INDIA

INTRODUCTION

Our understanding of Indian history has changed rapidly in recent decades as new DNA testing, archeological finds, and linguistic analysis have altered previously understood facts. Through DNA analysis, it is now known that India was populated about 60,000 BC in the first wave of human migration out of Africa. These were the original hunters and gatherers of the Indian subcontinent upon whose cultural foundations everything else was built. Later, during the Neolithic era, farmers and herders migrated, generation by generation, into India from the Middle East and Tibet, and, after the rise of civilization, India absorbed immigrants and invaders from all over Eurasia. This has meant, over the course of her entire history, India has absorbed a kaleidoscope of various peoples and cultures. She has experienced a high level of diversity rather than homogeneity. Her linguistic variation alone comprises 15 official major languages, 40 minor languages, and 700 dialects.

What are the main features of India’s geography?

The Hindu Kush Mountains and Indus River in the Northwest, the Himalayas and Ganges River in the Northeast, the Deccan Plateau (dry and hilly) in the center of the subcontinent and the Arabian Sea, the Indian Ocean, and the Bay of Bengal surrounding the country are the main geographic features. Although it seems India was well-protected from invasion, low passes in the Hindu Kush range, such as the Khyber Pass, allowed outsiders to either invade or migrate to the country.

EARLIEST BEGINNINGS OF INDIA’S HISTORY

With the benefit of DNA analysis, India’s history can now be traced back to 60,000 years ago when the first wave of modern Homo Sapiens Sapiens left Africa and migrated into that large peninsula. These people, who were hunters and gatherers, are called the Adi Dravidas. Their etchings and rock paintings have been found in caves in central India. They are genetically directly related to the hunters and gatherers who continued to migrate all the way to Australia and New Guinea to settle there.

In the Neolithic Era, about 8,000 BC, the descendents of the early hunters and gatherers in India made the transition from hunting and gathering to herding cattle taking their herds across various migratory routes. Cattle flourished in India’s savannah environment, so much so, that cattle later became, as they did in East Africa, the chief source of wealth and a yardstick for measuring political power.
Farmers settled down to growing crops and organizing village communities. These people adapted to the warmer weather at the end of the Ice Age when melting glaciers and flooding of coastal areas led to changes in lifestyle. Housing varied from one region to another and was constructed in accordance with the environment. In the Deccan plateau, for instance, shelters remained simple because the weather was pleasant. In the Northeast, among tribal groups of that region, large, elaborate wood structures provided shelter during monsoon rains. The most solid structures were granaries where wheat and other foodstuffs were stored.

The Dravidians were people in next wave of migration into India. They came from the Middle East about 5,000 BC and were related to the Elamites from the Zagros Mountains in what is today Iran. Bringing cattle, horses, cereals and cotton, pottery, and metallurgy, they intermarried with the hunter/gatherer and Neolithic people already there.

Studies of mitochondrial DNA taken from cemeteries and from modern-day people reveal that most Indian females are genetically linked to India’s original inhabitants from Africa. The Dravidians were foreign men who intermarried with native women. The evidence from these genetic studies is clear and abundant.

**RISE OF CIVILIZATION IN INDIA**

The Indus River Valley Civilization (also called Harappan civilization) was constructed about 3,000 BC by people who lived in Western India. Archeological excavations reveal the civilization had two large cities, Harappa and Mohenjo Daro. The cities were well-planned and organized with streets laid out in grids, granaries, sewer systems, and brick houses all built on a citadel complex. Houses had inner courtyards with doors and windows facing inward. Since no palaces or royal tombs have been found, we cannot say specifically what the political organization was. We might assume, however, that with such well-organized cities surrounded by solid fortifications, someone held tremendous coercive power and utilized this power to amass the labor necessary for construction of an extensive urban infrastructure.

The written language of early Indian civilization consisted of about 400 inscriptions on clay seals. These inscriptions have never been deciphered. Along with the inscriptions were images of lotus flowers, pipal trees, bulls, and cross-legged yogis, images still common in India today 4,000 years later!

Commercial activities of the Indus Valley civilization covered the entire Indian subcontinent, the Himalayas, Central Asia, and the Middle East. Trade with Mesopotamian Civilization reached a peak between 2370-1760 BC. Indian seals
have been found in Mesopotamia and Mesopotamian texts mention a place called Meluhha that seems to refer to India. Indian trade goods such as gold, pearls and ivory came from central India, lapis-lazuli and other precious stones came from Kashmir and the Himalayas, and cotton, timber and poultry came from various locations.

The Harappan civilization fell into decline around 1500 BC for reasons which are not clear to historians. It may have been due to the flooding of rivers as their flow shifted because of tectonic uplift. This flooding may have caused the collapse of the cities’ agricultural base. The subsequent abandonment of farmlands would open a niche for the re-settlement of the region by herding and farming peoples.

**INDO-EUROPEAN ARRIVAL IN INDIA**

Around 1500 BC Indo-Europeans (also called Aryans meaning “noble”) migrated from the west in horse-drawn chariots, speaking Sanskrit, and worshipping gods of war, thunder and lightening. Some of them may have been invaders, but the previous understanding of them, that they came in with a massive invasion force and overwhelmed a passive population, is now discredited. The Harappans must have known about these Indo-Europeans, with all of the trade and contact in the entire greater region.

The Indo-Europeans may have been mercenaries who were invited into the Indus Valley as auxiliary forces by rival factions engaged in a civil war. Or they may have come in as itinerate traders. But it is now thought that they were mainly males who came without families. This has been ascertained through recent genetic analysis.

They brought a warrior culture. Their chief god, a sky deity named Indra, threw lightening bolts at his enemies just as the Viking god Thor did in a distantly related European culture. With a military advantage of two-horse chariots, the Indo-Europeans ruled over the farmers in the region. Gradually a cultural synthesis occurred between the Harappans and Indo-Europeans. The Indo-Europeans brought with them their beliefs and stories, hymns and prayers which were later written down in the Vedas.

**ARYAN-HARAPPAN SYNTHESIS (1500-500 B.C.) 1,000 years**

It is now thought that the Harappan Civilization was declining even before the Indo-European migrations into India. After the Indo-Europeans came in, Harappan civilization recomposed and became tribes headed by tribal leaders called rajas. Rajas eventually formed kingdoms in the Ganges river valley.
The Hindu faith emerged out of the Aryan-Harappan synthesis, and its sacred books, the Vedas, were written in the Aryan language, Sanskrit. Hindu priests, called Brahmins, offered sacrifices to the gods according to intricate ancient rules and rituals layered with magical rites, sorcery, curses, charms, and amulet-making. Brahmins worked with Rajas. The caste system, which ranked people at birth according to occupation and color, became a basic social structure of Indian culture.

MAGADA KINGDOM (490-321 B.C.) 170 years

The first kingdom in India rose to prominence in the Ganges River valley. It was located on two trade routes and controlled rich iron deposits. This kingdom was the basis of two of India’s later empires - Mauryan and Gupta. During these years, Alexander the Great invaded India (327 B.C.) and, although he stayed only 2 years, he established trade routes from India to the Mediterranean which lasted for centuries.

MAURYAN EMPIRE (321-185 B.C.) 136 years

Chandragupta I established an empire – the first Indian empire – which eventually nearly covered the entire subcontinent. His palace at Patna on the Ganges river was made of teak wood towers, balconies, and numerous rooms. He conquered all of India with the help of the callous and ruthless policies of Kautilya, his advisor who created a secret police and wrote a famous book Arthasastra. This book can be compared to Machiavelli’s The Prince, a treatise advising Italian royal families on how to instill fear in their subjects so that the country could be unified.

The reign of Asoka (268-231) - 37 years, Chandragupta’s grandson, was a golden age of humane governance in world history similar to Periclean Athens and Augustan Rome. Asoka, a convert to Buddhism, built giant pillars called “rock edicts” on which was inscribed his principles – reverence for teachers and parents, compassion, religious piety, and non-violence. He also built hospitals, roads, and rest houses for travelers.

500 YEARS OF POLITICAL DECENTRALIZATION (185 BC – 320AD)

This was a time in India when there was no central government, only separate kingdoms and principalities. Foreign invasions and migrations included: Greeks, Persians, Kushans (Indo-Europeans from Bactria – modern northern Afghanistan), Parthian Persians, nomads from China and Russia, Turko-Mongols. All left something of their own in India – words, techniques, art, and intermarriage.
GUPTA EMPIRE (320 – 540 AD) - 220 years

This empire was also centered in the Ganges River valley and was another golden age of India’s history as was the Mauryan Empire. The rulers had the same name as the earlier Mauryan rulers, but were not related. Chandragupta I and II presided over extensive trade with Africa, Arabia, and Southeast Asia (gold and silver coins were used) and the arts and cultural life flourished. In 500 AD the White Huns invaded and India was again fragmented into regional kingdoms and principalities.

400 YEARS OF POLITICAL DECENTRALIZATION (600-1000 AD)

India experienced political disorder as civil wars, power struggles, and invasions took a toll on the subcontinent. After the White Huns’ invasion in 500 AD, Arabs also invaded. In addition to foreign invasions, Rajputs (aristocratic Hindu clans) fought civil wars which were caused by religious extremism and political corruption.

TURKISH/MUSLIM INVASIONS (1,000-1700 AD) - 700 years

Turks invaded northern India, introduced Islam, and established the Delhi Sultanate in the 1200’s. The sultans were patrons of the arts, builders of splendid monuments, and proponents of philosophy, but they murdered political rivals and tortured prisoners taken in war. This regime disintegrated internally and was destroyed by the Turko-Mongol Tamerlane in 1388. They further established Islam in India. Muslim officials unified India in the 1500’s and ruled until the 1700’s. Muslim Emperor Shah Jahan built the Taj Mahal in honor of his wife in the 1600’s AD. During this time many Hindus found emotional appeal in the Muslim faith, some converted to lighten their taxes, some hoped to raise their caste status, or tried to qualify for public service by converting to Islam. An example of the cultural synthesis which occurred is the creation of Urdu, a spoken Indian language using Persian, Arabic, and Turkish words within Hindi grammatical constructions. A new religion, Sikhism, became a blend of Hindu and Muslim religions. But religious disagreements between Hindus and Muslims persisted over such issues as polytheism, religious images, and closed castes. Aristocratic Hindu leaders resisted Islam and often suffered cruel persecution. Life in India was still divided into Hindu and Muslim streams.

What were the main characteristics of India’s political development?

In summary, the general pattern of India’s political life was fluctuation between periods of political unity followed by periods of political decentralization. India
achieved cultural and social unity due to her emphasis on loyalty to the social order rather than to the political structure.

**With such diversity and political fragmentation what made Indian social life cohesive enough to hold the culture together?**

The beliefs of the Hindu faith provided the structure for the way of life in India. Hinduism emphasized and supported the Caste system and within the Caste system a person’s duties and responsibilities were carefully set forth. These duties were called dharma. Unlike Christianity and Islam which required followers to adhere to specific religions doctrines (for example, that there was only one God in Islam, and that Jesus was the Son of God in Christianity), Hinduism emphasized loyalty to the social order. A person was in a Caste by heredity and could not leave that caste or marry into another caste. Caste was based on occupation and also on notions of purity and pollution. A person was obligated to follow caste rules to enhance purity and avoid pollution. Lower castes removed impurities (like dust and dirt) for higher castes. Higher castes transmitted purity down to lower classes. Everyone was supposed to strive for bodily and dietary purity by exercising, eating pure food, and working for internal purity.

Hindus believed the stratification in castes was the will of the gods. They believed if they fulfilled the duties of their caste in their present life, they may be reborn into a higher caste in their next life. Even kings had to adhere to certain duties – protect and defend the people, administer justice, and attend temple functions. The extreme inequality and lack of career and social mobility were widely accepted because the caste system was a central belief of Hinduism, justified by Hinduism and accepted by the whole society. They believed there was order in nature and in human life and they believed the caste system was part of the human order.

**How did India assimilate so many diverse peoples over the years?**

India could accommodate and assimilate diverse peoples because when these peoples arrived they became part of the caste system and part of hundreds of occupational categories within each caste. Immigrants, or even invaders, could be incorporated into their own occupational category, whether it was soldier or warrior, cook, or merchant. People within each occupational category helped each other out and there was a lot of solidarity among them.

**What has been the situation for women in India?**

Women have been very subordinate and subject to extremes of the patriarchal system originally brought to India by the Indo-Europeans who had a warrior society. The following customs show what women have been subjected to: a woman’s family paid for the dowry to acquire a husband, the woman joined the
husband’s family after the wedding, widows were burned on the funeral pyre along with the deceased husband in a custom called sati (also spelled suttee), women were excluded from the Hindu priesthood, from education and from remarrying after divorce. When Muslim rule came to India (1,000-1700 AD) women were required to wear a veil, marry younger, and many suffered from refusal of Hindu society to accept returning women who had been captured and carried off to Muslim harems.

To further explain the custom of sati, it must be said that this ritual had its basis in the Hindu faith. Believing in the divinity and interdependence of all creation, Hindus emphasized that the bonds between husband and wife were eternal. If the wife agreed to be cremated with her husband when he died, she would insure their eternal union in the afterlife as both of their souls merged with the oneness of the cosmos, Brahman. The couple would not have to go through many incarnations, they would immediately reach Brahman. Women who went along with this custom were considered to have reached the pinnacle of virtue in the Hindu faith.

**What are the main beliefs of the Hindu religion?**

Hinduism incorporates monotheism and polytheism in one religion. The many gods and goddesses, Brahma (Creator), Vishnu (Preserver) and Shiva (Destroyer), and their partners Sarasvati, Lakshmi, and Kali are all aspects of a single God. This single God is a supreme unity called Brahman which is the spiritual oneness of the cosmos. This oneness pervades everything so there is a sense of personal identity with the entire universe. Brahman connects with the atman, or self of the individual soul, and there is a merging of the self with the spiritual oneness of the cosmos.

Because of the belief in the oneness of all life and that all living beings have souls, Hindus also believe that each living thing could be reborn into the body of any other living thing. How depends on the fate (karma) of the living thing and how well it fulfills its duty (dharma). The concept that all living things have souls led to the belief in non-violence (ahimsa).

Hindus do not believe in a personal God as Christians, Hebrews, and Muslims do. The Hindu God is the entire universe. The ultimate goal of a Hindu is to unite one’s soul with the universal spirit, Brahman, through acts of renunciation.

500 years before Christ, Indians had formulated a religion which emphasized the oneness of all life. Now, today scientists have proven this oneness of all life scientifically through the discovery of DNA.
Along with their basic beliefs, Hindus have priests and rituals connected with washing, eating, drinking, sex, childbirth, prayers, meditation and yoga. These rituals permeate every aspect of daily life. Because Hinduism had a tendency to tolerate doctrinal variation, is known as a tolerant religion and has, therefore been a catalyst for absorbing foreigners and invaders into Indian life.

**What are the beliefs of Buddhism?**

Siddhartha Gautama (later called Buddha) was a reformer in India about 500 BC who objected to the Caste system of Hinduism. He created the beginnings of a new religion, his followers added to his beliefs, and the teachings spread from India to China, Japan, and Southeast Asia. Buddhists believe in 4 noble truths which hold that suffering and anxiety are caused by greed, egotism, and the impermanence of life. People can triumph over these difficulties by following an 8-fold path to Nirvana – show love, compassion, joy and serenity in daily life, choose the right career, and eliminate distractions and desires. When a Buddhist learns how to meditate properly, he can clear his mind, extinguish desire, and eventually reach Nirvana. People are reborn over and over until they reach Nirvana which is eternal oneness with ultimate Unity and Bliss of the cosmos.

Buddhism had enormous appeal and won converts all over Asia because of its egalitarian outlook, its simplicity, and its faith in each person’s potential to reach Nirvana.

Buddhism later split into sects (Mahayana, Theravada, and Zen) just as Islam split into Shiite, Sunni and Sufi and Christianity divided up into Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, and Protestantism.

**How did India trade with the rest of Eurasia?**

India traded with Mesopotamia as early as 2500 BC and by 500 BC had elaborate overland and sea networks. India had overland routes through the Persian Empires which later became Muslim Empires of the Middle East. Sea routes crossed the Arabian Sea and sailed up through the Persian Gulf or the Red Sea to the Mediterranean Sea. 4 months of monsoon winds from the southwest permitted ships to travel from Arabia to India headed east and 4 months of northeast winds permitted travel from India to Arabia. Merchants from foreign lands settled in port cities along the coasts in India. Goods produced in India and exported were: cotton, silk, pottery, iron wear, copper, gems, pearls, spices, herbs, peacocks, apes, and tea.

**What were the main contributions of the Indian Civilization to humankind?**
Indian literature included the first 4 sacred texts of Hinduism called the Vedas written in Sanskrit around 1500 BC, the Upanishads also sacred texts written about 700 BC devoted to teachings on the universal spirit Brahman and the soul (atman) of each individual and teachings on caste, dharma, karma, samsara and moksha, and 2 famous epics, the Mahabharata (including a famous segment the Bhagavad-Gita) and the Ramayana, and finally folktales and legends in the Puranas.

During the Gupta Empire, around 400 AD, Indians made many advances in mathematics such as Arabic numerals, the invention of the zero, discoveries in algebra, and the discovery of pi in geometry. These advances were carried west from India by Arabs.

Hindu-Buddhist temples and stone carvings can be seen all over India and Southeast Asia as can art depicting courtiers, dancers, gods and goddesses, and favorite animals. Outstanding Muslim architecture such as the Taj Mahal enriched and revitalized Indian architecture.

**Bibliography**

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