

The Economic Aspects in the R̥gvedic Period

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Abstract

The Economic Aspects of the Indian society are vividly reflected in the R̥gveda. The R̥gvedic people were conscious in economics. The main factor of all the sciences is man. Without man, neither economics nor anyother progress may occur. So, the R̥gvedic people stressed upon well- organized society. The social life of the people was connected with the economic factors. The base of economics and the economic activities is to acquire happiness. One of the important characteristics of the R̥gvedic economics is that it was based on morality. The R̥gveda declares that an ideal Vedic person never utilizes other's wealth for one's sake to nourish himself. In the R̥gveda, the people are advised to earn honestly. The R̥gveda mentioned that the wealth earned through truth is the pure. The people of the R̥gvedic age earned their livelihood through various occupations. Those are – agriculture, cattle rearing, weaving and knitting, metal work, leather work, trade and commerce etc. From the R̥gveda, we can know the different means of living in the R̥gvedic society and the members of the same family took different professions for their livelihood. The present paper is unique because it attempts to look into the Economic Aspects in the R̥gvedic period.

Keywords: Hymns, Kṛṣi, R̥gveda, Vedic literature, Handicraft, Industry.

1. Introduction

The Veda is the earliest and the most important record of the religion. The Vedic literature comprises the four (4) Vedas, viz. the R̥gveda, the Yajurveda, the Sāmaveda and the Atharvaveda. The R̥gveda is one of the oldest scripture among the four Vedas which is the collection of the laudatory verses. Macdonell says, “The R̥gveda is undoubtedly the oldest literary monument of the Indo-European language.”¹ The R̥gveda is the foundation of the entire Vedic literature. This Veda was composed between roughly 1700-1100 BCE, texts. The R̥gveda is considered to be the best source of economic information. Everything related to the economy of Indian people are formulated in the R̥gveda. This Veda furnishes the rich data in searching the economic aspects pertaining to the R̥gvedic period is regarded as the very important sources of study.

2. Objectives:

The study depends on following objectives:

- a) To highlight the economic aspects of the R̥gveda in detail.

- b) To study the various ways of livelihood in the Ṛgvedic period.
- c) It gives us the idea of economic system of the people in the Ṛgvedic period.

3. Methodology applied:

The method in the present topic is chiefly analytical. Description method is also used. All the materials have been collected from the primary and secondary sources. All these materials are systematically analyzed and constructively synthesized.

4. VARIOUS ASPECTS OF ECONOMY:

4.1 Village and urban life

In the Ṛgvedic age, the economic condition was having two layers- village and urban life. In that time, large people lived in village. The term 'grāma' was used in the Ṛgveda.² So, it may be called that various family lived in one village with unity. The chief of village was called 'grāmaṇī'.

4.2 Agriculture

In the Ṛgvedic period, agriculture was the chief livelihood of the people. Agriculture was considered as holy work. Agriculture was main industry and occupation. Economic stability depended upon it. The term 'kṛṣi' for agriculture occurs in the Ṛgveda quite number in times³. Agriculture is one of the most essential aspects of human life. The Ṛgveda is an authentic treasure of agricultural knowledge developed during ancient ages in India. The Kṣetrapati- Sūkta⁴, the Parjanya-Sūkta⁵, the Pṛthivī-Sūkta⁶, the Akṣa-Sūkta⁷ and many other hymn in the Ṛgveda contain various aspects of agriculture.

The Ṛgveda considers agriculture to be a real source of wealth and prosperity. In Akṣasūkta, agriculture was compared with dicing. The Sūkta of the Ṛgveda considers agriculture to be the best of all occupations and advises to give up gambling and take to farming for the welfare of the family: 'akṣairmā divyaḥ kṛṣimit kṛṣasva vitte ramasva bahu manyamānaḥ' (RV 10.34.13), i.e. Giving serious attention to my advice, play not with dice and pursue agriculture and enjoy the gain, deem that wealth sufficient.

Each family had own agriculture field⁸. The agriculture field 'kṣetra' was far from village. For the purpose of agriculture, fertile plot of land was selected. The land which was fit for cultivation was known as urvarā. The presiding deity of agriculture field was Kṣetrapati. Before beginning of cultivation, each family worshipped deity Kṣetrapati. In the Ṛgveda, this deity was eulogized as follows:

kṣetrasya patinā vyaṁ hiteneva jayāmasi |
gāmaśvaṁ poṣayitnvā sa no mṛdātīdṛṣe ||

(RV. 4.57.1)

4.3 Rearing of cows and other animals

In the Ṛgvedic time, after the development of agriculture cattle remained rare wealth. Because without such animals, agriculture could not developed. Every householder desire to occupy their own cattle and fertile land to used in cultivation.⁹ From cattles, people gained milk and meat used in daily life and also sacrificial purposes. Cattles i.e. cows, horses, asses, camels etc. were given

as gift by the kings. It were also used as gift in marriage ceremonies also (RV10.85.13). Cattle became a unit of exchange and trade. At that time, cow was a unit of exchange (RV 4.24.10).

The role of cows were most important in maintenance of life with all necessary support and religious function. Cows were offered as gift to priest at the completion of a religious rite. The cows were tied under shed in night and day from protect sharp sunshine. Each family domesticated cows and got easily ghee, milk, curd etc. Due to economic importance cow became indispensable among the various domesticated animals. The Āryans also domesticated sheep and goat. Sheep were used for manufacturing woolen garments. Milk of goat was used as excellent drinkable.

In that time, horses also took highest position. Horses were too much trustworthy, follower, beautiful, fast-moving, indomitable enthusiastic, brave and acceptable as excellent animal. Horses were used as vehicle and carrying animals. The other domesticated animals i.e. buffalo, ass, camel, dog, elephants etc. were used for ploughing, food and drink, riding, for warfare, racing etc.

4.4 Trade and commerce

The Ṛgvedic society was prosperous from pecuniary side. From the Ṛgveda we know that during that period trade and commerce were the important sources of economy. In Vedic time, trade and commerce were two types – (i) Internal and (ii) External. In internal trade, the animals bullock, horse, ass, camel, dog, buffalo etc. were used to export agricultural products from one place to another. It was also mentioned that the traders bargain about their trading commodities¹⁰. At that period, internal trade was carried on both by river and land.

External trade was running by the way of water road. In the Ṛgvedic mantra (1.25.7), ‘veda nāvaḥ samudriyaḥ, it was understand that boat or large vessel was running in sea for trade. In the Ṛgveda, it was also mentioned one type of ship with hundred oars. For gaining money, people sent ship to sea. Rice of food-grains, cloth and cattle, embroidered cloth, garments, turbans, deer-skin, wool of the sheep, ornaments of gold and silver were the commodities of trade and commerce.

For trading exchange custom was also prevalent. In Ṛgvedic period, cows were basically used as medium of buying and selling trading. Above this gold and silver coin was also applied for exchange. The neck ornament ‘niṣka’ was also used as exchange. Niṣka was a piece of gold of a fixed weight and a kind of currency too.

At that period loans and rate of interest were also well known. For larger profits the traders travelled to distant lands. Both inland and foreign trade were known (RV.1.56.2). Such references make it clear that at Ṛgvedic period both trade and commerce were most important.

5. VARIOUS TYPES OF LIVING WAYS AND MEANS

In the Ṛgvedic period, people also concentrated their mind in handicraft or hand work. The various professions that existed in the society of the Ṛgvedic age is discussed below:

5.1 Chariot Builders

Making of chariot was enumerated as an important living way. Chariot was most necessary for battle and travelling. Various Gods and Goddesses were going by chariot. In that time, horse, mule and ass pulled chariot. The chariot maker, carpenter was respectable livelihood. He made different types of wooden works. In the Ṛgveda, it was also mentioned that they made decorated artistic works of wooden¹¹. The profession of carpentry was in vogue in the Vedic society. Takṣan and taṣṭa were seen working in wood work. Takṣan did all sorts of work wood, eg. The making of

chariots, anas, boats and ships. He also made domestic utensils and furnitures. An axe (kuliśa) is mentioned as one of his tools in making the chariots.¹² So, it can be said that carpenter had an important position in the society.

5.2 Jewellery

The jewellers in the Ṛgvedic ages are found to have been occupying respectable place in the society. In the Ṛgvedic age, gold was used in enough. The goddess Savitā, Apāṁnapāt used golden chariot. Silver coins were also mentioned in the Ṛgveda. In Vedic age, women put on various types of gold ornaments. Preparing gold garments for horses also described in the Ṛgveda¹³. It was also found that gold and other metals were melted by goldsmith. Gold ornaments also used as gift to brides by their relatives. There were extravagant use of gold in the Ṛgvedic age viz., golden turban and helmets, chariot has golden seat and reins of gold, golden wheels and axle of gold etc.

There are various types of ornaments mentioned in the Ṛgveda. The ornaments for the body starts from the head down to the feet. The name of head ornaments are Stukā¹⁴, Kumba¹⁵, Kurīra¹⁶, Śṛṅga¹⁷, etc. The name of ear ornaments are Hiraṇyakarṇs¹⁸, Suchakra¹⁹ etc. In the neck and chest ornaments special mention may be made of rukma²⁰, niṣka²¹, Hiraṇya urvaśī²². The ornaments which were worn on the wrist like a Kaṅkaṇa (bracelet) mentioned in the Ṛgveda were Bhujan²³, Khādhasta.²⁴ Such extravagant use of gold indicate the economic condition of the Ṛgvedic people.

5.3 Leather industry

The leather industry was at a peak of development in the Ṛgvedic time. Several people earned their livelihood by this industry. They made various articles of leather for their use. Skin of bullock was used for preparing bowstring²⁵, rope for joining of chariot gadgets, bridle of horses, cord of whip.²⁶ By the Ṛgvedic verse (6.48.18 & 5.9.5), it could suppose the best position of leather industry of the Ṛgvedic time. At that period, skin clothing and utensils, made of animal skin were in great use. There were leather rope (RV 10.101.6), leather garment, leather bags, skin vessels for storing honey, curd etc. Such references give us a picture of leather industry that during the Ṛgvedic period it was highly developed.

5.4 Iron industry

The people of the Ṛgvedic ages were well acquainted with the usage of iron in their daily life. The usage of iron industry in this age was also mentioned in various types of verses. The Ṛgveda describes the blacksmith as Brahmaṇaspati who is able to build new things²⁷. In the Ṛgvedic age, it was also found that houses were made of iron: ‘pra kṣodarā dhāyasā sasa eṣā saraswatī dharuṇamāyasī puḥ’ (RV.7.95.1). When Viśpalā’s leg was broken in battle, then leg was joined by iron. Weapons of battle were also made of iron (RV.1.116.5). Agni is described as with the teeth of iron (RV.10.87.2). People in their everyday life, used iron in triturating soma.²⁸

5.5 Cloth Industry

The art of spinning and weaving also developed at that period. Both men and women took interest both these arts during the Ṛgvedic period. The Ṛgvedic verse ‘vi tanvate dhiyo asmā apāmsi vastrā patrāya mātaro vayanti’ (RV.5.47.6), indicates that mother wove cloths for her sons. The art of weaving is also compared with the sacrifice (RV.10.26.6). A female embroiderer was called

Peśakarī, Peśa. A weaver in the Ṛgveda as being described as Vāsovāya.²⁹ The tools for this industry were shuttle³⁰, loom³¹ etc. In the large scale industries of cloths, some people were appointed to weave length and the other groups of people were appointed to weave the breadth. The people used the wool of sheeps. From this reference it can be said that spinning and weaving was an helpful means of living.

6. Transport

Transport occupies a very important place in an economy. It connects village with village and town with town. Ratha (chariot) was the most common means of transport in the Ṛgvedic time. Ratha was generally used for journey, carrying loads and war purposes. Two to ten horses were generally employed in drawing the chariots. Rathaspati³² is known as the owner of the chariots. The anas³³ (draft wagon) were the modes of commercial transport. The Aryans were also very skilful for constructing of road. In the Ṛgveda, superior road also mentioned as following ‘ye te panthāḥ savitaḥ parvyasaḥ arenaḥ sukṛtāḥ’ (RV.1.35.11). Land transport was the chief means of transport at that time. But water transport was also given due importance by the Āryans.

7. Professional Education

Among various professions physician was held in great respect in the Ṛgvedic period. Medical science are usual in the society. The term ‘Rakṣohā’ or ‘Rakṣohantā’³⁴ indicates a physician. The physician always had store of herbs at hand. During this period, medicinal herbs were used curing from disease and release one from pain and distress.

During the Ṛgvedic period, the military profession was a popular one. Soldiers were imparted military education. All these indicate the development of professional education in the Ṛgvedic time.

8. Conclusion

The Ṛgvedic society was a complete society in all respects, in which people persued various occupations and economic activities. All kind of progress depends on the economic stability of the society, people were free enough to choose their occupations. It is found that agriculture and cattle rearing, making chariots, jewellery, house-building, fort making etc. were the principal means of livelihood. The above discussion give us a picture that during the Ṛgvedic period there were sense of morality in earning money. The Ṛgvedic people earned their livelihood by dint of labour in various fields. There are references to trade and commerce, transport. Thus there existed a well balanced economy in the days of the Ṛgveda.

Foot Notes

1. Macdonell, A.A., Vedic Reader, P.11
2. ṚV 1.114.1
imā rudrāya tavase kapardine kṣayadvīrāya pra bharāmahe matīḥ |
yathā śamasad dvipade catuṣpade viśvaṁ puṣṭam grāme asminnanātūram ||
3. Ibid. 1.23.15, 1.176.2, 10.34.13
4. Ibid.4.57
5. Ibid.5.83
6. Ibid.5.84

7. Ibid.10.34
8. Ibid.3.31.15
9. Ibid.1.127.6
sa hi śardho na mārutaṃ tuviṣvaṇirapnasvatīṣrvarā sviṣṭanirārtanāsvisṭaniḥ |
10. Ibid.4.14.10
11. Ibid.10.86.5
priyā taṣṭāni me kapirvyaktā vyadūḍaṣat |
śiro nvasya rāviṣaṃ na sugaṃ duṣṛte bhuvāṃ viśvasmādindra uttaraḥ ||
12. Ibid.3.2.1.
dviṭā hotāraṃ manuṣaśca vāghato dhiya rathaṃ na kuliśaḥ samṛṇvati |
13. Ibid.4.2.8
14. Ibid.1.24.7
15. Ibid.2.34.3
16. Ibid.10.85.8
17. Ibid.1.163.9
18. Ibid.1.112.14
19. Ibid.10.85.20
20. Ibid.2.34.2
21. Ibid.5.19.3
22. Ibid.7.31.3
23. Ibid.8.97.1
24. Ibid.7.56.13
25. Ibid.6.46.14
26. Ibid.6.75.11
27. Ibid.10.72.2
28. Ibid.9.1.2
29. Ibid.10.26.6
30. Ibid.10.130.2
31. Ibid.10.71.9
32. Ibid.10.64.10
33. Ibid.4.30.10
34. Ibid.10.97.6

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2. Mazumdar, R.C. & Pusalkar, A.D. 'The Vedic Age', Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, 1965.
3. Sarma. Thaneswar. 'Vaidic Sahityar Ruprekha', Asom Veda Vidyalaya, Guwahati, 1997.
4. Sharma, S.N. 'A History of Vedic Literature', Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series, Varanasi, 1973.