

Later Vedic Culture [History Notes for UPSC & Govt. Exams]

The Vedic Age is an important part of ancient Indian history. It is also especially important for the UPSC and other government exams preparation since many questions have been asked in both the [IAS prelims](#) and mains exams from this topic. In this article, you can read about all the crucial points related to the Later Vedic Age from the point of view of the UPSC exam and other govt. exams.

If you haven't read about the [Early Vedic Age](#), click on the linked article.

Later Vedic Culture and Civilisation

(c. 1000 - 500 BCE)

The Aryans further moved towards the east in the later Vedic period. The Satapatha Brahmana refers to the expansion of Aryans to the eastern Gangetic plains. One important development during this period is the growth of large kingdoms. Kuru and Panchala kingdoms flourished in the beginning. Parikshit and Janamejaya were the famous rulers of the Kuru kingdom. Pravahana Jaivali was a popular king of the Panchalas. He was a patron of learning. After the fall of Kurus and Panchalas, other kingdoms like Kosala, Kasi and Videha came into prominence. The later Vedic texts also refer to the three divisions of India - Aryavarta (Northern India), Madhyadesa (Central India), and Dakshinapatha (Southern India).

Political Life of Later Vedic Aryans

1. Larger kingdoms were formed during the later Vedic period. Many jana or tribes were amalgamated to form *Janapadas* or *Rashtras* (the term first appeared in this period) in the Later Vedic period. Hence, the royal power increased along with the size of the kingdom. The wars were no longer fought for the cows but for the territories.
2. The king was usually a Kshatriya and the office of the monarch was made almost hereditary. Traces of election of the chief or king appear in later Vedic texts but hereditary kingship was emerging. The king gradually emerged as the controller of the social order too. The king was addressed by different names across different regions. For instance, in northern regions, he was known as Virat, in eastern regions, he was called Samrat while in western and southern regions he was addressed as Svarat and Bhoja respectively.
3. The king's influence was strengthened by rituals. He performed the *rajasuya*, which was supposed to confer supreme power on him. He performed *asvamedha* 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 was made to win the race against his kinsmen. All these rituals impressed people by increasing the power and prestige of the king.

4. In later Vedic times, popular assemblies lost their importance and royal power increased at its cost. The vidhata completely disappeared. The sabha and samiti continued to hold the ground, but their character changed. They came to be dominated by princes and rich nobles. Women were no longer permitted to sit on the sabha and it was now dominated by nobles and the Brahmanas.
5. Even in the later Vedic times, kings did not possess a standing army. Tribal units were mustered in times of war, and according to one ritual for the success in war, the king had to eat along with his people from the same plate.

Social Life of Later Vedic Aryans

1. The later Vedic society was divided into four varnas called the Brahmanas, Rajanyas or Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras. (Know more about the [Varna system](#)). The growing cult of sacrifices enormously added to the power of the Brahmanas. They conducted rituals and sacrifices for their clients and for themselves, and also officiated at the festivals associated with agricultural operations. 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. The fourth varna was deprived of the sacred thread ceremony and with this began the imposition of disabilities on the Sudras. The prince, who represented the Rajanya order, tried to assert his power over all the other three varnas. According to Aitareya Brahmana, in relation to the Prince, the Brahmana is described as a seeker of livelihood and an acceptor of gifts but removable at will. A Vaisya is called tribute paying, and the worst position is reserved for the sudra. He is called the servant of another, to be made to work at will by another and to be beaten at will.
2. In the family, a patrimonial (authority of father) system developed and women were generally given a lower position. Although some women theologians took part in philosophical discussions and some queens participated in coronation rituals, ordinary women were thought to be inferior and subordinate to men. There are references to Sati and child marriages as well. According to Aitareya Brahmana, a daughter has been described as a source of misery.
3. The institution of gotra appeared in the later Vedic age. Literally, it means the "cow pen" or the place where cattle belonging to the whole clan is kept, but in course of time, it signified descent from a common ancestor. No marriage could take place between persons belonging to the same gotra or having the same ancestor. Caste exogamy was extensively practised. There is mention of Chandrayana penance for men marrying women of the same gotra. There were legendary seers such as Kashyapa, Bhrigu, Gautama, Bhardwaj, etc after whom the gotras were named.
4. Ashrams or four stages of life were not well established in Vedic times. In the post-Vedic texts, we hear of four Ashrams- Brahmachari (student), Grihastha (householder), Vanaprastha (partial retirement), and Sanyasa (complete retirement from the world). But only three are mentioned in the later Vedic texts, the last one or the fourth stage had not been well established in the later Vedic times.

5. In later Vedic age, certain craft groups like Rathakaras enjoyed a special status and had the right to wear the sacred thread.

Later Vedic Age Economy

(The Painted Grey Ware, PGW - Iron Phase Culture)

1. Agriculture was the chief means of livelihood and people led a settled life in the late Vedic age. Ploughing was done with the help of wooden ploughshare. The Satapatha Brahmana speaks at length about the ploughing rituals. Even kings and princes did not hesitate to take to manual labour. Balarama, the brother of Krishna, is called Haladhara or wielder of the plough. However, in the late times ploughing was prohibited for the upper varnas.
2. The Vedic people continued to produce barley, but during this period rice (vrihi) and wheat (godhuma) became their chief crops. In subsequent times, wheat became the staple food of the people in Punjab and western Uttar Pradesh. Various kinds of lentils were also produced in the later Vedic age. The agricultural produce came to be offered in the rituals (especially rice). Iron was used extensively in this period (around 1000 BCE), and this enabled people to clear forests (upper Gangetic basin) and bring more land under cultivation. The metal is called Syama or Krishna Ayas in the later Vedic texts.
3. Diverse arts and crafts proliferated during the later Vedic age and craft specialisation took deep roots. The later Vedic people were good smiths and smelters as a lot of copper objects have been found at PGW sites. Tin, lead, silver, bronze, gold, iron and copper were known to the people. Many occupational groups have been mentioned in this period e.g., stone breakers, jewellers, astrologers, physicians, etc. On the whole, both Vedic texts and excavations indicate the cultivation of specialised crafts.
4. Weaving was confined to women but was practised on a large scale. Leatherwork, pottery and carpenters' work made great progress. The later Vedic people were acquainted with four types of pottery - Black and Red ware, Black Slipped ware, Painted Grey ware (PGW) and Red Ware. The most distinctive pottery of the period is PGW.
5. The society was largely rural. However, towards the end of the period, there are traces of the beginning of urbanisation, as the "nagar" word used in the sense of a town is mentioned in the Taittiriya Aranyaka.
6. Exchange was still via barter, but nishka was used as a convenient unit of value although not as a typical currency.
7. In the later Vedic age, collection of taxes and tributes was made compulsory and was done by Sangrihitri. It is worth mentioning that the Vaisyas were the tribute payers in the later Vedic times.

Know more about the [differences between the early Vedic period and the later Vedic period](#) in the link.

Later Vedic Age Religion

1. The two outstanding 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 age. Some of the other minor gods of the Rigvedic period also became prominent, such as Rudra (the god of animals) and Vishnu (the preserver and protector of people).
2. Some of the social orders came to have their own deities - Pushan, who was supposed to look after cattle, came to be known as the god of the Sudras. There are also signs of idolatry in the later Vedic times.
3. The cult of sacrifices was the cornerstone of this culture and was accompanied by numerous rituals and formulae. Sacrifices became far more important and they assumed both public and domestic character. Public sacrifices involved the kings and the whole community while private sacrifices were performed by individuals in their houses as people led a settled life and maintained well-established households. 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. The sacrificer was known as Yajamana, the performer of yajna. Some of the important yajnas were Ashvamedha, Vajapeya, Rajasuya, etc.
4. The Brahmanas claimed a monopoly of priestly knowledge and expertise. They were rewarded generously for officiating the sacrifices. Dakshinas in the form of cows, gold, cloth and also horses were given. Sometimes the priests claimed a portion of territory as Dakshina.

Towards the end of the later Vedic age, a strong reaction began to emerge against the priestly domination, against cults and rituals, especially in the land of Panchalas and Videha where around 600 BCE, the Upanishads were compiled. These philosophical texts criticized the rituals and laid stress on the value of right belief and knowledge. The rise of [Buddhism](#) and Jainism was the result of a revolt against the sacrifices, the varna system and other rituals.