

Rudiments of Niyoga Tradition: A Study of the R̥gvedic Period

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Abstract: The ancient Indian tradition of Niyoga presents a distinct perspective in the history of the Indian subcontinent. Due to differing scholarly opinions about how prevalent the Niyoga tradition was, this study is titled 'Rudiments of Niyoga Tradition: A Study of the R̥gvedic Period.' To properly express and justify a future Niyoga-like tradition in the R̥gvedic Age, the term 'rudiments' has been used to frame this work. The word Niyoga is considered a technical term, later used by the Dharmasāstra, referring to the process of fathering a child with the assistance of a close relative if a husband dies without children. In later periods, however, additional restrictions were introduced through Dharmasāstra and Smṛti before a woman could seek or appoint someone to help her to have a child. Still, when examining the pages of the R̥gveda, the custom appears to have been significantly different both practically and logically. Some scholars have even tried to link this R̥gvedic tradition with the Levirate marriage practiced in Western cultures. This paper aims to explore these aspects of the R̥gvedic period, focusing on Maṇḍala IV and Maṇḍala X, as they contain more information on the topic. Additionally, it attempts, in a brief manner, to trace the origins of the tradition. The core of the study will revolve around the impressions of the rudiments of the Niyoga tradition as found in the R̥gvedic hymns.

Keywords: Ancient India, Dharmasāstra, Niyoga, Terminology, Sanskrit etc.

Date of Submission: 24.08.2026

Date of Acceptance: 31.08.2026

Introduction

The Sanskrit word Niyoga is an assimilation of two different variables, ni + yoga, having a varied meaning like employment, use, application, etc. Some other lexicologists, with an intent to provide a broader sense, suggest the meaning of Niyoga to be necessity and obligation. For the

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current study, the meanings cited by lexicologists like Vaman Shivaram Apte match aptly as Niyoga here bears a more resemblance to necessity and obligation than other meanings like employment, use, and application.

Rudiments of Niyoga Tradition in the R̥gveda

The impression of Niyoga in India appears to have existed during the R̥gvedic age, if we accept some of the hymns of the text concerning the issue. It is worth mentioning that the term Niyoga was, however, conceptualized much later, after the long lapse of the Vedic period. Codifying and arranging a terminology do not give us a valid impression to believe in the nonexistence of an ethos. Hence, long before the adoption of the term Niyoga, there was a tradition in the R̥gvedic period that allowed a woman to seek physical support from a male to beget a child. To give a proper expression to that embryo of the future Niyoga tradition, the study has been termed ‘rudiments of Niyoga’ tradition. A lot of studies have been made by Western scholars like Hermann Oldenberg, Emeneau, Nooten, and also by eminent Indian scholars like P.V. Kane, B.S. Upadhyaya, and others, on the Vedic and post-Vedic literature to trace varied facets of the Niyoga tradition. P.V. Kane, in his celebrated work ‘History of the Dharmasāstra’, defines Niyoga as the ‘appointment of a wife or a widow to procreate a son from the intercourse with an appointed male’. Likewise, Mani considers Niyoga as ‘a technical term in the Dharmasāstra which denotes a process in which if the husband died issueless or he was physically incapable of producing a child, the wife or the widow could take the help of a near relative to do so’. Upadhyaya, on the other hand, considers the tradition as a makeshift in the R̥gvedic period and ‘was termed as Niyoga in later literature.’ Similarly, V.B. Mishra observes Niyoga as a socially accepted room wherein ‘a woman could beget a son through the younger brother of her husband during the lifetime of the latter if he was incapable of procreation or after his death if he died without any male child. During lifetime, it was affected with the permission of the husband and after his death with the consent of the elders’. Apart from these earlier researches, Sahgal, in her recent research, alternately considers Niyoga as a strategy of heirship.

Thus, Niyoga in a popular parlance can be considered as a process adopted as a necessity and obligation, implemented by childless women or a widow, or in some cases, by a man to secure sons, with the help of others. The later literature has maintained several restrictions and

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conditions to undergo Niyoga by a widow or by another indigent. Manuśmṛti, one of the most important law books of early India, restrains the practice among outsiders and curbs it within the family. The law book strictly mentions the appointment of Devara, i.e., the brother of her [dead] husband, or a Sapiṇḍaⁱ of her husband. 'On failure of issue (by her husband), a woman who has been authorised may obtain, (in the) proper (manner prescribed), the desired offspring by (cohabitation with) a brother-in-law or with some other) Sapiṇḍa (of the husband). Further, the succeeding verse of Manuśmṛti directs, 'he (who is) appointed to (cohabit with) the widow shall (approach her) at night anointed with clarified butter and silent, (and) beget one son, by no means a second. To add further, 'but when the purpose of the appointment to (cohabit with) the widow has been attained following the law, those two shall behave towards each other like a father and a daughter-in-law'. In contrast, in the Ṛgvedic period, for progeny, such regulations and their implication in society have not been traced so far. Such stringent regulations of the Smṛti were maintained in the later period, and these regulations have a very trivial role to play in order to divulge the current study. To reiterate, the focus of the present study dwells on the sequential extent between 1500 BCE to 1000 BCE, wherein, as it is believed, the Ṛgveda, the earliest of all the Vedas, was composed.

The important object of marriage in the Ṛgvedic society appears to be procreating children, and for this, women were always considered as burgeoning subjects. Thus, for progeny, we hardly get a reference in the Ṛgveda about women's debarment from the process of creation and recreation. Rather, they were always encouraged to produce more children, preferably males, probably, to have the upper hand in the ongoing clan polity. The social psyche, as it resembles, was strenuous in producing more males, who could attest their position in the constant clan politics with significance. To add further, there are several hymns in the Ṛgveda expressing the desire to beget gallant and intelligent sons. One can notice that no similar hymns wishing to have a girl child are included in the testament. Nonavailability of the hymns, seeking blessing from the gods for the birth of a daughter, also reflects the apprehension of a society to produce a larger number of male combatants for its continuity and survival. Illustrating the purpose of marriage in the Ṛgvedic period, B.S. Upadhyaya observes, 'The chief object of marriage being the propagation of race by procreating children, the woman was always looked upon as a potential mother...the begetting of children was considered so very important that the impotency, absence or death of a husband was no bar to her giving birth to children. This makeshift was termed as Niyoga in later

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literature'. Several references related to the wives of weaklings procuring childrenⁱⁱ from capable ones come our way while dealing with this issue.

Although many variations in translation, the work on the R̥gveda by Griffithⁱⁱⁱ and Wilson^{iv} also exhibits a common thread of tradition, which in the succeeding centuries was termed as Niyoga. A hymn from Maṇḍala X, originally composed by sage Ghoṣā Kakṣīvatī, in praise of the God Aśvina following Jagatī metre, imprecisely indicates the existence of a proto-Niyoga tradition among the R̥gvedic Arya. Through the verse 'as the widow bed ward draws her husband's brother', one may effortlessly secure an impression of having a culture that would allow physical union between a widow and her deceased husband's brother, known in the text as Devara. It also comes to the purview that, later literature in the form of Smṛti has also given importance to such a union between the widow and her Devara. The term Devara in Sanskrit generally indicates a husband's brother, preferably the younger one. In some cases, however, the etymological expression can also be applied to indicate the elder ones. Observing the elasticity of amalgamation for progeny between a widow and her brother-in-law, in all likelihood, Yaksha's Nirukta, one of the Vedāṅgas, and a much later composed text, asserts 'देवर कस्मात् द्वितीयो वर उच्यते', meaning Who is Devara? He is called that because he is the second husband.

Another significant hymn from Maṇḍala X, composed by the same sage Ghoṣā Kakṣīvatī, following the same metre, further illustrates the issue and makes us believe in the rudiment of future Niyoga custom. Akin to the successive tradition of Niyoga, the pre-Niyoga practice also allowed a woman to ask for help to beget from an individual like Aśvina. The hymn composed by Ghoṣā Kakṣīvatī, the daughter of a sage Kakṣīvana states: 'You both speedily confer on us intellect and the capacity to work. Verily, you are extremely friendly and beneficial to us in our joy and happiness. You bless the barren women with progeny, and grant noble offspring to the happy wife. May you grant her ample health and strength'. Ghoṣā Kakṣīvatī seems to refer to two women, namely Śundhyu and Vadhṛimatī, before whom Aśvina, who is mentioned to be good-looking, appeared due to their invocation. Vadhṛimatī, as the text reflects, he was even granted an excellent child with exceptional wisdom by Aśvina. This illustration reliably indicates a physical union between Vadhṛimatī and Aśvina, the health and medicine god of the age, to have a child with extraordinary insight. She has again been mentioned in Maṇḍala X in a hymn by sage Vasukarṇa. Composed in Jagatī metre, the hymn asserts Aśvina giving a son named

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Śyāva to Vadhṛimatī. One can also find a reference to Vadhṛimatī in hymn 117.24, in Maṇḍala I, wherein sage Kakṣīvata invokes Aśvina, giving Vadhṛimatī's reference.

A prayer made by Ghōṣā Kakṣīvatī to Aśvina on behalf of her brother (Ṛgveda X.40.5) further makes us believe concerning the presence of a rudiment of Niyoga wherein a married lady could seek assistance for progeny. The hymn requests Aśvina to be with her side during day and night and grant favour to her brother, who possesses a chariot and horses, with a son.^v Further, the same hymn, in one of the succeeding verses, asserts Aśvina as a protector of the widows or Vidhvāmūrūṣyathah (Ṛgveda X.40.8). It is worth mentioning that there are several references in the text indicating widows living a normal, respectful, and hassle-free life. To substantiate further, if another hymn from the Maṇḍala X (Ṛgveda X.18.8) is to be considered, widows were also allowed to remarry with a suitable individual. The hymn reassures a widow, who was sitting near the funeral pyre of her deceased husband, to rise and hold the hand of a person of her choice to beget children (Ṛgveda X.18.8). Translation of the hymn is as under:

‘Rise, O woman, rise; accept now as a caretaker (or new mate) someone among the living ones. The person with whom you have been living all these days is now dead. May you (through this mate) beget children for yourself and for your late husband who took you by the hand (or for this new mate, if he so desires) and be happy and rejoicing.’

Upadhya presumes such widow marriages were contracted within the families, probably, with a brother-in-law, ‘before the obsequies ended and the dead body was disposed of’. Being a tribal society in nature, to reiterate, it had always given importance to keeping a family line intact and unbroken. Another hymn (Ṛgveda X.85.45) states about how important it was to have numerous male children in the family, and also proclaims that the husband should be the eleventh male member of the family, the rest ten being his sons.

‘Indra the showerer, make her the mother of sons, pleasing (to her husband); give her ten sons, make her husband the eleventh’.

Ṛgvedic society, thus, as discussed, was keen on acquiring more male children to give continuity to a particular family line. The important reason for such gusto, probably, was the social structure, which supposedly seems to be patriarchal and patrilineal, which allowed inheritance to the male member of the family. In such a social milieu, one can easily hypothesize the requirements and obligations of the people for the expansion and sustenance of a tradition that allowed women to reproduce even during the absence of a husband, related to various causes.

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Hence, the necessity of society was arguably responsible for the swift acceleration of the rudiments of Niyoga tradition to the farthest corners. The choice of a man to be appointed for the physical union does not appear to be confined to the younger brother of the husband. Verses and hymns composed by various sages in praise of Aśvina make us aware that assistance for progeny could even be taken from distant individuals like Aśvina, accredited with excellence and intelligence.

In addition to the hymns cited above, hymn 102 of the Maṇḍala X of the Ṛgveda provides an indistinct and mythical representation related to the rudiments of Niyoga tradition. Composed by sage Mūdgala in the oblation of Lord Indra in Anuvaka IX, mentions a conflict, wherein the wagon of Mūdgala seems to have fallen into a perilous situation. It was under a perplex hour, Mūdgala prayed before Indra for his wife Mudgalānī, who seemed to have been the charioteer, to recover the booty of the battle driven by her. In between these developments, there appears a bull that drinks a lake of water, cleaves the mountain peak, and goes against the enemy. Considering his bulky outlook and strength, he was well harnessed by the duo with the hope of winning the battle. Endowed with vigour, the bull seizes the foe, and Mūdgala proclaims his victory in the battle with a hundred thousand milch cattle. Mūdgala, as it appears, seems to be a weak sage and possibly childless. Thus, after the battle, as per the text, Mudgalānī, the wife of the supposedly weak and impotent sage, was granted a male child through the bull.

The narration of hymn 102 of Maṇḍala X seems to be inappropriate and unnatural to justify from the perspective of the current study. It can be, however, presumed that, instead of a bull, it could have been a man, possibly the bull driver named Keśī, from whom Mudgalānī had taken help for progeny. There are certain valid reasons to consider this observation. Firstly, exhibiting his best qualities, Keśī had thoroughly changed the face of the battle, made the bull roar, and granted victory to supposedly weak Mūdgala and his wife Mudgalānī. His bravery and courage had naturally attracted Mudgalānī for a sexual union to bear a child from him. Secondly, as the hymn indicates, the man appears to be well-trained and exceptionally good-looking with his long hair and a well-built figure. Thus, impressed with the valour, charm, and strength of Keśī, Mudgalānī might have agreed to cohabitation that could provide her a child from the gallant man. Ṛgveda, to reiterate, does not maintain requisite regulations in the form of social status or position of a male counterpart for progeny. Undoubtedly, during exigency, individuals like Varuṇa, Indra, and Aśvina were preferable choices, but there is some evidence, discussed elsewhere, that allowed

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even the common man to be the protector of widows who were deprived of offspring. Thus, in all possibilities, Keśī too has been a common man with uncommon valour and intellect that encouraged Mudgalānī to get conceived from him. In all postulations, to hide the identity of Keśī, which could have been an abhorrence in the then society, he probably has been represented as a bull in the hymn.

Apart from the postulation of hymn 102 of Maṇḍala X, there are some other instances in other Maṇḍalas of the text that deal with the issue. Hymn 42.8 and 9 of Maṇḍala IV also assert the begetting of a son named Trasdasyu by Purukutsānī during the absence of her husband. (R̥gveda IV, 42.9) The husband of Purukutsānī, as per the text, was said to have been imprisoned somewhere else, and therefore, Indra and Varuṇa come to the aid of Purukutsānī for the continuity of Purukutsa's (her husband's) family line.

‘The spouse of Purukutsā gave oblations to you, O Indra-Varuṇa, with homage
Then unto her ye gave King Trasdasyu, a demi-god, like Indra, conquering foemen.’

It can also be estimated that Indra had a close connection with the family of Purukutsā even before the birth of Māndhatra, father of Purukutsā, and during their adversities, we are informed about Indra's involvement in settling the matter. Maṇḍala I of the text mentions Indra warring on behalf of Purukutsā and overturning seven cities, (R̥gveda I.63.7) probably in the distant northwestern region of the Indian subcontinent. According to our observation, both Purukutsā and Trasdasyu were great kings, ruling over the region north-west of the Indus. Politically speaking, the period was marked by the elimination of the Dasyus by the Ārya, and in that process, Purukutsā was probably captured by his foes. Thus, his long absence and Indra's connection with the family probably had invigorated the latter to help Purukutsānī to begot Trasdasyu through him.

Therefore, considering hymns 42.8 and 9 of Maṇḍala IV, they offer the earliest impression of the beginnings of the future Niyoga tradition embedded within. Maṇḍalas II to VII, worth noting, are regarded by scholars as the oldest among all the Maṇḍalas. Consequently, the composition of this Maṇḍala is roughly dated to around 1300 BCE. It is also noteworthy that the episode in Maṇḍala IV involving Trasdasyu relates to the present-day Northwest India during that period. The tradition was likely initially institutionalized among pastoralist and rural communities in the region, gradually spreading toward the Saraswati area over time. Moreover, if this tradition was practiced among the Northwest tribes, and if the R̥gvedic Aryans adopted it from them, then it's

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true origin remains uncertain. Still, if the system originated within the Āryas, then we can hypothesize that the earliest traces of the future Niyoga tradition date back to this period. The lack of evidence, however, prevents us from definitively determining whether it was a common practice among the Ṛgvedic Aryans or borrowed from local tribes. The early forms of the Niyoga custom seem to have been uncommon among northwest Aryans, who engaged in pastoral economies intertwined with tribal elements. This observation is supported by the limited references related to this issue in Maṇḍala IV, which we estimate was composed around 1300 BCE. The purpose of such sexual unions, it seems, was primarily for the inheritance of a father's family property. As a pastoral society, there was always a need for a male successor, and to ensure clarity in succession and inheritance, this practice is alluded to in the Ṛgveda. Although these unions were intended to produce a male child, it is unclear how such situations were handled if a girl was born. We also lack information about the social status of girls born from pre-Niyoga unions, which requires further study. The references to gods like Indra and Varuṇa in the earliest mentions, such as in Maṇḍala IV, can be viewed as tools created by society to obscure the true identity of those involved in procreation. If we compare Maṇḍala IV and Maṇḍala X, the earlier process begins to show changes and modifications until the history of ancient India reaches the courtyards of possibly 1000 BCE. The tradition becomes more accessible to common people through Devaras, and for a select few, through Devatā like Aśvina. The fundamentals of Niyoga culture seem to have been in a budding stage during this period, likely due to the growing importance of land, labor, and capital. The age also indicates a political situation resembling a 'tug of war,' in which all the groups, like the Ṛgvedic Rajyās, led by chieftains called Rajas, were engaged in a struggle to maintain their dominance over the smaller tribes. Given the seriousness of the situation, to produce male members who could uphold their dominance, the embryo of future Niyoga tradition gained momentum, and probably because of this, there are additional supporting statistics in the verses of Maṇḍala X.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we may say that Niyoga had its rudiments in the early Vedic period, and therefore, as it is observed, there are several mentions about it in the Ṛgveda Vedic hymns. The earliest reference to it, as the study reveals, is maintained in Maṇḍala IV, which is considered to be one of the oldest Maṇḍalas. Over time, many alterations were made to the tradition, and we can notice some transformations in the two Maṇḍalas. In Maṇḍala IV, for instance, only through

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Devatās like Indra and Varuṇa, queen Purukutsānī gave birth to Trāsdāsyu. The Maṇḍala X, on the other hand, has allowed a widow to cohabit with her Devara to give birth to a male child. The only similarities we come across in the process featured in the two Maṇḍalas where, they both intended to have a male child out of the union, and in both cases, the indigents benefited with male heirs.

The succeeding eras in the form of the Upanishad had accelerated the tradition to its farthest extent. The R̥gveda Vedic concept of having more male children was further extended by the Taittiriya Upanishad through an exhortation प्रजातनुं मा व्यवच्छेत्सीः i.e., ‘never cut the thread of progeny’. Such declarations in the philosophical part had possibly provided a bigger space for supplanting the rudiments of Niyoga in the ancient society. With the lapse of time, the tradition was given a technical jargon of Niyoga by the Dharmashastras. During the heydays of the Smṛtis, Niyoga began to be practised as an Āpadadharma, i.e., an action during extraordinary circumstances, and not as a regular part of the social practices. With the composition of Manusmṛti, it began to be considered as Paśudharma, and Vṛhaspatismṛti declared the tradition as ‘impossible to the sensual people of later ages to observe the rigid rules’, thus, banishing the R̥gvedic tradition of social-sexual mobility forever.

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