

REVIEW ARTICLE



REFLECTION OF AGRARIAN PRACTICES IN VEDIC LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to highlight the agrarian Aryan society as represented in the Vedic literature. The society of the times had agriculture as its main occupation and that is why the literature of the times reflects the practice of agriculture in it. The main aspects of agriculture have been described in the Vedas, their Samhitas, Aranyakas, the Brahmanas and the Upanishads. Vedic society was an advanced society with good knowledge of various agricultural practices and their significance. This was the reason that different practices were performed in particular ways, and at times, ceremoniously. Citing references from the Vedic literature the paper highlights the terminology and the significance of various agricultural practices as described in the Vedic literature.

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INTRODUCTION

As far back as records of human history are available, it is evident that every society has spent much of its time and thought upon collecting materials which support life and increase its value. Search of valuable possessions has always been the quest of mankind. The concept of wealth in Vedic India included a correlation between wealth, want and welfare. Cattle wealth was highly valued. Besides, son, gold, grains etc were also recognized as wealth. Every individual was free to earn and accumulate wealth. Wealth was not considered as end in itself, but a most important means to the main objectives of life that is achievement of four *purusharthas* (*Dharma, Artha, Kama, Moksha*). Agriculture here was considered a holy profession to earn one's livelihood. During Vedic age the economic life of the Aryans was quite progressive. Aryans produced goods themselves for their own consumption. Every individual was given the right to work and was almost sovereign. The physical quality of life was dependent upon their economic

prosperity. That's why they used to pray to gods to make them the owner of every type of wealth, so that they mightn't have to face any kind of difficulty. Food grains, land, livestock, cattle, deer etc were their wealth.

Agriculture as an Occupation

It is assumed that Vedic economy was a developed Agricultural rural economy and agriculture was the main occupation of the Aryans. People lived in villages which were connected by roads (R.V.1.44.10; II 12.7.cha.Up.VII.6.2). The head of village was *Grāmans* (R.V.X.62.11; 107.5; AV III.5.71) which in turn were regarded as one of the *Ratnins* or jewels of the royal household (SB.V.3.1.5). The commodities were produced in the village and the production of these was controlled by the villagers.

The sanctity of agriculture as an occupation can easily be seen from a mantra of (RV.X.34.13) where a gambler is advised to take up the holy act of cultivation as his livelihood. The *Aksasukte* of Rig-Veda considers agriculture to be best of all

occupations. *Grow more food* (YV.IV.10) was the common slogan of Vedic poets. The term *Krsi* occurs in Rig Veda quite number of times. Similarly, the word *Kinasa* has been used for farmers in Vedas (Atharvaveda 3.17.5). Farmers have been termed as *Annavid* or 'specialist in grains'.

Among Aryans, land was recognized as wealth. The *Atharvaveda*, *Yajurveda* and *TaittiriyaSamhita* mention several kinds of land. There are three broad divisions-*Urvara* (fertile), *Irina* (barren) and *Saspya* (Pasture).

Farming

Methods of farming have been discussed in Vedic literature. There is great deal of similarity between methods of farming mentioned in *Atharvaveda* and modern methods. In *SatapathaBrahmana* the whole process of farming has been described in four words *Karsana* (cultivating the field), *Vapana* (sowing seeds), *Lavana* (reaping the harvest), *Maida* (Threshing). The word *Krishti* comes from the ploughing of the land. Cultivable fertile land was ploughed and prepared for sowing seeds. As ploughing was regarded as an important process in cultivation, it was celebrated with prayers in the favour of the ploughman.

Aryans ploughed their fields by means of pair(s) of oxen. VachaspatiGairola remarks that the largeness and efficiency of the plough was beyond imagination which was drawn by twenty-four oxen. *RigVeda* mentions that 2, 4, 6, 8, 12, 24 oxen were attached to a plough share at the same time to plough the land.

Atharvaveda (VI.91.1) says that for barley cultivation the plough used was drawn by a team of six or eight oxen. The oxen were yoked in the fields, fastened with hempen or leather traces and driven with a goad. The furrow caused by the plough was known as *Sitā*. *SatapathaBrahmana* gives detailed information about the tools used in process of agriculture. The ploughed land was known as *Urvara* or *Kshetra*. The rope tied around the neck of oxen was called *Vata*.

Sowing, being an important process in cultivation was given due attention. One of the mantras in *Rigveda* says on sowing "*Harness the ploughs fit on the yokes, now that the womb of earth is ready to sow the seeds there in...*"

The tools and appliances used in farming have also been mentioned in *Atharvaveda*. People invented sophisticated implements. The plough share is frequently mentioned in the *Rig-Veda* and later Vedic literature. It was made of iron (AV.111.17.3) and *Khadira* wood (AV.V.6.6). The mere plough was probably known as *langela*. A large and heavy plough was called *Sira*. Another mantra says "*Attach the 'Sira', spread apart the yokes, sow the seeds into the prepared womb.*"

The reaped crop was threshed to separate grains from the stalk. After threshing there was winnowing. The *Atharvaveda* also mentions holding *Surpa*, winnowing the husk, using husk for cows, collecting rice after separating its husk. Cleaning of grain by pounding it in mortar has been also being described. The cleaned grains were stored in large earthen pots after measuring its quantity. The pots used in measuring were called *Urdara* before being stored in the granaries called *Sthivis*. *SatapathaBrahmana* too mentions agricultural process as consisting of ploughing, sowing, reaping and threshing.

Evidences of use of manures is also found in Vedic literature. The word *Karisa* occurring in the *SatapathaBrahmana* denoted dry cowdung. The *Atharvaveda* provides the reference in mentioning cowdung as a useful manure for *Sāli*, a variety of rice. In *Rigveda*, *Ribhus* are shown as extracting the *sakrit* (dung) from the sheds. In *SatapathaBrahmana* it is described that dry cowdung *karira* was used for making the fields more productive. In *Atharvaveda* cows are said to be feeders of people as providing manure to their crops. In another mantra of *Atharvaveda* a maid-servant is shown as throwing cow-dung in the fields.

Irrigation

Several mantras in Vedic literature deal with the importance of rain for good crops. *Rig-Veda* mentions four kinds of water used for irrigation purposes. They are : a. *Divyāh* (Rain water) b. *Khanitrimāh* (Water of wells) c. *Svayamjāh* (Spring water) d. *Samudrārthāh* (The water of the rivers falling into sea)

The *Yajurveda* and *TaittiriyaSamhita* too mention various means of irrigation like wells, canals, fountains, tanks, rivers, and reservoirs. References in the Vedic Texts reveal that the

irrigational works were usually carried out by two systems - natural and artificial. Rain-water and streams were known as natural sources of irrigation while wells, tanks, canals were considered artificial sources in the Vedic period.

Normally, the Aryans were dependent on rain water for agriculture activities. *Rigveda* (V.83, *ParjanyaSūkta*) gives a beautiful description of the sentiments of Vedic seers inspired by the rainfall. As the greatest and all important need for animal and vegetative life, rain in abundance is prayed for in numerous hymns:

“Send to us for our nourishment and property the quick falling wonderful abundant water in the centre of clouds affecting of itself much good” (R.I, 21.3.10.)

The word *Avata* repeatedly occurs for man-made well in the RV.I.55.8,130.2, *Avata* is described as an unfailing source of water *aksita* (RV.X.101.6) which was raised by a wheel of stone *asmacakra* (RVX.101.7) to which was fastened by a strap (*Varatra*) with a pail (*kosa*) attached to it. These wells were used for irrigation purposes, the water being led off into broad channels *sūrmūsisirā* (RV.VIII.69.12). The word *utsa* (AV.111.24.4) is used for stream in the Vedic Texts. The word *kūpya* or *kūpastha* (RV.I.105.7, AV.V.31.80) also denote well in the Vedic literature. These wells were known for their depth as is understood by the story of *Trita* who fell into a deep well and had to take the help of others to get himself out of that.

Crops

The word *Yava* and *Dhānā* occurred in the *Rigveda* denotes Barley and corn respectively. The word *Dhānā* is always used in plural, it is to be stated that in the *Rigvedic* period *Yava* and *Dhana* were the main crops were cultivated by people.

Rigvedic Aryans were not aware of *Vrihi* or rice but in the *Atharvaveda* and later times it came to be known to the people. In AV(VIII.7.20) *Vrihi* and *Yava* are described as healing balms.

Yajurveda gives a detailed list of cultivated crops such as *Vrihi* (rice), *Yava* (Barley), *mudga*, *Tila*, *anuKhalva*, *godhūma*, *nivāra*, *priyamgu*, *masura*, *syāmāka*.

Godhuma or wheat was given top priority among the food grains by Aryans of the later Vedic

Samhita period. *Tila* and *masa* were also cropped. Sesamum oil was used as AV.(1.7.2) indicates that it was kept in jars. Black and white, two varieties of *Tilawere* cultivated by the Aryans. *Masura* counted among Pulses, was also grown. Sugarcane or *iksu* was also cultivated in Vedic period.

Protection of crops

Rigveda mentioned harmful pests such as insects birds and locusts and considered as most ruinous to the crops. Rodents, insects and demon considered harmful to the crops were kept away by means of charms (magic). We find a full hymn consisting of *mantras* in the AV (VI. 50) which express prayers of farmers to *Asvins* against petty destroyers of crops. The birds were also a great nuisance to agriculturists. They were kept away from growing corn by uttering loud cries.

Excess of rain or drought was also considered bad to crops and was more harmful than the pests. BaldevUpadhyaya has rightly said that life of Vedic farmers was not easy, they had to fear to save their crops from the natural calamities and insects as today.

Conclusion

On the basis of the above discussions, a few characteristics of the Vedic agriculture can be pointed out as under:

1. Generally, in the Vedic period, two harvests a year were gathered.
2. In the Vedic texts, there are mentioned many methods of storage of food gains.
3. Rice is not mentioned in the early Vedic literature. Aryans were not aware of rice in the early stages of their spread in India and learnt its cultivation from the aborigines of this country when they reached the areas now described as Uttar Pradesh, Uttrakhand, Bihar and Jharkhand .
4. The mastery over iron technology is undoubtedly an outstanding achievement of mankind. It almost led to a ‘Green Revolution’, which was sparked off as a result of the invention of two most important tools : the socketed iron axe and the iron ploughshare in the later Vedic period. In due course of time, all small tools for agriculture, viz, sickles, hoes and spades etc, were also manufactured from iron.

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