

The Primeval Sacrifice

The origin of the universe from a primeval sacrifice, in which a cosmic being offers himself as an oblation, is not unknown in primitive mythological traditions. However, the sacrifice of the male Purusha here is not so much the primordial sacrifice of a world-giant or the type *Ur-mensch* found in Norse or Germanic mythology, as it is a cosmogonic idea based on ritual sacrifice itself as the origin of the universe. Thus, the nature of the Purusha is a secondary blend of characteristics derived from the Vedic deities Agni, the sacrifice personified and the typical male principle; Surya, the sun; and Vishnu, another solar deity who embraces earth, atmosphere, and sky. Emphasized here is the universality of Purusha and his function as the cosmic sacrifice. In this way the ritual sacrifice performed on earth by a priestly class eventually was translated into terms of cosmological significance by a process identifying microcosmic, with macrocosmic, elements.

This hymn makes the earliest reference to the four social orders, later known as castes. The passage is important in that it emphasized the magico-ritualistic origin of castes. The brahmins formed the highest social order, the literate intelligentsia which gave India its priests, thinkers, law-givers, judges, and ministers of state. The rajanyas, later called kshatriyas or rulers, were the second social order, the Indian counterpart of feudal nobility: from this class were recruited kings, vassals, and warriors. The vaishyas formed the class of landowners, merchants and moneylenders, while the shudras, originally those peoples conquered by the Aryans, were workers, artisans, or serfs. (From *Rig Veda*, 10.90)

Thousand-headed Purusha, thousand-eyed, thousand-footed – he, having pervaded the earth on all sides, still extends ten fingers beyond it.

Purusha alone is all this – whatever has been and whatever is going to be. Further, he is the lord of immortality and also of what grows on account of food.

Such is his greatness; greater, indeed, than this is Purusha. All creatures constitute but one quarter of him, his three quarters are the immortal in the heaven.

With his three quarters did Purusha rise up; one quarter of him again remains here: With it did he variously spread out on all sides over what eats and what eats not.

From him was Viraj¹¹ born, from Viraj the evolved Purusha. He, being born, projected himself behind the earth as also before it.

When the gods performed the sacrifice with Purusha as the oblation, then the spring was its clarified butter, the summer the sacrificial fuel, and the autumn the oblation.

The sacrificial victim, namely, Purusha, born at the very beginning, they sprinkled with sacred water upon the sacrificial grass. With him as oblation the gods performed the

¹¹ The precise meaning of Viraj is uncertain. Here it seems to represent a kind of cosmic source – perhaps the waters themselves – from which creation proceeds.

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sacrifice, and also the Sadhyas (a class of semidivine beings) and the rishis (ancient seers).

From that wholly offered sacrificial oblation were born the verses (*rc*) and the sacred chants; from it were born the meters (*chandās*); the sacrificial formula was born from it.¹²

From it horses were born and also those animals who have double rows (i.e., upper and lower) of teeth; cows were born from it, from it were born goats and sheep.

When they divided Purusha, in how many different portions did they arrange him? What became of his mouth, what of his two arms? What were his two thighs and his two feet called?

His mouth became the brahman; his two arms were made into the rajanya; his two thighs the vaishyas; from his two feet the shudra was born.

The moon was born from the mind, from the eye the sun was born; from the mouth Indra and Agni, from the breath (*prana*) the wind (*vayu*) was born.

From the navel was the atmosphere created, from the head the heaven issued forth; from the two feet was born the earth and the quarters (the cardinal directions) from the ear. Thus did they fashion the worlds.

Seven were the enclosing sticks in this sacrifice, thrice seven were the fire-sticks made, when the gods, performing the sacrifice, bound down Purusha, the sacrificial victim.

With this sacrificial oblation did the gods offer the sacrifice. These were the first norms (*dharma*) of sacrifice.¹³ These greatnesses reached to the sky wherein live the ancient Sadhyas and gods.

¹² The verses (*re*), the sacred changes (*sama*), and the sacrificial formula (*yajus*) may refer to the three Vedas.

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