

A HISTORY
OF
ANCIENT SANSKRIT LITERATURE

SO FAR AS IT ILLUSTRATES

THE PRIMITIVE RELIGION OF THE BRAHMANS.

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still fluid state. They next appear as appellatives, not yet as proper names; they are organic, not yet broken and smoothed down. Nor can we compare that earlier, lower, and more savage phase of thought which we find in the Veda, with what we know of really barbarous tribes, such as the Negroes of Africa or the Indians of America. For, however inferior to the Greeks of Homer and the Jews of Moses, the Aryas of the Seven Rivers are far above those races, and had long crossed the bounds of an unconscious barbarism, when they worshipped Dyans and the other bright gods of nature.

Let us consider but a single point. We have accustomed ourselves to regard a belief in the unity of God as one of the last stages to which the Greek mind ascended from the depths of a polytheistic faith. The one unknown God was the final result which the pupils of Plato and Aristotle had arrived at when they came to listen to the strange teaching of St. Paul at Athens. But how can we tell that the course of thought was the same in India? By what right do we mark all hymns as modern in which the idea of one God breaks through the clouds of a polytheistic phraseology? The belief in a Supreme God, in a God above all gods, may in the abstract seem later than the belief in many gods. Yet let one poet but once perceive how he is drawn towards the Divine by the same feelings that draw him towards his father, let such a poet in his simple prayer but once utter, though it be thoughtlessly, the words, "My father," and the dreary desert through which philosophy marches step by step, is crossed at a single bound. We must not compare the Aryan and the Semitic races. Whereas the Semitic nations relapsed

from time to time into polytheism, the Aryans of India seem to have relapsed into Monotheism. In both cases these changes were not the result of a gradual and regular progress, but of individual impulses and peculiar influences. I do not think, therefore, that the mere occurrence of monotheistic ideas, and of other large philosophical conceptions, is sufficient to stamp any class of hymns as of modern date. A decided preponderance of such ideas, coupled with other indications in the character of the language, might make us hesitate before we used such as witnesses for the Chhandas period. But there is a monotheism that precedes the polytheism of the Veda, and even in the invocations of their innumerable gods the remembrance of a God, one and infinite, breaks through the mist of an idolatrous phraseology, like the blue sky that is hidden by passing clouds.

There is a hymn of peculiar interest in the tenth Maṇḍala, full of ideas which to many would seem to necessitate the admission of a long antecedent period of philosophical thought. There we find the conception of a beginning of all things, and of a state previous even to all existence. "Nothing that is, was then," the poet says; and he adds, with a boldness matched only by the Eleatic thinkers of Greece, or by Hegel's philosophy, "even what is not ($\tau\delta\ \mu\eta\ \delta\upsilon$), did not exist then." He then proceeds to deny the existence of the sky and of the firmament, and yet, unable to bear the idea of an unlimited nothing, he exclaims, "What was it that hid or covered the existing?" Thus driven on, and asking two questions at once, with a rapidity of thought which the Greek and the Sanskrit languages only can follow, he says, "What was the refuge of what?" After this metaphysical flight,

the poet returns to the more substantive realities of thought, and, throwing out a doubt, he continues, "Was water the deep abyss, the chaos, which swallowed everything?" Then his mind, turning away from nature, dwells upon man and the problem of human life. "There was no death," he says, and, with a logic which perhaps has never been equalled, he subjoins, "therefore was there nothing immortal." Death, to his mind, becomes the proof of immortality. One more negation, and he has done. "There was no space, no life, and lastly, there was no time, no difference between day and night, no solar torch by which morning might have been told from evening." All these ideas lie imbedded in the simple words, "Na râtryâ ahna âsit praketaḥ." Now follows his first assertion: "That One," he says, and he uses no other epithet or qualification—"That One breathed breathless by itself: other than it nothing since has been." This expression, "it breathed breathless" seems to me one of the happiest attempts at making language reflect the colourless abstractions of the mind. "That One," the poet says, "breathed, and lived; it enjoyed more than mere existence; yet its life was not dependent on anything else, as our life depends on the air which we breathe. It breathed breathless." Language blushes at such expressions, but her blush is a blush of triumph.

After this the poet plunges into imagery. "Darkness there was, and all at first was veiled in gloom profound, as ocean without light." No one has ever found a truer expression of the Infinite, breathing and heaving within itself, than the ocean in a dark night, without a star, without a torch. It would have been easy to fill out the picture, and a modern

writer would have filled it out. The true poet, however, says but a single word, and, at his spell, pictures arise within our own mind, full of a reality beyond the reach of any art.

But now this One had to be represented as growing—as entering into reality—and here again nature must supply a similitude to the poet. As yet, the real world existed only as a germ, hidden in a husky shell; now, the poet represents the one substance as borne into life by its own innate heat. The beginning of the world was conceived like the spring of nature; one miracle was explained by another. But, even then, this Being, or this nature, as conceived by the poet, was only an unconscious substance, without will and without change. The question how there was generation in nature, was still unanswered. Another miracle had to be appealed to, in order to explain the conscious act of creation: this miracle was Love, as perceived in the heart of men. "Then first came love upon it," the poet continues, and he defines love, not only as a natural, but as a mental impulse. Though he cannot say what love is, yet he knows that all will recognise what he means by love,—a power which arises from the unsearchable depths of our nature,—making us feel our own incompleteness, and drawing us, half-conscious, half-unconscious, towards that far off and desired something, through which alone our life seems to become a reality. This is the analogy which was wanted to explain the life of nature, which he knew was more than mere existence. The One Being which the poet had postulated was neither self-sufficient nor dead: a desire fell upon it,—a spring of life, manifested in growth of every kind. After the manifestation of this desire or will, all

previous existence seemed to be unreal, a mere nothing as compared with the fullness of genuine life. A substance without this life, without that infinite desire of production and reproduction, could hardly be said to exist. It was a bare abstract conception. Here, then, the poet imagines he has discovered the secret of creation, — the transition of the nothing into the something, — the change of the abstract into the concrete. Love was to him the beginning of real reality, and he appeals to the wise of old, who discovered in love, “the bond between created things and uncreated.” What follows is more difficult to understand. We hardly know into what new sphere of thought the poet enters. The growth of nature has commenced, but where was it? Did the piercing ray of light come from below, or from above? This is the question which the poet asks, but to which he returns no answer, for he proceeds at once to describe the presence of male and female powers, nor is it likely that what follows, “svadhâ avastât, prayatiḥ parastât,” is meant as an answer to the preceding inquiry. The figure which represents the creation as a ray entering the realm of darkness from the realm of light, occurs again at a much later time in the system of Manichaeism¹, but like all attempts at clothing transcendental ideas in the imagery of human thought, it fails to convey any tangible or intelligible impression. This our poet also seems to have felt, for he exclaims “Who indeed knows? Who proclaimed it here, whence, whence this creation was produced? The gods were later than its production, therefore who knows whence it came?” And now a

¹ Lassen, Indische Alterthumskunde, iii. p. 409.

new thought dawns in the mind of the Rishi, a thought for which we were not prepared, and which apparently contradicts the whole train of argument or meditation that preceded. Whereas hitherto the problem of existence was conceived as a mere evolution of one substance, postulated by human reasoning, the poet now speaks of an Adhyaksha, an overseer, a contemplator, who resides in the highest heavens. He, he says, knows it. And why? Because this creation came from him, whether he made it or not. The poet asserts the fact that this overseer is the source of creation, though he shrinks from determining the exact process, whether he created from himself, or from nothing, or from matter existing by itself. Here the poet might have stopped; but there are yet four more words of extreme perplexity which close the poem. They may be interpreted in two ways. They either mean “Or does he not know?” and this would be a question of defiance addressed to all who might doubt his former assertion; or they mean “Or he knows not,” and this would be a confession of doubt on the part of the poet, startling perhaps after the firm assertion of his belief in this one overseer and creator, yet not irreconcilable with that spirit of timidity displayed in the words, “whether he made it himself or not,” which shrinks from asserting anything on a point where human reason, left to herself, can only guess and hope, and, if it venture on words, say in last resort, “Behold, we know not anything.”

I subjoin a metrical translation of this hymn, which I owe to the kindness of a friend:—

"Nor aught nor naught existed; yon bright sky
 Was not, nor heaven's broad woof outstretched above.
 What covered all? what sheltered? what concealed?
 Was it the water's fathomless abyss?
 There was not death — hence was there naught immortal,
 There was no confine betwixt day and night;
 The only One breathed breathless in itself,
 Other than it there nothing since has been.
 Darkness there was, and all at first was veiled
 In gloom profound,—an ocean without light.—
 The germ that still lay covered in the husk
 Burst forth, one nature, from the fervent heat.
 Then first came Love upon it, the new spring
 Of mind — yea, poets in their hearts discerned,
 Pondering, this bond between created things
 And uncreated. Comes this spark from earth,
 Piercing and all-pervading, or from heaven?
 Then seeds were sown, and mighty power arose —
 Nature below, and Power and Will above.
 Who knows the secret? who proclaimed it here,
 Whence, whence this manifold creation sprang?—
 The gods themselves came later into being.—
 Who knows from whence this great creation sprang?—
 He from whom all this great creation came.
 Whether his will created or was mute,
 The Most High seer that is in highest heaven,
 He knows it,—or perchance e'en He knows not.

Many of the thoughts expressed in this hymn will, to most readers, appear to proceed rather from a school of mystic philosophers than from a simple and primitive clan of shepherds and colonists. Meditations on the mysteries of creation are generally considered a luxury which no society can indulge in before ample provision has been made for the lower cravings of human nature; such is no doubt the case in modern times. Philosophers arise after the security of a state has been established, after wealth has been acquired and accumulated in certain families,

after schools and universities have been founded, and a taste created for those literary pursuits which, even in the most advanced state of civilisation, must necessarily be confined to but a small portion of our ever-toiling community. Metaphysics, whether in the form of poetry or prose, are, and always have been, the privilege of a limited number of independent thinkers, and thoughts like those which we find in this ancient hymn, though clothed in a form of argument more in accordance with the requirements of our age, would fail to excite any interest except among the few who have learnt to delight in the speculations of a Plato, a Tauler, or a Coleridge. But it would be false to transfer our ideas to the early periods of oriental life. First of all, the merely physical wants of a people living in the rich plains of India were satisfied without great exertions. Secondly, such was the simplicity of their life, that nothing existed which could absorb the energies of the most highly gifted among them. Neither war, nor politics, nor arts, opened a field for the exercise of genius, and for the satisfaction of a legitimate ambition. Nor should it be forgotten that, in the natural course of human life, there is after all nothing that appeals with greater force to our deepest interests than the problem of our existence, of our beginning and our end, of our dependence on a Higher Power, and of our yearnings for a better life. With us these key-notes of human thought are drowned in the din of our busy society. Artificial interests have supplanted the natural desires of the human heart. Nor less should we forget how in these later ages most of us have learnt from the history of the past that our reason, in spite of her unextinguishable aspirations, consumes this life in a