



PRAJĀPATI AND BRAHMĀ

Creation in the *Rg Veda*

To begin at the beginning of both the story and the telling of the story, one must begin with the mythology of creation as it appears in the *Rg Veda*. The creation hymns – and indeed most of the *Rg Veda* hymns which allude directly to myths – appear in the two latest books (the first and the tenth), which already show the seeds of the philosophical speculation that was to emerge fully in the Brāhmaṇas and Upaniṣads within a few centuries. The most basic form of Vedic cosmogony is implicit in many early hymns, though never explicitly described: it is the formation of distinct elements out of the primeval cosmic flux, the evolution of order out of chaos, the popping apart of heaven and earth. This concept of creation as separation remains at the heart of much of later Hindu mythology (as well as Hindu social thought) and forms the animating spark of the conflict between gods and non-gods (demons or human beings).

INCEST: THE FATHER COMMITS INCEST WITH HIS DAUGHTER

One concept of creation which begins in the *Rg Veda* and persists through later Hindu mythology is the idea of primeval incest. No single hymn tells this story, but scattered references may be collected to give a summary of the Vedic myth, which never actually names the father or the daughter and may simply express in anthropomorphic terms the idea of the One who creates a Second with whom he unites as a pair.¹ Heaven and earth, once so carefully

1. In later mythology, the primeval incestuous act is attributed to the first man, Manu – himself also incestuously begotten by the creator.

and safely propped apart, meet here in an act which is creative but dangerous.

I. FROM THE *R̥g Veda*

As his phallus was stretched out in eagerness for the act of a man, the manly one pulled back. He drew back again from the maiden, his daughter, that tireless phallus which had been thrust in. As they were in the midst of the very act of union, when the father was satisfying his desire for the young girl, the two of them left a little of the out-flowing seed shed upon the back of the earth in the womb of good deeds. When the father shed his seed in his own daughter, he spilt his seed on the earth as he united with her. The benevolent gods created sacred speech and fashioned Rudra Vāstoṣpati, the protector of sacred rites . . . As Agni² made the seed for the great father, heaven, he entered into the womb, having noticed that she was inclined to him. The hunter shot an arrow at him boldly. The god satisfied his lust in his own daughter . . . As the heat of passion came to the king for his enjoyment, heaven laid aside on the ground the bright seed that had been spilt. Agni caused to be born the blameless benevolent group of youths³ and made them great . . . Heaven is my father, the engenderer, the navel here. My mother is this wide earth, my close kin. Between these two outstretched bowls is the womb;⁴ in it the father placed his daughter's embryo.

2. Agni (cognate with Latin *ignis*) is the god of fire. See below, myths 29-33, pp. 79-115.

3. These youths are the Aṅgirasas, mediators between gods and men, sons of heaven and progenitors of men, who distribute among men the gifts of the gods (cf. Greek *angelos*). Agni is one of the Aṅgirasas.

4. The word here translated as 'womb' is *yonī*, which originally designated the maternal womb, was later extended to any source, and, still later, denoted the sexual organ of the Goddess, worshipped with the phallus (*liṅga*) of Śiva.

DISMEMBERMENT: THE PRIMEVAL MAN IS SACRIFICED

One cosmogonic myth is the subject of an entire *R̥g Vedic* hymn, which explains original creation as the result of a primeval sacrifice – not a true blood sacrifice, but a dismemberment and distribution; not an actual creation of something out of nothing, but rather a re-arrangement, another instance of order out of chaos. The primeval Man is not *changed* into the various forms of life; rather, he *is* those forms, always. It is worthy of note that creation produces not only the physical elements of the universe but also the social order, the basis of life in the Hindu view, as well as the seasons and the parts of the very sacrifice from which creation proceeds.

2. FROM THE *R̥g Veda*

The Man [Puruṣa] has a thousand heads, a thousand eyes, a thousand feet. He pervades the earth everywhere and extends beyond for ten fingers' breadth. The Man himself is all this, whatever has been and whatever is to be. He is the lord of immortality and also lord of that which grows on food. Such is his greatness, and the Man is yet greater than this. All creatures make up a quarter of him; three quarters are the immortal in heaven. With three quarters the Man has risen above, and one quarter of him still remains here, whence he spread out everywhere, pervading that which eats and that which does not eat. From him Virāj⁵ was born, and from Virāj came the Man, who, having been born, ranged beyond the earth before and behind. When the gods spread the sacrifice, using the Man as the offering, spring was the clarified butter, summer the fuel, autumn the oblation. They anointed the Man, the sacrifice, born at the beginning, upon the sacred grass. With him the gods, Sādhyas, and sages sacrificed. From that sacrifice in which everything was offered, the clarified butter was obtained, and they made it into those beasts who live in the air, in the forest, and in villages. From that sacrifice

5. 'He who Rules Afar', a primeval being.

in which everything was offered, the verses and the chants were born, the metres were born, and the formulas⁶ were born. From it horses were born, and those other animals which have a double set of incisors; cows were born from it, and goats and sheep were born from it.

When they divided the Man, into how many parts did they disperse him? What became of his mouth, what of his arms, what were his two thighs and his two feet called? His mouth was the brahmin, his arms were made into the nobles, his two thighs were the populace, and from his feet the servants⁷ were born. The moon was born from his mind; the sun was born from his eye. From his mouth came Indra⁸ and Agni, and from his vital breath the wind [Vāyu] was born. From his navel the atmosphere was born; from his head the heaven appeared. From his two feet came the earth, and the regions of the sky from his ear. Thus they fashioned the worlds. There were seven enclosing fire-sticks for him, and thrice seven fire-sticks when the gods, spreading the sacrifice, bound down the Man as the sacrificial beast. With this sacrifice the gods sacrificed; these were the first *dharmas*.⁹ And these powers reached the dome of heaven where dwell the ancient Sādhyas and gods.

Creation in the Brāhmaṇas and Upaniṣads

The Brāhmaṇas deal at great length with the question of cosmogony, utilizing the various strands of R̥g Vedic belief. The incestuous father

6. The three Vedas consist of verses (*R̥g Veda*), chants (*Sāma Veda*) and formulas (*Yajur Veda*).

7. The four classes (*varṇas*) of ancient Indian society were the priests (*brahmins*), nobles or warriors (*kṣatriyas*), the 'all' – i.e. the general populace (*viś* or *vaiśyas*), and servants (*śūdras*).

8. Indra is the king of the gods. See below, myths 13–28, pp. 56–96.

9. *Dharma* designates social order, the social norm, the ideal order of the world.

is now identified as Prajāpati, the lord of creatures, and his seed is cast into the fire in place of the usual liquid oblation – clarified butter or Soma juice – in a form of Vedic sacrifice more sophisticated than the dismemberment of a victim, an actual ritual symbolically re-enacting primeval creation.

INCEST AND OBLATION

Prajāpati commits incest and Rudra is born

A series of Brāhmaṇa texts develops the full consequences of the incestuous act, particularly its iniquities and dangers. The astral symbolism which appears in these texts persists in later myths, as do the distinction between the mortal and immortal parts of man, the idea of the distribution of the seed into various life forms (concepts already present *in nuce* in the hymn of the dismemberment of the cosmic Man), and the use of false etymologies and word-play upon names.

3. FROM THE *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*

Prajāpati approached his daughter; some say she was the sky, others that she was the dawn. He became a stag and approached her, as she had taken the form of a doe. The gods saw him and they said, 'Prajāpati is now doing what is not done.' They wished for one who would punish him, but they did not find him in one another. Then they assembled in one place the most fearful forms, and these, assembled, became the deity Rudra;¹⁰ therefore his name contains the sound *Bhūta* [Bhūtapati, lord of ghosts]. The gods said to him, 'Prajāpati is now doing what is not done. Pierce him.' 'So be it', he replied, 'and let me choose a boon from you.' 'Choose.' He chose as his boon the overlordship of cattle; therefore his name contains the word cattle [Paśupati, lord of cattle]. And one who knows this name of his becomes rich in cattle. He took aim and pierced him; when he was pierced he flew upwards; they call him 'the Deer'. The piercer of the deer

10. A malevolent god associated with wildness and danger. See below, myths 34–6, pp. 117–25.

is called by that name, and the female deer is Rohiṇī. The arrow, made in three parts, became 'the Tripartite Arrow'.¹¹

When the seed of Prajāpati had been spilt, it ran and became a lake. The gods said, 'Let not this seed of Prajāpati spoil.' Since they said, 'Let not this seed of Prajāpati spoil [*mā duṣam*]', it became 'not to be spoilt' and its name was 'not to be spoilt'; that which is 'not to be spoilt' is connected with man; therefore they call that which is 'not to be spoilt' 'connected with man' [*mānuṣa*, 'mortal' or 'descended from Manu'],¹² with a mystery [a riddle], for the gods seem to love mystery.

They surrounded it with Agni; the Maruts blew upon it, but Agni did not cause it to flow. They surrounded it with Agni Vaiśvānara; the Maruts blew upon it and Agni Vaiśvānara caused it to flow. The first part of the seed that was ignited became Āditya; the second became Bhṛgu, whom Varuṇa took, and so Bhṛgu was adopted by Varuṇa. The third part, which was brilliant [*adīdet*], became the Ādityas. The coals [*aṅgārā*] became the Aṅgirasas; and when the coals blazed forth again after they had been quenched, Bṛhaspati was born. The completely charred coals became the black cattle; the reddened earth became tawny cattle. The ash spread in various forms – the buffalo, the ox, the antelope, the camel, the ass, and the tawny cattle.

The god said to them, 'This is mine; what remains here is mine.' But they deprived him of his claim by reciting the verse addressed to Rudra:

11. The Deer (Mṛga) is the constellation Capricorn, also called Deer's Head (Mṛgaśīras). The Deer-piercer or Hunter is Sirius. Rohiṇī (literally denoting a female gazelle or red cow) is alpha in Taurus. The Tripartite Arrow is the belt of Orion, near Rohiṇī and the Deer, while Prajāpati is Orion. See below, myth 37, pp. 131-7, for the arrow.

12. Manu is the progenitor of the human race. See below, myths 15-19, pp. 60-70.

'Father of the Maruts, let your good will approach us.
Do not separate us from the sight of the sun.
Spare our swift horses, O hero.
Let us increase in offspring, O Rudra.'¹³

Prajāpati and his sons create, and Rudra is born

The *Kauṣītaki Brāhmaṇa* expands several elements of the myth (Prajāpati's sons, instead of the father, are involved in the incestuous act; the daughter becomes actively seductive) and reverses certain others (Rudra is here born from the seed for which he punishes Prajāpati in the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa*). Motifs from the *Rg Veda* also reappear: the *Rg Vedic* arrow here becomes a thousand arrows, and Rudra has a thousand eyes and feet, like the cosmic Man.

4. FROM THE *Kauṣītaki Brāhmaṇa*

Prajāpati, wishing very much to have progeny, practised asceticism. As he became heated, five were born from him: Fire, Wind, Sun, Moon, and the fifth, a female, Dawn. He said to them, 'Practise asceticism,' and they consecrated themselves; when they had been consecrated and were practising asceticism, Dawn, the daughter of Prajāpati, took the form of a celestial nymph and appeared before them. Their hearts were moved by her and they poured out their seed. Then they went to Prajāpati, their father, and they said, 'We have poured out our seed. Let it not be lost.' Prajāpati made a golden bowl, an arrow's breadth in height and in width, and he poured the seed into it. Then the thousand-eyed god with a thousand feet and a thousand fitted arrows arose.

He grasped his father Prajāpati, who said to him, 'Why do you grasp me?' He replied, 'Give me a name, for without a name I will not eat food.' He answered, 'You are Bhava ["Existence"].' [He gave him seven more names.]

13. A reference to *Rg Veda* 2.33.1.

OBLATION INTO FIRE: PRAJĀPATI
CREATES AGNI AND SACRIFICES INTO HIM

The concepts of the eater versus the non-eater (or the eaten) and the appeasing of a dangerous, hungry creature are further developed in another text. Prajāpati spills his seed into the fire as before, but now the seed takes the form of milk that is milked out of him or butter that is churned from him, the verb 'rubbed' implying either or both of these acts.

5. FROM THE *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*

In the beginning, Prajāpati existed alone. He reflected, 'How may I produce progeny?' He exhausted himself practising asceticism, and he generated Agni from his mouth. Since he generated him from his mouth, Agni is therefore an eater of food. And he who knows that Agni is an eater of food becomes an eater of food himself. As he generated him first [*agre*] of all the gods, therefore he is called Agni, for the name Agni is the same as the name Agri. When he was born, he went forth in front, for they say that one who goes in front goes first. This is his Agni-ness.

Prajāpati then reflected, 'I have created from myself a food-eater, Agni, but there is no food here other than me, whom he would not eat.' Now, the earth was bald at that time; there were no plants nor any trees. And this was in his mind. Then Agni turned toward him with an open mouth, and the greatness went out of the terrified Prajāpati. Speech is his own greatness; and speech went out of him. He desired an offering made in himself. He rubbed¹⁴ his hands; and because he rubbed his hands, therefore this and this palm are without hair. Then he obtained an offering of clarified butter or an offering of milk; for both of these are made of milk. This offering did not

14. By 'rubbing' or 'churning' with his hands he produces sacrificial butter.

please him, for it was mixed with hair. He poured it away into the fire saying, 'Burn and drink this [*oṣa dhaya*].' From it the plants were born; therefore they are called plants [*oṣadhayas*]. A second time he rubbed his hands; then he obtained another offering, an offering of clarified butter or an offering of milk; for both of these are made of milk. This offering pleased him. He was uncertain whether to offer this offering or not. His own greatness said to him, 'Offer it.' Prajāpati realized that his own [*sva*] greatness had spoken [*āha*] to him. And so he said, 'Svāhā' as he offered it. Therefore one says 'Svāhā'¹⁵ as an offering is made.

Then he [the sun] rose up and grew hot, and then he [the wind] became mighty and blew.¹⁶ Then Agni turned away. Prajāpati performed the offering, produced progeny, and saved himself from Agni, who was death and who was about to devour him. And whoever knows this and offers the Agnihotra oblation, he produces progeny just as Prajāpati produced progeny. And in this way he saves himself from Agni, death, when he is about to devour him. And whenever one dies and is placed in the fire, he is reborn from the fire just as he is born from his mother and father, for the fire consumes only his body.

INCEST, OBLATION, AND DISMEMBERMENT:
BRAHMĀ COMMITS INCEST

All three of the major methods of creation in the Vedas and Brāhmaṇas are combined in the Upaniṣads: incest, oblation (a fire sacrifice), and dismemberment (the sacrifice of the androgynous Self into two pieces). The distinction between mortal and immortal is further extended, but now the false etymology for the human being is derived

15. 'Svāhā', the exclamation made when an oblation is offered to the gods, is the name of the oblation and of the wife of Agni. See below, myth 33, pp. 109-13.

16. Another possible translation would be: 'Then Agni arose and grew hot and became mighty and purified.'

not from the incestuous seed but from the androgynous primeval Man, the Puruṣa, here regarded as a mortal but also identified with Brahmā, the Creator, the god who supersedes the Prajāpati of the earlier Brāhmaṇas. Puruṣa's name in this text utilizes the 'preceding' etymology applied in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* to Agni, who is connected here, as usual, with food.

6. FROM THE *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*

In the beginning, this universe was Soul [ātman] in the form of the Man [Puruṣa]. He looked around and saw nothing other than himself. Then, at first, he said, 'I am,' and thus the word 'I' was born. Therefore even now when one is addressed he first says, 'It is I,' and then he speaks whatever other name he has. Since he, preceding [pūrva] all this universe, burnt up [uṣ] all evils, he is the Man [Puruṣa]. He who knows this burns up anyone who would precede him.

He was afraid; therefore one who is all alone is afraid. He reflected, 'Since there is nothing other than me, of what am I afraid?' Then his fear vanished, for of what could he have been afraid? One becomes afraid of a second. He did not rejoice; therefore one who is all alone does not rejoice. He desired a second. He was of the same size and kind as a man and woman closely embracing. He caused himself to fall [pat] into two pieces, and from him a husband and a wife [pati and patnī] were born. Therefore Yājñavalkya has said, 'Oneself is like a half-fragment.' Therefore this space was filled by a woman. He united with her, and from this mankind was born.

She reflected, 'How can he unite with me after engendering me from himself? For shame! I will conceal myself.' She became a cow; he became a bull and united with her, and from this all the cattle were born. She became a mare; he became a stallion. She became a female ass; he became a male ass and united with her, and from this all whole-hooved animals were born. She became a she-goat; he became a billy-goat;

she became a ewe; he became a ram and united with her, and from this goats and sheep were born. Thus he created all the pairs, even down to the ants.

He knew that he was creation, for he created all of this. Thus creation arose. Whoever knows this is born in that creation of his. Then he churned.¹⁷ From his mouth as the fire-hole [yoni] and from his two hands he created fire. Therefore both mouth and hands are without hair on the inside, for the fire-hole is without hair on the inside. When people speak of him, saying, 'Sacrifice to this god!' 'Sacrifice to this god!', speaking of one single god and then of another single god, it is his own creation, and he himself is all the gods. Now, whatever is moist he created from semen, and that is Soma.¹⁸ All this universe is food and the eater of food. For Soma is food, and Agni is the eater of food. This was the surpassing creation of Brahmā, for he created the gods, who were better than him, when he, being mortal, created immortals. Therefore it was a surpassing creation. Whoever knows this is born in that surpassing creation of his.

Creation in the *Mahābhārata*

Prajāpati in the Epic is no longer the supreme, original god, the universal Soul, but merely that member of the extensive Hindu pantheon whose particular task or assignment it is to perform crea-

17. Or 'rubbed' – that is, he twirled the fire sticks, his two hands, or 'churned' as in the previous myth.

18. Soma is the ambrosia that the gods drink to make them immortal; it is an elixir, unlike the solid food called ambrosia eaten by the Greek gods. Soma is the expressed liquid from the Soma plant, offered during the Vedic sacrifice, probably some kind of hallucinogenic drink; it is the name of the moon, for the ambrosia is said to be stored in the moon; and it is the name of the god who is the incarnation of the Soma juice.