

Vaidik Samskriti

by Govind Chandra Pande
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Monumental scholarship moving with smooth strides over a vast area, refreshingly original, thought provoking and challenging: these are some of the qualities one has grown accustomed to expect in the recent spate of works of Prof. G.C. Pande. The present book exemplifies these qualities at their attractive best.

Although his approach is historical, Prof. Pande has chosen to write on 'Vedic Culture' and not on the 'Vedic Age'. The reason for this choice has not been specifically explicated in the work. However, the present reviewer is in no doubt that Prof. Pande is making a statement through this conscious choice. Vedic Age in the current historical discourse, particularly in India, is taken to represent the period in Indian history in which the marauding white-skinned Aryan 'race' swooped down on the Indus plains (circa 1300 BC) across the Hindukush, destroying the magnificent urban centers (Purs) there; and then pressing forward into the Gangetic plains and the bracing Malawa regions they obliterated; enslaved and drove away the dark-skinned Pre-Aryan indigenous people into the inhospitable forest and mountainous shelters; and then (circa 600 BC) began building anew the 'urban culture', with all its concomitants, that they had previously destroyed so ruthlessly. On the social plane, the Vedic Age is supposed to represent a predominantly pastoral society, practically unacquainted with city life except as its inveterate enemy. And this account is based almost entirely on an avowedly priestly literature that was designed to serve a sacred and sacerdotal end. The very choice of Prof. Pande's theme underlines his disagreement with the prevailing interpretation of the history of Vedic Age.

The study of culture has been a lifelong engagement of Prof. Pande and

he has often elucidated his view of what constitutes the essence of culture.¹ Culture, in his formulation, is the ultimate goal that a civilization sets for human beings. It is these goals that distinguish one civilization from another. Culture from this point of view is thus the foundational philosophy of life permeating a society. However, in the present work he has taken a wider view of culture. Along with his main notion of culture as the chosen *summum bonum* of life, to which he steadfastly adheres, in this book Prof. Pande also accommodates the social and economic life and organizations of people within the purview of Vedic Culture. Culture has been looked upon here as the ways of life of people as well as the expression of the fundamental philosophy of life. Vedic literature has been viewed as a mirror reflecting variegated patterns of life on the one hand and as a lamp illuminating a vision of fundamental values on the other. With astute subtlety, all through the astoundingly detailed marshalling of evidence, Prof. Pande weaves a fine texture of arguments in which both the views of culture are seen as converging. Perhaps in concession to the historical methodology currently in vogue, in the present work Prof. Pande has adopted a somewhat different arrangement of chapterisation from that in his *Foundations of Indian Culture*. In the *Foundations of Indian Culture* he begins with the spiritual, religious, philosophical, creative and aesthetic spheres and then moves on to the social and economic; in the present work he traverses, what essentially is the same ground, from the direction that historians would find closer to their approach. The ten chapters in the book are arranged in the following order: Vedas, their authorship and the period of their composition; In quest of the Aryas:

Linguistic and Archaeological (Perspectives); The Early Vedic Society and its Material Aspects; Spirituality of the Early Vedic Age; The Stream of the Poetry of the Seers; The Later-Vedic Period; The Later-Vedic Samhita and Brahmana Literature; *Karmakanda* and its Significance; Understanding the Upanishads; and Vedic Science.

The main theme and the allied issues in each chapter have been penetratingly and exhaustively discussed. The author's mastery over the original sources, i.e. the massive Vedic literature ranging from the *Rik Samhita* to the *Upanishads* along with the ancillaries (*Vedangas*) and the commentaries (Yaska, *Mimamasakas*, Sayana, etc.) and *Avestan* tradition, as well as his command over the equally impressive body of works of the modern masters, the German, French, English, American, have lent his book the kind of authenticity not easily available in the works of present day Indian historians dealing with early India. The advantage of going directly to the original works not mediated by translators—and this applies equally to the German and French works—is evident in the whole book. The methodology Prof. Pande has used, following the one laid out by his teacher Pandit Ksetresachandra Chattoopadhyaya, has been referred to more than once (pp. IX, 108, etc.) Four feet, as it were, of the Vedic study have been identified: (a) Vedic Texts; (b) the *Avesta*; (c) modern comparative methodology; and (d) the Indian tradition of Vedic Studies. Prof. Pande has underlined the fact often not even taken notice of in the historiography currently dominant in our country, that the Indian tradition of Vedic interpretation, despite many odds continues to be vibrant even in the modern times in the works of Dayanand, Aurobindo, Coomaraswamy, Anirvana, Madhusudhan Ojha, Matilal Sastri, etc.

The present work is a weighty addition to this tradition and it adds a new dimension to it.

The first two chapters are mainly devoted to the contextual background of the Vedic culture. The implications of some of the current views relating to the 'Aryan' question have been scrutinized in detail and from several angles. The notion of Aryan as a race has of course lost its credibility for quite some time. Prof. Pande's discussion, however, goes a much longer distance than merely reinforcing the untenability of the racial construction of the notion of Arya. In fact, Prof. Pande has argued in a number of his earlier works too that the notion of race was alien to the realm of Vedic thought. The alleged dichotomy between the Arya and Dasa-Dasyu was actually cultural and conduct-based. What really emerges out of the discussion of the question of Arya in the present work is the interesting fact that despite the garb of a linguistic construction of the 'Arya' the prevailing theory retains most of the illogical and offensive features of the 'racial' theory. It retains the concept of a single 'group' of all-conquering alien people, imposing its own culture, language and world view on the surviving members of the conquered; giving in the name of a language speaking group instead of a race does not make any real difference. Affinity of language does not bear one-to-one relationship with invasion and subjection. From the examination of available evidence, both linguistic and archaeological, Prof. Pande believes that the construction of the Indo-European, both as a language and a common group of ancestral people, is a modern artifice and cannot bear acute examination. Similarly, the supposed dichotomy between the Vedic and the Harappan and the alleged grounds of this dichotomy need a fresh re-looking. Prof. Pande does not think that there is sufficient evidence to warrant the conclusion that the authors of the Veda were 'primitive' invaders that poured into the country across the

Hindukush. These two chapters are a plea based on a thickly woven texture of fine arguments to look at the Veda without the theory of Aryan invasion casting its shadow over it. The question of Vedic chronology, it has been argued, also needs fresh evaluation. In this connection, it is worth noting that the emerging archaeological picture of the rise of chalcolithic cultures in Eastern India around 2000 BC calls for the re-dating and re-locating of the Videgha Mathava legend of the *Satapatha Brahmana* and the process of the 'Aryan Expansion' to the east of the Sadanira. And this in its turn would suggest a substantially older date of the *Rigveda*. Moreover, the changing archaeological scenario seems to be creating space for a critical rehabilitation of some of the traditions found in the *Puranas*. The appraisal of the Vedic chronology and the theater of Vedic culture appear to accord quite well with the emerging outlines of archaeological scene.

Protagonists of socio-economic history would find chapters 3 and 6 of absorbing interest. Even though intervening ones separate these chapters, in order to savour them without break, it would not be a bad idea to read them in continuation. Within the constraints of the nature of evidence, in these chapters the author has largely succeeded in approximating the ideal of 'total history'. His minute and lively reconstruction of the life of the people reminds one of the methodologies followed by the celebrated French historians like Braudel and Laduri. Although Prof. Pande does not approach social history from the Structuralist or Marxist viewpoints, he has dealt with the issues associated with social units and their interrelationships and the prevalent sources and the nature of production and subsistence. The connotations and significance of terms like *jana*, *janapada*, *vis*, *gotra*, *goshtha*, *gavishhti*, *kula*, *rashtra*, *rajya*, *rajan*, *pur*, and so on have been discussed in depth. Similarly, the question whether the Early Vedic society was nomadic-pastoral-

tribal in character, gradually developing into an agrarian state-based society has been considered in detail. His evaluation, of course, differs from that of Kosambi and other Marxist scholars. The difference is most marked in the way he emphasizes the philosophy that coloured the Vedic idea of society, which can be found expressed, e.g., in the *Atharvaveda* 12.1.45. This philosophy was essentially pluralistic and accommodative in outlook and strongly advocated concord in place of competition and exploitation, including exploitation of the earth (see, e.g., pp. 47, 261). Prof. Pande makes no bones about the fact that the understanding of the social organization, the economic life and dispensation and the nature of political authority cannot be divorced from this philosophy without running the risk of getting a distorted and one-dimensional perspective.

In the present academic climate of intense ideological conflict—which is not very conducive to real academic growth, but that is a matter for a larger debate and we may not enter it here—Prof. Pande's methodology and attitude might be viewed by some as an effort to romanticize and sublimate the past. In this context, the reader's attention is particularly invited to Prof. Pande's discussion of the Varna system (pp.269ff). He candidly accepts the inequity that crept into the system as a kind of a permanent cancerous virus eating into the vitals of Indian society (p.275). However this obvious shortcoming does not induce him to lose his holistic perspective in evaluating the Vedic society. As a matter of fact, these two chapters (3 & 6) represent critical scholarship looking at some of the accepted assumptions about the 'Vedic Aryans' and the application of many of the contemporary social science concepts to early Indian society at its dignified best. Some of his observations are highly interesting. He remarks that the names of the rivers in the famous *nadisukta* of the *Rigveda* are enumerated from east to west beginning with Ganga (p.45) and it is mentioned

assumed that the Aryans were not familiar with the colours of blue and green; blue and green, after all, it has been argued, were absent among the colours of the cattle. Prof. Pande has remarked how could a people moving in forests and in grassland and leading an open-air life miss the ubiquitous colours of green fields and forests and of the blue sky? (p.51). There are more references to *pur* in the *Rigveda* than to *grama* (pp. 56-57). These do not go well with the assumption that the Early Vedic people were predominantly nomadic pastoralists inhabiting the area stereotyped as '*saptasindhava*'. Prof. Pande observes that the chalcolithic cultures of the third millennium BC indicate the existence of pastoralism, agriculture, and urban centers with developed trade and commerce. There must have been groups of nomadic people, people with hunting, farming, etc., as their occupations, but there is no reason for believing that these people alone represented the Early Vedic culture (p.54). In fact the social composition of Early Vedic India was far from monolithic; like subsequent periods in Indian history it was pluralistic with a worldview that respected diversity (p. 58).

Religion, ritual and philosophy have been discussed mainly in chapters 4, 8 and 9. Besides these, other chapters also contain occasional observations relating to beliefs, speculations, worldviews and religious practices. Although insights from comparative religion have been made use of, the perspective mainly has been the traditional Indian one. The first pages of chapter 4 give a summary of Prof. Pande's views on the main features of Vedic religious beliefs and spirituality. The chapter contains an incisive discussion of the concept of *rita* and its place in Indian culture. Cosmogonical and cosmological issues have been discussed both in chapter 4 and again in chapters 8 and 9. These chapters are highly important for they also provide the key to understand the Vedic attitude to society.

Among the most attractive parts of the book should be counted chapters 5, 7 and

9, which contain extensive Hindi rendering of some of the most significant portions of Vedic literature. It is well known that Sanskrit poetry loses a great deal of its effectiveness bereft of its fabulously rich *chanda*. It is thus a measure of the ample felicity that Prof. Pande is gifted within handling Hindi, that he has been able to transport the poetic power of the Rigvedic verses and the literary quality of Upanishadic poetry and passages of pregnant prose. Although it is perhaps not totally fair, because the degrees of language kinship are markedly different, a comparison of Prof. Pande's Hindi renderings of the Rigvedic or Atharvavedic *suktas* with the most popular English renderings of them brings home the fact how warmly liquid a good translation can be. And in the rendering no distortion has been allowed to intrude upon the essentially spiritual and religious character of the texts or to sully the 'twilight' nature of the mystic

vocabulary (*sandhyabhasha*) in concession to poetic effect. Prof. Pande has done yeoman's service in rehabilitating Vedic literature into the domain of 'literature'; the 'modernist' readers of Hindi can now savour the Veda just for its literary quality and realize that modern poetic sensibilities are not so distant from those of the composers of the Vedic hymns.

Vaidik Samskriti embodies a refined and dedicated scholarship of rare kind and a mellowed and dignified mind. For its presentation, style and language, it should be hailed as a classic in Hindi literature. The book deserves widest circulation.

¹ Although Prof. Pande has been often refining and adding on to his concept of culture, *The Meaning and Process of Culture* still remains his most elaborate statement on the subject.

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