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Vedic Civilization

The Aryans were a semi-nomadic pastoral people. • The original homeland of the Aryans is a matter of debate with different experts suggesting • different regions from where they originated. Some say they came from the area around the Caspian Sea in Central Asia (Max Muller), • while others think they originated from the Russian Steppes. Bal Gangadhar Tilak was of the opinion that the Aryans came from the Arctic region. The Vedic Age started with the Aryan occupation of the Indo-Gangetic Plains. • Meaning of the word Arya: Noble. • They spoke Sanskrit, an Indo-European language. • They led a rural, semi-nomadic life as compared to the Indus Valley people who were • urbanised. It is believed that they entered India through the Khyber Pass. • Two phases of the Vedic Period Early Vedic Period or Rig Vedic Period (1500 BC – 1000 BC) Initially, the Aryans lived in the land known as “Sapta Sindhu” (Land of the Seven Rivers). These seven rivers were: Sindhu (Indus), Vipash (Beas), Vitasta (Jhelum), Parushni (Ravi), Asikni (Chenab), Shutudri (Satluj) and Saraswati. Political structure: Monarchical form of government with a king known as Rajan. • Patriarchal families. Jana was the largest social unit in Rig Vedic times. • Social grouping: kula (family) – grama – visu – jana. • Tribal assemblies were called Sabhas and Samitis. Examples of tribal kingdoms: Bharatas, • Matsyas, Yadus and Purus. Social structure: Women enjoyed a respectable position. They were allowed to take part in Sabhas and Samitis. • There were women poets too (Apala, Lopamudra, Viswavara and Ghosa). Cattle especially cows became very important. • Monogamy was practised but polygamy was observed among royalty and noble families. • There was no child marriage. • Social distinctions existed but were not rigid and hereditary. • Economic structure: They were a pastoral and cattle-rearing people. • They practised agriculture. • Products made out of copper, iron and bronze were in use. • They had horse chariots. • Rivers were used for transport. • Cotton and woollen fabrics were spun and used. • Initially trade was conducted through the barter system but later on coins called ‘nishka’ were • in use. Religion: They worshipped natural forces like earth, fire, wind, rain, thunder, etc. by personifying them • into deities. Indra (thunder) was the most important deity. Other deities were Prithvi (earth), Agni (fire), • Varuna (rain) and Vayu (wind). Female deities were Ushas and Aditi. • There were no temples and no idol worship. • Later Vedic Period or Painted Grey Ware Phase (1000 BC – 600 BC) During this time, the Aryans moved eastwards and occupied western and eastern UP (Kosala) and Bihar. Political structure: Kingdoms like Mahajanapadas were formed by amalgamating smaller kingdoms. • King’s power increased and various sacrifices were performed by him to enhance his position. • Sacrifices were Rajasuya (consecration ceremony), Vajapeya (chariot race) and Ashwamedha • (horse sacrifice). The Sabhas and Samitis diminished in importance. • Social structure: The Varna system of social distinction became more distinct. This became less based on • occupation and more hereditary. The four divisions of society in decreasing social ranking were: Brahmanas (priests), • Kshatriyas (rulers), Vaishyas (agriculturists, traders and artisans), and Shudras (servers of the upper three classes). Women were not permitted to attend public assemblies like Sabhas and Samitis. Their • position in society diminished. Child marriages became common. • Sub-castes based on occupation also emerged. Gotras were institutionalised. • Economic structure: Agriculture was the chief occupation. • Industrial work like metalwork, pottery and carpentry work also was there. • There was foreign trade with far off regions like Babylon and Sumeria. • Religion: Prajapati (creator) and Vishnu (preserver) became important gods. • Indra and Agni lost their significance. • Importance of prayers diminished and rituals and sacrifices became more elaborate. • The priestly class became very powerful and they dictated the rules of the rites and rituals. • Because of this orthodoxy, Buddhism and Jainism emerged towards the end of this period.

Vedic Literature The word ‘Veda’ originated from the root ‘vid’ which means spiritual knowledge/subject of • knowledge/means of acquiring knowledge. The four Vedas are: Rig, Yajur, Sama and Atharva. • Rig Veda was composed during the Early Vedic Age. The other three were written in the • Later Vedic Age. Rig Veda – this is the oldest religious text in the world. It contains 1028 hymns and is • classified into 10 mandalas. Yajur Veda – this deals with the ways to perform

rituals.● Sama Veda – deals with music. Indian music is said to be originated from Sama Veda.● Atharva Veda – contains spells and magical formula.● Other Vedic texts were the Brahmanas (explains the meaning of sacrifices); Upanishads (also● called Vedantas, 108 in number, source of Indian philosophy); and Aranyakas (books of instructions). The great Indian epics of Mahabharata and Ramayana were also composed during this period.●