

Historical research on Gram, villages in Shruti and Smriti Literatures

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ॐ भद्रं कर्णेभिः शृणुयाम देवाः ।
भद्रं पश्येमाक्षभिर्यजत्राः ।
स्थिरैरङ्गैस्तुष्टुवाग्ँसस्तनूभिः ।
व्यशेम देवहितं यदायुः ।
स्वस्ति न इन्द्रो वृद्धश्रवाः ।
स्वस्ति नः पूषा विश्ववेदाः ।
स्वस्ति नस्तार्क्ष्यो अरिष्टनेमिः ।
स्वस्ति नो बृहस्पतिर्दधातु ॥
ॐ शान्तिः शान्तिः शान्तिः ॥

Abstract:

This paper examines the historical foundations of the village (grāma) as a civilisational and economic unit in Vedic and post-Vedic Bharat, drawing primarily from Śruti literature—especially the Rgveda—and post-Vedic administrative texts such as Kauṭilya’s Arthaśāstra. It situates the village within the geographical and cultural landscape of Sapta Sindhu, highlighting its role as the bedrock of agricultural production, social organisation, governance, and economic self-sufficiency. Through a close reading of Vedic hymns, the study demonstrates that Vedic society was predominantly rural and agrarian, with agriculture, cattle rearing, and cottage industries forming the core of economic life. The paper further traces the continuity of village administration into the post-Vedic period, illustrating how structured governance, land management, taxation, and cooperative systems were institutionalised under imperial polities. By foregrounding concepts such as Grāmaṇī, collective responsibility, and the pañca system, the study argues that the village functioned as a resilient, autonomous, and participatory unit that ensured civilisational continuity despite political upheavals. The paper concludes that revisiting the Vedic and post-Vedic village model offers valuable insights for contemporary rural development policy and planning in Bharat, especially as the nation approaches Amṛt Kala and reflects on its long civilizational trajectory.

The geographical limits of Vedic and post Vedic Bharat being North India-parts of Punjab (in Pakistan and in India), Rajasthan, Sindh Pradesh, Haryana. The Sapta Sindhu (Sanskrit: सप्त सिंधु, also Hapta Hindu in Avestan) "seven rivers" are the seven sacred rivers, mentioned at various places in RigVed.

आ यत्साकं यशसो वावशानाः सरस्वती सप्तथी सिन्धुमाता ।
याः सुष्वयन्त सुदुघाः सुधारा अभि स्वेन पयसा पीप्यानाः RV ॥7.36.6॥

In this Shlok of Rigveda- Sarasvati is mentioned as the seventh river originating from Sindhu (Sarasvati Saptathi Sindhu Mata). Zenda Avestha, most sacred book of Persians mentions hapta händu. It is same as the Sapta Sindhu.

The Vedic bhartiya, is the oldest civilization in the world and lived in an area called Sapta-Sindhu or Land of Seven Rivers.

य ऋक्षादंहसो मुचद्यो वार्यात्सप्त सिन्धुषु ।
वधर्दासस्य तुविनुम्ण नीनमः ॥8.24.27॥

This paper is an attempt to study the concept of village from the Shruti Literature- specifically the Rig Veda. The Shruti Literatures are the primary sources of information pertaining to the Vedic period.

For the post Vedic Bharat, this paper has briefly studied Arthashastra which details about the life during the Magadh Empire, during the period 600–200 BCE.

As Bharat enters into Amrit Kaal, where, in another twenty five years from now, in 2047, India shall observe shatabdi (100 years). This brief insight into Vedic period shall help planners and policy makers in Rural Development with a different perspective. Indian villages are depicted as being selfsufficient, autonomous tiny republics in both Vedic and PostVedic literature.

Bharat endured through rise and fall of kingdom and empires. This crucial element has maintained Bharat's feeling of continuity over centuries and millenniums.

In the Vedic era, a respected official who received guidance from a council of elders oversaw the village's affairs. The Ramayana and Rigveda mentions Gramani as a renowned village chief.

Before getting on to the definition of Gram-village, I searched for references of Rashtra (roughly translated as nation state in English) in the four Mantra-Samhitas viz- Rig Ved, Yajur Ved (Shukla Yajurved and Taitreya Samhita), Sam Ved and Atharv Ved. **I found that, the word Rashtra appears one hundred and fourty one (141 times).**

Vedic economy was a developed agricultural Village economy. People lived in the villages which were connected by the roads. The head of the village was known as Gramani.

Have included the word "village" in my description because Vedic economic life was essentially Rural. Vedic economy was a developed agricultural village economy, which is to say that Vedic economic life was primarily rural and agricultural.

Another reason for my search for the definition of 'village' is that commodities were produced within the villages, and their production was overseen by the residents. In my perspective, the phrase 'agricultural' is crucial to indicate that the lives of Vedic Sanatanis were

predominantly influenced by agriculture. Agriculture was acknowledged as a significant occupation by the populace.

I have used in my definition the term 'developed' to indicate that Vedic economy was a developed economy in all walks of the society. Agriculture, cottage industries, means of transportation, trade and commerce and banking were at their climax. I shall justify this usage. Agriculture as an occupation was considered a holy way of earning one's livelihood. The story of agriculture is, in fact, as old as the story of human civilization. The main industry of Vedic Bhartiya was agriculture and there are frequent allusions to it in the Vedic Shruti Literature. Along with agriculture, cattle-rearing, giving and taking of daksina and donation, fine arts and cottage industries were recognized as the individual sources of income in the Vedic period. The sanctity of agriculture as an occupation can easily be seen from a mantra of Rigved (10.34.13) where a gambler has been advised to take up the holy act of cultivation as his livelihood. We find a full hymn in the Rigved 4.57 which gives detailed information on the agricultural importance in the common life of the people. Grow more food, has been common in Rigveda and subsequently in Atharvaved. The advancement of agriculture clearly indicates that the people of Vedic Bharat were self-sufficient.

IV Mandalam of Rigved and specifically the 57th Suktam is very interesting. It deals extensively with agriculture and its practice. Rigveda IV.57.4 presents a very interesting aspect about the vedic agrarian village system, which gave utmost importance to best agrarian practices.

शुनं वाहाः शुनं नरः शुनं कृषतु लाङ्गलम् ।
शुनं वरत्रा बध्यन्तां शुनमष्टामुदिङ्गय ॥4.57.4॥

There by meaning: Cultivators should cultivate the fields in the best manner by collecting the best ploughs, bullocks and seeds and producing the best crops.

Further, next shlok shares a very interesting aspect towards the learning and art of agriculture and related science. Cultivators should first learn the art of farming and then cultivate properly and be rich in wealth and grain. This is the crux of fifth shlok which reads as:

शुनासीराविमां वाचं जुषेथां यद्दिवि चक्रथुः पयः ।
तेनेमामुप सिञ्चतम् ॥4.57.5॥

The cattle wealth had an intimate bearing on agricultural development, health and economic prosperity of the people. The welfare of the people and the progress of agriculture was bound up with the welfare of cattle. The love which a cow held in Vedic period is based as much on a deep-rooted sentiment as on economic and health grounds. People used to keep

a cow for its religious as well as its economic significance in their day-to-day life. Different from other animals, the cow was considered the symbol of wealth and prosperity in the Vedic age and that is why it is described as the most valued possession of Vedic Janah. This is found in the **RigVeda 8.4.21**

वृक्षाश्चिन्मे अभिपित्वे अरारणुः ।

गां भजन्त मेहनाशवं भजन्त मेहना RV ॥8.4.21॥

This sukta very poetically shares, how donation or gifting of cows has been very well appreciated by one and all. At several places in Rigved, cow has been shown as the superior donation of the time. Besides, other animals like horses, oxen, camels, sheep, goats etc. were also known for their economic values. I am sharing Rigved 8.46.22, which is

षष्टिं सहस्राश्वस्यस्युतासनमुष्ट्रानां विंशतिं शता ।

दश श्यावीनां शता दश त्र्यरुषीणां दश गवां सहस्रा RV ॥8.46.22॥

The Rig Veda, in the ninth mantra of the 73rd sukta of the 10th chapter (10-73-9), states that the **cow's milk contains the therapeutic and preventive properties of the medicinal herbs** it consumes. **Cow's milk was utilized not only for therapeutic purposes** but also as a prophylactic against certain diseases.

चक्रं यदस्याप्स्वा निषत्तमुतो तदस्मै मध्विच्यच्छद्यात् ।

पृथिव्यामतिषितं यदूधः पयो गोष्वदधा ओषधीषु RV ॥10.73.9॥

Even in Shreesuktam, the seeker, seeks wealth in the form of Ashva-Horses, Godayi-giver of cows and that has been ascribed as the ultimate source of all wealth and abundance.

अश्वदायि गोदायि धनदायि महाधने ।

धनं मे जुषतां देवि सर्वकामांश्च देहि मे ॥

In the subsequent shlok of ShreeSuktam as well, wealth is sought in the form of human resource and livestock, especially the cow. It says, provide us wealth, grains, elephants, horses, cows, and carriages for everyday usage, as well as children and grandchildren to carry on our family line.

पुत्रपौत्र धनं धान्यं हस्त्यश्वादिगवे रथम् ।

प्रजानां भवसि माता आयुष्मन्तं करोतु माम् ॥

Vedic sanatanis often approached to their deities to bestow riches consisting of cattle-wealth as can be seen from RigVeda 10. 166. 1

We find reference of three kinds of animals at RigVeda 10.90.8

तस्माद्यज्ञात्सर्वहुतः सम्भृतं पृषदाज्यम् ।

पशून्ताँश्चक्रे वायव्यानारण्यान्ग्राम्याश्च ये ॥10.90.8॥

Here Rigved shares division of animal kingdom based on their habitation, viz air (Vayavya), those of the jungles (aranya) and those of the villages (gramya).

Cows, regarded as important assets, were consistently safeguarded from hazards, including loss, falls into pits, limb fractures, and theft.

**मा कस्मै धातमभ्यमित्रिणे नो माकुत्रा नो गृहेभ्यो धेनवो गुः ।
स्तनाभुजो अशिश्वीः ॥1.120.8॥**

In Bhagvad Geeta, 18th Chapter, 44th Shloka importance of agriculture and dairy farming has been shared as कृषिगौरक्ष्य वाणिज्यं वैश्यकर्म स्वभावजम् ।

In the 10th Chapter, 28th Shloka, Prabhu Shri Krishna Says I am the Vajra (thunderbolt) amongst weapons and Kamadhenu amongst the cows. I am Kaamdev, the deity of love, the primary force behind conception; and among serpents, I am Vasuki.

**आयुधा नामहं वज्रं धेनूनामस्मि कामधुक् ।
प्रजनश्चास्मि कन्दर्पः सर्पाणामस्मि वासुकिः BG ॥ 10.28॥**

The next most useful domestic animal was the horse (asva). They were considered as a symbol of power and used for riding or drawing chariots. Horse-racing was an important amusement. Horses of various colours have been referred to in the Vedic Texts.

**उक्षन्ते अश्वान् अत्याँइवाजिषु नदस्य कर्णेस्तुरयन्त आशुभिः ।
हिरण्यशिप्रा मरुतो दविध्वतः पृक्षं याथ पृषतीभिः समन्यवः RV ॥2.34.3॥**

According to Atharv Veda, a white horse with black ears was regarded as of special value.

**नास्य श्वेतः कृष्णकर्णो धुरि युक्तो महीयते ।
यस्मिन्नाष्ट्रे निरुध्यते ब्रह्मजायाचित्या AV ॥5.17.15॥**

The ass (gardabha or rasabha) was viewed inferior to a horse but the best among bearers of the loads.

The goat (aja) was a animal used for milk, wool and to pull light carts. The occupation of goat-herd (ajapala) is clearly mentioned.

In essence, the Harappan society of pre-Vedic times was urban. Nevertheless, urban centers (nagara) are seldom present in the Rigvedic economy. Purandara, which means "one who ruins the puras or towns," is the name given to Indra, the main deity and the protagonist. In RigVeda 6.47.18 Indra is referred and attributed various forms.

रूपरूपं प्रतिरूपो बभूव तदस्य रूपं प्रतिचक्षणाय ।

इन्द्रो मायाभिः पुरुरूप ईयते युक्ता ह्यस्य हरयः शता दश ॥6.47.18॥

For the brevity of space, I am inclined to look at the village system and administration in post Vedic period. Kautilya's Arthashastra is one of the most detailed account of the polity, administration, civic life, systems and processes.

In the second book of Kautilya's Arthshashtra: The Duties of Government Superintendents, a special chapter has been devoted to formation of villages. Formation of villages; division of land; construction of forts; buildings within the fort; and several other aspects related to governance and administration of village is mentioned in Arthshastra. The village was established either by encouraging foreign immigration (paradesapráváhanena) or by prompting densely populated areas within his own kingdom to disperse their surplus population (svadésábhishyandavámanéna vá). The king may create villages on either new locations or ancient ruins (bhutapurvamava).

Villages of no fewer than one hundred families and no more than five hundred families of agricultural individuals of the súdra caste, with boundaries extending up to one or two krósa (2250 yards), and capable of mutual protection shall be established. Boundaries shall be defined by a river, a mountain, forests, bulbous plants (grishti), caves, artificial structures (sétubandha), or by trees such as sálmali (silk cotton tree), samí (Acacia Suma), and kshiravriksha (milky trees).

A stháníya (a castle of that name) shall be established at the center of eight hundred villages, a drónamukha at the center of four hundred villages, a khárvátika at the center of two hundred villages, and a sangrahana amidst a collection of ten villages.

Lands may be expropriated from individuals who fail to cultivate them and allocated to others, or they may be farmed by village workers (grámabhritaka) and traders (vaidehaka) to prevent negligent owners from remitting reduced payments to the government. If cultivators promptly remit their taxes, they may receive favorable provisions of wheat, livestock, and currency.

No ascetic except a vánaprastha (forest-hermit), no association other than those of local origin (sajátádanyassanghah), and no guilds other than local cooperative guilds (sámuttháyikádanyassamayánubandhah) shall be permitted entry into the villages of the kingdom.

Roads going to sayóniya, military installations (vyúha), burial or cremation sites, and communities shall have a width of eight dandas. Thus concludes the discussion on specifications and precision in the period around three hundred centuries prior to the Christian Era.

Alcohol shall not be removed from villages, nor shall liquor establishments be in proximity to one another.

Coastal villages or those situated around rivers and lakes shall remit a predetermined tax amount (kliptam). Fishermen shall remit one-sixth of their catch as costs for the fishing license (naukáhátakam). Merchants shall remit the standard toll imposed in port towns. Passengers disembarking from the king's vessel shall remit the necessary sailing fees (yátrávetanam).

Chapter Thirty-Five of Arthashastra: The Responsibilities of Revenue Collectors; Informants Disguised as Householders, Merchants, and Ascetics. Upon partitioning the kingdom (janapada) into four districts and further categorizing the villages (gráma) into primary, intermediate, and subordinate ranks, he shall classify them under one of the subsequent categories: Villages exempt from taxation (pariháraka); those that provide soldiers (áyudhíya); those that remit taxes in the form of grains, cattle, gold (hiranya), or raw materials (kupyá); and those that furnish free labor (vishti) and dairy products as tax substitutes (karapatikara).

By delineating boundaries for villages and categorizing land as cultivated, uncultivated, plains, wetlands, gardens, vegetable gardens, enclosures (váta), forests, altars, temples, irrigation systems, cremation sites, feeding houses (sattra), water supply stations for travelers (prapá), pilgrimage sites, pastures, and roads, he shall establish the demarcations of various villages, fields, forests, and roads, and subsequently document donations, sales, charitable contributions, and tax exemptions pertaining to the fields.

I conclude my paper with this reference of Panch (Five representative of the people) from the Atharvaved. This could be a further scope for study and research on various aspects of village system, viz administration, economy, society, livelihood, agriculture practices, during the Vedic period. Fact that the panch-system which has evolved or continued to remain so, as a very potent form of democracy, even existed during vedic period. This speaks volumes of the culture and chitti (consciousness) that Bharat is.

ब्राह्मण एव पतिर्न राजन्यो न वैश्याः ।

तत् सूर्यः प्रब्रवन्नेती पंचेभ्यो मानवेभ्यः ॥

अथर्ववेद

Brahmana (Yogi-he who has attained Brahma) is the Master, neither the warrior nor the trader. This, God of Light (Knowledge) says unto the Panchas (representatives of the people).
- Atharva Veda.

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