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 19th 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 principies of the text, The Hymns of the Rigveda, with Sayana’s commentary (London, 1849–75, 6 vols.; 2nd 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

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 ghuratnuwo hari ihop’ vakshatah|Indre sukhatame rathe|

Sayana: dhaanah bhrashtya yavatan-dulanuddish’ sukhatame rathe Indram avasthapya ...

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: pra javana|prkarshena jaayant iti vrihyadyaaha
pra jah|purudh nanap rakarena vidyamavrihya-
vadirupaprajavaa|bahu vrihau ‘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 pachatptitur bhrujyati dhaanah|

Sayana: Tathayah paktihi paktayavanschhya purodahadina pachat pachet pachanam kuryat|uta api cha yah dhanah bharjanyogyan 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: *purodasadi pachyate|bh�rtta 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 nidhtta|tilmashvrihyadikam gramyasaptkam*

The above verse describes sowing operation. Sayyanacharya’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 yavam 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 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 Koldiwha
(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, Koldiwhah, 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 19th century and their successors. According to that view the Vedic people entered India only in the 2nd 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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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 to project that Vedic people ate barley.

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.

References


Monier-Williams M. 1872. A Dictionary in English and Sanskrit. Motilal Banarasidass, New Delhi, India. 859 pp. (Reprint 1999.)
