

Vedic Society

We learn much about the social and cultural life of the Early and Later Vedic period from the literary and archeological sources discovered till date. Some of these are discussed here.

Family

- The Rig Vedic society was patriarchal. The oldest male member of the family was its head. He was called *Grihapati* which means 'master of the house'.
- The joint family system was prevalent.
- Monogamy was generally practised while polygamy was prevalent among the royal and noble families.
- The wife was responsible for taking care of the household.

Position of women

In the Early Vedic period, women had the right to education and enjoyed equal opportunities as men for their spiritual and intellectual development. Women attended the popular assemblies and took part in all religious rites. The practices of child marriage and *sati* were absent. Widows could marry again. Women could choose their husbands.

In the Later Vedic age, there was a decline in the status of women. They did not enjoy the right to property. The rules of marriage underwent a drastic change. As a result, the freedom enjoyed by women of choosing their own husbands was curbed. Widow remarriage was no more favoured.

Food, dress and amusements

- In the Early Vedic period, both men and women wore upper and lower garments made of cotton and wool.
- They wore clothes that were heavy but simple in design. Men wore turbans.
- Ornaments made of gold, silver and ivory were used by both men and women.
- Barley, milk and its products like curd and ghee, vegetables and fruits were their main food.
- Chariot-racing, horse-racing, playing dice, music and dance were the favourite pastimes of the people.
- In the Later Vedic period, there are evidences which indicate the production and consumption of rice by the people.
- They also drank soma, an intoxicating drink, mainly during festivals.

The four-fold class division

In the Early Vedic period, the society was divided into classes based on professions. There were four varnas or 'orders of society'—the *Brahmins*, the *Kshatriyas*, the *Vaisyas* and the *Shudras*. They are discussed here.

- People who preached spiritual teachings to the society and lived spiritual lives were called the *Brahmins*.

- The *Kshatriyas* were the people who protected the society against external attacks and maintained the internal order.
- The *Vaisyas* were the business class, traders and farmers.
- The *Shudras* were the people who were engaged in serving the upper classes. The professions like that of carpenters, blacksmiths, goldsmiths, cobblers and porters fell under this category.

This system classified the religious, political, financial and physical powers into four different social classes.

During the Later Vedic period, these professions became hereditary and it resulted in the emergence of the caste system which, by this time, had become extremely rigid. A superior position was enjoyed by the *Brahmins* and the *Kshatriyas*. The position of the *Shudras* became pathetic and they were also deprived of the rights of performing sacrifices and learning the religious texts.

|| The four ashramas or stages of life

(In the Later Vedic period, man's life was divided into four phases, of 25 years each, known as the four *ashramas*) They were *brahmacharya*, *grihastha*, *vanaprastha* and *sanyasa*. These are discussed here.

1. **Brahmacharya** (up to 25 years): The celibate student time of youth was for acquiring knowledge in a *gurukul*. The focus was on healthy and positive training, discipline and learning.
2. **Grihastha** (25 to 50 years): The householder phase of life was when one lived with his spouse and children, fulfilling worldly interests and duties of maintaining his family. It was a time of giving, living, learning and loving one's family and working for the community.
3. **Vanaprastha** (50 to 75 years): The hermitage period of life was for focusing more on the spiritual practices of meditation, contemplation and prayer. A man took up the role of a mature mentor for the adolescents and community.
4. **Sanyasa** (75 to 100 years): It was a time for the matured man to retreat from any kind of active involvement in worldly matters. They focussed on spiritual goals in this final phase of life. This was the period of renunciation.

Review

1. Name the drink which was consumed during festivals in the Later Vedic period?
2. What was the role of wife in Rig Vedic society?
3. Who was the head of the family during in the Rig Vedic society?

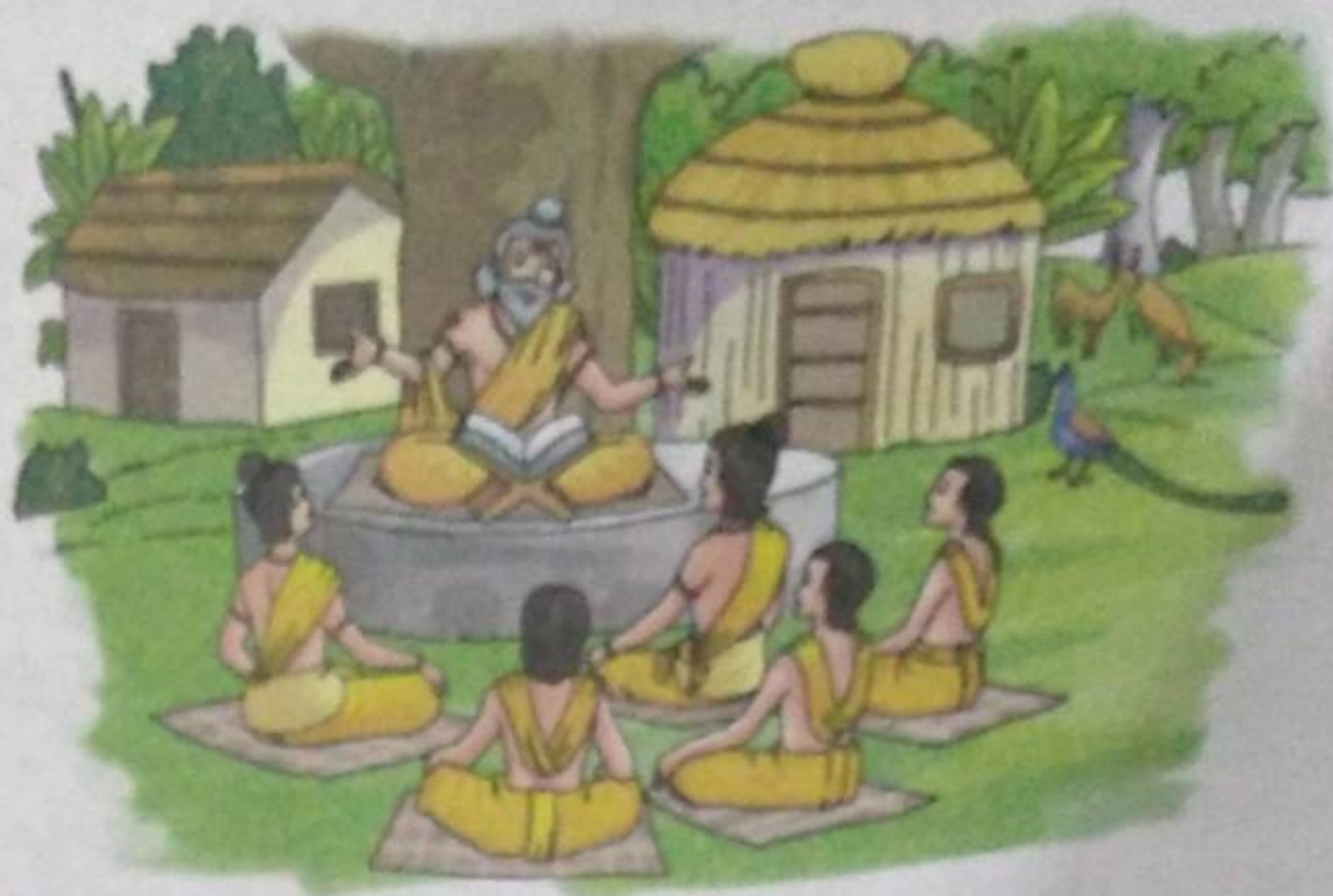
Points to Remember

- Vedic society was patriarchal.
- Women enjoyed considerable freedom in the Early Vedic period but their freedom was restricted in the Later Vedic society.
- The four varnas were the *Brahmins*, *Kshatriyas*, *Vaisyas* and *Shudras*.
- The four Ashrams were *brahmacharya*, *grihastha*, *vanaprastha* and *sanyasa*.

Education

The *gurukul* system existed in ancient India where the students were imparted

education. *Gurukul* means 'family of the guru'. The pupils resided with the teachers, served them and simultaneously learnt and gained knowledge. In a *gurukul*, the *shishyas* tended to cattle, gathered fuel for cooking, begged alms, worked in the fields and did other household chores. The *guru* was a guide, role-model and a father-figure who treated the pupils like his children.



▲ Gurukul

Grammar, ethics, logic, Puranas, mathematics, astronomy, astrology, law, military science and Vedic literature

were some of the subjects that were taught. There were lady teachers as well. Fees were not taken by the *gurus* but the *shishyas* gave a voluntary contribution known as *gurudakshina* when they completed their education.

Political organisation

Early Vedic political organisations: In the Rig Vedic or the Early Vedic period, the political organisation comprised *grama* (village), *visha* and *jana*. Many *gramas* formed a *visha* and several *vishas* made a *jana*.

The leader of a *grama* was called *gramani*, the leader of a *vish* was called *vishpati* and that of a *jana* was known as *jyeshtha*.

The state was governed by *rajan*, the king. He was also known as *samrat*, the supreme ruler. The king ruled with the consent of the people. There were three popular councils—*sabha*, *samiti* and *vidhata*. The women were allowed to attend only two—*sabha* and *vidhata*.

The *samiti* was the assembly of the people and the *sabha* was the council of the elders. The *sabha* performed advisory as well as judicial functions. The *vidhata* performed functions like economic, religious, social as well as military.

The duty of the king was to protect the tribe, in which he was assisted by a *purohit*, the royal chaplain and *senani*, the chief of the army. The king did not possess a standing army.

Later Vedic political organisations: In the Later Vedic period, kingship became hereditary. At the same time, the role of the people in the administration diminished as during this period, the popular assemblies of the Early Vedic times lost their importance. In Later Vedic period, the *vidhata* completely disappeared. The *sabha* and *samiti* continued, but their characters changed.

Women were no longer permitted to sit in the *sabha*. It was now dominated by nobles and the *Brahmins*. The kings became more powerful. The term *rashtra*, which indicates territory, first appeared in this period. The king performed a number of rituals and sacrifices to consolidate his hold over the throne. These included the following.

- *Rajasuya* sacrifice was supposed to confer supreme power to the king.
- The king also performed *ashvamedha* ritual which meant unquestioned control over the areas in which the royal horse ran uninterrupted.

- He also performed the *vajapeya* or the chariot race in which the royal chariot was made to win the race against his kinsmen.
- Taxes and tributes were deposited to an officer called *sangrihitri*. Even in the Later Vedic times, the king did not possess a standing army. The tribal units used to assemble during the time of war.

Economy

In the Early Vedic period, the economy was predominantly pastoral. Agriculture was also important. There are references in the *Rig Veda* to the leveling of field, seed processing and storage of grains in large jars. They used wooden ploughshare for cultivating the lands. The various occupations mentioned in the Vedic texts were that of the leather workers, smiths, potters and carpenters. None of these occupations was considered low in status. (Booty captured after war was also a major source of wealth.)

The economic exchanges were conducted by giving gifts, particularly to kings, called *bali* and priests, called *dana*. (Barter system prevailed.) The possession of cattle was synonymous to wealth. While gold is mentioned in some hymns, there is no indication of the use of coins.

In the Later Vedic period, the transition of the Vedic society from semi-nomadic life to settled agriculture lead to an increase in trade. (Agriculture dominated the economic activity) along the Gangetic plains and the use of iron tools increased. Crops such as wheat, rice and barley were cultivated.

Although coins were introduced, barter system was still dominant in trade. Besides agriculture and trade, occupations such as carpentry, leather work, tanning, pottery, astrology, jewellery-making, dying and wine-making were also in vogue. (Occupations were centred on caste-system.) Apart from the use of copper, bronze and gold, the Later Vedic texts also mention tin, lead and silver. So the use of various types of metals was known to Later Vedic people. (Women were engaged in many other occupations like dyeing, knitting, weaving and spinning.)

Review

1. What was the voluntary contribution given to the teacher by a student in the *gurukul* system known as?
2. What is an *ashvamedha* sacrifice?
3. Name some of the professions in vogue during the Later Vedic period.

A Comparison: Early Vedic Period and Later Vedic Period

Early Vedic Period	Later Vedic Age
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women enjoyed equal rights and status. They chose their husbands and widow remarriage was prevalent. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The position of women significantly declined. They could not choose their husbands and widow remarriage was no more favoured.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There was no rigid caste system. The <i>varna</i> system was occupation-centric. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The caste system became rigid and hereditary.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The people participated actively in political organisations. The king was the head. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The king became more powerful and the role of people in administration diminished.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The economy was predominantly pastoral. Cow was considered as the chief source of wealth. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The economy was centred on agriculture. Land became the indicator of wealth.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wooden ploughs were used in agriculture. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agriculture was revolutionised with the coming of iron tools. More crops were produced.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The religious beliefs were simple and gods were worshipped who were the manifestation of nature and its forces. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The religious beliefs became complicated and more ritual-centric. <i>The Brahmins</i>, as priests, became important. The concept of rebirth, <i>karma</i>, <i>dharma</i> and <i>moksh</i> gained roots.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As recorded in the texts, the use of metals such as copper, bronze and gold existed. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Metals such as tin, lead and silver got added to the list.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Barter system was prevalent but there were no coins. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Barter system was still prevalent but coins came in vogue.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Other occupations included leather and metal work, pottery and carpentry. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Occupations like jewellery-making, wine-making, dyeing, spinning, weaving, knitting and astrology became popular.

Answer the following questions:

1. State the position of the women in early and later Vedic age.
2. Discuss the four-fold class division.
3. Give a brief account of the political organisations of Early Vedic age.
4. Explain the economy of later Vedic period.
5. What is an ashvamedha sacrifice?