HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

INDIAN HISTORY – Ancient Period

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PART I: PREHISTORY

Overview The history of India's Stone Age is recoverable largely from the archaeological record of its three stages: Palaeolithic (c.1,000,000 - 40,000 BCE), Mesolithic (c. 40,000-7,000 BCE) and Neolithic (c. 7,000 - 3,000 BCE). It is important to state that these dates, especially the earliest ones, are not conclusive and undergo constant revision in light of new research. Recent excavations near Madras, for example, suggest a radical shift in the chronology of the earliest tool-making hominid communities in the subcontinent. Similarly, work at a site in Pakistan has already provided evidence that has changed our understanding of the Neolithic period. In studying stone-age subsistence patterns, it is also important to emphasise that they are not mutually exclusive. Hunting and gathering, for instance, did not disappear with the cultivation of animals and plants. Indeed, some groups practiced, and some still do practice, multiple subsistence patterns.

Palaeolithic (c.1,000,000-10,000 BCE)

New research At Attirampakkam, a site near Madras, a team of Indian and French archaeologists have recently (since 2012) found more than 4,000 artefacts, including stone hand-axes and cleavers, which they believe are at least a million years old and possibly as old as 1.5 million years. The team analysed traces embedded in the artefacts and correlated the resulting dates with changes in the earth's magnetic field. Their findings challenge the accepted narrative of prehistory in India. Before this new research, the consensus view among specialists was that hominid presence in India began approximately 500,000 BCE. Now, however, evidence is gathering to push that date back to more than a million years BCE. The number of Palaeolithic sites in the subcontinent has also increased substantially due to recent discoveries. There are now about 50 major such sites in the subcontinent, stretching from Sanghao in the northwest, to Laimai in the east, to Palghat in the south.

Migration from Africa This new view of hominid history in India suggests that Homo erectus migrated from Africa following what is known as the 'southern route.' Having left Africa and entered west Asia, early humans split, one group going north and the other south, taking them to India, southeast Asia and eventually to Australia. Homo erectus is a now extinct species that dominated the earth for at least a million years during the Pleistocene epoch. Homo sapiens, from whom modern humans descend, appear to have entered South Asia between 75,000 and 50,000 BCE.

Tools The earliest humans in the subcontinent were primitive hunter-gatherers using stones that they found with a sharp edge or that they made by chipping off parts from a stone. If you break a large stone into two or three parts, the largest part is known as the 'core tool' and the other fragments as 'flake tools.' The reliance on core tools is characteristic of the Palaeolithic age. Either the core or the flake tools may be worked on to produce the desired shape, although many tools in this period were unfinished. The tools made in this (and subsequent periods) include cleavers, hand axes, knives and scrappers. Rather than a specialist skill, tool-making was a communal task, in which all adults in a band of hunter-gatherers (approximately 40-80 people) were expected to cooperate.

Tool factories Stones used for tools appear to have been quarried at certain 'factory' sites, especially in the Deccan. At Isampur (c. 500,000 BCE) in modern-day Karnataka, for example, archaeologists have identified four adjacent sites (each about 300-400 sq miles), where a large cache of these early stone tools were found. The tools were probably made from the large limestone slabs and blocks in the area.

Subsistence Although **e**arly stone-age people in India were hunter-gatherers, most of their food was gathered rather than hunted. In fact, the hunting element of the 'hunter-gatherer' image is often exaggerated by both scholars and the general public. As a generalisation, and based on gender divisions among tribals in modern India, it appears that men tended to hunt and women to gather. Again contrary to popular belief, hunting was not done with spears or arrows, but rather with clubs and large stones, and meat was often eaten from dead animals. Gathering, likewise, did not involve sophisticated implements, and people mostly used their hands to collect fruit, berries, nuts, small insects and possibly honey. Fishing was also common

Habitation Recent research has revised the geographical location of all these early stone-age communities in India. Most sites of human habitation were originally located in the terraces of the Soan River and Potwar plateau in present-day Pakistan, but many more have found in central and south India. Contrary to the common assumption that stone-age sites must be distant and isolated, many of these sites are close to today's towns and cities, and near a water source. Most of them were rock shelters, although caves were also common, such as those at Sanghao in Pakistan and Kurnool in Andhra Pradesh. These stone shelters are those that have survived over time, while others, presumably made of foliage and branches, would also have been used.

Mesolithic (c. 10,000-7,000 BCE)

Transition The gradual transition from the Old- to the Middle-Stone Age in India is marked by the slow diminution in the size of stone tools. The unwieldy 'core-tools' (such as hand-axes and cleavers) of the Palaeolithic were gradually replaced by smaller 'flake-tools'. From the widespread presence of stone fragments (about 5 cm in width), scientists conclude that the larger stones were chipped and shaped by smaller stones. Most of these new, smaller tools were made of flint and quartzite, which were harder and more easily worked than other types of stone.

Subsistence The new technology of reducing large stones to these smaller, more efficient tools, such as knives and sickles, then enabled hunter-gatherers to forage more effectively. Although hunting in the Mesolithic may have involved spears and arrows, there is no direct evidence for this in India, either from skeletal remains or lithic analyses. Stones with flaked tips might have been used as weapons, but they are neither as numerous nor as complex as those found in other Mesolithic societies around the world. Some groups also domesticated animals, such as cattle and sheep, which were used for meat, fat, milk, hides and bones. Again, fishing was a major source of food for some populations.

Habitation The net result of these changes in subsistence was that hunter-gatherers became less nomadic and formed larger groups. Another consequence was the spread of settlement sites to new ecological niches. Although rock shelters continued to be the dominant habitation, some hunter-gatherers began to live outside caves. For example, during this period we find evidence of camps in forest areas, with postholes, hearths, pottery remains and animal bones (wild sheep and cattle). These non-rock habitations also show different degrees of sedentariness, with some settlements being used on a semi-permanent or seasonal basis.

Chopani Mando The partial transition from hunting and gathering to settled agriculture during the Mesolithic can be traced at Chopani Mando in Madhya Pradesh. A large collection of artefacts from that site demonstrates the shift to smaller, harder and more sophisticated stone tools. Pieces of burnt clay with impressions also indicate that the people of Chopani Mando lived in wattle-and-daub huts. A total of nineteen round and oval huts have been found, grouped close together and with an average diameter of about 4 metres. The final piece of evidence of a transition toward the Neolithic at this site is wild rice dated to the end of the Mesolithic.

Crafts Pottery is found in only a few, late Mesolithic sites in India, in contrast to other Mesolithic cultures around the world. However, ornament-making was widespread. Animal bones with grooves found at Kurnool in Andhra Pradesh suggest that they may have been worn as ornaments. Similar suggestions have been made for round, disc-like stones and ostrich egg shells with holes in them, resembling ornaments found in prehistoric Siberia, China and Africa. Beads made from ostrich egg shells have been found in many sites across the subcontinent. In one Bhimbetka cave, for instance, a buried man wore a necklace, presumably of various types of beads, although only the egg shell ones remained.

Neolithic (c. 7,000- 3,000 BCE)

Definition The defining features of the Neolithic period—food production, weapons, settled communities, increased populations, complex political organisation, social stratification and pottery—represent the culmination of a long sequence of developments. This cluster of elements appeared at roughly the same time (8,000-5,000 BCE) in three different regions of the world: the Near East, South and southwest China and northwest India.

Mehrgarh Located in a valley that connects India with Afghanistan, Mehrgarh (c. 7,000- 4,000 BCE) is a Neolithic site of great significance for Indian history. Only discovered in the 1970s and excavated more recently, it has now revised our understanding of the transition to urban settlements. Before the discovery of Mehrgarh, it was thought that the Neolithic period in the subcontinent began in the 4th millennium BCE as the result of diffusion from Mesopotamia. Now, however, we can trace a gradual and more localised evolution from about the 7th millennium BCE. It thus represents a crucial link from pre-history to the well-known Indus Valley civilisation.

Subsistence At its height, Mehrgarh covered about half a square mile and served as a hub for trade with other villages in the Quetta valley. The people of Mehrgarh cultivated barley, rice and wheat in large amounts. Harvesting was probably accomplished by using crude stone sickles, while the stone mortar and pestle were used to grind grains and leaves. Although sheep, cattle and goats were domesticated, wild animals continued to be hunted. The invention of sophisticated weapons (the spear, and bow and arrow) facilitated hunting. Animal bones and seed remains found at burial sites suggest that Mesolithic people in India had a varied diet. Swamp deer and hog deer were the stable, supplemented by the tortoise and fish. Trade with the Near East is evidenced by the presence of lapis lazuli and turquoise beads among the grave goods**.**

Habitation The residents of Mehrgarh lived in houses of hand-made mud-bricks, with small, rectangular rooms. Other brick buildings were used for storage, perhaps as granaries. These structures can be seen as direct antecedents to those found in the Indus Valley civilisation.

Crafts The people of Mehrgarh made reed baskets, wove cotton and wool, carved ornaments and manufactured pots. Indeed, by the end of this period, pottery had evolved from crude, handmade vessels to wheel-made pots with geometric designs, typically with black and red colours. One manufacturing area was found with three ovens and metres of pottery debris.

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 Bhimbekta, 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 Penna 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.

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

Upinder Singh, *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India: From the Stone Age to the 12th Century* (Longman, 2008)
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Part II: INDUS VALLEY CIVILIZATION

Overview

Comparative The Indus Valley (or Harappan) Civilisation (c. 3000-1500 BCE) is not only the crowning achievement of ancient Indian history. 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.

Revisions Recent and ongoing research at many sites are forcing scholars to revise many of their assumptions. For instance, we now know that the IVC covered more territory than previously thought and that its government was less centralised. Analogies from Egypt and Mesopotamia, with highly centralised theocratic polities, have now been dismissed in favour of the idea of regionalism. Moreover, we now believe that the social and economic systems of the IVC were more complex than previously thought. And explanations for its demise have been reconsidered.

Dating Dating the IVC, perhaps the most significant task for researchers, is also undergoing revision. Ever since it was first excavated in the 1920s, the start date of the IVC has fluctuated between 3,000 and 2,000 BCE. However, radio carbon dating of pottery from Haryana in 2016 suggests that the origin is closer to 7,000 BCE. In part this debate turns on the difficult question of when a civilisation can be said to begin. Most scholars now accept that there was an evolution, over millennia, before the emergence of the full-blown IVC with sophisticated urban settlements.

Neolithic Sites It is also important to point out that, although the IVC dominates our thinking during this period, societies in other parts of the subcontinent were still making the transition to the Neolithic. From Kashmir to South India, we have evidence of early farming, domesticated animals, village-level settlements and increasingly complex rituals and beliefs. A good example is the site of Burzahom in Kashmir (c. 3,000-1,000 BCE), where researchers have found evidence of huts made of mud, mud-brick and timber. They also discovered two stone slabs, one of which shows hunters aiming a long spear and bow- and-arrow at a deer.

Extent The IVC includes more than 1000 sites spread over an area of almost 1000 square miles (about the size of modern-day Pakistan). While the core of the civilisation is in the Indus river basin, it extends west to the eastern

border of Afghanistan, north to northern Afghanistan, east to Uttar Pradesh and south to Gujarat. Major cities include the well-known settlements of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa, as well as Lothal, Rakhighari, Kalibangan, Dholavira and Rupar. At its peak, the total population of the IVC is estimated to have reached beyond five million. According to some estimates, 40,000 people lived in Mohenjo Daro alone, while Harappa covered 150 hectares (5 kilometres in circuit).

Origins

Mehrgarh Before the discovery of Mehrgarh, it was thought that the Neolithic period in the subcontinent began in the 4th millennium BCE and had spread from Mesopotamia. Now, however, we can trace a gradual, more localised evolution from about the 7th millennium BCE. From that date, Neolithic farmers evolved into larger, more settled communities with houses and domesticated animals. This evolution can be seen clearly at Mehrgarh in Baluchistan, at the foothills of the mountains separating Pakistan from Afghanistan. By the middle of the third millennium BCE, the long evolution that had led to the Neolithic phase of Indian history at Mehrgarh reached its final stage in a transition to urbanisation in the Indus Valley Civilisation.

Decline

Debate The decline and disappearance of the Indus cities is poorly understood and hotly debated. Starting about 1900 BCE, sites were eventually abandoned, the seals were no longer manufactured, drainage systems broke down and flooding increased. At the same time, smaller settlements displaying Indus features arose farther east in the Gangetic plain, and some scholars now call this 'Late Harappan' or 'Late Indus' civilisation. This was more or less simultaneous with the arrival of the Indo-Aryans in the Indus region.

Invasion Until the late 20th century, many scholars believed that the Indus cities had been destroyed, or conquered, by 'invading' Indo-Aryans with their superior weapons, warfare techniques and horse-riding skill. Fractured skulls and mutilated skeletons found in a street and houses in Mohenjo Daro seemed to be evidence of an assault if not slaughter. However, it has recently been shown that the fractures and mutilations were caused by erosion and not by violence.

Climate change A more plausible explanation for decline focuses on climate change, both extensive flooding and the drying up of river beds, which would have stimulated population shifts. Recent research (2016) from Haryana suggests that the strength of the monsoon decreased over the life-span of the IVC. There is also evidence of considerable deforestation, probably caused by the massive consumption of wood needed to feed the kilns that manufactured bricks and other products.

Overcrowding Another, more recent, theory claims that the Indus cities were occupied long after the 1900 BCE date and possibly as late as 1300 BCE. The same evidence used to demonstrate decline—breakdown of the drainage system, cessation of seal manufacturing and disuse of weights—can be interpreted as proof that the cities were overcrowded and ungovernable. In other words, the very success of the IVC, its spread further east into the Gangetic plain, caused an unsustainable extension of political and economic systems that led to its fragmentation and eventual decline. Lacking an army, elites could not prevent people from abandoning old cities and moving on to new settlements.

Legacy

Despite its mysterious disappearance, the IVC exerted influence over subsequent periods of Indian history. For example, although glass production is considered to be distinctive to post-IVC north India (the Painted Grey Ware culture, c. 1200- 600 BCE), glass beads were manufactured in the Indus cities. Similarly, the later phase of IVC saw rudimentary iron working, a technology that would shape the history of the subcontinent for two thousand years. The same is true for pottery, brick-making and farming techniques. Claims have also been made for links between the religion of the IVC and later Hinduism. The swastika is found on a button-seal (1 cm square) in a house in Harappa. The true legacy of the IVC, however, is its hold on the imagination. Even if we cannot decipher its script and not understand its demise, its antiquity and its sophistication have made it a powerful symbol in the mind of modern India.

Political system

Theocracy theory Based on a now-discarded analogy from other Bronze Age civilisations, it was once assumed that the IVC was a theocracy, with its centre at Mohenjo-Daro or Harappa. A famous figure of a bearded man was put forward as 'a priest-king', and a large building in Mohenjo-Daro (the 'citadel') was widely accepted as a centre for ritual and state authority. The citadel, we now know, was actually a grain storage facility.

Centralisation However, some degree of centralised state organisation linking the wide geographic spread of the IVC is suggested by the uniformity of houses, mud-bricks, weight measures, inscribed seals, grid pattern of streets, street drainage and grain storage. Centralisation is most obvious in the sophisticated drainage system. Houses were equipped with bathing areas, latrines and sewage drains. Linked to larger mains, which eventually emptied outside the city walls, the sewers would have removed wastewater from the habitation areas and deposited fertile sludge on the surrounding agricultural fields. On the other hand, the vast territory and rudimentary transport system would have made centralisation difficult to achieve.

Regionalism Recent research has tended to support the opposite claim: that the IVC was dominated by regionalism. New evidence has led to the idea that there were six or seven regional administrative centres, each with links to villages in the hinterland. These regional centres, it is claimed, were the major cities (Mohenjo-Daro, Harappa, Lothal, Rakhighari, Kalibangan, Dholavira and Rupar), where political and commercial power was concentrated. Each centre operated like a city-state or a complex chieftaincy. Power was shared among various elite kin-groups rather than a hereditary monarchy. And power was gained through trade rather than warfare.

Economy

Evolution As a generalisation we can say that the economy of the Indus Valley civilisation was the culmination of a slow evolution from semi-nomadic pastoralism to settled agriculture and then to commerce in urban centres. Compared to earlier periods, IVC objects were standardised and mass-produced. Since coinage is not found in India until the subsequent Iron Age, we have to assume that the Indus economy operated by means of barter and trade.

Complexity Whatever the actual degree of political centralisation or regionalism in the Indus Valley civilisation, it is clear that its economic system was complex. Sustaining a far-flung network of regional centres for more than ten centuries would have required surplus food production, commercial activities, division of labour and trade networks.

Metallurgy Copper and bronze (copper alloyed with tin, arsenic or nickel) artefacts are plentiful in the IVC. Sixteen copper workshops existed in Harappa alone. Copper and bronze knives, spears, swords, needles, rings, bangles and mirrors were common. Bronze was also used to make statues, while copper plates were used for writing.

Brick-making IVC houses, warehouses, fortress walls and its few large buildings required a considerable quantity of unglazed mud-fired bricks. Even the drain pipes of houses and other buildings were made of terracotta. This extensive brick industry, in turn, depended on an extensive timber industry to supply the wood for the many kilns where the bricks were fired. Finally, masons and other builders were required to construct houses.

Crafts IVC people made pots in a wide variety of standardised styles and shapes. Most are sturdy, wheel-turned and high quality pots, with geometric designs of either red or black. IVC people also wove silk, cotton and woollen textiles, built houses and made ornaments of stone, terracotta, shell, semi-precious gems, gold and silver.

Food production IVC farmers cultivated wheat, cotton, millet, rice, sesame, melons, peas, dates, garlic and several varieties of gram. The fertile river basin required (and still requires) little ploughing, irrigation or manuring. Terracotta models of animal-drawn ploughs have been found, but no actual plough has survived, presumably because they were made of wood. Reservoirs, bunds and canals were built to contain and divert surface water.

Domesticated animals The most important domesticated animals were cattle and buffalo, used for meat, milk and labour. Sheep and goats were also raised for food, as well as for wool. Small figurines of dogs suggest that they too were domesticated. Claims that horse bones have been found are extremely controversial since horses are associated with the Indo-Aryans, who are thought to have migrated to India only after (or at the same time as) the decline of the IVC.

Internal trade Food, raw materials and manufactured goods were traded between villages, regional markets and urban centres within the IVC area. Harappa had an open-plan market for stalls, surrounded by workshops where shell, copper and agate artefacts were produced. Fascinating new analyses of grain deposits (phyloliths) suggest that rural farmers shifted from growing a single crop for local consumption to a variety of crops that were processed for trade with the regional centres. It is thought that this shift occurred because of commercial demands from powerful merchants in the cities.

External trade External trade was crucial to the IVC economy. Lapis lazuli, tin, gold, silver and fine woollen textiles came from Central Asia, West Asia and Afghanistan. To these regions, the IVC exported mainly cereal grains, livestock and cotton textiles. Trade with Mesopotamia is demonstrated by the fact that shell bangles, carnelian beads and numerous Indus Valley seals have been found in ancient Near Eastern cities.

Transport The IVC trade networks relied heavily on the bullock cart, and the Indus (along with Mesopotamia) was among the first societies to use wheeled transport. Boats were also important. These were most likely small, flat-bottomed craft, perhaps driven by sail and similar to those one can see on the Indus River today.

Dockyard One extraordinary discovery is a large dockyard at Lothal, on the west coast of India, which would have facilitated maritime trade to the Near East. At Lothal, burnt bricks were used to construct a basin with walls over 200 meters long on the east and west sides, and about 35 meters long on the north and south sides. A sluice-gate and a spill channel were used to regulate the water level.

Society

Population It is estimated that only about 100,000 of the total 5 million people of the IVC lived in towns and cities. This means that the great majority of the people lived in small towns and villages. However, because most of the archaeological material comes from the handful of large urban centres, our picture of IVC society is disproportionately based on the city-dwelling population.

Ethnicity Genetic studies of skeletons found at major sites across the IVC show considerable uniformity. However, there is also regional diversity. Bodies analysed from a specific site have a strong biological affinity with local hunter-gatherer populations in that area. For example, the bodies excavated at Lothal show an extremely close link with populations in that part of Gujarat.

Egalitarian The extreme uniformity of the IVC suggests that its society was more egalitarian than hierarchical. All the examples of uniformity— standardised bricks, houses, urban grid pattern, seals and measures—reflect a relatively classless society. In addition, artefacts are distributed throughout various occupational levels and are not concentrated in high-status residences or monuments. Important goods (semi-precious stones, copper and bronze ornaments, inscribed seals) are found in small hamlets as well as urban centres. The relative weakness of any ruling elite is further indicated by the nature of grave goods, in particular the absence of hoards.

Groups Despite the lack of a powerful elite, such as a hereditary monarchy or clan, differentiation based on wealth and power clearly existed. Indeed, the complex commercial and political organisation of the regional centres required a social structure of groups with different status and skills. From material remains, it has been suggested that the IVC consisted of eight distinct classes: artisans, labourers, land-owners, merchants, administrators (and their assistants), farmers, ritual leaders and political elites. These eight groups might be represented by the eight types of animals inscribed on the seals. Each of these groups had sub-groups, such as masons, potters, carpenters and jewellers among the artisans.

Everyday life Both men and women wore two cotton garments: some kind of lower dhoti or skirt and (usually) an upper shawl thrown over the shoulder. Domestic utensils included axes, knives, needles and saws made from stone, bone, copper and bronze. A detailed toy bullock-cart, an exquisitely shaped dancing girl and several sets of cubical dice (with one to six holes painted on the faces) show that people amused themselves much as we might today. A harp-like instrument incised on a stone seal and two shell objects suggest the presence of musical instruments. There is also some evidence for a bowed, stringed instrument (similar to the *ravanhatta* played in western India today).

Kinship and marriage Indus valley society would have been structured in part, if not in the main, by kinship. While we have no textual information as to the kinship system, we can assume that marriage was central. And for this we can glean some details from the scenes depicted on the seals and pottery. For example, one famous seal shows a group of people arranged around a central figure standing behind a circle or pattern drawn on the floor that resembles the floor designs used today for weddings. Some seals had holes, presumably for a string, enabling them to be worn, perhaps as a wedding pendant, as is the custom today.

Social change Despite the egalitarian and uniform nature of IVC society, it must have changed during its more than ten centuries. Factors stimulating change include climate variation, trade and the influx of new people. We know there was considerable trade between the IVC and the neighbouring regions, particularly Central Asia, Afghanistan and the Near East. The humped bulls and the black buck shown on painted pots suggest that these animals, which are not native to the Indus valley, may have been brought to the area by migrants from the Near East.

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, axel 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 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 250-300 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.

<u>Discussion/questions</u>

1. The evidence for a centralised state in the Indus Valley civilisation is mixed. Analyse the evidence (such as bricks, weights, seals and drainage) to build an argument that uses comparative data from at least one other world civilisation (preferably from the same time period). In conclusion, explain why the issue of state organisation is important not only for an understanding of the Indus Valley civilisation but for later Indian history, as well.

2. The economy of the IVC operated by means of barter, rather than coinage or currency. Studies of archaic barter societies (see, for example, 'The Gift' by M. Mauss) emphasise the importance of rules and reciprocity. How, then, does barter differ from modern economic exchange?

3. The overwhelming majority of the IVC population lived in small towns and villages, yet most of the archaeological evidence comes from a handful of large urban centres. Does this discrepancy distort our understanding of the civilisation? Although our first answer might be 'yes,' consider that the villages were connected to the cities by trade networks and possibly political links as well. In addition, most artefacts are found in both urban and rural sites.

4. 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 'civilisation' and how does it differ, if at all, from culture?

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Part III: INDO-ARYAN CIVILIZATION

Overview

Origins The Indo-Aryans (who called themselves 'Arya') came from the Iranian high plateau ('Iran' and 'Aryan' are cognate words) and entered India around 1,500 BCE, that is, at about the same time that the Indus Valley civilisation was in decline. For many decades, scholars thought that these two events were casually linked in that the Indo-Aryans had 'invaded' en mass and destroyed the Indus cities. That idea has been discredited by lack of evidence. Instead, it seems likely that the Indo-Aryans migrated from the Eurasian steppes to India over two or three centuries, in a series of overlapping movements. This migration may have been concurrent with the end of the Indus Valley civilisation, but it was not a factor in its decline.

Controversy The history of the Indo-Aryans in India is a scholarly and public minefield. Although the 'invasion' idea has been abandoned, many people do not believe that these ancient people migrated to India. Rather, they believe that they are indigenous to the subcontinent. This 'sons of the soil' theory is a foundational principle of present-day Hindu nationalism, which demonises Muslims as 'outsiders.' Archaeological, linguistic and recent genetic evidence, however, make migration an established fact.

Influence The Indo-Aryans 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. Another powerful legacy of early Indo-Aryan history is the caste system. It was articulated in the religious texts known as the Vedas and underwent significant change during the classical period as the Indo-Aryans assimilated into local populations and social rules were codified.

Developments Other major developments occurred as a result of the gradual integration of the early Indo-Aryans with indigenous peoples. The tribe-based political system of the early Indo-Aryans, rooted in their semi-nomadic pastoralism, evolved into chiefdoms. The economy of the early Indo-Aryans also shifted to settled agriculture, a fundamental change made possible by the spread of iron-making and forest clearance.

Government

Tribes Early Indo-Aryans were organised into tribes (*jana*), with a chief (*raja*), who was advised by two different tribal councils (*sabha* and *samiti*). Later, these isolated tribes amalgamated into larger groups, with larger territory and greater formal organisation. Rulers were consecrated with extensive rituals.

Warfare The horse and the chariot gave the early Indo-Aryans superiority in warfare over the people they encountered on their migration, who were mainly settled agriculturists. Judging from the Vedas, the early Indo-Aryans were often engaged in war or raiding. The battle of the 'Ten Kings' (mentioned in the Rig Veda) was decided when one ruler broke the dam of another and conquered his land.

Horse-sacrifice Another method of territorial conquest was ritualised. This elaborate ceremony, described in the religious texts, was called the 'horse-sacrifice' (*ashvamedha*). If a ruler wished to extend his territory, he performed the ritual by releasing a horse to wander for a year. During that time, anyone could challenge the new territorial claim by attacking the warriors accompanying the wandering horse. If no attack took place, the horse was taken back to the ruler and sacrificed as a consecration of the ruler's new territory.

Alliances As Indo-Aryan populations moved ever eastward, from the rivers of the Punjab to the plains of north India, particularly the Gangetic region, these semi-nomadic pastoralists mixed with indigenous peoples, producing settled agricultural communities. Although the tribe remained the basis of Indo-Aryan society, power became dependent less on wealth and more on the ability to forge alliances. The most powerful tribes of the ancient period were the Panchala, formed from five independent tribes, and the Kuru, an amalgam of two separate tribes.

Chiefdoms These larger, composite tribes that controlled greater territory were called *janapada*s (lit. 'foothold of a tribe'). We have the names of nearly 40 chiefdoms from early Sanskrit texts. By 800 BCE these Neolithic farming and pastoralist communities combined into yet larger political structures called *maha ('*great'*) janapada*s, or complex chiefdoms. Sixteen of these complex chiefdoms dominated north India in this period, stretching from Taxila, in the northwest to Anga, in the far east. These include Kosala, with its capital at Ayodhya, where Rama of the *Ramayana* ruled; Magadha, with its capital at Pataliputra, later the capital of the Mauryan Empire; Kuru, with its capital at Indraprastha, whose two factions fought the war described in the *Mahabharata*.

Economy

Early pastoralism The subsistence pattern of the early Indo-Aryans was predominately semi-nomadic pastoralism, although they also cultivated crops on a limited scale. They kept horses, sheep and goats, but cattle were their preoccupation. Cattle were a form of currency, cattle raids were frequent and cattle were essential for ritual sacrifice. Goods, especially cattle, were battered, although ritual gift-giving also played a role in exchanges.

Assimilation By 1000 BCE, Indo-Aryans were beginning to assimilate with indigenous farming populations and their distinctive pastoralist economy gave way to other means of subsistence. Most importantly, the new sedentary life entailed a transition from livestock to land as a measure of wealth.

Pottery Another development that resulted from this intermingling of Indo-Aryans with local populations was the emergence of sophisticated pottery. Pots were wheel-thrown and dried in the sun. Interestingly, there are no animals or humans depicted, only geometric patterns and simples lines painted in black.

Coinage India's first minted coins (as opposed to shells or beads used as barter) were manufactured in the Gangetic plain around 500 BCE. Made from silver bars, these early coins were punched and stamped with a symbol, such as an animal or the swastika. By the end of the ancient period, coinage and increased political centralisation enabled a more complex economy.

Iron-making Early Indo-Aryans may have possessed iron objects, but they did not introduce this critical technology to India. Instead, as part of their assimilation, they learned to make iron from the indigenous populations. By about 800 BCE, iron was used to make a variety of objects, including needles, nails, hooks, heavy axes, knives, arrow heads, tongs and clamps. The discovery of clay furnaces at many sites in north India indicates the spread of the ability to make iron objects. Most furnaces are of the open type that used bellows. Some of them are large-scale and capable of making heavy tools, such as axes. Very little research has been done to identify the source of the iron ore, but most scholars believe that it came from the Himalayan foothills.

Influence of iron The emergence of iron technology, especially heavy axes, literally changed the face of India by enabling large-scale forest clearance in the Gangetic plain. This clearance, in turn, facilitated the production of considerable food production, which sustained the large populations that led to a shift from tribe to chiefdom. For this reason, it is no exaggeration to say that iron-making was the most important development in ancient India.

Society

Varna The Vedic literature of the Indo-Aryans provides the template for the Indian caste system by listing its four main categories (*varna*, or 'colour'):

1. Brahmin: priests and scholars
2. Ksatriya: rulers and warriors, including property owners
3. Vaisya: merchants and skilled artisans
4. Sudra: labourers and servants

Twice –born A critical distinction between these four categories is that the first three were considered 'twice-born' because they underwent an initiation ritual that formalised their role in society. This reinforced the low status of the fourth category, the sudras. It is significant, however, that the concept of 'twice-born' is not found in early Vedic texts and appeared only about 800-600 BCE.

Untouchables Untouchables were not part of the original four-fold scheme, either. However, Vedic literature did mention groups inferior in rank to the sudras. These included the *dasas* ('slaves'), who are described as having dark skin, broad, flat noses, speaking a strange language and practicing magic. Elsewhere in the literature, the stigma of impurity/untouchability is associated with people who come in contact with death, such as human corpses, dead animals and animal skins. Over time, these low status groups came to be called *a-varna* ('out-castes'). Western writers in the early 20th century coined the term 'Untouchable', Gandhi called them 'Harijan' ('children of God') and now they call themselves 'Dalit' ('broken').

Jati When Indians (or anyone else) speaks of 'caste', they usually refer to the dozens of sub-divisions within each of the five overarching categories (the four *varna*s + untouchables). These sub-groups are known as *jati* ('birth'). They are the group into which one is born and is expected to marry. There is great regional variation in the *jati* system. For instance, a specific *sudra* caste in one region, or even one village, may not exist in the adjoining region or village. On the other hand, there might be six or eight different *vaisya* castes (*jati*s) in the same village. The *jati* system has also allowed newcomers to be slotted into the overall social system by allotting them a new name.

Women Based on the Vedas, it appears that women enjoyed a comparatively high status. Daughters as well as sons were given education and taught the sacred texts. Female ascetics appear as frequently as male ascetics and often receive more praise. Girls moved freely in public, attending meetings and ceremonies, where they also spoke. Women could inherit property, and widows could remarry. At the same time, the role of women was to produce progeny for the blood line, and wives were subordinate to their husband.

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 1,500 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. 1,500-1,200 BCE), which contains speculation about the cosmos, its origins and order, its guardians and enemies. Some of its1,028 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. 1,200-900 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

Myth The Vedas contain the earliest articulation of many stories that would evolve into the corpus of Hindu mythology. For example, Indra, king of the gods, slays the cloud-dragon Vrtra with his thunderbolts.
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.

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. .

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 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?

2. Early Indo-Aryans were organised into tribes and later developed chiefdoms. What is a 'chiefdom'? And how does it differ from a 'tribe' and a 'state'?

3. Although the caste is often considered unique to India, scholars have found very similar social systems (at various historical periods) in South Africa, Japan and the southern United States. These comparative studies are somewhat flawed in that they do not agree a common definition of 'caste.' What is a good definition of 'caste'?

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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 immorality 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.

(translated by Michael Myers, 1989
http://public.wsu.edu/~brians/world_civ/worldcivreader/world_civ_reader_1/rig_veda.html)

3. From the *Isha Upanishad*

He encircled all, bright, incorporeal, scatheless, sinewless, pure,
untouched by evil; a seer, wise and omnipresent, self - existent, he
dispensed all things well for ever and ever.

4. From the *Svetasvatara Upanishad*

There is one Rudra only, they do not allow a second, who rules all the worlds by his might. He stands behind all things, he made all of the worlds, and protects them, and rolls them up at the end of time.
The Lord lives in the faces of all beings ... He lives in the inmost heart
of all, the all - pervading, all - present Siva.

Part IV: CLASSICAL PERIOD

Overview

During this period (c.500 BCE-500 CE) , and especially under the patronage of the Gupta Empire, cultural forms 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. A system of chiefdoms developed into a centralised empire (the Mauryan), which later fragmented into to a series of smaller states and then consolidated again in a second empire (the Gupta). The use of iron tools changed the face of India by enabling forest clearance, large-scale cultivation, food surplus and concentrated urban populations. Expanding urbanism led in turn to a wealthy mercantile class, improved transport, increasing trade, minted coins and new banking methods. Underlying many of these developments was the appearance of writing sometime between 350-250 BCE. However, nearly all literary texts in the period were still orally composed.

Events and People

Mahabharata War The war and battle described in the epic of the *Mahabharata* (c. 400 BCE-200 CE) is thought to have taken place about 900 BCE. (Thus, like the *Iliad*, the Indian epic chronicles an event that occurred centuries earlier.) Although many scholars point out that there is no evidence to prove that such a battle did take place, several references to places and people in the epic are corroborated by other texts. In addition, recent excavations at Hastinapura, the capital of the clashing factions in the epic, have revealed artefacts consistent with the dating and narrative of the epic.

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.

Persian invasion In the early 6th c. BCE, the northwest corner of India was conquered by the Achaemenid kings of Persia, who considered that region to be their eastern province. At the time, the region was ruled by King Bimbisara of the Magadha kingdom. Persians controlled this corner of India for more than a century, leaving a legacy of learning and administration that would later produce two of ancient India's greatest thinkers: the grammarian Panini and the political philosopher Kautilya, both 4th c. BCE. Significantly, it was through the Persians that the ancient Greeks, such as Herodotus, gained knowledge of India, which eventually led to Alexander's invasion.

Alexander Alexander the Great (356-323 BCE) invaded northwest India and ended a political system of chieftaincy (*mahajanapada*) that had existed for at least 500 years. Marching from Macedonia, Alexander conquered Persia and then advanced across the Punjab in 326 BCE before a mutiny forced him to return. He died three years later in Baghdad. The last Greek province in India was held until 316 BCE. However, Greek provinces in Bactria (northern Afghanistan) survived until the end of the pre-Christian era and produced a distinct school of Greco-Buddhist art. Greek influence can also be detected in later Indian architecture, theatre and religion (Mahayana Buddhism). More generally, Alexander's adventure initiated a cultural exchange between India and the West that would remain a factor in shaping India history to the present day.

Chandragupta The chief beneficiary of Alexander's invasion was Chandragupta (340-297 BCE?), founder of the Mauryan Empire. Chandragupta, who may have actually faced Alexander on the battlefield, went on to reign from c. 321 BCE until his death in c. 297 BCE. During his rule, Chandragupta defeated a second Greek invasion in 305 BCE, expanded his territory west to the border of the Persian Empire and south to the Deccan. According to tradition, Chandragupta suffered the early death of his father (leader of the then-struggling Mauryas) and was brought up by a cowherd. He later befriended a philosopher who wrote a famous treatise on governance *(Arthasastra*). It is also said that he became a Jain in later life and went on pilgrimage to a famous Jaina shrine in present-day Karnataka, where he fasted to death.

Ashoka Chandragupta's grandson, and the greatest of the Mauryan rulers, was Ashoka (c. 304- 232 BCE). Indeed, Ashoka (r. 272-232 BCE), whose stone pillar is now the official emblem of the Republic of India, is perhaps the best-remembered ruler in all Indian history. Even stripping away the legendary accounts, he was a remarkable man. He became a lay Buddhist and went on a year-long pilgrimage to the sacred sites of this new religion, which he later propagated and spread to regions beyond India. He sent messengers to the Greek provinces in the northwest and his own son to Ceylon (Sri Lanka).

Ashokan edicts We know all this because Ashoka issued edicts or proclamations. His 33 edicts, written primarily in the Brahmi script on carved pillars, rocks and cave walls, are the earliest deciphered writing in India. All other Indian scripts derive from the Brahmi script, itself probably derived from a Sumerian or Semitic script. The language of the inscriptions is mostly Prakrit, a spoken form of Sanskrit, with a few examples of Greek and Aramaic. Some edicts announce major government policy, such as the renunciation of all violence (warfare, hunting, animal sacrifice) and an acceptance of all religions.

Kanishka Kanishka (r. 115-140 CE) was another leader, though less famous than Ashoka, who played a key role in transmitting Buddhism. Kanishka was the ruler of the Kushan (or Kushana) kingdom, which pushed down from Bactria and into northwest India in the 1st century CE. Kanishka used his patronage to support Buddhist institutions and famously convened a council of monks to create a Mahayana Buddhist canon. His support for Buddhist art and architecture was also key to the spread of culture to central Asia, China and Tibet along a path that we now call the Silk Route.

Faxian (Fa Hsien) Faxian (337-442? CE) came to India as a Buddhist pilgrim in 402 CE on a personal mission. He was determined to acquire and study the original texts of Mahayana Buddhism, which had migrated across the Himalayas to China several hundred years earlier (in part because of Kanishka). In 399 CE, at the age of 65, Faxian set out on foot. Travelling west from northern China, he crossed large stretches of arid central Asia before negotiating the snow-bound Pamir Mountains and then slipping into the Punjab through the Khyber Pass. In India, he spent time at each of the important Buddhist sites in north India, especially Pataliputra, a major centre for Buddhist learning as well as the capital of the Gupta Empire. After six years in India, he took a sea route home, stopping for two years in Sri Lanka.

Faxian's Legacy Like Alexander the Great many centuries before him, Faxian undertook an arduous journey that set in motion a cultural exchange, this time between India and China. During his six years in India, he made copies of all the major Mahayana texts and then translated them into Chinese when he returned home. An equally significant contribution to Indian history is the personal diary of his journey, which provides insights into pre-Muslim India, especially the court of the Gupta Empire.

Hun invasion The interconnectedness of European and Asian history is illustrated by the fact that a branch of the same people who brought down the Roman Empire also (and at the same time) laid waste to the Gupta Empire. The

Huns (or Hunas), a group of central Asian horsemen ruled by Attila, had been sniping away at the northwest edge of the Gupta Empire for some time before they finally swept south and east in the late 5th and early 6th centuries CE. The Gupta Empire was shattered, its trade links broken and its authority reduced to the capital. The glory of India would not shine again in the north until the Mughal Empire a thousand years later.

Government

Mauryan Empire The long evolution in north India from tribe to chiefdom to state culminated in the establishment of the Mauryan Empire (321- 185 BCE). Its more immediate cause, however, was Alexander's invasion, which stimulated feuding rulers to join together for protection. Chandragupta, founder of the empire, took advantage of the chaos caused by both the Greek incursion in the northwest and the breakdown of smaller kingdoms elsewhere to conquer large swathes of territory, with the exception of south India. The Mauryas defeated a second Greek invasion in the northwest and eventually pushed east, extending their authority to the Bay of Bengal. At its height, the Mauryan state was an efficient bureaucracy with a large civil service. Despite its centralised administration, however, the Mauryan state could not exert control over its extensive territory. Four main provinces were controlled by local princes, while other regions were run by governors and salaried officials. The last Mauryan ruler was assassinated by one of his own generals in 185 BCE.

Pataliputra The capital of the Mauryan Empire was Pataliputra, one of the great cities of the ancient world. It was built in 489 BCE at the confluence of the Ganges and one of its tributaries, where it served as the capital of the three successive polities: the Magadha chiefdom, the Nanda chiefdom, the Mauryan state and then the Shunga kingdom. At the time of the Mauryas, when its population reached nearly 200,000, the city was a thriving commercial centre and a seat of Buddhist learning. Its beauty and opulence, including palaces and Buddhist stupas, are described by Megasthenes (c. 350-290 BCE), a Greek ambassador who resided in the city for several years (c. 302-298 BCE).

Arthasastra The rules of Indian statecraft were codified in the *Arthasastra* ('Science of Power'), a Sanskrit treaties composed by Kautilya in about 400 BCE. It appears to describe an idealised state, based largely on the composite chiefdoms that preceded the Mauryan Empire. Not very dissimilar to Machiavelli's *The Prince*, it guides would-be rulers through a murky political world of betrayal, deception, spying and assassination.

Post-Mauryan states Following the break-up of the Mauryan Empire, a series of smaller but still powerful states ruled north India. The first of these was the Shungas, who retained Pataliputra as their capital and reigned from 185-78 BCE. Next came the Shakas (or Indo-Scythians), a central Asian people who migrated and fought their way into India in the first century CE. Although they controlled large tracts of territory in the north and west, they ruled for only a brief time. Another kingdom with its origins in Central Asia was the Kushana (or Kushan), which ruled Bactria and the surrounding regions (modern-day Afghanistan and Pakistan) before pushing south into India, where they ruled from about 100-250 CE. The Deccan was ruled by the Satavahanas (c. 200 BCE-230 CE), fighting off two invasions by the Shakas along the way. Less centralised than the Mauryan Empire, the Satavahana state was based on alliances with local rulers. They were also the first Indian kingdom to issue coinage with portraits of their rulers.

Gupta Empire Most of India was once again unified in a single administration under the Gupta Empire (320-c. 550 CE). Like the Satavahanas, the Gupta rulers used alliances, in the form of dynastic marriages, and warfare to gain control over territory. Chandragupta I (r. 320-335 CE, not to be confused with Chandragupta Maurya several centuries earlier) married a princes from the Licchavi clan (in the Himalayan foothills), and his son, Samudragupta (r. 335-385 CE), extended the kingdom to the Deccan by more marriages. The empire was administered by a cadre of officials dispatched to localities to oversee an extensive system of tax-free land grants to Brahmins and merchants. This system permitted local leaders to exercise considerable authority and yet be responsible to the centre. The result was a state in which regional units and diverse communities prospered and cohered in a political whole.

Decentralisation The Gupta state thus instituted two key features of government that characterised states throughout the medieval period and into the pre-modern period. First, states and localities existed in a balance of power. The authority of the centre was residual in that judicial and police functions were left in the hands of local rulers, guilds and associations. Second, and as a result of this decentralisation, the centre assumed more and more symbolic power and authority.

Kings as gods Gupta kings became the objects of worship and were treated almost like gods. The beginnings of this royal cult are seen in early Buddhism, where the Buddha is called *chakravartin* (lit. 'Turner of the Wheel'), an epithet for the Sun-god or ideal ruler). The Mauryan ruler Ashoka referred to himself as 'Beloved of the Gods,' while the Kushana kings adopted the title 'Son of God'. Later Gupta rulers portrayed themselves, on coins and in ceremonies, as equal to the gods. In early south India, the paucity of Brahmins meant that kings were the divine representatives on earth and over time became regarded as gods. For example, the Tamil word for 'king's house' came to mean 'temple.'

Economy

Cities The Mauryan Empire (321- 185 BCE) was at the centre of India's second urban-based economy (the first being the Indus Valley civilisation). The expansion of settlements into cities occurred in many parts of India, although primarily in riverine plains. Cities created the conditions for a growing merchant class, skilled craftsmen and entrepreneurial traders. The role of cities is demonstrated by the fact that Pataliputra was the capital of the Mauryan, Gupta, Shunga and Nanda states.

Guilds Another key factor that stimulated the economy in this period were the mercantile guilds. Texts mention 75 different occupations that could form guilds, including potters, metal-workers, goldsmiths, weavers and carpenters. Operating as early banks, these associations of merchants pioneered the use of money (silver and copper coins), some of which they issued themselves. They also established early banking methods, such as investments and endowments.

Trade The modernising urban economy that flourished under the Mauryas (c. 321-185 BCE) developed even further under the Guptas (320-c. 550 CE). The Mauryan state instituted a single currency across India to facilitate trade, while the Gupta rulers improved roads and extended trade routes so that even interior areas had access to commercial centres and seaports. This sophisticated transport system enabled the Gupta rulers to collect land tax and import duties.

Forests Despite the centralisation of the economy, certain groups of people remained on the periphery of any government. Prominent among these groups were tribal populations living in the forests of north and central India. Forests were central to the economy as a source of timber, elephants, iron, copper and lead. The *Arthasastra*, an early text on statecraft, recommends that rulers build fortresses at the edge of the forests in order to control the 'wild' and 'criminal' people in the forest. Even the humane ruler Ashoka issued an edict that ordered the forest people 'to repent' and 'not to expect forgiveness' for their part in armed clashes between them and the state.

Society

Consolidation Over the course of this long period, social interactions were increasingly constrained by caste rules. In part, this is explained by the influx of newcomers, from the northwest and from Central Asia, as well as by trade and by conquest. In order to maintain social cohesion, each new group had to be slotted into place in the complex social structure of the caste system. If they floated free, the entire system might drift into dangerous flexibility. As a result, marriage between castes became rare, and the number of permissible partners within one's caste narrowed, too. Hindu texts distinguish eight different types of marriage, according to the rules of endogamy and exogamy, or marriage inside caste but outside certain kin groups.

Kings An important exception to the hardening of caste rules was the acknowledgement that kings could be made from any social strata. Early texts insisted that kings must be *ksatriya* (warrior) by birth, but later texts accepted the reality that many Shaka, Kushan and Shunga rulers were not from the warrior caste. In effect, men could become kings by conquest rather than by ancestry.

Merchants Another group whose social status shifted in the classical period were merchants (vaisya). Benefitting from urbanism, trade and guilds, merchants grew steadily wealthier and began to exercise power in the political sphere. In the normative texts, however, these are low castes, just one rung above slaves and labourers (*sudra*). Indeed, many texts claim that merchants are *sudra* because of mixed ancestry. The important point here is that merchants did not change caste—they remained *vaisya*—but they gained new social standing. Class, not caste, was decisive.

Women On the other hand, the status of women declined toward the end of the classical period. Whereas women in the Vedic texts could own and inherit property, including land, this was no longer true by the time of the Gupta Empire. This decline is usually attributed to the consolidation of the caste system, the increase in hierarchical divisions and the formalisation of social rules. Although Buddhism opened up a new social space for women, by the end of the period, the canonical laws of Manu had codified gender inequality.

Heterodox challenge Buddhism and, to a lesser extent, Jainism were based on a rejection of brahminical authority, which was the lynchpin of the caste system. The Buddha was a prince, not a pauper, but he was not a Brahmin either, and yet he was regarded as the pinnacle of wisdom. Buddhism thus challenged the idea that birth was the determinant of worth, arguing instead that effort and compassion led to enlightenment. Buddhism also taught *a-himsa*, or non-violence, including violence against animals, which was a direct criticism of traditional Hindu ritual sacrifice.

Popularity of Buddhism As a result of these teachings, and the waning of brahmincial authority, Buddhism attracted followers from lower castes. Merchants, in particular, joined in large numbers because although their wealth and power had grown, they remained in a relatively inferior social category. Buddhist values of rationality, discipline and moderation also appealed to these commercial groups, as well as to wealthy landowners. Some women, too, found the Buddhist path a welcome escape from a Hindu identity defined by domestic and social conventions.

Buddhist monastic order Buddhism created an alternative society with the establishment of a monastic order (*sangha*, 'association'). This community of monks and nuns and lay followers was governed by a formal set of rules announced in the earliest Buddhist texts. Although at first monks and nuns lived an itinerant life, by the 3rd century BCE, they were resident in large monasteries, which also served as centres of learning. Fortnightly meetings were convened in the monasteries, democratic rules for discussion were adopted and a treasury was set up to handle financial transactions, especially donations made by wealthy lay followers.

Culture

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.

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.

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.

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.

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. 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.

<u>Questions/Discussion</u>

1. The historicity of the Mahabharata war is not just an academic debate in India. It is central to the Hindu nationalist revision of history, which has recently gained more political and scholarly support. Why is it important that this ancient battle be seen as a true event?

2. There is a case for arguing that the historical Buddha is the single most influential person in Indian history. And his influence has been magnified many times over by the 'story' of his life that has now become inseparable from the history of Buddhism. This illustrates the power of what is now called 'life-history.'

3. An excellent research topic would be to compare the influence of Alexander the Great and of Faxian on Indian history. The differences are immediately obvious—one was a military genius, the other a religious pilgrim—but the similarities in their stories and their legacies are also considerable.

4. Maritime trade is an under-studied topic in the economic history of this period. Because peninsular India (or south India) had seaports on both coasts, sea trade was a powerful force in shaping its history. Archaeologists have excavated a large trading centre at Arikamedu near modern Pondicherry, south of Madras. Along with a hoard of Roman coins, they found residential quarters, warehouses, docks and fortifications. Other sites have been found along the east coast and west coast, suggesting a network of linked trading outposts.

5. What specific role did coinage play in facilitating economic growth in this period? What did coinage replace and why?

6. 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.

7. 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.

8. 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?

<u>Reading</u>

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

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Texts

1. Ashokan rock edict at Kalinga, 262-261 BCE (?), expressing his remorse for killing and forswearing violence in the future.

'Beloved-of-the-Gods [Buddha] says…I wish to see that everything I consider to be proper is carried out in the right way...

All men are my children. What I desire for my own children, and I desire their welfare and happiness both in this world and the next, that I desire for all men. You do not understand to what extent I desire this, and if some of you do understand, you do not understand the full extent of my desire.

You must attend to this matter. While being completely law-abiding, some people are imprisoned, treated harshly and even killed without cause so that many people suffer. Therefore your aim should be to act with impartiality. It is because of these things -- envy, anger, cruelty, hate, indifference, laziness or tiredness -- that such a thing does not happen. Therefore your aim should be: May these things not be in me. And the root of this is non-anger and patience…Great fruit will result from doing your duty, while failing in it will result in gaining neither heaven nor the king's pleasure….

This edict is to be listened to on Tisa day, between Tisa days, and on other suitable occasions, it should be listened to even by a single person…'

2. South Indian rock inscription (c. 100 CE), which records a Hindu ruler's gift to a shelter sacred to Jaina ascetics.

'Cave-shelter gifted by Atiyan Netuman Anci, the Satyaputra [king's title].'

3. Sanchi inscription of Chandragupta II (c. 412 CE), which records this Hindu ruler's donation to a Buddhist monastery.

'Perfection has been attained! To the community of the faithful in the holy great monastery, in which the organs of sense have been subdued by the virtues of (good) character, religious meditation, and wisdom…which has come together from the four quarters of the world (and) which is the abode of most excellent monks, having prostrated himself in an assembly of five persons, Amrakârdava the son of Undâna, whose means of subsistence have been made comfortable by the favour of the feet of the glorious Chandragupta (II.) …From [the interest of the money] given by him, with half, as long as the moon and the sun (endure), let five monks be fed, and let a lamp burn in the jewel-house, for the perfection of all the virtues of….the glorious Chandragupta (II.)…'