

Chapter 2

The Brahmanical Beginnings

Sacrifice, cosmic speculation, oneness

The beginning of the 5th century BCE: this is where we will begin our discussion of Indian philosophical thought, by looking at the ideas and practices established in northern India by brahmin priests at that time. This is a good place to start for several reasons. First, the milieu of north India at this period was dominated by the Brahmanical tradition, and it remained the only tradition to secure a lasting hegemonic grip on the country's socio-religious structure. No matter how influential the ideas and practices of others became at certain times, it was the Brahmanical tradition that retained control of normative criteria. Second, by the beginning of the 5th century BCE, two clearly identifiable approaches coexisted within this tradition, and we know enough about both to be able to highlight their key features and concerns. Third, and perhaps most importantly for our purposes, from a discussion of these two approaches we can see how they jointly contributed to the subsequent proliferation of questioning, debate, and attempts to refute the ideas of others. In establishing these points, we shall also see the way in which the two approaches emerged from earlier stages of the tradition.

Sacrifice

The brahmins of the 5th century BCE were the descendants of people called the Aryans, who came from central Eurasia and settled in

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Chronology

c.2000-1500 BCE: The Vedic sacrificial tradition, based on ritual actions, was brought into north-west India by the Aryans. This tradition was preserved and administered by brahmin priests.

c.800-500 BCE: The teachings recorded in the early Upanisads, in which knowledge is said to be of ultimate importance, were embraced by the Brahmanical tradition.

By 500 BCE: these two branches – ritual and gnostic – of the Brahmanical tradition coexisted.

north-west India many centuries earlier, bringing their practices and ideas with them. For a very long time they had a sacrificial, ritual-based religion, the sacred details of which were carefully memorized and preserved in ritual 'manuals'. As writing was as yet unknown to them, different lineages of brahmin priests, each of which contributed to the rituals, had responsibility for the oral preservation of the material relating to their particular ritual duties. They took this responsibility extremely seriously, because it was on accuracy that the efficacy of the sacrifice depended. Memorization techniques of various kinds were perfected, and from the evidence we now have it is thought likely that a very high degree of accuracy was achieved.

Though it is now regarded as a religious activity, the performance of the Vedic sacrificial rituals was largely for this-worldly ends. That is, the primary purpose of the sacrifice was the maintenance of the cosmos at its optimum level of status quo. The sacrifices were addressed to aspects of the natural order of the cosmos, such as sun, rain, lightning, wind, and so on, as well as abstract principles, such as contract and vow. Collectively, addressees of the sacrifice were referred to as *devas*. The

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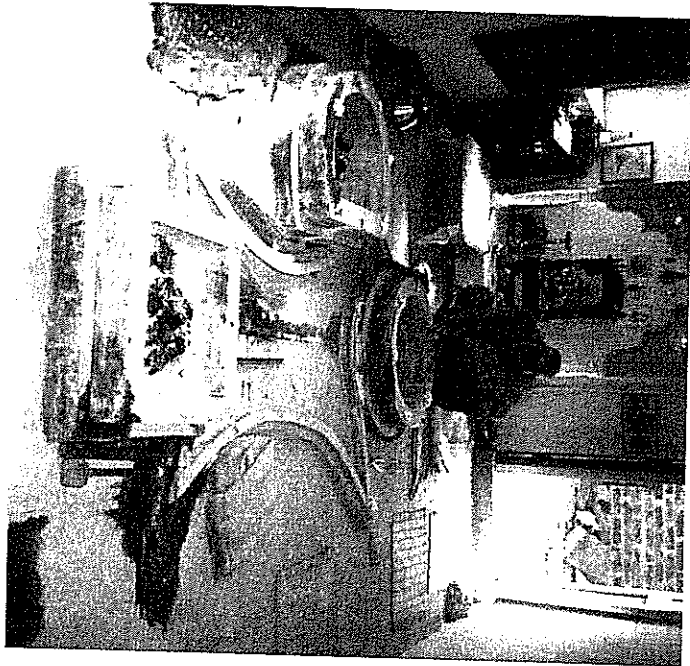
The sacrificial rituals of the Aryans were performed by specialized people (brahmin priests), on behalf of those who had both a right and a duty to employ them. The sacrifice took place in a specially prepared space, arranged around a central fire or fires. To the accompaniment of spoken, chanted, and muttered words and sounds, special implements were used to make an offering into a fire of substances such as cooked grains and oil. All aspects of the sacrifice, from the measurements of the space to what substance should be offered and which words used, were prescribed in the ritual manuals.

Indian Philosophy

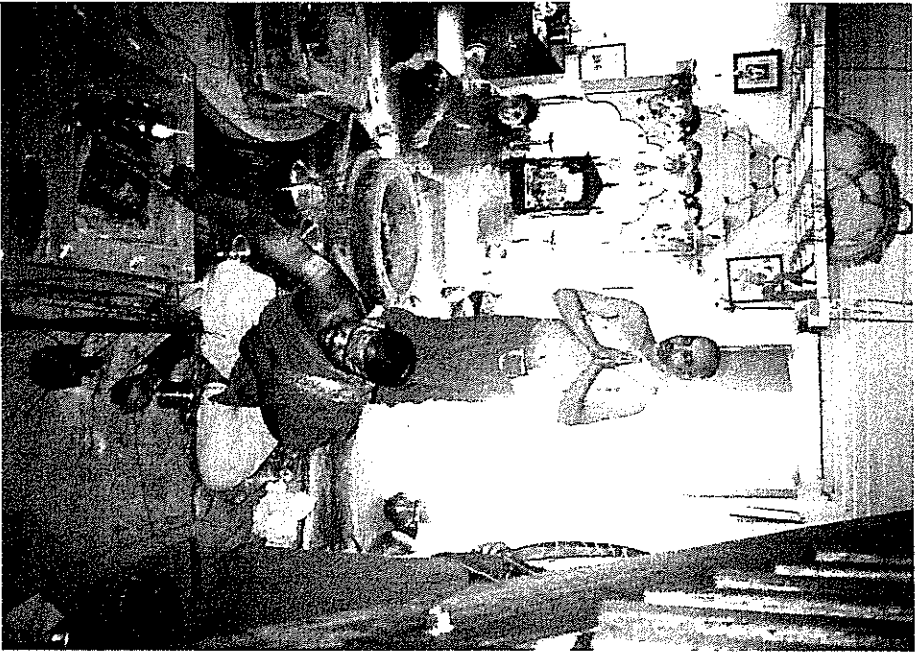
rationality of the exercise was that if man performed the sacrificial rituals correctly, the devas would reciprocate by performing their cosmic function in the most beneficent way. Thus cosmic order – which later came to be known as *Dharma* – was maintained. The necessity to do this was enjoined upon the brahmins by the ritual manuals. These form the earliest parts of the corpus of material known as the Veda, so they can be referred to as the Vedic ritual manuals, and the sacrificial religion is sometimes referred to as the Vedic sacrificial religion.

The word *veda* means 'knowledge'. It refers to the belief that ancient ancestors of the 5th-century BCE brahmin priests knew or 'saw' the truth the Vedas contain (which is why they were called seers). This is understood not at all in terms of revealed, teacher-specific truth, but as impersonal and eternal cosmic truth, not of human origin, that the seers were merely instrumental in recording for posterity. As such, the status of the Vedic sacrificial texts is primary. And anything enjoined on man by this corpus of material is considered self-validating – it must be done because it must be done: this is part of eternal truth. The concern with accuracy to ensure efficacy was thus reinforced by the belief that the correct performance of each ritual act was part of cosmic duty.

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1. Ritual implements used in Vedic sacrifice.



2. Vedic sacrificial rituals are still performed today, little changed from ancient times.

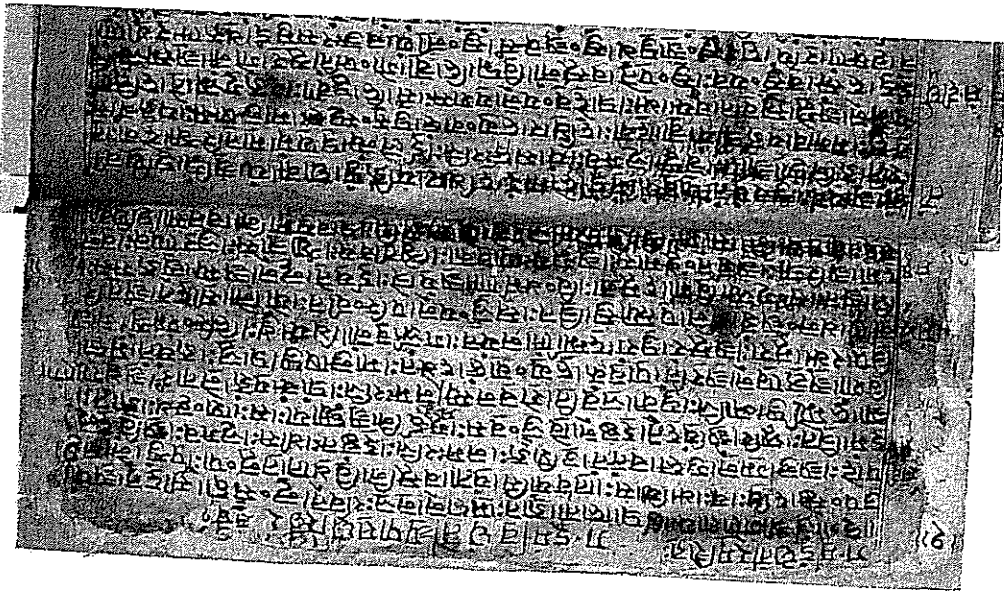
As well as physical ritual actions, the ritual manuals prescribed a variety of words and sounds, which can be referred to collectively as formulas, that had to be spoken, muttered, or chanted at the sacrifice. Both physical act and sound contributed to the results of the sacrifice: both were consequential 'actions', or karma. The language in which formulas were constructed was Sanskrit, and as a result the language was regarded more as a highly potent sacred tool than as a means of communication. It was seen, in effect, as the representation in sound form of the manifestation of the universe.

The language of Sanskrit

The word *sanskrit* shares a verbal root, *kr*, with the word *karma*. The prefix *sans* gives the word the meaning 'well-formed' or 'well-constructed'. This suggests the correlation between the correct sounding of Sanskrit words and the manifest universe to which they refer.

Because of the status and power of the Vedic material and the Sanskrit language, knowledge of both was closely guarded by the brahmin priests. They may have sought to legitimize this exclusivity on the grounds that such material needed protection, but at the same time it put the priests themselves in a position of supreme authority in the society of the time, and society itself was ordered in such a way as to maintain this authority. The origins of what is now called the caste system of India are recorded in the Vedic ritual manuals, where people are classified according to a hierarchy of ritual purity, with the brahmins, the purest, at the top. Their purity both entitled and enabled them to associate safely and effectively with the sacred actions and language of the sacrifice.

So the main characteristics of the Vedic sacrificial religion were that it was based on ritual actions, both physical and verbal, the precise



3. Extract from the Rig Veda, manuscript dated 1434 AD.

accuracy of which was essential to ensure efficacy, and it was wholly preserved and administered by brahmin priests. The purpose of the performance of ritual practices was the maintenance of cosmic continuity, and the various actions of the sacrifice – physical and verbal – were believed to be correlated with their effects accordingly.

Cosmic Speculation

This-worldly though the system largely was, many of the Vedic texts record that some of the ancient ritual specialists were also sophisticated speculators about the nature of the cosmos they sought to sustain. They realized that the parts played by the devas to whom the sacrifices were addressed were limited to the particular place and role each had in the cosmos, and they speculated as to whether there might be something greater. They also wanted to know more about the origins of the cosmos itself. How did it all begin? Who or what (if anyone or anything) created it? Did it begin as a golden embryo? Was it constructed by a heavenly architect? Did it emerge out of a cosmic sacrifice? What role did speech play (that is, the sound of the sacred language)? Was breath the animator of all things? Or was it time that began it all? What was there before? and perhaps most important: Who knows about it?

This ancient speculation is extraordinary in its extent and profundity, and suggests a considerable degree of analytical thinking on the part of the ritualists about the nature of what it was they were doing. We have no evidence that the speculation affected the rituals themselves; indeed, it would be unlikely that it did because the rituals were so precisely codified. But it is possible that ongoing questioning contributed to a second strand of ideas and religious practice being embraced by the Brahmanical tradition. Alongside the continuing practice by the majority of outward and visible sacrificial rituals, the Vedic texts record that some began to go on retreat to contemplate the nature of the sacrifice in more depth. Eventually, some of these people

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

There was neither death nor immortality then. There was no distinguishing sign 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 . . .

Who really knows? Who will here proclaim it? Whence was it produced? Whence is this creation? The devas 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.

(*Rig Veda* 10.129, from *The Rig Veda: An Anthology*, ed. and trans. by Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981)

The dating of the *Rig Veda* is uncertain, but is thought to be considerably earlier than the 5th century BCE – possibly as early as 1500 BCE.

came to think that the sacrifice could be 'internalized', practised by means of concentration and visualization techniques.

The gradual development of this trend is recorded in books of the Vedic corpus of material known as Brāhmaṇas and Āraṇyakas (see the box below), but it is in the Upaniṣads that teachings are found which might specifically represent its culmination. The Upaniṣads form the final part of the Vedic canon – they are called the 'end of the Veda' – and their contents were gathered in the same Brahmanical lineages as the ritual material.

The Vedic material was preserved in different Brahmanical lineages. Four 'strands' of ritual manual, used by different kinds of brahmin priests, were supplemented over time by Brāhmaṇas, Āraṇyakas, and finally, Upaniṣads:

The four ritual strands were:

Rg Veda Sāma Veda Yajur Veda Atharva Veda

Into these lineages were incorporated Brāhmaṇa and Āraṇyaka texts, which contained ideas on the nature of the sacrifice and of 'internalizing the sacrifice'.

The Upaniṣads form appendices to the earlier material:

Kausītaki	Chāndogya	Taittirīya	Muṇḍaka
Kena		Bṛhadāraṇyaka	Prāśna
		Kāthā	
		Īśa	
		Śvetāśvatara	

The Upanisads contain a great deal, speculative and instructive, on the nature, purpose, and necessity of the performance of sacrificial rituals. But what distinguishes them from earlier Brahmanical texts is that they also contain teachings and ideas that subordinate the rationale of the ritual to an imperative to seek to understand the nature of the human being. Further, the knowledge that was sought was subjective and esoteric – inner, 'spiritual' knowledge – in contrast with the exoteric, ritual knowledge of the sacrifice. This marks a shift in the tradition from its previous cosmos-centred concerns to more person-centred issues – or rather it brings the individual person into more specific focus within the broader cosmic picture of the earlier purely ritual period. The early Upanisads contain the first known record of the idea that human beings are reborn again and again into circumstances conditioned by their actions in previous lives. They state that the dutiful and correct performance of sacrifices will not only bring about the consequences to which the sacrifices are addressed, but will also beneficially affect the conditions of one's next life. This is the law of karma (action) applied not just to ritual but also to the mechanics of human experience.

Indian Philosophy

The most important thing to aspire to, however, is gaining insight into the nature of one's essential self or soul, called *ātman* in Sanskrit. The Upanisads teach that self and cosmos are one, repeatedly stating that one's *ātman* is inseparable from all that there is. This is famously expressed as *tat tvam asi*: 'you are [all] that' (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 6.8 ff.). Gaining experiential insight of this identity is to be aspired to because such knowledge effects one's release (in Sanskrit, *mokṣa*) from continued rebirth. This teaching introduces the idea of salvation into the Brahmanical tradition for the first time, and while sacrificial rituals have continued to be practised to this day, the experience of *mokṣa* was quickly established as the supreme goal of human existence. It was seen in the wholly positive sense of knowledge which enabled one to escape from the treadmill of rebirth and experience immortality: 'One who sees this does not experience death, sickness, or distress [any more]'. (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 7.26.2)

Oneness

Looked at from the point of view of the universal rather than the particular, the teaching that self and cosmos are identical also responds to earlier speculation as to the nature of the cosmos. In the early Upanisads, the universe is referred to by the neuter term *Brahman* (not to be confused with its masculine form, *Brahmā*, which is the name of an important deva in the tradition). Brahman is the equivalent of an impersonal absolute that might also be called Oneness or Being. An important passage, in which a father is instructing his son, states:

In the beginning, this world was just Being – one only, without a second. It is true that some people say 'in the beginning this world was just non-existence – one only, without a second; and from that non-existence

The teaching that the universe is One is referred to by the ontological term *monism*. This means that there is only one existent thing, and there is nothing that is not that thing. So whatever there is is ultimately the same thing, even if this does not appear to us to be the case: we do not have to be able to see it for it to be true. Monism is a numerical, not a qualitative, term. Other information is required in order to know the nature and characteristics, if any, of the oneness.

Monism is not a theistic term either, and should not be confused with *monotheism*. Monotheism states that there is one God, but tells us nothing else about what there is *per se*. It is not stating there is only oneness. If the universe is monistic, within that oneness it is possible that there might be thought to be something that appears as God – or, indeed, many gods – but this would have no more bearing on the underlying oneness than the apparent plurality of the empirical world does.

Being emerged.' But how could that possibly be the case? How could Being come from non-existence? On the contrary, in the beginning, this world was just Being - one only, without a second.'

(*Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 6.2.1-2)

The early Upaniṣads are full of statements drawing out the implications of such oneness: 'It is by seeing, hearing, reflecting, and concentrating on one's essential self (ātman) that the whole world is known.' (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 2.4.5). 'The ātman is below, above, to the west, east, south, and north; the ātman is, indeed, the whole world.' (*Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 7.25.2). Mostly straightforwardly, the expression 'ātman is Brahman' unequivocally identifies essential self with cosmos, ultimately not two things but one.

Indian Philosophy

The focus on the identity of inner self and cosmos suggests that the teachings contained in the Upaniṣads might be seen as the culmination of the internalization of the sacrifice, as suggested above. The outward and visible practices directed towards the external world are simply transposed to an inner understanding of the world. The Upaniṣads also uphold the tradition of the sacrificial ritual in that at no point do they suggest that rituals should be abandoned. On the contrary, they reinforce both the need to perform rituals and the hierarchical social structure, based on ritual purity, within which they operate. Thus it was that both ritual and Upaniṣadic teachings could coexist alongside each other within the Brahmanical tradition. The primary status accorded to the Vedic ritual manuals is similarly accorded to the Upaniṣads in that both are considered to contain teachings about the truth.

One can also immediately see, however, the way in which these two strands of the tradition embrace issues and views that are potentially divisive or internally contentious. Not only do the focus and emphasis shift in the Upaniṣads from the this-worldly concerns of the ritual to the nature and destiny of the person, as described above; it is also the case that the attaining of esoteric knowledge is considered of superior

significance and purpose than the performing of ritual actions. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, the Vedic practice of rituals and the Upaniṣadic seeking of knowledge are each underpinned by a different understanding of the nature of reality. The Upaniṣads make it clear that rituals, while important, are merely what should take place within a worldview which assumes the transcendental reality of the plural world; indeed, the purpose of the rituals is to maintain that plural world. But such plurality, the Upaniṣads suggest, is only empirically (or conventionally) real, and it is knowledge of the greater reality of the underlying oneness of the world that leads to the higher goal of immortality:

'There is really no diversity here. He goes from death to death who perceives diversity here. One must see it as just one . . . by knowing that very one, a wise brahmin can obtain insight for himself.'

(*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4.4.19)

Those who state that the plurality of the world around us is ultimately real are *pluralists*. Other terms for this ontology are *pluralistic realism* and *transcendental realism*. This means that what we see – the plurality of the empirical world – is real in itself, transcendent (or outside) of anything to do with human perception.

Those who state that empirical plurality is not transcendental real (and this would include those who state that reality is one) are not denying empirical reality. Rather, what they are stating is that there is a greater degree of reality – absolute reality – that differs from what we see on the surface. Empirical reality in this case is 'conventional'.

In the early decades of the 5th century BCE, these two approaches do not appear to have been mutually contentious or to have given rise to incompatible worldviews vying for supremacy. But as we shall see in following chapters, this soon changed. Not only did this century see the Buddha and others challenge Brahmanical teachings based on the Upaniṣads, but it soon became necessary for ritual specialists to defend their realistic worldview against those who sought to refute or ridicule the point of the sacrifice. And in doing so they themselves had to refute any notion of the merely conventional status of the empirical world such as suggested in the Upaniṣads, as well as by others. This meant that not only did the Brahmanical tradition have to grapple with criticism from outside, but it also became increasingly exposed to internal divergence based on its two branches of primary material.

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Later, some who were concerned not to question the legitimacy of the presence of both approaches within the same tradition sought to overcome their incompatibility by suggesting that ritual duties should be carried out during the period of one's life when one was married and producing children. This would mean both that the maintenance of the ritual-dependent world would be ensured, and also that succeeding generations of sons, on whom the continuity of the brahmin-led social hierarchy depended, would be produced. Once this stage of life had passed, attention could then be focused on the quest for liberating knowledge. To this day, those whose primary concern is religious practice rather than philosophical debate see this as the path of Brahmanical orthodoxy that acknowledges the primary status of the whole of the Veda.

As the more philosophical and polemical debate developed, thinkers from a variety of traditions became involved, but in the direct lineage of this early material, two of the classical darśanas – Mīmāṃsā and Vedānta – based their different teachings and worldviews on exegesis of the Vedic ritual material and the Upaniṣads respectively. These two bodies of material, on which were based the ritual and gnostic branches

of the Brahmanical tradition that coexisted during the early part of the 5th century BCE, came to be known by challengers, reconcilers, and exegetes alike as the 'action section' (*karma-kāṇḍa*) and the 'knowledge section' (*jñāna-kāṇḍa*) of the Veda.