

# Chapter 8: Empires of South Asia

## TIMELINE

321–185 BCE	Mauryan empire
320–550 CE	Gupta empire
400s CE	Hun incursions into northern India

## IMPORTANT PEOPLE, PLACES, EVENTS, AND CONCEPTS

Chandragupta Maurya

stupa\*

monsoon\*

Ashoka

sati\*

Note: Terms marked with an asterisk appear in the Glossary.

## THE MAURYAN EMPIRE

When Alexander the Great and his troops departed India in 325 BCE, a local ruler from the prosperous agricultural and trading center of Magadha in the central Ganges plain rose to power. **Chandragupta Maurya** (322–298 BCE) began a program of conquest that would include northwestern India and areas of the Ganges plain and would form the first unified, centralized government in India. Relying on the advice of a treatise called the *Arthashastra*, Chandragupta and his successors amassed an empire that encompassed all of present-day India except for the southern tip.

The Mauryans supported their government by taxing agricultural crops. Standard coinage throughout their empire facilitated trade, while government control of manufactures, mines, and shipbuilding strengthened the state. A national army consisted not only of infantry and cavalry divisions, but also of chariots and war elephants.

### The Rule of Ashoka

The greatest of the Mauryan rulers was **Ashoka**, the grandson of Chandragupta. One of Ashoka's greatest joys was conquest—until he witnessed the horrible results of his conquests in eastern India. Rather than continuing to devote his energy to conquest, Ashoka converted to Buddhism and embarked on a program to construct public works and to encourage vegetarianism in an effort to reduce the slaughter of animals. His policy of ending

the killing of cows, combined with the already revered status of cattle from the Aryan era, contributed to the concept of sacred cows that became a part of the Indian civilization. Ashoka also attempted to live his Buddhist faith by spreading peace and building an efficient government. His efforts met with resistance from the caste of brahmins, whose power was displaced by Ashoka's central government.

The Buddhist disapproval of the caste system was advantageous for artisans and merchants, who supported the growing number of Buddhist monasteries. Buddhist law also improved the status of women by granting them more authority within their families and by allowing them to enter the monasteries as Buddhist nuns.

Ashoka publicized his tolerant Buddhist program by engraving his decisions on large rocks and sandstone pillars that he had scattered throughout his empire. Great shrines of stone, called *stupas*, were constructed by the Buddhists to house relics of the Buddha. Ashoka also furthered the Buddhist faith by sending missionaries to Ceylon (Sri Lanka), the Himalayan regions, and the grasslands of central Asia. By means of the Silk Roads, Buddhism spread to various points of southeast and east Asia.

### **The End of the Mauryan Empire**

After Ashoka's death in 232 BCE, weaker rulers ascended to the Mauryan throne. By 185 BCE, the empire no longer existed, and political division characterized the South Asian subcontinent. Waves of invaders entered the region, until the rise of a new dynasty that would allow the brahmans to diminish the power of Buddhism and strengthen the position of Hinduism in India.

## **THE DECLINE OF BUDDHISM IN INDIA**

The decline of Buddhist power in India was, in part, caused by the actions of the Buddhist monks themselves. The monks had become more preoccupied with philosophy than with serving the needs of the common people in India. As the monks devoted more time to the wealthy patrons who supported the monasteries, the brahmans used this opportunity to capture the attention of the ordinary people of India. The new focus of Hinduism called upon followers to become personally involved in the worship of the major gods Shiva and Vishnu. More temples arose to house statues of the gods, and even untouchables were allowed to embrace the new form of Hinduism, which eventually allowed the inclusion of the Buddha as one of the many Hindu gods. Women were also permitted to participate. The *Upanishads* acquired new prominence as Hinduism taught that the ultimate purpose of the soul was to merge with the divine essence from which it had originated. The world itself was viewed as an illusion.

After the fall of the Han empire in the third century CE, trade decreased, creating a decline in merchant support for the Buddhist monasteries. Furthermore, the arrival of a new dynasty sympathetic to Hinduism hastened the decline of Buddhism in India. The center of Buddhism would now shift to central and southeast Asia and to China, Japan, and Korea; there Buddhism would develop into the Mahayana form, which allowed rituals in worship.

## **THE GUPTA EMPIRE**

Like the Mauryan empire, the Gupta empire was founded by a family from the kingdom of Magadha in eastern India. By the conclusion of the fourth century CE, the Gupta family had amassed an empire that included most of northern India, though not as extensive as that of the Maurya family. Although the Gupta empire was not as centralized as its predecessor, it succeeded in bringing nearly 300 peaceful and prosperous years to the people of northern India.

## Women in Gupta Society

Characteristic of the Gupta rule was a further definition of Hinduism and the caste system. Restrictions upon members of the lowest castes and the untouchables became even more severe. The position of women also declined under the Guptas. Under Hindu law, women were minors subject first to their father, then to their husband, and then to their sons. Women were not allowed to own or inherit property. Marriages were usually arranged, and young girls often left home years before their marriage to live with and be molded by their future mother-in-law and future husband. Female infants were often viewed as economic liabilities and were frequently killed. Women who were widowed before they bore sons were ostracized from society; widows with sons were not permitted to remarry. The most pronounced degradation of women involved the custom of *sati*. This practice, which was observed in some parts of India among the elite varna, or castes, expected a widow to throw herself on her husband's burning funeral pyre. Women who failed to honor their deceased husbands in this manner were forbidden to remarry and were excluded from society.

## Gupta Achievements

While denying educational opportunities to women and members of lower castes, the Gupta empire was noted for an array of achievements, especially in mathematics and science. Gupta mathematicians accurately calculated the value of pi to four decimal places and the circumference of the earth. They also used decimals and developed the concept of the zero as a placeholder. Another achievement was the introduction of the numbers used around the globe (the Western world would label these "Arabic" numbers because they came to the West via Arab traders and academics). Gupta physicians set up hospitals and developed treatments for numerous diseases and various surgical techniques.

The Gupta period was also renowned for its artistic and literary achievements. The poet Kalidasa, who was considered the greatest writer in the Sanskrit language, painted word pictures of Gupta life. Also noteworthy were the rock paintings and statues of the Buddha located in the caves of Ajanta; the caves also housed monasteries for Buddhist monks.

In spite of the decline in long-distance trade with China, commerce flourished between Gupta India and other areas. Archeological finds of Roman coins in southern India attest to the presence of trade between these two areas. One remaining trade route included passage through the Hindu Kush to Persia and the Mediterranean world. Mariners used the **monsoon** winds to cross the Indian Ocean to Southeast Asia and the islands of Indonesia, and they also sailed to Arabia. The overland route between India and China still saw some trade, despite the presence of bandits.

## Decline of the Gupta Empire

Similar to the experiences of the Han and Roman empires, the Gupta empire was plagued by repeated attacks of foreigners along its border areas. The Xiong-nu, or Hunas, who exerted pressure on the borders of the Han empire also raided across the Himalayas into northern India during the early fifth century CE. The drain on the treasury resulting from efforts to repel Hunas invaders, combined with internal struggles between Gupta rulers and their vassals, led to the eventual collapse of the Gupta empire. By 530 CE, the empire was overrun by further Xiong-nu invasions and broke up into numerous local governments.