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978-0-521-05382-2 - The Indian Theogony: A Comparative Study of Indian Mythology
from the Vedas to the Puranas

Sukumari Bhattacharji

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

ORTHODOX Indian religion contains much that must have been assimilated from primitive bases but Indian mythology as we have it has very little that is overtly or recognizably primitive. Hence theories of sociologists who worked in the field of primitive societies could not be applied to Indian religion and mythology without considerable modification and then only within a very limited scope. Because generations of mythographers have gone on adding, altering, selecting, rejecting, embellishing and 'modernizing' the myths, the traces of animism, totemism, manism or fetishism—so apparent in primitive myths—have been buried under the Indian material till there is hardly any obvious or incontrovertible evidence of these left. The ethnographer's approach to Indian religion will bear fruit only after much more investigation is done on the racial constituents of the Indian population and on the mythological correlative of their material experience. Even then, it is extremely doubtful whether it can yield any concrete or plausible results; first, because the necessary relationship between race and religion is now generally discredited, and secondly, because many of the ancient contributions of the various racial elements are now irretrievably lost in subsequent syncretism.

Two trends of research in the last two centuries had direct bearing on the exploration of Indian mythology—the social anthropological school of E. B. Tylor, Herbert Spencer, Lévy Bruhl, Andrew Lang and E. Durkheim and the Indologists' school of Max Müller, J. J. Meyer and A. Bergaigne.¹ The former carried on researches among primitive, tribal people and arrived at totemistic, animistic, manistic, fetishistic, solar, lunar or astral theories of the origin of myths. The latter, while subscribing to one or other of these theories, interpreted Indian myths relying chiefly on linguistic evidence. Coming to more recent time we again have two trends: the first represented by S. Freud, C. G. Jung, W. Schmidt, J. G. Frazer, Jane Harrison and S. H. Hooke, and the second by scholars like G. Dumézil, L. Renou, J. Gonda, H. Zimmer and A. Coomaraswamy. The first group drew their material from primitive and classical cultures and the second were primarily Indologists aware of the researches of social anthropologists.

¹ For these and subsequent references in the Introduction see the bibliographical note at the end of the chapter.

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Jung, whose work was mainly based on Freud's, put forward his theory of archetypes; the human mind, he believed, thinks in terms of archetypes which are buried deep in the collective unconscious, and myths are a projection of these archetypes. This theory as an explanation of the origin of myths has an obvious difficulty: it ignores the fact that mythological thinking existed side by side with rational thinking, as modern scholars state emphatically. It also underestimates the value of ritual, the volitional correlative of myths. Frazer showed that primitive beliefs based on contiguity and similarity gave rise to magic and religion. All subsequent work was profoundly influenced by him. The ritual school of Jane Harrison, Gilbert Murray and S. H. Hooke made a reassessment of the interrelation of ritual and myth and interpreted myths with reference to their relation to corresponding rituals.

Although these researches opened up large vistas for the mythologist, not many scholars in social anthropology brought their theories to bear upon Indian myths. The reason is twofold. First, archaeology has not yet yielded the requisite amount of data for the material infra-structure which threw up the mythological superstructure of ancient India; and secondly, India was culturally too far away from primitive societies as well as from classical European cultures—the main areas of social anthropological study. Indian mythological material was used for illustration in works of Western mythology but there has not been any systematic or historical study of Indian mythology itself.

Max Müller's philological school of interpretation predominated in the study of Indian myths until modern Indologists like G. Dumézil, J. Gonda and L. Renou appeared in the field. H. Zimmer and A. Coomaraswamy were mainly philosophical and idealistic in their approach to myths and sought a symbolical correlative of myths on the metaphysical plane.

Mircea Eliade for the first time used the findings of all the allied and relevant disciplines in the field of mythology, avoiding the extremes of philological, historical, metaphysical and symbolic schools on the one hand and the unimaginative and comparatively barren approaches of many of the social anthropologists on the other. He traces common patterns in different mythological systems and probes into the cultural roots of these patterns. These, together with the inner structural organization (as emphasized by Lévi-Strauss), can explain the nature of the change, growth and development of the contours and dimensions of myths. His work assumes that myths are projections of vital experiences of a people; but he goes deeper than Malinowski and seeks to reveal the vital experiences

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which make myths the only valid medium for externalizing these experiences. This approach has greater potentialities for my material than those pursued so far, and in my book I have explored some of these lines to establish a pattern of the evolution of the Indian mythology from the Vedic to the epic-Purāṇic period. I have traced how the myriads of gods in the Vedic pantheon gradually converged into the epic-Purāṇic triad of Brahman, Viṣṇu and Śiva.

Regarding the parallels between Indian and non-Indian myths I adhere to Lévi-Strauss's view, viz. that diffusion within the limits of historical probability should be the natural explanation of similarities in myths of different areas, and when this fails the archetype in the collective unconscious should be accepted as the reason for such similarities. 'If history, when it is called upon unremittingly (and it must be called upon *first*) cannot yield an answer, then let us appeal to psychology, or the structural analysis of forms; let us ask ourselves if internal connections whether of a psychological or logical nature, will allow us to understand parallel recurrences whose frequency and cohesion cannot possibly be the result of chance' (Lévi-Strauss, *Structural anthropology*, p. 248).

In the first part the Vedic-Brahmanical and epic-Purāṇic components of Śiva, Varuṇa, Yama, Niṛṛti, Agni, Kāla, the mother-goddess, Kārttikeya, Gaṇapati, Kāma and Pūṣan, are treated. Their rise to prominence and their decline is shown and their contributions to some traits of the emergent epic-Purāṇic divinity, Śiva, are discussed. Some of these gods fade out, leaving one or two traits for Śiva, others are transmuted to form important and abiding factors of the Śiva-complex. Still others rise out of insignificance and become vital aspects of this hierophany. The resultant figure of Śiva is that of a sectarian god who stands for different things and is worshipped in a different manner. The Vedic, non-Vedic, Aryan, non-Aryan composition of the god, his emotional, philosophical and cultic associations are analysed and the processes of this growth, change and development traced with reference to similar gods in other mythologies.

Part II studies the rise of Viṣṇu. The component gods—the Vedic solar gods Savitr, Sūrya, Vivasvat, Mitra, Aryaman, Bhaga, Aṃśa, Dakṣa, Mārtaṇḍa, Indra, and Viṣṇu together with the epic-Purāṇic incarnations of Viṣṇu (with their Vedic precursors) are analysed. The process by which the minor Vedic god Viṣṇu eclipses other demiurges, the Ādityas, by absorbing their traits—fighting some, making alliances with others, pushing yet others into insignificance—is traced. The rise of sectarianism, with its special demands, accounts for some of these changes; different cults

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obtaining among different sections of the people account for others. Many distinct cults and sects mingled under the Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa complex and these are held together by some fundamental link which one might call the essence of the new god. The resultant figure is the object of the worship, devotion and contemplation of a vast section of the people.

With Brahman (part III) the picture is different. In the Vedic-Brāhmanical gods—Bṛhaspati, Brahmaṇaspati, Prajāpati, Viśvakarman, Hiraṇyagarbha, Puruṣa, Skambha, Parameṣṭhin, Pitāmaha, and Brahman—we do not get a very tangible figure, far less that of a sectarian god. These merge into the Brahman, Prajāpati or Pitāmaha of the epic-Purāṇic literature, but fail to answer to the definition of a sectarian god, so that no cult grows around the resultant image, and the central concept is transferred to philosophy which is thus enriched at the cost of theology. Brahman (m.) remains an attenuated figure, too unconvincing to have a real cult of his own.

In part IV the general characteristics of the Purāṇic pantheon are analysed. Here, on the one hand, there are innumerable regional, functional divinities, tutelary gods and goddesses, village- or disease-gods, and also gods for different occasions in life, while on the other hand there is the lofty Triad, which, thanks to the predominance of philosophy, is frequently stated to be three facets of the same supreme being. These latter belong to the official 'high religion' while the former remain the low gods. Thus the Hindu pantheon has struck a compromise and has made room for all. The 'high religion' explains the minor gods as manifestations of the central triad thus establishing it in unquestionable power and prominence.

II

And ponder it well in thy mind, that from the same origin sprang gods and mortal men (Hesiod, *Works and Days* 1. 107).

Men and the gods above one race compose (Pindar, *Nemean Ode* 6. 1-7).

In Indian mythology, Kaśyapa is the progenitor of both gods and men. Thus we see that the Indo-European mind did not imagine the gods as very high, distant or different from men. Their god-making impulse stemmed from awe, wonder and admiration, an impulse unlike the other impulse of fear and misgivings which tends to create gods as very distant and formidable. All generalization is apt to be exaggerated and hence to some extent false, but if we try to probe into the fundamental attitude of the mythopoeic mind it will perhaps strike us that the Indo-European gods

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are friendly, living not very far from mortals, helpers in need, sharing faults and frailties with men. The Indo-European gods are not perfect; they are not above anger, malice, boastfulness, wile and jealousy.

The Indian pantheon as found in the *RV* is predominantly a legacy of the Indo-European pantheon. From the late tenth Maṇḍala, through the *YV* and *AV Samhitās* down to the *Brāhmaṇas* we find new factors operating as formative influences in this pantheon. The gods change their character mainly through the impact of the non-Vedic population. Exogamy introduced non-Aryan wives who brought their own gods together with the mode of their worship into their husbands' homes as Rachel brought Laban's gods into Jacob's household. As neighbours, too, the non-Vedic people influenced the newcomers. The result of this ethnic and cultural intermixture is first noticed in the tenth Maṇḍala and the process reaches a culmination in the *Brāhmaṇas*. When under the Guptas Brāhmaṇism again came into its own it was set up on a richer and more complex level. Thus we can trace three strata in the Indian pantheon: the Indo-European, the Vedic-Brāhmaṇical and the epic-Purāṇic.

The first stratum belongs to the history of the Indo-Europeans before their advent in India. For the second phase, that is, the Vedic-Brāhmaṇical, northern India—modern Punjab and Uttar Pradesh—was the centre of the Vedic Indians' myth-making activities. Between the seventh and sixth centuries B.C. heterodoxy flourished strongly in what is now south-eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The Brāhmaṇical religion was introduced rather later in that region and consequently the population there was little affected by the earlier Aryan social, or religious systems. Yakṣas, Nāgas and other local, chthonic deities were worshipped at sacred groves or chaityas (mounds), even after the Aryan religion had arrived there. The social structure was different, administration and forms of government were also different; an opulent merchant class lived in comparative economic security, while the free peasants and artisans, constituting the bulk of the population, enjoyed quite a high standard of living. The old tribal structure was disintegrating, older administrative institutions were crumbling and a number of petty principalities had arisen in which something of the tribal political structure was retained in the republic type of administration. Confederacies became powerful and although, through Aryan infiltration, new modes of social or religious life were absorbed slowly but surely, this did not happen without considerably altering the character of the Vedic religion itself and largely casting it into an indigenous mould. The development of organized state-machinery and the advance of material culture ran concurrently with

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the rapid spread of new religious and philosophical movements—the Upaniṣadic upheaval, Buddhism, Jainism, Yoga, Sāṃkhya and Vedānta. In the tremendous ferment of the succeeding ages the contribution of this ‘new thought’ was largely incorporated into the emergent religion and remained fundamental to all subsequent religious thought in India.

The chief characteristics of this ‘new thought’ were: a deep dissatisfaction with the existing state of affairs in the religious and philosophical world, an other-worldliness, a growing crystallization of the theory of re-birth and Karman (action), greater preoccupation with release from the chain of existence, increasing detachment and emphasis on non-violence and non-enjoyment. About two centuries after the Buddha there arose a cult which filled in the hiatus of the negative aspect of these doctrines—viz. the Bhāgavata cult. According to some, Kṛṣṇa, its first teacher, later became the central divinity of the cult and ended up by becoming an avatāra (incarnation) of Viṣṇu. In the next period (c. 200 B.C.—A.D. 300), when religious thought was at its most active and when the later mythological sections of the epics and early *Purāṇas* were being composed and redacted vigorously and briskly, we notice the rise of other sects—Śaiva, Vaiṣṇava (Nārāyaṇīya) and Saura. This period is characterized by a greater accent on the doctrine of reincarnation, the concept of the impersonal Brahman and the personal soterial god, Īśvara, the authority of the Smṛtis (religious conventions) alongside the Śrutis (Vedas), increasing stratification of caste and the four stages of life, the emergence of the triad (Brahman, Viṣṇu and Śiva), the reincarnation of the supreme being (avatāra), different levels of spiritual ability (adhikāra), rituals and image worship (pūjā), pilgrimages, shrines and temples and finally the slow but sure resurgence of the indigenous gods in different syncretistic shapes. It was a period of spiritual turmoil and achieved an astonishing transformation in Indian mythology.

III

Śaunaka says that gods are to be praised by their name, form, actions and (together with their) friends. (Stutistu nāmnā rūpeṇa karmaṇā bāndhavana ca, *Bṛhaddevata* 17.) The object of this worship is stated as heaven, long life, wealth and sons; this is called Āśih (Svargāyurdhanaputrādyāirarthairāśistu kathyate, *ibid.*). In this passage we have a glimpse into the object of Vedic worship: gods were praised for material well-being. By the time of the *Purāṇas* much of this had changed. Some of the old gods had faded out altogether, some had grown more important while

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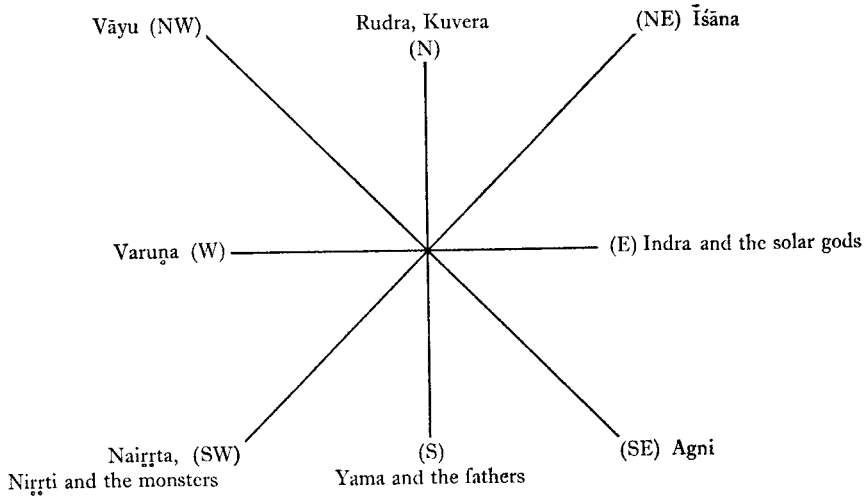
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others were less so than before, and many new gods had appeared in the new pantheon. These new gods and the changed old gods were worshipped differently.

Several factors in this far-reaching change can be ascertained with some degree of certitude.

One characteristic of some of these gods is conspicuous from the Brāhmaṇical literature. From the *Brāhmaṇas* onwards certain gods are spoken of as guardians of certain quarters. A study of this relationship brings out an important fact:



Indra and the solar gods rule only one quarter, the east (regarded mythologically as Aditi who gives birth to the Ādityas). In sharp opposition the west is ruled by Varuṇa. Varuṇa, when included among the Ādityas, symbolizes the setting sun and, as such, is more closely allied to the gods and powers of darkness than to those of light. Varuṇa is gradually absorbed in the Śiva-complex and the west is allotted as his quarter. Agni, in the *ṚV*, is both beneficent and sinister; as *havyavāhana* he is with the solar gods, as *Kavyavāhana* and *Kravyād* he is with the gods of darkness. Īśāna, too, has both divine and sinister bearings. He is a product of the *Brāhmaṇas* and is clearly an intermediary between the gods and the other powers. Rudra is a Vedic god, but with time he comes to take on dark and malevolent associations. Kuvera, his friend, is subdivine, with some links with the camp of the gods through his friendship with Rudra. He is the lord of the *Yakṣas*, who again are a species of *Sondergötter*. Between Rudra and

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Varuṇa is Vāyu, a god who leans more to the dark gods than to the dwellers in the east. In the south is the region of Yama and the fathers. Yama, too, like Rudra and Varuṇa was a god like any other god in the *RV* but came to be associated with dark and destructive functions and character from the *Brāhmaṇas* until in the Purāṇic age he is almost a malevolent figure. When Yama rules in the south, his subjects are the fathers, that is, the dead ancestors. Between Yama and Varuṇa is the Nairṛta Koṇa, the south-west quarter, where Niṛṛti rules and where monsters (Nairṛtas) dwell.

Analysing the residences of the gods we see that while Indra and the Ādityas command only one quarter, the seven other quarters are presided over by gods who somehow oppose the solar forces. What connects the other seven guardians of the quarters is their association with death, decay, destruction and the fathers. This is a vitally important characteristic of the Indian pantheon.

Most of the Vedic Ādityas died out by the time of the epics. We no longer hear of Savitr, Bhaga, Aryaman, Dakṣa, Aṃśa, Pūṣan or Mārtaṇḍa. Vivasvat becomes unconvincing, mythologically the Asyins are as good as forgotten, while Varuṇa changes his character to a great extent. Indra, too, dwindles in power and significance. The Ādityas gradually become less powerful. Only Viṣṇu grows, but even he grows as a culture-hero of the Indian people, not as an Āditya. The east remains the region of light, life and growth, but the pantheon is slowly moving away from the east.

The seven other quarters are connected with gods who are associated with death, destruction and decay. Their connection with the fathers binds them together, and the fathers in Vedic religion evoke a distinct set of associations. All through ritual gods and fathers are opposed to each other. In the first nine books of the *RV* the fathers do not play an important part; they come into prominence (together with their overlord Yama) only in the tenth book and increase in stature until they dominate a great part of ritual and mythology.

The *ŚB* says: 'the east is the quarter of the gods. . . the north of men. . . the south is the quarter of the deceased ancestors' (1: 2: 5: 17). We are also told that spring, summer and rainy seasons belong to and represent the gods, while autumn, winter and the dewy season belong to the fathers. The fortnight during which the moon waxes represents the gods and that in which it wanes represents the fathers. The day belongs to the gods, the night to the fathers, the morning to the gods, the afternoon to the fathers (*ŚB* II: 1: 3: 1). The contrast and opposition between the worship of the gods and that of the fathers is clearly discernible in such passages. Thus

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while the Vedic Aryans were preoccupied with the cult of the solar gods who stood for light and life, the non-Vedic people had been pre-eminently concerned with rituals to the ancestors who dwelt on the other side of life, whose time was the afternoon, the night, the fortnight during the waxing of the moon and the dull seasons. The division cannot be mathematical or precise or even mutually exclusive. Even among the Vedic Aryans an ancestor-cult must have existed since the impulse which prompts ancestor-ritual is universal and timeless. But the first nine books do not record much of this; they are primarily concerned with the gods on whose bounty depended their material existence and well-being. Perhaps these hymns record the chants of collective worship because ancestor-worship is, almost necessarily, a private affair of the family concerned. 'The two lines of religious development which were found in the Indo-European period, namely, the worship of ancestors and the worship of the "heavenly ones" continued throughout the Indo-Iranian period, for they appear in both the *RV* and the *Avesta*' (H. D. Griswold, *The religion of the Rigveda*, pp. 22–3). But the emphasis shifts, even in the period of Vedic literature, for while the *RV Samhitā* is predominantly occupied with the heavenly ones, in the other *Samhitās* and *Brāhmaṇas* the fathers figure more and more prominently. All through the ritual the gods and the fathers stand for opposite sets of values. In the major part of the *RV* the gods predominate, in the later Brāhmaṇical literatures the fathers also come into the limelight; in the later *Samhitās* and earlier *Brāhmaṇas* a balance is struck when gods and fathers receive almost equal attention.

IV

Another distinction exists between the religions of these two periods ('early Vedic' and 'later-Vedic to Brāhmaṇical'). While in the first the worship of the male gods predominates, in the latter the goddesses, too, become powerful. Vedic society, was basically patriarchal. If a nation's pantheon can be taken as a more or less faithful index of its human level of existence, then, the fact that gods dominate the early Vedic pantheon and are more numerous than the goddesses is significant. Uṣas is a minor goddess; Ilā, Bhāratī and Sarasvatī are hardly convincing as theophanies, Aditi is much better known because of her sons, and Pṛthivī because of her consort. In pre-Vedic Indian society, goddesses were equally, if not more, powerful and plentiful; this is shown by the artefacts found in the excavations of prehistoric sites. At the first clash of the two peoples, the pantheon of the

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indigenous population, like their worshippers, suffered a defeat and went underground. But with time the old gods steadily regained lost ground and retrieved their lost prestige. Thus in the *Brāhmaṇas* we have the first signs of the return of the mother-goddesses into power. Niṛṛti, Śaci, Mīdhuṣī, Yamī, Ambikā, Rudrāṇī, Śrī, Lakṣmī, Sarasvatī (or Vāc) re-emerge as mother-goddesses. One reason of the Aryans' partial religious surrender is the pre-Aryan worship of images; the visual appeal of the gods captured the imagination of the Aryans who worshipped ideas. Besides, Pūjā (worship of idols) is much more colourful than Yajña, although Yajña might well have been more awe-inspiring. Pūjā has a greater and more direct appeal to man's aesthetic sense.

v

The Aryans were a nomadic people and so had no temples or images. The primitive sacrifices must have been of a rough and ready sort although the Brāhmaṇical ritual was a much more elaborate affair. But they had to compete with visible images, which naturally increased their hold on the popular imagination. Besides, images and their worship had infiltrated into the Aryans' homes through their non-Aryan wives. The result was a compromise: the superior beauty of the hymns, their language and poetry retained its hold while the concrete images were adopted because of their immediate and inescapable aesthetic appeal and greater realism. Many of these images were female figures and they filled a gap in the Aryan pantheon. The goddesses gained in stature and significance. 'History became a conflict between these two forces: the old, stable unawakened matriarchal powers against the new, mobile, liberating tendencies of the equestrian peoples which were rising into consciousness' (Karl Jaspers, *The origin and goal of history*, p. 16).

This distinction between the patriarchal and matriarchal pantheons is linked to the other distinction of the Āgamic and Nigamic religions.¹ In the current Āgamas Śiva and Pārvatī hold a discussion, approved of by Vāsudeva. The Āgamic element embodied in the popular and perhaps the

¹ In this book I have sometimes used the terms Āgamic and Nigamic, terms which are quite familiar in India with accepted usage in religious terminology. In *Mbh.* XIII: 145: 61 we read: 'Āgamā lokadharmāṇām maryādā pūrvanirmītā' (the Āgamas are the previously ordained confines of the popular religions). In actual usage 'Āgama' generally signifies Śaiva texts and also all pre-Vedic (i.e. popular, indigenous and hence non-Vedic) religious treatises, chiefly oral and chthonic in character. Vedic Aryan religion was mostly sun-oriented and this was Nigama, i.e. Vedic. Later, the *Tantras*, i.e. scriptures of the mother-goddess (Śakti) were called Āgamas, and still later, certain Vaiṣṇava texts, too, called themselves Āgamas.