

Rig Veda, Indus Culture and the Indo-Iranian Connections

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Starting with the origin of the Sanskrit language formulated borrowing from the local Dravidian and Munda languages, the Indo-Iranian connections are explored in the context of myths and legends. The connection between the Rigveda text and the Indus Culture is described, making use of the Indus seals. The non-Vedic traditions in the RV text are traced to present day folk performances. Some Rigvedic entities like *dAsa* tribes, their dwellings, the *SaradI purs* and *surh-dagAl* mounds, *hAmuns*, and more are identified, based on the geological and environmental data from the Sistan region. Areas of further research are identified.

Keywords: Indo-Iranian, Rig Veda, Indus Culture, Dravidian, Sanskrit Language, Vedic Hymns

Introduction

Until half a century ago, Sanskrit was regarded as the original language, the mother of all Indian languages belonging to Indo-Sanskritic languages like Hindi, Marathi, Gujrati and Bengali. However, a new trend is emerging, which suggests that Sanskrit was a language formulated upon those languages already existing in the subcontinent prior to the development of Sanskrit. This observation is based on the fact that there are many words from the Dravidian group of languages and the Munda language origin in the Rigvedic language (Witzel 2001). In recent years, scholars in Indic Studies are exploring this dimension of philological studies. Reviewing the Rigvedic references in this light, it is possible to reconstruct evidence for Sanskrit as a formulated language. In fact, the proposition that Sanskrit was a purposefully formulated language is not new. Rather, awareness dates back to the Rigvedic period. Rig Veda 10.71.1-2 explicitly states that the Vedic seers formulated the speech.

*bRhaspate prathamam vAco
agram yatprairata nAmadheyam
dadhAnAH |yadeZAm SreZTham
yadaripramAsItpreNA tadeZAm
nihitam guhAviH || (RV 10.71.1)*

Tr: “*bRhaspati!* When they set in motion the first beginning of speech, giving names, their most pure

and perfectly guarded secret was revealed through love.”

*saktumiva titaunA punanto yatra dhIrA
manasA vAcamakrata |atrA sakhAyaH
sakhyaAni jAnate bhadraiZAm
LakZmIrrnihitAdhi vAci || (RV 10.71.2)*

Tr: “When the wise ones fashioned speech with their thought sifting it as grain is sifted through sieve, then friends recognized their friendships. A good sign was placed on their speech” (Doniger 1981).

There are two conclusive references to the formulation of a new language. They are the word *navIyasIm* (RV 8.51.5 and 8.95.5), newly formed language; and, *giram*, which was obviously formulated from extant colloquial languages.

Initially, Western scholars promoted the idea of Sanskrit as the original language and of local and vernacular languages as subsequent to it. However, this idea was discarded some half century ago, since the so-called Dravidian and Munda elements cannot be isolated from the Rigvedic Sanskrit. Indian scholar Vishvanath Khaire has been advocating the linguistic bridge Sam-Ma-Ta, Sanskrit-Marathi-Tamil for more than three decades and he has a host of articles and books to his credit. He goes beyond vocabulary, linking Rigvedic entities and legends with Tamil roots (Khaire 1981).

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Incorporating the Local, Non-Sacrificial Tradition in the RV Text

Rigvedic hymns are used mainly in the performance of the Vedic sacrifices. For a long time, RV was regarded as text of sacrificial ritual. Incorporation of the non-Vedic gods and traditions in the Vedic texts or the so-called Brahminical domain dates back to Rigvedic times. There is non-*yajJa* rituals incorporated in the RV text. Rudra, one of the prominent gods of the Rig Vedic pantheon, was drawn from the tribal stratum of society. The story of the Rigvedic seer Nabhanedishtha (RV 10.61 and 10.62) in the Aitareya Brahmana mentions that Rudra appeared before him and claimed his share of the leftovers of the sacrifice. This story occurs in two prominent Vedic texts, the Taittiriya text of Yajur Veda (TS 3.1.9.4) and the Aitareya Brahmana text affiliated with the Rig Veda (AB 5.14). Rudra's tribal antecedents are evident and well documented by the statement in the *Apastambha Srauta sUtra* (ApSS 8.17.11) addressed to Rudra during the *sAkamedha* sacrifice: "If he (the sacrificer) does not have an enemy, let him say, 'the mole is your animal'." In this author's personal experience, tribal members in India like the mole (*Akhu* in Sanskrit) very much. In addition, "The word *nAbhAnediZTA* must be very old, for we find it several times in the form *nabAnazdista* in the Zend Avesta. It is an epithet of the Fravashis (Yasna 1,18. Yazts 13, 156), and signifies the lineal descendents in future generations" (Haug 1976: 27). Similarly, in the Rig Vedic text, Pashun was the god of cowherds who wielded a goad or *astram* (RV 6.58.2), a pointed stick used to control animals. In the Vedic sacrifices, he was offered oblations (Pathak 2007b).

Another important and interesting incorporation of the local, non-Vedic, non-Brahminical tradition into the Rig Veda text is in the Indrani-Vrishakapi dialogue hymn (RV 10.86), famous for its amorous content. There is a tradition in Uttar Pradesh (UP), a northern state in India, which can be traced back to this amorous dialogue between *indrANi-* and *vRZAkapi*. BBC correspondent Mark Tully witnessed this tradition during a marriage procession in a remote village in UP and reported on it in his book *No Fullstops in India* (1992: 46). He described two men dressed in women's attire, with

false breasts bulging through their blouses. A third man was dressed as a monkey, with a large tail and a large penis made of cloth. Initially, all three danced, making seductive gestures. Next, there was an enactment of sexual intercourse and the achievement of ecstasy by one of the "women." Thus, the *indrANi-vRZAkapi* dialogue hymn points to the fertility cult, traces of which are found in current rural marriage customs in non-brahminical sections in India. The process of assimilation and ritualistic adaptation continued for millennia, when the local gods were sanctified by bestowing them with the status of incarnations of the Vedic gods Vishnu and Shiva, and of goddesses like *lakZmi*.

Vedic Hymns and Indus Culture Seals

A commonly held idea is that there is no connection between the Rig Veda and other Vedic texts, and the Indus Culture (IC), since they stand centuries apart. However, it is now possible to understand some Indus Culture seals as pictorial representations of the Atharva Vedic and the Rigvedic hymns.

The motif on the well-known IC Pashupati seal appears in varied forms at many IC sites. A typical male figure of a central deity sitting cross-legged is the central image on all these seals (fig. 1). The large number of such seals indicates their importance. The Rig Vedic god Rudra is known as Pashupati in both YV and AV. There is a complete hymn devoted to Lord Pashupati in Atharva Veda (AV 2.34). The seal depicts the visual embodiment of the hymn (Pathak 1991a, 1991b). The fact that the hymn is in the



Fig.1. Pashupati seal found at Mohenjo-Daro. (After: Flood: 1996)



present tense establishes that it is contemporary with the seal-engraving period. There are other seals, as well, which can be understood as pictorial representations of AV and RV hymns (Pathak 1992, 1997a, 1997b).

The most dominant theme in the RV text Indra is that of the killing the serpent demon vRtra. There is further evidence of the Vedic story of Indra-Vritra, which dates to 2700 BCE, as depicted on the famous Khafajeh steatite bowl from Susa reported by M. E. L. Mallowan (1965, fig. 2). The relief image on the Baluchistani bowl depicts “rain making” (?) myth pictorials and can be understood based on references to the Vritra killing in the RV text. This makes the story of Indra killing Vritra some 5000 years old (Pathak 1999 : 18-20). The theme of the dual deities Indra Agni flanking the serpent demon Vritra is found on a circular seal at Lothal (Rao 1985: fig. 12), confirming that the RV story was considered so important as to appear on an IC seal (Pathak 1997 b).



Fig.2: Khafajeh bowl , currently in the British Museum.

The sacrificial altars of the Vedic period were constructed with carefully prescribed measurements. The creation process, too, was equated with the performance of a sacrifice. The Rig Vedic creation myth in RV 10.130 refers to both planning the sacrificial ground and to an image used during the sacrifice, as indicated in the case of Pashupati seal. The exact words are:

*ka AsIt pramA pratimA kim
nidAnam (RV 10.130.3a)*

Tr: “What was the original model, and what was the copy and what was the connection between them?” (Doniger 1981: 33).

Here, “*pramA*” refers to a properly measured layout and “*pratimA*” refers to a figure or a seal like that of the Pashupati seal (and not to a copy). There were seals as well as statues in IC. Therefore, Asko Parpola identified the trefoil pattern on the Priest King statue from Mohenjo-Daro with the *tArpya* garment mentioned in post-Rig Vedic texts like AV 18.4.31 (Parpola 1985: 37-44).

Indus Culture and Spoked Wheels

Since the initial excavation of Indus Culture, assumptions about its distinctness from the RV were based on a limited number of discoveries. One was the absence of spoked wheels in IC. In the RV, there are clear references to the spoked wheel of the year, with its six seasonal spokes (RV 1.164.11). Scholars concluded that Aryan newcomers introduced spoked wheels. However, in the recent excavations at the IC site of Bhirrana, District Fatehabad, Haryana, archaeologist L. S. Rao found examples of spoked wheels . They are solid terracotta wheels, each with a hub in the centre and spokes in low relief; additional spokes are painted on the outer sides. Lynchpin grooves confirm that these were not spindles but rather the wheels of toy carts. Rao was able to identify similar wheels from many previously sites excavated, at which such wheels were found but incorrectly identified. Thus, this reason for distinguishing between IC and Rigvedic culture was invalidated (Rao 2005).

Indo-Iranian Connections

Much has been written on the Rigvedic and Indo-Iranian connections. In fact, the academic discipline of philology emerged through the study of the close similarity found between deities, words and rituals in the RV and the Zend Avest. The earliest study of the common heritage of the followers of the Vedic sacrificial traditions and the Indo-Iranian Homa sacrifice is Martin Haug's extensive introduction to the text of Aitareya Brahmana in 1863 (Haug 1976: 1-80).

Many Vedic scholars, in particular proponents of the Aryan invasion (or now, migration) theory were



either ignorant of the fact that Dasas never lived in India, or purposefully ignored it. Dasas have been residents of Sistan province in both Afghanistan and Iran, living there from Rigvedic times until today (Pathak 1999 ; also, personal communication with Dr. Mehdi Mortazavi from the University of Sistan and Baluchestan in Zahedan, Iran [April 2010]). The conflict between Aryans and Dasas occurred not in the Indus Valley but in Sistan province. Dasas also patronized the Vedic seers and shared in the well-developed civilization of the people of the Rig Veda, as is evident from the archaeological excavations at Mundigak (Casal 1961). The site of Dahan-e-Ghulaman, about 30 km southeast of Zabol in Persian Sistan, was discovered in 1960. It is located on a terrace at the foot of the desert plateau that surrounds the *Hamun e-Helmand* basin (Yarshater 1993). The site became famous for its monumental remains of an Iranian fire-worship complex, highlighting the close affinity between the Vedic and Indus cultures. As Scerrato points out, “The singularity of the holy building of Dahan-e-Ghulaman consists partly in the fact that it is unique among the Iranian religious architecture that we are familiar with and in the fact that it is earliest archaeological evidence of the worship of three entities or groups of divine entities and of the Indo-Iranian doctrine of three fires” (1979).

The author (1999) has proposed the following four identifications:

1. The Dahamardeh tribal people from the Sistan region common to both Iran and Afghanistan were the *Dasa* tribe people referred to in several RV hymns (RV 1.158.5, 1.174.7, 5.30.7, etc.) and in Indo-Iranian texts (Yasta 10.144).

2. The connection between Sanskrit language and Vedic culture is attested to by linguistic affinities. For names of hamlets, see “*dAha bASi deh*” (Ir.) to *dAsa bhASi deSa*” (Sk.); “*bAd-i-sad-o-bist*” (Ir.) and “*vAtAH Sata vimSati*” (Sk.). Both mean “wind of hundred days.” *hAmuns*, the shallow lakes spread over vast landscapes are the *sAmanA bhUmi* mentioned in RV 3.30.9. There are several place names in Afghanistan ending in *deh*, meaning “place” or “location,” while the word used in the RV

text is *dehyaH*(RV 6.47.2, 7.6.5).

3. Thousands of mounds called *surh-dagAl*, which dot the vast landscape of Sistan province west of Helmand (fig. 3), are identified with the *SAradI purs* mentioned in the RV 1.131.4, 1.174.2, 6.20.10.

4. The *bAd-i-sad-o-bist* winds are identified with the Rigvedic deities Maruts (Pathak 2007a).

The Scope of Future Research

Vedic and Indo-Iranian research has remained confined to easily accessible sites in the northern Iran and Afghanistan, and also to Vedic and Indo-Iranian texts, in part due to the inaccessibility of the desert locations in the southern part in the region. In modern times, though, accessibility to these areas has increased, making it possible to conduct archaeological and ethno-archaeological studies in the Sistan Region. Archaeologists, philologists and anthropologists are challenged to explain words of Sanskrit origin transformed into other Indo-European languages. Below are the names of entities from the Rig Veda text that are common to the Indo-Iranian heritage.

a. Vritrahan-Vritraghna in the Vedic texts, Verethragna in Avesta and Vahagna in Armenia;

b. Ahi Dasa in the Vedic texts, Azi Dahak in Avesta and Azo Daha in Armenia;

c. Sharva in the Vedic texts, Saurva in Avesta and Cernunnos in Celtic;

d. Yahva in the Vedic texts, Yazu in Avesta, Yahve in Chaldean and YHWH in biblical texts.

It is interesting to explore the migration path of the myths, concepts and rituals associated with the above entities.

e. Linguistic affinities of Indo-Iranian texts with the non-Sanskrit languages belonging to Brahui-Dravidian group and Munda, etc.

f. Tracing the use of spoked wheels in ancient Iranian sites in Sistan and neighboring regions;



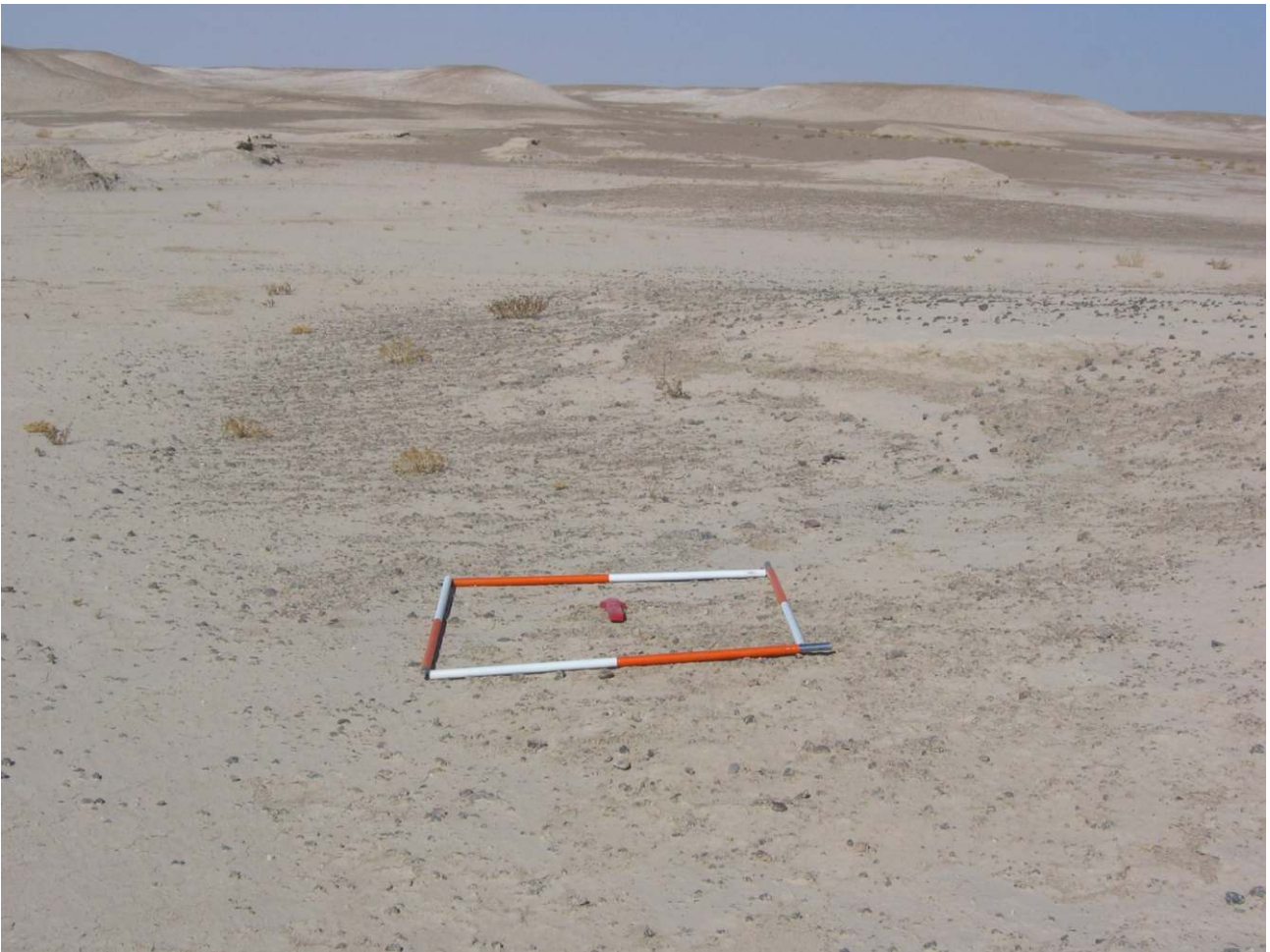


Fig. 3: Suhr- da gal hills formed due to erosion as the winds “Badha-e-Sado Bist Roze” blow over the landscape (Picture: M. Mortazavi)

g. Correlating Dahamardeh folklore and ritual with the Vedic and Indo-Iranian traditions;

h. Further verification of *surh-dagaAl* with all their attributes as *SAradI purs*, as proposed by the author.

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