

REVIEW

The contemporary politics of ancient history

How 'Indian' were the vedic people, and why does it matter so much?

reviewed by *Rhoderick Chalmers*

The search for origins lies at the heart of many current debates. In India, claims and counter-claims about nativeness have come to symbolise major political faultlines and the histories of peoples have been subjected to intensified scrutiny. Gradually, such historical probings have been extended further into the past, to the extent that the prehistory of the major South Asian population groups is now inextricably intertwined with the political status of current communities. Amidst concerns for demonstrating enduring historicity and asserting age-old claims to belonging, the word 'vedic' has acquired an ever more talismanic status.

Writing in English on Vedic traditions used to be a dusty corner of textual scholarship peopled by some of the more obscurantist Orientalists and characterised by debates that could hardly be translated into a popular format. Now, however, vedic studies has been reinvented and reinvigorated as a field replete with a rash of new research institutes and vocal scholars and commentators divided by their sharply polarised motivations and methodologies. To publish today on the subject of the hymns and rituals of an ancient, migratory branch of the Indo-European family is to enter into one of the most testing and politicised of academic arenas. In such a context, the unpleasant controversy that arose earlier this year with the appointment of Professor Romila Thapar as the first holder of the Kluge Chair in Countries and Cultures of the South at the Library of Congress in Washington DC was perhaps only to have been expected. The petitions against her selection and counter-petitions defending her academic integrity illustrate only too tellingly that the ancient history of India is an area as controversial as any contemporary topic. Or rather, that India's ancient history is a contemporary topic; that the chronological distance of the subject material is no bar to its ability to whip up passions.

With *The Vedic People*, one of India's most distinguished scientists has decided to navigate a path through this tricky terrain in a work designed to be accessible to a general readership. Rajesh Kochhar is by profession an astrophysicist but his interests extend to science policy, the sociology of science, and ancient history. And the unmistakable subtext of his title is the quest to uncover the origins of the vedic people. In short, where did they come from? Or, in more provocative terms, how 'Indian' were the vedic people? For a non-specialist to venture into the thick of controversies which are shaped by present-day beliefs and whose roots must be sought in a corpus of highly specialised literature is a bold undertaking. So how does Kochhar fare in his exploration and what does he have to tell us of vedic history?

From the start, we become aware that the author is armed with one important weapon. Schooled in the methodologies of the exact sciences, he brings to his research an open-mindedness well balanced by the rigour with which he evaluates evidence and its relevance to his wider conclusions. He weighs his facts carefully—and accumulates no shortage of them in a wide-ranging investigation—before adding them one by one to the complex jigsaw that successive chapters piece together. And this is some jigsaw: the frontispiece diagram indicates that he will bring together approaches from archaeology, natural history, geomorphology, the history of technology, astronomy and linguistics to centre on the Rigveda itself. With such an array of scientific or semi-scientific tools to draw on, one might presume that Kochhar will take a strict line with more ambiguous sources, such as the puranas. But to his credit he does not rush to dismiss even the more tendentious of such narratives and genealogies, but rather mines them sensitively for any evidence they may bring to bear on the data gleaned from other investigative methods.

The analytical style adopted by Kochhar is clearly set out at the opening, one of the few points where he allows himself to address broader philosophical questions about the role of history: "Our interpretation of the past depends on our perception of the present. That is why history cannot provide proof; it can only provide illustration. This, however, does not mean that history is a free-for-all, and can never be definitive. Uncertainty in history lies at the level of the significance of events, not at the level of events themselves". However, any reader who hopes that the broaching of such questions will lead to further epistemological ruminations or a more probing assessment of the author's own position as a scientist tackling materials which have generally been left to scholars in the humanities, will be disappointed. On the other hand, those who appreciate a matter-of-fact style and a lucid array of factual nuggets presented in simple prose will be more than satisfied.

The *Vedic People* makes neither pretensions to literary finesse nor any apology for its down-to-earth approach. If at times it reads like an extended report of laboratory findings, that can no doubt be attributed partly to the author's own background and partly to the welcome desire to free this area from the mists of ideologically tinted rhetoric and to concentrate on a logical evaluation of a series of interconnected inquiries. We are then taken on a tour through the landscape of the vedic people such as it can be reconstructed from available evidence.

Consideration of language and literature opens up one of the major avenues for research, while insights offered by puranic history are cross-referenced to corroborating data from astronomy or archaeology. We learn from the outset that Kochhar is going to take the Western tradition of Sanskrit studies seriously, so seriously indeed that we are presented with a dense five-page potted history of the first European encounters with Indic languages and their development as objects of serious study by outsiders. Here the strengths and weaknesses of Kochhar's approach become apparent. While the weight of detail he assembles is impressive, it may occasionally prove crushing to the more casual reader, especially as it is not always clear what value the information being presented adds to the overall argument. The carefully dated and footnoted tales of early Orientalist endeavours may be interesting but until he begins to address the work of Max Müller, they have little bearing on the central questions of the book.

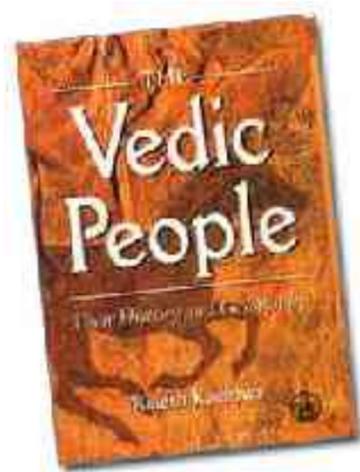
Important issues such as the emergence of the concept of an 'Aryan race' are, unfortunately, skipped over rather lightly. This historical precedent raises particularly pertinent questions for a work such as this: the temptation to conflate linguistic and racial categories highlights one of the significant dangers involved in the combining of evidence from divergent disciplines. Kochhar summarises that: "the Nazi holocaust brought the whole concept of an Aryan race into disrepute", but implies that this was on moral grounds, rather than for sound academic reasons. He himself continues to use 'Aryan' as a term to describe linguistic populations. Meanwhile, the brief early mention of Aryans may also prompt readers to ask why the central construct of the book—the idea of a 'vedic people'—is nowhere explained or justified in any detail.

We are left to presume that vedic people (in fact, the author prefers 'Rigvedic people') are roughly equivalent to the society that produced the Rigvedic hymns. But such classifications are notoriously slippery when subjected to closer analysis: even within the Rigvedic corpus there are occasional Prakrit forms which suggest the artificial preservation of an older language within a community which was already using a new form of speech. Similarly the assumption that the production of these orally-transmitted hymns (and it is worth remembering that these were not originally 'books' or 'texts') is enough to define a whole people as a homogeneous unit may be questioned, and deserves at least to be explained.

Yet it is not surprising if the treatment of early language and literary sources lacks the insights that might be brought by a specialist. After all, the author is constrained to using English translations of all materials and relying largely on secondary sources for his interpretations. Given this, a certain lack of feeling for the subtleties of vedic expression and the difficulties of interpretation is both understandable and forgivable. For when we move on to more scientific territory, Kochhar's narrative becomes more intriguing and his reasoning more compelling. The ground he covers is immense: we sweep through reconstructions of the major puranic dynasties to a scientifically justifiable dating of the events of the Mahabharata and Ramayana; we are taken on a tour of the archaeological evidence for prehistoric communities and treated to an investigation of the 'Indo-Iranian habitat', a linguistic-geographical conflation which may be excused for its detailed and convincing treatment of the mystery surrounding the vedic libation of soma. And there is little time to pause before moving on to an attempt to match the rivers named in the Rigveda to potential historical counterparts in present-day Afghanistan and Pakistan.

In these areas Kochhar is at his strongest: the pared down prose conveys sometimes complex arguments with admirable simplicity while from a broad array of methods and materials he starts to extract a more identifiable central narrative. Ultimately we return inescapably to the big question of origins. Kochhar's answer is not new but he has presented a solid enough case to allow himself the luxury of stating his findings baldly: "an examination of the evidence in totality leads to the conclusion that India is not the original home of the Rigvedic people". No surprises for scholars here, nor in his rejection of the almost universally discredited 'Aryan invasion' theory and his assessment that the Rigvedic people are distinct from the founders of the Harappan tradition. The details of his arguments are more likely to provoke limited controversy on certain geographical points, such as the presence consistently to identify vedic rivers with original courses (some now dried up or shifted) far to the north-west of the present-day counterparts that bear their names. Yet the author acknowledges that there remain specific questions to which firm answers cannot be given and he is characteristically careful in distinguishing between reasonable conjecture and demonstrable fact.

The *Vedic People* has already proved popular, having progressed quickly into a reprinted paperback edition, and it is not hard to appreciate the reasons behind its success. Its attention to the value of evidence, its enthusiastic willingness to engage with a great variety of sources, and its honesty in declaring the limitations of the conclusions that can be drawn in the current state of our knowledge, all offer a welcome change from the overheated rhetorical claims which have too frequently distorted popular understandings of this important area. Rajesh Kochhar himself stands firmly on the side of reason and faith in the slow accumulation and sifting of empirical evidence as the best way to establish a more definitive historical narrative. Yet he does not seek to devalue vedic and puranic traditions or to cast judgment on the systems of beliefs which have emerged from them. Established scholars in the fields of literature or archaeology may not be excited by his findings but nor are they likely to feel that their collective expertise has been traduced by an unthinking interloper. In fact they, and the rest of us, should be glad that such a measured, thorough, and well-intentioned attempt has been made to bring sober academic analysis to a wider audience.



THE VEDIC PEOPLE
Their History and Geography
Rajesh Kochhar
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To publish today on the subject of the hymns and rituals of an ancient, migratory branch of the Indo-European family is to enter into one of the most testing and politicised of academic arenas.

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