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### The Age of the *Rig Veda*

#### Arrival of the Indo-Aryans

The Indo-Iranians, comprising the Indo-Aryans and Iranians, moved towards India from two areas of Central Asia. The first area is archaeologically called the Andronovo culture which covered almost the whole of Central Asia during the second millennium BC. The second is archaeologically called the Bactria–Margiana Archaeological Complex (BMAC) and dated 1900– 1500 BC. This cultural zone extended over south Central Asia, and included Bactria or Balkh covering Afghanistan, and Margiana covering Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Some ceramics from south Uzbekistan and north Afghanistan are similar to those found in the Gandhara grave culture. The Andronovo culture manifests all the important elements of Aryan life. These comprise stock breeding, widespread use of horse, spoked wheels, practice of cremation, pit-dwellings roofed with birch and other parts of wood, and the soma drink. This culture is therefore regarded as proto-Indo-Iranian. It eventually spread to both Iran and the northern part of the Indian subcontinent.

Around 1500 BC, the BMAC shows evidence of the domestic horse, chariots with spoked wheels, partial cremation, and the svastika motif. Half a dozen graveyards suggest movements of herdsmen. However, in the BMAC area, the remains of proto-urban culture of pre-Aryan times suggest that the herdsmen, who damaged it, moved from this area to the border of the Indian subcontinent. That is why the horse remains and post-cremation burials figured in the Swat valley from about 1400 BC. At about the same time, some ceramics from south Central Asia resemble those found in the Swat region.

Of the three areas covered by the BMAC, Bactria is well known in the Indian

tradition. It is called Bahlika, which means an outside country coterminous with modern Balkh. Though this term is not mentioned in the *Rig Veda*, it figures in later Vedic texts. In one such text, Bahlika appears as a part of the name of a king. Bahlika also figures in classical Sanskrit texts and in inscriptions. A Gupta inscription of the fourth century refers to the conqueror of Bahlika who reached there after crossing seven mouths of the Indus. Real conquest there may not have been, but the existence of Bactria is known in the Gupta period. However, later sources considered Punjab to be Bahlika and differentiated it from Prachya or eastern India. Bactria covers a substantial part of Afghanistan, which was well known to the *Rig Veda*. Several rivers flowing in this land appear in this text. That the Aryans came to settle in Afghanistan is shown by the Aryan names of the rivers, and a part of that country is known as Araiya or Haraiya from which Herat is derived.

The earliest Aryans lived in the geographical area covered by eastern Afghanistan, the North-West Frontier Province, Punjab, and the fringes of western UP. Some rivers of Afghanistan, such as the river Kubha, and the river Indus and its five branches, are mentioned in the *Rig Veda*. The Sindhu, coterminous with the Indus, is the river par excellence of the Aryans, and it is repeatedly mentioned. Another river, the Sarasvati, is called *naditama* or the best of rivers in the *Rig Veda*. It is identified with the Ghaggar–Hakra channel in Haryana and Rajasthan, but its Rig Vedic description shows it to be the Avestan river Harakhwati or the present Helmand river in south Afghanistan from where the name Sarasvati was transferred to India. The entire region in which the Aryans first settled in the Indian subcontinent is called the Land of the Seven Rivers.

We know about the Aryans in India from the *Rig Veda*. The term *arya* occurs thirty-six times in this text, and generally denotes a cultural community that speaks the Indo-Aryan language. The *Rig Veda* is the earliest text of the Indo-European languages. It is written in Sanskrit, but also includes many Munda and Dravidian words. Probably these words percolated to the *Rig Veda* through the languages of the Harappans. It is a collection of prayers offered to Agni, Indra, Mitra, Varuna, and other gods by various families of poets or sages. It consists of ten *mandalas* or books, of which books II to VII form the earliest parts. Books I and X seem to have been the latest additions. The *Rig Veda* has many things in common with the *Avesta*, which is the oldest text in the Iranian language. The two texts use the same terms for several gods and even for social classes.

However, the earliest specimen of the Indo-European language is found in an inscription of about 2200 BC from Iraq. Later, such specimens occur in Hittite

inscriptions in Anatolia (Turkey) from the nineteenth to the seventeenth centuries BC. They also figure in the Mycenaean inscriptions of Greece around 1400 BC. Aryan names appear in Kassite inscriptions of about 1600 BC from Iraq and in Mitanni inscriptions of the fourteenth century BC from Syria. However, so far no such inscriptions have been found in India.

The Aryans migrated to India in several waves. The earliest wave is represented by the Rig Vedic people, who came to the subcontinent in about 1500 BC. They came into conflict with the indigenous inhabitants called *dasas*, *dasyus*, etc. As the *dasas* are also mentioned in ancient Iranian literature, they seem to have been a branch of the early Aryans. The *Rig Veda* mentions the defeat of Sambara by a chief called Divodasa of the Bharata clan. In this case, the term *dasa* appears in the name Divodasa. In all probability, the *dasyus* in the *Rig Veda* represent the original inhabitants of India, and an Aryan chief who overpowered them was called Trasadasyu. The Aryan chief was soft towards the *dasas*, but very hostile to the *dasyus*. The term *dasyuhatya*, slaughter of the *dasyus*, is repeatedly used in the *Rig Veda*. The *dasyus* possibly worshipped the phallus and did not husband cattle for dairy products.

## Tribal Conflicts

We know little about the weapons of the adversaries of the Indo-Aryan people, although we hear of many defeats inflicted by Indra on the enemies of the Aryans. In the *Rig Veda*, Indra is called Purandara which means that he destroyed dwelling units. We cannot, however, identify these units held by the pre-Aryans, some of which may have been situated in north Afghanistan. The Indo-Aryans succeeded everywhere because they had chariots drawn by horses, and introduced them for the first time into West Asia and India. The Aryan soldiers were probably also equipped with coats of mail (*varman*) and better arms.

The Indo-Aryans were engaged in two types of conflicts. First, they fought with the pre-Aryans, and secondly, they fought amongst themselves. Intra-tribal conflicts rocked the Aryan communities for a long time. According to tradition, the Aryans were divided into five tribes called *panchajana*, but there might have been other tribes too. The Aryans fought amongst themselves and sometimes enlisted the support of the non-Aryan peoples for the purpose. The Bharatas and the Tritsu were the ruling Aryan clans, and they were supported by priest Vasishtha. The country Bharatavarsha was eventually named after the tribe

Bharata, which is first mentioned in the *Rig Veda*. The Bharata ruling clan was opposed by a host of ten chiefs, five of whom were heads of Aryan tribes and the remaining five of the non-Aryan people. The battle that the Bharatas fought with the host of ten chiefs is known as the Battle of Ten Kings. It was fought on the river Parushni, coterminous with the river Ravi, and it gave victory to Sudas and established the supremacy of the Bharatas. Of the defeated tribes, the most important was that of the Purus. Subsequently, the Bharatas joined hands with the Purus and formed a new ruling tribe called the Kurus. The Kurus combined with the Panchalas, and they together established their rule in the upper Gangetic basin where they played an important role in later Vedic times.

## Cattle Rearing and Agriculture

We can form some idea of the material life of the Rig Vedic Aryans. They owed their success to the use of horses, chariots, and also possibly some better arms made of bronze of which we have very little archaeological evidence. In all probability, they also introduced the spoked wheel which made its debut in the Caucasus area in 2300 BC. When they settled in the western part of the subcontinent, they possibly used copper supplied by the Khetri mines in Rajasthan. The Rig Vedic people had a superior knowledge of agriculture. The ploughshare is mentioned in the earliest part of the *Rig Veda*, though some consider it to be an interpolation, and was possibly made of wood. They were acquainted with sowing, harvesting, and threshing, and knew about the different seasons. Agriculture was also well known to the pre-Aryans who lived in the area associated with the Vedic people, but was perhaps used primarily to produce fodder.

However, there are so many references to the cow and the bull in the *Rig Veda* that the Rig Vedic people can be called a predominantly pastoral people. Most of their wars were fought over cows. The terms for war in the *Rig Veda* is *gavishthi* or search for cows, and cow seems to have been the most important form of wealth. Whenever we hear of gifts made to priests, they usually consist of cows and women slaves and never of land. The Rig Vedic people may have occasionally occupied pieces of land for grazing, cultivation, and settlement, but land did not form a well-established type of private property.

The *Rig Veda* mentions such artisans as the carpenter, chariot-maker, weaver, leather worker, and potter. This indicates that they practised all these crafts. The term *ayas*, used for copper or bronze, shows that metalworking was known. We

do not, however, have clear evidence of the existence of regular trade. The Aryans or the Vedic people principally used the land routes because the word *samudra* mentioned in the *Rig Veda* primarily indicates a stretch of water. Similarly, the term *pur* mentioned in that text means either a dwelling unit or a cluster of such units, not a city or a fort. Sometimes such a unit is credited with a thousand doors, but the term *sahasra* is used as an exaggeration in many places in the *Rig Veda*. Therefore, the Aryans did not live in cities, and possibly lived in some kind of fortified mud settlements which still await satisfactory identification by archaeologists. They were also familiar with caves in the mountains.

Recently a site called Bhagwanpura in Haryana and three other sites in Punjab have yielded Painted Grey Ware along with 'late Harappan' pottery. The date assigned to the Bhagwanpura finds ranges from 1600 to 1000 BC which also roughly corresponds to the period of the *Rig Veda*. The geographical area of these four sites also coincides with that of a substantial portion of the area represented by the *Rig Veda*. Although Painted Grey Ware has been found at all these sites, iron objects and cereals are missing. We may, therefore, think of a pre-iron phase of the PGW which coincided with the Rig Vedic phase. An interesting find at Bhagwanpura is a thirteen-roomed mud house whose dating has not been confirmed. This might indicate either a house for a large extended family or of a tribal chief. Cattle bones are found in substantial numbers at all these sites, and horse bones at Bhagwanpura.

## Tribal Chieftdom

The administrative machinery of the Aryans in the Rig Vedic period functioned with the tribal chief, for his successful leadership in war, at the centre. He was called *rajan*. It seems that in the Rig Vedic period, the king's post had become hereditary. However, the *rajan* was a kind of chief and did not exercise unlimited power, having to reckon with the tribal organizations. We have traces of the election of the king by the tribal assembly called the *samiti*. The king was called the protector of his tribe. He protected its cattle, fought its wars, and offered prayers to the gods on its behalf.

Several tribal or kin-based assemblies such as the *sabha*, *samiti*, *vidatha*, and *gana* are mentioned in the *Rig Veda*. They exercised deliberative, military, and religious functions. Even women attended the *sabha* and *vidatha* in Rig Vedic times. The *sabha* and the *samiti* mattered a great deal in early Vedic times, so

much so that the chiefs or the kings showed an eagerness to win their support.

In the day-to-day administration, the king was assisted by a few functionaries. The most important of these seems to have been the *purohita*. The two priests who played a major role in Rig Vedic times were Vasishtha and Vishvamitra. Vasishtha was a conservative and Vishvamitra a liberal. Vishvamitra composed the *gayatri* mantra to widen the Aryan world. Whoever recited the *gayatri* was admitted to the Aryan fold. Eventually, however, this mantra was made the monopoly of the three higher varnas, and priests did not permit women and shudras to recite it. The Vedic priests inspired the tribal chiefs into action and lauded their exploits in return for handsome rewards in cows and women slaves. Next in rank to the king was the *senani* or the head of the army. He used spears, axes, swords, etc. We do not learn of any officer concerned with the collection of taxes. In all probability, the people made voluntary offerings called *bali* to the *rajan*. Presents and the spoils of war were perhaps distributed in some Vedic assemblies, as is done in kin-based communities. The *Rig Veda* does not mention any officer for administration of justice. It was not, however, an ideal society but one in which there were cases of theft and burglary, and people stole cows. Spies were employed to keep an eye on such antisocial activities.

The titles of the officials do not indicate territorial administration. However, some officers appear to have been attached to territories. They enjoyed positions of authority in the pasture grounds and settled villages. The officer who enjoyed authority over a large stretch of land or pasture ground was called *vrajapati*. He led to battle the heads of the families called *kulapas*, or heads of the fighting hordes called *gramanis*. Initially the *gramani* was just the head of a small tribal kin-based fighting unit called *grama*, but when the unit settled, the *gramani* became the head of the village, and in course of time his position became the same as that of the *vrajapati*.

The king did not maintain any standing army, but in times of war he mustered a militia whose military functions were performed by various tribal groups called *vrata*, *gana*, *grama*, *sardha*. By and large, it was a tribal system of government in which the military element was strong. There was no civil system or territorial administration because people were in the throes of perpetual expansion and migrated from one area to another.

## Tribe and Family

Kinship was the basis of the social structure, and a man was identified by the clan to which he belonged, as can be seen in the names of several Rig Vedic kings. The people's primary loyalty was to the tribe, which was called *jana*. In one of the early verses, the combined strength of the warriors of two tribes is given as twenty-one. This indicates that the total number of members in a tribe may not have exceeded 100. The term *jana* occurs at about 275 places in the *Rig Veda*, and the term *janapada* or territory is not used even once. The people were attached to the tribe as neither control over territory nor the kingdom was yet established.

Another important term which stands for tribe in the *Rig Veda* is *vis*, which is mentioned 170 times in that text. Probably the *vis* was divided into *gramas* or smaller tribal units organized to fight. When the *gramas* clashed with one another, it resulted in *samgrama* or war. The most numerous varna of the vaishyas arose out of the *vis* or the mass of the tribal people. The term for family (*kula*) is rarely mentioned in the *Rig Veda*. It comprised not only mother, father, sons, slaves, etc., but many other people too. It seems that family in the early Vedic phase was denoted by the term *griha*, which frequently occurs in this text. In the earliest Indo-European languages, a single word is used to denote nephew, grandson, cousin, etc. This would imply that differentiation in family relationships leading to the setting up of separate households had not thus far occurred, and the family was a very large joint unit. It was obviously a patriarchal family headed by the father, as was the case in Roman society. It seems that several generations of the family lived under the same roof. As it was a patriarchal society, the birth of a son was repeatedly desired, and people prayed to the gods for brave sons to fight the wars. In the *Rig Veda* no desire is expressed for daughters, though the desire for children and cattle is a recurrent theme in the hymns.

Women could attend assemblies and offer sacrifices along with their husbands. We have an instance of five women who composed hymns, although the later texts mention twenty such women. Evidently the hymns were composed orally, and nothing written relates to that period.

The institution of marriage was established, although symbols of primitive practices survived. We hear of a proposal made by Yami, the twin-sister of Yama, to establish love relations, but the offer is resisted by Yama. We have some indications of polyandry. For instance, the Maruts are stated to have enjoyed Rodasi, and the two Asvin brothers are represented as living with Surya, the daughter of the sun god, but such instances are infrequent. Possibly they indicate matrilineal traces, and we have a few examples of sons being named

after their mother, as in the case of Mamateya.

We also notice the practice of levirate and widow remarriage in the *Rig Veda*. There are no examples of child marriage, and the marriageable age in the *Rig Veda* seems to have been 16 to 17.

## Social Differentiation

The *Rig Veda* displays some consciousness of the physical appearance of people in north-western India in about 1500–1000 BC. Varna was the term used for colour, and it seems that the Indo-Aryan language speakers were fair and the indigenous inhabitants dark in complexion. Colour may have provided the identifier for social orders, but its importance has been exaggerated by writers with an excessive belief in racial distinctions. The factor that contributed most to the creation of social divisions was the conquest of the indigenous inhabitants by the Indo-Aryans. The *dasas* and the *dasyus*, who were conquered by the Aryans, were treated as slaves and shudras. The *Rig Veda* mentions the *arya* varna and *dasa* varna. The tribal chiefs and the priests acquired a larger share of the booty and naturally became wealthy at the cost of their kinsmen, thereby creating social inequalities in the tribe. Gradually the tribal society was divided into three occupational groups, warriors, priests, and the common people on the same pattern as in Iran. The fourth division called the shudras appeared towards the end of the Rig Vedic period. The term shudra is mentioned for the first time in the *Rig Veda* in its tenth book, which is the latest addition.

We repeatedly hear of slaves who were given as gifts to the priests. These were primarily women employed for domestic purposes. It is clear that in Rig Vedic times slaves were not used directly in agriculture or other productive activities.

In the age of the *Rig Veda*, differentiation based on occupations had begun, but this was very sharp. We hear of a family in which a member says: ‘I am a poet, my father is a physician, and my mother is a grinder. Earning a livelihood through different means we live together ...’ We hear of gifts of cattle, chariots, horses, slaves, etc. Unequal distribution of the spoils of war created social inequalities, and this aided the rise of princes and priests at the cost of the common tribal people. However, as the economy was mainly pastoral and not food producing, the scope for collecting regular tributes from the people was very limited. We do not find gifts of land, and even gifts of cereals are rare. We find domestic slaves but not wage-earners. The tribal elements in society were



stronger and social divisions based on the collection of taxes or accumulation of landed property did not exist, and thus the society was still tribal and egalitarian.

## Rig Vedic Gods

Every people discover their religion in their surroundings. The Aryans found it difficult to explain the coming of the rains, the appearance of the sun and the moon, and the existence of the rivers, mountains, and the like. They, therefore, personified these natural forces and looked upon them as living beings to whom they attributed human or animal attributes. We have a large number of such divinities in the *Rig Veda*, which is replete with hymns composed in their honour by the poets of sundry families. The most important divinity in the *Rig Veda* is Indra, who is called Purandara or destroyer of dwelling units. Indra played the role of a warlord, leading the Aryan soldiers to victory against the demons, and has 250 hymns devoted to him. He is considered to be the rain god and thought to be responsible for causing rainfall. The second position is held by Agni (fire god) to whom 200 hymns are devoted. Fire played a significant part in the life of primitive people because of its use in burning forests, cooking, and the like. The cult of fire occupied a central place not only in India but also in Iran. In Vedic times, Agni acted as a kind of intermediary between the gods, on the one hand, and the people, on the other. The oblations offered to Agni were supposed to be carried in the form of smoke to the sky, and thus transmitted to the gods. The third important position is occupied by Varuna who personified water. Varuna was supposed to uphold the natural order; and whatever happened in the world was thought to be the reflection of his desires. Soma was considered to be the god of plants, and an intoxicating drink is named after him. In the *Rig Veda* many hymns explain the methods of preparing this drink from plants that have not so far been satisfactorily identified. The Maruts personify the storm. Many hymns are devoted to the river Sarasvati, who was considered an important goddess. Thus we have many deities who represent the different forces of nature in one form or another but are also assigned human activities.

There are some women divinities too, such as Aditi, and Usha who represented the appearance of the dawn, but they were not prominent at the time of the *Rig Veda*. However, given the patriarchal society of the period, the male gods were far more important than the female.

The dominant mode of worshipping the gods was through the recitation of prayers and performance of sacrifices. Prayers played an important part in Rig

Vedic times, both collective and individual. Originally every tribe or clan was the votary of a special god. It seems that prayers were offered to the gods in chorus by the members of an entire tribe. This also happened in the case of sacrifices: Agni and Indra were invited to partake of sacrifices made by the tribe (*jana*) as a whole. Offerings of vegetables, barley, etc., were made to gods, but in Rig Vedic times this was not accompanied by any ritual or sacrificial formulae. At this stage the magical power of the word was not considered as important as it became in later Vedic times. Why did people worship gods during the Rig Vedic period? They did not do so for their spiritual uplift or for ending the miseries of existence. They principally asked for *praja* (children), *pashu* (cattle), food, wealth, health, and the like.

## Chronology

(BC)	
2300	Spoked wheel found in the Caucasus area.
2 M	The Indo-Iranian Andronovo culture covered the whole of Central Asia.
1900–1700	Specimens of Indo-European language in Hittite inscriptions in Anatolia.
1900–1500	Bactria–Margiana Archaeological Complex (BMAC) in south Central Asia.
1600	Aryan names in Kassite inscriptions from Iraq.
1600–1000	The date assigned to the PGW and late Harappan pottery from Bhagwanpura.
1500	The Aryan migration in the subcontinent represented by the <i>Rig Veda</i> . Domestic horse, chariots with spoked wheels, partial cremation, and the svastika motif in the BMAC.
1400	Specimens of the Indo-European language in the Mycenaean inscription of Greece.
1400 onwards	Horse remains and post-cremation burials in the Swat valley.
1400 onwards	Ceramics from south Central Asia similar to those of the Swat valley.
14 C	Aryan names in Mitanni inscriptions in Syria.