

# *The Status of the Warrior in the Rig Veda*

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**O**F THE living religions of the world, Hinduism, more than any other, concerns itself with a permanent warrior class. No sacred scripture of any other living religion refers so often to the warrior as does the Rig Veda of Hinduism. The Rig Veda, therefore, is a fruitful area of sociological investigation on the subject of war. It is the richest religious source book on fighting.

In order to gain a fuller appreciation of the position of the warrior in the Rig Veda, it is necessary both to give a general survey of the caste system as it exists in Hinduism, and to show the place of the Rig Veda among the sacred scriptures of that religion.

Hinduism is the most ancient organized religion in the world. More than any other living religion it has always been confined to the country of its origin. In recent years it has been confronted with two strongly missionary religions, Islam and Christianity. These religions have made substantial inroads into the constituency of Hinduism; nevertheless, it is still the third largest religious grouping in the world. Also, Hinduism has given birth to more religions now alive than any other in human history: Jainism, Buddhism, Sikhism.

The most unique aspect of Hinduism (as of India) is its system of caste. There are four main historic castes. Caste members must follow their hereditary occupations, must refrain from marrying and even from eating with members of other castes. Arranged in successively subordinate position, the major castes are: Brahmans, the priestly and

intellectual class; Kshatriyas, the rulers and warriors; Vaisyas, the common agriculturalists and artisans; and the low-caste Sudras. The process of subdivision has become so extensive that there are now fifty-eight major castes, proper, and over two thousand mutually exclusive subcastes.

The caste system, particularly as it related to the four major castes, is historically and voluminously described in the sacred literature of Hinduism. More than ever, scientific scholars are recognizing the important advance which has been made in recent years in the understanding of social relationships which a direct study of the sacred scriptures of the various organized religions can provide. A system of caste, like other social phenomena, must be viewed in its historical perspective. In the case of India, it can best be seen in the sacred literature of Hinduism.

Hinduism has developed at least six different types of religion, which have been embodied in sets of documents. These together constitute the sacred scriptures of Hinduism. They are all written in the Sanskrit language which is the ancient forebearer of most of the modern Indo-European languages. The six sets of religious literature are:

1. The Four Vedas: early nature worship (before 1000 B. C.)
  - a. Rig Veda, the Veda of Verses, or Psalms.
  - b. Yajur Veda, the Veda of Sacred Formulas.
  - c. Sama Veda, the Veda of Chants.
  - d. Atharva Veda, the Veda of Charms.
2. The Brahmanas: priestly Hinduism (1000-800 B. C.)
3. The Upanishads: philosophic Hinduism (800-600 B. C.)
4. The Laws of Manu: legalistic Hinduism (about 250 B. C.)

*Note—The first number in each footnote quotation reference indicates the book of Rig Veda, the second reference indicates the particular hymn within the book, the third reference or number indicates the verse of the hymn.*

5. The Bhagavad Gita: devotional Hinduism (about 1 A. D.)
6. The Epics and Puranas: popular Hinduism (1-25 A. D.)

The caste system as a rigid and permanent social control is not evident in Hinduism's sacred literature until the period of the Brahmanas. There is one, and only one, mention in the Rig Veda of the caste system, but this without doubt is an interpolation of a much later origin. In this passage, Indian society is compared to the various organs or functions of the primeval Person:

"When they divided the divine Person, how many portions did they conceive?

What are his mouth and arms called?

What are his thighs and feet called?

The priest was his mouth, of both arms the warrior was created.

From his thighs came the toiler, and from his feet the Sudra was produced."<sup>1</sup>

Thus an unknown Brahmanic poet attempted to give cosmic proportions to a then rapidly solidifying caste system. From the analogy he drew, it is apparent that he was a member of the priestly class and that he was trying to justify cosmically the superior position of his group. That this passage is of much later origin than the Rig Veda is evident primarily on technical grounds. Moreover, it clearly shows a form of society which was totally alien to that depicted in the Rig Veda, but which was in complete harmony with that of the Brahmanic period.

Although there is no formal division of society reflected in the Rig Veda which may be described as a caste system, nevertheless, there is social differentiation of function. Each person fits into a divine, pre-ordered plan which involves social division, and all work together harmoniously. There is no need for any specific human controlling will in that society. This conception is clearly seen in a hymn to Soma:

"All of us have our various thoughts and plans men's ways all differ..

The priest seeks the worshipper, the

mechanic seeks the broken, the doctor the sick..

Flow, Indus, flow for Indra's sake.

The artisan with ripe and seasoned plants, with feathers of the birds of the air,

With stones, and with flaming flames, seeks him with a store of gold.<sup>2</sup>

Flow, Indus, flow for Indra's sake.

I am a poet, the son of a doctor; my mother lay meals on the stones.

We all strive for wealth with varied plans; we follow our desires like cattle.

Flow, Indus, flow for Indra's sake.

A horse would like to draw an empty cart; the gay host attracts those who laugh and jest.

The male desires the approach of his mate, the frog is eager for food.

Flow, Indus, flow for Indra's sake."<sup>3</sup>

India of the Vedic period knew many occupations. The following references should show that the conception of only four distinct occupational groupings was unknown at that time. The significance of agriculture was recognized by the religious poets and is celebrated by a notable hymn to "the father of the fields."<sup>4</sup> Life-sustaining milk which came from patient cows also won the praise of the religionists; this indicates the occupation of herding.<sup>5</sup> The craftsman had a fundamental place in the Indian economy of that time. His was the task of making "a chariot for the man who needs it."<sup>6</sup> Workmen were needed for the building of boats (which suggests that the early Aryamen wandered from the Punjab).<sup>7</sup> Leather work required skilled craftsmen.<sup>8</sup> The healer found "the waters" beneficial to ills, although curative powers rested only in the gods.<sup>9</sup> The people needed ropes for many purposes, if not chiefly to fetter

<sup>1</sup> 10.90.11-12

<sup>2</sup> Reference to the process of making arrows for the highest payer.

<sup>3</sup> 9.112

<sup>4</sup> 4.57

<sup>5</sup> 4.58

<sup>6</sup> 1.61.4

<sup>7</sup> 1.115

<sup>8</sup> 4.45.1

<sup>9</sup> 1.23

their horses.<sup>10</sup> They also knew how to use the iron smelter to advantage.<sup>11</sup> The making of good wine was a religious obligation.<sup>12</sup> Also there were those devoted to weaving.<sup>13</sup> Other occupations were: barber,<sup>14</sup> bard,<sup>15</sup> currier,<sup>16</sup> merchant,<sup>17</sup> usurer.<sup>18</sup>

But the priests were the highest in the human order, according to the Rig Veda. They are even besought "as gods themselves, the ways of gods following."<sup>19</sup> We may conclude, however, that the priests were much less powerful than the priestly written Rig Veda avers. For the Rig Veda describes that period of Indian history when the northwestern section of the country had been overrun by foreign, migrating tribes of light-skinned people. And, we may imagine, these light-skinned invaders found success more because of their prowess in combat than because of their religion or skin differences. The fact that the priests needed to claim such an exalted origin and association, that is, with the gods, is sufficient proof of their otherwise insecure position.<sup>20</sup> They were constantly obliged to remind the warriors of the priest-share of the spoils:

"When with the glory of your chariot you travel, when you go speeding like the priests of men,  
Give good horses to the sacrificers;  
may we, O gods, gain our share of riches."<sup>21</sup>

Moreover, the priests taught that the success of the warrior in battle was dependent upon his liberality to the gods (priests):<sup>22</sup>

"On the high ridge of heaven he stands exalted, yes, even to the gods he ascends, the liberal giver.

The streaming waters run for him with fatness, to him this gift ever yields abundance.

For those who give good gifts are all these splendors; for those who give good gifts the sun shines in heaven. The givers of good gifts become immortal; the givers of rich fees prolong their life.

Let not the liberal giver sink to sin and sorrow; the pious chiefs who worship never decay.

Every man will protect them, and affliction will be upon the niggardly."<sup>23</sup>

A need of religious sanction for material gains is evident in one hymn to Agni, the god of fire, where there is a striking mixture of requests by a warrior for "a hundred oxen, all of speckled hue," and the recognition of the god's "lofty rule like the unwasting sun in heaven."<sup>24</sup>

The whole economy of Vedic society revolved about the warrior. The more peaceful occupations were never secure unless the warrior was able to keep the dark-skinned indigenous inhabitants of the Punjab in subjection.<sup>25</sup> Even the priests were dependent upon the spoils of the raiders.<sup>26</sup>

The real importance of the warrior in Vedic society is evident in the conception of deity of that period. Religions most intimately associated with nature and more developed than animism easily reveal anthropomorphic conception of their deity or deities. Such is the case in Vedic Hinduism: the gods are projections of human beings, groups, qualities of nature and men. Vedic religion shows clearly that Hinduism has always been non-pacifist, even in the official sanction of its conception of deity. The gods are responsible for human valor; they take part in battles among men; later, they fight among themselves; they fight against the gods of the foreigners. Indra is the chief of

<sup>10</sup> 1.162.14

<sup>11</sup> 5.9.5

<sup>12</sup> 1.191.10

<sup>13</sup> 6.9.2

<sup>14</sup> 8.4.16

<sup>15</sup> 9.112.3

<sup>16</sup> 7.64.2

<sup>17</sup> 8.45.14

<sup>18</sup> 8.55.10

<sup>19</sup> 3.8.7b

<sup>20</sup> 1.180.7

<sup>21</sup> 1.180.9

<sup>22</sup> 1.122.8-10

<sup>23</sup> 1.125.5-7

<sup>24</sup> 5.27

<sup>25</sup> 1.112.10

<sup>26</sup> 1.84

the Vedic deities.<sup>27</sup> He is the tutelary god of the Aryamen.<sup>28</sup> An early hymn speaks of his efforts in battle while drunk:

"When Indra rejoiced with strong drink, he mounted the steeds which swerved wider and wider.

The strong One let loose his lightning with the swift rush of rain, and he rent the enemy's well-built fort in pieces."<sup>29</sup>

He was constantly called upon as the god who offered protection:

"From near or far may Indra, the mighty, giver of aid, come as our protection.

Lord of men, armed with thunder, helped by the strongest men, slaying his enemies in conflict, in battles."<sup>30</sup>

Indra battles the demons of the air for the worshipper below.<sup>31</sup>

His attributes indicate that he is a lover of battle and the favorite deity of the warriors.<sup>32</sup> In the case of Indra, as with other deities, the warrior is given a certain type of cosmic justification and glorification.

One passage speaks of sacrifice and battle as representing the highest concern of the Aryamen. Indra is called upon by the poet to stand by the worshipper in his sacrificing and in his battles.<sup>33</sup> Again, the gods are thought to be helpful in two respects; in assuming the grieving individual, and in winning spoils in combat.<sup>34</sup> Indra will help in the "strife for kins" and "at home reveal rich opulence."<sup>35</sup> The gods are especially friendly with those who fight.<sup>36</sup> Although Vedic life was deeply permeated with a type of religion, nevertheless, one can safely say that the pre-eminent concern was fighting, upon which even the existence of the priesthood depended.

We may conclude that the Rig Veda attests to the supreme power of the warriors in this period, even though the priests claimed superior rights. This situation continued until the following period, that of the Brahmanas, when the priests gradually gained unconditional power. The Upanishads of the period

following the Brahmanas represent the attempt of non-priestly classes in India to formulate a type of religious philosophy wherein the necessity for a priesthood would largely be eliminated.

The basic division of Vedic society was, as in every country which has experienced invasion, between the conquerors and the conquered. Some scholars think that this distinction is sufficient to explain the later development of the caste system. It certainly is a significant factor. There are, however, more factors involved in the development of Indian caste than this important and necessary one.

The Rig Veda clearly reflects a society which knows and respects the power of physical force. There was no unified or stratified social system in the strict sense of the term. The problem of making themselves secure in a new land troubled the Aryamen. Following the invasions when the raiders became secure, more was made of color distinctions and less of actual armed superiority. A sort of racial superiority theory was espoused by the leaders and accepted by the masses, and this theory took the place of the physical force.

There are many passages in the early hymns of the Rig Veda which show the hatred of the invader for the aboriginal inhabitants of India. In one hymn the difference seems to be over sacrificial practices. This means in its wider scope that the invaders were disdainful of the religious activities of the aborigines and thought themselves to be superior for that reason. The settled people in India were "godless."<sup>37</sup>

<sup>27</sup> 1.131.1

<sup>28</sup> 1.7

<sup>29</sup> 1.151.11

<sup>30</sup> 4.201; also 4.21

<sup>31</sup> 1.11.7; also 1.80.10

<sup>32</sup> 2.11.18

<sup>33</sup> 4.20.2

<sup>34</sup> 4.21.8

<sup>35</sup> 10.38.1

<sup>36</sup> 4.24.6; 36A; 1.132.4

<sup>37</sup> 2.26.1

The Aryamen had a profound respect for law, both cosmic (or natural) and moral. They believed that law is eternal,<sup>38</sup> that the gods received their mighty powers through law.<sup>39</sup> Law is compared to the womb because it is the primary controlling factor in human life.<sup>40</sup> The indigenous people of India were barbarians to the Aryamen. The dusky aborgines did not know law; they were lawless people.<sup>41</sup> The gods fight against the lawless and thereby "uphold the mighty law."<sup>42</sup>

Again, the basis of the invasion was avowedly for plunder. Thus, the aborgines were not thought of as being inferior or superior, but simply as enemies that refused to give over certain material objects. Seemingly these early Aryamen were not primarily motivated by altruistic ideas. At a somewhat later time they fought presumably because their enemies had darker skin, but not in the early Vedic period. Sometimes the two strains of lawlessness and plunder are intimately interwoven as in an early hymn to Indra:

"Thou hero; winner of plunder, who can speed the chariot of warriors, Burn, like a lamp with a flame, the lawless enemy, O Conqueror."<sup>43</sup>

Another passage of the Rig Veda suggests that the invaders fought against the inhabitants of India because they hated the pretense of those who had great riches while they had none — the familiar story of the "haves" and the "have nots."<sup>44</sup> The enemy "deems himself to be immortal," that is, the enemy thinks himself to be the perpetual owner of his riches.<sup>45</sup> There is no conception of a personal immortality or survival of death in the Rig Veda.

Drinking of intoxicants was a religious obligation to the invaders. Soma was the god of intoxicants. The Aryamen believed that the condition which intoxicants brought on was of religious value. When they drank the bitter soma-juice they believed that they were taken from mundane existence to a celestial realm where the gods surely

dwelt. Combat with the enemy must occasionally have taken place under such conditions. Their zeal must have approximated religious fervor, for the Vedic poet speaks of "hero deeds" in "breaking down enemy forts." The men "attacked in rapturous joy." These achievements "were wrought when the soma flowed."<sup>46</sup>

The Aryamen loved a good fight. Most of the Rig Veda, although it purports to be a religious manual, is concerned with the struggles of the Aryamen against their enemies. The Aryamen did not pray only for themselves. They prayed for prosperity "vast and exhaustless," and also that the gods might "strengthen therewith both the hatred of the Aryamen and their enemies," and let the might of Nahushas (neighboring enemy tribes) be great.<sup>47</sup> Nowhere in the Rig Veda did the Aryamen wish the complete extinction of their enemies. Indra, one of the chief deities of this period, was responsible for the slaying both of the Aryamen and of their enemies:

"Both groups, Indra, of opposing warriors, O Hero, both the Aryamen and their enemies,

Hast thou struck down like trees with lightning well-directed; thou killest them in fight, thou manly Chieftain."<sup>48</sup>

There is some suggestion in the Rig Veda that the priests may have had enemies among both the Aryamen and the aborgines. Indra-Agni (a combination of the gods, usually implying superpower) are besought by the priests thus:

"The strong Ones, scatterers of enemies, Indra and Agni, we invoke;

<sup>38</sup> 1.1.8

<sup>39</sup> 1.2.8

<sup>40</sup> 1.65.2

<sup>41</sup> 1.32.4

<sup>42</sup> 2.23.17; 42A; 1.102.9-11

<sup>43</sup> 1.175.3

<sup>44</sup> 2.11.2

<sup>45</sup> 2.11.2

<sup>46</sup> 4.32.10-11

<sup>47</sup> 6.22.10; bold type mine.

<sup>48</sup> 6.33.3

May they be kind to one like me.  
 They kill our Aryamen enemies these  
 Chiefs of heroes; they slay our Dasa  
 (enemies of the Aryamen) enemies,  
 And drive away all our enemies."<sup>49</sup>

The Aryamen felt their enemies to be strange. They worshipped different gods, they possessed unequal amounts of riches, they were loyal to different kinds of laws. They also felt that they were different in physical appearance (aside from the color of the skin). Occasionally reference is made to the inferior combative qualities of the aborigines.<sup>50</sup> And, in one passage the aborigines are said to be "bull-jawed," which is a somewhat polite way of equating the enemy with the lower forms of animal life (a practice well known in our day).<sup>51</sup> The strangeness which the Aryamen felt toward their enemies is aptly summarized in a late hymn:

"Around us is the enemy, riteless, void  
 of reason, inhuman, keeping alien  
 laws.

Confuse, thou slayer of the enemy, the  
 weapon which this enemy uses."<sup>52</sup>

Some time after the Aryamen had conquered the indigenous people of India, a theory of racial superiority was developed which took the place of former physical force. As the later poets looked back on the heroic struggles of the Aryamen, they explained their success wholly in terms of biological or racial superiority. The color of the skin had something to do with the success of the Aryamen.

"Day upon day, far from their homes,  
 he (Indra) drove them alike, those  
 darksome creatures.

The Hero slew the meanly-heckstering  
 enemies where the waters meet."<sup>53</sup>

The lighter skin became a badge of purer racial origin. Credit for the conquest in later times was given to the mighty Thunderer, Indra, "with his fair-complexioned friends." They "won the land, the sunlight, and the waters."<sup>54</sup> Indra "drove the dusky brood away."<sup>55</sup> The Aryamen are compared to the sons of Manu, in one passage, which indicates that they are men of the highest order, par excellence:

"Indra in battles helps the Aryamen  
 who worships; he hath a hundred  
 helpers at hand in every fray, in  
 frays that win the light of heaven.  
 Plaguing the lawless he (Indra)  
 gave up to Manu's seed those of  
 dark skin;

Flaming, as it were, he burns away  
 each greedy man; he burns the ty-  
 rant."<sup>56</sup>

So it was, that the conquerors substituted a theory of original superiority which they themselves believed (from all the indications which Rig Veda gives) and which the indigenous people later seemingly accepted.

<sup>49</sup> 6.60.5-6

<sup>50</sup> 7.100.4

<sup>51</sup> 7.100.4

<sup>52</sup> 10.22.8

<sup>53</sup> 6.47.21

<sup>54</sup> 1.100.18

<sup>55</sup> 1.101.1

<sup>56</sup> 1.30.8