

Historical Highlights

In ancient India, the link between literature and history was religion. From earliest times, literature expressed religious belief, which in turn drove the political and social forces that molded India's unique history.

Indus Valley Civilization

2500–1500 B.C.

About the time the Egyptians were building pyramids, people in the Indus Valley were creating complex cities. In the largest cities, Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa, brick public buildings and private homes stood on a grid of broad avenues and smaller cross streets. Most houses had indoor bathrooms and sewer connections. After flourishing for centuries, however, this advanced civilization mysteriously declined.

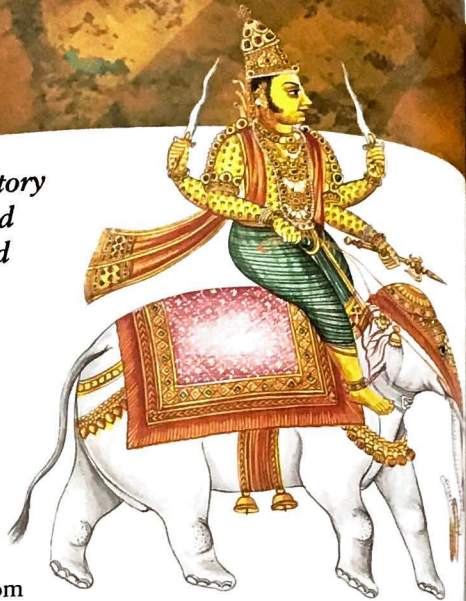


Carved stone seals like this one were probably used by Indus Valley merchants to stamp their goods. The writing on them has never been translated.

Early Vedic Age

1500–1000 B.C.

After the decline of the Indus Valley civilization, Indo-European tribes invaded India from what is now Iran. They called themselves Aryans, “the ones of noble birth,” and referred to the darker-skinned Indus Valley people as *dasas*, “the dark ones.” The conquering Aryans introduced their religion, their class system, and their language, Sanskrit, which is related to English and other languages in the Indo-European language family. This period of Indian history is called the Vedic age after the Aryan sacred literature known as the Vedas, four collections of hymns, prayers, magic spells, and rituals. Some basic concepts of Hinduism—such as the caste system and the belief in an afterlife—originally came from the *Rig Veda*, the oldest of the Vedas.



Indra, shown on a battle elephant, was the mightiest of the Vedic gods.

Late Vedic Age

1000–500 B.C.

The Aryans spread southeast along the Ganges River, settling in farms and villages. As powerful clans organized larger areas, violent conflicts arose over who should rule. Priests also grew more ambitious, causing concerns about their power.

India's great national epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, describe political struggles of this period and also explain important social and religious concepts. The *Upanishads* interpreted Vedic hymns and introduced new spiritual principles of Hinduism—such as belief in one universal spirit, reincarnation, and *karma*.

INDUS VALLEY
CIVILIZATION

2500 B.C.

EARLY
VEDIC AGE

1500 B.C.

Rise of Buddhism and Jainism

560–321 B.C.

Buddhism and Jainism were new belief systems that attracted followers from all social classes.

Buddhism was founded by a young prince named Siddhartha Gautama. His religion was based on ethical behavior and nonviolence rather than worship of gods. Known as the Buddha, or “enlightened one,” he preached throughout India for about 40 years.

Jainism also emphasized individual morality and nonviolence but was more strict. Its founder, Mahavira, believing that all living creatures had a soul, refused to harm even an insect.



The Buddha is shown with earlobes stretched long by the costly earrings he wore before giving up his wealth.

Age of Empires

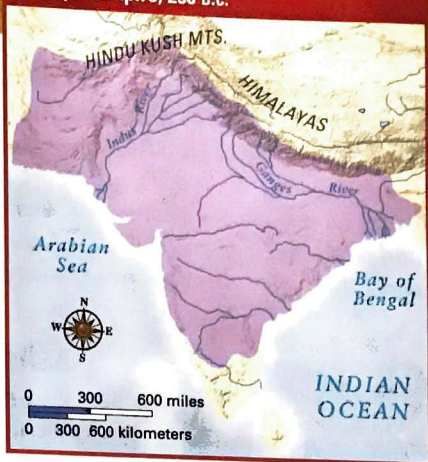
321 B.C.—A.D. 500

India’s first empire builder, Chandragupta Maurya, succeeded in politically uniting the northern part of India for the first time. His adviser Kautilya wrote a “how-to” handbook for emperors, called the *Arthashastra*.

Chandragupta’s grandson Asoka further expanded the empire through war but promoted peace after he converted to Buddhism.

The Mauryan Empire began to break up soon after Asoka’s death in 322 B.C., as waves of invaders poured into northern India. Stability returned about 500 years later during the Gupta Empire. The Gupta rulers presided over a golden age in which literature and the arts flourished.

Mauryan Empire, 250 B.C.



History to Literature

EVENT IN HISTORY

Aryans invade the Indus Valley about 1500 B.C.

A civil war erupts in the large Bharata kingdom about the tenth century B.C.

Aryan religious beliefs are questioned during the late Vedic age and after the fall of the Mauryan Empire.

India enjoys a golden age during the Gupta Empire.

EVENT IN LITERATURE

The *Rig Veda* contains sacred hymns celebrating the Aryan way of life.

The *Mahabharata* describes a war between factions of the Bharata tribe: the Kauravas, ruling from their capital at Hastinapura, and the Pandavas, ruling from Indraprastha.

Holy men outline many principles of Hinduism in the *Upanishads*; later, the *Bhagavad-Gita* clarifies important Hindu concepts.

The great poet Kalidasa writes plays for Emperor Chandra Gupta II’s court.

LATE
VEDIC AGE

1000 B.C.

RISE OF BUDDHISM
AND JAINISM

560 B.C.

AGE OF
EMPIRES

321 B.C.

A.D. 500

People and Society

Perhaps the most durable Aryan tradition in India is the caste system, which still persists. According to the Rig Veda, four basic social classes emerged, in descending order, from the body of Purusha, the first man. These castes were based on occupation and skin color (varna), and separated Aryans from non-Aryans. In the late Vedic age, a fifth class division arose outside the caste system.



Brahmans

The **brahmins**, or priests, sprang from the mouth of Purusha. The Aryans devised their ranking system according to the purity and dignity they thought attached to an occupation. Since priests performed sacred rituals, they were considered the purest class and wore white clothes to distinguish themselves. Brahmins rose from being second in status in early Vedic times to being more powerful than kings in the late Vedic age.

Warriors were members of the kshatriya caste.

Kshatriyas

Kshatriyas were warriors and rulers, who came from Purusha's arms. They wore red and commanded the most respect in early Vedic society.

A characteristic feature of the caste system is the concept of **dharma**, or roughly translated, "duty." Each class had sacred duties to perform to maintain the order of the universe. If you were born a warrior, you went to battle; you couldn't, for instance, sell vegetables in the market. As the god Krishna says in the *Bhagavad-Gita*, "It is better to do one's own duty badly than to do another's duty well."

Vaishyas

The vaishya caste consisted of farmers, merchants, and tradespeople such as carpenters and physicians. Most artisans, including poets and dancers, belonged to this caste. They emerged from Purusha's thighs and were assigned the color yellow.

The vaishyas, kshatriyas, and brahmins made up the three highest classes. During the late Vedic age, this social order hardened into a rigid hierarchy. Membership in a caste was strictly hereditary and usually not subject to change. One exception was that men in the top two castes could choose wives from a lower caste, although a lower-caste man could not marry up. That is, a priest could marry a farmer's daughter, but a farmer could not marry a priest's daughter.



The British Library/The Art Archive.



Street sweepers belonged to the category of outcastes.

Shudras

Shudras—servants and menial laborers—were the lowest of the four main castes. They came from Purusha's feet and wore the color black. This caste also included dasas, indigenous people conquered by Aryan tribes. Aryans gradually came to use the word *dasa* to mean "slave." Although a shudra's quality of life probably depended on his or her employer, it couldn't have been very satisfying. By the late Vedic age, it was legal to beat or even kill a shudra.

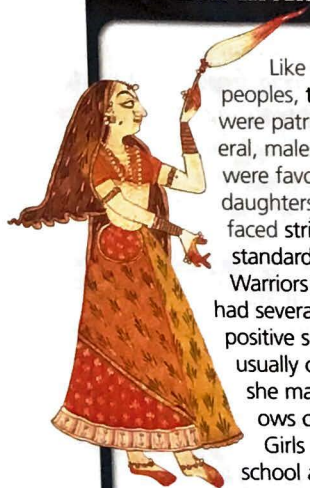
An interesting crack in the caste structure occurred during the shift from hereditary rule by tribal chiefs to the government of kingdoms by powerful monarchs. Although members of the kshatriya caste continued to rule local communities, most kings came from shudra families.

Outcastes

In later Vedic times, a new class division arose outside the caste system. **Outcastes**, also called **untouchables**, were thought to be so unclean, so polluted, that merely touching them endangered a person's purity. Generally, the nature of their work condemned outcastes: digging graves, for instance, or disposing of animal and human waste. Even butchers and leatherworkers fell into the category because they handled dead animals. Upper-caste Hindus went to extreme measures to avoid untouchables, requiring them to ring a bell as a warning of their presence.

Hindus believed that they could be born into a higher or lower caste in the next life, depending on their actions in their present life.

Women in Ancient India



Like most ancient peoples, the Aryans were patriarchal. In general, males ruled. Sons were favored over daughters, and women faced stricter moral standards than men. Warriors customarily had several wives. On the positive side, a woman usually chose the man she married, and widows could remarry.

Girls attended school and could engage in religious activities when they grew up. Some of the hymns of the Vedas were composed by women.

Life got worse for women under Hinduism. Hindus considered women inferior, sinful, and a source of contamination.

Around the first century B.C., the Laws of Manu set down a detailed code of conduct for Hindus. Here are a few of the laws relating to women:

- Brides could be as young as eight.
- Warriors could abduct a bride and murder her family.
- Women were forbidden to own property or otherwise be independent.
- A wife couldn't displease her husband, even after he died.

Victoria & Albert Museum, London.

Arts and Culture

Perhaps the most important contribution of ancient India is its religious traditions. Hinduism and Buddhism share a reverence for the inner life and remind us of the riches to be found within ourselves. The literature, art, music, and dance that grew from these traditions are beautiful and moving, inspirational to people across the world.

Literature

The literature of ancient India remains a living tradition, tied to religion and moral instruction. Although Hinduism has changed significantly from the Aryan beliefs recorded in the Vedas, Hindus still chant hymns from the *Rig Veda* at weddings and funerals. The great epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, contain exciting tales for children to enjoy as well as philosophical ideas for adults to ponder. The fables of the *Panchatantra* and the Jataka tales of the Buddha's past lives appeal to readers of all ages. The classic drama of the poet Kalidasa—known as the Shakespeare of India—is still performed on Indian stages.

A separate literary tradition developed in southern India among speakers of the Tamil language. Unlike Sanskrit, Tamil is not an Indo-European language. It is Dravidian. The earliest Tamil poetry dates from the first century A.D.

How Was Literature Presented?

The sacred Vedas were composed orally hundreds of years before they were written down. Priests kept the Vedas alive by memorizing them and teaching them to the next generation of priests. The hymns and rituals had to be recited perfectly to have the desired religious effect. This practice required extraordinary feats of memory. The *Rig Veda* alone contains more than 1,000 hymns.

The British Library/The Art Archive.

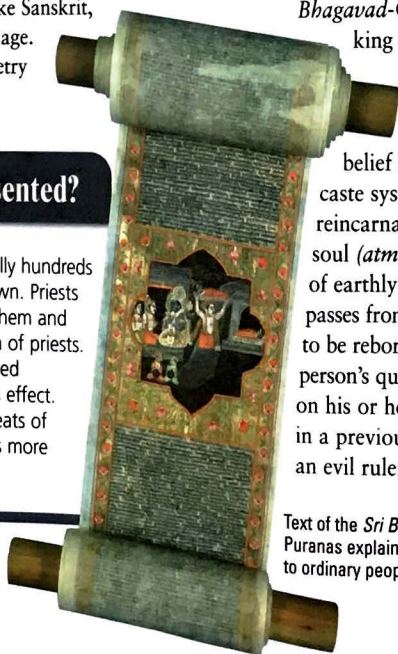
Religion

Hinduism began as a blending of Aryan and non-Aryan traditions and developed over a period of more than 2,500 years. Hindus basically believe in one god, Brahman. More an abstract spirit than a being, however, Brahman exists everywhere, both within all living things and in the surrounding cosmos. Below Brahman—and yet part of him—are three other gods: Brahma, the creator; Vishnu, the preserver; and Shiva, the destroyer. Vishnu is said to have come to earth in ten bodily forms, or avatars. The most important of these avatars are the mythical Krishna and the legendary king Rama of the *Bhagavad-Gita*, the legendary

king Rama of the *Ramayana*, and the historical Buddha.

Central to Hindu belief as well as to India's caste system is the concept of reincarnation. An individual soul (*atman*) evolves in a cycle of earthly existence by which it passes from one body at death to be reborn in another body. A person's quality of life depends on his or her actions, or *karma*, in a previous life. For example, an evil ruler might come back

Text of the *Sri Bhagavata Purana*. Puranas explained Vedic concepts to ordinary people.



Arts and Architecture

Ancient Indian arts had a religious purpose. The classic Indian architectural form is the Hindu temple, made of stone blocks and carved with images of deities. Buddhist monuments, or *stupas*, were built in the shape of mounds, to symbolize the universe. Beautiful paintings line caves where Buddhist monks once worshiped, and some of the most famous Indian sculptures depict Hindu gods, such as Shiva.

as an untouchable; a greedy merchant could return as a crow. The goal of existence is *moksha*—perfect understanding of the universe and, ultimately, a release from the cycle of rebirth and union with Brahman.

Buddhism arose as a reaction to Hinduism's complex rituals and the power of the Vedic priests. Buddhists accept the Hindu belief in reincarnation with the ultimate goal being enlightenment and union with the universal spirit (*nirvana*). But Buddhists reject the caste system and don't worship Hindu gods. The way to salvation lies in moderation, specifically by following the Buddha's Middle Way, between desire and self-denial. Buddhists practice meditation, nonviolence, and religious toleration. After some of its ideas were absorbed by Hinduism, Buddhism eventually died out in India. It gained a stronger foothold in Sri Lanka, East Asia, and Southeast Asia.

Jainism, like Buddhism, arose in response to the power of the Vedic priests. Jains practice extreme forms of self-denial and nonviolence. The sect still exists in India today, but it never spread widely outside of India.

Shiva the Destroyer

In his upper right hand, he holds a drum that represents the pulse of creation.

Shiva is worshiped as both the destroyer and the creator of life.



His lower right hand blesses his followers.

He tramples the dwarf of ignorance with his right foot.

Shiva's dance maintains the movement of the universe, symbolized by the ring of fire.

Shiva dancing. Courtesy of the Trustees of the Victoria & Albert Museum, London.