CHAPTER - 1
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Historians of the 19th century, writing on and about India, were primarily concerned with the religious history. Hence, they emphasised on the 'eternal' and overwhelming role of religion in shaping every walk of life especially the socio-cultural contours of early India. They largely focussed on the formation and development of vedic myths and corresponding social formations.

H.T. Colebrooke was, perhaps, the first western scholar who ever wrote about the Veda. However, his study dealt more with the 'externals' of the Vedic Literature rather than with its contents.1 After Colebrooke, there appeared philologists and comparative linguists2 who compared vedic religion and mythology with other traditions including the Greek and Iranian ones. The peer in this regard was F. Maxmuller, who was, perhaps, the

2. e.g. Franz Bopp, Uber das Conjugationssystem der Sanskrits-prache" Frankfurt, a. m. 1816, Roth, "Zur Litteratur und Geschichte des Weda", Stuttgart, 1846.
first scholar who aroused genuine interest for the Vedas among the intelligentsia of the west. His first volume of Rigveda with Sayana's commentary came in 1849 and the last one in 1874. Although suffering from certain prejudices, his main concern was the religion of the Vedas. To him, mythology and religion of the Vedas was inextricably related. He also connected the Vedic religion with language. Being a comparative religionist and a comparative mythologist, he evolved three basic assumptions, namely the assumption of a common Indo-European pantheon of gods and a common Indo-European mythology was made up of natural phenomena translated into the language of myths and legends, the assumption that etymologizing the names of Vedic gods helped in illuminating their character and establishing their relationship with their counterpart in other Indo-European mythologies. However, it is to be noted that many of his etymologies are not

3. F. Maxmuller's views on Vedic religion are well represented in his Hibbert Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religion (as illustrated by the Religion of India) delivered in 1878.
always convincing. His another important contribution was the theory of henotheism or Kenotheism in Rigveda, which is distinguished from the phase of pantheism.

Bergaigne went against the comparative mythological approach but, to him, Rigveda was full of priestly rhetoric subtleties and paradoxes. Hillebrandt and Oldenberg made further advancement in the study of vedic religion and mythology despite adhering to the naturalistic interpretation of vedic hymns. A. A. Macdonell, being a contemporary of Oldenberg, made a detailed study of original texts and presented his own views about the Indra-Vṛtra fight, identification of Varuna etc. However, his study is regarded 'retrospective' in nature for neither enunciating any original theory nor examining the theories of other scholars.

M. Bloomfield, following the path of 'wise conservatism', gave a very readable account of the development of vedic religion from the Rigveda to the Upanishads. However, his views regarding vedic totemism are off the mark. To scholars like M. Winternitz, Rigvedic mythology was simply a transformation of natural phenomenon into mythological figures—a view contested by Poussin. In the hands of Pischel and Geldner, vedic research got Indian orientation. Interestingly, they went against the works of comparative linguists and held that vedic mythology must be expounded in the light of later Indian mythology and not of Indo-European mythological concepts. Rudolf Otto adopted quite a new approach i.e. psychological to study the vedic religion and mythology. To him, genesis of the vedic gods is a specific and priori faculty of apperception of a power called 'numen' that is at the bottom of all consciousness of divinity.

Vedic mythology was shaped by different ethnic groups and this fact was emphasized by J. Przyluski\textsuperscript{16}, who has mainly pointed towards the role of Austro-Asiatic people. He also emphasized the role of Varuna in weakening the brahmana orthodoxy. Among the western scholars who have written extensively on vedic culture and mythology, A. B. Keith\textsuperscript{17} is perhaps the most prolific and encyclopaedic. Although following the path of 'wise conservatism', he has presented a wide survey of all existing knowledge about a wide range of topics relating to the vedic religion and philosophy.

Marxist historians, relying on 'no production, no history' theory\textsuperscript{18}, have highlighted the role of material culture in social formation. However, the positive role of 'superstructure' i.e. myth, despite duly acknowledged by D. D. Kosambi\textsuperscript{19}, has remained neglected by them. They

\begin{enumerate}
\item Przyluski, "Vārṇa; god of the sea and the sky", JRAS, 1931.
\item D. D. Kosambi, \textit{The Culture and Civilisation of Ancient India in Historical Outline}, Delhi, 1990, p. 1. Kosambi believes that the lowest level often preserved these myths but in the hands of higher castes these myths changed as they were set in a better developed social framework.
\end{enumerate}
have been unable to explain issues like why individuals and society behaved in a particular way and how individuals and groups in ancient India identified themselves in society in relation of each other. Moreover, they have also failed to recognize mutual relation of a society and an individual working for material prosperity as well as the socio-cultural cohesion despite the presence of dominant social groups.

Emile Durkheim of France and Weber of Germany studied myth in relation to the formation and development of sophisticated culture and corresponding social formation. They also highlighted dominance of those groups who happened to formulate dominant socio-cultural ideology for themselves. These dominant social groups managed economic affairs of the society in their favour. Bureaucratic organization and rational legal authority relationships, evolution of charismatic leadership, birth and political acumen relating to the division of labour, notion of 'sacred' and 'profane' in terms of social welfare, birth
and growth of group cohesion—all these were subjected to the critical study of birth and growth of myth and popular culture. However, these authors were still very unclear over the issues of how individuals and social groups maintained their mutual relationships in their material prosperity as well as their socio-economic and cultural cohesion. This cohesion becomes all the more important in the light of existence of element of social dominance by some social groups. Weber is accused of making departure from sociological approach and accommodating historical materialism when he talks of class interest.\(^{20}\) Weber recognised role of religious beliefs but held that they could take a variety of forms due to different class situation of those who create or receive the particular belief.\(^{21}\)

Indologists like J. Gonda and J. C. Heesterman have contributed significantly to the study of rituals, mythology and their


\(^{21}\) Ibid.
interrelation with society. Gonda has presented his own viewpoints on several aspects of *vedic* mythology rather than maintaining 'wise conservatism.' However, his emphasis on the interplay of religion and magic in *vedic* mythology and non-existence of secular world in *Rigveda* is hardly acceptable. Moreover, his emphasis on notion of paradox in *veda* and Indian culture\(^{22}\) appears to be biased. Gonda's pupil J. C. Heesterman has gone too far in analyzing the role of ritual in mythology.\(^{23}\) He found conflict of traditions in Indian cultural ethos and also between the temporal power and spiritual authority.\(^{24}\)

Indologists such as G. Held, Georges Dumézil and P. Masson Ourrel have tried to separate myths and rational elements in the structure of early Indian society but they are


\(^{24}\) Ibid, p. 141.
greatly influenced by French sociologists.\textsuperscript{25} Dumezil’s tripartite mythology based on comparative study of Indo-Iranian, Celtic, Italian and Greek sources has been criticised by R. Thapar.\textsuperscript{26} Moreover, his division of Aryan gods into three categories i.e. moral, military and economic is highly schematic.\textsuperscript{27} Dumont, contradicting views of Heesterman, held that the relation between the king and the brahmana was based on associations and not conflict. But, he also makes an absolute division between spiritual and temporal role of the brahmana and king respectively\textsuperscript{28} which is not beyond doubt.

Sigmund Freud opened up the psychological approach to the study of birth.

\begin{enumerate}
\item R. N. Dandekar, op. cit., pp. 237-238.
\item Ibid.
\item Louis Dumont, \textit{Kingship in Ancient India, Contribution to Indian Sociology}, 6 (1962), pp. 48-77.
\end{enumerate}
and growth of myths and popular culture and its impact on social formation.²⁹ His followers thereafter tried to recast the popular myths and culture of India in his setting – myths and popular culture originated with the first “parricide”, a “primordial murder” which is ritually repeated in the totematic sacrifice. Ethnologists of all shades—Marxian and non-Marxian—have criticised this Freudian interpretation of the origin of myth and popular culture and their impact on the society. It has been argued that the Freudian model has simplified complex method of myth formation and cultural rites which should not be taken so easily. These myths play a significant role in determining individual and social behaviour and cultural ethos which, in turn, shape the life-pattern of the society. Though Imity-Ovsyaniko-Kulikovsky’s works such as The cult

of the God Soma in Ancient India in the Vedic Age, and on the History of the Cult of Fire Among the Indians in the Vedic Age are important contributions in this field they are circumscribed by Marxist thinking that it were the material conditions i.e. 'structure' of the society which shaped and formed myth and culture. That there could be a vice-versa case too is completely overruled by these historians. In fact, although being a straightforward story, myth reflects the integrating values around which societies are organised. It provides social norms, according to which activities of society are regulated. It is not wise to limit the scope of myth study to natural phenomenon or rituals as attempted earlier.

Malinowsky's views that myths were essentially charters of validation in which the aim was very often to provide a sanction for current situation underlined the social

relevance of myth. However, this view emphasises on back-projection of a current situation i.e. validating a current situation which is difficult to believe. The beliefs of a society are codified in its myth and it is also this myth which safeguards the morality of a society. The study of mythology is necessary for it is concerned with the quest for understanding the significance of nature and culture. The study is more significant for a society where oral tradition is very important for large scale communication and an important means of communication from generation to generation. We attempt, in the present study, to go into the details of myth formation in successive stages of the vedic period. Based upon the intensive study of the Vedas, Aranyakas, Brahmanas, Upanishads and the Dharmasutras, the study is done along scientific lines.

Before we proceed further, it is better to be very clear about the present

research topic. First, we came to the term word 'Myth'. This term derived from the Greek 'Myth' ('Word' or 'Speech') is used for a 'story concerning gods and superhuman beings.' It is sacred in notion and also reports realities and events from the origin of the world that remains valid for the basis and purpose of all there is. It serves as a model for human activity, society, wisdom and knowledge. Myth also is a collective term used for a kind of symbolic communication. It indicates one basic form of religious symbolism as distinguished from symbolic behaviour (cult, rituals etc.). Myths are not produced in berren but are the product of a particular geographical, socio-economic and cultural ethos. In fact, various factors go in the making of mythy. Hence, it will be wrong to set them aside as being meaningless because they form an important ingredient of our social beliefs. The religious observances of various groups of India,

particularly those belonging to the lower strata, reflect their social position. The fossilized and stratified remnants of the primitive observances, combined with caste and religion work as a cohesive factor in combining different groups. It is here that study of myth assumes relevance and significance.  

Myths have two components—the purpose of action and the agency of action. The purpose of action includes either to moralize or to explain why and how past events happened. The agency of action, of course, was ultimately human but it is important to discover group of men who are regarded as the actors in history and, thus, having a key-role in myth-making. Myth is inextricably linked with the events of remote past. In a sense, it is a prototype history since it is a selection of ideas composed in narrative form for the purpose of preserving and giving significance to an important aspect of the past. Although not to be used as

descriptive sources for the past, they reflect the beliefs and assumptions of a society. They record what a people like to think about their past. It is important to study the structural aspect of a myth as it can reveal the structure of the society from which it emanates. Being a functional means of communication on a large scale, myth becomes one of the means of passing on information. There is, thus, a process of constant adjustment, and myths from earlier periods are recast in conformity with the social assumptions of later periods.

Myths have a widely over-arching relationship to all aspects of society and each major myth could be the subject of an expansive analysis. Despite having such an enormous significance, the attempt here is not to provide a complete analysis of each myth but to recognize and point out the historically significant aspects of certain myths. An attempt in present study is to look at myths in structure as it would enable us to draw elements of
socio-cultural changes in a sequence. In the foregoing pages, the attempt is not to ascertain the historical authenticity of a myth but to explain socio-cultural undercurrents associated with it. As charter of validation, myth has a distinct connection with social organization not only representing the assumptions of the past but also underpinning the social relationships of the present.

The term 'culture' refers to functionally interrelated features or groups of features of people living in a particular area. Culture consists of diverse elements including the language, ideas, beliefs, customs, codes, institutions, tools, works of art and so on. Hence, it is a comprehensive term and includes within its admit a wide gamut of things, which go in the making and functioning of an individual and a society. In the present study, the attempt is to highlight religious ideas,

beliefs, codes and customs and their interface with the society. Although the emphasis is
given on the vedic and post-vedic culture, the non-vedic elements too have been mentioned whenever required. It is in this perspective that emergence of materialistic ideas and rise of different heterogeneous cults including Buddhism and Jainism and their contribution to the field of religious and social issues in the post-vedic era has been dealt with. As myth and culture are very intimately related with each other forming a very comprehensive area, our concern is only with the major undercurrents of myth and culture. However, the attempt is not to differentiate between the so-called ‘lower’ and “upper / higher” cultures as both form an indistinct part of Indian culture.

The issue of ‘social dominance’ is relatively a new emphasized concept and has acquired significant attention in the recent years. Most of the western scholars, while

41. e.g. Celestian Bougle, Eassys on Caste System, 1971, p. 53; J. C. Heesterman, India and the Inner Conflict of Tradition, Delhi, 1985, pp. 141-142.
taking the varna order as the cast-system, highlight the dominance of brahmana-Kshatriya duo in the social framework. It is held by them that there was tacit understanding between the brahmanas and the kshatriyas to establish control over the vaishyas and the shudras in order to get control over the surplus. Some authors have even tried to show conflict between the temporal and spiritual authority represented by the kshatriyas and the brahmanas respectively. Our present study endeavours to go into all these conjectural points. At the outset, however, it is better to say that the idea of social dominance itself is irrelevant in ancient Indian historical perspective. Despite the prevalence of the varna order and certain privileges enjoyed by the brahmanas and the kshatriyas, different social groups led a harmonious life. Element of social hierarchy, though present, was not dominant and there was certain mobility in the varna order as to be seen in the foregoing pages. We

42. J.C. Heesterman, India and the Inner Conflict of Tradition, pp. 141-142.
are to see in the next pages how the rigours of the varna order were mitigated by the elements of social harmony and coherence binding different social groups together.

The issue of social domination is a related concept of hegemony, formulated by the Italian political philosopher, AntonicoGramsci. Most of his thoughts contained in his *Prison Notebooks* are not defined precisely and hence, it has been given contrary interpretations. However, his most interesting ideas hover around the concept of cultural hegemony which we apply, in many respects, to our present study. Gramsci made a distinction between domination which is realized through the coercive organs of the state and intellectual and moral leadership, which is objectified in and exercised through the institutions of civil society. He says that the latter is far more


pervasive and durable than that achieved through coercion. Hegemony consists of "an order in which a certain way of life and thought is dominant, in which one concept of reality is diffused throughout society in all its institutional and private manifestations informing with its spirit all tastes, morality, customs, religions and political principles and all social relations, particularly in their intellectual and moral connotations." Thus, this hegemony is a relation of domination not by means of force but through ideological legitimation. It is the organization of consent. This consent is a complex mental state where contradictory elements, approval and indiffernce, resistance and resignation-coexist. The presence of these elements and the dynamics of historical development leads to changes in the intensity of hegemonic situation.


Gramsci's significant contribution was to connect ideas with the social matrix in this concept of hegemony. He broadened and deepened the Marxist notions of ideology. His emphasis on the role of consciousness in maintaining social equilibrium as well as in accelerating social change, has led many critics to discover idealistic tendencies in his writings. However, Gramsci did not reject the crucial centrality of material basis in shaping his consciousness. He has been criticized by Perry Anderson for emphasising on ideology while underplaying coercion. However, this criticism is off the mark as he neither relegated coercion to the background nor conceived of culture and ideology independently of power. Recent interpretations of Gramsci, notably from Femia, Adamson and Lears, are increasingly emphasizing that Gramsci recognised the possibility and co-existence of contradictory consciousness in

the outlook of single individuals as well as
groups within any given hegemony.  

There are several limitations in
applying Gramsci’s concept of hegemony to the
study of social dominance in ancient India.
First of all, Gramsci presented his theory in
order to understand the functioning of
capitalist society and highlighted the role of
dominant group or ruling class in controlling
production process. But, we find vast
differences regarding the nature of both social
organization and state. Moreover, the typical
institution of civil society did not exist in
the vedic period. Second, and this is crucial,
the brahmanas and kshatriyas hardly controlled
production. Yet, there is an essential similarit
in the functioning of hegemony anywhere. The
context-specific variables determine the nature

Gramsci,’ Political Studies, vol. 23, No. 1, 1975, P. 53, Walter Adamson,
Hegemony and Revolution : A Study of Antonio Gramsci’s Political
and Cultural Theory, University of California Press, Berkley, 1980,
p. 174, T. J. Jackson Lears, “The Concept of Cultural Hegemony, Problems
and Possibilities”, American Historical Review, vol. 90, No. 3, June
1985, p. 38.
and intensity of hegemonic control but, the need for ideological support for an emerging socio-political order, irrespective of its form, can not be denied. The effort of the clerics to reshape a popular culture and transmit it through festivals finds an unmistakable resonance in the brahmanical adoption of local cultures and traditions as a symbol of shared myths, rituals and beliefs and the dissemination of these through sacrifices. Moreover, the brahmanas functioning as purohitas and working as "intellectuals" for the society, the location of ideological domination in non-coercive organs of society, the kshatriyas working as nobles and regulating affairs of the state without using coercive measure (at least in period under consideration) and the mutually supportive function of the kingship and the society in terms of division of power and labour-are all conditions that fit into the Gramscian conception of hegemony. However, as the socio-economic and political structure was still in its nascent stage and yet to get a sound status,
the element of hegemony too existed in an embryonic stage.

The basic theory followed in the present study is "continuity with change." It implies that the tradition of myth-formation continued for centuries-a process involving diverse trends and hence very complex. This process was not monotonous, nor it followed a straight way. With the expansion of Aryan culture, different cultural traditions mingled which further complicated myth formation. This process becomes all the more important in the light of presence of dominant social groups and the elite which functioned in tandem with other social groups. Thus, there being the continuity of earlier tradition but, there were also forces of change working for the material and cultural advancements.

An attempt is also made here to highlight different forces at work in the formation of myth and also the role of social dominance. How myths underwent a change during different phases of the vedic period and how
psycho-sociological factor influenced this complex process is-taken into account. Moreover, the role of myth in holding groups of men together and establishing harmonious relationship among them is further highlighted in the present work. Further, the way this process moulded the mutual relation of the individual and the society and the role of dominant social groups in regulating this whole affair, is given due attention. How this mutual relation was able to cope up with the material advancement and how different groups came to acquire or lose their position in society at different stages and their role in transforming socio-cultural milieu is dealt at length.

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49. C. Drekmeier, Kingship and Community in Early India, Stanford, 1962, p. 2.