sindhu- and Its Synonyms in the Rgveda

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0. Preface

$sindhu$-, including its derivatives, is referred to 210 times in the Rgveda (RV) and this frequency stands out above the use of other words related to the rivers. This word denotes not only the river name “Sindhu” (Indus) in the sg., but also “river” or “stream” as a common noun in all numbers. Although most of the nouns related to the rivers are referred to in f. in the RV, $sindhu$- is in both m. and f. Since -u- stems share most of the same endings we can identify their exact gender only when they are modified by an adjective, pronoun, or relative. In this paper, I begin with the investigation of three words related to the river: $sruti$-, $avāni$-, and $nadi$-, focusing on the way they flow and their significance for the life of the old Indo-Aryans. Next, I consider three characteristics of $sindhu$- taking account of the connection with preceding three words. Finally, some aspects of the rivers in the RV will be examined.

1. The Words Related to the Rivers: $sruti$-, $avāni$-, $nadi$-

Reminiscences of the previous age when Indo-Aryans led a semi-nomadic life around the mountainous regions of Afghanistan are strongly reflected in the basic image of the world in the RV. One may notice that the seasonal rise and fall of the water level in a river is regarded as an important event in this literature. One of the most popular myths in the RV, the slaying of the demonic serpent Vṛtra and of the releasing the rivers by Indra, is probably based on the natural phenomenon of the thawing of snow on the mountains and the snow-fed stream.

1.1. $sruti$- “f. way, course. < srav ‘flow’ (RV + ).”

Gorô (2006, p. 260, fn. 20) assumes that this word originally meant a “river, riverbed, or channel,” being used as a path in a dry season: II 13,12ab āramayaḥ sārapasas tārāya kāmāturvṛtaye ca vayyāya ca srutim | “You
stopped the river for the crossing of the defective one (?), for Turviti and Vayya." We can also observe the passages in which sruti- denotes "way" or "path," and this word denotes especially the way which reaches straightaway to the right destination: X 32,7 ákṣetra-vi
śā prāti kṣetra-vi
śānuṣiṣṭāḥ | etād vai bhadrāṁ anuśāsanasyo-
śā srutim vindatā añjāśinām || "Because the one who doesn't know the field (the poet) asked the one who knows the field (Indra), he goes forward being instructed by the one who knows the field. This, verily, is the good of instruction. And he finds out the right way."

1.2. aváni- "f. riverbed, river." 5) This word describes the seasonal change in the river's water level: V 54,2 prá vo marutas taviṣā udanyāvo 1 vayovīḍho aśvayūjaṁ pārijarayaḥ | sāṁ vidyutā dāḍhata vāsati trītāḥ 1 svāranty āpo ṣvānā pārijarayaḥ || "O Maruts, your strong [chariots] yoked with horses / [groups] yoking horses 6) [go] forward, seeking water, increasing vitality, covering the whole distance. 7) They fit a thunderbolt [as an arrow on their bows] (?) ." 8) Tira neighs. The waters make a sound in the riverbed, spreading entirely." V 85,6 imām ū nū kavitamasya māyāṁ 1 mahīṁ devaśya nākīṁ a dadharṣa | ēkam yād udbhā nā prāntaṁ ēnir 1 āśiṅcāntir avānayaḥ samudrāṁ || "On the other hand, now, no one defied to this great miraculous faculty [of calculation] of the best seer (Varuṇa). [Because of this faculty,] the colorful rivers, pouring [water], do not fill one sea (Samudra) with water."

1.3. nadi- "f. river (RV + )." Probably the original meaning is "roaring, bellowing one" < nad “to roar.” 9) This word has the third most frequency after sindhu- and sārasvatī- among the words concerning the rivers.

1.3.1. nadi- is widely used for "river" in general in all numbers. We should notice that this word denotes especially rivers that have a large amount of water: I 158,5ab nā mā garan nadyō māṭtamā 1 dāsā yād im sisamudbham avādhuḥ | "The rivers (nadi-), the best of mothers, should not devour me (Dīrghatamas), even though the slaves sunk me, being bound tightly, [into the river] !" VII 60,7cd pravrājé cin nadyō gāḍhāṁ asti 1 pārāṁ no asyā vispītāya parṣan || "Even in the flood of a river (nadi-), a shallow place exists, They (Ādityas) will take us across to [the farther shore of] this distress (?)." 10)

1.3.2. nadi- is sometimes described as a bulk of water which flows through the riverbed, but not the way or riverbed itself as preceding sruti- or aváni-: VI 30,3ab adyā cin nū cit tād āpo nadiṇāṁ 1 yād ābh, yo árada gātām indra | "Even today, even now, this is [your (Indra)] work about the rivers (nadi-): you dug the course for them (the rivers)." II

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15,3bc vájreṇa khāṇy atṛṣṇan nāḍīnām | vṛthāsrjat pathibhir dirghayāṭhāḥ “By vajra, he (Indra) drilled the exit for the rivers (nāḍī-). As he pleased, he released [the rivers] through the paths [and] the long courses.” 11

1.3.3. The rivers with individual names like Sarasvatī should be classified as nāḍī-: II 41,16ab āmitame nāḍitame1 dévitame sārasvatī | “O the best mamma, best river (nāḍī-), best goddess, Sarasvatī, . . .” VII 95,2ab ēkā cetat 12 sārasvatī nāḍīnām | súcīr yati giri-bhya ā samudrāt | “Sarasvatī stands out 13 as the only one among the rivers (nāḍī-), shining, going from the mountains to the ocean.”

1.3.4. The poets of the RV often refer to the battle against the “rivals” 14 over nāḍī-, which can provide abundant water indispensable for their lives: I 131, 5d-g cakārtha kārām ebh,yah 1 pītanāsu prāvantave | té anyām-anyām nāḍyām saniṣṇata 1 śravasyāntah saniṣṇata || “You (Indra) brought work to completion for them (Uṣījs) to win battles. They gained one river (nāḍī-) after another. Those who seek fame gained one [river (nāḍī-) after another].” 15 We can find other examples which refer to the war around the rivers (nāḍī-) in VII 18 (Pāruṣī-, Yamūnā-) or VI 61 (Sārasvatī-) as well. 16

2. síndhu-

2.1. As mentioned above (0.), síndhu- is referred to in a wide range of contexts in both m. and f. The following are a few examples: IV 17,1cd tvām vrtrām śavasā jaghanvān 1 srjāḥ síndhūnir āhinā jagrasānān || “After you (Indra) slew Vṛtra with your power, you released the rivers (m.) swallowed by the serpent” (Vṛtra myth). X 35,2bc māṭēn síndhūn pārvatān charyanāvathā | anāgāstvām sūryām uṣāsam imahe “We ask the mother rivers (m.) 17 the mountains of Śaranyāvant, the sun, [and] the dawn for innocence.”

2.2. Although it is difficult to systematically classify the differences in gender and number in each passage, we can determine the meaning of f. sg.: the river called “Sindhu,” a nāḍī- with an individual name as I showed in section 1.3.3. 18 X 75,7 ějīt,y ěnī rūṣatī mahītvā 1 pāri jrayāmsi bharate rājāmsi | ādabdha síndhur apāsām apāstamā- 1 svā nā citrā vápuṣiva darṣatā || “Going straight, colorfully, shining whitely, she brings 19 her expanses around the spaces 20 with her greatness: undeceivable Sindhu (f.), the most skillful among the skillful, standing out like a mare, worth gazing upon like an amazing (beautiful) woman,” 8 śvāvā síndhuḥ surāthā suvāsā 1 hiranyāyī sūkṛtā vājīnīvati | īrṇāvati yuvatīh silāmāvat.y 1 utādhi vaste subhāgā madhuvyāham || “Having good horses, good chariots, and good
clothes, **Sindhu** (f.) is golden, well-made, [and] victorious. The young woman is rich in wool\(^{21}\) [and] rich in Silamā.\(^ {22}\) And the woman with good fortune wears the Madhuvṛddh,\(^ {23}\) VIII 26,18 utā syā śvetayāvari \(\text{vāhiṣṭhā} \text{vām nadinā,} \text{m} | \text{sindhur hiranyavarmanih} \||

“And that white Sindhu (f.) with golden rut\(^ {24}\) is the best carrier of you two (Aśvins) among the rivers (nadi-).”

2.3. The poets of the RV often refer to “the crossing of sindhu-.” The following passage tells that Indra helped Turviti and Vayya in the crossing of a river, just as in II 13,12ab cited above (1.1.): IV 19,6 \(t_jvām \text{mahīm} \text{avānīm viśvādhenaṁ} | \text{turvītye vayya kśārantim} | \text{āramayo nāmasājya} \text{ārṇaḥ} \text{1 suntaranām} \text{akṣor indra sindhun} \||

“For Turviti and Vayya, with respect, you halted the great and flowing river [bed] with the streams of milk for all, [and] the swaying wave. O Indra, you made the rivers (m.) easy to cross.” As a metaphor for the conquering difficulties, the expression “as if across Sindhu/a river with a boat” is frequently used as a formula: I 97,8ab \(sā \text{nāh} \text{sindhum} \text{iva nāvayā-} \text{1}_t \text{ti parśa} \text{s, vāstāye} | \text{“Let him (Agni) make us cross over, as if [across] Sindhu / a river by a boat, for the sake of well-being, . . .” I would like to emphasize that this aspect is not observed with respect to nadi-.

3. Conclusion

From the passages concerning the rivers in the RV, we can observe some characteristics of rivers peculiar to this literature. They seem to recall the pastoral life of old Indo-Aryans in the mountainous region around Afghanistan. For example, sruti- “road” or “river” and avāni- “riverbed” or “river” remind us of the geological environment in which the water level of a river rises and falls dramatically according to the season. The myth of Indra’s slaying of Vṛtra and releasing of the rivers can be interpreted in this context. On the other hand, nadi-, including rivers with individual names, connotes “rivers which carry a large amount of water,” and because of the importance of water, it seems that the people sometimes fought against their “rivals” over nadi-. Unlike sindhu-, however, nadi- were not regarded as rivers to be crossed over. This fact implies that people at that time regarded nadi- as essential for their lives, and the regions around nadi- as ideal places for living. The following passage, the last stanza of the Sarasvatī hymn, clearly describes this aspect of nadi-: VI 61,14cd jūsāsva \(nāh\) sakhyā veśyā ca \(1 \text{mā tvāt kṣētrāṇy} \text{āraṇāni gamma} \||

“Take pleasure in our alliances and tribal societies! Don’t let us go to the strange settlements

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[away] from you (Sarasvati)!" Contrary to nadi-, we can frequently observe references to the crossing of sindhu-. However, it is difficult to find passages that suggest conflict over sindhu-. From this, it follows that sindhu- indicates rivers which Indo-Aryans crossed over in the process of migration.\(^{25}\) In sum, one may say that nadi- were the destinations of the immigration of the old Indo-Aryans and sindhu- the transit points.\(^{26}\)

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1) Cf. EWAia II, pp. 729–730.
2) 7x in m. sg., 6x in f. sg., 34x in m. pl., 2x in f. pl. The m. pl. acc. sindhun is referred to 24 times, but f. pl. acc. *sindhús is not attested. The examples in which the m. forms agree with f. relative are observed in VII 47.4 and X 111.9. In addition, see note 17.
4) Cf. EWAia II, p. 784 (s.v. "srav").
5) Cf. EWAia I, p. 131.
8) Followed Geldner’s translation (RV II, p. 61). This stanza would describe the swelling river after the torrential rain of monsoon.
9) Cf. EWAia II, p. 9.
11) We can observe this aspect of nadi- from the comparison to the chariot in I 130.5 as well.
12) Ed. Aufrecht ēkācetat.
15) Geldner (RV I, p. 185) interprets this stanza as referring to the advance of the Indo-Aryans to the Punjab.
16) ārṇasātā- “the winning of the flood (waves)” is a typical word which tells about the battle over the river water: IV 24,3 tām in nāro vi havyante samikē rīrīvāṁsas tān, vā ṃ ḍrīvātā ātram mitho yāt tyāgāṁ ubhāyāsō āgman \(1\) nāras tokāsya tānvasya sātāu || “The men (i.e., the constituents of the two tribes in the hostile relations) are calling to him (Indra) [to get him on their side] in the battle. Having given up their bodies, they make [him] their defense, when the men of both sides have gone to the abandonment [of their bodies] in the winning of [their] offspring [and the continuation [of their family].” 4 kratuyānti kṣitāyo yogā uγhra- \(1\) āsūṇānaso mithā ārṇasātāu | sām yād viśo \(1\) vāyṛtranta yudhmā ād in nema indravyante abhikē || “The settlements (i.e., people) stir up their mental power at the yoking [of the horses for the battle], an impetuous one, snorting in the winning of the flood. When the residents have confronted one another (cf. Hoffmann, Aufs., pp. 591–592) as warriors, only then does one seek for Indra at the encounter.” For further examples, see I 63,6, II 20,8, V 41,14 (abhīṣātā ārṇāḥ “the conquered waves”) and V 50,4 (\(1\)ṛṇā, \(1\) sānītā “the one who wins the waves”).
17) Thus f. pl. acc. (mātrāḥ, but otherwise mātr̥s in the RV) with m. pl.
18) VII 95,1 might be an exception in which f. sg. sindhu- seems to be used as an epithet for Sarasvati.
21) Geldner interprets that the Sindhu valley was rich in wool, horses, and so on, and the poet describes Sindhu as a young woman who possesses such things.
22) Unclear. Cf. EWAia II, p. 733 (s.v. "silāmāvati-.")
23) Scarlata (Wz.komp., p. 521) interprets the meaning as “being rich in honey” or “growing with
the sweet liquid” and assumes that it is the name of a plant. 24) I.e., “After Sindhu flowed, gold remained.” A comparison with a chariot (see note 11). 25) The following example may tell us of such historical background: the Indo-Aryans, led by Indra, had crossed over the rivers and finally arrived at the land of the seven streams, X 104,8 saptápa deviḥ surānā amṛktā́ yāḥ-bhīḥ sindhum ātara indra pūrbhit | navatim srotāy nāva ca śravantī́ devēbhya gātum máヌse ca vīndah || “Seven are the heavenly, very delightful [and] unharmed waters with which you (Indra), as a fence breaker, crossed over the Sindhu [and] flowing 99 streams. For the gods and Manus, you [always] find out the course.” WitZel (1986, p. 200) points out that the “movement of the rivers” implies the common custom that immigrants use the place name of their homelands for the new one. 26) Let me stress again that f, sg. sindhu- is regarded as a nādi-. “Sindhu (f.) who has the good fields” (sukṣēṭrā sindhum) in I 122,6d would be a typical example of Sindhu as a settlement.

References and Abbreviations


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(Key words) sindhu-, sruti-, avāni-, nādi-, Rgveda, river, Indo-Aryan

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