

allurgy enabled new fringe groups to challenge many of the now old and tired chariot kingdoms. With plentiful and therefore cheap weapons available to both their external and internal enemies, a number of these civilized societies found themselves fighting for their very survival, and several succumbed. Mycenaean Greece slipped back into a precivilized state after it was overwhelmed by waves of ruder Greek cousins; the mighty Hittite Empire was wiped out and soon became a faded memory. Other regions rode out these invasions with greater resilience. Egypt successfully fought off the invaders but only at great cost. The land of Syria-Palestine experienced invasion and settlement by Philistines, Hebrews, and others, but in the end it managed to absorb all without losing the essential elements of civilization.

Geographic isolation protected China from these Iron Age migrations. Iron would not be produced in China until the sixth century B.C.E. Around 1200 B.C.E., however, the chariot made its appearance in China and was used to great effect by the Zhou in their toppling of the Shang.

Around 1000 B.C.E. the general level of nomadic violence subsided for awhile across Eurasia and North Africa, but the previous eight centuries had seen successive waves of nomads challenge, at times overwhelm, and in a few isolated instances eradicate centers of civilization.

The Indo-Europeans

Sometime around 2000 B.C.E. and following, pastoral people living on the steppes of western Asia — roughly in the area that lies north of the Caucasus Mountains, between the Black and Caspian Seas — began to migrate out of their traditional grazing lands and, in successive waves, wandered into Europe, Asia Minor, Mesopotamia, Iran, and India. These bronze-armed nomads spoke a variety of related languages that shared a common origin in a prehistoric tongue scholars call *proto-Indo-European*. Through their migrations, these people eventually spread their family of languages from Central Asia to the British Isles. The fact that *Aryan*, *Eire* (the Gaelic name for the Republic of Ireland), and *Iran* derive from the common archaic root word *aryo*, which means “lord,” eloquently attests to the extent of the ancient Indo-European wanderings and settlements.

Among the many significant waves of Indo-European newcomers were the *Aryans*, who spoke Sanskrit, and the *Achaeans*, who spoke an early form of Greek. The Sanskrit speakers moved eastward across the Hindu Kush mountain range and into the fertile Indus valley, where they encountered Harappan civilization. The Greek speakers moved westward into the Balkans, absorbing or displacing the native agricultural people they encountered.

Life, Death, and the Gods in Aryan India



11 ▼ THE RIG VEDA

It is unclear whether the Aryans conquered and destroyed a vigorous Harappan civilization or, what seems more likely, took over a society already in eclipse. Whatever the case, by 1500 B.C.E. the Aryans were ruling northwest India as an illiterate warrior aristocracy, and the Harappan arts of writing and statecraft had disappeared. India would not reemerge into the light of recorded history until around 600 B.C.E.

Because the early Aryans were a preliterate people, what little we know about them we derive from their oral tradition, which survives chiefly in four great collections of priestly hymns, chants, incantations, and ritual formulas known as the *Vedas*. *Veda* means “wisdom” or “knowledge,” and the Aryans accepted these collections of sacred poetry as the eternal word of the gods.

The most celebrated and earliest of the four is the *Rig Veda*, a collection of 1,028 songs, which probably was compiled for the most part between 1200 and 900 B.C.E., although it contains many elements that stretch back to a time long before the Aryans arrived in India. This Sanskrit masterpiece remains, even today, one of the sacred books of Hinduism. It is also the earliest extant major work of literature in an Indo-European tongue, predating by several centuries the Homeric Greek epics.

As is common in preliterate societies, Aryan priests, known as *Brabmins*, were trained to perform prodigious feats of memory. Generation after generation, they sang these songs and passed them on to those who followed. As a result, although the *Vedas* would not be written down until long after 1000 B.C.E., many of the songs reflect the religious, social, and political realities of Aryan life around 1500 B.C.E. or earlier. Conversely, other vedic hymns were the products of much later centuries and mirror the more sophisticated culture of an emerging Indo-Aryan civilization.

The following three poems illustrate the evolution of Indo-Aryan religious thought. The first celebrates the victory over *Vritra*, the dragon of drought, by *Indra*, the *Rig Veda*'s chief deity. A lusty god of war, Indra was noted for imbibing large amounts of *Soma*, a sacred hallucinogenic drink reserved for the gods and their priests, and his military victories over the *Dasas* (the slaves), the indigenous people of northern India whom the Aryans were subduing. In this particular hymn, however, Indra conquers another foe, *Vritra*, known as the *Encompasser*, and liberates the universe, which *Vritra* has swallowed. In his conquest Indra releases life-giving monsoon rains, irrigating waters that were vital to the Aryans, who were now settling down and farming the land. As the Aryans were absorbed into the rich cultural fabric of India, their forms of religious expression also changed. Indra, whose worship was the central reality of early vedic religious life, largely fell out of favor as a major deity in post-Vedic India, becoming simply the god of weather. Our second hymn hints at the change in religious perception that was taking place in later Indo-Aryan society as some Aryans even

dared to doubt the very existence of this ancient god of battle. As this second hymn also indicates, the Aryans had originally envisioned Indra as the creator god. Our third hymn, which is clearly one of the last vedic songs to be crafted, presents another vision of creation. In this poem the gods create the universe (and themselves) by sacrificing *Purusha*, the Primeval Man, to himself. The paradoxical view of reality presented in this hymn would become a hallmark of classic Hindu thought, as we shall see in Chapter 3.

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

1. The hymn regarding the victory over Vritra is the earliest of the three poems. What sort of god is the Indra who appears in poem 1? What does your answer suggest about the society that worshipped him as its chief deity?
2. Compare the Indra of hymn 1 with the Indra whom we see in the second hymn. In what ways has he remained the same? Are there any important attributes ascribed to him in this second hymn that are lacking in the first hymn? If so, what are they? What inferences do you draw from them?
3. What inferences do you draw from the fact that the second hymn seems to have been composed to refute doubts about Indra's very existence? What does this suggest about Indo-Aryan society at that time?
4. What are the clues in the hymn to Purusha that point to its late composition?
5. What evidence is there in hymn 3 for the emergence of what would become the Hindu *caste* system (Chapter 3, source 17), and how is that system explained and justified?
6. Can you find in the hymn to Purusha evidence of the basic Hindu concept of the unity of all life? How is it articulated?
7. If Purusha brings forth all life by self-sacrifice, what does this suggest about the Indo-Aryan view of life and death? Is death a negation of life? Are they mutually exclusive states?
8. Compare Indra and Purusha as deities. In what ways do they represent significant historical changes that took place within Indo-Aryan society?

VICTORY OVER VRITRA

I will declare the manly deeds of Indra, the first that he achieved, the thunder-wielder.

He slew the dragon, then disclosed the waters, and cleft the channels of the mountain torrents.

He slew the dragon lying on the mountain: his heavenly bolt of thunder 'Twashtar¹ fashioned.

Like lowing cows in rapid flow descending, the waters glided downward to the ocean.

Impetuous as a bull, he chose the Soma, and quaffed in threefold sacrifice the juices.

Maghavan² grasped the thunder for his weapon, and smote to death this firstborn of the dragons.

¹The divine artisan.

²Lord Bountiful — another name for Indra.

When, Indra, you had slain the dragon's first-born, and overcome the charms of the enchanters.

Then, giving life to sun and dawn and heaven, you found not one foe to stand against you.

Indra with his own great and deadly thunder smote into pieces Vritra worst of Vritras.³

As trunks of trees, what time the axe has felled them, low on the earth so lies the prostrate dragon.

He, like a mad weak warrior, challenged Indra, the great impetuous many-slaying hero.

He, brooking not the clashing of the weapons, crushed — Indra's foe — the shattered forts in falling,⁴

Footless and handless still⁵ he challenged Indra, who smote him with his bolt between the shoulders.

Emasculated yet claiming manly vigor, thus Vritra lay with scattered limbs dissevered. . . .

Nothing availed him. Lightning, nothing, nor thunder, hailstorm or mist which he had spread around him.⁶

When Indra and the dragon strove in battle, Maghavan gained the victory for ever. . . .

Indra is king of all that moves and moves not, of creatures tame and horned, the thunder-wielder.

Over all living men he rules as sovereign, containing all as spokes within a rim.

WHO IS INDRA?

The god who had insight the moment he was born, the first who protected the gods with his

³"Dragon, worst of dragons."

⁴The clouds are pictured as forts imprisoning moisture.

⁵Vritra is serpentlike, lacking feet and hands.

⁶Vritra used magic to surround himself with storms and mist, but they failed him.

⁷Heaven and earth.

⁸A demon who penned up Indra's cows, cows being tokens of wealth among the early Aryans.

power of thought, before whose hot breath the two world-halves⁷ tremble at the greatness of his manly powers — he, my people, is Indra.

He who made fast the tottering earth, who made still the quaking mountains, who measured out and extended the expanse of the air, who propped up the sky — he, my people, is Indra.

He who killed the serpent and loosed the seven rivers, who drove out the cows that had been pent up by Vala,⁸ who gave birth to fire between two stones,⁹ the winner of booty in combats — he, my people, is Indra.

He by whom all these changes were rung, who drove the race of Dasas down into obscurity, who took away the flourishing wealth of the enemy as a winning gambler takes the stake — he, my people, is Indra.

He about whom they ask, 'Where is he?', or they say of him, the terrible one, 'He does not exist,' he who diminishes the flourishing wealth of the enemy as a gambler does — believe in him! He, my people, is Indra.

He who encourages the weary and the sick, and the poor priest who is in need, who helps the man who harnesses the stones to press Soma, he who has lips fine for drinking — he, my people, is Indra.

He under whose command are horses and cows and villages and all chariots, who gave birth to the sun and the dawn and led out the waters, he, my people, is Indra.

He who is invoked by both of two armies, enemies locked in combat, on this side and that side, he who is even invoked separately by each of two men standing on the very same chariot,¹⁰ he, my people, is Indra.

⁹Indra is the bringer of fire, which is kindled by striking two flints. He is also the creator of lightning (the fire between [the stones of] heaven and earth) and Soma, which is made by being crushed between stones. He also created the sun, another fire between heaven and earth.

¹⁰Two persons rode in a war chariot, the priest-charioteer and the warrior-noble (see Chapter 3, source 17).

He without whom people do not conquer, he whom they call on for help when they are fighting, who became the image of everything, who shakes the unshakeable — he, my people, is Indra.

He who killed with his weapon all those who had committed a great sin, even when they did not know it, he who does not pardon the arrogant man for his arrogance, who is the slayer of the Dasyus,¹¹ he, my people, is Indra.

He who in the fortieth autumn discovered Sambara living in the mountains,¹² who killed the violent serpent, the Danu,¹³ as he lay there, he, my people, is Indra.

He, the mighty bull who with his seven reins let loose the seven rivers to flow, who with his thunderbolt in his hand hurled down Rauhina¹⁴ as he was climbing up to the sky, he, my people, is Indra.

Even the sky and the earth bow low before him, and the mountains are terrified of his hot breath; he who is known as the Soma-drinker, with his thunderbolt in his hand, with the thunderbolt in his palm, he, my people, is Indra.

He who helps with his favor the one who presses and the one who cooks,¹⁵ the praiser and the preparer, he for whom prayer is nourishment, for whom Soma is the special gift, he, my people, is Indra.

You¹⁶ who furiously grasp the prize for the one who presses and the one who cooks, you are truly real. Let us be dear to you, Indra, all our days, and let us speak as men of power in the sacrificial gathering.

¹¹The Dasas, or slaves.

¹²A demon who kept Soma from Indra in mountain for-
tresses.

¹³Vritra.

¹⁴An obscure enemy about whom nothing else is known.

¹⁵Those who press and those who cook Soma.

¹⁶Indra.

¹⁷Purusha, the all-pervading universal spirit and source of all life, is conceived as a god with countless eyes, hands, and feet. Purusha is both limitless and able to be enclosed

TO PURUSHA

A thousand heads had Purusha,¹⁷ a thousand eyes, a thousand feet.

He covered earth on every side, and spread ten fingers' breadth beyond.

This Purusha is all that yet has been and all that is to be;

The lord of immortality which waxes greater still by food.

So mighty is his greatness; yea, greater than this is Purusha.

All creatures are one-fourth of him, three-fourths eternal life in heaven.¹⁸

With three-fourths Purusha went up: one-fourth of him again was here.

Thence he strode out to every side over what eats not and what eats.

From him Viraj¹⁹ was born; again Purusha from Viraj was born.

As soon as he was born he spread eastward and westward o'er the earth.

When gods prepared the sacrifice with Purusha as their offering,

Its oil was spring, the holy gift was autumn; summer was the wood.

They balm'd as victim on the grass²⁰ Purusha born in earliest time.

With him the deities and all Sadhyas²¹ and Rishis²² sacrificed.

in the smallest of spaces. In an act celebrated by this poem, Purusha is simultaneously the sacrifice and the sacrificer.

¹⁸One-quarter of Purusha is found in all mortal creation; three-fourths of Purusha is divine and eternal.

¹⁹The female creative germ.

²⁰Special grasses laid out during vedic sacrifices for the gods to sit upon.

²¹A class of demigods.

²²Sages.

From that great general sacrifice the dripping fat was gathered up.

He formed the creatures of the air, and animals both wild and tame.

From that great general sacrifice Richas and Samahymns²³ were born:

Therefrom the meters were produced,²⁴ the Yajus²⁵ had its birth from it.

From it were horses born, from it all creatures with two rows of teeth:

From it were generated cows, from it the goats and sheep were born.

When they divided Purusha how many portions did they make?

What do they call his mouth, his arms? What do they call his thighs and feet?

The Brahmin²⁶ was his mouth, of both his arms was the Rajanya²⁷ made.

His thighs became the Vaisya,²⁸ from his feet the Sudra²⁹ was produced.

The Moon was gendered from his mind, and from his eye the Sun had birth;

Indra and Agni³⁰ from his mouth were born, and Vayu³¹ from his breath.

Forth from his navel came mid-air; the sky was fashioned from his head;

Earth from his feet, and from his ear the regions. Thus they formed the worlds.

Seven fencing-logs had he, thrice seven layers of fuel were prepared,³²

When the gods, offering sacrifice, bound, as their victim, Purusha.

Gods, sacrificing, sacrificed the victim: these were the earliest holy ordinances.

The mighty ones attained the height of heaven, there where the Sadhyas, gods of old, are dwelling.

²³The constituent elements of the *Rig Veda*.

²⁴The verses of the *Sama Veda*. The *Sama Veda* is largely a collection of elements from the *Rig Veda* arranged for religious ceremonial use.

²⁵The ritual formulas of the *Yajur Veda*. It was compiled a century or two after the *Rig Veda* and served as a collection of sacrificial chants.

²⁶An Aryan priest.

²⁷The *Rajanyas*, or *Kshatriyas*, comprised the ruling or warrior class.

²⁸This class initially encompassed free herders and farmers; later it included traders and artisans.

²⁹The slave and servant class. The term was originally applied to the Dasas, the native people whom the Aryans conquered and subjugated when they entered India.

³⁰The god of fire and sacrifice. This Sanskrit word is cognate with *ignis*, the Latin word for "fire" (hence, *ignite* in English).

³¹The wind.

³²For a sacrificial fire.

A Journey to the Underworld



12 ▼ Homer, *THE ODYSSEY*

By 1600 B.C.E. history's first identifiable Greeks, a people who called themselves the *Achaeans*, had created in the Balkan Peninsula a decentralized, warrior civilization, which we term *Mycenaean*. The name derives from *Mycenae*, a city that exercised a loose leadership over the petty principalities of southern and central Greece. Around 1450 B.C.E. the Achaeans were masters of the island civilization of Crete and, as accomplished pirates and maritime merchants, a major force in