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**A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS ON THE CONCEPT  
OF CULTURE AND PERIOD OF VEDIC IN  
ANCIENT INDIA**

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# A Comparative Analysis on the Concept of Culture and Period of Vedic in Ancient India

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**Abstract – The Vedic Period is one of major milestones in the history of India. It is estimated that the Vedic Period in India lasted from 1500 - 600 B.C. This period brought about a multitude of changes in the lifestyle of people. The Vedic age is broadly classified into two categories: Early Vedic Age and Later Vedic age. There was development in agricultural practices, worshipping patterns, philosophical outlooks, etc. A number of dynasties and new religions came into being during this period that left a huge impact on people. Read on the history of the Vedic Age.**

**The migration of the Aryans to the Indian sub-continent is what triggered off the Vedic Age. As the name suggests, this period got its name from the four major Vedas or the sacred scriptures that were created during that time. The four sacred Vedas are Rig Veda, Sama Veda, Yajur Veda and Atharva Veda. These scriptures provide essential knowledge of the lifestyle during the Vedic Age. The Vedas are the foundation of the Hindu religion. Apart from the Vedas, we have two great epics, Ramayana and Mahabharata written during this age. These two epics tell a lot about the culture, society, religious beliefs, etc. of people during that time.**

**The religion of Vedic India was sacrificing based, taking as its example the primordial sacrifice of the god Purusa. Because of the importance of sacrifice, the gods Soma and Agni were among the most important in the Vedic pantheon. Agni was the god of the sacrificial fire, and Soma the god of the sacred drink and the moon.**

**It was against this backdrop that further Indian civilization was to develop. Both the golden age of Asoka's rule, Buddhism, and modern Indian culture are all rooted in the Vedic age. It was at this time that the essential 'great ideas' were formed, though it would take many more centuries for them to come to their full glory.**

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## INTRODUCTION

The Aryans or the Indo-Europeans were nomadic tribes from the Euro-Asian plains. They were very tough and warlike people. The Sapt Sindhu (land of seven rivers), comprising the present day Afghanistan, Punjab (both in India and Pakistan) and western areas of Uttar Pradesh were inhabited by the Aryans. The vedic period (1500BC - 600BC) got its name from the four vedas written during this period. The vedas are perhaps the oldest written literature available to man today. They have been passed through various cultures for over 100,000 years. The vedic age laid the foundation of the Hindu religious philosophy. It is during this period that the great Indian epics, namely the Ramayana, Mahabharata, Upanishads, and hymns in praise of the vedas were written. The four Vedas were written in Sanskrit language and were categorized into four groups:

- Rig Veda (oldest veda)
- Yajurveda

- Sam Veda
- Atharvaveda.

The original text (mantra) and a commentary portion (Brahmana) are part of every veda. Brahmana is further classified into two parts, one explaining the ritual and other the philosophy (known as Upanishads). The vedic period is studied under two broad branches, namely:

## EARLY VEDIC PERIOD

The people of this period practiced limited agriculture and domesticated cattle and other farm animals. With a gradual increase in population, these people settled as farmers. The Aryan race called its people as Jana (people) while Janapada meant land. Every Aryan tribe had a tribal chief and a group of wise man assisted him in his work. There was no domination of any individual and the group worked in tandem. The tribal chief, warriors and priests were the important people, and lead the common public in social and

religious events. Prayers were offered by chanting religious hymns and mantras. Nature and its main elements, the sun, moon and wind were worshiped as God. Performing rituals was an important part of their daily duties. Animal sacrifice was a common ritual sacrifice.

**Later Vedic Period** - It was in the later Vedic Period, that the epics Ramayana, Mahabharata and Upanishads were written. These epics defined the way of leading a meaningful life. The Ramayana and Mahabharata deals with various social, political and religious views of Hindu culture, while the Bhagavad Gita (an extract from the Mahabharata) beautifully describes Hinduism in its true essence.

In this period, hereditary form of leadership gained popularity and the tribal chiefs' sons generally took over as the next chief. With dominance creeping in the society, the heads of religious tribes became powerful brahmin priests and the caste system came into existence.

The society was divided into four main subsections, 'brahmins' or the priestly people became leaders and religious heads and educated the common people while the 'Kshatriyas' were responsible for the safety of the society. The 'Vaishyas' adopted the roles of businessmen and merchants and the 'Shudras' or the 'outcasts', were a deprived section of the society. They performed the jobs of removing dead bodies, picking garbage, etc. and weren't given much option to prosper within the society.

The Vedic Period formed a platform for the rise of Hindu principles and indeed, the whole religion. It also contributed to Indian philosophy and literature. Empires and kingdoms started to flourish after the Vedic Period. The discovery of 'zero' and other mathematical theorems, ayurveda and yoga are few gifts of the Vedic Period, that makes it an immortal era of Indian civilization.

The Vedic Age marks a new phase in ancient Indian History which began with the arrival of the Aryans in India around 1500 BC. It lasted for almost a thousand years, in the course of which a number of economic, social, political and religious developments took place. The Vedic Age is accordingly divided into two periods of about equal duration - Early Vedic Period and Later Vedic Period.

Have you heard of the Vedas? They are the most important source of information on the Vedic Age. The Early Vedic period is known mainly from the Rig Veda, which was the first Veda to be composed. For this period, when the Vedic tribes lived in northwest part of the subcontinent including Punjab and Afghanistan, we do not have much archaeological evidence. This was probably because the Early Vedic people generally led a nomadic life and did not stay for long at any place. Their economy was mainly pastoral. Cattle-rearing was the chief means of livelihood. Horses, goats and sheep

were also important. A little agriculture was also practiced. Family, clan and tribes (called Janas) were the social units, and there were no castes. The chief of the tribe was called Raja. Popular assemblies of all members of the Janas, called Sabhas and Samitis, had an important say in public affairs. A number of deities were worshipped, Indra being the most important of them.

The Later Vedic period is known in much greater detail from the vast corpus of Later Vedic literature as well as from archeological material. The Later Vedic literature comprised of the following books, that is, the three Vedas – Sama Veda, Yajur Veda and Atharva Veda. There were also commentaries on all the four Vedas called Brahmanas, Aranyakas and Upanishads.

## PHYSICAL GEOGRAPHY THROUGHOUT VEDIC-CIVILIZATION

The philosophy of Geography had been changed from its developmental chronology. In the dawn of Geographical thought, it was firmly concentrated within Environmental Deterministic approach. People were mainly dependent on nature and their culture and life was controlled by natural components like; Light, Wind, Water, Soil. The disturbances in the aforesaid components create a fair situation and that was the regulator of human culture and their society. During Vedic period, Vedic society followed a specimen geographical environment; where physical to socio-cultural environment have been dealt very promptly. Each of the four Vedas consists of the metrical Mantra or Samhita and the prose Brahmana gives direction of the ceremonies at which the Mantras were to be used and explanations of the legends connected with the Mantras and rituals. Both these portions are termed shruti (which was passed on to consecutive generations orally instead of any hand written documentation). Each of the four Vedas seems to have passed to numerous Shakhas or schools, giving rise to various recessions of the text. Within the all mantras of Vedic literature, multi-dimensional socio-economic-cultural and also physical outlook have been reflected and through the proper analysis of different mantra (hymns or chants) we can find out a geographical environment of Vedic-time.

## THE MOVEMENT OF RISHI, DEVATA, AND CHHANDAS IN THE STRUCTURE OF THE VEDA

There is one other structure of the Veda that is basic to understanding the Veda. In the process of knowing itself, the infinite pure consciousness, which is eternal knows itself. In knowing itself, pure consciousness creates a division within itself of knower, known, and process of knowing. This is necessary for it to know itself. It is both eternally one, and yet it is eternally three—knower, knowing, and known—making a three-in-one structure of self-knowing consciousness.

This is another fundamental feature of pure consciousness that it is both eternally one and eternally many. From the threefold structure of knower, known, and process of knowing, consciousness continues to reflect on itself, giving rise to many more reiterations of itself, until the one has evolved into the diversity of the entire Veda. This threefold structure of pure knowledge, that it is one and three at the same time, Maharishi calls the three-in-one structure of pure knowledge. It is expressed in the Veda in the terms rishi (knower), devata (process of knowing) and chhandas (known). Every sukta of the Rig Veda has a structure of rishi, devata, and chhandas, which is announced at the beginning of the hymn. There are infinitely many values of rishi, infinitely many values of devata, and infinitely many values of chhandas. These provide the basic key to understanding the structure of the Rig Veda, as well as Sama, Atharva, and Yajur Veda.

Not only the Veda but all of Vedic literature reflects this structure of knower, knowing, and known. Each branch of the Vedic literature flows out of the mechanics of self-knowing consciousness. The Vedic literature, with its six-fold organization, reflects the process of movement from rishi, to devata, to chhandas, and from chhandas back to devata and rishi. This process is the basic process that structures the entire Rig Veda and the entire Vedic literature. It is the process of self-knowing consciousness. In the following chapters, we will rediscover the structure of the entire Veda and Vedic literature. This is an immense voyage of discovery into a new world of knowledge that has been lost for thousands of years. It is a journey into the fabric of our own consciousness. It is regaining lost knowledge of our own infinite Self.

## **THE ACTUAL PARADIGM ALTER**

For the last over a century and a half, scholars concerned with Vedic historical studies have remained under the spell of what is called the Aryan Invasion Theory (AIT). Though the spell has broken recently its hangover still continues and it might take some more time to be completely cleared off. It was indeed a period of spell, a bewitched state, for otherwise it is difficult to understand why during such a long span of time scholars, who normally maintain a distinction between a theory and a fact, not only overlooked this important epistemological difference but even accepted this theory as a Gospel Truth that cannot be doubted or challenged. This theory perpetuated the notion that the authors of the Vedic Culture were not indigenous to South Asia but had arrived here from somewhere outside as invaders in about 1500 BC. While the place of their original habitat continued to be debated, the image of the early Vedic Aryans as a culturally backward but physically vigorous and bellicose people soon found general acceptance.

By the time the Indus Valley Civilization, now known as the Harappan or Indus-Saraswati Civilization, was discovered, the image of the 'barbarous invading Aryans' had turned into an article of faith and, therefore, it was readily accepted that these very invading people destroyed this earliest civilization of South Asia. It was said that they were nomadic pastoralists not doing even agriculture but, being extremely warlike and possessing horses and horse-drawn chariots, that provided them superior maneuverability in battles, they succeeded in destroying the Harappan cities and forcing their inhabitants, the Dravidians, to move to the south. This notion of a culturally backward, nomadic and tribal Early Aryans has persisted till now and contradicted only recently.

Scholars like L. Poliakov (1974) and Jim G. Shaffer (1984) have discussed the genesis of the Aryan Invasion Theory that fostered these notions. Its roots go back to the acute anti-Semitic racial feelings that dominated the socio-political psychology of the Christians of Europe in the 18th century. The ideas leading to the theory had several ramifications and the theory itself passed through many vicissitudes. It was soon picked up and made the very foundation of German nationalism in one context and later utilized by the British for their colonial interests in a different context. It is worth noting, however, that in the initial stages of the development of the theory the Vedic Culture was highly praised by the Europeans who admitted that India was the original home of the entire human race and the cradle of civilization. Many scholars like Kant and Herder delighted in showing analogies between the myths and philosophies of ancient India and the West. Voltaire was 'convinced that everything has come down to us from the banks of the Ganges, astronomy, astrology, metempsychosis, etc.' (Voltaire quoted in Poliakov 1974:185). Giving these and other examples, Poliakov (1974:188) concludes: 'Thus we see that a wide variety of authors and schools located the birthplace of the entire human race between the Indus and the Ganges'. This high esteem for India and its culture in the minds of the European scholars may have developed partly because of their anti-Semitic feelings<sup>4</sup>, but the fact remains that the image of Vedic Aryans was tarnished only in a subsequent version of the theory.

## **A SINGLE ETHNICAL HISTORY: THE VEDIC AND HARAPPAN**

The acceptance of the Vedic-Harappan identity is another characteristic feature of the new paradigm. This is not to say that the relationship of Vedic and Harappan cultures is expressed by the equation 'A is the same as B'. The two cultures are not identical in that sense. In fact, the Harappan or the Indus-Saraswati Civilization is an aspect or a spatiotemporal



phase of a much earlier, more extensive and more durable Vedic Civilization.

There is another distinction between the two that must not be glossed over while talking about their identity. As I have discussed elsewhere (Singh 2001; 2002), the considerations that define the Harappan and Vedic cultures are not exactly the same. It is basically the rise, intensification and collapse of an urban process that defines the Harappan Culture. As against this, it is the emergence, spread and dominance of an ideology based on a kind of sacrificial ritual and concomitant social psychology that constitutes the hallmark of the Vedic Culture. Unlike urbanization, this ideology is characterized by a world-view based on concepts like 'Rita' creating harmony in sensual, mental and spiritual levels and generates a social identity. Significant is also the fact that the ideological process survived the collapse of the urban process. Thus, notionally they represent two distinct processes, urban and ideological but, as we shall see, despite this perceived functional difference, they are part and parcel of one and the same cultural tradition.

Space-time considerations and literary-archaeological convergence lead us to infer that Early Vedic, that is, Rigvedic Culture corresponds to the archaeological cultures called the Pre-Harappan (Hakra, Kunal I), Early Harappan and early phases of Mature or Urban Harappan. The identification of the Later Vedic Culture with the PGW Culture suggested by R. S. Sharma (1975-76: 63-67) is untenable in view of recent revision of later Vedic chronology as a sequel to a pre-1900 BC dating of the Rigveda. Late Harappan and other contemporary Neolithic-Chalcolithic cultures must also be included in the Late Vedic horizon of which the PGW Culture appears to represent the last phase. The debate on Vedic-Harappan identity relates mostly to the correspondence between Rigvedic and Early-to-Mature Harappan cultures. This identity is based on three basic parities between the two: geographical, chronological and cultural. Let us discuss them briefly.

## EARLY IS THE VEDIC TRADITION

How did it begin? Was it the creation of a people who invaded India from outside, as many European scholars believed for centuries? Or did it arise among an indigenous people of northern India? In this chapter we will ask where the Vedic tradition originated, and in the next chapter, we will consider when it came into existence. We will consider its relation to European civilization. According to the Vedic tradition, the Veda is eternal. It exists within the eternal fabric of consciousness itself. As such it is uncreated. But even so, we can ask, when was the Veda first cognized? And when did the tradition of reciting the Veda begin?

Many myths about the Veda and Vedic tradition have formed that must be dispelled before we can get an accurate picture of its origins. One myth is that a race of lightskinned Aryan peoples invaded India from

outside, pushing the dark-skinned natives, called Dravidians, into the south. According to this theory, the lighter-skinned race invaded India in an incursion that took place, some scholars project, around 1,500 BC. This myth persisted long after an overwhelming body of scientific evidence, and a consensus of archeologists, showed that it is completely untenable. It must be discredited before we can get an accurate picture of the character of Vedic Civilization.

**Migrations of Early Civilization** - The other issue that needs to be considered is language origins. Historical linguistics appears to detect patterns of language change which some think may imply patterns of migration of early peoples, and which may therefore provide a clue to the origins of Vedic civilization.

The original theory proposed by the early historical linguistics who considered these issues was that Vedic Sanskrit conserved the original sound system of the "proto-Indo-European" language most closely, and that Iranian and European languages underwent a systematic sound shift, creating break-away or daughter languages spoken by the people who populated India and Europe.<sup>9</sup> According to this theory, Vedic Sanskrit was put at near the trunk of the proto-Indo-European language tree, if not the trunk itself.

This theory has been challenged and hotly debated in recent years, most especially by computer linguists.<sup>10</sup> Since the 1990s, it is now common for computer linguists to hold that Sanskrit is not so near the root of the Indo-European language tree, but a subsequent branch. A currently dominant theory is that the original Indo-European language stemmed from an Indo-European proto-language that has since been lost. The first languages to break off from the proto-Indo-European root, according to the dominant contemporary linguistic theories, was Anatolian (the language of what is now central Turkey), followed by Celtic (a language found in nearby Thrace in northeastern Greece, and also Ireland suggesting that there was a commerce or colonization between Ireland and early Thrace), then Greek, and then Armenian.<sup>11</sup> According to these theories, the Indian and Iranian language groups are still later branches off the proto-Indo-European "root."

## CONCLUSION

As Vedic tradition is at the roots of this and many other facets of Indian culture, one feels that something should be done for its preservation in modern times and for future generations. Even if regarded outside the religious context and meaning, both Vedic recitation and ritual can be viewed as some kind of a rather complicated art, and they should be preserved as such. The general public will more and more lose interest in these 'outdated' ceremonies, and in consequence, less and less young boys will be found to be willing to undertake the hard task of learning by heart the texts and sequences of a rite, not to speak of learning by rote a whole Veda Samhita or Brahmana:

"There is no money in it". Once the line of tradition, now ranging back some three thousand years, has been cut, however, a reintroduction will be very difficult, and it will not be a genuine Indian tradition then. Some kind of help therefore should be given to insure this ancient tradition.

To return to this tradition: Vedic texts and rituals always have been transmitted orally, by learning them by heart, from teacher to pupil, in an unbroken line of tradition starting with the rig veda time itself (as alluded to in the text). This has been done with such fidelity and accuracy that, for instance, a Vedic mantra heard in India will have exactly the same wording and even the same intonation (with the musical accents long lost in everyday speech) in Kashmir or Gujarat or Kerala. No word or accent has been changed for a period of at least 3000 years. This is quite remarkable, especially when compared to the religious or literary traditions of other cultures.

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