

## 4. Vedic Period

### 4.1 Vedic Culture : Vedic literature, Linguistics and Archaeology

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### 4.1 Vedic Culture : Vedic literature, Linguistics and Archaeology

It is now confirmed by the research of many years that the Harappan civilisation was not destroyed by foreign invaders but it declined because of various factors like natural calamities and the deterioration of environment. There are multiple unanswered questions, such as, who were the Aryans, did they arrive in India from a distant place or were they natives of India, which are the archaeological sites where the remains of their culture are found, how to identify those remains, etc. Most of the information about their culture is derived from the Vedic literature. This literature is fundamentally in the form of the faith systems of the Vedic tribes and eulogies of their deities.

Mention of the material culture occurs in the Vedic literature as an unintended aspect. Also, there are references to god Indra's victories over their enemies. It was attempted to find answers to above questions, on the basis of these details. There are various opinions about the chronology of the Vedic culture. However, there is a general agreement that the Vedic people composed Rigveda in India around 1500 B.C.E. However, Lokmanya Tilak calculated this date as 6000 B.C.E. on

the basis of astronomical events. He was also of the opinion that the original home of the Aryans was in the Arctic region.

This debate began in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Till then the concept of the 'Aryans' was not known. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century the European academics became aware of the similarities between Sanskrit and Latin-Greek languages. It resulted into the notion of the 'Indo-European' language family, which gave a momentum to the search of a Mother

**By the way :** The notion of a language group with a common mother language seems to have been toyed with by some European scholars since the 12th century C.E. However the awareness of a direct link between Sanskrit and Latin attained the status of academic discussions on much later in the 18th century. We can trace the beginnings of this kind of interest to the 16th century. In the year 1583, an Italian merchant by the name Fillippo Sassetti came to Kochi (Cochin) the port city in Kerala. He never returned to his motherland. He stayed in Kerala and Goa. During his stay he wrote detailed letters to his family members about Indian life, language and culture. He happens to be the first European who wrote about his observations of the Indian society. He also studied Sanskrit. He was the first one who observed the similarities between Sanskrit and Latin. His observations could be said to be the first, to give impetus to the notion of a family of Indo-European languages.

language from which developed the Indo-European languages. It further led to the development of a branch of linguistics known as 'Philology'. Philology is a discipline, which traces the etymological history and meanings of words.

At about the same time European scholars had also developed interest in the ancient Indian literature. As a result of this interest 'Asiatic Society of Bengal' was established by Sir William Jones in 1784. This period saw the beginning of compiling and translating Sanskrit texts in European languages. Also, systematic research in the field of Vedic literature and archaeological cultures had gained academic importance.

On the basis of the research in these two fields, notions like the authors of Vedic civilisation came from the West; they brought the knowledge of horses and speedy chariots having spoked wheels, as well as the science of mounted archery, got deeply rooted among academics. In brief, it was believed that the techniques of Vedic warfare was superior to that of the Harappans, who stayed in fortified cities. Also, it was supposed that the Harappans were the enemies of the Vedic people, mentioned as 'Dasyu' in the Vedic literature.

The archaeological research has now proved that the origin, spread and decline of Harappan civilisation took place mainly in some parts of Afghanistan, Baluchistan and Iran as well as in Punjab, Harayana, Rajasthan and Gujarat. The Geographic region described in the Vedic literature concurs with it. However, there is no agreement among the scholars about the chronology of the Vedic Aryans. Therefore, in spite of a number of academic declarations, nothing conclusive can be said about the interrelationship between the Vedic and the Harappan cultures. Chronologically Mature

(urban) Harappan phase was earlier. Many scholars are inclined to accept that succeeding Late Harappan culture was equivalent to the Vedic culture.

The Saraswati (Ghaggar-Hakra) to the east, Sindhu to the west and the five rivers of Punjab – Shatdru (Sutlaj), Vipasha (Bias), Asikni (Chinab), Parushni (Ravi) and Vitasta (Jhelum) – together comprised the region known as 'Saptasindhu'. Besides these rivers mentioned in the Vedic literature are Kubha (Kabul), Gomati (gomal), Suvastu (Swat), etc. Vedic people called the region enriched by these rivers as the 'God's Country' (Devnirmit Desh). However, there is no mention of the region of their origin, if they had arrived in India from outside.

Some scholars believe that Vedic Aryans had stayed in the region of Saptasindhu from the beginning. Now many scholars are searching for the answer to the question, whether the Harappans and the Vedics were one and the same. Apparently no final answer has been found yet. The answer may be found if researchers could decipher the Harappan script.

## 4.2 Vedic Literature and Social organisation of Vedic Times

The Vedic literature is supposed to be the earliest literature of India. Its language is Sanskrit. The four Vedas namely, Rigveda, Yajurveda, Samaveda and Atharvveda form the core of the Vedic literature. The texts of each Veda is referred to as 'Samhitas'. 'Vid' in Sanskrit means to know and 'Ved' means the knowledge.

The Rigveda contains *Suktas* (hymns) composed to eulogise the deities. The verses in Rigveda are known as '*Ruchas*'. A number of *Ruchas* strung together makes a *Sukta* (hymn). Many *Suktas* make one Mandala.

The Yajurveda offers explanation of the sacrificial rituals. It explains when and how

the mantras should be used. A Rigvedic *Rucha*, when recited in sacrificial rituals, is regarded as Mantra. The Yajurveda is a combined composition of the Rigvedic richa in verse and the explanation of its use as a mantra in prose.

The Samaveda is a text that gives the rules of reciting mantras in a musical form. The Samaveda is regarded as the text that is fundamental in the development of Indian music.

The Atharvaveda is about the day-to-day life. It contains information about charms and medicines for various problems and diseases. It also talks about the norms of statesmanship.

Later, Brahmana texts, Aranyaka texts and Upanishadas were created. They are also considered as integral part of the Vedic literature. Vedic literature was created over a prolonged time. Its completion took about 1500 years . It is the only source of information about the life of Vedic people. It offers a glimpse of the organisation of Vedic society, Vedic family and the day-to-day life of the Vedic people.

### **Varna System**

The Vedic society was organized into four classes known as 'Varna', namely, Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. The varna system is first mentioned in the tenth mandala (chapter) of the Rigveda. In the later Vedic period the varna system lost its flexibility. Also the caste system got rooted firmly by this period. In the beginning the varna or the caste was decided by one's occupation. Later it came to be determined on the basis of birth. Hence it became impossible to change one's varna and caste, in which he/she was born.

### **Ashrama System**

The Ashrama System of the Vedic culture lays down the norms of living an ideal life

by dividing the span of human life into four successive stages, namely Brahmacharyashram, Grihasthashram, Vanaprasthashram and Sanyasashram. In the first stage one was expected to spend an austere life and earn knowledge and necessary occupational skills. In the second stage one was expected to fulfil one's prescribed duties with one's wife by his side. In the third stage one was expected to retire from the active life of the householder and if the need be, to give advise to the younger people. It was also desirable that one should stay away from human settlement. In the fourth and the last stage one was expected to renounce all the family bonds, accept a wandering life and to go away. A Sanyasi was not permitted to settle at one place for a longer time.

### **4.3 The Early Vedic Culture as unfolded through Vedic Literature**

The Rigvedic culture is the culture of the Early Vedic period. The tribes of the Early Vedic period staying in the Saptasindhu region have been mentioned in the Rigveda. Among them occur the names like Puru, Anu, Yadu, Druhyu, Turvash, etc. They were the tribes who subsisted on agriculture. The Rigveda mentions a battle known as 'Dashradnya Yuddha' that was fought among ten tribal chiefs. In the Early Vedic period along with the Rigvedic tribes, other local tribes also stayed in the Saptasindhu region, who did not belong to the Rigvedic people. They were called 'Das', 'Dasyu' and 'Pani'. Panis were looked upon as enemies by the Vedic people. Panis used to steal the cattle of the Vedic people.

The tribal settlements and the Vedic people residing there have been mentioned as 'Krishtya' in the Rigveda. 'Krisht' means ploughing. Hence the people who ploughed and also their settlements were mentioned as 'Krishtya'. The importance of agriculture is

**You would like to know :** There is a school of thought, according to which, the Late Harappans, that is the Vedic people, migrated because of adverse climatic conditions and natural calamities. They migrated to Ganga-Yamuna Doab in the east and also went toward the west to Iran, Iraq, Egypt, etc. The evidence of the inscriptions found at 'Boghazkui' in Iraq is used to confirm it. These inscriptions contain the text of a treaty between two tribes called Hittite and Mittanni. It begins by invoking deities like Indra, Varuna and Nasatya. This and similar evidence is offered by some of the European and Indian scholars to prove that Vedic people arrived in India from the West. This is one of the examples to illustrate the way the riddles in history are created.

So far, scholars have been unable to solve the riddle of the 'Aryans' by putting together the archaeological and literary evidence. Nevertheless, it seems to be

certain that the Later Vedic people migrated by two different routes. The Vedic literature mentions 'Uttarapath' (The northern route) and 'Dakshinapath' (the southern route). Both of these routes pass through regions, which differed drastically. Accordingly their environment also differed. Considering this, it becomes clear that the ancient people managed to traverse through extremely difficult terrains.

The northern route extended from Central Asia to Saptasindhu and from there to Himalayan foothills and then proceeding to Ganga-Yamuna Doab, reaching the delta region thereafter.

The southern route formed a link between the Ganga-Yamuna Doab and the southern regions of India. It extended from the southern part of Sindh, through Kutch, South Rajasthan, Malwa and from there to the Deccan Plateau. We have seen in the previous lesson that the Harappan people reached Maharashtra via this route.

clearly emphasised in the 10<sup>th</sup> mandala of the Rigveda.

It states, that for the farmer his ploughshare is the means of obtaining food. The deities, Ashwins and Indra were supposed to be the gods of agriculture. It is mentioned that the Ashwins hold the plough and make available food in large quantities. 'Urvara' means cultivable land prepared by ploughing. Indra is mentioned as the 'Lord of Urvara' (Urvarapati). Barley was the main crop grown by the Vedic people. The 10<sup>th</sup> mandala of the Rigveda mentions well water used for irrigation. According to its description a stone wheel tied with earthen jars (Rahatgadage in Marathi) was used to draw water from the well. It is instructed to secure the belts firmly around the jars. The Rigved describes the

palace of Lord Varuna having 1000 doors. This description is an allegory, indicative of the imagination of the poet. There is no evidence available so far to support this kind of Vedic architecture.

Along with agriculture the Early Vedic people also practised animal husbandry. Cattle, Buffaloes and horses formed part of their pastoral wealth. The god who protected their animals was known as 'Pushan'. The chariot makers in this period were known as 'Rathakara' and the carpenters were known as 'Takshan'. Rathakar and Takshan were artisans of importance. A Rathakara was supposed to have a good knowledge of carpentry too. The carpenters used to make wooden utensils, equipments necessary for performing the sacrificial rituals and other

objects of domestic utility. The Rigveda mentions boats with hundred oars known as 'Aritram'. These descriptions afford a glimpse of the skills of the carpenters of those times.

The Rigveda does not have a specific term for the potter. However there are separate terms for utensils of specific use. 'Ukha' was the term used for a cooking pot. The other terms like 'patra', 'kumbha', 'kalash' etc. also occur. A potter is mentioned as an artisan in the Yajurveda for the first time as 'Kulal'.

'Vayya; means the weaver, and its feminine as it occurs in the Rigveda is 'Vayyaa'. Along with this there are terms associated with the textile industry. 'Tantum' (warp), 'Otum' (weft), 'Tasar' (shuttle), are a few of them. Rigveda also mentions woollen cloth. 'Urna' is the word for wool. However, Rigveda does not mention cotton or silk cloth.

The artisan who worked on leather was known as 'Charmanma'. Various objects of leather are mentioned in the Rigveda. Objects made of gold (hiranya), of copper-bronze or iron (ayas) are mentioned. Iron was not yet common in the Early Vedic period. The artisans who made the metal objects were known as 'Karmar'. The Varna system seems to have established by the end of the Early Vedic period. The 10<sup>th</sup> mandala of the Rigveda in which this system finds the first mention is supposed to be composed at the end of the Early Rigvedic period.

The chariot has been already mentioned. A cart was known as 'Anas'. The river transport was known as 'Navya'. Pushan was the lord of the land routes while

Varuna and Ashwins were the lords of water routes. The Rigveda also mentions trade by exchange, negotiations and traders travelling far and wide to earn profits. At times, though rarely, an ornament called 'Nishka' was used like money.

#### 4.4 Later Vedic Period

Later Vedic Period is dated to around 1000-600 B.C.E. The information about this period is gathered from the treatises written in that period. The material culture as reflected in the epics, Ramayana and Mahabharata was studied with the help of archaeological evidence. A picture of the migration in the Later Vedic period can be gathered from the Saptasindhu region toward the east and its geographic markers from the literature of that period. This period saw the spread of Later Vedic culture from the foothills of Himalayas in the north to the Vindhya mountains in the south. There is a story of Videgha Mathava (Videha Madhava) in this context that occurs in the Shatapatha Brahmana. It appears in this story that the Later Vedic people were settling and bringing the land under cultivation from the west to the east.

The Later Vedic period saw a gradual formation of confederacies of the Vedic villages. They were known as 'Janapada'. Generally, the seniors and the elites in a Janapada collectively took social decisions. They functioned like oligarchic states. The powerful Janapadas among them gradually expanded into Mahajanapadas. In the next lesson we will study the history of the 4 centuries from 1000-600 B.C.E.

## Exercise

**Q1. (A) Choose the correct alternative and write the complete sentences.**

- (1) The importance of agriculture is clearly emphasised in the ..... mandala of the Rigveda.  
(a) 4<sup>th</sup> (b) 10<sup>th</sup> (c) 8<sup>th</sup> (d) 6<sup>th</sup>
- (2) A potter is mentioned as an artisan in the ..... for the first time.  
(a) Rigveda (b) Yajurveda  
(c) Samaveda (d) Atharvveda
- (3) The god who protected the animals was known as .....  
(a) Indra (b) Pushan  
(c) Ashwin (d) Varun

**(B) Find the incorrect pair from set B and write the correct ones.**

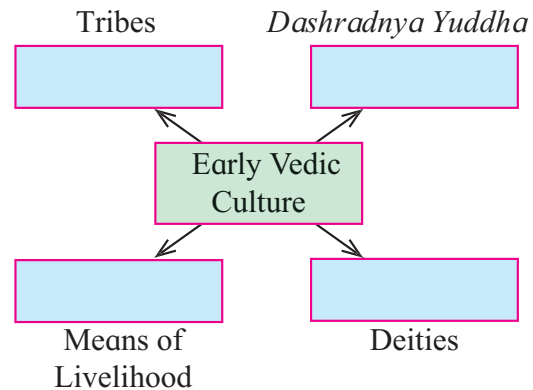
**Set 'A'      Set 'B'**

- (1) Nishka      Gold ornament
- (2) Barley      Main crop of the Vedic people
- (3) Krishtya      The apparatus of drawing water from the well
- (4) Navya      river transport

**(C) Write the names**

- (1) A branch of linguistics -
- (2) A battle fought among the ten tribal chiefs -
- (3) Cultivable land prepared by ploughing -

**Q.2 Complete the concept map given below.**



**Q.3 Choose the correct reason and complete the sentence.**

Panis were looked upon as enemies by the Vedic people because -

- (a) they belonged to a different tribe.
- (b) their language was impure
- (c) Panis used to steal the cattle of the Vedic people
- (d) Panis did not obey the orders of the Vedic people.

**Q.4 State your opinion.**

- (1) There is a debate about the original home of the Aryans.
- (2) The Rigvedic people subsisted on agriculture.

**Q.5 Explain the following concepts.**

- (1) Origin of Aryan people
- (2) Indo-European family of languages

