THE EARLY VEDIC AGE

Early Aryan Settlements

INDIA, as is well known, derives its name from the Sindhu (Indus), and the earliest civilization of this country of which we have any definite trace had its cradle in the valley of the same river. We have seen in the last chapter that excavations at several places in the lower part of the valley have laid bare the ruins of well-built cities, and seals surprisingly similar to those discovered at Eshnunna, Kish and Ur in Mesopotamia, and assigned by archaeologists on the worship of the Mother-Goddess and a male deity who seems to have been the prototype of Siva. The phallic cult was prevalent, but fire pits were conspicuous by their absence.

Far different is the picture of another civilization which had its principal home higher up the Indus valley. The people who evolved this culture called themselves Aryas or Aryans. Their earliest literature makes no reference to life in stately cities comparable to those whose remains have been unearthed at Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro. Their religion was normally aniconic, and in their pantheon the female element was subordinated to the male, and the place of honour was given to deities like Indra, Varuna, Mitra, the Nasatyas, Surya, Agni (Fire) and other supernal beings who seem to have been quite unknown to the originators of the “Indus” culture as described in the last chapter. Unfortunately, the early literature of the Aryas—called the Veda—cannot be dated even approximately, and it is impossible to say with absolute precision in what chronological relation the civilization portrayed in the Veda stood to the “Indus” culture of the third millennium B.C. Max Muller hesitatingly placed the beginning of the Vedic literature in the latter half of the second millennium B.C. Tilak and Jacobi, on the other hand, tried to push the date much farther back on astronomical grounds. But, as pointed out by several Indologists, astronomical calculations prove nothing unless the texts in question admit of unambiguous interpretation. Tilak himself points out how unsafe it is to act upon calculations based on loose statements in literature regarding the position of the heavenly bodies.

In the chaotic state of early Aryan chronology, it is a welcome relief to turn to Asia Minor and other countries in Western Asia and find in certain tablets of the fourteenth century B.C., discovered and find at Boghas Keui and other places,
references to kings who bore ‘Aryan names and invoked the gods Indra, Mitra, Varuna and the Nasatyas to witness and safeguard treaties. It is certain that the tablets belong to a period in the evolution of the Aryan religion when Indra, Varuna, and the other gods associated with them, still retained their early Vedic pre-eminence and had not yet been thrown into the shade by the Brahmanic Prajapati or the epic and Puranic Trimurti.

Did the worshippers of Indra go from an earlier home in the Indus valley to Asia Minor or was the process just the reverse of this? In this connection it is interesting to note that in one passage of the Rig Veda a worshipper invokes from his pratna okas, or ancient abode, the god Indra whom his ancestors formerly invoked. We are also told that Yadu and Turvasa, two among the most famous Rig-Vedic tribes, were brought by Indra from a distant land. The former is in several passages brought into special relation with Pasu or Parsu, a name borne by the ancient people of Persia. The latter took part in a conflict with a king who is styled a Parthava, a name that reminds us of Iran and is comparable to Parsu mentioned in connection with the Yadus. If the name Illariyupiya, which is the designation of a river or a city according to the commentators, and is associated with the mysterious people called Vrichivats who “broke the sacrificial vessels”, can be connected with Harappa, as has already been suggested by some, we have here an interesting glimpse of a period when that great centre of early Indus a battle-ground of fierce invaders exulting in the worship of Indra, clad in coats of mail (varmna4) and possessed of “prancing horses”, both of which the warriors of the lower Indus culture possibly lacked.

The Indra-worshipping tribes seem to have been divided into two rival groups. One of these included the Srinjayas and their allies the Bharatas, both lauded by the priestly family of the Bharadvajas. To the other group belonged the Yadus, Turvasas, Druhyus, Anus and Purus who are found frequently in alliance with indigenous tribes. The first two tribes of the second group are branded as Dasas in one passage of the Rig-Veda, and of the remaining three, the Purus are styled midhravachah, “of hostile speech”, an epithet otherwise applied only to the non- Aryan Dasyus.

Distinct from both these Indra-worshipping groups were the Dasas proper or Dasyua, a dark-skinned flat-nosed race who spoke a tongue unintelligible to the
Aryans, possessed forts and herds of cattle coveted by the new-comers, despised the sacrificial religion of the latter and possibly worshipped the phallus. This latter characteristic connects them with the men who evolved the pre-historic civilisation of the lower Indus valley.

It may be that the folk (jana) of the Bharatas represents an Aryan stock altogether different from that of the Yadu group. The memory of the migration of the Bharatas is not distinctly preserved in any of the hymns, while Yadus and Turvasas are expressly mentioned as new arrivals. In the Rig- Veda Bharata princes are found sacrificing on the Drishadvati, the Sarasvati and the Apaya, all rivers in the western part of the Madhya-desa, far away from the north-west frontier. It is interesting to note that they are specially associated with the cult of Agni, the Fire-God, a deity conspicuous by his absence in the Boghaz Keni records of the fourteenth century B.C., and of whose worship no traces are found in the early ruins of Mohenjo-Daro.

The Bharatas were at first admittedly inferior to their foes and were “shorn of their possessions . . . but Vasishtha became their family priest and Tritsus prospered”. Tritsu seems to have been the name of the ruling dynasty of the Bharatas, the most famous representatives of which were Divodåsa and his son or grandson Sudas. Opposed to the Tritsus and the allied tribe of the Sriñjayas stood the Yadus, Turvasas, Druhyus, Anus and Pürus.

It is clear that the Bharatas and their allies did not like the idea of being permanently “shorn of their possessions” by their enemies. The result was that the two rival groups of tribes engaged in a deadly struggle with one another. In one of these—contests the Srinjayas scattered the forces of the Turvasas and their allies the Vichivats. In another and a more famous conflict, known as the Battle of Ten Kings, Sudas, the Tritsu king, defeated hostile tribes, who were joined on the river Parushni (Ravi) by the Sivas, Pakthas and associate tribes from the north-west. The Bharatas now definitely established their pre-eminence among the Aryan folks, and a late Vedic text—the Satapatha Brahmana— refers to an old gatha which describes “the greatness of the Bharatas neither the men before nor those after them attained”. 
More important than the internal conflicts of the Aryans were their struggles with the non-Aryans, which gradually led to a considerable extension of the Aryan dominion towards the east. To Divodasa belongs the credit of fighting against a Dasa chieftain named Sambara. His policy was continued by Sudas who crushed a hostile combination of indigenous tribes on the banks of the Jumna. Under the guidance of a priest named Vivamitra, the Bharatas even seem to have entertained designs against the Kikatas, a non-Aryan people traditionally associated with South Bihar. In the campaign against the Dasas, the Bharatas were ably seconded by their rivals the Purus, one of whose kings bore the significant name of Trasadasyu, i.e. “terror to the Dasyus”.

The geographical area eventually occupied by the Rig-Vedic tribes is clearly indicated by the mention of certain rivers which permit of easy identification. The most important among these are the Kubha (Kabul), the Suvastu (Swat), the Krumu (Kurram), the Gomati (Gurnal), the Sindhu (lucius), the Sushoma (Sohan), the Vitasta (Jhelum), the Asikni (Chenāb), the Marudvridhā (Maruwardwan), the Parushni (Ravi), the Vipas (Bias), the Sutudri (Sutlej), the Sarasvati, the Drishadvati (the Rakshi or Chitang), the Jumna, the Ganga, and the Sarayu. The mention of these rivers implies the possession by the Aryans of a considerable portion of the country stretching from eastern Afghanisatan to the upper valley of the Ganges. The major part of this area came to be known as Sapta Sindhu the Land of the Seven Rivers. The whole of this extensive tract of land could not have been occupied entirely by Aryan tribes, because we hear also of the clans (Visah) of the Dasas who must have occupied some part at least of this territory, and whose supersession in any case must have been a slow and gradual process. Moreover, vast tracts of country were still covered with forest (aranya) or were altogether barren, containing only a few wells (prapa) here and there

**Political Organisation of the Rig-Vedic Aryans**

The basis of the political and social organisation of the Rig – Vedic people was the patriarchal family. The successive higher units were styled grama, vis and jana, and in some rare passages we even hear of aggregates of janas. The precise relationship between the grama, the vis and the jana is nowhere distinctly stated. That, the grama was normally a smaller unit than either the vis or the jana appears probable from the fact that the gramani, the leader of the grama (horde or village),
who is usually a Vaisya, is clearly inferior to lord of the vis (vispati) or the protector (gopa) of the jana, who is often the king himself.

It is more difficult to say in what relationship the vis stood to the jana. In some Vedic passages there is a clear contrast between the two, and Iranian analogies seem to suggest that the vis is a sub-division of a jana, if the latter may be taken as a parallel to the Iranian Zantu.

The prevailing form of government among the Rig-Vedic tribes was monarchical. But names applied in later ages to non-monarchical communities were also known. We have references to the gana with the ganapati or jyeshtha (elder) at its head. The mention of the term jyeshtha, which corresponds to jetthaka of the Pali texts, possibly points to some sort of organisation parallel to that of the well-known tribal republics of early Buddhist times.

The Rig-Vedic state (rashtra) seems, however, to have been normally ruled by a potentate styled rajan (king) who was “without a rival and a destroyer of rivals”. Kingship was usually hereditary. Thus the Purus and the Tritsus two among the most famous of the Rig-Vedic clans had as their rulers’ dynasties of princes, some whose names are recorded in the Rikh-Samhita. Elective monarchies were perhaps not altogether unknown, though the Rig-Veda has no clear reference to them. In the Atharva Veda and the Great Epic, however, we have several explicit references to the election of the rajan to the kingship by the people, and in the Rig-Veda itself the need of the people’s approval, if sovereignty is to be steady and unvacillating, is emphasised in the consecration hymns. In addition to the title rajan we come across the designation samrata, which in later times undoubtedly meant a paramount ruler. In the Rig-Veda, however, there is no trace of any terrestrial kingship of the Mauryan or Gupta type, though the idea of a universal monarch (visvasya bhuvanasya raja) is met with.

The rajan occupied a position of pre-eminence in the tribe. He was formally consecrated to kingship and was marked out from the commonalty by his shining robes and the splendid palace where he lived, surrounded by his officers and retainers and lauded by priests and singers.

The foremost duty of the king was the protection of the tribe and the tribal territory. He fought against external enemies. He employed spies (spasa) to watch
over the conduct of the people who were apparently punished when they went wrong. He had to maintain a body of priests who performed the sacred rites and received a contribution (bali) from the people. The king was assisted by a number of functionaries of whom the most important was the Purohita or chaplain. The Purohita not only gave advice to the ruler, but used his spells and charms to secure the success of his pezron’s arms and lauded his exploits when victory was won. Another important official was the Senani or the leader of the organisation of the Sena or army which he led, our information is meagre. It must have included foot soldiers, later called Patti, as well as Ratins or Warriors who fought from chariots. “Prancing horses” are also alluded to in certain battle - songs. But the use in war was as yet uncommon. Warriors of noble descent wore coats of mail, metal helmets, and hand-guards. The chief offensive weapon was the bow. Two kinds of arrows were used; one was poisoned and had a head of horn; the other was copper or iron- headed (ayomukham). Spears, swords and axes are also mentioned. We have also reference to the pur charishnu or moving fort which may have been an engine or assaulting strongholds. Banners were used in war, and musical instruments are mentioned. The army may have been divided into units termed dardha, vrata and gana, but the matter is obscure. Kulapas or heads of families fought under the banner of the vrajapati, who is sometimes identified with the Gramani. The latter functionary was probably the head of the village both for civil and military purposes. Forts or strongholds were under the Purpati. The Vedic king had a system of espionage and also employed dutas or messengers.

The raja, though the lord of the people, did not govern without their consent. The business of the tribe was carried out in a popular assembly styled Samiti, at which princes and people were alike present. We have also references to another body, termed Sabha which some regard as a Council of Elders. Others think it was a village assembly or the place of meeting which also served as a centre for social gatherings. Certain passages of the Rig –Veda seem to connect the Sabha with the men of wealth, opulence and goodly form, and this lends countenance to the view that in the main it functioned as a Council of Elders rather than an assembly of the whole tribe. Women at any rate were, according to a later Vedic text, excluded from the Sabha. The Sabha gave decisions regarding matters of public moment and, in later literature, figures prominently in connection with the administration of justice.
Social Life

It has already been stated that the foundation of the political and social structure in the Rig Vedic age was the family. The members of a family lived in the same house. Houses in this age were presumably built of wood or reed. In every house there was a fireplace (agnisala), besides a sitting-room and apartments for the ladies. The master of the house was called grihapati or dampati. He was usually kind and affectionate, but occasional acts of cruelty are recorded. Thus we have the story of a father who blinded his son for his extravagance.

Families being patrilineal, people prayed for abundance of sons. The birth of daughters was not desired, but once born they were treated with kindness and consideration. Their education was not neglected, and some of them lived to compose hymns and rise to the rank of seers like Visvavra, Ghosh and Apala. Girls were given in marriage when they attained full development. Marriage for love as well as for money was known. Weddings were celebrated in the house of the bride’s parents. Ordinarily a man married but one wife. Polygamy was, however, practiced, but not polyandry. Remarriage of widows was permitted. Women were not independent persons in the eye of the law, and had to look to their male relations for aid and support. Their position in the house—hold was one of honour. The term dampati is sometimes used to designate the mistress of the house. The wife participated in the religious offerings of the husband and was the queen of his home. There is no evidence in Rig - Veda of the seclusion of women, and ladies trooped to festal gatherings “decked, shining forth with sunbeams”.

Particular attention was paid to dress and adornment. The Vedic costume seems to have consisted of three parts—an undergarment styled nivi, a garment called vasa or paridhana and mantle styled adhivasa, atka or drapi. The clothes were of different hues and were made of cotton, deer skin or wool. Garments were often embroidered with gold. The use of gold ornaments and floral wreaths was common, especially on festive occasions. Both the sexes wore turbans. The hair was worn long and combed. The long locks of women were folded in broad plaits.

The daily fare of the Vedic household consisted mainly of parched grain, cakes (apupa), milk and its various products such as curd and butter, and many sorts of vegetables and fruits. The use of animal food was common, especially at
the great feasts and family gatherings. The slaying of the cow was, however, gradually looked upon with disfavour as is apparent from the name aghnya (not to be killed) applied to it in several passages. Curiously enough, we have no reference to the use of salt in the Rig - Veda.

Drinking water was obtained not only from rivers and springs (utsa), but also from avatas or artificial wells from which it was raised by a wheel of stone and poured into buckets of wood. Reference is also made to more exhilarating drinks such as Soma and Sura. The former was the juice of a famous plant grew on mountains, especially on the Mujavat peak of the Himalayas. It was identical with the Haoma of the Aveeta. Its use was restricted to religious ceremonies. On the other hand Sura was an ordinary intoxicating drink, the use of which was condemned.

The favorite amusements of the more virile classes were rag, hunting and the war-dice. The chariot-race was extremely popular and formed an important element of the sacrifice, celebrated in later times as the Vajapeya. No less popular was hunting. The animals hunted were the lion, the elephant, the wild boar, the buffalo, and deer. Birds also were hunted. Another favourite pastime was dicing, which frequently entailed considerable loss to the gamester. Among other amusements, mention may be made of boxing, dancing and music. Women in particular loved to display their skill in dancing and singing to the accompaniment of lutes and cymbals. Lute-players played an important part in the development of the epic in later ages.

The Vedic singers loved to dwell on the joys of life and seldom referred to death except in the case of enemies. When a man died, he was either cremated or buried. The burning of widows does not appear to have been prevalent.

The Vedic Kulas or families were grouped into larger units in the formation of which Varna (colour) and Sajaty (kinship) played an important part. From the beginning, the white-hued (svitnya) Aryan invaders were marked out from their dark-skinned opponents, who were called dasa, dasyu or sudra. In the Aryan community itself men of kingly family (rajanya or kshatra) and descendants of priests (Brahmanas) were clearly distinguished from the common free men, the vis. The quadruple division of society is mentioned in some of the earlier hymns, but it...
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makes its formal appearance in the Purushasukta which seeks to explain the existing divisions by adumbrating the theory that “when they divided the primeval being (Purusa) the Brahmana was his mouth, the Rajanya became his arms, the Vaisya was his thighs, and from his feet sprang the Sudras”.

The social divisions mentioned here have their parallel in other Indo-European communities. But it is important to remember that in the hymns of the Rig-Veda there is little trace of the rigid restrictions typical of caste in its mature form. There was hardly any taboo on intermarriage, change of occupation or commensality. We have instances of marriages of Brahmanas with Rajanya women, and of the union of Arya and Sudra. Families were not wedded to a particular profession. “I am,” says the author of a hymn, “a jet, my father is a doctor; and my mother is a grinder of corn. With our different views, seeking after gain, we run, as after cattle.” There was no ban on the taking of food cooked by the Sudras, and there is no evidence that impurity was communicated by the touch or contact of the inferior castes.

The rigid restrictions with regard to occupation, commensality, etc., originated, according to recent writers, not with the Aryans but with the totemistic proto-Australoid and the Austro-Asiatic inhabitants of pre-Dravidian India who dreaded the magical effects of the practice of strange crafts and the taking of tabooed food. A taboo on intermarriage is also traced to a similar source.

The Aryan invader, with his ideas about colour and hypergamy, ply crystallized and perpetuated a system which was already in existence and was based on the taboo arising from magical ideas. Other factors, geographical economic, and religious, have had their share in later developments.

In later ages, a member of each of the three higher castes, who wished to lead an ideal life had to pass through rigorous discipline of the Asramas or the four stages of life. First he was brahmacharin or Vedic student vowed to chastity, then a grihasta or married householder, next a vanaprastha or forest hermit, and finally a sannyasin, that is, an ascetic who had renounced the world.

The germ of the system of Asrama is already met with in the Vedic hymns. Besides the grihapati, we have reference to the brahmacharin as well as the muni, The brahmacharin practised self-restraint and studied the sacred lore. “The master
The munis are described as “long-haired some were wind-olad, others wore a soiled garment of brown colour and led a life of wandering”.

**Economic Life**

The Rig-Vedic Aryans were mostly scattered in villages. The word nagara (city) does not occur in the hymns. We find indeed, mention of purs which were occasionally of considerable size and were sometimes made of stone (asmamayi) or of iron (ayasi). Some were furnished with a hundred walls (satabhuji). But the purs were in all probability rather ramparts or forts than cities, and served as places of refuge, particularly in autumn, as is suggested by the epithet Saradi applied to them in some passages. It is significant that, unlike the later texts, the Rig-Veda makes no clear mention of individual cities like Asandivat or Kampila.

Regarding the organisation of the village we have a few details. There was an official styled the Gramani who, looked after the and, who led to battle the various Kulapas and led to the family.

Homestead and arable lands in the village appear to have been owned by individuals or families, while grass lands (khilya) were probably held in common.

Agriculture was the principal occupation of the village folk. The importance of the art of tilling is clearly brought out by the name krishti or Charshani (agriculturist) which is applied to people in general, and in particular to the five principal tribes into which the early Vedic community was divided. Cultivated fields were known as Urvara or Kshetra. They were often watered by irrigation canals. The use of manure was also known. The grain grown on the soil was styled dhana or yava, but the exact significance of these in the earliest literature is not known. In later times they meant rice and barley. When ripe, they were cut with a sickle, tied in bundles and threshed on the floor of the granary. They were next winnowed, ground in the mill made into cakes (apupa).

The rearing of cattle and other domestic animals was scarcely less important than agriculture. Cows were held in much esteem, and milk, as we have seen, formed an important part of the dietary in the Vedic household. Herds of cattle
were daily led to the pasture by the gopa (cowherd). The valley of the Yamuna was especially famous for its wealth of kine. The marking of the ears of cattle as a common practice, as is shown by the use of expression ashtakarni (having pierced ears or having the sign of 8 marked on the ear to mean a cow.

Other use animals were the draught-ox, the horse, the dog, the goat and the sheep. The owes of the land Gandhāra were famous for their wool.

Though mainly an agricultural and patrol people, the Vedic tribes were not indifferent to trade and industry. Commerce was largely in the hands of a people styled Pani, who were probably non-Aryans an whose niggardliness was proverbial, but amongst them we have reference also to bountiful merchants like Bribu. Trade probably consisted mainly of barter. The chief articles of trade, judging by the evidence of the later Samhitas, were clothes, coverlets and skins. The standard unit of value was the cow, but necklets of gold (nishka) also served as a means of exchange. Whether nishkas in the early period possessed all the characteristic marks of a regular coinage, is a highly debatable question. No gold coin of the old indigenous type has yet been discovered in India, but the transition to the use of coined money was clearly prepared by the nishka, which was a piece of metal that came to possess a definite weight, if not the hallmark of. State authority. We have also in the Rig-Veda, in an enumeration of gifts, reference to the golden mana which some authorities identify with the old Babylonian weight-unit, the manah (Latin Mina).

The principal means of transport by land were chariots (ratha) and wagons (anas), the former usually drawn by horses and the latter by oxen. The epithet pathi-krit, “path-maker”, applied to the Fire-God, suggests that the services of the deity frequently requisitioned to burn the primeval forests, infested by wild animals and haunted by highwaymen (taskara, stena), to make roads for the use of travellers and merchants.

A great controversy has centred round the question as to whether marine navigation was practised in Rig Vedic times. According to one view, navigation was limited to the crossing of rivers in boats, but we have undoubted references to navigators sailing in ships with a hundred oars. In the story of the ship wreck of Bhujyu, mention is made of the Samudra, “which giveth no support, or hold, or
station”. Some think that Samudra means no more than the stream of the Indus in its lower course. Others regard the story as a matter of hearsay knowledge gathered from travellers, but acquaintance with the sea is rendered probable by references to the “treasures of the deep”. If the identification of the Vedic mana with the Babylonian manah is correct, we have indubitable testimony to a very early intercourse between Vedic India and distant lands beyond the seas.

Of the industries of the Rig-Vedic period, those of the woodworker, the metal-worker, the tanner, the weaver and the potter deserve special mention. The wood-worker or carpenter not only made chariots wagons, houses and boats, but showed his skill in carved work of a finer type such as artistic cups. The metal worker or smith fashioned all sorts of weapons; implements and ornaments from various kinds of metal including gold and the mysterious ayas, which some authorities take to mean copper or bronze while others favour the sense of iron. Workers in leather made water-casks, bow-strings, slings and hand-guards for the protection of the archers. Weavers included men as well as women. The latter showed their skill in sewing, weaving and the plaiting of mats from grass or reeds. The potter (Kulala) also plied his craft for the benefit of the people.

The art of poetry was in full bloom as is evidenced by the splendid collection of lyrics known as the Rik-Samhitā which consists of hymns in praise of different gods. The number of hymns is 1.017. These are grouped into books termed as ashtakas or mandalas containing eight and ten hymns respectively, which were recited by priests styled hotris ot reciters. The old hymns are chiefly to be found in the so called Family Books (II – VII), each of which is ascribed by tradition to a particular family of seers (rishis).Their names are Gritsamada, Visvamitra, Vamadeva, Atri, Bharadvaja and Vasishtha. Book VIII is ascribed to the Kanvas and Angirases. Book IX is dedicated to Soma. The latest parts of the collection are to be found in Books I and X, which, however, contain some old hymns as well.

Fine specimens of lyric poetry are to be found among the Rig- Vedic hymns, notably in those addressed to the Goddess of the dawn.

A Knowledge of the art of writing has been deduced from references to ashtakarni cows, where the epithet ashta- karni is interpreted to mean “having the
sign for the number 8 marked on the ear”. But the expression admits of other interpretations. The prevailing view has been that the Rig Vedic people did not possess the art of writing, and that the old script in which the inscription of Asoka and his successors are written goes back to Semitic, and not Vedic Aryan, origin. Writing was no doubt practised by the pre-historic people of the Indus valley who developed the ancient culture of Harappa and Mohenjo-daro, but it is significant that the early literature of the Aryans was transmitted orally.

Architecture made some advance in Rig-Vedic India. There are references to mansions supported by a thousand columns and provided with a thousand doors. Mention is also made of stone castles and structures with a hundred walls. Allusions to images of Indra possibly point, according to some, to the beginnings of sculpture.

The medical art of the age distinguished quite a number of diseases. But the physician (bhishaj) was still a fiend-slayer as well as a healer of disease, and charms and spells were regarded as equally efficacious with healing herbs and drugs. The use of iron legs as a substitute for natural ones points, however, to some advance in surgery. The science of astronomy made definite progress, and certain stars had already been observed and named.

The early Vedic religion has been designated by the name of henotheism or kathenotheism—a belief in single gods, each in turn standing out as the highest. It has also been described as the worship of Nature leading up to Nature’s God. The chief deities of the earlier books owe their origin to the personification of natural phenomena. Abstract deities like Dhatri, the Establisheer; Vidhatri, the Ordainer; Visvakarman, the All-Creating, and Prajapati, the Lord of Creatures, Sraddha, Faith; Manyu, Wrath, make their appearance at a later stage. Besides the higher Gods, lauded by priests, we have reference to others whose worship was not countenanced in orthodox circles. Some scholars find in the hymns traces of the cult of the linga, and even of Krishna. Siva occurs as an epithet of the god Rudra worshipped by the Vedic priests. The Krishna mentioned in Rig-Vedic hymns can hardly be identified with his epic and Puranic namesake, as the river with which he associated in the Rig-Veda is not the Jumna but some stream in the Kuru country, as we learn from the Brihaddevata.
Father Dyaus (Zeus, Diespiter), the shining God of Heaven, and Mother Prithivi, the Earth Goddess, are among the oldest of Vedic deities, but his hymns scarcely reflect their former greatness. They have been cast into the shade by Varuna, the Encompassing Sky, and Indra, the God of Thunder and Rain. Varuna is the most sublime deity of ‘the ‘early Vedic pantheon. He bears the epithet Asura (Avestan Ahura) and he is the great upholder of physical and moral order, Rita, the idea of which is at least as old ‘as the fourteenth century B.C., as we learn from inscriptions mentioning the name of the Mitanni kings. To Varuna people turned for forgiveness of sin just as they did to Vishnu in a later age.

“If we have sinned against the man who loves us, have ever wronged a brother, friend, comrade,

The neighbour ever with us, or a stranger, O Varuna, remove from us the trespass.

“O Varuna, whatever the offence may be which we as men, commit against the heavenly host,

When through our want of strength we violate thy laws, punish us not, O God, for that iniquity.”

The worship of Varuna, with its consciousness of sin and in the divine forgiveness, is undoubtedly one of the first roots of the later doctrine of Bhakti.

If Varuna is the sovereign of the Universe and the guardian of the moral laws, Indra is the puissant God of war, the lightning-wielder, who

“... slew the serpent, then discharged the waters,

And cleft the caverns of the lofty mountains”;

“... made all earthly things unstable,

Who humbled and dispersed the Dasa colour,

Who, as the player’s stake the winning gambler,

The foemen’s fortune gains. . .”
Indra came to occupy the chief place among the Vedic gods, while Varuna recorded to the background and became merely the Lord of Waters, a sort of Indian Neptune.

Closely connected with Varuna is Mitra, the friend, the personification of the sun’s beneficent agency, and the two belonged to the class of deities styled Aditya, sons of Aditi, the Goddess of Eternity. Other important deities of the upper realm of light are Surya, the Illuminator; Savitri, the Enlivener; Pushan, the Nourisher, Vishnu Urukrama, the wide-striding Sun; the Asvins or the Nasatyas, perhaps the Morning and Evening Stars, later the gods of healing, parallel to the Dioscuri; and Ushas, the lovely Goddess of the Dawn.

Between the world of light above and the earth below lies the realm of the air, and the chief deities of this region are, besides Indra, the Maruts (Storm Gods), Vayu and Vata (the Wind Gods), Rudra (the Howling God of Storm and Lighting), and Parjanya (the God of Rain). Of the terrestrial deities, the chief are Agni, Soma and Sarasvati. Agni, or the Fire-God, received special homage because no sacrifice could be performed without offerings to him. The libation of Soma was also regarded as especially sacred. Sarasvati was a river deity who came to be regarded later as the Goddess of Learning. Of the three principal deities of the later mythology, Vishnu and Rudra (Siva) are, as we have seen already, known to the Rig-Veda, and Brahma, though not explicitly mentioned, has his precursors in Vidhatri (the Ordainer), Hiranyakarboha (the Germ of Gold), Prajapati (the Lord of Creatures) and Brahmanaspati (the Lord of Prayer).

An important characteristic of Vedic Mythology is the predominance of the male element. Goddesses like Prithvi, Aditi, Ushas, and Sarasvati occupy a very subordinate position. In this respect the Vedic civilization presents a contrast to the prehistoric culture of the Indus valley, where the Mother Goddess is co-equal with her male partner.

Another important feature of the Vedic religion is the tendency towards monotheism and even monism. The hymns foreshadow the idea of universal unity and express the belief that God is One although he bears many names.
“They call him Indra, Mitra, Varuna,
And Agni; he is the heavenly bird Garutmat;
To what is one, the poets give many a name,
They call it Agni, Yama, Matarisvan.”

The monotheistic conception appears more prominently in the hymns addressed to Hiranyagarbha (the Gold Germ), and to Visvakarman (the All-Creating),

“Who is our Father, our Creator, Maker,
Who every place doth know and every creature,
By whom alone to gods their names were given,
To Him all other creatures go, to ask Him.”

Finally, we have a song of Creation according to which in the beginning

“… neither death nor deathlessness existed;
Of day and night there was yet no distinction.
Alone that One breathed calmly, self-supported,
Other than It was none, nor aught above It.”

Sacrifices occupy a prominent place in the Vedic ritual. These include offerings of milk, grain, ghee, flesh and juice of the Soma plant. The use of material objects as symbols of deities was perhaps not altogether unknown, and one passage apparently makes a reference to an image or symbol of Indra. The symbol of phallic worship is, as we have seen, detected by some in the allusions to the Sisnadevas.

Regarding life after death, the Rig-Vedic hymns have no consistent theory. According to some passages, the dead dwell in the realm of Yama, the beneficent king of the departed. The idea of metempsychosis is, however, not yet developed.