

A HISTORY OF INDIAN LITERATURE

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PURĀṆAS AND TANTRAS

TRANSLATED FROM THE ORIGINAL GERMAN BY
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AND

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To
RABINDRANATH TAGORE
The Great Poet, Educator, and Lover of Man
This English Version of the "History of Indian Literature"
is dedicated
as a token of loving admiration and sincere gratitude
by the Author.

in the hymn Rv. II, 12, translated above, which praises so confidently the might and the feats of strength of Indra, and the separate verses of which end in the refrain, which is flung out in such full faith: "He, O men, is Indra,"—even there we hear that there were people who did not believe in Indra: "Of whom they ask 'Where is he?' Of him indeed, they also say 'He is not'.....Believe in him: for he, O men, is Indra." Similar doubts occur in the remarkable hymn Rv. VIII, 100, 3 f., where the priests are invited to offer a song of praise to Indra, "a true one, if in truth, he is: for many say: 'There is no Indra, who has ever seen him? To whom are we to direct the song of praise?'" Whereupon Indra personally appears, in order to give assurance of his existence and his greatness: "There I am, singer, look at me here, in greatness I tower above all beings" and so on.

But when people had once begun to doubt Indra himself, who was the highest and mightiest of all the gods, so much the more arose scruples concerning the plurality of the gods in general, and doubts began to arise whether indeed there was any merit in sacrificing to the gods. Thus in the hymn Rv. X, 121, in which Prajāpati is praised as the creator and preserver of the world and as the one god, and in which, in the refrain recurring in verse after verse: "Which god shall we honour by means of sacrifice?" there lies hidden the thought, that in reality there is nothing in all the plurality of the gods, and that alone the one and only god, the Creator Prajāpati, deserves honour. Finally, this scepticism finds its most powerful expression in the profound poem of the Creation (Rv. X, 129).¹⁾ It begins with a description of the time before the creation:

"Nor aught existed then, nor naught existed,
There was no air, nor heaven beyond.
What covered all? Wherein? In whose shelter was it?
Was it the water, deep and fathomless?"

¹⁾ Translation by E. T. H. Griffith,

No death was then, nor was there life immortal.
Of day and night there was then no distinction.
That *One* alone breathed windless by itself.
Than that, forsooth, no other thing existed."

Only very timidly does the poet venture on a reply to the question regarding the origin of the world. He imagines the state before the creation as "darkness shrouded in darkness," far and wide nothing but an impenetrable flood, until through the power of the Tapas,¹⁾ "the One" arose. This "One" was already an intellectual being; and as the first product of his mind—"the mind's first fruit," as the poet says—came forth Kāma, *i.e.* "sexual desire, love,"²⁾ and in this Kāma "the wise searching in their hearts, have by meditation discovered the connection between the existing and the non-existing." But only gentle hints does the poet venture to give, soon doubts again begin to arise, and he concludes with the anxious questions:

"Who knoweth it forsooth, who can declare it here,
Whence this creation has arisen, whence it came?
The gods came hither by this world's creation only:³⁾
Who knoweth then, whence this creation has arisen?"

Whence this creation has arisen, whether
It has been made or not: He who surveys
This world in highest heaven, he may be knoweth,—
Or, it may be, he knoweth not."⁴⁾

¹⁾ *Tapas* may here have its original meaning of "heat" (some "creative heat" analogous to the heat by which the brood-hen produces life from the egg) or it may mean the 'fervour' of austerities; or, as *Deussen* thinks, both meanings may be implied in the word.

²⁾ Not the "will" of Schopenhauer, as *Deussen* and others assume. As sexual desire leads to the procreation and birth of beings, so these ancient thinkers considered sexual desire as the primal source of all existence.

³⁾ That is the gods themselves were created only with the rest of creation, therefore they cannot tell us whence the world originated.

⁴⁾ Translated into English by the author. This famous hymn has been often translated and discussed, thus by H. T. *Colebrooke*, *Miscellaneous Essays* (2nd Ed., Madras,

In most of the philosophical hymns of the R̥gveda the idea certainly comes to the foreground of a creator who is named now Prajāpati, now Brahmanaspati, or Bṛhaspati, or again Viśvakarman, but who is still always thought of as a personal god. But already in the above-quoted verse it appears doubtful to the poet whether the creation was "made" or whether it came into being by some other means, and the creative principle receives no name in this poem, but is called "the One." Thus already in the hymns the great idea of Universal Unity is foreshadowed, the idea that everything which we see in Nature and which the popular belief designates as "gods," in reality is only the emanation of the One and Only One, that all plurality is only imaginary—an idea which is really already expressed clearly and distinctly in the verse R̥v. I, 164, 46 :

"They call him Indra, Mitra, Varuṇa,
And Agni; he is the heavenly bird Garutmat :
To what is one, the poets give many a name,
They call it Agni, Yama, Mātariśvān."

While these philosophical hymns form, as it were, a bridge to the philosophical speculations of the Upaniṣads, there exist also a number of poems in the R̥gveda-Saṃhitā—there might be about twenty of them—which form a connecting link with the epic and dramatic poetry. These are fragments of narratives in the form of dialogues (Saṃvādas), and may therefore be fitly called Saṃvāda or dialogue hymns. H. Oldenberg¹⁾ called them "Ākhyāna hymns,"

1872), I, pp. 33 f.; Max Müller History of Ancient Sanskrit Literature, 2nd Ed., London 1860. p. 564; J. Muir, Original Sanskrit Texts, V, p. 356; H. W. Wallis, Cosmology of the R̥gveda, London, 1887, pp. 89 ff.; W. D. Whitney, JAOS, XI, p. cix; P. Deussen, Allgemeine Geschichte der Philosophie I (where all the philosophical hymns of the R̥gveda are discussed); L. Scherman, Philosophische Hymnen aus der R̥g-und Atharvaveda-Saṃhitā, Strassburg, 1887, pp. 1 ff. It has also been translated by Macdonell, E. J. Thomas, etc.

¹⁾ "Das altindische Ākhyāna" in ZDMG 37 (1883) 54 ff. and Ākhyānahymnen im R̥gveda" in ZDMG 39 (1885) 52 ff. Ākhyāna means "narrative."

and started a theory, in order to explain their fragmentary and enigmatic character. The oldest form of epic poetry in India, he said, was a mixture of prose and verse, the speeches of the persons only being in verses, while the events connected with the speeches were narrated in prose. Originally only the verses used to be committed to memory and handed down, while the prose story was left to be narrated by every reciter in his own words. Now in the dialogue hymns of the R̥gveda only the verse portions, containing conversations, have been preserved, while the prose portions of the narrative are lost to us. Only some of these narratives can partly be restored with the help of the Brāhmaṇas or the epic literature, or even of commentaries. Where these aids fail, nothing remains for us but to try to guess the story from the conversations. This theory seemed to be supported by the fact that not only in Indian, but also in other literatures, the mixture of prose and verse is an early form of epic poetry. It is found, for instance, in Old Irish and in Scandinavian poetry.¹⁾ In India we find it in some narrative portions of the Brāhmaṇas and Upaniṣads, in some of the old parts of the Mahābhārata, in Buddhist literature, in the literature of fables and tales, in the drama, and again in the campū. It is true that, in all these cases the prose has been handed down together with the verses, but as the R̥gveda is professedly the Veda of the *verses*, it was not possible to include any prose in the Saṃhitā of the R̥gveda. And if an Ākhyāna, consisting of prose and verse, was to find a place in the R̥gveda-Saṃhitā, the prose portion would have to be omitted. This is the theory of Oldenberg, which for a long time was almost generally accepted by scholars.

¹⁾ Already in the year 1878 in a lecture delivered at the 33rd meeting of German philologists and pedagogues at Gera, Ernst Windisch had pointed out the significance of quite similar phenomena in the old Irish legend-poetry, and on this occasion had also already drawn attention to the related phenomena in Indian literature.