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## From Pastoral Hymns to Philosophical Contemplations: Change and Shift in Society from Early Vedic Age to the Times of Upanishads

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### ANNOTATION

The Vedic period, spanning approximately around 1500-800 B.C., represents an essential period in the beginning and outspreading of Hinduism. This time witnessed an intriguing evolution, not only in religious thinking and ideas but also in the basic foundation of society itself. As time outspread, the effervescent pastoral society illustrated in the early Vedic hymns altered into a more complex and thoughtful society grappling with philosophical questions and societal changes beautifully represented in Upanishads. This paper delves deep into these undeniable shifts and traces the changes in the dynamics of society and religion during that period right from the dawn of the Vedas to their later chapters.

**KEYWORDS:** Indra, Zeus, Sabha, Samiti, Lopamudra, Chhandogya, Kali Age and others.

**Early Vedic society:** Hymns of Praise and Pastoral Rhythms

During the earlier phase of Rigveda which echoes from 1500 B.C. we step into a world of vast landscape which is reverberating with the hymns of the Rigveda. We come across a vibrant pantheon of deities which are related with nature and throughout these lyrical hymns they reign supreme. Foremost among them is Indra who is the warrior of thunder and lightning and wields his vajra to vanquish demons. Indra has more similarity with Zeus of Greek mythology who is also the God of light and thunder and this shows some sort of cultural similarity which earlier Aryans shared with Greek society. Agni was the fire god and more oblations were done in Rigvedic hymns to him next only to Indra. In fact, the very first hymn in The Rigveda is dedicated in the honor of Agni. Rivers in this larger than life compilation murmur divine wisdom and have in its bosom deities representing different forms of nature. Society revolves around yajnas, elaborate fire sacrifices designed to please the gods and maintain cosmic order. Priests (Brahmins) hold immense power, chanting mantras and officiating over rituals that bind humans and deities in a web of mutual obligation.

Life of the Rigvedic people revolved around cattle which was the main source of wealth and prosperity. Herds roamed on fertile plains tended by nomadic tribes who used to sing praises of their divine protectors. Social structures were relatively fluid, with kinship playing a dominant role. Society was divided into four varnas which is described in the tenth Mandala of Rigveda wherein the primeval human was sacrificed and it decreed that Brahmanas came from head, Kshatriyas from arms, Vaishyas from thighs and Shudras from feet. Although the characteristic of Varna were not hereditary in nature in the initial stage but as time passed by and we came in the time of Smritis we find that Varnas transformed into Jatis and they became hereditary in

societal fabric and were accepted as such. The Rigvedic society during its earlier phase did not have any kind of defined dictum which could eventually form the basis of future polity. It could be assumed that leaders of the tribe were chosen in sabhas or samitis where people could nominate their candidate for leading their tribe and whosoever would get more supporters was elected as the chosen leader. This leader would lead them in getting wealth in the form of raids on neighboring tribes and getting their land and cattle. The sons of the leaders were not their natural heirs initially and after the demise of kings the aforementioned process would start again to choose their leader. But in the Later Vedic age we see that kingship also had become hereditary in character. The Kings, chosen from warrior clans, lead their people, ensuring security and prosperity. Women also participated in rituals and hold positions of influences and we see seers like Apala, Ghosa, Visavara, Lopamudra and many others compiling Vedic hymns. We see that the compendium of Rigveda has many hymns composed by female authors which depicts that women had a respectable position in early Vedic age and they were not lesser to their male counterparts in terms of intellect and erudition.

### **Later Vedic Age and Upanishads: Era of Change and Transformation.**

However, beneath the apparent stability, subtle tremors of change were already stirring. The later Vedas (Samaveda, Yajurveda, and Atharvaveda) echo a tectonic shift in focus. Rituals were becoming more sophisticated and codified and a shift was visible which emphasized meticulousness and adherence to strict guidelines. The Sutras were also being composed which laid greater stress on observing strict adherence for the households. These rituals were attached with a being right from his appearance on earth to his demise from the world. The Brahmins solidified their position as mediators between humans and gods and their power and prestige increased as they exerted exclusively the arcane knowledge of rituals.

Meanwhile, the seeds of introspection and rebellion are also sown in the Upanishads which were philosophical treatises embedded within the later Vedas. These introspective texts turn inward, seeking the ultimate reality, the Brahman, within the self. Questions about the nature of existence, the purpose of life, and the true meaning of sacrifice begin to surface, challenging the purely ritualistic focus of the earlier Vedic period. It has also been claimed that philosophical nature of Upanishads was somehow related with Kshatriya's opposition of the entirety of the power grabbed by the treatises composed by Brahmanas. These texts composed by Brahmanas claimed that a ten years old Brahman child was superior to a hundred years old Kshatriya. This privilege and position of dominance was authenticated by texts composed by Brahmanas themselves and we see in Upanishadic age these dictums being challenged by the philosopher kings like Asvapati of Kekaya and Pravahana Jaivali of Panchala.

The Upanishadic revolution, as it is dubbed by many historians, culminates in a profound questioning of Vedic rituals and beliefs. The focus shifts from appeasing external deities to realizing the divine essence within oneself. The concept of karma, the law of cause and effect, and reincarnation takes hold, emphasizing personal responsibility and ethical conduct. Questions about the nature of time, the impermanence of the world, and the true meaning of happiness ignite and become impetus for lively philosophical debates. This emphasis on internal realization finds resonance in the emerging of moksha, liberation from the cycle of rebirth. Asceticism and monasticism find fertile ground, offering alternative paths to spiritual fulfillment outside the confines of ritualistic practices.

### **Societal Metamorphosis in terms of society and religion:**

Societal structures in the later Vedic period undergo a complex metamorphosis. Nomadic tribes gradually settled and became sedentary in character. This paved way for permanent settlements and agricultural economies. Social stratification increased with the rise of warrior elites (Kshatriyas) and landowning peasants (Vaishyas). The caste system, though nascent in the early Vedas, begins to solidify, marking social divisions based on birth and occupation. Women's roles become more circumscribed, their participation in rituals and public life started to diminish.

The change and transformation from early Vedic period to the later Vedas and Upanishads was not exclusive to society but this phase also had long lasting effect on the nature of Hindu society. Hitherto, supreme deities of Rigvedic age like Indra, Varuna, Agni and others lost their charm over society and they were somehow relegated in this transformation period. The lacunas created by them were filled by deities who had place in the older text but these deities did not exercise much effect in the preceding age. They were Brahma, Vishnu and Lord Shiva which are collectively called as trinity of the larger Hindu pantheon. They are referred to as the creator (Brahma), preserver (Visnu) and destroyer (Shiva) of the society. The entire space was captured by these deities and we see Later Vedic texts like Samveda, Yajurveda and Atharveda singing their glories and exalted them to higher status.

### **Legacy Enduring: Seeds Sown for the Future**

The transformation witnessed in the later Vedic period would cast certain eminent and probable transformations on the future of Hinduism. The rise of philosophical introspection paves the way for the introspective, personalized religiosity of the Puranic era. The burgeoning emphasis on internal realization foreshadows the rise of the bhakti movement and its focus on devotion and love for the divine. Even the solidifying caste system, despite its challenges, provides a framework for social organization that will persist for centuries to come. The dominance of the Brahmanas would be challenged by the newer order of the society and people will no longer attach themselves with their assigned duties as prescribed by Varnas. Brahmanas would later on address this situation by inventing a "Kali Age" which would depict upheaval and transgression in society. Bhakti movement across entire Indian subcontinent would lay focus on an individual's relation with his deity shunning the barriers of rigid complexities of caste and creed.

### **Conclusion:**

The journey from early Vedic society to its later chapters marks a period of profound transformation, not only in religious beliefs and practices but also in the fabric of society itself. The shifts in society and religion provided in the time period undertaken by study marks a transformative period in the history of India. The transition from the ritualistic practices of the Early Vedic society to the philosophical enquiries carried out by seers of Upanishad ages was shaped by cultural, social and intellectual forces that continue to resonate in Contemporary India. It is a testament to the inherent dynamism of Hinduism, its ability to adapt, evolve, and incorporate new ideas while retaining its core essence. The seeds sown in this fertile period will continue to blossom in the centuries to come, shaping the rich tapestry of Hinduism as we know it today.

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