

INDIAN CULTURE- Ancient Period

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Part I : PREHISTORY

Overview

Our knowledge of the culture of prehistoric India is constantly changing due to new research. For example, while the consensus view among specialists has been that hominids first lived in the subcontinent from approximately 500,000 BCE, stone tools recovered from a site near Madras have pushed that date back to 1.0 million years ago. Cultural artefacts, however, are dated back only to roughly 40,000-30,000 BCE, when the cave paintings at Bhimbetka in central India were produced. These remarkable paintings, which are broadly similar to those on the cave walls in Lascaux, France and in Botswana, were discovered by chance in the 1950s, when an archaeologist noticed strange rock formation while travelling in a train. Twenty years later, the narrative of Indian prehistory shifted again, when archaeologists uncovered a Neolithic settlement at Mehrgarh, in present-day Pakistan.

Art

Rock art The earliest examples of visual art in the subcontinent are rock paintings and rock engravings. More than 150 sites with this kind of artwork have been located, the earliest dating from approximately 40,000 BCE, and the majority from 15,000 to 5,000 BCE.

Bhimbetka paintings The rock paintings at Bhimbetka (in 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 paintings in the Bhimbetka caves is that they extend from roughly 40,000-30,000 BCE to the first millennium CE. These paintings are dominated by a series of geometric figures, some on horses, some dancing, plus many animals and birds. In a remarkable instance of cultural continuity these same images are today painted on house walls by the Warli tribe not far from Bhimbetka.

Animal images Twenty-nine different animal species are depicted at Bhimbetka, including bison, tigers, panthers, antelopes, elephants, lions and rhinoceroses (the last three are no longer found in the area). Given the prominence of snakes in Indian tradition, it is noteworthy that none are painted at Bhimbetka or any other stone-age site in India.

Human images The human figures at Bhimbetka (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, and the women wear their hair braided. Some dancers wearing masks may be ritual specialists.

Edakkal engravings The rock art at Edakkal in modern-day Kerala is much later (c. 6000 BCE) and different in technique to the Bhimbetka paintings. Although similar in their stick-like design, the Edakkal images of humans and animals are carved on the rock face (petroglyphs). Scholars have recently discovered an image of a man holding a cup that resembles an image found in the later Indus Valley civilisation.

Religion

Shamanism Although our knowledge of stone-age religion in India is limited, there can be little doubt that it involved 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 living things (animals, flowers, trees), topographical features (rivers, mountains, caves) and, most important, the sun and moon. Stone-

age handprints on cave walls in Panna Dt. Madhya Pradesh are identical to those on the house walls of tribal people in nearby villages, where they are considered to be 'good luck' signs that provide protection from the capricious spirit world.

Shamans We can also surmise that rituals and chanting in stone-age India were performed by specialists 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 masked dancers, who may have been shamans.

Animals Large animals, such as tigers and lions, painted on cave walls appear to represent objects of worship. Stone-age hunters elsewhere in the world 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 also believe that 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 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. At one site, with more than 150 bodies, 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 an after-world where these possessions would be useful. There is also evidence of 'secondary' burial, a reflection of more complex cosmological ideas.

Fertility Crude female figurines shaped from stone and bone have been found at many stone-age sites and 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.

Shrines One of the Bhimbetka caves contains what appears to be a 'shrine' or ritual centre. A long corridor (25 metres long) leads to a large space where researchers found a tall rock with several small scooped-out depressions, which may have been used to produce music. Another possible stone-age shrine has been located in a cave at Baghor, Madhya Pradesh. Inside the cave, researchers found a fragmentary stone lying on a circular, sandstone platform (85 cm in diameter and dated to about 9,000 BCE). When the stone, which had been worked to produce a complex design, was joined with other fragments, it formed a pyramid. Significantly, tribal people living nearby also make platforms on which they worship triangular stones.

Mehrgarh

Significance Mehrgarh is a Neolithic settlement located in Baluchistan, at the foot of the mountains separating Pakistan from Afghanistan. Discovered only in the 1970s and excavated a decade later, it has transformed our knowledge of prehistoric culture in the subcontinent. Before its discovery, scholars thought that the Neolithic revolution in India began in the 4th millennium BCE and had spread from Mesopotamia. Now, however, we can trace a gradual and more localised evolution from about the 7th millennium BCE, when early farming groups evolved into larger settled communities with houses and domesticated animals. This evolution reached its final stage in the 3rd millennium BCE in the fully urbanised, literate civilisation of the Indus Valley.

Arts and Crafts From about 7,000 BCE, the people of Mehrgarh used axes and stone tools to fashion ornaments of stone, semi-precious stone and shell. They also employed pit kilns and the potter's wheel to manufacture pots and containers with geometric designs, typically using black and red colours. Also interesting are ceramic human figures from about 4,000 BCE with well-delineated facial features and prominent breasts, which resemble those found in the Indus Valley civilisation.

Architecture Mud-brick houses and granaries dating from about 7,000 BCE at Mehrgarh are the earliest surviving examples of architecture in the subcontinent. The houses contained several rooms, usually four, and most had a hearth in the corner. Larger buildings, with as many as ten rooms, are assumed to have been granaries. The clay-plastered interior house walls were decorated with red colours, although the images have not survived.

Religion The people of Mehrgarh buried their dead. In one cemetery containing 99 bodies, several heads were placed on raised bricks. Grave goods included painted pots, sea shells and gems, such as lapis lazuli and turquoise. One grave contained the bodies of two young females, wearing headbands decorated with shells, and five sacrificial goats. This diversity and richness of grave goods indicate a considerable social investment in the welfare of the dead and a belief that they might achieve a successful transfer to an after-world.

Discussion/questions

1. The oldest surviving cultural artefacts in India are the numerous and complex rock cave paintings at Bhimbetka. Compare those paintings with the more famous ones found at Lascaux, France and the Kalahari Desert, Botswana. What does the uniformity or variation among these three sites indicate about cultural homogeneity or heterogeneity among hunter-gatherer societies in the three regions?
2. Attempts to reconstruct the religion of stone-age cultures in India rely, in part, on practices and beliefs of modern tribes living near stone-age sites. When an image painted on a wall in a modern village matches an image painted on a cave wall 30,000 years ago, scholars extrapolate from modern meanings of the image to understand its ancient meaning. Are such reconstructions valid?
3. The religious beliefs of prehistorical cultures are also often deduced from graves. The position of the body, the type and amount of grave goods and the physical site (a deep pit or an erect stone, for example) provide clues to worldviews that may include a dimension beyond present reality. To evaluate the validity of such an approach, consider what future scholars could learn from burial practices and structures in a contemporary culture (your own country or region or town).

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Part II : BRONZE AGE

Overview

The decline of the Indus Valley civilisation is virtually concurrent with the arrival in the subcontinent of an entirely different culture. The Indo-Aryans entered India from the northwest, beginning about 1500 BCE and probably in a series of migrations spread out over many years. What they brought with them was an Indo-European culture, a highly sophisticated tradition of oral literature (the Vedas) in Sanskrit and the embryo of the caste system in modern India. The contrast with the Indus Valley people could not have been greater for the Indo-Aryans did not know writing and left very little in the way of archaeological remains. However, the enduring status of Sanskrit as a sacred language, of the Vedas as textual authority and of Brahmins as guardians of both has ensured that Indo-Aryan culture remains a dominant element in the cultural diversity of India.

Literature

Vedas The Vedas, composed in Sanskrit by the Indo-Aryans between roughly 1500-900 BCE, represent the foundation of Hindu religious literature. The Vedas (from the Sanskrit word for 'knowledge') have two major divisions: ritual texts and the commentaries. Here we are concerned primarily with the ritual texts, which are a diverse compilation of hymns, formulae, myths, charms and philosophical speculations. They are not only the oldest texts in Indian literature but also the oldest texts of world literature still in use today. These ritual texts are commonly called the 'four Vedas.'

Rig Veda The Rig Veda, which is the oldest and most literary of the four, contains 1028 hymns to be chanted during sacrifices. It is also the most important text in terms of literary history and tradition as it contains many early versions of Hindu myths and legends. It tells the story of Indra, king of the gods, who slays the cloud-dragon Vrtra with his thunderbolts. In other verses, gamblers lament their losses, the beauty of Dawn (Usas) is evoked with tenderness and Surya (the sun) rides across the heavens in a chariot drawn by seven horses. 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. Many hymns invoke Agni (fire) and Soma (an intoxicating libation), the two principal elements of the sacrifice at the core of the Rig Veda.

Other Vedas The other, slightly later Vedas (Yajur, Sama and Atharva) contain similar imprecations but focus primarily on rituals, especially the fire sacrifice. The Sama Veda is more abstruse, being a re-arrangement of

certain verses from the Rig Veda for liturgical purposes. The Yajur Veda, composed probably two centuries after the Rig Veda, is a compilation of verses to be sung by an assistant priest at the sacrifice. The last, the Atharva Veda, is very different from the others in that it mainly contains charms and imprecations. All these texts describe and explain the complex techniques necessary for conducting the ceremonies.

Mantra The key to performing the sacrifice is the efficacy of speech and the knowledge of the Brahmin priests. This concept of potent speech is summed up in the word 'mantra', which is a word or formula spoken by a knowledgeable person in the correct way. 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.

Creation myths Consistent with the multi-layered nature of Hinduism, the Rig Veda contains several creation myths. One verse proclaims that speech (the goddess Vac) created the world. (Compare this with '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 is also said to come out of a 'golden womb' as well as a 'universal egg.' Later, creation becomes the work of a figure, named Prajapati. 'But where did the original substance come from?' the ancient sages ask. 'How did being evolve from non-being?' There is no certainty, not even among those 'who look down on it, in the highest heaven.' When we read these lines in the Rig Veda and feel a quickening of uncertainty, we enter a dialogue about the human condition that stretches back three thousand years.

Composition The Vedas were not written. Writing was used in the earlier Indus Valley civilisation (c. 2500 - 1500 BCE), but that script remains undeciphered, and the first inscriptions in a known Indian language appear only about 500 BCE.

Vedic literature was 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 (indeed, speech is deified as the goddess Vac). This fact cannot be repeated too many times: the Vedas were not read. They were heard.

Metre The metric system of the Vedas, like that of most early and later Indian poetic traditions (and most Indo-European literatures), is measured by long and short syllables and not (as in English) by stress. A syllable was counted as 'long' if it contained a long vowel or a short vowel and two consonants. Most of the hymns are arranged in quatrains, although divisions of three and five are also common. Similarly, while the standard metre is iambic, there is considerable variation in metre.

Religion

Pantheon The Indo-Aryan pantheon is clearly related to those of other Indo-European peoples, from Iran to Scandinavia. Dyaus, the sky-father, for example, is cognate with Zeus. Other major deities include Rta (guardian of cosmic order), Varuna (god of the waters), Indra (warrior god with a thunderbolt) and Vrtra (Indra's enemy). Goddesses are also important, especially Usha (dawn) and Vac (speech). The enemies of the gods are the *asuras* (anti-gods, known in ancient Persia, as *ahura*), who are renowned for their power and knowledge, and must therefore be destroyed.

Ritual The religion of the early Indo-Aryans was dominated by fire-worship and sacrifices made to the gods (*devas*), often to Agni ('fire') and to Soma (an intoxicating drink offered to the gods). Indeed, most of the vast Vedic literature can be seen as a ritual manual, instructing priests what to say and when to say it, while also providing explanations of abstruse concepts and terms. Over time, Indo-Aryan rituals became complex and expensive, exemplified by the horse-sacrifice (*ashvamedha*) and the installation of a king (*rajasuya*). These and other ceremonies were performed by Brahmins to bring prosperity, in the form of cattle and progeny, as well as success in cattle-raids, and even in playing dice. Sponsorship of a ritual conferred status on a raja, while performing a ritual demonstrated the powers of a Brahmin.

Philosophy Vedic speculation about the nature of reality is underpinned by the concept of 'correspondence.' Underlying material concerns of cattle-keeping and physical health, early Indians believed that performance of the sacrifice = the recreation of cosmos. Similarly, the correct ritual utterance of a word created the reality denoted by that word. The Vedic world was also an optimistic one, filled with wonder and brilliance, expansion and growth, gambling and drinking. It all culminated, in the eschatological view that successful sacrifices would secure one a permanent place in heaven. Only toward the end of the Vedic period, about 900-600 BCE,

did doubt creep in with the awful prospect of 'redeath,' that is, a return to earth when one's merit was exhausted in the afterlife. This doubt evolved into the key concept of karma.

Legacy

Today, the four Vedas are little understood by most Indians, and many of the gods and goddesses mentioned in them are no longer worshipped. Indeed, Vedic Sanskrit became obsolete long before the turn of the Christian era. However, and partly for this reason, this oral tradition acquired a sacred status that continues to this day. The category of 'Veda' has persisted throughout Indian history, with many important texts in regional languages being hailed as the 'Fifth Veda.' And while the practice of chanting the four Vedas has declined, some Brahmin priests, especially in Kerala on the southwest coast, still chant Vedic verses to accompany ceremonies.

Discussion/Questions

1. Visual imagery produced by the people of the Indus Valley civilisation is often used to demonstrate the roots of Hinduism, stretching back to the third millennium BCE. The main evidence for this assertion are a terracotta bust of bearded man identified as a priest; a picture on a seal of a man in a yoga-like pose with an animal headdress identified as Siva; and many female figurines identified as goddesses. Assess this evidence and come to your own conclusion concerning religious continuity from the Indus Valley to later Hinduism.
2. The script of the Indus Valley has been described as the greatest remaining mystery of the ancient world. Despite a hundred years of intense research, including recent computerised analyses, no definitive decipherment of the script or its underlying language has been achieved. Why is the answer to this puzzle so important to Indians today?
3. The most enduring cultural achievement of ancient India is the body of Vedic hymns created at the end of the period. Very little else survives of the culture of the Indo-Aryans, who composed and preserved this extensive corpus of oral literature. Analyse the lasting cultural significance of this elite priestly tradition by focusing not only on its mythological content and religious details but also on its orality, ritual efficacy and centuries-long transmission.

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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 immortality then. There was no distinguishing sign of night nor of day. That one breathed, windless, by its own impulse. Other than that there was nothing beyond.

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

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

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

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

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

(translation by Wendy O'Flaherty, 1981)

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

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

Only Purusha 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 Purusha. One-quarter of him is all beings; three-quarters of him is the immortal in heaven.

Three-quarters of Purusha 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 Purusha. When born he extended beyond the earth, behind as well as in front.

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

It was Purusha, 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 Purusha, 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 Rajanya [*Kshatriya* 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 Purusha.

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)

Part III : CLASSICAL AGE (1000 BCE-500 CE)

Architecture

Pataliputra A gap of more than a thousand years separates the cities of the Indus Valley from the next examples of architecture in the subcontinent. In the 4th c. BCE the city of Pataliputra, on the Ganges and already the centre of earlier kingdoms, was established as the capital of the Mauryan Empire. Its wooden palaces and buildings were several stories high and surrounded by parks and ponds. In the 3rd c. BCE, the Mauryan Emperor Ashoka had the city rebuilt in stone. Other Mauryan cities, notably Taxila in northwest India, were also built at the same time.

Stupa The chief architectural monument of the classical period was the *stupa*. Essentially a funeral mound housing the relics of the Buddha, the *stupa* is also the first example of a religious structure built with stone in India. The oldest and most elaborate stupa at Sanchi is 16 metres high and 37 metres in diameter. Four gateways were added about 100 CE and then decorated with scenes of the Buddha's life. Another magnificent stupa was completed about 200 CE at Amravati, in south India.

Rock Caves Stupas and pillared halls were also carved out of rock caves at Ajanta and Ellora in western India. Dated from about 200 BCE to 300 CE, the ceilings and walls of these religious spaces were painted with murals showing images taken from Buddhist texts, especially the *Jataka* stories. The famous paintings at Ajanta probably represent one regional variant of a more widespread tradition since examples of a similar style, dated a few centuries later, are found in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu.

Sculpture

Mauryan The elaborately carved monolithic columns and capitals erected by the Mauryas (322-185 BCE) appeared more than a millennium after the simple sculpted figures in the Indus Valley Civilisation (2500-1500 BCE). Their highly polished sandstone surfaces and the historical gap with the Indus Valley figures has given rise to a debate about the possible origin of this virtuosic art. Persian influence is likely, as is the contribution by indigenous styles, but the extent and nature of these influences remain unknown.

Post-Mauryan After the Mauryas, Buddhist sculpture decorated rock-cut and free-standing stupas, monasteries and halls built over much of the subcontinent from the 2nd c. BCE to the 3rd c. CE. Characteristic iconography includes the lotus flower, water symbols and the gestures and poses of the historical Buddha. Outstanding examples are found in north and central India at Sanchi, Ellora and Ajanta, but perhaps the most spectacular is found in south India at Amravati, where exquisitely carved figures, often in narrative scenes and in small niches, display a rare skill, dynamism and imagination.

Shift In the early centuries of the Common Era sculpture experienced a shift from symbols and narrative scenes to individual figures. Earlier iconography, consistent with Buddhist ideas of impermanence and the absence of a soul, used aniconic symbols (an

empty throne, Bodhi tree, wheel of life) and scenes to represent the Buddha. Now, however, the Buddha began to appear in anthropomorphic form as a powerful presence alongside other figures, such as folk deities and water nymphs.

Gandhara At roughly the same time, another school of Indian sculpture developed in the northwest. The Gandhara school of Greco-Buddhist art is named after the region of Gandhara, where Alexander the Great's invasion left behind Greek influence. Artisans produced large, muscular representations of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas (particularly Maitreya), who resemble Greek figures wearing Roman togas.

Gupta The Gupta Empire (4th-6th c. CE) in north India produced the classical school of Indian sculpture, characterised by supreme plasticity, graceful lines and sensual yet serene surfaces. A good illustration is the red sandstone standing image of the Buddha from Mathura, wearing a diaphanous robe with delicately carved folds. Similar softly moulded figures of the Indian pantheon were the inspiration for Hindu and Buddhist art produced in Southeast Asia, China and Japan. These images, displaying both physical presence and disembodied wisdom, became the ideal for Mahayana Buddhism.

Dance

Natyasastra Many Indian traditions share a common repertoire that derives from the *Natyasastra* (*Treatise on Theatre*), possibly from the 1st or 2nd c. CE. This normative Sanskrit text, which also provided the blueprint for early Indian plays written during the Gupta Empire, governed the form and technique of classical dance and still guides their performance today. The text contains a full description of 15 different types of dance-drama, a language of hand-gestures and a sophisticated exposition of aesthetics. Two key terms are *bhava*, the mood or emotion of the dancer, and *rasa*, the distillation of that mood that is evoked in a (discerning) audience.

Content One important common feature of classical Indian dance is content. All the major dance forms draw heavily on Hindu mythology, epics and sculpture. Siva's role as the 'king of dance' and Krishna's dance among the cowherds, for example, supply dance with rich symbolism. Overall, however, Krishna's story is the predominant source for classical dance forms.

Religion

Hinduism Hinduism underwent a major shift during this period from external sacrifice (emphasised in the Vedas) to internal contemplation (emphasised in the Upanishads, 800-500 BCE) and finally to the devotionalism (emphasised in the myths or *puranas*, dating from the 3rd c. CE). The worship of Siva is evident in the Upanishads, and the devotional cult of Visnu was patronised by the Gupta rulers (4th-6th c. CE). During this period of 1500 years, Sanskrit texts, practices and beliefs were localised and adapted to pre-existing religious systems throughout the subcontinent. The other significant consequence of the 'great shift' in religious thinking in this period was the emergence of Buddhism and Jainism.

Buddhism Buddhism grew out of Hinduism in the 6th c. BCE through a rejection of the Hindu concept of the soul and the embrace of a more austere path to enlightenment. This new, heterodox belief system also rejected the domination of Hinduism's priestly elite in favour of monks and laymen and laywomen, who could follow the path of non-violence and virtue. This ideology, which appealed to the emerging mercantile and trading communities in the cities, was patronised by the Mauryan Empire and spread

quickly all over India, including the far south, where it played a major role in literary, social and political life.

Jainism Like Buddhism, Jainism is an offshoot of Hinduism and based on a historical figure who lived in the 6th c. BCE (Mahavira, 'Great Hero'). 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. Jainism also spread through mercantile groups and contributed to literature and scholarship in many regional languages.

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Discussion questions

The gap, measured by archaeological evidence, between the cultural achievements of the Indus Valley Civilisation and the Mauryan Empire stretches to more than a thousand years. We know, however, that culture did not stop evolving during this period. Study the lesser-known elements of culture in this so-called 'gap' and use that new knowledge to build a bridge over this long period of fifteen centuries.

Buddhism and Jainism are alike in many ways. Both are heterodox off-shoots of Hinduism founded by an individual in the 6th c. BCE. Both rejected animal sacrifice and Brahmin elites. Both proclaimed a new conception of the soul. Nevertheless, the two religions differ in fundamental ways, which has led to divergent histories for them in India. Analyse these differences and explain why Buddhism is now a world religion but

not popular within India, whereas Jainism is still current in India but insignificant outside it.

Analyse the significance of the stupa in Indian art and culture. What are its archaeological origins? What is its religious function? What role did it play in the development of Indian architecture, sculpture and painting in the classical period?

Study the thirty-three edicts of Ashoka, the Mauryan Emperor. These inscriptions on stone pillars, boulders and cave walls were an innovation in both architecture and communication. Analyse their content, their medium (including scripts and languages) and their role in building an empire.