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Preface

This book is an attempt to reconstruct the efforts of the ancient Indian thinkers in understanding the world and themselves. They expressed their concepts in a text called the *Ṛgveda*, which is analysed in this book. The *Ṛgveda* is the earliest Indian composition and fundamental to its later culture. It is also an important testimony for the beginnings of Indian philosophy and for human philosophical thinking in general.

1. The *Ṛgveda*

The *Ṛgveda* (RV) is a collection of poetical hymns composed during the second half of the second millennium BC in the earliest form of Sanskrit. Its authors, who called themselves Ārya or Arya, belonged to the eastern Indo-Iranian branch of tribes speaking Indo-European languages, who gradually settled on the Panjab plateau during the second millennium B.C¹. At its peak the *Ṛgvedic* civilisation extended from the Kabul River to the Gaṅgā (Witzel 1995a: 93).

¹ In the western archaeology there are two major hypothesis about the homeland of the Proto-Indo-Europeans (Rozwadowski 2003: 74–75): that of Pontic-Caspian steppe (Childe 1926, Gimbutas 1977, Mallory 1977, 1991) and that of Anatolia (Ivanow, Gamkrelidze 1984, Renfrew 1987). Some Indian scholars reject the European origin of the *Ṛgvedic* poets and argue for their indigenous origin (e.g. Talageri 2000, for discussion, cf. Witzel 2001a and Patton, Bryant 2005, Bryant 2001). Various problems connected with so called ‘Aryan problem’ are discussed in Erdosy 1995, for the terms *ārya/arya*, cf. Witzel 2001b, 2–3, Elizarenkova 1989: 455. The survey of archaeological problems connected with reconstruction of the Indo-Aryans can be found in Erdosy 1995. For reconstructions of Indo-Aryan ethnicity and languages, cf. Witzel 2000, 2004, Parpola 1988, 1997, 1999, Deshpande 1995, Southworth 1995, Oberlies 1998: 159 ff.; also Bronkhorst, Deshpande 1999. In this book I will use the term ‘Aryan’ as ‘a cultural term indicating the speakers of Vedic Sanskrit and the bearers of Vedic culture’ (Witzel 2001b: 3) which, as the *Ṛgvedic* poets themselves stress, is different from other cultures (be it Indo-Iranian or not).