

# The Vedic Period

## The Vedic Culture

The age of history in which the Vedas were composed in the Indian subcontinent is known as the **Vedic Age**. The Vedas were composed by the Aryans. There are four Vedas—the Rigveda, Samaveda, Yajurveda and Arthaveda. The period when the Aryans first settled in India during 1500–1000 BC is known as the **Early Vedic Period**. Later, between 1000 BC and 500 BC, the Aryans moved eastwards and settled along the banks of the rivers Ganga and Yamuna. This period is known as the **Later Vedic Period**.

### Literary Sources

- The Vedic texts are divided into two chronological groups—the Early Vedic texts (1500–1000 BC) when most Rigvedic hymns were composed and the Later Vedic texts (1000–500 BC) which include the remaining three Vedas and the Brahmanas, Aranyakas and Upanishads.
- The Vedic texts shed light on the political, social, economic and religious life of the Aryans.
  - **The Rigveda** is considered one of the oldest religious texts in the world. The hymns in the Rigveda are dedicated by the sages to God. They were passed orally from teachers to disciples. It forms the basis of Indian philosophy.
  - **The Samaveda** contains 1875 hymns. They are supposed to be sung at the time of sacrifice by priests.
  - **The Yajurveda** contains 2086 hymns which give us glimpses of the social and religious life of the Aryans.
  - **The Arthaveda** has 731 hymns which mostly deal with magic and charm. Some hymns also deal with medicinal values of various herbs.
- The Brahmanas are in prose and explain the social and religious importance of rituals. Each Veda has several Brahmanas.
- The Aranyakas, also known as the 'Forest Books', are written for guiding hermits and students residing in the forests. They form the concluding part of the Brahmanas.
- The Upanishads are the philosophical commentaries on the Vedas. They deal with various doctrines such as Karma and Moksha.
- Apart from these, some other Vedic texts are the Vedangas (deals with pronunciation and grammar), the Sutras (deals with yajnas and sacrifices), the Upvedas (subsidiary Vedas), the Darshanis (include six schools of Indian philosophy), the Dharmashastras (these are the law books which lay down the duties of the priests, kings and people) and the Ashtadhyayi (a treatise on Sanskrit grammar written by Panini).
- The epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata tell us about the social, political, economic and religious life of the people. Ramayana tell us about the Aryan expansion into the south. Mahabharata containing 'Bhagwad Gita' is considered the sacred religious text of the Hindus. It deals with Hindu philosophy.
- These epics provide us with information about the existence of many Aryan kingdoms of that time. It sheds light on the high ideals of family life of the Aryans.



A manuscript containing a sukta of the Rigveda

## Archaeological Sources

The remains of pottery and iron implements are some archaeological sources which shed light on the Vedic Period.

- Iron played an important role in the advancement of civilisation in the world. Iron in India began to be used from about 1000 BC. Iron was a harder metal which could be used to make a variety of tools and implements.
- Iron was used to make agricultural tools like axes which were used to clear forests for cultivation. With the use of iron ploughs, sickles and hoes, large areas of forestlands were brought under cultivation, and crops such as wheat, rice and barley were grown. Agriculture thus became the major occupation of the people.
- The use of iron began to be used to make implements such as hammers, nails, saws, tongs and chisels. This gave rise to occupations such as carpentry, tanning, tool making and spinning.
- Because of its hardness and durability, iron was used to make weapons such as swords, armours, shields and slings.
- Pottery is an important source of information of the period. Three kinds of pottery—Grey Ware (GW), Painted Grey Ware (PGW) and Northern Black Polished Ware (NBPW)—have been discovered from Vedic sites. The NBPW pottery was glossy and shining. Pottery tells us about the economic and social lives of the people.

## Origin of the Aryans

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Historians differ over the origin of the Aryans. While historians such as A. C. Das believe that the Aryans were natives of India, others like Bal Gangadhar Tilak concluded that the Arctic Region was the original home of the Aryans. Dayanand Saraswati believed that Tibet was the original home of the Aryans. The German scholar Professor Max Mueller contended that the Aryans came from Central Asia. Many historians have supported the theory of Max Mueller. They have accepted the theory because of the following reasons:

- The stone inscriptions discovered in Asia Minor prove that the Aryans worshipped gods such as Indra and Varuna in the ancient times. This resembles the religious beliefs of the Aryans in India.
- In ancient times, Asia Minor was a fertile land which made it suitable for agriculture and domestication of animals.
- The flora and fauna mentioned in the Rigveda were found in Asia Minor.
- About 35% of the genetic traits of the people of the Steppes in Central Asia were similar to the genetic traits of the people residing in north India. Thus, many historians concluded that the Aryans migrated to India from Central Asia.

However, the issue of the origin of the Aryans is still disputed, and hence, research studies are still being carried out to find out their origin.

## Settlements of the Aryans

- It is believed that the Aryans entered India from present-day Afghanistan and settled in the valley of Kabul and Punjab. This was called Sapta Sindhu or the land of the seven rivers—Indus, Ravi, Beas, Satluj, Jhelum, Chenab and Saraswati. Because the region was fertile, the Aryans took to agriculture.
- It is believed that when the Aryans came to India, they came into conflict with the local people. The local inhabitants were defeated and they came to be known as '*dasas*' or '*dasyus*'.

## Social Conditions

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- The Aryans lived in villages in the Early Vedic Period. The family was the basic unit of society. It was patriarchal as the oldest male member was the head of the family. He was known as the '*Grihapati*' or '*Kulpati*'. After his death, his son became the head of the family.
- Several families lived in a 'grama' or village. Many villages together formed a Visha. Many vishas collectively formed a Jana.
- The '*Gramini*' was the head of the village, while the *vishapati* was the head of a *visha*. *Rajan* was the king of a *jana*.
- The king ruled with the help of his ministers. The *Senani* (Commander-in-Chief) and the *Purohit* (priest) were important ministers. The king did not have a regular army. Many tribals formed an army during wars.
- In the Vedic Period, there were three assemblies which advised the kings. These were
  - The Vidhata: It performed economic, military, religious and social functions. Women actively participated in its meetings.
  - The Samiti: It was the assembly of the people. It was called on special occasions.
  - The Sabha: It was an assembly of the elders and performed advisory and judicial functions.
- In the Later Vedic Period, several changes came into society. Kingship became hereditary and the Sabha and the Samiti lost their former importance. It came to be dominated by the chiefs, rich and nobles.

### Position of Women

- Women held a high place in the Vedic Period. Daughters had the freedom to choose their husbands. Widows could remarry. No evidence of child marriage has been recorded.
- In the Later Vedic Period, the position of women declined. It was now not necessary for them to participate in yajnas. They also did not have any right to inherit property. The freedom of women was curtailed.

### Caste Division

- In the Vedic Period, the caste system did not exist in its rigid form. Society was divided into various classes on the basis of their profession. These professions later became hereditary.
- In the Later Vedic Period, the caste system became rigid and society came to be divided into four main castes. Brahmans occupied the top position and performed all the rituals. Kshatriyas were a warring class who occupied the second class and protected their kingdom from any external attacks. Vaishyas were farmers, traders and businessmen. Shudras occupied the lowest strata of society and were supposed to do all the menial work.

### The Ashram System

- While in the Early Vedic Period, people grew according to family traditions, life was divided into four ashramas in the Later Vedic period.
- The first stage was the Brahmacharya which lasted up to 25 years. People were expected to acquire knowledge in gurukuls. The second stage was of the Grihastha ashram in which man had to marry and raise children. This period lasted from 25 to 50 years.
- Vanaprastha Ashram was the third stage which lasted 50–75 years. In this stage, he had to give up his worldly life and acquire spiritual knowledge. Sanyasa Ashram was the fourth stage in which a man had to renounce the world and go for mediation to achieve moksh or salvation.

## Education

- The residences of the gurus or teachers were known as *gurukuls*. Education was imparted in *gurukuls*. They were located mainly in the outskirts of the city or in forests.
- Teaching usually took place orally and after the completion of education, students had to give *gurudakshina* to teachers. Gurus were highly respected.
- Vedas, Puranas, grammar, mathematics, ethics, logic and military sciences were the main subjects. Emphasis was laid on the physical, mental and spiritual development of students.

## Food, Dress and Amusement

- Barley was the main crop grown during this period. Rice came to be grown during the Later Vedic Period.
- Aryans domesticated animals for milk and its products. Soma—an intoxicating drink—was consumed during religious ceremonies and festivals.
- The clothing of the Aryans consisted of dhoti (undergarment) and vasa (upper piece).
- Ornaments were made of gold, silver, ivory and precious stones.
- Chariot races, horse races, dancing, singing and hunting were the main sources of entertainment for the people. People celebrated festivals and participated in sports activities and gambling.

## Religious Beliefs

- People worshipped forces of nature. Indra was an important god. Agni (fire), Varuna (water), Surya (Sun), Vayu (wind) and Yama (god of dead) were some other important gods.
- Goddesses were also worshipped by the Vedic Aryans. Some important deities were Usha (goddess of dawn), Ratri (spirit of night) and Prithvi (goddess of the Earth).
- During the Later Vedic Period, Prajapati or Brahma, the creator became the supreme God and Agni and Indra lost their former importance. While Vishnu was worshipped as The Preserver, Shiva was regarded as The Destroyer.
- Yagnas were held on most occasions and the simplicity of nature worship was lost. Sacrifices were also performed.
- Later, emphasis began to be laid on penance called tapasya. The doctrines of karma, dharma and moksha began to be emphasised.
- Religion laced with sacrifices and rituals strengthened the position of the Brahmins, and they came to be regarded as possessing divine powers.



Chariots have been said to be brought to India by the Aryans.

## Economy

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- The Vedic economy was mainly pastoral and references to cultivation were made in the later part of the Rigveda. Wooden ploughshares were used for the cultivation of land in the Early Vedic Period.
- Leather making, smithery, pottery and carpentry were other occupations of the people. People involved in this work were considered of low status.
- In the Later Vedic Period, cultivation became the primary occupation of the people and iron ploughshares began to be used. Land now became the main source of wealth.
- Generation of agricultural surpluses led to the expansion of trading activities. Towns and cities developed around the markets.
- Many trading guilds were formed in the Later Vedic Period.
- Although coins were introduced at this time, the barter system still prevailed.
- Domestication of animals, crafts in various metals, carpentry, pot making and fisheries were some other occupations of the people.
- Women were engaged in spinning, weaving, knitting and dyeing.