

4. The Vedic Civilization

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4.1 The Vedic literature

The civilization that is based on Vedic literature is known as Vedic civilization. The Vedas are considered to be our earliest literature. The Vedas were composed by many Sages or *rishis*. Some vedic hymns were composed by women.

Vedic literature is in Sanskrit. Vedic literature is very rich and diverse. The Rigveda is considered to be the first text. It is in the form of verses. There are four Vedas – Rigveda, Yajurveda, Samaveda and Atharvaveda. The Vedic texts are known as *Samhita*. ‘*Vid*’ means ‘to know’. The term ‘Veda’ derives from *vid*. It means ‘knowledge’. The Vedas have been preserved through the oral tradition. The Vedas are also called as *Shruti*.

Rigveda Samhita : Each verse of the Veda is known as a *richa*. So, the Veda consisting of *richas* is called ‘Rigveda’. *Richa* means a verse composed to praise a deity. When a number of *richas* are put together to praise a particular deity, the poetic composition is called a *sukta*. The Rigveda consists of many *suktas* composed to praise different deities.

Yajurveda Samhita : The Yajurveda contains *mantras* uttered during a *yajna*. Yajurveda provides guidance about how and when the different *mantras* must be chanted during *yajna* rites. This text includes the verses or poetic incantations and their explanation in prose.



Do you know ?

The meaning of some *suktas*

- * O Almighty, make it rain in plenty. May we get a plentiful crop in our field. May there be plenty of milk for our children.
- * May the cows come to our homes and stay happily in their pens. May they bear many calves.
- * Arise, O People. Darkness has vanished with the advent of dawn and sunlight comes. Dawn has awakened the whole world. Let us pursue our own occupations and earn riches.

Samaveda Samhita : The Samaveda provides guidance on singing Rigvedic verses to a set rhythm and tune at the time of *yajna* rites. The Samaveda has contributed in a major way in laying the foundation of Indian music.

Atharvaveda Samhita : The Atharvaveda is named after Atharva *rishi*. This Veda is different from the other three Vedas. It is more concerned with many things in the day-to-day life of the people. It includes solutions to adversities and diseases. It also provides information about medicinal herbs. The Atharvaveda provides guidance to a king about the way he should administer his kingdom.

The Brahmana texts, Aranyakas and Upanishads were written after the composition of the *Samhitas*. They are also included in Vedic literature.

Brahmana texts : They were composed to provide guidance on using Vedic *mantras* in *yajna* rituals. Each Veda has independent texts called Brahmanas .



Aranyakas : Aranyakas consist of the reflections or thoughts expressed after meditating with deep concentration in forests or wilderness. The Aranyakas are concerned with accurate performance of *yajna* rites.

Upanishads : The term Upanishad indicates knowledge acquired by sitting at the feet of the teacher. Human beings have always wondered about events like life and death. It is not easy to find answers to them. The Upanishads discuss such serious and profound issues.

The four Vedas, Brahmanas, Aranyakas and the Upanishads were composed over a period of one thousand and five hundred years. During this long period, the Vedic civilization underwent many changes. The Vedic literature is an important source for the study of those changes and of the day-to-day life in the Vedic period.

4.2 Family system, day-to-day life

Joint family system was prevalent in the Vedic period. The *grihapati* was the head of the family, a man responsible for the family. His family included his old parents, wife and children and also the families of the children, the younger brothers and their families. This family system was patriarchal. In the initial period, there are references to women scholars such as Lopamudra, Gargi and Maitreyi in Vedic literature. However, slowly the restrictions on women went on increasing and their position in the family and society became secondary.

The houses during the Vedic period were earthen or wattle and daub constructions. Wattle means woven lattice of wooden strips which is daubed with clay mixed with cowdung. A house was called *griha* or *shala*.

The diet of the people mainly consisted of cereals like wheat, barley and rice. From this, they made different preparations. Words like *yava*, *godhoom*, *vrihi*, etc. can

be found in the Vedic literature. *Yava* means ‘barley’, *godhoom* - wheat, *vrihi* - rice. The



Houses in the Vedic period

Vedic people relished milk, yoghurt, ghee, butter, honey. Black gram (*udad*), lentil (*masoor*), sesame and meat were also a part of their diet.

People in the Vedic period used cotton and woolen garments. They also used *valkals* or clothes made from barks of trees. Similarly, animal skins were also used as clothing. Men and women used ornaments of gold, flower garlands, strings made of beads, etc. A kind of pendant called *nishka* seems to have been popular. It was also used as a currency.

Singing, playing musical instruments, dance, board games, chariot-race and hunting were the means of recreation. Their main musical instruments were *veena*, *shat-tantu*, cymbals and the conch. Percussion instruments like *damru* and *mridanga* were also used.



Vedic musical instruments

4.3 Agriculture, animal husbandry, economic and social life

Agriculture was the main occupation during the Vedic period. Many oxen were yoked together to plough the fields. The plough had iron ploughshares. The Atharvaveda considers insects, pests and other animals that destroy crops and suggests certain remedies. Cowdung was used as manure.

During the Vedic period, animals like horses, cows and dogs had special importance. Cows were used as means of exchange. That is why, cows were highly priced. People took special care to ensure that their cows would not be stolen. The horse was valued because of its speed. The Vedic people were skilled in taming the horses and harnessing them to the chariots. Chariots in the Vedic period had spoked wheels which are lighter than solid wheels. The horse drawn and spoked wheel chariots of the Vedic period were swift and speedy.



A chariot



Do you know ?

‘Horse power’ is a unit of measuring power – the rate at which work is done by an engine.



In this period, apart from agriculture and animal husbandry, several other occupations had also flourished. Artisans and people practising various occupations were an important part of the social system. They formed independent organizations known as *shrenis* or guilds. The head of the guild was known as *shreshthi*. However, slowly, the status of skilled artisans became secondary.

During this period, there were four *varnas* – Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. A *varna* was determined by the occupation of the people. In the later period, the *varnas* came to be determined on the basis of birth. This gave rise to castes. The caste system led to inequality in the society.

During the Vedic period, certain notions about leading an ideal life had become well established. There were four stages or four *ashramas*, from birth to death. The first *ashrama* was the *brahmacharyashrama*, or the period of staying with the Guru to learn from him.

The next stage after the successful completion of *brahmacharyashrama* was *grihasthashrama*. It was expected that during this period, a man would carry out his duties towards his family and society with the help of his wife. The third stage was *vanaprasthashrama* when a man was





Guru and disciples

expected to detach himself from the household, retire to a solitary place and lead a very simple life. The fourth stage was the *sanyasashrama*. At this stage, the convention was to renounce all relations, lead life in order to understand the meaning of human life, and not stay in one place.

4.4 Religious ideas

In the religious ideas of the Vedic period, forces of nature such as the sun, wind, rain, lightning, storms and rivers were given the form of deities. Vedic compositions pray them to become life giving forces. The Vedic people put offerings into the *yajna* fire to please them. These offerings were called *havi*. *Yajna* is the act of offering *havi* into fire. Initially, the *yajna* rites were simple. Later on, the rules of *yajna* became harder and harder. The importance of priests went on increasing.



Yajna

People in the Vedic period had thought about how the natural phenomena occur. Summer is followed by the rainy season and the rainy season by winter. This is a regular cycle in nature. The cycle in nature and the life cycle that moved with it were termed by the Vedic people as *rita*. The life of all living beings is a part of the cycle in nature. Disturbance in the cycle of nature leads to calamities. Everyone should be careful not to let it happen. Nobody should break the laws of nature. It was believed that following these rules was to follow *dharma*.



Let's discuss.

What could be the causes that upset the cycle of nature? What attempts can you make to avoid it? For example, what will you do for effective management of drinking water when there is scanty rainfall?

4.5 Political System

In the Vedic period, each village had a head known as *gramani*. A group of villages formed a *vish*, whose head was called *vishpati*. Several *vish* formed a *jana*. Later, when the *jana* settled into a specific region, it came to be known as a *janapad*. The head of the *jana* was known as *nripa* or *raja* (king). The main duties of the king were to protect the people, collect taxes and run the administration efficiently.

In order to run the administration smoothly, the king appointed various officers. The *purohit* (priest) and the *senapati* of the army were officers of special importance. The officer who collected the taxes was known as *bhagdugh*. *Bhag* means share. The person who collected the king's share of the produce of a *jana* was called *bhagdugh*. There were four institutions who guided the king – *sabha*, *samiti*, *vidath* and *jana*.

The people of the State participated in their working. Women, too, participated in the working of *sabha* and *vidath*. The *sabha* consisted of senior citizens of the State whereas the *samiti* was a general body of the people.

Later on in the Vedic thought, Smriti and Puranas were composed. After a period of time, the religious stream based on the

Vedas, Smritis, Puranas and local traditions came to be known as Hinduism.

Along with the Vedic stream, there were other religious trends which took a different position from the Vedic one, regarding *yajna* rites and the *varna* system. We will learn more about them in the next chapter.



Exercise

1. Name the following with reference to the lesson.

- (1) Women scholars in Vedic literature
.....
- (2) Means of entertainment in the Vedic period
.....
- (3) The four *ashramas*
.....

2. Right or wrong?

- (1) Rigveda – *Mantras* uttered during *yajna*.
- (2) Samaveda – Guidance on singing a *mantra* during *yajna* rites.
- (3) Atharvaveda – The Veda derived its name from *Atharva rishi*.

3. Answer in one word each.

- (1) The language of Vedic literature
.....
- (2) The meaning of *vid*.....
- (3) The head of a family.
- (4) The head of *shrenis*

4. Name the following :

- (1) The musical instruments you know
.....
- (2) Two modern ornaments of women
.....
- (3) Today's means of entertainment
.....

5. Answer in short.

- (1) What foods were included in the diet of the Vedic people?
- (2) Why were cows priced highly ?
- (3) What was a man expected to do in *sanyasashrama* ?

6. Write notes on :

- (1) The religious ideas during the Vedic period.
- (2) Houses in the Vedic period.
- (3) Political system in the Vedic period.

Activity :

- (1) Interview some artisans in your locality and write about them.
- (2) List the new words in the lesson and find their meaning.

