

Vedic Cultures

Rigvedic Period (1500-1000 BC approx.)

Introduction

- The culture of Harappan was succeeded by the semi-nomadic and pastoral Aryans who created the Vedic Cultures
- Main source of information about the Aryans in India is the Vedas
- The word Veda comes from the Sanskrit word vid (to know) which means knowledge in general
- The Vedas are four in numbers:
 - I. Rigveda
 - II. Samaveda
 - III. Yajurveda
 - IV. Atharvaveda

- The Rigveda is a collection of 1028 hymns and is the oldest amongst the Vedas
- The Rigveda help us in reconstructing the history of the early Aryans
- According to the Rigveda, the early Aryans first settled at Sapt- Sindhu region (which roughly corresponds to present day Punjab)
- The Aryans during this period did not proceed beyond the river Yamuna
- In the following slides we will discuss about the various aspects of lives of the Aryans.

Rigvedic period: contd..

- Political Organization:
- Rigvedic Aryans were rural in character and lived in small villages
- Basis of political and social organization was the family or *kula*
- The *kula* was headed by the *kulapati* or *grihapati* (*the eldest male member as the head of the household*)
- Several families(*kula*) formed the *grama*(*village*) headed by the *gramani*
- Several *gramas* formed the *visya*(*clan*) headed the *visyapati*
- Several *visyas* collectively formed the *Jana*(*people*), which was ruled by a king called *Rajan*.

Political organization: contd..

- Hereditary monarchy was the prevailing system of political organization, though there are references of a cruel king being deprived of his kingship by the people
- The king's primary duty was to serve as the protector(*gopa*) of the *jana* (people).
- Main duties: to protect the lives, honor, property of his subjects, to lead them in war(*gavishti*) literally meaning 'in search of cows', to punish the guilty and to maintain priests for the performance of sacrifices.
- No taxation system, the king derived his income from the tributes paid by the conquered tribes and voluntary tributes called *bali* by his own subjects.
- In his administration, he was assisted by the *Purohita*(chief priest), *Senani*(head of the army) and the *Gramani*(chief administrator).
- He also employed envoys and spies(espionage system).

Political organization: contd..

- The one novelty of this age was the presence of two assemblies called the Sabha and the Samiti, which checked the power of the king.
- The Samiti was a general tribal assembly presided by the king.
- The Sabha was a Council of the elder members of the tribe.
- Main elements of army : infantry, cavalry and chariots
- Army was headed by the *Senani*, but major expeditions were led by the king himself.
- Soldiers used coats of nails, metal helmets, shields for protection and offensive weapons include bows and arrows, swords, spears, axes, lances and slings etc.

Introduction

- Who were the Aryans?
- The Aryans were semi-nomadic and pastoral people who created the Vedic Culture in India
- Original Home of the Aryans?
- Several theories have been given by historians...
- Most acceptable theory: Central Asian Theory of Prof. Max Muller
- He argued that the people in Central Asia experienced Population Explosion as Mortality Rate decreased because of agriculture
- Hence, people migrated to various parts of the world and the branch that entered India via North-Western part of India were called as the Indo-Aryans

Social Conditions

- The social structure during the Rigvedic period was patriarchal in character
- The head of the family was the eldest male member called the *grihapati*
- The property was owned by the grihapati and usually property passed from father to the eldest son and daughters were not given any share
- But if she happened to be the only issue she could claim the property.
- The members lived in houses made of wood and reed and each house consisted of a fireplace(*agnishala*), sitting room and a ladies parlor
- When the Aryans first came to India, there was no consciousness of caste

The Aryans were of fair complexion, tall and sharp nosed, whereas the natives were dark-skinned and short and were called *dasa*, *dasyu*.

So, initially there arose two classes in the society, namely, the Aryans and the non-Aryans on the basis of their complexion, i.e., *Varna*.

Social Conditions.. Contd.

- ***Position of Women:***

- During this period, women were held in great respect.
- Several rites and rituals could not be performed without the presence of the wife(dampati).
- There was no purdah system and child marriage and sati were not practiced.
- Girls were married off when they attained maturity
- Girls enjoyed freedom in choosing their husbands, with the consent of their parents.
- They were given good education and some of them rose to great heights.
- Women like Visvavara, Ghosa and Apala composed hymns and were experts in sastras.

Monogamy (practice of keeping only one wife) was the usual rule

Though polygamy (practice of keeping several wives) existed amongst kings and chiefs.

Social conditions... contd.

- ***Food Habits and Dress Habits:***
- Wheat and barley formed the staple food of the people.
- Milk and its various products such as curd, butter, ghee and many kinds of vegetables and fruits were taken.
- Fish, birds, wild animals like boars, antelopes, buffaloes were relished.
- On ceremonial occasions, the meat of animals such as sheep, goats etc. were consumed.
- However, the meat of the cow was not taken because it was already considered aghnaya “not to be killed”.
- Distilled liquor called Sura was consumed on ordinary occasions and the intoxicating juice of a plant called Soma was freely taken during sacrifices and religious ceremonies
- Clothes were made of cotton, wool and skin of animals.
- Dresses consisted mainly of two garments, the vasa (lower garment) and the adhivasa (upper garment). Often the garments were embroidered with gold.
- Both men and women used ornaments made of gold such as earrings, necklaces, bracelets and anklets.

Social conditions... contd.

- **Education :**

- Education was imparted orally
- The teachers repeated the mantras from the Vedas and then repeated by the students.
- The main aim of education was to sharpen the intellect of the person and to develop their character.

- **Amusement:**

- The Rigvedic Aryans were fond of merry-making.
- On joyous occasions, they indulged in music, both vocal and instrumental and dancing.
- Besides, chariot racing and horse racing, gambling with dice was the most popular amusement.

Economic Conditions:

- Rigvedic Aryans were essentially rural
- People lived in villages where economy was self-sufficient.
- The Aryans came as semi-nomadic pastoralists living chiefly on the produce of cattle
- For some time, cattle-rearing remained their main occupation.
- The cow was the measure of value and was a precious commodity.
- Thus, *gavishti*, literally “to search for cows”, came to mean “to fight”
The obvious implication being that cattle raids and lost cattle frequently led to tribal fights.
- Hence, cows were revered and respected because of its economic value
- The number of cows one possessed determined his wealth and prosperity.
- Among other domesticated animals were the horse, goat, ass, sheep, ox and dog.

Economic conditions... contd.

- ***Agriculture:***

- The more permanent settling-down of the tribes made agriculture the main occupation of the Aryans
- The usual method adopted for ploughing the fields was by means of a pair of oxen bound to the yoke.
- Cultivated fields were known as Urvava or Kshetra.
- The main crops grown were barley, wheat, oil-seeds, cotton and some rice.
- The use of manure was known and they also constructed irrigation canals to water their fields

- ***Trade and Commerce:***

- Rigvedic hymns indicate that trade and commerce were also known.
- Inland trade was a profitable business where goods were transported through chariots drawn by horses and bullock carts.
- Trade with foreign countries like Babylon and West Asian countries were carried on by means of the seas and oceans.
- Barter system was used as a medium of exchange and cow was also regarded as a unit of value.
- The main items of trade were cloth, leather goods, pearls and shells.
- Most probably they also knew about currency and the coin used by them was known as Nishka, though it has been argued that the use of currency was very limited during this period.

Economic conditions... contd.

- Among the other economic activities,

The early Aryans were quite adept in pottery-making, weaving, carpentry, metal-working, leather-working etc.

- During the Rigvedic Age, only copper was used.
- Thus, the general term ayas has been used.
- Subsequently, in later years, the use of iron was known, then copper and iron came to be known as lohit ayas and shyama ayas respectively

Religious conditions:

- Rigvedic religion was very simple.
- They observed nature and its mighty influences and hence started to worship the various powers and manifestation of nature, such as the Sun, the Moon, the Sky, the Dawn, the Wind and the Air.
- People conceived these gods in human forms and bestowed upon them with human qualities.
- The various gods worshipped by Rigvedic Aryans can be classified into three categories:
 1. Gods of the Sky or Heavens such as Dyaus (Sky), Varuna (Sky-god proper), Usha (Dawn), Asvins (Stars) and Surya (Sun)
 2. Gods of Atmosphere such as Indra (Thunder), Rudra (Storm), Maruts (Storm god), Vayu (Wind) and Parjanya (Rain)
 3. Gods of the Earth such as Prithvi (Earth), Agni (Fire) and Soma (Plant).

Religious conditions... contd.

- Temples, images, altars and hereditary priests were absent during this period.
- The *grihapati* or the householder acted as the priest.
- To please the various gods, they offered prayers in the form of hymns and sacrifices.
- The common items offered to the gods were milk, grains, ghee and soma.
- These offerings were made to win divine favor or to gain control over gods or nature.
- They also believed in the theory of karma, attainment of salvation and in life after death.
- They did not consider any one god as supreme but believed that all the gods were one and the same.
- **Conclusion:**
- Thus, through the above discussion, we have analyzed the political, social, economic and religious lives of the Rigvedic Aryans
- All these various aspects saw gradual changes and development in the Later Vedic Period.