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## Early Societies in South Asia



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**For a god, Indra was a very rambunctious fellow.** According to the stories told about him by the Aryans, Indra had few if any peers in fighting, feasting, or drinking. The Aryans were a herding people who spoke an Indo-European language and who migrated to south Asia in large numbers after 1500 B.C.E. In the early days of their migrations they took Indra as their chief deity. The Aryans told dozens of stories about Indra and sang hundreds of hymns in his honor.

One story had to do with a war between the gods and the demons. When the gods were flagging, they appointed Indra as their leader, and soon they had turned the tide against their enemies. Another story, a favorite of the Aryans, had to do with Indra's role in bringing rain to the earth—a crucial concern for any agricultural society. According to this story, Indra did battle with a dragon who lived in the sky and hoarded water in the clouds. Indra first slaked his thirst with generous drafts of *soma*, a hallucinogenic potion consumed by Aryan priests, and then attacked the dragon, which he killed by hurling thunderbolts at it. The dragon's heavy fall caused turmoil both on earth and in the atmosphere, but afterward the rains filled seven rivers that flowed through northern India and brought life-giving waters to inhabitants of the region.

The Aryans took Indra as a leader against earthly as well as heavenly foes. They did not mount a planned invasion of India, but as they migrated in sizable numbers into south Asia, they came into conflict with Dravidian peoples already living there. When they clashed with the Dravidians, the Aryans took the belligerent Indra as their guide. Aryan hymns praised Indra as the military hero who trampled enemy forces and opened the way for the migrants to build a new society.

For all his contributions, Indra did not survive permanently as a prominent deity. As Aryan and Dravidian peoples mixed, mingled, interacted, and intermarried, tensions between them subsided. Memories of the stormy and violent Indra receded into the background, and eventually they faded almost to nothing. For a thousand years and more, however, Aryans looked upon the rowdy, raucous war god as a ready source of inspiration as they sought to build a society in an already occupied land.

Tools excavated by archaeologists show that India was a site of paleolithic communities at least two hundred thousand years ago, long before the Aryans introduced Indra to south Asia. Between 8000 and 5000 B.C.E., cultivators built a neolithic society west of the Indus River, in the region bordering on the Iranian plateau, probably as a result of Mesopotamian influence. By 7000 B.C.E. agriculture had taken root in the Indus River valley. Thereafter agriculture spread

**OPPOSITE:** Sandstone bust of a distinguished man, perhaps a priest-king, from Mohenjo-daro.

rapidly, and by about 3000 B.C.E. Dravidian peoples had established neolithic communities throughout much of the Indian subcontinent. The earliest neolithic settlers cultivated wheat, barley, and cotton, and they also kept herds of cattle, sheep, and goats. Agricultural villages were especially numerous in the valley of the Indus River. As the population of the valley swelled and as people interacted with increasing frequency, some of those villages evolved into bustling cities, which served as the organizational centers of Indian society.

Early cities in India stood at the center of an impressive political, social, and cultural order built by Dravidian peoples on the foundation of an agricultural economy. The earliest urban society in India, known as Harappan society, brought wealth and power to the Indus River valley. Eventually, however, it fell into decline, possibly because of environmental problems, just as large numbers of Indo-European migrants moved into India from central Asia and built a very different society. For half a millennium, from about 1500 to 1000 B.C.E., the Indian subcontinent was a site of turmoil as the migrants struggled with Dravidian peoples for control of the land and its resources. Gradually, however, stability returned with the establishment of numerous agricultural villages and regional states. During the centuries after 1000 B.C.E., Aryan and Dravidian peoples increasingly interacted and intermarried, and their combined legacies led to the development of a distinctive society and a rich cultural tradition.

## Harappan Society

Like societies in Mesopotamia and Egypt, Harappan society—named after Harappa, one of its two chief cities—developed in the valley of a river, the Indus, whose waters were available for irrigation of crops. As agricultural yields increased, the population also grew rapidly, and by about 3000 B.C.E. neolithic villages were evolving into thriving cities.

Unfortunately, it is impossible to follow the development of Harappan society in detail for two reasons. One is that many of the earliest Harappan physical remains are inaccessible. Silt deposits have raised the level of the land in the Indus valley, and the water table has risen correspondingly. Because the earliest Harappan remains lie below the water table, archaeologists cannot excavate them or study them systematically. The earliest accessible remains date from about 2500 B.C.E., when Harappan society was already well established. As a result, scholars have learned something about Harappa at its high point, but little about the circumstances that brought it into being or the conditions of life during its earliest days.

A second problem that handicaps scholars who study Harappan society is the lack of deciphered written records. Harappans had a system of writing that used about four hundred symbols to represent sounds and words, and archaeologists have discovered thousands of clay seals, copper tablets, and other artifacts with Harappan inscriptions. Scholars consider the language most likely a Dravidian tongue related to those currently spoken in central and southern India, but they have not yet succeeded in deciphering the script. As a result, the details of Harappan life remain hidden behind the veil of an elaborate pictographic script. The understanding of Harappan society depends entirely on the study of material remains that archaeologists have uncovered since the 1920s.

### *Foundations of Harappan Society*

#### *The Indus River*

If the Greek historian Herodotus had known of Harappan society, he might have called it the “gift of the Indus.” Like the Nile, the Indus draws its waters from rain

and melting snow in towering mountains—in this case, the Hindu Kush and the Himalayas, the world's highest peaks. As the waters charge downhill, they pick up enormous quantities of silt, which they carry for hundreds of kilometers. Like the Nile again, the Indus then deposits its burden of rich soil as it courses through lowlands and loses its force. Today, a series of dams has largely tamed the Indus, but for most of history it spilled its waters annually over a vast floodplain, sometimes with devastating effect. Much less predictable than the Nile, the Indus has many times left its channel altogether and carved a new course to the sea.

Despite its occasional ferocity, the Indus made agricultural society possible in northern India. Early cultivators sowed wheat and barley in September, after the flood receded, and harvested their crops the following spring. Inhabitants of the valley supplemented their harvests of wheat and barley with meat from herds of cattle, sheep, and goats. Their diet also included poultry: cultivators in the Indus valley kept flocks of the world's first domesticated chickens. Indus valley inhabitants cultivated cotton probably before 5000 B.C.E., and fragments of dyed cloth dating to about 2000 B.C.E. testify to the existence of a cotton textile industry.

As in Mesopotamia and Egypt, agricultural surpluses in India vastly increased the food supply, stimulated population growth, and supported the establishment of cities and specialized labor. Between 3000 and 2500 B.C.E., Dravidian peoples built a complex society that dominated the Indus River valley until its decline after 1900 B.C.E. The agricultural surplus of the Indus valley fed two large cities, Harappa and Mohenjo-daro, as well as subordinate cities and a vast agricultural hinterland. Archaeologists have excavated about seventy Harappan settlements along the Indus River. Harappan society embraced much of modern-day Pakistan and a large part of northern India as well—a territory about 1.3 million square kilometers (502,000 square miles)—and thus was considerably larger than either Mesopotamian or Egyptian society.

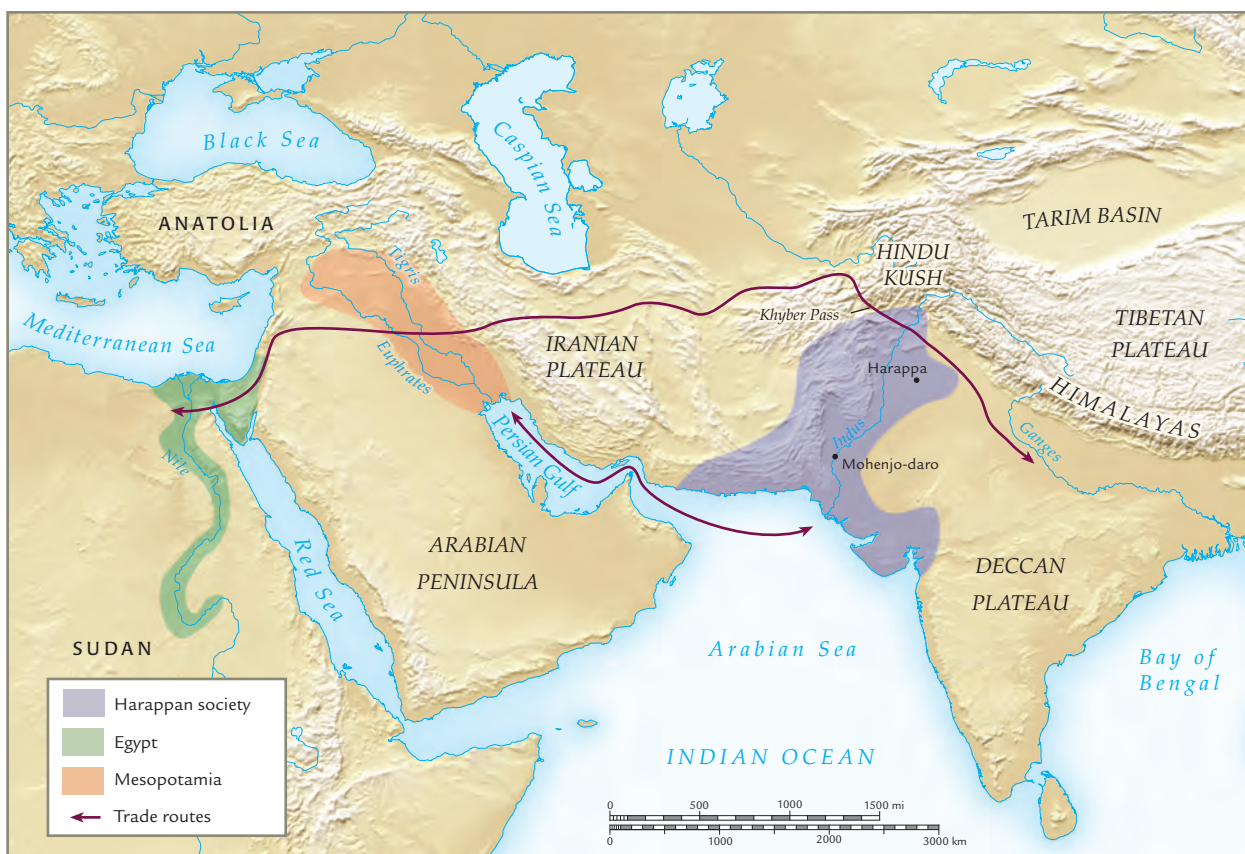
No evidence survives concerning the Harappan political system. Archaeological excavations have turned up no evidence of a royal or imperial authority. It is possible that, like the early Sumerian city-states, the Harappan cities were economic and political centers for their own regions. Because of their large size, however, Harappa and Mohenjo-daro were especially prominent in Harappan society even if they did not dominate the Indus valley politically or militarily. The population of Mohenjo-daro was thirty-five to forty thousand, and Harappa was probably slightly smaller. Archaeologists have discovered the sites of about 1,500 Harappan settlements, but none of the others approached the size of Harappa or Mohenjo-daro.

Both Harappa and Mohenjo-daro had city walls, a fortified citadel, and a large granary, suggesting that they served as centers of political authority and sites for the collection and redistribution of taxes paid in the form of grain. The two cities represented a considerable investment of human labor and other resources: both featured marketplaces, temples, public buildings, extensive residential districts, and broad streets laid out on a carefully planned grid so that they ran north-south or east-west. Mohenjo-daro also had a large pool, perhaps used for religious or ritual purposes, with private dressing rooms for bathers.

The two cities clearly established the patterns that shaped the larger society: weights, measures, architectural styles, and even brick sizes were consistent throughout the land, even though the Harappan society stretched almost 1,500 kilometers (932 miles) from one end to the other. This standardization no doubt reflects the prominence of Harappa and Mohenjo-daro as powerful and wealthy cities whose influence touched all parts of Harappan society. The high degree of standardization was possible also because the Indus River facilitated trade, travel, and communications among the far-flung regions of Harappan society.

### *Political Organization*

### *Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro*



**Map 4.1 Harappan society and its neighbors, ca. 2000 B.C.E.** Compare Harappan society with its Mesopotamian and Egyptian contemporaries with respect to size. What conditions would have been necessary to enable trade to flow between the Indus River valley and Mesopotamia?

### *Specialized Labor and Trade*

Like all complex societies in ancient times, Harappa depended on a successful agricultural economy. But Harappans also engaged in trade, both domestic and foreign. Pottery, tools, and decorative items produced in Harappa and Mohenjo-daro found their way to all corners of the Indus valley. From neighboring peoples in Persia and the Hindu Kush mountains, the Harappans obtained gold, silver, copper, lead, gems, and semiprecious stones. During the period about 2300 to 1750 B.C.E., they also traded with Mesopotamians, exchanging Indian copper, ivory, beads, and semiprecious stones for Sumerian wool, leather, and olive oil. Some of that trade may have gone by land over the Iranian plateau, but most of it probably traveled by ships that followed the coastline of the Arabian Sea between the mouth of the Indus River and the Persian Gulf.

### *Harappan Society and Culture*

Like societies in Mesopotamia and Egypt, Harappan society generated considerable wealth. Excavations at Mohenjo-daro show that at its high point, from about 2500 to 2000 B.C.E., the city was a thriving economic center with a population of about forty thousand. Goldsmiths, potters, weavers, masons, and architects, among other



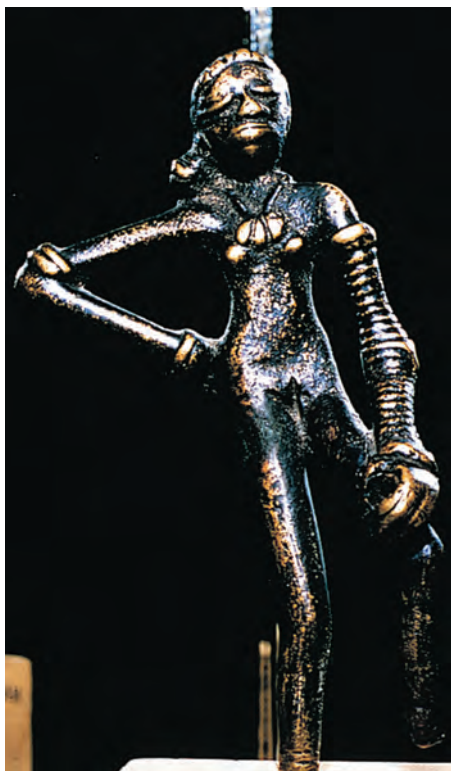
■ This aerial view of the excavations at Mohenjo-daro illustrates the careful planning and precise layout of the city.

professionals, maintained shops that lined Mohenjo-daro's streets. Other cities also housed communities of jewelers, artists, and merchants.

The wealth of Harappan society, like that in Mesopotamia and Egypt, encouraged the formation of social distinctions. Harappans built no pyramids, palaces, or magnificent tombs, but their rulers wielded great authority from the citadels at Harappa and Mohenjo-daro. It is clear from Harappan dwellings that rich and poor lived in very different styles. In Mohenjo-daro, for example, many people lived in one-room tenements in barrackslike structures, but there were also individual houses of two and three stories with a dozen rooms and an interior courtyard, as well as a few large houses with several dozen rooms and multiple courtyards. Most of the larger houses had their own wells and built-in brick ovens. Almost all houses had private bathrooms with showers and toilets that drained into city sewage systems. The water and sewage systems of Mohenjo-daro were among the most sophisticated of the ancient world, and they represented a tremendous investment of community resources.

In the absence of deciphered writing, Harappan beliefs and values are even more difficult to interpret than politics and society. Archaeologists have discovered samples of Harappan writing dating as early as 3300 B.C.E., and they have recovered hundreds of seals bearing illustrations and written inscriptions. Scholars have been able to identify several symbols representing names or words, but not enough to understand the significance of the texts. Even without written texts, however, material remains shed

#### *Social Distinctions*

*Fertility Cults*

**Bronze statuette of a dancing girl from Mohenjo-daro.**

some tantalizing light on Harappan society. A variety of statues, figurines, and illustrations carved onto seals reflect a tradition of representational art as well as expertise in gold, copper, and bronze metallurgy. A particularly striking statue is a bronze figurine of a dancing girl discovered at Mohenjo-daro. Provocatively posed and clad only in bracelets and a necklace, the figure expresses a remarkable suppleness and liveliness.

Harappan religion reflected a strong concern for fertility. Like other early agricultural societies, Harappans venerated gods and goddesses whom they associated with creation and procreation. They recognized a mother goddess and a horned fertility god, and they held trees and animals sacred because of their associations with vital forces. For lack of written descriptions, it is impossible to characterize Harappan religious beliefs more specifically. Many scholars believe, however, that some Harappan deities survived the collapse of the larger society and found places later in the Hindu pantheon. Fertility and procreation are prominent concerns in

popular Hinduism, and scholars have often noticed similarities between Harappan and Hindu deities associated with those values.

*Harappan Decline*

Sometime after 1900 B.C.E., Harappan society entered a period of decline. One cause was ecological degradation: Harappans deforested the Indus valley to clear land for cultivation and to obtain firewood. Deforestation led to erosion of topsoil and also to reduced amounts of rainfall. Over hundreds of years—perhaps half a millennium or more—most of the Indus valley became a desert, and agriculture is possible there today only with the aid of artificial irrigation. Those climatic and ecological changes reduced agricultural yields, and Harappan society faced a subsistence crisis during the centuries after 1900 B.C.E.

It is also likely that natural catastrophes—periodic flooding of the Indus River or earthquakes—weakened Harappan society. Archaeologists found more than thirty unburied human skeletons scattered about the streets and buildings of Mohenjo-daro. No sign of criminal or military violence accounts for their presence, but a sudden flood or earthquake could have trapped some residents who were unable to flee the impending disaster. In any case, by about 1700 B.C.E., the populations of Harappa and Mohenjo-daro had abandoned the cities as mounting difficulties made it impossible to sustain complex urban societies. Some of the smaller, subordinate cities outlived Harappa and Mohenjo-daro, but by about 1500 B.C.E., Harappan cities had almost entirely collapsed.

Decline of the cities, however, did not mean the total disappearance of Harappan social and cultural traditions. In many ways, Harappan traditions survived the decline of the cities, because peoples from other societies adopted Harappan ways for their



The carving on a seal discovered at Mohenjo-daro depicts a man wearing cattle horns and meditating while surrounded by both domestic and wild animals. The figure may well represent a Harappan deity.

own purposes. Cultivation of wheat, barley, and cotton continued to flourish in the Indus valley long after the decline of Harappan society. Harappan deities and religious beliefs intrigued migrants to India and found a home in new societies. Eventually, cities themselves returned to south Asia, and, in some cases, Harappan urban traditions may even have inspired the establishment of new cities.

## The Indo-European Migrations and Early Aryan India

During the second millennium B.C.E., as Harappan society declined, bands of foreigners filtered into the Indian subcontinent and settled throughout the Indus valley and beyond. Most prominent were nomadic and pastoral peoples speaking Indo-European languages who called themselves Aryans (“noble people”). By 1500 B.C.E. or perhaps somewhat earlier, they had begun to file through the passes of the Hindu Kush mountains and establish small herding and agricultural communities throughout northern India.

Their migrations took place over several centuries; by no means did the arrival of the Aryans constitute an invasion or an organized military campaign. It is likely that Indo-European migrants clashed with Dravidians and other peoples already settled in



India, but there is no indication that the Aryans conquered or destroyed Harappan society. By the time the Indo-Europeans entered India, internal problems had already brought Harappan society to the point of collapse. During the centuries after 1500 B.C.E., Dravidian and Indo-European peoples intermarried, interacted, and laid social and cultural foundations that would influence Indian society to the present day.

### *The Aryans and India*

#### *The Early Aryans*

When they entered India, the Aryans practiced a limited amount of agriculture, but they depended much more heavily on a pastoral economy. They kept sheep and goats, but they especially prized their horses and herds of cattle. Horses were quite valuable because of their expense and relative rarity: horses do not breed well in India, so it was necessary for Aryans to replenish their supplies of horseflesh by importing animals from central Asia. Like their Indo-European cousins to the north, the Aryans harnessed horses to carts or wagons to facilitate transportation, and they also hitched them to chariots, which proved to be devastating war machines when deployed against peoples who made no use of horsepower. Meanwhile, cattle became the principal measure of wealth in early Aryan society. The Aryans consumed both dairy products and beef—cattle did not become sacred, protected animals (as they are today among Hindus) until many centuries after the Aryans' arrival—and they often calculated prices in terms of cattle. Wealthy individuals in early Aryan society usually owned extensive herds of cattle.

#### *The Vedas*

The early Aryans did not use writing, but they composed numerous poems and songs. Indeed, they preserved extensive collections of religious and literary works by memorizing them and transmitting them orally from one generation to another in their sacred language, Sanskrit. (For everyday communication, the Aryans relied on a related but less formal tongue known as Prakrit, which later evolved into Hindi, Bengali, Urdu, and other languages currently spoken in northern India.) The earliest of those orally transmitted works were the Vedas, which were collections of hymns, songs, prayers, and rituals honoring the various gods of the Aryans. There are four Vedas, the earliest and most important of which is the *Rig Veda*, a collection of some 1,028 hymns addressed to Aryan gods. Aryan priests compiled the *Rig Veda* between about 1400 and 900 B.C.E., and they committed it to writing, along with the three later Vedas, about 600 B.C.E.

The Vedas represent a priestly perspective on affairs: the word *veda* means “wisdom” or “knowledge” and refers to the knowledge that priests needed to carry out their functions. While transmitting religious knowledge, however, the Vedas also shed considerable light on early Aryan society in India. In view of their importance as historical sources, scholars refer to Indian history during the millennium between 1500 and 500 B.C.E. as the Vedic age.

#### *The Vedic Age*

The Vedas reflect a boisterous society in which the Aryans clashed repeatedly with the Dravidians and other peoples already living in India. The Vedas refer frequently to conflicts between Aryans and indigenous peoples whom the Aryans called *dasas*, meaning “enemies” or “subject peoples.” The Vedas identify Indra, the Aryan war god and military hero, as one who ravaged citadels, smashed dams, and destroyed forts the way age consumes cloth garments. These characterizations suggest that the Aryans clashed frequently with the Dravidians of the Indus valley, attacking their cities and wrecking the irrigation systems that had supported agriculture in Harappan society. It is clear that Aryans often had friendly relations with Dravidian peoples: they learned about the land, for example, and adopted Dravidian agricultural techniques when they settled in villages. Nevertheless, competition over land and resources fueled intermittent conflict between Aryan and Dravidian peoples.

The Aryans also fought ferociously among themselves. They did not have a state or common government but, rather, formed hundreds of chiefdoms organized around herding communities and agricultural villages. Most of the chiefdoms had a leader known as a *raja*—a Sanskrit term related to the Latin word *rex* (“king”)—who governed in collaboration with a council of village elders. Given the large number of chiefdoms, there was enormous potential for conflict in Aryan society. The men of one village often raided the herds of their neighbors—an offense of great significance, since the Aryans regarded cattle as the chief form of wealth in their society. Occasionally, too, ambitious chiefs sought to extend their authority by conquering neighbors and dominating the regions surrounding their communities.

During the early centuries of the Vedic age, Aryan groups settled in the Punjab, the upper Indus River valley that straddles the modern-day border between northern India and Pakistan. These migrations were some of the most prominent waves in the larger process of early Indo-European migrations (discussed in chapter 2). After establishing themselves in the Punjab, Aryan migrants spread east and south and established communities throughout much of the Indian subcontinent. After 1000 B.C.E. they began to settle in the area between the Himalayan foothills and the Ganges River. About that same time they learned how to make iron tools, and with axes and iron-tipped plows they cleared forests and established agricultural communities in the Ganges valley. Iron implements enabled them to cultivate more land, produce more food, and support larger communities, which in turn encouraged them to push deeper into the Ganges River valley. There they began to cultivate rice rather than the wheat and barley that were staple crops in the Punjab. Since rice is a highly productive crop, it provided food for rapidly expanding populations. By about 750 B.C.E., populations had increased enough that Aryans had established the first small cities in the Ganges River valley. Indeed, population became so dense in northern India that some Aryans decided to move along and seek their fortunes elsewhere. By 500 B.C.E. Aryan groups had migrated as far south as the northern Deccan, a plateau region in the southern cone of the Indian subcontinent about 1,500 kilometers (950 miles) south of the Punjab.

As they settled into permanent communities and began to rely more on agriculture than herding, the Aryans gradually lost the tribal political organization that they had brought into India and evolved more formal political institutions. In a few places,



**This bronze sword manufactured by Aryan craftsmen was a much stronger and more effective weapon than those available to Harappan defenders.**

*Aryan Migrations in India*

*Changing Political Organization*

especially in the isolated hilly and mountainous regions of northern India, councils of elders won recognition as the principal sources of political authority. They directed the affairs of small republics—states governed by representatives of the citizens. In most places, though, chiefdoms developed into regional kingdoms. Between 1000 and 500 B.C.E., tribal chiefs worked increasingly from permanent capitals and depended on the services of professional administrators. They did not build large imperial states: not until the fourth century B.C.E. did an Indian state embrace as much territory as Harappan society. But they established regional kingdoms as the most common form of political organization throughout most of the subcontinent.

### *Origins of the Caste System*

Although they did not build a large-scale political structure, the Aryans constructed a well-defined social order. Indeed, in some ways their social hierarchy served to maintain the order and stability that states and political structures guaranteed in other societies, such as Mesopotamia, Egypt, and China. The Aryan social structure rested on sharp hereditary distinctions between individuals and groups, according to their occupations and roles in society. Those distinctions became the foundation of the caste system, which largely determined the places that individuals and groups occupied in society.

The term *caste* comes from the Portuguese word *casta*, and it refers to a social class of hereditary and usually unchangeable status. When Portuguese merchants and mariners visited India during the sixteenth century C.E., they noticed the sharp, inherited distinctions between different social groups, which they referred to as castes. Scholars have employed the term *caste* ever since in reference to the Indian social order.

The caste system did not come into being overnight. Rather, caste identities developed slowly and gradually as the Aryans established settlements throughout India. When the Aryans first entered India, they probably had a fairly simple society consisting of herders and cultivators led by warrior-chiefs and priests. As they settled in India, however, growing social complexity and interaction with Dravidian peoples prompted them to refine their social distinctions. The Aryans used the term *varna*, a Sanskrit word meaning “color,” to refer to the major social classes. This terminology suggests that social distinctions arose partly from differences in complexion between the Aryans, who referred to themselves as “wheat-colored,” and the darker-skinned Dravidians. Over time Aryans and Dravidians mixed, mingled, interacted, and intermarried to the point that distinguishing between them was impossible. Nevertheless, in early Vedic times differences between the two peoples probably prompted Aryans to base social distinctions on Aryan or Dravidian ancestry.

After about 1000 B.C.E. the Aryans increasingly recognized four main *varnas*: *brahmins* (priests); *kshatriyas* (warriors and aristocrats); *vaishyas* (cultivators, artisans, and merchants); and *shudras* (landless peasants and serfs). Some centuries later, probably about the end of the Vedic age, they added the category of the *untouchables*—people who performed dirty or unpleasant tasks, such as butchering animals or handling dead bodies, and who theoretically became so polluted from their work that their very touch could defile individuals of higher status. A late hymn of the *Rig Veda*, composed probably around 1000 B.C.E., offers a priestly perspective on *varna* distinctions. According to the hymn, the gods created the four *varnas* during the early days of the world and produced brahmins and kshatriyas as the most honorable human groups that would lead their societies. Thus during the late Vedic age the recognition of *varnas* and theories of their origins had the effect of enhancing the status and power of priestly and aristocratic classes.

*Caste and Varna*

*Social Distinctions  
in the Late  
Vedic Age*

Until about the sixth century B.C.E., the four *varnas* described Vedic society reasonably well. Because they did not live in cities and did not yet pursue many specialized occupations, the Aryans had little need for a more complicated social order. Over the longer term, however, a much more elaborate scheme of social classification emerged. As Vedic society became more complex and generated increasingly specialized occupations, the caste system served as the umbrella for a complicated hierarchy of subcastes known as *jati*. Occupation largely determined an individual's *jati*: people working at the same or similar tasks in a given area belonged to the same subcaste, and their offspring joined them in both occupation and *jati* membership. By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries C.E., in its most fully articulated form, the system featured several thousand *jati*, which prescribed individuals' roles in society in minute detail. Brahmins alone divided themselves into some 1,800 *jati*. Even untouchables belonged to *jati*, and some of them looked down upon others as far more miserable and polluted than themselves.

### *Subcastes and Jati*

Castes and subcastes deeply influenced the lives of individual Indians through much of history. Members of a *jati* ate with one another and intermarried, and they cared for those who became ill or fell on hard times. Elaborate rules dictated forms of address and specific behavior appropriate for communication between members of different castes and subcastes. Violation of *jati* rules could result in expulsion from the larger group. That penalty was serious, since an outcaste individual could not function well and sometimes could not even survive when shunned by all members of the larger society.

The caste system never functioned in an absolutely rigid or inflexible manner but, rather, operated so as to accommodate social change. Indeed, if the system had entirely lacked the capacity to change and reflect new social conditions, it would have disappeared. Individual vaishyas or shudras occasionally turned to new lines of work and prospered on the basis of their initiative, for example, and individual brahmins or kshatriyas sometimes fell on hard times, lost their positions of honor, and moved down in the social hierarchy. More often, however, social mobility came about as the result of group rather than individual efforts, as members of *jati* improved their condition collectively. Achieving upward mobility was not an easy matter—it often entailed moving to a new area or at least taking on a new line of work—but the possibility of improving individual or group status helped to dissipate tensions that otherwise might have severely tested Indian society.

### *Caste and Social Mobility*

The caste system also enabled foreign peoples to find a place in Indian society. The Aryans were by no means the only foreigners to cross the passes of the Hindu Kush and enter India. Many others followed them over the course of the centuries and, upon arrival, sooner or later organized themselves into well-defined groups and adopted caste identities.

By the end of the Vedic age, caste distinctions had become central institutions in Aryan India. Whereas in other lands, states and empires maintained public order, in India the caste system served as a principal foundation of social organization. Individuals have often identified more closely with their *jati* than with their cities or states, and castes have played a large role in maintaining social discipline in India.

## *The Development of Patriarchal Society*

While building an elaborate social hierarchy on the foundations of caste and *varna* distinctions, the Aryans also constructed a strongly patriarchal social order on the basis of gender distinctions. At the time of their migrations into India, men already dominated Aryan society. All priests, warriors, and tribal chiefs were men, and the

## Sources from the Past

### The Rig Veda on the Origin of the Castes

*Priests compiled the Rig Veda over a period of half a millennium, and the work inevitably reflects changing conditions of Aryan India. One of the later hymns of the Rig Veda offers a brief account of the world's creation and the origin of the four castes (varnas). The creation came when the gods sacrificed Purusha, a primeval being who existed before the universe and brought the world with all its creatures and features into being. The late date of this hymn suggests that the Aryans began to recognize the four castes about 1000 B.C.E. The hymn clearly reflects the interests of the brahmin priests who composed it.*

A thousand heads hath Purusha, a thousand eyes, a thousand feet.

He covered earth on every side and spread ten finger's breadth beyond.

This Purusha is all that hath been and all that is to be,  
The Lord of Immortality which waxes greater still by food.

So mighty is his greatness; yea, greater than this is Purusha.

All creatures are one-fourth of him, [the other] three-fourths [of him are] eternal life in heaven. . . .

When the gods prepared the sacrifice with Purusha as their offering,

Its oil was spring, the holy gift was autumn; summer was the wood. . . .

From that great general sacrifice the dripping fat was gathered up.

He formed the creatures of the air, and animals both wild and tame.

From that great general sacrifice [sages] and [ritual hymns] were born.

Therefrom were [spells and charms] produced; the Yajas [a book of ritual formulas] had its birth from it.

From it were horses born; from it all creatures with two rows of teeth.

From it were generated [cattle], from it the goats and sheep were born.

When they divided Purusha, how many portions did they make?

What do they call his mouth, his arms? What do they call his thighs and feet?

The *brahmin* was his mouth, of both his arms was the *kshatriya* made.

His thighs became the *vaishya*, from his feet the *shudra* was produced.

The moon was gendered from his mind, and from his eye the sun had birth;

Indra and Agni [the god of fire] from his mouth were born, and Vayu [the wind] from his breath.

Forth from his navel came mid-air; the sky was fashioned from his head;

Earth from his feet, and from his ear the regions. Thus they formed the worlds.

#### FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

How does this passage from the *Rig Veda* compare with accounts of the world's creation offered by other religious and scientific traditions?

SOURCE: Ralph T. Griffith, trans. *The Hymns of the Rigveda*, 4 vols., 2nd ed. Benares: E. J. Lazarus, 1889–92, 4:289–93. (Translation slightly modified.)

Aryans recognized descent through the male line. Women influenced affairs within their families but enjoyed no public authority. By maintaining and reinforcing gender distinctions, the Aryans established a patriarchal social order that stood alongside the caste system and *varna* hierarchy as a prominent feature of their society.

As the Aryans settled in agricultural communities throughout India, they maintained a thoroughly patriarchal society. Only males could inherit property, unless a family had no male heirs, and only men could preside over family rituals that honored departed ancestors. Because they had no priestly responsibilities, women rarely

learned the Vedas, and formal education in Sanskrit remained almost exclusively a male preserve.

The patriarchal spokesmen of Vedic society sought to place women explicitly under the authority of men. During the first century B.C.E. or perhaps somewhat later, an anonymous sage prepared a work and attributed it to Manu, founder of the human race according to Indian mythology. Much of the work, known as the *Lawbook of Manu*, dealt with proper moral behavior and social relationships, including sex and gender relationships. Although composed after the Vedic age, the *Lawbook of Manu* reflected the society constructed earlier under Aryan influence. The author advised men to treat women with honor and respect, but he insisted that women remain subject to the guidance of the principal men in their lives—first their fathers, then their husbands, and, finally, if they survived their husbands, their sons. The *Lawbook* also specified that the most important duties of women were to bear children and maintain wholesome homes for their families.

Thus, like Mesopotamian, Egyptian, and other early agricultural societies, Vedic India constructed and maintained a deeply patriarchal social order. One Indian custom demonstrated in especially dramatic fashion the dependence of women on their men—the practice of *sati* (or, *suttee*), by which a widow voluntarily threw herself on the funeral pyre of her deceased husband to join him in death. Although widows occasionally entered the fires during the Vedic age and in later centuries, *sati* never became a popular or widely practiced custom in India. Nevertheless, moralists often recommended *sati* for widows of socially prominent men, since their example would effectively illustrate the devotion of women to their husbands and reinforce the value that Indian society placed on the subordination of women.



*The Lawbook of Manu*

Sati

This greenish-blue schist carving illustrates the devotion of a mother to her child.

## Religion in the Vedic Age

As the caste system emerged and helped to organize Indian society, distinctive cultural and religious traditions also took shape. The Aryans entered India with traditions and beliefs that met the needs of a mobile and often violent society. During the early centuries after their arrival in India, those inherited traditions served them well as they fought to establish a place for themselves in the subcontinent. As they spread throughout India and mixed with the Dravidians, however, the Aryans encountered new religious ideas that they considered intriguing and persuasive. The resulting fusion of Aryan traditions with Dravidian beliefs and values laid the foundation for Hinduism, a faith immensely popular in India and parts of southeast Asia for more than two millennia.

### *Aryan Religion*

As in Mesopotamia, Egypt, and other lands, religious values in India reflected the larger society. During the early centuries following their migrations, for example, the Aryans

sati (suh-tee)

spread through the Punjab and other parts of India, often fighting with the Dravidians and even among themselves. The hymns, songs, and prayers collected in the *Rig Veda* throw considerable light on Aryan values during this period.

### Aryan Gods

The chief deity of the *Rig Veda* was Indra, the boisterous and often violent character who was partial both to fighting and to strong drink. Indra was primarily a war god. The Aryans portrayed him as the wielder of thunderbolts who led them into battle against their enemies. Indra also had a domestic dimension: the Aryans associated him with the weather and especially with the coming of rain to water the crops and the land. The Aryans also recognized a host of other deities, including gods of the sun, the sky, the moon, fire, health, disease, dawn, and the underworld. The preeminence of Indra, however, reflects the instability and turbulence of early Vedic society.

Although the Aryans accorded high respect to Indra and his military leadership, their religion did not neglect ethics. They believed that the god Varuna presided over the sky from his heavenly palace, where he oversaw the behavior of mortals and preserved the cosmic order. Varuna and his helpers despised lying and evil deeds of all sorts, and they afflicted malefactors with severe punishments, including disease and death. They dispatched the souls of serious evildoers to the subterranean House of Clay, a dreary and miserable realm of punishment, while allowing souls of the virtuous to enter the Aryan heaven known as the World of the Fathers.

### Ritual Sacrifices



**Accompanied by an attendant bearing his banner and weapons, Indra rides an elephant that carries him through the clouds, while a king and a crowd of people in the landscape below worship a sacred tree.**

### Spirituality

Yet that ethical concern was a relatively minor aspect of Aryan religion during early Vedic times. Far more important from a practical point of view was the proper performance of ritual sacrifices by which the Aryans hoped to win the favor of the gods. By the time the Aryans entered India, those sacrifices had become complex and elaborate affairs. They involved the slaughter of dozens and sometimes even hundreds of specially prepared animals—cattle, sheep, goats, and horses from the Aryans' herds—as priests spoke the sacred and mysterious chants and worshipers partook of soma, a hallucinogenic concoction that produced sensations of power and divine inspiration. The Aryans believed that during the sacrificial event their gods visited the earth and joined the worshipers in ritual eating and drinking. By pleasing the gods with frequent and large sacrifices, the Aryans expected to gain divine support that would ensure military success, large families, long life, and abundant herds of cattle. But those rewards required constant attention to religious ritual: proper honor for the gods called for households to have brahmins perform no fewer than five sacrifices per day—a time-consuming and expensive obligation.

Later in the Vedic age, Aryan religious thought underwent a remarkable evolution. As the centuries passed, many Aryans

became dissatisfied with the sacrificial cults of the Vedas, which increasingly seemed like sterile and mechanical rituals rather than a genuine means of communicating with the gods. Even brahmins sometimes became disenchanted with rituals that did not satisfy spiritual longings. Beginning about 800 B.C.E. many thoughtful individuals left their villages and retreated to the forests of the Ganges valley, where they lived as hermits and reflected on the relationships between human beings, the world, and the gods. They contemplated the Vedas and sought mystical understandings of the texts, and they attracted disciples who also thirsted for a spiritually fulfilling faith.

These mystics drew considerable inspiration from the religious beliefs of Dravidian peoples, who often worshiped nature spirits that they associated with fertility and the generation of new life. Dravidians also believed that human souls took on new physical forms after the deaths of their bodily hosts. Sometimes souls returned as plants or animals, sometimes in the bodily shell of newborn humans. The notion that souls could experience transmigration and reincarnation—that an individual soul could depart one body at death and become associated with another body through a new birth—intrigued thoughtful people and encouraged them to try to understand the principles that governed the fate of souls. As a result, a remarkable tradition of religious speculation emerged.

### *The Blending of Aryan and Dravidian Values*

Traces of that tradition appear in the Vedas, but it achieved its fullest development in a body of works known as the Upanishads, which began to appear late in the Vedic age, about 800 to 400 B.C.E. (Later Upanishads continued to appear until the fifteenth century C.E., but the most important were those composed during the late Vedic age.) The word *upanishad* literally means “a sitting in front of,” and it refers to the practice of disciples gathering before a sage for discussion of religious issues. Most of the disciples were men, but not all. Gargi Vakaknavi, for example, was a woman who drove the eminent sage Yajnavalkya to exasperation because he could not answer her persistent questions. The Upanishads often took the form of dialogues that explored the Vedas and the religious issues that they raised.

The Upanishads taught that appearances are deceiving, that individual human beings in fact are not separate and autonomous creatures. Instead, each person participates in a larger cosmic order and forms a small part of a universal soul, known as *Brahman*. Whereas the physical world is a theater of change, instability, and illusion, Brahman is an eternal, unchanging, permanent foundation for all things that exist—hence the only genuine reality. The authors of the Upanishads believed that individual souls were born into the physical world not once, but many times: they believed that souls appeared most often as humans, but sometimes as animals, and possibly even occasionally as plants or other vegetable matter. The highest goal of the individual soul, however, was to escape this cycle of birth and rebirth and enter into permanent union with Brahman.

The Upanishads developed several specific doctrines to explain this line of thought. One was the doctrine of *samsara*, which held that upon death, individual souls go temporarily to the World of the Fathers and then return to earth in a new incarnation. Another was the doctrine of *karma*, which accounted for the specific incarnations that souls experienced. The *Bṛhadaranyaka Upanishad* offers a succinct explanation of the workings of karma: “Now as a man is like this or like that, according as he acts and according as he behaves, so will he be: a man of good acts will become good, a man of bad acts, bad. He becomes pure by pure deeds, bad by bad deeds.” Thus individuals who lived virtuous lives and fulfilled all their duties could expect rebirth into a purer

### *The Upanishads*

### *Brahman, the Universal Soul*

### *Teachings of the Upanishads*

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Upanishads (oo-PAHN-ee-shahds)



## Sources from the Past

### The Mundaka Upanishad on the Nature of Brahman

*Indian commentators often spoke of the Mundaka Upanishad as “the shaving Upanishad” because, like a razor, it cut off errors arising in the mind. Its purpose was to teach knowledge of Brahman, which it held was not accessible through sacrifices, rites, or even worship. Only proper instruction would bring understanding of Brahman.*

Brahma was before the gods were, the Creator of all, the Guardian of the Universe. The vision of Brahman, the foundation of all wisdom, he gave in revelation to his first-born son Atharvan.

That vision and wisdom of Brahman given to Atharvan, he in olden times revealed to Angira. And Angira gave it to Satyavaha, who in succession revealed it to Angiras.

Now there was a man whose name was Saunaka, owner of a great household, who, approaching one day Angiras with reverence, asked him this question: “Master, what is that which, when known, all is known?” The Master replied: Sages say there are two kinds of wisdom, the higher and the lower.

The lower wisdom is in the four sacred *Vedas*, and in the six kinds of knowledge that help to know, to sing, and to use the *Vedas*: definition and grammar, pronunciation and poetry, ritual and the signs of heaven. But the higher wisdom is that which leads to the Eternal [i.e., Brahman].

He is beyond thought and invisible, beyond family and colour. He has neither eyes nor ears; he has neither hands nor feet. He is everlasting and omnipresent, infinite in the great and infinite in the small. He is the Eternal whom the sages see as the source of all creation.

Even as a spider sends forth and draws in its thread, even as plants arise from the earth and hairs from the body of man, even so the whole creation arises from the Eternal.

By *Tapas*, the power of meditation, Brahman attains expansion and then comes primeval matter. And from this comes life and mind, the elements and the worlds and the immortality of ritual action.

From that Spirit [Brahman] who knows all and sees all, whose *Tapas* is pure vision, from him comes [the

god] Brahma, the creator, name and form and primal matter. . . .

This is the truth: As from a fire aflame thousands of sparks come forth, even so from the Creator an infinity of beings have life and to him return again.

But the spirit of light above form, never-born, within all, outside all, is in radiance above life and mind, and beyond this creation’s Creator.

From him comes all life and mind, and the senses of all life. From him comes space and light, air and fire and water, and this earth that holds us all.

The head of his body is fire, and his eyes the sun and the moon; his ears, the regions of heaven, and the sacred *Vedas* his word. His breath is the wind that blows, and this whole universe is his heart. The earth is his footstool. He is the Spirit that is in all things.

From him comes the sun, and the source of all fire is the sun.

From him comes the moon, and from this comes the rain and all herbs that grow upon earth. And man comes from him, and man unto woman gives seed; and thus an infinity of beings come from the Spirit supreme. . . .

From him the oceans and mountains; and all rivers come from him. And all herbs and the essence of all whereby the Inner Spirit dwells with the elements: all come from him.

#### FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

How does the understanding of the world as articulated in the *Mundaka Upanishad* compare and contrast with the view outlined in the story of Purusha’s sacrifice as told in the selection from the *Rig Veda* presented earlier?

SOURCE: Juan Mascaró, trans. *The Upanishads*. London: Penguin, 1965, pp. 75–78.



A cave painting from an undetermined age, perhaps several thousand years ago, shows that early inhabitants of India lived in close company with other residents of the natural world.

and more honorable existence—for example, into a higher and more distinguished caste. Those who accumulated a heavy burden of karma, however, would suffer in a future incarnation by being reborn into a difficult existence, or perhaps even into the body of an animal or an insect.

Even under the best of circumstances, the cycle of rebirth involved a certain amount of pain and suffering that inevitably accompany human existence. The authors of the Upanishads sought to escape the cycle altogether and attain the state of *moksha*, which they characterized as a deep, dreamless sleep that came with permanent liberation from physical incarnation. That goal was difficult to reach, since it entailed severing all ties to the physical world and identifying with the ultimate reality of Brahman, the universal soul. The two principal means to *moksha* were asceticism and meditation. By embarking on a regime of extreme asceticism—leading extremely simple lives and denying themselves all pleasure—individuals could purge themselves of desire for the comforts of the physical world. By practicing yoga, a form of intense and disciplined meditation, they could concentrate on the nature of Brahman and its relationship to their souls. Diligent efforts, then, would enable individuals to achieve *moksha* by separating themselves from the physical world of change, illusion, and incarnation. Then their souls would merge with Brahman, and they would experience eternal, peaceful ecstasy.

Just as brahmin theories about the origins of *varna* distinctions reflected Aryan society about 1000 B.C.E., so the religious views of the Upanishads dovetailed with the social order of the late Vedic age. Indeed, modern commentators have sometimes interpreted the worldview of the Upanishads—particularly the doctrines of *samsara* and *karma*—as a cynical ideology designed to justify the social inequalities imposed by the caste system. The doctrines of *samsara* and *karma* certainly reinforced the Vedic social

*Religion and  
Vedic Society*

order: they explained why individuals were born into their castes—because they had behaved virtuously or badly during a previous incarnation—and they encouraged individuals to observe their caste duties in hopes of enjoying a more comfortable and honorable incarnation in the future.

It would be overly simplistic, however, to consider these doctrines merely efforts of a hereditary elite to justify its position and maintain its hegemony over other classes of society. The sages who gave voice to these doctrines were conscientiously attempting to deal with genuine spiritual and intellectual problems. To them the material world seemed supremely superficial—a realm of constant change and illusion offering no clear sign as to the nature of ultimate reality. It seemed logical to suppose that a more real and substantial world stood behind the one that they inhabited. Greek philosophers, Christian theologians, and many others have arrived at similar positions during the course of the centuries. It should come as no great surprise, then, that the authors of the Upanishads sought ultimate truth and certain knowledge in an ideal world that transcends our own. Their formulation of concepts such as *samsara* and *karma* represented efforts to characterize the relationship between the world of physical incarnation and the realm of ultimate truth and reality.

The Upanishads not only influenced Indian thought about the nature of the world but also called for the observance of high ethical standards. They discouraged greed, envy, gluttony, and all manner of vice, since those traits indicated excessive attachment to the material world and insufficient concentration on union with the universal soul. The Upanishads advocated honesty, self-control, charity, and mercy. Most of all, they encouraged the cultivation of personal integrity—a self-knowledge that would incline individuals naturally toward both ethical behavior and union with Brahman. The Upanishads also taught respect for all living things, animal as well as human. Animal bodies, after all, might well hold incarnations of unfortunate souls suffering the effects of a heavy debt of *karma*. Despite the evil behavior of these souls in their earlier incarnations, devout individuals would not wish to cause them additional suffering or harm. A vegetarian diet thus became a common feature of the ascetic regime.

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**L**ike sub-Saharan African and other regions of Eurasia, south Asia was a land of cross-cultural interaction and exchange even in ancient times. Knowledge of agriculture made its way to the Indian subcontinent as early as 7000 B.C.E., probably from southwest Asia, and a productive agricultural economy made it possible for Dravidian peoples to build a sophisticated society in the Indus River valley and to trade with peoples as far away as Mesopotamia. The arrival of Aryan migrants led to intense and systematic interactions between peoples of markedly different social and cultural traditions. Although they no doubt often engaged in conflicts, they also found ways of dealing with one another and living together in a common land. By the end of the Vedic age, the merging of Aryan and Dravidian traditions had generated a distinctive Indian society. Agriculture and herding had spread with the Aryans to most parts of the Indian subcontinent. Regional states maintained order over substantial territories and established kingship as the most common form of government. The caste system not only endowed social groups with a powerful sense of identity but also helped to maintain public order. A distinctive set of religious beliefs explained the world and the role of human beings in it, and the use of writing facilitated further reflection on spiritual and intellectual matters.

C H R O N O L O G Y	
8000–7000 B.C.E.	Beginnings of agriculture in south Asia
2500–2000 B.C.E.	High point of Harappan society
1900 B.C.E.	Beginning of Harappan decline
1500 B.C.E.	Beginning of Aryan migration to India
1500–500 B.C.E.	Vedic age
1400–900 B.C.E.	Composition of the <i>Rig Veda</i>
1000 B.C.E.	Early Aryan migrations into the Ganges River valley
1000 B.C.E.	Emergence of <i>varna</i> distinctions
1000–500 B.C.E.	Formation of regional kingdoms in northern India
800–400 B.C.E.	Composition of the principal Upanishads
750 B.C.E.	Establishment of first Aryan cities in the Ganges valley
500 B.C.E.	Early Aryan migrations to the Deccan Plateau

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