MYTHOLOGIS

HINDU MYTHOLOGY

Shiva, Vishnu, Krishna, and the sacred epics of India

GUILLAUME HENRY

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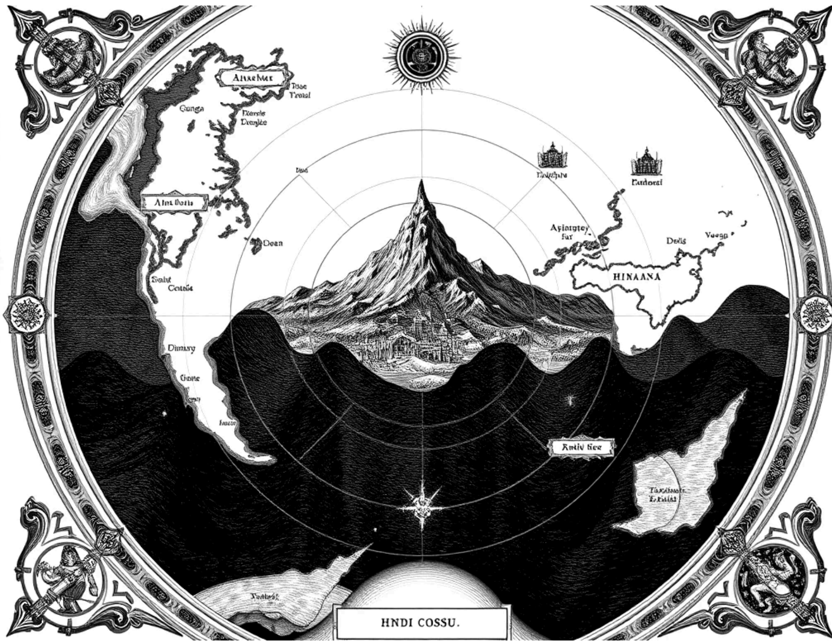

HINAANA
HNDI COSSU.

For those who hear the conch shell's call across three thousand years.

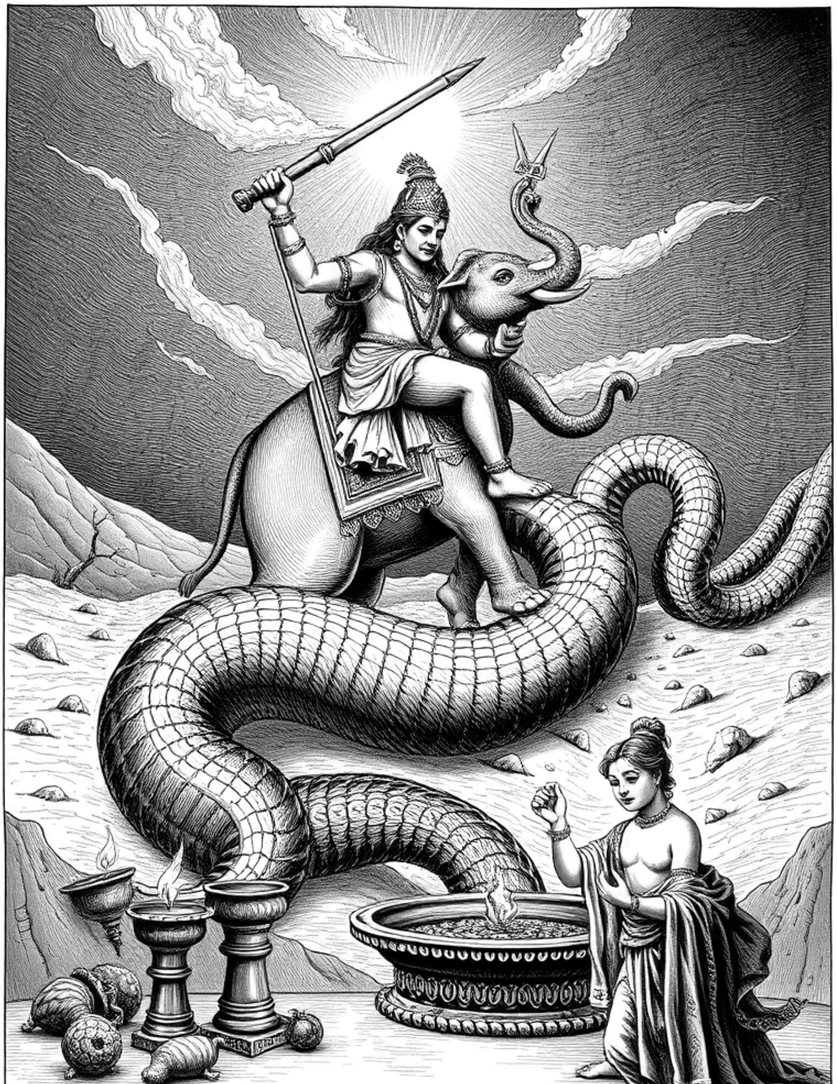
INTRODUCTION

I am standing barefoot on the ghats of Varanasi at dawn, watching a priest pour Ganges water over a Shiva lingam while chanting verses composed before Homer was born. The same hymns echo in a temple in Tamil Nadu, in a village shrine in Nepal, in a Brooklyn apartment where a grandmother lights a diya. This is a living mythology, not a museum piece. The gods are still at work. The stories have not stopped moving. That fact changes everything about how this book must be written. I came to Hindu mythology the way I came to most things: sideways, through pattern recognition. My background is cryptography. I spent years in the French Navy working with encrypted signals, learning to see structure where others saw noise. When I left the service and began reading mythology in earnest, I noticed something. The Greek myths I had grown up with were fossils, beautiful and complete. You could hold the whole corpus in your hands. Hesiod's Theogony, Homer's epics, Apollodorus' Library. Finished. Frozen. The temples were ruins, the rituals extinct, the priests long dead. Hindu mythology is not like that. It sprawls across three millennia and half a continent. It has no single author, no canonical text, no central authority to say what counts and what does not. The Rigveda, composed sometime between 1500 and 1200 BCE on the plains of the Sarasvati River basin, contains 1,028 hymns arranged in ten mandalas. It is the oldest continuous religious text still in use. But it is not the beginning. Before the Rigveda, there were the cities of the Indus Valley: Harappa, Mohenjo-daro, settlements with drainage systems and seals depicting figures that might be proto-Shiva, might be something else entirely. We do not know. The script is undeciphered. The religion is silent. Then the Vedic hymns arrive, and we hear voices. Agni, the fire god. Indra, the storm god who kills the ser-

pent Vritra. Varuna, keeper of cosmic order. These are not the gods most people think of when they hear "Hindu mythology." Vishnu is there, but only as a minor solar deity. Shiva does not exist yet, not by that name. The mythology of the Rigveda is a mythology of sacrifice, of priests maintaining the world through ritual precision. The gods are powerful but not omnipotent. They need the offerings. The cosmos is a transaction. By the time of the Upanishads, composed between roughly 800 and 400 BCE, the tone has shifted. The gods recede. The focus turns inward: Brahman, the ultimate reality; Atman, the self; the mechanics of karma and rebirth. The mythology becomes philosophy, or the philosophy was always there beneath the mythology. The line is hard to draw. Then come the epics. The Mahabharata, in its final form around 400 CE, runs to eighteen parvas and some 100,000 shlokas. It is the longest poem ever composed, and it contains within itself the Bhagavad Gita, the most widely read Hindu text in the modern world. The Ramayana, in seven kandas, tells the story of Rama, Sita, and the demon king Ravana. Both epics are narrative engines. They take the distant Vedic gods and give them families, conflicts, emotions, flaws. Vishnu is no longer a minor solar figure. He is the preserver of the cosmos, incarnating again and again to restore balance. Shiva emerges fully formed, the ascetic destroyer, the lord of yoga and dance. The Puranas, composed between roughly 300 and 1000 CE, take the process further. There are eighteen major Puranas and dozens of minor ones, each associated with a particular deity or sect. The Bhagavata Purana, in twelve skandhas, centres on Krishna. The Devi Mahatmya, in thirteen chapters, tells of the goddess Durga slaying the buffalo demon Mahishasura. These texts are not philosophy. They are stories meant to be heard, retold, enacted. They shaped temple iconography, festival calendars, devotional poetry. They are the mythology most Hindus know. Here is the problem, and it is not a small one. The term "Hindu mythology" is a convenience, not a precision. There is no single Hinduism. There are Hinduisms, plural. Vaishnavism centres on Vishnu and his avatars. Shaivism centres on Shiva. Shaktism centres on the goddess in her many forms. Each has its own texts, its own rituals, its own cosmology. A Vaishnava will tell you Vishnu is supreme. A Shaiva will tell you Shiva is supreme. A Shakta will tell you the goddess is supreme, and the male gods are her instruments. All three are correct within their own frameworks. The traditions overlap, contradict, argue with each other. Regional variation adds another layer. The Krishna of Mathura is not

quite the Krishna of Puri. The Durga of Bengal is not quite the Durga of Tamil Nadu. This is not a flaw. It is a feature. Hindu mythology is not a single story but a conversation, centuries long, conducted in Sanskrit, Tamil, Bengali, Kannada, Malayalam, and a dozen other languages. It is oral and textual, elite and popular, rigid and improvisational. It has no Nicene Creed, no Vatican, no Luther to nail theses to a door. It absorbs, adapts, argues with itself. So how do you write a book about it? You follow the threads. You privilege the texts that had the widest influence, the stories that recur across regions and sects. You acknowledge the gaps and contradictions instead of smoothing them over. You treat the reader like an adult who can hold complexity without needing it resolved. This book begins with the Vedic cosmos, not because it is the "true" Hinduism but because it is the earliest layer we can read. It moves through the Upanishads, the epics, the Puranas. It follows Vishnu from minor deity to cosmic preserver. It watches Shiva coalesce from Rudra, the howling storm god, into the lord of ascetics and householders alike. It tracks the goddess from her Vedic fragments, Ushas and Sarasvati and Prithvi, to her Puranic centrality as Durga, Kali, Lakshmi, Parvati. The structure is chronological where it can be, thematic where it must be. Some chapters focus on a single deity. Others focus on a single text or concept. I have tried to let the sources speak in their own voices, quoting directly where the language is too good to paraphrase. I have also tried to connect the mythology to practice, because the stories were never just stories. They were performed, painted, danced, sung. They still are. I am not a scholar of Sanskrit. I am not a Brahmin, not a Hindu, not Indian. I am a French ex-sailor who learned to read patterns and became obsessed with the patterns gods make across cultures. I have read the translations, the commentaries, the ethnographies. I have walked through temples in Madurai and Khajuraho, watched Ramlila performances in Varanasi, listened to Carnatic musicians sing the Tiruppavai. I have tried to write the book I wanted to read when I first encountered this material: one that assumes intelligence, rewards attention, and does not pretend the subject is simpler than it is. A note on translation. All the primary texts in this book exist in multiple English versions. For the Rigveda, I have relied primarily on Wendy Doniger's translation, which captures the strangeness of the hymns better than the Victorian versions. For the Mahabharata, I have used the Clay Sanskrit Library editions where possible, and the Ganguli translation where not. For the Ramayana, I have drawn on the Valmiki text

as translated by Arshia Sattar and Robert Goldman. For the Puranas, I have used the Motilal Banarsidass editions. Where translations differ, I have noted it. A note on names. Sanskrit allows for multiple transliterations. I have used the simplest forms without diacritics: Krishna, not Kṛṣṇa; Shiva, not Śiva. Specialists will forgive the informality. General readers will thank me. A note on scope. This book cannot be comprehensive. No single book can. I have focused on the narratives that recur, the deities that endure, the texts that shaped the tradition. I have given less space to regional and folk traditions, not because they matter less but because they deserve their own books. I have also given less space to philosophy and theology than to story, because this is a book about mythology, not metaphysics. The Upanishads appear where they illuminate the gods. The Vedanta commentaries do not. What I hope you take from this book is not a tidy system but a sense of scale and motion. Hindu mythology is not a puzzle to be solved. It is a river, fed by a hundred tributaries, still flowing. The gods are not fixed. They change with the needs of their devotees, the skill of their poets, the politics of their temples. They are older than Rome and younger than the smartphone in your pocket. The priest on the ghats is still chanting. The water is still being poured. The stories are still being told. Turn the page, and we begin where the hymns begin: with fire, with the god who carries offerings to the heavens, with the first words of the Rigveda.



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CHAPTER 1

THE VEDIC DAWN: INDRA, AGNI, AND THE SACRIFICE

The soma juice runs golden through the woollen filters, drop by slow drop, into wooden cups that have been polished smooth by a hundred rituals. The liquid catches the firelight. It smells of earth and something sharper, something that tightens the throat. The hotar priest lifts his voice in a meter so old that the words themselves have worn smooth at the edges, their meanings debated by scholars three thousand years later. His chant rises over the crackle of the sacrificial fire. The flames are fed with clarified butter, ghee that hisses and spits as it meets the heat, sending up columns of smoke that twist toward a sky still pale with dawn. The altar is built of bricks, each one laid according to specifications that will later fill entire texts. The fire is Agni himself, mouth of the gods, mediator between earth and heaven. He consumes the offerings and carries them upward in smoke. The priests move with the precision of men who know that a single mispronounced syllable can unravel the cosmos. Their robes are simple, undyed. Their hands are steady. Around the fire, the sponsors of the sacrifice sit cross-legged on woven mats. They are wealthy men, patrons who have commissioned this ritual to secure cattle, sons, victory in battle, or simply the favour of gods whose attention must be earned and re-earned with each dawn. The cost of a soma sacrifice is not trivial. It requires priests, materials, animals, days of preparation. But the stakes are higher still. The universe runs on reciprocity. The gods give rain, victory, prosperity.

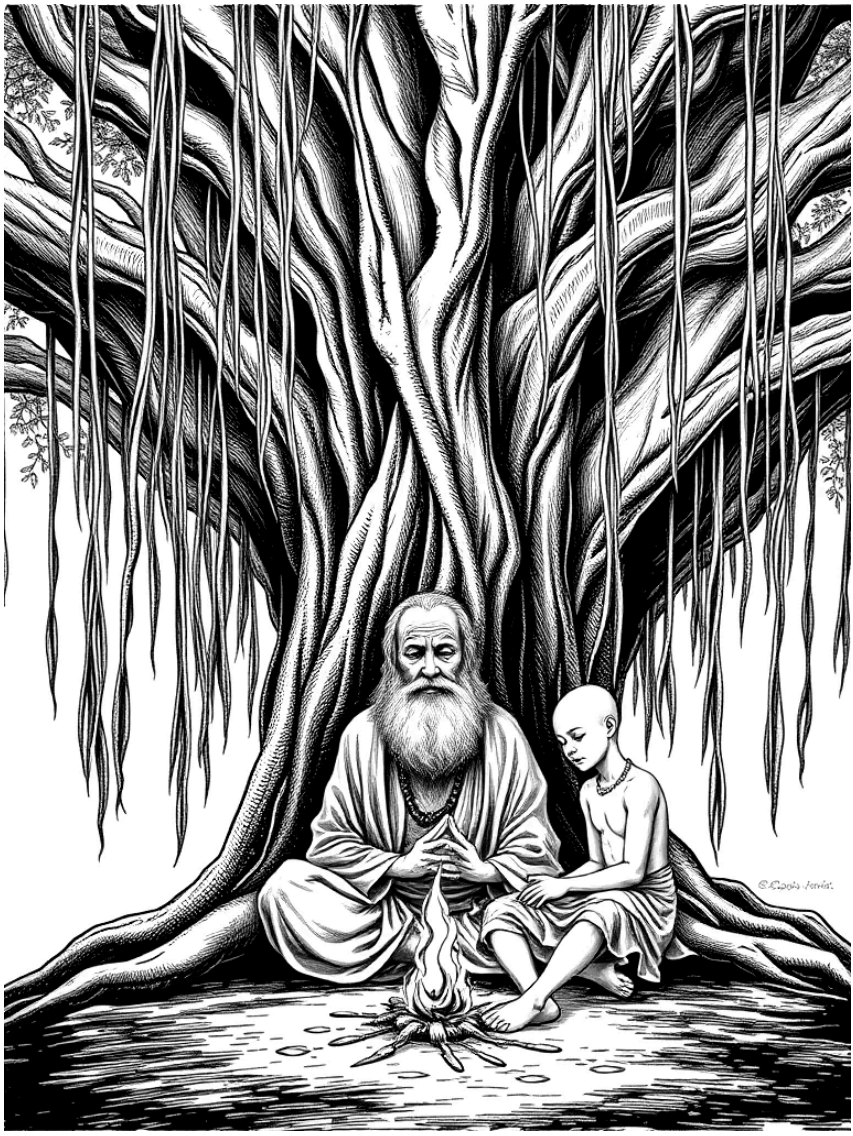
Humans give sacrifice. The exchange is not metaphorical. Above, in a realm the priests invoke but cannot see, Indra stirs. He is the king of the devas, the storm god, the dragon-slayer. His weapon is the vajra, a thunderbolt forged by Tvashtri the divine craftsman. His thirst is legendary. He drinks soma by the vat, and the drink makes him swell with power until he is large enough to stride across the sky. Today, as on every day the sacrifice is correctly performed, he will drink again. The priests know this. They chant his deeds, his victories, his appetites. They remind him, in verse, of what he has done and what he must do again. Somewhere in the waters of chaos, Vritra the serpent coils around the rivers, holding them captive. The drought tightens its grip on the land. The people wait. The fire burns. The soma drips. The gods are hungry. This is the Vedic world, circa 1500 to 500 BCE, on the plains and riverbanks of what will one day be called northern India. It is a world sustained not by temples or icons but by the spoken word and the sacrificial fire. --- The Rigveda, oldest of the four Vedas, is a collection of 1,028 hymns arranged in ten books or mandalas. It was composed in an archaic form of Sanskrit by poets whose names are sometimes preserved, sometimes lost. The hymns were transmitted orally for centuries before being written down, and the precision of that transmission is one of the marvels of human memory. Scholars date the composition of the core hymns to roughly 1500 to 1200 BCE, though the text as we have it was codified later. The Rigveda is not a narrative. It is liturgy, theology, cosmology, and poetry compressed into verses meant to be chanted during sacrifice. The cosmogony of the Rigveda is not a single story but a set of competing and complementary visions. The most famous, and the most paradoxical, is the Nasadiya Sukta, the Hymn of Creation, found in Rigveda 10.129. It begins not with a god or a word but with a question: "Then there was neither non-existence nor existence. There was no realm of air, no sky beyond." The hymn proceeds in a tone of radical uncertainty. It suggests that the gods themselves came after creation, so they cannot know its origin. It ends with one of the most disarming lines in any sacred text: "He, the first origin of this creation, whether he formed it all or did not form it, whose eye controls this world in highest heaven, he verily knows it, or perhaps he knows not." This is not the confident declaration of a creator deity. It is philosophy in verse, an acknowledgment that the ultimate origin may be beyond knowledge. The tone is speculative, almost scientific in its willingness to admit ignorance. It sits oddly alongside other

hymns that describe gods in vivid, anthropomorphic detail. Another cosmogonic hymn, the Purusha Sukta (Rigveda 10.90), offers a different image. Purusha, the cosmic person, is sacrificed by the gods. From his dismembered body, the world is made. His mouth becomes the Brahmins, the priestly class. His arms become the Kshatriyas, the warriors. His thighs become the Vaishyas, the merchants and farmers. His feet become the Shudras, the labourers. The four varnas, the social classes that will later harden into the caste system, are thus inscribed into the body of the cosmos itself. The sun is born from his eye, the moon from his mind, Indra and Agni from his mouth. Sacrifice is not just a ritual act; it is the engine of creation, the process by which order is wrested from chaos. Indra dominates the Rigveda. More than 250 hymns invoke him, more than any other deity. He is the warrior god, the storm bringer, the slayer of Vritra. Rigveda 1.32 recounts his most famous deed. Vritra, whose name means "the enveloper" or "the obstructor," is a serpent or dragon who holds the waters captive. Without water, there is no life, no crops, no cattle. Indra, fortified by soma, takes up his vajra and strikes. The hymn is vivid: "He slew the dragon lying on the mountain; Tvashtri fashioned the thunderbolt for him. Like lowing cows, the flowing waters rushed straight down to the sea." The waters are freed. The rivers flow. The world is made habitable. This is not a one-time event. The myth is a template, a cosmic pattern that must be re-enacted. Each year, the monsoon must come. Each year, the drought must be defeated. Each sacrifice to Indra is a re-performance of that first victory, a way of ensuring that the pattern holds. Indra's appetite for soma is central to the story. He drinks until he is vast, until his belly swells, until he is strong enough to split mountains. The sacrifice feeds him, and in return, he fights on behalf of the cosmic order. Indra's rivalry with Varuna is hinted at in several hymns. Varuna is the older god, the guardian of rita, the cosmic order or truth that underlies all things. He is associated with the night sky, with the waters, with sovereignty of a more remote and absolute kind. He has a thousand eyes; nothing escapes his gaze. He binds transgressors with invisible nooses. In the early hymns, Varuna and Mitra are often invoked together as dual sovereigns, overseers of oaths and contracts. But as the Rigveda progresses, Indra's star rises. He is the god of action, of the thunderstorm, of the here and now. Varuna recedes into the background, his role gradually diminished in later texts until he becomes little more than a god of the ocean. Agni, the fire god, is invoked in the very first hymn of

the Rigveda: "I praise Agni, the household priest, the divine minister of the sacrifice, the invoker, the best bestower of treasure." Agni is present in every sacrifice because he is the fire itself. He has three forms: the terrestrial fire, the lightning that strikes from the sky, and the sun that burns above. He is the mediator, the one who carries the offerings from the human realm to the divine. Without Agni, there is no sacrifice. Without sacrifice, the cosmic order collapses. Agni is also elusive. Several hymns describe him hiding, reluctant to take up his role. He must be found, coaxed, rekindled. This may reflect the practical challenge of maintaining the sacred fire, which in Vedic households was never allowed to go out. It may also reflect a deeper theological idea: the divine is not always willing, not always present. It must be invoked, again and again, with the right words and the right offerings. Yama, the first mortal, is the lord of the dead. Rigveda 10.14 describes him as the one who first found the path to the realm of the fathers, the ancestors who dwell in a pleasant afterlife where they feast and sing. Yama is not a god of punishment; he is a king, a guide, a psychopomp. His realm is not a place of torment but a continuation of life in a different key. He is accompanied by two four-eyed dogs, Shyama and Shabala, who guard the path and seek out the souls of the dying. One of the strangest hymns in the Rigveda is the dialogue between Yama and his twin sister Yami (Rigveda 10.10). Yami proposes that they become lovers, that they ensure the continuation of the human race. Yama refuses, citing the law, the order of things, the boundaries that must not be crossed. It is a hymn about the origins of taboo, about the moment when humans became subject to rules that even the gods must respect. --- The ninth mandala of the Rigveda is devoted entirely to soma. It is 114 hymns of praise, invocation, description, and longing. Soma is a god, but he is also a plant, a drink, an experience. The hymns describe the ritual preparation: the stalks are pressed between stones, the juice is filtered through wool, it is mixed with milk or water, it is offered to the gods and consumed by the priests. The effects are not subtle. Soma grants visions, strength, immortacy (at least temporarily), communion with the divine. The botanical identity of soma has been debated for more than a century. The plant described in the Rigveda grows in the mountains, has no leaves, and produces a juice that is intoxicating. Candidates include Ephedra, a stimulant; Amanita muscaria, a hallucinogenic mushroom; and various other plants native to the region. The identity may have been lost as the Indo-Aryans migrated south and east, away

from the plant's original habitat. Substitutes were used in later rituals. The loss of the original soma is one of the quiet tragedies of religious history, a gap that can never be filled. But in the Rigveda, soma is everywhere. It is the drink of immortality, the amrita that the gods guard jealously. It is stolen by an eagle or a hawk, brought to earth for human use. It is the fuel of Indra's victories. It is the medium through which the divine and the human meet. Rigveda 8.48 is a hymn of intoxication, a poet's ecstatic testimony: "We have drunk soma and become immortal; we have attained the light, the gods discovered." The sacrifice, the yajna, is the centre of Vedic religion. It is not a private devotion or a mystical experience. It is a transaction, a technology, a way of maintaining the structure of the cosmos. The Brahmanas, prose texts composed after the Rigveda, elaborate the mechanics of sacrifice in exhaustive detail. They describe the construction of altars, the timing of rituals, the division of labour among the priests. There are four main priestly roles: the hotar, who recites the hymns from the Rigveda; the adhvaryu, who performs the physical actions of the ritual; the udgatar, who chants melodies from the Samaveda; and the brahman, who oversees the entire process and corrects any errors. The idea underlying all of this is that the universe is not self-sustaining. It requires maintenance. The gods require nourishment. The cosmic order, rita, must be upheld through correct action and correct speech. A mistake in the ritual can have catastrophic consequences, not just for the sponsor but for the community, even for the world. This is why the priests are so highly valued, why their training takes years, why their knowledge is guarded and passed down with such care. They are not intermediaries in the Christian sense. They are technicians of the sacred, operators of a cosmic machine. I find it striking that the Vedic gods are not omnipotent. They are powerful, but they are also dependent. They need the sacrifice. They need humans to remember them, to invoke them, to feed them. This is not the monotheism of later traditions, where God is self-sufficient and humans are supplicants. It is a relationship of mutual dependence, a partnership in maintaining the world. The later Vedic texts, the Brahmanas and the Aranyakas, push this idea further. They suggest that the sacrifice itself, when performed correctly, has power independent of the gods. The gods become almost secondary. The ritual is the thing. This will eventually lead to a profound shift in Hindu thought, the Upanishadic turn toward the inner sacrifice, the idea that the external ritual is a symbol for an internal transformation. But that is the subject of the next

chapter. --- The sun is higher now. The soma has been offered. The fire has consumed the butter, the grain, the flesh of the sacrificial animal. The priests chant the closing hymns, their voices hoarse from hours of recitation. The smoke rises in a column that dissolves into the pale blue of midday. Indra, in the realm of the gods, lowers the cup. The soma courses through him, golden and fierce. He feels the weight of the vajra in his hand, the familiar heft of it, the way it hums with stored lightning. Vritra is not dead, not permanently. The serpent will coil again around the waters. The drought will return. The battle is never finished. But today, the waters flow. The rivers run full. The people will drink, and the cattle will drink, and the fields will be green. Agni flickers on the altar, smaller now, his hunger temporarily sated. He will be fed again tomorrow, and the day after, and the day after that. He is the oldest god and the youngest, born anew with each kindling. He is the mouth that speaks the names of the other gods, the tongue that tastes the offerings on their behalf. Below, in the shadowed realm where the dead gather, Yama sits on his throne. His two dogs lie at his feet, their four eyes watchful. A soul approaches, hesitant, newly arrived. Yama rises to greet it. The path to the fathers is well-worn. There is no judgment here, only arrival. The dead will feast and sing, and the living will remember them in the rituals, speaking their names, offering them water and rice. The sacrifice is finished. The pattern holds for another day. The cosmos, held together by chant and fire and the precise arrangement of bricks, does not collapse. Not today. The priests gather their implements, wrap them in cloth, and walk away from the altar. Behind them, the fire burns low, a bed of coals glowing in the sunlight. The smoke thins to a thread, then to nothing. The sky is empty and blue. The gods have eaten. The world continues.



CHAPTER 2

BRAHMAN AND THE UPANISHADIC TURN

The student sits beneath a banyan tree, his head freshly shaved, the stubble still tender to the touch. Three days have passed since his teacher last spoke. The old man sits across from him, eyes half-closed, breath so slow it seems he might have stopped breathing altogether. The fire burns between them, small and contained, no longer the towering sacrificial blaze that consumed butter and grain and flesh. This fire is symbolic now, a reminder of what was once the centre of everything. The student's legs ache. He has been sitting cross-legged since dawn, forbidden to move until his teacher releases

him. The banyan's roots descend from the branches above, thick as a man's arm, some of them reaching the ground to become new trunks. The tree is a forest unto itself. Birds move through the canopy, invisible, their calls sharp in the afternoon heat. The student's mind wanders despite his efforts. He thinks of the questions he has prepared, the verses he has memorised, the ritual procedures he can now perform without error. He thinks of his father's house, the meals he is missing, the comfort of a bed instead of this mat of woven grass. The teacher opens his eyes. "That which cannot be spoken with words, but by which words are spoken," he says, his voice dry and quiet. "That alone know as Brahman." The student waits for more. There is no more. The old man gestures toward the fire. "You have learned the hymns. You have learned the sacrifices. You know how to invoke Indra, how to feed Agni, how to ensure that the cosmic order holds. You know the names of the gods and the structure of the altar and the metres of the chants." He pauses. A crow lands

on one of the banyan's aerial roots and tilts its head, watching them. "Now forget all of it," the teacher says. The student blinks. The crow launches itself back into the air with a harsh cry. "Not forget the knowledge," the teacher continues. "Forget the idea that the knowledge is the thing itself. The sacrifice is not the fire. The hymn is not the god. The word is not the reality it points toward. You have been learning the map. Now I will show you the territory." He leans forward. The firelight catches the deep lines of his face, the hollows beneath his cheekbones. "Brahman is not a god you can invoke. It is not a force you can manipulate with the correct syllables. It is the ground of all being, the substance of which the gods themselves are made. It is what remains when you strip away every name, every form, every concept. It is closer to you than your own breath. It is you. It has always been you." The student opens his mouth to ask a question, but the teacher raises a hand. "Sit," he says. "Be silent. Listen to what cannot be heard." The fire crackles. The

student closes his eyes. He listens to his own breath, the sound of air moving in and out. The rhythm has continued since birth. It will continue until death. Somewhere beneath the breath, beneath the thought, beneath the sense of being a separate self sitting beneath a tree, something else is present. He cannot name it. He cannot grasp it. But for a moment, he knows it is there. --- The Upanishads mark a philosophical revolution in Indian thought, a shift from the external mechanics of sacrifice to the internal landscape of consciousness. The word "Upanishad" means "sitting down near," the posture of a student receiving secret teaching from a master. These texts were composed over several centuries, roughly from 800 BCE to 200 BCE, though dating individual Upanishads is notoriously difficult. They were not written as systematic philosophy but as dialogues, parables, meditations, and sudden declarations of insight. They assume the reader already knows the Vedic hymns and the sacrificial procedures. Now they ask: what lies beneath all of that?

The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, probably the oldest, opens with a meditation on the sacrificial horse. The Ashvamedha, the horse sacrifice, was the most elaborate and politically significant ritual in Vedic religion. A king would release a consecrated horse to wander for a year, and his warriors would follow it, claiming all the territory it crossed. At the end of the year, the horse would be sacrificed in a ritual involving hundreds of priests and lasting many days. The Brihadaranyaka takes this grand political and religious spectacle and reinterprets it as a cosmological symbol. The dawn is the horse's head. The sun is its eye. The year is its body. The horse is the universe, and the universe is the sacrifice, and the sacrifice is Brahman. This is the Upanishadic method: take the familiar structure of the ritual and reveal it as a pointer to something beyond itself. The fire on the altar is not just fire. It is the fire of digestion in the belly, the fire of the sun in the sky, the fire of consciousness in the mind. All of these are manifestations of a single reality.

Brihadaranyaka 1.4 offers a creation story that begins not with a god but with the Self. "In the beginning this world was just the Self, in the shape of a person. He looked around and saw nothing but himself. He first said, 'I am.'" This primordial Self is alone. It is afraid. It desires companionship. It divides itself, male and female, and from that division comes the human race. Then it divides again, becoming all the animals, all the forms of life. The text is explicit: "He became all this. Therefore they call him the All." This is radically different from the Rigvedic cosmogonies. There is no Indra here, no Varuna, no cosmic battle. There is only the Self, alone and afraid, choosing to become many in order to escape its solitude. The gods are not creators but creations, forms that the Self assumes. The implication is clear: the ultimate reality is not a deity to be worshipped but the ground of existence itself, the "I am" that precedes all names and forms. The term "Brahman" appears in the Rigveda, but there it refers to the sacred power of the hymns, the potency of correctly uttered words.

In the Upanishads, Brahman becomes the name for the ultimate reality, the unchanging substrate beneath the flux of appearances. It is neuter, not masculine or feminine. It is not a person. It has no desires, no preferences, no mythology. Describing it is nearly impossible because all descriptions involve distinctions, and Brahman is precisely that which has no distinctions. The Brihadaranyaka resorts to negation: "neti neti," not this, not that. Brahman is what remains when you strip away everything that can be named or conceived. Parallel to Brahman is the concept of atman, the Self. Atman begins in earlier texts as the breath, the life force, the animating principle. In the Upanishads, it becomes the innermost essence of the individual, the witness of all experience, the "I" that observes thoughts and sensations but is not identical with them. The central teaching of the Upanishads is the identity of atman and Brahman. The Self within and the ultimate reality without are one and the same. This is not pantheism, the idea that everything is