



History Notes
**Vedic Literature
& Aryans**

The Vedic literature was composed in Sanskrit. To begin with, the Vedas were recited and not written. They were taught orally. Hence they were called as Sruti (heard) and Smriti (memorized). But later on, they were reduced to writing after the invention of scripts. The major literary and religious works of the Vedic Period are the **four Vedas** and **the Upanishads**. These works still continue to hold immense authority in the sphere of spiritual and religious literature. The idea and principles of Karma (action) and Moksha (spiritual liberation) are widely accepted by the people belonging to the Hindu faith.

Four Vedas

Veda is a Sanskrit word. It means "knowledge". There were four Vedas :

1. **The Rig Veda**
2. **The Sama Veda**
3. **The Yajur Veda and**
4. **The Atharva Veda.**

1. The Rig Veda

- Collection of hymns
- Oldest of all Vedas
- Associated of 1017 hymns or Suktas after adding "Bhilya Sukta" number in 1028
- Compiled in **10 'mandalas'** & **8 'Akhtaks'**.
- **Also contains the famous** Gayatri Mantra
- II, III, IV, V, VI & VII are oldest mandalas
- I, VIII, IX, X are latest mandalas.
- The Tenth "Mandalas" or chapter which has the "**Purushasukta**" hymn, was probably added later.
- Mandala IX is completely devoted to '**Soma**'.
- Mandala II to VII was created by Grita Samada, Vishwamitra, Vamadeva, Atri, Bharadwaj, Vashistha, VIII Kanwa and Angira, IX Soma

2. Samveda

- **Rhythmic** compilation of hymns for Rigveda
- "**Book for Chants**" contains 1,549 hymns, meant to be sung at the 'soma' sacrifice by a special class of Brahmanas called **Udgatris**. But the Samaveda has very little original value.
- Has only 75 fundamental hymns

3. The Yajur Veda

- Book of sacrificial prayers
- **Rituals of yajnas**
- Is sung of priest "Adhvaryu"
- Its mantras tell us how the sacrifices were to be performed and what part the "Adhvaryus"- the Brahmanas who performed the manual work in the arrangement of sacrifice were to play at the time of sacrifice.
- Has been compiled in "**fourth path**"
- Has been divided into, **Krishna(black) Yajurveda** & **Shukla(white) Yajurveda**
- Prose text

4. Atharvaveda

- Mantras for **magic spells**
- **Populate ritualistic** system & superstitions

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- Associated with "Saunkiya" and "Paiplad" community
- Collection of 711/731/760 hymns
- Not included in 'Trai'
- Has been divided into 20 "**Kandas**"
- 18th, 19th & 20th 'Kandas' are later works
- Provides freedom from **evils spirits**.
- **Oldest text on Indian Medicine.**

The vast literature of the Aryans is divided into two parts -

- **Sruti**
- **Smriti**

1. Sruti Literature: The word Veda has been divided from the Sanskrit word **Ved**, which means 'spiritual knowledge'. The Vedas are four in number - **Rig Veda, Samaveda, Yajurveda, and Atharvaveda**. The Rig Veda contains a reference only to the first three Vedas, which suggests that the fourth **Veda** was composed at some later date.

Vedic literature is usually divided into three periods:-

1. The Mantra period when the Samhitas were composed
 2. Brahaman period when the Brahamanas, Upanishads and Aranyakas were composed
 3. the Sutra period.
- **Brahmanas** are massive prose text which contains speculation of the meaning of the hymns, give precepts for their application, relate stories of their origin in connection with sacrificial rites and explain the secret meaning of the later.
 - The **Aranyakas** are the concluding parts of the Brahamanas. It does not lay much stress on rites, rituals and sacrifices, but merely contain the philosophy and mysticism. The lead with the problems of soul, origin and elements of the universe and the creation of the universe.

Aranyaka:-

- Literarily, it means '**Jungle**'
- Provides the description of Moral Science and Philosophy
- Provides details of hermits and saints who lived in Jungles
- Give stress on meditation
- Protests the system of '**Yajnas**'

It would be appropriate to describe Upanishadas as mystic writings. There are 108 Upanishads in all, the most prominent of them being *Ish, Prasana, Aitareya, Taittiriya, Chhandogaya, Kathoupanishad, Ishopanishad, Brehadaranyaka, etc.*

Upanishada

- Literary meaning is '**Satra**' (to sit near masters feet) in which Guru offers a band of knowledge to their disciples
- Is a combination of Tatva-mimansa and philosophy
- They are also called "**Vedanta**"
- Primitive upanishada are "**Brahadaranyaka**" and "**Chandogya**"
- Later **Upnishada** like "**Katha**" and "**Swetaswatar**" have been written in poetic forms.
- Brahma is the summary of philosophy, which is the only a 'truth' in the world.
- Knowledge awards salvation says Upanishadas
- Oldest possibility Narsinghpurvatanpani
- Latest possibility Allopanishada in Akbar's reign

2. Smriti Literature: Smriti is traditional knowledge and designates almost the entire body of post-Vedic classical Sanskrit literature. Smriti literature generally includes the following overlapping subjects:-

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1. **The Vedangas:** They refer to certain branches of post-Vedic studies regarded as auxiliary to the Vedas. The Vedangas are conventionally divided into six heading namely:-
 - (i) **Kalpa** or the ritual canon, including the **dharma shastras** or legal codes,
 - (ii) **Jyotisha** or astrology,
 - (iii) **Siksha** or phonetics,
 - (iv) **Chhanda** or metre
 - (v) **Nirukta** or etymology
 - (vi) **Vyakarana** (Grammar)
1. The **Shad-Darsana:** Six orthodox schools of Hindu philosophy, namely Nyaya, 'Vaiseshikha', Sankhya, Yoga, Mimamsa and Vedanta.
2. **Itihasa:** Legendary or semi-legendary works, specifically the Ramayana and Mahabharata and often extended to the Puranas.
3. **Puranas:** Being a fairly late description of ancient legends, they are heavily coloured with the superstitions. The Puranas represent the most corrupt form of Hinduism. They are 18 in number
 - The Eighteen Puranas
 - Brahma Purana
 - Vishnu Purana
 - Shiva Purana
 - Padma Purana
 - Shrimad Bhagwat Purana
 - Agni Purana
 - Narad Purana
 - Markandey Purana
 - Bhavishya Purana
 - Ling Purana
 - Varah Purana
 - Vaman Purana
 - Brahm Vaivertya Purana
 - Shanda Purana
 - Surya Purana
 - Matsya Purana
 - Garuda Purana
 - Brahmand Purana

Upaveda: Also known as the auxiliary Vedas, they deal with medicine, architecture, erotics, archery and various arts and crafts. These were partly derived from original Vedic texts and were traditionally associated with one or other of the Vedas.

Tantras: Tantras are the writings of Shakta or Shaivite sects and also of certain antinomian Buddhist scholars

Agamas: They are scriptures of sectarian Hindus like Vaishnavites, Shaivites and Shaktas.

Upangas: They are a generic name for any collection of treatises although traditionally confined to the philosophical systems of 'Nyaya' and 'Mimamsa' - the 'Dharma Sutras' the 'Puranas' and the 'Tantras'

Epics

Some historians regard the Later Vedic Period as the Period of Epics. The *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* are the two great epics of this period.

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Ramayana: It is said to have been composed by the sage, Valmiki. The incident related in it precedes the *Mahabharata* by about a hundred and fifty years. The story of Ramayana is of indigenous origin and had existed in ballad form in Prakrit, in more than one version. It was rewritten in Sanskrit and augmented with many 'Shlokas'. The epic was given a Brahmanical character which was not visible in the original work. It is also known as *Adi Kavya*. Evidence places the oldest part of the Ramayana to before 350 BC. The reference in the epic to the mingled hordes of Yavanas and Shakas suggests that it received accretions in the Graeco-Scythian period and may have acquired its final shape by about AD 250.

Mahabharata: The Mahabharata is the bulkiest epic consisting of 100,000 verses and is divided into 18 paravas (books). This book is usually assigned to Rishi Ved Vyas, but scholars have expressed doubts if such a great work could have been accomplished by one single person. The story itself occupies only about one-fourth of the poem. It is a tale about the conflict between Aryans-Kaurava and Pandava.

The rest is episodic comprising Cosmology, Theogony, statecraft, the science of war, ethics, legendary history, mythology, fairy tales and several digressional and philosophical interludes, of which the best known is the **Bhagavad Gita**.

Vedic Period and the Aryans

- The Aryans were semi-nomadic pastoral people and originated from the area around the Caspian Sea in Central Asia (Many historians have given various theories regarding their original place). The Central Asian theory is given by **Max Muller**.
- Entered India probably through the Khyber Pass (Hindukush mountain) around 1500 BC.

Early Vedic or Rig Vedic Period (1500- 1000 BC)

Political Organization

- Monarchical form. The tribe was known as Jan and its king as **Rajan**.
- The family was the basic unit of society. The family was patriarchal in nature.

Economy

- Aryans followed a mixed economy i.e. pastoral and agricultural in which cattle played a predominant part.
- The standard unit of exchange was Cow. At the same time coins were also there.

Religion

- The Aryans personified the natural forces and looked upon them as living beings.
- The most important divinity was **Indra** who played the role of the warlord (breaker of forts-*Purandar*)

Later Vedic Period (1000- 600 BC) (Painted Gray Ware Phase)

Political Organization

- Tiny tribal settlements were replaced by strong kingdoms.

Social

- The fourfold division of society became clear, initially based on occupation, which later became hereditary: *Brahmins* (priests), *Kshatriyas* (warriors), *Vaishyas* (agriculturists, cattle-rearers, traders), *Shudras* (servers of the upper three).
- The institution of the gotra appeared for the first time in this age.

Religion

- *Indra* and *Agni* lost their importance. *Prajapati* (the creator) became supreme. **Vishnu** came to be conceived as the preserver and protector of the people.

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The Vedic Literature

The Vedas

The word **Veda** comes from the root "**vidi**" signifying knowledge. They are four in all - **Rig Veda, Sama Veda, Yajur Veda** and **Atharva Veda**.

(1) Rig Veda

- The oldest religious text in the world.
- Contains 1,028 hymns and is divided into 10 mandalas.

(2) Sama Veda

- Derived from the root **Saman** i.e "melody". It is a collection of melodies.

(3) Yajur Veda

- Deals with the procedure for the performance of sacrifices.

(4) Atharva Veda

- Mostly dealing with magic(along with personal problems of people).

The Upanishads

- Called **Vedanta**
- They are the main source of Indian Philosophy, 108 in numbers.

The Brahmins

- They explain the meaning of sacrifices and also the methods of performing them.
- Shatpath Brahmin on Yajur Veda is the largest among Brahmins.

The Aranyakas

- These granths were studied in the forest.
- These are the books of instructions.

Epics

Mahabharata

- It was written in Sanskrit by **Ved Vyas**
- It describes a war between Kauravas and Pandavas of 950 BC in Kurukshetra.
- Translation of "Mahabharat" in Persian is called **Rajm nama** done by **Badauni**.

Ramayana

- It was written by **Valmiki** in sanskrit.
- It has 24000 Shlokas, also known as **Aadi-kavya**.
- Its persian translation is done by **Badauni** and Tamil translation by **Kamban**.
- Ramcharitmanas is written by Tulsidas.

Puranas

- Puranas are 18 in number.
- It was written during the Gupta Age in AD 4th Century.
- Matsya Purana is the oldest Purana.

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