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FROM TRANSCENDENT ORDER TO REALITY:  
EARLY DEVELOPMENTS IN THE INDIAN  
CONCEPT OF TRUTH\*

I

By Truth, the sun gives heat,  
by truth, the moon shines,  
by truth, the wind blows,  
by truth, the earth supports.  
By truth exist the waters, by truth the fire,  
the ether by truth, too,  
by truth, the gods,  
by truth, the sacrifices<sup>1</sup>.

This is the Viṣṇusmṛti speaking, one of the classical and reputable among Indian Law-Books, and to our ears this sounds like a pas-

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\* The following pages were written at the kind invitation of the President of the Agrigento *Accademia di Studi Mediterranei*. Professor Vincenzo Fazio, to be delivered at the Accademia's Conference on Human Values in November 1995. The editorial staff of *Indologica Taurinensia* have suggested their inclusion in the present issue – an honour for which I am deeply grateful.

1. *satyenādityas tapati / satyena bhāti candramāḥ / satyena vāti pavanaḥ / satyena bhūr dhārayati / satyenāpas tiṣṭhanti / satyenāgniḥ / khaṃ ca satyena / satyena devāḥ / satyena yajñāḥ / Viṣṇusmṛti 8.27-35, ed. JOLLY p. 35.*

sage from primeval myths rather than from a collection of legal injunctions. There are the elements which form the first beginning of the world: in earth, water, fire, and wind we recognize the four elements familiar to us from the pre-Socratic philosophers, and we are not mistaken in this interpretation: the philosophy of the Upaniṣads has these same four in its list of elements, and adds a fifth and highest to them, ether, which we duly find in the passage quoted. Then, there are the sun and moon: very obviously, to see the sources of light associated with Truth again stems from early layers of thought, long before we would suppose formalized law to have evolved. And the gods and the sacrifices which conclude this list will only strengthen our impression, by pointing to a layer deeper than that of an elementary philosophical analysis: the level where truth is protected and guaranteed by what lies beyond human experience and authority.

No doubt, in some of these associations we are correct; yet in their general drift I am persuaded we would misunderstand what the author means to say. To a traditional Hindu ear of perhaps 1500 years ago, i.e. the time when the text was possibly compiled<sup>2</sup>, this series of concepts is not mythology, but rather the key words of a model of the world which was conceived as thoroughly rational. We see this clearly in the Five Elements we have recognized: finally evolved in the Upaniṣads, they count as the ultimate components of all creation for much of Indian philosophical tradition. Sun and moon stem from earlier models for explaining existence and the fate of man<sup>3</sup>, as do the gods. The sacrifice, finally, was founded on an elaborate theory of symbolical actions which fashioned it into the ultimate embodiment and point of reference of truth and reality. This happened even before the period of the Brāhmaṇas, i.e. the group of texts which preceded the Upaniṣads. The variables of the list, sun, moon, wind etc., are the components of Created World, such as analysis had at different stages identified them. Stripped to a sketeton, the passage gives the key words of early Indian intellectual history. Again: there can be no doubt it is rational rather than mythical in intent: it is but another case

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2. See P.V. KANE, *History of Dharmasāstra*, vol. 1, p. 125.

3. See, e.g., TaittU 1.5.1.

of what OLDENBERG has so felicitously called «Science before Science», *Vorwissenschaftliche Wissenschaft*.

This much for an initial clarification; now to turn to what the text affirms. All these components of Created World, it says, are ultimately grounded on Truth: it is Truth from which they derive their existence and their characteristic properties.

These to us are strange claims, as is clearest, perhaps, from the last assertion but one. *The gods exist by truth*: this is nothing less than a reversal of priorities such as they are familiar to our ears. Truth stems from God, rather than the other way round: this is how the Old Testament has it (*All the paths of the Lord are mercy and truth unto such as keep his covenant and testimonies* Ps.25,10; cf. Ps.43,3 etc.), and the New Testament still has similar ideas: *I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father but by me* Joh. 14,6.

It is the crucial stage in the emergence of this inversion which I mean to present before you.

2. The question of Truth in the oldest Indian texts, the Vedas, has been treated at considerable length by H. LÜDERS in his *Varuṇa*, posthumously published. This monograph, a monument of erudition, shows quite clearly how Truth was a concept central to Vedic religion, one of the means by which its followers established their identity against the surrounding heathens who worshipped uncouth gods (1.156.5; 7.21.5; p. 583). The ideas which formed around this nucleus are the subject of much reflection. There are two Sankrit words to denote them, *ṛtá-* and *satyá-*. Taken together, they occur some 500 times (roughly 350 *ṛtá-*, 150 *satyá-*), being found in a great variety of contexts and applications, ranging from the most sublime, pious, and awe-inspiring to the tangible, worldly, and flat. Truth, Lüders demonstrates, was guarded and watched over by the Ādityas, God *Varuṇa* chief among them, and much of Vedic religious practice and thought was devoted to attempts to ascertain its nature, and to regulating behaviour according to its rules.

This truth, LÜDERS goes on to assert, was designated in Vedic language by two separate but synonymous words, *ṛtá-* and *satyá-*<sup>4</sup>. In

saying so, he went against most of the Vedic research that had preceded him. *satyá-*, to be sure, had always been taken in this sense, and is abundantly attested in all periods of Sanskrit literature. The case of *ṛta-* is different: by and large, it is a Vedic word, and its interpretation to a great extent depends on the views one holds of the nature, functions and devices of Vedic religion. Vedic scholars prior to LÜDERS had usually taken the word in a sense like «cosmic or divine order» etc. etc. LÜDERS has meticulously examined the mythical associations and ramifications that had grown round the concept, and has reconstructed a great part of a model of the world which had Truth at its core, and from this core branched out into various directions.

In all this, there is an assumption where to my mind LÜDERS had misjudged the evidence. This is the equivalence of *ṛtá-* and *satyá-* which he posits. To me, it seems quite plain there is a marked distinction between them, and I should say this distinction was of considerable interest for the early history of Indian thought. The drift which I think one can recognize in the texts is given in the title of this essay: Truth and Reality. Rather than define at the outset what these two words are taken to mean, I shall present a few contexts to you which in my eyes show the direction in which we have to seek. In this, I shall have to reduce the argument to the main lines.

2.1. First, the *ṛtá-*. The solution seems to lie in a combination, and indeed fusion, of LÜDERS's and his predecessors' findings. To be sure, the *ṛtá-* is Truth, but it is a truth which more often than not lies beyond the sphere of man and is but imperfectly recognized by him.

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4. «Man wird ... kaum bestreiten, daß die Ausdrücke *ṛtá-* und *satyá-* nicht nur parallel, sondern auch synonym sind» (*Varuṇa* 2, p. 576): this is in consonance with a stray remark of GELDNER's (RV translation, ad 1.105.12). This of course raises a question of principle which has been much debated: do languages really afford themselves the luxury of exact synonyms? and even if one was to say they do, will they have exact synonyms in a semantic field which is of crucial importance to beliefs and ethics? – There is no need to pursue the topic in the present context where the semantic difference between the two concepts is so very clear. It strikes me as odd that LÜDERS's reading seems to have been accepted practically without demur, a notable exception being B. SCHLERATH who, in an unpublished lecture to the 1961 Moscow Congress of Orientalists, came to conclusions similar to those suggested here.

Distinguishing Truth from Untruth is the domain of the gods, (Mitra's and Aryaman's and) Varuṇa's in particular, while Man is often not aware of it: a paraphrase like the older «cosmic order» captures this aspect.

The *ṛtá-* – and this is perhaps the most important of its manifestations – was instrumental in the creation of this world. RV 5.1.7. speaks of Agni «who has spread out (~ separated?) Heaven and Earth by truth (*ā yás tatāna ródasī ṛténa*)». Why should it do so, why should Truth be assigned this function? The answer is clear: because it denotes the pre-established plan or order which, when carried into practice, ensures creation follows the right course. The *ṛtá-* sets a standard that is rooted in the ultramundane design of whichever god; and what happens on earth, the acts of nature and the deeds of man, are measured against it. If the two correspond, order is maintained, the *ṛtá-* fulfilled; if not, man is faced by the corresponding negative, *ánṛta-*, an untruth or lie. Again, to my ears a paraphrase like «cosmic order» would seem to be to the point.

In support, one might refer to the ideas about its location. Many verses make it clear this is with the gods (RV 10.66.4). To quote one example: The poet makes Varuṇa say *dhārāyaṃ dívam sádama ṛtásya* (RV 4.42.4) «At the seat of Truth, I have fixed heaven»: in other words, Truth, to us an abstract concept, is visualized; it has a defined place (cf. 1.105.6) which lies in highest heaven: there are verses which make it quite clear it was imagined in the heavenly waters. It is the intuition of the poet which clarifies it and makes it visible and brings it down to earth.

Third, the *ṛtá-* is elusive and, in the hands of its masters, the gods, variable. This is why Varuṇa can establish or ordain a new *ṛtá-*. At times, it is given to the poet to voice a new truth of this kind, by virtue of their insight and inspiration, which stems from the gods. These are the instances which LÜDERS, partly following GELDNER, interprets as «hymn» («*Lied, Kultlied*»):

*bráhmā krṇoti váruṇo  
gātvídaṃ tám īmahe /  
vy ūṛṇoti hṛdā matīṃ  
návyo jāyatām ṛtām // RV 1.105.15*

«Varuṇa makes a formulation: we go to him who knows paths; he uncovers thought by means of the heart: let a new truth be born».

i.e. the new truth which stands revealed in the poet's words directly stems from the formulation of Varuṇa – who, as the verse expressly says, is *gātuvíd-*, knows the ways or paths: in particular those, it goes without saying, which lead into the unknown. And the gods, or at least the Ādityas, are masters of the *ṛtá-* and have the power to invert its normal course:

*yád devā devahédanaṃ dévāsaś cakṛmā vayám /  
ādityās tásmān no yūyám ṛtāsya ṛténa muñcata / AV 6.114.1*

«O gods, whatever cause of the wrath of the gods we, o gods, have committed – from that do ye, o Ādityas, release us «by right of right» (*ṛtá*) WHITNEY.

Here, «truth» no longer makes sense<sup>5</sup>. The first half of the verse clearly says there was a fault, or may have been, and from this guilt the poet wants to be released. Surely, he cannot mean to ask the gods to convert his misdeed into truth. However we mean to interpret the rhetorical figure *ṛtāsya ṛtá-*, something like «release us by the truth of your divine might» must be intended.

2.2. The associations of *satyá-* are quite different in tone and connotations. Just two examples:

*vaiśvānara táva tát satyám astu  
asmān ráyo maghāvānaḥ sacantām RV 1.98.3*

«Vaiśvānara, this of thee shall be true: let riches and bountiful (gods/patrons) favour us.»

*yád aṅgá dāśúṣe tvám ágne bhadráṃ kariṣyasi  
távét tát satyám aṅgiraḥ RV 1.1.6*

«Agni! What good indeed thou wilt do to him who serves thee: this of thine verily (will become) true, o Aṅgiras.»

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5. As LÜDERS, Varuṇa p. 578, admits.

Both times it is Agni who is invoked, the fire, the god, the chief agent of communication between and gods; both authors voice expectations or ask for wishes to be fulfilled, boons to be granted: and they want them to become true – *real*, that is, *actual*, *visible*, and *certain*. This is a type of truth stripped and devoid of transcendental overtones: a kind of truth which is factual and observable, quite distinct from the *ṛtá-*. The opposition is particularly clearly marked in RV 3.54.3 which show both terms side by side: *yuvór ṛtám rodasī satyám astu* «O Heaven and Earth, let this truth of yours (i.e. yours who are deities who have a nature of your own) become true (i.e. stand revealed)»: here as in many other contexts, «real», «reality» are the better words.

Once this distinction is recognized, some instances of the word gain an additional sharpness and precision. A standard feature of hymns to Indra, e.g., is a reference to his heroic deeds. These are often not called *ṛtá-* (as would be natural<sup>6</sup> since they transcend actual human experience), but rather *satyá-*. Choosing this term implies an affirmation not without a hyperbolic ring: he and his deeds are *real*, i.e. are represented as being literally and factually true, they have actually happened, here on earth. And like a confirmation it is chiefly one other god who partakes both of the *ṛtá-* and the *satyá-*. This is Agni, the God of Fire<sup>7</sup>. He is a deity, no doubt; but he is also visible in every sacrificial place and in every house.

The *ṛtá-* is located with the gods on high, with Varuṇa; the *satyá-* is at home in the world of men and what they can observe. It is devoid of the mysterious and arcane tinge that is a component of the Supreme Truth which to men stands but half revealed. It is *satyá-* alone which is in our domain: Here is Varuṇa looking down upon what in 7.49.3 is called *s a t y ā nṛté [...] jánānām*, «the truths and lies of men»<sup>8</sup>. Or, for another instance that is very clear:

6. (and is e.g. found in 8.97.15).

7. See, e.g., RV 1.145.5 '*gnir vidvān ṛtacíd dhí satyáh*.

8. RV 1.105.12 is quite a neat case for testing interpretations (cf. LÜDERS, *Varuṇa*, p. 577). The Heavenly Waters are found at the place where Varuṇa resides – which is inaccessible to Man. The Sun, in contradistinction, is there to be seen by everyone: it is visible reality, it is *satyá-*.

*viśvam anyān nī viśate yād éjati*  
*viśvāhāpo viśvāhó eti sūryaḥ // RV 10.37.2 cd*

«All else that moves goes to rest, (but) the waters (flow) every day, the sun rises every day.»: there is nothing surprising about these lines; they say nothing we don't all know; it is a truism just as much as a truth. This is what to the poet is a *satyókti-*, a «true pronouncement»: *sá mā satyóktiḥ pári pátu viśvato* RV 10.37.2a «Let this true word protect me all (around) from all (sides).» We see *satyá-* is a truth, any truth that corresponds with fact, i.e. it demands a counterpart in reality.

This same view of *satya-* as Reality, rather than Truth, still plays a major role in the Upanishads. Here is a short passage from the BĀU, 1.6.3, one of the old and really important representatives of this most prestigious group of texts. It speaks about the soul of Individual Man, the *ātman*, and how it will represent itself in the form of breath, and how it is this rather than his external, perishable body which is to be regarded as part of the Universal Soul, the *brahman*:

«This is immortal, the text says, “hidden/covered by Reality” (*tad amṛtaṃ satyena cchannam*)»

and it goes on to explain this notion of *satya-*:

«[the breaths are what is immortal.] Name-and-form are reality; by these two this breath is hidden» (*prāṇā vā amṛtaṃ nāmarūpe satyaṃ tābhyām ayaṃ prāṇas cchannam*):

Name-and-form are what I can hear and see: hence this is a current designation for an individual. Obviously, translating *satya-* by «truth» would obscure the sense of the passage: its whole purpose is to tell us we have to look beyond reality to arrive at what is the essence of man; the word clearly means the limited Truth of this phenomenal world of ours.

It is thus a very transparent and clear-cut distinction which persists between the two concepts. *ṛtá-* is the truth as rooted in the eternal order of things; it stems from the sphere of the Divine, affects Varuṇa's realm: he guards it and watches over it and punishes those

who trespass against it. *satyá-*, on the other hand, is the truth as found in the everyday sphere: it is tangible, evident reality, and lacks the transcendental overtones that are such an essential component of the *ṛtá*. About the latter, even the poet often finds himself in very genuine and profound and troublesome doubt; a doubt about *satyá-*, the reality, is an uncertainty as to observable fact: its resolution involves no problem of principle.

3. There are two formal, i.e. distributional facts which we have to consider when speaking about *ṛtá-* and *satyá-* and the nature of truth – and to my mind one cannot help concluding they both demonstrate there is an essential difference between the meanings of the two early Sanskrit terms.

First for a most unexpected fact. This is the negations, «untruth», and they lead us to a significant point.

*ánṛta-* first and naturally is what is not *ṛtá-*, what runs against the divine or cosmic order. Here is a man addressing the gods in heaven in some sore affliction, not understanding the reasons for his plight, for as far as he knows, he has observed the truth: *kvà ṛtám pūrvyám gatám* 1.105.4 «Where has my former truth gone?»; but then he remembers the elusive nature of this divine order and asks *kád va ṛtám kád ánṛtam* 1.105.5 «What to you (gods) is truth, what untruth?». Similarly Yama speaking to his sister who tries to seduce him: «Speaking truths, we should be uttering an untruth» (*ṛtā vādanto ánṛtam rapema*, 10.10.4; a collection of relevant passages is found at LÜDERS, Varuṇa, pp. 415f).

*satyá-* does not offer the same neat proportion. The words of him «who speaks what is not» (*ásata [indra] vaktā*) are not *asatyá-*, but *ánṛta-*<sup>9</sup>. We find the same ideas when looking at RV 8.62. Let us for a moment allow ourselves to be captured by the spirit and scene that a lively mind unfolds before us. Here is the poet inviting God Indra to partake of a sacrifice which has been prepared for him: he offers an

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9. *yó mā pákena mánasā cárantam abhicāṣṭe ánṛtebhir vácobhiḥ / ápa iva káśínā sāmṅrbhītā ásanm astv ásata indra vaktā /*

invocation (*upastuti-*) which is to praise him; they who prepare the Soma for him to drink are going to strengthen (*vardhanti*, present tense) his greatness with verses (*uktha*). Then, the God's deeds are evoked before us, again in the present tense, not in the past: he, the god, is alive, and his acts are his characteristics of the present moment, as of the past; too; he is the one who will perform heroic deeds, *táva vīryāṇi kariṣyató*, verse 3). The poet is going to join him, physically: *ahám ca tvám ca vrtrahan śam yujyāva sanībhya ā*, Verse 11: «I and you (note the sequence: the speaker first, and only then, the God), you killer of Vṛtra: let us join together for rewards»; and then, from the final verse:

*satyám íd vā u tám vayám      índraṃ stavāma nāṅṛtam*

'verily, we praise this Indra only according to truth, and not by lies' 8.62.12

– which is to say, everything that has been said about Indra is actual reality, is *satyá-*, i.e. has happened on this earth and can happen again.

For *satyá-*, then, the negation is the same word *ánṛta-* which also was the opposite of *ṛtá-*. With the semantic distinction outlined, this fact is easily understood. A negation or denial or offence against a divine or cosmic truth of course is *ánṛta-*. What, then, about the negation of an observable fact, a denial of a fact of reality? If I claim this is not a chair, I am of course saying something that is false, in a logical sense. But this falsehood in normal parlance easily acquires a moral overtone: I am misrepresenting reality, and the distortion will be viewed as going against the moral order. So the false accusations of someone who intentionally perverts simple speech are *ánṛta-* (RV 7.104.8-9).

In this way, any denial of *satyá-* will be *asatya-*: this goes without saying. But what is more important is another aspect: going against reality will first and foremost be *-ánṛta-*, a lie, and this is how it is called. The language is not content with a neutral description of my distortion of reality, but assesses it and expresses a moral evaluation. In a sense, then, we could say the *satyá-* is part of the *ṛtá-*, and for the negations, this holds true beyond a doubt: any denial of reality will go

against the transcendental order, and this is why it is necessarily viewed as «Non-Truth», *ánṛta*-<sup>10</sup>.

The second distributional fact will occupy us for a little while. It has of course been noted long ago: the word *ṛtá* disappears from the language of our texts and is replaced by *satyá*-. Not so its opposite: «untruth», «lie» continue to be *ánṛta*-.

## II

It is a spectacle not without grandeur to pursue the history of Truth through the next stage of the intellectual development of India. The relevant fact can be stated in the simplest of terms: Some isolated occurrences notwithstanding, the word *ṛtá*- disappears from the discussions of the learned; what remains and continues to occupy thinkers, from the period of the Brāhmaṇas onwards, is *satyá*-, i.e. that part or aspect of truth which is reality, accessible to man and his observation.

ChāndU 6.16 contains a classical instance of this distribution. This is the well-known reference to the ordeal by fire: the man accused of theft has to touch a heated axe:

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10. The one instance of *asatyá*- is worth closer examination. This is from RV 4.5, a hymn which GELDNER thinks belongs to the context of learned disputation, and indeed in the poet's words there are plain traces of disparaging an opponent. Verse 5, the crucial one in our argument, belongs to this layer:

*abhrātáro ná yóśano vyántah  
patirípo ná jánayo durévāḥ /  
pāpāsah sānto anṛtā asatyā  
idāṃ padām ajanatā gabhīrām //*

«Importunate (“aggressive”) like young women without a brother; evil-doing like wives who deceive their husbands, being bad, without *ṛtá*-, without reality, you have produced this deep place/word?» Is this to mean they do not behave as ‘real, genuine’ wives do? i.e. are no real wives at all?

*sa yadi tasya kartā bhavati tata evānṛtam ātmānaṃ kurute so 'nṛtābhisandho 'nṛtenātmānam antardhāya paraśuṃ taptam pratigṛhṇāti sa dahyate 'tha hanyate / atha yadi tasyākartā bhavati tata eva satyam ātmānaṃ kurute sa satyābhisandho satyenātmānam antardhāya paraśuṃ taptam pratigṛhṇāti sa na dahyate 'tha mucyate*

«If he has committed it, then verily he turns himself into an *untruth*, speaking an *untruth*, covering himself by *untruth*, he seizes the heated axe; he is burnt, then killed. – If he has not committed it, then verily he turns himself into *truth*, speaking *truth*, covering himself by *truth*, he seizes the heated axe; he is not burnt, then set free.»

– it is a question of fact, then, which is to be established here: the accused has to prove whether he stole or not. By his assertion he either «covers himself» with untruth or with truth, in the sense of what really happened, and according to the truth of his claim, the fire either burns him or not.

There is something very fundamental that lies behind this change. It is a thorough re-orientation of the goals and methods of research and reflection. It separates the Vedic Saṃhitās on the one side from the Brāhmaṇas and Upaniṣads on the other. By and large, the chief concern of the older Vedic period centered round the gods and the ways to propitiate them, the sacrifice being the chief means for this purpose. The Brāhmaṇas mark a decisive shift of emphasis, from gods to sacrifice. There was a most sensible and rational idea behind this. The gods demanded sacrifice, and they depended on it: this was the old tenet. Now, even in the older Vedic period, the thinkers' goal increasingly turned to the Absolute and Ultimate; and beings whose well-being or even existence *depended on* something outside themselves could by pure logic not be identical with the absolute that was sought. It is not that the gods are abolished: they just lost their relevance, just disappeared from reflections which had the Ultimate as their final goal.

Where to find it? a first answer was easily framed: it was to be found in the Sacrifice that nourished the very gods. Hence, it is the sacrifice which even the gods stand in need of; it is the sacrifice which now occupies the centre of attention.

Many Vedic sacrifices had been conceived as elaborate symbolical acts, designed so as to mirror the world or its parts. The standard

example is an altar which was built of 360 bricks; of course they stand for the days of the year. What happens in the Brāhmaṇas is that the relation of subject and predicate is as it were inverted: the altar consists of 360 bricks, i.e. days, the year follows the pattern set by the sacrificial act. This is not inference; the principle is voiced in unmi-stakable terms: *yajñāṃ hy évedāṃ sárvaṃ ánu* ŚBr 3.6.3.1 «For all this [creation] “is after” the sacrifice», «is after» doubtlessly means «results or follows» from it.

In further application of this principle, more and more facts of external nature – «all this», *idāṃ sárvaṃ*, as the text just quoted has it – are drawn into the compass of the sacrifice, are found out to be symbolized, or rather created, by this sacrificial act or that. Again: the aim in all this was to demonstrate how the sacrifice preceded creation and serves as its prototype.

In the course of this protracted exercise of imagination and ingenuity, in the whole mass of wild speculations and ad-hoc interpretations, the learned assembled a solid body of observations of natural phenomena, and of models for their interpretation. It remained for the Upaniṣads to effect the next change of focus: the sacrifice lost its position as the universal point of reference; the accumulated observations about nature &c. were assembled and classified into systems.

This, then, is the shortest possible sketch of the layer of texts which shows the *ṛtá*- vanishing from sight and the *satya*- taking its place. To my eyes it is clear both facts are but two sides of the same coin. In a system of thought which no longer found gods particularly relevant, there was no room for a transcendental order either; a truth grounded on divine injunctions and subject to Varuṇa’s whims had outlived its usefulness; what interested people now was the reality, i.e. precisely what to the older thinkers was the *satyá*-. TaittU 2.6.1 (something like a correspondence to the Brāhmaṇa sentence just quoted) clearly demonstrates the shift of emphasis: *satyam abhavat yad idaṃ kimca / tat satyam ity ācakṣate* «Whatever there is grew into Reality: this they declare Reality».

2. It remains for us to spell out the implications of this change.

The older notion of Truth was grounded upon the cosmic order of things, which governed gods and men alike. This is replaced by a term that denotes Manifest and Tangible Reality, i.e. something that is

accessible, not only to the visionary by way of revelation or divine intercession (: the role of Agni), but something rooted in the observable order of things, in manifest reality. It is by observation and reflection that one will deal with it; propitiation would be pointless. The truth which is *satyá-* lies in immanence, not in transcendence.

This tallies with the marked shift of emphasis which we have sketched. The authors of the Brāhmaṇas are no longer much concerned with the gods: it is the sacrifice which occupies their chief interest, and sacrifices are taken as prototypes of and models for the facts of the phenomenal world: we have spoken of the 360 bricks.

In all this, the method and its implications are much more important than the results. This new kind of truth, though complex, as a matter of principle is amenable to Reason and ratiocination.

To be sure, as this reality moves ever higher and grows ever more comprehensive, the *satya-* too, moves away from naive and unreflected perception; predictably, there were those who realized it is hard of access, moves outside the sphere of common and everyday experience and stands revealed only after long efforts. In the last resort, it is an ordered universe where Truth = Reality can occupy the position of the ultimate principle. Phenomenal reality, some will say, does contain the truth, but is hidden, as it were, under the veil of ephemeral facts: reflection is needed to realize, e.g., that man is composed of the Five Elements. Such thoughts in mind we find sentences like *yan mūrtaṃ tad asatyam yad amūrtaṃ tat satyaṃ tad brahma* (MaitrU 6,3) «whatever has a shape is unreal; whatever has no shape, this is real, this is the brāhman-».

The *satya-*, then, requires us to distinguish between Ultimate Reality and the face of things. This is a long way from the demand of the poet clamouring for his reward. Faced by a sentence like our last, «whatever has a shape is unreal», one might think one approaches the limits of human understanding. It looks like Truth withdrawing into the realm of the ineffable, as if we had come back to the *ṛta-*. This, however, is not how the author saw it: he opens his discourse with a quotation from BĀU 2.3.1 *dve vāva brahmaṇo rūpe mūrtaṃ*

*cāmūrtaṃ ca martyaṃ cāmṛtaṃ ca* »Verily, there are two forms of the brāhman-: one with shapes and one without; one mortal and one immortal.» We see he has carried the notion of Truth as Reality to what one might call its logical conclusion: to his mind, Truth in the fullest sense necessarily stands for the ultimate reality of the Universe. And this is where one remembers the old verse about the Golden Bowl that hides the face of Truth from Man, and how the God is petitioned to lift it at Death.

And now, near the end of our reflections, it may be fruitful to return to the passage from the Viṣṇusmṛti which stood at the beginning of our reflections. It says it is Reality which has brought forth the elements, the sacrifice, even the gods. In other words, there is an immovable pattern which underlies all creation. It lies in its very nature that this pattern will also dictate the behaviour and expectations of man.

In a sense, then, this Reality has been raised and elevated to a concept/status like to the *primum movens* of the universe. The wheel seems to have turned full circle: in an essential respect, the *satyā-* has now taken the place that was the *ṛtā*'s in the older texts.

But in equating the two ideas, we would be ignoring two essential factors. One is the confidence that this ultimate truth is, in principle, not outside the reach of man. There are the many expressions for those who have attained it: all the gods who teach and who are so often called *sarvaśāstraviśārada-*, *vedapāraga-*, *sarvadharmajñā-* BNīlat Ch6 (deities); the king whom the Raghuvamśa calls *vidyānām pāradṛśvanah* (1.23), «seeing the other shore (i.e. end) of (the branches of) knowledge» [cf. 5.24 *śrutapāradṛśvā*]: the other shore, though remote, always does exist; in other words, ultimate Knowledge, the Truth can be attained: fundamentally, Knowledge is a finite, not to say a closed, system: there is such a thing as complete mastery.

And the second point is in a sense, its corollary. This is the obligation to see it attained and practised, which results from the firm conviction it can actually be realized. This is the last point we shall have to consider.

## III

Reality, then, is the framework and point of reference for the early Indian interpretation of Truth: and we shall easily understand Truth, taken in this way, is anything but a concept abstract and remote. Rather, it also is a fundamental demand and postulate: it implies the guidelines for a proper life: it must needs be the framework for what is the Law and what is Right Behaviour and Right Action. The BĀU says so quite clearly when it equates Truth and *dharma*, i.e. the rules and conduct ordained: *yo vai sa dharmah satyam vai tat* (1.4.14) «Verily, what is this *dharma*, that verily is truth».

This is where we leave the field of speculation and theory and come to applications, to the Life of Man: In the most reputable of Indian law texts, in Manu, the rules it is to be governed by are usually called *ācāra*-, «behaviour, conduct», as commonly translated, and when the law books use it, it is of course understood as the standards of conduct proper to one's station in life, the «conduct of the good, *satām ācārah*». This, Manu says, is the highest rule or standard (: *ācārah paramo dharmah* 1.108). In traditional practice, it is taken as a fixed canon, again in consonance with Manu: «[proper] conduct is eternal, perennial» (: *ācāraś caiva śāśvataḥ* 1.107).

Here again, we come to a fuller appreciation of what is meant when going back to origins. *ā* + *car*-, the verb which this term for «behaviour» is derived from, means «to approach or go near to s.o. or s.th.», then also the result of this process, «to reach, attain». The gloss makes it quite clear the word implies someone or something that is to be approached, an object or goal<sup>11</sup>. This, I suggest, is one's *dharma* which is truth. One occasionally finds the thought expressed in plain words –

*yady ācarati dharmam saḥ prāyaśo 'dharmam alpaśaḥ /  
tair eva cāvṛto bhūtaiḥ svaḥ sukham upāśnute // Manu 12.20*<sup>12</sup>

11. objects: *nācaret kiṃcit* apriyaṃ 5.156; *devānām priyaṃ* 9.95; *vidhim* 11.217; *vidhānam* 7.113; *dharmam* 10.53.

12. The next verse offers an interesting corollary: *yadi tu prāyaśo 'dharmam*

«If someone mostly follows the *dharma*, and but a little what is not *dharma*, then he will attain bliss in heaven, being enveloped by these elements.»

In a sense, these words carry us back to the beginning, to what the Viṣṇusmṛti had said about the elements that we had quoted. It had taught us earth, water, fire, wind, ether had come into existence as manifestations of Truth. Here, we see them in the same function. Perfection is not granted to normal human existence: this is why following the *dharma* «most of the time» (*prāyaśaḥ*) is enough to ensure the protection by the elements. The reason why they can shield man is abundantly clear: according to the anthropology of this layer of texts, the body of creatures is made up of precisely this group of five which the Viṣṇusmṛti had listed. They can and will shield him who has done little ill: for seated within his body, they know whether he has been true or not<sup>13</sup>. Him who has «followed» truth they will protect beyond this present life.

Here, then, we have the theoretical framework for what is Hindu Law and Custom, and we have the guiding principle for putting in into practice. The ultimate goal is Truth, rooted in reality: and one has to note this reality will encompass both the laws of nature and those that govern social conduct. The Rights of Man are covered by these concepts, just as those of any other created being. And if we speak of Rights, then from the Hindu point of view they are at the same time duties: the proper nature of objects has to be realized (: this is the theoretician's domain), and realized (: this is the task that falls to you and me).

Being rooted in reality, the nature of Truth is fixed. On the absolute level, then, there is no scope for changes. Modification of rules can only come through new reflections, through a better and more

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*sevate dharmam alpaśaḥ / tair bhūtaiḥ sa parityakto yāmīḥ prāpnoti yātanāḥ* // «But if he mostly serves what is not *dharma*, and *dharma* but a little, he attains the torments of Yama (the God of Death), bereft of these elements' – after which, he disintegrates and is dissolved into the elements that had formed his earthly body (12.22).

13. The same idea lies behind the practice of most ordeals.

comprehensive apperception of the true nature of things. This provides the stimulus and justification for all the many manifold attempts to re-interpret the world and to organize one's life according to this insight; this lies behind all the Holy Men that India is famous for; it lies behind figures like Gāndhī with his indomitable will and his stubborn insistence: how could he compromise on what to him were essentials? it is not by chance that he called his practice *satyāgraha*, «seizing the truth». In their various ways and methods, they try to live up to the challenge the clearest wording of which we owe to the Upaniṣad (ChU 7.17.1) *satyaṃ ... vijijñāsitavyam*, «one should wish to examine reality, one should wish to discern the truth».