

CHAPTER 3

Classical Civilization: India

CHAPTER SUMMARY

The Framework for Indian History: Geography and a Formative Period. Important reasons for India's distinctive path lie in geography and early historical experience. India's topography shaped a number of vital features of its civilization. The vast Indian subcontinent is partially separated from the rest of Asia (and particularly from east Asia) by northern mountain ranges. Mountain passes linked India to civilizations in the Middle East. Though it was not as isolated as China, the subcontinent was nevertheless set apart within Asia. The most important agricultural regions are along the two great rivers, the Ganges and the Indus. During its formative period, called the Vedic and Epic ages, the Aryans (Indo-Europeans), originally from central Asia, impressed their own stamp on Indian culture. During these ages, the caste system, Sanskrit, and various belief systems were introduced.

Patterns in Classical India. By 600 B.C.E., India had passed through its formative stage. Indian development during its classical era did not take on the structure of rising and falling dynasties, as in China. Patterns in Indian history were irregular and often consisted of invasions through the subcontinent's northwestern mountain passes. As a result, classical India alternated between widespread empires and a network of smaller kingdoms. Even during the rule of the smaller kingdoms, both economic and cultural life advanced. The Maurya and Gupta dynasties were the most successful in India, run entirely by Indians and not by outside rulers. The greatest of the Mauryan emperors was Ashoka (269-232 B.C.E.). The Guptas did not produce as dynamic a leader as Ashoka, but they did provide classical India with its greatest period of stability.

Political Institutions. Classical India did not develop the solid political and cultural institutions the Chinese experienced, nor the high level of political interest of Greece and Rome. Its greatest features, still observable today, were political diversity and regionalism. The Guptas, for example, did not require a single language for all of their subjects. The development of a rigid caste system lies at the heart of this characteristic. In its own way, the caste system promoted tolerance, allowing widely different social classes to live next to each other, separated by social strictures. Loyalty to caste superseded loyalty to any overall ruler. Religion, particularly Hinduism, was the only unifying influence in Indian culture.

Religion and Culture. Two major religions, Hinduism and Buddhism, marked classical India. Hinduism, the religion of India's majority, is unique among world religions in that no central figure is credited for developing it. Hinduism encouraged both worldly and mystical pursuits and was highly adaptable to varying groups. Buddhism was founded on the teachings of an Indian prince, Gautama, later called Buddha, or "enlightened one." Buddha accepted many Hindu beliefs but rejected its priests and the caste system it supported. Buddhism spread through missionaries into Sri Lanka, China, Korea, and Japan. Classical India also produced important work in science and mathematics. The Gupta-supported university at Nalanda taught religion, medicine, and architecture, as well as other disciplines. Indian scientists, borrowing ideas from Greek learning provided by Alexander the Great, made important discoveries. Still more important were mathematical advancements, including the concept of zero, "Arabic" numerals, decimal system. Artists created shrines to Buddha called stupas and painted in lively colors.

Economy and Society. India developed extensive trade both within the subcontinent and on the ocean to its south. The caste system described many key features of Indian society and its economy. The rights of women became increasingly limited as Indian civilization developed; however, male dominance over women was usually greater in theory than in practice. The economy in this era was extremely vigorous, especially in trade, surpassing that in China and the Mediterranean world. Merchants traded from the Roman Empire to Indonesia to China.

In Depth: Inequality as the Social Norm. The Indian caste system, like the Egyptian division between noble and commoner and the Greco-Roman division between free and slave, rests on the assumption that humans are inherently unequal. All classical social systems (with the partial exception of Athens' democracy) played down the importance of the individual and emphasized obligations to family, group, and government. This runs counter to modern Western notions about equality. Classical China and Greece probably came closest to modern views about individuality, but in both civilizations, it was largely expected that rulers should come from society's elites. In nearly all societies throughout most of human history, few challenged the "natural order" of social hierarchy and fewer still proposed alternatives.

Indian Influence. Because of its extensive trading network, Indian cultural influence spread widely, especially in southeast Asia. Buddhism was a leading cultural export. Indian merchants often married into royal families in other areas. Political dominance of outside peoples was not a characteristic of Indian governments.

China and India. China and India offer important contrasts in politics and society, yet they resembled each other in that both built stable structures over large areas and used culture to justify social inequality. The restraint of Chinese art contrasted with the more dynamic style of India. The latter developed a primary religion, Hinduism, while the former opted for separate religious and philosophical systems. Chinese technological advancements stressed practicality, while Indians ventured into mathematics for its own sake. Indian merchants played a greater societal role than their Chinese counterparts. Both, however, relied on large peasant classes in agrarian settings; both accepted political power based on land ownership.

Global Connections: India and the Wider World. No classical civilization was more open to outside influences than India. None was more central to cross-cultural exchanges in the common era. Important innovations in mathematics and science came from classical India. Buddhism is one of the few truly world religions. Indian influence was especially important in southeast Asia. Placed between the great empires and trading networks of the Mediterranean and of China, India was ideally situated for its culture to influence both East and West.

KEY TERMS

Alexander the Great: Greek invader who provided important contacts between India and Hellenistic culture.

Aryans: During the Vedic and Epic ages these Indo-European migrants developed the region's first epic stories, later written down in Sanskrit. Their rigid ideas about social order influenced India's caste system.

Maurya dynasty: First dynasty to unify much of the subcontinent. Borrowed political examples from Persia and Alexander.

Ashoka: Greatest Mauryan ruler. Gained all but the southern tip of India through conquest. Converted to and greatly promoted Buddhism.

Gupta: Empire began in 320 C.E. and provided two centuries of political stability. Overturned in 535 C.E. by invading Huns.

Caste system: Social relationship developed on a large scale uniquely in India. Five major castes regulated social status and work roles. Grew more complex over time into a multitude of subcastes. Governed society more than any political body.

Untouchables: Lowest caste. It was widely held that any member of a higher caste who touched these people would be defiled. Held the most menial jobs but were not slaves.

Hinduism: The religion of India's majority, developing at first in the Vedic and Epic ages. Hinduism has no single founder or central holy figure, unlike all other major religions.

Sanskrit: The first literary language of India, introduced by the Aryans. Under the Guptas, it became the language of educated people but never became the universal language of India. Was the language of the Vedas, the sacred books of early India.

Upanishads: The Epic Age saw the creation of these poems with mystical themes. From these, the Hindu ideas of divine forces informing the universe developed.

Dharma: A Hindu concept that was a guide to living in this world and at the same time pursuing spiritual goals. However, it was less prescriptive than other world religions' codes. Hindu avoidance of a fixed moral rule is why it allowed for more diversity than most religions.

Vishnu and Shiva: Two important gods in the enormous Hindu pantheon. Vishnu was the preserver and Shiva, the destroyer.

Buddhism: The Indian prince Gautama became the Buddha, or "enlightened one," when he questioned the poverty and misery he saw. Generally seen as a reform movement out of Hinduism. Buddhism had its greatest effect outside of India, especially in southeast Asia.

Panchatantra: A collection of stories produced during the Gupta era, including "Sinbad the Sailor" and "Jack the Giant Killer." Best-known Indian stories around the world.

Tamils: Southern Indians who traded cotton, silks, and many other materials with the Middle East and with Rome. Reflected the strong merchant spirit in classical India.

Buddha: (563 – 483 B.C.E.) Creator of a major Indian and Asian religion; born in the 6th century B.C.E. as son of a local ruler among Aryan tribes located near Himalayas; became an ascetic; found enlightenment could be achieved only by abandoning desires for all earthly things.

Himalayas: Mountain system of south-central Asia which divides India from Asia, leaving India to develop in relative cultural isolation.

Vedas: Meaning hymns to the gods; four ancient books of Aryan religious traditions in which can be found the origins of Hinduism.

Mahabharata and Ramayana: Aryan epic poems composed in Sanskrit which include myths, legends, philosophy, and moral stories.

Varnas: Aryan social classes.

Jati: Subgroups of castes, each with distinctive occupations tied to their social stations by birth.

Indra: Aryan god of thunder and strength.

Chandragupta Maurya: (322 – 298 B.C.E.) Ruler of a small Ganges Valley state who defeated the Greeks in the area and made himself king in 322 B.C.E. He then created and enlarged the Mauryan Empire.

Kushans: Invaders of India c. 100 B.C.E. who were gradually absorbed into Indian culture and became the Kshatriya caste.

Kautilya: Chief minister of Chandragupta Maurya who wrote the book *Arthashastra*, which gave advice on how to gain power and use it through whatever means as long as the ruler pleases his subjects.

Gurus: Hindu mystics who gathered disciples around themselves.

Brahma: Hindu idea that a basic holy essence formed part of everything in the world.

Reincarnation: Hindu idea in which souls do not die when bodies do but pass into other beings, either human or animal. Where the soul goes depends on how good a life that person has led.

Yoga: Hindu practice of mediation and self-discipline which has the goal to free the mind to concentrate on the divine spirit.

Bhagavad Gita: Hindu sacred hymn which details the story of Arjuna, a warrior, who struggles with the decision of whether to go to battle against his own family.

Nirvana: Buddhist idea which literally means a world beyond existence itself. It is the ultimate goal of the reincarnation cycle.

Kamasutra: A manual of the “laws of love” written in the 4th century C.E., which discusses relationships between men and women.

Stupas: Spherical shrines to Buddha.