
UNIT 8 VEDIC PERIOD-I*

Structure

- 8.0 Objectives
- 8.1 Introduction
- 8.2 Sources
 - 8.2.1 Literary Sources
 - 8.2.2 Archaeological Sources
- 8.3 The Aryan Invasion — A Myth or Reality?
- 8.4 Economy
- 8.5 Society
- 8.6 Polity
- 8.7 Religion
- 8.8 Summary
- 8.9 Key Words
- 8.10 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises
- 8.11 Suggested Readings

8.0 OBJECTIVES

After studying this unit, you will be able to learn about:

- the various sources through which we can attempt to know about the Early Vedic period;
- the theory of a large-scale migration by the Indo-Aryan through these sources and critically evaluate it; and
- the nature of economy, society, polity and religion of the Early Vedic people.

8.1 INTRODUCTION

During the period 2000-1000 BCE, communities at different stages of cultural development were present in different regions of India. Their cultures were essentially agro-pastoral and our understanding of these cultures is based entirely on archaeological remains because with the exception of Harappan culture, none of these cultures have left behind any written records. In this Unit and the following Unit, however, we shall be focussing on the evidence provided by a voluminous body of religious texts which are considered to be the earliest literary records of India. We shall also try to supplement this evidence with, wherever relevant, archaeological evidence. The *Rigveda* is considered to be the earliest collection of hymns available, and so, we shall start by examining the *Rigveda* for an understanding of the Early Vedic period and then go on to other Vedas and allied texts which are placed later. This exercise is relevant for two reasons. First, The Vedas are thought to have been composed by the Aryans and it was long believed that the Aryans played a major role in civilizing the Indian subcontinent. The contents of the *Rigveda*, if analysed carefully, do not give the

* This Unit has been adopted from EHI-02, Block 3

impression of a very advanced material culture. On the other hand, many of the material traits, which are characteristic of the Indian civilization, are already present in the non-Vedic archaeological cultures in different parts of India. Second, when the contents of the *Rigveda* are compared with the contents of the Later Vedas and allied texts, it becomes clear that significant changes took place in the Vedic society itself. This means that there is no fixed cultural pattern which can be called Vedic culture or Aryan culture.

The core geographical area to which the evidence of the *Rigveda* relates to was *Sapt-Sindhava* or the land of seven rivers. This would correspond with the whole of Punjab and its neighbouring regions of Haryana; but *Rigvedic* geography also included the Gomal plains, southern Afghanistan and southern Jammu and Kashmir.

Earlier interpretations regarding the Early Vedic society are based on the theory of Indo-Aryan migration from West Asia into the Indian subcontinent. These migrants who are regarded as the authors of the 'Vedas' are called the Vedic people. According to this historical interpretation, the Aryans came to India in several stages or waves.

The Aryans are considered to represent a linguistic group speaking Indo-European languages. They are distinguished by traditional historians and archaeologists from the non-Aryan Harappans of the preceding period.

However, in making certain observations on Early Vedic society it may be fruitful to see if literary texts and archaeological evidence can supplement each other. If both types of sources are from the same region and of the same period, then they together can give us a more detailed idea on economic, social, political and religious life.

Let us begin by referring to these sources.

8.2 SOURCES

We have two types of sources to study the Early Vedic period-Literary and Archaeological Sources.

Let us examine the literary sources for this period.

8.2.1 Literary Sources

Among the literary sources we may first refer to the four Vedas:

- *Rigveda*
- *Samveda*
- *Yajurveda*
- *Atharvaveda*

Out of these, the *Rigveda* is the earliest text.

The word 'veda' is derived from the Sanskrit word 'Vid' which means 'to know'. The Vedas are essentially a compilation of prayers and hymns, offered by different families of poets and sages to different gods. These four Vedas are also 'Samhitas', in the sense that they represent the oral tradition of the time. Since the hymns

were meant to be recited, learnt and transmitted orally, they were not written down when they were first composed. Due to this reason, none of the *Samhitas* can be dated precisely. Relative dating in terms of the context of these four *Samhitas* has led scholars to believe that the period represented in the *Rigveda* can be placed between 1500 BCE to 1000 BCE.

The *Rigvedic Samhita* comprises ten books or ‘*Mandalas*’ of which books II to VII are considered to be the earliest and belong specifically to the Early Vedic Phase. Books I, VIII, IX and X are considered later additions to the *Samhita*.

Scholars found similarities in the language used in the *Rigveda* and the Avesta, the old Iranian text, older to the *Rigveda*. Based on these linguistic similarities and taking into account the chronological precedence of the Avesta over the *Rigveda*, these scholars suggested that:

- 1) The people represented in both these books belonged to a common linguistic group; they migrated from West Asia and Iran to the Indian subcontinent. These people were called the ‘Aryans’.
- 2) The Aryans had a common original home, from where different groups migrated to Europe and the East.

However, the debate regarding the original home of the Aryans is no longer valid, since the concept of a common racial identity for the Aryans has now been proved false. But a common linguistic identity is still believed by historians and on this basis, some of them still insist upon the theory of the Aryan migration.

8.2.2 Archaeological Sources

Excavations conducted in Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, northern Rajasthan, along the Indus and Ghaggar rivers over the last 40 years, have unearthed many post-Harappan /Chalcolithic settlements from these regions. These have been dated from 1700 BCE to 600 BCE. The Chalcolithic cultures are also called Late-Harappan, OCP (Ochre Coloured Pottery), BRW (Black-and-Red Ware) and PGW (Painted Grey Ware) cultures.

However, we must remember that pottery types do not reflect the entire culture of the people. Different pottery types do not necessarily mean that people who used these pots also differed. Pottery analysis only helps in defining a specific trait of the cultural assemblage, nothing more. Some scholars have made attempts to examine whether the evidence provided by some of these cultures of north-western and northern India can be compared with what we know from the study of Vedic texts.

8.3 THE ARYAN INVASION — A MYTH OR REALITY?

Was the Aryan invasion a myth or reality? Let us see to what extent archaeological evidence help us in answering this question.

Archaeologists have attempted to relate the various post-Harappan cultures with the Aryans. The Painted Grey Ware which has been dated between 900 BCE to approximately 500 BCE has been repeatedly connected with Aryan craftsmanship. Their argument is based on inferences which historians make from their analysis

of the literary texts. Hence, archaeologists, following linguistic similarities found between the *Rigveda* and the Avesta, tried to find similarities in pottery forms, paintings on ceramics and forms of copper objects etc. between post-Harappan and the West Asian/Iranian Chalcolithic assemblages. Such similarities were magnified to support the view that the Aryans were a group of people who migrated from West Asia to the Indian subcontinent. Thus literary and archaeological works were made to support one another in order to validate the notion of migration.

Linguistic similarities between the *Rigveda* and the Avesta are not disputed. But such similarities do not really suggest large-scale migration of people into the Indian subcontinent. Secondly, the similarities which have been found between Chalcolithic artefacts of India and those of Western Asia are only occasional. They also do not suggest large-scale migration of people. The concept of an “Aryan”, as stated before, cannot be equated with any particular type of pottery. It also does not have any ethnic or racial significance. The ‘Aryan’ is, therefore, at best a vague concept, related to linguistic similarities between people.

In this context you should take into account the following points suggested by archaeological excavations at various sites:

- 1) Earlier scholars believed that the Indo-Aryans caused the downfall of the Harappan civilization by destroying the Harappan towns and cities. They quoted *Rigvedic* hymns which invoke Indra to destroy the dwellers of the forts. But archaeological evidence has shown that the decline of the Harappan civilization was not caused by any large-scale destruction brought about by an alien invading group.
- 2) Attempts to identify the makers of Painted Grey Ware with the Aryans also do not receive strong support from archaeological evidence. If the PGW cultures were related to the Aryans, then keeping the theory of invasion in mind, we should have found this pottery type in the areas of Bahawalpur and Punjab i.e. along the route taken by the so-called Aryan migrants. However, we find these pottery types confined to a particular geographical region comprising Haryana, Upper Ganga basin and eastern Rajasthan.
- 3) It was earlier thought that there exists a time gap and hence, a cultural discontinuity between the Late Harappan and the post-Harappan Chalcolithic period. However, recent excavations at Bhagwanpura, Dadheri (Haryana), and Manda (Jammu) have shown that the Late Harappan and Painted Grey Wares could be found together without any breaks. Hence “invasion” cannot be proved on the basis of the excavated sites.

What disappeared after 1750 BCE were the towns and cities of the Harappan civilization and such artefacts as the seals, weights, measures etc. i.e. articles connected with trade and urbanism. The rural structure of the earlier period continued into the second and the first millennium BCE. The variation found in the archaeological remains of the post-Harappan period, in terms of pottery, metal implements and other objects, may also represent ‘regional’ variations in Indian Chalcolithic cultures.

Archaeological evidence relating to the period between second millennium BCE and first millennium BCE has thus helped us modify existing views regarding the Vedic ‘Aryans’ in several ways. First, there is no substantial proof in

archaeology that there was **large-scale migration** of people from central or Western Asia into the Indian subcontinent around 1500 BCE. Second, archaeologically there is no proof that the Aryans destroyed the Harappan civilization and laid the foundation of a new Indian civilization. In fact, although the *Rigveda* repeatedly refers to hostilities and wars between different groups, the so-called clashes between Aryan and non-Aryan communities and cultures are not documented in archaeology. However, since the *Rigveda* is the earliest collection of religious hymns available to us, its importance as a document of history is immense. The hymns provide such insights into various aspects of an early society as would not be available in archaeological evidence. From them we get insights regarding the nature of economy, social organization, kingship and political organization, religions and cosmological beliefs and so on. Much of this information is relevant also for understanding the nature of Indian society at later stages. We now therefore turn to what we learn from the *Rigveda* about the Early Vedic society.

8.4 ECONOMY

The Early Vedic society was pastoral; cattle rearing was the dominant occupational activity. A pastoral society relies more on its animal wealth than agricultural produce. Pastoralism is a subsistence strategy adopted by people who live in areas where large scale agriculture is not feasible due to some environmental and to a certain extent, cultural constraints.

Hymns of the *Rigveda* yield extensive evidence of the importance of cattle in the Early Vedic society. Many linguistic expressions in the *Rigveda* are associated with the cow (*gau*). Cattle was the chief measure of wealth and a wealthy man who owned many cattle was called ‘*gomat*’. The terms used for conflicts and battles in this period were *gavishti*, *gavesana*, *gavyat*, etc. The former literally means ‘to search for cows’. The terms themselves suggest that possession of cattle was the bone of contention between groups and led to occasional inter-tribal fights and conflicts. The Panis, who were the enemies of the Vedic people, are stated in the *Rigveda* to have hidden their wealth, mostly cows, in the mountains and forests. The Vedic god Indra was invoked to release these cattle. This reference suggests that cattle raids were common. The *raja* or the chief is called the ‘*gopati*’ or one who protects cows. In the *Rigveda*, *Godhuli* is used as a term for a measure of time. Distance is called *gavyuti*. A daughter is called *duhitri* or one who milks the cows. Kinship units are labelled as *gotra*.

All these terms are derived from the word *gau* and suggest that social relations and all-important areas of *Rigvedic* life centred round the rearing of cows. Literary references to pasture lands, cow pens, dairy products and domesticated animals are also found in most of the hymns and prayers.

Compared to the very substantial linguistic evidence for cattle rearing in the *Rigveda*, agricultural activities find very few references. Most of the references to agriculture are of a later date. Apart from ‘*Yava*’ or barley, no other grains are mentioned. The Early Vedic people did not use iron technology. Copper, with which they were familiar, did not have as much value in agricultural operations as iron implements. Stone tools (like axes) were used and these are mentioned in the *Rigveda*. Fire was used to burn down the forest cover and shifting agriculture was practised. Further, the region under discussion received low rainfall and all

the rivers mentioned in the *Rigveda* i.e. the Satluj, Indus, Ghaggar, Ravi etc. are known to change their courses frequently. Without the facilities of large-scale irrigation which were not developed in this period, the alluvial lands near the rivers could not be cultivated on a permanent basis. Thus the hoes, sickles and axes mentioned in the texts, were probably used for slashing purposes or shifting cultivation. The evidence of pastoralism as well as shifting cultivation suggests that the people were either nomadic or semi-nomadic. They moved out of their villages with their herds for a certain period in order to feed their cattle. The literary and the archaeological sources do show that the people did not lead a fully sedentary life. The mobile character of the population is seen in the term 'vis' which also implied a settlement. The suffixes Punar (*vis*), Upa (*vis*) and Pra (*vis*) were constantly used, and the settlements were qualified by them to mean settling near (a settlement), re-entering (a settlement) or coming back (to the settlement).

Gift exchange and redistribution had an important economic role in the society. Tribal conflicts led to the payment of tributes and prestations, i.e. *bali*, to the victorious chiefs by the defeated or the subordinate groups. The rest of the clansmen of the victorious tribe had a share in the spoils and booty won in the war. The chief also fed and gave gifts to his clansmen during ceremonial occasions. This was done by him to acquire prestige.

Evidence of trade and commerce in Early Vedic society is meagre. There was no concept of private property based on land-ownership.

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- 1) Discuss the main sources which have been used to reconstruct the history of the Early Vedic people.

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- 2) What were the salient features of the economy of the *Rigveda* people?

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8.5 SOCIETY

The Early Vedic society was a tribal society, in which social relations based on kingship ties were predominant. The society was not divided according to caste lines, and even the *rajas* (kings), the *purohitas* (priests), the artisans etc. were parts of the clan networks. The tribe was referred to as the *jana* and many

references to the different tribes are found in the *Rigveda*. Inter-tribal conflicts were frequent, an example being the battle of the Ten Kings mentioned in the *Rigveda*. Some of the tribes, which fought in this battle were the Bharatas, the Purus, the Yadus, the Druhyus, the Anus and the Turvasus. Tribal conflicts, as mentioned earlier, were related to cattle raids, cattle thefts etc. The chief of the tribe was the *raja* or the *gopati*. He was the leader in battle and the protector of the tribe. His office was not based on heredity, but he was selected from amongst the clansmen. The warrior category was the '*rajanya*'. Many clans (*vis*) formed a tribe. The clans settled in villages or *grama*. The basic social unit was the *Kula*, or the family, and the *Kulapa* i.e. 'one who protects the family' denoted the eldest male member or the head of the family.

Tribe (*Jana*), Tribal Unit (*Vis*), Village (*Grama*), Family (*Kula*), Head of the family (*Kulapa*).

Society was patriarchal. The birth of a son was the common desire of the people. The importance given to the male members is reflected in the hymns, where the desire for a son is a constant prayer.

Even though society was patriarchal, women also had an important position in it. They were educated and they had access to the assemblies. There are also instances of women who composed hymns. They had a right to choose their partners, and could marry late. However women were always thought to be dependent on their fathers, brothers or husbands. Education was imparted orally, but the tradition of education was not very well developed in this period.

The authors of the *Rigveda* distinguished themselves from other groups whom they called *Dasas* and *Dasyus*. The *Dasas* are described as dark, full-lipped, snub-nosed, worshippers of the phallus and of hostile speech. They were rich in cattle and lived in fortified strongholds. We learn about another people called the Panis who were wealthy in cattle treasures. The term Pani came to be associated with merchants and wealth in the subsequent ages. These groups fought and befriended each other from time to time and one cannot define them as separate racial or the linguistic groups. For example, the most famous chief mentioned in the *Rigveda* is Sudasa who led the Bharata tribe in the battle of the Ten Kings. The *Dasa* ending in his name might suggest some links with the *Dasas*. However, the presence of different groups in the same area might have contributed to the emergence of the *varna* system.

Various occupational groups such as those of weavers, smiths, carpenters, leather workers, chariot-makers, priests etc. are also mentioned. The chariot-makers occupied special social status. There are no references to beggars, wage-earners or wages in the *Rigveda*. However, society was economically stratified, and we do find references to rich people possessing chariots, cattle, etc. and making generous gifts of them.

8.6 POLITY

The tribal polity was not completely egalitarian. A division is found in the *Rigveda* itself, which is seen in references to two groups — the *Rajanyas*, or those who fought the wars, and are credited to be the senior lineage, and the rest of the clansmen or the *vis*, who formed the junior lineage. Though none of the groups occupied a distinct social hierarchy, constant conflicts and inter-tribal wars helped

to create a division in the society. The growing needs for more pasture lands, cattle for the protection of people and their settlement all probably contributed to an increase in inter and intra-tribal conflicts and warfare. The clans held large *yajnas* or sacrifices to help the warrior groups in the wars. In these *yajnas* the officiating priest or the *purohita* acted as the mediator between his clansmen and the gods. He also invoked the gods' blessings for the tribal chief, for his success in the wars. Initially, the whole clan participated in these *yajnas* on an equal footing. Large scale distribution of wealth, food, etc. was made during these sacrifices and members got an equal share. But with the growing incidence of conflicts and fights, *yajnas* or sacrifices also became important and the *purohita* assumed a special status in the society. In the later part of our period, they received a major share of the gifts from the *rajās* and assumed a superior position vis-à-vis the other clan members.

The office of the *raja* also assumed importance on account of wars, etc. and the division between the senior and the junior lineages became sharper. At what point of time these political distinctions became apparent is difficult to state, but we must remember that the 10th book of the *Rigveda* contains the 'Purusha-Sukta' hymn, and in the Later Vedic texts we find evidence of the superior *rajnaya* groups, assuming the status of the Kshatriya, a separate *varna* by itself. These developments took place after 1000 BCE. This does not mean that the society was stagnant during our period of study. In fact it was changing slowly but surely leading to the development, in the Later Vedic phase, of a complex socio-political structure.

Tribal assemblies e.g. the *Gana*, *Vidatha*, *Sabha* and *Samiti* are mentioned in the *Rigveda*. The *Sabha* may have been the council of select clan members and the *Samiti* perhaps comprised the whole clan. These assemblies performed the functions of the government and administration and were also involved in the selection of the *raja* from amongst the clansmen. They thus kept the power of the warriors in check. However, as stated before, though we do not find well defined political hierarchy in the Early Vedic set up, the changes during the period gave rise to a socio-political hierarchy which manifested itself in the origin of the *Varna* system during the 'Later Vedic phase'. Early Vedic Society was governed by tribal values and norms and was largely egalitarian.

8.7 RELIGION

The religious ideas of the Vedic people are reflected in the hymns of the *Rigveda*. They venerated the natural forces around them (like wind, water, rain, thunder, fire etc.) which they could not control, and invested nature with divinity conceived in human forms, which were mostly masculine. Very few female deities were venerated. The religion thus reflected the patriarchal society and was that of primitive animism.

Indra was the god of strength, who was invoked to destroy the enemies. He was the God of thunder and was the rainmaker who was asked periodically to release the water. He could not be vanquished. Thus thunder and rain (natural phenomena) were related with strength, which was personified in a masculine form, represented in the god Indra. The concept of a tribal chief, who was a war-lord is also found represented in the character of Indra.

Agni, next in importance to Indra, was the god of fire. He was considered to be an intermediary between heaven and earth i.e., between gods and men. He dominated the domestic hearth and marriages were solemnized in his presence. Fire destroyed dirt and germs, and hence Agni was considered to be pure. The importance of Agni can be related to that of the *yajna* or sacrifice in the Early Vedic society. It was supposed that the oblations offered to Agni were carried to the gods in the form of smoke. Varuna personified water, and he was the upholder of the natural order of the universe.

Yama was the god of death and had an important place in the Early Vedic religious beliefs. There were many other gods e.g. Surya, Soma (also a drink), Savitri, Rudra etc., and hosts of celestial beings like *Gandharvas*, *Apsaras*, Maruts to whom prayers and hymns were addressed in the *Rigveda*.

The Vedic religion was sacrificial in nature. Sacrifices or *yajnas* were performed:

- to invoke the gods,
- in order to grant boons; victory in battles,
- or for acquisition of cattle, sons etc.

We find some hymns dedicated to the power residing in the sacrificial implements, especially to the sacrificial altar, to the stones used for pressing the *Soma* plant, to the weapons of war, drums, mortars etc. Hymns and prayers were recited in these sacrifices and generally priests performed these *yajnas*. The growing importance of sacrifices in the Vedic society resulted in the growing importance of priests as well. The ritual of sacrifice also led to the growth and development in the knowledge of mathematics and animal anatomy. Elementary mathematics was necessary to make the calculations which were required to establish the positions of various objects in the sacrificial area. Also, the frequent sacrifices of animals led to a knowledge of their anatomy. For the Vedic people, the world grew out of a vast cosmic sacrifice. Religion was not based on magico-ritual formulae, rather it stressed direct communication with the gods through sacrifices, hymns etc. Gods were not worshipped for the spiritual upliftment of the people, nor for any other abstract philosophical concepts, but were invoked to grant material gains.

Sacrificial religion is a religion of the pastoral people. Animal sacrifice is rampant in the pastoral society, where the older animals which can no longer produce milk or meat, or used for breeding purposes, i.e. those who are no longer economically viable, are killed in order to lessen the burden on their owner. Hence animal sacrifice was one way of destroying the old animals and thus had an important role in the society. In the agrarian society however older animals are employed in the fields, used for traction purposes and hence the destruction of animals is frowned upon by a society which primarily depends on agricultural activities. Thus the Vedic religion reflected the patriarchal pastoral society and was materialistic in perspective.

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

- 1) Discuss five important characteristics of the Early Vedic society? Write in five sentences.

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- 2) What was the position of *Rajan* in the Early Vedic polity?
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- 3) Discuss the nature of religion of the Early Vedic people.
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- 4) Write 'Yes' or 'No' against each sentence
 - a) The Avesta is the oldest Iranian text.
 - b) The *Purohita* or the priest had no specific place in the society.
 - c) The '*Sabha*' and the '*Samiti*' had no power in the selection of the *Raja*.
 - d) Indra, the God of strength, was the most important god in the Early Vedic period.
 - e) Religion was based on magico-ritual formulae.

8.8 SUMMARY

In this unit you have learnt about literary and to some extent archaeological sources which help in the reconstruction of Early Vedic society. In the light of the archaeological sources it is difficult to accept the notion of a large-scale Aryan migration. The early Vedic economy was mainly pastoral and cow was the most important form of wealth. Agriculture had secondary importance in the life of the Early Vedic people. The Early Vedic society was tribal and basically egalitarian. Clan and kinship relations formed the basis of the society and family was the basic social unit. Social divisions based on occupations had started but there was no caste division. In the Early Vedic polity, the tribal chief or the *Rajan* and the priest or the *Purohita* had important positions. Among several tribal assemblies the *Sabha* and the *Samiti* played important roles. Though there was no well-defined political hierarchy in the Early Vedic set up, the tribal polity was not completely egalitarian. The Early Vedic people personified the natural forces, e.g. wind, water, rain etc. and worshipped them as gods. They worshipped god not through any abstract philosophical concept but for material gains. There was growing importance of sacrifices or *yajnas* in the Vedic religion. What you must remember is that this society was not static but dynamic. Between 1500 BCE and 1000 BCE society was constantly evolving and newer elements in the economic, social, political and religious were operating to transform its structure.

8.9 KEY WORDS

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| Artefacts | : Something made by human beings, of archaeological interest, e.g. a simple tool or weapon. |
| Bali | : Tributes and prestations paid to the victorious chiefs by the defeated groups. |
| Clan | : Large family group, found in tribal communities. |
| Kinship | : Relationship by blood. |
| Nomad | : Member of a tribe that wanders from place to place and who has no fixed home. |
| Patriarchy | : Male dominated family or tribe. |
| Animism | : The attribution of a soul to natural objects and phenomenon. |
| Semi-sedentism | : Settlers who do not settle in a place permanently and move to a new settlement. |
| Shifting agriculture | : After the use of a land for cultivation for a short period, it is left and fresh land is used. |
| Stratigraphy | : Layers detected in the excavation. The basis for detecting these layers could lie in the different soil types or different artefacts found in the excavated profile. |

8.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- 1) See Section 8.2
- 2) See Section 8.4.

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

- 1) Your answer should include that it was a tribal society, society was patriarchal, family was the basic social unit, caste division was not present etc. See Section 8.5.
- 2) *Raja* was the chief of the tribe. Frequent wars made him important. He was the protector of the tribe. His position was not always hereditary. See Section 8.6.
- 3) The Vedic people worshipped various forces of nature as gods. Stress was on sacrifice but not on magico-ritual formulae. Religion was based on material gains. See Section 8.7.
- 4)
 - a) yes
 - b) no
 - c) no
 - d) yes
 - e) no

8.11 SUGGESTED READINGS

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