

Different Ethnic Groups in Rgveda

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Abstract

Vedas of India shed light to the engagements of the people who lived in those days. In Rgveda many references can be seen in connection with the ethnic groups that can be categorized into two main groups –Aryan and non-Aryan. There are difference of opinion regarding the Aryan and non-Aryan issue among the scholars. There are many incidents that prove the rivalry between the above said group of people in Rgvedic hymns. The rivalry between these two was not racial but cultural. The present paper aims to discuss different ethnic groups in Rgveda in order to find out the reason behind the religious schisms in the ancient Indian social structure.

Keywords

The issues behind the Aryan and non-Aryan Tribes in the time of Vedas, Five people of Rgveda, War among Ten Kings, Rgvedic Priests.

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Introduction

India has a variety of cultural, religious and also political history. Vedas of are invaluable sources of various knowledge systems that contain a large amount of mythical accounts of ancient India. Studying those myths can reveal India's ancient past more vivid. There are many references to different ethnic groups categorized as Aryan and non Aryan tribes can be seen in Vedas. As the oldest available literary record *Rgveda* contain the primary concept of these different cultured people. This paper tries to discuss different ethnic groups seen in *Rgveda* who possess different culture and practices.

Aryan and non-Aryan Tribes

Rgvedic hymns profusely refer to Aryan and non-Aryan (Anarya) people. Scholars widely accept that the people who composed Vedas belonged to the Aryan clan. Aryan is admitted here not as a race but as a culture. In *Rgveda* the term 'arya' occurs in 36 contexts.¹ Reference to the people who are identified as the enemies of Vedic people such as Dasas, Dasyus, Asuras, Raksasas, Panis etc. are found hundreds of different contexts in *Rgvedic* hymns. The common nature of the concept of the references to the above noted people in *Rgveda* is the rivalry towards them by the Vedic people. It noticeably reflects the religious schisms in the ancient Indian social structure.

Five People of *Rgveda*

It is difficult to distinguish the Aryan and non-Aryan people in *Rgveda*. It often refers to five tribes as *pancamanusa%* (*Rgveda*, VIII.9.2), *pancakrstayah* (*Rgveda*, III.2.10; III.53.16) and *pancakrstayah* (*Rgveda*, V.86.2; VII.15.2; IX.101.9). According to D.D. Kosambi² the usage of *krsaya%* and *karsaya%* are derived from the root 'krc' the meaning of which in later times is 'ploughing the land'. Some scholars think that the five tribes known as *pancajana%* or *pancakrsmaya%* belonged to the Aryan class.³ The term 'k[cmi' derived from 'k[c' means to cultivate the land. H.H. Wilson⁴ in his translation of *Rgveda*, II.2.10 has given the meaning 'men' to 'krcmi'. The commentator Sayana explained the five tribes are the people who belonged to the four castes and Nicadas.⁵ But this interpretation seems to be of very later origin and thus *pancak[cmaya%* only meant the five men or five people. Certainly it won't be the four castes and Nisadas because there were no references to caste system in the early period of *Rgveda*. The compound 'pancajana' (I.117.3) also indicates the sense of five tribal groups who have some common features. The tribes Anus, Druhyus, Yadus, Turvasas, T[tsus, Purus, and Bharatas which are frequently mentioned in *Rgveda* are considered to be

representatives of the five tribes. A.C. Das⁶ considers Yadus and Turvasas are in one tribal group of Trtsus and Bharatas. But, scholars like D.P. Saxena⁷ and R.N. Dandekar⁸ point out that the five tribes are Anus, Druhyus, Purus, Turvasas and Yadus.

War among Ten Kings

Rgveda incessantly refers to the persistent quarrel among the different tribal groups. Sometimes these quarrels were due to the personal or tribal jealousies or some other times as a powerful leader of one tribe cherished the ambition of extending his domain over the neighboring places. R.S. Sharma⁹ opines that war in a predominantly tribal society of *Rgveda* was a logical and natural economic function. He also observes the process of man hunting was the logical extension of animal hunting. Dasarajna war seen in *Rgveda* is considered to be the earliest recorded event in history. U.C. Sharma,¹⁰ who has done a detailed research about the Dasarajna war, considers that the war took place at such a time when the Indo-Aryan settlers have already been established and have already their roots spread in the soil of ancient India. The narration of Dasarajna war can be seen in the 3rd and 7th Mandalas of *Rgveda* which are attributed to the seer-ship of Visvamitra and Vasistha respectively. The war is considered to be the most ancient of the recorded wars fought on earth in general and in India in particular. The fight has taken place between the forces of the Trtsu-Bharatas on one side and more than ten confederate tribes on the other side. The figure ten in the word is round and approximate and it actually meant many more than that. The leader of Bharatas was Sudas Pajavana who won the war. Romila Thapar¹¹ opines that the conflict arose from several reasons such as stealing cattle, dispute over grazing grounds, controlling the river water etc. Families or clans of that time often owned herds but the pastures used were common for all. The rapid increase of livestock could only be achieved through a raid or conflict. The fertility of soil, abundance of water, regularity of seasons and bright sun-shine are some ecological factors which prompted the immigrants to settle down in India.¹² The approximate regions where the earliest settlements had happened are Afghanistan, North-West parts of India, Western Punjab etc. Their tribal organization slowly came to be transformed into territorial states. Early five Aryan settlements in Sapta-Sindhu region are Purus, Anus, Druhyus, Turvasas and Yadus. There were also a few non-Aryan settlements side by side with the Aryan settlements. The second wave of Aryan immigration according to Dandekar was of Bharatas. They were under the leadership of Sudas. He wished to defeat the earliest Aryan settlements as well as the indigenous non-Aryan principalities under his control.

Priests and the Tribes in *Rgveda*

Purohitas (priests) played an important and inevitable role in the socio-political organization of early Vedic period. Visvamitra and Vasistha played a leading part for the victory of Sudas in *Rgveda*. In the initial stage Bharadvaja was the Purohita of Bharatas. However, while advancing into the Sapta-Sindhu area Visvamitra had taken the place of Bharadvaja. In that time Vasistha was the Purohita of Trtsus and he was the most influential person in the Trtsu clan. Sudas wished Vasistha to be the priest of Bharatas. He believed that under the priesthood of Vasistha he can defeat other tribal groups and fulfill his aim. For that Visvamitra was replaced by Vasistha by the bold stroke of diplomacy created by Sudas. Furious Visvamitra went over to Pancajanas and became their priest.

Bharatas and Tatsus led by Sudâs and Vasistha on one side and more than ten kings presumably under the leadership of Bheda and Visvamitra as their Purohita on the other side fought each other.¹³ The War seems to have comprised two notable battles, one at the Parusni or Ravi river-side and the other on the bank of the Yamuna.¹⁴ These evidences mark the boundaries of Sarasvati river region. The capital of Sudas might have been somewhere near to the Sarasvati. Thus modern Haryana and Punjab in India, the eastern part of the west Punjab in Pakistan were probably the war place. With the help of Vasistha's brilliant priest-craft and under the benign behest of the Aryan war-god Indra, Sudas became victorious in the war. Dandekar¹⁵ believes that it was after the name of those victorious Bharata people, the land of India came to be known as Bharatavarsa. This event is considered to be the many versions of the traditional rivalry between the families of the great seers Vasistha and Visvamitra.

Non Vedic People - Different Ethnic Groups in *Rgveda*

D.P. Saxena¹⁶ in his book *Regional Geography of Vedic India* has given a brief sketch of the regional distribution of Vedic tribes both Aryan and non-Aryan. He differentiates the Aryans and non-Aryans on the basis of some references seen in Rgvedic hymns. He thinks that the Aryans distinguished themselves from others based on the colour of skin and nasal index i.e. short nose of the non-Aryans. The cultural differences of both people are also pointed out by him. The non-Aryan Dasyus were regarded in *Rgveda* as 'akarman'¹⁷ (riteless), 'adevyu'¹⁸ (indifferent to the gods), 'abrahaman'¹⁹ (without devotion), 'ayajvan'²⁰ (non-sacrificing), 'avrata'²¹ (lawless), 'mrdhra-vac'²² (unintelligible or hostile speaker) and 'sisna-deva'²³ (worshippers of a phallus deity). These cultural differences also caused the frequent conflict amongst the Aryan and Non-Aryan people.²⁴ The geographical classification of Vedic tribes according to D.P.

Some scholars consider all the tribes in Vedas as belonging to one clan i.e. 'Aryan'. They are of opinion that difference in beliefs and practices different sections of them caused conflicts amongst them.²⁵

The Aryan tribes according to him are Anus, Druhyus, Yadus, Turvasas, Purus, Bharatas, Trtsus, Krivis, Pancalas (a fusion of Krivis), Kikatas, Cedis, Matsyas, Ajas, Yaksus, Sigrus, Prthus, Visanins, Sivas, Alinas, Pakthas, Bhalanasas, Srnjayas etc. The people though belonged to the Aryan clan inherited a different culture and civilization, are also considered as the enemies by the prominent section of Aryans. They according to A.C. Das, include Sisinadevas (phallic-worshippers), Vrtras (serpant-worshippers) Krtvans, Arjikas, Krsnas etc.²⁶

Conclusion

The people who are mentioned under the group of Aryan and Non-Aryan apparently are the followers of two different cultures. This is the criteria of scholars in classifying them into separate groups. The division of Vedic people into Aryan and Non-Aryan is still a matter of dispute. Vedic hymns clearly attest to the existence of different cultured people. However, the difference is thought to be cultural and not racial. The details regarding the enemies of the Vedic people who inherited a different life and culture is few in Vedas. But, there are references within the Vedic texts which give valuable information regarding the cultural as well as religious differences among them.

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- *Rgveda Samhita*, Edited by H.H. Wilson, Vol. II, Parimal Publications, Delhi, **1997**, p.8.
- In the commentary of Sankara on *Brhadaranyakopanisad* he has explained that the term 'pancajanas' includes the peoples such as the Gandharvas, fore-fathers, gods, Asuras and Raksasas. Refer to *Brhadaranyaka-Upanisad* with the commentary of Sankaracarya, Edited by E. Roer, Bharatiya Kala Prakashan, Delhi, **2000**, IV.4.17, p.364.
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 - . Refer to R.S. Sharma, *Material Culture and Social Formations in Ancient India*, **Macmillan, Delhi, 2000, p.38.**
 - . U.C. Sharma, *op.cit.*, **p.17.**
 - . Romila Thapar, *Early India-From the Origins to AD 1300*, Penguin, London, **2002, p.44.**
 - . R.N. Dandekar, *The Dasarajna* in U.C. Sharma (ed.), *op.cit.*, **p.53.**
 - . There are many tribes and persons who took an active part directly and indirectly on both sides in the battle. Bharatas, Trtsus, Indra and Vasistha as their Purohita under the leadership of Sudas assembled on one side and became victorious in the Dasarajna War. The names of persons and tribes who fought against Sudas are Anus, Druhyus, Purus, Turvasas, Yadus, Ajas, Alinas, Bhatanas, Bhrgus, Kavasa, Kavi Cayamana, Matsyas, Pakthas, Pratrds, Purukutsa, Sigrus, Simyus, Sivas, Vaikarnas, Vaisanta, Vaisanins, Krivis, Yaksus and Pancalas were presumably under the leadership of Bheda and Visvamitra's priesthood. For a detailed study regarding the Dasarajna War see *Ibid.*, p.17ff and also see the Appendix of the same book.
 - . *Ibid.*, **p.18.**
 - . *Ibid.*, See Appendix, **p.56.**
 - . D.P. Saxena, *Regional Geography of Vedic India*, Grantham, Kanpur, 1976, **pp.31-68.**
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 - . *Rgveda*, **I.51.8; I.175.3.**
 - . *Rgveda*, **V.29.10.**
 - . *Rgveda*, **VII.21.5; X.99.3.**
 - . The geographical classification of Vedic tribes according to D.P. Saxena is:
Aryan Tribes
Tribes of Trans-Himalayan region- Uttara Kuru, Urttara Madra.
1. Tribes of North Western Hills- Alinas, Bhalanas, Pakthas, Visanins, Gandharas.

2. Tribes of Himalayan region- Mujavan, Mujivants, Arjikas, Mahavrsas, Sivas, Bahikas.
3. Tribes of Sindhu basin - Yadus, Turvasas, Anus, Druhyus, Krivis.
4. Tribes of the Sarasvati basin- Bharatas, Trtsus, Pharus, Kurus.
5. Tribes of the Ganga basin- Pancalass, Usinaras, Varsas, Kasis, Kosalas, Videhas.
6. Tribes of the Rajasthan uplands- Matsyas.

Non-Aryan Tribes

1. Tribes of the Ganga Valley- Magadhas, Angas, PuGdras, and Vangas.
2. Tribes of the Trans-Vindhyan uplands- Satvants, Pulindas, Avantis.
3. Western Tribes- Sindhu-Sauviras, Saurastras.
4. Tribes of the Dakshinapatha- Vidarbhas, Andhras, Kalingas.
5. Non- Aryan tribes of the Himalayan region- Parvatas, Ajas, Sigrus and Yaksas.

The names of the tribes here include both of the early Vedic and later Vedic periods. Most of the tribes referred to under the title of Vedic tribes belonged to Aryan tribes. In fact the details available about the non-Aryan tribes are very few. The area inhabited by a tribe was probably called after the name of that tribe and ruled by a tribal leader or a king. See D.P. Saxena, *op.cit.*, **pp.31-68**. The Yaksas in the above mentioned list are closely related with the Raksasas. In the time of Epics and Puranas Yaksas and Raksasas were said to be originated from a common ancestor.

- A.C. Das, *Zgvedic Culture*, Mohit Publications, New Delhi, **2002, pp.160-170**.
- Sisnadevas, Vrtras and Krsnas in the hymns of *Rgveda* are mentioned as the non-believers of Vedic cult and its practices. A.C. Das considers Sisnadevas, Vrtras and Krsnas as separate tribal groups in the Vedic age. See *Ibid*.