

Quadrant II – Transcript and Related Materials

Programme: Bachelor of Arts (First Year)

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Paper Title: History of India (From Earliest Times upto 8th Century C.E.)

Unit Name:

Module Name: Early Vedic Culture – Social Stratification and Polity

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NOTES:-

Early Vedic Period: Social Stratification and Polity

Social Life: The family, called *Griha* or *Kula* was the pivot of the Rig Vedic society. Joint family system was prevalent. Father was the head of the family and was known as *Grihapati* or *Kulapati*. All the family members obeyed to him. After the death of the father, the responsibility of the family fell on the shoulders of his eldest son.

Marriage and Position of Women: - In the Vedic society marriage was considered sacred and indissoluble. Monogamy was the normal practice though polygamy was also prevalent among the princes. Polyandry, known in later days, does not appear to have come into vogue in Rig Vedic times. Child marriage was unknown and the marriage of the girls was not considered to be essential. There were unmarried girls, like *Gosha* who lived all their life with their parents. The girls enjoyed considerable freedom in the selection of their bridegroom. The remarriage of widows was permitted and ordinarily a widow was required to marry her dead husband's younger brother. There was no dowry system. Instead bride money was paid in certain cases. Women occupied a distinctive place of honour in the society. They were given education. Several women like *Ghosha*, *Apala*, and *Visvawara* are to have acquired high level of education. They attended

religious ceremony with their husbands. The right of adoption was recognized. Women could not inherit their father's property.

Caste System was not prevalent at that time. There was distinction between the Aryans and the non-Aryans. The non – Aryans were called as *Dasas*, *Dasyus* or *Asuras*. The Aryans considered themselves to be superior to the non – Aryans. Gradually the tribal society of the Aryans was divided into four different social orders on the basis of occupation - the *Brahmanas*, the *Kshatriyas*, the *Vaishyas* and the *Shudras*.

Education was a private affair in Rig Vedic times. Education was imparted in *Gurukuls* located mainly in the forests. The students stayed in the *Gurukul* till the completion of the education. The entire instruction was orally given to the students. There are references of various women scholars in Vedic literature. Maitreyi and Gargi were gifted women scholars. Vedic literature was the main subject of study. Besides this they studied subjects like grammar, mathematics, astronomy, ethics, medicine, military science and astrology.

Dress- Rig Vedic people had two or three kinds of garments, consisting of the under-garment (*Nivi*), upper garment (*uttariya*) and the lower garment (*antariya*). They wore cotton, woollen and silken clothes. Clothes of men and women did not differ much. Clothes were dyed with madder or indigo or with the juice of flowers. Clothes of rich were embroidered with gold thread. Both men and women wore necklaces, ear-rings, bracelets and anklets. Women as well men plaited their hair.

Diet-They ate both vegetarian and non- vegetarian food. Rice and barley were staple food. They also consumed fruits, vegetables, ghee, and meat of goat, sheep and horses. They also consumed two alcoholic drinks- *soma ras* and *sura*.

Amusements- The amusements of the people included chariot-racing, horse racing, music, dancing and dicing. Both men and women participated in dancing drum, cymbals, karkari lute, harp, flute and dubhi were used for music.

Political Life: Rig Veda reveals that the Aryans possessed a large territory. The "War of Ten Kings described in Rig Veda refers to many tribes and kingdoms of Rig Vedic India. The most important of them were the Bharatas. They were settled in the territory between the Saraswati and the Yamuna. From the evidence of Rig vedic texts it appears that monarchy was the prevalent form of government, although the concept of republics was also known.

Kingship. As a rule kingship was hereditary and monarchy was a system of government. But there are instances when the king owed his position to the choice of the people. The protection of the people was the primary duty of the king. Other duties of the king were to establish peace in his region, to lead the army in battles, to dispense justice and to appoint priests to perform sacrifices and other sacred rites. In lieu of all these duties, he received voluntary offerings from his subjects, for administrative purposes. These were known as '*Bali*', these offerings were made in kind and were both compulsory and voluntary. The main income was derived from the booties collected in war.

Ministers. The king appointed various for running the administration efficiently. The foremost among them was the *Purohita*. He was the guide, philosopher and friend of the king. *Purohita* was the domestic priest of the king. Vasishtha and Vishwamitra were two famous *purohits* of the Rig vedic times. The supreme commander of the armed forces was called *Senani*. In peacetimes the *Senani* discharged civil duties. The king appointed spies and *dutas* also. Spies gave him all the information about the people and the kingdom while *dutas* acted as ambassadors between the different states. The king's entourage also included the

Senani and the *Gramani* who looked after the army and served as the village headman respectively.

Assemblies. A very striking feature of the Rig Vedic polity was the institution of two political units known as the *Samiti* and the *Sabha*. It is difficult to enumerate and distinguish the functions of the two organisations.

(a) *Sabha*-The *Sabha* is mentioned in many passages of the Rigveda as 'Body of the Elders'. It was attended by persons of noble birth i.e. *Brahmanas* and rich patrons. It was as important as the *Samiti*. The *Sabha* acted as the national judicature.

(b) *Samiti*-Various passages of Rigveda refer to *Samiti* but they do not define its exact character and function. The *Samiti* was an ordinary assembly of the tribe and its members were called *Visha*. The king attended the *Samiti*. The most important work of the *Samiti* was to elect the king.

Local Government: Local government played a more important part in the Rig Vedic days. The lowest unit of administration was the family or '*Kul*' and its chief was known as *Grihapati* or *Kulapati*. A group of families or "*Kuls*" constituted a village, which in the Rig vedic days was called "*Grama*". The village officer was called "*Gramini*". The village head, '*Gramini*' led the villagers in time of war and attended the meetings of the *Sabha* and the *Samiti*. Several villages together formed a '*Vis*' or clan and its chief was called '*Vispati*'. He was also a military leader and used to lead his clan in times of war under the guidance and instructions of the *Rajan* of the tribe. The tribe was known as the '*Jana*' and the head of the '*Jana*' was the *Rajan*, who was constantly assisted by the *Senani* and the *Purohita*.

