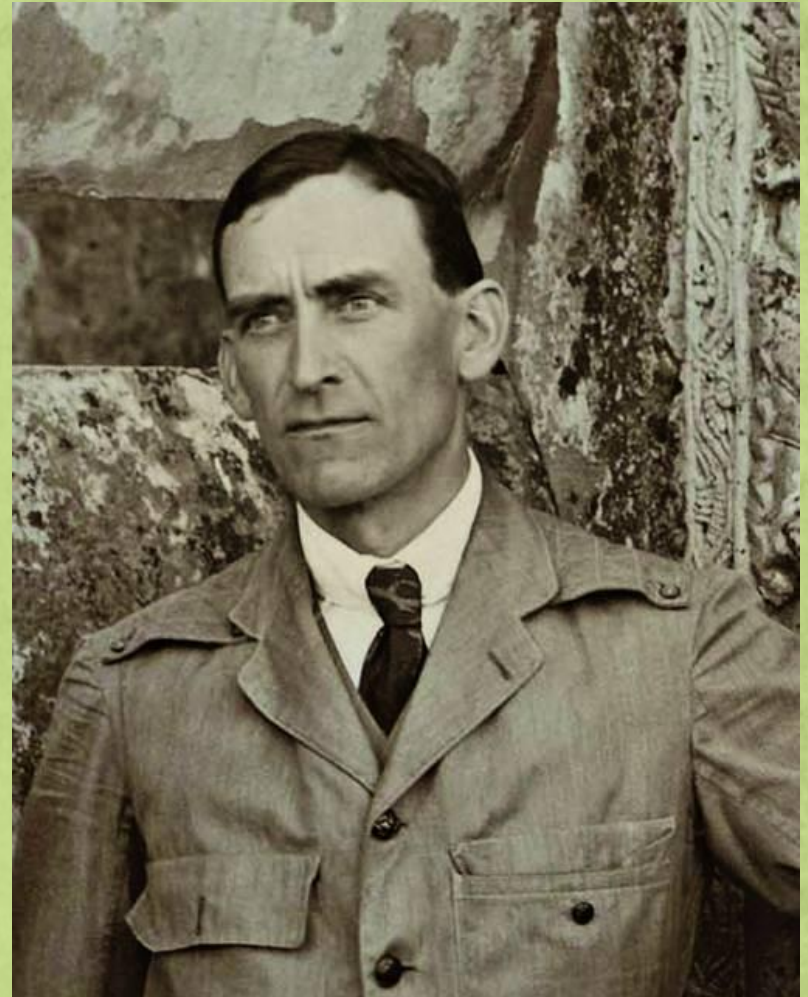


The Origins of Hinduism: The Vedic Period (c. 1500- 500 BCE)

HPRS4003 Asian Religious Traditions

The Indus Valley Civilization

- Sir John Marshall (1876-1958), Director General of the Archaeological Survey of India
- 1921: excavations begin at Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa
- Indus valley civilization (Dravidian?): c. 2500-1500 BCE



The Indus Valley Civilization



The Indus Valley Civilization (Mohenjo-Daro)



The Religion of the Indus Valley



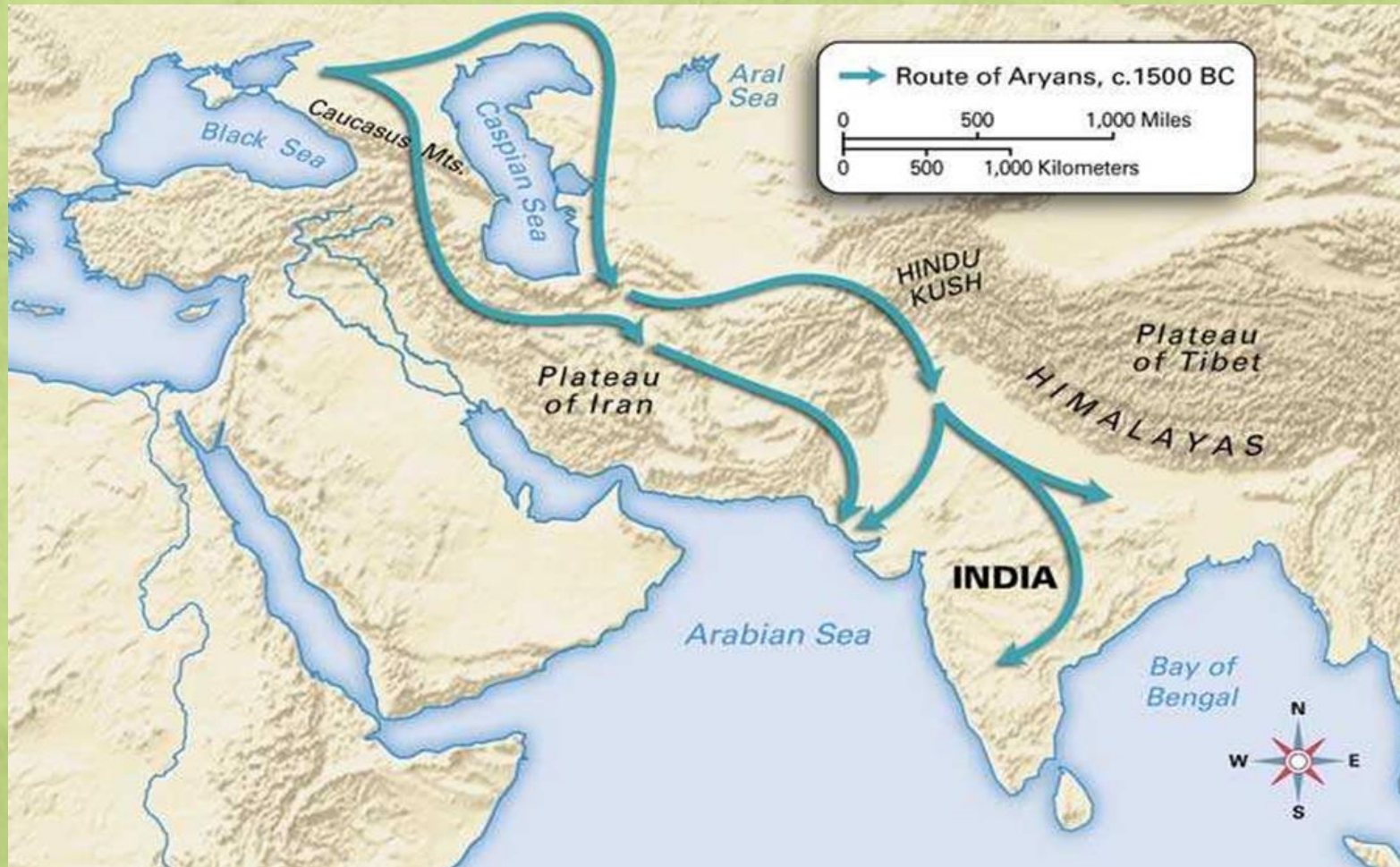
The Religion of the Indus Valley (Pashupati Seal)



Aryan Civilization

- Indus Valley Civilization began to decline c. 1800 BCE.
- From c. 1500 BCE, the Aryans appeared on the Indian subcontinent (*arya* = 'noble' or 'honourable').
- The Aryan migration thesis vs. the cultural transformation thesis.
- Controversy regarding the relationship between the two cultures but the migration thesis still the majority view (even if it has come under pressure in recent years).

The Aryan Migration Thesis



The Aryan legacy

- A language – **Sanskrit**
- A textual tradition – **the Vedas**
- A system of ritual and worship
- A form of social organisation

The Vedic Literature

- Sanskrit compositions developed between 1500-800 BCE.
- Initially an oral tradition: ***shruti*** ('that which is heard').
- Early Vedic texts – primarily liturgical; later Vedas – more philosophical, speculative.
- Believed to contain divine knowledge.

The Vedic Literature

	Rig Veda	Sama Veda	Atharva Veda	Yajur Veda
Samhita				
Brahmana				
Aranyaka				
Upanishad				

The Vedic Literature

- **Samhitas:** verse compositions – mainly hymns of praise to the Vedic gods; *mantras* to be used in liturgy.
- **Brahmanas:** later prose compositions – develop the ideas in the Samhita, focus on correct performance of the ritual.
- **Aranyakas** – ‘forest compositions’ – esoteric knowledge.
- **Upanishads** – literally: to ‘sit near’ (the guru); more philosophical in nature (c. 600-300 BCE).

Vedic Sacrificial Ritual (*Yajna*)

- Aim: to propitiate the gods (*devas*) and receive material benefits
- Sacrificial objects: domestic animals, milk, butter, grain
- The medium of sacrifice: fire
- The sponsors: wealthy patrons (*yajamana*) seeking the well-being of their family or social group

Vedic Sacrificial Ritual (*Yajna*)



The Vedic Deities: Agni

'I pray to Agni, the household priest who is the god of the sacrifice, the one who chants and invokes and brings most treasure.

Agni earned the prayers of the ancient sages, and of those of the present, too; he will bring the gods here.

Through Agni one may win wealth, and growth from day to day, glorious and most abounding in heroic sons.

Agni, the sacrificial ritual that you encompass on all sides – only that one goes to the gods.

Agni, the priest with the sharp sight of a poet, the true and most brilliant, the god will come with the gods.

Whatever good you wish to do for the one who worships you, Agni, through you, O Angiras, that comes true.

To you, Agni, who shine upon darkness, we come day after day, bringing our thoughts and homage

To you, the king over sacrifices, the shining guardian of the Order, growing in your own house.

Be easy for us to reach, like a father to his son. Abide with us, Agni, for our happiness'.

The Vedic Deities: Soma

'I have tasted the sweet drink of life, knowing that it inspires good thoughts and joyous expansiveness to the extreme, that all the gods and mortals seek it together, calling it honey.

When you penetrate inside, you will know no limits, and you will avert the wrath of the gods. Enjoying Indra's friendship, O drop of Soma, bring riches as a docile cow brings the yoke.

We have drunk the Soma; we have become immortal; we have gone to the light; we have found the gods. What can hatred and malice of a mortal do to us now, O immortal one...

Inflame me like a fire kindled by friction; make us see far; makes us richer, better. For when I am intoxicated with you, Soma, I think myself rich. Draw near and make us thrive'.

- Rig Veda 8:48:1-6 (*We Have Drunk the Soma*)

The Vedic Deities (Indra)

'Let me now sing the heroic deeds of Indra, the first that the thunderbolt-wielder performed. He killed the dragon and pierced an opening for the waters; he split open the bellies of mountains...

With his great weapon, the thunderbolt, Indra killed the shoulderless Vrtra, his greatest enemy. Like the trunk of a tree whose branches have been lopped off by an axe, the dragon lies flat upon the ground.

For, muddled by drunkenness like one who is no soldier, Vrtra challenged the great hero who had overcome the mighty and who drank Soma to the dregs. Unable to withstand the onslaught of his weapons, he found Indra an enemy to conquer him and was shattered, his nose crushed.

Without feet or hands he fought against Indra, who struck him on the nape of the neck with his thunderbolt. The steer who wished to become the equal of the bull bursting with seed, Vrtra lay broken in many places'.

- Rig Veda 1:32 (*The Killing of Vrtra*)

The Organization of Vedic Society

- A verse in the Rig Veda refers to the sacrifice of Purusha, the cosmic giant:

From his mouth came the **Brahmins** (priests)

From his arms came the **Kshatriyas** (kings and warriors)

From his thighs came the **Vaishyas** (farmers, craftsmen, artisans, traders)

From his feet came the **Shudras** (servants of the other classes)

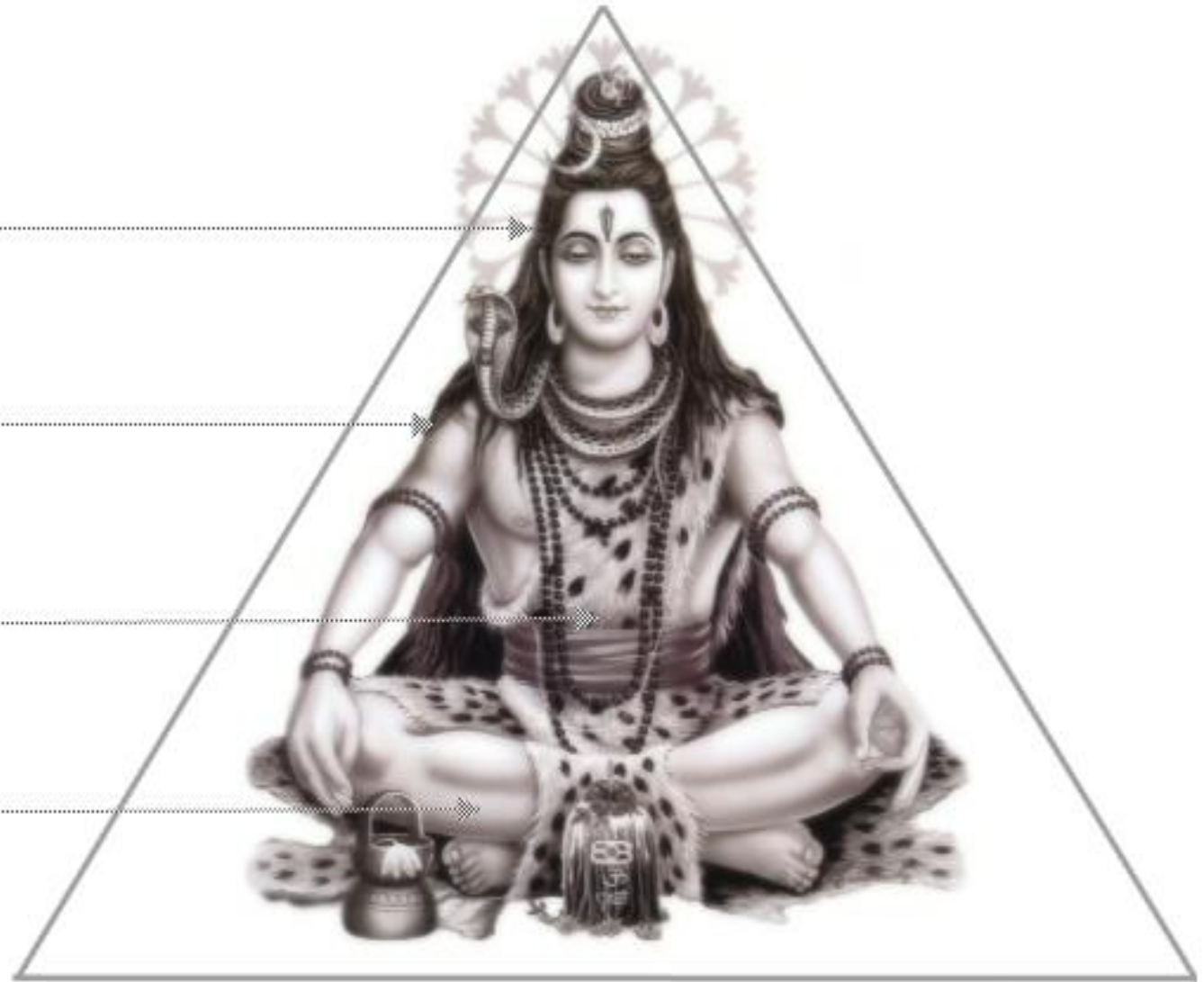
(Rig Veda 10:90:12).

Brahman
Knowledge

Kshatriya
Defense

Vaishya
Sustenance

Shudra
Service

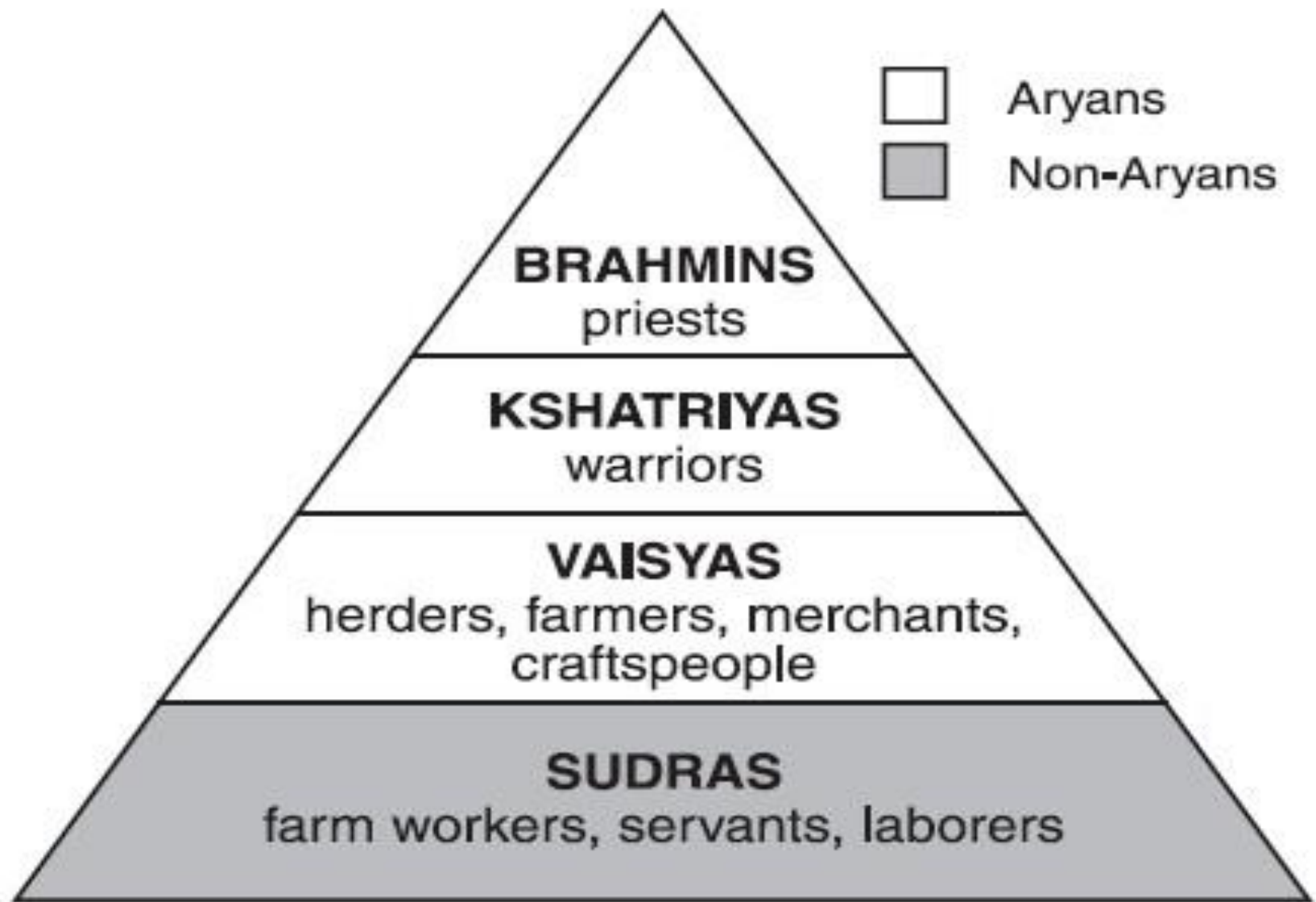


The Four Classes (*Varna*)

- **Brahmins:** priests, spiritual leaders
- **Kshatriyas:** the ruling/military class
- **Vaishya:** the common folk, merchants, farmers, artisans
- **Shudras:** servants and labourers (non-Aryan)

The Four Classes (*Varna*)

- The first three classes comprised the 'twice-born' (*dvija*).
- Males of the first three classes could, after undergoing formal initiation (*upanayana*), become legitimate members of Vedic society.
- They could participate in *yajna*, the sacrificial ritual.
- The fourth class had an inferior status and were debarred from ritual participation.



Source: *Guide to the Essentials of World History*,
Prentice Hall, 1999 (adapted)

The Ideal of *Dharma*

- As a concept, ***dharma*** has been indispensable to the history and development of Hinduism.
- From the Sanskrit verb *dhr* ('maintain' or 'support').
- 'The religious and moral law governing individual conduct' (Encyclopaedia Britannica).
- Every section of society had a role to play in the preservation of dharma.

The Ideal of *Dharma*

- The main expositions on *dharma* appear not in *shruti* literature but in later ***smriti*** literature ('that which is remembered').
- Elaborated upon in *Dharmasutras* (late Vedic period) and *Dharmashastras* (early centuries CE), and also in the Sanskrit epics: the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*.
- ***Varnashrama-dharma***: a system of defining the moral/religious duties of the individual (*svadharma*) according to his/her class (*varna*) and stage in life (*ashrama*).

Varna Dharma

- *Dharma* in the Vedic period was relative to one's place in society:

Brahmins (priests and scholars): duty-bound to engage in scriptural study, and to conduct ritual correctly.

Kshatriyas (kings and warriors): duty-bound to preserve social order, protect the subjects, rule justly, fight righteous wars .

Vaishyas (farmers, artisans, traders): duty-bound to work at their respective crafts and produce and exchange material goods.

Shudras (servants of the rest of society): duty-bound to serve the three other *varna*.



Ashrama Dharma

- *Dharma* was also relative to one's stage in life. The four stages or *ashramas*:

Brahmacharya (celibacy and scholarship)

Grihastha (householdership)

Vanaprastha (the life of a hermit)

Sannyasa (renouncerhood)

Summary: The Origins of Hinduism

- Vedic society shaped by Aryan culture.
- Vedic religious sentiment preserved in the body of Sanskrit texts known as the Vedas.
- Early Vedic society centred around the sacrificial ritual (*yajna*).
- Society divided into four classes (*varna*).
- Dharma a major preoccupation of (later) Vedic society. Moral, religious and civic duties defined according to social class and stage in life (*varnashrama-dharma*).

Suggested Reading (see folder on Moodle page)

- Klostermaier, K. K., *Hinduism: A Beginner's Guide* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2007), pp. 9-42
- Patton, L. L., 'Veda and Upanishad', *The Hindu World* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), ed. S Mittal and G. R. Thursby, pp. 37-51, see especially 37-45
- Shattuck, C., *Hinduism* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 18-26