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**A STUDY ON CULTURE AND CIVILIZATION IN
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A Study on Culture and Civilization in Indian Ancient Period: Historical Perspective

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Abstract – The argument is that “civilization” is the key term to denote groups and peoples who share a large and common geographic locus, values and social institutions, and that “culture” refers to a particular set of values or beliefs within the larger historico-cultural entity that is a civilization. If we treat “civilization” as the largest and highest socio-historical unit and “culture” as something smaller, lower, and subsumed under “civilization,” we will better understand the ubiquitous phenomenon of cultural appropriation and civilizational hybridization. To further elucidate how these two terms should be understood and to disentangle them from each other, the essay provides an historical account of the context in which each term arose.

The associated culture, sometimes referred to as Vedic civilization, was probably centred early on in the northern and northwestern parts of the Indian subcontinent, but has now spread and constitutes the basis of contemporary Indian culture. After the end of the Vedic period, the Mahajanapadas period in turn gave way to the Maurya Empire (from ca. 320 BC), the golden age of classical Sanskrit literature.

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INTRODUCTION

India has a continuous history covering a very long period. Evidence of neolithic habitation dating as far back as 7000 BC has been found in Mehrgarh in Baluchistan. However, the first notable civilization flourished in India around 2700 BC in the north western part of the Indian subcontinent, covering a large area. The civilization is referred to as the Harappan civilization. Most of the sites of this civilization developed on the banks of Indus, Ghaggar and its tributaries.

The culture associated with the Harappan civilization is the first known urban culture in India. The Harappans built the earliest cities complete with town planning, sanitation, drainage system and broad well-laid roads. They built double storied houses of burntbricks each one of which had a bathroom, a kitchen and a well. The walled cities had other important buildings such as the Great Bath, Granaries and Assembly Halls.

Agriculture was the main occupation of the Harappans who were living in rural areas. Those living in the cities carried on internal and external trade and developed contacts with other civilizations such as Mesopotamia. They were excellent potters. Various types of utensils, toys, seals, figurines have been excavated from different sites. Harappans also had the technical knowledge of metals and the process of alloying. The bronze sculpture of a dancing girl found in Mohenjodaro testifies the sculptural skills and aesthetic sense of the

Harappans. Shell, ivory, bone and faience were used as material for different crafts and objects. Lothal was a dockyard situated in Dholaka Taluk of Ahmedabad in Gujarat. It was also a well-planned wall city. It was an important centre of sea trade with the western world. Another important town in Gujarat was Dhaulavira while Kalibangam was in Rajasthan.

Numerous seals carrying the images of the one-horned rhinoceros known as unicorn, peepal leaves and a male god throw light on the religious beliefs of the Harappans. It appears that they worshipped plants and animals and the forces of nature. They worshipped a male god resembling Lord Shiva of later times and a mother goddess among others.

They probably believed in life after death and also in charms and spells. Seals engraved with animal figures like the humped bull, elephant and rhinoceros suggest that these animals were considered sacred. ‘Peepal’ has been found depicted on many seals.

The History of Ancient India is a history of thirty centuries of human culture and progress. It divides itself into several distinct periods, each of which, for length of years, will compare with the entire history of many a modern people.

Other nations claim an equal or even a higher antiquity than the Hindus. Egyptian scholars have claimed a date over four thousand years B.C. for the foundation of the first Egyptian dynasty of kings. Assyrian

scholars have claimed a date over three thousand years B.C. for Saragon I., who united Sumir and Accad under the Semetic rule; and they claim a still earlier date for the native Turanian civilizations of Accad which preceded the Semetic conquest of Chaldea. The Chinese claim to have an authentic history of dynasties and facts from about 2400 B.c. For India, modern scholars have not claimed an earlier date than 2000 B.c. for the hymns of the Rig Veda, although Hindu civilizations must have been centuries or thousands of years old when these hymns were composed.

Ancient Hindu works are of a different character. If they are defective in some respects, as they undoubtedly are, they are defective as accounts of dynasties, of wars, of so-called historical incidents. On the other hand, they give us a full, connected, and clear account of the advancement of civilizations, of the progress of the human mind, such as we shall seek for in vain among the records of any other equally ancient nation. The literature of each period is a perfect picture—a photograph, if we may so call it—of the Hindu civilizations of that period. And the works of successive periods form a complete history of ancient Hindu civilizations for three thousand years, so full, so clear, that he who runs may read.

Scholars who have studied the Vedic hymns historically are aware that the materials they afford for constructing a history of civilizations are fuller and truer than any accounts which could have been recorded on stone or papyri. And those who have pursued Hindu literature through the different periods of ancient Hindu history, are equally aware that they form a complete and comprehensive story of the progress and gradual modifications of Hindu civilizations, thought, and religion through three thousand years. And the philosophical historian of human civilizations need not be a Hindu to think that the Hindus have preserved the fullest, the clearest, and the truest materials for his work.

The very shortcomings of Hindu civilizations, as compared with the younger civilizations of Greece or Rome, have their lessons for the modern reader. The story of our successes is not more instructive than the story of our failures. The hymns of Visvamisra, the philosophy of Kapila, and the poetry of Kalidasa have no higher lessons for the modern reader than the decadence of our political life and the ascendancy of priests. The story of the religious rising of the people under the leadership of Gautama Buddha and Asoka is not more instructive than the absence of any efforts after popular freedom. And the great heights to which the genius of Brahmins and Kshatriyas soared in the infancy of the world's intellectual life are not more suggestive and not more instructive than the absence of genius in the people at large in their ordinary pursuits and trades, in mechanical inventions and maritime discoveries, in sculpture, architecture, and arts, in manifestations of popular life and the assertion of popular power.

The history of the intellectual and religious life of the ancient Hindus is matchless in its continuity, its fulness, and its philosophical truth. But the historian who only paints the current of that intellectual life performs half his duty. There is another and a sadder portion of Hindu history, and it is necessary that this portion of the story, too, should be faithfully told.

THE DISCOVERY OF THE INDUS CULTURE

THE two previous chapters dealt with the nature of acculturation in India. The Indian peasants now forming the vast majority of the country's population and the few remaining tribesmen exercised reciprocal influence through the ages. The zigzag, though on the whole steady, development of the peasantry by inner growth because of the better food supply and externally out of the withering away of tribal life can be traced without much difficulty. The outlines are clear, though not always the precise order or date in each region. The question remains of the origin and development of city life. After all, civilizations means the formation of urban, civic life as a leading feature of the life of a whole country. Though modern Indian cities owe their position to a foreign mode of production, there were cities in India long before the machine age and before the feudal period. How did they develop out of prehistory?

The accepted view till a generation ago was that the first Indian cities of any importance appeared only during the first millennium B.C. These were supposedly built by the descendants of pastoral nomads, the Aryans, who entered India as invading Bronze Age tribesmen from the north-west.

From about 1500 B.C. to a little after 1000 B.C. they fought among themselves and with a few aborigines in the Panjab. Then came civic life and civilizations, rather slowly, in the Gangetic basin. The first really great Indian city in the older view seemed to have been Patna. But this was mostly conjectured from the oldest Sanskrit books, hymns, and stories, which were all on the level of myth and legend. In 1925 archaeologists announced a spectacular discovery of immense urban ruins of which no mention was to be traced in the ancient literature. The principal remains were of two cities, each perhaps a mile square in its third-millennium heyday. Both were in the basin of the Indus and both had been on important rivers. The southern, now a deserted mound known as Mohenjo-daro in Sind, had been on the Indus proper. The upper, Harappa in west Panjab, was once on the Ravi, a major tributary of the Indus. The rivers have formed new channels, as happened so often in historic times, because they flow through deep alluvium. The city houses had been many-storied, palatial, solidly built of well-baked bricks and supplied with such amenities as excellent bathrooms and lavatories. The pottery was very good in quality, mass-produced on the fast wheel, though not too well decorated.

Gold, silver, jewels, and other evidence of lost wealth came to light. The layout was unique, originally in

rectangular blocks about 200 x 400 yards, with wide main streets and good minor lanes. Nowhere else was civic organisation of such complexity and excellence to be found so carefully planned at so early a date. The Egyptian cities were architecturally insignificant compared to the mountainous tombs of their rulers, and to the great temples. Sumeria, Akkad, Babylon had brick-built cities nearer to the Indus type, but they just grew. The streets in all these cases, as in Rome, London, Paris," and for that matter in later Indian towns followed irregular country paths. The Indus cities show town planning of a truly amazing nature. Besides the straight streets meeting at right-angles, there was a superb drainage system for carrying away rain-water and cesspools for clearing the sewage. No Indian city possessed anything of the sort till modern times; far too many still lack these amenities. There were enormous granaries, too large to be in private possession. They were accompanied by small tenement houses in regular blocks which must have accommodated the special class of workers or slaves who pounded and stored the grain. There was evidence of considerable trade, some of it across the ocean.

This meant that all earlier ideas of ancient Indian history had to be reoriented. India's cultural development had not been in a straight, logical sequence, but showed a great set-back and unexplained reversion to pastoral barbarism. A large city like Harappa implies the existence of supporting territory which produced enough surplus food. The city normally becomes the seat of power. That is, the existence of one or more cities means the presence of a state. Some people had to produce a food surplus which was then taken away by others who did not produce but who might plan, direct, or control operations. This merely says that no cities could exist in antiquity without class division and division of labour, based upon the rule of a few over many. But then why should such a city vanish without successors or trace? Its ruin should mean the rise of some other cities under its direct influence or in rivalry. In Iraq, those who conquered the cities continued in occupation. The great Babylonian king and lawgiver Hammurabi (seventeenth century B.C.) came from such conquerors, originally barbarians. Similarly in Egypt. This expected continuity of urban culture was missing in India.

PRODUCTION IN THE INDUS CULTURE

The essential feature of the Indus culture passes unremarked as a rule, namely that it could not spread to the fertile and well-developed parts of India. Its range was vast but of a special nature, about a thousand miles from the north to the sea-coast, and perhaps as far along the sea-coast to the west. The trade outposts or small colonies of this culture have gradually been located, thinly scattered from the gulf of Cambay in Gujarat to Sutkagen Dor on the Makran coast. The entire region is arid compared with the rest of India. The

climate might have been better in older days, but not much better. The difference could easily be due to the greater deforestation in modern times. Why should the first great urban development on the sub-continent have taken place along a river that flows through a virtual desert?

The answer is fairly simple. The river is necessary for water and as a source of fish, a main food. Later, it becomes a handy means of heavy transport by boat over long distances. This enables the primitive population to increase at the first stage. The alluvial desert is just as important in its own way. It means that the early population is confined to a strip along the river. Food-gathering beyond a certain stage and range is impossible, the forest being at best thin scrub. This disadvantage is greatly outweighed by two advantages. First, protection against wild animals, dangerous reptiles and insects is less necessary than in the dense Indian jungle. Secondly, agriculture becomes not only necessary but also becomes feasible without clearing away a heavy growth of forest. Fire would do for the clearing and even stone tools are enough, whereas the real Indian monsoon-fed wilderness cannot be brought under cultivation without an ample supply of metal- iron. The alluvial soil is fertile beyond compare provided the land is watered regularly. All this is quite easy to prove. The world's ancient civilizations grew up along just such rivers: the Nile and the Tigris-Euphrates complex, both in a very dry environment. The Danube prehistoric cultures and the early seats of Chinese civilizations had something nearly as good as a surrounding alluvial desert, namely loess corridors (with thin forest) which provided a reasonably fertile base for agriculture.

The rivers Amazon and Mississippi, though the greatest of all streams, did not develop civilizations in prehistory. The Amazon forest is too dense to clear with profit even today. The sod of the U.S. Midwest was too thick for cultivation to be possible before the advent of the heavy steel plough.

Correspondingly India's sacred river Ganges had no significant urban settlements near or on its banks till towards the first millennium B.C., when even the memory of the Indus valley people had faded away. The Indus valley culture belongs to the Bronze Age. Though excellent chert flakes continued to be used as knives and household tools, the best tools used at Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro were of bronze, sturdy and serviceable; not copper, but real bronze, an alloy of copper and tin with traces of other metals. The copper ore came from Rajas than and was available in sufficient quantity for export of the metal to the west. The conclusion is reached from Babylonian and earlier records. The great trade depot for exchange between the Indus region and Iraq was the island of Bahrein in the Persian Gulf. This was the Tilmun of Mesopotamian legend. Here the deathless, legendary Sumerian Noah Ziusudda spent his days after

surviving the deluge and was sought out by the hero Gilgamesh in search of the secret of immortality. The cuneiform clay tablets that speak of trade through Bahrein conducted by a special class of merchants, the alik Tilmun have been amply confirmed by modern excavation, though about 100,000 grave mounds still remain unopened. Certain round button seals found in the Indus cities and in Mesopotamia seem to have originated in Bahrein. Later, the merchants traded under the special protection and partnership of the Assyrian king, who took a major share of the profits, but must also have been their greatest customer. The Indus region seems to have been called Meluhha by the Mesopotamians. All mention of Meluhha ceases by about 1750 B.C., which means that trade contacts were then interrupted, presumably by invaders. There was some other intermediate trade centre, Magan or Makkan, not properly identified, probably on the coast between Bahrein and India.

SPECIAL FEATURES OF THE INDUS CIVILIZATIONS

The problem now is to make some reasonable guess about the methods by which the surplus was taken from those who grew it. To this end it is essential to note just what sets the Indus cities apart from developments in Egypt and Mesopotamia of the third millennium B.C. Explaining these differences would then be one method of reconstruction of the Indus society.

The first point has been mentioned: the lack of great changes. The twin cities seem to have sprung up fully planned. Both have the identical layout as far as can be ascertained. Neither changed till near the very end of the period. The pottery, the tool types, and the seals remained the same.

The alphabet also was static; this is in strong contrast to India in the historical period, where the form of the letters varied so much from one century to the next that the script offers a fairly good method- sometimes the only known method- of dating manuscripts or inscriptions. The ground level of the cities rose steadily. At Mohenjo-daro the lower stories of a house might be filled up to rise above periodic floods; fresh stories were then raised on top. Some houses decayed naturally, to be rebuilt on top of the levelled debris. The street level also rose. Nevertheless, the street plan remained fixed, the houses were raised still higher on the same walls or the same room plan with very little change. The wells were built up so high on the original brick lining that they look like factory chimneys as the excavation goes to deeper levels. Only towards the end are there signs of decline and disorder. Some of the upper-level houses, crudely built of poorer materials, encroached upon the street plan; which means that the particular quarter of the city was then ruined. Pottery kilns appeared within city limits, as they never had at any earlier stage. Brick kilns have nowhere been found; the bricks during the cities' millennium of prosperity were made at a distance, wherever fuel was handy, and carted or floated down to the metropolis. The Umler

came from the Himalayas, down the great rivers. The last houses re-used some of this older material with unbaked mud bricks dried in the sun. During the Indus millennium, Egypt had a dozen complete dynasties; Sumer had been conquered by Akkad; Sargon the Great founded an empire which collapsed under his successors. Every Mesopotamian city showed significant variation in its structure during this period, as the Indian did not.

Secondly, the Indus cities have no public monuments or display in the sense of the two parallel cultures, with one possible exception. There is no great meeting-place, though a 70-metre-long hall at Mohan-jo-daro with pillared aisle or portico may have been for public use. There are no known inscriptions, no obelisks or statues, no public decrees of any sort. Some of the richer houses have walls 7 feet thick, of well-burnt brick, which means that the houses rose to several stories. None dominates the rest as the palace or temple complex did in the other contemporary riparian civilizations.

The street front as far as can be seen was of blank, undecorated walls. Mosaics, frescoes, glazed tiles, specially moulded bricks with figures, stucco work, and even decorated doorways were lacking. The entrance to the house was normally through a side lane, with door narrow enough to be easily secured. That is, the wealth within these houses was not connected with the great display one associates with temples or the vainglory of military conquests. At the same time, the accumulated treasures were not secure enough against unsocial elements or brigands. Whatever authority ruled the city had not reliable police arrangements.

VEDIC CULTURE

A few centuries after the decline of the Harappan civilization, a new culture flourished in the same region and gradually spread across the Ganga-Yamuna plains. This culture came to be known as the Aryan culture. There were significant differences between this culture and the culture which preceded it.

Aryans settled on the banks of rivers Indus (Sindhu) and Saraswati (which is now nonexistent). They composed many hymns in honour of the gods and goddesses they worshipped. These were compiled in four Vedas - the *Rig Veda*, *Sama Veda*, *Yajur Veda* and *Atharva Veda*. The word veda means knowledge of the sacred spiritual knowledge.

These vedas were considered infallible as they imparted the highest spiritual knowledge. Initially the Vedas were transmitted orally. Since our knowledge of the early Aryans is based on these Vedas, the culture of this period is referred to as the Vedic Culture. Scholars divide the vedic period into the earlier and later Vedic period. The earlier is represented by the *Rig Veda* while the latter by all other Vedic literature including the Brahmanas, Aranyakas and Upanishads. Two epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and the Puranas,

though compiled much later, also throw light on the life and society of an earlier period. For this period archaeological evidence has also been found in some areas of Uttar Pradesh.

Society and religion-Though Aryan society was patriarchal, women were treated with dignity and honour. The family was the smallest social unit; several families (*kula*) made a village (*grama*) and several villages formed a *vis*. A number of villages formed a tribe or *jana* which was ruled by a chief called *rajan*. His chief function was to protect the tribe from external attack and maintain law and order. He was assisted by the members of two councils called *sabha* and *samiti*. The *Purohita* performed religious functions while the *senani* looked after military activities. There was no concept of the state or kingdom at this stage. Although the post of Rajan had become hereditary, he could be removed from power if found weak and inefficient or cruel.

Towards the later Vedic period, society was divided into four *varnas* - Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. This was also called the Varna-Vyavastha. To begin with it denoted categories of people doing different kinds of functions but with the passage of time this division became hereditary and rigid. The teachers were called Brahmins, the ruling class was called Kshatriyas, farmers, merchants and bankers were called Vaishyas while the artisans, craftsmen, labourers were called Shudras. Moving from one occupation to another became difficult. Simultaneously, the Brahmins also occupied a dominant position in the society.

Another important social institution of the time was the system of *chaturashrama* or the division of life span into four distinct stages i.e. *brahmacharya* (period of celibacy, education and disciplined life in guru's ashram), *grihastha* (a period of family life), *vanaprastha* (a stage of gradual detachment and *sanyasa* (a life dedicated to spiritual pursuit away from worldly life). However it should be noted that these stages were not applicable to women or to the people of lower *varnas*. Women were respected by the society, enjoyed freedom, had access to education and were often free to choose their partners through *swayamvara*.

Purdah and sati was not prevalent. The ultimate aim of life was to attain *moksha* or salvation through the pursuit of *dharma*, *artha* and *kama*. *Karma* or performance of duty without any expectation or return was preached in the Bhagavad Gita.

The early Vedic people worshipped forces of nature and personified them as gods and goddesses. Indra, Agni, Varuna, Marut were some of their gods while Usha: Aditi, Prithvi were some of their goddesses. Some of the solar Gods and goddesses referred to in the Rig Veda are Surya, Savitri and Pushau. *Yajna* (sacrifice) was performed along with chanting of Vedic hymns. People poured *ghee* (clarified butter) and other

ingredients into the fire to invoke the blessings of gods. Agni or fire was looked upon as an intermediary between Gods and humans. The vedic people prayed individually as well as collectively for the welfare of the *jana*.

Material life and economy-The Aryans were primarily pastoral and agricultural people. They domesticated animals like cows, horses, sheeps, goats and dogs. They ate simple food consisting of cereals, pulses, fruits, vegetables, milk and various milk products. They drank a beverage called *Soma*. Games of chess, chariot racing etc. were their modes of entertainment.

In the early period there was no money transaction or taxes. *Bali* or voluntary donation was prevalent. Cows were the measure of wealth. As the time passed, extensive use of iron brought great changes in their material life. Iron axes enabled them to clear forests leading to the expansion of agriculture throughout the Gangetic plains. Iron tools resulted in varied crafts and technology. Use of iron weapons and horses enabled them to fight wars and defend themselves better against enemies. Increasing number of crafts, availability of surplus food and growth of population led to specialisation of skills and urbanisation.

Towns and cities grew and territorial states emerged. High quality earthenware called 'Painted Grey Ware' and 'Northern Black Polished Ware' have been found in many areas. Coins came into circulation. Trade was carried on, both overland and through waterways, enhancing material prosperity.

ASHOKA THE GREAT: REPRESENTING THE ACME OF INDIAN CULTURE

Ashoka occupies a unique place in the history of India. His policies of universal peace, non-violence and religious harmony find no parallel in the monarchs of the world. Ashoka stands out as a monarch who combined successful kingship with idealism and philosophy. Like other rulers, Ashoka too began his reign with war - the conquest of Kalinga. However, the mindless destruction of life and property in this war shattered him so greatly that he vowed never to wage any war again. Instead he adopted the policy of *Dhamma Vijaya* that is conquest through *dhamma*. In his thirteenth major Rock Edict, Asoka states that true conquest is by piety and virtue. Such a decision taken by a king, who lived in an era where military might was the measure of power, earned him a unique place in history.

Ashoka was a true humanist. His policies were oriented towards the welfare of his people. His *dhamma* was based on social responsibility. Besides giving importance to respecting brahmins, and servants, obedience to elders, abstention from killing living beings, *dhamma* also asked people to live in

religious harmony. It combined in itself the good points of all sects. Ashoka proved to be a tolerant monarch who, although himself a Buddhist, never sought to impose his personal religion on his subjects. In his twelfth major Rock Edict, he states that in honouring of other sects lies the honour of one's own sect.

As a king, Ashoka set a very high ideal for himself. He saw himself as a father and the subjects as his children. He communicated his thoughts and philosophy to his people by inscribing them on stone pillars and rock surfaces. These edicts are remarkable examples of Mauryan architecture and also of engineering skills. They are the living monuments of his times.

Ashoka attempted to educate his subjects by pointing out the wastefulness of expensive rituals. He asked people to practice *ahimsa*. He himself gave up the practices of the royal hunt and pleasure tours and instead began *Dhamma Yattas* tours for the furtherance of *Dhamma*. By giving his empire a common *Dhamma*, a common language, and practically one script (Brahmi) he brought further political unification. India has been a secular country since the Buddhist age. Though he himself became a Buddhist he did not impose it on the others but followed a tolerant religious policy. He made gifts and grants to non-Buddhist as well as anti-Buddhist.

Ashoka's fame also rests on the measures that he took to spread the message of peace amongst the different regions of the world. He sent ambassadors to the Greek kingdoms and the West. Indian culture spread to far-away lands. According to a Buddhist tradition, Asoka sent Buddhist missions to regions such as Sri Lanka and Central Asia. Buddhism spread to different parts of the world and although it is no longer a major force in India today, yet it continues to be popular in Sri Lanka and the Far Eastern countries.

The Varna system popularly known as the caste system which had arisen in the Vedic Age now became well established and gradually became the dominant form of social organization throughout India. Along with the new religions and philosophy the growth of cities, crafts and trade furthered the process of cultural unity in our country. Asoka unified the entire country under one empire and renounced the use of war as state policy. On the other hand he says that he strives to discharge the debt he owes to all living creatures.

CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT DURING THE GUPTA PERIOD

The last phase of ancient Indian history starts in early fourth century A.D. and ends in about the 8th A.D. The Guptas built a strong and powerful kingdom and under the political unity and state patronage that was provided by them, cultural activities increased manifold. You will recall that following the Greek invasion, various art forms in India had been markedly influenced by Graeco-Roman styles. This art mainly depicted the Buddha or Buddhist thought. But during the Gupta

period art became more creative and Hindu gods and goddesses also came to be portrayed.

The artistic achievement of the age is exhibited in the delicate workmanship and the variety of designs shown in different kinds of Gupta coins. The general scheme that was followed was to exhibit the portrait of the king on one side of the coin or an appropriate goddess with her associated symbols on the other side. The king is shown in many positions shooting a tiger or a lion, playing a musical instrument seated on a high backed couch etc. On the reverse in most cases was Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and in some cases Saraswati, the goddess of knowledge and arts.

Besides coins, Gupta art found adequate expression in monuments and sculptures. The skilled artists of this age used their tools and skills to express the ideals and philosophical traditions of India through various art forms. They decorated even the niches and corners of religious places with statues of gods and goddesses. The images of gods were treated as symbols representing attributes associated with the gods. Hence the god were shown having four or eight arms in each carrying a symbol or an *ayudha* (weapon) although they were depicted in human forms. Stone, terracotta, and other materials were used to construct the abodes of gods and goddesses.

CONCLUSION

The roughly 1,000 years between 1500-500 b.c.e. is called the Vedic, or Aryan, age. The beginning of the Vedic age corresponded with the end of the Indus civilization (c. 2500-1500 b.c.e.), although it is not clear what precise role the Aryans played in the final fall of the Indus civilization. The two peoples belonged to different racial groups, and the Indus urban culture was more advanced than the mainly pastoral society of the Indo-European Aryans. The 1,000 years after 1500 is divided into the Early and Late Vedic age, each spanning about 500 years, because of significant differences between the cultures of the two halves. The earlier period marked the conquest and settlement of northern India by Indo-Europeans who crossed into the subcontinent across the Hindu Kush passes into the Indus River valley, across the Thar Desert and down the Ganges River valley. The latter half saw the development of a more sophisticated sedentary culture. The name Vedic refers to the Vedas, sacred texts of the Aryans, which is a principal source of information of that era.

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