

CC-1/GE-1: HISTORY OF INDIA FROM EARLIEST TIMES UP TO 300 CE

IV. THE VEDIC PERIOD: POLITY, SOCIETY, ECONOMY AND RELIGION, IRON AGE WITH REFERENCE TO PGW AND MEGALITHS.

NOTE-1

THE VEDIC PERIOD: POLITY, SOCIETY, ECONOMY AND RELIGION

Harappan Civilization was followed by another great culture Known as the Vedic Culture. It is called Vedic Age as its reconstruction is primarily based on using Vedic texts as sources. Indo-Aryans are believed to be the composers of Vedic texts. The term ‘Indo-Aryans’ is basically a linguistic term and refers to speaker of a sub group of the Indo- Iranian branch of the Indo- European family of languages.

Understanding the Vedic corpus- a vast and voluminous sacerdotal literature-is intimately linked up with the study of India’s past in a remote antiquity for a variety of reasons. First, with the Vedic corpus India society and culture enters its literary phase, a phenomenon of momentous significance. The Vedic corpus is the earliest literary tradition in Indian History, and the Rig veda is also the earliest literary creation in India.

The Vedic corpus is generally divided into Early Vedic and Later Vedic texts. In terms of chronology the Early Vedic period is assigned to c.1500-1000 BCE and the later Vedic period is assigned to c.1000-500 BCE.

In the Hindu tradition, the Vedas have the status of shruti (literally, ‘that which has been heard’). They are thought to embody an eternal, self-existent truth realized by the rishis (seers) in a state of meditation or revealed to them by the gods. The category of smriti (literally, ‘remembered’) texts includes the Vedanga, Puranas, epics, Dharmashastra, and Nitishastra.

The word Veda comes from the root vid (literally, ‘to know’) and means ‘knowledge’. There are four Vedas—Rig, Sama, Yajur, and Atharva. The Rig Veda contains the world’s oldest surviving poetry, some of it of extraordinary beauty and philosophical depth. Each Veda has four parts, the last three of which sometimes blend into each other—the Samhita, Brahmana, Aranyaka, and Upanishad.

The Rig Veda Samhita is a collection of 1,028 hymns (suktas) arranged in 10 books (Mandalas). The Sama Veda consists of 1,810 verses, mostly borrowed from the Rig Veda, arranged according to the needs of musical notation. The original melodies are, however, lost. The Yajur Veda deals with the details of the performance of rituals. The Atharva Veda is the latest Veda and contains hymns (some from the Rig Veda), but also spells and charms which reflect aspects of popular beliefs and practices.

Vedic literature forms an important part of the Brahmanical tradition—texts preserved and transmitted by a section of Brahmana males. It reflects their religious beliefs, practices, and points of view. As a source of history, these texts are used for information about life in parts of north-western and northern India during the 2nd and 1st millennia BCE.

A number of supplementary texts known as Vedanga (literally, ‘limbs of a Veda’) aimed at helping the proper recitation, use, and understanding of the Vedas. These include works on phonetics (shiksha), metre (chhanda), grammar (vyakarana), etymology (nirukta), ritual (kalpa), and astronomy (jyotisha).

THE PURANAS

The word 'Purana' means 'old'. According to tradition, the Puranas were composed by Vyasa, but it is clear that in the form in which they have come down to us, they were not the work of one person nor of one age. There are 18 Mahapuranas (great Puranas), and many more Upapuranas (secondary Puranas). The standard list of the 18 Mahapuranas includes the Vishnu, Narada, Bhagavata, Garuda, Padma, Varaha, Matsya, Kurma, Linga, Shiva, Skanda, Agni, Brahmanda, Brahmavaivarta, Markandeya, Bhavishya, Vamana, and Brahma. The origins of the Puranas may have overlapped to some extent with the Vedas, but their composition stretched forward into the 4th–5th centuries CE, and in some cases, even later. The Puranas have accounts of mountains, rivers, and places, which are useful for the study of historical geography. They also reflect the emergence of religious cults based on devotion, especially towards the gods Vishnu and Shiva and the goddess Shakti. This devotion was expressed through the worship of images of deities in temples, pilgrimage (tirtha), and vows (vrata).

THE DHARMASHASTRA

The Sanskrit word dharma (from the root dhri, meaning 'to maintain, support, or sustain') is very rich in meaning and difficult to translate. The concept of dharma is based on the idea that the universe is governed by a certain natural law and that the moral laws guiding people's lives should be in consonance with that natural law. A special group of Sanskrit texts dealing specifically with dharma are collectively known as the Dharmashastra. These texts can be subdivided into three groups. The first two are the Dharmasutras and the Smritis. The third includes brief and elaborate commentaries, comments and conclusions.

THE TWO SANSKRIT EPICS

The two Sanskrit epics, the Mahabharata and Ramayana, fall within the category of smriti as well as itihasa (traditional history), although the Ramayana is sometimes classified as kavya (poetry). The Mahabharata consists of 18 Parvas (books) and has two main recensions—a northern and southern. The core story concerns a conflict between two sets of cousins—the Kauravas and the Pandavas—and a great war that was fought between them at Kurukshetra. The Ramayana exists in the form of two main recensions—northern and southern. The basic story is about Rama, prince of Kosala; his banishment to the forest due to the intrigues of his wicked stepmother; the abduction of his wife Sita by Ravana, the king of Lanka; Sita's rescue; and Rama's return to the capital, Ayodhya, to become king.

POLITY

The Rig Veda is replete with prayers to deities who are expected to help humans to overcome their enemies; accounts of clashes also regularly account in Rig Veda. The Rig Veda retains memory a major battle, namely the battle of the ten kings (Dasarajana) against the Bharat chief Sudra. Though the Vedic literature does not offer any connected accounts of political events for nearly a millennium, the later Vedic texts pay considerable attention to various rituals meant for aspirants' political control. The Vedic corpus was also aware of the role of the popular assemblies. Images of polity and political situation are not entirely absent from the voluminous Vedic texts.

The Rig Veda regularly acquaints us with terms like gana, jana and vis which all point to group or collection of people. An even small or more primitive unit was grama which originally did not stand for its commonly accepted connotation of a village; grama too denoted a combination, a group.

The word Rajan (or raja) occurs many times in the family book of the Rig Veda. Since a full-fledged monarchical state had yet emerged, this word is best translated as 'chieftain' or 'noble', rather than as king.

The Rig Veda mentions assemblies such as the Sabha and Samiti. The Sabha seems to have been a smaller, more elite gathering, whereas the samiti appears to have been larger assembly presided over by a Rajan.

SOCIETY AND ECONOMY

The Rig Veda repeatedly emphasises the importance of cattle-wealth (go). The cattle (go) in the Rig Veda is synonymous with wealth (rayi). A person rich in Cattle (goman) is considered wealthy (maghavan), fit to be a part of the Sabha. The Rig Veda therefore considered the cattle as the principal form of social wealth., agriculture though known and practised, was secondary to cattle keeping in the Rig Vedic economy. It is no wonder that the Rig Veda knew the chief of the clan (vispati) as gopati (lord of the cattle); wars were termed in the Rig Veda as Gavishthi. The Go was also the medium of exchange in the Rig Veda.

No less coveted than the go was the horse (asva), which was not encountered in India prior to the advent of the Indo-Aryan speakers. The horse regularly appears in the Rig Veda as a coveted animal, which was often obtained as booty in a war. The Rig Vedic people were not entirely nomadic, but semi pastoralists, who therefore did not experience a fully sedentary society.

It is possible that towards the end of the Rig Vedic time the importance of agriculture was being taken into account.

Only rudimentary crafts figure in the Rig Veda. One of them was that of the carpenter (takshaka) who is different from the wood cutter.

The Vedic literature is indeed our principal source for understanding contemporary social life. The primary unit of the social life was the family (kula). Right from the Rig Vedic times the family is patriarchal; the head of the family usually being the father.

The Rig Veda offers the earliest known account of the four varnas- the brahmana, the kshatriya, the vaishya and the sudra, the most distinctive feature of the traditional society in India. The later Vedic texts on the other hand provide information about social change from a relatively simpler society to a more complex and sharply differentiated society.

The growing rigours of the Varna system are also clear from the restrictions on marriage. The Vedic society was patriarchal. Such a society as this invariably placed women in a position secondary to the male members of the family. The position of women seem to have taken a worsening turn from the Later Vedic times. The undesirability of the birth of a daughter became pronounced.

RELIGION

Vedic literature being religious in nature, historians have regularly used the Vedic corpus for understanding the belief-system and rites and rituals. The centrality of the Vedic religious life is given to ritual of sacrifice of various kinds.

One of the most significant Gods in the Rig Veda was the fire God Agni. Agni was the purifier and the linkage between the human beings and God. The most prominent deity in the Rig Vedic times was Indra, he is a great hero, chief of the Gods in their incessant war with demons (asuras). Another important deity was Varuna who was the upholder of the cosmic order. He is closely associated with Mitra, the Sun God. There is a separate sun God, Surya.

One of the most important deities was Soma. Soma is both an inebriating drink and also the presiding deity over that drink. Vishnu in the Rig Veda is a solar

deity in the name of Aditya, while Siva figures as Rudra. The Rig Veda strongly upholds the worship of nature and various natural phenomenon like rainfall, thunderbolt, dawn and the river-Goddess Sarasvati.

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