



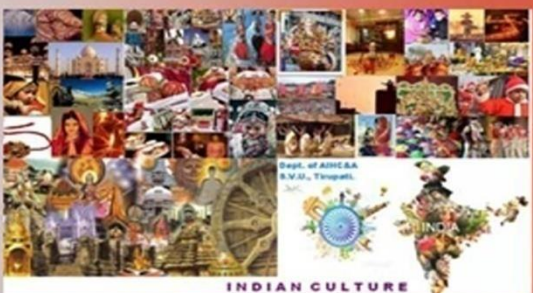
## Component-I (A) – Personal details:

 **Pathshala**  
पाठशाला  
A Gateway to all Post Graduate Courses

 **MHRD**  
Govt. of India


An MHRD Project under its National Mission on Education through ICT (NME-ICT)

Subject: **Indian Culture**



Production of Courseware  
- Content for Post Graduate Courses

Paper : **Economic History of India (from earliest to 1707 AD)**  
Module : **Economy of Vedic People**

  
ज्ञान-विज्ञान विमुक्तये

 **Pathshala**  
पाठशाला

 **MHRD**  
Govt. of India

## Development Team

<b>Principal Investigator</b>	Prof. P. Bhaskar Reddy Sri Venkateswara University, Tirupati.
<b>Paper Coordinator</b>	Dr. Krishnendu Ray University of Calcutta.
<b>Content Writer</b>	Dr. Sayantani Pal University of Calcutta.
<b>Content Reviewer</b>	Prof. P. Bhaskar Reddy Sri Venkateswara University, Tirupati.

**Component-I (B) – Description of module:**

Subject Name	Indian Culture
Paper Name	Economic History of India (from earliest to 1707 AD)
Module Name/Title	Economy of Vedic People (early and later: Agriculture, trade and commerce)
Module Id	IC / EHI / 06
Pre requisites	Economic aspects of Ancient India
Objectives	To know the economic condition of the Vedic period with emphasis on Agriculture, Trade and Commerce
Keywords	Vedic economy/ Gangetic valley/ Rigvedic period/ Aryans

**E-Text (Quadrant-I) :****1. Introduction**

The principal source for the study of the Vedic economy is the Vedic literature. On the basis of the period of composition, the whole corpus of the Vedic literature has been divided into two sections, representing two phases: 1) Early Vedic, comprising the Rigveda and 2) Later Vedic, comprising the samhitas of Yaju, Sama and Atharva Vedas, together with their Brahmanas, Aranyakas and Upanishada sections. It is also assumed that while the 1<sup>st</sup> phase may be assigned to c.1500 – 1000 BCE, the later phase represents a period between 1000 BCE – 600 BCE. The economy of these two phases also had different characters. While the first phase was predominantly pastoral, the second phase saw the beginning of agricultural economy.

**2. Area**

The Vedic literature does not present a pan-Indian scenario. Rather the early portion represents the economy of its area of composition, i.e., the Saptasindhavah, corresponding to parts of present Afghanistan, the North-west frontier and the parts of Punjab in India and Pakistan. The Later Vedic texts speak of an area further east, in the Gangetic valley that extended upto north Bihar. Thus when we are talking about the Vedic economy we are basically referring to these two regions in two different time frames.

**3. Early Vedic Economy**

It has already been pointed out that the Rigvedic period corresponds to c.1500 – 1000 BCE. Presently the Rigveda comprises 10 mandalas of which the 2<sup>nd</sup> to the 9<sup>th</sup> are earlier in date. The 1<sup>st</sup> and the 10<sup>th</sup> mandalas have been regarded as later additions.

**4. The antecedents**

The composers of the Rigvedic hymns are commonly known as the Aryans. However, the term is not used in the sense of a race in the Rigveda. Rather it has been used in the sense of a gentleman. The composers of the Rigveda belonged to the Indo-European language

group. The term Aryan may also refer to this language group. There is a long standing debate regarding their original homeland. It has been assumed that prior to their entry into the Indian subcontinent they were accustomed to a nomadic way of life since they travelled a long way from the Kirghiz Steppe in present Kazakhstan. They also achieved skill in horse-riding. These antecedents naturally influenced the economy when they settled in the Punjab, the land of Five Rivers.

## 5. Nature of the Early Vedic Economy

The pre-Vedic Harappan civilization was essentially urban. But in the Rigvedic economy, urban centres (nagara) are almost absent. Rather Indra, the principal God and the Hero has been named as Purandara, meaning one who destroys the puras or cities of the dasas and dasyus, perhaps representing the indigenous people.

As a band of nomadic people the Rigvedic Aryans were primarily pastoralists. In fact the Rigveda emphasizes cattle as the chief property.

Thus neither the urban characters of the Harappan economy left any impression on the Rigvedic economy, nor did it saw the development of economy based on agrarian villages. Rather pastoralism was the mainstay of the economic life. Thus the term used to refer to a wealthy person in the Rigveda is *gomat*, meaning one who owns cattle. R.S. Sharma has found 176 references to the cow in the Rigveda. Praying for cattle and horses forms the theme of a large number of hymns. Besides cattle was considered to be a form of wealth that can be own from the rivals by conquest. Thus *gavisti* (to pray for cows) is a term synonymous to battle in the Rigveda. Significantly reference to warfare for land is rare in the Rigveda. To support these data from literary sources, it may also be pointed out that foodgrains or iron artefacts are absent in the Early Vedic sites in Punjab, Haryana and Jammu dated between 1500-1000 BCE. Rather large quantity of cattle bones indicate that pastoralism was practiced on a larger scale by the Vedic people.

## 6. Agriculture

The geographical horizons of the Rigvedic settlements was, however, favourable for agriculture, with the presence of a number of rivers in the Indus valley and the Punjab. Reference to agriculture, nevertheless occurs in the Rigveda. There are 21 references to agriculture in the text. One of the Rigvedic suktas (4-57) is dedicated to kshetrapati, the guardian of agriculture. Kshetra here refers to cultivated land. The term *sunasira* refers to the plough and ploughshare while *sita* refers to the furrow. A ploughed field dated to the 12<sup>th</sup> century BCE has been found at Aligama in the Swat valley. The term *kulya* (3-45-3) most probably referred to artificial canal. However, most of the references to agriculture occur in the 1<sup>st</sup> and the 10<sup>th</sup> mandala which are later in date. It may therefore, be presumed that the Rigvedic people were gradually realizing the importance of agriculture.

## 7. Crafts

With limited agricultural production by the pastoral people of the Rigveda the surplus was almost negligible. This caused a hindrance to the development of full fledged specialists on any craft since under such circumstance a craftsman was required to procure food and he could not devote his full time to the pursuit of his craft.

The term *takshaka* in the Rigveda probably refers to a carpenter. He specialized in the manufacture of chariot-wheels. It is to be mentioned here that the Rigvedic Aryans probably introduced horse-drawn chariots in India. Chariots were not only meant for battles, but chariot-racing was also a favourite pastime. Therefore, the *rathakaras*, that is the chariot-makers were quite popular in the Rigveda. The *charmmana* or the leather-worker used to

make water-vessels, whips, horse-saddles etc. The weavers were also popular. References to different types of ornaments like hiranyakarna (gold earrings?), nishka (Necklace) indicates that ornament-manufacturing as a craft was also familiar in the Rigveda.

It is not certain that whether the term *ayas* in the Rigveda refers to iron in particular. The use of iron was not prevalent in India prior to 850 BCE. In such a circumstance the weapons or agricultural tools like sickles could have been made of copper. The separate reference to *dravina* (expert in smelting of metals) and *karmara* (one who manufactured tools from metals, the predecessors of later-day carpenters) gives a hint to the beginning of division of labour in the same craft.

## **8. Trade**

The limited amount of surplus production created an obstruction to the growth of trade. Still the Rigveda refers to the journey of the merchants to distant lands in search of wealth. Even there are hymns in the Rigveda, addressed to Pusha, the God, to protect the merchants on their way. The term *pani* probably refers to traders. They were wealthy. But the attitude of the composers of the hymns towards them is negative. Probably the *panis* included the original inhabitants of the land prior to the coming of the Rigvedic people. That is why they have been regarded as *dasas* or *dasyus*.

Although the term *samudra* occurs several times, still it could have only meant the confluence of the Indus with the sea and not the sea proper. Besides, there is a lack of reference to any large vessel capable of journey into the sea. In view of the absence of surplus in adequate quantity, it is difficult to think of the practice of maritime trade in the Rigvedic period.

## **9. Currency**

A.D. Pusalkar took the term *nishka* occurring in the Rigveda in the sense of a coin. But its weight or value is unknown. In later period *nishka* definitely referred to coins. But in the background of a pastoral economy of the Rigveda, it is difficult to assume the use of coins as medium of exchange. Rather cows could have served as the chief medium of exchange in the Rigvedic period.

## **10. The concept of ownership**

Cows, being the chief form of wealth, its ownership were perhaps communal, rather than individual. The pastures were also not under individual ownership. Rather it belonged to the whole clan. In such a society, inequality on the basis of possession of wealth could have been unknown. This could be the chief factor resulting in the absence of varna system in the Rigveda. Although the Purusasukta hymn in the 10th mandala of the Rigveda refers to the origin of four varnas, *brahmana*, *rajanya*, *vaisya* and *sudra*, still in the Rigveda varna largely corresponds to colour. There were two varnas, the *Arya* varna and the *dasyu* varna.

The king was also mainly a chief of the clan. He did not claim regular tax since the surplus was absent. The *Danastutis* in the Rigveda refers to gifts made by the chiefs to the members of the clan. It has been assumed that this refers to the system of redistribution of wealth by the chief. He secured a part of the loot for him and his family members and distributed the rest among the clan members. This system has been compared with *Potlach* practiced by the Red Indian chiefs to their clan members.

The Rigvedic economy has also been regarded as a gift economy. The idea of gift economy was introduced by Marcel Mauss, the French Sociologist. Such economy is based on the idea of reciprocal gift-giving practices and not on compulsory payment of taxes. Since in the

Rigvedic economy the king did not claim tax, but he only received voluntary tribute from his clan members, it has been compared with the concept of gift economy.

### **11. Later Vedic Period**

The transition from the pastoral phase to an agricultural economy is clear in some of the hymns in the later portion of the Rigveda. The eastward movement of the Rigvedic Aryans has been reflected in Later Vedic literature that contain several references to the rivers like the Ganges and the Yamuna. In Rigveda these two rivers have been mentioned only once. The northern and western parts of the Gangetic valley now came to be settled. The Satapatha Brahmana (800 BCE) refers to the story of Videgha Mathava who followed Agni Vaisvanara in his journey towards the east. They reached upto the river Sadanira which has been identified with the Gandak. Rising from the Himalayas and flowing through North and South Bihar it joins the Ganges near Patna. Videgha Mathava ended his journey at Videha or Mithila in north Bihar. The economic significance of this eastward movement was important. The Gangetic valley has abundant rainfall and is full of perennial rivers. Besides it is rich in alluvial soil. All these features contributed to the expansion of agriculture in the Later Vedic period. Pastoralism receded to the background.

### **12. Agriculture**

According to the Atharvaveda, Prithu Vainya invented agriculture. It may, however, be pointed out that the pre-Vedic Harappan people knew agriculture. But the Atharvaveda tried to suppress this fact. It is also emphasized in the text that while the Aryas practice agriculture, the vratyas (socially degraded groups) were averse to it. The term Arya here refers to a gentleman and it indicates the positive attitude of the Later Vedic people towards agriculture. Still some people who stuck to pastoralism were gradually being degraded socially by the majority who practiced agriculture.

### **13. Crops**

The Later Vedic texts refer to a variety of crops compared to the Rigveda. Yava or barley was one of the chief crops. Godhuma refers to wheat. Vrihi in the sense of rice has been used for the first time in the Later Vedic literature whereas prior to this, in the Rigveda it did not refer to any specific crop, but has been used in a general sense. Its synonym shashthi refers to the variety of rice that used to ripen through a period of 60 days. Abundant rainfall, moist weather and the presence of fertile alluvial soil must have surely contributed to the growth of rice production in the Gangetic valley. Charred rice has been found from the PGW phase at the archaeological site of Hastinapur.

### **14. Knowledge of Agriculture**

The knowledge of agricultural seasons is also found in the Later Vedic texts. According to the Taittiriya Samhita seeds of barley are to be sown in winter and it ripens in Summer while rice are sown in the rainy season and it ripens in the season of Hemanta. Use of cowdung as manure was known. The Satapatha Brahmana refers to the four important phases of agricultural operations as ploughing the field, sowing seeds, the cutting of crops and finally the threshing of the foodgrains. Besides, abundant references have been made to the plough. The ploughshare used to be made of khadira or udumbara (wood of the fig-tree). Copper was also used for this purpose. However, the use of iron was not known. The Atharvaveda, Vajasaneyi Samhita, Satapatha Brahmana etc. refers to the number of oxen required to draw the plough as six to twenty-four. Use of so many numbers of oxen might be due to the large size of cultivated plots. Besides, the soil of the Gangetic valley was much sticky than in the Punjab. This could have been the reason for the requirement of such a large number of oxen. Often the seedlings were destroyed by the rats or insects. Therefore,

the Atharvaveda contains magical formulas to protect the crops from such dangers. The knowledge about the systems of irrigation was, perhaps, not much advanced. Therefore people believed in the power of such magical formulas.

Apart from the favorable geographical factors for agricultural production, the role of fire in the clearing of forests in the Gangetic valley has been hinted at in the story of Videgha Mathava in the Satapatha Brahmana.

### **15. Use of Iron**

The Later Vedic period also saw the beginning of the use of iron. Reference to shyamayasa or krishnayasa probably indicates the use of iron. The beginning of the use of iron around 850-800 BCE was a significant factor contributing to the expansion of settlements in the Gangetic valley. The agricultural tools of iron, are however, lesser in number than the iron weapons. Iron ploughshare has been found from the archaeological site of Jakhera in U.P. Large number of iron weapons like arrowheads, socketed axe etc. have been found at Atranji Khera in U.P. Furnace for iron-smelting has been discovered at Jhunjhunu in Rajasthan.

### **16. Pottery**

The type of pottery found associated with iron implements from the archaeological sites are a grey coloured pottery painted with black. Thus they are known as Painted Grey Ware or PGW. It has been assumed that the period of the composition of the Later Vedic texts coincides with the occurrence of PGW and iron tools. PGW pottery has been found from the archaeological sites of Noh, Bhagavanpur, Dadheri, Mathura, Bairat, Sonpur, Alamgirpur etc. They belong to the period from 900 – 500 BCE. Its distribution area includes the Punjab, Haryana, northern Rajasthan, the water shade and the Doab of the Ganges and the Yamuna.

### **17. Crafts**

The production of surplus by an agricultural society ensured that the craftsmen could devote more time to develop his craft skills. Pottery and manufacture of iron tools were two important occupations. The development of textile production is indicated by the Later Vedic texts that refers to garments of silk or the dress to be worn during the performance of a Yajna. The Vajasaneyi Samhita of the Yajurveda gives a long list of craftsmen like kaulala (potter), karmara (blacksmith), manikara (ornament manufacturer), dhivara (fishermen), sailusha (singer) etc. Besides the Vajasaneti Samhita and the Taittiriya Brahmana indicates that the occupation of a vaidya or physician was very popular. He commanded respect from the society.

### **18. Trade**

The economic progress triggered by the expansion of agrarian economy, development of crafts and industries contributed to the promotion of trade. The term sresthi, used for the first time in the Later Vedic texts refer to a wealthy merchant. People could comprehend that wealth can be acquired through trade. The Yajurveda refers to Vanija (son of a Vanik). This perhaps indicates that that the profession of a merchant became hereditary. This is also indicative of the promotion of trade. The Satapatha Brahmana refers to the eastern and the western sea. Thus the term sagara clearly refers to sea in the Later Vedic texts.

## 19. Currency

The term krishnala has been used in the sense of a unit of weight. Satamana refers to an item weighing 100 krishnalas. According to some scholars krishnala and satamana were two types of coins. However, till now we do not have any specimen of a coin belonging to the Later Vedic period. Besides the economic horizons of the period also rules out the idea of coins as serving the medium of exchange in trade.

## 20. Impact of economy on the society and polity

The above discussion brings out that the expansion of an agricultural economy in the Later Vedic period resulted into the development of material culture. This again led to the growth of inequality in the possession of wealth. The impact of this economic change was a stratified society. In the later Vedic texts the social difference between the brahmanas and the ksatriyas on the one hand and the vaisyas and sudras on the other increased. The king also acquired more power. The brahmanas became the chief supporters of the king. Thus there was the development of a relationship of interdependence between the king and the brahmanas. The Rigvedic chief obtained vali from the members of his clan. It was of a voluntary nature and not regular. But the Later Vedic king became the valihrit meaning one who claims vali. Thus vali also acquired the nature of a regular tax.

The king exercised his power mainly on the vaisyas who became the chief tax-payers. The Atharvaveda declares that the king should be given his due share of villages, horses and cattle. Reference to villages may indicate that the king claimed the surplus agricultural produce of the villages. This was to be spent for the maintenance of the royal officers and the army.

## 21. Summary

On the whole the establishment of the agrarian economy between 1000 – 600 BCE was a landmark in the history of India. It resulted in the subsequent historical developments like territorial state formation, urbanization development of trade and the beginning of coinage.