

## Sources

The literary and the archaeological sources for the reconstruction of history of the Vedic age are discussed here.

## Literary sources

The Vedic literature is divided into the following categories:

- the *Rig Veda*, *Sama Veda*, *Yajur Veda* and *Atharva Veda* and their *Samhitas*

- the *Brahmanas*
- the *Aranyakas*
- the *Upanishads*

1. **The Vedas:** The word *Veda* is derived from the root word *vid*, which means 'to know'. The term *Veda* signifies 'knowledge'. The Vedic literature consists of the four Vedas.

i. The **Rig Veda** is the **oldest religious text in the world**. It contains **1028 hymns** divided into **10 mandalas**. It was composed during the Early Vedic period. These hymns were the first source of knowledge dedicated to the gods by the sages.

This knowledge was passed down orally from *guru* (teacher) to *shishya* (disciple). It is a valuable source of information on various topics. The *Rig Veda* contains the *Gayatri Mantra*, which is a **revered mantra** of the Vedic tradition.

ii. **Yajur Veda** contains rituals or hymns which were recited during the performance of fire sacrifices or *yajna*. They are about 2086 hymns.

iii. **Sama Veda** contains 1875 hymns which were chanted during the time of sacrifices made by the priests.

iv. **Atharva Veda** contains 731 hymns. It deals with magic and charm and also *gyan* (knowledge), *karma* (action) and *upasana* (invocation).

The *Vedas* are the most important literary sources of this period and help historians reconstruct the past.

Other than the *Vedas*, other literary traditions of the period included the following:

- **The Samhitas:** The hymns, spells and prayers of the Vedas are collected in their *Samhitas*.

- **The Brahmanas:** They are mostly written in prose form. The *Brahmanas* explain the social importance and the religious significance of rituals and sacrifices. They also bear some historical recordings. The word *brahmana* has its origin in the word *Brahman* which means 'prayer' or 'devotion'. The *Brahmanas* contain explanations of the *Samhitas*.

- **The Aranyakas:** The *Aranyakas* derive its name from the Sanskrit root word *aranya* which means 'forest'. They are also called 'forest books' and talk about mysticism and philosophy. They form the concluding part of the *Brahmanas*.

- **The Upanishads:** They form the **main source of Indian philosophy** and they were composed between **1000 BCE and 800 BCE** by different sages. The *Upanishads* record the emergence of some of the central concepts of Hinduism. Later, other Vedic literary bodies were added to it. The *Upanishads* contain revealed truths, *shruti*, regarding the nature of ultimate reality, *brahman*. It also describes the character and form of human salvation, *moksha*.

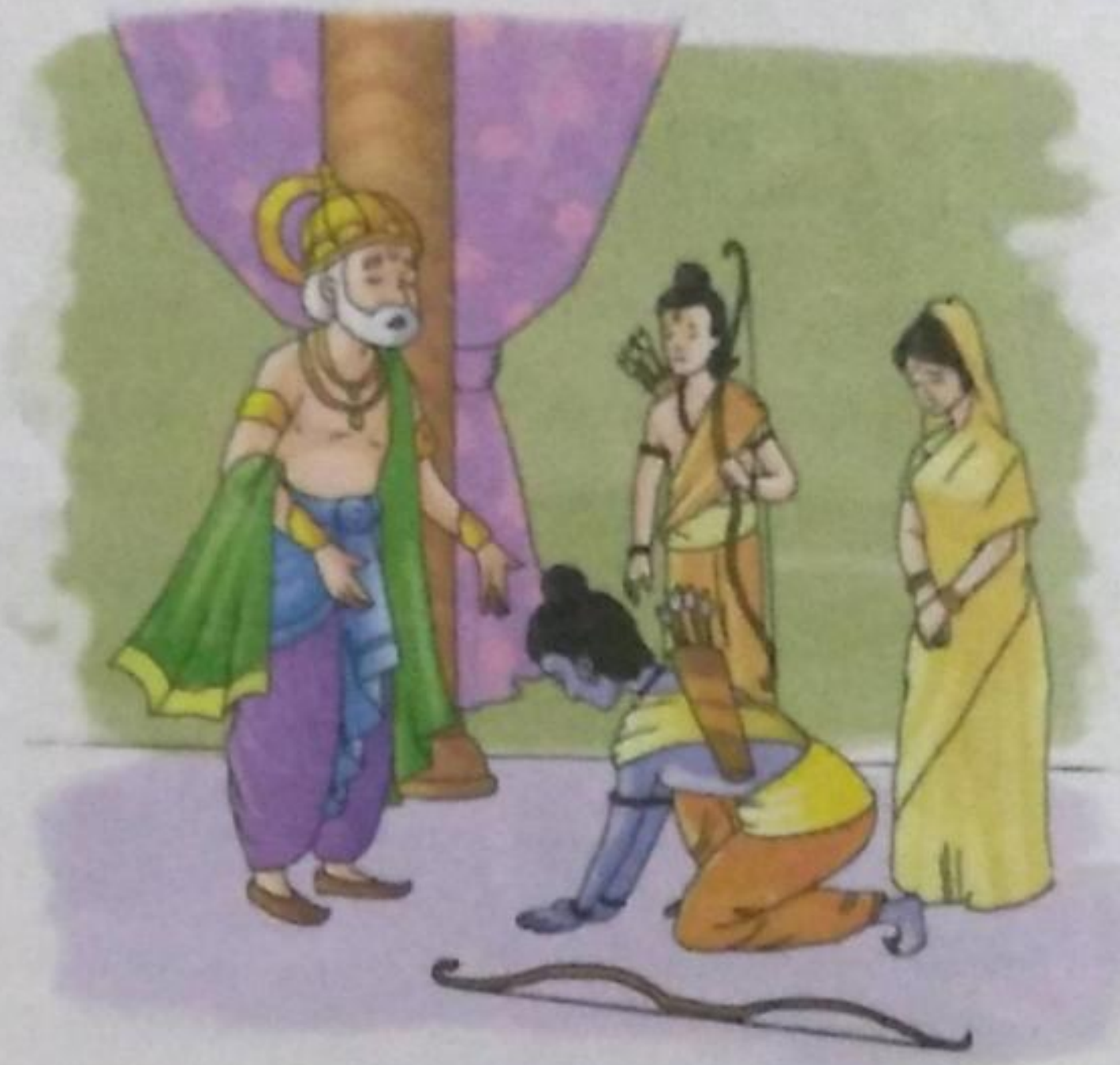
### Points to Remember

- The Aryans originally lived in Central Asia.
- When the Aryans came to India, they initially settled in the Sapta Sindhu region.
- The Vedic literature consists the four *Vedas* which serve as one of the most important literary sources of the period.
- The Vedic period can be divided into two phases – Early Vedic and Later Vedic periods.

2. **The Epics:** There are two primary epics in India—the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharat*. They were originally composed in Sanskrit and were later translated into many other languages. These are some of the oldest surviving epic poems.

i. The *Ramayana* is an ancient Sanskrit epic. It was written by the sage, Valmiki around 500 BCE to 100 BCE. The epic narrates the story of Ram's quest to rescue his wife Sita from the clutches of Lanka's king, Ravan.

Ram, the eldest prince of Ayodhya from the first wife of King Dashrath, won the hand of princess Sita in marriage. He was exiled with her and his brother Laksman for fourteen years because his stepmother wanted her own son to be the king. In the forest, Sita was abducted by Ravan who was enamoured by the beauty of Sita. With the help of an army of monkeys headed by Hanuman, Ram began his search for Sita. The allies attacked Lanka, Ram defeated Ravan and rescued Sita. After the couple's triumphant return to Ayodhya, Ram's righteous rule was established.



▲ A scene from the Ramayan

ii. The *Mahabharat* is supposed to be written by sage Vyas. It narrates the story of **two sets of paternal cousins—the five sons of the deceased King Pandu, the Pandavas and the one hundred sons of the blind King Dhritarashtra, the Kauravas**. They became bitter rivals and opposed each other in war for possession of the ancestral Bharat kingdom with its capital, Hastinapur.

The **five sons of Pandu were assisted by Krishna**, an avatar of the deity Vishnu, descended to the Earth in his human form to rescue **law, good deeds, right and virtue**. He served as Arjun's mentor and charioteer in the great war of **Kurukshetra**.

The Kauravas' malice displayed itself most dramatically when they took away the wealth and kingdom from the Pandavas in a game of dice. They humiliated the Pandavas and abused their wife, Draupadi. After completing twelve years of exile and a year in **disguise or incognito**, the Pandavas met the Kauravas in the battlefield of **Kurukshetra**. On the eighteenth day of the war, the Pandavas emerged victorious and Yudhisthir was made the ruler of Hastinapur.

The *Bhagwad Gita*, which forms a part of the *Mahabharat*, is one of the most sacred religious texts for millions of Hindus in India and all over the world.

### Review

1. Who composed the *Ramayana*?
2. What are the *Samhitas*?
3. Why is the *Bhagwad Gita* important?

Their historical significance rests in the fact that:

- they have become the main sources of information of the Epic Age and give an insight into the political systems, socio-economic conditions and cultural systems of the period and the Aryans.
- they are the finest literary works of ancient India and are respected for their philosophical value.
- the *Bhagwad Gita* stresses on the philosophy of Karma. It also talks about the indestructibility and immortality of the soul.

### Points to Remember

- The Vedic literature is divided under the following headings: *Rig Veda, Sama Veda, Yajur Veda* and *Atharva Veda, Samhitas, Brahmanas, Aranyakas* and *Upanishads*.
- The two epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharat*, provide valuable insights into the political, socio-economic and cultural life of the period.
- The *Bhagwad Gita* is the sacred book of the Hindus and stresses on *Karma*.

### Archaeological sources

There are mainly two archaeological sources from which we get information about the Vedic period.

1. **Iron:** The Iron Age is believed to have begun around 1000 BCE in India and around 1200 BCE in other parts of the world. The discovery of iron forms an important stage in the development of civilization. Iron-tools such as axes, plough-heads and sickles started being used in agriculture. These tools made tilling the land easier. Iron axes and other implements also helped the people to cut down forests and bring more land under cultivation. It resulted in the production of more grains, fruits and vegetables.

Small-scale and cottage industries such as tanning, animal husbandry, weaving and tool-making also emerged. Other essential tools made of iron included hammers, tongs and chisels. Weapons such as swords, armours and shields were also made up of iron.

2. **Pottery:** The evidences of colourful and artistic pottery with set patterns were discovered in the areas between the Ganga and Yamuna rivers. These are called Painted Grey Ware. These are fine-grey pottery, painted with geometric patterns in black. The Painted Grey Ware culture is associated with the settlement of villages and towns, domestication of horses and the advent of iron metallurgy. The people belonging to this culture, with their iron technology, were the first to bring a drastic change in the settlement pattern in the Ganga-Yamuna basin. On the foundation laid by these people, the superstructures like the Mahajanapadas flourished in the sixth and fifth centuries BCE.



▲ Iron Age tools

Answer the following .

1. With reference to the Vedic literature, answer the following :
  - a. write a short note on the four Vedas .
  - b. Explain the meaning of Brahmanas and Upanishads .
2. Discuss about two archaeological sources from which we get information about the Vedic Age .