4 India's Beginnings

He who worships God must
stand distinct from Him,
So only shall he know the
joyful love of God. For if he say
that God and he are one,
That joy, that love, shall vanish
instantly away.

—"Song of Tukaram"

HOW OLD ARE THE MOST ancient civilizations? Is it possible that the oldest of all are yet to be discovered? Until fairly recently, it was believed that the civilization of India had been founded only some 2,000 years ago—far later than China, Egypt, or Mesopotamia. But in the early twentieth century, archaeologists found that a highly advanced, urbanized civilization had existed since the middle of the third millennium BCE in the valley of the Indus River, in what is now Pakistan. The discovery of this chapter in world history is a dramatic story, and much of the detail is still being pieced together. Enough is known, however, to whet our appetite to know much more, especially about the possible contributions of this civilization to two of the world's leading religious beliefs: Hinduism and Buddhism.

c. 2500–1900 BCE	Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa flourish
c. 1500 BCE	Invasion of Aryans
c. 1500–500 BCE	The Vedic Epoch
563–483 BCE	Life of the Buddha
326 BCE	Invasion by Alexander the Great
320–232 BCE	Mauryan Dynasty

Indus Valley Civilization and Early Trade

As in Mesopotamia and Egypt, the earliest Indian civilization was located in the plain bordering two great streams, the Indus and the Saraswati Rivers. Both flow south and west from the foothills of the Himalayan range, the world's loftiest and most forbidding mountains. The Himalayas are the highest of several ranges that separate India and Pakistan from Tajikistan and China (see Map 4.1).

Archaeologists are still unsure about the precise origins of the **Indus Valley civilization**, but because it was linked with the north and west by trade even before agriculture appeared, Mesopotamian civilization might have influenced its emergence. Farming on the floodplains of the Indus Valley began around

MAP 4.1 The Indian Subcontinent

India is a very large and diverse geographic entity, ringed by the Himalayas and other high mountains to the north and northeast. The usual routes of contact with other peoples have been from the northwest and by sea, from both eastern and western directions. Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa were part of a highly advanced, urbanized ancient civilization that flourished in the valley of the Indus River before the Aryan invasions.

>> MAP QUESTIONS

Examine the map and explain why India is classified as a subcontinent.

View an interactive version of this or a related map online.

6000 BCE, and by 4000 BCE the region had a dense population and numerous fortified farming villages. Soil erosion and frequent, violent flooding constantly plagued settled life along these riverbanks, so preplanning was essential. Evidence of flood-control systems and grid-like street layouts show up in the very deepest (earliest) layers in excavations that archaeologists have carried out in early Indus Valley farming sites.

The third millennium BCE saw explosive growth in the region and the enlargement of towns into cities. As in other early civilizations like Mesopotamia and Egypt, Indus Valley civilization rested firmly on the agrarian base of cereals cultivation—dryland crops like wheat, barley, and cotton. But even more than in other civilizations, it seems, the central role of trade was striking, considering its importance and its endurance. Finds in the Indus Valley of items manufactured from cotton, metals, and lapis lazuli show that southwest Asia already had an extensive trade with northwest India by 2600 BCE; and by 2350 BCE, there even existed Indian settlements in southern Mesopotamia. Professional merchants gave this trade a high degree of organization, and it is likely that it had a major impact on the growth and wealth of Indus urban life. In its earliest stages, this trafficking relied chiefly on land routes, although there was some waterborne trade within the Gulf and along coastal regions of southern Asia. Gradually, sea routes opened into the Indian Ocean, the Red Sea, and the Persian Gulf, allowing for the expansion of early trade. Eventually, this development placed India at the center of a trade network that linked it with the eastern Mediterranean, East Africa, Arabia, and other parts of Asia.

Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa

At two locations on the Indus River, called *Mohenjo-Daro* (mo-HEN-jo-DAH-ro) and *Harappa* (hah-RAP-pah), archaeologists have found the remnants of large, carefully constructed walls and the cities they enclosed. Each city was more than three miles across and probably housed more than 100,000 people. Many smaller towns and villages have also been found under the dust of centuries, scattered along the Indus and its several tributaries in western India.

The cities and villages were built of fired brick and carefully planned. Streets ran at precise right angles, laid out in precise grid patterns. The main thoroughfares were thirty-four feet wide, large enough to allow two large

National Museum of India, New Delhi, India/The Bridgeman Art Library

INDUS VALLEY JEWELRY. The fine workmanship and imagination exhibited here allow us to draw some conclusions about the state of Indus civilization at this epoch—about 2000–1800 BCE. Some of the precious stones in this jewelry had to have been brought from as far away as China. Discoveries of such manufactures as well as others made from metals and ivory throughout the western Indian Ocean suggest the impact trade had on Indian civilization as early as the third millennium BCE.

Robert Harding Picture Library

RUINS OF MOHENJO-DARO. Systematic excavation commenced in the ruins of Mohenjo-Daro in the late nineteenth century, under the auspices of the British colonial government. It continues today, directed by the Pakistani government. Shown here is the Great Bath, a pool and surrounding cells that clearly existed for ritual bathing. Some have suggested that the emphasis on purification by water in present-day Hinduism may go back to these origins.

carts to pass safely and still leave room for several pedestrians, while smaller avenues were nine feet wide. Many of the buildings had two or even three stories, which was unusual for residences in the ancient world. They were built of bricks that were almost always of two sizes, but only those two. The interior dimensions of the houses were almost identical. A sewage canal ran from each house to a larger canal in the street that carried off household wastes. Small statues of gods and goddesses, almost always of the same size and posture, are frequently found in the house foundations.

All this regularity suggests a government that was very powerful in the eyes of its subjects and possibly gained its authority from religious belief. Some experts on Indus civilization believe that it was a *theocracy* (thee-AH-crah-see), in which the priests ruled as representatives of the gods. In no other way, they think, could the government's power have been strong enough to command residential uniformity over a period of centuries, as happened in Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa.

Both cities also contain monumental buildings—probably a communal granary and the temples of the local gods—situated on a citadel. Harappa differs from Mohenjo-Daro in building style and other details, but the similarities are strong enough that the two cities and the surrounding villages are believed to have probably constituted one civilization, sometimes termed *Dravidian.*

For their food, the cities depended on the irrigated farms of the surrounding plain. Like the people of Egypt, the ordinary people apparently enjoyed a high standard of living for many generations. Although scholars have unearthed a good many works of art and figurines, they have been unsuccessful in decoding Harappan writing. This, as well as the long period during which this civilization was forgotten, has hindered scholars' efforts to obtain a detailed knowledge of the people. We still know next to nothing about their religion, their government, the social divisions of the people, and their scientific and intellectual accomplishments. One thing now seems clear, however: The cities and villages were prosperous, expanding settlements from at least 2500 to about 1900 BCE.

Around 1900 BCE, for reasons still only guessed at, they began a long decline, which ended with the abandonment of Mohenjo-Daro about 1200 BCE and Harappa somewhat later. Some evidence indicates that landslides changed the course of the lower Indus and that a noticeable shift

to cooler and drier conditions prevented the continuation of the intensive farming that had supported the cities. Equally likely, the population may have fallen victim to malaria, as the blocked river created mosquito-ridden swamps nearby. Others think that the irrigated land gradually became alkaline and nonproductive, as happened in lower Mesopotamia.

Whatever the role of natural disasters, it is certain that the decline of the Indus Valley was accelerated when the same Indo-European nomads who created the Persian empire began a series of migrations out of their homelands, somewhere north of the Caspian Sea, into Iran and Afghanistan after 1500 BCE. For many of these Proto-Iranians, this was not the end of their pastoralist wanderings. Some continued their movement south from Afghanistan, through the Khyber Pass, and into the Indus Valley. The name by which these people called themselves was closely related to that of their Iranian cousins to the north, namely the **Aryans** (AYR-yanz).

The Vedic Epoch

These Aryans and their Indo-European-speaking relatives were among the earliest nomadic, horse-breeding people of ancient Asia, and their aggressive ways were the terror of other civilizations besides that of the Indus Valley. Many scholars believe that they overwhelmed the agrarian Indian civilizations and set themselves up as a sort of master group, using the Indians as labor to do the farming and trading that the Aryan warriors despised as inferior.

Our knowledge of the Aryans comes largely from their **Vedas** (VAY-dahs), ancient oral epics that were written down only long after the Aryan invasion. So the pictures the Vedas present may be deceptive. We know that the Aryans worshiped gods of the sky and storm, and made impressive use of bronze weaponry and horse-drawn chariots in battle. (Apparently, the Indus Valley people knew the horse only as a beast of burden and were at a disadvantage against the Aryan chariots.) The **Rigveda** (rig-VAY-dah), the oldest and most important Veda, paints a picture of a war-loving, violent folk, led by their *Raja* (RAH-jah), or chieftain, and their magic-working priests.

The Aryans moved on from the agriculturally played-out Indus Valley, preferring instead better-watered regions to the east and south. In time, the Aryans extended their rule across all of northern India, but centered it on the Ganges River and its tributaries. Gradually, they abandoned their nomadic ways and settled down as agriculturists and town dwellers, just as they had elsewhere. Two factors probably contributed to this: the new iron technology the Aryans introduced, which gave them better tools, and the introduction of rice cultivation from the east, supplemented by pepper and spices, which provided more and better foods for their diet. They never conquered the southern half of India, and as a result, the southern culture and religion still differ from those of the north in some respects.

The Beginnings of the Caste System

The Vedas describe the beliefs of a warlike people who saw themselves as the natural masters of the inferior Indians and who reinforced their difference by dividing society into four groups, or classes. The two highest classes of priests and warriors were reserved for the Aryans and their pureblooded descendants. The priests were called **Brahmins** (BRAH-mihns) and originally were superior in status to the warriors, who were called *Kshatrija* (shah-TREE-yah) and evolved over time from warriors to the governing class. The third class, the *Vaishya* (VIE-shyah), was probably the most numerous and included freemen, farmers, and traders. In the fourth and lowest group within the system were the peasant farmers, or *Shudra* (SHOO-drah).

Over the long course of the **Vedic Epoch** (over a thousand years, from 1500 to about 500 BCE), these four classes evolved into something more complex by far: multiple social groups defined by birth, or **caste** (pronounced "cast"). A caste is a social unit into which individuals are born and which dictates most aspects of daily life. It confers a status that cannot be changed. Each caste except the very lowest has special duties and privileges, some of which are economic in nature, whereas others are manifested by dietary and marital restrictions. A high-caste Indian normally has very little contact with lower castes and none at all with the outcastes, or *pariahs* (pah-REYE-yahs). Perhaps a seventh of Indian society still falls into this last category—the untouchables—whose members until recently were treated worse than animals.

The stratification of Indian society begun by the Aryan conquest persists to the present day. The Aryans were gradually absorbed into the indigenous Indian peoples through intermarriage with high-status individuals, but the caste system took ever-stronger root. By the eighteenth century CE, there were more than 3,000 separate subcastes, or *jati* (JAH-tee). Although the number has probably declined since then, the belief that one is born into a group that is fixed by age-old traditions and allows no change is still strong among rural Indians.

Throughout Indian history, caste has had the effect of inhibiting any type of change, particularly social change. Why? Combined with the beliefs of Hinduism (see the next section), caste made it next to impossible for someone born into a low state to climb the ranks of social prestige and privilege. It also limited political power to the uppermost ranks. Caste discouraged or prohibited cultural innovation by those in the lower ranks. Meanwhile, those on top were very content to have things go on forever as they were. Under the Aryan-founded caste system, India became a highly stratified and immobile society.

Hinduism

The religion of the overwhelming majority of Indians is Hinduism, the fourth largest in the world with about one billion adherents. Hinduism is both more and less than a *religion* as the West understands that term: It is a way of life, a philosophical system, an inspiration for art, and the basis of all Indian political theory in the past. But it is not a rigid set of theological doctrines. And it possesses almost innumerable localized variations in manner and content.

In Hinduism's earliest form, this was not the case: Each of the four classes played a rigidly defined role. Vedic (VEH-dik) Hinduism was highly ritualistic and exclusive in nature. The priestly caste—Brahmins—had power by virtue of their mastery of complex ceremonies and their semimagical knowledge of the gods. As in other agrarian civilizations, religious practice was limited to the enactment of highly formal, public rituals that only the priests—the Brahmins in this case—were thought to be competent to direct. Scholars give the name of **Brahminism** to this early form of Hinduism.

Gradually, the more educated people became alienated from this ritual formalism and sought other explanations for the mystery of human fate that allowed them to experience the divine in ways that met their personal spiritual yearnings in more satisfying ways. Following the fifth century BCE, three new modes of thought gradually became established in India: *Jainism* (JEYE-nism), Buddhism, and **Bhakti** (BAHK-tee) **Hinduism**.

Jainism is limited in its historical appeal. It is less a supernatural religion than a philosophy that emphasizes the sacredness of all life. In modern India, the Jains are a small number of high-caste people representing perhaps 2 percent of the total Indian population.

Hinduism retained its caste-based ritual formalism, but gradually a new version called *Bhakti* surfaced. Those who resisted conversion to Buddhism and who remained faithful to the old tradition began apprehending the old Hindu gods in different ways. Rather than remaining as mere abstractions or as capricious super beings demanding worship and sacrifice, these gods steadily assumed more personal attributes that made them more approachable. This change allowed individuals to seek spiritual fulfillment by devoting themselves to individual gods.

In its modern form, the Hindu faith has evolved greatly and is a product of the slow mixing of Brahminism with religions of the earlier agrarian cultures as well as with groups who migrated to the subcontinent in later centuries. Many of Hinduism's basic principles still reflect the patriarchal and class-conscious society that the Aryan conquerors founded. A revealing glimpse at early Hinduism is given by the **Laws of Manu**, excerpted in the Society and Economy box. One's birth family determines his caste, as it does the relationship of men to women and husbands to wives.

But Hinduism is different from the religions of the West in its insistence on the illusory nature of the tangible world and the acceptance of the individual's fate in earthly life. Its most basic principles and beliefs are as follows:

SHIVA IN THE DANCE OF LIFE. One of the great trinity of Hindu deities, Shiva is sometimes portrayed as a female. Shiva is the god who presides over becoming and destroying, representing the Great Wheel of the universe.

1. The nonmaterial, unseen world is the real and permanent one.
2. The universe works as a Great Wheel, with epochs, events, and lives repeating themselves neverendingly. The individual dies, but the soul is immaterial and undying. So it reincarnates (*samsara*), being born, living, and dying again and again and again as the Great Wheel turns and its karma determines the next caste into which it will pass.
3. Conceptually, **karma** (KAHR-mah) resembles the ancient Egyptian *maat* (Chapter 3)—the notion of order and "rightness" that is built into the structure of the universe. Like maat, too, it has a moral dimension: As a soul goes from one life to the next, good and bad deeds committed by an individual in a given life are tallied up. "Justice" is rendered as good karma, which results in birth into a higher caste in the next life—bad karma, into a lower one.
4. One must strive for good karma by following the code of morals prescribed for one's caste, called **dharma** (DAHR-mah), as closely as one can. One meaning of dharma is "duty"; one has a "duty" to obey the rules of caste.

The gods **Brahman** (BRAH-mahn; the impersonal life force), **Shiva** (SHEE-vah; the creator and destroyer), and **Vishnu** (VISH-noo; the preserver) dominate an almost-endless array of supernatural beings. Most Hindus are devotees of either Shiva or Vishnu as the foremost deity, but they worship them in a huge variety of rituals.

When a person has lived a life in perfect accord with his or her dharma, death will lead to final release from reincarnation and the great Wheel of Life. This release is **moksha** (MOHK-shah), and it is the end for which all good Hindus live. Moksha is the end of individuality, and the individual soul is then submerged into the world-soul represented by Brahman. A classic analogy is a raindrop, which, after many transformations, finds its way back to the ocean that originated it and is dissolved therein.

In contrast to Hinduism, Buddhism is, and has long been, one of the great religions of the world. It has adherents in all South and East Asian nations and includes several sects. Buddhism today has the third-largest membership of all faiths after Christianity and Islam. Historically, its appeal has always lain in its highly "democratic" nature: Anyone who seeks the divine can experience it in the Buddhist *nirvana.*

Daily Life and the Position of Women

The abject misery from which India's rural population often has suffered is a relatively recent phenomenon—usually the product of mismanagement or a shortage of agricultural land. Until the last two or three centuries, shortages were almost unknown or limited to small areas. Although the material conditions of village life could not have been high by today's standards, the natives and the Aryan invaders had extensive areas of both irrigable and undeveloped land suitable to agriculture in various forms, and they steadily brought these lands into production for a millennium. When a shortage did threaten the food supply of large populations, emigration to another, less crowded area was the usual and most effective solution.

As in the Near East, Indian tradition regarding the relative status of women shows an initial period of near equality or possibly matriarchy. But with the arrival of the Aryan nomads, female prestige seems to have begun a descent that continued in the Vedic Hindu era. Manu, the legendary lawgiver, established the proper relationships between the sexes once and for all. Gradually, the ritual of widows' suicide (**sati**: SAH-tee) and isolation from all nonfamily males (**purdah**: PURR-dah) became established. The Laws of Manu established that a female's fundamental dharma in all castes was to obey and serve her husband and her sons (see the Society and Economy box).

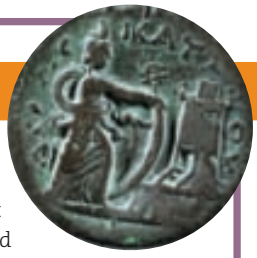
KALI. The Indian goddess of destruction was frequently portrayed in a sexual context, but in this stone representation (fifteenth century CE) from south India, she takes a Buddha-like position while extending her four arms with traditional household implements.

Buddhism

Buddhism began in India as an intellectual and emotional revolt against the emptiness of Vedic ritualism. Originally an earthly philosophy that rejected the idea of immortal life and the gods, it was turned into a supernatural belief system soon after the death of its founder, the Buddha.

Siddhartha Gautama (sih-DAHR-thah GAW-tah-mah; 563–483 BCE), an Indian aristocrat, was the Buddha—or Enlightened One—and his life is fairly well documented (see the Patterns of Belief box). As a young man, he wandered for several years through the north of India seeking more satisfying answers to the riddle of life. Only after intensive meditation was he finally able to come to terms with himself and human existence. He then became the teacher of a large and growing band of disciples, who spread his word gradually throughout the subcontinent and then into East Asia. Buddhism eventually came to be much more important in China and Japan than in India, where it was practically extinct by 1000 CE.

SOCIETY AND ECONOMY



National Maritime Museum, Haifa, Israel/© Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY

The Laws of Manu

The Laws of Manu are an ancient compilation of teachings from Hindu India. Manu was a being simultaneously human and divine, from whom devout Hindus could learn what was needed for perfection and the attainment of moksha. Manu's laws were the cornerstone of Hindu traditional opinion on the rights and duties of the sexes and of family members, as well as castes. These opinions and prejudices did not change substantially until recent times. The attitude of the Laws of Manu toward women and the lower castes are especially revealing. (Note: The Shudra [SHOO-drah] are the lowest of the four original castes of India established during the Aryan epoch.)

> That place where the shudra are very numerous . . . soon entirely perishes, afflicted by disease and famine.
>
> A Brahmin may confidently take the goods of his shudra, because the slave cannot have any possessions and the master may take his property.
>
> A Brahmin who takes a shudra to wife and to his bed will after death sink into Hell; if he begets a child with her, he will lose the rank of Brahmin. The son whom a Brahmin begets through lust upon a shudra female is, although alive, a corpse and hence called a living corpse. A shudra who has intercourse with a woman of a twice-born caste [that is, a Brahmin] shall be punished so: if she was unguarded he loses the offending part [his genitals] and all his property; if she was guarded, everything including his life.
>
> Women . . . give themselves to the handsome and the ugly. Through their passion for men, through their unstable temper, through their natural heartlessness they become disloyal toward their husbands, however carefully they may be guarded. Knowing their disposition, which the lord of creation laid upon them, to be so, every man should most strenuously exert himself to guard them. When creating them, Manu allotted to women a love of their bed, of their seat and of ornament, impure desire, wrath, dishonesty, malice, and bad conduct. . . .
>
> It is the nature of women to seduce men in this world; for that reason the wise are never unguarded in the company of females. For women are able to lead astray in this world not only the fool, but even a learned man, and make of him a slave of desire and wrath.

But the exhortations of Manu are not completely one-sided:

> Reprehensible is the father who gives not his daughter in marriage at the proper time [namely, puberty]; reprehensible is the husband who approaches not his wife in due season, and reprehensible is the son who does not protect his mother after her husband has died.
>
> Drinking spirituous liquors, associating with wicked ones, separation from the husband, rambling abroad, sleeping at unseasonable hours, and dwelling in houses of other men are the six causes of ruin in women.

>> Analyze and Interpret

How do these laws differ, if at all, from the attitudes toward women reflected in the code of Hammurabi? Where did women find better protection and justice, by modern standards?

Source: D. Johnson, ed., *Sources of World Civilization*, Vol. 1. © 1994, Simon & Schuster.

You can read more of the Laws of Manu online.

The **Eightfold Path** to spiritual bliss, or **nirvana** (ner-VAH-nah), demands right (or righteous, we would say) ideas, right thought, right speech, right action, right living, right effort, right consciousness, and right meditation. The person who consistently follows these steps is assured of conquering desire and will, therefore, be released from suffering. The heart of the Buddha's message is that suffering and loss in this life are caused by the desire for an illusory power and happiness. Once the individual understands that power is not desirable and that such happiness is self-deception, the temptation to pursue them will gradually disappear. The individual will then find the serenity of soul and the harmony with nature and fellow human beings that constitute true fulfillment.

Much of the popularity of Buddhism stemmed from its *democracy of spirit.* Everyone—male and female, high and low—was able to discover the Four Truths and follow the Eightfold Path. No one was excluded because of caste restrictions or poverty.

PATTERNS OF BELIEF

The Buddha

Traditions say that Siddhartha Gautama (*c.* 563–483 BCE) was the pampered son of a princely Indian family in the northern borderlands, in present-day Nepal. A member of the kshatrija caste of warrior-governors, the young man had every prospect of a conventionally happy and rewarding life as master of a handful of villages. Married young to a local aristocrat like himself, he dedicated himself to hunting, feasting, and revelry—the usual pursuits of his class and time.

But in his late twenties, a notable change occurred. According to a cherished Buddhist legend, on successive excursions he encountered an aged man, then a sick man, and finally a corpse by the roadside. These reminders of the common fate set the young man thinking about the nature of all human life in a (for him) novel way. Finally, he abandoned home, wife, and family, and set out to find his own answers. In the already-traditional Indian fashion, he became a wandering ascetic, begging a handful of rice to stay alive while seeking truth in meditation.

Years went by as Siddhartha sought to answer his questions. But for a long time, he found no convincing answers—neither in the extreme self-denial practiced by some nor in the mystical contemplation recommended by others. At last, as he sat under the *bodhi* tree (the tree of wisdom) through an agonizingly long night of intensive meditation, enlightenment reached him. He arose, confident in his new perceptions, and began to gather around him the beginnings of the community known as Buddhists ("the enlightened ones").

From that point on, the Buddha developed a philosophy that was a revision of the ruling Vedic Hindu faith of India and, in some important ways, a denial of it. By the time of the Buddha's death, the new faith was firmly established, and some version of his teaching would gradually grow to be the majority viewpoint before being extinguished in the land of its birth.

In the original Buddhism, little attention was given to the role of the supernatural powers in human life or to reincarnation. The gods were thought to exist but to have minimal influence on an individual's karma, or fate. Gods could not assist a person to find what Hindus call moksha and Buddhists nirvana, or the state of release from earthly life and its inherent suffering. But in time, this changed among the majority (Mahayana) Buddhists, who came to look on the Buddha and other bodhisattvas as divine immortals who could be called on for spiritual assistance.

>> Analyze and Interpret

How would the Buddha have received this development during his own lifetime? The answer is not hard to guess, because his rejection of supernatural deities was well known. But it remains true that the very breadth of Buddhist doctrines and practices, which range from simple repetitive chants to the most refined intellectual exercise, has allowed a sizable proportion of humankind to identify with this creed in one or another of its forms.

Contrast the Buddhist emphasis on human beings' capability of finding their own way to serenity with the Zoroastrian convictions you will read about in Chapter 5. Which seems more persuasive? Why?

Buddhism quickly spread among Indians of all backgrounds and regions, carried forth by the Buddha's disciples during his lifetime. What made it so appealing?

RECLINING BUDDHA. A so-called reclining Buddha, one of the frequent colossal representations of the Buddha, on the island of Sri Lanka, the center of the Theravada school of the religion.

Soon after the Buddha's death, his followers made him into a god with eternal life—a thought foreign to his own teaching. His movement also gradually split into two major branches: *Theravada* and *Mahayana* Buddhism.

Theravada (thayr-rah-VAH-dah, or Hinayana), which means "the narrower vehicle," is the stricter version of the faith. Theravada Buddhism emphasizes life in a monastery (**Sangha**) for both men and women, and takes a rather rigorous approach to what a good person who seeks nirvana must believe. It claims to be the pure form of the Buddha's teachings and rejects the idea of the reincarnation of the Master or other enlightened ones (called *bodhisattva;* boh-dih-SAHT-vah) appearing on Earth. It is particularly strong in Sri Lanka and Cambodia.

Mahayana (mah-hah-YAH-nah) Buddhism is much more liberal in its beliefs, viewing the doctrines of the Buddha as a sort of initial step rather than as the ultimate word. The word *Mahayana* means "the larger vehicle," reflecting the belief that there are many ways to salvation. Its faithful believe that there are many buddhas, not just Siddhartha Gautama, and that many more will appear. Monastic life is a good thing for those who can assume it, but most Mahayana Buddhists will never do so and do not feel themselves disadvantaged thereby. Mahayana adherents far outnumber the others and are found in Vietnam, China, Japan, and Korea.

The Mauryan Dynasty

For a century and a half after the Buddha's death, the philosophy he founded steadily gained adherents but remained a distinctly minority view in a land of Hindu believers. In the 330s BCE, however, the invasion of India by Alexander the Great (see Chapter 8) not only brought the first direct contact with Western ideas and art forms but also enabled a brief period of political unity under the **Mauryan** (MOH-ree-yahn) Dynasty, which moved into the vacuum left by Alexander's retreat. The founder of this first historical dynasty in India was Chandragupta Maurya (chan-drah-GUHP-tah MOH-ree-yah), who succeeded in seizing supreme powers in northwestern India upon the withdrawal of the Greeks. The rule of the dynasty was brief but important for India's future. The third and greatest of the Mauryan rulers, **Ashoka** (ah-SHOH-kah; 269–232 BCE), was the outstanding Indian emperor of premodern times, admired by all Indians as the founding spirit of Indian unity and nationhood.

Ashoka's significance stems in large part from his role in spreading the Buddhist faith in India, thereby initiating the tradition of mutual tolerance between religions that is (or used to be) one of the subcontinent's cultural boasts. After a series of successful wars against the Mauryans' neighbors and rivals, Ashoka was shocked by the bloodshed at the battle of *Kalinga* at the midpoint of his reign. Influenced by Buddhist monks, the king became a devout Buddhist and pacifist. The last twenty years of his reign were marked by unprecedented internal prosperity and external peace, thanks mostly to the support he and his Buddhist advisors gave to trade. The inscriptions enunciating his decrees were placed on stone pillars scattered far and wide over his realm, and some of them survive today as the first examples of written Indian language. They and the accounts of a few foreign travelers are the means by which we know anything of Indian government in this early epoch.

After Ashoka's death, his weak successors soon gave up what he had gained, both in defense against invasion and in internal stability. New waves of nomadic horsemen entered India through the gateway to Central Asia, the Khyber Pass (see Map 4.1). Most of them became sedentary in habit soon enough, adopted Indian civilization, and embraced the Buddhist faith. But the political unity established by the Mauryan rulers disintegrated. Four centuries passed before the Gupta Dynasty could reestablish it in the 300s CE.

THE LIONS OF SARNATH. Sarnath was the site where Siddhartha Gautama first preached. The Lions of Sarnath were created by King Ashoka to symbolize the proclamation of Buddhism to the world. The modern Republic of India has adopted the lions as the official symbol of state.

Trade and the Spread of Buddhism

Early India had remarkably little cultural interchange with its Asian neighbors. The main reason for this lack of contact was that the high mountain ranges to India's north provided no easy passages to the east. There were, however, some exceptions to this lack of contact. By far the most significant one was the export of the Buddhist faith from India to Central and East Asia. In the first century CE, Buddhist merchants, drawn by the lucrative trade that passed along the Silk Road, braved the difficult passages through the northern mountain ranges that took them to Central Asia. There, in its Mahayana form, the new doctrine won converts among the tribespeople who controlled the east–west corridors. From the caravan centers, the new religion was conveyed

eastward and took root in China, where it entered deeply into Chinese cultural life, blending the new ideas with traditional Confucian practice and ethics (see Chapter 13).

India's commercial and cultural preponderance in regions that made up the (appropriately named) Indian Ocean domain was even weightier than in Central and Eastern Asia. Again, it was Ashoka's conversion that helped India position itself in the very center of this arena of continents. The reason lay in the fact that, while Hindu priests frowned on dealings with foreigners, Buddhists taught that trade contributed to everyone's welfare. Ashoka and his Buddhist advisors encouraged the extension of trade along sea-lanes to Southeast Asia, a development aided by two other major advances. The first was the Mauryan conquest of the Ganges River port of Tamluk, which faced the Bay of Bengal. The other, more crucial development was the discovery of the prevailing directions of the Indian Ocean's monsoon winds.

From June to September, the winds blew from the southwest to the northeast; then from November to March, they shifted to the opposite direction. This realization enabled Indian merchants to complete roundtrip voyages either to eastern or western destinations in a year or less. It also allowed traders to develop routing strategies that turned the Indian Ocean into the center of a vast mercantile world that, when combined later with the Silk Road, placed the Indian Ocean at the southern end of an Asian commercial nexus that was the largest in the world prior to the advent of the modern era. Besides trade goods, along the strands of this web of interconnectedness passed people and ideas that helped shape whole civilizations. Thus Indian merchants introduced Southeast Asia to Buddhism, and once there, it became as integral to its civilization as in China. (For more on this, see Chapter 12.)

SUMMARY

SETTLED LIFE IS NOW KNOWN to have emerged in India much earlier than previously believed. By 2500 BCE, people of the Indus River valley had developed irrigated fields and good-sized towns that traded widely with both the surrounding villagers and distant neighbors to the west. These towns seem to have been governed by a priesthood, but information on their history is still sparse. The civilization was already in decline, possibly from natural causes, when it fell to Aryan nomads, who instituted the beginnings of the caste system.

In the thousand years after the Aryan conquest—the Vedic Epoch (1500–500 BCE)—the Hindu religion was gradually constructed from a combination of Aryan beliefs and the Indus Valley faith. When this ritualistic Hinduism was challenged by other, more ethically conscious doctrines such as Buddhism and Jainism, it gave way. Buddhism, in particular, became an international religion and philosophy, as several variants took root throughout East and Southeast Asia through India's growing trade networks.

Although arts and sciences flourished, the cultural and political unity of India was only sporadically enforced by a strong central government. Many invasions from the northwest kept India in a frequent state of political fragmentation. Religious belief, rather than government, was the cement that held its people together and gave the basis for their consciousness of being a nation.

Identification Terms

Test your knowledge of this chapter's key concepts by defining the following terms. If you can't recall the meaning of certain terms, refresh your memory by looking up the boldfaced term in the chapter, turning to the Glossary at the end of the book, or accessing the terms online: www.cengagebrain.com.

Aryans
Ashoka
Bhakti Hinduism
Brahman (or Brahma)
Brahmin
Brahminism
caste
dharma
Eightfold Path
Indus Valley civilization
karma
Laws of Manu
Mahayana Buddhism
Mauryan Dynasty
moksha
nirvana
purdah
Rigveda
Sangha
sati
Shiva
Siddhartha Gautama
Theravada Buddhism
Vedas
Vedic Epoch
Vishnu