

Meeting 18: The jána-s & their organization Nationhood in the Vedic religion

Nikhil Surya Dwibhashyam

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Meeting agenda

- (Re)introduction to discussion group
- Today's topic præsentation
- Free discussion

Why a Vedá discussion group?

- What is Vedic literature?
 - Sámhitā-s
 - Brāhmaṇa-s
 - Others?
- Vedá-s vs. Vedánta & Upaniṣad-s
 - Later monism (ádvāita) vs. earlier dualism (dvāitá)
- Modern (religious, scholarly) fixation upon later literature

What is there to discuss?

- History & linguistics
- Metaphysics of religion
- Exegesis (e.g. countering western narratives)
- Moral principles
- Nuances of Śrāutá ritual

Our plans

- Weekly meetings on Sundays at 1200 EDT
 - Followed by more in-depth literature meeting at 1330 EDT
- Different topic/aspect/angle discussed in depth every week
- Format:
 - Præsentation
 - Free-form discussion
- Eventually something more

WhatsApp group

<https://chat.whatsapp.com/IXCQEkhfrcwHI7CNY8Fgat>

Let's introduce ourselves!

- Name
- School (if student)
- How you found this group
- Briefly: background/interest in Hinduism & Vedic literature

Some questions to consider

- How did the ancient Ārya tribes come to be?
- How were the ancient Ārya tribes socially organized?
- What historical developments took place in the Ārya tribes across time?
- To what extent did the ancient Ārya-s constitute a nation?

The nation

- Community of people with shared features
 - Language (intelligibility)
 - Genetics (kinship or phenotype)
 - History (shared struggle)
 - Beliefs (religion)
 - Conjunction of these often necessary in the past
- Perennialism vs. modernization theory
- Shared interests
- Organization-agnostic

The Ārya designation

- A group of Sanskrit-speaking tribes originating in NW India
 - Allied in war, but also had internecine battles
 - Comparable to flower wars?
- Distinct from western academic term “Aryan”
 - Which includes Iranic peoples Ārya-s would consider Dásyu
- & from Gobineau’s even broader use for all IE peoples
- Genetic aspect (obviously)
 - Patrilineal descent
 - Not the same as “steppe DNA”, R1a, ANI, &c.
 - Ārya is a binary.
 - Adoption?
- United most of all by religion: *aryá*

Caste: the common fate of IE peoples

- Invading ethnic group conquers another
 - Forms élite group in new region
 - Over generations: *prajā dakṣinā 'bhi-jáyantī yanti* (MS 4.7.9)
 - *Ārya várṇa* (RV 3.34.9) vs. *Dāsá várṇa* (RV 2.12.4)
 - White vs. black: not (entirely?) skin color
- Herrenmoral: the rule of the free man
 - Subjugation of conquered group & eradication of their faiths
 - o *pañcā-śátam vadhúnām* (RV 8.19.36), *śatám Dāsán* (RV 8.56.3)
 - Less complete in India due to population density
- Conquered group integrated into society of conquerors
 - Śūdrá-s: slaves/servants, later peasants

Caste: the common fate of IE peoples

- Élite aristocracy *within* conquering group
 - Dumézil's "trifunctional hypothesis", várṇa (estate/color)
 - Brāhmaṇa-s (white): priests responsible (solely) for religion
 - Kṣatriya-s (red): warriors responsible (solely) for lordship
 - Some amount of exchange between them, cf. Viśvāmitra
 - Endogamous lineages from very beginning
- Vīś (black): commoners among conquering group
 - Associated with "productive functions", e.g. gopā-s
 - cf. Gob^hGS 4.7.5 for colors
- Priests & warriors dominated commoners.
 - *Vāśya máyi, yát te paró níhitam, tát á' hara* (ŚB 1.3.2.15)
 - Similar to (pagan & Christian) European nobility

The jána-s

- Spread across region from Upáriṣyena to Víndhya-s
 - South India considered alien to Ārya-s until centuries later
- From Dharma-śāstrá-s onwards: Āryāvartá
- Individually conquered neighboring territories & kine
 - From non-Ārya-s through Vrāta raids
 - From each other through war (gáv-iṣṭi)
- Five great tribes (RV 8.10.5): Ánu, Turváša, Druhyú, Pūrú, Yádu
- United under Aryamán (guardian of Ārya customs)
 - Bound by oaths to one another under Mitrá–Váruṇa:
 - An Ārya may attack another, but not break an oath.

The jána-s

- Élite spoke various dialects of Vedic Sanskrit
 - & commoners a language not too divergent
 - As opposed to the *mṛd^hrá-vāc-s* (RV 1.172.2)
- Fascinating dialectal differences: see Witzel
 - Gods speak differently from men, but still Sanskrit (MS 1.5.12)
 - Northerners had best speech
 - Woman spoke more clearly, used “popular” forms (*kuru*)
 - Also diachronic differences: see Arnold
- Jána-s often corresponded with *śák^hā-s*

Internecine conflict

- Ten Kings' Battle (RV 7.18)
 - Probably *not* related to the Mahā-bhārata
 - Five tribes with Paktʰá-s, Bʰalānás-s, Álina-s, Viṣāṇín-s
 - Against Tṛ̥tsu-s, Bʰarata-s
 - Gods intervened, decided victory of Tṛ̥tsu-s
 - Viśvámitra began to serve Sudáś
- Plenty of other conflicts between fully Árya tribes mentioned
- Decidedly less violent than any other conflicts!

Social organization within the jána

- Rule by a king: consistent throughout Vedá
- Expansionism through aśva-medhá (e.g. ṚV 1.162)
- Consecration at rāja-sūya (e.g. ṚV 10.173)
- Division of labor between men & women
 - & of course by caste
- Progenitor of four classic stages of life

Consolidation

- Towards end of Vedic period
- Kuru–Pañcala & Kosala–Videha were two hegemons
 - But many outlying tribes still
- Paved way for pan-subcontinental empires of later India
- Consolidation of ritual as well
 - No more “newest hymn”!
- Vedic religion became much more centralized
 - Functioned as more formalized state religion like Romans’
- “Hindu synthesis” well under way

Ārya nationhood in later India

- Traditional Vedic rituals still used to legitimize rule
 - Aśva-medhá on Gupta coinage, for example
 - But only 2 aśva-medhá-s in past millennium!
- Vedic dynasties & names of jánas frequent in literature
 - Tribal names (likely real) basis for Mahā-bhārata lineages
- Political movements like “dvijá identitarianism”

Some references

- Rau, W. "Staat und Gesellschaft im alten Indien" 1957.
- Witzel, M. "Tracing Vedic dialects." 1989.
- Witzel, M. "Early Sanskritization." *Elec. Journ. Vedic Stud.*, 1995.
- Witzel, M. "Autochthonous Aryans?" *Elec. Journ. Vedic Stud.*, 2001.

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