

The Significance of Livestock in Vedic Economy

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Abstract

Agriculture and animals husbandry was developed in India from pre-Vedic times, for in the Rig-Veda itself we find references to hundreds and thousands of cows, to horses yoked to chariots, to sheep and goats offered to gods as sacrificial oblations and to the use of wool for clothing. The famous cow-hymn of the Rig-Veda (6.28) indicates that cow had already becomes the very basis of rural economy. In another hymn (8,101), cow is designated as mother of Vasus, of Rudras and of Adityas, as also the pivot of immortality. The Vedic people appear to have had large forests at their disposal for securing timber, and a amount of green fodder to animals. The farmer's vocation was held in high regard, and both agriculture and animal husbandry developed in India to a degree of skill rarely known in other parts of the world.

Introduction

Agriculture and animal husbandry have thus been developed and practiced in India for at least 6 or 7 thousand years since the Pre-Vedic times, the practical knowledge being handled down from generation to generation since then in the families of farmers and tillers of land and developed by the practical experience in their field of activity and vocation. Along with agriculture Aryans considered even cattle as their wealth. In agriculture dominated society cattle has its own importance because without cattle not even agriculture cannot be practiced.

In India it has almost been considered impossible to practice agriculture without having good cattle. In past times holdings were small, agriculture practices were old fashioned and marketing of produce continued to be done with bullock carts. Again milk and milk products were the only sources of animals proteins in the diet of the predominantly vegetarian population of the country came from them .The farmer also supplemented his meager resources through milk and milk products especially during the wide gaps that occurred between sowing and reaping of agriculture crops.

Livestock in Ancient India

In ancient India cattle tending was one of the items of solemn religious vow vrata and it was entrusted to a certain section of the people who thoroughly understood and mastered the business. Agriculture, cattle rearing, trade and commerce contributed the fourfold, pursuit suitable for making fortune. Agriculture and animal husbandary flourished hand in hand in India.

In later Vedic period agriculture flourished as a means of occupation of vedic people but cattle remained their principal wealth. Cattle wealth was highly valued during the Vedic period and that is why we find various prayers attributed to the different deities that wealth on worshippers. Taittiriya Samhitā clearly recognizes cattle as wealth .Detailed description of animals and other living beings are founds in the Vedas. Animals have been classified then

1. Grāmya - Those living in villages known as pet animals.
2. Aranya – those living in the forests.

This division finds place in Maitrāyani Samhitā and kāthaka and Kātha ka Samhitā . The Atharvaveda stresses the importance of livestock. Let there be pet animals in every house. May there be prosperity of livestock all around. May there be livestock too along with food and wealth. In Rigveda cows have been described as superior wealth.

Cows

From the economic and religious point of view Aryans considered cows as the most important and useful animal. Apart from food grains- milk curd we get from cows only. Cows enjoyed a very important status and prominent place in the life of the people in Vedic times. Among the innumerable boons prayed for by the Vedic seers the cows may be deemed one of the most cherished one. Milk, butter, ghee and curd the daily produce from cows were not only highly esteemed foods but they were also some of the main offering to the Gods. Cows supplied the other needs of agriculture and of life in general, providing plough bullocks, pack bullocks and cart bullocks. Their leather provided many articles in general use or required for special purpose. They were kept in herds and probably no man or homestead was so poor not to own a few. Wealth consisted as much in the number of cows owned as in the number and size of full granaries. Cows were carefully guarded inside walled enclosures.

The milking of the cows, the making of curds, of butter and ghee were domestic duties of everyday importance, besides being offered to the gods, they comprised the daily food, both by themselves and put up in many forms in mixture with other foods.

Ghee was required in large quantities both for sacred fire in house and in the sacrificed halls cows were tended with great care. Cows were treated against injuries and diseases and many herbal and other specify were known.

The cows was the symbol of wealth and prosperity as milk, butter and ghee were the symbols of fertility and abundance. Gift of charity, reward or religions merit were made in the shape of cows whose number varied with the wealth or status of the donor.

“Wide fields ,vast treasures and spacious Pastures has India bestowed up on his friends “ (R , III 3.2.15) “*We seek to bring down from the (India) thousands and hundreds of cattle. May riches come to us from thee*” (R, IV .3.11.18). “*O, Agni, may I have milking cows in thousands and tens of thousands*” (Y, 219.15). “*Let not the cows be lost, let no thief carry them away, let no hostile weapon fall upon them, may the master of cattle be long possessed of those with which he sacrifices and presents to the gods*” (R; VI 3.53)

The Vedic people prayed for cows which gave abundant milk and unfailingly and which can be milked with great ease.

“*Grant us cows which will be yielding unfailingly everyday*”; (Y; 374.)

The Brāhmans too contain references which show that care was taken for both the maintenance and protection of the cattle.

Cow is verily the mother of all in this world. One who aspires to prosper should devote himself to the service of cow by all means .It was a popular belief in these days that if a domestic cow was not taken care of property, the concerned householder would come to trouble. Gift and donation of cows was valued most in comparison with that of other things.

Cow dung and cow urine are regarded as purifying agents and were utilized as respectably for plastering the floor of houses and for purifying one’s body by drinking and bathing. Killing of cows and eating of cow flush was totally prohibited. Rearing of cows was considered to be the duty of Vaisyas in the days almost each family possessed at least one cow for the purpose of daily sacrifice and the Vaisyas took cow rearing as a profession.

Milk is the chief nourisher of man and milk products are prayed for in numerous hymns. The churning of curds was done with the churning rod and the rope as it is done to this day.

“*He is the seed (of the calf), the embryo, the navel cord, and caul, the first milk, the colostrums the fresh milk, the curdled milk and ghee*”(Y; 157.4)

Butter and ghee-Milk, butter and ghee were the symbols of plenty and fertility. “*May the land so ploughed and rich with milk, strength and wet with honey and ghee comes back to*

us.” Large quantities of ghee were used in sacrificial fire, thus:”*these streams of ghee descend upon the fire, like deer fleeing from a hunter*” (R.IV.5.13.6).

Cows were fed on grain in addition to the grass on pastures. Cows were watered at wells. These numerous and varied referenced to many aspects of the importance of cows and milk and milk products make it absolutely clear that the breeding of the cow as a milk animal must have received greater attention and reached a high state of perfection. Cows met with accidents and were also open to attacks by wild beast, prayers were offered for their protection, thus “*Let not, Push an our cattle perish let them not to be injured, let them not be hurt by falling into a well*”(R.VI.5.5.7)

Horse

The horse as the servant of man figures very much in the Vedas almost as much as cow. Pack horses ,riding horse , chariot horses , war horses, race horses ,and even ploughing horse all find mention .Horses ,mare figure among the gifts made to the priests , and generally along with chariot, by kings and other wealthy donors . The Aswamedha or horse sacrifice is described in the hymns in (RVI 22.6,7) in all its gruesome details and not within a pathetic element

As in the case of cows, much attention should have been bestowed upon the breeding of horses or more than one type evolved each suited to one or other of the several uses to which horses were put. Horses were presented by kings in large numbers.

Horses were also recognized among superior wealth (R.V.I.92.8, VII.75.8, 77.5). They were considered as important possession because of their utility in riding and drawing chariots .In (RV.V.41.5). Maruts are asked to bring wealth comprising horses. A white horse with black ears is mentioned in (AV.V. 17.15) as of special value.

Sheep’s was domesticated by the people for their wool. The word avi for sheep was frequently been occurred in Vedic texts (RV.VIII.34.3; 66.8); (AV.V.8.4).The sheep of *Gandhara* was famous for their wool (RV.I.126.7) The main use of sheep was their wool hence the expression woolly (*urnavati*) is used to designate a sheep (RV.VIII.56.(8).3). In RV(X.75.8). *Sindhu* is described as rich in wool. It seems that sheep was largely domesticated in Sindhu region. In RV Pusan is said as the weaver of the wool (RV.X.26.6). The *soma*-sieve was made of sheep’s wool.

Aja .RV.X.16.4; *aja* occur as the common name for goat in the RV and later Vedic Texts. It was domesticated by the Aryans for its soft wool. Goats were reared for their milk and wool .Sometimes goats were used for drawing light carts (RV.X.26.8), as also were camels for big

carts. Goat was also known for its delicious milk. Camel was used for carrying loads and passengers from one place to another.

Elephants were considered a symbol of royalty. The buffalo was bred for its milk and butter. The mule was known for carrying burdens and asses were particularly famous among the cattle for taking big loads from one place to another (S.V.1.5.5). Dog was also domesticated by the Aryans. It used to guard houses and cattle and barked at thieves (RV.VII.55.3). A.C Das says that “*It is well known that in the Polar Regions the dog is used by the Esquimaux to draw sledges over the ice. Even in later times, Sapta-Sindu was famous for its dogs, and large numbers used to be exported to Persia and Mesopotamia to assist in the hunt.*” The bull was employed in ploughing and drawing carts. Besides, the dung of the domesticated animals was used as a fertilizer.

People often performed sacrifices. They offered oblation, consisting of ghrta, purodasa, caru, milk etc to their gods. On the other hand they made daksinas consisting of animals and other valued things, to the rtviks for using their services in the ritual. Among the animals which were often given in daksina were cows, buffaloes, bulls, mares, mules, camels, elephants, sheep, rams, horses, oxen etc. It is needless to say that cattle played an important role in the ritual. Vedic Aryans being agriculturists took care of their cattle in view of getting manure from them for their fields.

After animals death their skins, bones, horns etc were used for different purposes. The leather-work was at its flourishing stage and was recognized as a source of income in the Vedic age. The word *Carmon* for ‘hide’ has often been occurred in the Vedic Texts. The leatherer made various articles like bow-strings.(RV.VI.75.11) thongs to fasten the parts of the chariots, RV.VI.47.14 reins for horses (RV.VI 46.14). etc. Animal’s skins were used as articles of clothing. Besides in AV. (IV.37) it is mentioned that goat horns were used for medicinal purposes.

It is to be stated that the economic life of Aryans was centered around the cattle. Next to agriculture, cattle-rearing was considered the important source of income. Baldev Upadhyaya has rightly said that the importance of cattle, especially of cow and bull, is beyond imagination in an agricultural economy.

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