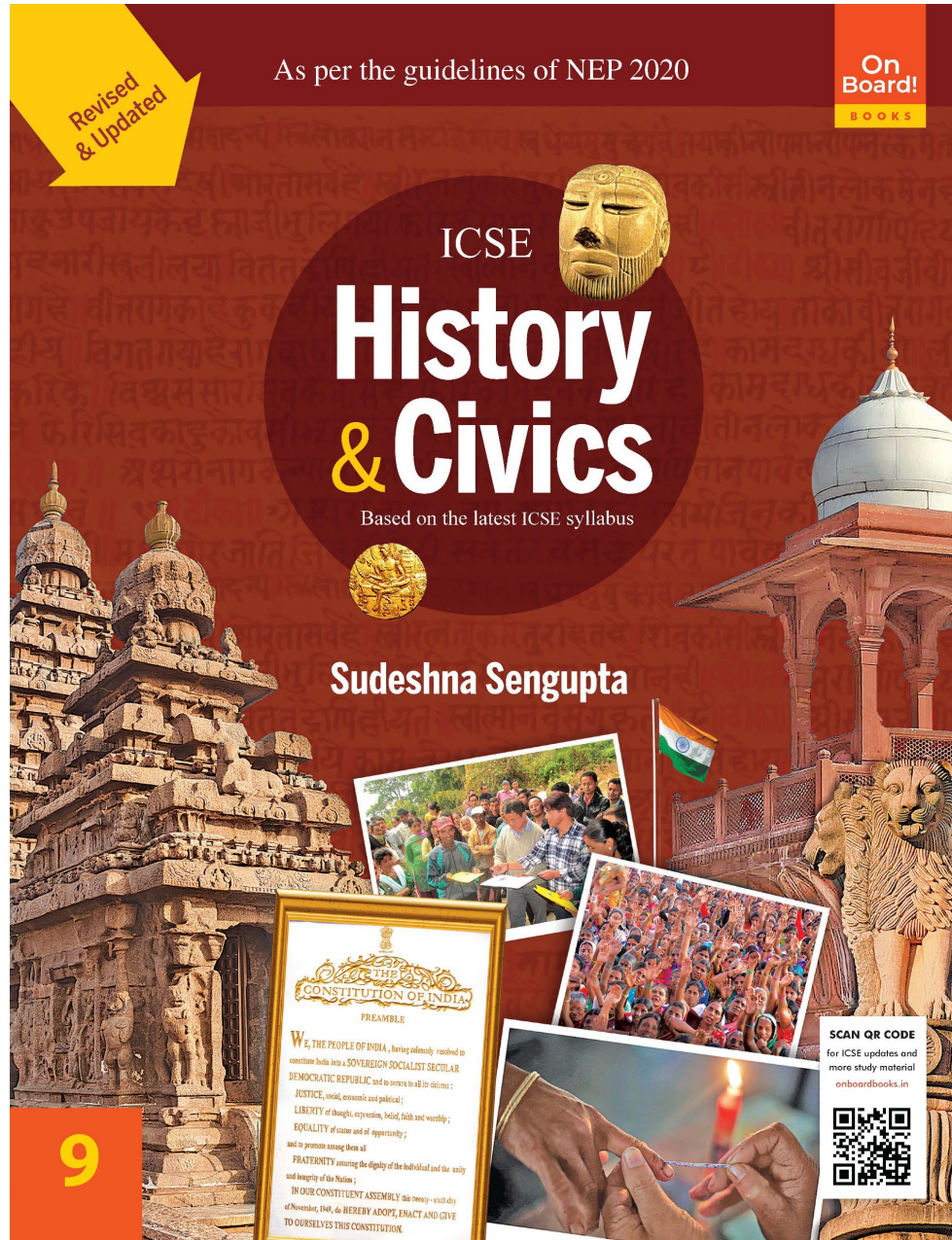


On Board!

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History 9

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Chapter 2: The Vedic Period

The fading of the Harappan Civilization coincided with the advent of the Aryans. Scholars hold different views regarding the original home of the Aryans. Some hold that the Aryans, derived from 'arya' meaning pure blood, were the original inhabitants of India. The most acceptable theory was propounded by the German Indologist, Max Muller who believed that the Aryans came from the region around the Caspian Sea in Central Asia. From there the Aryans might have migrated to different regions of Europe and Asia.

The Aryans migrated to India around 1500 BC. The period from 1500 to 600 BC is called Vedic India. This period is sub-divided into: a. the Early Vedic Period or the Rig Vedic Period, which is from 1500 to 1000 BC, and b. the Later Vedic Period from 1000 to 600 BC.

THE VEDIC LITERATURE

The chief source for the Vedic period are the Vedas. The word Veda is derived from the root 'vid' meaning knowledge or to know. There are mainly four Vedas— the Rig Veda, the Yajur Veda, the Sam Veda and the Atharva Veda. Each of the Vedas is divided into four parts, namely, Samhita, Brahmana, Aranyaka and Upanishad.

- Samhita are hymns, which were sung and written in rhymes. Each Veda has its own Samhita.
- Likewise each Veda also has its own Brahmana. In the Brahmana the rituals of the yajna are described.
- For those who found it difficult to follow the intricate rituals of yajna, Aranyakas were composed.
- The philosophical thought that emanated from the essence of the Aranyakas came to be known as Upanishads.

EARLY VEDIC PERIOD

The Rig Veda informs us that the early Aryan settlements extended in the valleys of the five rivers of the Punjab, i.e. the Indus and its tributaries, otherwise called the **Sapta-Sindhu** region. This region was so rich and fertile that the Aryans referred to it as the *Brahmavarta* or 'Land of the Gods'.

Political organization

The early Aryans were divided into tribes or **janas**. The chief of the tribe was called **rajan**. He was selected by the tribe and he ruled according to the wishes of his tribesmen. The jana comprised a number of villages, called **gramas**. The village headman was called the **gramani**. Each village consisted of a number of families. The head of the family was called the **grihapati**. The rajan was assisted by the purohita (priest), the senani (the war commander) and the gramani.

Social life

Fourfold division When the Aryans came to India they had no class distinction. But when they defeated the non-Aryans and established their settlement in India, there arose two classes in the society, namely, the Aryans and the non-Aryans. But with the growth of population and complexities of social life, the society came to be divided into four classes on the basis of division of labour.

- **Brahmans**: performed yajna, studied the Vedas and imparted education.
- **Kshatriyas**: warriors who fought wars and defended the country.
- **Vaishyas**: worked as farmers, craftsmen
- **Shudras**: did physical labour

The family and position of women The basic unit of the Aryan society was the family. The eldest male member was the head of the family. However, women enjoyed an important position in this period.

Food and dress The early Aryans ate wheat, barley, milk, fruits, vegetables. The Aryans wore dresses made of both cotton and wool. Ornaments of gold and silver were worn by both men and women.

Economic life

The early Aryans had a mixed economy, i.e. they practised pastoralism and agriculture. Cattle-rearing played an important role. The early Aryans knew how to cultivate different crops by using ox-driven plough. There are references of *yava* or barley in the Rig Veda.

Religious life

Nature influenced all aspects of the Aryan life, including their religion. The early Aryans, therefore, worshipped forces of nature as Gods and Goddesses. Indra, the God of rain, and Varuna, the God of sky were popular Gods. Other Gods worshipped were Surya, the sun God and Agni, the God of fire. On special occasions, people performed yajnas.

LATER VEDIC PERIOD

Our chief source of information on the Later Vedic Period are, besides the three Vedas, the epics—the Ramayana and the Mahabharata.

The Epics

Valmiki wrote the *Ramayana* and **Ved Vyas** wrote the *Mahabharata*.

As the *Ramayana* detailed a more advanced stage of civilization, it has been concluded that the *Mahabharata* was written first and is the older of the two. Though the socio-economic conditions of the people during this period do not show any remarkable difference yet the cultural conditions described in the *Ramayana* are superior to that of the *Mahabharata*. The epics tell us that,

- ◆ Hereditary kingship was the usual form of government.
- ◆ The king was the repository of all powers but he could take the counsel of his ministers.
- ◆ Kshatriyas dominated the political field.
- ◆ Villages were set up around the cities. During wars the villagers could take shelter within the cities which were usually protected by a wall.

- ◆ The social life was simple and easy. The values of respecting elders and parents were greatly in vogue. Polygamy was not unknown.
- ◆ The caste system had become very rigid and the inter-caste marriages and intermingling were strictly prohibited.
- ◆ Apart from agriculture, people lived on animal husbandry and hunting.
- ◆ There were numerous guilds of merchants and artisans. These guilds played an important part in the economic life of the people.
- ◆ Revenue was earned through payment from the produce, either from the land or any other commodity.
- ◆ Idol worship was practised. New Gods like Krishna and Rama were worshipped.

Political organization

The tribal kingship of the Early Vedic Period gave way to territorial monarchy. That is, in this period, the kings no longer ruled over tribes but over territories. The Sabha and Samiti lost their pre-eminent position. The kings wielded greater authority and kingship became hereditary. The voluntary tributes of the Early Vedic Period gave way to regular taxes being paid to the kings. Further with the gradual expansion of the territorial boundaries, administration became elaborate.

Social life

Caste system The social fluidity of the Early Vedic Period gradually faded away. The fourfold division of the society got crystallized.

- The classes gradually transformed into castes. Birth determined the caste of a person.
- Intermarriage between different classes was being gradually looked upon with disfavour and was eventually prohibited.

A notable feature of this age was that while the brahmins gained importance, the shudras came to be regarded as untouchables.

The family and position of women Family increasingly became patriarchal.

Four ashramas The life of the Vedic Aryans was divided into four stages or ashramas.

The first ashrama was *brahmacharya*. It was a stage during which a person received education from his guru..The second was *grihastha*, i.e. a stage in which a person got married and led a family life. *Vanaprastha* was the stage when a person gave up worldly life and went to the forest to meditate. *Sanyasa* was the stage in which a person gave up everything. He led the life of a recluse.

The gurukul system The Later Vedic Period saw the evolution of the gurukul system. The Aryans used to send their sons to gurukul.

- The *gurukul* was the residence of the guru, usually in a secluded area.
- The young Aryan lived with the family of the guru during the entire period of his education.
- Education was imparted orally. Besides Vedic literature, secular subjects were also taught.
- No fee was charged.
- On the completion of education the students voluntarily paid *gurudakshina*.
- The students did the routine chores around the house like gathering fuel, tending cattle, etc.

Economic life

- There is a textual references of iron being used in this period. The iron implements like the axes, sickles and hoes were used to clear the thick forests and turn them into
- settlements and agricultural land. Agriculture came to be practised on a larger scale. In addition to barley, wheat, rice, beans and sesame were cultivated. Besides the cow and the horse, people also domesticated animals like buffalo.

Rise of new art and craft The use of iron also led to the development of numerous crafts. The blacksmiths created implements which contributed to the growth of carpentry, tanning, weaving, metal work and other allied crafts.

Trade With the rise of new crafts, rudimentary trade came to be practised. Literary sources inform us about merchants being organized into guilds.

Religious life

In this period religion became more complex with elaborate rituals and animal sacrifices to please the gods. The early Vedic Gods lost their importance. New gods like Shiva, Vishnu and Brahma came into prominence. Rama and Krishna were worshipped as incarnations of Vishnu.

The Vedic Age of the Aryans is an important period of Indian history as there was a definite growth of social and political organization. The developments of this period have left an indelible mark on the different aspects of socio-economic and religio-political life of the people of this country.

To Remember

Origin of the Aryans—Numerous theories, the most accepted being Max Muller's, he believed that the Aryans came from the region around the Caspian Sea, the period from 1500 to 600 BC is called the Vedic India. This period is sub-divided into the Early Vedic Period or the Rig Vedic Period and the Later Vedic Period.

The Vedic literature—The chief source are the *Vedas*, *Vedas* are also called *Shruti*, other Vedic texts are the *Samhita*, *Brahmana*, *Aranyaka* and the *Upanishad*, the epics though not a part of the Vedic literature, do shed light on contemporary India.

Early Vedic Period—The early Aryans settled in the Sapta-Sindhu region, Political organization: Rajan was the military leader, kingship was tribal, people offered voluntary tributes, rajan was assisted by purohita, senani and gramani, *sabha* and *samiti* acted as significant curbs on rajan's authority, Social life: Society divided primarily on the basis of occupation, fourfold division of the society namely the brahmans, the kshatriyas, the vaishyas and the shudras, society was not rigid, family was an important social unit, but women enjoyed important position, they participated in the assemblies, the Aryans ate wheat, barley, drank sura and soma, wore cotton and woollen dresses and ornaments of gold and silver, Economic life: The early Aryans practised a mixed economy, cow was the chief medium of exchange, Religious life: Forces of nature were worshipped, Indra and Varuna were popular Gods.

Later Vedic Period—The chief source were the three Vedas and the epics, the Aryans moved towards the Gangetic valley, Political organization: Territorial monarchy was in vogue, kingship became hereditary, *sabha* and *samiti* no longer

remained powerful, administration became elaborate, Social life: The caste system got crystallized, birth determined the caste of a person, women ceased to attend assemblies, an Aryan's life was divided into four ashramas, ashramas were meant for only the three upper castes, children were sent to *gurukul*, Economic life: The discovery and use of iron revolutionized agriculture, rise of new art and craft, rudimentary trade also began, Religious life: New Gods like Shiva, Vishnu and Brahma came to be worshipped.

Thank You