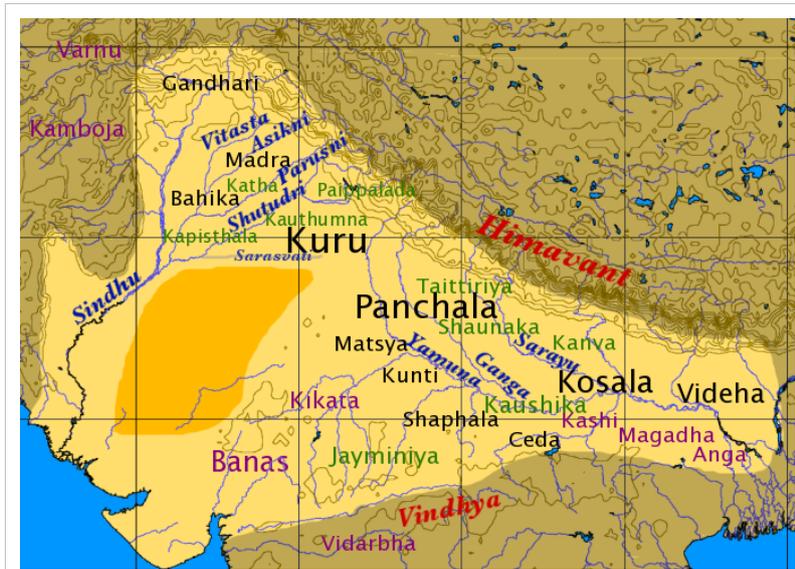


Vedic period



Map of northern India in the late Vedic period

History of South Asia	
Stone Age	before 3300 BCE
Mature Harappan	2600–1700 BCE
Late Harappan	1700–1300 BCE
Iron Age	1200–300 BCE
Maurya Empire	321–184 BCE
Middle Kingdoms	230 BCE–1279 CE
Satavahana	230 BCE–220 CE
Gupta Empire	280–550 CE
Pala Empire	750–1140 CE
Delhi Sultanate	1206–1596
Mughal Empire	1526–1803
Maratha Empire	1674–1818
British India	1858–1947
Modern States	since 1947
Timeline	

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 1700–1100 BCE, also referred to as the early Vedic period.^[1] 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.^[2]

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 centered 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.

Overview

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:

1. **Rigvedic:** 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 millenia
2. **Mantra language:** 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 *krno-*). 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.
3. **Samhita prose:** 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 center from the Kurus to the Pancalas on the Ganges.
4. **Brahmana prose:** 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, VadhSS).
5. **Sutra language:** 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.^[3] Videha (N. Bihar) as a third political center is established.
6. **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 Vedanta, 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.

Rigvedic period

See also Rigvedic tribes

The origin of the Vedic civilization and its relation to the Indus Valley civilization, Indo-Aryan migration and Gandhara Grave culture related cultures remains controversial and politically charged in Indian society, often leading to disputes on the history of Vedic culture. The Rigveda is primarily a collection of religious hymns, and allusions to, but not explanation of, various myths and stories, mainly in the younger books 1 and 10. The oldest hymns, probably in books 2–7, although some hold book 9, the Soma Mandala, to be even more ancient, contain many elements inherited from pre-Vedic, common Indo-Iranian society. Therefore, it is difficult to define the precise beginning of the "Rigvedic period", as it emerges seamlessly from the era preceding it. Also, due to the semi-nomadic nature of the society described, it cannot be easily localized, and in its earliest phase describes tribes that were essentially on the move.

RigVedic Aryans have a lot in common with the Andronovo culture and the Mittanni kingdoms as well as with early Iranians. The Andronovo culture is believed to be one of the first sites of the horse-drawn chariots.

Political organization

The *grama* (wagon train), *vis* and *jana* were political units of the early Vedic Aryans. A *vish* was a subdivision of a *jana* or "krishti", and a *grama* was a smaller unit than the other two. The leader of a *grama* was called *gramani* and that of a *vish* was called *vishpati*.

The *rashtra* (polity) was governed by a *rajan* (chieftain, 'king'). The king is often referred to as *gopa* (protector) and occasionally as *samrat* (supreme ruler). He governed the people with their consent and approval. He was elected from a restricted class of 'royals' (rajanya). There were various types of meetings such as the *vidhata* or "Sabhā". Gana was the non-monarchical assembly that is a parallel one to the monarchical assemblies of that period headed by Jyestha the same was referred in Buddhist text named Jettaka. The Sabhā, situated outside of settlement, was restricted to the Vratyas, bands of roving Brahmins and Kshatriyas in search of cattle, with a common woman (pumscali) ^[4] while the vidhata was the potlatch-like ritual distribution of bounty.^[5]

The main duty of the king was to protect the tribe. He was aided by several functionaries, including the *purohita* (chaplain) and the *senani* (army chief; *sena*: army). The former not only gave advice to the ruler but also was his chariot driver and practiced spells and charms for success in war. Soldiers on foot (*pattis*) and on chariots (*rathins*), armed with bow and arrow, were common. The king employed *spas* (spies) and *dutas* (messengers). He collected taxes (originally ceremonial gifts, *bali*), from the people which he had to redistribute.

Society and economy

The concept of *varna* (class) and the rules of marriage were rigid as is evident from Vedic verses (RV 10.90, W. Rau 1957). The status of the Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras were all the same. It was not a caste system, but a class system, which was fundamentally based on the strengths and abilities of each individual. The Brahmins were specialized in creating poetry, preserving the sacred texts, and carrying out various types of rituals. Functioning as intellectual leadership, they also restricted social mobility between the varnas, as in the fields of science, war, literature, religion and the environment. The proper enunciation of verses in ritual was considered essential for prosperity and success in war and harvests. Kshatriyas amassed wealth (cattle), and many commissioned the performance of sacrifices. Kshatriyas helped in administering the polity, maintained the structure of society and the economy of a tribe, and helped in maintaining law and order.

In the Early Vedic Period all the three upper classes Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and Vaishyas were considered as —relatively— equal Arya, but in the Later Vedic Age the Brahmins and Kshatriyas became upper class. The Vaishyas were pastoralists and farmers; the Shudras were the lower class; they included artisans and were meant to serve the upper three classes.^[6] As the caste system became deep-rooted there were many restrictions and rules which were to be followed.

Cattle were held in high esteem and frequently appear in Rigvedic hymns; goddesses were often compared to cows, and gods to bulls. Agriculture grew more prominent with time as the community gradually began to settle down in post-Rigvedic times. The economy was based on bartering with cattle and other valuables such as salt or metals.

Families were patrilineal, and people prayed for the abundance of sons. The Society was strictly organized in a system of four varna (classes, to be distinguished from caste, jati)

Vedic religious practices

Main articles: Historical Vedic religion, Vedic astrology

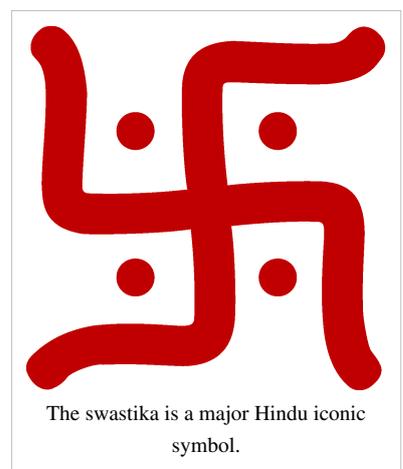
The Vedic forms of belief are the precursor to modern Hinduism. Texts considered to date to the Vedic period are mainly the four Vedas, but the Brahmanas, Aranyakas and the older Upanishads as well as the oldest Shrautasutras are also considered to be Vedic. The Vedas record the liturgy connected with the rituals and sacrifices performed by the 16 or 17 Shrauta priests and the purohitas.

The rishis, the composers of the hymns of the Rigveda, were considered inspired poets and seers (in post-Vedic times understood as "hearers" of an eternally existing Veda, *Śrauta* means "what is heard").

The mode of worship was performance of sacrifices which included the chanting of Rigvedic verses (see Vedic chant), singing of Samans and 'mumbling' of offering mantras (Yajus) . The priests executed rituals for the three upper classes (varna) of Vedic society, strictly excluding the Sudras. People offered for abundance of rain, cattle, sons, long life and gaining 'heaven'.



Ceramic goblet from Navdatoli, Malwa, 1300 BC.



The swastika is a major Hindu iconic symbol.

The main deities of the Vedic pantheon were Indra, Agni (the sacrificial fire), and Soma and some deities of social order such as Mitra–Varuna, Aryaman, Bhaga and Amsa, further nature deities such as Surya (the Sun), Vayu (the wind), Prithivi (the earth). Goddesses included Ushas (the dawn), Prithvi and Aditi (the mother of the Aditya gods or sometimes the cow). Rivers, especially Saraswati, were also considered goddesses. Deities were not viewed as all-powerful. The relationship between humans and the deity was one of transaction, with Agni (the sacrificial fire) taking the role of messenger between the two. Strong traces of a common Indo-Iranian religion remain visible, especially in the Soma cult and the fire worship, both of which are preserved in Zoroastrianism. The Ashvamedha (horse sacrifice) has parallels in the 2nd millennium BC Andronovo culture, in Rome and old Ireland, was continued in India until at least the 4th century AD and revived under Jai Singh II of Amber in 1716 AD.

Vedic religion evolved into the Hindu paths of Yoga and Vedanta, a religious path considering itself the 'essence' of the Vedas, interpreting the Vedic pantheon as a unitary view of the universe with 'God' (Brahman) seen as immanent and transcendent in the forms of Ishvara and Brahman. These post-Vedic systems of thought, along with later texts like Upanishads, epics (namely Gita of Mahabharat), have been fully preserved and form the basis of modern Hinduism. The ritualistic traditions of Vedic religion are preserved in the conservative Śrauta tradition, in part with the exception of animal sacrifice, which was mostly abandoned by the higher castes by the end of the Vedic period, partly under the influence of the Buddhist and Jain religions, and their criticism of such practices.

The later Vedic period

The transition from the early to the later Vedic period was marked by the emergence of agriculture as the dominant economic activity and a corresponding decline in the significance of cattle rearing. Several changes went hand in hand with this. For instance, several large kingdoms arose because of the increasing importance of land and long distance trade. The late Vedic period, from ca. 500 BC onward, more or less seamlessly blends into the period of the Middle kingdoms of India known from historical sources.

Kingdoms

The late Vedic period was marked by the rise of the sixteen *Mahajanapadas* referred to in some of the literature. The power of the king and the Kshatriyas greatly increased. Rulers gave themselves titles like *ekarat* (the one ruler), *sarvabhauma* (ruler of all the earth) and *chakravartin* ('who moves the wheel'). The kings performed sacrifices like *rajasuya* (royal consecration), *vajapeya* (including a chariot race) and, for supreme dominance over other kings, the ashvamedha (horse sacrifice). The coronation ceremony was a major social occasion. Several functionaries, in addition to the purohita and the senani, took part. The role of the people in political decision making and the status of the Vaishyas as such was greatly decreased.

Notes

- [1] Oberlies (1998:155) gives an estimate of 1100 BC for the youngest hymns in book 10. Estimates for a *terminus post quem* of the earliest hymns are more uncertain. Oberlies (p. 158) based on 'cumulative evidence' sets wide range of 1700–1100
- [2] Witzel, Michael, "Vedas and Upaniṣads", in: Flood 2003, p. 68
- [3] V.A. Gunasekara (<http://www.budsas.org/ebud/ebdha255.htm>)
- [4] H.Falk, *Bruderschaft und Würfelspiel*, Freiburg 1986
- [5] F.B.J. Kuiper, *Selected Writings on Indian Linguistics and Philology*, pp. 406-417
- [6] W. Rau, *Staat und Gesellschaft*, 1957

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Further reading

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External links

- Restoration of Vedic Wisdom (<http://www.quantumyoga.org/Movement for the Restoration .pdf>) (pdf), Patrizia Norelli-Bachelet

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