

FIRE AND SACRIFICE

LIVING BY THE VEDAS

Imagine you could watch the history of the world as a super-fast movie shot from outer space. If you were watching the South Asian subcontinent, things would look about the same from about 3000 to 2000 BCE with cities, villages, and crops sprinkled throughout the Indus Valley. But about 2000 BCE, the scene would start to change dramatically. Some of the old settlements along what used to be the Saraswati River would disappear as the once-great river dried up. Then you would see spaces opening up in the jungles along the Yamuna and Ganga River valley as new communities moved in. These communities cut down and burned trees to make room for towns, cities, and fields of summer crops watered by the monsoon, such as rice and millet.

We know a lot more about these new communities than we do about the Harappans because we have their scriptures, called the **Vedas**. The Vedas are a collection of hymns, stories, and religious instructions in the Sanskrit language. Sanskrit was not written down at first, and the Vedas were only passed on through memorization. How much can you memorize? Could you memorize a poem? A story? How about a whole book? How about memorizing a whole book by repeating back what your teacher tells you, without having words to look at? How about a whole lot of books?

The Vedas were so important that students spent 10, 15, or even 20 years studying and memorizing them so that they would not be lost from generation to generation. Young boys who belonged to a class of people called Brahmin had to learn the alphabet of the sacred language of Sanskrit before they could begin to learn the hundreds of sacred texts in the Vedas.

One of the hundreds of stories in the Vedas tells us about a 12-year-old boy named Ketu who was getting ready to study the Vedas. On a typical day, Ketu awoke to the

{ The word *Veda* comes from the Sanskrit *vid*, which means “to know.” The Vedas are sacred knowledge.

COULD I BORROW YOUR LANGUAGE?

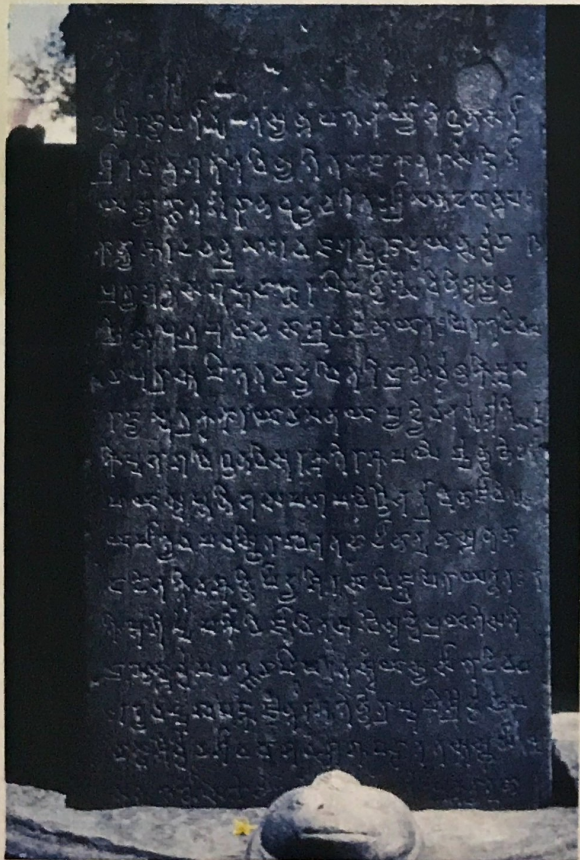
Sanskrit is in the same family as other West Asian and European languages—the Indo-European language family. For example, the Sanskrit word for father is *pitr*, the Latin word is *pater*, and the Spanish is *padre*. Scholars still don't agree about where this large language family started or how it spread over such a vast area. But many words (even the names of gods and goddesses) are so alike that there must have been some contact, maybe through trade, between the communities living in the Indus Valley, Central Asia, Iran, and even Greece.

sounds of his mother getting breakfast ready and his older sister sweeping the kitchen in preparation for the morning rituals. The kitchen would have been located in an open courtyard in the northeastern part of the house, the purest and most holy part of the home. The sun hit this area first, warming the mud-plastered walls and bringing light to the courtyard. On cold mornings, Ketu might well have wished that he had been born a girl. His sister got to stay at home and help their mother in the warm kitchen, but he had to bathe in the ice-cold river in the fog before his morning worship of the sun god Surya.

One of the first things Ketu learned as a child was that there were four different *varna*, or classes of people. The Vedas taught that the four *varna* came from the body of Purusha, the cosmic being whose sacrifice resulted in the creation of the universe. The Brahmins, the class of priests, came from the head of Purusha. The Kshatriyas, the warriors and kings, came from his arms, while the Vaisyas, or merchants, came from his thighs, and the Shudras, or peasants, from his feet.

The Vedic peoples believed that people were born into the *varna* they deserved. If a people lived good lives, they would be reborn into a higher class. If they did not live a good life, they came back in a lower class. When people lived such good lives that they became perfect, they united with the cosmic being. Since Ketu belonged to a priestly Brahmin family, everyone believed that he had followed the rules of the Vedas in his last life.

As a child, Ketu learned to recite the names of his male



This Sanskrit edict, written in a script called Devanagari, proclaims the conquest of Nepal by King Manavadeva I in 464 CE.

ancestors beginning with his father and going back many generations. He was proud of his father's family line, but he was also proud that his mother belonged to the second most important class: the Kshatriya, who were the warriors and politicians. (During Vedic times, people from different *varna* could marry, but in later periods this practice was discouraged and eventually banned.)

Ketu walked to the river for his bath with boys from the Vaisya class. Their fathers were merchants and important community leaders. On the road they passed another group of boys who were driving oxen pulling a heavy plow to the fields. These boys were from the lowest class, the Shudra. Shudras worked the land and butchered animals or made leather harnesses. Because the work that they did was considered unclean, they were not allowed to learn the sacred hymns and prayers called **mantras**. They were not even allowed to touch the sacred pottery or containers used to carry the food that would be sacrificed to the gods.

If Ketu even brushed against a Shudra, he had to bathe and purify himself right away. As a Brahmin, his job was to keep the world from ending by making sacrifices to the gods, which he could only do if he was pure. This was the Brahmins' sacred duty, not just for themselves, but for everyone in the community, including the Kshatriyas, Vaisyas, and even the untouchable Shudras. It was an important responsibility. *You* wouldn't want to be responsible for the end of the world, would you?

Ketu was preparing for his initiation along with some other boys from his class. When that day arrived, his mother and sister plastered the courtyard of their home with a fresh layer of clay mixed with sacred cow manure. Cows were holy, and their manure mixed with clay purified the space needed for the special ritual. (Many harmful bacteria do not grow in cow manure, so this practice actually *did* keep things clean. Grass fibers in the manure did something else, too, it made the plaster of the walls stronger.) Ketu's family built a small, square fire altar in the center of the courtyard with four rectangular fired bricks that his mother and sister also plastered with clay and manure.

{ *man* + *tra* = "to think" +
"tool" or "instrument"
A mantra is a word or saying
repeated during meditation
or worship. One popular
mantra is the word "ohm."



The fire god Agni, often shown with two heads and seven tongues, was considered the mouth of the gods. Worshippers gave him offerings to feed all the gods and keep the world in harmony. This 17th-century carving is from South India.

“ Hymn to Agni, Rig Veda, 1700 BCE

MAJOR GODS AND GODDESSES OF THE VEDAS

Agni	<i>god of fire and sacrifice</i>
Indra	<i>god of war and rain</i>
Saraswati, Ganga, and others	<i>river goddesses (each major river was a goddess)</i>
Surya	<i>sun god</i>
Ushas	<i>goddess of the dawn</i>

When everything was ready, Ketu's father and two other priests brought out the special tools to kindle the sacred fire. One man held a wood plank, and a second man held a wooden drill. Ketu's father pulled back and forth on a cord wrapped around the thick wooden drill, so that the drill tip pressed into the wood board. After a few turns, the tip of the stick started to smoke, and soon the charred wood powder that built up in the hearth began to glow. One of the priests blew on the glowing embers and added a bit of dry kindling soaked in butter until the sacred fire—Agni—sprang to life.

Once the fire was going, Ketu's father recited a hymn to Agni, inviting the god to the altar to receive the sacrifice:

May your offerings, oblations, directed to heaven
Come forth with the butter ladle.
Agni goes to the gods, seeking their favor.
Having been called, Agni, sit down for the feast.

Then the priests recited prayers to purify Ketu and the other boys who were sitting quietly in a row next to the fire altar. The boys dropped butter and small animal and human figurines made of wheat flour into the sacred fire. The priests sprinkled purified water over the heads of each boy, and then carefully draped the sacred cotton thread over their left shoulders, around their bodies, and under their right arms. This sacred thread was a symbol of the boys' second birth as Brahmin students. (Kshatriya and Vaisya boys

could also receive the sacred thread, but they had to wait until they were older.)

After receiving the sacred thread, Ketu and his friends moved into the house of a learned priest who tutored them for 12 years. A student's life was very hard. Students collected firewood for fire sacrifices and everyday cooking, helped build fire altars, and learned to make the sacred fire. Most of the time, they memorized the Vedas, carefully pronouncing each sound exactly right to call the gods to sacrifices.

Many young boys were not as lucky as Ketu, or even as lucky as the Shudras, the peasants. The Vedic peoples discriminated against the Dasa, a group of people who spoke a different language that did not sound at all like Sanskrit. The Brahmins sometimes made fun of the Dasa and said that they spoke as if they had no noses. (Pinch your nose and see what you would sound like.) The Dasa had wide flat noses and long curly black hair, and the Brahmins claimed they had darker skin and called them uncivilized barbarians, who didn't know how to behave.

The Dasa had, in reality, lived in the region for hundreds of years. Their ancestors in the Indus Valley were the Harappans who had named the rivers and mountains, and had built the cities that now lay abandoned. Although at first the Rig Vedic culture seemed to sweep over the northern plains, many earlier traditions of the Harappans lived on and reemerged in later times.



NOTHING IS TOO GOOD FOR THE GODS

According to the Vedas, Agni the fire god enjoyed sacrifices of horses, bulls, male buffalo, goats, sheep, and sometimes even human beings. (But it wouldn't be considered cheating to use figurines of clay or flour instead of live animals and people.) The horse sacrifice was particularly important. A pure-white male horse was purified, fed, and then allowed to wander for a full year. Wherever it went, the king and his army followed. If it crossed into a neighboring kingdom, the king there either had to submit to the new king or fight to protect his own borders. After a year, the horse was sacrificed. But if this was too much, Agni also liked plainer sacrifices of milk, curds, and butter from the sacred cow, and *soma*, an intoxicating and stimulating drink.

Brahmin boys are sprinkled with holy Ganga River water by a priest during their upanayana, or sacred thread ceremony. After the ceremony, they will begin formal study of the Vedas and wear the sacred thread over their left shoulders.