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State, Society, and the Quest for Salvation in India



kingdoms rather than centralized empires. Imperial regimes were crucial for the consolidation of Indian cultural traditions, however, because they sponsored cultural leaders and promoted their ideals throughout the subcontinent and beyond. The spread of Buddhism is a case in point: imperial support helped the faith secure its position in India and attract converts in other lands. Thus, even in the absence of a strong and continuing imperial tradition like that of Persia or China, the social and cultural traditions of classical India not only shaped the lives and experiences of the subcontinent's inhabitants but also influenced peoples in distant lands.

The Fortunes of Empire in Classical India

Following their migrations to India after 1500 B.C.E., the Aryans established a series of small kingdoms throughout the subcontinent. For centuries the rulers of those kingdoms fought constantly among themselves and sought to expand their states by absorbing others. By the sixth century B.C.E., wars of expansion had resulted in the consolidation of several large regional kingdoms that dominated much of the subcontinent. Despite strenuous efforts, none of these kingdoms was able to establish hegemony over the others. During the classical era, the Mauryan and the Gupta dynasties founded centralized, imperial states that embraced much of India, but neither empire survived long enough to establish centralized rule as a lasting feature of Indian political life.

The Mauryan Dynasty and the Temporary Unification of India

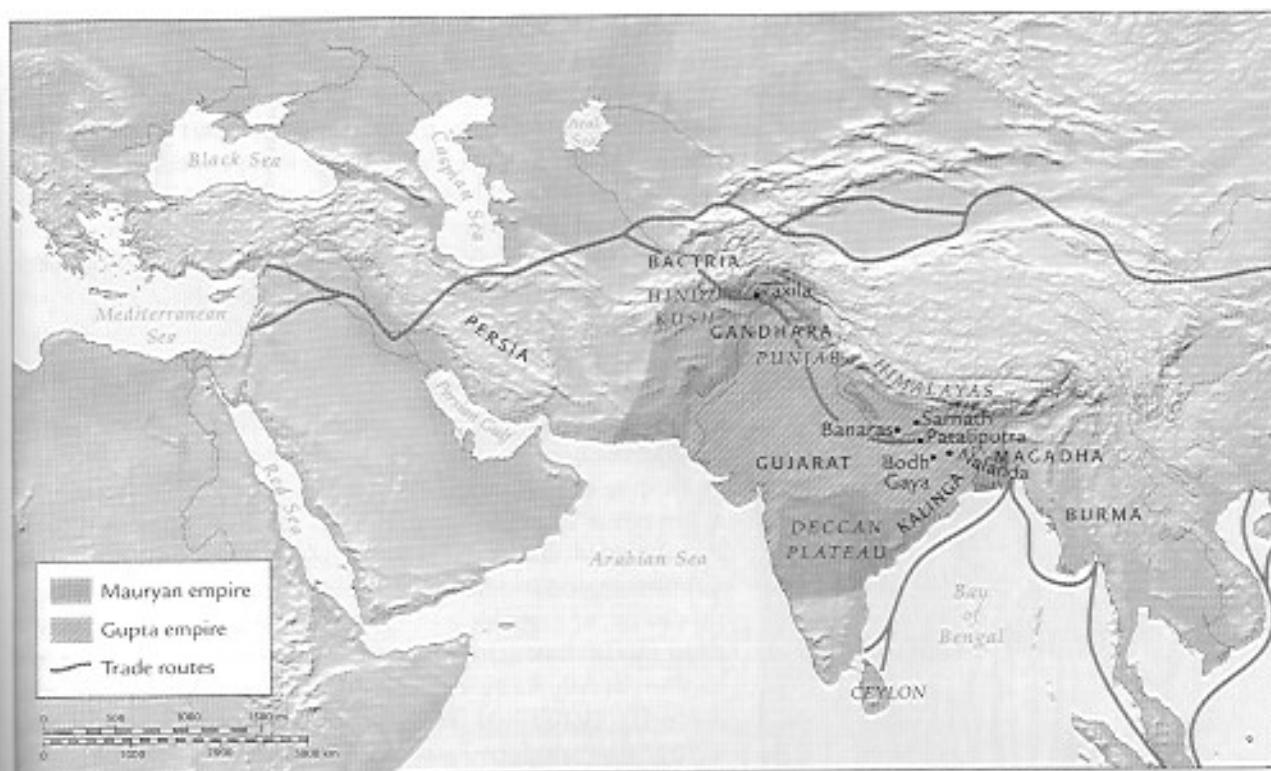
The unification of India came about partly as a result of intrusion from beyond the subcontinent. About 520 B.C.E. the Persian emperor Darius crossed the Hindu Kush mountains, conquered parts of northwestern India, and made the kingdom of Gandhara in the northern Punjab (northern modern-day Pakistan) a province of the Achaemenid empire. The establishment of Achaemenid authority in India introduced local rulers to Persian techniques of administration. Almost two centuries later, in 327 B.C.E., after overrunning the Persian empire, Alexander of Macedon crossed the Indus River and crushed the states he found there. Alexander remained in India only for a short time, and he did not make a deep impression on the Punjabi people: he departed after his forces mutinied in the year 325 B.C.E., and contemporary Indian sources did not even mention his name. Yet his campaign had an important effect on Indian politics and history, since he created a political vacuum in northwestern India by destroying the existing states and then withdrawing his forces.

Kingdom of Magadha

Poised to fill the vacuum was the dynamic kingdom of Magadha, located in the central portion of the Ganges plain. Several regional kingdoms in the valley of the Ganges had become wealthy as workers turned forests into fields and trade became an increasingly prominent feature of the local economy. By about 500 B.C.E. Magadha had emerged as the most important state in northeastern India. During the next two centuries, the kings of Magadha conquered the neighboring states and gained control of Indian commerce passing through the Ganges valley as well as overseas trade between India and Burma passing across the Bay of Bengal. The withdrawal of Alexander from the Punjab presented Magadha with a rare opportunity to expand.

*Chandragupta
Maurya*

During the late 320s B.C.E., an ambitious adventurer named Chandragupta Maurya exploited that opportunity and laid the foundation for the Mauryan empire, the first state to bring a centralized and unified government to most of the Indian subcontinent. Chandragupta began by seizing control of small, remote regions of Magadha



Map 9.1 The Mauryan and Gupta empires, 321 B.C.E.–550 C.E. The Mauryan and Gupta dynasties both originated in the kingdom of Magadha. Why was this region so important in ancient India? What advantages did it offer for purposes of trade and communication with other regions?

and then worked his way gradually toward the center. By 321 B.C.E. he had overthrown the ruling dynasty and consolidated his hold on the kingdom. He then moved into the Punjab and brought northwestern India under his control. Next he ventured beyond the Indus River and conquered the Greek state in Bactria—a large region straddling the border between modern Pakistan and Afghanistan, where Alexander of Macedon's Greek successors maintained a kingdom during the Seleucid era. By the end of the fourth century B.C.E., Chandragupta's empire embraced all of northern India from the Indus to the Ganges.

A careful and systematic advisor named Kautilya devised procedures for the governance of Chandragupta's realm. Some of Kautilya's advice survives in the ancient Indian political handbook known as the *Arthashastra*, a manual offering detailed instructions on the uses of power and the principles of government. The *Arthashastra* outlined methods of administering the empire, overseeing trade and agriculture, collecting taxes, maintaining order, conducting foreign relations, and waging war. Kautilya also advised Chandragupta to make abundant use of spies, and he even included prostitutes in his stable of informants. Like the emperors of Persia and China, Chandragupta and Kautilya built a bureaucratic administrative system that enabled them to implement policies throughout the state.

Tradition holds that Chandragupta abdicated his throne to become a monk and led such an ascetic life that he starved himself to death. Whether that report is true or not, it is certain that his son succeeded him in 297 B.C.E. and added most of southern India to the growing empire. The high point of the Mauryan empire, however, came during the reign of Chandragupta's grandson Ashoka.

Chandragupta's Government

Ashoka Maurya



As a symbol of his rule, Ashoka had this sculpture of four lions mounted atop a column about 20 meters (66 feet) tall. The lion capital is the official symbol of the modern Republic of India.

Ashoka began his reign (268–232 B.C.E.) as a conqueror. When he came to power, the only major region that remained independent of the Mauryan empire was the kingdom of Kalinga (modern Orissa) in the east-central part of the subcontinent. In fact, Kalinga was not only independent of Mauryan rule but also actively hostile to its spread. The kingdom's resistance created difficulties for Ashoka because Kalinga controlled the principal trade routes, both by land and by sea, between the Ganges plain and southern India. Thus Ashoka's first major undertaking as emperor was to conquer Kalinga and bring it under Mauryan control, which he did in a bloody campaign in 260 B.C.E. By Ashoka's estimate, 100,000 Kalingans died in the fighting, 150,000 were driven from their homes, and untold numbers of others perished in the ruined land.

In spite of that campaign, Ashoka is much better known as a governor than as a conqueror. With Kalinga subdued, Ashoka ruled almost the entire subcontinent—only the southernmost region escaped his control—and he turned his attention to the responsible government of his realm. As heir to the administrative structure that Chandragupta and Kautilya had instituted, Ashoka ruled through a tightly organized bureaucracy. He established his capital at the fortified city of Pataliputra (near modern Patna), where a central administration developed policies for the whole empire. Pataliputra was a thriving and cosmopolitan city: the Greek ambassador Megasthenes reported that a local committee looked after the interests of foreigners in the city—and also carefully observed their movements. Ashoka went to great pains to ensure that his local subordinates implemented his policies. A central treasury oversaw the efficient collection of taxes—a hallmark of Kautilya's

influence—which supported legions of officials, accountants, clerks, soldiers, and other imperial employees. Ashoka communicated his policies throughout his realm by inscribing edicts in natural stone formations or on pillars that he ordered erected. In these promulgations, known as the rock and pillar edicts, Ashoka issued imperial decrees, encouraged his subjects to observe Buddhist values, and expressed his intention to serve as a fair, just, and humane ruler.

As a result of Ashoka's policies, the various regions of India became well integrated, and the subcontinent benefited from both an expanding economy and a stable government. Ashoka encouraged the expansion of agriculture—the foundation of the empire's wealth—by building irrigation systems. He encouraged trade by building roads, most notably a highway of more than 1,600 kilometers (1,000 miles) linking Pataliputra with Taxila, the chief political and commercial center of northern India, which offered access to Bactria, Persia, and other points west. Ashoka also provided comforts for administrators, merchants, and other travelers by planting banyan trees to provide shade, digging wells, and establishing inns along the roads.

Ashoka's policies did not long survive his rule, nor did his empire. Ashoka died in 232 B.C.E., and decline set in almost immediately. During its later years the Mauryan empire suffered from acute financial and economic difficulties. The empire depended on a strong army and a large corps of officials to administer imperial policy. Salaries for both soldiers and bureaucrats were expensive: Megasthenes said that in times of peace, military forces spent their time in idleness and drinking bouts while continuing to draw

Decline of the Mauryan Empire



Archaeological excavations have unearthed parts of the defensive palisade, constructed of timbers almost 5 meters (16 feet) tall, that surrounded Pataliputra during Mauryan times.

their pay. Eventually, those administrative costs outstripped the revenues that flowed into the central treasury. The later Mauryan emperors often resorted to the tactic of debasing their currency—reducing the amount of precious metal in a coin without reducing its nominal value. Because of their financial difficulties, they were unable to hold the realm together. They maintained control of the Ganges valley for some fifty years after Ashoka's death, but eventually they lost their grip even on this heartland of the Mauryan empire. By about 185 B.C.E. the Mauryan empire had disappeared.

The Emergence of Regional Kingdoms and the Revival of Empire

Although the Mauryan empire came to an end, India did not crumble into anarchy. Instead, local rulers formed a series of kingdoms that brought order to large regions. Although regional kingdoms emerged throughout the subcontinent, historical records and archaeological excavations have thrown clearest light on developments in northern India. For almost two centuries after the collapse of the Mauryan empire, northwestern India fell under the rule of Greek-speaking conquerors from Bactria—Alexander of Macedon's imperial heirs who had mingled with local populations since establishing an independent Bactrian kingdom in the third century B.C.E. Indo-Greek forces invaded

*Bactrian Rule in
Northwestern India*

northern India as early as 182 B.C.E. and seized a large territory extending as far south as Gujarat. Bactria was a thriving commercial center linking lands from China in the east to the Mediterranean basin in the west, so Bactrian rule had the effect of promoting cross-cultural interaction and exchange in northern India. Large volumes of trade provided sources of revenue for the Bactrian rulers, and the city of Taxila flourished because of its strategic location on trade routes leading from northern India to Bactria. The northern region of Gandhara became a site of intense cultural as well as commercial exchange.

The Kushan Empire

Beginning in the late second century B.C.E., several groups of nomadic conquerors from central Asia attacked Bactria and eventually put an end to the Indo-Greek kingdom there. The most successful of these conquerors were the Kushans, who ruled a sizable empire embracing much of northern India and central Asia from about 1 to 300 C.E. Under Kanishka, the most prominent of the Kushan emperors (reigned 78–103 C.E.), the Kushan empire included modern-day Pakistan, Afghanistan, and northern India to Gujarat and the central part of the Ganges valley. Like the Indo-Greek Bactrians, the Kushans facilitated commerce between India and lands to the north. Indeed, the Kushan empire played a crucial role in the silk roads network (discussed in chapter 12) by pacifying much of the large region between Persia and China, thus making it possible for merchants to travel safely across long distances. On several occasions the Kushans and other rulers of northern India faced ambitious kings who sought to expand their realms and imitate the Mauryas by building an empire based in the Indian subcontinent. Only with the Guptas, however, did any of them approach the realization of their imperial ambitions.

The Gupta Dynasty

Like the Mauryas, the Guptas based their state in Magadha, a crucial region because of its wealth, its dominance of the Ganges valley, and its role as intermediary between the various regions of the subcontinent. The new empire arose on foundations laid by Chandra Gupta (not related to Chandragupta Maurya), who forged alliances with powerful families in the Ganges region and established a dynamic kingdom about the year 320 C.E. His successors, Samudra Gupta (reigned 335–375 C.E.) and Chandra Gupta II (reigned 375–415 C.E.), made the Magadhan capital of Pataliputra once again the center of a large empire. Between the two of them, Samudra Gupta and Chandra Gupta II conquered many of the regional kingdoms of India, and they established tributary alliances with others that elected not to fight. Only the Deccan Plateau and the southernmost part of the subcontinent remained outside the orbit of Gupta influence.

The Gupta empire was somewhat smaller in size than the Mauryan, and it also differed considerably in organization. Ashoka had insisted on knowing the details of regional affairs, which he closely monitored from his court at Pataliputra. The Guptas left local government and administration, and even the making of basic policy, in the hands of their allies in the various regions of their empire. When nomadic invaders threatened the empire during the later fifth century C.E., it split easily along the fault lines of the administrative regions. During the late fourth and early fifth centuries C.E., however, the Gupta dynasty brought stability and prosperity to the subcontinent. A Chinese Buddhist monk named Faxian traveled widely in India searching for texts of the Buddhist scriptures during the reign of Chandra Gupta II. In an account of his travels, Faxian reported that India was a prosperous land with little crime. It was possible to travel throughout the country, he said, without fear of molestation and even without official travel documents.

Science and Mathematics

Gupta (GOOP-tah)

Under conditions of political stability, Gupta prosperity sustained the work of scholars and enabled them to lay the foundations for sophisticated studies in the natural sciences and mathematics. Indian physicians developed techniques of plastic surgery, and astronomers determined that the earth is a sphere that rotates on its axis.

Most influential of the scholars were the mathematicians. Advanced mathematics was possible because Indian numerals included a symbol for zero, which facilitates adoption of a place-value notation system, which in turn expedites mathematical computations. It is much simpler to multiply 19×84 , for example, than $XIX \times LXXXIV$. With their flexible numerals and their system of place-value notation, Indian mathematicians were able to carry out advanced algebraic calculations and anticipate the invention of calculus. Indian mathematicians calculated the value of π to 3.1416 and the length of the solar year to 365.3586805 days. In the eighth century, Arab and Persian scholars encountered Indian mathematics and readily adopted what they called "Hindi numerals," which Europeans later termed "Arabic numerals," since they learned of them through Arab Muslims.

Gupta administrative talents and cultural creativity were not a match, however, for the invasions of the White Huns, a nomadic people from central Asia who occupied Bactria during the fourth century C.E., and then prepared to cross the Hindu Kush mountains into India. For the first half of the fifth century, the Guptas repelled the Huns, but the defense cost them dearly in resources and eventually weakened their state. By the end of the fifth century, the Huns moved across the Hindu Kush almost at will and established several kingdoms in northern and western India.

The Gupta dynasty continued in name only: regional governors progressively usurped imperial rights and powers, and contemporary documents do not even record the names of all the later Gupta emperors. Once again, imperial government survived only for a short term in India. Not until the establishment of the Mughal dynasty in the sixteenth century C.E. did any state rule as much of India as the Mauryan and Gupta empires ruled. Memories of empire remained, to be sure, and there were periodic efforts to bring all of the subcontinent again under the control of a unified regime. But for the most part, large regional kingdoms dominated political life in India during the millennium between the Gupta and the Mughal dynasties.

Gupta Decline

Economic Development and Social Distinctions

After spreading through the subcontinent, Aryan migrants turned increasingly from herding to agriculture. After about 1000 B.C.E., when they learned the techniques of iron metallurgy, they used iron axes and tools to advance into regions previously inaccessible to them, notably the jungle-covered valley of the Ganges River. The Aryans dispatched shudras, semi-free serfs, to work in recently cleared fields, and from fertile lands they reaped large harvests. Agricultural surpluses supported the large-scale states such as the regional kingdoms and the Mauryan and Gupta empires that organized Indian public life. Agricultural surpluses also encouraged the emergence of towns, the growth of trade, and further development of the caste system.

Towns and Trade

After about 600 B.C.E. towns dotted the Indian countryside, especially in the northwestern corner of the subcontinent. These towns served the needs of a productive agricultural society by providing manufactured products for local consumption—pots, textiles, iron tools, and other metal utensils—as well as luxury goods such as jewelry destined for the wealthy and elite classes. Demand for manufactured products was very high, and some entrepreneurs organized businesses on a large scale. During Mauryan times, for example, a pottery manufacturer named Saddalaputta owned about five

Towns and Manufacturing

Many surviving gold coins reflect the commercial vitality of northern India in the late first and early second centuries C.E. This one depicts the Buddha gesturing to his followers.



Long-Distance Trade

hundred workshops, whose products he distributed throughout the Ganges valley in his fleet of boats.

Flourishing towns maintained marketplaces and encouraged the development of trade. Within the subcontinent itself trade was most active along the Ganges River, although trade routes also passed through the Ganges delta east to Burma and down the east Indian coast to the Deccan and southern India. Roads built by Ashoka also facilitated overland commerce within the subcontinent.

Meanwhile, the volume of long-distance trade also grew as large imperial states in China, southwest Asia, and the

Mediterranean basin provided a political foundation enabling merchants to deal with their counterparts in distant lands. Direct political and military links with foreign peoples drew Indians into long-distance commercial relations. Beginning with Cyrus, the Achaemenid rulers of Persia coveted the wealth of India and included the northern kingdom of Gandhara as a province of their empire. The presence of Persian administrators in India and the building of roads between Persia and India facilitated commerce between the two lands. Alexander of Macedon's conquests helped to establish even more extensive trade networks by forging links between India and the Mediterranean basin by way of Bactria, Persia, and Anatolia.

From India, long-distance trade passed overland in two directions: through the Hindu Kush mountains and the Gandharan capital of Taxila to Persia and the Mediterranean basin, and across the silk roads of central Asia to markets in China. Cotton, aromatics, black pepper, pearls, and gems were the principal Indian exports, in exchange for which Indian merchants imported horses and bullion from western lands and silk from China.

Trade in the Indian Ocean Basin

During the Mauryan era merchants continued to use land routes, but they increasingly turned to the sea to transport their goods. Seaborne trade benefited especially from the rhythms of the monsoon winds that govern weather and the seasons in the Indian Ocean basin. During the spring and summer the winds blow from the southwest, and during the fall and winter they come from the northeast. Once mariners recognized these rhythms, they could sail easily and safely before the wind to any part of the Indian Ocean basin.

As early as the fifth century B.C.E., Indian merchants had traveled to the islands of Indonesia and the southeast Asian mainland, where they exchanged pearls, cotton, black pepper, and Indian manufactured goods for spices and exotic local products. Many of those goods did not remain in India but, instead, traveled west through the Arabian Sea to the lands bordering the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea. Indian products also found markets in the Mediterranean basin. Indian pepper became so popular there that the Romans established direct commercial relations and built several trading settlements in southern India. Archaeologists working in southern India have unearthed hoards of Roman coins that testify to the large volume of trade between classical India and Mediterranean lands.

Family Life and the Caste System

In the midst of urban growth and economic development, Indian moralists sought to promote stability by encouraging respect for strong patriarchal families and to promote the maintenance of a social order in which all members played well-defined roles. Most people lived with members of their nuclear family. Particularly among higher castes, however, several generations of a family often lived in large compounds ruled by powerful patriarchs. Literary works suggest that women were largely subordinate to men. The two great Indian epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, commonly portrayed women as weak-willed and emotional creatures and exalted wives who devoted themselves to their husbands. In the *Ramayana*, for example, the beautiful Sita loyally followed her husband Rama into undesired exile in a wild forest and remained faithful to him even during a long separation.

During the early centuries C.E., patriarchal dominance became more pronounced in India. By the Gupta era child marriage was common: when girls were age eight or nine, their parents betrothed them to men in their twenties. Formal marriage took place just after the girls reached puberty. Wives often came to dominate domestic affairs in their households, but the practice of child marriage placed them under the control of older men and encouraged them to devote themselves to family matters rather than to public affairs in the larger society.

After their arrival in India, the Aryans recognized four main castes or classes of people: brahmins (priests), kshatriyas (warriors and aristocrats), vaishyas (peasants and merchants), and shudras (serfs). Brahmins in particular endorsed this social order, which brought them honor, prestige, and sometimes considerable wealth as well. The growth of trade and the proliferation of industries, however, had deep implications for the larger structure of Indian society, since they encouraged further development of the caste system.

As trade and industrial activity expanded, new groups of artisans, craftsmen, and merchants appeared, many of whom did not fit easily in the established structure. Individuals working in the same craft or trade usually joined together to form a guild, a corporate body that supervised prices and wages in a given industry and provided for the welfare of members and their families. Guild members lived in the same quarter of town, socialized with one another, intermarried, and cared for the group's widows, orphans, and needy.

In effect, the guilds functioned as subcastes, known as *jati*, based on occupation. In fact, *jati* assumed much of the responsibility for maintaining social order in India.



Buddhist art often depicted individuals as models of proper social relationships. Here a sculpture from a Buddhist temple at Karli, produced about the first century C.E., represents an ideal Buddhist married couple.

Gender Relations

Social Order

Castes and Guilds

Mahabharata (mah-hah-BAH-rah-tah)

Ramayana (rah-mah-yah-nah)



Jewel-bedecked flying goddesses drop flowers on the earth from their perch in the heavens. Their gems and personal adornments reflect the tastes of upper-class women during the Gupta dynasty. This painting on a rock wall, produced about the sixth century C.E., survives in modern Sri Lanka.

Jati regularly organized courts, through which they disciplined guild members, resolved differences, and regulated community affairs. Individuals who did not abide by group rules were liable to expulsion from the community. These outcasts then had to make their way through life—often by working as butchers, leather tanners, or undertakers or in other occupations deemed low and unclean—without the networks of support provided by *jati*. Thus Indian guilds and *jati* performed services that central governments provided in other lands. The tendency for individuals and their families to associate closely with others of the same occupation remained a prominent feature of Indian society well into modern times.

Beyond encouraging further development of the caste system, economic development in the subcontinent also generated tremendous wealth, which posed a serious challenge to the social order that arose in India following the Aryan migrations. Traditional social theory accorded special honor to the brahmins and the kshatriyas because of the worthy lives they had led during previous incarnations and the heavy responsibilities they assumed as priests, warriors, and rulers during their current incarnations. Members of the vaishya and shudra castes, on the other hand, merited no special respect but, rather, had the obligation to work as directed by the higher castes. During the centuries after 600 B.C.E., however, trade and industry brought prosperity to many vaishyas and even shudras, who sometimes became wealthier and more influential in society than their brahmin and kshatriya contemporaries.

Wealth and the Social Order



A painting produced in the sixth century C.E. in the Ajanta caves of central India depicts individuals of different castes, *jati*, and ethnic groups in a crowd scene.

Economic development and social change in classical India had profound implications for the established cultural as well as the social order. The beliefs, values, and rituals that were meaningful in early Aryan society seemed increasingly irrelevant during the centuries after 600 B.C.E. Along with emerging towns, growing trade, increasing wealth, and a developing social structure, classical India also saw the appearance of new religions that addressed the needs of the changing times.

Religions of Salvation in Classical India

Ancient Indian religion revolved around ritual sacrifices offered by brahmin priests in hopes that the gods would reward their loyal human servants with large harvests and abundant herds. Because the brahmins performed services deemed crucial for the survival of society, they enjoyed exemption from taxation. They also received hefty fees and generous gifts in return for their services. As the Indian economy developed, however, these services seemed less meaningful, especially to the newly wealthy classes of merchants and artisans. Many of these individuals came from the lower castes, and they resented the brahmins' pretensions to superiority.

During the sixth and fifth centuries B.C.E., a rash of new religions and philosophies rejected the brahmins' cults and appealed to the interests of new social classes. Some of them tended toward atheistic materialism: members of the Charvaka sect, for example, believed that the gods were figments of the imagination, that brahmins were

Vardhamana
Mahavira



Mahavira with one of his disciples. Representations of the early Jains often depicted them in the nude because of their ascetic way of life.

charlatans who enriched themselves by hoodwinking others, and that human beings came from dust and returned to dust like any other animal in the natural world. The Charvakas' beliefs clearly reflected the increasingly materialistic character of Indian society and economy. Others, such as the Jains, the Buddhists, and the Hindus, turned to intense spirituality as an alternative to the mechanical rituals of the brahmins.

Jainism and the Challenge to the Established Cultural Order

Among the most influential of the new religions was Jainism. Although Jainist doctrines first appeared during the seventh century B.C.E., they became popular only when the great teacher Vardhamana Mahavira turned to Jainism in the late sixth century B.C.E. Mahavira ("the great hero") was born in northern India about 540 B.C.E. to a prominent kshatriya family. According to the semilegendary accounts of his life, he left home

at the age of thirty to seek salvation by escaping from the cycle of incarnation. For twelve years he led an ascetic life wandering throughout the Ganges valley, after which he gained enlightenment. He abandoned all his worldly goods, even his clothes, and taught an ascetic doctrine of detachment from the world. For the next thirty years, until his death about 468 B.C.E., he expounded his thought to a group of dedicated disciples who formed a monastic order to perpetuate and spread his message. These disciples referred to Mahavira as *Jina* ("the conqueror"), and borrowing from this title his followers referred to themselves as *Jains*.

Much of the inspiration for Jainist doctrine came from the Upanishads. Jains believed that everything in the universe—humans, animals, plants, the air, bodies of water, and even inanimate physical objects such as rocks—possessed a soul. As long as they remained trapped in terrestrial bodies, these souls experienced both physical and psychological suffering. Only by purification from selfish behavior could souls gain release from their imprisonment, shed the burdens of karma that they had accumulated during their various incarnations, and attain a state of bliss.

Individuals underwent purification by observing the principle of *ahimsa*, or non-violence to other living things or their souls. Devout Jain monks went to extremes to avoid harming the millions of souls they encountered each day. They swept the ground before them as they walked to avoid causing harm to invisible insects; they strained their drinking water through cloth filters to remove tiny animals they might unwittingly consume; they followed an abstemious and strictly vegetarian diet; they even wore masks

Jainist Ethics

Jainism (JEYEN-iz'm)
ahimsa (uh-HIM-suh)

and avoided making sudden movements so that they would not bruise or otherwise disturb the tiny souls inhabiting the surrounding air.

Jainist ethics were so demanding that few people other than devout monks could hope to observe them closely. The Jains believed that almost all occupations inevitably entailed violence of some kind: farming involved the killing of pests and the harvesting of living plants, for example, and crafts such as leather tanning depended on the slaughter of animals. Thus for most people Jainism was not a practical alternative to the religion of the brahmins.

For certain groups, however, Jainism represented an attractive alternative to the traditional cults. Jainist values and ethics had significant social implications. If all creatures possessed souls and participated in the ultimate reality of the world, it made little sense to draw sharp distinctions between different classes of human beings. As a result, the Jains did not recognize social hierarchies based on *varna* or *jati*. It is not surprising, then, that their faith became popular especially among members of lower castes who did not command much respect in the traditional social order, including merchants, scholars, and literary figures. In a typical day, individuals in these classes did little overt violence to other creatures or their souls, and they appreciated the spiritual sensitivity and the high moral standards that Jainism encouraged. They provided substantial lay support for the Jainist monks and helped to maintain the ideal of *ahimsa* as a prominent concern of Indian ethics. Indeed, the doctrine of *ahimsa* has been an especially influential teaching over the long term, both in India and beyond. Quite apart from some two million Indian individuals who maintain Jainist traditions in the present day, many Buddhists and Hindus recognize *ahimsa* as a fundamental element of their beliefs, and prominent reformers of the twentieth century C.E. such as Mohandas K. Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. relied on the doctrine of *ahimsa* when promoting social reform by nonviolent means.

In spite of the moral respect it has commanded and the influence it has wielded through the centuries, however, Jainism has always been the faith of a small minority. It has simply been too difficult—or even impossible—for most people to observe. A more popular and practical alternative to the brahmins' cults came in the form of Buddhism.

Early Buddhism

Like Mahavira, the founder of Buddhism came from a kshatriya family, but he gave up his position and inheritance in order to seek salvation. His name was Siddhartha Gautama, born about 563 B.C.E. in a small tribal state governed by his father in the foothills of the Himalayas. According to early accounts, Gautama lived a pampered and sheltered life in palaces and parks, because his father had determined that Gautama would experience only happiness and would never know misery. He married his cousin and excelled in the program of studies that would prepare him to succeed his father as governor.

Eventually, however, Gautama became dissatisfied with his comfortable life. One day, according to an early legend, while riding toward a park in his chariot, Gautama saw a man made miserable by age and infirmity. When he asked for an explanation of this unsettling sight, Gautama learned from his chariot driver that all human beings grow old and weak. On later outings Gautama saw a sick man and a corpse, from whose fates he learned that disease and death were also inevitable features of the human condition. Finally Gautama noticed a monk traveling by foot in his distinctive dress, and he learned that some individuals withdraw from the active life of the world to lead holy lives and to perfect their spiritual qualities. In light of the misery he had

Appeal of Jainism

Siddhartha Gautama

Siddhartha Gautama (sih-DHAR-tuh GOW-tau-mah)

Gautama's Search for Enlightenment



A painting produced in the late fifth century C.E. depicts the Buddha seated under a pavilion as servants attend to his needs and anoint him with holy water.

previously witnessed, Gautama considered the monk a noble character and determined to take up an ascetic, wandering life for himself in the hope that it would help him to understand the phenomenon of suffering. Though not a strictly historical account, this story conveys well the Buddhist concern with suffering.

About 534 B.C.E. Gautama left his wife, his family, and the comforts of home to lead the existence of a holy man. He wandered throughout the Ganges valley searching for spiritual enlightenment and an explanation for suffering. He survived for a while by begging for his food but then abandoned society altogether to live as a hermit. He sought enlightenment first by means of intense meditation and later through the rigors of extreme asceticism. None of

those tactics satisfied him. Then, according to Buddhist legends, as he sat one day beneath a large bo tree in Bodh Gaya, southwest of Pataliputra, Gautama decided that he would remain exactly where he was until he understood the problem of suffering. For forty-nine days he sat in meditation as various demons tempted him with pleasures and threatened him with terrors in efforts to shake his resolution. Eventually the demons withdrew, and Gautama prevailed. After forty-nine days under the bo tree, he received enlightenment: he understood both the problem of suffering and the means by which humans could eliminate it from the world. At that point, Gautama became the Buddha—"the enlightened one."

The Buddha publicly announced his doctrine for the first time about 528 B.C.E. at the Deer Park of Sarnath, near the Buddhist holy city of Banaras (modern Varanasi), in a sermon delivered to friends who had formerly been his companions in asceticism. Buddhists refer to this sermon as the "Turning of the Wheel of the Law" because it represented the beginning of the Buddha's quest to promulgate the law of righteousness. His teachings quickly attracted attention, and disciples came from all parts of the Ganges valley. He organized them into a community of monks who owned only their yellow robes and their begging bowls. They traveled on foot, preaching the Buddha's doctrine and seeking handouts for their meals. For more than forty years, the Buddha led his disciples throughout much of northern India in hopes of bringing spiritual enlightenment to others. About 483 B.C.E., at an age of some eighty years, he died after leaving his companions with a final message: "Decay is inherent in all component things! Work out your salvation with diligence!"

The core of the Buddha's doctrine, known as the Four Noble Truths, teaches that all life involves suffering; that desire is the cause of suffering; that elimination of desire

The Buddha and His Followers

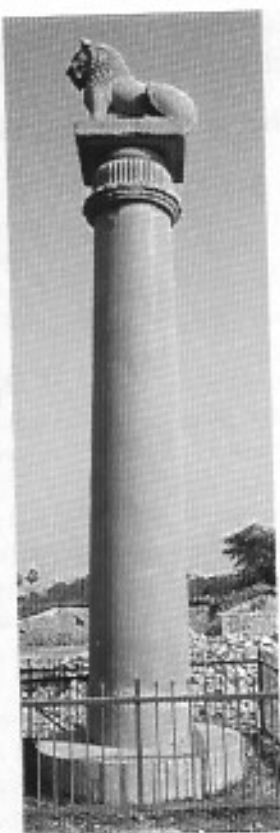
Buddhist Doctrine: The Dharma

teous existence involved considerable sacrifice: giving up personal property, forsaking the search for social standing, and resolutely detaching oneself from the charms of family and the world. The earliest Buddhists thought that numerous physical incarnations, stretching over thousands of years, might be necessary before an individual soul would become pure enough to achieve salvation and pass into nirvana. Though perhaps more attractive than the religion of the brahmins, Buddhism did not promise to make life easy for its adherents.

Between the third century B.C.E. and the first century C.E., however, three new developments in Buddhist thought and practice reduced obligations of believers, opened new avenues to salvation, and brought explosive popularity to the faith. In the first place, whereas the Buddha had not considered himself divine, some of his later followers began to worship him as a god. Thus Buddhism acquired a devotional focus that helped converts channel their spiritual energies and identify more closely with their faith. In the second place, theologians articulated the notion of the *bodhisattva* ("an enlightened being"). Bodhisattvas were individuals who had reached spiritual perfection and merited the reward of nirvana, but who intentionally delayed their entry into nirvana to help others who were still struggling. Some theologians taught that bodhisattvas could even perform good deeds on behalf of their less spiritually inclined brethren. Like Christian saints, bodhisattvas served as examples of spiritual excellence, and they provided a source of inspiration. Finally, Buddhist monasteries began to accept gifts from wealthy individuals and to regard the bequests as acts of generosity that merited salvation. Thus wealthy individuals could enjoy the comforts of the world, avoid the sacrifices demanded by early Buddhist teachings, and still ensure their salvation.

Because these innovations opened the road to salvation for large numbers of people, their proponents called their faith the *Mahayana* ("the greater vehicle," which could carry more people to salvation), as opposed to the *Hinayana* ("the lesser vehicle"), a pejorative term for the earlier and stricter doctrine known also as Theravada Buddhism. During the early centuries C.E., Mahayana Buddhism spread rapidly throughout India and attracted many converts from lay and wealthy classes. In later centuries Mahayana Buddhism became established also in central Asia, China, Japan, and Korea. The stricter Theravada faith did not disappear: it remained the dominant school of Buddhism in Ceylon, and in later centuries it spread also to Burma, Thailand, and other parts of southeast Asia. Since the first century C.E., however, most of the world's Buddhists have sought to ride the greater vehicle to salvation.

Mahayana Buddhism flourished partly because of educational institutions that efficiently promoted the faith. During the Vedic era, Indian education was mostly an informal affair involving a sage and his students. When Jains and Buddhists organized monasteries, however, they began to offer regular instruction and established educational institutions. Most monasteries provided basic education, and larger communities offered advanced instruction as well. Best known of all was the Buddhist monastery at



King Ashoka erected many stone pillars such as this handsome column, which stands 10 meters (32 feet) tall, to promote Buddhist teachings, direct travelers to holy sites, or commemorate significant events of the Buddha's life.

Development of Buddhism

The Spread of Mahayana Buddhism

Nalanda

bodhisattvas (BOH-dih-SAT-vuhs)

Mahayana (mah-huh-YAH-nah)

Sources from the Past

Ashoka as a Teacher of Humility and Equality according to the *Ashokavadana*

Following Ashoka's death, many legends circulated about the emperor, his life, his rule, and his devotion to Buddhism. About the second century C.E., anonymous editors collected many of those legends in a work known as the Ashokavadana (The Legend of Ashoka). Though not historically reliable, the legend is valuable as a work showing how later generations revered Ashoka and made a hero of the Buddhist emperor. The following selection celebrates Ashoka's efforts to promote the Buddhist values of humility and the equality of believers in spite of their different caste origins.

Not long after King Ashoka had come to have faith in the Teaching of the Buddha, he started honoring Buddhist monks, throwing himself at their feet wherever he saw them, in a crowd, or in a deserted place.

Now Ashoka had a minister named Yasas, and although he had the utmost faith in the Blessed One [the Buddha], he said, one day, to the king: "Your majesty, you ought not to prostrate yourself before wandering mendicants of every caste, and the Buddhist monks do come from all four castes."

To this Ashoka did not immediately respond. Sometime later, however, he told all his ministers that he needed to have the heads of various sorts of creatures, and he asked one of them to bring him the head of such and such an animal, and another to bring him the head of another animal, and so on. Finally, he ordered Yasas to bring him the head of a human being.

Now when the ministers had gathered all these heads, Ashoka ordered them to go to the market place and sell them. Soon, all of the heads had been sold, except Yasas's human head that no one would buy. Ashoka then told Yasas to give his head away, but, even though it was gratis, still no one would take it.

Ashamed at his lack of success, Yasas came back to Ashoka and said: "O king, the heads of cows, asses, sheep, deer, and birds—all were sold to people for a price; but no one would take this worthless human head, even free of charge."

"Why is that?" Ashoka asked his minister, "why wouldn't anyone accept this human head?"

"Because it disgusted them," Yasas replied.

"Oh?" said the king, "is it just this head that is disgusting or the heads of all human beings?"

"The heads of all humans," answered Yasas.

"What?" said Ashoka, "is my head disgusting as well?"

Out of fear, Yasas did not want to tell him the real fact of the matter, but the king ordered him to speak the truth, and finally he answered: "Yes."

After forcing this admission out of his minister, Ashoka then revealed to him his purpose in doing so: "You, sir, are obsessed with matters of form and superiority, and because of this attachment you seek to dissuade me from bowing down at the feet of the monks. But if I acquire some merit by bowing down a head so disgusting that no one on earth would take it, even free of charge, what harm is there in that? You, sir, look at the caste (*jati*) and not at the inherent qualities of the monks. Haughty, deluded, and obsessed with caste, you harm yourself and others."

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

In what ways and for what reasons might this story from the *Ashokavadana* have appealed to various groups of early Buddhists?

SOURCE: John S. Strong, *The Legend of King Ashoka: A Study and Translation of the Ashokavadana*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983, pp. 234–36. (Translation slightly modified.)

Nalanda, founded during the Gupta dynasty in the Ganges River valley near Pataliputra. At Nalanda it was possible to study not only Buddhism but also the Vedas, Hindu philosophy, logic, mathematics, astronomy, and medicine. Nalanda soon became so famous as an educational center that pilgrims and students from foreign lands traveled there to study with the most renowned masters of Buddhist doctrine. By the end of the Gupta dynasty, several thousand students may have been in residence there.

The Emergence of Popular Hinduism

As Buddhism generated new ideas and attracted widespread popular interest, Hinduism underwent a similar evolution that transformed it into a popular religion of salvation. While drawing inspiration from the Vedas and the Upanishads, popular Hinduism increasingly departed from the older traditions of the brahmins. Like Mahayana Buddhism, Hinduism experienced changes in doctrine and observances that resulted in a faith that addressed the interests and met the needs of ordinary people.

The great epic poems, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, illustrate the development of Hindu values. Both works originated as secular tales transmitted orally during the late years of the Vedic age (1500–500 B.C.E.). Brahmin scholars revised them and committed them to writing probably during the early centuries C.E. The *Mahabharata* dealt with a bloody civil war for the control of northern India between two groups of cousins. Though originally a purely secular work, the brahmins made a prominent place in the poem for the god Vishnu, the preserver of the world who intervened frequently on behalf of virtuous individuals.

The *Ramayana* was originally a love and adventure story involving the trials faced by the legendary Prince Rama and his loyal wife, Sita. Rama went to great lengths to rescue Sita after the demon king of Ceylon kidnapped her, and his alliance with Hanuman, general of the monkeys, led to exciting clashes with his enemies. Later brahmin editors made Rama an incarnation of Vishnu, and they portrayed Rama and Sita as the ideal Hindu husband and wife, devoted and loyal to each other even in times of immense difficulty.

A short poetic work known as the *Bhagavad Gita* (“song of the lord”) best illustrates both the expectations that Hinduism made of individuals and the promise of salvation that it held out to them. The *Gita* was the work of many hands, and the date of its composition is uncertain. Scholars have placed it at various points between 300 B.C.E. and 300 C.E., and it most likely underwent several rounds of revision before taking on its final form about 400 C.E. Yet it eloquently evokes the cultural climate of India between the Mauryan and the Gupta dynasties.

The work is a self-contained episode of the *Mahabharata*. It presents a dialogue between Arjuna, a kshatriya warrior about to enter battle, and his charioteer Krishna, who was in fact a human incarnation of the god Vishnu. The immediate problem addressed in the work was Arjuna’s reluctance to fight: the enemy included many of his friends and relatives, and even though he recognized the justice of his cause, he shrank from the conflict. In an effort to persuade the warrior to fight, Krishna presented Arjuna with several lines of argument. In the first place, he said, Arjuna must not worry about harming his friends and relatives, because the soul does not die with the human body. Arjuna’s weapons did not have the power to touch the soul, so he could never harm or kill another person in any meaningful way.



Carving of a bodhisattva from the second or third century C.E. This carving perhaps represents Avalokitesvara, also known as the Lord of Compassion. Almost as perfect as the Buddha, Avalokitesvara had a reputation for protecting merchants and sailors, helping women conceive, and turning enemies into kindhearted friends.

The Epics

The Bhagavad Gita

Vishnu (VISH-noo)
Bhagavad Gita (BUH-
 guh-vahd GEE-tuh)

Krishna also held that Arjuna's caste imposed specific moral duties and social responsibilities upon him. The duty of shudras was to serve, of vaishyas to work, of brahmins to learn the scriptures and seek wisdom. Similarly, Krishna argued, the duty of kshatriyas was to govern and fight. Indeed, Krishna went further and held that an individual's social responsibilities had spiritual significance. He told Arjuna that failure to fulfill caste duties was a grievous sin, whereas their observance brought spiritual benefits.

Finally, Krishna taught that Arjuna would attain everlasting peace and blessedness if he devoted himself to the love, adoration, and service of Krishna himself. Arjuna should abandon his selfish and superficial personal concerns and surrender to the deeper wisdom of the god. As a reward, wholehearted worship would bring Arjuna eternal salvation through unity with his god. Alongside understanding of the soul and caste duties, then, unquestioning faith and devotion would put Arjuna in the proper state of mind for the looming conflict by aligning his actions with divine wisdom and will. Krishna's teaching that faith would bring salvation helped inspire a tradition of ecstatic and unquestioning devotion in popular Hinduism.

Hindu Ethics

Hindu ethics thus differed considerably from those of earlier Indian moralists. The Upanishads had taught that only through renunciation and detachment from the world could individuals escape the cycle of incarnation. As represented in the *Bhagavad Gita*, however, Hindu ethical teachings made life much easier for the lay classes by holding out the promise of salvation precisely to those who participated actively in the world and met their caste responsibilities. To be sure, Krishna taught that individuals should meet their responsibilities in detached fashion: they should not become personally or emotionally involved in their actions, and they especially should not strive for material reward or recognition. Rather, they should perform their duties faithfully, concentrating on their actions alone, with no thought as to their consequences.

Other works by early Hindu moralists acknowledged even more openly than did the *Bhagavad Gita* that individuals could lead honorable lives in the world. Indeed, Hindu ethics commonly recognized four principal aims of human life: *dharma* (obedience to religious and moral laws), *artha* (the pursuit of economic well-being and honest prosperity), *kama* (the enjoyment of social, physical, and sexual pleasure), and *moksha* (the salvation of the soul). According to Hindu moral precepts, a proper balance of *dharma*, *artha*, and *kama* would help an individual to attain *moksha*.

As devotional Hinduism evolved and became increasingly distinct from the teachings of the Upanishads and the older traditions of the brahmins, it also enhanced its appeal to all segments of Indian society. Hinduism offered salvation to masses of people who, as a matter of practical necessity, had to lead active lives in the world and thus could not even hope to achieve the detachment envisioned in the Upanishads.

Popularity of Hinduism

Hinduism gradually displaced Buddhism as the most popular religion in India. Buddhism remained strong through much of the first millennium C.E., and until about the eleventh century pilgrims traveled to India from as far away as China to visit the holy sites of Buddhism and learn about the faith in its original homeland. Within India, however, Buddhism grew remote from the popular masses. Later Buddhist monks did not seek to communicate their message to the larger society in the zealous way of their predecessors, but increasingly confined themselves to the comforts of monasteries richly endowed by wealthy patrons.

Meanwhile, devotional Hinduism also attracted political support and patronage, particularly from the Gupta emperors. The Guptas and their successors bestowed grants of land on Hindu brahmins and supported an educational system that promoted Hindu values. Just as Ashoka Maurya had advanced the cause of Buddhism,