

## IMPORTANCE OF RIVERS IN THE *RIGVEDA*

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Rivers are very important, loved and revered in the *Rigveda*. The level of importance given to rivers in the *Rigveda* is that of the mythical divine cow “*Kamadhenu*” which can fulfill any wish-

*Dhenuriva manave vishwadohaso janaaya vishwadohasah* (For thoughtful people the rivers render riches like the divine cow *Kamadhenu* gives everything according to the wish of the person).<sup>1</sup>

Rivers have played a vital role in the lives of the people since eternity. No wonder people wanted to live next to the riverbanks and many civilizations of the world developed on the riverbanks- Mesopotamian civilization on the banks of the rivers Tigris and Euphrates; Egyptian civilization on the banks of the river Nile; Harappan civilization on the banks of Indus river and Chinese on Yangtze (yellow river) banks. Rivers have been cradles of many civilizations because they are a source of food (fish, meat, water etc.) and above all their fertile soil supports agriculture. That is why the *Rigveda* calls the flowing rivers life-giving forces.<sup>2</sup> Rivers were used for transportation also. Hymn 3.33 in the *Rigveda* describes the crossing of two swollen rivers by the chariots and wagons of the Bharata tribe. ‘*Nau*’ word is used for boat and ship. The word Navy is derived from this Sanskrit word. It is frequently mentioned in the *Rigveda* and *Atharvaveda*. The term ‘*nava*’ refers to a ship.<sup>3</sup> There is a reference of a boat with a hundred oars by which Bhujyu reached his destination.<sup>4</sup>

The *Rigveda* values rivers, reveres them and reveres them to the extent of personifying them in its descriptions. Out here rivers talk between themselves- ‘Why is this person yelling for us’- the two rivers talking in this verse.<sup>5</sup> In another place they are addressing the devotee- “We, the two rivers heard you. You have come from far so you travel on a chariot or a cart; we will lower down ourselves the way a mother does to feed her milk to the child or a wife to her husband.”<sup>6</sup>

Rivers are like friends, sisters, wife and above all a mother.<sup>7</sup> Mother is the most important relation in a human life, the very source of one’s birth and existence to an extent. *Rigveda* says that rivers are like mothers to us. Mothers give birth and rivers give life. When *Deerghatamaa* (the son of Uchathya) was tied and thrown into the river, then it is the river which protected him and nourished him like a mother (... *maatrtamaa* ...).<sup>8</sup>

Rivers take care as a wife.<sup>9</sup> Rivers are as loving as sisters.<sup>10</sup> Rivers take us to right directions as charioteers.<sup>11</sup> Rivers guide as a friend.<sup>12</sup> An imagination of an intrinsic relationship

between rivers and the mountains is also there.<sup>13</sup> The ocean has been depicted as the husband of rivers. There could be two reasons for this- (i) the relative size of a river and the ocean, and (ii) rivers merging into the oceans.

Rivers were also visualized as cows<sup>14</sup> and mares<sup>15</sup>— two very useful animals in the Rigvedic period. Like two bright mother-cows that lick their young ones, river Vipasa and Shutudri speed down with their waters.<sup>16</sup> Rivers and cows are often poetically correlated in the *Rigveda*. Indra slays Vritra (literally “the obstacle”) and liberates the rivers. In a different myth, Indra smashes the Vala cave and releases the cows/light (word ‘go’ is used for both) captured there. In the *Rigveda* there is an entire hymn called in the praise of rivers called the *Nadi-sukta*.<sup>17</sup> It’s beautiful, lively and interesting description of Sindhu that endorses that people lived in that area where river Sindhu flowed with its tributaries-

*Abhi tva Sindho shishuminna mataro... pravataminakshi* – (O Sindho! Like cows with their milk run to their calves, similarly these rivers come roaring towards you. Like the warrior king moves forward with his army, similarly you move forward with these rivers).<sup>18</sup> There are beautiful poetic descriptions of the rivers and their flow in the *Rigveda*. People lived on these shores (Videha Mathava lived on the banks of river Saraswati).<sup>19</sup> King Nahusha and king Chitra lived on river banks.<sup>20</sup> All of them enjoyed the beauty and the different moods of the rivers, prayed to them and performed *yajnas* there and some also wrote about them. The streams of the rivers flow the way the birds go to their nests.<sup>21</sup> They flow fast hitting their shores with a force.<sup>22</sup> The sage Archnana performed Somayagas for Rathaviti Darbhya on the banks of river Gomati.<sup>23</sup> The sons of Kushik pray to the river enormously and ask for protection.<sup>24</sup> Gritsamada and Shunhotra find all the energies set in river Saraswati.<sup>25</sup> Rivers are prayed to flow favourably and not to bring floods and also not to get dry. Rivers are prayed to bring good crops.<sup>26</sup>

Apart from all these things the Rigvedic rivers provide us with much authentic historical, geographical and linguistic information.

The descriptions in the *Rigveda* help the historians decide the place where the Rigvedic verses were written and where Aryans lived. Rathaviti Darbhya’s kingdom was on the banks of Gomati river (*Esha ksheti rathavitirmaghwa Gomatiranu*).<sup>27</sup>

The rivers that have been mentioned in the *Rigveda* can be divided in four categories:

1. Rivers, which are still flowing with the same name like *Ganga, Yamuna*.
2. Rivers, which are still flowing but with the name changed like – *Vipasha – Vyasa, Shutudri– Satluj and Parushni – Ravi*.
3. Rivers, which are still flowing but with the course changed.
4. Rivers, which have dried up and cannot be traced now. *Sarswati*, which is the most important river of the *Rigveda* and which has the maximum number of references here but with the passage of time *Sarswati* went underground.

Many rivers like *Apaya*, *Anitabha*, *Drishadwati*, *Ganga*, *Parushni*, *Rasaa*, *Sarswati*, *Saryu*, *Shutudri*, *Vipasha*, *Yamuna* and others find mention in the *Rigveda*. Some of these still retain the same name. Some names however, have changed like the *Vipasha* river of the *Rigveda* is now known as *Vyasa* and *Shutudri* as *Satluj* and likewise. In *Rigveda* X.75 the verses are only river related hence it is called the *Nadi-sukta*. Identification of the Rigvedic Rivers is the most important way of establishing the geography of the early Vedic civilization. References of four rivers<sup>28</sup> and seven rivers<sup>29</sup> are important with the research point of view. The Seven Rivers are a group of seven chief rivers of uncertain (the number seven is of greater importance than the exact members of the group). It is not entirely clear how the Seven Rivers were intended to be enumerated. These are often located in northern India / eastern Pakistan. If the *Saraswati* and the five major rivers of India are included (*Shutudri/Sutlej*, *Parushni/Ravi*, *Ashikni/Chenab*, *Vitasta/Jhelum*, *Vipasha/Beas*, (all tributaries of *Sindhu/Indus*), one river is missing, probably the *Kubha* (this name figures in only one place in the *Rigveda*).<sup>30</sup> All other rivers are in feminine gender with the exception of *Sindhu* having feminine or masculine gender both. Other possibilities include the *Arjikiya* or *Sushoma*; come in the list of ten rivers, both east and west of the *Indus*, in the *Nadistuti sukta*.<sup>31</sup> In 6.61.10, *Saraswati* is called “she with seven sisters” (*saptasvasā*) indicating a group of eight rivers, the number seven being more important than the individual members. In *Rigveda* 10.64.8 and *Rigveda* 10.75.1, three groups of seven rivers are referred to (*trīḥ saptā sasrā nadiyah* “thrice seven wandering rivers”), as well as ninety nine rivers. The *Sapta-Saindhava* region was bounded by *Saraswati* in the east, by the *Sindhu* in the west and the five in between were *Shatudru*, *Vipasa*, *Asikni*, *Parusni* and *Vitasta*. Many researchers do not agree with this interpretation. According to other interpretation, “*Sapta Sindhu*” is only a small subset of the Rigvedic terrain and its disproportionate importance derives from it being the original homeland of the victorious *Bharata Trutsu* tribe. As far as geography is concerned the Vedic texts have a wide geographical horizon, speaking of oceans, rivers, mountains and deserts. “Eight summits of the Earth, three shore or desert regions, seven rivers (*asthau vyakhyat kakubhah prthivyam tri dhanva yojana sapta sindhun*)”.<sup>32</sup> The Vedic land is a land of the seven rivers flowing into the ocean. It encompasses the regions from *Gandhara* to *Kurukshetra*. Hymn in praise of rivers (*Nadi-sukta*)<sup>33</sup> of the *Rigveda* is very important in this regard as it mentions certain rivers which stretch from eastern Afghanistan to the western Gangetic plain, clustering in the undivided *Punjab* (the region’s name means “five rivers”, the word ‘*Punj*’ literally means five and ‘*Ab*’ means water). A number of names can be shown to have been re-applied to other rivers as the centre of Vedic culture moved eastward from the central Vedic heartland in undivided *Punjab*. It is possible due to the *Nadistuti sukta*<sup>34</sup> of the *Rigveda*, to establish somewhat a clear picture of the then flowing rivers of that particular area as this hymn contains a geographically ordered list of rivers. The most prominent river of the *Rigveda* is the *Saraswati*, next to the *Indus*. The *Rigveda* mentions *Saraswati* River as between *Yamuna* to the East and river *Sutlej* to the west. The *Mahabharata* clearly talks about

the river Saraswati drying up. The mighty and perennial Saraswati River flowed from the Himalayan Glaciers to the Rann of Kutch where it emptied into the Arabian Sea. Dwaraka of Lord Krishna was part of this civilization. Ganges was also flowing at that time into the Bay of Bengal. Saraswati started drying up in 4000 BC due to tectonic plate shifts which blocked the glacier source, and made this river dependant on rains, not melting ice. Gradually the whole river was buried under the Thar Desert sand dunes, leaving only disconnected pools and lakes here and there. Yamuna River soon started pouring into Ganges instead of Saraswati. When the Saraswati River started drying up, the whole civilization may have migrated to fertile lands – some to Ganges, some to south-west of India from Goa to Kerala. Some of the rivers mentioned in the *Rigveda* have changed their course. Some have dried up like river Sarswati which is now not visible on the outer surface. It is important for the reconstruction of the geography of the Vedic civilization. Saraswati Sindhu (the Indus) is addressed as the mightiest of rivers and addressed specifically in verses 1, 2, 7, 8 and 9 of the river-hymn. In verse 5, the sage enumerates ten rivers, beginning with the Ganga and moving westwards:

O Ganga, Yamuna, Saraswati, Shutudri (Sutlej), Parushni (Iravati, Ravi), follow my praise! O Asikni (Chenab) Marudvridha, Vitasta (Jhelum), with the Arjikiya (Haro) and Sushoma (Sohan), listen.<sup>35</sup>

1. Gang, 2. Yamuna, 3. Saraswati, 4. Shutudri, 5. Parushni, 6. Asikni, 7. Marudvrdha, 8. Vitasta, 9. Arjikiya and 10. Sushoma.

Verse 6 of the *nadi-sukta* adds north-western rivers (tributaries of the Indus flowing through Afghanistan and north-western Pakistan).

“First thou goest united with the Trishtama on this journey, with the Susartu, the Rasa, and the Sveti, O Sindhu with the Kubha (Kophen, Kabul river) to the Gomati (Gomal), with the Mehatnu to the Krumu (Kurrum) with whom thou proceedest together”. Griffith translates: “First united with the Trishtama in order to flow, with the Susartu and Rasa, and with this Svetya (you flow), O Sindhu (Indus) with the Kubha (Kabul) to the Gomati (Gomal), with the Mehatnu to the Krumu (Kurrum), with whom you rush together on the same chariot”.

1. Tristama, 2. Susartu, 3. Rasa, 4. Shvetya, 5. Sindhu, 6. Kubha, 7. Gomati, 8. Krumu and 9. Mehatnu.

From the point of linguistic researches the journey of the names of many rivers mentioned in the *Rigveda* can be of great importance. Some of these rivers still retain the same name by which they were known during the Rigvedic period. Some names, however, have changed-Asikni (literally meaning black-Chenaba), Vipasha (Vitasta), Shutudri (Satluj),<sup>36</sup> Parushni, (Iravati, Ravi). Marudvridha seems to be a general name for river. Roth talks of the combined course of the Akesines and Hydaspes. “Vitasta, the last of the rivers of the Punjab, changed in Greek into Hydaspes. It is the modern Behat or Jilam”. According to Yaska the Arjikiya is the

Vipasa”. “Its modern name is Bias or Bejah”. “According to Yaska the Sushoma is the Indus. Thus the names of the rivers that have changed in due course of time provide important clues for linguistic researches.

For river the word “*Nadi*” has been used in the *Rigveda*<sup>37</sup> in singular and plural forms and in different cases. The word “*nadyah*” seems to have been used in a wider context rather than just being used for a flowing stream of water-the river.<sup>38</sup> “*Nadyah*” also is stream of lights. The word “*Nadi*” has been derived from the verb root ‘*nad*’ which means– to sound, to thunder or to roar. *Yaska* has enlisted the root *nadati* in *stutikarma* (*Nighantu* 3.14).<sup>39</sup>

Rivers are universally important as they give in abundance. It is for us to realize their importance which people did in the Rigvedic times. They offered them the best of prayers, prayed them for enrichment,<sup>40</sup> asked for their protection; requested them to come to the people with all their resources and above all cared for them-

*Ut tye nah parvataasah sushastayah sudeetayo nadyastraamane bhuvan,  
Bhago vibhaktaa shavasaavasaa gamaduruvyachaaaditih shrotu me havam.*<sup>41</sup>

The 33<sup>rd</sup> *sukta* of the *Rigveda* is dedicated to the rivers, as all the 13 verses of this *Sukta* are river related, devoted to the invocation and praise of sister streams – Vipasha and Shutudri. Saraswati, Saryu and Sindhu are the big streams with more descriptions.<sup>42</sup> In fact, the words Hindu and India have originated from rivers described in the *Rigveda*. Since the Aryans lived on the banks of Sindhu river and surrounding areas and in Iranian language the letter “S” is pronounced as “H”so in due course of time ‘Sindhu’ became “Hindu”. Similarly in Greek language ‘Sindus’ became “Indus” and later “India”.<sup>43</sup>

However, Rigvedic rivers have been important for us all along. Some of them are much polluted now. The pollution of the Ganges is being handled on a large scale by the government of India. In fact, we should take a lesson from the Rigvedic verses and look after our rivers in a true sense by not polluting them. Rivers gave ample returns to the wise people who looked after them well<sup>44</sup> endorses the *Rigveda*. All these rivers mentioned in the *Rigveda* surely existed then. Now the scholars agree upon the fact that Sarswati did exist in that period. The Haryana Saraswati Heritage Development Board in India has done a commendable research work in this field. The *Rigveda* provided most important information about Saraswati’s source and end<sup>45</sup> and also about its volume.<sup>46</sup> May be the geological researchers can also trace the course of other rivers and those may then unravel many more mysteries of the past like in the case of that time most worshipped Saraswati river. During the Vedic period the *yajnas* were performed on the riverbanks and later temples were also built near rivers. In fact, rivers and religion in India go together. We cannot find any river in India which does not have a temple alongside. There are many rivers where yearly congregations are held and people from all caste and creed gather and camp there. They are culturally vibrant and impressionable, not to miss the recently held

Kumbha in the city of Prayagraja on the banks of the holy river the Ganges in Northern India where people from all over the world congregated in the winter of 2018. Thus rivers and religion have been complementing each other since the time of the *Rigveda*. Rivers have given Indra (the most powerful deity of the *Rigveda*) the fame for one of his most acclaimed and beautiful work that he filled the rivers with sweet water,<sup>47</sup> he filled seven rivers with water.<sup>48</sup>

Rigvedic rivers were important then, Rigvedic rivers are important now. *Rigveda* endorses that rivers are not only like mothers but they are the best mother (*Ambitame*):

अम्बितमे नदीतमे देवितमे सरस्वति।अप्रशस्ता इव स्मसि प्रशस्तिमम्ब नस्कृधि॥<sup>49</sup> (Rig. 2.41.16)

(O river Saraswati! You are the best mother, best amongst deities and best amongst rivers. We are ignorant children. Kindly bless us with best knowledge).

#### Notes and References:

1. *Rigveda*, 1.30.5.
2. *Rigveda*, 10.95.7.
3. *Rigveda*, 1.97.8.
4. *Rigveda*, 1. 116.5.
5. *Rigveda*, 3.33.10.
6. *Ibid*.
7. *Rigveda*, 10.64.9.
8. *Rigveda*, 1.158.5.
9. *Rigveda*, 3.33.10; 5.42.12.
10. *Rigveda*, 3.33.9.
11. *Rigveda*, 7.33.2.
12. *Rigveda*, 6.61.14.
13. *Rigveda*, 5.55.7; 10.64.8.
14. *Rigveda*, 7.33.1; 4; 10.75.4.
15. *Rigveda*, 7.33.1.
16. *Rigveda*, 3. 33.1.
17. *Rigveda*, 10.75.
18. *Rigveda*, 10.75.4.
19. *Tarhi Videtho Madhava Asa saraswatyam*, page 393, *Vaidika Sahitya Ka Itihasa* by Acharya Baldeva Upadhyaya, Varanasi 1967.

20. *Rigveda*, 7.95.2; 8.21.18.
21. *Rigveda*, 2.19.2.
22. *Rigveda*, 5.45.2.
23. *Rigveda*, 5.61.19.
24. *Rigveda*, 3.33.5.
25. *Rigveda*, 2.41.17; 18.
26. *Rigveda*, 7.33.2.
27. *Rigveda*, 5.61.19.
28. *Rigveda*, 1.62.6.
29. *Rigveda*, 1.102.2.
30. *Rigveda*, 5.53.9.
31. *Rigveda*, 10.75.
32. *Rigveda*, 1.35.8.
33. *Rigveda*, 10.75.
34. *Ibid.*
35. This translation is by Griffith.
36. Max Muller on *Rigveda*, 10.75.5 in his book '*India-What it can teach us now?*'
37. *Rigveda*, 1.158.5; 2.35.3; 3.3.4; 5.46.6; 55.7; 10.64.8 etc.
38. *Rigveda*, 10.64.8.
39. A Critical study of *Rigveda* by Dr. Deo Prakash Patanjali Shastri on page 331.
40. *Rigveda*, 2.41.6.
41. *Rigveda*, 5.46.6.
42. *Rigveda*, 10.64.9.
43. *Sanskrit Sahitya Ka Itihasa*, 1967, Varanasi, India by Acharya Baldeva Upadhyaya, p. 388.
44. *Rigveda*, 1.130.5.
45. *Rigveda*, 7.95.1; 2.
46. *Rigveda*, 6.61.2; 8.
47. *Rigveda*, 1.62.2.
48. *Rigveda*, 1.102.2.
49. *Rigveda*, 2.41.16.