

India
AP World History
Kienast

The earliest traces of civilization in the Indian subcontinent are to be found in places along, or close, to the Indus river. Excavations first conducted in 1921-22, in the ancient cities of Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro, both now in Pakistan, pointed to a highly complex civilization that first developed some 4,500-5,000 years ago, and subsequent archaeological and historical research has now furnished us with a more detailed picture of the Indus Valley Civilization and its inhabitants.

The Indus Valley people were most likely Dravidians, who may have been pushed down into south India when the Aryans, with their more advanced military technology, commenced their migrations to India around 2,000 BCE. The Dravidians probably built their cities in Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro due to geographical advantages. Both are located centrally between people trading from India to Mesopotamia. Traders had to go through both cities in order to trade. All of the Indus cities also benefitted from steady rains brought to them by seasonal winds that blew off the Indian Ocean, called monsoons.

Though the Indus Valley script remains undeciphered down to the present day, the numerous seal stones discovered during the excavations, as well as statuary and pottery, not to mention the ruins of numerous Indus Valley cities, have enabled scholars to construct a reasonably plausible account of the Indus Valley Civilization. Seal stones, carved stones that were used to stamp documents or agreements to make them official, were used in trade and found as far away as Mesopotamia, providing evidence of long-distanced trade.

Some kind of centralized state, and certainly fairly extensive town planning, is suggested by the layout of the great cities of Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro. The same kind of burnt brick appears to have been used in the construction of buildings in cities that were as much as several hundred miles apart. The weights and measures show a very considerable regularity. The Indus Valley people domesticated animals, and harvested various crops, such as cotton, sesame, peas, barley, and cotton. In most respects, the Indus Valley Civilization appears to have been urban, defying both the predominant idea of India as an eternally and essentially agricultural civilization, as well as the notion that the change from 'rural' to 'urban' represents something of a logical progression. The Indus Valley people had a merchant class that, evidence suggests, engaged in extensive trading.

One of the great mysteries of early Indian society is the question about how this civilization declined. We do know that India was taken over by a group of people called the Aryans, who were likely from Central Asia. The first attacks on outlying villages by Aryans appear to have taken place around 2,000 BCE. For centuries after the Aryan invasion, India was divided into small states. Each state had its own ruler and India had no central government. Then, in the 300s BCE, a foreign conqueror, Alexander the Great, took over part of northwestern India. His armies soon left, but his influence continued to affect Indian society. Inspired by Alexander's example, a strong leader soon united India for the first time.

In the 320s BCE a military leader named Chandragupta Maurya (kuhn-druh-GOOP-tuhMOUR-yuh) seized control of the entire northern part of India. By doing so, he founded the Mauryan Empire. Mauryan rule lasted for about 150 years. Around 270 BCE Chandragupta's grandson Asoka (uh-SOH-kuh) became king. Asoka was a strong ruler, the strongest of all the Mauryan emperors. He extended Mauryan rule over most of India. In conquering other kingdoms, Asoka made his own empire both stronger and richer.

For many years, Asoka watched his armies fight bloody battles against other peoples. A few years into his rule, however, Asoka converted to Buddhism. When he did, he swore that he would not launch any more wars of conquest. After converting to Buddhism, Asoka had the time and resources to improve the lives of his people. He had wells dug and roads built throughout the empire. Along these roads, workers planted shade trees and built rest houses for weary travelers. He also encouraged the spread of Buddhism in India and the rest of Asia by sending missionaries to lands all over Asia, using trade routes in the Indian Ocean to spread Buddhism as far East as Indonesia. Asoka also used architecture to promote Buddhism, synthesizing Buddhist and Hindu architecture. An example of this synthesis would be brahminical temples, which were Hindu style temples that allowed for the practice of Buddhism. Asoka died in 233 BCE, and the empire began to fall apart soon afterward. His sons fought each other for power, and invaders threatened the empire. In 184 BCE the last Mauryan king was killed by one of his own generals. India divided into smaller states once again.

After the collapse of the Mauryan Empire, India remained divided for about 500 years. During that time, Buddhism continued to prosper and spread in India, and so the popularity of Hinduism declined. Eventually, however, a new dynasty was established in India. It was the Gupta (GOOP-tuh) Dynasty, which took over India around CE 320. Under the Guptas, India was once again united, and it once again became prosperous. The first Gupta emperor was Chandragupta I. Although their names are similar, he was not related to Chandragupta Maurya. From his base in northern India, Chandragupta's armies invaded and conquered neighboring lands. Eventually he brought much of the northern part of India under his control.

Indian civilization flourished under the Gupta rulers. These rulers were Hindu, so Hinduism became India's major religion. The Gupta kings built many Hindu temples, some of which became models for later Indian architecture. They also promoted a revival of Hindu writings and worship practices. Although they were Hindus, the Gupta rulers also supported the religious beliefs of Buddhism and Jainism. They promoted Buddhist art and built Buddhist temples. Gupta kings believed the social order of the Hindu caste system would strengthen their rule. As a result, the Guptas considered the caste system an important part of Indian society.

Gupta rule remained strong in India until the late 400s. At that time the Huns, a group from Central Asia, invaded India from the northwest. Their fierce attacks drained the Gupta Empire of its power and wealth. As the Hun armies marched farther into India, the Guptas lost hope. By the middle of the 500s, Gupta rule had ended, and India had divided into small kingdoms yet again.