



CHAPTER OUTLINE

- Foundations of Indian Civilization, 1500 B.C.E.–300 C.E.
- Imperial Expansion and Collapse, 324 B.C.E.–550 C.E.
- Southeast Asia, 50–600 C.E.
- Conclusion

ENVIRONMENT + TECHNOLOGY *Indian Mathematics*

DIVERSITY + DOMINANCE *Relations Between Women and Men in the Kama Sutra and the Arthashastra*



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The Thousand Pillared Hall in the Temple of Minakshi at Madurai At the annual Chittarai Festival, the citizens of this city in south India celebrate the wedding of their patron goddess, Minakshi, to Shiva.



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India and Southeast Asia, 1500 B.C.E.—600 C.E.

In the Bhagavad-Gita (**BUH-guh-vahd GEE-tuh**), the most renowned Indian sacred text, the legendary warrior Arjuna (**AHR-joo-nuh**) rides out in his chariot to the open space between two armies preparing for battle. Torn between his social duty to fight for his family's claim to the throne and his conscience, which balks at the prospect of killing relatives, friends, and former teachers in the enemy camp, Arjuna slumps down in his chariot and refuses to fight. But his driver, the god Krishna (**KRISH-nuh**) in disguise, persuades him, in a carefully structured dialogue, both of the necessity to fulfill his duty as a warrior and of the proper frame of mind for performing these acts. In the climactic moment of the dialogue Krishna endows Arjuna with a “divine eye” and permits him to see the true appearance of God:

It was a multiform, wondrous vision,
with countless mouths and eyes
and celestial ornaments,

Everywhere was boundless divinity
containing all astonishing things,
wearing divine garlands and garments,
anointed with divine perfume.

If the light of a thousand suns
were to rise in the sky at once,
it would be like the light
of that great spirit.

Arjuna saw all the universe
in its many ways and parts,
standing as one in the body
of the god of gods.¹

In all of world literature, this is one of the most compelling attempts to depict the nature of deity. Graphic images emphasize the vastness, diversity, and multiplicity of the god, but in the end we learn that Krishna is the organizing principle behind all creation, that behind diversity and multiplicity lies a higher unity.

This is an apt metaphor for Indian civilization. The enormous variety of the Indian landscape is mirrored in the patchwork of ethnic and linguistic groups that

- What historical forces led to the development of complex social groupings in ancient India?
- How, in the face of powerful forces that tended to keep India fragmented, did two great empires—the Mauryan Empire of the fourth to second centuries B.C.E. and the Gupta Empire of the fourth to sixth centuries C.E.—succeed in unifying much of India?
- How did a number of states in Southeast Asia become wealthy and powerful by exploiting their position on the trade routes between China and India?

¹From Bhagavad-Gita, translated by Barbara Stoler Miller, translation copyright © 1986 by Barbara Stoler Miller. Used by permission of Bantam Books, a division of Random House, Inc.

occupy it, the political fragmentation that has marked most of Indian history, the elaborate hierarchy of social groups into which the Indian population is divided, and the thousands of deities who are worshiped at innumerable holy places that dot the subcontinent. Yet, in the end, one can speak of an Indian civilization united by shared views and values. The photograph shows the interior of a temple in the city of Madurai in southern India. Here the ten-day Chittarai Festival, the most important religious event of the year, celebrates the wedding of a local goddess, Minakshi, and the great Hindu god Shiva, symbolizing the reconciliation of local and national deities, southern and northern cultural practices, and male and female potentialities.

This chapter surveys the history of South and Southeast Asia from approximately 1500 B.C.E. to 600 C.E., highlighting the evolution of defining features of Indian civilization. Considerable attention is given to Indian religious conceptions, due both to religion's profound role in shaping Indian society and the sources of information available to historians. For reasons that will be explained below, writing came late to India, and ancient Indians did not develop a historical consciousness like other peoples of antiquity and took little interest in recording specific historical events.

FOUNDATIONS OF INDIAN CIVILIZATION, 1500 B.C.E.—300 C.E.

India is called a *subcontinent* because it is a large—roughly 2,000 miles (3,200 kilometers) in both length and breadth—and physically isolated landmass. It is set off from the rest of Asia to the north by the Himalayas (**him-uh-LAY-uhs**), the highest mountains on the planet, and by the Indian Ocean on its eastern, southern, and western sides (see Map 6.1). The most permeable frontier, used by invaders and migrating peoples, lies to the northwest, but people using this corridor must cross the mountain barrier of the Hindu Kush (**HIHN-doo KOOSH**) (via the Khyber [**KIE-ber**] Pass) and the Thar (**tahr**) Desert east of the Indus River.

The Indian Subcontinent

The subcontinent—which encompasses the modern nations of Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, India, and the adjacent island of Sri Lanka—divides into three distinct topographical zones. The mountainous northern zone contains the heavily forested foothills and high meadows on the edge of the Hindu Kush and Himalaya ranges. Next come the great basins of the Indus and Ganges (**GAHN-jeez**) Rivers. Originating in the snow-clad Tibetan mountains to the north, these rivers have repeatedly overflowed their banks and deposited layer on layer of silt, creating large alluvial plains. Northern India is divided from the third zone, the peninsula proper, by the Vindhya range and the Deccan (**de-KAN**), an arid, rocky plateau. The tropical coastal strip of Kerala (Malabar) in the west, the Coromandel Coast in the east with its web of rivers descending from the central plateau, the flatlands of Tamil Nadu on the southern tip of the peninsula, and the island of Sri Lanka often have followed paths of political and cultural development separate from those of northern India.

The northern rim of mountains shelters the subcontinent from cold Arctic winds and gives it a subtropical climate. The most dramatic source of moisture is the **monsoon** (seasonal wind). The Indian Ocean is slow to warm or cool, while the vast landmass of Asia swings between seasonal extremes of heat and cold. The temperature difference between water and land acts like a bellows, producing a great wind. The southwest monsoon begins in June, absorbing huge amounts of moisture from the Indian Ocean and dropping it over a swath of India that encompasses the rain forest belt on the western coast and the Ganges Basin. Three harvests a year are possible in some places. Rice is grown in the moist, flat Ganges Delta (modern Bengal). Else-



AP* Exam Tip The Indian subcontinent is called South Asia on the AP* World History exam.

monsoon Seasonal winds in the Indian Ocean caused by the differences in temperature between the rapidly heating and cooling landmasses of Africa and Asia and the slowly changing ocean waters. These strong and predictable winds have long been ridden across the open sea by sailors, and the large amounts of rainfall that they deposit on parts of India, Southeast Asia, and China allow for the cultivation of several crops a year.

CHRONOLOGY	
India	Southeast Asia
2000 B.C.E.	ca. 2000 B.C.E. Swidden agriculture ca. 1600 B.C.E. Beginning of migrations from mainland Southeast Asia to islands in Pacific and Indian Oceans
1500 B.C.E.	ca. 1500 B.C.E. Migration of Indo-European peoples into northwest India
1000 B.C.E.	ca. 1000 B.C.E. Indo-European groups move into the Ganges Plain
500 B.C.E.	ca. 500 B.C.E. Siddhartha Gautama founds Buddhism; Mahavira founds Jainism 324 B.C.E. Chandragupta Maurya becomes king of Magadha and lays foundation for Mauryan Empire 273–232 B.C.E. Reign of Ashoka 184 B.C.E. Fall of Mauryan Empire
1 C.E.	ca. 50–560 C.E. Funan dominates southern Indochina and the Isthmus of Kra 320 C.E. Chandra Gupta establishes Gupta Empire
500 C.E.	550 C.E. Collapse of Gupta Empire ca. 500 C.E. Trade route develops through Strait of Malacca

Vedas Early Indian sacred “knowledge”—the literal meaning of the term—long preserved and communicated orally by Brahmin priests and eventually written down. These religious texts, including the thousand poetic hymns to various deities contained in the Rig Veda, are our main source of information about the Vedic period (ca. 1500–500 B.C.E.).

Arya Migrations

where the staples are wheat, barley, and millet. The Indus Valley, in contrast, gets little precipitation (see Chapter 1), and agriculture requires extensive irrigation.

Although invasions and migrations usually came by land through the northwest corridor, the ocean has not been a barrier to travel and trade. Mariners learned to ride the monsoon winds across open waters from northeast to southwest in January and to make the return voyage in July. Ships sailed west across the Arabian Sea to the Persian Gulf, the southern coast of Arabia, and East Africa, and east across the Bay of Bengal to Indochina and Indonesia (see Chapter 7).

Many characteristic features of later Indian civilization may derive from the Indus Valley civilization of the third and early second millennia B.C.E., but proof is hard to come by because writing from that period has not yet been deciphered. That society, with its advanced social organization and technology, succumbed around 1900 B.C.E. to some kind of environmental crisis (see Chapter 1).

The Vedic Age

Historians call the period from 1500 to 500 B.C.E. the Vedic Age, after the **Vedas (VAY-duhs)**, religious texts that are our main source of information about the period. The foundations for Indian civilization were laid in the Vedic Age. Most historians believe that new groups of people—animal-herding warriors speaking Indo-European languages—migrated into northwest India around 1500 B.C.E. Some argue for a much earlier Indo-European presence in this region in conjunction with the spread of agriculture. In any case, in the mid-second millennium B.C.E. northern India entered a new historical period associated with the dominance of Indo-European groups.

After the collapse of the Indus Valley civilization there was no central authority to direct irrigation efforts. The region became home to kinship groups that depended mostly on their herds of cattle for sustenance. These societies were patriarchal, with the father dominating the family as the king ruled the tribe. Members of the warrior class boasted of their martial skill and courage, relished combat, celebrated with lavish feasts of beef and rounds of heavy drinking, and filled their leisure time with chariot racing and gambling.

After 1000 B.C.E. some groups migrated east into the Ganges Plain. New technologies made this advance possible. Iron tools—harder than bronze and able to hold a sharper edge—allowed settlers to fell trees and work the newly cleared land with plows pulled by oxen. The soil of the Ganges Plain was fertile, well watered by the annual monsoon, and able to sustain two or three crops a year. As in Greece at roughly the same time (see Chapter 4), the use of iron tools to open new land for agriculture must have led to a significant increase in population.

Stories about this era, not written down until much later but long preserved by memorization and oral recitation, speak of bitter warfare between two groups of people: the Aryas, relatively light-skinned speakers of Indo-European languages, and the Dasas, dark-skinned speakers of Dravidian languages. It is possible that some Dasas were absorbed into Arya populations and that elites from both groups merged. For the most part, however, Aryas pushed the Dasas south into central and southern India, where their descendants still live. Today Indo-European languages are primarily spoken in northern India, while Dravidian speech prevails in the south.

Skin color has been a persistent concern of Indian society and is one of the bases for its historically sharp internal divisions. Over time there evolved a system of *varna*—literally “color,” though the word came to indicate something akin to “class.” Individuals were born into one of four classes: *Brahmin*, comprising priests and scholars; *Kshatriya* (**kshuh-TREE-yuh**), warriors and officials; *Vaishya* (**VIESH-yuh**), merchants, artisans, and landowners; or *Shudra* (**SHOOD-ra**), peasants and laborers. The designation *Shudra* originally may have been reserved for Dasas, who were given the menial jobs in society. Indeed, the very term *dasa* came to mean “slave.” Eventually a fifth group was marked off: the Untouchables. They were excluded from the class system, and members of the other groups literally avoided them because of the demeaning or polluting work to which they were relegated—such as leather tanning, which involved touching dead animals, and sweeping away ashes of the dead after cremations.

People at the top of the social pyramid could explain why this hierarchy existed. According to one creation myth, a primordial creature named Purusha allowed itself to be sacrificed. From its mouth sprang the class of Brahmin priests, the embodiment of intellect and knowledge. From its arms came the Kshatriya warrior class, from its thighs the Vaishya landowners and merchants, and from its feet the Shudra workers.

The varna system was just one of the mechanisms developed to regulate relations between different groups. Within the broad class divisions, the population was further subdivided into numerous *jati*, or birth groups (sometimes called *castes*, from a Portuguese term meaning “breed”). Each *jati* had its proper occupation, duties, and rituals. Individuals who belonged to a given *jati* lived with members of their group, married within the group, and ate only with members of the group. Elaborate rules governed their interactions with members of other groups. Members of higher-status groups feared pollution from contact with lower-caste individuals and had to undergo elaborate rituals of purification to remove any taint.

The class and caste systems came to be connected to a widespread belief in reincarnation. The Brahmin priests taught that every living creature had an immortal essence: the *atman*, or “breath.” Separated from the body at death, the *atman* was later reborn in another body. Whether the new body was that of an insect, an animal, or a human depended on the *karma*, or deeds, of the *atman* in its previous incarnations. People who lived exemplary lives would be reborn into the higher classes. Those who misbehaved would be punished in the next life by being relegated to a lower class or even a lower life form. The underlying message was: You are where you deserve to be, and the only way to improve your lot in the next cycle of existence is to accept your current station and its attendant duties.

The dominant deities in Vedic religion were male and associated with the heavens. To release the dawn, Indra, god of war and master of the thunderbolt, daily slew the demon encasing the universe. Varuna, lord of the sky, maintained universal order and dispensed justice. Agni, the force of fire, consumed the sacrifice and bridged the spheres of gods and humans.



AP* Exam Tip It is best to focus on the impact of a technology, here iron metallurgy, rather than on the specific time in which it was developed.



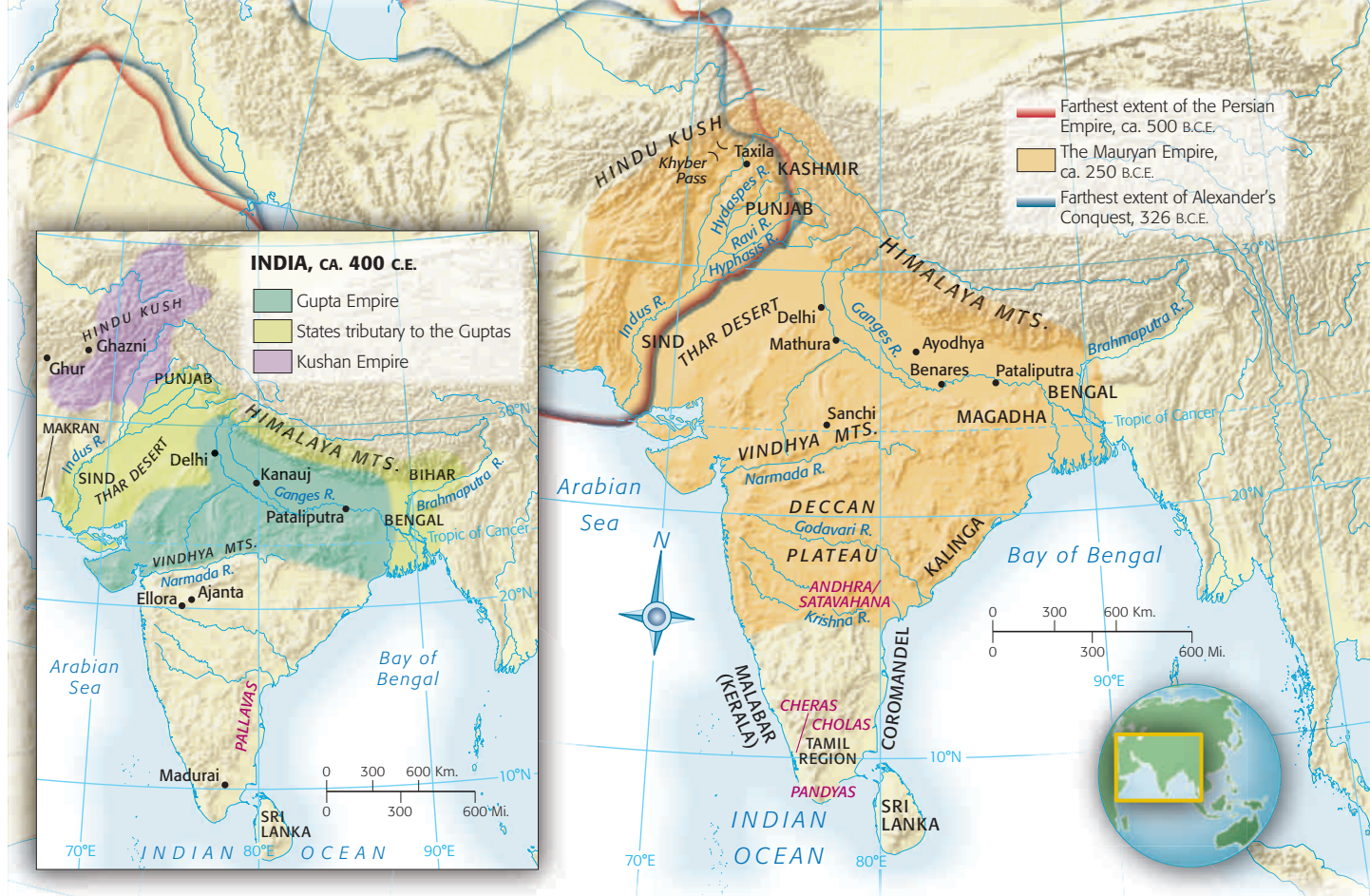
AP* Exam Tip Understand and be able to compare social hierarchies of all types, not just the caste system in India.

Class and Caste

varna/jati Two categories of social identity of great importance in Indian history. Varna are the four major social divisions: the Brahmin priest class, the Kshatriya warrior/administrator class, the Vaishya merchant/farmer class, and the Shudra laborer class. Within the system of varna are many *jati*, regional groups of people who have a common occupational sphere and who marry, eat, and generally interact with other members of their group.

karma In Indian tradition, the residue of deeds performed in past and present lives that adheres to a “spirit” and determines what form it will assume in its next life cycle. The doctrines of karma and reincarnation were used by the elite in ancient India to encourage people to accept their social position and do their duty.

Vedic Religion



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MAP 6.1 Ancient India Mountains and ocean largely separate the Indian subcontinent from the rest of Asia. Migrations and invasions usually came through the Khyber Pass in the northwest. Seaborne commerce with western Asia, Southeast Asia, and East Asia often flourished. Peoples speaking Indo-European languages migrated into the broad valleys of the Indus and Ganges Rivers in the north. Dravidian-speaking peoples remained the dominant population in the south. The diversity of the Indian landscape, the multiplicity of ethnic groups, and the primary identification of people with their class and caste lie behind the division into many small states that has characterized much of Indian political history.

e Interactive Map

Sacrifice—the dedication to a god of a valued possession, often a living creature—was the essential ritual. The purpose of these offerings was to invigorate the gods and thereby sustain their creative powers and promote stability in the world.

Brahmin priests controlled the sacrifices, for only they knew the rituals and prayers. The *Rig Veda*, a collection of more than a thousand poetic hymns to various deities, and the *Brahmanas*, detailed prose descriptions of procedures for ritual and sacrifice, were collections of priestly lore couched in the Sanskrit language of the Arya upper classes. This information was handed down orally from one generation of priests to the next. The priests’ “knowledge” (the term *veda* means just that) was the basis of their economic well-being. They were amply rewarded for officiating at sacrifices, and their knowledge gave them social and political power because they were the indispensable intermediaries between gods and humans. Some scholars hypothesize that the Brahmins resisted the introduction of writing in order to preserve their control of sacred knowledge. This might explain why writing came into widespread use in India later than in other societies of equivalent complexity. However, we may be unaware of earlier uses of writing because it involved perishable materials that have not survived in the archaeological record.

e **PRIMARY SOURCE:**
The Rig Veda Read how Indra, “the thunder-wielder,” slew Vritra, “firstborn of dragons,” and how Purusha created the universe through an act of ritual sacrifice.

It is difficult to uncover the experiences of women in early India. Limited evidence indicates that women in the Vedic period studied sacred lore, composed religious hymns, and participated in the sacrificial ritual. They could own property and usually did not marry until reaching their middle or late teens. Several strong and resourceful women appear in the Indian epic poems originating in this era.

The sharp internal divisions and complex hierarchy of Indian society served important social functions. They provided each individual with a clear identity and role and offered the benefits

of group solidarity and support. However, there is evidence that groups sometimes were able to upgrade their status. Thus the elaborate system of divisions was not static and provided a mechanism for working out social tensions. Many of these features have persisted into modern times.

Challenges to the Old Order: Jainism and Buddhism

moksha The Hindu concept of the spirit’s “liberation” from the endless cycle of rebirths. There are various avenues—such as physical discipline, meditation, and acts of devotion to the gods—by which the spirit can distance itself from desire for the things of this world and be merged with the divine force that animates the universe.

Jainism



AP* Exam Tip The details of Jainism are less emphasized than the major teachings of Hinduism and Buddhism on the AP* exam.

After 700 B.C.E. various forms of reaction against Brahmin power and privilege emerged. People who objected to the rigid hierarchy of classes and castes or the community’s demands on the individual could retreat to the nearby forest that still covered much of ancient India. These wild places symbolized freedom from societal constraints.

Certain charismatic individuals who abandoned their town or village and moved to the forest attracted bands of followers. Calling into question the priests’ exclusive claims to wisdom and the necessity of Vedic chants and sacrifices, they offered an alternate path to salvation: the individual pursuit of insight into the nature of the self and the universe through physical and mental discipline (*yoga*), special dietary practices, and meditation. They taught that by distancing oneself from desire for the things of this world, one could achieve **moksha**, or “liberation.” This release from the cycle of reincarnations and union with the divine force that animates the universe sometimes was likened to “a deep, dreamless sleep.” The *Upanishads* (**ooH-PAH-nee-shad**)—a collection of more than one hundred mystical dialogues between teachers and disciples—reflect this questioning of the foundations of Vedic religion.

The most serious threat to Vedic religion and Brahmin prerogatives came from two new religions that emerged around this time: Jainism and Buddhism. Mahavira (540–468 B.C.E.) was known to his followers as Jina, “the Conqueror,” from which is derived *Jainism* (**JINE-iz-uhm**), the belief system that he established. Emphasizing the holiness of the life force animating all living creatures, Mahavira and his followers practiced strict nonviolence. They wore masks to prevent accidentally inhaling small insects, and they carefully brushed off a seat before sitting down. Those who gave themselves over completely to Jainism practiced extreme asceticism and



Dinodia Photo Library

Carved Stone Gateway Leading to the Great Stupa at Sanchi Pilgrims traveled long distances to visit stupas, mounds containing relics of the Buddha. The complex at Sanchi, in central India, was begun by Ashoka in the third century B.C.E., though the gates probably date to the first century C.E. This relief shows a royal procession bringing the remains of the Buddha to the city of Kushinagara.




Robert Fisher

Sculpture of the Buddha, Second or Third Century C.E. This depiction of the Buddha, showing the effects of a protracted fast before he abandoned asceticism for the path of moderation, is from Gandhara in the northwest. It displays the influence of Greek artistic styles emanating from Greek settlements established in that region by Alexander the Great in the late fourth century B.C.E.

Buddha An Indian prince named Siddhartha Gautama, who renounced his wealth and social position. After becoming “enlightened” (the meaning of *Buddha*), he enunciated the principles of Buddhism. This doctrine evolved and spread throughout India and to Southeast, East, and Central Asia.

Buddhism

 **PRIMARY SOURCE:**
Setting in Motion the Wheel of Law Siddhartha’s first sermon contains the core teaching of Buddhism: to escape, by following the Middle Path, the suffering caused by desire.

nudity, ate only what they were given by others, and eventually starved themselves to death. Less zealous Jainists, restricted from agricultural work by the injunction against killing, were city dwellers engaged in commerce and banking.

Far more significant for Indian and world history was the rise of Buddhism. So many stories were told about Siddhartha Gautama (563–483 B.C.E.), known as the **Buddha**, “the Enlightened One,” that it is difficult to separate fact from legend. He came from a Kshatriya family of the Sakyas, a people in the foothills of the Himalayas. As a young man he enjoyed the princely lifestyle to which he had been born, but at some point he abandoned family and privilege to become a wandering ascetic. After six years of self-deprivation, he came to regard asceticism as no more likely to produce spiritual insight than the luxury of his previous life, and he decided to adhere to a “Middle Path” of moderation. Sitting under a tree in a deer park near Benares on the Ganges River, he gained a sudden and profound insight into the true nature of reality, which he set forth as “Four Noble Truths”: (1) life is suffering; (2) suffering arises from desire; (3) the solution to suffering lies in curbing desire; and (4) desire can be curbed if a person follows the “Eightfold Path” of right views, aspirations, speech, conduct, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and meditation. Rising up, the Buddha preached his First Sermon, a central text of Buddhism, and set into motion the “Wheel of the Law.” He soon attracted followers, some of whom took vows of celibacy, nonviolence, and poverty.

In its original form, Buddhism centered on the individual. Although not quite rejecting the existence of gods, it denied their usefulness to a person seeking enlightenment. What mattered was living one’s life with moderation, in order to minimize desire and suffering, and searching for spiritual truth through self-discipline and meditation. The ultimate reward was *nirvana*, literally “snuffing out the flame.” With nirvana came release from the cycle of reincarnations and achievement of a state of perpetual tranquility. The Vedic tradition emphasized the eternal survival of the atman, the “breath” or nonmaterial essence of the individual. In contrast, Buddhism regarded the individual as a composite without any soul-like component that survived upon entering nirvana.

When the Buddha died, he left no final instructions, instead urging his disciples to “be their own lamp.” As the Buddha’s message—contained in philosophical discourses memorized by his followers—spread throughout India and into Central, Southeast, and East Asia, its very success began to subvert the individualistic and essentially atheistic tenets of the founder. Buddhist monasteries were established, and a hierarchy of Buddhist monks and nuns came into being. Worshipers erected *stupas* (**STOO-puh**) (large earthen mounds symbolizing the universe) over relics of the cremated founder. Believers began to worship the Buddha himself as a god. Many Buddhists also revered *bodhisattvas* (**boe-dih-SUT-vuh**), men and women who had achieved enlightenment and were on the threshold of nirvana but chose to be reborn into mortal bodies to help others along the path to salvation.

The makers of early pictorial images refused to show the Buddha as a living person and represented him only indirectly, through symbols such as his footprints, his begging bowl, or the tree under which he achieved enlightenment, as if to emphasize his achievement of a state of nonexistence. From the second century C.E., however, statues of the Buddha and bodhisattvas began to proliferate, done in native sculptural styles and in a style that showed the influence

Mahayana Buddhism “Great Vehicle” branch of Buddhism followed in China, Japan, and Central Asia. The focus is on reverence for Buddha and for bodhisattvas, enlightened persons who have postponed nirvana to help others attain enlightenment.

Theravada Buddhism “Way of the Elders” branch of Buddhism followed in Sri Lanka and much of Southeast Asia. Theravada remains close to the original principles set forth by the Buddha; it downplays the importance of gods and emphasizes austerity and the individual’s search for enlightenment.

The Hindu Gods

Hinduism A general term for a wide variety of beliefs and ritual practices that have developed in the Indian subcontinent since antiquity. Hinduism has roots in ancient Vedic, Buddhist, and south Indian religious concepts and practices. It spread along the trade routes to Southeast Asia.

of the Greek settlements established in Bactria (modern Afghanistan) by Alexander the Great (see Chapter 4). A schism emerged within Buddhism. Devotees of **Mahayana** (**mah-huh-YAH-nuh**) (“Great Vehicle”) **Buddhism** embraced the popular new features, while practitioners of **Theravada** (**there-uh-VAH-duh**) (“Teachings of the Elders”) **Buddhism** followed most of the original teachings of the founder.

The Evolution of Hinduism

Challenged by new, spiritually satisfying, and egalitarian movements, Vedic religion made important adjustments, evolving into **Hinduism**, the religion of hundreds of millions of people in South Asia today. The foundation of Hinduism is the Vedic religion of the Arya peoples of northern India. But Hinduism also incorporated elements drawn from the Dravidian cultures of the south, such as an emphasis on intense devotion to the deity and the prominence of fertility rituals. Also present are elements of Buddhism.

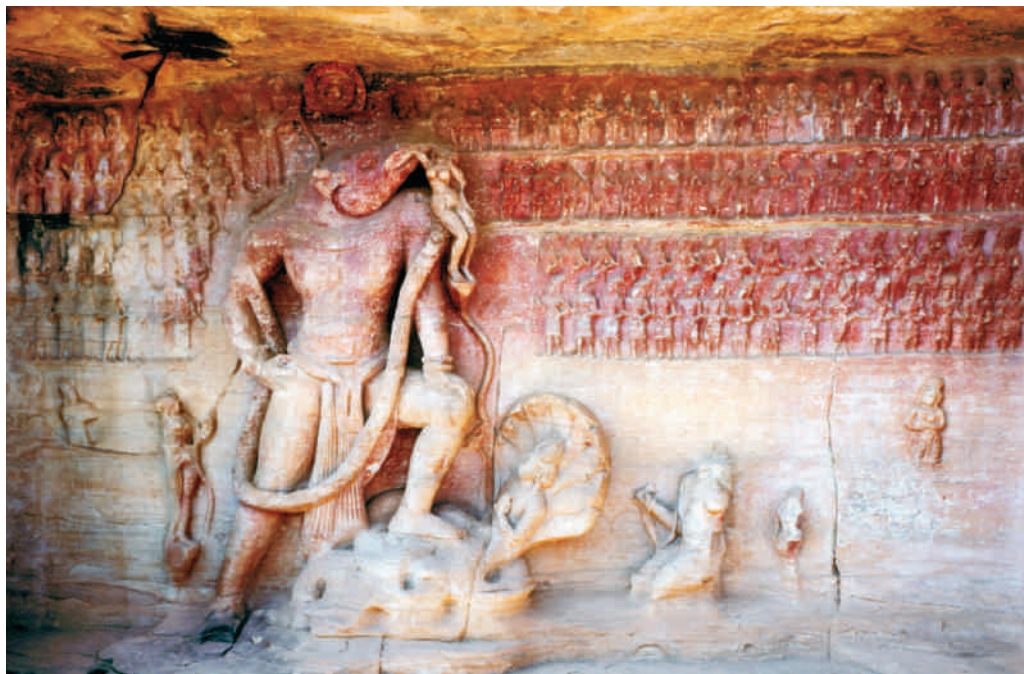
The process by which Vedic religion was transformed into Hinduism by the fourth century C.E. is largely hidden from us. The Brahmin priests maintained their high social status and influence. But sacrifice, though still part of traditional worship, was less central, and there was more opportunity for direct contact between gods and individual worshipers.

The gods were altered, both in identity and in their relationships with humanity. Two formerly minor deities, Vishnu (**VIHSH-noo**) and Shiva (**SHEE-vuh**), became preeminent. Hinduism emphasized the worshiper’s personal devotion to a particular deity, usually Vishnu, Shiva, or Devi (**DEH-vee**) (“the Goddess”). Both Shiva and Devi appear to be derived from the Dravidian tradition, in which fertility cult and female deities played a prominent role. Vishnu, who has a clear Arya pedigree, remains more popular in northern India, while Shiva is dominant in the Dravidian south. These gods can appear in many guises. They are identified by various cult names and are represented by a complex symbolism of stories, companion animals, birds, and objects.



Jean-Louis Nou/ake-images

Hindu Temple at Khajuraho This sandstone temple of the Hindu deity Shiva, representing the celestial mountain of the gods, was erected at Khajuraho, in central India, around 1000 C.E., but it reflects the architectural symbolism of Hindu temples developed in the Gupta period. Worshipers made their way through several rooms to the image of the deity, located in the innermost “womb-chamber” directly beneath the tallest tower.



Borromeo/Art Resource, NY

Vishnu Rescuing the Earth Goddess, Fifth Century c.e. This sculpture, carved into the rock wall of a cave at Udayagiri in eastern India, depicts Vishnu in his incarnation as a boar rescuing the Earth Goddess from the vast ocean. As the god treads triumphantly on a subdued snake demon and the joyful goddess clings to his snout, a chorus of gods and sages applaud the miracle.

Vishnu, the preserver, is a benevolent deity who helps his devotees in time of need. Hindus believe that whenever demonic forces threaten the cosmic order, Vishnu appears on earth in one of a series of *avatars*, or incarnations. Among his incarnations are the legendary hero Rama, the popular cowherd-god Krishna, and the Buddha (a clear attempt to co-opt the rival religion's founder). Shiva, who lives in ascetic isolation on Mount Kailasa in the Himalayas, is a more ambivalent figure. He represents both creation and destruction, for both are part of a single, cyclical process. He often is represented performing dance steps that symbolize the acts of creation and destruction. Devi manifests herself in various ways—as a full-bodied mother-goddess who promotes fertility and procreation, as the docile and loving wife Parvati, and as the frightening deity who, under the name Kali or Durga, lets loose a torrent of violence and destruction.

The multiplicity of gods (330 million according to one tradition), sects, and local practices within Hinduism is dazzling, reflecting the ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity of India. Yet within this variety there is unity. Ultimately, all the gods and spirits are seen as manifestations of a single divine force that pervades the universe. This sense of underlying unity is expressed in texts, such as the passage from the Bhagavad-Gita quoted at the beginning of this chapter; in the different potentials of women represented in the various manifestations of Devi; and in composite statues that are split down the middle—half Shiva, half Vishnu—as if to say that they are complementary aspects of one cosmic principle.

Forms of Worship

Hinduism offers the worshiper a variety of ways to approach god and obtain divine favor—through special knowledge of sacred truths, mental and physical discipline, or extraordinary devotion to the deity. Worship centers on the temples, which range from humble village shrines to magnificent stone edifices built under royal patronage. Beautifully proportioned statues in which the deity may take up temporary residence are adored and beseeched by eager worshipers. A common form of worship is *puja*, service to the deity, which can take the form of bathing, clothing, or feeding the statue. Potent blessings are conferred on the man or woman who glimpses the divine image.

Pilgrimage to famous shrines and attendance at festivals offer worshipers additional opportunities to show devotion. The entire Indian subcontinent is dotted with sacred places where

worshippers can directly sense and benefit from the inherent power of divinity. Mountains, caves, and certain trees, plants, and rocks are enveloped in an aura of mystery and sanctity. Hindus consider the Ganges River especially sacred, and each year millions of devoted worshippers bathe in its waters and receive their restorative and purifying power. The habit of pilgrimage has promoted contact and the exchange of ideas among people from different parts of India and has helped create a broad Hindu identity and the concept of India as a single civilization, despite enduring political fragmentation.

Religious duties may vary, depending not only on the worshiper's social standing and gender but also his or her stage of life. A young man from one of the three highest classes undergoes a ritual rebirth through the ceremony of the sacred thread, marking the attainment of manhood and readiness to receive religious knowledge. From this point, the ideal life cycle passes through four stages: (1) the young man becomes a student and studies the sacred texts; (2) he then becomes a householder, marries, has children, and acquires material wealth; (3) when

his grandchildren are born, he gives up home and family and becomes a forest dweller, meditating on the nature and meaning of existence; (4) he abandons his personal identity altogether and becomes a wandering ascetic awaiting death. In the course of a virtuous life he has fulfilled first his duties to society and then his duties to himself, so that by the end he is so disconnected from the world that he can achieve moksha (liberation).

The successful transformation of a religion based on Vedic antecedents and the ultimate victory of Hinduism over Buddhism—Buddhism was driven from the land of its birth, though it maintains deep roots in Central, East, and Southeast Asia (see Chapters 7 and 10)—are remarkable phenomena. Hinduism responded to the needs of people for personal deities with whom they could establish direct connections. The austerity of Buddhism in its most authentic form, its denial of the importance of gods, and its expectation that individuals find their own path to enlightenment may have demanded too much of ordinary people. The very features that made Mahayana Buddhism more accessible to the populace—gods, saints, and myths—also made it more easily absorbed into the vast social and cultural fabric of Hinduism.

SECTION REVIEW

- The Aryas, pastoralist warriors, migrated into the Indus River Valley ca. 1500 B.C.E. and the Ganges plain after 1000 B.C.E., driving the Dasas into the southern part of the peninsula.
- The system of classes and castes, a mechanism for regulating the interactions of different groups, was linked to the concept of reincarnation and used to justify the power of the higher classes.
- Brahmin domination was challenged by new religions—Jainism and Buddhism.
- Theravada Buddhism remained close to the ideas of the founder, but Mahayana Buddhism developed gods, saints, monasteries, and shrines.
- Hinduism, created from a Vedic base but including Dravidian and Buddhist elements, preserved Brahmin status and privilege but allowed worshippers to make direct contact with the supernatural.
- Behind the diversity and multiplicity of Indian religion lies an ultimate unity.

IMPERIAL EXPANSION AND COLLAPSE, 324 B.C.E.–550 C.E.

Political unity in India, on those rare occasions when it has been achieved, has not lasted long. A number of factors have contributed to India's habitual political fragmentation. Different terrains called forth varied forms of organization and economic activity, and peoples occupying diverse zones differed in language and cultural practices. Perhaps the most significant barrier to political unity lay in the complex social hierarchy. Individuals identified themselves primarily in terms of their class and caste; allegiance to a higher political authority was secondary.

Despite these divisive factors, two empires arose in the Ganges Plain: the Mauryan (**MORE-yuhn**) Empire of the fourth to second centuries B.C.E. and the Gupta (**GOOP-tuh**) Empire of the fourth to sixth centuries C.E. Each extended political control over much of the subcontinent and fostered the formation of a common Indian civilization.



Origins of the Mauryan Empire

Mauryan Empire The first state to unify most of the Indian subcontinent. It was founded by Chandragupta Maurya in 324 B.C.E. and survived until 184 B.C.E. From its capital at Pataliputra in the Ganges Valley it grew wealthy from taxes on agriculture, iron mining, and control of trade routes.

Ashoka

Ashoka Third ruler of the Mauryan Empire in India (r. 273–232 B.C.E.). He converted to Buddhism and broadcast his precepts on inscribed stones and pillars, the earliest surviving Indian writing.

The Mauryan Empire, 324–184 B.C.E.

Around 600 B.C.E. independent kinship groups and states dotted the landscape of north India. The kingdom of Magadha, in eastern India south of the Ganges (see Map 6.1), began to play an increasingly influential role, however, thanks to wealth based on agriculture, iron mines, and its strategic location astride the trade routes of the eastern Ganges Basin. In the late fourth century B.C.E. Chandragupta Maurya (**MORE-yuh**), a young man from the Vaishya or Shudra class, gained control of Magadha and expanded it into the **Mauryan Empire**—India’s first centralized empire. He may have been inspired by the example of Alexander the Great, who had followed up his conquest of the Persian Empire with a foray into the Punjab (northern Pakistan) in 326 B.C.E. (see Chapter 4). Chandragupta (r. 324–301 B.C.E.) and his successors Bindusara (r. 301–273 B.C.E.) and Ashoka (r. 273–232 B.C.E.) extended Mauryan control over the entire subcontinent except the southern tip. Not until the height of the Mughal Empire of the seventeenth century C.E. was so much of India again under the control of a single government.

Tradition holds that Kautilya, a crafty elderly Brahmin, guided Chandragupta in his conquests and consolidation of power. Kautilya is said to have written a surviving treatise on government, the *Arthashastra* (**ahr-thuh-SHAHS-truh**). Although recent studies have shown that the *Arthashastra* in its present form is a product of the third century C.E., its core text may well go back to Kautilya. This coldly pragmatic guide to political success and survival advocates the so-called *mandala* (**man-DAH-luh**) (circle) theory of foreign policy: “My enemy’s enemy is my friend.” It also presents schemes for enforcing and increasing the collection of tax revenues, and it prescribes the use of spies to keep watch on everyone in the kingdom.

A tax equivalent to as much as one-fourth the value of the harvest supported the Mauryan kings and government. Other revenues came from tolls on trade; government monopolies on mining, liquor sales, and the manufacture of weapons; and fees charged to those using the irrigation network. Close relatives and associates of the king governed administrative districts based on traditional ethnic boundaries. A large imperial army—with infantry, cavalry, and chariot divisions and the fearsome new element of war elephants—further secured power. Standard coinage issued throughout the empire was used to pay government and military personnel and promoted trade.

The Mauryan capital was at Pataliputra (modern Patna), where five tributaries join the Ganges. Surrounded by rivers and further protected by a timber wall and moat, the city extended along the riverbank for 8 miles (13 kilometers). Busy and crowded (the population has been estimated at 270,000), it was governed by six committees with responsibility for manufacturing, trade, sales, taxes, the welfare of foreigners, and the registration of births and deaths.

Ashoka, Chandragupta’s grandson, is an outstanding figure in early Indian history. At the beginning of his reign he engaged in military campaigns that extended the boundaries of the empire. During his conquest of Kalinga, a coastal region southeast of Magadha, hundreds of thousands of people were killed, wounded, or deported. Overwhelmed by the brutality of this victory, the young monarch became a convert to Buddhism and preached nonviolence, morality, moderation, and religious tolerance in both government and private life.

Ashoka publicized this program by inscribing edicts on great rocks and polished pillars of sandstone scattered throughout his enormous empire. Among the inscriptions that have survived—they constitute the earliest decipherable Indian writing—is the following:

For a long time in the past, for many hundreds of years have increased the sacrificial slaughter of animals, violence toward creatures, unfilial conduct toward kinsmen, improper conduct toward Brahmins and ascetics. Now with the practice of morality by King [Ashoka], the sound of war drums has become the call to morality. . . . You [government officials] are appointed to rule over thousands of human beings in the expectation that you will win the affection of all men. All men are my children. Just as I desire that my children will fare well and be happy in this world and the next, I desire the same for all men. . . . King [Ashoka]. . . desires that there should be the growth of the essential spirit of morality or holiness among all sects. . . . There should not be glorification of one’s own sect and denunciation of the sect of others for little or no reason. For all the sects are worthy of reverence for one reason or another.²

Ashoka, however, was not naive. Despite his commitment to peaceful means, he reminded potential transgressors that “the king, remorseful as he is, has the strength to punish the wrongdoers who do not repent.”

Commerce and Culture in an Era of Political Fragmentation

The Mauryan Empire prospered for a time after Ashoka’s death in 232 B.C.E. Then, weakened by dynastic disputes and the expense of maintaining a large army and administrative bureaucracy, it collapsed from the pressure of attacks in the northwest in 184 B.C.E. Five hundred years passed before another indigenous state exercised control over northern India.

Foreign Powers in the Northwest

In the meantime, a series of foreign powers dominated the northwest, present-day Afghanistan and Pakistan, and extended their influence east and south. The first was the Greco-Bactrian kingdom (180–50 B.C.E.), descended from troops and settlers left in Afghanistan by Alexander the Great. Greek influence is evident in the art of this period and in the designs of coins. Occupation by two nomadic groups from Central Asia followed, resulting from large-scale movements of peoples set off by the pressure of Han Chinese forces on the Xiongnu (see Chapter 5). The Shakas, an Iranian people driven southwest along the mountain barrier of the Pamirs and Himalayas, were dominant from 50 B.C.E. to 50 C.E. They were followed by the Kushans (**KOO-shahn**), originally from Xinjiang in northwest China, who were preeminent from 50 to 240 C.E. At its height the Kushan kingdom controlled much of present-day Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and northwest India, fostering trade and prosperity by connecting to both the overland Silk Road and Arabian seaports (see Chapter 7). The eastern Ganges region reverted to a patchwork of small principalities, as it had been before the Mauryan era.

Economic and Cultural Vitality

Despite political fragmentation in the five centuries after the Mauryan collapse, there were many signs of economic, cultural, and intellectual vitality. The network of roads and towns that had sprung up under the Mauryans fostered lively commerce within the subcontinent, and India was at the heart of international land and sea trade routes that linked China, Southeast Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East, East Africa, and the lands of the Mediterranean. The growth of crafts (metalwork, cloth making and dyeing, jewelry, perfume, glass, stone and terracotta sculpture), the increasing use of coins, and the development of local and long-distance commerce fostered the expansion and prosperity of urban centers. In the absence of a strong central authority, guilds of merchants and artisans became politically powerful in the towns. They were wealthy patrons of culture and endowed the religious sects to which they adhered—particularly Buddhism and Jainism—with richly decorated temples and monuments.

During the last centuries B.C.E. and first centuries C.E. the two greatest Indian epics, the *Ramayana* (**ruh-muh-YAH-nuh**) and the *Mahabharata* (**muh-huh-BAH-ruh-tuh**), based on oral predecessors dating back many centuries, achieved their final form. The events that both epics describe are said to have occurred several million years in the past, but the political forms, social organization, and other elements of cultural context—proud kings, beautiful queens, wars among kinship groups, heroic conduct, and chivalric values—seem to reflect the conditions of the early Vedic period, when Arya warrior societies were moving onto the Ganges Plain.

Mahabharata A vast epic chronicling the events leading up to a cataclysmic battle between related kinship groups in early India. It includes the Bhagavad-Gita.

The vast pageant of the *Mahabharata* (it is eight times the length of the Greek *Iliad* and *Odyssey* combined) tells the story of two sets of cousins, the Pandavas and Kauravas, whose quarrel over succession to the throne leads them to a cataclysmic battle at the field of Kurukshetra. The battle is so destructive on all sides that the eventual winner, Yudhishtira, is reluctant to accept the fruits of so tragic a victory.

Bhagavad-Gita The most important work of Indian sacred literature, a dialogue between the great warrior Arjuna and the god Krishna on duty and the fate of the spirit.

The **Bhagavad-Gita**, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, is a self-contained (and perhaps originally separate) episode set in the midst of those events. The great hero Arjuna, at first reluctant to fight his own kinsmen, is tutored by the god Krishna and learns the necessity of fulfilling his duty as a warrior. Death means nothing in a universe in which souls will be reborn again and again. The climactic moment comes when Krishna reveals his true appearance—awesome and overwhelmingly powerful—and his identity as time itself, the force behind all creation and destruction. The Bhagavad-Gita offers an attractive resolution to the tension in Indian civilization between duty to society and duty to one’s own soul. Disciplined action—that is, action



Central and Southern India

Tamil kingdoms The kingdoms of southern India, inhabited primarily by speakers of Dravidian languages, which developed in partial isolation, and somewhat differently, from the Arya north. They produced epics, poetry, and performance arts. Elements of Tamil religious beliefs were merged into the Hindu synthesis.

Rise of the Gupta Empire

Gupta Empire A powerful Indian state based, like its Mauryan predecessor, on a capital at Pataliputra in the Ganges Valley. It controlled most of the Indian subcontinent through a combination of military force and its prestige as a center of sophisticated culture.

Political Organization

theater-state Historians' term for a state that acquires prestige and power by developing attractive cultural forms and staging elaborate public ceremonies (as well as redistributing valuable resources) to attract and bind subjects to the center. Examples include the Gupta Empire in India and Srivijaya in Southeast Asia.

taken without regard for any personal benefits that might derive from it—is a form of service to the gods and will be rewarded by release from the cycle of rebirths.

This era also saw significant advances in science and technology. Indian doctors had a wide knowledge of herbal remedies. Panini (late fourth century B.C.E.) undertook a detailed analysis of Sanskrit word forms and grammar. His work led to the standardization of Sanskrit, arresting its natural development and turning it into a formal, literary, and administrative language. Prakrits—popular dialects—emerged to become the ancestors of the modern Indo-European languages of northern and central India.

This period of political fragmentation in the north also saw the rise of the Satavahana dynasty (also called Andhra) in the Deccan Plateau from the second century B.C.E. to the early third century C.E. (see Map 6.1). Elements of north Indian technology and culture—including iron metallurgy, rice-paddy agriculture, urbanization, writing, coinage, and Brahmin religious authority—spread throughout central India, and indigenous kinship groups were absorbed into the Hindu system of class and caste.

The three **Tamil kingdoms** of Cholas, Pandyas, and Cheras in the southernmost parts of the peninsula were in frequent conflict with one another and experienced periods of ascendancy and decline, but they persisted in one form or another for over two thousand years. The period from the third century B.C.E. to the third century C.E. was a “classical” period of great literary and artistic productivity. Under the patronage of the Pandya kings and the intellectual leadership of an academy of five hundred authors, works of literature on a wide range of topics—grammatical treatises, collections of ethical proverbs, epics, and short poems about love, war, wealth, and the beauty of nature—were produced, and music, dance, and drama were performed.

The Gupta Empire, 320–550 C.E.

In the early fourth century C.E., following the decline of the Kushan and Satavahana regimes in northern and central India, a new imperial entity took shape in the north. Like its Mauryan predecessor, the **Gupta Empire** emerged from the Ganges Plain and had its capital at Pataliputra. The founder, consciously modeling himself on the first Mauryan king, called himself Chandra Gupta (r. 320–335). The monarchs of this dynasty never controlled territories as extensive as those of the Mauryans. Nevertheless, over the fifteen-year reign of Chandra Gupta and the forty-year reigns of his three successors—the war-loving Samudra Gupta, Chandra Gupta II, a famed patron of artists and scholars, and Kumara Gupta—Gupta power and influence reached across northern and central India, west to Punjab and east to Bengal, north to Kashmir, and south into the Deccan Plateau (see Map 6.1).

This new empire enjoyed the same strategic advantages as its Mauryan predecessor, sitting astride important trade routes, exploiting the agricultural productivity of the Ganges Plain, and controlling nearby iron deposits. Although similar methods for raising revenue and administering broad territories were adopted, Gupta control was never as effectively centralized as Mauryan authority. The Gupta administrative bureaucracy and intelligence network were smaller and less pervasive. A standing army, whose strength lay in the excellent horsemanship (learned from the nomadic Kushans) and skill with bow and arrow of its cavalry, maintained tight control and taxation in the core of the empire. Governors, whose position often passed from father to son, had a freer hand in the more outlying areas. Distant subordinate kingdoms and areas inhabited by kinship groups made annual donations of tribute, and garrisons were stationed at key frontier points. At the local level, villages were managed by a headman and council of elders, while the guilds of artisans and merchants had important administrative roles in the cities.

Limited in its ability to enforce its will on outlying areas, the empire found ways to “persuade” others to follow its lead. One medium of persuasion was the splendor, beauty, and orderliness of life at the capital and royal court. The Gupta Empire is a good example of a “**theater-state**.” A constant round of solemn rituals, dramatic ceremonies, and exciting cultural events was a potent advertisement for the benefits of association with the empire. The center collected luxury goods and profits from trade and redistributed them to dependents through the exchange of gifts and other means. Subordinate princes gained prestige by emulating the Gupta center

Indian Mathematics

The so-called Arabic numerals used in most parts of the world today were developed in India. The Indian system of place-value notation was far more efficient than the unwieldy numerical systems of Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans, and the invention of zero was a profound intellectual achievement. This system is used even more widely than the alphabet derived from the Phoenicians (see Chapter 3) and is, in one sense, the only truly global language.

In its fully developed form the Indian method of arithmetic notation employed a base-ten system. It had separate columns for ones, tens, hundreds, and so forth, as well as a zero sign to indicate the absence of units in a given column. This system makes possible the economical expression of even very large numbers. It also allows for the performance of calculations not possible in a system like the numerals of the Romans, where any real calculation had to be done mentally or on a counting board.

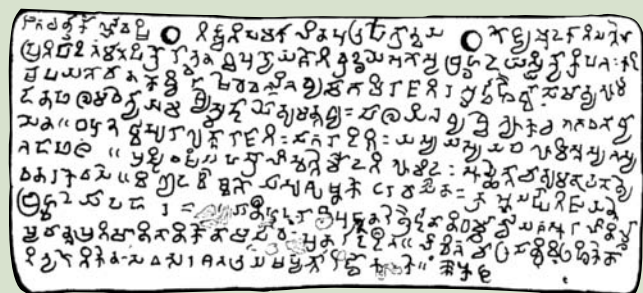
A series of early Indian inscriptions using the numerals from 1 to 9 are deeds of property given to religious institutions by kings or other wealthy individuals. They were incised in the Sanskrit language on copper plates. The earliest known example has a date equivalent to 595 C.E. A sign for zero is attested by the eighth century, but textual evidence leads to the inference that a place-value system and the zero concept were already known in the fifth century.

This Indian system spread to the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and East Asia by the seventh century. Other peoples quickly recognized its capabilities and adopted it, sometimes using indigenous symbols. Europe received the new technology somewhat later. Gerbert of Aurillac, a French Christian monk, spent time in Spain between 967 and 970, where he was exposed to the mathematics of the Arabs. A great scholar and teacher who eventually became Pope Sylvester II (r. 999–1003), he spread word of the “Arabic” system in the Christian West.

Knowledge of the Indian system of mathematical notation eventually spread throughout Europe, partly through the use of a mechanical calculating device—an improved version of the Roman counting board, with counters inscribed with variants of the Indian numeral forms. Because the counters could be turned sideways or upside down, at first there was considerable variation in the forms. But by the twelfth century they had become standardized into forms close to those in use today.

As the capabilities of the place-value system for calculations became clear, the counting board fell into disuse. This led to the adoption of the zero sign—not necessary on the counting board, where a column could be left empty—by the twelfth century. Leonardo Fibonacci, a thirteenth-century C.E. Italian who learned algebra in Muslim North Africa and employed the Arabic numeral system in his mathematical treatise, gave additional impetus to the movement to discard the traditional system of Roman numerals.

Why was this marvelous system of mathematical notation invented in ancient India? The answer may lie in the way its range and versatility correspond to elements of Indian cosmology. The Indians conceived of immense spans of time—trillions of years (far exceeding current scientific estimates of the age of the universe as approximately 14 billion years)—during which innumerable universes like our own were created, existed for a finite time, then were destroyed. In one popular creation myth, Vishnu is slumbering on the coils of a giant serpent at the bottom of the ocean, and worlds are being created and destroyed as he exhales and inhales. In Indian thought our world, like others, has existed for a series of epochs lasting more than 4 million years, yet the period of its existence is but a brief and insignificant moment in the vast sweep of time. The Indians developed a number system that allowed them to express concepts of this magnitude.



Facsimile by Georges Ifrah. Reproduced by permission of Georges Ifrah.

Copper Plate with Indian Numerals This property deed from western India shows an early form of the symbol system for numbers that spread to the Middle East and Europe and today is used all over the world.

on whatever scale they could manage, and they maintained close ties through visits, gifts, and marriages to the Gupta royal family.

Astronomers, mathematicians, and other scientists received royal support. Indian mathematicians invented the concept of zero and developed the “Arabic” numerals and system of place-value notation used in most parts of the world today (see Environment and Technology: Indian Mathematics). The Gupta monarchs also supported poets and dramatists and the compilation of law codes and grammatical texts.



Benoy K. Behl

Wall Painting from the Caves at Ajanta, Fifth or Sixth Century C.E. During and after the Gupta period, natural caves in the Deccan were turned into shrines decorated with sculpture and painting. This painting depicts one of the earlier lives of the Buddha, a king named Mahajanaka who lost and regained his kingdom, here listening to his queen, Sivali. While representing scenes from the earlier lives of the Buddha, the artists also give us glimpses of life at the royal court in their own times.

Because of the moist climate of the Ganges Plain, few archaeological remains from the Gupta era have survived. An eyewitness account, however, provides valuable information about Pataliputra, the capital city. A Chinese Buddhist monk named Faxian (**fah-shee-en**) made a pilgrimage to the homeland of his faith around 400 C.E. and left a record of his journey:

The royal palace and halls in the midst of the city, which exist now as of old, were all made by spirits which [King Ashoka] employed, and which piled up the stones, reared the walls and gates, and executed the elegant carving and inlaid sculpture-work—in a way which no human hands of this world could accomplish. . . . By the side of the stupa of Ashoka, there has been made a Mahayana [Buddhist] monastery, very grand and beautiful; there is also a Hinayana [Theravada] one; the two together containing six hundred or seven hundred monks. The rules of demeanor and the scholastic arrangements in them are worthy of observation.³

Women

There was a decline in the status of women in this period (see Diversity and Dominance: Relations Between Women and Men in the *Kama Sutra* and the *Arthashastra*). As in Mesopotamia, Greece, and China, several factors—urbanization, increasingly complex political and social structures, and the emergence of a nonagricultural middle class that placed high value on the acquisition and inheritance of property—led to a loss of women’s rights and an increase in male control over women’s behavior.

Relations Between Women and Men in the Kama Sutra and the Arthashastra

The ancient Indians articulated three broad areas of human concern: dharma—the realm of religious and moral behavior; artha—the acquisition of wealth and property; and kama—the pursuit of pleasure. The Kama Sutra, which means “Treatise on Pleasure,” while best known in the West for its detailed descriptions of erotic activities, is actually far more than a sex manual. It addresses, in a very broad sense, the relations between women and men in ancient Indian society, providing valuable information about the activities of men and women, the psychology of relationships, the forms of courtship and marriage, the household responsibilities of married women, appropriate behavior, and much more. The author of this text, Vatsyayana, lived in the third century C.E.

When a girl of the same caste, and a virgin, is married in accordance with the precepts of Holy Writ, the results of such a union are the acquisition of Dharma and Artha, offspring, affinity, increase of friends, and untarnished love. For this reason a man should fix his affections upon a girl who is of good family, whose parents are alive, and who is three years or more younger than himself. She should be born of a highly respectable family, possessed of wealth, well connected, and with many relations and friends. She should also be beautiful, of a good disposition, with lucky marks on her body, and with good hair, nails, teeth, ears, eyes and breasts, neither more nor less than they ought to be, and no one of them entirely wanting, and not troubled with a sickly body. . . . But at all events, says Ghotakamukha [an earlier writer], a girl who has been already joined with others (i.e., no longer a maiden) should never be loved, for it would be reproachable to do such a thing.

Now in order to bring about a marriage with such a girl as described above, the parents and relations of the man should exert themselves, as also such friends on both sides as may be desired to assist in the matter. These friends should bring to the notice of the girl's parents the faults, both present and future, of all the other men that may wish to marry her, and should at the same time extol even to exaggeration all the excellencies, ancestral and paternal, of their friend, so as to endear him to them. . . . Others again should rouse the jealousy of the girl's mother by telling her that their friend has a chance of getting from some other quarter even a better girl than hers.

A girl should be taken as a wife, as also given in marriage, when fortune, signs, omens, and the words of others are

favourable, for, says Ghotakamukha, a man should not marry at any time he likes. A girl who is asleep, crying, or gone out of the house when sought in marriage, or who is betrothed to another, should not be married. The following also should be avoided:

- One who is kept concealed
- One who has an ill-sounding name
- One who has her nose depressed
- One who has her nostril turned up
- One who is formed like a male
- One who is bent down
- One who has crooked thighs
- One who has a projecting forehead
- One who has a bald head
- One who does not like purity
- One who has been polluted by another
- One who is disfigured in any way
- One who has fully arrived at puberty
- One who is a friend
- One who is a younger sister
- One who is a Varshakari [prone to extreme perspiration]

But some authors say that prosperity is gained only by marrying that girl to whom one becomes attached, and that therefore no other girl but the one who is loved should be married by anyone. . . .

A virtuous woman, who has affection for her husband, should act in conformity with his wishes as if he were a divine being, and with his consent should take upon herself the whole care of his family. She should keep the whole house well cleaned, and arrange flowers of various kinds in different parts of it, and make the floor smooth and polished so as to give the whole a neat and becoming appearance. She should surround the house with a garden, and place ready in it all the materials required for the morning, noon and evening sacrifices. Moreover she should herself revere the sanctuary of the Household Gods. . . .

As regards meals, she should always consider what her husband likes and dislikes and what things are good for him, and what are injurious to him. When she hears the sounds of his footsteps coming home she should at once get up and be ready to do whatever he may command her, and either order her female servant to wash his feet, or wash them herself. When

Women in India lost the right to own or inherit property. They were barred from studying sacred texts and participating in sacrificial rituals. In many respects, they were treated as equivalent to the lowest class, the Shudra. A woman was expected to obey first her father, then her husband, and finally her sons. Girls were married at an increasingly early age, sometimes as young as six or seven. This practice meant that the prospective husband could be sure of his

going anywhere with her husband, she should put on her ornaments, and without his consent she should not either give or accept invitations, or attend marriages and sacrifices, or sit in the company of female friends, or visit the temples of the Gods. And if she wants to engage in any kind of games or sports, she should not do it against his will. In the same way she should always sit down after him, and get up before him, and should never awaken him when he is asleep.

The core of the Arthashastra, which means “Science of Wealth,” may have been composed in the later third century B.C.E. by Kautilya, an adviser to the first Mauryan ruler, Chandragupta, but the text as we have it includes later additions. While the Arthashastra is primarily concerned with how the ruler may gain and keep power, it includes prescriptions on other aspects of life, including the kinds of problems that may threaten or destroy marriages.

If a woman either brings forth no live children, or has no male issue, or is barren, her husband shall wait for eight years before marrying another. If she bears only a dead child, he has to wait for ten years. If she brings forth only females, he has to wait for twelve years. Then, if he is desirous to have sons, he may marry another. . . . If a husband either is of bad character, or is long gone abroad, or has become a traitor to his king, or is likely to endanger the life of his wife, or has fallen from his caste, or has lost virility, he may be abandoned by his wife. . . .

Women of refractive natures shall not be taught manners by using such expressions as “You, half-naked!; you, fully-naked; you, cripple; you, fatherless; you, motherless.” Nor shall she be given more than three beats, either with a bamboo bark or with a rope or with the palm of the hand, on her hips. . . .

A woman who hates her husband, who has passed the period of seven turns of her menses, and who loves another, shall immediately return to her husband both the endowment and jewelry she has received from him, and allow him to lie down with another woman. A man, hating his wife, shall allow her to take shelter in the house of a beggar woman, or of her lawful guardians or of her kinsmen. . . . A woman, hating her husband, cannot divorce her husband against his will. Nor can a man divorce his wife against her will. But from mutual enmity divorce may be obtained. . . .

If a woman engages herself in amorous sports, or drinking in the face of an order to the contrary, she shall be fined three panas. She shall pay a fine of six panas for going out at daytime to sports or to see a woman or spectacles. She shall pay a fine of twelve panas if she goes out to see another man or for sports. For the same offences committed at night the fines shall be doubled. If a woman goes out while the husband is asleep or

intoxicated, or if she shuts the door of the house against her husband, she shall be fined twelve panas. If a woman keeps him out of the house at night, she shall pay double the above fine. If a man and a woman make signs to each other with a view to sensual enjoyment, or carry on secret conversation for the same purpose, the woman shall pay a fine of twenty-four panas and the man double that amount. . . . For holding conversation in suspicious places, whips may be substituted for fines. In the center of the village, an outcaste person may whip such women five times on each of the sides of their body. . . .

A Kshatriya who commits adultery with an unguarded Brahman woman shall be punished with the highest amerement; a Vaishya doing the same shall be deprived of the whole of his property; and a Shudra shall be burnt alive wound round in mats. . . . A man who commits adultery with a woman of low caste shall be banished, with prescribed marks branded on his forehead, or shall be degraded to the same caste. A Shudra or an outcaste who commits adultery with a woman of low caste shall be put to death, while the woman shall have her ears and nose cut off.

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

1. In what ways are women given essentially equal treatment to men in these excerpts? In what ways are they treated unequally?
2. On what bases do men and women choose spouses and lovers? How does the class status of the two individuals play a part in these choices?
3. What were the most important household responsibilities of ancient Indian women? What social, intellectual, and cultural activities did they engage in?
4. In light of the prescriptions for how a married woman should treat her husband, what do you think was the nature of the emotional relationship of husband and wife? How might this differ from marriages in our society? Why did some marriages fail in ancient India?

Sources: First selection from Sir Richard Burton and F. F. Arbuthnot, *The Kama Sutra of Vatsyayana* (1883), sections III.1, III.4, III.5, IV.1, found at <http://www.sacredtexts.com/sex/kama/index.htm>. Second selection from R. Shamasastri, *Kautilya's Arthashastra*, 2nd ed. (1923), sections III.2, III.3, IV.13, from Internet Indian History Sourcebook at <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/india/kautilya2.html>.

wife's virginity and, by bringing her up in his own household, could train her to suit his purposes. The most extreme form of control took place in parts of India where a widow was expected to cremate herself on her husband's funeral pyre. This ritual, called *sati* (**suh-TEE**), was seen as a way of keeping a woman “pure.” Women who declined to make this ultimate gesture of devotion were forbidden to remarry, shunned socially, and given little opportunity to earn a living.

Religion in the Gupta Period

Some women escaped male control by entering a Jainist or Buddhist religious community. Status also gave women more freedom. Women who belonged to powerful families and courtesans trained in poetry and music as well as ways of providing sexual pleasure had high social standing and sometimes gave money for the erection of religious shrines.

The Mauryans had been Buddhists, but the Gupta monarchs were Hindus. They revived ancient Vedic practices to bring an aura of sanctity to their position. This period also saw a reassertion of the importance of class and caste and the influence of Brahmin priests. In return for the religious validation of their rule given by the Brahmins, the Guptas gave the priests extensive grants of land. The Brahmins became wealthy from the revenues, which they collected directly from the peasants, and they even exercised administrative and judicial authority over the villages in their domains. Nevertheless, it was an era of religious tolerance. The Gupta kings were patrons for Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain endeavors. Buddhist monasteries with hundreds or even thousands of monks and nuns in residence flourished in the cities, and a Buddhist university was established at Nalanda. Northern India was the destination of Buddhist pilgrims from Southeast and East Asia, traveling to visit the birthplace of their faith.

e PRIMARY SOURCE: The Laws of Manu See how the principle of dharma justifies the traditional roles of men and women and of priests, warriors, merchants, and servants in Hindu society.

The classic form of the Hindu temple evolved during the Gupta era. Sitting atop a raised platform surmounted by high towers, the temple was patterned on the sacred mountain or palace in which the gods of mythology resided, and it represented the inherent order of the universe. From an exterior courtyard worshipers approached the central shrine, where the statue of the deity stood. Paintings or sculptured depictions of gods and mythical events covered the walls of the best-endowed sanctuaries. Cave-temples carved out of rock were also richly adorned with frescoes or sculpture.

The vibrant commerce of the previous era continued into the Gupta period. Artisan guilds played an influential role in the economic, political, and religious life of the towns. The Guptas sought control of the ports on the Arabian Sea but saw a decline in trade with the weakened Roman Empire. In compensation, trade with Southeast and East Asia was on the rise. Adventurous merchants from the ports of eastern and southern India made the sea voyage to the Malay (**muh-LAY**) Peninsula and islands of Indonesia in order to exchange Indian cotton cloth, ivory, metalwork, and animals for Chinese silk or Indonesian spices. The overland Silk Road from China was also in operation but was vulnerable to disruption by Central Asian nomads (see Chapter 7).

Decline and Transformation

By the later fifth century C.E. the Gupta Empire was coming under pressure from the Huns. These nomadic invaders from the steppes of Central Asia poured into the northwest corridor. Defense of this distant frontier region eventually exhausted the imperial treasury, and the empire collapsed by 550.


During and after the centuries of Gupta ascendancy and decline in the north, the Deccan Plateau and the southern part of the peninsula followed an independent path. In this region, where the landscape is segmented by mountains, rocky plateaus, tropical forests, and sharply cut river courses, there were many small centers of power. From the sixth to twelfth centuries, the Pallavas, Chalukyas, and other warrior dynasties collected tribute and plundered as far as their strength permitted, storing their wealth in urban fortresses. These rulers sought legitimacy and fame as patrons of religion and culture, and much of the distinguished art and architecture of the period were produced in the kingdoms of the south. Many elements of northern Indian religion and culture spread in the south, including the class and caste system, Brahmin religious authority, and worship of Vishnu and Shiva. These kingdoms also served as the conduit through which Indian religion and culture reached Southeast Asia.

SECTION REVIEW

- The Mauryan Empire, founded in the late fourth century B.C.E. by Chandragupta Maurya, eventually controlled most of the subcontinent.
- King Ashoka, a convert to Buddhism, inscribed stones and pillars with a call to nonviolence, moderation, and religious toleration.
- After the Mauryan fall in 184 B.C.E., foreign occupiers—Indo-Greeks, Shakas, and Kushans—controlled the northwest.
- Despite political fragmentation, commerce and culture thrived.
- A renaissance of art and literature occurred in the Tamil kingdoms of south India between the third century B.C.E. and the third century C.E.
- The Gupta Empire, while not as extensive as the Mauryan Empire, fostered scholarship, science, and the arts from the fourth to sixth centuries C.E.



MAP 6.2 Southeast Asia Southeast Asia's position between the ancient centers of civilization in India and China had a major impact on its history. In the first millennium c.e. a series of powerful and wealthy states arose in the region by gaining control of major trade routes: first Funan, based in southern Vietnam, Cambodia, and the Malay Peninsula, then Srivijaya on the island of Sumatra, then smaller states on the island of Java. Shifting trade routes led to the demise of one and the rise of others.

 Interactive Map

SOUTHEAST ASIA, 50–600 C.E.

Southeast Asia consists of three geographical zones: the Indochina mainland, the Malay Peninsula, and thousands of islands extending on an east-west axis far out into the Pacific Ocean (see Map 6.2). Encompassing a vast area of land and water, this region is now occupied by the countries of Myanmar (**myahn-MAH**) (Burma), Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Brunei (**broo-NIE**), and the Philippines. Poised between the ancient centers of China and India, Southeast Asia has been influenced by the cultures of both civilizations. The region first rose to prominence and prosperity because of its intermediate role in the trade exchanges between southern and eastern Asia.

The strategic importance of Southeast Asia is enhanced by the region's natural resources. This is a geologically active zone; the islands are the tops of a chain of volcanoes. Lying along the equator, Southeast Asia has a tropical climate. The temperature hovers around 80 degrees Fahrenheit (30 degrees Celsius), and the monsoon winds provide dependable rainfall throughout the year. Thanks to several growing cycles each year, the region is capable of supporting a large human population. The most fertile agricultural lands lie along the floodplains of the largest silt-bearing rivers or contain rich volcanic soil deposited by ancient eruptions.

Early Civilization

Rain forest covers much of Southeast Asia. As early as 2000 B.C.E. people in this region practiced swidden agriculture, clearing land for farming by cutting and burning the vegetation. The

Ecology and Population

cleared land was farmed for several growing seasons. When the soil was exhausted, the farmers abandoned the patch, allowing the forest to reclaim it, while they cleared and cultivated other nearby fields in similar fashion. Rice was the staple food—labor-intensive (see Chapter 2), but able to support a large population. A number of plant and animal species spread from Southeast Asia to other regions, including rice, soybeans, sugar cane, yams, bananas, coconuts, chickens, and pigs.

The Malay peoples who became the dominant population in this region were the product of several waves of migration from southern China beginning around 3000 B.C.E. Some indigenous peoples merged with the Malay newcomers; others retreated to remote mountain and forest zones. Subsequently (beginning, perhaps, around 1600 B.C.E.), rising population and disputes within communities prompted streams of people to leave the Southeast Asian mainland for the islands. By the first millennium B.C.E. Southeast Asians had developed impressive navigational skills. They knew how to ride the monsoon winds and interpret the patterns of swells, winds, clouds, and bird and sea life. Over a period of several thousand years groups of Malay peoples in large, double outrigger canoes spread out across the Pacific and Indian Oceans—half the circumference of the earth—to settle thousands of islands.

The inhabitants of Southeast Asia clustered along riverbanks or in fertile volcanic plains. Their fields and villages were never far from the rain forest, with its wild animals and numerous plant species. Forest trees provided fruit, wood, and spices. The shallow waters surrounding the islands teemed with fish. This region was also an early center of metallurgy. Metalsmiths heated copper and tin ore to the right temperature for producing and shaping bronze implements by using hollow bamboo tubes to funnel oxygen to the furnace.

External Influences

Northern Indochina, by its geographic proximity, was vulnerable to Chinese pressure and cultural influences, and it was under Chinese political control for a thousand years beginning in the second century B.C.E. Farther south, larger states emerged in the early centuries C.E. in response to two powerful forces: commerce and Hindu-Buddhist culture. Southeast Asia was situated along the trade routes that merchants used to carry Chinese silk westward to India and the Mediterranean. The movements of nomadic peoples had disrupted the old land route across Central Asia. But in India demand for silk was increasing—both for domestic use and for transshipment to satisfy the fast-growing luxury market in the Roman Empire. Gradually merchants extended this exchange network to include goods from Southeast Asia, such as aromatic woods, resins, and cinnamon, pepper, cloves, nutmeg, and other spices. By serving this trade network and controlling key points, Southeast Asian centers rose to prominence.

The other force leading to the rise of larger political entities was the influence of Hindu-Buddhist culture imported from India. Commerce brought Indian merchants and sailors into the ports of Southeast Asia. As Buddhism spread, Southeast Asia became a way station for Indian missionaries and East Asian pilgrims going to and coming from the birthplace of their faith. Shrewd Malay rulers looked to Indian traditions as a rich source of ideas and prestige. They borrowed Sanskrit terms such as *maharaja* (**mah-huh-RAH-juh**) (great king), utilized Indian models of bureaucracy, ceremonial practices, and forms of artistic representation, and employed priests, administrators, and scribes skilled in Sanskrit writing to expedite government business. Their special connection to powerful gods and higher knowledge raised them above their rivals.

The Southeast Asian kingdoms, however, were not just passive recipients of Indian culture. They took what was useful to them and synthesized it with indigenous beliefs, values, and institutions—for example, local concepts of chiefship, ancestor worship, and forms of oaths. Moreover, they trained their own people in the new ways, so that the bureaucracy contained both foreign experts and native disciples. The whole process amounted to a cultural dialogue between India and Southeast Asia, in which both were active participants.

The first major Southeast Asian center, called “**Funan**” (**FOO-nahn**) by Chinese visitors, flourished between the first and sixth centuries C.E. (see Map 6.2). Its capital was at the modern site of Oc-Eo in southern Vietnam. Funan occupied the delta of the Mekong (**MAY-kawng**) River, a “rice bowl” capable of supporting a large population. The rulers mobilized large numbers of laborers to dig irrigation channels and prevent destructive floods. By extending its control over most of southern Indochina and the Malay Peninsula, Funan was able to dominate the trade route from India to China. The route began in the ports of northeast India, crossed the Bay of

Funan An early complex society in Southeast Asia between the first and sixth centuries C.E. It was centered in the rich rice-growing region of southern Vietnam, and it controlled the passage of trade across the Malaysian isthmus.

Funan

Bengal, continued by land over the Isthmus of Kra on the Malay Peninsula, and then continued across the South China Sea (see Map 6.2). Indian merchants found that offloading their goods from ships and carrying them across the narrow strip of land was safer than making the 1,000-mile (1,600-kilometer) voyage around the Malay Peninsula—a dangerous trip marked by treacherous currents, rocky shoals, and pirates. Once the portage across the isthmus was finished, the

SECTION REVIEW

- Climate and resources enabled Southeast Asia to support large human populations.
- Located on the trade and pilgrimage routes between China and India, Southeast Asia came under strong Hindu and Buddhist influence.
- Shrewd rulers used Indian knowledge and personnel to enhance their power and prestige.
- Funan rose to prominence between the first and sixth centuries c.e. by controlling the trade route across the Malay Peninsula.

merchants needed food and lodging while waiting for the monsoon winds to shift so they could make the last leg of the voyage to China by sea. Funan stockpiled food and provided security for those engaged in this trade—in return for customs duties and other fees.

Chinese observers have left reports of the prosperity and sophistication of Funan, emphasizing the presence of walled cities, palaces, archives, systems of taxation, and state-organized agriculture. Nevertheless, Funan declined in the sixth century. The most likely explanation is that international trade routes changed and Funan no longer held a strategic position.

CONCLUSION

This chapter traces the emergence of complex societies in India and Southeast Asia between the second millennium B.C.E. and the mid-first millennium C.E. Because of migrations, trade, and the spread of belief systems, an Indian style of civilization spread throughout the subcontinent and adjoining regions and eventually made its way to the mainland and island chains of Southeast Asia. In this period were laid cultural foundations that in large measure still endure.

The development and spread of belief systems—Vedism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Hinduism—have a central place in this chapter because nearly all the sources of information are religious. A museum visitor examining artifacts from ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, the Greco-Roman Mediterranean, and China will find many objects of a religious nature. Only the Indian artifacts, however, will be almost exclusively from the religious sphere.

Writing came later to India than to other parts of the Eastern Hemisphere, for reasons particular to the Indian situation. Like Indian artifacts, most ancient Indian texts are of a religious nature. Ancient Indians did not develop a historical consciousness and generate historiographic texts like their Israelite, Greek, and Chinese contemporaries, primarily because they held a strikingly different view of time. The distinctive Indian conception—of vast epochs in which universes are created and destroyed again and again and the essential spirit of living creatures is reincarnated repeatedly—made the particulars of any brief moment seem relatively unilluminating.

The tension between divisive and unifying forces can be seen in many aspects of Indian life. Political and social division has been the norm throughout much of the history of India, a consequence of the topographical and environmental diversity of the subcontinent and the complex mix of ethnic and linguistic groups inhabiting it. The elaborate structure of classes and castes was a response to this diversity—an attempt to organize the population and position individuals within an accepted hierarchy, as well as to regulate group interactions. Strong central governments, such as those of the Mauryan and Gupta kings, gained ascendancy for a time and promoted prosperity and development. They rose to dominance by gaining control of metal resources and important trade routes, developing effective military and administrative institutions, and creating cultural forms that inspired admiration and emulation. However, as in Archaic Greece and Warring States China, the periods of fragmentation and multiple small centers of power seemed as economically and intellectually dynamic as the periods of unity.

Many distinctive social and intellectual features of Indian civilization—the class and caste system, models of kingship and statecraft, and Vedic, Jainist, and Buddhist belief systems—originated in the great river valleys of the north, where descendants of Indo-European immigrants predominated. Hinduism then embraced elements drawn from the Dravidian cultures of the south as well as from Buddhism. The capacity of the Hindu tradition to assimilate a wide range of popular beliefs facilitated the spread of a common Indian civilization across the subcontinent, although there was, and is, considerable variation from one region to another.

KEY TERMS

monsoon p. 174
Vedas p. 175
varna p. 176
jati p. 176
karma p. 176
moksha p. 178

Buddha p. 179
Mahayana Buddhism p. 180
Theravada Buddhism p. 180

Hinduism p. 180
Mauryan Empire p. 183
Ashoka p. 183
Mahabharata p. 184
Bhagavad-Gita p. 184

Tamil kingdoms p. 185
Gupta Empire p. 185
theater-state p. 185
Funan p. 192

EBOOK AND WEBSITE RESOURCES

Primary Sources

The *Rig Veda*
 Setting in Motion the Wheel of Law
 The *Laws of Manu*

Interactive Maps

Map 6.1 Ancient India
Map 6.2 Southeast Asia

Plus flashcards, practice quizzes, and more. Go to:
www.cengage.com/history/bulletearthpeople5e

SUGGESTED READING

- Avari, Burjor. *India: The Ancient Past: A History of the Indian Sub-Continent from c. 7000 BC to AD 1200*. 2007. A clear, concise introduction to ancient Indian history.
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- Diskul, M. C. S. *The Art of Srivijaya*. 1980. Covers the art of early Southeast Asia.
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- Trainor, Kevin, ed. *Buddhism: The Illustrated Guide*. 2001. Devotes several chapters to Buddhism in ancient India.

NOTES

1. Barbara Stoler Miller, *The Bhagavad-Gita: Krishna's Counsel in Time of War* (New York: Bantam, 1986), 98–99.
2. B. G. Gokhale, *Asoka Maurya* (New York: Twayne, 1966), 152–153, 156–157, 160.
3. James Legge, *The Travels of Fa-hien: Fa-hien's Record of Buddhistic Kingdoms* (Delhi: Oriental Publishers, 1971), 77–79.

AP* REVIEW QUESTIONS FOR CHAPTER 6

- Indian societies, like other societies, developed ways to regulate relations between different groups. One of these ways was through
 - the Vedas.
 - polytheism.
 - the varna system.
 - the use of dowries.
- Which of the following was a pull factor for people to settle in the Ganges Plain?
 - A lack of monsoons
 - Easy access to the sea
 - Fertile, well-watered soil
 - The offer of free land by the local king
- The most serious threats to the Vedic religion came from
 - Mongol invaders from the north.
 - nomadic invaders from Thailand.
 - Alexander the Great.
 - Jainism and Buddhism.
- India's first centralized empire was formed by
 - Chandragupta Maurya.
 - Alexander the Great.
 - Devi the Great.
 - Ashoka.
- Ashoka extended the boundaries of his empire and later converted to which religion?
 - Jainism
 - Islam
 - Hinduism
 - Buddhism
- As in Mesopotamia, Greece, and China, the role of women in India
 - remained stable as the region developed into a more complex empire.
 - declined as the social structure became more complex.
 - was controlled by the leader.
 - was limited in religious observances only.
- Among the early converts to the Buddhist way were
 - soldiers, who sought redemption.
 - the nobility, because they could read and write.
 - women, as a way to gain more freedom.
 - the priests, because they needed to make more money for temples.
- In Southeast Asia, the first political units
 - were copies of those in India and based on caste.
 - took parts of Indian culture that were useful to them and synthesized them with indigenous beliefs, values, and institutions.
 - used a hereditary king based on clan systems.
 - tended to reflect the Chinese systems of the time due to trade with China.
- The first major center in Southeast Asia was Funan, in modern-day
 - Myanmar.
 - Singapore.
 - Thailand.
 - Vietnam.
- While the dominant population of Southeast Asia is Malay, culturally it is
 - a blend of Indian, Malay, and Chinese.
 - mainly Indian.
 - a blend of Cambodian and Indian.
 - mainly Chinese.
- Most of India's earliest writings are
 - stories that tell the origin of the Indian people.
 - historiography of the early Indian empires.
 - religious in nature.
 - trade reports and tax collections.

ORAL SOCIETIES AND THE CONSEQUENCES OF LITERACY

The availability of written documents is a key factor used by historians to divide human prehistory from history. When we can read what people of the past thought and said about their lives, we begin to understand their cultures, institutions, values, and beliefs in ways that are not possible based only on the material remains unearthed by archaeologists.

Literacy and nonliteracy are not absolute alternatives. Personal literacy ranges from illiteracy through many shades of partial literacy (the ability to write one's name or to read simple texts with difficulty) to the fluent ability to read that is possessed by anyone reading this textbook. And there are degrees of societal literacy, ranging from nonliteracy through so-called craft literacy—in which a small specialized elite uses writing for limited purposes, such as administrative recordkeeping—up to the near-universal literacy and the use of writing for innumerable purposes that is the norm in the developed world in our times.

The vast majority of human beings of the last five to six thousand years, even those living in societies that possessed the technology of writing, were not themselves literate. If most people in a society rely on the spoken word and memory, that culture is essentially “oral” even if some members know how to write. The differences between oral and literate cultures are immense, affecting not only the kinds of knowledge that are valued and the forms in which information is preserved, but also the very use of language, the categories for conceptualizing the world, and ultimately the hard-wiring of the individual human brain (now recognized by neuroscientists to be strongly influenced by individual experience and mental activity).

Ancient Greece of the Archaic and Classical periods (ca. 800–323 B.C.E.) offers a particularly instructive case study because we can observe the process by which writing was introduced into an oral society as well as the far-reaching consequences. The Greeks of the Dark Age and early Archaic period lived in a purely oral society; all knowledge was preserved in human memory and passed on by telling it to others. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* (ca. 700 B.C.E.), Homer's epic poems, reflect this state of affairs. Scholars recognize that the creator of these poems was an oral poet, almost certainly not literate, who had heard and memorized the poems of predecessors and retold them his own way. The poems are treasuries of information that this society regarded as useful—events of the past; the conduct expected of warriors, kings, noblewomen, and servants; how to perform a

sacrifice, build a raft, put on armor, and entertain guests; and much more.

Embedding this information in a story and using the colorful language, fixed phrases, and predictable rhythm of poetry made it easier for poet and audience to remember vast amounts of material. The early Greek poets, drawing on their strong memories, skill with words, and talent for dramatic performance, developed highly specialized techniques to assist them in memorizing and presenting their tales. They played a vital role in the preservation and transmission of information and thus enjoyed a relatively high social standing and comfortable standard of living. Analogous groups can be found in many other oral cultures of the past, including the bards of medieval Celtic lands, Norse *skalds*, west African *griots*, and the tribal historians of Native American peoples.

Nevertheless, human memory, however cleverly trained and well practiced, can only do so much. Oral societies must be extremely selective about what information to preserve in the limited storage medium of human memory, and they are slow to give up old information to make way for new.

Sometime in the eighth century B.C.E. the Greeks borrowed the system of writing used by the Phoenicians of Lebanon and, in adapting it to their language, created the first purely alphabetic writing, employing several dozen symbols to express the sounds of speech. The Greek alphabet, although relatively simple to learn as compared to the large and cumbersome sets of symbols in such craft literacy systems as cuneiform, hieroglyphics, or Linear B, was probably known at first only to a small number of people and used for restricted purposes. Scholars believe that it may have taken three or four centuries for knowledge of reading and writing to spread to large numbers of Greeks and for the written word to become the primary storage medium for the accumulated knowledge of Greek civilization. Throughout that time Greece was still primarily an oral society, even though some Greeks, mostly highly educated members of the upper classes, were beginning to write down poems, scientific speculations, stories about the past, philosophic musings, and the laws of their communities.

It is no accident that some of the most important intellectual and artistic achievements of the Greeks, including early science, history, drama, and rhetoric, developed in the period when oral and literate ways existed side by side. Scholars have persuasively argued that writing, by opening up a virtually limitless capacity to store information,

released the human mind from the hard discipline of memorization and ended the need to be so painfully selective about what was preserved. This made previously unimaginable innovation and experimentation possible. The Greeks began to organize and categorize information in linear ways, perhaps inspired by the linear sequence of the alphabet; and they began to engage in abstract thinking now that it was no longer necessary to put everything in a story format. We can observe changes in the Greek language as it developed a vocabulary full of abstract nouns, accompanied by increasingly complex sentence structure now that the reader had time to go back over the text.

Nevertheless, all the developments associated with literacy were shaped by the deeply rooted oral habits of Greek culture. It is often said that Plato (ca. 429–347 B.C.E.) and his contemporaries of the later Classical period may have been the first generation of Greeks who learned much of what they knew from books. Even so, Plato was a disciple of the philosopher Socrates, who wrote nothing, and Plato employed the oral form of the dialogue, a dramatized sequence of questions and answers, to convey his ideas in written form.

The transition from orality to literacy met stiff resistance in some quarters. Groups whose position in the oral culture was based on the special knowledge only they possessed—members of the elite who judged disputes, priests who knew the time-honored formulas and rituals for appeasing the gods, oral poets who preserved and performed the stories of a heroic past—resented the consequences of literacy. They did what they could to inflame the common people's suspicions of the impiety of literate men who sought scientific explanations for phenomena, such as lightning and eclipses, that had traditionally been attributed to the will and action of the gods. The elite attacked the so-called Sophists, or “wise men,” who charged fees to teach what they claimed were the skills necessary for success, accusing them of subverting traditional morals and corrupting the young.

Other societies, ancient and modern, offer parallel examples of these processes. Oral “specialists” in antiquity, including the Brahmin priests of India and the Celtic Druids, preserved in memory valuable religious information about how to win the favor of the gods. These groups jealously guarded their knowledge because it was the basis of their livelihood and social standing. In their determination to select and to maintain control over those who received this knowledge, they resisted committing it to writing, even after that technology was available. The ways in which oral authorities feel threatened by writing and resist it can be seen in the following quotation from a twentieth-century C.E. “griot,” an oral rememberer and teller of the past in Mali in West Africa:

We griots are depositories of the knowledge of the past. . . . Other peoples use writing to record the past, but this invention has killed the faculty of memory among them. They do not feel the past anymore, for writing lacks the warmth of the human voice. With them everybody thinks he knows, whereas learning should be a secret. . . . What paltry learning is that which is congealed in dumb books! . . . For generations we have passed on the history of kings from father to son. The narrative was passed on to me without alteration, for I received it free from all untruth.¹

This point of view is hard for us to grasp, living as we do in an intensely literate society in which the written word is often felt to be more authoritative and objective than the spoken word. It is important, in striving to understand societies of the past, not to superimpose our assumptions on them and to appreciate the complex interplay of oral and literate patterns in many of them.

NOTE

1. D. T. Niane, *Sundiata: An Epic of Old Mali* (Harlow, UK: Longman, 1986), 41.