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The Indo-Aryans and the Vedic Age

Around 1500 BCE, Indo-Aryan-speaking people began navigating the rugged passes of the Hindu Kush into northern India. They arrived with horses, swift chariots, herds of cattle, and a language never before heard on the subcontinent.

A Journey Traced by DNA

DNA evidence traces part of their ancestry to cattle herders who lived on the vast grasslands north of the Black and Caspian Seas. Over many generations, their descendants moved south across the Hindu Kush and into the Indian subcontinent.

Early Indo-Aryans were semi-nomadic cattle herders who also farmed. Cattle were their primary measure of wealth, and warriors frequently raided neighboring groups to capture livestock. To clear land for crops, they relied on slash-and-burn agriculture.

Slash and Burn Agriculture

A band of farmers would cut the trees on a plot of land to create a field. Months later, when the fallen brush had dried, they set it on fire. The ashes fertilized the soil for a few growing seasons. The farmers would repeat the process in a new area once the soil lost its nutrients.

Warriors

The Indo-Aryans were skilled warriors. Their experience as cattle herders made them expert horsemen. Like the Assyrians of Mesopotamia, they used chariots with spoked wheels, which were faster and easier to steer than chariots with solid wheels.

The newcomers clashed with people already living in India and gradually gained power across much of the north. They also had children with local people. Over time, Indo-Aryan languages and traditions spread across northern India, while Dravidian languages remained strongest in the south.

Into the Ganges River Valley

About 1000 BCE, Indo-Aryan communities began moving east into the Ganges River Valley, where local people were already using iron. Heavy monsoon rains created thick jungle in the valley. When the Indo-Aryans used iron tools to clear the trees and brush, they opened up fertile land that allowed them to farm permanently along the banks of the Ganges. Within 500 years, their farming villages had grown into small kingdoms.

Sanskrit

The Indo-Aryans spoke Sanskrit, a language related to many European languages but unrelated to the Dravidian languages already spoken in India. It belongs to the same large language family as Greek, Latin, and English. For example, the ancient Sanskrit words mātṛ (mother) and bhrātṛ (brother) sound strikingly similar to English. The Indo-Aryans likely moved through present-day Afghanistan and Pakistan before spreading into northern India. Their songs and poems, however, tell no story of this great migration.

An Oral Tradition

The first Indo-Aryans preserved their history and beliefs without writing, relying instead on a rich oral tradition. Storytellers used rhythm, melody, and strict repetition to memorize thousands of verses. For hundreds of years, these sacred songs and epic poems were handed down from teacher to student by word of mouth.

The Vedas

Over many centuries, the Indo-Aryans composed and preserved a body of sacred texts called the Vedas. Veda is a Sanskrit word that means "knowledge." The oldest of these, the Rig Veda, is a collection of more than 1,000 hymns.

More than three thousand years later, the Vedas are still recited in India, making them among the oldest sacred traditions practiced in the world today. The influence of these traditions on the subcontinent is why historians label the period of Indian history lasting from about 1500 BCE to 322 BCE as the Vedic Age.

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Fill in the Blanks

Around 1500 BCE, Indo-Aryan-s__e__k__ng people crossed the H__n__u Kush into n__r__h__rn India, bringing h__r__es, chariots, c__t__le, and a new l__n__u__ge. DNA traces part of their a__c__st__y to c__t__le herders from the g__a__s__am__s north of the B__a__k and C__s__i__n Seas. The I_do-A__y__ns fought neighboring groups for l__nd and l__v__s__o__k. Over time, they gained ★c__n__r__l over much of northern I__d__a and often had c__i__d__en with local people. About 1000 BCE, Indo-Aryan people east into the G__n__es River V__l__ey. Using ir__n tools, they c__e__r__d thick j__n__le and opened f__r__i__e land for ★p__r__a__e__t farming. Their villages eventually grew into small k__n__d__ms. The Indo-Aryans spoke S__n__k__it, a distant relative of G__e__k, Latin, and E__g__i__h. Without writing, s__o__y__e__l__rs preserved thousands of v__rs__s through m__m__r__z__t__on and r__p__t__ti__n. These sacred t__a__i__i__ns became the V__d__s, including the Rig Veda. Their lasting i__flu__n__e gave the period from about 1500 BCE to 322 BCE its name: the V__d__c Age.

Answer in Complete Sentences

★1. Explain why the first Indo-Aryans did not remain in one place long.

2. How did the first Aryans farmers fertilize their soil?

★3. What evidence helps historians trace the Indo-Aryan migration to India?

4. What are the Vedas?

★ This is a higher order learning question. You must answer the question to the best of your ability, but any reasonable answer will be graded as correct.

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