

CHAPTER 9

STATE, SOCIETY, AND THE QUEST FOR SALVATION IN INDIA

INTRODUCTION

This chapter addresses the significant developments in classical India between about 520 B.C.E. and 550 C.E. during which two influential empires emerged in northern India: the Maurya and the Gupta. Although these two state systems were not permanent, they contributed to the growth of long-distance trading networks, the consolidation of cultural traditions, and the promotion of several significant religions. More specifically, India, during this period of one thousand years or so, witnessed the following important developments:

- A high volume of manufacture and trade with regions as far east as China and as far west as the Mediterranean basin.
- The consolidation of the social traditions of patriarchal families and caste distinctions, the latter becoming more elaborated with the appearance of subcastes called *jati* usually based on occupation.
- The emergence and spread of salvation-based religions: Jainism, Buddhism, and popular Hinduism.

OUTLINE

I. The fortunes of empire in classical India

A. The Mauryan dynasty and the temporary unification of India

1. Magadha kingdom filled power vacuum left by withdrawal of Alexander of Macedon
2. Chandragupta Maurya began conquest in 320s B.C.E.
 - a) Founded Maurya dynasty stretching from Bactria to Ganges
 - b) Kautilya's advice manual, *Arthashastra*, outlined administrative methods
3. Ashoka Maurya (reigned 268–232 B.C.E.)—peak of empire
 - a) Conquered the kingdom of Kalinga, 260 B.C.E.
 - b) Ruled through tightly organized bureaucracy
 - c) Established capital at Pataliputra
 - d) Policies were written on rocks or pillars
 - e) Empire declined after his death because of financial problems

B. The revival of empire under the Guptas

1. Greek-speaking Bactrians ruled in northwest India for two centuries
2. Kushans (nomads from Central Asia) conquered and ruled, 1–300 C.E.
 - a) High point was Emperor Kanishka, 78–103 C.E.

- b) Crucial role in Silk Road trading network
- 3. The Gupta dynasty, founded by Chandra Gupta (375–415 C.E.)
 - a) Smaller and more decentralized than Maurya
 - b) Invasion of White Huns weakened the empire
 - c) After the fifth century C.E., Gupta dynasty continued in name only
 - d) Large regional kingdoms dominated political life in India

II. Economic development and social distinctions

A. Towns and trade

- 1. Towns dotted the India countryside after 600 B.C.E.
 - a) Towns provided manufactured products and luxury goods
 - b) Active marketplaces, especially along Ganges
- 2. Trade with Persia, China, Indian Ocean basin, Indonesia, southeast Asia, Mediterranean basin

B. Family life and the caste system

- 1. Gender relations: patriarchal families, female subordination, child marriage
- 2. Development of caste system
 - a) With trade and commerce, new social groups of artisans, craftsmen, and merchants appeared
 - b) These social groups functioned as subcastes, or *jati*
 - c) *Vaishyas* and *shudras* saw unprecedented wealth
 - d) Old beliefs and values of early Aryan society became increasingly irrelevant

III. Religions of salvation in classical India

A. Jainism and the challenge to the established cultural order

- 1. Vardhamana Mahavira (*Jina*) founded Jain religion in 5th century B.C.E.
- 2. Jainist doctrine and ethics
 - a) Inspired by the Upanishads: everything in universe has a soul
 - b) Striving to purify one's selfish behavior to attain a state of bliss
 - c) Principle of *ahimsa*, nonviolence toward all living things
 - d) Too demanding, not a practical alternative to the cult of the *brahmins*
- 3. Appeal of Jainism
 - a) Social implication: individual souls equally participated in ultimate reality
 - b) Jains did not recognize social hierarchies of caste and *jati*

B. Early Buddhism

- 1. Siddhartha Gautama (563–483 B.C.E.) became the Buddha

- a) Gave up his comfortable life to search for cause of suffering
 - b) Received enlightenment under the bo tree
 - c) First sermon about 528 B.C.E. at the Deer Park of Sarnath
 - d) Organized followers into a community of monks
2. Buddhist doctrine: the dharma
- a) The Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path are the way to end suffering
 - b) Suffering is caused by desire
 - c) Religious goal: personal salvation, or nirvana, a state of perfect spiritual independence
3. Appeal of Buddhism
- a) Appealed strongly to members of lower castes because it did not recognize social hierarchies of castes and *jati*
 - b) Was less demanding than Jainism, which made it more popular
 - c) Used vernacular tongues, not Sanskrit
 - d) Holy sites venerated by pilgrims
 - e) The monastic organizations—extremely efficient at spreading the Buddhist message and winning converts to the faith
4. Ashoka converted and became important patron of Buddhism
- C. Mahayana Buddhism
- 1. Early Buddhism made heavy demands on individuals
 - 2. Development of Buddhism between third century B.C.E. and first century C.E.
 - a) Buddha became a god
 - b) The notion of *bodhisatva*—“an enlightened being”
 - c) Monasteries began to accept gifts from wealthy individuals
 - d) These changes became known as Mahayana Buddhism
 - e) Educational institutions (like Nalanda) promoted new faith
- D. The emergence of popular Hinduism
- 1. The epics
 - a) *Mahabharata*, a secular poem revised by brahman scholars to honor the god Vishnu, the preserver of the world
 - b) *Ramayana*, a secular story of Rama and Sita, was changed into a Hindu story
 - 2. The Bhagavad Gita
 - a) A short poetic work: dialogue between Vishnu and warrior
 - b) Illustrated expectations of Hinduism and promise of salvation

3. Hindu ethics
 - a) Achieve salvation through meeting caste responsibilities
 - b) Lead honorable lives in the world
4. Hinduism gradually replaced Buddhism in India

IDENTIFICATION: PEOPLE

What is the contribution of each of the following individuals to world history? Identification should include answers to the questions *who, what, where, when, how, and why is this person important?* (Figures with an asterisk are found in the glossary.)

Chandragupta Maurya

Kautalya

Ashoka

Kanishka

Chandra Gupta

Vardhamana Mahavira

Siddhartha Gautama*

IDENTIFICATION: TERMS/CONCEPTS

State in your own words what each of the following terms means and why it is significant to a study of world history. (Terms with an asterisk are defined in the glossary.)

Kingdom of Magadha

Mauryan Empire

Kautalya*

*Arthashastra**

Bactria

Kushan empire

Gupta dynasty

White Huns

Caste

Jainism*

Buddhism*

Nalanda

Hinduism*

*Dharma**

*Karma**

Hinayana*

Mahayana*

*Bodhisatva**

Noble Eightfold Path*

*Samara**

*Mahabharata**

*Bhagavad Gita**

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How did the Persian conquest set the stage for the emergence of the Maurya empire?
2. What were five major accomplishments of the emperor Ashoka?
3. How did the Gupta administrative practices differ from those of the Maurya?
4. How did India fit in to the trade along the Silk Road?
5. In what ways did the development of trade and manufacturing impact the caste system?
6. What are the fundamental beliefs of Jainism? What has been its long-term impact? Why did it never become as popular as other major world religions?
7. What was the popular appeal of Buddhism? How does it compare and contrast to Hinduism?
8. How did early Buddhism evolve into Mahayana Buddhism? How did that help spread the religion?
9. How did Hinduism evolve in India during this period?
10. Why did Buddhism eventually lose popularity in India?

INQUIRY QUESTIONS

1. Even though the Maurya and Gupta empires were highly influential, Indian history largely is characterized by small regional kingdoms. Why do you think large empires did not “take hold” in India as they did in other parts of the world we have studied? What is unusual or different about Indian culture in this respect?
2. How did the social customs of India—especially family patriarchy and caste—and classical Hinduism mesh? How did the practices and beliefs reinforce each other?
3. Jainism, Buddhism, and Hinduism all emerged in India in this period. How did each one appeal to people? Did each one appeal to different groups of people? Why? How did their popularity develop through this period?

MATCHING

Match these figures, terms, or dynasties with the statements that follow.

- | | |
|--------------------|-------------------------|
| A. <i>Jati</i> | F. <i>Arthashastra</i> |
| B. <i>Nirvana</i> | G. <i>Ahimsa</i> |
| C. <i>Ramayana</i> | H. <i>Mahayana</i> |
| D. <i>Dharma</i> | I. <i>Bhagavad Gita</i> |
| E. <i>Brahmins</i> | J. <i>Boddhisatva</i> |

1. ___ Jainist principle meaning nonviolence toward other living things or their souls.
2. ___ Political handbook containing advice from Kautilya and others to the Gupta dynasty regarding principles of government.
3. ___ “Song of the Lord,” a short poetic work of India that clearly illustrated both the expectations and promise of Hinduism for its believers.
4. ___ “The enlightened being,” a Buddhist concept referring to inspirational individuals who had reached spiritual perfection but who intentionally delayed their salvation to help others.
5. ___ Basic Buddhist doctrine that including the teachings of the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path.
6. ___ One of the great Indian epics; it was originally a love and adventure story and later revised by scholars to bear Hindu values.
7. ___ Subcastes that evolved out of occupational guilds; they assumed much of the responsibility for maintaining social order.
8. ___ Highest, priestly caste that was increasingly challenged by popular new religious beliefs.
9. ___ “The greater vehicle” branch of Buddhism that included the worship of the Buddha as a god.
10. ___ The state of perfect spiritual independence achieved through the escape from the cycle of incarnation.

SEQUENCING

Place the following clusters of events in chronological order. Consider carefully how one event leads to another, and try to determine the internal logic of each sequence.

A.

- ___ Ashoka converts to Buddhism and becomes one of its greatest patrons.
- ___ Chandragupta Maurya gradually conquers the Magadha kingdom.
- ___ Ashoka conquers Kalinga in a bloody military campaign.
- ___ The Guptas are weakened by expending resources to repel the invasions of the White Huns.
- ___ Nomadic conquerors from central Asia establish the Kushan empire.
- ___ Conquest of northern section of India by Alexander of Macedon.

B.

- ___ Ashoka sends missionaries to Bactria and Ceylon.
- ___ The Buddha delivers a sermon at the Deer Park of Sarnath.
- ___ Mahayana spreads to China, Japan, and Korea.
- ___ Buddhism noticeably declines in India and Hinduism grows in popularity.
- ___ Siddhartha Gautama receives enlightenment under a bo tree.

QUOTATIONS

For each of the following quotes, identify the speaker, if known, or the point of view or the subject. What is the significance of each passage?

1. "I shall also tell thee, O Bharata, what the duties are of a Kshatriya. A Kshatriya, O king, should give but not beg. . . . He should protect the people, he should put forth his prowess in battle."
2. "You, sir, look at the caste (*jati*) and not at the inherent qualities of the monks. Haughty, deluded, and obsessed with caste, you harm yourself and others."
3. "Union with women who are of lower caste, or who are excommunicated, or with those once married and later deserted or widowed, or with courtesans, is neither commended nor condemned, since this relationship is entered into for mere pleasure."
4. "Though hurt by the grass, he should not wear clothes . . . the wise monk will not lament his lost comfort. He must bear it all to wear out his karma. . . . Until his body breaks up, he should bear the filth upon it."
5. "So he pours out his love and compassion upon all those beings, and attends to them, thinking, I shall become the savior of all beings, and set them free from their sufferings."
6. "As a man, casting off old clothes, puts on others and new ones, so the embodied self, casting off old bodies, goes to others and new ones."

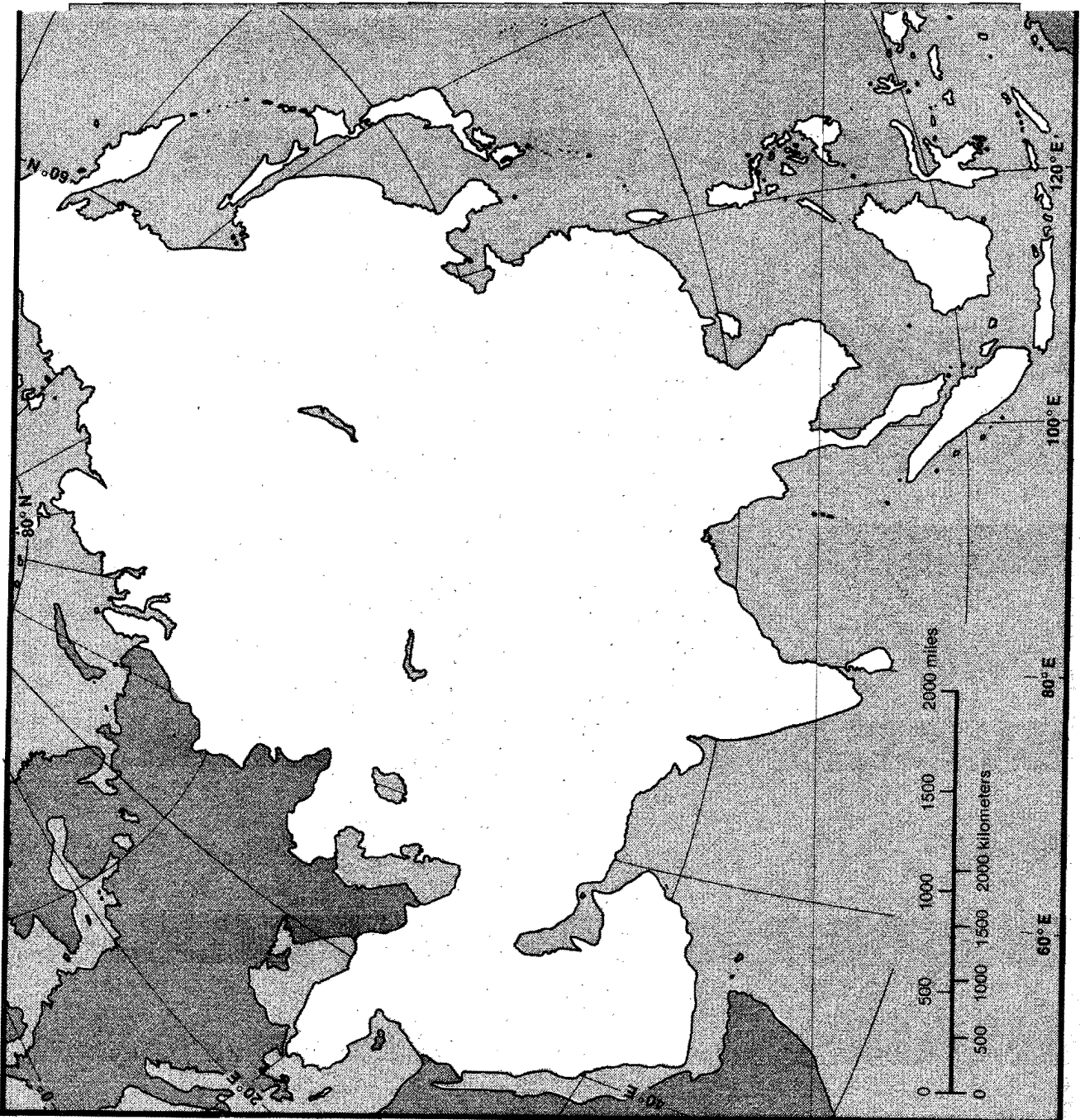
MAP EXERCISE

Fill in the following information on the map below.

- Regions: Magadha, Deccan Plateau, Gandhara, Kushan, Punjab, Bactria, Burma, Ceylon
- Cities: Pataliputra, Sarnath, Bodh Gaya, Taxila, Nalanda
- Mountains: Himalayas, Hindu Kush
- Bodies of water: Ganges River, Indus River, Bay of Bengal, Persian Gulf, Arabian Sea

Look on a current map and identify the modern names for the locations of Ceylon, Bactria, Indus River, Kushan, Magadha.

Why do you think the most important cities of this period were grouped so closely together?



CONNECTIONS

In fifty words or less, explain the relationship between each of the following pairs. How does one lead to or foster the other? Be specific in your response. (May be done individually or in small groups.)

- Darius of Persia and Chandragupta Maurya
- *Jati* and Silk Road
- Ashoka and Buddhism
- “Turning of the Wheel of the Law” and *Bhagavad Gita*

FILMS

Asoka (2001). Half factual, half fictional account of the life of one of the greatest Indian emperors. Directed by Satosh Sivan and with Shah Rukh Khan and Kareena Kapoor.

The Mystic's Journey: India and the Infinite – The Soul of a People (1997). On Buddhism, Hinduism and Christianity.

Altars of the World (1999). VHS, New York, NY: Wellspring Media. Distributed by Fox Lorber, Associates. On Buddhism and Jainism.

The Mahabharata (1989). VHS, stage production adapted by Jean-Claude Carrière; screenplay by Peter Brook, Jean-Claude Carrière, Marie-Hélène Estienne; directed by Peter Brook. New York, NY: Parabola Video Library.