

THE VEDIC AGE

The Harappan civilisation was followed by another great civilisation and culture known as the Vedic culture. The Vedic texts are the primary sources for the reconstruction of the Vedic culture/Vedic age. Archaeological materials have also supplemented the texts, though not comprehensively. Vedic texts are believed to be composed by the Indo-Aryans. Indo-Aryans refer to the speakers of a subgroup of the Indo-Iranian branch of the Indo-European family of languages. Rig Veda composers describe themselves as Arya, etymologically derived from “Ar” meaning to cultivate, literally meaning kinsmen or companion; in Sanskrit, it means favourably disposed newcomers and later it came to mean “men of good family” or noble.

There are different theories associated with the Aryans, their origin and possible migration/invasion in the Indian Subcontinent. These are as follows:

- **Central Asian theory** – This theory was propounded by Prof. Max Muller, a German scholar of comparative languages. As per this theory, the Aryans originally lived in Central Asia. With the comparative study of the “Avesta” (Iranian text) and the “Vedas”, one finds a striking linguistic relationship between them of not just words but of concepts also. The interchangeability between ‘h’ and ‘s’ and incredible consistency in this change as seen in Hepta Hindu (Sapta Sindhu), Ahura (Asura), Haoma (Soma), Daha (Dasa), further substantiates the claim.
- **European theory** – Sir William Jones, Giles (Hungary), Shroeder (France), Morgan (Western Siberia) are supporters of this theory. As per this theory, the Aryans inhabited Europe and voyaged to various places and the Aryans who came to India were an offshoot of the Europeans. The proponents of this theory established the resemblance of Sanskrit with the European languages. For example, the Sanskrit words Matri and Pitri are similar to the Latin Mater and Pater. Suryyas and Maruttash of the Kassite (Mesopotamia) inscriptions are equivalent to the Vedic Surya and Marut.
- **Theory of North Pole/Arctic theory** – According to Bal Gangadhar Tilak, the Northern Arctic region was the original home of the Aryans. He commented that the Rig Veda comprises specific references to a place where harsh cold and long days and nights of six months each are found.
- **Tibet theory** – Swami Dayanand Saraswati was the proponent of this theory. According to this theory, Tibet is the original home of the Aryans with reference to the Vedas and other Aryan texts.
- **Indian theory** – Dr. A.C Dass, Ganga Nath Jha, Sri L.D Kalla, Sri D.S Trivedi have acknowledged this theory. According to this theory, the Aryans were the residents of the Sapta Sindhu. This region stretched from the river Indus, reaching up to Saraswati river. Kashmir and Punjab were also under this region. The sacrificial rituals of the Vedic Aryans point to their Indian origin. The river hymns in the Rig Veda mention the names of the rivers of this region. The flora and fauna mentioned are mostly similar to the Himalayan region. Regarding the affinity of the Indian and European languages, this theory states that in the language of the Aryans, there is a plethora of Sanskrit words, but

this is not the case with the latter. If Aryans had come from outside, their ancient Literature (Vedas) should have been found there, but no Vedic literature has been found outside India.

The most accepted view is that there was a series of Aryan immigration and they came to the subcontinent as immigrants. The earliest Indo-Aryans lived in the geographical area covered by Eastern Afghanistan, Punjab and the fringes of Western Uttar Pradesh. Some rivers of Afghanistan, such as the river Kubha (Kabul) and the river Indus (Sindhus) and its five tributaries are mentioned in the Rig Veda. The five tributaries are the Jhelum (Vitasta), Beas (Vipasa), Chenab (Askini), Ravi (Parushni), Satluj (Sutudri). The Sindhu, identical with the Indus, is the river par excellence of the Aryans. Another river mentioned is the Sarasvati, now lost in the sands of Rajasthan, the area represented by it is covered by the Ghaggar river. The whole region in which the Aryans first settled in India is called the land of seven rivers.

The Early Vedic or The Rig Vedic Civilisation

The only source of Vedic culture is the Vedic literature. It is divided into:

1. **Early Vedic Literature/Rig Vedic Culture (c. 1500 – 1000 BCE)** – It includes the Rig Veda Samhita and other texts of the family. They are called family books since they are believed to have been composed by the families of a few seer poets like Atri, Vasishtha, Vishvamitra, Bharadvaja and Gritsamada.
2. **Later Vedic Literature/Later Vedic Culture (c. 1000 – 500 BCE)** – It includes books 1, 8, 9, & 10 of the Rig Veda Samhita, the Samhitas of the Sama Veda, the Yajur and the Atharva Vedas and the Aranyakas, Brahmanas & Upanishads attached to the 4 Vedas.

Early Vedic Period or Rig Vedic Period (1500 BC – 1000 BC)

Initially, the Aryans lived in the land known as “Sapta Sindhu” (Land of the Seven Rivers). These seven rivers were: Sindhu (Indus), Vipash (Beas), Vitasta (Jhelum), Parushni (Ravi), Asikni (Chenab), Shutudri (Satluj) and Saraswati.

Political structure:

- Monarchical form of government with a king known as Rajan.
- Patriarchal families. Jana was the largest social unit in Rig Vedic times.
- Social grouping: kula (family) – grama – visu – jana.
- Tribal assemblies were called Sabhas and Samitis. Examples of tribal kingdoms: Bharatas, Matsyas, Yadus and Purus.

Social structure:

- Women enjoyed a respectable position. They were allowed to take part in Sabhas and Samitis. There were women poets too (Apala, Lopamudra, Viswavara and Ghosa).
- Cattle especially cows became very important.
- Monogamy was practised but polygamy was observed among royalty and noble families.
- There was no child marriage.

- Social distinctions existed but were not rigid and hereditary.

Economic structure:

- They were pastoral and cattle-rearing people.
- They practised agriculture.
- They had horse chariots.
- Rivers were used for transport.
- Cotton and woollen fabrics were spun and used.
- Initially, trade was conducted through the barter system but later on, coins called 'nishka' were in use.

Religion:

- They worshipped natural forces like earth, fire, wind, rain, thunder, etc. by personifying them into deities.
- Indra (thunder) was the most important deity. Other deities were Prithvi (earth), Agni (fire), Varuna (rain) and Vayu (wind).
- Female deities were Ushas and Aditi.
- There were no temples and no idol worship.

Later Vedic Period or Painted Grey Ware Phase (1000 BC – 600 BC)

During this time, the Aryans moved eastwards and occupied western and eastern UP (Kosala) and Bihar.

Political structure:

- Kingdoms like Mahajanapadas were formed by amalgamating smaller kingdoms.
- King's power increased and various sacrifices were performed by him to enhance his position.
- Sacrifices were Rajasuya (consecration ceremony), Vajapeya (chariot race) and Ashwamedha (horse sacrifice).
- The Sabhas and Samitis diminished in importance.

Social structure:

- The Varna system of social distinction became more distinct. This became less based on occupation and more hereditary.
- The four divisions of society in decreasing social ranking were: Brahmanas (priests), Kshatriyas (rulers), Vaishyas (agriculturists, traders and artisans), and Shudras (servers of the upper three classes).

- Women were not permitted to attend public assemblies like Sabhas and Samitis. Their position in society diminished.
- Child marriages became common.
- Sub-castes based on occupation also emerged. Gotras were institutionalised.

Economic structure:

- Agriculture was the chief occupation.
- Industrial work like metalwork, pottery and carpentry work also was there.
- There was foreign trade with far off regions like Babylon and Sumeria.

Religion:

- Prajapati (creator) and Vishnu (preserver) became important gods.
- Indra and Agni lost their significance.
- Importance of prayers diminished and rituals and sacrifices became more elaborate.
- The priestly class became very powerful and they dictated the rules of the rites and rituals. Because of this orthodoxy, Buddhism and Jainism emerged towards the end of this period.

Vedic Literature

The Vedic literature is the most significant source of information about the Vedic civilisation. The word “Veda” means knowledge. The Vedic literature has evolved in the course of many centuries and was handed down from generation to generation by the word of mouth. Later, they were compiled and written down, and the earliest surviving manuscript is from the 11th century.

There are 4 Vedas and each Veda generally has 4 parts – Samhita, Brahmana, Aranyaka, and Upanishads. The four Vedas are – Rig Veda, Sama Veda, Yajur Veda, and Atharva Veda.

Rig Veda

- It is the oldest Veda and depicts the life of early Vedic people in India. UNESCO has included the Rig Veda in the list of literature signifying World Human Heritage.
- Its text consists of 1028 hymns (Sukta) which are divided into ten Mandalas or books.
- Mandalas 2 – 7 form the oldest part of the Rig Veda Samhita and are called “family books” as they are ascribed to particular families of seers/rishis.
- Mandala 8 – Here, the hymns are dedicated to various gods and have been mostly composed by the Kanva clan.
- Mandala 9 – All the hymns are dedicated entirely to Soma.
- Mandala 1 – It is primarily dedicated to Indra and Agni. Varuna, Surya, Mitra, Rudra, and Vishnu have also been mentioned.
- Mandala 10 – It contains Nadi Stuti Sukta praising the rivers. It also contains Nasadiya Sukta and Purush Sukta. It contains hymns that are traditionally chanted during marriage and death rituals.
- Only surviving recension of Rig Veda is the Shakala Shakha.

- The Upaveda of Rig Veda is the Ayurveda.

Sama Veda

- The Sama Veda or the “Veda of Chants” is the collection of verses drawn almost wholly from the Rig Veda, that are provided with musical notations and are intended as an aid to the performance of sacred songs.
- It contains the famous Dhrupada Raga, later sung by Tansen in medieval times.
- Recensions (Shakhas) of the Sama Veda are Kauthuma, Ranayaniya and Jaiminiya (Talavakara).
- Sama Veda’s Upaveda is the Gandharva Veda.

Yajur Veda (Worship or ritual knowledge)

- This Veda deals with the procedure for the performance of sacrifices. It is further divided into-
 - Shukla Yajur Veda/ Vajasaneya / White Yajur Veda – it contains only the mantras. It contains the Madhyandina and Kanva recensions.
 - Krishna Yajur Veda / Black Yajur Veda – it includes mantras as well as prose explanations/commentary. It contains Kathaka, Maitrayani, Taittiriya and Kapishtala recensions.

The Upaveda of the Yajur Veda is the Dhanur Veda.

Atharva Veda

- It concerns itself with magic spells to ward off evil spirits or dangers.
- It is considered to be a non-Aryan work and is classified into 20 kandas or books, with 711 hymns.
- It contains Shaunaka and Paippalada recensions.
- Shilpa Veda is the Upaveda of Atharva Veda.

Brahmanas

The Brahmanas consist of details about the meaning of Vedic hymns, their applications and origin stories. Every Veda has several Brahmanas attached to it.

- Aitareya or Kaushitaki Brahmanas were allotted to Rig Veda for detailing.
- Tandya and Jaiminiya Brahmanas to Sama Veda for detailing.
- Taittiriya and Shatpatha Brahmanas to Yajur Veda for detailing.
- Gopath Brahmana to Atharva Veda for detailing.

Aranyakas

The Aranyakas are also called “forest books” as they were written chiefly by hermits residing in the forests for their students. They lay emphasis not on sacrifices but on meditation. They are in fact, opposed to sacrifices and many of the early rituals. They are the concluding portion of the Brahmanas and interpret rituals in a philosophical way.

Upanishads

The literal meaning of Upanishad is to “sit near someone”. There are 108 Upanishads, of which 13 are the most prominent. It introduces the concept of ‘Atman’ and ‘Brahman’. It states that the core of one’s self is neither the body nor the mind, but the Atman or the “soul”. It further points out that the core of all creatures is the Atman itself and can be experienced through meditation. According to the Upanishads, the Brahman is the underlying substance of the universe. It is an unchanging ‘Absolute being’. The Upanishads are mainly philosophical in nature and speak of the highest knowledge.

- Satyamev Jayate in the National Emblem is taken from Mandukyopanishad.
- The Chandogya Upanishad clearly refers to the first 3 ashrams and discusses the (mainly two) types of marriage:
 - Anuloma marriage – the marriage of a man in his own varna or below his varna. It is the most accepted and common form of marriage in society.
 - Pratiloma marriage – the marriage of a woman in a varna lower than her own. It is not sanctioned by the Vedas.

Vedanta

The Vedanta reveals the final aim of the Vedas and signifies the end of the Vedas. It condemns sacrifices, ceremonies and denotes the last phase of the Vedic period.

Vedanga

The literal meaning of the word Vedanga is “limbs of the Vedas”. Just like the limbs of the body, they perform various supportive and augmenting functions in the study, preservation and protection of the Vedas and the Vedic traditions. They are considered to be of human origin and are written in the form of Sutras (short condensed statements used to express different ideas). There are 6 Vedangas as follows:

1. Shiksha (Phonetics)
2. Kalpa (Ritualistic science)
3. Jyotisha (Astronomy)
4. Vyakaran (grammar)
5. Nirukta (Etymology)
6. Chhanda (Metrics)

The Kalpa Sutra is further divided into:

1. **Shrauta Sutra** – prescribes rules for the performance of different types of sacrifices and rituals.
2. **Grihya Sutra** – concerned with comparatively simpler domestic sacrifices. It includes rituals pertaining to crucial life stages (Samskaras) such as Upanayana (initiation), Vivaha (marriage), and Antyeshti (funerary practices).
3. **Dharmasutra** – pertaining to the rituals’ Dharma.

Puranas

The word Purana literally means ‘ancient’ or ‘old’.

- Traditionally, Puranas are considered to be composed by Ved Vyasa.
- The Puranas treat various topics concerning religious developments that occurred around the 5th and 6th centuries.
- The Puranas reflect the growth of Hindu Dharma, the condition of society in ancient times, social customs, religious ceremonies as well as yogic methods of discipline.
- Traditionally, a Purana discusses five subjects or “five signs” in the time span of 4 ages/yugas (Satya, Treta, Dvapara, and Kali):
 - Sarga – the primary creation of the universe.
 - Pratisarga – recreation, secondary creation after annihilation.
 - Manvantaras – the reigns of the various Manus.
 - Vamsha – the genealogy of gods and rishis.
 - Vamshanucharita (Royal lineage) – the history of Solar (Suryavanshis) and Lunar (Chandravanshis) dynasties.

All Puranas are strongly sectarian – some are devoted to Shiva, some to Vishnu and some to a goddess. However, the Purana that is devoted to a particular god often pays considerable attention to other gods as well.

It is commonly accepted that four yugas make up a Mahayuga, that 1000 Mahayugas make a Kalpa, that every Kalpa is further divided into 14 Manvantaras which are presided over by a specific Manu. Each yuga is periodically destroyed and again, the recreation of the world occurs with the cyclic decline and revival of Dharma.

The Puranas are divided into 18 Mahapuranas (such as Vishnu, Brahma, Narada, Padma, Garuda, Matsya, Kurma, Shiva, Agni, Bhagavata, etc.) and numerous Upapuranas (secondary Puranas).

The Puranas are regarded as post-Vedic texts.

Dharmashastra

- The Dharmashastra are the Sanskrit texts about morality and religious duty. They provide guiding rules and principles for the order and regularity of society and righteous conduct.
- Dharmashastra refers to the fulfilment of Purusharthas (life goals) such as Dharma (righteous conduct), Artha (material well being), Kama (desires, sensual pleasures) and Moksha (liberation from the cycle of life and death).
- The Dharmashastra are subdivided into Dharmasutras (c. 600 – 300 BCE) and Smritis (c. 200 – 900 BCE). They recognise three sources of Dharma – the Vedas (Shruti – what is heard), Smriti (what is remembered) texts and Shistachara (good manners and practices of cultured people).
- A person’s Dharma was dependent on many factors such as gender, marital status, varna and ashram. Out of the four varnas, three varnas – Brahmanas, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas were considered Dvija (twice-born, as they had the right to the sacred thread ceremony considered akin to second birth), while the fourth varna – Shudras were burdened with many civil disabilities.

- The four ashrams dividing the life of a male Dvija were:
 - Brahmacharya (celibate student hood)
 - Grihastha (household caretaker)
 - Vanaprastha (partial renunciation)
 - Sanyasa (complete renunciation)

The different ashram stages were not followed by all and it was not applicable to women and Shudras.

Epics

The other important literature of ancient India is the Great Epics – the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. Both were written in the form of long poems and took place in ancient Hindu Kingdoms on the Indian subcontinent. They describe the political, social and economical structure of ancient India.

Mahabharata

Ramayana

1. Roughly composed between c. 400 BCE – 400 CE.

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2. It is composed by Ved Vyasa and consists of 18 Parvas (books) and has around 1 lakh verses (longest epic poem ever written).

2. Ramayana is composed by Valmiki and consists of seven Kandas (books) having 24,000 verses.

3. The Mahabharata is essentially the story of the rivalry between two bands of brothers in the Hastinapura Kingdom, which culminates in a great battle.

3. The word Ramayana literally means the journey of Rama. It is a story of good over evil.

4. Traditionally, the war is believed to have happened in the Dvapara Yuga. But, historians consider the events and social character of the Mahabharata corresponding to an earlier age of development than the Ramayana, as the Mahabharata settings pertain to the Indo-Gangetic divide and upper Ganga valley.

4. It is considered that Rama lived in the Treta yuga (age), earlier than the Mahabharata. Since the settings of the Ramayana shifted eastwards to the middle Ganga valley, and the language of the Ramayana is more polished and its concepts are more closely related to later societies, historians consider it of a later stage than the Mahabharata.

5. The Mahabharata is more realistic.

5. The Ramayana is more idealistic.

Differences Between Early Vedic Age and Later Vedic Age

Early Vedic Period	Later Vedic Period
The caste system was flexible and based on profession rather than birth	The caste system became more rigid in this period with birth being the main criteria
There was no concept of Shudra or untouchables	Shudras became a mainstay in the Later Vedic period. Their sole function was to serve those of the

	upper-castes
Women were allowed a greater degree of freedom in this period. They were allowed to participate in the political process of the time to a certain extent	Women were restricted from their participation in society by being relegated to subordinate and docile roles
Kingship was fluid as the kings were elected for a fixed period by the local assembly known as <i>Samiti</i>	As society became more urbanized in this period, the need for stable leadership was realized. Thus the absolute rule of the Kings became more and more prominent
Early Vedic society was pastoralist and semi-nomadic in nature	Society became more settled in nature. It became centred around agriculture in general
In the Early Vedic Period, the barter system was more prevalent with little to no monetary value transaction being part of the exchange	Although the barter system was still in practice, it was largely replaced by the exchange of gold and silver coins known as <i>Krishnala</i>
Rigveda. This text is cited as the earliest text from this period	Yajurveda. Samaveda Atharvaveda