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# Distance Learning Programme

UPSC Prelims

## Ancient India





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# ANCIENT INDIA


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## CHAPTER

# VEDIC AGE

The cities of the Harappan Culture had declined by 1500 BCE. Consequently, their economic and administrative system had slowly declined. Around this period, the Aryans entered the north-west India probably from the Indo-Iranian region. The word 'Arya' means 'noble'.

Aryans migrated to India in several waves through the passes in the northwestern mountains. Their earliest life seems to have been mainly pastoral, agriculture being a secondary occupation. We know about the Aryans from the Rig Veda. Aryan names also appear in Kassite inscriptions of about 1600 BCE from Iraq and in Mitanni inscriptions of the 14<sup>th</sup> century BCE from Syria.

They initially settled in the valleys of the north-west and the plains of the Punjab. Later, they moved into the Indo-Gangetic plains. They led a nomadic life and were mainly in search of pastures. By 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, they occupied the whole of North India, which was referred to as Aryavarta.

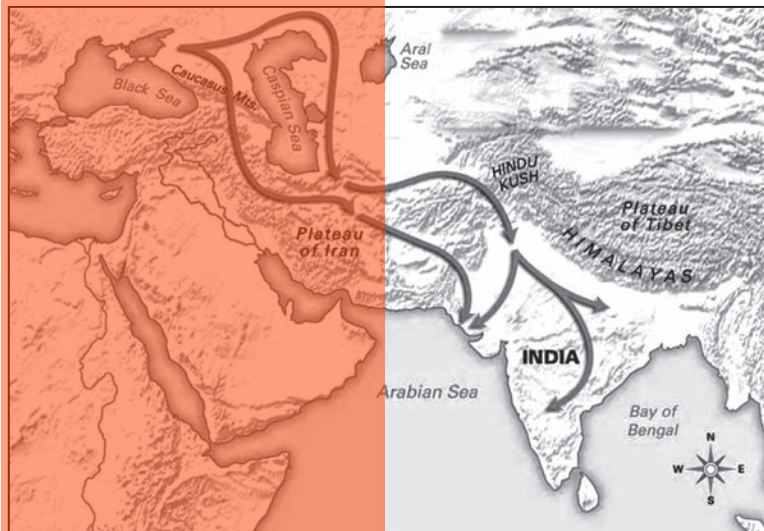
The period between 1500 BCE and 600 BCE may be divided into:

- The Early Vedic Period or Rig Vedic Period (1500 BCE–1000 BCE)
- The Later Vedic Period (1000 BCE–600 BCE)

## Original Home of the Aryans

The original home of the Aryans is a debatable question and different scholars have identified different regions as the original home of the Aryans.

- Some historians say that the original home of the Aryans was Central Asia.
- According to Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Aryans originally inhabited Siberia, but due to the falling temperature, they had to leave Siberia for greener pastures.
- The other view is that their original home was in southern Russia (near the Caspian Sea) or in the Southeast Europe (in Austria and Hungary). From there, they had migrated to the European countries, Persia and India.



**Fig:** Route of the Aryans



However, the theory of southern Russia appears to be more probable and widely accepted by historians. From there, the Aryans moved to different parts of Asia and Europe. They entered India in about 1500 BCE and came to be known as Indo-Aryans. They spoke the Indo-Aryan language, Sanskrit.

## Tribal Conflicts

The first group of Aryans fought against the Dravidians and other inhabitants whom they defeated and are supposed to have been pushed down towards south India. The enemies were described by Aryans as Panis and Dasas. The Panis were cattle-thieves. Dasas were held to be inferior because of their dark skin and flat facial features. The word Dasa later came to denote a slave.

The term dasyuhatya (slaughter of the dasyus) is repeatedly mentioned in the Rig Veda. However, the Aryans also fought among themselves and thus many intra-tribal conflicts were common among the Aryan communities.

The country, 'Bharatvarsha' is named after the Bharata tribe, which is mentioned in the Rig Veda. The famous Battle of Ten Kings or the Dasrajan Yudha was fought between the tribe Bharatas, led by king Sudas and the Confederacy of the other ten tribes – Puru, Yadu, Turvasa, Anu, Druhyu, Alina, Paktha, Bhalanas, Shiva and Vishanin. The former five are said to be Aryan tribes while the latter five are said to be Non-Aryan tribes. The Bharatas emerged victorious in the battle which was fought on the banks of river Parushni (present Ravi).

## Vedic Literature

The word 'Veda' is derived from the root 'vid', which means 'to know'. In other words, the term 'Veda' signifies wisdom, knowledge or vision. There are four Vedas and Rig Veda was composed in the early Vedic period while the other three Vedas were written in the later Vedic period.

### Four Vedas

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- **The Rig Veda:** It is the earliest of the four Vedas and it consists of ten mandalas or books and 1028 hymns. The hymns were sung in praise of Agni, Indra, Mitra, Varuna and other Gods. It contains the famous Purushasukta that explains that the four varnas, i. e., Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra were born respectively from the mouth, arms, thighs and the feet of the Creator. The universally famous Gayatri mantra (Savitri) is also in Rig-Veda.
  - **The Sama Veda:** It is a collection of melodies. It contains stanzas taken from the Rig Veda and set to the tune for the purpose of singing. Samaveda is important in tracing the history of Indian music.
  - **The Yajur Veda:** It consists of not only hymns, but also rituals that have to accompany their recitation. Various details of rules to be observed at the time of sacrifice are mentioned in this Veda. The rituals reflect the social and political milieu in which they arose. There are two main texts of the Yajurveda: Shukla Yajurveda or Vajasaneyi (Madhyandina and Kanva) and Krishna-Yajurveda (Taittiriya, Kathaka, Maitrayani and Kapisthal).
  - **The Atharva Veda:** It contains details of rituals. It also contains charms and spells to ward off evils and diseases. The content of this Veda also throws light on the beliefs and practices of the non-Aryans.



Besides the Vedas, there are other sacred works like the Brahmanas, the Upanishads, the Aranyakas and the epics Ramayana and Mahabharata.

- The Brahmanas explain the hymns of the Vedas. They act as the appendices to the Vedas. They are written in prose and they elaborately describe the various sacrifices and rituals, along with their mystical meanings. Each Veda has several Brahmanas. The two Brahmanas attached to the Rig-Veda are Aitareya Brahmana and Kaushitaki Brahmana.
- The Aranyakas are called forest books and they deal with mysticism, rites, rituals and sacrifices. They deal with mysticism and symbolism. They form the natural transition to the Upanishads. They offer the bridge between Karma marga (way of deeds) which was the sole concern of the Brahmanas and the Jnana marga (way of knowledge) which the Upanishads advocated.
- The Upanishads are philosophical texts dealing with topics like the soul, the absolute, the origin of the world and the mysteries of nature. It criticizes the rituals and lay stress on the value of right belief and knowledge. The language of the Upanishads was classical Sanskrit and not the Vedic Sanskrit. It states that goal of the life is to attain salvation which is possible through self control.
- An epic is a long poetry narrating the deeds and adventures of heroic or legendary figures. The author of epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata was Valmiki and Veda Vyasa, respectively.

#### Important Upanishads

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- **Aitareya Upanishad:** Talks about the creation of Atman (Soul) and Consciousness.
- **Chandogya Upanishad:** Deals with rhythm and chanting of Mantras.
- **Katha Upanishad:** Tells the story of Nachiketa and Yama. Their conversation evolves into discussion of Man, Atman (soul), Knowledge, and Moksha (liberation).
- **Brihadaranyaka Upanishad:** Talks about the transmigration of Atman; passages on metaphysics and ethics.
- **Mundaka Upanishad:** Contains the mantra “Satyameva Jayate” (truth alone triumphs) which is borrowed in the National Emblem of India.

## Rig Vedic Age or Early Vedic Period (1500–1000 BCE)

During the Rig Vedic period, the Aryans were mostly confined to the Indus region. The Rig Veda refers to Saptasindhu or the land of seven rivers. This includes the five rivers of Punjab, namely Jhelum, Chenab, Ravi, Beas and Sutlej along with the Indus and Saraswati. The political, social and cultural life of the Rig Vedic people can be traced from the hymns of the Rig Veda.

### Political Organization

Early Vedic age had a tribal polity in which the tribal chief led wars (for cattle) and was also a protector of the entire group. Instead of a standing army, the entire village participated in wars. Kingship was hereditary. The king or the chief enjoyed a position of pre-eminence in the tribe. He was required to be ‘Indra’ in valour, ‘Mitra’ in kindness and ‘Varuna’ in virtues.



### Administrative Divisions

- The lowest unit of the Rig-Vedic society was the patriarchal family or kula. A number of families bound together by kinship ties of blood formed a clan.
- The 'grama' consisted of several families. It was under a headman known as 'gramani'. 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'.
- Several janas formed a 'janapada' or 'kingdom'. The 'Rajan' or the king was the head of the Janapada. There were several tribal kingdoms during the Rig Vedic period, such as Bharatas, Matsyas, Yadus and Purus.

### Administration

The tribal chief or the Rajan was at the centre of the administrative machinery of the Aryans. In the work of administration, the king was assisted by a number of functionaries like the Purohita (priest), the Senani (General of the Army), the Gramani (village headman) and the spsa (spies).

Visishtha and Vishvamitra were the two important priests in Rig Vedic age. The former was conservative while the latter was liberal. Vishwamitra composed the 'Gayatri Mantra' to widen the Aryan world.

Purohita was the most important officer of the state.

- The king did not maintain any regular or standing army, but during times of war he mustered militias. The military element was strong in the tribal system of the government. The army mainly consisted of Patti (infantry) and Rathins (chariot warriors). The weapons used by the soldiers were bows, arrows, swords, axes and spears. These weapons were made up of iron. The soldiers were organised into units known as Sardha, Vrata and Gana.
- We do not come across any officer responsible for tax collection. There was a very limited role for collection of regular tax as the economy was mainly pastoral and not food producing.
- However, bali, the voluntary offerings from the people, was probably received by the chiefs. Presents and spoils of war were perhaps distributed among some Vedic assemblies.
- There was no special officer for justice. But spies were employed to keep an eye on theft or burglary.
- Vrajapati was the officer who enjoyed authority over a large land or pasture ground.
- He led Gramanis to the battle. Gradually Gramani became identical to Vrajapati.

### Popular Assemblies

The Aryans had their own folk assembly known as Vidhata meant for the economic, social and military purpose. Though the king enjoyed substantial power, yet he was not an autocrat. In the work of administration, he consulted two bodies and acted according to their decision. These were:

- **Sabha:** It was a select body of elders and advised the king on administration. It also functioned as a court of law and tried criminal cases. The head of the sabha was known as 'Sabhapati'.
- **Samiti:** It was the most popular assembly and included common people. The Samiti mainly dealt with the political business of the state. It also used to elect the king. The head of Samiti was known as 'Pati'.



## Social Life

### Society

- Kinship was the basis of the social structure and the identity of the man was decided by his clan. People gave their primary loyalty to the tribe or jana.
- There are indications which point towards the consciousness of physical appearance among the people. Varna was the term used for colour which provided the identity mark for the social orders. Rig Veda mentions *arya* and *dasa varna*.
- It seems that Aryan people were fair in colour while the indigenous population were dark. The *dasas* and the *dasyus* conquered by the Aryans, were treated as slaves.
- Slaves and mainly women slaves meant for domestic purposes, were given as gifts to priests.
- Social inequality in the tribes emerged as tribal chiefs and the priests acquired a large share of booty at the cost of their kinsmen. Gradually, the society came to be divided into three groups – warriors, priests and the people.
- However, differentiation of society based on occupation was not very sharp. The society was largely tribal and egalitarian.

### Family

- The family was patriarchal and was regarded as the social and the political unit. The father was the head of the family and he was known as “*grihapati*”.
- Monogamy was generally practiced while polygamy was prevalent among the royal and noble families. There are few indications of polyandry. There are also indications of matrilineal traces. The wife took care of the household and participated in all the major ceremonies.
- Women were given equal opportunities as men for their spiritual and intellectual development. There were women poets like *Apala*, *Viswavara*, *Ghosa*, *Lopamudra* and *Gargi* during the Rig Vedic period.
- Women could even attend the popular assemblies. There was no child marriage and the practice of *sati* was absent. The marriageable age seems to have been 16 to 17.
- Women could offer sacrifices along with their husbands.
- Widow remarriage and the practice of *levirate* was present in the Rig Vedic society.

### Clothing

- 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*’.
- Both men and women wore gold ornaments. The women used earrings, necklace, bangles and anklets.

### Food

- Wheat and barley, milk and its products like curd and ghee, vegetables and fruits were the chief articles of food.
- Fish, birds, goats, rams, bulls and horses were slaughtered for their food.
- Slaughter of the cow was prohibited since it was considered a sacred animal. People also drank intoxicating liquor, “*Sura*”.





### **Caste System**

- In the early Vedic age, there was no caste system. Instead, they were divided into classes.
- Member of the same family could pursue different occupations, arts, crafts and trades and could change it at will. There was hardly any restriction in intermarriage and change of occupation.

### **Education**

- There were Gurukulas which imparted education to the disciples after their sacred-thread ceremony. Entire instruction was given orally.
- 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.

### **Economic Condition**

The Aryans did not live in cities, but possibly in a kind of fortified mud settlements. Painted Grey Ware has been found in the Bhagwanpura and other sites in Punjab, along with late Harappan pottery.

### **Agriculture**

The Rig Vedic Aryans were pastoral people, but when they permanently settled in North India, they began to practice agriculture. They ploughed the land by means of a pair of oxen. The ploughed land was known as Urvara or Kshetra. With the knowledge and use of iron, they were able to clear forests and bring more lands under cultivation. However, the land did not form a well established private property. The earliest literary references to the use of iron in Indian Sub-continent are found in Yajurveda.

- Besides the main crops of barley and wheat, cotton and oilseeds were also grown.
- Cows were worshipped and were symbols of wealth and prosperity. Sometimes cow was the medium of exchange. The wealth of the people was estimated in terms of their cattle. The cow seems to be their most valuable possession and the wars were fought for the sake of the cows.
- Other animals like horse, draught ox, dog, goat, sheep, buffalo and donkey were also domesticated.

### **Crafts**

- Weaving was an important occupation.
- Carpentry was another important profession and the availability of wood from the forests cleared made the profession profitable. Carpenters produced chariots and ploughs.
- Workers in metal made a variety of articles with copper, bronze and iron.
- Spinning was another important occupation and cotton and woollen fabrics were made.
- Goldsmiths were active in making ornaments.
- The potters made various kinds of vessels for domestic use.

### **Trade and Commerce**

Trade was conducted through barter system. There were trade and maritime activities. Sometimes traders made a journey to distant lands for larger profits in trade. The cow was



used as a unit of value. Gradually the pieces of gold called “nishka” were used as a means of exchange. Trade and commerce were regulated and managed by a group of people called “Pani”.

### **Transport**

Rivers served an important means of transport. The chief means of transport by land were rathas (Chariots) and wagons drawn by horses and oxen.

## **Religion**

### **Gods**

- The religious life of the Rig Vedic Aryans was simple and plain.

- They worshipped and personified the natural forces into many gods such as Prithvi (Earth), Agni (Fire), Vayu (Wind), Varuna (Rain) and Indra (Thunder).

	<b>Other Important Gods</b>
Varuna	God of truth and moral order
Maruta	God of storm
Usha	Goddess of dawn
Prithvi	Goddess of grain and of procreation
Vishnu	God of three worlds
Surya	Destroyer of darkness.

- In spite of worshipping various deities, the Vedic age saw the prevalence of monotheism. The idea of single supreme power governing and controlling the universe seems to have emerged.

- Indra was the most important God and was also known as Purandara (the destroyer of forts) and God of rain. Agni was second in importance only to Indra. He acted as the intermediary between the Gods and the worshipper.

- Soma was the God of plants. The Maruts personified storm. There were also female gods like Aditi and Ushas. However the male gods were more important than female gods in the patriarchal set-up of the period.

### **Nature of Worship**

- There were no temples and no idol worship during the early Vedic period. Prayers were offered to the gods in the expectation of rewards. Ghee, milk and grain were given as offerings. Elaborate rituals were followed during the worship.

- Worship was not meant for the spiritual uplift or ending miseries, but it was intended mainly for praja (children), pashu (cattle), food, wealth, health etc.

- The magical power of the word was not considered so important as it came to be in later Vedic times.

- Animals like horses, buffaloes, rams, bulls, and even cows were also sometimes sacrificed. There was no priestly class for performing the religious rites.

- The theory of reincarnation or rebirth was not completely formed. The Rig Vedic hymns had no consistent theory regarding life after death.

## **Later Vedic Period (1000–600 BCE)**

The Aryans further moved towards east in the upper Gangetic basin in the Later Vedic Period. They succeeded in the second phase of their expansion because they used iron weapons and horse drawn chariots.