

CHAPTER-III

Religion and Magic in Vedic India

The word 'religion' comes either from the Latin word *religare* to bind together or from the word *religere* to ponder, to rehearse, to execute¹. According to MaxMüller the word is derived from the word *religere* and it expresses the concepts of respect, care and reverence². Galloway too is of the opinion that "religion is man's faith in a power beyond himself, whereby he seeks to satisfy emotional needs and gain stability in life and which he expresses in acts of worship and service"³. Furthermore, when the word is derived from the word *religare* it suggests group activity or unity of the people belonging to a certain religious group. According to Herder religion is the means of establishing man's relationship to the divine order of things, whereas Reville holds that religion creates a bond between the human mind and a mysterious mind⁴.

As pointed out by Frazer religion has two elements viz., a) theoretical and b) practical. Theoretical religion consists in a belief in an omnipotent power in the world around us and practical religion involves an attempt to propitiate that

¹ cf., Yinger, J.M., *Religion, Society And The Individual*, New York, 1957,p.13; See *An Encyclopedia of Religion* (ed.) V.Ferm, New York, 1945, p.646

² MaxMüller, F., *Origin and Growth of Religion*, 1898, pp.10-12

³ Galloway, G., *The Philosophy of Religion*, Edinburgh, 1914,p.184

⁴ Herder and Reville referred to in *Origin and Development of Religion in Vedic literature*, P.S. Deshmukh, pp. 6 & 8

power⁵. Thus, religion is a belief and faith in a Divine Being behind the empirical world, either out of love, or respect or fear towards that Being, accompanied by the act of worship in order to propitiate that Being who is superior to man. Every religion contains some principles, doctrines, and beliefs which are parts of that religion. Thus for example Hinduism believes in god but Buddhism does not. Furthermore every religion follows some rules of conduct which are based on certain principles and beliefs and which aim at securing happiness of the individual in this life and beyond.

Religion as a matter of fact, is an empirical reality which can be traced back to antiquity. This is because, it is a human phenomenon. All the great religions of the world like Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam are human creations, which can be mapped historically. However, it is not possible to precisely ascertain the dawn of religion. One can nowhere find the actual dawn of religion in an entire early non-religious environment. One can however think of some typical characteristics of the workings of pre-historic human mind. At first it might have been a vague endeavour on the part of the primitive man to understand and to influence the world around him by himself. In this context one may refer to Frazer who holds that it is probable that ‘the civilized races of the world’ might have passed through a phase in which they made attempts ‘to force the great powers of nature to do their pleasure before

⁵ Frazer, J.G., *The Golden Bough*, Abridged Edition, London, Reprint 1974, pp.65,66

they thought of courting their favour by offerings and prayer'⁶. Thus, Frazer believes that religion had its root in magical practices which attempts at affecting the course of nature through spells and incantations. A magician unlike a priest does not seek divine intervention in achieving the result of magical practices. The ancient magician did not probably supplicate any higher power, for he believed that he himself had the power to affect an event. This is because, for a magician the forces which control the world and subsequently human life are unconscious, impersonal and mechanical and hence, he by dint of his compelling incantations and rites can influence the course of these forces. However, there might have come a time when the magician realised that his attempts at influencing the powers that control life of earth was not offering the desired results. It must have been at such a juncture of time that the thought of supplicating these forces arose in human mind. In this way in hoary antiquity the seed of a concept of the divine force behind the visible world might have been sowed in the psyche of the primitive man. From this it may be assumed that in the intellectual history of religion there was an age of magic. And it was perhaps for this reason that although magic seeks to compel and religion to impel the higher forces of nature, the priest in all primal religions of the world had in him both a man of religion and of magic⁷.

⁶ Frazer, *op.cit.*, p.72

⁷ See Frazer, *loc. cit.*, p.69

The Sanskrit word used to mean religion is *dharmā*. This word has no parallel in Sanskrit. Although the Sanskrit word *dharmā* is translated in to English as ‘religion’, the word religion does not and cannot express the multitude of meanings expressed by the word *dharmā*. The word *dharmā* comes either from the root √*dhṛñ* (to support) or from the root √*dhṛñ* (to take up a position) and denotes the senses of a) a supporter, and an upholder as well as of b) consistency or stability. Out of these two denotative senses evolved a number connotations of the word like decree, statute, practice, religion, supporter, custom and so on⁸.

In the *Veda* the word *dharmā* as it appears, denotes the sense of a sustainer or a supporter. The *Ṛksamhitā* contains many instances in which the word *dharmā* has been used to qualify a deity who supports or sustains life on earth⁹. On certain occasions the word occurs in the sense of the act or means sustenance¹⁰.

In *Ṛksamhitā* X.90 it is said that the very first means of sustaining the world (*dharmāṇi*) were produced in a divine sacrifice in which the gods sacrificed the Cosmic Man as the ritualistic *paśu*¹¹.

⁸ See *A Sanskrit English Dictionary*, M. Monier Williams, New Delhi, 1984, under the word *dharmā*

⁹ See *RV.*, I.187.1; X.92.2; VIII.6.20; X.50.6; X.170.2 etc. Cf., *ŚB.*, 14.2.2.29

¹⁰ See *ibid.*, X.90.1; I.160.1; I.134.5; *AB.*, 8.12

¹¹ *yajñena yajñamayajanta devāstāni dharmāṇi prathānyāsan|*
te ha nākaṁ mahimānaḥ sacanta yatra pūrve sādhyāḥ santi devāḥ || ibid., X.90.16

So far as the religion (*dharma*) of the Vedas is concerned, it is out and out ritualistic in character. The Vedic religion is characterised by a body of beliefs in a certain supernatural power represented by a multitude of gods. The Vedic Aryans depended on these gods for their sustenance and protection from physical and emotional dangers like death, disease, poverty, physical pain, hunger etc. Vedic religion was created as an attempt to tackle the ultimate concern of the society to safe guard life and its basic needs. The very word *dharma* primarily signifies this very purpose of religion viz., bringing emotional relief to its adherents in the face of earthly sufferings that press on them. The Vedic Aryan sought to gain this relief by propitiating the gods through various rituals accompanied by the recitation of their eulogies. In Vedic religion one can always see an urge on the part of the worshipper to establish a close relation with the gods through supplication. The Vedic Aryan's concept of worship of the gods was shaped on the basis of human relations such as a emotionally rewarding faith in one's own mother, father, son, brother, friends etc¹².

In view of the above stated characteristics of Vedic religion it is somewhat difficult to believe that Vedic religion had its root in magical spells and ceremonies. This is so, inspite of the fact that according to Frazer all ancient religions were derived from magic. Keith too is of the opinion that Vedic religion could not possibly have arisen out of magical practices. He says "The myths of the *R̥gveda* in particular are usually simple and direct enough, and

¹² cf., *RV.*, I.1.9; I.164.33; II.1.9; VIII.19.27; IX.97.30

reflect too clearly the actual phenomena of nature to allow us to imagine that they have any other origin than the expression by man of the ideas which naturally occur to him from the observation of such things as the daily movement of the sun or the bursting of the monsoon with all that it means for Indian life.¹³”

Even if it is assumed that Vedic religion did not have its origin in magic, it is totally unlikely that the seers of the hymn poetry were not acquainted with magical practices. It is quite evident from the contents of the *Atharvaveda* that magic was prevalent in Vedic society. The *Ṛksamhitā* which is the earliest of the four Vedas contains in it although minimally, references to the magician and magical practices. It should be recalled in this context that as it has been pointed out by Winternitz, while some of the hymns of the *Atharvasamhitā* are contemporary to some Ṛgvedic hymns, some Atharvavedic hymns may even belong to a pre-Ṛgvedic time¹⁴. According to Raja such hymns of the *Atharvasamhitā* portray a primal culture¹⁵.

The *Ṛksamhitā* is a collection of metrical hymns and is a rich store house of mythological material. The recitation of the invocations of the deities found in this *Samhitā* are meant to accompany the oblations of *soma*-juice and clarified butter in the sacrificial rites. Very few of its hymns display acquaintance with

¹³ Keith, A.B., *The Religion And Philosophy of the Vedas And Upanishads*, Vol.I, Delhi, p.48

¹⁴ See Winternitz, M., *A History of Indian Literature*, Vol.I, Delhi, p.127

¹⁵ See Raja, C.K., *Survey of Sanskrit Literature*, Bombay, 1962, p.3

magic. According to Macdonell the magical elements found in the *Ṛksamhitā* are not only very few but are also of late origin. He holds that out of its 1028 hymns only twelve are concerned with magic and out of these twelve, six are beneficial in character and the remaining six are maleficent in nature¹⁶. In view of the religious scenario reflected in the *Ṛksamhitā* its magical contents may be treated as exceptions. As a matter of fact, in this *Samhitā* one comes across Mantras in which the magician and his art have been deprecated. Thus, in the *Ṛksamhitā* VII.104 the sage Vaśiṣṭha who is accused of being a sorcerer and an associate of a magician, laments the false accusations hurled at him and prays to the gods to destroy the accuser. The fourteenth verse of the hymn contains suggestion that if a magician approaches a deity with prayers, his prayers being false go in vain. It is however, interesting to note that in this very hymn there occurs a reference to the magical power of the sound of the stones used to pound the *soma* creepers in a ritual. Thus, the seventeenth verse of the hymn is aimed at destroying demonesses and demons by the sound of the pressing stones¹⁷. And in this way the verse assumes the character of a magical spell. It should however, be pointed out here that in the rest of the verses of the hymn under reference, the seer has approached the gods Indra and the Maruts to destroy the evil spirits¹⁸. It may not

¹⁶ Macdonell, A. A., *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol.8, Edinburgh, 1915, p.311

¹⁷ *ye pākaśamsam viharanta evairyē vā bhadram dūṣayanti svadhābhiḥ| ahaye vā tānpradadātu soma ā vā dadhātu nirṛterupasthe|| ṚV., VII.104.9*

¹⁸ See *ibid.*, VII.104.18-25

be out of context to state here that portrayal of great gods like Indra, Agni, Varuṇa etc. as demon-killers is a characteristic of the Atharvavedic spells and incantations. One would also like to mention here that the words *yātu*, *yātudhāna* and *yātudhānī* in their various declensional forms have occurred in the *Ṛksamhitā* on several occasions. The word *kṛtyā* has been mentioned twice¹⁹. Another Ṛgvedic hymn which displays influence of magic in it, is X.97. In this hymn, in the sixth verse the medicine-man has been referred to as a killer of demons-*bhiṣak rakṣo 'hā amīvacātana*. In the eleventh verse of the same hymn it is stated that the moment the medicine man takes up in his hands the medicinal plants, the very soul of the disease meets its death. Furthermore, in the sixteenth verse of the hymn one hears about the magical effects of the medicinal plants in warding off sins and in keeping at bay the noose of Varuṇa, the shackle of Yama and the anger of all the deities. In the twenty second verse of the same hymn the magical power of the medicinal plants has been alluded to by saying that these plants can have positive effect not only on the ailing person but also on the one who treats the ailment²⁰. The *Ṛgveda* VII.103, which is popularly known as the 'Frog Song' too is looked upon as a magical charm which is capable of bringing down the rains from the sky. Behind the idea that this hymn can magically affect the rains, lies the age-old popular belief that the croaking of the possess some

¹⁹ See *ibid.*, I.35.10; IV.16.1; V.45.9; VII.21.5; VII.104.15,16; X.87; I.191.8; X.118.8; X.85.28; ,29 etc.

²⁰ *auśadhayaḥ sam vadante somena saha rājñā|
yasmai kṛṇoti brāmaṇastam rājan pārayāmasi|| ṚV., X.97.22*

kind of power to bring down the rains. In the *Ṛgveda* X.98.3 and 7, there is reference to a perfect *stotra* which the god Bṛhaspati had gifted the Devāpi who by virtue of the power of the *stotra* brought down the life- sustaining rains to the kingdom of Śantanu. The fifth verse of the hymn alludes to the power of the ritualistic religion of the *Veda* by saying that Devāpi achieved the miraculous rains to save the kingdom from draught and famine. As the legend goes the gods did not send the rains for as long as twelve years²¹. In this hymn the seer has alluded the magical power of the *stotra* and the ritual which appeased the wrath of the gods and thus achieved a miracle. In the *Ṛgveda* there occur several passages in which one comes across the magical character of the *Soma* sacrifice through which rains are produced without influencing the goodwill of the deities who are the creators of the rains²².

In the *Ṛgveda*, III.33.1-12 one reads about the seer Viśvāmitra who by directly invoking the two rivers *Vipāṭ* and *Śutudrī*, made them fordable for himself. In the hymn VII. 76, in the fourth verse the Ṛgvedic seer speaks about the ancient forefathers who by dint of their spells discovered the hidden light and thereby produced the goddess of dawn and by doing so they became the companions of the gods. In this way it is possible to cite some other examples from the *Ṛksamhitā* in which there occur references to magical elements²³. One

²¹ See *Bṛhaddevatā*, VIII.2

²² See *ṚV.*, IX.49.1; IX.97.17; IX.104.9; IX.108.9 etc.

²³ See *ṚV.*, I.83.4,5; X.62.3; X.68.11

can feel the touch of black magic in the Ṛgvedic passage viz., *yo no dveṣṭyadharaḥ sa padīṣṭa yamu dviṣmastamu prāṇa jahātu*. This passage occurs in *Ṛgveda* III. 53.21. Another passage of this type occurs in X.164.5 which to say in the words of Sāyaṇa, aims at doing away with bad dreams. Bad dreams are supposedly the results of sin. The seer of the verse wishes that his sins may cing to his enemy.

While the *Ṛksamhitā* is essentially a book of prayers and glorifications of the gods, its *Brāhmaṇa* text called the *Aitareya* deals with the rituals performed by the *Hotṛ* priest. The duty of the *Hotṛ* consists of recitation of the Śastras which are ritualistic glorifications of the deities unto whom oblations are offered at the sacrifices. This *Brāhmaṇa* text is replete with magical notions. By way of example, one may refer to the use of verses with interpolated words. Such verses are known as Prapadas²⁴. In these verses extra words are inserted into one of the words of the verses and the verses are recited together with the interpolated words. The objective of these rituals is purely for securing magical effects of the ritual in the interest of the sacrificer. Another example is the use of the three Vyahṛties viz., *bhūh*, *bhūvaḥ* and *svaḥ* during the ritual of *Punarabhiṣeka* of a king. These three words are supposed to have very powerful magical effect. It is said that if the family priest of the king wishes prosperity only for the *Kṣatriya yajamāna*, he should utter the word *bhūh*. If he wants to make the king prosperous for two generations, the words *bhūr* and *bhuvah* should be uttered. If

²⁴ See *AB.*, 8.10,11

however, the priest wishes that the king should be made powerful for three generations, the priest should utter all the three words²⁵. Furthermore, during his consecration, the *Kṣatriya* is made to sit on the skin of a tiger. The notion behind this practice is that if the king sits on a tiger-skin during the ceremony he will absorb the strength of the tiger – the king of the animals²⁶. Before consecrating the *Kṣatriya* the priest makes him take a vow to the effect that he will never act against the interests of the priest. In case he does, the priest will by dint of his power take away everything that the *Kṣatriya* possesses in his life-time. This is clearly a reference to the magical power of the priest²⁷.

In this connection one may refer to the magical rite performed by the family priest of a *Kṣatriya*. This rite, which is expected to kill the rival kings of the *Kṣatriya* is known as *Brahmaṇah Parimarah* and is performed at the end of the consecration ceremony²⁸. It is possible to cite numerous examples from the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* which are tinged with magical ideas and elements. As a matter of fact, throughout the text of this *Brāhmaṇa* it is very often stated that the very knowledge of the significance of a rite or a *mantra* can positively affect the sacrificer. These instances consist of expressions like, *ya evam veda ...etc.*²⁹

²⁵ *ibid.*, 8.7

²⁶ *ibid.*, 8.6

²⁷ *ibid.*, 8.15

²⁸ *ibid.*, 8.40

²⁹ See *ibid.*, 1.1; 1.5; 2.6; 3.11; 3.12; 4.16; 4.17; 5.21; 5.22; 6.26; 6.29; 7.32; 8.37; 8.41 etc.

The *Yajurveda* is out and out a ritualistic text. This *Veda* clearly shows the influence of magic in various *Śrauta* rituals. As a matter of fact, it appears even from the afore cited examples from the *Rksamhitā* that magic entered Vedic religion through the rites and rituals. It is in the actual performance of the rituals by the Yajurvedic priests, that magic prevails. One may cite many examples of the existence of magic in the texts belonging to the *Yajurveda*. In the *Darśapūrṇmāsa Yāga* on the full moon day an offering is made to *Indravaimṛdha*. According to the *Taittirīya Samhitā* (2.5.3.1) this offering helps the sacrificer to drive away his enemies. As stated in the *Taittirīya Samhitā* (5.3.3.1) during the *Agnicayana* ceremony in the fourth layer of fire altar eighteen bricks are put in an unorganized way and this is done for scattering the enemies of the sacrificer. Through this act the sacrificer becomes prosperous and his enemy is defeated.

There are some rites which are imitative of magical rituals. Such rites are performed by throwing, cutting or killing some sacrificial objects. For example, in the *Darśapūrnamāsa*, the priest cuts the roots of some grass taken from the *vedī*. According to the *Taittirīya Samhitā* (2.6.4.2) the *Maitrāyaṇīya Samhitā* (4.1.10) and the *Kāṭhaka Samhitā* (31.8) through this act of cutting, the priest cut off the root of the enemy. Similarly, the *Taittirīya Samhitā* (6.1.1.5) and *Kāṭhaka Samhitā* (21.3) have stated that, during the time of *dīkṣā* of the *Yajamāna* at the *Soma* sacrifice he anoints his eyes with collyrium, by this act he is able to take away the eyes of the enemy. In the *Śuklayajurveda Samhitā* in

chapter VII, the third verse is used for a magical offering. In *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* (4.1.1.26) it is prescribed that with this verse the drops of *soma*-juice which cling to the limbs and garments of the priest during the preparation of the juice should also be offered at the time of offering the *Upāśugraha* in order to affect black magic. It is to be noted that the verse under reference consists of the magical syllable *phat* which is usually not uttered in normal rites. In his commentary on this verse Uvaṭa has clearly said that the verse is meant for *Abhicāra*: *bāhvādiśliṣṭamāśum abhicāraṃ juhuyāt*. In this *Samhitā* in the sixteenth chapter called *Rudrādhyāya*, there occurs the sentence *yam dviṣma yaśca dveṣṭi tameṣām jambhe dadhmaḥ* as a refrain in the last three verses. Through this sentence the worshipper of Rudra seeks to place into the terrible jaws of the frightful Rudras, those who despise him and those whom he despises. Such vengeful utterances are typical characteristics of black magic.

In this context one needs to state that as stated in the *Ṛksamhitā* (X.90) sacrifice was first performed by the gods in heaven. In the *Taittirīya Samhitā* (2.6.7) it has been said that Manu performed *Yajña* on earth for the first time in imitation of the *yajña* performed by the gods. As stated in the *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* (1.5.1.7), others followed Manu and started performing sacrificial rituals. The Vedic Aryans believed that man by imitating the divine sacrifice can make their own contribution in sustaining and protecting the universe. This idea has been expressed in a number of verses in the *Ṛksamhitā* itself, such as V.15.2, X.35.8 etc. As it appears, the mimicry of the divine

sacrifice by man on earth in order to exert some human influence on nature for averting danger has some elements of magic in it. As a matter of fact, the very concept of *Yajña* seems to have in it imitative magic. For *Yajña* appears to be an imitation of the act of creation that goes on in nature day in and day out. Every day in nature in the forests numerous seeds fall into the ground from the trees big and small. The seeds in course of time get merged in the ground and from these seeds saplings of plants emerge out of the ground. Thus, the trees as it were, offer oblations of seeds to the goddess of earth and the earth in return awards the trees with their progeny. In this way through the very act of symbolic imitation of nature the priests hope to secure the blessings of gods by offering oblations to the fire. In this context one may refer to the *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* where it has been shown that *Yajña* is a process of exchanging one object for another. *Yajña* it is said, is called so because in it the *soma* juice offered as an oblation is reborn as the fruit of the ritual³⁰. The voluminous work *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* of the white *Yajurveda* contains numerous rites and ceremonies which are full of magical elements. A few examples are being cited below by way of illustration.

The very act of kindling the fire at the morning sacrifice (as referred to in *Rgveda* IV.51.7) assumes a magical character in the *Śatapatha* where it is stated that the offerings made to the fire before sunrise make the sun to be born³¹. In

³⁰ See *sa (soma) yan jāyate tasmād jañjo ha vai nāmaitad yadyajña*, *ŚB.*, 3.9.4.2

³¹ *ibid.*, 2.3.1.5

3.6.4.15 and 3.7.1.10 the clarified butter which is offered during the rites connected with the preparation and raising of the sacrificial post is praised as a thunderbolt which has the power to destroy evil spirits. According to 11.2.7.26 of *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* the performance of the *Anuyāja* i.e., the fore-offering in *Darśapūrṇamāsa* helps the sacrificer to scare away his spiteful enemies. In 5.2.4.7 of this *Brāhmaṇa* it is stated that the performance of the *Pañcavātīya* rite in the *Rājsūya* sacrifice can keep fiends and Rākṣasas away. The same result is ensured through the performance of the rite called *Indraturīya* in the *Rājasūya*. Some other rites with magical effects upon the enemies of the sacrificer are found in *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* 1.1.2.10; 1.1.4.4; 1.2.4.16, 17, 18; 2. 5.4.1; 4.1.1.17; 4.1.2.17; 4.2.1.14; 4.2.1.14; 5.2.4.3; 11.2.7.28; 14.1.3.16 etc. These are but very few of the numerous examples of black magic, that one comes across in this *Brāhmaṇa* text. So far as the *Sāmaveda* is considered it is the book of Vedic music known as the Sāmans. Many Sāmans have been recognized as having magical powers to destroy Rakṣases and human enemies. In the *Taittirīya Samhitā* (6.6.3.1) and in the *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* (4.4.5.6 and 14.3.1.10) Sāmans have been referred to as destroyers and repellers of evil spirits. The magical effects of the Sāmans have been stated quite frequently in the Sāmavedic texts like *Tāṇḍyamahābrāhmaṇa*, *Jaiminīyabrāhmaṇa*, *Ṣaḍviṃśabrāhmaṇa* etc³². The *Sāmavidhānabrāhmaṇa* is supposed to deal only with *Śrauta* rites as it has been done by the other important *Brāhmaṇas* of the *Sāmaveda*. But this work has

³² See *TMB.*, 5.9.5; 8.2.7; 8.3.1; 12.3.12,14; 12.9.20, 21,22; 12.13.4; 14.3.18; *JB.*, 1.183; 3.43; 3.80; 3.102;3.132; 3.185; 3.215; 3.221; *ṢdB.*, 3.6.3; 3.7.2; 4.2,15 etc.

often crossed its limits and has dealt with magical rites. In this *Brāhmaṇa* as its very name suggests, prescribes the chanting of Sāmans for achieving the same results which a sacrificer may acquire through the performance of the great *Śrauta* rituals³³. If considered from the point of view of Sāyaṇa the entire *Sāmavidhānabrāhmaṇa* is in reality a work of magical rites. In order to give an idea the magical contents of this work some topics found in it are mentioned bellow-

- a) Pacification of persons overpowered by Rakṣas (2.2.2)
- b) Removal of fear from serpents and enemies (2.3.4)
- c) Removal of the effect of poison (2.3.4)
- d) Removal of fear while travelling (2.4.3)
- e) Subjugating (*vaśīkaraṇa*) woman and prostitutes (2.5.11-13)
- f) Driving away enemies (2.6.16)
- g) Destroying enemies and their army (3.6.10,11)
- h) Killing a single person (3.6.12)
- i) Subjugating Piśācas and other evil spirits (3.7.3, 9,10)

While concluding this brief discussion on the influence of magic on Vedic religion it may be observed that throughout the Vedic era there has always been intermingling of religion which seeks to impel the great gods to bless the humans and magic which strives to compel the inanimate nature to fulfil the

³³ See Sāyaṇa in his commentary on *SVB.*, *Sāmavidhāna Brāhmaṇa*, B.R. Sarma, (ed.), Tirupati, 1980,p.2

objectives of the magician. From this discussion it also becomes apparent that the ordinary masses of people in Vedic society were thoroughly acquainted with magical practices and practiced them side by side with religious rituals and ceremonies.