

Later Vedic Society (1000 B.C. to 600 B.C)

The period which extends roughly from 1000 B.C. to 600 B.C. is known as the Later Vedic Period in Indian History. By this period some of Vedic tribes had moved from the 'Sapta Sindhava' region to the upper Ganga Valley and other adjacent regions. During this period a number of changes in their social, political, economic and religious structure took place.

3.1 SOURCES

We get both literary as well as archaeological sources to study this period.

3.1.1 Literary Sources

The later additions, especially the 10th Mandala to the Rigveda Samhita and the Sama, the Yajur and the Atharva Veda samhitas are the other Vedic texts which are assigned to the later Vedic phase.

- The Sama Veda samhita is a book of prayers and chants which are from the Rigveda, modified and set to tune for the explicit purpose of singing them during rituals.
- The Yajurveda elaborates the rituals which accompany the recitation of hymns. The rituals and the hymns in this samhita document the social and political milieu of this period.
- The Atharvaveda contains the folk tradition of this period and represents popular religion. It is a good source for understanding the socio-religious conditions of the common people.

These Samhitas are followed by a series of texts called the Brahmanas, which are commentaries on the Vedas. They explain the social and religious aspects of the rituals and throw light on the Vedic society. Although it would be wrong to take any period of early Indian history as the 'epic' period as such the two Sanskrit epics, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana are rich in information on different aspects of early Indian society. Historians believe that the core of what is reflected in these epics can be traced to the later vedic phase. The geographical focus of the phase was on the territories of the upper Ganga basin and the middle Ganga basin, although other regions are also mentioned. In the epics also the major events took place in this region. We must however

remember that there is nothing to prove that the stories narrated in the epics were actual historical events. Secondly both the epics took centuries to reach their present shape. So there are many types of societies which we may find reflected in the epics.

3.1.2 Archaeological Sources

The literary sources repeatedly refer to the areas of Western U.P., Haryana and Rajasthan. The period assigned to the later Vedic phase is circa 1000 B.C. to 600 B.C. Many communities and cultural groups are mentioned in the texts. Thus, particular pottery forms cannot be identified with some tribe or group. However, in the same geographical region some agricultural communities flourished in roughly the same time bracket. These communities used a particular kind of pottery called the Painted Grey Ware (PGW). Thus, these archaeological finds would reflect the material conditions of the later Vedic society.

More than 700 PGW sites have been found along the Upper Ganga Basin. Their distribution extends from the *dry* beds of the river Ghaggar in Bahawalpur and northern Rajasthan, to the watershed of the Indus and Ganges and the Ganga-Yamuna Doab. The eastern limits of this ware are restricted to the northern plains of the Ganges, as the site of Sravasti indicates. Some important PGW sites are Atranjikhera, Ahichhatra, Noh, Hastinapura, Kurukshetra, Bhagwanpura and Jakhera.

The Banas culture of southern Rajasthan, which has been dated from 2000- 1400 B.C. may have possibly extended to the Ganges Valley at around 800 B.C. Thus, these Black and Red Ware users can also be related to the present period. Archaeology does not document the eastward shift of the 'Vedic Aryans', a shift which is suggested in the literary texts. Archaeology does not document any single culture shifting eastwards. Thus there remains a large gap between the nature of the literary and the archaeological sources. There is however the general point that the later Vedic society as well the society reflected in archaeology was a society which had used iron.

Iron objects are common to most of the PGW sites. The Carbon 14 dates from Atranjikhera, Jodhpura and Noh suggest that in the context of the Gangetic plains this metal was introduced around 1000-800 B.C.

The exploitation of the iron ore in Uttar Pradesh, Himachal and Punjab, and later in South Bihar, was an indigenous phenomenon. The Rigveda

mentions "ayas" which may refer to Iron, though the archaeological evidence relates iron to the Later Vedic period. Literary sources provide ample corroboration of this. The Yajurveda qualifies "ayas" as Syama ayas, and the Brahmanas speak of Krishna ayas. Both the words refer to a black metal which means Iron.

Recent excavations suggest that the megalithic people of south India too were familiar with iron technology. Hence we can no longer talk in terms of the introduction of iron technology into the Indian subcontinent by the migrant Aryans.

3.2 IRON TECHNOLOGY AND ITS IMPACT

Does the knowledge of iron lead to any advancement in the metal technology of the period? Similarly one would also like to know the extent to which the introduction of a new technology changes the material milieu of the society.

The evidence of the Later Vedic period suggests a transition from a pastoral society to a sedentary agrarian society. It was earlier suggested that the socketed axes made of iron were extensively used to clear the forests and the Gangetic Doab for permanent cultivation. It was also believed that iron tipped ploughshares and hoes increased the efficiency of the agricultural implements which furthered agricultural activities. Thus scholars believed that the knowledge of Iron technology was an important factor for the development of agrarian economy. However, we now know that the Later Vedic period was neither purely agrarian, nor was it well advanced in iron technology. The rich iron ore mines of Bihar were still not exploited and the technology of smelting iron was primitive.

The objects which are found in the excavations are iron tipped arrowheads, spearheads, etc. i.e. weapons of which the largest number comes from the Ahichhatra excavations. Sickles hoes, axes are rarely found in the excavations. One ploughshare has been reported from Jakhera which probably belongs to the end of this period. Thus, from the excavations, it appears that the use of iron was restricted to making weapons. Iron did not influence the agricultural technology until the second half of the first millennium B.C. when the marshlands and monsoon forests in the middle Gangetic valley were gradually cleared.

In the Later Vedic period, clearing of forests by burning was carried out in the upper Doab. We have the description of the burning of the

Khandavavana in the Mahabharata to establish the city of Indraprastha. Iron tipped weapons and horse chariots helped military activities which were rampant in this period and have been extensively documented in the Mahabharata. However, in subsistence related activities, iron technology had practically no role.

3.3 THE NATURE OF THE ECONOMY

The growth of agriculture in the Later Vedic period was made possible by the availability of vast tracts of fertile alluvial lands of the Ganga-Yamuna Doab and the middle Ganga valley-an area which was slowly settled throughout the first millennium B.C. However, the later vedic texts reflect the continued importance of pastoralism.

Both archaeological and literary sources document the introduction of rice as the staple diet of the people. The PGW and Banas culture yield charred grains of rice from the excavated sites. The Vedic texts mention Vrihi, Tandula and Sali, all denoting rice. It appears that cropping was practised now, and the fields grew both barley and rice. The elaborate sacrifices of this period, e.g. the rajasuya, include offerings of grain along with milk, ghee and animals. The twelve sacrifices prescribed in the Atharvaveda for acquiring material benefits recommend the gifts of cows, calves, oxen, gold, cooked rice, thatched houses and well cultivated fields to the brahmanas. The items of the offerings are a clear indication of the growing importance of sedentary settlements and agriculture. Later Vedic texts also refer to eight, twelve and even twenty four oxen yoked to the plough. Though the number of oxen mentioned is possibly symbolic, the reference suggests that plough cultivation was familiar in this period.

3.3.1 Importance of Pastoralism Declines

Pastoralism was no longer the main subsistence activity of the people as it was in the Early Vedic period. Mixed farming which included cultivation and herding was the occupational norm of this period. Agricultural activities in this phase were not labour intensive. The sites from where rice remains are found in the excavations are located on the elevated areas of the Doab. This suggests that wet rice cultivation which is labour intensive was not practiced as yet.

Mixed farming led to the rise of sedentary settlements. The PGW deposits are generally 2 to 3 m. deep and indicate that people were living in the same spot for a long time. At Bhakpura and Jakhera, the excavations

show that the earlier phase of circular huts made of wattle and daub or wood were replaced in this period by more substantial houses with earth walls. Thus durable materials were being used for house construction owing to the adoption of a sedentary life style.

3.3.2 Changes in the Functions of the Rituals

In the Early Vedic society rituals were performed to bring about the welfare of the entire tribe. Gods were worshipped for ensuring victory over other tribes, granting cattle and sons. It was also an occasion for the chiefs to distribute wealth. In the Later Vedic society the function of the rituals underwent a subtle change. Rituals became much more complicated which could continue for years. Thus only the rich could perform them. The spirit of collectivity was reduced. Sacrifices were performed to ensure control over rest of the tribe. Gifts were no longer given to the entire tribe. Rather the chief gave gifts to the Brahmans who performed sacrifices for him. The rituals were so complicated that it needed expert Brahmans to perform it since a wrong incantation could bring disaster to the performer. The performer of sacrifices was supposed to grant super-human status to the chiefs meaning that they were superior to rest of the tribe. For this service the chief passed on a large part of his wealth to the Brahman priest. Thus, the rituals became a mechanism for ensuring the material and spiritual superiority of the chiefs and the Brahmans.

3.3.3 Emerging Importance of Land

Land was cultivated through family labour and the help of domestic servants and slaves. In this period, initially land was owned by the clan or the Vis. When clan ownership gradually changed to family ownership the grihapati or householder became a man of wealth. The vaisyas (those who originally belonged to the Vis) were the producing class in the society and they became the source of wealth and subsistence for the Kshatriyas and the Brahmanas, who did not actively participate in food production. The vaisyas had to give prestations to the Kshatriyas in lieu of the latter protecting their lands, and dana and dakshina to the priests for their moral upliftment. The vis/vaisya, characterizing the house-holding economy, became the mainstay of economy. Prestations and dana to the non-producing classes helped in the distribution of subsistence goods. There are no references to the sale of land. Visvakarma Bhauvana, a ruler, was rebuked by Prithvi (the earth) when he tried to make a grant of land. This textual reference suggests

communal ownership of land over which the Vis had major participatory rights.

3.4 POLITY AND SOCIETY

The transition from a predominantly pastoral to a mixed farming economy had a great impact on the character of the Later Vedic society and polity. The main trends of changes were:

- Tribal identity of the Early Vedic society gradually gave way to territorial identity and consequently the nature of chiefship changed.
- The social structure which was based on relations within a clan and was largely egalitarian in the Early Vedic period became much more complex. This type of society is marked by inequality. Even the same clan was divided into groups, some of which could have high status in society and some low status.

3.4.1 Polity

Jana was used in the sense of people or tribe in the Rigvedic period, but now the concept of Janapada emerged. Janapada meant the area where the tribe settled. The word *rashtra* was also used for the first time in the Later Vedic texts. However, it was still not used in the sense of a state with well-defined territories.

The Kurus, who were formed from the union between two major Vedic tribes—the Bharatas and the Purus, are mentioned in texts as occupying the area in the upper portion of the Ganga-Yamuna Doab. Similarly, the Panchalas are mentioned as people who occupied the middle portion of the Doab, called the Panchala *desa*. This indicates that tribal identities were merging with territorial identities. It is also stated that when the Kurus and the Panchalas came together; their authority over the upper and middle reaches of the Ganga-Yamuna Doab was complete. These changes in the relationship between the Jana and the area over which it wielded control helped towards the formation of the Mahajanapadas and Janapadas by the 6th century B.C.

Tribal Chiefs and Warriors: When tribal groups came to be associated and identified with particular territories, it also brought about a change in the status and functions of the tribal chiefs. The Rajan or the chief was no longer involved only in cattle raids but emerged as the protector

of the territory where his tribesmen settled. The rajanya which already was a superior lineage during the Rigvedic period, now became the 'Kshatriya' i.e. those who held power over dominions, which is the literal meaning of the word 'Kshatriya'. The Kshatriya class based their power on their role as the protector of their tribes and the land over which their tribes settled. The "vis" had to pay prestations to the Kshatriya, in lieu of the latter's protection and thus the status of the Vis was progressively subordinated to the Kshatriya lineage. Bali and Bhaga no longer meant prestations given at will, but gradually assumed the forms of regular tributes and taxes.

Tribal Assemblies: The change in the status of the Kshatriya or the warrior class is also reflected in the changing nature of the tribal assemblies. The Sabha became more important than the samiti during this period.

Reference to rajas in the assembly or the sabha suggests that they helped the king in his duties. The office of the raja or the chief was not based solely on birth but the choice of rajas restricted to the Kshatriyas.

Raja's Legitimacy: In the absence of firmly established principles of heredity and primogeniture, consecrator) rituals became very important for the ruler in order to assert this authority. Hence, ceremonial sacrifices like rajasuya, asvamedha and vajapeya were performed on lavish scale. In the Rigvedic period, the asvamedha yajna was a small affair. But in this period, this was performed to subjugate other areas and legitimize the ruler's hold over alien lands. The other yajnas included prayers for the rulers' health and all three were in essence legitimizing methods, employed by the raja to proclaim his superiority and power. For instance the sacrificer was proclaimed as a raja in the course of the rajasuya. These: sacrifices were found to be of relevance in later periods also when new kingdoms and new monarchs emerged. They used sacrifices to give religions legitimacy to their power.

The raja was also required to integrate his territory with resources, economic production and distribution, which enhanced his status considerably from a mere raider, or a leader of battles. However, he was not yet the sovereign. The fact that he was elected and could be removed put severe constraints on him, since he was answerable to the clan. Also, he did not appoint the other rajas who helped him with his duties. They were chiefs in their own right. What is important is that the Kshatriya lineage gained a distinctly superior status during this period, the reason

being that the concept of territorial identity was established now. Thus territory became the physical manifestation of the ruler's power to rule.

Tribal Conflicts: The nature of the intra-tribal conflicts and conflicts within tribes also changed. Fights were no longer mere skirmishes over cattle, now the acquisition of land was an important element in these disputes. The necessity of increasing territory can be connected with the growth of population within the tribes. Iron weapons and light wheeled chariots driven by horses raised the efficiency of the fighters. The Mahabharata depicts intra-clan warfare between the Kauravas and the Pandavas of the Kuru clan.

The Priest: With the rising importance of the rajanya Kshatriya, the Brahmanas too became important since they legitimized the office of the ruler through the consecratory rituals. The redistribution of wealth through dana and dakshina on such occasions was primarily from the Kshatriya yajamana to the brahmana priests. The elaborate consecratory rituals suggest that initially the power of the raja was not so secure and hence he had to provide proof of his ability to rule. The status of the officiating priests became at par with the gods, in the later period. It was felt that the gods had to be propitiated with yajnas and the officiating brahmana had to be satiated with dana. Thus the channel of redistribution was between these two higher status groups, and political supremacy was slowly becoming the domain of the Kshatriya.

3.4.2 Society

We have already read about the declining status of the Vis and the ascendancy of the Kshatriyas and the Brahmanas. Society was thus composed of unequal groups.

This hymn describes the origin of the four varnas, i.e. Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaisya and the Sudra, from the body of the universal creator, Prajapati. The 'Hymn of the Primeval Man' comes from the later portion of the Rigveda. Thus hymn for the first time describes the origin of the four varnas. It says.....

"When they divided the Man, into how many parts did they divide him? What was his mouth, what were his arms, what were his thighs and his feet called?"

"The Brahman was his mouth, of his arms made the Kshatriya, his thigh became the Vaisya, and of his feet the Sudra was born".

The symbolism which is projected in these hymns is that Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaisya and Sudra are limbs of the society. However, these limbs did not have equal status. The Brahman was compared to the head whereas the Sudra was compared to the feet. In social life Brahmans were considered the highest Varna because society could communicate with gods with the help of Brahmans only. The Sudras on the other hand performed menial tasks and included slaves captured in wars.

Concept of Varna: The system of Varna had the following features:

- a) status by birth
- b) A hierarchical ordering of the varnas (Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaisya, Sudra) with Brahmana at the top and Sudra at the base).
- c) Rules of endogamy and ritual purity.

The Varna system is further tied with the concept of Dharma i.e. universal law, and the Varna dharma was an attempt to establish a social law for a systematic functioning of the society. However, the Varna dharma system was not properly developed in the Later Vedic society

The division of social groups was based on occupation alone, and society was still flexible, where one's occupations did not depend on birth.

Even in the later times i.e., post-Vedic, the Varna dharma described the ritual status of each group. The Varna system did not prevent the non-Kshatriyas from claiming Kshatriya status and becoming rulers (examples being the Nandas and the Mauryas) nor brahmanas from claiming political suzerainty (e.g. the Sunga kings).

Thus the theoretical model of the Varna system could never be rigidly enforced in the post-Vedic period.

It is Likely that during the Later Vedic period, with the shift in the geographical focus, the Vedic people encountered many non-Vedic tribes and considerable interaction must have helped formation of a composite society. At least the Atharvaveda depicts a host of non-Vedic religious practices which were sanctioned by the priests. However, tribal endogamy through strict marriage rules was the aim in order to maintain

the purity of the tribe. Also, the growing importance of the Kshatriyas and the brahmanas in the *society* made it imperative to maintain their exclusive superior status, as compared to the rest. During the Later Vedic period however, the concept of Varna was rudimentary in nature. The notion of untouchability for instance is absent.

Gotra: The institution of gotra (literally meaning-cow pen) appeared during this period. As against tribal endogamy (marriage within tribe) people practised gotra exogamy (marrying outside the gotra). Gotra signified descent from a common ancestor and marriages could not take place between couples belonging to the same gotra.

Family: The patriarchal family was well established and the grihapati acquired a special status. Since householding economy was gaining predominance, the position of the householder too acquired economic importance. The rights on land were based on usage, and communal ownership of land prevailed. The grihapatis were wealthy and their ritual role was that of a yajamana (i.e. he who orders sacrifice). Their wealth did not come from gifts, but was produced by their own efforts. Through yajnas, which they were bound to perform to gain merit, a part of their wealth got *channeled* to the brahmanas. Despite the presence of some women philosophers and the references to a few queens participating in the coronation rituals, women were considered subordinate to men, and were not involved in any major decision making.

Three stages of life: Three ashramas, i.e. stages of life were prescribed and these stages were represented by the brahmachari (studentship), grihastha (householder), vanaprasthi (partial retirement from householding life by living in the forest). It seems that the fourth i.e. the sanyasa (or complete retirement from the participation in the world) stage of life was not known till the time that the Upanishads were written. The sanyasis or the ascetics in later periods were individuals who protested either passively or actively against the Vedic social structure.

3.5 RELIGION

The texts of this period indicate two different religious traditions:

- The Vedic, which is documented in the Sama and Yajurveda. samhitas and the Brahmanas, and

- The non-vedic or perhaps the folk tradition extensively documented in the Atharvaveda.

The fact that the Atharvan religious tradition was considered to be part of the Vedic suggests assimilation of different cultures and beliefs into the Vedic religious system. The Yajurveda Samhita and Brahmanas document the sacrificial religion of the period. Sacrifices became very important during this period and they assumed both a public and private character. The public sacrifices e.g. the Rajasuya, Vajapeya, Asvamedha were conducted on a massive scale, where the whole community participated. Some of the rituals performed in these sacrifices show elements of a fertility cult. For instance the Asvamedha yajna required the chief queen to lie next to the sacrificial horse, where the queen represented the earth, and this ritual was thought to ensure the prosperity for the king. A number of agricultural rituals were performed in the Rajasuya and the Vajapeya yajna. The periodical rejuvenation of the earth and its fertility are some of the themes which were included in the ceremonial yajnas.

3.5.1 Priestcraft

Later Vedic texts reveal the elaboration of rituals which were complicated and needed professional men, trained in the art of performing them. Vidhis or rules for performing the sacrifices were formulated and the Vedic sacrifices no longer meant simple offering of food/oblations in to the fire. The types of offering, types of sacrifices etc. differed according to the needs of the patron or the yajamana. Sacrifices were now endowed with mystical symbolism and every ritual act was endowed by mysterious power. A new science of priestcraft emerged because of the complexities involved in the performance of these yajnas whether private or public. Thus a class of priests became specialists in the performances of Yajnas. There were even different sets of priests for performing different stages of the same sacrificial ritual.

3.5.2 The Changing Gods

Two prominent Early Vedic gods, Indra and Agni lost their importance. Prajapati the creator became important. This phenomenon also represents the importance of sedentism now, since creation myths are important in the agrarian groups. Rudra, a minor deity in the Rigveda, became important now and Vishnu was conceived as the creator and protector of the universe. Pushan who protected cattle in the former

period now became the god of the Sudras. The changing status of the deities is in indication of the change in the character of the tribes from pastoral groups to sedentary agriculturist groups. The Early Vedic gods who represented natural phenomena were slowly discarded and the personification of natural elements as divine beings became very complex. It was no longer easy to find the natural element which represented a particular god from the hymns of the Later Vedic period.

3.5.3 Folk Tradition

The Atharvaveda is a mine of information regarding the folk tradition. Its contents are radically different from the Vedic sacrificial religion and it is concerned more with magic. The contents of this Veda cover different aspects of human life. The hymns deal with:

- the cure for diseases
- prayers for health
- charms for the prosperity of home and children
- cattle and fields
- charms to produce harmony
- charms concerned with love and marriage or conversely rivalry and jealousy etc.

The Atharvaveda thus documents the kinds of superstition and beliefs which were prevalent. The term Atharvan indicates a magical formula and the Atharvan priests officiated in this religion. Gods of the Vedic tradition were invoked but the reasons for which they were invoked were trivial and individualistic. Many godlings and spirits such as pisacas, rakshasas and so on (some malevolent and some benevolent), were invoked either to bring good fortune or to cause havoc and destruction to one's friends and foes respectively. The invocations and the chants related to the domestic and the household and were close to the daily cycles of existence of the common man.

For example, Indra was asked to kill the house robber, the worm in the body and the wolf devil. The Asvins were entrusted with the protection of agriculture and the killing of rats. Savitri was summoned to fix a place where a new home could be built. Pusan was invoked to bring harmony and safe delivery of babies, while Surya was invoked to remove demons.

Towards the end of this period, a strong reaction against the priestly domination and against the complexities involved in the yajnas resulted in the formulation of a philosophical doctrine which is enunciated in the

Upanishads. These texts emphasized the knowledge of the atma or the soul as against ritualistic practices and the wasteful expenditure which accompanied sacrifices. Thus the materialistic aspect of the religion was discarded and religion was raised to the realm of philosophy. The Upanishads emphasized the changelessness and indestructability of the soul which in a way seemed to emphasize the need for stability and integration in a period when the janapadas and mahajanapadas, i.e. republics and monarchies were emerging.

Thus we find that a great change in religious beliefs and practices had taken place between the Early Vedic and the Later Vedic period. This change was partly related to the shift from pastoralism to agriculture. The religious changes of this period parallel and reflect the socio-political and economic changes that had taken place from the Early Vedic to the Later Vedic phase.

3.6 PRACTICE QUESTIONS

- Write in fifty words the impact iron technology had on Later Vedic society.
- What was the family in the Later Vedic phase?
- What does the changing status of gods in Later Vedic phase indicate?