

# 4

## Classical Civilization: India

Listen to Chapter 4  
on MyHistoryLab

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

4.1 How did India's geography affect the characteristics of classical society in India? p. 76

4.2 What were the main political phases in classical India? p. 78

4.3 Why was the state less important in classical India than in classical China? p. 80

4.4 What was the relationship between Hinduism and Buddhism? p. 82

4.5 What were the main features of the caste system? p. 87

4.6 What was India's trading position in the classical world? p. 88

**Of the many enduring expressions of** religious devotion in human history, few can match the splendid complexes of temples and monasteries carved from stone into the cliffs at Ajanta and Ellora in the western reaches of the Deccan plateau, which stretches across central India. More than 60 religious structures were carved into or out of solid rock at the two sites,



View the **Closer Look** on MyHistoryLab: Gupta Sculpture: Lokanatha

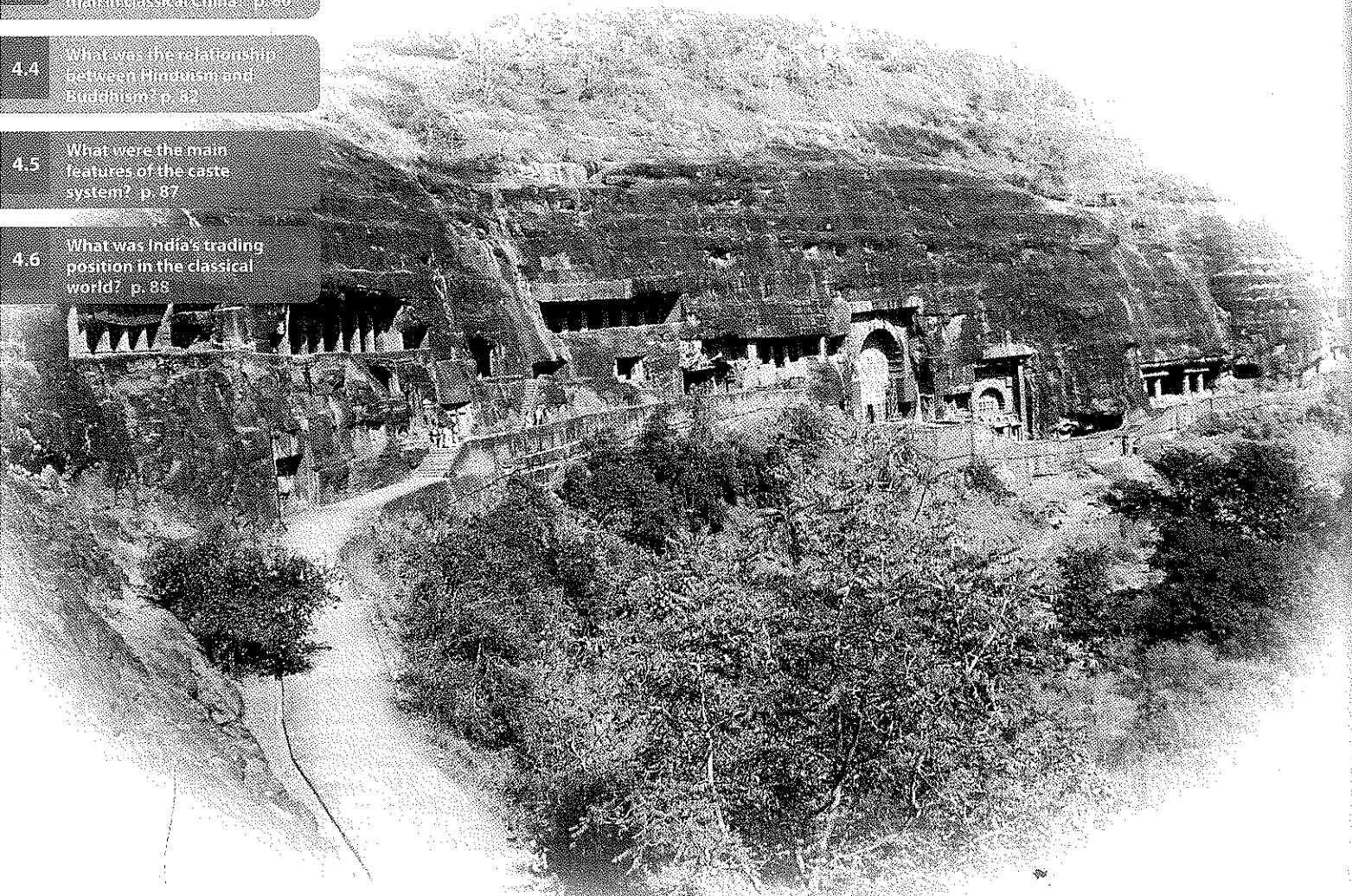


FIGURE 4.1 The cave temples carved out of solid stone at Ajanta in central India provide dramatic evidence of the religious fervor that swept through south Asia in the age of the Buddha and the Hindu revival.

### Watch the Video Series on MyHistoryLab

Learn about some key topics related to this chapter with the *MyHistoryLab Video Series: Key Topics in World History*

which are approximately 30 miles apart. These monumental religious edifices were constructed in successive stages from the last centuries B.C.E. through the 8th century C.E. This millennium of history spans an era of momentous change and creativity that in many ways culminated in the Gupta empire, which ruled most of north India from early in the 4th until the mid-6th century C.E.

The art and architecture of Ajanta and Ellora provide dramatic evidence of the intensity of the religious ferment that shaped all aspects of Indian life as a result of the challenges to the existing brahmanical order posed by the emergence of Buddhism and other popular religious alternatives in the 6th and 5th centuries B.C.E. But these monumental buildings, and particularly the exquisite sculptures and paintings they contain, also tell us a great deal about the nature of society, everyday life, and popular culture, as well as the worldview and aspirations of those who lived in what many historians consider India's golden age. The mixture, for example, of Buddhist shrines and monastic quarters and Hindu and Jain cave temples exemplifies the overwhelmingly nonviolent nature of the rivalry between these major religious systems. The blend of religions at Ajanta and Ellora also mirrored the common adoption of rituals, objects of worship, and basic beliefs by the adherents of different Indian religions in this era.

Beyond religious thought and practice, the wall paintings and stone-carved sculptures provide some of the best illustrations we have of everything from Indian ships and styles of dress at different social levels to musical instruments, weapons, and tools for farming and construction. Stone friezes decorating the walls of the shrines and temples illustrate in remarkable detail popular legends of the Buddha's life and path to enlightenment and the rich mythology that developed around the gods and goddesses propitiated by the brahman priests. One of the most celebrated temples, carved out of solid rock to be a free-standing structure, relates in stone carvings numerous episodes from the *Ramayana*, which had become one of the two great epics of Indian civilization by the last centuries B.C.E.

The kings and their consorts, brahman priests and Buddhist monks, workers and temple dancers portrayed in the Ajanta and Ellora cave temples help us to visualize more than a millennium of history that is covered in this chapter. Lasting from roughly 700 B.C.E. to 600 C.E., this era saw the rise and fall of some of India's most powerful dynasties. The brahman-dominated society that emerged in the kingdoms Aryan migrants established in the Gangetic plains was challenged in fundamental ways by the rise of Buddhism in the 6th century B.C.E. Buddhism also played a major role in the rise of the powerful Maurya dynasty and was in turn weakened by the decline of its empire. The political fragmentation in the centuries after the demise of the Mauryas was mirrored in the intense, although largely peaceful, competition among different schools of Buddhism, brahmanism, and a wide variety of other religious sects. The patronage of the rulers of the Gupta empire, which controlled much of north India from the 4th to the mid-6th centuries C.E., sparked a revival of brahmanism. These centuries comprised an age of remarkable religious effervescence, artistic creativity, and scientific breakthroughs that secured India's enduring stature as one of the core civilizations of the preindustrial world. ■

After the long period of disruption following Harappa's fall—around 1500 B.C.E.—a new civilization arose in India. India became the third great center of classical civilization, along with the Mediterranean and Middle East (Greece, Persia, and Rome) and China. India also served as a key hub of the trans-regional trading patterns that emerged in the classical period. The new foundations for Indian civilization were laid between 1500 and 500 B.C.E. by nomadic Aryans who moved into India during the centuries during and after Harappa's collapse. By the end of this period, fairly large

1600 B.C.E.	1200 B.C.E.	750 B.C.E.	500 B.C.E.	250 B.C.E.	1 C.E.
1600–1000 Aryan invasions of India	1200–700 Sacred Vedas composed	700–c. 550 Era of unrivaled brahman dominance	327–325 Alexander the Great invades India	200 B.C.E.–200 C.E. Period of greatest Buddhist influence	319 Gupta empire founded; one of the world's first universities established
1500–1000 Vedic Age	1000–600 Epic Age: <i>Mahabharata</i> , <i>Ramayana</i> , and <i>Upanishads</i> composed	563–483 Life of the Buddha	322–298 Chandragupta Maurya rules		535 Gupta empire overturned by the Huns
			269–232 Reign of Ashoka		

states, ruled by kings who claimed divine descent, controlled much of the fertile farmland of the Ganges River plains. The settlement of this vast area came at the cost of clearing the great forests that once covered it. As in northwest India and the Mediterranean, cultivation and forest-clearing on the Ganges plains contributed to significant climate change.

Ritual divisions and restrictions on intermarriage between different social groups grew more rigid as an increasingly complex social hierarchy became a pervasive force in Indian life. Vedic priests, or brahmins, emerged as the dominant force in Indian society and culture. As the brahmins' power peaked, however, forces were building in Indian society that threatened to alter the course of civilized development in south Asia. By the 6th century B.C.E., many religious seers and dissenting philosophers wanted to move beyond the rituals associated with sacrifices to the gods and were weary of the power seeking and materialism of the priestly class. One of these thinkers, now known as the **Buddha**, founded one of the great world religions—a religion that provided a powerful challenge to the brahmins and many of the ancient Vedic beliefs and practices.

## THE FRAMEWORK FOR INDIAN HISTORY: GEOGRAPHY AND CULTURE

4.1

How did India's geography affect the characteristics of classical society in India?

In the centuries that followed the Aryan incursions, the rivalry between Buddhists and brahmins played a major role in shaping gender relationships and the nature of social hierarchies as a whole in south Asia. The Buddha's teachings also contributed to the establishment of India's first genuine empire. Beginning in the late 4th century B.C.E., the rulers of a local dynasty in eastern India, the Mauryas, built what would become the largest empire in premodern India, but the Mauryan empire was short-lived. When it collapsed, it was followed by another round of nomadic invasions through the Himalayan passes in the northwest, and the subcontinent was again fragmented politically. But in the early 4th century C.E., there arose in north India a powerful new dynasty, the Gupta, that was committed to reasserting brahmins' dominance. The Gupta rulers' patronage of the religion we now know as Hinduism reaffirmed the position of the brahmins as high priests and political advisors. It also led to an age of splendid achievement in architecture, painting, sculpture, philosophy, literature, and the sciences.

The classical period of Indian history includes a number of contrasts to that of China—and many of these contrasts have proved enduring. Whereas the focus in classical China was on politics and on social structures that would support the Confucian order, the focus in classical India was on religion and social structures that would support a Hindu way of life. A political culture existed in India, of course, but it was less cohesive and less important to the larger culture than its Chinese counterpart. In religion, science, economics, and family life, the classical period generated a culture that continues to make India unique among the world's major civilizations.

While India's distinctiveness was considerable, the fact that it was an agricultural society dictated that it would be similar in many ways to China. Most people were peasant farmers, whose lives were shaped around the production of food for their family's survival. In both India and China, peasant families clustered together in villages for mutual aid and protection. This village structure gave a

strong localist flavor to many aspects of life in both cultures. In addition, agriculture influenced family life. Patriarchy dictated that women seldom owned property other than their personal possessions. Although they were primarily agricultural, both China and India built great cities and engaged in extensive trade. These added to social and economic complexity and created the basis for most formal intellectual life, including schools and academies.

### Formative Influences

India's distinctive culture was born of its geography and early historical experience. India was much closer to the orbit of other civilizations than China. Trading contacts with China developed late in the classical period and had little impact—China was more affected. But India was frequently open to influences from the Middle East and even the Mediterranean world. Persian empires spilled over into India at several points, bringing new artistic styles and political concepts. **Alexander the Great** invaded India, and while he did not establish a durable empire, he made possible important Indian contacts with Hellenistic culture. Periodic influences from the Middle East continued after the classical age, forcing India to react and adapt in ways that China largely avoided because it was more isolated.

In addition to links with other cultures, India's topography shaped a number of vital features of its civilization. The vast Indian subcontinent is partially separated from the rest of Asia, and particularly from East Asia, by northern mountain ranges, notably the **Himalayas**. However, important passes through the mountains, especially in the northwest, linked India to other civilizations in the Middle East. At the same time, divisions within the subcontinent made full political unity difficult. India was thus marked by greater diversity than China's Middle Kingdom. The most important agricultural regions are those along the two great rivers, the Indus and the Ganges. However, India also has mountainous northern regions, where a herding economy took root, and a southern coastal rim, separated by mountains and the Deccan plateau, where an active trading and seafaring economy arose. India's separate regions help explain not only economic diversity but also the racial and language differences that, from early times, have marked the subcontinent's populations.

Much of India is semitropical in climate. In the river valley plains, heat can rise to 120° F during the early summer. Summer also brings torrential **monsoon** rains, crucial for farming. But the monsoons vary from year to year, sometimes bringing too little rain or coming too late and causing famine-producing drought, or sometimes bringing catastrophic floods. Certain features of Indian civilization may have resulted from a need to come to terms with a climate that could produce abundance one year and grim starvation the next. In a year with favorable monsoons, Indian farmers could plant and harvest two crops and thus support a sizable population.

### Brahman Culture

We have seen that, after the fall of Harappan civilization, Aryan (Indo-European) migrants increasingly penetrated the subcontinent. These migrants gradually settled down to agriculture and extend their agricultural base to the fertile Ganges river. The Aryans also developed the series of oral epics, called the Vedas and ultimately written down in **Sanskrit**, which became the literary language of the new culture. Composed by various priests, the epics provided a wealth of stories about the gods and about proper standards for human behavior. The characteristic Indian caste system also began to take shape during these formative centuries, perhaps initially as a means of establishing relationships between the Aryan invaders and the indigenous people, whom the Aryans regarded as inferior. Aryan social classes (**varnas**) partly enforced divisions familiar in agricultural societies. Thus, a warrior or governing class, the Kshatriyas (kuh-shuh-TREE-uhs), and the priestly class, or brahmins, stood at the top of the social pyramid, followed by Vaisyas, the traders and farmers, and Sudras, or common laborers. Many of the Sudras worked on the estates of large landowners. A fifth group gradually evolved, later called the **untouchables**, who were confined to a few jobs, such as transporting the bodies of the dead or hauling refuse. It was widely believed that touching these people would defile anyone from a superior class. Initially, the warrior group ranked highest, but during the Epic Age the brahmins replaced them, signaling the importance of religious links in Indian life. Thus, a law book stated, "When a brahman springs to light he is born above the world, the chief of all creatures, assigned to guard the treasury of duties, religious and civil." Gradually, the five social groups became hereditary, with marriage between castes forbidden and punishable by death; the basic castes divided into smaller subgroups, called *jati*, each with distinctive occupations and each tied to its social station by birth.

**Alexander the Great** Successor of Philip II; successfully conquered Persian empire prior to his death in 323 B.C.E.; attempted to combine Greek and Persian cultures.

**Himalayas** Mountain region marking the northern border of the Indian subcontinent; site of the Aryan settlements that formed small kingdoms or warrior republics.

**monsoons** Seasonal winds crossing Indian subcontinent and southeast Asia; during summer bring rains.

**Sanskrit** The sacred and classical Indian language.

**varnas** Clusters of caste groups in Aryan society; four social castes—brahmins (priests), warriors, merchants, and peasants; beneath four Aryan castes was group of socially untouchable Dasas.

**untouchables** Low social caste in Hindu culture; performed tasks that were considered polluting—street sweeping, removal of human waste, and tanning.

The *Rig-Veda*, the first Aryan epic, attributed the rise of the caste system to the gods:

When they divided the original Man  
into how many parts did they divide him?  
What was his mouth, what were his arms,  
what were his thighs and his feet called?  
The brahman was his mouth, of his  
arms was made the warrior.  
His thighs became the vaisya, of  
his feet the sudra was born.

The Aryans brought to India a religion of many gods and goddesses, who regulated natural forces and possessed human qualities. Thus, **Indra**, the god of thunder, was also the god of strength. Gods presided over fire, the sun, death, and so on. This system bore some resemblances to the gods and goddesses of Greek myth or Scandinavian mythology, for the very good reason that they were derived from a common Indo-European oral heritage. However, India was to give this common tradition an important twist, ultimately constructing a vigorous, complex religion that, in contrast to the Indo-European polytheistic faiths, endures to this day.

During the epic periods, the Aryans offered hymns and sacrifices to the gods. Certain animals were regarded as particularly sacred, embodying the divine spirit. Gradually, this religion became more elaborate. The epic poems reflect an idea of life after death and a religious approach to the world of nature. Nature was seen as informed not only by specific gods but also by a more basic divine force. These ideas, expressed in the mystical *Upanishads*, added greatly to the spiritual power of this early religion and served as the basis for later Hindu beliefs. By the end of the Epic Age, the dominant Indian belief system included a variety of convictions. Many people continued to emphasize rituals and sacrifices to the gods of nature; specific beliefs, as in the sacredness of monkeys and cattle, illustrated this ritualistic approach. The brahman priestly class specified and enforced prayers, ceremonies, and rituals. However, the religion also produced a more mystical strand through its belief in a unifying divine force and the desirability of seeking union with this force. Toward the end of the Epic period one religious leader, Gautama Buddha, built on this mysticism to create what became Buddhism, another major world religion.

## PATTERNS IN CLASSICAL INDIA

### 4.2 What were the main political phases in classical India?

By 600 B.C.E., India had passed through its formative phase. Regional political units grew in size, cities and trade expanded, and the development of the Sanskrit language, although dominated by the priestly brahman class, furthered an elaborate literary culture. A full, classical civilization could now build on the social and cultural themes first launched during the Vedic and Epic ages.

Indian development during the classical era and beyond did not take on the convenient structure of rising and falling dynasties characteristic of Chinese history. Political eras were even less clear than in classical Greece. The rhythm of Indian history was irregular and often consisted of landmark invasions that poured in through the mountain passes of the subcontinent's northwestern border.

Toward the end of the Epic Age and until the 4th century B.C.E., the Indian plains were divided among powerful regional states. Sixteen major states existed by 600 B.C.E. in the plains of northern India, some of them monarchies, others republics dominated by assemblies of priests and warriors. Warfare was not uncommon. One regional state, Magadha, established dominance over a considerable empire. In 327 B.C.E., Alexander the Great, having conquered Greece and much of the Middle East, pushed into northwestern India, establishing a small border state called Bactria.

### The Mauryan Dynasty

Political reactions to this incursion produced the next major step in Indian political history, in 322 B.C.E., when a young soldier named **Chandragupta Maurya** seized power along the Ganges River. He became the first of the **Mauryan** dynasty of Indian rulers, who in turn were the first

**Indra** Chief deity of the Aryans; depicted as a colossal, hard-drinking warrior.

Two major empires united large parts of India at crucial periods in classical Indian history.

**Chandragupta Maurya** [chuhn-druh-GOOP-duh MAHR-yeh] (r. 322–298 B.C.E.) Founder of Maurya dynasty; established first empire in Indian subcontinent; first centralized government since Harappan civilization.

**Mauryan** [MAHR-yuhn] Dynasty established in Indian subcontinent in 4th century B.C.E. following invasion by Alexander the Great.

rulers to unify much of the entire subcontinent. While it is difficult to know what, if anything, the Mauryan dynasty borrowed directly from Persian political models or the example of Alexander the Great, Chandragupta and his successors maintained large armies, with thousands of chariots and elephant-borne troops. The Mauryan rulers also developed a substantial bureaucracy, even sponsoring a postal service.

Chandragupta's style of government was highly autocratic, relying on the ruler's personal and military power. This style would surface periodically in Indian history, just as it did in the Middle East, a region with which India had important contacts. A Greek ambassador from one of the Hellenistic kingdoms described Chandragupta's life:

Attendance on the king's person is the duty of women, who indeed are bought from their fathers. Outside the gates [of the palace] stand the bodyguards and the rest of the soldiers. . . . Nor does the king sleep during the day, and at night he is forced at various hours to change his bed because of those plotting against him. Of his nonmilitary departures [from the palace] one is to the courts, in which he passed the day hearing cases to the end. . . . [When he leaves to hunt,] he is thickly surrounded by a circle of women, and on the outside by spear-carrying bodyguards. The road is fenced off with ropes, and to anyone who passes within the ropes as far as the women, death is the penalty.

Such drastic precautions paid off. Chandragupta finally designated his rule to a son and became a religious ascetic (a person who renounces the pleasures of the material world), dying peacefully at an advanced age.

Chandragupta's grandson, **Ashoka** (269–232 B.C.E.), was an even greater figure in India's history. First serving as a governor of two provinces, Ashoka enjoyed a lavish lifestyle, with frequent horseback riding and feasting. However, he also engaged in a study of nature and was strongly influenced by the intense spiritualism not only of the brahman religion but also of Buddhism. Ashoka extended Mauryan conquests, gaining control of all but the southern tip of India through fierce fighting (Map 4.1). His methods were bloodthirsty; in taking over one coastal area, Ashoka admitted that "one hundred and fifty thousand were killed (or maimed) and many times that number later died." But Ashoka could also be compassionate. He ultimately converted to Buddhism, seeing in the belief in **dharmā**, or the law of moral consequences, a kind of ethical guide that might unite and discipline the diverse people under his rule. Ashoka vigorously propagated Buddhism throughout India while also honoring Hinduism, sponsoring shrines for its worshippers. Ashoka sent Buddhist missionaries to the Hellenistic kingdoms in the Middle East, and also to Sri Lanka to the south (Figure 4.2). The "new" Ashoka urged humane behavior on the part of his officials and insisted that they oversee the moral welfare of his empire. Like Chandragupta, Ashoka also worked to improve trade and communication, sponsoring an extensive road network dotted with wells and rest stops for travelers. Stability and the sheer expansion of the empire's territory encouraged growing commerce.

The Mauryan dynasty did not, however, succeed in establishing durable roots, and Ashoka's particular style of government did not have much later impact, although a strong Buddhist current persisted in India for some time. After Ashoka, the empire began to fall apart, and regional kingdoms surfaced once again. New invaders, the **Kushans**, pushed into central India from the northwest. The greatest Kushan king, Kanishka, converted to Buddhism but actually hurt this religion's popularity in India by associating it with foreign rule.

### The Guptas

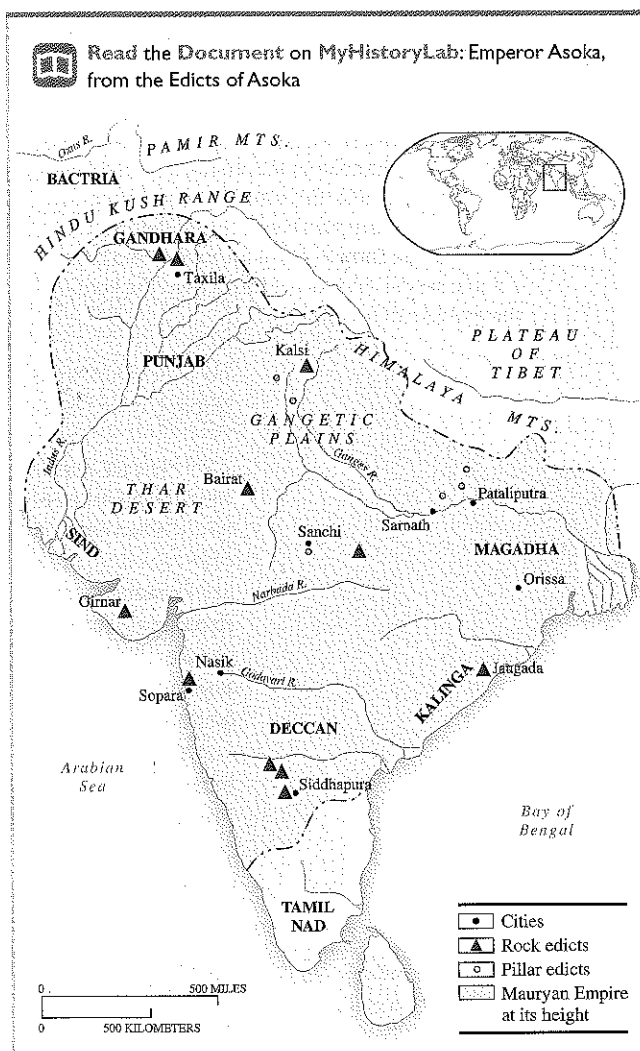
The collapse of the Kushan state, by 220 C.E., ushered in another hundred years of political instability. Then a new line of kings, the **Guptas**, established a large empire, beginning in 320 C.E. (Map 4.2). The Guptas produced

**Ashoka** (r. 273–232 B.C.E.) Grandson of Chandragupta Maurya; completed conquests of Indian subcontinent; converted to Buddhism and sponsored spread of new religion throughout his empire.

**dharmā** The caste position and career determined by a person's birth; Hindu culture required that one accept one's social position and perform occupation to the best of one's ability in order to have a better situation in the next life.

**Kushans** See Kush, p. 28.

**Guptas** Dynasty that succeeded the Kushans in the 3rd century C.E.; built empire that extended to all but the southern regions of Indian sub-continent; less centralized than Mauryan empire.



**MAP 4.1 India at the Time of Ashoka** Although, as the map shows, the Mauryan monarchs claimed to rule most of present-day South Asia, much of the subcontinent was only loosely controlled.

View the Closer Look on MyHistoryLab:  
Lion Capital of Ashoka at Sarnath

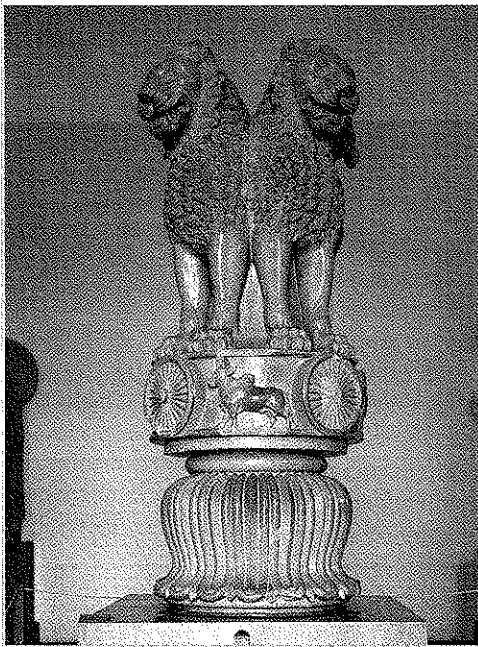
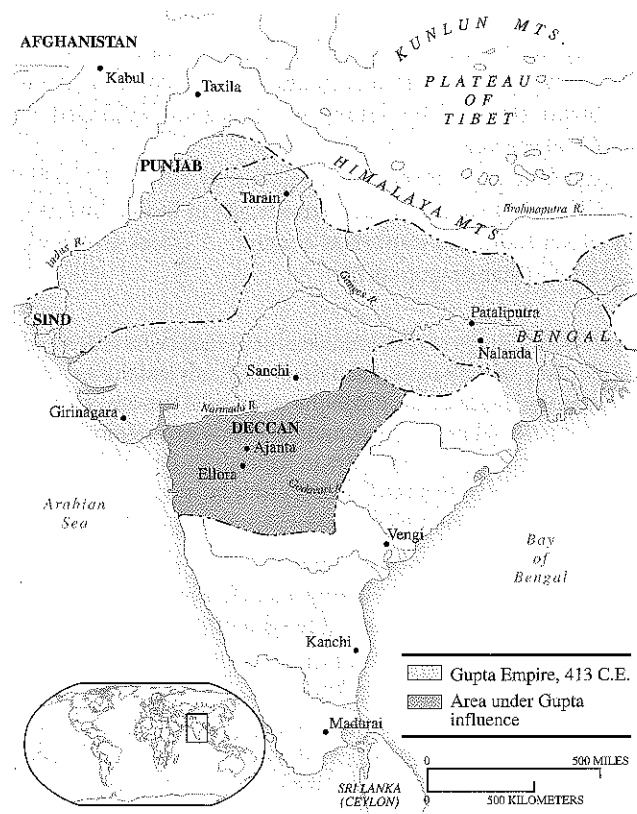


FIGURE 4.2 Two of the four lions that originally sat atop the Ashoka column at Sarnath, in present-day Uttar Pradesh, India (this view of the sculpture obscures the other two lions). This sculpture, now housed at the Sarnath Museum, was carved from a single sandstone block. Ashoka used the lions as the emblem of his rule.



MAP 4.2 The Gupta Empire. Not only was the territory claimed by the Gupta dynasty a good deal smaller than the empire of their Mauryan predecessors, even the area controlled was ruled to a far greater extent by local lords than the Gupta emperors.

no individual rulers as influential as the two great Mauryan rulers, but they had perhaps greater impact. One Gupta emperor proclaimed his virtues in an inscription on a ceremonial stone pillar:

His far-reaching fame, deep-rooted in peace, emanated from the restoration of the sovereignty of many fallen royal families. . . . He, who had no equal in power in the world, eclipsed the fame of the other kings by the radiance of his versatile virtues, adorned by innumerable good actions.

Bombast aside, Gupta rulers often preferred to negotiate with local princes and intermarry with their families, which expanded influence without constant fighting. Two centuries of Gupta rule gave classical India its greatest period of political stability, although the Guptas did not administer as large a territory as the Mauryan kings had. The Gupta empire was overturned in 535 C.E. by a new invasion of nomadic warriors, the Huns.

Classical India thus alternated between widespread empires and a network of smaller kingdoms. Periods of regional rule did not necessarily suggest great instability, and both economic and cultural life advanced in these periods as well as under the Mauryas and Guptas.

## POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS

### 4.3 Why was the state less important in classical India than in classical China?

Classical India did not develop the solid political traditions and institutions of Chinese civilization, or the high level of political interest that would characterize classical Greece and Rome. The most persistent political features of India, in the classical period and beyond, involved regionalism, plus considerable diversity in political forms. Autocratic kings and emperors dotted the history of classical

India, but there were also aristocratic assemblies in some regional states with the power to consult and decide on major issues.

As a result of India's diversity and regionalism, even some of the great empires had a rather shaky base. Early Mauryan rulers depended heavily on the power of their large armies, and, as we have seen, often feared betrayal and attack. Early rulers in the Gupta dynasty used various devices to consolidate support. They claimed that they had been appointed by the gods to rule, and they favored the Hindu religion over Buddhism because the Hindus believed in such gods. The Guptas managed to create a demanding taxation system, seeking up to a sixth of all agricultural produce. However, they did not create an extensive bureaucracy, rather allowing local rulers whom they had defeated to maintain regional control so long as they deferred to Gupta dominance. The Guptas stationed a personal representative at each ruler's court to ensure loyalty. A final sign of the great empire's loose structure was the fact that no single language was imposed. The Guptas promoted Sanskrit, which became the language of educated people, but this made no dent in the diversity of popular, regional languages.

The Guptas did spread uniform law codes. Like the Mauryan rulers, they sponsored some general services, such as road building. They also served as patrons of much cultural activity, including university life as well as art and literature. These achievements were more than enough to qualify the Gupta period as a golden age in Indian history.

The fact remains, however, that the political culture of India was not very elaborate. There was little formal political theory and few institutions or values other than regionalism that carried through from one period to the next. Chandragupta's chief minister, **Kautilya**, wrote an important treatise on politics, but it was devoted to telling rulers what methods would work to maintain power—somewhat like the Legalists in China. Thinking of this sort encouraged efficient authority, but it did not spread political values or a sense of the importance of political service very widely, in contrast to Confucianism in China and also to the intense interest in political ethics in Greece and Rome. Ashoka saw in Buddhism a kind of ethic for good behavior, as well as a spiritual beacon, but Buddhist leaders in the long run were not greatly interested in affairs of state. Indeed, Indian religion generally did not stress the importance of politics, even for religious purposes, but rather the preeminence of priests as sources of authority.

The limitations on the political traditions developed during this period of Indian history can be explained partly by the importance of local units of government—the tightly organized villages—and particularly by the essentially political qualities of social relationships under the caste system. Caste rules, interpreted by priests, regulated many social relationships and work roles. To a great extent, the caste system and religious encouragement in the faithful performance of caste duties did for Indian life what more conventional government structures did in many other cultures, in promoting public order.

India's caste system became steadily more complex after the Epic Age, as the five initial classes subdivided into ultimately almost 300 jati (or livings), which became further divided into a multitude of subcastes—the true basis of the caste system—which defined the groups that a person could eat with or marry within. Hereditary principles grew ever stronger, so that it became virtually impossible to rise above the caste in which a person was born or to marry someone from a higher caste. It was possible to fall to a lower caste by marrying outside one's caste or by taking on work deemed inappropriate for one's caste. Upward mobility could occur within castes, as individuals might gain greater wealth through success in the economic activities appropriate to the caste. Rulers, like the Mauryans, might spring from the merchant castes, although most princes were warrior-born. It is important not to characterize the caste system in an oversimplified way, for it did offer some flexibility. Nevertheless, the system gave India the most rigid overall framework for a social structure of any of the classical civilizations.

In its origins, the caste system provided a way for India's various races, the conquerors and the conquered, to live together without perpetual conflict and without full integration of cultures and values. Quite different kinds of people could live side by side in village or city, separated by caste. In an odd way, castes promoted tolerance, and this was useful, given India's varied peoples and beliefs. The caste system also meant that extensive outright slavery was avoided. The lowest, untouchable castes were scorned, confined to poverty and degrading work, but their members were not directly owned by others.

The political consequences of the caste system derived from the detailed rules for each caste. These rules governed marriages and permissible jobs, but also social habits such as eating and drinking. For example, a person could not eat or drink with a lower-caste individual or perform any service for that person. This kind of regulation of behavior made detailed political administration less necessary. Indeed, no state could command full loyalty from subjects, for their first loyalty was to caste.

**Kautilya** [kah-TIHL-yeh] (350–275 B.C.E.) Political advisor to Chandragupta Maurya; one of the authors of *Arthashastra*; believed in scientific application of warfare.

## RELIGION AND CULTURE

4.4

What was the relationship between Hinduism and Buddhism?

More of the qualities of Indian civilization rested on widely shared cultural values than was the case in China. Religion, and particularly the evolving Hindu religion as it gained ground on Buddhism under the Guptas, was the clearest cultural cement of this society, cutting across political and language barriers and across the castes. Hinduism itself embraced considerable variety, and it gave rise to important religious dissent. Nor did it ever displace important minority religions. However, Hinduism has shown a remarkable capacity to survive and is the major system of belief in India even today. It also promotes other features in Indian culture. Thus, contemporary Indian children are encouraged to indulge their imaginations longer than Western children, with less urging to test flights of fancy against external reality. It is this kind of tradition that illustrates how classical India, although not the source of enduring political institutions beyond the local level, produced a civilization that would retain clear continuity and cultural cohesiveness from this point onward—even though the subcontinent was rarely politically united, at least under indigenous rulers.

The culture of classic India was not just religious, however. Along with religion, an important tradition of rational scientific inquiry emerged. This helped sustain major initiative in higher education. It is also important to note that the Indian religions themselves were tolerant—both of other religions and of other aspects of culture. Indian governments might support religious missionaries, but they also established an openness to religious diversity. This, too, was a legacy to Indian cultures in later periods.

### The Formation of Hinduism

Hinduism, the religion of India's majority, developed gradually over a period of many centuries. Its origins lie in the Vedic and Epic ages, as the Aryan religion gained greater sophistication, with concerns about an overarching divinity supplementing the rituals and polytheistic beliefs supervised by the brahman caste of priests. The *Rig-Veda* expressed the growing interest in a higher divine principle in its Creation Hymn:

Then even nothingness was not, nor existence. There was no air then, nor the heavens beyond it.  
Who covered it? Where was it? In whose keeping. . . ? The gods themselves are later than creation,  
so who knows truly whence it has arisen?

Unlike all other world religions, Hinduism had no single founder, no central holy figure from whom the basic religious beliefs stemmed. This fact helps explain why the religion unfolded so gradually, sometimes in reaction to competing religions such as Buddhism or Islam. Moreover, Hinduism pursued a number of religious approaches, from the strictly ritualistic and ceremonial approach many brahmins preferred to the high-soaring mysticism that sought to unite individual humans with an all-embracing divine principle. Unlike Western religions or Daoism (which it resembled in part), Hinduism could also encourage political and economic goals (called *artha*) and worldly pleasures (called *karma*)—and important textbooks of the time spelled out these pursuits. Part of Hinduism's success, indeed, was the result of its fluidity, its ability to adapt to the different needs of various groups and to change with circumstance. With a belief that there are many suitable paths of worship, Hinduism was also characteristically tolerant, coexisting with several offshoot religions that garnered minority acceptance in India.

Brahman leadership reshaped Indian ideas about the gods, creating more elaborate definitions (scholars call early Hinduism *brahmanism* because of this leadership role, although Hindus always called their religion *dharma*, or moral path). Original gods of nature were altered to represent more abstract concepts. Thus, Varuna changed from a god of the sky to the guardian of ideas of right and wrong. The great poems of the Epic Age increasingly emphasized the importance of gentle and generous behavior, and the validity of a life devoted to concentration on the Supreme Spirit. The *Upanishads* particularly stressed the shallowness of worldly concerns—riches and even health were not the main point of human existence—in favor of contemplation of the divine spirit. It was in the *Upanishads*

that the Hindu idea of a divine force informing the whole universe, of which each individual creature's soul is thought to be part, first surfaced clearly, in passages such as the following:

"Fetch me a fruit of the banyan tree."

"Here is one, sir."

"Break it."

"I have broken it, sir."

"What do you see?"

"Very tiny seeds, sir."

"Break one."

"I have broken it, sir."

"What do you see now?"

"Nothing, sir."

"My son. . . what you do not perceive is the essence, and in that essence the mighty banyan tree exists. Believe me, my son, in that essence is the self of all that is. That is the True, that is the Self."

However, the *Upanishads* did more than advance the idea of a mystical contact with a divine essence. They also attacked the conventional brahman view of what religion should be, a set of proper ceremonies that would lead to good things in this life or rewards after death. From the Epic Age onward, Hinduism embraced this clear tension between a religion of rituals, with fixed ceremonies and rules of conduct, and the religion of mystical holy men, seeking communion with the divine soul.

The mystics, often called **gurus** as they gathered disciples around them, and the brahman priests agreed on certain doctrines, as Hinduism became an increasingly formal religion by the first centuries of the common era. The basic holy essence, called *brahma*, formed part of everything in this world. Every living creature participates in this divine principle. The divine aspects of *brahma* are manifested in the forms of many gods, including **Vishnu**, the preserver, and **Shiva**, the destroyer, who could be worshipped or placated as expressions of the holy essence. The world of our senses is far less important than the world of the divine soul, and a proper life is one devoted to seeking union with this soul.

**gurus** Originally referred to as brahmins who served as teachers for the princes of the imperial court of the Guptas.

**Vishnu** The brahman, later Hindu, god of sacrifice; widely worshipped.

**Shiva** Hindu, god of destruction and reproduction; worshipped as the personification of cosmic forces of change.

## DOCUMENT

### A Guardian's Farewell Speech to a Young Woman About to Be Married

ONE OF THE GREAT PLAYS WRITTEN during the Hindu revival of the early centuries C.E. was *Shakuntala*, by Kalidasa. The play is a Cinderella-style tale about a beautiful young woman, Shakuntala, who is loved by a king, and the travails she must endure before they are happily united. In the following exchange, as Shakuntala sets out to join her husband at his palace, she is instructed by her guardians (the hermits Kashyapa and Gautami) on the proper behavior for a young wife, in a manner that recalls the famous speech by Polonius to his son, Laertes, in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

**Kashyapa:** Now you Shakuntala. Respect your superiors,  
Be friendly toward the ladies of the palace.

Never be angry with your husband, no matter what happens.

Be polite with the maids;

In everything be humble.

These qualities make a woman; those without them are black sheep in their families.

What is your opinion, Gautami?

**Gautami:** A bride needs nothing more. Remember his advice, Shakuntala.

**Shakuntala:** How will I ever manage in the palace? I feel so lost. I belong here, Father.

**Kashyapa:** Don't worry, my child; you are privileged.

You will be his great wife;

He is noble and great.

You will give him a son, as the East gives us light.

The pain of separation will then pass.

#### QUESTIONS

- What does this conversation tell you about gender relationships and marriage in classical India?
- What does it say about attitudes toward women?
- How do these relationships and attitudes compare with those found in China and Greece in this era?
- How do they compare with those in our own society?

**reincarnation** The successive attachment of the soul to some animate form according to merits earned in previous lives.

However, this quest may take many lifetimes, and Hindus stressed the principle of **reincarnation**, in which souls do not die when bodies do but pass into other beings, either human or animal. Where the soul goes, whether it rises to a higher-caste person or falls perhaps to an animal, depends on how good a life the person has led. Ultimately, after many good lives, the soul reaches full union with the soul of brahma, and worldly suffering ceases.

Hinduism provided several channels for the good life. For people who renounced this world in search of salvation, there was the meditation and self-discipline of *yoga*, which means “union,” allowing the mind to be freed to concentrate on the divine spirit. For others, there were the rituals and rules of the brahmins. These included proper ceremonies in the cremation of bodies at death, appropriate prayers, and obedience to injunctions, such as treating cows as sacred animals and refraining from the consumption of beef, and following the life patterns (*dharma*) associated with the caste (or *jati*) into which one was born. Many Hindus also continued the idea of lesser gods represented in the spirits of nature, or purely local divinities, which could be seen as expressions of Shiva or Vishnu (Figure 4.3).

Hinduism also provided a basic, if complex, ethic that helped supply some unity amid the various forms of worship. The epic poems, richly symbolic, formed the key texts. They illustrated a central emphasis on the moral law of *dharma* as a guide to living in this world and simultaneously pursuing higher, spiritual goals. The concept of *dharma* directed attention to the moral consequences of action and at the same time the need to act. Each person must meet the obligations of life, serving the family, producing a livelihood and even earning money, and serving in the army when the need arises. These actions cannot damage, certainly cannot destroy, the eternal divine essence that underlies all creation. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, a classic sacred hymn, a warrior is sent to do battle against his own relatives. Fearful of killing them, he is advised by an incarnation of Brahma (Krishna) that he must carry out his duties. He will not really be killing his victims because their divine spirit will live on. This ethic urged that honorable behavior, even pleasure seeking, is compatible with spirituality and can lead to a final release from the life cycle and to unity with the divine essence. The Hindu ethic explains how devout Hindus could also be aggressive merchants or eager warriors. In encouraging honorable action, it could legitimize government and the caste system as providing the frameworks in which the duties of the world might be carried out, without distracting from the ultimate spiritual goals common to all people.

The ethical concept of *dharma* was far less detailed than the ethical codes associated with most other world religions, including Christianity and Islam. For certain caste groups, at certain points in their lives, *dharma* stresses inner study and meditation, building from the divine essence within each creature, rather than adherence to a fixed set of moral rules.

The spread of Hinduism through India, and to some other parts of Asia, had a great influence on most of southeast Asia for over a millennium and is still culturally vital and pervasive. Also it had—and still has—a major impact on Nepal, Tibet, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, and parts of Central Asia. And its impact in most of these places and in East Asia was

also felt in numerous ways through its many influences on Buddhism. The religion accommodated extreme spirituality. It also provided satisfying rules of conduct for ordinary life, including rituals and a firm emphasis on the distinction between good and evil behavior, although many of the areas to which it spread did not adopt the rigid caste hierarchy. The religion allowed many people to retain older beliefs and ceremonies, which they may have derived from a more purely polytheistic religion. Through most of India, it reinforced the caste system, giving people in lower castes hope for a better time in lives to come and giving upper-caste people, including the brahmins, the satisfaction that if they behaved well, they might be rewarded by communion with the divine soul. Even though Hindu beliefs took shape only gradually and contained many ambiguities, the religion was sustained by a strong cadre of priests and through the efforts of individual gurus and mystics.

## Buddhism

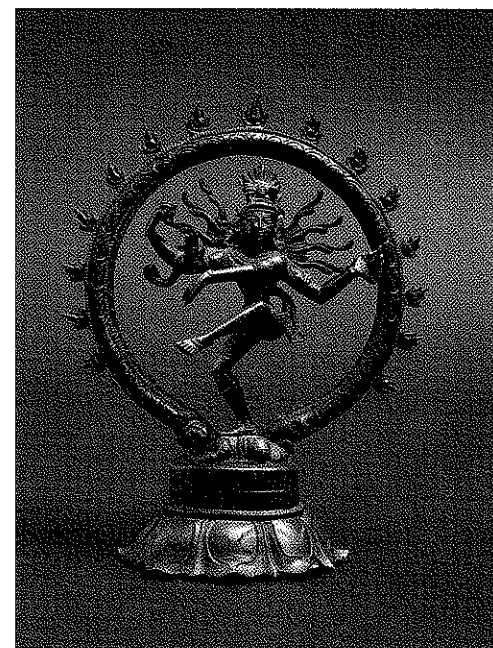
At times, however, the tensions within Hinduism broke down for some individuals, producing alternatives to the dominant religion. One such response, which occurred right after the Epic Age, led to a new religion closely related to Hinduism. Around 563 B.C.E. an Indian prince, Siddhartha Gautama, was born who came to question the fairness of earthly life in which so much poverty and misery

abounded. Gautama, later called Buddha or “enlightened one,” lived as a Hindu mystic, fasting and torturing his body. After six years, he felt that he had found truth, then spent his life traveling and gathering disciples to spread his ideas. Buddha accepted the spiritual truth behind many Hindu beliefs, such as reincarnation, but he denied the validity of others, such as caste. He held the material world to be a snare that warped human relations and caused pain via the frustrations inherent in it: All worldly things decay, but men and women suffer and harm others as they struggle to remain attached to youth, health, and life itself, though all are destined to pass away.

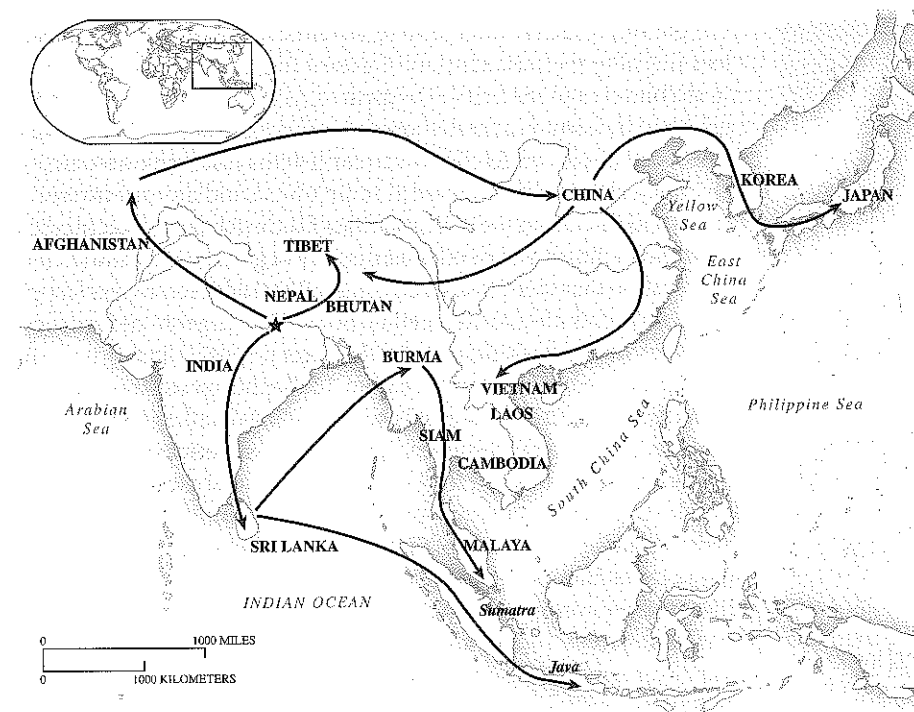
Buddha maintained the possibility of spiritual rewards after life, but he saw salvation as arising from the destruction of the self, whose annihilation opens the door to a realm where suffering and decay are no more, literally a world beyond existence itself: **nirvana**. Individuals could regulate their lives and aspirations toward this goal without elaborate ceremonies. Great stress was placed on meditation and self-control: “Let a man overcome anger by love, let him overcome evil by good, let him overcome the greedy by liberalness, the liar with the truth.” By arguing that a holy life could be achieved through individual effort by people at every level of society, Buddhism denied the spiritual value not only of caste and the performance of rituals, but also the absolute authority of priests. This was another sign of the complexity of Indian social life in practice.

Buddhism spread and retained coherence through the example and teachings of groups of monks, organized in monasteries but preaching throughout the world. Buddhism attracted many followers in India itself, and its growth was greatly spurred by the conversion of the Mauryan emperor Ashoka. Increasingly, Buddha himself was seen as divine. Prayer and contemplation at Buddhist holy places and works of charity and piety gave substance to the idea of a holy life on earth. Ironically, however, Buddhism did not witness a permanent following in India. Brahman opposition was strong, and it was ultimately aided by the influence of the Gupta emperors. Furthermore, Hinduism showed its adaptability by emphasizing its mystical side, thus retaining the loyalties of many Indians. Buddhism’s greatest successes, aided by the missionary encouragement of Ashoka and later the Kushan emperors, came throughout Southeast Asia, including the island of Sri Lanka, off the south coast of India, and in China, Korea, and Japan (Map 4.3). Still, in some regions of South Asia, Buddhism retained a substantial following. They were joined by other dissident groups who rejected aspects of brahmanism.

**nirvana** The Buddhist state of enlightenment, a state of tranquility.



**FIGURE 4.3** Perhaps the most frequently depicted Indian religious image is the god Shiva as the celestial dancer, here portrayed in a south Indian bronze. The position of the god’s hands and the objects held in them each represent a different aspect of his power, which may be simultaneously creative and destructive. His left hand closest to his head, for example, is held in the posture of reassurance, and the left hand furthest away holds a drum, which signifies time. His left foot crushes the demon of ignorance, which seems to want to be destroyed by the illustrious god.



**MAP 4.3 The Spread of Buddhism in Asia, 400 B.C.E.–600 C.E.** In less than two centuries wandering missionaries had carried the Buddhist faith from central Asia to Sri Lanka and into China and Japan.

Thus, though “Hinduism” in its many forms grew increasingly dominant, it had to come to terms with the existence of other religions from the last centuries B.C.E..

If Hinduism, along with the caste system, formed the most distinctive and durable products of the classical period of Indian history, they were certainly not the only ones. Even aside from dissident religions, Indian culture during this period was vibrant and diverse, and religion encompassed only part of its interests. Hinduism itself encouraged many wider pursuits.

Indian thinkers wrote actively about various aspects of human life. Although political theory was sparse, a great deal of legal writing occurred. The theme of love was important also. A manual of the “laws of love,” the **Kamasutra**, written in the 4th century C.E., discusses relationships between men and women.

## Arts and Sciences

Indian literature, taking many themes from the great epic poems and their tales of military adventure, stressed lively story lines. The epics were recorded in written form during the Gupta period, and other story collections, like the *Panchatantra*, which includes Sinbad the Sailor, Jack the Giant Killer, and the Seven League Boots, produced adventurous yarns now known all over the world. Classical stories were often secular, but they sometimes included the gods and also shared with Hinduism an emphasis on imagination and excitement. Indian drama flourished also, again particularly under the Guptas, and stressed themes of romantic adventure in which lovers separated and then reunited after many perils. This literary tradition created a cultural framework that still survives in India. Even contemporary Indian movies reflect the tradition of swashbuckling romance and heroic action.

Classical India also produced important work in science and mathematics. The Guptas supported a vast university center—one of the world’s first—in the town of Nalanda that attracted students from other parts of Asia as well as Indian brahmans. Nalanda had over a hundred lecture halls, three large libraries, an astronomical observatory, and even a model dairy. Its curriculum included religion, philosophy, medicine, architecture, and agriculture.

At the research level, Indian scientists, borrowing a bit from Greek learning after the conquests of Alexander the Great, made important strides in astronomy and medicine. The great astronomer Aryabhatta calculated the length of the solar year and improved mathematical measurements. He also calculated the circumference of the earth with remarkable accuracy—which also indicates that he believed it to be round. Indian astronomers understood and calculated the daily rotation of the earth on its axis, predicted and explained eclipses, and developed a theory of gravity, and through telescopic observation they identified seven planets. Medical research was hampered by religious prohibitions on dissection, but Indian surgeons nevertheless made advances in bone setting and plastic surgery. Inoculation against smallpox was introduced, using cowpox serum. Indian hospitals stressed cleanliness, including sterilization of wounds, while leading doctors promoted high ethical standards. As was the case with Indian discoveries in astronomy, many medical findings reached the Western world only in modern times.

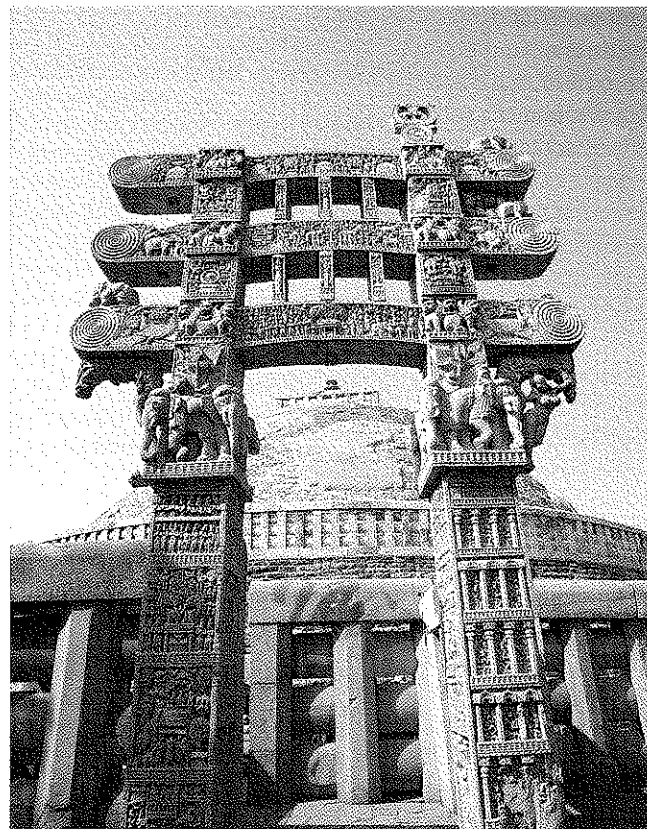
Indian mathematics produced still more important discoveries. The Indian numbering system is the one we use today, although we call it Arabic because Europeans imported it secondhand from the Arabs. Indians invented the concept of zero, and through it they were able to develop the decimal system. Indian advances in numbering rank with writing itself as key human inventions. Indian mathematicians also developed the concept of negative numbers, calculated square roots and a table of sines, and computed the value of pi more accurately than the Greeks did.

Finally, classical India produced lively art, although much of it perished under later invasions. Ashoka sponsored many spherical shrines to Buddha, called **stupas**, and statues honoring Buddha were also common (Figure 4.4). Under the Guptas, sculpture and painting moved away from

### **Kamasutra** [kah-muh-SOO-truh]

Written by Vatsayana during Gupta era; offered instructions on all aspects of life for higher-caste males, including grooming, hygiene, etiquette, selection of wives, and lovemaking.

**stupas** Stone shrines built to house pieces of bone or hair and personal possessions said to be relics of the Buddha; preserved Buddhist architectural forms.



**FIGURE 4.4** The great Buddhist stupa at Sanchi in central India. Stupas were built to house relics of the Buddha, and they became major sites of pilgrimage. The intricate carved gates and railing surrounding the stupa related incidents from the Buddha’s life or displayed symbols associated with his teachings. The great dome that covered the dirt mound that formed the core of the stupa often was painted white, and it struck approaching pilgrims as a great cloud floating on the horizon.

realistic portrayals of the human form toward more stylized representation. Indian painters, working on the walls of buildings and caves, filled their work with forms of people and animals, captured in lively color. Indian art showed a keen appreciation of nature. It could pay homage to religious values, particularly during the period in which Buddhism briefly spread, but could also celebrate the joys of life.

There was, clearly, no full unity to this cultural outpouring. Religion, legalism, abstract mathematics, and art and literature coexisted. The result, however, was a somewhat distinctive overall tone, continuing, for example, with the Chinese concentration on political ethics. In various cultural expressions, Indians developed an interest in spontaneity and imagination, whether in fleshly pleasures or a mystical union with the divine essence.

## ECONOMY AND SOCIETY

### 4.5 What were the main features of the caste system?

The caste system shaped many key features of Indian social and economic life, as it assigned people to occupations and regulated marriages. Low-caste individuals had few legal rights, and servants were often abused by their masters, who were restrained only by the ethical promptings of religion toward kindly treatment. A brahman who killed a servant for misbehavior faced a penalty no more severe than if he had killed an animal. This extreme level of abuse was uncommon, but the caste system did unquestionably make its mark on daily life as well as on the formal structure of society. The majority of Indians living in peasant villages had less frequent contact with people of higher social castes, and village leaders were charged with trying to protect peasants from too much interference by landlords and rulers.

Family life also emphasized the theme of hierarchy and tight organization, as it evolved from the Vedic and Epic ages. The dominance of husbands and fathers remained strong. One Indian code of law recommended that a wife worship her husband as a god (see the Document on p. 83). Indeed, the rights of women became increasingly limited as Indian civilization took clearer shape. Although the great epics stressed the control of husband and father, they also recognized women’s independent contributions. As agriculture became better organized and improved technology reduced (without eliminating) women’s economic contributions, the stress on male authority expanded. Here India followed a common pattern in agricultural societies, as women’s sphere of action was gradually circumscribed. Hindu thinkers debated whether a woman could advance spiritually without first being reincarnated as a man, and there was no consensus. The limits imposed on women were reflected in laws and literary references. A system of arranged marriage evolved in which parents contracted unions for children, particularly daughters, at quite early ages, to spouses they had never even met. The goal of these arrangements was to ensure solid economic links, with child brides contributing dowries of land or domestic animals to the ultimate family estates, but the result of such arrangements was that young people, especially girls, were drawn into a new family structure in which they had no voice.

However, the rigidities of family life and male dominance over women were often greater in theory than they usually turned out to be in practice. The emphasis on loving relations and sexual pleasure in Indian culture modified family life, since husband and wife were supposed to provide mutual emotional support as a marriage developed. The *Mahabharata* epic called a man’s wife his truest friend: “Even a man in the grip of rage will not be harsh to a woman, remembering that on her depend the joys of love, happiness, and virtue.” Small children were often pampered. “With their teeth half shown in causeless laughter, their efforts at talking so sweetly uncertain, when children ask to sit on his lap, a man is blessed.” Families thus served an important and explicit emotional function as well as a role in supporting the structure of society and its institutions. They also, as in all agricultural societies, formed economic units. Children, after early years of indulgence, were expected to work hard. Adults were obligated to assist older relatives. The purpose of arranged marriages was to promote a family’s economic well-being, and almost everyone lived in a family setting.

The Indian version of the patriarchal family was thus subtly different from that in China, although women were officially just as subordinate and later trends—as in many patriarchal societies over time—would bring new burdens. But Indian culture often featured clever and strong-willed women and goddesses, and this contributed to women’s status as wives and mothers. Stories also celebrated women’s emotions and beauty.

The caste system structured India’s social framework, but a strong emphasis on trade was also important. Family life combined patriarchy with an emphasis on affection.

Read the Document on MyHistoryLab: Cast(e)aways? Women in Classical India (200 C.E., 6th C.E.)

The economy of India in the classical period became extremely vigorous, certainly rivaling China in technological sophistication and probably briefly surpassing China in the prosperity of its upper classes. In manufacturing, Indians invented new uses for chemistry, and their iron working was the best in the world. Indian capacity in ironmaking outdistanced European levels until a few centuries ago. Indian techniques in textiles were also advanced, and their cotton goods in particular were the finest in the world: hence our names for muslins, calicos, cashmeres, and pajamas. Most manufacturing was done by artisans who formed guilds and sold their goods from shops.

Indian emphasis on trade and merchant activity was far greater than in China, and indeed greater than that of the classical Mediterranean world. Indian merchants enjoyed relatively high caste status; they also traveled widely, not only over the subcontinent but by sea to the Middle East and East Asia. The seafaring peoples along the southern coast, usually outside the large empires of northern India, were particularly active. These southern Indians, the Tamils, traded cotton and silks, dyes, drugs, gold, and ivory, often earning great fortunes. From the Middle East and the Roman empire they brought back pottery, wine, metals, some slaves, and above all gold. Their trade with southeast Asia was even more active, as Indian merchants transported not only sophisticated manufactured goods but also Indian artistic and architectural styles to places like Malaysia and the larger islands of Indonesia. In addition, caravan trade developed with China.

The Indian economy remained firmly agricultural at its base. The wealth of the upper classes and the splendor of cities like Nalanda were confined to a small portion of the population, as most people lived near the margins of subsistence. But India was justly known by the time of the Guptas for its wealth as well as for its religion and intellectual life—always understanding that wealth was relative in the classical world and very unevenly divided. A Chinese Buddhist on a pilgrimage to India wrote:

The people are many and happy. They do not have to register their households with the police. There is no death penalty. Religious sects have houses of charity where rooms, couches, beds, food, and drink are supplied to travelers.

## INDIAN INFLUENCE AND COMPARATIVE FEATURES

### 4.6 What was India's trading position in the classical world?

Classical India, from the Mauryan period onward, had a considerable influence on other parts of the world. In many ways, the Indian Ocean, dominated at this point by Indian merchants and missionaries, was the most active linkage point among cultures, although admittedly, the Mediterranean, which channeled contact from the Middle East to North Africa and Europe, was a close second. Indian dominance of the waters of southern Asia, and the impressive creativity of Indian civilization itself, resulted in goods and influence traveling well beyond the subcontinent's borders. And while Indian rulers did not usually attempt political domination, dealing instead with the regional kingdoms of Burma, Thailand, Indonesia, and Vietnam, Indian travelers or settlers did bring to these locales major economic and cultural influences. Indian merchants sometimes married into local royal families. Indian-style temples were constructed and other forms of Indian art traveled widely. Buddhism spread from India to many parts of Southeast Asia, and Hinduism converted many upper-class people, particularly in several of the Indonesian kingdoms. India thus serves as an early example of a major civilization expanding its influence well beyond its own regions.

Indian influence had affected China, through Buddhism and art, by the end of the classical period. Earlier, Buddhist emissaries to the Middle East stimulated new ethical thinking that informed Greek and Roman religious and philosophical thinkers, such as the groups like the Stoics, and through them aspects of Christianity later on.

Within India itself, the classical period, starting a bit late after the Aryan invasions, lasted somewhat longer than that of China or Rome. Even when the period ended with the fall of the Guptas, an identifiable civilization remained in India, building on several key factors first established in the classical period: the religion, to be sure, but also the artistic and literary tradition and the complex social and family network. The ability of this civilization to survive, even under long periods of foreign domination, was testimony to the meaning and variety it offered.

## THINKING HISTORICALLY

### Inequality as the Social Norm

THE INDIAN CASTE SYSTEM IS PERHAPS the most extreme expression of a type of social organization that violates the most revered principles on which modern Western societies are based. Like the Egyptian division between a noble and a commoner and the Greek division between a freeperson and a slave, the caste system rests on the assumption that humans are inherently unequal and that their lot in life is determined by the families and social strata into which they are born. The caste system, like the social systems of all other classical civilizations, presumed that social divisions were fixed and stable and that people ought to be content with the station they had been allotted at birth.

Furthermore, all classical social systems (with the partial exception of the Greeks, at least in Athens) played down the importance of the individual and stressed collective obligations and loyalties that were centered in the family, extended kin groups, or broader occupational or social groups. Family or caste affiliation, not individual ambition, determined a person's career goals and activities.

All of these assumptions directly contradict some of the West's most cherished current beliefs. They run counter to one of the most basic organizing principles of modern Western culture, rooted in a commitment to equality of opportunity. This principle is enshrined in European and American constitutions and legal systems, taught in Western schools and churches, and proclaimed in Western media. The belief in human equality, or at least equality of opportunity, is one of the most important ideas that modern Western civilization has exported to the peoples of Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

The modern concept of equality rests on two assumptions. The first is that a person's place in society should be determined not by the class or family into which he or she is born but by personal actions and qualities. The second is that the opportunity to rise—or fall—in social status should be open to everyone and protected by law. Some of our most cherished myths reflect these assumptions: that anyone can aspire to be president of the United States, for example, or that an ordinary person has the right to challenge the actions of the politically and economically powerful.

Of course, equality is a social ideal rather than something any human society has achieved. No one pretends that all humans are equal in intelligence or talent, and there are important barriers to equality of opportunity. But the belief persists that all humans should have an equal chance to better themselves

by using the brains and skills they have. In the real world, race, class, and gender differences often favor some individuals over others, and laws and government agencies often do not correct these inequities. But the citizens of modern Western societies, and increasingly the rest of the world, champion the principles of equality of opportunity and the potential for social mobility as the just and natural bases for social organization and interaction.

However, what is just and natural for modern societies would have been incomprehensible in the classical age. In fact, most human societies through most of human history have been organized on assumptions that are much closer to those underlying the Indian caste system than to those underlying modern Western norms. Ancient Egyptians and Greeks, medieval Europeans, and early modern Chinese believed that career possibilities, political

power, and social privileges should be set by law according to the position of one's family in the social hierarchy. The Indian caste structure was the most rigid and complex of the systems by which occupations, resources, and status were allotted. But all classical civilizations had similar social mechanisms that determined the obligations and privileges of members of each social stratum.

In some ways, classical Chinese and Greek societies provided exceptions to these general patterns. In China, people from lowly social origins could rise to positions of great status and power, and well-placed families could fall on hard times and lose their gentry status. But "rags to riches" success stories were the exception rather than the rule, and mobility between social strata was limited. In fact, Chinese thinkers made much of the distinctions between the scholar-gentry elite and the common people.

Although some of the Greeks, particularly the Athenians, developed the idea of equality for all citizens in a particular city-state, most of the people of these societies were not citizens, and many were slaves. By virtue of their birth the latter were assigned lives of servitude and often drudgery. Democratic participation and the chance to make full use of their talents were limited to the free males of the city-states.

In nearly all societies, these fixed social hierarchies were upheld by creation myths and religious beliefs that proclaimed their divine origins and the danger of punishment if they were challenged. Elite thinkers stressed the importance of the established social order to human peace and well-being; rulers were duty bound to defend it. Few challenged the naturalness of the hierarchy itself; fewer still proposed alternatives to it. Each

***In nearly all societies, these fixed social hierarchies were upheld by creation myths and religious beliefs that proclaimed their divine origins and the danger of punishment if they were challenged.***

(continued on next page)



(continued from previous page)

person was expected to accept his or her place and to concentrate on the duties and obligations of that place rather than worry about rights or personal desires. Males and females alike were required to subordinate their individual yearnings and talents to the needs of their families, clans, communities, or social superiors. In return for a person's acceptance of his or her allotted place in the hierarchy, he or she received material sustenance and a social slot. Of course, these benefits were denied to people who fought the system. They might be outcast or exiled, physically punished, or even killed.

**QUESTIONS**

- What arguments did the thinkers of the classical civilizations of Greece, China, and India use to explain and justify the great differences in social status and material wealth?
- How did those who belonged to elite groups justify their much greater status, wealth, and power compared to the peasants, artisans, and servants who made up most of the population?
- Comparing these modes of social organization with the ideals of your own society, what do you see as the advantages and drawbacks of each?

**scholar-gentry** Chinese class created by the marital linkage of the local land-holding aristocracy with the office-holding shi; superseded shi as governors of China.

**China and India Compared**

The thrusts of classical civilization in China and India reveal the diversity generated during the classical age. The restraint of Chinese art and poetry contrasted with the more dynamic sensual styles of India. India ultimately settled on a primary religion, although with important minority expressions, that embodied diverse impulses within it. China opted for separate religious and philosophical systems that would serve different needs. China's political structures and values found little echo in India, whereas the Indian caste system involved a social rigidity considerably greater than that of China. On the other hand, the higher status of merchants in India contributed to high levels of commerce. India's cultural emphasis was, on balance, considerably more otherworldly than that of China, despite the impact of Daoism and Buddhism, which after all was an Indian import. Quite obviously, classical India and classical China created vastly different cultures. Even in science, where there was similar interest in pragmatic discoveries about how the world works, the Chinese placed greater stress on purely practical findings, whereas the Indians ventured further into the mathematical arena.

Beyond the realm of formal culture and the institutions of government, India and China may seem more similar. As agricultural societies, both civilizations relied on a large peasant class, organized in close-knit villages with much mutual cooperation. Political power rested primarily with those who controlled the land, through ownership of large estates and the ability to tax the peasant class. On a more personal level, the power of husbands and fathers in the family—the basic fact of patriarchy—encompassed Indian and Chinese families alike.

However, Indian and Chinese societies differed in more than their religion, philosophy, art, and politics. Ordinary people had cultures along with elites. Hindu peasants saw their world differently from their Chinese counterparts. They placed less emphasis on personal emotional restraint and detailed etiquette; they expected different emotional interactions with family members. Indian peasants were less constrained than were the Chinese by recurrent efforts by large landlords to gain control of their land. Although there were wealthy landlords in India, the system of village control of most land was more firmly entrenched than in China. Indian merchants played a greater role than their Chinese counterparts. There was more sea trade, more commercial vitality. Revealingly, India's expanding cultural influence was due to merchant activity above all else, whereas Chinese expansion involved government initiatives in gaining new territory and sending proud emissaries to satellite states. These differences were less dramatic, certainly less easy to document, than those generated by elite thinkers and politicians, but they contributed to the shape of a civilization and to its particular vitality, its areas of stability and instability.

Because each classical civilization developed its own unique style, in social relationships as well as in formal politics and intellectual life, exchanges between two societies like China and India involved specific borrowings, and never an effort at wholesale imitation. India and China, the two giants of classical Asia, remain subjects of comparison to our own time, because they have continued to build distinctively on their particular traditions, established before 500 c.e. These characteristics, in turn, differed from those of yet another center of civilization, the societies that sprang up on the shores of the Mediterranean during this same classical age.

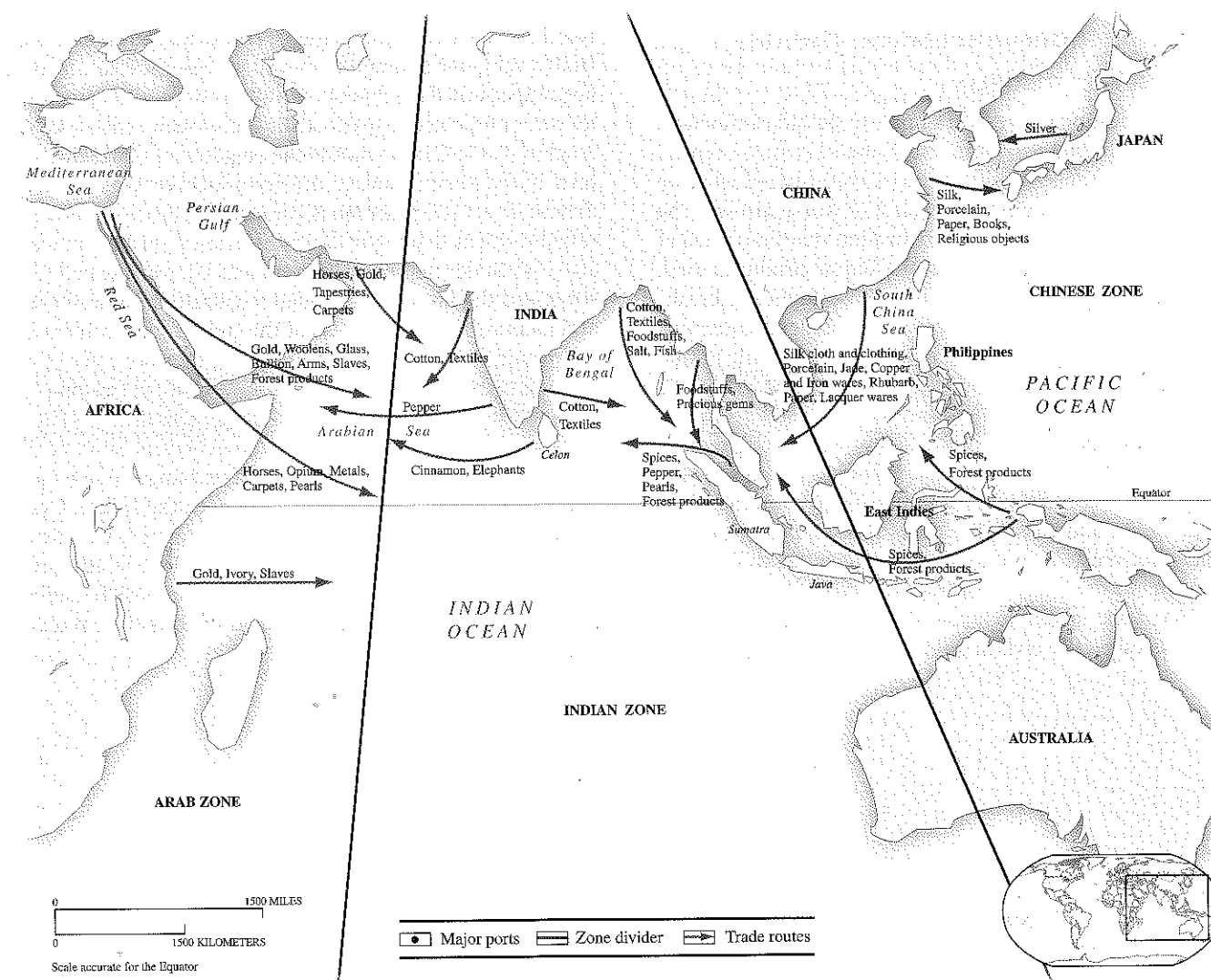
**VISUALIZING THE PAST**

**The Pattern of Trade in the Ancient Eurasian World**

THE PERIOD OF MAURYA RULE IN India coincided with a great expansion in trade between the main centers of civilization in Eurasia and Africa. In the centuries that followed, a permanent system of exchange developed that extended from Rome and the Mediterranean Sea to China and Japan. The trading networks that made up this system included both those established between ports connected by ships and sea routes and those consisting of overland exchanges transmitted along the chain of trading centers that crossed central Asia and the Sudanic region of Africa. By the last centuries B.C.E., this far-flung trading system included

much of the world as it was known to the peoples of the Eastern Hemisphere.

Some products produced at one end of the system, such as Chinese silks and porcelains, were carried the entire length of the network to be sold in markets at the other edge—in Rome, for example. As a general rule, products carried over these great distances tended to be high-priced luxury goods such as spices and precious jewels. But most of the exchanges, particularly in bulk goods such as metal ores or foodstuffs, were between adjoining regions. The ports of western India, for example, carried on a brisk trade with those in



**MAP 4.4 Eurasian and African Trading Goods Routes, c. 300 B.C.E. to 300 C.E.** As the map above illustrates, a vibrant oceanic trading system was in place across the Afro-Eurasian continents by the last centuries B.C.E., and the Indian subcontinent was central as a producer and consumer in this vast network of contact and exchange.

(continued on next page)