Ancient India

CHAPTER OUTLINE
AND FOCUS QUESTIONS

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The Aryans in India
What were some of the distinctive features of the class system introduced by the Aryan peoples, and what effects did it have on Indian civilization?

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Why was India unable to maintain a unified empire in the first millennium B.C.E., and how was the Mauryan Empire temporarily able to overcome the tendencies toward disunity?

The Exuberant World of Indian Culture
In what ways did the culture of ancient India resemble and differ from the cultural experience of ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt?

CRITICAL THINKING

What are some of the key factors that explain why India became one of the first regions to create an advanced society in the ancient world? To what degree does it merit comparison with Mesopotamia and Egypt as the site of one of the first civilizations?

ARJUNA WAS DESPONDENT as he prepared for battle. In the opposing army were many of his friends and colleagues, some of whom he had known since childhood. In despair, he turned for advice to Krishna (KHRISH-nuh), his chariot driver, who, unknown to Arjuna (ahr-JOO-nuh), was an incarnation of the Indian deity Vishnu (VISH-nu). “Do not despair of your duty,” Krishna advised his friend.

To be born is certain death; to the dead, birth is certain.
It is not right that you should sorrow for what cannot be avoided. . . .
If you do not fight this just battle you will fail in your own law and in your honor, and you will incur sin.

Krishna’s advice to Arjuna is contained in the Bhagavad Gita (bah-gu-hvahd GEE-tuh), one of India’s most sacred classical writings, and reflects one of the key tenets in Indian philosophy—the belief in reincarnation, or rebirth of the soul. It also points up the importance of doing one’s duty without regard for the consequences. Arjuna was a warrior,
and according to Aryan (AR-ee-un) tribal tradition, he was obliged to follow the code of his class. “There is more joy in doing one’s own duty badly,” advised Krishna, “than in doing another man’s duty well.”

In advising Arjuna to fulfill his obligation as a warrior, the author of the Bhagavad Gita, writing around the second century B.C.E. about a battle that took place almost a thousand years earlier, was by implication urging all readers to adhere to their own responsibility as members of one of India’s major classes. Henceforth, this hierarchical vision of a society divided into groups, each with clearly distinct roles, would become a defining characteristic of Indian history.

The Bhagavad Gita is part of a larger work, called the Mahabharata (mu-hahb-huh-RAH-tuh), that deals with the early history of the Aryan peoples who entered India from beyond the mountains north of the Khyber Pass between 1500 and 1000 B.C.E. When the Aryans, a pastoral people speaking an Indo-European language, arrived in India, the subcontinent had had a thriving civilization for almost two thousand years. The Indus valley civilization, although not as well known in the West as the civilizations of Mesopotamia and Egypt, was just as old, and its political, social, and cultural achievements were equally impressive. That civilization, known to historians by the names of its two major cities, Harappa (huh-RAP-uh) and Mohenjo-Daro (moh-HEN-joh-DAH-roh), emerged in the late fourth millennium B.C.E., flourished for more than a thousand years, and then came to an abrupt end about 1500 B.C.E. It was soon replaced by a new society dominated by the Aryan peoples. The new civilization that emerged represented a rich mixture of the two cultures—Harappan and Aryan—and evolved over the next three thousand years into what we know today as India.

The Emergence of Civilization in India: Harappan Society

FOCUS QUESTION: What were the chief features of Harappan civilization, and in what ways was it similar to the civilizations that arose in Egypt and Mesopotamia?

Like the civilizations of Mesopotamia and Egypt, the earliest civilizations in India arose in river valleys and were shaped, in part, by their environment. Thus, from its beginnings, Indian civilization has been intimately associated with the geography of the subcontinent.

A Land of Diversity

India was and still is a land of diversity. This diversity is evident in its languages and cultures as well as in its physical characteristics. India possesses an incredible array of languages. It has a deserved reputation, along with the Middle East, as a cradle of religion. Two of the world’s major religions, Hinduism and Buddhism, originated in India, and a number of others, including Sikhism and Islam (the latter of which entered the South Asian subcontinent in the ninth or tenth century C.E.), continue to flourish there.

In its size and diversity, India seems more like a continent than a nation. That diversity begins with the geographic environment. The Indian subcontinent, shaped like a spade hanging from the southern ridge of Asia, is composed of a number of core regions. In the far north are the Himalayan and Karakoram mountain ranges, home of the highest mountains in the world. Directly to the south of the Himalayas and the Karakoram range is the rich valley of the Ganges, India’s “holy river” and one of the core regions of Indian culture. To the west is the Indus River valley. Today, the latter is a relatively arid plateau that forms the backbone of the modern state of Pakistan, but in ancient times it enjoyed a more balanced climate and served as the cradle of Indian civilization.

South of India’s two major river valleys lies the Deccan, a region of hills and an upland plateau that extends from the Ganges valley to the southern tip of the Indian subcontinent. The interior of the plateau is relatively hilly and dry, but the eastern and western coasts are occupied by lush plains, which have historically been among the most densely populated regions of India. Off the southeastern coast is the island known today as Sri Lanka. Although Sri Lanka is now a separate country quite distinct politically and culturally from India, the island’s history is intimately linked with that of its larger neighbor.

In this vast region live a rich mixture of peoples: people speaking one of the languages in the Dravidian family, who may have descended from the Indus River culture that flourished at the dawn of Indian civilization more than four thousand years ago; Aryans, descended from the pastoral peoples who flooded southward from Central Asia in the second millennium B.C.E.; and hill peoples, who may have lived in the region prior to the rise of organized societies and hence may have been the earliest inhabitants of all. Although today this beautiful mosaic of peoples and cultures has been broken up into a number of separate independent states, the region still possesses a coherent history that is recognizably Indian.

Harappan Civilization: A Fascinating Enigma

In the 1920s, archaeologists discovered the existence of agricultural settlements dating back more than six thousand years in the lower Indus River valley in modern Pakistan. Those small mudbrick villages eventually gave rise to the sophisticated human communities that historians call Harappan civilization. Although today the area is relatively arid, during the third and fourth millennia B.C.E., it evidently received much more abundant rainfall, and the valleys of the Indus River and its tributaries supported a thriving civilization that may have covered a total area of more than 600,000 square miles, from the Himalayas to the Indian Ocean. More than seventy sites have been unearthed since the area was discovered in the 1850s, but the main sites are at the two major cities, Harappa, in the Punjab, and Mohenjo-Daro, nearly 400 miles to the south near the mouth of the Indus River (see Map 2.1).
In several respects, Harappan civilization closely resembled the cultures of Mesopotamia and the Nile valley. Like them, it probably began in tiny farming villages scattered throughout the river valley, some dating back as far as 6500 or 7000 B.C.E. These villages thrived and grew until by the middle of the third millennium B.C.E. they could support a privileged ruling elite living in walled cities of considerable magnitude and affluence. The center of power was the city of Harappa, which was surrounded by a brick wall over 40 feet thick at its base and more than 3.5 miles in circumference. The city was laid out on an essentially rectangular grid, with some streets as wide as 30 feet. Most buildings were constructed of kiln-dried mud-bricks and were square in shape, reflecting the grid pattern. At its height, the city may have had as many as 80,000 inhabitants, making it as large as some of the most populous Sumerian urban centers.

Both Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro were divided into large walled neighborhoods, with narrow lanes separating the rows of houses. Houses varied in size, with some as high as three stories, but all followed the same general plan based on a square courtyard surrounded by rooms. Bathrooms featured an advanced drainage system, which carried wastewater out to drains located under the streets and thence to sewage pits beyond the city walls. But the cities also had the equivalent of the modern slum. At Harappa, tiny dwellings for workers have been found near metal furnaces and the open areas used for pounding grain.

**MAP 2.1 Ancient Harappan Civilization.** This map shows the location of the first civilization that arose in the Indus River valley, which today is located in Pakistan.

**Q** Based on this map, why do you think Harappan civilization resembled the civilizations of Mesopotamia and Egypt?
Unfortunately, Harappan writing has not yet been deciphered, so historians know relatively little about the organization of the Harappan state. Recent archaeological evidence suggests, however, that unlike its contemporaries in Egypt and Sumer, Harappa was not a centralized monarchy with a theocratic base but a collection of more than 1,500 towns and cities loosely connected by ties of trade and alliance and ruled by a coalition of landlords and rich merchants. There were no royal precincts or imposing burial monuments, and there are few surviving stone or terracotta images that might represent kings, priests, or military commanders. It is possible that religion had advanced beyond the stage of spirit worship to belief in a single god or goddess of fertility. Presumably, priests at court prayed to this deity to maintain the fertility of the soil and guarantee the annual harvest.

As in Mesopotamia and Egypt, the Harappan economy was based primarily on agriculture. Wheat, barley, rice, and peas were apparently the primary crops. The presence of cotton seeds at various sites suggests that the Harappan peoples may have been the first to master the cultivation of this useful crop and possibly introduced it, along with rice, to other societies in the region. But Harappa also developed an extensive trading network that extended to Sumer and other civilizations to the west. Textiles and foodstuffs were apparently imported from Sumer in exchange for metals such as copper, lumber, precious stones, and various types of luxury goods. Much of this trade was conducted by ship via the Persian Gulf, although some undoubtedly went by land.

**HARAPPA CULTURE** Archaeological remains indicate that the Indus valley peoples possessed a culture as sophisticated in some ways as that of the Sumerians to the west. Although Harappan architecture was purely functional and shows little artistic sensitivity, the aesthetic quality of some of the pottery and sculpture is superb. Harappan painted pottery, wheel-turned and kiln-fired, rivals work produced elsewhere. Sculpture, however, was the Harappans' highest artistic achievement. Some artifacts possess a wonderful vitality of expression. Fired clay seals show a deft touch in carving animals such as elephants, tigers, rhinoceroses, and antelope, and figures made of copper or terra-cotta show a lively sensitivity and a sense of grace and movement that is almost modern.

Writing was another achievement of Harappan society and dates back at least to the beginning of the third millennium B.C.E. (see the comparative essay "Writing and Civilization" on p. 41). Unfortunately, the only surviving examples of Harappan writing are the pictographic symbols inscribed on clay seals. The script contained more than four hundred characters, but most are too stylized to be identified by their shape, and as noted earlier, scholars have been unable to decipher them. There are no apparent links with Mesopotamian scripts, although, as in Mesopotamia, the primary purpose of writing may have been to record commercial transactions. Until the script is deciphered, much about the Harappan civilization must remain, as one historian termed it, a fascinating enigma.

**THE COLLAPSE OF HARAPPAN CIVILIZATION** One of the great mysteries of Harappan civilization is how it came to an end. Archaeologists working at Mohenjo-Daro have discovered signs of a gradual decay and then a sudden destruction of the city and its inhabitants around 1500 B.C.E. Many of the surviving skeletons have been found in postures of running or hiding, reminiscent of the ruins of the Roman city of Pompeii, destroyed by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 c.e.

These tantalizing signs of flight before a sudden catastrophe once led scholars to surmise that the city of Mohenjo-Daro (the name was applied by archaeologists and means “city of the dead”) and perhaps the remnants of Harappan civilization were destroyed by the Aryans, pastoral peoples from the north who arrived in the subcontinent around the middle of the second millennium B.C.E. Although the Aryans were considered to be less sophisticated culturally than the Harappans, like many nomadic peoples they excelled at the art of war. As in Mesopotamia and the Nile valley, contacts between pastoral and agricultural peoples proved unstable and often ended in armed conflict. Today, however, historians are doubtful that the Aryan peoples were directly responsible for the final destruction of Mohenjo-Daro. More likely, Harappan civilization had already fallen on hard times, perhaps as a result of climatic change in the Indus valley. Archaeologists have found clear signs of social decay, including evidence of trash in the streets, neglect of public services, and overcrowding in urban
neighborhoods. Mohenjo-Daro itself may have been destroyed by an epidemic or by natural phenomena such as floods, an earthquake, or a shift in the course of the Indus River. If that was the case, any migrating peoples arrived in the area after the greatness of Harappan civilization had already passed.

WHO WERE THE ARYANS? Historians know relatively little about the origins and culture of the Aryans. The traditional view is that they were Indo-European-speaking peoples who inhabited vast areas in the steppes north and east of the Black and Caspian Seas. The Indo-Europeans were pastoral peoples who migrated from season to season in search of fodder for their herds. Historians have credited them with a number of technological achievements, including the invention of horse-drawn chariots and the stirrup, both of which were eventually introduced throughout much of the Eurasian supercontinent.

Whereas many other Indo-European-speaking peoples moved westward and eventually settled throughout Europe, the Aryans moved south across the Hindu Kush into the

COMPARATIVE ESSAY
Writing and Civilization

In the year 3250 B.C.E., King Scorpion of Egypt issued an edict announcing a major victory for his army over rival forces in the region. Inscribed in limestone on a cliff face in the Nile River valley, that edict is perhaps the oldest surviving historical document in the world today.

According to prehistorians, human beings invented the first spoken language about 50,000 years ago. As human beings spread from Africa to other continents, that initial language gradually fragmented and evolved into innumerable separate tongues. By the time the agricultural revolution began about 10,000 B.C.E., there were perhaps nearly twenty distinct language families in existence around the world.

During the later stages of the agricultural revolution, the first writing systems also began to emerge in various places around the world (see Map 2.2). The first successful efforts were apparently achieved in Mesopotamia and Egypt, but knowledge of writing soon spread to peoples along the shores of the Mediterranean and in the Indus River valley in South Asia. Wholly independent systems were also invented in China and Mesoamerica. Writing was used for a variety of purposes. King Scorpion’s edict suggests that one reason was to enable a ruler to communicate with his subjects on matters of official concern. In other cases, the purpose was to enable human beings to communicate with supernatural forces. In China and Egypt, for example, priests used writing to communicate with the gods. In Mesopotamia and in the Indus River valley, merchants used writing to record commercial and other legal transactions. Finally, writing was also used to present ideas in new ways, giving rise to such early Mesopotamian literature as The Epic of Gilgamesh.

How did these early written languages evolve into the complex systems in use today? In almost all cases, the first systems consisted of pictographs, pictorial images of various concrete objects such as trees, water, cattle, body parts, and the heavenly bodies. Eventually, the pictographs became more stylized to facilitate transcription—much as we often use a cursive script instead of block printing today. Finally, and most important for their future development, these pictorial images began to take on specific phonetic meanings so that they could represent sounds in the written language. Most sophisticated written systems eventually evolved to a phonetic script, based on an alphabet of symbols to represent all sounds in the spoken language, but others went only part of the way by adding phonetic signs to the individual character to suggest pronunciation while keeping the essence of the original pictograph to indicate meaning. Most of the latter systems, such as hieroglyphics in Egypt and cuneiform in Mesopotamia, eventually became extinct, but the ancient Chinese writing system survives today, in greatly altered form.

What are the various purposes for which writing systems were developed in the ancient world? What appears to have been the initial purpose for the development of the Harappan script?
plains of northern India. Between 1500 and 1000 B.C.E., they gradually advanced eastward from the Indus valley, across the fertile plain of the Ganges, and later southward into the Deccan Plateau. Eventually, they extended their political mastery over the entire subcontinent and its Dravidian-speaking inhabitants, although the indigenous culture survived to remain a prominent element in the evolution of traditional Indian civilization.

In recent years, a new theory has been proposed by some Indian historians, who contend that the Aryan peoples did not migrate into the Indian subcontinent from Central Asia, but were in fact the indigenous population that had originally created the Indus River civilization. Most scholars, however, continue to support the migration hypothesis, although the evidence is not conclusive. They point out that the spoken language of the Aryan people, known as Sanskrit, is widely recognized as a branch of the Indo-European family of languages. Moreover, the earliest account produced by the Aryan people themselves, known as the Rig Veda (RIK VAY-duh) (see the next section), describes a culture based primarily on pastoralism, a pursuit not particularly suited to the Indus River valley. A definitive solution to the debate will have to await further evidence.

The Aryans in India

**FOCUS QUESTION:** What were some of the distinctive features of the class system introduced by the Aryan peoples, and what effects did it have on Indian civilization?

After they settled in India, the Aryans gradually adapted to the geographic realities of their new homeland and abandoned the pastoral life for agricultural pursuits. They were assisted by the introduction of iron, which probably came from the Middle East, where it had been introduced by the Hittites (see Chapter 1) about 1500 B.C.E. The invention of the
The Origins of Kingship

Both India and China had a concept of a golden age in the remote past that provided a model for later governments and peoples to emulate. This passage from the famous Indian epic known as the Mahabharata describes a three-stage process in the evolution of government in human society. Yudhisthira and Bhishma are two of the main characters in the story.

The Mahabharata

Yudhisthira said: "This word ‘king’ [raja] is so very current in this world, O Bharata; how has it originated? Tell me that, O grandfather."

Bhishma said: "Currently, O best among men, do you listen to everything in its entirety—how kingship originated first during the golden age [kṛta-yuga]. Neither kingship nor king was there in the beginning, neither scepter [danda] nor the bearer of a scepter. All people protected one another by means of righteous conduct, O Bharata, men eventually fell into a state of spiritual lassitude. Then delusion overcame them. Men were thus overpowered by infatuation, O leader of men, on account of the delusion of understanding; their sense of righteous conduct was lost. When understanding was lost, all men, O best of the Bharatas, overpowered by infatuation, became victims of greed. Then they sought to acquire what should not be acquired. Thereby, indeed, O lord, another vice, namely, desire, overcame them. Attachment then attacked them, who had become victims of desire. Attached to objects of sense, they did not discriminate between what should be said and what should not be said, between the edible and inedible and between right and wrong. When this world of men had been submerged in dissipation, all spiritual knowledge [brahman] perished; and when spiritual knowledge perished, O king, righteous conduct also perished."

When spiritual knowledge and righteous conduct perished, the gods were overcome with fear, and fearfully sought refuge with Brahma, the creator. Going to the great lord, the ancestor of the worlds, all the gods, afflicted with sorrow, misery, and fear, with folded hands said: "O Lord, the eternal spiritual knowledge, which had existed in the world of men, has perished because of greed, infatuation, and the like, therefore we have become fearful. Through the loss of spiritual knowledge, righteous conduct also has perished, O God. Therefore, O Lord of the three worlds, mortals have reached a state of indifference. Verily, we showered rain on earth, but mortals showered rain [religious offerings] up to heaven. As a result of the cessation of ritual activity on their part, we faced a serious peril. O grandfather, decide what is most beneficial to use under these circumstances."

Then, the self-born lord said to all those gods: "I will consider what is most beneficial; let your fear depart, O leaders of the gods."

Thereupon he composed a work consisting of a hundred thousand chapters out of his own mind, wherein righteous conduct [dharma], as well as material gain [artha] and enjoyment of sensual pleasures [kama] were described. This group, known as the threefold classification of human objectives, was expounded by the self-born lord; so, too, a fourth objective, spiritual emancipation [moksha], which aims at a different goal, and which constitutes a separate group by itself.

Then the gods approached Vishnu, the lord of creatures, and said: "Indicate to us that one person among mortals who alone is worthy of the highest eminence." Then the blessed lord god Narayana reflected, and brought forth an illustrious mind-born son, called Virajas [who, in this version of the origins of the Indian state, became the first king].

Q

What is the author’s purpose here? How does this vision compare with other views in the ancient world on the reasons for the emergence of political leadership? What differences and similarities do you see between this description and the portrayal of kingship in Egypt in Hymn to the Pharaoh in Chapter 1?

From Chieftains to Kings

As in other Indo-European societies, each of the various Aryan tribes was led by a chieftain, called a raja (RAH-juh), who was assisted by a council of elders composed of other leading members of the community; like them, he was normally a member of the warrior class, called the kshatriya (kshuh-TREE-yuh). The chief derived his power from his ability to protect his people from rival groups, a skill that was crucial in the warring kingdoms and shifting alliances that were typical of early Aryan society. Though the rajas claimed to be representatives of the gods, they were not viewed as gods themselves (see the box above).
As Aryan society grew in size and complexity, the chieftains began to be transformed into kings, usually called maharajas (mah-huh-RAH-juhs) (“great rajases”). Nevertheless, the tradition that the ruler did not possess absolute authority remained strong. Like all human beings, the ruler was required to follow the dharma (DAR-muh), a set of laws that set behavioral standards for all individuals and classes in Indian society.

THE IMPACT OF THE GREEKS While competing groups squabbled for precedence in India, powerful new empires were rising to the west. First came the Persian Empire of Cyrus and Darius. Then came the Greeks. After two centuries of sporadic rivalry and warfare, the Greeks achieved a brief period of regional dominance in the late fourth century B.C.E. with the rise of Macedonia under Alexander the Great. Alexander had heard of the riches of India, and in 330 B.C.E., after conquering Persia, he launched an invasion of the east (see Chapter 4). In 326, his armies arrived in the plains of northwestern India and the Indus River valley. They departed almost as suddenly as they had come, leaving in their wake Greek administrators and a veneer of cultural influence that would affect the area for generations to come.

The Mauryan Empire

The Alexandrian conquest was a brief interlude in the history of the Indian subcontinent, but it played a formative role, for on the heels of Alexander’s departure came the rise of the first dynasty to control much of the region. The founder of the new state, who took the royal title Chandragupta Maurya (chun-druh-GOOP-tuh MOWR-yuh) (324–301 B.C.E.), drove out the Greek administrators that Alexander had left behind and solidified his control over the northern Indian plain. He established the capital of his new Mauryan Empire at Pataliputra (pah-tah-lee-POO-truh) (modern Patna) in the Ganges valley (see the map on p. 57). Little is known of his origins, although some sources say he had originally fought on the side of the invading Greek forces but then angered Alexander with his outspoken advice.

Little, too, is known of Chandragupta Maurya’s empire. Most accounts of his reign rely on the scattered remnants of a lost work written by Megasthenes (muh-GAS-thuh-neez), a Greek ambassador to the Mauryan court, in about 302 B.C.E. Chandragupta Maurya was apparently advised by a brilliant court official named Kautilya (kow-TIL-yuh), whose name has been attached to a treatise on politics called the Arthasastra (see the box on p. 45). The work actually dates from a later time, but it may well reflect Kautilya’s ideas.

Although the author of the Arthasastra follows Aryan tradition in stating that the happiness of the king lies in the happiness of his subjects, the treatise also asserts that when the sacred law of the dharma and practical politics collide, the latter must take precedence: “Whenever there is disagreement between history and sacred law or between evidence and sacred law, then the matter should be settled in accordance with sacred law. But whenever sacred law is in conflict with rational law, then reason shall be held authoritative.” The Arthasastra also emphasizes ends rather than means, achieved results rather than the methods employed. For this reason, it has often been compared to Machiavelli’s famous political treatise of the Italian Renaissance, The Prince, written more than a thousand years later (see Chapter 15).

As described in the Arthasastra, Chandragupta Maurya’s government was highly centralized and even despotic: “It is power and power alone which, only when exercised by the king with impartiality, and in proportion to guilt, over his son or his enemy, maintains both this world and the next.” The king possessed a large army and a secret police responsible to his orders (according to the Greek ambassador Megasthenes, Chandragupta Maurya was chronically fearful of assassination, a not unrealistic concern for someone who had allegedly come to power by violence). Reportedly, all food was tasted in his presence, and he made a practice of never sleeping twice in the same bed in his sumptuous palace. To guard against corruption, a board of censors was empowered to investigate cases of possible malfeasance and incompetence within the bureaucracy.

The ruler’s authority beyond the confines of the capital may often have been limited, however. The empire was divided into provinces that were ruled by governors. At first, most of these governors were appointed by and reported to the ruler, but later the position became hereditary. The provinces themselves were divided into districts, each under a chief magistrate appointed by the governor. At the base of the government pyramid was the village, where the vast majority of the Indian people lived. The village was governed by a council of elders; membership in the council was normally hereditary and was shared by the wealthiest families in the village.

Caste and Class: Social Structures in Ancient India

When the Aryans arrived in India, they already possessed a social system based on a ruling warrior class and other groupings characteristic of a pastoral society. In the subcontinent, they encountered peoples living by farming or, in some cases, by other pursuits such as fishing, hunting, or food gathering. Although the immediate consequences of this mixture of cultures are still unclear, the ultimate result was the emergence of a set of social institutions that continues to have relevance down to the present day.

THE CLASS SYSTEM At the crux of the social system was the concept of a hierarchical division of society that placed each...
The Duties of a King

Kautiya, India’s earliest known political philosopher, was an adviser to the Mauryan rulers. The Arthasastra, though written down at a later date, very likely reflects his ideas. This passage sets forth some of the necessary characteristics of a king, including efficiency, diligence, energy, compassion, and concern for the security and welfare of the state. In emphasizing the importance of results rather than motives, Kautiya resembles the Italian Renaissance thinker Machiavelli. But in focusing on winning popular support as the way to become an effective ruler, the author echoes the view of the Chinese philosopher Mencius, who declared that the best way to win the empire is to win the people (see Chapter 3).

The Arthasastra

Only if a king is himself energetically active do his officers follow him energetically. If he is sluggish, they too remain sluggish. And, besides, they eat up his works. He is thereby easily overpowered by his enemies. Therefore, he should ever dedicate himself energetically to activity. . . .

A king should attend to all urgent business; he should not put it off. For what has been thus put off becomes either difficult or altogether impossible to accomplish.

The vow of the king is energetic activity; his sacrifice is constituted of the discharge of his own administrative duties; his sacrificial fee (to the officiating priests) is his impartiality of attitude toward all; his sacrificial consecration is his anointment as king.

In the happiness of the subjects lies the happiness of the king; in their welfare, his own welfare. The welfare of the king does not lie in the fulfillment of what is dear to him; whatever is dear to the subjects constitutes his welfare.

Therefore, ever energetic, a king should act up to the precepts of the science of material gain. Energetic activity is the source of material gain; its opposite, of downfall.

In the absence of energetic activity, the loss of what has already been obtained and of what still remains to be obtained is certain. The fruit of one’s works is achieved through energetic activity—one obtains abundance of material prosperity.

To whom was the author of this document directing his advice? How do the ideas expressed here compare with what most people expect of their political leaders in democratic societies today?

individual within a ritual framework that defined the person’s occupation and status within the broader community. In part, this division may have been an outgrowth of attitudes held by the Aryan peoples with regard to the indigenous population. The Aryans, who followed primarily pastoral pursuits, tended to look askance at their new neighbors, who lived by tilling the soil. Further, the Aryans, a mostly light-skinned people, were contemptuous of the indigenous peoples, who were darker. Light skin came to imply high status, whereas dark skin suggested the opposite.

The concept of color, however, was only the physical manifestation of a division that took place in Indian society on the basis of economic functions. Indian classes (called varna, literally, “color,” and commonly but mistakenly translated as “castes” in English) did not simply reflect an informal division of labor. Instead, at least in theory, they were a set of rigid social classifications that determined not only one’s occupation but also one’s status in society and one’s hope for ultimate salvation (see “Escaping the Wheel of Life” later in this chapter). There were five major varna in Indian society in ancient times (see the box on p. 46). At the top were two classes, collectively viewed as the aristocracy, which represented the ruling elites in Aryan society prior to their arrival in India: the priests and the warriors.

The priestly class, known as the brahmins, was usually considered to be at the top of the social scale. Descended from seers who had advised the ruler on religious matters in Aryan tribal society—brahmin meant “one possessed of Brahman” (BRAH-mun), a term for the supreme god—they were eventually transformed into an official class after their religious role declined in importance. Megasthenes described this class as follows:

From the time of their conception in the womb they are under the care and guardianship of learned men who go to the mother and . . . give her prudent hints and counsels, and the women who listen to them most willingly are thought to be the most fortunate in their offspring. After their birth the children are in the care of one person after another, and as they advance in years their masters are men of superior accomplishments. The philosophers reside in a grove in front of the city within a moderately sized enclosure. They live in a simple style and lie on pallets of straw and [deer] skins. They abstain from animal food and sexual pleasures, and occupy their time in listening to serious discourse and in imparting knowledge to willing ears.

The second class was the kshatriya, the warriors. Although often listed below the brahmins in social status, many kshatriyas were probably descended from the ruling warrior class in Aryan society prior to the conquest of India and thus may have originally ranked socially above the brahmins, although they were ranked lower in religious terms. Like the brahmins, the kshatriyas were originally identified with a single
The Law of Manu is a set of behavioral norms that, according to tradition, were prescribed by India’s mythical founding ruler, Manu. The treatise was probably written in the first or second century B.C.E. The following excerpt describes the various social classes in India and their prescribed duties. Many scholars doubt that the social system in India was ever as rigid as it was portrayed here, and some suggest that upper-class Indians may have used the idea of varna to enhance their own status in society.

**The Law of Manu**

For the sake of the preservation of this entire creation, the Exceedingly Resplendent One [the Creator of the Universe] assigned separate duties to the classes which had sprung from his mouth, arms, thighs, and feet.

Teaching, studying, performing sacrificial rites, so too making others perform sacrificial rites, and giving away and receiving gifts—these he assigned to the [brahmins].

Protection of the people, giving away of wealth, performance of sacrificial rites, study, and nonattachment to sensual pleasures—these are, in short, the duties of a kshatriya.

Tending of cattle, giving away of wealth, performance of sacrificial rites, study, trade and commerce, usury, and agriculture—these are the occupations of a vaisy.

The Lord has prescribed only one occupation [karma] for a **sudra**, namely, service without malice of even these other three classes.

Of created beings, those which are animate are the best; of the animate, those which subsist by means of their intellect; of the intelligent, men are the best; and of men, the [brahmins] are traditionally declared to be the best.

The code of conduct—prescribed by scriptures and ordained by sacred tradition—constitutes the highest dharma; hence a twice-born person, conscious of his own Self [seeking spiritual salvation], should be always scrupulous in respect of it.

**Q** Based on this description, how does the class system in ancient India compare with social class divisions in other societies in Asia? Why do you think the class system, as described here, developed in India? What is the difference between the class system (varna) and the jati (discussed later in this chapter)?

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**CHRONOLOGY: Ancient India**

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<tr>
<th>Event</th>
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<tr>
<td>Harappan civilization</td>
<td>c. 2600–1900 BCE</td>
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<tr>
<td>Arrival of the Aryans</td>
<td>c. 1500 BCE</td>
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<tr>
<td>Life of Gautama Buddha</td>
<td>c. 560–480 BCE</td>
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<tr>
<td>Invasion of India by Alexander the Great</td>
<td>326 BCE</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mauryan dynasty founded</td>
<td>324 BCE</td>
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<td>Reign of Chandragupta Maurya</td>
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<td>Reign of Ashoka</td>
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<tr>
<td>Collapse of Mauryan dynasty</td>
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<td>Rise of Kushan kingdom</td>
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groups considered outside Indian society. Even after slavery was outlawed, the untouchables were given menial and degrading tasks that other Indians would not accept, such as collecting trash, handling dead bodies, or serving as butchers or tanners. One historian estimates that they may have accounted for a little more than 5 percent of the total population of India in antiquity.

The lives of the untouchables were extremely demeaning. They were regarded as not being fully human, and their very presence was considered polluting to members of the other varna. No Indian would touch or eat food handled or prepared by an untouchable. Untouchables lived in ghettos and were required to tap two sticks together to announce their approach when they traveled outside their quarters so that others could avoid them.

Technically, these class divisions were absolute. Individuals supposedly were born, lived, and died in the same class. In practice, upward or downward mobility probably took place, and there was undoubtedly some flexibility in economic functions. But throughout most of Indian history, class taboos remained strict. Members generally were not permitted to marry outside their class (although in practice, men were occasionally allowed to marry below their class but not above it). At first, attitudes toward the handling of food were relatively loose, but eventually that taboo grew stronger, and social mores dictated that sharing meals and marrying outside one’s class were unacceptable.

THE JATI The people of ancient India did not belong to a particular class as individuals but as part of a larger kin group commonly referred to as the jati (JAH-tee) (in Portuguese, casta, which evolved into the English term caste), a system of extended families that originated in ancient India and still exists in somewhat changed form today. Although the origins of the jati system are unknown (there are no indications of strict class distinctions in Harappan society), the jati eventually became identified with a specific kinship group living in a specific area and carrying out a specific function in society. Each jati was identified with a particular varna, and each had its own separate economic function.

Jatis were thus the basic social organization into which traditional Indian society was divided. Each jati was composed of hundreds or thousands of individual nuclear families and was governed by its own council of elders. Membership in this ruling council was usually hereditary and was based on the wealth or social status of particular families within the community.

In theory, each jati was assigned a particular form of economic activity. Obviously, though, not all families in a given jati could take part in the same vocation, and as time went on, members of a single jati commonly engaged in several different lines of work. Sometimes an entire jati would have to move its location in order to continue a particular form of activity. In other cases, a jati would adopt an entirely new occupation in order to remain in a certain area. Such changes in habitat or occupation introduced the possibility of movement up or down the social scale. In this way, an entire jati could sometimes engage in upward mobility, even though that normally was not possible for individuals, who were tied to their class identity for life.

The class system in ancient India may sound highly constricting, but there were persuasive social and economic reasons why it survived for so many centuries. In the first place, it provided an identity for individuals in a highly hierarchical society. Although an individual might rank lower on the social scale than members of other classes, it was always possible to find others ranked even lower. Class was also a means for new groups, such as mountain tribal people, to achieve a recognizable place in the broader community. Perhaps equally important, the jati was a primitive form of welfare system. Each jati was obliged to provide for any of its members who were poor or destitute. It also provided an element of stability in a society that all too often was in a state of political turmoil.

Daily Life in Ancient India

Beyond these rigid social stratifications was the Indian family. Not only was life centered around the family, but the family, not the individual, was the most basic unit in society.

THE FAMILY The ideal social unit was an extended family, with three generations living under the same roof. It was essentially patriarchal, except along the Malabar coast, near the southwestern tip of the subcontinent, where a matriarchal form of social organization prevailed down to modern times. In the rest of India, the oldest male traditionally possessed legal authority over the entire family unit.

The family was linked together in a religious sense to its ancestral members by a series of commemorative rites. Family ceremonies were conducted to honor the departed and to link the living and the dead. The male family head was responsible for leading the ritual. At his death, his eldest son had the duty of conducting the funeral rites.

The importance of the father and the son in family ritual underlined the importance of males in Indian society. Male superiority was expressed in a variety of ways. Women could not serve as priests (although some were accepted as seers), nor were they normally permitted to study the Vedas. In general, males had a monopoly on education, since the primary goal of learning to read was to conduct family rituals. In high-class families, young men, after having been initiated into the sacred thread, began Vedic studies with a guru (teacher). Some then went on to higher studies in one of the major cities. The goal of such an education might be either professional or religious. Such young men were not supposed to marry until after twelve years of study.

MARRIAGE In general, only males could inherit property, except in a few cases when there were no sons. According to law, a woman was always considered a minor. Divorce was prohibited, although it sometimes took place. According to the Arthasastra, a wife who had been deserted by her husband could seek a divorce. Polygamy was fairly rare and apparently occurred mainly among the higher classes, but husbands were permitted to take a second wife if the first was barren.
Producing children was an important aspect of marriage, both because children provided security for their parents in old age and because they were a physical proof of male potency. Child marriage was common for young girls, whether because of the desire for children or because daughters represented an economic liability to their parents. But perhaps the most graphic symbol of women’s subjection to men was the ritual of sati (suh-TEE) (often written suttee), which encouraged the wife to throw herself on her dead husband’s funeral pyre. The Greek visitor Megasthenes reported “that he had heard from some persons of wives burning themselves along with their deceased husbands and doing so gladly; and that those women who refused to burn themselves were held in disgrace.” All in all, it was undoubtedly a difficult existence.

According to the Law of Manu, an early treatise on social organization and behavior in ancient India, probably written in the first or second century B.C.E., a woman was subordinated to men throughout her life—first to her father, then to her husband, and finally to her sons:

She should do nothing independently
   even in her own house.
In childhood subject to her father,
   in youth to her husband,
and when her husband is dead to her sons,
   she should never enjoy independence... .

Though he be uncouth and prone to pleasure,
   though he have no good points at all,
the virtuous wife should ever
   worship her lord as a god.

The role of women

At the root of female subordination to the male was the practical fact that as in most agricultural societies, men did most of the work in the fields. Females were viewed as having little utility outside the home and indeed were considered an economic burden, since parents were obliged to provide a dowry to acquire a husband for a daughter. Female children also appeared to offer little advantage in maintaining the family unit, since they joined the families of their husbands after the wedding ceremony.

Despite all of these indications of female subjection to the male, there are numerous signs that in some ways women often played an influential role in Indian society, and the code of behavior set out in the Law of Manu stressed that they should be treated with respect (see the box on p. 49). Indians appeared to be fascinated by female sexuality, and tradition held that women often used their sexual powers to achieve domination over men. The author of the Mahabharata, a vast epic of early Indian society, complained that “the fire has never too many logs, the ocean never too many rivers, death never too many living souls, and fair-eyed woman never too many men.” Despite the legal and social constraints, women often played an important role within the family unit, and many were admired and honored for their talents. It is probably significant that paintings and sculpture from ancient and medieval India frequently show women in a role equal to that of men, and the tradition of the henpecked husband is as prevalent in India as in many Western societies today.

The Economy

The arrival of the Aryans did not drastically change the economic character of Indian society. Not only did most Aryans eventually take up farming, but it is likely that agriculture expanded rapidly under Aryan rule with the invention of the iron plow and the spread of northern Indian culture into the Deccan Plateau. One consequence of this process was to shift the focus of Indian culture from the Indus valley farther eastward to the Ganges River valley, which even today is one of the most densely populated regions on earth. The flatter areas in the Deccan Plateau and in the coastal plains were also turned into cropland.

Indian farmers

For most Indian farmers, life was harsh. Among the most fortunate were those who owned their own land, although they were required to pay taxes to the state.
The Position of Women in Ancient India

The ambivalent attitude toward women in ancient India is evident in this passage from the Law of Manu, which states that respect for women is the responsibility of men. At the same time, it also makes clear that a woman’s place is in the home.

**The Law of Manu**

Women must be honored and adorned by their father, brothers, husbands, and brother-in-law who desire great good fortune.

Where women, verily, are honored, there the gods rejoice, where, however they are not honored, there all sacred rites prove fruitless.

Where the female relations live in grief—that family soon perishes completely; where, however, they do not suffer from any grievance—that family always prospers.

The father who does not give away his daughter in marriage at the proper time is censurable; censurable is the husband who does not approach his wife in due season; and after the husband is dead, the son, verily is censurable, who does not protect his mother.

Even against the slightest provocations should women be particularly guarded; for unguarded they would bring grief to both the families.

Regarding this as the highest dharma of all four classes, husbands though weak, must strive to protect their wives.

His own offspring, character, family, self, and dharma does one protect when he protects his wife scrupulously.

The husband should engage his wife in the collections and expenditure of his wealth, in cleanliness, in dharma, in cooking food for the family, and in looking after the necessities of the household.

Women destined to bear children, enjoying great good fortune, deserving of worship, the resplendent lights of homes on the one hand and divinities of good luck who reside in the houses on the other—between these there is no difference whatsoever.

**Q** How do these attitudes toward women compare with those we have encountered in the Middle East and North Africa?

Many others were sharecroppers or landless laborers. They were subject to the vicissitudes of the market and often paid exorbitant rents to their landlord. Concentration of land in large holdings was limited by the tradition of dividing property among all the sons, but large estates worked by hired laborers or rented out to sharecroppers were not uncommon, particularly in areas where local rajas derived much of their wealth from their property.

Another problem for Indian farmers was the unpredictability of the climate. India is in the monsoon zone. The monsoon is a seasonal wind pattern in southern Asia that blows from the southwest during the summer months and from the northeast during the winter. The southwest monsoon, originating in the Indian Ocean, is commonly marked by heavy rains. When the rains were late, thousands starved, particularly in the drier areas, which were especially dependent on rainfall. Strong governments attempted to deal with such problems by building state-operated granaries and maintaining the irrigation works, but strong governments were rare, and famine was probably all too common. The staple crops in the north were wheat, barley, and millet, with wet rice common in the fertile river valleys. In the south, grain and vegetables were supplemented by various tropical products, cotton, and spices such as pepper, ginger, cinnamon, and saffron.

**TRADE AND MANUFACTURING** By no means were all Indians farmers. As time passed, India became one of the most advanced trading and manufacturing civilizations in the ancient world. After the rise of the Mauryas, India’s role in regional trade began to expand, and the subcontinent became a major transit point in a vast commercial network that extended from the rim of the Pacific Ocean to the Middle East and the Mediterranean Sea. This regional trade went both by sea and by camel caravan. Maritime trade across the Indian Ocean may have begun as early as the fifth century B.C.E. It extended eastward as far as Southeast Asia and China and southward as far as the straits between Africa and the island of Madagascar. Westward to Egypt went spices, teakwood, perfumes, jewels, textiles, precious stones and ivory, and wild animals. In return, India received gold, tin, lead, and wine. The subcontinent had become a major crossroads of trade in the ancient world.

India’s expanding role as a manufacturing and commercial hub was undoubtedly a spur to the growth of the state. Under Chandragupta Maurya, the central government became actively involved in commercial and manufacturing activities. It owned mines and land and undoubtedly earned massive profits from its role in regional commerce. Separate government departments were established for trade, agriculture, mining, and the manufacture of weapons, and the movement of private goods was vigorously taxed. Nevertheless, a significant private sector also flourished; it was dominated by great caste guilds, which monopolized key sectors of the economy. A money economy probably came into
operation during the second century B.C.E., when copper and gold coins were introduced from the Middle East. This in turn led to the development of banking. But village trade continued to be conducted by means of cowry shells (highly polished shells used as a medium of exchange throughout much of Africa and Asia) or barter throughout the ancient period.

Escaping the Wheel of Life: The Religious World of Ancient India

FOCUS QUESTIONS: What are the main tenets of Brahmanism and Buddhism? How did they differ, and how did each religion influence Indian civilization?

Like Indian politics and society, Indian religion is a blend of Aryan and Dravidian culture. The intermingling of those two civilizations gave rise to an extraordinarily complex set of religious beliefs and practices, filled with diversity and contrast. Out of this cultural mix came two of the world’s great religions, Buddhism and Hinduism, and several smaller ones, including Jainism and Sikhism. Early Aryan religious beliefs, however, are known to historians as Brahmanism. In time, Brahmanical beliefs and practices would give rise to Hinduism, as will be discussed in Chapter 9. Here we will focus on the earliest religious traditions and on the origins of Buddhism.

Brahmanism

Evidence about the earliest religious beliefs of the Aryan peoples comes primarily from sacred texts such as the Vedas, four collections of hymns and religious ceremonies transmitted by memory through the centuries by Aryan priests. Many of these religious ideas were probably common to all of the Indo-European peoples before their separation into different groups at least four thousand years ago. Early Aryan beliefs were based on the common concept of a pantheon of gods and goddesses representing great forces of nature similar to the immortals of Greek mythology. The Aryan ancestor of the Greek father-god Zeus, for example, may have been the deity known in early Aryan tradition as Dyaus (see Chapter 4).

The parent god Dyaus was a somewhat distant figure, however, who was eventually overshadowed by other, more functional gods possessing more familiar human traits. For a while, the primary Aryan god was the great warrior god Indra. Indra summoned the Aryan tribal peoples to war and was represented in nature by thunder. Later, Indra declined in importance and was replaced by Varuna, lord of justice. Other gods and goddesses represented various forces of nature or the needs of human beings, such as fire, fertility, and wealth.

The concept of sacrifice was a key element in Aryan religious belief in Vedic times. As in many other ancient cultures, the practice may have begun as human sacrifice, but later animals were used as substitutes. The priestly class, the brahmins, played a key role in these ceremonies.

Another element of Indian religious belief in ancient times was the ideal of asceticism. Although there is no reference to such practices in the Vedas, by the sixth century B.C.E., self-discipline or subjecting oneself to painful stimuli had begun to replace sacrifice as a means of placating or communicating with the gods. Apparently, the original motive for asceticism was to achieve magical powers, but later, in the Upanishads (oo-PAHN-ih-shahds)—a set of commentaries on the Vedas compiled in the sixth century B.C.E.—it was seen as a means of spiritual meditation that would enable the practitioner to reach beyond material reality to a world of truth and bliss beyond earthly joy and sorrow. It is possible that another motive was to permit those with strong religious convictions to communicate directly with metaphysical reality without having to rely on the priestly class at court.

Asceticism, of course, has been practiced in other religions, including Christianity and Islam, but it seems particularly identified with Hinduism, the religion that emerged from the early Indian religious tradition. Eventually, asceticism evolved into the modern practice of body training that we know as yoga (“union”), which is accepted today as a meaningful element of Hindu religious practice.

REINCARNATION Another new concept that probably began to appear around the time the Upanishads were written was reincarnation. This is the idea that the individual soul is reborn in a different form after death and progresses through several existences on the wheel of life until it reaches its final destination in a union with the Great World Soul, Brahma. Because life is harsh, this final release is the objective of all living souls. From this concept comes the term Brahmanism, referring to the early Aryan religious tradition.

A key element in this process is the idea of karma—that one’s rebirth in a next life is determined by one’s actions (karma) in this life (see the box on p. 51). Hinduism, as it emerged from Brahmanism, placed all living species on a vast scale of existence, including the four classes and the untouchables in human society. The current status of an individual soul, then, is not simply a cosmic accident but the inevitable result of actions that that soul has committed in its past existence.

At the top of the scale are the brahmins, who by definition are closest to ultimate release from the law of reincarnation. The brahmins are followed in descending order by the other classes in human society and the world of the beasts. Within the animal kingdom, an especially high position is reserved for the cow, which even today is revered by Hindus as a sacred beast. Some scholars have speculated that the unique role played by the cow in Hinduism derives from the value of cattle in Aryan pastoral society. But others have pointed out that cattle were a source of both money and food and suggest that the cow’s sacred position may have descended from the concept of the sacred bull in Harappan culture.

The concept of karma is governed by the dharma, or the law. A law regulating human behavior, the dharma imposes different requirements on different individuals depending on their status in society. Those high on the social scale, such as
At the time the Rig Veda was originally composed in the second millennium B.C.E., brahmins at court believed that the best way to communicate with the gods was through sacrifice, a procedure that was carried out through the intermediation of the fire god Agni. The first selection is an incantation uttered by priests at the sacrificial ceremony.

By the middle of the first millennium B.C.E., however, the tradition of offering sacrifices had come under attack by opponents, who argued that the best way to seek truth and tranquility was by renouncing material existence and adopting the life of a wandering mendicant. In the second selection, from the Mundaka Upanishad, an advocate of this position forcefully presents his views. The similarity with the fervent believers of early Christianity, who renounced the corrupting forces of everyday life by seeking refuge in isolated monasteries in the desert, is striking.

The Rig Veda
I extol Agni, the household priest, the divine minister of the sacrifice, the chief priest, the bestower of blessings. May that Agni, who is to be extolled by ancient and modern seers, conduct the gods here.

Through Agni may one gain day by day wealth and welfare which is glorious and replete with heroic sons.

O Agni, the sacrifice and ritual which you encompass on every side, that indeed goes to the gods.

May Agni, the chief priest, who possesses the insight of a sage, who is truthful, widely renowned, and divine, come here with the gods.

O Agni, O Angiras [“messenger”], whatever prosperity you bring to the pious is indeed in accordance with your true function.

O Agni, illuminator of darkness, day by day we approach you with holy thought bringing homage to you.

Presiding at ritual functions, the brightly shining custodian of the cosmic order [rta], thriving in your own realm.

O Agni, be easy of access to us as a father to his son. Join us for our well-being.

The Mundaka Upanishad
Unsteady, indeed, are those boats in the form of sacrifices, eighteen in number, in which is prescribed only the inferior work. The fools who delight in this sacrificial ritual as the highest spiritual good go again and again through the cycle of old age and death.

Abiding in the midst of ignorance, wise only according to their own estimate, thinking themselves to be learned, but really obtuse, these fools go round in a circle like blind men led by one who is himself blind.

Abiding manifestly in ignorance they, all the same, like immature children think to themselves: “We have accomplished our aim.” Since the performers of sacrificial ritual do not realize the truth because of passion, therefore, they, the wretched ones, sink down from heaven when the merit that qualified them for the higher world becomes exhausted.

Regarding sacrifice and merit as most important, the deluded ones do not know of any other higher spiritual good. Having enjoyed themselves only for a time on top of the heaven won by good deeds [sacrifice, etc.] they reenter this world or a still lower one.

Those who practice penance [tapas] and faith in the forest, the tranquil ones, the knowers of truth, living the life of wandering mendicancy—they depart, freed from passion, through the door of the sun, to where dwells verily . . . the imperishable Soul [atman].

Having scrutinized the worlds won by sacrificial rites, a brahmin should arrive at nothing but disgust. The world that was not made is not won by what is done [i.e., by sacrifice]. For the sake of that knowledge he should go with sacrificial fuel in hand as a student, in all humility to a preceptor [guru] who is well versed in the [Vedic] scriptures and also firm in the realization of Brahman.

Upto him who has approached him in proper form, whose mind is tranquil, who has attained peace, does the knowing teacher teach, in its very truth, that knowledge about Brahman by means of which one knows . . . the only Reality.

In which passages in these two documents do you find a reference to the idea of karma? Which document makes use of the concept, and how? What role does ascetism play in these documents?

How the concept of reincarnation originated is not known, although it was apparently not unusual for early peoples to believe that the individual soul would be reborn in a different form in a later life. In any case, in India the concept may have
had practical causes as well as consequences. In the first place, it tended to provide religious sanction for the rigid class divisions that had begun to emerge in Indian society after the arrival of the Aryans, and it provided moral and political justification for the privileges of those on the higher end of the scale.

At the same time, the concept of reincarnation provided certain compensations for those lower on the ladder of life. For example, it gave hope to the poor that if they behaved properly in this life, they might improve their condition in the next. It also provided a means for unassimilated groups such as ethnic minorities to find a place in Indian society while at the same time permitting them to maintain their distinctive way of life.

The ultimate goal of achieving “good” *karma*, as we have seen, was to escape the cycle of existence. To the sophisticated, the nature of that release was a spiritual union of the individual soul with the Great World Soul, *Brahman*, described in the Upanishads as a form of dreamless sleep, free from earthly desires.

### Popular Religion

Little is known about the religious beliefs of the vast majority of the Indian people during this formative stage in South Asian society. In all likelihood, popular religion during the first millennium B.C.E. was a distant reflection of its counterpart in India today, which is peopled with a multitude of very human gods and goddesses. It has been estimated that the Hindu pantheon contains more than 33,000 deities. Only a small number are primary ones, however, notably the so-called trinity of gods: Brahman the Creator, Vishnu the Preserver, and Shiva (SHI-vuh) (originally the Vedic god Rudra) the Destroyer. Although Brahman (sometimes in his concrete form called Brahma) is considered to be the highest god, Vishnu and Shiva take precedence in the devotional exercises of many Hindus, who can be readily divided into Vishnuites and Shaivites. In addition to the trinity of gods, all of whom have wives with readily identifiable roles and personalities, there are countless minor deities, each again with his or her own specific function. A notable example is Ganesha, described in Indian literature as a son of Shiva who was accidentally beheaded by his father in a fit of anger. When Shiva repented of his action, he provided his son with the head of an elephant. Even today the widely revered Ganesha is often viewed as the god of good fortune.

The rich variety and the earthy character of many of these deities are somewhat misleading, however, for Hindus regard the multitude of gods simply as different manifestations of one ultimate reality. The various deities also provide a way for ordinary Indians to personify their religious feelings. Even though some individuals among the early Aryans attempted to communicate with the gods through animal sacrifice or asceticism, most Indians undoubtedly sought to satisfy their own individual religious needs through devotion, which they expressed through ritual ceremonies and offerings at a temple. Such offerings were not only a way of seeking salvation but also a means of satisfying all the aspirations of daily life.

Over the centuries, Indian religious belief changed radically from its origins in Aryan pastoral society. An early belief in deities representing forces of nature gradually gave way to a more elitist system, with a priestly class at court performing sacrifices in order to obtain heavenly favors. During the first millennium B.C.E., religious belief began to evolve into a more personal experience, with an emphasis on ethics as a means of obtaining a union between the individual soul (*Atman*) and the ultimate reality (*Brahman*).

Such a concept, however, was probably too ethereal for the average Indian, who looked for a more concrete form of heavenly salvation, a place of beauty and bliss after a life of disease and privation. In later centuries, the Brahmanical beliefs and practices of early Aryan society would gradually be replaced by a more popular faith that would henceforth become known as Hinduism. We will discuss that transformation in Chapter 9.

### Buddhism: The Middle Path

In the sixth century B.C.E., a new doctrine appeared in northern India that would eventually begin to rival the popularity of...
of Brahmanical beliefs throughout the subcontinent. This new doctrine was called **Buddhism**.

**THE LIFE OF SIDDHARtha Gau TAMa** The historical founder of Buddhism, Siddhartha Gautama (si-DAR-tuh GAW-tuh-muh) (c. 560–480 B.C.E.), was a native of a small kingdom in the foothills of the Himalaya Mountains in what is today southern Nepal. He was born in the mid-sixth century B.C.E., the son of a ruling **kshatriya** family (see the comparative illustration above). According to tradition, the young Siddhartha was raised in affluent surroundings and trained, like many other members of his class, in the martial arts. On reaching maturity, he married and began to raise a family. At the age of twenty-nine, however, he suddenly discovered the pain of illness, the sorrow of death, and the degradation caused by old age in the lives of ordinary people and exclaimed, “Would that sickness, age, and death might be forever bound!” From that time on, he decided to dedicate his life to determining the cause and seeking the cure for human suffering.

**COMPARATIVE ILLUSTRATION**

**The Buddha and Jesus.** As Buddhism evolved, transforming Siddhartha Gautama, known as the Buddha, from mortal to god, Buddhist art changed as well. Statuary and relief panels began to illustrate the story of his life. At the left, in a frieze from the second century C.E., the infant Siddhartha is seen emerging from the hip of his mother, Queen Maya. Although dressed in draperies that reflect Greek influences from Alexander the Great’s brief incursion into northwestern India, her sensuous stance and the touching of the tree evoke the female earth spirit of traditional Indian art. On the right is a Byzantine painting depicting the infant Jesus with his mother, the Virgin Mary, dating from the sixth century C.E. Notice that a halo surrounds the head of both the Buddha and Jesus. The halo—a circle of light—is an ancient symbol of divinity. In Hindu, Greek, and Roman art, the heads of gods were depicted emitting sunlike divine radiances. Early kings adopted crowns made of gold and precious gems to symbolize their own divine authority.

**What similarities and differences do you see in these depictions of the mothers of key religious figures?**
To find the answers to these questions, Siddhartha abandoned his home and family and traveled widely. At first he tried to follow the model of the ascetics, but he eventually decided that self-mortification did not lead to a greater understanding of life and abandoned the practice. Then one day after a lengthy period of meditation under a tree, he achieved enlightenment as to the meaning of life and spent the remainder of his life preaching it. His conclusions, as embodied in his teachings, became the philosophy (or as some would have it, the religion) of Buddhism. According to legend, the Devil (the Indian term is Mara) attempted desperately to tempt him with political power and the company of beautiful girls. But Siddhartha Gautama resisted:

Pleasure is brief as a flash of lightning
Or like an autumn shower, only for a moment. . . .
Why should I then covet the pleasures you speak of?
I see your bodies are full of all impurity:
Birth and death, sickness and age are yours.
I seek the highest prize, hard to attain by men—
The true and constant wisdom of the wise. 8

BUDDHISM AND BRAHMANISM How much the modern doctrine of Buddhism resembles the original teachings of Siddhartha Gautama is open to debate, for much time has elapsed since his death and original texts relating his ideas are lacking. Nor is it certain that Siddhartha even intended to found a new religion or doctrine. In some respects, his ideas could be viewed as a reformist form of Brahmanism, designed to transfer responsibility from the priests to the individual, much as the sixteenth-century German monk Martin Luther saw his ideas as a reformation of Christianity. Siddhartha accepted much of the belief system of Brahmanism, if not all of its practices. For example, he accepted the concept of reincarnation and the role of karma as a means of influencing the movement of individual souls up and down the scale of life. He praised nonviolence and borrowed the idea of living a life of simplicity and chastity from the ascetics. Moreover, his vision of metaphysical reality—commonly known as Nirvana—is closer to the Aryan concept of Brahm than it is to the Christian concept of heavenly salvation. Nirvana, which involves an extinction of selfhood and a final reunion with the Great World Soul, is sometimes likened to a dreamless sleep or to a kind of ”blowing out” (as of a candle). Buddhists occasionally remark that someone who asks for a description does not understand the concept.

At the same time, the new doctrine differed from existing practices in a number of key ways. In the first place, Siddhartha denied the existence of an individual soul. To him, the concept of Atman—the individual soul—meant that the soul was subject to rebirth and thus did not achieve a complete liberation from the cares of this world. In fact, Siddhartha denied the ultimate reality of the material world in its entirety and taught that it was an illusion that had to be transcended. Siddhartha’s idea of achieving Nirvana was based on his conviction that the pain, poverty, and sorrow that afflict human beings are caused essentially by their attachment to the things of this world. Once worldly cares are abandoned, pain and sorrow can be overcome. With this knowledge comes bodhi, or wisdom (source of the term Buddhism and the familiar name for Gautama the Wise: Gautama Buddha).

Achieving this understanding is a key step on the road to Nirvana, which, as in Brahmanism, is a form of release from the wheel of life. According to tradition, Siddhartha transmitted this message in a sermon to his disciples in a deer park at Sarnath, not far from the modern city of Varanasi (Benares). Like so many messages, it is deceptively simple and is enclosed in four noble truths: life is suffering, suffering is caused by desire, the way to end suffering is to end desire, and the way to end desire is to avoid the extremes of a life of vulgar materialism and a life of self-torture and to follow the Middle Path. Also known as the Eightfold Way, the Middle Path calls for right knowledge, right purpose, right speech, right conduct, right occupation, right effort, right awareness, and right meditation (see the box on p. 55).

Another characteristic of Buddhism was its relative egalitarianism. Although Siddhartha accepted the idea of reincarnation (and hence the idea that human beings differ as a result of karma accumulated in a previous existence), he rejected the division of humanity into rigidly defined classes based on previous reincarnations and taught that all human beings could aspire to Nirvana as a result of their behavior in this life—a message that likely helped Buddhism win support among people at the lower end of the social scale.

In addition, Buddhism was much simpler than existing beliefs. Siddhartha rejected the panoply of gods that had become identified with Brahmanism and forbade his followers to worship his person or his image after his death. In fact, many Buddhists view Buddhism as a philosophy rather than a religion.

After Siddhartha Gautama’s death in 480 B.C.E., dedicated disciples carried his message the length and breadth of India. Buddhist monasteries were established throughout the subcontinent, and temples and stupas (STOO-puhs) (stone towers housing relics of the Buddha) sprang up throughout the countryside.

Women were permitted to join the monastic order but only in an inferior position. As Siddhartha had explained, women are “soon angered,” “full of passion,” and “stupid”: “That is the reason . . . why women have no place in public assemblies . . . and do not earn their living by any profession.” Still, the position of women tended to be better in Buddhist societies than it was elsewhere in ancient India (see the box on p. 56).

JAINISM During the next centuries, Buddhism began to compete actively with the existing Aryan beliefs, as well as with another new faith known as Jainism. Jainism (JY-ni-zuhm) was founded by Mahavira (mah-hah-VEE-ruh), a contemporary of Siddhartha Gautama. Resembling Buddhism in its rejection of the reality of the material world, Jainism was more extreme in practice. Where Siddhartha Gautama called for the “middle way” between passion and luxury on one extreme and pain and self-torture on the other, Mahavira preached a doctrine of extreme simplicity to his followers,
How to Achieve Enlightenment

One of the most famous passages in Buddhist literature is the sermon at Sarnath, which Siddhartha Gautama delivered to his followers in a deer park outside the holy city of Varanasi (Benares), in the Ganges River valley. Here he set forth the key ideas that would define Buddhist beliefs for centuries to come. During an official visit to Sarnath nearly three centuries later, Emperor Ashoka ordered the construction of a stupa (reliquary) in honor of the Buddha’s message.

The Sermon at Benares

Thus have I heard: at one time the Lord dwelt at Benares at Isipatana in the Deer Park. There the Lord addressed the five monks:

“These two extremes, monks, are not to be practiced by one who has gone forth from the world. What are the two? That conjoined with the passions and luxury, low, vulgar, common, ignoble, and useless; and that conjoined with self-torture, painful, ignoble, and useless. Avoiding these two extremes the Tathagata has gained the enlightenment of the Middle Path, which produces insight and knowledge and tends to calm, to higher knowledge, enlightenment, Nirvana.

“And what, monks, is the Middle Path, of which the Tathagata has gained enlightenment, which produces insight and knowledge, and tends to calm, to higher knowledge, enlightenment, Nirvana? This is the noble Eightfold Way: namely, right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. This, monks, is the Middle Path, of which the Tathagata has gained enlightenment, which produces insight and knowledge, and tends to calm, to higher knowledge, enlightenment, Nirvana.

1. Now this, monks, is the noble truth of pain: birth is painful, old age is painful, sickness is painful, death is painful, sorrow, lamentation, dejection, and despair are painful. Contact with unpleasant things is painful, not getting what one wishes is painful. In short the five groups of graspings are painful.

2. Now this, monks, is the noble truth of the cause of pain: the craving, which tends to rebirth, combined with pleasure and lust, finding pleasure here and there; namely, the craving for passion, the craving for existence, the craving for nonexistence.

3. Now this, monks, is the noble truth of the cessation of pain, the cessation without a remainder of craving, the abandonment, forsaking, release, nonattachment.

4. Now this, monks, is the noble truth of the way that leads to the cessation of pain: this is the noble Eightfold Way; namely, right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration.

And when, monks, in these four noble truths my due knowledge and insight with its three sections and twelve divisions was well purified, then, monks . . . , I had attained the highest complete enlightenment. This I recognized. Knowledge arose in me, insight arose that the release of my mind is unshakable; this is my last existence; now there is no rebirth.”

Q How did Siddhartha Gautama reach the conclusion that the “four noble truths” were the proper course in living a moral life? How do his ideas compare with the commandments that God gave to the Israelites (see Chapter 1)?
ASHOKA, A BUDDHIST MONARCH  Buddhism received an important boost when Ashoka (uh-SHOH-kuh), the grandson of Chandragupta Maurya, converted to Buddhism in the third century B.C.E. Ashoka (269–232 B.C.E.) is widely considered the greatest ruler in the history of India. By his own admission, as noted in rock edicts placed around his kingdom, Ashoka began his reign conquering, pillaging, and killing, but after his conversion to Buddhism, he began to regret his bloodthirsty past and attempted to rule benevolently.

Ashoka directed that banyan trees and shelters be placed along the road to provide shade and rest for weary travelers. He sent Buddhist missionaries throughout India and ordered the erection of stone pillars with official edicts and Buddhist inscriptions to instruct people in the proper way (see Map 2.3 and the illustration on p. 57). According to tradition, his son converted the island of Sri Lanka to Buddhism, and the peoples there accepted a tributary relationship with the Mauryan Empire.

The Rule of the Fishes: India After the Mauryas

FOCUS QUESTION: Why was India unable to maintain a unified empire in the first millennium B.C.E., and how was the Mauryan Empire temporarily able to overcome the tendencies toward disunity?

After Ashoka’s death in 232 B.C.E., the Mauryan Empire began to decline. In 183 B.C.E., the last Mauryan ruler was overthrown by one of his military commanders, and India reverted to disunity. A number of new kingdoms, some of them perhaps influenced by the memory of the Alexandrian conquests, arose along the fringes of the subcontinent in Bactria, known today as Afghanistan. In the first century C.E., Indo-European-speaking peoples fleeing from the nomadic Xiongnu (SHYAHNG-noo) warriors in Central Asia seized power in the area and

The Voices of Silence

Most of what is known about the lives of women in ancient India comes from the Vedas or other texts written by men. Classical Sanskrit was used exclusively by upper-class males in religious and court functions. Only a few examples of women’s writings remain from this period. In the first poem quoted here, a Buddhist nun living in the sixth century B.C.E. reflects on her sense of spiritual salvation and physical release from the drudgery of daily life. The second poem was produced several hundred years later in southern India by an anonymous female author at a time when stringent restrictions on women had not yet been established in the area. Poetry and song were an essential part of daily life, as women sang while working in the fields, drawing water at the well, or reflecting on the hardships of their daily lives. The second poem quoted here expresses the simultaneous grief and pride of a mother as she sends her only son off to war.

**A Woman Well Set Free!**

A woman well set free! How free I am, How wonderfully free, from kitchen drudgery. Free from the harsh grip of hunger, And from empty cooking pots, Free too of that unscrupulous man, The weaver of sunshades. Calm now, and serene I am, All lust and hatred purged.

To the shade of the spreading trees I go And contemplate my happiness.  
Translated by Uma Chakravarti and Kumkum Roy

**Her Purpose Is Frightening, Her Spirit Cruel**

Her purpose is frightening, her spirit cruel. That she comes from an ancient house is fitting, surely.  
In the battle the day before yesterday, her father attacked an elephant and died there on the field.  
In the battle yesterday, her husband faced a row of troops and fell. And today, she hears the battle drum, and, eager beyond reason, gives him a spear in his hand, wraps a white garment around him, smears his dry tuft with oil, and, having nothing but her one son, “Go!” she says, sending him to battle.  
Translated by George L. Hart III

What are the various points of view that are being expressed in these short poems? Can you think of any equivalents from other ancient civilizations at this time?
proclaimed the new Kushan (koo-SHAHN) kingdom (see Chapter 9). For the next two centuries, the Kushans extended their political sway over northern India as far as the central Ganges valley, while other kingdoms scuffled for predominance elsewhere on the subcontinent. India would not see unity again for another five hundred years.

Several reasons for India's failure to maintain a unified empire have been proposed. Some historians suggest that a decline in regional trade during the first millennium C.E. may have contributed to the growth of small land-based kingdoms, which drew their primary income from agriculture. The tenacity of the Aryan tradition, with its emphasis on tribal rivalries, may also have contributed. Although the Mauryan rulers tried to impose a more centralized organization, clan loyalties once again came to the fore after the collapse of the Mauryan dynasty. Furthermore, the behavior of the ruling class was characterized by what Indians call the "rule of the fishes," which glorified warfare as the natural activity of the king and the aristocracy. The Arthasastra, which set forth a model of a centralized Indian state, assumed that war was the "sport of kings." Still, this was not an uneventful period in the history of India, as Indo-Aryan ideas continued to spread southward and both Brahmanism and Buddhism evolved in new directions.

MAP 2.3 The Empire of Ashoka. Ashoka, the greatest Indian monarch, ruled over much of the subcontinent in the third century B.C.E. This map shows the extent of his empire and the locations of the pillar edicts that were erected along major trade routes.

Why do you think the pillars and rocks were placed where they were?

The Exuberant World of Indian Culture

Few cultures in the world are as rich and varied as that of India. Most societies excel in some forms of artistic and literary achievement and not in others, but India has produced great works in almost all fields of cultural endeavor—art and sculpture, science, architecture, literature, and music.
Literature

The earliest known Indian literature consists of the four Vedas, which were passed down orally from generation to generation until they were finally written down after the Aryans arrived in India. The Rig Veda dates from the second millennium B.C.E. and consists of more than a thousand hymns that were used at religious ceremonies. The other three Vedas were written considerably later and contain instructions for performing ritual sacrifices and other ceremonies. The Brahmanas and the Upanishads served as commentaries on the Vedas.

The language of the Vedas was Sanskrit (SAN-skrit), one of the Indo-European family of languages. After the arrival of the Aryans in India, Sanskrit gradually declined as a spoken language and was replaced in northern India by a simpler tongue known as Prakrit (PRAH-krit). Nevertheless, Sanskrit continued to be used as the language of the bureaucracy and of literary expression for many centuries after that and, like Latin in medieval Europe, served as a common language of communication between various regions of India. In the south, a variety of Dravidian languages continued to be spoken.

As early as the fifth century B.C.E., Indian grammarians had codified Sanskrit to preserve the authenticity of the Vedas for the spiritual edification of future generations. A famous grammar written by the scholar Panini in the fourth century B.C.E. set forth four thousand grammatical rules prescribing the correct usage of the spoken and written language. This achievement is particularly impressive in that Europe did not have a science of linguistics until the nineteenth century, when it was developed partly as a result of the discovery of the works of Panini and later Indian linguists.

After the development of a writing system in the first millennium B.C.E., India’s holy literature was probably inscribed on palm leaves stitched together into a book somewhat similar to the first books produced on papyrus or parchment in the Mediterranean region. Also written for the first time were India’s great historical epics, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana (rah-mah-YAH-nah). Both of these epics may have originally been recited at religious ceremonies, but they are essentially histories that recount the martial exploits of great Aryan rulers and warriors.

The Mahabharata, consisting of more than 90,000 stanzas, was probably written about 100 B.C.E. and describes in great detail a war between cousins for control of the kingdom nine hundred years earlier. Interwoven in the narrative are many fantastic legends of the gods. Above all, the Mahabharata is a tale of moral confrontations and an elucidation of the ethical precepts of the dharma. The most famous section of the book is the so-called Bhagavad Gita, a sermon by the legendary Indian figure Krishna on the eve of a major battle. In this sermon, as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Krishna sets forth one of the key ethical maxims of Indian society: in taking action, one must be indifferent to success or failure and consider only the moral rightness of the act itself.

The Ramayana, written at about the same time, is much shorter than the Mahabharata. It is an account of a semilegendary ruler named Rama (RAH-mah) who, as a result of a palace intrigue, is banished from the kingdom and forced to live as a hermit in the forest. Later he fights the demon-king of Sri Lanka, who has kidnapped his beloved wife, Sita (SEE-tuh). Like the Mahabharata, the Ramayana is strongly imbued with religious and moral significance. Rama is portrayed as the ideal Aryan hero, a perfect ruler and an ideal son, while Sita projects the supreme duty of female chastity and wifely loyalty to her husband. The Ramayana is a story of the triumph of good over evil, duty over self-indulgence, and generosity over selfishness. It combines filial and erotic love, conflicts of human passion, character analysis, and poetic descriptions of nature (see the box on the next page).

The Ramayana also has all the ingredients of an enthralling adventure: giants, wondrous flying chariots, invincible arrows and swords, and magic potions and mantras. One of the real heroes of the story is the monkey-king Hanuman, who flies from India to Sri Lanka to set the great battle in motion. It is no wonder that for millennia the Ramayana has remained a favorite among Indians of all age groups, often performed at festivals today and inspiring a hugely popular TV version produced in recent years.

Architecture and Sculpture

After literature, the greatest achievements of early Indian civilization were in architecture and sculpture. Some of the earliest examples of Indian architecture stem from the time of Emperor Ashoka, when Buddhism became the religion of the state. Until the time of the Mauryas, Aryan buildings had been constructed of wood. With the rise of the empire, stone began to be used as artisans arrived in India seeking employment after the destruction of the Persian Empire by Alexander. Many of these stone carvers accepted the patronage of Emperor Ashoka, who used them to spread Buddhist ideas throughout the subcontinent.

There were three main types of religious structures: the pillar, the stupa, and the rock chamber. As noted earlier, during Ashoka’s reign, many stone columns were erected alongside roads to commemorate the events in the Buddha’s life and mark pilgrim routes to holy places. Weighing up to 50 tons each and rising as high as 32 feet, these polished sandstone pillars were topped with a carved capital, usually depicting lions uttering the Buddha’s message. Ten remain standing today (a photograph of one of these pillars appears on p. 234).

A stupa was originally meant to house a relic of the Buddha, such as a lock of his hair or a branch of the famous Bodhi tree (the tree beneath which Siddhartha Gautama had first achieved enlightenment), and was constructed in the form of a burial mound (the pyramids in Egypt also derived from burial mounds). Eventually, the stupa became a place for devotion and the most familiar form of Buddhist architecture. Stupas rose to considerable heights and were surrounded with a spire, possibly representing the stages of existence en route to Nirvana. According to legend, Ashoka ordered the construction of 84,000 stupas throughout India to promote the Buddha’s message. A few survive today, including the

58 \  CHAPTER 2  Ancient India
Rama and Sita

Over the ages, the conclusion of the Indian epic known as the Ramayana has been the focus of considerable debate. After a long period of captivity at the hands of the demon Ravana, Sita is finally liberated by her husband, King Rama. Although the two have a joyful reunion, the people of Rama’s kingdom voice suspicions that she has been defiled by her captor, and Rama is forced to banish her to a forest, where she gives birth to twin sons. The account reflects the belief, expressed in the Arthasastra, that a king must place the needs of his subjects over his personal desires. Here we read of Rama’s anguished decision as he consults with his brother, Lakshmana.

By accepting banishment, Sita bows to the authority of her husband and the established moral order. Subservient and long-suffering, she has been lauded as the ideal heroine and feminine role model, imitated by generations of Indian women. At the close of the Ramayana, Rama decides to take and humiliated, however, and begs Mother Earth to open up and swallow her.

The Ramayana

“A king must be blameless.”

“Such words pierce my heart,” said Lakshmana. “Fire himself proved her innocent. She is fired gold, poured into golden fire!”

Rama said, “Lakshmana, consider what is a king. Kings cannot afford blame. Ill fame is evil to kings; they above all men must be beyond reproach. . . . See into what a chasm of sorrow a King may fall. . . .”

Lakshmana said, “Gradually everything seems to change again, and even an Emperor must pay his way through life.”

Rama faced his brother. “It must be! It’s all the same, can’t you see? Where there is growth there is decay; where there is prosperity there is ruin; and where there is birth there is death.”

Lakshmana sighed hopelessly. “Well, what will you do?”

“Sita expects to go to the forests tomorrow. Let Sumantra the Charioteer drive you both there, and when you arrive by the river Ganga abandon her.”

“She will die. Your child will die!”

“No,” said Rama. “I command you! Not a word to anyone.”

Lakshmana said, “Surely a king is remote and lonely, and very far from reason. We cannot speak to you. . . .”

Rama said, “Each person can be told what he will understand of the nature of the world, and no more than that—for the rest, take my word. . . .”

Sita was forever beautiful. Wearing her ornaments she turned slowly around and looked at every person there.

“Rama, let me prove my innocence, here before everyone.”

“I give my permission,” said Rama.

Then Sita stepped a little away from him and said, “Mother Earth, if I have been faithful to Rama take me home, hide me!”

Earth rolled and moved beneath our feet. With a great rumbling noise the ground broke apart near Sita and a deep chasm opened, lighted from below with bright lights like lightning flashes, from the castles of the Naga serpent kings. . . .

On that throne sat Mother Earth. Earth was not old, she was fair to look on, she was not sad but smiling. She wore flowers and a girdle of seas. Earth supports all life, but she feels no burden in all that. She is patient. She was patient then, under the Sun and Moon and through the rainfalls of countless years. She was patient with seasons and with kings and farmers; she endured all things and bore no line of care from it.

But this was the end of her long patience with Rama. Earth looked at her husband Janaka and smiled. Then she stretched out her arms and took her only child Sita on her lap. She folded her beautiful arms around her daughter and laid Sita’s head softly against her shoulder as a mother would. Earth stroked her hair with her fair hands, and Sita closed her eyes like a little girl.

The throne sank back underground and they all were gone; the Nagas dove beneath the ground and the crevice closed gently over them, forever.

How does this story reflect some of the basic values of traditional Indian civilization? Why do you think it was necessary for the story to have an unhappy ending, unlike Homer’s epic The Odyssey, which ends with the return of the hero Odysseus to his wife, Penelope, after many arduous travels?

The Exuberant World of Indian Culture

famous stupa at Sanchi, begun under Ashoka and completed two centuries later.

The final form of early Indian architecture is the rock chamber carved out of a cliff on the side of a mountain. Ashoka began the construction of these chambers to provide rooms to house monks or wandering ascetics and to serve as halls for religious ceremonies. The chambers were rectangular, with pillars, an altar, and a vault, reminiscent of Roman basilicas in the West. The three most famous chambers of this period are at Bhaja, Karli, and Ajanta (uh-JUHN-tuh); the last one contains twenty-nine rooms (see the comparative illustration on p. 60).

All three forms of architecture were embellished with detailed reliefs and freestanding statues of deities, other human figures, and animals that are permeated with a sense of nature and the vitality of life. Many reflect an amalgamation of popular and sacred themes, of Buddhist, Vedic, and
pre-Aryan religious motifs, such as male and female earth spirits. Until the second century C.E., Siddhartha Gautama was represented only through symbols, such as the wheel of life, the Bodhi tree, and the footprint, perhaps because artists deemed it improper to portray him in human form, since he had escaped his corporeal confines into enlightenment. After the spread of Mahayana Buddhism in the second century, when the Buddha was no longer portrayed as a teacher but rather as a god, his image began to appear in stone as an object for divine worship.

By this time, India had established its own unique religious art. The art is permeated by sensuousness and exuberance and is often overtly sexual. These scenes are meant to express otherworldly delights, not the pleasures of this world. The sensuous paradise that adorned the religious art of ancient India represented salvation and fulfillment for the ordinary Indian.

Science
Our knowledge of Indian science is limited by the paucity of written sources, but it is evident that ancient Indians had amassed an impressive amount of scientific knowledge in a number of areas. Especially notable was their work in mathematics, where they devised the numerical system that we know as Arabic numbers and use today, and in astronomy, where they charted the movements of the heavenly bodies.
and recognized the spherical nature of the earth at an early date. Their ideas of physics were similar to those of the Greeks; matter was divided into the five elements of earth, air, fire, water, and ether. Many of their technological achievements are impressive, notably the quality of their textiles and the massive stone pillars erected during the reign of Ashoka. As noted, the pillars weighed up to 50 tons each and were transported many miles to their final destination.

_Sanchi Gate and Stupa._ Constructed during the reign of Emperor Ashoka in the third century B.C.E., the stupa at Sanchi was enlarged over time, eventually becoming the greatest Buddhist monument on the Indian subcontinent. Originally intended to house a relic of the Buddha, the stupa became a holy place for devotion and a familiar form of Buddhist architecture. Sanchi’s four elaborately carved stone gates, each more than 40 feet high, tell stories of the Buddha set in joyful scenes of everyday life. Christian churches would later similarly portray events in the life of Jesus to instruct the faithful.

_Symbols of the Buddha._ Early Buddhist sculptures depicted the Buddha only through visual symbols that represented his life on the path to enlightenment. In this relief from the stupa at Bharhut, carved in the second century B.C.E., we see four devotees paying homage to the Buddha, who is portrayed as a giant wheel dispensing his “wheel of the law.” The riderless horse on the left represents Siddhartha Gautama’s departure from his father’s home as he set out on his search for the meaning of life.
CHAPTER SUMMARY

While the peoples of North Africa and the Middle East were actively building the first civilizations, a similar process was getting under way in the Indus River valley. Much has been learned about the nature of the Indus valley civilization in recent years, but the lack of written records limits our understanding. How did the Harappan people deal with the fundamental human problems mentioned at the close of Chapter 1? The answers remain tantalizingly elusive.

As often happened elsewhere, however, the collapse of Harappan civilization did not lead to the total disappearance of its culture. The new society that eventually emerged throughout the subcontinent after the coming of the Aryans was an amalgam of two highly distinctive cultures, each of which made a significant contribution to the politics, social institutions, and creative impulse of ancient Indian civilization.

With the rise of the Mauryan dynasty in the fourth century B.C.E., the distinctive features of a great civilization begin to be clearly visible. It was extensive in its scope, embracing the entire Indian subcontinent and eventually, in the form of Buddhism and Hinduism, spreading to China and Southeast Asia. But the underlying ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity of the Indian people posed a constant challenge to the unity of the state. After the collapse of the Mauryas, the subcontinent would not come under a single authority again for several hundred years.

In the meantime, another great experiment was taking place far to the northeast, across the Himalaya Mountains. Like many other civilizations of antiquity, the first Chinese state was concentrated on a major river system. And like them, too, its political and cultural achievements eventually spread far beyond their original habitat. In the next chapter, we turn to the civilization of ancient China.

CHAPTER TIMELINE

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CHAPTER REVIEW

Upon Reflection

Q What is the debate over the origins of the Aryan peoples, and why do many historians of India consider it to be such an important question?

Q Why was Buddhism able to make such inroads among the Indian people at a time when Brahmanical beliefs had long been dominant in the subcontinent?

Q What were some of the main characteristics of Indian politics and government during the first millennium B.C.E., and how can they be compared and contrasted with those of ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia?
Key Terms

raja (p. 43)  
kshatriya (p. 43)  
maharajas (p. 44)  
dharma (p. 44)  
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Prakrit (p. 58)

Suggested Reading

THE EMERGENCE OF CIVILIZATION IN INDIA: GENERAL WORKS Several standard histories of India provide a good overview of the ancient period. One of the most readable and reliable is S. Wolpert, New History of India, 7th ed. (New York, 2003). Also see B. Metcalf and T. Metcalf, A Concise History of India (Cambridge, 2001). R. Thapar, Early India: From the Origins to ad 1300 (London, 2002), provides an excellent review of recent scholarship by an Indian historian.

HARAPPAN SOCIETY Because of the relative paucity of archaeological exploration in South Asia, evidence for the Harappan period is not as voluminous as for areas such as Mesopotamia and the Nile valley. Some of the best work has been written by scholars who actually worked at the sites. One fine account is J. M. Kenoyer, Ancient Cities of the Indus Valley Civilization (Karachi, 1998). Commercial relations between Harappa and its neighbors are treated in S. Ratnagar, Encounters: The Westerly Trade of the Harappan Civilization (Oxford, 1981).

For information on the invention of the first writing systems, see J. T. Hooker, ed., Reading the Past: Ancient Writing from Cuneiform to the Alphabet (London, 1990), and A. Hurley, The Alphabet: The History, Evolution, and Design of the Letters We Use Today (New York, 1995).

ESCAPING THE WHEEL OF LIFE: THE RELIGIOUS WORLD OF ANCIENT INDIA There are a number of good books on the introduction of Buddhism into Indian society. The Buddha’s ideals are presented in P. Williams (with A. Tribe), Buddhist Thought: A Complete Introduction to the Indian Tradition (London, 2000). Also see J. Strong, The Buddha: A Short Biography (Oxford, 2004).


THE EXUBERANT WORLD OF INDIAN CULTURE There are a number of excellent surveys of Indian art, including the concise Indian Art, rev. ed. (London, 1997), by R. Craven. See also V. Dehejia, Devi: The Great Goddess (Washington, D.C., 1999) and Indian Art (London, 1997).


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Chapter Summary