

THE  
RIG-VEDIC  
AND  
POST-RIG-VEDIC  
POLITY  
(1500 BCE - 500 BCE)

**R.U. S. PRASAD, Ph.D**



VERNON PRESS

*Dedicated to my son Shantanu*  
*For his human qualities*

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# Chapter I

## Introduction

*“The Vedas, I feel convinced, will occupy scholars for centuries to come, and we take and maintain forever, its position as the most ancient of books in the library of mankind”.*

**- Friedrich Max Müller**

### **Vedic Age (1500 BCE- 500 BCE)**

The story of Vedic India begins with the demise of mature Harappan phase around 1900 BCE and ingress of Aryans in successive batches around 1500 BCE into the northwestern region of the Indian sub-continent. The collapse of the mature Harappan phase was triggered most likely by ecological or tectonic reasons. The Harappan civilization was urban centric with well laid out urban settlements and a high level of cultural organization. The disintegration of the urban phase, scholars believe, occurred in a progressive manner and involved an eastward drift of population to regions corresponding to modern Saurashtra, Haryana and Delhi where some elements of the Harappan culture still survived. The settlements in these regions, however, do not provide any conclusive evidence for survival of any critical feature of the Harappan culture, such as, international trade, seals, drainage system etc. In fact, the post-urban phase witnessed a return to, what Allchin calls, the material culture ‘closer to that of the pre-urban stage.’<sup>3</sup> The demise of this civilization also had another important fall-out. With the disappearance of the semblance of economic and political unity, which the mature Harappan phase represented, a power vacuum was created in the region to the northwest of India. This presented an opportunity for incursions by the pastoralist Vedic tribes who ventured into the region around 1500 BCE. Later they moved to areas along the river Yamuna and even the Ganges as can be inferred from the later vedic texts. The network of Vedic tribes was thus established in the entire region which would correspond to the area of the Greater Panjab up to Delhi and the upper Ganges as well as adjacent areas in Afghanistan.

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<sup>3</sup> The Archaeology of Early Historic South Asia- the emergence of city and states: Allchin F.R., Cambridge University Press, 1995. P.38

The question of the origin of the Vedic Aryans is a hotly debated issue among the scholars and it continues to be so. This issue has been discussed in detail in Appendix I of the book. There is, no meeting point between the nationalist discourse which regards the Vedic Aryans as indigenous people, and the protagonists of migration theory who hold that the Vedic Aryans came from outside. There is, however, a broad consensus among the scholars which favours their migration from the Central Asian region. The movement of Vedic Aryans from this region, it is believed, was actuated by their desire to escape from harsh living conditions they faced and a search for a more hospitable terrain to elude a living. This seems plausible since even Alexander<sup>4</sup> during his campaign had to encounter the rigours of inhospitable terrain of the Central Asian region and serious logistical crisis, when he led his troops early in the spring of 329 BCE, north across the Hindukush into Bactria. This was the first of many such disasters he encountered due to “exceptionally harsh weather and rugged terrain of the area”. Initially, the Vedic tribes were confined to areas surrounding Afghan mountains as the older books of the Ṛgveda (Books 4 and 6) seem to suggest. This region, where they initially settled had semi-arid climate and suffered from paucity of rain. This did not present to them as an ideal location for their settlement and soon they moved eastwards in search of arable land and better pastures along the lower Himalayan foothills. Finally, they found the vast expanse of the Sapta-Sindhu<sup>5</sup> region which covers the northwestern plank of the Indian sub-continent as suitable for their settlement. The region was endowed with availability of water on a regular basis and a salubrious climate which the Aryans found very attractive for pursuing their pastoral profession in an unhindered manner. The climatic factors and the availability of water seem to have been a crucial and determining element in the movement of the Indo-Aryan speaking tribes in successive stages. Discussing the

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<sup>4</sup> The geographical situation of Central Asia as described in *The LandMark Arrian (The Campaigns of Alexander)* Ed. James Romm , Pantheon Books, New York, 2010 (A new translation by Pamela Mensch).

<sup>5</sup> The standard list of rivers included under the expression Sapta-Sindhu fluctuates. It is common to identify this expression with seven rivers, namely, Kubhā(Kabul), Sindhu(the Indus), Vitastā (Jhelum), Asiknī(Chenab), Paruṣṇī (Ravi), Vipāś (Beas) and Śutudrī (Sutlej). These rivers along with rivers Sarasvati and Gomāl (Gomati) find mention in the Book X hymn 75 of the Rig-Veda but the river Vipāś (Beas) is missing here.

importance of water availability, Harry Falk<sup>6</sup> has attributed this as a factor in the movement of the Indo-Aryan tribes from the Central Asian region “fed by the melting snows for a short time in spring with changing quantities from year to year” to the region along the Sapta-Sindhu fed by perennial rivers drawing water from the melting Himalayan snow. The availability of regular water supply haunted the Aryans again when they moved towards east in the Madhyadesa region (Uttar Pradesh and surrounding areas), where they had to face the uncertainties of monsoon rains. The mythology regarding Indra’s (Warrior god) victory over the cosmic serpent Vṛtra resulting in liberation of waters, underscores the importance of water availability for Vedic Aryans for meeting their economic needs as also performance of rituals. This event also led to personification of Indra as a god of the rains.

The other credible reason for the movement of the Indo-Aryans from the Central Asian region could have been the demise of the urban civilization that flourished in the Indus Valley and the abandonment of settlements in the Indus and Sarasvati<sup>7</sup> regions. The course of infiltration towards the north-west region initially and from there to fertile plains eastwards was, perhaps, actuated by the search for better pastures and arable land that was more conducive to the production of crops such as, rice and millet.

However, on coming to the north-west region of India, the Aryan tribes encountered antagonism from both man and nature. First, they had to struggle to secure their existence from the original inhabitants who offered resistance; secondly, they had to devise formulae for overcoming the vagaries of nature. To meet the first challenge, required better leadership, formidable (perceived as *manly*) warriors and more effective resources.

The use of horses and light-spoked wheel chariots which they had brought, helped them to outmanoeuvre their opponents when faced with

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<sup>6</sup> “The Purpose of Rig-Vedic Ritual”: H.Falk in *Inside the Texts Beyond the Texts*, Harvard Oriental Series, Opera Minora Vol.II, Cambridge 1997.

<sup>7</sup> Sarasvati is believed to have been a mighty river during the Vedic period and finds mention several times in the R̥gveda. This river is believed to have originated from the Shivalik hills in the Panjab (India) and ran its full course parallel to the Indus river before emptying itself in the Rann of Kutch. Recent researches associate this river with a palaeo channel, a dried up river bed and links it with the Harappan sites prior to the demise of the Harappan civilization around 1900 BCE.

such resistance. The Ṛgveda mentions about such resistance in the stone forts of the local leader Śambara<sup>8</sup> in the mountainous area of the Northwest. The Vedic tribes ensured their success through effective use of these resources. They also turned to deities to obtain success in such encounters. The Ṛgvedic hymns abound in invocations to Indra, perceived as a warrior god, seeking his benediction for success in battle and to shower his blessings on the clan. Whitaker<sup>9</sup> while discussing the importance of masculine gods in the Ṛgvedic hymns, also refers to poet-priests insistence on men to keep Indra on their side in the eventuality of a war and “that this relationship can be achieved only through ritual performances”. To meet the second challenge of escaping the vagaries of nature, they invoked different deities found in the Vedic hymns, such as Varuṇa (lord of cosmic law), Agni (Fire god), Marut (a group of deities symbolizing storm, thunder, lightning, wind and rain), Uṣas (the goddess of Dawn) and Prithvi (the earth) etc., who personified nature in its various forms. The Vedic Aryans did not worship animal figures unlike the Harappans.

The process of migration into the new found territory was, however, not entirely disruptive. Such skirmishes with the indigenous tribes did not halt the progress of Indo-Aryan culture. The long duration of the Ṛgvedic period, as many scholars contend, drawing support from the various Ṛgvedic hymns, could not have passed without close interaction at different levels between the Aryan and non-Aryan tribes. This interaction was mostly but not always one of acrimony and constant strife but also had a peaceful dividend reflected in the initiation of “multiple processes of cultural, social and linguistic acculturation” on mutual basis between the two. While, on the one hand, this led to the adaptation by the local tribes to the salient features of Aryan culture, such as Vedic Sanskrit, Vedic gods, pastoralism and social structure, on the other, some non-Aryan words also entered Ṛgvedic lexicon, such as, names of low level deities piśāca, Cūmuri, and names of poets like Kaṇva and Kavaṣa.

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<sup>8</sup> According to Macdonell and Keith in Vedic Index Vol.II, the name Sambara finds mention in various books of Rig-veda (Bk.i. 51,6; 54,4; 59,6; I0I,2; I03,8; Bk.ii. I2,II; Bk.iv.26,3; 30,I4;Bk.vi.I8,8;26,5; Bk.vii.I8,20; 99,5. He is reckoned as an enemy of Indra. He is supposed to have had a number of forts, variously mentioned in the Rig-veda with Divodasa as his great enemy who won victories over him with Indra’s aid. Sambara was believed to be an aboriginal enemy, living in the mountains

<sup>9</sup> Strong Arms and Drinking Strength, Whitaker, J.L., OUP, 2011, P. 18

The culmination of these processes resulted in “Aryanization” of local population and “Indianization” of the immigrating Indo-Aryans. This is clearly reflected in the researches of Kuiper who has established how the language of the Aryan tribes was brought “into harmony with the languages of the indigenous families, in particular Dravidian and Munda”.<sup>10</sup> Kuiper<sup>11</sup> has also carried out a detailed analysis of words of foreign origin in the R̥gvedic lexemes and concluded that they constitute approximately 4 percent. This figure, he maintains, represents a much slower process of Aryanization as compared to western societies where the process of acculturation is much faster. This is primarily because the local population did not have to adjust to the new environment ushered in by the Aryans as they were already ‘firmly rooted in their dwelling places and probably were in the majority’.

On the political plane too, there are instances of Aryan kings with non-Aryan names, such as Balbutha and B̥r̥bu.<sup>12</sup> This was something similar to what happened later to Alexander’s empire after his demise which broke up into Hellenistic kingdoms each with its own dynasty.<sup>13</sup> While Alexander’s campaigns ensured spread of Greek culture, “the Hellenistic kingdoms revealed a two way effects of accommodation and assimilation”.

It is generally acknowledged that the Indo-Aryan speaking people who came to India sometime in the second millennium BCE, composed the Vedic texts which not only contain rituals and their explanation but also philosophical speculation. They are also regarded as the first reference point of political thought and institutions in ancient India. The Vedic literature which were compiled in different time span, show how the Indian thought process underwent a change in successive phases and what impact it had on political and social institutions and the way of life of Vedic Aryans. The Vedic corpus bequeathed by the Vedic Aryans stands out as their monumental gift to mankind.

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<sup>10</sup> The genesis of a Linguistic Area, Kuiper, F.B.J, Text of the Collitz lecture delivered at the summer meeting of the Linguistic Society of America at Ann Arbor, July 30, 1965.

<sup>11</sup> Aryans in the R̥gveda, F.B.J. Kuiper, Rodopi B.V., Amsterdam-Atlanta, GA 1991, Printed in The Netherlands

<sup>12</sup> Electronic Journal of Vedic Studies, Vol.2, 1966

<sup>13</sup> Arrian Alexander the Great, The Anabasis and the Indica, Trans. by Martin Hammond, Oxford World’s Classics, 2013, P.Xii

After the Indus civilization, the influx of these Vedic tribes is regarded as the next important development in shaping early Indian civilization. The Vedic age, in fact, is identified with the timeline of the composition of Vedic texts, beginning with the composition of the Ṛgveda, the oldest and the most venerated Vedic text for which the maximally possible time frame is reckoned between 1400-1000 BCE. This period is characterized as the Rgvedic phase.

The time frame for the composition of the later Vedic texts, namely, the Yajur-Veda, the Sāma-Veda, the Atharva-Veda, the Brāhmaṇas, the Āraṇyakas ending with the Upaniṣads is suggested as the early part of the first millennium BCE which is identified with the post Ṛgvedic phase. To the list of the later Vedic texts, the Dharmasūtras, the earliest law books, written circa 500 BCE-200 BCE could also be added in the category of post Ṛgvedic texts and identified with the post Ṛgvedic phase. These Dharmasūtras deal with taxation, property, family matters and issues having a bearing on political institutions and social life of the time. These taken together constitute the Vedic corpus. Thus the Vedic corpus encompasses various phases of socio-political development, ranging from the Ṛgvedic to Atharva-Vedic times and that of the other Mantra collections (post Ṛgvedic) of the Yajur-Veda, the Sāma-Veda and the Rgveda Khilas and the period of the early Krishna Yajur-Veda prose.

These texts mirror the social, religious and philosophical speculation of the Indian mind, and present a curious blend of religion with politics where the practice of *Rta* (cosmic law later morphed into Dharma) – as the highest harmonizing principle – regulates the political and social order. The contents of Vedic literature cover a vast ground with the hymns of the Ṛgveda, usually addressed to the Vedic gods, providing a brilliant exposition of the personified power of nature; the Yajur-Veda representing liturgical formulas and growing complexity in ritualistic practice; the Sāma-Veda, borrowing heavily from the Ṛgveda as is the case with the other Vedas, with verses to be chanted at Soma sacrifice and the Atharva-Veda, containing charms and spells as also blessings and curses, as well as theosophic matters.

The other strand of the Vedic literature, consists of the Brāhmaṇas, the Āraṇyakas, the Upaniṣads and the earlier Sūtras. The Brāhmaṇas provide explanation of rituals to be practiced during sacrificial ceremonies; the Āraṇyakas, also called 'Forest Books' and being mystical in their contents, were supposed to be communicated by the teacher to the disciples in the solitude of the forest. The Upaniṣads, characterized by philosophical

speculation, represented the evolved mindset of Vedic Aryans. As Brian Black<sup>14</sup> puts it “the Upanishadic orientation towards the self marks a significant transformation in relation to previous Vedic literature, which primarily focuses on the description and meaning of ritual actions.” The earlier Sūtras represented the first attempt towards systematizing Brahmanic rituals and provided the guidelines for conduct of daily life.

The predominantly religious character of Vedic literature, and high philosophical content of the Upaniṣads led some scholars to view the persona of Vedic Aryans as a group of inward looking people with natural inclination towards metaphysics and self-introspection. Max Müller<sup>15</sup>, a great German scholar and Indologist, who produced monumental works covering different aspects of the Vedic literature, also extolled the metaphysical side of the Indian mind and described the Hindus as “a nation of philosophers”. On the face of it, such observations seem to be credible since the tenor of social, religious and political life of Vedic Aryans was guided by the cardinal principle of Rta (Cosmic and social law). This gravitated their thinking towards natural philosophy and introspection. Geographical factors also influenced the psyche of Vedic Aryans in no small measure. This draws support from the geographical location of India, being bounded by the sea on three sides with the great Himalayan range casting its shadow from the north. It was in the Sapta-Sindhu region that the Ṛgvedic texts were composed during the early second millennium BCE. The references of names, places, rivers, events etc. occurring in this text unmistakably belong to this region and not the places significant in the Harappan context.

The two phases of the Vedic period, namely, the Ṛgvedic Saṃhitā period and the Mantra period (during which the Post-Ṛgvedic texts were composed) differ from each other in many respects. Geographically, the Ṛgvedic period flourished in the north and north-west regions including the Sapta-Sindhu areas whereas during the post-Ṛgvedic period, the scene of activities shifted to the Ganga-Yamuna belt, Madhyadesha (Central region) and further towards east and the south. Politically, the early phase was dominated by some major and many smaller Vedic tribes; the Ṛgvedic

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<sup>14</sup> The Character of the Self in Ancient India, Brian Black, State University of New York Press, 2007. P.1

<sup>15</sup> F.Max Muller, A History of Ancient Sanskrit Literature, Vol.1, P.30-31, second revised edition, 1860, Williams and Norgate, 20 South Frederick Street, Edinburgh

period is essentially a story of two major tribes, the Pūrus and later the Bharatas, covering a span of some five or six generations of their kings, characterized by intermittent strife. This period was interspersed with the presence of only a few of the other prominent tribes during the early R̥gvedic period. These were the Yadus-Turvaśas; Anus-Druhyus and later joined by the Pūrus.

The Vedic polity in the earlier phase was both tribal and pastoral in character. Romila Thapar<sup>16</sup>, an eminent historian, prefers to describe the tribal phase of the R̥gvedic polity as “lineage society” as this term represented “the centrality of lineage in all its aspects... particularly in relation to power and access to resources [...]”. During the early Vedic period, the tribal chief or the ruling elite derived legitimacy through lineage and this factor was considered vital for differentiation between the ruling elite and the people outside the elite group. It was not a homogenous entity but consisted of several tribal groupings with different identities, inhabiting different locations. Names of various clans find mention in the R̥gveda, some representing Indo-Aryan speaking stock while others belonging to indigenous stream. The broad social division consisted of the Vedic tribes and the non-Vedic people. These two categories were differentiated on grounds of colour of their skin or as Romila Thapar<sup>17</sup> describes it as adherence to ‘different cultural forms’. The governance structure was fairly simple and so was the ritual practice excepting Soma ritual which became fairly complex even in the R̥gvedic period. The lowest unit in the structure of the R̥gvedic polity was the family (Kula), following patriarchal norms with grāma (equivalent to a village) as the next higher tier, followed by a group of clans. The Vedic Jana was the highest social unit which represented the whole tribe. The role of protector devolved upon that individual in the tribe who was considered the most capable of protecting the interest of his tribe. Such an individual donned the mantle of chief of the tribe. A question has sometimes been raised whether an institution of spies had existed during the early Vedic period. In the R̥gvedic, the word *spas*, denoting a spy, occurs 14 times. For example, the sun or the stars are taken to be the spy of the gods; however, it needs to be clarified that an organized spy system had not yet emerged during the Vedic period. The need for the same, perhaps, did not arise for

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<sup>16</sup> From Lineage to State, Romila Thapar, OUP, New Delhi, 1990, P.18

<sup>17</sup> The Penguin History of Early India-From the Origins to AD 1300, Romila Thapar,2002, P.112

administering small tribal communities. For the Vedic period, Scharfe<sup>18</sup> also maintains that “the rulers of small tribal communities had sufficient opportunities to run informal checks on their employees and subjects as also to gather information on their neighbors. Even covert operations hardly needed an organizational set up.”

The post-Rgvedic phase witnessed a consolidation of tribes under the umbrella of two major groups of tribes, namely, the Kuru-Pañcāla and the Kosala-Videha. There was perceptible social stratification of society into four classes with the Brahmins and Kṣatriyas emerging strong against the Vaiśyas and Śūdras who were relegated to the last two tiers of society. Perceptible changes also occurred in ritual practices, which had now become much more complex. Similarly, the governance structure no longer remained a simple framework but assumed a more elaborate character in order to meet the requirement of additional manpower arising from changes in the structure of the polity and diversification of economic activities. The spy system which was non-existent during the Rgvedic period, however, appeared much later during the Mauryan times. The Mauryan kings maintained a network of spy system which covered all parts of empire. These spies secretly fed information to the king about officials, ministers and people. The occupational structure of the society also underwent a change with agriculture and crafts becoming an important feature of economic activities.

Indeed the coming of the Vedic tribes in the Sapta-Sindhu region (qualified by seven rivers, namely, Kubhā (Kabul), Sindhu (the Indus), Vitastā (Jhelum), Asiknī (Chenab), Paruṣṇī (Ravi), Vipāś (Beas)<sup>19</sup> and Śutudrī (Sutlej) and their later movement towards further east and south east was an event of great political and social significance. It was not just a conquest process through use of horses or light spoked wheel chariots but, perhaps, a beginning of acculturation process both in political and socio-cultural terms to which both the Vedic Aryans and the indigenous tribes contributed in successive phases.

The foregoing serves as a brief account of developments that followed the arrival of the Vedic Aryans in the Indian sub-continent up to the

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<sup>18</sup> *The State in Indian Tradition*, Hartmut Scharfe, E.J. Brill, Leiden, The Netherlands, 1989, P. 160

<sup>19</sup> The name of Vipāś is missing in the list of names of rivers which find a mention in Book X, hymn 75 of the Rig-Veda. The list, however, includes the rivers Sarasvati and Gomāl (Gomati).

redaction of their monumental texts beginning with the Ṛgveda to the earlier Sūtras, the time-line spanning 1500 BCE- 400 BCE. However, the composition of these texts and the matter they contain have been variously interpreted by scholars, with those following a western line of investigation and others who veer round the nationalist discourse holding diametrically opposite views on the subject. One also comes across different views depending upon the time-line of the scholars. The 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries Western scholars mostly viewed these texts from a religious lens, with Frederick von Max Muller describing indulgence in metaphysics and philosophical speculation as the special forte of Vedic Aryans. The scholars of their ilk, perhaps, missed to uncover or highlight non-theological content situated in these texts. The nationalistic stream of scholars while eulogizing India's past, also ferreted out evidence from the Vedic hymns to substantiate their claim of linkages between some aspects of Vedic political institutions with institutions such as the state and other representative bodies that we know in the modern context. No doubt, one does come across in the Ṛgvedic hymns and other vedic texts, mention of various terms like Rajan (King), the Sabha (a clan assembly, later evolved into an elite body) and the Samiti (folk assembly, also used, according to some scholars, for consultation on important matters), Purohita (the priest) and other subsidiary entities in the administrative apparatus, but these have to be appreciated keeping the context in view. How far such a view-point could be sustained in the modern context, is open to question. Between the two opposing viewpoints, perhaps, the truth lies somewhere in between.

We, however, cannot ignore the fact these institutions of the Vedic period bore seeds of political institutions which flowered later towards the end of the post Ṛgvedic period and assumed a definite shape when we come to the age of the Mauryas and the Guptas. A distinct trend and a new approach is now seen among the Western and Indian scholars to go beyond purely religious aspects of the Vedic texts and provide new interpretation to what is embedded in these texts. For example, Theodore Proferes<sup>20</sup>, comes up with a new interpretation to the three-fold hierarchy of fires practiced by Vedic Aryans and relates it to the Vedic view of sovereignty (his views are discussed later in the book while dealing with Vedic concept of sovereignty). Drifting away from the nationalist

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<sup>20</sup> Vedic Ideals of Sovereignty and the Poetics of Power, Theodore N. Proferes, American Oriental Series, Vol.90, New Haven, Connecticut, 2007. P.23-25

discourse, R.S. Sharma<sup>21</sup>, an eminent historian underscores the importance of “social and economic processes” in the development of polity in ancient India. Others of his ilk discuss the importance of discovery of iron around 1000 BCE and breakdown of kin structure during the post Ṛgvedic phase in the context of their impact on the nature of Vedic polity. This is not to suggest that ritualism that pervades the Vedic period and is the centre-piece of Vedic texts ceased to be a factor. Far from it, the stranglehold of ritualism, in fact grew as we traverse from the Ṛgvedic to post Ṛgvedic period and continued to exercise great influence on Vedic polity in all its aspects. The ritualistic practices, particularly after an extensive Srauta reform, became very complex during the post Ṛgvedic phase and since the priestly class being well-versed with these rituals, were the only people possessing the ability to execute them, there was an exponential increase in their importance and authority. The king also perceived that it was only through the medium of the priests he could perform such rituals to connect with the god and receive his benediction for strengthening his position. This confluence of interest prepared the ground for the development of a close nexus between the Brahmins (priestly class) and the king. The performance of complex rituals posited the king as the chief sacrificer and provided him with an occasion to assert his authority among the people. The priestly class also saw in this an opportunity to ensure and consolidate their elevated status in the society. This strong alliance between the king and the priestly class came to be euphemistically described as “Brahma-Kṣatra” which did not go unchallenged towards the end of the post Ṛgvedic phase. The continued brahminical dominance and complex ritualistic practices evoked sharp reaction from society during this phase and the emergence of two rational schools of thought, Buddhism and Jainism is seen as a reaction against the brahminical dominance and evil aspects of ritualistic practices.

Indian culture and civilization continue to be tied to the umbilical cord of the values and philosophy enunciated in the Vedic texts. This continuity is evident in language, literature, social and religious practices. The recitation of Vedic hymns on religious and social occasions continue to be in vogue till the present day. Indeed the evolution of Indian thought process from the stage of worship of nature deities as seen during the Rig-Vedic period to philosophical speculation involving a spirit of inquiry, a search for truth and self-realization as embedded in the Upaniṣads, is

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<sup>21</sup> Aspects of Political Ideas and Institutions in Ancient India, R.S. Sharma, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, Delhi, Reprint 2009. P.414

unparalleled in the history of human civilizations. This has imparted vitality to the Indian civilization and accounts for the continuity of its core values and traditions despite a long period of trials and tribulations and that of alien rule it has been subjected to. It remains a country where the ancient sages divined the Vedas and composed the Upaniṣads and disseminated the spirit of inner peace, truth and eternal bliss. Putting across in the context of Indian civilization, Dr S. Radhakrishnan<sup>22</sup>, an eminent philosopher says that “the civilization which is inspired by the spiritual insight of our sages is marked by a certain moral integrity, a fundamental loyalty, a fine balance of human desires and social demands, and it is these that are responsible for its vitality and continuity.”

While the continuity with the past culture in many aspects denotes the vitality of the Indian civilization, the linkages with the past seems to have been lost in the case of some of the other ancient civilizations, such as the Egyptian and the Mesopotamian. The Egyptian civilization flourished on the banks of river Nile some five thousand years ago. It has to its credit unique achievements under the successive rule of Pharaohs in the spheres of art, architecture, culture, language, mathematics and astronomy. The civilization, however, decayed after the end of the rule of the last of the Pharaoh in 343 BCE, following defeat at the hands of the Persians, and later under the Greek, Roman and Arab occupation. What survives now are the monuments and the relics that serve as a reminder of the glorious past of this great civilization. The Mesopotamian civilization flourished in the valley between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Around 3000 BCE, the Sumerians, Akkadians, Babylonians and Assyrians inhabited the region of ancient Mesopotamia. The invention of the first writing by the Sumerians was the high point of this civilization. Various factors including the chaotic situation in the aftermath of the fall of the last Sumerian dynasty around 2000 BCE, are attributed for the decline of this civilization. In the case of this civilization also the link with the past no longer survives.

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<sup>22</sup> Dr S. Radhakrishnan, *The Cultural Heritage of India*, Vol.I, P.xxiii, The Rama Krishna Mission, Institute of Culture, Kolkata, First ed. 1937.

## Dating of the Ṛgveda

Various attempts have been made by scholars to date the Ṛgveda on different parameters. Some scholars, like Arnold<sup>23</sup> use metrical tests; others, including Ludwig<sup>24</sup> and Jacobi<sup>25</sup>, prefer astronomical factors; still others rely on discoveries at Boghaz-Koi (where names identical to Ṛgvedic gods, namely, Indra, Varuṇa, Mitra and Nāsatya [Aśvin]) have been found in Mitanni records of 14<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Hence, it seems plausible to assume the Mitannian records as predating the Ṛgveda. The names of these gods are just one item among many others (royal names, horse colours etc. etc.) that are Indo-Aryan. This finds support from Prof. Michael Witzel, who holds that “the dates of Mitanni and Kassite documents point to mid-2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE” and that “their form is clearly pre-Ṛgvedic”. This, according to him, is a clear pointer to the fact that the composition of the Ṛgveda would have taken place after 1600/1500 BCE and the bulk of Ṛgvedic hymns is likely to have been composed between c.1250- 1100 BCE. This position holds good unless there is a change in the date of ‘first smelted iron’ or unless new discoveries in Bactria, Sīstān, the Hindukush and Gandhara throw some new light on the movement of Indo-Aryan speakers.<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps, if we juxtapose the time frame of composition of bulk of the Ṛgvedic, with the time frame of 5-6 generations of kings and of contemporary poets of the Pūru-Bharata tribes, it will be reasonable to conclude that the beginning of the Ṛgvedic period is somewhere around 1500 BCE. and if we take into account 1000 BCE as the possible date for

<sup>23</sup> Professor Edwin Arnold is credited with the research connected with determination of different stages in the composition of the Ṛgveda and he does so by dividing the text into five layers using the metrical test. Keith, however, finds this criterion as “unsound” as it depends “on a purely hypothetical reconstruction of the metrical history of the hymns...” (Keith, *The Religion and Philosophy of the Veda*, Pt.I, P.3).

<sup>24</sup> Ludwig has deduced 11<sup>th</sup> century BCE as the date for Ṛgveda on the basis of two eclipses mentioned in that text. Reference, Keith’s *The Religion and Philosophy of the Veda*, Pt.I, P.4

<sup>25</sup> Prof. Jacobi has expressed the view that the Ṛgveda dates back to 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE. Reference, Keith’s *The Religion and Philosophy of the Veda*, Pt.I, P.4

<sup>26</sup> “Mitanni Indo-Aryan Mazda and the date of the Ṛgveda”, Michael Witzel, in *The Complex Heritage of Early India-Essays in Memory of R.S. Sharma*, Edited by D.N. Jha, Manohar Publishers, 2014

the introduction of iron in the north-west region on the basis of recently available archaeological inputs and also the fact there is no mention of iron in the Ṛgvedic texts, the end of the Ṛgvedic period could be placed at 1000 BCE. The fact that iron does not figure in the Ṛgveda and only appears in the post Ṛgvedic texts, it follows that the composition and completion of the Ṛgvedic texts would have taken place before c. 1000 BCE. This is also because the language of the Ṛgveda is slightly later than the language of the Mitanni records<sup>27</sup> and the Ṛgvedic period is believed to be much later than the common Indo-Iranian period (around 2000 BCE). Max Müller has assumed that the Ṛgvedic hymns were composed between 1200 and 1000 years before the Christian era and the later Samhitās between 1000 and 800 years before the Christian era. Max Müller's views on dating of the Ṛgveda are merely based on the model which allows 200 years for each of the four stages for composition of Vedic texts. There is also a view that the composition of the Ṛgveda took place during 1400-1000 BCE while the other Vedas were composed around 1000 BCE.

The maximally possible time frame of 1400-1000 BCE for the Ṛgvedic period explains the redaction of the Ṛgveda in two stages – first, relating to the period of kings of the Pūru-Bharata tribes, and the second, the period of the Kurus when the Book X was added to the corpus. The political and social life evolved considerably during the second stage. In the first phase, the Aryan tribes on coming mostly from the Central Asian region, settled down in the Sapta-Sindhu region. The Pūrus and the Bharatas were the dominant tribes in this region. The most notable incident during this period was the Bharata victory under Sudās over the “Ten Kings alliance.” (RV VII, Hymn 18). Despite the evidence brought out as above, the issue regarding dating of the Ṛgveda, is still far from being resolved. The refrain of nationalist discourse, however, has been to link the drying up of the Vedic river Sarasvatī around 1900 BCE due to “a major seismic activity in the Himalayan region”<sup>28</sup> with the abandonment of population of mature Harappan phase at Kalibangan (located on the left bank of the river Ghaggar, in Hanumangarh district of Rajasthan, India) around the same time. This, according to them is a clear indication that the Ṛgveda, in

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<sup>27</sup> Michael Witzel's article Mitanni Indo-Aryan Mazdā and the date of the RV in R.S. Sharma Memorial Volume, 2014.

<sup>28</sup> Vedic River Sarasvatī and Hindu Civilization, Ed. S. Kalyanaraman, PP.104-05, Aryan Books International, New Delhi, 2008.

which the Vedic river Sarasvati finds mention several times, was composed earlier than 1900 BCE and that the Aryans were an indigenous people rather than migrants. It has also been stated that the poets of the Rig-Veda, in which the Sarasvati river and Vedic seers find mention in several hymns, could not have been in the Sarasvati region if we subscribe to the generally accepted position on the dating of the Rig-Veda.

This view seems to erase the distinction between the mature Harappan phase and the beginning of the R̥gvedic phase which, perhaps, it is difficult to establish conclusively at this stage. In support of the current position regarding the dating of the Rig-Veda, it has been pointed out that the important traits of the mature Harappan phase are not to be found during the R̥gvedic period. For example, the Harappan polity had an urban character while pastoralism characterized the R̥gvedic phase. There is hardly much credible evidence of horses being used in Harappa while the animal is a key feature of the R̥gvedic rituals and was also used in skirmishes against the indigenous tribes.

The possibility of migration of Vedic Aryans from Central Asian region after the demise of the mature Harappan phase, also finds some corroboration at the linguistic level. An intimate relationship is seen between languages spoken in Central Asia (BMAC)<sup>29</sup> and that of the Punjab region. Lubotsky<sup>30</sup>, while examining the structure of the Indo-Iranian substratum, has observed that “the phonological and morphological features of Indo-Iranian loan words are strikingly similar to those which are characteristic of Sanskrit loan words” and this indicates that the substratum of Indo-Iranian and Indo-Aryans represent the same language. The occurrence of such loan words in the R̥gveda is also a pointer to possible immigration of the Aryans from the Central Asian

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<sup>29</sup> Bactria-Margiana Archaeological Complex

<sup>30</sup> A. Lubotsky, The Indo-Iranian Substratum, Early Contacts between Uralic and Indo-European linguistic and Archaeological Considerations; Paper presented at University of Helsinki, 8-10, January, 1999.

region which also helps in dating the Rgveda. Witzel<sup>31</sup> has also drawn attention towards a large body of loan words in the oldest Indian and Iranian texts to substantiate the use of the pre-Indo-Iranian languages by people inhabiting the region of BMAC (Bactria-Margiana Archaeological Complex). Edwin Bryant<sup>32</sup>, however, questions the basis of “evidence of a linguistic substratum in Indo-Aryan” as a determining element for the origin of Indo-Aryan.

The above discussions clearly bring out the divide that exists among the scholars as regards the dating of the Rgveda. Currently, the broadly accepted view is to relate the composition of the Rgveda to a period after the arrival of the Aryans (or Indo-Aryans as some scholars prefer to use this terminology) in the Sapta-Sindhu region following the demise of the mature Harappan phase. This position can undergo a change, as Witzel maintains, if any fresh archaeological inputs become available or some credible evidence emerges which may change the currently accepted date of around 1000 BCE for the introduction of iron in the north-west region.

## **Timeline of the later Vedic Texts**

The timeline of the later Vedic texts, such as, Yajur, Sama and Atharva Vedas which were compiled in Haryana and Western Uttar Pradesh, is generally taken to be the early part of the first millennium BCE. The Brahmanas, Aranyakas, and the Upanisads which also form another strand of the later Vedic texts, were also compiled in Western Uttar Pradesh, during the first half of the first millennium BCE. However, some of them, such as Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa and Brhad Āraṇyaka Upaniṣad were compiled during this period in eastern Uttar Pradesh/Bihar. To the list of

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<sup>31</sup> Witzel, M. Linguistic Evidence for Cultural Exchange in Prehistoric Western Central Asia. Philadelphia: Sino-Platonic Papers 129, Dec. 2003 [http://www.sino-platonic.org/complete/spp129\\_prehistoric\\_central\\_asia\\_linguistics.pdf](http://www.sino-platonic.org/complete/spp129_prehistoric_central_asia_linguistics.pdf) (accessed on 20 March, 2013, In this paper, Witzel has referred to a large number of loan words pertaining to agriculture, flora and fauna and rituals in the oldest Indian and Iranian texts which were part of the languages spoken in the areas covered by the Bactria-Margiana Archaeological Complex (BMAC). These pre-Indo-Iranian languages later found their way into Iran and Northern India. See also Witzel, M. “Early Sources for South Asian Substrate Languages”, Mother Tongue, Special Issue, Oct. 1999.

<sup>32</sup> Aryan and Non-Aryan in South Asia, Ed. J. Bronkhorst and M.M Despande, Manohar, 2012, P.80

the later Vedic texts, the earlier Dharmasūtras, the earliest law books, written circa 500-200 BCE could also be added since they deal with issues having a bearing on political institutions and social life of the time and also with taxation, property, family matters. These along with early Vedic texts taken together constitute the Vedic corpus.

## **Composition of the Ṛgveda and other Vedic texts - Possible locations**

There are divergent views as regards the place where the Ṛgvedic poems were composed. E.W. Hopkins has discussed the imagery aspect in his writing “Punjab and the Rgveda”<sup>33</sup> and discounted the possibility of the Punjab plains being one such region. Keith<sup>34</sup> also maintains that keeping in view the stress on natural features by the Vedic poets in the Ṛgveda, it is highly unlikely that the Panjab could have been the region where the bulk of hymns were composed. He has further observed that on this basis, the home of Vedic Aryans could be attributed to the kuruksetra region between the rivers Sarasvatī and Drsadvati (modern Chitang). There is also a contrary view which holds that the Ṛgvedic hymns were composed in the areas watered by the Sapta-Sindhu. According to this view, the Sapta-Sindhu area lies close to the mountains and is endowed with the necessary elements/imagery which the hymns of the Ṛgveda reflect.

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<sup>33</sup> The Puñjāb and the Rgveda Author(s): Edward Washburn Hopkins Reviewed work(s): Source: Journal of the American Oriental Society, Vol. 19 (1898), pp. 19-28., American Oriental Society, URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/592471> (accessed on 11<sup>th</sup> February, 2012). Discounting the Punjab as a possible place for composition of such hymns, Hopkins has observed “If the first home of the Aryans in India can be determined at all by the conditions, topographical and meteorological, described in their early hymns, then decidedly the Punjab was not that home. For here there are neither mountains to be seen nor monsoon storms to burst, yet storm and mountain belong to the very marrow of the Rgveda...” Continuing, he adds “The country divinely meted out by the rivers Sarasouti and Ghuggar, and lying between them, is where the (Rig, etc.) Veda arose, and hence is called brahmdvarta or ‘home of the Veda’ in the tradition of the learned.”

<sup>34</sup> The Religion and Philosophy of the Veda, Pt.I, A.B Keith P.3

The rivers mentioned in the text also offer clues in this respect<sup>35</sup>. The major rivers mentioned in the Ṛgveda include Krumu, Gomāl, Kubha (Kabul river) in Eastern Afghanistan and Sarayū (i.e., Haroiū of the Herat area), a river in western Afghanistan on road to Persia, and the Sapta-Sindhu that cover the North and North-Western regions of India up to the Eastern part of Afghanistan. This goes to show that the early Aryans and their work flourished during the Ṛgvedic period in the regions lying between Yamuna and Sutlej rivers along the upper course of the river Sarasvatī.

Besides the above, geographical locations of the seers and their families to whom authorship of the books of the Ṛgveda is attributed also help in localization of the Ṛgvedic text. The geographical area of the family of priests and their affiliation with certain tribes are discernible in the Ṛgvedic hymns. For example, the Gr̥tsamāda clan to whom the composition of Book II of the Ṛgveda is attributed, finds mention in hymns 4.9; 19.8; 39.8 and 41.18 of this book and the affiliation of this school with Bharata tribe seems to be clear from hymn 7.5 of this book. The geographical area of the habitat of this clan seems to be north-western and the Punjab regions. The imagery associated with this area is reflected in Book II. Demolition of Śambara's hundred ancient forts which were known to be located in the mountainous area of the northwest, finds mention in hymn 14.6 of this book. Similarly, the authorship of book III of the Ṛgveda is attributed to Viśvāmītra clan who lived in the Punjab and the Sarasvatī regions; Book IV to Vāmadeva clan with habitat in the North-west and the Punjab; Book V to Atri clan, with habitat in the North-west, the Punjab region and along the Yamuna; Book VI to Bhāradvāja clan associated with geographical area covered by North-west, the Punjab, the Sarasvatī and the Ganges; Book VII to Vasiṣṭha clan, associated with geographical area in the Punjab, Sarasvatī and Yamuna regions; and Book VIII to Kaṇva and Angirasa clans associated with geographical area in the North-west and the Punjab region. Association of the seers with the regions mentioned above clearly show that the composition of the Ṛgvedic texts occurred in the Sapta-Sindhu region.

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<sup>35</sup> One of the possible ways for approximating the habitat of Vedic tribes is by turning to the rivers occurring in Vedic texts, with which they are connected. It should, however, be borne in mind, that these rivers as Macdonell and Keith maintain "traversed the alluvial plains of the north [...] were, therefore, [...] liable to constant fluctuations in their channels." (Vedic Index, Vol. I P.XV)

As for the later Vedic texts, there exists a consensus, as discussed earlier, regarding the location of places they were composed. The Brāhmanas, Aranyakas, and the Upaniṣads which come under the category of the later Vedic texts, were compiled in Western Uttar Pradesh, during the first half of the first millennium BCE. But, some of them, such as the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa and the Bṛhad Aranyaka Upaniṣad were compiled during this period in eastern Uttar Pradesh/Bihar. As regards the locale of composition of Yajurvedic Saṃhitās (Maitrāyaṇī, Kātha, Kapiṣṭhala-kātha and the Taittirīya and Vājasaneyī Saṃhitās), the various references to mountains, river flows, climatic conditions help in identification of areas where they were composed. For example, the reference to mountain (the Himalayas) in Maitrāyaṇī Saṃhitā (MS 3.14.11) and the mention of the Kurus (4.2.6) point to areas situated in the Himalayan foothills and the Western Uttar Pradesh<sup>36</sup>. The similarity seen in the contents of Maitrāyaṇī and the Kātha Saṃhitā also shows that these two schools must have flourished in areas close to each other. Most poems of the Atharva-Veda, are Atharva-Vedic and not Ṛgvedic but also borrows to some extent from the Ṛgveda. Its hymns are metrical, which makes it similar to the Ṛgveda in form. Judging from the probability of the existence of Mantra time (Post Ṛgvedic) collections of the typical Atharva-Vedic hymns and also proto-Atharva-Veda form of such hymns (found in the Ṛgveda Book X), it can be surmised that the composition of the Atharva-Vedic texts occurred during the Kuru period and its PS (Paippalada Saṃhitā) was composed in the Kuru territory. This establishes the fact that it was a post-Ṛgvedic text.

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<sup>36</sup> Michael Witzel's Paper On the Localisation of Vedic Texts and Schools, in India and the Ancient World, Gilbert Pollet (ed.), Departement Orientalistiek, Leuven, 1987, P.178-179.



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