

GIST OF N.C.E.R.T

THE LATER VEDIC PHASE

Expansion in the Later Vedic Period (c. 1000-500 B.C.)

THE HISTORY of the later Vedic period is based mainly on the Vedic texts which were compiled after the age of the Rig Veda. The collections of the Vedic hymns or mantras were known as the Samhitas. For purposes of recitation, the prayers of the Rig Veda were set to tune, and this modified collection was known as the Sama Veda Samhita. In addition to the Sama Veda, in post-Rig Vedic times two other collections were composed. These were - the Yajur Veda Samhita and the Atharva Veda Samhita. The Yajur Veda contains not only hymns but also rituals which have to accompany their recitation. The Atharva Veda contains charms and spells to ward off evils and diseases. The Vedic Samhitas were followed by the composition of a series of texts known as the Brahmanas. These are full of ritualistic formulae and explain the social and religious meaning of rituals.

All these later Vedic texts were compiled in the upper Gangetic basin in circa 1000-500 B.C. These are called Painted Grey Ware (PGW) sites because they were inhabited by people who used earthen bowls and dishes made of painted grey pottery. They also used iron weapons. With the combined evidence from the later Vedic texts and PGW iron-phase archaeology we can form an idea of the life of the people in the first half of the first millennium B.C. in western Uttar Pradesh and adjoining areas of Punjab, Haryana and Rajasthan.

The texts show that the Aryans expanded from Punjab over the whole of western Uttar Pradesh covered by the Ganga-Yamuna doab. The Bharatas and Purus, the two major tribes, combined and thus formed the Kurus. In the beginning they lived between the Sarasvati and the Drishadvati just on the fringe of the doab. Soon the Kurus occupied Delhi and the upper portion of the doab, the area called Kurukshetra or the land of the Kurus. Gradually they coalesced with a people called the Panchalas, who occupied the middle portion of the

doab. The authority of the Kuru-Panchala people spread over Delhi, and the upper and middle portion of the doab. The authority of the Kuru-Panchala people spread over Delhi, and the upper and middle parts of the doab. They set up their capital at Hastinapur situated in the district of Meerut. The history of the Kuru tribe is important for the battle of Bharata, which is the main theme of the great epic called the Mahabharata. This war is supposed to have been fought around 950 B.C. between, the Kauravas and the Pandavas, although both of them belonged to the Kuru clan. As a result practically the whole of the Kuru clan was wiped out.

Towards the end of the later Vedic period, around 600 B.C. the Vedic people spread from the doab further east of Koshala in eastern Uttar Pradesh and Videha in north Bihar. Although Koshala is associated with the story of Rama, it is not mentioned in Vedic literature.

The UGW-Iron Phase Culture and Later Vedic Economy

Around 1000 B.C. iron appears in Dharwar district in Karnataka. Excavations show that iron weapons such as arrow-heads and spear-heads came to be commonly used in western Uttar Pradesh from about 800 B.C. onwards. With iron weapons the Vedic people may have defeated the few adversaries that may have faced them in the upper portion of the doab. Towards the end of the Vedic period knowledge of iron spread in eastern Uttar Pradesh and Videha. The earliest iron implements discovered in this area belong to the seventh Century B.C., and the metal itself is called shyama or Krishna ayas in the later Vedic texts.

Although very few agricultural tools made of iron have been found, undoubtedly agriculture was the chief means of livelihood of the later Vedic people. The Shatapatha Brahmana speaks at length about the ploughing rituals. According to ancient legends, Janaka, the king of Videha and father of Sita, lent his hand to the plough. In later times ploughing came to be prohibited, for the members of the upper varnas.

The Vedic people continued to produce barley, but during this period rice and wheat became their chief crops. In subsequent times wheat became the staple food of the people in Punjab and western Uttar Pradesh. For the first time the Vedic people came to be acquainted with rice in the doab. It is called *vrihi* in the Vedic texts, and its remains recovered from Hastinapur belong to the eighth century B.C. The use of rice is recommended in Vedic rituals, but that of wheat only rarely.

Agriculture and various crafts enabled the later Vedic people to lead a settled life. Excavations and explorations give us some idea about settlements in later Vedic times. Widespread Painted Grey Ware sites are found not only in western Uttar Pradesh and Delhi, which was the Kuru-Panchala area but also in the adjoining parts of Punjab and Haryana, which was the Madras area and in those of Rajasthan, which was the Matsya area. Altogether we can count nearly 700 sites, mostly belonging to the upper Gangetic basin.

Although the term *nagara* is used in later Vedic texts we can trace only the faint beginnings of towns towards the end of the later Vedic period. Hastinapur and Kaushambi (near Allahabad) can be regarded as primitive towns belonging to the end of the Vedic period. They may be called proto-urban sites.

Political Organization

In later Vedic times Rig Vedic popular assemblies lost importance, and royal power increased at their cost. The *vidatha* completely disappeared. The *sabha* and *samiti* continued to hold the ground, but their character changed. They came to be dominated by chiefs and rich nobles. Women were no longer permitted to sit on the *sabha*, and it was now dominated by nobles and brahmanas.

The formation of bigger kingdoms made the chief or the king more powerful. Tribal authority tended to become territorial. Princes or chiefs ruled over tribes, but the dominant tribes gave their names to territories, which might be inhabited by tribes other than their own. In the beginning each area was named after the tribe which settled there first. At first Panchala was the name of a people, and then it became the name of a region. The term *rashtra*, which indicates territory, first appears in this period.

Traces of the election of the chief or the king appear in later Vedic texts. Other qualities were elected *raja*. He received voluntary presents called

bali from his ordinary kinsmen or the common people called the *vis*. But the chief tried to perpetuate the right to receive presents and enjoy other privileges pertaining to his office by making it hereditary in his family; the post generally went to the eldest son. However, this succession was not always smooth.

The king's influence was strengthened by rituals. He performed the *rajasuya* sacrifice, which was supposed to confer supreme power on him. He performed the *ashvamedha*, 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 the people with the increasing power and prestige of the king.

During this period collection of taxes and tributes seems to have become common. They were probably deposited with an officer called *sangrihitri*. In the discharge of his duties the king was assisted by the priest, the commander, the chief queen and a few other high functionaries. At the lower level, the administration was possibly carried on the village assemblies, which may have been controlled by the chiefs of the dominant clans.

Social Organization

The later Vedic society came to be divided into four varnas called the brahmanas, *rajanyas* or *kahatriyas*, *vaishyas* and *shudras*. The growing cult of sacrifice enormously added to the power of the brahmanas.

The *vaishyas* constituted the common people, and they were assigned to do the producing functions such as agriculture, cattle-breeding, etc. Some of them also worked as artisans. Towards the end of the Vedic period they began to engage in trade. The *vaishyas* appear to be the only tribute-paying in later Vedic times, and the brahmanas and *kahatriyas* are represented as living on the tributes collected from the *vaishyas*. This was done with the help of the priests who also fattened at the cost of people or the *vaishyas*. 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 the recitation of the *gayatri* mantra and with this began the imposition of disabilities on the *shudra*.

Generally the later Vedic texts draw a line of

demarcation between the three higher orders on the one hand, and the shudras on the other. There were, nevertheless several public rituals connected with the coronation of the king in which the shudras participated, presumably as survivors of the original Aryan people. Certain sections of artisans such as rathakara or chariotmaker enjoyed a high status, and were entitled to the sacred thread ceremony. Therefore, even in later Vedic times varna distinctions had not advanced very far.

In the family we notice the increasing power of the father, who could even disinherit his son. In princely families the right of primogeniture was getting stronger. Male ancestors came to be worshipped. Women were generally given a lower position. Although some women theologians took part in philosophic discussion and some queens participated in coronation rituals, ordinarily women were thought to be inferior and subordinate to men.

The institution of gotra appeared in later Vedic times. Literally it means the cow-pen or the place where cattle belonging to the whole clan are kept, but in course of time it signified descent from a common ancestor. People began to practise gotra exogamy. No marriage could take place between persons belonging to the same gotra or having the same lineage.

Ashramas or four stages of life were not well established in Vedic times. In the post-Vedic texts we hear of four ashramas—that of Brahmachari or student, grihastha or householder, vanaprastha or hermit and sannyasin or ascetic who completely renounced the worldly life. Only the first three are mentioned in the later Vedic texts; the last or the fourth stage had not been well established in later Vedic times though ascetic life was not unknown. Even in post-Vedic times only the stage of the householder was commonly practised by all the varnas.

Good, Rituals said Philosophy

The two outstanding Rig Vedic 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 pantheon. Some of the other minor gods of the Rig Vedic period also came to the forefront. Rudra, the god of animals, became important in later Vedic times, and Vishnu came

to be conceived as the preserver and protector of the people. In addition, some objects began to be worshipped as symbols of divinity; signs of idolatry appear in later Vedic times. Pushan, who was supposed to look after cattle, came to be regarded as the god of the shudras.

People worshipped gods for the same material reasons in this period as they did in earlier times. However, the mode of worship changed considerably. Prayers continued to be recited. Sacrifices became far more important, and they assumed both public and domestic character.

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.

Sacrifices were accompanied by formulae which had to be carefully pronounced by the sacrificer. The sacrificer was known as the yajamana, the performer, of yajna, and much of his success depended on the magical power of words uttered correctly in the sacrifices.

In addition to cows, which were usually given as sacrificial gifts, gold, cloth and horses were also given. Sometimes the priests claimed portions of territory as dakshina. The Shatapatha Brahmana states that in the ashvamedha, north, south, east and west all should be given to the priest.

Towards the end of the Vedic period began a strong reaction against priestly domination, against cults and rituals, especially in the land of the Panchalas and Videha where, around 600 B.C., the Upanishads were compiled. These philosophical texts criticized the rituals and laid stress on the value of right belief and knowledge. They emphasised that the knowledge of the self or atman should be acquired and the relation of atman with Brahma should be properly understood.

JAINISM AND BUDDHISM

NUMEROUS religious sects arose in the middle Gangetic plains in the second half of the sixth century B.C. Of these sects Jainism and Buddhism were the most important, and they emerged as the most potent religious reform movements.

Causes of Origin

In post-Vedic times society was clearly divided into four varnas: brahmanas, kshatriyas, vaishyas and

shudras. Each varna was assigned well-defined functions, although it was emphasised that varna was based on birth. The brahmanas, who were given the functions of priests and teachers, claimed the highest status in society. The kshatriyas ranked second in the varna hierarchy. The vaishyas were engaged in agriculture, cattle-rearing and trade.

They appear as principal taxpayers. The shudras were meant for service to the three higher varnas, and along with women were barred from taking to Vedic studies.

Naturally the varna-divided society seems to have generated tensions. We have no means to find out the reactions of the vaishyas and the shudras. But the kshatriyas, who functioned as rulers, reacted strongly against the ritualistic domination of the brahmanas, and seem to have led a kind of protest movement against the importance attached to birth in the varna system. The kshatriya reaction against the domination of the priestly class called brahmanas, who claimed various privileges, was one of the causes of the origin of new religions. Vardhamana Mahavira, who founded Jainism, and Gautama Buddha, who founded Buddhism belonged to the kshatriya clan, and both disputed the authority of the brahmanas.

But the real cause of the rise of these new religions lay in the spread of a new agricultural economy in north-eastern India. In the middle Gangeic plains, large-scale habitations began in about 600 B.C., when iron came to be used in this area. The use of iron tools made possible clearance, agriculture and large settlements. The agricultural economy based on the iron ploughshare required the use of bullocks, and it could not flourish without animal husbandry. But the Vedic practice of killing cattle indiscriminately in sacrifices stood in the way of the progress of new agriculture. But if the new agrarian economy had to be stable, this killing had to be stopped.

The period saw the rise of a large number of cities in north-eastern India. We may refer, for example, to Kaushambi near Allahabad, Kusinagar (in Deoria district of Uttar Pradesh).

Banaras, Vaishali (in the newly created district of the same name in north Bihar), Chirand (in Saran district) and Rajgir (situated at a distance of about 100 km south-east of Patna). Besides others these

cities had many artisans and traders, who began to use coins for the first time. The earliest coins belong to the fifth century B.C., and they are called punch-marked coins. They circulated for the first time in eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The use of coins naturally facilitated trade and commerce, which added to the importance of the vaishyas. In the brahmanical society the vaishyas ranked third, the first two being brahmanas and kshatriyas. Naturally they looked for some religion which would improve their position.

Vardhamana Mahavira and Jainism

According to the Jainas, the origin of Jainism goes back to very ancient times. They believe in twenty-four tirthankaras or great teachers or leaders of their religion. The first tirthankara is believed to be Rishabhdev who was born in Ayodhya. He is said to have laid the foundations for orderly human society. The last, twenty-fourth, tirthankara, was Vardhamana Mahavira who was a contemporary of Gautama Buddha. The twenty-third tirthankara was Parshvanath who was born in Varanasi. He gave up royal life and became an ascetic. Many teachings of Jainism are attributed to him. According to Jaina tradition, he lived two hundred years before Mahavira. Mahavira is said to be the twenty-fourth.

According to one tradition, Vardhamana Mahavira was born in 540 B.C. in a village called Kundagrama near Vaishali, which is identical with Basarh in the district of Vaishali, in north Bihar. His father Siddhartha was the head of a famous kshatriya clan called Jnatika and the ruler of his own area. Mahavira's mother was named Trishala, sister of the Lichchhavi chief Chetaka, whose daughter was wedded to Bimbisara.

In the beginning, Mahavira led the life of a householder, but in the search for truth he abandoned the world at the age of 30 and became an ascetic. In the thirteenth year, when he had reached the age of 42, he attained kaivalya. Through kaivalya he conquered misery and happiness. Because of this conquest he is known as Mahavira or the great hero or jina, i.e. the conqueror, and his followers are known as Jainas. He propagated his religion for 30 years, and his mission took him to Koshala, Magadha, Mithila, Champa, etc. He passed away at the age of 72 in 468 B.C. at a place called Pavapuri near modern

Rajgir. According to another tradition, he was born in 599 B.C. and passed away in 527 B.C.

Doctrines of Jainism

Jainism taught five doctrines: (i) do not commit violence, (ii) do not speak a lie, (iii) do not steal, (iv) do not acquire property, and (v) observe continence (brahmacharya). It is said that only the fifth doctrine was added by Mahavira: the other four were taken over by him from previous teachers. Jainism attached the utmost importance to ahimsa or non-injury to living beings in later times, Jainism was divided into two sects: shvetambaras or those who put on white dress, and digambaras or those who keep them-selves naked.

Jainism mainly aims at the attainment of freedom from worldly bonds. No ritual is required for acquiring such liberation. It can be obtained through right knowledge, right faith and right action. These three are considered to be the Three Jewels or triratna of Jainism.

Jainism prohibited the practice of war and even agriculture for its followers because both involve the killing of living beings. Eventually the Jainas mainly confined themselves to trade and mercantile activities.

Spread of Jainism

In order to spread the teachings of Jainism, Mahavira organized an order of his followers which admitted both men and women. According to a late tradition, the spread of Jainism in Karnataka is attributed to Chandragupta Maurya (322-298 B.C.). The emperor became a Jaina, gave up his throne and spent the last years of his life in Karnataka as a Jaina ascetic. The second cause of the spread of Jainism in south India is said to be the great famine that took place in Magadha 200 years after the death of Mahavira. The famine lasted for twelve years, and in order to protect themselves many a Jaina went to the south under the leadership of Bhadrabahu, but the rest of them stayed back in Magadha under the leadership of Sthalabahu. The emigrant Jainas spread Jainism in south India. At the end of the famine they came back to Magadha, where they developed differences with the local Jainas. Those who came back from the south claimed that even during the famine they had strictly observed the religious rules; on the other hand, they alleged, the Jaina ascetics living in Magadha had violated those rules and had

become lax. In order to sort out these differences and to compile the main teachings of Jainism a council was convened in Pataliputra, modern Patna, but the southern Jainas boycotted the council and refused to accept its decisions. From now onwards, the southerners began to be called digambaras, and the Magadhans shvetambaras. However, epigraphic evidence for the spread of Jainism in Karnataka is not earlier than the third century A.D. In subsequent centuries, especially after the fifth century, numerous Jaina monastic establishments called basadis sprang up in Karnataka and were granted land by the king for their support.

Jainism spread to Kalinga in Orissa in the fourth century B.C., and in the first century B.C. it enjoyed the patronage of the Kalinga king Kharavela who had defeated the princes of Andhra and Magadha.

Contribution of Jainism

Jainism made the first serious attempt to mitigate the evils of the varna order and the ritualistic Vedic religion. The early Jainas discarded Sanskrit language mainly patronized by the brahmanas. They adopted Prakrit language of the common people to preach their doctrines. Their religious literature was written in Ardhamagadhi, and texts were finally compiled in the sixth century A.D. in Gujarat at a place called Valabhi, a great centre of Education. The adoption of Prakrit by the Jainas heeded the growth of this language and its literature. Many regional languages developed out of Prakrit languages, particularly Shauraseni, out of which grew the Marathi language. They contributed to the growth of Kananads, in which they wrote extensively.

Gautam, Buddha and Buddhism

Gautama Buddha or Siddhartha was a contemporary of Mahavira. According to tradition he was born in 563 B.C. in a Shakya kshatriya family in Lumbini in Nepal near Kapilvastu, which is identified with Piprahwa in Basti district and close to the foothills of Nepal. Gautama's father seems to have been the elected ruler of Kapilvastu, and headed the republican clan of the Shakyas. His mother was a princess from the Koshala dynasty. Thus, like Mahavira, Gautama also belonged to a noble family.

At the age of 29, like Mahavira again, he left home. He kept on wandering for about seven years and

then attained knowledge at the age of 35 at Gaya under a pipal tree. From this time onwards he began to be called the Buddha or the enlightened,

Gautam Buddha delivered his first sermons at Sarnath in Banaras, Gautama Buddha passed away at the age of 80 in 483 B.C. at a place called Kusinagar, identical with the village called Kasia in the district of Deoria in eastern Uttar Pradesh.

Doctrines of Buddhism

Gautama Buddha recommended an eight-fold path (ashtangika marga) for the elimination of human misery. This path is attributed to him in a text of about the third century B.C. It comprised right observation, right determination, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right exercise, right memory and right meditation. If a person follows this eight fold path he would not depend on the machinations of the priests, and will be able to reach his destination. Gautama taught that a person should avoid the excess of both luxury and austerities. He prescribed the middle path.

The Buddha also laid down a code of conduct for his followers on the same lines as was done by the Jain teachers. The main items in their social conduct are: (i) do not covet the property of others, (ii) do not commit violence, (iii) do not use intoxicants, (iv) do not speak a lie, and (v) do not indulge in corrupt practices. These teachings are common to the social conduct ordained by almost all religions.

Special Features of Buddhism and their Causes of Its Spread

Buddhism does not recognize the existence of god and soul (atman). This can be taken as a kind of revolution in the history of Indian religions. It particularly won the support of the lower orders as it attacked the varna system. People were taken into the Buddhist order without any consideration of caste. Women also were admitted to the sangha and thus brought on par with men. In comparison with Brahmanism, Buddhism was liberal and democratic.

The use of Pali, the language of the people, also contributed to the spread of Buddhism. It facilitated the spread of Buddhist doctrines among the common people. Gautama Buddha also organized the sangha or the religious order, whose doors were

kept open to every body, irrespective of caste and sex. The only condition required of the monks was that they would faithfully observe the rules and regulations of the sangha. Once they were enrolled as members of the Buddhist Church they had to take the vow of continence, poverty and faith. So there are three main elements in Buddhism: Buddha, sangha and dhamma. The monarchies of Magadha, Koshala and Kaushambi and several republican states and their people adopted this religion.

Two hundred years after the death of the Buddha, the famous Maurya king Ashoka embraced Buddhism. This was an epoch-making event. Through his agents Ashoka spread Buddhism into Central Asia, West Asia and Sri Lanka, and thus transformed it into a world religion. Even today Sri Lanka, Burma (Myanmar), Tibet and parts of China and Japan, profess Buddhism although.

Importance and Influence of Buddhism

Despite its ultimate disappearance as an organized religion, Buddhism left its abiding mark on the history of India. The Buddhist showed a keen awareness of the problems that faced the people of north-east India in the sixth century B.C.

Undoubtedly the objective of the Buddhist teaching was to secure the salvation of the individual or nirvana.

Buddhism made an important impact on society by keeping its doors open to women and shudras. Since both women and shudras were placed in the same category by Brahmanism, they were neither given sacred thread nor allowed to read the Vedas. Their conversion to Buddhism freed them from such marks of inferiority.

With its emphasis on non-violence and the sanctity of animal life, Buddhism boosted the cattle wealth of the country. The earliest Buddhist text Suttanipata declares the cattle to be givers of food, beauty and happiness (annada, Vannada, sukhada), and thus pleads for their protection. This teaching came significantly at a time when the non-Aryans slaughtered animals for food, and the Aryans in the name of religion.

Buddhism created and developed a new awareness in the field of intellect and culture. They enormously enriched Pali by their writings. The early Pali literature can be divided into three

categories. The first contains the sayings and teachings of the Buddha, the second deals with the rules to be observed by members of the sangha, and the third presents the philosophical exposition of the dhamma. In the first three centuries of the Christian era, by mixing Pali with Sanskrit the Buddhists created a new language which is called Hybrid Sanskrit. The literary activities of the Buddhist monks continued even in the Middle Ages, and some famous Apabhramas writing in east India were composed by them. The Buddhist monasteries developed as great centres of learning, and can be called residential universities. Mention may be made of Nalanda and Vikramashila in Bihar, and Valabhi in Gujrat.

Buddhism left its mark on the art of ancient India. The first human statues worshipped in India were probably those of the Buddha. From the first century A.D. onwards the panel images of Gautama Buddha began to be made. The Greek and the Indian sculptors worked together to create a new kind of art on the north-west frontier of India, which is known as the Gandhara art. For the residence of the monks rooms were hewn out of the rocks, and thus began the cave architecture in the Barabar hills in Gaya and in western India around Nasik. Buddhist art flourished in the Krishna delta in the south and in Mathura in the north.