

## An Analytical Study on "The Age of the Rigveda and its Socio-Cultural Importance"

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### ABSTRACT

The Rigvedic period and its culture are a formative era in ancient Indian civilisation. It delves into the complex dating of the Rigveda, primarily situating its composition between 1500 and 1000 BCE based on linguistic and archaeological evidence, while also addressing contentious astronomical claims. This compilation comprises 1,028 hymns, also divided into ten Mandalas and composed in the oldest dialect of Vedic Sanskrit. These hymns were primarily composed as verbal offerings to the gods and were used in various religious rituals. The study draws attention to the Rigvedic culture, which had a patriarchal but flexible system. It was characterised by an increasingly high place for women, growing social stratification, and occupational mobility, including their participation in intellectual and religious events. Economically, the period was characterized by a blend of pastoralism and primitive agriculture, with cattle serving as the primary wealth and a prevalent barter system, notably predating the widespread use of iron. Religiously, it was polytheistic and nature-centric, focusing on simple yajna (sacrifice) rituals free of temples or idol worship, laying the groundwork for later Hindu philosophical breakthroughs. The enduring oral tradition of the Rigveda, its sophisticated interpretations, and its emphasis on values like diligence show its profound cultural and spiritual legacy, which still shapes modern Indian identity.

**Introduction:**

The Rigveda is the oldest of the four Vedas. It is an invaluable literary and cultural treasure of ancient India, serving as the sacred foundation of Hinduism and one of the world's oldest cultural traditions. It is not only a religious text, but also reflects the early stages of Vedic culture, serving as an important source of religious sentiments, social values, economic life, and daily practices of the Aryans of that time. Written in the oldest dialect of Vedic Sanskrit, this collection comprises 1,028 hymns. It is arranged into ten mandalas, which occupy a unique place in the history of intellectual and spiritual development. These hymns were mainly addressed to the gods and were used in various religious rituals. The Rigveda presents a comprehensive picture of the religious beliefs of the people of that era, their observations of nature and their concept of the cosmos.

The main objective of this report is to discuss in detail the various theories and evidence existing regarding the period of composition of the Rigveda and to provide a well-organised, fact-based and analytical work by deeply analysing the social, economic, religious and cultural life of the Rigvedic period, which will give the reader a proper idea about this important period of ancient India. The study of the Rigveda serves as a fundamental pillar of the historical continuity and cultural and spiritual evolution of Indian civilisation. It is not only a document of a specific historical period, but it also provides a primary framework for the development of later Vedic literatures, such as the Brahmanas, the Aranyakas, the Upanishads, and, above all, the various branches of Hinduism. This continuous tradition makes the relevance of the Rigveda not limited to a mere matter of historical curiosity, but also an indispensable means of penetrating the depths of contemporary Indian culture.

Another notable feature of the Rigveda is its method of oral preservation, which has helped preserve its text almost intact for thousands of years. Brahmin priests learned complex recitation techniques from childhood, which were based on the pronunciation of vowels, the specific pronunciation of each letter, and specific word combinations. This is not only a historical fact, but also demonstrates how innovative and rigorous the methods adopted by ancient Indian scholars were in preserving their sacred texts with utmost accuracy. This methodological purity further enhances the reliability of the Rigveda, especially when its chronology is in dispute.

**Dating of the Rigveda: Controversy and Evidence**

The dating of the Rigveda is a complex and much-debated issue. There is profound disagreement among scholars about the date of composition of the Rigveda. The question of when and by whom the



Vedas were composed remains a subject of scholarly research. It is impossible to say when the Rig Mantras were first seen (composed?) and how long after that they were first written down. The dating of any ancient literature is based on three sources of evidence: a) traditional literature, b) rock inscriptions, and c) Western literature. Therefore, literary evidence alone is of little help in dating the Veda. In addition, its dating depends on a complex interrelated field of archaeological, linguistic and literary evidence. Below are the views of scholars involved in determining the time of the Rigveda -

According to ancient Eastern scholars, the Vedas are *apaurusheya*, meaning they were not composed by any human being. The Vedic mantras are eternal and timeless. The wise sages have seen them. In the Purussukta of the Rigveda, it is said –

*tasmāt yajñāt sarbahutaḥ ṛcaḥ samāni yajñire.*

*chandāmsi yajñire tasmāt yajustasmādayāta.*

*(Rig Samhita, 10/90/9)*

Western scholars and modern Indian scholars do not accept the above view. According to them, the Vedas were composed in India. The code of conduct of the Aryans, as outlined in these Vedas, is not timeless. Therefore, they have presented their own views on the time of composition of the Vedas.

The first to attempt to determine the period of the Veda was the German scholar Max Müller in 1859 AD. He divided Vedic literature into 4 periods: a) Rhythmic Period, b) Mantra Period, c) Brahmanical Period, d) Sutra Period. According to him, each period may take at least 200 years to develop. The two famous authors of the Sutra Period, Shaunaka and Katyayana, were contemporaries or predecessors of the Buddhist period. The Sutra Period is dated to 600-400 BC, the Brahmanical Period is dated to 800-600 BC, the Mantra Period is dated to 1000-800 BC, and the Rhythmic Period is dated to 1200-1000 BC. It was during this Rhythmic Period that the Vedic Aryans composed the Rigveda.

According to linguistic theory, the main body of the Rigveda was composed between 1500 and 1200 BCE, although there is some disagreement. This period is generally regarded as the Early Vedic period. The text is believed to have been composed after the Indo-Iranians separated (c. 2000 BCE). Bhuler, based on some geographical information in the Vedas, has dated the composition of the Rigveda to between 1500 and 1200 BCE. Haug, analysing the language of the Rigveda, has dated it to between 2400 and 1400 BCE. In the Mitanni documents (c. 1450–1350 BCE), mention is made of gods such as Indra, Varuna, Mitra, Nasyata, etc. According to Stenkon and Winternitz, these are undoubtedly Vedic gods. These references place the composition of the Rigveda around 1400 BCE, which is consistent with linguistic assumptions.



The Rigveda is linguistically much older than other Indo-Aryan texts and exhibits strong linguistic and cultural similarities with the Persian scripture, the Avesta. Macdonell dates the Rigveda to around 1500–1300 BCE, using linguistic features, metre, and content as chronological markers, with the first to ninth mandalas falling within this period. Later Vedic literature, such as the Atharvaveda Samhita, the rhythmic portion of the Yajurveda Samhita, the Brahmanas, and the Upanishads, is estimated to have been composed between 1000 and 400 BCE. These linguistic analyses play a crucial role in determining the antiquity of the Rigveda and its evolutionary position.

Some scholars, such as Shankara Balakrishna Dixit, have proposed a date before 3500 BCE based on astronomical information found in the Shatapatha Brahmana. Jacobi, citing some astrological information found in the Rigveda, has suggested that the Rigveda was composed before 3000 BCE. Balgangadhar Tilak, using the positions of various constellations found in the Vedas and other geological and natural theories, has divided the Vedic era into four parts and fixed the composition of the Rigveda between 6000 and 4000 BCE. Various dates are mentioned in various hymns, ranging from 7000 BCE to 2200 BCE. For example, these dates include 7240 BCE, from the legend of the Ribhus; 4250 BCE, from the legend of the Mandukas; and 3928 BCE, from the solar eclipse of Atri.

However, Talageri strongly criticises this astronomical method of dating. He argues that the Rigveda does not contain any specific reference to the positions of stars or the equinoxes that can be used to determine an accurate date. Talageri points out that the constellations (ex., Krittika, Ardra) or words (ex., Bhadrpada) mentioned by the Acharas are nowhere to be found in the Rigveda. In the example of a solar eclipse, Talageri questions how it is possible to determine a specific date (ex., 3928 BCE) from the description of a single eclipse, when no specific features are mentioned in the hymns.

There is no mention of the use of iron in the Rigveda, indicating that it was a Bronze Age culture. Iron is mentioned as "shyamaayas" (black metal) in later Vedic literature (the Atharvaveda), starting around 1000 BCE. This technological difference creates a clear chronological distinction between the Rigvedic and later Vedic periods.

The connection between the Harappan civilisation and the Vedic period is an important and politically sensitive debate. Archaeologists and the Sanskrit scholar Weber are collaborating to decipher the Rigveda and establish this connection. Evidence of sacrificial altars and fire altars found at Rakhigarhi is consistent with the fire worship mentioned in the Rigveda. The mention of the Saraswati River (71 times in the Rigveda) and the location of about 2000 Harappan settlements in its basin (two-



thirds of which are on the banks of the Saraswati River) indicate a possible connection between the Harappan and Vedic civilisations.

Talageri proposes an internal chronology of the ten mandalas of the Rigveda. According to him, the Rigveda was composed in three main stages: The Early Rigvedic period (mandalas 6, 3, 7), the Middle Rigvedic period (mandalas 4, 2), and the Later Rigvedic period (mandalas 5, 1, 8, 9, 10). This sequence is supported by various analyses, including the authors' relationship, geographical names, and historical terminology. For example, references to spoked wheels, domesticated camels, and donkeys are found in the later mandalas but are absent in the early or middle mandalas. These technological references link the later compositions of the Rigveda to the late third millennium, as these innovations occurred during that time.

Thus, despite all the efforts of scholars to determine the chronology of Vedic literature, it has not been possible to reach a unanimous conclusion.

The Rigvedic period (1500–1000 BCE) and the later Vedic period (1000–600 BCE) mark two distinct phases of Indian civilization, which brought about significant changes in social, economic, and religious spheres. During the Rigvedic period, society was largely semi-nomadic and pastoral, with rural settlements and tribes as the primary social base. People lived in simple thatched huts and lived a life based on animal husbandry. The Rigveda was composed during this period. On the other hand, a significant change occurred in the later Vedic period, with a shift from tribal organisation to a monarchical and centralised state. Agriculture became more important, and the use of iron began, which increased agricultural production and helped the development of permanent settlements and urban centres. The Brahmanas and Upanishads, including the Yajurveda, Samaveda, and Atharvaveda, were composed during this period.

During the Rigvedic period, social stratification was relatively flexible, with the caste system not yet fully developed. Occupational mobility and the prevalence of inter-caste marriages indicate that social status was more dependent on individual skills and contributions than on birth. In contrast, in the later Vedic period, the caste system became more well-defined, with society classified into four castes: Brahmins (priests and scholars), Kshatriyas (warriors and rulers), Vaishyas (traders and merchants), and Shudras (labourers and artisans). This evolutionary process shows how a semi-nomadic, pastoralist, relatively egalitarian society transformed into a settled, agrarian, monarchical, and rigidly caste-based society, reflecting the dynamic nature of Vedic civilisation.



## Rigvedic society and culture

Rigvedic society was primarily patriarchal, with the head of the family being the eldest male member, known as the 'kulpa' or 'grihapati'. These families were the basic unit of society, known as 'kula', and often lived together for several generations. The birth of sons was highly desirable, and prayers were made for brave sons, highlighting the patriarchal social system.

Society was based on kinship ties, and strong tribal ties existed. There was no concept of a permanent village in the early Vedic period; a 'grama' was a group of families ruled by a 'gramini'. This tribal structure was in keeping with the semi-nomadic nature of Rigvedic society. Guests were entertained with great respect and affection, which was considered a religious duty.

Early Rigvedic society was divided into three main classes: warriors (rajanyas), priests (brahmins) and commoners (farmers, artisans, etc., known as 'vishas'). The 'shudra' category did not fully develop until the late Rigvedic period. Early Vedic society was tribal, egalitarian and did not have a rigid caste system. There was occupational mobility in this society, and occupation was not determined by birth. An individual could take up different occupations. This flexibility suggests that social status was more dependent on personal skills and contributions than on birth.

Social divisions were based on 'caste', which defined the difference between Vedic and non-Vedic people. The word 'das' was initially used to refer to a separate group. However, later its meaning changed, reflecting an evolutionary process in which the social structure became more rigid over time. This change was likely due to the development of agrarian society and new methods of wealth distribution, which led to a shift from a tribal, egalitarian structure to a more complex, hierarchical one.

In the early Vedic period, women had a respectable position and had equal rights to education. They could actively participate in religious rituals and public life. The Rigveda mentions more than 27 female sages, including Vishwavara, Apala, Lopamudra (who composed two verses of the Rigveda), and Ghosha. They were called 'rishikes' or 'brahma-vadini', i.e. those who recited or taught the Vedas. Gargi and Maitreyi were also notable women of this era, recognised for their intelligence and scholarly achievements.

Women were economically independent and earned money from teaching, spinning and weaving. Sati ritual, purdah tradition or child marriage were not practised. The age of marriage was typically fixed at 16 or 17 years. Widow marriage and the practice of niyag (childless widows could marry the brother or close relative of their deceased husband) were common. Marriage was a well-established practice, with



both dowries and dowries being common. Eight types of marriage were mentioned, of which monogamy was the norm, but in some cases, polygamy and polyandry were also recognised.

The high status, education, and freedom of women to participate actively in public life in Rigvedic society mark a significant difference from the later Vedic period. The women's roles became increasingly restricted. Women were relatively more independent and influential in the Rigvedic period; this likely reflects the characteristics of a semi-nomadic and tribal society, in which the contributions of each member were important. However, as society became more settled, agricultural, and monarchical, the patriarchal structure became stronger, and women's roles became confined mainly to the household.

The Rigvedic economy was largely based on animal husbandry and agriculture. Cattle were the most important resource, and the number of cattle measured wealth. Many words have been derived from the word 'go' (cow), indicating the importance of cattle. The Rigvedic Aryans raised cows, sheep, goats and horses for milk, meat and hides.

The society practised agriculture, where land was cleared by fire and wooden ploughs (langla and sura) were used. The word 'sita' referred to the crop produced by the plough. Barley (javam) and wheat (godhum) were cultivated at that time. The Rigveda mentions levelling of fields, processing of seeds and storing of grain in large containers. Water-lifting machines, powered by cattle, were probably used for irrigation.

Trade was limited in Rigvedic society. Barter was prevalent, and cattle were the primary medium of exchange. War booty was also a significant source of income. Gifts (sacrifices and grain) were given to kings and priests, which was an important method of distributing wealth. Although gold is mentioned ('hiranya' is the oldest Sanskrit word mentioned in the Rigveda), there is no mention of the use of currency.

The Rigveda mentions various professions, including warriors, priests, herders, farmers, hunters, barbers and wine makers. Crafts include chariot building, cart building, carpentry (takana), metalworking (karmakar), leather work, bow making, sewing, weaving, and making grass and reed mats.

There is a mention of a metal called 'Ayas', which could be copper or bronze. There is no mention of the use of iron in the Rigveda. It indicating that the early Vedic period was predominantly a Bronze Age culture. Iron is mentioned as 'Shyama Ayas' (black metal) in later Vedic literature (such as the Atharvaveda), starting around 1000 BCE. This technological difference marks an important economic and social evolution between the Rigvedic and later Vedic periods. The use of iron increased agricultural



production and facilitated the development of permanent settlements and urban centres. It contrasted with the Rigvedic lifestyle, which was typically nomadic or semi-nomadic. This economic difference also profoundly influenced the evolution of social and political structures, giving rise to more complex societies.

The concept of private property, especially in the case of land, was not yet developed in Rigvedic society. There was communal ownership of property, a characteristic of the tribal way of life. Slavery ('das', 'dasi') existed in the society of that time, but slaves were mainly used for domestic work, not for productive work. Slavery usually occurred due to war or unpaid debts. This limited form of slavery, along with the absence of the concept of private property, is a clear indication of the relatively egalitarian nature of Rigvedic society.

The Rigvedic religion was polytheistic, where the Aryans worshipped primarily natural forces such as earth, fire, wind, rain, and thunder. These gods and goddesses were seen as the embodiment of cosmic events and natural forces. The hymns of the Rigveda mention various gods and goddesses, who were divided into three main categories: the earthly, the Extraterrestrial, and the celestial.

A distinctive feature of this period was henotheism or kathenotheism, in which a particular deity was temporarily given supreme status in each hymn. However, the existence of other gods was not denied. Although many gods were worshipped, there was an underlying idea that all these gods were different manifestations of one supreme being.

The primary form of worship was yajna, or sacrifice. Various types of yagna were performed to appease the gods and goddesses and seek their blessings. In these rituals, animal sacrifices (such as cows, horses, bulls, buffaloes, and sheep) and offerings, including fruits, milk, ghee, wine, and grains, were thrown into the sacred fire. Fire was considered very sacred and was believed to act as an intermediary between humans and the gods, conveying offerings to the gods through smoke. Fire worship was a distinctive feature of both Indo-Aryan and Indo-Iranian cultures. Magic or bad omens were not prevalent during this period.

Indra, the greatest god of the Aryans, is dedicated to him in 250 hymns. Agni, the second most important deity, is dedicated to him in 200 hymns. Agni is the god of sacrifice, considered the mediator between humans and gods. Varuna is the third most important deity. Other deities mentioned include Soma, Rudra, Yama, Pushana, Surya, Vishnu and Usha. However, no temples or shrines were built during the Rigvedic period, and no idols or statues of gods and goddesses were worshipped. Worship was



primarily performed on sacrificial altars under the open sky, which aligns with their nature-centred religious beliefs.

The concept of reincarnation and the afterlife was not fully developed at this time and was vague. People of the Rigvedic period believed that after death, the soul went to the 'father's land', where Yama judged them and awarded them rewards or punishments according to their actions. Although the concept of karma existed, the concept of the transmigration of the soul was not yet well understood.

The religious beliefs and practices of the Rigvedic period laid the foundation for later Hinduism. The simple nature worship, the importance of sacrifice, and the concept of monotheism within the polytheism of this period played a significant role in the later development of a more complex religious philosophy and various sectarian traditions. For example, the Upanishads expound on profound spiritual concepts, such as atman (the soul) and Brahman (the ultimate reality), which shift the focus from external rituals to internal reflection and meditation. This evolution shows how a simple religious system developed into a complex philosophical foundation, reflecting the dynamics of Indian spiritual thought.

The tradition of Vedic hymn recitation is one of the oldest cultural traditions in the world, developed and composed by the Aryans over a period of more than 3,500 years. This tradition consists of a vast collection of Sanskrit poetry, philosophical dialogues, mythological stories, and ritual mantras. Therefore, it is no exaggeration to say that the Vedas are considered the sacred foundation of Hindu knowledge and religion.

The Vedic language, which originated from classical Sanskrit, was used for reciting hymns. Traditionally, these hymns were recited in sacred ceremonies and daily in Vedic society. The profound value of this tradition lies not only in the rich content of its oral literature but also in the various innovative techniques used by Brahmin priests to preserve these texts intact over thousands of years. To preserve the sound of each word, practitioners were taught complex recitation techniques from childhood, which focused on the pronunciation of vowels, the specific pronunciation of each letter, and particular word combinations. This oral tradition further enhances the reliability of the Rigveda, especially when its chronology is disputed.

Art and architecture during the Rigvedic period were relatively simple. People of this period lived in simple thatched huts, reflecting their semi-nomadic lifestyle. Pottery and basic dwellings were very common. There was little emphasis on the creation of visible art forms such as sculpture or idols during this period. However, some ideas about architectural practice can be gleaned from textual references. The



use of wood, earthenware, and temporary structures was prevalent. Important ritual sites, such as fire altars, played a significant role in the development of sacred spaces. Although more sophisticated art and architecture developed in the later Vedic period, there was less emphasis on material culture during the Rigvedic period, which was in line with their philosophical outlook.

The Vedas and Hindu scriptures teach humanity to lead a better life and a better work ethic to prosperity. Work ethic is presented as a fundamental element in the Vedas. Even in the 21st century, there is a need for skills such as communication, creativity, innovation, collaboration, and critical thinking, which are closely related to the Vedic values of the past. Hinduism emphasises logic and critical thinking.

The Rigveda condemns laziness and encourages diligence and perseverance. One of the attributes of the gods is brilliance, just as fire is always brilliant. These values were essential not only for personal prosperity but also for social and spiritual progress. The Vedas instruct mankind to think and act correctly, to be diligent and enterprising, without deviating from the path of truth. The teachings of Vedic literature are rich in action and high values, which remain applicable over time and are taught as life values in the broader society.

The Rigveda is considered a fundamental and highly revered sacred text of Hinduism, comprising Vedic Sanskrit hymns. It serves as a primary source for understanding the religious practices of the early Aryans, their deities, and rituals. The collection of these hymns reflects the spiritual sentiments of ancient Indian society and provides valuable insights into various rituals and practices.

## **Conclusion**

The Rigveda is not only a religious text of ancient India but also a comprehensive historical document that depicts the early stages of civilisation. Its chronology is a complex process, with linguistic evidence indicating a period of 1500–1000 BCE, consistent with the Mitanni documents. Claims of a more ancient date based on astronomical data have been criticized, as the Rigveda lacks specific astronomical references. Archaeological evidence, such as the absence of iron and the mention of the Saraswati River, has added new dimensions to the ongoing debate about the possible relationship between Rigvedic culture and the Harappancivilisation, which is deeply intertwined with modern Indian self-identity.

The Rigvedic society was predominantly patriarchal, yet it represented a dynamic stage in which social divisions were flexible and a rigid caste system had not yet developed. Occupational mobility and



inter-caste marriage were common, highlighting the relatively egalitarian nature of this society. A notable feature of this period was the high status of women, their education, and their freedom to participate in public life, which can be considered a "golden age" compared to the later Vedic period, in which women's roles became increasingly restricted.

The economy was primarily based on animal husbandry and agriculture, with cattle being the leading resource; barter was also prevalent. The absence of iron use marks the Rigvedic period as a Bronze Age culture, which creates a clear distinction from the later Vedic period.

Religious beliefs were nature-centred and sacrificial, with an underlying monotheistic foundation, although many gods and goddesses were worshipped. Temples or idol worship were not practised, and believers connected with the gods through sacrificial offerings. This simple religious system laid the foundation for the complex philosophical framework of later Hinduism.

The Rigveda's oral tradition and its multilayered sense of meaning highlight the epistemological depth and innovative power of ancient Indian scholars. The text serves not only as a religious guide but also as a reflection of a civilisation's moral values, such as diligence and hard work, and its interest in acquiring knowledge.

Overall, the Rigvedic civilisation represents a pivotal era in ancient India, leaving a profound and lasting impact on the development of later Indian culture, religion, and social structure. Its study not only helps in understanding the past, but it also illuminates the cultural and spiritual roots of present-day Indian society.

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