Mauryan and Gupta India
World History
Kienast

By 600 B.C., almost 1,000 years after the Aryan migrations, many small kingdoms were scattered throughout India. In 326 B.C., Alexander the Great brought the Indus Valley in the northwest under Macedonian control—but left almost immediately. Soon after, a great Indian military leader, Chandragupta Maurya (chuhn•druh•GUP•tuh MAH•oor•yuh), seized power. Chandragupta Maurya may have been born in the powerful kingdom of Magadha. Centered on the lower Ganges River, the kingdom was ruled by the Nanda family. Chandragupta gathered an army, killed the unpopular Nanda king, and in about 321 B.C. claimed the throne. This began the Mauryan Empire.

In 301 B.C., Chandragupta's son assumed the throne. He ruled for 32 years. Then Chandragupta's grandson, Asoka (uh•SOH•kuh), brought the Mauryan Empire to its greatest heights. Asoka became king of the Mauryan Empire in 269 B.C. At first, he followed in Chandragupta's footsteps, waging war to expand his empire. During a bloody war against the neighboring state of Kalinga, 100,000 soldiers were slain, and even more civilians perished. Although victorious, Asoka felt sorrow over the slaughter at Kalinga. As a result, he studied Buddhism and decided to rule by the Buddha's teaching of "peace to all beings." Throughout the empire, Asoka erected huge stone pillars inscribed with his new policies. Some edicts guaranteed that Asoka would treat his subjects fairly and humanely. Others preached nonviolence. He also had temples called stupas built, which helped promote the religion. Stupas were actually traditional Hindu temples, so using them for Buddhism helped those who only knew Hinduism to have a familiar place of worship. Still others urged religious toleration—acceptance of people who held different religious beliefs.
Asoka had extensive roads built so that he could visit the far corners of India and so that Hinduism would be spread. He also improved conditions along these roads to make travel easier for his officials and to improve communication in the vast empire. For example, every nine miles he had wells dug and rest houses built. This allowed travelers to stop and refresh themselves. Such actions demonstrated Asoka's concern for his subjects' well-being. Asoka also improved trade along the Indian Ocean trade routes, improving ports and encouraging trade. Improving ocean trade also helped spread Buddhism. Noble as his policies of toleration and nonviolence were, they failed to hold the empire together after Asoka died in 232 B.C.

After 500 years of invasion and turmoil, a strong leader again arose in the northern state of Magadha. His name was Chandra Gupta (GUP•tuh), but he was no relation to India's first emperor, Chandragupta Maurya. India's second empire, the Gupta Empire, oversaw a great flowering of Indian civilization, especially Hindu culture. The Gupta Empire ended up adopting Hinduism due to the structure of the caste system. Having a social class system kept people in their place and prevented rebellion.

The Mauryan and Gupta Empires also promoted Buddhism and Hinduism. Both religions are similar in that they are founded on the concepts of the universal spirit, karma and reincarnation. They differ in how their followers believe a person gets to the universal spirit.

Buddhism

Historians estimate that the founder of Buddhism, Siddhartha Gautama, lived from 566 to 480 B.C. The son of an Indian warrior-king, Gautama led an extravagant life through early adulthood, reveling in the privileges of his social caste. But when he bored of the indulgences of royal life, Gautama wandered into the world in search of understanding. After encountering an old man, an ill man, a corpse and an ascetic, Gautama was convinced that suffering lay at the end of all existence. He renounced his princely title and became a monk, depriving himself of worldly possessions in the hope of comprehending the truth of the world around him. The culmination of his search came while meditating beneath a tree, where he finally understood how to be free from suffering, and ultimately, to achieve salvation. Following this epiphany, Gautama was known as the Buddha, meaning the "Enlightened One." The Buddha spent the remainder of his life journeying about India, teaching others what he had come to understand.

The Four Noble Truths comprise the essence of Buddha's teachings, though they leave much left unexplained. They are the truth of suffering, the truth of the cause of suffering, the truth of the end of suffering, and the truth of the path that leads to the end of suffering. More simply put, suffering exists; it has a cause; it has an end; and it has a cause to bring about its end. The notion of suffering is not intended to convey a negative world view, but rather, a pragmatic perspective that deals with the world as it is, and attempts to rectify it. The concept of pleasure is not denied, but acknowledged as fleeting. Pursuit of pleasure can only continue what is ultimately an unquenchable thirst. The same logic belies an understanding of happiness. In the end, only aging, sickness, and death are certain and unavoidable.

The Four Noble Truths are a contingency plan for dealing with the suffering humanity faces -- suffering of a physical kind, or of a mental nature. The First Truth identifies the presence of suffering. The Second Truth, on the other hand, seeks to determine the cause of suffering. In Buddhism, desire and ignorance lie at the root of suffering. By desire, Buddhists refer to craving pleasure, material goods, and immortality, all of which are wants that can never be satisfied. As a result, desiring them can only bring suffering. Ignorance, in comparison, relates to not seeing the world as it actually is. Without the capacity for mental concentration and insight, Buddhism explains, one's mind is left undeveloped, unable to grasp the true nature of things. Vices, such as greed, envy, hatred and anger, derive from this ignorance.

The Third Noble Truth, the truth of the end of suffering, has dual meaning, suggesting either the end of suffering in this life, on earth, or in the spiritual life, through achieving Nirvana. When one has achieved Nirvana, which is a transcendent state free from suffering and our worldly cycle of birth and rebirth, spiritual enlightenment has been reached. The Fourth Noble truth charts the method for attaining the end of suffering, known to Buddhists as the Noble Eightfold Path. The steps of the Noble Eightfold Path are Right Understanding, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration. Moreover, there are three themes into which the Path is divided: good moral conduct (Understanding, Thought, Speech); meditation and mental development (Action, Livelihood, Effort), and wisdom or insight (Mindfulness and Concentration).

Contrary to what is accepted in contemporary society, the Buddhist interpretation of karma does not refer to preordained fate. Karma refers to good or bad actions a person takes during her

lifetime. Good actions, which involve either the absence of bad actions, or actual positive acts, such as generosity, righteousness, and meditation, bring about happiness in the long run. Bad actions, such as lying, stealing or killing, bring about unhappiness in the long run. The weight that actions carry is determined by five conditions: frequent, repetitive action; determined, intentional action; action performed without regret; action against extraordinary persons; and action toward those who have helped one in the past. Finally, there is also neutral karma, which derives from acts such as breathing, eating or sleeping. Neutral karma has no benefits or costs.

Karma plays out in the Buddhism cycle of rebirth. There are six separate planes into which any living being can be reborn -- three fortunate realms, and three unfortunate realms. Those with favorable, positive karma are reborn into one of the fortunate realms: the realm of demigods, the realm of gods, and the realm of men. While the demigods and gods enjoy gratification unknown to men, they also suffer unceasing jealousy and envy. The realm of man is considered the highest realm of rebirth. Humanity lacks some of the extravagances of the demigods and gods, but is also free from their relentless conflict. Similarly, while inhabitants of the three unfortunate realms -- of animals, ghosts and hell -- suffer untold suffering, the suffering of the realm of man is far less.

The realm of man also offers one other aspect lacking in the other five planes, an opportunity to achieve enlightenment, or Nirvana. Given the sheer number of living things, to be born human is to Buddhists a precious chance at spiritual bliss, a rarity that one should not forsake.

Hinduism

Common to virtually all Hindus are certain beliefs, including, but not limited to, the following:

- a belief in many gods, which are seen as manifestations of a single unity.
- a belief in the universal law of cause and effect (karma) and reincarnation
- a belief in the possibility of liberation and release (moksha) by which the endless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth (samsara) can be resolved

Hinduism is bound to the hierarchical structure of the caste system, a categorization of members of society into defined social classes. An individual's position in the caste system is thought to be a reflection of accumulated merit in past lives (karma).

Observance of the dharma, or behavior consistent with one's caste and status, is discussed in many early philosophical texts. Not every religious practice can be undertaken by all members of society. Similarly, different activities are considered appropriate for different stages of life, with study and raising families necessary for early stages, and reflection and renunciation goals of later years. A religious life need not be spiritual to the exclusion of worldly pleasures or rewards, such as the pursuit of material success and (legitimate) pleasure, depending on one's position in life. Hindus believe in the importance of the observation of appropriate behavior, including numerous rituals, and the ultimate goal of moksha, the release or liberation from the endless cycle of birth.

Moksha is the ultimate spiritual goal of Hinduism. How does one pursue moksha? The goal is to reach a point where you detach yourself from the feelings and perceptions that tie you to the world, leading to the realization of the ultimate unity of things—the soul (atman) connected with

the universal (Brahman). To get to this point, one can pursue various paths: the way of knowledge, the way of appropriate actions or works, or the way of devotion to God.

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 Candragupta 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 Candragupta’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. Ashoka 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 Candra Gupta I. Although their names are similar, he was not related to Candragupta Maurya. From his base in northern India, Candra Gupta’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.