

In the Beginning 2: Speculation?

N. Kazanas, August 2016

0. Western scholars like to speculate and so import speculation even in places where none exists. Almost all who have dealt with the early aspect of Indian philosophy, say from the *RV* (*R̥gveda*) to the Upanishads, write of “Hindu philosophical speculation.” But a careful examination of the *RV* and the early Upanishads shows very little speculation. On the contrary, the texts evidently arise from and describe first-hand experience – except where the poet-seers indulge in playful metaphors, tropes and verbal games like riddles.

1. In the rigvedic hymn 8.48.3 we read:

*ápāma sómam amṛtā abhūma áganma jyótir-avidāma devān;
kīm nūnām-asmān kṛṇavad-áratih kīm-u dhurtir, amṛta, mártasya.*

We drank soma, we became immortal; we went to the light, found the gods.
How could distress affect us now, O immortal one, how mortal’s malignity?

This sounds like a very factual statement describing experience: some people say they drank soma and, passing into an altered state of [higher?] consciousness, into a realm of light, found the gods. As a consequence they feel confident that men’s malignity will not harm them. One may question the truth of it and the meeting with gods (in line 1). But there is no speculation. In hymn 7.88 3-4 seer Vasiṣṭha says that he and god Varuṇa sail together in a boat in the middle of the ocean. To us it sounds fanciful, but some of those sages did believe they had close contact with the gods (whoever the latter might be). But, again, such statements are not speculative.

Vasiṣṭha, again, in 7.90.4 tells us that some seers ‘found the spacious/infinite light even as they were meditating/reflecting’: *urú jyótir vividur dídhyanāḥ*. Here too we may question the truth of the statement but it is one of descriptive narration not of speculation.

On the other hand, those seers claim to have experiences in realms that are not accessible to us. Consequently they could have had knowledge that we, despite our proud technological progress and centuries of philosophical speculation cannot attain. Thus they could state very simply, after a succession of instances of how the many relate to or arise from One, and that the One has become all (and everything) in 8.54.2:

*éka evāgnir bahudhā sámiddha; ékaḥ sūryo vísvam ánuabhūtāḥ;
ékaivóśaḥ sárvam-idám vibhāty; ékaṃ vā idám ví babhūva sárvam.*

‘Being one, Agni (fire) is kindled variously/in-many-places; the sun being one has prevailed over all; being one, indeed, the Dawn lights all this [creation]; the One has variously (*vi*) become all this [and everything]’. Here, the poet states matter-of-factly that the entire creation has evolved out of the One, an unnamed primal Power, and illustrates this with instances of common experience.

Elsewhere, in 1.164.21, the seer Ucathya Dīrghatamas feels and declares that ‘the mighty and wise shepherd of the whole world has entered into me [=the poet], a simpleton’: *inó vísvasya bhúvanasya gopāḥ sá mā dhīraḥ pākamātrā viveśa*. This too is a statement coming from experience: there is no qualification of any sort (“I feel/think that...” or “some say that...”). Here again one may doubt the truth of it, but the poet is not speculating.

Let us take another hemistich from 3.54.8, from the Viśvāmitra family book: *éjad dhruvám patyate viśvam-ékam cārat patatṛ viśunam vījātām*. Here, the neuter *ékam* can be taken as both subject and object and some of the other neuters agree with both! I construe the verse accordingly incorporating as many aspects as reasonably possible: ‘Moving yet firm, the One governs all – this manifested multiplicity, that is mobile and immobile, what walks and flies, and is [also] one’. Despite the playful syntax, here too we have an assertive statement, without any hint of doubt or of speculation, about the unity of the universe.

Such and many other factual statements could be presented by the hundreds. In view of this, I cannot but feel baffled at the constant references by most scholars to philosophical and psychological ideas in the rigvedic hymns as “Hindu speculations”.

2. A typical example of an academic who exhibits this habit of calling “speculation” the ancient Indian philosophical and psychological ideas is Franklin Edgerton, particularly in his book *The Beginnings of Indian Philosophy* (1965).

G. J. Larson writes on the development of the Sāṅkhya system (1998) and cites Edgerton: he too refers repeatedly to early philosophical ideas as “speculation” (pp 27, 41, 54, 76 etc etc). So do many other academics in English, French and German, even back to the 19th century, e.g. M. M. Williams’ *Indian Wisdom*, 1893 (N. Delhi 1978). Louis Renou inserted the adjective “speculative” in the title of his publication *Hymnes Spéculatifs du Veda...* Paris 1956.

In 1955 Johan Huizinga wrote in his *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* that the speculative symposium with its “ritual riddle-solving competitions” marked the birth of Indian philosophy: “the enigmatic questions of the Vedic hymns lead up to the profound pronouncements of the Upanishads” (p. 107). In his *Poetry and Speculation of the Rgveda* (1980) W. Johnson writes of the “speculative and cosmological thought” and the “speculative content” of the rigvedic hymns, especially “speculative enigmatizing images... in the context of sacrificial symposia” (e.g. the *asyá vamásya* hymn 1.164 of Dīrghatamas) and points out that such “enigmatic verses were given the name *bráhmaṇ*” (pp 5-6). He then deals at great length with such enigmas/riddles and “speculative questions: Who witnessed Agni the first born?” (1.164.4a) and ignores so many passages that are not in the least speculative as I showed above. Finally he cautions the readers – “Despite their archaic age these questions should not be dismissed” (p 109): but who dismisses them, except academics who did not understand them?

Obviously the references to Western writings could be multiplied. However, many Indian scholars also, inspired perhaps by so many Western works, write of speculation in the early Vedic texts, academics like Hirianna (1932) and Ch. Sharma (1960) and many others.

All this in itself would not matter but it is based upon and inextricably bound with two highly speculative assumptions that have little foundation in reality. The first is the wretched Aryan Invasion/Immigration Theory, AIT in short. The second is the notion that such “speculations” developed from primitive animism, ritualistic nature-worship, simplistic magic and the like, to monotheism and monism.

The AIT holds that a group or groups of Sanskrit-speakers came c1700 BCE and settled in the Saptasindhu, the Land of the Seven Rivers (today’s N-W India and SE Pakistan) through Iran from the Pontic Steppes. These people forced the natives east and

south or made them generally servile. Somehow they imposed their culture and language on the whole area and, at the same time, absorbed elements from the natives. This theory which is mainstream dogma in Indic and Indo-European Studies has been vigorously refuted by non-mainstream scholars since the 1990's including myself (Kazanas 2009, 2015), who argue very cogently that the Indoaryans are indigenous in Saptasindhu from at least the 7th millennium BCE.

The other theory of the development of religiophilosophical “speculation” is again mainstream dogma in most cultural studies, anthropological and religious. It is based on what I consider defective thinking, established in the late 19th century and sees practically every such phenomenon as evolving from a so-called “primitive” or crude form to more refined or complex ones. This emerged in large part due to Darwin’s general theory of evolution on the one hand and on the other from the initial and increasing studies of the so-called “primitive” non-European peoples and cultures like the Red Indians in America or various tribes in Africa. I pointed out the fallacies of this thinking in Kazanas (2015).

The most misleading and pernicious publication on the evolution of “Hindu speculation” is Edgerton’s book noted above. It is with this that I shall mainly deal in the following paragraphs.

3. In the Preface to his book Edgerton writes that he regards it as his last will and testament as it sums up his views on “early Indian speculation... after a lifetime of philological study and reflection”. And he considers that some of them “are unconventional not to say unorthodox”. Unfortunately, except for some rare people out of the academic stream, we all find it difficult if not impossible to break free of our long-established prejudices. Our so-called thinking is in fact regurgitating deeprooted and almost never questioned notions taken in, often unconsciously, from other unknown sources. Like most good academics, Edgerton does acknowledge many of his sources (Oldenberg, Deussen, Dasgupta, Renou et al) but the views he expresses are very much the mainstream run of the mill. It surprises me, however, that he did not consult and does not mention Keith’s *The Religion & Philosophy of the Veda and Upanishads* (1925), wherein he would have found well tabulated most of his notions but also some correctives to some of his more extravagant views.

In the *RV* he finds a “primitive animism” and a “ritualistic nature-worship” entailing a “complicated system of sacrifices” which compelled the gods “to do what the sacrificer desired” (p17). This cult was both hieratic and aristocratic, since only the rich could afford the expensive sacrificial rituals. But there were for the masses simpler ceremonies and rites not connected with the rigvedic cult. This lower cult is found in the Atharvaveda. Here “all creatures, things, powers, and even abstract principles” are regarded as “volitional potencies or spirits” and are sought to be controlled “by incantations and magic rites” (p18). Apart from the rigvedic pantheon these ceremonies know “other gods which perhaps belonged at the start to aboriginal non-Aryan tribes (Aryan is the name which the Vedic Hindus apply to themselves)”.

Here, in the final sentence lurks the assumption of the AIT; also the assumption of development from primitive to refined (bred of anthropological investigations in the 19th century). I don’t doubt that there were several popular cults for the masses but I also don’t doubt that they were not earlier just as I don’t doubt that there was no Aryan invasion/immigration c.1700 or 2000 or even 4000 BCE. And from the double

assumption lurking in Edgerton's thought, as adumbrated in the previous paragraph, I conclude that it is the writer who speculates, not the Hindus.

4. Edgerton's speculation continues. "Out of the older ritualistic nature-worship with its indefinite plurality of gods," he writes, arose the tendency to henotheism whereby one particular god out of the many is given the attributes of a single supreme deity – creator, preserver, destroyer, ruler of all – who "seems to feel it as an insult to his dignity to admit the competition of other deities" (p18)! That Edgerton writes pejoratively here may seem surprising but, then, his entire approach is not really respectful or sympathetic.

"Some advanced thinkers," he continues, "went beyond henotheism" and set up a new figure "to receive such attributes as creation of all things and supremacy over gods, men, animals, and natural powers" (p19). This new figure in the hymns was often "personalised as a sort of super-god" or as "an ultimate First Principle, an abstraction, a tentative monism". And downgrading or undervaluing the intelligence of those seers, Edgerton tells us "the distinction between these two was probably not very sharp or clear to the Vedic poets" (p19).

How on earth does an American academic in the 20th century of our Era know what happened five or six thousand (and many more) years ago in Saptasindhu, the Land of the Seven Rivers?

He examines analytically the texts, you may tell me.

Does he really?

I doubt the efficiency and veracity of his analysis and description. And I shall provide more than enough justification for this.

He writes for instance that the "remarkable hymn" 10.129 (*nāsadīya sūkta* or Creation Hymn) "struggles towards purely negative characterizations; in the beginning there was 'neither non-existent nor existent'" (p20).

Such a description is simply untrue. Edgerton translates this hymn on pp73-4 and gives for *āmbhas* (in st 1d) 'water'; then, in st 3b *salilá* is rendered as 'ocean'. But, surely, if nothing existed, as he correctly translates st 1a, how could there be 'water' or 'ocean'? When I published last my "In the Beginning" I dealt at length with this ridiculous contradiction in all translations – as I dealt with it several times earlier in other papers.

We perhaps may like to indulge unreasonably in contradictions but we have no right to ascribe similar irrationality to the ancient poets.

And there is nothing negative about the description of That One breathing "airless by innate power". And there was 'profound Potency' *āmbhas* and imperceptible 'fluctuating energy' *salilá*. Surely these characteristics can be regarded only as positive and sufficient to warrant the subsequent evolution or creative process.

5. He writes that henotheism arose "out of the older ritualistic nature worship" (p19). But he offers no proof whatever for this. He does not really know. Nobody really knows. And in any case why speculate that it was mere nature-worship and ritualistic at that?

Here we note two seminal aspects: Edgerton's defective reading of the hymns as sources and the alleged development to henotheism (and thence to monism/monotheism).

Earlier (p18) he had written that the “aboriginal non-Aryan tribes” invoked the nature-gods “after the manner of magic-mongers, much as medieval European incantations invoke the persons of the Trinity and Christian saints... to heal a broken bone or to bring rain for the crops”. Medieval European incantations to christian saints and powers are really his source, not the hymns. He is not in fact, reading the hymns as they are but as he sees them through the christian notions and practices which he has absorbed and here projects backwards. And this is what most academics do.

Undoubtedly, not only Atharvavedic but also some Rigvedic hymns are spells/incantations or invocations to different deities for various favours (e.g. 7.55 for sleep; 7.103 against all demons; 10.145 against rival wife; 10.184 for safe pregnancy; etc). And we find similar practices in peoples in Africa or South America who still live with the technology of the late palaeolithic or, at best, bronze age. The instances are many and certain and we need not linger on this matter.

However, there is a vast difference between the Vedic conception of deities and other traditions including Buddhist, Christian etc, and even Hindu. This difference is hardly ever mentioned and when it is mentioned, as by Edgerton, it is hardly given much value. Vedic deities are forces within man. Yes, of course they are deities outside, all around, natural forces on earth, in the atmosphere and the sky, (the earth itself with its fecundity, waters, rain, air, sun, moon etc); there are also gods of morality like Varuṇa, Mitra and Bṛhaspati. But, as the Atharvavedic hymn 11.8.32 says, Man is the *brahman* and all *devatā* (deities, gods) reside in him as cattle in a pen!

Edgerton has included in his illustrative translated hymns the Atharvavedic hymn 10.2, which presents the structure of the human body and calls it (st 31) “the impregnable citadel of the gods”. Stanza 32 says the *ātman* resides in its golden treasure-chest and (st 32) that the Brahman has entered the same. Then, Edgerton titles 11.8 “Man and his relation to the universe”. Apart from st 32, st 4 gives 10 functions in man as gods/potencies: these are – four breaths, hearing, speech, thought, perishability and imperishability; they are said to be far older than other gods like Indra, Agni, 2 Aśvins etc (st 5), who are as yet unmanifest! In st 30 the *brahman* enters while in st 31 the sun is man’s sight and the wind man’s breath; therefore in st 32 *puruṣa* ‘Man’ is the *brahman*. So gods are internal as well.

But the internalisation of the deities had already appeared in the *RV*. Agni, the Firegod, is said to be set within man’s heart *hṛdaya āhita* and, so, is the constant light of all inspiration, in the early hymn 6.9.6 of the Bharadvāja clan. This luminous power is perceived through mind *mānasā nicay* – (3.26.1) and itself as mental force *manas* is the fastest of all entities that fly (6.9.5). Indra too is internalised identifying himself with sages Manu, Kakṣivan and Uśanās (4.26.1) and his state may be attained by men, though not by deeds or sacrificial rites (8.70.3). Then, human functions like foresight and vigour are deified in 1.53.5 as *devī prāmati* and *devī tāviṣī* respectively.

What academics and most others ignore, as they get absorbed in the ceremonies of sacrifice, is that the soma-ritual is explicitly internalised also. The purifying filter, normally outside, is said to be in the heart *hṛdy-antār-ādadhē* (9.73.8). And hymn 9.113.2 says that it flows out with the right expression *ṛtavakyena*, with truth *satyena*, with faith *śraddhayā* and transforming power *tapasā*.

Going back to hymn 6.9.5 –

dhruvām jyótir nihitam dṛśāye kam māno jāviṣṭhaṃ patáyatsv-antāḥ;
viśve devāḥ sámanasaḥ sáketā ékaṃ krátum ábhi vi yanti sādhu.

‘The constant light has been set within for seeing/discerning, the mind being swiftest among all that fly. All the gods, of one mind and one intent, separately move unerringly to their one purpose’.

This I take simply that just as Agni Vaiśvanara (=belonging to all men) is the light of inspiration/discernment/consciousness in man and illumines with understanding, so the other gods who operate as the various functions in his organism (breath, circulation, digestion, hearing, sight etc etc) move in harmony performing their duty (*ékam krátum*).

However, I do acknowledge that probably most people in the Vedic age regarded deities as external, imperceptible superhuman Powers that should be worshipped, placated and invoked for favours.

Thus, from the very earliest hymns (Maṇḍalas 3, 6, 7) some people or clans, and certainly some rishis, knew that “deities” were not mere Powers of natural phenomena but also forces-functions within man. And, as was said in 10.129.4 (*nāsadīya sūkta*) “the wise poets discovered the bond of true-being in unreality/illusion by delving with perspicuity in their heart” (*sató bāndhum nīravindan hrđi pratīṣyā kāvayo manīṣā*). For a more extensive study of the gods within, see S. Kak (2002) and N. Kazanas (2009: ch 2).

6. F. Edgerton was a distinguished academic and an excellent sanskritist who left behind much good work. But in *The Beginnings...* he goes astray, just like so many others, because of adherence to prevalent prejudices.

In his selections from the *RV* (p51ff) he has first the two stanzas (45, 46) from the hymn 1.164 I cited above. St 45 is about the four levels of Speech *Vāc*, obviously within man! St 46 states that seers *vīpra* call That which is One *ékam sāt* variously by different names – Mitra, Varuṇa, Agni, the celestial Sunbird, Yama, Mātariśvan. But because of the established speculative notions about riddles and rituals he ignores them.

As I mentioned earlier in §1, he ignores st 21 where the poet says “the mighty shepherd of the world has entered into me” and sees in the two stanzas he presents only a “tentative monotheism and monism”. Be it noted that this is the only passage he cites for monism! He cites, on the contrary, many other hymns wherein one god is worshipped exclusively (e.g. Agni 2.1.3-7, Indra 2.12, Parjanya 5.83) or fashions the world (e.g. Brahmaṇaspati 10.72.2, Viśvakarman 10.81). And one must wonder why he disregards so many other passages that express pure monism. No, he does not examine the hymns carefully.

In my previous paper “In the Beginning” I cited several passages. A very clear statement is the one I cite at the beginning of the present paper, hymn 8.54.2, third in §1: *ékam vā idám vi babhūva sárva* ‘being One, indeed, it became all this [world]’. This states not only that there is One [supreme deity] but also that this One became all [and everything] which is an axiom in Vedānta (brahman) or in Sāṅkhya (*prakṛti*).

One may doubt the truth of this last and similar assertions about the One being the supreme source whence all and everything is produced. There is no tangible proof for or against it and people are entitled to their own views. But why say, as Edgerton does, that it is speculation and that some thinking priests struggled from crude polytheism towards monotheism and monism?

It is quite obvious to anyone who reads the *RV* that polytheism, henotheism and monism existed simultaneously. It is equally obvious that, since the vast majority of

hymns express polytheism and henotheism and only few hymns express monism, the first two were by far the most popular cults and monism is thrown here and there, perhaps (here I do some speculating), to remind others that there is another view! Even today monism is not all that popular: most people are irreligious atheists (or materialists) and the rest follow some religion or other. A very small minority, an insignificant percentage of the population turn earnestly to monism.

But what is unforgivable in modern academics is their arrogance. They think they know best. They think they know better than what centuries' old traditions convey and than what the ancient people themselves actually say they experience. So when Dīrghatamas in 1.164.21 says explicitly that the glorious guardian of the universe entered into him, academics ignore this pretending it is not there and go on expatiating about sacrificial ritual, riddles and other peripheral matters. Yet this seer gives us an empirical statement (**the Supreme is in man**) and practical proof of the theoretical teaching of the Upanishads and other Vedānta sources. Intent on his pet theories and thinking that he actually set in definitive order the “speculative beginnings” of ancient Indian Philosophy, Edgerton ignores this plain statement as unimportant “for our subject”(p51)!

So do, of course, hundreds of other mainstreamers.

7. The *RV* alone has the real beginning of (Indian) philosophy, psychology, religion and art. It is not only the most ancient and primary text of the Vedic and general Indic culture. It is also, most probably, the oldest extant document for all such aspects of the Indoeuropean culture(s). However, as it contains hymns and not essays or treatises, what we find is brief or broken ideas and expressions of (implied) larger systems of thought. I have dealt with the all-comprehensiveness of the *RV* with its poetry, philosophy, psychology, religion and sciences, frequently in the past (Kazanas 2009: 66-117; Kazanas and Klostermaier 2012; especially Kazanas 2015: ch3). In this final section I shall deal only with religiophilosophical aspects.

a) There was atheism/materialism. This is obvious in 2.12 where the poet mentions in st 5 that there are people who deny Indra's existence. Not so obvious but surely indicative of a not respectful attitude towards orthodoxy is the hymn of the Frogs 7.103, which lampoons brahmin priests, gurus and devotees. Then, there are several hymns showing that in one way or another some people are not even superstitiously religious or that they easily stray from the moral path (7.86 to Varuṇa; 9.112 to Soma; 10.34 with the gambler's lament).

b) There was the low popular “religion” which amounted to superstition, magic of sorts and make-believe. As most scholars indicate, the bulk of *AV* and some Rigvedic hymns (*RV* 7.55 for sleep; 10.97 on healing plants; etc) bear this out very clearly. This could well have been the strongest strand among common people.

c) Orthodox brahmanic religion with its rituals and extensive duties is most in evidence in the *RV*. This was the religion of the Aryas generally, but, apart from the hieratic class, only the better-to-do could really adhere to it fully since sacrifices and other rites were expensive. But this was the stem that developed later into Hinduism.

d) The esoteric cult involved a much smaller percentage of the people that gathered in groups (or “schools”) in different areas and applied to their everyday behaviour moral or yogic practices (and I don't mean *āsanas* and related gymnastics) for the realisation of the divine Self that they felt or thought or knew they were. This self-

realisation is evidenced clearly in Kaṇva's second birth (*RV* 8.6.10): "Having received from my father the essential wisdom (*medhā*) of the Cosmic Order (*ṛta*) I was [re-]born even like the Sungod Sūrya". These adherents practised meditation and prayer (7.90.4; 5.40.6; 3.31.9; etc) or strict moral behaviour and mental discipline (1.125.7; 1.151.4; 2.23.17; etc) and, of course, imbibed soma (8.43.3; 9 *passim*).

All these religiophilosophical strands and variations thereof existed at the same time even in the earlier period of the *RV* (see also Werner 1998). It is only highly prejudicial speculation, ignoring factual evidence and reason, that would give priority to "primitive animism" or "ritualistic nature-worship". For then, could it not be that the beginning was a full and sure knowledge of the One and this gradually degenerated (=evolved) into the other three aspects mentioned above? Is it not prejudicial thinking on our part, fundamentally formed in the later 19th century, that generates all our pseudo-scientific speculations?

I shall return to this investigation and complete it in a third essay.

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