

PART V THE ASIAN CULTURAL ROOT

Chapter 14 An Introduction to the Civilization of India

I. India's Early History

1. The earliest civilizations of India were the Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro, which flourished after about 3000 B.C.
2. The decline is at least partially explained by the Aryan invasions of the Indian subcontinent in around 1500-2000 B.C.

A. The Aryan Migrations

1. The Aryans were Central Asians who moved into India as well as Europe and Mesopotamia starting around 2000 B.C.
2. Aryan is a linguistic classification, not a racial one, and the language of the Aryans, Indo-European, is related to nearly all of the languages of Europe.
3. The languages of Northern India today are also classified as Indo-European languages.
4. The Aryans first settled in the Indus valley and then in the Ganges river basin and further south.

B. Western Invasions

1. Prosperity and trade with the West attracted the attention of the Persians, who invaded what is now northwestern Pakistan in 530 B.C.
2. The Persians eventually took control of all of what is now Pakistan and the center of Indian culture shifted to the Ganges valley.
3. The Persians were displaced by Alexander the Great who conquered Persia and then invaded the Indus valley in 327 B.C.
4. The Greek military presence was short lived but the Hellenistic influence continued through the merchants and artists who stayed on.
5. Trading links with the West increased.
6. Indian art shows a Hellenistic influence beginning in this period.

C. Mauryan Empire

1. During this period (c. 321–180 B.C.), the Mauryans brought all of the Indian landmass under their control.
2. It marked the first and only time the region was unified for nearly 2,000 years.
3. The rule of Emperor Asoka (c. 269–232 B.C.) represented the zenith of Mauryan power.
4. Asoka inscribed decrees and commands on columns and rocks all over India—a clear example of Greek and Persian influence in his leadership style.
5. Asoka strove to spread the Buddhist faith throughout his territories and beyond, transforming it from a local sect to a world religion.
6. Central government eluded India for 500 years after the collapse of the Mauryan Empire, but development and urbanization spread to the southern regions.

D. The Gupta Dynasty

1. The Gupta dynasty (320 A.D.—late 400s) represented the classical age of Indian culture.

2. The Gupta dynasty was a confederation of small states in Northern India only.
3. The Gupta dynasty's political and cultural influence was greater than its formal authority would suggest.
4. Indian art achieved its own expression independent of Greek and Persian influence.
5. The poems and plays of Kalidas and the love manual the *Kamasutra* both date from this period.
6. The invention of the zero and other advances in science and mathematics came about during this period.
7. The caste system became more rigid and devotional religious worship more popular during this age.

#### E. The Post-Gupta Period

1. Invasions by the Huns ended the Gupta Empire.
2. The north of India became fragmented into competing states, much like the southern half of the peninsula, for 500 years.

#### F. Islam

1. Islam came to India in the eighth century A.D.
2. Muslim merchants brought Islam to the North, while Arab invaders brought Islam to the South.
3. Islam took hold in the twelfth century when Mohammed of Ghur expanded his rule from Afghanistan with the conquest of Northern India.
4. Muslim power continued to expand for centuries, culminating in a unified area larger than that of the Mauryans.
5. The last Muslim invaders, the Mughals, entered India in the sixteenth century.
6. The Mughals created an empire across northern and central India.

## II. Hinduism

1. There are a number of obstacles to understanding Hinduism.
2. Compared with other major religions like Islam, Christianity, or Buddhism, the Hindu religion is much less coherent.
3. Hinduism lacks dates of establishment, a well-defined body of doctrine, and founders.
4. The "religion" takes its name from the region of India known as Hindustan and was originally a British colonial designation for Indians who were neither Christian nor Muslim.
5. The study of Asia was closely connected to imperialist aims and yet many of the most influential books about Asia, even for Asians, were written by Westerners.
6. The variety of beliefs and the secular nature of many of its practices suggest that Hinduism might not be a religion, but more accurately, a culture.

#### A. Classes and Castes

1. The classical text *Bhagavad Gita*, written around 500 A.D., suggests four ranks in the Hindu social system.

2. Skin tone likely formed the basis of the rankings but has little meaning after centuries of intermarriage.
3. The four ranks are Brahman (priest), Katriya (warrior), Vaisya (merchant), and Sudra (peasant, servant).
4. Rank was closely correlated with wealth.
5. Castes are governed by complex rules concerning marriage, occupation, and “self-pollution.”
6. Under the present Indian Constitution, caste discrimination is illegal.

#### B. Hindu Religion: The *Bhagavad-Gita*

1. While lacking in doctrinal clarity, Hinduism does have some fundamental concepts—dharma, reincarnation, mokhsa, yoga, and karma.
2. Indian classical literature, such the *Bhagavad-Gita*, is one source for understanding the principles of Hindu religion.
3. The *Bhagavad-Gita* fits the model of epic poetry in the Western tradition.
4. Through the trials of the warrior Arjuna Hindu, beliefs such as dharma, reincarnation, and karma are explored.

### III. Buddhism and Islam

1. Siddhartha Gautama (c. 563–486 B.C.) known as Buddha (“one who has awakened”), came from within the Hindu tradition.
2. Although he rebelled against the caste system, he upheld Hindu beliefs in karma, reincarnation, yoga, and nirvana.
3. He taught that suffering was caused by desire and the way to eliminate suffering was to eliminate desire.
4. Through meditation a person could transcend desire and suffering, rise above the endless suffering of rebirths, and achieve nirvana.
5. Buddhist missionaries spread his teachings throughout Asia but Buddhism was no longer a major religion of India by the seventh century.
6. With the coming of Islamic rulers in 711 A.D., the religious landscape became even more complex.
7. Through Islam, Indian culture became linked to the Arabic, Persian, and Central Asian worlds.

### IV. The Village

1. India is a nation of villages, with only about one-fourth of the people living in towns and cities of over 100,000 in 1981.
2. The typical social unit is a community of two to five thousand people.
3. The villages are close together and densely populated.
4. Seventy percent of the people work in agriculture.
5. Mahatma Gandhi said India was “a hundred-thousand villages.”

### V. Indian Literature

1. The classical language of Indian literature is Sanskrit which was used from 1400 B.C. to 1200 A.D..
2. The *Rigveda*, a series of hymns worshipping deities associated with forces of nature, are the earliest known Sanskrit literary writings.

3. Prose commentaries on these Vedic hymns called *Brahmans* and the *Upanishads* followed.
4. The two great Indian epics in Sanskrit are the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*.
5. Works from the Gupta period (India's Golden Age) include the *Kamasutra* as well as the plays and poetry of India's greatest classical dramatist, Kalidasa.
6. Early epics, like the *Ramayana*, were rewritten in innumerable regional variations, linking these vernaculars to a common earlier tradition.

## I. Art and Architecture

### A. Beginnings in the Indus Valley

1. The early Indus valley society yielded some remarkable artifacts.
2. The High Priest and the Dancing Girl present techniques that are consistent with the art of early cultures in other lands.

### B. The Impact of Buddhism

1. The Buddhists created three architectural forms for creating retreats where pilgrims might come for contemplation—vihar (monastic cell group), the Chaityah (hall of worship), and the stupa (burial mound).
2. Many such retreats were established with routes into the hall and around the stupa ritually prescribed.
3. The walls and stones were decorated with stories of Buddha's life.
4. "Capitals" set upon columns like the Lion Capitol show a Persian influence.
5. The Caves at Ajanta show the very complex building efforts the faith inspired.

### C. Hindu Art and Architecture

1. Understanding Hindu cosmology is important for understanding Hindu art.
2. The great trinity of the gods was *Brahma*, the creator; *Vishnu*, the preserver; and *Siva*, the destroyer.
3. Images are intended to realistically convey the actual image of the god.
4. The images are not fetish objects; they simply represent an image of the god to assist in contemplation.

## II. Music and Dance

1. Each of India's many ethnic groups has its own variety of music and dance.
2. One kind of Indian music, known as Indian classical music, has gained a worldwide audience.
3. In central India there remains the music of Indian tribes believed to have lived in India long before the Aryan invasions.
4. Their tribal music has been handed down in an unwritten tradition for centuries.
5. As with aboriginal peoples everywhere, their musical art is functional, ritualistic, and intimately tied to the activities of daily life and to their deities.
6. This aboriginal music is in sharp contrast to the music of the Kathakali Dance Theater of south India, which is performed by professional, trained musicians who study music theory and performance and who memorize a vast repertoire of classical Vedic material.