Aryan Civilization Daily Life

The Vedic & Epic Periods

1500 BCE - 500 BCE

Have you ever wondered why Indian women place a red dot on their foreheads, between their eyes? This goes back to Aryan days! In ancient times, a groom used to apply a spot of his blood on his bride’s forehead, in recognition of wedlock! Today, married Indian women may choose to wear this mark. A married woman does not have to do this, but she can if she wants. However, if a woman is single, divorced, or a widow, she cannot wear this mark. It’s a sign of marriage!

Thousands of years ago, things changed in the Indus Valley when a new group of people arrived, called the Aryans. The Aryans came from Central Asia (modern-day Southern Russia). They entered the Indus Valley through the fabled Khyber Pass in the Hindu Kush Mountains.

The Aryans were nomads. They raised livestock, rode chariots, and loved to gamble. They had no sophisticated government. They grouped in clans, and were ruled by warrior chiefs called rajas. Their history is one of constant war amongst themselves, between the various clans. We have little archeological evidence about them, but we do have something else we can use to learn about them. The Aryans created marvelous stories, stories they told or sang for centuries.

The Vedas:

The Aryan beliefs and daily life are written down in the four Vedas, a collection of poems and sacred hymns, composed around 1500 BCE. The word ‘Veda’ means knowledge. The Vedas are composed of the Rig, Sama, Yajur, and Atharva Vedas. The period from roughly 1500 BCE to 1000 BCE is called the Vedic period because that is the time period that the Vedas were written down.

The Ramayana & the Mahabharata:

Around 1000 BCE, the Aryans started to create two marvelous epics alongside the Vedas. We know about daily life during this period from these famous epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. These epics are stories about Aryan life, wars, and accomplishments. Even today, school kids in India know these stories very well! They’re great stories! The Ramayana tells a story in which the (good) king Aryan king Rama destroys the (evil) pre-Aryan king Ravana. The other epic, the Mahabharata, talks of Aryan wars amongst themselves, where two clans, the Pandavas and Kauravas, battle it out, and the Pandavas emerge victorious. This is why the period from roughly 1000 BCE to 500 BCE is known as the Epics Period. It is named after these two great epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata.

How did the Aryans live?

The Aryan clans, or tribes, settled in different regions of northwestern India. The tribes were called Gana (which means a “collection” of people). The chief of each tribe was a hereditary job, meaning it was passed down from ancestors. If a father was the chief, someday, his son would be chief. The chief made decisions after listening to a committee, or perhaps even the entire tribe. People had a voice, but the chief was the boss.
Aryan Houses:
The people in the Vedic period lived in straw and wooden huts. Some homes were made of wood, but not until later, during the Epics Period.

Yagna (Central Fire Place):
The life of the tribal Aryans was focused around the central fireplace called the Yagna. Dinner time was social time. The tribe would gather around the central fireplace and share news as well as the happenings of the day. Those who tended the central fireplace also cooked for the rest of the tribe. This was a very special job. The fire tenders were the go-between between the fire god and the people. These fire tenders, later on, formed the caste of priests. The Aryans ate meat, vegetables, fruit, bread, milk, and fish. The word for guest was Go-Ghna or eater of beef.

What did they do when they were not working or fighting with each other?
The Aryans loved to gamble. They introduced the horse to ancient India and raced chariots. They played fighting games. They loved to tell stories. The ancient Aryans were proud, fierce, and deeply religious. They had many gods and goddesses, so they were polytheistic.

Jobs:
As the Aryans settled in and began to grow crops, people started to have different occupations. In each tribe, people began to belong to one of four groups: the Brahmana (priests), Kshatriya (warriors), Vaishya (traders and farmers), and Shudra (workers). In the beginning, these were just jobs. You could move from group to group. However, this changed over time, until a person’s occupation or group depended on birth. If your father was a farmer, you had to be a farmer. Change from one group to another became very difficult; eventually almost impossible. This system was eventually known as the Caste System.

Education:
Kids were taught by a guru (teacher). Even chiefs’ sons had to obey the guru. All students followed a rigorous course of studies which was taught orally. Writing was done on bark and leaves, and hence, disintegrated over time. Because of this, we have very little evidence to tell us what they learned in school.

Clothing:
Clothing was initially made of animal skins. As the Aryans settled down, their clothing began to be made of cotton.

Modern-day India has been heavily influenced by the Aryan culture. Many Indian women still choose to wear a red dot to symbolize their marriage. The Vedas and the two great Aryan epics (The Ramayana and Mahabharata) are still well-known throughout India. Many Indians continue to use a Yagna in their daily lives. The Caste System was used for centuries in India and some of those rules are still followed today!

The Aryans, who Invasion India over 3,000 years ago, set up a culture that has influenced millions of people for thousands of years!