deepest, most enduring, most primeval, most penetrating, most vitally, vividly vibrating thoughts and experiences of the most intensely aware and highly realised souls of the earliest times remembered by *homo sapiens*. And it was a monumental tragedy, as we shall try to illustrate later, that the Aryans of West Asia and Europe lost these priceless treasures and the messages they bore—which might easily have been theirs too.

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However, there was also another outcome of the **Deva-Asura** War, not directly connected with Europe. This was the tremendous influence Zoroastrianism exerted on the three main *Semitic* religions that have survived down to our times, *viz.*, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The influence was not always direct, though at times it certainly was, and very strikingly so too. But whether direct or indirect, it was there; and as we said before, it determined the history of the world forever. It was not merely in the matter of monotheism that this influence was felt. It was also in the matter of aniconic worship; the repudiation of the caste system; the emphasis on the ideal of militancy (in early Judaism and in Islam) and of an organised Church (in Christianity). In the matter of emphasis on Righteousness and Justice. On the Love and the Fatherhood of God. On the concept of a Saviour-to-come: the very term actually invented by Zoroastrianism. On the Joy of the Life Divine: a Joy not dependent on external circumstances but transcending them. We shall be able to trace the influence of Zoroastrian teaching on these as well as many other aspects of the three main *Semitic* religions.

But, as I have said, to do this we shall first have to study some more of what the First Prophet of Mankind actually taught—at least the main tenets of his religion. Let us now proceed to do so.

<sup>30</sup> Hinduism without **Râma** and **Krishna** may almost be compared to Christianity without Christ, so strong is the Hindus' reverence for these two **Avatâras**. The story of **Râma**—the *Râmâyana*, the first great epic poem of human history—is perhaps the most touching tale of Divine incarnation ever told: for in order to destroy a **Râkshasa** or Demon called **Râvana**—who had asked for, and been granted, a boon of invincibility against all creatures in heaven or in hell—The Supreme Being Himself had to obliterate from His consciousness all traces of His own divinity, and, incarnating as an ordinary mortal (against whom Râvana had disdained to request invincibility), defeat the demon using only common human skills. No other person in whom the Divine is held to have incarnated ever suffered the pangs of human heartache, or became acquainted with the severe limitations of the human condition, as thoroughly as **Râma** did, for while he lived on earth he never knew he was God incarnate; and even though numerous **Rishis**—who, due to their spiritual insight, knew better—often tried to point out the fact to him, he could never bring himself to be fully convinced of it, repeatedly saying "I am a [simple] man; I consider myself to be [nothing more than] **Râma**, the eldest son of King **Dasharatha**". In sharp contrast to him, **Krishna**—who figures prominently (though not exclusively) in the other great Indian Epic, the *Mahâ-bhârata*—was from his childhood so very conscious of his own Divine nature that he played pranks with mortals as adults play with children: and his endearing but immensely greater superiority to humans—and his clear consciousness of it—provides a beautiful counterpose to the pathos of the story of **Râma**. The two together so well complement each other that it is upon the tales of **Râma** and **Krishna**—rather than upon western-type fairy tales—that Indian children are raised; it is these two **Avatâras** who abide in the hearts of virtually every Hindu, peasant or prince; and it is with the name of **Râma** on his lips that Mahatma Gandhi died.