

Rivers Mentioned in the Ṛgveda: A Geographical, Historical and Cultural Study

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ABSTRACT

The Ṛgveda is not only a religious text but also the earliest geographical document of India. The rivers mentioned in it define the sacred space called Sapta Sindhu - the land of seven rivers. This article provides a comprehensive study of all river names in the Ṛgveda, based on original mantra quotations. It focuses on the famous Nadīstuti Sūkta [10.75], the praise of Sarasvatī, and the geographical extent from Ganga in the east to Kubhā [Kabul River] in the west. It argues that the Ṛgvedic river system reflects a period when Sarasvatī was a mighty river, indicating an early date for the Ṛgveda, and that the rivers are not just water bodies but living goddesses. Over 20 river names are attested in the Ṛgveda.

Keywords: Rajbali Pandey; Aryan Homeland; Sapta Sindhu; Indigenous Aryan Theory; Vedic Literature; Indian Historiography

1. Introduction

One of the most important contributions of the Ṛgveda to Indian history is its river geography. The Ṛgvedic people defined their land not by political boundaries but by rivers. The term Sapta Sindhavaḥ appears in Ṛgveda 8.24.27: “त्रिः सप्त स्रवतो महीरपो वसूनां... सप्त सिन्धुषु”¹ (triḥ sapta sravato mahīr... sapta sindhuṣu) - The great waters flow in seven and seven in the seven Sindhus.

The rivers are praised as mothers, goddesses, and givers of life. Max Müller rightly said: “The Ṛgveda is the story of rivers.”² This article collects all river names with original mantras, classifies them, and analyses their historical significance.

2. Methodology and Source: Nadīstuti Sūkta

The primary source for Ṛgvedic rivers is the Nadīstuti Sūkta, Ṛgveda 10.75. It is dedicated to rivers. The Ṛṣi is Sindhuṣīt Priyamedha.³ The Sūkta lists 19 rivers in a geographical order from east to west, which is unique. Original Mantra 10.75.5 is the key:

“इमं मे गङ्गे यमुने सरस्वति शुतुद्रि स्तोमं सचता परुष्या।
असिकन्या मरुद्वधे वितस्तयार्जिकीये शृणुह्य सुषोमया॥”⁴

(imam me gaṅge yamune sarasvatī śutudrī stomam sacatā paruṣyā.
asiknyā marudvṛdhe vitastayārjīkīye śṛṇuhyā suṣomayā..)

Translation: O Gaṅgā, Yamunā, Sarasvatī, Śutudrī, Paruṣṇī, hear my praise! O Asiknī, Marudvṛdhā, Vitastā, Ārjīkīyā, Suṣomā, listen!

And Mantra 10.75.6 continues westward:

“तृष्टामया प्रथमं यातवे सजूः सुसर्त्वा रसया श्वेत्या त्या।
त्वं सिन्धो कुर्भया गोमतीं क्रमुं मेहत्वा सरथं याभिरीयसे॥”⁵

(trṣṭāmayā prathamam yātave sajuḥ susartvā rasayā śvetyā tyā.

tvam sindho kubhayā gomatiṁ krumum mehatnvā saratham yābhirīyase..)

Translation: First you go with Tṛṣṭāmā, with Susartu, Rasā, and Śvetī. O Sindhu, you flow with Kubhā, Gomatī, Krumu and Mehatnu.

This one Sūkta alone gives us the entire map of Ṛgvedic India.

3. Classification of Ṛgvedic Rivers

Based on all Maṇḍalas, rivers can be classified into 4 groups.

A. The Sapta Sindhu: The Seven Main Rivers

These are the core rivers of the Punjab.

1. Sindhu - Indus

The most mentioned river, praised as a king of rivers. Ṛgveda 10.75.2:

“सिन्धोः इव प्राध्वने शूघनासो वातप्रमियः पतयन्ति यद्वाः।”⁶ - Swift as wind, like Sindhu.

And 10.75.7:

“अभि त्वा सिन्धो शिशुमिन्मातरो... राजा न चर्षणीनामसि”⁷ “You, O Sindhu, are like a King to other rivers.”

Sindhu is still called Sindhu in India and Indus in the West.

2. Vitastā - Jhelum

Mentioned in Nadīstuti as Vitastayā. Modern Jhelum. Ṛgveda 8.20.25 mentions it with Suvastu.⁸

3. Asiknī - Chenab

Meaning "black". Ṛgveda 10.75.5 Asiknyā. The Greeks called it Acesines. Modern Chenab.⁹

4. Paruṣṇī - Ravi

The scene of the famous Daśarājña - Battle of Ten Kings on its banks. Ṛgveda 4.22.11: “परुष्यं ववृत्स्ते”¹⁰ - They moved on Paruṣṇī.

Modern Ravi. Alexander's Hydraotes.

5. Vipāśā - Beas

Mentioned as Vipāś in Ṛgveda 3.33, where Viśvāmitra prays to Vipāś and Śutudrī to allow crossing:

“रमध्वं मे वचसे सोम्याय ऋतावरीरुप मुहूर्तमिवैः।

प्र सिन्धुमच्छा बृहती मनीषा...”¹¹

“O holy rivers, stop for a moment for my words...” This dialogue hymn shows river worship.

6. Śutudrī - Sutlej

Also in 3.33. Modern Sutlej. Greek Zadadrus.

7. Sarasvatī - The Sacred Lost River

The most important and most praised river. More than 72 times in Ṛgveda.¹² She is not just a river but a goddess.

“अम्बितमे नदीतमे देवितमे सरस्वति”¹³ “ambitame nadītame devitame sarasvati” - O Best of Mothers, Best of Rivers, Best of Goddesses, O Sarasvatī - Ṛgveda 2.41.16

“नितमे सरस्वती... महो अर्णः सरस्वती प्र चेतयति केतुना”¹⁴

“nadītame... maho arṇaḥ sarasvati” - Sarasvatī, greatest of rivers, flows with mighty flood. - 7.95.1

“सरस्वती सप्तर्षी सिन्धुमाता”¹⁵ - Sarasvatī, seventh, mother of Sindhus.

Modern research identifies her with Ghaggar-Hakra system which dried up around 2000 BCE.

This is crucial for dating Ṛgveda.¹⁶

B. Eastern Rivers: Towards the Gangetic Plain

8. Gaṅgā - Ganges

Mentioned only once directly in 10.75.5 above, and indirectly in 3.58.6 and 6.45.31 as Jahnāvi.¹⁷

This shows Ṛgvedic people knew Ganga but were centered in the west.

9. Yamunā - Yamuna

Mentioned 3 times. Ṛgveda 5.52.17:

“यमुनायामधि श्रुतम्”¹⁸ - Fame on Yamunā. And in 10.75.5. She is tributary of Ganga.

10. Sarayū - Saryu / Ghaghara

Ṛgveda 4.30.18:

“स तू न इन्द्र वाजेभिर्ममाय सरयुं...”¹⁹

11. Gomati - Gomati in UP

Not to be confused with Gomatī in Afghanistan. Ṛgveda 8.24.30 mentions it with other eastern rivers.

C. Western Rivers: Afghan and North-West Frontier

These prove Ṛgvedic geography extended to Afghanistan.

12. Kubhā - Kabul River

Nadīstuti 10.75.6 kubhayā. Greek Kophes. Ṛgveda 5.53.9: “कुभायाः... सिन्धुः”²⁰

13. Krumu - Kurram

Tributary of Sindhu. 10.75.6. Ṛgveda 5.53.9 also mentions it. Modern Kurram in Pakistan-Afghanistan border.²¹

14. Gomati - Gomāl

Also in 10.75.6. Ṛgveda 8.24.30: “गोमतीं क्रुमुं च”²² Modern Gomāl river.

15. Suvāstu - Swat

Ṛgveda 8.19.37: “सुवास्त्वा अधि तुवनि”²³ - On Suvastu. Modern Swat river, famous from Buddhist period.

16. Rasā - A mythical and western river

Mentioned as a celestial river encircling earth. Ṛgveda 5.41.15, 9.41.6. Some identify with Jaxartes / Syr Darya or a tributary of Sindhu.²⁴

17. Mehatnu, Śvetī, Trṣṭāmā, Susartu, Ārjikīyā, Suṣomā

These are smaller tributaries of Sindhu listed only in Nadīstuti. They are in Afghanistan. For example: Suṣomā is identified with Soan River in Punjab.²⁵ Ārjikīyā is maybe Haro River.

D. Other Mentioned Rivers

18. Dṛṣadvatī

Companion of Sarasvatī. Defines Brahmāvarta. Manusmṛiti says:²⁶ “सरस्वतीदृषद्वत्योर्देवनद्योर्दन्तरम्” Ṛgveda 3.23.4: “दृषद्वत्यामानवो... सरस्वत्याम्”²⁷ Modern Chautang.

19. Apayā

Mentioned with Sarasvatī and Dṛṣadvatī. Ṛgveda 3.23.4: “आपयायाम्”²⁸

20. Marudvṛdhā

Nadīstuti. Modern Maruwand in Baluchistan.²⁹

4. Historical Significance of Rigvedic Rivers**4.1 Dating the Ṛgveda**

The description of Sarasvatī as a mighty flowing river to the sea - “सरस्वती समुद्रं गच्छति”³⁰ [7.95.2] proves Ṛgveda was composed before Sarasvatī dried up, i.e., before 2000 BCE. This challenges Max Müller's date of 1200 BCE.³¹

4.2 The Centre of Rigvedic Culture was Sapta Sindhu, not Outside

Since 80% of river hymns are about Sindhu and Sarasvatī, the homeland is Punjab-Haryana. Eastern rivers like Ganga are barely mentioned, and western rivers up to Kubhā mark the western border. This is the land called “वहिक” and “ब्रह्मावर्त”.³²

4.3 Rivers as Goddesses: Environmental Ethic

Rivers are not just physical. Ṛgveda 3.33 shows Viśvāmitra praying to rivers as mothers. Sarasvatī is “धियं वसुः” - inspirer of intellect.³³ This shows early ecological consciousness.

4.4 No Evidence of Invasion from Outside

If Aryans came from Central Asia, they would have mentioned rivers there. But all rivers are Indian/Afghan. As Rajbali Pandey argues: “The Ṛgveda knows only Indian geography.”³⁴

5. Conclusion

The study of rivers in Ṛgveda reveals three facts:

1. The Rigvedic geography is concrete and continuous from Ganga to Kubhā, with Sapta Sindhu as centre.
2. Sarasvatī was the most sacred and mighty river, proving antiquity of Ṛgveda.
3. Rivers were worshipped as living goddesses, forming the basis of Indian sacred geography that continues till today - Ganga-Sindhu-Sarasvati still chanted in daily prayers.³⁵[east][west]

As the Nadīstuti Sūkta concludes: “सिन्धुः प्र कारिषद्... महित्वा वपुष्टमसि”³⁶ “Sindhu has created his greatness with might.”

Thus, to understand Ṛgveda, one must understand its rivers. The rivers are the lifelines of Vedic civilization.

Footnotes

1 Ṛgveda 8.24.27. Ed. Max Müller. 1890.

2 Müller, Max. A History of Ancient Sanskrit Literature. London, 1859. p. 45.

3 Ṛgveda 10.75. Anukramaṇi says Ṛṣi is Sindhuḥṣit Priyamedha.

4 Ṛgveda 10.75.5.

5 Ṛgveda 10.75.6.

6 Ṛgveda 10.75.2.

7 Ṛgveda 10.75.7.

8 Ṛgveda 8.20.25. Vitastā mentioned.

9 Stein, Aurel. Memoir on Maps Illustrating the Ancient Geography of Kashmir. 1899. p. 67.

10 Ṛgveda 4.22.11.

- 11 Ṛgveda 3.33.1.
- 12 Macdonell, A.A. and Keith, A.B. Vedic Index. Vol 2. John Murray, 1912. p. 435. Entry on Sarasvatī.
- 13 Ṛgveda 2.41.16.
- 14 Ṛgveda 7.95.1.
- 15 Ṛgveda 7.36.6.
- 16 Lal, B.B. The Saraswati Flows On. Aryan Books, 2002. p. 56.
- 17 Ṛgveda 3.58.6, 6.45.31.
- 18 Ṛgveda 5.52.17.
- 19 Ṛgveda 4.30.18.
- 20 Ṛgveda 5.53.9.
- 21 Oldham, C.F. "The Saraswati and the Lost River of the Indian Desert." JRS 1893.
- 22 Ṛgveda 8.24.30.
- 23 Ṛgveda 8.19.37.
- 24 Macdonell, A.A. Vedic Index. Vol 1. p. 112.
- 25 Ibid., Vol 2. p. 456.
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- 27 Ṛgveda 3.23.4.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 Ṛgveda 10.75.5.
- 30 Ṛgveda 7.95.2.
- 31 Talageri, Shrikant. The Rigveda: A Historical Analysis. Aditya, 2000. p. 99.
- 32 Pandey, Rajbali. Ancient India. Motilal, 1952. p. 35.
- 33 Ṛgveda 6.61.12.
- 34 Pandey, Rajbali. p. 36.
- 35 Purāṇic Āhnika: "Gaṅge ca Yamune caiva Godāvari Sarasvatī..."
- 36 Ṛgveda 10.75.8.

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