

or Benares). Here, both Vardhamana Mahavira (also called the Jina), the founder of Jainism, and Gautama Siddhartha, the founder of Buddhism, were born into distinguished clans in the nonmonarchical state systems that flourished at this time. The Upanishads laid the foundation for all of subsequent Indian philosophy, with their basic concept of the identity of the individual soul (the *atman*) with the world-soul (*brahman* or *atman*). These texts also began to proselytize for the renunciation (*sannyasa*) of world and family life and the seeking of release (*moksha*) from the wheel of rebirth (*samsara*). Coming as they did at the end of the Vedas, the Upanishads were known as the “end of the Vedas,” or “Vedanta,” a name later applied to schools of philosophy that further developed the doctrine of the identity of the individual soul and the world-soul.

HUMANS, ANIMALS, AND GODS IN THE *RIG VEDA* 1500–1000 B.C.E.

tat savitur varenyam bhargo devasya dhimahi
dhiyo yo nah prachodayat.

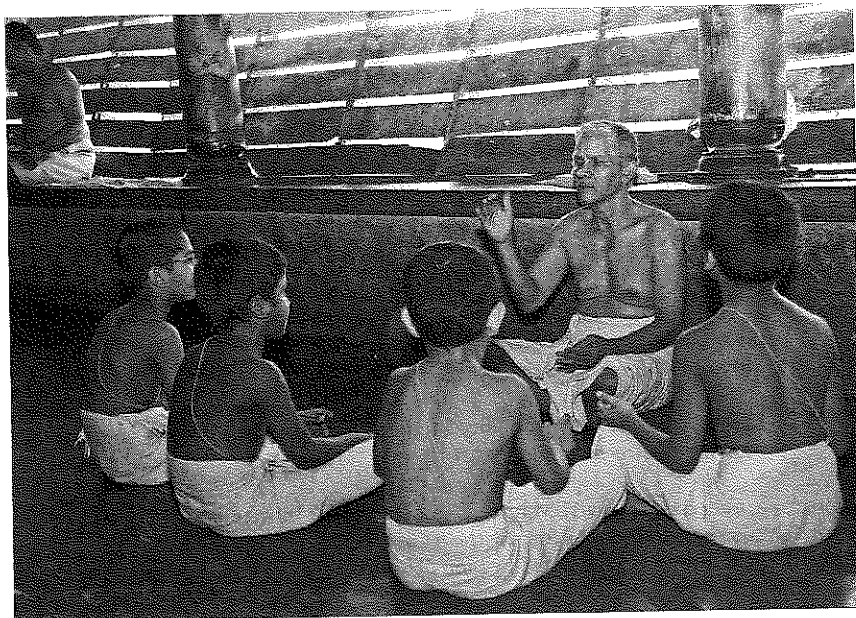
Let us meditate on this beloved light of the god who enlivens.
May he inspire our thoughts.

This verse, called the Gayatri Mantra (“an incantation in the Gayatri meter”) or the Savitri Mantra (“an incantation to the sun god in his aspect of Savitri”), verse 3.62.10 of the *Rig Veda*, is recited by pious Hindus every day as they greet the rising sun; it is often introduced by the sacred syllable “Om” and the words “bhur bhuvah svah” (“earth, atmosphere, heaven”). The *Rig Veda* is the oldest religious text of India, composed, in Sanskrit, by people who lived in what is now the Punjab, in northwest India and Pakistan, around 1500 B.C.E.. The Vedic people were nomads and pastoralists who grazed their cows and horses, sheep and goats, in the hills. The *Rig Veda* (which means “Knowledge of Verses”) consists of 1,028 poems, often called *mantras* (incantations, words with powers to affect reality), grouped into ten “circles” (*mandalas*). (It is generally agreed that the first and last books are later additions.)

The *Rig Veda* was preserved orally for centuries, even when the Indians had long come to use writing for everyday matters. It was a powerful text, whose power must not fall into the wrong hands. Unbelievers and infidels, as well as Dalits and women, were forbidden to learn the Veda, because they might defile or injure the power of the words. Its exclusively oral preservation ensured that the *Rig Veda* could not be misused even in the right hands: you couldn’t take the *Rig Veda* down off the shelf in a library, for you had to learn it in the company of a wise teacher or guru, who would make sure that you understood its application to your life. Thus the Veda was usually passed down from father to son, and the lineages of the schools or “branches” that passed down particular commentaries “from one to another” were often also family lineages, patriarchal lineages. Those who taught and learned the *Rig Veda* in this early period were therefore invariably male Brahmins, though later other classes, too, may have supplied teachers; and from the start those who composed the poems may well have been more varied, even perhaps including women, to whom some poems are attributed.

The oral nature of the *Rig Veda* (and of the other Vedas, too) was expressed in the term often applied to it: it was called *shruti* (“what is heard”), both because it was originally “heard” (*shruta*) by the human seers to whom the gods dictated it and because it continued to be transmitted not by being read or seen but by being *heard* by the worshipers when the priests chanted it. The oral metaphor is not the only one—ancient sages also “saw” the Vedic verses—but it does reflect the dominant mode of transmission. It made no more sense only to “read” the Veda than it would only to read the score of a Brahms symphony.

One might suppose that a text preserved orally in this way would be subject to steadily encroaching inaccuracy and unreliability, that the message would become increasingly garbled like the message in a game of telephone; but one would be wrong. For the very same sacredness that made it necessary to preserve the *Rig*



A teacher with his students at a school in Thrissur, one of the few schools that still teach according to ancient Vedic methods.

Veda orally rather than in writing also demanded that it be preserved with meticulous accuracy. People regarded the *Rig Veda* as a text revealed to human poets by the gods, and one does not tinker with revelation. The *Rig Veda* was memorized in a number of mutually reinforcing ways, including matching physical movements (such as nodding the head) with particular sounds and chanting in a group, which does much to prevent individual slippage. There are no significant variant readings in any of the numerous copies of the *Rig Veda*; people preserved it intact orally long before they preserved it intact in manuscripts.

RITUAL

All the poems of the *Rig Veda* are ritual hymns in some sense, since all were sung as part of the Vedic ceremony, but only some are self-consciously devoted to the meaning of the ritual. Although detailed instructions on the performance of the rituals were spelt out only in later texts, the *Rig Veda* presupposes the existence of some proto-version of those texts. As far as we can reconstruct the rituals from what is, after all, a hymnal, the Vedic people made offerings to various gods by throwing various substances, primarily butter, into a fire that flared up dramatically in response and consumed the offering (the oblation). The Vedic ritual of sacrifice established bonds between the human world (particularly the components of the ritual) and corresponding parts of the universe. Ritual was thought to have effects on the visible and invisible worlds because of such connections. The verses served as *mantras* to be pronounced during rituals of various sorts: solemn or semi-public rituals such as royal consecrations, life-cycle rituals (weddings, funerals, and even such tiny concerns as a baby's first tooth), healing rituals, and both black and white magic spells. The personal concerns of the priests interest the authors of

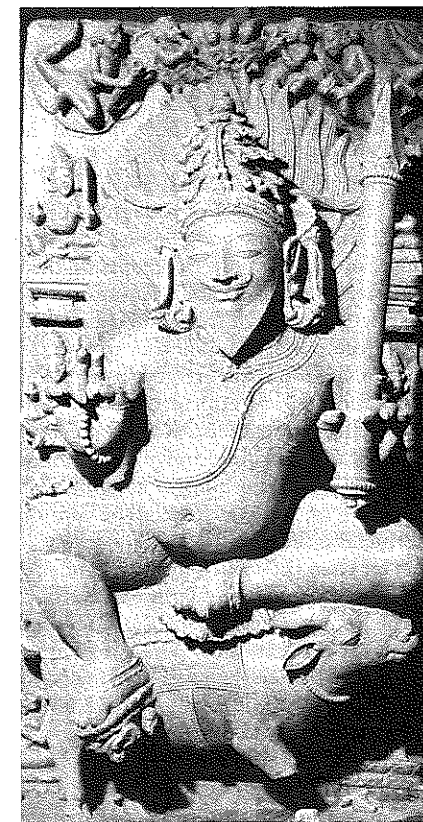
the poems (most of whom were priests themselves): the priest whose patron is the king laments the loss of his royal friend and praises faith and generosity, while other priests, whose tenure is more secure, express their happiness and gratitude. There were animal sacrifices (usually of a goat, occasionally of a horse) and simple offerings of butter into the consecrated fire. The more violent sacrifices have been seen as a kind of life insurance, giving the gods what they need to live (butter, animal sacrifices, etc.) in order that they will give us what we need to live.

The great gods of later Hinduism, Shiva (here called Rudra) and Vishnu, make only cameo appearances in the *Veda* ("Have Mercy on Us, Rudra" and "The Three Strides of Vishnu"). By contrast, the most important gods of the *Veda*, such as Agni, Soma, Indra, and Varuna, all closely tied to the Vedic sacrifice, become far less important in later Hinduism, though they survive as symbolic figures of natural forces: fire, the moon, rain, and the waters, respectively.

Agni, the god of fire (whose name is cognate with the English "ignite"), is invoked at the very beginning of the *Rig Veda* ("I Pray to Agni"). Agni is the divine model for the sacrificial priest, the messenger who carries the oblation from humans to the gods, brings all the gods to the sacrifice, and intercedes between gods and humans. When Agni is pleased, the gods become generous. The building of the fire-altar is a literally foundational Vedic ceremony, and the kindling and maintaining of three fires—the household fire, the ceremonial fire, and the sacrificial fire—were a basic responsibility of every householder.

An important ritual was devoted to Soma, a plant with hallucinogenic properties, which was pressed to release its fluid, consumed by the priests, and offered to the gods in the course of the sacrifice. Indra, the king of the gods, the paradigmatic warrior, is also the god of rain (a cousin of Zeus and Wotan). As the great Soma drinker, he appears often in the Soma poems, and he is the one who brings Agni back when the anti-gods (Asuras) steal him. The poets also praise Indra for freeing the cows that have been stolen and hidden in a cave, but his greatest deed is the killing of the dragon Vritra, who is called a Dasa, an "alien" or "slave." By killing Vritra, Indra simultaneously releases the waters or rains that Vritra has held back and conquers the enemies of the Vedic people, getting back the waters that are likened to cows trapped in the cave. Other Vedic gods, too, are personifications of natural forces, particularly solar gods. There are exquisite poems to the goddesses Dawn and Night, and to the god Surya, the Sun.

But most of the gods, even those representing natural forces, are vividly anthropomorphized. The gods are like us, only more so. They want what we want, things like marriage (and adultery), and fame, and praise. And most of the gods are closely



Agni, god of fire, sitting on his vehicle, the sacrificial ram, with the beard and paunch of a human Brahmin. Bhubaneswar, in Orissa, eleventh century.

associated with particular social classes: Agni is the Brahmin priest, Varuna the Brahminical sovereign ("Varuna Provoked to Anger," p. 98), Indra the warrior king.

We can also reconstruct a great deal of the belief system preserved in the *Rig Veda*, according to which the enemies of the Vedic gods are the anti-gods (Asuras), who live in the sky with the gods, and the ogres (Rakshasas), lower-class demons on earth that harass humans rather than gods. The anti-gods are the older brothers of the gods, the "dark, olden gods," like the Titans of Greek mythology, in contrast with "the mortal gods of heaven." The gods and anti-gods have the same moral substance (indeed, the gods lie and cheat far more than the anti-gods do—power corrupts, and divine power corrupts divinely); the anti-gods are simply the other team. The players on each side are not intrinsically differentiated by their morals, which shift back and forth from one category to another during the course of history and even from one text to another in any single period: As there are good humans and evil humans, so there are good gods and evil gods, good anti-gods and evil anti-gods. In the absence of ethical character, what the gods and anti-gods have is power, which they can exercise at their pleasure. The gods and anti-gods compete for the goods of the sacrifice, and since humans sacrifice to the gods, humans are against the anti-gods, who always, obligingly, lose to the gods in the end. It is therefore important for humans to keep the gods on their side. Moreover, since the gods live on sacrificial offerings provided by devout humans, the gods wish humans to be virtuous, for then they will continue to offer sacrifices.

The Vedic gods were light eaters; they consumed only a polite taste of the butter, or the animal offerings, or the expressed juice of the Soma plant, and the humans got to eat the leftovers. What was fed to the fire was fed to the gods. Not only did the gods live upon the sacrificial foods, but the energy generated in the sacrifice kept the universe going. The offerings that the priest made into the fire kept the fire in the sun from going out; if no one sacrificed, the sun would not rise each morning. Moreover, the heat that the priest generated in the sacrifice was a powerful weapon for gods or humans to use against their enemies. Heat is life, in contrast with the coldness of death; and Hindus believe that there is a fire in the belly (called "the fire that belongs to all men"), which digests all the food people eat, by cooking it (again). When that fire goes out, it's all over physically for the person in question, as it is ritually if the sacrificial fires go out; you must keep the sacrificial fire in your home burning, and carefully preserve an ember to carry to the new home if you move.

What the Vedic people asked the gods for most often in the prayers that accompanied sacrifice was life, health, victory in battle, and material prosperity, primarily in the form of horses and cows. As nomadic tribes, the Vedic people sought pastureland for their horses and their cattle, not only cows but other livestock kept for meat or milk, such as sheep and goats. As pastoralists and, later, herders and farmers, they lived in rural communities. They sacrificed cattle to the gods and ate them themselves, and they counted their wealth in cattle. They ate the beef from steers (the castrated bulls), both ritually and in secular feasts; they sacrificed the bulls and kept most of the cows for milk. One verse states that cows were "not to be killed," but another says that a cow should be slaughtered on the occasion of marriage, and another lists among animals to be sacrificed a cow that has been bred but has not calved, while still others include cows among animals whose meat was offered to the gods and then consumed by the people at the sacrifice. The usual meal of milk, ghee (liquid butter that has been heated and clarified until it is transparent), vegetables, fruit, wheat, and barley would be supplemented by the flesh of cattle, goats, and sheep on special occasions, washed down with *sura* (wine) or *madhu* (a kind of mead).

WOMEN

In the *Rig Veda*, a book dominated by men in a world dominated by men, women appear as objects. Every Vedic man valued equally his two most precious possessions: his cattle and his wife. A man needed a wife to be present when he performed

any Vedic sacrifice, though she had to stay behind a screen. Women were expected to live on after the deaths of their husbands, as we learn from "The Funeral Fire" and the "Burial Hymn." Women also appear occasionally as subjects, even as possible authors, of Vedic poems. And women may have had a voice in poems that treat women's interests sympathetically, such as magic spells to incapacitate rival wives and to protect unborn children in the womb and the Vedic ritual that an unmarried virgin performs to get a husband. Some spells are directed against evil powers but addressed to human women, warning them to be careful.

Several poems explore the relationships between men and women, mortal and immortal. These poems present narratives centering on courtship, marriage, adultery, and estrangement, often in the form of conversations, such as the one between Agastya and Lopamudra. One long poem celebrates the marriage of the moon and the daughter of the Sun, and another alludes to the marriage of the Sun to the equine goddess Saranyu. But these are not simple hierogamies (sacred marriages), for the celestial gods also share our sexual frailties. To say that a marriage is made in heaven is not necessarily a blessing; in the Vedic world, adultery, too, is made in heaven.

Not all the females in the *Rig Veda* are anthropomorphic. Abstract nouns (usually feminine) are sometimes personified as female divinities, such as Destruction (Nirriti) and Speech (Vach). There are also natural entities with feminine names, such as the Waters, and terrestrial goddesses, such as the nymphs (Apsaras) and the Forest. But there are also divine wives, named after their husbands (Mrs. Surya, Mrs. Varuna, etc.) and at least one divine husband, named after his rather abstract wife: Indra is called "The Lord of Shachi" (*shachi-pati*), *pati* meaning "husband" or "master" (literally, "protector") and *shachi* meaning "power" (from the verb *shak* or *shach*). Together, they suggest that Indra is the master of power or married to a goddess named "Shachi," which became another name for Indrani, Mrs. Indra. So, too, later goddesses played the role of the *shakti* (another form derived from the same verb) that empowered the male gods. But no goddesses (except Vach, Speech) have any part in the sacrifice that was the heart of Vedic religion. Most Vedic creator gods (like most Vedic gods in general) are male, as in the "Creation Hymn" and "The Hymn of the Primeval Man," but one Vedic poem ("Aditi and the Birth of the Gods") imagines cosmic creation through the down-to-earth image of a female giving birth.

Prithivi ("broad"), with the connotation of something very much like "wide open spaces," is a name of the Earth, a goddess who was the natural consort of any king. The opposite of the word *prithu* is the word for a tight spot, in both the physical and the psychological sense; that word is *amhas*, signifying a kind of claustrophobia, the uneasiness of being constrained in a small space. (*Amhas* is cognate with the English word "anxiety" and the German *Angst*.) In this context, *amhas* might well be translated, "Don't fence me in," since it occurs in a number of Vedic poems in which the poet imagines himself trapped in a deep well or a cave, from which he prays to the gods to extricate him. (Sometimes it is the cows who are trapped in the cave, or the waters, or the sun.) Many of the poems take this form; the poet thanks the god for his help in the past ("Remember the time I was in that tight spot, and you got me out?"), reminds him of his gratitude ("And didn't I offer you great vats of Soma after that?"), flatters him ("No one but you can do this; you are the greatest"), and asks for a return engagement ("Well, I'm in even worse trouble now; come and help me, I beg you"). It is often the Ashvins who rescue people from such tight spots and bring them back into the good, broad places; they are twin horse-headed gods (whose name means "equine"), like the Gemini or Dioskuroi of Roman and Greek mythology. The other Vedic gods generally snub the Ashvins, in part because they are animal herders and physicians (the latter a low trade in ancient India, involving as it does polluting contacts with human bodies) and in part because they persist in slumming, helping out mortals in trouble. They are associated with the social class of workers (Vaishyas).

POLYTHEISM AND MONISM

The *Rig Veda* has a kind of polytheism that contains the seeds of what will later flower into monism (which assumes that all living things are elements of a single, universal substance). A much-quoted line proclaims this singular multiplicity, in a context that is theological rather than philosophical: "They call it Indra, Mitra, Varuna, Agni, and it is the heavenly bird that flies. The wise speak of what is One in many ways" (1.164.46). This is a tolerant, hierarchical sort of polytheism: the worshiper acknowledges the existence, and goodness, of gods other than the god that he or she is addressing at the moment.

The polytheism of Vedic religion is actually a kind of serial monotheism that Friedrich Max Müller (1823–1900) named "henotheism" or "kathenotheism," the worship of a number of gods, one at a time, regarding each as the supreme, or even the only, god while you are talking to that god. Thus, one Vedic poem will praise a god and give him credit for separating heaven and earth, propping them apart with a pillar, but another Vedic poem will use exactly the same words to praise another god. (In addition, each god has characteristics and deeds that are his alone; no one but Indra kills Vritra.) Vedic kathenotheism made possible a quasi-hierarchical pantheon; the attitude to each god was hierarchical, but the various competing practical monotheisms canceled one another out, so that the total picture was one of equality: each of several was the best.

This time-sharing property of the Vedic gods is an example of individual pluralism: each individual worshiper would know, and might use, several different poems to different gods. And the text is intolerant of intolerance: one Rig Vedic verse curses people who accuse others of worshiping false gods or considering the gods useless (7.104.14). When the double negatives in this statement cross one another out, we are left with a record of heretics and atheists. But the broader intellectual pluralism of the Vedas regards the world, or the deity, or truth itself as plural; the Vedas tackle the problem of ontology, of being, from several different angles, branching off from an ancient and still ongoing argument about the way the world is, about whether it is basically uniform or basically multiform.

PRONOUNCING GLOSSARY

Aditi: <i>uh-di-tee'</i>	Rig Veda: <i>rig vay'-duh</i>
Agastya: <i>uh-gus'-tyuh</i>	Rudra: <i>roo'-druh</i>
Agni: <i>ug'-nee</i>	Sadhya: <i>sah'-dyuh</i>
Angiras: <i>un'-gi-rus'</i>	Sama Veda: <i>sah'-muh vay'-duh</i>
Apsaras: <i>up'-suh-ruhs'</i>	Sindhu: <i>sind'-hoo</i>
Atharva Veda: <i>uh-tahr'-vuh vay'-duh</i>	Soma: <i>soh'-muh</i>
Daksha: <i>duk'-shuh</i>	Tvashtri: <i>tvuh'-sh-tree</i>
Kiyamba: <i>ki-yahm'-buh</i>	Varuna: <i>vuh-roo'-nuh</i>
Lopamudra: <i>loh-pah'-moo-drah'</i>	Vasishta: <i>vuh-sish'-tuh</i>
Manu: <i>muh'-noo</i>	Viraj: <i>vee-rahj'</i>
Martanda: <i>mahr'-tahn'-duh</i>	Vishnu: <i>vish'-noo</i>
Marut: <i>muh-root'</i>	Vyalkasha: <i>vyul'-kuh-shah'</i>
Mitra: <i>mi'-truh</i>	Yajur Veda: <i>yuh'-joor vay'-duh</i>
Pakadurva: <i>pah'-kuh-door'-vah'</i>	Yama: <i>yuh'-muh</i>
Purusha: <i>poo'-roo-sha</i>	

I PRAY TO AGNI

Appropriately placed at the very beginning of the *Rig Veda*, this hymn invites Agni, the divine priest, to come to the sacrifice.

Rig Veda 1.1.1

I pray to Agni, the household priest who is the god of the sacrifice, the one who chants and invokes and brings most treasure.

Agni earned the prayers of the ancient sages, and of those of the present, too; he will bring the gods here.

Through Agni one may win wealth, and growth from day to day, glorious and most abounding in heroic sons.

Agni, the sacrificial ritual that you encompass on all sides—only that one goes to the gods.

Agni, the priest with the sharp sight of a poet, the true and most brilliant, the god will come with the gods.

Whatever good you wish to do for the one who worships you, Agni, through you, O Angiras,¹ that comes true.

To you, Agni, who shine upon darkness, we come day after day, bringing our thoughts and homage

to you, the king over sacrifices, the shining guardian of Order, growing in your own house.

Be easy for us to reach, like a father to his son. Abide with us, Agni, for our happiness.

TRANSLATED BY Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty.

1. The Angirases were an ancient family of priests, often identified with Vedic gods such as Agni and Indra.

CREATION HYMN

The *Rig Veda* imagines several quite different creation scenarios, most of which occur in the first and tenth books, the last to be composed, which already show the seeds of the philosophical speculation that was to emerge fully in the Brahmanas and Upanishads within a few centuries. The most basic form of Vedic cosmogony, or theory about the origins of the universe, is implicit in several hymns, though never spelled out: it is the formation of distinct elements out of the primeval cosmic flux, the evolution of order out of chaos. Other hymns describe creation as a result of the incest of the primeval father with his daughter, the dismemberment of a cosmic giant ("The Hymn of the Primeval Man"), or the first oblation offered into the fire.

This short hymn, though linguistically simple (with the exception of one or two puzzling nouns), is conceptually extremely provocative and has provoked hundreds of complex commentaries among Indian theologians and both Hindu and non-Hindu scholars. Called the "Nasadiya" from its opening words ("There was neither"), in

many ways it is meant to puzzle and challenge, to raise unanswerable questions, to pile up paradoxes. It has an extraordinary humility and open-mindedness, a tolerance, a celebration of plurality, even in asking unanswerable questions about the beginnings of all things. For in the end it clearly implies that the gods cannot be the source of creation since they came after it.

Rig Veda 10.129

There was neither non-existence nor existence then; there was neither the realm of space nor the sky which is beyond. What stirred?¹ Where? In whose protection? Was there water, bottomlessly deep?

There was neither death nor immortality then. There was no distinguishing sign² of night nor of day. That one breathed, windless, by its own impulse. Other than that there was nothing beyond.

Darkness was hidden by darkness in the beginning; with no distinguishing sign, all this was water. The life force that was covered with emptiness, that one arose through the power of heat.³

Desire came upon that one in the beginning; that was the first seed of mind. Poets⁴ seeking in their heart with wisdom found the bond of existence in non-existence.

Their cord⁵ was extended across. Was there below? Was there above? There were seed-placers; there were powers.⁶ There was impulse beneath; there was giving-forth above.

Who really knows? Who will here proclaim it? Whence was it produced? Whence is this creation? The gods came afterwards, with the creation of this universe. Who then knows whence it has arisen?

Whence this creation has arisen—perhaps it formed itself, or perhaps it did not—the one who looks down on it, in the highest heaven, only he knows—or perhaps he does not know.

TRANSLATED BY Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty.

1. The verb "stir" is often used to describe the motion of breath. The verse implies that the action precedes the actor.
2. That is, the difference between night and day, light and darkness, or possibly sun and moon.
3. "Heat" here refers to *tapas*, in particular the heat generated by ritual activity and by physical discipline of the body.

4. The Sanskrit term used here designates poets or inspired sages.
5. Possibly a reference to the "bond" mentioned in verse 4, or a kind of measuring cord by which the poets delimit—and hence create—the elements.
6. The verse contrasts male seed-placers, giving-forth, above, with female powers, impulse, below.

ADITI AND THE BIRTH OF THE GODS

This creation hymn poses several different and paradoxical answers to the riddle of origins. It is evident from the tone of the very first verse that the poet regards creation as a mysterious subject, and a desperate series of eclectic hypotheses (perhaps quoted from various sources) tumbles out right away: the craftsman (the priest, Brahmanaspati or Brihaspati, lord of inspired speech); the philosophical paradox of nonexistence (which we have just encountered in the "Creation Hymn"); contradiction (the earth born from the crouching divinity and then said to be born from the quarters of the sky); and mutual creation (Aditi and Daksha, the female

principle of creation or infinity and the male principle of virile efficacy, creating one another). A Vedic commentator on this verse (Sayana, who probably lived in the fourteenth century C.E.) takes pains to explain that for the gods, two births can mutually produce one another.

The dominant visual image of this poem is the goddess of infinity, who crouches with knees drawn up and legs spread wide, a position designated by a term primarily associated with a woman giving birth but later associated with yoga, and one which is also depicted on seals from the Indus Valley. The poem then moves on to the myth of Aditi and Daksha, with vaguely incestuous overtones, and then to the creation of gods and humans. When the poet speaks of "seeing" the births of the gods (v. 1), he may refer not to being actually present at that early time but rather to the poet's gift of "seeing" mythic events by means of his inspired vision. The creation of the universe out of water (vv. 6–7) and the rescuing of the sun from the ocean (v. 7) move the hymn back to the cosmic level, from which it then returns to the anthropomorphism of the story of Martanda, whose name originally meant "born of an egg" (i.e., a bird) and is an epithet of the sun-bird. The verb describing what his mother did to him (in v. 8) may mean either to throw aside or to miscarry, and a later etymology of Martanda is "dead in the egg" (i.e., miscarried). Later Hindu texts tell how Aditi bore seven healthy sons, the Adityas, but the eighth was unformed, until the Adityas made him into the sun. On another level, Martanda is an epithet of the human being, born from the "dead egg" that is the embryo: he is thus an ancestor of humankind, born to die.

Rig Veda 10.72

Let us now speak with wonder of the births of the gods—so that some one may see them when the hymns are chanted in this later age.

The lord of sacred speech, like a smith, fanned them¹ together. In the earliest age of the gods, existence was born from nonexistence.

In the first age of the gods, existence was born from nonexistence. After this the quarters of the sky were born from her who crouched with legs spread.

The earth was born from her who crouched with legs spread, and from the earth the quarters of the sky were born. From Aditi, Daksha was born, and from Daksha Aditi was born.

For Aditi was born as your daughter, O Daksha, and after her were born the blessed gods, the kinsmen of immortality.

When you gods took your places there in the water with your hands joined together, a thick cloud of mist² arose from you like dust from dancers.

When you gods like magicians³ caused the worlds to swell,⁴ you drew forth the sun that was hidden in the ocean.

Eight sons are there of Aditi, who were born of her body. With seven she went forth among the gods, but she threw Martanda, the sun, aside.

With seven sons Aditi went forth into the earliest age. But she bore Martanda so that he would in turn beget offspring and then soon die.

TRANSLATED BY Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty.

1. "Them" must refer to the two worlds, heaven and earth, rather than to the gods.
2. "Mist" or "dust" refers to the atomic particles of water, half water and half air, mediating between matter and spirit.
3. These are Yatis, who may be a class of sages or ascetics or, most likely, magicians, among whose

traditional bag of tricks in ancient India was the ability to make plants suddenly grow. They may be linked with the dancers in verse 6, another aspect of creative shamanism.
4. "Swell" implies filling up with milk from the breast.

THE HYMN OF THE PRIMEVAL MAN

In this hymn, the gods create the world by dismembering the cosmic giant, the Man, the primeval male, Purusha; *purusha* later comes to designate any male creature, indeed the male gender. He is both the victim that the gods sacrificed and the divinity to whom the sacrifice was dedicated; that is, he is both the subject and the object of a Vedic sacrifice that creates the whole universe, when the gods "spread" (v. 6) the sacrifice, stretching it out like the earth spread out on the cosmic waters. The sacrifice creates not only living creatures but the verses (of the *Rig Veda*), chants (of the *Sama Veda*), meters and formulas (of the *Yajur Veda*) (v. 9)—that is, the elements of the Vedic sacrifice! It also creates (v. 16) the first ritual laws, that is, the dharmas, a pro-*tean* word that here designates the patterns of behavior established during this first sacrifice to serve as the model for all future sacrifices.

Moreover, the "sacrifice" means both the ritual and the victim killed in the ritual. The Vedic chicken-or-egg paradox is repeated in a more general pattern, in which the gods sacrifice to the gods, and a more specific pattern, in which one particular god, Indra, king of the gods, sacrifices (as a king) to himself (as a god). This tautological thinking is also reflected (v. 5) in the mutual creation of the Man and Viraj (the active female creative principle, who is later replaced, as the mate of Purusha, by Prakriti or material nature). Though the theme of the cosmic sacrifice is a widespread mythological motif, this hymn is part of a particularly Indo-European corpus of myths of the dismemberment of a cosmic giant. The underlying concept is, therefore, quite ancient; yet the fact that this is one of the latest hymns in the *Rig Veda* is evident from its reference to the four social classes or *varnas* (v. 12), the first time that this concept appears in an Indian text.

The fourth social class, the servants (or Shudras), may have consisted of the people new to the early Vedic system, perhaps the people already in India when the Vedic people entered, people from a system already in place in India, or simply the sorts of people who were always outside the system. That the Shudras were an afterthought is evident from the fact that the third class, the people (Vaishyas), is sometimes said to be derived from the word for "all" and therefore to mean "everyone," leaving no room for anyone below them—until someone added a class below them. In support of this supposition is the fact that the final combination often functioned not as a quartet but as a dualism: all of us (in the first three classes) versus all of them (in the fourth class, the non-us, the Others).

This text ranks the kings below the priests. The supremacy of Brahmins was much contested throughout later Hindu literature and may have been nothing but a Brahmin fantasy. Many texts argue, or assume, that Kshatriyas (the class of kings and warriors) never were as high as Brahmins, and others assume that they always were, and still are, higher than Brahmins. Buddhist literature puts the kings at the top, the Brahmins second, and many characters in Hindu texts also defend this viewpoint.

The French sociologist Georges Dumézil (1898–1986) argued that the Indo-European speakers—that is, the hypothetical people from whose hypothetical language, Proto-Indo-European, all Indo-European languages such as Sanskrit were derived—had been divided into three social classes or functions. At the top were kings who were also priests, then warriors who were also policemen, and then the rest of the people. But by the end of the period in which the *Rig Veda* was composed, a fourfold social system that deviates in two major regards from the Dumézilian model was in place: this new system adds a fourth class at the bottom, and it detaches the status of kings from that of priests, demoting kings to the second, warrior-policeman function. The kings have come down one rung from their former alleged status by no longer sharing first place with the Brahmins. This, then, would have been one of the earliest documented theocratic takeovers, a silent, totally mental

palace coup—the Brahmins forcing the Kshatriyas into second rank by dissociating them from the exercise of priesthood. Thus, even in this hymn that supposedly assumes a social charter that was created at the very dawn of time and is to remain in place forever, we can see, in the positioning of the kings in the second rank, movement, change, slippage, progress, or decay, depending upon one's point of view.

Rig Veda 10.90

The Man has a thousand heads, a thousand eyes, a thousand feet. He pervaded the earth on all sides and extended beyond it as far as ten fingers.

It is the Man who is all this, whatever has been and whatever is to be. He is the ruler of immortality, when he grows beyond everything through food.

Such is his greatness, and the Man is yet more than this. All creatures are a quarter of him; three quarters are what is immortal in heaven.

With three quarters the Man rose upwards, and one quarter of him still remains here. From this¹ he spread out in all directions, into that which eats and that which does not eat.

From him Viraj was born, and from Viraj came the Man. When he was born, he ranged beyond the earth behind and before.

When the gods spread the sacrifice with the Man as the offering, spring was the clarified butter, summer the fuel, autumn the oblation.

They anointed² the Man, the sacrifice born at the beginning, upon the sacred grass.³ With him the gods, Sadhyas,⁴ and sages sacrificed.

From that sacrifice in which everything was offered, the melted fat⁵ was collected, and he⁶ made it into those beasts who live in the air, in the forest, and in villages.

From that sacrifice in which everything was offered, the verses and chants were born, the meters were born from it, and from it the formulas were born.

Horses were born from it, and those other animals that have two rows of teeth;⁷ cows were born from it, and from it goats and sheep were born.

When they divided the Man, into how many parts did they apportion him? What do they call his mouth, his two arms and thighs and feet?

His mouth became the Brahmin; his arms were made into the King, his thighs the People, and from his feet the Servants were born.

The moon was born from his mind; from his eye the sun was born. Indra and Agni came from his mouth, and from his vital breath the Wind was born.

From his navel the middle realm of space arose; from his head the sky evolved. From his two feet came the earth, and the quarters of the sky from his ear. Thus they⁸ set the worlds in order.

TRANSLATED BY Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty.

1. That is, from the quarter still remaining on earth, or perhaps from the condition in which he had already spread out from the earth with three quarters of his form.

2. The word actually means "sprinkle" with consecrated water, but it indicates the consecration of an initiate or a king.

3. A mixture of special grasses was strewn on the ground for the gods to sit upon.

4. A class of demigods or saints, whose name lit-

erally means "Those who are yet to be fulfilled."

5. Literally, a mixture of butter and sour milk used in the sacrifice; figuratively, the fat that drained from the sacrificial victim.

6. Probably the Creator, though possibly the Man himself.

7. Incisors above and below, such as dogs and cats have.

8. The gods.

There were seven enclosing-sticks⁹ for him, and thrice seven fuel-sticks, when the gods, spreading the sacrifice, bound the Man as the sacrificial beast.

With the sacrifice the gods sacrificed to the sacrifice. These were the first ritual laws. These very powers reached the dome of the sky where dwell the Sadhyas, the ancient gods.

9. Green twigs that keep the fire from spreading; the fuel sticks are seasoned wood used for kindling.

THE FUNERAL FIRE

Just as the Vedic poets speculate in various contrasting, even conflicting ways about the process of creation, so do they vary in their speculations about death and in the questions they ask about death. The poets view death and sleep as a part of chaos, in contrast with the ordering of life in the hierarchy of social classes. (Later, some forms of Hinduism stood this value system on its head and viewed life as a terrifying chaos and death as the liberating peace of perfect order.) Surprisingly for a document so devoted to war and sacrifice, both of which involve killing, the *Rig Veda* actually says relatively little about death. What it does say, however, is comforting: for the virtuous, the world of death is a hazy but pleasant place.

The poet prays, "Deliver me from death, not from immortality" (7.59.12). By "immortality" the ancient sages meant not an actual eternity of life—even the gods do not live forever, though they live much longer than we do, and they never age—but rather a full life span (usually conceived of as seventy or a hundred years). Death in the Vedas is something to be avoided as long as possible; one hopes only to escape premature death, never to live forever; the prayer is that people should die in the right order, that children should not die before their parents. When it comes to the inevitable end of the life span, the *Rig Veda* offers varied but not necessarily contradictory images of a rather muted version of life on earth—shade (remember how hot India is), lots of good-looking women (this heaven is imagined by men), and good things to eat and drink. There is also some talk about a deep pit into which evil spirits and ogres are to be committed forever, but no evidence that human sinners would be sent there.

The poems also propose many different nonsolutions to the insoluble problem of death, many different ways that the square peg of the fact of death cannot be fitted into the round hole of human rationality. These approaches are often aware of one another; they react against one another and incorporate one another, through the process of intertextuality. And there is general agreement on some points, such as that the dead person would go to the House of Clay, to be punished, or to the World of the Fathers (that is, dead male ancestors), to be rewarded. Sometimes, as in this hymn, the corpse was burned; sometimes either the ashes of the cremated corpse were buried (as in the "Burial Hymn") or the corpse was.

The poet in another hymn addresses the corpse: "Leaving behind all imperfections, go back home again; merge with a glorious body" (10.14.8). Despite this "glorious body" with which the dead person merges, the poet of "The Funeral Fire" expresses concern that the old body be preserved, and confidence that it will be. Not only is the fire not to destroy the body, but it is to preserve it. Yet, when this poem addresses the dead man, it speaks of the ultimate cosmic dispersal of the old body, the eye to the sun, in a reversal of the dismemberment in "The Hymn of the Primeval Man."

There are even some vague intimations of transmigration—the passage of souls at death to another state of existence. There is a rather suggestive, if cryptic, allusion to rebirth: "Let him reach his own descendants, dressing himself in a life span" (10.16.5). This verse can be interpreted to mean that Agni should let the dead person come back to his former home and to his offspring. The dead in the Upanishads come back to the earth in the form of rain, and that idea may be encoded here, too. "Take root in the plants with your limbs" (10.16.3) might also be a hint of the sort of rebirth in plants that the Upanishads will describe in detail. The plants in verses 13 and 14, some called by obscure names, others by descriptive epithets ("cool one"), are water plants. These verses accompany the ritual of dousing the fire with water so thoroughly that it produces a marsh where water plants and frogs may thrive. The female frog, in particular, is a symbol of rain and fertility. Thus new life sprouts at the end of the funeral.

When the poet says, "Go to the sky or to earth, as is your nature" (10.16.3), he may mean that the dead man will be reborn according to the record of his good works, his karma. A line in another poem also hints at the importance of good karma: "Unite with the fathers, with Yama [king of the dead], with the rewards of your sacrifices and good deeds, in the highest heaven" (10.14.7). Still, these are, at best, the early, murky stirrings of a doctrine that will become clear only in the Brahmanas and Upanishads.

Rig Veda 10.16

Do not burn him entirely, Agni, or engulf him in your flames. Do not consume his skin or his flesh. When you have cooked him perfectly, O knower of creatures, only then send him forth to the fathers.

When you cook him perfectly, O knower of creatures, then give him over to the fathers. When he goes on the path that leads away the breath of life, then he will be led by the will of the gods.

[*To the dead man:*] May your eye go to the sun, your life's breath to the wind. Go to the sky or to earth, as is your nature; or go to the waters, if that is your fate. Take root in the plants with your limbs.

[*To Agni:*] The goat is your share; burn him with your heat.¹ Let your brilliant light and flame burn him. With your gentle forms, O knower of creatures, carry this man to the world of those who have done good deeds.

Set him free again to go to the fathers, Agni, when he has been offered as an oblation in you and wanders with the sacrificial drink.² Let him reach his own descendants, dressing himself in a life span. O knower of creatures, let him join with a body.

[*To the dead man:*] Whatever the black bird has pecked out of you, or the ant, the snake, or even a beast of prey, may Agni who eats all things make it whole, and Soma³ who has entered the Brahmins.

Gird yourself with the limbs of the cow as an armor⁴ against Agni, and cover yourself with fat and suet, so that he will not embrace you with his impetuous heat in his passionate desire to burn you up.

TRANSLATED BY Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty.

1. This refers to the practice of placing the limbs of a goat over the dead man, so that Agni would consume them and not the corpse with his violent flames.

2. The libation offered to the gods at the funeral.

3. Soma appears here in his capacity of god or plant (compare the cooling plants in the final

verses), or simply as the Soma juice inside the priests.

4. This refers to the limbs and caul (inner membrane of the embryo) or skin of a dead cow that would be used in addition to or in place of the scapegoat, while the corpse would be anointed with fat and suet.

[To Agni:] O Agni, do not overturn this cup⁵ that is dear to the gods and to those who love Soma, fit for the gods to drink from, a cup in which the immortal gods carouse.

I send the flesh-eating fire far away. Let him go to those whose king is Yama,⁶ carrying away all impurities. But let that other, the knower of creatures, come here and carry the oblation to the gods, since he knows the way in advance.

The flesh-eating fire has entered your house, though he sees there the other, the knower of creatures; I take that god away to the sacrifice of the fathers.⁷ Let him carry the heated drink to the farthest dwelling-place.

Agni who carries away the corpse, who gives sacrifice to the fathers who are strengthened by truth—let him proclaim the oblation to the gods and to the fathers.

[To the new fire:] Joyously would we put you in place, joyously would we kindle you. Joyously carry the joyous fathers here to eat the oblation.

Now, Agni, quench and revive the very one you have burnt up. Let Kiyamba, Pakadurva and Vyalkasha plants grow in this place.

O cool one, bringer of coolness; O fresh one, bringer of freshness; unite with the female frog. Delight and inspire this Agni.

5. A wooden cup that the dead man had used in life to make Soma offerings to the gods and to "those who love the Soma" (i.e., the fathers) was filled with melted butter and placed at the corpse's head.

6. Yama is the king of the dead, therefore king of the fathers.

7. The hot oblation for the fathers, who either come to the sacrifice (brought by the non-flesh-eating Agni) or have Agni bring them the drink.

BURIAL HYMN

The *Rig Veda* is more concerned with the living than with the dead, as is clear from the way this burial hymn, which begins by addressing Death and occasionally the dead man, addresses the mourners. The poet urges the widow to go on living. Certainly she is not expected to die with her husband, though "lying beside a dead man" may have been a survival from an earlier period when the wife was actually buried with her husband; the *Atharva Veda* (18.3.1) regards the practice of the wife lying down beside her dead husband (but perhaps then getting up again) as an ancient custom. On the other hand, women in the Vedic period may have performed a purely symbolic suicide on their husbands' graves, which was later cited as scriptural support for the actual self-immolation of women on their husbands' pyres, which the British, much later, called "suttee."

Rig Veda 10.18

Go away, death, by another path that is your own, different from the road of the gods. I say to you who have eyes, who have ears: do not injure our children or our men.

When you have gone, wiping away the footprint of death, stretching farther your own lengthening span of life, become pure and clean and worthy of sacrifice, swollen with offspring and wealth.

These who are alive have now parted from those who are dead. Our invitation to the gods has become auspicious today. We have gone forward to dance and laugh, stretching farther our own lengthening span of life.

I set up this wall¹ for the living, so that no one else among them will reach this point. Let them live a hundred full autumns and bury death in this hill.

As days follow days in regular succession, as seasons come after seasons in proper order, in the same way order their life spans, O Arranger, so that the young do not abandon the old.

Climb on to old age, choosing a long life span, and follow in regular succession, as many as you are. May Tvashtri² who presides over good births be persuaded to give you a long life span to live.

These women who are not widows, who have good husbands—let them take their places, using butter³ to anoint their eyes. Without tears, without sickness, well dressed let them first climb into the marriage bed.

Rise up, woman, into the world of the living. Come here; you are lying beside a man whose life's breath has gone. You were the wife of this man who took your hand and desired to have you.

I take the bow⁴ from the hand of the dead man, to be our supremacy and glory and power, and I say, 'You are there; we are here. Let us as great heroes conquer all envious attacks.'

Creep away to this broad, vast earth, the mother that is kind and gentle. She is a young girl, soft as wool to anyone who makes offerings; let her guard you from the lap of Destruction.⁵

Open up, earth; do not crush him. Be easy for him to enter and to burrow in. Earth, wrap him up as a mother wraps a son in the edge of her skirt.

Let the earth as she opens up stay firm, for a thousand pillars⁶ must be set up. Let them be houses dripping with butter for him, and let them be a refuge for him here for all his days.

I shore up the earth all around you; let me not injure you as I lay down this clod of earth. Let the fathers hold up this pillar for you; let Yama build a house for you here.

On a day that will come, they will lay me in the earth, like the feather of an arrow.⁷ I hold back speech that goes against the grain,⁸ as one would restrain a horse with a bridle.

1. The wall may have been a stone to mark the boundary of the world of death, while the hill was the mound over the grave.

2. The artisan and smith of the gods.

3. Ritually purified butter would be used instead of mascara or eye shadow to protect the women among the mourners.

4. Probably done only when the dead man was a warrior.

5. Destruction (Nirriti) is the female personification of disorder and disintegration, in contrast with the orderly and peaceful aspects of death.

6. Yama, the king of the dead, built a house, with

pillars, for the dead man, perhaps symbolized by the urn containing his bones (or his cremated ashes) placed in the earth.

7. An elliptical metaphor, perhaps referring to the way the feather is stuck into the cleft made for it in the arrow, or as a feather floats gently down to earth when it is freed from the arrow.

8. Most likely, a command to remain silent lest one say something ill-omened, but also perhaps a reference to the poet's satisfaction in having made a good hymn, or his pleasure in returning to more auspicious subjects, or a statement that the rest is silence.

VARUNA PROVOKED TO ANGER

Varuna combines aspects of the roles of priest and king. His original function was that of a sky god, in particular the god of the waters in the heavenly vault (like Ouranos, a sky god who is Varuna's Greek counterpart). But by the time of the *Rig Veda* Varuna had developed into a god whose primary role was watching over human behavior (as a sky god was well situated to do) and punishing those who violated the sacred law, of which Varuna was the most important custodian. He would snare miscreants in his bonds, which often revealed their presence through disease (particularly edema, the retention of water) or misfortune.

This hymn to Varuna has an extraordinarily introspective tone, a sense of personal unworthiness and uncertainty ("What did I do?"). The poem assumes that, on the one hand, one may not be blamed, or perhaps not entirely blamed, for errors committed under the influence of passionate emotions, and, on the other hand, one may be punished not only for conscious errors but also for errors committed unconsciously (in sleep, or under the sway of wine) or even by other people (both one's parents and one's children). "The evil that sleep does not avert" may be a bad dream or a deed committed during sleep. The implication of someone else in one's own evil deed tends to negate the sense of remorse; one can regret the results of an unknown act (visible in Varuna's punishment) even if someone else is responsible for it, but not repent for intending to do it. The worshiper, like the sage Vasishtha, said to be the author of this hymn, wishes to serve Varuna in order to become free from the effects of his misdeeds. This idea becomes much more important in later Hinduism, in texts that characterize the Vedic transaction as one in which the ritual transfers to the sponsor the good karma that the priest generates. Eventually, the idea of the transfer of good karma in a ritual act with effects in this life develops into the idea of the moral consequences of any act, not only in this life but also in future lives.

Rig Veda 7.86

The generations have become wise by the power of him who has propped apart the two world-halves even though they are so vast.¹ He has pushed away the dome of the sky to make it high and wide; he has set the sun on its double journey² and spread out the earth.

And I ask my own heart, 'When shall I be close to Varuna? Will he enjoy my offering and not be provoked to anger? When shall I see his mercy and rejoice?'

I ask myself what that transgression was, Varuna, for I wish to understand. I turn to the wise to ask them. The poets have told me the very same thing: 'Varuna has been provoked to anger against you.'

O Varuna, what was the terrible crime for which you wish to destroy your friend who praises you? Proclaim it to me so that I may hasten to prostrate myself before you and be free from sin, for you are hard to deceive and are ruled by yourself alone.

TRANSLATED BY Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty.

1. Creation consists in the act (here attributed to Varuna, elsewhere to other gods) of propping apart heaven and earth and releasing the sun.

2. Either by day in the sky and under the earth by night, or, less likely, the sun's daily and annual revolutions.

Free us from the harmful deeds of our fathers, and from those that we have committed with our own bodies. O king, free Vasishtha like a thief who has stolen cattle, like a calf set free from a rope.

The mischief was not done by my own free will, Varuna; wine, anger, dice, or carelessness led me astray. The older shares in the mistake of the younger.³ Even sleep does not avert evil.

As a slave serves a generous master, so would I serve the furious god and be free from sin. The noble god gave understanding to those who did not understand;⁴ being yet wiser, he speeds the clever man to wealth.

O Varuna, you who are ruled by yourself alone, let this praise lodge in your very heart. Let it go well for us always with your blessings.

3. The elder brother may be implicated in his younger brother's lapse, or he may be the cause of it. "Older" may also refer to an older generation, the ancestral sin mentioned in the previous verse.

4. The wisdom that Varuna gives to the genera-

tions is his own truth. Varuna himself is "yet wiser" either than those to whom he gave understanding or than the clever man that he helps. Varuna is wise in a pious and mystical sense; the clever man is merely worldly-wise.

AGASTYA AND LOPAMUDRA

The conversation poems of the *Rig Veda* often involve goddesses and heavenly nymphs, are particularly associated with fertility, and may have been part of a special ritual performance involving actors and dancers. The dialogues with women present situations in which one member of the pair attempts to persuade the other to engage in some sort of sexual activity; sometimes, as in "Agastya and Lopamudra," it is the woman who takes the role of persuader, sometimes the man. In general, the mortal women and immortal men are successful in their persuasion, while the quasi-immortal women and mortal men fail. Often, as here, the poem zeroes in on a story that is already well under way, taking it up at a crucial turning point in a plot that we are presumed to know (and that the later commentaries spell out for us).

In this conversation, Lopamudra seeks to turn her husband, Agastya, who has taken a vow of chastity, away from his asceticism so that he will beget a child upon her. Agastya implies that he will ultimately give in to her desires, and she overpowers him (v. 4). Afterward, he wishes to atone for his lapse by drinking Soma. Finally, the poet affirms that the two of them, by uniting after each had perfected a power (she eroticism, he asceticism), achieved both forms of immortality, spiritual and corporeal (through children). This story was retold often and is perhaps best known from the *Mahabharata* (3.94-97).

Rig Veda 1.179

[Lopamudra:] 'For many autumns past I have toiled,¹ night and day, and each dawn has brought old age closer, age that distorts the glory of bodies. Virile² men should go to their wives.

TRANSLATED BY Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty.

1. This word often refers to the exertion of religious activity. When Lopamudra uses it, she may refer to her work as Agastya's wife or to her own asceticism (the commentator suggests that both of them practice asceticism), and when he uses it (v. 3) he refers to his asceticism.

2. The basic meaning of this word (*virishan*), which recurs throughout this hymn (and elsewhere in the *Rig Veda*), is one who sheds rain or seed; it comes to mean a potent male animal, particularly a bull or a stallion.

'For even the men of the past, who acted according to the Law and talked about the Law with the gods, broke off when they did not find the end.³ Women should unite with virile men.'

[*Agastya*.] 'Not in vain is all this toil, which the gods encourage. We two must always strive against each other, and by this we will win the race that is won by a hundred means, when we merge together as a couple.'

[*Lopamudra*.] 'Desire has come upon me for the bull who roars and is held back,⁴ desire engulfing me from this side, that side, all sides.'

[*The poet*.] Lopamudra draws out the virile bull: the foolish woman sucks dry the panting⁵ wise man.

[*Agastya*.] 'By this Soma which I have drunk, in my innermost heart I say: Let him forgive us if we have sinned, for a mortal is full of many desires.'

Agastya, digging with spades,⁶ wishing for children, progeny, and strength, nourished both ways, for he was a powerful sage. He found fulfilment of his real hopes among the gods.

3. The end of their asceticism: that is, they died childless and unsuccessful.

4. He holds back his seed. If this verse is spoken by Agastya, it would mean: "The desire of my swelling reed, which is held back, overwhelms me..."

5. He pants either with desire (before) or with exhaustion (after); "panting" merely indicates heavy breathing. This verse may follow an episode of mimed sexual intercourse.

6. A fairly obvious sexual metaphor.

HAVE MERCY ON US, RUDRA

Though only three entire hymns in the *Rig Veda* are addressed to the storm god Rudra, the rich ambivalence of his character is the basis of an important line of theology that culminates in the Hindu god Shiva, who inherits several of Rudra's characteristics, including his name. Rudra is fierce and destructive like a terrible beast, like a wild storm; but he is also a healer. He is invoked with Vedic hymns but not invited to partake in the regular Vedic sacrifice; as the embodiment of wildness and unpredictable danger, he is addressed more with the hope of keeping him at bay than with the wish to bring him near.

Rig Veda 1.114

We bring these thoughts to the mighty Rudra, the god with braided hair,¹ who rules over heroes, so that it will be well with our two-footed and four-footed creatures, and in this village all will flourish unharmed.

Have mercy on us, Rudra, and give us life-force. We wish to bow low in service to you who rule over heroes. Whatever happiness and health Manu² the father won by sacrifice, we wish to gain that with you to lead us forth.

We wish to gain your kindness, Rudra, through sacrifice to the gods, for you are generous. O ruler over heroes, come to our families with kindness. Let us offer the oblation to you with our heroes free from injury.

TRANSLATED BY Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty.

1. Rudra's long hair is braided in dreadlocks or matted on top of his head.
2. As the primeval ancestor of humankind,

Manu (p. 212) performed the first sacrifice by mortals for immortals.

We call down for help the dreaded Rudra who completes the sacrifice, the sage who flies. Let him repel far from us the anger of the gods; it is his kindness that we choose to have.

Tawny boar of the sky, dreaded form with braided hair, we call you down and we bow low. Holding in his hand the healing medicines that we long for, let him grant us protection, shelter, refuge.

These words are spoken for Rudra, the father of the Maruts,³ words sweeter than sweet, to strengthen him. And grant us, O immortal, the food for mortals. Have mercy on us, and on our children and grandchildren.

Do not slaughter the great one among us or the small one among us, nor the growing or the grown. Rudra, do not kill our father or our mother, nor harm the bodies dear to us.⁴

Do not harm us in our children or grandchildren, nor in our life span, nor in our cows or in our horses. Rudra, do not in fury slaughter our heroes. With oblations we call you here for ever.

I have driven these praises to you as the herdsman drives his cattle. Grant us kindness, father of the Maruts, for your kindness brings blessings most merciful, and so it is your help that we choose to have.

Keep far away from us your cow-killing and man-killing power, O ruler of heroes. Have mercy on us and speak for us, O god, and grant us double protection.⁵

Seeking help, we have spoken in homage to him. Let Rudra with the Maruts hear our call. Let Mitra, Varuna, Aditi, Sindhu,⁶ Earth and Sky grant this to us.

3. Gods of wind and storm.

4. This phrase means both our own bodies and the bodies of people we love.

5. Probably protection from Rudra's own wrath as well as that of the other gods (before whom he is here asked to speak on behalf of the worshi-

per), or from the killing of men and the killing of cattle.

6. A river goddess. "Sindhu" means "river" and is the basis of both the name of the Indus River and the words "Hindu" and "India."

THE THREE STRIDES OF VISHNU

Vishnu is, like Rudra, invoked alone in only a few Vedic hymns, but he is a more typically Vedic god, solar, benevolent, and procreative. This hymn is the basis of the myth of Vishnu's dwarf avatar (developed in later Sanskrit texts), who expands into a giant form and takes three steps to win the world from the anti-gods. Here, Vishnu is a giant, whose three space-creating steps prop apart and thereby make the earthly regions and the "upper dwelling place" (v. 1) or "highest footstep" (vv. 5–6), the seat of the immortal gods; the resulting space in between, covered by the second step, makes the universe threefold. His three steps are dawn, noon, and sunset, or the three phases of the year that Vishnu "measures apart" (vv. 1 and 3). The word *pada* (cognate with the Latin *pes*, *pedis*, and the English *foot*) recurs with several meanings: "foot," "step," "footprint," and "base" (in the sense of dwelling place); in the final verse it refers both to the actual place where humans and gods dwell and to the footstep made by a cow's hoof.

Rig Veda 1.154

Let me now sing the heroic deeds of Vishnu, who has measured apart the realms of earth, who propped up the upper dwelling-place, striding far as he stepped forth three times.

They praise for his heroic deeds Vishnu who lurks in the mountains, wandering like a ferocious wild beast, in whose three wide strides all creatures dwell.

Let this song of inspiration go forth to Vishnu, the wide-striding bull who lives in the mountains, who alone with but three steps measured apart this long, far-reaching dwelling-place.

His three footprints, inexhaustibly full of honey, rejoice in the sacrificial drink. Alone, he supports threefold the earth and the sky—all creatures.

Would that I might reach his dear place of refuge, where men who love the gods rejoice. For there one draws close to the wide-striding Vishnu; there, in his highest footstep, is the fountain of honey.¹

We wish to go to your dwelling-places, where there are untiring, many-horned cattle.² There the highest footstep of the wide-stepping bull shines brightly down.

TRANSLATED BY Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty.

1. The honey in the footprints acts like Soma, intoxicating the creatures who dwell there—the “men who love the gods”—and making them rejoice. Though the honey is in all three of Vishnu's footsteps (v. 4), the highest footstep is the fountain of the nectar of immortality.

2. The cattle may simply stand for cattle (and, by

extension, the riches of life) or for something more. They may be rays of light (coming from Vishnu as the sun); they may be stars. As cattle, they are untiring; as rays, unfading; “many-horned” would mean something like “twinkling” (for stars) or “widely diffused” (for sunbeams).

SACRIFICE IN THE BRAHMANAS

800–500 B.C.E.

Where the *Rig Veda* expressed uncertainty and begged the gods for help, the Brahmanas (mythological, philosophical, and ritual glosses on the Vedas) express confidence that the Vedic verses (*mantras*) can deal with all dangers.

What accounts for this dramatic shift in tone, from questions to answers? In part, it was caused by a major change in the living conditions of the authors of these texts. For the Brahmanas were composed during a time of social and intellectual transformation so extreme that it could well be called revolutionary. From about 1100 to 1000 B.C.E., Vedic texts begin to mention the Doab (“Two Waters”), the land between the Ganges and the Yamuna (later called the Jumna). Then, in about 800 B.C.E., we find references to an area farther down in the western and middle Ganges Valley, where people built palaces and kingdoms. The move to the Ganges took place incrementally over several centuries, and the political changes were correspondingly gradual. Among the first cities were Kashi, later known as Varanasi (or Benares, the capital of Koshala/Videha), and, west of Kashi, Kaushambi (in Vatsa, now Uttar Pradesh), probably founded between 1300 and 1000 B.C.E. The Brahmanas must have been composed a few centuries after the founding of these cities, for considerable time must have passed since the composition of the *Rig Veda* (even of the first and last books, which are already noticeably later than the other eight). The language of the Brahmanas is significantly different, somewhat like the shift from *Beowulf* to Chaucer in early English. The Brahmanas cite Vedic verses and explain them, describing the circumstances under which those verses were first created. Not only the language but the nature of the texts changed: between 1000 and 500 B.C.E., Vedic rituals spawned more and more commentaries, and by the sixth century B.C.E. the different schools, or branches, were well established.

PRONOUNCING GLOSSARY

Agni/agni: ug'-nee	oshadhayas: oh'-shuh-dah'-yuh
Agnihotra: ug'-nee-hoh'-truh	Prajapati: pruh-jah'-puh-tee'
agri: uh'-gree	purusha: poo-roo'-sha
aha: ah'-huh	Pushan: poo'-shun
Bhrigu: bri'-goo	Shatapatha Brahmana: shuh'-tuh-puh'- tuh brah'-muh-nuh
charati: chuh'-ruh-tee	Surya: soor'-yuh
charu: chuh'-roo	sva: svuh
Indra: in'-druh	Svaha: svah-hah'
Jaiminiya Brahmana: jai'-muh-nee'-yuh brah'-muh-nuh	Ugradeva Rajani: oo'-gruh-day'-vuh rah'- juh-nee
jhasha: juh'-shuh	Varuna: vuh'-roo-muh
Manu: muh'-noo	Vayu: vah'-yoo
nishkriti: nish-kri'-tee	