

The Rig Veda, an Archeological View

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The Rig Veda is the earliest extant source of Hindu heritage, dated around 2,000 BCE. To a historian, it is a rich archeological find (inscription) of what life was like in those days. This is an attempt to reconstruct the social climate of that era from the text. This is an archeological, not a religious, view of the Rig Veda. The text is from Griffith, 1896 translation. The numbers refer to [book.hymn.sloka]. Only one sloka is presented, in both Sanskrit and English, to give a taste of the original.

यज्ञेनेन्द्रमवसा चक्रे अर्वागैनं सुम्राय नव्यसे ववृत्याम्।

यः स्तोमेभिर्वावृधे पूर्व्येभिर्यो मध्यमेभिरुत नूतनेभिः॥ ०३.०३२.१३

[03.032.13] 13 With sacrifice and wish have I brought Indra; still for new blessings may I turn him hither, Him magnified by ancient songs and praises, by lauds of later time and days yet recent.

The Rig Veda was ancient songs and praises, lauds of later time and days yet recent.

[01.105.8] 8 Like rival wives on every side enclosing ribs oppress me sore. O Satakratu, biting cares devour me, singer of thy praise, as rats devour the weaver's threads. Mark this my woe, ye Earth and Heaven.

There was a textile industry. There were rats too! Some men had more than one wife. (Monogamy was common. Polygamy was not uncommon.)

[10.026.6] 6 One who is Lord of Suca (he), Lord of Sucaa (she) caring for herself: Weaving the raiment of the sheep and making raiment beautiful.

Wool garments were made. Women were skilled.

[10.142.4] 4 O'er hills through vales devouring as thou goest, thou partest like an army fain for booty. As when a barber shaves a beard, thou shavest earth when the wind blows on thy flame and fans it.

A barber shaved a beard.

[09.112.3] 3 A bard (poet) am I, my dad's a leech (physician), mammy lays corn upon the stones (grinder). Striving for wealth, with varied plans, we follow our desires like kine (focused). Flow, Indu, flow for Indra's sake.

[01.157.6] 6 Leeches are ye with medicines to heal us, and charioteers are ye with skill in driving. Ye Strong, give sway to him who brings oblation and with his heart pours out his gift before you.

Members of the same family were engaged in different occupations.

[01.089.8-9] 8 Gods, may we with our ears listen to what is good, and with our eyes see what is good, ye Holy Ones. With limbs and bodies firm may we extolling you attain the term of life appointed by the Gods.

9 A hundred autumns stand before us, O ye Gods, within whose space ye bring our bodies to decay; Within whose space our sons become fathers in turn. Break ye not in the midst our course of fleeting life.

[07.066.16] 16 A hundred autumns may we see that bright Eye, God-ordained, arise A hundred autumns may we live.

Life expectancy was the term of life appointed by the Gods of one hundred autumns.

[10.191.2-4] 2 Assemble, speak together: let your minds be all of one accord, As ancient Gods unanimous sit down to their appointed share.

3 The place is common, common the assembly (Samiti), common the mind, so be their thought united. A common purpose do I lay before you, and worship with your general oblation.

4 One and the same be your resolve, and be your minds of one accord. United be the thoughts of all that all may happily agree.

Polity was democratic republic. The place was common, common the assembly, and minds of one accord that all may happily agree. (This is the concluding hymn of the Rig Veda. Samiti was the highest legal authority.)

[10.030.6] 6 So maidens bow before the youthful gallant who comes with love to them who yearn to meet him. In heart accordant and in wish one-minded are the Adhvaryus (priest) and the heavenly Waters.

[10.027.12] 12 How many a maid is pleasing to the suitor who fain would marry for her splendid riches? If the girl be both good and fair of feature, she finds, herself (without dowry), a friend among the people.

Maidens selected their partners in life based on beauty, love, and money.

[10.085.45-46] 45 O Bounteous Indra, make this bride blest in her sons and fortunate. Vouchsafe to her ten sons, and make her husband the eleventh man.

46 Over thy husband's father and thy husband's mother bear full sway. Over the sister of thy lord, over his brothers rule supreme.

Bride was blessed and received as a full member of a family.

[01.164.46] 46 They call him Indra, Mitra, Varuna, Agni, and he is heavenly nobly-winged Garutman (Surya). To what is One, sages give many a title: they call it Agni, Yama, Matarisvan.

Religion was Monoism. To what is One (Brahman), sages give many a title. (The words Monoism and Brahman were introduced in Upanishads, around 800 BCE.)

[05.003.1] 1 Thou at thy birth art Varuna, O Agni; when thou art kindled thou becomest Mitra. In thee, O Son of Strength, all Gods are centered. Indra art thou to man who brings oblation.

Agni was Varuna, Mitra, and Indra. (The Rig-Vedic Indra was the sacred fire that accepted oblation. It is not to be confused with the other Indra the celebrated seducer of the latter-day Puranas.)

[01.073.4] 4 Thee, such, in settlements secure, O Agni, our men serve ever kindled in each dwelling. On him have they laid splendour in abundance: dear to all men, bearer be he of riches.

In settlements secure, Agni (sacred fire) was ever kindled in each dwelling.

[10.007.3] 3 Agni I deem my Kinsman and my Father, count him my Brother and my Friend for ever. I honour as the face of lofty Agni in heaven the bright and holy light of Surya.

Agni was deemed kinsman, father, brother, and friend.

[09.067.10] 10 May Pusan, drawn by goats, be our protector, and on all his paths Bestow on us our share of maids.

[08.035.10] 10 Come hitherward and drink and satisfy yourselves, bestow upon us progeny and affluence. Accordant, of one mind with Surya and with Dawn, O Asvins, grant us vigorous strength.

They prayed for wives, children, wealth, and health.

[10.091.14] 14 He in whom horses, bulls, oxen, and barren cows, and rams, when duly set apart, are offered up, - To Agni, Soma-sprinkled, drinker of sweet juice, Disposer, with my heart I bring a fair hymn forth.

[10.087.17] 17 The cow gives milk each year, O Man-regarder: let not the Yatudhana ever taste it. If one would glut him with the biestings (new baby), Agni, pierce with thy flame his vitals as he meets thee.

There was animal sacrifice. Milch cow was legally protected.

[08.055.10] 10 How great his power resistless! How invincible the Vrtra-slayer's matchless might! Indra excels all usurers (money lenders) who see the day (living), excels all traffickers (petty traders) in strength.

[08.047.17] 17 As we collect the utmost debt, even the eighth and sixteenth part, So unto Aptya we transfer together all the evil dream.

Usurer charged steep interest and many poor people were in utmost debt, unable to repay even the eighth or sixteenth part. (Notice the binary units of measurement.)

[01.065.4] 4 Kin as a brother to his sister floods, he eats the woods as a King eats the rich. When through the forest, urged by wind, he spreads, verily Agni shears the hair of earth.

Taxes by a King ate the rich.

[01.065.1] 1 One-minded, wise, they tracked thee like a thief lurking in dark cave with a stolen cow; Thee claiming worship, bearing it to Gods: there nigh to thee sate all the Holy Ones.

[04.038.5] 5 Loudly the folk cry after him in battles, as 'twere a thief who steals away a garment; Speeding to glory, or a herd of cattle, even as a hungry falcon swooping downward.

[08.029.6] 6 Another, thief-like, watches well the ways, and knows the places where the treasures lie.

Thieves stole cows, garments, and treasures in houses.

[10.085.32] 32 Let not the highway thieves who lie in ambush find the wedded pair. By pleasant ways let them escape the danger, and let foes depart.

There were highway thieves.

[10.117.3,5] 3 Bounteous is he who gives unto the beggar who comes to him in want of food and feeble. Success attends him in the shout of battle. He makes a friend of him in future troubles.

5 Let the rich satisfy the poor implorer, and bend his eye upon a longer pathway. Riches come now to one, now to another, and like the wheels of cars are ever rolling.

Liberals cared for the needy.

[10.101.3] 3 Lay on the yokes, and fasten well the traces: formed is the furrow, sow the seed within it. Through song may we find hearing fraught with plenty: near to the ripened grain approach the sickle.

[10.048.7] 7 This One by stronger might I conquered singly; yea, also two: shall three prevail against me? Like many sheaves (bunches) upon the floor I thrash them. How can my foes, the Indraless, revile me?

[10.068.3] 3 Brhaspati, having won them from the mountains, strewed down, like barley out of winnowing-baskets, The vigorous, wandering cows who aid the pious, desired of all, of blameless form, well-coloured.

[02.014.11] 11 Him, ministers, the Lord of heavenly treasure and all terrestrial wealth that earth possesses, Him, Indra, fill with Soma as a garner is filled with barley full: be this your labour.

They formed the furrow, sowed the seed within it, cut crop with the sickle, thrashed bunches upon the floor, separated barley out of winnowing-baskets, and filled a garner full with barley.

[03.045.3] 3 Like pools of water deep and full, like kine thou cherishest thy might; Like the milch-cows that go well-guarded to the mead, like water-brooks that reach the lake.

[10.101.5] 5 Arrange the buckets in their place: securely fasten on the straps. We will pour forth the well that hath a copious stream, fair-flowing well that never fails.

Fields were irrigated by pools, brooks, lakes, and deep wells.

[10.019.4] 4 I call upon their herdsman, him who knoweth well their coming nigh, Their parting and their home-return, and watcheth their approach and rest.

Herdsman took cattle to pasture.

[10.079.3] 3 Seeking, as 'twere, his Mother's secret bosom, he, like a child, creeps on through wide-spread bushes. One he finds glowing like hot food made ready, and kissing deep within the earth's recesses.

They ate hot food made ready.

[04.024.9] 9 He bid a small price for a thing of value: I was content, returning, still unpurchased. He heightened not his insufficient offer. Simple and clever, both milk out the udder.

[08.001.5] 5 O Caster of the Stone, I would not sell thee for a mighty price, Not for a thousand, Thunderer! nor ten thousand, nor a hundred (thousand), Lord of countless wealth!

Prices were negotiated.

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