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THE ISSUE OF ETHNIC IDENTITY OF SOME VEDIC TRIBES

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INTRODUCTION

Certain sections of the *Vedas* and the *Avesta* contain references to the interactions between the ancient Aryans and the neighboring peoples or tribes that accompanied them. These two sources are regarded as the earliest textual references to the society of the ancient Aryans, who are referred to in modern historiography as the Proto-Indo-Iranian peoples. Through these texts, one can obtain valuable insights into the social stratification of early Indo-Iranian society, their hostile or amicable relationships with surrounding tribes and ethnic groups, as well as socio-political processes such as ideological and religious conflicts with followers of other beliefs.

In any discussion of the ancient Aryans, it is essential to first consider the question of their large-scale migrations. It should be noted that there are various hypotheses regarding the spread of the Aryans across South Asia. These hypotheses may generally be divided into two main categories:

1. **Migrationist Hypotheses** – These suggest that the Proto-Indo-Iranian peoples migrated and settled in South Asia and the Iranian plateau. Even within this migrationist framework, there are differing views. Some scholars—such as T.V. Gamkrelidze, V.V. Ivanov, and I.V. Sarianidi—argue that the Aryans originated in the Near East and migrated to South Asia via the Iranian plateau. Others—such as M. Gimbutas, C. Renfrew, I.P. Mallory, and Y. Kuzmina—propose that the Aryans migrated from the Eurasian steppes through Central Asia to South Asia and the Iranian plateau.
2. **Autochthonous Hypotheses** – These assert that the Aryans were not migrants but rather indigenous to South Asia, and that, conversely, they spread northward into other regions.

So, what do the ancient Aryans themselves say about this?

As noted above, the oldest historical-literary sources attributed to the Aryans are the *Vedas*, composed in the Indian subcontinent, and the *Avesta*, which emerged in Central Asia. These texts provide the earliest internal perspectives on the identity and worldview of the ancient Aryan peoples.

The *Vedas* of India are a large body of texts that were composed orally over the course of many centuries and were transmitted orally from generation to generation, being remarkably well preserved in the process. As M. Witzel emphasizes, the *Vedas* preserved not only words that had long disappeared from colloquial usage but even their intonations and phonetic features, almost like a precise recording on tape. [Witzel 2001: 4]

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3 The *Rigveda* is not only a work reflecting religious and philosophical concepts
4 but also serves as a crucial source for understanding the social, cultural, and political
5 conditions of the ethnic groups of its time. The ethnic composition of the tribes and
6 peoples mentioned in the *Rigveda*, along with their mutual interactions, has attracted
7 considerable scholarly attention. In particular, the identification of ethnic groups
8 such as the *Druhyu* and *Turvaśa*, their interrelations, and the way they are portrayed
9 in the *Rigvedic* texts have generated deep academic interest.
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12 This article explores the issue of ethnic identity of the *Druhyu* and *Turvaśa*
13 peoples in the *Rigveda*. It examines the religious, cultural, and social distinctions of
14 these groups, as well as the concepts and descriptions associated with them as
15 reflected in the *Rigveda*. The article also investigates the interactions between the
16 *Druhyus* and the *Turvaśas*, along with their competition and social differentiation in
17 relation to the *Arya* people. This analysis contributes to a clearer understanding of
18 ethnic groups and their interrelationships as presented in *Rigvedic* literature.
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21 The primary aim of this study is to identify the ethnic identity of the *Druhyu*
22 and *Turvaśa* as depicted in the *Rigveda*, to compare them with similarly described
23 tribes and peoples in other historical sources, and to draw meaningful conclusions.
24 By examining the historical development and cultural differences of these groups,
25 the research provides a more detailed view of the ethnic landscape within the
26 *Rigveda*.
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29 DISCUSSION AND RESULTS 30

31 In both the *Rigveda* and the *Avesta*, the *Arya* (*Aryan*) people are exalted, with
32 a clear emphasis on demonstrating their superiority over other tribes and peoples.
33 The Aryans are portrayed as a people favored by the gods. In both Vedic and Avestan
34 societies, the Aryans, who held a special status, are depicted as engaging in struggles
35 with their rivals and enemies. In the *Avesta*, they are referred to collectively as
36 *anairyas* (“non-Aryans”), and certain tribes such as the *Tuirya*, *Sairima*, *Dāha*, and
37 *Sāinu* (or *Sāini*) are mentioned by name. [Boyce 2012: 99]
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41 In the *Rigveda*, two main terms are used to describe the enemies of the *Aryan*
42 people: *dasa* and *dasyu*. According to the text, *dasas* are primarily depicted as the
43 political enemies of the Aryans, while *dasyus* are portrayed as their ideological and
44 religious enemies. The *dasyus* are noted for not performing sacrificial rituals and for
45 refusing to honor the Aryans “sacred deities” and cults. While the concept of *dasa*
46 might initially seem to refer to a general enemy of the Aryans, a deeper examination
47 reveals additional facets. The *dasas* in the *Rigveda* are depicted as the local
48 population in the Punjab region and surrounding urban areas, who are characterized
49 by dark (*kṛṣṇa*) skin. Modern scholars have often identified these people as the
50 “Vedic Dravidians”.
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54 Notably, some of the ethnic groups that arrived in the Indian subcontinent
55 alongside the Aryans during the Great Migration and later became political rivals
56 (and even enemies) of the Aryans are not explicitly referred to as *dasas* in the
57 *Rigveda*. This distinction provides a clearer understanding of the ethnic boundaries
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3 associated with the *dasa* concept. The identity of the *dasas* can be defined by their
4 settled lifestyle, urbanization, absence of sacrificial beliefs, and dark skin color.
5 There is evidence for this in the *Rigveda*. For instance, in Mandala 4, Sukta 16,
6 Mantra 13, Indra is praised for his actions in subjugating the powerful enemy land
7 of *Mrgaya*, annihilating fifty thousand dark-skinned enemies, and conquering the
8 cities of a ruler named *Śambara*—cities that are likely to correspond to the ruins of
9 Mohenjo-daro and Harappa.
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12 In the *Rigveda*, there is an account of competition and conflict between the
13 Aryan and non-Aryan (anarya) tribes that settled in northern India. This account is
14 known as *Daśarājñayuddha* (“The Battle of the Ten Kings”) and is expressed not as
15 a single continuous narrative but through brief stories within hymns. This account
16 holds significant historical importance, as it describes not only the competition
17 between Aryan tribes but also the struggles between the non-Aryan tribes in the
18 Punjab region and its surrounding areas during the second half of the second
19 millennium BCE.
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22 In this rivalry, the Puru tribe plays a central role. It seems that the Puru tribe
23 represented the elite of the Aryans and formed a tribal alliance. The Puru tribe itself
24 consisted of several clans, with the Bharata clan being the most influential. The
25 confederate ruler of the Puru tribe, Sudas, also belonged to the Bharata clan.
26 However, in most parts of the *Rigveda*, the Puru and Bharata tribes are mentioned
27 as two separate and distinct prominent tribes. [Erdosy, Witzel 1995: 204]
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30 One of the non-Aryan tribes mentioned in the *Rigveda* is the Druhyu tribe.
31 The Druhyu people are depicted in the *Rigveda* as a tribe that honors Indra and, by
32 his grace, lives “among the waters”. [Rigveda: 7.18.12] It appears that the Druhyu
33 tribe settled in a fertile region near the rivers and floodplains of the Punjab area.
34 However, Vedic commentators often translate the word “apsu” as “underwater” or
35 “beneath the waters”.
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38 In another hymn, [Rigveda: 1.108.8], Indra and Agni visit the Yadu,
39 Turvashu, Druhyu, Anu, and Puru tribes to partake in the sacred soma drink. Later
40 interpretations of this hymn categorize these tribes as follows: Yadu – peace-loving,
41 Turvashu – aggressive, Druhyu – tyrannical, Anu – life-loving, and Puru – pleasure-
42 seeking.
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45 In the 7th Mandala of the *Rigveda*, it is noted that the Turvasha tribe took the
46 initiative in performing sacrifices, attacked the Matsya kingdom, and formed an
47 alliance with the Bhrigu and Druhyu tribes. However, they were defeated by the
48 grace of Indra during their battle against the Puru tribe. [Rigveda: 7.18.6]
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51 In the 14th mantra of the same Mandala, it is mentioned that the Anu and
52 Druhyu tribes, intending to drive away cattle, came into conflict with the pious king
53 Sudas. However, during the ensuing wars, sixty-six thousand six hundred and sixty
54 (66,660) individuals were killed. [Rigveda: 7.18.14] These numbers represent a
55 large population, indicating the significant size of the tribes involved.
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3 In conclusion, King Sudas of the Bharata tribe defeated all his rivals and
4 became the hegemonic ruler of northern India. The Druhyu tribe, thus, was driven
5 out of India. The subsequent fate of the Druhyu tribe remains unclear, though some
6 hypotheses have emerged through later historical processes. The memories of the
7 Druhyu tribe gradually faded from the Puranic texts, which chronologically omit any
8 further reference to them. According to the Puranas, the Druhyu tribe originally
9 inhabited the “Land of the Seven Rivers” (the Punjab and surrounding regions) and
10 later migrated to the Gandhara area.
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13 According to additional information found in the five Puranas, the Druhyu
14 tribe entered the northern Mlechcha lands, spread there, and established numerous
15 small kingdoms. [Majumdar: 1951, 283] According to autochthonist views, the
16 Druhyu tribe, in the form of Druids, extended as far as the remote areas of Europe,
17 maintaining their religious beliefs based on fire worship and a system rooted in
18 genealogies. However, this hypothesis remains weak and inconsistent with the
19 historical and geographical context.
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22 Thus, the subsequent fate of the Druhyu tribe remains unclear. Based on
23 information gathered from the Vedic and other sources, it is possible to conclude
24 that the Druhyu tribe engaged in pastoralism, participated in the Great Migration,
25 and lacked significant Aryan (Proto-Indo-Iranian) elements. They likely lived in the
26 lowlands of Turan and, motivated by the desire for access to rich resources, moved
27 towards the Indian subcontinent. After failing in their competition with the local
28 populations, they left India and settled in southern Central Asia, where they
29 established several small kingdoms. It is possible that they later participated in the
30 rise of states such as Margiana and Parthia. Moreover, the pastoral people known as
31 the Dahae, located to the east of the Caspian Sea, may be their distant descendants.
32 The similarities in their ethnonym and daily practices suggest shared characteristics
33 between these two peoples over various periods.
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36 From a linguistic perspective, the Druhyu ethnonym sheds light on the issue.
37 The negative portrayal of the Druhyu people in the Rigveda can be linked to the
38 Proto-Indo-Iranian terms *dhrukš (“lie”) and *dhrujyati (“to deceive”), as well as
39 the Proto-Germanic *dreugana (“to deceive”, “to mislead”) and Proto-Celtic
40 *drukos (“bad”). [Kroonen 2013: 102]
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43 On the other hand, it is also possible that the Druhyu ethnonym is directly
44 related to the Proto-Baltic-Slavic *draugas (“companion,” “friend”) [Kroonen 2013:
45 104], or the Proto-Germanic *druhtiz (“army”) or *druhtinaz (“army leader,”
46 “commander”). [Kroonen 2013: 102] This perspective might be accepted by
47 autochthonist scholars as supporting evidence for their theories. However, it does
48 not confirm the notion that the Proto-Baltic-Slavic and Proto-Germanic peoples
49 migrated from the Indian subcontinent northward and then spread throughout
50 Europe during the second millennium BCE. This is because the evidence suggests
51 that, first, the significant disparity in natural resources between India and the
52 northern regions, along with the complex climate of the European and Asian plains,
53 was not appealing to the ancient inhabitants of South Asia. Second, the appearance
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and culture of the small tribes in Chitral and Nuristan, which are attributed to early Aryan origin (such as the Kalash people), show a more European-like character than that of the people of India, which further refutes this theory. Moreover, in the Rigveda itself, these invaders refer to themselves as “guests” or “foreigners” (*atithigva*) [Rigveda: 7.19.8].

Some researchers attempt to link the ethnonym “Druhyu” to the ancient Iranian term “dahyu”. In fact, the term “dahyu” was used in reference to the settlements of settled populations. For example, in Old Persian texts, the term “dahyu” appears and means “province” or “country”. [Rastorguyeva, Edelman 2003: 286-287] In modern Iranian languages, the term “deh” specifically refers to a settled population, i.e., a village. In the Uzbek language, which is widely spoken in Central Asia, the term “daha” exists, which refers to administrative and territorial divisions of a city and is considered to have been borrowed from Sogdian. These examples suggest that the term “dahyu” is more likely to be associated with the Dasa tribe rather than the Druhyu tribe. This is because the Dasa tribe in the Rigveda is described as living in urban centers in fertile river valleys and leading a settled life.

From the southeastern shores of the Caspian Sea to the lands of Margiana, from the Parthian region to the borders of Khwarezm, there lived a people recorded in Greek sources as “Daaī” and in Roman historical works as “Dahae”. Subsequent historical processes indicate that this tribe lived in a tribal system, engaging in pastoral nomadism. After the Greek-Macedonian rule in Parthia, in the mid-3rd century BCE, this tribe, in alliance with other tribes (such as the Parni), seized power, established an independent state, and eventually developed into an imperial power. The territory inhabited by the Dahae people later became known in the medieval period as the geographical region of Dehistan. There are also views that the ethnonym *Dāṇha* or *daiṇhu* (enemy, foreign) found in the Avesta refers specifically to the Dahae people [Witzel 2001: 13].

The Dahae people, known for their nomadic lifestyle, can be linked to the terms “foreign” and “enemy” used in the Avestan texts. This connection allows us to associate the Dahae with the concepts of Druhyu or dasyu mentioned in the Rigveda. In this context, these groups were considered enemies by the Aryans due to their cultural and lifestyle differences. Druhyu and dasyu were likely sedentary populations, as opposed to the nomadic Aryans, and their practices conflicted with those of the Aryan people.

Moreover, the Dahae people are believed to have migrated from their initial settlements in the northern parts of the Indian subcontinent or Central Asia and eventually settled in areas that were favorable to them. This pattern of movement implies that these groups were well-acquainted with the regions they traversed during their migrations, particularly those in the northern Indian subcontinent and Central Asia.

Regarding the “Aryan Migration” theory, while scholars continue to debate the origins and routes of this migration, there is consensus among anthropologists

and linguists that it did indeed take place. However, the focus on only Proto-Indo-Iranian groups migrating has been questioned. Evidence suggests that not only the Proto-Indo-Iranians but also other Indo-European groups and local populations from Central Asia may have participated in the migration. This argument is supported by logical conclusions drawn from various sources.

In this regard, the notion that the migration was exclusive to Proto-Indo-Iranian peoples is questioned. This view does not account for the involvement of other ethnic groups in the migration process, particularly from Central Asia and adjacent regions. The existence of other ethnic groups that participated in these migrations, as evidenced by linguistic, archaeological, and anthropological data, further supports the idea that multiple groups contributed to the spread of Indo-European cultures across the region.

In summary, the question of migration remains complex and unresolved, but it is evident that the Aryan migration was not solely limited to Proto-Indo-Iranians. Further research into the participation of other groups and their interactions with local populations is necessary to fully understand the dynamics of these ancient migrations.

Another distinctive ethnic group mentioned in the Rigveda is the Turvaśa people. The ethnonym “Turvaśa” appears frequently in the earliest Vedic sources of the Rigveda, although references to them decrease chronologically in later Vedic periods. The Turvashas are one of the five major tribes mentioned in the Rigveda. [Jamison, Breton 2014] The Turvasha people are often mentioned alongside the Yadu people in the Rigveda and are depicted as a tribe that came from afar:

"May that young Indira, who brought the Turvaśa and Yadu peoples with noble deeds from afar, be our friend!" [Rigveda: 6.45.1]

Information about the Turvaśas is primarily found in hymns to Indira in the Rigveda. The relationship with the Yadu and Turvaśa tribes is sometimes portrayed in a friendly manner, and at other times, in a hostile tone. This suggests that the depiction of the Turvaśas and Yadus as enemies by the gods is not necessarily the case, but rather reflects the conflicting relations with the tribe that created the Rigveda.

In some other mandalas and suktas of the Rigveda [Rigveda: 1.174.9; 5.31.8; 6.20.12], it is mentioned that the Turvaśa people faced extreme difficulties, having crossed or swum through a large water basin (*samudra*), with Indira preserving their safety. Apparently, the Narya, Turvaśa, Yadu, and Turviti tribes attacked a state belonging to the Harappan civilization in the Sindh Valley. The name of this state's ruler was Śambara. The battle against Śambara was described as extremely difficult, to the point that “even with chariots and horses, escape was impossible”. [Rigveda: 1.54.6] Despite this, it is noted that 99 fortresses (*pura*) were destroyed by the nomadic pastoral invaders. [Rigveda: 1.54.6]

From the development of events in the Vedic texts, it can be inferred that after Śambara and his state were defeated by the nomadic invaders, the invaders themselves also fell into internal conflict. Specifically, it is stated that after the ruler Divodasa defeated Śambara, he also subdued the Turvaśa and Yadu tribes. [Rigveda: 1.61.2] Given that these two tribes were allies of the Aryans, the emergence of such enmity seems unlikely. Various hypotheses exist regarding how this conflict arose. However, the Rigveda mentions that the Turvaśa attacked the Matsya people, and for this act, Indira caused their destruction (i.e., the Turvasha tribe was attacked by other tribes, and a large portion of their population was slaughtered). It is said that the surviving members of the Turvaśa tribe then formed an alliance with the Bhrigu and Druhyu tribes. [Rigveda: 7.18.6]

In the Rigveda, the Turvaśa people are often associated with horses and cattle as their primary material wealth [Rigveda: 6.27.7; 8.4.19], and they are mostly mentioned in hymns dedicated to the Vedic sky god, Indra, with their relationship with Indra being highlighted. This indicates that the Turvaśa people worshipped the sky god (according to the Rigveda, Indra), took the initiative in offering sacrifices to him [Rigveda: 7.18.6], and that the god protected them from dangers when necessary, and at times also punished them.

Vedic scholar M. Witzel emphasizes that the Vedic Turvaśa tribe was partially connected to the Indo-Aryan culture [Witzel 1999]. Based on the aforementioned evidence, it can be concluded that the Turvasha people were an ancient ethnic group who lived in Central Asia, participated in the Aryan migration, and were expelled from the Indian subcontinent due to competition. Their ethnic and cultural traits differed from the Aryans (the ancient Indo-Iranian peoples), and it is highly probable that they were one of the proto-Turkic tribes. This is because the Turvasha ethnonym is linked to the Turya ethnonym, which was seen as a rival and enemy by the Avestan Aryans. The Turya people, initially mentioned in the Avesta, later reflected the pastoral populations living in the steppes and mountainous areas of Turan. The Turyas could have been the early name of the Saka-Massagetae. [Rajabov 2025: 36] Numerous hypotheses exist that suggest the Turyas were ancient Turks. There is also a connection between the ancient Turks' worship of the sky god, Tengri, and the Turvaśa people's worship of Indra.

From the examples cited in the Rigveda, it is clear that the Turvaśa people were pioneers in offering sacrifices, owned noble horses, and were active in large water basins, engaging in competition with Aryan tribes through attacks. A similar process is observed in the Avesta as well. For instance, in the Yasht, dedicated to Ardvi Sura (Anahita), the deity of prosperity, water, and purity [Yasht: 5.11.41-43], it is mentioned that Frangrsyan, a descendant of the Turyas, brought sacrifices and asked Ardvi Sura for divine happiness, complete sovereignty, and salvation from the sea named Vorukasha. This similarity helps to clarify the puzzling issue in Avestan studies regarding why vast water basins, such as Vorukasha, are depicted in the Avesta as being created by peoples residing in the steppe regions. As noted by

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3 Avestan scholar A.V. Williams Jackson, linking the Avesta to Sanskrit opens the
4 door to new possibilities of understanding [Williams Jackson 1892: i-ii].
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6 The question arises: could the Turyas, mentioned in the Avesta as hostile to
7 the Aryans (Iranians), be the earliest Turks (proto-Turks)? This leads to the
8 assumption that one of the early homelands of the Turks may have been Central
9 Asia. [Khodjayev 2010] Historian G. Boboyorov, considering the morphological
10 similarity between the ethnonyms "Turyas" and "Turks," as well as the long-standing
11 interchangeable use of the toponyms "Turon" and "Turkistan," asserts that the
12 Turyas were certainly the ancient Turks [Boboyorov 2024].
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15 Another reason to consider the Turvaśa people as proto-Turks is that all Turkic
16 peoples not only originated from the Altai region, but also lived for millennia in the
17 vast land of Turan as settled and pastoral communities. The Altai Turks were a part
18 of the Turkic peoples in Turan [Rajabov 2025: 29-30]. Ancient Greek authors, such
19 as Strabo, referred to the Crimea Peninsula as Taurica and its inhabitants as Taurians.
20 If the ethnonym *Taur* is indeed related to *Tur* (or *Turya*), this suggests that the lands
21 inhabited by the ancient Taurians were even more extensive than previously
22 assumed.
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26 Based on the above information, while advancing the hypothesis that the
27 Turvaśa tribe was proto-Turkic, there is another conclusive piece of evidence to
28 support this theory. Observing the historical parallel developments in the Rigveda
29 and the Avesta, it can be inferred that after the Turvaśa people migrated to India,
30 they did not find their place there and were defeated in the intertribal competition
31 among the incoming tribes. In such circumstances, as a potential region, Turvaśa
32 chose the steppes and pastures of Central Asia. This choice was made because,
33 firstly, these regions were suitable for their economic system, and secondly, they
34 were not foreign to the other tribes residing in these areas.
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38 CONCLUSIONS

39 The Rigveda and Avesta contain important information about the competition,
40 wars, and cultural differences between the Aryan people (the Indo-Iranians) and their
41 enemies. These sources portray the Aryans as a people beloved by the gods and as
42 the superior class, emphasizing their religious, political, and cultural superiority over
43 other peoples. Other groups or tribes, such as the Dasa and Dasyu, are depicted as
44 enemies of the Aryans due to their settled lifestyle, advancement in urbanization,
45 and failure to carry out religious rituals such as sacrifices.
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48 The Dasas were regarded as Vedic Dravidians, distinguished by their dark
49 skin. The Druhyu, Turvaśa, Yadu, and other tribes competed with the Aryans and
50 opposed their cultural and political order.
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53 The Druhyu and Turvaśa are frequently mentioned in the Rigveda as ethnic
54 groups, often depicted as rivals to the Aryans. The ethnic identities of these peoples,
55 their religious conflicts, and their cultural differences are evident throughout the text.
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The Druhyu and Turvaśa tribes, through various events, battles, and social situations, exerted their influence in the Rigveda and other ancient Hindu texts.

The Druhyu people are depicted in a negative light in the Rigveda and are associated with a nomadic lifestyle based on animal husbandry. There is no clear information about their later fate, but some hypotheses suggest that they migrated to Central Asia and later established small kingdoms in the regions of Parthia and Margiana. The Druhyu may have been one of the ancient Indo-European peoples or belonged to the prototurks.

The Turvaśa people, on the other hand, are often depicted in the Rigveda as a tribe that worshiped the god Indra and engaged in a nomadic lifestyle. At times, the Turvaśa and Yadu peoples are shown as allies of the Aryans, while at other times, they are portrayed as their enemies. Their ethnic and cultural characteristics differed from those of the Aryans and they were likely related to prototurk tribes. Some of the characteristics of the Turvaśa people described in the Rigveda align with the Turya people in the Avesta, which supports the hypothesis that both groups might have been prototurk tribes.

Based on the research findings, three hypotheses emerged:

1. In the migration of the steppe peoples across South Asia, not only Proto-Indo-Iranians participated, but also traces of other ethnic groups with distinct languages, cultures, and ethnic characteristics can be found.
2. The Druhyu and Turvaśa tribes, which migrated from Central Asia to India and later returned to Central Asia, were Turanian peoples, and they exhibited stronger elements of prototurk characteristics.
3. The northern migration of ethnic groups like the Druhyu and Turvaśa occurred due to common ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and economic similarities with northern ethnic groups.

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