

History of India

This article is about the pre-1947 history of the Indian subcontinent. For post-1947 history, see History of India (1947–present).

According to consensus in modern genetics, anatomically modern humans first arrived on the Indian subcontinent from Africa between 73,000 and 55,000 years ago.[1] However, the earliest known human remains in South Asia date to 30,000 years ago. Sedentariness, which involves the transition from foraging to farming and pastoralism, began in South Asia around 7000 BCE. At the site of Mehrgarh, its presence can be documented, with evidence of domestication of wheat and barley, rapidly followed by that of goats, sheep, and cattle.[2] By 4500 BCE, such settled life had increasingly spread, [2] and began to gradually evolve into the Indus Valley civilisation, which was contemporaneous with Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia. This civilisation flourished between 2500 BCE and 1900 BCE in present-day Pakistan and north-western India, and was noted for its urban planning, baked brick houses, elaborate drainage, and water supply.[3]

Early on in the second millennium BCE, persistent drought caused the population of the Indus Valley to scatter from large urban centres to villages. Around the same time, Indo-Aryan tribes moved into the Punjab from Central Asia in several waves of migration. The Vedic Period (1500–500 BCE) was marked by the composition of their large collections of hymns called Vedas. Their varna system, which evolved into the caste system, consisted of a hierarchy of priests, warriors, free peasants, and servants. The pastoral and nomadic Indo-Aryans spread from the Punjab into the Gangetic plain, large swaths of which they deforested for agriculture. The composition of Vedic texts ended around 600 BCE, when a new, interregional culture arose. Then, small chieftaincies (janapadas) were consolidated into larger states (mahajanapadas).

A second urbanisation took place, which came with the rise of new ascetic movements and religious concepts[4] in Greater Magadha, including the rise of Jainism and Buddhism. These opposed the growing influence of Brahmanism and the primacy of rituals—often presided by Brahmin priests—that had come to be associated with Vedic religion.[5] In response to the success of these movements, the latter was synthesised with the preexisting religious cultures of the subcontinent, giving rise to Hinduism.

Indian cultural influence (Greater India)

Chandragupta Maurya with the guidance of Acharya Chanakya succeeded in overthrowing the Nanda Empire and established the first great empire in ancient India, the Maurya Empire. Most of the Indian subcontinent was conquered by the Maurya Empire during the 4th and 3rd centuries BCE. From the 3rd century BCE onwards, Prakrit and Pali literature in the north and Tamil Sangam literature in southern India started to flourish.[6][7] Wootz steel originated in south India in the 3rd century BCE and was exported.[8][9][10] The Maurya Empire would collapse in 185 BCE, on the assassination of the then-Emperor Brihadratha by his General Pushyamitra Shunga. Shunga would go on to form the Shunga Empire in the North and Northeast of the subcontinent, while the Greco-Bactrian Kingdom would claim the Northwest and found the Indo-Greek Kingdom.

Various parts of India were ruled by numerous dynasties, including the Gupta Empire in the 4-6th centuries CE.

This period, witnessing a Hindu religious and intellectual resurgence, is known as the Classical or Golden Age of India. During this time, aspects of Indian civilisation, administration, culture, and religion spread to much of Asia. Kingdoms in southern India had maritime business links with the Middle East and the Mediterranean. Indian cultural influence spread over many parts of Southeast Asia, which led to the establishment of Indianised kingdoms in the region, forming the Greater India.[11][12]

The most significant event between the 7th and 11th century was the Tripartite struggle centred on Kannauj that lasted for more than two centuries between the Pala Empire, Rashtrakuta Empire, and Gurjara-Pratihara Empire. Southern India saw the rise of multiple imperial powers from the middle of the fifth century, most notably the Chalukya, Chola, Pallava, Chera, Pandyan, and Western Chalukya Empires. The Chola dynasty conquered southern India and successfully invaded parts of Southeast Asia, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and Bengal[13] in the 11th century.[14][15] In the early medieval period Indian mathematics, including Hindu numerals, influenced the development of mathematics and astronomy in the Arab world, including the creation of the Hindu-Arabic numeral system.[16]

Islamic conquests made limited inroads into modern Afghanistan and Sindh as early as the 8th century,[17] followed by the invasions of Mahmud Ghazni.[18] The Delhi Sultanate was founded in 1206 CE by Central Asian Turks who ruled a major part of the northern Indian subcontinent in the early 14th century, but declined in the late 14th century,[19] and saw the advent of the Deccan sultanates.[20] The wealthy Bengal Sultanate also emerged as a major power, lasting over three centuries.[21] This period also saw the emergence of several powerful Hindu states, notably the Vijayanagara Empire and Rajput states, such as Mewar. The 15th century saw the advent of Sikhism.

The early modern period began in the 16th century, when the Mughal Empire conquered most of the Indian subcontinent,[22] signaling the proto-industrialization, becoming the biggest global economy and manufacturing power,[23] with a nominal GDP that valued a quarter of world GDP, superior to that of Europe.[24][25] The Mughals suffered a gradual decline in the early 18th century, which provided opportunities for the Marathas, Sikhs, Mysoreans, Nizams, and Nawabs of Bengal to exercise control over large regions of the Indian subcontinent.[26][27]

From the mid-18th century to the mid-19th century, large regions of India were gradually annexed by the East India Company, a chartered company acting as a sovereign power on behalf of the British government. Dissatisfaction with company rule in India led to the Indian Rebellion of 1857, which rocked parts of north and central India, and led to the dissolution of the company. India was afterwards ruled directly by the British Crown, in the British Raj. After World War I, a nationwide struggle for independence was launched by the Indian National Congress, led by Mahatma

Gandhi, notable for nonviolence. Later, the All-India Muslim League would advocate for a separate Muslim-majority nation state. The British Indian Empire was partitioned in August 1947 into the Dominion of India and Dominion of Pakistan, each gaining its independence.

Paleolithic

Main article: South Asian Stone Age

Hominin expansion from Africa is estimated to have reached the Indian subcontinent approximately two million years ago, and possibly as early as 2.2 million years before the present.[32][33][34] This dating is based on the known presence of *Homo erectus* in Indonesia by 1.8 million years before the present and in East Asia by 1.36 million years before present, as well as the discovery of stone tools at Riwat in the Soan River valley of the Pabbi Hills region, Pakistan.[33][35] Although some older discoveries have been claimed, the suggested dates, based on the dating of fluvial sediments, have not been independently verified.[34][36]

The oldest hominin fossil remains in the Indian subcontinent are those of *Homo erectus* or *Homo heidelbergensis*, from the Narmada Valley in central India, and are dated to approximately half a million years ago.[33][36] Older fossil finds have been claimed, but are considered unreliable.[36] Reviews of archaeological evidence have suggested that occupation of the Indian subcontinent by hominins was sporadic until approximately 700,000 years ago, and was geographically widespread by approximately 250,000 years before the present, from which point onward, archaeological evidence of proto-human presence is widely mentioned.[36][34]

According to a historical demographer of South Asia, Tim Dyson:Modern human beings—*Homo sapiens*—originated in Africa. Then, intermittently, sometime between 60,000 and 80,000 years ago, tiny groups of them began to enter the north-west of the Indian subcontinent. It seems likely that initially, they came by way of the coast. ... it is virtually certain that there were *Homo sapiens* in the subcontinent 55,000 years ago, even though the earliest fossils that have been found of them date to only about 30,000 years before the present.[37]

According to Michael D. Petraglia and Bridget Allchin:

Y-Chromosome and Mt-DNA data support the colonization of South Asia by modern humans originating in Africa. ... Coalescence dates for most non-European populations average to between 73–55 ka.[38]

And according to historian of South Asia, Michael H. Fisher:

Scholars estimate that the first successful expansion of the *Homo sapiens* range beyond Africa and across the Arabian Peninsula occurred from as early as 80,000 years ago to as late as 40,000 years ago, although there may have been prior unsuccessful emigrations. Some of their descendants extended the human range ever further in each generation, spreading into each habitable land they encountered. One human channel was along the warm and productive coastal lands of the Persian Gulf and northern Indian Ocean. Eventually, various bands entered India

between 75,000 years ago and 35,000 years ago.[39]

Archaeological evidence has been interpreted to suggest the presence of anatomically modern humans in the Indian subcontinent 78,000–74,000 years ago,[40] although this interpretation is disputed.[41][42] The occupation of South Asia by modern humans, over a long time, initially in varying forms of isolation as hunter-gatherers, has turned it into a highly diverse one, second only to Africa in human genetic diversity.[43]

According to Tim Dyson:

Genetic research has contributed to knowledge of the prehistory of the subcontinent's people in other respects. In particular, the level of genetic diversity in the region is extremely high. Indeed, only Africa's population is genetically more diverse. Related to this, there is strong evidence of 'founder' events in the subcontinent. By this is meant circumstances where a subgroup—such as a tribe—derives from a tiny number of 'original' individuals. Further, compared to most world regions, the subcontinent's people are relatively distinct in having practised comparatively high levels of endogamy.[43]

Neolithic

Mehrgarh site, in Beluchistan, Pakistan

Settled life emerged on the subcontinent in the western margins of the Indus River alluvium approximately 9,000 years ago, evolving gradually into the Indus Valley Civilisation of the third millennium BCE.[2][44] According to Tim Dyson: "By 7,000 years ago agriculture was firmly established in Baluchistan. And, over the next 2,000 years, the practice of farming slowly spread eastwards into the Indus valley." And according to Michael Fisher:[45]

"The earliest discovered instance ... of well-established, settled agricultural society is at Mehrgarh in the hills between the Bolan Pass and the Indus plain (today in Pakistan) (see Map 3.1). From as early as 7000 BCE, communities there started investing increased labor in preparing the land and selecting, planting, tending, and harvesting particular grain-producing plants. They also domesticated animals, including sheep, goats, pigs, and oxen (both humped zebu [*Bos indicus*] and unhumped [*Bos taurus*]). Castrating oxen, for instance, turned them from mainly meat sources into domesticated draft-animals as well."[45]

Bronze Age (c. 3300 – c. 1800 BCE)

Indus Valley Civilisation

Main article: Indus Valley Civilisation

See also: List of Indus Valley Civilisation sites

Mature Harappan Period, c. 2600 - 1900 BCE

The Bronze Age in the Indian subcontinent began around 3300 BCE. Along with Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, the Indus Valley region was one of three early cradles of civilization of the Old World. Of the three, the Indus Valley civilisation was the most expansive,[46] and at its peak, may

have had a population of over five million.[47]

The civilisation was primarily centered in modern-day Pakistan, in the Indus river basin, and secondarily in the Ghaggar-Hakra River basin in eastern Pakistan and northwestern India. The mature Indus civilisation flourished from about 2600 to 1900 BCE, marking the beginning of urban civilisation on the Indian subcontinent. The civilisation included cities such as Harappa, Ganweriwal, and Mohenjo-daro in modern-day Pakistan, and Dholavira, Kalibangan, Rakhigarhi, and Lothal in modern-day India.

Mohenjo-daro, one of the largest Indus cities. View of the site's Great Bath, showing the surrounding urban layout.

Dholavira, a city of the Indus Valley civilisation, with stepwell steps to reach the water level in artificially constructed reservoirs.[48]

Archaeological remains of washroom drainage system at Lothal

Inhabitants of the ancient Indus river valley, the Harappans, developed new techniques in metallurgy and handicraft (carneol[[further explanation needed](#)] products, seal carving), and produced copper, bronze, lead, and tin. The civilisation is noted for its cities built of brick, roadside drainage system, and multi-storeyed houses and is thought to have had some kind of municipal organisation. Civilization also developed a Indus script, which is presently undeciphered.[49] This is the reason why Harappan language is not directly attested, and its affiliation uncertain.[50] A relationship or membership of the Dravidian or Elamo-Dravidian language family is proposed by some scholars.[51][52]

Three stamp seals and their impressions bearing Indus script characters alongside animals: "unicorn" (left), bull (center), and elephant (right); Guimet Museum

After the collapse of Indus Valley civilisation, the inhabitants of the Indus Valley civilisation migrated from the river valleys of Indus and Ghaggar-Hakra, towards the Himalayan foothills of Ganga-Yamuna basin.[53]

Ochre Coloured Pottery culture

Sinauli "chariot", photograph of the Archaeological Survey of India.[54]

During 2nd millennium BCE, Ochre Coloured Pottery culture was in Ganga Yamuna Doab region. These were rural settlement with agriculture and hunting. They were using copper tools such as axes, spears, arrows, and swords. The people had domesticated cattle, goats, sheep, horses, pigs and dogs.[55] The site gained attention for its Bronze Age solid-disk wheel carts, found in 2018,[56] which were interpreted by some as horse-pulled "chariots".[57][58][[note 1](#)]

Iron Age (c. 1800 – 200 BCE)

See also: Iron Age in India

Vedic period (c. 1500 – 600 BCE)

Main articles: Vedic period, Historical Vedic religion, and Vedas

See also: Indo-Aryan peoples and Indo-Aryan migrations

Starting ca. 1900 BCE, Indo-Aryan tribes moved into the Punjab from Central Asia in several waves of migration.[60][61] The Vedic period is the period when the Vedas were composed, the liturgical hymns from the Indo-Aryan people. The Vedic culture was located in part of north-west India, while other parts of India had a distinct cultural identity during this period. Many regions of the Indian subcontinent transitioned from the Chalcolithic to the Iron Age in this period.[62]

The Vedic culture is described in the texts of Vedas, still sacred to Hindus, which were orally composed and transmitted in Vedic Sanskrit. The Vedas are some of the oldest extant texts in India.[63] The Vedic period, lasting from about 1500 to 500 BCE,[64][65] contributed the foundations of several cultural aspects of the Indian subcontinent.

Vedic society

An early 19th century manuscript in the Devanagari script of the Rigveda, originally transmitted orally with fidelity[66]

Historians have analysed the Vedas to posit a Vedic culture in the Punjab region and the upper Gangetic Plain.[62] The peepal tree and cow were sanctified by the time of the Atharva Veda.[67] Many of the concepts of Indian philosophy espoused later, like dharma, trace their roots to Vedic antecedents.[68]

Early Vedic society is described in the Rigveda, the oldest Vedic text, believed to have been compiled during 2nd millennium BCE,[69][70] in the northwestern region of the Indian subcontinent.[71] At this time, Aryan society consisted of largely tribal and pastoral groups, distinct from the Harappan urbanisation which had been abandoned.[72] The early Indo-Aryan presence probably corresponds, in part, to the Ochre Coloured Pottery culture in archaeological contexts.[73][74]

At the end of the Rigvedic period, the Aryan society began to expand from the northwestern region of the Indian subcontinent, into the western Ganges plain. It became increasingly agricultural and was socially organised around the hierarchy of the four varnas, or social classes. This social structure was characterized both by syncretising with the native cultures of northern India,[75] but also eventually by the excluding of some indigenous peoples by labeling their occupations impure.[76] During this period, many of the previous small tribal units and chiefdoms began to coalesce into Janapadas (monarchical, state-level polities).[77]

Janapadas

Main article: Janapada

See also: Battle of the Ten Kings and List of ancient Indo-Aryan peoples and tribes

Late Vedic era map showing the boundaries of Āryāvarta with Janapadas in northern India, beginning of Iron Age kingdoms in India – Kuru, Panchala, Kosala, Videha

The Iron Age in the Indian subcontinent from about 1200 BCE to the 6th century BCE is defined by the rise of Janapadas, which are realms, republics and kingdoms—notably the Iron Age Kingdoms of Kuru, Panchala, Kosala, Videha.[78][79]

The Kuru Kingdom (c. 1200–450 BCE) was the first state-level society of the Vedic period, corresponding to the beginning of the Iron Age in northwestern India, around 1200–800 BCE,[80] as well as with the composition of the Atharvaveda (the first Indian text to mention iron, as śyāma ayas, literally "black metal").[81] The Kuru state organised the Vedic hymns into collections, and developed the *śrauta* ritual to uphold the social order.[81] Two key figures of the Kuru state were king Parikshit and his successor Janamejaya, transforming this realm into the dominant political, social, and cultural power of northern Iron Age India.[81] When the Kuru kingdom declined, the centre of Vedic culture shifted to their eastern neighbours, the Panchala kingdom.[81] The archaeological PGW (Painted Grey Ware) culture, which flourished in the Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh regions of northern India from about 1100 to 600 BCE,[73] is believed to correspond to the Kuru and Panchala kingdoms.[81][82]

During the Late Vedic Period, the kingdom of Videha emerged as a new centre of Vedic culture, situated even farther to the East (in what is today Nepal and Bihar state in India);[74] reaching its prominence under the king Janaka, whose court provided patronage for Brahmin sages and philosophers such as Yajñavalkya, Aruni, and Gārgī Vāchaknavī.[83] The later part of this period corresponds with a consolidation of increasingly large states and kingdoms, called Mahajanapadas, all across Northern India.

Second urbanisation (c. 600 – 200 BCE)

City of Kushinagar in the 5th century BCE according to a 1st-century BCE frieze in Sanchi Stupa 1 Southern Gate.

The period between 800 and 200 BCE saw the formation of Śramaṇa movement from Jainism and Buddhism originated. The first Upanishads were written during this period. After 500 BCE, the so-called "second urbanisation" started, with new urban settlements arising at the Ganges plain, especially the Central Ganges plain.[84] The foundations for the "second urbanisation" were laid prior to 600 BCE, in the Painted Grey Ware culture of the Ghaggar-Hakra and Upper Ganges Plain; although most PGW sites were small farming villages, "several dozen" PGW sites eventually emerged as relatively large settlements that can be characterized as towns, the largest of which were fortified by ditches or moats and embankments made of piled earth with wooden palisades, albeit smaller and simpler than the elaborately fortified large cities which grew after 600 BCE in the Northern Black Polished Ware culture.[85]

The Central Ganges Plain, where Magadha gained prominence, forming the base of the Maurya Empire, was a distinct cultural area,[86] with new states arising after 500 BCE[87] during the so-called "second urbanisation".[88][note 2] It was influenced by the Vedic culture,[89] but differed markedly from the Kuru-Panchala region.[86] It "was the area of the earliest known cultivation of rice in South Asia and by 1800 BCE was the location of an advanced Neolithic population associated with the sites of Chirand and Chechar".[90] In this region, the Śramaṇic movements flourished, and Jainism and Buddhism originated.[84]

Buddhism and Jainism

Main articles: Upanishads and Śramaṇa

Further information: History of Hinduism, History of Buddhism, History of Jainism, Indian religions, and Indian philosophy

Upanishads and Śramaṇa movements

A page of Isha Upanishad manuscript.

Mahavira, the 24th and last Tirthankara of Jainism.

Gautama Buddha's cremation stupa, Kushinagar (Kushinara).

The time between 800 BCE and 400 BCE witnessed the composition of the earliest Upanishads.[5][91][92] The Upanishads form the theoretical basis of classical Hinduism, and are also known as Vedānta (conclusion of the Vedas).[93]

The increasing urbanisation of India in the 7th and 6th centuries BCE led to the rise of new ascetic or "Śramaṇa movements" which challenged the orthodoxy of rituals.[5] Mahavira (c. 549–477 BCE), proponent of Jainism, and Gautama Buddha (c. 563–483 BCE), founder of Buddhism, were the most prominent icons of this movement. Śramaṇa gave rise to the concept of the cycle of birth and death, the concept of samsara, and the concept of liberation.[94] Buddha found a Middle Way that ameliorated the extreme asceticism found in the Śramaṇa religions.[95]

Around the same time, Mahavira (the 24th Tirthankara in Jainism) propagated a theology that was to later become Jainism.[96] However, Jain orthodoxy believes the teachings of the Tirthankaras predates all known time and scholars believe Parshvanatha (c. 872 – c. 772 BCE), accorded status as the 23rd Tirthankara, was a historical figure. The Vedas are believed to have documented a few Tirthankaras and an ascetic order similar to the Śramaṇa movement.[97]

Sanskrit epics

Main articles: Mahabharata and Ramayana

See also: List of historic Indian texts and List of Hindu texts

Manuscript illustration of the Battle of Kurukshetra.

The Sanskrit epics Ramayana and Mahabharata were composed during this period.[98] The

Mahabharata remains, till this day, the longest single poem in the world.[99] Historians formerly postulated an "epic age" as the milieu of these two epic poems, but now recognize that the texts (which are both familiar with each other) went through multiple stages of development over centuries. For instance, the Mahabharata may have been based on a small-scale conflict (possibly about 1000 BCE) which was eventually "transformed into a gigantic epic war by bards and poets". Archaeology cannot conclusively prove or disprove the historicity related to the epics.[100] The existing texts of these epics are believed to belong to the post-Vedic age, between c. 400 BCE and 400 CE.[100][101]

Mahajanapadas

Main article: Mahajanapadas

The Mahajanapadas were the sixteen most powerful and vast kingdoms and republics of the era, located mainly across the Indo-Gangetic plains.

The period from c. 600 BCE to c. 300 BCE witnessed the rise of the Mahajanapadas, sixteen powerful and vast kingdoms and oligarchic republics. These Mahajanapadas evolved and flourished in a belt stretching from Gandhara in the northwest to Bengal in the eastern part of the Indian subcontinent and included parts of the trans-Vindhyan region.[102] Ancient Buddhist texts, like the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*,^[103] make frequent reference to these sixteen great kingdoms and republics—Anga, Assaka, Avanti, Chedi, Gandhara, Kashi, Kamboja, Kosala, Kuru, Magadha, Malla, Matsya (or Machcha), Panchala, Surasena, Vṛji, and Vatsa. This period saw the second major rise of urbanism in India after the Indus Valley Civilisation.^[104]

Early "republics" or *gaṇasaṅgha*,^[105] such as Shakyas, Koliyas, Mallakas, and Licchavis had republican governments. *Gaṇasaṅghas*,^[105] such as the Mallakas, centered in the city of Kusinagara, and the Vajjika League, centered in the city of Vaishali, existed as early as the 6th century BCE and persisted in some areas until the 4th century CE.^[106] The most famous clan amongst the ruling confederate clans of the Vajji Mahajanapada were the Licchavis.^[107]

This period corresponds in an archaeological context to the Northern Black Polished Ware culture. Especially focused in the Central Ganges plain but also spreading across vast areas of the northern and central Indian subcontinent, this culture is characterized by the emergence of large cities with massive fortifications, significant population growth, increased social stratification, wide-ranging trade networks, construction of public architecture and water channels, specialized craft industries (e.g., ivory and carnelian carving), a system of weights, punch-marked coins, and the introduction of writing in the form of Brahmi and Kharosthi scripts.^{[108][109]} The language of the gentry at that time was Sanskrit, while the languages of the general population of northern India are referred to as Prakrits.

Many of the sixteen kingdoms had coalesced into four major ones by 500/400 BCE, by the time of Gautama Buddha. These four were Vatsa, Avanti, Kosala, and Magadha. The life of Gautama Buddha was mainly associated with these four kingdoms.^[104]

Early Magadha dynasties

Main articles: Magadha and Greater Magadha

See also: Magadha period, Pradyota dynasty, Haryanka dynasty, and Shaishunaga dynasty
Maghadha dynasties

The Magadha state c. 600 BCE, before it expanded from its capital Rajagriha – under the Haryanka dynasty and the successor Shishunaga dynasty.

Indian warrior of the Achaemenid army, circa 480 BCE, on the Tomb of Xerxes I.

Magadha formed one of the sixteen Mahajanapadas (Sanskrit: "Great Realms") or kingdoms in ancient India. The core of the kingdom was the area of Bihar south of the Ganges; its first capital was Rajagriha (modern Rajgir) then Pataliputra (modern Patna). Magadha expanded to include most of Bihar and Bengal with the conquest of Licchavi and Anga respectively,[110] followed by much of eastern Uttar Pradesh and Orissa. The ancient kingdom of Magadha is heavily mentioned in Jain and Buddhist texts. It is also mentioned in the Ramayana, Mahabharata and Puranas.[111] The earliest reference to the Magadha people occurs in the Atharva-Veda where they are found listed along with the Angas, Gandharis, and Mujavats. Magadha played an important role in the development of Jainism and Buddhism. The Magadha kingdom included republican communities such as the community of Rajakumara. Villages had their own assemblies under their local chiefs called Gramakas. Their administrations were divided into executive, judicial, and military functions.

Early sources, from the Buddhist Pāli Canon, the Jain Agamas and the Hindu Puranas, mention Magadha being ruled by the Pradyota dynasty and Haryanka dynasty (c. 544–413 BCE) for some 200 years, c. 600–413 BCE. King Bimbisara of the Haryanka dynasty led an active and expansive policy, conquering Anga in what is now eastern Bihar and West Bengal. King Bimbisara was overthrown and killed by his son, Prince Ajatashatru, who continued the expansionist policy of Magadha. During this period, Gautama Buddha, the founder of Buddhism, lived much of his life in the Magadha kingdom. He attained enlightenment in Bodh Gaya, gave his first sermon in Sarnath and the first Buddhist council was held in Rajgriha.[112] The Haryanka dynasty was overthrown by the Shaishunaga dynasty (c. 413–345 BCE). The last Shishunaga ruler, Kalasoka, was assassinated by Mahapadma Nanda in 345 BCE, the first of the so-called Nine Nandas, which were Mahapadma and his eight sons.

Nanda Empire and Alexander's campaign

Main article: Nanda Empire

See also: Indian campaign of Alexander the Great

The Nanda Empire (c. 345–322 BCE), at its greatest extent, extended from Bengal in the east, to the Punjab region in the west and as far south as the Vindhya Range.[113] The Nanda dynasty was famed for their great wealth. The Nanda dynasty built on the foundations laid by their Haryanka and Shishunaga predecessors to create the first great empire of north India.[114] To achieve this objective they built a vast army, consisting of 200,000 infantry, 20,000 cavalry, 2,000 war chariots and 3,000 war elephants (at the lowest estimates).[115][116][117] According to the

Greek historian Plutarch, the size of the Nanda army was even larger, numbering 200,000 infantry, 80,000 cavalry, 8,000 war chariots, and 6,000 war elephants.[116][118] However, the Nanda Empire did not have the opportunity to see their army face Alexander the Great, who invaded north-western India at the time of Dhana Nanda, since Alexander was forced to confine his campaign to the plains of Punjab and Sindh, for his forces mutinied at the river Beas and refused to go any further upon encountering Nanda and Gangaridai forces.[116]

Maurya Empire

Main article: Maurya Empire

Maurya Empire

The Maurya Empire under Ashoka the Great.

Ashokan pillar at Vaishali, 3rd century BCE.

The Maurya Empire (322–185 BCE) unified most of the Indian subcontinent into one state, and was the largest empire ever to exist on the Indian subcontinent.[119] At its greatest extent, the Mauryan Empire stretched to the north up to the natural boundaries of the Himalayas and to the east into what is now Assam. To the west, it reached beyond modern Pakistan, to the Hindu Kush mountains in what is now Afghanistan. The empire was established by Chandragupta Maurya assisted by Chanakya (Kautilya) in Magadha (in modern Bihar) when he overthrew the Nanda Empire.[120]

Chandragupta rapidly expanded his power westwards across central and western India, and by 317 BCE the empire had fully occupied Northwestern India. The Mauryan Empire then defeated Seleucus I, a diadochus and founder of the Seleucid Empire, during the Seleucid–Mauryan war, thus gained additional territory west of the Indus River. Chandragupta's son Bindusara succeeded to the throne around 297 BCE. By the time he died in c. 272 BCE, a large part of the Indian subcontinent was under Mauryan suzerainty. However, the region of Kalinga (around modern day Odisha) remained outside Mauryan control, perhaps interfering with their trade with the south.[121]

The Mauryan carved door of Lomas Rishi, one of the Barabar Caves, c. 250 BCE.

Bindusara was succeeded by Ashoka, whose reign lasted for around 37 years until his death in about 232 BCE.[122] His campaign against the Kalingans in about 260 BCE, though successful, led to immense loss of life and misery. This filled Ashoka with remorse and led him to shun violence, and subsequently to embrace Buddhism.[121] The empire began to decline after his death and the last Mauryan ruler, Brihadratha, was assassinated by Pushyamitra Shunga to establish the Shunga Empire.[122]

Under Chandragupta Maurya and his successors, internal and external trade, agriculture, and economic activities all thrived and expanded across India thanks to the creation of a single efficient system of finance, administration, and security. The Mauryans built the Grand Trunk

Road, one of Asia's oldest and longest major roads connecting the Indian subcontinent with Central Asia.[123] After the Kalinga War, the Empire experienced nearly half a century of peace and security under Ashoka. Mauryan India also enjoyed an era of social harmony, religious transformation, and expansion of the sciences and of knowledge. Chandragupta Maurya's embrace of Jainism increased social and religious renewal and reform across his society, while Ashoka's embrace of Buddhism has been said to have been the foundation of the reign of social and political peace and non-violence across all of India. Ashoka sponsored the spreading of Buddhist missionaries into Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia, West Asia, North Africa, and Mediterranean Europe.[124]

The Arthashastra wrote by Chanakya and the Edicts of Ashoka are the primary written records of the Mauryan times. Archaeologically, this period falls into the era of Northern Black Polished Ware. The Mauryan Empire was based on a modern and efficient economy and society. However, the sale of merchandise was closely regulated by the government.[125] Although there was no banking in the Mauryan society, usury was customary. A significant amount of written records on slavery are found, suggesting a prevalence thereof.[126] During this period, a high-quality steel called Wootz steel was developed in south India and was later exported to China and Arabia.[8]

Sangam period

Main articles: Sangam period, Sources of ancient Tamil history, Sangam literature, and Five Great Epics

See also: Three Crowned Kings, Tamilakam, and List of Tamil monarchs

Tamilakam, located in the tip of South India during the Sangam period, ruled by Chera dynasty, Chola dynasty and the Pandyan dynasty.

Ilango Adigal is the author of Silappatikaram, one of the five great epics of Tamil literature.[127] During the Sangam period Tamil literature flourished from the 3rd century BCE to the 4th century CE. During this period, three Tamil dynasties, collectively known as the Three Crowned Kings of Tamilakam: Chera dynasty, Chola dynasty, and the Pandya dynasty ruled parts of southern India.[128]

The Sangam literature deals with the history, politics, wars, and culture of the Tamil people of this period.[129] The scholars of the Sangam period rose from among the common people who sought the patronage of the Tamil Kings, but who mainly wrote about the common people and their concerns.[130] Unlike Sanskrit writers who were mostly Brahmins, Sangam writers came from diverse classes and social backgrounds and were mostly non-Brahmins. They belonged to different faiths and professions such as farmers, artisans, merchants, monks, and priests, including also royalty and women.[130]

Around c. 300 BCE – c. 200 CE, Pathupattu, an anthology of ten mid-length books collection, which is considered part of Sangam Literature, were composed; the composition of eight

anthologies of poetic works Ettuthogai as well as the composition of eighteen minor poetic works Patīṇṇkīlkaṇakku; while Tolkāppiyam, the earliest grammarian work in the Tamil language was developed.[131] Also, during Sangam period, two of the Five Great Epics of Tamil Literature were composed. Ilango Adigal composed Silappatikaram, which is a non-religious work, that revolves around Kannagi, who having lost her husband to a miscarriage of justice at the court of the Pandyan dynasty, wreaks her revenge on his kingdom,[132] and Manimekalai, composed by Chithalai Chathanar, is a sequel to Silappatikaram, and tells the story of the daughter of Kovalan and Madhavi, who became a Buddhist Bikkuni.[133][134]