

Vedic Age [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 Vedic Age (Rig Vedic & Later Vedic) from the point of view of the UPSC exam and other govt. exams.

The Vedic Age (Rig Vedic & Later Vedic)

(c. 1500 - 500 BCE)

The [Harappan civilisation](#) was followed by another great civilisation and culture known as the Vedic culture. The Vedic texts are the primary sources for the reconstruction of the Vedic culture/Vedic age. Archaeological materials have also supplemented the texts, though not comprehensively. Vedic texts are believed to be composed by the Indo-Aryans. Indo-Aryans refer to the speakers of a subgroup of the Indo-Iranian branch of the Indo-European family of languages. Rig Veda composers describe themselves as Arya, etymologically derived from “Ar” meaning to cultivate, literally meaning kinsmen or companion; in Sanskrit, it means favourably disposed newcomers and later it implied “men of good family” or noble.

There are different theories associated with the Aryans, their origin and possible migration/invasion in the Indian Subcontinent. These are as follows:

- **Central Asian theory** - This theory was propounded by Prof. Max Muller, a German scholar of comparative languages. As per this theory, the Aryans originally lived in Central Asia. With the comparative study of the “Avesta” (Iranian text) and the “Vedas”, one finds a striking linguistic relationship between them of not just words but of concepts also. The interchangeability between ‘h’ and ‘s’ and incredible consistency in this change as seen in Hepta Hindu (Sapta Sindhu), Ahura (Asura), Haoma (Soma), Daha (Dasa), further substantiates the claim.
- **European theory** - Sir William Jones, Giles (Hungary), Shroeder (France), Morgan (Western Siberia) are supporters of this theory. As per this theory, the Aryans inhabited Europe and voyaged to various places and the Aryans who came to India were an offshoot of the Europeans. The proponents of this theory established the resemblance of Sanskrit with the European languages. For example, the Sanskrit words Matri and Pitri are similar to the Latin Mater and Pater. Suryyas and Maruttash of the Kassite (Mesopotamia) inscriptions are equivalent to the Vedic Surya and Marut.
- **Theory of North Pole/Arctic theory** - According to [Bal Gangadhar Tilak](#), the Northern Arctic region was the original home of the Aryans. He commented that the Rig Veda comprises specific references to a place where harsh cold and long days and nights of six months each are found.
- **Tibet theory** - Swami Dayanand Saraswati was the proponent of this theory. According to this theory, Tibet is the original home of the Aryans with reference to the Vedas and other Aryan texts.
- **Indian theory** - Dr. A.C Dass, Ganga Nath Jha, Sri L.D Kalla, Sri D.S Trivedi have acknowledged this theory. According to this theory, the Aryans were the residents of the Sapta Sindhu. This region stretched from the river Indus, reaching up to Saraswati river. Kashmir and Punjab were also under this region. The sacrificial rituals of the Vedic Aryans point to their Indian origin. The river hymns in the Rig Veda mention the names of the rivers of this region. The flora and fauna mentioned are mostly similar to the

Himalayan region. Regarding the affinity of the Indian and European languages, this theory states that in the language of the Aryans, there is a plethora of Sanskrit words, but this is not the case with the latter. If Aryans had come from outside, their ancient Literature (Vedas) should have been found there, but no Vedic literature has been found outside India.

The most accepted view is that there was a series of Aryan immigration and they came to the subcontinent as immigrants. The earliest Indo-Aryans lived in the geographical area covered by Eastern Afghanistan, Punjab and the fringes of Western Uttar Pradesh. Some rivers of Afghanistan, such as the river Kubha (Kabul) and the river Indus (Sindhus) and its five tributaries are mentioned in the Rig Veda. The five tributaries are the Jhelum (Vitasta), Beas (Vipasa), Chenab (Askini), Ravi (Parushni), Satluj (Sutudri). The Sindhu, identical with the Indus, is the river par excellence of the Aryans. Another river mentioned is the Sarasvati, now lost in the sands of Rajasthan, the area represented by it is covered by the Ghaggar river. The whole region in which the Aryans first settled in India is called the land of seven rivers.

The Early Vedic or The Rigvedic Civilisation

(c. 1500 - 1000 BCE)

The only source of Vedic culture is the Vedic literature. It is divided into:

1. **Early Vedic Literature/Rig Vedic Culture (c. 1500 - 1000 BCE)** - It includes the Rig Veda Samhita and other texts of the family. They are called family books as their composition is attributed to the families of certain seer poets, such as Vishvamitra, Atri, Gritsamada, Vasishtha and Bharadvaja.
2. **Later Vedic Literature/Later Vedic Culture (c. 1000 - 500 BCE)** - It includes books 1, 8, 9, & 10 of the Rig Veda Samhita, the Samhitas of the Sama Veda, the Yajur and the Atharva Vedas and the Brahmanas, Aranyakas and Upanishads attached to all the four Vedas.

Vedic Literature

The Vedic literature is the most significant source of information about the Vedic civilisation. The word “Veda” means knowledge. The Vedic literature has evolved in the course of many centuries and was handed down from generation to generation by the word of mouth. Later, they were compiled and written down, and the earliest surviving manuscript belongs to the 11th century.

There are four Vedas and every Veda generally has four parts - Samhita, Brahmana, Aranyaka, and Upanishads. The four Vedas are - Rig Veda, Sama Veda, Yajur Veda, and Atharva Veda.

Rig Veda

- It is the oldest Veda and depicts the life of early Vedic people in India. The Rig Veda has been included by [UNESCO](#) in the list of literature signifying World Human Heritage. Its text consists of 1028 hymns (Sukta) which are divided into ten Mandalas or books.
- Mandalas 2 - 7 form the oldest part of the [Rig Veda](#) Samhita and are called “family books” as they are ascribed to particular families of seers/rishis.
- Mandala 8 - Here, the hymns are dedicated to various gods and have been mostly composed by the Kanva clan.

- Mandala 9 - All the hymns are dedicated entirely to Soma.
- Mandala 1 - It is primarily dedicated to Indra and Agni. Varuna, Surya, Mitra, Rudra, and Vishnu have also been mentioned.
- Mandala 10 - It contains Nadi Stuti Sukta praising the rivers. It also contains Nasadiya Sukta and Purush Sukta. It contains hymns that are traditionally chanted during marriage and death rituals.
- Only surviving recension of Rig Veda is the Shakala Shakha.
- The Upaveda of Rig Veda is the Ayurveda.

Sama Veda

- The Sama Veda or the “Veda of Chants” is the collection of verses drawn almost wholly from the Rig Veda, that are provided with musical notations and are intended as an aid to the performance of sacred songs.
- It contains the famous Dhrupada Raga, later sung by Tansen.
- Recensions (Shakhas) of the Sama Veda are Kauthuma, Jaiminiya (Talavakara), and Ranayaniya.
- The Upaveda of the Sama Veda is the Gandharva Veda.

Yajur Veda (Worship or ritual knowledge)

- This Veda deals with the procedure for the performance of sacrifices. It is further divided into-
 - Shukla Yajur Veda/ Vajasaneya / White Yajur Veda - it contains only the mantras. It contains the Madhyandina and Kanva recensions.
 - Krishna Yajur Veda / Black Yajur Veda - it contains both mantras and prose explanations/ commentary. It contains Kathaka, Maitrayani, Taittiriya and Kapishtala recensions.
- The Upaveda of the Yajur Veda is the Dhanur Veda.

Atharva Veda

- It concerns itself with magic spells to ward off evil spirits or dangers.
- It is considered a non-Aryan work and is divided into 20 kandas (books), with 711 hymns.
- It contains Shaunaka and Paippalada recensions.
- The Upaveda of Atharva Veda is the Shilpa Veda.

Brahmanas

The Brahmanas contain details about the meaning of Vedic hymns, their application and stories of their origin. Each Veda has several Brahmanas attached to it.

- Aitareya or Kaushitaki Brahmanas were allotted to Rig Veda for detailing.
- Tandya and Jaiminiya Brahmanas to Sama Veda for detailing.
- Taittiriya and Shatpatha Brahmanas to Yajur Veda for detailing.
- Gopath Brahmana to Atharva Veda for detailing.

Aranyakas

The Aranyakas are also called “forest books” as they were written mainly by hermits living in the jungles for their pupils. They lay emphasis not on sacrifices but on meditation. They are in fact, opposed

to sacrifices and many of the early rituals. They are the concluding portion of the Brahmanas and interpret rituals in a philosophical way.

Upanishads

The literal meaning of Upanishad is to “sit near someone”. There are 108 Upanishads, of which 13 are the most prominent. It introduces the concept of ‘Atman’ and ‘Brahman’. It states that the core of one's self is neither the body nor the mind, but the Atman or the “soul”. It further points out that the core of all creatures is the Atman itself and can be experienced through meditation. According to the Upanishads, the Brahman is the underlying substance of the universe. It is an unchanging ‘Absolute being’. The Upanishads are mainly philosophical in nature and speak of the highest knowledge.

- Satyamev Jayate in the National Emblem is taken from Mandukyopanishad.
- The Chandogya Upanishad clearly refers to the first three ashrams and discusses the types of marriage (mainly two):
 - Anuloma marriage - the marriage of a man in his own varna or below his varna. It is the most accepted and common form of marriage in society.
 - Pratiloma marriage - the marriage of a woman in a varna lower than her own. It is not sanctioned by the Vedas.

Vedanta

The Vedanta reveals the final aim of the Vedas and signifies the end of the Vedas. It condemns sacrifices, ceremonies and denotes the last phase of the Vedic period.

Vedanga

The literal meaning of the word Vedanga is “limbs of the Vedas”. Just like the limbs of the body, they perform various supportive and augmenting functions in the study, preservation and protection of the Vedas and the Vedic traditions. They are considered to be of human origin and are written in the form of Sutras (short condensed statements that are used to express varied ideas). They are six in number:

1. Shiksha (Phonetics)
2. Kalpa (Ritualistic science)
3. Jyotisha (Astronomy)
4. Vyakaran (grammar)
5. Nirukta (Etymology)
6. Chhanda (Metrics)

The Kalpa Sutra is further divided into:

1. **Shrauta Sutra** - prescribes rules for the performance of different types of sacrifices and rituals.
2. **Grihya Sutra** - concerned with comparatively simpler domestic sacrifices. It includes rituals pertaining to crucial life stages (Samskaras) such as Upanayana (initiation), Vivaha (marriage), and Antyeshthi (funerary practices).
3. **Dharmasutra** - concerned with the rituals' Dharma.

Puranas

The word Purana literally means 'ancient' or 'old'.

- Traditionally, Puranas are considered to be composed by Ved Vyasa.
- The Puranas treat various topics concerning religious developments that occurred around the 5th and 6th centuries.
- The Puranas reflect the growth of Hindu Dharma, the condition of society in ancient times, social customs, religious ceremonies as well as yogic methods of discipline.
- Traditionally, a Purana discusses five subjects or “five signs” in the time span of 4 ages/yugas (Satya, Treta, Dvapara, and Kali):
 - Sarga - the primary creation of the universe.
 - Pratisarga - recreation, secondary creation after annihilation.
 - Manvantaras - the reigns of the various Manus.
 - Vamsha - the genealogy of gods and rishis.
 - Vamshanucharita (Royal lineage) - the history of Solar (Suryavanshis) and Lunar (Chandravanshis) dynasties.
- All Puranas are strongly sectarian - some are devoted to Shiva, some to Vishnu and some to a goddess. However, the Purana that is devoted to a particular god often pays considerable attention to other gods as well.
- It is commonly accepted that four yugas make up a Mahayuga, that 1000 Mahayugas make a Kalpa, that every Kalpa is further divided into 14 Manvantaras which are presided over by a specific Manu. Each yuga is periodically destroyed and again, the recreation of the world occurs with the cyclic decline and revival of Dharma.
- The Puranas are divided into 18 Mahapuranas (such as Vishnu, Brahma, Narada, Padma, Garuda, Matsya, Kurma, Shiva, Agni, Bhagavata, etc.) and numerous Upapuranas (secondary Puranas).
- The Puranas are regarded as post-Vedic texts.

Know the differences between the Vedas and the Puranas [here](#).

Dharmashastra

- The Dharmashastra are the Sanskrit texts about morality and religious duty. They provide guiding rules and principles for the order and regularity of society and righteous conduct.
- Dharmashastra refers to the fulfilment of Purusharthas (life goals) such as Dharma (righteous conduct), Artha (material well being), Kama (desires, sensual pleasures) and Moksha (liberation from the cycle of life and death).
- The Dharmashastra are subdivided into Dharmasutras (c. 600 - 300 BCE) and Smritis (c. 200 - 900 BCE). They recognise three sources of Dharma - the Vedas (Shruti - what is heard), Smriti (what is remembered) texts and Shistachara (good manners and practices of cultured people).
- A person's Dharma was dependent on many factors such as gender, marital status, varna and ashram. Out of the four varnas, three varnas - Brahmanas, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas were considered Dvija (twice-born, as they had the right to the sacred thread ceremony considered akin to second birth), while the fourth varna - Shudras were burdened with many civil disabilities.
- The four ashrams dividing the life of a male Dvija were:
 - Brahmacharya (celibate student hood)
 - Grihastha (household caretaker)
 - Vanaprastha (partial renunciation)
 - Sanyasa (complete renunciation)

- The different ashram stages were not followed by all and it was not applicable to women and Shudras.

Epics

The other important literature of ancient India is the Great Epics - the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. Both were written in the form of long poems and took place in ancient Hindu Kingdoms on the Indian subcontinent. They describe the political, social and economical structure of ancient India.

Mahabharata	Ramayana
1. Roughly composed between c. 400 BCE - 400 CE.	1. Roughly composed between c. 400 BCE - 300 CE.
2. It is composed by Ved Vyasa and consists of 18 Parvas (books) and has around 1 lakh verses (longest epic poem ever written).	2. Ramayana is composed by Valmiki and consists of seven Kandas (books) having 24,000 verses.
3. The Mahabharata is essentially the story of the rivalry between two bands of brothers in the Hastinapura Kingdom, which culminates in a great battle.	3. The word Ramayana literally means the journey of Rama. It is a story of good over evil.
4. Traditionally, the war is believed to have happened in the Dvapara Yuga. But, historians consider the events and social character of the Mahabharata corresponding to an earlier age of development than the Ramayana, as the Mahabharata settings pertain to the Indo-Gangetic divide and upper Ganga valley.	4. It is considered that Rama lived in the Treta yuga (age), earlier than the Mahabharata. Since the settings of the Ramayana shifted eastwards to the middle Ganga valley, and the language of the Ramayana is more polished and its concepts are more closely related to later societies, historians consider it of a later stage than the Mahabharata.
5. The Mahabharata is more realistic.	5. The Ramayana is more idealistic.

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Varied Aspects of Rig Vedic Culture

Political Life of Rig Vedic Aryans

1. The early Rig Vedic society was a semi-nomadic tribal society with a pastoral economy. The tribe was called Jana and the tribal chief was called Rajan, Gopati or Gopa (protector of cows) and the chief queen was called Mahisi. The main responsibility of the Rajan was to protect the Jana and cattle from the enemies along with offering prayers to gods on behalf of Janas. The Janas often had fights with Panis, who used to hide the cattle of Janas in the forest. In order to get their cattle back, the Vedic god, Indra was invoked and many battles such as Gavisthi, Gaveshana, Goshu, Gavyat were fought.
2. It seems that in the Rig Vedic period the King's post was hereditary (similar to monarchical form). Although his post was hereditary, we also have some traces of election by the tribal assembly called Samiti.
3. Administration:
 1. The administration of the Rig Vedic society consisted of:
 1. **Purohit (priest)** - In return for the ritualistic services, the priests received dana (gifts) and Dakshina (sacrificial offerings).
 2. **Sanani** - Chief of the army.

3. **Vrajpatri** - Officer who controlled the territory.
 4. **Gramini** - Leader of the village and fighting unit.
2. There is no evidence of any officer concerned with the collection of taxes. Probably, the chief received voluntary offerings called “bali” from the people. There is also no mention of any officer for administering justice.
4. Assemblies:
 1. Several tribal assemblies are mentioned in the Rig Veda. These are:
 1. **Sabha** - Smaller body meant for elites.
 2. **Samiti** - Broad-based folk assembly, presided over by the Rajan.
 3. **Vidatha** - Tribal assembly with diverse functions.
 4. **Gana** - Assembly or troop.
 2. Women also attended the Sabha and Vidatha in Rig Vedic times. The Sabha and Samiti were important assemblies from a political point of view and the king showed eagerness to win their support.
5. The king did not maintain any regular or standing army, but in times of war, he mustered a militia whose military functions were performed by different tribal groups called Vrata, Sardha or Gana. The Rig Vedic charioteers used Varma (coats of mail) and sipra/ sironastra (helmets) and went to combat equipped with asi (swords), hanas (arrows) and ilhianus (bows).
6. Battles:
 1. The Aryans have engaged in two types of battles -
 1. With pre-Aryans called Dasa / Dasyus.
 2. Amongst themselves - two such battles have been mentioned:
 1. A battle occurred between a Bharata King Divodasa (winner) and Dasa ruler Shambara.
 2. The battle of ten Kings (dasarajna) - This was fought between the Bharata chief Sudas, grandson of Divodasa (winner) on one side, and ten other tribes on the other side including the famous five tribes (Panch-Jana), namely, the Yadu, Turvasha, Puru, Anu and Druhyu on the banks of the river Paurushni (Ravi). Later, the Bharatas joined hands with the Purus to form the Kuru tribe who further allied with Panchalas and established their control over the Upper Ganga valley.

Social Life of Rig Vedic Aryans

1. The kinship was the basis of social structure. The basic social unit was kula (family) and Kulapa was the head of the family. The family was part of a larger grouping called vis or clan. One or more clans made jana/ tribe. The jana was the largest social unit. The family was a large joint unit and was patriarchal, headed by the father. As it was patriarchal, the birth of a son was desired especially brave sons to fight the wars. In the Rig Veda, no desire is expressed for daughters, though the desire for children and cattle is a recurrent theme in the hymns. Women also had an important position in the society, could attend assemblies (Vidatha) and even composed hymns.
2. The institution of marriage was established and there are no examples of child marriages, Sati or purdah in the Rig Veda. There are instances of re-marriage and levirate (marrying the husband's younger brother on the death of the husband). The marriages were usually monogamous, though there are some references to polygamy and polyandry.
3. The society was not divided on caste lines and occupation was not based on birth. This is indicated by the following verse in the Rig Veda - ‘I am a poet, my father is a physician and my mother grinds grain upon the stone. Earning livelihood through different means, we live together’. People with different occupations were part of the clan.

4. The Rig Veda shows some consciousness of the physical appearance of people. Varna was the term used for colour, and it seems that Aryans were fair and the indigenous inhabitants were dark in complexion. The colour distinctions may have partially given rise to social orders. The factor which contributed most to the creation of social divisions was the conquest of the indigenous inhabitants by the Aryans. The Dasa and Dasyus, who were conquered by the Aryans were treated as slaves and Sudras.
5. The only mention of the four varnas was found in the Purushasukta of the tenth mandala (book) of the Rig Veda, which makes one conclude that the varna system was probably introduced at the end of the Rig Vedic age and that there was social mobility and the absence of strict social hierarchy. The society was still tribal and largely egalitarian.

Rig Vedic Economy

1. There are so many references to the cow in the Rig Veda that the Rig Vedic Aryans seem to have been pastoral people. Most of their wars were fought for the sake of cows. The term for war in the Rig Veda is “gavisthi” or search for cows. A wealthy man, who owned many cows was known as Gomat. The importance of cows in the Rig Vedic age can be drawn from the fact that the donations to the priests were made in terms of cows and women slaves and never in terms of the measurement of land. The land did not form a well-established type of private property.
2. Gold coins called “niksha” (unit of currency) were used as a medium of exchange in large transactions. Mostly, trade was conducted on the barter system and the cow was an important unit of value. The kingdom was maintained by the voluntary offerings (bali) of subjects and bounty won in a battle, as there was no regular revenue system.
3. The Rig Veda mentions artisans such as the carpenter, the chariot maker (enjoyed a special status), the weaver, the potter, the leather workers, etc. This indicates that they practised all these crafts. Chariot racing and dice gambling were popular pastimes.
4. The term “ayas” used for copper and bronze shows that these were in use in the Rig Vedic age. However, it seems that they didn't use iron technology.
5. For transport - bullock carts, horses and horse-drawn chariots were used. There are also references to the sea and boats.
6. The gift exchanges known as “prestations”, were done not on an individual level but at a group level.

Rig Vedic Religion

The Rig Vedic Aryans worshipped the natural forces like earth, fire, wind, rain and thunder. They personified these natural forces into many gods and worshipped them. They generally worshipped in the open air through yajnas. There was neither temple nor idol worship in the early Rig Vedic age. The dominant mode of worshipping the gods was through the recitation of prayers and offering of sacrifices. Both collective and individual prayers were made. Aryans worshipped gods mainly for praja (children), pasu (cattle), food, wealth, health, etc. (not for the spiritual uplift). A peculiar case of Henotheism or Kathenotheism is found in Rig Vedic religion, wherein the deity being invoked in a particular hymn is considered the supreme god.

Some of the deities worshipped by the Rig Vedic people were as follows:

1. **Indra** -
 1. Greatest god of the Aryans.
 2. Also called Purandhara (breaker of forts), Maghavan (bounteous), and Vritrahan (Slayer of Vritra, chaos).

3. Rain god (responsible for causing rain).
4. 250 hymns are attributed to him.
2. **Agni** -
 1. The god of fire (second most important god).
 2. Intermediary between gods and people.
 3. The son of earth and heaven.
 4. 200 hymns are attributed to him.
3. **Varuna** -
 1. The god of personified water (third most important god).
 2. Looked after rita or the cosmic order.
 3. Ethically, the highest of all Rig Vedic gods.
4. **Soma** -
 1. The king of gods, god of plants, special god of the Brahmanas.
 2. Aryans knew Himalaya (Munjavat) as the source of the soma plant.
 3. Considered the wise god who inspires the poets to compose hymns.
 4. All the hymns of 11 mandalas are assigned to him.
5. **Yama** - Lord of death.
6. **Rudra** -
 1. Amoral archer god whose arrows brought diseases.
 2. Resembled Greek god Apollo and identified as Protosiva.
7. **Surya** - Son of Dyaus, who drives away darkness and spreads light.
8. **Vayu** - God of wind.
9. **Prithvi** - Earth goddess.
10. **Aditi (female)** - Goddess of eternity and mother of the gods, invoked to bestow freedom from evil, harm and sickness.
11. **Marutas** - The sons of Rudra who personifies storms.
12. **Ushas (female)** - Goddess of dawn and her name is mentioned around 300 times in the Rig Veda hymns.
13. **Ashvins** - The twin gods of war and fertility.
14. **Sinivali** - Bestows children.
15. **Savitri** - Solar deity to whom the famous Gayatri Mantra is attributed to, in the third mandala of the Rig Veda.

There is also mention of some Demi-gods such as -

1. **Gandharvas** (Divine musicians)
2. **Apsaras** (Mistress of gods)
3. **Vishwa Devas** (Intermediate deities)
4. **Aryaman** (Guardian of matrimony)