CHAPTER 3

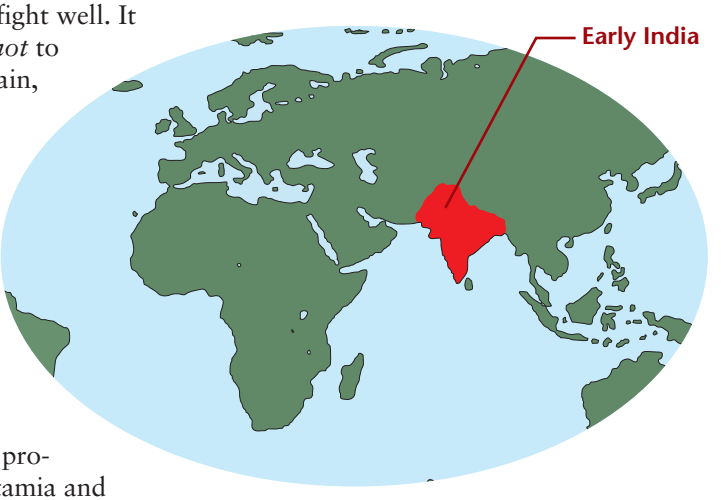
Societies and Beliefs of Early India, to 300 C.E.

Early Indian Sculpture

India's earliest complex societies, which flourished in the Indus River valley over four thousand years ago (pages 56-59), left behind numerous cultural artifacts, including this sculpture of a bearded man. Based on his stately attire and serene expression, he may have been a ruler or priest.

The **Mahabharata** (*muh-hah-BAH-ruh-tuh*), the world's longest epic poem, tells of a legendary war between related families in ancient India. The epic's most famous segment, the "Song of the Lord" or Bhagavad Gita (*BAH-guh-vahd GĒ-tah*), recounts the reluctance of the warrior Arjuna to fight and kill his own relatives. His chariot driver, a god in human form, explains to Arjuna that, as a member of the warrior caste, it is his sacred duty to fight in battle and fight well. It is permissible to kill in war only if you resolve *not* to spare your kin, since even though the body is slain, the soul will be reborn:

> For certain is the death of the born,
> And certain is the birth of the dead;
> Therefore that which is inevitable
> Thou shouldst not regret.



Thus emboldened by the wisdom of a god, and reassured of the inevitability of both death and rebirth, Arjuna and his kin engage in a lengthy battle that results in extensive slaughter.

In many ways ancient India, the society that produced the Mahabharata, was similar to Mesopotamia and Egypt. As in those two regions, in India cities emerged near a river where farming had long flourished. Like Mesopotamia and Egypt, India had powerful rulers and priests who served numerous gods and goddesses believed to interact with human beings. Like Mesopotamia and Egypt, India was overrun by outsiders who blended the cultures of the people they conquered with their own culture and spread the combined culture to surrounding regions. As in West Asia and North Africa, such connections and conflicts produced diverse societies that bickered and battled, engaged in commerce, and made major contributions to science, mathematics, literature, and the arts.

As reflected in Arjuna's story, however, India's society was unique in several ways. One was its widespread belief that, as Arjuna was assured, the spirits of those who die are reborn, or reincarnated, into new bodies. While other cultures believed in life after death, usually in another world or a different form of existence, people in India believed that the souls of the dead return to life in *this* world. Another distinction was India's segregation into hereditary occupational groups, such as Arjuna's warrior caste, which people had to stay in until they died and were reborn into another life. Other societies had social classes, but few were as rigid as India's. At the same time, despite the celebration of violence in such epics as the Mahabharata, India also produced belief systems embracing contemplation, passivity, and nonviolence. In a region noted for political fragmentation and almost constant conflict, Indians found hope in the prospect of a better incarnation, security in a rigid social structure, and peace through inner tranquility.

The Indian Subcontinent

India is a subcontinent, a huge land mass substantially separated from the rest of Asia by mountains and seas. To the north are the world's tallest mountains, the towering Himalaya (*HIM-uh-LĀ-uh*) and Hindu Kush (*HIN-doo KOOSH*) ranges. In the south,

between the Bay of Bengal and Arabian Sea, is a vast subtropical peninsula that includes the Deccan, an extensive central plateau surrounded by low mountain ranges. Between these regions, stretching across northern India, are broad plains drained by two great rivers: the Ganges (*GAN-jēz*) and the Indus (Map 3.1).

India's geographic diversity promotes political disunity

India's great geographic diversity has fostered political fragmentation, long a dominant feature of Indian society. The challenges involved in vanquishing and ruling so vast and varied a land have deterred or defeated all but a handful of empire builders and leaders. Rare have been the rulers who have managed to unite all of India and keep it united for long.

The terrain and climate have also had other major impacts. The northern mountains have served as both a shield against invasion and a buffer against the icy winds that sweep across Central Asia. But this buffer, along with the subtropical location of much of the subcontinent, also helps to ensure that India has almost relentless heat. Rainfall is seasonal and uneven, with annual monsoon winds bringing heavy rains from surrounding seas in the summer and early fall, especially in the coastal areas and the Ganges valley. Other seasons and other regions, however, tend to be rather dry, and many areas experience recurrent drought.

Ganges and Indus Rivers dominate northern India

In the north, the two great rivers provide abundant water for humans, animals, and the irrigation of crops. The Ganges, rising in the Himalayas, flows south and east to the Bay of Bengal through fertile plains that are favorable for human settlement. Although heavy rains in the Ganges Valley sometimes cause serious flooding, the Ganges has traditionally been viewed as bounteous and benevolent. The Indus River, on the other hand, is far less predictable, prone to significant changes in its depth and course. But it was the Indus, not the Ganges, that gave the subcontinent its name. For it was along the Indus that India's earliest complex societies emerged.

Harappan India: Early Indus Valley Societies

Farming begins in Indus Valley by 7000 B.C.E.

From the majestic Hindu Kush and Himalaya mountains, through the arid plains of what is now Pakistan, the Indus River flows southwest to the warm Arabian Sea. The river usually floods twice a year: once in spring, when melting mountain snow swells the tributaries that feed the river, and once in summer, when the monsoon winds blowing in from the sea bring heavy rains. As in Egypt, the receding floodwaters deposit a rich layer of silt, enabling farmers in the river valley to plant and harvest two crops a year. Thanks partly to this fertility, and partly to farming's eastward spread from West Asia, agriculture came early to the Indus Valley. By 7000 B.C.E., the region was already home to a number of farming villages.

The Early Cities

Towns and cities emerge in Indus Valley by 3000 B.C.E.

As the population increased, the villages grew larger, and by 3000 B.C.E. towns and cities had begun to emerge. As in Mesopotamia and Egypt the growing population, combined perhaps with the need to control the river and irrigate the fields, led to the formation of larger, more complex, and better-organized communities, while farming advances supplied the food surplus needed to support them. Sustained by this surplus, from roughly 2800 to 1700 B.C.E., a cosmopolitan culture with large, thriving cities flourished in the Indus Valley.

The two main cities unearthed by archeologists in the Indus Valley are Mohenjo-Daro (*mō-HEN-jō-DAH-rō*), meaning "Mound of the Dead," and Harappa (*hah-RAP-puh*).

FOUNDATION MAP 3.1 India's Geography and Early Indus Cities, Third Millennium B.C.E.

The Indian subcontinent's main geographic features include the northern mountains that separate it from the rest of Asia, the great Indus and Ganges Rivers that flow from these mountains across northern India, and the vast southern Indian peninsula embracing the Deccan Plateau. Note that India's earliest cities emerged in the northwest, in the Indus River valley, by the third millennium B.C.E. What factors account for the early emergence of agriculture and the rise of cities and towns in this region? Why would this region have more contacts with other cultures than other parts of early India?

Excavations at Mohenjo-Daro, with citadel in the background.

The entire culture, including these cities and others, is called the Indus Valley or Harappan civilization (Map 3.1).

With 40-foot-thick brick walls, more than three miles around, and populations of 30,000 or more, Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro were similar to cities in ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt. But the early Indus cities were also like many modern ones, with dwellings aligned along straight streets arranged in a grid-like pattern. Working-class districts, with rows of single-room barracks, bordered prosperous neighborhoods of multi-room brick houses with courtyards and bathrooms, served by an ingenious system of pipes that brought water from upriver and deposited waste downstream. Clearly there were disparities between the poor and the rich.

In each city there were temples, marketplaces, and a raised citadel with large buildings probably used by rulers and governing officials. Mohenjo-Daro had a beautiful public bath with a large brick-lined pool, while Harappa had a large grain storage facility, built with a raised floor to protect against floods. These features suggest that each city had a high degree of urban planning and a central authority with the power to carry out large public works projects.

Excavations shed light on early Indus civilization

Farming, Culture, and Commerce

At its height, between roughly 2500 and 2000 B.C.E., the Indus Valley civilization covered over a half million square miles and included hundreds of villages, towns, and cities. Its people raised abundant food, manufactured high-quality goods, devised an elaborate system of symbols, and traded with other societies.

Farming was the foundation of Harappan society. Although wheat was apparently their main food crop, Indus Valley residents also grew rice and barley and herded sheep, cattle, goats, and pigs. Key agricultural achievements included the domestication of chickens and the cultivation of cotton, used to make lightweight clothing suited to the hot climate.

Indus culture centers on farming, fertility, and family

Central to Indus peoples' outlooks were family, nature, and fertility. Numerous carvings and figurines found in their cities, including children's toys and depictions of animals, indicate great respect for family and nature. Religious artifacts, such as phallic symbols and images of large-breasted women, suggest that their worship involved fertility rites. And the sculpture of a stately bearded man, shown on page 54, hints that they may have had a priestly ruling class.

One of many inscribed square seals found in the Indus Valley cities.

Excavations have also uncovered numerous pottery vessels, as well as farm tools and fine utensils made out of copper and bronze—products that display great metalworking skill. Yet few metal weapons have been found, suggesting perhaps that Harappan societies were less prone to warfare than those of Mesopotamia.

Also uncovered have been numerous square seals, made of soapstone or baked clay, carved with symbols that include depictions of humans, animals, and sacrificial rites. Many scholars have seen these symbols as features of an early writing system, and some speculate that Harappans spoke languages ancestral to those in the Dravidian (*druh-VID-ē-un*) language family that is now dominant in southern India. Other scholars, however, suggest that the symbols are religious, and claim that there is no clear evidence of any Dravidian connection.

There is clear evidence, however, that Indus Valley peoples had connections with distant cultures. Harappan clay seals and other Indus artifacts, for example, have been

found in the Tigris and Euphrates valleys, while various items made in Mesopotamia have been discovered in India. Especially intriguing are sculptures, excavated at Harappa, that appear to depict Sumerian epic heroes such as Gilgamesh and Enkidu, about whom the Indians must have learned through contact with West Asia.

Indus people connect commercially and culturally with Mesopotamia

The Decline of Harappan Society

In the centuries following 2000 B.C.E., the Indus Valley culture declined. Population seems to have fallen, perhaps on account of climate changes, diseases, or deforestation and soil exhaustion from centuries of intensive farming. There is evidence, too, that movements of the earth's tectonic plates may have unleashed floods and earthquakes that changed the course of the Indus and dried up other rivers in the region, fatally disrupting agricultural and urban patterns. Without surplus food to sustain them, large numbers of people—laborers, merchants, pottery makers, metalworkers, and government officials—apparently left the cities, moving most likely to farming villages so they could raise their own food. By 1700 B.C.E., although farming and herding in the Indus Valley continued, the Harappan cities, with their commerce, governments, and specialized occupations, had been largely abandoned.

Bronze statuette of a dancing girl, found at Mohenjo-Daro.

Vedic India: The Aryan Impact

As Harappan culture declined, according to many scholars, Indo-European pastoral nomads called Aryans (*AIR-ē-unz*) moved into the Indus Valley from the west and north (Map 3.2). Eventually they spread across northern India, interacting and often clashing with the people who already lived there. Over the next thousand years, from before 1500 B.C.E. until about 500 B.C.E., these connections and conflicts produced a blended culture, distinguished on one hand by political division and conflict, and on the other hand by social stability and control.

Indo-European Aryans migrate to north India by 1500 B.C.E.

Aryan Incursions and the Rise of Vedic Culture

The Aryan incursions most likely were part of the general Indo-European migrations described in Chapter 2. Like other early Indo-Europeans, the Aryans were pastoral nomads, herders of cattle and sheep, with metal-tipped weapons and horse-drawn chariots that made them effective warriors. Reputedly light-skinned and ruthless, the ancient Aryans were much later hailed as racial forebears by Nazis and other white supremacists. Scholars, however, reject such racial claims, and instead use terms such as Aryan and Dravidian to designate language groups.

Aryans arrive in India as herders and warriors

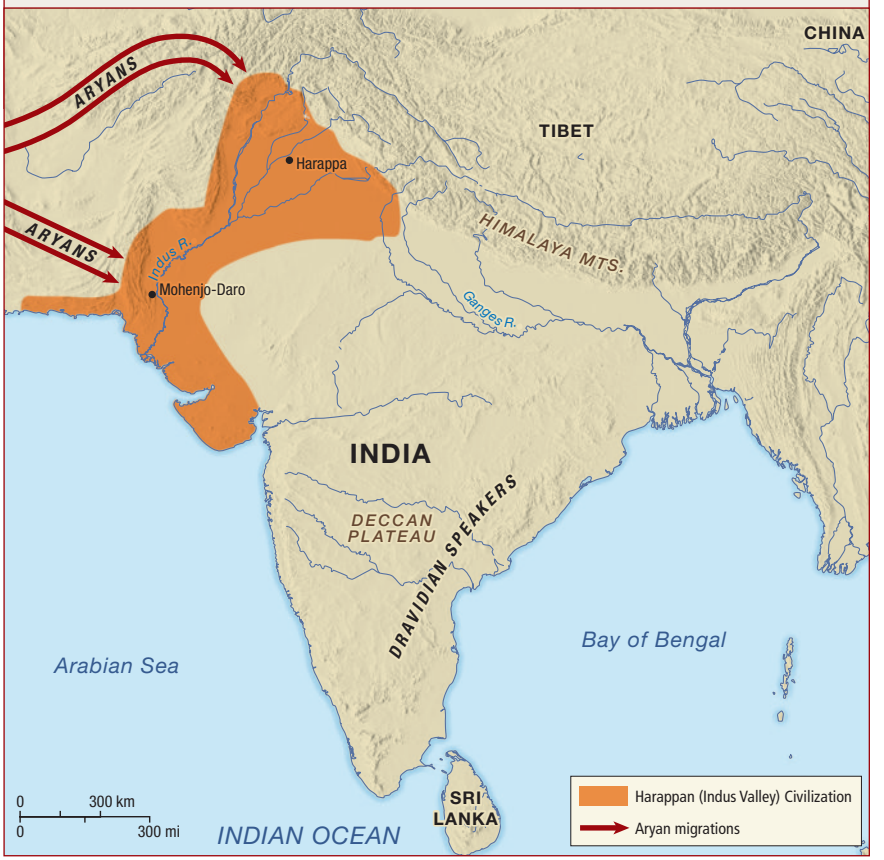
At some point before 1500 B.C.E., Aryan speakers started moving into northern India, bringing with them their horses and imposing weapons. There they encountered agricultural peoples, including perhaps Dravidian speakers, with farming villages and fortified towns that may have slowed but did not stop the Aryan advance.

Over several centuries the Aryans prevailed, eventually forming many small contentious kingdoms ruled by warrior kings called rajahs (*RAH-jahz*). As these realms fought one another for regional dominion, regularly raiding one another's herds and attacking each other's domains, conflict and political disunity emerged as central

Aryans prevail over farming peoples of northern India

Map 3.2 Aryans Migrate into India, Second Millennium B.C.E.

By 1500 B.C.E., Aryan-speaking peoples had begun moving into India from the northwest, creating historic connections and conflicts with the people who already lived there. Notice that the Aryans came first to the Indus River Valley, birthplace of Harappan civilization, and perhaps interacted with users of Dravidian languages, now spoken mainly in southern India. What were the major impacts on India of the Aryan migrations?



hallmarks of Indian society. But conflict and disunity did not prevent the development of Indian culture.

The culture that developed in Aryan India is often called **Vedic** (*VĀ-dik*), since much of what we know about it comes from Vedas (*VĀ-dahz*), sacred hymns composed by Aryan priests for use in religious rituals. Since the Aryans initially had no writing system, Vedas were composed in oral form, largely between 1500 and 1000 B.C.E., in meters and stanzas that made them easy to remember. Committed to memory, they were passed on by word of mouth for centuries. Only after 800 B.C.E., when a writing system emerged, were the Vedas actually written down.

Although religious in intent, the Vedas provide abundant information about Aryan culture (see "Excerpts from the Rig Veda"). They depict Aryans as people who loved

Document 3.1 Excerpts from the Rig Veda

The Vedas, composed as sacred hymns, provide many insights into ancient Aryan culture. The following excerpts from the Rig Veda reflect Aryan devotion to the war god Indra and Aryan fascination with warfare, competition, and gambling.

WHO IS INDRA?

The god who had insight the moment he was born, the first who protected the gods with his power of thought, before whose hot breath the two world-halves tremble at the greatness of his manly powers—he, my people, is Indra . . .

He . . . who drove the race of Dasas down into obscurity, who took away the flourishing wealth of the enemy as a winning gambler takes the stake—he, my people, is Indra . . .

He who encourages the weary and sick, . . . he who has lips for fine drinking—he, my people, is Indra . . .

He, the mighty bull . . . who with his thunderbolts in his hand hurled down [the enemy] as he was climbing up to the sky—he, my people, is Indra . . .

TO ARMS

His face is like a thundercloud, when the armored warrior goes into the lap of battles. Conquer with an unwounded body; let the power of armor keep you safe.

With the bow . . . let us win the contest and violent battles with the bow. The bow ruins the enemy's pleasure; with the bow let us conquer all the corners of the world . . .

Standing in the chariot, the skilful charioteer drives his prize-winning horses forward wherever he wishes to go. Praise the power of the reins: the guides follow the mind that is behind them . . .

Spare us, O weapon flying true to its mark; let our body be stone . . .

Whoever would harm us, . . . let all the gods ruin him. My inner armor is prayer.

THE GAMBLER'S LAMENT

The dice seem to me like a drink . . . keeping me awake at night . . .

When I swear, 'I will not play with them,' I am left behind by my friends as they depart. But when the brown dice raise their voice as they are thrown down, I run at once to rendezvous with them, like a woman to her lover.

The gambler goes to the meeting hall, asking himself "Will I win?" and trembling with hope. But the dice cross him and counter his desire, giving the winning throws to his opponent.

The dice goad like hooks and prick like whips; they enslave, deceive, and torment . . . They are coated with honey—an irresistible power over the gambler.

SOURCE: Wendy D. O'Flaherty, editor and translator, *The Rig Veda: An Anthology* (New York: Penguin Books, 1984) 160–161, 236–237, 240–241.

wine and music, lived in patriarchal families, worshiped numerous deities, sacrificed animals to the gods, and believed in life after death. As portrayed in the Vedas, Aryans also glorified bravery and warfare, often fighting among themselves as well as against other peoples. The Rig Veda, the oldest and most famous of the Vedas, exalts the Aryan war god Indra, wielder of thunderbolts and destroyer of towns, and asks him to help the nomadic Aryans destroy enemy settlements. The Vedas further suggest that Aryans were fond of competition and gambling, traits that may help explain why they are traditionally credited with inventing both dice and chess.

While thus acclaiming the Aryans, whose very name means "noble," the Vedas disparage the defeated peoples as Dasa (*DAH-suh*), a term meaning "subject" or "slave." This attitude reflects not only the conquerors' contempt for the conquered, but also the disdain of nomadic warriors for settled farming peoples, whom the nomads saw as enslaved to the land and shackled to their villages and towns.

Aryan ways blend with farming cultures to form a complex, diverse society

Eventually, however, as had happened after conquests in West Asia and North Africa, the conquerors adapted ideas and ways from the people they had conquered. In time, for example, Aryans built towns, took up settled farming, and even intermarried with Dravidian speakers and others. Aryan religion became infused with the spirituality of India's farmers, focusing on fertility, stressing nature's cycles of destruction and rebirth, and inferring from these cycles that people's spirits are reborn in a new body after death. As a result of such blending, by 500 B.C.E., India was home to a very complex and multi-faceted society.

The Emergence of Caste

Aryan society, as portrayed in the Vedas, was divided into classes called **varnas**, based on the functions fulfilled by their members in society. At the top were the priests, or Brahmins, who performed religious rituals and sustained sacred legends, and the warriors, or Kshatriya (*kuh-SHAH-trē-uh*), who protected society. At first the warriors apparently were preeminent, but over time the Brahmins, esteemed for their ability to gain favor with the gods, gained superior status. Below the priests and warriors were the commoners, or Vaishya (*VĪSH-yuh*), who performed basic services such as farming, herding, and trading. Below them were the servants, or Shudra (*SHOO-druh*), consisting initially of conquered peoples compelled to menial labor.

Indian society evolves into rigid class system

For centuries after the Aryan incursions, interclass mobility and marriage seems to have been fairly common, blurring class boundaries and diminishing distinctions between Aryans and non-Aryans. As time went on, however, the system became more rigid. Upper-class families, anxious to protect their status, increasingly refused to socialize or arrange marriages with those of lower rank. The classes thus hardened into **castes**, exclusive and restrictive hereditary occupational groupings, based on birth and ranked in hierarchical order. People were expected to fulfill their caste's occupational functions, to marry and share meals within their caste, and to observe its dress and behavioral codes.

Jatis emerge as social-economic subcaste communities

As society grew more complex, numerous regional subcastes, called **jatis** (*JAH-tēz*), emerged. As a rule each jati identified with a certain trade, a specific locale, and often a particular god or goddess. Each jati, embracing hundreds of families, functioned as a community: its members ate, worked, socialized, and intermarried mainly with each other, and cared for one another during times of need. Jatis often vied with each other for higher ranking in the social structure.

Castes also came to be connected with religious notions of purity and pollution. On one end of the spectrum were Brahmins, regarded as pure since they dealt with spiritual rather than bodily functions. On the other end were those who did work that was seen as impure—such as jobs involving contact with dead bodies and human or animal waste. Since touching people who did such work was considered a source of pollution, or spiritual contamination, they were widely shunned as "untouchables," ranking even below the Shudra at the bottom of Indian society.

Family, Status, and Stability

Although Indian society limited freedom and mobility, it provided considerable stability. Grouped by family, occupation, and heredity, people almost always knew their place and what was expected of them. Within the family, for example, women were clearly subordinate to men, and children were strictly subject to their parents. Within the larger society, occupations were determined by caste membership and duties were clearly prescribed. Each caste and subcaste supervised and protected its own members, providing them with security and employment. Deeply rooted in family and status, India's social structure was stratified, hierarchical, and stable.

Jatis and individuals can improve status through good work

Yet social interaction and upward mobility were not entirely impossible. Social interaction could occur when people of different castes worshiped together, for example, or when they participated jointly in village festivals and councils. Upward mobility could take place in several ways. One was available to subcastes: an entire jati that excelled in its work could hope to move up within the social hierarchy. Another was available to individuals: those who lived good lives and performed their duties well could hope for a higher standing in their next incarnation, according to India's distinctive religious beliefs.

The Religions of India

The religious beliefs that emerged in Vedic India, fostered largely by the Brahmin (priestly) caste, are often referred to as the Vedic religion or Brahmanism. Centered on a universal and eternal spiritual source called Brahman, and including a wide array of distinctive gods and rituals, this early religion set forth three basic concepts that have since been central to the Indian worldview: samsara (*sam-SAH-ruh*), dharma, and karma.

The Wheel of Dharma, an ancient symbol of Indian Buddhist values.

Samsara, sometimes called "reincarnation" or "transmigration of souls," was the basic belief that each being has a soul or eternal spiritual core called the Atman, identified with and encompassed in the Brahman, which is reborn into a new body after the old one dies. Each person thus has an ongoing series of lives. **Dharma** represented the faithful performance of the duties that pertained to one's caste or station in life. **Karma** referred to one's fate or destiny in the next incarnation, based on performance of one's dharma in the current life. Those who dutifully carried out their dharma would thereby have good karma and thus be reborn through samsara into a higher status. Those who did not fulfill their dharma would have bad karma and thus likely be reborn into a lower status. A servant who did her job well, for example, could improve her caste status in the next life, while a warrior who fought poorly could be reincarnated into a lower caste.

Dharma, karma, and samsara reinforce social stability

These three concepts reinforced the social structure. Fearful of acquiring bad karma, and thus undermining their chance for rebirth into a higher caste, lower caste members felt compelled to do their duties, accept their low status, and endure the dominance of priests and warriors. The privileged status of the upper castes was thus also preserved.

Jains and Buddhists seek salvation from endless cycle of lives

At the end of the Vedic era, however, around 500 B.C.E., several new religions began to challenge this social structure. Rejecting the concept of caste, Jainism (*JĪN-iz-um*) and Buddhism saw karma and samsara not as the means to a better life but as hardships trapping the soul in an endless cycle of lives. The ultimate goal of these new faiths was to free the soul from this cycle and provide salvation from suffering.

Jainism: Reverence for All Living Things

Jainism was based on the teachings of a wandering religious figure known as Mahavira (*mah-hah-VĒ-rah*), the "great hero," or Jina (*JĪ-nah*), the "conqueror," who lived from around 540 to 486 B.C.E. At the age of 30, according to tradition, he chose a life of **asceticism** (*uh-SET-ih-siz'm*), renouncing all possessions and practicing extreme self-denial, while also promoting pacifism and vegetarianism. His followers, called Jains, believed that all living things—including animals, insects, and plants—possess an eternal spirit and must be treated with reverence.

Jains stress *ahimsa*: nonviolence toward all living things

Jains therefore practiced **ahimsa** (*ah-HIM-sah*), or nonviolence toward all living things. Some Jains even swept the ground ahead of them to avoid stepping on insects and wore face masks to avoid inhaling tiny gnats and flies. By showing profound reverence for life in all its forms, Jains believed they could purify their spirits and eventually attain **moksha** (*MŌK-shah*), or liberation from the cycle of death and reincarnation.

Although Jains, who spurned the inequalities of caste, were widely admired by members of the lower castes, few actually practiced Jainism in its entirety. Most engaged in occupations, such as farming or herding, that at times involved the killing of plants or animals, practices that went against Jainist teachings. Only people such as merchants or scholars, whose trades did not involve such practices, or monks and nuns, who renounced worldly pleasures, could hope to lead a fully Jainist life. Jainist ideals were influential, but few could fully follow them. Jains thus remained throughout the centuries a small religious minority.

Buddhism: The Path to Inner Peace

Buddhism, on the other hand, became one of the world's most widely practiced religions. It grew out of the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama (*sih-DAHR-tah GOW-tah-mah*), a spiritual leader whose influence compares to that of Moses, Confucius, Jesus, and Muhammad. Born into a princely family in the Himalayan foothills of what is now Nepal, Gautama reportedly lived from 563 to 483 B.C.E. According to Buddhist traditions, he enjoyed great comfort in his early life, protected by his parents from all distress. At age 29, however, he ventured outside his palace, eventually encountering an old man, a sick man, and a dead man. Determined to discover the meaning of aging, illness, and death, he left his wife and family to lead an ascetic life. For six years he practiced extreme self-denial, eating sparsely and avoiding most other pleasures. But he found this life no more fulfilling than his earlier self-indulgence.

Siddhartha Gautama gains enlightenment, becoming the Buddha

Finally, while meditating near the Ganges River underneath a tree, Gautama experienced enlightenment, a revelation enabling him to comprehend the secrets of salvation from human suffering. For the rest of his life he traveled throughout northeastern India, gathering disciples, preaching to all who would listen, and sharing the wisdom that had been imparted to him. He came to be known as the Buddha ("enlightened one"), and his followers eventually were called Buddhists.

The Buddha's central teachings, known as the "Four Noble Truths," can be summarized briefly as follows: (1) Life consists of pain and suffering. (2) Pain and suffering are caused by desire. (3) To escape from suffering, one must curb desire. (4) Desire can be curbed by righteous living. To live righteously, one must follow the "Eightfold Path," which entails right thinking, right purpose, right conduct, right speech, right livelihood, right

effort, right awareness, and right contemplation. Buddhists are expected to be kind, pure, truthful, and charitable, and to refrain from faultfinding, envy, hatred, and violence—although their adherence to ahimsa is typically less total than that of the Jains. If the faithful absorb these truths and follow this path they can eventually achieve enlightenment, like the Buddha himself, and ultimately escape the cycle of karma and samsara by attaining **nirvana** (*nir-VAH-nah*), a state of infinite tranquility.

Buddhism's simple, attractive teachings gain it a wide following

These beliefs made Buddhism widely attractive. Like Jainism, Buddhism respected all beings and rejected caste inequalities, thus appealing to people of low social status, such as servants, merchants, and farmers. Unlike Jainism, however, Buddhism counseled moderation: it provided a simple and elegant formula for escape from suffering, not through extreme self-sacrifice or rigid adherence to ahimsa, but through self-awareness, meditation, avoidance of ambition, and pursuit of inner peace.

Hinduism: Unity amid Diversity

Traditional Vedic beliefs evolve into Hindu religion

Challenged by Jainism and Buddhism, which spread slowly throughout India in the centuries after 500 B.C.E., the Vedic religion adapted and endured in the form of Hinduism, an assortment of beliefs and practices that eventually evolved into India's main faith. Unlike Jainism, Buddhism, and other major religions, Hinduism was not based on the revelations of a famous founder or teacher; instead it developed organically in concert with Indian society. Rather than becoming an organized church with a fixed ritual and creed, Hinduism remained a flexible faith with a wide array of divinities, doctrines, and devotions. Supremely adaptable, it readily embraced new gods and new beliefs, including concepts adapted from the Jains and Buddhists.

Hindu deities Vishnu and Lakshmi depicted in stone sculpture as sensuous lovers.

Like their Vedic ancestors, Hindus worshiped a multitude of deities, the most prominent of which was Brahma, seen as the supreme creator and universal being. Other gods and goddesses, however, came to be more widely revered. Shiva (*SHĒ-vah*), the mighty "destroyer" and "lord of the dance," was a god who embodied the eternal cycle of destruction and renewal. Vishnu (*VISH-noo*), the valiant "preserver" and protector of the world against demonic powers, was a god said to take on different incarnations as needed—including Rama (*RAH-muh*), the ideal man and a model of virtue and reason, and Krishna (*KRĒSH-nuh*), a benevolent god who involved himself directly in human affairs. Among the main goddesses were Lakshmi (*LUK-shmē*), a popular deity identified with wealth and good fortune; Kali, a fearsome divinity linked with violence and death; and Durga, a multi-armed warrior often pictured riding on a lion or tiger. All three were seen as manifestations of a supreme mother goddess, sometimes called Devi (*DĀ-vē*), a Hindu term for goddess.

Hindus come to seek eventual salvation through devotion to caste duties

Unlike Jains and Buddhists, Hindus accepted the caste system, including the notion that an honorable life meant fulfilling one's caste functions. Like Jains, however, Hindus came to believe that they could eventually achieve moksha, gaining an eternal peace akin to the Buddhist nirvana—except that for Hindus this peace involved a union of the personal soul or spiritual core (Atman) with the universal life force (Brahman). Hindus sought to secure this salvation by dedication to their caste duties, devotion to the gods, meditation, and reverence for life.

Although, like Jains and Buddhists, Hindus revered all forms of life, they developed a special veneration for certain places and beings. For example, they regarded the

Hindus revere shrines, pilgrimages, the Ganges River, and cows

Ganges, the source of life-giving waters, as a sacred river, bathing in it for spiritual purification. They treated cows, the source of nourishing milk, as sacred, allowing them to roam undisturbed through towns and villages as symbols of nature's benevolence. They prayed at numerous sacred sites and shrines, making regular pilgrimages to these places. Believing in a rich diversity of divinities, Hindus saw them all as manifold expressions of Brahman—the single, unifying, universal force.

Post-Vedic India: Connections and Divisions

Buddhism's spread and West Asian connections shape post-Vedic India

In the late sixth century B.C.E., several key developments marked the transition from India's Vedic era, traditionally dated as ending around 500 B.C.E., to the post-Vedic era. One was the emergence of Buddhism, a compelling new religion that gained widespread influence throughout India and beyond. Another was the invasion and conquest of northwestern India, between 518 and 513 B.C.E., by the Persians, whose rule of that region vastly increased India's connections with other cultures. In the centuries that followed, both the spread of Buddhism and contacts with outside cultures played key roles in shaping Indian society.

Magadha flourishes south of the Ganges, but India remains disunited

Political disunity continued in post-Vedic India. In the sixth century B.C.E. there were 16 major kingdoms and principalities in northern India alone, including the one where Siddhartha Gautama was born. The dominant kingdom in the north was Magadha (*MAH-guh-duh*), located mostly south of the lower Ganges, in a hilly area laden with visible iron ore deposits. For several centuries Magadha flourished, prospering from its iron mines, agriculture, and control of the Ganges regional trade. But its sporadic efforts to gain sway over its neighbors achieved only limited success.

Conflicts and Contacts with Persians and Greeks

Persian conquest of Indus Valley links India with West Asia

While Magadha flourished in northeast India, new intruders arrived in the northwest. Around 518 B.C.E., forces from the Persian Empire, a realm that had recently expanded across West Asia, began probing the Indus Valley, eventually subjecting it to Persian rule for most of the next two centuries (Map 3.3). Although only this part of India was actually ruled by Persia, most of the subcontinent was affected in some way by the Persian presence. It brought unprecedented trade and contact, not just with Persia but also with cultures in West Asia and North Africa that came under Persian rule. These contacts, for example, enabled Indians to export spices, perfumes, gems, and cotton textiles to the lands of the eastern Mediterranean and in return to receive such goods as wine, tin, and gold.

Alexander invades northwest India, but his forces refuse to go farther

These increased connections, by spreading awareness of India's vast resources and potential wealth, eventually brought new conflicts. In 326 B.C.E. the famed Macedonian warrior Alexander the Great, having overrun Persia with his Greek and Macedonian armies (Chapter 7), invaded India in hopes of bringing its lands and wealth under his control. One Indian rajah tried to halt the intruders with a force of 200 war elephants. But Alexander's soldiers fired flaming arrows, frightening the huge beasts, who then stampeded and trampled the rajah's infantry.

Alexander, however, was unable to follow up on his victory. His men, already far from home, refused to advance any farther, compelling him to turn back toward West

Map 3.3 Persian Empire Connects India with West Asia and North Africa After 518 B.C.E.

For almost two centuries, from about 518 until 326 B.C.E., the Persians ruled northwestern India, enhancing its commercial and cultural connections with West Asia and North Africa. Note, however, that the rest of India, also affected by these enhanced connections, was governed by various independent principalities and kingdoms, most notably the wealthy Magadha realm in the lower Ganges region. What were the major impacts on India of the Persian connection?

Asia. Although he left behind some officials and soldiers to administer northwest India, they could not perpetuate his control of the region. His unexpected death in 323 B.C.E. created widespread confusion, clearing the way for the formation of India's first full-fledged empire.

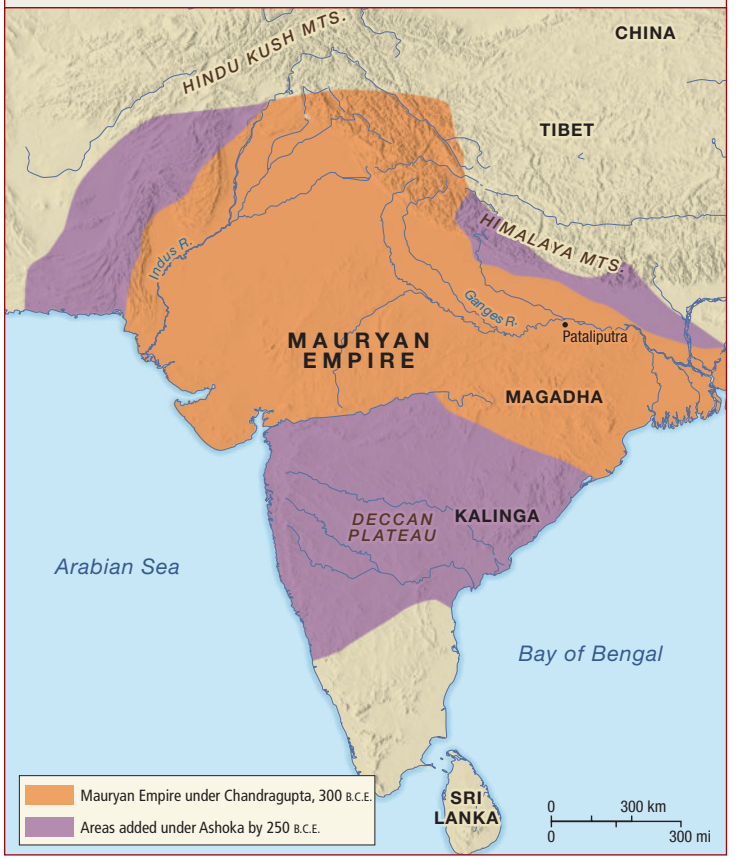
The Rise of the Mauryan Empire

In the muddled situation surrounding Alexander's death, Chandragupta Maurya (*chahn-druh-GOOP-tah MOW-rē-ah*), ruler of a minor Ganges Valley principality, saw a chance to expand his power. Having joined in the struggle against Alexander's forces, he adopted some of their military methods to defeat his Indian rivals. By 321 B.C.E. he had gained control of the Magadha kingdom and much of the Ganges basin. He then moved northwest into the Indus Valley, vacated by Alexander's departure, and added it to his domains. In 305 B.C.E. he turned back an effort by Seleucus Nikator (*sih-LOO-kus nih-KAH-tor*), Alexander's former lieutenant and founder of the Seleucid (*sih-LOO-sid*) kingdom in Persia, to retake the

Chandragupta Maurya forms Mauryan Empire in northern India

Map 3.4 Mauryan Empire Unites Much of India, 321–184 B.C.E.

The Mauryan Empire, founded by Chandragupta Maurya, united and connected most of northern India by 300 B.C.E. Notice that by 250 B.C.E., during the reign of his grandson Ashoka, the empire connected much of the subcontinent. How did the Mauryans learn and benefit from contacts with other cultures, and what were the major impacts on India of Mauryan rule?



Mauryan Empire expands to control much of India

Indus region. In exchange for 500 war elephants, Seleucus agreed to withdraw his forces from northwestern India, leaving this entire region under Chandragupta's rule.

Chandragupta Maurya thus created the Mauryan (*MOW-rē-un*) Empire, uniting much of India in a prosperous and populous domain that lasted from 321 to 184 B.C.E. (Map 3.4). The empire exemplified the benefits of connections among cultures, combining Indian religion and social structure with Persian administrative methods and Macedonian military techniques, while expanding India's commerce with the Mediterranean world.

The Mauryan Empire developed an impressive system of roads and public works, a magnificent capital city at Pataliputra (*PAH-tah-lih-POO-trah*)—now called Patna (*PUTT-nah*)—on the Ganges, and an extensive bureaucracy of officials who administered the realm. The empire also had a huge standing army, reportedly consisting of more than a half million soldiers, and a vast network of spies and special agents to protect its ruler against rebellion or assassination. Imperial laws and decrees were rigidly enforced, and those who defied them were brutally punished. According to legend, however, in his final years Chandragupta embraced Jainism and practiced ahimsa, giving up his throne to become a simple monk.

By this time, around 300 B.C.E., Chandragupta's realm included most of northern India. His policies were continued and extended by his son, who conquered and annexed the vast central Indian plateau called the Deccan. But it was Chandragupta's grandson Ashoka (*ah-SHŌ-kah*), reigning from around 270 until 232 B.C.E., who proved the most memorable of all the Mauryan rulers.

Ashoka's Reign: Buddhism and Paternalism

Ashoka's reign began in violence when he defeated his older brothers in a bloody civil war. Then, like his predecessors, Ashoka embarked on a course of military expansion. In conquering the east coast region of Kalinga, his armies killed many thousands of people. The carnage is said to have so sickened Ashoka that he had a profound change of

heart, renouncing violence and publicly expressing remorse for the misery he had caused. He converted to Buddhism, gave up hunting and eating meat, and embraced ahimsa.

Ashoka renounces violence and widely promotes Buddhism

Ashoka then used his imperial powers to propagate his new faith. He traveled about preaching Buddhist principles and urged his officials to do likewise. He built numerous Buddhist temples and shrines, patronized Buddhist scholarship and art, and established a number of Buddhist religious communities. He had huge polished stone pillars, carved with his edicts and Buddhist teachings, erected throughout his realm. He hosted Buddhism's Third Great Council, helping thereby to standardize doctrines and resolve religious disputes. According to tradition, he even sent his daughter and son as Buddhist missionaries to the island now called Sri Lanka off India's southern coast. Buddhism, formerly practiced only in parts of northern India, thus spread across the subcontinent and beyond.

Ashoka also practiced what he preached, creating a benevolent, paternalistic government devoted to the welfare of his subjects, whom he referred to as his children. He dispatched special agents throughout the realm to learn people's needs and ensure that local officials treated them with compassion and respect. To encourage commerce and religious pilgrimages he constructed numerous roads, with rest houses, shade trees, and watering spots along the way. To improve his people's lives, he established hospitals, had wells dug for water, and built irrigation systems. Despite his devotion to Buddhism, he respected and supported other faiths such as Hinduism and Jainism, helping to maintain their shrines and promote their worship. During his long and successful reign he personified the ideal Buddhist king, setting a standard of humanitarian rule that few other monarchs in history would match.

Ashoka's rule, however, was based not just on Buddhism and paternalism, but also on political control, sustained by the empire's large bureaucracy and army. His numerous officials and soldiers collected taxes, enforced his laws, and supervised his public works projects, effectively administering a huge kingdom with numerous people speaking many different languages. Ashoka's authorities used force sparingly, but the threat of its use helped hold his vast realm together. Indeed, Ashoka's promotion of Buddhism and nonviolence, while no doubt sincere, also served to dissuade his subjects from violently resisting his rule.

India After Ashoka: New Connections and Conflicts

Unfortunately for India, Ashoka's successors were neither as humane nor as capable as he. The Mauryan Empire under their rule was weakened by corruption and local revolts, and by financial problems that were worsened by the huge expenses of its bureaucracy and army. As its power steadily declined, so did the territory under its control. The empire finally ceased to exist in 184 B.C.E., when its last ruler was killed by one of his own commanders.

Mauryan collapse initiates five centuries of Indian disunity

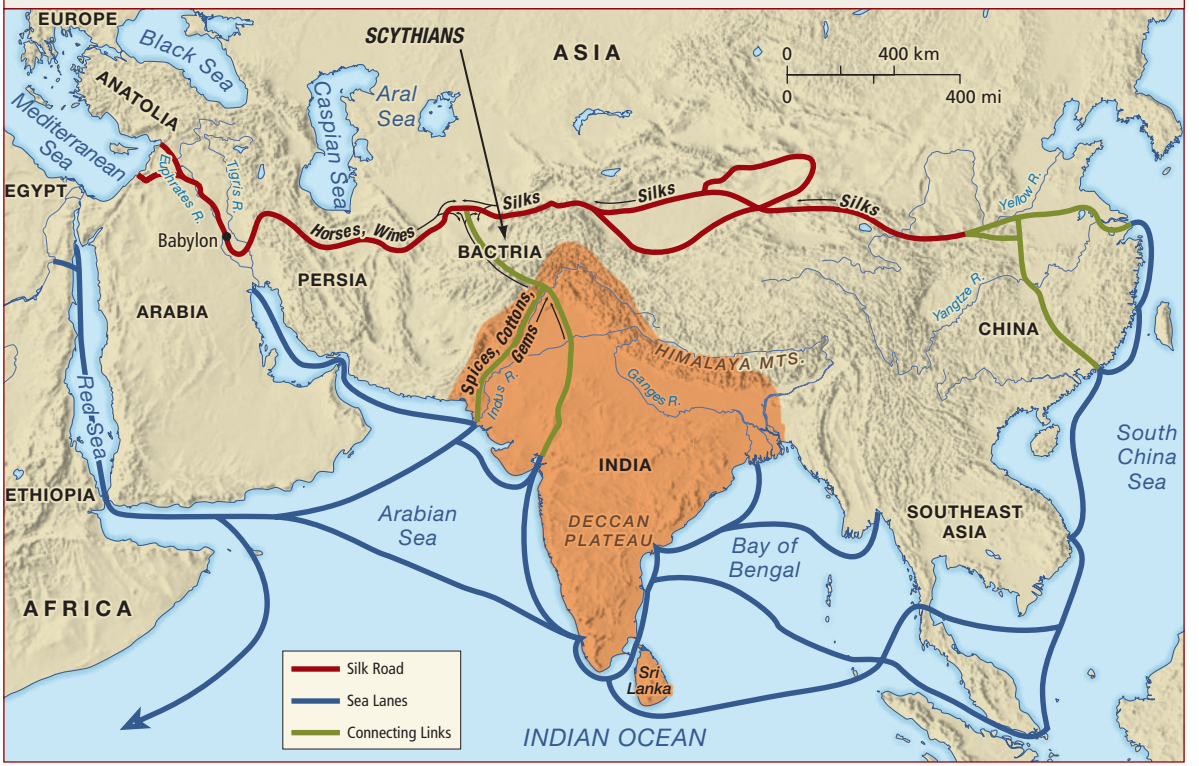
The collapse of the Mauryan Empire began five centuries of political disunity in India. In both the north and the south, a series of small kingdoms emerged. As in the Vedic era, India's great size and diversity once more stood in the way of centralization.

Indian connections grow with other cultures east and west

Disunity, however, was by no means a disaster. During this era, in spite of their divisions, Indians greatly expanded their contacts with other cultures. Sea lanes linked the subcontinent with Egypt and Arabia across the Arabian Sea, and with southeast Asia across the Bay of Bengal, while land routes connected it through Persia with the West, and through central Asia to China (Map 3.5). Indian monks traveled to southeast and

Map 3.5 Trade Routes Link India with Other Lands by Late First Millennium B.C.E.

In the centuries of disunity following the Mauryan Empire's collapse in 184 B.C.E., Indians expanded their commercial and cultural connections, using land and sea routes that linked India with other parts of Asia. Notice that, because the Himalaya Mountains were virtually impassable, the main land routes from India to China went north from the Indus Valley, then east through Central Asia along the Silk Road (Chapter 4). Note also that sea routes connected India with diverse cultures to its east and west. What key impacts did these connections have on Indian culture and commerce?



central Asia, and from there to China, preaching the Buddha's message and translating Buddhist writings into different languages. Indian merchants traded extensively with other lands, exporting pepper and other spices, cottons, and precious gems, while importing horses, metal wares, silks, and wines.

Southern India, separate from north, develops regional connections

Meanwhile southern India, separated from the rest of the subcontinent by the Deccan plateau and its adjacent mountain ranges, remained largely indifferent toward the north. Buddhist missionaries often traveled from the north to the south, and merchants conducted trade between the two regions, but given the lengthy and dangerous land travel required, such commerce was not extensive during this period. The kingdoms in the south found it more rewarding to trade by sea, first with the Mediterranean world and later with Southeast Asia. They also warred incessantly with one another and showed no interest in unification.

Northern Kingdoms and Connections. In the north, around 180 B.C.E., descendants of the soldiers of Alexander the Great established a Greco-Bactrian kingdom in the Indus

Valley and neighboring Bactria (present-day Afghanistan). This regime, looking westward toward Greece, expanded northern India's connections with the Mediterranean world. Beginning around 100 B.C.E., however, the Greco-Bactrians were invaded by Scythians (*SIH-thē-unz*), pastoral nomads driven from their Central Asian homelands (Map 3.5). By 88 B.C.E. the Scythians were entering the Indus Valley, and in 50 B.C.E. they overran that region and destroyed the Greco-Bactrian kingdom.

Kushans displace Scythians, driving them south, around 50 C.E.

Scythian rule lasted only a century. By 50 C.E. the Kushans (*koo-SHAHNZ*), the nomadic people who had originally pushed the Scythians out of Central Asia, now drove them from northwest India as well. Forced to move south, many Scythians eventually assimilated into Indian culture, settling in central India, adopting new names, and converting to Hinduism. The Kushans, meanwhile, established in the north a sizable kingdom centered in the upper Indus Valley.

Kushans dominate trade routes connecting India with much of Eurasia

For almost two centuries, from around 50 to 240 C.E., the Kushans dominated Bactria and parts of northern India. Their kingdom sat astride the trade routes connecting India with China and West Asia, making it a crossroads of both commerce and ideas. From the West, for example, came products such as wines, jewelry, and horses, as well such ideas as the seven-day week, the 60-minute hour, and the solar calendar. From China came porcelain wares and especially silk, a cloth so prized that the main east-west trade route was known as the Silk Road (Chapter 4). From India came spices and cotton cloth, scholars, artists, and poets, and above all Buddhist ideals, which spread from India to Central and East Asia by way of the Kushan Kingdom.

Kanishka expands Kushan Kingdom and widely promotes Buddhism

Buddhism's Spread and Division. The most influential Kushan king was Kanishka (*kah-NISH-kah*), whose reign of several decades began at some point between 78 and 144 C.E. A man of broad vision and territorial ambition, he expanded southward toward central India and north into central Asia, creating a large, multicultural kingdom. He is best known, however, for supporting Buddhism and helping to spread it throughout his kingdom and beyond (Map 3.6). Kanishka, who like Ashoka may have been a convert to Buddhism, sent Buddhist missionaries into Central Asia, where they preached the faith to merchants and others in towns along the trade routes. From there Buddhism eventually spread to East Asia, where it later flourished in China, Korea, and Japan. Like Ashoka, Kanishka promoted Buddhist architecture, sculpture, and art. Indeed, the famous popular depictions of the Buddha, seated in meditation with his legs crossed, originated in the Kushan era.

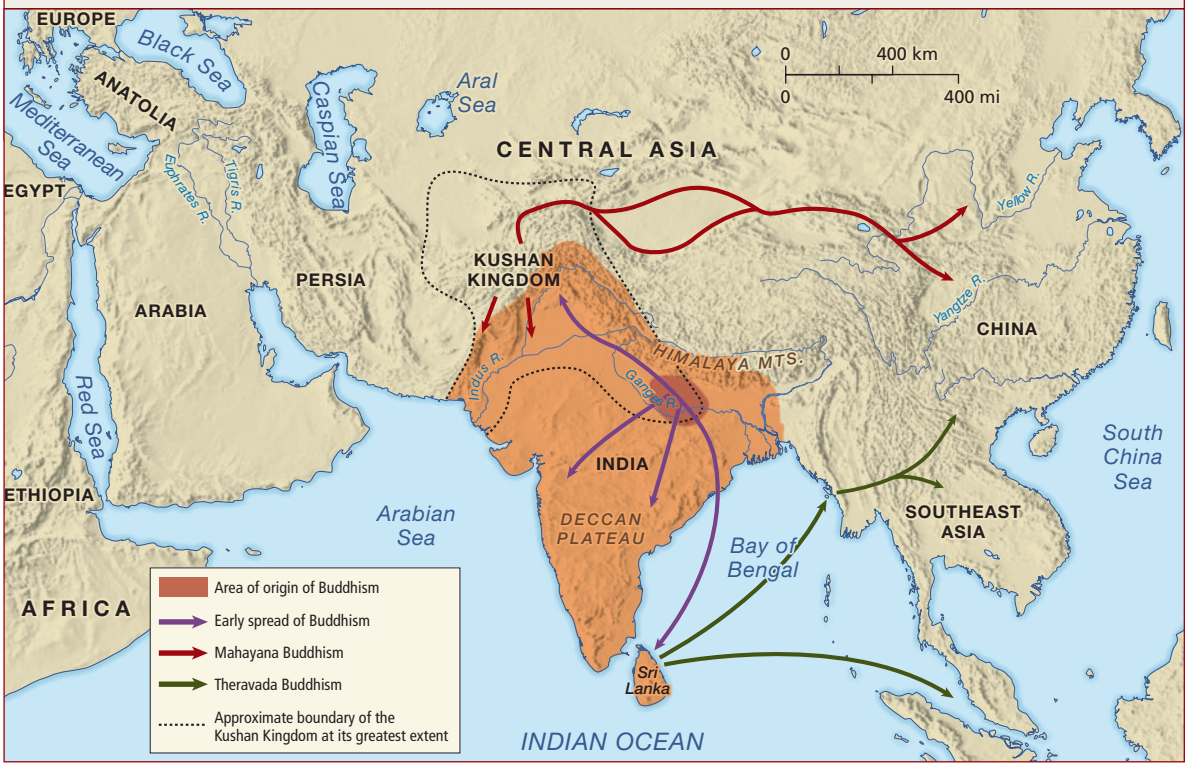
Aided by poet Ashvaghosha, Kanishka hosts great Buddhist council

Kanishka was assisted in his efforts by Ashvaghosha (*ahsh-VUH-gō-shuh*), a gifted Indian dramatist and poet who seems to have been a spiritual advisor to the Kushan king. Raised as a devout Hindu of the Brahmin caste, Ashvaghosha was reportedly a staunch opponent of Buddhism until he was won over in a spirited debate with a noted Buddhist teacher. The author of elegant essays, plays, and poems, including a famous Life of the Buddha written in poetic verse, Ashvaghosha was influential at Buddhism's Fourth Great Council, hosted by King Kanishka, which confirmed the division of Buddhism into two major branches.

In the centuries before the council, Buddhism as practiced in northwestern India had evolved into an elaborate religion, marked by devotions to numerous divinities and holy persons. Its followers there exalted the Buddha not just as a man who had attained enlightenment but also as a god who could help them gain salvation from suffering. They also venerated various other buddhas and bodhisattvas (*bō-di-SAHT-vuhz*), saintly

Map 3.6 The Kushan Kingdom (50–240 C.E.) and Buddhism's Spread

Over many centuries, Buddhism spread from its birthplace in northern India throughout much of Asia. Notice that the Kushan Kingdom (50–240 C.E.), where Mahayana Buddhism flourished, sat astride the trade routes (shown on Map 3.5) that connected India with Central Asia and China. How did the Kushans contribute to the development and spread of Mahayana Buddhism?



figures who, having gained enlightenment, were moved by compassion to postpone their own nirvana so they could help save others.

Mahayana dominates Kanishka's council, leading to Buddhist split

Devotees of this form of Buddhism called it Mahayana (*mah-hah-YAH-nah*), the "greater vehicle," claiming it saved more people than traditional forms, which shunned such devotions and stressed instead withdrawal from worldly pursuits. Merchants, artisans, officials, and others who were unwilling or unable to set aside their worldly pursuits thus tended to favor Mahayana, which enabled them to seek salvation through devotions and compassion. Mahayana supporters, including Ashvaghosha, dominated the Fourth Great Council, which affirmed their teachings. As the form of the faith embraced by the Kushans and spread by them to Central and East Asia, Mahayana was the main branch of Buddhism that later took hold in China, Korea, and Japan.

Mahayana Buddhism spreads throughout Central and East Asia

Traditional Buddhists, however, rejected the Fourth Council and its teachings. They promoted instead strict adherence to the Buddha's original principles, focusing on righteous living and enlightenment rather than devotions to divinities. Scorned by Mahayana

supporters as Hinayana (*HĒ-nah-YAH-nah*), the "lesser vehicle," traditional Buddhism nonetheless endured in several forms. One, known as Theravada (*ter-ah-VAH-dah*), the "way of the elders," flourished in Sri Lanka and spread to Southeast Asia, where it remains the main belief system today.

Traditional Theravada Buddhism endures in Southeast Asia

Hinduism's Evolution and Endurance. The reign of Kanishka marked a high point of Kushan power. His successors, less talented than he, failed to consolidate and maintain their hold on the regions he had conquered. By 240 C.E. the Kushan Kingdom had lost most of its lands and had ceased to be an important regional force.

Kanishka's reign also marked a high point of Buddhist influence in India. Divided into competing factions and deprived of its most powerful patron by the Kushan Kingdom's decline, Buddhism began its own slow decline in the Indian subcontinent, even as the faith was spreading to other Asian cultures.

Hinduism, competing with Buddhism, evolves into popular faith

Buddhism's gradual decline in India coincided with Hinduism's gradual evolution into a popular religion. Hinduism competed successfully with Buddhism partly by making the Buddha one of the various incarnations of the Hindu god Vishnu. Above all, however, Hinduism evolved in ways that widened its appeal, softening its asceticism and elitism, while helping it better meet the needs of the lower classes.

As practiced over time by the masses, popular Hinduism invited believers to fully enjoy life within the context of their caste. Although Hindus still had to fulfill their caste's occupational functions, within this framework they were encouraged to seek material success. Merchants or farmers, for example, could pursue prosperity by doing their caste duties honorably and well, thereby improving both their comfort in this life and their status in their next incarnation. Likewise, although Hindus were still expected to associate and intermarry with members of their own caste, within this context they were encouraged to experience the pleasures of social engagement, so central to the community, and the joys of sexuality, so central to the family. While Buddhism, even in its Mahayana form, urged its adherents to curb their worldly desires, popular Hinduism placed the common people under no such restraint.

Hindus develop devotions to personal divinities

In addition, as it evolved over the centuries, popular Hinduism also let its followers tailor their devotions to meet their individual needs. Rather than relying on rituals performed by Brahmins, for example, Hindus increasingly sought to develop a personal relationship with a particular god or goddess, typically an incarnation of Vishnu, Shiva, or Devi. By repeatedly invoking the name, singing the hymns, and visiting the shrines of their personal deity, Hindus could hope to create a bond that would help them eventually gain moksha. In the long run, then, Hinduism's ability to meet the daily needs of diverse peoples, combined with its multiplicity of divinities and devotional practices, helped it to adapt better than Buddhism to the needs of Indian society.

Indian Society and Culture

Except for a short period of peace and unity under Mauryan rule, most of India's early history was marked by conflict and political fragmentation. These conditions, however, did not prevent the emergence of a stable social structure and a flourishing culture. Like ancient Mesopotamia, India showed that society and culture could thrive amid regional diversity, political disunity, and religious discord.

Caste, Family, and Gender

Hindu society centers on caste and family

Hindu society was dominated by the caste system, which influenced almost every aspect of life. Each caste had its own particular dharma, carrying with it rights, obligations, and restrictions. Beyond this was a generalized dharma applicable to all: deference to the Brahmins, devotion to the gods, and reverence for the Ganges and for sacred cattle. Procreation, too, was considered a sacred duty: large families were seen as blessings from the gods, and any attempt to limit family size was frowned upon. Since reproduction was essential to reincarnation, for most people marriage and parenthood were moral obligations. Some Jains and Buddhists might seek sanctity as celibate monks or nuns, but for Hindus the single life was socially unacceptable, and prolonging virginity was considered perverse.

Parents arrange marriages, often when children are quite young

Naturally, to fulfill their dharma, people had to marry within their caste. Unwilling to leave such a crucial concern to romance or personal choice, parents arranged proper unions for their children, sometimes at ages as young as eight or nine, before sexual attraction had a chance to complicate things. Marriages based on romantic love were possible but rare, and generally not regarded as respectable.

Indian society was patriarchal, centered on villages and extended families dominated by males. The villages, in which most people lived, were administered by men, who served on village councils typically composed of male heads of households. The households were largely supported by the labor of the men, who performed the occupational duties associated with their caste, which for most meant farming and herding. Families were governed by their senior males, who exercised ownership of family possessions and authority over the women and children.

In Vedic days the position of women was not entirely subordinate: they could participate equally with men in religious rituals and, within the framework of marriages arranged by their parents, they could have some say in the selection of their spouse. As a rule they could leave home on their own to shop, visit friends or family, and attend celebrations. If they were widowed, they were usually free to remarry, as long as their new husband was a member of the same caste.

Indian society restricts women's rights and roles

During the post-Vedic era, however, the opportunities available to women declined. Women were increasingly barred from religious and social activities, forbidden to remarry after their husbands died, and confined to the home and family. Girls were often engaged before age ten, and then wed at the onset of puberty to men in their twenties, a practice promoting both bridal virginity and male domination. Within the family framework, as in other societies, women might gain substantial influence over household management. But their primary dharma was to serve their husbands; if they performed it with grace and devotion, they might expect a better status in their next incarnation.

The most extreme example of female subordination was **sati** (*suh-TĒ*), a practice whereby widows cremated themselves on their dead husbands' funeral pyre (a pile of wood used to burn a dead body rather than burying it). Although sati, which means "loyal wife," may have predated Vedic India, in Vedic times the widow was allowed to lie briefly on the pyre and then get off before it was set ablaze. By post-Vedic times, however, the practice had returned to its lethal form. Brahmins at first condemned it, but then accepted it as a testament to the eternal sanctity of marriage, and sometimes even promoted it as an exemplary display of a woman's marital fidelity. Although denounced by Buddhists and others, and never practiced extensively, sati survived among some segments of Indian society well into the twentieth century C.E.

The Visual Arts

Buddhism's spread changes Indian art from sensual to spiritual

Early Indian society, while focusing on stability and structure, produced a culture distinguished by its delicacy, intricacy, and subtlety. In areas such as sculpture, art, and architecture, India ranked among the ancient world's most creative and productive societies.

Persians, Greeks, and Buddhists influence Indian architecture

Early Indian sculptors, for instance, produced many superb statues and reliefs, portraying gods and goddesses, animals, and humans in exquisite detail. These sculptors often depicted female figures in alluring and sensuous poses, reflecting a deep fascination with beauty and grace, passion and pleasure, fertility and sexuality.

Later the spread of Buddhism shifted the focus of Indian sculpture and art from the sensual to the spiritual. At first the Buddha's followers, anxious to avoid idolatry, refused to depict him in any lifelike way. In time, however, contacts with Greek culture and the rise of Mahayana Buddhism overcame their concerns. By the second century C.E., sculptors were producing scores of statues of buddhas and bodhisattvas, some of which still adorn the landscapes of southern and Central Asia.

The Great Stupa at Sanchi in India, commissioned by the Emperor Ashoka.

More impressive still was early Indian architecture. Before the coming of the Persians and Greeks, buildings in India were made mainly of wood, but thereafter stone construction became more and more common. During the Mauryan Empire, and especially under Ashoka, artisans erected thousands of shrines and prayer halls, some of them carved into mountainsides and hewn out of solid rock. Even more spectacular were the numerous **stupas**, massive domed edifices constructed of stone, initially built to house relics such as bones of the Buddha and later used as temples for pilgrimage and worship. The faithful flocked to these stupas, and typically prayed while walking around them on a circular path.

Science and Mathematics

Early Indian thinkers, like those in West Asia and Egypt, made a number of crucial contributions to science and mathematics. Indian astronomers, for example, accurately plotted the paths of the planets and stars, and even determined that the Earth is a sphere revolving on its axis. And ancient Indian mathematicians devised an early form of algebra.

Indians develop place-value number system, ancestor of 'Arabic' numerals

India's most valuable mathematical innovation, however, was its method of expressing numbers. As early as 250 B.C.E., Indians were using a place-value system of numerical notations, based on the number ten. A thousand years later, Arab scholars adopted this system and then spread it to the West, where the notations were thus called Arabic numerals. This system, far more functional than the cumbersome symbols (such as Roman numerals) used in other ancient cultures, so vastly facilitated numeric computation that it is used almost everywhere today.

Philosophy and Literature: Upanishads and Epics

Like the Epic of Gilgamesh, the Hebrew Bible, and other ancient West Asian works, early Indian literature focused on connections and conflicts between physical and spiritual forces. Its main works were the **Upanishads** (*oo-PAH-ni-shahdz*), philosophical and religious texts composed by learned writers over many centuries beginning in late Vedic

Upanishads reflect introspective and intuitive philosophy

times, but it also included superb epic poems recorded in the post-Vedic era. Composed in Sanskrit, an Aryan language used for religious and literary purposes, these works serve as the basic scriptures of the Hindu faith.

Unlike the works of ancient West Asia, however, the Upanishads look inward rather than outward in their search for answers, valuing intuition and flashes of insight over intellectual speculation. They puzzle over such fundamental questions as where we came from, why we are here, how we should live, and where we are going. The answers, consistent with Hindu tradition, seek to connect mortal beings with the immortal and divine. One's spiritual core is Atman, the soul and depth of one's being; the core of the world is Brahman, the life force of all existence. Properly understood, however, Atman and Brahman are identical; thus each individual is one with the divine and cannot be alienated from any manifestation of the infinite. The Upanishads provide guidance for attaining internal peace, rather than an analysis of the external world. They thus exemplify the intuitive introspection often said to distinguish "eastern" thought from the more worldly and analytic "western" approach.

Epics describe the virtues and ventures of gods and legendary heroes

A worldly approach was nonetheless reflected in India's two great epic poems, the Mahabharata and the **Ramayana** (*RAH-mah-YAH-nah*), both written in the post-Vedic era based on Vedic oral traditions. The Mahabharata is a massive masterpiece that not only recounts an ancient war, full of legends and godly interventions, but also prescribes proper conduct and devotion to duty. As noted in this chapter's introduction, it includes the splendid Bhagavad Gita, regarded as one of India's most important ethical and spiritual works. The Ramayana describes the wanderings and adventures of Rama, heir to the throne of a northern Indian kingdom caught up in the great war. Later revered as a human manifestation of the god Vishnu, Rama was seen as a model of courage, fidelity, and devotion to family. These virtues were exemplified in the loving relationship between him and his wife Sita (*SĒ-tah*), whose hand he won by bending and breaking her father's great war bow, and who remained loyal to him through many tribulations (see "Ramayana Excerpts: Rama and Sita").

Upanishads and epics entertain and inspire Indians over the ages

For centuries these epics were recited from memory at family meals and at roadside inns, delighting and entertaining listeners. Their elegance and directness are enchanting, even to many people today who do not share India's religious traditions.

To Indians for thousands of years, however, these works have been sources of inspiration, not just entertainment. Often incorporated into religious rituals, they have served as guides to proper conduct, illustrated by valiant role models who enact the search for answers to life's most basic questions. Over the ages, millions of people have followed the precepts of the Upanishads and epics, hoping thereby to be cleansed of imperfections and eventually attain moksha.

Indian culture provides harmony and beauty amid diversity and disunity

On the whole, then, early India's culture, developed through interactions among India's diverse peoples, was characterized by complexity and inner depth. It was also shaped by contacts with other cultures, and profoundly influenced by the teachings of Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism. It reflected a society that sought unity in the midst of diversity, order in the midst of instability, tranquility in the midst of turmoil, beauty in the midst of bedlam, and virtue in the midst of violence.

Document 3.2 Ramayana Excerpts: Rama and Sita

In these excerpts from the Ramayana, heroic Rama, son of King Dasa-ratha, wins the hand of the princess Sita by bending and breaking the great war bow of her father, King Janak of Videha. Rama and Sita then wed and exemplify the loving, faithful husband and wife.

Rich in royal worth and valour, rich in holy
Vedic lore,
Dasa-ratha ruled his empire in the happy days of yore . . .

Janak, monarch of Videha, spake his message near and far,
He shall win my peerless Sita who shall bend my bow of war,

Suitors came from farthest regions, warlike princes known to fame,
Vainly strove to wield the weapon, left Videha in their shame . . .

Stalwart men of ample stature pulled the mighty iron car
In which rested all-inviolate Janak's dreaded bow of war, . . .

"This the weapon of Videha," proudly thus the peers begun,
"Be it shown to royal Rama, Dasa-ratha's righteous son" . . .

Rama lifted high the cover of the pond'rous iron car,
Gazed with conscious pride and prowess on the mighty bow of war.

"Let me," humbly spake the hero, "on this bow my fingers place,
Let me lift and bend the weapon, help me with your loving grace."

"Be it so," the rishi answered, "be it so," the monarch said,
Rama lifted high the weapon on his stalwart arms displayed,

Wond'ring gazed the kings assembled as the son of Raghu's race
Proudly raised the bow of Rudra with a warrior's stately grace,

Proudly strung the bow of Rudra which the kings had tried in vain
Drew the cord with force resistless till the weapon snapped in twain! . . .

And the chiefs and gathered monarchs fell and fainted in their fear,
And the men of many nations shook the dreadful sound to hear!

Pale and white the startled monarchs slowly from their terror woke,
And with royal grace and greetings Janak to the *rishi* spoke:

Now my ancient eyes have witnessed wond'rous deed by Rama done,
Deed surpassing thought or fancy wrought by Dasa-ratha's son,

And the proud and peerless princess, Sita glory of my house,
Sheds on me an added lustre as she weds a godlike spouse,

True shall be my plighted promise, Sita dearer than my life,
Won by worth and wond'rous valour shall be Rama's faithful wife . . .

With a woman's whole affection fond and trusting Sita loved,
And within her faithful bosom loving Rama lived and moved,

And he loved her, for their parents chose her as his faithful wife,
Loved her for her peerless beauty, for her true and trustful life,

Loved and dwelt within her bosom though he wore a form apart,
Rama in a sweet communion lived in Sita's loving heart!

SOURCE: R. C. Dutt, translator, *The Ramayana: The Great Hindu Epic,* Book I: *The Bridal of Sita*. http:/ /hinduism. about.com/ library/ weekly/ extra/ bl-ramayana1. htm

Chapter Review

Putting It in Perspective

By the third century C.E., all the basic elements of Indian civilization were in place. In many ways these elements were a study in contrasts. India's Aryan-inspired literature glorified violence and warfare, but its Jain and Buddhist traditions exalted nonviolence and compassion. India's religious structure accommodated numerous gods, but it also insisted that all beings are one with each other and with the divine in an infinite cycle of life. India's political climate was marked by disunity and conflict, but its social system emphasized stability and control.

These contrasts are hardly surprising, given India's vast size and its great geographical and cultural diversity. Ancient India was not in fact a single society but a wide assortment of societies that interacted through numerous connections and conflicts. These interactions were shaped not only by Harappan, Aryan, and Dravidian influences, but also by peoples who at times ruled parts of India, including especially the Persians, Greeks, Scythians, and Kushans.

Nor is it surprising that ancient India produced no long-enduring empire. In the ancient world, of all the great conquerors and leaders, only a few were able to create and maintain immense, diverse, and populous domains that lasted for centuries. The most successful of these realms, discussed in upcoming chapters, were the empires established by the Chinese, Persians, and Romans.

Reviewing Key Material

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ASK YOURSELF

1. In what ways were the societies and cultures of India similar to those of West Asia and North Africa? In what ways were Indian cultures and belief systems unique?
2. How did the system of castes develop in ancient India? What were its advantages and disadvantages for the Indian people? How did dharma and samsara help to reinforce the system?
3. What were the basic features and beliefs of Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism? In what ways did they support, and in what ways did they challenge, the political and social structures?
4. How and why did Buddhism evolve and divide into separate branches? How and why did Hinduism evolve and endure as a popular religion?
5. What factors made it difficult to achieve and maintain political unity in India? What factors enabled India to flourish despite its political divisions?

GOING FURTHER

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Key Dates and Developments

by 7000 B.C.E.	Farming in Indus Valley
2800–1700 B.C.E.	Harappan (Indus Valley) civilization
by 1500 B.C.E.	Indo-European Aryans arrive in India
1500–500 B.C.E.	Vedic Age: Vedas, caste system, early Upanishads
563–483 B.C.E.	Siddhartha Gautama (Buddha): founder of Buddhism
540–486 B.C.E.	Mahavira (Jina): founder of Jainism
518–513 B.C.E.	Persian conquest of northwest India
500–300 B.C.E.	Initial compilation of Mahabharata and Ramayana
327–326 B.C.E.	Alexander the Great's invasion of northwest India
321–184 B.C.E.	Mauryan Empire
321–297 B.C.E.	Reign of Chandragupta Maurya
270–232 B.C.E.	Reign of Ashoka
180–50 B.C.E.	Greco-Bactrian kingdom in northern India
50–240 C.E.	Kushan Kingdom; Spread and division of Buddhism