

# EARLY VEDIC PERIOD

## VEDIC AGE

The Vedic Age begins with the coming of Aryans to India. They came to India during the second millennium B.C. This age is called the Vedic Age because much of the knowledge about this period is derived from the Vedic texts, The Vedas. The Vedic Age roughly extends from the composition of the Rigveda in about 5000 B.C to 600 B. C.

## THE EARLY VEDIC LITERATURE

The Vedic literature comprises mainly the Vedas and the two great epics – the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. All these books are in Sanskrit and throw a great light on all spheres of life of the Aryans.

## THE VEDAS

The term “Veda” comes from the root “Vid” which means wisdom or knowledge. Vedas are the oldest literature of Indian thoughts, a collection of religious and philosophical poems and hymns composed over several generations beginning as early as 3000 B. C. The knowledge of the Aryans is contained in Four Vedas, The Brahmanas, The Aranyakas and The Upanishads etc. The Vedas are four in number – The Rigveda, The Samaveda, The Yajurveda and The Atharvaveda. It is believed that they were revealed by God to the Rishis.

(i) **Rigveda:** According to German Scholar Max Mueller, its traditional date goes back to 3000 B.C. It contains 1028 hymns (10,589 verses) dedicated to 33 different gods. The most often addressed gods were nature gods like Indra, Agni and Soma. It was written when Aryans were settled in the Punjab.

(ii) **The Yajur Veda:** The Yajur Veda outlines various chants which should be sung and pay respects to the various instruments which are involved in the sacrifice by particular section of the priests. This book is in two parts- Krishna Yajur Veda and The Shukla Yajur Veda.

(iii) **The Sama Veda:** There are 1549 hymns in all the Sama Veda. These hymns were pronounced by the priests at the time of some Yajna. Except 75 hymns all these hymns have been taken from the Rigveda.

(iv) **The Atharva Veda:** There are nearly 20 chapters and 731 hymns in this book. The Atharva ved is called the wisdom of the Atharvan section of the Brahmins. Most of the hymns have been written to pacify and control the demons and evil spirits.

## THE BRAHMANAS

The book known as ‘Brahman’ is in prose. The prose commentary of the hymns of the Vedas has been given in them.

Rigveda Translated to – “Arya Brahman and Kaushtiki Brahman”

SamaVeda —————→ Tandya Brahman and Geminia Brahman

Yajtu Veda —————→ Shatpath Brahman

Atharva Veda —————→ Gopath Brahman.

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## THE UPNASHIDS

The Upnashids deal with the Indian philosophy and evolve the theories of Karma, Maya and Mukti. These are nearly 300 in number. The notable upnashids are 'Actrya', Chhandogya, Taltrya, and Kaushitki.

They do not lay emphasis on rites, ceremonies and austerities. The Upnashida are dated between 800 B.C and 500 B. C.

## THE ARYANS

The word 'Arya' stands for 'Superior'. The Aryans are considered as one of the most civilised and cultured races of the world. They were tall and fair complexioned people with sharp features. They had a strong physique.

Historians and Scholars have put forth different views regarding the original home of the Aryans. It is generally believed that they came from Iran or from Central Asia.

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They were probably forced by the shortage of food and fodder to leave their homes and sought settlements in other lands. Those groups of the Aryans, who came to India, are called 'Indo - Aryans'. They came in waves, one after the other, claiming occupation of the fertile land and pushing the earlier inhabitants down towards the south.

## SETTLEMENT OF THE ARYANS

Indo-Aryans entered Punjab and other North-Western parts of India. They settled in villages on the banks of the rivers Indus and Saraswati. The region which the Aryans occupied was known as Sapta Sindhu. They pushed further while driving the 'Dasyus' beyond the Vindhya and thus gained the occupation of more and more land in the eastern and the northern parts of the country. They named it as 'Aryavarta' or the 'Abode of the Aryans.'

## THEORIES REGARDING THE ORIGIN OF THE ARYANS

**Critically examine the various theories regarding the original home of the Aryans.**

Different theories have been provided regarding the original home of the Aryans:

1. **Central Asian Theory:** Prof. Max Muller, a Great German scholar, holds that the original home of the Aryans was Central Asia. According to him, the Aryan gods and goddesses bore resemblance to the gods and goddesses worshipped in Central Asia. Besides, the Rigveda, the religious work of the Indo-Aryans and Zend-Avesta, the work of Iranian Aryans contain many similar facts.

2. **Tilak's Arctic Region Theory:** Lok Manik Tilak is of the opinion that the Aryans lived in the Arctic Region before migrating to India. In Rigveda we find mention of long mornings and snowfall, the phenomenon of the polar regions.

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3. **Tibetan Theory:** According to Swami-Dayanand Saraswati, the original home of the Aryans was Tibet. As Tibet was too cold a place to live in. Aryans held fire in great respect and worshipped it as a god.

4. **Sapt-Sindhu Theory:** The famous Indian scholar A.C. Dass opines that the original home of the Aryans was India. They lived in the Sapt-Sindhu area. Some of the natural scenes, the birds, the animals mentioned in Rigveda and other religious books of the Aryans bear testimony to the fact that Aryans did not migrate to India. Rather they originally belonged to it.

5. **European Theory:** Sir William John says that the original cradle of the Aryan race was Europe. He holds that there is a striking resemblance between the European languages and Sanskrit language, the language of the Aryans. As for instance, the 'Pita' and 'Mata' in the Latin. Their pronunciation is also very much the same (as pitri-Pater, Matri-Mater).

### SOCIAL LIFE OF ARYANS

(i) **Family life:** The Aryans lived in joint families. The eldest male member in the family, known as 'Kulapa' or 'Gritapati', exercised full authority over all the members. It was his duty to perform sacrifices or Yajnas. Next to him in importance was the mother. Her presence was must at all religions ceremonies.

(ii) **Status of Women:** The women occupied a position of honour. Marriage was considered sacred and binding. The women were given right education and some of them even composed the Rigvedic hymns. Child marriages, polyandry and the custom of sati were unknown in early stages. The woman was an honour to a father, glory to a husband and goddess to sons.

(iii) **Food:** The food of Aryans was very simple but nourishing. They took wheat and barley, plenty of milk and milk products like butter, ghee, curd and cheese. They were found of intoxicating drinks, 'Soma and Sura'. These were also offered to the Gods.

(iv) **Dress:** The dress of Aryans consisted of two or three garments. It consisted of the Vasas and the Adhivasa. These were usually made of cotton, wool or skin and were of different colours. Both men and women wore embroidered clothes and gold ornaments. Men put on turbans and grew beard.

(v) **Amusements:** The Aryans found leisure for enjoyment and merrymaking. The favourite past times were hunting, chariot racing, wrestling and game sling. Music was both vocal and instrumental.

(vi) **Education:** Education, both oral and written were known. The Aryans Studied a wide range of subjects. These included not only Vedas, Itihas, the Puranas, Grammar, but also geometry, astronomy, military science and arts and crafts. Gurukula system of education was widely prevalent.

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(vii) **Standards of Morality:** They maintained high standard of morality. People lived in contentment and did not take to crimes such as stealing, robbery and murder. Morality among women was also very high.

(viii) **Caste System:** The Aryan society was divided into four varnas namely, Brahmanas, Kashatriya, Vaishya and Sudras. Brahmanas or the Priests were the learned who performed sacrifices while the Kshatriyas belonged to the ruling class or warriors. The Vaishyas belonged to the trading classes. The Sudras duty was to serve the higher varnas and to perform such menial jobs as scavenging. The caste system was as such not hereditary but latter on it became rigid.

### ECONOMIC CONDITIONS OF ARYANS (OCCUPATIONS)

1. **Agriculture:** The Rigvedic Aryans were primarily an agricultural people. They cultivated lands and grew crops of wheat and Barley. Oil-seeds and cotton were also grown. The water for irrigation came from wells, canals and lakes the fields were cultivated by oxen.

2. **Domestication of Animals:** A large majority of the early Aryans were cattle – breeders. They loved pastoral life. Their wealth and prosperity depended upon the possession of a large number of animals especially cows, considered as a sacred animal. The other domesticated animals were bulls, oxen, horses, sheep, goats, asses and dogs.

3. **Trade and Transport:** The Aryans had made a great progress in different Arts and crafts. Such professions including potters, weavers, carpenters, chariot-makers, Jewellers, smiths, dyers and masket makers are known. Trade was carried on barter system. Generally the cow was regarded as the standard of value. A sort of coinage, known as 'Nishka' was also prevalent. Trade was carried on by land and sea. The chief means of transport of goods was the cart driven by oxen.

### RELIGIOUS BELIEFS OF ARYANS

The early Aryans were religious. They worshipped different forces of nature such as Indra, Vayu, Prithvi, Varuna, Surya, Agni and Usha. They offered prayers to these gods in order to seek wealth and prosperity and to avert evils. They offered sacrifices or Yajnas to them and made offering of ghee, honey, milk and grains. They offered sacrifices to various gods asking them to bestow boons such as prosperity, longevity of life, health, male – children, power and defeat of their rivals.

Though Rigvedic Aryans worshipped many gods, yet they believed in only one Supreme God.

### POLITICAL CONDITIONS

1. **Status of the king:** The Aryans lived in Tribes, called 'Janas.' Each Jana had its own ruler who was called 'Rahan'. Kingship was generally hereditary. His main function was to lead the people in times of war. This duties included punishing the wicked and upholding of the Dharma. The king lived in a royal palace in the capital and received taxes from his subjects.

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2. **Ministers:** The king was assisted in the conduct of his administration by a number of ministers e.g., Purohita, the Senani, Gramani etc. The Purohita was the religious advisor of the king and enjoyed a very dignified position. The 'Senani' was the leader of the army. The Gramani was the leader of the village. These ministers and officers were men of high character and thus exercised a sort of check on the autocracy of the king.

3. **The Sabha and the Samiti:** The most popular representative bodies of the Rigvedic Age were the Sabha and the Samiti. These acted as a check on the arbitrary powers of the king. The Sabha wielded great influence over the king and the administration. The membership of the Sabha was restricted to the elders of the families.

The Samiti included the representatives of the common people and a few influential Brahmins and heads of the aristocratic families. It was in Samiti that the political affairs of the kingdom were freely discussed.

