

CHAPTER 4

EARLY SOCIETIES IN SOUTH ASIA

Before you get started: You have made it through three chapters and the details may begin to be overwhelming. Do not panic and do not try to memorize everything; remember the course themes listed at the start of Chapter 1? If not, go back and review them. Those big categories should structure your thinking as you read and provide a scaffold for your new learning.

By the time you finish working through this chapter, you should be able to discuss examples from Harappan and Aryan societies for each theme. Try making your own chart or visual organizer to record your thinking. Remember, this course is based on large pictures and examples, not every minute detail. Use the boldfaced words to create a vocabulary of terms you can use to address each theme.

HARAPPAN SOCIETY

The earliest known urban society in India, known as **Harappan society**, developed c. 7000 B.C.E. along the Indus River. The availability of fresh water and fertile silt for crops produced increasing agricultural output of wheat, barley, and cotton as well as land suitable for herding cattle, sheep, and goats; the ensuing rapidly growing population spread throughout the Indian subcontinent by 3000 B.C.E. The developments in Harappan society are difficult for scholars to trace because the earliest Harappan settlement remains lie under the water table and because there are no deciphered written records. Harappan society declined after 1900 B.C.E.; scholars are still unclear as to reasons for its demise.

Foundations of Harappan Society

(Themes: #2 Development and Interaction of Cultures, #3 Politics, #4 Economic Systems)

Harappan society, which embraced much of modern-day Pakistan and northern India, was considerably larger than either Mesopotamian or Egyptian society. Its agricultural economy, which relied on the somewhat erratic flooding of the Indus River, produced food and cotton which were traded both domestically and with the peoples of Persia and Mesopotamia by following the Arabian Sea coastline.

Despite the size and splendor of the two largest cities, **Mohenjo-daro** and **Harappa**, scholars have no evidence concerning the Harappan political system. Archeological evidence from those two cities suggests that they had large populations and served as economic and political centers.

Harappan Society and Culture

(Themes: #2 Development and Interaction of Cultures, #5 Social Structures)

Harappan economic wealth reached its high point between 2500 B.C.E. and 2000 B.C.E. Archaeological evidence reveals a diverse economic, occupational, and social structure. Without access to a deciphered written language, scholars depend on statues, illustrations, and carved seals to understand Harappan society. Like all known early civilizations, their **polytheistic religion** appears to have centered around creation and procreation.

Harappan society began to decline c. 1900 B.C.E. Ecological degradation, especially deforestation and desertification, as well as natural catastrophes, severely reduced agricultural output; by 1500 B.C.E. most Harappan cities had collapsed.

THE INDO-EUROPEAN MIGRATIONS AND EARLY ARYAN INDIA

As Harappan society declined, **nomadic** and **pastoral peoples** who called themselves **Aryans** migrated through the Hindu Kush and established small herding and agricultural communities throughout northern India. There is little indication that this movement was an invasion or in any significant way contributed to the destruction of Harappan society. The interaction of Aryan and Dravidian peoples laid the foundations of modern Indian society.

The Aryans and India

(Theme: #1 Human-Environment Interaction)

Historically, the Aryans were pastoralists who practiced very limited agriculture. They measured their wealth in sheep, goats, and, especially, cattle, even using them to calculate the price of other goods. Horses were also valued in Aryan culture, though the Aryans had to import them from central Asia. Unlike the Harappans, the early Aryans did not have a written language but relied on oral tradition using Sanskrit to preserve extensive collections of religious and literary works known as the Vedas, a term which means "wisdom." The *Rig Veda*, the most important of these works, was committed to writing c. 600 B.C.E. Today, scholars use the Vedas to understand early Aryan society in India, the Vedic age.

Life during the Vedic age was characterized by competition for land and resources as reflected in the chief god of the Aryan pantheon, Indra. The Aryans fought the Dravidians, and among themselves, attacking cities and ruining essential irrigation systems. The Aryans did not have a state or common government but were controlled by chiefdoms dominated by a **raja** who governed in collaboration with a council of village elders. Raiding for cattle and horses was common.

As part of the early Indo-European migration c. 1500 B.C.E., the Aryans established themselves in the Punjab, then spread east and south establishing communities throughout the Indian subcontinent. During this era, they learned how to work with iron to make axes and plows that increased their food production, spurred their population growth, and encouraged them to push further into India. By 1000 B.C.E., they had settlements between the Himalayan foothills and the Ganges River and by 500 B.C.E., they had migrated as far south as the northern Deccan plateau. The Aryans established permanent communities throughout these regions, began to rely more on agriculture, and gradually lost their tribal political organization. The traditional chiefdoms developed into regional kingdoms that built permanent capitals, depended on professional administrators, and became the most common form of political organization on the subcontinent.

RELIGION IN THE VEDIC ERA

The foundations of Hinduism are found in the fusion of Aryan and Dravidian traditions.

Aryan Religion

(Theme: #2 Development and Interaction of Cultures)

The Aryans were polytheistic with gods for the sun, the sky, the moon, fire, health, and other natural phenomena. *Indra*, the Aryan god of war and weather, was the most important of those gods, reflecting the difficulties of survival in Vedic society. From his heavenly palace, *Varuna*, another important Vedic god, oversaw the behavior of humans and preserved the order of the universe; his role was to ensure ethical behavior with the threat of disease, suffering, and death for evildoers and entrance to heaven called the World of the Fathers for virtuous souls.

Early Aryans practiced extensive ritual sacrifice as a way to gain divine support, win military battles, produce large families, ensure long life, and guarantee abundant cattle herds. These sacrifices could become quite elaborate, requiring hundreds of animals from the Aryans' herds, constant prayer and attention from the Brahmins (priests), and the ingestion of drugs by participants to manifest the gods' appearance and their positive response.

Over time, Aryan religious practice changed dramatically. By 800 B.C.E., **ascetic practices**, mystical interactions with religious texts, living in nature, and study with a revered teacher, became the more ideal form of religious practice. This evolution of religious thought included changes in beliefs as well as in practice as the Aryans drew inspiration from traditional Dravidian religion. The ideas of transmigration and reincarnation intrigued the Aryans and fostered an interest in understanding the fate of souls after death.

The Blending of Aryan and Dravidian Values

(Themes: #2 Development and Interaction of Cultures)

The *Upanishads* began to appear in the late Vedic Age, 800–400 B.C.E. These works, which often took the form of dialogues between a sage and his disciples, sought to explore ultimate truth and knowledge in an ideal world that transcends this earth by introducing the concepts of *samsara* and *karma* to explain how each person exists as part of *Brahman*, the universal soul. Brahman is the permanent foundation of all living things, according to the Upanishad's explanations, and, unlike the physical world, is unchanging, eternal, and the only genuine reality. The authors of the Upanishads believed individual souls were

born into the physical world many times and in many forms but their highest goal was to escape this cycle of birth, death, and rebirth and join with Brahman.

The state of rejoining Brahman was known as *moksha*; it signified the soul's permanent liberation from reincarnation. Though difficult, *moksha* could be attained through asceticism and meditation, which would separate the individual from the physical world of change, illusion, and incarnation. Later, both Greek philosophers and Christian theologians would seek to explain a separation between the physical world and a spiritual realm.

The Upanishads called for **high ethical standards** by discouraging any and all personal traits which indicated an excessive attachment to the material world and insufficient focus on union with the universal soul. They advocated personal integrity, self-knowledge, and a respect for all living things. Yet, these teachings from the Upanishads can be interpreted as a cynical ideology designed to justify the social inequalities of the caste system by encouraging individuals to observe their caste and jati rules despite hardships and inequities in hopes of enjoying a more positive incarnation in the future.