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AMRTĀ: WOMEN AND INDIAN TECHNOLOGIES OF  
IMMORTALITY

“I don’t want to become immortal through my works. I want to become immortal by not dying.” This wise quip, or something like that, is supposed to have been said by the American film director and comic Woody Allan. Apart from the intended humor, there is a deeper, perhaps unintended, meaning underlying this statement. Conceptions of immortality contain both an individual and a social dimension. People do live on after their death in the memories of friends and relatives, in the lives of people they have touched, and in the products they leave behind, be they films, books, or children.<sup>1</sup> These two dimensions are inextricably interwoven, I believe, in debates on and technologies directed at achieving immortality. They become even more interwoven because, in spite of Woody Allan’s aspiration and in spite of ancient alchemy and modern medicine, all human beings die. So immortality is not about “not dying”, but about ways of postponing death and about coping with death at personal and ideological levels, coping which is, more often than not, intertwined with social memory. So we need not be surprised at recent news reports from Beijing announcing that the good old communist Deng Xiaoping had “joined the immortals”!

Ideas and aspirations, moreover, do not exist in a vacuum; they are influenced by and in turn influence the social and economic conditions of the time and thus exist in a creative tension with their underlying socio-economic matrix. The aim of this paper is to explore the connections between ancient Indian ideas about immortality, debates regarding what it means to die and to survive death, and technologies for achieving a deathless state, on the one hand, and the changing social conditions of the time, on the other. My question is not what immortality is, although some attention needs to be paid to beliefs concerning immortality, but who can become immortal?

My specific question relates to gender: are women part of the ancient Indian discussions about immortality, and if so, what sort of roles are they assigned? Are they agents or mere instruments in the emerging technologies of immortality? India is big, Indian history is long, and

my own expertise is limited. So, I will limit my exploration of these topics to the time span from the middle to the late Vedic period, that is somewhere between 700 and 300 BCE, give or take a few centuries, although I will occasionally cite evidence from later periods.

#### I. MEANINGS OF *AMṚTA*

The Sanskrit term for “immortal” and “immortality” is *amṛta*. It consists of *mṛta*, which is the past participle of the verbal root  $\sqrt{mr}$  = to die, with the negative prefix *a*. This is a somewhat curious formation, because theoretically it should mean “not dead” rather than “non-dieable” or “immortal”, which in Sanskrit should be *amartya*. Negated past participles, however, tend to have an “un-Xable” rather than an “un-Xed” meaning,<sup>2</sup> and the former is the primary meaning of *amṛta*. The term *amṛta* as “immortal”, however, is not a Sanskrit invention; it has solid Indo-European roots, with the Greek cognate *ambrotos* (from which is derived *ambrosia*) and the Avestan *ameša*. Paul Thieme (1968) has studied these terms and their meanings in detail; I summarize here his findings.

Thieme has shown that in Indo-European the term had two distinct meanings: the first he calls “Lebenskraft spendend”, “giving vitality”; and the second, “unsterblich”, “immortal”. The spectrum of objects to which the term *amṛta* is applied in the Vedic texts, objects from clarified butter, gold, and the Soma drink to food, water, semen, son, and gods, supports Thieme’s conclusion.<sup>3</sup> The term *amṛta* does not always mean immortal in the sense we usually attach to it; it often means vitality or vital energy (Thieme’s *Lebenskraft*) – it is a full and prosperous life and all things that sustain and promote such a life, including food, drink, cattle, and medicine.<sup>4</sup> *Amṛta* can thus indicate both life/immortality, as well as instruments that sustain life and ward off death. The two terms *amṛta* and *āyus* (long and full life) are often juxtaposed and form a single complex of meanings. Indeed, the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (10.2.6.7–9) sees long life as a visible sign that a man is destined to become immortal: “The life of a hundred years makes for heaven. . . . He alone who lives a hundred years or more attains to that immortal life.”

I disagree with Thieme, however, in taking these two meanings as somehow distinct and separate. Both because of the identity of the term and because life in all its forms confronts death as its opposite, I think what we have, at least in ancient India, is a spectrum of meanings that are never totally separate, each merging into and influencing the conception of the others. It is also this broad semantic range of the

term that permitted its use simultaneously with regard to a wide variety of objects without contradiction. The term underwent further widening as the conception of death and the after-death state underwent drastic change within the ideology of rebirth (*saṃsāra*), coming to signify not just survival after death but the liberation from the cycle of rebirth (*mokṣa*).

## II. CONCEPTIONS OF THE SELF

The changing conceptions of immortality in ancient India were closely connected with the changing conception of “self”, of what it means to be a human individual. Michael Carrithers (1985), responding to Marcel Mauss’s attempt to trace the history of the ‘self’<sup>5</sup> makes a useful distinction between *personne* and *moi*, a distinction that provides a helpful heuristic tool to understand the connection between three things: conception of self, conception of immortality, and the position of women.

Carrithers (1985: 235–36) defines *personne* as “a conception of the individual human being as a member of a (1) significant and (2) ordered collectivity”, and *moi* as “a conception of (1) the physical and mental individuality of human beings within (2) a natural or spiritual cosmos, and (3) interacting with each other as moral agents”.

I want to extend Carrithers’ somewhat narrow definition of *personne*<sup>6</sup> to include the selfhood of an individual, especially of a married male, within the society of ancient India hierarchically ordered according to class and gender. A *personne* is defined in terms of interlocking social relationships – to living and deceased members of one’s family, to members of one’s caste, to residents of one’s village, and so forth. When self is defined in terms of *personne*, the collectivity of which an individual is a member plays a determining role in the definition of a person’s self and vitally affects an individual’s choices and goals. Self as *moi*, on the other hand, sees the individual as a unique and self-contained entity transcending temporary social relationships. This conception of the self emerged in India within the context of the rebirth ideology which sees social relationships as fleeting and ephemeral, not affecting the inner core of one’s self.

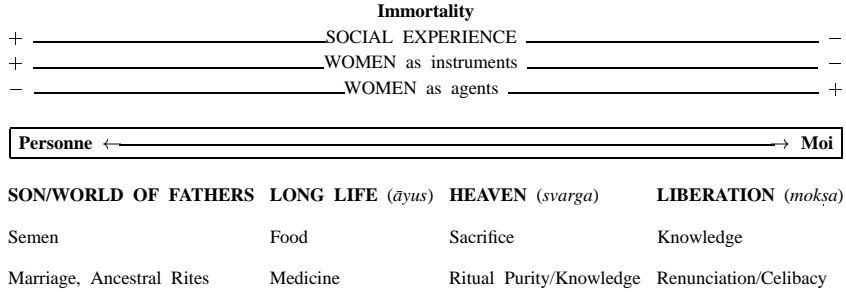
In distinguishing the two conceptions of self I am not suggesting that *personne* and *moi* are watertight and self-contained categories. These two conceptions of the self do exercise influence on each other especially in complex societies where an individual often belongs to several “collectivities”.<sup>7</sup> In ancient India, such collectivities may have

included family/lineage, caste, language group, city/village, kingdom, and sectarian religious affiliation. I like to see the two conceptions of self at two ideal-typical poles of a continuous line [see chart], in which the features of the one penetrate the other.

Different social experiences, furthermore, must underlie these conceptions of self. I have argued elsewhere<sup>8</sup> that the development of large bureaucratic states with complex economies and the rise of urbanization along the Gangetic plain in the middle of the first millennium BCE were, at least in part, responsible for the rise of world-renouncing ideologies and of conceptions of selfhood divorced from social relationships.

The differing conceptions of the self, in turn, influenced differing conceptions of what it means to die, to survive death, and to become immortal. From among these conceptions I have selected four for comment [see chart]: son (together with the world of the fathers), a full life span, heaven, and liberation from the cycle of rebirth. The reason for selecting these is because they are the ones that are prominent in the technologies of immortality found in the extant literature of the period. It would be a mistake, however, to think that these were the *only* views regarding immortality in ancient India or that they represent a chronological history of the conceptions of immortality. The literature that has survived was produced for the most part by a male elite of the Brahmin class; their concerns dominate the discourse. We have no idea of what other classes and other peoples of ancient India may have thought about these matters. Even more significantly, we do not know the aspirations of ancient Indian women themselves or their thoughts about their own selves and their mortality/immortality. The women we encounter in the Vedic literature are literary creations of men and women's voices from ancient India are really the ventriloquial speech of men. Given the social prestige of Brāhmanical writings, especially of the Vedic texts, however, the "minority view" on self and immortality found in them did have a disproportionate influence on Indian society, an influence that Collins (1982: 32), borrowing an expression from Gramsci, has called the "culturally hegemonous role" of Brāhmanism vis-à-vis other groups and ideologies of India.

I will also argue, somewhat in the manner of Mary Douglas's (1982) paradigm of grid and group, that A) social experiences and constraints are strong [represented by + in the chart] at the *personne* pole and become weaker [- in the chart] as we move toward the *moi* pole; and B) the perception of women as instruments is strong [+ ] at the *personne* pole, while the perception of women as agents and individuals with



*Chart.*

desires and roles independent of their connection to males is strong at the *moi* pole.

### III. SONS AND IMMORTALITY

The instrumentality of the wife is most evident and the self as *personne* most central in the conception of the son as the physical and ritual continuation of the father, as the father’s immortality. This idea is very old. Already in the *R̥gveda* (4.4.10) we find the prayer: *prajābhir agne ’mṛtatvam aśyām*, “Through offspring, O Angi, may we attain immortality”, The *Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa* (1.5.5.6) exhorts: *prajāṃ anu prajāyase tad u te martyāmṛtam*, “In your offspring you are born again; that, O mortal, is your immortality”.<sup>9</sup> The wife is often said to be the completion of the husband; he becomes a complete “self” only when he is married: *ardho ha vā eṣa ātmano yaj jāyā tasmād yāvaj jāyāṃ na vindate naiva tāvat prajāyate ’sarvo hi tāvad bhavaty atha yadaiva jāyāṃ vindate ’ha prajāyate tarhi hi sarvo bhavati*, “A full half, surely, of one’s self is one’s wife. As long as one does not obtain a wife, therefore, one can never be reborn, for he then remains incomplete. As soon as he obtains a wife, however, he is reborn, for then he becomes complete” (SB 5.2.1.10). Now, it is not altogether clear whether *amṛtatva* and *amṛta* in passages such as these mean immortality or merely life/vital energy. Children, just like wives and cattle, can be seen as the expansion of the father’s life, a life that he defined here not just as biological existence but “living a full life”, the life of a rich, prosperous householder.

But I think there is more to it than that; the child is seen here as the continuation of the father both when the father is alive and especially

after his death.<sup>10</sup> It is, however, not just any child that constitutes the continuation of the father; it is the son: *ya u vai putraḥ sa pitā yaḥ pitā sa putraḥ*, “The father is the same as the son, and the son is the same as the father” (SB 12.4.3.1). At the birth of a son the father ritually takes him, saying: *aṅgād aṅgāt sambhavasi hṛdayād adhiḥyāyase, ātmā vai putranāmāsi sa jīva śaradaḥ śatam*, “From my every limb you spring; out of my heart you are born. You are my self (*ātman*) called ‘son’; live a hundred autumns!” (*Pāraskara Gṛhyasūtra* 2.3.2; cf. BU 6.4.9). The family line continues uninterrupted in the son despite the death of the father; the son inherits the paternal estate and replaces the father as the ritual and economic head of the family – the father’s *personne* continues in the son.

As the son survives his father’s death, so the father in his son survives his own death. In a very moving song the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* (7.13) eulogizes the son as the new birth of the father:

A debt he pays in him, and immortality he gains, the father who sees the face of his son born and alive. The husband enters the wife; becoming an embryo he enters the mother. Becoming in her a new man again, he is born in the tenth month. A wife is called ‘wife’ (*jāyā*), because in her he is born again (*jāyate*). The gods said to men: ‘She is your mother again’. A sonless man has no world. All the beasts know this. Therefore a son mounts even his mother and sister.<sup>11</sup>

In this song that would have, had he but known it, brought joy to Freud’s heart, the instrumentality of the wife in accomplishing the immortality of her husband is brought out in starkest clarity. The same vision of wife and son is the focus of Śakuntalā’s heart-wrenching outburst to Duṣanta when he feigned not to remember his affair with her: “Because a husband enters his wife and is born (*jāyate*) again from her, the poets of old knew that this is the ‘wifehood’ (*jāyātva*) of a wife (*jāyā*). . . . A son, the wise say, is the man himself born from himself; therefore a man will look upon his wife, the mother of his son, as his own mother. The son born from his wife is like a man’s face in a mirror”.<sup>12</sup> Mother and wife exchange roles and become fused together in their role of begetting male children to continue the male line unbroken, thus assuring male immortality.<sup>13</sup>

Ancient speculation regarding the nature of semen also contributed to the equation of father and son. A man’s sperm is viewed as his *rasa* or essence. In other words, a man replicates himself, creates a second self for himself, in his sperm. The *Aitareya Upaniṣad* (2.1; see note 37), for example, calls semen a man in embryonic form that he carries within himself; when he deposits it in a woman it becomes his first birth: “At the outset, this embryo comes into being within a man as semen. This radiance gathered from all the bodily parts he bears in himself

(*ātman*) as himself (*ātman*). And when he deposits it in a woman, he gives birth to it. That is his first birth.” The *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* (3.10.3) locates procreation, immortality, and orgasmic bliss in the sexual organ (*prajātir amṛtam ānanda ity upasthe*), underscoring the connection between these three concepts.<sup>14</sup> In this view of a man’s replication of himself through the ejaculation of semen and the accompanying bliss, the wife plays a passive and clearly instrumental role;<sup>15</sup> she is the fertile field, the soil, in which the seed is planted.<sup>16</sup>

The continuation of the father in the son is ritually and dramatically expressed in the ancient rite of transmission (BU 1.5.17–20; KsU 2.15). When the father is about to die, the son comes and lies on top of the father, each of his organs touching the respective organs of the father. The father consigns all his faculties to the son; entering the son he stands firm in the world even after death. In the son the father continues his *personne*, his role as paterfamilias. The reversal of roles is dramatic as it is permanent; if the father happens to recover he is expected either to leave home and live as an ascetic or to live at home under the authority of his son.

The theological articulation of the identity between father and son and of this generational continuity as a form of male immortality leaves mothers, wives, and daughters out of the discourse except insofar as wife and mother. Śakuntalā’s speech to her husband underscores the male expectation (articulated by the male author of the tale) that wives and mothers would unhesitatingly internalize this theology.

Another conception of after-death connected with the centrality of a son is the “world of fathers”. The happiness of one’s ancestors depends on food and water offerings made by their male descendants, and this belief is often presented as a cornerstone of the imperative to marry and to father sons and as an argument against celibate modes of life.<sup>17</sup> The world of fathers, however, appears as an archaic concept already in the Brāhmaṇas, and it is often presented as a counterpoint to immortality associated with the “world of gods”. Fathers are said to be mortal, while gods are immortal. But like many things in Indian religious history, the belief that the destiny of the deceased ancestors is tied to their continuing relationship to their descendants endured and still endures, ritually enshrined in the *śrāddha* offerings. Even in death the self is very much a *personne* tied to enduring kinship relations.

In the middle and late Vedic literature we come across the interesting concept of *punarmṛtyu*, re-death; people who die may be subject to death once again. Bodewitz (1996) in his recent article has argued, correctly I believe, that “re-death” is more an argument than a belief; an argument

by anti-ritualists that the worlds won by rites, for example, the world of fathers, are still subject to death. One reason why re-death appears to be a debating point is that it appears only in ritualist discourses (we must assume that they are responding to anti-ritualist arguments) and always with a corrective: those who do X will not die again, a conclusion that appears to be a preemptive answer to possible anti-ritualist claims. Nevertheless, the world of fathers becomes identified with death (and re-death) and appears again in later discussions about rebirth: the path of fathers entailing rebirth and the path of gods assuring immortality and liberation from rebirth.

The “world of fathers” is also interesting in what it leaves out – the mothers, the women. As its name suggests, the world of fathers is clearly a male conception closely connected with social memory and the inheritance of property.<sup>18</sup> Thus, only the three previous generations of ancestors – father, grandfather, and great-grandfather – are addressed by name in the ritual food offerings of *śrāddha*. These are called the *aśrumukha* or tearful fathers, because they are still in the collective memory of the family. Prior generations are called *nāndī mukha* or joyful fathers, and they are anonymous. When one’s father dies, his grandfather departs from social memory and joins the anonymous group of fathers. In ancestral food offerings female ancestors enter into the picture only as wives of the fathers.<sup>19</sup> Here, as we will see also in our discussion of heaven, women enter into the discourse and ritual only as appendages of their husbands. The very fact that “ancestors” are called *pitarah* (“fathers”) indicates the male bias in the social/ritual memory of the dead.

#### IV. LONG LIFE AND IMMORTALITY

The meaning of *amṛta* that comes closest to Thieme’s (1968) first meaning is *āyus*, a long and full life. Long life may seem unproblematic to us with our public health programs and medical technology; but in ancient times the probability of a new-born child living its full life span, viewed ideally in ancient India as 100 years, must have been extremely low. A recurring refrain at the conclusion of Vedic descriptions of most rites is that the person “will live his full life span” *sarvam āyur eti*.<sup>20</sup> So, the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (2.1.4.4) says that a man who sets up his fires during the period when the sun moves north lives his full life span, because that period belongs to the gods, who are immortal; while the period when the sun moves south belongs to the fathers, who are mortal.



As Thieme (1968) has pointed out, *amṛta* is not simply “not dying” or “un-dieble” but also that which stands apart from death, that is, life, vitality, health, and all that promotes life. The connection between *āyus* and *amṛta* in the Vedic mind can be seen in the many substances that are called both *āyus* and *amṛta*.<sup>21</sup> The two terms are also used together, as in *amṛtam āyur hiraṇyam*.<sup>22</sup>

There were at least some who proposed that a long life was the only “immortality” that humans can aspire to. The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (9.5.1.10) says: *eta vai manuṣyasyāmṛtatvaṃ yat sarvam āyur eti*, “For a man immortality is simply this – that he lives his full life span”.<sup>23</sup> Likewise: *tad dhaitad yāvac chatam samvatsarās tāvad amṛtam anantam aparyantam sa yo haitad evaṃ vedaivaṃ haivāsyaitad amṛtam anantam aparyantam bhavati*, “A hundred years is as much as immortality – unending and everlasting; and a man who knows it in this way will have immortality – unending and everlasting” (SB 10.1.5.4). The *Śatapatha* (SB 2.2.2.14) also says that gods became immortal by establishing the fire in their inmost self; a man who does the same will get to live his full life span, because “there is for him no hope of immortality” (*nāmṛtatvasyāśāsti*). Gods themselves were not naturally immortal; they achieved immortality through a variety of means consisting mostly of different ritual technologies. Likewise, humans cannot achieve their full life span naturally; it is the outcome of ritual activity and ritual knowledge.

Living a long life may appear as a somewhat individualistic enterprise, closer to the *moi* conception of self than the *personne*. Yet, within the ancient Indian context of the ritual persona, living a long life is rooted within a ritual/familial context and is bound up with fame, riches, children, and social position. It would have seemed absurd to associate *āyus* or *amṛta* with a poor, low-class, and ignorant man.<sup>24</sup> *Āyus* is not simply living but living well and living long. We have this refrain repeated ten times in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (2.11–20): *sa ya evam etad . . . veda . . . sarvam āyur eti jyog jīvati mahān prajayā paśubhir bhavati manān kīrtiyā*, “When in this manner a man knows this . . . , he lives his full life span; he lives a long life; he becomes a big man on account of offspring and livestock; and he becomes a big man on account of his fame.” As we will see in our discussion of heaven, it is not just any human being who is the subject of this discussion about *āyus*; it is a married male possessing the ritual fires as the head of a household. A wife is an absolute necessity for performing ritual functions; she is as much a sacrificial instrument as the priests, spoons, knives, and fires, an instrument in assuring her husband’s *āyus*.

## V. HEAVEN AND IMMORTALITY

Human desire knows no bound, and the advice of some who asked humans to be content with a long life and children mostly fell on deaf ears. The *Aitareya Āraṇyaka* (2.3.2–3) astutely observes: *martyenāmṛtam īpsati . . . sa eṣa puruṣaḥ samudraḥ sarvaṃ lokam ati / yad dha kiṃcāśnute 'ty enaṃ manyate yady antarikṣalokam aśnute 'ty enaṃ manyate yady amuṃ lokam aśnuvītāty evainaṃ manyeta*, “By means of the mortal he desires to obtain the immortal . . . This man is an ocean, beyond the entire universe. Whatever he obtains, he thinks beyond it. If he obtains the intermediate world, he thinks beyond it. If he were to obtain the world up there, he would surely think beyond it.”

Men, in other words, want to be like the gods. They want to be immortal not merely in their sons, but in their own self-identity and self-consciousness. “To have the same world as the gods”, *devānām salokatā*, is the refrain one hears with reference to people who perform sacrifices. We are moving here closer to a *moi* definition of self, a self that can survive and transcend death, a self that is the architect of its future, a self that does not require an unbroken ritual connection to its former kin for its existence and happiness.

By the middle Vedic period it was a common belief that gods themselves were not originally immortal. A universal principle applicable to all beings, gods and humans alike, appears to have been established: immortality is not a natural attribute of any being; it is something to be achieved. At first gods were on earth and they were mortal. It was through their full knowledge and correct performance of the sacrifice that they became immortal and reached heaven. *yajñena vai devā divam upodakrāman*, “It is by means of the sacrifice that the gods ascended to heaven” (SB 1.7.3.1).<sup>25</sup> The seers discovered this divine secret, the ritual technology of immortality, which the gods tried their level best to hide from men, and revealed it in the Vedas.<sup>26</sup> Now men also possess the ritual technology to become immortal, to ascend to the world of the gods, to become like the gods.<sup>27</sup>

But this ritual technology for reaching heaven is a male prerogative. Only men are taught the Vedic secrets; only men can sacrifice. But single men are not entitled to sacrifice, just as they are not entitled to father children. Only married men accompanied by their wives have the capacity to sacrifice and thus aspire to heavenly immortality. The woman is viewed as the completion of the male sacrificial persona. The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (5.2.1.10), we have seen, proclaims the wife to be one half of the husband; it is only when they are together that they constitute a full ritual person. At one level this requirement elevates

the position of a woman. Stephanie Jamison (1996) has demonstrated both the centrality and the complex nature of a wife's participation in the Vedic ritual, bringing a much needed corrective to the oft-repeated platitudes about the status of women in "Hindu" society.

Note, however, that the entire discourse regarding the female participation in the ritual is carried out from a male perspective; one needs a wife to perform a sacrifice, just as one needs firewood and ghee. They are all instruments. Women, nevertheless, are different from other instruments; they are also ritual actors. Women, indeed, can aspire to heaven, but only as wives of their heaven-bound husbands. In a significant rite during the Soma sacrifice the sacrificer and his wife pretend to climb the sacrificial pole that connects heaven to earth. In the *Taittirīya Saṁhitā* (1.7.9.1–2) the sacrificer tells his wife: *jāya ehi suvo rohāva rohāva hi suvar ahaṁ nāv ubhayoḥ suvo rokṣyāmi . . . suvar devān aṅamāmṛtā abhūma prajāpateḥ prajā abhūma sam ahaṁ prajāyā sam mayā prajā sam ahaṁ rāyaspoṣaḥ sam mayā rāyaspoṣaḥ*, "Come here, wife, let us climb to heaven, let us, indeed, climb to heaven. I will climb to heaven for both of us. . . . To heaven, to the gods we have come! We have become immortal! We have become Prajāpati's children! May I be joined with children; may children be joined with me! May I be joined with increase of wealth; may increase of wealth be joined with me!" Besides the union of husband and wife in heaven, this passage also highlights the connections among several things we have examined: sacrifice, heaven, children, wealth.

Women, in this ritual theology, are not independent ritual actors.<sup>28</sup> They can only hope to get to heaven as wives, hanging on to their husbands' ritual coat-tails, but at least they can get there. We have come some way from immortality defined as the son where the wife and women are instruments but not participants.

## VI. MOKṢA AND IMMORTALITY

All the technologies of immortality we have looked at thus far are located within the social context of family, rituals, and wealth. Indeed, the possession of wealth was regarded as a prerequisite for performing any rite, many of which were quite expensive to conduct, requiring the services of numerous ritual experts.<sup>29</sup> To put it crassly, you have to be rich to become immortal.

The middle of the first millennium B.C.E. was a watershed in the cultural and religious history of India. Drastic social, political, and economic changes took place during this period principally in the

Gangetic plain. A surplus and complex economy, the creation of larger political units coming close to state formation (Thapar, 1984), facility of travel, trade, and urbanization – all contributed to the emergence of new religions such as Buddhism and Jainism based on ideologies and religious practices very different from the Vedic,<sup>30</sup> ideologies that underlie at least some of the literature of the late vedic period, including the Upaniṣads. Let me highlight two elements of the new religious culture which underscore the emerging centrality of self as *moi*. They are the belief in rebirth and the institution of world renunciation.

Rebirth asserts the continuity of individual identity across life times both in the past and into the future. The same individual is born, dies, and is reborn, repeating this cycle indefinitely. The relationships and roles a person establishes within a given lifetime – wife/husband, children, and parents, as well as kinship, caste, professional, and political ties –, relationships that constitute a *personne*, are all fleeting and do not constitute one's self, one's *moi*. Indeed, over several lifetimes an individual will enter into and sever many such relationships, as presented graphically in a passage from the *Rāmāyaṇa* (2.98.25–26): “As two pieces of wood might meet upon the open sea and, having met, drift apart after a few brief moments, so too do your wives and children, your relatives and riches meet with you and hasten away” (tr. Pollock). The doctrine of *karma*, furthermore, proclaims that an individual is the architect of his or her own future.

A renouncer does here and now what death does at the end of life; he severs the social relationships that constitute his *personne*. An ascetic leaves home and family, severs all kinship and economic ties, and lives as a homeless, wandering mendicant. He loses all title to property, his marriage is dissolved *ipso facto*, and he is often regarded as ritually dead.<sup>31</sup>

The new ideology puts into question many of the central elements of previous conceptions of immortality. Let us take son and semen, for example. In the rebirth ideology the son is a separate individual with a long series of prior births and deaths; he is not the continuation of the father and his relation to his present father is contingent at best. The new ideology also questions older ideas about the meaning of semen. In one of the earliest attempts to describe the process of rebirth (BU 6.29–16; CU 5.3–10; cf. JB 1.45–46), the self of the deceased person is said to go up as smoke to the sky. It finally reaches the moon and comes down as rain. The individual, now transformed into water, is absorbed into plants and finally becomes food. A man eats that food and transforms it into semen, which he deposits in a woman, giving rise

to a new birth of the dead man. As opposed to the doctrine which sees the semen as the condensed self of the father, the new doctrine sees the semen as totally another person transformed into a new dimension. The father is a mere conduit, a reprocessing machine, for another being who is reborn by means of his semen.

The relationship of the current generation to its forefathers and the imperative of begetting sons are also put into question. The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (4.4.22) has this to say about people who have discovered their true self, their *moi*: *etad dha sma vai tat pūrve vidvāṃsaḥ prajāṃ na kāmayante / kiṃ prajāyā kariṣyāmo yeṣāṃ no 'yam ātmāyaṃ loka iti / te ha sma putraiṣaṇāyās ca vittaiṣaṇāyās ca lokaiṣaṇāyās ca vyutthāyātha bhikṣācaryāṃ caranti*, “It was when they knew that that men of old did not desire offspring, reasoning: ‘Ours is this self, it is our world. What then is the use of offspring for us?’ So they gave up the desire for sons, the desire for wealth, and the desire for worlds, and undertook the mendicant life.” Note again how sons, wealth, and worlds are brought together here as the objects of desire; the desire for worlds demand the desire for the means of attaining them, namely, sons and wealth (= rites). Another passage responds to the older idea that a wife completes the self of the husband: *tasmād apy etarhy ekāki kāmayate jāyā me syād atha prajāyeyātha vittaṃ me syād atha karma kurvīyati / sa yāvad apy eteṣāṃ ekaikaṃ na prāpnoty akṛtsna eva tāvan manyate / mana evāsyātmā vāg jāyā prāṇaḥ prajā cakṣur mānuṣaṃ vittaṃ . . . śrotraṃ daivaṃ . . .*, “So even today when one is single, one has the desire: ‘I wish I had a wife so I could father offspring. I wish I had wealth so I could perform rites.’ As long as someone has not obtained either of these, he considers himself to be utterly incomplete. Now, this is his completeness – his mind is his self; his speech is his wife; his breath is his offspring; his sight is his human wealth . . . ; and his hearing is his divine wealth . . .” (BU 1.4.17). This is as clear a statement of self as *moi* as we can expect: one’s self is self-contained, it does not need external things or relationships to make it complete.

In the new ideology, immortality is not seen as a form of survival after death; within the rebirth ideology survival is guaranteed to all. Neither is it some desirable location (e.g., heaven) after death, for now all those locations are regarded as way-stations in the unending cycle of births and deaths. Immortality is the liberation from that cycle, from being subject to repeated births and deaths, by means of some type of secret and powerful knowledge.

How do women fare in this new ideological climate? An answer to this question emerges in the story about Yājñavalkya and his two wives related twice in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (2.4; 4.5): “Now, Yājñavalkya had two wives, Maitreyī and Kātyāyanī. Of the two, Maitreyī was a woman who took part in theological discussions, while Kātyāyanī’s understanding was limited to womanly matters. One day, as he was preparing to undertake a different mode of life, Yājñavalkya said: ‘Maitreyī, I am about to go away from this place. So come, let me make a settlement between you and Kātyāyanī.’ Maitreyī asked in reply: ‘If I were to possess the entire world filled with wealth, sir, would it, or would it not, make me immortal (*amṛtā*).’ ‘No,’ said Yājñavalkya, ‘it will only permit you to live the life of a wealthy person. Through wealth one cannot expect immortality.’ ‘What is the point in getting something that will not make me immortal?’ retorted Maitreyī. ‘Tell me instead, sir, all that you know’”.<sup>32</sup>

A couple of points about this story: first, this is possibly the first time in the whole of the Vedic literature that the feminine adjective *amṛtā* (“immortal”) is used with reference to an actual flesh-and-blood woman, the adjective I have used as the title of this paper.<sup>33</sup> Maitreyī dares to ask – or, to be more precise, the author dares to put this question in Maitreyī’s mouth – how she can become immortal, and she does that as an individual in her own right and not just as the wife of Yājñavalkya. Indeed, if the wife accompanied the husband into immortality, as we saw within the context of the sacrifice, then Maitreyī needn’t have worried; she would have become immortal automatically as part of her husband’s self. But now the secret to immortality is not the sacrifice which demands wealth but knowledge which cannot be obtained vicariously. To become immortal Maitreyī did not need wealth; she had to know what Yājñavalkya knew.

In an interesting reversal, the acknowledgment of female agency with respect to immortality is accompanied by the denial to women of an instrumental role in the acquisition of male immortality.<sup>34</sup> The passage I cited above BU (1.4.17) tells a man not to consider himself incomplete if he lacks a wife or son; his completeness lies within himself, and his wife is his speech. In a curious but significant way male independence from women created independence for women as well, and vice versa.

Women’s liberation obviously did not come to India with the rebirth/liberation ideology, but at least now women become part of the discourse on human aspiration for immortality. This is nicely demonstrated by the third and fourth books of the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, a section that originally formed the conclusion of the great

*Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*<sup>35</sup> and constitutes what I would call “The Triumph of Yājñavalkya”, the individual responsible for the composition of the White Yajurveda. This triumphant conclusion of that Veda contains four episodes that establishes Yājñavalkya as the foremost theologian of the time. King Janaka appears as a main figure in the first three; the fourth is the conversation between Yājñavalkya and his wife Maitreyī. Renowned for his knowledge,<sup>36</sup> the presence of Janaka is a deliberate literary strategy of the author to highlight Yājñavalkya’s supremacy in knowledge. If he can teach Janaka, a listener will think, he must be the greatest!

In the first of these episodes a group of distinguished theologians have assembled at the king’s court, and Janaka wants to find out who among them is the most learned. In this group of theologians is one woman, Gārgī Vācakovī. Her mere presence would have raised many a Brāhmaṇical eyebrow, and I think that this was a deliberate literary strategy of the author. Within the literary structure of this story, she plays a crucial role precisely because she is a woman. First, Gārgī is the only member of the group who questions Yājñavalkya twice. On the second occasion she makes this boast to her male colleagues [BU 3.8.1–2]: *brāhmaṇā bhagavanto hantāham imaṃ dvau praśnau prakṣyāmi / tau cen me vakṣyati na vai jātu yuṣmākam imaṃ kaścid brahodyaṃ jeteti*, “Distinguished Brahmins! I am going to ask this man two questions. If he can give the answers to them, none of you will be able to defeat him in a theological debate.” Then she challenges Yājñavalkya: *ahaṃ vai tvā yājñavalkya yathā kāśyo vā vaideho vogradputra ujjyaṃ dhanur adhijyaṃ kṛtvā dvau bāṇavantau sapatnātiviyādhināu haste kṛtvopotiṣṭhed evam evāhaṃ tvā dvābhyāṃ praśnābhyāṃ upodasthām / tau me brūhīti*, “I rise to challenge you, Yājñavalkya, with two questions, much as a fierce warrior of Kāśi or Videha, stringing his unstrung bow and taking two deadly arrows in his hand, would rise to challenge an enemy. Give me the answers to them!” The military image is interesting; as Mrs. Thatcher is said to have been in her cabinet, Gārgī is presented here as the only man in that male assembly. The image is also interesting because both of Gārgī’s questions contain the metaphor of weaving, in all likelihood an occupation closely associated with women (see Rau, 1970). The author of the tale mixes his metaphors, so to speak, to create the wonderful character of Gārgī – woman, theologian, and warrior. After Yājñavalkya answers her questions, she turns to her male colleagues: *brāhmaṇā bhagavantas tad eva bahu manyedhvaṃ yad asmān namaskāreṇa mucyedhavam / na vai jātu yuṣmākam imaṃ kaścid brahmodyaṃ jeteti*, “Distinguished Brahmins! You should consider

yourself lucky if you escape from this man by merely paying him your respects. None of you will ever defeat him in a theological debate” [BU 3.8.12]. She, in other words, tells her male colleagues: “If I can’t beat him, none of you can!” The leader of the group, Sākalya, did not heed her warning, and lost his head after he was defeated by Yājñavalkya.

The triumph of Yājñavalkya concludes with his instruction of another woman, his wife Maitreyī. The prominence of women in this section, I think, is a literary strategy intended to show the triumph of the new ideology connected with Yājñavalkya: even women can understand the truth better than those old fogies!

Going beyond the Brāhmanical tradition, we see in Buddhism and Jainism the world’s first voluntary organizations for women – the Buddhist and Jain orders of nuns. Here are women who leave their families, break their kinship ties, and voluntarily and possibly against the wishes of their families enter a community of celibate women. This is quite a departure from Manu’s dictum: “A girl, a young woman, or even an old woman should not do anything independently, even in her own house. In childhood a woman should be under her father’s control, in youth under her husband’s, and when her husband is dead, under her son’s. She should never be independent” (MDh 5.147–48). Here are Buddhist and Jain nuns exercising a daring freedom of choice, living lives in female communities outside direct male control, and taking control of their own sexuality. What better example of the ultimate triumph of the self as *moi*.

## VII. THE MORE THINGS CHANGE . . .

The chart I have drawn and the way I have structured my comments may leave the impression that the path from *personne* to *moi* and the concomitant changes in the position of women vis-à-vis immortality chart a clear chronological line, each ideological change leaving its predecessors in the dust. This, of course, is far from the truth. Although there is some detectable chronology to these changes, given the problems inherent in dating Indian texts with any degree of accuracy and certainty, building a chronology of these changes is very much like building a house of cards. More importantly, however, in India older ideologies did not change, yielding place to new; as Louis Dumont (1960) has accurately observed, Indian religious history by and large has moved by way of aggregation, putting new stones on old, rather than substitution. So, for example, rites and ideologies involving sons and the world of



the fathers coexisted and continued to coexist in India side by side with the ideologies of rebirth and liberation.

Attempts, however, were made to synthesize the differing conceptions of death and immortality. The *Aitareya Upaniṣad* (2.1–4), for example, attempts a synthesis in terms of the three births of a man:

At the outset, this embryo comes into being within a man as semen. This radiance gathered from all the bodily parts he bears in himself (*ātman*) as himself (*ātman*). And when a man deposits [lit. pour] it in a woman, he gives birth to it. That is his first birth.

It becomes one with the woman's body (*ātman*), as if it were a part of her own body. As a result, it does not harm her. And she nourishes this self (*ātman*) of his that has entered her. As she nourishes him, so he should nourish her. The woman carries him as the embryo. At the beginning, he nourishes the child even before its birth. When he nourishes the child even before its birth, he thereby nourishes himself (*ātman*) for the continuance of these worlds, for it is in this way that these worlds continue. That is his second birth.

And he – this self (*ātman*) of his – is appointed to carry out holy rites, while his other self, after it has done all it has to do, becomes old and dies. As soon as he departs from this world, he is born again. That is his third birth.<sup>37</sup>

Here we have a curious combination of “selfhoods” in terms of new births, that is, taking on new selves. The first self/birth is when one ejaculates oneself as one's semen into a woman. Here the coming out of the semen from one's body is viewed as a birth, just as the coming out of the baby from the mother's body. Both these hark back to the conception of self as son. The self of his that is the son continues his ritual tasks after his death, while his “other self” takes birth anew. This third birth is, of course, based on the rebirth ideology.

Another attempt at synthesis is found in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (1.5.16) in terms of the different worlds that a man aspires to win: *atha trayo vāva lokā manuṣyalokaḥ pitṛlokaḥ devaloka iti / so 'yaṁ manuṣyalokaḥ putreṇaiva jayyo nānyena karmaṇā / karmaṇā pitṛlokaḥ / vidyayā devalokaḥ / devaloka vai lokānām śreṣṭhaḥ / tasmād vidyām praśaṁsanti*, “Now, there are only three worlds: the world of men, the world of ancestors, and the world of gods. One can win this world of men only through a son, and by no other rite,<sup>38</sup> whereas one wins the world of ancestors through rites, and the world of gods through knowledge. The best of these, clearly, is the world of gods, and for this reason they praise knowledge.”

The coexistence of different notions of self and after-death states makes for a messy situation. Clarity is often achieved in such situations only at the expense of accuracy. The Hindu funeral rite is a good example of this “mess theory” of Indian religious history. Theoretically, this is the one rite that should bring to the foreground a culture's ideas about death and afterlife. Given that the dominant ideology in Indian culture

with respect to afterlife is rebirth, we should expect to find this belief clearly articulated in the funeral rite. The opposite is, in fact, the case. An observer looking solely at the Hindu funeral rite will have no idea that Indians believed in rebirth; this belief is completely ignored in favor of the ideology of the world of the fathers. The same is true of all rites connected with ancestral offerings.

In the religions rooted in the ideologies of rebirth and liberation and wedded to the concept of self as *moi*, such as Buddhism and Jainism, furthermore, we should expect to find the claim of women to liberation and immortality articulated loud and clear. But that is not the case. There is great ambivalence and ambiguity in both traditions regarding the spiritual capabilities of women. The Buddha is supposed to have opened his monastic order to women with great reluctance and at the urging of his favorite disciple Ānanda; after giving his reluctant assent, he is said to have predicted that had women not been admitted the Buddhist way of life would have lasted 1000 years, but because women had been admitted it will last only 500 years (Lamotte, 1958, 211). We do not know, of course, what the Buddha himself thought; but the story is direct evidence of the great ambivalence the Buddhist male monastic community (we have no idea as to what the nuns themselves thought about this) must have felt about the order of nuns and the spiritual capabilities of women. Diana Paul (1985) details the debates that raged within Mahāyāna Buddhism regarding the possibility of women becoming a Buddha. And more recently Padmanabh Jaini (1991) has chronicled the debates between the Digambara and Śvetāmbara Jains about the possibility of women attaining liberation as women, that is, without being reborn as men.

The same ideologies that brought a modicum of agency to women also created ascetic traditions that considered women as temptresses and created a truly misogynic literature (Olivelle, 1995). Within the Brāhmanical/Hindu traditions there has been an ongoing controversy whether it was legitimate for women to become ascetics (Olivelle, 1993, 183–90). And as we have seen, the legal codes, composed many centuries after the emergence of the rebirth ideology, repeatedly insist that women are never to be independent agents either in the legal/economic or in the ritual/religious field (MDh 5.147–56; see note 28).

Nevertheless, within the rebirth ideology women have at least had the opportunity to choose not to marry, to control their sexuality, to live independently of male authority, to pursue individual aspirations, and even to become religious élite. They do not have to be mere instruments

of their husbands' aspirations and have the opportunity to become agents of their own destiny.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The connection between social memory, in this case embodied in a literary product, and immortality was not alien even to ancient Indians. The god Brahmā tells Vālmiki, the author of the epic *Rāmāyaṇa*: "As long as the mountains and rivers shall endure upon the earth, so long will the story of the *Rāmāyaṇa* be told among men. And as long as the story of Rāma you compose is told, so long will you live on in my worlds above and below" (*Rāmāyaṇa*, 1.2.35–36; tr. Goldman).

<sup>2</sup> I am indebted to Stephanie Jamison for these two fine expressions and for elucidating several aspects of this term. There are other examples of negated past participles functioning as gerundives, for example, *adhṛṣṭa* "undareable-against".

<sup>3</sup> For a study of *amṛta* in the Vedic literature, see Gonda 1965, 38–70.

<sup>4</sup> *agnir amṛtam*, "the immortal is fire" (SB 10.2.6.17); *annam amṛtaṃ vadanti*, "they say that the immortal is food" (KS 70.6); *amṛtaṃ vai prāṇāḥ*, "the breaths are indeed the immortal" (TS 2.6.8.7); *amṛtaṃ vā ājyam*, "clarified butter is indeed the immortal" (TA 2.17.2); *amṛtaṃ vai hiraṇyam*, "gold is indeed the immortal" (TS 5.2.7.2); *amṛtam eva saptamī citiḥ*, "the seventh layer is truly the immortal" (SB 8.7.4.18); *amṛto vai somaḥ*, "Soma is indeed immortal" (SB(Kāṇva) 4.3.4.12); *ādityo amṛtam*, "the immortal is the sun" (SB 10.2.6.16). These examples could be multiplied. I have translated *amṛta* uniformly as "immortal" for the sake of consistency, but as one can see in many of these examples the more accurate translation, following Thieme, would be something like "fire is what gives vitality", "they say that what gives vitality is food", etc.

<sup>5</sup> Mauss's article 'A Category of the Human Mind: The Notion of Person; the Notion of Self', originally published in 1938, is reprinted in the same volume (pp. 1–25) as Carrithers's paper.

<sup>6</sup> Carrithers appears to restrict *personne* to those societies that have legally defined citizenship carrying rights and responsibilities. He denies that such a category is applicable to the Indian *varṇa* system (1985, 251). I think that the selfhood within the *varṇa* system is very much a *personne*, because it is defined by one's belonging to a particular social group, a belonging that carries rights and responsibilities, even though that group is not the nation-state.

<sup>7</sup> Carrithers (1985, 236) gives one example: "a German of the early nineteenth century might have found himself to be a citizen of a small principality, a member of the Catholic Church, and a member of some notionally powerful German nation."

<sup>8</sup> Olivelle 1993, 55–67. I am not suggesting here that changes in the perception of the self can be reduced simply to socio-economic changes, but that such changes form a significant part of the causal complex.

<sup>9</sup> For a detailed discussion of this ideology, Olivelle 1993, 41–53.

<sup>10</sup> A text from a later period points this out clearly: "Through a son he conquers the worlds, through a grandson he obtains immortality, but through his son's grandson he gains the world of the sun" (VaDh 17.5). This conception points to the significance of offspring for the continued felicity of deceased ancestors.

<sup>11</sup> *ṛṇam asmin saṃnayaty amṛtatvaṃ ca gacchati / pitā putrasya jātasya paśyec cej jīvato mukham // . . . patir jāyāṃ praviṣati garbho bhūtvā sa mātaram / tasyāṃ punar navo bhūtvā daśame māsi jāyate // taj jāyā jāyā bhavati yad asyāṃ jāyate punaḥ // . . . devā manuṣyān abruvann eṣā vo janani punaḥ // nāputrasya loko 'stīti yat sarve paśavo viduḥ / tasmāt putro mātaraṃ svasāraṃ cādhirohati //*

<sup>12</sup> *bhāryām patiḥ sampraviśya sa yasmāj jāyate punaḥ / jāyāyā iti jāyātvaṃ purāṇāḥ kavayo viduḥ // . . . ātmātmanaiva janitaḥ putra ity ucyate budhaiḥ/ tasmād bhāryām naraḥ paśyen mātṛvat putramātaram // bhāryāyām janitaṃ putram ādarśe svam ivānanam / MBh 1.68.36, 47–48 (van Buitenen’s translation modified).*

<sup>13</sup> The view that the husband is born again in his wife finds expression even in later texts: see MBh 3.13.62; MDh 9.8; YDh 1.56. A passage in the epic *Rāmāyaṇa* (2.35.8) illustrates this: the earth is viewed as the wife of a king; when the king dies she becomes a widow, but regains a husband when his sons becomes the new king.

<sup>14</sup> For a more detailed study, see Olivelle 1997, 163–70.

<sup>15</sup> The instrumentality of the woman is nicely illustrated in the bridal prayer (*Āśvalāyana Gr̥hyasūtra* 1.7.22): “May my husband live long, and may I have offspring.” And the husband pours ritually consecrated water on the bride, saying: “The evil substance which dwells in you that brings death to your husband, death to your children, death to cattle, destruction to the house, destruction to fame, that I change into one that brings death to thy paramour. Thus live with me to old age, N. N.”

<sup>16</sup> For the idea of wife as the field (soil) for man’s seed, see MDh 10.70–73. This idea also spawns the legal view that a son born in one’s field (i.e., one’s wife) belong to the owner of the field (i.e., the husband of the mother) and not to the owner of the seed (i.e., the biological father), just as a tree planted by someone in another man’s field belongs not to the man who planted the seed but to the man who owns the field (for this comparison see MDh 9.36–41). On the controversy as to who owns the son begotten on someone’s wife, see MDh 9.42–44. One of the several type of legitimate sons is called *kṣetraja*, “born in one’s field”.

<sup>17</sup> It is also the central element of the so-called theology of debt: a man is born with debts to gods, ancestors, and seers. The debt to ancestors is paid by fathering a son. On the question of debts as an argument against celibate modes of life, see Olivelle 1993, 41–53, 83–91.

<sup>18</sup> In Hindu jurisprudence the obligation to offer *śrāddhas* to an ancestor is connected with inheritance: whoever inherits the estate of a deceased person has the obligation to make *śrāddha* offerings to him: “Whoever inherits the estate has to offer the *piṇḍa* (rice balls) to him” (*Viṣṇu Dharmasūtra*, 15.40). The point appears to be that the owner of ancestral wealth has the obligation to feed those who depend on that wealth, the living, as well as the dead, members of the family. See Kane 1973, 734–38.

<sup>19</sup> For sources and discussion, see Kane 1973, 474–76. Even when the female side of the ancestral line is represented, the focus is on the males of that line. Thus, for example, offerings are made to the mother (i.e., father’s wife) and then not to the mother’s mother but to the maternal grandfather etc. After death women appear to fall from the collective social memory – at least ritually enacted memory – much faster than men.

<sup>20</sup> See SB 2.1.4.9; 2.3.3.6; BU 2.1.10, 12; 6.4.14–18.

<sup>21</sup> *agnir āyuh, yajña āyuh*, “long life is fire”, “long life is sacrifice” (MS 2.3.4; cf. KS 5.3; JB 1.70); *annam u vā āyuh*, “long life is indeed food” (SB 9.2.3.16); *āyus saṃvatsaraḥ*, “long life is the year” (MS 4.6.8); *āyur ghytam*, “long life is ghee” (TS 2.3.2.2); *āyus* is also identified with gold (SB 3.8.2.27; 4.5.2.10; MS 1.7.5; 2.1.7; 4.4.2; KS 9.2; 11.8). Here the meaning is that these substances contain the means to securing a long life. Compare these statements with parallel ones regarding *amṛta* in note 4. The connection between *āyus* and *amṛta* is highlighted also in the TS 3.3.4.3: *amṛtam asi prāṇāya tveti hiranyam abhi vyanity amṛtam vai hiranyam āyuh prāṇo ’mṛtenaivāyur ātman dhatte*, “You are the immortal! You for breath!” With these words he breaths over the gold. The gold is the immortal, breath is life. With the immortal indeed he places breath in himself.”

<sup>22</sup> SB 3.7.2.27; 4.5.2.10; 4.6.1.6. Eggeling translates “gold is immortal life”, but the two terms may well qualify gold independently: gold is *amṛta* and gold is *āyus*.

<sup>23</sup> A similar statement is made in the *Vaikhānasa Gṛhyasūtra* (3.21): “When eighty years and eight months, reckoned according to the solar year, have passed as a man practices this, he has seen a thousand moons. They call such a man Brahman’s body – a body that is endowed with rites and has performed meritorious deeds to the highest extent.” *tad evaṃ vartamānasya yady aṣṭamāsādhikāśītivarṣāṇi ravivarṣeṇādhigāny adhiḡaccheyuḥ sa dṛṣṭasahasracandro bhavati tam enaṃ kriyāyuktaṃ puṇyākṛttamaṃ brahmaśarīram ity ācakṣate.*

<sup>24</sup> The importance of wealth to being a “religious man” in ancient India has often been ignored. Rau (1957, 32–34) has shown that the terms *pāpīyān* (worse) and *śreyān* (better) within the context of the class distinctions existing within ancient Indian society are not merely religious or ethical terms. The “worse” are people who are poor and powerless, while the “better” are the rich and the powerful. The two terms frequently refer specifically to the economic standing of a person, as at CU 4.16.3.

<sup>25</sup> The SB (2.2.2.8–14) portrays gods and Asuras as mortal because they lacked a self, they were *anātmānaḥ*. The sacred fire is the *amṛta*. The gods made it their self and became immortal. See SB 10.4.3.8–10; 11.1.2.12–13; TS 2.3.2.1.

<sup>26</sup> See *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* 2.3.4.4.

<sup>27</sup> The world of gods in the Vedas has clear spatial dimensions. It is up above beyond the atmosphere – sometimes associated with the sun, sometimes with the moon which contains the divine ambrosia, and sometimes with the milky way, the divine river in the sky. See Witzel 1984.

<sup>28</sup> This is, of course, not an invariable rule. Jamison (1996, 36–38) has shown that within very restricted parameters women can act as sole ritual agents, that is, perform rites unaccompanied by their husbands. In spite of these exceptions, however, the theology of ritual dependence of women remained firm. Manu, as usual is explicit and emphatic: “No sacrifice, no vow, no fast must be performed by women apart (from their husbands)” (MDh 5.155); “By a girl, by a young woman, or even by an aged one, nothing must be done independently, even in her own home” (MDh 5.147).

<sup>29</sup> That only a sufficiently rich man was entitled to perform a Soma sacrifice is clearly stated even in as late a text as Manu: “A man who possesses a supply of food sufficient to maintain his dependents for three years or more is entitled to drink Soma [i.e., to perform a Soma sacrifice]. If a twice-born man possessing less wealth drinks Soma, he derives no benefit from it, even though he has drunk Soma.” MDh 11.7–8. The BU (1.4.17) expresses the reason for desiring wealth: “I wish I had wealth so I could perform rites.”

<sup>30</sup> For a longer discussion with bibliography, see Olivelle 1993, 55–70.

<sup>31</sup> For the legal consequences of renunciation within Hindu law, see Olivelle 1984.

<sup>32</sup> *atha ha yājñavalkyasya dve bhārye babhūvatur maitreyī ca kātīyānī ca / tayor ha maitreyī brahmavādinī babhūva / strīprajñāiva tarhi kātīyānī / atha ha yājñavalkyo 'nyad vṛttam upākariṣyan / maitreyīti hovāca yājñavalkyaḥ / pravrajiṣyan vā are 'ham asmāt sthānād asmi / hanta te 'nayā kātīyānyāntaṃ karavāṇīti / sā hovāca maitreyī yan nu ma iyaṃ bhagoḥ sarvā pṛthivī vittena pūrṇā syāt syāṃ nv ahaṃ tenāmṛtāho neti / neti hovāca yājñavalkyaḥ / yathavopakaraṇavatāṃ jīvitaṃ tathaiva te jīvitaṃ syāt / amṛtatvasya tu nāśāsti vitteneṭi / sā hovāca maitreyī yenāhaṃ nāmṛtā syāṃ kim ahaṃ tena kuryām / yad eva bhagavān veda tad eva me brūhīti / BU 4.5.1–4*

<sup>33</sup> The feminine is used with regard to goddesses, as well as objects that are grammatically feminine: e.g., RV 1.113.13; AV 10.8.26.

<sup>34</sup> At a much later time, in Buddhist and Hindu Tantric traditions where women

become the sexual partners and objects in Tantric rituals aimed at liberation, women emerge once again as instruments of male immortality.

<sup>35</sup> In the extant BU this section is followed by another containing chapters 5 and 6 of the BU. But even the indigenous tradition recognized this as a supplement, calling it *khilakāṇḍa*; it was probably added at a later time to the original BU consisting of chapters 1–4.

<sup>36</sup> The fame of Janaka's wisdom and learning is revealed in a remark by King Ajātaśatru. When Bālāki tells him that he will teach him *brahman*, Ajātaśatru exclaims: "We'll give you a thousand cows for such a speech! People are sure to rush here, crying, 'Here's a Janaka! Here's a Janaka!'" (BU 2.1.1; KsU 4.1). To be called a second Janaka appears to have been a great compliment.

<sup>37</sup> *puruṣe ha vā ayam ādīto garbho bhavati yad etad retaḥ / tad etat sarvebhyo 'ṅgebhyas tejaḥ sambhūtam ātmany evātmānaṃ bibharti / tad yadā striyāṃ siñcaty athainaj janayati / tad asya prathamam janma / tat striyā atmabhūyam gacchati yathā svam aṅgam tathā / tasmād enāṃ na hinasti / sāsyaitam ātmānam atra gataṃ bhāvayati / sā bhāvayitrī bhāvayitavyā bhavati / taṃ strī garbham bibharti / so 'gra eva kumāraṃ janmano 'gre 'dhi bhāvayati / sa yat kumāraṃ janmano 'gre 'dhi bhāvayaty ātmānam eva tad bhāvayaty eṣāṃ lokānāṃ saṃtatyā evaṃ saṃtatā hīme lokāḥ / tad asya dvitīyam janma / so 'syāyam ātmā puṇyebhyaḥ karmabhyaḥ pratidhīyate / athāsīyāyam itara ātmā kṛtakṛtyo vayogataḥ praiti / sa itaḥ prayann eva punar jāyate / tad asya tṛtīyam janma /*

<sup>38</sup> Note how the sexual act of procreation is implicitly regarded as a rite alongside "other rites". For passages that regard sex as a sacrifice, see BU 6.2.13; 6.4.1–4.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

- AV Atharva Veda  
 BU Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad  
 CU Chāndogya Upaniṣad  
 JB Jaiminiya Brāhmaṇa  
 KS Kāthaka Saṃhitā  
 KsU Kauṣītaki Upaniṣad  
 MBh Mahābhārata  
 MDh Mānava Dharmaśāstra (Manusmṛti)  
 MS Maitrāyaṇīya Saṃhitā  
 RV Ṛg Veda  
 SB Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa  
 TA Taittirīya Āraṇyaka  
 TS Taittirīya Saṃhitā  
 VaDh Vasiṣṭha Dharmasūtra  
 YDh Yājñavalkya Dharmaśāstra (Yājñavalkyasmṛti)

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