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The History of Ancient India

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The earliest imprints of human activities in India go back to the Paleolithic Age, roughly between 400,000 and 200,000 B.C. Stone implements and cave paintings from this period have been discovered in many parts of the South Asia. Evidence of domestication of animals, the adoption of agriculture, permanent village settlements, and wheel-turned pottery dating from the middle of the sixth millennium B.C. has been found in the foothills of Sindh and Baluchistan (or Balochistan in current Pakistani usage), both in present-day Pakistan. One of the first great civilizations—with a writing system, urban centers, and a diversified social and economic system—appeared around 3,000 B.C. along the Indus River valley in Punjab and Sindh. It covered more than 800,000 square kilometers, from the borders of Baluchistan to the deserts of Rajasthan, from the Himalayan foothills to the southern tip of Gujarat. The remnants of two major cities—Mohenjo-daro and Harappa—reveal remarkable engineering feats of uniform urban planning and carefully executed layout, water supply, and drainage. Excavations at these sites and later archaeological digs at about seventy other locations in India and Pakistan provide a composite picture of what is now generally known as Harappan culture (2500-1600 B.C.).

The major cities contained a few large buildings including a citadel, a large bath—perhaps for personal and communal ablution—differentiated living quarters, flat-roofed brick houses, and fortified administrative or religious centers enclosing meeting halls and granaries. Essentially a city culture, Harappan life was supported by extensive agricultural production and by commerce, which included trade with Sumer in southern Mesopotamia (modern Iraq). The people made tools and weapons from copper and bronze but not iron. Cotton was woven and dyed for clothing; wheat, rice, and a variety of vegetables and fruits were cultivated; and a number of animals, including the humped bull, were domesticated. Harappan culture was conservative and remained relatively unchanged for centuries; whenever cities were rebuilt after periodic flooding, the new level of construction closely followed the previous

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pattern. Although stability, regularity, and conservatism seem to have been the hallmarks of this people, it is unclear who wielded authority, whether an aristocratic, priestly, or commercial minority.

By far the most exquisite but most obscure Harappan artifacts unearthed to date are steatite seals found in abundance at Mohenjo-daro. These small, flat, and mostly square objects with human or animal motifs provide the most accurate picture there is of Harappan life. They also have inscriptions generally thought to be in the Harappanscript, which has eluded scholarly attempts at deciphering it. Debate abounds as to whether the script represents numbers or an alphabet, and, if an alphabet, whether it is proto-Dravidian or proto-Sanskrit.

The possible reasons for the decline of Harappan civilization have long troubled scholars. Invaders from central and western Asia are considered by some historians to have been the “destroyers” of Harappan cities, but this view is open to reinterpretation. More plausible explanations are recurrent floods caused by tectonic earth movement, soil salinity, and desertification.

VEDIC ARYANS

A series of migrations by Indo-European-speaking seminomads took place during the second millennium B.C. Known as Aryans, these preliterate pastoralists spoke an early form of Sanskrit, which has close philological similarities to other Indo-European languages, such as Avestan in Iran and ancient Greek and Latin. The term Aryan meant pure and implied the invaders' conscious attempts at retaining their tribal identity and roots while maintaining a social distance from earlier inhabitants.

Although archaeology has not yielded proof of the identity of the Aryans, the evolution and spread of their culture across the Indo-Gangetic Plain is generally undisputed. Modern knowledge of the early stages of this process rests on a body of sacred texts: the four Vedas (collections of hymns, prayers, and liturgy), the Brahmanas and the Upanishads (commentaries on Vedic rituals and philosophical treatises), and the Puranas (traditional mythic-historical works). The sanctity accorded to these texts and the manner of their preservation over

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several millennia—by an unbroken oral tradition—make them part of the living Hindu tradition.

These sacred texts offer guidance in piecing together Aryan beliefs and activities. The Aryans were a pantheistic people, following their tribal chieftain or raja, engaging in wars with each other or with other alien ethnic groups, and slowly becoming settled agriculturalists with consolidated territories and differentiated occupations. Their skills in using horse-drawn chariots and their knowledge of astronomy and mathematics gave them a military and technological advantage that led others to accept their social customs and religious beliefs. By around 1,000 B.C., Aryan culture had spread over most of India north of the Vindhya Range and in the process assimilated much from other cultures that preceded it.

The Aryans brought with them a new language, a new pantheon of anthropomorphic gods, a patrilineal and patriarchal family system, and a new social order, built on the religious and philosophical rationales of varnashramadharma . Although precise translation into English is difficult, the concept varnashramadharma , the bedrock of Indian traditional social organization, is built on three fundamental notions: varna (originally, “color,” but later taken to mean social class—see Glossary), ashrama (stages of life such as youth, family life, detachment from the material world, and renunciation), and dharma (duty, righteousness, or sacred cosmic law). The underlying belief is that present happiness and future salvation are contingent upon one’s ethical or moral conduct; therefore, both society and individuals are expected to pursue a diverse but righteous path deemed appropriate for everyone based on one’s birth, age, and station in life. The original three-tiered society—Brahman (priest), Kshatriya (warrior), and Vaishya (commoner)—eventually expanded into four in order to absorb the subjugated people—Shudra (servant)—or even five, when the outcaste peoples are considered.

The basic unit of Aryan society was the extended and patriarchal family. A cluster of related families constituted a village, while several villages formed a tribal unit. Child marriage, as practiced in later eras, was uncommon, but the partners’ involvement in the selection of a mate and dowry and bride-price were customary. The birth of a son was welcome because he could later tend the herds, bring honor in battle, offer

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sacrifices to the gods, and inherit property and pass on the family name. Monogamy was widely accepted although polygamy was not unknown, and even polyandry is mentioned in later writings. Ritual suicide of widows was expected at a husband's death, and this might have been the beginning of the practice known as sati in later centuries, when the widow actually burnt herself on her husband's funeral pyre.

Permanent settlements and agriculture led to trade and other occupational differentiation. As lands along the Ganga (or Ganges) were cleared, the river became a trade route, the numerous settlements on its banks acting as markets. Trade was restricted initially to local areas, and barter was an essential component of trade, cattle being the unit of value in large-scale transactions, which further limited the geographical reach of the trader. Custom was law, and kings and chief priests were the arbiters, perhaps advised by certain elders of the community. An Aryan raja, or king, was primarily a military leader, who took a share from the booty after successful cattle raids or battles. Although the rajas had managed to assert their authority, they scrupulously avoided conflicts with priests as a group, whose knowledge and austere religious life surpassed others in the community, and the rajas compromised their own interests with those of the priests.

KINGDOMS AND EMPIRES

From their original settlements in the Punjab region, the Aryans gradually began to penetrate eastward, clearing dense forests and establishing "tribal" settlements along the Ganga and Yamuna (Jamuna) plains between 1500 and ca. 800 B.C. By around 500 B.C., most of northern India was inhabited and had been brought under cultivation, facilitating the increasing knowledge of the use of iron implements, including ox-drawn plows, and spurred by the growing population that provided voluntary and forced labor. As riverine and inland trade flourished, many towns along the Ganga became centers of trade, culture, and luxurious living. Increasing population and surplus production provided the bases for the emergence of independent states with fluid territorial boundaries over which disputes frequently arose.

The rudimentary administrative system headed by tribal chieftains was transformed by a number of regional republics or hereditary monarchies that devised ways to appropriate revenue and to conscript

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labor for expanding the areas of settlement and agriculture farther east and south, beyond the Narmada River. These emergent states collected revenue through officials, maintained armies, and built new cities and highways. By 600 B.C., sixteen such territorial powers—including the Magadha, Kosala, Kuru, and Gandhara—stretched across the North India plains from modern-day Afghanistan to Bangladesh. The right of a king to his throne, no matter how it was gained, was usually legitimized through elaborate sacrifice rituals and genealogies concocted by priests who ascribed to the king divine or superhuman origins.

The victory of good over evil is epitomized in the epic Ramayana (The Travels of Rama, or Ram in the preferred modern form), while another epic, Mahabharata (Great Battle of the Descendants of Bharata), spells out the concept of dharma and duty. More than 2,500 years later, Mohandas Karamchand (Mahatma) Gandhi, the father of modern India, used these concepts in the fight for independence. The Mahabharata records the feud between Aryan cousins that culminated in an epic battle in which both gods and mortals from many lands allegedly fought to the death, and the Ramayana recounts the kidnapping of Sita, Rama's wife, by Ravana, a demonic king of Lanka (Sri Lanka), her rescue by her husband (aided by his animal allies), and Rama's coronation, leading to a period of prosperity and justice. In the late twentieth century, these epics remain dear to the hearts of Hindus and are commonly read and enacted in many settings. In the 1980s and 1990s, Ram's story has been exploited by Hindu militants and politicians to gain power, and the much disputed Ramjanmabhumi, the birth site of Ram, has become an extremely sensitive communal issue, potentially pitting Hindu majority against Muslim minority

THE MAURYAN EMPIRE

By the end of the sixth century B.C., India's northwest was integrated into the Persian Achaemenid Empire and became one of its satrapies. This integration marked the beginning of administrative contacts between Central Asia and India.

Although Indian accounts to a large extent ignored Alexander the Great's Indus campaign in 326 B.C., Greek writers recorded their impressions of the general conditions prevailing in South Asia during this period. Thus, the year 326 B.C. provides the first clear and historically

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verifiable date in Indian history. A two-way cultural fusion between several Indo-Greek elements—especially in art, architecture, and coinage—occurred in the next several hundred years. North India's political landscape was transformed by the emergence of Magadha in the eastern Indo-Gangetic Plain. In 322 B.C., Magadha, under the rule of Chandragupta Maurya, began to assert its hegemony over neighboring areas. Chandragupta, who ruled from 324 to 301 B.C., was the architect of the first Indian imperial power—the Mauryan Empire (326-184 B.C.)—whose capital was Pataliputra, near modern-day Patna, in Bihar.

Situated on rich alluvial soil and near mineral deposits, especially iron, Magadha was at the center of bustling commerce and trade. The capital was a city of magnificent palaces, temples, a university, a library, gardens, and parks, as reported by Megasthenes, the third-century B.C. Greek historian and ambassador to the Mauryan court. Legend states that Chandragupta's success was due in large measure to his adviser Kautilya, the Brahman author of the Arthashastra (Science of Material Gain), a textbook that outlined governmental administration and political strategy. There was a highly centralized and hierarchical government with a large staff, which regulated tax collection, trade and commerce, industrial arts, mining, vital statistics, welfare of foreigners, maintenance of public places including markets and temples, and prostitutes. A large standing army and a well-developed espionage system were maintained. The empire was divided into provinces, districts, and villages governed by a host of centrally appointed local officials, who replicated the functions of the central administration.

Ashoka, grandson of Chandragupta, ruled from 269 to 232 B.C. and was one of India's most illustrious rulers. Ashoka's inscriptions chiseled on rocks and stone pillars located at strategic locations throughout his empire—such as Lampaka (Laghman in modern Afghanistan), Mahastan (in modern Bangladesh), and Brahmagiri (in Karnataka)—constitute the second set of datable historical records. According to some of the inscriptions, in the aftermath of the carnage resulting from his campaign against the powerful kingdom of Kalinga (modern Orissa), Ashoka renounced bloodshed and pursued a policy of nonviolence or ahimsa, espousing a theory of rule by righteousness. His toleration for different religious beliefs and languages reflected the realities of India's regional pluralism although he personally seems to have followed Buddhism. Early

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Buddhist stories assert that he convened a Buddhist council at his capital, regularly undertook tours within his realm, and sent Buddhist missionary ambassadors to Sri Lanka.

Contacts established with the Hellenistic world during the reign of Ashoka's predecessors served him well. He sent diplomatic-cum-religious missions to the rulers of Syria, Macedonia, and Epirus, who learned about India's religious traditions, especially Buddhism. India's northwest retained many Persian cultural elements, which might explain Ashoka's rock inscriptions—such inscriptions were commonly associated with Persian rulers. Ashoka's Greek and Aramaic inscriptions found in Kandahar in Afghanistan may also reveal his desire to maintain ties with people outside of India.

After the disintegration of the Mauryan Empire in the second century B.C., South Asia became a collage of regional powers with overlapping boundaries. India's unguarded northwestern border again attracted a series of invaders between 200 B.C. and A.D. 300. As the Aryans had done, the invaders became "Indianized" in the process of their conquest and settlement. Also, this period witnessed remarkable intellectual and artistic achievements inspired by cultural diffusion and syncretism. The Indo-Greeks, or the Bactrians, of the northwest contributed to the development of numismatics; they were followed by another group, the Shakas (or Scythians), from the steppes of Central Asia, who settled in western India. Still other nomadic people, the Yuezhi, who were forced out of the Inner Asian steppes of Mongolia, drove the Shakas out of northwestern India and established the Kushana Kingdom (first century B.C.-third century A.D.). The Kushana Kingdom controlled parts of Afghanistan and Iran, and in India the realm stretched from Purushapura (modern Peshawar, Pakistan) in the northwest, to Varanasi (Uttar Pradesh) in the east, and to Sanchi (Madhya Pradesh) in the south. For a short period, the kingdom reached still farther east, to Pataliputra.

The Kushana Kingdom was the crucible of trade among the Indian, Persian, Chinese, and Roman empires and controlled a critical part of the legendary Silk Road. Kanishka, who reigned for two decades starting around A.D. 78, was the most noteworthy Kushana ruler. He converted to Buddhism and convened a great Buddhist council in Kashmir. The Kushanas were patrons of Gandharan art, a synthesis between Greek and

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Indian styles, and Sanskrit literature. They initiated a new era called Shaka in A.D. 78, and their calendar, which was formally recognized by India for civil purposes starting on March 22, 1957, is still in use.

THE DECCAN AND THE SOUTH

During the Kushana Dynasty, an indigenous power, the Satavahana Kingdom (first century B.C.-third century A.D.), rose in the Deccan in southern India. The Satavahana, or Andhra, Kingdom was considerably influenced by the Mauryan political model, although power was decentralized in the hands of local chieftains, who used the symbols of Vedic religion and upheld the varnashramadharma. The rulers, however, were eclectic and patronized Buddhist monuments, such as those in Ellora (Maharashtra) and Amaravati (Andhra Pradesh). Thus, the Deccan served as a bridge through which politics, trade, and religious ideas could spread from the north to the south.

Farther south were three ancient Tamil kingdoms—Chera (on the west), Chola (on the east), and Pandya (in the south)—frequently involved in internecine warfare to gain regional supremacy. They are mentioned in Greek and Ashokan sources as lying at the fringes of the Mauryan Empire. A corpus of ancient Tamil literature, known as Sangam (academy) works, including Tolkappiam, a manual of Tamil grammar by Tolkappiyar, provides much useful information about their social life from 300 B.C. to A.D. 200. There is clear evidence of encroachment by Aryan traditions from the north into a predominantly indigenous Dravidian culture in transition.

Dravidian social order was based on different ecoregions rather than on the Aryan varna paradigm, although the Brahmans had a high status at a very early stage. Segments of society were characterized by matriarchy and matrilineal succession—which survived well into the nineteenth century—cross-cousin marriage, and strong regional identity. Tribal chieftains emerged as “kings” just as people moved from pastoralism toward agriculture, sustained by irrigation based on rivers, small-scale tanks (as man-made ponds are called in India) and wells, and brisk maritime trade with Rome and Southeast Asia.

Discoveries of Roman gold coins in various sites attest to extensive South Indian links with the outside world. As with Pataliputra in the

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northeast and Taxila in the northwest (in modern Pakistan), the city of Madurai, the Pandyan capital (in modern Tamil Nadu), was the center of intellectual and literary activities. Poets and bards assembled there under royal patronage at successive concourses and composed anthologies of poems, most of which have been lost. By the end of the first century B.C., South Asia was crisscrossed by overland trade routes, which facilitated the movements of Buddhist and Jain missionaries and other travelers and opened the area to a synthesis of many cultures.

GUPTA AND HARSHA

The Classical Age refers to the period when most of North India was reunited under the Gupta Empire (ca. A.D. 320-550). Because of the relative peace, law and order, and extensive cultural achievements during this period, it has been described as a “golden age” that crystallized the elements of what is generally known as Hindu culture with all its variety, contradiction, and synthesis. The golden age was confined to the north, and the classical patterns began to spread south only after the Gupta Empire had vanished from the historical scene.

The military exploits of the first three rulers—Chandragupta I (ca. 319-335), Samudragupta (ca. 335-376), and Chandragupta II (ca. 376-415)—brought all of North India under their leadership. From Pataliputra, their capital, they sought to retain political preeminence as much by pragmatism and judicious marriage alliances as by military strength. Despite their self-conferred titles, their overlordship was threatened and by 500 ultimately ruined by the Hunas (a branch of the White Huns emanating from Central Asia), who were yet another group in the long succession of ethnically and culturally different outsiders drawn into India and then woven into the hybrid Indian fabric.

Under Harsha Vardhana (or Harsha, r. 606-47), North India was reunited briefly, but neither the Guptas nor Harsha controlled a centralized state, and their administrative styles rested on the collaboration of regional and local officials for administering their rule rather than on centrally appointed personnel. The Gupta period marked a watershed of Indian culture: the Guptas performed Vedic sacrifices to legitimize their rule, but they also patronized Buddhism, which continued to provide an alternative to Brahmanical orthodoxy.

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The most significant achievements of this period, however, were in religion, education, mathematics, art, and Sanskrit literature and drama. The religion that later developed into modern Hinduism witnessed a crystallization of its components: major sectarian deities, image worship, devotionism, and the importance of the temple. Education included grammar, composition, logic, metaphysics, mathematics, medicine, and astronomy. These subjects became highly specialized and reached an advanced level.

The Indian numeral system—sometimes erroneously attributed to the Arabs, who took it from India to Europe where it replaced the Roman system—and the decimal system are Indian inventions of this period. Aryabhatta's expositions on astronomy in 499, moreover, gave calculations of the solar year and the shape and movement of astral bodies with remarkable accuracy. In medicine, Charaka and Sushruta wrote about a fully evolved system, resembling those of Hippocrates and Galen in Greece. Although progress in physiology and biology was hindered by religious injunctions against contact with dead bodies, which discouraged dissection and anatomy, Indian physicians excelled in pharmacopoeia, caesarean section, bone setting, and skin grafting.

THE SOUTHERN RIVALS

When Gupta disintegration was complete, the classical patterns of civilization continued to thrive not only in the middle Ganga Valley and the kingdoms that emerged on the heels of Gupta demise but also in the Deccan and in South India, which acquired a more prominent place in history. In fact, from the mid-seventh to the mid-thirteenth centuries, regionalism was the dominant theme of political or dynastic history of South Asia. Three features, as political scientist Radha Champakalakshmi has noted, commonly characterize the sociopolitical realities of this period. First, the spread of Brahmanical religions was a two-way process of Sanskritization of local cults and localization of Brahmanical social order. Second was the ascendancy of the Brahman priestly and landowning groups that later dominated regional institutions and political developments. Third, because of the seesawing of numerous dynasties that had a remarkable ability to survive perennial military attacks, regional kingdoms faced frequent defeats but seldom total annihilation.

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Peninsular India was involved in an eighth-century tripartite power struggle among the Chalukyas (556-757) of Vatapi, the Pallavas (300-888) of Kanchipuram, and the Pandyas (seventh through the tenth centuries) of Madurai. The Chalukya rulers were overthrown by their subordinates, the Rashtrakutas, who ruled from 753 to 973. Although both the Pallava and Pandya kingdoms were enemies, the real struggle for political domination was between the Pallava and Chalukya realms.

Despite interregional conflicts, local autonomy was preserved to a far greater degree in the south where it had prevailed for centuries. The absence of a highly centralized government was associated with a corresponding local autonomy in the administration of villages and districts. Extensive and well-documented overland and maritime trade flourished with the Arabs on the west coast and with Southeast Asia. Trade facilitated cultural diffusion in Southeast Asia, where local elites selectively but willingly adopted Indian art, architecture, literature, and social customs.

The interdynastic rivalry and seasonal raids into each other's territory notwithstanding, the rulers in the Deccan and South India patronized all three religions—Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism. The religions vied with each other for royal favor, expressed in land grants but more importantly in the creation of monumental temples, which remain architectural wonders. The cave temples of Elephanta Island (near Bombay, or Mumbai in Marathi), Ajanta, and Ellora (in Maharashtra), and structural temples of Kanchipuram (in Tamil Nadu) are enduring legacies of otherwise warring regional rulers. By the mid-seventh century, Buddhism and Jainism began to decline as sectarian Hindu devotional cults of Shiva and Vishnu vigorously competed for popular support.

Although Sanskrit was the language of learning and theology in South India, as it was in the north, the growth of the bhakti (devotional) movements enhanced the crystallization of vernacular literature in all four major Dravidian languages: Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, and Kannada; they often borrowed themes and vocabulary from Sanskrit but preserved much local cultural lore. Examples of Tamil literature include two major poems, Cilappatikaram (The Jewelled Anklet) and Manimekalai (The Jewelled Belt); the body of devotional literature of Shaivism and Vaishnavism—Hindu devotional movements; and the reworking of the Ramayana by

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Kamban in the twelfth century. A nationwide cultural synthesis had taken place with a minimum of common characteristics in the various regions of South Asia, but the process of cultural infusion and assimilation would continue to shape and influence India's history through the centuries.

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