

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

INDIAN CULTURAL HISTORY – Ancient period

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Contents

Part I : PREHISTORY

Part II : INDUS VALLEY CIVILIZATION

Part III : INDO-ARYAN CIVILIZATION

Part IV : CLASSICAL PERIOD

Part I: PREHISTORY (c. 40,000-3,000 BCE)

Overview

The culture of prehistoric India is largely reconstructed from some remarkable rock paintings, the archaeology of numerous burial sites and ethnographic studies of stone-age communities elsewhere in the world. One striking finding is the number of parallels between the cultural elements depicted in the rock paintings and the culture of tribes living in the area today.

Art

Rock art The earliest examples of visual art in the subcontinent are rock paintings and rock inscriptions (petroglyphs). More than 150 sites with this kind of artwork have been located, the earliest dating from approximately 40,000 BCE, with the majority from 15,000 to 5,000 BCE. Rock inscriptions, especially those found at Edakkal (modern-day Kerala and dated to 6000 BCE), show human and animal figures with a distinct resemblance to those of the later Indus Valley civilisation.

Bhimbetka paintings The rock paintings at Bhimbetka (modern Madhya Pradesh) are one of the largest known collections of stone-age art in the world. The 243 caves there form part of a group of about 750 rock shelters in this part of central India. The remarkable feature of the painting in the Bhimbetka caves is that it extends from roughly 40,000-30,000 BCE up to the first millennium CE. Even more significantly, the paintings depict many elements of culture that can be seen among tribes in the area today.

Technique Sixteen different colours were used at Bhimbetka, made from minerals and mixed with water, animal fat, animal marrow or egg whites. A pale white, made from limestone, and a dark red, made from iron oxide, are the dominant colours. Archaeologists assume that the brushes (which have not survived) were made of twigs and animal hairs.

Animal images Twenty-nine different animal species are depicted at Bhimbetka, including bison, tigers, panthers, antelopes, elephants, lions and rhinoceroses (the last three are no longer found in the area). It is noteworthy that no snakes of any kind are painted at Bhimbetka or any other stone-age site in India.

Human images Human figures (men, women and children) are drawn stick-like, many wearing necklaces, knee bands, wrist bands and bangles. Some carry spears or bow and arrows (although the extent of the use of these weapons is a matter of debate). There are also several scenes of humans dancing in a circle with linked hands. The men wear loin cloths, the women wear their hair braided. Some dancers wear masks and may be ritual specialists.

Religion

General The archaeological record provides scant evidence of the religious practices and still less the beliefs of stone-age communities in India. We can only sketch an outline, relying mainly on the remains at burial sites, supplemented by studies of stone-age religion in other part of the world and ethnographies of the religious system of tribal populations still living near many sites.

Shamanism There can be little doubt, for example, that stone-age communities in India practiced a form of shamanism. Like the shamanism of tribes in modern India, their ancestors probably conceived of a spirit world, with numerous named forces, perhaps associated with other living things (animals, flowers, trees), topographical features (rivers and mountains) and, most important the sun and moon. Stone-age handprints on cave walls in Panna Dt. Madhya Pradesh are identical to those on the house walls of tribal people in nearby villages, where they are 'good luck signs' and provide protection from the capricious spirit world.

Shamans We can also surmise that rituals and chanting were performed by specialists or shamans (although this term is often misused) in order to contact and communicate with these spirits. Several of the paintings in the Bhimbetka caves, for example, show a ritual-like dance with some masked dancers, who may be specialists.

Animals Large animals, such as tigers and lions, painted on the cave walls may represent objects of worship. Stone-age hunters elsewhere are said to have prayed to an animal spirit, asking it to manifest itself so that it could be

hunted and then ritually sacrificed. Tribal populations in modern India believe that many animals have (or are) spirits that can be contacted through chanting by ritual specialists. Killing animals, especially those with whom humans feel a strong bond, is often ritualised with chanting, dancing and singing.

Burial Burial sites provide us with further hints of stone-age religion in India. Most graves were shallow pits in which the body was aligned east to west, suggesting a possible orientation with the sun. Burnt ash found at the bottom of the pits indicates some kind of funerary ritual. One site contained more than 150 bodies, with slightly more complex graves. A small niche was cut into one side of the pit, and the body and the goods were placed inside. The niche was then sealed with mud-bricks, presumably to keep the ancestor 'safe.' Grave goods, such as necklaces, bone ornaments and dead animals, indicate a belief that the dead person would make a journey to a spirit world where these possessions would be useful. Another theory is that digging graves and performing funerary rituals was a method of claiming new territory.

Secondary burial There is also evidence of 'secondary' burial, a reflection of more complex cosmological ideas. Secondary burials or funeral rituals are defined as any artificial structures made after death, such as grave pits, erect stones (dolmens) or mounds, which become the focus for human activity and/or thought. Another theory is that digging graves and performing funerary rituals was a method of claiming new territory.

Fertility Female figurines, shaped from stone and bone and found at stone-age sites, have been interpreted as fertility symbols. At one site in Madhya Pradesh, a large, shaped stone (dated to about 20,000 BCE) matches images that are today worshipped by nearby villagers as fertility symbols.

Bhimbetka shrine One of the Bhimbetka caves contains what appears to be a 'shrine' or ritual centre. A long corridor (about 25 metres long) leads to a large space with three other entrances. In the centre of this space is a tall, vertical rock with several small scooped-out depressions, which may have been used to produce music. In any case, it appears that the space was the site ritual activity.

Baghor shrine Another possible shrine has been located in a cave at Baghor, Madhya Pradesh. In the centre of a circular platform, 85 cm in diameter, made of sandstone and dated to about 9,000 BCE, archaeologists found a natural stone with a complex design of triangles and colours. More fragments of this central stone were found and were joined together to form a pyramid. Tribal people living nearby also make platforms on which they worship triangular stones.

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Human images Human figures (men, women and children) are drawn stick-like, many wearing necklaces, knee bands, wrist bands and bangles. Some carry spears or bow and arrows (although the extent of the use of these weapons during the Stone Age is a matter of debate). There are also several scenes of humans dancing in a circle with linked hands. The men wear loin cloths, while the women wear their hair braided. Some dancers wear masks and may be ritual specialists.

Discussion/Questions

1. Compare the rock paintings in India with their more famous counterparts in Spain and France. What differences are apparent, and what might those differences suggest about the societies that painted them?
2. 'Religion is basically the worship of the dead.' Discuss this claim with reference to the burial practices in stone-age India.
3. Ideas, values and beliefs are not easily extrapolated from material remains. What suggestions of this conceptual world can you find in the evidence from stone-age India?
4. Although research on stone-age communities reveals new facts every year, many of our assumptions about these people and this period remain stubbornly static. A good project would be to study the popular perceptions of the 'stone-age' and then to compare them with the emerging picture from ancient India.

Reading

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Jonathan Mark Kenoyer, John Desmond Clark, Jagannath Pal and Govardhan Rai Sharma, "An Upper Palaeolithic shrine in India?" *Antiquity* 57 (1983): 88-94

Part II: INDUS VALLEY CIVILIZATION (c.3000-1500 BCE)

Overview

The Indus Valley (or Harappan) Civilisation (c. 3000-1500 BCE) is not only the crowning achievement of ancient Indian culture. It also belongs to that select group of ancient civilisations that arose at roughly the same time elsewhere in the world. Like its contemporaneous counterparts in Mesopotamia and Egypt, the Indus Valley Civilisation (IVC) developed in a riverine plain, used writing and built cities. Unlike the other ancient civilisations, however, the Indus valley writing remains undeciphered, which means that we rely on material remains to reconstruct the foundations of Indian history. At the same time, we have tantalising suggestions of continuity from this ancient civilisation to Hinduism in the present day.

Art

Workmanship In a civilisation of long duration, vast territory and monumental buildings, we might expect to find art and architecture on a monumental scale. In fact, the art of the IVC is characterised by small-scale elegance. IVC people created visual images by painting and incising them on a variety of surfaces, as well as by shaping them into three-dimensional forms. Most observers comment on the skilled workmanship of these craftsmen, who worked on such a small-scale and displayed such control of their medium.

Seals The incised steatite seals, for example, range in size from ½ x ½ inch to 2.5 x 2.5 inches. Yet on these tiny surfaces, using a few deft strokes, artists managed to depict anatomically convincing animals, detailed urns and flowering trees (in addition to the as-yet undeciphered writing).

Figurines The three-dimensional representations of humans and animals are mostly terracotta (unglazed fired clay), although we also have a few notable statues of stone and bronze (see examples noted below). Some of the terracotta pieces are no larger than a thumb. Many are goddesses with elaborate headdresses and ornaments, such as belts and bangles, some of which are painted. Others figurines are of animals—water buffalo, deer, ram, rhinoceros, elephant, monkey, bear, rabbit, dog and zebu (humped cattle)—as well as birds and fish.

Toys Among the many IVC objects seemingly made for play are a number of miniature bullock carts. Several of these are complete with driver, four or two wheels, axle and load of wood or pots. These carts average about 15 cm in length and 7 cm in width. Researchers have found that the proportions of the IVC miniature objects are exactly the same as those for full-scale carts used in modern-day Pakistan.

Dancing girl One of the standout objects of IVC art is a bronze statuette of a dancing girl. Its fine workmanship, especially in the modelling of the body with sinewy curves, is impressive. When it was discovered and first shown, in the 1920s, archaeologists doubted that it came from the Indus valley and suggested that it must have been made much later in the classical period. When the early date was confirmed, scholars then began to wonder if somehow Greek art had been influenced by the Indus artists.

Bearded man Another impressive art piece from the IVC is the bust of a so-called 'bearded man' or 'priest-king.' Made of soapstone and 18 cm tall, it was found in a wall-niche of a building with ornamental brickwork. His beard and upper lip are closely shaved, he has pierced earlobes and he seems to wear an elaborate hairstyle, though this is partially obscured. He also wears an armband and a cloak or shawl with an elaborate pattern of circles.

Fish bowl Among the thousands of terracotta works, we can point to a bowl to illustrate the imagination and skill of potters in the IVC. This shallow container (4 cm high, 23 cm in diameter at the top and 10 cm at the base) has been painted grey and black with a dazzling pattern of fish. Three fish swim counter-clockwise in one panel while two others travel in the opposite direction just below them. The black wavy line on the lip gives the impression that what we see below is water.

Religion

Speculation While little is known of the religion of the IVC, the archaeological evidence is suggestive. One example is the bust of a 'bearded man', which was conveniently identified as a 'priest,' though this is unsubstantiated. More promising are various scenes on the seals that appear to show religious figures or actions. A man in a yoga pose, with an animal headdress, looks like an early form of Siva, while other scenes resemble animal sacrifice. There are also a number of female terracotta figurines that have been identified as 'mother goddesses' who symbolise fertility. Much of this, it has to be emphasised is speculation and may be erroneous. As an example, worked stone pieces that had once been claimed as phallic symbols, associated with Siva, turned out to be domestic pestles.

Structures In contrast to Egyptian and Mesopotamian civilisations, the Indus Valley civilisation seems to have lacked any large temples or palaces that would give clear evidence of religious rites or specific deities. Although a large building (12 metres high) in Mohenjo-Daro is often identified as a 'citadel,' there is no evidence that it had a ritual function. Similarly, the function of the so-called 'great bath' at Mohenjo-Daro (12 x 7 x 2.5 metres, with two sets of stairs) remains a mystery. Many scholars believe it would have had a ritual cleansing function, but this interpretation may be an example of reading back from later Vedic culture.

Burial Funeral practices included burial and cremation. Unlike in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, however, the people of IVC did not bury the dead with items of wealth. Instead, we find common pots, beads and ornaments. The pots, and frequent animal bones, may have been thought to provide water and meat for the dead person in some kind of an after-life. The body was usually separated from the earth by a shroud, coffin or layer of clay, which it is tempting to interpret as a concern with ritual purity. In any case, the usual orientation of the body (head to the north and feet to the south) is striking because south is the direction of death in the Vedas and later Indian religions.

Writing

Indus seals The IVC used a system of writing incised on soapstone seals and copper plates, and painted on a few terracotta shards. The seals number approximately 3,700, with an average of five signs on each. The inscriptions on the copper plates, which number about a dozen, are much longer. Despite intense and ongoing computerised research and unverified 'discoveries,' the Indus script remains undeciphered. There is no consensus even on the number of characters in the script, although a figure of 350-500 is generally accepted. Many scholars believe the underlying language is a form of Proto-Dravidian, others claim it is Sanskrit, while there is a growing consensus that it might simply represent a form of communicating commercial transactions (invoices and receipts). There is no doubt, however, that the Indus script (not the language) is related to the script in Mesopotamia: both are logo-

syllabic. It is also significant that cuneiform tablets have been found in the Indus valley and Indus seals have been found in the Near East.

Symbols of power A new theory regarding the use of the undeciphered stone seals has been proposed by Mark Kenoyer. He suggests that the writing on them might be royal titles and administrative offices. Further, he believes that the various animals inscribed on the seals represent symbolic power and might have been used by elite clans or social groups. The unicorn, for example, which is the most common animal image on the seals, might be associated with merchants.

Discussion/questions

1. Writing is generally considered a prerequisite of a civilisation, but the Indus Valley script remains undeciphered, despite decades of dedicated research. Why is writing considered so fundamental to civilisation? What is a 'civilisation' and how does it differ, if at all, from a 'culture'?
2. The role of the Indus valley script remains unknown: it may have been used to record business transactions or to write more complex ideas. What we do know is that roughly 1500 years passed before writing was again appeared in India. Brahmi inscriptions date from approximately 500 BCE, but the most famous are those used to write the edicts of King Ashoka in the 3rd c. BCE. How can we explain this hiatus of more than a millennium in the history of writing in India? Did the knowledge of writing simply disappear? Did the technology vanish? Did the need for writing no longer exist?
3. There are undoubted continuities from the religion of the Indus people to modern-day Hinduism, but the evidence is sparse. Consider the arguments made for the 'bearded man' as a priest, for the man in a yoga position as a 'proto-Siva' and for the female figurines as early goddess figures.

Reading

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Gregory Possehl, *The Indus Civilization: A Contemporary Perspective* (AltaMira, 2002)

Asko Parpola, *Deciphering the Indus Valley Script* (Cambridge, 2009)

Part III: INDO-ARYANS

Overview

The Indo-Aryans (who called themselves 'Arya') came from the Iranian high plateau ('Iran' and 'Aryan' are cognate words) and entered India around 1500 BCE, that is, at about the same time that the Indus Valley civilisation was in decline. The influence of the Indo-Aryans on later Indian culture is difficult to overestimate. They brought with them the language of Sanskrit and the religious texts of the Vedas, both of which continue to have enormous cultural authority in India. Although Hinduism underwent considerable change in the millennia following the arrival of the Indo-Aryans, many of its fundamental ideas, practices and structures are evident in this ancient period. In contrast to the Indus Valley culture, which left us a *troupe* of material remains without literature, the Indo-Aryans left virtually no objects but a rich oral literature.

Religion

Indo-European The religion of the early Indo-Aryans was a branch of a wider set of Indo-European beliefs and practices found among ancient Greek, Norse, Iranian and Germanic peoples. Key features of this reconstructed religion include a sky-father god, a myth of dragon slaying and a myth of two brothers who create the world from a sacrifice. The Vedic sky-father god Dyaus Pitr is cognate with the Zeus and Ju-piter. A Vedic god, Indra, slays a dragon. And a Vedic myth explains the creation of the world from sacrifice.

Vedas The religion of the Indo-Aryans is encoded in a remarkable set of Sanskrit oral texts known collectively as the Vedas (after the Sanskrit word for 'knowledge'). There are four Vedas, composed from about 1500 to 900 BCE and then memorised and transmitted by specialists (Brahmins) to the present day. These ancient texts are filled with optimism and exuberance, a celebration of life and wonder at the magnificence of the world. The gods are benign and protective, especially if men continue to honour them with sacrifice.

Rig Veda The oldest of these four texts is the *Rig Veda* (c. 1500-1200 BCE), which contains speculation about the cosmos, its origins and order, its guardians and enemies. Some of its 1028 verses are charms and curses, intended to protect the cattle-keeping Indo-Aryans from disease, accident and misfortune.

Later Vedas The three other Vedas (Yajur, Sama and Atharva, c. 1200-900 BCE) also contain imprecations but focus on rituals. These later three texts describe and explain the complex techniques necessary for conducting the ceremonies, with an emphasis on the power of breath, spoken words and the one who speaks them, the Brahmin priest. Specific form of words, or mantras, are said to be imbued with magical power.

Pantheon Vedic religion is pantheistic. Rather than a single, all-powerful creator god, it encompasses many diverse gods and goddesses, most of whom are associated with natural forces. Chief male deities include Dyaus Pitr (sky-father), Varuna (guardian of cosmic order), Agni (fire), Indra (a sky warrior who succeeded Dyaus as 'king of the gods'), Yama (lord of the underworld) and Surya (Sun). Vac (goddess of speech) and Ushas (Dawn) are the only prominent female deities.

Sacrifice At the heart of Vedic religion is the fire sacrifice. Many hymns invoke Agni (fire) and Soma (an intoxicating libation), the two principal elements of the sacrifice. Brahmins conduct this sacrifice on behalf of others who wish to increase their wealth or progeny, or to ward off disease and misfortune. The fire sacrifice is still performed today, in a much changed form, during Hindu weddings.

Literature

Poetry Despite the heavy hand of cosmology and ritual, the Vedas also contain subtle poetic descriptions. For instance, the beauty of Dawn (Ushas) is evoked with tenderness. There is also magnificence in descriptions of the Sun (Surya) riding across the heavens in a chariot drawn by seven horses.

Myth The Vedas contain the earliest articulation of many stories that would evolve into the corpus of Hindu mythology. The underlying story describes how Indra, king of the gods, slays the cloud-dragon Vrtra with his thunderbolts and releases the rivers and the cows. In another story, Yama, the first human and the first to die,

presides over the world of the dead, where others must travel after death. The virtuous are guided on this journey by two dogs, while the others are attacked by demons.

Creation Vedic religion, and Hinduism more generally, has several creation myths. One story explains that speech (the goddess Vac) created the world. (Cf. 'In the beginning was the word.') Elsewhere, the world emerges from a primeval sacrifice of a man, who is then divided into four parts corresponding to the four major caste groups. The world also comes out of a 'golden womb', as well as from a 'universal egg.' Later, creation becomes the work of a figure named Prajapati. However, the most haunting creation myth has no definitive answer. 'How,' ask the ancient sages, 'did being evolve from non-being?' There is no certainty, not even among those 'who look down on it, in the highest heaven.'

Orality The Vedas were not written. Instead, they were composed, performed and transmitted orally, using a complex set of mnemonic techniques, metrical schemes and literary conventions, by a series of poets, over a period of several hundred years. In other words, Vedic literature is speech. Orality thus has an extremely high cultural status in India. Indeed, speech is deified as the goddess Vac.

Memorisation Vedic priests underwent extensive training in memorising the sacred texts to ensure that they were passed down without error, thus ensuring their efficacy. If one syllable was forgotten or recited in the wrong place, the ritual would not produce the desired results. Scholars, working from largely 20th-century field research, have identified eight different techniques of memorisation. In one, for example, every two adjacent words were recited in their original order, then in reverse order and again in their original order. The most complex method involved reciting the entire *Rig Veda* in reverse order.

Metre The Vedas are composed in a variety of metres, measured by syllables (*akshara*) and lines (*pada*, or 'foot'). The three most common metres employ lines of 8, 11 and 12 syllables. The most frequent of these (used in 25% of the *Rig Veda*) is the *gyatri* metre, which consists of three eight-syllable lines and is roughly similar to the Greek iambic dimeter. Interestingly, although both Sanskrit and Greek prosody use the term 'foot', in Sanskrit this refers to a line (or stanza), and in Greek (and in English) to a cluster of syllables.

Mantra The power of speech, especially carefully calibrated speech, is central to understanding the Vedas. A 'mantra' (word or formula spoken by a knowledgeable person in the correct way) is potent. Based on the concept of correspondences, through which the visible is linked to the invisible, speech can alter the material conditions of someone's life, whether to increase prosperity through sacrifice or to thwart disease through a spell. The potency of the spoken word connects this ancient layer of Indian literature with later genres and traditions, both popular and sophisticated.

Grammar Given this sophisticated science of the spoken word among early Sanskrit speakers, it is not surprising that they produced a remarkable grammar of the language. Panini's grammar (c. 400 BCE), with its nearly 4,000 rules, is still regarded by linguists as the finest description of Sanskrit available.

Discussion/Questions

1. The mythology of the Vedas is recognisably Indo-European. That is, it shares figures and stories with Persian, Greek and north European mythology. Follow the trail of one common story, such as the creation of the world by the dismemberment/sacrifice of a giant or proto-human. Find as many parallel stories as possible, plot them on a map and consider how such stories travelled so far.
2. The oral composition and transmission of the Vedas is one of the most astonishing achievements in world history. However, even today scholars persist in saying that the Vedas were 'written'. Why does the written word have a superior status in today's world? When did writing overtake orality in status? How does an oral/aural culture differ from an essentially graphic/visual culture?

Reading

Wendy Doniger, trans, *Hindu Myths* (Penguin, various editions)

Frits Staal, *Discovering the Vedas: Origins, Mantras, Rituals, Insights* (Penguin India, 2008)

A.L. Basham, *The Wonder that was India (Sidgwick and Jackson, 1963)*

Edwin Bryant, *The Quest for the Origins of Vedic Culture: The Indo- Aryan Migration Debate (Oxford, 2001)*

Texts

1. Creation of the World (*Rig Veda* 10.129)

There was neither non-existence nor existence then; there was neither the realm of space nor sky which is beyond. What stirred? Where? In whose protection? Was there water, bottomlessly deep?

There was neither death nor immortality then. There was no distinguishing sign of night nor of day. That one breathed, windless, by its own impulse. Other than that there was nothing beyond.

Darkness was hidden by darkness in the beginning; with no distinguishing sign, all this was water. The life force that was covered with emptiness, that one arose through the power of heat.

Desire came upon that one in the beginning; that was the first seed of mind. Poets seeking in their heart with wisdom found the bond of existence in non-existence.

Their cord was extended across. Was there below? Was there above? There were seed-placers; there were powers. There was impulse beneath; there was giving-forth above.

Who really knows? Who will here proclaim it? Whence was it produced? Whence is this creation? The gods came afterwards, with the creation of this universe. Who then knows whence it has arisen?

Whence this creation has arisen—perhaps it formed itself, or perhaps it did not—the one who looks down on it, in the highest heaven, only he knows. Or perhaps he does not know.

(translation by Wendy Doniger (O'Flaherty), 1981)

2. Purusha, the Creation of Man (*Rig Veda* 10.90)

Thousand-headed is Purusa, thousand-eyed, thousand-footed. Having covered the earth on all sides, he stood above it the width of ten fingers.

Only Purusa is all this, that which has been and that which is to be. He is the lord of the immortals, who grow by means of [ritual] food.

Such is his greatness, yet more than this is Purusa. One-quarter of him is all beings; three-quarters of him is the immortal in heaven.

Three-quarters of Purusa went upward, one-quarter of him remained here. From this [one-quarter] he spread in all directions into what eats and what does not eat.

From him the shining one was born, from the shining one was born Purusa. When born he extended beyond the earth, behind as well as in front.

When the gods performed a sacrifice with the offering Purusa, spring was its clarified butter, summer the kindling, autumn the oblation.

It was Purusa, born in the beginning, which they sprinkled on the sacred grass as a sacrifice. With him the gods sacrificed, the demi-gods, and the seers.

From that sacrifice completely offered, the clotted butter was brought together. It made the beasts of the air, the forest and the village.

From that sacrifice completely offered, the mantras [Rig Veda] and the songs [Samaveda] were born. The meters were born from it. The sacrificial formulae [Yajurveda] were born from it.

From it the horses were born and all that have cutting teeth in both jaws. The cows were born from it, also. From it were born goats and sheep.

When they divided Purusa, how many ways did they apportion him? What was his mouth? What were his arms? What were his thighs, his feet declared to be?

His mouth was the Brahman [caste], his arms were the Rajanaya [Ksatriya caste], his thighs the Vaisya [caste]; from his feet the Sudra [caste] was born.

The moon was born from his mind; from his eye the sun was born; from his mouth both Indra and Agni [fire]; from his breath Vayu [wind] was born.

From his navel arose the air; from his head the heaven evolved; from his feet the earth; the [four] directions from his ear. Thus, they fashioned the worlds.

Seven were his altar sticks, three times seven were the kindling bundles, when the gods, performing the sacrifice, bound the beast Purusa.

The gods sacrificed with the sacrifice to the sacrifice. These were the first rites. These powers reached the firmament, where the ancient demi-gods and the gods are.

Part IV: CLASSICAL PERIOD

Overview

During this period (c.500 BCE-500 CE), and especially under the patronage of the Gupta Empire (320-550 BCE), literary, artistic and religious elements that we now recognise as 'classical India' took shape. Hinduism evolved from its Vedic origins into a temple-based devotionalism. Hindu gods and goddesses were popularised through an extensive body of literature, and they were widely celebrated in the visual arts. Buddhism and Jainism also emerged, out of deep philosophical and social differences with Hinduism, and produced their own cultural traditions. Underlying many of these developments was the appearance (or reappearance) of writing sometime between 350-250 BCE. However, nearly all literary texts in the period were still orally composed.

Religion

Hinduism In the first part of this period, Hinduism underwent a fundamental shift, away from the external, sanguine outlook of the Vedas (c. 1,500-900 BCE) and toward the internal, sceptical contemplation of the Upanishads (c. 800-300 BCE). In broad terms, the early emphasis on ritual as action was replaced by an examination of ritual as symbol. Knowledge of the sacrifice became more important than actually performing the sacrifice. And the greatest knowledge was knowledge of the self or soul (*atman*). This shift was also deeply influenced by the emergence of Buddhism and Jainism.

Buddhism Buddhism grew out of Hinduism in the 6th c. BCE through a rejection of brahminical authority and the Hindu concept of the soul. Buddhism announced the startling claim that there was no 'soul', no permanent self, and that everything was in flux. The only reality was pure consciousness. In proposing a more open yet austere path to enlightenment, Buddhism split into two wings: the Hinayana (now found in Sri Lanka, Burma and Southeast Asia) and the Mahayana (found in Tibet, Nepal, Japan and China). Both schools developed sophisticated philosophical and philological traditions, the first in Pali, the second in Sanskrit and Tibetan.

Gautama Buddha Tradition holds that the ‘historical’ Buddha, a prince named Gautama, was born at Lumbini, on the Indian-Nepalese border, in the mid-6th century BCE. However, there had been no material evidence to support this claim until 2013, when archaeologists digging at Lumbini uncovered the remains of a timber structure (called a ‘shrine’) dated to the 6th century BCE. Whether the founder of Buddhism was born in that century or later, there is little doubt that there was an historical figure in the middle of the first millennium BCE who changed the course of Indian and world history.

Jainism Like Buddhism, Jainism is an offshoot of Hinduism and based on a historical figure (Mahavira, ‘Great Hero’) who lived in the 6th c. BCE. Again like Buddhism, asceticism and non-violence are central to Jainism. However, a key tenet of Jainism is the indestructible and immortal individual soul (*jiva*), which differentiates it from both Hinduism and Buddhism. Jains made a significant contribution to literature and philosophy, especially in south India, and won patronage from important rulers up to the medieval period.

Devotionalism Devotionalism (*bhakti*) was a pan-Indian religious movement that began toward the end of the classical period. Although it affected Buddhism, its primary imprint was on Hinduism. In this new religiosity, an individual worshipper imagined and nurtured a direct bond with a specific god or goddess. Contemplation of abstract spiritual ends gave way to more active engagement with deities, who were given human-like qualities of generosity and compassion. Although devotionalism was signalled in the late Upanishads, it flourished under the patronage of the Gupta rulers, especially in their state support for the worship of Visnu and Lakshmi.

Art

Architecture The chief architectural monument of the early period was the stupa. Essentially funeral mounds housing the relics of the Buddha, stupas were first built in the reign of Ashoka (3rd c. BCE). As such, they are the oldest surviving religious structures in India. The earliest and most elaborate stupa is that at Sanchi, which measures 16 metres high and 37 metres in diameter. Its hemispherical frame is made of brick, but the four gateways, added about 100 CE and decorated with fine sculptures of the Buddha’s life, are carved from sandstone.

Ajanta and Ellora Stupas, prayer-halls and monasteries were also carved out of rock caves at Ajanta and Ellora in western India (c. 200 BCE to 300 CE). Monasteries (*vihara*) were multi-storied structures containing kitchens, sleeping quarters and niches. The prayer-halls (*caitya*) were large spaces in which worshippers could gather, and most also contained a stupa. Some prayer-halls were built with wood, evidenced by a vault supported by horseshoe-shaped ribs, but only the rock-hewn examples survive.

Painting The ceilings and walls of these religious spaces in caves were painted with murals showing Hindu, Buddhist and Jaina figures and scenes from religious texts, especially the Buddhist *Jataka* stories. The paintings were done in ‘dry fresco’ style: painted on top of a dry plaster surface rather than onto wet plaster. These paintings—luxurious, sensual and ethereal—are considered by many to be the highpoint of Indian painting.

Sculpture A school of sculpture emerged that depicted scenes and figures from the life of the Buddha and the *Jataka* tales. Its characteristic features included the lotus flower, water symbols and the gestures and physical poses of the historical Buddha. Outstanding examples are found in north and western India at Sanchi, Ellora and Ajanta, but perhaps the most spectacular is found in south India at Amaravati. These exquisitely carved figures, often in narrative scenes and in small niches, display a skill, dynamism and imagination unseen in most later Indian sculpture.

Gandhara At roughly the same time, the Gandhara (or Greco-Buddhist) style of sculpture developed in the northwest. This style is named after the region of Gandhara, where Persian, Greek, Scythian and Chinese cultures intermingled. Artisans here were inspired by Mahayana Buddhism, patronised by the Kushana king Kanishka and influenced by Greek models. They produced large, muscular representations of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas (particularly Maitreya), who resemble Greek figures wearing a Roman toga.

Literature

Writing The re-emergence of writing (after the disappearance of the undeciphered Indus script in the second millennium BCE) underpinned many developments in this period. Writing in the Brahmi script first appeared in the

edicts of king Ashoka in the 3rd century BCE, although brief inscriptions on pottery found in Sri Lanka have recently been dated to between 450-350 BCE. The Brahmi script, which probably derives from a Semitic or Sumerian script, is the forerunner of all later scripts used in India, with the single exception of Kharosthi, which had a brief life in northwest India between about 200 BCE and 200 CE.

Sanskrit literature Sanskrit literature flourished during this period. The first examples of narrative prose in Indian literature appear in the Upanishads (c. 800-300 BCE). The first Indian biography, the *Buddhacarita* ('Life of the Buddha') by Ashvagosa (c. 200 CE), is a poetic hagiography of the historical Buddha. The great epics of the Ramayana and Mahabharata, which were composed over many centuries (culminating perhaps about 400 CE), became vehicles for the new devotionalism and provided material for every type of cultural expression. The same is true of Hindu myths, which cycled and recycled in numerous versions, serving as entertainment, ethical instruction and ritual manual. Sanskrit court poetry and drama flourished under the Guptas. Kalidasa (5th c. CE) excelled at both, producing plays that are still performed today.

Pancatantra The *Pancatantra* ('Five-Books') is a collection of nearly 100 animal fables orally composed in Sanskrit (and later found in all Indian languages). The frame-story is that a pundit instructs three ignorant princes in the art of statecraft, using these moral stories as lessons. The work is divided into five sections, each focusing on an aspect of statecraft, although each has more general significance. The five topics are: The Separation of Friends, The Gaining of Friends, War and Peace, Loss of Gains and ill-Considered Action. Each of these sections is itself introduced by a frame-story, within which animals take turns telling a story.

Jataka The *Jataka* tales are similar to those in the *Pancatantra* (some tales are found in both collections) with the important differences that they were adapted to tell the story of the previous lives of the historical Buddha and were orally composed in Pali, the language of Hinayana Buddhism. In most variants of the text, each tale has a similar structure. First there is a folktale in prose, in which the Buddha-to-be appears as one of the characters, either human or animal. This is then followed by a brief commentary in verse that links the story to an aspect of the Buddha's teaching

Sattasai An early but little-known collection of classical Indian poetry is the *Sattasai* ('Seven Hundred') by Hala (c. 100 CE). These 700 single-verse, largely secular poems were composed in Prakrit (a regional variant of Sanskrit), probably in the Deccan. The poet Hala was a king of the Satavahana dynasty, though little is known of his life.

Tamil literature A large corpus of Tamil classical poems was composed between c. 100-300 CE. Independent of Sanskrit conventions, Tamil tradition divided literature into two overarching genres: *akam* ('interior') and *puram* ('exterior'). These terms, which refer to both the topographical and psychological dimensions of a poem, are usually translated as 'love' and 'war' poems. Love poems describe inner states of love, usually in or around the house. They are divided into five sub-groups, each devoted to a specific type or condition of love, and each associated with a specific landscape, flower, time of the day, season of the year and bird. Convention requires that no names, only stock figures, appear in the love poems. Many are extremely short, not more than ten lines. War poems, on the other hand, typically describe public events, especially war and the actions of kings. They also contain the names of kings, poets, battles and towns, and they have an ethos of fame and shame. A mother, for instance, does not want to see wounds on her son's back. A king places his daughters in the care of a bard before he starves himself to death, rather than face defeat. A Tamil epic, 'The Lay of the Anklet' (*Cilappatikaram*), was composed in about 500 CE, probably by a Jain monk. While it bears some similarity to contemporaneous Sanskrit court poetry, especially in its ornate descriptions of place and nature, its deeper message of loss and revenge sets it apart.

Questions/Discussion

1. Over the course of this period, we can trace a widening separation between courtly culture and popular culture. Contributing factors to this division include the increasing use of writing, the spread of urbanism and the expanding authority of the state.

2. The history of the heterodox religions, Buddhism and Jainism, share many elements. They both developed out of early Hinduism in the 6th c. BCE; both were founded by an historical figure; and both challenged the religious beliefs of the time. However, their later histories are radically different. Although Buddhism became a major social and political force in India until about 1000 CE, thereafter it declined and is a negligible presence today. Outside India, however, in Southeast Asia, Buddhism wields the power it once had in India. Jainism, on the other hand, never gained the popularity that Buddhism did, but it also never lost the small status it did gain.
3. Early Buddhist art contains some of the finest examples of visual representation anywhere in the world. The earliest pieces, however, are aniconic. That is, they do not show the figure of the Buddha. This aniconism was consistent with the extreme austerity of the early Buddhist tradition. Within two centuries this changed, and artists created delicate, sensual representations of the Buddha and other figures. What can account for this shift in thinking and practice?

Reading

Susan L. Huntington, *The Art of Ancient India: Buddhist, Hindu, Jain* (Weatherhill, 1985)

Wendy Doniger, *Hindu Myths* (2nd ed.) (Penguin, 2004)

Ainslie T. Embree, *Sources of Indian Tradition, vol. 1* (Columbia, 1988)

A.K. Ramanujan, *The Interior Landscape* (OUP India, 1994)

William Buck, *Ramayana* (California, 2000)

John Smith, *Mahabharata* (Penguin, 2009)

Daniel Ingalls, *Sanskrit Poetry* (Harvard, 2000)

R. Parthasarathy, *Cilappatikaram: The Tale of an Anklet* (Penguin India, 2004)

Texts

1. From the Sanskrit *Buddhacarita*, translated by Charles Willemsen, 2009

Birth, old age, illness, and death are suffering; separation from what one loves or meeting with enmity, not attaining something one wants, and so on are kinds of suffering.

If one renounces desire or does not yet renounce it, has a body or is without a body, if one is without any pure quality, one may briefly say that all this is painful.

When, for instance, a great fire is appeased, it does not give up its heat, even though it may have become smaller. Even in a self that is quiet and subtle by nature, great suffering still exists.

The afflictions of greed and the others, and all kinds of wrong actions—these are the causes of suffering. If one gives them up, suffering is extinguished.

When, for instance, seeds are without earth, water, and so forth, when all conditions are not combined, shoots and leaves do not grow.

Existences continue by nature, from heaven to the woeful destinations. The wheel keeps turning and does not stop. This is produced by desire. Demotion differs according to weak, intermediate, or strong, but all kinds of actions are the cause.

If one has extinguished greed and so forth, there is no continuation of existence. When all kinds of actions have ended, different kinds of suffering know long-lasting appeasement. If this exists, then that exists. If this is extinguished, then that is extinguished.

Absence of birth, old age, illness, and death; absence of earth, water, fire, and wind; and both absence of beginning, middle, and end and condemnation of a deceptive law—these mean tranquility without end, abodes of the noble.

2. From the Tamil *Kuruntokai*, translated by AK Ramanujan

What could my mother be to yours?
What kin is my father
to yours anyway?
And how did you and I ever meet?
But in love,
our hearts have mingled
As red earth and pouring rain.

3. From the Tamil *Kuruntokai*, translated by AK Ramanujan

Bigger than earth, certainly,
higher than the sky,
more unfathomable than the waters
is this love for this man
of the mountain slopes
where bees make rich honey
from the flowers of the kurinci
that has such black stalks.

4. From the *Purunanuru*, translated by AK Ramanujan, 1985

This world lives
Because some men do not eat alone,
not even when they get
the sweet ambrosia of the gods;
they've no anger in them,
they fear evils other men fear
but never sleep over them;
give their lives for honor,
will not touch a gift of whole worlds
if tainted;
there's no faintness in their hearts
and they do not strive for themselves.
because such men are,
This world is.