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.
(Dinoselia Photo Library)

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?

Mauryan (more-yuhm) Gupta (goop-tuh)
INDIA AND SOUTHEAST ASIA, 1500 B.C.E.—600 C.E.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

- Foundations of Indian Civilization, 1500 B.C.E.—300 C.E.
- Imperial Expansion and Collapse, 324 B.C.E.—650 C.E.
- Southeast Asia, 50—600 C.E.
- Comparative Perspectives
  - Environment and Technology: Indian Mathematics
  - Diversity and Dominance: Relations Between Women and Men in the Kama Sutra and the Arthashastra

In the Bhagavad-Gita, the most renowned of all Indian sacred texts, Arjuna, the greatest warrior of Indian legend, 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 the relatives, friends, and former teachers who are in the enemy camp, Arjuna slumps down in his chariot and refuses to fight. But his chariot driver, the god Krishna 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

Bhagavad-Gita (BUH-guh-vahd GEE-tuh) Arjuna (AHR-joo-nuh) Krishna (KRISH-nuh)
"divine eye" and permits him to see the true appearance of God:

It was a multifaceted, 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. If one word can characterize India in both ancient and modern times, it is diversity. The enormous variety of the Indian landscape is mirrored in the patchwork of ethnic and linguistic groups that 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 the innumerable holy places that dot the subcontinent. Yet, in the end, one can speak of an Indian civilization that is united by a set of shared views and values. The photograph shows the interior of a temple in the city of Madurai in southern India. Here the ten-day Chitharal Festival, the most important religious event of the year, revolves around the wedding of a local goddess, Minakshi, and the great Hindu god Shiva, a ceremony that symbolizes the uniting and reconciliation of local and national deities, southern and northern cultural practices, and male and female potentialities.

In this chapter we survey the history of South and Southeast Asia from approximately 1500 B.C.E. to 600 C.E., focusing on the evolution of defining features of Indian civilization. Considerable attention is given to Indian religious conceptions. This coverage is due, in part, to religion’s profound role in shaping Indian society. It is also a consequence of the sources of information available to historians. Lengthy epic poems, such as the Mahabharata and Ramayana, preserve useful information about early Indian society, but most of the earliest texts are religious documents—such as the Vedas, Upanishads, and Buddhist dialogues and stories—that were preserved and transmitted orally long before they were written down. In addition, Indian civilization held a conception of vast expanses of time during which creatures were repeatedly reincarnated and lived many lives. This belief may be why ancient Indians did not develop a historical consciousness like that of their Israeliite and Greek contemporaries and took little interest in recording specific historical events: such events seemed relatively insignificant when set against the long cycles of time and lives.

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 within the continent of Asia. It is set off from the rest of Asia by the Himalayas, the highest mountains on the planet, to the north, and by the Indian Ocean on its eastern, southern, and western sides (see Map 6.1). The most permeable frontier, and the one used by a long series of invaders and migrating peoples, lies to the northwest. But people using this corridor must cross over the mountain barrier of the Hindu Kush (via the Khyber Pass) and the Thar Desert east of the Indus River.

## Chronology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year BCE</th>
<th>Event India</th>
<th>Event Southeast Asia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2000 BCE</td>
<td>Swidden agriculture</td>
<td>CA. 2000 BCE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1500 BCE</td>
<td>Migration of Indo-European peoples into northwest India</td>
<td>CA. 1600 BCE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1000 BCE</td>
<td>Indo-European groups move into the Ganges Plain</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>500 BCE</td>
<td>Siddhartha Gautama founds Buddhism; Mahavira founds Jainism</td>
<td>CA. 50–560 CE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>324 BCE</td>
<td>Chandragupta Maurya becomes king of Magadha and lays foundation for Mauryan Empire</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>273–232 BCE</td>
<td>Reign of Ashoka</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>184 BCE</td>
<td>Fall of Mauryan Empire</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 CE</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>320 CE</td>
<td>Chandra Gupta establishes Gupta Empire</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>500 CE</td>
<td>Collapse of Gupta Empire</td>
<td>500 CE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>550 CE</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>606–647 CE</td>
<td>Reign of Harsha Vardhana</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### The Indian Subcontinent

The subcontinent—which encompasses the modern nations of Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, India, and the adjacent island of Sri Lanka—can be divided into three topographical zones. The mountainous northern zone takes in 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' Rivers. Originating in the ice of the Tibetan mountains to the north, these rivers have repeatedly overflowed their banks and deposited a layer upon layer of silt, creating large alluvial plains. Northern India is divided from the third zone, the peninsula proper, by the Vindhyas range and the Deccan, an arid, rocky plateau that brings to mind parts of the American southwest. 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 rim of mountains looming above India's northern frontier shelters the subcontinent from cold Arctic conditions.

---

**Ganges** (GAHN-jez)

**Deccan** (de-KAN)
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, and the vast landmass of Asia swings rapidly between seasonal extremes of heat and cold. The temperature difference between the water and the land acts like a bellows, producing a great wind in this and adjoining parts of the globe. The southwest monsoon begins in June. It picks up huge amounts of moisture from the Indian Ocean and drops 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 (the modern region of Bengal). Elsewhere the staples are wheat, barley, and millet. The Indus Valley, in contrast, gets little precipitation (see Chapter 1). In this arid region agriculture depends on extensive irrigation. Moreover, the volume of water in the Indus is irregular, and the river has changed course from time to time.

Although invasions and migrations usually came by land through the northwest corridor, the ocean surrounding the peninsula has not been a barrier to travel and trade. Indian Ocean 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 made their way 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).

It is tempting to trace many of the characteristic features of later Indian civilization back to the Indus Valley civilization of the third and early second millennia B.C.E., but proof is hard to come by because the writing from that period has not yet been deciphered. That society, which responded to the challenge of an arid terrain by developing high levels of social organization and technology, seems to have 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, 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—nomadic 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 and perhaps supplemented their diet by doing some gardening. These societies, like those of other Indo-European peoples—Greeks, Iranians, Romans—were patriarchal. The father dominated 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 and heavy drinking, and filled their leisure time with chariot racing and gambling.

After 1000 B.C.E. some of these groups pushed 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, written down much later but preserved by memorization and oral recitation, speak of bitter rivalry and 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. Some scholars contend that some Dasas were absorbed into Aryan populations and elites from both groups merged. For the most part, however, the Aryas pushed the Dasas south into central and southern India, where their descendants still live. Indo-European languages are primarily spoken in northern India today. 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, the group comprising priests and scholars; Kshatriya, warriors and officials; Vaishya, merchants, artisans, and landowners; or Shudra, 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 after cremations.

People at the top of the social pyramid in ancient India 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 Brahmans, 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 that Indian society 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 are 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

Kshatriya (kshuh-TREE-yuh) Vaishya (VAISH-yuh) Shudra (SHOOD-ra)
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 \textit{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.

\textbf{Online Study Center}

\textit{Improve Your Grade}

\textit{Primary Source:}
\textit{The Laws of Manu}

The dominant deities in Vedic religion were male and were 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.

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 technology of sacrifice, for only they knew the rituals and prayers. The \textit{Rig Veda}, a collection of more than a thousand poetic hymns to various deities, and the \textit{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. Some scholars have hypothesized that the Brahmans opposed the introduction of writing. Such opposition would explain why this technology did not come into widespread use in India until the Gupta period (320–550 C.E.), long after it had begun to play a conspicuous role in other societies of equivalent complexity. The priests’ “knowledge” (the term \textit{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.

\textbf{Online Study Center}

\textit{Improve Your Grade}

\textit{Primary Source:}
\textit{Rig Veda}

As in nearly all ancient societies, it is difficult to uncover the experiences of women in ancient India. Limited evidence indicates that women in the Vedic period studied sacred lore, composed religious hymns, and participated in the sacrificial ritual. They had the opportunity to own property and usually were not married until they reached their middle or late teens. A number of strong and resourceful women appear in the epic poem \textit{Mahabharata}. One of them, the beautiful and educated Draupadi, married—by her own choice—the five royal Pandava brothers. This probably should not be taken as evidence of the regular practice of polyandry (having more than one husband). In India, as in Greece, legendary figures had their own rules.

The sharp internal divisions of Indian society, the complex hierarchy of groups, and the claims of some to superior virtue and purity served important social functions. They provided each individual with a clear identity and role and offered the benefits of group solidarity and support. 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.

\textbf{Challenges to the Old Order: Jainism and Buddhism}

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 forest. Despite the clearing of extensive tracts of land for agriculture, much of ancient India was covered with forest. Never very far from civilized areas, these wild places served as a refuge and 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 alternative path to salvation: the individual pursuit of insight into the nature of the self and the universe through physical and mental discipline (\textit{yoga}), special dietary practices, and meditation. They taught that by distancing oneself from
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 Kushinagar. (Bizarre Photo Library)

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—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 to the prerogatives of the Brahmin priestly class came from two new religions that emerged around this time: Jainism and Buddhism. Mahavira (540–488 B.C.E.) was known to his followers as Jina, "the Conqueror," from which is derived Jainism, the name of the belief system that he established. Emphasizing the holiness of the life force that animates all living creatures, Mahavira and his followers practiced strict nonviolence. They wore masks to prevent themselves from 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 nudity, ate only what they were given by others, and eventually starved themselves to death. Less zealous Jains, restricted from agricultural work by the injunction against killing, tended to be city dwellers engaged in commerce and banking.

Of far greater significance for Indian and world history was the rise of Buddhism. So many stories have been 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 Sakya, 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 experienced a change of heart and gave up family and privilege to become a wandering ascetic. After six years of self-deprivation, he came to regard asceticism as no more likely than the luxury of his previous life to produce spiritual insight, 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.

Jainism (JINE-is-uhm)
in order to minimize desire and suffering, and searching for spiritual truth through self-discipline and meditation. The ultimate reward was *nirvana*, literally “smudging 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* (large earthen mounds that symbolized the universe) over relics of the cremated founder and walked around them in a clockwise direction. Believers began to worship the Buddha himself as a god. Many Buddhists also revered *bodhisattvas*, 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 had 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 of the Greek settlements established in Bactria (modern Afghanistan) by Alexander the Great (see Chapter 4). A schism emerged within Buddhism. Devotees of Mahayana* ("Great Vehicle") Buddhism embraced the popular new features, while practitioners of Theravada* ("Teachings of the Elders") Buddhism followed most of the original teachings of the founder.

---

The Rise 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 term *Hinduism*, however, was imposed from outside. Islamic invaders who reached India in the eleventh century C.E. labeled the diverse range of practices they saw there as Hinduism: "what the Indians do.") 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 and symbolism. Also present are elements of Buddhism.

---

*stupa* (STOO-puh)  *bodhisattva* (bool-dih-SUT-ruh)
*Mahayana* (mah-huh-YAH-ruh)  *Theravada* (there-uh-YAH-duh)
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. (Jean-Louis Nouv/Ala Images)

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 much 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 and Shiva, assumed preeminent positions in the Hindu pantheon. Hinduism emphasized the worshipper's personal devotion to a particular deity, usually Vishnu, Shiva, or Devi ("the Goddess"). Both Shiva and Devi appear to be derived from the Dravidian tradition, in which a fertility cult and female deities played a prominent role. Their Dravidian origin is a telling example of how Arya and non-Arya cultures fused to form classic Hindu civilization. It is interesting to note that 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.

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. A worshipper's devotion to one god or goddess does not entail denial of the other main deities or the host of lesser divinities and spirits. Ultimately, all 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.

Hinduism offers the worshipper 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, richly decorated stone edifices built under royal patronage. Beautifully proportioned statues beckon the deity to take up temporary residence within the image, to be reached 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 a worshipper 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. The literal meaning of tirthayatra, the term for a pilgrimage site, is “journey to a river-crossing,” pointing out the frequent association of Hindu sacred places with flowing water. Hindus consider the Ganges River to be especially sacred, and each year millions of devoted worshipers travel to its banks to bathe and receive the restorative and purifying power of its waters. The habit of pilgrimage to the major shrines 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 worshipper's social standing and gender but also on his or her stage of life. A young man from one of the three highest classes (Brahmin, Kshatriya, or Vaishya) 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 of his life 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.

**Imperial Expansion and Collapse, 324 B.C.E. – 650 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—mountains, foothills, plains, forests, steppes, deserts—called forth different forms of organization and economic activity, and peoples occupying topographically diverse zones differed from one another 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 (birth group); allegiance to a higher political authority was of secondary concern.

Despite these divisive factors, two empires arose in the Ganges Plain: the Mauryan Empire of the fourth to second centuries B.C.E. and the Gupta Empire of the fourth to sixth centuries C.E. Each extended political control over a substantial portion of the subcontinent and fostered the formation of a common Indian civilization.

The Mauryan Empire, 324–184 B.C.E.

Around 600 B.C.E. separate kinship groups and independent 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, a young man who may have belonged to the Vaishya or Shudra class, gained control of the kingdom 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). Indeed, Greek tradition claimed that Alexander met a young Indian native by the name of “Sandracottus,” an apparent corruption of “Chandragupta.”

The collapse of Greek rule in the Punjab after the death of Alexander created a power vacuum in the northwest. Chandragupta (r. 324–301 B.C.E.) and his successors Bindusara (r. 301–269 B.C.E.) and Ashoka (r. 269–232 B.C.E.) extended Mauryan control over the entire subcontinent except for the southern tip of the peninsula. 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*. 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 boldly pragmatic guide to political success and survival advocates the so-called *mandala* (circle) theory of foreign policy: “My enemy’s enemy is my friend.” It also relates a long list of 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 one-fourth the value of the harvest supported the Mauryan kings and government. Close relatives and associates of the king governed administrative districts based on traditional ethnic boundaries. A large imperial army—with infantry, cavalry, chariot, and elephant divisions—and royal control of

Maurya (MOR-ya)  Arthashastra (ahr-thuh-SHAHS-truh)  mandala (mahn-DAH-luh)
mines, shipbuilding, and the manufacture of amentis further secured power. Standard coinage issued throughout the empire fostered support for the government and military and promoted trade.

The Mauryan capital was at Pataliputra (modern Patna), where five tributaries join the Ganges. Several extant descriptions of the city composed by foreign visitors provide valuable information and testify to the international connections of the Indian monarchs. Surrounded by a timber wall and moat, the city extended along the river for 8 miles (13 kilometers). It was governed by six committees with responsibility for features of urban life such as 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 (modern Orissa, 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, unfilled conduct toward kinsmen, improper conduct toward Brahmans 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 employing peaceful means whenever possible, he hastened to remind potential transgressors that “the

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, it collapsed from the pressure of attacks in the northwest in 184 B.C.E. Five hundred years passed before another indigenous state was able to extend its control over northern India.

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 (180–32 B.C.E.), descended from troops and settlers left in Afghanistan by Alexander the Great. Greek influence is especially evident in the art of this period and in the designs of coins. Occupation by two nomadic peoples from Central Asia followed. The Shakas, an Iranian people known as Scythians in the Mediterranean world, were dominant from 30 B.C.E. to 50 C.E. They were followed by the Kushans, 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). Several foreign kings—most notably the Greco-Bactrian Menander (Menander in Greek) and the Kushan Kanishka—were converts to Buddhism, a logical choice because of the lack of an easy mechanism for working foreigners into the Hindu system of class and caste. The eastern Ganges region reverted to a patchwork of small principalities, as it had been before the Mauryan era.

Despite the political fragmentation of India in the five centuries after the collapse of the Mauryan Empire, there were many signs of economic, cultural, and intellectual development. 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. In the absence of a strong central authority, guilds of merchants and artisans became politically powerful in the Indian towns. Their wealth enabled them to serve as patrons

Kushan (KOO-shahn)
of culture and to endow 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 and the Mahabharata, 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—pride in kings, beautiful queens, wars among kinship groups, heroic conduct, and chivalric values—seem to reflect the conditions of the early Vedic period, when Aryan warrior societies were moving onto the Ganges Plain.

The Ramayana relates the exploits of Rama, a heroic prince, who is an incarnation of the god Vishnu. When his beautiful wife is kidnapped, he defeats and destroys the chief of the demons and his evil hordes, aided by his loyal brother and the king of the monkeys. 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, Yudhishthira, is reluctant to accept the fruits of so tragic a victory.

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 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 and were in demand in the courts of western and southern Asia. Indian scholars made impressive strides in linguistics. Panini (late fourth century B.C.E.) undertook a detailed analysis of Sanskrit word forms and grammar. The work of Panini and later linguists led to the standardization of Sanskrit, which arrested its natural development and turned it into a formal, literary 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 important states in central India, particularly the Andhra dynasty in the Deccan Plateau (from the second century B.C.E. to the second century C.E.), and the three Tamil kingdoms of Cholas, Pandyas, and Cheras in southern India (see Map 6.1). The three Tamil kingdoms 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. Historians regard the period from the third century B.C.E. to the third century C.E. as a “classical” period of great literary and artistic productivity in Tamil society. 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.

In the early fourth century C.E., a new imperial entity took shape in northern India. Like its Mauryan predecessor, the Gupta Empire grew out of the kingdom of Magadha on the Ganges Plain and had its capital at Pataliputra. Clear proof that the founder of this empire consciously modeled himself on the Mauryans is the fact that he called himself Chandra Gupta (r. 320-335), borrowing the very name of the Mauryan founder. A claim to wide dominion was embodied in the title that the monarchs of this dynasty assumed—“Great King of Kings”—although they 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—Samudra Gupta, Chandra Gupta II, and Kumar 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, like its Mauryan predecessor, sat astride important trade routes, exploited the agricultural productivity of the Ganges Plain, and controlled nearby iron deposits. It adopted similar methods for
raising revenue and administering broad territories. The chief source of revenue was a 25 percent tax on agriculture. Those who used the irrigation network also had to pay for the service, and there were special taxes on particular commodities. The state maintained monopolies in key areas such as the mining of metals and salt. The state also owned extensive tracts of farmland and demanded a specified number of days of labor annually from the subjects for the construction and upkeep of roads, wells, and the irrigation network.

Gupta control, however, was never as effectively centralized as Mauryan authority. The Gupta administrative bureaucracy and intelligence network were smaller and less pervasive. A powerful army maintained tight control in the core of the empire, but governors had a free hand in organizing the outlying areas. The position of governor offered tempting opportunities to exploit the populace. It often was hereditary, passed from father to son in families of high-ranking members of the civil and military administrations. Distant subordinate kingdoms and areas inhabited by kinship groups were expected to make annual donations of tribute, and garrisons were stationed at certain key frontier points to keep open the lines of trade and expedite the collection of customs duties.

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 constant round of solemn rituals, dramatic ceremonies, and exciting cultural events was such a potent advertisement for the benefits of association with the empire that modern historians point to the Gupta Empire as a good example of a "theater-state." The relationship of ruler and subjects in a theater-state also has an economic base. The center collects luxury goods and profits from trade and redistributes them to its dependents through the exchange of gifts and other means. Subordinate princes gained prestige by emulating the Gupta center on whatever scale they could manage and by maintaining close ties through visits, gifts, and marriages to the Gupta royal family.

Astronomers, mathematicians, and other scientists received royal Gupta support. Indian mathematicians invented the concept of zero and developed the "Arabic" numerals and system of place-value notation that are in use in most parts of the world today (see Environment and Technology: Indian Mathematics).

Because the moist climate of the Ganges Plain does not favor the preservation of buildings and artifacts, there is relatively little archaeological data for the Gupta era. An eyewitness account, however, provides valuable information about the Gupta kingdom and Pataliputra, its capital city. A Chinese Buddhist monk named Faxian\textsuperscript{\textsuperscript{4}} 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. . . . The cities and towns of this country are the greatest of all in the Middle Kingdom. The inhabitants are rich and prosperous, and vie with one another in the practice of benevolence and righteousness. . . . The heads of the Vaishya families in them establish in the cities houses for dispensing charity and medicines. All the poor and destitute in the country, orphans, widows, and childless men, maimed people and cripples, and all who are diseased, go to those houses, and are provided with every kind of help.\textsuperscript{3}

Various kinds of evidence point to 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 (see Chapters 3, 4, and 5), urbanization, the formation of 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. Over time, women in India lost the right to own or inherit property. They were barred from studying sacred texts and participating in the sacrificial ritual. In many respects, they were treated as equivalent to the lowest class, the Shudra. As in Confucian China, a woman was expected to obey first her father, then her husband, and finally her sons (see Chapter 5). Indian 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 wife's virginity and, by bringing her up in his own household, could train and shape her to suit his purposes. The most extreme form of
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 the Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans, and the invention of zero was a profound intellectual achievement. Indeed, it has to be ranked as one of the most important and influential discoveries in human history. This system is used even more widely than the alphabet derived from the Phoenicians (see Chapter 4) and is, in some sense, the only truly global language.

In its fully developed form the Indian method of arithmetic notation employed a base-10 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. And it 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 (see below). The earliest known example has a date equivalent to 595 C.E. A sign for zero is attested by the eighth century. Other 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, in part 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 written calculations became clear, the counting board fell into disuse. The abandonment of this device 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 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 in which 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 old)—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.

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 that today is used all over the world. (Facsimile by Georges Ifrah. Reproduced by permission of Georges Ifrah.)
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 character and 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 B.C.

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 unmarred 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, 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... One of the friends should also disguise himself as an astrologer, and declare the future good fortune and wealth of his friend by showing the existence of all the lucky omens and signs, the good influence of planets, the auspicious entrance of the sun into a sign of the Zodiac, propitious stars and fortunate marks on his body. Others again should rouse the jealousy of the girl's mother by telling her that her 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 affected with the Gulma [glandular enlargement]
- 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. . . . The wife should always avoid the company of female beggars, female Buddhist mendicants, unchaste and roguish women, female fortune tellers and witches. 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 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 but one child, 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 jewelery 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 spectrographs. 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 Khatriya who commits adultery with an unguarded Brahman woman shall be punished with the highest amercement; a Vaisya doing the same shall be deprived of the whole of his property; and a Shudra shall be burnt alive wounded 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 do some marriages fail in ancient India?

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 complexes of 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 a glimpse of life at the royal court in their own times. (Bonyo K. Behl)

control of women’s conduct took place in parts of India where a widow was expected to cremate herself on her husband’s funeral pyre. This ritual, called sati, 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.

Some women escaped these instruments of male control. One way to do so was by entering a Jainist or Buddhist religious community. Status also gave women more freedom. Women who belonged to powerful families and courtesans who were trained in poetry and music as well as in ways of providing sexual pleasure had high social standing and sometimes gave money for the erection of Buddhist stupas and other 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. 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. Northern India was the destination of Buddhist pilgrims from Southeast and East Asia, traveling to visit the birthplace of their faith.

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 with sculpture.

The vibrant commerce that had grown up after the fall of the Mauryan Empire continued into the Gupta period. Coined money served as the medium of exchange, and 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 Peninsula.
and islands of Indonesia in order to exchange Indian cotton cloth, ivory, metalwork, and exotic animals for Chinese silk or Indonesian spices.

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. Save for a brief revival of imperial unity under Harsha Vardhana (r. 606–647), northern India reverted to its customary state of political fragmentation.

**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. Encompassing a vast area of land and water, this region is now occupied by the countries of Myanmar (Burma), Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Brunei, 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.

Rain forest covers much of Southeast Asia. Rain-forest ecosystems are particularly fragile because of the great local variation of plant forms within them and because of the vulnerability of their soil to loss of fertility if the protective forest canopy is removed. As early as 2000 B.C.E. people in this region were clearing land for farming by cutting and burning the vegetation growing on it. The cleared land, known as swidden, was farmed for several growing seasons. When the soil was exhausted, the farmers abandoned the patch, allowing the forest to reclaim it before they cleared it again for agriculture. In the meantime, they cleared and cultivated other nearby fields in similar fashion.

A number of plant and animal species spread from Southeast Asia to other regions. Among them were wet rice (rice cultivated in deliberately flooded fields), soybeans, sugar cane, yams, bananas, coconuts, cocomys, chickens, and pigs. Rice was the staple food product, for even though rice cultivation is labor-intensive (see Chapter 2), it can support a large population.

Historians believe that 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. In some cases the indigenous peoples merged with the Malay newcomers; in other cases they retreated to remote mountain and forest zones. Subsequently, rising population and disputes within communities prompted streams of people to leave the Southeast Asian mainland in the longest-lasting colonization movement in human history. By the first millennium B.C.E. the inhabitants of Southeast Asia 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 tended to cluster 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, particularly bronze. Metalsmiths heated copper and tin ore to the right temperature for producing and shaping bronze implements by using hollow bamboo tubes to funnel a stream of oxygen to the furnace.

The first political units were small. The size of the fundamental unit reflected the number of people who drew water from the same source. Water resource "boards," whose members were representatives of the leading families of the different villages involved, met periodically to allocate and schedule the use of this critical resource.

Northern Indochina, by its geographic proximity, was particularly vulnerable to Chinese pressure and cultural influences, and it was under Chinese political control for a
thousand years (111 B.C.E.–938 C.E.). Further south, larger states emerged in the early centuries C.E. in response to two powerful forces: commerce and Hindu-Buddhist culture. Southeast Asia was strategically situated along a new trade route 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 the Arabian Gulf and Red Sea to satisfy the fast-growing luxury market in the Roman Empire. At first, a route developed across the South China Sea, by land over the Isthmus of Kra on the Malay Peninsula, and across the Bay of Bengal to India. Over time, merchants extended this exchange network to include not only silk but also 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. Indian cosmology, rituals, art, and statecraft constituted a rich treasury of knowledge and a source of prestige and legitimacy for local rulers who adopted them. The use of Sanskrit terms such as mahāraja (great king), the adaptation of Indian ceremonial practices and forms of artistic representation, and the employment of scribes skilled in writing all proved invaluable to the most ambitious and capable Southeast Asian rulers.

The first major Southeast Asian center, called "Funan" by Chinese visitors, flourished between the first and sixth centuries C.E. Its capital was at the modern site of Oc-Eo in southern Vietnam. Funan occupied the delta of the Mekong 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 Isthmus of Kra—a key point on the trade route from India to China. Seaborne merchants from the ports of northeast India 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 merchants needed food and lodging while they waited for the monsoon winds to shift so that 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, most probably, for customs duties and other fees.

According to one legend (a sure indicator of the influence of Indian culture in this region), the kingdom of Funan arose out of the marriage of an Indian Brahmin and a local princess. 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, for reasons not yet clear to modern historians, Funan declined in the sixth century. The most likely explanation is that international trade routes changed and Funan no longer held a strategic position.

mahāraja (mah-huh-RAH-jah)  Funan (FOO-na)  Mekong (MAY-kawng)
This chapter traces the emergence of complex societies in India and Southeast Asia between the second millennium B.C.E. and the 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 the 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 are religious. A visitor to a museum who examines artifacts from ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, the Greco-Roman Mediterranean, China, and India will find that a prominent part of the collection consists of objects from religious shrines or with cultic function. Only the Indian artifacts, however, will be almost exclusively from the religious sphere.

The prolific use of writing came later to India than to other parts of the Eastern Hemisphere, for reasons particular to the Indian situation. Like Indian artifacts, most of the ancient Indian texts are of a religious nature. Ancient Indians did not generate historiographic texts of the kind written elsewhere in the ancient world, primarily because they held a strikingly different view of time. Mesopotamian scribes compiled lists of political and military events and the strange celestial and earthly phenomena that coincided with them. They were inspired by a cyclical conception of time and believed that the recurrence of an omen at some future date potentially signaled a repetition of the historical event associated with it. Greek and Roman historians described and analyzed the progress of wars and the character of rulers. They believed that these accounts would prove useful because of the essential constancy of human nature and the value of understanding the past as a sequence of causally linked events. Chinese annalists set down the deeds and conduct of rulers as inspirational models of right conduct and cautionary tales of the consequences of impropriety. In contrast, the distinctive Indian view of time—as 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. It is 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 at 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 fertile and 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 came to dominate. Hinduism embraced elements drawn from the Dravidian cultures of the south as well as from Buddhism. Hindu beliefs and practices are less fixed and circumscribed than the beliefs and practices of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, which rely on clearly defined textual and organizational sources of authority. The capacity of the Hindu tradition to assimilate a wide range of popular beliefs facilitated the spread of elements of a common Indian civilization across the subcontinent, although there was, and is, considerable variation from one region to another.
SUMMARY

- 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?

From 1500 B.C.E. Arya kinship groups moved first into the northwest and then into the Ganges Plain, pushing many of the darker-skinned Dasas into the southern part of the subcontinent. A class system (varna) of priests (Brahmins), warriors (Kshatriyas), landowners and merchants (Vaishyas), and peasants and laborers (Shudras)—further subdivided by castes (jati) of people who lived, worked, ate, and married within their group—provided a mechanism for ordering the relations of an ethnically, linguistically, and culturally diverse population. The system was justified by Vedic religious doctrine and the promise that those who accepted their place and performed their social duties would be reincarnated into a higher station. Various forms of resistance to the secular and religious domination of the Brahmins arose, including the more egalitarian Buddhist and Jainist belief systems. Nevertheless, the traditionalists responded to the challenge, and Hinduism, evolving out of the Vedic religion, provided people with a number of ways—mental and physical discipline, special sacred knowledge, and extreme devotion to a particular deity—to make personal connections with the gods.

While the diversity of the landscape and people’s primary identification with class and caste were obstacles to political unity, the Mauryan (fourth to second centuries B.C.E.) and Gupta (fourth to sixth centuries C.E.) rulers were able to bring most of the subcontinent under their control. Both dynasties exploited the rich agricultural productivity of the Ganges Plain, monopolized the mining of metals and production of weapons, built up powerful standing armies, and developed complex administrative bureaucracies and networks of spies. These two imperial eras, as well as the more politically fragmented centuries between them, saw the rise of cities and towns; increasing prosperity from the manufacture of goods and vibrant trade both within India and with East, Southeast, and Central Asia and the Roman Mediterranean; more advanced technologies; and new forms of art and literature.

This same malleable quality also came into play as the pace of international commerce quickened in the first millennium C.E., and Indian merchants embarking by sea for East Asia passed through Funan and other commercial centers in Southeast Asia. Indigenous elites in Southeast Asia came into contact with Indian merchants, sailors, and pilgrims. Involvement in the lucrative long-distance commerce and adoption of Indian political and religious ideas and methods brought wealth, power, and prestige to able and ambitious leaders. Finding elements of Indian civilization attractive and useful, they fused it with their own traditions to create a culture unique to Southeast Asia.

KEY TERMS

- monsoon p. 168
- Vedas p. 168
- varna p. 169
- jati p. 169
- karma p. 170
- moksha p. 171
- Buddha p. 171
- Mahayana Buddhism p. 172
- Theravada Buddhism p. 172
- Hinduism p. 172
- Mauryan Empire p. 175
- Ashoka p. 176
- Mahabharata p. 177
- Bhagavad-Gita p. 177
- Tamil kingdoms p. 177
- Gupta Empire p. 177
- theater-state p. 178
- Malay peoples p. 183
- Funan p. 184
SUGGESTED READING

A useful starting point for the Indian subcontinent is Karl J. Schmidt, Art Atlas and Survey of South Asian History (1995), with maps and facing text illustrating geographic, environmental, cultural, and historical features of South Asian civilization. A concise discussion of the history of ancient India can be found in Stanley Wolpert, A New History of India, 7th ed. (2004). R. S. Sharma, India's Ancient Past (2005); Romila Thapar, Early India: From the Origins to AD 1300 (2003); and Paul Masson-Oursel, Ancient India and Indian Civilization (1998), are fuller, up-to-date presentations. Ainslie T. Embree, Sources of Indian Tradition, vol. 1, 2nd ed. (1988), contains translations of primary texts, with the emphasis almost entirely on religion and few materials from southern India.

Barbara Stoler Miller, The Bhagavad-Gita: Krishna’s Counsel in Time of War (1986), is a readable translation of this ancient classic with a useful introduction and notes. An abbreviated version of the greatest Indian epic can be found in R. K. Narayan, The Mahabharata: A Shortened Modern Prose Version of the Indian Epic (1978). The filmed version of Peter Brook’s stage production of The Mahabharata (5 videos, 1988) generated much controversy because of its British director and multicultural cast, but it is a painless introduction to the plot and main characters. Robert Goldman, The Ramayana of Valmiki: An Epic of Ancient India (1984), makes available the other Indian epic. To sample the fascinating documentation on state building supposedly composed by the adviser to the founder of the Mauryan Empire, see T. N. Ramaswamy, Essentials of Indian Statecraft: Kautilya’s Arthasastra for Contemporary Readers (1982). James Legge, The Travels of Fa-hien (Fa-hien): Fa-hien's Record of Buddhist Kingdoms (1714). and John W. McCrindle, Ancient India as Described by Megasthenes and Arrian (1877), provide translations of reports of foreign visitors to ancient India.

A number of works explore political institutions and ideas in ancient India: Charles Drekinzer, Kingship and Community in Early India (1962); John W. Spellman, Political Theory of Ancient India: A Study of Kingship from the Earliest Times to Circa A.D. 300 (1964); and R. S. Sharma, Aspects of Political Ideas and Institutions in Ancient India, 2nd ed. (1966). Romila Thapar, Asoka and the Decline of the Mauryas, rev. ed. (1997), is a detailed study of the most interesting and important Mauryan king.


Roy C. Craven, Indian Art (1976), is a clear, historically organized treatment of its subject. Mario Bussagli and Calembus Sivaramamurti, 5000 Years of the Art of India (1971), is lavishly illustrated. Susan L. Huntington, The Art of Ancient Indian Buddhist Art, India, Jain (1985), focuses on the art and architecture of antiquity. For the uniqueness and decisive historical impact of Indian mathematics see Georges Ifrah, From One to Zero: A Universal History of Numbers (1985).


The art of Southeast Asia is taken up by Maud Girard-Geslot et al., Art of Southeast Asia (1996), and Daigoro Chihara, Hindu-Buddhist Architecture in Southeast Asia (1996).

NOTES