

A PERCEPTION OF BUBBLINGS IN THE INDIAN WORLDVIEW

A PERCEPTION OF BUBBLINGS  
IN THE INDIAN WORLDVIEW: A  
A JOURNEY INTO THE NĀRĀYAṆĪYA

By

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The chunk of time during which the Mahābhārata was compiled (4 B.C. to 4 A.D.) saw many changes in the Indian vision of what-Is. The vastness of these changes is awesome enough to predicate a kind of dizzying confusion -- a vertigo of understanding.

This study attempts to understand some of these vision-changes without the usual nauseating side effects. The Nārāyaṇīya section of the Śāntiparvan provides this study with firm ground from which to perceive the hugeness of change. By comparing the strand of religious vision revealed in the Nārāyaṇīya with strands of visions gone before, and strands of visions later seen, a feeling for the changing colours of the weave within the fabric of the larger Indian religious vision may be obtained. This feeling speaks of differences in myth and ritual between the various strands, and these differences point to greater shifts in meaning which this study attempts to link to a shift in the Indian understanding of world and World. Thus by centering on

what seems to be a stationary point, and then by setting it in swirling context, this study allows a perception of the bubblings in Worldview of the Indian tradition, circa the compilation period of the Mahābhārata, to arise.

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I. BEGINNINGS; OF THE TEXT AND THE AUTHOR'S EXCUSE

She sang of the love that left her  
And of the woman that she'll never be  
Made me feel like the buck and a quarter  
That I paid 'em to listen and see  
I paid 'em to listen and see

John Prine, "The Torch Singer"  
Diamonds in the Rough

## I. BEGINNINGS; OF THE TEXT AND THE AUTHOR'S EXCUSE

Perhaps it is best to begin any discussion of the Nārāyaṇīya with the great warrior, Bhīṣma, as he lays dying by the side of the huge battlefield -- pincushioned by the arrows of the mighty Arjuna. Having contrived to bring about his own defeat out of compassion for the Pāṇḍavas, Bhīṣma awaits just one final task before he chooses the moment of his death.

The great Bharata battle was over. Having surveyed the carnage, Yudhiṣṭhira, king of the Pāṇḍavas, was troubled, and his resolve to once more rule over his kingdom began to crumble. It was Bhīṣma's final task to counsel the disheartened Yudhiṣṭhira on the dharma of kings. Happily, at least for dharma, Bhīṣma, because he was "the repository (sic) of all histories and dis-<sup>1</sup>courses", was able to raise Yudhiṣṭhira's spirits by lecturing on all aspects of kingly duty for the 15,000 slokas of the Śāntiparvan, in the Mahābhārata. Then, after persuading Yudhiṣṭhira to reassume the throne, Bhīṣma employed intense yoga to mend his many wounds, and with that his heretofore restrained life-breath broke through the crown of his head, and he died.

The Śāntiparvan is the longest parvan of the Mahābhārata and is divided into three sections: the Rājadharmā, the Āpad-dharmā and the Mokṣadharmā. Of these three, the first two deal with the duties of the king both in normal times and in times of strife,

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<sup>1</sup>  
Mahābhārata, English transl. K. M. Ganguly (Calcutta: P. G. Roy, 1884-1896), v.X, p.535. Hereafter this will be referred to as Mhb., PCR, v.X. in the notes.

and the third is an unorganized compendium of religious ideas still in flux.<sup>2</sup> The editors of the critical edition note that "most of the doctrines presented in the Mokṣadharmā seem to belong to a period of thought-ferment when free lance thinkers were speculating and setting forth tentative ideas pertaining to a variety of philosophical questions."<sup>3</sup> It is to this third section, the Mokṣadharmā, that the Nārāyaṇīya belongs. The flavour of the Mokṣadharmā then, will no doubt occur, albeit subtly, in the Nārāyaṇīya. Ultimately it will be shown that the Nārāyaṇīya is quite comfortable in this "period of thought-ferment."

Current study places the date of the Nārāyaṇīya with certainty after the second century A.D., and with probability in the third or fourth century.<sup>4</sup> This date, occurring as it does towards the end of the eight hundred year period in which the Mahābhārata was compiled, coupled with the text's irrelevance to the plotline of the epic battle, as well as an internal structure

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Vishnu S. Sukthakas, et.al., ed., The Mahābhārata, v.16, S. K. Belvalkar, Śāntiparvan Introduction, (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1966), pp.CLXXXI, CCXXXII.

3

Ibid., p. CCXXXII.

4

Suvira Jaiswal, The Origin and Development of Vaiṣṇavism, (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1967), pp. 15-16.

markedly lacking in cohesion, suggest that the Nārāyaṇīya might well be an addition -- to the epic 'kernel'. For most scholarship to date, the importance of the Nārāyaṇīya has been its meager revelations concerning the existence and teachings of the Pañcarātra sect. For example, the name 'Pañcarātara' as it applies to worshippers of Nārāyaṇa first appears in the Nārāyaṇīya. Indeed the main thrust of the text is to glorify Nārāyaṇa (is Viṣṇu, is Vasudeva . . .) as the godhead of the Pañcarātra sect. This theme is laid in the context of one of Yudhiṣṭhira's questions to Bhīṣma -- "who is the Pitri of the Pitris?" -- or in other words, who is the greatest god deserving the people's worship? Bhīṣma's answer, with the interruptions of various sages, forms the body of the Nārāyaṇīya, an extended prose poem in praise of Nārāyaṇa.

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Sukthakas, op.cit., v.16, p.CCII. Also, Alf Hiltebeitel's recent article, "The Mahābhārata and Hindu Eschatology", (History of Religion, 12:2) shows that the great epic's depiction of the Viṣṇu-Śiva relationship is complementary. Since in the Nārāyaṇīya this relationship is obviously not complementary (cf. Mhb.PCR, v.X, pp.547, 570-1), this would reinforce the additive quality of the Nārāyaṇīya.

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For example, Jaiswal, op.cit., pp.41-48, R. G. Bhandarkar, Vaiṣṇavism, Śaivism and Minor Religious Systems (Varanasi: Indo-logical Book House, 1913), pp.4-8, and Surendranath Dasgupta, A History of Indian Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1940) v.III, pp.12-13, p.19.

7

Ibid., p. 41.

8

Sukthakas, op.cit., v.16, p.CCXLV.

9

Mhb., PCR, v.X, p.530.

However, in spite of this clear intent, the Nārāyaṇīya remains cloudy due to a vast array of disjointed myths and images. It is perhaps because of this disjointedness that the Nārāyaṇīya has seemed lifeless to scholars, and thus a study of Nārāyaṇīya qua Nārāyaṇīya has, to my knowledge, never been done. Hopefully in this study an interpretive re-creation of this array will act to breathe life back into the text, and thereby illuminate the change in Worldview which occurred in the Indian religious tradition in the six centuries surrounding the beginning of the Common Era.

It is perhaps best before beginning any interpretive study to first rip away any dark, dingy, muddling confusions which are likely to besiege the reader as he journeys amongst paragraphs - at least those confusions which have already snared the author and thus are known. The confusions which most often tangle the reader are undoubtedly those slippery presuppositions which each author, by virtue of his very humanness, leaves scattered lurking about from page to page to confound and anger at every turn. Appropriately, methodological presuppositions may be at once both the slimy moss of interpretation, and the finely tuned keys of investigative research, for if they are revealed at the outset, the reader can use them to open dark locks that

the author may not even consciously create. The extreme difficulty in baring methodological presuppositions lies in what may be the ultimate mobius strip <sup>10</sup> - in order to reveal one set of presuppositions one must employ another set which may be revealed by yet another and so on. Despite the futility of the operation it nevertheless is a necessity, especially if some vague, nearly absurd limitations are set. Within these limitations, for example, I might describe the methodological presuppositions that will be assumed for the main thrust of the study, but the reader can never be sure of the methodological perspective of the introduction -- largely because it remains a mystery to the author, a conscious methodological suppression breaking and thus preventing the 'ultimate mobius strip'. It is with this in mind that I shall attempt to reveal the two methodological presuppositions which I am able to discern and which seem most important. <sup>11</sup>

The first such presupposition within this study is that the historical existence of a phenomenon will not be questioned. This is not to say that the chronological situation of various texts

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For an artistic rendering of a mobius strip see M. C. Escher, The Graphic Work of M. C. Escher (New York: Ballantine, 1967) plate no. 40.

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It should be understood that these presuppositions do not necessarily originate with me. No doubt many sources have contributed to my methodological quirks. It would be fitting to note that I take full responsibility, but not the blame, for their existence.

will be ignored, but rather that the religious visions represented in the texts will be considered as real. Questions, for example, dealing with whether or not Viṣṇu actually appeared before Nārada, and whether or not the White Island actually existed will simply not arise. These sorts of questions are concerned with historical actuality - a realm nigh on to irrelevant to an understanding of the visions revealed in mythic reality. For even the most astute Western reader, the pursuit of this kind of understanding often necessitates conscious suspension of the concern with historical realness which forms part of a design in the fabric of his thinking. It is only after this concern has been temporarily suspended that the full richness of mythic song and ritual dance can be seen. With this seeing comes a fuller understanding, providing, of course, the author has re-created the phenomenon in such a way that both re-creation and vision are in harmonious tune.

To some, this distinction between the historically real and the mythically real might seem quite out of place and silly. But this is just the point. To many of us Westerners this distinction would seem quite overdone precisely because our mythically real is made up largely of that which is historically real or purports to be so. The importance given myth in all this is a significant sub-presupposition consequent to allowing a phenomenon (here, myth) to arise into view unencumbered by questions of

historical existence. Without these burdensome questions, the crystal reflections of mythic narratives, which otherwise 'could not have happened', jump and dance in the mind's eye.

To attempt to further explain the importance with which myth and, by association, ritual, are treated in this method might become, as it might with any presupposition, as difficult as trying to explain the colour orange. In spite of this difficulty some attempt must doubtlessly be made. My attempt to discern the sacred vision of the Nārāyaṇīya through the myths told in that text, is based on an underlying notion in which myth appears as a vāhana of that vision - as the eagle-mount, Garuḍa is to Viṣṇu so myth is to the vision of sacredness in the Nārāyaṇīya. While the metaphor of myth as vision-bearer is sufficient in the context of this study, it seems certain that the power of myth transcends such metaphors. For this methodological soul-baring, however, myth as vāhana will suffice.

It is clear from reading just the Nārāyaṇīya that a sacred vision may be 'carried' or 'born' by many vehicles. Philosophical teachings ramble betwixt the meanderings of myth, and some of the myths speak of sacrifice as well as other means of worship thereby implicating ritual in the realm of vāhana. This study concentrates on myth and ritual, rather than philosophy, as vāhanas because it is also quite clear from reading the

Nārāyaṇīya that narrative dominates in sheer bulk and weight.

The revelation of Nārāyaṇa to Nārada, the high point of the work, is a mythic expression of the vision of the real which the Nārāyaṇīyan person experienced. Of course philosophical teaching is not wholly separate from myth and ritual. There is a finely tuned, complementary relationship between the 'vāhanas' which means that no kind of vision-bearer can be ignored.

Nevertheless, this study will centre on myth and ritual, and treat philosophy in its supportive role. Such a treatment does not pretend to exhaust the limits of philosophy, or even myth, in the Nārāyaṇīya. Indeed the feasibility of a treatment centering on the philosophy of the Nārāyaṇīya cannot be denied. In this study, however, the vāhanas of myth and ritual emerge as central, born of the presupposition that the historical existence of a phenomenon should not be questioned.

In many ways the second presupposition which demands explication is more fundamental than the first. The emphasis which the Western person might well place on the historical existence of a phenomenon can be seen as an intrinsic aspect of his understanding of his World, in other words, his Worldview. This understanding, partly or not at all conscious, forms the backdrop moving to foreground which colours all thought and action, shades relationships, mutes space and twists time and

ultimately 'conditions' human beings into cultural persons. That this Worldview is significant in the formalization, although not necessarily the perception, of a sacred vision is the essence of my second exposed presupposition.

It has perhaps become clear that this notion of Worldview is a large one, approached, but not encompassed, by the German, Die Weltanschauung. The idea of 'World' is very nearly all inclusive, but might be tentatively 'defined' as those things and relationships which a person perceives and understands to be Real. The 'view' part of Worldview incorrectly implies a limited perspective. For the Worldviewer (who is really more participant than viewer) his Worldview includes the whole horizon of things, processes and ideas. Furthermore this Worldview through which one understands his World is culturally given and in more traditional cultures, sacrally given. In any case this givenness means that the 'viewing' process occurs on a level that we are not aware of - it is un- or perhaps trans-conscious. For one who lives in a particular World, his Worldview is the way things really are, and rarely is this reality questioned. Only a shift in Worldviews allows such questions to arise; otherwise there is no need - what is, is. And even then, such a shift in Worldviews is understandably ponderous and can take centuries, the 'is'ness of the World changes slowly.

If, for the duration of this study we understand the

capitalized 'World' to be those things and relationships seen as real, then what of this earth upon which we tread - what Beckett's Krapp calls "this old muckball"<sup>12</sup>. Within this study this earth-ball will be called a smallcase 'world' whose relationship to the more profound World might best be demonstrated through Krapp himself. As in the case of many of Beckett's characters, Krapp is world-weary. He can't remember having ever sung and his drunken attempts at song are only perversions. He and his recorded tapes bear witness to a life trudged through - years<sup>13</sup> which he 'wouldn't want back', and a present in which he has nothing to say. Krapp, of course, is an embodiment of Beckett's vision of the twentieth century Western man staggering through a world which is as bleak as the empty stage the characters inhabit.

Krapp's notion of the world as "muckball", then, reflects his 'modern' Worldview which sees the earth as a rather unfortunate, 'mucky' place to be. At least according to Beckett, the contemporary person rejects the world as unfit, and this, according to this author, is an important element of that person's Worldview. The world is wholly affirmed, or wholly rejected, or any of the many permutations in between, but the World is neither affirmed, nor rejected - it simply is.

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<sup>12</sup>

Samuel Beckett, Krapp's Last Tape (New York: Grove Press, 1960), p.24.

<sup>13</sup>

Ibid., p. 28.

II. SOMA AND SEMANTIC DEPLETION:

WHAT'S A NICE GOD LIKE YOU DOING WITH A  
CURSE LIKE THIS?

So it's hurry! Hurry!  
Step right up  
It's a matter of life or death  
The sun is going down  
And the moon is just holding its  
breath

John Prine, "Mexican Home",  
Sweet Revenge

II. SOMA AND SEMANTIC DEPLETION: WHAT'S A NICE GOD LIKE YOU  
DOING WITH A CURSE LIKE THIS?

The Nārāyaṇīya appears to the eager interpreter as a disconnected procession of chimera - just as one begins to recognize a particular image, it disappears. The sum total of this vaporizing procession of chimera/myths might be likened to a primordial sea, enveloping, stultifying, but tremendously fertile. Bobbing on this vast sea, seemingly without design, is a small twig of familiar aspect hinting at an interpretive key afloat in the vicinity. Grasping more out of desperation than creative intent, the interpreter snags the twig and hangs on, and, after a great while, he risks a tentative look around.

Within the vast Nārāyaṇīya the myth of Soma and his awful curse is our twig transformed. Distinguishing itself by little more than its recognizability, this myth bobs between a myth of Aditi cooking for her sons and a myth of a ṛṣi cursing the trees. Beyond the edges of the Nārāyaṇīya sea, however, the god Soma has a recognizable history from the Rg Veda onward, and as such provides a welcome twig to grasp. A considered examination of this twig/myth should demonstrate that the interpretive key of semantic shifts -- meaning leakiness and replenishment -- is a graceful ocean swimmer even navigating the changing tides of the

of the Nārāyaṇīya with ease. In short, the Nārāyaṇīyan Soma myth shows most clearly that some sort of meaning change may be discerned in the text of the Nārāyaṇīya.

The myth involves Dakṣa who, in this context, is a son of Brahma and the father of the ṛṣi Nārada. He, himself, is called a celestial ṛṣi and is eminently potent. Of his sixty daughters he gave twenty-seven in marriage to Soma, the moon god. Although all of the daughters were equal in beauty and disposition, Soma began more and more to favour one of his wives, Rohiṇī, over the others. The twenty-six wives felt left out and became quite jealous. Consequently they went home to father. There they told Dakṣa what had occurred. Dakṣa became incensed when he heard the news and placed an infamous ṛṣi curse on Soma. The content of the curse was that Soma should be infested by the disease of consumption. Because the ṛṣis always spoke the truth, Soma was indeed assailed by consumption and began to waste away. In desperation he went to Dakṣa for help.

Dakṣa told Soma of his cure. In the Western ocean was a sacred water called Hīranyasarah. Soma was to go to this water and bathe in it. Soma did as he was instructed and was subsequently cleansed of his sin. Thereafter those waters were called Prabhāsa<sup>1</sup> as they were illuminated by Soma.

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This etymology given in the text seems to revolve around abhasita given as "illuminated" and thus related to "Prabhāsa".

In consequence, however, of the curse denounced upon him in the days of old by Daksha, Shoma [Soma], to this day, begins to wane from the night of the full moon till his total disappearance on the night of the new moon whence he once more begins to wax till the night of the full moon. The brightness also of the lunar disk from that time received a stain, for the body of Shoma, since then, has come to . . . exhibit the mark of a hare.<sup>2</sup>

The striking wealth of explanatory consequences flowing from Dakṣa's curse on Soma hints at an interpretive tool described by the German anthropologist, Adolf Jensen. Jensen discerns two types of myths which form extreme examples or poles of a continuum. One type he labels "genuine", the other "etiological":

Decisive for the relationship between etioloical and genuine myth is their formal congruency. They belong to the same type of narration. In consequence, there can be no sharp boundary line between them. Where a given myth may be inserted in the continuum only analysis can decide.<sup>3</sup>

According to Jensen, a 'genuine' or 'true' myth is concerned primarily with reality. He writes: "We must consider . . . all the great genuine myths . . . related to reality even without observational corroboration. The fact that the myth exists and carries conviction for a more or less numerous population let us assume such a  
4  
relationship." This relation to reality which Jensen speaks of is

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Mhb. X, p. 582.

3

Adolf Jensen, Myth and Cult Among Primitive Peoples, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 74.

4

Ibid., pp. 66-67.

taken up by Mircea Eliade. It is Eliade's contention that myths are vehicles for the establishment and maintenance of reality of what Eliade calls the World. The ability of myth to perform such feats is due to the permeation of sacredness throughout. Says Eliade:

myths disclose their creative activity and reveal the sacredness . . . of their world. In short, myths describe the various and sometimes dramatic breakthroughs of the sacred . . . into the world. It is this sudden breakthrough of the sacred that really establishes the World and makes it what it is today.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, at one end of the continuum 'genuine' myth expresses in sacred form the creation and/or maintenance of the what-is-real (World), and in that expression is itself sacralized.

Similar to genuine myth in form is the etiological myth. Jensen distinguishes etiological from genuine myth by noting that etiological myths lack sacred content and a close relationship to reality: "Accordingly, etiological myths seem mythic in form only but seem to lack foundation in religion and a belief that they state a truth."<sup>6</sup> The formal similarities in etiological myths which Jensen notes are most often witnessed in the appropriation of sacred names from the ancestral past of once-upon-a-time (illo tempore). The etiological myth, rather than being involved with

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Mircea Eliade, Myth and Reality, (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), p. 6.

6

Jensen, op.cit., p. 69.

establishing and maintaining the World, is concerned with answering relatively mundane why's and how's -- why the hippopotamus lost his fur, how the rooster got his plumage, why the moon has the mark of the hare, and so on. "Religious ideas", notes Jensen, "are not kindled by matters of such small concern, for the creative divine spark is revealed in them only in very mediate form."<sup>7</sup> Thus, at the other end of the continuum etiological myth, owing its very existence to its artistic charm, "lacks all verity, mythic or otherwise."<sup>8</sup> The essential difference between the 'genuine' and etiological ends of the continuum, then, lies in the stated and developing theme of a particular myth.<sup>9</sup>

It would seem a simple interpretive matter to plug the Nārāyaṇīya Soma myth into Jensen's continuum towards the etiological side. The 'genuine' Soma was a powerful god who rushed and coursed his way through the ninth mandala of the Ṛg Veda. Here the 'etiological' Soma is revealed to be an irresponsible husband impotently subject to an angry ṛṣi's curse. This kind of interpretation would tend toward a neat compactness that myths nearly always defy, and consequently the validity of the understanding in the interpretation might be lost in too simple superficiality.

Happily this understanding gathers shades of enrichment from

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7

Ibid., pp. 73-74.

8

Ibid., p. 75.

9

Ibid., p. 74.

Eliade's ideas on origin myths and Soma's own history. If this Soma myth corresponded to what Eliade calls an origin myth, it would be much more prestigious than at first appears. According to Eliade, the creation of the World is "the pre-eminent instance of creation"<sup>10</sup>. He goes on to suggest that "for archaic societies life cannot be repaired, it can only be recreated by a return to sources."<sup>11</sup> Thus any myth which draws on the World creation myth participates in the necessary periodic re-creation of the World, and is consequently of great import. Eliade describes this origin myth as follows:

First and most important is the fact that the origin myth frequently begins with a sketch of the cosmogony: the myth briefly summarizes the essential moments of the Creation of the World and then goes on to relate the genealogy of the royal family or the history of the tribe or the history of the origin of sickness and remedies, and so on.<sup>12</sup>

While it does deal with the history of the origin of consumption, the Nārāyaṇīya Soma myth does not measure up to this notion of origin myth because there is no mention of a cosmogony. An obvious murkiness develops on this point in that there is no cosmogony in the Ṛg Veda which features Soma at all. Indeed the hymn form of the early Vedic literature is not an apt medium for any detailed

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Eliade, Myth, p. 21, also p. 34.

11

Ibid., p. 30.

12

Ibid., p. 36.

mythic narrative, including cosmogonies. In spite of this lack, it is clear that Soma is a vital force in the R̥g Veda. In the book devoted entirely to Soma hymns, he is found on countless occasions<sup>13</sup> coursing, rushing or advancing through the sacrificial strainer. He is called "heaven's prop and stay",<sup>14</sup> and "begetter of the sage's speech",<sup>15</sup> and is frequently called on to provide wealth, often in the form of cattle. His complementary relationship with Indra is clear as in a number of hymns he provides the "thunder-armed one" with his strength-instilling drink.<sup>16</sup> And finally he is seen as the lord of the plants.<sup>17</sup> One thing Soma was not in the early literature was the moon god. While J. Gonda cites some convincing ideological similarities between moon-symbolism and Soma, even he cannot find textual justification for an early identity.<sup>18</sup>

It would seem that the Nārāyaṇīya author was not drawing on anything that might be remotely construed as the creation of the

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Ralph T. H. Griffith, trans., The Hymns of the R̥g Veda, vol. II, (Varanasi, India: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office, 1963), p. 289, 9:28, and p. 282, 9:17. Also see: Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa, 12:1:12 where plants are referred to as saumya, 'of Soma'.

14

Ibid., p. 270, 9:2:5.

15

Ibid., p. 321, 9:67:13.

16

Ibid., p. 288, 9:27:1-2.

17

Ibid., p. 382, 9:114:2, also see: 9:96:6 and 9:14:7.

18

J. Gonda, "Soma, Amṛta and the Moon", in Change and Continuity in Indian Religion, (London: Mouton and Co., 1965), pp. 40-52.

World, except the name of "Soma", and the adjective "Prajāpati",  
 19  
 used to describe Dakṣa. Eliade's notion of origin myth would  
 be irrelevant here were it not for another Soma myth appearing  
 in the Śālyaparvan which is chronologically prior or equal to  
 20  
 the Nārāyaṇīyan myth. The content of the Śālyaparvan Soma  
 myth simultaneously gives substance to the origin myth notion,  
 and puts the Nārāyaṇīya myth in a wholer perspective.

In the Śālyaparvan version the context of the Soma myth  
 is straightforward -- the myth is one of many which is related  
 to explain the sacredness of the tīrthas (sacred spots) which  
 Balarama visited while the great battle was raging. This myth  
 explains, as does the Nārāyaṇīyan myth, how the Prabhāsa tīrtha  
 received its name. It seems that the great ṛṣi Dakṣa had twenty-  
 seven star daughters called Nakṣatras. They were the fairest  
 women in all the world, but one, Rohiṇī excelled even the others  
 in beauty. So it was that Dakṣa gave his daughters in marriage  
 to the moon god Soma, and that Soma loved Rohiṇī over her sisters.  
 The twenty-six became disturbed and returned to their father who  
 reprimanded Soma and sent his daughters back to their husband.  
 Some, however, did not take heed, and thus the daughters returned  
 to Dakṣa in tears and begged him to take them into his home, even  
 as servants. Again Dakṣa warned Soma, and again Soma ignored his

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Any thematic relationship that this 'Prajāpati' reference  
 has to the creation myths of the Brāhmaṇas which involve Prajāpati  
 is at best obscure.

20 Since both these versions appear in the critical edition  
 (Sukthankar, et.al, op.cit., v.11, the Tīrthyātrā subparvan,  
 described p. LIII, and v.16, chapter 329, described, p.CCXXIX) it  
 (continued)

warning. And so it came to pass when his daughters appeared bleary-eyed on his doorstep a third time, that Dakṣa became angered and hurled the curse of consumption at Soma.

In consequence of this curse, Soma began to waste away and, because he was the lord of the plants, the plants began to dry up and become tasteless. Because the plants began to waste away, so too all the creatures, who depended on the plants, started to decay. And so it was that the celestials, who depended on sacrifice, also became emaciated. It was with not a little distress that the gods visited Soma to discover the cause of all this hardship. Soma directed the gods to the ṛṣi Dakṣa who received their pleas sympathetically. The gods pointed out that the world was running down due to Soma's consumption and that their very existence was threatened, "Without us", asked the gods, "what would the universe be?"<sup>21</sup> Dakṣa realizing the truth of the gods' plea struck a compromise. Noting that he could not take back his words (because ṛṣis always speak the truth), Dakṣa pronounced the cure: if Soma treated all his wives equally and bathed in the river Sarasvatī where it meets

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20 (continued)

is possible to say that neither were interpolations made after the fourth century A.D. Furthermore, the Nārāyaṇīya is generally accepted to be a late addition to the Mahābhārata proper and therefore we might hypothesize that it is chronologically later than the Tīrthyātrā subparvan of the Sālyaparvan.

21

Mhb, P. C. Roy, vol. 7, p. 108.

the ocean, he would grow again. Dakṣa also pronounced Soma's eternal fate, "for half the month Soma shall wane everyday, and for half the month (following) he will wax every day! These words of mine are true!"<sup>22</sup>

At Dakṣa's direction Soma hustled down to the Sarasvatī and there it was that on the day of the new moon he "got back his cool rays and continued once more to illumine the worlds."<sup>23</sup> (As in the Nārāyaṇīya myth the tīrtha received its name from this illumination.) All creatures and plants resumed their former health and lived in joy. The Śālyaparvan author concludes:

I have thus told thee everything about how the maker of the night had been cursed, and how also Prabhasa became the foremost of all tirthas. On every recurring day of the new moon, O monarch, the god having the hare for his mark bathes in the excellent tīrtha of Prabhasa and regains his form and beauty.<sup>24</sup>

It seems quite clear that we are confronting two very different versions of the same myth. The Nārāyaṇīya myth is but a brief outline of the Śālyaparvan myth. The latter is fuller and richer, and includes a number of elements which might be seen as drawing on a cosmogonic tradition. For example, the connection<sup>25</sup> between the moon and the lunar stars was known to Vedic authors.

22

Ibid.

23

Ibid.

24

Ibid., pp. 108-109.

25

Gonda, op.cit., p. 52.

But foremost among these elements is Soma's role as lord of the plants. In this myth this traditional tie to Vedic lore is not superficial, but integral to the problem and solution of Dakṣa's curse. In conclusion, it is clear that the origin of the cure for consumption (the Prabhāsa tīrtha) is placed in a richly embroidered setting which might suggest a close connection between cosmogonic myth, or an implicit understanding of one, and the myth of the origin of a sickness and its remedy. It is, of course, foolish to suggest that this myth is an origin myth, and as such is worthy of 'prestige'. Nonetheless the Śālyaparvan Soma myth is much more suggestive of an origin myth (given certain cosmogonic limitations) than is the Nārāyaṇīya Soma myth.

A return to the Nārāyaṇīya Soma myth to note the elements which are different from the myth in the Śālyaparvan is quite revealing for such a comparison locates the Nārāyaṇīya myth more certainly in the 'genuine'/etiological continuum. Some differences seem incidental - Dakṣa has sixty rather than twenty-seven daughters, Soma acquires his hare mark instead of already possessing it - but many of the differences between the myths are essential to their understanding. For example, in the Nārāyaṇīya the twenty-seven daughters are equally beautiful whereas in the Śālyaparvan, Rohiṇī surpasses the others in beauty. Consequently Soma, who in both myths appears stubborn and irresponsible, is portrayed in the Nārāyaṇīya as petty and unreasonable as well. The Śālyaparvan

at least gives Soma a reason, albeit a wrong one, for his irresponsible actions. There are different characterizations of Dakṣa as well. In the Nārāyaṇīya Dakṣa never warns Soma before he curses him, and as a result he seems rash and foolhardy. In the Śālyaparvan he warns Soma twice before losing his temper. Similarly it is not clear in the Nārāyaṇīya why Dakṣa relents and cures Soma, while in the Śālyaparvan the gods plead with Dakṣa to restore Soma in order to restore the world. Thus in the Nārāyaṇīya Dakṣa seems fickle and wishy-washy -- seemingly changing his mind on whim.

Furthermore the thematic thrust of the Śālyaparvan Soma myth again in comparison with the Nārāyaṇīya myth, is rich and varied. The message of social dharma in the Śālyaparvan is hardly vague: a man should love and respect all his wives equally regardless of their beauty. This myth also explains the origin of the consumption curing tīrtha, and thus why it is so potent. The more etiological concerns of the waxing and waning of the moon as well as the moon's spousal relationship to the lunar stars and the naming of the tīrtha are of course prominent as well. And perhaps most obvious and thus most subtle, the awesome power of the truth-telling ṛṣis over gods and men is splendidly displayed.

Perhaps the single most important difference is the absence of the lord of the plants motif in the Nārāyaṇīya myth. As mentioned before, this motif is an integral part of the theme of

the developed Śālyaparvan story. It is because Soma is the lord of the plants that Dakṣa's curse has such an impact, and it is because Soma is the lord of the plants that the audience hearing the myth would have understood the larger context of the myth. The integral function within the myth of Soma as lord of the plants might stir the primordial mud of the listeners' minds calling into comprehension the World maintaining power of Soma. Therefore the submission of Soma to ṛṣi power would take on the full import intended by the myth. In the Nārāyaṇīya, only the name "Soma" appears, creating large comprehension gaps which might try the listeners' powers of understanding, especially given the contextual void that the myth is framed in. Neither myth sandwiching the Soma myth in the Nārāyaṇīya aids in the wrestling of meaning from the marriage of Soma and Dakṣa's daughters and subsequent events.

The Soma myth of the Śālyaparvan, while etiological, derives a good deal of meaning from its ties with a presupposed World which has elements of the Vedic World. These elements include Soma as lord of plants, the star-goddess/moon story and the gods' relationship to sacrifice. The Soma myth of the Nārāyaṇīya, however, is most certainly etiological, having few, if any, meaningful moments. There is nothing of a World establishing or maintaining character about it. Rather it provides a mundane cause for the waxing and waning of the moon as well as the moon's 'mark of the hare', and it demonstrates the awful power of the ṛṣi, who both curses

and cures the curse. At the same time the story has a narrative mythic form, speaks of "days of old" and gives Dakṣa auspicious ancestral parents. Thus while the trappings seem genuinely mythic, the essence is etiological.

If the Soma myth of the Nārāyaṇīya were surrounded by an array of myths which tended to be more genuine than etiological then its presence would be insignificant. However, occurring immediately before the Soma myth are myths which explain how Viṣṇu received the mark on his chest and how Vivasvat came to be called<sup>26</sup> Martanda. And immediately following the Soma myth are myths explaining why the trees do not flower all the time, why the ocean is salty, how it is that the mountains of Himavat have no gems,<sup>27</sup> and finally how Hari came to be called by so many names. The intention of these myths is for the most part to display the power of the ṛṣis over gods and men alike. While this intention will become important in and of itself later in our study, here it serves to distort the original meanings of the myths, rendering them nearly lifeless. Such an abundance of etiological myths cannot be set aside as insignificant.

Adolf Jensen indicates the significance of etiological myths in his discussion of the process of semantic depletion or meaning-loss. Etiological myths, says Jensen, may be seen as

<sup>26</sup>

Mhb, vol. 10, pp. 581-82.

<sup>27</sup>

Ibid., pp. 583-88.

'survivals', a kind of cultural baggage, now without meaning, carried from earlier epochs. The presence of these myths may signal a process of semantic depletion.

28

The situation of genuine myth unaffected by semantic depletion might be compared to a healthy batch of wine brewing. Within a cask a thriving yeast grows, and in so doing uses up sugar, making alcohol and unwanted gases which escape through a controlled outlet called a fermentation lock. This lock must be filled with the waters of Creation in order that the wine remain originally healthy and strong. The unwanted gases bubbling through the waters are purified. The fermenting process flows in a harmonious creative system. Should the waters of Creation dry up, however, the process begins to reel out of control. A leak could develop high up on the cask, and slowly, drop by drop, the wine might leak out. Over a long period of time, enough wine could leak out to enable air riddled with vinegar bacteria to waft in. Eventually the whole cask would be vinegar and would have to be thrown out, excepting perhaps a bit of the yeast deposit which might flavour the next batch. The presence of etiological myth, according to Jensen, may indicate a meaning-leak in the World. Eventually the vision of the what-it-is-that's-out-there World must be thrown out, or at least drastically altered to stop the meaning-leak; reality/World as a leaky cask. Jensen describes the occasioning

of semantic depletion or meaning leakiness in this way:

The decisive event which leads to semantic depletion is the changing of the world view and man's orientation toward other aspects of reality and other possibilities of expressing them.<sup>29</sup>

Only multi-focused study of the process of semantic depletion in the Nārāyaṇīya can reveal the nature of the change in World understanding which we can expect to find there. Such study may also shed light on the influx of meaning or semantic impletion which must naturally accompany the shift in Worldview. The god Indra as he appears in the Nārāyaṇīya and elsewhere will provide a quite different focus on these complementary happenings.

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29

Ibid., p. 76.

30

The process of semantic depletion is only a half-perspective because, at least in the Nārāyaṇīya, there is ample evidence to indicate semantic impletion: the influx of new understandings, new myths, and new rituals -- a meaning replenishment. Semantic impletion seems an obvious complement to semantic depletion, but Jensen, perhaps because his study included primarily "primitive" or archaic cultures recently disrupted by Western civilization, does not recognize the impletion phenomenon.

III. THE CASE OF INDRA; WHERE HAS ALL THE POWER GONE

. . . for Count Roland smote  
So rudely that he split his helm, and clove  
His nose and mouth and teeth, nor did the coat  
Of shining mail stop the bright blade - it shore  
The Paynim's frame asunder, and sank down  
Into his steed, cutting the silver girths  
Which held the golden saddle. Man and horse  
He slew beyond all help. And so the host  
Of Spanish Paynims wept aloud for grief;  
And the Franks cried: "That was a goodly blow!"

The Song of Roland,  
Frederick Bliss Luquiens, transl.

### III. THE CASE OF ÍNDRA; WHERE HAS ALL THE POWER GONE

The Nārāyaṇīya contains one of the several renditions of the Índra-Vṛtra conflict found in the Mahābhārata. Throughout the Nārāyaṇīya version we hear whispers of meaning leakiness, which become like shouts when viewed in a comparative overview.

It is not surprising to find Índra in the Nārāyaṇīya in that he plays a relatively substantial role in the Mahābhārata. Again, his presence in the whole of the epic is quite understandable as it is in keeping with his partiality for the battlefield to appear among warriors. It is appropriate that Índra is the father of Arjuna the foremost of all warriors in the Mahābhārata. During the twelve year exile of the Pāṇḍavas, Arjuna undertakes a pilgrimage in which he visits his father in heaven. From Índra, Arjuna receives many celestial weapons including the Vajra, the famous thunderbolt. On another occasion Índra, disguised as a Brahmin, petitioned a boon from Karṇa who had vowed to grant boons to any Brahmin who asked. Índra asked Karṇa for his earrings and armour. Since Karṇa had been born with this warrior's garb, he had to cut the earrings and armour off with his knife. As he gave the bloody implements to Índra, he asked for the Śakti weapon in return, for he had been told by Sūrya that Índra would come as a Brahmin. Índra allowed that Karṇa would use the Śakti weapon once in battle, and then it would return to Índra. Índra

then caused the ṛākṣasa, Ghaṭokaca, to be born in order to be killed in battle by the Śakti weapon, thus protecting his son,<sup>1</sup> Arjuna.

It is noteworthy that the inclusion of the Indra-Vṛtra conflict in the Nārāyaṇīya has no relevance to the plot of the Mahābhārata.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, unlike other versions of the Indra-Vṛtra conflict in the Mahābhārata,<sup>3</sup> this story is completely without any semblance of poetic context. It seems to be one of many myths demonstrating the power of ṛṣis over men, devas, and aṣuras strung together with virtually no transition. As in the case of the Soma myth, this lack of flow hints at possible semantic depletion.

The Nārāyaṇīya Indra-Vṛtra story is not duplicated exactly anywhere in the Mahābhārata. It begins with Viśvarūpa, the three-headed son of Tvaṣṭṛ, becoming the Hotṛ of the gods. While he publicly offered shares of the sacrifice to the gods, he

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1

Chakravarthi Narasimhan, The Mahābhārata; an English Version Based on Selected Verses (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), p.20 and pp.155-6.

2

In Mhb. PCR, v.4, pp.14-31 and v.12 pp.18-19 the Indra-Vṛtra conflict is propounded as an example for the Pāṇḍavas. For instance, in the Udyoga parvan, Indra's losing and regaining his celestial kingdom is emphasized and held out to the exiled Pāṇḍavas as an auspicious example of a king losing everything (as Yudhiṣṭhira had) only to gain it back after an exile and a battle.

3

The other accounts can be found in P. C. Roy; v.4, pp.41-31; v.13 pp.18-19; v.2, pp.224-232; v.11, pp.182-187; v.7, pp.128-29; and v.9, pp.331-336.

privately gave shares to the Aṣuras because he was related to the Aṣuras on his mother's side. After a time the Aṣuras with King Hiranyakaśipu at their head went to their sister, Viśvarūpa's mother, and complained that Viśvarūpa's actions were strengthening the gods and weakening themselves. Thus, it was that his mother came to Viśvarūpa and asked him not to slight his maternal uncles. Viśvarūpa, not wanting to show disrespect to his mother, left the gods and became the Hotṛ of the Aṣuras. He soon settled into his new position, and, in order to benefit the Aṣuras, he performed severe ascetic austerics (tapas).

Indra, fearing the growing power of Viśvarūpa and the Aṣuras, sent the Apsarases, who were divine nymphs of wonderful beauty, to distract the Hotṛ of the Aṣuras. The Apsarases worked their wiles on Viśvarūpa who was helpless to resist. Seeing that Viśvarūpa was hopelessly in love with them, the Apsarases revealed their identity and repaired to the abode of Indra, no doubt giggling gleefully.

Discovering not only his broken heart, but also that he had been made a fool of, Viśvarūpa flew into a rage and laid his ṛṣi curse on Indra. Indra and all the deities, he said, would cease to exist. Viśvarūpa then began saying mantras to that end, and true to his word he began to decrease the energy of the gods. With one mouth he drank all the soma offered in sacrifice, with

his second mouth he ate all of the sacrificial food offerings, and with his third mouth he began to drink up the energies of the gods.

Before too long the gods began to feel the pinch and, noticing that Viśvarūpa was swelling, they went to Brahma for advice. Brahma told them that they should visit the ṛṣi Dadhica, and ask for the boon of his bones. Thus it was that they approached Dadhica, who had done much tapas, and said, "It behoveth thee to cast off the body for benefiting the three worlds!"<sup>4</sup> Because he perceived happiness and misery in the same light, he happily cast off his body. Dhātṛ took the bones of Dadhica and fashioned the vajra weapon and presented it to Indra.

Indra took the vajra and killed Viśvarūpa. He then cut off the ṛṣi's heads, but lo and behold, from the body of the slain Viśvarūpa came the great Aṣura, Vṛtra. Then, says the Nārāyaṇīya, "Vṛtra became the foe of Indra, but Indra slew him also with the Thunderbolt [vajra]."<sup>5</sup> This one sentence is the full description of the combat. There follows a long discourse on the consequences of the killings.

Because of the double Brahmanicide, Indra was overcome by a great fear, and had to abandon his kingdom. He retreated to

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4

Mhb. PCR v.10, p.578.

5

Ibid.

Mānasa Lake and, using yoga-power, he became very tiny and entered the fibres of the cool lotus stalk. Meanwhile, the lordless world fell into chaos -- rajas and tamas assailed the gods, the mantras of the ṛṣis lost their power, and rākṣasas were everywhere. All the beings of the world lost their strength and fell easy prey to the rākṣasas.

In the face of this intolerable situation, the gods and ṛṣis made Nahuṣa the king of the gods. Nahuṣa's greatest asset was the five hundred luminaries on his forehead which sucked energy from all creatures, thus making him very powerful. Under Nahuṣa the world was restored to its former condition and all things lived cheerfully. Then one day Nahuṣa noticed the beautiful Saci, Indra's spouse. Nahuṣa reasoned that, since all things that were once Indra's were now his, he should also have Saci. Saci had other ideas, and went to Bṛhaspati for help. He told Saci to call forth the boon-giving goddess Uparuti, who did indeed come, and furthermore showed Saci where Indra was hiding.

Indra became concerned when he saw Saci standing before him looking pale, thin, and troubled. He asked her what was wrong, and she told him of her troubles with Nahuṣa. Indra thought for a bit, and then told Saci to demand that Nahuṣa come to her on a vehicle never before used -- namely one which was drawn by ṛṣis. With that Saci returned home and sent her invitation to Nahuṣa.

Nahuṣa, being quite pride-blind, fell for the ruse and harnessed a number of very angry ṛṣis to his vehicle, and went to present himself before Saci. Nahuṣa was soon confronted by the powerful ṛṣi, Agastya, and managed to add injury to insult by kicking Agastya in the head. Thereupon Agastya cursed Nahuṣa who fell to earth and was transformed into a snake. Thus it was that once again the world was lordless.

This time the gods and ṛṣis went to Viṣṇu and asked him to restore Indra. Viṣṇu replied that Indra should do a horse sacrifice in honour of Viṣṇu, and then he would be restored. However, the gods and ṛṣis could not find Indra and consequently went to Saci who in turn fetched Indra from the lotus stalk. They all went to Br̥haspati who conducted the horse sacrifice, but substituted a black antelope for the horse. At the conclusion Br̥haspati had Indra ride the antelope (which was saved from actual slaughter) to his throne in heaven. There he reigned, cleansed of the sin of Brahmanicide which was divided into four parts and made to reside in women, fire, trees and kine. This version of the story ends with these concluding remarks:

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6

In another Indra-Vṛtra account, Mhb. PCR v.9, p.336, this quartering of the sin of Brahmanicide is explained in detail. The sin is personified as a hag-like woman who will only leave Indra if she has a place to reside. Thus, Brahma sends one quarter to Agni to be passed on to adharmic people who withhold sacrifices, one quarter to the trees, plants and grasses who may pass it on to people who cut or tear any of them "when Parva days come", one quarter to the Apsarases who should pass it on to men desiring sexual intercourse with women during menstruation, and one quarter to the Waters to pass on to adharmic people who expell phlegm, urine or feces into streams or lakes.

It was thus that Indra, strengthened by the energy of a Brahmana, succeeded in slaying his foe (and when, as a result of that act of his, he had been overpowered by sin, it was the energy of another Brahmana that rescued him). It was thus that Indra once more regained his position.<sup>7</sup>

The vision of Indra which is revealed in this version of the Indra-Vṛtra conflict stands in sharp contrast to the Indra of Vedic mythology. Indra is by far the most popular god of the Rg Veda with over one quarter of the hymns praising his feats. He is the exemplar warrior god who loves to drink soma more than any living being.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps most importantly he, of all the gods in the Rg Veda, has the most clearly defined character. He is a strong-minded, fun-loving and boisterous braggart -- quintessentially adolescent-man.<sup>9</sup> At the same time he is a strong warring hero

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Mhb. PCR, v.10, pp.577-581.

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A. A. MacDonell, The Vedic Mythology (Delhi: Indological Book House, 1971), pp. 54-56.

9

For example witness this Rg Vedic hymn (X:119) as translated by H. H. Wilson:

Like wild winds the draughts  
have raised me up.  
Have I been drinking Soma?

The draughts have born me up,  
as swift steeds a chariot.  
Have I been drinking Soma?

Frenzy has come upon me, as  
a cow to her dear calf.  
Have I been drinking Soma?

(continued)

capable of defeating any foe which challenges his kingly rule of  
 10  
 the world. Indra's ultimate heroic deed is, of course, the  
 slaying of Vṛtra. Many hymns celebrate this conquest which

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9 (continued)

As a carpenter bends the seat of  
 a chariot I bend this frenzy  
 round my heart.  
 Have I been drinking Soma?

Not even as a mote in my eye  
 do the five tribes count with me.  
 Have I been drinking Soma?

The heavens above do not  
 equal one half of me.  
 Have I been drinking Soma?

In my glory I have passed  
 beyond the sky and the great earth.  
 Have I been drinking Soma?

I will pick up the earth,  
 and put it here or put it there.  
 Have I been drinking Soma?

10

For example in RV I:80, (Griffith, VI, p. 104) we find:

There is not, in our knowledge, one who passeth Indra  
 in his strength:  
 In him the Deities have stored manliness, insight,  
 power and might, landing his own imperial sway.

11

released the fertile waters, but Rg Veda I:32 is perhaps the best account:

- I will declare the manly deeds of Indra, the first that he achieved, the Thunder-wielder.  
He slew the Dragon, then disclosed the waters, and cleft the channels of the mountain torrents.
- 2 He slew the Dragon lying on the mountain: his heavenly bolt of thunder Tvashtar fashioned.  
Like lowing kine in rapid flow descending the waters glided downward to the ocean.
- 3 Impetuous as a bull, he chose the Soma, and in three sacred beakers drank the juices.  
Maghavan grasped the thunder for his weapon, and smote to death this firstborn of the dragons.
- 4 When, Indra, thou hadst slain the dragons' firstborn, and overcome the charms of the enchanters,  
Then, giving life to Sun and Dawn and Heaven, thou foundest not one foe to stand against thee.
- 5 Indra with his own great and deadly thunder smote into pieces Vritra, worst of Vritras.  
As trunks of trees, what time the axe hath felled them, low on the earth so lies the prostrate Dragon.
- 6 He, like a mad weak warrior, challenged Indra, the great impetuous many-slaying Hero.  
He, brooking not the clashing of the weapons, crushed--Indra's foe--the shattered forts in falling.
- 7 Footless and handless still he challenged Indra, who smote him with his bolt between the shoulders.  
Emasculate yet claiming manly vigour, thus Vritra lay with scattered limbs dissevered.
- 8 There as he lies like a bank-bursting river, the waters taking courage flow above him.  
The Dragon lies beneath the feet of torrents which Vritra with his greatness had encompassed.

11

cf. RV 1:80 1:61, 1:52, 2:11, 3:33, 4:19, 5:32, 6:20, 10:89, etc.

- 9 Then humbled was the strength of Vritra's mother: Indra  
hath cast his deadly bolt against her.  
The mother was above, the son was under, and like a cow  
beside her calf lay Danu.
- 10 Rolled in the midst of never-ceasing currents flowing without  
a rest for ever onward,  
The waters bear off Vritra's nameless body: the foe of Indra  
sank to during darkness.
- 11 Guarded by Ahi stood the thralls of Dasas, the waters stayed  
like kine held by the robber.  
But he, when he had smitten Vritra, opened the cave wherein  
the floods had been imprisoned.
- 12 A horse's tail wast thou when he, O Indra, smote on thy bolt;  
thou, God without a second,  
Thou hast won back the kine, hast won the Soma; thou hast  
let loose to flow the Seven Rivers.
- 13 Nothing availed him lightning, nothing thunder, hailstorm or  
mist which he had spread around him:  
When Indra and the Dragon strove in battle, Maghavan gained  
the victory for ever.
- 14 Whom sawest thou to avenge the Dragon, Indra, that fear  
possessed thy heart when thou hadst slain him;  
That, like a hawk affrighted through the regions, thou  
crossedst nine-and-ninety flowing rivers?
- 15 Indra is King of all that moves and moves not, of creatures  
tame and horned, the Thunder-wielder.  
Over all living men he rules as Sovran, containing all as  
spokes within the felly.<sup>12</sup>

In this hymn, as in the Nārāyaṇīya, both the conflict  
between Indra and Vṛtra and the subsequent flight of Indra (verse  
14 above) are mentioned. The differences in emphasis are staggering-  
ly apparent. In the Nārāyaṇīya only one sentence in four pages is  
devoted to the actual combat with Vṛtra, and fully one half of the

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12

Griffith, op.cit., v.1, pp. 43-45.

myth deals with Indra's flight. Here only one verse hints at Indra's fear, and nearly all of the remaining verses describe the great battle.

Sometimes Indra's victory over Vṛtra is seen as causally related to the separation and supporting of earth and heaven (RV. 5:29,4), but more frequently Indra is seen as a cosmic steadier and maintainer apart from his heroic fight. Perhaps the single most-detailed expression of Indra's World establishing and maintaining feats can be found in Rg Veda 2:12, parts of which are reproduced here:

- 2 He who fixed fast and firm the earth that staggered, and set at rest the agitated mountains,  
Who measured on the air's wide middle region and gave the heaven support, He, men, is Indra.
- 3 Who slew the Dragon, freed the Seven Rivers, and drove the kine forth from the cave of Vala.  
Begot the fire between two stones, the spoiler of warriors' battle, He, O men, is Indra . . .
- 7 He under whose supreme control are horses, all chariots, and the villages and cattle;  
He who gave being to the Sun and Morning, who leads the waters, He, O men, is Indra . . .
- 9 Without whose help our people never conquer; whom, battling, they invoke to give them succour;  
He of whom all this world is but the copy, who shakes things moveless, He, O men, is Indra . . .
- 13 Even the Heaven and Earth bow down before him, before his very breath the mountains tremble.  
known as the Soma-drinker, armed with thunder, who wields the bolt, He, O ye men, is Indra.<sup>13</sup>

From this we can surmise that Iṅdra was involved in some manner with the creation of the World--"He of whom all this world is but the copy," "He who gave being to the Sun and Morning, and "[he] who measured out the air's wide middle region." It is perhaps just as significant that Iṅdra functions to direct and steady the World. He has in the past quieted the restless earth, and he continues to rule over all the world and its horses, chariots, villages, and cattle. Iṅdra in the Ṛg Veda, then, may be seen as a popular king of the gods, whose heroic feats are epitomized by the slaying of Vṛtra, and whose primary activities are centered on the establishment and maintenance of the World.

When we compare the Iṅdra of the Nārāyaṇīya to the Ṛg Vedic Iṅdra, the former comes off much the worse for the comparison. A version of the story which appears in the first part of the Nārāyaṇīya myth describing the rise and fall of Viśvarūpa was known in Vedic literature.<sup>14</sup> The known version understood that Viśvarūpa, a three-headed Aṣura, was slain by Iṅdra, and alternately, by Trita. The Nārāyaṇīya introduces a Viśvarūpa-as-ascetic motif. Iṅdra becomes fearful, and perhaps jealous, of the ascetic's power and sends the celestial nymphs to distract the ascetic. This is not the only time in the Mahābhārata Iṅdra becomes threatened by someone doing tapas, nor is it the only time he sends the lovely nymphs on a distracting

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MacDonell, op.cit., p. 160, and RV 10:8, 8-9.

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mission. In other versions the Apsarases have mixed results. The point is clear--the once all-powerful *Indra* can no longer fight his way through every foe, now he often must use guile to win his battles.

Another more impressive demonstration of the relative powerlessness of *Indra* lies in the conclusion of the myth. Ascetic *ṛṣis* help him out of every jam he gets in. A *ṛṣi* provides the material for *Indra*'s vajra, perceptive advice to *Saci*, the means for defeating *Nahuṣa* and the means for purifying *Indra* (the *aśvamedha*). These *ṛṣis* are not, however, identical with the Rg Vedic *ṛṣis*. In the Nārāyaṇīya the terms '*ṛṣi*' and '*brahmana*' are used nearly interchangeably to mean a person of immense power who gains his power from doing *tapas*. The mighty *Indra* before whom "even the Heaven and Earth bow down" is seen in the Nārāyaṇīya as an insecure god with a tenuous grip on his power and a tendency to flee rather than fight.

As in the case of *Soma*, if we found the vision of *Indra* in this Nārāyaṇīya myth to be an isolated case of depletion, then an interpretation pointing to semantic depletion would be unwarranted. However this is not the case. Within the Nārāyaṇīya itself *Indra* is subject to further humiliating circumstances. On one occasion *Indra* is cursed for making a "licentious assault" on a man's wife,

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For example, see Mhb., PCR, v.1, pp. 166-168 and 290, and v.4, p. 14.

16

and receives a green beard for his trouble. In another incident  
 Indra is cursed by Kauṣika for an unspecified reason and loses his  
 testicles. Through the generosity of the gods he receives a pair  
 of ram testicles in lieu of the originals. <sup>17</sup> It is also noteworthy  
 that none of the Indra-Vṛtra stories in the Mahābhārata depict the  
 battle as a life-giving event as does the Rg Veda. All the stories  
 stress the flight of Indra and the consequent chaos. While it is  
 true that Indra remains king of the gods, his role can be filled  
 by another, albeit imperfectly. In the Rg Veda such a substitution  
 could have not have been 'seen' within the vision.

Furthermore, the later tradition emasculates Indra to an  
 even greater extent. He is seen as a spiteful 'storm god' who acts  
 in a chaotic, rather than a maintaining manner. The establishment  
 and maintenance of the World are far removed from the revengeful  
 bully who stalks the Viṣṇu Purāṇa and Bhagavata Purāṇa. In both  
 of these texts, one dated decidedly later than the other, <sup>18</sup> is the

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16

Mhb., PCR, v.10, p.567.

17

Ibid.

18

Jaiswal, op.cit., p. 17. Mrs. Jaiswal concludes that the Viṣṇu Purāṇa may be dated in the last quarter of the third or first quarter of the fourth century A.D. making a roughly contemporary to the Nārāyaṇīya. The Bhagavata Purāṇa may be dated in the ninth or tenth century A.D.

19

story of Īndra's attack on the cowherd people of Vraja. Kṛṣṇa, intent on angering Īndra the king of celestials, talked the people of Vraja out of performing a sacrifice to Īndra. Instead, he argued, why didn't they offer prayers and sacrifice to the mountain Govardhana and to their cows? Swayed by Kṛṣṇa's words, the cowherds held a sacrifice to the mountain and their cows, and Kṛṣṇa became the mountain to accept their sacrifices. Īndra, true to form, became incensed when he learned he had been deprived of his sacrifice and, with his cloud friends proceeded to Vraja. There he sent a terrifying storm raging against the people.

The clouds roared aloud, as if in terror of the lightning's scourge, poured down uninterrupted torrents. The whole earth was enveloped in impenetrable darkness by the thick and volumed clouds; and above below, and on every side, the world was water.<sup>20</sup>

Seeing his friends begin to float away, Kṛṣṇa decided it was time to help. Without a second's hesitation, he picked up the mountain Govardhana by its base and held it aloft in one hand as an umbrella. It goes without saying that Kṛṣṇa did not strain himself in this task, but rather accomplished the feat "in sport" for seven days and nights. The cowherds and cows were, of course, saved and Īndra was profoundly humiliated.

The trend towards a nearly impotent Īndra is quite clear

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Viṣṇu Purāṇa, tr. H. H. Wilson (Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, 1961) pp. 416-423 and Srimad-Bhavadatam, tr. J. M. Sanyal, (Calcutta: Oriental Publishing Co., 1965) pp. 104-111. For an artistic rendering of this incidence cf. Heinrich Zimmer, The Art of Indian Asia (New York: Bollingen, 1960), v. 1, plate number C-6.

20

Viṣṇu Purāṇa, p. 420.

when this myth is viewed in conjunction with the others under study. It is true that here Indra remains at least the titular head of the gods, but he is not able, with all his might, to harm those under the protection of Kṛṣṇa who is 'merely playing'. This humiliated Indra is a far cry from the mighty warrior and World creator/maintainer of the R̥g Veda. Along with Indra's development from celestial hero to spiteful bully, the Nārāyaṇīyan vision of the fearful, insecure conniver fits quite neatly. His impotence in the face of ṛṣi power more than any other factor, points to semantic depletion. The reinterpretation of the vision of Indra has left him a nearly meaningless puppet serving only as an example in myths which once powerfully revealed the creation and order of the World. Meaning leakiness has rendered Indra as weak as consumption rendered Soma.

We have now seen in two Nārāyaṇīya myths two of the greatest gods of the Vedic World greatly reduced in stature. When the process of semantic depletion whirls through the folds of myth with such pervasiveness, it is not surprising to witness the same phenomenon at work in ritual activity. It has long been established that myth and ritual are fundamentally inseparable media for visions of the real.

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In fact, in studying the Hindu tradition it is

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Jensen, op.cit., p. 40.

sometimes easier to document the process of ritual semantic depletion than mythic semantic depletion. Because myth and ritual always dance in the tension of their union, however, documentation of one aspect in depletion implies a similar process in the other, regardless of starting point.

IV. THE CASE OF SACRIFICE; DOES IT MATTER WHAT I GIVE YOU  
ANY MORE?

But I had no idea  
What a good time would cost  
Till last night  
When you sat and talked with me

John Prine, "A Good Time",  
Sweet Revenge

#### IV. THE CASE OF SACRIFICE; DOES IT MATTER WHAT I GIVE YOU ANY MORE

Indra's winding downhill path from world-maker to vengeful bully is marked by one important consistency: Indra remains the king of the celestial realm - the ruler of the gods. The importance of this consistency crystallizes through a ritual perspective on semantic depletion. Such a perspective can be gained by a study of the significance of the sacrificial ritual in the Nārāyaṇīya and the texts which both antedate and postdate the Mahābhārata.

It is not surprising to discover a myth about sacrifice in the Nārāyaṇīya, as the ritual of a sacrifice is prominent within the main storyline of the Mahābhārata. In fact, the occasion for the recorded re-telling of the great epic is provided by a snake sacrifice held by the young King Janamejaya.<sup>1</sup> Within the epic, Yudhiṣṭhira performs the rājasūya sacrifice shortly after the splendid city of Indraprastha has been built. This sacrifice seems to mark the peak of the glorious rule of the Pāṇḍavas before the world-shattering dice game with the Kauravas.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Yudhiṣṭhira performs a horse sacrifice (aśvamedha) after the slaughter of the great battle. While obviously serving as a purification ritual, this aśvamedha also marks the re-establishment

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<sup>1</sup> Narasimhan, op.cit., pp. 3-4.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp. 44-47.

3

of order through the rule of the Pāṇḍava kingdom.

Even this most powerful of aśvamedhas is undercut by the ambiguity which will be a focus of this chapter. Here the ambiguity is revealed by a blue-eyed, half-gold mongoose who appears at the end of Yudhiṣṭhira's aśvamedha to mock the grandeur of the goings-on:

that proud denizen of a hole, with large body,  
spoke in a human voice and said, - 'Ye Kings,  
this great sacrifice is equal to a prastha of powdered  
barley given by a liberal Brahmana of Kurakshetra who  
was observing the Unccha vow.<sup>14</sup>

The words of the mongoose call up the same dispute which<sup>5</sup> provides the basis for a Nārāyaṇīya myth concerning sacrifice. In the Nārāyaṇīya the sacrificial dispute centers around King Uparicara, also known as Vasu. This king is held as the exemplary earthly monarch throughout the Nārāyaṇīya. He was a friend of Indra and was completely devoted to Nārāyana. Those Brahmins who were most knowledgeable in the Pañcarātra ritual, resided in his palace, and he viewed all his power and wealth as ultimately belonging to Nārāyana. Uparicara, as the exemplary King, was naturally the best of sacrificers. He held a horse sacrifice in which he ordered no animal to be slain. Nārāyana was so pleased with the King that he took up his share of the offerings remaining invisible to everyone but Uparicara. This incident caused Bṛhaspati to lose his temper

3

Ibid., p. 197.

4

Mhb., PCR, V.12, p. 172.

5

Ibid., v.10, p. 535.

and hurl the sacrificial spoon into the air weeping copious  
<sup>6</sup> tears. The sacrifice knows no rage like that of a ṛṣi scorned.

In the normal course of events King Uparicara died, and, because of his abundant merit, he resided in the celestial realm. One day as he was cruising through the sky with his entourage, he happened upon a group of squabbling gods and ṛṣis. The crux of their dispute was the kind of offering which ought to be given in a sacrifice. The gods argued that Vedic śruti required that 'ajas' meaning 'goat' should be offered. The ṛṣis countered that Vedic śruti demanded a sacrifice of 'ajas' meaning 'seeds'. "How," argued the ṛṣis, "can animals be slaughtered in this epoch of  
<sup>7</sup> righteousness? [the Krita age]". Before the dispute could continue, someone spotted King Uparicara and both sides agreed that he would make a fine arbitrator. Uparicara, when presented with the animal-grain option, in this no-win situation, demonstrated his political savvy by asking who thought what. Discovering that the gods favoured meat and the ṛṣis were lobbying for grains and herbs, Uparicara, moved by partiality for the gods, said that sacrifice should be performed with animals.

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<sup>6</sup>  
Ibid., p. 539.

<sup>7</sup>  
Ibid., p. 543.

Needless to say the ṛṣis were not pleased with the King and, true to form, they cursed him with one mighty curse.

Since thou hast (wrongly) taken up the side of the deities, do thou fall down from heaven. From this day, O monarch, thou shalt lose the power of journeying through the sky. Through our curse, thou shalt sink deep below the surface of the Earth.<sup>8</sup>

Uparicara, on his part, fell like a stone into the earth, but never ceased his worship of Nārāyana. For his unflagging belief Nārāyana ordered that the king not lose his memory. Meanwhile, the gods were a bit unsettled to have their friend reduced to worm-status. They quickly decided to band together to provide whatever relief they could, and with this in mind they hustled to the spot where Uparicara was holed up. The gods reassured Uparicara that his devotion to Nārāyana would carry him through the worst of the ṛṣis' curse and would eventually save him altogether. At the same time they cautioned: "It is proper, however, that the high-souled Brahmanas should be honoured. Verily, O best of Kings, their penances should fructify."<sup>9</sup>

In other words, the ṛṣis' curse cannot simply be annuled - it must run its course.

So that Uparicara did not starve, the gods granted him a boon of receiving the streaks of ghee called Vasudhara sacrificed

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8

Ibid., p. 544.

9

Ibid.

with accompanying mantras by Brahmins. Sustained by this food, Uparicara whiled away the time in the adoration of Nārāyana, primarily through saying silent mantras and performing "the well-known five sacrifices that are performed five times every day."<sup>10</sup> By and by Nārāyana became very pleased with King Uparicara in consequence of his devotion and, noting that the ṛṣis' curse had come to fruition, called on the great bird, Garuḍa, to rescue Uparicara. Having heard the words of Nārāyana, Garuḍa flew straight to the hole in which Uparicara was living, snatched him up in his beak and soared up into the sky where he deposited the king in his rightful place.

While the sacrificial dispute obviously resolves itself in favour of grain in this myth, the proper sacrificial offering is hardly clear in the Nārāyaṇīya. Even within the stories of King Uparicara there is some ambiguity. On one hand he conducts an aśvamedha with no animal sacrifice, and on the other, he decrees that animal sacrifice is the correct offering according to Vedic Śruti. This muddledness is strengthened later in the text when a sacrifice to Viṣṇu includes offerings of clarified butter or meat.

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10

Ibid., p. 545.

11

Ibid., pp. 594-595.

In order to understand this animal-grain dispute, it is necessary to look back with retrovision to a more certain time when Indra was Indra and important sacrifices were largely of animals. The vision of the World revealed through the sacrifices of the Brāhmaṇas leaves little question that the rituals described in near painful detail worked to establish and maintain the World.

With the sixth kanda of the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa begins the agnicayana or the ceremony for the building of the fire-altar. The kanda begins with a narrative of a creation of the world. In this cosmogony Prajāpati, the lord of creation, created the world from desire. The objects and processes of creation are catalogued in some detail, and then, (in SB: 6,1,2,12) Prajāpati, having finished creation, fell to pieces. The vital air went out of him and the gods left him. He pleaded with Agni to restore him and Agni<sup>12</sup> agreed saying, "So be it!"

The fire-altar is constructed from five layers of bricks in the shape of a great, headless bird with wings outspread, pointing in an easterly direction.<sup>13</sup> The building ritual is patterned after Agni's restoration of Prajāpati, and through the construction of the fire-altar and the sacrifices offered on it, Prajāpati's vital air

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<sup>12</sup>  
Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa, transl. Julius Eggeling, (SBE), 6,1,2,13, (hereafter abbreviated SB).

<sup>13</sup>  
SB, p. 419, (diagram).

is restored to him. Following the blending of seven vital air-persons into one Person, the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa instructs:

That same Person became Prajāpati (lord of generation).  
And that Person which became Prajāpati is this very Agni  
(fire-altar), who is now (to be) built. (SB: 6,1,1,5).

And again:

'Only he who knows abundant bricks possesses of  
(special) prayers, should build up the fire (altar):  
abundantly indeed he then heals Father Prajāpati.'  
(SB: 6,1,2,24).

The relationship between ritual and cosmogony delineated here demonstrates most clearly what Eliade means by the 'prestige of origins' noted earlier. The fire-altar ritual becomes meaningful through participation in the restoration of the exhausted, post-creation Prajāpati.

Characteristically the text includes many formulae concerning the mystic correlations between the various restoration activities and the fire-altar construction. For example, the seven vital air-persons mentioned above find ritual enactment in the measurements of the altar which was usually built to the specifications of seven of the sacrificer's body lengths square.<sup>14</sup> In a similar vein the five layers of the altar correspond to the five bodily parts<sup>15</sup> of Prajāpati (6,1,2,17), the five seasons of the year (6,1,2,18),

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<sup>14</sup>

Cf. note in SB, pp. 144-45.

<sup>15</sup>

Significantly, there are 365 bricks used in constructing the fire-altar which correspond to the days in the solar year. Thus, it would seem that the altar becomes the year.

and finally the whole world.

And these five bodily parts of his [Prajāpati's] the seasons which became relaxed, are the regions (or quarters); for five in number are the regions [four cardinal quarters plus the upper region], and five those layers: when he builds up the give layers, he builds him up with the regions; and in as much as he builds up, therefore they are layers.  
(6,1,2,19)

The pithy nature of these correspondences is explained in part by the god's love of the 'mystic',<sup>16</sup> and in part by the intense power of the fire-altar ritual, derived from its World establishing and maintaining capacity.

The importance of animal sacrifice, while pertinent to our discussion, remains a bit more 'mystic' than the ordering property of the ritual. This 'mystic'-ness is due in part to the wealth of varied interpretations given in the text. However it is possible to discern a pattern which may well be incomplete, but is nevertheless noteworthy.

Animal sacrifice seems to be a precondition for making the bricks of the altar. Bricks made without such a sacrifice<sup>17</sup> are not sacred and are not really even bricks. The reason for this is that the sacrifice provides food and thus a home for Agni.

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16

This refrain, "the gods love the mystic", resounds throughout, for example, p. 149.

17

SB, 6,2,1,10.

Now when he slaughters those animals, he prepares a home for Agni; for nowhere but in his home does one enjoy himself. But the home means food; it is that he lays down in front, and when Agni sees that, he turns unto him. (6,2,1,14)

Bricks prepared without sacrifices then, remain profane because they do not become the residence of Agni. They do not become Agni's residence because they remain unappealing to him. In another instance the offering of the omentum of a sacrificed animal is the restoring of the vital air to Prajāpati. (6,2,2,13).

Similarly:

that animal sacrifice is his vital air, and if anything were to cut him off from that, it would cut him off from the vital air; and if anything were to cut him off from the vital air, he would thus die; let him therefore complete (the sacrifice). (6,2,2,38).

The nourishing quality of animal sacrifice leaps from these examples -- the gods need the food of the sacrifice for sustenance. Without it, they would cease to exist.

While the agnicayana is not clear as to kinds and numbers of animals to be sacrificed, it makes the importance of animal sacrifice quite explicit, while at the same time noting the complement of grain sacrifice. The heads of the sacrificed animals were in some cases incorporated into bricks. Apparently some sacrificers made replicas of the animals from gold or earth. The text condemns this practice:

Some, however, make gold ones, saying, 'They are immortal bricks (amṛteshṭakā). But indeed those are false bricks (anṛteshṭakā), those are no heads of victims (6,2,1,38)

Clearly the sacrifice had to be of animals in order to prove efficacious. Indeed, how could the gods be expected to eat gold?

The aśvamedha or horse sacrifice is also predominantly an animal sacrifice, although again, grain is offered as well. A magnificent horse of a very powerful person, usually a king, is allowed to roam freely over the earth for twelve months. The horse must be kept under close guard, however, so that he does not become lost, stolen, or sexually engaged. Should any ill befall the horse, the sacrifice would fail and the sacrificer would lose all his power. When Yudhiṣṭhira held his aśvamedha, Arjuna guarded the horse, thus securing his brother's power. A tether measuring twelve cubits (for the twelve months: 13,1,2,1) is fashioned from darbha grass to aid the guards. As with the agnicayana, most of the elements of the sacrificial ritual are laden with meaning. Here the rope tether serves to underline the solar year aspect of the horse's journey.

He who offers the aśvamedha, says the text, conquers the world because the horse is the world, thus the aśvamedha "makes him a ruler and upholder" (SB: 13,1,2,3). This

conquering of the world by conquering the horse brings about many desirable effects. "Wherever they perform this (Aśvamedha) sacrifice, security of possession becomes assured to the people." (13,1,9,10).

In another chapter it reads: "It is the wives that annoint (the horse), for they . . . are a form of prosperity . . .: it is thus prosperity he confers on him (the Sacrificer), and neither fiery spirit, nor energy, nor cattle, nor prosperity pass away from him". (13,2,6,7). The increased wealth and power of the king mean that the World is ordered and bountiful. The orderedness of the World is expressed in this verse which is the last of many extolling the virtues of the aśvamedha:

Verily, this is the sacrifice called Support (foundation):  
wherever they worship with this sacrifice, everything  
indeed becomes supported (firmly established). (13,3,7,12)

The bounty-giving quality of the aśvamedha is indicated by what must have been a most impressive ritual. Just after the horse had been sacrificed, the chief queen (the mahiṣī) entered into ritual union with the slain horse (13,2,8,9 and 13,5,2,1-10).

According to Eliade, the obscene dialogue which accompanies the ceremony indicates the ancientness and popularity of this ritual.

He surmises that the union of the mahiṣī and horse represents an  
18  
archaic fertility rite which insured the fecundity of the world.

Shortly after the ritual union of horse and queen, the horse was cut up and offered to the various gods. Again the notion of

divine nourishment is linked with the animal sacrifice, and again it goes hand in hand with the maintaining (ordering and fecundating) of the world. Eliade concludes that the aśvamedha "is clearly a ritual designed to regenerate the whole Cosmos and restore all social classes and trades to their exemplary state of perfection."<sup>19</sup> To support this contention, Eliade offers a quotation from the Vajasaneyi Samhita version of the aśvamedha which makes a considerable contribution to our understanding of Vedic sacrifice.

The priest recites the following lines:

"May the Brahman be born in sanctity, full of the light of sanctity! May the prince be born in royal majesty, hero, archer, warrior, with the strong bow and invincible chariots! May the cow be born rich with milk, the oxen strong, the horse swift, the woman fruitful, the soldiers victorious and the young man eloquent! May he who makes this sacrifice have a hero for a son! May Parjanya give us at all times the rain we want! May the corn ripen plentifully for us! May our work and our rest be blessed!"<sup>20</sup>

Again in the aśvamedha we find that the sacrificial ritual serves to establish and maintain the world.

Similar World reinforcement characteristics are prevalent in the rājasūya sacrifice as well. J. C. Heesterman in his definitive work, The Ancient Indian Royal Consecration, notes that the consecration of the King was not a once-in-a-lifetime ceremony, but rather the rājasūya was a yearly event which ensured that "the powers active in the universe are regenerated."<sup>21</sup> This universal regeneration

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<sup>19</sup>

Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Vajasaneyi Samhita, XXII, 22, transl. H. Oldenberg - quoted in Eliade, The Two, p. 152.

<sup>21</sup> J. C. Heesterman, The Ancient Indian Royal Consecration. ('S-Gravenhage: Mouton & Co., 1957), p. 222.

transpired during the regeneration of the king who during his  
 unction dies and is born again.<sup>22</sup> Receiving the unction, the king  
 stands with arms upraised. At this point,

the King manifests himself as the cosmic pillar, the  
 path between heaven and earth along which the fertilizing  
 unction waters take their circular course from sky to  
 earth and back again.<sup>23</sup>

As in the other Brahmanic rituals the king (sacrificer) is identified  
 with Prajāpati, the exhausted substance of creation. Through this  
 identification the king surpasses even his manifestation as cosmic  
 pillar, and becomes the World itself. Thus at the moment of royal  
 unction the power of the king/World is restored to its former,  
 24  
 beneficial level. Clearly the emphasis in Brahmanic sacrificial  
 ritual is upon the establishment (or re-establishment) and maintenance  
 of the World - a theme which Jensen would label 'genuinely' mythic.  
 The place of sacrifice in the Nārāyaṇīya is quite different.

The stories of King Uparicara have pointed up the ambiguous  
 expression given sacrificial ritual in the Nārāyaṇīya. When some of  
 the minor subthemes take on a decided etiological tinge, then further  
 fuzziness results. For example, the food-boon given to Uparicara  
 (Vasu) in his underground home nicely explains why streaks of ghee  
 called Vasudhara are to this day run down walls during some sacrificial  
 events.

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22

Ibid., p. 224.

23

Ibid., pp. 223-24.

24

Ibid.

It would seem that what does clearly emerge from this ambiguity is the notion that sacrifice simply isn't as important as it once was. The reason for this diminished importance is quite fundamental -- there is, by the time of the Nārāyaṇīya, another expression of religiousness. The formula which lays out the two different religious expressions weaves the two in complementary fashion. Those persons whose natures are made up primarily of the gunas of tamas and rajas will tend to perform sacrifices to Nārāyana (called the religion of Pravṛtti), and those persons whose natures are made up primarily of the sattvic guna will perform ascetic devotion to Nārāyana (called the religion of Nivṛtti). The practice of Pravṛtti, which is a path of action in the world of men, will accrue merit for the practitioner, and could result in the eventual attainment of the heaven of Brahma. However, merit is exhaustible and both heavenly beings and Brahma himself are subject to the wheel of rebirth. The practice of Nivṛtti, which is a path of ceasing from worldly acts, will result in the achievement of mokṣa and union with Nārāyana.<sup>25</sup> Significantly, Nārāyana, who created both paths "with the view of giving variety to the universe,"<sup>26</sup> chose the path of Nivṛtti for himself.

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25

Mhb., PCR, v.10, pp. 565-66, and 614.

26

Ibid., p. 567.

While it is true that the continual sacrificial re-establishment and maintenance of this world is essential for the existence of the Nivṛtti path, the secondary importance of sacrifice (and thus this world) flutes the edges of the Nārāyaṇīya. Instead of sacrifice, ascetic devotion moves to the fuzzy foreground of the Nārāyaṇīya as man's primary religious expression.

This vision of sacrifice is strengthened in later texts such as the Viṣṇu Purāṇa<sup>27</sup> and the Bhagavata Purāṇa. In the Viṣṇu Purāṇa, dated slightly after the Nārāyaṇīya, Brahma created the four castes for the performance of sacrifice which nourish the gods and are the source of happiness.<sup>28</sup> Here sacrifice is again seen as part of the world of karma and samsara, only tangentially related to the eternal Viṣṇu.

When we return to the aborted sacrifice to Indra in the Bhagavata Purāṇa cited in the previous chapter, further evidence of the erosion of the importance of sacrificial ritual appears in the words of Kṛṣṇa. Kṛṣṇa argued with the cowherds at the foot of Mount Govardhana that sacrifice to Indra was futile. In the radiant splendor he asked,

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Viṣṇu Purāṇa, transl. H. H. Wilson, (Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, 1961), p. 39.

28

Ibid., p. 41.

"Of what service can Indra then be to corporeal beings that are bound to accept the results of their own actions? Of what avail will the adoration of Indra be, when he cannot undo the actions which men perform in conformity with their individual nature inherited from a previous existence?"<sup>29</sup>

Of course he convinces the cowherds that sacrifice to Indra is futile, and in so doing points up the limitations of sacrifice before the relatively new vision of karma accumulated through previous existences. From this, it is safe to say that by the time of the Bhagavata Purāṇa, written easily five hundred years after the Nārāyaṇīya, the sacrificial offering is always grain alone (as contrasted to grain and animal), and more importantly, the relationship between ascetic devotion and sacrifice has been gently cemented at least within the stream of Vaiṣṇavism.

The myth which perhaps best expresses this new vision of sacrifice again involves the great ṛṣi Dakṣa. As in the Soma myth, it is through the role of father-in-law that Dakṣa plays out his part in the story. In the Bhagavata Purāṇa Dakṣa is the father of Sati and father-in-law of Śiva. It is clear from an early stage that Dakṣa is not pleased with his daughter's

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Srimad-Bhagavatam, op.cit., p. 106.

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It is not surprising to find these Vaiṣṇava texts reflecting the concept of ahimsa. This may well not have been the case throughout India.

unorthodox husband. Becoming incensed at one of Śiva's social faux pas, Dakṣa complained before a large assembly:

Naked and with dishevelled hair and surrounded by ghosts and goblins he roams about the cremation grounds like a maniac. Sometimes laughing and sometimes weeping, he is besmeared with ashes of burnt dead bodies, encircled by goblins and embellished with dead men's bones . . . Alas by what awful destiny I was influenced to confer my chaste daughter upon him.<sup>31</sup>

Given this enmity between the two, it is not surprising that, when the newly promoted Dakṣa held a great sacrifice, he did not invite Śiva. Sati, however, heard of the festivities and, moved by a desire to visit her home and relatives, set out for her father's sacrifice. Once there, she was treated rudely by everyone except her mothers and sisters, and when she found that her father was not offering any of the sacrifice to Śiva, she flew into a rage which threatened to destroy the world. Sati quickly restrained herself and, "in the hearing of the whole universe,"<sup>32</sup> she began to berate her father. As her argument started to mellow a bit, she turned to the acceptability of the two religious paths of Pravṛtti and Nivṛtti.

But one following one system of religion should not hate another following a different system of religious principle. Pravritti and Nivritti are the two classes of acts prescribed by the Vedas, and the actions of the people following the two classes aforesaid have been foreordained in the Vedas.<sup>33</sup>

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Srimad-Bhagavatam, op.cit., p. 9.

32

Ibid., p. 15.

33

Ibid., p. 17.

Having argued for religious tolerance, Sati went on to point out the superiority of ascetic devotion, playing mongoose to her father's Yudhiṣṭhira:

the wealth . . . that we own is beyond the reach of persons like thee. Such wealth is not found through sacrifices nor is it celebrated by men of acts whose appetite may be appeased by feeding on the rice offered in sacrifice. . . .<sup>34</sup>

The upshot of the story is that Dakṣa did not listen to Sati, who then renounced her body in sorrow. Śiva hearing the news demonstrated his awesome power by razing the sacrifice and slaying Dakṣa through a demon created from a lock of his matted hair. By means of the petitions of the other gods to Śiva, order is eventually restored. The implication of Sati's argument for our study is quite clear. The vivid images revealed through this myth indicate that the later tradition opts for a vision of sacrifice only ambiguously manifest in the Nārāyaṇīya, and further that this later vision understands sacrifice as a secondary religious expression.

Comparing this later vision with the vision of sacrifice revealed in the Brāhmaṇas is a case in point of semantic depletion. Both the nature and symbols of sacrifice in the Nārāyaṇīya vis-a-vis the Brāhmaṇas show a meaning-leak which threaten to reach flood

proportions. In importance, sacrifice is no longer the supreme religious act, and has become a secondary, temporary nourishment of a world that must be escaped. Given this secondary, temporary quality, the slaughter of animals seems needless.

The symbols of sacrifice may be seen in a similar light. Since the absence of animal sacrifice in the contemporary Western world has nothing to do with an understanding of sacrifice as a secondary religious act, we must bracket our queasy ethical notions for a moment and realize that the power of a blood-sacrifice, when compared to a grain sacrifice, is many times greater. The world-regenerating symbolic union of queen and slaughtered horse in the aśvamedha would lose much of its awful sacred power if the chief queen were joined in ritual union with a pile of porridge.

In spite of all the contrasts in the visions of myth and ritual in the Vedic literature and in the Nārāyaṇīya, an important argument could be made for certain consistencies in both myth and ritual. Since our discussion has dealt thus far primarily with Indra and sacrifice, it seems only fitting that they continue to be our keys. The most significant consistency in the case of Indra is his role as king of the gods. Although he loses his position briefly in the Nārāyaṇīya, there is never any question but that the heavenly throne is Indra's rightful place. As king of the celestials in both the Vedic and Nārāyaṇīyan visions, his duty

is primarily to maintain the order of the World. This has been demonstrated in the hymns of the Rg Veda, specifically in his conquest of the chaotic demon, Vṛtra. In the Nārāyaṇīya, while his function has been semantically depleted, the World still falls into chaos when Iṅdra leaves the throne. In both visions Iṅdra reigns over the three worlds, insuring that order is maintained.

Similarly the ritual of sacrifice is consistent in its establishment and maintenance of the World. As has been shown earlier, the agnicayana, aśvamada, and rājasūya all serve to order, re-create or rejuvenate the world and thus the World. Likewise in the Nārāyaṇīya, Viṣṇu, lecturing the lesser gods on their duty as regards receiving sacrifice, demonstrates this point nicely:

. . . drawing strength from those rites and observances that will be current in the several worlds, taking their rise from the fruits of Pravṛtti, do ye continue to uphold the affairs of those worlds.<sup>35</sup>

In other words the path of Pravṛtti, yielding sacrificial offerings, will nourish the gods so that they may 'uphold the affairs' of the world.

What these consistencies point to is not that the understanding of Iṅdra and sacrifice has changed per se, but rather that the overall vision of the World, or Worldview, has changed. By the time of the Nārāyaṇīya, Iṅdra's realm is no longer very

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Mhb. PCR, v.10, p. 565.

vast compared to the universes of Nārāyana. No longer can a man  
 get a good jump on religious immortality by living one hundred  
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 years on this earth. No longer does the earth, upon being  
 37  
 created, sing, "thinking herself quite perfect."

The Nārāyaṇīyan World consists of much more than, but  
 includes, the semantically depleted World visioned in the Vedic  
 texts. Thus, in order to more fully understand the change in the  
 overall vision of the World registered in the Nārāyaṇīya, it is  
 necessary to look beyond the myths and rituals depleted of meaning,  
 to the myths and rituals which still vibrate with sacred energy.  
 These myths and rituals constitute what I have labelled semantic  
 impletion, and will be considered now.

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SB; 10,1,5,4; 10,2,6,8; 13,1,5,6.

37

SB; 6,1,1,15.



V. NĀRADA'S TRIP; THE VISION REPLENISHED, THE WORLD TURNED

Despite the various cases of semantically depleted gods and ritual in the Nārāyaṇīya, the text considers itself quite valuable. Reading or writing the Nārāyaṇīya seems as efficacious as the reciting of Vedic mantras. One of the learned hearers of the recited tale tells the narrator, "Having listened to this discourse of thine that has Nārāyaṇa for its topic, that is sacred and capable of cleansing one of every sin, all of us have certainly become holy." <sup>1</sup> On two separate occasions the Nārāyaṇīya is compared to the amṛta churned up by the gods from the vast ocean. "After the same manner, the Brahmanas, uniting together in the days of yore, churned all the scriptures and raised this narrative which resembles nectar." <sup>2</sup> In part because of its sacred theme and auspicious creation, the very recitation of the Nārāyaṇīya seems to establish and maintain the World. Vaiśampāyana, protégé of the venerable Vyasa and part-time narrator of the Mahābhārata, notes the healing and supportive powers which hearing or reading the Nārāyaṇīya hold.

He who . . . frequently listens, with concentrated attention, to this discourse or reads, or recites it to others, becomes endued with intelligence and health, and possessed of beauty and strength. If ill,

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<sup>1</sup>

Mhb, PCR, vol. 10, p. 590.

<sup>2</sup>

Ibid., p. 559, 591.

he becomes freed from that illness, bound, freed from his bonds . . . . A Brahmana, by doing this, becomes conversant with all the Vedas, and a Kshatriya becomes crowned with success. A Vaisya, by doing it, makes considerable profits, and a Sudra attains to great felicity. A sonless man obtains a son. A maiden obtains a desirable husband. A woman that has conceived brings forth a son . . .<sup>3</sup>

The list goes on to further demonstrate that besides healing the sick and ensuring the proper functioning of the caste system, recitation of this text provides the social security which only sons can bring, and consequently the preservation of the World.

Thus we find that the Nārāyaṇīya does not view itself as a catalogue of broken gods and burned out sacrificial fires, but rather as a potent religious expression which has the mantra-power to order and maintain the World. This suggests that semantic depletion - meaning leakiness - is only part of the process flowing between the lines of the Nārāyaṇīya. If we take these claims of mantra-power seriously, then it is apparent that the Nārāyaṇīya understands itself to be offering a viable religious statement to its audience. Given this self-understanding and given the semantic depletion recorded in the text, it seems logical to suspect that meaning has also been replenished in the Nārāyaṇīya. It remains, then, to detect the vehicles of this meaning-replenishment (semantic impletion) for just as Soma, Indra and sacrifice may be seen as

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Ibid., p. 568.

signals of meaning leaks, so someone or something may well herald meaning replenishment.

Ironically, it was in the documentation of the meaning leaks of the Nārāyaṇīya that the vehicles of semantic impletion first appeared. In all the myths re-told in previous chapters, the phenomenon of ṛṣi power has been hinted at. The ṛṣi of the Nārāyaṇīya seems capable of literally anything. In a rage, a ṛṣi curses the god Soma with a deforming disease which Soma as moon carries to this day. It further adds to the ṛṣi's power that he was later able to lessen the severity of this curse.

We have seen the immense power of the ṛṣi given further description in the Indra-Vṛtra story of the Nārāyaṇīya. Indra repeatedly gets himself into trouble in this version of the great conflict. Having brought an ascetic's rage down upon himself and his fellow gods, Indra must rely on the power of the ṛṣis on a number of occasions to prevent the reduction of the World to chaos. The vajra which Indra uses to slay Vṛtra is granted in a boon by a mokṣa-bound ṛṣi. When Indra's kingly heir becomes overly proud and thereby threatens the smooth running of the cosmos, it is a ṛṣi who brings the tyrant down, quite literally. The tyrant becomes transformed into a snake by means of the ṛṣi's curse. And finally, besides bumping the plot along at various points, yet another ṛṣi suggests and carries out the ritual purification of Indra which must precede his re-ascension to the celestial throne.

Again in the semantic depletion of the sacrifice witnessed in the myth concerning King Uparicara, the power of the ṛṣis is very much in evidence. Here the ṛṣis favor grain and only grain as the proper sacrificial offering, and it is quite clear that the point of the myth is to demonstrate just that position. The curse they place on Uparicara is noteworthy on two counts. Firstly it wipes out all the merit the king had slowly accrued during his lifetime of exemplary devotion to Nārāyaṇa, and secondly a necessary condition of this (and any) curse is that it come to maturity. Even the gods are wary of acting contrary to a ṛṣi's curse, preferring to sustain Uparicara in his dark hole rather than rescuing him completely and incurring the wrath of the ṛṣis. Nārāyaṇa, too, seems to respect the ṛṣi's curse, choosing to postpone Uparicara's salvation until he had indeed spent some time in the ground - as spoken by the ṛṣis. The undercurrent to this and other episodes seems to be a reinterpretation of the maxim 'the ṛṣis always speak the truth'. In Vedic times this seemed to refer to the validity of the ṛṣi's hymn -- the reality of his vision of the gods. By the time of the Nārāyaṇīya (and indeed the Mahābhārata proper) this maxim is understood to mean that anything that the ṛṣi says or prophesies has or will come to pass. Thus a curse is seen as a prophecy, and, as ṛṣi speech, it must come true.

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Private communication from David Kinsley provided this insight.

If the depictions of meaning-leakiness quietly hint at the ṛṣi-power vehicle of semantic impletion, then the main mythic thread of the Nārāyaṇīya pastes up the billboards and rousts out the marching band proclaiming the centrality of ṛṣi power. This mythic thread is spun by the journey of one Nārada, here portrayed as a kind of super-ṛṣi. The stage is set early on in the Nārāyaṇīya when it is told that long ago in the Kṛita age the eternal Nārāyaṇa (Viṣṇu) took birth as the son of Dharma in four forms: Nara, Nārāyaṇa, Hari and Kṛṣṇa. Of these four, the Nārāyaṇīya says, Nara and Nārāyaṇa underwent the severest austerities, having become ṛṣis at a Himalayan retreat called Badarī. As a result of doing such great tapas, they became so extremely emaciated that none of the gods, excepting the eternal Nārāyaṇa, could look at them.

We pick up on Nārada's journey as he "dropped down" to earth and wandered about before stopping at Badarī. He arrived at the retreat just as Nara and Nārāyaṇa were performing their daily rituals. Nārada, knowing that these two ṛṣis were forms of the eternal Nārāyaṇa, wondered who they might be worshipping. After duly presenting himself and noting the vast power of the eternal Nārāyaṇa, Nārada asked the two ascetics the object of their worship. They answered that, while it was really an ancient mystery and nothing more could be said, Nārada's devotion warranted a fuller

answer. The ṛṣi Nārāyaṇa went on to say that they worshipped the 'all-pervading Soul' (Paramatma) also called Kṣetrajña, who was also the eternal Nārāyaṇa. He concluded that fulfillment of devoted worship to Paramatma was a uniting with him:

Those persons in this world who, filled with His spirit, become fully and conclusively devoted to Him, attain to ends that are much higher, for they succeed in entering Him and becoming merged into his Self.<sup>5</sup>

After wishing the two ascetics the best of luck, Nārada announced his intention to visit Śvetadvīpa (White Island) in hopes of having a vision of the eternal Nārāyaṇa and departed. Nārada had been flying by yoga-power for some time when he stopped at Mount Meru in order to rest. Looking off to the northwest, he "beheld an exceedingly wonderful sight"<sup>6</sup> -- there in the ocean of milk was the large island that was his destination. This island was populated by a group of white-complexioned ascetics who had many extraordinary features, and who were all completely devoted to Nārāyaṇa. Nārada hastened to Śvetadvīpa and beheld the White Islanders. Understanding that complete devotion to Nārāyaṇa was the only means of seeing Paramatma, Nārada began to do tapas.<sup>7</sup> Standing with arms upraised, he sang a huge hymn praising Nārāyaṇa.

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Mhb, PCR, vol. 10, p. 533.

6

Ibid., p. 534.

7

Ibid., pp. 546-549.

This hymn had verses which were unknown to anyone but Nārada, and in consequence of his hymn and enduring devotion, Nārāyaṇa revealed himself to Nārada. The Nārāyaṇīya describes the revelation in part as follows:

His form was somewhat purer than the moon and differed from the moon in some respects. He somewhat resembled a blazing fire in complexion. . . . He resembled in some respects a hill of antimony and in some a mass of pure gold. His complexion somewhat resembled coral when first formed, and was somewhat white. In some respects that complexion resembled the hue of gold and in some the hue of the blue lapis lazulus. . . . Bearing these diverse kinds of hues on his person, the eternal Deity appeared before Narada. He had a thousand eyes and was possessed of great beauty. He had a hundred heads and a hundred feet. He had a thousand stomachs and a thousand arms. He seemed inconceivable to the mind.<sup>8</sup>

The mind-boggling metaphoric images of visual divine revelation are followed by aural revelations - the words spoken by Nārāyaṇa to Nārada. Nārāyaṇa began by telling Nārada that only these people who are devoted to him with their whole heart would be able to see him in a divine revelation. Nārāyaṇa next offered Nārada a boon on account of his unmatched devotion, but the latter declined saying that the sight of the great god was gift enough. The eternal Nārāyaṇa in his "universal form . . . freed from decay and deterioration",<sup>9</sup> then explained the strange looking inhabitants of Śvetadvīpa in words which were reminiscent of the two ṛṣis of Badarī.

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8

Ibid., p. 550.

9

Ibid., p. 551.

These worshippers of mine, possessed of lunar complexions, are divested of all senses and do not subsist upon any kind of food. They are, again, all Emancipate; with minds wholly concentrated upon me. Such worshippers will never meet with any impediments. These men are all crowned with ascetic success and are highly devoted to me. They have been freed from the attributes of Rajas and Tamas. Without doubt they are competent to enter me and become merged with my Self.<sup>10</sup>

After having described these exemplary devotees, the eternal Nārāyaṇa went on to explain the process of creation and in so doing notes that Brahma "is employed in attending to many of my concerns."<sup>11</sup> He then related his many wonderful deeds, many names, and many future activities and avatars.<sup>12</sup> And finally Nārāyaṇa impressed upon Nārada the uniqueness of his revelation saying that even Brahma had not obtained sight of this eternal form.<sup>13</sup> Nārada due to his complete devotion, he said, was sole privy to these mysteries. Nārāyaṇa then vanished. The Nārāyaṇīya further explains that this revelation has come to be called Pañcarātra as Nārada repeated it to brahma and so it was passed down through time until we hear Bhīṣma reciting it to Yudhiṣṭhira at the edge of the great

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10

Ibid.

11

Ibid., p. 553.

12

Ibid., pp. 554-557.

13

Ibid., p. 558.

14

battlefield.

Having received this divine revelation and remembering the 'weighty words' of Paramatma, Nārada quickly proceeded to Badarī where he arrived in time to witness the ṛṣis Nara and Nārāyaṇa again doing tapas. Nārada noticed that the two ṛṣis had swirls on their chests, matted locks, sixty teeth and many other auspicious marks which corresponded exactly with the appearance of the White Islanders. Recalling the exemplary sacred status of those Śvetadvīpa ṛṣis, Nārada excitedly told the two ṛṣis of his experience and his interpretation of the visual similarity:

I have seen that beautiful Being that is immutable and who has the universe for his form. In Him dwell all the worlds, and all the deities with the rishis. Even now I behold that immutable Being, in beholding you two. Those marks and indications which characterise Hari himself of undisputed, characterise you two that are endowed with forms displayed before the senses. Verily I behold both of you by the side of that great God.<sup>16</sup>

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The relationship between this revelation and the Pañcarātra sect is a bit tenuous. Certainly the centrality of bhakti is common, as are the four Vyūhas revealed to be steps in the process of creation. However, J. A. B. van Buitenen has pointed out ("The Name 'Pañcarātra'", History of Religions, 1:2, pp. 291-299) that there are two apparently unrelated sets of four forms each which appear in the Nārāyaṇīya. The first is left largely undeveloped, the second seems to be "Kṛṣṇa devotion gone philosophical". (p.295). This inconsistency, coupled with a virtual ignorance of Nārada's vision in the Pañcarātra sect, may well be why most scholars speak of the Nārāyaṇīya as part of a Pañcarātra prehistory. (Dasgupta, op.cit., v. III, p. 19).

15

The Nārāyaṇīya calls the White Islanders 'ṛṣis' several times, for example Mhb, PCR, v. 10, p. 593.

16

Ibid., p. 594.

The ṛṣis Nara and Nārāyaṇa admitted to their oneness with the eternal creator of the universe and went on to describe the cosmic steps to union with that god. The revelation of this cosmic path is followed by a passage which discloses that one of the fruits of merging with the eternal Nārāyaṇa is omniscience. Nara and Nārāyaṇa inform the super-ṛṣi of his own power:

'In the three worlds consisting of mobile and immobile Beings, there is nothing that is unknown to us. Of good or evil that will occur or has occurred or is occurring, that God of gods, O great ascetic, has informed thee!'<sup>17</sup>

Hearing the words of the two ṛṣis, Nārada "joined his hands  
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in reverence", and became completely and utterly devoted to the eternal Nārāyaṇa. It is said that he remained at Badarī where he engaged in ascetic devotion to the great god for one thousand divinely calendared years.

This myth is the only story in the Nārāyaṇīya which holds the whole text together as a narrative. The other myths cited earlier are all inserted between episodes of this myth - therefore, if asked what the Nārāyaṇīya was mythically 'about', one would have to relate the story of Nārada's journey from Badarī to Śvetadvīpa and back. The centrality of this myth further points up the

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17

Ibid., p. 397.

18

Ibid., p. 597.

importance of ṛṣi power within the Nārāyaṇīya. Those persons who ascribe to, and sometimes attain, the highest religious experience are invariably ṛṣis. In this myth, the quest of Nārada, the super-ṛṣi, is rewarded many times over by a vision of the great god, Nārāyaṇa.

Perhaps even more important than the phenomenon of ṛṣi power, at least in terms of meaning-replenishment, is the source of this power. There can be no doubt that the source of this power of the ṛṣi is, in the Nārāyaṇīya, derived from ascetic devotion. Nārāyaṇa becomes pleased with a worshipper when he devotes his whole self to the god. According to the text, only after many, many years - perhaps lifetimes - of ascetic devotion does the worshipper transcend the gunas of rajas and tamas and merge with the eternal Nārāyaṇa. The crucial nature of ascetic devotion is underscored by one of the countless myths interspersed in the myth of Nārada's journey. This particular myth flows nicely in the movement of the larger myth because it patterns Nārada's trip to Śvetadvīpa.

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The blending of tapas and bhaktī in the Nārāyaṇīya results in the appearance of an unusual phenomenon in the Vaiṣṇava stream of Hinduism -- ascetic devotion. The significance of this phenomenon for the later tradition, especially Pañcarātra, is difficult to ascertain. It seems safe to assume, however, that the later tradition was not especially moved by this 'peculiar' notion.

Ekata, Dvita and Trita were three sons of Brahma, who, seeking to obtain their "highest good" viz., a vision of Nārāyaṇa "in his own form",<sup>20</sup> journeyed to the north. They underwent tapas for one thousand years and accrued a large amount of ascetic merit. Their practice of 'ascetic severities' included standing on only one foot "like fixed stakes of wood".<sup>21</sup> Having finished their thousand year stint, they heard a voice, "deep as that of the clouds and exceedingly sweet and filling the heart with joy",<sup>22</sup> which said that they had done well and, if they wished to see Paramatma, they should travel to Śvetadvīpa where they would see men completely devoted to that god. "Go thither, ye ascetics, for there I have revealed myself!"<sup>23</sup>

Heeding this divine call, the three ṛṣis went to White Island, but on arrival they could see nothing. In fact they were blinded by the intense energy of Nārāyaṇa. As a result of this experience of blindness coupled with the grace of the great god, the three ṛṣis realized that one who had not done sufficient tapas could not easily look upon Nārāyaṇa.<sup>24</sup> Knowing this they did

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20

Ibid., p. 539.

21

Ibid.

22

Ibid.

23

Ibid., p. 540.

24

Ibid.

another one hundred years of penances after which time they could at least see the White Islanders. Each resident of Śvetadvīpa whom the three ṛṣis beheld gave off great amounts of light and each resembled "the splendours which Sūrya assumes when the time comes for the dissolution of the universe."<sup>25</sup> As they watched, the White Islanders congregated with joined hands and ran towards a bright light which suddenly appeared. The devotees began to prepare what seemed to be a sacrifice, but before the three ṛṣis could ascertain the nature of this worship, they were "deprived of vision, strength and all the senses."<sup>26</sup>

In attempting to recall their experiences they could remember only some chants in praise of Nārāyaṇa and a breeze which smelled of celestial flowers. They surmised that these occurrences indicated Paramatma had appeared, but that they had been stupified by that great god's māyā and consequently saw nothing. Ekata, Dvita and Trita then became quite anxious for they had failed to realize the object of their quest, and furthermore they had no companionship because the White Islanders had no senses (having transcended them), and thus did not recognize the three ṛṣis' presence.

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25

Ibid., p. 541.

26

Ibid.

Just as they were feeling lonely, tired out from austerities and outclassed they received further divine instruction from the celestial voice. The voice explained that the White Islanders were able to see Nārāyaṇa due to their complete devotion, and contained a rather straightforward directive:

Go hence, ye Munis, to the place whence ye have come. That great Deity is incapable of being ever seen by one who is destitute of devotion. Incapable of being seen in consequence of his dazzling effulgence, that illustrious Deity can be beheld by only those persons that in course of long ages succeed in devoting themselves wholly and solely to Him.<sup>27</sup>

The disembodied voice of Nārāyaṇa went on to restore the three ṛṣis shattered spirits by prophesying great things for them in epochs to come. The storyline then returns by roundabout route to Nārada's ongoing journey concluded earlier on.

It should be clear from the example of Nārada on one hand, and Ekata, Dvita and Trita on the other, that the intention of these stories is nothing less than a mythic rendering of the exemplary religious experience as perceived by the Nārāyaṇīya. For the Nārāyaṇīyan person, worship of the eternal Nārāyaṇa was the supreme religious activity and this activity was best carried out by long, often arduous, devotion. The paradigm of the White Islanders stood to inspire the devotee to complete and utter devotion to Nārāyaṇa.

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Ibid., p. 542.

It was only through this ascetic devotion that the worshipper could merge with the great god and achieve mokṣa. The Nārāyaṇīya, then, far from being empty due to meaning-leaks, presents a mythically revealed path to religious salvation which tingles with the healthy glow of meaning replenishment. Thus there can be little question that ascetic devotion forms the essence of semantic impletion in the Nārāyaṇīya.

While we have suggested cosmic reasons for the semantic fluctuations within the Nārāyaṇīya, the full implication of shifting perceptions of the World can only be envisioned in light of both meaning leakiness and replenishment. As noted earlier, Jensen has pointed out the correlation between semantic depletion and a change in Worldview, suggesting that the divine twins, myth and ritual, do not come into question unless a fundamental change in the perception of the World has occurred. With this shift comes a myriad of changes in man's orientation to all facets of reality. It is our contention that to fully understand such a shift, both the World left and the World gained must be perceived. To this end both semantic depletion and semantic impletion must be considered. Within the Nārāyaṇīya the shift in Worldview is still flowing, with the result that a certain ambiguity clouds the text from time to time. Hopefully the metaphors of meaning-leakiness and replenishment have

served to seed these confusing clouds, precipitating a fertilizing rain of understanding.

An exploration of this shift in Worldview is perhaps the only way to stave off drowning in a sea of over-blown stylistic device. The Worldview which is being implemented in the Nārāyaṇīya seems decisively more world rejecting than the Worldview being depleted. Some relatively world rejecting qualities have emerged in the truncated description of the White Islanders already given. For example the exemplary devotees have transcended the gunas of rajas and tamas, the two most this-worldly components of earth-stuff. Similarly the White Islanders have no senses which are open to this world. They have closed off the input from this world in order to perceive the divine with greater clarity.

This world-rejecting quality, of course, is not bounded by the Nārāyaṇīya. Many parts of the great tradition in India reflect variations of this vision of the World. Perhaps the clearest delineation of world rejection occurs in Jainism - especially as manifested in the Jaina saint, the Tīrtaṅkara. The Jaina notions of the World and the means of escaping this world are complex and subtle, thus any short description which appears here is bound to be oversimplified. Beginning with this disclaimer, it seems possible to see at the center of the Jaina notion of release the freeing of the jiva from the constraints of this world. These constraints are

understood to be strands made up of "the accumulated filth of  
<sup>29</sup>  
 karmas", which hold the jiva in the material body and thus in  
 this world. Karma is accumulated by any action of attachment in  
 this world. Thus the Jaina ascetic attempts to avoid the jiva-  
 binding tug of karma by shutting out this world:

Hence the saint completely controls the five senses. . . .  
 The ascetic, thus, refuses to be seduced by the pleasant-  
 ness and unpleasantness of the sensuous objects. He  
 witnesses all the objects of the senses in their meta-  
 physical perspective, and regards them as . . . ontologically  
 foreign to the nature of the real self.<sup>30</sup>

Actually the Jaina list of ascetic vows, duties and practices is  
 quite long, and a thorough study would be too long and tangential  
 in the context of this study. In the interest of concise clarity,  
 then, a brief look at the exemplary Jaina ascetic might be in order.

Unfortunately detailed descriptions of the Tīrtaṅkara do  
<sup>31</sup>  
 not abound, but this textual lack is more than made up for by  
 the wealth of sculptural renderings of these great teachers. The

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29

Kamal Chand Sogani, Ethical Doctrines in Jainism (Scholapur:  
 Lalchand Hirachand Doshi, 1967), p. 142.

30

Ibid., p. 136.

31

I have no doubt that good descriptions of Tīrtaṅkaras  
 exist, however I could not find any in translated Jaina scriptures.  
 Of the information I have discovered much of it contradicts in  
 detail, while agreeing in substance with the sculpted Tīrtaṅkara.  
 Most of this textual detail comes from Hermann Jacobi, transl.,  
Jaina Sutras, part I, Sacred Books of the East, vol. 22 (Delhi:  
 Motilal Banarsidass, 1968), a section entitled "Lives of the Jinas"  
 pp. 218-285. Here we find that while motionlessness (Mahavira in  
 the womb, p. 249) and control of the senses (Parsva, p. 272) are  
 important, the Tīrtaṅkara's noteworthy characteristics include his  
 houselessness, his removal of all his body hair by yanking it out  
 (continued)

two most striking traits which these depictions convey are motionless-ness and purity. The statues of the Tīrtañkaras are usually chiseled out of white marble which apparently causes them to shine slightly as if with inner divine light.<sup>32</sup> The images are often rendered standing in a rigid, arms-to-sides immobile position, while seeds germinate and vines creep up their legs. This stiff, erect standing position is called kāyotsarga - 'dismissing the body'.<sup>33</sup> It is from this posture, or alternately a more yoga-like sitting position, that the jiva of the saint is released from its bodily and worldly restraints. The following composite portrayal, consistent with textual and artistic depictions of the Tīrtañkara, demonstrates the rich mythic quality which reveals this world-rejecting asceticism:

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31 (continued)

usually in five handfuls, and his release, experienced at the moment of death, occurring after a fast, while the saint is either sitting or squatting (not standing), usually under a tree.

32

Examples of these sculptures are included in Heinrich Zimmer, The Art of Indian Asia, (New York: Bollingen, 1960), v. 2, plates numbered 245, 247, 389, 394 and 395. Also Heinrich Zimmer, Philosophies of India, ed. Joseph Campbell, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), plate number VIII.

33

Zimmer, Art, v. 1, p. 1333.

it is said of . . . [the Tīrtaṅkara] that his body is "of a miraculous beauty and of a miraculously pure fragrance. It is not subject to disease, and is devoid of perspiration as well as of all the uncleanness originating from the process of digestion." It is a body akin to those of the gods, who do not feed on gross food, do not perspire, and never know fatigue. "The breath of the Tīrtaṅkaras is like the fragrance of water lilies; their blood is white, like milk fresh from the cow." Hence they are of the hue of alabaster - not yellow, rosy, or darkish, like people whose veins are filled with blood that is red. "And their flesh is devoid of the smell of flesh."<sup>34</sup>

When Nārada first views Śvetadvīpa from the summit of Mount Meru, the Nārāyaṇīya prepares its audience for what Nārada will find there by providing a description of the White Islanders. Nārada later duplicates this early description nearly word for word when speaking of the two ṛṣis, Nara and Nārāyaṇa. These two descriptions are remarkable not only because they hint at an identity between exemplary devotee and object of devotion (Nārāyaṇa), but they also contain many similarities with the above perceptions of the Jaina Tīrtaṅkaras. The first description in the Nārāyaṇīya is credited to "the learned".<sup>35</sup> According to what 'the learned say',

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34

Zimmer, Philosophies, p. 209, the quoted material apparently all comes from Helmuth von Glasenapp, Der Jainismus, Eine indische Erlösungsreligion, Berlin, 1925, p. 252.

35

Mhb, PCR, v. 10, p. 534.

The denizens of that realm have no senses. They live without taking food of any kind. Their eyes are winkless. They always emit excellent perfumes. Their complexions are white. They are cleansed of every sin. They blast the eyes of those sinners that look at them. Their bones and bodies are hard as thunder. They regard honour and dishonour in the same light. They all look as if they are of celestial origin. Besides, all of them are endued with auspicious marks and great strength. Their heads seem to be like umbrellas. Their voices deep like that of the clouds. Each of them has four mushkas [testicles]. The soles of their feet are marked by hundreds of lines. They have sixty teeth all of which are white (and large), and eight smaller ones. They have many tongues.<sup>36</sup>

The most striking similarities are the whiteness of Tīrtaṅkara image and White Islander and the absence of 'useless' senses in each case. Neither Tīrtaṅkara nor White Islander had great need for food - the former fasted prior to and during the most sacred times. Each emitted 'excellent perfumes' instead of perspiration and both exemplary ascetics appeared god-like. And the Tīrtaṅkara, like the White Islander in his way, viewed 'honour and dishonour' as alien to the jiva. Much that remains of the description of the White Islanders - the auspicious marks, deep, cloud-like voices, lines on the soles of their feet - correspond to the image of the eternal Nārāyaṇa and his two ṛṣi avatars Nara and Nārāyaṇa. On another occasion Nārada describes the eternal Nārāyaṇa as "practising

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36

Ibid., pp. 534-535. The rather 'earthly' characteristic of possessing four testicles may signify the great capacity which these ascetics have for storing sperm and thus sexual energy - energy which, through yoga, might be transformed into mental energy.

37

Ibid., p. 593.

penances . . . standing on one foot." This posture is reminiscent of some Tīrtañkaras standing motionless on one foot oblivious to their surroundings.

This wealth of similarities is, of course, not accidental. However, while an interpretation which argues for 'borrowing' across traditions is quite plausible, it is not helpful in this study for two reasons. First and most importantly, these mythic correspondences are significant here not because they might establish syncretistic priorities, but rather because they point to a more fundamental likeness - a similar vision of the World. Secondly the correspondences are not clear enough to say with any conviction that, for example, the White Islanders' sweet smell came from an ascetic exemplar in the Jaina tradition. Such conclusive statements presuppose a neatness which these correspondences 'mess up' at every opportunity. To demonstrate such an interpretive ambush one need only look as far as the Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad where some of the fruits of yoga are listed.

Lightness, healthiness, steadiness,  
Clearness of countenance and pleasantness of voice,  
Sweetness of odor, and scanty excretions -  
These, they say, are the first stage in the progress  
of Yoga.<sup>39</sup>

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38

Ibid., p. 594.

39

Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad: 11, 2, 13, Robert Hume's translation.

The White Islanders' umbrella-headedness provides a further deterrent to the would be connective-historian. Nārada describes the heads of Nara and Nārāyaṇa as 'large and round, resembling open umbrellas'<sup>40</sup>. This open umbrella is suggestive of the snake shield which protects the head of the Tīrtāṅkara, Parśva.<sup>41</sup> This sort of snake shield, however, is certainly not unique to Parśva.<sup>42</sup> The Buddha is often depicted with his naga protectors, and indeed Viṣṇu himself, reclining on the cosmic serpent, may appear to have a naga-umbrella sort of head.<sup>43</sup> This wealth of umbrella-sources may suggest more about the relationship of superwise serpents to wisdom-seeking ascetics in the great tradition, than it does about ascetics and Worldview.<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless we again have an example of mythic depiction drawing on a larger tradition which generally tends towards world rejection.

The significance of this raft of mythic correspondences between the White Islanders and the Jaina Tīrtāṅkaras for this

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Mhb, PCR, v. 10, p. 539.

41

Zimmer, Art, v. 1, plate number B2c.

42

Zimmer, Philosophies, plate number IV.

43

Zimmer, Art, vol. 2, plate numbers 110, 111, 122, 127.

44

It should be noted here that it is remotely possible that the umbrella of the umbrella-headed ascetics is understood to be vertical rather than horizontal as I suppose. If this is the case, then rather than suggesting nagas, the umbrella would suggest the white umbrella which has been the symbol of kingly authority in India since ancient times; cf. D. MacKenzie Brown, The White Umbrella: Indian Political Thought from Manu to Gandhi, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1959).

study is that these two manifestations of 'exemplary ascetic' must reflect a similar Worldview in order that these similarities exist at all. Furthermore this similar vision of the World ultimately rejects the importance of this material world for another sphere of reality far more sacred, and only attainable through ascetic means.

The certainty of this interpretation becomes all the more striking when the Nārāyaṇīyan Worldview is contrasted to the early Vedic Worldview discussed earlier. Central to this early Vedic vision of the World was the notion that sacrificial rituals, such as the agnicayana, aśvamedha and rājasūya, were necessary to the maintenance of the three worlds. Whether the specific understanding was that the sacrifice restored the exhausted Prajāpati or nourished the order-keeping gods with Indra at their head, the most fundamental consideration was the re-establishment or maintenance of the World. This very basic consideration presupposed that it was worthwhile to maintain the world in and of itself. Through the doing of sacrifice, this world was affirmed. Within this vision sacrifice was performed as the supreme sacred act, not as the secondary religious function necessary so that men might have a place from which to attain release.

In the Nārāyaṇīya, under the slow change of Worldview, sacrifice was understood in precisely the latter instance. The highest sacred act was not sacrifice, but rather ascetic devotion to Nārāyaṇa.

If one's devotion to Nārāyaṇa were complete and total, then he might become like the exemplar White Islander, transcend the gunas of rajas and tamas and merge with great god. The step-by-step process which makes up this journey to the eternal Nārāyaṇa was revealed to Nārada by the two ṛṣis, Nara and Nārāyaṇa. The path to divine merger with the great god, said the ṛṣis, begins with Sūrya who is the door through which the supreme ascetic must pass. There his body is annihilated by the fire and he becomes invisible,<sup>45</sup> having been reduced to miniscule atoms. In this form he begins to enter into Nārāyaṇa who lives at the center of the sun. First the ascetic devotee enters into Aniruddha and in so doing becomes mind alone. Then he enters Pradyumna and then Saṅkarṣana and finally into Paramatma, who is Kṣetrarajña, who is Vasudeva, who<sup>46</sup> is the eternal Nārāyaṇa.

By experiencing mokṣa in this way the ascetic exactly reverses the process of creation. A skeletal version of the process of creation is revealed to Nārada by no greater authority than the eternal Nārāyaṇa, and he, after all, should know. Nārāyaṇa begins his brief outline quite naturally with himself, using the name of Kṣetrarajña. The process continues "from Saṅkarshana arises

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A significant parallel to this sun as doorway to mokṣa may be found in the Chandogya Upaniṣad, 3.3.1 - 3.11.5, and 8.6 (Hume, *op.cit.*, pp. 203-207, and p. 267f.).

46

*Mhb*, PCR, v. 10, p. 596.

Praddyumna who is called 'He that is born as Mind'. From Praddyumna is He who is Aniruddha.<sup>47</sup> And from Aniruddha the rest of creation flows. The steps of creation are exactly reversed in the steps to salvation.<sup>48</sup>

This reversal process symbolizes the rolling back of the world by the ascetic devotee. By performing severe austerities in honour of the eternal Nārāyaṇa, the best of ascetics can transcend step by step the process which set this world in motion, and thereby can escape all that changes in the spinning dance of time. A fundamental presupposition of this understanding of salvation entails a vision of the World which saw this earth-ball as a place of secondary import, significant only insofar as it served as a preparation for the path to the eternal Nārāyaṇa. And according to the Nārāyaṇīya, undertaking this preparation was the supreme sacred act -- the highest form of worship.

In conclusion, the Nārāyaṇīya reveals itself to be a ledger of change. The slip 'n slide and flux 'n flow of the crazy dancers, ritual and myth, are entries in that ledger. The semantic depletion of Soma, Indra and the sacrificial ritual can be traced in the text, as can the semantic impletion of ascetic devotion. Both these processes mark a ponderous re-evaluation of the Hindu sacred vision in light of an equally profound change in Worldview that began many hundreds of years before.

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47

Ibid., p. 553.

48

Private communication from David Kinsley provided this insight.

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