



A STUDY OF THE EARLY VEDIC AGE IN ANCIENT INDIA

FASALE M.K.*

Department of History, Abasaheb Kakade Arts College, Bodhegaon, Shevgaon- 414 502, MS, India

*Corresponding Author: Email- fmachindra@yahoo.com

Received: December 04, 2012; Accepted: December 20, 2012

Abstract- The Vedic period (or Vedic age) was a period in history during which the Vedas, the oldest scriptures of Hinduism, were composed. The time span of the period is uncertain. Philological and linguistic evidence indicates that the Rigveda, the oldest of the Vedas, was composed roughly between 1700 and 1100 BCE, also referred to as the early Vedic period. The end of the period is commonly estimated to have occurred about 500 BCE, and 150 BCE has been suggested as a terminus ante quem for all Vedic Sanskrit literature. Transmission of texts in the Vedic period was by oral tradition alone, and a literary tradition set in only in post-Vedic times. Despite the difficulties in dating the period, the Vedas can safely be assumed to be several thousands of years old. The associated culture, sometimes referred to as Vedic civilization, was probably centred early on in the northern and northwestern parts of the Indian subcontinent, but has now spread and constitutes the basis of contemporary Indian culture. After the end of the Vedic period, the Mahajanapadas period in turn gave way to the Maurya Empire (from ca. 320 BC), the golden age of classical Sanskrit literature.

Keywords- Hinduism, Culture, Empire, Oldest, Evidence

Citation: Fasale M.K. (2012) A Study of the Early Vedic Age in Ancient India. Journal of Arts and Culture, ISSN: 0976-9862 & E-ISSN: 0976-9870, Volume 3, Issue 3, pp.-129-132.

Copyright: Copyright©2012 Fasale M.K. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

Introduction

The Vedic period religions laid the foundation of the religious practices that are continued till date in modern India. These religions arose from the sacred scriptures that were composed during the Vedic period. These scriptures founded the very base of Hinduism in India. The scriptures that talk of the various religious practices are basically the four Vedas namely Rig Veda, Yajur Veda, Sama Veda and Atharva Veda. The Upanishads are also considered to be a part of the Vedas and contain valuable information regarding the rituals and religions of Vedic Age.

The principles of religions in Vedic Era were basically laid down by the priests, who were the highest class of people in the society. They were the ones who performed the rituals, chanted hymns and read out holy texts in temples and functions. The texts recorded in the Vedas were supposed to have divine power and were to be chanted perfectly with the right tone, pronunciation and emphasis. This was believed to make the hymns effective to the hilt and gain the maximum power out of it.

Vedic Religion

The Vedic period religions laid the foundation of the religious practices that are continued till date in modern India. These religions arose from the sacred scriptures that were composed during the Vedic period. These scriptures founded the very base of Hinduism in India. The scriptures that talk of the various religious practices are basically the four Vedas namely Rig Veda, Yajur Veda, Sama Veda and Atharva Veda.

Vedic Culture

The Vedic period has been broadly classified into two categories: the Early and Later Vedic Periods. This has been done according to the way the transition in the style of culture and society took place. The Vedic period society developed rapidly as time passed by. In Vedic age, culture and society developed from the crude form to the refined form as more and more people came to settle and started to contribute their own ideas to reform the society.

Religion in Early Vedic Period

Religion in early Vedic period revolved around crude forms of worshipping which basically includes nature worship. This means that people in the early Vedic period worshipped different forms of nature as god like sun, earth, moon, wind, rain, and other natural phenomena. Since there were no scientific explanations for natural phenomena like rain, thunder, wind, etc. people feared them and thus worshipped them. Chanting of prayers and hymns were a common practice to invoke the Gods and it was normal to sacrifice animals in the name of religion.

Religion in Later Vedic Period

The later Vedic age saw the increase in powers of the priests and they formed the highest class in the society. Religious practices were refined and worship of Gods in the form of idols gained importance. Animal sacrifice also increased during this period. With rituals and hymns taking center stage, the evolution of Hindu religion took place. Nature worship gave rise to new beliefs and new

Gods. The duty of imparting the religious know how to people was the duty of the priests.

The reconstruction of the history of Vedic India is based on text-internal details. Linguistically, the Vedic texts could be classified in five chronological strata:

Rigvedic Text

The Rigveda is by far the most archaic of the Vedic texts preserved, and it retains many common Indo-Iranian elements, both in language and in content, that are not present in any other Vedic texts. Its creation must have taken place over several centuries or millennia.

Mantra Language Texts

This period includes both the mantra and prose language of the Atharvaveda (Paippalada and Shaunakiya), the Rigveda Khilani, the Samaveda Samhita (containing some 75 mantras not in the Rigveda), and the mantras of the Yajurveda. Many of these texts are largely derived from the Rigveda, but have undergone certain changes, both by linguistic change and by reinterpretation. Conspicuous changes include change of *vishva* "all" by *sarva*, and the spread of the *kuru*- verbal stem (for Rigvedic *kno*-). This is the time of the early Iron Age in north-western India, corresponding to the *Black and Red Ware* (BRW) culture, and the kingdom of the Kurus, dating from ca. the 10th century BC.

Samhita Prose Texts

This period marks the beginning of the collection and codification of a Vedic canon. An important linguistic change is the complete loss of the injunctive. The Brahmana part ('commentary' on mantras and ritual) of the Black Yajurveda (MS, KS, TS) belongs to this period. Archaeologically, the *Painted Grey Ware* (PGW) culture from ca. 900 BC corresponds, and the shift of the political centre from the Kurus to the Pancalans on the Ganges.

Brahmana Prose Texts

The Brahmanas proper of the four Vedas belong to this period, as well as the Aranyakas, the oldest of the Upanishads (BAU, ChU, JUB) and the oldest Shrautasutras (BSS, VadSS).

Sutra Language Texts

This is the last stratum of Vedic Sanskrit leading up to c. 500 BC, comprising the bulk of the Śrauta and Grhya Sutras, and some Upanishads (e.g. KathU, MaitrU). All but the five prose Upanishads are post-Buddhist [4]. Videha (N. Bihar) as a third political centre is established.

Epic and Pāṇinian Sanskrit

The language of the Mahabharata and Ramayana epics, and the Classical Sanskrit described by Pāṇini is considered post-Vedic, and belongs to the time after 500 BC. Archaeologically, the rapid spread of *Northern Black Polished Ware* (NBP) over all of northern India corresponds to this period. The earliest Vedānta, Gautama Buddha, and the Pali Prakrit dialect of Buddhist scripture belong to this period.

Historical records set in only after the end of the Vedic period, and remain scarce throughout the Indian Middle Ages. The end of Vedic India is marked by linguistic, cultural and political changes. The

grammar of Pāṇini marks a final apex in the codification of Sutra texts, and at the same time the beginning of Classical Sanskrit. The invasion of Darius I of the Indus valley in the early 6th century BC marks the beginning of outside influence, continued in the kingdoms of the Indo-Greeks, new waves of immigration from 150 BC (Abhira, Shaka), Kushan and ultimately the Islamic Sultans. The most important historical source of the geography of post-Vedic India is the 2nd century Greek historian Arrian whose report is based on the Mauryan time ambassador to Patna, Megasthenes.

Early Aryan Settlements

INDIA, as is well known, derives its name from the Sindhu (Indus), and the earliest civilisation of this country of which we have any definite trace had its cradle in the valley of the same river. We have seen in the last chapter that excavations at several places in the lower part of the valley have laid bare the ruins of well built cities, and seals surprisingly similar to those discovered at Eshnunna, Kish and Ur in Mesopotamia, and assigned by archaeologists to the third millennium BC., have been found. The identity of the originators of this early Indus culture is uncertain. They appear to have professed a religion that was iconic and laid emphasis on the worship of the Mother-Goddess and a male deity who seems to have been the prototype of Siva. The phallic cult was prevalent, but fire-pits were conspicuous by their absence.

Far different is the picture of another civilisation which had its principal home higher up the Indus valley. The people who evolved this culture called themselves Aryas or Aryans. Their earliest literature makes no reference to life in stately cities comparable to those whose remains have been unearthed at Harappa God mitra and Mohenjo-Daro. Their religion was normally aniconic, and in their pantheon the female element was subordinated to the male, and the place of honour was given to deities like Indra, Varuna, Mitra, the Nasatyas, Surya, Agni (Fire) and other supernal beings who seem to have been quite unknown to the originators of the "Indus" culture as described in the last chapter. Unfortunately, the early literature of the Aryas-called the Veda-cannot be dated even approximately, and it is impossible to say with absolute precision in what chronological relation the civilisation portrayed in the Veda stood to the "Indus" culture of the third millennium BC. Max Muller hesitatingly placed the beginning of the Vedic literature in the latter half of the second millennium BC. Tilak and Jacobi, on the other hand, tried to push the date much farther back on astronomical grounds. But, as pointed out by several Indologists, astronomical calculations prove nothing unless the texts in question admit of unambiguous interpretation. Tilak himself points out how unsafe it is to act upon calculations based on loose statements in literature regarding the position of the heavenly bodies.

In the chaotic state of early Aryan chronology, it is a welcome relief to turn to Asia Minor and other countries in Western Asia and find in certain tablets of the fourteenth century BC., discovered at Boghaz Keui and other places, references to kings who bore Aryan names and invoked the gods Indra, Mitra, Varuna and the Nasatyas to witness and safeguard treaties. It is certain that the tablets belong to a period in the evolution of the Aryan religion when Indra, Varuna, and the other gods associated with them, still retained their early Vedic pre-eminence and had not yet been thrown into the shade by the Brahmanic Prajapati or the epic and Puranic Trimurti.

Political Organisation of the Rig-Vedic Aryans

The basis of the political and social organisation of the Rig-Vedic people was the patriarchal family. The successive higher units were styled grama, vis and jana, and in some rare passages we even hear of aggregates of janas. The precise relationship between the grama, the vis and the jana is nowhere distinctly stated. That the grama was normally a smaller unit than either the vis or the jana appears probable from the fact that the gramani, the leader of the grama (horde or village), who is usually a Vaisya, is clearly inferior to the lord of the vis (vispati) or the protector (gopa) of the jana, who is often the king himself.

It is more difficult to say in what relationship the vis stood to the jana. In some Vedic passages there is a clear contrast between the two, and Iranian analogies seem to suggest that the vis is a subdivision of a jana, if the latter may be taken as a parallel to the Iranian Zantu.

Social Life

It has already been stated that the foundation of the political and social structure in the Rig- Vedic age was the family. The members of a family lived in the same house. Houses in this age were presumably built of wood or reed. In every house there was a fireplace (agnisala), besides a sitting-room and apartments for the ladies. The master of the house was called grihapati or dampati. He was usually kind and affectionate, but occasional acts of cruelty are recorded. Thus we have the story of a father who blinded his son for his extravagance.

The favourite amusements of the more virile classes were racing, hunting and the war-dance. The Mesopotamian chariot-race was extremely popular and formed an important element of the sacrifice celebrated in later times as the Vajapeya. No less popular was hunting. The animals hunted were the lion, the elephant, the wild boar, the buffalo, and deer. Birds also were hunted. Another favourite pastime was dicing, which frequently entailed considerable loss to the gamester. Among other amusements, mention may be made of boxing, dancing and music. Women in particular loved to display their skill in dancing and singing to the accompaniment of lutes and cymbals. Lute-players played an important part in the development of the epic in later ages.

Economic Life

The Rig-Vedic Aryans were mostly scattered in villages. The word nagara (city) does not occur in the hymns. We find indeed mention of forts which were occasionally of considerable size and were sometimes made of stone (asmamayi) or of iron (ayasi). Some were furnished with a hundred walls (satabhuji). But the forts were in all probability rather ramparts or forts than cities, and served as places of refuge, particularly in autumn, as is suggested by the epithet Saradi applied to them in some passages. It is significant that, unlike the later texts, the Rig-Veda makes no clear mention of individual cities like Asandivat or Kampila.

Regarding the organisation of the village we have a few details. There was an official styled the Gramani who looked after the affairs of the village, both civil and military. We have also reference to a functionary called Vrajapati who may have been identical with the Gramani, and who led to battle the various Kulapas or heads of families.

Arts and Sciences

The art of poetry was in full bloom as is evidenced by the splendid collection of lyrics known as the Rik-Samhita which consists of hymns in praise of different gods. The number of hymns is 1,017. These are grouped into books termed ashtakas or mandalas containing eight and ten hymns respectively, which were recited by priests styled hotris or reciters. The old hymns are chiefly to be found in the so-called Family Books (II-VII), each of which is ascribed by tradition to a particular family of seers (rishis). Their names are Gritsamada, Visvamisra, Vamadeva, Atri, Bharadvaja and Vasishtha. Book VIII is ascribed to the Kanvas and Angirases. Book IX is dedicated to Soma. The latest parts of the collection are to be found in Books I and X, which, however, contain some old hymns as well.

Fine specimens of lyric poetry are to be found among the Rig-Vedic hymns, notably in those addressed to the Goddess of the Dawn.

Religion

The early Vedic religion has been designated by the name of henotheism or kathenotheism—a belief in krishnasingle gods, each in turn standing out as the highest. It has also been described as the worship of Nature leading up to Nature's God. The chief deities of the earlier books owe their origin to the personification of natural phenomena. Abstract deities like Dhatri, the Establisher; Vidhatri, the Ordainer; Visvakarman, the All-Creating, and Prajapati, the Lord of Creatures, Sraddha, Faith; Manyu, Wrath, make their appearance at a later stage. Besides the higher Gods, lauded by priests, we have reference to others whose worship was not countenanced in orthodox circles. Some scholars find in the hymns traces of the cult of the linga and even of Krishna. Siva occurs as an epithet of the god Rudra worshipped by the Vedic priests. The Krishna mentioned in Rig-Vedic hymns can hardly be identified with his epic and Puranic namesake, as the river with which he is associated in the Rig-Veda is not the Jumna but some stream in the Kuru country, as we learn from the Brihaddevata.

Father Dyaus (Zeus, Diespiter), the Shining God of Heaven, and Mother Prithivi, the Earth Goddess, are among the oldest of the Vedic deities, but the hymns scarcely reflect their former greatness. They have been cast into the shade by Varuna, the Encompassing Sky, and Indra, the God of Thunder and Rain. Varuna is the most sublime deity of the early Vedic pantheon. He bears the epithet Asura (Avestan Ahura) and he is the great upholder of physical and moral order, Rita, the idea of which is at least as old as the fourteenth century BC., as we learn from inscriptions mentioning the names of the Mitanni kings. To Varuna people turned for forgiveness of sin just as they did to Vishnu in a later age.

"If we have sinned against the man who loves us, have ever wronged a brother, friend, comrade, The neighbour ever with us, or a stranger, O Varuna, remove from us the trespass." O Varuna, whatever the offence may be which we as men commit against the heavenly host, When through our want of strength we violate thy laws, punish us not, O God, for that iniquity."

The worship of Varuna, with its consciousness of sin and trust in the divine forgiveness, is undoubtedly one of the first roots of the later doctrine of Bhakti.

Conclusion

The roughly 1,000 years between 1500-500 b.c.e. is called the Vedic, or Aryan, age. The beginning of the Vedic age corresponded with the end of the Indus civilization (c. 2500-1500 b.c.e.), although it is not clear what precise role the Aryans played in the final fall of the Indus civilization. The two peoples belonged to different racial groups, and the Indus urban culture was more advanced than the mainly pastoral society of the Indo-European Aryans. The 1,000 years after 1500 is divided into the Early and Late Vedic age, each spanning about 500 years, because of significant differences between the cultures of the two halves. The earlier period marked the conquest and settlement of northern India by Indo-Europeans who crossed into the subcontinent across the Hindu Kush passes into the Indus River valley, across the Thar Desert and down the Ganges River valley. The latter half saw the development of a more sophisticated sedentary culture. The name Vedic refers to the Vedas, sacred texts of the Aryans, which is a principal source of information of that era.

References

- [1] Nilakanta Sastry K.A. (1936) *A Comprehensive History of India*, I, II & III.
- [2] Narendra Nath Kher (1973) *Agrarian and Fiscal Economy in the Mauryan and Post-Mauryan Age (324 B.C.-300 A.D.)*.
- [3] Kosambi D.D. (1964) *The Culture and Civilization of Ancient India in Historical Outline*.
- [4] Kosambi D.D. ((1957) *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History*.
- [5] Sachindra Kumar Maity (1957) *Economic Life in Northern India in the Gupta Period (A.D. 300 - A.D. 550)*.
- [6] Nigam S. (1975) *Economic Organisation in Ancient India (220 B.C.-200 A.D.)*
- [7] Krishnaswami Aiyangar S. (1871) *Some Contribution of South India to Indian Culture*.
- [8] Tripathi V. (1976) *The Painted Grey Ware, An Iron Age Culture of Northern India*, Concept Publishing house, Delhi.
- [9] Moorti U. (1994) *Megalithic Cultures of South India*.
- [10] Misra V.N. (1989) *Stone Age in India, An Ecological Perspective, Man & Environment*.
- [11] Dhavalikar M.K. (1997) *Indian Protohistory*.
- [12] Mukhia Harban (1979) *Indian History Congress Waltair Session*.
- [13] Wheeler R.E.M. (1953) *The Indus Civilization*.
- [14] Sankaliya H.D. (1974) *The Pre-history and Proto-history of India and Pakistan*.