

The Mauryan and Gupta dynasties formed the first great Indian empires. Their cultures were the basis for civilizations that followed.

Origin of an Empire

How did religion affect the development of the Mauryan Empire?

By the 500s B.C., India was divided into many small kingdoms. Conflict over land and trade weakened the kingdoms, leaving them open to foreign invasion. Persian armies conquered the Indus Valley in the 500s B.C. and made it part of the Persian Empire. The Greeks, under Alexander the Great, then defeated the Persians. Alexander entered India but turned back in 325 B.C., when his homesick troops threatened to rebel.

India's First Empire

After Alexander left India, an Indian military officer named Chandra Gupta Maurya (CHUHN • druh GUP • tuh MAH • oor • yuh) built a strong army. He knew that only a large and powerful empire could defend India against invasion. In 321 B.C., Chandra Gupta set out to conquer northern India and unify the region under his rule.

Chandra Gupta was the first ruler of the Mauryan dynasty. He was a skilled administrator. He set up a well-run government in his capital city of Pataliputra (PAH • tah • lih • POO • truh). One of his major achievements was an efficient postal system. The system improved communications throughout his empire.

Chandra Gupta's powerful army crushed any resistance to his rule. He also used spies to report any disloyalty among his subjects. While he was a strong ruler, Chandra Gupta was very cautious. He was afraid of being poisoned, so he had servants taste his food before he ate it. He was so concerned about being attacked that he never slept two nights in a row in the same bed.

What did Ashoka Accomplish?

The Mauryan Empire reached the height of its glory under Chandra Gupta's grandson Ashoka (uh • SOH • kuh). Ashoka governed most of northern and central India from about 273 B.C. to 232 B.C.

Ashoka was an unusual king. Like many rulers, Ashoka began his rule with fierce wars of conquest. **Eventually**, he came to hate killing. After one battle, he looked at the fields covered with dead and wounded soldiers. He was horrified by what he saw. He decided that he would follow Buddhist teachings and become a man of peace.

Ashoka kept his promise. During the rest of his life, he tried to improve the lives of his people. Ashoka made laws that encouraged people to do good deeds, practice nonviolence, and respect others. He created hospitals for people and for animals. He built fine roads, with rest houses and shade trees for the travelers' comfort.

Ashoka was the first ruler to promote Buddhism. He sent teachers to spread the religion throughout India and other parts of Asia. Buddhist teachings and the laws of Ashoka were carved on rocks and tall stone pillars for all the people to read. Carved on one rock is the idea that:

"Father and mother must be hearkened [listened to]; similarly, respect for living creatures must be firmly established; truth must be spoken. These are the virtues of the Law of Piety [devotion] which must be practiced."

—from "Summary of the Law of Piety," The Edicts of Ashoka

Ashoka also had thousands of stupas (stoo • puhs) built throughout India. Stupas are Buddhist shrines shaped like a dome or burial mound. The stupas contained religious objects and served as a place of worship. Although he was a devout Buddhist, Ashoka was tolerant of all beliefs and allowed his Hindu subjects to practice their religion.

Ashoka's able leadership helped the Mauryan Empire prosper. India's good roads helped it become the center of a large trade network that stretched to the Mediterranean Sea.

The End of the Mauryan Empire

After Ashoka died in 232 B.C., the Mauryan Empire declined. The kings who came after Ashoka lacked his kindness and skills. The new rulers made merchants pay heavy taxes and took lands from the peasants. The Indian people rebelled against the harsh treatment. In 183 B.C., the last Mauryan king was murdered by one of his own generals. The land of the

Mauryan Empire split into many small warring kingdoms.

Explaining What caused Ashoka to denounce violence? What was the result?

Just the war and
thought it was wrong

The Gupta Empire

Why did the Gupta Empire become powerful?

For 500 years, the small warring kingdoms fought one another for control of India. Then, in A.D. 320, the Gupta dynasty came to power in the Ganges River valley. The city of Pataliputra had been the capital of the old Mauryan Empire. It now became the capital of the Gupta Empire. Chandra Gupta I, the first Gupta ruler, had the same name as the first ruler of the Mauryan dynasty.

Chandra Gupta I ruled for 10 years. He chose his son, Samudra Gupta (suh • MOO • druh GUP • tuh), to rule after him. Samudra Gupta expanded the Gupta Empire in northern India. He was a great military leader and a patron of arts and literature. Under Samudra Gupta, India entered a golden age.

Gupta rulers practiced the Hindu religion like many of their subjects did. They donated money to support Hindu scholars and build Hindu temples. Many temples had brightly painted sculptures of deities and images from Hindu sacred writings.

Trade helped the Gupta Empire thrive. Salt, cloth, and iron were common goods traded in India. Indian merchants also traded with China and with lands in Southeast Asia and the Mediterranean area. The Gupta rulers benefited from their control of much of the trade. They owned silver and gold mines and large estates.

Cities arose along trade routes. People called pilgrims (PIHL • gruhms) used the trade routes to journey to holy sites. Cities with famous temples grew wealthy from visiting pilgrims.

Explaining How did the Gupta Empire profit from trade routes?

Culture in Ancient India

What were the cultural contributions of the Mauryan and Gupta Empires?

Ancient India produced a brilliant culture. Artists, builders, writers, and scientists made many contributions while the Mauryan and Gupta kings ruled.

The Literature of India

The Vedas were among the first works written in the Sanskrit language. The literature of ancient India also includes epics. Hindu epics are sacred texts that teach important moral lessons. The people could learn the correct and acceptable behavior through interesting stories.

The *Mahabharata* (muh • HAH • BAH • ruh • tuh) is an ancient religious epic. It is also the longest poem in any written language, with about 90,000 verses. The *Mahabharata* describes a struggle for control of an Indian kingdom that took place about 1100 B.C. Its exciting stories about great heroes influenced Hindus then and now.

The best-known section of the *Mahabharata* is the *Bhagavad Gita* (BAH • guh • VAHD GEE • tuh), or "Song of the Lord." In it, the deity Krishna goes with a prince into battle. The prince does not want to fight because members of his family are on the other side. Krishna reminds the prince to obey his duty as a warrior. The prince makes the painful choice to fight his family.

A second epic, the *Ramayana* (rah • mah • YAH • nah), is a poem that grew to about 25,000 verses before it was written down. It tells the story of Rama, the perfect king, and Sita, his faithful wife. When Sita is kidnapped by an evil king, Rama rushes to her rescue with the help of friends.

The Arts and Architecture

The ancient Hindus believed that music was a gift from the gods. Many sacred texts, such as the Bhagavad Gita, were probably sung. At yearly festivals, people danced, sang, and played music. Musical instruments included tambourines, flutes, drums, and flutes.

Much of early India's art was created on fragile materials, such as paper, and has not survived. What is left today is mostly

religious art—elaborate sculptures carved in stone. Sculptors carved images of the Buddha as early as the A.D. 100s.

The most important structures in early India were the rulers' palaces and the temples used for religious worship. During Ashoka's reign, many stone pillars carved with Buddhist messages were placed alongside roads.

Mathematics

Indian mathematicians of the Gupta period made important contributions. Aryabhata (AHR • yuh • BUHT • uh) was one of the first scientists known to have used algebra. Indian mathematicians explained the idea of infinity—something without an end. They also invented the symbol "0" and connected it with the idea of nothing. The Indians' invention of zero affected the study of mathematics and science. Modern technology, such as computers, would not be possible without the concept of zero.

Gupta mathematicians developed symbols for the numbers 1 to 9 that we use today. In the A.D. 700s, Arab traders adopted these number symbols, or numerals. European traders later borrowed them from the Arabs. In the A.D. 1200s, use of these numbers spread though Europe and replaced Roman numerals. Today, this system of number symbols is known as the Indian-Arabic numerical system.

Advances in Science

Scientists and scholars in ancient India also made important advances in astronomy and technology. Indian astronomers mapped the movements of planets and stars. They proposed the theory that the Earth was round and revolved around the sun. During the Gupta period, scientists advanced metalworking. Among their most impressive constructions is the pillar of iron of Delhi, dating from around A.D. 400. It is still standing, and, in spite of its age, it has hardly rusted.

Advances in Medicine

Can you imagine doctors performing dental surgery 1600 years ago? Indian doctors treated dental problems using tools such as the bow drill. The doctors used this tool, which was usually used to make fire, to drill teeth.

Doctors during the Gupta era were advanced for their time. They could set broken bones, sew wounds, and perform complicated surgeries. They also were skilled in making medical instruments, such as scalpels and needles.

A doctor named Shushruta (shoosh • ROO • tah) repaired damaged noses in an early type of plastic surgery. Indian doctors used herbs to cure illnesses. They also believed in healing the causes of a disease, not just treating the disease itself.

Analyzing What lasting achievement did Indian mathematicians make?

Connections to TODAY

Math Poems

Some writings about mathematics from the Gupta dynasty have survived. The math formulas are written as poems. Scholars had to find ways to fit numbers into the poems so that they would sound correct. Imagine having to turn in your math homework in the form of a poem.

LESSON 3 REVIEW

Review Vocabulary

1. How would a *pilgrim* in ancient India use a *stupa*?

2. What is the *Bhagavad Gita*?

Answer the Guiding Questions

3. **Determining Cause and Effect** How did religion influence the Mauryan Empire?

4. Describing How did the Gupta Empire grow powerful?

5. Identifying What were the written epics of the Mauryan and Gupta period?

6. NARRATIVE You are living in India during the rule of Ashoka. Write a letter to a friend describing the things Ashoka is doing as a leader. In your letter, explain whether you think Ashoka is a great ruler.