The Greatness of India and Its Culture

3. The Greatness of Indian Literature – I

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I. The Uniqueness of Indian Culture and Literature

"The arts which appeal to the soul through the eye are able to arrive at a peculiarly concentrated expression of the spirit, the aesthesis and the creative mind of a people, but it is in its literature that we must seek for its most flexible and many-sided self-expression, for it is the word used in all its power of clear figure or its threads of suggestion that carries to us most subtly and variably the shades and turns and teeming significances of the inner self in its manifestation. The greatness of a literature lies first in the greatness and worth of its substance, the value of its thought and the beauty of its forms, but also in the degree to which, satisfying the highest conditions of the art of speech, it avails to bring out and raise the soul and life or the living and the ideal mind of a people, an age, a culture, through the genius of some of its greatest or most sensitive representative spirits. And if we ask what in both these respects is the achievement of the Indian mind as it has come down to us in the Sanskrit and other literatures, we might surely say that here at least there is little room for any just depreciation and denial even by a mind the most disposed to quarrel with the effect on life and the character of the culture. **The ancient and classical creations of the Sanskrit tongue both in quality and in body and abundance of excellence, in their potent originality and force and beauty, in their substance and art and structure, in grandeur and justice and charm of speech and in the height and width of the reach of their spirit stand very evidently in the front rank among the world's great**

literatures. The language itself, as has been universally recognised by those competent to form a judgment, is one of the most magnificent, the most perfect and wonderfully sufficient literary instruments developed by the human mind, at once majestic and sweet and flexible, strong and clearly-formed and full and vibrant and subtle, and its quality and character would be of itself a sufficient evidence of the character and quality of the race whose mind it expressed and the culture of which it was the reflecting medium.* The great and noble use made of it by poet and thinker did not fall below the splendour of its capacities. Nor is it in the Sanskrit tongue alone that the Indian mind has done high and beautiful and perfect things, though it couched in that language the larger part of its most prominent and formative and grandest creations. It would be necessary for a complete estimate to take into account as well the Buddhistic literature in Pali and the poetic literatures, here opulent, there more scanty in production, of about a dozen Sanskritic and Dravidian tongues. The whole has almost a continental effect and does not fall so far short in the quantity of its really lasting things and equals in its things of best excellence the work of ancient and mediaeval and modern Europe. The people and the civilisation that count among their great works and their great names the Veda and the Upanishads, the mighty structures of the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, Kalidasa and Bhavabhuti and Bhartrihari and Jayadeva and the other rich creations of classical Indian drama and poetry and romance, the Dhammapada and the Jatakas,

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**The bold letters appearing on various pages have been used by the editor to stress important passages and are not there in the original sources.*

the Panchatantra, Tulsidas, Vidyapati and Chandidas and Ramprasad, Ramdas and Tukaram, Tiruvalluvar and Kamban and the songs of Nanak and Kabir and Mirabai and the southern Shaiva saints and the Alwars,–to name only the best-known writers and most characteristic productions, though there is a very large body of other work in the different tongues of both the first and the second excellence,–must surely be counted among the greatest civilisations and the world's most developed and creative peoples. A mental activity so great and of so fine a quality commencing more than three thousand years ago and still not exhausted is unique and the best and most undeniable witness to something extraordinarily sound and vital in the culture."[1]

"A criticism that ignores or belittles the significance of this unsurpassed record and this splendour of the self-expressing spirit and the creative intelligence, stands convicted at once of a blind malignity or an invincible prejudice and does not merit refutation. It would be a sheer waste of time and energy to review the objections raised by our devil's advocate: for nothing vital to the greatness of a literature is really in dispute and there is only to the credit of the attack a general distortion and denunciation and a laborious and exaggerated cavilling at details and idiosyncracies which at most show a difference between the idealising mind and abundant imagination of India and the more realistically observant mind and less rich and exuberant imagination of Europe. The fit parallel to this motive and style of criticism would be if an Indian critic who had read European literature only in bad or ineffective Indian translations, were to pass it under a hostile and disparaging review, dismiss the Iliad as a crude and empty semi-savage and primitive epos, Dante's

great work as the nightmare of a cruel and superstitious religious fantasy, Shakespeare as a drunken barbarian of considerable genius with an epileptic imagination, the whole drama of Greece and Spain and England as a mass of bad ethics and violent horrors, French poetry as a succession of bald or tawdry rhetorical exercises and French fiction as a tainted and immoral thing, a long sacrifice on the altar of the goddess Lubricity, admit here and there a minor merit, but make no attempt at all to understand the central spirit or aesthetic quality or principle of structure and conclude on the strength of his own absurd method that the ideals of both Pagan and Christian Europe were altogether false and bad and its imagination afflicted with a "habitual and ancestral" earthiness, morbidity, poverty and disorder. No criticism would be worth making on such a mass of absurdities, and in this equally ridiculous philippic only a stray observation or two less inconsequent and opaque than the others perhaps demands a passing notice. But although these futilities do not at all represent the genuine view of the general European mind on the subject of Indian poetry and literature, still one finds a frequent inability to appreciate the spirit or the form or the aesthetic value of Indian writing and especially its perfection and power as an expression of the cultural mind of the people. One meets such criticisms even from sympathetic critics as an admission of the vigour, colour and splendour of Indian poetry followed by a conclusion that for all that it does not satisfy, and this means that the intellectual and temperamental misunderstanding extends to some degree even to this field of creation where different minds meet more readily than in painting and sculpture, that there is a rift between the two mentalities and what is delightful and packed with meaning

and power to the one has no substance, but only a form, of aesthetic or intellectual pleasure for the other. This difficulty is partly due to an inability to enter into the living spirit and feel the vital touch of the language, but partly to a spiritual difference in similarity which is even more baffling than a complete dissimilarity and otherness. Chinese poetry for example is altogether of its own kind and it is more possible for a Western mentality, when it does not altogether pass it by as an alien world, to develop an undisturbed appreciation because the receptivity of the mind is not checked or hampered by any disturbing memories or comparisons. Indian poetry on the contrary, like the poetry of Europe, is the creation of an Aryan or Aryanised national mind, starts apparently from similar motives, moves on the same plane, uses cognate forms, and yet has something quite different in its spirit which creates a pronounced and separating divergence in its aesthetic tones, type of imagination, turn of self-expression, ideative mind, method, form, structure. The mind accustomed to the European idea and technique expects the same kind of satisfaction here and does not meet it, feels a baffling difference to whose secret it is a stranger, and the subtly pursuing comparison and vain expectation stand in the way of a full receptivity and intimate understanding. At bottom it is an insufficient comprehension of the quite different spirit behind, the different heart of this culture that produces the mingled attraction and dissatisfaction."[2]

1. The Hindu Temperament in Literature

"The Hindu has been always decried as a dreamer & mystic. There is truth in the charge but also a singular inaccuracy. The Hindu mind is in one sense the most

concrete in the world; it seeks after abstractions, but is not satisfied with them so long as they remain abstractions. But to make the objects of this world concrete, to realise the things that are visited by sun & rain or are, at their most ethereal, sublimated figures of fine matter, that is comparatively easy, but the Hindu is not contented till he has seized things *behind* the sunlight also as concrete realities. He is passionate for the infinite, the unseen, the spiritual, but he will not rest satisfied with conceiving them, he insists on mapping the infinite, on seeing the unseen, on visualising the spiritual. The Celt throws his imagination into the infinite and is rewarded with beautiful phantoms out of which he evolves a pale, mystic and intangible poetry; the Hindu sends his heart & his intellect & eventually his whole being after his imagination and for his reward he has seen God and interpreted existence. It is this double aspect of Hindu temperament, extreme spirituality successfully attempting to work in harmony with extreme materialism, which is the secret of our religion, our life & our literature, our civilisation. On the one side we spiritualise the material out of all but a phenomenal & illusory existence, on the other we materialise the spiritual in the most definite & realistic forms; this is the secret of the high philosophic idealism which to the less capable European mind seems so impossible an intellectual atmosphere and of the prolific idolatry which to the dogmatic & formalising Christian reason seems so gross.

In any other race-temperament this mental division would have split into two broadly disparate & opposing types whose action, reaction & attempts at compromise would have comprised the history of thought. In the myriad minded &

undogmatic Hindu it worked not towards mental division but as the first discord which prepares for a consistent harmony; the best & most characteristic Hindu thought regards either tendency as essential to the perfect & subtle comprehension of existence; they are considered the positive & negative sides of one truth, & must both be grasped if we are not to rest in a half light. Hence the entire tolerance of the Hindu religion to all intellectual attitudes except sheer libertinism; hence also the marvellous perfection of graded thought-attitudes in which the Hindu mind travels between the sheer negative & the sheer positive and yet sees in them only a ladder of progressive & closely related steps rising through relative conceptions to one final & absolute knowledge.

The intellectual temperament of a people determines the main character-stamp of its poetry. There is therefore no considerable poet in Sanscrit who has not the twofold impression, (spiritual & romantic in aim, our poetry is realistic in method), who does not keep his feet on the ground even while his eyes are with the clouds. The soaring lark who loses himself in light, the ineffectual angel beating his luminous wings in the void are not denizens of the Hindu plane of temperament. Hence the expectant critic will search ancient Hindu literature in vain for the poetry of mysticism; that is only to be found in recent Bengali poetry which has felt the influence of English models. The old Sanscrit poetry was never satisfied unless it could show colour, energy & definiteness, & these are things incompatible with true mysticism. Even the Upanishads which declare the phenomenal world to be unreal, yet have a rigidly practical aim and labour in every line to make the indefinite definite &

the abstract concrete. But of all our great poets Kalidasa best exemplifies this twynatured Hindu temperament under the conditions of supreme artistic beauty & harmony. Being the most variously learned of Hindu poets he draws into his net all our traditions, ideas, myths, imaginations, allegories; the grotesque & the trivial as well as the sublime or lovely; but touching them with his magic wand teaches them to live together in the harmonising atmosphere of his poetic temperament; under his touch the grotesque becomes strange, wild & romantic; the trivial refines into a dainty & gracious slightness; the sublime yields to the law of romance, acquires a mighty grace, a strong sweetness; and what was merely lovely attains power, energy & brilliant colour. His creations in fact live in a peculiar light, which is not the light that never was on sea or land but rather our ordinary sunshine recognisable though strangely & beautifully altered. The alteration is not real; rather our vision is affected by the recognition of something concealed by the sunbeams & yet the cause of the sunbeams; but it is plain human sunlight we see always. May we not say it is that luminousness behind the veil of this sunlight which is the heaven of Hindu imagination & in all Hindu work shines through it without overpowering it? Hindu poetry is the only Paradise in which the lion can lie down with the lamb."[3]

2. The Pre-eminence of Indian Literature Among the Great Literatures of the World

"It is a singular and as yet unexplained phenomenon in the psychology of mankind that out of so many magnificent civilisations, so many powerful, cultured and vigorous nations and empires whose names and deeds crowd the pages of history, only a select few have been able to develop a

thoroughly original and self-revealing literature. Still fewer have succeeded in maintaining these characteristics from beginning to end of their literary development. There have been instances in which a nation at some period of especial energy and stress of life has for a moment arrived at a perfect self-expression, but with the effort the literary originality of the race seems to exhaust itself. We have the picture of an age, not the spiritual and mental history of a nation. Such a period of partial self-revelation we find in the flowering of Italian literature; in the *Divine Comedy,* the *Decameron,* the works of Petrarch, Machiavelli, Cellini, Castiglione, mediaeval Italy lives before our eyes for all time; but the rest of Italian prose and poetry is mere literature and nothing more. Again when we have seen the romantic spirit of Spain, its pride, punctilious sense of honour, courage, cruelty, intrigue, passion and the humour and pathos of its decline mirrored in the work of Calderon and Cervantes we seem to have exhausted all that need interest the student of humanity in Spanish literature. Similar instances offer themselves in the Sagas of the Scandinavian peoples and Germany's *Nibelungenlied,* in the extraordinary picture of Mahomedan civilisation of which the *Thousand and One Nights* are the setting. On the other hand there are literatures of high quality and world-wide interest which are yet almost purely derivative in their character and hardly succeed in rendering the national spirit to us at all, so overloaded are they with foreign material, with things learned rather than experienced; such are the American literature, the modern German literature. Instances there are again of the nation freeing itself from foreign domination in one or two kinds of writing which partially reflect its inner mind and life, while the rest of its literature remains derivative and second-

hand in its every fibre. We get to the heart of Roman life and character in Roman Satires, the annalistic histories of Livy and Tucitus, the Letters of Cicero or Pliny, but in the more splendid and ambitious portions of Latin literature we get only the half Greek dress in which the Roman mind learned to disguise itself. Let us suppose that all historical documents, archives, records were destroyed or disappeared in the process of Time and the catastrophies of civilisation, and only the pure literature survived. Of how many nations should we have the very life, heart and mind, the whole picture of its life and civilisation and the history of its development adequately revealed in its best writing? Three European nations would survive immortally before the eyes of posterity, the ancient Greeks, the modern English and French, and two Asiatic nations, the Chinese and the Hindus, – no others.

Of all these the Hindus have revealed themselves the most perfectly, continuously and on the most colossal scale, precisely because they have been the most indomitably original in the form and matter of their literature. The Vedas, Upanishads and Puranas are unique in their kind; the great Epics in their form and type of art stand apart in the epic literature of the world, the old Sanskrit drama has its affinities with a dramatic species which developed itself in Europe more than a thousand years later, and the literary epic follows laws of form and canons of art which are purely indigenous. **And this immense body of first-rate work has left us so intimate and complete a revelation of national life and history, that the absence of pure historical writings becomes a subject of merely conventional regret.** The same intense originality and depth of self-expression are continued after the decline of the classical language in the

national literatures of Maharashtra, Bengal and the Hindi-speaking North."[4]

"Everything that has phenomenal existence, takes its stand on the Eternal and has reality only as a reflection in the pure mirror of His infinite existence. This is no less true of the affections of mind and heart and the formations of thought than of the affections of matter and the formations of the physical ether-stuff out of which this material Universe is made. Every ethical ideal and every religious ideal must therefore depend for its truth and permanence on its philosophical foundation; in other words, on the closeness of its fundamental idea to the ultimate truth of the Eternal. If the ideal implies a reading of the Eternal which is only distantly true and confuses Him with His physical or psychical manifestations in this world, then it is a relatively false and impermanent ideal. Of all the ancient nations the Hindus, for this reason only, attained to the highest idea and noblest practice of morality. The Greeks confused the Eternal with His physical manifestations and realised Him in them on the side of Beauty; beauty therefore was their only law of morality which governed their civilisation. Ethics in their eyes was a matter of taste, balance and proportion; it hinged on the avoidance of excess in any direction, of excessive virtue no less than of excessive vice. The fine development of personality under the inspiration of music and through the graceful play of intellect was the essential characteristic of their education; justice, in the sense of a fine balance between one's obligations to oneself and one's obligations to others, the ideal of their polity; decorum, the basis of their public morality; the sense of proportion the one law of restraint in their private ethics. Their idea of deity was confined to the

beautiful and brilliant rabble of their Olympus. Hence the charm and versatility of Greek civilisation; hence also its impermanence as a separate culture. The Romans also confused the Eternal with His manifestations in physical nature, but they read Him on the side not of beauty but of force governed by law; the stern and orderly restraint which governs the Universe, was the feature in Nature's economy which ruled their thought. Jupiter was to them the Governor and great Legislator whose decrees were binding on all; the very meaning of the word religion which they have left to the European world was "binding back" and indicated as the essence of religion restraint and tying down to things fixed and decreed. Their ethics were full of a lofty strength and sternness. Discipline stood as the keystone of their system; discipline of actions created an inelastic faithfulness to domestic and public duties; discipline of the animal impulses an orderly courage and a cold, hard purity; discipline of the mind a conservative practical type of intellect very favourable to the creation of a powerful and well-ordered State but not to the development of a many-sided civilisation. Their type too, though more long-lived than the Greek, could not last, because of the imperfection of the ideal on which it was based. Beauty is not the ultimate Truth of the Eternal but only a partial manifestation of Him in phenomena which is externalised for our enjoyment and possession but not set before us as our standard or aim, and the soul which makes beauty its only end is soon cloyed and sated and fails for want of nourishment and of the growth which is impossible without an ever-widening and progressive activity. Power and Law are not the ultimate Truth of the Eternal but manifestations of Himself in phenomena which are set within us to develop

and around us to condition our works, but this also is not set before us as our standard or aim. The soul which follows Power as its whole end must in the long run lose measure and perish from hardness and egoism and that which sees nothing but Law wither for dryness or fossilise from the cessation of individual expansion. The Chinese seem to have envisaged the Eternal in a higher aspect than these Mediterranean races; they found Him not in the manifested physical Universe itself, but in its origination and arrangement out of the primal materials from which it arose. Heaven, Akasha or the Eternal in the element of Ether, creates in the womb of Earth or formal Matter which is the final element developed out of Ether, this arranged and orderly Universe;–He is therefore the Father, Originator, Disposer and Arranger. Veneration for parents and those who stand in the place of parents, became the governing idea of their ethics; orderly disposition, the nice care of ceremony, manners, duties, the law of their daily life; origination and organisation the main characteristics of their intellectual activity. The permanence and unconquerable vitality of their civilisation is due to their having seized on an interpretation of the Eternal which, though not His ultimate truth to humanity, is at least close to that truth and a large aspect of it. It is really Himself in his relation to the Universe but not the whole of Himself. But the ancient Aryans of India raised the veil completely and saw Him as the universal Transcendent Self of all things who is at the same time the particular present Self in each. They reached His singleness aloof from phenomena, they saw Him in every one of His million manifestations in phenomena, God in Himself, God in man. God in Nature were the "ideas" which their life expressed. Their civilisation was therefore more many-sided

and complete and their ethical and intellectual ideals more perfect and permanent than those of any other nation. They had in full measure the sense of filial duty, the careful regulation of ceremony, manners and duties, the characteristics of origination and organisation which distinguished the Chinese. They had in full measure the Roman discipline, courage, purity, faithfulness to duty, careful conservatism; but these elements of character and culture which in the Roman were hard, cold, narrow and without any touch of the spirit in man or the sense of his divine individuality, the Hindus warmed and softened with emotional and spiritual meaning and made broad and elastic by accepting the supreme importance of the soul's individual life as overriding and governing the firm organisation of morals and society. They were not purely devoted to the worship and culture of beauty like the Greeks and their art was not perfect, yet they had the sense of beauty and art in a greater degree than any other ancient people; unlike the Greeks they had a perfect sense of spiritual beauty and were therefore able to realise the delight and glory of Nature hundreds of years before the sense of it developed in Europe. On the ethical side they had a finer justice than the Greeks, a more noble public decorum, a keener sense of ethical and social balance, but they would not limit the infinite capacities of the soul; they gave play therefore to personal individuality but restrained and ordered its merely lawless ebullitions by the law of the type (caste). In addition to these various elements which they shared with one civilisation or another, they possessed a higher spiritual ideal, which governed and overrode the mere ethics *(mores* or customary morality) which the other nations had developed. Humanity, pity, chivalry, unselfishness, philanthropy, love of and self-

sacrifice for all living things, the sense of the divinity in man, the Christian virtues, the modern virtues were fully developed in India at a time when in all the rest of the world they were either non-existent or existent only in the most feeble beginnings. And they were developed because the Aryan Rishis had been able to discover the truth of the Eternal and give to the nation the vision of the Eternal in all things and the feeling of His presence in themselves and in all around them."[5]

3. The True Worth of the Western Evaluation of Hindu Drama and Poetics

"The origin of the Sanscrit drama, like the origin of all Hindu arts and sciences, is lost in the silence of antiquity; and there one might be content to leave it. But European scholarship abhors a vacuum, even where Nature allows it; confronted with a void in its knowledge, it is always ready to fill it up with a conjecture and this habit of mind while it has led to many interesting discoveries, has also fostered a spirit of fantasy and dogmatism in fantasy, which is prejudicial to sane and sober thinking. Especially in the field of Sanscrit learning this spirit has found an exceptionally favourable arena for the exercise of its ingenuity; for here there is no great body of general culture and well-informed lay opinion to check the extravagances to which a specialised knowledge is always prone. Undaunted therefore by the utter silence of history on the question, European scholars have set about filling up the void with theories which we are asked or rather bidden to accept, not as ingenious scholastic playthings, but as serious solutions based upon logical and scientific deduction from convincing internal evidence. It is necessary for reasons

I shall presently touch on to cast a cursory glance at the most important of these attempts.

The first thought that would naturally suggest itself to an average European mind in search of an origin for Hindu drama is a Greek parentage. The one great body of original drama prior to the Hindu is the Greek; from Greece Europe derives the beginnings of her civilization in almost all its parts; and especially in poetry, art and philosophy. And there was the alluring fact that Alexander of Macedon had entered India and the Bactrians established a kingdom on the banks of the Indus before the time of the earliest extant Hindu play. To the European mind the temptation to build upon this coincidence a theory was irresistible, more especially as it has always been incurably loath to believe that the Asiatic genius can be original or vigorously creative outside the sphere of religion."[6]

"Deftness & strength in dialogue, masterly workmanship in plot-making & dramatic situation and vital force of dramatic poetry are enough in themselves to make a fine and effective poetical play for the stage, but for a really great drama a farther & rarer gift is needed, the gift of dramatic characterisation. This power bases itself in its different degrees sometimes on great experience of human life, sometimes on a keen power of observation and accurate imagination making much matter out of a small circle of experience but in its richest possessors on a boundless sympathy with all kinds of humanity accompanied by a power of imbibing and afterwards of selecting & bringing out from oneself at will impressions received from others. This supreme power, European scholars agree, is wanting in Hindu dramatic literature. A mere poet like Goethe may extend unstinted &

even superlative praise to a Shacountala but the wiser critical & scholarly mind passes a far less favourable verdict; there is much art in Hindu poetry, it is said, but no genius; there is plenty of fancy but no imagination; beautiful and even moving poetry is abundant, but the characters are nil; the colouring is rich but colour is all. Indian scholars trained in our schools to repeat what they have learnt do not hesitate to add their voice to the chorus. A Hindu scholar of acute diligence and wide Sanscrit learning has even argued that the Hindu mind is constitutionally incapable of original & living creation; he has alleged the gigantic, living and vigorous personalities of the Mahabharat as an argument to prove that these characters must have been real men and women, copied from the life; since no Hindu poet could have created character with such truth and power. On the other side the Bengali critics, men of no mean literary taste and perception though inferior in pure verbal scholarship, are agreed in regarding the characters of Kalidasa and Bhavabhuti as beautiful and energetic creations, not less deserving of study than the personalities of Elizabethan drama. This contradiction, violent as it is, is not difficult to understand, since it takes its root in an element always more or less present in criticism, the national element. National character, national prejudices, national training preordain for the bulk of us the spirit in which we shall approach unfamiliar poetry. Now the average English mind is capable of appreciating character as manifested in strong action or powerfully revealing speech, but constitutionally dull to the subtleties of civilized character which have their theatre in the mind and the heart and make of a slight word, a gesture or even silence their sufficient revelation. The nations of Europe, taken in the mass, are still semicivilized; their mind

feeds on the physical, external and grossly salient features of life; where there is no brilliance & glare, they are apt to condemn the personality as characterless. A strength that shuns ostentation, a charm that is not luxuriant, not naked to the first glance, are appreciable only to the few select minds who have chastened their natural leanings by a wide and deep culture. The Hindu on his side distastes violence in action, excess in speech, ostentation or effusiveness in manner; he demands from his ideal temperance and restraint as well as nobility, truth and beneficence; the Aryan or true gentleman must be मिताचारः and मितभाषी, restrained in action and temperate in speech.

This national tendency shows itself even in our most vehement work. The Mahabharat is that section of our literature which deals most with the external and physical and corresponds best to the European idea of the epic; yet the intellectualism of even the Mahabharat, its preference of mind-issues to physical and emotional collisions and catastrophes, its continual suffusion of these when they occur with mind and ideality, the civilisation, depth and lack of mere sensational turbulence, in one word the Aryan cast of its characters, are irritating to European scholars. Thus a historian of Indian literature complains that Bhema is the one really epic character in this poem. He meant, evidently, the one character in which vast and irresistible strength, ungovernable impetuousness of passion, warlike fury & destroying anger are grandiosely displayed. But to the Hindu, whose ideas of epic are not coloured with the wrath of Achilles, epic motive and character are not confined to what is impetuous, huge and untamed; he demands a larger field for the epic and does not confine it to savage and half savage epochs. Gentleness, patience, self-

sacrifice, purity, the civilized virtues, appear to him as capable of epic treatment as martial fire, brute strength, revenge, anger, hate and ungovernable self-will. Rama mildly and purely renouncing the empire of the world for the sake of his father's honour seems to them as epic & mighty a figure as Bhema destroying Kechaka in his wild fury of triumphant strength and hatred. It is noteworthy that the European temperament finds vice more interesting than virtue, and in its heart of hearts damns the Christian qualities with faint praise as negative, not positive virtues; the difficulty European writers experience in making good men sympathetic is a commonplace of literary observation. In all these respects the Hindu attitude is diametrically opposed to the European. This attitude of the Hindu mind as evinced in the Mahabharata is so intolerable to European scholars that they have been forced to ease their irritation by conjuring up the phantom of an original ballad-epic more like their notions of what an epic should be, an epic in which the wicked characters of the present Mahabharata were the heroes and the divine champions of right of the present Mahabharata were the villains! The present Mahabharata is, they say, a sanctimonious monastic corruption of the old vigorous and half-savage poem. To the Hindu the theory naturally seems a grotesque perversion of ingenuity but its very grotesqueness is eloquent of the soil it springs from, the soil of the half barbarous temperament of the martial & industrial Teuton which cannot, even when civilised, entirely sympathise with the intellectual working of more radically civilised types. This fundamental difference of outlook on character, generating difference in critical appreciation of dramatic and epic characterisation is of general application, but it acquires a peculiar force when

we come to consider the Hindu drama; for here the ingrained disparity is emphasized by external conditions.

It has been pointed out, perhaps too often, that the Hindu drama presents some remarkable points of contact with the Elizabethan. In the mixture of prose and poetry, in the complete freedom with which time & scene vary, in the romantic lifelikeness of the action, in the mixture of comedy with serious matter, in the gorgeousness of the poetry and the direct appeal to the feelings, both these great literatures closely resemble each other. Yet the differences, though they do not strike us so readily as the similarities, are yet more vital and go deeper; for the similarities are of form, the differences of spirit. The Elizabethan drama was a great popular literature which aimed at a vigorous and realistic presentation of life and character such as would please a mixed and not very critical audience; it had therefore the strength and weakness of great popular literature; its strength was an abounding vigour in passion & action, and an unequalled grasp upon life; its weakness a crude violence, imperfection and bungling in workmanship combined with a tendency to exaggerations, horrors & monstrosities. The Hindu drama, on the contrary, was written by men of accomplished culture for an educated, often a courtly audience and with an eye to an elaborate and well-understood system of poetics.

The vital law governing Hindu poetics is that it does not seek to represent life and character primarily or for their own sake; its aim is fundamentally aesthetic, by the delicate & harmonious rendering of passion to awaken the aesthetic sense of the onlooker and gratify it by moving or subtly observed pictures of human feeling; it did not attempt to seize a man's spirit by the hair and drag it out into a storm of horror &

pity & fear and return it to him drenched, beaten and shuddering. To the Hindu it would have seemed a savage and inhuman spirit that could take any aesthetic pleasure in the sufferings of an Oedipus or a Duchess of Main or in the tragedy of a Macbeth or an Othello. Partly this arose from the divine tenderness of the Hindu nature, always noble, forbearing & gentle and at that time saturated with the sweet & gracious pity & purity which flowed from the soul of Buddha; but it was also a necessary result of the principle that aesthetic & intellectual pleasure is the first object of all poetic art. Certainly poetry was regarded as a force for elevation as well as for charm, but as it reaches these objects through aesthetic beauty, aesthetic gratification must be the whole basis of dramatic composition; all other objects are superstructural. The Hindu mind therefore shrank not only from violence, horror & physical tragedy, the Elizabethan stock-in-trade, but even from the tragic moral problems which attracted the Greek mind; still less could it have consented to occupy itself with the problems of disease, neurosis and spiritual medicology generally which are the staple of modern drama and fiction. An atmosphere of romantic beauty, a high urbanity and a gracious equipoise of the feelings, a perpetual confidence in the sunshine & the flowers, are the essential spirit of a Hindu play; pity and terror are used to awaken the feelings, but not to lacerate them, and the drama must close on the note of joy and peace; the clouds are only admitted to make more beautiful the glad sunlight from which all came & into which all must melt away. It is in an art like this that the soul finds the repose, the opportunity for being, confirmed in gentleness and in kindly culture, the unmixed intellectual and aesthetic pleasure in quest of which it has turned away

from the crudeness & incoherence of life to the magic regions of Art.

When therefore English scholars, fed on the exceedingly strong & often raw meat of the Elizabethans, assert that there are no characters in the Hindu drama, when they attribute this deficiency to the feebleness of inventive power which leads "Asiatic" poetry to concentrate itself on glowing description and imagery, seeking by excess of ornament to conceal poverty of substance, when even their Indian pupils perverted from good taste and blinded to fine discrimination by a love of the striking & a habit of gross forms & pronounced colours due to the too exclusive study of English poetry, repeat & reenforce their criticisms, the lover of Kalidasa & his peers need not be alarmed; he need not banish from his imagination the gracious company with which it is peopled as a gilded & soulless list of names. For these dicta spring from prejudice and the echo of a prejudice; they are evidence not of a more vigorous critical mind but of a restricted critical sympathy. **Certainly if we expect a Beautiful White Devil or a Jew of Malta from the Hindu dramatist, we shall be disappointed; he deals not in these splendid or horrible masks. If we come to him for a Lear or a Macbeth, we shall go away discontented; for these also are sublimities which belong to cruder civilisations and more barbarous national types; in worst crimes & deepest suffering as well as in happiness & virtue, the Aryan was more civilized & temperate, less crudely enormous than the hard, earthy & material African peoples whom in Europe he only half moralised. If he seeks a Pere Goriot or a Madame Bovary, he will still fail in his quest; for though such types doubtless existed at all times among the mass**

of the people with its large strain of African blood, Hindu Art would have shrunk from poisoning the moral atmosphere of the soul by elaborate studies of depravity. The true spirit of criticism is to seek in a literature what we can find in it of great or beautiful, not to demand from it what it does not seek to give us."[7]

4. The Ancient Worship of Delight and Beauty and the Modern Mind

"The earliest surviving poetry of ancient India was philosophical and religious, the Veda, the Upanishads, and our modern notions tend to divorce these things from the instinct of delight and beauty, to separate the religious and the philosophic from the aesthetic sense; but the miracle of these antique writings is their perfect union of beauty and power and truth, the word of truth coming out spontaneously as a word of beauty, the revealed utterance of that universal spirit who is described in the Upanishads as the eater of the honey of sweetness, *madhvadam purusam;* and this high achievement was not surprising in these ancient deep-thinking men who discovered the profound truth that all existence derives from and lives by the bliss of the eternal spirit, in the power of a universal delight, Ananda. The idea of beauty, the spontaneous satisfaction in it, the worship of it as in itself something divine, became more intellectually conscious afterwards, was a dominant strain of the later Indian mind and got to its richest outward colour and sensuous passion in the work of the classical writers, while the expression of the spiritual through the aesthetic sense is the constant sense of Indian art, as it is also the inspiring motive of a great part of the later religion and poetry. Japan and China, more especially

perhaps southern China, for the north has been weighted by a tendency to a more external and formal idea of measure and harmony, had in a different way this fusion of the spiritual and aesthetic mind and it is a distinguishing stamp of their art and culture. The Persian had a sort of sensuous magic of the transforming aesthesis born of psychic delight and vision. Ancient Greece did all its work of founding European civilisation by a union of a subtle and active intelligence with a fine aesthetic spirit and worship of beauty. The Celtic nations again seem always to have had by nature a psychic delicacy and subtlety united with an instinctive turn for imaginative beauty to which we surely owe much of the finer strain in English literature. But there these spontaneous miracles of fusion end and in the mind of later peoples who come in and take possession with a less innate, a more derivative culture, the sense of beauty works with a certain effort and is clogged by many heavier elements which are in conflict with and prevent the sureness of the aesthetic perception. There is in their cruder temperament and intelligence a barbaric strain which worships rudely the power and energy of life and is not at home with the delight of beauty, an ethical and puritanic strain which looks askance at art and beauty and pleasure, a heavy scholastic or a dry scientific intellectual strain which follows after truth with a conscientious and industrious diligence but without vision and fine aesthesis. And the modern mind, inheritor of all this past, is a divided and complex mind which strives at its best to get back at the old thing on a larger scale and realise some oneness of its many strands of experience, but has not yet found the right meeting-place; and it is besides still labouring under the disadvantage of its aberration into a mechanical, economical, materialistic,

utilitarian civilisation from which it cannot get free, though it is struggling to shake off that dullest side of it for which a naked and unashamed riot of ugliness could be indulged in without any prickings of the spiritual conscience but rather with a smug self-righteousness in the hideous, the vulgar and the ignoble. **The day when we get back to the ancient worship of delight and beauty, will be our day of salvation; for without these things there can be neither an assured nobility and sweetness in poetry and art, nor a satisfied dignity and fullness of life nor a harmonious perfection of the spirit."**[8]

"At one time poetry was a revelation to the race of the life of the gods and man and the meaning of the world and the beauty and power of existence and through its vision and joy and the height and clarity of its purpose it became creative of the life of the people. Ananda, the joy of the spirit in itself carrying in it a revelation of the powers of its conscious being, was to the ancient Indian idea the creative principle, and ancient poetry did thus creatively reveal to the people its soul and its possibilities by forms of beauty and suggestions of power in a way we have to a great extent lost by our later pettier use of this always great art and medium. One might almost say that ancient India was created by the Veda and Upanishads and that the visions of inspired seers made a people. That sublime poetry with its revelation of godhead and the joy and power of life and truth and immortality or its revelation of the secrets of the self and the powers of its manifestation in man and the universe and of man's return to self-knowledge got into the very blood and mind and life of the race and made itself the fountain-head of all that incessant urge to spirituality which has been its distinguishing gift and cultural motive. The

Mahabharata and the Ramayana revealing to it in forms of noble beauty and grandiose or beautiful or telling types of character the joy of its forms of life, the significance of its spiritual, ethical and aesthetic ideals, the powers and dangers of the human soul, its godheads and its titanisms have played a great and well-recognised formative part second only to religion and the stress of religio-social training in the life of the Indian peoples. And even later the religious poetry of the Vaishnavas, Shaivas, Shaktas has entered powerfully into the life of the nation and helped to shape its temperament and soul-type. The effect of the Homeric poems in Greece, the intimate connection of poetry and art with the public life of Athens sprang from a similar but less steep height of poetic and artistic motive. The epic poems revealed the Hellenic people to itself in the lucid and clear nobility and beauty of an uplifting of life and an aesthetic sense of the humanity and divinity of man; the later art and poetry interpreted to Athens her religious ideas, her thought, her aesthetic instincts, the soul of grandeur and beauty of her culture.

And in all these instances, as in others like the art and poetry of Japan and of China, a more or less profoundly intuitive creation from the depths and expression through poetic delight of the soul of a people has been the secret of this effect and this power of creation or influence. But in other times and places poetry has been more a servant of aesthetic pleasure than a creative master of life and great spiritual agent; when it is at all great, it cannot fail to be that to a certain extent, but it has not so acted as a whole, centrally, in the same large and effective way or with the same high conscience of its function. It has leaned too much on the surface or external interests of life for the pleasure of the intellect and

imagination and failed too much to create life from within by a deeper delight in the power of vision of the soul and spirit. The high energy of English poetry has done great and interesting things; it has portrayed life with charm and poetic interest in Chaucer, made thought and character and action and passion wonderful to the life soul in us in Shakespeare, seen and spoken with nobility and grandeur of vision and voice in Milton, intellectualised vigorous or pointed commonplace in Pope and Dryden, played with elegance and beauty on the lesser strings with the Victorians or cast out here and there a profounder strain of thought or more passionate and aspiring voice, and if the most spiritual strains have been few, yet it has dreamed in light in Shelley or drawn close in Wordsworth to the soul in Nature. And it may seem hard to say in the face of all this splendour and vigour and glow and beauty and of the undeniable cultural influence, that something was too often lacking which would have made the power of this poetry more central and intimate and a greater direct force on the life of the people, and yet this is, I think, true in spite of exceptions, not only here, but of almost all the later European literature. To get back to a profounder centre, to create from within in a more universal power of the spirit and its vision and delight of existence will supply the missing element and make poetry once again young and mighty and creative and its word deeply effective on life by the power of a greater Ananda."[9]

II. The Vedas

"At the root of all that we Hindus have done, thought and said through these many thousands of years, behind all we are and seek to be, there lies concealed, the fount of our philosophies, the bedrock of our religions, the kernel of our thought, the explanation of our ethics and society, the summary of our civilisation, the rivet of our nationality, a small body of speech, Veda. From this one seed developing into many forms the multitudinous and magnificent birth called Hinduism draws its inexhaustible existence. Buddhism too with its offshoot, Christianity, flows from the same original source. It has left its stamp on Persia, through Persia on Judaism, through Judaism, Christianity and Sufism on Islam, and through Buddha on Confucianism, and through Christ and mediaeval mysticism, Greek and German philosophy and Sanskrit learning on the thought and civilisation of Europe. There is no part of the world's spirituality, of the world's religion, of the world's thought which would be what it is today, if the Veda had not existed. Of no other body of speech in the world can this be said."[10]

"The early mind of India in the magnificent youth of the nation, when a fathomless spiritual insight was at work, a subtle intuitive vision and a deep, clear and greatly outlined intellectual and ethical thinking and heroic action and creation which founded and traced the plan and made the permanent structure of her unique culture and civilisation, is represented by four of the supreme productions of her genius, the Veda, the Upanishads and the two vast epics, and each of them is of a kind, a form and an intention not easily paralleled in any other literature. The two first are the visible foundation of

her spiritual and religious being, the others a large creative interpretation of her greatest period of life, of the ideas that informed and the ideals that governed it and the figures in which she saw man and Nature and God and the powers of the universe. The Veda gave us the first types and figures of these things as seen and formed by an imaged spiritual intuition and psychological and religious experience; the Upanishads constantly breaking through and beyond form and symbol and image without entirely abandoning them, since always they come in as accompaniment or undertone, reveal in a unique kind of poetry the ultimate and unsurpassable truths of self and God and man and the world and its principles and powers in their most essential, their profoundest and most intimate and their most ample realities,– highest mysteries and clarities vividly seen in an irresistible, an unwalled perception that has got through the intuitive and psychological to the sheer spiritual vision. And after that we have powerful and beautiful developments of the intellect and the life and of ideal, ethical, aesthetic, psychic, emotional and sensuous and physical knowledge and idea and vision and experience of which the epics are the early record and the rest of the literature the continuation; but the foundation remains the same throughout, and whatever new and often larger types and significant figures replace the old or intervene to add and modify and alter the whole ensemble, are in their essential build and character transmutations and extensions of the original vision and first spiritual experience and never an unconnected departure. There is a persistence, a continuity of the Indian mind in its literary creation in spite of great changes as consistent as that which we find in painting and sculpture."[11]

1. How the Vedas Came to be Unintelligible to Modern Man

*"The Vedas are the roots of Indian civilisation and the supreme authority in Indian religion. For three thousand years, by the calculation of European scholars, for a great deal more, in all probability, the faith of this nation, certainly one of the most profound, acute and intellectual in the world, has not left its hold on this cardinal point of belief. Its greatest and most rationalistic minds have never swerved from the national faith….**India by an inevitable law of her being casts out, sooner or later[,] everything that is not Vedic**.... Religious movements & revolutions have come & gone or left their mark but [a]fter all and through all the Veda remains to us our Rock of the Ages, our eternal foundation....The Upanishads, mighty as they are, only aspire to bring out, arrange philosophically in the language of later thinking and crown with the supreme name of Brahman the eternal knowledge enshrined in the Vedas. Yet for some two thousand years at least no Indian has really understood the Vedas."*[12]

"Since our earliest ages the Veda has been, in the invincible tradition of our race, the bedrock of all our creeds; in this our goddess of veiled and ancient speech we have always persisted in seeing the fruitful mother of all our Indian spirituality. For it is nothing but the simple truth, evident whenever we look below the surface & beyond the details, that every creed, sect, school of philosophy which has had any roots in our Indian temperament or any vitality of survival in our Indian surroundings has been in its secret nature, if not in its open features, a child of the eternal Vedic inspiration. All the outbursts of religious life that have helped to maintain or renew through the course of several millenniums the vitality of our race, the eternal richness and fruitfulness of our ancient

culture, the fineness and profound sincerity of our undying spiritual attainment and endeavour, were derived, if we trace them to their remote sources, from the word or the substance of the Veda. All our religious innovators, restorers, systematisers, "wittingly or unwittingly, of good will or against their grain, have been stirred to their task by some vibration that reached them from those far-off ages. Our Darshana, Tantra and Purana, our Shaivism, Shakt-ism and Vaishnavism, our orthodoxy, heresy and heterodoxy, even when they have been the most perfect misunderstandings of each other, have always been imperfect understandings of one Vedic truth. Shankara clasped the head of Vedic truth, Ramanuja embraced its heart; but both the great disputants were dazzled by their adoration of the body of one veiled deity. Our greatest modern minds are mere tributaries of the old Rishis. This very Shankara who seems to us a giant, had only a fragment of their knowledge. Buddha wandered away on a byepath of their universal kingdom. In our own day Ramakrishna lived in his being and concretised in his talk, Vivekananda threw out into brilliance of manysided thought and eloquent speech the essence of ancient Veda. The Veda was the beginning of our spiritual knowledge; the Veda will remain its end. These compositions of an unknown antiquity are as the many breasts of the eternal Mother of knowledge from which our succeeding ages have all been fed.

Yet, of these our mighty origins, how much do we really understand? The four Vedas, written in a language which has ceased to be intelligible to us, couched in a vocabulary which, by its resemblance to classical Sanscrit as much as by its difference, offers an unequalled vantage-ground no less for natural misunderstanding than for the deliberate ingenuities

of the scholar, using for their expression of deep religious and psychological truths a scheme of terms and symbols of which the key has long been withdrawn from us, remain to us even now a sacred but a sealed volume. Imperfectly understanding their secret even in our more ancient epochs, we have allowed them, as the current of time carried us farther away from our beginnings, to fall into a sacred neglect and almost into a revered oblivion."[13]

"The history of the Veda is one of the most remarkable & paradoxical phenomena of human experience. In the belief of the ancient Indians the three Vedas, books believed to be inspired directly from the source of all Truth, books at any rate of an incalculable antiquity and of a time-honoured sanctity, were believed to be the repositories of a divine knowledge. The man who was a Veda knower, Vedavid, had access to the deepest knowledge about God and existence. He knew the one thing that was eternally true, the one thing thoroughly worth knowing. The right possession of the ancient hymns was not supposed to be possible by a superficial reading, not supposed to result directly even from a mastery of the scholastic aids to a right understanding, – grammar, language, prosody, astronomy, ritual, pronunciation,–but depended finally and essentially on explanation by a fit spiritual teacher who understood the inner sense that was couched in the linguistic forms & figures of the Scriptures. The Veda so understood was held to be the fountain, the bedrock, the master-volume of all true Hinduism; that which accepted not the Veda, was and must be instantly departure from the right path, the true truth. Even when the material & ritualistic sense of the Veda had so much dominated & hidden in men's ideas of it its higher parts that to go beyond it seemed

imperative, the reverence for this ancient Scripture remained intact. At the time when the Gita in its modern form was composed, we find this double attitude dominant. There is a strong censure of the formalists, the ritualists, who constantly dispute about the Veda and hold it as a creed that there is no other truth and who apply it only for the acquisition of worldly mastery and enjoyments, but at the same time the great store of spiritual truth in the old sacred writings and their high value are never doubted or depreciated. There is in all the Vedas as much utility to the Brahma-knower as to one who would drink there is utility in a well flooded with water on all its sides. Krishna speaking as God Himself declares "I alone am He who is to be known by all the Vedas; I am He who made Vedanta and who know the Veda." The sanctity and spiritual value of the Vedas could not receive a more solemn seal of confirmation. It is evident also from this last passage that the more modern distinction which grew upon the Hindu mind with the fading of Vedic knowledge, the distinction by which the old Rigveda and Sama and Yajur are put aside as ritualistic writings, possessing a value only for ceremonial of sacrifice, and all search for spiritual knowledge is confined to the Vedanta, was unrecognised & even unknown to the writer of the Gita. To him the Vedas are writings full of spiritual truth; the language of the line Sarveshu vedeshwaham eva vedyo, the significance of the double emphasis in the etymological sense of "knowledge" in Vedavid, "the knower of the book of knowledge" as well as in vedeshu vedyo are unmistakable. Other means of knowledge even more powerful than study of the Vedas the Gita recognises; but in its epoch the Veda even as apart from the Upanishads still held its place of honour as the repository of the high and divine knowledge;

it still bore upon it the triple seal of the Brahmavidya.

When was this traditional honour first lost or at least tarnished and the ancient Scripture relegated to the inferior position it occupies in the thought of Shankaracharya[?] I presume there can be little doubt that the chief agent in this work of destruction was the power of Buddhism. The preachings of Gautama and his followers worked against Vedic knowledge by a double process. First, by entirely denying the authority of the Veda, laying a violent stress on its ritualistic character and destroying the general practice of formal sacrifice, it brought the study of the Veda into disrepute as a means of attaining the highest good while at the same time it destroyed the necessity of that study for ritualistic purposes which had hitherto kept alive the old Vedic studies; secondly, in a less direct fashion, by substituting for a time at least the vernacular tongues for the old simple Sanscrit as the more common & popular means of religious propaganda and by giving them a literary position and repute, it made a general return to the old generality of the Vedic studies practically impossible. For the Vedas were written in an ancient form of the literary tongue the real secret of which had already been to a great extent lost even to the learned; such knowledge of it as remained, subsisted with difficulty by means of a laborious memorising and a traditional scholarship, conservative indeed but still slowly diminishing and replacing more & more real knowledge by uncertainty, disputed significance and the continuously increasing ingenuities of the ritualist, the grammarian and the sectarian polemical disputant. When after the fall of the Buddhistic Mauryas, feeble successors of the great Asoka, first under Pushyamitra and his son and afterwards under the Guptas,

Hinduism revived, a return to the old forms of the creed and the old Vedic scholarship was no longer possible. The old pre Buddhistic Sanscrit was, to all appearance, a simple, vigorous, living language understood though not spoken by the more intelligent of the common people just as the literary language of Bengal, the language of Bankim Chandra, is understood by every intelligent Bengali, although in speech more contracted forms and a very different vocabulary are in use. But the new Sanscrit of the revival tended to be more & more a learned, scholarly, polished and rhetorical tongue, certainly one of the most smooth, stately & grandiose ever used by human lips, but needing a special & difficult education to understand its grammar, its rhetoric, its rolling compounds and its long flowing sentences. The archaic language of the Vedas ceased to be the common study even of the learned and was only mastered, one is constrained to believe with less & less efficiency, by a small number of scholars. An education in which it took seven years to master the grammar of the language, became inevitabl[y] the grave of all true Vedic knowledge. Veda ceased to be the pivot of the Hindu religion, and its place was taken by the only religious compositions which were modern enough in language and simple enough in style to be popular, the Puranas. Moreover, the conception of Veda popularised by Buddhism, a Scripture of ritual and of animal sacrifice, persisted in the popular mind even after the decline of Buddhism and the revival of great philosophies ostensibly based on Vedic authority. It was under the dominance of this ritualistic conception that Sayana wrote his great commentary which has ever since been to the Indian Pundit the one decisive authority on the sense of Veda. The four Vedas have definitely taken a subordinate place as

karmakanda, books of ritual; and to the Upanishads alone, in spite of occasional appeals to the text of the earlier Scriptures, is reserved that aspect of spiritual knowledge & teaching which alone justifies the application to any human composition of the great name of Veda.

But in spite of this great downfall the ancient tradition, the ancient sanctity survived. The people knew not what Veda might be; but the old idea remained fixed that Veda is always the fountain of Hinduism, the standard of orthodoxy, the repository of a sacred knowledge; not even the loftiest philosopher or the most ritualistic scholar could divest himself entirely of this deeply ingrained & instinctive conception. To complete the degradation of Veda, to consummate the paradox of its history, a new element had to appear, a new form of intelligence undominated by the ancient tradition & the mediaeval method to take possession of Vedic interpretation. European scholarship which regards human civilisation as a recent progression starting yesterday with the Fiji islander and ending today with Haeckel and Rockefeller, conceiving ancient culture as necessarily primitive culture and primitive culture as necessarily half savage culture, has, turned the light of its Comparative Philology & Comparative Mythology on the Veda. The result we all know. Not only all vestige of sanctity, but all pretension to any kind of spiritual knowledge or experience disappears from the Veda. The old Rishis are revealed to us as a race of ignorant and lusty barbarians who drank & enjoyed and fought, gathered riches & procreated children, sacrificed and praised the Powers of Nature as if they were powerful men & women, and had no higher hope or idea. The only idea they had of religion beyond

an occasional sense of sin and perpetual preoccupation with a ritual barbarously encumbered with a mass of meaningless ceremonial details, was a mythology composed of the phenomena of dawn, night, rain, sunshine and harvest and the facts of astronomy converted into a wildly confused & incoherent mass of allegorical images and personifications. Nor, with the European interpretation can we be proud of our early forefathers as poets and singers. The versification of the Vedic hymns is indeed noble and melodious,–though the incorrect method of writing them established by the old Indian scholars, often conceals their harmonious construction,–but no other praise can be given. The Nibelungenlied, the Icelandic Sagas, the Kalewala[,] the Homeric poems, were written in the dawn of civilisation by semibarbarous races, by poets not superior in culture to the Vedic Rishis; yet though their poetical value varies, the nations that possess them, need not be ashamed of their ancient heritage. The same cannot be said of the Vedic poems presented to us by European scholarship. Never surely was there even among savages such a mass of tawdry, glittering, confused & purposeless imagery; never such an inane & useless burden of epithets; never such slipshod & incompetent writing; never such a strange & almost insane incoherence of thought & style; never such a bald poverty of substance. The attempt of patriotic Indian scholars to make something respectable out of the Veda, is futile. If the modern interpretation stands, the Vedas are no doubt of high interest & value to the philologist, the anthropologist & the historian; but poetically and spiritually they are null and worthless. Its reputation for spiritual knowledge & deep religious wealth,

is the most imposing & baseless hoax that has ever been worked upon the imagination of a whole people throughout many millenniums.

Is this, then, the last word about the Veda? Or .... is it not rather the culmination of a long increasing & ever progressing error? The theory this book is written to enunciate & support is simply this, that our forefathers of early Vedantic times understood the Veda, to which they were after all much nearer than ourselves, far better than Sayana, far better than Roth & Max Muller, that they were, to a great extent, in possession of the real truth about the Veda, that that truth was indeed a deep spiritual truth, karmakanda as well as jnanakanda of the Veda contains an ancient knowledge, a profound, complex & well ordered psychology & philosophy, strange indeed to our modern conception, expressed indeed in language still stranger & remoter from our modern use of language, but not therefore either untrue or unintelligible, and that this knowledge is the real foundation of our later religious developments, & Veda, not only by historical continuity, but in real truth & substance is the parent & bedrock of all later Hinduism, of Vedanta, Sankhya, Nyaya, Yoga, of Vaishnavism & Shaivism & Shaktism, of Tantra & Purana, even, in a remoter fashion, of Buddhism & the later unorthodox religions. From this quarry all have hewn their materials or from this far off source drawn unknowingly their waters; from some hidden seed in the Veda they have burgeoned into their wealth of branchings & foliage."[14]

2. The Vedas in the Eyes of the Ancient Vedic Rishis and Vedantic Seers

In the eyes of the ancient rishis and seers the Veda was

the Word discovering the Truth and clothing in image and symbol the mystic significances of life. "It was a divine discovery and unveiling of the potencies of the word, of its mysterious revealing and creative capacity, not the word of the logical and reasoning or the aesthetic intelligence, but the intuitive and inspired rhythmic utterance, the *mantra*. Image and myth were freely used, not as an imaginative indulgence, but as living parables and symbols of things that were very real to their speakers and could not otherwise find their own intimate and native shape in utterance, and the imagination itself was a priest of greater realities than those that meet and hold the eye and mind limited by the external suggestions of life and the physical existence. This was their idea of the sacred poet, a mind visited by some highest light and its forms of idea and word, a seer and hearer of the Truth, *kavayaḥ satyaśrutaḥ*. The poets of the Vedic verse certainly did not regard their function as it is represented by modern scholars, they did not look on themselves as a sort of superior medicine-men and makers of hymn and incantation to a robust and barbarous tribe, but as seers and thinkers, *ṛṣi*, *dhīra*. These singers believed that they were in possession of a high, mystic and hidden truth, claimed to be the bearers of a speech acceptable to a divine knowledge, and expressly so speak of their utterances, as secret words which declare their whole significance only to the seer, *kavaye nivacanāniṇyā vacāṁsi*. And to those who came after them the Veda was a book of knowledge, and even of the supreme knowledge, a revelation, a great utterance of eternal and impersonal truth as it had been seen and heard in the inner experience of inspired and semi-divine thinkers. The smallest circumstances of the sacrifice around which the hymns were written were intended

to carry a symbolic and psychological power of significance, as was well known to the writers of the ancient Brahmanas. The sacred verses, each by itself held to be full of a divine meaning, were taken by the thinkers of the Upanishads as the profound and pregnant seed-words of the truth they sought and the highest authority they could give for their own sublime utterances was a supporting citation from their predecessors with the formula, *tad eṣā ṛcābhyuktā,* "This is that word which was spoken by the Rig-Veda." Western scholars choose to imagine that the successors of the Vedic Rishis were in error, that, except for some later hymns, they put a false and non-existent meaning into the old verses and that they themselves, divided from the Rishis not only by ages of time but by many gulfs and separating seas of an intellectualised mentality, know infinitely better. But mere common sense ought to tell us that those who were so much nearer in both ways to the original poets had a better chance of holding at least the essential truth of the matter and suggests at least the strong probability that the Veda was really what it professes to be, the seeking for a mystic knowledge, the first form of the constant attempt of the Indian mind, to which it has always been faithful, to look beyond the appearances of the physical world and through its own inner experiences to the godheads, powers, self-existence of the One of whom the sages speak variously–the famous phrase in which the Veda utters its own central secret, *ekaṁ sad viprā bahudhā vadanti*."[15]

"The Vedic mind, looking out on the great movement of material forces around it, aware of their regularity, law, universality, saw in them symbols and expressions of a diviner life behind. Everywhere they felt the presence of intelligence, of life, of a soul. But they did not make the common

distinction between soul and matter. Matter was to them itself a term and expression of the life and soul they had discovered. It was this peculiarity of thought which constituted the essential characteristic of the Vedic outlook and has stood at the root and basis of all Indian thought and religion then & subsequently."[16]

"...the Brahmanas are in their nature rubrics of directions to the priests for the right performance of the outward Vedic sacrifice,– that system of symbolic & effective offerings to the gods of Soma-wine, clarified butter or consecrated animals in which the complex religion of the Veda embodied itself for material worship, – rubrics accompanied by speculative explanations of old ill-understood details & the popular myths & traditions that had sprung up from obscure allusions in the hymns. Whatever we may think of the Brahmanas, they merely affirm the side of outward ritualism which had grown in a huge & cumbrous mass round the first simple rites of the Vedic Rishis; they do not exclude the existence of deeper meanings & higher purposes in the ancient Scripture. Not only so, but they practically affirm them by including in the Aranyakas compositions of a wholly different spirit & purpose, the Upanishads, compositions professedly intended to bring out the spiritual gist and drift of the earlier Veda. It is clear therefore that to the knowledge or belief of the men of those times the Vedas had a double aspect, an aspect of outward and effective ritual, believed also to be symbolical,–for the Brahmanas are continually striving to find a mystic symbolism in the most obvious details of the sacrifice;– and an aspect of highest & divine truth hidden behind these symbols. The Upanishads themselves have always been known as Vedanta. This word is nowadays often used &

spoken of as if it meant the end of Veda, in the sense that here historically the religious development commenced in the Rigveda culminated; but obviously it means the culmination of Veda in a very different sense, the ultimate and highest knowledge & fulfilment towards which the practices & strivings of the Vedic Rishis mounted, extricated from the voluminous mass of the Vedic poems and presented according to the inner realisation of great Rishis like Yajnavalkya & Janaka in a more modern style and language."[17]

"The Upanishads everywhere rest their highly spiritual and deeply mystic doctrines on the Veda. We read in the Isha Upanishad of Surya as the Sun God, but it is the Sun of spiritual illumination, of Agni as the Fire, but it is the inner fire that burns up all sin and crookedness. In the Kena Indra, Agni and Vayu seek to know the supreme Brahman and their greatness is estimated by the nearness with which they "touched" him,– edistham pasparsha. Uma the daughter of Himavan, the Woman, who reveals the truth to them is clearly enough no natural phenomenon. In the Brihadaranyaka, the most profound, subtle and mystical of human scriptures, the gods and Titans are the masters, respectively of good and of evil. In the Upanishads generally the word devah is used as almost synonymous with the forces and functions of sense, mind and intellect. The element of symbolism is equally clear. To the terms of the Vedic ritual, to their very syllables a profound significance is everywhere attached; several incidents related in the Upanishads show the deep sense then and before entertained that the sacrifices had a spiritual meaning which must be known if they were to be conducted with full profit or even with perfect safety. The Brahmanas everywhere are at pains to bring out a minute symbolism in the least

circumstances of the ritual, in the clarified butter, the sacred grass, the dish, the ladle. Moreover, we see even in the earliest Upanishads already developed the firm outlines and minute details of an extraordinary psychology, physics, cosmology which demand an ancient development and centuries of Yogic practice and mystic speculation to account for their perfect form and clearness. This psychology, this physics, this cosmology persist almost unchanged through the whole history of Hinduism. We meet them in the Puranas; they are the foundation of the Tantra; they are still obscurely practised in various systems of Yoga. And throughout, they have rested on a declared Vedic foundation."[18]

"From the Brahmanas as well as from the Upanishads it is evident that the Veda came down to the men of those days in a double aspect, as the heart of a great body of effective ritual, but also as the repository of a deep and sacred knowledge, Veda and not merely worship. This idea of a philosophic or theosophic purport in the hymns was not created by the early Hindu mystics, it was inherited by them. Their attitude to the ritual even when it was performed mechanically without the possession of this knowledge was far from hostile; but as ritual, they held it to be inferior in force and value, avaram karma, a lower kind of works and not the highest good; only when performed with possession of the knowledge could it lead to its ultimate results, to Vedanta. "By that" says the Chhandogya Upanishad, "both perform karma[,] both he who knows this so and he who knows not. Yet the Ignorance and the Knowledge are different things and only what one does with the knowledge,–with faith, with the Upanishad,–that has the greater potency."[19]

3. The Vedas and the Work of the Vedic Scholars – Yaska and Sayana

"The text of the Veda which we possess has remained uncorrupted for over two thousand years. It dates, so far as we know, from that great period of Indian intellectual activity, contemporaneous with the Greek efflorescence, but earlier in its beginnings, which founded the culture and civilisation recorded in the classical literature of the land. We cannot say to how much earlier a date our text may be carried. But there are certain considerations which justify us in supposing for it an almost enormous antiquity. An accurate text, accurate in every syllable, accurate in every accent, was a matter of supreme importance to the Vedic ritualists; for on scrupulous accuracy depended the effectuality of the sacrifice. We are told, for instance, in the Brahmanas the story of Twashtri who, performing a sacrifice to produce an avenger of his son slain by Indra, produced, owing to an error of accentuation, not a slayer of Indra, but one of whom Indra must be the slayer. The prodigious accuracy of the ancient Indian memory is also notorious. And the sanctity of the text prevented such interpolations, alterations, modernizing revisions as have replaced by the present form of the Mahabharata the ancient epic of the Kurus. It is not, therefore, at all improbable that we have the Sanhita of Vyasa substantially as it was arranged by the great sage and compiler."[20]

"We have, then, as our basis a text which we can confidently accept and which, even if we hold it in a few instances doubtful or defective, does not at any rate call for that often licentious labour of emendation to which some of the European classics lend themselves. This is, to start with, a

priceless advantage for which we cannot be too grateful to the conscientiousness of the old Indian learning."[21]

"It is when we come to the interpretation of the Veda and seek help from ancient Indian scholarship that we feel compelled to make the largest reserves. For even in the earlier days of classical erudition the ritualistic view of the Veda was already dominant, the original sense of the words, the lines, the allusions, the clue to the structure of the thought had been long lost or obscured; nor was there in the erudite that intuition or that spiritual experience which might have partly recovered the lost secret. In such a field mere learning, especially when it is accompanied by an ingenious scholastic mind, is as often a snare as a guide.

In Yaska's lexicon, our most important help, we have to distinguish between two elements of very disparate value. When Yaska gives as a lexicographer the various meanings of Vedic words, his authority is great and the help he gives is of the first importance. It does not appear that he possessed all the ancient significances, for many had been obliterated by Time and Change and in the absence of a scientific Philology could not be restored. But much also had been preserved by tradition. Wherever Yaska preserves this tradition and does not use a grammarian's ingenuity, the meanings he assigns to words, although not always applicable to the text to which he refers them, can yet be confirmed as possible senses by a sound Philology. But Yaska the etymologist does not rank with Yaska the lexicographer. Scientific grammar was first developed by Indian learning, but the beginnings of sound philology we owe to modern research. Nothing can be more fanciful and lawless than the methods of mere ingenuity used by the old etymologists down even to the nineteenth century, whether in

Europe or India. And when Yaska follows these methods, we are obliged to part company with him entirely. Nor in his interpretation of particular texts is he more convincing than the later erudition of Sayana.

The commentary of Sayana closes the period of original and living scholastic work on the Veda which Yaska's Nirukta among other important authorities may be said to open. The lexicon was compiled in the earlier vigour of the Indian mind when it was assembling its prehistoric gains as the materials of a fresh outburst of originality; the Commentary is almost the last great work of the kind left to us by the classical tradition in its final refuge and centre in Southern India before the old culture was dislocated and broken into regional fragments by the shock of the Mahomedan conquest.

Since then we have had jets of strong and original effort, scattered attempts at new birth and novel combination, but work of quite this general, massive and monumental character has hardly been possible. The commanding merits of this great legacy of the past are obvious. Composed by Sayana with the aid of the most learned scholars of his time, it is a work representing an enormous labour of erudition, more perhaps than could have been commanded at that time by a single brain. Yet it bears the stamp of the coordinating mind. It is consistent in the mass in spite of its many inconsistencies of detail, largely planned, yet most simply, composed in a style lucid, terse and possessed of an almost literary grace one would have thought impossible in the traditional form of the Indian commentary. Nowhere is there any display of pedantry; the struggle with the difficulties of the text is skilfully veiled and there is an air of clear acuteness and of assured, yet unassuming authority which imposes even on the dissident.

The first Vedic scholars in Europe admired especially the rationality of Sayana's interpretations.

Yet, even for the external sense of the Veda, it is not possible to follow either Sayana's method or his results without the largest reservation. It is not only that he admits in his method licences of language and construction which are unnecessary and sometimes incredible, nor that he arrives at his results, often, by a surprising inconsistency in his interpretation of common Vedic terms and even of fixed Vedic formulae. These are defects of detail, unavoidable perhaps in the state of the materials with which he had to deal. But it is the central defect of Sayana's system that he is obsessed always by the ritualistic formula* and seeks continually to force the sense of the Veda into that narrow mould."[22]

"In the formula of the philosophic schools, the hymns, even while standing as a supreme authority for knowledge, are yet principally and fundamentally concerned with the

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** "The ritualism of Sayana is an error based on a false preconception popularised by the Buddhists & strengthened by the writers of the Darshanas, – on the theory that the karma of the Veda was only an outward ritual & ceremony; the naturalism of the modern scholars is an error based on a false preconception encouraged by the previous misconceptions of Sayana,–on the theory of the Vedas [as] not only an ancient but a primitive document, the production of semi-barbarians. The Vedantic writers of the Upanishads had alone the real key to the secret of the Vedas; not indeed that they possessed the full knowledge of a dialect even then too ancient to be well understood, but they had the knowledge of the Vedic Rishis, possessed their psychology, & many of their general ideas, even many of their particular terms & symbols."*[23]

Karmakanda, with works,–and by works was understood, preeminently, the ritualistic observation of the Vedic sacrifices. Sayana labours always in the light of this idea. Into this mould he moulds the language of the Veda, turning the mass of its characteristic words into the ritualistic significances,–food, priest, giver, wealth, praise, prayer, rite, sacrifice.

Wealth and food; – for it is the most egoistic and materialistic objects that are proposed as the aim of the sacrifice, possessions, strength, power, children, servants, gold, horses, cows, victory, the slaughter and the plunder of enemies, the destruction of rival and malevolent critic. As one reads and finds hymn after hymn interpreted in this sense, one begins to understand better the apparent inconsistency in the attitude of the Gita which, regarding always the Veda as divine knowledge, yet censures severely the champions of an exclusive Vedism, all whose flowery teachings were devoted solely to material wealth, power and enjoyment.

It is the final and authoritative binding of the Veda to this lowest of all its possible senses that has been the most unfortunate result of Sayana's commentary. The dominance of the ritualistic interpretation had already deprived India of the living use of its greatest Scripture and of the true clue to the entire sense of the Upanishads. Sayana's commentary put a seal of finality on the old misunderstanding which could not be broken for many centuries. And its suggestions, when another civilisation discovered and set itself to study the Veda, became in the European mind the parent of fresh errors."[24]

"The modern world cares little for orthodox Hindu opinion, for the opinion of its Pandits or for the ancient authority of its received guides; putting these things aside as

the heavy and now useless baggage of the dead past it moves on free and unhampered to its objective, seeking ever fresh vistas of undiscovered knowledge. But a Hindu writer, still holding the faith of his ancestors, owes a certain debt to the immediate past, not so much as to hamper his free enquiry and outlook upon truth, but enough to demand from him a certain respect for whatever in it is really respectworthy and some attempt to satisfy his coreligionists that in opening out a fresh outlook on ancient knowledge he is not uprooting truths that are essential to their common religion. Nothing in those truths compels us to accept the plenary authority of Sayana or the ritualistic interpretation of the Vedas. The hymns of the Veda are, for us, inspired truth and therefore infallible; it follows that the only interpretative authority on them which can claim also to be infallible is one which itself works by the faculty of divine inspiration. The only works for which the ordinary tradition claims this equal authority are the Brahmanas, Aranyakas & Upanishads. Even among these authorities, if we accept them as all and equally inspired and authoritative, – and on this point Hindus are not in entire agreement, –the Brahmanas which deal with the ceremonial detail of Vedic sacrifice, are authoritative for the ritual only; for the inner sense the Upanishads are the fit authority. Sayana can lay claim to no such sanctity for his opinions. He is no ancient Rishi, nor even an inspired religious teacher, but a grammarian and scholar writing in the twel[fth] century after Christ several millenniums subsequent to the Rishis to whom Veda was revealed. By his virtues & defects as a scholar his interpretation must be judged. His erudition is vast, his industry colossal; he has so occupied the field that everyone who approaches the Veda must pass to it under his shadow;

his commentary is a mine of knowledge about Vedic Sanscrit and full of useful hints for the interpretation of Veda. But there the tale of his merits ends. Other qualities are needed for a successful Vedic commentary which in Sayana are conspicuous by their absence; and his defects as a critic are almost as colossal as his industry and erudition. He is not a disinterested mind seeking impartially the truth of Veda but a professor of the ritualistic school of interpretation intent upon reading the traditional ceremonial sense into the sacred hymns; even so he is totally wanting in consistency, coherence and settled method. Not only is he frequently uncertain of himself, halts and qualifies his interpretation with an alternative or not having the full courage of his ritualistic rendering introduces it as a mere possibility, – these would be meritorious failings, – but he wavers in a much more extraordinary fashion, forcing the ritualistic sense of a word or passage where it cannot possibly hold, abandoning it unaccountably where it can well be sustained. The Vedas are masterpieces of flawless literary style and logical connection. But Sayana, like many great scholars, is guiltless of literary taste and has not the least sense of what is or is not possible to a good writer. His interpretation of any given term is seldom consistent even in similar passages of different hymns, but he will go yet farther and give two entirely different renderings to the same word though occurring in successive riks & in an obviously connected strain of thought. The rhythm and balance of a sentence is nothing to him, he will destroy it ruthlessly in order to get over a difficulty of interpretation; he will disturb the arrangement of a sentence sometimes in the most impossible manner, connecting absolutely disconnected words, breaking up inseparable connections, inserting a second and alien

sentence in between the head & tail of the first, and creating a barbarous complexity & confusion where the symbolic movement of the Rishis, unequalled in its golden ease, lucidity and straightforwardness, demands an equal lucidity & straightforwardness in the commentator. A certain rough coherence of thought he attempts to keep, but his rendering makes oftenest a clumsy sense & not unoften no ascertainable sense at all; while he has no scruple in breaking up the coherence entirely in favour of his ritualism. These are, after all, faults common in a scholastic mentality, but even were they less prominent & persistent in him than I have found them to be, they [would] liberate us from all necessity of an exaggerated deference to his authority as an interpreter. Nor, indeed, were Sayana an ideal commentator, could he possibly be relied upon to give us the true sense of Veda; for the language of these hymns, whatever the exact date of their Rishis, go[es] back to an immense antiquity and long before Sayana the right sense of many Vedic words and the right clue to many Vedic allusions and symbols were lost to the scholars* of India."[25]

**"Neither of these great authorities can be held to be infallible. Yaska is an authority for the interpretation of Vedic words in his own age, but that age was already far subsequent to the Vedic and the sacred language of the hymns was already to him an ancient tongue. The Vedas are much more ancient than we usually suppose. Sayana represents the scholarship and traditions of a period not much anterior to our own. There is therefore no authoritative rendering of the hymns. The Veda remains its own best authority."* [26]

4. The Vedas and the Modern Vedic Scholarship

(a) The European Scholarship

"The advent and labours of European scholarship have rescued these divine hymns from a long secrecy and neglect, but have thrown no trustworthy illumination on their secret. Rather, if Indians hardly understand the Vedas at all, the Europeans have systematised a radical misunderstanding of them. Their materialistic interpretation, now dominant in cultivated minds, translated into our modern tongues, taught in our universities, [diffused] unquestioningly by pen and tongue, has been more fatal to Vedic truth than our reverential ignorance. For, passed through a mentality at once modern and alien, these ancient writings present themselves to us in a strange and disillusioning garb, no longer obscure, indeed, to our fancy, but to our understanding crude, shallow and barbarous. They appear to us as the work, incoherent in utterance, arbitrary in fancy & void of intellectual content, of early savages,– savages with a singularly warped and insincere mind and a gaudy and incompetent imagination. In reality, these strange trappings are a modern masquerade. The scholars of Europe have constructed for themselves by a study from outside of degenerate humanity at the point of lapsing back into the animal, a fanciful psychology of prehistoric humanity; they have read into this psychology the most ingenious Alexandrian conceits possible to the richly stored and rapidly creative modern scholastic imagination, and this compound they have presented to us as the ascertained meaning of the Veda. They base their version on the inchoate sciences, so-styled, but [not] so admitted by serious scientists,

of Comparative Philology, Comparative Mythology and Archaeology, – branches of conjectural learning which may well be the obscure dawn of a great and illuminative knowledge, but, as yet and in themselves, are so inchoate, so imperfect, so devoid of sure fundamental laws that they can be no more authoritative to future enquiry than the early gropings of Paracelsus and his contemporaries to the modern chemical analyst. And if they are not to be authoritative to future enquiry, neither can they be binding on the living seeker after knowledge. Anyone of Indian birth who wishes to occupy his life or his leisure with Vedic enquiry as it is at present conducted, may enjoy the pleasures of an interesting and liberal branch of speculative research, in which he will find ample sport for his imagination and a delightful satisfaction and freedom for the most extravagant gambols of his ingenuity; but more serious results need not be expected from his labour. After the ingenious toils of Roth & Max Muller, as after the erudite diligence of Yaska & Sayana, the Vedic mantras remain for us what they have been for some thousands of years, a darkness of lost light and a sealed mystery."[27]

"We ought at least to free our minds of one misconception which has a very strong hold on the average Indian mind and blocks up the way for free investigation & the formation of a strong & original school of Indian scholars better circumstanced than the Europeans for determining the truth about our past and divining its difficult secrets. The triumphant & rapid march of the physical sciences in Europe has so mastered our intellects and dazzled our eyes, that we are apt to extend the unquestioned finality which we are accustomed to attach to the discoveries & theories of modern Science, to all the results of European research & intellectual

activity. Even in Europe itself, we should remember, there is no such implicit acceptance. The theories of today are there continually being combated and overthrown by the theories of tomorrow. Outside the range of the physical sciences & even in some portions of that splendid domain the whole of European knowledge is felt more & more to be a mass of uncertain results ephemeral in their superstructure, shifting in their very foundations. For the Europeans have that valuable gift of intellectual restlessness which, while it often stands in the way of man's holding on to abiding truth, helps him to emerge swiftly out of momentarily triumphant error. In India on the other hand we have fallen during the last few centuries into a fixed habit of unquestioning deference to authority. We used to hold it, & some still hold it almost an impiety to question Shankara's interpretation of the Upanishads, or Sayana's interpretation of the Veda, and now that we are being torn out of this bondage, we fall into yet more absurd error by according if not an equal reverence, yet an almost equal sense of finality to the opinions of Roth & Max Muller. We are ready to accept all European theories, the theory of an "Aryan" colonisation of a Dravidian India, the theory of the Nature-worship and henotheism of the Vedic Rishis, the theory of the Upanishads as a speculative revolt against Vedic materialism & ritualism, as if these hazardous speculations were on a par in authority & certainty with the law of gravitation and the theory of evolution. We are most of us unaware that in Europe it is disputed and very reasonably disputed whether, for instance, any such entity as an Aryan race ever existed. The travail of dispute & uncertainty in which the questions of Vedic scholarship & ethnology are enveloped is hidden from us; only the over-confident statement of

doubtful discoveries and ephemeral theories reaches our knowledge.

We should realise that these so called Sciences of Comparative Philology and Comparative Mythology on which the European interpretation of Veda is founded are not true Sciences at all. They are, rather, if Sciences at all, then pseudo-Sciences. All the European mental sciences, not excluding Psychology, though that is now proceeding within certain narrow limits by a sounder method, belong to a doubtful class of branches of research which have absorbed the outward method of Science, without its inward spirit[.] The true scientists in Germany, the home of both Science & Philology, accustomed to sound methods, certain results, patient inquiry, slow generalisations, have nothing but contempt for the methods of Philology, its patchiness, its haste, its guesswork, and profess no confidence in its results; the word Philology is even, in their mouths, a slighting & discourteous expression. This contempt, itself no doubt excessive is practically admitted to be just by the great French thinker, Renan, who spent the best part of his life in philological & kindred researches, when he described apologetically his favourite pursuits as "petty conjectural sciences." Now, a Science that is conjectural, a Science that proceeds not by fixed laws and certain methods, but by ingenious inference & conjecture,– & this is in truth the nature of Comparative Philology & Comparative Mythology, – is no science at all; it is a branch of research, a field of inquiry & conjecture in which useful discoveries may be made; it may even contain in itself the germs of a future science, but it is not yet itself worthy of that name & its results have no right to cloak themselves falsely in the robe of authority which

belongs only to the results of the true Sciences. So long as a "science" is conjectural, its results are also conjectural, can at any moment be challenged and ought at all times even in its most brilliant & confident results to be carefully and sceptically scrutinised."[28]

(b) Swami Dayananda

"Swami Dayananda, the founder of the Arya Samaj, preached a monotheistic religion founded on a new interpretation of the sacred hymns. But this important attempt successful & vigorous in the Panjab is not likely to command acceptance among the more subtle races of the south & west. It was based like the European rendering on a system of philology, – the Nirukta of Yaska used by the scholastic ingenuity & robust faith of Dayananda to justify conclusions far-reaching & even extravagant to which it is difficult to assent unless we are offered stronger foundations. Moreover, by rejecting the authority of all later Scriptures and scouting even the Upanishads because they transcend the severity of his monotheistic teaching, Dayananda cut asunder the unity of [Hindu] religion even more fatally than the Europeans & by the slenderness of vision & the poverty of spiritual contents, the excessive simplicity of doctrine farther weakened the authority of this version for the Indian intellect. He created a sect & a rendering, but failed to rehabilitate to the educated mind in India the authority of the Vedas. Nevertheless, he put his finger on the real clue, the true principle by which Veda can yet be made to render up its long-guarded secret."[29]

"Dayananda's interpretation of the hymns is governed by the idea that the Vedas are a plenary revelation of religious, ethical and scientific truth. Its religious teaching is

monotheistic and the Vedic gods are different descriptive names of the one Deity; they are at the same time indications of His powers as we see them working in Nature and by a true understanding of the sense of the Vedas we could arrive at all the scientific truths which have been discovered by modern research.

Such a theory is, obviously, difficult to establish. The Rig Veda itself, indeed, asserts that the gods are only different names and expressions of one universal Being who in His own reality transcends the universe; but from the language of the hymns we are compelled to perceive in the gods not only different names, but also different forms, powers and personalities of the one Deva. The monotheism of the Veda includes in itself also the monistic, pantheistic and even polytheistic views of the cosmos and is by no means the trenchant and simple creed of modern Theism. It is only by a violent struggle with the text that we can force on it a less complex aspect."[30]

"….Dayananda … affirms that the truths of modern physical science are discoverable in the hymns. Here we have the sole point of fundamental principle about which there can be any justifiable misgivings. I confess my incompetence to advance any settled opinion in the matter. But this much needs to be said that his idea is increasingly supported by the recent trend of our knowledge about the ancient world. The ancient civilisations did possess secrets of science some of which modern knowledge has recovered, extended and made more rich and precise but others are even now not recovered. There is then nothing fantastic in Dayananda's idea that Veda contains truth of science as well as truth of religion. I will even add my own conviction that Veda contains other truths

of a science the modern world does not at all possess, and in that case Dayananda has rather understated than overstated the depth and range of the Vedic wisdom."[31]

5. Sri Aurobindo's Discovery of the Secret of the Veda

"Like the majority of educated Indians I had passively accepted without examination, before myself reading the Veda, the conclusions of European Scholarship both as to the religious and as to the historical and ethnical sense of the ancient hymns. In consequence, following again the ordinary line taken by modernised Hindu opinion, I regarded the Upanishads as the most ancient source of Indian thought and religion, the true Veda, the first Book of Knowledge. The Rig Veda in the modern translations which were all I knew of this profound Scripture, represented for me an important document of our national history, but seemed of small value or importance for the history of thought or for a living spiritual experience.

My first contact with Vedic thought came indirectly while pursuing certain lines of self-development in the way of Indian Yoga, which, without my knowing it, were spontaneously converging towards the ancient and now unfrequented paths followed by our forefathers. At this time there began to arise in my mind an arrangement of symbolic names attached to certain psychological experiences which had begun to regularise themselves; and among them there came the figures of three female energies, Ila, Saraswati, Sarama, representing severally three out of the four faculties of the intuitive reason,– revelation, inspiration and intuition.

Two of these names were not well known to me as names

of Vedic goddesses, but were connected rather with the current Hindu religion or with old Puranic legend, Saraswati, goddess of learning and Ila, mother of the Lunar dynasty. But Sarama was familiar enough. I was unable, however, to establish any connection between the figure that rose in my mind and the Vedic hound of heaven, who was associated in my memory with the Argive Helen and represented only an image of the physical Dawn entering in its pursuit of the vanished herds of Light into the cave of the Powers of darkness. When once the clue is found, the clue of the physical Light imaging the subjective, it is easy to see that the hound of heaven may be the intuition entering into the dark caverns of the subconscious mind to prepare the delivery and out-flashing of the bright illuminations of knowledge which have there been imprisoned. But the clue was wanting and I was obliged to suppose an identity of name without any identity of the symbol.

It was my stay in Southern India which first seriously turned my thoughts to the Veda. Two observations that were forced on my mind, gave a serious shock to my second-hand belief in the racial division between Northern Aryans and Southern Dravidians. The distinction had always rested for me on a supposed difference between the physical types of Aryan and Dravidian and a more definite incompatibility between the northern Sanskritic and the southern non-Sanskritic tongues. I knew indeed of the later theories which suppose that a single homogeneous race, Dravidian or Indo-Afghan, inhabits the Indian peninsula; but hitherto I had not attached much importance to these speculations. I could not, however, be long in Southern India without being impressed by the general recurrence of northern or "Aryan" types in the Tamil race. Wherever I turned, I seemed to recognise with a

startling distinctness, not only among the Brahmins but in all castes and classes, the old familiar faces, features, figures of my friends of Maharashtra, Gujerat, Hindustan, even, though this similarity was less widely spread, of my own province Bengal. The impression I received was as if an army of all the tribes of the North had descended on the South and submerged any previous populations that may have occupied it. A general impression of a Southern type survived, but it was impossible to fix it rigidly while studying the physiognomy of individuals. And in the end I could not but perceive that whatever admixtures might have taken place, whatever regional differences might have been evolved, there remains, behind all variations, a unity of physical as well as of cultural type throughout India. For the rest, this is a conclusion to which ethnological speculation itself has an increasing tendency.

But what then of the sharp distinction between Aryan and Dravidian races created by the philologists? It disappears. If at all an Aryan invasion is admitted, we have either to suppose that it flooded India and determined the physical type of the people, with whatever modifications, or that it was the incursion of small bands of a less civilised race who melted away into the original population. We have then to suppose that entering a vast peninsula occupied by a civilised people, builders of great cities, extensive traders, not without mental and spiritual culture, they were yet able to impose on them their own language, religion, ideas and manners. Such a miracle would be just possible if the invaders possessed a very highly organised language, a greater force of creative mind and a more dynamic religious form and spirit.

And there was always the difference of language to

support the theory of a meeting of races. But here also my preconceived ideas were disturbed and confounded. For on examining the vocables of the Tamil language, in appearance so foreign to the Sanskritic form and character, I yet found myself continually guided by words or by families of words supposed to be pure Tamil in establishing new relations between Sanskrit and its distant sister, Latin, and occasionally, between the Greek and the Sanskrit. Sometimes the Tamil vocable not only suggested the connection, but proved the missing link in a family of connected words.

And it was through this Dravidian language that I came first to perceive what seems to me now the true law, origins and, as it were, the embryology of the Aryan tongues. I was unable to pursue my examination far enough to establish any definite conclusion, but it certainly seems to me that the original connection between the Dravidian and Aryan tongues was far closer and more extensive than is usually supposed and the possibility suggests itself that they may even have been two divergent families derived from one lost primitive tongue. If so, the sole remaining evidence of an Aryan invasion of Dravidian India would be the indications to be found in the Vedic hymns.

It was, therefore, with a double interest that for the first time I took up the Veda in the original, though without any immediate intention of a close or serious study. It did not take long to see that the Vedic indications of a racial division between Aryans and Dasyus and the identification of the latter with the indigenous Indians were of a far flimsier character than I had supposed. But far more interesting to me was the discovery of a considerable body of profound psychological thought and experience lying neglected in these ancient hymns.

And the importance of this element increased in my eyes when I found, first, that the mantras of the Veda illuminated with a clear and exact light psychological experiences of my own for which I had found no sufficient explanation either in European psychology or in the teachings of Yoga or of Vedanta, so far as I was acquainted with them, and, secondly, that they shed light on obscure passages and ideas of the Upanishads to which, previously, I could attach no exact meaning and gave at the same time a new sense to much in the Puranas.

I was helped in arriving at this result by my fortunate ignorance of the commentary of Sayana. For I was left free to attribute their natural psychological significance to many ordinary and current words of the Veda, such as *dhī*, thought or understanding, *manas*, mind, *mati*, thought, feeling or mental state, *manīṣā*, intellect, *ṛtam*, truth; to give their exact shades of sense to *kavi*, seer, *manīṣī*, thinker, *vipra*, *vipaścit*, enlightened in mind, and a number of similar words; and to hazard a psychological sense, justified by more extensive study, for words like *dakṣa* which for Sayana means strength and *śravas* which he renders as wealth, food or fame. The psychological theory of the Veda rests upon our right to concede their natural significance to these vocables.

Sayana gives to the words *dhī*, *ṛtam*, etc., very variable significances. *Ṛtam*, which is almost the key-word of any psychological or spiritual interpretation, is rendered by him sometimes as "truth", more often "sacrifice", occasionally in the sense of water. The psychological interpretation gives it invariably the sense of Truth. *Dhī* is rendered by Sayana variously "thought", "prayer", "action", "food", etc. The psychological interpretation gives it consistently the sense of

thought or understanding. And so with the other fixed terms of Veda. Moreover, Sayana's tendency, is to obliterate all fine shades and distinctions between words and to give them their vaguest general significance. All epithets conveying ideas of mental activity mean for him simply "intelligent", all words suggesting various ideas of force, and the Veda overflows with them, are reduced to the broad idea of strength. I found myself on the contrary impressed by the great importance of fixing and preserving the right shade of meaning and precise association to be given to different words, however close they may be to each other in their general sense. I do not see indeed why we should suppose that the Vedic Rishis, unlike all other masters of poetic style, used words pell-mell and indiscriminately without feeling their just associations and giving them their right and exact force in the verbal combination. **By following this principle I found that without departing from the simple natural and straightforward sense of words and clauses an extraordinarily large body not only of separate verses but of entire passages came at once into evidence which entirely altered the whole character of the Veda. For this Scripture then appeared to have a constant vein of the richest gold of thought and spiritual experience running all through it and appearing sometimes in small streaks, sometimes in larger bands, in the majority of its hymns. Moreover, besides the words that in their plain and ordinary sense give at once a wealth of psychological significance to their context, the Veda is full of others to which it is possible to give either an external and material or an internal and psychological value according to our conception of the general purport of Veda.** For instance

such words as *rāye*, *rayi*, *rādhas*, *ratna*, may mean either merely material prosperity and riches or internal felicity and plenitude applying itself equally to the subjective and the objective world; *dhana*, *vāja*, *poṣa* may mean either objective wealth, plenty and increase or all possessions internal or external, their plenitude and their growth in the life of the individual. *Rāye* is used in the Upanishads, in a quotation from the Rig Veda, to mean spiritual felicity; why should it be incapable of bearing that sense in the original text? *Vāja* occurs frequently in a context in which every other word has a psychological significance and the mention of physical plenty comes in with a violent jar of incoherency into the homogeneous totality of the thought. Commonsense, therefore, demands that the use of these words with a psychological import should be admitted in the Veda."[32]

6. The Real Character of the Veda

"The real character of the Veda can best be understood by taking it anywhere and rendering it straightforwardly according to its own phrases and images. A famous German scholar rating from his high pedestal of superior intelligence the silly persons who find sublimity in the Veda, tells us that it is full of childish, silly, even monstrous conceptions, that it is tedious, low, commonplace, that it represents human nature on a low level of selfishness and worldliness and that only here and there are a few rare sentiments that come from the depths of the soul. It may be made so if we put our own mental conceptions into the words of the Rishis, but if we read them as they are without any such false translation into what we think early barbarians ought to have said and thought, we shall find instead a sacred poetry sublime and powerful in its words and images, though with another kind of language

and imagination than we now prefer and appreciate, deep and subtle in its psychological experience and stirred by a moved soul of vision and utterance. Hear rather the word itself of the Veda.

'States upon states are born, covering over covering awakens to knowledge: in the lap of the mother he wholly sees. They have called to him, getting a wide knowledge, they guard sleeplessly the strength, they have entered into the strong city. The peoples born on earth increase the luminous (force) of the son of the White Mother; he has gold on his neck, he is large of speech, he is as if by (the power of) this honey wine a seeker of plenty. He is like pleasant and desirable milk, he is a thing uncompanioned and is with the two who are companions and is as a heat that is the belly of plenty and is invincible and an overcomer of many. Play, O Ray, and manifest thyself.' *(Rig Veda V. 19)*

Or again in the succeeding hymn,–

'Those (flames) of thee, the forceful (godhead), that move not and are increased and puissant, uncling the hostility and crookedness of one who has another law. O Fire, we choose thee for our priest and the means of effectuation of our strength and in the sacrifices bringing the food of thy pleasure we call thee by the word. . . . O god of perfect works, may we be for the felicity, for the truth, revelling with the rays, revelling with the heroes.'

And finally let us take the bulk of the third hymn that follows couched in the ordinary symbols of the sacrifice,–

'As the Manu we set thee in thy place, as the Manu we kindle thee: O Fire, O Angiras, as the Manu sacrifice to the gods for him who desires the godheads. O Fire, well pleased

thou art kindled in the human being and the ladles go to thee continually. . . . Thee all the gods with one pleasure (in thee) made their messenger and serving thee, O seer, (men) in the sacrifices adore the god. Let the mortal adore the divine Fire with sacrifice to the godheads. Kindled, flame forth, O Bright One. Sit in the seat of Truth, sit in the seat of peace.'

That, whatever interpretation we choose to put on its images, is a mystic and symbolic poetry and that is the real Veda.

The character of Vedic poetry apparent from these typical verses need not surprise or baffle us when we see what will be evident from a comparative study of Asiatic literature, that though distinguished by its theory and treatment of the Word, its peculiar system of images and the complexity of its thought and symbolised experience, it is in fact the beginning of a form of symbolic or figurative imagery for the poetic expression of spiritual experience which reappears constantly in later Indian writing, the figures of the Tantras and Puranas, the figures of the Vaishnava poets,–one might add even a certain element in the modern poetry of Tagore,–and has its kindred movements in certain Chinese poets and in the images of the Sufis. The poet has to express a spiritual and psychical knowledge and experience and he cannot do it altogether or mainly in the more abstract language of the philosophical thinker, for he has to bring out, not the naked idea of it, but as vividly as possible its very life and most intimate touches. He has to reveal in one way or another a whole world within him and the quite inner and spiritual significances of the world around him and also, it may well be, godheads, powers, visions and experiences of planes of consciousness other than the one with which our normal minds are familiar. He uses or

starts with the images taken from his own normal and outward life and that of humanity and from visible Nature, and though they do not of themselves actually express, yet obliges them to express by implication or to figure the spiritual and psychic idea and experience. He takes them selecting freely his notation of images according to his insight or imagination and transmutes them into instruments of another significance and at the same time pours a direct spiritual meaning into the Nature and life to which they belong, applies outward figures to inner things and brings out their latent and inner spiritual or psychic significance into life's outward figures and circumstances. Or an outward figure nearest to the inward experience, its material counterpart, is taken throughout and used with such realism and consistency that while it indicates to those who possess it the spiritual experience, it means only the external thing to others,–just as the Vaishnava poetry of Bengal makes to the devout mind a physical and emotional image or suggestion of the love of the human soul for God, but to the profane is nothing but a sensuous and passionate love poetry hung conventionally round the traditional human-divine personalities of Krishna and Radha. The two methods may meet together, the fixed system of outward images be used as the body of the poetry, while freedom is often taken to pass their first limits, to treat them only as initial suggestions and transmute subtly or even cast them aside or subdue into a secondary strain or carry them out of themselves so that the translucent veil they offer to our minds lifts from or passes into the open revelation. The last is the method of the Veda and it varies according to the passion and stress of the sight in the poet or the exaltation of his utterance.

The poets of the Veda had another mentality than ours,

their use of their images is of a peculiar kind and an antique cast of vision gives a strange outline to their substance. The physical and the psychical worlds were to their eyes a manifestation and a twofold and diverse and yet connected and similar figure of cosmic godheads, the inner and outer life of man a divine commerce with the gods, and behind was the one spirit or being of which the gods were names and personalities and powers. These godheads were at once masters of physical Nature and its principles and forms, their godheads and their bodies and inward divine powers with their corresponding states and energies born in our psychic being because they are the soul powers of the cosmos, the guardians of truth and immortality, the children of the Infinite, and each of them too is in his origin and his last reality the supreme Spirit putting in front one of his aspects. The life of man was to these seers a thing of mixed truth and falsehood, a movement from mortality to immortality, from mixed light and darkness to the splendour of a divine Truth whose home is above in the Infinite but which can be built up here in man's soul and life, a battle between the children of light and the sons of Night, a getting of treasure, of the wealth, the booty given by the gods to the human warrior, and a journey and a sacrifice; and of these things they spoke in a fixed system of images taken from Nature and from the surrounding life of the war-like, pastoral and agricultural Aryan peoples and centred round the cult of Fire and the worship of the powers of living Nature and the institution of sacrifice. The details of outward existence and of the sacrifice were in their life and practice symbols, and in their poetry not dead symbols or artificial metaphors, but living and powerful suggestions and counterparts of inner things. And they used too for their

expression a fixed and yet variable body of other images and a glowing web of myth and parable, images that became parables, parables that became myths and myths that remained always images, and yet all these things were to them, in a way that can only be understood by those who have entered into a certain order of psychic experience, actual realities. The physical melted its shades into the lustres of the psychic, the psychic deepened into the light of the spiritual and there was no sharp dividing line in the transition, but a natural blending and intershading of their suggestions and colours. It is evident that a poetry of this kind, written by men with this kind of vision or imagination, cannot either be interpreted or judged by the standards of a reason and taste observant only of the canons of the physical existence. The invocation "Play, O Ray, and become towards us" is at once a suggestion of the leaping up and radiant play of the potent sacrificial flame on the physical altar and of a similar psychical phenomenon, the manifestation of the saving flame of a divine power and light within us. The Western critic sneers at the bold and reckless and to him monstrous image in which Indra son of earth and heaven is said to create his own father and mother; but if we remember that Indra is the supreme spirit in one of its eternal and constant aspects, creator of earth and heaven, born as a cosmic godhead between the mental and physical worlds and recreating their powers in man, we shall see that the image is not only a powerful but in fact a true and revealing figure, and in the Vedic technique it does not matter that it outrages the physical imagination since it expresses a greater actuality as no other figure could have done with the same awakening aptness and vivid poetical force. The Bull and Cow of the Veda, the shining herds of the Sun lying hidden in the cave

are strange enough creatures to the physical mind, but they do not belong to the earth and in their own plane they are at once images and actual things and full of life and significance. It is in this way that throughout we must interpret and receive the Vedic poetry according to its own spirit and vision and the psychically natural, even if to us strange and supranatural, truth of its ideas and figures.

The Veda thus understood stands out, apart from its interest as the world's first yet extant Scripture, its earliest interpretation of man and the Divine and the universe, as a remarkable, a sublime and powerful poetic creation. It is in its form and speech no barbaric production. The Vedic poets are masters of a consummate technique, their rhythms are carved like chariots of the gods and borne on divine and ample wings of sound, and are at once concentrated and wide-waved, great in movement and subtle in modulation, their speech lyric by intensity and epic by elevation, an utterance of great power, pure and bold and grand in outline, a speech direct and brief in impact, full to overflowing in sense and suggestion so that each verse exists at once as a strong and sufficient thing in itself and takes its place as a large step between what came before and what comes after. A sacred and hieratic tradition faithfully followed gave them both their form and substance, but this substance consisted of the deepest psychic and spiritual experiences of which the human soul is capable and the forms seldom or never degenerate into a convention, because what they are intended to convey was lived in himself by each poet and made new to his own mind in expression by the subtleties or sublimities of his individual vision. The utterances

of the greatest seers, Vishwamitra, Vamadeva, Dirghatamas and many others, touch the most extraordinary heights and amplitudes of a sublime and mystic poetry and there are poems like the Hymn of Creation that move in a powerful clarity on the summits of thought on which the Upanishads lived constantly with a more sustained breathing. The mind of ancient India did not err when it traced back all its philosophy, religion and essential things of its culture to these seer-poets, for all the future spirituality of her people is contained there in seed or in first expression.

It is one great importance of a right understanding of the Vedic hymns as a form of sacred literature that it helps us to see the original shaping not only of the master ideas that governed the mind of India, but of its characteristic types of spiritual experience, its turn of imagination, its creative temperament and the kind of significant forms in which it persistently interpreted its sight of self and things and life and the universe. It is in a great part of the literature the same turn of inspiration and self-expression that we see in the architecture, painting and sculpture. Its first character is a constant sense of the infinite, the cosmic, and of things as seen in or affected by the cosmic vision, set in or against the amplitude of the one and infinite; its second peculiarity is a tendency to see and render its spiritual experience in a great richness of images taken from the inner psychic plane or in physical images transmuted by the stress of a psychic significance and impression and line and idea colour; and its third tendency is to image the terrestrial life often magnified, as in the Mahabharata and Ramayana, or else subtilised in the transparencies of a larger atmosphere, attended by a greater

than the terrestrial meaning or at any rate presented against the background of the spiritual and psychic worlds and not alone in its own separate figure. The spiritual, the infinite is near and real and the gods are real and the worlds beyond not so much beyond as immanent in our own existence. That which to the Western mind is myth and imagination is here an actuality and a strand of the life of our inner being, what is there beautiful poetic idea and philosophic speculation is here a thing constantly realised and present to the experience. It is this turn of the Indian mind, its spiritual sincerity and psychic positivism, that makes the Veda and Upanishads and the later religious and religio-philosophic poetry so powerful in inspiration and intimate and living in expression and image, and it has its less absorbing but still very sensible effect on the working of the poetic idea and imagination even in the more secular literature."[33]

7. The Secret of the Persistent Vedism of Indian Thought and Spirituality

Today, the Vedas are dark to us except in their ceremonial aspect and the Upanishads are clear to us only in their central ideas and larger suggestions. "But how then can writings so obscure or at any rate so imperfectly understood have exercised over the thought of millenniums the vast and pervasive influence of which we know, so pervasive that all positive Indian thought, even Buddhism, can be described as Vedic in origin and shaping spirit when not Vedic or even when anti-Vedic in its garb and formed character? Thought has other means of survival and reproduction than its ordinary overt and physical instruments. After it has been deprived of propagation by speech and writing, even after it has

disappeared out of the conscious mentality, it can return and recover itself not only in the individual, –that is common enough, – but, by a very similar act of memory, in the race. The workings of our psychology are as yet ill understood and we do not know precisely by what means or forces the subconscious operations of mentality are conducted; but some of the processes used by the great Universal in His more secret works are becoming apparent."[34]

(a) The Physical Heredity

"Physical heredity is certainly one of them. It is true that thought is not inherited; but types of mentality and mental tendencies are, apparently, handed down with the physical plasm, and out of a persistent type of mentality there is always a possibility of the emergence from age to age of a recurrent type of thought. The Vedic mental type was fixed in the Indian race at an early period of its formation and throughout all external variations has never really changed. There is, therefore, in the Indian mind a predisposition to the recovery of the fundamental Vedic ideas; those directions of mentality which are most natural to the Vedic mental type, easily recur and a slight suggestion is all that is needed to set thought spinning in the old grooves[.]"[35]

(b) The Pressure of the Mental Atmosphere

"But the physical inheritance is not sufficient in itself, nor is it even the only subconscious instrument in the persistence of human and national mentality. As psychology progresses, I think it will be more and more clearly recognised that just as men live in one physical atmosphere and are affected in their physical conditions by its state, currents and contents and by the physical condition of others near to them,

so also and even to a greater extent we live in one mental atmosphere and are affected in our mental condition and activities by its state, current and contents and by the mental condition and activities of others similarly affected in our near vicinity. The dynamic action of the mental atmosphere is evident enough in the psychology of crowds, in the rapidity of development of great thought-movements & general tendencies of corporate action and in their contemporaneous efflorescence in widely divided countries. These phenomena have given rise to a vague idea of thought-waves resembling the waves of electricity in the physical parts of Nature. But if, instead of confining ourselves to these superficial and striking phenomena, we go deeper down into the normal and obscurer action, we shall find in addition to the dynamic movements a constant static condition and pressure of the mental atmosphere which varies but seems hardly to change substantially from age to age. For waves and currents presuppose a constant sea out of which they rise and into which they again sink to rest. It is the pressure of this atmospheric sea that more permanently determines the constant mentality of a continent or a nation. Into it, after all revolutions and dynamic activities, humanity tends to sink back with whatever riches it has gained and often long periods are necessary for their absorption and assimilation. **The mind-atmosphere has its needs and its conditions; it alters into its own image whatever is new and foreign and assimilates even when it seems to be assimilated; it rejects everything that would too radically disintegrate its enduring composition. It is at once infinitely yielding & plastic and infinitely persistent in its general character. It casts essential Buddhism out of India and replaces it**

by a huge phantasmagorical complex Hinduised Buddhism; it constantly purges mysticism out of Europe and replaces essential Christianity with its sublimely tender and delicate Oriental psychology by a strenuous, external, dogmatic, materialistic and practical creed. Individual men and even men in the mass are ready enough to change under a comparatively slight impulsion; it is the compelling pressure of the mental atmosphere which prevents them from changing too radically so that when we think we have effected a revolution, we find that we have only effected an external readjustment or new dress of an old reality. The soul of things in us tends to remain the same. For steadfastness in mobility is the sound law of our being & the condition of healthy survival; Nature keeps us to it on peril of prolonged disorder, deterioration or fatal decay. Into this circumambient mental atmosphere in which we live & by which we draw our mental inspiration and respiration, all the old thoughts have entered, are lying obscure, many of them disaggregated, but none entirely lost. Under the proper conditions they may, they even tend to reconstitute themselves, to reappear.

In India such returns upon our past are more common than in any other country, partly from certain external causes, from the persistence of certain external suggestions, but much more because of the constant practice of Yoga by a large number of typical and central souls who act, overtly or silently, upon the general mass of Indian humanity. The discipline of Yoga renders a man much more sensible to the surrounding mental atmosphere, than in his ordinary state. He becomes consciously aware of it, feels intelligently its impacts, stirs more

quickly to its deep buried secrets and obscure suggestions. And as he becomes more quick to receive, so also he becomes more powerful to impart. Practising forms of the old Vedantic discipline, he recovers also forms of the old Vedantic thought and mentality and, modifying them in expression but not in essence by his own present personality, he pours them out on his surroundings. This has been the secret of the persistent Vedism of Indian thought & spirituality" from the earliest ages to those modern movements of which we are ourselves the witnesses or the partakers."[36]

(c) The Reign of Vedic Philosophies and the Influence of Religion and the Systems of Yoga

"Outward aids have powerfully confirmed the effect of these inward processes,–the reign of Vedic philosophies, the dominance of religions rich with the sap of the old Vedic spirit, the traditional teachings of particular Yogic schools, the theory & practice of the Guru-parampara. It would be as great a mistake to exaggerate as to belittle the importance of any of these aids in themselves. Vedic knowledge was rich, manysided, elastic, flexible; but the metaphysical philosophies are limited by the very law of their logical structure. They are compelled to select and reject, to systematise only what can be harmonised in a single logical formula; and a logical formula, however wide, is always too narrow to contain God's truth which is universal, complex and many-faceted. The dominance of particular metaphysical systems has tended to preserve fragments of the old Vedic truth, but to disfigure and dissolve it as a whole in its comprehensiveness and catholicity. Moreover, a metaphysical system by itself can never lay powerful hold on a people. We of the present age,

who are excessively intellectualised, are apt to attach too great an importance and power to the works of the pure intellect. Systems of pure metaphysics which have no connection with the constant psychological experience and practice of men, are apt to become, like the modern philosophies of Europe and unlike the old Greek philosophies, merely noble pastimes for the intellectual few. They influence the generality of men, but by a slight and indirect process, not profoundly, not puissantly, not permanently. The Indian metaphysical systems have influenced the whole mentality of the Indian people profoundly, puissantly, permanently, not because of their logical subtleties, not even so much by the force & loftiness of their general ideas, but by their close dependence on powerful and widely-practised systems of psychological discipline,–systems, as we say in India, of Yoga.

The influence of religion has been yet more dynamical; it always indeed more dynamical than, the influence of philosophy, "Because religion appeals to the higher, secret, unattainable parts of our nature through the emotions and sensations which are better developed in humanity than the pure intellect. But even the religious emotions & sensations, though strong, swift and tenacious of a satisfaction once given, yet eventually tire and change; for this reason religions tend after a time to decay and perish. But in India the Vedic religions do not decay and perish; they change and are reborn. And they have this good fortune precisely because of the Vedic element in them. Their ritual, forms, worship, ceremonies, high days are not Vedic; even if they enshrine old Vedic ideas, they do it ignorantly and under a disguise; but all these religions have in their recesses some core of constant psychological practice and discipline, in a word, some form of Yoga, by

which they live; and always it is, in essence, a Vedic practice and a Vedic discipline, religions think that they live by their dogmas, their sacred books, their ceremonies, but these are all aids and trappings; they live really by the men who practise them, by their clergy and mystics and much more by their mystics than by their clergy. So long as a religion has in its fold a sufficient number of souls who can retire within themselves and live there with God, so long it cannot help enduring, even though all the rest of the world is against it; once it loses this core of life, no amount of temporal power and prestige, of attractive ceremonial, of passionate belief & stiff dogmatism or even of wise and supple flexibility, savoir-faire & self adaptation can save it from its inevitable disappearance. The great Vedic religions in India have always had this nucleus of mystics; they have always been rich in men capable of living with God; but they have not left the preservation of the indispensable nucleus to chance, they have attempted to secure it by a traditional practice and discipline, usually of what is known in India as Bhaktiyoga. By this Yoga and the experience of the saints and Sadhus who have practised it, much more than by Puranic legend and outward devotion,–though these also have helped,–our religious systems have done much to preserve the thoughts and experiences of the early Rishis to their distant posterity.

This vitalising core of philosophy, this saving essence of religion, Yoga, has itself an inner reality and an outer body. It has organised and variously summarised its different parts of experience and various methods of experiment in a great number of schools; and it preserves in all its schools a common fund of essential experience which goes back to the ancient Vedic sources. In these days, when the natural

ignorance of Europeans about this characteristic Indian discipline has been successfully acquired as a part of their enlightenment by educated Indians, there is a tendency to identify Yoga with the Raja-yogic system of Patanjali, because that alone is known to the European scholar. But Yoga cannot be confined to a single school or a single system. Patanjali's Yogashastra is concerned only with Rajayoga and only with one system of Rajayoga; there are a hundred others of which a few have their written rules, practices or aphorisms, but the rest, among them some of the most ancient and august, like the school of Dattatreya, have been handed down from an early era by the long linked generations of its Guru-parampara. This profuse ramification of Yogic systems, like the inexhaustible fertility of religious sects and orders, is a sign and an unfailing accompaniment of the richness, power and freedom of spiritual life in this country. It is not only an accompaniment, but a necessary condition. If, for instance, Yoga had allowed itself to formalise into the strict tenets and stereotyped methods of a single school, even a sound and great school like Patanjali's, it would long ago have perished or become, like much of our religious observance, a soulless body. The Infinite within us demands an infinite freedom, of various experience, of various self-expression, of various self-realisation; It loves order and arrangement, but will not long brook a confined immobility. It is only the material, the inert that depends for its stability on blind obedience to iron and immutable processes, the stability of inner things rests rather on a regulated, but still free and variable activity. Therefore, whatever in the mental world formalises too rigidly, is preparing its own decadence: the movement towards rigidity too long persisted in, is usually a sign that the infinite Life is

about to withdraw from the body it has been informing. India has not been exempt from the immobilising tendency even in that Yoga which has been its hidden wellspring of life and the secret of its perennial vitality; there has been a disposition to formalise into one school or another and repeat from generation to generation its methods & experiences. But the Indian mental atmosphere tends always, by a return upon that which is most vital in it, to bring out great souls who, like Buddha, like Chaitanya, like Nanak, like Ramdas, like Ramakrishna, belong to no school, owe their knowledge to no spiritual preceptor, but go back to the Source of all within themselves and emerge from it with some perfectly realised truth of the eternal and universal Veda. As their source is universal, so too they tend to cast out their gains universally upon mankind, so far at least as their surroundings & time are able to bear the truth and live; thus they revivify and preserve the spirituality in our mental environment. Great are the Yogins who, faithful to some long-established school of spiritual discipline, renew perfectly in themselves its perfect results and hand down their sacred gains as in a sealed and jealously guarded vase to the most worthy disciple; but those have a greater effect on the world who break the vase before they depart and pour out its content of life-giving sweetness on the world around them. Here too, as in philosophy, as in religion, the outer & systematised forms have done much to preserve the ancient truth, in its parts, if not in its fullness; they have served the purpose of flasks for keeping a little of the Soma wine of the Veda[.] But it is to those who have gone back most freely to the inner source that is due the perpetual reflooding of the Indian mind with Vedic truth and its

immortal permanence and unfailing reappearance in philosophy, in religious teaching and observance and in personal spiritual experience and discipline."[37]

(d) The Guruparampara

"None of these puissant exterior aids to the permanence of the Veda would have been entirely effective without another, yet more characteristic of our Indian organisation, the guruparampara or unbroken succession of the human vessels of divine knowledge. This Indian institution, ill-understood by the mechanical rationalistic temper of our modern times, is founded upon a perfectly correct appreciation of the essential conditions indispensable for the transmission of a difficult knowledge. All human knowledge consists of three necessary elements, the thing itself which is known, the word or form in which it is expressed and the sense of the word or form which is the link between the thing and its expression. The thing itself, existing always, is always and at any given time capable of being known; the word or form can also be constantly preserved and may, then, always and at any given time yield up its secret; but that secret lies in the right sense to be attached to the symbol and needs for its preservation an intermediary, a vessel, a fourth element. The existence of the thing to be known is not sufficient for knowledge; the existence of the perfect symbol is not sufficient; we need in addition as a receptacle of its sense the competent knower who is termed technically in the language of our philosophy, the aptajana, the expert and adept. The aptajana transmitting his knowledge to a fit disciple is our Indian guru. To take a simple scientific instance, it has always been true and will always remain true that the mixture of

oxygen and hydrogen results in water; the chemical formula expressing the truth, may, having been once settled, remain permanently written; but unless there is also the competent knower who understands the sense of the formula, has submitted it to the test of realisation by experience and is able to hand on his knowledge and his method to his successors, the existence of the formula would not save the knowledge from disappearing for a time from the grasp of humanity. The formula would then come to be regarded only as an incomprehensible superstitious jargon and abracadabra, as the mantras of our religious & Yogic schools are now regarded by many modernised Indians. In the things of the spirit this necessity of the human intermediary is a hundred times more keenly felt than in any material process; for the thing itself is more remote from daily experience, the methods which bring it into the range of intelligent realisation are much more difficult and delicate and the formulas in which it is couched, are necessarily elusive and with difficulty intelligible. Therefore India, supremely sensitive to the importance of spiritual knowledge and experience, unequalled in its instinct for the right spiritual method, has organised the institution of the guruparampara as an essential instrument for the survival of Veda. The truth of Brahman is the thing to be known, the Veda and Vedanta are the word-symbol and formal expression of the Brahman, – shabdam Brahma, the guru is the human receptacle of the knowledge who transmits it to his worthiest disciples. Thus the guruparampara forms the succession of spiritual torchbearers, who, as in the ancient Greek festival, hand on the light of truth from generation to generation so that the sacred knowledge received in the morning of our national daytime may last, even though with

diminutions and obscurations, not only into its evening but on through whatever night of time is intended, to the dawn of another golden age of spirituality. Who shall say out of what distant twilight of time the Veda was first revealed to mankind? Who shall say to what pre-cataclysmal undreamed consummation of our present humanity it shall endure? But we Hindus believe it to be an eternal message which God will have preserved by his chosen vessels as the secret thing out of which all human activity dumbly emerges and to which it is destined by a conscious fulfilment to return.

It is this wise and necessary institution of our forefathers to which we owe the preservation of Vedic truth in our midst even after the actual words of the written Vedas have ceased to bear to us their original significance. Without its aid the abstruse and difficult generalisations of metaphysics could not have prolonged their vitality nor so powerfully propagated themselves that even the beggar in the streets and the peasant in his fields are permeated with some portion of their truth; the living truths of religion could not have maintained so persistent and so puissant a vitality; the schools of Yoga could not have transmitted the essence of their knowledge, methods and experiences from early Vedic times onward into the darkness of our own era. But like all external forms the guruparampara is liable to vicissitudes, to formalisation, to loss of its perfect original virtue. The orthodox formalist supposes that by the mere mechanical act of transmission the unimpaired vitality of the truth is automatically secured. But there are many accidents to which that security is liable[.] The guru may not always find a perfect disciple; he still imparts his knowledge, but the vessel can only hold according to its capacity: then the truth is obscured, if not permanently, then

for one or more generations. There are also more general mishaps incidental to the general law of periodicity & decay which governs many parts of Nature[.] As the mental & vital atmosphere in which we dwell becomes thickened with obscurations, the general capacity of men diminishes and a time comes when the essential office of the guru is only fulfilled in the exceptions and the name becomes ordinarily prostituted to the mercenary priest or the unworthy physical heir of ancient Masters and knowers who either hands on the formula without any knowledge of its sense or is unable even to preserve the formula itself in its purity, – as if the scientific formula for the mixture of oxygen & hydrogen were to be mumbled faithfully from generation to generation without any slightest knowledge or practice of the actual experiment which constitutes its value. Even when this extreme degeneracy does not happen, the transmission is subject to the play of individuality & the varying tendencies of thought from century to century and under that influence this part of the truth may be overstressed, that deprived of its emphasis, much may be sacrificed as no longer useful to the actual practice of the new generations or too high for its attainment and what is preserved may be manipulated, extended, diverted by the enthusiasms of individual thought and experience. What is thus lost or blurred, may not be recovered or restored to its purity for long ages. Nevertheless the institution always preserves something of its value. Much of the body of the truth tends to survive even the worst vicissitudes, and in the body something must always remain of the spirit; even a formula long unintelligently repeated may, by passing into the possession of an alert and curious mind or an ardent & sincere nature, be a suggestion or a starting-point for the

recovery of the old lost experience which it keeps as its secret. Here again, as with the other external aids, we come back to the perennial source of the truth, the experience of the strong souls who passing beyond the school, the formula, the belief, the aid, the letter, go back into themselves for the light, respond to those buried suggestions ever lying in ambush for us in the mental atmosphere from which we draw our inner sustenance, and are strong enough to emerge with something of the ancient truth which gave so ineffable a vastness and profundity to the spiritual life of our forefathers. Behind and beyond all human gurus there dwells within us all the World-Teacher, the universal jagadguru of whom human teachers are only the masks and nominal representatives. He keeps for us the complete book of the Veda written in our secret being, nihitam guhayam; veiled, but accessible. He awaits our reverential approach and our questioning and, sincerely & constantly questioned, He lights the fire of Agni in our hearts and makes Surya to rise upon our darkness."[38]

8. The Supreme Importance of the Recovery of the Full Vedic Truth for the Future of the Human Race

"From these considerations there arise two apparently conflicting, but really complementary truths,–first, that in spite of powerful external aids, by the inexorable vicissitudes of Time, we have lost the sense of Veda and do not possess the full sense of Vedanta, secondly, that both these capital losses can, though with difficulty, by the methods of Yoga & the [. . .][1] experience of great souls, be repaired. We possess

[1] *Illegible Word*

intellectually the general truths of Vedanta, the transcendental unity of things and the universal unity, ekam adwitiyam Brahma and so'ham asmi; the secret of divine renunciation of the Ascetic and the secret of divine joy of the Vaishnava, with much else that is sovereign, vital, a priceless heritage. We possess many symbolic forms of religious application by which we enter into possession of the eternal truth through the emotions, through the intellect or through active experience in our inner life & outward relations. We possess numerous methods & forms of psychological discipline by which we repeat old profound experiences and do even actually possess many apparently lost details of Vedic truth preserved in another form and couched in more modern symbols. **All this is much; it has kept us alive through the centuries. But it is only in its totality that the Truth can work its utter miracles. Otherwise, if we live on her broken meats we tend either to lose ourselves in the outer formulae or concentrate dogmatically on fragments & sides of the living truth; when great spirits arise to give us their deep & vast experience, we prove ourselves limited and shallow vessels and are unable to receive more of the truth than is in harmony with our confined intellects and narrow natures; and, if powerful floods of materialism invade us, as in the present European era of humanity, we have not the strength to resist, to hold fast to that which is difficult but enduring; we are overborne, lose our footing and are carried away in the vehement but shallow currents. Perfection of knowledge is the right condition for perfection of nature and efficiency of life. The perfect truth of the Veda is the fundamental knowledge, the right relations with the Truth of things, on which alone**

according to our ideas, all other knowledge can receive the true orientation needed by humanity. The recovery of the perfect truth of the Veda is therefore not merely a desideratum for our modern intellectual curiosity, but a practical necessity for the future of the human race. For I believe firmly that the secret concealed in the Veda, when entirely discovered, will be found to formulate perfectly that knowledge and practice of a divine life to which the march of humanity, after long wanderings in the satisfaction of the intellect and senses, must inevitably return and is actually at the present day, in the impulses of its vanguard, tending more and more, but vaguely and blindly, to return. If we can set our feet on the path, not vaguely and blindly, but in the full light that streamed so brilliantly and grandiosely on the inner sight of our distant forefathers, our speed will be more rapid and our arrival more triumphant."[39]

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[1]*SABCL : Sri Aurobindo Birth Centenary Library*
[2]*A & R : Sri Aurobindo, Archives and Research*
[3]*CWSA : Collected Works of Sri Aurobindo*

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