

Lecture 1

Overview of Indian Culture &
The Origins of Indian Philosophy

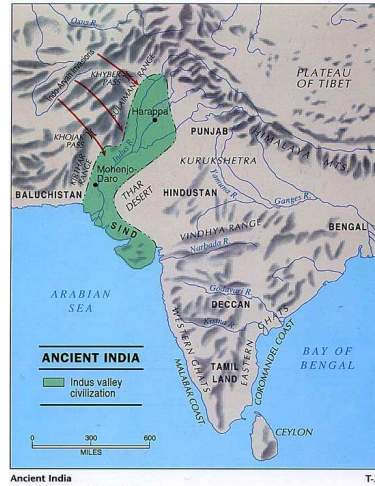
The Dravidians

- indigenous people of the Indian sub-continent
- civilization probably began *circa* 3000 BCE in lower Indus River Valley (Pakistan)
- eventually spread to about 1/3 of present-day India



The Aryans

- The Aryans arrived in India *circa* 1500 BCE
- Came from Europe / southern Russia
- Described themselves as tall, fair-skinned, blond-haired, and civilized



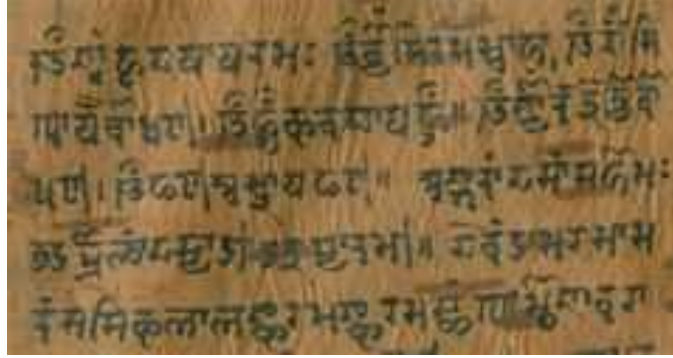
The Aryans: Advantages

- Civilization?
- War technology (esp. horse-drawn chariots)



The Aryans: Innovations

- Sanskrit
 - **aryan** = one who knows life's value
- Caste System
 - **brahmins** = priestly class



The *Vedas*

- **vedas** = "body of knowledge"
- Key Theme: symbiotic relationship between gods and humans

Rig Veda

- Oldest of the *Vedas* (*circa* 1500 BCE)
 - Perhaps oldest text in an Indo-European language
 - Excerpt: Hymn of Origins (10.129)
 - Verse 1: What is the absolute beginning?
1. There was neither non-existence nor existence then;
there was neither the realm of space nor the sky which is beyond.
What stirred? Where?
In whose protection?
Was there water,
bottomlessly deep?

Rig Veda

- Verse 2: The absolute beginning is a primordial oneness called THAT ONE
 - cannot be described in language
 - NB: Contradicts *creation ex nihilo*
2. There was neither death nor immortality then.
- There was no distinguishing sign of night nor of day.
- THAT ONE breathed, windless, by its own impulse.
- Other than that there was nothing beyond.

Rig Veda

- Verse 3: There is a lack of differentiation in this primordial wholeness.

3. Darkness was hidden by darkness in the beginning;

with no distinguishable sign, all this was water.

That life force was covered with emptiness,

THAT ONE arose through the power of heat.

Rig Veda

4. Desire came upon
THAT ONE in the
beginning;

that was the first
seed of mind.

Poets seeking in their
heart with wisdom
found the bond of
existence in
nonexistence.

Their cord was
extended across.

5. Was there below?
Was there above?

There were seed-
placers; there were
powers.

There was impulse
beneath;

there was giving-forth
above.

Rig Veda

6. Who really knows?
Who here can say?

Whence was it
produced? Whence is
this creation?

The gods came
afterwards, with the
creation of the
universe.

Who then knows whence
it has arisen?

7. Whence this
creation has arisen.

Perhaps it formed
itself, or perhaps it
did not.

The one who looks down
on it, in the highest
heaven,

only He knows -- or
perhaps He does not
know.

The *Upanishads*

- Written by Brahmins dissatisfied with the this-worldly focus of *Vedas*
- Recorded between 1000 BCE and 500 BCE
- Contains more insights from native Dravidians
- **upanishads** = a sitting instruction at the feet of a master

Of what use is the *Rig Veda* to one who does not know the Spirit from whom the *Rig Veda* comes, and in whom all things abide? For only those who have found him have found peace.

- *Svetasvatara Upanishad*

Vedas vs. Upanishads

- *Vedas* focus on ritual practices
- Reflective questioning, but no definite answers
- Claims asserted without argument
- *Upanishads* focus on inner experience
- Attempt to explain fundamental principles of existence
- Attempt to provide reasons for claims

General Characteristics

1. Emphasis on introspective analysis

Not through much learning is the Atman reached, not through the intellect and sacred teaching.

- *Katha Upanishad*

He comes to the thought of those who know him beyond thought: he is unknown to the learned and known to the simple.

- *Kena Upanishad*

General Characteristics

2. Emphasis on ignorance as the key to other problems.

- We are prevented from experiencing ultimate reality (THAT ONE) due to our ignorance of what ultimate reality is

Abiding in the midst of ignorance, thinking themselves wise and learned, fools go aimlessly hither and thither, the blind led by the blind.

- *Katha Upanishad*

Those who know him who is greater than all, beyond form and beyond pain, attain immortality: those who know not go to the worlds of sorrow.

- *Svetasvatara Upan.*

General Characteristics

3. Emphasis on practices for gaining knowledge.

- Yogic practices are designed to clear the mind, support a state of serene and detached awareness

With upright body, head, and neck lead the mind and its powers into thy heart; and the OM of Brahman will then be thy boat with which to cross the rivers of dear. And when thy body is in silent steadiness, breathe rhythmically through the nostrils with a peaceful ebbing and flowing of breath. The chariot of the mind is drawn by wild horses, and those wild horses have to be trained.

- *Svetasvatara Upan.*

General Characteristics

4. Strong devotional
faith tradition

- **bhakti yoga** =
intense devotion to a
personal
manifestation of
Brahman

(Statue of Shiva in
meditation at Bangalore)



General Characteristics

5. Sharply analytical: technical terms, arguments and rules of logic, adversarial rhetoric
6. Primary emphasis on epistemological and metaphysical issues
 - Secondary emphasis on ethics
 - Least emphasis of all on aesthetics, politics, social philosophy

General Characteristics

7. Tendency toward a two-layered view of reality

- world of sensory appearances (**maya**) vs. world of true reality

We should consider that in the inner world Brahman is consciousness; and we should consider that in the outer world Brahman is space.

- *Chandogya Upanishad*

Note about Reading

- Primary texts are scaffolding, not the building itself.
- The texts do not make sense without the requisite background knowledge.



Reading for Next Time

- *The Upanishads*
 - Katha Upanishad: 55-66
 - Mandukya Upanishad: 83-85

Optional: Brihad-Aranyaka Upanishad: 127-132