

The Vedas as Influential Literary Achievement

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History vs. blind belief

Most Hindu traditionalists claim that the Vedas are a revealed scripture, *apauruṣeya*, “not made by human hand”. Some of the great Hindu thinkers, such as Śaṅkara, insist on this divine origin. In this respect, even the egalitarian anti-caste *Ārya Samāj*, socially reformist, was traditionalist. Generally it is not known as traditionalist but as fundamentalist: its “back to the Vedas” as an instance of the common viewpoint of all fundamentalists, “back to the sources”. Unlike the traditionalists, it rejected post-Vedic practices, such as idol-worship and untouchability, and scriptures such as the *Purāṇas*. But it didn’t think through the fundamental assumptions of Hinduism, which then were mostly traditionalist. So, it equally continued to assume the revealed origin of the Vedas.

This contrasts with the view of the Indologists and of everyone who would stumble upon a book full of hymns: these hymns are poetry written by human poets. In the disastrous attempts by California Hindus to introduce more Hindu-friendly amendments in the state’s social science textbooks in 2005-6 (see Elst 2012:137-155), one demand was to replace the term “poetry” for the Vedas with “scripture”, on a par with the Bible and the *Qur’ān*. “Scripture” is a status that the believers attribute to a book, whereas “poetry” as a characterization of the Vedic hymns is just descriptive, factual. Even if revealed, they visibly remain poetry. But alright, it then also has the status of scripture. Yet, if Hindus claim their religion to be

“scientific”, as they often do, they ought to do better than such primitive a-dime-a-dozen claims for a supernatural origin.

Why should we take issue with this belief? The first reason is the one behind every scholarly paper: *la vérité est bonne* (French proverb: “Truth is a good thing”), it will do no harm to set the record straight on a belief that animates millions. Let’s find out the true story and let the chips fall where they may. The second reason is the one that triggered this research: we have noticed that this belief is the enemy of historical investigation of Vedic society and culture.

In reply to Shrikant Talageri’s historicization of the Vedas (Talageri 2020a), Prof. Narahari Achar argues from scripture that neither the Vedas nor other ancient sources give a historical analysis. Mostly they don’t, and even those few that deliberately did try to write a historical account (say, *Thucydides*, or *Kalhana*), still fell short by modern standards. From a poetry book, a fortiori, you wouldn’t expect any better. Historians are the last to read religious poetry as a factual account, yet they remain interested in it. What they hope to find in there are meta-data, historical information not intended as such by the writer but nonetheless present because all writers unwittingly let on much about their circumstances.

Traditionalists, however, are allergic to historical readings of Vedic episodes. The *Ārya Samāj*’s translations avoid all history-related word meanings (discussed in Talageri 2000: 406-412). Followers of Sri Aurobindo too prefer profound symbolic readings. Hence the Hindu protests against the first Orientalist translators of the Vedas and now against Shrikant Talageri for their mining the Vedas for historical data. Thus, Talageri (2000, 2020b) notes that most traditionalists reject not only the notion of “pre-Vedic” but also the discerning of successive historical layers within the Vedas, the key to lots of data about the geographical east-to-west gradient crucial in the “Aryan” homeland debate.

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Traditionalists pull up their noses for something as mundane as the early history of the Indo-European languages, a mere 6000 years ago. This language family's homeland location, a question not arising from Vedic literature itself, is at most a very fleeting concern. It didn't exist until the 18th century and won't survive the 21st, given that the advances in linguistics and archaeology and the emergence of genetics have brought the resolution to this question very close – in all, too ephemeral to sacrifice the belief in the supernatural Vedas to. This argument would be unassailable if the supernatural provenance of the Vedas were true; but we will show reason why, even for Veda devotees, this hypothesis is baseless.

Apauruseyatva imputed to the Vedas

Let us first verify how believing Hindus say that the Vedas are *apauruseya*, “non-human”. This means that they are of super-human or divine origin, revealed, uncreated, as old as the universe.

Thus, a catechism-style introduction to Hinduism teaches: “The real name of our religion is Vedic dharma. In ancient days it was just called Dharma. Our religion has its roots in the Vedas, which are our original scriptures. (...) Another name for our religion is Sanātana Dharma.” (Vedalankar 1978:7)

Sanātana (Dharma) means “eternal (normative system)”, and if it is deemed synonymous with “Vedic”, it implies that the Vedas are eternal. The position of this paper is just the opposite: Hindus carelessly use the two terms interchangeably, but they are different in meaning: “Vedic” refers to a literary corpus that can be located in a specific time and place, non-eternal. For modern outsiders to the Vedic tradition this will not be very sensational, but we will argue that even for Vedic practitioners this ought to be evident as soon as they look into the Vedas' contents.

Note that if “our religion” is Hinduism, it is quite an assertion to say that its real essence is “Vedic dharma”, for this is not so obvious. If you visit a Hindu home or temple, you will see a lot that is not Vedic, starting with *mūrtipūjā*, idol-worship. In spite of lavish lip-service, few Hindus know the Vedas. In terms of books (or their derivative plays, dances, music and films), their favourites are the epics, the fable collections and the *Purāṇas*. And even the specialists of Vedic recitation have rarely contemplated the contents of what they recite. The Vedas are the most prestigious tributary to the Hindu stream, but it would be very partisan and unhistorical to reduce Hinduism to Vedic dharma.

Anyway, this is how the author (of *Ārya Samāj* persuasion) pictures the mechanics of this divine revelation: “The Vedas have not been created by men.

In the very beginning God revealed unto the Rishis the knowledge of the Vedas. (...) When these Rishis sat in meditation, God gave them the knowledge of the Vedas.” (Vedalankar 1978:32)

Traditionalists divide scripture into *Śruti*, “that which is heard (from a divine source)”, viz. the Vedas in the broad sense (*Samhitā*, *Brāhmaṇa*, *Āraṇyaka*, *Upaniṣad*); and *Smṛti*, “that which is remembered” (and of which no divine origin is claimed, though in practice it is also treated as unquestionable authority), viz. the *Itihāsa-Purāṇa* literature and the *Dharma Śāstras*.

According to Annie Besant and Bhagavan Das: “The *Śruti*, consisting of the four Vedas, is the final authority in the Āryan religion, and these four Vedas form in their entirety *the Veda, the perfect knowledge*, revealed by Brahmā, seen by the ṛṣis, and clothed in words by them to benefit the Āryan peoples.” (Besant & Das 2000:2) In this view, the Vedic composers or Ṛṣis were not *Mantrakāra*, “verse maker”, but *Mantradṛṣṭā*, “verse seers”.

Modern authors often show a certain embarrassment about this apparently irrational claim, yet try to save it. Thus: “The rishi or rishika received the revelation of wisdom from the supreme plane termed as *paramē vyoman* in RV and transcribed it into poems with appropriate words and metres. Thus there is no contradiction between the traditional view that the Veda is *apauruseya*, not composed by a human being, and the modern view that the rishis are the poets of RV since the verses came out of their mouth. This is clear from the RV itself.” (Kashyap 2012:12) What follows are a few claims by 20th-century authors like Sri Aurobindo, and only one from the Veda itself: the phrase “*dadarśa vācam*”, “he saw the word” (RV 10.71.4), from the fag end of the (literally millennial) composition span of the *Ṛg-Veda*.

This Vedic phrase is not a straightforward description of the genesis of Vedic verses. The entire hymn is, at any rate, a human composition addressed to the “god” *Jñāna*, “wisdom”, though poet *Bṛhaspati* *Āngiras* also addresses himself. He never pretends that some divine source is putting words into his mouth or that he himself “sees words”. He only makes the point that some see a word, some hear a word, but don't “get” it, while a rare individual seizes upon “her”, the word, who then “gives herself like a loving wife to her husband” (in itself a beautiful way to describe the poet's extraordinary openness to inspiration). In case this verse does describe the way a Vedic poet encounters the words he puts in verse, it only fits the scenario we envision to reconstruct the slow evolution from purely human poetry via this late-Vedic verse to the post-Vedic belief in revealed hymns.

A rather authoritative commentator is the late Kanchi Shankaracharya, Sri Chandrashekharendra Saraswati. He

explains: “The Vedas are called *anādi*—without a beginning in terms of time. That is to say, anything previous to it or older than it does not exist.” (Chandrashekharendra 1991:3) But he starts by doubting this: “How can this be accepted? A book has necessarily to have an author; at least one, if not more.” (Chandrashekharendra 1991:3)

This sounds promising, but the sequel doesn’t lead to the answer modern rationalists expect. The choice is only between “as old as” or “older than” creation: “If the Vedas came into being with the first creation, they cannot be said to be without beginning.” (Chandrashekharendra 1991:5)

He finds the solution for this strange conundrum in a late-Vedic verse (Western Orientalists limit the term *Veda* or *Śruti* to the *Saṁhitās*, but Indians include the *Upaniṣads* in them): “*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 2.4.10 says the Vedas are *Īśvara*’s exhalation.” So “they coexist with Him” (Chandrashekharendra 1991:6), the Vedas inhere in the Divine every moment of its eternal existence. But since we didn’t *create* our breath, it existed from as soon as we were born, and likewise the Vedas exist for as long as God exists: “even He cannot be said to have created them. They have always existed together.” (Chandrashekharendra 1991:6) So, sort of eternal.

By the way, having been written long before a wave of theistic devotionism submerged Hinduism, this *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* phrase doesn’t contain the word *Īśvara* which a 20th-century commentator imputes to it. It merely says that, the way smoke emanates from fire, the Vedas together with the natural sciences have all emanated, but doesn’t say whence. If this late-Vedic verse had made a distinction between the Vedas on the one hand and on the other hand history, the natural sciences and all compositions agreed to be of human origin, we could have categorized it as typical for the transition period between the fully creative Vedic period and the static exalted post-Vedic belief in *apauruṣeyatva*. But we don’t even have to that: in spite of the 20th-century attempt to enlist it in the *apauruṣeyatva* doctrine, it actually fails to exalt the Vedas above the undoubtedly human compositions. It treats all books as essentially the same kind of composition, viz. by a human author.

Philosophical basis

The term *apauruṣeya* is usually translated as “non-human”, “impersonal”. It does not come from the Vedas themselves, not at all, but from the *Pūrva Mīmāṃsā* school of philosophy, centuries younger than the youngest book that could reasonably be called Vedic: “The *Mīmāṃsakas* hold that the Veda is self-subsistent, eternal and ‘*Śruti*’ or divine revelation.” (Anirvan 2018:11-12)

In the intervening centuries, the Vedas had been extolled, with a class of people set apart just to memorize them and pass them on unchanged to the letter; with the best of sciences (grammar, mathematics, astronomy) growing up around them; and with kings in distant parts of India invited Brahmin communities and settling them in privileged *agrahāras* to add Vedic lustre to their dynasties. If anything in the surroundings of an ancient Hindu approached the divine, this was it. The idea of divinizing them or at least their provenance caught on among intellectually unsophisticated minds, and finally also among the cream of Hindu philosophers, *Śaṅkara* and the others.

So the authority for the *apauruṣeyatva* belief can be traced back in writing at least some 2200 years: to the *Pūrva Mīmāṃsā* school, the most Veda-centric of the Hindu philosophical schools. In the foundational *Pūrva Mīmāṃsā Sūtra*, sage *Jaimini* sets out to prove: “The unquestionable validity of ‘Vedic injunction’ as the only means of knowing Dharma.” (PMS 5) Yet he admits something that was already opined by (no, not ugly ill-wishing foreigners or incomprehending Orientalists, but) his Hindu contemporaries: “According to some people, the Vedas are the work of human authors; being, as they are, named after man. Also because we find (in the Veda the mention of) many non-eternal things.” (PMS 27-28)

He waves these objections off by breezily claiming: “But the eternality of the word has already been established.” (PMS 29) So let’s check the preceding passage he refers to. They merely assert (questionable) claims about the word, as a generic category, never specifying Vedic as distinct from other texts: “(The word) must be regarded as eternal.” (PMS 18)

But none of the reasons given for this bizarre claim is convincing. Thus it is asserted: “What is perceptible [by the ear] is not what is spoken of.” (PMS 22) In modern linguistic terms (incidentally inspired on *Pāṇini*): the signifier (*le signifiant*) differs from the signified (*le signifié*). Of course the word “water” does not equal the element water, but linguists don’t deduce the eternality of any object from this.

Or because the word exists before it is uttered and still exists after having been uttered. (to sum up PMS 13) By this standard, your car is eternal, for before you take it out on a ride, it already existed, and after you park it, it goes on existing.

Or: “We meet with (texts) indicative of the eternality of words.” (PMS 23) We don’t think that highly of the longevity of texts, but they can indeed last longer than their composition or recitation. More pertinently, though, by making a claim about “the” word, any word, this fails to differentiate between fleeting human compositions

and the supposedly very special, divine Vedas. If this proves the Vedas are uncreated, it does the same for all profane writings.

The *Qur'ān* as *apauruṣeya*

This *apauruṣeyatva* doctrine is actually a mirror-image of the Islamic view of the *Qur'ān*: abiding since creation (if not earlier) in God's bosom, the *Qur'ān* is rained down on humanity at a time and place of God's choosing.

Next to the *Qur'ān*, the *Hadīth* (traditions about the Prophet's sayings and doings) and *Sīra* (the Prophet's biography) do not have that divine status, but function nonetheless as the basis for unchangeable Islamic law, *Śarī'a*. In Hinduism the *Śāstras* have a similar status.

The difference between really existing *Dharma* and *Dīn*, effective Hinduism and Islam, viz. *Śāstra* and *Śarī'a*, is not as radical as often thought. The exclusive claim of Islam has no counterpart in Vedic tradition, that much is radically different; but its attitude to the supernatural is similar. Part of its scripture has a supernatural origin; and part of it has a human origin (and is thus a bit more negotiable) but is nonetheless normative. And this did not come about under Islamic influence, but stems from a common layer in human nature, a pan-human tendency to idealize and absolutize anything deemed spiritual, a tendency well-attested in many cultures throughout history.

Yet, the difference is unmistakable for those who care to read the source texts. The *Qur'ān* (or likewise, the Biblical Ten Commandments) takes the form of God speaking to his prophet or to mankind. By contrast, the Vedic hymns take the form of a human composer addressing or describing a Deity.

Ṛṣis are not receptacles

Traditionalist Hinduism makes a claim on the Vedic *Ṛṣis*, viz. that they were passive receptacles of divine revelations. However, this assertion would be unrecognizable to the *Ṛṣis* themselves: they *created* these "revelations".

The Vedic text itself serves to verify this. Unlike Mohammed for the *Qur'ān*, at least according to Islamic doctrine, the *Ṛṣis* were *authors* of the Vedic hymns. They all mention themselves as the agentive minds behind the hymns and the worship proceedings which they captured in words or in which they were employed.

The very first hymn of the *Ṛg-Veda* is *Oṃ Agnim ile*, "I worship the Fire" (RV 1.1.1): The poet as subject, the personified Fire or the Fire god as object. Likewise hundreds of others, e.g.: "I worship Heaven and Earth, parents of the Gods." (RV 7:53:1 and again 7:43:1)

The first hymn was probably put first on purpose, but is not considered the oldest. Since Hermann Oldenberg (1888), and made widely known in India by Shrikant Talageri (2000:38), not the first but the sixth book is considered the oldest. The hymns within the book are not necessarily in chronological order, but its first hymn belongs at any rate to the oldest generation of hymns.

Well, its composer *Bharadvāja* starts with: *Tvaṃ hy Agne prathamo...*, "You, Agni, are truly the first..." (RV 6.1.1.) God spoken to, man speaking. His second hymn, likewise directed to Agni, likewise opens with *Tvaṃ hi...*, "You truly", and credits him with giving *na*, "us", our food and all the rest. (RV 6.1.2) In the third hymn, the poet describes his own devotion to "you, Agni", and implores Agni for protection. (RV 6.1.3)

(Of *Bharadvāja* we don't have much biographical detail except in much later post-Vedic literature, esp. in the notoriously fanciful *Purāṇas*. The extant contemporary writings on the Vedic *Ṛṣis*, such as Sastry 1980, Nagar 2012:86-96, and Mishra 2022, are typically based on these divergent later accounts and conflate the original sages with their descendants who carry the same name; they lack a critical investigation of what we can reliably know about these sages. Anyway, we plead for more scholarly attention to the individual histories of the Vedic sages, esp. *Bharadvāja* as the first of them, given their crucial importance for Hindu history.)

For some more stray examples from later hymns, consider one showing how the composers valued their compositions as precious gifts to the deity addressed: "Agni, Creator, to you who are wise, acquainted with the past, I address, oh sage, these soliciting mysterious words, ever-to-be-recited poems, together with praises and prayers." (RV 4.3.16)

Or they illustrate the principle of "feeding the gods", how it is sacrifices by humans that give life to the gods: "For you, Agni, these sweetest words; for you, may this invocation be a blessing to the heart. You are the one these songs fill with power." (RV 5.11.5)

Or they ask "you", the deity, to purify "our" thoughts: "God *Savitā*, impel the ritual! Impel for good fortune the lord of ritual! Divine Gandharva, purifier of thought, purify our thoughts!" (YV, *Taittirīya Saṃhitā* 4.1.7) Witness especially the two most famous Vedic hymns: in the *Gāyatrī Mantra*, "may You, the rising Sun, awaken our minds" (RV 3.62.10); or in the *Mṛtyunjaya Mantra*: "we worship the *tryambaka* deity" (RV 7.59.12).

The composers are sometimes quite explicit about their own effort to complete and perfect their poems: "A thought have I imagined, like a workman." (RV 3.38.1) This refers to the craftsmanship needed, and the hard

work of fashioning verses: as any poet knows, composing poetry is one part inspiration and nine parts perspiration.

Ṛṣi Vasiṣṭha even praises himself for having, through his perfect hymns, swayed the god *Indra* into supporting his employer, king *Sudās*, so that the latter wins the Battle of the Ten Kings (in the only hymns that takes a living human being as presiding deity, viz.: *Vasiṣṭha* and his sons): “*Vasiṣṭhas*, through your prayers did *Indra* defend *Sudās* in the War of the Ten Kings.” (RV 7:33:3)

The hymns themselves regularly refer to a pre-Vedic age, impossible if they are uncreated. Thus, to the “*Ṛṣis* from the past” (RV 1.1.2); to past battles, e.g. against the *Druhyu* tribe with the help of *Aikṣvāku* king *Māndhātā* (RV 1.112.13, RV 8.39.8, RV 8.40.12), within memory of the Vedic project’s initiators, king *Bharata* and his court-priest *Ṛṣi Bharadvāja*; or many times to more distant ancestors like *Manu* and *Ilā*.

For a final example, consider the concluding verse of the *Īśa Upaniṣad*: “Oh *Agni*, lead us along the auspicious path to prosperity, oh god who knowest all our deeds. Take away from us deceitful sins. We shall offer many prayers unto thee.” (IU 18) The *Upaniṣads*, the philosophical prose concluding the Vedas, though later and from a period when the Vedic hymns were already being idealized, continue the position taken by the hymns: when mentioning a deity, they do not pretend to be spoken by this deity (1st person), but instead are human utterances about (3rd person) or towards (2nd person) the deity.

Criticism

For the modern scholarly view, we can start in the introduction to philosophy by Prof. Chandradhar Sharma, who says point-blank that “the orthodox view that the Vedas are authorless and eternal (...) cannot be philosophically sustained”. (1987:16)

One indication is human fallibility, presumably not applicable to God. The Vedas do contain mistakes. Not many, but enough to prove their humble human origin. Thus, the *Maitrāyaṇīya Upaniṣad* (1.4) evokes an impression of increasing chaos, a familiar lament. As an example how not only sinful men but even the stars have started disobeying natural law, it mentions that *Dhruva* (Thuban or Alpha Draconis), the Pole Star in ca. 2800 BC, is falling away from the North Pole. The name *Dhruva*, “fixed”, was clearly given at a time when it was indeed on the Pole and didn’t seem to move in a night time, whereas the other stars all circled around the Pole. But because of a perfectly natural movement called the precession, less visible than daily rotation or yearly revolution, no Pole Star is forever. Precession is a cycle of around 25772 years, or 1° per ca. 71 years, so it takes sophisticated astronomical knowledge to become aware of it. The *Maitrāyaṇīya* writer clearly hadn’t, so he give a wrongly negative interpretation to a movement that was

perfectly compliant with *ṛta*, natural law. Would God have made this mistake?

One of the proofs is the intertextuality (quotations and other deference to earlier texts) present in Vedic literature, possibly even with the oldest hymns quoting passages of irretrievable pre-Vedic texts, but at any rate verifiably with later Vedic texts quoting earlier Vedic texts. This is sometimes to repeat their meaning, sometimes to give novel interpretations to old phrases set in stone, and sometimes even to disagree with what some ancestor had said. Prof. Daya Krishna (1990:63-94) gives a number of examples of later hymns borrowing from earlier hymns, or the *Yajur-Veda* and *Atharva-Veda* reproducing *mantras* from the *Ṛg-Veda*, or the *Upaniṣads* from the *Saṁhitās*.

Thus, the *Puruṣa* section of the *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* (3.11-21) is an obvious and explicit reference to the Vedic *Puruṣa Sūkta* (RV 10.90). It partly restates the hymn’s verses literally, but also shifts the focus to the deity *Śiva*, equated with the cosmic man, and the typically *Upaniṣadic* concept of the colourless Self (*Ātma*).

Another famous passage from the *Ṛg-Veda* concerns two birds: “Two birds associated together and mutual friends take refuge in the same tree, one of them eats the sweet fig; the other, abstaining from food, merely looks on.” (RV 1.164.20) This imagery is copied in the *Mundaka Upaniṣad* 3.1.1-2 and the *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* 4.6-7, and there becomes the master image of the choice between *saṁṛtti* and *nivṛtti*, worldly involvement vs. renunciation; or between *jīva*, “soul”, the entity wandering through life and facing all its challenges, and *ātma*, “Self”, the unchanging core of our being. This was to remain a major theme throughout Hindu philosophy.

These are just a few examples of the common phenomenon of Vedic intertextuality. Does God, by definition the highest authority, deal in quotations, which are an appeal to higher authority?

A specific case of intertextuality is later Vedic passages referring to earlier ones to disagree with them. It is often said that the Buddha rejected Vedic ritualism, as part of the now-common assertion of Buddhism’s separateness from “Hinduism” or at least from the Vedic tradition. But this is in fact one of the cases where the Buddha simply continues a trend started in the *Upaniṣads*, i.e. in the concluding part of the Veda itself (“*Vedānta*”). To put it in well-known terms, the *Upaniṣads* replace (or at least, shift the focus from) *karmakāṇḍa*, the ritualist half, to highlight *jñānakāṇḍa*, the wisdom half.

Thus, in the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 7.1.4 ff. the senior sage *Sanatkumāra* explains to the junior sage *Nārada* that the Vedas are called *nāma*, “a mere name”, together with (and on the same footing as) a string of worldly sciences. Then he assures him that there is something higher than this

“name” category, and enumerates a number of things successively higher, such as *sañkalpa* (decisiveness) and *prāṇa* (life breath). This chapter is not one of the most logically cogent in the *Upaniṣads*, but at least it testifies that the Vedas are not given the unique reverence due to a uniquely divine revelation.

The *Mundaka Upaniṣad* 1.1.5 lists the four Vedas along with the auxiliary (undoubtedly human-originated) sciences or *Vedāṅgas* as *aparavidya*, “non-supreme science”. It contrasts all of these, including the Vedic hymns, with the roadmap to the *akṣara*, the “immutable” or absolute, which is *paravidya*, “supreme science”. To drive home this point further, the *Mundaka Upaniṣad* 1.2.7 compares Vedic sacrifices or *yajñās* to leaky boats: “These ships of sacrifice (...) are inferior in merit, transient and fleeting.”

Would God, or whatever we call the supernatural power that supposedly gave us the Vedas, first reveal a doctrine that He had carried with Him for ages, and then within a few centuries (a mere blip on a divine time-scale) repudiate His very own message?

Actually we do find this situation in the Islamic system, where Allah is said to have “abrogated” some *Qur’ān* passages with later ones of a different or opposite thrust. But if we take a sober outsiders’ look, we see this “abrogation” doctrine for what it is: a transparent attempt by apologists to keep up the postulated divinity of a text though it bears the hallmarks of authorship by an human composer who changed his mind under changing circumstances. Similarly, the world evolved in the Vedic age and new human insights gave rise to new texts of a different thrust.

Finally, we have a few cases of intertextuality with non-Vedic texts. The overlaps with the *Mahābhārata* are a bit trivial, but are to be noted, for they confirm the Vedic situatedness in space and time. Thus, the youngest person mentioned in the *Ṛg-Veda* is *Śantanu*, who is the stepfather of the Veda editor (*Veda-Vyāsa*, né *Kṛṣṇa Dvāipāyana*). The youngest in the *Yajur-Veda* is *Veda-Vyāsa*’s biological son *Dhṛtarāṣṭra*, which tallies well with the tradition that *Veda-Vyāsa* gave the definitive form to the Vedas, or at least to the *Veda-Trayī* of *Ṛg-Veda*, *Sāma-Veda* (which mostly repeats from *Ṛg-Veda*, but now set to music) and *Yajur-Veda*. The *Atharva-Veda* took a few generations more, for the youngest person mentioned there is *Veda-Vyāsa*’s great-great-grandson *Parīkṣit*.

A far more sensational case of external intertextuality concerns the *Vārṣāgira* battle mentioned in RV 1.100. It lists the main protagonists of the battle, which took place on the Afghan side of the Bolan Pass (a sequel to the Battle of the Ten Kings mainly discussed in RV 7.18, 7.33 and 7.83). This battle and the main protagonists likewise figure in the Iranian scripture *Avesta*, mainly *Yašt* 5.109-113 and *Yašt* 9.30, and they match (fully discussed in

Talageri 200:208-231, esp. 216). It is extremely exceptional to find a battle this early where we have the version of both the warring parties.

Finally we must mention a very fundamental critique, for which we can as yet only quote a personal communication from the nonagenarian art historian Dr. Lokesh Chandra. According to him, the term *Śruti* is usually subject to mistranslation, it should be “that which can be heard; fame, glory”. Indeed, whereas the *Śāstras* are discretely used for learned reference in judicial proceedings among specialists, the Vedic hymns were recited in public or included in publicly-conducted rituals. They were heard from afar. It is not impossible that this down-to-earth use of the description “heard” was subsequently reinterpreted in a supernatural sense. The latter interpretation has become the accepted one since more than two thousand years, but that doesn’t make it authentic.

Vedas in history

The Vedas, by their own testimony, are located in history. Their flora (no sequoias or pine trees), fauna (no giraffes, penguins or kangaroos), rivers (no Yellow River or Mississippi) and level of technology (no stone fist-axes nor automobiles) indicate a particular window in space-time. Unambiguously, their cradle was in Bronze-Age Northwest-India. From there and then, a number of historical events found their way into otherwise religious poetry.

All the arguments we have ever heard against the historicity of the Vedas (which cannot annul the *Ṛṣis*’ own primary testimony anyway) are based on post-Vedic sayings making the same claim that the traditionalists still make, nothing more. Thus from the *Manu Smṛti*: “But from fire, wind and sun, He [= *Prabhu*, the Lord] drew forth the threefold eternal Veda, called *Ṛk*, *Yajus* and *Sāman*, for the due performance of the sacrifice.” (MS 1.23)

Mind you, already in the *Ṛg-Veda*, the *Ṛṣis*’ distant ancestor *Manu* was known as a lawgiver, and the notion of “Manu’s Law” may already have existed. But it was malleable, evolved with the times (as still explicitly permitted in the concluding part of the presently-available *Manu Smṛti*), but the historically-attested version bears the imprint of the social conditions ca. two thousand years ago. It is absolutely not a contemporary testimony of the Vedas’ genesis, and anyway, its florid formulation seems just a manner of speaking, not a denial of the Vedas’ composition by human hand.

In a general sense, it is of course true that the *Manu Smṛti*, the *Bhagavad Gītā* and other post-Vedic literature took this new narrative of uncreated revealed eternal

Vedas and ran with it, making it into an unquestioned tradition. Yet, with all due respect for those authority-laden books, their claim is and remains in conflict with the much older evidence from the Vedas themselves, and wrong.

Among the reasons not yet discussed, we might mention that explaining the hymns as supernaturally induced does injustice to the divine character of the gods: if these have to dictate to the poets the hymns of praise to themselves, they are narcissistic. If a girl is given a serenade by a suitor below her balcony, she is not going to dictate to him which praises to sing. On the contrary, she wants to be surprised by what new imaginative phrases he comes up with.

The relation between composer and deity is indeed that of a lover singing a serenade under his beloved's balcony. Just as the suitor hopes to sway her and make her favour him, the poet hopes to influence the deity towards his side (*"do ut des"*). It is absurd to think that the girl has dictated the lyrics of the song of praise to the suitor: "Tell me how uniquely beautiful I am. Sing how my eyes are as deep as the ocean! Compare me to a summer's day!" On the contrary, she wants to get impressed with the novel imagery he has managed to invent. Similarly, it is absurd to think that the gods have dictated the hymns in praise of themselves to the composers.

How was the transition made from human hymnal poetry into a legacy from the gods?

In practice, the Vedas derived an enormous prestige from: 1) the quality of the poetry, at a time when mastery of the possibilities of language was the highest art form (cfr. the pre-Islamic Arabs, who as nomads had no sculpture or architecture worth the name, but had a cult of singing and poetry); 2) the discipline of learning the hymns by heart, the whole edifice of their mnemotechniques and the social support by a Brahminical class set apart for it, and 3) the fact that they became the backbone around which many new sciences grew (*Vedāṅgas*, *Upavedas*, some of them worldwide firsts, esp. linguistics and some branches of mathematics).

They peacefully conquered India, because kings in eastern and peninsular India invited Brahmin communities to settle in their domains, encouraging their immigration with the gift of privileged neighbourhoods (*agrahāras*), all in order to add the prestige of the Vedic tradition to their dynasty's fame. This way, the Vedas and their language acquired a new role as the glasses through which to see all the accruing non-Vedic components of Hinduism (e.g. *mūrtipūjā*), serving as vault over these and providing them with a conceptual framework and technical language.

As their origin disappeared on the horizon but their glory became ever more conspicuous, the Vedas were

elevated ever higher. A new narrative gained ground, allotting them a divine origin.

Invented tradition

This evolution provides one of world history's best examples of an "invented tradition". The term was launched by the British Marxist philosopher Eric Hobsbawm, ca. 1980. An invented tradition is fairly recent but falsely claims ancientness. Or more charitably, it reinterprets earlier tradition and absorb it into a new worldview. By the time literacy was popularized (we won't speak out on the common assumption that it was "revived"), ca. 300 BCE, a new tradition had been invented that continues the centrality of and veneration for the Vedas, but overlays this with a newly-added doctrine of their supernatural provenance.

An invented tradition projects the present norms onto the past, or norms valid in a recent past onto a more ancient past. Its votaries homogenize the past into a single screen, denying any specific time-depth to different phases. They do in time what we all do in space when looking at the stars: we see no space-depth, these stars all look homogeneously far, whether 4 or 4,000 light years away. In doing so, the invented-traditionalists deny changes that have taken place at some historical point in the past. This takes the form of grafting onto the ancient past far more recent traditions.

When Marxists speak of an invented tradition, they usually insinuate a sinister motive for imposing this false account of the past. The oppressor class misuses its cultural power to misinform the oppressed classes, all the better to seduce them into accepting their subaltern position. In this case, however, we see no reason to posit such an ulterior motive. The Hindu mind innocently tends towards divinization, as exemplified by the cases of *Rāma* and *Kṛṣṇa*.

The heroes *Rāma* and *Kṛṣṇa* started out as ordinary human beings: born from a mother like everyone (as attested by their respective birthplaces, still centres of pilgrimage), they both experienced love and intrigue, war and flight and victory, mourning and joy, doubt and compromise. They died an all-too-human, meaningless death: drowned in a flood c.q. shot in a hunting accident. Yet a few generations later, they got elevated to the status of *Viṣṇu*'s incarnation, in recognition of their role as upholder of *dharma* in the human world (magnified in the retelling), the human counterpart of the deity's role in the pantheon as Preserver. Next, temples are dedicated to them, on the same footing as temples to the immortal gods.

Though we consider the *apauruṣeyatva* doctrine a mistake, we need to emphasize its relative innocence, for

it contrasts with a similar and related invented tradition that is not so innocent: the attribution of a divine origin to the institution of caste.

Caste was absent in the Vedic age, as affirmed by Orientalists like Frits Staal (2008:53-55) and even Marxist historian Shereen Ratnagar (in Thapar 2006:166). On its fundamentalist revaluation of the Vedas, the 19th-century reform movement *Ārya Samāj* based its seemingly very modern rejection of caste, taking Vedic society as model for its projected casteless society.

Next, patrilineal caste appeared during the long millennium when the *Mahābhārata* was being edited. This may be exemplified by the case of *Veda-Vyāsa*, sage par excellence and son of sage *Parāśara*, but his mother belonged to a fishermen community. This patrilineal system prevailed till at least the *Buddha's* lifetime (he had to deal with a conflict in his friend *Prasenajit's* family when son *Virūdhaka* discovered that his mother was not a proper *kṣatriya*: no problem according to the aged *Buddha*, but intolerable for the young prince). Then the new norm of endogamy appears in the upper class, and this gradually gets generalized to all of Hindu society by ca. 300 CE, when geneticists find that it has developed a box-type division in separate communities. (Biswas 2016)

Traditionalists will at this point tend to minimize the caste problem, pointing out e.g. that outsiders typically fail to understand how, before being an exclusion-from, caste also is a belonging-to, a solidarity network. Alright, the issue is complicated, but it remains true that the new caste structure of society privileged certain communities. It clearly served the power interests of certain emerging castes, while demeaning others.

It is too late now to get worked up over social evolutions taking place thousands of years ago, but we may frown when we still see an (admittedly shrinking) group justifying caste stratification and distorting history to that end. Invented-traditionalists tend to dehistoricize caste. They deny its gradual rise, and claim it as eternal and intrinsic to Hinduism. (Today, it certainly serves the interests of the Christian Missionaries and anti-Hindu Leftists who pontificate that “there is no Hinduism without caste” – in perfect unison with the Hindu invented-traditionalists.)

This invented tradition on caste differs from but piggy-backs on the *apauruṣeyatva* tradition. They argue that caste was divinely ordained, and that this is clear from its legitimation in the God-given Vedas. We just argued that caste is absent there, yet they always point to the *Puruṣa Sūkta* (RV 10:90) as the basis for caste. This hymn appears at the very end of the *Ṛg-Veda*, and according to many scholars including Friedrich Max Müller it is an even later interpolation, put there precisely to create Vedic legitimacy for caste. This would make it a very wilful

case of invented tradition, fielded deliberately with an oppressive intent.

However, no matter what the hymn's provenance, a close reading shows surprisingly that it doesn't contain the defining elements of caste at all: hereditary profession and endogamy. It merely sums up four functional layers in society, hierarchically arranged like the body parts from head to toe, which you find in any developed society. This is simply the application of the *corporatist*, “body-like” model to the social world, after the hymn had likewise applied it to the natural world. This again is a comparison you find in many cultures: the skull corresponding to the heavenly vault, the eyes to sun and moon, the bones to the mountains, the bloodstream to the rivers, the feet to the earth.

In Roman society too, the upper-class negotiator Menenius Agrippa (ca. 500 BC) persuaded the rebellious lower classes with the corporatist metaphor: all parts of society have to work together and accept each other's specificities, just like the parts of the body. Saint Paul, a Roman citizen, would repeat it (1 Corinthians 12:12-31). Then with that passage as a lead, the Catholic Church through Pope Leo XIII (encyclical *Rerum Novarum* 1891) would declare corporatism the “social teaching of the Church”, upholding the harmony model against the then-rising socialist model of class struggle.

But here you see the poison of invented traditions again. The terms used had not been casteist in the mind of the writer, but had meanwhile *become* caste terms. For at least sixteen centuries, 4th till 20th, these four *varṇa* (colour, quality) groups had a hereditary monopoly on certain professions, and refrained from intermarriage. These defining traits of caste (hereditary profession and endogamy) got back-projected onto the *Puruṣa Sūkta*, hence on the Vedas, hence on the gods who had supposedly authored the Vedas. This went effortlessly: every Hindu in 800, or 1800, who heard about a *Brāhmaṇa* or a *Śūdra*, was bound to think of caste, and was likewise bound to associate the Vedic source with divine revelation.

This is how bad history, including invented traditions, can lead to grave problems. It can absolutize them, turn them into a matter of divine volition, no less. But this also shows how good history can relativize them and make them manageable again.

Conclusion

The assumption that the Vedas are of supernatural origin, *apauruṣeya*, is demonstrably in conflict with various types of testimony in the Vedas themselves. Oddly, for people who hold the Vedas in such quasi-divinizing awe, the invented-traditionalists turn out to go against this Vedic testimony. We invite them to briefly interrupt their

devout Veda recitations for a critical reading of the Vedas, to clear up their confusion.

They won't welcome this refutation of their fond belief. They may associate our observations with despised ideological movements like Nehruvian secularism, materialism and atheism. But look at the bright side. Hindus too are called to develop the Constitutionally-ordained "scientific temper", which was never contradicted by any Hindu religious dogma. The *apauruṣeyatva* belief was never un-Hindu, only a mistake, as happens once in a while to human beings.

Moreover, if traditionalists care about ancestry, this refutation of their cramped belief ought to gladden them. It implies that their Ṛṣi ancestors were not passive receptacles of voices from above, but creative geniuses. Surely this quality is still lurking somewhere in their own genes.

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