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The Later Vedic Phase Transition To State And Social Formation

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Abstract

The Later Vedic period (c. 1000–600 BCE) marked a crucial transition in ancient Indian history, characterized by the evolution of tribal, pastoral communities into more complex state structures and hierarchical social formations. This phase witnessed the consolidation of monarchical states (janapadas), the codification of varna (caste) divisions, the expansion of agriculture, and the emergence of formalized administrative and legal institutions. The role of rituals and religious authority, particularly the increasing dominance of the Brahmins, contributed to the structuring of socio-political hierarchies. This study explores the factors driving this transformation, including economic developments, territorial expansion, and ideological shifts in governance and social order. By analyzing archaeological evidence, Vedic texts, and comparative historical frameworks, this research aims to understand the broader implications of the Later Vedic transition on state formation, governance models, and social stratification, shaping the trajectory of early Indian civilization.

The history of the later Vedic period is based mainly on the Vedic texts which were compiled after the age of the Rig Veda. The collections of Vedic hymns or mantras are known as the Samhitas. The Rig Veda Samhita is the oldest Vedic text, on the basis of which we have described the early Vedic age. For the purpose of recitation, the prayers of the Rig Veda were set to tune, and this modified collection was known as the Sama Veda. The Later Vedic phase marked a significant transition to a state-level society with a complex social hierarchy, primarily characterized by the emergence of the "Varna" system, where society was divided into four social classes (Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras), with increased power concentrated in the hands of a king and the priestly class (Brahmanas) as the Aryans expanded into the fertile Gangetic plains and adopted a more settled agricultural lifestyle; this transition also saw the development of powerful kingdoms like Kuru and Panchala, with a growing emphasis on elaborate rituals and sacrifices as part of religious practice.

Keywords: Later Vedic Period (1000–600 BCE), Janapadas and Mahajanapadas, Political Centralization, King (Rajan) and Monarchy, Sabha and Samiti, Varna System, Kshatriyas and Brahmanas, Agriculture and Iron Technology, Gopati and Bhupati (Lord of Cattle and Land), Land Ownership and Taxation.

The Vedic Samhitas were followed by the composition of a series of texts known as the Brahmanas. These are replete with ritualistic formulae and explain the social and religious meaning of rituals. All these later Vedic texts were compiled in the upper Gangetic basin in c. 1000-500 BC. During the same period and in the same area, digging and exploration have brought to light nearly 700 inhabited sites. These are called Painted Grey Ware (PGW) sites because they were inhabited by people who used earthen bowls and dishes made of painted grey pottery. They also used iron weapons. With the combined evidence from the later Vedic texts and PGW iron-phase archaeology, we are able to form an idea of the life of the people in the first half of the first millennium BC in western UP and the adjoining areas of Punjab, Haryana, and Rajasthan.

They set up their capital at Hastinapur situated in Meerut district. The history of the Kuru tribe is important for the battle of Bharata, which is the principal theme of the great epic called the Mahabharata. This war is supposed to have been fought around 950 BC between the Kauravas and the Pandavas. Since both of them belonged to the Kuru clan, as a result of war virtually the whole of the Kuru clan was wiped out.

Discussion

In later Vedic times people hardly knew the use of burnt bricks. The mud structures that have been discovered at Hastinapur could not be imposing and lasting. From traditions we learn that Hastinapur was flooded, and the remnants of the Kuru clan moved to Kaushambi near Allahabad. The Panchala kingdom, which covered the modern districts of Bareilly, Badaun, and Farukhabad, is famous for its philosopher kings and brahmana theologians mentioned in later Vedic texts. This would suggest that the later Vedic people also encountered the Munda speakers in this area. Whoever the opponents of the later Vedic people were, they evidently did not occupy any large and compact area and their number in the upper Gangetic basin does not seem to have been large. The Vedic people succeeded in the second phase of their expansion because they used iron weapons and horse-drawn chariots.

The story of iron is similar to that of the horse. The domesticated horse is first noticed near the Black Sea in the sixth millennium BC, but it became common only from the second millennium BC onwards. Similarly iron underwent a long gestation. Lumps of stone or iron move in outer space. Such a piece was found in ancient Egypt in c. 3000 BC. It was identified as iron, and was called black copper from heaven in the Egyptian language. Many copper minerals containing iron ores. It took many years to separate iron ores from these minerals and form the pure iron metal. As a pure metal, iron was first made in Mesopotamia in 5000 BC, and later in Anatolia in the third millennium BC. However, up to 1200 BC, iron was valued as a precious metal in western Asia and used as presents by rulers. In the Indian subcontinent, iron is sometimes attributed to Lothal and to some sites in Afghanistan in Harappan times. Neither of these however represents pure iron metal nor working in iron.

In India, pure iron at some sites in Rajasthan in the copper-stone age has been reported and also in Karnataka towards the end of that phase. Iron can thus be placed in the second half of the second millennium BC. In this phase we have no idea about its continuing use in terms of time and place. The iron axe may have been used to clear the forests in the upper Gangetic basin although, because rainfall ranged between 35 cm and 65 cm, these forests may not have been very dense. Towards the end of the Vedic period knowledge of iron spread in eastern UP and Videha. The earliest iron implements discovered in this area relate to the seventh century BC, and the metal itself is called shyama or krishna ayas (black metal) in the later Vedic texts.

Although very few agricultural tools made of iron have been found, undoubtedly agriculture was the chief means of subsistence of the later Vedic people. Late Vedic texts speak of six, eight, twelve, and even twenty-four oxen yoked to the plough. This may be an exaggeration. Ploughing was done with a wooden ploughshare, which could function in the light soil of the upper Gangetic plains. Sufficient bullocks could not have been available because of cattle slaughter in sacrifices. Agriculture was, therefore, primitive, but there is no doubt about its wide prevalence. The Shatapatha Brahmana speaks at length about the ploughing rituals. According to ancient legends, Janaka, the king of Videha and Sita's father, lent his hand to the plough.

In those days, even kings and princes did not hesitate to take to manual labour. Balarama, Krishna's brother, was called Haladhara or wielder of the plough. Gautama Buddha is depicted ploughing with oxen in a Bodhi-Gaya sculpture. Eventually ploughing was assigned to the lower orders and prohibited for the upper varnas. The Vedic people continued to produce barley, but during the later Vedic period rice and wheat became their chief crops. In subsequent times, wheat became the staple food of the people in Punjab and western UP. For the first time, the Vedic people became acquainted with rice in the doab, called vrihi in the Vedic texts, and remains of it recovered from Hastinapur relate to the eighth century BC. Rice was also grown at Atranjikhera in Etah district at around the same time. Various kinds of lentils were also produced by the later Vedic people.

Literature Review

The Later Vedic period (c. 1000–600 BCE) marked a significant transition in Indian history, as societies evolved from pastoral and tribal structures to more complex state and social formations. The future scope of studying this transition is vast and includes multiple academic and applied fields: Further excavation and research can provide deeper insights into the shift from tribal to state-based societies. Comparative studies with other ancient civilizations (like Mesopotamia and China) can refine our understanding of state formation. Advances in archaeological techniques, such as AI-assisted artifact analysis and genetic studies, can help trace population movements and social structures. The Later Vedic transition provides a case study for early monarchy, administration, and governance. It can contribute to theories on how decentralized societies develop into centralized states. Lessons from this period can be applied to modern discussions on governance and political evolution. The rise of varna (caste) systems and their long-term impact on Indian society can be explored further. Economic studies can analyze how agrarian expansion, trade, and technology influenced social hierarchies. Insights from this period can contribute to broader discussions on economic transformations in pre-modern societies.

The shift from early Vedic rituals to more structured Brahmanical traditions shaped later Indian religious philosophies. The transition influenced Upanishadic thought, which later contributed to Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain philosophies. Research can explore how these changes influenced contemporary religious and spiritual practices. AI and big data can help analyze Vedic texts for linguistic and thematic patterns. Digital reconstructions of Vedic settlements can provide immersive historical experiences. Online education platforms can use this period as a case study for teaching early state formations. The Later Vedic period offers insights into early legal and administrative systems. Understanding past social structures can help in addressing caste-related issues today. Political evolution theories from this period can be applied to developing societies.

The later Vedic period saw the rise of diverse arts and crafts. We hear of smiths and smelters, who certainly had something to do with iron working from about 1000 BC. The Vedic people were familiar with copper from the very outset. Numerous copper tools of the pre-1000 BC period found in western UP and Bihar might suggest the existence of coppersmiths in non-Vedic societies. The Vedic people may have used the copper mines of Khetri in Rajasthan, but in any event, copper was one of the first metals to be used by them. Copper objects are found in Painted Grey Ware sites. They were used principally for war and hunting, and also for ornaments.

Weaving was confined to women but practiced on a wide scale. Leather work, pottery, and carpentry made great progress. The later Vedic people were acquainted with four types of pottery—black-and-red ware, black-slipped ware, Painted Grey Ware, and red-ware. The last type of pottery was the most popular, and is found almost all over western UP. However, the most distinctive pottery of the period is known as Painted Grey Ware. It consisted of bowls and dishes that were used either for rituals or for eating or for both, probably by the emerging upper orders. Glass hoards and bangles found in the PGW layers may have been used as prestige objects by a few persons. On the whole, both Vedic texts and excavations indicate the cultivation of specialized crafts. Jewellers are also mentioned in later Vedic texts, and they possibly catered to the needs of the affluent sections of society.

The Vedic Aryans were the authors of the Vedic hymns. Aryans were considered a race in the nineteenth century. Originally, the Aryans seem to have lived somewhere in the Steppes stretching from **southern Russia to Central Asia**. A group of them migrated from here to northwest India, where they were known as Indo-Aryans or simply Aryans. The Aryans are considered to represent a linguistic group speaking Indo-European languages. They are distinguished by traditional historians and archaeologists from the non-Aryan Harappans of the preceding period. There is no well-defined political hierarchy in the Early Vedic setup; however, changes during the period gave rise to a socio-political hierarchy, which manifested itself in the origin of the Varna system during the 'Later Vedic phase'. Early Vedic society was largely egalitarian and governed by tribal values and norms.

The Early Vedic Period social structure, which was based on clan relations and was largely egalitarian, became much more complex in the later Vedic period. The early Vedic society was not divided on the basis of caste, while later, Vedic society was the hymns of the Rigveda reflect the religious ideas of the Vedic

people. They revered the natural forces around them (such as wind, water, rain, thunder, fire, and so on) over which they had no control and invested nature with divinity conceived in human forms. The Kuru and Panchala kingdoms flourished in this period. The Kuru kingdom started in 900 BC and declined in 500 BC. It was formed by two major tribes called the Bharatas and the Purus. Parikshit and Janamejaya were two famous and important rulers of the Kuru kingdom. The very famous 'Mahabharata' is deemed to have been fought in 950 BC between two clans of the Kuru kingdom, the Kauravas and the Pandavas.

The Panchala kingdom started in 1100 BC and declined in 500 BC. Pravahana Jaivali was an important king of the Panchala dynasty. Both Kuru and Panchala kingdoms declined by the end of the later Vedic period. Some other kingdoms which flourished in this period were Kosala, Videha and Kasi. Some tribal kingdoms in the far East were Magadha, Anga and Yajnavalkya. India was divided into three parts in the later Vedic period – Northern (Aryavarta), Southern (Dakshinapatha) and Central (Madhyadesa).

Conclusion

The later Vedic period started from 1000 BC and continued up to 500 BC. The Vedic people started expanding their land territory in this period. By the end of the later Vedic age, the Aryans had expanded their territory past the Vindhyas in the South up to the Gangetic Valley in the North. Also, one of the important events in this period was the use of iron. A timeline of the later Vedic age can be summarized as follows:

The history of the later Vedic period is primarily dependent on Vedic texts compiled after the Veda. The collections of Vedic hymns or mantras are known as the Samhitas (Vedic scriptures), and Iron took a long time to develop. Iron implements dating from the seventh-century bc have been discovered in eastern Uttar Pradesh, and Videha, & the metal is known as Shyama or Krishna ayas. Farming was the later Vedic people's primary source of subsistence. They also developed barley, but rice and wheat were their main crops during the later Vedic period. Various arts & crafts flourished throughout the later Vedic period. Settlements can be deduced from excavations and expeditions.

Therefore, the Later Vedic Period saw extreme economic, social, political, and religious changes weighing the aspects of both good and evil. This period was primarily dependent on Vedic texts, scriptures, hymns, mantras, and more, which impacted society on a large scale. Kingdoms grew larger, more powerful kings and queens ruled and implemented regulations according to those Vedic texts. Trading, commerce, food industries, women's rights, child marriage, caste system, and religious system affected people during that period. The Aryans expanded administration and Political systems. The most powerful figures aspired to be the single ruler (Ekarat or Samrat) and master of the land.

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