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Early Vedic Age : Origin, Social Life, Economic Life, Culture and Religion

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Early Vedic Age : Origin, Social Life, Economic Life, Culture and Religion!

After the decline of the Indus Valley Civilization, another glorious civilization flourished in India. The people who were responsible for the evolution of this civilization called themselves Aryas or Aryans.

Arya' literally means the man of 'noble character', and the "free-born". They belonged to the group of people known as Indo-Europeans. They entered into India from the north-west.

They spoke the Indo-European languages from which modern languages like Sanskrit, Persian, Latin, Greek, Celtic, Gothic have developed. Originally, the Aryans seem to have lived somewhere in the area east of the Alps, known as Eurasia.

European Origin:

The early Aryans were familiar with certain animals such as goats, dogs, pigs, cows, horses etc. and also with the trees like pine, maple, oak, willow, birch etc. which are found in Europe. This led to Prof. Giles to suggest the European origin of the Aryans. It is generally believed that they migrated to India and other parts of Asia from Europe.

It is difficult to locate the exact part of Europe where the Aryans originally lived before they migrated elsewhere. According to Giles, Balkan countries were the original home of the Aryans. The flora and fauna and the animals with which the early Aryans were familiar could be found in the Balkan countries at that time.

Prof. Hirst believes that the Aryans migrated from Lithuania Europe into Caucasus and from there they entered into Iran. Again from Iran they entered into Punjab. This view is proved by the discovery of Boghaz Koi inscription and the Tel-El- Amarna Letters in Western Asia.

Migration from Southern Russia:

Some historians held the view that the Aryans entered into India from the region of South Russia. Brandenstein has suggested that the Aryans migrated to India from Kirghiz steppes in Russia.

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The great Philologist, Schrader accepts South Russia as the original home of Russians from where they migrated to different areas.

Indian Origin:

Some historians held the view that Aryans belonged to India. The Rig Veda refers to 'Sapta Sindhu' land (of seven rivers) which was the name of Punjab. Subsequently it was called "Panchanada" (land of five rivers). The flora and fauna with which the Aryans were familiar are not found in Punjab. Again the fertility of Punjab must have attracted immigration. From the linguistic view point Greek and Latin belong to Aryan group of Languages. These considerations led the historians to believe that Aryans do not originally belong to India.

From linguistic study it is proved that the Aryans migrated from Europe or Asia to India. For example 'Pider' and 'Mader' in Parsi, 'Pater' and 'Mater' of Latin, "Father" and 'Mother' of English resemble with 'Pitru' and 'Matru' of Sanskrit. So the historians generally accepted the view that Aryans migrated from Europe or Asia to India. The Aryans first appeared in Iran on their way to India, where the Indo-Iranians lived for a long time. From Rig Veda, which is the earliest specimen of Indo-European language we know about the Aryans. The Rig Veda consists of ten mandalas or books. It is a collection of prayers offered to Agni, Indra, Mitra, Varuna and other gods by various families of poets or sages.

Rig Veda has many things in common with 'Avesta' of Iran. The 'Rig Veda' and 'Avesta' use the same names for several gods and even for several classes. Some Aryan names engraved in the Kassite inscriptions of 1600 B.C. and the Mittani inscriptions of the fourteenth century B.C. found in Iraq proves that from Iran a branch of the Aryans moved towards the west.

Home of the Aryans in India:

The Aryans appeared in India a little earlier than 1500 B.C. The earliest Aryans settled down in eastern Afghanistan, Punjab, and fringes of Uttar Pradesh. The Rig-Veda mentioned the names of some rivers of Afghanistan such as the river Kubha, and the river Indus and its five branches. The earliest settlements of Aryans were confined to the valleys of the river Sindh and its tributaries and of the Saraswati and the Drishadvati.

Though they were confined mainly in Punjab, yet their outer settlements reached to the banks of the Ganga and the Yamuna. They named that region Madhya Desa. Gradually they occupied the whole of Uttarapatha, the loan between Himalayas and the Vindhya and from the western seas to the east were called as Aryavarta.

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The Vedas:

The Vedas form the oldest literary works of the Aryans and occupy a very distinguished place in the history of the world literature. Vedas have been looked upon as the revealed words of God by millions of Hindus. In course of many centuries Vedas had grown up and was orally handed down from generation to generation. The Vedas were probably authored during 1800 BC and 600 BC. It consists of three successive classes of literary production.

These three classes are:

(i) The Samhitas or Mantras—these are collections of hymns, prayers, charms, litanies, sacrificial formulas.

(ii) The Brahmanas—a kind of Primitive theology and philosophy of Brahmanas.

(iii) The Aranyakas and Upanishads—they are partly included in the Brahmanas or attached thereto and partly exist as separate work. They contain philosophical meditations of the hermits and ascetics on soul, God, world & man.

There are four Samhitas which are different from one another.

These are:

(i) The Rigveda Samhita:

A collection of hymns. It has ten mandalas with a total of 1028 ‘Suktas’ or ‘stutis’ for the worship of gods like Indra, Surya, Agni, Yama, Varuna Ashwini, Usha etc.

(ii) Samaveda Samhita:

A collection of songs mostly taken from Rig Veda. It contained 1549 stutis. A special class of priests known as “Udgator” were to recite its hymns.

(iii) Yajur Veda Samhita:

A collection of sacrificial formula. It has 40 mandals. There are two distinct forms of Yajur Veda namely. “Sukla Yajur Veda” and “Krishna Yajur Veda”. The “Sukla Yajur Veda” contains the genesis while the “Krishna Yajur Veda” describes the “Vasya” or the philosophy.

(iv) Atharva Veda Samhita:

A collection of songs and spells. It has twenty mandalas with 731 ‘stutis’. It deals with magic, hypnotism, enslavement through mantra. It is regarded on a

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lower level than the other three Vedas. These four samhitas formed the basis of four Vedas.

Every work belonging to the second and third classes of Vedic literature viz, the Brahmanas, the Aranyakas and the Upanishads, is attached to one or another of these samhitas and is said to belong to that particular Veda.

The Authorship of the Vedic Literature:

The Hindus have a belief that the hymns were merely revealed to the sages and not composed by them. For this Vedas are called “apaurusheya” (not made by man) and ‘ṛitya” (existing in all eternity). The ‘Rishis’ to whom they are ascribed are known as Mantradrastra’. (Who received the mantra by sight directly from the Supreme Creator).

Vedangas:

Besides the Vedas, there is another class of works whose authorship is ascribed to human beings. They are known as Sutras or Vedangs. There are six vedangas. They are six subjects. These are siksha (pronunciation), chhandas (metre) Jyotisha (astronomy), Kalpa (ritual), Vyakarana (grammar), Ninukta (explanation of words).

Indian Culture in the Rig Vedic Age:

Although the Rig Veda deals with devotional work of religious nature, yet it gives a vivid picture of the early Vedic civilization. The Vedic Civilization is best understood from the social life, political organisation, economic life and religious beliefs.

1. Political Organisation
2. Administrative Divisions:

The lowest unit of the Rig-Vedic society was the patriarchal family. A number of families bound together by ties of blood formed a clan, several clans formed a district, and a number of districts composed a tribe, the highest political unit. From the Rig Veda we come to know about some administrative units termed as ‘grama’, ‘vis’, and the ‘jana’.

The ‘grama’ consisted of several families. It was under a headman known as ‘gramani’. During war or battle he used to lead the soldiers from his village. He attended the meetings of the ‘Sabha’ and ‘Samiti’. Several villagers formed a ‘vis’. It was placed under a ‘visapati’. He was a military leader.

A group of ‘vishes’ formed a ‘jana’(tribe) whose members were bound together by real or supposed ties of kinship. ‘Gopa’ was the head of one ‘jana’.

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Rig Veda mentions about various tribes such as Bharatas, Matsyas, Krivis, Tritsus. But the tribes which acquired great importance are the Purus, Trigvasas, Yadus, Aus and Drahyus. Several janas formed a 'janapada' or 'kingdom'. The 'Rajan' or the king was the head of the Janapada.

3. Form of Government:

Monarchy was the normal form of Government. Kingship was hereditary. But there was a sort of hierarchy in some states, several members of the royal family exercising the power in common. There were references of democratic form of government and their chiefs were elected by the assembled people.

4. The King:

The kingdom was small in extent. The king enjoyed a position of pre-eminence in the tribe. Kingship was hereditary. He was anointed by the priest as king in the 'Abhishka' Ceremony. He wore gorgeous robes and lived in a splendid palace, gaily decorated than a common building. The king had the duty to protect the life and property of his people. He was required to be 'Indra' in valour, 'Mitra' in kindness and 'varuna' in virtues.

The sacred duty of the king was the protection of the tribes and the territory and maintenance of priests for the performance of sacrifices. Maintenance of law and order was his principal duty. He maintained justice with the help of Purohitas. He collected tributes known as "Bali" in kind from his subjects.

5. Officials

In the work of administration the king was assisted by a number of functionaries like the Purohita (priest), the senani (general) the Gramani (village headman) and the spsa (spies). Purohita was the most important officer of the state.

6. The Army:

The army was mainly consisting of Patti (infantry) and Rathins (chariots). The weapons used by the soldiers were bows, arrows, swords, axes and spears. These weapons were made up of irons. The soldiers were organised into units known as Sardha, Vrata and gana.

7. Popular Assemblies:

The Rig Veda mentions the names of two popular assemblies known as Sabha and Samiti. Though the king enjoyed substantial power yet he was not an autocrat. In the work of administration he consulted these two bodies and act

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according to their decision. Sabha was a select body of elders. The head of the sabha was known as 'Sabhapati'.

The Sabha advised the king on administration. It also functioned as a court of law and tried the cases of criminals and punished them. The Samiti was the most popular assembly and included common people. The head of Samiti was known as 'Pati' The Samiti mainly dealt with the political business of the state. It also used to elect the king. In the early Vedic Age the Sabha and Samiti had a commendable role to play as the political organisation of the aryaans.

8. Social Life:

Family:

The family was regarded as the social and political unit. It was the nucleus of the social life of the early Aryans. The father was the head of the family and he was known as "grihapati". The Aryans had joint families. The father had great authority over the children. Though the father was kind and affectionate yet at times he became cruel towards his children. From Rig-Veda we come to know about a father who blinded his son for his extravagance.

9. Position of Women:

In the early Vedic age women enjoyed an honored place in the society. The wife was the mistress of the household and authority over the slaves. In all religious ceremonies she participated with her husband. Prada system was not prevalent in the society. Sati system was also not prevalent in the Vedic society.

The education of girls was not neglected. The Rig-Veda mentions the names of some learned ladies like Viswavara, Apala and Ghosa who composed mantras and attained the rank of Rishis. The girls were married after attaining puberty. The practice of 'Swayamvara' was also prevalent in the society. Monogamy was the general Practice.

Polygamy was, of course, practiced and it was confined only to Kings and chiefs. Remarriage of widows was permitted. The women were not independent persons in the eye of the law. They had to remain under the protecting care of their male relations.

Dress and Ornaments:

The Aryans wore dresses made from cotton, wool and deer skin. The garments consisted of three parts—an undergarment called 'nivi', a garment called 'Vasa' or 'Paridhan' and a mantle known as 'adhivasa', 'atka' 'dropi'. The garments were also embroidered with gold. Both men and women wore gold ornaments.

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The women used ear-rings, neck-lace, bangles, anklets. These ornaments were sometimes studded with precious stones. Both men and women oiled and combed their hair which was plaited or braided. The men kept beard and moustache but sometimes also shaved them.

Food and Drink:

The Aryans ate both vegetable and animal foods. Rice, barley, bean and sesamum formed the staple food. They also ate bread, cake, milk, ghee, butter, and curd together with fruits. Fish, birds, goats, rams, bulls and horses were slaughtered for their food. Slaughter of cow was prohibited. They also drank intoxicating liquor, known as sura, a brandy made from corn and barley and the juice of soma plant.

Amusements:

Rig Vedic people spent their leisure time in various amusements like gambling, war—dancing, chariot racing, hunting, boxing, dancing and music. Women displayed their skill in dancing and music. Three types of musical instruments like percussion, string and wind were used by the singers.

Morality:

The morals of women were of high standard. But the standard of morality of men was not very praiseworthy. Polygamy was practiced by men. Great respect and affection was shown to guests. The people hated seduction and adultery. There was a class of women known as hetairai and dancing girls whose morality was probably not above reproach.

Education

In the Rig-Vedic age great importance was given to education. There were Gurukulas which imparted education to the disciples after their sacred-thread ceremony. Entire instruction was given orally. The Vedic education aimed at proper development of mind and body. The disciples were taught about ethics, art of warfare, art of metal and concept of Brahma and philosophy, and basic sciences like agriculture, animal husbandry, and handicrafts.

Caste System:

In the early Vedic age there was no caste system. Member of same family took to different arts, crafts and trades. People could change their occupation according to their needs or talents. There was hardly any restriction in intermarriage, change of occupation. There, was no restriction on taking of food cooked by the sudras. A late hymn of the Rig-Veda known as Purushasukta

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refers to four castes. But many scholars reject the theory that caste system existed in Rig Vedic age. According to them Purushasukta is a late hymn and caste system was never rigid and hereditary.

10. Economic Life:

The Village:

In the Rig Vedic Age people lived in villages. The houses were made of wood and bamboo. They had thatched roof and clay floors. The hymns of Rig-Veda refer to Pura. It seems that Puras were fortified places and served as places of refuge during danger of invasion.

There was absence of word nagara (city) in the hymns of Rig-Veda. Gramani was the chief of the village. He looked after the affairs of the village, both civil and military. There was another officer known as Vrajapati who led Kulapas or heads of families to battle.

Agriculture:

Reference in Rig-Veda shows, that agriculture was the principal occupation of the people. They ploughed the field by means of a pair of oxen. Rig-Veda even mentions that twenty four oxen were attached to a plough share at the same time to plough the land. The ploughed land was known as Urvara or Kshetra. Water was supplied into the fields by means of irrigation canal. Use of manure was known to them. Barley and wheat were mainly cultivated. Cotton and oil seeds were also grown. Rice was perhaps not extensively cultivated. Agriculture was their main source of income.

11. Domestication of animals:

Besides agriculture, cattle breeding were another means of living. There are prayers in the Vedas for Gosu (cattle). Cows were held in great respect. Cows were symbols of wealth and prosperity of the Aryans. Sometimes cow was the medium of exchange. The Aryans had also domesticated animals like horse, draught OX, dog, goat, sheep, buffalo and donkey.

Occupation:

Apart from agriculture and animal husbandry Aryans had also other occupation. Weaving was the most important occupation. We learnt about weavers of wool and cotton together with the workers in the subsidiary industries of dying and embroidery. The carpenters built houses, chariots, wagons and supplied household utensils and furniture.

Then there were blacksmiths who supplied various necessities of life, from fine needles and razors to the sickles, ploughshares, spears and swords. The gold smiths made ornaments like ear-rings, bangles, necklaces, bands etc. The leather-

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workers made bow-strings and casks for holding liquor. The physicians cured diseases. The priests performed sacrifices and composed hymns and taught them to the disciples.

Trade and Commerce:

There were trade and maritime activity. Sometimes traders made journey to distant lands for larger profits in trade. There was probably commercial intercourse with Babylon and other countries in Western Asia. The principal media of trade was barter. Cow was used as unit of value. Gradually pieces of gold called “mishka” were used as means of exchange. Trade and commerce was regulated and managed by a group of people called “Pani”.

12. Transport and Communication:

The chief means of transport by land were rathas (Chariots) and wagons drawn by horses and oxen. Riding on horseback was also in vogue. Travelling was common though roads were haunted by taskara (highway men) and forests were infested by wild animals.

Religious Condition:

The religious life of the Aryans was simple and plain. They worshipped various manifestations of nature such as the sun, the moon, the sky, the Dawn, the thunder, the wind and the Air. Vedic hymns were composed in praise of nature. Rigveda mentions that thirty three gods and goddesses were worshipped by the Aryans.

These divinities were placed under three categories namely:

- (1) the terrestrial gods such as Prithvi, Agni, Brihaspati (Prayer), and Soma,
- (2) The atmospheric gods, such as, Indra, Rudra (Probably lightning), Maruts, Vayu (wind) and Parjanya and
- (3) celestial gods such as Dyaus (the sky), Varuna (vault of Heaven), Ushas (dawn), Asvins (probably twilight and morning stars) and Surya, Mitra, Savitri and Vishnu all associated with the most glorious phenomenon of nature, viz., the sun.

Among the vedic gods, Indra occupied the chief place, was given the largest number of hymns—about one fourth of the total number of hymns in the Rig Veda Samhita. He was also known as Purandara and the destroyer of forts. He was also the god of rain. Varuna was regarded as the god of truth and moral order. He was conceived as the omniscient ruler of the cosmic waters. Maruta

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was the god of storm. He helped Indra in scattering away the demons. Usha was the goddess of dawn.

Prithvi was regarded as the goddess of grain and of procreation. Agni was second in importance only to Indra. He acted as the coordinator among all deities. He conveyed to the gods the oblations offered by the devotees. He received special homage by the people as no sacrifice could be performed without offering to him. Vishnu was worshipped as the god of three worlds. Surya was regarded as the destroyer of darkness. Apart from these deities, others like Savitri, Saraswati, Brihaspati and Prajnya were also worshipped.

Mode of Worship:

The mode of worship was simple. The Vedic worship meant primarily only oblation and prayer. A great value was attached to the hymns. The Aryans chanted hymns to appease the various divinities. Yajna or sacrifice was another mode to appease the gods and goddesses. They offered milk, ghee, grains, wine, fruits etc. as offering into fire.

Animals like horses, buffaloes, rams, bulls, and even cows were also sometimes sacrificed. The process of sacrifice was simple. Every Aryan family took part in the offering of prayers and performing of fire-sacrifice. There was no priestly class for performing these religious sites. No shrine or temple was built. Image worship was unknown in those days.

The theory of reincarnation or rebirth was not completely formed. The Rig Vedic hymns had no consistent theory regarding life after death. The Rig Vedic idea of life after death was very vague. The soul departed to "Land of fathers", pitralok was received by Yama and rewarded or punished according to its deeds. So the conception of rebirth was there.

The doctrine of transmigration of soul was not properly developed. In spite of worshipping various deities the Vedic age saw the prevalence of monotheism. The hymns of Rig-Veda, Mandal x, 82 express the belief that God is one although. He bears many names. The idea of single supreme power governing and controlling the universe seems to have emerged. The spiritual life of Vedic Aryans was simple. They worshipped nature through prayer and sacrifice which later on formed the basis of Hindu religion.