CHAPTER - II
*Rta* and the Ethics of Antiquity
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RȚA AND THE ETHICS OF ANTIQUITY

Our search for the foundations of Indian ethics has to begin with the study of the Vedas, not only because of their being the earliest available records of Indian antiquity, but also because they contain some of the fundamental ethical concepts on which the whole edifice of Indian ethical thought is founded. Rța is one such foundational ethical concept which entails a profound ethical theory.

The Vedas come to us in a fourfold division i.e., Rg-Veda, Yajur-veda, Sdma-veda and Atharvana-veda. The Rg-veda contains hymns in praise of nature-gods. These hymns are called Rks, from which this division derives its name. The Yajur-Veda borrows many hymns from the Rg-veda in addition to its own characteristic liturgic formulae in prose called yajus, which are concerned with procedure of ritual practices. The Sāma-Veda borrows a lot from the Rg-veda and puts those riks to music by slightly modifying them to suit the purpose. The Atharvana-Veda contains charms and spells which refer to the superstitions, folklore and primitive forms of magic. These four Vedas put together form the great compendium of Aryan thought with the generic name 'Veda', which means 'to know' or 'knowledge'.

The Veda consist of Samhitas, Brahmana and Aranyakas. The Samhitas are collections of verses in praise of nature-gods, which are used in yajña, - the vedic rituals. The Brahmana contain rules and discussions pertaining to the application of hymns in yajña. The Aranyakas primarily comprise of theosophical speculations, the germs of which can be found in the Brahmana. These speculations reach their zenith in the Upaniṣads which are appended to the Aranyakas. The Samhitas, Brahmana and Upaniṣads betray a continuity in evolution of thought. The Brahmana and Upaniṣads are of later origin and presuppose the existence of the Samhitas.
THE Rg-veda

Among the Samhitas, Rg-veda Samhita is the oldest and serves as a source for rest of the vedic literature. The Rg-veda Samhita contains the basic and original hymns which are incorporated by the other three Vedas to a large extent. As a compilation, it is the oldest and offers us the genuine primitive structure of social and religious thought of the vedic Aryans. As Wilson rightly states, “from the extensive manner in which the hymns of Rg-veda enter into the composition of the other three, we should, naturally, infer its priority to them and its greater importance to the history of Hindu religion. In truth, it is to the Rg-veda that we must have recourse, principally, if not exclusively, for correct notions of the institutions, religions or civil, of the Hindus”.

The Rg-veda Samhita consists of 1,028 hymns with more than 10,000 stanzas. These hymns or Suktas of the Samhita are attributed to specific Rishis, i.e., poet-seers or to families of those seers, traditionally. Katyayana's Vedānakramaṇi (Index to the Veda) specifies the name of the seer or of his family, the deity addressed, the number of stanzas and the meter or composition of each Sūkta. The hymns of Rg-veda are doubtless composed over a very long period of time and the Rg-veda itself vouches for this fact. The oldest strata of the hymns are separated from the latest by some centuries. The hymns are preserved by an uninterrupted oral tradition, even to this day. Despite of conflicting opinions of the scholars, we can safely presume the period between 2000 B.C. - 1000 B.C. as the Rg-vedic age.

Rta is the most dominant ethical concept in the Rg-veda. Before we embark on a philosophical understanding of rta, a few remarks on the general character of the Rg-veda Samhita are in the order. It is generally viewed as a collection of primitive poetry in praise of the nature-gods, expressing wishes which are mostly materialistic, and connected with the performance of rituals. It is also probable that only those hymns which are

Wilson H.H., The Rg-veda Samhita, Introduction, P. IX.
useful in the practice of *yajña* found a place in the compilation of the *Samhita*. Though these hymns are primarily liturgic in purpose, they, nevertheless, incidentally describe the primitive form of life and the institutions thereof. As poetry, these hymns are of high literary value and it is really astonishing to see such high standards of creativity in such a remote antiquity.

*Rta, the Cosmic and Moral Order*

The word *rta* stands for the unerring order found in the course of natural phenomena, which are defied in the *Veda*, and also, more importantly, it is the moral order in obeyance to which gods and men are to conduct themselves. The concept of *rta* is not a speculative abstraction but a concrete reality which is apprehended directly in the course of natural phenomena. Further, it is not a mythical concept, for nowhere do we find deification or anthropomorphication of *rta*. It is rather discussed in man’s relation with Nature and with fellow men. The vedic idea of Nature is not disconnected with man’s social and personal experiences and thus we have a complex idea of Cosmic-Moral order. This may not be intelligible for positivist for whom the world is made up of facts and ethics is devoid of cognitive value. But it is not so with Vedic man for whom Nature and society have a unitary order.

In its cosmic aspect, it is due to *rta* that the sun travels, the sky and the earth are firm, dawns arise, waters flow, cows yield milk. Simply, everything is what, it is and how it is due to the working of *rta*. It is the regulative law in the universe. In its moral aspect, *rta* is the order because of which gods and men live in harmony. *Rta* constitutes the ethical standard which had a direct impact on the lives of the Vedic people. According to Bloomfield, “*rta* is unquestionably the best conception that has been elaborated by Aryans... we have in connection with the *rta* a pretty complete system of Ethics, a kind
of counsel of perfection".2

Though rta is first found in the Veda, its origin, however, can be traced back to much earlier prehistoric age called Indo-Iranian period. This is the period prior to the advent of Aryans into North-Western provinces of India from the Iranian highlands. The concept of rta is inherited from the age when Indian and Iranian Aryans were still one people.

This conjecture about the prehistoric origin of rta is based upon the conceptual and linguistic similarities between Persian Zend Avesta and The Veda which inherited much in common from the Indo-Iranian period. The pioneering studies of Indologists in comparative mythology and philology established these similarities. The rta in the Veda corresponds to asha or areta of the Avesta which too means the cosmic order. In the Avesta, we find parallel gods to some of those in the Veda, and this fact suggests the prehistoric origin of those gods. Among such gods, Dyaus, Agni, Indra, Varuna, Yama, Āryamaēn, Sōma, Mitra, Vivasvant, Trita are some. The discoveries in the field of comparative mythology and ethnology suggest that Aryans had migrated in the pre-vedic times, for reasons unknown, to the plains of Indus from Iranian highlands with some traditional ritual practices, ethical notions and prehistoric gods. The later developed their own isolated culture and religion, which acquired an independent character. However, the relics of past were not totally lost sight of, and some of the vedic poets look at their antiquity with nostalgic exuberance.

According to Bloomfield, the idea of rta might have existed a long time before 1600 B.C.3 The cuneiform tablets discovered at Tel-el-Amaran of Egypt mention the persian names Artashuvara and Artatama. the prefix in those names i.e., the stem arta is identical with arta of Western Iranian and Acamendian inscriptions, asha of Avesta and rta of

2Maurice Bloomfield, The Religion of the Veda, P. 126.
3Maurice Bloomfield, The Religion of the Veda, P. 12.
the *Veda*. Hence Bloomfield argues that the idea of *rta*, with its parallels in *Avesta* and Acamendian inscriptions, is older than the cuneiform tablets which date back to 1600 B.C. This evidence suggests a much earlier date for the beginning of Vedic literary activity too.

**Rta and the Vedic Gods**

Before we see how the vedic gods and *rta* are connected, let us briefly recall the character of the vedic gods in general. The scholars are mostly unanimous in accepting the view that the vedic gods are deified natural phenomena. The *Veda* considers gods as luminous, benevolent and right minded devine entities. The Sanskrit word for gods *devas*, with its root *div* or *dyu*, suggests that gods are personified luminous manifestations of Nature. In the *Veda*, most of the gods represent ostencible natural phenomena. Though some of the gods are thoroughly anthropomorphised in course of time, yet there are some gods who are still not deprived of their transparent natural characters. Among such gods, *Dyaus* (sky), *Agni* (fire), *Vāyu* (air), *Prithvi* (earth), *Usha* (dawn), *Soma* (*Soma* plant), *Surya* (sun) are some. There are, however, some gods whose correspondence to natural phenomena is obscure. In the *Veda*, we find even the articles employed in the ritual also deified — the sacrificial post, the vessels of *Sōma*, the *Soma* pressing stones being the examples for such deification. There are some abstract qualities and actions deified too — *Sraddha* (faith), *Daksina* (sacrificial fee) are the examples. However, the most important vedic gods are representatives of natural objects and phenomena. Nature as a whole, every natural object between the sky and earth found a place in the vedic patheon. In fact Father sky (*Dyaus pitar*) and Mother Earth are said to be the parents of all the gods.\(^4\)

It is true, gods are also spoken of as progeny of *Aditi*, which literally means ‘limitless’

\(^4\)The *Rg Veda* L. 159.1; L. 185.4; VL. 17.7 etc.
or 'boundless'. According to Giffrith, one of the translators of the Rg-vedic hymns, Aditi is the boundless, infinite Nature. Hence, all the gods owe their origin to Nature. In other words, they are Nature-gods, however, the idea of Father sky appears to be much archaic, having its corresponding words in Greek Zeus Pater and Roman Diespiter or Jupiter.

The Nature-worship is common to all the primitive peoples of the world. This lead to the deification of Nature in its various aspects. Such deification found expression in the stupendous mythology of the Veda. In fact, the Veda stands as the paradigm for understanding how natural phenomena acquire the status of deities through the primitive art of deification and myth-making. "Deprived of hymns of the Rg-veda, we should hardly know to this day that mythology is the first and fundamental adjustment of the individual human life to the outer active, interfering, dynamic world, which sorrounds and influences man from the moment when he opens his eyes upon the wonders of its unexplained phenomena. In this sense, vedic mythology in its day what empirical science is in our day".5

Further, the studies in primitive mythology show that while the primitive people draw from Nature the basic materials for myth-making, they also express their own patterns of life in the mythology. This explains why the mythologies of different peoples vary, though they diefy the same Nature: "A certain amount of the complications and entanglements of human life must be imported into mythology before it becomes mythology".6 Again as Thomson asserts, "...man’s consciousness of the world around him is a social image or a product of society".7 Hence an analytical study of a mythology provides us with, if not a detailed description, the broad outlines of the social reality.

5Maurice Bloomfield, The Religion of the Veda, P. 82.
6Maurice Bloomfield, The Religion of the Veda, P. 95.
Given the naturalistic origin of gods, \textit{rta} as the order in the universe must also guide the gods. Precisely this is the \textit{Rg-veda} speaks of gods in relation to \textit{rta}. Gods are intimately connected with \textit{rta} throughout the \textit{Samhita}. The epithets like \textit{Rtajata} (born of \textit{rta}), \textit{Rtajña} (knowers of \textit{rta}), \textit{rtavṛdh} (promoter of \textit{rta}), etc., are frequently given to gods. What is more remarkable is that nowhere gods are viewed as controllers of \textit{rta} rather than followers or upholders of \textit{rta}. The \textit{rta} on the other hand is viewed as regulating order according to which gods conduct themselves.

Generally, all the gods, at one place or the other, are related to \textit{rta} as its followers or upholders. Heaven (\textit{Dyaus}) and Earth are regarded as the mothers of \textit{rta}.\textsuperscript{8} At a few places, Dawn and Night are called 'mothers of \textit{rta}'.\textsuperscript{9} The sky and the wide expanse was held to be the domain of \textit{rta}.\textsuperscript{10} Again is frequently called as the offspring of \textit{rta}.\textsuperscript{11} Godess Dawn is said to be arising according to \textit{rta}.\textsuperscript{12} At one place \textit{rta} is likened to the wheel of time, a year with twelve spokes (months) and six hundred and twenty sons (days and nights) paired together.\textsuperscript{13}

\textit{Mitra} and \textit{Varuna}, especially the latter, stand in a special relation to \textit{rta}. The dual gods, the most important among \textit{Adityas}, are the guardians of \textit{rta}. The \textit{Rg-veda} poets usually address these two together. However, a few hymns, mostly deprecatory or expiatory, are addressed to \textit{Varuna} in isolation.\textsuperscript{14}

\textit{Mitra} and \textit{Varuna} are said to have attained their mighty power through \textit{rta} and by being lovers and cherishers of \textit{rta}.\textsuperscript{15} They are the gods who by \textit{rta}, uphold \textit{rta} and are the lords of shining light of \textit{rta}.\textsuperscript{16} They are true to \textit{rta}, born in \textit{rta} and the strenghteners of

\textsuperscript{8}The \textit{Rg-veda.} III. 54.3; VL. 17.7; X. 59.8.
\textsuperscript{9}The \textit{Rg-veda.} I. 142.7; V. 5.6.
\textsuperscript{10}The \textit{Rg-veda.} III. 54.6; X. 65.8; X. 92.4.
\textsuperscript{11}The \textit{Rg-veda} I. 144.7; I. 189.6; VI. 48.5 etc.
\textsuperscript{12}The \textit{Rg-veda IV.} 2.19; IV. 51.7-8; VII. 75.1, etc.
\textsuperscript{13}The \textit{Rg-veda} 1.164.11.
\textsuperscript{14}The \textit{Rg-veda I.} 25.28; V. 85; VIII. 45, 86-89.
\textsuperscript{15}The \textit{Rg-veda.} I. 2.8.
\textsuperscript{16}The \textit{Veda.} I. 23.5.
The supremacy of these gods is established by X. 36.12 of the *Samhita*, according to which *Mitra* and *Varuna* govern all the gods through *ṛta*.

As guardians of *ṛta*, they are said to have established heaven and earth firmly. They caused the cows to stream, the plants to flourish and by scattering the swift drops, sent down the rain. All the workings of *ṛta* are ascribed to *Mitra* and *Varuna* in general.

*Varuna*, though usually is accompanied by *Mitra*, is the chief guardian of *ṛta*. While *Varuna* is addressed by a few hymns in solitude, *Mitra* was hardly so addressed except by III. 59 of the *Samhita*. Again, *Varuna* is regarded as the moral chastiser and is prayed for moral condonation but *Mitra* is generally viewed as mere moral exhorter. This shows the relatively greater significance of *Varuna* over his partner.

*ṛta* is the very form of *Varuna*. He is the principal guide of *ṛta*. He is the every alert observer of *ṛta* among men. He is an omniscient god who knows every act of men. *Atharvāṇa-Veda* speaks of *Varuna* as the god from whom no one can conceal one’s thoughts and whenever two people sit together and scheme, *Varuna* will be there as the third man and knows it. He is omnipresent and is hidden even in a pretty drop of water. Even winking of men are counted by him. *Varuna* knows the path of birds, ships on sea and even the path of wind. *Adityas* are saidd to be the spies of *Varuna* who observe the moral conduct of men. The character of these *Adityas* serves as an important due for the moral description of Aryan social organisation. We shall deal with it in a later section of this chapter.

*Varuna* establishes his unsurpassable supremacy as the guardian of moral order and as

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17 The *Ṛg-veda*. VHI. 66.13.
18 The *Ṛg-veda*. V. 62.3.
19 The *Ṛg-veda*. V. 66.1.
20 The *Ṛg-veda*. VII. 40.4.
21 The *Ṛg-veda*. I. 25.11.
22 The *Atharvāṇa-Veda*. IV. 16.
23 The *Ṛg-veda* I. 25.7-9.
24 The *Ṛgveda* I. 25.13; VII. 87.3.
the omnicient chastiser. Varuṇa’s refuge is sought by transgressors of ṛta in an interesting way. Those hymns vouch for moral probity and dconscious rectitude of the Vedic people. Much of it will be seen a little later. Presently, let us look into the prehistory of Varuṇa, which throws light on our analysis of ṛta in a very important aspect.

**Varuṇa and Prehistory**

As mentioned earlier, Varuṇa is one of the prehistoric gods inherited by the Vedic people from their hoary Indo-Iranian past. Varuṇa has his counterpart in Avesta known as Ahura Mazda or Ormez. The epithet Ahura which means ‘lord’ is also found in the Veda in the form of Asura. This word in its original sense means ‘lord’ in the Veda also. However, surprisingly enough, Asura in the later parts of the Veda came to mean evil spirits distinct from Rākṣasas and demons. The Asuras are perennial foe-men of god Indra, one of whose popular Vedic names is ‘Asura-slayer’. However, the Veda still retains the origin sense of the word to mean ‘the lord or chief of gods’. Asura in the later sense became an appellation of non-Aryan aborigines, the dark-skinned Dasyus. The epithet in its former sense of ‘lord’ is given to Varuṇa specifically.

Ahura Mazda, like Varuṇa is chiefly connected with asha, the corresponding concept of ṛta, in the Avesta. However, unlike Varuṇa, Ahura Mazda is the creator of the divine order. In the Veda, Varuṇa is nowhere said to have created ṛta. He is rather a guardian of it. In this sense, Mazda has a somewhat different stature than that of Varuṇa. In the Veda, Varuṇa is vested with magical powers (maya). But this does not certainly suggest that he created ṛta. Except this particular feature, Varuṇa and Mazda are almost identical.

As far as the moral preservation is concerned, they have a striking similarity Mazda,
like Varuna, cannot be deceived and knows all the thoughts and needs of men.²⁸ Again, Varuna and Ahura Mazda are ascribed certain identical celestial exploits - like paving paths for sun and stars, causing moon to wax and wane, governing waters and plants etc., — in the Veda and Avesta. Ahura also has his partner called Mithra, phonetically almost identical with the vedic Mitra. Notwithstanding minor differences, Varuna and Ahura can be described as two images of the same deity, in two mirrors.

The identity of Varuna and Ahura, with their cosmic and moral responsibility of guarding the order, reveals two important facts: first, the antiquity of Varuna beyond the Vedic period; secondly, the symbiotic origin of Varuna and rta. The second point is very important for it amply explains the fading away of rta and Varuna together in the later Vedic period. This is the significant theoretical purpose served by our digression into the prehistory of Varuna.

Rta and Yajña

The two distinguishing characteristic features of the Rg-Vedic religion, unanimously accepted by the scholars, are the naturalistic polytheism and the cherished practice of yajña. Without these two, the Rg- Vedic religion is simply inconceivable. We have already noted how the naturalistic polytheism of the Rg-Vedic period is related to rta. Now, let us try to discern the relation between yajña and rta. Our interest here is not to somehow account for the primitive ritual practice or to accommodate it in the bosom of rta. On the other hand, our primary concern is to see what light the fostered ritual heritage, in its origin and development, can throw on our understanding of rta.

To start with, let us take up the popular opinions of two renowned western Indologists — Maurice Bloomfield and A. A. Macdonell — regarding the general estimate of the vedic literature and religion. This is essential for our study, because the question of ethical relevance of the ritual obligates a clear understanding of the nature and purpose of the

²⁸Yasna 31.13; 43.6; 45.4.
ritual itself.

Let us first see what Bloomfield has to say. In his famous book, *The Religion of the Veda*, Bloomfield observes:

"The Vedic religion is a hieratic or priestly religion. As regards its mechanism, or its external practices, it is unmistakably liturgic or ritualistic. As regards its purpose, or its economic aspect, it is thoroughly utilitarian and practical. Its purpose is to secure happiness and success, health and long life for man, notably the rich man, while living upon the earth; to secure a very talented and thrifty class of priest-poets abundant rewards in return for their services in procuring for men this happiness, success and so on; to satisfy the divine powers visible and invisible, beneficent and noxious, gods and demons, that is, to establish liveable relations between gods and men; and finally to secure after death the right to share the paradise of gods in the company of pious fathers that have gone their before".  

The problem with the foregoing analysis and understanding of the vedic ritual by Bloomfield is that, despite of his brilliant work in comparative mythology, philology and ethnology, he completely missed the ethical aspect of *yajña* and confined himself to the trivial formal characterization of it. He, unfortunately and unduly, restricted his characterization of ritual to the overt and immediately economic aspect of it, without probing for any fundamental considerations beneath the origin of the institution.

In his opinion, the ritual is primarily a hieratic or priestly practice. He arrives at this by looking at the trivial liturgical discussions of the yajur- Veda and Brāhmaṇas; the way *Dakshina* (sacrificial fee for the priests) is deified; the presence of *dāna-stuti* or munificience hymns in the *Rg- Veda*; and the way liberality is eulogised by the priests. These evidence certainly show the formal character of the ritual practice. However, this

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30The *Rg- Veda*. 125, 126; V. 27; VIII.18; X.33.
a later development in the practice of *yajña*, which gave rise to excessive formalism. The *Rg-Veda*, on the other hand, certainly points to a time when *yajña* was not strictly a priestly activity rather than a collective activity. The hieratic culture was without doubt a later offshoot and the *Rg-Veda* contains some hymns which unmistakably defy the existence of specialized priests as the principal partakers in the ritual performance. They show the existence of *yajña* much prior to the rise of priestly class. These hymns should not be neglected while defining the purpose of *yajña*.

The primary assumption for hieratic characterization of the ritual is the distinction between the priest and *yajamana*, the rich patron. The *Rg-Veda* contains some hymns where the poet himself is the *yajamana*. Again, there are numerous hymns which speak of not a solitary *yajamana* but a number of *yajamanas* sacrificing together and offering hymns.\(^{31}\) Most of the hymns address the deities with a self-referential *we*. Again, wealth, progeny, long life are desired, in most of the hymns, for not, a particular patron but for the tribesmen as a whole. Sometimes, wishes are advanced in favour of the ancient five tribes of Aryans or the Aryan race as such.\(^{32}\) The hymns in their origin were not production of priests for the sake of rich patrons. In I. 114.9, we find a herdsman praying *Rudra* for the welfare of his cattle. All these hymns, along with similar hymns abundantly found in the Samhita, show the pre-hieratic practice of *yajña*. So, one can neither evince priestly interest as the motive for sacrifice in general nor can claim that the entire vedic religion is principally hieratic.

Further, Bloomfield suggests 'satisfying gods' as one of the primary motive behind the rituals. On the face of it, yes! it is true. But why should the gods be satisfied at all? And how does the sacrifice satisfy gods? The clue lies in the fact, well stated by Giffith, that 'the preservation of the whole world rests, according to the Vedic view, on

\(^{31}\text{e.g. I 127.2; III.35.6; X.46.2; X.150.2.}\)

\(^{32}\text{The *Rg-Veda* I. 7.9; I. 176.3; VI. 46.7; VII. 15.2 etc.}\)
the sacrifices offered by men, as these give the gods strength and enable them to perform their duties. As gods perform their duties according to \( rta \), \( yajña \) is nothing but the process of strengthening \( rta \). It is not meant for, as Bloomfield contended, mere satisfying gods but for rejuvenating them. Sacrifice is the process of revitalizing the defied forces of Nature, through whom \( rta \) will be strengthened. But what exactly is the mechanism through which a sacrifice can revitalize gods? To know this, we have to examine the material features of sacrifice in general.

First, how does anyone, forget about gods for the moment, gain strength? The answer is simple -- food! As our practical experience reveals, food is the cause of strength in any organism. For the primitive people, gods are no exception to this rule. Even the gods have to be fed in order that they gain strength to discharge their functions in accordance with \( rta \). If gods get weakened, as men do after continuous work, then \( rta \) is also weakened in the sense that its operation becomes difficult. If \( rta \) is weakened, the natural course of happenings would get disturbed. For the people who were still in the secure lap of Nature, who derive their sustenance from Nature, it is disastrous. As mentioned earlier, rain is due to \( rta \). Due to rain, pastures grow; through pastures cows will be fed; well-fed cows multiply and the multiplied cows are the wealth for the nomadic Aryan tribes. They liken every important thing to cows. Clouds are cows, the sun is a cow, sacrifice is a cow and remember, cows yield milk due to \( rta \). Hence, proper course of \( rta \) i.e., efficient working of gods is directly and ostensibly linked with their food, subsistence, wealth, longevity, progeny and everything good in their lives. Rain and food are the most immediate benefits of strengthening \( rta \).

Rain is so closely connected with \( rta \), that the word itself acquired the sense of waters. God \textit{Varuna} is the god of rain and waters. Even in the later mythology, \textit{Varuna} retained this image. \textit{Varuna} and \textit{Mitra} are frequently urged for rain and food:

\[^{33}\text{Giffith's note on I. 36.5.}\]
From you, Mitra and Varuna, may we gain fully food for our sustenance.\textsuperscript{34}

Send us from heaven, 0. Varuna and Mitra, rain and sweet food, ye who pour down your bounties.\textsuperscript{35}

May we be thine Varuna and with our princes, Mitra, thine:
Food and heaven’s light will we obtain.\textsuperscript{36}

Eternal Law hath varied food that strengthens: thought of eternal law removes transgressions.

By holy law long lasting food they bring us; by holy law have cows come for our worship.

To law belong the vast deep Earth and Heaven. Milch-Kine supreme, to law their milk they render.\textsuperscript{37}

These hymns show how materialistically relevant strengthening gods and \textit{rta} is for those people. Now, strengthening gods being the aim of sacrifice, it is the process, by implication, of feeding the gods. There are three important features of the vedic sacrifice. They are — fire kindled, the oblations poured into the fire and the hymns offered to gods. All other materials used in the sacrifice are incidental or subservient to these three main features.

\textit{Soma} drink, clarified butter and barley are the most general oblations. Among these, \textit{Soma} is doubtless the most important that it acquired by itself the status of deity. It is said to be surprisingly revitalizing drink. Clarified butter and barley are the staple food of the early vedic people. Hence these oblations are offered to gods in order that they gain strength and perform their functions well, under \textit{rta}, with renewed strength.

Direct allusion to this idea is repeatedly found in the Samhita:

\textsuperscript{34}The \textit{Rg-Veda} V. 70.2.
\textsuperscript{35}The \textit{Rg-Veda} VIII. 64.2.
\textsuperscript{36}The \textit{Rg-Veda} VII. 66.9.
\textsuperscript{37}The \textit{Rg-Veda} IV. 23.8-10.
"He who with dainty food hath won you, Indra and Varuna, won gods as his allies to friendship • • • when they, as friends inclined to friendship, honoured with dainty food, delight in flowing Soma".38

Again, Sōma is addressed thus:

"Stream to us food and Vigour, kine and horses; give us broad lights and fill the gods with rapture."39

Indra, the warrior god is the most fond drinker of Sōma. The anthropomorphic description of Indra includes big belly, rugged jaws, big mouth, broad shoulders, big lips etc., to suit the image of a heavy consumer of Soma. He is said to have drunk three lakes-full of Sōma. As a warrior god, he needs greater quantities of revitalizing Sōma than anybody else. Hence it is clear that oblations are offered primarily as the food for gods.

Now, coming to the hymns offered to gods, they serve two important purposes. First, to address each god with his specific share of oblation and secondly to express wishes or the materialistic desires to the gods. The first purpose is closely connected with oblation, the food of gods. So, prayers, in the first place, serve the purpose of offering each god with his share of food. In the Samhita, even prayers are likened to food:

"O Asuras, O Varuna and Mitra, this hymn to you like food, anew I offer."40

"Sing forth to lofty Dyaus a strength - bestowing song • • •41

At one place, a holy song is directly said to be strengthening rta:

"O Indra, hear him that hath produced for thee a new and lovely song, with comprehending mind a pious song such as of yore has strengthened the divine order of the universe."42

Hence, the finding a mental purpose of hymns is to address gods their due shares of

38The Rg-Veda IV. 41.2-3.
39The Rg-Veda IX. 94.5.
40The Rg-Veda VII. 36.2.
41The Rg-Veda I. 54.3.
42The Rg-Veda VHI. 84.5 cited by Bloomfield.
food. The expression of desires is, however, secondary. The eulogies, of the gods and their exploits, are also aimed at strengthening gods by inspiring their zeal.\footnote{Cf. The \textit{Rg-Veda} III. 34.2.} The idea of pleasing gods through well decked songs is also frequent in the \textit{Veda}. But it cannot be taken as the primary purpose because it does not explain why \textit{hymns} should be a part of \textit{yajña} alone. The simultaneous acts of offering hymns and oblations prove otherwise. The hymns are thus intricately linked with the process of offering food i.e., oblations to gods.

This understanding of hymns appears to be naive and an oversimplification. However, this is not to undermine the aesthetic aspect of hymns. In fact, it is their poetic beauty that elevates the otherwise monotonous hymns to a respectable place in the world literature. Our point here is that as far as the fundamental relation of hymns to \textit{yajña} is concerned, the hymns are essentially if not solely, connected with offering oblations to gods. So, our view is not one sided or incomplete and does not undermine the other important aspects of the hymns. Nor do we evaluate hymns only in terms of their function in the \textit{yajña}. In fact, their are some beautiful hymns e.g., the hymn on dice\footnote{X. 34.}, the hymn on frogs\footnote{VII. 103.} and many other verses describing things external to the ritual which are more of literary interest than of any liturgic value. The hymns on Dawn stand apart as some of the most excellent pieces of poetry ever produced by man kind. However, our generalisation does not preclude the appreciation of these better aspects of the holy hymns.

Sacrificial fire, another chief feature of \textit{yajña}, is also closely related to offering food or oblations to the gods. \textit{Agni}, as the sacrificial fire, is viewed as the envoy or herald to gods. The oblations are carried by \textit{Agni} to gods.\footnote{Cf. The \textit{Rg-Veda} IV. 7.7.} He is the deity whose importance in the
vedic ritual lies in the conception that gods receive their shares of oblation through him. He is called the messenger and courier between the two worlds (Heaven and Earth). Numerous hymns in the Veda eulogise this sacerdotal aspect of Agni.

Now, it is clear that the three chief features of yajña are closely connected with invigorating gods. The mechanism in the sacrifice through which this intention is carried out is also clear. The oblations poured into fire are carried by it to gods and the oblations are apportioned by the hymns as they address the gods. Agni is said to be 'the mouth of gods' into which oblations are poured. The gods are also called 'fire tongued' in the sense that it is through Agni they taste their food. Again, Brhaspati or Brahmanaspati, the deified prayer is supposed to be the celestial apportioner of shares among gods. These views concerning the mechanism of the vedic rite amply supports our thesis that the primary propose of yajña is to invigorate gods and through them rta.

In this sense, the vedic sacrifice, as far as its original intention is concerned, is more an ethical act than anything else. If it were, as Bloomfield suggested, a mere instrument of priestly interest, it hardly explains how yajña is cherished by people for ages even to this day. A practice cannot survive through such a long history of if it were just a product of parasitic interest of a particular class. On the other hand, yajña acquired so much of emotional significance one to two ethical considerations beneath it. Hence, the survival value of yagna lies precisely in its ethical character. It is true that the later tradition lost sight of the original intentions of poet-seers and priests replaced gods in yajña. However, the ethical significance of yajña was never questioned in Hindu tradition on the basis of priestly interest. Carvakas are of course an exception to this.

The conception of the sacrificial mechanism to bring out the desired ends has undergone thorough transformation in the later Brdhmanas period. But the ethical grounds for the sacrifice are not entirely lost sight of. yajña, even in the smrīti period, is viewed

47Cf. The Rg- Veda IV. 7.11.
as a debt (ṛṇa) to gods.

The early vedic idea of strengthening gods through sacrificial offerings, nevertheless, involves a certain amount of primitive belief in magic. This is quite apparent and obvious. However, the magickal element in the sacrifice does not invalidate the ethical purpose beneath it. We may not, in terms of modern science, be able to explain completely the efficacy of yajñā. But we cannot question, on the basis of our modern reasoning, the ethical presuppositions of a grand tradition and the great peoples of antiquity. Nor can we consider them as lesser rational beings. If we do so, we are committing ourselves to 'Judicial Blindness'. After all, reason or rationality is a social product and thus cannot be evaluated independent of the specific social conditions. Reason is not an extrasystemic value but is an immanent category peculiar to a system. Then what is the object of the so-called rational studies of antiquity? The answer is simple — understanding! better understanding!! still better understanding!!! This understanding of our past helps us in moulding ourselves towards better objects of thought and action. This precisely is the relevance of studying the conceptions and lives of our own forefathers. The man makes himself through his history!

Coming back to our original topic, let us see what Macdonell observes in relation to the vedic literature: "It (Ṛg-veda) is rather a body of skillfully composed hymns produced by a sacerdotal class and meant to accompany the Soma oblation and the fire sacrifice of melted butter which were offered according to a ritual by no means so simple as was at one time supposed, though undoubtedly so much simpler than the elaborate system of the Brahmana period."48

What concerns us much here Macdonell's view of the priestly origin of the Ṛg-Vedic hymns. But, as we have seen, the formation of priests as a class is epigonic to the long tradition of pre-class ritual practice. Many of the hymns certainly speak of priests, but

48Macdonell A.A., A History of Sanskrit Literature, P. 64.
it does not mean that priests alone are the authors of hymns. Our point here is that the Rg-Vedic allusions to the priests cannot be taken as an evidence to characterize the whole Rg-Veda as a product of priestly class. Such undue generalization hampers our understanding of rta and yajña in their original ethical significance.

Fortunately, we have certain internal evidences in the Rg-Veda which show that all composers of hymns are not priests and vice versa. One of the poets of the RgVeda in III.43 asks Indra to make him a ruler, priest or a richman. If every composer of hymns were a priest by himself, then it is funny that he is asking Indra to make him what he already is. So, this hymn shows that all composers are not priests. Further the apri hymns, which the yagamana has to recite, composed by his forefathers, show that hymns used to be composed by all their families long back. The hymn on frogs VII. 103. which is a satire on priests, exhibits that it was no work of a priest. Again, IX. 112 of the Rg-Veda is a popular old song incorporated with a refrain at the end of each stanzavouches for this fact.

Our argument, further, is substantiated by the popular character of the magical charms in the Atharva-Veda. Though Atharva-Veda, as a compilation, is later to the Rg-Veda, some of the hymns of the former are, if not older, as archaic as those in the Rg-Veda. Even the Rg-Veda contains charms and spells which betray a popular character. The tradition referred to by Grhya Sutras also is popular in practice entailing household practices. So, Macdonell’s observation regarding priestly origin of the Rg-Vedic hymns is partially true. Our point, on the other hand, is that the Vedic religion, in its entirely, is not a hieratic religion solely supported by rich patrons but it also has a popular aspect of it which is much earlier to the rise of priestly class.

Again, Macdonell, commenting on rta, says that "the unvarying regularity of the

\[49\text{Cf. Giffith’s note on this hymn.}
\[50\text{Cf. the Rg-Veda X.161-184.}

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sun and moon, and the unfailing recurrence of dawn, however suggested to the ancient singers the idea of unchanging order that prevails in Nature. The notion of this general law, recognised under the name \textit{Rta} (properly the ‘\textit{course}’ of things), we find in the \textit{Rg-\Veda} extended first to the fixed rules of the sacrifice (rite), and then to those of morality(right).\footnote{Macdonell A.A., \textit{A History of Sanskrit} Literature. P. 66.}

This observation of Macdonell implies that the procedural rules are the first outcome of \textit{rta} and that the moral rectitude is rather a secondary application of \textit{rta}. However, it is not convincing to make the formalism in the sacrifice, insistence on which is found in the later vedic literature, the first and foremost relevance of \textit{rta}. It is true, order in the rite is alluded. But it certainly is not the principal application of \textit{rta}, at least in the older portions of the vedic literature. Macdonell’s view fails to understand the organic-ethical relationship between \textit{rta} and the sacrifice. It relates them only on the surface of formalism involved in the sacrifice. It does not explain why ritual has to be practiced and the ethical relevance of \textit{rta} to the question. The problem with Macdonell’s view, precisely, is that a prehistoric conception of moral order and a prehistoric practice of ritual are connected in terms of formalism, the magnification of which is clearly traceable to the later vedic period. This is not to say that the prehistoric and early vedic practice of \textit{yajña} is totally devoid of any procedural norms. The point, however, is that the formalism should not be the basis of understanding \textit{rta} and its essentially ethical relation to \textit{yajña}. \textit{Rta} as an ethical order entails \textit{yajña} itself and not merely the formalism followed in it.

What is really remarkable about the \textit{Rg-Vedic} conception of the relation between \textit{rta} and \textit{yajña} is that \textit{yajña}, as a practice to strengthen \textit{rta}, is not an external stimulus to \textit{rta} but an integral part of the order of the universe. \textit{yajña}, in this sense, is not like the modern artificial respiratory equipment which stimulates the process being external to the organism. It is rather like lungs which promote the process as an internal organ. This
is the precise reason why \textit{rta} acquired the sense of \textit{yajña}. The word \textit{rta} is frequently found to mean \textit{yajña} in the \textit{Rg-Veda}. Hence, the relation between \textit{rta} and \textit{yajña} is almost that of an identity. In fact, the \textit{Rg-Veda} uses \textit{rta} so often to mean \textit{yajña} that the translators of the Samhita are frequently confounded as to the appropriate use of it in a given stanza. Giffrith and Wilson differ in their rendering of the word very often. Giffrith mostly translates it as 'the law' while Wilson favours the other rendering.

Hence, in the course of examining the views of the most renowned scholars — Bloomfield and Macdonell — we arrived to the conclusion that \textit{rta} is primarily the ethical order which entails \textit{yajña} as an ethical practice. The ritualistic religion, atleast in its origin, was not entirely a hieratic practice rather than a collective activity. This popular dimension of \textit{yajña} will be further elucidated in our next section. With this, let us set ourselves to see how \textit{rta} serves as a moral standard in the social interaction of the \textit{Rg-Vedic} people.

\textit{Rta, the Grand Moral Order}

The ethical gravity of \textit{rta} can be understood from various hymns of the \textit{Rg-veda}, which ostentate a high degree of moral rectitude. \textit{Rta} provided moral security and an impetus for moral exertion. \textit{Rta} offers stability through harmonious co-existence and collective social life:

"I laud you, 0 ye guileless gods, here where we meet to render the praise.

None, \textit{Varuna} and \textit{Mitra}, harms the mortal who honours and obeys your laws.

He makes his house endure, he gathers plenteous food who pays obedience to your will.

Born in his sons a new, he spreads as law commands, and prospers every way unharmed.

\textit{Even without war he gathers wealth, and goes his way on pleasant paths}.\footnote{\textit{The Rg-Veda} VIII.27.15-17.}

\textit{Rta} beyond doubt was the grand moral order which offered moral solace to the early
vedic people. It entails not only yajña as an ethical practice but also a set of values cherished by Aryans. One poet distinguishes yajña from witchcraft or foul magic in terms of rta. While sacrifice invokes gods in accordance with rta, foul magic is contrary to rta. So, rta not only characterises the moral aspect of yajña but also, by itself, stands as a principle of rectitude.

Rta is not a mere ideal set for human beings but it is a grand order adhered to by gods also. Rta is a conception which has its roots in a particular form of life as reflected in the cosmos. In order to workout its details, we have to see what exactly it suggests in the realm of gods.

The most immediate moral principle observed among gods, the followers and upholders of rta, is harmony. As all of them work under the eternal law, they are unanimous or one-minded. The order in the universe is revealed through the harmonious working of the gods. They stand as a model for harmonious collective life. In fact, the idea of harmony among gods itself is a cosmic reflection of the primitive collective life.

The unanimity among gods is due to rta they follow. Day and Night are said be working harmoniously by following rta. The gods in general are one minded in their celestial operations:

"All gods are of one accord, with one intention, more unobstructed to a single purpose".54

"Fair formed, of different hues and yet one minded, Night and Dawn clash not, neither do they tarry".55

"Gods are one minded and they restored Agni together".56

"With Agni and with Indra, Viṣṇu, Varuṇa, with the Adityas, Rudras, Vasus, closely

53The Rg- Veda VII. 34.8.
54The Rg- Veda VI. 9.5.
55The Rg- Veda I. 113.3.
56The Rg- Veda I. 65.1.
Accordant, of one mind with Sūrya and with Dawn, 0 Asvins, drink the Soma juice”\(^5\).

This fundamental harmony and unanimity constitutes the gist of \(\textit{rta}\), the normal order of the early vedic people. The vedic seers fondly remembered the unanimity existed among their ancient fathers:

"Meeting together in the same enclosure, they strive not, of one mind, one with another"\(^5\).

They wished that they could foster such unanimity among themselves. The Atharva-Veda tries to engender unanimity in the tribal assembly through a charm\(^9\). The poet of X. 191 appeals for the restoration of unanimity through the hymn:

“Assembly, speak together: let your minds be all of one accord, As ancient Gods unanimous sit down to their appointed share.”\(^6\)

Hence, unanimity constitutes one of the chief features of the ancient vedic society. This unanimity is followed from the genuine conception of \(\textit{rta}\) which entails harmonious conduct among gods and men. For our further analysis of chief features of the ancient social organization, we have to examine the character of Adityas, the observers of \(\textit{rta}\).

While Varuna and Mitra are the principal guardians of \(\textit{rta}\), Adityas in general are regarded as the moral observers. Adityas are the spies of Varuna, who constantly watch men in their behaviour and thought.\(^6\) Adityas are the sons of Aditi, the infinite Nature. They are luminous celestial beings. Mitra and Varuna belong to this class of dieties. They are the chief Adityas. The \(\textit{Rg-Veda}\) gives varied number of these Adityas. Sometimes they are said to be six, sometimes seven, at a few places they are eight. The later vedic literature fixes their member, at last, as twelve. But the original number, at last,
as twelve. But the original number of these Ādityas is six to which varied additions are made. The six original Ādityas are Varuṇa, Mitra, Aryamaan, Dakṣa, Bhāga and Ansā.\(^{62}\)

The Ādityas as moral observers are of special interest for a simple reason. One can be a moral observer only if one does not lack the moral quality one is observing. A drunkard cannot be a moral observer over another drunkard to put it more positively, the character of a moral observer, for which he is known, reveals the moral feature over which he is an observer. So, a probe into the specific character of these Ādityas discloses the structure of the social morality over which these deities are observers.

Varuṇa is the most important Aditya who is not only a moral observer but also a chastiser. The other Ādityas are at his disposal as his spies. As far as social organization is concerned, he is the most important deity. He is said to be "the founder of society united by common practices".\(^{63}\) He is thus called "the eldest brother". So, Varuṇa suggests the brotherhood of primitive collective community. Trita Aptya is another prehistoric deity who also preaches brotherhood of men.\(^{64}\) Mitra, on the other hand, is frequently called 'a friend', as his name itself suggests, who guides men in their endeavours.

Aryamaan is a prehistoric god who has Airyama as his counterpart in the Avesta. This Indo-Iranian god is remembered as 'the ancient kinsman' in the Rg-Veda. Along with Varuṇa and Mitra, he appears in many hymns as a moral observer. One hymn calls these three as the caretakers of rta.\(^{65}\) He figures as a groomsman in the vedic marriage rites and appears as a share seeker or share distributor in the tribal assembly. Macdonell Bloomfield, Muir and Bergaine unanimously suggest that 'Aryamaan' means 'comrade' or 'comradeship'. At one place, Aryamaan is equated to a share in the assembly (VII. 69.12). Hence, this specific character of Aryamaan suggests that equality, comradeship

\(^{62}\) The RV II. 27.1.
\(^{63}\) Giffith's note on X. 11.2.
\(^{64}\) The Rg-Veda I. 105.9.
\(^{65}\) Cf. The Rg-Veda VII. 69.13; VII. 64.1; V. 67.1 and VII. 69.12.
or kinsmanship is one of the features of early Vedic society.

Daksā is another Aditya, the creative power associated with Aditi. Though he started his Rg-Vedic career as an Aditya, he later assumed very important role of the progenitor. He became a prajapati. Gods have sprung from Daksā. Varuna, Mitra and Indra are called 'sons of Daksā'. What is really astonishing is that even Aditi is said to be his daughter (X. 72.4). Sayana takes Daksā as 'the lord of vigour or strength' and Bloomfield says that this deity is an abstraction of 'Dexterity' or 'cleverness'. However, it is clear that Daksā progressively assumed a new role as the progenitor because he is the deity of skillfulness which is needed in the act of creation. As also evident from the story of Tvastru, who is elevated to the position of gods due to his dexterity, we can understand that creative skill is regarded high in the Vedic society.

Bhdga and Ansa, the other two Adityas, have a special moral significance. These two prehistoric deities show a determinate and explanatory moral features of rta and the early Aryan society. Bhaṅga has a hoary antiquity and his name is frozen in Indo-European cultures as a general term for 'spender of goods or blessing'. The slovic bogu, old persian baga and Avestan bagha are counterparts of the Vedic Bhdga. The deity Bhdga is not a general abstraction of wealth or splendour but, most remarkably, 'shared wealth. Bhaṅga, even in the later Sanskrit refers to a part (Bhaṅgam). Bhdga as a deity is 'dispenser or distributor of wealth'. Bhdga stands for wealth in general because in the primitive tribal communities all wealth is distributed. Wealth, for them, is what is apportioned. Ansa, the last in the list of Adityas, is an abstraction which means 'a portion' in general. Hence, Bhdga and Ansa are synonymous as far as the aspect of sharing is concerned. But Bhdga refers to 'wealth or fortune' while Ansa is just 'a portion' without any specification.

This sharing of wealth refers to a closed communal life in which people have equal

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66 The RgVeda VI. 50.2. Cf. Giffith's note on it.
67 The RgVeda VII. 66.2; VIII. 25.6; VIII. 52.10.
claims to the wealth, which was mostly in the form of cattle. The ancient Angirasas are said to have common cattle. Distribution of cows in the assemblies is often alluded to. This aspect of Bhāga is unequivocally betrayed in some hymns:

Now, must Bhāga be invoked by mortals, lord of great riches who distributes treasures (VII. 38.1).

The mighty calls on Bhāga for protection, on Bhāga calls the weak to give him riches (VII. 38.6).

Thinking of whom, the poor, yea, even the mighty, even the king says give me Bhāga (VII. 41.2).

These verses show that everyone had a claim to a share in the wealth. Bhāga in many hymns appears not as a deity but as a mere share of wealth distributed among men. Agni, Savitar, Indra and many other gods are described as apportioners of 'shares of wealth' (Bhāga). At one place, Indra is said to be the sole distributor of shares of treasures (VII. 26.4). Agni is called on to give shares of wealth (III. 1.9). Savitar is asked to send riches in earnest shares (V. 82.3). Another class of deities called Vājins are considered as good appportioners and excellent arbiters of claims for shares, in the tribal assembly:

"Deep skilled in rta, deathless singers, 0 Vājins, help us in each fray for booty". 69

This sharing of wealth and food is, interestingly, a feature not only among mortals but is a principle among gods too:

“For of one spirit are the gods with mortal men, co-shares all of gracious gifts”. 70

Even the gods have claims for their shares in the oblations and libations offered by men in the sacrifice. Agni is viewed as 'the tongue of gods'. He carries the gifts of men to gods. Brahmanaspati, the deified prayer, is the distributor of shares among gods. 71

Remember, the primary function of prayer, in relation to the sacrifice, is to advance

69The Rg-Veda VII. 38.8.
70The Rg-Veda VIII. 27.14.
71The Rg-Veda II. 23.2; II. 24.14.
specific shares of oblation to gods. Varuṇa, Mitra and Āryaman are said to be sharing the gifts of men equitably (VIII. 27.17).

So, the specific characters of the Adityas show that brotherhood, common religious practices, friendship, equality, comradeship, distribution of wealth and collective social life are the ethical features of the early vedic society. This collective form of life was due to simple mode of economic production and the homogeneity of the Aryan race. However, the confrontation of Aryans with non-Aryan aborigines brought sweeping changes in the economic and social aspects of Aryan life. The simple collective mode of living was ruined. The conditions for this shall be discussed in a later section. The idea of rta, the ancient law was replaced by new ideas which owe their origin to the transformed state of social affairs. However, Rta remained as a nostalgic ancient form of social concordance and its influence lasted long even after the break of primitive collective social institutions. Much of this will be discussed later. For now, let us look into the deprecatory and expiatory hymns of Rg- Veda to estimate the moral commitment of the people to rta.

**Rta and Moral Rectitude**

In the Rg- Veda, we find numerous verses condemning certain actions as morally wrong and some hymns seek condonation of gods for the moral misconduct. These deprecatory and expiatory hymns illumine the magnitude of moral consciousness among the vedic people. Rta as the moral order enjoins a set of moral principles to be followed by men in their social conduct. Among such principles, truth (Satya) is the foremost.

Rta, as the true path of gods and men, entails Satya as a moral value to be followed in thought, speech and action. Satya in its devine aspect, represents 'the unvarying conduct of gods'. Gods are true to rta in the sense that their adherence to the law is without variation. A thought or speech or deed is true only if it does not vary in any condition. Satya here is a moral character, of speech in particular. It is yet to acquire an ontological significance of reality as found in the later theosophical and speculative texts.
of the Vēda. Satya and rta are identified on the grounds that they are unvarying. Satya is the unvarying conduct of gods and men, while rta is the order followed by them. In this sense, Satya and rta hardly refer to an abstract ontological category of sat or reality. Asatya and Anrta, the negatives of satya and rta respectively, represent variation in speech or conduct and variation in the proper order. Rta is straight-rju and whatever crooked is called arjina. Hence, falsehood, double-tongue, double dealing, false swearing, false accusation, failing to fulfil the agreement are deprecated as asatya and anrta. They are viewed as sins against gods and men.\textsuperscript{72} The unbinding variation of thought and action is thus transgression of rta and is subject to deprecation or condemnation.

Among the positive moral values, in addition to truth, health, strength, peace, non-injury, harmony, liberality and friendship are often praised. The hymn on gregarious liberality, which highlights helping the distressed and giving food to hungry, is one of the most beautiful and morally significant hymn of the Rg-Vēda.\textsuperscript{73} Probably it is the best piece of morally exhorting poetry even outside the Vēda. Offering food to a hungry man is emphatically called nriyajña or sacrifice to man.\textsuperscript{74}

The idea of sin first appears in the Rg-Vēda in relation to rta. It is primarily viewed as transgression of rta and guile against gods and fellow men. It is considered as objective and often likened to fetters or bonds from which release is sought.\textsuperscript{75} Sin is not only objective but, amazingly, also transferable or infictive. Some poets urge the gods not to punish them for the sins of their parents, forefathers and fellow men.\textsuperscript{76} Sin is not just individual but is also collective and is prone to inflict the other members of the society. This idea, significantly, shows the way the early vedic people felt a collective responsibility towards the evils of fellow men.

\textsuperscript{72}The Rg-Vēda I. 23.22; I. 147.4-5; V. 3.7; V. 12.4-5; X. 9.8; X. 899 etc.
\textsuperscript{73}The Rg-Vēda X. 117.
\textsuperscript{74}The Rg-Vēda I. 31.15.
\textsuperscript{75}The RgVeda I. 24.9; V.85.8; VII. 86.5 etc.
\textsuperscript{76}The Rg-Vēda V. 86.5; VI. 51.7.
Sin can accrue from both intentional and unintentional transgressions. Refuse of gods is sought for both committed and uncommitted sins.\(^{77}\) The idea of retribution is also found in connection with sin. While \(\text{\textit{rd}}\) fosters and preserves life, \(\text{\textit{anrta}}\) or transgression of the law, it is believed, leads to decay and death which is called nirriti. The transgression of law causes wrath of the gods which in turn leads to nirriti:

"Whatever law of thine, 0 god, Varuṇa, as we are men, day after day we violate give us not as a prey to death (nirriti), to be destroyed by thee in wrath,

To thy fierce anger when displeased.

Far from us, far away drive those Destruction (nirriti). Put a way from us even the sin we have committed."\(^{78}\)

Though the idea of divine wrath and retribution occurred in the \(\text{\textit{Rg- Vēda}}\), the idea of hell as a place of punishment, however, does not seem to be clear on the minds of the \(\text{\textit{Rg- Vedc}}\) people. Except a few vague allusions, we hardly find any substantial description of hell in the \(\text{\textit{Samhita}}.\)^{79}

The concepts of sin and divine wrath lead the poets to seek refuse of the gods and expiatory efficacy of the sacrifice elaborated in the \(\text{\textit{Brāhmaṇas}}\) and \(\text{\textit{Smritis}}\) literature:

"If we have sinned against the man who loves us, have over wronged a brother, friend or comrade.

The neighbours ever with us or a stranger, 0 Varuna, remove from us the trespass.

If we, as gamesters cheat at play, have cheated, done wrong unwittingly or sinned of purpose.

Cast all these sins away like loosened fetters, and Varuṇa, let us be thine own beloved".\(^{80}\)

\(^{77}\)The \(\text{\textit{Rg- Vēda X}}. 63.8.\)

\(^{78}\)The \(\text{\textit{Rg- Vēda I. 25. 1-2; I 24.9.}}\)

\(^{79}\)The \(\text{\textit{Rg- Vēda IV. 5.5; VII. 104.3.}}\)

\(^{80}\)The \(\text{\textit{Rg- Vēda V. 85.7-8.}}\)
As god Varuṇa is connected with waters, water is viewed as an instrument in expiation. This idea prevails, even today, that waters are capable of cleansing sins. The holy rivers are revered for this. The following verse appears twice in the Samhita:

"Whatever sin is found in me, whatever evil I have wrought, if I have lied or falsely sworn, waters, remove it far from me." 81

The idea of expiation vouches for the moral commitment ṛta had been demanding even in the later vedic period. A poet urges gods to restore perfect innocence to him. 82 Ṛta, beyond doubt, exerted great moral influence on those people. However, the Aryan society had undergone changes, over the long period of the Rg-Vedic age, structurally and thus morally too. Ṛta and Varuṇa could not reign supreme in the altered conditions and at the end they had to fade away. Some of the hymns mark this economic and ethical transition. Let us now see what those conditions were, which brought about thorough transformation in the material and ethical spheres of the Aryan society.

Loss of Ṛta and Downfall of Varuṇa

Ṛta, even in the oldest hymns of the Rg Veda, is referred to as the ancient law followed by the Angirasas, founding fathers of Aryan society. So, the antiquity of ṛta is confirmed by the vedic poets themselves. Ṛta, thus, is the traditional moral standard, the inheritance of which is fondly and proudly proclaimed by the vedic seers. This ancient law of social morality influenced the moral consciousness of the vedic society for quite a long time. Ṛta occurs throughout the Samhita as the guiding law of men and gods. it is not an exaggeration to say that there are hardly a few hymns in which the word ṛta does not occur. God Varuṇa is the most imposing god in the early hymns of the Veda, revered for his relation to ṛta.

However, ṛta and Varuṇa could not wield their peaks all through the Veda and finally

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81 I. 23.23; X. 9.8.
82 The Rg Veda X. 37.11.
they were forced to oblivion. Loss of rta and the wanning importance of Varuna found grave concern in some of the Rg-vedic hymns. As rta and Viruna had symbiotic origin in the prehistoric times and as they were closely connected throughout, it is quiet natural that the loss of one results in the fall of the other. But what were the conditions which caused withering away of rta and Varuna together?

The Aryan tribes were homogenous flocks which had a long prehistoric tradition rooted in the Indo-Iranian age. Their social life, as shown by our analysis of rta, was founded on equality, fraternity, collective wealth and communal life. The Angirasas, who came down through the lanes of memory as the ancient fathers', were recollected to have unanimous, strife-free, collective life.83 So, the traditional Aryan society was a simple collective communal form of life.

These Aryan nomadic tribes, whose wealth chiefly consisted in cattle, entered the North-Western plains of India with rich culture and tradition different from that of the aborigines. As the Aryans started spreading towards east, they confronted the aborigines. Their confrontation with aborigines brought in a new economic dimension to their life marked by robber wars. The frequent occurrence of these robber wars is clear from innumerable hymns, especially those addressed to Indra.

The intensified robber wars had two fold impact on the Aryan society. Firstly, it had an economic impact which gave raise to warrior class and priestly class. The battles naturally result in a strengthened military class, over a period of time. It is not that the warrior element did not exist in the Aryan society till then. In fact, kṣatriya vairya is one of the Amesha Spents or 'the Immortal Holy Ones' enlisted in Avesta. It speaks for the prehistory of this warrior element in the Aryan society. However, this element was strengthened to form a class with the rise of inter racial robber wars.

The robber wars also marked the raise of priestly class over a period of time. The

83The Rg-Veda VII. 76.4-5.
precondition for an intellectual or a military parasitic class is economic surplus to support that class. A primitive community cannot produce an intellectual class for it cannot produce surplus. This is true of all the primitive communities. However, due to the robber wars, the required surplus flowed into Aryan society through plunder or booty. Composing hymns and conducting sacrifices, which at one time was a collective activity, became the specialized occupation of a few. These neo-religious class was rewarded by the princes of warrior class through the plundered cattle and wealth. This resulted in composition of Munificence hymns which praise the liberal warrior donors.\(^8\)

So, the homogenous cattle raisers (vis) were stratified into vaisya, the cattle breeders and agriculturists, Kṣatriya, the warriors and Brāhmaṇa, the priestly class. These classes further crystalized after a long time when the aborigines were totally conquered and included in Aryan society as Sudras. The original Aryan classes i.e., Vaisyas, Kṣatriyas and Brāhmaṇas wielded power over the Sudras and surplus produced by them. Hence, the germs of division in the Aryan society are sown by robber wars. With introduction of this division, the original united collective community disintegrated. So was rta which supported the pre-class Aryan society.

The second impact of the robber war was religious. The robber wars formed the condition for ascendency of Indra to supremacy. Indra, the warrior god came to forefront with the rise of military element in the society. Indra is closely connected with the robber wars throughout the Veda. He is the chief of Aryan armies. He became the slayer of Dasyus, Asuras (demons) and the dark skinned. He is the inspirer of warriors. The spoil or plunder of these wars were distributed in sacrificial ssemblies. So, Indra became a god of treasures too. He is the supporter of Aryan warriors in all the robber wars. His exploits are mostly his victories in robber wars:

\[^{84}\text{\textit{Indra}, indeed, is found a seeker of spoil (plunder), spoil seeker for his allies (I. 132.3).}\]

\[^{84}\text{\textit{Cf. The Rg- Veda V. 27; I. 25; VII. 18; X. 33 etc.}}\]
Indra, that man when fighting shall obtain the spoil, whose strong defender thou will be (VII. 32.11).

To the Tritsus (Aryan tribe) came the Arya's comrade (Indra), through love of spoil and heroes' war, to lead them.

The foemen, measuring exceeding closely, abandoned to Sudas (Chief of Tritsus) all their provisions (VIII. 18.15).

Hero, rejoicing in thy might, in combat give us a portion of the stall of cattle plundered (VII. 27.1).

Indra is often invoked for victory in battles and for the wealth thereof. This made Indra to rise to the status of a national hero. He became tutelary god of Aryans. The clash between the old lord of order and the new chief of warriors is depicted in IV. 42 of the Rg-Veda. The claims of each god to supremacy are alluded and the poet, at the end, strikes an equivocal compromise between the two gods. However, in X. 124, Indra clearly supercedes Varuna. Agni decides to leave Varuna and seeks Indra as his new lord. Indra's supremacy is established in clear terms here. The wanning power of A sura Varuna as a god is thus simultaneous to the withering away of rta, the ancient moral order. The seer of VII. 84, seeks the refuse of Indra from the wrath of Varuna. This shows the transition of moral consciousness of the Aryan people and their adjustment to the new order and new lord.

The deep concern and anguish over the loss of rta and fall of Varuna finds expression in I. 105 of the Samhita Kutsa, the seer of the hymn passionately questions:

"Where is the ancient law divine? who is its new didfuser now? Mark this my woe, ye Earth and Heaven.

Ye gods who yander have your home in the three lucid realms of heaven,

What count ye truth and what untruth? where is mine ancient call on you?

What is your firm support of Law? What Varuna 's observant eye?"
**How may we pass the wicked on the path of mighty Āryamaān? Mark this my woe, ye Earth and Heaven**

"What hath become of those our ancient friendships, when we without enmity walked together?

After a few centuries the new order was thoroughly established with fourfold division of society into stratified classes. The society could produce enough surplus to support the military and priestly classes. So, the age witnessed the origin of speculative theosophy and philosophy. By this time the Aryans stopped collecting hymns and turned their attention to elaboration of ritual norms which were preserved in the Brāhmaṇas.

Even Indra had to fade away along with other gods at a later time. When the inter racial wars were over, resulting in stabilized fourfold society, Indra as a warrior gods was no more necessary. His very existence was doubted in VIII. 89.3 and eventually he receded to backdrop. The Brahminical speculations, which ended in monotheistic conception of one great Brahman, held sway over the ancient nature-gods. With spiritualistic speculations in Upaniṣads concerning the nature of the Brahman, even the vedic rituals went out of vogue.

The Monotheism, reality of transmigrating souls and theory of Karma which were products of theosophical speculations, laid foundations for Dharma in social sphere, Bhakti in religious sphere and Moksa in the spiritual sphere. We shall deal with them in the next chapter.

With the foregoing analysis, it was clear that rta was the moral order of the primitive collective homogenous communal living which founded on fraternity, kinship and unanimity. One ancient poet says: never may we enjoy another's solemn feast, ourselves, our sons or our progeny.\(^8^5\) Compare him to the later spoil seeker. What a transformation!

\(^8^5\) The *Rg-Veda* V. 70.4.
difference and division.

The ideas of primitive society with all its egalitarian features broke down due to the new order in which the society is stratified with conflicting interests. The unanimity of ancient fathers was looked upon with reverence and nostalgic fervour by later vedic poets. The last verse of the Rg- Veda is a fitting epitaph on the tomb of r/a:

"One and the same by your resolve, and be your minds of one accord.
United be the thoughts of all that all may happily agree."\(^\text{86}\)

\(^{86}\text{The Rg- Veda X. 191.4.}\)