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Eaters, Food, and Social Hierarchy in Ancient India

A Dietary Guide to a Revolution of Values

Brian K. Smith

IN THE MOST ANCIENT texts of India, power and dominance were unabashedly embraced and unashamedly displayed—in the “religious” sphere of ritual no less than in more “secular” domains. The Vedic ideology Sylvain Lévi once called “brutal” and “materialistic” (Lévi:9) is nowhere more brutally and materialistically articulated than in the discourse concerning “food” and “eaters.” As one text succinctly puts it, “The eater of food and food indeed are everything here” (SB 11.1.6.19), and what might appear as a culinary metaphor was really meant as a descriptive account of the natural world organized into a hierarchically ordered food chain. The later Indian image of ungoverned life reverting to the “law of the fishes” (bigger fish eat littler fish) has its roots in this Vedic vision. But in the older literature the harsh reality of a dog-eat-dog world was not contrasted to a more easily digestible ideal or a soteriological alternative (i.e. *moksa* or “liberation”). In the Veda, violence and power—that is, power *over* another, the power the eater has over food—were celebrated on their own terms.¹

“What we in Europe, in the classical period, called ‘the chain of being,’ ” observes Francis Zimmermann (1), “is presented in India as a sequence of foods.” Nature in the Veda was regarded as a hierarchically ordered set of Chinese boxes, or better, Indian stomachs. And as we shall see in this article, the rather basic and literal description of the world endlessly divided into food and eaters of food was also applied in a seemingly more figurative way to the interrelations between the classes

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¹I am indebted to those who responded to a verbal presentation of large parts of this article, delivered at Cornell University, Oct. 20, 1989 (particularly Daniel Gold, Christopher Minkowski, and Peggy Egnor). I am also grateful to Katherine Fleming, Bruce Lincoln, Wendy Doniger, and the anonymous reader for JAAR for helpful comments on earlier drafts.

in the social world: the higher orders “live on” the lower. But it may be just a prejudice to regard as symbolic the image of the lower classes as “food” for their superiors. Perhaps here too we are not dealing with metaphor but rather with an accurate, if unadorned, depiction of actual interpersonal, social, political, and economic relations within any society.

Although the Veda was certainly composed by the priestly and intellectual class (i.e., the Brahmins), the ideology propounded in it is shot through with the martial values ordinarily associated with warriors (i.e., the Kshatriyas). The texts depict a life where I gain only at your loss, my prosperity entails your ruin, my continued existence depends on your death, my eating requires that you become food.² It is an order of things seemingly most advantageous to the one with the greatest physical strength and military might—the biggest fish, the top dog.

Nevertheless, the Brahmin authors did manage to present a rationale for their own social superiority even under these less than optimal circumstances, as they have done ever after. But perhaps the claim for Brahmin precedence became most persuasive only when there arose post- and anti-Vedic principles concerning food, eating, and social hierarchy.

II

According to the Veda, one’s diet was overdetermined. Eating was simultaneously an act of nourishment, a display of wealth and status, and a demonstration of domination over that which was eaten. In all cases, to eat one’s proper food was to participate in a natural and cosmic order of things.³

Food was, of course, understood to be the source of physical survival and bodily strength; indeed, food was synonymous with life itself.⁴

²The best analysis of this “agonistic” mentality may be found in the work of Jan Heesterman (1985), to whom I am greatly indebted for the interpretation presented here (see also Smith 1988). Heesterman, however, usually places unbridled agonism in a hypothetical “preclassical” age. With the dawn of the “classical” period and the redaction of the Veda as we know it, agonism was supposedly more or less systematically eliminated. The argument set forth here assumes that much of what Heesterman might regard as anachronistic survivals of the “preclassical” period is central to the worldview of “classical” Vedism as it is represented in the Veda.

³The distinction drawn by Jonathan Z. Smith between “food” (“a phenomenon characterized by limitation”) and “cuisine” (“a phenomenon characterized by variegation”) is, of course, applicable to the Vedic context too; the former is one entailment of the notion of “proper food.” A detailed analysis along these lines lies beyond the scope of this article, however.

⁴“Food is life (*āyus*),” SB 9.2.3.16. See also PB 12.4.20 and SB 10.3.5.6 (“By food one is born, and

Food was frequently identified with life sap (*rasa*, e.g. KB 2.7), vital strength (*ūrj*, ŚB 9.3.3.10; PB 8.8.19) and vigor or *vāja*.⁵ As the concentrated core of vitality, food also had medicinal and restorative value. In the beginning, when the creator god Prajāpati (the “lord of creatures”) was fatigued from fighting off evil and death, he asked for food. “Therefore even now when one who is afflicted gets better he asks for food. Then they are hopeful for him [thinking], ‘He asks for food; he will live’ ” (ŚB 8.5.2.1).⁶

Secondly, the possession of food in ancient India (no less than in any other time and place) was an irreducible marker of worldly wealth and well-being. A man is “indeed successful whose old supply of food is still undiminished while new food is coming in. He, indeed, possesses abundant food” (ŚB 1.6.4.14). Food was thus often equated with wealth (*śrī*), fame (*yaśas*), and other signs of status and material success.⁷

Thirdly, consuming food was regarded as an exercise of power in its most naked form. Eating was both the source and proof of virility, of *vīrya*; conversely, emaciation was juxtaposed with fear (ŚB 1.6.4.4). One’s food “is” one’s virility (ŚB 2.2.1.12; 12.2.2.7-8), and therefore to take away the food of another is to take away the rival’s masculinity. Adding insult to (mortal) injury, the appropriation of the opponent’s nourishment is, in effect, castration: “It was the year, virility, and the eating of food that they [viz., the gods] wrenched away from them [the demons]. He who knows this appropriates from his rival the year [i.e., life], virility, and the eating of food” (PB 21.13.4-5). An “eater of food” is a ruler and conquerer, and possessing food is often depicted as “defeating” and “gaining supremacy over” it: “He [Prajāpati] obtained supremacy over all food. Those who perform this [rite] obtain supremacy over all food” (PB 23.14.3).

by food one is propelled.”). For food as *pitu* (“food” in the sense of “nourishment”), consult ŚB 1.9.2.20 and 7.2.1.15.

⁵“Vigor is food. . . . For when there is food, cow, horse, and man are vigorous.” PB 13.9.13; 15.11.12; JB 3.298. For food identified with *vāja*. See also ŚB 1.4.1.9; 5.1.4.3ff; 5.1.5.17,26; 7.3.1.46; 7.5.1.18; 9.3.4.1; and PB 18.6.8. For the frequent identification of the sacrifice called “*Vājapeya*” and “food and drink” (*annapeya*), see e.g. ŚB 5.1.3.3; 5.2.1.13; and 5.2.2.1 (“for he who offers the *vājapeya* wins food, *vājapeya* being the same as *annapeya*”).

⁶For the relation between food and medicine, see also ŚB 7.2.2.2; PB 4.10.1; TB 1.2.6.1; PB 1.8.7 (food as “pain-allaying” and strengthening); and Thite (125 ff.). Cf. the text at AitB 5.27 where food is identified with “reparation” of ritual error (*prayascitti*). The sacrifice, like the creator god and his microcosmic representative, man, is also healed by means of food.

⁷“In the beginning Prajāpati, desiring offspring, offered this sacrifice [thinking], ‘May I have many offspring and domestic animals. May I obtain wealth. May I become famous. May I become an eater of food’ ” (ŚB 2.4.4.1). For food as wealth or *śrī*, see also ŚB 1.2.2.3; 8.6.2.1; 13.2.9.4.

Food was therefore not just a physiological requirement or standard of economic status; it was also the name for losers in life's deadly game of "eat or be eaten." The nutritional chain, comprised of an endless series of food and eaters, exactly describes the order of the species. At the top of the Vedic "natural" world were supernatural (*sic*) entities who feed on sacrificial oblations that were explicitly represented as substitutes for the human sacrificers who are next in line on the menu (Smith and Doniger). Humans eat animals, the next lowest life-form, and animals eat plants,⁸ which in turn, "eat" rain or "the waters" from which all food is ultimately generated.⁹

Although the essence of food is said to be "invisible" (ŚB 8.5.4.4), its visible manifestation is all the inhabitants of nature. Each entity is interlinked with others in such a way that every living being is regarded as the regenerative sustenance for the one on the next rung of the ladder. Food is what eaters live on in all senses of the phrase, and "everything here lives on food" (ŚB 7.5.1.20). Everything here also dies as food. The nutritional chain of entrées was envisioned as a closed circle of life and death, a cosmic *maṇḍala* of recirculating foodstuffs. "Those which are found on earth live by food alone, and in the end they return to it," it is said in a Upanishad (TU 2.2). And humans are, of course, not exempt from nature's cycle. We are all also destined to become food. We are fodder for Mṛtyu, death personified (a.k.a. "the Grim Reaper," see e.g. ŚB 10.1.3.1; 10.4.3.10).

In Vedic texts, the sacrifice plays the pivotal role in this perpetual redistribution of food. The sacrifice was the dining hall of the gods; humans fed the divinities in the expectation that the sated diners would, in turn, feed the universe (in the form of rain in many formulations). But the site of the ritual, by virtue of *bandhus* or homologies, was itself a

⁸Note that carnivorous animals (= "wild" animals in Vedic classification schemes) cannot be accounted for within this version of the food chain. Bruce Lincoln (1986: 200) observes that "Once wild animals are excluded from consideration, the groupings of fluids, plants, animals, and humans into relations of eater and eaten assume a clear and elegant form . . . When one introduces wild animals—that is, carnivores—into this system, the system collapses, for such animals not only eat meat (the prerogative of humans) while scorning plants (the proper food of animals), they even go so far as to eat humans. Wild beasts thus not only are a physical threat, but also pose a threat to the structures of thought appropriate to cultured existence."

⁹"For water is indeed food. Therefore when water comes to this world, food is produced here" (ŚB 2.1.1.3). Cf. ŚB 8.6.1.20; TB 3.2.8.1-3; PB 11.8.11-12; and KB 3.4. Alternatively, the gods in the beginning made it rain and "as many drops fell down, that many plants were born" as food for animals (TB 2.1.1.1). For the cycle, see e.g. Manu 3.76: "A burnt oblation cast properly into the fire approaches the sun; rain is created from the sun, from rain comes food, and from that, offspring."

microcosm of the natural world as a whole.¹⁰ Manipulation of the ritual counterparts in the course of the sacrifice could therefore be viewed as an effective and efficient means for directly influencing natural prototypes (Smith 1989a: esp. 73-81). Indeed, the sacrifice itself was regarded as the original source of all being, the locus of the origin of all food; the sacrifice therefore “is” food (ŚB 12.8.1.2). Sacrifice, cooking, feeding, and eating were close kin in Vedism,¹¹ and, as we shall see, the first term in the series no less than those following was inextricably connected to the power and violence that characterized the Vedic perspective.

Offerings to the gods of one or another of the oblation substances that are made to represent “all food”¹² (as well as the sacrificer himself) are returned to humans as the nutritive substance is transmuted through nature’s circuitous channels. The cosmic force of the two offerings of milk poured into the fire at the twice-daily Agnihotra ritual, for example, sets into motion a chain reaction. And in each instance the natural phenomenon so incited is represented as a reduplicated version of the original impetus, the sacrifice:

Those two libations, when offered, ascend. They enter the atmosphere and make the atmosphere their offering (*āhavanīya*) fire; the wind is the fuel, and the rays of the sun become a resplendent libation. They satiate the atmosphere and rise up from it. They enter the sky, and make the sky their offering fire; the sun is the fuel, and the moon becomes a resplendent libation. They satiate the sky and return from there. They enter this [world] and make this [world] their offering fire; the fire is the fuel, and the plants become a resplendent libation. They satiate this [world] and rise up from it. They enter man, and make his mouth their offering fire; his tongue is the fuel, and food becomes a resplendent libation. They satiate man. And for him who eats food knowing this, the Agnihotra is, in effect, offered. They rise up from there. They enter

¹⁰See, e.g., AitB 5.28: “The sacrificial post is yonder sun, the altar the earth, the sacrificial strew is the plants, the kindling wood is the trees, the sprinkling waters are the waters, the enclosing sticks are the quarters.” The particular homologies proffered in this passage are very common in Vedic texts.

¹¹The identification of ordinary eating and drinking with the sacrifice (the stomach envisioned as an internal sacrificial fire) is already found at ŚB 10.5.4.12 where what man drinks is equated with sacrificial oblations and what he eats is identified with the fuel for the sacrificial fire. Cf. ŚB 11.1.7.2. This theme recurs frequently in later texts. For the intricacies of cooking, eating and sacrifice in Vedism, consult Charles Malamoud (1975); compare also the Greek data presented in Detienne and Vernant (1989).

¹²For example, milk (ŚB 2.5.1.6), soma (ŚB 3.9.1.8; 4.6.5.5; 9.5.1.66; KB 9.6), and sacrificial animals (ŚB 3.2.1.12; 5.2.1.16; 7.5.2.42; 8.3.1.13; 8.3.3.2ff; 8.5.2.1; 8.6.2.1,13; 9.2.3.40; etc.) are so designated as “all food.”

woman and make her vagina their offering fire; her vulva (*dhāarakā*) is the fuel—it is called the vulva because by it Prajāpati bore (*dhārayām cakāra*) creatures—and semen becomes a resplendent libation. They satiate woman. And for him who knowing this comes to her in order to make love, the Agnihotra is, in effect, offered. The son who is born from that rises up in the world. (ŚB 11.6.2.6-10)

Sacrifice, the circulation of food, and human procreation are here conflated in a way that prefigures the doctrine of transmigration as it was articulated in the early Upanishads (Smith 1989a:204-207; cf. Tull). In those texts too, the universe is depicted as a series of interdependent cosmic sacrifices that end with the conception and birth of the human being. But the recirculating entity propelled by the sacrifices of man and nature is not food, quite, but rather the human soul. From the cremation fire, into which the body is “offered” and “fed,” the deceased begins a universal tour, during which it undergoes some of the same transmigrations that the older texts delineated for the recycling sacrificial victuals:

Those who worship in the village, concentrating on sacrifices and goods works and charity, they are born into the smoke, and from the smoke into the night, and from the night into the other fortnight [i.e., that of the waning moon], and from the other fortnight into the six months when the sun moves south. They do not reach the year. From these months they go to the world of the fathers, and from the world of the fathers to space, and from space to the moon. That is king Soma. That is the food of the gods. The gods eat that. When they have dwelt there for as long as there is a remnant [of their merit], then they return along that very same road that they came along, back into space; but from space they go to wind, and when one has become the wind he becomes smoke, and when he has become smoke he becomes mist; when he has become mist, he becomes a cloud, and when he has become a cloud, he rains. These are then born here as rice, barley, plants, trees, sesame plants, and beans. It is difficult to move forth out of this condition; but if someone eats him as food and then emits him as semen, he becomes that creature’s semen and is born. (ChU 5.10.3-6, trans. in O’Flaherty 1989:36-7; cf. BAU 6.3.9ff.)

Apart from its more complex structure and subtle moral overtones,¹³

¹³The sequence the text lays out may be diagrammed as human > smoke > night > fortnight of waning moon > half-year of southerly sun (six months) > world of fathers > space > moon (= soma = food of gods) > space > wind > smoke > mist > cloud > rain > plants > semen > animal or human. As for the moral overtones, in addition to the fact that the whole structure is for those who “sacrifice and do good works” and not for those liberated from all rebirth, the text also

this cycle of rebirth enunciated in the Upanishads recapitulates the cycle of food, impelled on its journey by sacrificial activity, outlined in earlier texts. As Zimmermann (2006) has written. “Food, sacrifice, and the cycle of rebirths: all belong to the same constellation of ideas.” While in the Upanishadic view it is the soul of the dead man that reappears on each table of the cosmic restaurant, in the Vedic sacrificial ideology it is a substitute that embarks on this circumambulatory feast. But in both cases, the natural world is envisioned as a kind of closed circuit that natural entities eternally traverse. And also in both cases, the process of transmutation was seen in terms of the harsh realities of life and death.

Many different realms could simultaneously be ordered by this paradigm, that is, in terms of who eats whom. The enumeration of feeders and food could take in the heavens and the earth, all the gods and their vassals:

The great one is Agni [fire] and the great one of that great one are the plants and trees, for they are his food. And the great one is Vāyu [wind] and the great one of that great one are the waters, for they are his food. And the great one is Aditya [sun] and the great one of that great one is the moon, for that is his food. And the great one is man and the great one of that great one is the animals, for they are his food. These are the four great ones, these are the four great ones of the great ones. (SB 10.3.4.4)

Fire is the eater of plants, wind of water, sun of moon, and man of animals. Divine entities, natural elements, cosmic orbs, and man and beast are all classified into eaters and food for eaters. Man’s power over the animals, and his culinary appreciation of their savoriness, is thus set in a macrocosmic context of alimentary violence—just as man’s power over his fellows is, as we shall soon see.

Another text repeats the widespread assertion that the sun is the eater of the moon, goes on to declare that fire is the eater of oblations,¹⁴ and then equates these cosmic and sacrificial truisms with the inner workings of human physiology. The passage begins with the observation that “there is this pair, the eater and food” (compare this with the statement cited above that “The eater of food and food are everything

notes that those in the process of transmigrating stay in the moon “for as long as there is a remnant [of their merit].”

¹⁴Because of the sacrificial ideology whereby offerings in the fire were regarded as food for the gods in general and Agni in particular, which they returned to earth (in the form of rain, plentiful harvests, and general aid), Agni is designated both as the eater or “lord” of food (e.g. AitB 1.8; 5.25; 7.12; SB 8.6.3.5; 10.1.4.13; 11.4.3.8; cf. PB 25.9.3) and the “bestower of food” (e.g. PB 17.9.1-3).

here"). We further learn that "when these two come together it is called the eater, and not the eaten." "Food" loses its identity when consumed by the "eater," and thus eating is appropriation, colonization.¹⁵ The text continues:

The eater is this Agni [fire]. Whatever they put into him are his deposits, and these deposits (*āhitis*) are mysteriously oblations (*āhutis*), for the gods love what is mysterious. And the eater is Aditya [the sun], and his deposits [i.e. oblations] are the moon, for the moon is put into the sun. So much for divinity. Now as to that which relates to the self. The eater is breath, and its deposits are food, for the food is put into the breath. (SB 10.6.2.24)

A similar comparison between human physiology and extra-human natural processes is embedded in a myth of origins that simultaneously accounts for the lunar cycle and hunger pangs in the stomach:

[Upon being defeated by the god Indra] he [the serpent demon Vṛtra] said [to Indra], 'Do not throw [your thunderbolt] at me. You are now what I [was before, i.e. an eater of food]. Just divide me up, but do not let me become annihilated.' He [Indra] said, 'You shall be my food.' 'So be it.' He then divided him in two. From that [part] of his which belonged to Soma he made the moon, and that which was demonic he put into these creatures as their stomach. Thus they say, 'Vṛtra was once an eater of food, and Vṛtra is so now.' For even now, whenever that one [the moon] waxes fuller it fills itself from this world. And whenever these creatures get hungry they pay tribute to this Vṛtra, the stomach. Whoever knows that Vṛtra is an eater of food becomes himself an eater of food. (ŚB 1.6.3.17)

The defeated demon is split in two. One half becomes the moon, which is simultaneously "food" for Indra and the eater of food from "this world" during its waxing fortnight. The other half becomes a consumer in a different guise, the human stomach, as anatomy recapitulates astronomy.

In a variant account of this tale, the parallels drawn from the cosmic phenomenon to the human situation are not physiological but sociological and political. Just as the conquered Vṛtra (the moon) is "devoured" by the victorious Indra (the sun), so is the sacrificer's enemy "swallowed up" by one who "knows this:"

Now the one who burns up there [the sun] is no other than Indra, and

¹⁵See also ŚB 10.4.1.1 where it is noted that "food, when enveloped within the body, becomes the body itself."

that moon is no other than Vṛtra. But the former is by birth the enemy of the latter. Therefore, although this one [the moon, Vṛtra] once rose at a great distance from him [the sun, Indra; i.e. before the full moon night], he now swims towards him and enters into his open mouth. Having swallowed him [the moon], he [the sun] rises, and that [moon] is not seen either in the east or in the west. He who knows this swallows his hateful enemy, and of him they say 'He alone exists, his rivals do not exist.' (ŚB 1.6.4.18-19)

The eater of food, whether it be Indra, the sun, or the sacrificer, completely "swallows up" the "food" or identity of that which is "eaten" (Vṛtra, the moon, or the rival). Being consumed is again equated with annihilation. But, on the other hand, food really cannot wholly disappear simply because it is eaten; it must reappear to be eaten again. Food travels through a circuit, a kind of culinary "eternal return." The complex system of recycling sketched out above may also be viewed in the very simple terms of power relations: food endlessly comes back to the eater, the exploited always returns to the exploiter. The second half of the lunar cycle is thus also accounted for in mythological, astronomical, alimentary, and sociological terms. Indra,

having sucked him [i.e. Vṛtra the moon] dry, spits him out. And the latter, emptied out, becomes visible in the west. He swells up again; he again swells up in order to become the food of that one [the sun]. If one's hateful enemy thrives by trade or through any other means, he continually thrives in order to become food for him who knows this. (ŚB 1.6.4.20)

Here is the Vedic "Catch 22" whereby even when one's enemy prospers, even when "food" replenishes itself, it does so only to once more become nourishment for the victor, the feeder. Food may circulate from the cosmic point of view, but from a hierarchical social perspective it flows (or should flow) only in one direction: from the exploited to the exploiter, from the other to the self.

Eating is, then, both the destruction of food and the continual reappropriation of it as it ever regenerates itself. Eating and killing were two sides of the same coin. But eating was also frankly regarded as the perpetual reenactment of the defeat and subjugation of one's rival. Food was not neutral, and feeding was not understood to be a regrettable but necessary sacrifice of the other for one's own survival. One's cuisine was one's adversary, and eating was the triumphant overcoming of the natural and social enemy, of those one hates and is hated by:

For the gods then made food of whomever hated them, and of whomever they hated, and put them into him [Agni, the fire]. With that they

pleased him, and that became his food, and he burned up the evil of the gods. And in like manner does the sacrificer now make food of whom-ever hates him, and of whomever he hates, and put them into him [Agni]. With that one pleases him, and that becomes his food, and he burns up the sacrificer's evil. (SB 6.6.3.11)

Consumption was, in sum, the ultimate victory of the consumer over the consumed, of the victor over the vanquished, and of the self over the rival. Eating and winning were fully equatable, as were being eaten and losing. Put simply, the stronger consumes the food of the weaker (SB 5.5.4.8), and such a pattern was not liable to attenuation or modification due to "fairness" or "ethical" concerns. Given this depiction of eating as entailing the defeat and humiliation of the consumed, the fear of revenge, the anxiety that the food one devours in this world will become one's eater after death, was inevitable.¹⁶ But the texts never fail to provide the ritual methodology for preventing such reciprocity (e.g., KB 11.3; JB 1.26). The possibility for equal exchange is short-circuited in the interests of the overwhelming efficacy of the sacrifice and of a fixed hierarchy of invariable, "natural" power relations.

III

Thomas Szasz once wrote that "In the animal kingdom, the rule is, eat or be eaten: in the human kingdom, define or be defined" (Szasz: 200). In Vedism, the two clauses of Szasz's aphorism were collapsed; social classes were defined in terms of eaters and food. A natural world categorized into dominating feeders and dominated food was reprojected as the paradigm for the "natural" order of the social world. We have witnessed in texts already cited some instances of the ways in which accounts of natural phenomena, like the waxing and waning of the moon, shade into discussions about how to vanquish one's enemy, how to attain the victory of the feeder over the food. In yet another account

¹⁶See ŚB 12.9.1.1; KB 11.3; and the myth of Bhrgu's journey to various worlds where plants and animals eat humans (SB 11.6.1.1-13; JB 1.42-44). See also Lanman's pun on Manu 5.55 and Mbh 13.117.34 where it is explained why meat (*mamsa*) is so designated (because he (*sa*) eats me (*mām*) in the next life if I eat him here and now): "Me eat in t'other world will he, whose meat in this world eat do I." Cited in O'Flaherty (1985: 40). As Lommel (1950) has suggested, such conceptions are in line with the more general notion that conditions in the afterlife will be the opposite of those prevailing in this world. Such a conception is also manifest in the many Vedic texts that assume that the gods have customs which are the inverse of those of human beings. In sum, the fear of retribution of those (plants, animals, and humans) who are "eaten" in this life is almost certainly not stimulated out of concerns for a certain brand of "justice" or "ethics" anachronistically projected into the Veda.

of who eats whom in the natural world, the food chain is followed along its links from species to species and, like other texts cited above, shifts in the end from a natural observation to a social statement about the relations between men:

Plants and trees are food and animals are the eater, for animals eat plants and trees. Of these [animals], those who have two sets of incisors, and who are categorized in the [same] class [as that] of man are eaters of food;¹⁷ the other animals are food. They surpass the other animals, for the eater is superior to his food. He who knows this lords over his peers. (AitA 2.3.1)

The eater is superior to his food, in society as well as in nature. Some animals are like humans, that is, they are equipped with the weapons (a double set of incisors) for eating other animals. And some humans are further fortified—in this instance, with knowledge—and become dominant over other humans.

The social world, no less than the natural, is one of rulers and ruled, of consumers and consumed, of exploiters and exploited, of the strong and the weak. No text puts the case of continuity between nature and culture more starkly than Manu 5.29: “Immobile beings are the food of those which are mobile, those without teeth are the food of those with teeth, those without hands are the food of those with hands, and the cowards are the food of the brave.”

The nature of social life is described more specifically in terms of the interrelations between the social classes or *varṇas*. Society’s classes, like nature’s, are divided into eaters and food, and supposedly immutable hierarchical distinctions are drawn between the *varṇas* on this basis. The creator god Prajāpati is portrayed as manifest on earth in the form of a series of mouths: “The Brahmin is one of your mouths. With that mouth you eat Kshatriyas. With that mouth make me an eater of food. The king is one of your mouths. With that mouth you eat the Vaishyas. With that mouth make me an eater of food” (KU 2.9; cf. SānA 4.9). The hierarchical encompassment of the lower by the higher in society is here articulated in alimentary (and elementary) terms: you are more than the one you eat and less than the one by whom you are eaten.

¹⁷My translation follows the interpretation of the text first put forward by Heinrich Zimmer (1879: 74-76). For other possibilities see Keith (“Of animals, those who have teeth above and below and are formed like men . . .”), and Hanns-Peter Schmidt (1980:234) (“Of the (animals) those who have incisors in both jaws and are disposed according to the disposition of man . . .”). Compare the passage with that at Manu 5.18 where animals with one set of incisors are declared edible by humans (with some exceptions).

The Brahmins claim to be “eaters of Kshatriyas” (and everybody else) and argue for their superiority in ways we will discuss presently. For now, let it be noted that the relationship between the rulers and warriors, on the one hand, and *hoi polloi* on the other, is represented—and justified—by taking recourse to the “natural” order of things: the stronger consume the weaker in a hierarchical order conceived as a food chain.

The Vaishyas or commoners are sometimes directly equated with the animals in general, or more particularly with the domesticated animals they are charged with tending.¹⁸ As “animals,” the masses are the natural food¹⁹ and prey of the higher two classes, as well as the class held responsible for producing food, both animal and vegetable. Whereas the Brahmin is said to be “emitted” from the mouth of the creator god, and the Kshatriya from his chest and arms, the Vaishya is generated out of Prajāpati’s penis, thereby ensuring that this “food” will be ever replenishing: “Therefore the Vaishya, although devoured [by the others] does not decrease, for he was emitted from the penis. Therefore he has abundant animals. . . . Therefore he is the food of the Brahmin and the Kshatriya, for he was emitted below [them]” (PB 6.1.10; cf. RV 10.90). Or again, the Vaishyas were created out of the stomach of the creator, and “therefore they are to be eaten, for they were created from the receptacle of food” (TS 7.1.1.5). The hierarchically inferior Vaishya exists, or so it is said, solely in order to be “eaten up” by the two ruling classes.²⁰

Brahmins and Kshatriyas are thus both “eaters” of the ordinary folk. But the *viś* or “masses” are regarded as the special delicacy of the Kshatriyas who are directly above them in society’s version of nature’s food chain.²¹ “The Kshatriya is the eater, and the commoners are food,” it is

¹⁸Both connotations adhere to the word “*paśu*.” See, e.g., ŚB 4.4.1.15-18; PB 19.16.6; and AitB 1.28.

¹⁹For Vaishyas as food, see also ŚB 2.1.3.8; 3.9.1.16; 4.2.1.12; 5.1.3.3; 6.7.3.7; TB 1.7.5.2; 2.7.2.2; PB 6.6.2ff. This class is also homologically assigned the time of year that is most closely associated with the fertility of the crops, the rainy season, “for the rainy season is the *viś*, and the *viś* are food” (ŚB 2.1.3.8). For Vaishyas as animals, and therefore also “food,” consult SB 2.1.4.11ff.; 4.4.1.15ff; and AitA 5.3.2.

²⁰The Shūdras, who are created from the feet of the creator, are also food. “Therefore the Shūdra has abundant animals,” that is, this *varṇa* too is “food” for others, “but is unable to sacrifice, for he has no deity emitted along with him. Therefore he does not rise above simply the washing of feet, for from the feet he was emitted” (PB 6.1.11).

²¹For the Kshatriya as the “eater of food” in general, see TS 4.4.8.1; AV 15.8.1-3; 12.5.5-11; AitB 8.12; ŚB 8.7.1.2; 9.4.3.5; 8.7.2.2; 1.3.2.12ff. At AitB 8.7 the *ksatra* power is juxtaposed with the “eating of food,” the “sap of food” (cf. AitB 8.8), the “sap of the plants and waters,” and other comparable essences.

said in many passages. “Where there is abundant food for the eater, that kingdom is prosperous and grows.”²²

The ŚB (1.3.2.11-15) spells out some of the consequences of designating one numerically small class as the “eater” of another and much larger class. The test first constitutes the sacrificial *juhū* ladle as the analogue of “the eater,” and the *upabhr̥t* ladle as the symbol of “that which is eaten.” It then goes on to extract certain social meanings from particular ritual acts:

When he draws butter [with the spoon] four times [and places it] into the *juhū*, he makes the eater more limited and less numerous; and when he draws butter eight times [and places it] into the *upabhr̥t*, he makes that which is to be eaten more unlimited, more numerous. For there is prosperity (*samṛddha*) wherever the eater is less numerous and that which is to be eaten is more numerous. When he draws butter only four times [and places it] into the *juhū*, he nevertheless draws up a greater quantity of butter; and when he draws butter eight times [and places it] into the *upabhr̥t* he takes less butter. . . . While thus making the eater more limited and less numerous, he still puts virility and physical strength into him. . . . And while making that which is to be eaten more unlimited more numerous, he makes it impotent and weaker. Therefore a ruler who has come to dwell among unlimited commoners exploits them while just sitting in his own palace, and takes whatever he likes. . . . Now if he were to offer [the oblation] with the *upabhr̥t*, the subjects would become separated from him, and there would not be either eater or what is to be eaten. When, on the other hand, he mixes [the butter] together and offers it with the *juhū*, then the commoners pay tribute to the Kshatriya. Thus, when he draws butter [and places it] into the *upabhr̥t*, the Vaishya, being in the power of the Kshatriya, becomes one who possesses many animals. And when he mixes [the butter] together and offers it into the fire with the *juhū*, the Kshatriya says whenever he wants to, ‘Hey Vaishya, bring me whatever you have laid away!’²³

The “food” or Vaishya class is here desired to be “more unlimited, more numerous” in relation to the “eater” or Kshatriya, just as one’s enemy’s prosperity means (one hopes and ritually arranges) that there will sim-

²²SB 6.1.2.25. Cf. ŚB 3.9.1.16 and the remarkable text at PB 18.5.6 where the *viś* are said to drain out of the expelled king like the fecal matter of a man sick with diarrhoea. According to AV 15.18.1-3, the Kshatriya (*rājanya*) came into being when the creator god became impassioned (*raj*) and immediately went for the Vaishyas who were his food.

²³SB 1.3.2.12-15. For similar meanings extracted out of the same ritual act, consult also ŚB 1.5.2.1-2; 1.5.3.17-20; 1.8.2.17; and 1.8.3.5-6. Most of these comparable texts, interestingly enough, regard the *upabhr̥t* ladle (= food) not as the Vaishyas but as the enemy or rival.

ply be more for oneself to “eat.”²⁴ But the Vaishyas are also to be “weaker” than Kshatriyas to ensure that they will be infinitely exploitable. They are not to escape the ruler’s power and “separate” from him for then “there would not be either eater or what is to be eaten”—the Kshatriya would lose his “food” (meaning, among other things, the tribute the Vaishya brings him), and hierarchical distinctions would collapse. When, however, proper hierarchy is maintained the Vaishyas become wealthy in livestock and the Kshatriya’s “wealth” (“Hey Vaishya, bring me whatever you have laid away!”) remains secure.²⁵ This is, one might say, taxonomy in the interest of taxation.²⁶ The Vaishya is summarily characterized in another text as a “payer of tribute to another, one who is to be eaten by another and exploited at will” (AitB 7.29).

The people may be the food for the Kshatriyas, but the Veda also makes it clear that Brahmins are not to be “eaten.” In the consecration ceremony for a Kshatriya ruler, the officiating priest “makes all this food for him [the king]; only the Brahmin he excepts. Therefore the Brahmin is not food, for he has Soma as his king.”²⁷ The Brahmin is not to be consumed by the king, like everyone else, for his ruler is Soma, the “king” who presides over the sacrificial realm. Elsewhere we read that one who regards the Brahmin as food consumes poison (AV 5.18.4).

The social order is to replicate the natural order so as to lend to the former the prestige and authority of the latter. In both realms, the various classes are hierarchically ranked according to where they are located in a food chain that is both absolutely literal (bigger animals eat smaller ones) and to some extent figurative (the sun “eats” the moon and Kshatriyas “live on” the Vaishyas). The rank order of eaters and food in the natural world is straightforward: the physically more powerful eat the physically less powerful. And the principle supposedly holds when it comes to the social world.

But what then are we to make of the Brahmin’s claim to preeminence? On what ground can priests and intellectuals stand to justify their supremacy in a pecking order regulated by raw power?

The Veda assumes that military might is the sole preserve of the Kshatriya; the tools of coercive power, the weapons of war and violence,

²⁴See the discussion above on this Vedic “Catch 22.” Thus at ŚB 13.2.6.8 the royal sacrificer performs a rite intended to supply his subjects with abundant food and make his *viś* “eaters.”

²⁵Cf. ŚB 11.2.6.14 where the sacrificer’s offerings to gods are likened to the tribute brought to the king by the *viś*.

²⁶I owe the observation and the phrase to Norvin Hein.

²⁷SB 5.3.3.12. Cf. ŚB 5.4.2.3; AitB 7.29ff.; and KU 2.9.

were clustered in the hands of the warriors. The ideal Kshatriya is described as “an archer, a hero, and a great charioteer”²⁸ and as “one who kills his enemies and contests with rivals” (ŚB 2.1.2.17). Strong in arms and legs and fitted with armor, he is to go around performing “manly” or “heroic” deeds (TB 3.8.23.3). But the Veda also reserves sacrificial technology for the Brahmins, and certain ritual privileges provide advantages to this class in an ideology ruled by the alimentary image. As priests, they are the only ones allowed to consume the sacrificial oblations, thus putting them on a par with the gods, the supreme eaters in the cosmos.

Prajāpati emitted the sacrifice, and after the sacrifice the *brahman* power and the *kṣatra* power were emitted. After them were emitted those creatures who eat sacrificial oblations and those who do not. The Brahmins are those creatures who eat sacrificial oblations; the Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shūdras are those who do not. (AitB 7.19)

The Brahmins, as “human gods” (*manusyadevas*), are the exclusive visible eaters of sacrificial oblations, the divine cuisine. This particular perquisite can be put into play to back up the contention that the priests are feeders upon the lower social classes, including the warriors and kings who are ideally obligated to defend and provide for them. A sacrificial rule such as this one could serve the Brahmins well in staking their claim to preeminence in a world ordered by means of dietary imagery.

But the Brahmins went much further in rationalizing their claims to social superiority by reference to their monopoly of sacrificial skills. The control of a ritual sphere that had as its climax the violent death of an animal victim (or a vegetable substitute) was marketed as the control of the very process of cosmic life and death. The scene of orchestrated sacrificial violence could be favorably compared to the much more uncertain and risky, but equally deadly, power struggle in the extra-ritual world ruled by Kshatriyas.

The powers of the sacrifice are often juxtaposed or even assimilated to those of the martial arts. The specialities each of the two classes monopolizes are portrayed in one rite where two singers and lute players, one a Brahmin and the other a Kshatriya, extol the different virtues of the king who is here acting as the sacrificer:

‘Such and such sacrifices he offered, such and such he gave away!’

²⁸TS 7.5.18.1; TB 3.8.13.1; cf. VS 22.22 and ŚB 13.1.9.1-2; MS 3.12.6; JUB 1.1.4.2. See also ŚB 13.3.7.9 where the Kshatriya is supposed to be a good marksman (*ativyādhi*): and AitB 7.19 and ŚB 1.2.4.2 where the weapons of the Kshatriya (chariot, armor, bow and arrow, etc.) are listed.

[These are the topics about which] the Brahmin sings. For to the Brahmin belongs the fulfillment of wishes (*iṣṭāpūrta*). It is the fulfillment of wishes he thus bestows on him [viz., the sacrificer]. ‘Such and such a battle he fought, such and such a war he won!’ [These are the topics about which] the Kshatriya sings. For the battle is the Kshatriya’s virility. It is virility he thus bestows upon him.” (SB 13.1.5.6; cf. TB 3.9.14.1-2; SB 13.4.3.5ff)

In other instances, ritual power is more or less equated to military power. The two classes are said to possess “weapons” of very different sorts, however:

Prajāpati emitted the sacrifice, and after the sacrifice the *brahman* power and the *kṣatra* power were emitted. . . . The sacrifice departed from them. The *brahman* power and the *kṣatra* power followed after it, each with their own weapons. The weapons of the *brahman* are the weapons of the sacrifice; those of the *kṣatra* are the horse chariot, armor, and bow and arrow. The sacrifice escaped, recoiling, from the *kṣatra*’s weapons, and the *kṣatra* did not catch it. The *brahman* followed it, caught it, and restrained it, standing from above. Caught, restrained from above, and recognizing its own weapons, [the sacrifice] returned to the brahman. Therefore, even now the sacrifice finds support in the *brahman* power and in the Brahmins, (AitB 7.19)

The Brahmins stand apart from all others on the basis of their sacrificial privileges. They are the class that has the exclusive right to partake of the oblations in the ritual, and while the Kshatriyas may have the weapons of war it is only the Brahmins who possess the “weapons” (i.e. the sacrificial implements) that tame the powerful sacrifice.

It is indeed their respective weapons of ritual and war, mythologically traced back to the god Indra’s thunderbolt or *vajra*, that both defines the individual functions of the Brahmins and Kshatriyas and justifies the power they jointly assume over the masses. When the warrior god Indra hurled his thunderbolt at his enemy, the serpent demon Vṛtra, it broke up into four pieces:

Thus the Brahmins make use of two [of these pieces] in the sacrifice, and Kshatriyas [make use of] two in battle. The Brahmins [perform the ritual] with the sacrificial sword (*sphya*) and the stake to which the sacrificial victim is bound; and the Kshatriyas [fight] with the chariot and the bow and arrow. (SB 1.2.4.1-2)

But the possession of weapons of such very different sorts would have rather different practical results in the real world, or so one would think. A well-aimed arrow from the bow of a warrior careering about on his chariot would instantly render ineffectual the priest ritually

engaged in drawing lines in the earth with his toy wooden sword, “fulfilling his wishes” as one text cited above so revealingly puts it. Otherwise stated, it would seem fairly obvious that actualized physical and military force could easily and whenever it wished overpower ritual technicians. And perhaps it did in the reality that was historical India.

Even as that world was portrayed by the Brahmins, there are indications that the Kshatriyas had certain undeniable powers over even the Brahmins themselves, as well as over the other classes. In one rite, if the sacrificer is a Kshatriya certain verses are to be repeated three times, for “there are three other sorts of men besides the Kshatriya—Brahmin, Vaishya, and Shūdra. He thus makes them subordinate to him” (TS 2.5.10.1). A remarkable Vedic text posits that a Kshatriya sacrificer who mistakenly consumes soma, a symbol (and “the king”) of the Brahmin class, is doomed to have Brahmin-like progeny: “Among your offspring will be born one who is equal to a Brahmin—a recipient of charity, a drinker [of soma], a job-seeker, one who may be dismissed at will. When evil befalls a Kshatriya, one who is equal to a Brahmin is born among his offspring” (AitB 7.29).

Several passages transmit dire warnings as to the consequences of a Kshatriya appropriating to himself the property (usually signified by cattle) of the Brahmin (e.g., AV 5.18.1ff; and 12.5.5-11), most likely because the latter really was quite vulnerable on this score. The Brahmin is sometimes presented as somewhat less glorious than the ruler (e.g. SB 5.4.2.7; TB 3.9.14.2) or as one who merely “follows in the train” of his ruler (SB 1.2.3.2). The all-too-real advantages of the Kshatriyas and the fears provoked by them are sometimes confronted head-on by the Brahmin literati. In one myth, the gods (who, as we have seen, are supposedly close kin to the Brahmins) “were afraid of the Kshatriya when he was born.” But gods, and those who speak for them, have their ways of ensuring that the human warriors and rulers will ultimately subject themselves to the authority of the priests. Mythologically, at least, the Kshatriya’s power is allowed expression only through the medium of Brahmin interests:

When the Kshatriya was born, the gods became fearful. Being still within [the womb] they fettered him with a rope. The Kshatriya therefore is born fettered. If the Kshatriya were to be born unfettered, he would continually kill his enemies. If one [viz., an officiating priest] desires regarding a Kshatriya, ‘May he be born unfettered; may he continually kill his enemies,’ then one should offer for him the boiled offering dedicated to Indra and Bṛhaspati. For the Kshatriya has the nature of Indra, and Bṛhaspati is the *brahman* power. By means of the *brahman*

power he thus liberates him from the rope that fetters him. (TS 2.4.13.1)

While it may very well have been that the Kshatriyas in actuality determined the conditions under which life was really led, as warriors and rulers so often do,²⁹ the Brahmins authors of the Veda generally project a rather different image—possibly a mere hope—about the relative power of their own class vis-à-vis the Kshatriyas. Writers and intellectuals in our day like to say that the pen is mightier than the sword; the Brahminical version of this optimistic wish was expressed in terms of the awesome force of *their* sword, the little wooden *sphya* they wielded in the sacrifice. In the description of one rite within a ritual designed to consecrate a king we read the following:

Then a Brahmin, either the *adhvaryu* priest or his [the king's] personal priest (*purohita*), hands him the wooden sword [saying], 'You are Indra's thunderbolt. With that serve me.' The thunderbolt is that wooden sword. That Brahmin, by means of the 'thunderbolt,' makes the king weaker than himself, for the king who is weaker than the Brahmin becomes stronger than his enemies. Thus he makes him stronger than his enemies. (SB 5.4.4.15)

Only by placing himself under the supposedly superior power of the Brahmin can the Kshatriya in turn become superior to his rivals. Many other texts also shift the scene to the sacrificial grounds where the Brahmins manipulate their rites so as to claim dominance over the Kshatriyas.³⁰ The placement of certain mantras or offerings to the deified representatives of the two classes are in such an order as to make the Brahmins "come first" and the Kshatriyas "follow after," since the former is declared "prior" to the latter (both in the sense of being created first and being therefore "predominant" or "first," "preeminent").³¹ While the Brahmins and Kshatriyas together might be proclaimed as superior to the commoners, the Brahmins did not hesitate

²⁹For a suggestive reinterpretation of the Brahmin-Kshatriya relationship in present day village life in North India, see Raheja.

³⁰In addition to the examples cited below, consider the intriguing text at AitB 2.33, where instructions are given to the Brahmin priests for secretly depriving the unwitting Kshatriya sacrificer of his power and rule by means of manipulation of certain recitations. A similar passage at AitB 3.19 additionally provides the method for inciting a rebellion among the commoners against their ruler should the priests wish to do so.

³¹E.g., PB 2.16.4; 11.1.2; 15.6.3; AitB 8.1; 8.4. At PB 2.8.2 and 11.11.8 such methods are used to make both the Kshatriyas and the *vis* "subject to" the Brahmin class. For a survey and analysis of cosmogonic accounts also designed to posit the "priority" of the Brahmin *varna*, consult Smith (1989b).

to declare their own class as higher (*śūyān*) than the Kshatriyas (AitB 7.15; cf. AV 5.17.9).

The conglomeration of the Brahmins and Kshatriyas into the Vedic ruling class is sometimes characterized as the union of spiritual authority and temporal power, religion and politics, ideological persuasion and physical coercion (e.g. Coomaraswamy). But such dichotomies may very well be misapplied here. In the ancient texts, both Brahmin and Kshatriya skills were couched in aggressive, even militaristic, language—the *lingua franca* of Vedism. The Brahmins, in other words, displayed their ritual as war by other means, indeed, by superior means, and were adept at manipulating the rites in such a way as to inferiorize the other social classes. Brahmin claims to supremacy, based on their control of a violent sacrifice directed toward the domination of others, were not those of a “spiritual” over and against a “temporal” power. Both Brahmins and Kshatriyas maneuvered in the “dog-eat-dog” world of the Veda. But the authors of these texts put forward their own speciality, the sacrificial ritual, as the ultimate weapon in society’s version of the survival of the fittest. Ritual—arguably the epitome of a cultural event, a “megacultural” exercise in control, predictability, and representation—was, and had to be, delineated in terms of the agonistic “laws of nature.”

IV

The Vedic depiction of the natural order determined by violence or *himsā* was preserved in later Indian thought. Mentioned has been made above of the later Hindu conception of the “law of the fishes” and it can safely be said, I think, that such a vision of unbridled nature remains the dominant one in post-Vedic traditions of all sorts. Furthermore, those texts that deal with Realpolitik rather than religious ideals also perpetuate the ancient belief in a congruence between the natural world of brutality and human life as it actually is lived.³² Witness, for example, the paean to *danda* or the king’s duty to instill fear of punishment in his subjects in the Mbh:

³²The Arthashastra is, of course, the epitome of such works. The Vedic viewpoint is also preserved in the medical texts of Ayurvedic traditions. But as Zimmermann (187) notes, Ayurvedic treatises, like some of the early *dharma* texts, usually “provide two series of texts: one series praises the virtue of meat; the other prescribes abstinence and, above all, ‘nonviolence’ (*ahimsā*), which is fundamentally linked with vegetarianism.” Zimmermann quotes the Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa (32.4) to help explain the apparent contradiction: “Whoever eats meat commits no sin either when it has been consecrated or when it serves as a remedy.”

All the limits established in the world, O king, are marked by *daṇḍa*. . . . No man will sacrifice if he is not afraid, nor will he give gifts or hold to his promise. . . . I see no being which lives in the world without violence. Creatures exist at one another's expense; the stronger consume the weaker. The mongoose eats mice, just as the cat eats the mongoose; the dog devours the cat, O king, and wild beasts eat the dog. Man eats them all—see *dharma* for what it is! Everything that moves and is still is food for life. (Mbh, Southern Recension, 12.15.10ff., trans. by Shulman: 29)

Vedic presuppositions (“I see no being which lives in the world without violence”), still articulated in the idiom of food and eaters (“Everything that moves and is still is food for life”), are here simply reiterated. Human life, ruled by *dharma* (here meaning the law “as it is” rather than how it “should be”) and coercive, repressive power (*daṇḍa*), reduplicates life in nature dictated by the “law of the fishes.”

Such continuities, however, should not obscure the revolutionary quality of other later and non-Vedic³³ ideas regarding human diet and the principles, if not the rank order, of the social hierarchy. As Zimmermann points out, the Indic discourses in which vegetarianism and nonviolence (*ahimsā*)³⁴ occupied a privileged place must be seen as radical departures from previous assumptions about nature, nutrition, and the goals of life:

In the animal kingdom and then the human one, the dialectic of the eaten eater introduces further divisions between the strong and the

³³Hanns-Peter Schmidt's (1968) assumption of a Vedic “ritual *ahimsā*” that is later generalized (and to some extent moralized) by the world-renouncers depends on the notion that “the ritualists were . . . deeply concerned with the killing and injuring of animate beings which occurs in the sacrifice itself.” While it is true that in Vedic ritualism there was expression of concern that the sacrificial victim not suffer or cry out (the animal is strangled to ensure this), that he accept his fate voluntarily and eagerly and so forth, all this is part and parcel of sacrificial ideologies everywhere (Smith and Doniger). As a virtually universal feature of sacrifice, such characteristics of the Vedic ritual provide no persuasive evidence for the origins of the peculiarly Indian conception of *ahimsā* and vegetarianism. Furthermore, Schmidt himself notes that “in a number of instances *ahimsāyai* refers to the prevention of injury to the sacrificer, his progeny and cattle.” Such a self-interested *ahimsā* in relation to oneself and one's possessions is of course a desideratum in Vedism, but that is certainly not the *ahimsā* of post-Vedism. In light of the data presented in this article, later views on nonviolence (towards others) can only strike one as more or less radical innovations. As Heesterman (1966:147) categorically states, “The Vedic texts do not know the *ahimsā* doctrine.”

³⁴For an attempt at a history of the concepts in Indian religions, see Alsdorf. The author argues that vegetarianism and *ahimsā* were originally separate ideals, and that contradictions in texts like Manu regarding the pros and cons of a carnivorous diet can be explained as the conflation of historically discrete stages of thought. For an outline of a rather different explanation of these contradictions, see Heesterman. Kane (776), among many others, contends that “Another motive for the insistence on *himsā* was probably the idea of defilement caused by eating flesh.” For a survey of the early Buddhist materials on the subject, consult McDermott.

weak, the predator and his prey, the carnivore and the vegetarian. Vegetarianism—a brahminic ideal and a social fact in India—precisely calls into question that fateful dialectic in which every class of being feeds on another. The prohibition of flesh, which became increasingly strict in brahminic society, was one way to break the chain of all this alimentary violence and affirm that it is not really necessary to kill in order to eat. To that end, a new type of opposition between men was introduced. It was no longer a matter of courage and fear, domination and servitude; it was instead an opposition between the pure and the impure and a hierarchy of castes. Abstention from eating meat became a criterion of purity. (Zimmermann:1-2)

In later Indic traditions no less than in the Vedic texts social ideology was fixated on food. Vegetarianism was far more than an interesting new dietary custom; it was the focal point of what might be called a revolution of values.³⁵ In the Veda there was no question about it: “Meat is indeed the best kind of food” (ŚB 11.7.1.3; cf. 12.8.3.12). Here is the credo of a personal alimentary regimen conducted in conformity with nature, as those higher on the food chain (humans) consume those just below (animals). Correlatively, in society the stronger “naturally” dominate and encompass (“consume”) the weaker and are therefore “higher” on the social chain of being. Vegetarianism, introduced into such a context, was an intentional subversion of the older vision of the natural order of things—and helped to provoke a reorganization of the rules for social ranking.

“No meat can be obtained without violence (*himsā*) toward living beings,” so admits Manu (5.48). Eschewing animal flesh was an attempt to break free from the shackles of the food chain and to claim, as Zimmermann says, that it is not really necessary to kill in order to eat.³⁶ Vegetarianism was put forward as the only way to liberate oneself from the bonds of natural violence. A concomitant of this new dietary practice was a social hierarchy governed to some extent by the relative

³⁵The shift in the ancient Indian context is comparable to what Nietzsche claimed the early Christians did by systematically turning inside out the “pagan” values of the Romans. An even more comparable situation could be constructed if one adds to vegetarianism and *ahimsā* the ideology of *bhakti* with its emphasis on “service,” “grace,” humility, and “love”—all of which may be regarded as inversions of Vedic ideals. From this point of view, what we call “Hinduism” might be regarded as the alliance of the values of world renunciation and those of the disempowered masses who seem to have been responsible for the origin of *bhakti*. For the appropriation of such a “Hinduism” by the Brahmins, see below.

³⁶Similarly, in the Upanishads one finds the proposition that it is no longer necessary to sacrifice to the gods, that is, one is no longer called upon to offer oneself up (deploying substitutes, of course) as food to the divinities who are higher on the food chain. See, e.g., BAU 1.4.10.

realization of the ideal of *ahimsā*. The rank order of the four social classes or *varṇas* did not change, *but the rationale for the ranking did*. The nonviolent principles regulating personal diet as well as the social order, on the one hand, and the violent principles determining the course of nature, on the other, became antitheses. Nature and culture were disjoined; the strangle hold of the former over the latter was broken. In place of a “natural” legitimation for cultural practices like diet and the positioning of the social classes according to relative domination of others was substituted an ideal that transcended, and contradicted, the nasty world of nature, now referred to as *samsāra*.

Regardless of the original source of vegetarianism and nonviolence (and it seems most likely a product of the world renouncers or *śrāmaṇas* who were so influential beginning in ca. the sixth century B.C.E.), they were soon thoroughly appropriated by the “orthodox” Brahmin class.³⁷ As Zimmermann observes, vegetarianism and nonviolence became signifiers of “purity;” Dumont goes further by contending that purity replaced sacrificial skills as the mainstay in the Brahmin’s rationale for their own precedence within the social hierarchy.³⁸ And whereas in the Veda ritual technique (insofar as ritual is “symbolic”) was in some respects the exception to the rule of actualized physical and military power, in post-Vedic Hinduism power becomes the exception to the rule of “purity.”

But why? What possible impetus might account for such a revolutionary shift? While surely the phenomenon is overdetermined,³⁹ I have hinted in this article at one possible factor.

The Veda assumes principles that may not have been in the best interests of those who composed it, poets and priests dependent on the patronage of Kshatriya powerbrokers. The Brahmin authors of the Veda were paid employees of the Kshatriya patrons; the texts thus reflect the attempt of the former to address and serve the interests of the latter. On

³⁷Kane (780), however, points out that “Centuries were required before the views propounded by Manu [and thus a certain segment of Brahmins] became predominant. Gradually large sections of the population of India gave up flesh-eating and even those who did not regard it as forbidden to them rarely partook of it or did so in an apologetic way. The spread of Vaiṣṇavism tended to wean people from flesh as required by the Bhāgavata Purāṇa.”

³⁸“It should be recalled that although the Brahman is characterized in the Vedic period by his sacrificial function, in the Hindu period, in harmony with the decline of the sacrifice in favour of other rites, the Brahman is, above all, purity” (Dumont:70).

³⁹It might also be part of a gradual ideological readjustment in light of a much earlier shift from a pastoral economy to an agrarian one. Another and most intriguing possible factor that I only touch upon here is the correlation of an increased restriction of diet and caste distinctions: the more exclusive the caste, the fewer the types of food its members will eat.

the other hand, as we have observed, the priests were also interested in establishing and promoting their own claims to status and power. In the Veda, the Brahmins could do so only in an idiom that seems to have originated in and been shaped by a warrior ideology.

The authors of the Veda attempted to formulate an escape clause to the rule of physical power in order to place themselves at the top of the hierarchical heap. We have noted above that within the Vedic context the Brahmins staked their claim to precedence on their monopoly of the controlled violence of the sacrifice and represented the ritual as the supreme tool for domination. One wonders, however, the extent to which that assertion of social superiority was realized in a society that by all accounts attempted to reduplicate in the social order a natural order envisaged in starkly Hobbesian terms. Such a claim to ritually based "power" might have easily been disputed by Kshatriya warriors whose coercive potential was, shall we say, more readily apparent.

The introduction of vegetarianism and nonviolence, ideals probably stemming from those who turned their backs on the social world and who posited a discontinuity between human potentiality and natural limitations, may have been regarded as opportune by a class of priests and intellectuals whose ritual (or "symbolic") base for social supremacy might appear a bit shaky in the Vedic world of ("nonsymbolic") martial values. The superiority that the Brahmins assumed in the Vedic struggle of eaters and food—on what might well have been regarded by others as dubious grounds—may have been consolidated only in post-Vedic times by rewriting the rules of the game. Brahmin social precedence, otherwise put, may have become virtually indisputable only with the introduction of nonviolence as the principal criterion for "purity" and as the template for relative social standing.

To the extent that imitation of the Brahmin's pattern of life is operative as a form of upward mobility in caste society,⁴⁰ vegetarianism and nonviolence became generalized ideals. Beginning in Manu (10.63), *ahimsā* is usually listed among other qualities that comprise universal (*sāmānya*) *dharma*, applicable to all regardless of class or caste (for other citations, see Kane: 10-11). Those castes with occupations that entail relatively little violence towards others and that practice vegetarianism

⁴⁰In terms of the imitation of the Brahmin's vegetarian diet and nonviolent life style, it might be better to speak of the imitation of the ascetic or world renouncer. There are other reasons for being wary of speaking about "Brahminization" or "Sanskritization." As has often been noted, the imitation of the Kshatriya is also an operative factor in caste India, as is imitation of the foreigner ("Westernization").

were, generally and theoretically speaking, ranked higher than those who do not.

With, of course, the exception of the Kshatriyas. Maintaining their high position in the caste hierarchy, second only to the Brahmins, the warriors and rulers become categorically anomalous in light of their carnivorous bent and occupational commitment to violence. Henceforth, as Dumont and others have noted, "purity" (defined in large part by how near one's mode of life approximated the ideal of *ahimsā*) and power, manifest in their paradigmatic forms in the figures of the Brahmin and the Kshatriya, were established as alternative and contradictory principles with the former taking precedence over the latter in the theoretical hierarchical scheme of things. Power was not entirely banished from society—for the very good reason that it could not be—but was inferiorized in relation to new Brahminical ideals.

Some things, however, never change. For although the infusion of the value of nonviolence into the social order rendered the Kshatriyas theoretically inferior to the Brahmins (just as the Brahmin monopoly on ritual technology had attempted to do in the Veda), in real life things were, and are, different. As Dumont (71-2) puts it, "In theory, power is ultimately subordinate to priesthood, whereas in fact priesthood submits to power."

Such multiple contradictions in the social hierarchy as it was reenvisioned in post-Vedic India are fairly well known. But there is another that is not always noted. For the Brahmins, even while adopting new practices and ideals that might have better "rationalized" their social standing, did not discard the older Vedic basis for their superiority. The Veda had been established quite early on as unquestionable revelation, the source of all knowledge, and as the canonical touchstone for all subsequent "orthodox" truth claims (Smith 1987). Correlatively, the Vedic sacrifice became the paradigm of all praxis in post-Vedic Hindu traditions (Smith 1989a:203-18). The absolute authority of both Vedic knowledge and Vedic practice was brokered by a Brahmin class which simultaneously borrowed from the "prestige of origins" that the Veda and the *yajña* represented as they embraced anti-Vedic pacifistic principles. Thus, in addition to precedence claimed in terms of "purity" based on nonviolence, the Brahmins continue to claim it on the grounds of their expertise in the knowledge and performance of an intrinsically violent ritual that was often explicitly directed towards aggressive ends.⁴¹

⁴¹In the *dharma* texts, Brahmins are set apart from all others in that they officiate at sacrifices (as

The paradox did not escape the attention of the priests. In subsequent ritual texts and those concerning *dharma* in general, the Brahmins did their best to reconcile the two contradictory rationales for their own social superiority.

One of the methods devised to do so was simply to deny that there was a contradiction. Killing in the sacrifice is not killing at all: "Slaughter in a sacrifice is not slaughter. . . . This violence (*himsā*) prescribed in the Veda [i.e. sacrifice] should really be understood as nonviolence (*ahimsā*)."⁴² Sacrifice, in effect, is here revealed to be the ultimate form of *ahimsā*, just as in an early time, under different contingencies, it had been represented as the ultimate form of *himsā*. Another method for transforming the bellicose sacrifice was to redirect its purpose. Instead of a weapon deployed against the hated other (one's "enemy," one's "food"), certain sacrifices were reconstituted as expiations for the inevitable *himsā* of the householder's everyday life.⁴³ Yet another revisionist tactic was to introduce a new rite (the *tyāga*) at the beginning of the old ritual in which the sacrificer states that he renounces the fruit of the sacrifice, thus transfiguring a formerly self-aggrandizing activity into an exemplary exercise in what the Bhāgavad Gītā calls *karma yoga*, selfless action.

But perhaps the most important device for defanging a potentially embarrassing ritual was to thoroughly metaphorize it. The problematic violent sacrifice, in any event, was increasingly actually performed only by kings and in isolated Brahmin communities.⁴⁴ But the enduring

well as offer them, as others of the "twice-born" are still suppose to do) and teach (as well as learn) the Veda which is all about those sacrifices.

⁴²Manu 5.39, 44. Cf. Vedānta Sūtra 3.1.25 and Dalhana on the Suśruta Samhitā 10.3 (cited in Zimmermann: 191): "The medical practitioner no more commits a crime [when he prescribes fresh blood] than he who kills animals in the accomplishment of a sacrifice." One result of this declaration that black is white was to make possible the eating of certain meats under sacrificial circumstances. Consuming flesh under the many conditions categorized as constituting an "emergency" (*āpad*) is also allowable. Bruce Lincoln, however, points out that such redefinitions need not be understood as deliberate mystifications; they may simply be attempts "to establish differential categories of killing based upon context, motive, performer, and results"—a classificatory necessity in all societies. Personal communication, Sept. 11, 1989.

⁴³See, e.g., Manu 3.68-69 on the purpose of the five "great sacrifices" (*mahāyajñas*) of the householder, and Madeleine Biardeau's analysis (42): "The main point of the religious activity of the Brahmins amounts to a series of expiations."

⁴⁴The violence inherent in the sacrifice continues to cause trouble for those who actually perform it. See Frits Staal's account (1983:464-8) of the recent controversy in India over the issue of whether animals should be sacrificed, as is called for, in the performance of the Agnicayana ritual. Staal writes that "the chief objection was against the sacrifice of goats, a custom that was felt to be not merely barbaric, but contrary to the spirit of a nation dedicated to *ahimsā*, 'non-violence'" (464).

archaic prestige of the Vedic *yajña* was passed on to an array of bloodless Hindu practices that were equated with “sacrifice:” renunciation, meditation, yoga, asceticism, pilgrimage, construction of temples, devotional services to the deities of *bhakti* cults (Smith, 1989a:203-16), marriage (occasionally a nonviolent activity) (Harman:112-13), and even to selfless and/or nonviolent action itself. The Brahmin class could in this way maintain the older basis for social precedence (superior “fire power,” so to say, by virtue of monopoly over the sacrifice) while shoring up their social status—especially over and against the Kshatriyas—with the exact opposite principle (superior “purity” by virtue of nonviolence).

ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|------|-----------------------------|
| AitĀ | Aitareya Āraṇyaka |
| AitB | Aitareya Brāhmaṇa |
| AV | Atharva Veda Saṃhitā |
| BAU | Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad |
| ChU | Chandogya Upaniṣad |
| JB | Jaiminiya Brāhmaṇa |
| JUB | Jaiminiya Upaniṣad Brāhmaṇa |
| KB | Kauṣītaki Brāhmaṇa |
| KU | Kauṣītaki Upaniṣad |
| Mbh | Mahābhārata |
| MS | Maitrāyaṇī Saṃhitā |
| Manu | Manu Smṛti |
| PB | Pañcaviṃśa Brāhmaṇa |
| RV | Ṛg Veda Saṃhitā |
| ŚānĀ | Śāṅkhāyana Āraṇyaka |
| ŚB | Satapatha Brāhmaṇa |
| TA | Taittirīya Āraṇyaka |
| TB | Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa |
| TS | Taittirīya Saṃhitā |
| TU | Taittirīya Upaniṣad |
| VS | Vājasaneyya Saṃhitā |

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