

6th – What Books and Burial Tell Us I



After the decline of the Harappan civilization in 1500 BCE, the next stage in the history of our country belonged to the people who composed the Vedas. This civilization flourished around the river Indus and the river Saraswati. It is called the Vedic civilization because the source of information about it is the Vedic literature. This civilization is divided into two periods-early Vedic periods or rig Vedic age and the later Vedic period.

The Vedas: There are four Vedas. The rig Veda is the oldest among them. The other three are the Sama Veda, Yajur Veda and the Atharva Veda.

Rig Veda: It is a collection of prayers offered to various Hindu deities like Agni (fire god), Vayu (wind god), Varun (water god), Surya (sun god), soma (god of plants), Usha (goddess of dawn), etc. There are 1028 hymns and prayers in praise of gods and goddesses in the rig Veda. It is considered to be the first source of all knowledge and wisdom. The rig Veda is the oldest literary work of India. It describes a very early stage in the evolution of Hinduism and describes a pastoral, possibly nomadic, culture based on cattle.

Sama Veda: The Sama Veda is considered to be a collection of hymns taken from the rig Veda. It is a music book which includes rig Vedic prayer songs set to music. However, that does not mean that all the hymns of the Sama Veda have been taken from the rig Veda. Many hymns of the Sama Veda are different from the rig Veda. There are some places where the hymns of the Sama Veda show slight resemblance to the hymns of the rig Veda.

Yajur Veda: The yajur Veda is a collection of ceremonial and sacrificial rituals. It has been divided into two parts- the Shukla yajur Veda and the Krishnan yajur Veda. It is a guide to the way different ceremonies and rituals are performed. These rituals reflect the social and political set-up of their times.

Atharva Veda: This is the last of the four Vedas. It deals with spells and charms to cast away evil spirits. Besides the four Vedas, the Vedic literature also includes the Brahmins, the Aranyakas, the Upanishads and the Upavedas.

The epics: The two epics, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana are also considered to be prominent Vedic age literature. Both these epics were composed in Sanskrit and, according to most historians, not before 5th century BCE.

The geographical extent: The Vedic literature contains names of rivers, mountains and regions which indicate the extent of the Vedic civilization. The hymns of the rig Veda mention various rivers like the Sindhu (Indus), Saraswati (now lost), Parushni (Ravi), Vipas (Beas), Shutudri (Satluj), Asikni (Chenab) and Vitasta (Jhelum).

Early Vedic age (1500-1000 BC): This period is also known as the Rigvedic period as the rig Veda was composed at this time and it is the chief source of information about this period.

Political life: The early Vedic society was divided into various tribes. They were cattle breeders. The entire kingdom consisted of many villages called gramas. The village headman was called Gramani. The people were called Jana or vish. The tribal chief of king was called rajan. This post was mostly hereditary. However, on some occasions, the chief could also be elected by an assembly called samiti. The king was expected to be strong and able to protect his tribe. He offered prayers on behalf of the tribes and received a Bali for his services which was a voluntary donation.

Economic life: The Vedic people led a settled life. They were pastoral people. Rearing cattle was one of their main occupations. The cow was one of their favorite and sacred animals. It was their principal form of wealth. The kings gifted cows to the priest. Most of their wars were fought for the sake of cows. The cow was also their unit of barter. They also used horses but did not worship them. There were chariots which were pulled by horses.

Social life: The smallest social unit was the joint family in which members of three or more generation lived in the same house. The father was the head of the family. He was known as grihapati (householder). Women held a position of respect in society. They could attend assemblies and offer prayers along with their husbands. Being a patriarchal

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society, parents preferred sons to daughters. They prayed for brave and strong sons capable of fighting in wars.

Food: The people were very fond of good food which included cereals, vegetables, fruits, honey, milk and milk product. Intoxicating drinks like Sura and Soma were their favorites. They also consumed different varieties of meat.

Clothes and Ornaments: People wore cotton and woolen clothes depending on the weather. Both men and women wore an upper garment wrapped around the shoulders called adhivasa and a lower garment called dhoti which was wrapped around the waist. Some of them wore a shirt called vasa. People wore ornaments like earrings, necklaces, armlets and bangles, depending upon their economic status.

Education and Amusements: The children went to gurukula to study. They lived there and served their guru (teacher) while studying various arts and crafts from him. Chariot racing, horse and hunting were their favorite's pastimes. They knew the game of dice and played musical instruments like veena and drum. Dancing and singing was also prevalent in their culture.

Religion: Just like the Harappan people, the early Vedic people also found it difficult to explain the natural phenomena like rains, appearance of sun and moon etc; hence they looked upon these natural forces as divine beings. Their most important god was Indra. There were no idols. The prayers were chanted in open air. Rituals were simple. Fire was worshipped and was an integral part of their rituals. At the beginning of the later Vedic period, the Aryans learnt the use of iron. This was the beginning of the Iron Age in India.

Later Vedic period: The rest of the three Vedas, namely the Sama Veda, the yajur Veda and the Atharva Veda were composed during this period. The Ramayana, Mahabharata and some parts of puranas were also composed during this period. The Ramayana was written by Valmiki and the Mahabharata was written by Veda Vyasa.

Political life: The Rajan was no more a tribal chief now. He was now a king with a proper kingdom and a big army at his disposal. The extent of his kingdom determined his power and status. The rajan now enjoyed the titles like Samrat and Maharajadhiraja.

Economic life: Besides the Vedas, the excavations at various sites like Hastinapur, Kausambi and Atranjikhera in Uttar Pradesh have discovered remains of mud walls with pieces of mud bricks and burnt bricks. Bamboo poles were used for building roofs in these houses. The floors were made of fine yellowish earth. Large quantities of wheat, rice and barley have been found that the Vedic men must have grown. Ploughing was done with wooden ploughshares.

Society: The position of women became inferior to men. Even though the presence of women was essential in religious ceremonies, still they occupied a lower position in society. Their education had also taken a backseat. The family continued to be the basic unit of society with the father as head of the family. The boys were sent to gurukula to study in the same way as in the early Vedic period.