

## Rigveda has References to Rice?

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In my paper “Rice research in South Asia through ages” published a few years ago (Nene, 2005), I had stated the following:

“Most scholars seem to agree that the oldest Veda, the Rigveda, does not contain any reference to rice, and that a subsequent Veda, the Yajurveda has reference to rice. If one reads Rigveda, one cannot miss noting the word *dhana*, which according to Sanskrit dictionaries means rice. Words such as *dhana* (IV.24.7), *dhanaa* (I.16.2), and *dhanya* (V.53.13) are found in Rigveda, and all these have been interpreted as the words for cereals in general. Susruta, a sage of the ancient era and whose work is described later, recognizes only rice as *dhanya* (also supported by Monier-Williams, 1872) and others as *kudhanya*, lesser or minor cereals. Charaka, who lived before Susruta, also gave much more details about rice than wheat. Sayanacharya (1400 AD) of Vijayanagar, in his commentary on Rigveda (I.16.2) uses the word *tandula*, which, most scholars agree, means rice (Sontakke and Kashikar, 1983). Why scholars want to believe that Rigveda has no reference to rice is a riddle, which needs more discussion.”

During the intervening years, I kept on thinking, reading, and pondering over the issue. I feel there is sufficient indirect

evidence to put forth the view that the Rigveda does mention rice in addition to barley, wheat, sesame, black gram, and few other crops. This view is contrary to the established view of traditional Indologists and historians the world over since the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

This communication is based on various commentaries of Rigveda (Griffith, 1896; Sontakke and Kashikar, 1983; Sharma, 1991), dictionaries (Monier-Williams, 1872; Apte, 1965; Amarsimha’s Amarkosa by Jha, 1999), Encyclopedia Britannica (1993), books on barley and rice, as well as communications available on the Internet.

### Rigveda

The first published translation of any part of the Rigveda in any Western language was into Latin by Friedrich August Rosen (*Rigvedae specimen*, London, 1830), predating Friedrich Max Müller’s *Editio principes* of the text, *The Hymns of the Rigveda*, with Sayana’s commentary (London, 1849–75, 6 vols.; 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 4 vols., Oxford, 1890–92). Rosen was working from manuscripts brought back from India by Henry Thomas Colebrooke (1782–1807). Horace Hayman Wilson (1786–1860) was the first to translate complete Rigveda into English, published in 6 volumes during

the period 1850–88. Wilson’s version was based on the commentary of Sayanacharya (a great Sanskrit scholar, who flourished under the kings of Vijayanagar Empire of southern India in the 14<sup>th</sup> century AD). In 1977 Wilson’s edition was enlarged by Nag Sharan Singh (Nag Publishers, Delhi, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 1990). In 1896 Ralph TH Griffith published his translation as “The Hymns of the Rigveda” in London. A German translation was published by Karl Friedrich Geldner; the title was *Der Rig-Veda: aus dem Sanskrit ins Deutsche Ubersetzt, Harvard Oriental Studies, Vols. 33–37* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: 1951–57) (Source: World Wide Web).

Most translators depended on Sayanacharya’s commentary and accepted *yava* as the Sanskrit word for barley; however, the word *yavagoo* means rice gruel, sour gruel made from rice or any other grain, such as barley (Apte, 1965). Although I have often wondered whether these translators wrongly translated the word *yava* as barley only, I shall not dwell on that issue in the present communication.

I have highlighted some of the *ruchas* (verses) from Rigveda (RV) below for the purpose of discussion.

1.16. 2

**RV:** *ima dhaanah ghrutasnuwo hari ihop’ vakshatah|Indre sukhatame rathe|*

**Sayana:** *|dhaanah bhrashtya yavatan-dulanuddish’ sukhatame rathe Indram avasthapyā ...*

This verse has the word *dhaanah* that could mean roasted rice or barley (Apte, 1965), though Amarsimha (c. 200 BC) mentions *dhaanah* as roasted barley. In fact the commentary of Sayanacharya mentions both *yava* and *tandula*. Why? If it was roasted barley only, *dhaanah* and *yava* would have been adequate. The word *tandula* normally means rice grain that is ready for cooking.

3.56.3

**Sayana:** *prajavana|prakarshena jaayant iti vrihyadyaaha prajah|purudh nanaprakarena vidyamanvrihiya-vadirupaprajavaan|bahuvrihau ‘udhaso s nang’ ...*

The above quote is from the commentary of Sayanacharya. The word *vrihi* appears at three places. Translators have interpreted *vrihi* and *bahuvrihi* as barley, wheat, etc. but not rice (Sharma, 1991). Why?

4.24.7

**RV:** *ya Indraya sunvatsomamadya pachatpktirut bhrujyati dhaanah|*

**Sayana:** *Tatha yah paktihi paktavyanshchya purodashadin pachat pachet pachanam kuryat|uta api cha yah dhanah bharjanyogyān yavan|*

Even if we concede *dhanah* as roasted barley, the word *purodasha* in Sayanacharya’s commentary should make us wonder if the word *dhanah* meant rice.

4.27.7

**Sayana:** *purodashadi pachyate|bhrushta yavah dhanah| tashcha santi havirarth sanskrita bhavanti*

Contents of this verse are similar to 4.24.7 and my comments would therefore be the same.

10.101.3

**Sayana:** *krute ch'yonou iha sitayam beejam gramyamaranayam ch' vapat nidhita|tilmashvrihyadikam gramyasaptkam*

The above verse describes sowing operation. Sayanacharya's commentary mentions *til* (sesame), *mash* (black gram), *vrihi* (rice), and other crops.

## Dictionaries

### Amarkosa

It would be relevant to mention meanings of certain words related to rice and barley as mentioned by Amarsimha (c. 200 BC) in Amarkosa.

- *Vrihi*: *yava, mudga, mash, priyangu, godhuma, chanak*
- *Yavyam*: field suitable for *awned, awnless barley*, and *shashtikam (sathi)* rice
- *Dhanyam*: *vrihi, stambakar* all mean *dhanya*
- *Dhanya*: *vrihi, stambakar* all mean *dhanya*

- *Dhanah*: roasted barley
- *Annam, odanah*: cooked rice or *bhaat*

Thus all the words given above would give flexibility to translators to use the name or names of crops. Thus reference to rice in Rigveda cannot be ruled out.

### Apte

- *Yava*: barley
- *Yavanna*: boiled barley
- *Yavagu*: rice gruel; sour gruel made from rice or from any kind of grain such as barley
- *Yavasa*: meadow grass
- *Vrihi*: rice
- *Vrihi-agar*: a granary
- *Annam*: food in general
- *Annakuta*: a large heap of boiled rice
- *Annamaya*: consisting or made of food; composed of or containing boiled rice
- *Dhaanah*: roasted rice or barley

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### Monier-Williams

- Rice: *vrihi*, *dhanyam*, *tandulah*, *stambkari*, *nivarah*, *kalamah*, *shastika*, *annam* and *odanam* (boiled rice), *dhaanah* (fried rice), *pyasum* (rice-milk), *vrihimaya* (made of rice)

There is considerable ambiguity about the meanings of the word mentioned above. According to Amarkosa, the word *yava* should be included in *vrihi* in a broad sense, but *yavyam* may mean *shastikam* rice. While *dhanah* can mean barley or rice, *dhanyam* and *dhanya* can include *vrihi*. Apte considers *annam* as food in general but Amarkosa considers *annam* as cooked rice or *bhaat*. However, the words *annakuta* and *annamaya* refer only to rice. Although Apte mentions *yava* and *yavanna* as barley and boiled barley, respectively, he explains *yavagu* as gruel from rice or barley.

### Views of some modern Indologists

Kalyanaraman (2007) wrote: *Anna* means rice in Rigveda. He further states:

“Why do Indologists and IEL (Institute for Educational Leadership, Washington DC, USA) pundits claim that Rigveda has no reference to ‘rice’? Because, they are

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Eurocentric and look only for cognates in European languages. If *annam* doesn’t occur in Europe, it is not their fault; after all, most of Europe was covered with a deep sheet of ice during the ice age.”

“Paul Kekai Manansala (a freelance writer): Panini suggests *anna* as ‘food’ although it generally did come to mean mainly (cooked) rice. *Otoh*, *odana*, and *odanam* refer to rice cooked in milk as found in the Emusa (a boar) myth [Shatpatha (Sat.) Brahmana (Br.) 2.1.1]. Panini also has *purodasa* as ‘rice cake’ and the Brahmanas specifically state that the Rgvedic verses using *purodasa* refer to rice (Sat. Br. 2.1.3). The Brahmanas and other commentaries state that *apupa* as used in the RV refers to sweet rice cakes (RV 10.45.9, Sat. Br. 2.2.3.12). According to Sayanacharya, *tandula* at RV 1.16.2 refers to rice porridge. *Apupa*: sweet rice cakes (III. 52.1, 7; VIII. 91.2; X. 45.9). *Purodasa*: ground rice cakes (I. 162.3; III. 28.1-6; 41.3; 52.2-6, 8; IV. 24.5; 32.16; VI. 23.7; VII. 18.6; VIII. 2.11; 31.2). *Odana*: boiled rice (VIII. 69.14; 77.6, 10) (Source: akhandabaratam@yahoogroups.com).

### Archaeological evidence

#### Rice

Mehra (2007) has reviewed archaeological findings of the Indus-Sarasvati civilization. He pointed that wild rice was eaten in the advanced Mesolithic or pre-Neolithic (c. 8080 ± 115 BC) period at Chopani Mando. Prolific use of rice (cultivated – *Oryza sativa*; wild annual – *Oryza nivara*; and wild perennial – *Oryza rufipogon*) husk and chaff as pottery temper at Koldiwah

(c. 6570 ± 210 BC) and Mahagara (c. 5440 ± 240 BC), and the discovery of the grains of cultivated rice at Mahagara establish the cultivation of *Oryza sativa*. Incidentally, all three locations, Chopani Mando, Koldiwah, and Mahagara are in the Ganga region of central Uttar Pradesh in India. It is worth mentioning that rice has been preferred over barley and grown in Kashmir since time immemorial. It strongly suggests that the wild rice was grown and eaten during Rigvedic times (c. 8000 BC). Additional intensive researches might provide evidence of cultivated rice during the Rigvedic times.

### Barley

Archaeologists discovered seed imprints of naked six-rowed barley at Mehrgarh in Baluchistan (now in Pakistan), which were dated between 7000 and 6500 BC (Mehra, 2007).

Barley, according to European translators, was the staple cereal for Vedic people. However, when we read historical accounts on the origin and spread of barley in many standard books, the geographical region of Vedic people is invariably mentioned only casually. If barley was really the staple food of Vedic people, one should have found prominent reference about it in books on barley and in Encyclopedia Britannica (1993).

### Crops vis-à-vis Rigveda

According to most Indologists of yesteryears and the present-day historians, Rigveda (with Sayanacharya's commentary) mentions

barley, wheat, sesame, black gram, etc. but not rice. The "etc." is not listed explicitly. It is evident that during the Rigvedic period, there were the main rainy season (June–September) and the postrainy season with less rain (October–January). Barley and wheat are the normal postrainy season crops whereas sesame and black gram are the rainy season crops, and both these require moderate rainfall. Rigveda hints at heavy rainfall during the rainy season. Which crop could then the farmers be growing? Most logical answer should be the rice.

### Concluding remarks

Subhash Kak, in his Foreword to the book by Frawley (1994) states, "Recent archaeological researches have compelled the abandonment of that view of the Vedic civilization, which was popularized by European scholars of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and their successors. According to that view the Vedic people entered India only in the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC and the traditions of the Vedic religion go back at best to this epoch. Academics held on to this dogma

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in spite of considerable evidence within the Vedic literature that pointed to epochs going back to the 4<sup>th</sup> millennium BC and earlier."

As an ingredient of that dogma, overemphasis was given to barley as staple food, and even though there was sufficient evidence that the Vedic people ate rice, mentioning the latter was avoided in translations. Barley, which originated in West Asia, fitted well with the "Aryan invasion" view and to project that Vedic people ate barley. If translations had been done honestly, rice would have appeared in print and that would have jeopardized the "Aryan invasion" view; because all evidence points to the fact that rice was domesticated very early and must have been the staple of Vedic Indians.

In view of the discussion provided in this paper, it is high time that we, at least in India, accept that rice could have been the staple food during Rigvedic period.

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