

Vedic religion, mythology, and society.



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Paige Hammerl Vedic Religion, Mythology and Society The early civilizations of India have proven to be a highly intellectual, god fearing, and advanced collaboration of people. From approximately 2700 B. C. E to around 500 B. C. E two societies flourished in the northern region of India known as the Indus Valley. The Indus Valley Civilization and later, the Aryans - believed by some to have migrated to India from Europe and the middle East - paved the foundation of Hinduism through the influences of their cultures, early religions and social structures.

Unfortunately, there is little to be said of the earliest inhabitants, the people of the Indus Valley Civilization because there still does not exist a decipherment of the Indus Valley Script. Based on loose interpretations of artifacts found in ancient Indus Valley cities, we have been able to depict that the people of the Indus Valley were originally a nomadic tribe, but later had a high degree of uniformity amongst city development, a language written on a variety of small 1 inch seals, and may have worshiped Goddesses or a pre-Siva God, often seen on these seals with three faces, bullhead, sitting in a yogic position.

According to A. L Bashman's book *The Origins and Development of Classical Hinduism*, over time the Indus Valley Civilization began to dwindle because they were driven from their lands by natural disasters, such as the sudden rise in the level of the sea bed south of the delta of the Indus River (Bashman, 1989, pg. 2). Although we have been able to extract minuscule clues from the Indus Valley Civilization, most of Hinduism's pre-history stems from an religious Aryan ancient text called *The Veda*, consisting of four traditions, the Rg-, Yajur-, Sama-, and Atharva-.

It is important to mention that the Veda's are thought of as eternal, or not written by human beings, and the Aryan people passed down knowledge of the Veda's from generation to generation through word of mouth. People saw the Veda's as extremely sacred texts or scriptures and they were verbally relayed for nearly 3000 years with little to almost no change to them. By some the translation of the Veda's into written word was viewed as against the religion because traditionally not everyone was actually allowed or able to learn the Veda's in early times, and also it was as if physical written words tainted the sacredness of the scripture.

The priestly class of the Vedic Aryans, known as the Brahmins, were viewed as the preservers of vedic tradition. They were allowed to attend the various theological schools which would specialize in the memorization of specific texts within the Veda's. The Veda's were composed chronologically with the Rg-Veda as the first text "written". The Rg-Veda consists of 10 books of 1028 hymns praising various deities, guessed to be composed in early Sanskrit as early as 1200 BCE over a period of a few hundred years. The Sama-Veda is a book of songs, all based on the hymns of the Rg-Veda.

The Yajur-Veda consists of 4 books: one book is the white Yajur-Veda, and the other three are the black Yajur Veda. Within these books lies vital information regarding procedures for rituals and sacrifices. Lastly, the Atharva-Veda is a collection of hymns and "magical" material (spells, charms, imprecations, and incantations), and this Veda is essentially overlapping magic and religion. Each of the four Veda's have a vast number of gods, or devas, being acknowledged and praised. However, within the

Veda's, stories or myths of the gods are scarcely present; that information was assumed to be common knowledge.

All the pantheon of Vedic religion are divided into two classes: the gods (devas) which follow rta, the cosmic order, the set course of nature, and the demons (asura), follow anrta, or anti-rta, in an attempt to overturn the natural course of things. The gods uphold rta, which is essentially moral and physical universal law. Many other gods or devas are deities associated with nature, the heavens and space. The main Devas include Indra, Varuna, Mitra, Nasya, and the minor devas include Yama, Vishnu, and Rudra. The nature divinities include Surya (sun), Agni (fire), Soma (ritual plant), Pajanya (rain), Ushas (dawn), Earth, Moon and Night.

The gods are viewed as powerful and willing beings whose pleasure or dissatisfaction determines the course of events in humans day to day lives. If they are pleased they can bless the people with rain for their crops, fertility in woman, good health, etc. and if they are displeased they first punish wrong-doers with disease, and after they are banished to “ The House of Clay” a gloomy hell-like place, similar to where Hades of the Greeks resides. Of all the gods mentioned in the vedas, most notably in the Rg-Veda, the god Indra, god of war and weather, has a staggering 250 hymns in his honor.

Indra is believed to be the creator of the cosmos, for when the demons, led by the serpent Vrtra, came to attack the gods, Indra, strengthened by Soma drink, faced them alone and came out victorious and from Vrtra's dead body he created our world. Because of this, Indra is mainly viewed as a war leader (Bashman, 1989, pg. 12). The Veda's main function were its involvement in public worship, and it were an essential part in rituals. The vedic Aryans

main religious practice was promised religious sacrifice on a cyclical basis with the purpose of pleasing the gods and their ancestors.

Both demanded praise and acknowledgement so anything from milk, clarified butter or ghee, curds, grain (rice/barely), soma plant, and even domestic animals were all used as offerings to the gods during sacrificial ceremonies (Bashman, 1989,). There were two types of sacrificial ceremonies: domestic (life-cycle rites, requiring one fire) and solemn (public rites, requiring three fires). The vedic Aryan people used regular sacrificial ritual to maintain functionality of their tribe or cities. The gods were believed to have control over things such as rain, disease, sun, fertility, etc. o the people would sacrifice various goods/animals in their name in order to please them or strengthen them to help them. in order to maintain the functionality of the tribe. Each ritual was an extremely delicate experience. If one word, or one procedure was out of place the ritual was deemed void, and could even sometimes cause harm to the tribe for displeasing the gods. This is where the use of Brahman's were vital, the rituals did not require massive buildings or elaborate icons, but only a qualified Brahman who knew all the required procedures learned from the Yajur-Veda.

Often they had several Brahman's present in order to ensure the correct sequence of events occurred. Rituals were centered around the idea of fire. In rituals the fire god Agni would, via a specific number of domestic fires, receive sacrifices/praises from the people and pass them onto the other gods. This gives Agni the reputation of a rather important god, with 200 hymns dedicated to him in the Rg-Veda. Fire was viewed as a link between the worldly and divine realms (Flood, 2004, 41). Also, rituals consisted one

other important act preformed by the Brahmans - the eating of the Soma plant.

According to Gavin Flood in *An Introduction to Hinduism*, Soma is believed to be some variation of a hallucinogenic mushroom, and was used to bring the priests to a mystical state where they could see the gods and recite veda hymns to them. Soma was not only a plant used in rituals, but was also a deity (god) and was praised for creating the link between gods and humans. To the drinker, Soma brought superhuman strength, a sense of growing to a gigantic size, and gave visions of the gods coming down to join the worshipers (Bashman, 1989, 14).

Soma was also given to the gods during rituals as a strength inducer so they would be able to fight off the demons causing a tribe grief. As stated in *An Introduction to Hinduism*, rituals were preformed on a daily basis by every Aryan at around dusk or dawn, and also more complicated rituals were preformed at the beginning of the two lunar fortnights of the months (the days of full and new moons). One expensive and important ritual preformed during this period was the rajasuya sacrifice. It was a royal sacrifice used by kings to ensure them a place in heaven during afterlife and also to prove their worth as a king.

This complicated sacrifice was put on by the king and was centered around a great stallion (or horse) that would be followed by groups of men for about a year as it roamed the plains going city to city demanding praise before coming back to the main city to be sacrificed to the gods. The significance of the rajasuya sacrificial ceremony was its link to political power (Bashman, 1989, 33). These sacrifices were used to maintain the functionality of a

tribe/city and give kings the opportunity to prove their worth to the people, so kings would pay all the extensive expenses in order to put forth these ceremonies.

However, the only people that were able to perform these specific ceremonies with perfect precision was the priest class (Brahmans). This gave them a considerable amount of power, and one could argue that it created a power struggle between the ruling class and the priestly class. Nevertheless, all the sacrificial offering ceremonies were a time for rejoicing, not only for the kings who put them on, but also for the entire population because everyone was benefiting. Later in Vedic history, after all the Vedas had been written, people began to grow antsy with their religion.

They started to seek more answers and try to create connections between the meaning of life, birth/rebirth, karma, the gods, and the purpose of ritual (Reat, 1977, 1). This is the period when the Upanishads were written. The Upanishads were a “secret conversation” that was only meant to be heard by a select few people, and was the beginning of the emergence of Enlightenment and created the basis of classical Hinduism. Vedic religion is not the same as the Hinduism religion, it is however a precursor to it.

From the Vedic religion we can see the pre-stages of important Hinduism concepts, such as the connection between religious sacrifice and karma. To this day some people in traditional Hindu and Nepal societies practice early Vedic traditions. The Vedic religion is overall a polytheistic religion, however it is seen being practiced as monotheistic and henotheistic, and in my opinion this excerpt coming from the Yajur-Veda sums up the Vedic Religion: “ O

Supreme Force governing the world! You function as per unchangeable laws which remain the same throughout without slightest of deviations.

May I also seek inspiration from. You to be unflinchingly principled in my life. Thus I resolve to seek truth constantly by eliminating the false from my life every moment to the best of my abilities, intentions and efforts. May I be successful in this noble decision of mine. " Yajurveda 1. 5 Bibliography Bashman, A. L. The Origins & Development of Classical Hinduism. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1989. Print. Flood, Gavin. An Introduction to Hinduism. New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2004. Print. Hammerl, Paige and Deshpande, Madhov. Vedic Religion/Lifestyle Notes.

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