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The Later Vedic Phase: Transition to State and Social Orders

Expansion in the Later Vedic Period (*c*. 1000–500 BC)

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*. In post-Rig Vedic times, two other collections, the *Yajur Veda Samhita* and the *Atharva Veda Samhita*, were composed. The *Yajur Veda* contains not only hymns but also rituals to accompany their recitation, the latter reflecting the social and political milieu of the time. The *Atharva Veda* contains charms and spells to ward off evils and diseases, its contents throwing light on the beliefs and practices of the non-Aryans. 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 earthern 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.

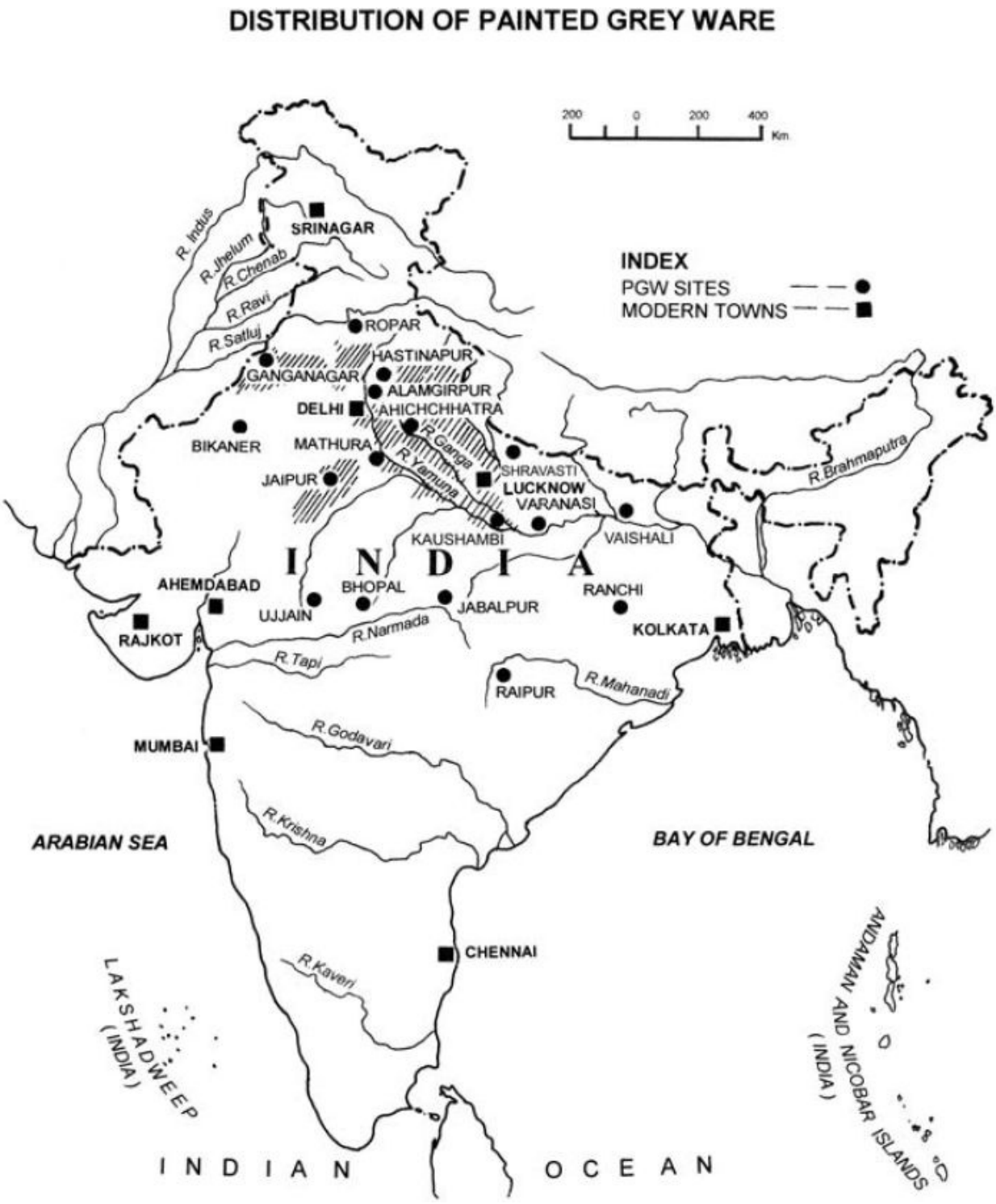
The texts show that the Aryans expanded from Punjab over the whole of western UP covered by the Ganga–Yamuna doab. The Bharatas and Purus, the two major tribes, combined and thus formed the Kuru people. Initially they lived between the Sarasvati and the Drishadvati just on the fringe of the doab. Soon the Kurus occupied Delhi and the upper reaches of the doab, the area called Kurukshetra or the land of the Kurus. Gradually they coalesced with a people called the Panchalas who occupied the central part of the doab. The authority of the Kuru–Panchala people spread over Delhi, and the upper and central parts of the doab. 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.

Excavations at Hastinapur, datable to the period 900 BC to 500 BC, have revealed settlements and faint beginnings of town life. They do not, however, reflect the description of Hastinapur in the *Mahabharata* because the epic was finally compiled much later in about the fourth century AD when material life had greatly advanced. 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 Bareilley, Badaun, and Farukhabad, is famous for its philosopher kings and brahmana theologians mentioned in later Vedic texts.

Towards the end of the later Vedic period, in around 500 BC, the Vedic people spread in large numbers from the doab further east to Koshala in eastern UP and to Videha in north Bihar. Although Koshala is associated with the story of Rama, this story is not mentioned in Vedic literature. In eastern UP and north Bihar, the Vedic people had to contend against a people who used copper implements and the black-and-red earthen pots. In western UP they possibly came up against the people who used pots of ochre or red colour together with copper implements. At a few places they also came against the users of the late Harappan culture. Many Munda words occur in later Vedic texts which were compiled in the upper Gangetic basin. This would suggest that the later Vedic people also encountered the The Later Vedic Phase: Transition to State and Social Orders 119 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.



MAP 6 Distribution of Painted Grey Ware. *Courtesy ASI*

Use of Iron

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. When they encounter the atmosphere, they hit the ground and plummet to earth as meteorites. 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 contain 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 represent pure iron metal nor working in iron. They are really copper objects containing iron ores. These ores have not been separated from copper and given a distinct and separate identity as a pure iron metal.

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.

Around 1000 BC it was used in the Gandhara area in Pakistan. Iron implements buried with dead bodies have been discovered in substantial numbers. They have also been found in Baluchistan. At about the same time, iron was used in eastern Punjab, western UP, MP, and Rajasthan. Excavations show that iron weapons, such as arrowheads and spearheads, came to be commonly used in western UP from about 800 BC onwards. With iron weapons the Vedic people may have defeated the few adversaries that they may have faced in the upper portion of the doab. 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.

Agriculture

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 Bodh-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. The use of rice is recommended in Vedic rituals, but that of wheat only rarely. Various kinds of lentils were also produced by the later Vedic people.

Arts and Crafts

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 practised 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.

Settlements

Though the term *jana* or tribal people is common in the four Vedas, *janapada* or people's settlement is not mentioned there. It first occurs in some later Vedic texts called Brahmanas dating to not earlier than 800 BC.

Agriculture and various crafts enabled the later Vedic people to lead a settled life. Excavations and explorations give us some idea about settlements in later Vedic times. Widespread Painted Grey Ware sites have been found not only in western UP and Delhi, which was the Kuru–Panchala area, but also in the adjoining parts of Punjab and Haryana, the Madra area, and in those of Rajasthan, that constituted the Matsya area. Altogether, we can count nearly 700 sites, mostly in the upper Gangetic basin, only a few sites such as Hastinapur, Atranjikhera, and Noh have been excavated. As the thickness of the material remains of habitation ranges from one to three metres, it appears that these settlements lasted from one to three centuries. By and large, these were entirely new settlements which had no immediate predecessors. People lived in mud-brick houses or in wattle-and-daub houses erected on wooden poles. Although the structures are poor, ovens and cereals (rice) recovered from the sites show that the Painted Grey Ware people, probably identifiable with the later Vedic people, were farmers who led a settled life. However, as they generally cultivated with the wooden ploughshare, the peasants were unable to produce

enough to feed those engaged in other occupations, and therefore they would not contribute much to the rise of towns.

Although the term *nagara* is used in later Vedic texts only the faint beginnings of towns appear towards the end of the later Vedic period. Hastinapur and Kaushambi (near Allahabad) seem to be primitive towns dating to the end of the Vedic period, and may be called proto-urban. The Vedic texts also refer to the seas and sea voyages. Thus some form of commerce may have been stimulated by the rise of new arts and crafts.

By and large, the later Vedic phase registered a great advance in the material life of the people. The pastoral and semi-nomadic forms of living were relegated to the background and agriculture became the primary source of livelihood, and life became settled and sedentary. Equipped with diverse arts and crafts, the Vedic people now settled permanently in the upper Gangetic plains. The peasants living in the plains produced enough to maintain themselves, and were also able to spare a marginal part of their produce for the support of chiefs, princes, and priests.

Political Organization

In later Vedic times, the Rig Vedic tribal assemblies lost importance, and royal power increased at their cost. The *vidatha* completely disappeared; the *sabha* and *samiti* continued to hold their ground but their character changed. They were now controlled by chiefs and rich nobles, and women were no longer permitted to sit in the *sabha* which was now dominated by warriors and brahmanas.

The formation of larger kingdoms increased the power of the chief or king. Tribal authority tended to become territorial. The dominant tribes gave their names to territories which might be inhabited by tribes other than their own. Initially each area was named after the tribe that first settled there. First Panchala was the name of a people, and then it became the name of a region. The term *rashtra*, which indicates territory, first arose during this period. The concept of controlling people also appeared. It was indicated by the use of the term *rajya*, which meant sovereign power.

Traces of the election of the king appear in later Vedic texts. The individual considered to have the best in physical and other attributes was elected raja. A tribal who pioneered settlements, showed skill in farming, and fought bravely was elected the chief of his tribe. This may have been the case with the raja. He received voluntary presents called *bali* from his ordinary kinsmen or the

common people called the *vis*. Gradually these voluntary presents assumed the form of tributes that were forcibly collected. The ruler, however, sought to perpetuate the right to receive presents and enjoy other privileges pertaining to his office by making it hereditary in his family, the post generally going to the eldest son. However, this succession was not always smooth. The *Mahabharata* tells us that Duryodhana, the younger cousin of Yudhishthira, usurped power. Battling for territory, the families of the Pandavas and Kauravas virtually destroyed themselves. The Bharata battle shows that kingship knows no kinship.

The king's influence was strengthened by rituals. He performed the *rajasuya* sacrifice, which was supposed to confer supreme power on him. He performed the *ashvamedha*, which meant unquestioned control over an area in which the royal horse ran uninterrupted. He also performed the *vajapeya* or the chariot race, in which the royal chariot drawn by a horse was made to win the race against his kinsmen. All these rituals impressed the people by demonstrating the power and prestige of the king.

During this period collection of taxes and tributes seems to have become common. These were probably deposited with an officer called *sangrihitri* who worked as the king's companion. The epics tell us that at the time of a grand sacrifice, large-scale distributions were made by the princes, and all sections of the people were sumptuously fed. In the discharge of his duties the king was assisted by the priest, the commander, the chief queen, and a few other high functionaries. At the lower level, the administration was possibly run by village assemblies, which may have been controlled by the chiefs of the dominant clans. These assemblies also tried local cases. However, even in later Vedic times the king did not have a standing army. Tribal units were mustered in times of war and, according to one ritual, for success in war, the king had to eat along with his people (*vis*) from the same plate.

Social Organization

Aryanization promoted social differentiation. In the later Vedic texts the term *arya* encapsulates brahmana, kshatriya, vaishya, and shudra. Thus it was the Vedic Aryans who introduced the varna system.

The later Vedic society came to be divided into four varnas called the brahmana, *rajanya* or kshatriya, vaishya, and shudra. The growing cult of sacrifices enormously added to the power of the brahmanas. Initially the brahmanas were only one of the sixteen classes of priests, but they gradually

overshadowed the other priestly groups and emerged as the most important class. The rise of the brahmanas is a peculiar development that did not occur in Aryan societies outside India. It appears that non-Aryan elements had some role to play in the formation of the brahmana varna. They conducted rituals and sacrifices for their clients and for themselves, and also officiated at the festivals associated with agricultural operations. They prayed for the success of their patron in war, and, in return, the king pledged not to do anything to harm them. Sometimes the brahmanas came into conflict with the *rajanya*s, who represented the order of the warrior nobles, for positions of supremacy. However, whenever the two upper orders had to deal with the lower orders, they put aside their differences. From the end of the later Vedic period onwards, it began to be emphasized that the two upper orders should cooperate to rule over the rest of society.

The vaishyas constituted the common people, and they were assigned producing functions such as agriculture, cattle-breeding, and the like; some of them also worked as artisans. Towards the end of the Vedic period they began to engage in trade. The vaishyas appear to have been the only tribute payers in later Vedic times, and the brahmanas and kshatriyas are represented as living on the tributes collected from the vaishyas. The process of subjugating the mass of the tribesmen to the position of tribute payers was long and protracted. Several rituals were prescribed for making the refractory elements (*vis* or vaishya) submissive to the prince (raja) and to his close kinsmen called the *rajanya*s. This was achieved with the assistance of the priests who also fattened themselves at the cost of the people or the vaishyas. All the three higher varnas shared one common feature: they were entitled to *upanayana* or investiture with the sacred thread according to the Vedic mantras. *Upanayana* heralded the beginning of education in the Vedas. The fourth varna was deprived of the sacred thread ceremony and the recitation of the *gayatri* mantra. The *gayatri* was a Vedic mantra that could not be recited by a shudra, thereby depriving him of Vedic education. Similarly, women were also denied both the *gayatri* and *upanayana*. Thus, the imposition of disabilities on the shudras and women began towards the end of the Vedic period.

The prince, who represented the *rajanya* order, sought to assert his authority over all the three other varnas. The *Aitareya Brahmana*, a text of the later Vedic period, represents the brahmana as a seeker of livelihood and an acceptor of gifts from the prince but also removable by him. A vaishya is called tribute-paying, meant to be beaten and oppressed at will. The worst position is reserved for the shudra. He is called the servant of another, to be made to work at will by another, and to be beaten at will.

Generally, the later Vedic texts draw a line of demarcation between the three higher orders, on the one hand, and the shudras, on the other. Nevertheless, several public rituals associated with the coronation of the king in which the shudras participated, were presumably survivors of the original Aryan community. Certain sections of artisans, such as the *rathakara* or chariot maker, enjoyed a high status and were entitled to the sacred thread ceremony. Thus, in later Vedic times, varna distinctions had not advanced very far.

The family shows the increasing power of the father, who could even disinherit his son. In princely families, the right of primogeniture was getting stronger. Male ancestors came to be worshipped. Women were generally given a lower position. Although some women theologians took part in philosophical discussions and some queens participated in coronation rituals, ordinarily women were thought to be inferior and subordinate to men.

The institution of *gotra* appeared in later Vedic times. Literally, it means the cow pen or the place where cattle belonging to the entire clan are kept, but in course of time it signified descent from a common ancestor. People began to practise *gotra* exogamy. No marriage could take place between persons belonging to the same *gotra* or having the same lineage.

Ashramas or the four stages of life were not well established in Vedic times. The post-Vedic texts speak of four ashramas: that of *brahmachari* or student, *grihastha* or householder, *vanaprastha* or hermit, and *sannyasin* or ascetic who completely renounced the worldly life. Only the first three are clearly defined in the later Vedic texts; the last or the fourth stage was not well established, though ascetic life was not unknown. Even in post-Vedic times, only the stage of the householder was commonly practised by all the varnas.

Gods, Rituals, and Philosophy

In the later Vedic period, the upper doab emerged as the cradle of the Aryan culture under brahmanical influence. All the Vedic literature seems to have been compiled in this area in the land of the Kuru–Panchalas. The cult of sacrifice, central to this culture, was accompanied by rituals and formulae.

The two outstanding Rig Vedic gods, Indra and Agni, lost their former importance. On the other hand, Prajapati, the creator, came to occupy the supreme position in the later Vedic pantheon. Some of the other minor gods of the Rig Vedic period also came to the forefront. Rudra, the god of animals, became important in later Vedic times, and Vishnu came to be conceived of as

the preserver and protector of the people who now led a settled life rather than a semi-nomadic one. In addition, some objects began to be worshipped as symbols of divinity; signs of idolatry appear in later Vedic times. As society became divided into social classes, such as brahmanas, *rajanya*s, vaishyas, and shudras, some social orders began to have their own deities. Pushan, who was supposed to tend to cattle, came to be regarded as the god of the shudras, although in the age of the *Rig Veda* cattle rearing was the primary Aryan occupation.

People worshipped gods for the same material reasons in this period as they did in earlier times. However, the mode of worship underwent substantial change. Prayers continued to be recited, but they ceased to be the dominant mode of placating the gods. Sacrifices became far more important, and they assumed both a public and domestic character. Public sacrifices involved the king and the entire community, which still in many cases coincided with the tribe. Private sacrifices were performed by individuals in their houses because during this period the Vedic people maintained regular households. Individuals offered oblations to Agni, and each of these took the form of a ritual or a sacrifice. Sacrifices involved the killing of animals on a large scale and, especially, the destruction of cattle wealth. The guest was known as *goghna* or one who was fed on cattle.

Sacrifices were accompanied by formulae that had to be carefully enunciated by the sacrificer. The sacrificer was known as the *yajamana*, the performer of *yajna*, and much of his success depended on the magical power of words uttered correctly during the sacrifices. Some rituals performed by the Vedic Aryans are common to the Indo-European peoples, but several of them seem to have been developed on the Indian soil.

These formulae and sacrifices were invented, adopted, and elaborated by the priests called the brahmanas who claimed a monopoly of priestly knowledge and expertise. They invented numerous rituals, some of which were adopted from the non-Aryans. The reason for the invention and elaboration of the rituals is not clear, but mercenary motives cannot be ruled out. We hear that as many as 240,000 cows were given as *dakshina* or gift to the officiating priest in the *rajasuya* sacrifice. Swami Vivekananda speaks of both orthodox and beef-eating brahmanas in Vedic times, and he recommends animal food for the Hindus in the modern context.

In addition to cows, which were usually given as sacrificial gifts, gold, cloth, and horses were also donated. Sometimes the priests claimed portions of territory as *dakshina*, but the grant of land as sacrificial fee is not established in the later Vedic period. The *Shatapatha Brahmana* states that in the *ashvamedha*,

the north, south, east, and west should all be given to the priest. If this really happened then what would remain with the king? This, therefore, merely indicates the desire of the priests to grab as much property as possible. In reality, however, considerable transfer of land to priests could not have taken place. There is a reference in which land, which was being given to the priests, refused to be transferred to them.

Towards the end of the Vedic period a strong reaction arose against priestly domination, against cults and rituals, especially in the land of the Panchalas and Videha where, around 600 BC, the Upanishads were compiled. These philosophical texts criticized the rituals and laid stress on the value of right belief and knowledge. They emphasized that knowledge of the self or *atman* should be acquired and the relation of *atman* with Brahma should be properly understood. Brahma emerged as the supreme entity, comparable to the powerful kings of the period. Some of the kshatriya princes in Panchala and Videha also cultivated this form of thought and created the atmosphere for the reform of the priest-dominated religion. Their teachings promoted the cause of stability and integration. Emphasis on the changelessness, indestructibility, and immortality of the *atman* or soul served the cause of stability that was necessary to sustain the rising state power headed by the kshatriya raja. Stress on the relation of *atman* with Brahma fostered allegiance to a superior authority.

The later Vedic period saw certain important changes, such as the beginnings of territorial kingdoms, called *janapada*s, under the kshatriya rulers. Wars were fought not only for the possession of cattle but also for territory. The famous Mahabharata war, fought between the Kauravas and the Pandavas, is attributed to this period. The predominantly pastoral society of early Vedic times had become agricultural. The tribal pastoralists came to be transformed into farmers who could maintain their chief with frequent tributes. Chiefs, called *raja* or *janapadin*, grew at the expense of the tribal peasantry, and handsomely rewarded the priests who supported their patrons against the common people called the vaishyas. The shudras were still a small serving order. The tribal society broke up into a varna-divided society, but varna distinctions could not be carried too far. Despite the support of the brahmanas, the *rajanya*s or the kshatriyas could not establish a mature state system. A state cannot be set up without a regular taxation system and a standing army. The entire administrative structure, including the army, depends upon taxes, but the existing mode of agriculture did not provide scope for regular taxes and tributes.

Chronology

(BC)	
6 M	The domesticated horse in the Black Sea area.
5 M	Iron in Mesopotamia.
3 M	Iron in Anatolia. Iron in Egypt.
2nd half of the 2 M	Iron in the copper–Stone Age in Rajasthan and Karnataka.
1200	Iron used as presents by rulers in western Asia.
Pre-1000	Copper tools from western UP and Bihar.
1000	Iron use in the Gandhara area, Baluchistan, eastern Punjab, western UP, MP, and Rajasthan.
1000–500	Later Vedic texts, namely the Brahmanas compiled in the upper Gangetic basin. Nearly 700 Painted Grey Ware sites existed. People used iron weapons and cultivated rice and wheat as the principal crops.
950	The Mahabharata war.
900–500	Faint beginnings of town attributed to Hastinapur.
800	Iron commonly used in western UP.
700	Earliest iron implements in eastern UP.
600	Upanishads compiled in Panchala and Videha.
500	Spread of Vedic people to Koshala and Videha.
(AD)	
2 C	Gautama Buddha depicted ploughing with oxen.
4 C	The *Mahabharata* was finally compiled.