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THE BRAHMAN TRADITION

BY DANIEL INGALLS

TO give an intelligible account of the Brahman tradition of India in the space of a few pages, the writer must simplify his facts drastically. He must also limit himself to what is most peculiarly associated with the Brahmans, for there is a wide area where it is impossible to set a boundary between Brahman culture and the general culture of India. Finally, he must keep his eye more to the past than to the present, for the Brahman tradition is now changing at different rates and in different directions in various parts of India in such a way as to make general statements meaningless.

I shall try to abide by these restrictions, and to speak to you of the Brahman tradition under two headings: first, the content of this tradition and the method of its transmission; second, the humans who have been its carriers.

From the viewpoint of content, the heart and origin of the Brahman tradition is the Veda. Actually, the study of the Veda is enjoined by the lawbooks on all the twice-born, that is, all members of the upper classes,¹ but for the past two thousand years at least, this study has been usually limited to Brahmans. The Lawbook of Manu says that a Brahman who knows not the Vedic verses receives no more profit from this world and the next than a eunuch receives from women.² In fact, as the eunuch is not properly a man, so he who knows not the Veda is not properly a Brahman. He is a *brahmabandhu*, a Brahman in name only.

What is meant by knowing the Veda is primarily the memorizing of Vedic verses, especially those verses which are necessary to a Brahman for the performance of his personal ritual. He may go on to memorize more, to memorize the whole of one of the four great Vedic collections. Something close to this is necessary if he is to perform the ritual for other persons, that is to say, if he is to earn his living according to the traditional manner prescribed for his class. For, according to the lawbooks, a Brahman except in times of calamity, should earn his living as a priest, as a teacher, or as a minister of state.

Each of the four Vedas contains at least three parts: the *mantras*, that is, the sacred or magical words; the *brāhmaṇa* or explanation, which tells one how to employ the *mantras* and furnishes the mythological and religious explanation of the ritual; and finally, the *sūtras* or practical rules of procedure. To indicate the amount of memorizing necessary to master all this, one may take an example. The White Yajur Veda according to the Mādhyamīna school, as it stands printed in the edition of Albrecht Weber, comes to somewhat over 3,000 quarto pages of Sanskrit text. And this does not exhaust the Indian power of memory. Brahman families are still found with the names Dube, Tiware, Chaube, words which derive from the Sanskrit *Dvivedī*, *Trivedī*, *Caturvedī*, meaning that some remote ancestor of the family once memorized two, three or four Vedas respectively.

The memorizing of a Veda was expected to take eight years, and the traditional

time for beginning this study was when a Brahman boy was eight years old. In that year would be held the *upanayana*, the ceremony of investing the boy with the sacred thread. Directly after the investiture he would be taught the *Gāyatrī*, a three-line verse from the *Rig-veda* which he would prefix to his morning and evening prayers for the rest of his life.

A Veda knower with whom I have spoken has told me that he already knew a good many verses before he was eight years old. He had older brothers whom his father had taught before him, so he had overheard the Veda lesson every day since he could first remember. There is very little privacy in an Indian house. After his investiture, by repeating the verses for two or three hours a day word for word as his teacher recites them, a boy can soon memorize a vast amount. Sometimes he is made to recite the words backwards or in other elaborate arrangements so as to be sure that no syllable is omitted, no accent misplaced. In all this period of learning the boy is seldom told anything of the meaning of the verses, and he often passes his life in complete ignorance on this score. He is told simply how to use the verses, which verses to use in which rituals. And if he is studying what is specifically the ritual Veda, he will be given instruction in the complicated acts of his trade.

Until the last twenty or thirty years there was always a wide market for the services of these Vedic memorizers. They were needed at weddings and funerals; they were needed at the hundred and one apotropaic ceremonies that middle and upper class Hindus used to find necessary. A wife had had a nightmare, her son was sick of a fever, the husband had taken impure food on his trip to the city—for all these things there was a ceremony to ward off the evil. And even when business was bad there were still eclipses and holidays. I know of a *Yajurveda* priest who always used to walk with his sons to the neighboring village the day before new moon and full moon. He would call at the house of each of his patrons and tell them that the next day was a holiday. "Otherwise," his son told me, "they might not have known, for you see they were not Brahmins." And the families would give him vegetables and rice which the boys would carry home.

But from ancient times there were other Brahmins who followed different paths of learning. Instead of emphasizing memory, they emphasized analysis and an intellectual approach. The earliest forms of this learning were exegesis and grammar. I have not time to trace the gradual development of the Brahmin intellectual tradition. Surendranath Dasgupta devoted five volumes to it and was still far from having covered the whole of its history.³ But let me try to make clear at least the present nature of this intellectual tradition.

The word *śāstrī* is applied in modern times to the man trained by this analytical or intellectual method, and the chief branches of *śāstric* tradition as still preserved are grammar, rhetoric, poetry, logic, and philosophy. The *śāstrī*'s method of learning, as also his place of learning, differs considerably from that of the Vedic student. Whereas the repeater of the Vedas is trained by a single teacher usually in a village, the *śāstrī* is usually trained in a school or *ṭol*, and the school is usually in a town or city. There are exceptions to this statement, but it is worth emphasizing that the *śāstric* tradition is essentially an urban tradition and has flourished chiefly at the capital cities of Hindu dynasties and at important places of pilgrimage: at Poona, Dharbhanga, Mysore, Banaras, or going back to earlier times: at Vijayanagar, Pratiṣṭhāna, Ujjain, Pataliputra. The golden age of this tradition was between the ancient period of in-

vasions and the advent of the Moslems in the thirteenth century. But it continued after the thirteenth century in the south and has held out in a few corners of India into our own time.

The *śāstrī*, it is true, is subjected in his youth to what we should consider a formidable amount of memorizing, but it is considerably less than is expected of the Vedic student, and it is much less important that he remember it exactly word for word. There are various ways in which a child may begin in this tradition. A favorite way is to start him out with Sanskrit grammar, usually with the *Siddhāntaṭīkā* for textbook. He will be expected to memorize the rules and to learn to apply them. To watch children applying these rules is something utterly fascinating. They will be given a Sanskrit inflectional form, say the form *vijigīṣavaḥ* and told to construct it from the beginning. They then take the simple root, reduplicate for the desiderative, add the signatic suffix, retroflex it after the high vowel, append the participial suffix and so forth and so on. Often there are ten or twelve steps. At each step the child justifies what he has done by quoting the pertinent grammatical rule, running through these rules as fast as the auctioneer on the Lucky Strike Program. Often there are conflicting rules or a choice of various methods of explanation. The constructions then are like the problems of geometry. They require not only memory but imagination and ingenuity. If a child can stand this training for the first year, he usually comes to enjoy it, and one can see these young grammarians testing each other after the teacher has turned away from his class. The teacher of the beginners is usually an older student of the school, and if the children have not understood what he taught or if it seems wrong to them, they will go to the master and say, "Joshī Śāstrī has told us so-and-so, but surely he must be wrong," and the master will reexplain the problem in the presence of the older student. There is more honesty, more patience, and more true teaching in these antiquated *ṭols* than there is in the Westernized colleges of India, at least to the extent that I have been able to observe them.

The teaching of logic and philosophy proceeds in much the same way. The basic texts offer as it were a map of the universe. All the categories and the major types of relations are there precisely defined. The student is then tested with various sets of circumstances which he is asked, as one might say, to fit into the map. One student will take one point of view, another another, and at each step justification is given by reference to the rules of the game. A senior student acts as umpire with occasional reference to the master. On special occasions, that is, on holidays or on the visit of some great *śāstrī* from another city, there will be a more formal debate with advanced students and even the masters taking part.

There is a third sort of Brahman tradition beyond the Vedic and the sastric, what one might call the esoteric tradition. The tantras and much of the Vedānta fall within this category, although the Vedānta originally was firmly attached to a ritual base. The esoteric tradition consists of dogma, symbolism, and poetry concerning the ultimate truths, the nature of reality, the afterlife, and *mokṣa* 'freedom' or 'release.' Bits of this tradition are known very widely, but the tradition as an organized whole is passed down within special sects or orders of ascetics. It is imparted as a whole to a student only after he has passed through a fairly long period of service and training.

Finally, with a good many Brahmans the traditions of their class run a good bit thinner than anything I have indicated. There have always been Brahmans who took their Vedic study very lightly, learning little more than the Gāyatrī, and who possessed

no intellectual or esoteric education either. In the same way, there are professors' children in America who spend the day looking at television or reading comics.

Now to consider the Brahman tradition from the viewpoint of the tradition bearers. The heart or center of the tradition bearers has always been what one might call the respectable Brahman family, that is to say, a family which earned its livelihood, married, and was burned according to the memorized, and since the time of Christ or so, according to the written traditions. The head of the family would serve as a priest for Kṣatriyas and the well-to-do, or would be a householder in an *agrahāra*, that is, a tract of tax-free land given to Brahmins. An enormous number of land grants to Brahmins are revealed to us by the inscriptions. And it is interesting to note that in some instances, for example in the inscriptions of the kings of Vallabhī, the recipients of the grants bear precisely the same caste names as the Brahmins who still live on this land 1300 years later.⁴

The training in such a family emphasized time and again the supreme position of the Brahman. A Brahman was a god on earth. The earth actually belonged to the Brahmins, but Kṣatriyas were allowed to rule it so that Brahmins could avoid the necessity of taking life and could devote themselves to their ritual. There was an enormous amount of this ritual, of which you may find a faithful record in the essays of Colebrooke or in Mrs. Sinclair Stevenson's *Rites of the Twiceborn*.⁵ The head of the family might spend five hours or more of the day in ritual performances, in the *saṃdhyā* or crepuscular ceremony, in the bathing, the offerings, the fire ceremony, the Vedic recitations. The Brahman's wife or some other female member of his family would devote an hour of the day to the worship of the household idols.

This family life minimized the importance of wealth without, however, inculcating asceticism. The important thing was not to grow rich but to lead a decent, harmonious life. Perhaps the most pleasing pictures of this traditionalism come from the pen of Kālidāsa, although his name indicates that he himself was not a Brahman. Constantly he is attracted by the peaceful smoke of sacrificial fires. He writes lovingly of the dignified matrons going about their religious rites in the rooms of a great house.⁶ And it is Kālidāsa who sums up the ideal of ultratraditionalism in his praise of King Dilipa. Under the good King Dilipa, "the people swerved not a rut's breadth from the path traveled by the ancients, no more than the tire swerves under a skillful driver."⁷

Even the intellectuals among the Brahmins always gave lip service to this traditionalism. The logicians, for example, completely transformed the doctrines of the sage who compiled the *Nyāya-sūtra*. Indeed they had to do this if they were to compete in argument with the Buddhists. But only seldom did they write professedly original works. What they would do is comment on an older text, claiming that although the sage was silent on a given point, what he had meant to say was such and such. The school of Prācīna Nyāya, extending over a thousand years, consists essentially of a single work six layers deep: *sūtra*, commentary, supercommentary, super-super commentary and so on to the sixth degree.

There is no question but that traditionalism has been a steady ideal in Brahman culture. But this does not explain the immense influence of Brahmanism on Indian culture as a whole. This influence, I think, derives largely from Brahman minorities who broke with traditionalism either covertly or overtly. I shall mention two such minorities.

There were in the first place those Brahmins who sought wealth. The pathway to wealth was education, a Sanskrit education, specifically the education of what is now called a *śāstrī*. It is hard for us few Sanskritists nowadays to realize what material pleasures could once be attained by our discipline. The *Sāhityadarpaṇa*, a standard textbook of the fourteenth century on literature, states that Sanskrit literature is the primary means to all the ends of man. The reason it gives is instructive. In the first place, excellence in Sanskrit procures wealth, and with wealth one can buy sensual enjoyments. It goes on to say that by attention to the content of traditional literature one will also gain religious goals and final release, but the first and obvious reason for this exacting training was that it was profitable.⁸ The argument of the *Sāhityadarpaṇa* is not an uncommon one. In classical Sanskrit poetry, in the works of the literary critics and in the anecdotes that were told of ancient writers, one is reminded time and again that the ability to turn a good Sanskrit verse, especially a good panegyric of the king, was a passport to a lucrative position at court. The inscriptions furnish evidence that the argument is sound. Thus, we know Umapatidhara as an author of elegant verses in the anthologies.⁹ The inscriptions show that he was a great minister of the Sena dynasty of Bengal. He composed verses for royal land grants himself, of which an example has been recovered, showing in its preamble the sort of exaggerated but delicate praise of the ruling house which had probably earned the minister his post.¹⁰ The author of the *Sāhityadarpaṇa*, from which I have just quoted, was a Brahmin minister of the kings of Orissa.¹¹ One could give a hundred other instances. The ministers of King Bhoja of Dhar, the ministers of a whole line of kings of Kashmir, the great Sayanācārya of Vijayanagar in the south—all these were Brahmin scholars who owed much of their wealth and prestige to their intellectual accomplishments in the śāstric tradition.

These successful scholars in the position of temporal rulers were able to influence Indian institutions and mores far more than could the stay-at-home traditionalists. In some places they even attempted to carry out the letter of the old Brahmin law-books. In all places they established the prestige of a Brahmin code of behavior. Even if not followed, it was recognized as an ideal. It is also worth noting that these mighty Brahmins seem also to have been the cause of whatever anti-Brahmin sentiment there was in the India of the past. And it is no accident that the only areas of modern India where there is an active anti-Brahmin political movement are those areas where the Brahmins recently occupied this position of power and wealth.

A second group who broke with traditionalism were of very different character. These men gave up the leisurely life of the respectable householder, but they renounced wealth instead of seeking it. Toward the end of the Vedic period, there appear traces of ascetic orders recruiting members from the Brahmin class. There is evidence that such orders had existed among the non-Brahmin indigenous population from a much earlier period. The Brahmin ascetics become more numerous as one passes into the Christian era. Some of their orders were bound together by worship of a particular god, others were atheistic. An interesting chapter could be written on the battle between these new ascetics and the orthodox. For many centuries the Brahmins of respectable families regarded them as renegades. The orthodox of the orthodox, represented by the Mīmāṃsā, or school of ritualists, held out against the movement the longest, and perhaps have never been entirely reconciled to it.

The man who made asceticism and mysticism respectable in the eyes of most of

the orthodox was the great Śaṅkara, who lived in the eighth century A.D. He accepted orthodox views as tentatively valid. That is, they were the correct views up to the point where one sought for absolute truth. This could be found only by a life of thorough asceticism, a life which he admitted was to be recommended to very few persons.

Śaṅkara founded an order of monks from which ten sects of the present day trace their descent.¹² A scholarly history of the movement has yet to be written, but it is abundantly clear that Śaṅkara's monks exerted an immediate influence not only on the orthodox but on Indian culture at large. From Śaṅkara's time forward the popular admiration that had been directed toward Buddhist monks and teachers shifted to this new Brahman minority.

These Vedānta monks had certain qualities that were immediately appealing and evocative of admiration. Śaṅkara insisted that they give up everything, not simply family and wealth; they must give up even their Brahman pride. He was the first Vedānti to insist that his pupils give up the sacred thread. To the man who would see truth all things must be pure. In modern works on Śaṅkara such points are often forgotten in a maze of philosophical speculation. But for explaining the popularity of his movement they are important. Equally important are the nonphilosophical hymns which he or his followers taught to the wandering monks, hymns which sing with glowing passion of freedom and the unity of mankind.¹³ The word for 'freedom' is *mokṣa*. The philosophers sometimes forget its basic meaning and spend all their effort speculating on what sort of metaphysical entity is left when you are ultimately free. But *mokṣa* to the monks who sang the Vedānta hymns meant first of all freedom from the ritual, freedom from social bonds; then it meant freedom from desire, and finally freedom from personality, a state in which there would no longer be any mine and yours, any I and you.

The effect of Śaṅkara and his followers on the Brahman majority was profound. Not that many were actually converted to the new asceticism and mysticism, but for the most part they respected it, and this respect somehow broadened their outlook on the world. Asceticism and mysticism have been, for many centuries now, to the respectable Indian classes what art has been for the last century and a half to the bourgeoisie of Western Europe: something for which most of the majority has no talent, or dares not try, but which many of them feel somehow justifies their own dull and unimportant lives.

I have run to the end of my space, and yet have left much unsaid. I have not mentioned temple priests, nor *paurāṇikas*, nor astrologers, nor those Brahmans who emigrated to southeast Asia, introducing into those lands the learned language and the learned notions of India. And, finally, I have said nothing of the many Brahmans who simply do not fit into any category one can construct. For while Brahmans have their traditions, they are also human beings, and the range of variation among human beings, while not infinite, is certainly greater than any one human being can conceive.

NOTES

¹ *Manusmṛti* [The Laws of Manu] *śrīmat-Kullūkabhaṭṭa-viracitayā Manvarthamukṭāvalyā sametā* (Bombay, 1902), II, 165.

² *Manusmṛti*, II, 158.

³ Surendranath Dasgupta, *A History of Indian Philosophy* (Cambridge, Eng., 1932-1955).

⁴ Sylvain Lévi, "Les donations religieuses des rois de Vallabhi," *Bibliothèque de l'École des Hautes-Études, Sciences religieuses*, 7 (1896), 75-100, reprinted in *Mémorial Sylvain Lévi*, ed. Paul Hartmann (Paris, 1937), p. 228.

⁵ H. T. Colebrooke, "On the Religious Ceremonies of the Hindus, and of the Brahmans Especially," *Miscellaneous Essays* (London, 1837), I, 123-226. Mrs. Sinclair Stevenson, *The Rites of the Twiceborn* (Oxford, 1920).

⁶ Kālidāsa, *Vikramorvaṣīyam*, (Bombay, 1942), III, 2.

⁷ Kālidāsa, *Raghuvamśa with the Commentary of Mallinātha* (Bombay, 1892), I, 17.

⁸ *Sāhityadarpaṇa*, Kashi Sanskrit Series 145 (Benares, 1947), I, 2ff (p. 5ff.).

⁹ See *Saduktakarṇāmṛta*, Punjab Oriental Series 15 (Lahore, 1933), pp. 40-42.

¹⁰ *Epigraphia Indica*, I, pp. 305-315.

¹¹ In the colophon to Chapter I of the *Sāhityadarpaṇa*, he signs himself "Viśvanātha, Poet Laureate, First Minister of Peace and War. . . ."

¹² G. S. Ghurye, *Indian Sadhus*, The Popular Book Depot (Bombay, 1953), p. 92ff.

¹³ Such verses may be found in *Minor Works of Śrī Saṅkarācārya*, 2nd ed., Poona Oriental Series 8 (1952). A few are translated in a little book by V. Raghavan, *Prayers, Praises and Psalms*, (Madras, s.d.). See, for example, the verse "Worship Govinda, worship Govinda," p. 228ff. Many such hymns are certainly not by the great Saṅkaracarya, but they spring from the movement which he initiated.

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