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From Proto-Indo-European Religion to Hindutva

Some Brief Reflections on Indian Religious Thinking

The cultural heritage of India is as great and complex as is the history of the sub-continent. For the foreign scholar, the pre-eminence of religion is striking, but this impression may well be due to the gradual separation of religion and philosophy in the history of Western thought. The following brief reflections are those of a linguist and colleague of Konrad Klaus with strong interests in older Indo-Aryan culture, languages and literatures.

From Indo-European to Indo-Aryan

The only way to Proto-Indo-European Culture is the interpretation of the results of Comparative Grammar, especially the lexicon and the so-called ‘formulars’ of Indo-European Poetry.¹ This is to be confronted with what we know about the religions of the oldest ‘Indo-European’ peoples i.e. those who spoke an Indo-European language and left us documents of religious content in their languages: the Hittites and others of the ‘Anatolian branch’, the Greeks, the Iranians,² and the

¹ The standard collection is Rüdiger Schmitt's *Dichtung und Dichtersprache in indogermanischer Zeit* (Schmitt 1967). For later discoveries and recent literature, see the conference volume edited by Pinault and Petit (2006).

² To speak of ‘Irano-Aryans’, as earlier authors had proposed, might be clearer indeed, for there were other, non-Aryan cultures in the vast region later called ‘Greater Iran’, such as the Elamites; but such term would be linguistically absurd, because modern *Īrān* < older *Ērān* is already a form of the Aryan self-denomination, cf. Avestan *airiianəm vaējō* “the land (roaming territory) of the Aryans”, Pahlavī *ērān vēž*, renewed as NP *ērān šahr*.

Indo-Aryans. The result is rather meager but nevertheless, it is beyond doubt that the god ‘Father Sky’ and the goddess ‘Dawn’ have been venerated, that prayers were spoken standing upright, that the gods were called by their ‘proper names’, and that for a ‘sacrifice’, the divine persons were invited to dinner.

We stand on much firmer ground in studies of common Aryan culture and religion. First of all, the great similarity of the Old Iranian and Old Indian languages are proof that the two subgroups are offsprings from one common language, called ‘Aryan’ by the speakers themselves. Second, we have sufficiently large corpora of religious literature, viz. the Avesta, esp. the Gāθās of Zaratustra, and the Vedas, esp. the Ṛgveda. These texts contain the third pillar of what is known about the Aryans: several hundreds of parallel formulations i.e. poetic formulars used by the Aryan poets. Their works are, of course, completely lost; but their tradition lived on in Zaratustra's Gāθās and the Vedic hymns. Due to enormous changes and later breaks in the Iranian tradition – Zaratustra's ‘Reform’, unknown other factors, and later Alexanders's powerful Hellenisation–, it is sometimes rather difficult to decide whether some trait of Vedic religion still reflects Aryan tradition or is an Indian innovation.

One part of the Aryans migrated to the lands of Iran, the other moved in the direction of India. This may have happened around 1500 BC, but precise data (i.e. absolute chronologies) are—as is well known—hard to ascertain before the Achaemenids in Iran and Emperor Aśoka in India. None of those tribes, however, came into an empty land. It may well have been populated rather sparsely, but contacts between the invaders and former inhabitants and should be taken into consideration. Anyhow, there must have been influences of various sorts from the ‘locals’ to the newcomers, starting from the names of animals and plants unknown previously to the Aryans. – In the following, only the Indo-Aryan side is considered.

It is hardly possible to trace the influence of indigenous peoples' religions on the Aryan invaders in detail. It is sometimes argued that black images of possibly divine figures might have autochthonous roots that go back to pre-Aryan imaginary. There is a vast literature about the culture of Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro, but as long as the script (if it is a script) has not been deciphered convincingly, only lofty speculations based on archeological finds have been presented. The interpretation of a shamanic figure on the Indus valley seals as proto-Shiva is not less doubtful as the central ritual pool theory in Mohenjo-Daro. Anyhow, cultural contacts between the Indo-Aryans and those populations who have lived in North-western India during early periods is likely even if the cities may have lain in ruins long before the arrival of the Aryans. In view of the sparseness of our knowledge about those groups, any speculation must remain unreliable. To sum up: An unknown, and hardly low, number of pre-Aryan human communities must have

flourished in the regions where the incomers first roamed about, and soon settled down. Loanword from non-Indo-European stock in Old Indo Aryan and neologism following Dravidian models prove beyond doubt that there have been contacts between different language groups, particularly or Northern Dravidian and Austro-Asiatic stock. The language map of Northern South Asia in the Vedic period is a mystery to large extent. One has only to think of languages such as the isolated Burushaski³ and the Dravidian Brahui⁴, which may have had a much wider spread than today. As shown by similar events throughout human history, contacts and influences in both directions, from 'indigenous' to 'invader' and *vice versa* are to be assumed even if they may be quite difficult to prove.

Vedic

Argumentation becomes possible only on the base of securely attested documents: In the case of India this is the *Ṛgveda* and subsequent Vedic literature. The preservation of this vast corpus is an extraordinary fortunate event in the history of India (as shown by many publications of our honorand), and of great importance for human cultural history in general. One outstanding aspect of Vedic tradition is that the Vedic poets – to use a handy word for all authors as well as ancient editors – not only faithfully preserved the old formulations by highly developed mnemotechnical skills but also left us the results of their, nearly contemporaneous, scholarly analyses of these documents. Without their work, our understanding of the Vedic world would be much poorer!

And yet, many questions remain on all levels of interpretation. The language of the *Ṛgveda*, the oldest preserved form of Sanskrit, is well documented by Indian scholarship from the *Prātiśākhya*s to the present day. Its linguistic analysis is based on Pāṇini's world-famous *Aṣṭādhyāyī* on the one hand, and on comparison within the framework of Indo-European Comparative Grammar on the other, from Franz Bopp's groundbreaking *Conjugationssystem der Sanskritsprache* (Berlin 1816) to Jacob Wackernagel's and Albert Debrunner's *Altindische Grammatik* (Göttingen 1896–1954) and Manfred Mayrhofer's *Etymologisches Wörterbuch* (Heidelberg 1986–2001). One should not forget that even the oldest linguistic layer, the language of the oldest books of the RV, is not free of obviously younger and of clearly foreign elements. Some of the latter may be of non-Aryan origin (so e.g. Kuiper 1948 and Witzel 1999). The discussion of this and other pertaining questions is far from being closed.

³ See Berger (1974 and 1998).

⁴ Cf. Elfenbein (1998).

Vedic literature shows at least three layers of religious concepts. The oldest is, of course, the inherited Indo-European religion, fairly well understood by comparison of the oldest relevant texts in Vedic, Greek, Hittite, etc. *Dyaus Pitā* and *Uṣas* are direct continuants of Proto-Indo-European deities, and some other figures such as *Apām Napāt* and the *Maruts* seem to have undergone only slight modifications. But several important Vedic gods, esp. *Agni*, *Indra* and *Soma* have no Proto-Indo-European predecessor! The dichotomy of *Devas* vs. *Asuras* clearly reposes on inherited (common Indo-European?) ideas, but all the details are specifically Indian (i.e. no longer shared with Iranian) innovations.⁵

A specific Aryan concept were the *Ādityas*, personifications of Aryan values: *Mitra* (“Contract”), *Varuṇa* (“True/Wise Speech”), etc. Aryan theologians succeeded in combining these ‘moral deities’ with inherited ‘natural’ powers and new figures who may have emerged partly from old Indo-European traditions (god of fire, god of war) and partly from other sources. This is especially true for the **Sauma* (Av *Haoma* / Ved *Soma*) cult which probably came from Central or Northern Asia. In the R̥gveda, gods and humans⁶ still are depicted as acting in the old, free way: Humans have no doubt about the great superiority of the gods and their powers, but apart from the sharp divide between mortals and immortals, between earthlings and celestial personalities, the forms of social contact are surprisingly free. Men speak to gods as followers to their war-lord, invite them to sumptuous dinners and are confident that such good behaviour will be followed by honourable gifts in return. There is no trace of servility, no constant feeling of sinfulness. Ideas about afterlife are simple: after a heroic life, outstanding men expect to meet their forefathers in a kind of eternal feasting on a pleasant green. Obviously, afterlife for everybody was unthinkable for the poets.

This ‘noble’ order is only called into question in the very latest hymns such as 10, 121 or 10, 129. There, one sees the emergence of critical reflection, and truly philosophical questions are asked for the first time: Is there a reality behind the gods? How could the world have come into being? What is the ultimate force in all that happens? But these beginnings were overgrown or at least diverted into

⁵ It is tempting to see the *Devas* as “jetzt herrschende Götter” and the *Asuras* as “ehemals herrschende Götter” (cf. Th. Oberlies, *Die Religion des R̥gveda*, Wien 1998: 345), especially if compared with similar dichotomies elsewhere, e.g. in Greece (Olympic Gods vs. (underworldly) Giants, Ases and Vanes in the Germanic world, and the various layers of super-human beings in Old Irish mythology. But any ‘historic’ reading of such competent powers smacks of later construction.

⁶ One should never forget that the hymns exclusively reflect the life-style of the higher layers of a ‘heroic’ paternalistic society. Women may have had different views indeed, not to speak about all other people who must have lived among, or better, under the ‘aristocratic’ upper class.

non-rationalistic directions quite soon by an upsurge of mythological and magical tendencies.⁷

Specifically Indo-Aryan ideas—i.e. no longer shared with the Iranian cousins—emerge in the Atharva-Veda and the Brāhmaṇas. Magic is becoming the main subject, and the gods can now be forced by those who know the right formula. Old features of magic poetry are mixed up innovative ideas. An important instrument in argumentation is the possibility of identification: one item (of any kind) can be seen as equivalent (on a hidden, secret level of ‘magic reality’) to another (deity, divine power, vel sim.) whenever the words denoting them are similar or when they share certain aspects or qualities for the specialist “who knows”. The ritual is understood as a magic method to control the secret powers for one's own purposes.⁸ To the Western mind, all of this is arbitrary and unfounded, but within the system, a certain logic is undeniable.⁹ It is remarkable, I think, that the ultimate goal of human existence is not yet *mokṣa* in Upanishadic or later sense, but simply immortality after death, cf. ŚBr 2,3,3,12 : “And as, while standing inside a chariot, one would look down from above on the revolving chariot-wheels, even so does he look down from on high upon day and night: and, verily, day and night destroy not the reward of him who thus knows that release from day and night.” (Eggelings's translation).

Completely new, and certainly specific for Vedic India, is a philosophical¹⁰ way of thinking represented by the *Upaniṣads*. Here, the individual deities are of no concern any more, and ‘religious’ questions are discussed in purely philosophical manner: the idea of rebirth, the One and the Ego (*brahman* and *ātman*), epistemology, morals, etc. The goal of human existence is *mokṣa*, the liberation from the ‘wheel of the *saṃsāra*’, i.e. endless rebirth in (painful) lower or (lustful) higher existences (in heaven, on earth, or in hell) according to good or bad *karman*.

⁷ One might be tempted to see, here again, effects of non-Aryan, specifically Indian substrates. This is, however, impossible to be supported by positive arguments, due to the total lack of sources.

⁸ This leads to the reversal of cause and effect: The sun raises in the morning because the sacrificial fire has been lit (ŚBr 2,3,15). Numerology is important: The cosmos has 21 parts: 12 months, 5 seasons, 3 worlds and the sun; therefore the human being also has 21 parts: 10 fingers, 10 toes and the *ātman* (KauBr 8,2; AitBr 6,2,11).

⁹ Examples abound in the texts: This world is Agni, the space (*antarikṣa*) is Soma, the celestial world is Viṣṇu (KauBr 8,9); the metra are rivers (AitBr 3,47); the gods are equivalents of body parts or functions (AitBr 3,2), etc. etc.

¹⁰ To speak of ‘philosophy’ in this context is, of course, problematic. It clearly is a way of thinking and arguing, distinct from strictly religious or theological thought. Indian philosophy has its own logic and can hardly be judged according to the concepts of Greek (and generally Western) philosophy.

Post-Vedic

In Post-Vedic times, we observe a variety of further developments: the best known of these new teachings are Jainism and Buddhism which emerged between the 6th and 4th century,¹¹ approximately, and exist till the present day. Both Mahāvīra, the *Jina* “Victor”, and Siddharta Gautama, the *Buddha* (“the Awoken One”) stick to traditional beliefs in gods, *samsāra*, and *karma*, but offer new ways out of the painful chain of existences: The Jina’s goal is a quiet happiness (cf. the Brāhmaṇas) in the highest heaven which can be reached not by magic knowledge but by leading an ascetic life in moral purity (*ahiṃsa* “non-violence”, *aparigraha* “independence”, *satya* “truth”); the Buddha teaches that the *nirvāṇa* is obtainable (characteristically enough for human beings only, not for gods!) through following the ‘noble eightfold path’ of ‘right view, right resolve, right speech, right conduct, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right *samādhi* (“meditative absorption or union)’. The followers of boths have produced a vast literature in vernaculars, no longer in Sanskrit.¹² Their diction clearly stands in the tradition of the Brahmanas. Through active mission, Buddhism became a world religion, whereas Jainism restricted itself to India. Ironically, Buddhism nearly disappeared from its native country but its importance even for modern India today is widely acknowledged (cf. the *dharmacakra*, “the wheel of law” in the Indian flag). A remarkable feature of Buddhism is a new ‘ecclesiastical’, and purely literary language, viz. Pali. In general, Buddhists are always prepared to translate religious texts in the all the languages of those countries where they preached: Tokharian, Saka, Uigur in Central Asia; Chinese and Japanese in the Far East; all languages of Indo-China, etc.¹³

Many similar ‘movements’ must have existed (cf. the *Ājīvikas* mentioned by Aśoka, and probably others, called sometimes *āsaṇḍa* by Buddhist authors) but practically no detail of their teachings is known because they have not been conferred to writing. On the whole, besides new philosophical ideas about mankind’s possible ways to *mokṣa* i.e. redemption from the *samsāra*, a strong input from non-

¹¹ Cf. Bechert (1991: 20), summarizing the results of the conference documented in the vols. ed. by him: “The majority ... suppose that the date of the Buddha’s Parinirvāṇa occurred [sic] considerably later than 480 B.C.”

¹² Mahāyāna Buddhism later returned to Sanskrit and even (more or less happily) Sanskritized older vernacular texts. As the translators or authors did not respect the strict rules of Classical Sanskrit, their literary language is often called ‘Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit’.

¹³ The oldest parts of the Jaina-Canon are composed in ‘Jaina-Prākṛt’, obviously an earlier form of Māhārāṣṭrī; this later (since about the 3rd to 5th c. AD) became the classical language of the Jains. The following commentaries, however, followed the general trend to Sanskritization.

Aryan social substrates and their various religions must be assumed: fertility cults, ‘popular’ cults, female and chthonian deities. All this comes to the surface only later, due to the specific nature of the sources and various ways of tradition (oral and written literature, archeological finds and remnants, folklore, etc.).

Hinduism

Hinduism as we know it today emerged in the first centuries of the Christian era and is vibrant till the present day. The term ‘Hinduism’ is a European coinage: first as “Hindooism” 1829 (OED), but probably older, cf. Sweetman (2003). The current spelling was introduced by the very influential Max Müller 1859. ‘Hinduism’ has been used ever since as a cover term for all kinds of local cults, more or less superficially adapted to the vast pan-Hindu pantheon with its innumerable deities. The details are quite difficult to specify. Hinduism no doubt comprises all sorts of older religious ideas; religious theories and practices seem to have concentrated soon on popular divine personalities who clearly have emerged from ‘below’. Due to strong inclusive tendencies, all and every divine figure, even prophets of other religions, can be identified with traditional Hindu gods and thereby included in a divine hierarchy dominated by the triad of *Brahma* the creator (not to be confounded with the neuter *Brahman*, the All-One), *Viṣṇu* the preserver, and *Śiva* the destroyer.

As is well known, it is no problem for many Hindus to formally regard Zarathustra, the Buddha, Jesus and Mohammad as *avatāras* (forms, embodiments) of *Viṣṇu*.¹⁴ Feelings instead of philosophical or theological thinking, ‘love’ (*bhakti*) to the personal god (rather not to fellow humans), strict social layering (*varṇa/gotra/jāti*-system), and obsessive ‘purity’ become important. In spite of all pretension to antiquity (“*Purāṇas*”), this is new and not based on Vedic thinking. The formal reference to the Ṛgveda is still important in most of the Hindu belief systems, but at least from an outside perspective, the discontinuities between the Vedic religion and modern Hinduism are strikingly clear.

Besides all those diverging religious practices, a number of philosophical tendencies belong to Hinduism also, though the distance between ‘theory’ and ‘practice’ seems to be enormous for the Western eye. Traditionally, six philosophical ‘systems’ are listed in the common anthologies, even though more elaborative systems of categorizing philosophical and theological systems have been vibrant. Modern Hinduism seen the six systems as largely complementary to each other,

¹⁴ The poet Kabīr (15th c) even identified Allah with Rāma (or vice versa). Supposedly, *Rām* in Kabir’s terminology is simply a (the?) word for “god” (or “God”?), not a term for a *certain* *avatāra* of *Viṣṇu*.

even though they contain widely diverging, and partly contradictory ideas. *Mimāṃsa*, *Vedānta*, *Sāṃkhya*, *Yoga*, *Nyāya* and *Vaiśeṣika* – each split up in various ‘schools’¹⁵ – offer a large spectrum of world-views and ways to salvation from the *samsāra*, *mokṣa* which is the basic purpose of any philosophy for Hinduism.¹⁶

Disquieting Present

For the Western scholar of religions, Hinduism as observable in the religious practices and textual traditions of present-day India appears to be a case of perseveration, continuity, syncretism and discontinuity at the same time. One might be tented to speak of an intellectual fallback. Hardly anything of the old, noble Aryan way of thinking (as found in pre-Maṇu Vedic texts) seems to have survived. What remains? Clinging to ancient, obviously anachronistic ideas such as the deprecation of women, the hierarchy of castes, irrational purity rules, the endlessness of rebirth, the oppression of minorities, the cynical treatment of the poor (it's their own fault, bad *karma*!)—all that appears to be unsuitable for the modern ‘enlightened’ world. *Hindutva* ideology (as preached by contemporary fanatics) is a barrier to all attempts to overcome India's overwhelmingly huge social problems.¹⁷ The recent political instrumentation of religion, combined with narrow-minded nationalism can only be deplored. A thoroughly uniform nation is nothing but a dangerous fiction as demonstrated by all too many examples of recent history. Basic human values—first formulated in India!—such as Truth (cf. Gandhi's *satyāgraha*), Hospitality (expressed by the very name *ārya*-), and Tolerance (as preached by Aśoka's edicts)¹⁸ are abandoned for petty¹⁹ nationalism and contempt and even

¹⁵ In Western non-specialized literature, Śaṅkara's Advaita-Vedānta (a form of monism) is often taken as the only (or as the most important) characteristic of Hinduism. This is a misunderstanding, due to earlier authors such as Paul Deussen whose writings became popular with a wider public.

¹⁶ Characteristic for some of those views is e.g. Śaṅkara's doctrine that *mokṣa* can be gained by Brahmins only, not by members of the ‘lower’ castes.

¹⁷ Promoters of *Hindutva* obviously tend to use Hinduism (as defined by them!) a powerful means of societal cleansing, thus welding together a pure and strong united nation.

¹⁸ Which were, of course, based not only on his moral, but also his political thinking.

¹⁹ The language name *Hindī* is a modern coinage, a shortened form of *Hindustānī* (current up to about 80 years ago), the Persian word for the language of “Hindustān”. This *Hindustānī* was originally mostly written in Arabic script, understandable for a variant of Urdu, the “language of the army” of the Persian-speaking Mogul rulers. – Just one linguistic remark: *Hindutva* activists seem to have overlooked that the *h*- and the *-d*- in *Hindī*, *Hindu*, etc. show typical Iranian phonology. If they were truly interested in reverting to ‘their own purely Indian’ culture, they should speak of “*Sindhya*” (vel sim.), “*Sindhī*”, and “*Sindhutva*”. The loss of *h*- in Greek, Latin, English (etc.) “India” is, of course, due to the old Ionian psilosis (Ionian is the Greek dialect spoken at the western

hatred for all who are allegedly ‘foreign’ i.e. confess other faiths even if their communities contribute to Indian culture since ages: Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Zoroastrianism. History is deformed into absurd constructions,²⁰ and ideology replaces rational thinking. Such a dazzled world-view, combined with an admirable mastery of modern information technologies, gives ample cause for fear. Let us hope that India is not becoming a second China which intends to control in detail everybody's behaviour and even thinking.²¹

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frontier of the Acaemenid Empire). – By the way, Sindhī is the name of a modern Indo-Aryan language spoken in the province of Sindh.

²⁰ Such as the ‘Out-of-India’ theory, or the interpretation of divine *vāhanas* as spaceships.

²¹ Further discussion of the political situation and prospects of India is far beyond the scope of this short article and would demand other qualifications than mine, anyhow. Readers will, I trust, understand my intention to simply present an old friend and esteemed colleague with a small contribution to his Festschrift, hoping that a view from behind the neighbour's fence is not fully devoid of interest. – Many thanks to Heinz Werner Wessler for helpful criticism of my ms.

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