

Talageri's RigVeda

Koenraad Elst*

This is a very brief comment on the views of Shrikant Talageri, and his sharpened position on the chronological layered-ness of the RigVeda, as in 'The chronological gulf between the old RigVeda and the new RigVeda;' and 'A review of *Rivers of the RigVeda* by Jijith Nadumuri Ravi.' For all the details and references, see <https://talageri.blogspot.com/2020/08/>.

Talageri emphasizes throughout his work that the RigVeda (let alone the other Vedas and the ancillary literature) contains successive layers, as already pointed out by the late nineteenth century US and German Orientalists Edward Hopkins c.q. Hermann Oldenburg. This then allows for a chronological classification: with Family Books (2-7) at the ancient most top, the books 1, 8, 9, 10 at the end, and further subdivisions like books 3, 6, 7 at the older extreme and book 10 at the youngest end, centuries later than the others. So far this seems uncontroversial enough, right?

For whomsoever sees the Vedas as a key to history, a repository of factual data, this type of chronological division is a matter of course. We may still differ on which part precedes which other part, but it is only logical that in such a diverse corpus, age is only one of the factors of diversity. Yet it turns out that two very different groups object to it. One group is very large and its objections already old and deep-seated. The other group is small and its objections opportunistic.

Millions of Hindu traditionalists feel very uneasy about this tinkering with their Vedas. Better to leave them in one piece. Even when they learn that for Talageri, this analysis of the Vedas happens to contribute to the demonstration of an east-to-west gradient, with the older parts proving

more easterly and the later more westerly, thus disproving the Veda-belittling Aryan immigration scenario, they still feel uncomfortable with it. In the traditional view, India was central; in the newer Immigrationist view, it was only an expansion zone of a culture centred outside of it; but in Talageri's view it regains that centrality, or is at any rate freed from the stigma of being a foreign dependency. All true, yet they would rather be free from that modernist Immigrationism, in which they had never seriously believed anyway, without this self-abnegating exercise of cutting up their own scriptures. So, Talageri receives occasional hate mail from traditionalists, not seriously threatening but still unpleasant.

Discovering temporal layers in the text means that it was not created at one go. Instead, it implies that the Old Books were already in existence while the final Book 10 was still totally unheard of. For ordinary creations this is but normal but is this also true for the Vedas? Well, the Vedic Sages themselves would not have been uptight about it. They formulated their poems as their own creation, of very human and temporal origin, directed to rather than received from the gods. They were neither believers in nor preachers of the entirely post-Vedic doctrine of a supernatural or *Apaurusheya* origin.

But sclerotic adherents to the post-Vedic and quasi-Quranic doctrine of a divine origin, find it more logical that the Vedas were created all at the same time in heaven, waiting for an eternity until a *Mantradrashtha*, a 'seer of Vedic verses,' would captivate them; just as the Quran has been waiting since creation until God cared to send it down through the Prophet. This belief seems to be a common weakness of the religious mind, which in Islam has made it into the core of the theology and in Hinduism at least in the customary assumptions of many. One can imagine that as the RigVeda got completed, enjoying the prestige of public declamations, institutions guaranteeing transmission, and a surrounding culture of auxiliary sciences (linguistics, astronomy, mathematics), people lifted it ever higher into the sky and started divinizing it.

* Well-known Indologist, (°Leuven 1959). MA in Sinology, Indology and Philosophy. Stayed for research at the Benares Hindu University during late 1980s. Earning a doctorate with field work on Hindu nationalism, obtained with great distinction in 1998. He can be reached at koenraad.elst@gmail.com.

That is why many Hindus insist that there are no historical data in the RigVeda: no personal names, no rivers or mountains, certainly no names of battles. Then again, it is not a history book, but any book will off-hand give some details about its circumstances. This way, the RigVeda is, through its landscape names and technological level, fauna and flora, unambiguously an Indian Bronze Age text. This realization has percolated rather widely, and many traditionalists hold an unstable half-way position.

Another consequence is that many Hindus like to trace their own Hindu Dharma back to the RigVeda. They think everything Hindu proceeds from the Veda. One example is yoga, which Western scholars deduce from other, older sources, rightly or wrongly. Here, Talageri strongly disagrees: the Vedic tradition is a creation of the Bharata clan, itself part of the Paurava tribe, itself part of the 'five tribes' (two of whom he leads out of India where they become the ancestors of many nations), itself part of the people of the great patriarch Manu, a fundamental Hindu by any accounts. That is why he objects to Ravi's attempts to derive all Hindu communities through migration from a Vedic Northwest. This goes down well with Veda-centric Hindus, but there is no indication of it. Not only is there no reason to assume that India was ever empty and in need of migrations, but there was no Vedic conspiracy behind all the Hindu sects either, regardless of where they are.

Alright, so much for one very large demographic reluctant to accept the RigVeda as a historical product, resulting from intense human activity in the Bronze-Age Northwest India. Another group tries to profit from the common belief in oneness of the entire RigVeda. Consider the chronological implications of the statement that 'the RigVeda contains evidence of the spoked wheel,' with spoked wheels not predating, say 2300 BCE. Many still use this as an argument against a high chronology: the book can't be older than this *terminus postquem*. So, Talageri makes a distinction: those references are in the tenth Mandala, which as the RigVeda's youngest book may indeed be limited to that time bracket; but it can't constrain the earlier books, which may well be a thousand years older. That is incompatible with the Aryan Immigration paradigm, hence the desire among some Immigrationists, otherwise modern and rational, to pretend that the Rigveda is a unit and that conclusions about its last book also count for its first book.

Well, that sums it up. Scholars reluctant to face the revisionist consequences, will not keep the acceptance of history within and behind the RigVeda off for very long. The objections of the traditionalists may be a tougher nut to crack. But that has never prevented Shikant Talageri from being candid about where the evidence is leading us.